

THE
MAD MUSE

james russell gray



THE MAD MUSE
published by

A o s Press

INTRODUCTION

I am thirty-five, married eleven years come September. No children. If you want a description -- five feet ten, weigh 140. Brown hair and eyes. Three years college, have teacher's certificate, but have never used it. Have been : soda jerk, grocery clerk, time keeper, foreman, requisition writer in government warehouse. File clerk, W P A interviewer, information clerk, and assistant postmaster. I started reading stf about twenty years ago. Jules Verne, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and the old Argosy stfantasy tales. Desires : I'd like to be a writer, have sold one story to a nationally circulated magazine; a confession story to True Story Magazine in 1935. Have sold about three dozen poems, mostly to form magazines, in the last twenty years. Though friendly, am an introvert. Read a lot. Philosophy : see the poem noon. It's good to live and feel the sun at noon. All we've got is now. Yesterday is gone, tomorrow hasn't arrived yet. Enjoy beautiful things. Love poetry. Prefer

the sort of verse that has rhyme and rhythm

James Russell Gray

20 May 1944

CONTENTS

THE WEREWOLF

SUMMONS

ENCHANTMENT

BEREFT

ETCHING

OBLIVION

THE IMMORTAL

THE POET AND THE FOOL

WHISPERS

ENIGMA

THE DREAMER

LAUGHTER

DREAM SNARES

EXORCISM

TWIN

ALIEN THINGS

CONTRAST

PERVERTSITY

MERMAID

UNITED

MORNING AND NIGHT

THE MAD MUSK

IMPRESSIONISTIC

DOGS

L'INVOL

for
ALLEN

THE WEREWOLF

The moon is pale in the heavens,
And the stars are cold and bright;
And the forest trail is dim and pale
As I check my headlong flight
To sniff at the wind in the darkness - -
In the snow-filled, wintry darkness - -
Of this mid-December night.

I must keep my tryst with the wolf-pack
On the top of yonder hill.
I've a rendezvous; while the night is new
We will run and howl - - and kill!
Oh, our souls are drenched in darkness - -
They are pledged to the powers of darkness - -
But tonight we eat our fill!

SUMMONS

The sky is darkly overcast,
And sheets of rain are falling ...
The wind is screaming through the night;
I hear it wildly calling ...
I wonder, if I rushed outside,
Would nature, elemental,
Wash clean my soul, and make my dreams
Exotic ... transcendental?

ENCHANTMENT

Last night I found a garden, in a dream,
Where moonlight tinkles, and where stardust falls ...
Where music echoes softly, with its theme
The restfulness of slumber ... and the walls
Of my dream garden are of amethyst ...
Enchantment waits ... tonight I have a tryst ...

BEREFT

I made a world to fit my own desires ...
Once in a dream I found a paradise ...
All things were there to which my heart aspires;
There was a moon up in the velvet skies;
There was a boat that drifted like a feather
Upon a lake where stars came down to shine
Beneath the surface ... you and I, together,
Were very gay, and all the world was mine ...
But suddenly I awakened ... I will never
Regain my dream ... the spell is gone forever.

ETCHING

The ghost of autumn haunts the world; extends
Her hand to winter. All the leaves are down;
They give the earth a cloak of gold and brown
To shelter it against the bitter winds.
Each chilly morning, now, a haze descends
Upon the valleys like a flowing gown,
And distant purple mountains seem to frown
Because the sun is hiding from his friends.
I sit before a cheerful fire at night,
And wonder if the ponds and streams will freeze.
Outside, the sky is clear; the stars are bright;
A shining carpet lies beneath the trees - -
The earth in sparkling silver is arrayed - -
Where frost has settled on each stem and blade.

OBLIVION

The sun was warm upon my face,
The wind ran fingers through my hair;
I lay and watched two swallows race
Above the forest, in the air - -
And vanish, leaving not a trace
To show that they were ever there.

And something brooded in the trees;
I felt a grim, ironic mind,
And heard a whisper on the breeze;
"This little man - - like all his kind
Who swarm upon the land, the seas - -
Must go, and leave no trace behind!"

THE IMMORTAL

The thought of death was something that he feared;
He was a doctor famous for his cures,
And, working with a new drug that appeared,
He found success; 'Eternal life is yours!'
He told himself, injecting in his veins
The mixture that would bring undying youth.
But, later, when he felt the tearing pains,
The doctor had to face the bitter truth:
The drug was evil; he could never die,
Yet he was doomed to constant agony;
And as the creeping, pain-racked years went by
His tortured soul was eager to be free;
While other men approached their graves with dread,
He longed for the calm slumber of the dead.

THE POET AND THE FOOL

'I am a fool,' he thought. 'My poetry
Has very little worth. Although I write
Of beauty's forms, and feel its poignancy,
No matter how I strive my work is trite.
I am a fool.'

