

For The Living

If you like a person here,
Tell them so;
If you hold their friendship dear,
Let them know;
All the roses that you spread
On their bier when they are dead
Are not worth one kind word said
Years ago.

You can help a person now
If you will
Smooth the furrows from their brow;
You can kill
The despair that's in their heart
With a word, and ease the smart.
So why stand you now apart
Keeping still?

You can help a person when
They are here;
They would hold your praises then
Very dear.
But absurdly still you stay
And withhold what you could say
That would cheer them on their way
For their bier.

What, I wonder, if the dead
Saw and heard
What is done and what is said
Afterward,
Would they utter in reply?
Would they smile and ask us why,
When the time to help was nigh,
No one stirred?

'Keep your roses for the living,'
They would say,
'Waste no time in praises giving
Us today;
Strew some living person's way so,
If you like another, say so,
For the thing that now you praise so
Is but clay.'

Edgar Albert Guest (1881-1959)