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THE BURNING MOUNTAIN

Also by

JOHN GOULD FLETCHER

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LIFE IS MY SONG

XXIV ELEGIES

The Burning Mountain

JOHN GOULD
FLETCHER



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FIRST EDITION

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*Of this first edition of "The Burning Mountain"
twenty-five hundred copies have been printed.*

TO EDWIN J. STRINGHAM

and

NORMAN HOLMES PEARSON

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J. G. F.

THE BURNING MOUNTAIN

I. SHADOW ON THE PRAIRIE

North, east, south, west, goes by this sea of grass,
Sunsmit, unchanged;
Across it days and clouds and dreams and darkness pass,
As when the buffalo ranged;
Across it man in his littleness moves by,
Forever fixed to the solitude of sky.

It seemed to him, the land
Was a gigantic woman, sprawled asleep
Beneath the sun; a river crawled to her hand,
The nape of her neck was girdled with the deep
Green of the corn; over her granite knees
The skirts of the blackjacks trembled in the breeze; —

And afar from the westward, over the slow blue ridges,
The wind came crying, but it woke her not.
It seemed to him that she was fixed to this spot
As in a spell; a spell only man could break:
That she was lonely and could never wake,
As men went by and saw but troubled not
This vast, gigantic earth-woman carven from horizon to sky.
So hour on hour went by,
Blue of the untroubled zenith brought down into a blot,
While he sat and looked at her, sitting on a ridge, his head bowed
to his knees,
Where the hills of the east break down
And leave the west alone:
Wave beyond wave, unquenched prairie grass
Over which storms and sorrows and suns unheeded pass.

Now slowly down from the ledge of the rock that sizzled in
the sun,
He went, stumbling and staggering, to fall and lie prone at her
feet,

Where the hawk in his flight and the jackrabbit before him had
gone,
And the lazy cattle would eat.
He clutched at the rounded hummocks, he drew himself up,
very slow,
By the edge of the knees of that shape, which to his dream
Lay prone upon the land; the cottonwoods by the stream
Shivered for a moment, rustling their leaves the way the wind
would go.
The windmills whined in the breeze,
Sundisks to the sundisk turning.
He strove to get closer; in his eyes was a crazy light;
His throat was burning
With the will to slow extinction, to unsummoned night;
To forget the dun towers, the vast and appalling weight
Of the great oil-town from which he had that day come;
And the sweet curves of her body brought peace from too much
debate —
Mole-darkness under the sun.

So they found him there later, the lean bronzed riders, the
leathery men with the hard edge
To their lips, and to their tongues the slow drawling speech;
He was dead there forever upon the prairie, beyond the pale
drift of the sedge,
In a realm they could not reach:
He had found his earth-woman at last, and the love without
memory or hope,
Lips locked to a stone;
He had entered by the way of the plains the unchanging seas
where men grope
For the peace of the night, and are gone.

Tulsa, Oklahoma, June, 1933

II. ON MESA VERDE

I.

Is there a spot on earth,
Where time is not?
Naught but the weathering of the sun
Across the rocks?
And the winds going
Like far-off echoes of an ocean storm,
Through the old pinyon branches,
Dense as dark jade against these yellow cliffs?

Here is the place
Where canyons fill with heat;
And the blue waste
Smoulders like turquoise under a sun-washed sky;
Intense and deep
Holding earth still in its flight
Winter on winter, month on month the same,
Till centuries pass
Monotonous beads suspended in one clear pool of flame.

II.

The wind, like old remote
Moanings of far-off seas,
Blows through the trees by day;
One does not see the wind —
One only hears its cry:
And after, endless silence
Surges back to tell
The wind that it must die.

Amid the jade-green jungle,
Monotonously rocking, moaning to and fro,
The dead tree stands; its jagged frozen antlers
Thrust out, bone-white, unheedful of the trees
Swaying their froned tips
Luxuriously before the wind:
The cery, whispering cries
That the live trees here make
Breathe round but do not penetrate the dead tree's
 paralyzed heart;
Dry coral in a sea of undulating tone.

I I I.

The quarter-centuries drop,
Grains from a full ear of corn;
The world is made younger,
Man has more things to say:
There was one who once came here
Not knowing how to build his future,
He is long gone now;
The world would not walk his way.

Speeding, the age has pierced
Even his ultimate silence;
But the pines and the junipers keep
Their bodiless drifts of low tone
That he heard as the dirge of a Viking,
A violin-sweep from the heart of the world;
Should he sing it? Who stood there to listen?
Now he comes, but to claim back his own.

I V.

The purple Durango summits to the east,
The purple bulk of Ute Peak west by south;
Between these two
This feathery carpet of green is still outspread.

Slashed at its southern edge
With wandering soundless canyons, sandstone-rimmed;
Dry rivers licking up
The table-land of silence.

Where the heart, free and high,
Looks out to south and sees in ashen space
Through a great ocean of mirages, grey, remote,
A ship that beats against the far blue ledge

Of the table-land; a ghostly ship of stone
Blown through the ocean of desert, cruising far;
I think its freightage must have been men's hopes
When life burned hotly here, in centuries forgot.

v.

The sunset's hour has passed,
Scrawling its fading color-words across a turquoise sky;
The moon keeps state
Above the Mesa Verde.

The crickets drone
Across the moon their long-held fiddle notes;
The news of night
Breathes in the balsam scent of thick, unalterable trees.

Under the cliff
The city stands, upbuilt once, now lost;
And ages pass,
The flapping of a bat's wings through blue space.

Moon, long ago,
You moulded men like metal in your hands;
Copper and bronze,
Builder on cliff and coiler of the bowl;

All is run out
Like snake-trails over rock;
I think you cheat men, moon.
Death is the only peace.

Moon like grey ash,
And coyote yapping in the night;
We are hot coppery sparks
Blown out across blue space;

As the moon keeps
Above the Mesa Verd' its solemn state,
Circle or bow,
Where the ghost-canyons into darkness go.

*Santa Fé, New Mexico,
August 1-14, 1934*

III. REQUIEM FOR A TWENTIETH-CENTURY
OUTLAW

(In Memoriam, Charles, "Pretty Boy," Floyd)

He learned the ways of life on some dull street,
Striving to get by rote the usual part;
But there was that in him which would defeat
This purpose; God or Nature gave his heart

A tiny grain of that brown crumbling earth
Where once the buffalo thundered and went by;
Or from those thickets gathered, when the north
Brings autumn and red blackjacks brush the sky:

Now this was his. It steadily brought back
Like gallop of wild horsemen through the night,
Within an age of motors and steel track,
The thought of bearded heroes and old fight;

Man against man, hand against hand; who knows
What echoes shook his heart like a quivering shell,
When hunted, desperate, from his seat he rose
And with machine-gun pointed, aimed too well?

Who knows what dreams assailed the alley cat
Whose forbears had been lions? Does the hand
Of time too hurriedly altered, alter that
Which chimes like music through a bygone land?

Yet so it was that none might heed his dream;
Eating the gall of lead for all his pride,
Harried from town to town, past field and stream,
He turned and fled and turned and fled — then died.

The dark earth took him back to her wide breast,
Unreckoning of all things but the star-sown sky.
Having already rocked to perfect rest
Wilder and bolder sons, in years gone by.

Shawnee, Oklahoma, November, 1934

IV. ODE TO NEW YORK

I.

Steel, smelted out of rock,
Rock, rivetted to steel;
Out of the grind of sullen glaciers, the spark, the sway, the shock
That builds more than the thought could compass, heaps effort
 higher than we feel;
Out of the moan of forests dying, these huge aerial fires;
Out of the sea mists sweeping inward, these jagged ranks of
 towers;
Golden windows glowing like the petals of strown flowers:
Out of the sand on sunbleached beaches, this hourglass running
 with unspent desires.

Thus rooted to the rock, last lodging-place for life,
Anchored at the keel, but not the top, this corsair crammed with
 loot of years,
Ship overladen staggering onward to a reef, its mastheads
 wreathed in sudden flame,
Spilling the loot that has glutted its keel through every hatchway
 as the coast
Swings nearer, and the run is finished through the long nights
 and the days —
Boasting of the storms it battled through ere it was struck with
 unseen fears,
The city rears
Its bulk, to be garnered or lost:
To spend, to be spent: to shatter, to requicken this ledge of earth
 with life's unsummed arrears.

The beads that the Indians bartered this land for, glow again full,
tonight;
After centuries of fingering, they are polished now at last;
Lying looped in long strings over headlands, or heavily heaped in
one plot
Where like fresh-spilt and sliding drops of flame,
Taxis in headlong multitudes career and converge to this spot
A present made triumphant by contrast with the past,
By trumpeted fame made bright.

Steel out of the rock rising,
Life murmuring underneath, stone broken away from stone.

Music is made out of the rattle of rivetters,
Music is made out of the clicking of typewriters,
Music is made out of feet moving ever onward,
Music is made out of wheels brushing softly the street.
Song out of nothingness fused, rumor and clamor of waters,
Ebbing past midnight slowly, thrumming at dawn still
triumphant,
We do not hear it roar and pass, yet it still sounds and returns,
And in it steadily burns
Madness of triumph, misery of defeat.

I I.

After the voyage and the landfall found,
The sailors swarm on deck, their memories crossed
With thresh and boom of waves — the fierce, the dark
Glut of the Gulf Stream going, and the whistle of loud winds;
The narrow bunks, the oily reek, the toil
Through oaths and blows free-showered; the stench,
the servitude.

Like lighthouses that watch an unknown coast,
The towers stand above the shallows, and beyond
The roar of the city rises from an unseen host,
Foretelling enchantments of a world new-found,
To sweep the memories of old seas away.

