

Classic Poetry Series

Edwin Markham
- poems -

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Edwin Markham(23 April 1852 - 7 March 1940)

Charles Edwin Anson Markham was an American poet.

Life

Edwin Markham was born in Oregon City, Oregon and was the youngest of 10 children; his parents divorced shortly after his birth. At the age of four, he moved to Lagoon Valley, an area northeast of San Francisco; there, he lived with his sister and mother. He worked on the family's farm beginning at twelve. Although his mother was opposed to his pursuing higher education, he studied literature at the California College in Vacaville, California, and received his teacher's certificate in 1870. In 1872 he graduated from San Jose State Normal School, and in 1873 finished his studies of classics at Christian College in Santa Rosa. He went by "Charles" until about 1895, when he was about 43, when he started using "Edwin".

In 1898, Markham married his third wife, Anna Catherine Murphy (1859–1938) and in 1899 their son Virgil was born. They moved to New York City in 1901, where they lived in Brooklyn and then Staten Island. Edwin Markham had, by the time of his death, amassed a huge personal library of 15 000+ volumes. This collection was bequeathed to Wagner College's Horrmann Library, located on Staten Island. Markham also willed his personal papers to the library. Edwin's correspondents included Franklin D. Roosevelt, Ambrose Bierce, Jack and Charmian London, Carl Sandburg, Florence Earle Coates and Amy Lowell

Career

Markham taught literature in El Dorado County until 1879, when he became education superintendent of the county. While residing in El Dorado County, Markham became a member of Placerville Masonic Lodge. Charles also accepted a job as principal of Tompkins Observation School in Oakland, California in 1890. While in Oakland, he became well acquainted with many other famous contemporary writers and poets, such as Joaquin Miller, Ina Coolbrith, Charles Warren Stoddard, and Edmund Clarence Stedman.

Edwin's most famous poem was first presented at a public poetry reading in 1898. He read "The Man With the Hoe," which accented laborers' hardships. His main inspiration was a French painting of the same name (in French, L'homme à la houe) by Jean-François Millet. Markham's poem was published, and it became quite popular very soon. In New York, he gave many lectures to labor groups.

These happened as often as his poetry readings.

In 1922, Markham's poem "Lincoln, the Man of the People" was selected from 250 entries to be read at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial. The author himself, read the poem. Of it, Dr. Henry Van Dyke, of Princeton said, "Edwin Markham's Lincoln is the greatest poem ever written on the immortal martyr, and the greatest that ever will be written." Later that year, Markham was filmed reciting the poem by Lee De Forest in his Phonofilm sound-on-film process.

As recounted by literary biographer William R. Nash, between publications, Markham lectured and wrote in other genres, including essays and nonfiction prose. He also gave much of his time to organizations such as the Poetry Society of America, which he established in 1910. In 1922, at the conclusion to the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial, Markham read a revised version of his poem, "Lincoln the Man of the People. Throughout Markham's later life, many readers viewed him as an important voice in American poetry, a position signified by honors such as his election in 1908 to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Despite his numerous accolades, however, none of his later books achieved the success of the first two.

Legacy

The change in Markham's literary significance has been tied to the development of modernist poetry and his steadfast refusal to change to meet the increasing demands arising with the appearance of poets such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams. Their emphasis on changes in literary forms and their movement away from social commentary and political topics made much of what distinguished Markham's verse dated. He gradually fell from critical favor, and his reputation never fully recovered.

"Nevertheless, despite the critics' increasing disenchantment with him, Markham remained an important public figure, traveling across the nation and receiving warm praise nearly everywhere he went. At his home on Staten Island, his birthday was a local school holiday, and children marked the event by covering his lawn with flowers. The crowning glory came on Markham's eightieth birthday, when a number of prominent citizens, including President Herbert Hoover, honored his accomplishments at a party in Carnegie Hall and named him one of the most important artists of his age. In 1936 Markham suffered a debilitating stroke from which he never fully recovered; he died at his home on Staten Island, New York.

