



DONALD DAVIDSON

POEMS
1922-1961

Donald Davidson

POEMS • 1922–1961

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Prefatory Note

THIS BOOK includes a selection of poems from *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems* (1938) and *The Long Street* (1961), together with a few from *An Outland Piper* (1924) and, in its entirety, *The Tall Men* (first published in 1927 as a separate book and here reprinted in the revised version of 1938). I am deeply grateful to the Vanderbilt University Press, publishers of *The Long Street*, for their kind permission to reprint a number of poems from that volume.

D. D.

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I NORTHERN SUMMERS SOUTHERN AUTUMNS

But one must be explicit as well as brief. — Allen Tate, “The Meaning of Life”

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THE NINTH PART OF SPEECH

A Verse Letter: To Louis Zahner

Whatever an empty schoolhouse still can teach
We need to learn, and that is why we come
So late and shy when you are not at home.

We may be more than forty years too late
To hear the last bell ringing near this gate
And write the morning maxim on a slate,
Yet have excuses you might not impeach:
Problems that flare out like a comet's tail,
Unsolved equations, surded with bane and bale.

We do not shun your austere reprimand.
Truant from glass-front life-adjustment schools
Where Dunce and Master sit on equal stools,
We seek a hand to guide a hand.

For you as Master-Pupil Resident
The Schoolhouse is far more than monument.
You could have told us, had you not been gone,
How much you fathomed in the first intent
Of wood-wise hands that axed this mountainy place
And raised a Schoolhouse, square in the forest's face.

We felt your door was locked
But for manners' sake we knocked.
Only the white pine stirred. We crossed your lawn
And found wild orchids blooming as of old —
The purple-fringed, high-masted, cresting the gold

Billows of grass and leaf among the spruce trees —
And if we understood what the orchids said
We had some right to feel comforted
On hearing how at peripatetic ease
You won within this grove some new degrees.

Whoever takes a schoolhouse for his house
Must move beyond a printed grammar's reach
And try some parleying among birch boughs
With beaver, deer, and the neat scurrying grouse
Who use what is their own.
And from them learn the ninth part of speech
That never yet was parsed or paradigmmed.

That must be why a wilderness heart redeemed
An exiled Schoolhouse from a helpless Town,
Outwitting Dewey and consolidation
By plain regressiveness plus renovation.
By moving up while all the world moved down
He gave first principles another start
And saved a corner for the abandoned art
Of simple, solitary meditation.

Vermont would call it good economy.
We have not asked, or yet made any survey.
Old schoolhouses it has for lease or purvey,
Enough to adult-educate a few
Unlaundered brains — but only just enough
For those who like their walking rough
Up trails that slip around technology
To gulfs of fern and banks of memory.
One such you know — your neighbor down the road.
Blackboard and bench still honor his abode
And under his maples give him spiritual aid
If he would raise the song that Moses made

Of how all dwelling-plans but One must fade;
Or pace the highway's margin, conning in Hebrew
Verses that drink the early autumn dew.

We could not leave without one farewell look
Where birch and pye-weed overhang your brook,
And found, incised upon bright sand, the mark
Another caller left by dusk or dark.
Tawny and lean you will imagine him,
Clip-eared, bobtailed, and whiskered trim.
Sometime you may have heard his cry
Or thought you glimpsed him flickering by
To vault the pumpgunned sportsman's law
And snatch his kill with tooth and claw.

High-minded was that moment, and high-hearted,
When you could link the theorem with the thing,
Catch up a twilight's winnowing
And so join hands with colleagues long departed.

We'll name but one — you may have heard the tale.
It might be better told to the wind's wail
With a kettle singing on the kitchen stove,
The sort of gossip Robert Frost might love.
But at Homer Noble's Farm, before Frost came,
We heard it from the Mistress of that place:
A gentle voice with just a touch of shy
And yet a twinkle in her quick blue eye —
Topping off one of Homer's bedtime stories
As if to tone down his too masculine glories
And yet not quite reprove him to his face.
Ah yes, she said, the men must hunt a bear,
And each man takes a gun,
But she, a lady schoolteacher, had none
The day the wildcat kept her after school

Much as she'd kept her little scholars in
Lest she or they should be undutiful
And slack the upper hand of discipline.

It was this very Schoolhouse. The Old Woman
Was picking her geese. And she, alone and late,
Well-bundled, on the top step, chanced to look
And saw she had an official visitor.

He was no semi-literate school inspector;
She felt convinced his interest was in her.
Her knees shook.

Quite too apparently he would not go,
But she could certainly wait
And watch him, and the snow.
And that she did — behind a bolted door.
Till dark fell he was Master, she the class;
She figured unknowns through her pane of glass,
Chill binomials, hour by hour:
She plus the burning eyes, the frozen grass
Times weather to the *n*th power —
Then horses' hoofs, a voice, deliverance.

She minded only the tedious mischance —
Silence — and not a soul to wait with her;
And though 'twas more than cold that made
her shiver

It gave her no such sudden scare
As when, at home, another winter
She went to fetch a log of wood
And met a different beast — a wolf — right where
Her woodshed opened at the back. It stood
One breathless mortal moment planted there.
“*Loup cervier!*” old Homer said. “A lynx!”
“But a lynx is a cat. This was more like a dog,

A big gray dog." She watched him through the chinks
Until he left, then carried in her log.

So we bring ours. We know of nothing better
To keep a fire lit or to end a letter.

Few now are left who know the ancient rule
That tame abstract must wed the wild particular
In school or art, but most of all in school,
Else learning's spent to gild a fool
At market, altar, bench, or bar.
The shudder in the nerves must ever vex
Trim certainties of the vast complex,
And ever the wildcat's scream
Must break the Platonic dream
Else we but skim realities
And mock the great humanities.
To know this secret, you were not the first,
And will not be the last, we hope, to pledge
Redemption if the worst should come to worst,
And bring the schoolhouse back
Somewhere close to a wildcat's track
And the forest's finite edge.

GRADUAL OF THE NORTHERN SUMMER

To Dulcie Scott

I

Now let us leave the gate unshut
On hayfields grown too ripe to cut.
That Adirondack will not change its pose,
And this northern light looks back before it goes
Till Kirby Peak turns rose.

Whoever asks the day of the week
Can hold the wind on his western cheek,
Walk, and find an unblazed road where Monday
Measures as good a blueberry mile as Sunday.

Lest we should sin by being fanatic
We let the red squirrel all the attic.
Knowing God is, we say our vows
When vesper deer come forth to browse,
Telling the beads of many a yesterday.
Nine shadows lined against the wood;
The tenth you cannot see,
But count that other shadow where the gray
Boulder remembers the glacial flood,
And that will make our rosary.
Ave Maria while the evening star leans low
Brings dew upon the head.
Our Paternoster's said.
The lamp is lit within, and we must go.

II

We ask God for no better proof
Than that moss likes our shingle roof.

Locusts give shade; the sun will set;
Asters proclaim it will rise again.
The red ants know we will have rain
Though the merry cricket says, "Not yet!"

In the pavilion where the shade
Cools the sweat his labor made
Our gardener, loving God's command,
Adores the apple in his hand.
His Eve, to make the man complete,
Put an apple in for him to eat.
His mower, silent in the swathe,
Can count no time, can dream no scathe.
It waits on Charley's hand and faith;

While, derelict near the new-cut grass,
Eyes watch to see Nausicaa pass.
In shorts, because the day is warm,
She brings the washing on her arm.

Slim-legged, tiptoe, unaware
What wanderer's in the goldenrod,
She tightens rope and trusts in God.
She hangs out all the line will bear —
Sea-purple, white — and then is gone.
So the red fox invades the lawn.
Bony and lean, he has a brush
Would serve Odysseus for a bush.
The little, naked red fox peers
With prayerful face and upright ears,
Then genuflects, with sweep of paw,
To mark the rigor of God's law
And catch, of grasshoppers in riot,
His portion of a hermit's diet,

Which, if it is not sacrament,
Owes naught to secular government.

III

Once and again a tantara
Hails like a distant Gloria.
Others beyond our unshut gate
Follow a highway broad and straight;
Whoso would turn to our abode
Must take the narrow, rain-scraped road
And learn by one-way steepes and grooves
God loves best where he unimproves.
A horn in time is all the stitch
Our welfare takes to mind the ditch
And signal home friend and machine.

Let eyes now say what ears have seen:
The mistress of our high demesne
Who daily, though our sins be black,
Brings God's grace in a grocery sack.
How could she learn, without research,
The Gradual of our mountain church
If not from logs of pine and birch
That lift from every morning fire
The plainsong of our primitive choir?
We cannot stop to remember
That snow comes here in September.
Our calendar keeps its face to the wall;
We do not enter time till Labor Day
And that is far away.
We must not think of that at all.

Now, translating all to light,
An artist's eye confirms the rite

And seizes from time's spatial flame
Reflections we could never frame.
Images we would leave to burn,
Lines for which we lack an urn,
She gathers into perspective.
The shadows that our eyes refused
Are light she will not leave unused.
By dark as much as sun we live,
And pity knows, before we ask,
The trespass that the senses mask.

The foe that tears our parts piecemeal
Means to enslave, not to reveal.
To sever parts was our mistake;
The brush restores them for God's sake.
And so companioning the fox,
Our own Madonna of the Rocks
Between the steeple-bush and thistle,
Boulder for seat and lap for easel,
Redeems us from the evening shade
With light too absolute to fade.

A BARREN LOOK

"Here is the bridge where a trout pool used to be.
Step softly, look, and tell me what you see."

"Bright water coursing through an unreaped meadow
And my own face mirrored in a boulder's shadow."

"So there is water still, and water is good!
But look hard where that boulder stems the flood
And, whispering, say if any living shape
Floats in its lee or, darting, seeks escape."

"Only the empty water moves and the deep-tufted slender
grasses
Dowse their tips and sway where the eddying ripple passes;
White birch and jewel-weed tremble along the strand;
No track of man or beast or bird on the gray sand."

"Once all were here, but now you read their fate,
And that is why I feared a barren look."

"I read only a bridge and a mountain brook
That could be much more desolate
Beside this good road entered on our map
As fully paved through Middlebury Gap."

"No fish in the stream, no light in the head,
And what if, next, the land be dead!"

A TOUCH OF SNOW

Cold showers, drumming fit to wake the dead,
From morning darkness rout us out of bed.
As yet there's no last trumpet we can hear,
But fog on the mountain, rain, the turn of the year,
And on our brows that sudden breath, too soon, too near,
Proclaim summer must go.

Two wise men on our porch with ladder and brush
Turn broad backs to the north and the wind's rush.
They had counted on our porch to paint inside
When it should rain, if God should so decide.
And do they feel no other gust, of time, of tide?
They must know what I know.

They must know what comes next when a season shifts.
"Won't there be snow, high up, when the fog lifts?"
They shake their heads. Not theirs the risk to say
Unlucky weather's somewhere on the way.
"Oh, never mind the ridge," one holds, "long as we may
Keep summer here below."

From where that summer stays we still can watch
For any higher warnings man should catch:
Stars old or new that course the telltale night;
Tree-shapes that blaze too fair for mortal sight;
Or mist-flurries writing MENE there on our mountain
height
With just a touch of snow.

Now that the fog-veils lift, we see it clear —
A stretch of white that marks the turn of the year.
Summer may dally here with autumn-tide,
But we believe what the mountain testified.
Before God's frosty breath leaves snow too deep,
 too wide,
We'll make our turn, and go.

LINES WRITTEN FOR ALLEN TATE ON
HIS SIXTIETH ANNIVERSARY

The sound of guns from beleaguered Donelson
Up-river flowed again to Benfolly's hearth.
Year to familiar year we had heard it run
World-round and back, till Lytle cried out: "Earth
Is good, but better is land, and best
A land still fought-for, even in retreat;
For how else can Aeneas find his rest
And the child hearken and dream at his grandsire's
feet?"

You said: "Not Troy is falling now. Time falls
And the victor locks himself in his victory
Deeming by that conceit he cancels walls
To step with Descartes and Comte beyond history.
But that kildee's cry is more than phylon or image
For us, deliberate exiles, whose dry rod
Blossoms athwart the Long Street's servile rage
And tells what pilgrimage greens the Tennessee sod."

So, Allen, you have kindled many an evening
When the creed of memory summoned us to your fire.
I remember that blazon, remember the firelight blessing
Owsley's uplifted head, Ransom's gray eye,
The Kentucky voice of Warren, until that household's
Oaken being spoke like a plucked lyre
And we turned as men who see where a battle unfolds;

And as now, once more, I see young faces turn
Where the battle is and a lonelier kildee's cry,
Exultant with your verses to unlearn
The bondage of their dead time's sophistry;
They know, by Mississippi, Thames, or Seine,
What city we build, what land we dream to save,
What art and wisdom are the part of men
And are your music, gallant and grave.

Among these — if with shortened breath — I come
Bearing an old friend's garland in these lines,
Scarred but surviving the Telchins' lance and bomb
To join the long procession where it winds
Up to a mountain home —
No marshals but the Muses for this day
Who in other years did not veil their sacred glance
Or from you look askance
And will not cast you off when you are gray.

SOLDIER AND SON

Son. Father, before the years have dulled your tongue,
Tell me the tale you have kept so long unspoken.
Without recollection, how can I truly be
Your son, or a true father of sons?
What is kindred blood, and no memory?

Soldier. Not being a man for talk, I have held my peace
And watched you grow without my memory.
They say the weeds redeem the battlefield;
It is fallow land. My friends are in the grave.
I cannot bring them back to you with words
If language itself at last turns mercenary.
Go read in those who have such words to sell;
You will be thought an educated man.

Son. Skim milk they give and call it history.
I have read its lies — have you not said they were lies?
Belief I want that surpasses easy knowledge.
When I believe you, I believe myself
And am myself, beyond my present self.
I want the word that burns into my heart
Like God's coal alive on the prophet's tongue.
I would listen now while memory is ablaze
To seal your testament within my soul.

Soldier. I think you are my son. Now moonlight falls
On roads you never walked with me before.

WOODLANDS, 1956-1960

To Mary Chevillette Simms Oliphant

1. Evening

Late, by a hundred years, I come
To walk these paths of sand among your live-oaks,
Oh, unseen host, whose shade my heart invokes.
A stranger, yet not strange, I gather wood
 To light again the flame
 And bid it bear your name.

Here in the bitter days you kindled
Fire on the ashes of a ruined hearth;
Salved the deep wound, and from the immortal earth
Rebuilt a house while death plucked at your sleeve.
 It is not the scholars' trade
 To parley with a shade;

And they would call it self-deceit
If I should hear a footstep close to mine.
"A hundred years can measure only time,"
That footstep said, "in this our dear retreat."
 They would say the leaves sigh
 If they heard you pass by.

Hound voices from the Edisto
Thread the soft dark as evening takes the swampland.
The last mule-wagon, noiseless upon the sand,
Vanishes into the highway's merciless flow;

But the mossy oaks will screen
This house from that fell scene,

While by these glowing coals remembrance
Knits up its fitful present with the past,
And of its future measurers what will last
In the crazy skein of our new circumstance.

This is chill November air,
And if we mount the stair,

No candle leads us through the shadow,
No agate lamp within a window-niche,
But a groping hand can find somewhere a switch,
And light can give its modern relief.
Should we now plan for rational slumber?
It is a century of no belief
And cannot read your stories, Gilmore Simms,
If history is fabulous no longer.

We cannot live by that death.
How could we still draw breath
If ever the fable were lost?
Be with us, unseen host!

II. Morning

Not lost before — not on that old frontier!
Children of Homer rode from bay and swamp:
Porgy, Will Sinclair, or Mellichampe:
Even the wildest breathed Olympian air:
Blonay, Mad Archy Campbell, Supple Jack,
Nell on her “tacky,” Ballou, Hellfire Dick.
Colonus’ praise and seed of Attic glory
Were theirs and Carolina’s in your story;

And ours at Woodlands still this later year.
The very dawn-light calls each soul by name.
No cold voice of the world-city's dream —
Siren or magna-vox cannot rack us here.
Light on our eyelids, warm from the Low Country,
Is South Carolina softly wakening us;
Acorns upon the roof for Angelus
While the squirrel's muted bark and the hawk's cry
Make pure the heart and bless the exile's eye,

Till, practicing our redemption, we may see
Beneath the Church Oak, by the sunny gate,
Your household worshipping, or some day wait
Bridegroom and bride beneath your Marriage Tree;
Or hear, where drifts today our kitchen-smoke,
That fern-wreathed bell, clutched by your Eldest Oak —
Did he now ring alarm and stir his prophet's veil?
High in our morning! — look! — a sign — that vapor-trail!

The Tarletons of our horseless century,
Past sound or sight, dragoon the icy heaven;
Abstraction, triggered, fingers the bomber's levin;
Their squadrons wheel; the guide, infinity;
Guarding, they guard naught; knowing, they nothing know.
To that unearthly logic must we yield
This rooted tree, this house, this storied field?
It will be "Tarleton's quarters!" at hour zero.

Where better could the outcast heart now learn
What Marions yet can ride against that hour
Than in this grove? Here you outlive the power
That has but chains to fetter, fire to burn.
Gilmore Simms, we have watched the dust-cloud rise
And heard the hoofbeats of the Great Dragoon.

Who would not know that flag of death he flies?
Who would not say Tarleton has come again?
But we have seen beyond the dark lagoon
Shapes mounting, hand to bridle, as of old;
How could we doubt that they are Marion's men?
And surely we are, too, when your tale is told.

MEDITATION ON LITERARY FAME

What net, what oar, what forest path or dream
Retrieved for you, for us, the Theban's lyre?
The scholiast from Byzantium's funeral gleam
Plucked but the mute, the shattered frame;
And Yeats, consorting with moon-demons, heard
Images only, clutched at the abstract Bird
Of charred philosophy until he lost
Usheen, whom once he knew, and his dear land,
And all the Celtic host.
Fleeing that bitter choice, your reverend great-grandsire
Sailed, where the Muses led, to this western strand.

Where you were born, exiled Olympian song
Ever companioned us in game or chase.
For how could poet rightly shape his tongue
To cheer the winner of a country race
Unless some God or Goddess had stood there,
Likeness of Mentor in a hunter's coat,
And tuned the winged words for us,
And whetted on the praise?
By Isis or the Thames you found none fabulous
As those proud men at any county fair
Who wore the Southern gray or Tennessee butternut
As if great Pindar sat in the judge's chair.

Then let my messenger, this song, evoke
New praise and old remembrance like the voice
That first we heard beneath your Talking Oak

Foretelling your best victory —
(What if it's called defeat, this later year!)

Where are no griefs, can be no joys!
Happy the land where men hold dear
Myth that is truest memory,
Prophecy that is poetry.

THE CASE OF MOTORMAN 17: COMMITMENT
PROCEEDINGS

ἔσθ' ὅπου τὸ δεινὸν εὖ
καὶ φρενῶν ἐπίσκοπον
δαῖ μένειν καθήμενον
— *Eumenides*, 517–518

A Judge; A Deputy Sheriff; First Alienist; Second Alienist; A Preacher (the Reverend Dr. Brown); A Streetcar Inspector; A Poet; and Motorman 17 (Orestes Brown). SCENE: A Courtroom in a State Capital; TIME: c.1929

Judge. Now in this most bewildering case the Court
Must take occasion to remind
The complainant, officers, and witnesses
That we are not called on here to decide
If supernatural beings do exist,
Or if material substances like metals
Are ever moved by non-substantial means,
But only whether this unfortunate man
Is sane or insane. Let the alienists
Speak briefly to that single point once more
In view of the evidence today presented,
Not omitting this Exhibit A —
This antique coin — this carfare of the dead.
Restate for the Court your expert opinions.
Then, if other interested parties
Wish to plead, the Court will hear them too,
And give a judgment. First of all, we want
A statement from the arresting officer.

Deputy Sheriff. My name is James E. Balthrop and I am
A deputy sheriff serving in this county.
Answering a midnight call I came
To the residence of Reverend Doctor Brown.

I found his kitchen porch all smoke, as if on fire,
And this man running crazily back and forth
From an old-fashioned well with a single bucket,
Shouting and dashing water all around.
Of course I speedily called the Fire Department;
Then I arrested him upon complaint
Of the Reverend Doctor Brown himself. He said
This man was only pretending to put out
A blaze he set. I saw the man was wild.
He screamed out, "Flee from the wrath!" and kept on
screaming
Until we handcuffed him and got him quiet.
Then he began to say that he was ha'nted;
The ha'nts had pestered him right on his streetcar.
He claimed they were after him for three nights running,
There at the end of the line especially.
He even claimed they set the car on fire
And the preacher's house — he said he was trying to
stop them
Before we took him in. I personally checked
That streetcar, standing dark not far from the house.
In fact, there was a burnt spot near the front —
A good-sized burnt spot on the floor and a seat.
Some careless fool must have dropped a cigarette
Down on some trash — but that fire was out.

