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WORD OVER ALL

By the same author

Poetry

COLLECTED POEMS, 1929-1935
(including Transitional Poem,
From Feathers To Iron, and the
Magnetic Mountain)
(*Hogarth Press*)

A TIME TO DANCE
(*Hogarth Press*)

NOAH AND THE WATERS
(*Hogarth Press*)

SELECTED POEMS
(*Hogarth Press*)

OVERTURES TO DEATH
(*Cape*)

THE GEORGICS OF VIRGIL
(translation)
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ANATOMY OF OXFORD
(with Charles Fenby)
(*Cape*)

A NEW ANTHOLOGY OF MODERN VERSE
(with L. A. G. Strong)
(*Methuen*)

WORD OVER ALL

by

C. DAY LEWIS



"Word over all, beautiful as the sky,
Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage
must in time be utterly lost,
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night
incessantly softly wash again, and ever
again, this soiled world." . . .

WALT WHITMAN
(Reconciliation)

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

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Dedicated to

ROSAMOND LEHMANN

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The poems marked with an asterisk were published in a limited edition in 1940 by Jonathan Cape, under the title of *Poems in Wartime*.

PART ONE

The Lighted House

One night they saw the big house, some time untenanted
But for its hand-to-mouth recluse, room after room
Light up, as when Primavera herself has spirited
A procession of crocuses out of their winter tomb.

Revels unearthly are going forward, one did remark -
He has conjured a thing of air or fire for his crazed delight:
Another said, It is only a traveller lost in the dark
He welcomes for mercy's sake. Each, in a way, was right.

You were the magic answer, the sprite fire-fingered who
To lighten my heart, my house, my heirlooms; you are the ^{came}
That melts at my touch and still supports my prodigal flame: ^{wax}

But you were also the dead-beat traveller out of the storm
Returned to yourself by almost obliterated tracks,
Peeling off fear after fear, revealing love's true form.

The Album

I see you, a child
In a garden sheltered for buds and playtime.
Listening as if beguiled
By a fancy beyond your years and the flowering maytime.
The print is faded: soon there will be
No trace of that pose enthralling,
Nor visible echo of my voice distantly calling
'Wait! Wait for me!'

Then I turn the page
To a girl who stands like a questioning iris
By the waterside, at an age
That asks every mirror to tell what the heart's desire is.
The answer she finds in that oracle stream
Only time could affirm or disprove,
Yet I wish I was there to venture a warning, 'Love
Is not what you dream.'

Next you appear .
As if garlands of wild felicity crowned you -
Courtied, caressed, you wear
Like immortelles the lovers and friends around you.
'They will not last you, rain or shine,
They are but straws and shadows,'
I cry: 'Give not to those charming desperadoes
What was made to be mine.'

One picture is missing -
The last. It would show me a tree stripped bare
By intemperate gales, her amazing
Noonday of blossom spoilt which promised so fair.
Yet, scanning those scenes at your heyday taken,
I tremble, as one who must view
In the crystal a doom he could never deflect - yes, I too
Am fruitlessly shaken.

I close the book;
But the past slides out of its leaves to haunt me
And it seems, wherever I look,
Phantoms of irreclaimable happiness taunt me.
Then I see her, petalled in new-blown hours,
Beside me - 'All you love most there
Has blossomed again,' she murmuri, 'all that you missed
there
Has grown to be yours.'

The Hunter's Game

I am an arrow, I am a bow -
The bow sings fierce and deep,
The arrow's tipped with cruel flame,
Feathered with passionate sleep.
When you play the hunter's game,
I am your arrow and your bow.

Only my love can bend the bow:
When the bow leaps to kill
And darkly as a nerve of night
The string throbs out, you are the skill
That drew the impulsive bowstring tight,
The hand that bent the bow.

What is the air that floats my arrow
Smoothly aloft and bears
It up to the sun, down to the dark?
You are the wanton airs
Which shape and hold its shining arc,
The innocent air that flights the arrow.

What is the victim of this arrow
That flies so fast and true?
Deep in the close, fawn-dappled glade,
Pierced by a shaft of light are you
The huntress, white and smiling, laid —
The victim of your arrow.

Departure in the Dark

Nothing so sharply reminds a man he is mortal
As leaving a place
In a winter morning's dark, the air on his face
Unkind as the touch of sweating metal:
Simple goodbyes to children or friends become
A felon's numb
Farewell, and love that was a warm, a meeting place -
Love is the suicide's grave under the nettles.

