


2021

Armstrong's Good Night

David Kirby

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/bpr>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kirby, David (2021) "Armstrong's Good Night," *Birmingham Poetry Review*: Vol. 48, Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/bpr/vol48/iss2021/9>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

Armstrong's Good Night

"Good night, and joy be with you all," writes Johnnie Armstrong
in his prison cell as he awaits the dawn of the day he'll hang.
It's the winter of 1600, and border-raider Johnnie is about to
marry the ropemaker's daughter for his part in the murder
of Sir John Carmichael. The poem he writes as he awaits

his executioner becomes a song first called "Armstrong's
Good Night" and now "The Parting Glass," versions of which
are sung at funerals and retirement parties the world over
and also when friends move away to a better job, better lover,
better life. Armstrong's song is sad but beautiful, or perhaps

I should say sad and beautiful, for the deepest beauty
finds itself in the black heart of night. Now imagine Johnnie
Armstrong in his last hours when, like a shaft clear and cold,
the thought pierces him that in the end all this is only a small
and passing thing, that there's a radiance beyond the shadow's reach.

And so he writes, "But since it fell unto my lot / That I should rise
and you should not / I gently rise and softly call
Good night, and joy be with you all." Johnnie Armstrong was hanged
as a murderer, but to his people, he was a patriot,
though he admits to nothing more than carelessness: "Of all the money

that e'er I had / I spent it in good company / And all the harm I've ever done
Alas it was to none but me." I'd say I fall
somewhere between murderer and patriot, for I've killed no one yet,
and I love my country, or at least
my version of it. As for being careless, they don't hang you for that.

So let us say good night to each other while we can. Good night
to my darling wife and to the sweethearts
who came before her, and may you think well of me, as I do you.
Good night to my boys and their wives
and children and children's children, the ones I'll never see.

Good night to the soldier, the teacher, the engineer and banker,
good night to the prisoner in his cell
and to those who will come for him in the morning. Oh, and good night
to my parents, who were the first to bid me
good day. Good night, friend! Good night, and joy be with you all!