First Alienist. Your Honor, science earnestly upholds
The Court's exclusion of irrelevant issues.
We have no question here of good or evil,
No fine metaphysical distinctions,
Or a moral matter either, as I see it,
And of course nothing truly criminal.
Grant that he did set fire to the streetcar,
Then to the minister's house — and so he might —

Still he was no more responsible
Than for the smallpox if he caught the smallpox.
In plain terms, Orestes Brown is sick,
Mentally sick — I mean not rational.
To a layman's view, I grant, it may seem odd
That this uneducated man could see
Or, rather, claim to see, strange phantoms
Like pictures in a child's mythology book,
Especially on a twentieth-century streetcar
(He is quite ignorant of classical myth
As my examination has determined);
Or that he could visualize a *revenant*
In some anachronistic dress, and think
He received from her ghostly hand that obsolete coin.
The coin's mere accident — and all the rest
Is but delusion and hallucination
Born of a pathological disturbance
Of some grave kind. If we can get the time
We may find out by scientific means
The cause of this poor man's abnormal state.
It must lie deep — deep within the psyche,
And I would have to probe his mental history
From birth on up, to tell this Court the cause.
But as to diagnosis, there's no doubt.
To take a fabulous vision as real truth
Is surely symptomatic of disorder
Within the individual or group.
There is no need, Your Honor, to go further:
Dementia praecox of the classic type.
Orestes Brown is dangerous to society,
Being clinically and legally insane.
Prognosis and treatment must await
Later examination with the best

Available facilities. I urge
Commitment to State Hospital at once
For observation and for therapy.

Second Alienist. That view of course is professionally
correct

And for this moment of time is plausible.
And if I were professionally correct
In the popular sense — why, then, I would agree.
But, for the sake of science and much more,
A certain skepticism might be used
Toward shallow unbelief no less than shallow belief.
If, on the basis of mere unbelief
And our scant knowledge of man's brain and soul,
We send Orestes Brown to the insane asylum,
We might become more dangerous to society
Than ever he could be. How little we know
Of extrasensory perception!
We speak of the "group mind" as proven fact
And yet revile as vulgar charlatans
Those who believe in racial memories
And claim to know the *anima mundi*.
I am not saying I would believe a ghost
Gave Orestes Brown that antique coin,
But all who do believe in ghosts would think
It's absolute proof that spirits do exist.
Call that superstition if you will,
It yet might be more human, more sublime
Than my blind faith in some hypothesis
That makes a man just nerves and protoplasm.
Besides, that old coin is material fact
Not yet explained by anything I've heard.
Our inquiry is too brief, too superficial.
I see how this could be called *dementia praecox*

But cannot see that anything much is proved;
And if Orestes Brown is suspect of arson
Or any other crime, I'd let him be tried
In Criminal Court by regular legal process.
Commitment now might well be destruction
Both of the civil rights and of the man.
I think him sufficiently responsible;
I cannot hold him dangerous to society,
Not yet, at least. How could we ever live
Without some mental disturbance and concern?
And if we have no fear, can we have courage?

Judge. Two doctors disagree. We have a third
Whose views the Court will be much pleased to hear:
A minister who knows the soul's disease
As these the mind's. Now Reverend Doctor Brown,
Awhile ago you gave brief testimony
As, I believe, complainant in this case.
Go further now.
I see that you, too, are named Orestes,
And are a relative of this man.

Preacher. A very distant relative, Your Honor,
Yet nearer kin in blood than in belief,
Orestes' nearest relative in town.
And that is how I took this regrettable course
Which still seems in Christian charity
The best, most civilized, most decent way —
Least painful, least embarrassing for all,
And yet most helpful, for Orestes' sake.
I am sure we all agree that a criminal court —
The old harsh way, with its callous punishments —
Is long outmoded. What Orestes needs
Is to be healed of his tremendous Fear!

I humbly confess I must have failed in that.
The really peculiar thing is that his Fear
Attaches to *me*. He is afraid *for* me —
Somehow he fancies that he should protect me,
Maybe also rebuke —
He blames me that I do not fear enough
Some retribution that pursues our kin.

I very much dislike to bring this up,
But there is, of course, an old family matter,
An ancient story I do not know too well:
A father killed, blood-vengeance by the son
Upon the adulterous mother, and then flight
Across the sea, across the western mountains.
Perhaps that's why the family's here today.
Orestes thinks the ancient crime lives on
And he would save me from the avenging fires
That I suspect he sets, himself.
In brief outline, such is his mania.
He thinks he sees the very Hounds of Hell.

Saint Augustine believed the pagan gods
Really existed, but as demons only,
And if I held that very primitive view
I could maintain, Your Honor, that this man
Has been beset by demons — or by devils —
Scripture allows it — and I then could ask
That my ailing distant kinsman be released
Into my custody. But the Church today
Is not adverse where science and the law
Prove their authority;
For, if the mind's disordered, how can sin,
Original or new, be relevant?
We are too well informed now to believe

In curses that pass down the generations.
The curse of Adam is a symbolic term
To the enlightened student of religion.
In the Hebrew, *Adam* may be said to mean
That man derives from the lower animals,
Which then supports our modern theory.
Orestes' vision obviously is subjective;
The coin, and not the curse, has been handed down.
So I would judge.
I think a program
Of therapeutic attention
In a modern hospital
The right thing, precisely.

Streetcar Inspector. There are smarter men than I
am in this room.

You don't believe Orestes Brown, I see.
Now I don't follow what he did, but still
Believe that if he says he saw those things,
He saw them. He is an honest man.
He told me about the coin — and asked to keep it.
Put in a quarter of his own, instead.
I had to report Orestes Brown for leaving
Company property, that awful night.
I checked all that. Some claim he's the one
Who set the car on fire. Maybe he did.
I think he ought to be punished for that trick
If they can prove he did it — though he is
A good man and a good friend of mine.
I'd a-whole lot rather believe in what he says
Than to believe he's crazy.

Judge. Now you have no attorney, Mr. Brown,
But wish this gentleman to speak instead?

Orestes. The lawyers — they care nothing for my soul.
All they said was, “We leave it to the doctors.”
The lawyers think I’m crazy, but this poet
Believes or seems to believe my terrible story.
I hardly know how I could live without him.

Poet. Down the Long Street we two have walked as
strangers —
Strangers yet friends. For where the baked asphalt
Covers dead earth that once was quick with grass
We two cast down our harried eyes and saw
The swan trailing his frantic beak in the gutter
And wolves tracking the too-late hurrying feet.
Against the sky a lofty Grecian cupola
Tottered, there with its flags, on the Capitol;
Westward, beyond the Gulch, a spectral Parthenon
Faded, and smoke rose darker, and we heard
Wailing and lamentation wide in the land.
It was then we saw the winged shapes, the eyes
That drip red blood, the twining snaky locks.

For when the Divine Vision is lost
And the New Jerusalem is built by a steel crane
And Satan is no more King of Hell,
These others return. You, too, will see them, in time,
As the City withers into namelessness
And no man has a face or a place
And your neighbor becomes your foe.

It was different, once, for Orestes Brown. He lived
In the hill country where the bluegrass turns
To upland fallows and tobacco barns,
A land of no strangers. Orestes Brown had known
Man, woman, child, both white and black, and called
Folks by their first names from the Cumberland on

To his own hearthside. But all that was before
The family trouble that besets our race
Drove him to wander through a kinless world
Till he became a function and a number —
Motorman Seventeen, on the company rolls —
For whom, by singular principles of bondage,
Man, woman, child, both white and black, were
turned

To strangers all, who dropped their seven cents
Into the cash-box, so becoming fares,
Then sat or stood, nameless, till they got off.
But he, Orestes Brown, was not content
That people should go back and forth without
The pleasure of a name between themselves
And him; and in the fullness of his heart
He broke the rules — he talked to sulky boys
After the school and movies, or old men
With hound-dog weariness in their eyes, or forms
That had a country slouch about the shoulders.
These last would sometimes talk; the rest, not often.

One name he learned that made a difference
When the Reverend Doctor Brown returned at last
From a long vacation cruise to the Holy Land
And opened once more his house near the end of
the line.

It happened that they were, indeed, some kin;
And for loneliness Orestes joyed in him.
It was then came on the visitations;
The old family trouble began again
On the very day when Doctor Brown had preached
On the modern doctrine of rewards and punishments.
It is a famous sermon . . .

Preacher (interrupting suddenly).

I know what he is going to say, Your Honor,
But don't you think this gets us precisely nowhere?
It is true that this poor fellow came to me
And kept insisting that I was pursued by phantoms.
But I saw nothing — nothing — precisely nothing.
It is superstition only,
Combined with mental disorder.
I have always distinguished carefully
Between superstition and religion.

Judge. Continue, Mr. Poet, but be brief.

Poet. The old family trouble, as I have said —

It stumps even the best pathologists.
But speak to us now, Orestes Brown, and tell
Not of Motorman Seventeen and the grim
Correctness of prescribed servility,
But speak as Orestes Brown whose eyes have known
The deep shudder, the flake of doubt that eats
Within the steel — and sometime you have heard
The drumbeat of an ancient curse, reverberant, slow.

Orestes. I heard the Reverend, my Cousin, preach.

He said there are no golden streets in Heaven,
No angels, golden stairs, or harps, or saints;
Rewards are just our personality-building.
He said there are no eternal fires in Hell,
No devils, pitchforks, stinks, or screaming sinners;
The punishment is just personality-damage.
But I knew how the Lord said long ago:
I have set my face against this city for evil!
And the Lord said: *It shall be given*
To the King of Babylon to burn with fire;

And desolate is Zion's mount where the foxes run!
And when the Reverend Brown, that afternoon,
Got off my streetcar near the end of the line,
I saw three strangers following him — three women,
So they seemed — and they seemed to float in the air,
Dim, so dim I could hardly make them out,
But they were there. It was not the only time.
He did not seem to know that they were there.
I told him but he never would believe.
And I was sick at heart that a man of God
Should have Hell's ministers hot after him —
Hunting him down — as they have hunted others —
Yet walk stone-blind to the Devil at his elbow.
Better than I, a man of God should know,
That the family trouble, old as the years are old,
And how many times washed clean in the sacred blood,
Yet shows again in the new-begotten flesh
Of new generations wandering through the earth.
But the Lord God hath said:
His fury goes out like fire
And burns that none can quench it.
All should heed the sign.

A second sign — still he hardened his heart.
It was an owl, at first I thought, that came,
Surely only an owl at midnight flapping
Wings without sound or shriek across the dim
Flare of my headlight. Then I was not so sure.
The thing's head looked too human; I could see
Its eyes bloody, the twisted locks of hair,
And I would almost swear I saw a woman's
Breasts — or feathers shaped like a woman's breasts.
It came, swooping, close to the window, poised
A moment, beating heavily. Then darkness.

The trolley skidded off. No reason why.
And when I jerked it on again — why, nothing —
Nothing at all was there. I was alone
And over beyond the dimly tossing lights
The long street ended and the old house stood
Dark as Egypt. Then I heard a footstep.
It was the Reverend Doctor Brown. He brought
Letters to mail. He had been writing late, he said.
He had not seen an owl that looked like a woman.
So I reversed the trolley and went home.

And at night, likewise, the third sign!
It was a woman following him, that night,
Nodding into my mirror, a hawk-neck
Twisting and craning across the empty seats,
A beak-mouth mumbling to itself and hands
Bony and white, clutching at straps and creeping
Up to the door. I slowed the car. I said:
“You want to get off? That was the stop, back there.”
She said, “The old Brown place — that’s where I stop.”
I saw that she was very old. I saw
The cheeks all sunken, eyes glazed, the trembling
Chin, and the strange old-fashioned clothes. I said:
“I don’t recollect you getting on. I don’t
Believe you paid your fare.” She said:
“What is the fare?” “It’s seven cents,” I said.
“I’ll get you to change a shilling, then.”

“A shilling?”

There are no shillings now. That’s old folks’ talk.
You mean a quarter. The Company won’t take
Shillings.”

“A shilling’s all I’ve got.” She reached
A fist to me that was more like a claw.
Something was cold in my hand. I stopped the car

Under the midnight moon. I saw her walk
By the old hitching-post and the mounting-block
Into the boxwood-bordered paths. I watched
To see her pass the boxwood shrubs and come
Up to the big front door. She did not come. Between
One box-bush and the next she disappeared —
And suddenly I saw the owl again
Circling the house and sweeping close. I heard
A cry not like an owl's cry. See there!
*You have the shilling that she gave to me
If that is what it takes to make you believe.*
But then my streetcar was all full of smoke.
I found the little fire. I stamped it out.
I ran to the bigger fire that I could see
Like God's judgment descending on that house,
And drew up water from a nearby well.
Water was ever the best cure for fire
And all men should be near to that sweet creature
Which God has blessed to cleanse us for redemption.

Preacher. That well of mine has not been open for years.
Only a lunatic's strength could have heaved the lid.
I use the City water — and as to the fire:
If he did not start it himself, I might concede
It could perhaps have started from live coals
Hidden in ashes left by a heedless servant
Close to some trash. But I could never concede
It came from any supernatural force.
This dark, obsessive fear needs expert care.

First Alienist. Their cleverness is often superhuman
And may convince an inexperienced mind.

Second Alienist. You are building on suspicion of psychosis

Of which some might not like to see him cured!
What would be lost, and who would lose by that?

Poet. Did we not know of old that fear keeps watch
Over the soul of man; and reason alone
Cannot give courts of law a sacred place?
What force would else restrain the breakers of oaths,
Or stand guard at our doors against the foe?

Judge. This is not in any sense a criminal trial.
We do not pass on innocence or guilt.
There is, we note, some little disagreement
Among the doctors, but the weight of evidence
Reveals to us decided abnormalities
And actions commonly held to be insane.
Therefore the Court must now rule for commitment
Which, after all, can be a curative process
As was confirmed in this day's testimony
By modern science, liberal religion.
We have heard with interest the Poet's words,
But Poetry has no standing in this Court
Or in any Court of Law. I will sign the papers.

Epilogue

Poet (as the Court rises and all depart).
So do we come full circle at last?
What must I see? No light but desert sun
On the road to Damascus? Only a comet's flare
Brightening the wintry sky above Bethlehem?
And further back, an insane Orpheus torn by the
more insane?
Will Athena, conquered, turn from the suppliant?
Will Apollo call the Erinyes back from their caves
And all their elder law rage through the world again?

But if Orpheus bleed
His singing head
Will drift on the stream
To redeem men
Till poetry
And justice come again
Unless the world be dead.

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II THE OLD WAR

Li quens Rollanz se jut desuz un pin:
Envers Espaigne en ad turnet sun vis.
De plusurs choses a remembrer li prist.

— *Chanson de Roland*

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LEE IN THE MOUNTAINS

1865-1870

Walking into the shadows, walking alone
Where the sun falls through the ruined boughs of locusts
Up to the president's office. . . .

Hearing the voices

Whisper, *Hush, it is General Lee!* And strangely
Hearing my own voice say, *Good morning, boys.*
(*Don't get up. You are early. It is long*
Before the bell. You will have long to wait
On these cold steps. . . .)

The young have time to wait.

But soldiers' faces under their tossing flags
Lift no more by any road or field,
And I am spent with old wars and new sorrow.
Walking the rocky path, where steps decay
And the paint cracks and grass eats on the stone.
It is not General Lee, young men. . . .
It is Robert Lee in a dark civilian suit who walks,
An outlaw fumbling for the latch, a voice
Commanding in a dream where no flag flies.

My father's house is taken and his hearth
Left to the candle-drippings where the ashes
Whirl at a chimney-breath on the cold stone.
I can hardly remember my father's look, I cannot
Answer his voice as he calls farewell in the misty
Mounting where riders gather at gates.
He was old then — I was a child — his hand
Held out for mine, some daybreak snatched away,

And he rode out, a broken man. Now let
His lone grave keep, surer than cypress roots,
The vow I made beside him. God too late
Unseals to certain eyes the drift
Of time and the hopes of men and a sacred cause.
The fortune of the Lees goes with the land
Whose sons will keep it still. My mother
Told me much. She sat among the candles,
Fingering the *Memoirs*, now so long unread.
And as my pen moves on across the page
Her voice comes back, a murmuring distillation
Of old Virginia times now faint and gone,
The hurt of all that was and cannot be.

Why did my father write? I know he saw
History clutched as a wraith out of blowing mist
Where tongues are loud, and a glut of little souls
Laps at the too much blood and the burning house.
He would have his say, but I shall not have mine.
What I do is only a son's devoir
To a lost father. Let him only speak.
The rest must pass to men who never knew
(But on a written page) the strike of armies,
And never heard the long Confederate cry
Charge through the muzzling smoke or saw the bright
Eyes of the beardless boys go up to death.
It is Robert Lee who writes with his father's hand —
The rest must go unsaid and the lips be locked.

If all were told, as it cannot be told —
If all the dread opinion of the heart
Now could speak, now in the shame and torment
Lashing the bound and trampled States —

If a word were said, as it cannot be said —

I see clear waters run in Virginia's Valley
And in the house the weeping of young women
Rises no more. The waves of grain begin.
The Shenandoah is golden with new grain.
The Blue Ridge, crowned with a haze of light,
Thunders no more. The horse is at plough. The rifle
Returns to the chimney crotch and the hunter's hand.
And nothing else than this? Was it for this
That on an April day we stacked our arms
Obedient to a soldier's trust? To lie
Ground by heels of little men,
Forever maimed, defeated, lost, impugned?
And was I then betrayed? Did I betray?

If it were said, as still it might be said —
If it were said, and a word should run like fire,
Like living fire into the roots of grass,
The sunken flag would kindle on wild hills,
The brooding hearts would waken, and the dream
Stir like a crippled phantom under the pines,
And this torn earth would quicken into shouting
Beneath the feet of ragged bands —

The pen

Turns to the waiting page, the sword
Bows to the rust that cankers and the silence.

Among these boys whose eyes lift up to mine
Within gray walls where droning wasps repeat
A hollow reveille, I still must face,
Day after day, the courier with his summons
Once more to surrender, now to surrender all.
Without arms or men I stand, but with knowledge only
I face what long I saw, before others knew,
When Pickett's men streamed back, and I heard the tangled
Cry of the Wilderness wounded, bloody with doom.

The mountains, once I said, in the little room
At Richmond, by the huddled fire, but still
The President shook his head. The mountains wait,
I said, in the long beat and rattle of siege
At cratered Petersburg. Too late
We sought the mountains and those people came.
And Lee is in mountains now, beyond Appomattox,
Listening long for voices that never will speak
Again; hearing the hoofbeats come and go and fade
Without a stop, without a brown hand lifting
The tent-flap, or a bugle call at dawn,
Or ever on the long white road the flag
Of Jackson's quick brigades. I am alone,
Trapped, consenting, taken at last in mountains.

It is not the bugle now, or the long roll beating.
The simple stroke of a chapel bell forbids
The hurtling dream, recalls the lonely mind.
Young men, the God of your fathers is a just
And merciful God Who in this blood once shed
On your green altars measures out all days,
And measures out the grace
Whereby alone we live;
And in His might He waits,
Brooding within the certitude of time,
To bring this lost forsaken valor
And the fierce faith undying
And the love quenchless
To flower among the hills to which we cleave,
To fruit upon the mountains whither we flee,
Never forsaking, never denying
His children and His children's children forever
Unto all generations of the faithful heart.

THE LAST CHARGE

Where the road turns between the cedar groves
And the blue waves of hills lap all the distance,
Stop, look northward — all is clear.
Leaves of November are falling on Winstead Hill,
And before us, stark as Franklin field, the past
Is stripped to enduring boughs of memory,
And of glory, what still remains.

No more the sound of guns. The silence drags
Over the sunken breastworks and old graves
Where bones forget their names, and only earth
Utters fragments we know not how to reap.
No sound of guns. A different thunder plagues
The far-off streets where smokes recoil and languor
Dogs the blue cannoneers who now too late
Flinch from the lanyard. For the years take back
The spoils, the laurels that they gave.
The seed of Appomattox blooms; its fruit
Rots where eyes are dazed with a hungry searching,
And ears are deaf with steps that murmur and follow
No command. And no tongue.
Only confusion of tongues, the wrack
Of Babylon that falls, a twilight clutter.
But here a twilight not of dissolution.
In Harpeth valley where they lie the dead
Speak through the dusk, renewing all their vows;
An incantation seized again, by which

This old corruption puts on incorruption.
The lonely graveyard where the searchers brought
The pierced and unknown boys, the old men spent
With wounds and marching, wakes in an hour that brings
Steps of an army, Confederate bugles calling. . . .

Across the field, and red through autumn corn
Their still defiant flags toss to the yell
Of a raveled army breaking the thicket's edge.
This is the last charge of the old brigades
Whose battles rocked the west with thunder-names
On Tennessee waters rolling or the peaks
That looked on Chickamauga and the moon
Of stormy gatherings flung from ridge to ridge
In the red hills of Georgia. These have marched
To the sound of guns in swamps and wilderness,
Bled, retreated, rallied, charged again;
And now the viking arm of Hood, berserk,
Sweeps north at last: One great charge more, my brothers!
Rake the South free from burnt Atlanta's walls
North to Ohio, east to the camps of Lee,
Till the red hand of Sherman marches in vain.
One charge, the last!

Well, General, if you say so. . . .

We have riders who know how to lead the way,
And men with guns who can bite a cartridge yet.
Then sound the bugles, dress the ranks, and charge.
The Army of Tennessee knows how to charge.

November sunset reddens their starry banners.
Saint Andrew's Cross towers on Harpeth valley.
Brigades deploy and form their battle line.
The veterans are supple, steady in ranks.
They know their places, they move intent as panthers . . .

The brown necks bare, the rifles poised, the cartridge
Boxes unlatched by the bright-eyed rusty of beard;
And the generals alert in the chieftain's place;
They ride the line; the swords, the hats wave forward.
The skirmishers move out, like hunters
Giving the dare. Ranks march slowly at first,
Guiding center, watching the colors slant.
White and red among dusty trees, the town
Waits in the Federal lines. Batteries open
From hills beyond the river. Figures run
Among the poplars where a cotton gin
Clusters the flags that wave up death.
The charge quickens, they see the enemy now,
And, rushing, fill the valley with their high
Resentful hunt-cry as they mount the slope.
The Army of Tennessee knows how to charge!

