

**THE BOOK WAS
DRENCHED**

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OU_210842

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

THE MILLSTREAM
AND OTHER POEMS

THE MILLSTREAM
AND OTHER POEMS

BY
RALPH LAWRENCE

LONDON
MACMILLAN & CO. LTD
1944

COPYRIGHT

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY R. & R. CLARK, LIMITED, EDINBURGH

To the Memory of Philip

CONTENTS

	PAGE
FOUR SONNETS ON JOHN DONNE	I
MORTEHOE	4
COLTSFOOT	5
' IN EXITU ISRAEL	6
FOLLY FIELD	8
PORTENTS	10
WOOD MAGIC	11
THE MILLSTREAM	12
SUNRISE AND STARLIGHT	13
ROSEBAY I N LONDON	14
BATTLE	15
GREECE, 1941	16
LEAF-GATHERING, 1942	17
OVERTON'S ASPEN	18
HOSTAGES	19
OCTOBER	20
SUNFLOWERS	21
T H E VIGIL	23
DIVERSION	25
T H E SWANS	27
ANGLICAN	28
THE QUARREI	30
DUST	31
THE RETURN OF THE CHILDREN	32
MRS. DOBBS DIES	33
LAPFORD	37
LOVE I N WINTER	38
EXHORTATION	39
WORTH MATRAVERS	40

	PAGE
THE FOURTH WINTER	41
ANTON TCHEHOV	42
FAME	43
SPANISH REQUIEM	46
HEMLOCK	48
QUIETISM	49
THE TREELESS LAND	50
THE WEAPON	51
HARPSICHORD AIR	52
MIST	53
LOGOS	55
THE MARTYRS	56
T H E WIND	58
DEATH	61
THE LUTANISTS	62
A CITY CHURCH, A.D. 1943	63
THE SCEPTIC A S LOVER	65
THE HOURGLASS	66
W. B. YEATS	68
TEARS	69
FIRE	70
NOCTURNE	71
A M KAMIN	72
SNOW	74
ON AN AIR BY BACH	75
SUN AND SHADOW	77
Vox ULTIMA CRUCIS	78
GRIEF	So

FOUR SONNETS ON JOHN DONNE

I

FOR this man's soul, incessant warfare's waged —
A blindfold war of foray and retreat.
Who knows what adversaries are engaged,
Or why upon this shadowy field they've met !

Here is no candid duel of cut-and-thrust
Fought to a finish in the sun and wind,
But rather some distemper of the dust
Which brings anew Gethsemane to mind.

Regard his portrait; mark its salience now,
Since here the mind's dichotomy's expressed :
See eyes with lips contend, and chin with brow
In this swashbuckling servitor of Christ:

Mark, above all, how every feature glows,
Lapped in the light that only genius knows.

ii

Death compassed him about: in each foul street
Of the fair city crowned by Old St. Paul's
It set its gins to snare predestined feet,
While every alley echoed passing-bells.

Before Cadiz he saw companions fall —
Ships seemed more filled with phantoms than with
men —
Voluptuously observing Death annul
Such fragile hopes as budded in the brain.

I

The poet's luring fancy was bewitched
By the penumbra that surrounds the soul.
Corruption was his text; and, as he preached,
He watched Ann's face dislimn into a skull —

Dislimn, and then refashion from the bone;
But what was once his, now was Christ's alone.

III

No longer could he strip the April boughs
To weave a garland for his love ; instead,
He set an autumn wreath on sterner brows,
Thus to aggrandise a more glorious head.

As once with Essex he'd confronted Spain,
So now with Christ he matched his strength with sin.
And with what zest he turned to war again
As, sheathing his lean sword, he drew his pen !

He served his Saviour as he'd served his love —
With no less complex passionate regard ;
And none need look beyond his words for proof
Of the dark rapture which was his reward.

'Twixt God and man was forged an iron tie,
Since each had known what pain it was to die.