After the anchor rattles down, the deck
Grows keen with the screaming winches, crying afar
That the city has beckoned to men; the dockyards yawn;
 the stretch
Of the ugly foreshore stands unmoving, a firm bar.
One must slip free, and be in full haste to bury
Forgotten solitudes within a woman's arms,
Or swill them down; already now the eager passengers hurry
Ashore where they will be caught and kept aloof from harm.
The city, with its insistence, blurs the sea;
Each market-pushcart is a place to drop
Some of the freight of the deep, brought from where waves
 run free,
To where the waves have ceased. Now memories must stop.
New life again enthralls the mariners
In monstrous warrens of stone, till they heed what is hers.

I I I.

Steel, smelted out of rock,
Rock, rivetted to steel,
Only the night reveals your purpose, long forgot;
This rank on rank of towers enkindling, head to heel;
Only the darkness wakens
These glowing shapes and leaves them vividly printed upon
Moonshine or starshine, masses of lowering cloud.
They are all dead before dawn.

Here is not yet America inland, where the night
Goes deep and breathing, dark and lonely, lost as in a maze
Of woodsmoke, stream-sounds, cricket-chirp and whippoorwill
cry;

Where day has passed dressed in proud ruffles of green,
stretching out its illimitable sky
Over proud cornfields ripening, while the breeze
Sighing through down-trailing streamers, goes on its destined
way:

Not yet America inland here and not
Europe rich with old greatness, facing new horror-day;
But a vast gateway over which the towers
Lift vivid recollections, keeping the skies at night
Troubled and sullen, lit with hopes and promises to renew;
A realm unwon, unconquered, gateway to old and new,
Mighty in force and effort, divided in mind, swift-changing
head to keel.

Steel smelted out of rock,
Rock rivetted to steel.

New York, June 30, 1937

V. SYMPHONY OF SNOW

I.

Slow,
Over the sombre prairie, on the darkening earth below,
Out of midwestern silence
Spins the midwinter snow.

Out of the grey weft of the sky, cloud-blanketed,
Rolling in shell-like ripples under the northwest breeze,
Out of the silence of the old, frost-quieted cornlands
Snow drifts athwart the stark, attentive trees;

Settling at last in the dark ice-stiffened furrows,
Spinning and lifting to drift again in the hollows of the ground;
Coiling about the pale yellow corn-shocks, clinging to colorless
stubble,
Coming without a sound;

Slow,
Out of the empty prairie, on the settled earth below,
Restless before the rolling breeze, spinning in thin white
whirlwinds,
Comes, as has come for every year, the snow.

|

II.

Summer may come here, later in this year;
Summer once settled deep upon this land.
It is hard to think now of lost summer,
Hard to understand.

So lean, incredibly aged,
So lone, so lorn, so lost this vast cold north appears,
Yellow, a skull with coarse grey hair upon it:
Before these tossed white spears.

The farmhouse, ugly, square-shouldered,
Perched on its ridge, pushes apart the wood;
And the wide-curving highway turns gradually to southward
Towards an ice-glazed river that was once a green-banked flood;

The barns creak, corn-laden;
Across the yellow-grey landscape, the grey cloudbank runs fast.
And at the crossroads, in a sudden blink of sunlight,
A patch of flakes new-fallen lifts and dances on the blast.

I I I.

Here surges out of night
In the grey blink of dawn across these cornlands
A sombre field, a hill;

Waiting until the flight
Of flakes that fill the sky, drifted to cold snow fallen,
Can speak again their will.

No life left now to flourish;
This desolate road lifts, dips, turns towards the valley,
Runs like an aging wrinkle over a stern, sad face;

Land that plows cannot cherish,
Where no song sounds, where every growth is hidden,
Through which no wanderer goes, seeking his place!

Should one be walking here,
Surely he must be like that haggard, ragged tramp
We passed going south, clasping a stick, his fingers worn to bone:

With eyes that kindled fear,
Carrying afar to acre beyond acre
The death and desolation of great hopes, long gone.

I V .

When the spring comes again, this blast may be forgotten
That spreads across the world. When the awakening breath
Of the south wind blows sweetly through the soft curtain
 of birches,
Then there may be an end to this thwarted hour of death.

When the young oaks spread forth their fringes of green and
 their long yellow tassels,
Unmoved by the force that bids them stay; when the birds from
 the south fly back,
Then rich again will be this land, and whelmed in tremulous
 color,
Where now — like a tyrant's will — all is etched white and black.

But now, by the winter's decree, it is still remembered
How long the frost may stay;
Blight of chill days has wronged the yellow harvest,
Thinned all things out to grey.

Not the proud rustle of corn-stalks in the sunlight,
Can break this wind's sharp moan;
Not a hint of green, flashing splendor
Can change this monotone.

Not the new fleets of cloud sailing through blue, not the
dissonance of the thunder
Alters the steady grey drift of this old sky.
Life long ago has gone southward
Beyond the ice-packed rivers, and the roads where the snow
drifts high.

Central Iowa, January, 1938

VI. THE FLOOD SYMPHONY

I.

Again

The rivers of the South rise high and crest their green
 embankments,
Quickened by driving rain.

Again

Above the buried sandbars, the mile-wide, mud-brown fury;
Willows that pitch and strain.

Again

The cities fill with fear before the onset:
Ragged and shoeless folk, with eyes made dull by pain.

And yet, again,

The long leap and exultance of the water,
Rolling the dark drift downwards to the main.

II.

The hammering cry of frogs
Welcomed our coming home.

Flood-singers these, they chorused
From every pool beside
The southward-going road.

Where the red maples caught
A newer glint from scarlet-berried haws
And green-leafed canebrakes glowed.

Leaving the hollows cold,
The pine-ranked hills beside the ice-glazed pond,
We came into the South.

Where brooding by the sunlit tide
Still slept the town, amid the bold gold horns
Of daffodils sprung from the dark, soft earth.

I I I.

Hastily the rain falls, ripping athwart the blossom;
The forest roars with streams; the lowland field
Stands a brown stretch of pitted, sombre water,
Through which there straggle upward the stalks of last year's
yield.

The road fills with dark puddles; the cloud goes charging
northwards
With hissing bullets of storm; day and night drums the drift.
Folk gather huddling on the levees, watching
The stream, with threshing logs, swirl madly, muddily swift.

The fury spreads; the water blots out landmarks;
With burning anger of the sky that falls
Upon this age of loss and gain, transforming
Gain into loss, and all loss shaped as one.

The blossom will not bear, nor fruit be ripe for plucking,
Since earth and sky are now at war; this windrift
Rings the wide world, horizon to horizon,
Until the tempest slackens, and the tale of time be done.

I V.

Let the waters under the earth break loose and free their
fountains
Sealed in the rock for ages; let them dominate, this hour,
The shadowy, wooded valleys; let them rise to the base of the
mountains —
Ending man's transient power;

For we have been too brutalized by the black earth to heed
them;
We have become as cattle, feeding on heavy grass;
Lifting our heads no more to look at the skies — though much
we need them:
Heedless though hopes may pass.

Now let the wild floods rise and for a time estrange us
From the earth and from its ways;
So we shall be better prepared, after the dark waters change us,
To take up the drift of new days.

Making out of each one a light to be set, above life's tale of
slaughters,
In this boat that bears us on;
To where the floods are ended, the sun is all, and bread cast
on the waters
Makes for mankind at last, its late return.

Arkansas, February 21, 1938

VII. SPAIN, 1936-1939

I.

To north, the Cross; to south, blue-shaded mountains
And valleys where the fountains purl, and song
Shatters on ice-peaks of the mind; the wall
Shuttered and secret, the deep noon declining.

To north, the cloister and the sword; to south
The blazing dust of dawn, the soul fainting for God;
The vineyard and the azure pool beyond,
The fiery dance of stars, the flame of day.

And in between them, over unhewn stones,
Groaning in zigzag waves, the road rolls high;
At every milestone sprawls a blackened corpse
To mark the weary day, the night run by.

II.

Dry plains of Castille,
Landscape of El Greco;
Stifling night where thunderclouds
To unseen summits go,

Your emptiness is torn
Apart by this dance of death:
Villages ripped by shells
Taint the air with their breath;

Shattered walls; rats
Scurrying; night and a cry
From a starving child lost somewhere;
A wolfish dog slinks by.

Wine spilt over stones
Where yesterday blood was shed;
A harlot beckoning a drunken soldier
Off to her secret bed:

A burst of machine-gun fire,
Chattering, under the moon;
And hounds all howling in chorus
To night's grey monotone.

Where has Quixote gone
With Sancho, his red-faced squire?
They turned from the windmills and sheep,
Rode blindly into the fire;

Spurred to this last Crusade,
By the Moors, who the Cross upheld;
Where the greed-gorged men of God
Hailed Caesar; where Christ failed.

As on the other side —
Weep, skies; your hearts are dry.
The hammer and sickle gleaned
Red grain under Spanish sky.

I I I.

I had gone far unafraid,
I had not lost my faith;

Till I came, where at last was displayed
Madrid, the vast city of death.

Where the fishy-eyed Kings of the past
Sat crouched over heaps of dead gold;
Where the cassocked friars walked past
As the funeral bell was new-tolled.

Where the bull stands before the red capes,
And feels his heart slackening slow
While the clogged life-blood escapes
To the hot sands spreading below.

Where the owls hoot afar every night,
Where the blood-dripping vultures pass;
As tinselled, begauded, a flight
Of a witch-pack whirls to its Mass.

Under the scream of the shells,
Under the bombs that rain down,
Madrid, with its brothels and bells
Draped deep in its doom as a gown,

Slowly sinks deep to its grave,
Watched by wrinkled-necked vulture-hosts;
As the sun-withered willows still wave
Their boughs by the ford that was lost;

As a skeleton, thrusting its head
Out, with a long, bony hand,
From the vault, from the realm of the dead,
Scrawls "Nothing" across the sand.

By death made drunken,
 By pride and fire consumed, by evil magic
 Burnt red and black, shape that offends the daylight,
 Lost land of Spain;

The guilty nations wait
 And watch your lips draw back, your eyelids stiffen;
 Christ hanging on his cross, his wounds now oozing
 Their final gout of blood.