Fated, valorous army, who watches you
In this last darkling grapple? Who cheers you on?
Shall you walk in the valley of death without parade,
Knowing the taste of blood and the night too soon?
The hands of mourners will come to gather you
Under the maples of McGavock House,
And presently like you will moulder and sink,
Hearing but pilgrim steps, the pelt of leaves
That cover your ranks . . . your graves. Farewell,
Army of Tennessee! Rough glory, rooted here,
Feeds the lone vow, the lingering touch
Of a late comrade sworn to remember you!
Lights glow from river and town. The darkness stabs.
And winter sweeps the undefended earth.

FROM A CHIMNEY CORNER

An old room big with firelight holds the boy
Alone, till grandmother comes, remembering.
By the clock's tick, as grandfather looks down
From an oval frame, she draws him back.

The town
Rises in mind, the house on the Lewisburg road,
Where girl-grandmother lived, by battles made wise.
The voice murmurs, with the soft twilight knitting
Till night gathers deeper on these two sitting
Touched with old sorrow to unseal his eyes.

He sees a dank morning near Christmas, sixty-four,
With early mists trailing on window and door
Shut and barred tight until there comes a sound
Of slushing feet outside. The girl is bound
To peep at the window and sees, alas,
Too surely there beyond the clouded glass
The front yard filled with draggled men in gray,
Resting, shoulders propped, bandaged, drooping,
Drenched with December and sore defeat.
They do not talk or move till finally trooping
At some far command they take the road
And press in broken files on limping feet.
Aunt Alice whispers, *Now they are gone!*
The last of Hood's infantry. After them, none
But the groan of whipped wagons, the gallop of few
Horsemen, beards dripping. And few are these
Women who wait for the armies in blue
That soon will break through the distant cedars.

THE LAST RIDER

You, Andrew Lytle, told
How a darkey looked at a bold
Image of Forrest mounted
By Mississippi side,
And said: How his horse is poor!
Must be the General ride
All night long, like the war —
And a hard rider is Forrest,
Many a lonesome mile.

Then did a fellow smile?
Better — or worse — he knew.
But we know too much of Forrest
Not to believe it true,
And we know what call has a rider
To come between dark and dawn
To the bluegrass that sired him
And the roads he fought on;
And do not doubt that Forrest can come
From Mississippi side
Back where the living do not fight
And only the dead can ride.

LATE ANSWER: A CIVIL WAR SEMINAR

The talk had drifted further than they dreamed
While in the dusk the Adirondacks gleamed,
And all around us in the afterglow
Vermont woods turned to purple, and the slow
Fog-banners mustered out the darkling range.
Then Harvard said:

“Oh, not *that* war! How strange
That you should mix it in! Why, who would talk
Of Sixty-one, or bother to make walk
Old John Brown’s ghost that’s laid past all debate?
There’s no ill-will from here to Scituate.
When I said ‘war’ I meant of course the late
Unpleasantness. I must say you surprise
Me with these dank Faulknerian memories.
Why should you care for what we’ve long forgot?
That’s not the issue now.”

His center shot
Made darkness blessed while I lurked in it.
I guarded well what teeth I had to grit
And would, for one, have been content to see
The northern dark scoop up the mystery
And roll till day-dawn in its starry sieve
Whatever explanations I could give.

But Vassar bugled, Amherst bayed, and Yale
Picked up the scent. They gave tongue on my trail:
Admit! Confess! Nostalgic! No, he fights

*Historical process. . . . Absurd monuments. . . .
Remember what? Gastonia? That makes sense.*

I froze. They passed. But sober Dartmouth's whip
Corrected soon their ragged huntsmanship.
Two briar pipes glowed at me, and one said:
"We've heard so much — and so much more have read —
About that cry the Confederate soldiers gave.
The 'Rebel Yell,' you know. And yet to save
My life I could not confidently cite
One decent account of what it sounded like.
The books all disagree. Now, won't you tell
Just what it was — or, better, *give* the yell!"

How could he learn what history books forbade?
And why should I instruct him? I was glad
Once more that night-time and their courteous pause
Could shelter me and veil the ancient Cause.
If I should tell them, what would telling mean
To men whose logical eyes might never see
Those living fields I knew where memory
Was not yet shut in many books but strode,
A young Telemachus, the Old Plank Road?
Had they not seen him thread the Wilderness shade
Flaming, that day we fought the Vermont Brigade,
And on their side a thousand fell? Had they
No whispering in the live bone of that day?
But well I knew what moved on the Rapidan,
Whose lines in the brush — and so my heart began:

"The whispering in the marrow spreads to the brain;
The remembering heart carries it round again
Till it beats in the throat, the lips, the weeping eye
And is born at last in a blazing wordless outcry.

“But if that whisper’s fettered in the brain,
The heart, forgetful, takes not back again;
Throat and lips are cool; the eye is dry;
Speech clear and perfect and there’s no outcry.

“You who debate by night cannot be mourning
Far-off kinsmen dead or a roof burning;
Yet a burning roof, kin dead long ago,
If you could weep, would give you right to know
The sound of valor where it dwells with sorrow
Or, chilled by reason, hides in the deep marrow.
Did you hear it rousing once at Saratoga?
Or when the Highland dead at Ticonderoga
Lay naked to the stars? Or when the blood
Of Jennie McCrea cried out, you understood?

“We mourned with you then in brotherhood,
And I’ll weep with you now for those whose names
Burn on your monuments like altar flames.

“Come, let no darkness daunt us. Let us go
Where Cornwall Village dreams not far below
And on their obelisk read how Truman Lane
Died in the Wilderness; Stillman Smith was slain
At Donelson; and at Cold Harbor
Captain Samson. Then, strangely, Alva Barlow
‘Hung by guerrillas!’ – the stone does not say where.
Perhaps it’s not a monument’s affair.
But I’ll weep – even for Alva – if you can weep
For him, for all, for Southern boys asleep
Like these your fathers may somewhere have known.

“We, too, have names that blaze on mouldering stone
And I have seen men’s tears fall where they slept
And heard a shouting while I wept,

A century off yet louder in my ear
Than all that's so much magnified and near.

“Ah, Truman Lane, you heard it well as I! —
That rage of belief, the tears, the mystery
Quickened the flags of men right willing to die.
Only such men could tell what once could be,
Hear what we hear, see what we see.”

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III WHAT CITY! WHAT LAND!

Therefore not by looks nor learning . shalt thou
know charity,
Neither by words nor works . but by one will only,
And that knoweth no clerk . nor creature on earth,
But Piers the Plowman . *Petrus, id est, Christus.*

— Langland, *Piers Plowman*, B, XV, 203–206
Translated by Christopher Dawson

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AUNT MARIA AND THE GOURDS

Aunt Maria, to whom all doors are open
Knocks at none. Who are they, living now
Behind old doors where once her carriage stopped?
The Devil looks out for his own. The Devil has taken
Cherry and Spruce streets into the kingdom of Hell,
Lopped the trees, put in his plate-glass windows,
Smartened the ruins with optimism and paint,
As was foretold in Sixty-five. For her
The old home place is good enough to live in,
Especially good to die in. She will die
At the proper time, but meanwhile is at home
Thursdays at four o'clock on the Franklin Pike.
The yellow hair — you know how Colonel Bob,
Her father, shook his yellow hair
Before the charging ranks on Shiloh field —
That hair is graying. It becomes the hands
Which pass the cups and silver; and the voice
Matches the shoulders, gracious and unbowed
By all the kingdoms of Hell.

It is too late

To cultivate the rising generations,
But in the name of youth and spring
Born to fulfill the obscure prophecies
Written in blood and readable to the wise,
At every sowing-time she plants her gourds
Beside the porch where the dark shadow of doom
Speaks, when the ominous winds of March are near.

There have I visited, not yet too young
And not too strange to hear the song of the gourds;
And wandered homeward haunted by a face
Uncompromised by time, a ringing look,
A withered finger lifted, gesturing.

Beneath the window-sill the dry gourds clung
Ungathered, scraping the dry bricks,
Knocking brown shells when the wind blew
Clammy and fierce out of the wilderness.
November came, the gourds clicked and rasped
An innocent fatality of song.
Leaning at twilight over the window-sill,
Looking toward Nashville, neglecting the candles and voices,
I heard the gourds' foretelling, I felt the hollow
Rattle of voices singing of Babylon:
Of Babylon, to whom the years have whispered
Predictions that the builders cannot now
Confound with any charm or reassurance.
Vibrations deep, imperative as death,
Wrench and shiver. These are not a dream.

You who walk in callous innocence,
Pacing, as once I paced, the long street,
Pause, look down, remember how this stone
Slid and avoided when you set your foot.
Hear the rattle of gourds over Babylon.
Learn what the years have whispered secretly;
Learn how the stone refused your heel and may
Again miss and waver, and hurl you on
Stumbling to what awaits beyond the corner.

The wind blows, and Cumberland waters run
To carry us home. And there beneath the bluffs

Something stirs that once had life. It drops
Into the stream, a last act of faith.
Seedballs of sycamore, incautious leaves of willow,
These have outstayed their autumn, teasing death
Only so far, not yet beyond all patience.
Now they let go. The tawny wind-rocked billow
Receives them all, no questions, no complaints.
On Cherry Street there are no leaves to stir,
And no faith, even to die. Only a smoulder,
Only an evil burning and a smoke
That hardly lifts even for winds of spring.

Thus sang the gourds, but Aunt Maria stood
Watching us out of sight, and in the dark
Her voice still flashed like a creature of the air
About our heads, pleading, "Do not forget!
Come back! Remember! Take my love to all!"

RANDALL, MY SON

Randall, my son, before you came just now
I saw the lean vine fingering at the latch,
And through the rain I heard the poplar bough
Thresh at the blinds it never used to touch,
And I was old and troubled overmuch,
And called in the deep night, but there was none
To comfort me or answer, Randall, my son.

But mount the stair and lay you down till morn.
The bed is made — the lamp is burning low.
Within the changeless room where you were born
I wait the changing day when you must go.
I am unreconciled to what I know,
And I am old with questions never done
That will not let me slumber, Randall, my son.

Randall, my son, I cannot hear the cries
That lure beyond familiar fields, or see
The glitter of the world that draws your eyes.
Cold is the mistress that beckons you from me.
I wish her sleek hunting might never come to be —
For in our woods where deer and fox still run
An old horn blows at daybreak, Randall, my son.

And tell me then, will you some day bequeath
To your own son not born or yet begotten,

The luster of a sword that sticks in sheath,
A house that crumbles and a fence that's rotten?
Take, what I leave, your own land unforgotten;
Hear, what I hear, in a far chase new begun
An old horn's husky music, Randall, my son.

ON A REPLICA OF THE PARTHENON

Why do they come? What do they seek
Who build but never read their Greek?
The classic stillness of a pool
Beleaguered in its certitude
By aimless motors that can make
Only uncertainty more sure;
And where the willows crowd the pure
Expanse of clouds and blue that stood
Around the gables Athens wrought,
Shopgirls embrace a plaster thought,
And eye Poseidon's loins ungirt,
And never heed the brandished spear
Or feel the bright-eyed maiden's rage
Whose gaze the sparrows violate;
But the sky drips its spectral dirt,
And gods, like men, to soot revert.
Gone is the mild, the serene air.
The golden years are come too late.
Pursue not wisdom or virtue here,
But what blind motion, what dim last
Regret of men who slew their past
Raised up this bribe against their fate.

TWILIGHT ON UNION STREET

In the cool of morning Andrew Jackson came,
A young man riding on a horse of flame,
Tossed the reins to a black boy, and strode
High-booted and quick-oathed to court and code.

Of a sultry noontime General Jackson stalked,
A grimness that put silence where men talked.
The fluttering of the gossips thinned and fled;
They knew where General Jackson left his dead.

And now the twilight. History grows dim.
The traffic leads, we no more follow him;
In bronze he rides, saluting James K. Polk,
His horse's rump turned to us in the smoke.

THE HORDE

Father remembered the wild pigeons crowding
Beech groves, mast-rich. The flutter in boughs,
the cloud
Darkening all, a hurricane circling and surging.
Eye lost count, ear could not measure sound.
Mind hurled measureless with them, feathered
the sky.

Men took the New World harvest. Field was fat.
The heavy ear of corn full-drooped in shuck,
Waiting in frost the hand. The muscadine
Spilled on the clearing. The hickory nut on roof
Rattled in wind. Wild turkeys clucked.
Oak was gable; cedar was firewood; trout
Stirred white the water. And everywhere
birds' cries
Flung forever, whirling with hurried leaves,
Clans of the trampled skies that echoed back
Thunder of buffalo hoofs, the plunge of fish.

A man of the woods, his laughter undefiled,
Ooze of cider flecked on shirt, the stain
Of walnut on his palm, the reek
Of fur and feather about his coat, the light
Of a wilderness autumn sharpening his cheek,
Threaded the path, his Indian step unheard,
And told a boy: "The pigeons came

Thus, when I was a boy, in autumn time,
And still come on, for wilderness is ripe.”

1 1 1

This is an autumn when they come no more.
Beech leaves yellow and fall, the beech-mast rots
Uneaten. Infertile now the beech
Hollows its heart, begetting naught.
There is frost on the grandson's eyes,
And only rumor upon the skies. . . .

Until the starlings come, an immigrant horde,
Above the myriad twin eyes of motors dipping,
Besiege the evening roost with many cries;
Nervously settle; hardly touch their feet,
On lawn trees, till they chatter
Opinions graculous. They are finical, they squawk
Against too few boughs, complain to have no better.
The harvest moon comes up in smoke. Their litter
Spills on the walk, a nuisance to the guest.
I cast my ready stone. They fly from me
To try some other wilderness grandson's tree
And dream their protest is the pigeons' thunder.

HERMITAGE

*Written in Memory of Andrew Davidson,
a Pioneer of Southwest Virginia and of
Bedford County, Tennessee*

1. Descending Chestnut Ridge

Now let my habitude be where the vine
Tumbles the sagging rails, and the late crow
Alone can challenge, whom for countersign
I open these uncrafty hands,
Unweaponed now, to seek upon the hill
Stones where no filial tribute can be lost,
Above the bones not laid in stranger's lands,
But their own earth commingles with their dust;

To say for what beholden, to fulfill
The unuttered vows;

To hear the great wind in the twilight boughs
Whirl down the sapless nations and the cold
Fix their long-withering moment which conceives
No more the great year that their dreams foretold;

To walk where autumn heaps their promises
And, unregenerate by false faith, to tread
World-gazing prophecies as leaves to leaves;

To let the sibylline fragments fly;

Then slow descending by the hidden road
To mark the clearing and to know the hearth

Where one smoke stands against the frosty sky
And one axe rings above the frosty earth.

II. The Immigrant

I cannot see him plain, that far-off sire
Who notched the first oak on this western hill,
And the bronze tablet cannot tell what fire
— Urging the deep bone back to the viking wave —
Kindled his immigrant eye and drove his will.
But in the hearthside tale his rumor grows
As voice to voice into the folk-chain melts
And clamor of danger brings the lost kin close.

The runes run on, the song links stave by stave.
I summon him, the man of flints and pelts,
Alert with gun and axe. The valley-rim
Uplifts the wanderer on the buffalo-path,
First of the host of all who came like him,
Harried from croft and chapel, glen and strath.

Now where the beech-mast falls, no pibrochs wail.
The claymore rusts forgetting once how red
The dew lay at Culloden. Old feuds fail,
And nevermore the axe sings on the wall —
Since age on age we fled,
Since we together, Gael and Gaul,
Palatine, Huguenot, came in company
And washed the old bitter wars in the salt sea.

III. In Blue-Stocking Hollow

Traveler, rest. The time of man runs on;
Our home is far across the western wave
Back of whose steeps, forsaken and foregone,
Lost continents ebb we have no power to save.

The unending cycle breaks against this strand
Where blue tidewater laps our greener land.

And once the Virginian voyage brings us clear,
The hoodless eagles of the New World skies
Towering, unshackle us, and the wild geese rise,
Hurling southward with invincible wing
Omens unriddled for our journeying.

Rough pilgrims, faring far, whose Hesperus
Stooped by the piney woods or mountain cove,
Or whom the Buffalo Gods to the perilous
Lift of the Great Divide and the redwood grove
Spoke on and bid lay down from sea to sea
The sill and hearthstone of our destiny.

Salving our wounds, from the moody kings we came,
And even while kinsmen's shoulders raised and set
The first log true, bethought us of a name
To seal the firm lips of our unregret,
To charm the door against the former age
And bless the lintel of our hermitage.

Recite then while the inviolate hearth-flame leaps
How Ilion fell, and, hound at knee, recall
Platonic converse. Let the screech-owl keep
Watch where the fat maize crowds the forest wall.
High by the talking waters grows the cane;
Wild by the salt-lick herds the forest game.

And let the graybeard say when men and maids
Come for his blessing: "This I leave to you!
The Indian dream came on me in these glades,
And some strange bird-or-beast word named me new.
Peace be to all who keep the wilderness.
Cursed be the child who lets the freehold pass."

SANCTUARY

You must remember this when I am gone,
And tell your sons — for you will have tall sons,
And times will come when answers will not wait.
Remember this: if ever defeat is black
Upon your eyelids, go to the wilderness
In the dread last of trouble, for your foe
Tangles there, more than you, and paths are strange
To him, that are your paths, in the wilderness,
And were your fathers' paths, and once were mine.

You must remember this, and mark it well
As I have told it — what my eyes have seen
And where my feet have walked beyond forgetting.
But tell it not often, tell it only at last
When your sons know what blood runs in their veins.
And when the danger comes, as come it will,
Go as your fathers went with woodsman's eyes
Uncursed, unflinching, studying only the path.
First, what you cannot carry, burn or hide.
Leave nothing here for *him* to take or eat.
Bury, perhaps, what you can surely find
If good chance ever bring you back again.
Level the crops. Take only what you need:
A little corn for an ash-cake, a little
Side-meat for your three days' wilderness ride.
Horses for your women and your children,
And one to lead, if you should have that many.

Then go. At once. Do not wait until
You see *his* great dust rising in the valley.
Then it will be too late.
Go when you hear that he has crossed Will's Ford.
Others will know and pass the word to you —
A tap on the blinds, a hoot-owl's cry at dusk.

Do not look back. You can see your roof afire
When you reach high ground. Yet do not look.
Do not turn. Do not look back.
Go further on. Go high. Go deep.

The line of this rail-fence east across the old-fields
Leads to the cane-bottoms. Back of that,
A white-oak tree beside a spring, the one
Chopped with three blazes on the hillward side.
There pick up the trail. I think it was
A buffalo path once or an Indian road.
You follow it three days along the ridge
Until you reach the spruce woods. Then a cliff
Breaks, where the trees are thickest, and you look
Into a cove, and right across, Chilhowee
Is suddenly there, and you are home at last.
Sweet springs of mountain water in that cove
Run always. Deer and wild turkey range.
Your kin, knowing the way, long there before you
Will have good fires and kettles on to boil,
Bough-shelters reared and thick beds of balsam.
There in tall timber you will be as free
As were your fathers once when Tryon raged
In Carolina hunting Regulators,
Or Tarleton rode to hang the old-time Whigs.
Some tell how in that valley young Sam Houston
Lived long ago with his brother, Oo-loo-te-ka,

Reading Homer among the Cherokee;
And others say a Spaniard may have found it
Far from De Soto's wandering turned aside,
And left his legend on a boulder there.
And some that this was a sacred place to all
Old Indian tribes before the Cherokee
Came to our eastern mountains. Men have found
Images carved in bird-shapes there and faces
Moulded into the great kind look of gods.
These old tales are like prayers. I only know
This is the secret refuge of our race
Told only from a father to his son,
A trust laid on your lips, as though a vow
To generations past and yet to come.
There, from the bluffs above, you may at last
Look back to all you left, and trace
His dust and flame, and plan your harrying
If you would gnaw his ravaging flank, or smite
Him in his glut among the smouldering ricks.
Or else, forgetting ruin, you may lie
On sweet grass by a mountain stream, to watch
The last wild eagle soar or the last raven
Cherish his brood within their rocky nest,
Or see, when mountain shadows first grow long,
The last enchanted white deer come to drink.

THE NERVOUS MAN

"True! Nervous — very, very dreadfully nervous I have been and am! But why will you say that I am mad?"

He cannot sin, and so cannot betray.
Therefore his desk is clean. Bloodless the rugs.
Between him and the suppliant the day
Flows air-conditioned, washed of old dreams and drugs.
The light falls perfect on the dossier.

He knows — because the tentacles of his ear
Record in multiple copies all vibrations
That planetary instruments can hear.
These plot a curve. There are no complications.
He discounts in advance the suppliant tear.

He sees — because his new electric eye
Reports the spectrum of the macrocosm,
And shape, if any. It does not of course deny
An equal benefit to the microcosm.
Therefore the survey, indexed, does not lie.

The Church, it seems, disliked Copernicus,
But bowed to Einstein's epochal suggestion.
By proclamation, fear is ended. Thus
The wisdom of X is hardly open to question —
The power-potential is quite obvious.

Therefore, his clock is logical, and thought
Can be dispatched and scheduled like a train.
Therefore the difference between *can* and *ought*

Becomes absurd. If millions have been slain
Or the world exploded, it is no one's fault.