Gloomed and clemmed as if by an imminent ice-age
Lies the dear world
Of your street-strolling, field-faring. The senses, curled
At the dead end of a shrinking passage,
Care not if close the inveterate hunters creep,
And memories sleep
Like mammoths in lost caves. Drear, extinct is the world,
And has no voice for consolation or presage.

There is always something at such times of the passover,
When the dazed heart
Beats for it knows not what, whether you part
From home or prison, acquaintance or lover -
Something wrong -with the time-table, something unreal
In the scrambled meal
And the bag ready packed by the door, as though the heart
Has gone ahead, or is staying here for ever.

No doubt for the Israelites that early morning
It was hard to be sure
If home were prison or prison home: the desire
Going forth meets the desire returning.
This land, that had cut their pride down to the bone
Was now their own
By ancient deeds of sorrow. Beyond, there was nothing sure
But a desert of freedom to quench their fugitive yearnings.

At this blind hour the heart is informed of nature's
Ruling that man
Should be nowhere a more tenacious settler than
Among wry thorns and ruins, yet nurture
A seed of discontent in his ripest ease.
There's a kind of release
And a kind of torment in every goodbye for every man -
And will be, even to the last of his dark departures.

Cornet Solo

Thirty years ago lying awake,
Lying awake
In London at night when childhood barred me
From livelier pastimes, I'd hear a street-band break
Into old favourites - 'The Ash Grove', 'Killarney'
Or 'Angels Guard Thee'.

That was the music for such an hour -
A deciduous hour
Of leaf-wan drizzle, of solitude
And gaslight bronzing the gloom like an autumn flower -
The time and music for a boy imbrued
With the pensive mood.

I could have lain for hours together.
Sweet hours together,
Listening to the cornet's cry
Down wet streets gleaming like patent leather
Where beauties jaunted in cabs to their revelry,
Jewelled and spry.

Plaintive its melody rose or waned
Like an autumn wind
Blowing the rain on beds of aster,
On man's last bed: mournful and proud it complained
As a woman who dreams of the charms that graced her,
In young days graced her.

Strange how those yearning airs could sweeten
And still enlighten
The hours when solitude gave me her breast.
Strange they could tell a mere child how hearts may beat in
The self-same tune for the once-possessed
And the unpossessed.

Last night, when I heard a cornet's strain,
It seemed a refrain
Wafted from thirty years back - so remote an
Echo it bore: but I felt again
The prophetic mood of a child, too long forgotten,
Too lightly forgotten.

O Dreams, O Destinations

1

For infants time is like a humming shell
Heard between sleep and sleep, wherein the shores
Foam-fringed, wind-fluted of the strange earth dwell
And the sea's cavernous hunger faintly roars.
It is the humming pole of summer lanes
Whose sound quivers like heat-haze endlessly
Over the corn, over the popped plains -
An emanation from the earth or sky.
Faintly they hear, through the womb's lingering haze,
A rumour of that sea to which they are born:
They hear the ringing pole of summer days,
But need not know what hungers for the corn.
They are the lipping rushes in a stream —
Grace-notes of a profound, legato dream.

2

Children look down upon the morning-grey
Tissue of mist that veils a valley's lap:
Their fingers itch to tear it and unwrap
The flags, the roundabouts, the gala day.
They watch the spring rise inexhaustibly -
A breathing thread out of the eddied sand,
Sufficient to their day: but half their mind
Is on the sailed and glittering estuary.
Fondly we wish their mist might never break,
Knowing it hides so much that best were hidden:
We'd chain them Iry the spring, lest it should broaden
For them into a quicksand and a wreck.
But they slip through our fingers like the source,
Like mist, like time that has flagged out their course.

3

That was the fatal move, the ruination
 Of innocence so innocently begun,
 When in the lawless orchard of creation
 The child left this fruit for that rosier one.
 Reaching towards the far thing, we begin it\$
 Looking beyond, or backward, more and more
 We grow' unfaithful to the unique minute
 Till, from neglect, its features state and blur.
 Fish, bird or beast was never thus unfaithful —
 Man only casts the image of his joys
 Beyond his senses' reachj and by this fateful
 Act, he confirms the ambiguous power of choice.
 Innocence made that first choice. It is she
 Who weeps, a child chained to the outraged tree.

