

**Selected Poems
of
Florence Rubert Graves**

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John Samuel Graves, III**

LIKE MAN'S DESIRE¹
(Sept., 1934, rev. 1962)

Like man's desire this river is—
It ebbs and flows,
thins and grows,
swiftly comes, as swiftly goes,
draining itself of all it knows
till, empty, it turns and follows back
the self-same, time-eaten muddy track,
sweeping and swelling each creek and cove
with water like the caress of love,
flooding the marsh-grass, pressing the land,
tracing each curve of golden sand,
yearning in vain for what it sees
beyond its reach—tall restless trees
that in their turn stretch arms on high,
reaching and yearning for the sky,
until limbs grow heavy and roots ache.

River and trees and men! All hearts break.
We pull at our roots or clutch the shore,
with more than enough yet wanting more.
And always we turn, as turn we must,
flow with the tide or keep the trust.
Only Cod knows—only God must! —
the strength of the roots, twined in dust.

Like man's desire this river is—

¹ The river referred to is May River, Bluffton, SC. Used as lyrics for the song by **J. S. Graves** © 2012. The music of **J. S. Graves** can be found at jsgraves.musicaneo.com.

TWO LIVES (1933, rev. 1940 & 1960's)

Like a rock in the path, or a high brick wall,
like a cold strong wind from bleak and empty space—
disillusion.

But a rock, a great granite shoulder —
the love-core, resilient, resisting,
or the stumbling block—either—
can be worn down, can be cut with skill and persistence.

Unsuspected,
bitterness, hate, deceit steal
the green fruits, not yet ripened.

Life laughs: life can be cynic when it will.
Shattered, the brave hope,
and love defeated in its own frail stronghold.
Fate has slipped a tiny devil
into the hand of each.

MOCKERY² (1934, rev. 1940, 1962)

You passed in the night—
and I was silent.
I stood—unsure, hesitating,
watching and waiting—
within the deep shadow.
For one brief moment,
you paused near me.
I stood, dumb in my misery.

² Used as lyrics for the song by **J. S. Graves** © 2004. The music of **J. S. Graves** can be found at jsgraves.musicaneo.com.

COME TO THE DAWN'S BRIGHT WINDOW³
(1932, rev. 1940)

Come to the dawn's bright window—
Come while the day is new—
Come with its promise and hope, dear,
Over the shining dew.

Awake, sweet soul, and gaze upon
The hilltop, proud and fair.
Such eager eyes and laughing lips
Will set me singing there.

This glorious molten dawn,
The gleaming gold mesh fine
Will stir your soul, enrapture it,
And mark you for all time.

PETITION⁴ (Jan., 1934, rev. 1962)

This flower
Is my heart,
Richly red and warm and full—
Its young stalk
Is my life,
Fragile, slim but strong—
Its fragrance
Is my yearning,
Leaping ever higher, ever higher,
To reach you and beg you,
The connoisseur,
To choose me—

³ Used as lyrics for the song by *J. S. Graves* © 2012

⁴ Used as lyrics for the song *This Flower is my Heart*
by *J. S. Graves* © 2004

GOD'S WORLD (1933, rev. Oct. 1940)

Sun-gleams,
Vital, rich,
Life-giving, heart-warming light,
Gilding the summer air.

Noon tide,
Steadily flowing
To the silver-drenched,
Softly ebbing life—

Evening tide,
Dream-giving, soul-washing,
Offering release
After the toil of day.

Star-rays,
Piercing our evening skies,
Stealing into our consciousness
Little candles of hope and faith.

Soul-peace of water,
Still, solemn, mystic,
So deep that movement,
That stirring and change are not evident,
Running its course quietly, surely,
Surging and receding
By some ancient secret knowledge.

IN A CABIN ON A HILLSIDE⁵ (Sept., 1936)

In a cabin on a hillside lives a lassie fair.
One bright day I chanced to pause to ask for water there.
I was glad that thirst and chance had kindly led me there!
In a cabin far on a hillside lives a lassie fair.