But is there now a low sound pulsing slightly?
A muffled insult somewhere in the room?
A sensitive man cannot take such things lightly;
Is often nervous when pronouncing doom;
Expects his suppliants to behave contritely.

Order in court! Shall suppliants now change parts?
Be judges, thumping the clean desk with why's?
What noise, what throb is this? What fearful arts
Pollute his radiance with unshutting eyes
And split perfection with their telltale hearts?

OLD SAILOR'S CHOICE

"Oh, no, he did not jump! He simply fell.
In those high offices they build
The window-sills so low. He was not well,
And, working late that day to meet a deadline,
Leaned out to breathe — he fainted — dropped — was killed."

"No one had called?"

"No one. We read the headline."

They hushed. I passed, and, mounting gravely where
The steps compelled my feet, saw Circe there
And so, besought by that enchanting voice,
Returned to life.

With unaffected lip
The cool mortician guided us.

"No noise
Of weeping here," she said. "Be up-to-date.
Let hand forbear the sympathetic grip.
No flowers. Do not ask to see the late
Crew-member's family, or mention burial.
Cremation is the nicest way,
And it will come in another department
Some convenient, scheduled day.
Now let us leave the funeral home
When the hearse goes and traffic clears,
And the street contains no more than appears.
Drop in at my apartment

For cocktails and a requiem
Over him and over them.
But you have sailed to Hell in a black ship
And now must farther, farther roam.”

Among those voices not yet fallen or drowned,
Surviving still only by disenchantment,
I sat, O King, remembering a sound
Of shadows whimpering across a ditch.
But that was no place for wonderment.
The fair goddess turned on all the lights
To give the altered pig and the wolf’s bitch —
My dear companions — leave to propound
New generations and our human rights
Until the last Martini was consumed
And all were assured no one was doomed.
It was on that suggestion
I brought up my question.

One referred me to *The Golden Bough*.
Another held that view old-fashioned now.

Circe said: “It’s far across the sea
And broadcasts intermittently.
Then in Greek only. Who would understand?”
Later, when goodnights were said, her hand
Detained me gently.

“But you would,” she said.

“Would what?”

“Would know. You discoursed with the dead.”

And so beside the lamp and the spilling ashtray
Where the frayed napkin sticks to the empty glass
I told my tale, and Circe said, “Alas!
That you who sailed to Hell for a doubtful soothsay

And scatheless, in a crude ship, endured
The tossing sea and dread Tiresias,
Unsubsidized and, I fear, uninsured,
Must briskly venture forth again —

“But since you ask — my new statistical charts
As good as guarantee you in those parts.
You are blueprinted safe enough by laws of averages
And by ton-and-passenger mileages,
Figured by fiscal years and eight-hour days,
With some allowance for delays.

“I can predict arrival
And for you (at least) survival.

“No more fear the Wandering Rocks
With or without radar.
The United Nations handled that
As a multiple-purpose project.
The fallout did not fall very far,
And nobody will go to war.

“For the Sirens the old trick will do,
Although there is now a shortage of beeswax.
But you can jam their song quickly enough
With the right kind of transmitter.
The Seamen’s Union will be bitter
If you allow no shore-leave.
But the main thing is to save your crew.

“Skip Charybdis. The going there is rough
Even with modern equipment. I advise
Passage by way of Scylla. After all,
You must risk something — or at least somebody;
Somebody else if you are wise.

And Scylla is definitely human
With various honorary degrees
From the best institutions,
And the world is at her knees.

“Now, darling, there is your breeze!
And, to use a rather trite figure
Not unlike the Delphic oracle,
An inconvenient coracle
With hardly a fore and aft
Is at least as good as a raft
For a mission that’s bound
To go round and round.”

To mortal men, O King, the blessed word of immortals,
Spun though in golden letters it be, unravels too late,
And they cannot read clear counsel save through the glass
of folly
Until at last they come to their longed-for meeting
with Scylla —

Mute hands, wry feet, faint outcries blanked by loud seaspray,
Seized, convulsive, lost, yet thinking they make seizure.
Like as the black male spider scurries to death ecstatic,
Mad to embrace, in lust to gorge, and be engorged,
Even so do men, I vow, lust for the teeth of Scylla,
Courting the monstrous lips, the darting neck of their
love-death.

To Circe’s wand, likewise, they caper full willing.
Stockaded, carded, I have seen them milling.
They stand in line to be undone.
They will eat the Oxen of the Sun.

And I have seen the monster Scylla.

Within her cliffs of sheer synthetic rock
She glides on steely pathways. Plastic walls
Checkerboard in pseudo-marble cavern her lair.
These throw you off guard. "How," you ask,
Can anything go wrong where all is right —
Rectangular, slide-ruled, and functional?"
Mercy, pity, peace can be manufactured.
Scylla can end your pain
Now that the State decrees a tax increase
And no one can complain.
The neat-cut stencil echoes the brisk type.
Machines do the rest. The postage is metered.
And there is your release:
Well-packaged, mercy, pity, peace.
And I saw the stretching neck and the grinning teeth
In the soundproof room where artificial daylight
Blacks out the scudding clouds and the churning storm-wrack,
And the secretary with half-naked breasts
Extends the telephone on a crimson claw
And murmurs *Washington is calling!*

They could not wait to be undone.
They would eat the Oxen of the Sun.

"To Charybdis!" I cried, when the mast cracked.
But they, blanched at their oars, shrieked while I paced:
"Not Charybdis! You have no choice! Trust Scylla . . ."
Hoarse outcries flung on the wave while the ship broke up,
Black heads like ravens launched from a rocky nest,
Circling and drowned in the next lightning flash,
With no return — no raft — no eye above
Or throb of rescue, winged, droning over the sea.
But I could choose the severed keel and mast,
Destroyed, I rode destruction's blast.

For Charybdis and the heaved insensate sea
Where nothing human dwells
Take no deceitful shape, no monstrous face.
There the vortex spins like Poe's own maelstrom,
But a man's courage wears out the night.
The hurricane howls, but carries off the dead.

At dawn, choosing, by God's will I floated.
Loathing Scylla still I gazed unmoved
Where the deep cone spun to the very sea-bottom,
Then leaped from the wash and clutched a lonely fig-tree.
Better than the trunk and the brine slashing,
The tendons stretching, the ache in the deep marrow,
And my fingers alive, clasping a wholesome thing.
As the fig-tree roots clutched rock, so clutched I fig-tree
And overhung Charybdis only by handhold
Until the great suck stopped, and my mast and keel
Easily swam beneath, and I could drop.
There was timber enough for a raft
And the naked truth of a man with salt in his beard.

What should I say who come with salty lips
Telling, O King, a tale told yesterday?
Do I set myself up to tell it again tomorrow?
I seek my western shore and the house of my fathers.
I know no softer song.
My fingers still are curled with my hard grip.
My comfort is that they can never straighten.
These twisted hands reject the meeting with Scylla.
They choose to bend a bow
With a grip I learned from a fig-tree
And to cleanse a house;
Then sleep, a wanderer no more, beside
A faithful wife in the bed the young hands wrought.

AT THE STATION

“Who’s got the time?” said the clacking lips
And the red tongue, making an important sound.
Three wise men we, who sailed our books like ships,
But, turning our vocabularies round and round,
In the matter of time we had nothing to expound.
Nobody had the time.

“Who’s got the ticket?” said the questioning eyes
With tumult of strictured larynx and thin gullet.
We produced some pasteboard tabs by way of replies;
But they would not answer, no more than would a bullet.
Where we wanted to go, we had no word to call it,
And nobody had a ticket.

“Who’s got the key?” said the shivering soul,
Urging out from the brain like an old rumor.
For that we could summon up no answer at all;
The question was plainly immense; it shook our humor
Till nothing was left but a subsidence and a tremor.
Nobody had the key.

CROSS SECTION OF A LANDSCAPE

Here is the ice that girdles joyless ocean;
Water folding a sphere of quiet slime;
Under it rock that has no life or motion
Save from the twirl, the fruitless pantomime;

Under the rock is fire that dies by inches
Over the slag and ash of old decay;
Finally, what? The bold geometrist pinches
Space to a point in his vain Euclidean way.

But when I was a boy I searched from pole to pole
Of a gaudy globe, a rainbow-colored ball,
Peeled the cover, unraveled the shiny whole,
And was vexed to find at center nothing at all.

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IV FUGITIVE DAYS

And as for us the Ancients, we are content with the bee to pretend to nothing of our own, beyond our wings and our voice; that is to say, our flights and our language. For the rest, whatever we have got, has been by infinite labor and search, and ranging through every corner of nature.

— Jonathan Swift, "The Battle of the Books"

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JOE CLISBY'S SONG

What did my old song say?
Something of youth and desire
And summer passing away;
Yet love is a durable fire
And will stay.

Must I think a tune like this
Was never made for a time
That reads only lust in a kiss
And shreds the magic of rhyme
To hit-or-miss?

By old Bethel burying-ground
In moonlight passed along
True lovers as ever were found
Who plaited hearts in a song
Where their voices wound.

Nettie Long and I ,
Burt Whitson with his Ruth,
Walked and sang to the high
Church steeple as if youth
Could never go by.

And we walked and sang to the low
Ranks of the good dead people
As if to come or go
Was a fine tune that a steeple
And they would know.

For the old folks that lie there
We knew were singers all.
They could get a song by ear
And had a fiddle at call
And friends near.

If you would join their song
But fear to raise the sound,
Come walk with Nettie Long
And me, by the burying-ground.
You'll take no wrong.

Burt Whitson and his Ruth
And many couples more
Can tune the lips of youth
As they did mine before
To sing the truth.

ON CULLEOKA ROAD

Girl in the blue sports-car that floats across the bridge,
You toss your yellow hair and will not look below
Where deep in shadow we claim the shadows' privilege
And wait at a dry ford to watch you come and go.

But who can see us now if apples are gone from the hill
And if wild thickets of plum are stricken and chopped away?
And if new strange weather keeps all water from the mill
Who, then, can believe we too crossed here, one day?

Before there was ever a bridge, there was Culleoka Road
And driving down to bright water I checked my sleek bay mare;
Where she turned and drank a wagoner rested his load,
An old man with merry eyes and sunset on his hair.

"My girl," he said, "was a phoenix, dawn rosy on her breast;
Five nights I rode courting till the heavens overflowed
And I swam my horse to win her, for what young man can rest
Who comes to find his phoenix on Culleoka Road?"

"Old man," I said, "I know one whose eyes are blue as day
And hair bright as morning on a sycamore in spring.
Before the whippoorwills begin I know I'll hear her say
That she will be my phoenix through all my journeying."

When I rode from my phoenix the whippoorwills were calling;
Midnight a meadow the stars had overflowed;
On my lips her kisses and summer dew falling
Till we should be shadows on Culleoka Road.

SECOND HARVEST

At midnight, crowding the autumn paths, I hear those voices
That cannot sleep, as I cannot, for a restless horn
Whetting the dogs and whetting me while answering noises
Muster from all the hills and harry the too-long born.

They cry "Rise up, Joe Clisby, for the hunter's moon
Sickles the frosty lanes where green corn once was growing.
Quail and wild turkey know what play comes on so soon;
Beyond the ravished field, what cover's ripe for mowing."

Once I could ride as a man ought to a hill where horses
Neighed and my old companions called — that starry place
Where always the Ploughman drives the bear on her
changeless courses
And no man hangs his head to dream of a woman's face.

Then no soft arms could hold me from my wilderness yearning
To reap at daylight's fallow edge, with bullet or knife,
That flicker of hoof and pelt, that flash of wings returning —
The dogs trace it — harvest of life that gives me life.

THE SWINGING BRIDGE

Not arching up as good stone bridges do,
Nor glum and straight like common iron things,
But marvelously adroop between two trees
Trembling at even the softest step, it swings
To span the summer's long, long wish and a lazy
creek's vagaries.

A boy (I know him well) has crept up there
Through the smooth willow's crotch and footed the wire,
Tiptoe where ancient planks have rotted through
And gone, like folks who have followed old desire
Into some heaven and long, long fallen asleep where
they wanted to.

In the close leaves the rustle tells him to dream.
He knows the sunny rock and the leaping-in;
How the pool will jostle its lusters into flight
At the swimmer's stroke; and hears the laughter begin
And the voices calling *Ezell!* and *Joe!* till comes the
Long, long night.

But the bridge stirs under his feet, the wizard bridge.
"Cross me," it says, "and taste my sweet unrest."
Beyond the whispering leaves, beyond the stream
One dark hawk mounts the clouds to the sky's crest —
Long, long have I remembered that sky, those wings,
that climber's dream.

SPRING VOICES

Lovely in spring again flows Harpeth River
While bough to bough I hear the gray doves calling,
But the voices that answered me by Harpeth River
Are gone with the flowing stream and the blooms falling.

CRABBED YOUTH AND MERRY AGE

These are the young men whispering through the darkness,
Tongues of disaster muted with sleep and scorn.
Before the time resting they are tired;
Before the time of losing they are forlorn.

And these are the old men, risen at morning light,
Unlatching country gates before the sun,
To catch a horse and call with Stentor's voice
The lazy boy whose ploughing's not begun.

APPLE AND MOLE

For a high heavy time on the long green bough
Hangs the apple of a summer that is shaken
From its flat hot road to its apple-topped hill
With the scraping of a mole that would awaken.

He is under the turf of the long green meadow,
Snuffling under grass and lusty clover
With a sure blunt snout and capable paws
Up the long green slope past the beeches and the haws
For the summer must be shaken and over.

It's a ripe heavy time for an apple to hang.
He is butting out a path, he is shoveling a furrow,
Till the tree will be aquiver feeling mole at the root.
It is tall, it is green, but he will burrow

Till the root will be sapless and the twig will be dry
And the long green bough it will be shaken.
The apple is too old, it has worms at the core,
And the long green summer will be green no more.
The apple will fall and not awaken.

MARTHA AND SHADOW

Martha said, Shadow is little, Shadow is not
Able as I when world is gold in the sun.
She walked in the dew of the clover, and Martha forgot
That the day had only begun.

Martha said, Shadow is weak, Shadow will fly
Wherever I come in the dew and clover of morning.
Shadow was smaller at noon but would not die;
Shadow not Martha had a long time for growing.

Shadow said, Martha is little, Martha is not
Able as I in evening, and evening is last.
Martha said, Shadow is all, I know thee, O Shadow!
I will come into Shadow and rest.

WILD GAME

Whether it is only a thought
Or some wild thing, harried severely,
It is trapped for but never caught;
It visits us rarely

In the likeness of a deer
Perhaps, or sometimes a wild
Wolf that will slaver fear,
Or a dove; never beguiled

To drink or touch or taste
Our flat and homely waters;
Obeying no charm or the chaste
Prayers of our virgin daughters;

Yet is seen of certain men
Alone, who walk with eyes
Glazed to all else but it
And are long afterwards called wise.

STONE AND ROSES

To F. A. S.

Mornings and afternoons he moves in state,
Commanding stone to cornices and blocks;
At his curt nod the ranks of saws cut straight;
Columns and urns are born of stolid rocks.

But evenings, with a manner not of stone,
Reckless of dew he kneels and bows his head
Before his roses, fingering one by one
The twilight buds just stemming from their bed.

He knows their worshipful names, their blooming time.
They are his high-born queens and emperors,
Requiring with their courtly pantomime
The tribute of his gestureless devoirs.

FIDDLER DOW

It was cool swung six and crack o' the morn

With a fa-la-la-la-lady

When Fiddler Dow strolled into Thorn

With a fa-la-la-la-lady.

Who sent for him, nobody knows

But a fiddler must fiddle wherever he goes.

He followed his nose, he trusted his face,

And bobbed up smack in the marketplace.

He strung his bow with a hair from his beard;

He hemmed and hawed till his head was cleared.

With a tweedle-deedle-dee and thumpty-tum

He tuned the strings with his old slick thumb.

He cocked his cap on the side of his head

And snatched out "Hey, Is the Old Cow Dead!"

The farmers' wives on their neat hearthstones

Felt a singular fire in their cramped old bones.

They left the bacon frying in the pan,

Sailed through the door with a swish, and ran.

The farmers of Thorn were milking the cows;

They perked up their ears and knitted their brows.

Each cut a caper and a pigeon-wing

And bobbed through the streets like jacks on a string.

Dow was playing the Boatman's Salute,
Patting the dirt with his old square boot.

The farmers' sons were feeding the pigs;
They all came spinning like whirligigs.

The farmers' daughters were braiding their hair;
They tucked up their skirts and slid down the stair.

Old Mother Bridcomb, the scraggled old witch,
Gave her apron a twirl and her bonnet a twitch;

Over the chimneys like the bird of doom
The witch came scooting on a prancing broom.

Journeyman, Shoemaker, Parson, Judge
Began to sidle and snigger and nudge.

When the fiddle played "I'm a rank robber's son"
They kicked over chairs and began to run.

Each warped queer gable and lank red roof
Twitched, as though struck by the Devil's hoof.

Houses quivered in every stanchion
Down to cellar and cask and puncheon.

Thorn-folk skipped like grains on a griddle
To the rip and rant of the merry-mad fiddle.

Cows were not milked, the porridge got cold,
The bleating sheep could not get out of fold.

The plow stuck stiff, halfway on the furrow;
The opportune fox stole out of his burrow;

While the Thorn-folk danced, forgetting their lands,
For a rollicksome air and a clap of the hands.

It was hot swung twelve and top o' the noon
When Fiddler Dow played a different tune.

It was "Come kiss Janie" or "Janie and I."
Farmers clogged slower, beginning to sigh,

And you might have seen, from a cynical steeple,
How oddly the fiddler had coupled the people.

The Parson bowed in his crinkled surtout
And armed the old witch to the head of the rout.

Tattletale Tabitha, gossip and thief,
Danced with the Judge like a thin mad leaf.

Hunchback Willie, forgetting his crutch,
Caught sweet Madge Lorn in his spidery clutch.

And the Goblin of Thorn who lives so high
In a tower of bells, saw the fiddle go by,

Looked down wondering, smiled, and came
With Will o' the Wisp for his dancing flame.

The fiddle went *See!* The fiddle went *Saw!*
The long line followed the fiddler's law.

Shouting and whooping and caterwauling
They all streaked after the fiddle's calling.

They clacked the cobblestones down to the bridge;
The fiddle squeaked like a blood-drunk midge.

The tune he struck was a roguish lay;
It was "Over the River the Hunt's Away."

Where they were going, nobody knows;
You must follow a fiddle wherever it goes.

At cool swung six and rise o' the moon
Dow was playing the same old tune,
But sudden as doom at the bell's first clap
The Thorn-folk wakened as from a nap,
Rubbed at their eyes and felt of their bones,
Scuffed in the dirt and gathered stones.
The fiddle quavered, the stones were cast,
But nobody saw where the fiddler passed.
The fiddle quavered, the tune was lost;
Dow was gone like a late damp ghost.
Who paid the fiddler, nobody knows
With a fa-la-la-la-lady!
But a fiddler must fiddle wherever he goes
With a fa-la-la-la-lady!

THE OLD MAN OF THORN

Eph Dickon, the old man,
The old man of Thorn,
Plants thistles in cornfields
As other men plant corn.

High on a red stripped hill
He has a thistle farm.
There on an April night
He waves a spidery arm.

There of an April moonlight
His arm weaves to and fro;
He never stops to see
Which way the thin seeds go.

They drift, a slithery cloud,
Over heaved and harrowed ground.
Finically they sink
With a tiny malicious sound.

Then the old man of Thorn
Toasts the brash white moon
With a gurgly Hee-Ha-Ho
For a sprout in mellow June.

Come rain, come sniggering hail,
Come lolloping hot or dry,
Eph Dickon snores night through;
Never cracks his yellow eye.

Let the wise farmers of Thorn
Wag their solemn heads together
On the snub contrary seasons,
On the slack and drouthy weather;

Eph Dickon, the old man,
The old man of Thorn,
Views nettlesome plants a-waxing
And laughs the sky to scorn.

Propped in his shaggy door
He twiddles crooked thumbs
With a blowsy fiddle-dee-dee
Till the moon-mad harvest comes.

The owl and whippoorwill
Or, some say, bony things
Come skipping to his hilltop
When his pranksome farm-bell rings.

There all night long they puff
And blow and puff and ferry
Cloud-harvests of thistle-seed
With a hey-down, down-down-derry.

Bushels of bright thistle-seed
Come sailing to his barn loft.
Eph chuckles as he bounces
On shimmery crops and soft.

Straight from his loft he bounces
Into his kitchen door;
The hoarse owl and whippoorwill
Were waiting there before.

Who can tell what smack
They take of a lumpish jug?
Bones chatter, too, men say,
As they lip and pass the mug.

Then plagues they cry and curses
On the wise farmers of Thorn
Who totter and toil and wheedle
Over fields of scrawny corn.

“Be damned to you, then,” says Dickon,
“And never your crops be sold.
Corn yields perhaps a hundred,
But thistles a million-fold.”

“Blight take you, then,” says Dickon,
The old man of Thorn;
“Ag’in you harvest your furrows,
You’ll wish you’d never been born;

“You’ll wish you never had dreamed
Of the chink you never can get.
Sing a song of a field of thistles
And a crop that’s never failed yet.”

With a hey-down-down-down-derry
For the old old man of Thorn-O!
Eph Dickon, the fool old man,
The good old man of Thorn-O!

THE WOLF

The flour-barrels, cracker-boxes, cans
Of lard and coffee hem the live beast in,
Who jingles furtive fingers through the till,
Dropping delicious coins with snap and grin.