IV

So close to ours that vanished age appears:
The ache of love's unchanged, the itch of lust.
Man's dual mind still grovels and aspires —
The same quietus comes when all is past.

No skilled physician could so well dissect
The labyrinths which honeycomb the heart
As this adventurer, whose intellect
Too often proved the captain of his art.

He hammered verse as craftsmen hammer bronze,
So vehemently that it's lambent still
With the same turbulent magnificence
As when the first draft spluttered from his quill.

So, though far hence that golden age has gone,
Immortal and immutable stands Donne.

MORTEHOE

FROM over the edge of the world the tide comes rolling;
 Over the drawn-steel-wire's horizon-rim
Foaming the fugal tide comes, falling, foaming, forming,
 Though the day dazzle or dim,
As it bears on its breast its brood of dancing vessels,
 Squat, shapely, square and slim.

And who can watch this sea-tide rearing, roaring,
 Without he spares a thought
For that tide whereon we float our desperate vessels —
 Vessels so dearly bought —
Of which, as they sail from the heart's precarious haven,
 Too few return to port ?

COLTSFOOT

Now that the wind threshing the woods is silenced,
And the frost has slackened,
Amidst the grass stippling the railway-embankment,
Soot-smirched, smoke-blackened,
Doubling the sun which brought the flower to birth
In this mean place,
With due humility — as befits a weed — the coltsfoot
Uplifts its kindling face.

Ignored by the tide of city-men with pipes and evening-
papers
Intent on firelit homes,
Insidious as sleep, to this neutral London suburb,
Spring, the invincible, comes.
And my thoughts go out to friends who have their sons or
lovers
Domiciled far away,
In the hope that spring will bring balm to their hearts, then
leave them securely
Buttressed against dismay.

February 1943

‘ IN EXITU ISRAEL ’

ONE sees them frequently,
These charming people,
Walking along the reassuring pavements
Of, for example, High Street Kensington :
That purlieu which still preserves,
Despite repeated bombings,
Its aspect of serene Edwardian comeliness
And impeccable gentility.
Often the man wears slim brown pointed boots
And a beard,
With his coat carefully patched and his trousers ironed;
The woman, perhaps, a muff
And a hat which was modish some dozen seasons ago.
Obviously foreigners,
They amuse, and slightly impress one by their elaborate
manners
Which put to shame
One's habitual British brusquerie.
One sometimes makes their acquaintance,
And goes to drink after-dinner coffee
In their furnished, complacently-hideous rooms
Smothered in dingy plush,
With faded family photographs
Belonging to the landlady
Hanging above the lavishly-draped mantelpiece,
With Uncle John in the place of honour —
Uncle John with the side-whiskers and white tie,
Who drank himself to death
In eighteen-ninety-three ;
But who still preserves
In wilting effigy
An illusion of prosperous middle-class respectability...,
One drinks coffee

With these charming people.
Gathering round the fire,
We discuss contemporary art in cultured accents.
These charming people
Are of what used to be called
The finest flower of European civilisation ;
Yet are now nothing but flotsam
Spewed up by the scarlet tide
Frothing over the plains of Central Europe,
With scarcely two ha'pennies to rub together,
And with only a phantom hope
Of ever being able to pay their next month's rent.
But they give no indication,
These charming people,
Of any financial stringency, as they sip their coffee
And talk in exquisite English
Of Braque, Picasso and the French Impressionists.
As for the war,
It is scarcely mentioned. Occasionally
A word's let drop ; but they shrug expressive shoulders
In deprecation, and say :
* Please — we'd prefer not to mention. . . .
In Warsaw — yes:
It was — very regrettable. . . .
But you were saying about Braque . . . , ?'
And the talk flows on,
Meandering through the most delectable channels.
And it's only at odd moments,
When one passes one's cup to be refilled ;
Or when one's host puts more coal on the fire ;
Or at the moment of farewell,
That one sees in their eyes
The icy plains,
The icy plains, and wolves howling across the snow.

