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his
Wings*

CORALIE + CLARKE + REES



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May 1956

SILENT HIS WINGS

SILENT HIS WINGS

by

CORALIE CLARKE REES

"What is precious is never to forget . . ."

—STEPHEN SPENDER.

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To MAX
(Maxwell John Clarke)

R.A.A.F.

*And to all the silent company of fine young
airmen whose wings have been
furled by war*

1555390

INTRODUCTION

To honour her airman brother, sepulchred in distant snows, Coralie Clarke Rees has here written a moving elegy. Through her warm portraiture he glows with life again, recreated lovingly.

Idiom and imagery flower colloquially, not as a modernist form, but simply as a natural self-expression. The realistic treatment attests the sincerity which makes the varying moods of grief, protest, and remembrance deepen into passages of forceful poetry. Always the utterance is most stirring when most personal.

The poem is more, however, than a cry achieving poignance. It also reaches out, in the old elegiac tradition, to some mode of life redeeming the sacrifice of youth, transcending the brute fact of the grave. "The true disciple of philosophy," said Socrates, "is ever pursuing death and dying"; so death in turn begets the philosopher. Here Coralie Clarke Rees answers death, not by a Christian immortality or the pantheism of an Adonais, but by a social reference characteristic of our socialistic age. If the verse inevitably loses intensity by this difficult theme—difficult to transmute into poetry—it gains in pragmatic scope. Attacking the apathy of the common people as a root cause of war, she calls with crusading impulse for action in the "fight for everlasting Peace."

Thus the dirge broadens out into a dedication, affirming the dead as

"the living spirit that blows
meaning and purpose and hope through our veins."

Beginning strongly, the elegy ends bravely.

P. Hugh Moore
—————

Canberra University College.

Silent His Wings

Morning dawns ; silver, silent, bare—
empty the sea, empty the sky ;
and in our hearts blank bottomless despair.
He was too young to die—
too taut with the thrill of living ;
others are ripe for death's iron glove
to maul, without our giving
him, so tall, so lithe, so gay, so full of love.

There are the aged, ailing, waiting for death :
cancers, lepers ; lechers fattening,
thieves thriving, spawning, battenning
on life's sap ; while he
whom we and life all loved lies
silent amid the interminable snow—
our hearts seared by the scorching blizzard of woe.

Silent His Wings

He was all gold like his native sun and sand—
gold limbs, gold hair, lit smile,
and a throat full of sun-warm song.
“A man must fight for you all,” he said
to us, his women-folk; and we
buckled his tunic on and waved good-bye—
mute helots of war’s mangling misery.

Some go eager to toss with death—
the sport of fuhrers! Up and do ’em, spinner!
Blessed are they who drag no domestic entails—
warm intertwining arms of wife
and primitive devotion of mother;
those who have no past to mourn,
no future save the rip-tide race of war.

Silent His Wings

War was to him merely a hazardous hurdle
in the long exciting gallop of life—
a fraying interruption to a man's plans,
a job that had to be done, like crutching sheep
(jackerooing on that Bridgetown farm) —
a filthy boring job that a man did well,
because that's the way a man got the better of life,
doing jobs well.

But in this the odds were uneven—
an aircraft, a blizzard, and low-flying orders ;
yours not to reason why, yours but to throw away
your life. That life uniquely precious,
built day by day with infinite care
for twenty-two years. . . .
twenty-two years of three hundred and sixty-five days—
eight thousand and thirty days, and each lit with joy
in a mother's heart, because you were alive.

Silent His Wings

The windows of her bruised mind
are paned with images of you—
you a school-boy, sweet-serious and cut lip
after your first fight, stamp-album under arm
and excitement geared to racing a model train;
then your first pair of longuns, proudly pressed,
landing your first job, rich eagerness did the rest,
and led inevitably to your first love-affair;
warm, passionate, with adult flair, early maturing,
instinctively you knew there would not be time
for slow-sipping the delights of living;
you took great gulps of life, and your smile was elixir,
intoxicating radiance. . . . And then—
fulfilment of a dream—the chestnut mare;
yours, yours from the gay gleam of her flank,
the coquettish toss of her mane, the white flash
of her fetlock, as Gay Coquette won the Helena Handicap.