"In his day Markham managed to fuse art and social commentary in a manner

that guaranteed him a place among the most famous artists of the late nineteenth century. His reputation has faded because of the somewhat dated nature of his verse; nevertheless, he remains a notable figure for his contributions to American poetry. His work stands as an example of what American critics and readers valued near the turn of the century. His poetry offers insight into an important phase in the development of American letters."

A Creed

There is a destiny that makes us brothers:
None goes his way alone:
All that we send into the lives of others
Comes back into our own.

I care not what his temples or his creeds,
One thing holds firm and fast
That into his fateful heap of days and deeds
The soul of man Is cast.

Edwin Markham

A Look Into The Gulf

I LOOKED one night, and there the Semiramis,
With all her mourning doves about her head,
Sat rocking on an ancient road of Hell,
Withered and eyeless, chanting to the moon
Snatches of song they sang to her of old
Upon the lighted roofs of Nineveh.
And then her voice rang out with rattling laugh:
'The bugles! they are crying back again--
Bugles that broke the nights of Babylon,
And then went crying on through Nineveh.

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Stand back, ye trembling messengers of ill!
Women, let go my hair: I am the Queen,
A whirlwind and a blaze of swords to quell
Insurgent cities. Let the iron tread
Of armies shake the earth. Look, lofty towers:
Assyria goes by upon the wind!
And so she babbles by the ancient road,
While cities turned to dust upon the Earth
Rise through her whirling brain to live again--
Babbles all night, and when her voice is dead
Her weary lips beat on without a sound.

Edwin Markham

A Lyric Of The Dawn

Alone I list
In the leafy tryst;
Silent the woodlands in their starry sleep—
Silent the phantom wood in waters deep:
No footfall of a wind along the pass
Startles a harebell—stirs a blade of grass.
Yonder the wandering weeds,
Enchanted in the light,
Stand in the gusty hollows, still and white;
Yonder are plummy reeds,
Dusking the border of the clear lagoon;
Far off the silver clifts
Hang in ethereal light below the moon;
Far off the ocean lifts,
Tossing its billows in the misty beam,
And shore-lines whiten, silent as a dream:
I hark for the bird, and all the hushed hills harken:
This is the valley: here the branches darken
The silver-lighted stream.

Hark—
That rapture in the leafy dark!
Who is it shouts upon the bough aswing,
Waking the upland and the valley under?
What carols, like the blazon of a king,
Fill all the dawn with wonder?
Oh, hush,
It is the thrush,
In the deep and woody glen!
Ah, thus the gladness of the gods was sung,
When the old Earth was young;
That rapture rang,
When the first morning on the mountains sprang:
And now he shouts, and the world is young again!
Carol, my king,
On your bough aswing!
Thou art not of these evil days—
Thou art a voice of the world's lost youth:
Oh, tell me what is duty—what is truth—

How to find God upon these hungry ways;
Tell of the golden prime,
When bird and beast could make a man their friend ;
When men beheld swift deities descend,
Before the race was left alone with Time,
Homesick on Earth, and homeless to the end;
Before great Pan was dead,
Before the naiads fled;
When maidens white with dark eyes shy and bold,
With peals of laughter on the peaks of gold,
Startled the still dawn—
Shone in upon the mountains and were gone,
Their voices fading silverly in depths of forests old.
Sing of the wonders of their woodland ways,
Before the weird earth-hunger of these days,
When there was rippling mirth,
When justice was on Earth,
And light and grandeur of the Golden Age;
When never a heart was sad,
When all from king to herdsman had
A penny for a wage.
Ah, that old time has faded to a dream—
The moon's fair face is broken in the stream;
Yet shout and carol on, O bird, and let
The exiled race not utterly forget;
Publish thy revelation on the lawns—
Sing ever in the dark ethereal dawns;
Sometime, in some sweet year,
These stormy souls, these men of Earth may hear.