1942

FOLLY FIELD

This field's lain long forlorn : the rusty coulter
Lies with the rusty share,
Never again to scour and score the ploughland
In morning's indigent air.

Beside the unkempt hedge there lies the harrow,
Red, like the plough, with rust,
Obscured by nettles, sombre green in winter,
In summer gray with dust.

So long a waste, the field is rank with verdure
That desolation breeds;
And autumn-long the air above its acres
Is luminous with seeds

Which springtide's alchemy transmutes to hawk'sbit
Or dandelion of gold ;
Or, earliest so most fair, to sun-bright coltsfoot,
Warm where all else is cold.

Though bankrupt now, the field's suffused by treasure :
Life, phoenix-like, cheats death.
Who ventures forth in March may catch the violets'
Sweet and evasive breath ;

And see the elms soaring above the hedgerow,
Brilliant in new-fledged leaf.
Like pale green clouds they'll stand against the skyline
Forgetting former grief.

New growths will gaily mock the futile furrows
Scored all too long ago ;
Soon through the flowers and through the feathered grasses
The airs of June will blow.

When, in the threatening thunder-gloom of summer,
 Heavily hang the trees,
The field becomes a paradise of perfume
 For butterflies and bees.

Though for a space, as lyrical as lovely,
 The field regains its pride,
While, mutable as dreams, above its surface
 Clouds, faintly-gilded, glide ;

There's nothing now in Folly Field but sadness;
 Nothing but winter now :
Broken the rusty harrow in the nettles;
 Rusty the broken plough.

PORTENTS

BY a new impulse now the world is stirred ;
A fresh evangel wakes the wintry earth :
See how the first frail shoots adventure forth,
Each tender blade a green pacific sword.

With day approaching equipoise with night,
Despite the morning landscape etched in frost,
Spring is the word upon men's lips at last;
And surely spring should bring my heart delight ?

Yet, though life's palpable in every tree,
Remembered death draws still more close to me ;
Implacably November's phantoms cling :

Phantoms they are, these obstinate regrets
For one who in felicity forgets
How long one needs must wait to taste the spring.

WOOD MAGIC

HERE in the heart of the wood's
Oasis of still airs,
Save for a saffron butterfly,
No breathing creature stirs.
Here in the heart of the wood,
With only my thoughts for guests,
As quiet as a ghost in my bracken-bed,
I wait while the tired world rests.

But the dusk grows tense with frost;
And the bonfire's blue smoke drifts
Acrid and sweet between the pines;
And the twilight enchantment lifts.
And the wood grows dark and cold
In key with my darker mood ;
And a ghost am I, as my guests are ghosts,
Here in the heart of the wood.

THE MILLSTREAM

BETWEEN high banks, vivid with willowherb, rosebay and
meadowsweet,
 By alders overhung,
Driving its wheel around in a mood of liquid rumination,
 The millstream drifts along.
Amber and gray in the Quakerlike calm of the early evening
 Flows the casual stream ;
And, leaning over the bridge to watch its hypnotic progress,
 I lose myself in a dream.

I dream of a peace with war and with love forgotten,
 Which only Death can know —
Oblivion's peace : a citadel that no assaulting heartache
 Can hope to overthrow.
While far in the west, beyond the dusk-paling flowers and
 the alders,
 The fire of sunset burns ;
And round and round and round, in slow unceasing re-
volution,
 The dripping millwheel turns.

SUNRISE AND STARLIGHT

THE night closed in on drifting mist and rain,
Vague as the thoughts that vex a sick man's brain ;
But now that morning's been conceived anew,
Daybreak's immaculate in deepest blue ;
While planets glitter, brilliant and precise
As seraphim patrolling Paradise.
Did Adam such a sunrise once regard,
Dreaming of Eden, double-locked and barred —
Eden miraculous in matchless green,
Never again by Adam to be seen ?
And, as he watched the constellations burn,
Did he, compunctious, from their glory turn,
Fearful to face, with his apostate eyes,
The cold interrogation of the skies ?