No dances left now,
 No sunburnt peasants homing from the vineyard,
 With songs and laughter, nothing but the salt
 Of tears that cake the earth.

The nations, fascinated,
 Watch, while there clutches at their hearts a spasm of raw fear
 Forcing them now at last to face their greed, their indecision,
 Long as the war goes here.

You die to give them life,
 Life red and black, the fury of the coming
 Blast of destruction, flame of this doomed century,
 That will not peaceably pass

Till man has lived through death
 As the earth lives, when out of western deserts
 The dust-cloud gathers, bleakly scurrying,
 To sweep across the fields;

Speeding its stinging drift
 Into the farmyards and the barns, till, after,
 All lapses back anew
 To broken, sterile silence.

June 7-8, 1938

VIII. THE BURNING MOUNTAIN

(A Legend of the Santa Fé Trail)

The wagons went on west; the people fared
Into a land but dimly understood,
Since it was desert; nothing there to see
But stupid buffalo, and moving shapes
Of mirage; far-off lakes that licked the sky,
Giving back heat for heat. No single tree
Spoke there of forests they had left behind,
In springtime roaring as the rivers rose,
Osage, Missouri. Men must move on still;
Having well started their faring, having filled
For the last time the parting-cup, and thrown
Out of the back of their wagons surplus goods,
Books and armchairs.

There a mountain stood
Somewhat to south, apart, a pyramid;
Red sandstone reaching to the sky. It was
A landmark for Comanche bands, who rode
Their ponies past it on long raids, and told
Tales of the thunderbird on its cliffs. It stood
Utterly treeless, found scant rain. At last
No Indians came to find it, spy the land:
They changed to a miserable remnant, cadging on
The passing wagons, wasting their wits upon
Liquor and riot, feeble with disease,
Great thieves of horses.

Yet the mountain stood
To south, while day by day brown clouds of dust
Rose from slow-pacing oxen, as the wheels
Creaked, grinding slowly. Over them loomed the peak

So bold, so utterly vast, so suddenly steep,
That many a gingham-bonneted mother going,
Riding the jolting seat, trying to soothe
A fretting, feverish child held in her arms,
Pointed to it and said: "See that peak there,
It means the Rockies are near. There it is cool;
Plenty of shade, good water, space to play.
See, it is big. Daddy will bring us soon
To mountains even bigger, if you will
But hush and try to sleep. It can't be long;"
And half believed it as the oxen plodded
Their way through choking dust and teamsters went,
Their heads turned ever west, scarce stopping for a meal
Of flapjacks, or the digging of a grave.

Then, there were other days that mountain knew:
Once towards sunset, when the level rays
Burned hard upon its cliffs, making them rise
Like screens of ruby heaped to the sky. It saw
The sage-grey plains, all still; no buffalo now.
Suddenly from the south there swung aloft
A cloud of yellow dust, and through it rolled
A herd of longhorns, thousands strong, brought north
To the railhead, coming west. About them sped
With leather quirts on wrists, and coils of rope
On saddlebows, and hats jammed hard upon
Their sunbronzed foreheads, the cowherders moving
The cattle on with whoops. The milling herds
Roared, trampling heavily past, shaking their horns,
Pawing the dust, and vanished. Proud and still
The mountain saw them surge and disappear,
Burning to purple-rose above the trail
They made. It seemed as if its rays,
As the steers' thundering pierced its sullen heart,
Might follow on while they went past, to where

Beyond the sunset, high in hot evening sky,
A thundercloud lay black on the boundless plain.

We in this land of ours know little else
But rootless change. The mountain in its might
Resists change, is not willing change should come;
Holds high its scars, its crags, its gorges steep
Above change, past and future forged to one,
In light that surges, light that ebbs away.
We, rootless, are not fit to understand
Much but our rootlessness that bids us stray
From east to west, and back from west to east,
Fleeing ourselves yet finding but ourselves,
A force without a goal. The mountain burns, its roots
Run down into another age, ere speech
Was and the vision became fugitive;
Mirage that wakens mirage. We will still
Not be a people, not know if our path
Leads to a future till we find the strength
To go not on, but upward there. Great power
Must guide us to those crags, and wisdom lead
Across the avalanche, up slopes and screes,
Into black gorges. There must ageless faith
Awaken in us, force our hearts to scale
The rocks of ignorance, the bald, burnt crags
Of hopelessness, the steep ravines of greed.
We yet may make that mountain ours; may find
The land below holds nothing, the horizon holds
But wheel-tracks endless, circling back upon
That self-same spot. We yet may utterly find
Ourselves upon the peak we shunned, ignored;
And by necessity driven, be yet made
To build on the magic of that burning crest,
Set high as a beacon over broken waste —
The mountain of our meaning — in the years
That close for us, at last.

May, 1939

X. MEMORIAL FOR SUMMER, 1940

If we could but silence the gongs in thousands of cities,
Throttle the sirens, quench the low roar of the motors,
Muffle the click of the tickers, slow down the traffic,
Drown out all mechanical noise and suddenly substitute silence,
We might come to know at last the meaning of this world,
Which is as a wave come from the dark, a sudden, unexpected
movement

Always arrested, never completed, made vital by half-realized
beauty;

And which, though unfinished, flings this tragic generation
Like all those lost in the past, drowned in war, to lie gasping,
on the shore.

Driven and driven and driven,
Living despite of dying, dying because of living,
Is life's last terrible giving;
Poured out, overflowing, overwhelming, foaming away on the
pavement,
Froth of life, must of death, spilled deep upon the stones.
We cannot halt it, since we are part of it;
We cannot hold it since it holds us as its offering.
Our doing is part of its dream, our darkness is all of its triumph;
It is given and it abides, whether we will or no.

And now, since the silence will not arise and surround us,
Leaving us wondering about ourselves, looking each to the other,
Sketching the gesture that will finish with consummation —
We shall not know what meaning was held by that dream.
Not men but a man now; not life, but be led; not triumph, but
brutal obedience;
And laws graven deep in cold blood for the free play of instinct
and wisdom.

Since we have neither clear thoughts of ourselves, nor the quiet
of heaven,
Which is made out of fire and dark even as we, only wilder and
greater,
No joy shall be ours without horror, no peace without clamor.
With guns, tanks, aeroplanes, ships, dive-bombers, lies, bullyings,
threats, propaganda,
We shall go forward to a far alien land and we shall there bury
The light that burned flickeringly under mountains of dead
dreams, tumuli of faith unremembered,
To burst forth as volcanic fire to the future, and to blaze across
the world.

July, 1940

XI. AUGUST, 1940

I.

We in this summer have lived to see our final refuge broken;
The walls that we have set up, the delicate walls and the hedges
Of hope, well-fed with human will, that we fostered
Are made a mock of now, our strong garths and our gardens
Are given to wild swine to root in, our streets, our dwellings
Become the raven's spoil. We no longer stand upright
But are as toppling buildings at the edge of a cliff
Propped up and yet falling into the sea. There goes on a great
babble

Of what we can do to be saved. But we are lost, and the measure
Of our main loss is this: that the longer we strive, the more
dreadful

Our ruin is: irrevocably, the storm from beyond the horizon,
Its rigid blanket of night, its covert of hidden fires,
Leaps suddenly on us; and the gods of the underworld gaining,
Glutted with wreckage, yet hungry, beat at the crust
To loosen its spoil. We had vision,
And yet that vision was not enough. We had courage,
And yet our courage failed. The sun disk opened
Its dazzling wings, and in the midst was a darkness.
The night spread its stars abroad, and they were fires to trap us,
Scorching our best hopes, bidding us lift the dagger
And slay and slay. We stand on a desolate summit
Where the trees are toppled by a black wind, and the fires
followed after,
Seething across the plain, and crackling through the thicket,
Withering the grass and making mankind homeless,
And we know not how long it may take to reach some unburnt
shore.

What can we do now? What is there time to do,

Before the last wall crumbles, and the blaze
Sweeps on across the sun? Have we hopes yet that can carry
Us somewhere; winged hopes that will not betray us,
Leave us weaker than before? The sages and prophets have told us
That it was all Adam's fault. Agreed, then, Adam fell;
And yet Adam fell that we as men should be,
And as free men, might find joy. What joy now rises
Across the blank space, and the broken
Might of a dying world?

We hear nothing
But a cry that mankind is betrayed; that the children must
scatter in panic;
The famine is moving on fast behind the fury
Whereby the legions were battered. We have nothing;
Nothing but a shattered hope and a stubborn
Will to resist, and to add horror to horror.

I I.

Siegfried slew the dragon
In May, in the desolate wood;
Shy woodbirds scattered, in panic,
Flowers were dabbled in blood.

Siegfried slew the dragon.
The brooks were streaked with red:
But seven little dragons
Sprang from the severed head.

With wings of steel, spurred engines
For lungs, they flew abroad.
Siegfried slew the dragon.
But not the dragon's brood.

Now every land breeds its dragons:
Monsters and never men.
We must kill them all, till the King of Time
Puts them back in his sack, again.

I I I.

Scatter the talking leaf, be swift, and harry
The air with dying words. The word that will not die
Is silenced now. Let lies as rain fall down
From heaven, as manna-dew. Truth is yet quiet.
Truth need not speak; let her be still as stone.

Hale truth into the court. Let her stand there
In tattered cloak, with hungry eyes, afraid.
Street-walker truth, what have you left to say?
We are all Pilate-pilots. Let us wash
Our hands in blood, not water. Let the block
Be now prepared, the axe be newly ground.

I V.

Night, and full moon across
The trees, but never sleeping;
The light that marked our loss.
Past was the hour for weeping.

Only the beat of time
As God's doom still drew nearer;
Praying was all: and mine
Was done. Now brighter, clearer

The moon sailed through the night,
As light clings to the blessed
Face of one dead. Now light
Washed every hill's dark crescent.