4

Our youthtime passes down a colonnade
 Shafted with alternating light and shade.
 All's dark or dazzle there. Half in a dream
 Rapturously we move, yet half afraid
 Never to wake. That diamond-point, extreme
 Brilliance engraved on us a classic theme:
 The shaft of darkness had its lustre too,
 Rising where earth's concentric mysteries gleam.
 Oh youth-charmed hours, that made an avenue
 Of fountains playing us on to love's full view,
 A cypress walk to some romantic grave —
 Waking, how false in outline and in hue
 We find the dreams that flickered on our cave:
 Only your fire, which cast them, still seems true.

5

All that time there was thunder in the air:
 Our nerves branched and flickered with summer lightning.
 The taut crab-apple, the pampas quivering, the glare
 On the roses seemed irrelevant, or a heightening
 At most of the sealed-up hour wherein we awaited
 What? - some explosive oracle to abash
 The platitudes on the lawn? heaven's delegated
 Angel - the golden rod, our burning bush?
 No storm broke. Yet in retrospect the rose
 Mounting vermilion, fading, glowing again
 Like a fire's heart, that breathless inspiration
 Of pampas grass, crab-tree's attentive pose
 Never were so divinely charged as then -
 The veiled Word's flesh, a near annunciation.

6

Symbols of gross experience! - our grief
 Flowed, like a sacred river, underground:
 Desire bred fierce abstractions on the mind,
 Then like an eagle soared beyond belief.
 Often we tried our breast against the thorn,
 Our paces on the turf: whither we flew,
 Why we should agonize, we hardly knew -
 Nor what ached in us, asking to be born.
 Ennui of youth! - thin air above the clouds,
 Vain divination of the sunless stream
 Mirror that impotence, till we redeem
 Our birthright, and the shadowplay concludes.
 Ah, not in dreams, but when our souls engage
 With the common mesh and moil, we come of age.

Older, we build a road where once our active
 Heat threw up mountains and the deep dales veined:
 We're glad to gain the limited objective.
 Knowing the war we fight in has no end.
 The road must needs follow each contour moulded
 By that fire in its losing fight with earth:
 We march over our past, we may behold it
 Dreaming a slave's dream on our bivouac hearth.
 Lost the archaic dawn wherein we started,
 The appetite for wholeness: now we prize
 Half-loaves, half-truths — enough for the half-hearted,
 The gleam snatched from corruption satisfies.
 Dead youth, forgive us if, all but defeated,
 We raise a trophy where your honour lies.

But look, the old illusion still returns,
 Walking a field-path where the succory burns
 Like summer's eye, blue lustre-drops of noon,
 And the heart follows it and freshly yearns:
 Yearns to the sighing distances beyond
 Each height of happiness, the vista drowned
 In gold-dust haze, and dreams itself immune
 From change and night to which all else is bound.
 Love, we have caught perfection for a day
 As succory holds a gem of halcyon ray:
 Summer burns out, its flower will tarnish soon —
 Deathless illusion, that could so relay
 The truth of flesh and spirit, sun and clay
 Singing for once together all in tune!

To travel like a bird, lightly to view
Deserts where stone gods founder in the sand,
Ocean embraced in a white sleep with land,
To escape time, always to start anew.
To settle like a bird, make one devoted
Gesture of permanence upon the spray
Of shaken stars and autumns; in a bay
Beyond the crestfallen surges to have floated.
Each is our wish. Alas, the bird flies blind,
Hooded by a dark sense of destination:
Her weight on the glass calm leaves no impression,
Her home is soon a basketful of wind.
Travellers, we're fabric of the road we go;
We settle, but like feathers on time's flow.

PART TWO

Word Over All

Now when drowning imagination clutches
At old loves drifting away.
Splintered highlights, hope capsized - a wrecked world's
Flotsam, what can I say
To cheer the abysmal gulfs, the crests that lift not
To any land in sight?
How shall the sea-waif, who lives from surge to surge, chart
Current and reef aright?

Always our time's ghost-guise of impermanence
Daunts me: whoever I meet,
Wherever I stand, a shade of parting lengthens
And laps around my feet.
But now, the heart-sunderings, the real migrations -
Millions fated to flock
Down weeping roads to mere oblivion - strike me
Dumb as a rooted rock.

I watch when searchlights set the low cloud smoking
Like acid on metal: I start
At sirens, sweat to feel a whole town wince
And thump, a terrified heart,
Under the bomb-strokes. These, to look back on, are
A few hours' unreprieve:
But the roofless old, the child beneath the debris -
How can I speak for those?

Busy the preachers, the politicians weaving
Voluble charms around
This ordeal, conjuring a harvest that shall spring from
Our hearts' all-harrowed ground.

