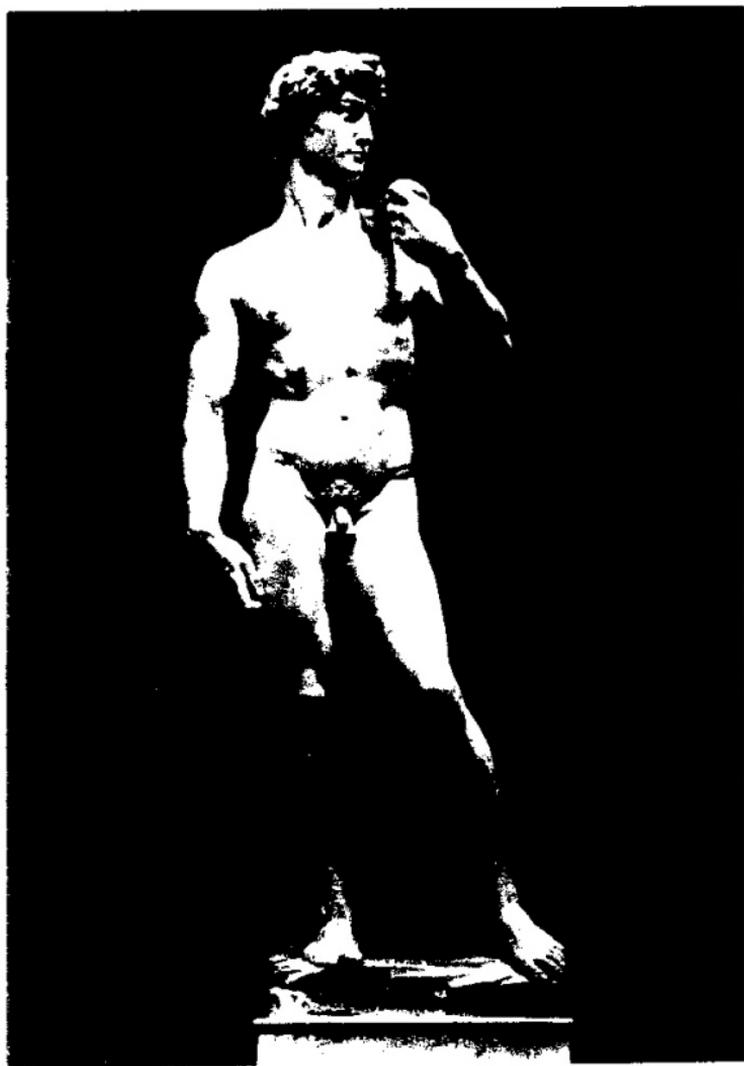


## Studies in Stone



# Gladys Mary Coles

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## Studies in Stone

*'Not even the greatest artist has conceived an idea  
a block of marble does not contain within itself.'*  
*Michaelangelo, Sonnet 151.*

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## STUDIES IN STONE

### *FLINT*

tongues of varying lengths  
blades without hafts

sharp slivers on a Clwyd hillside  
sorted through, tossed away  
only yesterday  
by a small dark man  
dressed in skins

### *QUARTZITE*

durable enticement  
of mica and crystal  
sheep's skulls glittering  
with frost

fingers and fists, before Man,  
knuckling above the highest ice

the Stiperstones, Devil-haunted

### *.JET*

a necklace of lozenge beads  
on white skin  
Lenin's harbingers of death -  
a line of black sledges  
across the snow

## LAPIS LAZULI

curled in the eye of Horus  
inlay of the sarcophagus

sparkle of pyrites  
sun flecks on a tideless sea

## EIDDYLLION

The crags of Snowden cry  
in a creaking wind -  
does Arthur sleep within?  
*Bones of sheep  
whiten the cwms.*

The rocks of Tryfan sigh  
in shrouding snow -  
does Bedivere lie here?  
*Ravens rise  
at Dinas Emrys.*

And the waters of Llyn Llydaw  
whisper to the shore -  
does Excalibur rest below?  
*Samite fish  
hide in the rushes.*

## AT BASINGWERK ABBEY, IN WINTER

St. Thomas' Eve: I tread the meadows cold,  
white grass underfoot, sheep ochre in the fold.  
I walk alone among the abbey stones,  
the broken cloisters covering old bones.  
Will the Welsh ghosts be gathering here?