Yet after his decease, his mounting fame
Was spread until all nations knew his name.
He was a poet!

'I am a poet,' thought another one.
'My poems hold the wisdom of the years;
They sing of dreams from drifting vapor spun - -
Of magic fires at dawn - - of misty tears - -
I am a poet.'

Despite his boasting, no one ever read
His puny verses after he was dead.
He was a fool!

WHISPERS

Trailing the sun like a silver ship,
O'er the horizon a white gull flies;
Swiftly he circles to rise and dip,
Then he is lost in the fading skies;
The moon is beginning her lonely trip
Over the sea as the twilight dies - -
While out of the darkness the shadows slip.

Gently the waves, as they come and go,
Lap on the sands of a starlit beach,
Ceaselessly moving they ebb and flow,
Grasping at something they cannot reach,
What are they whispering soft and low?
What does it mean, this eerie speech? - -
Only the creatures of darkness know!

ENIGMA

So what is love? It is a phantom fire
That glows upon the marshes after dark;
It is an angry sea; a tossing bark;
It is Euterpe singing to her lyre.
These things are love : It is a funeral pyre
Ignited by one tiny, leaping spark;
It is a nightingale; a soaring lark;
A glass reflecting madness and desire.
Love is the ecstasy that poets know,
An anguish of the soul that will not pass;
The theme that every wandering minstrel sings.
It is a shadow cast upon the snow;
A fragrant blossom hidden in the grass - -
Love is a demon shape with bat-like wings!

THE DREAMER

Her bed is grass, new grass of tender green;
A mocker serenades her as she sleeps;
Beside her lies an open magazine:
Fantastic Tales. Above, a willow weeps
And offers shade, while wild-plum blossoms fall
Like petaled snow upon her upturned face.
What are her dreams? Do far-off planets call,
And does she guide a rocket ship in space?
Or does she wander through enchanted lands
Where fairy drums like rhythm for her feet?
Perhaps she holds moon flowers in her hands,
And breaths their fragrance, rich and heady-sweet.
But let her dreams remain a mystery --
No dream was ever lovelier than she.

LAUGHTER

A full moon rises in a blaze of glory,
And I - - as always - - feel the old, old urge;
I rush into the darkness where a night wind,
High in the treetops, sings a mindless dirge;
Where shadows creep about the gloomy forest
And gather, here and there, in pools of jet;
While in the sky a flying creature passes
Across the moon in horrid silhouette.
And suddenly I hear sad, screaming laughter
That rings across the night and chills the spine;
Then silence falls, and I am weak and shaken - -
Because I know that obscene laugh was mine!

DREAM-SNAKES

My dreams, like birds that fear a hunter's gun,
Go winging, swift, beneath a dreary sky;
I clutch with eager hands as they go by,
But all in vain - - I cannot hold a one.
I play the spider; when my web is spun - -
My fragile web of hopes - - I stretch it high;
Sometimes I catch a smile, sometimes a sigh,
To show for all the work that I have done.
But who am I to grumble and complain?
No dreams are caught? All right, I let them go!
Tomorrow I can try my luck again;
My snares have proven futile, yet I know
That here where you once walked beneath the trees
Are dreams to catch, and bitter memories.

EXORCISM

The day begins anew,
And clouds are splashed with gold
To usher in the morn;
The grass is wet with dew;
I hear, clear-cut and bold,
A rooster's horn.

The shadows are in flight - -
Before the rising sun
The sky-gates open wide;
And creatures of the night,
Their evil labors done,
Slink off and hide.

TWIN

The old man paused, aghast. 'What have I said?

Why, son, I thought you knew you had a twin!

I rushed away; the thoughts that filled my head
Were swarming like a cloud of evil jinn.

I stumbled home at last, half in a daze,

and went upstairs to the Forbidden Room;

And there the thing that set my startled gaze

Was like a nightmare creature in the gloom.

And as I stood and watched it helplessly,

It crawled about upon the floor and whined;

I saw my features in grim travesty,

And something gave inside my fevered mind --

I screamed and screamed in thought-benumbing fright,

And ran outside to wander through the night.

ALIEN THINGS

The long hot day has ended
And gone to its repose,
While night approaches swiftly - -
But still the twilight glows
Across a world made lovely
(Outlines are softly blurred)
By perfume of the wildrose,
By song of mockingbird.
And blazing in the heavens
I see the evening star;
The moon is slowly rising,
A thin, white scimitar.
A night bird screams with laughter - -
Obscene, ironic mirth - -
And I recall that darkness
Brings alien things to Earth.

CONTRAST

A friendly bird, and a cheerful one!

When shadows flee, and night is done,

He sings his tunes to the rising sun

To drive away the dark.

I stop my feeding in the gloom,

And rest awhile beside the tomb.

How strange, the forms life may resume --

A ghoul -- a meadowlark!