I, who chose to be caged with the devouring
Present, must hold its eye
Where blaze ten thousand farms and fields unharvested,
And hearts, steel-broken, die.

Yet words there must be, wept on the cratered present,
To gleam beyond it:
Never was cup so mortal but poets with mild
Everlastings have crowned it.
See wavelets and wind-blown shadows of leaves on a stream
How they ripple together,
As life and death intermarried - you cannot tell
One from another.

Our words like poppies love the maturing field,
But form no harvest:
May lighten the innocent's pang, or paint the dreams
Where guilt is unharnessed.
Dark over all, absolving all, is hung
Death's vaulted patience:
Words are to set man's joy and suffering there
In constellations.

We speak of what we know, but what we have spoken
Truly we know not -
Whether our good may tarnish, our grief to far
Centuries glow not.
The Cause shales off, the Humankind stands forth
A mightier presence,
Flooded by dawn's pale courage, rapt in eve's
Rich acquiescence.

The Image

From far, she seemed to lie like a stone on the sick horizon:
Too soon that face, intolerably near,
Writhed like a furious ant-hill. Whoever, they say, set eyes
on

Her face became a monument to fear.

But Perseus, lifting his shield, beheld as in a view-finder
A miniature monster, darkly illustrious.
Absorbed, pitying perhaps, he struck. And the sky behind
her

Woke with a healthier colour, purified thus.

Now, in a day of monsters, a desert of abject stone
Whose outward terrors paralyse the will,
Look to that gleaming circle until it has revealed you

The glare of death transmuted to your own
Measure, scaled-down to a possible figure the sum of ill.
Let the shield take that image, the image shield you.

The Poet

For me there is no dismay
Though ills enough impend.
I have learned to count each day
Minute by breathing minute-
Birds that lightly begin it,
Shadows muting its end —
As lovers count for luck
Their own heart-beats and believe
In the forest of time they pluck
Eternity's single leaf.

Tonight the moon's at the full.
Full moon's the time for murder.
But I look to the clouds that hide her •••
The bay below me is dull,
An unreflecting glass -
And chafe for the clouds to pass,
And wish she suddenly might
Blaze down at me so I shiver
Into a twelve-branched river
Of visionary light.

For now imagination,
My royal, impulsive swan,
With raking flight - I can see her -
Comes down as it were upon
A lake in whirled snow-floss
And flurry of spray like a skier
Checking. Again I feel
The wounded waters heal.
Never before did she cross
My heart with such exaltation.

Oh, on this striding edge,
This hare-bell height of calm
Where intuitions swarm
Like nesting gulls and knowledge
Is free as the winds that blow,
A little while sustain me,
Love, till my answer is heard!
Oblivion roars below,
Death's cordon narrows: but vainly,
If I've slipped the carrier word.

Dying, any man may
Feel wisdom harmonious, fateful
At the tip of his dry tongue.
All I have felt or sung
Seems now but the moon's fitful
Sleep on a clouded bay,
Swan's maiden flight, or the climb
To a tremulous, hare-bell crest.
Love, tear the song from my breast!
Short, short is the time.

It would be strange

It would be strange
If at a crucial question, in wild-beast dens
Or cellars sweating with pain the stammerers
Should find their confidence.

It would be strange
If the haphazard starling learned a neat
Construction from the goldcrest, and the blackcap's
Seamless song in a night.

It would be strange
If from the consternation of the arit-hill
Arose some order angelic, ranked for loving,
Equal to good or ill.

It would be more than strange
If the devil we raised to avenge our envy, grief,
Weakness, should take our hand like a prince and raise us
And say, 'I forgive'.

The Assertion

Now, in the face of destruction.

In the* face of the woman knifed out of all recognition
By flying glass, the fighter spinning like vertigo
On the axis of the trapped pilot and crowds applauding,
Famine that bores like a death-watch deep b^low,
Notice of agony splashed on headline and hoarding,
In the face of the infant burned
To death, and the shattered ship's-boat low in the trough—
Oars weakly waving like a beetle overturned -
Now, as never before, when man seems born to hurt
And a whole wincing earth not wide enough
For his ill will, now is the time we assert
To their face that men are love.

For love's no laughing matter,
Never was a free gift, an angel, a fixed equator.-
Love's the big boss at whose side for ever slouches
The shadow of the gunman: he's mortar and dynamite;
Antelope, drinking pool, but the tiger too that crouches.
Therefore be wise in the dark hour to admit
The logic of the gunman's trigger,
Embrace the explosive element, learn the need
Of tiger for antelope and antelope for tiger.

