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Selected Poems No One
1931–1991
Can Stem the Tide

Jane Tyson Clement

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The Plough Publishing House

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Foreword

JANE TYSON CLEMENT was born on October 1, 1917, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Though she lived there until she was nineteen (her father worked at Columbia University), she was never truly at home in the city but preferred Bay Head, New Jersey, where the family owned a summer house. Bay Head's windswept shore drew Jane back year after year; as she confided in her seventies, "There was something eternal about it that was always a rock and an anchor for me."

After graduating from the Horace Mann School in 1935, Jane went on to Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, where among other things she studied poetry under Grace Hazard Conkling. Scholar Howard Patch, whose lectures on Chaucer often digressed into conversations about faith, influenced her too. Jane left Smith in 1939 with a degree in English, but she felt her real education still lay ahead. Privately she yearned to move beyond the "frivolous, self-centered side of my nature...and to do something – anything – about the

unfair treatment of workers, the hoarding of wealth in the hands of a few...and the prejudicial notion of the superiority of the white race.”

Eventually this search led her to God, though first through disillusionment and confusion, and the frustrating recognition that the world’s evil was as deeply embedded within organized Christianity as in secular life. Nevertheless, she found herself increasingly drawn into the quest for spiritual truth, particularly after reading the *Journal of George Fox*, which she discovered in a class on comparative religion: “Fox was a revelation to me, because I found I could respond to everything he believed and acted upon. And to think that there were still Quakers!”

World War II brought a series of teaching jobs in Pennsylvania, first at Germantown Friends, a private academy where she worked as an intern, and later at the Shippen School for Girls in Lancaster. It also brought marriage to Robert Allen Clement (the “R.A.C.” to whom several poems in this collection are dedicated), a Quaker attorney and fellow pacifist.

In 1942 the Clements settled in Haddonfield, New Jersey. Bob practiced law in nearby Philadelphia, while Jane busied herself as a housewife and mother (they eventually had seven children) and did work for their

local Friends Meeting, the Arch Street Yearly Meeting, and the American Friends Service Committee, a humanitarian organization. With one new responsibility after another, the demands on her time grew continually, and she began to feel pulled in all directions. Worse, she grew conscious of a nagging doubt that something about all her worthy activities was radically wrong: “Some subtle shift in base was necessary to jar the whole structure of my life into its God-given place.”

In late 1952 the Clements came into contact with the Bruderhof (“place of brothers”), a Christian community movement with origins in Europe. Soon afterward they opened their home to itinerant members from the movement’s South American base. Externally, the Bruderhof was a far cry from the Clements’ milieu. Of one couple they hosted, Heinrich and Annemarie Arnold, Jane wrote, “They were obviously poor, obviously different as night and day from middle-class America...But their simplicity, warmth, naturalness, and self-effacement were like a refreshing wind.” And their insistence on countering materialism and war not with words but by practicing voluntary community of goods offered a convincing – if unexpected – answer to her and Bob’s growing frustration with the deadening complacency of post-war suburbia.

In late 1954 the Clements packed their belongings, put their house on the market, and moved to Woodcrest, the Bruderhof's new center in Rifton, New York. (They had already tested communal life during a visit to one of the group's South American settlements some months before.) They stayed for good. Jane explained:

The undergirding facts were joy and love. And because of that we did not care how poor, how crowded, how (humanly speaking) precarious our situation, how much opposition we faced from family and friends, how physically tired we became, how sometimes we simply could not cope... Sometimes we were called upon to do the things we thought we were least fitted for, and discovered that by some power not of our making we could do them.

We learned to trust, not merely in our human brothers and sisters, but in what had called us together and gathered us all out of our former ways, and in what lay behind and above and underneath everything: surrender and service to our Master, Jesus. His love upheld us...

We were a small circle, from the most varied backgrounds and circumstances. Yet whenever we met, we felt something immediately – an inner authority that

did not come from the human individuals gathered there. We felt this inner security every day, in spite of all the uncertainties and unsolved situations; and this security did not come out of human confidence...

All of us who joined hands had dared something, had taken a leap into the unknown. How little we actually knew of what would be asked of us! How little we still know...

Though Jane never wavered in her dedication to the community she felt called to, she never stopped looking for a fuller, more genuine way to express her commitment. Practically, she found fulfillment in her work as a teacher at Bruderhof schools in New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and England, where her passion for literature and history left its mark on an entire generation of students. In artistic terms, her seeking found an outlet in the never-ending search for a new image or an apt turn of phrase with which to capture a longing, a struggle, an illuminating moment.

