

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-58612-3 - The Time Piece: A Poem
Frank Kendon
Excerpt
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The
TIME PIECE

[1]

PAST midnight, but the night as dark as night;
The said twelvemonth accepting ritual death
While night looks on, and expectation sinks
To ash again. We need not mend this fire.

Past zero of the year. Among his stars
The dark hand wanders. No committal bell
Declares midwinter with a deep and dying stroke;
The brother of space has silence for a bell.

Past midnight, with the night starry and black
And constant in its journey, in its sleep.
No Eye to notice, while we mount to rest,
Hurtled through shadow on successive stairs,
Or in still dream, or bedded with mock thought,
Moving vastly away through virgin space.

The clockmaker commends another year.
Begins no year, none ends, but our rehearsal,
As we wait eagerly on the wide river
Where brings time's true and everlasting tide

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New disposition for our plaything senses.
Spent is the past. A bell can nowise age us.
Set down the glasses on their rings again.
To bed, this year. We are halfway, are moving.
A frozen night; no moon.

[II]

Sometimes even
Cold for no symbol can be perfect when,
Aloft in noble trees,
Silence is frozen white among the branches there,
Before the astonisht sun—a speechless witness,
Such that he who can believe the rime he sees
Can believe anything.

[III]

Does not my diagram show that spinning earth
Makes day and night; that, rolling in her girth
Along an orbit pivoted upon
The unconsuming and inflaming sun,
She stems a fraction of his radial heat,
And with each circuit scores a year complete?
Show should it also how, by curious chance—
An axis tilted—this unending dance

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Gathers variety not at all implied
In star-born symmetry. (And this divide
The good to seasons, on a calendar,
And teach the surge and subsidence of a year.)
Diagram shows no goodman; earth, asleep,
Knows nothing of the fourfold plan we keep;
Of frost, of sap, of swath, of fruit, she hears
Nothing as down her destined track she veers.
Nor does the sun, this ball which hovers, burning,
As if to watch earth's wheel of nothing turning,
Pouring a wasteful flood through wantless space,
One ray of which finds hindrance at her face.
Sun loves not earth; earth feels not us, her creatures;
Ants and stars have their proportioned natures:
Stars and suns, it seems, forever to shine and move,
And Lives, not shining, living by hate and love.
O then, Philosopher, boast not gift unfairly:
In midst of trees, valleys, and waters born,
To these must life begin outpouring early;
It is not science sanctifies each morning,
But that within, which hails the sun an angel;
No diagram, no proof—a wild evangel,
Whose needy believers, cheered by a glance of light,
Make spring of winter gaily, morning of night.

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[iv]

Here winter aconites among wet beech leaves
Pois'd to gaze between iron bars to the sky . . .

Who told them Time's as yet unpublisht legend?
Oh, how far down do tender fibres extend
Unto what stronghold in what merciful dark
That flowers outface unalterable No?

Suppose they are sure by patience of their nature,
Took dying easily, mourn'd not to forget,
Seek not now in vain to surpass themselves—

[v]

Come, daybreak hope, to passive cold despair,
Finger the curtain with life-giving air.
Over wide lands from lethargy now lift us,
Lean survivors all of winter's thrift.

We part the folds; we would, through mortal frost,
See that begin which has of late almost
Died from these dreamless ways. They shall behold
Our tiles and tree-top edges afloat with gold.
O let it be bright, and bring—and melt thereby—
Tears that are not tears to our wakening eyes.

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A thrush sings nearer now. His beacon calls,
 Sweeping stale night away, shall break the walls,
 Wrench off the bolts of darkness, and, for a new creation,
 Unbind our bodies and mend our meditation. . .
 Come, daybreak, daybreak to passive cold despair,
 Finger the curtain with life-giving air.

[VI]

Needy we are, but not unfortunate;
 For this remote king of heaven whom we await
 (A clot of fire, incapable of folly)
 Both winter melts and our long melancholy.

Seeds first and spores catch life at his sphere's fire;
 Birds by his beams are voiced with their desire;
 Buds their vanes spread at touches of his terror;
 Meek mind itself warms passion at his mirror;
 For him butterflies creep from a dusty hiding;
 Rooks here this first wet vernal gale outriding
 Charge down his streaming sunbeams over the fallows;
 And starveling age bends onward, talking of swallows.