Drooling, like one who should be crunching bones,
He mouths the figured column of his kill.
A sneaking blast rattles the locked door;
The cat looks on, oracular and still.

The eyes that should be centering the brush
Blink at the hot stove's belly, glowing red.
The breath that should go howling to the moon
Blows out the lamp and wheezes off to bed.

A DEAD ROMANTICIST

With analytic men he had no quarrel,
Nor would engage their saucy rapiers.
He copied old Diogenes in his barrel
And cried "The sun!" O reverend little sirs.

He had remarked that two and two make four,
Learned theorems about hypotenuses,
But by such matters could not set much store
As pointing ways to scotch a life's abuses.

For he has seen a road by healing waters
Hushed into wintry slate against the sand,
And spoken there with the wind's elfin daughters,
And mingled in their dusty saraband.

He has known winds that blow from blossomy closes,
Rich with the fruity smell of summertide,
And kissed warm faery lips. . . . Now he reposes,
While we are not quite certain he has died.

THE DEMON BROTHER

I heard strange pipes when I was young,
Piping songs of an outland tongue.
I heard, and was agape to see
How like that piper was to me,
His brow, his gesture, even his dress
Perfections of my awkwardness,
And wandering forms of early wonder
Shaped into him, no more asunder.

Playing a tune to the rabble's whim
He marched away; I followed him.
For something in his rolling eye
Plucked at my senses mightily,
And something in that outland tongue
Drew me away, for I was young.
Then over the town he piping went;
Streets tipped, I thought, in ravishment;
Roofs clapped, and windows blazed to see
That alien piper, so like me.

I followed till the pipes trilled sweet
At the winding end of a nameless street,
And none of all the mob was nigh,
Nor door nor window cracked an eye.
Then, "Follow me no more," he said,
"Though I be of thy father bred,
And though I speak from thine own blood,
Yet I am not of mortal brood;

And follow not my piping sweet
To find the walking world a cheat;
And cherish not my outland grace,
Nor pride in likeness to my face,
For children of an earthly mother
Cry out against their demon brother.”
His smile flashed out a sudden dawn
In the dark street — then he was gone;
And through the town where he had sung
The futile raveled silence hung.

I heard, but I could not forget,
And through the world I follow yet,
And many a time I pause and sigh,
Thinking I hear his melody;
And peer at all men's character
To find that image so like me;
And marvel that his piping sweet
Left me to know a world's deceit,
Left me to seek an unknown kin
Through all the streets I travel in.

REDIVIVUS

Thin lips can make a music;
Hateful eyes can see;
Crooked limbs go dancing
To a swift melody.

The probing knife of madness
Can start a dullard brain;
Cold cheeks feel kisses
And warm with tears again;

The surly heart of clowns
Can crack with ecstasy;
Rootbound oaks toss limbs
If winds come fervently;

Then let my skeleton soul
Writhe upward from its loam,
Drink red morning again,
And look gently home.

SPOKEN AT A CASTLE GATE

Before you touch the bolt that locks this gate
Be warned. There's no return where you are going.
A sword is tinder at the touch of fate
And crumbles in a way beyond your knowing.

Something I've heard, but something less I tell.
An old man knows, advises — young men smile,
Blow slug-horns, chink a latch, or clank a bell.
I've watched a many a one this weary while.

You can hear the nightingales, I won't deny.
They always sing for eager souls like you,
Perched on their boughs of possibility,
Most vaguely heard and only vaguely true.

And they are more, perhaps, than mere tradition.
They must exist, though none come back to say
How they are feathered, or what rare nutrition
Keeps them, piping their sad peculiar lay.

Gardens there are and Queens, no doubt, a-walking,
White blooms adrift on gold and marvelous hair.
Young men in murmurous dreams have heard them talking,
Leaped up, like you, and entered . . . vanished . . . where?

For all I know, the castle's just a dream,
A shadow piled to mask a dangerous ledge,
A fantasy blown from devils' lungs in steam,
Made permanent here, just on a chasm's edge

Where you will tremble in a swoon of falling
And yet plunge upward through the unearthly mist
To hear once more the voice that you heard calling
And win at last those lips you would have kissed,

Even as you touch the bolt that locks this gate,
Smiling, with patience such as fits old men
Who prophesy. Ah yes, what you create
You'll surely find — but never come back again.

OLD HARP

Could thine ancient master rise
From his dark mound by the sea,
With what shame and hurt surprise
Would he look on thee,
Placarded here for eyes
That never knew the glee.

Once he sang of old, old things
In tongues men have forgot,
Of sleeping barrowed kings
That wait new Camelot
With richer coverings
Than men on earth have got;

Or of shield-rimmed galleys drifting
And Viking eyes ablaze
To catch gray towers lifting
Their round from bowered ways;
Or blue cliffs slowly rifting
That guard enchanted bays.

But his pliant hand is dust.
Here is no singing tongue.
Only the mute cool rust
Fingers thee, loosely strung,
And men read, as read they must,
What once was sung.

V THE TALL MEN

"Nay," sayd the lord Persë,

"I tolde it the beforne,

That I wolde never yeldyde be
to no man of a woman born."

TO THE MEMORY OF

*William Bluford Davidson, my father, and
Elma Wells Davidson, my mother*

PROLOGUE: THE LONG STREET

Pacing the long street where is no summer
But only burning summer — looking for spring
That is not, spring that will not be here
But with its blunt remembrancer and friend,
Its blunt friend Death . . . Pacing the long street
That ends with winter that will never be
Winter as men would say it . . . Thinking of autumn —
What but a few blown leaves and the biting smoke
That feeds on all of these till autumn is not
Autumn? The seasons, even the seasons wither,
And all is mingled with a chaff of time
Till I must wonder, pacing the long street,
If anything in this vague inconceivable world
Can end, lie still, be set apart, be named.

Yet I would name and set apart from time
One sudden face, built from a clay and spittle
Ancient as time, stubborn as these square cliffs
Of brick and steel that here enclose my steps.
The grass cannot remember; trees cannot
Remember what once was here. But even so,
They too are here no longer. Where is the grass?
Only the blind stone roots of the dull street
And the steel thews of houses flourish here,
And the baked curve of asphalt, smooth, trodden,
Covers dead earth that once was quick with grass.
Snuffing the ground with acrid breath the motors

Fret the long street. Steel answers steel. Dust whirls.
Skulls hurry past with the pale flesh yet clinging
And a little hair. Fevered bones under clean
Linen. Aimless knuckles of bones
Within buttoned gloves waving to eyeless sockets:
"Good day, old friend! Good day, my girl! Good-bye!
So long, old man!"

So long, forever so.

Forever, night after night, to say good-bye
Across the portals of an iron age
And close the ivory gate with hopeless stare
Down the long street and up and down again.
Again, old man? How shall we meet again . . .
Tonight, for lights bloom up uncertainly for us,
Or in this dead commingled smoke and dark take leave
Of dead men under a pall, nameless and choked?

THE TALL MEN

It was a hunter's tale that rolled like wind
Across the mountains once, and the tall men came
Whose words were bullets. They, by the Tennessee waters,
Talked with their rifles bluntly and sang to the hills
With a whet of axes. Smoke arose where smoke
Never had been before. The Red Man's lodges
Darkened suddenly with a sound of mourning.
Bison, cropping the wild grass, raised their heads
To a strange wind that troubled them. The deer
Leaped in the thicket, vainly loathing death
That stung without arrows. The great bear, hungry
for cattle,
Nudged the rough logs of an unyielding pen
And returned no more, having seen the fangs
Of the snarling dogs and the bright knife of the hunter.
Looks were all westward, I have heard, and feet,
Firm in moccasins after the Indian fashion,
Moved with keen presence like the quiet stir
Of a ravenous spring. The lips of hunters awoke
With rumor of far lands till Carolina
Firesides were restless, till the tall Virginians hated
The easy warmth of houses, the too-many-peopled
World. In twos and threes the tall men
Strode in the valleys. Their palisades were pitched
In the Cumberland hills. They brought their teeming wives
To rock the hickory cradles and to mould
Bullets for words that said: "Give way, Red Man.

You have lived long enough. The seed is sown and covered
Which like the dragon's-teeth in a new soil
Will sprout full-armed in tall men who fight
With a lazy smile, speaking from long rifles."

Something (call it civilization) crept
Across the mountains once, and left me here
Flung up from sleep against the breakfast table
Like numb and helpless driftwood. Through the trees
Where summer morning grows with a threat of drouth
I look back on the centuries (not quite two),
Rustling the morning paper and watching the clock.
On upper Sixth . . . some negroes . . . yesterday
Dug up old bones . . . and trash . . . while excavating . . .
Fundaments for the latest Towers of Babel!
An Indian grave, the state geologist says,
With beads and bear-tooth necklace and a few
Chipped flints and pots. Another grave?
What's that to me who have my teeth to wash
And a cigarette to light before I catch
A car at eight-fifteen with a paper folded
Neatly in my coat pocket. I must remember
Always to look before crossing. A man was killed
On this historic corner the other day
For failing to look while civilization crept
Upon him with rubber wheels and a stench of gas.
But here no Indians lurk. The motorman
Knows perfectly what I want. The prisoned air,
Steel, and electricity obey his wrist,
And my soft proud body is borne on the smooth
Parallel rails into a city hoarse
With nine o'clock which brings the swivel-chair
And to the hungry brain the pelt of typewriters.

Some sort of a battle, would you call it, where
Words pass for bullets, dabbed in a scribble of ink?
Now here the hero sprawls while a little man
Purrs in a patent tone of voice and a sleek
Copyrighted smile. He has a Northern way
Of clipping his words, and with an inevitable curve
Of an arm in a business suit reveals cigars
In the tribal code. Then we are wreathed in smoke
Like friends. He says: "You are so tall, you men,
You Tennesseans. I've never seen so many
Tall fellows riding in elevators.
What makes you then so tall? Is it the cornbread
And the buttermilk, or is it in the air,
Or is it having to climb so many hills
That makes you stretch your legs?"

Why, since you ask,
Tallness is not in what you eat or drink
But in the seed of man. And I am minded
(Remembering an Indian grave) to speak
As only I can speak of what I am,
What were the loins that begot me, what the breasts
That suckled me in danger, what the blood
Running rebelliously within me still
Of the tall men who walked here when there were
No easy roads for walking or for riding . . .

The curve of Mill Creek with its throat of moonlight
Dazzled McCrory's eyes and made him dream
Of how a girl's neck looked against the gray
Homespun at candle-lighting time.
Such fleshly thoughts were not his business,
And yet he thought them, gazing below his perch
At the dark logs of the station and the roof
Beneath which Phoebe slept, with her warm neck

Curved on a pillow. Outside it was cold
And tedious bother watching for the Indians
Who had not come and would not come, perhaps.
For it was already past the full of the moon;
The spies had skinned the country — all for nothing,
If he was any judge. It was plumb queer,
The way Buchanan had his dander up
And kept fifteen strong men away from harvest,
Waiting for Creeks and Cherokees to come.
Why couldn't he take the word of Indian fighters
Who'd never yet guessed wrong? McCrory's feet
Ached with the cold. He scuffed them on the bark.
The sentinel in the opposite shadow leaned
Lazily in his tower. The leaves of autumn
Roared and drooped, and the moon was midnight high.

A spatter of hoofbeats in the bottom-grass
Broke upward to the fort. McCrory jerked
Awake like a cat and saw a straggling herd
Of darting cattle, wild and snorting, crash
Through the plum-thickets and blackberry bushes. What
Had startled them? Maybe a prowling bear
Or a nosy wildcat? Maybe something else,
A nosy Cherokee or Creek? His rifle
Slid on the steady logs. McCrory peered.

And there they were, the painted devils, slinking
Across a patch of sedge. His rifle split
September midnight dead in two. He saw
A feathered topknot sag and crumple. God!
A good shot! Now to get reloaded quickly,
Ram and fire again while in the bare
Closure of palisades the tall forms raced
Madly with rifles tall as a man to station

Speaking hotly into the moonlight greetings
One-syllabled that were not gentle. Then
The hunters remembered their boasts. And useless
they thought
Was the life on earth of the Creek and the Cherokee.
Unacata drooped already with neck
Bubbling his blood. And Talotiskee tripped
Like steer beneath the axe when the bullet grunted
Home in his breast. Easy shooting, they said,
Laying a cheek against the stock and slowly
Drawing a bead; they felt the steel grow hot
Against their hard palms, looked and fired and looked
While Sally Buchanan ducked beneath the loopholes
Bringing them powder and ball and pouring whiskey
Out of a gourd. The bullets ripped and smacked
Around lean heads that had forgot to flinch,
And eyes that spotted flashes in the bush.
But now a torch lunged forward on the arm
Of Kiachatallee. The chief whose life was charmed
Despised the white men's rifles as he ran.
Leaping as a deer leaps, climbing as a squirrel
Climbs, he topped the flat low roof
And poked the flame against the tindery bark
While the lead spattered and the red devils whooped.
The hunters cursed and fretted when their bullets
Fell weak against the Indian medicine.
They could not draw a bead. McCrory said,
By God, I'll get him yet! and climbed his perch
Again, hurling his cap across the logs
And spitting for luck. He laid the barrel steady,
Smoothly gripping the trigger. The Indian jumped
Like a stricken deer. His falling arc of flame
Dashed on the groundward logs. McCrory strained

In an awkward cramp to get a second bead
While the dark form was scuffling desperately
To blow the dying torch. Then suddenly
The hunters knew the dawn and heard a boom
From northward hills where Nashboro was, and said,
It's Robertson with men and guns. But now,
Softly as night, the Red Men all had gone.

I have not seen the legendary tree
Where D. BOON CILLED A BAR and lightly slept
With one eye open, leathery cheek on rifle.
Another tree I know, a veteran
Of storms and traffic on a city street,
Bulging its muscular trunk in the dreary middle
Of glib macadam, sending its roots in the deep
Stones of the world where earth and Tennessee
Are all the same. The tree divides the stream
Of motors roaring homeward on the hill.
Here, from the Natchez Trace, the files of hunters
Warily lounged. And here war-parties met,
Pausing to spy the country, hooting like owls
In the forest twilight. Here I pass with looks
Too reminiscent for a clear impression
Of four-room bungalows fronting a concrete path
That radiates heat. And here I am besieged
By ghosts and shadows much too tall to be
The spirits of the little men who died
Respectably last week in a private hospital.
And I must let them speak as they know how . . .

John Sevier

Xavier my name in the Gascon country till
My great-sires came to England, and were called

Sevier in the rough English speech, but lost
No chivalry of their ancient name. I loved
The praise of men in hunting-shirts who cheered
For Nolichucky Jack at Watauga Old Fields
And followed me through night and the dripping forest
To King's Mountain. We were the backwoods hornets
Crowding the rocky slopes and buzzing death
To that gaudy lion, Ferguson. Elsewhere
It was the same. The sword of the Lord and of Gideon
In my hands smote the Indian villages
To dust and ashes till I lived in peace,
Governing my country, loving my Bonny Kate,
And seeking the praise of men. But where are they?
Where are Shelby and Campbell? Where is Cosby?
Where are the rifles and the lean hunters
Who strode the long trail with me? Have they left
No tall sons to hate what should be hated
And love what should be loved — the praise of men
Speaking with quiet eyes behind long rifles?

Andrew Jackson

What makes men live but honor? I have felt
The bullet biting next to my heart and yet
I kept my life for honor's sake and killed
My enemy. And what else was the fire
That fed my sickly body when I shamed
The Tennesseans into victory
At Horseshoe Bend? What was it then but honor
That blazed too hot for British regulars
At New Orleans? Then all the people knew
That I was of their breed and trusted me.
Cowards and lies and little men will pass,
But honor, by the Eternal, will endure.

David Crockett

The corn-shuckings and square dances, the fiddles,
The barrels of gin and whiskey, the jerked venison,
Juicy bear meat, hot corn pone, molasses,
And the girls giggling in corners — those are the things
That make life merry. But there came a time
When I neglected them all, and we made merry
(My Betsey and I) at a different kind of party,
Playing with powder and ball at the Alamo.
I regret nothing, not even the lies and jokes
I told in Congress. But what is this I hear?
Tennesseans, have you forgotten the songs
Of Old Zip Coon and Turkey in the Straw?

These are the words of ghosts. I was not there,
At Talledega, Horseshoe Bend, King's Mountain,
Not at Suwannee, Mobile, or Pensacola
In days when men were tall. I have not eaten
Acorns to still my hunger or followed the warpath
After a fiery leader tough as the hickory.
I have not heard the cry of the owl at night
With dreadful understanding. I have not seen
A friend plunge, furred with arrows, across his plough
Or heard the scream of a woman snatched from the hearth
By painted warriors. And when it was misty dawn
I was not by the ragged breastworks, priming my rifle,
Hearing the British drums beat. I have not sung
Old songs or danced old tunes. I have read a book.
I have loitered by graves. I have trod old floors,
Tiptoed through musty rooms and glanced at letters
Spread under glass and signed *Yr Obt Servant*,
And wistfully conned old platitudes in stone.
But shall I say the praise of men, bright honor,

The songs of my own race and the ways of fighters
Are something read in a book only, or graven
Only in stone and not in the hearts of men?

Speaking with words for bullets politely now
I move on rubber heels dividing parallel grooves
On the swept sidewalk. I with an evening paper
Folded neatly in my coat pocket salute the tree
And walk, a veteran of storms and traffic, home,
Where windows bloom with mellow lights against
A square slab of buildings. This is dusk
Where tall men humped on cushioned seats glide home
Impatiently. Feet in immaculate leather,
Silken-cased, urge down the throttle gently,
Speeding with effort only of ankle and wrist.
Seven o'clock in the twentieth century is
The hour of supper, not the hour of prayer,
And something (call it civilization) turns
A switch; a fan hums pianissimo,
Blowing old ghosts to outer darkness where
The bones of tall men lie in the Tennessee earth.

THE SOD OF BATTLEFIELDS

“By the Battery Lane,” he said, and veered the wheel
With casual wrist among the westward hills
Where all the neglected ghosts launch up in vain
Pleadings unrecognized. Here once of old
The westering sun called blood upon the hills
While men in gray reeled backward from the charge,
And saw the stubborn cannoneers, the dogged
Mouths of the guns through settling smoke, and dropped
To breathe in scattered ranks until despair
Herded them on like the ragged drift of autumn
Tossed by a northern wind. The Battery Lane?
Now but a glimpse of naked trees and a sere
Whirl of meadows, flashed on the speeding eyes,
Not yet opaque while phantoms trouble them,
Or fetches rouse the slumbering brain, until
The pageant of old wounds and gallantries
Beats for remembrance, quick in the startled mind.

Old men remember this who creep to the sun
In the winter of a time that heeds them not.
They are the proof of ancient differences
Not yet committed to the grave. They warm
Their bones with names that are not names to them
But panoplied moments, exultations made
Visible in the flesh that woke their banners.
This one has followed Lee. He has clutched the mane
Of the gray charger and wept farewell. He knows

Lee was the grandest face that ever looked
Victory to the conquered. This one has cheered
For Stonewall Jackson, riding the long gray lines
At Fredericksburg where ranks were steel. Then came
The lunge through Wilderness woods, the fatal moon
Of Chancellorsville, the waving plume of Stuart.
Another dropped at Chickamauga, felled
By the Bloody Pond. Another was taken at Vicksburg.
Another galloped from Donelson with Forrest
And never was taken. Another remembers groups
Of skirmishers that light as hounds advanced
On Little Round Top. This one has seen the dead
Peaceful as sleep on Shiloh field by the river. . . .
Laughter of a girl, uplifting at a gate
A face of love in sixty-three . . . the dust
Of cavalry gone from a Tennessee road forever.

These remember, and some forget. But here
Was the place of battle. You who have never known
The scour and pierce of battle may only remember
Moments by names, places by monuments,
But I who was born by the battlefields cannot
Escape a sorrow that dwells, a valor that lingers,
A hope that spoke on lips now still. It is
A fey place, haunted and old with tales
That I have heard and will not soon forget.

The Yankees came at night, my grandmother said,
Plundering the stables, leading the horses out.
They said, *Why, you won't need your old barn now,*
And so we'll burn it.

Chickens stirred in the cedars,
Stretching their necks at this unusual glare.

She put her nose against the kitchen window
With the other little girls in flannel nightgowns,
Hearing the horses stamp and whinny, hearing
Her mother sob, hearing the rocking-chair creak
Back and forth like a dull patient dream.

“Mother, if I was a man and had a gun. . . .
Mother, if Jim Ezell was here he wouldn’t let
The Yankees burn our barn, would he, Mother?”

Then out of the back yard hedge a sudden row
Of eight men in blue with Yankee feet
Violating the porch. Eight men with whiskey-breaths
Bashed into the silence across the carpets, poking
Their long bayonets under the beds and the sofa.
One with a stubby beard and woolly eyebrows
Above a fat chin stuck his Yankee bayonet
Right at a little girl in a flannel nightgown,
Laughing in a whiskey guttural.

“Shucks, I’m not afraid
Of you . . . You’re nothing but a damn Yankee!”

Then, many days after, the throb of guns
Repeating their murmur dully from Murfreesboro,
Until dusk without news. Another dawn,
Another day of faint long pounding.

“Mother,
Is it a battle? Mother, is Uncle Paul
Shooting the Yankees? Mother, do you reckon
The Yankees will kill Uncle Paul?”

