

Precious against a
Precious Thing
Selected Poems of Michael Field

Foreword by Stacy Szymaszek



Foreword

I admit I had not heard of Michael Field when Golias invited me to contribute a foreword for this book. Writing this is my introduction to the field of Michael Field, and so I am what I suspect most readers of this volume will be: a newcomer—and, after grappling with no small amount of bewilderment in navigating the space of their lyric production (or perhaps because of this grappling), a convert.

Michael Field was the pseudonym under which romantic partners Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper wrote and published in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England. The impetus for inventing a pseudonym is often located in the practical concern that one's work, for whatever reason, won't be taken seriously. In their case, a single male identity clearly bettered two women coauthors. That said, I think Michael Field was not simply a pseudonym but a lived identity, one born of necessity. Their invention of a male vessel made space for them to more deeply explore their erotic lives together. It is the doubleness of "Michael Field" that makes their project distinct and subversive.

Bradley and Cooper were friends with Robert Browning—who was not able to keep the secret of their "true" identities for very long—as well as many other aestheticist and decadent luminaries of the late-Victorian period, including Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Their collaborative authorship across dozens of plays and volumes of poetry—and even their journals—embodies a merging of voice without precedent that I know of. They themselves could not distinguish

whose lines were whose, and after Cooper's death Bradley would even publish Cooper's own early work under the name Michael Field. Their symbiotic relationship, intensified by their shared bloodline—they were aunt and niece—was also expressed in their passing: they died within nine months of each other, both from cancer.

Their biographies are fascinating, and the creation of Michael Field has obvious contemporary relevance to conversations about gender, sexuality, literary androgyny, collaborative authorship and authority, and the very idea of personal truth. Marion Thain and Emma Donoghue have both written scholarly books that have helped restore Michael Field to their rightful place in literary history. But here we have a book of their poems. It might not be immediately apparent to readers of today what to make of the work, with its archaic diction and late-Victorian concerns. How is this work important today; what does it have to tell us; what is its value? I suspect that with their early aesthetic allegiances they might not appreciate this line of questioning (Art for art's sake!), but poetry in our economy must always defend itself, even against the accusation that it is dead.

Often, I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but is a made place. . . .

—Robert Duncan

I hope it's not overly cute to return to the scene of every homo field in poetry that I know. I am cruising—in past disguises and identities I have donned. The made place of the Michael Fields is a transcendent space that is religious (they were at times pagans, Catholics, atheists, Anglicans), classical,

XXXIII

*Ταῖς κάλαις ὕμμιν [τὸ] νόημα τῶμον
οὐ διάμειπτον·*

Maids, not to you my mind doth change;
Men I defy, allure, estrange,
Prostrate, make bond or free:
Soft as the stream beneath the plane
To you I sing my love's refrain;
Between us is no thought of pain,
 Peril, satiety.

Soon doth a lover's patience tire,
But ye to manifold desire
Can yield response, ye know
When for long, museful days I pine,
The presage at my heart divine;
To you I never breathe a sign
 Of inward want or woe.

When injuries my spirit bruise,
Allaying virtue ye infuse
With unobtrusive skill:
And if care frets ye come to me
As fresh as nymph from stream or tree,
And with your soft vitality
 My weary bosom fill.

Grass in Spring

Spring!

The light is stronger, the air is shuddering,
The sky is smiling through sun-clouds that shall be showers,
And the grass is caught imagining
Flowers.



Ah me, if I grew sweet to man
It was but as a rose that can
No longer keep the breath that heaves
And swells among its folded leaves.

The pressing fragrance would unclosethe
The flower, and I became a rose,
That unimpeachable and fair
Planted an odour in the air.

No art I used men's love to draw;
I lived but by my being's law,
As roses are by heaven designed
To bring the honey to the wind.

I found there is scant sun in spring,
I found the blast a riving thing;
Yet even ruined roses can
No other than be sweet to man.

Onycha

There is a silence of deep gathered eve,
There is a quiet of young things at rest;
In summer, when the honeysuckles heave
Their censer boughs, the forest is exprest.
What singeth like an orchard cherry-tree
Of its blown blossom white from tip to root,
Or solemn ocean moving silently,
Or the great choir of stars for ever mute?
So falleth on me a great solitude;
With miser's clutch I gather in the spell
Of loving thee, unwooing and unwooded;
And, as the silence settles, by degrees
Fill with thy sweetness as a perfumed shell
Sunk inaccessible in Indian seas.

To Spring

A greater stranger even than Death is Spring
Thou art a greater stranger even than Death!
So alien I taste the April breath,
So mad the hustle of the rook's dark wing!
And what of this acute, blithe colouring?
As by a sharp-cut monument that saith
Nothing to me, that but bewildereth,
The record of some life-forgotten thing,
I stand before the verdure of thy fields.
Nor is this life the wattle-sheepfold yields:
No eddying leaves did ever course a spell
So aimless as this nickering hazel-dell:
The roosted little cries and jerks, if blithe,
Flash single, as the whetting of Time's scythe.

Imple Superna Gratia

We may enter far into a rose,
Parting it, but the bee deeper still:
With our eyes we may even penetrate
To a ruby and our vision fill;
Though a beam of sunlight deeper knows
How the ruby's heart-rays congregate.

Give me finer potency of gift!
For Thy Holy Wounds I would attain,
As a bee the feeding loveliness
Of the sanguine roses. I would lift
Flashes of such faith that I may drain
From each Gem the wells of Blood that press!

from "Hyssop"

I Have Mourned unto You

We have hushed all our sins away
To catch Thy breath as Thou dost pray.
How Thou dost mourn to us! What sound
Comes up to us as from the ground!

A voice it is of mysteries,
A cry as from deep-bruisèd trees;
And love, as when a hart doth pant,
And all the water-brooks are scant.

XXVIII.

When at the Door of Death,
The white door with the knocker of coiled snakes,
Shall I not cease even from my struggling breath,
Will not my voice stand by my heart that quakes,
And call, as life heaves from its mould to dust,
Call, call for thee: but listen dumb
If there is breeze of little breath up-thrust
Against the other side, or happy thrum
Of little feet upon the inner floor?
If I but hear those sounds, the bar is gone,
As if a lava-stream had split the wall;
No more the serpents and the portal wan,
A momentary blaze, then blotted out:
Death never more in front of me at all—
No knocking at the lintel echoes flout!
But thou, thou, my bright Flame, my welcome-home,
My joy's first touch . . . in front even of those forms
That I am rent through Death to reach. O thou,
My foremost, and my certainty love warms
The spaces of this space where spirits roam!
Close, close to me, my Chow,
My little Chow—for what hath been is passed,
We dancing glad . . . Those others come too fast.