ROSEBAY IN LONDON

(Suggested by an Article in *The Times*, 18/9/1941)

HERE, where the Berkshire Kennet dawdles by,
 Ashen in early light,
Serenely shadowed by the innocent gloom
 Of encroaching night;
Here, where the Kennet flows, mile upon mile
 Through its pastoral land,
By rushy banks the slim magenta spires
 Of the rosebay stand.

And now to London's desecrated streets
 The rosebay comes:
Beauty's insignia are stamped on what
 Were once its homes.
There it remains, portent and oriflamme
 Of the city's pride :
Memorial to those who, steadfast, selflessly
 Both dared and died.

BATTLE

BOMB-CRATERS now with grass arc floored; and through
Barbed wire's interstices rank nettles climb.
Loosestrife betrays that Nature is at work,
Abetted by her patient henchman Time.

She sows the sandbags with her darnel seeds;
Convolvulus the gunpit-flanks have claimed :
Life grapples trenchantly with Death, while man
Grimly regards the conflict, and is shamed.

Kensington Gardens, 22/8/41

GREECE, 1941

KEEPING a constant Lent, as stern and stark
As any epigram incised on stone,
Their music muted to a monotone,
They steadfastly await the vengeful dark.

At dusk I watch the slowly-brightening stars
That mitigate the anger in the sky,
And marvel how the men of Thessaly
Confront the last of their disastrous wars.

Jonquils adorn the stony soil of Crete,
Pacific is the April wind, and bright
The adventitious azure of the sea.

But, with the lustre fading from the grass
That screens the savage contours of the Pass,
The sun goes down behind Thermopylae.

LEAF-GATHERING, 1942

ALL through these hushed hours of cool October weather,
They've been brushing up the leaves:
Crinkled and colourful, they're all swept together
In bright abortive sheaves.

Now with the blue dusk and the air blowing colder,
The men have gone their ways.
Shrugging on their coats, they've left the leaves to smoulder
In a world that's all ablaze.

OVERTON S ASPEN

DUST may debauch it,
Winter strip it bare ;
Yet to my nostalgic mind
It's never less than fair.
Silver and sibilant,
Tremulous, tall,
It stands by the crossroads,
But craves no alms at all.

It stands where it stood,
Where the long hill grows steep :
Phlegmatic as a soldier,
It sighs but scorns to weep.
Long though I've loved
This silver sighing tree,
Well do I know that when I die
'Twill never sigh for me.

HOSTAGES

WHEN we together walked
Through evening's aftermath,
None but natural shadows
Fell athwart our path.
Happy in truth was I,
And, as I glanced at you,
Not without confidence
I deemed you happy, too.

Each twilight-tinted flower
And each leaf-laden tree
Overtly emphasised
The gifts accorded me —
Gifts from the treasury
Housed in your mind and heart,
Of which, importunate,
I've claimed so large a part.

Though I was happy then,
Experience has proved
How frail's the filament
'Twixt lover and beloved.
And ' What should I ever do
Without you !' was the cry
Of man's foredoomed revolt
Against mortality.

OCTOBER

EYES of evening, evening-clear,
Follow not war's corrosive wake ;
But ponder by this moss-lipped weir
And watch purred water, pearly-gray,
And weirsides willow-trees that shake
In winds which fan the failing day.

Certainly resentment's dumb
Before this fair though fading scene ;
Unavailing anguish numb ;
For nothing in this precinct's found
But leaves that change to gold from green
And spiral swiftly to the ground.

Find your heart's solutions now,
Here beside this lapsing stream.
Yet, while I muse on you, I vow
Tranquil hope of comfort dies,
So proudly passionate my dream
Mirrored within your evening eyes.