Is that shadow or monk  
in the transept?  
Does a hand move  
the worn, studded door?  
Are those whispered vespers  
or night-breeze?  
Footsteps or mouse  
on the altar floor?

I hear madrigals in the rag~leaved trees,  
wind round the ruins whistles,  
through the bark-boned building bare,  
winding up the winding stair.

Where white-gowned monks no longer are  
their orisons at break of star  
rustle now among dry thistles.

On the pond a cross of ice;  
frozen is the sacrifice.

## **ROCK CASTLE, CLWYDIANS (For Anna Haycraft)**

Seen from the valley, impressive,  
commanding, set high on a pulpit  
of rock, grey finger admonishing the sky.

This little chapel gleams, beckons  
like a Swiss scene.

I climb the lovers' path  
through tilted trees. Thorns catch  
with tiny claws of spite  
from out the green.

Reaching the lip of cliff, I see  
the living red - crimson fungi crushed  
in its mossy bed. Outside, congregations  
of leaves murmur their litanies. Inside

stillness, ancient silence. Only the motes -  
particles of the past - move, dance an airy ritual.

On the altar, stiff oblation of dead flies,  
legs fixed in supplication. I walk the aisle,  
cleave the musty air. Stained glass, cracked,  
casts a shadow-stigmata on off-white plaster.  
Through sellotaped holes in the panes, sunlight  
and spiders creep. A pieta droops in dust.

Lady of Sorrows for whom do you weep?  
the human victim ever in your arms,  
the bat-tom fieldmouse at your feet,  
this, your deserted shrine?

Yet on bright mornings from the east  
that daily benediction, sun - the world's host  
in a monstrance of twigs - gilds  
with pale light the fly-strewn altar,  
the cobwebbed crucifix.

## CASTLE SHAPES, CLWYDIANS

If this is no castle of man  
can it be simply mountain rock  
wind-moulded, undevised?

If these are no constructed turrets  
can they be purely nature's shape  
pinnacles eroded, innocent  
of power or terrors rape? ---

Then I am the flower  
in the stone

the wisp of life  
in a solid tomb tower

obedient to experience  
gracing this eternal fortress  
with the pain of love

and a fragile death.

## WINTER IN CLWYD: A SEQUENCE

1.

Snow takes the mountains  
advance forces the frosts:  
no field escapes  
each blade sprigged  
like blast dust on trees  
the fright-white ghosts of summer.  
The vale in frost-sprayed gown  
a thin hemline of mist  
below the hills.

2.

The Clwydians' great white shoulders  
nude giants turned to stone  
hiding their faces.

3.

A farmer's fence along the topmost field  
is a charcoal line demarcating  
from white hill the white sky.  
In the distance sheep move in flock -  
a yellow turgid river  
the dog fussing on its banks.  
Before me, pencilling of undergrowth  
pointillism of stubble. Closer now  
I see bird-pricks, flick of wings,  
fox-marks narrow with long central toes,  
indentations of dragged tails - rats  
or slender weasels - the matchless blobs  
of rabbits and, behind, unmistakable  
manprints. Secretly, silently in snow  
new graphics have appeared.

4.

Light breaks over eastern Clwyd:  
the hill hollows fill like breakfast bowls  
milky to the brim. Snow on the tops,  
crystalline mounds dissolving  
at the edge. Changing light eludes  
no matter how long I stare.  
I notice that mountains, their fronts  
in dark pleats at early morning,  
become smoothed out by coffee-time.  
I hold a steaming mug: froth clings  
like stale snow the rain disperses.

5.

On the chess board of fields  
a dark King stands cornered  
in check to a white Queen:  
the heavy oak, immobile, hedged in  
before a silver birch, slim  
moving in all directions.  
It's the wind's game.

## **N44, FRANCE: HOLIDAY ROUTE**

Maize, wheat, vines border the road,  
a straight road, one hour to Rheims;  
this the country of Champagne.  
The celebration wine from sad flatlands;  
white of the white grape  
from a blood-soaked earth.  
Signposts are to cemeteries  
to graves, as neat and thickly planted  
as the rows of vines. No bubbles here,  
no sparkle. On one side, a crucifix;  
on the other, a stone hand holding  
a stone flame. A little stone for every man.  
War is soil-deep here, though the maize  
grows fine ears, the vines have luscious grapes -  
all this ground seems tender,  
vulnerable. Hardly breathing, not believing  
in any harvest, least of all its own.