But hark again,
From the secret glen,
That voice of rapture and ethereal youth
Now laden with despair.
Forbear, O bird, forbear:
Is life not terrible enough forsooth?
Cease, cease the mystic song—
No more, no more, the passion and the pain:
It wakes my life to fret against the chain;
It makes me think of all the aged wrong—
Of joy and the end of joy and the end of all—

Of souls on Earth, and souls beyond recall.
Ah, ah, that voice again!
It makes me think of all these restless men
Called into time—their progress and their goal;
And now, oh now, it sends into my soul
Dreams of a love that might have been for me—
That might have been—and now can never be.

Tell me no more of these—
Tell me of trancéd trees;
(The ghosts, the memories, in pity spare)
Show me the leafy home of the wild bees;
Show me the snowy summits dim in air;
Tell me of things afar
In valleys silent under moon and star:
Dim hollows hushed with night,
The lofty cedars misty in the light,
Wild clusters of the vine,
Wild odors of the pine,
The eagle's eyrie lifted to the moon—
High places where on quiet afternoon
A shadow swiftens by, a thrilling scream
Startles the cliff, and dies across the woodland to a dream.

Ha, now
He springs from the bough,
It flickers—he is lost!
Out of the copse he sprang;
This is the floating briar where he tossed:
The leaves are yet atremble where he sang
Here a long vista opens—look!
This is the way he took,
Through the pale poplars by the pond:
Hark! he is shouting in the field beyond.
Ho, there he goes
Through the alder close!
He leaves me here behind him in his flight,
And yet my heart goes with him out of sight!
What whispered spell
Of Faëry calls me on from dell to dell?

I hear the voice—it wanders in a dream—
Now in the grove, now on the hill, now on
the fading stream.

Lead on—you know the way
Lead on to Arcady,
O'er fields asleep; by river bank abrim;
Down leafy ways, dewy and cool and dim;
By dripping rocks, dark dwellings of the gnome,
Where hurrying waters dash their crests to foam.
I follow where you lead,
Down winding paths, across the flowery mead,
Down silent hollows where the woodbine blows,
Up water-courses scented by the rose.
I follow the wandering voice—
I follow, I rejoice,
I fade away into the Age of Gold—
We two together lost in forest old.-
O ferny and thymy paths, O fields of Aidenn,
Canyons and cliffs by mortal feet untrod!
O souls that are weary and are heavy laden,
Here is the peace of God !

Lo! now the clamoring hours are on the way:
Faintly the pine tops redden in the ray;
From vale to vale fleet-footed rumors run,
With sudden apprehension of the sun;
A light wind stirs
The filmy tops of delicate dim firs,
And on the river border blows,
Breaking the shy bud softly to a rose.
Sing out, O throstle, sing:
I follow on, my king:
Lead me forever through the crimson dawn—
Till the world ends, lead me on!
Ho there! he shouts again—he sways—and now,
Upspringing from the bough,
Flashing a glint of dew upon the ground,
Without a sound
He drops into a valley and is gone!

Edwin Markham

A Mendocino Memory

I climbed the canyon to a river-head,
And looking backward saw a splendor spread.
Miles beyond miles, of every kingly hue
And trembling tint the looms of Arras knew—
A flowery pomp as of the dying day,
A splendor where a god might take his way.

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It was the brink of night and everywhere
Tall redwoods spread their filmy tops in air;
Huge trunks, like shadows upon shadow cast,
Pillared the under twilight, vague and vast.

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Lightly I broke green branches for a bed,
And gathered ferns, a pillow for my head.
And what to this were kingly chambers worth—
Sleeping, an ant, upon the sheltering earth.

Edwin Markham

A Prayer

Teach me, Father, how to go
Softly as the grasses grow;
Hush my soul to meet the shock
Of the wild world as a rock;
But my spirit, propt with power,
Make as simple as a flower.
Let the dry heart fill its cup,
Like a poppy looking up;
Let life lightly wear her crown
Like a poppy looking down,
When its heart is filled with dew,
And its life begins anew.

Teach me, Father, how to be
Kind and patient as a tree.
Joyfully the crickets croon
Under the shady oak at noon;
Beetle, on his mission bent,
Tarries in that cooling tent.
Let me, also, cheer a spot,
Hidden field or garden grot—
Place where passing souls can rest
On the way and be their best.