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These kin as a god the furious Sunstar wakens.
He pours himself down. What's to him who takes
His light for virtue, his expense as gift?
Earth knows not, even, in her headlong drift,
How spring begins in wight and weed and beast—
Why dawn gets earlier welcome in the east.

[VII]

Hold out your palms to the rains that fall, in March
When the daffodils bluster here and there under trees;
We are waiting our cue from these impatient ones.

The clouds drive over, fringed with welcome water;
We can leave the fire; we are proof against the cold,
Cloakt with our mounting expectancy, while still
The mercury stands at winter, and a thread
Scarcely shows in the soil that was winter mud.

And, by their songs, the birds themselves are like us,
Glad to survive and eager to be alive,
Powerful death-forgetters; channels as we
Of the jet of spirit that flouts mortality. . .

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The wheat thrusts gaily up through the crumbled furrow,
And the rain that darkens the furrow
Washes its blades to their right and sturdy green,
Kind to a farmer's eyes. A shepherd stoops
To the ewe with her lamb in the sheltering hurdle of straw;
The level wind tosses the grainless ears;
The dog stands, dreaming to north, bearing the gale.

[VIII]

Stillness is not silence; there is more
Than silence working. Over the far fields,
Tidy table-lands furrowd in corduroy,
One degree, one kindly degree more warm,
And a knowledge that brings keen vision (perhaps a folly
For candlelight eyes) in prophecy wanders afield,
Disturbing the flocks of plover, which seek to settle,
But ever fly keening, wheeling, turning, mounting,
Peopling the air with wanton and delay . . .
What is it we search for, with bewildered need,
In silver-white of sky, and brown of the fields?
One somewhere seen among the willows in mist,
Who does not know she is mistress of so many.

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[IX]

By the little streams we went, my daughter and I,
One polish'd easter day, when wide and high
Was the dome, and deep the blue, of the cloudless ceiling.
Piercing clear, clean and keen was the light
Entring the wavy glass of the softly-stealing—
A day of blue and gold, of each so bright
That our eyes wrinkl'd against the blade of the light,
Marking with pleasure how the shadows curvd
Across the brass-bound osier boughs and branches.
And I, I recall, had happen'd to look at the sun
At the selfsame time when she set eyes upon
The first marsh marigold budding against the bridge.
She shouted it out to me; but I was hinder'd—
Blind with unbidden suns of blue and crimson,
Which mockt my vision, and dazzled quite from my sight
Her strong green witness of a good beginning.
Soon, however, my secret astronomy falter'd;
The purple suns floated down the stream;
And I saw the spring before me as she had seen it.
We did not gather the bud (so to destroy it)
But left it, leaning both in sole possession
Over the solid rail of our brief bridge.

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[x]

If bidden, oh then before the beginning of Time
 Bidden to waste, in a frenzy of incandescence,
 The obedient Sun wakens this twig of lime. . . .
 Earth, who darkly hovers about his presence,
 Now at this point in heaven intercepteth
 At a warm slant once more his outward fever—
 Whereat beast, man, and tree, her life-adepts,
 By those waves kist, takes each a step that never
 Never to the end of Time will be retraced.
 Now new buds fatten, now the dumb hope cries
 Leaves, wings, to quicken this lost paradise—
 On earth which wanders—while sun flames to waste.
 O Unheard, Unhearing! Given this gold
 Our griefs disrobe to life, our chrysalids unfold.

[XI]

By blackbirds' bowings to brown mistresses
 I rede there will be nests along these hedges.
 We shall go out, one shouting winter day
 (The ship clouds sailing steadily all one way,
 Wheeling the spokes of sunbeams swift and wide
 Over the land set free)

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And by the layered edge of this woodside
We'll suddenly stop near by; stand, stooping over
To see the dark throat pulsing, the still eye
Fixed fast in fearful courage; hear the cry
As terror gets the mastery, and she threads
Down through the thorns away.
Then shall we stoop our heads
Above the tangle—there in the warm cup
Find four or five bright eggs—and go our ways
Foolishly lifted up as if by hope.
While she, when we be safely out of range,
Will creep beneath the thorns in passionate doubt,
Find the eggs safe, and nestle them like pain
To the warm comfort of her body pressed,
Drawing the ache of motherhood back again.

[XII]

Young William's out by wood side, watchful and shy,
Avoiding humans, not quite willing why,
But in a sweat of diffidence, to cover,
This phantasy of himself as Emily's lover.