And there was a tale of Jim Ezell and the Yankees,
How he licked ten of them — fifty, maybe —
All by himself. Oh, he was a Forrest scout
And a Chapel Hill boy, you know. The Yankees

Heard he was lying wounded and in bed
At old Dad Smiley's farm up by the creek,
So they sneaked up, all ten of them (maybe fifty),
And the first thing he knew he was surrounded.
Then Jim rared out of bed like a young colt,
Kicked up his heels, spit bullets in their faces,
That-a-way, this-a-way, lit in his saddle fighting,
Bang through the fence and splash in the creek,
And up the dirt road with his shirt-tail flapping.
The Yankees yelled and shot their guns. No use!
None of your butter-fingered Yankee cavalry
Ever could touch Jim Ezell. It took
Ten Yankees anyhow to lick a Southerner,
Even to make him run.

Another day
(After Chickamauga and the fall
Of Vicksburg, it must have been), my grandmother said,
She was alone in the yard one August evening
Just at twilight, swinging on the gate, maybe.
The noise of horses, pulled to a walk, and metal
Faintly clinking came from up the street
Where voices growled and argued. Then right past her
A troop of Yankee cavalry, some dismounted,
Dragged three men, three boys in country jeans.
One was Len Smiley, grandmother said, the others
She didn't remember. The boys were arguing
Plaintively with the Yankee captain, swearing:
"Why, Captain, we're no spies. You can't mean
You're going to shoot us. We're Confederate soldiers,
Slipped in home for a snack and a change of clothes."
And as they passed the gate Len Smiley said:
"Look here, Captain. I'm no spy. Why, there's

Becky Patton. She knows me. She'll tell you
I'm no spy, nor no bushwhacker either."
Roughly the guard, with carbines, dragged them on,
While the captain in Federal blue lounged on his horse
And sucked his moustaches. They took the three young men,
Lined them up in the middle of the town and shot them,
Shot them dead right there, those three young fellows,
Just boys, you know, all Chapel Hill boys.
One tried to run. He got across a garden
And over a paling-fence before they stopped him . . .
Full of bullet holes . . . riddled . . . The bodies
Lay in three pools of blood until the women
And old men carried them in by candlelight . . .
Dressed them decent . . . buried them.
Riddled . . . the blood lay in pools.

The sod of old battlefields is washed
Clean of blood. The wind and the rain have worn
Smooth rondures where the jagged breastworks were.
The matted roots of blue grass hold the earth
Where the young men fell, where the gallant old men rested
Their tired bones. Some lie under the grass,
Which is victorious here. And little boys
Wrangle on Sundays over the minié balls,
Much fewer now and hard to find in the grass.
The historic farmhouse where five generals lay
In bloody dignity is pointed out
To strangers. Hood is a one-legged fable
Argued in dusty volumes; Forrest, a name
Remembered by a few old men in gray
Stumbling in the hot sun while the hired band plays
Dixie, and sponsors simper. Heavily the old men
Shoulder their ancient rifles. Ranks are straggling.

Lee is a face, a granite face on a mountain.
And the grandsons of Confederate soldiers learn
About Abe Lincoln, the sad-eyed rail-splitter.
Banks close on his birthday. A few old negroes
Still tip their hats when they meet a white man,
And the years creep slowly by, Lorena.
Flags, bullet-torn, moulder in glass cases
While pneumonia, enemy of old men in gray,
Ravages freely. The U.D.C.'s still meet
Indomitably, despairing of their granddaughters.
The Union is saved. Lee has surrendered forever.
Today, Lorena, it is forbidden to be
A Southerner. One is American now;
Propounds the pig's conception of the state —
The constitution of, by, for the pig —
Meanwhile pushing his trotters well in the trough.
One goes to the movies, motors on Sunday swiftly
On the baked asphalt:

Yes, this is the Battery Lane.

*So they say. The battle of Nashville was fought
Somewhere around here. I suppose there's a tablet.
We won't go back to look. The Soldiers' Home? . . .
Off yonder through the trees . . . the new paint factory . . .
A little further on. . . . We'll soon be home.*

The years creep slowly by, Lorena, till
The sod of the old battlefields is washed
Clean of all blood. But have I forgotten these
Cool scouts, hidden in a wild-plum thicket,
Once in an autumn dusk near Ewell's Farm,
Perilously quiet, watching the hurried lines
Of Federal blue along the Franklin pike
That crept away while Forrest stamped and fretted?

Have I forgotten powder-blackened mouths
Meeting the ragged flame of enemy rifles
On the Franklin breastworks? Have I forgotten these
Tired eyes of Confederate soldiers lighting
With bitter courage momentarily at Nashville,
The withered army, the slow retreat, the rain
Falling on huddled shoulders? Have I forgotten
The dead young men whose flesh will not reflower
But in this single bloom which now I pluck,
Weaving it into my spirit as victors weave
A chaplet, gathered from mould, for honor's sake?
This is my body, woven from dead and living,
Given over again to the quick lustration
Of a new moment. This is my body and spirit,
Broken but never tamed, risen from the bloody sod,
Walking suddenly alive in a new morning.

GEOGRAPHY OF THE BRAIN

I

The modern brain, guarded not only by bone,
Afferent nerves, withering hair, and skin,
Requires the aid of a mystical apparatus
(Weights, levers, motor, steel rods, black boy)
And pyramiding dollars nicely invested
To float in boredom up to the cool fifth floor
And a tiled room. "Forward," says King Brain,
And atrophied muscles push two legs along
The usual carpet. Eleven strides, no more,
For unimportant legs while more important
Hands convey a briefcase or fumble keys,
Or click the light for impatient eyes. The brain
Enters in state its private cave at evening,
Attended by groan of trucks and probable distant
Whirl of chartered dynamos and swish
Of prisoned waters pumped in tubes of lead;
Attended, too, by copper, steel, potash,
Dreams of Ford, alembics of Pasteur,
The ingenious soul of Edison, the thousand
Backs and hands of brown and yellow men
In Singapore or Ceylon; attended by
Elaborate giants broidered with ticker tape
Involved above the smoke at Birmingham
Or perhaps Pittsburgh; attended by bellowing
Of Kansas steers (they go in, animals;
They come out, packages); attended by

The harried eyes of men on subway trains
And pale children staring from tenement windows.
Assisted to a chair (Grand Rapids) by
Two slippers (from St. Louis) bites cigar
(Perhaps Havana) strikes a match (Bellefonte)
Unwrinkles trousers (Massachusetts) leafs
The *New York Times* (by U.S. Postal Service).

And now, dismissing all its ministers
Abruptly as a king should, grows aghast
To hunch in tailored robes of state alone
Upon the apex of a pyramid
Till for rich garniture it summons up
The map of all its native circumstance,
And suddenly it is attended, it is alive.

II

I tell you, I have come a long way, I have come
Down a long street where looking backward is
A chanted roll call answered in many places
By voices out of the blood. A child keeps asking,
Where was I before I was born? And shall I say,
O questioning son of man, *I do not know*
Where you are now after you are born?
Not yet, for now I speak a different language. Here
In the complex fiber of brain are woven scenes
Meshed thick and deep as hidden roots of grass,
Composing like the grass the sod you are.

III

Over the Southern fields green corn is waving,
Husky and broad of blade. The ranks of corn
Push from the stable earth. The pollen falls,
A yellow life from shaken tassels, piercing

The seed below. Pollen falls in my heart,
A dust of song that sprinkles fruitfulness,
Mellowing like the corn in Southern fields.
For now in the summer dawn there's bottom-land
Where clover must be cut. A boy's hands thrust
Insistent swords of corn-leaves from his face.
Dew falls, a tiny rain. His heavy eyes
Dimly waken above pale morning glories
Lushly abloom in the dewy shadow of corn.
He pulls a delicate trumpet, hovers to mark
The ornate disk of a passion-flower. The corn
Plucks at his ragged hat. Among jimson-weeds
And straggling blackberry vines he climbs the fence
Along whose crumbling rails neat lizards run
When sun is warm. But now the sun just tips
The ploughed head of Hunter's Knob. Now guineas
Spatter their metal wheels of sound. The creek,
Unheard among deep willow-sprouts and roots
Of silvery sycamore, runs quietly. The field
Waits where the mower already clicks its teeth
And partridges scud whistling. Here are the teams.
Wagons rattle and halt. The haft of a pitchfork
Presses hickory into a youngish palm.
And corn and clover wave over Southern fields,
As in the brain of man where life is stirring.

Have you worked with your hands? Have you tossed the
pungent clover
High with sun-cured stalks into bottomless wagons?
Have you watched the motionless sun? Have you walked
and sweated
Shoulder to shoulder with black men and with white
Among long windrows? Pile the warm hay. Heap
The fat clover high. It is harvest time.

Take this reaping into your body. Take
The numerous life of earth into your brain
With harvest chant while bodies sway and bend —
I'm glad to see . . . the sinkin' sun . . . go down.
Oh, Lawdy!

(Heave yo' pitchfork, heave it, heave that hay!)
I'll see my gal when Saturday night come aroun'
Oh, Lawdy, Lawd!

(Don' white-eye, little boy!
Theh's monkeys in this hay. Theh's a monkey sittin'
On yo' shoulder, white boy. Don' let him git you.)
I'm glad to see . . .

the sinkin' . . .

sun . . .

go down!

IV

I know how twilights come on little towns
When trace-chains jingle homeward. Twilight filters
Cleanly the dross of yellow clapboard houses.
Wooden gates click shut. Between rows of boxwood,
Aromatic for wistful souls, the feet
May drag on moss-grown steps. And loaded trains
Hoot with a long groan on upward grades.
And men sit after supper on the porch
Among the moonflowers. Little boys on the floor
Swing bare feet in the shadows, and distant hills
Rear tree-shapes cut and gnarled against the sky
In fantasies of giants and Indian warriors.

Father, tell us a story. Tell us about
Old times when you were a boy. . . .

Oh, yes,

When I was a boy the winters all were snowy,
And it was very cold for little boys

Driving the mule teams into the highest hills
Where the big woods were. There all day we worked
And sawed and split till hands were chapped and sore.
We piled the cordwood high on wagons. Ha!
I tell you we had fires those days. We had
Poplar and hickory logs in the great fireplace. We had
Hoe-cake baked in the ashes and brown new sorghum.
And at Sugar Creek in the old home we had
Parties sometimes. Your grandfather was the greatest
Hand for parties. Ha, the songs he could sing,
The tales he could tell, the jokes he could crack!
And I remember the house at corn-shucking time,
With neighbors crowding the doors, and candles lit
On mantels and tables; the turkey, the cake,
The golden pies in the kitchen, the cider barrel;
The fiddles knocking out "Old Dan Tucker"; the gangs
Of shuffling negroes back of the house, the barn
With mountains of corn piled ready. Two sides
Hollered and whooped as they raced, a-shucking the corn.
I remember. Ha, I have seen it. And I remember
Your great-grandfather, the finest gentleman
That ever lived. Oh, he was finicky
And neat with beard and white moustache
Precisely trimmed. Slender fingers in gloves,
Always in gloves. Feet small, in polished boots.
His thoroughbred horses. He was a thoroughbred
And kept slaves. But that is all gone now,
On account of the War, and I had rather tell you
About Julius Caesar or Captain John Smith or read
Out of Plutarch's Lives. Or sing you the good old songs
My father used to sing of Barbara Allen,
Old Rosin-My-Beau, or maybe a funny one
Like Frog Went a-Courtin'. Oh, yes, I remember

The Ku Klux riders all in white parading
Around the square at Pulaski, and one who drank
Three buckets of water, saying to frightened negroes,
That's the first drink I've had since the battle of Shiloh.

*There's a play on the hill tonight,
A play on the hill tonight
There's a play on the hill tonight.
Don't let the Yankees know it.*

*The Rebels are my delight,
The Rebels are my delight,
The Rebels are my delight,
Don't let the Yankees know it.*

v

The plump black woman wipes the sheeny plates
Deftly, and pads on muted bare black feet
To and fro. Odors of smoke-cured bacon,
Stored onion and strings of peppers float
Under the dingy rafters. The lamp is dim.
It flares, blackening swiftly the glass
Chimney. A sudden breeze bangs doors
And fearful dark is shut without. She hangs
The dishpan on a nail with a mournful clatter,
Saying —

“Hear dat, chile? Hear dat dishpan say
Lawdy, ain't no mo'? Now Mammy's tiahd.
Go 'long chillun. Leave old Mammy rest.”

*But Aunt Zif, it isn't bedtime yet.
Tell us about the railroad man. . . .*

“Well, den.

Dere was a woman oncet. She married a man
What wu'ked in de section-gang. She fried his bacon,

Baked his hoe-cake, put it all in his bucket
Ev' y mo'nin' for his snack. One mo'nin'
Dey had words, dem two. He smacked her jaw,
An' she let him go hongry. She said, I ain't
Goneter cook for you. I'll see you dead fust.
At night he ain't come home. Dey said he was gone. . . ."
Gone, Aunt Zif?

“Gone, honey. You knows what I mean —
Runned over by de train or fell offen de trustle.
An' she cried and cried and nearly cried her eyes out
Twel she 'cided to go to de conjure-man. He said,
You said you'd see him dead fust? Well, den,
You'll hafter see him dead. An' she come home
An' seen de moon thoo de bresh, an' heered a screech-owl
Hollering over by the graveyard. She tuck a bowl
Of mush and milk, she did, an' she sot it down
Right in de co'ner behin' de door jist about
Dis time o' night. An' den she sot by de fire
An' holler out real sof' —

Oh, who will come

An' git dis mush an' milk?

An' den she heered

Sumpin' holler, way-off-like, behin'

De railroad track and say —

AN' I WILL!

An' so she holler ag'in —

Oh, who will come

An' git dis mush an' milk?

AN' I WILL!

Sumpin' say, a little closer, behin'

De gyarden fence, an' den she say ag'in,

Right sof' and low —

Oh, who will come

An' git dis mush an' milk?

An' sumpin' say

Right out on de porch out loud:

AN' I WILL!

Who'll come an' git mush an' milk? AN' I . . .

Creepin' . . .

Closeter . . .

WILL! . . ."

Oh, Mammy, you scared me.

You made me jump. Do the dead come back? Do ha'nts

Live in the graveyard? How can the dead people hear?

VI

Black man, when you and I were young together,
We knew each other's hearts. Though I am no longer
A child, and you perhaps unfortunately
Are no longer a child, we still understand
Better maybe than others. There is a wall
Between us, anciently erected. Once
It might have been crossed, men say. But now I cannot
Forget that I was master, and you can hardly
Forget that you were slave. We did not build
The ancient wall, but there it painfully is.
Let us not bruise our foreheads on the wall.

VII

Over the Southern fields a moon of ghosts
Enchants me with old tremulous histories
Of slender hands, proud, smiling lips, and halls
Peopled with fragile beauty. Rich is the land,
Rich and impregnable as this magnolia-bloom
Buried among dark lacquered leaves. Breathe not
Into the golden heart, so deep, of this lush flower

Lest it blacken. Take now only its perfume
Drifting so invisibly, seized for a moment
Only, magic only of moonlight lost
And unassailable love that perished here —
Where moonlight builds tall pillars of a house
Lording a shadowy park. Enter the door
So evidently failing. Here is the stair
Where Lady Miranda walked with futile lips
Gallantly firm. And Captain Prosper here
Was laid in agony by this tall window,
Bleeding from wounds at hands of Caliban,
Mournful as Arthur on the black-draped barge,
And said: *I go, but not to Avalon
Or any cloud-capped promontory hid
Beyond the eyes of men. The battle's end
Is now my fortune, but this change of state
Confounds me not. A duller magic rules
Until the blood shall speak again.*

Here are

In a glass case, pistols that killed a man
For honor's sake. Here music was, and here
Am I beside a failing mansion, looking
For a face I hardly know and thinking I see
The ghosts of gentlemen who died for honor.

VIII

I have come a long way, I tell you. I am attended
(The brain is attended here) by motley splendors:
Dust of battles, creak of wagons, vows
Rotting like antique lace; the smiles of women
Broken like glass; the tales of old men blown
From rheumy beards on the vague wind; silk gowns
Crumbling in attics; ruffled shirts on bones

Of gentlemen in forgotten graves; rifles,
Hunting-shirts, Bibles, looms, and desperate
Flags uncrowned. But is this then to be
Dreadfully attended or have bad dreams? I am
Wherever I go in silent pomp attended
By rivers where I dwelt in good times gone,
The bending Tennessee, the Cumberland
Between high wooded banks, the Father of Waters
Receiving all the westward streams. I go
With speech of the hills, an ancient tongue, on lips
That know no other language. I have taken
Trees for comrades. I acknowledge the oak,
The gray-barked beech, the dark cedar as friends,
But, firmer than all, tough-fibered hickory.
Stranger, smite my breast and feel the hard
Defiance of history. Know my attendants, know
My tough friends met by many a traveled road
Whose careless olden songs were chanted in fields
Among long cotton-rows or in the sun
Of corn-thick bottom-land or the grassy sides
Of shelving pastures. Know my haughty attendants,
Proud men quick with a rope or a gun, and quick
With a warm smile. They stay where they are put,
Steady within the modern brain which draws
Attendants grim or beautiful together,
Asking of motley splendor out of the past
A stubborn unity of courage, only
A wall against confusions of this night.

THE FARING

I

Faces gather and merge and build a face
Born as mine from an ancient clay and spittle.
Now changing like a cloud with fire at heart
It is melted, steeled and riven, glamour'd with thunder,
Dusted with dust of foreign roads, rained on
By foreign skies, whipped by the shriek of bullets,
Pressed by the stir of marching men to a cast
Less youthful, momentarily more dark.
Not now the rumored faces of a past
Far distant urge me into being. These
Are faces out of a past that still is present,
Though crusted with time, for still in the
 twenty-fourth year
Of manhood I go to war. Still I remember
Faces of men that passed into mine, and scenes
Most terrible or dear, lighted with strange
Glares of old battlefields and rigid twilights
Watched into darkness on the scarred French hills.
Black letters daubed across a noisy page
Spelled war to men who shook their heads and knew
Only the far-off din of a muffled dream.
But the noise of war came softly on my ears
At first, with a paper crinkling, saying, *Go.*
Accepted. May the twelfth. Report for duty.
Importantly the young man lounged by an open door,
Somewhat abashed before a girl, and said,

With awkward pride, "Well, I've enlisted. Here's
My notice." So until dark they walked
On the Tennessee roads, not saying much.
They stumbled in their speech and already learned
The way of a soldier's love. Parting is first,
Then hope of return, and then perhaps return.

II

In the ship's belly the tall men huddled with guns
And packs tossed on the narrow bunks. Buttoning blouses,
Setting caps askew smartly, they crowded the rail
On the strange decks wondering. They saw the immense
Vertical lift of the piled buildings sway and whirl
as the ship
Wheeled in the harbor, nosed and let loose by tugs,
Saw the wisps of white on packed ferryboats and people
Looking with farewell motions. They saw the sun
Dropping behind New York. They heard the whistles
Roar for the outward bound, for the tanned young faces
(Few over thirty years) looking good-bye
On the camps and the flags. Good-bye, wooded New World
shores,
Houses of their own country. Spume of the green Atlantic
Rushed from the furrowing prow set eastward at last.
Over the Viking road came the Viking blood
Eastward for battle, borne in the Angles' ship,
They who were Angles. They who were Vikings came
Back to the Norman shores, with the Norman sinew
Strong for the oldtime faring, with Norman brow
And the Norman name, fused, molten, changed.
Saxon and Norman came to the elder land,
Jesting in casual tongue, having heard of deeds
Bruited somewhere in France or in Flanders fields.

Liverpool saw a new tide on the Mersey water.
Rumpled khaki poured from the belly of ships,
And the tall men strode in even columns, sluiced
Through the dingy streets where children ran and
pointed —

“Why, what’s that on your sleeve?”

“A wildcat, sonny,
To scratch the Germans’ eyes out.”

(A wildcat snarling,

Emblem of western mountains where tall men strode
Once with long rifles. The Dechard rifles are clipped
To a neater weapon. The faces are unchanged.)
The towers of Oxford saw the strangers pass
Lightly on clicking trains. Beyond Senlac
They sped, and only the blood remembered
The narrowing circle of shields, the crunch of axes,
The bitter hail of arrows. By old Southampton,
The port of kings, they camped, having lost or forgotten
A printed letter from GEORGE, R. I., beginning,
“Soldiers of the United States.” They crossed
The Channel water indifferently one night,
Snoring in tousled groups. They stamped their feet
On the docks of Havre, and, cursing the dust of camps,
Prepared for inspection on a Norman hill
While a British major languished. Midnight
Acquainted them with pinching trains on laughable
Small wheels that ticked interminably till dawn,
And they looked out on narrow checkered fields
And poplars feathered against the sky. They chaffed
The sergeant, saying mournfully: “Sergeant!
What is the French for red wine, Sergeant?
What’s the word for bellyache? What’s
The English for mademoiselle? What’s Arkansas

For big drunk fool? Oh, Sergeant, Sergeant,
Will we have to police this train before we light
Wherever we are going?"

Now they are going
Somewhere in France on roads where Roman eagles
Slanted to meet the Nervii or where
Napoleon, flushed with greetings, galloped from Elba
A hundred years before. The husky guns
Rumbled at twilight from the Western Front.
The slow column poured like moving bronze.
And something (call it civilization) struck
In the latest battle of nations, somewhere in France.