It was not a self-important quest. As she wryly notes in one poem:

I stir no hands; I light no eyes from mine,
nor will my music ever shake the stars...
But in spite of such modesty, she could not escape her

need to create – an urge so deep-seated and clear that she could assert:

Oh, but I share the consciousness of breath;
I have my purpose – I fulfill my days.
Somewhere within me is the invulnerable flame
which hissed and flared the day man first took fire...

There is nothing ostentatious about the poems in this book. In many, the word-pictures are drawn straight from the natural world: sunsets and surf, breaking ice, budding trees, and wheeling gulls.

Metaphors abound – the endless running of the tide a reminder of the endless cycle of life, the weathers of the heart mirroring the weathers of the sky – yet much of the verse works on an even simpler level: its sole purpose is praise. “Christ the Shepherd,” for instance (a poem inspired by a trip through Wales), is first and foremost the outpouring of a devout heart.

Aside from *Strange Dominion*, a prize-winning narrative poem completed at Smith College in 1939, and *The Heavenly Garden*, a cycle printed by the Society of Friends in 1952, most of Jane’s poems never traveled beyond the hands of her family while she was alive. She was less guarded with her plays and short stories, several of which appeared in *The Sparrow* (Plough, 1968,

re-issued 2000 as *The Secret Flower*). Yet as one of her sons remarked after her death on March 21 of this year, his mother was so routinely dismissive of her gifts that he never even thought of her as a writer: “She certainly never seemed to think of herself in that way.”

In a verse that laments the inadequacy of language to convey the stirrings of the soul, Jane writes:

Words are the symbols of a mind’s defeat,
they shape the hollow air with transient life,
and trick and twist; and make the spirit reel,
vanish like ember’s fire; devour and leave
brave husks, and echoes of lost majesties.

Such ironic frustration is an inescapable part of practicing the writer’s craft. But it is not the whole story. For if it is true (as it is often said) that a work of art bears the stamp of its creator, it must be that the creation of a poem involves the expenditure of love. And such love does have power, if only to alter the lens of the mind’s eye and thus open it to new ways of seeing. Whether such claims can be made for the verses in this book, only the reader can decide.

C.M.Z.
July 2000

I

The Sea

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G I F T

The sea will follow me through all my years,
will lift my heart in song,
will quench my tears,
will lay benignant hands upon my head
at discontented whispers, sorrow led.
Death will find my body, hide it where
the ghastly shadows creep, all brown and sere;
will choke my singing voice,
will blind my eyes
to beauty which within the seasons lies,
the proofs of God, which fade and rise again,
restored by gentle fingers of His rain.
Yes, Death will find me.
Not immortal, I
who cling with earth-stained fingers
also die—
but not forever—no.
The sea will raise my song again,
remembering all my praise.

Gull, at the water's edge
mirrored in shining sand,
sleek in the silver wind
blown from the land;

in the clear fall of dark
past the thin pools of tide
with the gray sanderlings
swift at his side.

Outward beyond the eye
reaches the solitude
out to the end of time
where the winds brood.

One with his element,
quiet, unquestioning,
still, when the spill of wave
scurries the sanderling.

Dusk, and the spell of sea,
tide smell and all the vast
air for his wings when he
rises at last.

MANASQUAN INLET I (1939)

Here to these rocks, not grown from the sand
of this shore, not spawn of this sea-edge,
the men have come, drawn by the storm wind,
the leap of spray, drawn by the sleek, deep
no-colored seethe of the water at evening,
drawn by the sure power of morning
down to this outpost, this strange ledge of life,
this channel of finite to infinite; here the men gather;
always their heads are turned seaward.
Between the great jetties of rocks the tides come and
roil and devour and are manacled.

Here the men sit, and watch the known water,
the known and familiar waters of inland;
river and cove where the heron has waded,
marsh where the kingfisher screamed his blue anger,
shallows and reedy lagoon where the huntsmen
have waited; these are the waters they know
and have lived from, these are the waters
that feed the great hunger of ocean;

now the need of the tide will carry them outward,
lost in the dark indefinable surge of the sea.

Watching the run of the tide, the dark river
of knowledge, outward to mystery, out
to be mingled and claimed, the men find a fragment
of patience, a portion of fearlessness,
watching the waters go fearlessly outward to death.

MANASQUAN INLET II (1991)

No one can stem the tide; now watch it run
to meet the river pouring to the sea!
And in the meeting tumult what a play
of waves and twinkling water in the sun!

Ordained by powers beyond our ken,
beyond all wisdom, all our trickery,
immutable it comes, it sweeps, it ebbs
and clears the filthiness and froth of men.

NOT IN THESE DAYS

Not now, but when it is too late for gladness
will we remember these days of sunlight
and the clear water
netted with shadows moving and golden.
We will remember then, and the cry of the gull
will echo within us – gull's cry in the clean air.