Silent His Wings

“They’re off!” Freedom in the lead, followed closely
by War, Murder, Death, with Plunder and Rape on the
rails;
as they swing round the mile-post Freedom is losing her
lead,
and War cuts in on Rights of Man;
approaching three furlongs, Death, Plunder, and Rape
are neck and neck with Freedom, but as they come
down the straight, Freedom, now fully extended,
regains her lead, and wins by half a head
from War, with Plunder, Murder, Rape bunched up
further down the field, and Death a grisly last.
The time of the race was—more years than you had to
stake. . . .

Silent His Wings

So you dreamed your crepuscular Canadian cigarette dream
of a world where a man was free
to work for a man's world all the week
and race horses on Saturday. . . .
You used to sing of a white Christmas
from sand-hills drenched with sun ;
but when this song became life
you were dreaming of a gold Christmas
just like the ones you knew at home,
where the hot sands laze in shimmering haze
and the breakers pound in foam. . . .
And the snow lay round about you,
deep and crisp, and even its beauty turned to ashes ;
frozen ashes and frozen dust, and a pile of airgraphs
in a rubber-band, are all that's left to us.

Silent His Wings

Grief has turned the whole world phantom—
only you are real.

You filling the house with song,
tossing the children and piling their outstretched hands
with lollies and fruit and all the generous loot
of your home-coming ;
sending flowers to a sick old lady,
flinging silver to a newsboy or a down-and-out,
singling the lonely, the unlovely for the glow of your
gallantry.

Silent His Wings

Your heart, sometimes tender as a girl's,
was stout as a thoroughbred's. Your courage, whipped by
a steel will,
vaulted the sheer hurdle of your grim imaginings,
and carried you to the rank of natural leader.
You in a tiny hand-picked bunch of sappers
chosen to gelignite Broome in the teeth
of the down-swooping Jap, saw stately Dutch flying-boats,
lovely Dutch women, riddled with bullets, blasted, floating,
American Liberators and quaking Malays spine-shattered
by the hail of yellow bombs. You smelt and tasted death
and the tang of it never left your tongue.

Silent His Wings

Yet worse was boredom when the tide of death receded from Broome, leaving you stranded on a mile-long jetty, month after month, guarding a continent with a 303. There as you communed with your cobbler and the sharks sighting phantom armadas, you felt reason evaporate in tropic heat. You celebrated your twenty-first birthday stocking a cemetery, and dreamed of piloting a plane-winged movement after stagnation, cool swift flight; and more, it meant Perth, and home sometimes at night.

Each leave was sharp-etched, joy-pointed,
bitten into the heart of all who saw you;
in the hut as in the drawing-room
you were the magnet. "Sing us a song, Max!
Do the Goof Act! Sell us a pig!"
You sold them a pig and you sold them bayonet drill,
you knew you were selling your only life for us
just like that Jesus you believed in, onward up the Hill;
you won your wings and a halo's glow,
you were the light of our world,
quenched, quenched forever in the implacable snow.

Silent His Wings

And the wheel turns on in meaningless routine—
rise—bath—dress—eat—work—eat—sleep,
stand in queues, trains, escalators, like poor dumb sheep,
and just occasionally think, read, strive or weep
for human impotence and the vicious circle
of man's imperfectibility.

The crammed trams strain up the hill
lurching with women and infants, the aged and quivering,
shivering grey flesh clinging with shrunken bony fingers
clutching desperately at a weak thread of life outworn,
while your exultance, your pulsing manhood lies spilt
on the snow—your vigorous children unborn.

Silent His Wings

And the cards of sympathy flutter from the letter-box—
God's will be done—the ways of the Lord are passing
strange—

Greater love hath no man than this, and they shall not
grow old

as we that are left grow old. Ready-made sentiments,
tuppence-coloured in discreet heliotrope to save thinking;
mass-produced condolence ready printed for mass
slaughter.

So long, old man—Rest in Peace.

For thine is the fighting, the honour and glory—
and the memorial service. We cannot, Lord, thy purpose
see,

but all is well that's done by Thee.

And so, having conveniently cast the blame on God,
we turn to scrabble for our meat, beer, and cigarettes.

