

David Middleton

Oxalis

South Louisiana

Midwinter here gives way to early spring
With February just begun,
The last freeze all but done,
And pink oxalis close to blossoming.

It likes the morning sun, then partial shade
Warm afternoons, each leaflet-stem
Wilting till light grows dim,
Unwrinkling when the petals fold and fade.

Great swathes spread wild on open pineland floors;
Clumps mound in lines by garden walls
Or where a pathway falls
Between the garden-gate- and threshold-doors.

In meadows, yards, it seeds the windy grass,
Long stalks soon flowering everywhere,
Thriving in earth and air —
Invasive beauty! — come to stay, then pass. . .

For hardy as it is, at times a pest
Attacks it: powdery mildew rots;
Smut, rust, and fungus-spots,
Leaf miners, spidery mites plague, infest.

And if the plant escapes insects, disease,
Late summer still will wither, bleach
Dark leaves as petals reach
Their end in autumn frost or winter freeze.

All this we know, as flowers cannot do,
And so we praise them while they stay,
Hoping till our last day
That seeing things in time will see us through.

David Middleton

Song

In brush when snowflakes cling
The winter wren will sing,
The burden of its song
How long, how long?

Come earliest in spring,
To dead oaks martins bring
The burden of their song,
How long, how long?

Mockingbirds in summer trees
Sing lifted melodies,
The burden of all song
How long, how long?

In fall, no more is heard . . .
Wren, martin, mockingbird
Unburdened of my song
How long, how long, how long?

My Father's Shop

— 'Has my lord dallied with poetry among the roses?'
Queen Guinevere

— The king's poet ached with belated verse;
he took part against himself

of Taliesin, whose name means 'radiant brow'

Charles Williams, *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944)

So many years . . . yet still I find you there
Pushing the pedal of your potter's wheel,
Shaping wet clay for the kiln's burning air —
Old elements that you could see and feel.

And from a lump well-turned arose a bowl
Or column, balanced, set, by thumb and palm,
Then bisque-fired, glazed, glaze-fired, and so made whole
By paint and flames that harden into calm.

You built that shop yourself — from slab to roof —
Detached from the house, your own place apart
Where you could dream, engaged, and yet aloof
As who and what you were emerged in art.

From boyhood through my teens at times I came
To watch you work till hand and eye would bind
Imagination, intellect — the same,
And you would sing the song of heart and mind.

Then in good time, I too sang, in my room,
Like Arthur's bard, of white knights, black despair
In adolescent poems of gloom and doom
And courtly love for blushing maidens fair.

And one such knight a well-born maiden wed
But in that bed where ice would glaze desire
Her passion took the form of formless dread,

David Middleton

His hands unskilled at bringing clay to fire.

And by my own rhyme broken I soon sought
A place where goodness, truth, and beauty met
In hands through which the whole man thought and wrought
And you, my father, shaping, singing yet.

You spoke, though hesitant, to your grown son
In that repressive Baptist atmosphere
About the art of love, and what is done,
The secrets of a craft at last made clear.

The craft was learned too late. The maiden fled,
Her cutting words a blessing and a curse,
The knight who bled forever on their bed
Nursing a wound whose healing made it worse.

Yet in that knight and bed a shaper lay
Who rose to work his verse through bisque and glaze,
Each deep-cut word steel-penned in tablet-clay,
His mind a kiln, his ways a potter's ways.

And like a potter when the wheel has turned
And kiln-doors open to a cooling shelf
With column, bowl, cracked or intact, he learned
That verse well-turned may turn against itself.

*

Father, your shop was torn down years ago —
And you long dead, and I not long to stay —
Yet both near Taliesin, brows aglow,
God's potters singing from and of the clay.

Peasant Girl Day-Dreaming

after the painting by Jean-François Millet (1814-1875)
1848, oil on panel

i

The distaff on her lap, the spindle dangling
Between her knees from a limp left arm,
The fingers all but ready to let go,
She cools bare feet on earth still undisturbed.

This is her special place to think and dream,
A settled talus boulder for her seat,
A wall of rocks moldering though it holds
The steady weight of elbow, hand, and chin.

Twin trees behind her long have taken root,
Their branches interweaving as they rise
Above green seedlings that can only grow
Stunted between the canopy and ground.

The woman is a shepherdess, her flock
Grazing somewhere nearby yet out of sight.
Her gaze is toward the one she would become.
The woolen threads she spins tell what she is.

Beyond the rocks, against a slate blue sky
A sun, pale as the clouds, is almost gone
Leaving behind a face still lost in light,
Not solar, but the dream-like light of dreams.

And there she stays, both other and the same,
Suspended in a soft and fluid glow,
Floating past resignation and regret
Toward husband, children, Paris, riches, fame

Then back, a warp and woof of fancy, fact,
No willowy figure with a low-cut blouse
Tight-corseted but a sturdy girl whose dress
Is loosely fitted, flowing like a robe.

ii

David Middleton

Her world is not Watteau's nor yet Millet's
Where gleaners gather up the fatal grain
But one in which her yearning still belongs
With distaff, spindle, sheepdog, staff, and sheep.

Her pensive sadness holds her, holds Millet,
Far from the clash of citizen and king,
The masses, troops, and bloody barricades,
That Paris he had fled for Barbizon.

And there, in fear, ill health, and poverty —
Rheumatic pain migrating joint to joint —
He came home to a place he'd never left,
Painting a light whose source is not the sun

But cheeks that bloom as the smooth brushstrokes dry
On panel made of heartwood by a man
Who like the girl through dreams could wander free
Or flower in the ruins of Arcady.

Lines in Advent

Through ordinary time we come again
To Advent and the waiting on a sign,
Kneeling in pews, then trying to prepare,
A burdened heart, the body of our sin
Brought low by our own choices, by design,
Our wonder in an attitude of prayer.

Night's watch fires burn far up above us there,
Appointed, named, and numbered sending beams
Down through the eons to a chancel wall
Whose colored glass, now cold in autumn air,
The pieces held in place by leaden seams,
Depicts a Christ beyond the cross and gall.

One hand has bread, the other wine for all
Who pray the prayer He taught us — heart and mind
Together and our will “Thy will be done” —
Redeemed at last from Adam and his fall,
The Way the only way for humankind,
The very blood and body of the Son.

And yet . . . before Communion has begun
The Words of Institution give me pause,
The mystery of *is* — like “Let there be”
And Christ the Vine, the Shepherd — coming undone
Inside a mind restless with place and cause,
The snake's disastrous as a part of me.

Outside, the stars keep burning, as they must,
Illumining the stained-glass grape and grain,
Shapes of the elements we take on trust
Though I trust too in lines of grace and pain
In which alone I feel at one with Him,
My cross to bear, my Star of Bethlehem.

David Middleton

First of the Final Things

How often do we try to turn away
From facing it: the plain, blank, simple fact
That none of us forgets — our own one death —
Even in sleep or some heroic act
That takes the breath away.

What lies beyond this world we cannot know
Though we may think, hope, yearn, surmise, and dream
This side as to the other side of death —
If such is even there — *where be and seem*
Might be both *like and so*.

And what could follow — Judgment, Heaven, Hell?
Waters of uncreation, pool and tide?
An endless nothingness past life and death?
Pischon in Lethe flowing deep and wide
Forever from the Well?

The stone no angel's hand has rolled away,
Fire-shadows on the wall of Plato's cave —
Things flickering and fixed, all stayed by death —
The screening images we make and crave
Have yet to show The Way.