There is no trace of an echo now – in these days –
for there is nothing here to send the cry back to us –
low water and high sky and the free air between –
Not now – but when it is too late for gladness.

THE INLAND HEART

The wind is singing on the sun-struck dunes;
eastward the wind blows, and the level sea
runs with shadows golden-green and dark;
and no gull cries nearby, but far away
where the black finger of the rocks is laid
the white wings flash, the voices flash, and far
across the moving stretch a white sail gleams.

Here I am lost, hedged in with hills and shade;
and the bright music ripples all day long –
thrush and vireo, and in the dark
the harsh cicada; and my soul must fail,
starve for the sudden, final thrust of sea
over the earth's curve, for the steady sun
that now the hills devour when day is done.

O C E A N

The birds that fly
in a shifting pattern
over the sea
with their eyes turned downwards –
what do they find
in the shining water?

Here on the shoal
the small waves crumble
bright in the sun
as the gull's swift pinion,
green and clear
in the depth of shadow.

Inland the osprey
bears its burden,
yield from the sea
out of these waters;
out of this field
a shining harvest.

SUMMER NIGHT STORM

The ranting of the gods, this tumbling sky,
this wind-strong rain which pelts against my cheek,
the world re-lit by lightning, and the lie
of tall sea grass low bent against the sand.

I stand here, strangely still, with all the world
tumultuous at my feet, and yet my heart
is stronger than the roaring wind that swirls
about my body, taut against its force;
that blows my eyelids shut, that locks my lips,
lest all my spirit end its restlessness
in one wild song.

B A Y H E A D

This beach is the crumbled bone of many years;
who can construct again the skeleton
and join the scattered grains to their old form?

This sea is the blood and tears of all the ages;
who can define in it a single wound or grief—
so vast and mingled is the tide of pain?

Yet as the night floods darkness and the day
holds us in light, we walk earth's changing shore,
a brief path through the winds of good and evil,
and of loneliness—

Therefore the sand and sea await us.

The inland is not safe from sea;
here where the meadows hold the day
and tongues are of the earth, the fields,
the sea-mind still is safe and free.

Perhaps it walks a little worn
between the elm and peaked pine
or wakens restless to the sounds
of vigorous, healthy, country morn,

or finds the nights too long, too still,
lacking the rush and draw of wave,
or feels the eye cheated by the dark,
the sharp sky-crowding rise of hill.

But yet the wind of sea will run
the length of valleys and be here
sudden and full of space and wide
waters all leaping with the sun.

E B B T I D E

The tide will claim this shallow curve of sand
here where the thin waves curl and creep and die.
See – in this river no deeper than my hand
the young crab, pale and calico, slips by
into a safer, less tempestuous sea.
The eel, as silver and as quick as steel,
answers the sun; one moment he is free,
then the bird drops: a brief white circling wheel
cleaving the air, to splash, complete the arc;
the waters flicker, close, and leave no mark.

Take now this era, while the lengthening bars
stretch in the tawny shoals along the shore;
soon the sure rhythm of the moon and stars
will send the pliant waters in once more.

W I N T E R C O A S T

Gulls on the lonely beach
under the brooding sky;
over the darkened marsh
one gray gull's cry.

Wrack strewn upon the strand,
shards from the summer sea;
ripples from rising tide
creeping to me.

Winter is on the air,
sand drifted like the snow;
all the cold sky above,
sorrow below.

Boarded and silent wait
window and shuttered door.
Oh, will the summer joy
waken no more?

Summer of all mankind,
harvest from field and sea –
shattered and blown away –
no more to be?

Oh, but the promise lies
safe in His waiting hand;
sunrise again shall light
shimmering sand!

AT THE SHORE

Out of the black pool of sleep
the broken images like scattered sunlight
merge into morning, and I wake.

Here where the sea beats unangered
the gray gulls waddle along in the gray misty
 morning
and rise on white wings over the white sea
transformed into grace in their own element.

Must we take lessons always from everything—
gulls fat and ridiculous dabbling their feet in the
 tide-pool,
gulls flying sublime with the sunlight silver
 upon them?

Better return to sleep and waken prosaic.
We were meant to both dabble and soar,
and even the loveliest wings get weary.

STALKING A GULL

With stealthy step they stalked the greedy gull.
A noose they laid around the tempting bread
and waited, breathless, while with stately tread
the old bird on the sand came closer. Wait!
Will he be fool enough to seize the bait?

Ah, clever bird! No boy bamboozles him—
he rises slightly and on fluttering wing
seizes the bread and veers off down the beach.
The sprung noose dangles empty. Out of reach
over the waves the sagacious seagull flies
with taunting laughter in his raucous cries.