Yes, there are poppies, still in abundance;  
neither are the larks absent, nor their singing.  
Yet the peace now lying over this landscape  
seems merely a transfer about to be peeled back  
to reveal the real scene: battle, ambush.  
Trees seem about to explode;  
fields, copses, grassy knolls  
all units in the strategy, the campaign .

While Mephistopheles drinks champagne  
an angel smiles through centuries of war  
over the cathedral door  
at Rheims, where hotels offer the best of wine  
and tourists stay, less to mourn than dine.

## MICHAELANGELO'S DAVID

In this stone colossus  
is there a resemblance  
to the nimble boy  
messiah fated to kill a giant  
with one blow? Did he  
(in life larger than life)  
look keen in sculpted grace  
brood in sinewed strength  
fix thought in frozen frown?  
And were his mobile eyes  
as marble-steady; was he

ready with his sling?  
When Goliath faced the boy  
did he see a small statue,  
glimpse the sudden stone  
of death?

This David is a stone Goliath.

## AT HAWORTH

Roots of cloudberry  
among the nardus grass.  
Gritstone for grinding  
is lion shapes in the crags.  
Walls shift and settle  
as the moorland moves.

The gravestones sag,  
battalions of them;  
and the fortress line  
of linked cottages  
fronts horizontal wind,  
diagonal rain.

No wonder the cobbles  
huddle together  
and flat slabs shield  
those beds of the dead.  
Yet there are times when  
the Parsonage glows  
like topaz.

## MY JADE KING

You stand at the centre of my room.  
Each day I admire your texture -  
smooth, glossy almost.  
Your contours catch me, carved  
to my pleasure. You never fail  
in aesthetic appeal. Yet sometimes  
you reveal your subtle hidden green,  
show an alien aspect, smile turned  
to snarl. An inward change, not caused  
by sinister light or the day's mood.  
But then, you have the qualities of jade -  
green veined in varying shades,  
comparative softness yet sound self-structure:  
even if I drop you, you won't smash.

Of jade's five properties, two are yours,  
those most appropriate to a king:  
courage, certainly; a degree of wisdom.  
And the legendary healing power of jade?  
precious to Aztecs as 'stone of the loin',  
prescribed by early physicians  
to be taken internally (though a dose .  
is fatal). Yes, I know you can cure:  
successfully cauterising my naive belief,  
antidote to chronic 'in love'.  
Indispensable. Always I will want you  
on my shelf.

## GARGOYLES

Stone on stone devoid of bone.  
Granule hearts. All solid parts.  
Everything externalised. Grotesques  
always in the beautiful high places  
One time (not long ago) those faces  
spilling expression, spouting thought  
invariably caught me in wart-caress,  
clutched inner gargoyles, clawed my water-images.

Now I'm gauging fear, its forms, the chimera:  
seeing, last summer, the famed four of Paris  
fixed in surveillance on Notre Dame -  
Thinker out-thinking thought, Dragon  
all arched ferocity, grape-grasping Eagle  
and that eternal, entirely expected  
Devil (ridiculously griffin, almost pet).  
These no longer startle. Familiar, chromatic  
on postcards sent to Illinois or Marple.  
Tourist appeal like Auschwitz, Anne Frank's house  
the moody Tower or other of life's gibbets.

Unexpected ones still knife me :  
reptile boughs in meres,  
rock beasts with glaring fossil eyes,  
dark, omnipresent Satans in the sky.

## MERSEYSIDE POETRY MINIBOOKS SERIES

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GLADYS MARY COLES was born in Liverpool and educated at Liverpool University, where she edited *Sphinx*. She has won several major poetry competitions and a Welsh Arts Council Writer's Award; in 1984 she was a prize-winner in the BBC/Poetry Society National Poetry Competition. Her poems have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies.

Her previous collections are *The Sounding Circle* (Rondo (Rondo), *Sinerva and Other Poems* (Headland), *The Snowbird Sequence* (Headland), *Stoat, in Winter* (Priapus) and *Liverpool Folio* (Duckworth).

Based in both Merseyside and North Wales, she currently lectures in English literature for the W.E.A. and is a tutor in Creative Writing for the University of Liverpool School of Extension Studies Studies.

### WINDOWS

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