0 love, so honest of face, so unjust in action,
Never so dangerous as when denied,
Let your kindness tell us how false we are, your bloody
correction
Our purpose and our pride.

Watching Post

A hill flank overlooking the Axe valley.
Among the stubble a farmer and I keep watch
For whatever may come to injure our countryside -
Light-signals, parachutes, bombs, or sea-invaders.
The moon looks over the hill's shoulder, and hope
Mans the old ramparts of an English night.

In a house down there was Marlborough born. One night
Monmouth marched to his ruin out of that valley.
Beneath our castled hill, where Britons kept watch,
Is a church where the Drakes, old lords of this countryside,
Sleep under their painted effigies. No invaders
Can dispute their legacy of toughness and hope.

Two counties away, over Bristol, the searchlights hope
To find what danger is in the air tonight.
Presently gunfire from Portland reaches our valley
Tapping like an ill-hung door in a draught. My watch
Says nearly twelve. All over the countryside
Moon-dazzled men are peering out for invaders.

The farmer and I talk for a while of invaders:
But soon we turn to crops - the annual hope,
Making of cider, prizes for ewes. Tonight
How many hearts along this war-mazed valley
Dream of a day when at peace they may work and watch
The small sufficient wonders of the countryside.

Image or fact, we both in the countryside
Have found our natural law, and until invaders
Come will answer its need: for both of us, hope
Means a, harvest from small beginnings, who this night
While the moon sorts out into shadow and shape our valley,
A farmer and a poet, are keeping watch.

July, 1940

The Stand-To

Autumn met me today as I walked over Castle Hill.
The wind that had set our corn by the ears was blowing
still:
Autumn, who takes the leaves and the long days, crisped the
air
With a tang of action, a taste of death; and the wind blew
fail

From the east for men and barges massed on the other side -
Men maddened by numbers or stolid by nature, they have
their pride
As we in work and children, but now a contracting will
Crumples their meek petitions and holds them poised to kill.

Last night a Stand-To was ordered. Thirty men of us here
Came out to guard the star-lit village - my men who wear
Unwitting the seasons' beauty, the received truth of the
spade -
Roadmen, farm labourers, masons, turned to another trade.

A dog barked over the fields, the candle stars put a sheen
On the rifles ready, the sandbags fringed with evergreen:
The dawn wind blew, the stars winked out on the posts
where we lay,
The order came, Stand Down, and thirty went away.

Since a cold wind from Europe blows back the words in my
teeth,
Since autumn shortens the days and the odds against our
death,
And the harvest moon is waxing and high tides threaten
harm,
Since last night may be the last night all thirty men go
home,

I write this verse to record the men who have watched with
me-
Spot who is good at darts, Squibby at repartee,
Mark and Cyril, the dead shots, Ralph with a ploughman's
gait,
Gibson, Harris and Long, old hands for the barricade,

Whiller the lorry-driver, Francis and Rattlesnake,
Fred and Charl and Stan - these nights I have lain awake
And thought of my thirty men and the autumn wind that
blows
The apples down too early and shatters the autumn rose.

Destiny, History, Duty, Fortitude, Honour - all
The words of the politicians seem too big or too small
For the ragtag fighters of lane and shadow, the love that has
grown
Familiar as working-clothes, faithful as bone to bone.

Blow, autumn wind, upon orchard and rose! Blow leaves
along
Our lanes, but sing through me for the lives that are worth a
song!
Narrowing days have darkened the vistas that hurt my eyes,
But pinned to the heart of darkness a tattered fire-flag flies.

September, 1940

Where are the War Poets?

They who in folly or mere greed
Enslaved religion, markets, laws,
Borrow our language now and bid
Us to speak up in freedom's cause.

It is the logic of our times,
No subject for immortal verse -
That we who lived by honest dreams
Defend the bad against the worse.

Angel

We thought the angel of death would come
As a thundering judge to impeach us,
So we practised an attitude of calm or indignation
And prepared the most eloquent speeches.

But when the angel of death stepped down,
She was like a spoilt girl in ermine:
She tipped a negligent wing to some
And treated the rest as vermin.

Now we have seen the way she goes on,
Our self-possession wavers:
We'd fear a hanging judge far less than
That bitch's casual favours.

Airmen Broadcast

Speak for the air, your element, you hunters
Who range across the ribbed and shifting sky:
Speak for whatever gives you mastery -
Wings that bear out your purpose, quick-response
Fingers, a fighting heart, a kestrel's eye.