Night, and no cry was heard;
Across the dreary ocean
That severs world from world.
Strong darkness was my portion.

Darkness; the world's vast breast
Heaved up in grief and horror,
Not hoping for any rest,
Not knowing what might follow.

v.

If there be one
Who knew one single moment
Of human dignity not mocked, betrayed;
Let him avert his eyes
See here not even a glimpse
Of the unclean thing that now is shaped and made.

If there be any
Not an accomplice, and so never sharing
In the last rout, the final plunge to doom,
The forty days of flood that ended in no rainbow,
Let him be careful of his hands, for blood
Sticks to the memorial here, the sculptured stone.

If there are some
Who saw a little, lived a little while
The hour that God loathed, yet let His sun

Shine on, lived full; let them not breathe a word.
Stifle their lungs with pillows. Chain their lips
With padlocks. Let their tongues be wrenched and torn
From their red palates, living. It is not for them
To ever speak, be heard.

v i.

It was night on the cliff, and late.
All men were in their places.
The searchlight swung across
A sea of watchful faces.

Lightening their pallor there,
As time's finger might lighten
A world of clear despair.
There was nothing more that could frighten

These. All had been done.
The guilt, the grief, the glory.
There was no longer a sun
To make them glad or sorry.

Tears mingled with laughter fell
Down those faces, patient.
Heaven shone amid hell.
And youth and old age were sated.

As the eye staring sees,
Amid the world's affairs,
Like the lift of a casual breeze
The voiceless movement of prayers:

So the bombs, riddling to ruin,
Caught only a common striving.
Victorious doom's undoing,
And light in the land of the dying.

August, 1940

XII. THE FALLEN WOODS

(New England Hurricane, Sept. 21, 1938-Fall of France, 1940)

I.

I have seen them again at their working
In orange and crimson;
Have watched them again at their weaving,
Thin carpets of color thrown over the haze-filled sky.
They, the wind-ravaged,
The scattered, the shaken
Trees of the tangled woodland that could not stand to die.

Great roots through the earth still upbulging,
High tops drooping downwards, together,
Halted and frozen in a last, futile tragic gesture,
Birch, hemlock, maple, elm: all slanted by a giant's hand.
As the hurricane raced up the hillslope,
Swinging up from the south, this multitude downwards was
drifted;
To where, by the granite ridge-summit,
The storm-god's fury had fled across their land.

I have seen them still falling, still waiting,
Sheaves of a tempest-heaped fire, their tops yet aflame with
faint scarlet,
And their roots half-wrenched free, and dying
Slow, through the soft yellow-butterfly-filled hours of belated
September days;
For the clock has now passed through two cycles,
Turning back to the hour when the sky fell flat, and the fury
sped hurtling across it;
Leaping with howling outcry through a sea of torn leaves and
split branches,

Breaking the no more peaceful, the deep-ravaged woodland
ways.

Sombre wreckage, trailed torches
Over the granite boulders;
Dimly flickering with green in the spring, in the summer deep-
entangled
By the shores of the stone-bordered brook, and along the mist-
filled pond.
These are now this year keeping
Their final pact of flame with the sun, they utter their scarlet to
nightfall,
As the faint life-sap at the core of them all is failing,
And the flickering play of the northern lights speaks of white
snow-fields beyond.

Out of the north with long steps onwards dancing,
Winter will swoop upon them;
Snowflakes burying the slanted poles, drift spinning fast through
bowed branches,
The broken beams lying split on the granite, having lost their
last power to breathe flame;
In some later spring faintly renewing,
Yet slowly, inescapably dying;
For since one swift dusk of destruction, they can never be the
same.

I I.

It came, it roared
From the frontier into conflict
The storm that comes once in a hundred years;
Then in September; presaging this last May.

Like falling trees before it
The people broke, and scattered;
Riot of motor-cars fled Paris streets
Under great palls of greasy smoke, empty the city lay.

One month of mounting horror,
And merriment became panic.
The Stukas sweeping over crowded roads,
Each sunset flashing death in some new way.

Armies dissolving, broken,
Thirsty troops ragged, unshaven, trying to hold
A copse beside the roadside with jammed guns;
Such was the tale of that betrayal-day.

We have thought peace might yet be everlasting,
But underneath all peace, there surged the naked fury
That swept the skies clean bare of all but horror,
Not to be lost till a century moves away.

No longer now, the vast drifts, deep, majestic,
Gold, orange, crimson, of October color;
Sickly and weak the flame of fall shall crawl, half-stricken,
And sick and stricken shall the nations stay.

I I I.

Rain for two steady days, and the rivers going
Out of their banks before it;
Nobody knowing
What may come next, where the fury next may hit.

And the world vexed
By a new, stabbing tenor
Peace on its deathbed racked
With a swift-leaping horror.

[49]

Peace, who speaks peace, since Spain
Goes down in nameless groaning;
Since Prague no more can stand
On that dread autumn morning
Before the gauntleted hand?

And since the repeated warning
Was not heeded here, nor heard,
The blast untrammelled yet shall make its path
Out of the world-wide ocean, through the land, foreboding
years of wrath.

I V.

They came forth out of darkness
They faced the south;
They bowed to the wind's breathing,
They are broken: they yet remain.

The milkweed lazily pours
On the still air, its floating white seed-flocks
Like snowflakes over the fallen;
Weeds, worm and slow decay for the great life that once stirred.

Their beautiful strength uprooted,
Bulwarks of power made useless.
All is to do again
In some age we cannot find.

Now, in the evening
From the great swathes left to silence,
From the black sheaves that lie ungathered, here by the slope
of the mountain,
There rises a last song.

“We lie here to remind you
That your effort may be spent in vain, your power may be
wasted
Your peace be an empty dream.

“Glory was ours, and yet a broken glory
Rests on these ravaged piles of fallen pine;

“Fed by a starveling life, a few flames fitfully smouldering
Break into fragments of growth here still, amid these deep-
strawn weeds.

“Marking that trail of flame
Lost through us; scattering onward
Wreck of another century, to make wan life renewed.”

*Peterborough, New Hampshire,
September, 1940*

XIII. GOOD FRIDAY

I.

Here, in the crossing of the crowded years
We trace a cross in dust; we draw a line
Upward, as reaching from this base, dense earth
To heaven's height which made the earth bear fruit;
Yet lay athwart it yet another, firm
As limit, as the sharp horizon-line.

As a man's shape, with muscled arms outspread,
We take this symbol; backbone stretched to east,
As the valleys of mid-Asia stood behind
Those nomads who first stalked the desert way;
The face to west, as a reaper might move upon
His field of harvest, colored with sunlit sheaves;
The right hand stretching north as strength protects
Harvest from winter wind: and the left hand
Poised over south as guarding the good land
Furrowed by ploughs through many a ripening day.

Here, as the coulter cuts a furrow on
Another century; as the grapes of wrath
Glow in new orchards, at each street crossing still
Four lines shall intersect; and over the land
The cross shall yet be traced; though through the air
The steady engines drone, and men without a goal
Go forth to battle, everywhere, nowhere;
Peace is not given till the sky is cleared.
The engines race to a stop; the walls close in.
Those sleep beneath the cross, who found the world
Lost in the drift beyond the searchlight's glare.

East, south, west, north; a shape still bounded by
Sorrow and joy of birth, hope hiding amid strife,
Mature achievement matched by an ebbing strength;
Brute force yet holding back the drift of days.
Lift cannot flower in fairness, as the years
Run on and we yet stand; till nailed upon
The cross of the hour, we watch the world loom high
Through human shapes, to something more than man;
Till we, as offspring of the dust through space
Extended, yet as gods constrained by time,
May find in daily deaths one thing that bides:

The world beyond the world, the springing up
Of one sure flower through death, the seasons faring
Beyond earth's greening-time, to where is shaped
Self-dedicated strength; the steady beat renewed
Of the years' shuttle; nature's worn, tireless hands
Reshaping on time's endless warp, a face:
Napkin of new green for another one
Of the million-fold renewal of men's sons —
Broken by doom, made God through heavenly grace.

I I.

At the borders of life, a horde
Of onward hurrying shapes;
The homeless, haunted host
Who have no human place,
The lost.

At the borders of life, the wail
Of an unchanging hope;
Harried beyond the pale
Of time, these shadows grope:
Memory of home must fail.

At the borders of life, the thought
Of the cup drunken
And the great agony:
Abandoned where nothing is wrought
And none can ever see,
Bodies grotesquely fallen
As they still sought to flee.

At the borders, beyond the borders,
Hope must be born again;
New shapes be forged from pain.
These, the eternal marauders
That unlike the foxes have no holes, and who now have night-
long lain
Under the heavy rain
That beats on the lost borders,
Long as our day shall last, as ghosts shall come up again
To challenge the grim night-warders,
Who guard the forgotten borders:
Until we become as they, who have mocked at our meaningless
gain.

I I I.

By the shallow river, as by a sea, come down from the high plains
to wander
Over a thousand miles of landscape, limitless, time out of mind;
By the white thickets of Chickasaw plum, scattered about over
yonder,
The stream struggled on through its sandbars: and battered
against them, blind.

By the lost rhythm of drumbeats, drummed up along through
the prairie,
Again awakening, windswept, something they never knew;

Heat in the height of the sky shook with the hoofs that were
shattered.
We greeted the latest minute as minutely on it flew.

Butterflies pass to the plains, and the tamarisks are tortured
With threads of spun sand. The vision of peace is not for a heart
here to keep.

Wilderness works over buffalo-bones with the buffalo-currant
blossom:

We have enough to long for, to fill the sky's blue steep.

And the oil-rigs here are lost; as the stream, evading bridges,
Shifts from one sandbar to another, across a mile of waste space.
Ripples of sand waver and merge, shifting their battered edges;
And the world is aloof and untroubled like a bronzed, impassive
face.