Edwin Markham

A Song To A Tree

Give me the dance of your boughs, O tree,
Whenever the wild wind blows;
And when the wind is gone, give me
Your beautiful repose.

How easily your greatness swings
To meet the changing hours;
I, too, would mount upon your wings,
And rest upon your powers.

I seek your grace, O mighty tree,
And shall seek, many a day,
Till I more worthily shall be
Your comrade on the way.

Edwin Markham

A Workman To The Gods

Once Phidias stood, with hammer in his hand,
Carving Minerva from the breathing stone,
Tracing with love the winding of a hair,
A single hair upon her head, whereon
A youth of Athens cried, "O Phidias,
Why do you dally on a hidden hair?
When she is lifted to the lofty front
Of the Parthenon, no human eye will see."
And Phidias thundered on him: "Silence, slave:
Men will not see, but the Immortals will!"

Edwin Markham

An Old Road

A host of poppies, a flight of swallows;
A flurry of rain, and a wind that follows
Shepherds the leaves in the sheltered hollows
For the forest is shaken and thinned.

Over my head are the firs for rafter;
The crows blow south, and my heart goes after;
I kiss my hands to the world with laughter—
Is it Aidenn or mystical Ind?

Oh, the whirl of the fields in the windy weather!
How the barley breaks and blows together!
Oh, glad is the free bird afloat on the heather—
Oh, the whole world is glad of the wind!

Edwin Markham

Anchored To The Infinite

The builder who first bridged Niagara's gorge,
Before he swung his cable, shore to shore,
Sent out across the gulf his venturing kite
Bearing a slender cord for unseen hands
To grasp upon the further cliff and draw
A greater cord, and then a greater yet;
Till at the last across the chasm swung
The cable then the mighty bridge in air!

So we may send our little timid thought
Across the void, out to God's reaching hands—
Send out our love and faith to thread the deep—
Thought after thought until the little cord
Has greatened to a chain no chance can break,
And we are anchored to the Infinite!

Edwin Markham

Brotherhood

The crest and crowning of all good,
Life's final star, is brotherhood;
For it will bring again to Earth
Her long-lost Poesy and Mirth;
Will send new light on every face,
A kingly power upon the race.
And till it come, we men are slaves,
And travel downward to the dust of graves.
Come, clear the way, then, clear the way;
Blind creeds and kings have had their day;
Break the dead branches from the path;
Our Hope is in the aftermath-
Our hope is in heroic men
Star-led to build the world again.
Make way for brotherhood- make way for Man!

Edwin Markham

Earth Is Enough

We men of Earth have here the stuff
Of Paradise - we have enough!
We need no other stones to build
The Temple of the Unfulfilled -
No other ivory for the doors -
No other marble for the floors -
No other cedar for the beam
And dome of man's immortal dream.

Here on the paths of every-day -
Here on the common human way
Is all the stuff the gods would take
To build a Heaven, to mold and make
New Edens. Ours is the stuff sublime
To build Eternity in time!

Edwin Markham

Epigrams

Preparedness

For all your days prepare,
And meet them ever alike:
When you are the anvil, bear--
When you are the hammer, Strike.

Outwitted

He drew a circle that shut me out--
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

The Avengers

The laws are the secret avengers,
And they rule above all lands;
They come on wool-soft sandals,
But they strike with iron hands.

Edwin Markham

How Oswald Dined With God

Over Northumbria's lone, gray lands,
Over the frozen marl,
Went flying the fogs from the fens and sands,
And the wind with a wolfish snarl.

Frosty and stiff by the gray York wall
Stood the rusty grass and the yarrow:
Gone wings and songs to the southland, all-
Robin and starling and sparrow.

Weary with weaving the battle-woof,
Came the king and his thanes to the Hall:
Feast fires reddened the beams of the roof,
Torch flames waved from the wall.

Bright was the gold that the table bore,
Where platters and beakers shone:
Whining hounds on the sanded floor
Looked hungrily up for a bone.