Coupon-wingeing, our glazed eyeballs scan

“Mass raids on Berlin” with “The Pyjama Murder”

and “Lottery Nine-Five-One,” and we turn from thinking
to blaming politicians, censors, the Government, the
System.

Silent His Wings

We are the system ; there is no scapegoat.
You and I, even selling buttons for soldiers
or giving blood to the Red Cross,
we are to blame, not Hitler or Tojo.
We, the ordinary peace-loving people all over the world,
are too busy with our noses buried in some earth-bound
job,
too pre-occupied with the next meal and the next movie,
our new suit or the baby's weight,
to be bothered shouting "These things SHALL NOT BE!"
We leave the government to Big Business,
Monopolies which have betrayed their trust,
and benevolent Exploiters. They have time
to stoke the furnace of war with our dead bodies—
your husband's, my brother's, your son's.
It's too late for us to shout now,
to cry we'd rather have butter than guns ;
there's only time for us to die.

Silent His Wings

Dying's so swift ; it's living is long, arduous, uphill ;
but he is dead, and you and I are alive still.

He died to give us time to think,
to raise our voices and demand
the world shall be ruled for the many
not the privilege of the few.

We are the warriors on the home front,
ours is a lifelong fight against the evils of peace
that spawn war ; against men denied the right to work
and women to leisure, against children denied
the right to be born to a welcoming world, a world
whose riches men have so far used for death
not shared living. There'll be no armistice for us,
no let-up till all learn to give their all
for life. Only thus can we avenge his death,
transmute his sacrifice to positive,
not the mere salvaging that hulk of inequality
offering his nephews certain death in their maturity.
That way his sacrifice has been empty as an idiot's laugh
echoing down the corridors of the years ;
a gallant cry, muted by the noise of our neglect.

Silent His Wings

He gave us safety. Are we going to throw it away
and breed cause and corpses for future wars
by torpid thinking and ostrich-living—
burying our heads in the sand of the day's chores
and letting the future be moulded by sellers of guns?
We owe it to him to shout "No!";
to live "No!" with every fibre of our will;
to prove that living is not the mere
feeding our bodies while our souls perish.
Living is striving for the good of all, not private gain;
never resting while ignorance, injustice remain.

Silent His Wings

“A tall order!” you scoff, retreating into individual shells.
“What has that to do with us? We are but one,
how can we abolish the world’s hells?
Besides there’s no time; no sooner
we’ve earned our living and had a little fun—
life’s done.”

Remember huge anthills built by separate little ants;
remember huge armies built by separate human flesh.
Can human beings unite only to die—
not live together? It’s up to us, you and me.
He gave us time; we owe it to him.
As he would have said: “We’ve had War. Forever cease.
The game’s on! Let’s fight for everlasting Peace.”

Silent His Wings

Some are too old to fight ; they've given all—
all love, all light, all hope, gone with a flag's pall ;
for them a dragging chain of anguish-laden years,
their throats strained with crying, their nights full of tears.

And when the war is ended
—all sacrifices rendered,
no bells of victory can pierce
the deaf walls of hearts frozen with sorrow.
He was so full of plans, tenacious, fierce,
to outwit doom. Now there is no to-morrow
—only echoes of past years.

Silent His Wings

“Why you?” we cry to the impersonal stars,
and beat our breasts in vain ;
and the mocking answers come in the hum
of plane upon mocking plane.
Arrow-true, they split the dark apple of night,
cut the search-beams of this world ;
while you, the golden image of flight,
lie with your wings furled.

Silent His Wings

Stencil of aircraft against space,
black shadow-crosses,
twin-engined birds that wheel and race
like albatrosses;
while there's a wing-tip to bank the sky,
you should not die.

The engines shatter the clouds with their clatter,
the engines whine and shrill,
boring the aching core of our grief
like a cruel electric drill;
and our stricken flesh revolts with the cry
—"It should be you who rides the sky!"

Silent His Wings

Sun sets; golden, vibrant, red—
while there is warmth and colour that glows
you are not dead.

You are the living spirit that blows
meaning and purpose and hope through our veins,
you are the symbol of life at its crest,
you are the heart of all that remains,
—sweet be your rest!

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