By the shallow river, as by a sea, slipping along into quiet,
Dreams there were many, and beacons set on the rounded hill,
dark as the day;

The seagulls would not soar here, nor the wind-scooped sand
change its riot.

The moment arose and it vanished. It left us but little to say.

I V.

The lamb is no more slaughtered,
New blood stains not the doorposts:
But the bitter herbs are ready,
The parting cup is poured.

We eat here, hurriedly,
Girt as for instant travel.
Shoes set upon our feet,
We know we cannot stay.

The youngest one shall ask us,
“What mean you by this service?”
The oldest one make answer,
“Once God passed over our houses.”

Bitter herbs we eat now,
Unleavened bread eight days after,
Under the black cross-shadow,
That stretches athwart the sun.

Through the valley of that shadow passing,
Down the vale of humiliation,
We go, where the Lamb is slaughtered;
We go where man stands free at last, filling with his arms the sky.

Oklahoma, Easter, 1941

XIV. JOURNEY DAY

(*To Charlie May*)

I.

Out of this sea of time, a hidden shape now rises;
A shape is kept aloof, lost once but here renewed;
A shape, a living-space, where millions have no dwelling,
Where the nations drift backwards and forwards, seeking their
 homes destroyed.
At the rock-ridge, the edge, the ledge above the stream
 beyond which is no passing,
And the valley-floor of grass, where time grows slowly,
With the oxen of the sun browsing eternally on it,
A living shape stands far, to be beyond surpassing:
Hand-hewn, aloof amid the trees; its beauty unalloyed.

The year's at the spring, but it fails;
June brings society weddings, clumps of rambler roses,
Dusty against the fence. The city fills
With drifts of khaki. War-clouds hold the horizon,
Making the light look sickly here. We sought long for salvation
But what we found was not the thing we sought. Now we alone
 can attain it
If we thread through the obscure wood, and turn to the far
 pastures
Where the oxen of the sun browse on through daylight, going
 slowly
To the valley-farms of the future, against the hard upland road.

I I.

At the edge of the stream beyond which is no passing,
The delicate lights flash, moving athwart pine-shadows:
Boles going down to stream-banks where gleam white button-
willows,
Against the clear green water-surface shimmering athwart the
trees.

At the edge of the margin of the sharp rock and the water
The jewel-weed flares upward; orange bracts that catch at
sunlight.
Upon them, black with spots of gold, a butterfly poises slowly,
Shutting his fans upon the dust-filled sunset light.

At the edge of the bank where the road lapses, and the dark
green stream rolls over,
We emerge from the shadowy wood to find the road now gone;
strange figures there stare at us,
Dull hostility and astonishment growing evident in their eyes.
Halloos are carried across. We only hear of the distance
Remote for us, but not for them. Their language speaks no more.
There will be echoed calls — but strangers we are to each other,
In the present as in the past, at the edge of that sundering shore.

I I I.

Not to see the peak towering
Grey-splintered in its loneliness, against the hillside pines;

Nor the valley floor drowned in the blue haze, lowering
To the cold green river, where clear water against dark granite
shines:

Not to know ever again the warm peace of a deep-grassed valley,
Surrounded by worn grey cliffs, with pine-clad, crumbling walls;

Was it for this we made the ultimate sally
Into those wilds, to know how a doom befalls?

The silence of the forest will hold, mysterious,
Logs left to smouldering rot, black chimneys without sound.

But we will know only this was not for us,
Nor could its secret be shared while we stood above the ground.

No thread of thought over the ridge runs back into the city:
No wind moves through the scattered ferns to make their
 meaning ours;

Wild, wide and strengthless now the valley drowns. If a mood
 of pity
Moves men to seek it in the future, no one now lives who cares.

I V.

It stood on the ridge, the shoulder
Of the lost mountain, still looking
Out to the silent forest,
Backed by its craggy wall;
It stood there, empty and hollow;
Six long years, till the silence
Grew more than of old. The bare flooring
Longed most for a light footfall.

Hunters and fishermen knew it;
In the evening they crouched coldly
About the red blaze, on its hearthstone,
Speaking of passing things;
The pallets spread on its flooring,
The bubbling meat in the skillet,
This was aloof from the meaning
Of the home, which had taken wings.

Wings of thought delicately extending
Back to its dream, the lost shadow,
The pulse of the thought that kept ticking
Like a beetle within the dark wood:
The dance and the play of late sunlight
Over the worn sills, quiet;
The track that led onward, untravelled,
This was its link with old good.

Those who had shaped it, scattered;
And one who had come, as a stranger,
To spy out the valleys, the mountains,
Turning away now his head;
As afraid of the whispering silence,
On the lost ridge, towards nightfall;
Shaping some final negation —
While the house waited, quite dead.

Light as the gleam of a rainbow,
The dreams came, and they shattered;
Fiddles that scraped, and swift footfalls
Drumming athwart the dark floors:
Year after year, yet no answer,
No new voice to rouse it to effort:
No face but the face of a stranger
Peering slow through the half-shuttered doors.

The pioneers came, and they vanished
As a wave through a century going;
Till they came to the ridge of this mountain.
There they broke and avoided this wall.
Two fugitive souls overleapt it,
And went further on into silence:
But fled as their task grew more heavy,
How little is left now to fall!

Now, since so much wildness and silence
Have taken old walls to their keeping;
Since those who, reluctant, turned thither
Were not the same ones it had known;
Through a night of fury and terror,
It summoned the lightning to save it:
Sucked under, it vanished from seeing,
And the lost home was thus overthrown.

v.

The way fades out, into blackness;
The doors and ravaged windows suddenly vanish.
We turn a corner, find
Life in another shape confronting us once more.

At the edge of the roadside, in the gathering darkness
We eat hurriedly, silent,
The bitter bread of the homeless spread once more.

We leave behind us
Nothing but empty echoes:
Ashes of rooms through which no footstep wanders,
Walls on which thought has written a wordless scroll no more.

At the edge of the roadside, in slow-walking shadow,
After the journey that found no destination,
We think of this far-off shelter, gone once more.

Somewhere a voice recalls us:

“Thus, thus they looked. I saw them stand amidst us.”

People smile, nod, commit the thought to silence there once more.

At the edge of the roadside, in the firefly glimmer,
Sparks we tread under;
Ashes we touch of what will rise no more.

We tie in a string together,
New memories of this failure
To add to the unseen future,
Left drifting in the lofty tides that haunt a far-shaped shore.

At the edge of the roadside, night
Moves without stir or question;
For some, loss unforgotten, for some a hope once more.

Now we have found afar,
Naught but the past slow-blackening
To scattered ashes of hope upon the ridge-crest;
Dreams thwarted by the fire amid the pinewoods
That look upon a star, once and no more.

Perry County, Arkansas, July, 1941

XV. SALEM CAMPGROUND

So old it was, the summer said no word;
The oaks had seen remoter scenes; had seen
Wagons under hooped canvas; a dense crowd
Kneeling by split-log benches on hard ground.
Shouting and shrieks the oaks had heard of yore;
The giant oaks were little changed, but now
The horseshoe of low cabins curved around
The white frame church, the gathering hummed with sound;
Glowed with soft lights. And people sat before
Their doorways as in the years that lived no more.

Speak to the mourning dove,
Crops are laid by;
Now is the time to wander
Under a changing sky;
The thunder-heads to southward gone away,
Now is the time to shout, to sing, to pray.

So old it was . . . there sat, in the shadowy door,
Old Uncle in his wheelchair, propped and held
By pillows, speaking but little since the stroke
Had worked its will upon him; Katie Lou,
The youngest, with her flaxen plaits of hair
Touching her shoulders, did as the others do,
Lifted her quavering voice in the hymn that poured
Its winding torrent through sustaining trees;
So much of toil, so much of care, yet now
The triumph, and the sense of hard-won ease.

“Throw out the lifeline, someone is sinking;”
Words thundered out, though not in grief, but gladness;
These were the lifelines, these work-fretted figures,
Taking their burden of years through night to day.

The yellow half-moon faltering had seen others,
Backs bent as they, but of a grimmer spirit;
The firefly's glow had marked long-buried mothers,
Soothing as these, some sleepy child to rest.

So old it was; as old as wandering;
As long ago as that first coming thither,
Days reared on days like the logs of a cabin lifted,
To build at last a storm-enduring wall;
Spirit may change its shape, but still the spirit
Takes the same way; and this the oak-trees witnessed;
Standing as when the free breath of the forest
Moulded the first trunk, and the first leaf went forth.

Speak to the whirring quail,
Ripe is the corn;
The fields whiten for harvest,
Summer is spent, and worn.
Over these treetops let life's dense grey flight
Pass as the prayer ebbs, into unchanging night.

So old, these have found peace, with death behind them;
Here in this grove is peace, arrest from striving:
Peace, not the peace of heaven, but given by heaven.
Life-peace in midst of death and works of days.
The firefly lights its lamp, and lets it scatter —
As the rain and the wind our peace is. Voices rising
Carry a tone that spreads beyond, beneath us;
Old Salem, seat of kings, seen as the darkness gathered,
And spread more dense, upon your ways be peace.

August, 1941

XVI. THE LAND IS CLEARED

I.

That which these two had dreamed, was not that which was done;
It was another, a far holier thing;
The river flowing in full spate, passing on
From the winter that brought war, into a tragic spring;
The bronze shoulder of the ridge that hung above,
As halting all the drift, to which the years
Had given impalpable weight; the harvest made by love
Out of the shifting current of ten thousand hopes and fears:

The magic song of the world, in the swift brooks that carry
Away both freedom and the unchanging weight
Of cares and years; here on this ledge there still was time to
tarry:

As light across the waters bore calm freight.
Oakleaf now red and pine dense green — the vivid change of
day —

This now was theirs at last, to build above the past;
In syllables that voiced the wavering way
That had been found to this firm height, at last.