Laughing, the king took his seat at the board,
With his gold-haired queen at his right:
War-men sitting around them roared
Like a crash of the shields in fight.

Loud rose laughter and lusty cheer,
And gleemen sang loud in their throats,
Telling of swords and the whistling spear,
Till their red beards shook with the notes.

Varlets were bringing the smoking boar,
Ladies were pouring the ale,
When the watchmen called from the great hall door:
'O King, on the wind is a wail.

'Feebly the host of the hungry poor
Lift hands at the gate with a cry:
Grizzled and gaunt they come over the moor,
Blasted by earth and sky.'

'Ho!' cried the king to the thanes, 'make speed-
Carry this food to the gates,
Off with the boar and the cask of mead-
Leave but a loaf on the plates.'

Still came a cry from the hollow night:
'King, this is one day's feast;
But days are coming with famine and blight;
Wolf winds howl from the east!'

Hot from the king's heart leaped a deed,
High as his iron crown:
(Noble souls have a deathless need
To stoop to the lowest down.)

'Thanes, I swear by Godde's Bride
This is a cursèd thing-
Hunger for the folk outside,
Gold inside for the king!'

Whirling his war-ax over his head,
He cleft each plate into four.
'Gather them up, O thanes,' he said,
'For the work-folk at the door.'

'Give them this for the morrow's meat,
Then shall we feast in accord:
Our half of the loaf will then be sweet-
Sweet as the bread of the Lord!'

Edwin Markham

In Death Valley

There came gray stretches of volcanic plains,
Bare, lone and treeless, then a bleak lone hill
Like to the dolorous hill that Dobell saw.
Around were heaps of ruins piled between
The Burn o' Sorrow and the Water o' Care;
And from the stillness of the down-crushed walls
One pillar rose up dark against the moon.
There was a nameless Presence everywhere;
In the gray soil there was a purple stain,
And the gray reticent rocks were dyed with blood—
Blood of a vast unknown Calamity.
It was the mark of some ancestral grief—
Grief that began before the ancient Flood.

Edwin Markham

Joy Of The Morning

I hear you, little bird,
Shouting a-swing above the broken wall.
Shout louder yet: no song can tell it all.
Sing to my soul in the deep, still wood :
'Tis wonderful beyond the wildest word:
I d tell it, too, if I could.

Oft when the white, still dawn
Lifted the skies and pushed the hills apart,
I've felt it like a glory in my heart
(The world s mysterious stir)
But had no throat like yours, my bird,
Nor such a listener.

Edwin Markham

He built the rail-pile as he built the State,
Pouring his splendid strength through every blow,
The conscience of him testing every stroke,
To make his deed the measure of a man.

So came the Captain with the mighty heart;
And when the judgment thunders split the house,
Wrenching the rafters from their ancient rest,
He held the ridgepole up, and spiked again
The rafters of the Home. He held his place --
Held the long purpose like a growing tree --
Held on through blame and faltered not at praise.
And when he fell in whirlwind, he went down
As when a lordly cedar, green with boughs,
Goes down with a great shout upon the hills,
And leaves a lonesome place against the sky.

Edwin Markham

Lion And Lioness

ONE night we were together, you and I,
And had unsown Assyria for a lair,
Before the walls of Babylon rose in air.
How languid hills were heaped along the sky,
And white bones marked the wells of alkali,
When suddenly down the lion-path a sound . . .
The wild man-odor . . . then a crouch, a bound,
And the frail Thing fell quivering with a cry!

Your yellow eyes burned beautiful with light:
The dead man lying there quieted and white:
I roared my triumph over the desert wide,
Then stretched out, glad for the sands and satisfied;
And through the long, star-stilled Assyrian night,
I felt your body breathing by my side.

Edwin Markham

My Comrade

I NEVER build a song by night or day,
Of breaking ocean or of blowing whin,
But in some wondrous unexpected way,
Like light upon a road, my Love comes in.

And when I go at night upon the hill,
My heart is lifted on mysterious wings:
My Love is there to strengthen and to still,
For she can take away the dread of things.