SUNFLOWERS

ON these September mornings,
When the first frost silvers
The tawny gold of the bracken ;
When the fingers of chestnut-leaves are edged with
 brown,
And spiders spin indefatigable webs amidst the
 brambles —
On these September mornings,
When the sun withdraws itself behind a screen
Of opalescent mist,
And one by one the leaves drop from the sycamore,
And one's mind droops with regret for humanity :
It's then that I find
No small solace to be derived
From the sun's floral lieutenants
Flaunting their finery in a garden —
A cottage-garden, perhaps,
Or, more poignantly,
In what was once a spruce suburban garden ;
But which is now
Merely an irrelevant by-product of war.
Such a garden I saw to-day :
Weeds roved everywhere ; the lawn was a prairie ;
Paths were selvedged by moss ;
While Michaelmas daisies and rain-blanchéd Japanese
 anemones,
Jaunty no longer,
Like foodless refugee children
Invoked compassion from the passer-by.
Amidst this desolation,
Like the Old Guard at Waterloo,
The sunflowers towered boldly,
Determined to go down fighting.

And, as I looked at them, I felt nothing but resentment
Towards those who dislike these flowers;
Who censure their obvious colour-scheme,
Their lolling idiot heads,
Their tall, harsh, hirsute stems —
As well as towards those ingrates, who're content to
dismiss them
With a reference to Russia or Van Gogh.

For me, these radiant flowers
Symbolise the comforting doctrine of compensation,
Which, manna to the simple, is Greek to the logician.
Clouds gather, mists drizzle, leaves fall,
The life-giving sun is withdrawn.
Yet my eyes are dazzled by the sunflowers' opulence ;
While my heart,
My crudely-credulous heart,
Is hot with the hope of heaven.

1942

THE VIGIL

As quiet as the dust
On Amenhotep's tomb,
So rests a lady now
Within her room.
Screened from a sombre day
Of sultry heat,
Patient and passionless,
She waits—for what ?

Fame was her portion once ;
But fame turned coy,
Folded flamboyant wings
And passed her by.
Now, like an eremite,
She asks for nought
Save strength for the one fight
Yet to be fought.

Once, too, with love she held
Acquaintance long :
Ambrosial-sweet it seemed,
Adamant-strong.
No lack of love had she,
Nor fame, nor friends;
But now she sits alone —
And thus life ends.

Smoothing her prune-dark dress
With tranquil hands,
She rests impervious
To Time's demands:

How threadbare are the gains
Which Time has won —
No sooner fructified
Than past and gone !

Intaglio-pale of face,
She takes her ease :
Archetype, epitome
Of hardwon peace.
And, as the fading day
Drifts to its doom,
Her vigil nearly done,
She waits — for whom ?

DIVERSION

A SULLEN sky to match my mood :
A rising wind gustily blowing,
Straining the sere autumnal wood,
Flecking the furrowed river flowing
Between bare banks once bright with flowers —
Forget-me-not and meadowsweet —
When, through remote Arcadian hours,
An August sun the landscape lit.

Such is the scene my eye confronts;
While fishermen in mackintoshes
Sitting despondently in punts,
Listless and limp as their goloshes,
Wait for the silvery-breasted dace
To bite a deftly-baited hook ;
But not one drawn moustachioed face
Wears even a faintly-hopeful look.

The sulky sky and brimming stream,
The anglers on sad sport intent
Remind me of an artist's dream
Limned in a pale Whistlerian print.
A duck with wide divergent wake
Vies bravely with two swans that glide,
Arching their necks their thirst to slake,
Pontifically on the tide.

I long to see the hidden sun
Transform the scene before my sight —
To see the stream I'm gazing on
Traversed by dazzling shafts of light!

Even as these longings seize my mind,
I sense a sudden spurt of rain,
Seeing it slant before the wind
Like wheat upon some Russian plain.

Now, through slim veils of leaf-stripped trees,
I watch the sinuous silver stream ;
And now there falls, like summer's lease,
An all-triumphant sunlight-gleam.
Now, dragon-like, the cloud-rack whirls,
Spattered with blue of springtide scylla ;
While on the path a girl unfurls
Her shining, mushroom-pale umbrella.