PERVERASITY

Wet cobblestones that gleam with candleshine;
Departing footsteps, far away and dim;
A faint, 'Good-bye!' - - although these things are mine,
My heart cries out, 'What need have I of them?'
And yet (you know how strange a heart can be)
It hoards these meager treasures jealously.

MERMAID

Her song was half-heard magic, and the shock
Of her wild beauty caught me by the throat;
Unclad she lay upon a sea-washed rock
With green hair blowing, and I saw it float
Upon the water like a mass of weed;
I saw her fish's tail, her woman's hips,
And all at once I felt an insane need
To hold her in my arms and kiss her lips.
And careless of the sharks that lurked between,
I swam from shore to rock as though entranced;
I saw a bunch of seaweed, dank and green,
And found a place where smoky shadows danced;
And in the air above me, thin and high,
I thought I heard a sea-gull's lonely cry.

HUNTED

Silently running, I flee from disaster
Down the long hill where the moonbeams fall;
Maddened by terror, I speed ever faster,
Curse at the shock of a night bird's call.

Curse the bright moon, for a mob is behind me;
Mob that is hunting with torch and gun;
'Death!' screams my conscience; 'I die if they find me;
Flesh will be severed and blood will run!'

Here is a forest, perhaps if I cower
Deep in the shadows that ebb and flow,
I will regain all my magical power
Given by demons so long ago.

Soul black as night, it is too late for praying;
Devils are laughing; I hear their cries
Eager and shrill, and I know they are saying,
'This is the night that a warlock dies!'

MORNING AND NIGHT

I sometimes think that morning is the time - -

A summer morn - - that I like best, for then

The mockingbird pours out his silver rhyme - -

The heart is gay - - the world is young again - -

Beneath the sun, my better nature rules - -

And I forget the witches and the ghouls.

But when the skies grow dim, and darkness nears,

I feel a sudden change come over me - -

I seek the shadows - - and when night appears

I laugh and laugh in fevered ecstasy - -

Will-o-the-wisp will guide my footsteps to

A dreadful place where demons rendezvous.

THE MAD MUSE

My Muse, a wrinkled hag, comes in the night
When I would sleep. I know that she is mad!
She has a crystal ball ... enormous ... bright ...
'I show you life!' she cries. 'The good, and bad!
The crystal glows; within its depths I see
A phantom Stage, with footlights burning dim;
A pair of Lovers whisper; they agree
This lovely Play was written just for them.
But wait! What is that movement in the wings?
There is a threat to our adoring pair;
I see a crowd of monstrous, evil Things
With burning, sunken eyes and matted hair.
The Man struts proudly, and the Woman preens - -
While Horror crouches just behind the scenes.

NOON

The sunbeams fall straight down, a golden shower;

My shadow huddles close about my feet;

I'm like a sundial pointing to the hour

Of twelve; it's time to stop my work and eat.

Warm breeze that causes growing corn to stir;

Song of a mockingbird; cicada's hum;

A floating web of palest gossamer - -

All these are signs that summertime has come.

I'll take the team to drink and give them feed,

And then sit down here underneath this beech

To eat my lunch and rest. And I have need

To learn the lesson that my neighbor's teach:

Cicada, breeze and bird - - all of them croon,

'It's good to live and feel the sun at noon.'

NIGHT MAGIC

Perhaps you will recall the little trail
We followed through the dusk; the lonely pine
Beneath whose boughs we paused; the ghostly line
Of treetops in the east; the new moon, pale,
Whose urgent beams were caught, as in a jail,
Among the tendrils of your hair - - the shine
Of starlight when you gave your lips to mine
To seal a love we swore would never fail.
Night magic, this! For with the sunbar down
The moonlight disappeared ... the spell was gone ...

IMPRESSIONISTIC

The raiding Sioux
Have gone away
Many weary hours ago,
Leaving behind a gutted rancho --
And a dying man to watch the sunset.
The sun has plodded
His monotonous way
Across a brazen sky,
And now he sits wearily
Upon the highest peak of the western hills.
He seems to sigh with thankfulness
That the long day is over.
Maybe he has a rendezvous --
He seems so anxious to go.
He sinks behind the towering peak,
And leaves a mad world of shadows
Behind -- and suddenly
One bright, green star
Comes to blaze above the hills.
Outside the rancho walls
A coyote voices his shrill lament.
And like a falling curtain,
The darkness comes
And it is night.

0000

His nights were lit by virgin constellations;
By day the sun was flaming overhead;
He lived with fear and knew its grim sensations
For he was ill-equipped - - so he is dead.

A shadow bird! His helplessness betrayed him,
He stood beside some now-forgotten sea,
When Earth was young. But passing years have made his
One with the Unicorn - - a memory

L' ENVOI

If only one heart is bewildered a trifle,
One mind made to doubt that its thinking is sane,
One longing awakened that nothing can stifle - -
Then none of these verses were written in vain.