Edwin Markham

Poetry

SHE comes like the hush and beauty of the night,
And sees too deep for laughter;
Her touch is a vibration and a light
From worlds before and after.

Edwin Markham

Preparedness

For all your days prepare,
And meet them ever alike:
When you are the anvil, bear—
When you are the hammer, strike.

Edwin Markham

Rules For The Road

Stand straight:

Step firmly, throw your weight:

The heaven is high above your head,

The good gray road is faithful to your tread.

Be strong:

Sing to your heart a battle song:

Though hidden foemen lie in wait,

Something is in you that can smile at Fate.

Press through:

Nothing can harm you if you are true.

And when night comes, rest:

The earth is friendly as a mother's breast.

Edwin Markham

Sing A While Longer

Has the bright sun set,
Has the gale grown stronger?
Still we'll not grieve yet:
We will sing a while longer!

Has our youth been met
By Time the wronger?
Let us not grieve yet,
Let us sing a while longer!

Is the world beset,
Do the sorrows throng her?
Let us not grieve yet:
Let us sing a while longer!

Edwin Markham

The Chant Of The Vultures

We are circling, glad of the battle: we
joy in the smell of the smoke.
Fight on in the hell of the trenches: we
publish your names with a croak!
Ye will lie in dim heaps when the sunset
blows cold on the reddening sand;
Yet fight, for the dead will have wages—a
death-clutch of dust in the hand.
Ye have given us banquet, O kings, and
still do we clamor for more:
Vast, vast is our hunger, as vast as the
sea-hunger gnawing the shore.

'Tis well ye are swift with your signals—
the blaze of the banners, the blare
Of the bugles, the boom of battalions, the
cannon-breath hot on the air.
It is for our hunger ye hurry, it is for our
feast ye are met:
Be sure we will never forget you, O servants
that never forget!
For we are the Spirits of Battle, the peerage
of greed we defend:
Our lineage rose from the Night, and we
go without fellow or friend.

We were ere our servant Sesostris spread
over the Asian lands
The smoke of the blood of the peoples,
and scattered their bones to the sands.
We circled in revel for ages above the
Assyrian stream,
While Babylon builded her beauty, and
faded to dust and to dream.
We scattered our laughter on nations—
and Troy was a word and a waste,
The glory of Carthage was ruined, the

grandeur of Rome was effaced!

And we blazoned the name of Timour, as
he harried his herd of kings,
And the host of his hordes wound on, a
dragon with undulant rings.
And we slid down the wind upon France,
when the steps of the earthquake passed,
When the Bastile bloomed into flame, and
the heavens went by on the blast.
We hung over Austerlitz, cheering the
armies with jubilant cries:
We scented three kings at the carnage,
and croaked our applause from the skies.

O kings, ye have catered to vultures—
have chosen to feed us, forsooth,
The joy of the world and her glory, the
hope of the world and her youth.
O kings, ye are diligent lackeys: we laurel
your names with our praise,
For ye are the staff of our comfort, for ye
are the strength of our days.
Then spur on the host in the trenches to
give up the sky at a stroke:
We tell all the winds of their glory: we
publish their fame with a croak!

Edwin Markham

The Christ Of The Andes

After volcanoes husht with snows,
Up where the wide-winged condor goes,
Great Aconcagua, husht and high,
Sends down the ancient peace of the sky.

So, poised in clean Andean air,
Where bleak with cliffs the grim peaks stare,
Christ, reaching out his sacred hands,
Sheds his brave peace upon the lands.

There once of old wild battles roared
And brother-blood was on the sword;
Now all the fields are rich with grain
And only roses redden the plain.

Torn were the peoples with feuds and hates
Fear on the mountain-walls, death at the gates;
Then through the clamor of arms was heard
A whisper of the Master's word.

'Fling down your swords; be friends again:
Ye are not wolf-packs: ye are men.
Let brother-counsel be the Law:
Not serpent fang, not tiger claw.'

Chile and Argentina heard;
The great hopes in their spirits stirred;
The red swords from their clenched fists fell,
And heaven shone out where once was hell!