Bluer than the skies above her are my lassie's eyes
And the light of truth and beauty clearly in them lies.
Her golden hair and golden heart nothing can disguise.
Blue and pure and fair as the heavens are my lassie's eyes.

As the fragrance of a flow'r her memory is sweet.
Though distance dims and our fates sever,
 and though time is fleet,
Though in this life I nevermore my lassie fair may meet,
Haunting as the fragrance of a flow'r her memory is sweet.

A STAR FELL⁶ (Nov., 1938, rev. 1962)

A star fell,
Tearing Night's veil.
It was then I discovered
Night's weeping.
Are they for us—these tears?
Is this, then, for mortals—
This great compassion?
How silent you are, Night,
Gathering us in—
How silent and tender!
How comforting!

⁵ *Luke Peeples* wrote a song using this title and some of the lines as lyrics in 1938.

⁶ Used as lyrics for the song by *J. S. Graves* © 2004. The music of *J. S. Graves* can be found at jsgraves.musicaneo.com.

WHITE ROAD⁷ (Oct., 1936, rev. 1962)

O, white, white road,
White as high noon,
White and gleaming,
Fleeing before me,
Fleeing behind me—
In vain cool shadows
Attempt to detain you—
Tree-flung shadows
And shades of small houses—
White, as you are,
And red and gray—
And thin man-shadows
That slant and slide—
In vain the marshland,
The mudflats and rivers,
The small slow streams
Thrust their bridges and waters
Before you to stop you—
Clutch at your sides
As you run—
In vain I pursue you,
Race on and on—
You slip from me ever.
O, white, white road,
White as stars are white,
White as truth itself,
I shall never catch you—never—

⁷ The white road refers to the crushed oyster shell used for many roads in the SC lowcountry in those days.

MOOD OF MAY RIVER (Oct., 1940)

Wrapt in moods,
Grasses stir, pine trees quiver,
Palmettos toss and sigh and shiver
And, silent, the shrunken sombre river
Lies and broods.

Stiff the sand,
Aching mud, taut marsh springing,
Blue heron over island winging,
No sound but the wind and crickets singing—
Tense the land.

Noontide burns,
Cloud-streaked sky, blood-red seeping,
Foreboding storm, bleak north wind leaping,
White bluffs and parched shore gray water sweeping—
Tide returns.

THE SYMPHONY OF GOD (Aug. 1947) **Written for a concert of sacred music,** **Church of the Cross, Bluffton, S.C.**

Glorious music, fluid song!
Molten notes that mellow in the heart!
Sweet is the melody and strong—
Sweetly sustained from the golden start.
Such is the Symphony of God,
Love and beauty woven in the theme,
All life of sea and sky and sod
Instrumental for the Master's dream.

MEN, THE MUSICIANS (Nov., 1947, rev. 1961)

Men, the musicians whom God chose,
Must learn to use the instruments He made.
These may not be carelessly played.
With infinite knowledge, life's music grows—
Majestically—to those aware
Of beauty who wait with ready ear.
Spirit meets spirit when the song is heard.
“Even in the beginning was the Word !”
Difficult and dark our path lies.
Quickened by the sunrise as we plod,
Man is attuned, raised, harmonized,
Moved by the symphony of God.

THE STRANGER⁸ (Nov., 1939, rev. Nov., 1941)

You walk beside me but do not understand
The words I speak, much less the thoughts I think.
So I have learned to let this inner creature shrink
Within a safe and secret shell, a place
Made shining by its naked face.
Locked fast like dynamite which, if exposed,
Might yet explode a world so carefully composed,
This separate self folds splendid wings
And, all undaunted, softly sings
Its silence out from year to year
Where only kindred spirits hear.
You walk beside me but do not understand—
A stranger walks, yet loves you, holds your hand.