III

*Go, stranger, and to Lacedaemon tell
That here, obeying their behest . . .*

We saw
What only those may know who saw at dawn
Beyond Verdun, the tangled flats of Woivre
Torn with multiple steely beat and the mutter
Of unseen guns tucked in the lonely vast;
Or those who dwelt among the dead on hills
Nameless and lost in Argonne Wood, or crossed
The bridges numerous with blood and lay
Breathless among the shells, but prone and crouching,
Urged the five slim cartridges down with one
Quick press of a thumb, then jammed the hot bolt home;
Let those who know Buzancy, Montfaucon,
Fossoy, and Grand Pré, Fresnes, and Belleau Wood
Tell how patrols swish by with feet that suck
In the jealous mud of a trench, then clink the wire
And fade unchallenged where the low fog coils;
Or how the candle drips upon the map

As soldiers bunch grim heads and say: *There, there,
There tomorrow we go. The time is come.*
In the cold dugout's silence, the buckling of steel.

Go, stranger, tell, but you can never tell
What you have never known. Simonides
Has told you nothing. This is a fabulous battle
Vast and remote as gulfs beyond Orion,
And alien to your will . . . though you have dreamed
Beside your fire a night in nineteen-eighteen,
Letting staccato headlines droop across your lap
Toward slippered feet. The fire was warm. You dozed.
Then from your nodding sprang awake to hear
The shout of nations in the chimney-blast,
Hollow and wild, from mists beyond the sea,
And saw, before your eyelids blinked awake,
Uprising from the velvet of your dark,
An unknown image, poised and armed for war,
Bold, smeared with earth, the ruddy child of earth,
A soldier of the infantry, who smiled
Behind his tilted rifle, then moved on
Against the wind that smote him with its steel.
Confess the phantasy was true, and still
You have not seen, you will not know or see,
You cannot touch the image that is gone,
And yet there was an image once that lived.

The squadrons of the sky were winging home
Above the shrapnel cloud-puffs, and the guns,
Rousing their throats in Les Éparges, hurled east
Projectile screams that rode the air like howls
Of banshee dreams and struck like demon fists.
But that was overhead. Beneath was cold
And quiet business where McCrory led

The long-shanked riflemen to post, while dusk
Came down upon their crooked ell of trench
Till night prevailed upon them breathing there.
Then each of fifteen men laid out his gear
Ready to hand, the clips of five, the iron
Bulbs of grenades, the rockets, flares, and all
The clean smooth cylinders of war. And then
Each man composed his limbs against the frost,
Settled his gun, thumbed back the gliding lock
From safe to ready, for their custom was,
Marching or standing, always to be ready.
They had no mind to sleep.

But in his niche
High up against the parapet, a shelf
Spaded from rock and earth by hands now gone
To some French field, McCrory stood and gazed
Where gazing was, it seemed, so little use
That man as well might sleep. The night was thick
And noiseless in his front, and now the moon
Was past its full and late and weak in rising.
Yet orders still were orders. He must strain
His ear for sounds that death knows how to make,
Immensely trivial where No Man's Land
Poured all its filtered wreck of bush and stone
Into a darkling bowl whose far rim touched
The close pacific stars. Two nights had come
And gone with warning of some enemy raid
Unlaunched as yet from those gray lines where lurked
The stern and quiet foe. Tonight the third
Warning pestered the trench, but all was calm.
The phosphorous minutes moved with ticking strides
Upon McCrory's wrist. His feet were cold.
He scuffed them on the frozen shelf and heard

The sentinel in the opposite traverse move
Too restlessly, and cursed him for his noise,
Moving in absent thoughts beyond the sea,
Half-wakefully, remembering how a girl's
Deep eyes commanded his in a land far off
(And dim as Argos to the Achaean men
Before the hill of Troy, for they had left
Maiden and wife beyond the wine-dark sea).

So huddled in the frost, the riflemen
Endured the pinching hours till from Noire Haie
Five quick convulsive strokes leaped up with roar
Of steel; a long crescendo scream hurled down
Upon the steady trench. They felt the guns'
Hot lips speak toward them, winced for the crash,
and knew

The merging drumbeat of the deft barrage.
Down, down, you men, McCrory yelled, and saw
The dugout's black mouth gulp the bending backs
Till he alone was left. He pressed his side
And head against firm earth that dribbled crumbs
of dirt,

Felt at his breast a chain's cool links and drew
The whistle out and ready, pulled the hammer
Back on the wide-mouthed pistol, sent three lights
Bursting to heaven — one green, one red, one green —
And heard the answering batteries multiply
The rage of steel around his deafened head
Which still remembered *Orders! Orders! Orders!*
Wait and pick the moment! Wait and Wait!
Through all eternities of death and flame
While singing fragments whined and plumped their hail.
But now a lull. The great guns lengthened range.
McCrory topped the parapet and peered

While flares made blinding day along the front,
And there they were, the gray-green men, a line
Of forward wrenching shapes, careering, hurling
Lightnings and death about his head. His war-song
Leaped from the whistle, single-clear and shrill
Above the popping night, while in the trench
The tall men rushed to post with guns that spoke
Greetings one-syllabled that were not gentle.
They were not minded to let the strangers live,
For now they remembered the creeping nights, the rain,
The empty vigils and the comrades dead.
Good shooting, said the long-shanked riflemen
Laying the stock against a cheek and coolly
Drawing a bead while hell blazed white around.
They saw the helmets bob and topple, saw
The clenched forms stride and fall, they saw the wire
Sown with clutter of death, they looked and fired
And looked while mad McCrory cried, *By God,*
We'll get them yet! and called for bandoliers
While rushes dwindled.

Now the moon was up,
A sultry peak of light within a ring
Of ominous fog. McCrory stared at the red
Numbness that was his arm, and heard the click
Of bolts along the trench. Then softly as night
The foe had left the field, but many lay
Still where the rifles locked them into slumber.

IV

After eleven o'clock of November eleventh
We said, *Thank God, we'll build a fire at last!*
Tore the revetments out of ancient trenches,
Kindled a blaze and searched for cigarettes,

Queried, *Well, now, do you reckon the rolling-kitchens*
Will manage to get up? When do we eat?
And went to sleep while bells and whistles cheered
The paper fluttering in a cloud, and people
Shook very clean hands in victorious New York.

Heroes are muddy creatures, a little pale
Under two days' beard with gritty mouths that mumble
Oaths like the Ancient Pistol; or opening cans
Of messy beef with brittle bayonets;
Or winding spiral leggins with eyes alert
For cockleburrs. Or lanky six-foot men
Earnestly learning to dig with six-inch shovels;
Or tired boys in a trench where shells pursue
Heeding only the frost with a flimsy blanket
Pulled over head and ears. Cramped forms in a dugout
Vomiting smell of gas. Delirious corporals
Tearing at bloody bandages. Captains in rusty
Trench-coats mending broken cigars. Dead men
Wrapped in blankets and earth under wooden crosses.
Living and dead have different tongues for war.

The Living Speak:

The Colonel

The men did well. Who would have thought that green
Recruits would face machine-gun fire and crawl
Forward in flanking groups like veterans?
Division staff's another wobblier thing.
Why did they wait till 3 A.M. to give
Their damned old orders? Why did they make me put
The regimental P.C. off to the left?
Why did they send advance guard orders when
I'd told them that my front was held in force?

Why didn't they let me attack the second morning?
When I sent word again and again that I
Was ready to go. There might have been a chance
For a silver star. But now it's back to the cavalry!

The Major

That damned patrol was foolishness, I knew.
I couldn't tell a lieutenant that. I couldn't
Say, *Yes, of course, you'll never get that gun,*
And never get back alive with only fifteen
Men and such halfway plans. But the Colonel says.
West Pointers make me sick. Well, anyway,
We didn't get lost like the third battalion did,
And we got the gun at last. Oh, war is hell,
But cognac softens it around the edges.

Company Commander

Playing God for two hundred men is a snap
Until the battle starts and the scoundrels go
Two hundred different ways. I somehow remember
Bullets nicking the turf beside my wrist,
But mostly I was too busy to be scared.
What I hate worst is the job of writing letters
Back to the mothers and wives of dead men, telling
What noble fellows they were. And so they were.
But how can I say that Corporal Bell's last words
Were these: *Come on, you son-of-a-bitch?* I want
Most of all in this world a thick steak, rare,
French fried potatoes and my Greensboro paper.

A First Lieutenant

Why should they have lived, those German gunners, after
They killed Benfield and Clary, Adams and Robertson,

And my good old Sergeant McLarty? War takes guts,
They had guts. We had more. And my roughneck soldiers
Made them eat dirt. But somehow I'd like to see
What Germany looks like. I wonder if a man
Could get transferred to the Army of Occupation?

Sergeant Spear

I know what killed Lieutenant Clark; it warn't
No Dutchman's bullet. It come from the rear. I know
How Corporal Weinstein got blowed up. It warn't
No Dutchman's shell. I know how Ballington,
The dirty slob, got wounded in the leg.
I done it when the bastard started to run
Just as the third platoon was ordered up.
I know a hell of a lot. But I ain't a-goin' to tell.

Corporal Simmons

What am I, the son of a Methodist preacher,
A follower of Christ, doing here? Cleaning
Something that looks like blood from my rifle-barrel
And singing: "There is a fountain filled with blood."

Veuve Proctot

Mon Dieu, les sales Américains! Les cochons!
Swallowing the cognac, *comme ça*, demanding bread
When one has no tickets. *Ils sont fous!* They said
"BONG JOU', MADemoiselle," and winked their eyes
At a poor widow with two sons dead for France.
Eh bien, one smiles and makes them pay through the nose.
Ils sont très riches, les Américains, très riches!

Madame Truffot, la Femme du Maire

Comme ils étaient gentils, les Américains! So charming!

The beautiful officer quartered in my home.
But sure to die from a malady of lungs.
On the coldest nights, indeed every night, Monsieur,
He slept with windows open, both completely open,
Both, both open, *le pauvre enfant*.

Jeanne Cugnot, Fermière

They paid me many francs, the Americans.
But did they not lose the key to the grange, and laugh
As they left on their camions, shouting insane words?

Private Smith

Roses are blooming in Picardy, sang
My buddy, John McLaurin, the night before
We went over the top and he was killed. I think
That roses will bloom on the Hindenburg Line forever
Out of the breasts of men. Did I read at college
Something of Whitman's, saying, What is the grass?
The grass transpires from the white breasts of young men.
And roses bloom in the vigilant hearts of friends.

The Dead Speak:

An Airman

Return, over the autumn flats, return,
Oh squadrons of the sky, return from depths
Of blue and pierceable air of France and clouds
That once were wing and wing with us above
The concave gulf of battle. Squadrons, return!
Flash back your thousand circling glittering blades!
Upward your beaks, hurl up your Valkyrie shouts!
Obey, ye dead, the gathering call and keep
A comrade's tryst. Say whether I have fallen!

My death was fair. Far-diving over Conflans,
I drove the enemy home. He fled with speed
But speed still less than mine, until too late
I saw the triple Black Cross ambush plunge,
The fiery river of bullets rending the wood
And then my breast. But fallen? I have not fallen!
My death was pure as flame, and was a flame
To all the watching earth, when what was dross
Blazed toward the dust that never will coop this heart.

An Artilleryman

Missing, was all they said. They could not find
The body that was mine, for the counterfire
Searched through the battle-fog and struck our guns.
I heard the great shell rustling, with its point
Screaming toward me, and knew it bore my name,
But slammed the breech and sent my last shot home
Before oblivion took me, and the winds
Fluttered the cells that were my body once.
Missing I am not where my comrades gather
Lovingly calling my name for old time's sake.

An Unknown Soldier

Out of the earth that covers me, a pall
Flung by anonymous hands of men, I cry:
Not in vain, O States, not in vain the blood!

v

And now the tide ebbs west again. We are going
Home; we are homeward bound with music
Prouder than when we came and sad but rich
With memories of battle. We who were young
Are older now from death in a foreign land

Met and passed by. Remembering many comrades
We are coming home, fewer than once we were.
After the pilgrimage this is given to us,
Only to say we came with rifles once
Over the sea to a foreign battle, faced
The stranger's bullets, the cold and rain, and worse;
Only to learn what only the soldier knows,
Men find their country beautiful afar.

A flight of gulls! Sand streaks in the green
Tumbling waves! O greener pines! O Carolina!
Sweetly sail, ship in the harbor, home.
That is Fort Sumter — veterans hail a veteran —
Yonder the Battery, yonder the Charleston
Docks and the crowding faces. This is my own countree!
And June beats hot on spacious trains — we are going
Home through a landscape strange. We had never known
It was like this. Trees . . . earth . . . sky.

CONVERSATION IN A BEDROOM

By the waters of Thames or Meuse in another world
I laid me down and slept. By Cumberland
Now in a newer world there is no sleep.
In a square room, pent up with a ticking clock,
Fear drives me on to midnight. Fear
Booms up in measured corners where the boards
And bricks decline more gradually than I
Into their sleep of dust. It is easy to die
For me who am not made of wood or rock.
Minutes fall and flow. On a tousled pillow
Loudly the pulse ticks out my hours of life.
In the brain, numb and secret, insomnia breeds
A throng of bastard monsters. Sleep will not come
For him who counts the sheep or walks the numerals
Tiptoeing up the hundreds. Even to whisper
Under the breath and in the brain old charms
Will not suffice. I have no drug to make
The thinker stop his thinking. Thought remains
Rustling its stealthy memories. The bed
Shakes with horrors while the prurient ear
Clings to the distant motor, and the wind
Plucks all night among the empty boughs.

Have I eaten obscene food? Where did I wait
The dead, behind closed doors, or parley with ghosts,
Loquacious sepulchers diked out in linen
Who yet insist on living? There were streets

Walled up with stony faces, averted eyes,
Garroting me with sneers —

Why, old ex-service

*Nut, why what are you after now that the treaty
Ought to be signed but it's all messed up and jobs. . . .
She said, "You'll have to buy an overcoat."
I said, "I've spent my money on railroad fare,
And Treaties of Peace and other perishable rot.
I guess I'll wear my army overcoat."
He said, benignly posed like the annual convention
Of Y.M.C.A. Secretaries, "Well, what are your
Qualifications?" I said, "Qualifications?
In the army I learned the Impossibles."
He said, "We'll file your application." I said,
"Thank you, sir," and walked out buttoning tarnished
Buttons and swinging O.D. sleeves with a yellow V,
Meaning fodder for moths and spider-webs.*

Have I prayed to God? Am I washed in the Blood of the Lamb
In vain? I am red with sin. Or is it the flesh
Raw and stained with my own blood that shows?
Can blood then wash out blood? I'll have no blood,
But rather the potion of a different magic
To make me whole. God has poor ears. They are clogged
With pontifical wax. Then what of an antique Devil
Whose clean and pointed ears prick artfully up
At my first softest whisper? Magic conquers
Here while the room is turning, and the brain
Is mettled from its wounds for drugs and fancy.
Shadows may beg deliverance of shadows,
And I who sleepless groan beg sweet illusion
Whether from Hell or not. Good Devil, hear!
The walls blur and move, dissolving in cloud.
Night is alive with forms to comfort me. . . .

And most a black-browed prince with hat and whip
Like a circus ringmaster. Now with winning smile
He waits for questions such as hurt lips ask . . .

The Ringmaster
Though catalogued as a children's boggy,
A museum fossil, a biblical foggy,
 I still retain
Some powers not quite ornamental,
Instincts cunningly transcendental,
 And I maintain
A private service, guaranteed,
For invalid souls who are in need
 Of losing themselves.
The comforts willingly offered you
May now be viewed. But first, we do
 Nothing by halves. . . .

Ego
The Faustian contract, I suppose you mean?

The Ringmaster
I mean the same.

Ego
The price is still a soul?

The Ringmaster
The only indestructible — a currency
That never depreciates. Mine is a one-price service.

Ego
Before conviction the shrewd buyer surveys
The various bargain counters. The modern Faust

Has read much more than black-letter books, and seen
A thousand Helens whirled in motor cars.

The Ringmaster

A clever point, I grant. Within this box
A two-reel movie's coiled. I now present
Reel One — Disease of Modern Man — with titles
Rhymed as the fancy indicates. So action!

This is Rupert of the House
Of Rupert, famed in history,
Pondering on his income tax,
Deducting genealogy.

Great-grandfather from a loophole
Potted Choctaws in the thicker;
Rupert, menaced by the Reds,
Scratches the Democratic ticket.

Rupert's mother, D.A.R.;
Rupert's father, U.C.V.;
Rupert, mounting in his car
Zooms up to God in Rotary.

Grandma Rupert had ten children;
Rupert's father begot five.
All of Rupert's stocks and bonds
Are strained to keep one son alive.

Democracy, a fuddled wench,
Is bought from tousled bed to bed.
Bass voices in white vests defile
The echoes of great voices dead.

While piddlers and poseurs accept
The togas fallen by default,

The people's boredom quite dissolves
An honest cynic's grain of salt.

God is purveyed in little chips,
Snatched at and scattered in a quarrel.
The Church, aware of nakedness,
Parades in posters and a barrel.

The guardians of the public eye
Abhor the sin in which we wallow,
And, wearing double lenses, knit
Fig-leaves for Venus and Apollo.

Editors in public print
Chastise the younger generation,
Distribute syndicated pap,
Promote the national constipation.

The tribes of men, like haggled deer
Besieged by microscopic teeth,
Walk haunted by the wolves of space,
And in their blood are spores of death.

The flesh that was love's pillow grows
Malignant bulbs of dreadful life.
The newborn idiot defines
A curse that came from man and wife.

The earth, a tiny pellet, rolls
Among vague balls that once were stars.
And men shrink up to specks while minds
Push back astronomy's utmost bars. . . .

Ego

Intolerable pictures of death. I cannot bear
This pain of insignificance. Is there no cure?

The Ringmaster

The second reel is much the better. It brings
The picture to a happy ending. Here
Are speaking shadows of delivered men,
And ways and means of sweet deliverance.
Look how they rise, a vitaphonic dream!

A Traveler

Look to the roads, O sleeper, from which come
Magnificence and peace. Once Marco Polo
Hated the bickerings of Popes, the daggers
Mantled with golden corruption, and journeyed East.
He bathed at Arzingan, forded steamy rivers
Pebbled with lucent jade; he fingered at Yasdi
Cloths of silk and gold; he knew Ormus, Kashcar,
Yarcan, Kamul, Chinchitalos, and many
Cities stranger than dream, and was received
Into the Great Khan's bosom. So I have traveled,
Feasting on alien glory until I am
Myself no longer, but I have found my life.
The rescue of the wise is only in flight,
And lands are left where strangers may be kings.

The Mystic

In the beginning the Word . . . and in the end.
The hawks of doubt fly over the walls of cities
However they are built. The world is made
Of hidden correspondences that blend
In words like secret music. Hide in the darkness,
Hoarding the Word within thee that is life.

First Expatriate

Impossible country of bigots and warped schoolma'ams,
I have left you forever. In Paris a man may think

Without having the neighbors call the police patrol.
One may drink, talk, curse, carry a cane,
Wear spats, grow a moustache, and admire James
Joyce
Without being charged with adultery. I live in Paris.

Second Expatriate
Until I visited Oxford I never knew
What was wrong with me. Then I adopted
The Oxford accent, and became a gentleman.

Third Expatriate
Dada is laughter. Picasso, Cézanne, Matisse
Bring man back to his primal clownish self,
As I discovered in studying negro sculpture.
Visiting New York once I was amazed
To find Dada laughing in negro music.
Dada, I got the blues, I got the Dada blues.
Black men, I am starving. Make me fertile!

Satyr in a Tuxedo
Bacchus and Silenus betrayed me,
Paul and Peter caught and waylaid me,
Dunstan and Augustine unmade me
With book and bell.

Corinth and Ephesus deserted me,
Provence and Aquitaine perverted me,
Calvin and Wesley seized and converted me
On pain of Hell.

Adopted a Presbyterian snuffle,
Survived a Methodist cloak and muffle,
And came to life in the general scuffle
Of creed on creed.

Displaying now a goat's foot cockily,
Swigging out of the old flask rockily,
Shoved and yet unbudging stockily,
I prance at need.

Bobbed-Hair Bacchante

Nous n'irons plus au bois;
Les lauriers sont coupés.
But take the hour of joy
And speed on a darkened way
From the dance, the cackling horn,
And the raging raging drumbeat . . .
Nous irons jusqu'au bois.
In the silence, love, the meeting of lips till morn.
To others the dance, the fever of stamping feet.
For us, the darkness, the roadway's open retreat . . .
Nous irons jusqu'au bois . . .

An Intellectual

The tree of my life in Peoria, Illinois,
Was a thin sucker branched from a dying stump.
Transplanted now, I gingerly thrust my roots
Into strange pockets of stone where water lurks,
And thus by finical nourishment I grow.
Out of the broken gospels, out of the desert,
The parched, the shattered temples I heard
a voice
Chanting to a strident harp: *Oh, come, come in,*
Come in under the shadow of this red rock. . . .
Whither I come, and solace now my heart
With necrological beauties more permanent
In the round glitter of skulls and rondure
of bones

Than all the old disease of life. I crush
Hard stone with nervous bruise on ravished
 knuckles,
Cool my withered tongue with bitter almonds,
And conquer death with death. For all is said.

Ego

Oh, stop the reel. These negative freedoms burn
Like rockets in my brain and then puff out
With falling ashes. Here is no rest or peace.
Take back the promise. Steady the whirling walls
Beyond which, out of this nightmare world,
 there lie
Green hills where moonlight falls on honest grass
And honest men who sleep or, waking, speak
The tongue I speak and love.

But clocks will strike.

With blithely tortured face he warps the night
In shooting lines. Convulsive blackness crimps
A blasted angular world where fungus growths
Knit pile on pile of horrible beauty splashed
With writhing human smiles. Lights! Lights! I say . . .
Shall ever medicine thee!

