

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-316-61989-6 - The Alien Wood: Twenty Elegies  
James Turner  
Excerpt  
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## i

*The hands of God reach to the tranquil bays  
And shelter;  
A movement born of the wind,  
Sighing softly in evening under the moonlight,  
When earth is ploughed  
With the polished steel of the moon,  
And water is solid there,  
A gleaming silver sword.*

*The hands of God reach to the tranquil bays  
And shelter;  
A veil lifted with the fingers  
To reveal the golden rods  
Of his eternal peace,  
When earth is resting,  
With the moonlight forking  
A centuries pasture with bright teeth,  
And trees are statues there  
In the wide halls of oblivion.*

*The hands of God reach to the tranquil bays  
And shelter;  
A weeping torrent of the willow  
Dropping green tendrils to the water*

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*When earth is labouring  
With the moonlight raking  
A cavern's mouth with dark shadows,  
And rocks are ghosts there  
With secrets for the grinning skull.*

*The hands of God reach to the tranquil bays  
And shelter;  
A grey mould over the sea,  
Upon the lonely beach a naked light,  
When earth is bringing forth  
With the moonlight shivering  
An endless crystal of wavelets,  
And sea is burdened there  
With dark mysteries of eternity,  
The hands of God reach to the tranquil bays.*

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## ij

*Swans have folded their wings into the lake  
Beneath the languid trees.  
The sun is lost. Over this dismal earth  
Falls down no magic pall,  
No silvered carpet nor a curtain gold.*

*But blistering heat to shrivel up the dead,  
And yellow elongated flames to eat the dead,  
To shatter death, to ring a mournful bell  
Into the pits of hell.*

*The human heart is but a solid ash  
Blackened of all charity and broken  
Under the fall of masonry,  
Under the foolish grin of destruction,  
The bounds of hell.*

*Here was a palace, here the liquid note  
Of blackcap startled in a thicket,  
And here a glade where lovers met  
To give the living flesh its kiss  
Or raise an autumn's lingering lament.*

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*Here now is ash, grey ash of death,  
A mask discovered in a prince's hall  
And a mantle torn into rags,  
  And of doom, the bell.*

*Singing no more, there is no sound  
But of the waters muffled  
Where, under languid trees,  
Swans have folded their wings into the lake.*

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## iiij

*Flowers may open on a stricken world,  
Bestowing fragrance on the empty lawns,  
Giving sweet magic to the lonely house  
Wherein a century has held its hour.*

*And up the stairs a whisper nightly runs,  
‘Who comes, who comes?’*

*A door springs back, the floor is swept,  
‘Who comes?’*

*The moon is fingering the long pale wall,  
The rafters ring with long out-moded tones,  
A voice is wraithlike underneath the eaves,  
‘Who comes?’*

*The stairs will echo with the ghostly tread  
Of children’s feet. A cry, a laugh  
Will strike a ceiling where no angel sang,  
And moon, alone, walks hourly there  
To paint the wainscot light and dark again.*

*The voice cries into a wilderness  
Of flowers and scented grass;  
Over this stricken earth now moans  
Its spiritless acclaim,  
‘Who comes, who comes?’*

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## iv

*There is hemlock in the woods  
And the soothing syrup of belladonna.  
Take these to your lips and so forget  
The lonely hours of burning hearts!*

*What love has brought you here?  
Your face a mirage in the snow,  
Your fingers icy, but your lips aflame,  
What love has brought you here?*

*O! take this love into your power  
Since you are come. Within the glade  
Is sign of elfin feet, and a red rose  
Has blossomed here in winter,  
Where your lips have touched  
That frozen branch.*

*O! take this love into your power  
Since you will go, and going leave  
A golden chain to find you in the woods,  
To find a home and shelter,  
Where the summer dove may rest,  
And winter, like this last farewell,  
May die away forever into Spring.*

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## V

*And stood within an alien wood  
A Roman with a silver shield!*

*The straight road is the road of the dead  
Forgotten and unblessed. The berries  
In the hedges are of nightshade*

*And the killing drops.*

*Away the year has borne the tender note  
Of lark, of sunset liquid tongue,*

*Away the heritage of fabled voice*

*Which, with the spring, has toned its echo shrill,*

*About the hill*

*And up the down, where scattered lay*

*A hundred harebells to a foot of grass.*

*The straight road is the road of the dead*

*And Roman with a silver shield*

*Stood silent in an alien wood.*

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## vi

*The sea combs out the yellow sand  
With the finger of fate. Over  
The headland spins the bird  
Endlessly weaving life's tapestries.*

*Into the dark cave-mouth yells the sea  
With the moaning of torture,  
Under the glowing lights of the ferns  
Growing and dying unseen in the labyrinth.  
Over the headland spins the bird  
Endlessly weaving life's short tapestry.*

*Into the womb of the green mother  
Is sucked back the ever-thirsty water,  
Across the thousand golden shells  
And the tiny marine creatures.  
Down from the headland spins the bird  
Performing its circle of life's tapestry.*

*The sea sucks into the hard rock  
And roars upward from the cliff-face,  
Pining to escape forward ever  
And yet sucked and held back  
Upon the milk-white breast,  
Up the headland spins the bird  
Up into the enamelled dusk.*



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*Farewell into the dying sun,  
Shield over shield, white-winged  
Pale shadow-flight  
Over diaphanous sea,  
A two-barbed image  
Pointing to the sun in the west.*

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## vij

*Deep under the water lie the ancient groves  
With temples and statues and the corroded bones  
Of men. Under the sea-green water  
Tolls the bell and the music  
Caresses the high cliff whereon she stands,  
Bequeathing her soul into the depths,  
Her heart into the forgotten love tales.*

*The day was fair when she came  
Riding horse into those sun-splashed streets,  
And golden the roofs and golden  
The underfoot. Colours of her women  
As the sound of clear cymbals  
Across a green meadow where  
The pipit nests and the adder  
Sways nimbly the standing grass.*

*And the bell rang in that city  
Clear over the headland, over the sea,  
Clear into a far country,  
From which Fate drew her  
Down its spider skein,  
Drew her, riding her white horse  
Into the city beneath the sea.*