This is the home of the spirit, where far hills
Weave to a shining valley; where the hour
Hangs motionless, chained. Such mood the spirit thrills,
To make more bold, pointing to a greater power.
Sped from the city streets, here two had lost war's blight,
In the creaking cry of the wild geese, southward trailing
In fanwise files at sunset, crowding down on night;
Struggle with sheer fatigue, not yet found unavailing.

I I.

That at which so many hands, made hot and weary, labored;
Each stone within this wall, each panel in this woodwork —
Must bear a human purpose, a light to tame these trees,
Scarcely begun.

The fire must glow anew now, upon a familiar hearthstone.
Carried for long and lost, rekindled, flame must bear high,
Its grey smoke wavering upwards, its breath from dawn to dusk:
Towards the moving sun.

That at which so many hours, in labor, fought and struggled
To give it birth, so many faces leaned upon in light of expectation,
Must fill these walls with song now, crowd every nook to bursting
Before the long night summons, and the corners merge to one;

The far hope is made near now, the distant land close-beckons,
Rivers of time run athwart its face, but thought moves over the
rivers,
Seeking in fields remote this transient stay of brightness,
Finding the road that winds to west, through the dawn-evening
done.

I I I.

The river roars
Fed high by wintry floods;
From the great plains to westward
Carried away.

Each ridge here gazes
Upon some plain beyond,
Vast roaming for the spirit
To find its chosen way.

The river bears
From house to barn,
From the plowed field to grass,
Another day.

And no man knows
How fast it goes;
No boatman dares its current
In any human way.

Give to the river
Time that is spent, but keep your space in thought
Well-tilled; through change at last discover
A changeless way.

I V.

In the pines, greatness;
In the shadow of the hills, greatness unfulfilled.
Shall I, because of greatness
Still fail the choice I willed?

The year ends in loud thunder;
Lightning still flashes through the pines at dawn.
Shall I because of fear and wonder
Live lonely and withdrawn?

In the river, fury only,
And the loud wind roaring above the loosened rain.
I shall arise and set firmly
These stones above my pain.

Fixing them true and steady
Here, and around a light of changeless peace
Where rises still a struggling life, made ready
To find in toil release.

In the pines, darkness,
In the drift of the river, winter coming on.
Time to have done, time to rise up out of darkness,
Time to atone.

v.

Set stone here to stone,
Till this be made my own;
Join wood to wood,
See that the work be made good.
Keep many trees
So that my heart may find ease;
Here in this shaken wood of days,
May I, of my desire,
Await the ebbing of earth's offered fire.

August 23, 1941—January 3, 1942

XVII. THE STATUE OF LIBERTY SPEAKS, 1941

(Dedicated October 28, 1886, by President Grover Cleveland)

When I arose in bronze, the North was rich and cold;
The Kiowa kept their skin tepees; among the Sioux
Sitting Bull sat, scheming and growing old:
Anarchists in Chicago made headlines in the news.

Fifty-five years of life is a short span of time;
But now the age of steel reigns full, and the stone age is gone.
The Ozark hollows are charged with a clamorous war-design,
As Grand Coulee brings westward a new dawn.

So much I have seen and lost! The Gilded Age rose full;
Vanderbilts outbidding Astors; in twelve years
A shame-stained war with Spain; the viscid pool
Of labor churning, stirring new hopes, old fears.

It was once said: "I lift my lamp beside the golden door."
Sternly I held it up, to show, for many men to see,
Wilson, the sternly just, betrayed by his folk once more;
Such crimes were here committed in the name of Liberty.

Fighting and failing soon. Better were those who spoke
Their full disgust for war; and spoke it well.
When 'history grew bunk' and safety woke
A new charm in men's hearts, inured to that last hell:

Stamped by the clatter of the loud, dull machines
They made, which carried them afar, afar,
And back again, to face their monstrous sins;
As nature was defrauded, more and more.

At last, as if by thunderbolt, upon an autumn day
Not Washington but Wall Street cracked. I knew
The smoke-screen of men's lies rolled clean away,
And far beyond the city, lay the blue,

Untroubled and untouched: freedom, but not for long.
Europe still seethed with hate. There came at last
One who could speak and did: Give wrong for wrong,
Match lie with lie. The stronger lie will last.

This is the world I have. About my changeless torch
Fly swarms of lost souls now. They cry aloud,
Where rests the vision here? Upon this perch
The dead lie heaped, the living are quelled and cowed.

Now has struck deep and full, across the stricken plain,
Where wan men wander, having no place to go,
The crash of wars that falling, forge again
Another folk to one, bidding them face their foe.

Yet what our greed has taught, may rule us, easily, still;
And what old habits urged, may yet be inly ours:
The first shock over, once again our will
May yet resume the old path, of its blind and dull affairs;

Better not fill the terror of this day
With brassy clamor; better to come in pain.
And with grave faces stand here now and say,
We were not worthy; we must seek again.

We must achieve at last the never yet achieved;
A light no human soul has for long striving found;
A godlike gleam above a world bereaved.
This — or we are not worthy of this ground.

There is no compromise for us, and no escape,
Nor paltering for time. Now is the dusk, not dawn.
Put out that torch and swathe me up in crape,
Or shape a faith that saves the world for man.

November, 1941

XVIII. THE TIGER'S HOUR

I.

It all came so swift, and so sudden,
Defying at last, fixed laws;
None knew the hidden reason
None guessed at the far cause.

It shattered the crazy pattern
Of our lives set apart;
Changing all things to an instant
Contraction of the heart.

Amid music it thundered
Silencing every tone;
Beyond all wastes it wandered,
Till the folk stood out as one.

One, in the slackened weakness
Of the Sabbath, laid so still;
One in their hidden greatness,
One in their shaken will.

II.

There are moments of time that seem ageless;
No one exists who is not changed by them.
This was precisely one such moment
In its swift impact on the sons of men.

One such moment as this was
Came when the body of the young Jewish carpenter hung on its
cross by the hill;
Though over the plains of China as in Rome, that moment.
Peace brooded, calm and still.

Another such moment sounded
When the Goths' trumpets sounded, and Rome was sacked and
won;
Though in the pillared basilicas, at that moment,
The priests sang for the dawn.

Such another moment in the warm south sea-breeze whispered,
When Columbus' three tiny ships saw the tall green islands ahead
In the blue waters of the deep, spicy Caribbean —
Thinking Cathay had come to the long-spent dead.

Even so was that moment wakened,
When running before the fire-ships, the Armada's bulk struck
the storm;
And the sails were torn from their yards, in the gale that swept
up the Channel,
And England, unequal before fate, was saved from her last doom
and harm.

More terrible yet, the moment
When over the maddened Bastille, the flag of revolt first flew
And the people danced in the Paris streets, red-ripe for
Revolution,
As the old kings suddenly knew.

Great and tragic the moment
When over the Southern fields, the grey armies their weapons
laid down.
And Lincoln waking for the last time, in the White House
Knew he had dreamed of peace — and a great ship coming on.

None shall describe that moment
When Wilson, facing Versailles, knew inwardly he had failed;
And stubbornly fought against his clear-held knowledge,
As weariness of war and the evil peace prevailed.

These are moments of time that seen ageless;
No one exists who is not changed by them;
This was precisely one such moment.
Peace was no longer; war took all tribes of men.

I I I.

Under the weakness, the long held irresolution
Rise up and shout with pride;
Let music sound, let drums and trumpets spread now
Wild blessing on that tide

That made us one, one in unchanging purpose
One in unbroken will:
That fused and forged anew the scattered atoms
That we were still.

One people now; and over hill and valley
Let the loud hammers ring;
Till spring, with quickening victory, shall encircle
Our land with blossoming.

Under the faltering, the self-pity rising,
Stern in its steady sweep,
As eagle flying from grim ice-packed mountains,
This challenge scatters now the vague dreams of our sleep.

Bringing us out of the ages unforgotten
Prospect for effort such as no people ever had;
Fury of a great work for living millions,
Glory of a dark sleep for our heroic dead.

I saw them walk along the street,
 People with plain homely faces:
 Keeping life's even beat
 In their familiar places.

Not splendid, no, nor glorified;
 But my kin and my kind.
 They had more potent cause for pride;
 I who had never seen them thus, had been, before this, blind.

No rising sun, with dragon-guile
 Could daunt them, from afar.
 In the grave dignity of their style
 They shaped a new-born star.

Fit were they now, and better,
 Since the evil assault had been planned
 To smite the might of the traitor
 With strong right hand.

One people, ageless,
 Who never, in that moment, knew
 What power, changeless,
 In their hearts could dream, devise for man, and do.

December 8, 1941—January 8, 1942

XIX. LONG JOURNEY, LATE ARRIVAL

I.

Now let the world move you,
But be unmoved — so will you find reward;
So fight your way through.

Take now the purring, throbbing streamlined train
That waits for you;
Or take the aeroplane.

Let time fly past you,
But glean the seeds of time — and, seeking no reward —
Scatter some grains of thought which last, on waves of green and blue,
That come by, hurrying hard.

Think, think forever,
Through loss, through change, through triumph, through exile.
Let life be in your thinking
For a long while.

All things that live, have being,
Wait for completion, by an ordered seeing.

Take, speedily take, the purring streamlined train
That waits for you;
Or take the whirring-engined aeroplane.

There is so much to see yet;
Words were made long ago so no one need forget.

II.

If you find yourself left late at night in the great dusk-shrouded
station,

If you are alone, and no one in the city knows about you or
cares for your presence

Speak into darkness, and say: "All things that I once knew
are gone;

The voices of the poets, the roars of the cheering crowds, the
feet of the dancers,

Moulder under this quiet rain. All, all has now fallen,

Trickling as cold drops down the cliffs of these challenging
buildings —

To lie, at last, deep-buried, beneath the stone."

