

# Jasper



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## Poem of the day:

### *The Wild Swans at Coole*

by William Butler Yeats

Other children liked having birthdays, but I never looked forward to them. And now I know for certain that I have seen far more birthdays than I will ever see again.

My dog Jasper grows old, but he doesn't know that he does. The time passes, he changes, but that's natural for him. He's like a fish in water or a bird in the air. He doesn't notice it. But I'm not that way, and you are probably not that way, either. I count the time. I do more than remember. Jasper remembers a lot of things. I remember on purpose – I recall. It's as if I have a thousand thousand scrapbooks in my mind, and I decide to open this one or that, and look at a picture. I bring scenes from the past back to life. See, there is the time I had my First Communion. Here I am with my father when I was a freshman at college, on a sunny and windy day in the fall. That was my sister's wedding – and see how small my little girl was!

I have more than those scrapbooks, though. I have visions of the future. I can't take pictures of what is going to happen, but I look forward to it. There will come a moment, I hope, when the priest will give me communion for the last time, and I

will be able to pray, "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit."

A good Christian may tell me that I shouldn't dwell so much upon the passage of time, because Jesus the Lord of time has conquered it. He has stuffed the jaws of death with death itself. And there will come a time, he promises us, when we will all suddenly be changed "in the twinkling of an eye." But sometimes it is good to be a little bit



homesick. Have you ever had the feeling that though you love the place where you were born, and you love where you are living now, your real home is somewhere else? You shouldn't wish for that feeling to go away. It's the truth. We belong here for a time, but God has made us so that we should

want to dwell in his house forever. That means we all must get up and be on our way. The homesickness will give my legs more strength as I go forth with my belongings in a sack tied to the end of a stick, which I carry over my soldier. If I'm a pilgrim, I ought to know it and feel it.

The Irish poet William Butler Yeats wasn't much of a Christian, but few men ever wrote as well as he did about love and loss, and the beauty of things that pass away. So he goes to a place called Coole, as he has done for many years, to look upon the swans there. It's October. The trees are beautiful, the paths in the woods are dry, and there among the brimming water and the stones are nine and fifty swans.

I have never seen so many. Have you, reader? But Yeats has. It was a long time ago when he first saw them in such a crowd:

*The nineteenth autumn has come upon me  
Since I first made my count;  
I saw, before I had well finished,  
All suddenly mount  
And scatter in great broken rings  
Upon their clamorous wings.*

The swans are scared up by the man who has broken into their peace and their business. They rise up in a crowd before he can finish counting them, beating the air and going their way.

The poet isn't disappointed that he couldn't tally them up this time. Something else weighs upon his heart:

*I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,  
And now my heart is sore.  
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,  
The first time on this shore,  
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,  
Trod with a lighter tread.*

"All's changed," he says. What has changed? Something has. We don't know exactly what, but it doesn't matter. Anyone can put himself in that

man's place. Nineteen years ago, when he first came to the shore at Coole and first heard the wings of the swans beating like bells above his head, his step was lighter. He "trod with a lighter tread." What does that mean? He was younger, and his step had more spring in it. Maybe his step was light because his heart was light. Maybe he was in love. Maybe he had all the starry hopes of youth. That is gone now. He

was once a spring lad in the sun, and now he is just like the season and the time of day. He is like autumn, and the twilight. So he says.

The swans, God bless them, know nothing of it. They have a wild freedom that he wishes he had too:

*Unwearied still, lover by lover,  
They paddle in the cold  
Companionable streams or climb the air;  
Their hearts have not grown old;  
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,  
Attend upon them still.*

They have their loves and their triumphs, such as swans know, and nothing changes for them. The key word here is *still*. The swans move, they swim, they fly, they mate, they will die, but they do not really change. They are free of the troubles of the human heart. They don't know about

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disappointment or guilt. They don't know about a woman they love who has not loved them back. They know nothing about how Ireland, which is where Mr. Yeats lived, was trying to get free of her rulers, the British. The swans have no nation. They are what they are.

Yeats does not end his poem with any real hope. The stirrings of beauty that he feels will be felt by some other man in some other time and place. But for the poet it will mean loss, and for that other man too, it will eventually be the same:

*But now they drift on the still water,  
Mysterious, beautiful;  
Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lake's edge or pool  
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away?*

A voice once said to the prophet Isaiah, "Cry!" And Isaiah replied, "What shall I cry?" The answer came:

*All flesh is grass,  
and all its beauty like the flower of the field.  
The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
Surely the people is grass.*

It's like what the wild swans tell the poet. And if that was the last we were going to hear about how everything changes as we get old, and how we eventually lose everything we know and love, then

the Bible would be as sad as this poem. But the Bible is not sad, and that isn't the last we are going to hear, because "the word of the Lord stands forever." That word is God's promise to us. We shall all be changed, and from that time forth there shall be no change, but God shall be all in all.



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