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Poems

William Blake

WILLIAM BLAKE

Poems

SELECTED AND INTRODUCED BY
Patti Smith

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

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The text of this edition follows the versions established by Geoffrey Keynes which keep William Blake's own spellings and capitalisations.

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POEMS

William Blake was born in London on 28 November 1757. He was educated at home and then worked as an apprentice to the engraver James Basire before joining the Royal Academy in 1779. In 1782 he married Catherine Boucher. A year later he began his career as a poet when he published *Poetical Sketches*. These were followed by *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794) which he also designed and engraved. His other major literary works include *The Book of Thel* (1789), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (c.1793), *Milton* (1804-8) and *Jerusalem* (1804-20). He also produced many magnificent paintings and engravings during his lifetime. William Blake died on 12 August 1827.

Patti Smith is a writer, artist and performer. Her seminal album *Horses* was followed by ten releases, including *Radio Ethiopia*, *Easter*, *Dream of Life*, *Gone Again*, *Trampin'* and, most recently, *Twelve*. Her artwork was first exhibited at Gotham Book Mart in 1973, and she has been associated with the Robert Miller Gallery since 1978. Her books include *Witt*, *Babel*, *Woolgathering*, *The Coral Sea* and *Complete Lyrics*. In 2005 she received the Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. Patti Smith lives in New York City and is the mother of two children, Jackson and Jesse.

INTRODUCTION

The eternal loom spins the immaculate word. The word forms the pulp and sinew of innocence. A newborn cries as the cord is severed, seeming to extinguish memory of the miraculous. Thus we are condemned to stagger rootless upon the earth in search for our fingerprint on the cosmos.

William Blake never let go of the loom's golden skein. The celestial source stayed bright within him, the casts of heaven moving freely in his sightline. He was the loom's loom, spinning the fiber of revelation; offering songs of social injustice, the sexual potency of nature, and the blessedness of the lamb. The multiple aspects of woven love.

His angels entreat, drawing him through the natural aspects of their kingdom into the womb of prophecy. He dips his ladle into the spring of inspiration, the flux of creation.

A rough-hewn seer who never tasted but English air, who loved Michelangelo yet never saw Rome.

Laboring over his work in sleeves ink-stained, he transfigures London into the new Jerusalem. His crushed hat and threadbare coat seem to pulsate as he wends his way through the grimy clatter. He heads past dark factories where pubescent girls with hair of matted gold offer themselves in the shadows for a bit of bread. Later, through his swift fingers, they transform as the virgins of his glad day, languishing in the bath of absolution, readied to accept the seed of God.

He is a messenger and a god himself. Deliverer, receptacle and fount.

* * *

My mother gave me Blake. In a church bazaar she found *Songs of Innocence*, a lovely 1927 edition faithful to the original. I spent long hours deciphering the calligraphy and contemplating the illustrations entwined with the text. I was fascinated by the possibility that one creates both word and image as did Blake, with copperplate, linen and rag, walnut oils, a simple pencil.

My father helped me comprehend this childless man who seemed to me the ultimate friend of children, who bemoaned their fate as chimney sweeps, laborers in the mills, berating the exploitation of their innocence and beauty.

Through my life I have returned to him.

When Allen Ginsberg lay dying, I was among those who sat vigil by his bedside. I wandered into his library and randomly chose a book, a volume of Blake in blood-red binding. Each poem was deeply annotated in Allen's hand, just as Blake had annotated Milton. I could imagine these prolific, complex men discoursing; the angels, mute, admiring.

William Blake felt that all men possessed visionary power. He cited from Numbers 11:29: 'Would to God that all the Lord's people were prophets.' He did not jealously guard his vision; he shared it through his work and called upon us to animate the creative spirit within us.

Nature sits on her throne, and science cannot contain her, just as religion cannot contain God. Nature sees naught of good and evil; one eye art, the other science.

* * *

'I wrote my happy songs, every child a joy to hear'

May we all listen as children as we enter his garden.

Here is a selection, a bit of Blake, designed as a bedside companion or to accompany a walk in the countryside, to sit beneath a shady tree and discover a portal into his visionary and musical experience.

There is in his song something of the Appalachian, whose ballads immigrated from British soil. Threnody played with a dark fiddle. They remind me that when I was young I thought Blake was American. Many might claim him now.

Although much of his work seems impenetrable he never ceased in his desire to connect with the populace. He has succeeded in offering both. He has been the spiritual ancestor of generations of poets and alchemical detectives seeking their way through the labyrinth of inhuman knowledge even as schoolchildren recite his verses. His proverbs have become common parlance.

Passages of prophecy have been chosen as a lure, in appreciation of his rich language without the mystical fetters of a difficult cosmology. Fragments of his letters give us a glimpse into the poles of his daily existence, the ecstatic bursts, the trials of laborious poverty.

To take on Blake is not to be alone.

Walk with him. William Blake writes 'all is holy'.

That includes the book you are holding and the hand that holds it.

Patti Smith, 2007

POEMS

Trembling I sit day and night, my friends are astonish'd at me,

Yet they forgive my wanderings. I rest not from my great task!

To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination.

O Saviour pour upon me thy Spirit of meekness & love:

Annihilate the Selfhood in me: be thou all my life!

Guide thou my hand, which trembles exceedingly upon the rock of ages ...

William Blake, *Jerusalem*

FROM *POETICAL SKETCHES*
TO THE
EVENING STAR

Thou fair-hair'd angel of the evening,
Now, whilst the sun rests on the mountains, light
Thy bright torch of love; thy radiant crown
Put on, and smile upon our evening bed!
Smile on our loves, and while thou drawest the
Blue curtains of the sky, scatter thy silver dew
On every flower that shuts its sweet eyes
In timely sleep. Let thy west wind sleep on
The lake; speak silence with thy glimmering eyes,
And wash the dusk with silver. Soon, full soon,
Dost thou withdraw; then the wolf rages wide,
And the lion glares thro' the dun forest:
The fleeces of our flocks are cover'd with
Thy sacred dew: protect them with thine influence.

TO SPRING

O thou, with dewy locks, who lookest down
Thro' the clear windows of the morning, turn
Thine angel eyes upon our western isle,
Which in full choir hails thy approach, O Spring!

The hills tell each other, and the list'ning
Vallies hear; all our longing eyes are turned
Up to thy bright pavilions: issue forth,
And let thy holy feet visit our clime.

Come o'er the eastern hills, and let our winds
Kiss thy perfumed garments; let us taste
Thy morn and evening breath; scatter thy pearls
Upon our love-sick land that mourns for thee.

O deck her forth with thy fair fingers; pour
Thy soft kisses on her bosom; and put
Thy golden crown upon her languish'd head,
Whose modest tresses were bound up for thee!

TO SUMMER

O thou who passest thro' our vallies in
Thy strength, curb thy fierce steeds, allay the heat
That flames from their large nostrils! thou, O Summer,
Oft pitched'st here thy golden tent, and oft
Beneath our oaks hast slept, while we beheld
With joy thy ruddy limbs and flourishing hair.

Beneath our thickest shades we oft have heard
Thy voice, when noon upon his fervid car
Rode o'er the deep of heaven; beside our springs
Sit down, and in our mossy valleys, on
Some bank beside a river clear, throw thy
Silk draperies off, and rush into the stream:
Our vallies love the Summer in his pride.

Our bards are fam'd who strike the silver wire:
Our youth are bolder than the southern swains:
Our maidens fairer in the sprightly dance:
We lack not songs, nor instruments of joy,
Nor echoes sweet, nor waters clear as heaven,
Nor laurel wreaths against the sultry heat.