If you have faith left, a living spark burning somehow and
somewhere inside you,

Waiting between two trains, on a journey you may not yet
think of as ended:

Speak to the dusk-filled vault of the station: — "Here as my
baggage is shifted,

And the crowd waits, lighting their cigarettes, ere the dark
train-gates are opened;

Contact is made with invisible, stirring worlds;

These are the fields for my thought yet to explore; the limitless
limit

Of the journey and the arrival. These fields afar, I once planted
With living cell of the dream, and grain ripening white for
new harvest.

Keep hidden the old seed now. Scatter it not forth for the asking,
Some may yet eat the bread of your effort, though they know
not that it is yours."

III.

Oh God, to think that the great whale
Should have dived in the sea, and gone down!

That the high bridge of steel should have been broken
That once joined town to town;

That uneasily, in the shadow
Stir and whisper the rumors of endless war;

God, to think that this life-journey should be so endless,
The near goal so desperately far!

I V .

Now let the long horizon, as a blue wall to northward, blind us
To the rhythm shared again;
The renewal of day after night here shall forever find us
Twain made more than twain.

The coming of spring after showers, the shifting of the seasons,
Shall be glory enough and to spare;
And our crown of life shall be woven, anew, for the very best
of reasons
As we waken in that air.

Now shall completion come, and the power won through long
bearing,
Actively passive, the full weight of a day
That may be recalled, as the ageless pines now are up-flaring
About the long river's way.

Freely we meet and merge and go on with our striving
As the river-bank meets the stream; and both are enriched and
blest.
And after the long hard journey, and the late arriving,
Such meetings are the best.

March, 1942

XX. REPOSE IN STRIFE

I.

Having first wandered east, south, west, and north,
Turning and winding in an ever-changing way,
And having learned but little more for his late going-forth,
Here, on a ridge of land, he turned at last, at bay.

In a fair castle made of well-joined stone,
Finer than those cloud-castles that he once had dreamed;
Keeping his steady watch, no more alone;
And over his head, the proud days onward streamed,

Waving their banners in the wind, of gold
By sunlight woven; wrapped in long shrouds of rain.
Here, having sought for long, he chose to grow more old;
Without the clamor of the mad sea's refrain

Which men of passion seek, but men of virtue lose,
When they may choose to keep a steady course, at all.
For the sea, unharvested, holds no further use
For him who once has crossed it. Here grew, tall,

The pines that knew no seasons, scorned all time.
Such being his, he could not keep them still;
And out of their movements came unsought, a line
That he must write; which stirred his silenced will.

Guarded against intrusion, free from chance,
His strangeness noised afar, his humanness kept home,
He bore a burden of fire, made to mark slow advance,
Where he was least alone when most alone.

Out of the night, a sigh;
 Wind like a faun's awakening;
 Shadows passing by;
 As the stars, unshaken, sing:
 What wavering and invisible breeze
 Here stirred uncertain memories?

No return down that path
 Where the faun alone is lying,
 Wounded by the wild wrath
 Of the river-willows, dying.
 He rests where the stars keep
 Over the pines their watch, untroubled, deep.

Not to feel ever again
 Granite walls rock and quiver,
 In the breeze that through leaves came
 That morning up the river;
 Not to know, nor have heard
 Flute-ripples of a bird!

Now, through the afternoon
 To be rapt in dream and taken
 Where the stream plays its tune
 For we two who were not forsaken;
 Life unto life enlaced,
 And I, the last to taste!

Out of the night, a sigh;
 Strings in the music muted;
 What water-nymph will cry
 Over a dream uprooted?
 So many suns long gone;
 So little reckoned, dawn!

I I I.

By the edge of the hewn woodland,
By the drift of the dying pine-boughs,
By the secret place of the rocks,
The violets bloomed, that year,
Like shy and startled eyes.

Blazoned heraldic
Over the brown tatter of the leaves, they flared;
Purple that faded softly
Into the blue-grey of the promising March sky.

So wild is spring yet,
Here at the edge of the ploughland;
That the wild flowers flaunt
Their beauty, here, ere furrows have known green.

So swift is April coming
Now, ere the sluggish blood awakens for new springtime,
The redbud, jagged, thrusts its purpled boughs out
Here, ere we see the slightest work of sun.

So let me shape, prepare,
Long, long before the hour of gathering harvest,
In the wild moment when the world is moving elsewhere,
Some seeds that may bloom on in peace, untroubled,
Through the blown drift of many years gone by.

I V.

By the fag end of the town, where the pinky spring-beauties
flourished,
For their free hour of triumph, too soon to pass away;

Flaunting their brightness now against old hopes that long since
perished,
One of us now must turn back, taking his lonely way.

Here, where the pioneers reared their homes, befitting a proud
achievement
Soon to be broken by a future none of them, surely, could
guess,
Before it dawned, I go. And the cardinal, for bereavement,
Flutes his reiterant phrase, as a choir boy might chant in a Mass.

Much would I wish to know, what the pioneers felt in those
Aprils
When the oaks were younger and stronger, and time had less
distance to go;
But if they told the bumbling wild bee, he dropped it all on
his travels —
No hint of that secret lasts. It is something I never shall know.

Hewn is the new from the old. And help is not offered too easy
By heaven, to those who may seek it. One must wander far
off and thrive
Wrestling with soil never ploughed; and making no moment too
lazy,
As did the proud ones who lived here once; too lazy to labor
and live.

By the fag-end of the town, the redbud has come now to flourish,
Like flashes of jagged pink lightning, on the rain-cloud's breast
of grey,
And the magnolia stands stately and green. But here is a thing
that must perish,
Against the life that dares to be new in its living-created way.

Earth to the earth, is for the living, not the dead.
It is for those who live these words were said.

The spirit does not need them. Earth will spare
The vivid spirit, flashing through the air,

But not the living flesh. This still must groan
Athwart the earth and heap up stone on stone;

This still must lead the shining keel of plough
Through stump-encumbered acres, row on row;

This still must wait, till the heat works its will
Upon the springing field set by the hill;

Repose in strife, to finally ebb and pass,
Where the earth whispers that all flesh is grass.

March-April, 1942

XXI. THE PIONEER YEAR

I.

This is the year when the bird-foot violets flourished
From mid-March to the gates of May; when the poised white
 petals of dogwood
Met the spiked flame of the redbud, and they went up together
Through Chickasaw plum, through white drifts of haw; the
 strange new season
Of war to the ends of the earth, and peace that came secretly,
 slowly
Into soul after soul. . . .

 The year of pioneering,
When they came within sight of the river,
Silently winding past pine-crowned headlands, by crumbling
 bluffs stained with green lichen,
Into the wide floor, silent,
Of meadows washed with sun.

 There they halted
And built them a home; set a framework, upon which the rock
 rose up slowly,
Guarding as treasure the memories and dreams of many lost
 years. This their refuge
From the dusty roads, and the going
Through cities packed with dense effort: beside that wilderness
 river,
One year filled with a single thought, ere they sought to
 wander elsewhere;
The year of the pioneer.

I I.

When a new life begins with a new hope, and the old ways are
ended,
There is something to take from that old life, dreams that are
cherished and carried;
Dreams of homes that were unbuilt, sites never cleared, lands
lying beyond the mountains
To east or to west.

There is yet more to be added anew as space after space
breathes its secret:
Here is where this old hope may safely grow, where this bygone
vision may flourish;
But to him who would see this done, time must be pledged,
one must mortgage the future,
In labor and in rest."

I I I.

The lifeseed that we are has power to shape
Worlds within worlds. A hand may stoop and scatter
The tarnished yellow coins of the flat corn lying
On the brown unplowed earth. But the rain answers
The prayer for increase in the fields, sends skyward
The stalk that surpasses, at last, all human effort
That set it there.

Maize goddess bidding
Behind green veils of leaves, now is the pregnant moment,
Before the plumes spring forth.

Send the rain cloud and scatter
The tassels along the trail the corn makes, going upward
Across the mountain in the afternoon.

I V.

The cloud lay athwart the river
In the afternoon, but the meadows beyond flashed in sunlight
Their scarves of green: —
Before the loud thunder came on, with its winds and its rain-
drops,
Rushing down to greet the warm loam. Portentous, full of omen
For us that hour.

The cloud lay athwart the river;
But the river moved on beneath it, bank-full, untroubled
By the soon-coming storm. The river would keep its course,
unchanging,
Passing the pine-clad hill slopes, and tending south to the low-
lands;
As it had in the bygone years, ere the people travelled
Along its swift, muddy current, to see the clouds veer and pass.

The cloud lay athwart the river;
But suddenly, now, its dark cloak of shadow was rent by a
gold flash of sunlight —
Thrust through like a sword, sweeping up to the forests beyond
these rich fields. Light and shadow
In us are truth, and they shape the movement of life which
is faith unchanging
However often or far the clouds may cast their rain.

V.

Out of the fulness, the completion of the season,
There is yet more that the merciful hours may bring;
This year they brought for a reason, or no reason,
One more swift, lingering spring

Rain raged and the sky thundered; gone was the redbud
blossom;
The dogwood came — and bees forgot to sting
As they buzzed through the drooping wisteria; hugged close
to the earth's worn bosom
Was a naked, newborn spring.

Worlds crumbled swiftly. The soul inly flourished
In prayer, in praise, in peace. The offering
Of Self to the More-than-self went on. Well nourished
Was that queer spring.

Fire flickered, raged. The way through the wilderness,
changing,
Gave more at last than human words could sing;
There was light and the quiet of night and the late, last-ranging
Spirit of one more unaccomplished spring.

V I.

Under the walking shadow
Of the high cloud that froze the stream to glass,
They moved and gathered fruits of their new growing
As the months moved, to pass.

Under the eternal sunrise,
Which was the sunset also, lay that land.
The heart that harvested there, was now the woman's.
The hand that had scattered the grain was the man's hand.

Their home still lingered, waiting
Silent at noonday, darkly still at night.
As the hearts of these who filled it, tested by loss, went seeking
Under the walking shadow, the great light.

