

# **THE POET IN THE DESERT**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649761463

The Poet in the Desert by Charles Erskine Scott Wood

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**CHARLES ERSKINE SCOTT WOOD**

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BY CHARLES ERSKINE SCOTT WOOD

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## PROLOGUE

POET:

I have entered into the Desert, the place of desolation.  
The Desert confronts me haughtily and assails me with  
solitude.

She sits on a throne of light,  
Her hands clasped, her eyes solemnly questioning.  
I have come into the lean and stricken land  
Which fears not God, that I may meet my soul  
Face to face, naked as the Desert is naked;  
Bare as the great silence is bare:

I will question the Silent Ones who have gone before and  
are forgotten,  
And the great host which shall come after,  
By whom I also shall be forgot.  
As the Desert is defiant unto all gods,  
So am I defiant of all gods,  
Shadows of Man cast upon the fogs of his ignorance.  
As a helpless child follows the hand of its mother,  
So I put my hand into the hand of the Eternal.

I have come to lose myself in the wide immensity and  
know my littleness.  
I have come to lie in the lap of my mother and be  
comforted.  
I am alone but not alone—I am with myself.  
My soul is my companion above all companions.

Behold the signs of the Desert:  
A buzzard, afloat on airy seas,  
Alone, between the two immensities, as I am alone  
between two immensities;

A juniper-tree on a rocky hillside;  
A dark signal from afar off, where the weary may rest in  
the shade;  
A monastery for the flocks of little birds which by night  
hurry across the Desert and hide in the heat of the day;  
A basaltic-cliff, embroidered with lichens and illuminated  
by the sun, orange and yellow,  
The work of a great painter, careless in the splash of his  
brush.  
In its shadow lie timid antelope, which flit through the  
sage-brush and are gone;  
But easily they become fearless unto love.  
The sea of sage-brush, breaking against the purple hills  
far away.  
And the white alkali-flats which shimmer in the mirage  
as beautiful blue lakes, constantly retreating.  
The mirage paints upon the sky, rivers with cool, willowy  
banks;  
You can almost hear the lapping of the water,  
But they flee mockingly, leaving the thirsty to perish.  
I lie down upon the warm sand of the Desert and it seems  
to me Life has its mirages, also.  
I sift the sand through my fingers.

Behold the signs of the Desert:  
The stagnant water-hole, trampled with hoofs;  
About it shine the white bones of those who came too  
late.  
The whirling dust-pillar, waltz of Wind and Earth,  
The dust carried up to the sky in the hot, furious arms of  
the wind, as I also am lifted up.  
The glistening black wall of obsidian, where the wild  
tribes came to fashion their arrows, knives, spearheads.  
The ground is strewn with the fragments, just as they  
dropped them, the strokes of the maker undimmed  
through the desperate years.  
But the hunters have gone forever.

The Desert cares no more for the death of the tribes than  
for the death of the armies of black crawling crickets.  
Silence. Invincible. Impregnable. Compelling the soul  
to stand forth to be questioned.

Dazzling in the sun, whiter than snow, I see the bones  
Of those who have existed as I now exist. The bones are  
here; where are they who lived?

Like a thin veil, I see a crowd of gnats, buzzing their  
hour.

I know that they are my brethren, I am less than the  
shadow of this rock,

For the shadow returneth forever.

Night overwhelms me. The coyotes bark to the stars.

Upon the warm midnight sand I lie thoughtfully sifting  
the earth through my fingers. I am that dust.

I look up unto the stars, knowing that to them my life is  
not more valuable than that of the flowers;

The little, delicate flowers of the Desert,  
Which, like a breath, catch at the hem of Spring and are  
gone.

I have come into the Desert because my soul is athirst as  
the Desert is athirst;

My soul which is the soul of all; universal; not different.  
We are athirst for the waters which make beautiful the  
path

And entice the grass, the willows and poplars,  
So that in the heat of the day we may lie in a cool shadow,  
Soothed as by the hands of quiet women, listening to the  
discourse of running waters as the voices of women,  
exchanging the confidences of love.

The little rivers run away from the rugged Titans who  
are wrapped in cloaks of azure.

They steal out from the mountains into the bosom of the  
Desert;

And the willows follow after them, waving their hands,  
calling that they run not so fast away.