They hurled their cannons into flame
And out of the forge the strong Christ came.
Twas thus they molded in happy fire
The tall Christ of their hearts desire...

O Christ of Olivet, you husht the wars
Under the far Andean stars:
Lift now your strong nail-wounded hands
Over all peoples, over all lands

Stretch out those comrade hands to be
A shelter over land and sea!

Edwin Markham

The Cricket

The twilight is the morning of his day.
While Sleep drops seaward from the fading shore,
With purpling sail and dip of silver oar,
He cheers the shadowed time with roundelay,
Until the dark east softens into gray.
Now as the noisy hours are coming—hark!
His song dies gently—it is growing dark—
His night, with its one star, is on the way!

Faintly the light breaks over the blowing oats—
Sleep, little brother, sleep: I am astir.
We worship Song, and servants are of her—
I in the bright hours, thou in shadow-time:
Lead thou the starlit night with merry notes,
And I will lead the clamoring day with rhyme.

Edwin Markham

The Daring One

I would my soul were like the bird
That dares the vastness undeterred.
Look, where the bluebird on the bough
Breaks into rapture even now!
He sings, tip-top, the tossing elm
As tho he would a world o'erwhelm.
Indifferent to the void he rides
Upon the wind's eternal tides.

He tosses gladly on the gale,
For well he knows he can not fail—
Knows if the bough breaks, still his wings
Will bear him upward while he sings!

Edwin Markham

The Humming Bird

A sudden whirr of eager sound—
And now a something throbs around
The flowers that watch the fountain. Look!
It touched the rose, the green leaves shook,
I think, and yet so lightly tost
That not a spark of dew was lost.
Tell me, O rose, what thing it is
That now appears, now vanishes?
Surely it took its fire-green hue
From day-breaks that it glittered through;
Quick, for this sparkle of the dawn
Glints through the garden and is gone.

Edwin Markham

The Invisible Bride

The low-voiced girls that go
 In gardens of the Lord,
Like flowers of the field they grow
 In sisterly accord.

Their whispering feet are white
 Along the leafy ways;
They go in whirls of light
 Too beautiful for praise.

And in their band forsooth
 Is one to set me free --
The one that touched my youth --
 The one God gave to me.

She kindles the desire
 Whereby the gods survive --
The white ideal fire
 That keeps my soul alive.

Now at the wondrous hour,
 She leaves her star supreme,
And comes in the night's still power,
 To touch me with a dream.

Sibyl of mystery
 On roads unknown to men,
Softly she comes to me,
 And goes to God again.

Edwin Markham

The Last Furrow

THE SPIRIT OF EARTH with still, restoring hands,
Mid ruin moves, in glimmering chasm gropes,
And mosses mantle and the bright flower opes;
But Death the Ploughman wanders in all lands,
And to the last of Earth his furrow stands.
The grave is never hidden: fearful hopes
Follow the dead upon the fading slopes,
And there wild memories meet upon the sands.
When willows fling their banners to the plain,
When rumor of winds and sound of sudden showers
Disturb the dream of winter, all in vain
The grasses hurry to the graves, the flowers
Toss their wild torches on their windy towers;
Yet are the bleak graves lonely in the rain.

Edwin Markham

The Lizard

I sit among the hoary trees
With Aristotle on my knees
And turn with serious hand the pages,
Lost in the cobweb-hush of ages;
When suddenly with no more sound
Than any sunbeam on the ground,
The little hermit of the place
Is peering up into my face—
The slim gray hermit of the rocks,
With bright, inquisitive, quick eyes,
His life a round of harks and shocks,
A little ripple of surprise.

Now lifted up, intense and still,
Sprung from the silence of the hill
He hangs upon the ledge a-glisten.
And his whole body seems to listen!
My pages give a little start,
And he is gone! to be a part
Of the old cedar's crumpled bark.
A mottled scar, a weather mark!