April-May, 1942

XXII. THE BUILDERS OF THE BRIDGE

(In Memoriam James Franklin Lewis)

All day long, minute by minute, came the sound;
Men hammering at the bridge. Dark hammers fiercely clattered
Upon the rivets. Now before them crystal moments sprang
And shattered into glass. The bay beneath
Over which steamers threshed, was soon a sea of fragments
Grey-green, updancing into wavelets. Sound
Repeated, rat-tat-tat, took windows there
And shook them, scattering their watchers far and wide
Across the steamer-path.

Two men clung there
At ends of the gaunt, exploring spans that spread
Out into emptiness, a gap between.
One workman, lean and dark, glanced from his perch to north
That morning, saw a comrade far beyond
To south who did not raise his gaze. This fellow workman there
Guided his rivetting-drill, which seldom quivered
In his capable hands. A big, blond man he was
And quite oblivious. The lean darker one
As struck by some sudden thought that came from where
The wavelets, jangled, startled by the fresh breeze
Shook far below him, shaping their chaos-cry,
Stopped his work and stared hard.

The rivetted steel,
Earth metal, elemental, chilled and cooled
Before the steady gaze he found at last flung back.
This older man was one who had seen dark hills
Deep-tunneled, and great forests flung away
To find the ore. He had the granite in him
Which yields not, unless blasted. There was challenge

In that cool, steady gaze. And yet a warmth
Of answer came from his rivetting-drill that spoke
One instant later, weaving with netted sound
In the struts shaping to uphold the bridge,
Montony of a meaning made intent,
Above the sullen chaos of that bay.

Past into future fused stirred sudden thought;
Each morning, after, both men looked and grinned
At one another hammering on. Mechanically the wind
Between them raged and whistled. Days of calm
And thunder days with domes of cloud that piled
High in the heat their heads, and days of gales
With the oilskin flapping about the legs, and fingers
Grown numb and clammy, guiding the quivering drill
While the seething surface of the bay came close,
Went there about them, as they labored still.

They met at last. As strangers sometimes will.
Strangers, and yet the bridge that they had built
Stood there about them. Pavement upheld by steel
Between the shoulders of a bay estranged
From everlasting to the hour they came
Together; this was theirs and yet not theirs;
Shaped by their hands, directed by a plan
Which other men might know, not hammer on,
Making access to the ledge they stood upon
And spanning the gulf, where steady heads might fare,
And some could walk, though others jumped to fall. . . .
This was full theirs, as went that wandering day.

Bands of the west, dark fading, stirred to rose
Before them, like great hands, tremendous, shaping
A bridge of fire across the sky. Before them slowly gathered
Night in anticipation and a breeze

That stirred the bay to long wave-rollers packed
With thoughts as yet unspoken. Oceans spanned
And the bridge going on. The headlands close
Where desperately had mariners heaved the sail
And held on tacking, through dark years gone by;
The world assembled as the sunset flared,
And night stars nooning took the waste of sky.

Pontifically their hammers had roared down
The years onspeeding, ready to vent their wrath
And quench repeated blows. The drift of time was spanned
By that which was uprooted speeding on
From north into the south, and that which stirred
Through the dark-rooted south to welcome change,
Coming as March winds shook the hickory trees
About a home. The bridge that spanned all thought
Between two epochs stood. Thought into substance fused.
Grey steel unguarded, gave to each man his way.

And shall we say these worked in vain, who knew
But that they had to meet? And shall we say
That hopes thereby were blasted, as the bridge
Spanned the dark gulf beneath? We who have seen
How time, as by God driven, takes a thought
And flings it over lands and seas alike
Shaping a world, which earlier was no world,
Till time is no more time, till the dark drift
Bursts to a future³ Men reshape the planet
Each time a bridge is built. None knows the hour nor how
Necessity becomes beauty. Since the form
Flowers upon the act, that act is best
Which rests on interaction, more than self;
Which through the self expresses more than thought,
All that the self can find to bridge its human way.

Birch twined with banyan, lotus rivalling rose,
Cactus commingled with the Alpine pine
Which battled where the wind-blasts swiftly gathered
Across the snow-gulf, where the glare-ice clung
Each morning to green needles — all the world
In thought and in the feeling from which thought
Is shaped, moved toward that bridge two men had built
For other men. And no bombs fell to break
The spell of netted steel, that spelled a task
Completed in new form, for coming day.

This which I dreamed, this vision came unsought,
Of a steel arc that spans the earth and sky
And spurns the ocean, now I put within
The hands of one, strangely my friend. The bridge unbuilt
But in dim words which fade as fading coals
Within the fire-grate thinning — hope's vain theorem
Not fashioned out of steel, but dreams that sway
As wild as the grape-cables, which still cling
To the pines here, I give. And may the thought
Which shaped this song at last, be yet to better texture wrought.

April, 1943

XXIII. THE FIRST LOT

(*Summer, 1941*)

Moving through the green morning
By the cross-roads store, where the people went on their errands
To and fro, simply; and the sparse frame farmhouses were
 scattered
Amid the tent-caterpillar-ravaged, scrub persimmon trees;
A column of olive-drab trucks rolled southward, through the
 forgotten hill-country
Of the slow upland South; and in each one, men in helmets
Stared casually at the wayfarers walking the roads beside them,
Negro and white; and the wayfarers stared in their turn.

These were the first lot,
Going through summer to this spot
Willingly, unwillingly;
Two years ago — the memory
Is what time will not blot.
Now they are scattered far,
From Tunis to Australia;
They followed death, night after day,
Through the first months of war.

The land had never guessed such, had scarce seen
An armed man pass that way since when the ragged conscripts
Of the South broke; and grey footsoldiers scattering,
Left hill and plain wide open for long conquest.
These men were strangers, too; and an embarrassed shyness
Kept them aloof from the lush South, where people
Enmeshed in dreams, had gone so long, unmoving.
Now their last dream was shattered by a thousand ways of war.

These were the first lot,
Actors in the tragic plot
That the world must sometimes bear;
Waking many a casual stare
As hearts grew hard and hot.
No one who marked them moving by
Dared say, "We failed; you must atone."
Southward in olive monotone
They streamed through that July.

The borders of the world were sick; the bale-fires rising
Burst forth, now here, now there; the flame leaped higher
On Russia, threatening Moscow; England bore
Deep, unforgettable scars; the oceans ravaged
Grew gaping voids ships could not span, as that drab-olive convoy
Hundreds of trucks deep, rolled through dusty summer
Going southwest; the rhythm of the land
Was changed from peace to war then, though a faint hope of
 peace
Low-flickered, fading; as the tent-caterpillars
Greyly, wove web on web through green persimmon trees.

These were the first lot;
Testing their strength at shell and shot;
Men who were mighty, men
Such as the world may not see again,
Focussed upon this spot.
Deeply the landscape shows
As June anew holds sway,
We must bear on through a way
Untravelled, which none knows.

June 23, 1943

XXIV. TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

(*To Scott Greer*)

Fabulous energy poured forth; these astronomical figures
Of bridges and of highways, and tall buildings
Raping the sky; the plane that finds no spot upon the planet
Longer than sixty hours remote; the peace of a green hillside
Sentineled with steady pines, disturbed by the white fury
Of a bomb suddenly breaking; more billions spent for war;
And the war before that, in which twenty millions of people
 had to die,
Because they could not win it, but were dragons' teeth sown
 for new harvest —
And none emerged without bitterness, except in the vast land of
 Russia,
Where out of starving and horror there rose a red star;
Or in the volcanic chaos of Mexico, where the Indian wakened,
 forgotten,
Who had slumbered for four hundred years, hungrily, angrily,
 drumming
Then slipping back to his hidden crag. Day by day now, the
 eruption
Of steel-blast furnaces ranked; the massive, iron-towered
 confusion
Of the oil refineries sweltering under Oklahoma sky;
And the steel-skeletoned shipyards, with their travelling cranes
 tilted for war,
Their towering keels on the ways aloft, amid the clamor of
 hammers.
These are our modern monsters, so recent, yet seeming primeval;
And if we shrink back before them, we must drug ourselves,
 far from today.

And shall this be all? Shall we never escape from vast cities,
With their sour death-smells washed away every night, their
 leprous defilement
Eating into the stone by noon? The reek of the wasted lives
Crawling slowly along each street, moves onward with them and
 makes war:
While afar dream the fields and the high trees are loud with great
 voices
Unheard, that might quicken the soul and make perfect
That link, half lost and half-forged, between the head held in
 contact, and the heart seeking alone.
Wings were given to men, but not that they might the more
 easily fall
As Icarus, washed to the ocean. Now the long trail of the bomber
 has broken
Through boundaries and beings alike, bringing all down to one
 horror.
Let us take from the slow majesty of the brooding fields and far
 mountains
The water, the earth, and the sky as our garments — and guard
 each here his hearthstone, alone.

Can humankind bear much reality? What peace can now follow
That is not the peace of the starving? The great cathedrals have
 vanished;
The market-halls and the wine-vaults are ruin. Men have grown
 wolves, fleeing cities;
Europe is a ravaged plain on which stand wrecks of bombers,
And burnt-out parks of tanks amid a litter of rubble
That once were human homes. And new-built cities may take
 long to rise.
May the men and the women who are to live in them, have ever
 before their eyes
Splendor of stone, the shining panels of glass,
And trees high-standing, witness of nature's treaty

Which bids man trust his neighbor, unseen. Let there be now
no more
The factory smoke that drifts from door to door
Bringing back drunken wailing that another conscript soldier
Has gone to lay down his life for another set of tyrants,
Let there be sun for long and the slow, steady twining
Of the vine about the fig-tree. Thus in some future season,
When the door is shut on the two-faced God, and Janus is cold
and rotten
Men may salute with pride and hope some other century.

June 13-15, 1943

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