The lights are broken.

In a cackle of stentorian type I see
Immense tongues wagged from fleshless lips
And (TIME!) they prophesy corruption (TIME!)
From which strange flowers (TIME!) shall bloom
With fruitage (TIME!) that shrivels (TIME!) my soul . . .
Oh (TIME!) give me release from searing (TIME!)
Blackness (TIME!). Bring not this grain to (TIME!)
The harvest (TIME!) and fly the bearded sheaves.
Fly from the wrath of God *O lente lente*

(TIME!) *currite noctis equi*. Still

I'll buckle the heart with steel and smiling . . .

(TIME!)

‘ ‘ ‘

Who comes and proves that you are suddenly perishing
Let him be choked on his own blueprints of Hell.
Let his tongue itch with death, a furious cancer.
Let him bite his nails in the lone eyries of skyscrapers,
Invaded by personal devils.

Who comes with poisons,
Mental unguents and glittering antitoxins,
Clap him in the mortuary. Hang him by the ears,
Pendulous among the stiff. Let him joke with the corpses
Let him be burned in the crematory at last
Totally to ashes. Then bring a broom and shovel.

No perfume either.

Only the light of dawn.

*No gables burn, nor is it a dragon's breath
Blazing in eastern woods. It is no light
Of strangers' weapons clashing at eastern windows
And no false fire of Hell.*

This is the dawn!

And dawn's no fragile wonder. Dawn is a whistle
Blown for the Judgment Day each morning at five,
And out of perilous sleep the calm mind rises.
Dawn is a headline tossed on a sunny step,
The voice of the burly nations. Dawn is a woman
Lifting round arms before a mirror. Dawn
Is a child quickly alive with new imperatives,
A friend crossing the grass with eager feet and calling
Under the window where you sleep, *Oh, come,
Come down. I have news for you. It is morning!*

THE BREAKING MOULD

“O King,” the atheling said, “how the time of man
Is like to a sparrow’s flight from door to door
Of a hall where men sit feasting, and fire is warm.
From cold and darkness it comes. It is safe from weather
A moment only; then into the dim and outward
Winter it flies again. Does a man speak now
A word more certain than this? Does the tale of Christ
Speak a better word? Then I bid thee follow it.”

The long-haired thanes were silent in hall, and Aedwin
Stroked at his beard. He took the priest’s thin hand
Into both his great ones, hairy and scarred. He bowed
For the blessing of Christ his body, clashing with mail.
The Northumbrian shields upheld an alien captain.
The body of Christ was king in the circle of spears.
And lo, I was seized, marching from Baltic forests,
Or pressing beyond the Danube, the Rhine, or the Seine.
Salty with wash of the fjords, rimy with sea-spray,
I in my great boar-helmet was seized and won
By a lean priest whose eyes were kindling with dreams
Of the blessed Rood. I was gentled with Latin hymns,
Cleansed with holy water and crowned with thorns,
And told to remember a sin I had not known.
The hammer of Thor was fallen forever, and Odin
Looked upon Asgard sadly. Twilight came
With a mild Christian splendor of bells and incense.
The Goths unbuckled the sword. The sons of the Goths

Remembered the saints in stone with arches leaping
Heavenward like my soul from the desolate earth.

But now a hammer shines in the hand of Luther
Nailing the ninety-five theses on a door
At Wittenberg where sparks fly up. Tyndale
Burns, and Scotland's burning. A voice cries,
*I tell thee, Master Ridley, this day we light
A fire, O such a fire, shall burn and never
Shall be put out.* Now merry England's burning,
And I, dancing with sinful friends on the village green,
Heard voices crying out of heaven, *Fly!*
Fly from the wrath to come! And as I slept
I dreamed a dream of Beulah Land for which
I fought on Naseby Field, and later sailed
To a land not Beulah Land. With my father's claymore
I faced the Sassenach Tyrant at Culloden,
Then homeless fled to western mountains. There
The hunting-shirts were bowed at Watauga Old Fields,
And Samuel Doak, before King's Mountain, prayed
To the ancient God of battles. Are these not blessed,
The stern lips of mountain men who pray,
Firm in search for God so many a year?
And to me Evangelist came again in the blare
Of a cornet under a canvas tent, a borrowed
Piano tinkling a washed-out music, a sweating
Choir vaguely exalting the youthful blood
Of sinners —

*Brother, are you a Christian? Are you
Washed in the Blood? Oh, Brother, sinful Brother,
Come while the choir sings Number Seventy-nine
And give me your hand. God bless you, Brother. God
Bless you, young man. Will there be any stars,
Any stars in my crown when at evening . . .*

When at evening, I, a man conceived in sin,
Walked, unthoughtful of sin, I saw overhead
Vega, against the murk of space, and Mars,
A reddish bulb swung closer to this globe
By a few million miles. And Ursa Major
Hurled west against the beating of my heart
Forever. I said, the sun will rise and dawn
Will break again forever. The moon will turn
Its dry face toward the clutching earth, and men
Will walk as I have walked and ask the same
Clean question of a God that never answers. . . .

When at evening, I, a man conceived in sin,
Walked, not professing sin, I felt a cloud
Darken the windows of my brain, and death
Looked coarsely in. I said, this mortal plasm
Living by process of all centuries
Not yet has died. The seed is old as man,
Remainder and sum of many bodies, soul
Of infinite souls, an indestructible life.
Then say not, death, I shall not clench this hand
Tomorrow . . . tomorrow I shall not see this sky.
Say not tomorrow this bright urgency
Of looks and words must pass. Oh, come away, death!
I who have had no ending cannot know
What it is to end. I who have had no beginning
Know life only. Beyond, by either way,
Is God, whose answer has not come to men
But in the rumors of men — a gipsy race
Who flaunt their pride in legends of old glory
Half-forgotten, repeated as a charm
For comfort's sake when wind blows cold and death
Stands at the road's edge, a shadow beckoning *Stop*.

But still men dare to speak for God and shape
Their fumbling answers into a mould to keep
The quick proud spirit against the outer dread
Of spaceless terrible things. God is the mould
So many times cast off, so many times
Clay on the wheel again. For if ever the soul
Moves in its changeful dreams, the mould must break.
It is my restless soul that stirs. It is
My soul that will not be contained in the dead
Plaster that other hands have made. It is cramped
And like a child within the womb it must
Begone from that which gave it life. It rends,
It cleaves its way, and there is agony.

But if I pass you by, O House of God,
It is not now in scorn. I would not sit
In the seat of the scornful or walk in the way
of sinners.

But men are greater than the house they build
Even the House of God. And the prayers of men
Are mightier than the altars where they bow
Their wounded heads in one eternal wish.
I seek the joy of life. I seek the God
Who will not tame the manliness of men.

Three men am I. And one with pagan blood
Startles at dawn to find no sword at his side,
No hound to answer his horn, no charger ready,
No ashen spear by the wall, no throng of men
Bearded, shining with mail, in the smoky hall,
No noise of the feasting of gods in high Asgard.
And he says in his teeth: Now who has bewildered me
A thousand years with a doctrine of strange tongues?
Who clad me in strange garments? What smooth saws

Were whispered into my ear by Eastern voices?
What were the swarthy faces, what the drug
That sunk me into slumber? I am not
Of the blood of Hebrews. Who gave me over to Hebrews?
After a thousand years I have not learned
The voice of the Hebrew God or the Hebrew way.

The second man of me is Methodist,
Who learned of a gentle mother the Ten Commandments
And read the Good Book through at the age of twelve,
Chapter by chapter. The hymns of country choirs
Haunt my tongue. The words of stately men
Speaking from ghostly pulpits forbid me still
From shameful things. And youthful prayers arise
Unbidden to my lips in hours of dread.
Woman is sacred still, and wine is a mocker,
The words of God are written in the Book
Which I will keep beloved though earth may speak
A different language unto those who read her.

The third man was born to weigh the sun
And love the clean cool sureties of matter.
Whatever God is, this man does not guess.
He is content to know what all things do
Or can be made to do. How little is man,
He thinks, reckoning the life of stars, and yet
How easily things beneath the stars may serve
This little man's great will. No question shows
The cause behind a cause, for ever there are
Unmeasured causes still. He had rather walk
The observant friend of the world as it looks to be,
And move with it among all active things,
Using them all, or maybe used by them.
And if he die — why, many men have died!

And what is God? Well, what He is, He is —
Some Great Electron, not yet trapped or seen,
But there or not, whatever our debates.

In elder days than these men saw the gods.
Red-bearded Thor in a goat-pulled chariot came
To Thialfi's hut. Men sat at meat with the god,
Tearing the goat-flesh, jesting over the mead
Till the rafters rang and the gold-haired maidens laughed.
And once on a misty dawn by a northern ford
A ferryman answered a stranger's call, received
Into his boat an old man, one-eyed, gray-cloaked.
The shore was touched. And then the charmed man saw
The gnarled figure straighten and tower. Fog
Swirled round the breast of Odin. The golden voice
Spoke farewell to a man who sat with oars
Poised in a breathless trance. And on that spot
He raised a cairn of stones and slew a horse,
Sprinkling the blood while solemn runes were chanted.

Evangelist, you who called to me on the curb
And waved an inviting hand toward the vacant seat
Beside you in the car, hear this my question:
How can three alien men be reconciled
In one warm mind that like the sparrow flies
In a great hall lit for feasts and the laughter of men,
And would be glad before it goes forever
Out of the opening door? Oh, give me a scroll
Written anew, for where I pass are lions
Walking chainless and devils that will not flee.

EPITHALAMION

I

Now while the West is thunder and the broad
Hurry of wind in the oak and hackberry boughs
Crashes and shatters; now while the lightning breaks
The tumbled darkness, clogged with fluttering leaves;
Now while the endless rain is dashed in gusts
Against our windows — now we awake from sleep
And, fixed with a wild dread, we startle erect,
Crying, "Is it a storm?"

It is only a storm!

And then the warm hands fold in the darkness, then
Each knows that each is there, and the flame of lightning
Blazons only the passionate faces of lovers,
Saying, *Only a storm.* . . . And storms will pass,
And we shall stay in our firm element
Of human love, our *primum mobile*.

We have known this darkness and this storm of old.
Lady, it is the death of the year that speaks
In this familiar wind and rain — the turn
Of autumn into winter. Now the earth
Tips gently in its ceaseless whirl, and stars
Glide on their winter courses. Soon the sleet
Will dance across the frozen grass. The snow
Will pile small soundless drifts across the ledge
Of this our window. Sun will be far and weak
And under the breath we'll measure life and think,

Now, oh, now, we are older by a year
And shall be older still, not young again,
And smile a little ruefully, and sigh,
"So many years" and "Time goes on forever."
But when the eternal janitor has swept
The stairs to this our refuge, this small heaven,
Will he erase, with other dust, the print
Of mounting feet like ours that came and went
On lovers' errands? Will no echo stay
Of these our voices in the walls that bound
Our lovers' meetings? Will the final spring,
Unsealing after the storm the red-bud blooms,
Rustle of maple leaves, and the sheen of grass,
Unseal no lover's eyes to sight of us
Who came and went another spring?

Look not

For any ghostly consequence. Our love
Is ours only — the old way of the world
That in itself completes itself and asks
No doctrine or memorial but its own.

*Morning will come and we shall not be here,
Lady, whose eyes like mine awake,
Remembering in silence that we still
Are here who cannot always . . . always . . . be.*

*But if we cannot always waken thus
Remembering the days that make us one.
Let us remember now, let us remember
Morning by morning, night by night, the love
That, coming once, has come to us forever.*

*For us the flying months, forever April,
Take back no youth we cannot take again*

*In giving by the touch of hands or lips
New morning to our love. For morning is
A presence that we keep within ourselves
Translating and remembering all we are.*

*And shall I now translate these simple words
Into a bolder epithalamion?
The talk of blood, tears, agony, and doubt,
The patterns of the outward world, the din
Of old historic moments — all must dwindle
Into a sultry whisper, and I shall come
As a young man seeking your lips and crying "Love!"*

II

Northward the Tennessee under stars or sunlight
Flows unmindful of names and lines of men.
It was not drawn by the compass. It will not follow
Any map but its own. It will seek its own,
Its northward pathway where in the dawn of the world
The broad earth, cleft and yielding, brought it home
To the strange Ohio's breast. And the swift Ohio
Came in the dawn of the world to a southward meeting.
Now they are poured together. The rivers are one.
You are Ohio. I am Tennessee.
And in being faithful to you I have been unfaithful
Maybe, this once, to my own. I forgot the looks
Of the Tennessee girls whose ways were sweet enough
For an early spring, for a young man mad with spring,
Drunken with smell of locust-clusters, drugged
With the subtle filtering odor of honeysuckle.
Moonlight loosened my tongue. It was easy to look
On the warm white throats of Southern girls. It was easy
To hear soft laughter on a vine-thick porch . . .
But I was a willing traitor when you came.

And why, you know I know. The small, proud head,
Carried erect and firm; the thinking eyes
So dark and yet so clear with bright intention;
Lips curling easily into a smile; a body
Lithe and quick as a bird's and just as restless;
The strange clipped Northern speech; the hurrying step
Of those who dwell by Erie's shore and take
The lake-wind in their blood and the blue water
Beating on shores where men's dreams rise in steel.
That was your being and is still. You might
Be carved in stone, a daughter of winds and lakes,
But stone could not record what I know best,
The supple, reaching mind that leaps and conquers,
Vital and passionate after knowledge, spurning
The weak and easy, an intellectual flame.
Ohio girl, so new to me, so lovely,
I have taken you to my father's house, a stranger.

But was there maybe an elder meeting when,
Guarded by men in blue, the ragged lines
Of weary men in gray had halted at noon
By an old Ohio farmhouse. Shade was thick
And gentle by the gate. And then there came
A dark-eyed girl with pity in her glance,
Pity and love for a tired boy in gray
Who took with grateful lips the cup she poured
Of water, for love's sake, and looked his thanks,
And plodded on, when the sharp bugle called,
With a wistful backward smile. And did you then
Smile, too, across the gulf of war, and know
That bayonets cannot prison love? Love is
More proud and strong than armies with their banners.

And was there still an earlier meeting? Say,
If you remember in your blood a meeting

Brief by the Frisian coast, when the fair-haired Goths
Came a-harrying over the path of the whale.
Bright was the hall. The herald strode in the folk-stead.
Good to see was the man of the Goths when he came
Lifting his hand, unlocking his breast:

O King!

*Shelter of earls, to thee now offer the Goths
Peace in the burg. Plunder they will not bear
Hence in their ships if thou art minded for peace.*

Young was the herald of Goths. The light of his eyes
Burned in the crowded hall. And the eyes of a girl
Met his warm through the spears. The daughter of kings
Was not loath to look. But wroth were the Frankish men.
Eyes had spoken in vain. That day was battle.

There have been meetings unfulfilled and partings
Sealed with pledges under a castle window,
Longings unfulfilled when the clear horn sang
Challenge to battle waged in a foreign land.
*And on his breast a bloodie crosse he bore
But on his arm his own liege lady's scarf
In deare remembrance . . .*

On a later morn

The bugles played our reveille for France
And I was gone from you to a foreign field.

But have come back! Fulfillment of old vows
And broken meetings lies within a touch,
A look, a word, the silence of our hearts
Until our single room becomes the world.

Come now, though Muses are not left to sing
In sweet and pagan names the day of love,
Though ancient rites escape our fostering,

And boys and girls may take no blossom trove
From April boughs whereof
Garlands we plucked when youth was at its spring;
Though viol and rebeck may no longer play
For largesse of this morn, nor dancers move
With music to the house where we must stay,
Yet Love, awake, for still it is our bridal day.

Awake and come to windows where the night
Is gone and takes the storm, the powerful spell
That once it worked on us, but now delight
Kindles the tongue of every morning bell.
Awake and answer well
With thy red lips and all thy lovely might.
Enclose me with thine arms and kiss away
Old fevers that we breathed in love's despite,
And breathe a world where we can longer stay,
And wake, my Love, for still it is our bridal day.

Open the door whereat my love will go
To this the festival so long ordained.
Let be the music that ye long have feigned
For bridals that ye know,
And let the hills another music sound
From old and stubborn ground.
Let the long street a solemn music speak
And larger beauties break
From this wide world that is our marriage room,
And April grass and every April bloom,
And Hymen cry and now your joyance make,
And drink the skies' sweet influence while ye may.
Go forth, my Love, for still it is our bridal day.

EPILOGUE: FIRE ON BELMONT STREET

He was a worthy citizen of the town.
“Where is the fire?” he babbled as he ran.
“The fire! The fire!” Spat between pursy breaths
He dropped his question, stuck his gross right hand
Against his watch-chain, ran, and stared, and sobbed,
Out Belmont Street? My God, that’s where I live!
Stumbling with slow fat feet and tragic breath
While roaring sirens passed upon the wind.
And then I heard (What laughter!) blobs of heels
Pecking the night with hurry. Poor staccato,
Dragging a million feeble stumps across
The easy pavements while the flames went up,
Gobbling the roofs and sky. Beneath was earth.
Steady against all shouting, ground was waiting
Forever subtle, old. But walls dissolved
And houses quaked with Fire until I could
Endure no more, but ran, as clamorous
As all the plump mad mob, shouting like them.
“The fire,” I cried. “What fire? No gables burn,
Nor is that redness some unusual dawn
Sprawled against moonrise, nor a dragon’s breath
Spurred from some old sewer you forgot,
Nor ghosts of Red Men that your fathers knew,
Come back with devil-medicine to bombard
Your bungalows. Choctaw and Cherokee
Lie where the spitting Dechard rifles planted
Under the Tennessee grass, their tired bones.

The fire! What fire? Why God has come alive
To damn you all, or else the smoke and soot
Have turned back to live coals again for shame
On this gray city, blinded, soiled, and kicked
By fat blind fools. The city's burning up?
Why, good! Then let her burn!"

But I'll say more,
Remembering other odds, a narrow place,
A shock of arms, a cry of gables burning.
And there were gathered in that long grim room
Of warriors sixty who called Hnaef their lord,
Who saw the gray wolf creeping in the wood
And heard the grind of linden shields afar;
Surrounded were, yet held the door and died
While the strange light of swords and helmets made
The place like day.

But who will stand tonight,
Holding this other door against the press
Of brazen muscles? Who can conquer wheels
Gigantically rolled with mass of iron
Against frail human fingers? Who can quench
The white-hot fury of the tameless atoms
Bursting the secret jungle of their cells?
Oh, who can stay or ever chain the dull
Gnaw of the fiery smoke, eternally settling
Into the beating heart? There is no fire?
Only, perhaps, the breath of a Southern wind
That I have known too well in many a summer,
Drying the pulse, stopping the weary pulse,
Blowing the faint blood back in the curdled veins
Till there is no way to think of what might be
Better or worse. Yet maybe it were better
Climbing the tallest hill to cry at night:

“Citizens, awake! Fire is upon you, fire
That will not rest, invisible fire that feeds
On your quick brains, your beds, your homes, your
 steeple,
Fire in your sons’ veins and in your daughters’,
Fire like a dream of Hell in all your world.
Rush out into the night, take nothing with you,
Only your naked selves, your naked hearts.
Fly from the wrath of fire to the hills
Where water is and the slow peace of time.”

There is a place where beech-trees droop their boughs
Down-slanting, and the dark cedars grow
With stubborn roots threading the lichened rocks.
There the smooth limestone benches, rubbed
By warm primeval streams, yet hold the crystal
Forms of dead life. There on a summer’s evening
The screech-owl quavers and unseen July-flies
Trill their thin songs. And there my father said,
Pointing a low mound out to me: “My son,
Stand on this Indian’s grave and plainly ask,
Indian, what did you die for? And he’ll say,
Nothing!”

So was it! So it is!

What did you die for? Nothing indeed nothing!
The seed of the white man grows on Indian graves,
Waxing in steel and stone, nursing the fire
That eats and blackens till he has no life
But in the fire that eats him. White man, remember,
Brother, remember Hnaef and his sixty warriors
Greedy for battle-joy. Remember the rifles
Talking men’s talk into the Tennessee darkness
And the long-haired hunters watching the Tennessee hills
In the land of big rivers for something.

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Glosses

THE NINTH PART OF SPEECH

page 5. *Homer Noble's Farm*. A Vermont mountain farm, owned and occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Homer Noble in the nineteen-thirties.

LINES WRITTEN FOR ALLEN TATE

page 15. *Benfolly*. An old house on the Cumberland River near Clarksville, Tennessee.

WOODLANDS

page 19. "Woodlands" was the plantation home of William Gilmore Simms (1806–1870), author of *The Partisan*, *Woodcraft*, *The Yemassee*, *The Cassique of Kiawah*, and many other novels dealing with the Southern colonial frontier and the Revolutionary War. The large plantation house was burned in 1862 by a fire of unknown origin. In 1865, after being partially rebuilt, it was again burned, this time by stragglers from Sherman's army. The rebuilt library wing and other smaller original structures, with the extensive grounds and the plantation, are owned and maintained by Simms's descendants.

THE CASE OF MOTORMAN 17

page 25. The Greek epigraph might be translated as follows: "Fear is a good thing, and it ought to sit as watchman over the soul." Aeschylus has the Furies speak these words.

HERMITAGE

page 68. Read at Williamsburg, Virginia, before the Alpha of Virginia chapter of Phi Beta Kappa on December 5, 1940, at the annual celebration of the founding of the Phi Beta Kappa Society at the College of William and Mary.