⁸ Used as lyrics for the song by **J. S. Graves** © 2005. The music of **J. S. Graves** can be found at jsgraves.musicaneo.com.

NO MO' ROBERT! (Nov., 1937, rev. 1962)

She screams as, slowly, the awkward men—
Pine box moving to pine woods soil—
Toward her pick their way.
“No mo’ Robert! De las’ time, Robert!
Dis is goodbye today!”
She beats her breast while her body rocks.
She tears at her oiled untidy locks.
“No mo’ he come in de evenin’ cool.
No no’ he knock de do’.
No mo’,” she gasps. She shrieks to heaven,
“My Robert is no mo’!
Gawd! No mo’ Robert to laugh an’ talk!
He won’t eben see our fus’ chile walk—
Po’ Robert! Po’ Robert! Dis is goodbye today—”
They lift the lid from the scarred black face,
So honest, still and strong.
“No mo’ Robert! De las’ time, Robert!
Oh, Gawd! Let me look long—
Po’ Robert! Po’ Robert! Gawd pity me today!”

SONG OF TRIUMPH⁹ (Jan. 16, 1939)

Scatter my dreams, if you will!
Scatter my dreams!
They shall fall like seeds
In the midst of the weeds
On the hill.
Batter my dreams, if you will!
Batter my dreams!
As relentless rain
Batters the helpless hill!
And I, like the earth,
Shall pull you in,
Shall bare my breast
To your mad unrest—
And your chagrin.
For I, like the earth—
Poor helpless clod!
Am made of God
And miracle yet retain.
My seed shall swell
And burst from the hill
And spring to the sun again!

⁹ Used as lyrics for the song by **J. S. Graves** © 2002. The music of **J. S. Graves** can be found at jsgraves.musicaneo.com.

I'LL BUILD ON A BLUFF
(Mar., 1938, rev. Sept. 1960)

I'll build on a bluff, white-gold with sand,
Where blue salt river molds green land.
Wide window-eyes no street will trace,
Nor city smugness spoil the place,
Nor thin sophisticated door
The ungloved raps of life deplore.
Where I would build, tall burnished pines
Stand whispering guard in shining lines.
Grave bearded oaks spread mighty arms
To shield and shelter.

What harms

Could pass them by, these steadfast ones,
Whose tireless watch sees countless suns
And round on round of stars and moon?
There is peace here, I feel.

At noon

White-hot brilliance is in near fields,
Outlines the stretching shore. It yields
To calm oases of cool shade
Where sunlight barely drips through jade
Of leaves held close and moss that clings.
Where broomstraw sways, before one's eyes
The whirring wings of quail arise.
Taut buck and timid doe await
Hushed half-gloom hours, those soon or late—
Pale creeping dawn, the shuttered day
When twilight slips the sun away.
Such silvered shadows moonbeams know;
Sonic glimmering starlight follow.
Yet, none are so wild, nor none so light,
As herons swooping skyward.

Flight

For them is soft as drifting snow.
Unhurried, swirling high they go,
Blue-smoked or whitened as the cheeks

Of waterlilies in fresh creeks.
I'll build on a bluff, white-gold with sand,
Where blue salt river molds green land.
Cruel, too, this world is yet more kind
Than spheres created by man's mind.
And I, upon a heron's wing,
Will lift my heart from earth and fling
Its gladness out in ecstasy
Far from man's hypocrisy.

THE COW (Mar., 1946)

Deliver me
From complacency!
Even the cow,
Swallowing (not once but twice!)
The burrs among the clover,
Forgets its bovine manners—
Then and now—
And kicks the bucket over!

**PLANT A FLOWER, ALL THAT PASS!
(Mar., 1946)**

Plant a flower, all that pass!
If you pluck one, give it to the living.
What good to the dead is all your giving?
Lavish kind thoughts before breath goes.
We drop the seeds and beauty grows
Though we wither like the grass.

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