Speak of the rough and tumble in the blue,
The mast-high run, the flak, the battering gales:
You that, until the life you love prevails,
Must follow death's impersonal vocation -
Speak from the air, and tell your hunters' tales.

Lidice

'Not a grave of the murdered for freedom but grows
seed for freedom.' - WALT WHITMAN

Cry to us, murdered village. While your grave
Aches raw on history, make us understand
What freedom asks of us. Strengthen our hand
Against the arrogant dogmas that deprave
And have no proof but death at their command.

Must the innocent bleed for ever to remedy
These fanatic fits that tear mankind apart?
The pangs we felt from your atrocious hurt
Promise a time when even the killer shall see
His sword is aimed at his own naked heart.

Ode to Fear

The lustre bowl of the sky
Sounds and sustains
A throbbing cello-drone of planes.
Entombed beneath this caving liberty,
We note how doom endorses
Our devious fraud and folly where skeins
Of wild geese flew direct on visionary courses.

Now Fear has come again
To live with us
In poisoned intimacy like pus,
Hourly extending the area of our pain,
It seems I must make the most
Of fever's pulsing dreams and thus
Live to allay this evil or dying lay its ghost.

Fear has so many symptoms -
Planes throbbing above
Like headache, rumours that glibly move
Along the bloodstream, sleep's prophetic phantoms
Condemning what we have built,
Heartburn anxiety for those we love -
And all, yes all, are proof of an endemic guilt.

The bones, the stalwart spine,
The legs like bastions,
The nerves, the heart's natural combustions,
The head that hives our active thoughts - all pine,
Are quenched or paralysed
When Fear puts unexpected questions
And makes the heroic body freeze like a beast surprised.

The sap will rise anew in
Both man and brute:
Wild virtues even now can shoot
From the reviled interstices of ruin.
But oh, what drug, what knife
Can wither up our guilt at the root.
Cure our discoloured days and cleanse the blood of life?

Today, I can but record
In truth and patience
This high delirium of nations
And hold to it the reflecting, fragile word.
Come to my heart then, Fear,
With all your linked humiliations,
As wild geese flight and settle on a submissive mere.

The Dead

They lie in the Sunday street
Like effigies thrown down after a fete
Among the bare-faced houses frankly yawning revulsion,
Fag-ends of fires, litter of rubble, stale
Confetti-sprinkle of blood. Was it defeat
With them, or triumph? Purification
Or All Fools' Day? On this they remain silent.
Their eyes are closed to honour and hate.

We cannot blame the great
Alone - the mad, the calculating or effete
Rulers. Whatever grotesque scuffle and piercing
Indignant orgasm of pain took them,
All that enforced activity of death
Did answer and compensate
Some voluntary inaction, soft option, dream retreat.
Each man died for the sins of a whole world:
For the ant's self-abdication, the fat-stock's patience
Are sweet goodbye to human nations.

Still, they have made us eat
Our knowing words, who rose and paid
The bill for the whole party with their uncounted courage.
And if they chose the dearer consolations
Of living - the bar, the dog race, the discreet
Establishment - and let Karl Marx and Freud go hang,
Now they are dead, who can dispute their choice?
Not I, nor even Fate.

Reconciliation

All day beside the shattered tank he'd lain
Like a limp creature hacked out of its shell,
Now shrivelling on the desert's grid,
Now floating above a sharp-set ridge of pain.

There came a roar, like water, in his ear.
The mortal dust was laid. He seemed to be lying
In a cool coffin of stone walls,
While memory slid towards a plunging weir.

The time that was, the time that might have been
Find in this shell of stone a chance to kiss
Before they part eternally:
He feels a world without, a world within

Wrestle like old antagonists, until each is
Balancing each. Then, in a heavenly calm,
The lock gates open, and beyond
Appear the argent, swan-assembled reaches.

Will it be so again?

Will it be so again
That the brave, the gifted are lost from view,
And empty, scheming men
Are left in peace their lunatic age to renew?
Will it be so again?

Must it be always so
That the best are chosen to fall and sleep
Like seeds, and we too slow
'In claiming the earth they quicken, and the old usurpers
reap
What they could not sow?

Will it be so again -
The jungle code and the hypocrite gesture?
A poppy wreath for the slain
And a cut-throat world for the living? that stale imposture
Played on us onſe again?

Will it be as before -
Peace, with no heart or mind to ensue it,
Guttering down to war
Like a libertine to his grave? We should not be surprised:
we knew it
Happen before.