The river builds a safe fortress where the birds hide and  
the antelopes come for shelter.  
The carpet is a weaving of sweet grasses;  
But at last the impatient life-givers marry  
The marshes which in the Springtime are green with  
tule-rush and in Autumn copper-red;  
Vast sanctuaries for the herons, ducks, pelicans and  
plover.  
Here breed the stately cranes which in the fading year  
mount high to the cloudless heavens and circle about  
calling for the Southland.  
Who is their monitor? Who is their pilot?

The mountains afar girdle the Desert as a zone of  
amethyst;  
Pale, translucent walls of opal,  
Girdling the Desert as Life is girt by Eternity.  
They lift their heads high above our tribulation  
Into the azure vault of Time;  
Theirs are the airy castles which are set upon foundations  
of sapphire.  
My soul goes out to them as the bird to her secret nest.  
They are the abode of peace. The vexed soul's brooding  
place.  
Behind them, Creation slumbers, a naked god;  
His head pillowed on a rock, molten in the fires of chaos;  
He dreams of gods to come.  
Who shall awake him?  
Shall the flowers awake him with their tender fingers, or  
with the fairy music of their tremulous bells?  
Larkspur and blue-bells, lupins, spikes of lapislazuli;  
Wild sweet-william, pink as Aurora's bed?  
Sunflowers which on rocky hillsides flaunt the banners of  
their conquest?  
And golden seas of rabbit-brush which roll to the sunset,  
commingling?

The flowers bloom in the Desert joyously.  
They do not weary themselves with questioning;  
They are careless whether they be seen, or praised.  
They blossom unto life perfectly and unto death perfectly,  
leaving nothing unsaid.  
They spread a voluptuous carpet for the feet of the Wind  
And to the frolic Breezes which overleap them, they  
whisper:  
"Stay a moment, Brother; plunder us of our passion;  
"Our day is short, but our beauty is eternal."

Never have I found a place, or a season, without beauty.  
Neither the sea, where the white stallions champ their  
bits and rear against their bridles,  
Nor the Desert, bride of the Sun, which sits scornful,  
apart,  
Like an unwooded Princess, careless; indifferent.  
She spreads her garments, wonderful beyond estimation,  
And embroiders continually her mantle.  
She is a queen, seated on a throne of gold  
In the Hall of Silence.  
She insists upon humility.  
She insists upon meditation.  
She insists that the soul be free.  
She requires an answer.  
She demands the final reply to thoughts which cannot be  
answered.  
She lights the Sun for a torch  
And sets up the great cliffs as sentinels;  
The morning and the evening are curtains before her  
chambers.  
She displays the stars as her coronet.  
She is cruel and invites victims,  
Restlessly moving her wrists and ankles,  
Which are loaded with sapphires.  
Her brown breasts flash with opals.  
She slays those who fear her,

But runs her hand lovingly over the brow of those who  
know her,  
Soothing with a voluptuous caress.  
She is a courtesan, wearing jewels,  
Enticing, smiling a bold smile;  
Adjusting her brilliant raiment negligently,  
Lying brooding upon her floor which is richly carpeted;  
Her brown thighs beautiful and naked.  
She toys with the dazzlry of her diadems,  
Smiling inscrutably.  
She is a nun, withdrawing behind her veil;  
Gray, subdued, silent, mysterious, meditative;  
unapproachable.  
She is fair as a goddess sitting beneath a flowering peach-  
tree, beside a clear river.  
Her body is tawny with the eagerness of the Sun  
And her eyes are like pools which shine in deep canyons.  
She is beautiful as a swart woman, with opals at her  
throat,  
Rubies on her wrists and topaz about her ankles.  
Her breasts are like the evening and the day stars;  
She sits upon her throne of light, proud and silent,  
indifferent to her wooers.  
The Sun is her servitor, the Stars are her attendants;  
running before her.  
She sings a song unto her own ears, solitary, but it is  
sufficient.  
It is the song of her being. O if I may sing the song of  
my being it will be sufficient.  
She is like a jeweled dancer, dancing upon a pavement of  
gold;  
Dazzling, so that the eyes must be shaded.  
She wears the stars upon her bosom and braids her hair  
with the constellations.

I know the Desert is beautiful, for I have lain in her arms  
and she has kissed me.  
I have come to her, that I may know Freedom;