

Max Wickert

[from] **NOCTURNES**



Simon Marmion, *Tondal's Vision*

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1

At moonrise they know it all
behind the stars are brighter
stars below the sleeping ground
there lurks a deeper darkness
after their cries of delight
they mouth unutterable
words and a cold rhythm throbs
under their most excited
heartbeats.

 In obscurity
that leaps from their eyes the stars
begin and in the fire
that spreads from their foot-soles
night stabs into the grave the words
of the uncharted future
are plotted out when they speak
ultimate syllables time
grows motoric as they breathe

Moonrise and all is clear they
converse in the most ancient
of gestures grow silly fond
with old anticipation
of which something always comes
though it is rarely their own
doing

 and so they worry
about the onset of dawn

All would be well if morning
taught them that their great yearning
to grow up was also once
an innocent desire

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo, NY:
Outriders, 1972)

2

Absent-minded anyman
anonymous on the moon
can know neither here nor there
it is all one to him now
he has peeled his body bare
and emptied out his whole mind
has learned to keep his eye fixed
on the milky way and his heart
riveted to a single
woman even if she is
his mother.

 All the same he
knows "the perfume of flowers
the beautification of
the whole body night meetings
in secret music token
exchanges anguish remorse
jealousy murder the whole
opera"

 though he perhaps
can never be torn from his
ivory chair and his play
be nevermore entered
or altered by spoil-sport dawn

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo, NY:
Outriders, 1972)

3

Open mouth of the moon and
the youngest sons lie hidden
pips inside a dark apple
in the pulp of their sleeping
from thousands of open mouths
souls are protruding like mice

Dull eyes of owls fall open
wisdom spreads gigantic wings

The green primitives prepare
for the test of brotherhood
now they're bidding goodbye
to the heavy brutal voices
of their first youth now scoring
the soft face of the mother
with delicate knives and now
sweeping up moon dust into
the deep hollow of a cheek

They hurl their seed at the wall

The mice dart in and out like
tongues blades of wings cut the air
clouds wipe the moon-mouth and peace
composes trembling bowels
whispers on thousands of lips

Bedewed and calmed and strengthened
once more the savages squeeze
morning from the gourd of night

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo,
NY: Outriders, 1972)

4

It is trial by moonlight:
in this hot night human kind
thrashes bravely on empty sheets
no one will sleep with no one else
muscles bulge arms flail

bravol

you keep your cushions at bay

Memory my enemy
goodnight: goodnight desire
The loved one alone lies still
how disappointing to find
that the demons are friendly
and her flesh only flowers

But the disciple will dream
a sentence pronounced over
and over .

On June 16th

*Nineteen-hundred-and-four you
could still have endured your whole
contemporaneity*

No one will be allowed in
the Library
nowhere else
morning comes down like an axe.

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo, NY: Outriders, 1972)

6

Sober in their spotless night
ghosts of lovers stand naked
under every traffic light

regard each other calmly
and do not touch the dew falls
down through them to the pavement

the purposeless signals click
Others lie leisurely side
by side in the forsaken

parking lots sit on the curb
outside the Bank stroll *slowly*
past the Armory every

gesture and posture of theirs
unhurried and decisive
tender and reserved the dew

drops through them the darkness
includes their bright bodies these
presences of the City

and only you and I (love)
know when their night is over
and the hour when their cleanness

passes,
 while new traffic
trickles from the closed fist of
the disenchanting morning

--written 1971, published in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo,
NY: Outriders, 1972)

7

Because every blade of grass
points to a star and all light
has been lent to another
world,

 because wind and water
have enfranchised the swishing
of bare feet and the sleepy
cicadas

 and because now
although the road is endless
the concrete of the road ends
at your toes

 nobody knows
that a girl peels off her black
sweater in the pitch dark while
her man lies smiling and skinned
invisible even to
himself

 and only the smell
tells fieldmice and foxes what
shape to give unfamiliar fright,
until night floats away
like a ghost in a garment
and morning paints nakedness
cleanly back on the landscape

--written 1971, published in *Colleague: A Supplement to The Reporter* (November 18, 1971) and in *All the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo, NY: Outriders, 1972); reprinted in Dennis Maloney, ed., *On Turtle's Back* (Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, 1979) and in *Poems Since When* (1988); the poem was reused as "An Old One" in *Digging the Difference* (q.v.)

Aubade

When at night a brightness comes
and our two-backed ghost appears
writhing in the forbidden
place behind the glass make me
easy tell me this is not
the last night in the last night
all the rooms of our bodies
are entered and no mirrors
can make obstruction

When I
strain to see your face in your
shadow shape but only feel
my own eyes roll in my skull
make me a sign and tell me
this is not the last night in
the last night the dark behind
our eyes marries with the dark
we look out on

When something
about the chill of our room makes
me in my skeleton
shiver reach to touch you while
all the trumpets in the blood
breathe *Now the dawn comes! the dawn comes
now!* tell me it is not now
in the last night out souls
hang discarded in their frames
silent air in flutes of bone

and there can be no morning

--written 1971, published in *Poetry* (CXIX:4, January 1972) and in *All
the Weight of the Still Midnight* (Buffalo, NY: Outriders, 1972)