Shall it be so again?
Call not upon the glorious dead
To be your witnesses then.
The living alone can nail to their promise the ones who said
It shall not be so again.

PART THREE

The Innocent

A forward child, a sullen boy,
My living image in the pool,
The glass that made me look a fool -
He was my judgement and my joy.

The bells that chimed above the lake,
The swans asleep in evening's eye,
Bright transfers pressed on memory
From him their gloss and anguish take.

When I was desolate, he came
A wizard way to charm my toys:
But when he heard a stranger's voice
He broke the toys, I bore the shame.

I built a house of crystal tears
Amid the myrtles for my friend:
He said, no man has ever feigned
Or kept the lustre of my years.

Later, a girl and I descried
His shadow on the fern-flecked hill,
His double near our bed: and still
The more I lived, the more he died.

•
Now a revenant slips between
The fine-meshed minutes of the clock
To weep the time we lost and mock
All that my desperate ditties mean.

One and One

I remember, as if it were yesterday,
Watching that girl from the village lay
The fire in a room where sunlight poured.
And seeing, in the annexe beyond, M. play
A prelude of Bach on his harpsichord.

I can see his face now, heavy and numb
With resignation to the powers that come
At his touch meticulous, smooth as satin,
Firm as hammers: I can hear the air thrum
With notes like sun-motes in a twinkling pattern.

Her task there fetched from the girl the innate
Tingling response of glass to a note:
She fitted the moment, too, like a glove,
Who deft and submissive knelt by the grate
Bowed as if in the labour of love.

Their orbits touched not: but the pure submission
Of each gave Value and definition
To a snapshot printed in that morning's sun.
From any odd corner we may start a vision
Proving that one and one make One.

Windy Day in August

Over the vale, the sunburnt fields
A wind from the sea like a streamer unreels:
Dust leaps up, apples thud down,
The river's caught between a smile and a frown.

An inn-sign swinging, swinging to the wind,
Whines and whinges like a dog confined,
Round his paddock gallops the colt,
Dinghies at moorings curvet and jolt.

Sunlight and shadow in the copse play tig,
While the wallowing clouds talk big
About their travels, and thistledown blows
Ghosting above the rank hedgerows.

Cornfield, orchard and fernland hail
Each other, waving from hill to hill:
They change their colours from morn to night
In play with the lissom, engaging light.

The wind roars endlessly past my ears,
Racing my heart as in earlier years.
Here and everywhere, then and now
Earth moves like a wanton, breathes like a vow.

After the Storm

Have you seen clouds drifting across a night sky
After storm's blown out, when the wind that urged them
Lies asleep elsewhere and the earth is buoyed in
Moon-locked oblivion?

Slow the clouds march: only the moon is wakeful,
Watching them trail past in their brown battalions
Spent as storm-troops after defeat or triumph
Deeply indifferent.

No, not storm-troops now, but as crowds that wander
Vague and sluggish down the disordered boulevards
After a football match or a coronation,
Riot or lynching.

Done the act which tied them together, all its
Ebbing excitement leaves the heart a quicksand:
So betrayed by passion they move, remembering
Each his aloneness.

Clouds are not men. Yet, if I saw men move like
Clouds the wind inspires and abandons, I should
Feel that wakeful sympathy, feel the moon's wild
Ache for oblivion.

Fame

Spurred towards horizons
Beyond the common round.
Trained in ambition's cruellest ring,
Their powers grew muscle-bound

Like those equestrian public statues
Pawing the sky, that rear
And snort with furious nostrils
Nobly, and get nowhere:

A target for birds, a suntrap
For the elderly or infirm,
Children bowl hoops around them, a plaque
Nails them to their fame,

Whose strenuous flanks the sunlight grooms
While sculptured hyacinths
Breathe an odour of worship
Bedded below their plinths.

Fine for the public statues amid
Those noonday crowds: but when
Night falls and the park is emptied,
What do they think of then?

Does expectation still cast
Its overweening shadow
Onwards? Or do they look back in grief
To a foal of the green meadow? -

That foal with its mane like a carpet-fringe
And its hobbledehoy hooves;
That colt of the restive eye
Whose breast in amazement heaves -

Or, clamped to the sky in a tortured
Pose of the *haute ecole*,
Have they lost all kinship, horse and rider,
With the dead, the impatient foal?

