

POEM FOR
MICHAELMAS
DAY

Requiescat in Pace

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FOR THE MEMBERS OF THE
ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE SOCIETY

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POEM FOR MICHAELMAS DAY

Variation on a theme of Thomas Hood
for the Centenary of St. Michael's College Tenbury Wells

I remember, I remember, grey stone, a spiral stair to bed,
A long dormitory like the creaking hold of a galleon,
with slit windows, too high for gazing out,
where clouds went by and the moon came searching
through in shafts of uninvited silver;

A library, august and serious-coloured, remote as night itself,
where the still air was tinged with sandal-wood,
mysterious with motets and Latin titles embossed
on leather bindings brown as conkers, all waiting,
mute, compacted spine to spine, and out of reach
of hand or understanding.

I remember, I remember, the windy cloister-walk,
The bellows, gasping and shuddering in the effort to let
Bach breathe, or it might have been Widor
demanding full-blown lungs for a dogmatic
statement on the pedals;

St. Michael painted in his triumph round the pipes,
A choir screen of wrought iron supporting candlesticks,
a row of little ornamental dishes like top
notes hoisted and sustained;

The English language lying open on an eagle's wings,
Music unfolding like a fair, untravelled, promised land,
with meadows of flowering chords and sinuous,
contrapuntal streams;

Merbecke, William Byrd of Lincoln, S.S. Wesley, Walmisley
in [was it D minor?] and Stanford [which was
certainly in C],

And another bird, a robin that had lost its way, flickering
against a stained-glass patch of Galilean sky,
unable to regain its own, contemporary, blue;

A flutter and hedgerow chirrup just audible in the timeless
pause after the Benediction.

I remember, I remember, coming upon an amiable, shy
grass-snake in the tangles beyond
the boundary-six line during cricket;

Watching a golden-crested wren managing to get on all right
without Geography in a fir-tree during prep;

Biting a windfall of excruciating sourness on the way
 to football, never suspecting it was a
 foretaste of so much;
 Filling a cap with damsons in the time of damsons,
 a fortaste of so little, had one but known.
 But one never thought. There was no need. The world
 was innocent and singing.

I remember, I remember, the tuck-shop down the road where
 marshmallow fish were three a penny;
 Enormous mole-hills on the Common where for an instant
 the linnets would perch and survey
 the prospect as from an 'eminence';
 Six-spot burnet moths, and the low-flying, vivid cinnabar
 whose underwing was the colour of the school
 magazine;
 Clee Hill, away to the north, huge and consoling as a psalm,
 a lot of sky, and almost too many yellowhammers;
 An old gypsy woman who frightened me by asking the time in
 a bass voice, so deep she could have sung the
 bass part in Purcell's anthem *Jehovah, quam multi*
 and taken the bottom E in her stride;
 An attack on a wasp's nest when we were badly outnumbered;
 The thought of a letter in my pocket, the foreign stamps
 she had sent me with news of my chrysalis;
 Everywhere happiness, like the summer haze that hovered
 over the yellow-burning gorse and even seemed
 to be spreading far, far across the border
 into Shropshire;
 And all the while, from every aspect, wherever you were,
 the grey roof of the Chapel exalted above
 the elm-tops,
 St. Michael's Chapel, reassuring, bearing witness, saying
 to workers in the cider orchard, young boys
 mooching on the Sunday walk, and old ones
 coming in from Tenbury for Evensong,
 Saying to earth and to the heavens where the clouds from
 Ludlow and Clee will for ever be holding to the
 course of their serene, dissolving journeys,
 Night after night whispering gravely to the radiant constellations—
 God is a spirit . . . God is a spirit . . . and we must worship
 him . . . must worship him . . . in spirit and in truth.