

## The Old Man in the Night

Text by Gordon Getty

He was an old man, slow but straight; his head  
Looked set on something far. Perhaps he thought  
I had gone with the rest, but I had stayed  
A rise above him, with young pines between,  
To watch the sun fall. Now at last it caught  
Something at sea, then windows in a street  
Far off, and made them flash across the park  
Blood molten; now the light leapt molten green  
To sea again, then spilling in retreat,  
Now foot by foot stretched thinner, tangled, frayed,  
Guttered, the huge sun drowning, burning dark.

I meant to go, but then the old man said  
“I have come back. It is the day, the place,  
And now the hour. There, it was there she turned  
And looked at me. We walked again. Her hair  
Blew round her like a fire; the late light burned  
In her hair’s colors, fire-like, just as these.  
My friends and I were silent. No man there  
Had seen such beauty; I have seen none since,  
Beauty to stop men’s hearts and turn men white,  
Beauty to mute the watcher and to bind,  
Beauty to make him feel both clod and prince,  
Beauty to crown and beggar at its ease.  
For how could such as we return such grace?  
Then each man knew allegiance in his mind,  
And each man thought, “Well, Lady, I have sworn  
To love and serve you to the Judgment Morn.’  
But she had looked at me.”

I had no right,

I knew, to hear such things. What spectral tryst  
Had I profaned? For she of whom he spoke  
Was now forever in some way his own,  
And not for strangers. Yet I could not go  
Unheard; the walks were gravel. It grew late.  
The sun fell, now a star came, now a mist,  
Then other stars. Surely he need not know.  
Much better he should think himself alone;  
Much better that it were not I who broke  
That silence. Let that sundown hour long past  
Be his unshared for keeping. I could wait.  
Then he said,

“It was here I sought at last

The kindly night, with thoughts not to be told,  
The kindly night, lest men should see and muse,  
‘It is the grief that Adam knew of old,  
Who learned and lost.’ For grief is from the first,  
And sorrow the old coinage men must use  
To pay tuition as they learn the law  
Of time exacting, time that takes his due,  
Time that will have the best and leave the worst,  
Of time that garners beauty as he must,  
Of time most certain. Then at length I saw  
That sorrow is a precious thing whereby  
Beauty can stay awhile and may hold true,  
That beauty gone may live in sorrow’s trust,  
In sorrow and the night until we die.  
And so I walked, and thought the night a friend  
Worthy to keep all secrets to the end.”

This hint alarmed me. Had he found me out?  
I felt a fool, though I had meant the best.  
I could feign waking as from sleep, then leave.  
A silly game, yet better to deceive  
Than make things worse. Then as I sat in doubt  
He spoke again, and put my doubt to rest.  
He could not know, for what he said made clear  
That none alive save he was meant to hear:

“O beautiful my love, it is the hour  
To beauty sacred, beauty consecrate,  
It is the night that gathers in her reach  
Things past, things coming. Years fall, centuries  
Fall and are counted, but the night is one;  
We and Orion and the Pleiades,  
The Herdsman and his flock, the Huntress Moon  
Touch and are one. Now time yields up his power;  
Now hasten, beauty, his hand drops, he frees  
The prisoner decades, all is rebegun;  
We and the Huntress and her prey above  
All rebegun, renewed. O beauty lost,  
O beauty lithe and delicate, come soon,  
Make speed, O dextrous, beauty stepping light,  
Sure-footed beauty, come, O come in state,  
Come conquer, O majestic, reign and teach,  
O beauty, come in the archaic night,

Beauty beyond all keeping, worth all cost,  
O beautiful and merciless my love.”