The Singing Match

(Translated from the Third Eclogue of Virgil)

(Air: 'O waly, waly')

- DAMOETAS From Juppiter the Muse begins, and Juppiter is
everywhere:
He makes the earth all fruitful to be, he doth unto my
ditties give ear.
- MENALCAS But I'm the man that Phoebus loves. My garden
is Apollo's seat.
I give him gifts, the bay-tree and the hyacinth do blush
so sweet.
- D. Now Galatea throws at me an apple, she's a wanton
maid:
Off to the sally-trees she do run, wishing I spy where to
she's fled.
- M. But dear Amyntas is my flame. -He is my flame, and
never coy:
My little dog knows Delia well, far oetter doth he know
that boy.
- D. I have a present for my Venus, I've a present for my
love,
Since I myself did notice a spot where nestles high have
buidled the doves.
- M. Ten golden apples did I pluck, ten golden apples a wild
tree bore:
All that I could I sent to my boy, tomorrow he shall
have ten more.
- D. O many times, O charming words she's spoke to me — my
Galatea!
Whisper a little part of them, you breezes, into heaven's
ear!
- M. Oh what avails, Amyntas dear, that after me your
heart's inclined,
If while you hunt the ravening boar, you leave me the
nets to mind?

Jig

That winter love spoke and we raised no objection, at
Easter 'twas daisies all light and affectionate,
June sent us crazy for natural selection - not
Four traction-engines could tear us apart.
Autumn then coloured the map of our land,
Oaks shuddered and apples came ripe to the hand,
In the gap of the hills we played happily, happily,
Even the moon couldn't tell us apart.

Grave winter drew near and said, 'This will not do at all -
If you continue, I fear you will rue it all.'
So at the New Year we vowed to eschew it
Although we both knew it would break our heart.
But spring made hay of our good resolutions -
Lovers, you may be as wise as Confucians,
Yet once love betrays you he plays you and plays you
Like fishes for ever, so take it to heart.

Hornpipe

Now the peak of summer's past, the sky is overcast
And the love we swore would last for an age seems deceit:
Paler is the guelder since the day we first beheld her
In blush beside the elder drifting sweet, drifting sweet.

Oh quickly they fade - the sunny esplanade,
Speed-boats, wooden spades, and the dunes where we've
lain:

Others will be lying amid the sea-pinks sighing
For love to be undying, and they'll sigh in vain.

It's hurrah for each night we have spent our love so lightly
And never dreamed there might be no more to spend at all.
It's goodbye to every lover who thinks he'll live in clover
All his life, for noon is over soon and night-dews fall.

If I could keep you there with the berries in your hair
And your lacy fingers fair as the may, sweet may,
I'd have no heart to do it, for to stay love is to rue it
And the harder we pursue it, the faster it's away.

The Fault

After the light decision
Made by the blood in a moon-blanced lane,
Whatever weariness or contrition
May come, I could never see you plain;
No, never again

See you whose body I'm wed to
Distinct, but always dappled, enhanced
By a montage of all that moment led to -
Dunes where heat-haze and sea-pinks glanced,
The roads that danced

Ahead of our aimless car,
Scandal biting the dust behind us,
The feel of being on a luckier star,
Each quarrel that came like a night to blind us
And closer to bind us.

Others will journey over ^
Our hill up along this lane like a rift
Loaded with moon-gold, many a lover
Sleepwalking through the moon's white drift,
Loved or bereft.

But for me it is love's volcanic
Too fertile fault, and will mark always
The first shock of that yielding mood, where satanic
Bryony twines and frail flowers blaze
Through our tangled days.

The Rebuke

Down in the lost and April days
What lies we told, what lies we told!
Nakedness seemed the one disgrace,
And there'd be time enough to praise
The truth when we were old.

The irresponsible poets sung
What came into their head:
Time to pick and choose among
The bold profusions of our tongue
When we were dead, when we were dead.

Oh wild the words we uttered then
In woman's ear, in woman's ear,
Believing all we promised when
Each kiss created earth again
And every far was near.

Little we guessed, who spoke the word
Of hope and freedom high
Spontaneously as wind or bird
To crowds like cornfields still or stirred,
It was a lie, a heart-felt lie.

Now the years advance into
A calmer stream, a colder stream,
We doubt the flame that once we knew,
Heroic words sound all untrue
As love-lies in a dream.

Yet fools are the old who won't be taught
Modesty by their youth:
That pandemonium of the heart,
That sensual arrogance did impart
A kind of truth, a kindling truth.

Where are the sparks at random sown,
The spendthrift fire, the holy fire?
Who cares a damn for truth that's grown
Exhausted haggling for its own
And speaks without desire?