Edwin Markham

The Man With The Hoe (Written After Seeing Millet's World-Famous Painting)

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world.
Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
A thing that grieves not and that never hopes,
Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?
Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?
Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
Whose breath blew out the light within this brain?
Is this the Thing the Lord God made and gave
To have dominion over sea and land;
To trace the stars and search the heavens for power;
To feel the passion of Eternity?
Is this the Dream He dreamed who shaped the suns
And marked their ways upon the ancient deep?
Down all the stretch of Hell to its last gulf
There is no shape more terrible than this --
More tongued with censure of the world's blind greed --
More filled with signs and portents for the soul --
More fraught with menace to the universe.

What gulfs between him and the seraphim!
Slave of the wheel of labor, what to him
Are Plato and the swing of Pleiades?
What the long reaches of the peaks of song,
The rift of dawn, the reddening of the rose?
Through this dread shape the suffering ages look;
Time's tragedy is in that aching stoop;
Through this dread shape humanity betrayed,
Plundered, profaned and disinherited,
Cries protest to the Judges of the World,
A protest that is also prophecy.

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
Is this the handiwork you give to God,
This monstrous thing distorted and soul-quenched?

How will you ever straighten up this shape;
Touch it again with immortality;
Give back the upward looking and the light;
Rebuild in it the music and the dream;
Make right the immemorial infamies,
Perfidious wrongs, immedicable woes?

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
How will the Future reckon with this Man?
How answer his brute question in that hour
When whirlwinds of rebellion shake the world?
How will it be with kingdoms and with kings --
With those who shaped him to the thing he is --
When this dumb Terror shall reply to God,
After the silence of the centuries?

Edwin Markham

The Panther

The moon shears up on Tahoe now:
A panther leaps to a tamarack bough.
She crouches, hugging the crooked limb:
She hears the nearing steps of him
Who sent the little puff of smoke
That stretched her mate beneath the oak.

Her eyes burn beryl, two yellow balls,
As Fate counts out his last footfalls.
A sudden spring, a demon cry,
Carnivorous laughter to the sky.
Her teeth are fastened in his throat
(The moon rides in her silver boat.)
And now one scream of long delight
Across the caverns of the night!

Edwin Markham

The Wall Street Pit

I SEE the hell of faces surge and whirl,
Like malestrom in the ocean--faces lean
And fleshless as the talons of a hawk--
Hot faces like the faces of the wolves
That track the traveller fleeing through the night--
Grim faces shrunken up and fallen in,
Deep-plowed like weather-eaten bark of oak--
Drawn faces like the faces of the dead,
Grown suddenly old upon the brink of Earth.

Is this a whirl of madmen ravening,
And blowing bubbles in their merriment?
Is Babel come again with shrieking crew
To eat the dust and drink the roaring wind?
And all for what? A handful of bright sand
To buy a shroud with and a length of earth?

Oh, saner are the hearts on stiller ways!
Thrice happier they who, far from these wild hours
Grow softly as the apples on a bough.
Wiser the plowman with his scudding blade,
Turning a straight, fresh furrow down a field--
Wiser the herdsman whistling to his heart,
In the long shadows at the break of day--
Wiser the fisherman with quiet hand,
Slanting his sail against the evening wind.

The swallows sweep back south again,
The green of May is edging all the boughs,
The shy arbutus shimmers in the wood,
And yet this hell of faces in the town--
This storm of tongues, this whirlpool roaring on,
Surrounded by the quiets of the hills;
The great calm stars forever overhead,
And, under all, the silence of the dead!

Edwin Markham

The Whirlwind Road

THE MUSES wrapped in mysteries of light
Came in a rush of music on the night;
And I was lifted wildly on quick wings,
And borne away into the deep of things.
The dead doors of my being broke apart;
A wind of rapture blew across the heart;
The inward song of worlds rang still and clear;
I felt the Mystery the Muses fear;
Yet they went swiftening on the ways un-trod,
And hurled me breathless at the feet of God.

I felt faint touches of the Final Truth,—
Moments of trembling love, moments of youth.
A vision swept away the human wall;
Slowly I saw the meaning of it all—
Meaning of life and time and death and birth,—
But cannot tell it to the men of Earth.
I only point the way, and they must go
The whirlwind road of song if they would know.

Edwin Markham