The crystal lancets of the rain ;
The towering and tumultuous sky ;
The black balls pendent from the plane
Seem tranced in timeless ecstasy.
And suddenly my gloom takes flight,
Steals wholly unperceived away,
Losing itself in the laughing light
That gilds the dancing, glancing day.

THE SWANS

LIKE the slow movement of a symphony,
Six swans I saw, this autumn morning, fly
Across the waste of unilluminated gray
Which overhung a London working-day.
Frieze-like against the sky's impassive dome,
With wings as rhythmic as a metronome,
From some park lake these apparitions came ;
Yet for awhile, forgetting they were tame,
They found untrammelled freedom in the air,
Which even I, a workbound man, could share.
High overhead they coursed in heavy flight,
Then one by one they disappeared from sight —
From sight they disappeared, but not from mind ;
Since now that evenfall has come, I find
These swans have filled my thoughts the whole day
through;
And still in thought these six swans I pursue
Towards that altitude of Plato's dreams
Where inviolably Perfection gleams;
While to my heart responsive memory brings
The steadfast beat of those reverberant wings.

ANGLICAN

FOR evensong to church I go
Where stained-glass windows faintly glow,
Where the lifeless local Great
Lie in proud posthumous state,
Showing how barren is the part
Played by pomp divorced from art;
And where the organist drones on
In pleasant plaintive undertone.
With dust the air is dark and dry,
Smelling of lamps and sanctity ;
While clump, clump, clump, with iron-shod boots
And camphor-reeking Sunday suits,
And hats adorned with flowers and feathers,
Long-seasoned to all seasons' weathers,
The congregation shuffles in
To be absolved from its sin.
Volleying hymns and muddling psalms,
It adds a quota to the palms
Awarded at some distant date
When it becomes immaculate.
It coughs and sneezes through the prayers
Intent upon its own affairs;
While candles waver in the wind
Like doubts that vex the Vicar's mind.
Outside, the evening droops upon
The grass-encircled slabs of stone
Where outlived generations keep
Silence in everlasting sleep ;
And yew-trees murmur threnodies,
Soothing the Sabbath with their sighs.
Veni Emmanuel! Is this place
A fit receptacle for Grace ?
How can I doubt it when I read

Cranmer's collects and proceed
To prayers that make me catch my breath,
So peerless is each paragraph ?
And yet their beauty makes me blind
To unresolved and undefined
Dilemmas that admit of no
Solution by the embryo
Philosopher that is myself.
So, with religion on the shelf—
Although despairingly one tries,
Like Mother Church, to compromise —
I puzzle through my anxious days
Incapable of prayer or praise,
Listening to sermons with, I fear,
Far too critical an ear —
Such as the one I'm hearing now,
No worse than most, I dare avow,
But yet as false as it is feeble,
Preached by a halfwit fresh from Keble.
Short though it is, it's all too long —
So thinks the inattentive throng
That drowns in its pitch-pine pews
While Mr. Blank expounds his views.
The last hymn sung, the last prayer said,
The living mingle with the dead
As down the churchyard path we go
Beneath a flurry of fine snow.
Like heaven to the undevout,
The evening stars are blotted out,
With but one Jack o' Lantern's spark
To guide God's children through the dark.

THE QUARREL

SUDDENLY thoughts, which through dark brooding hours
Had given no peace,
Became articulate : a clamorous starling-rout
That craved release.

Evening arrived to gladden the heat-parched fields —
Golden and gay
The cornstooks lolled in its light, ere the spinsterish dusk,
Demure and gray,

Dismissed the earth to its dreams; while gay and gold
In the sun's kind fire,
Nursing your babe, solicitous eyes alight
With achieved desire,

By the window you sat, your maternal heart at rest,
Breathing the stock-scented air ;
As I, my spirit with foolish resentment burning,
Surprised you there.

What bitter words were mine ! And with what keen,
All too-accustomed skill
I launched my shafts; while, shielding your babe, you sat
Saddened and still.

When later we stood in the lane, conscious that soon
I must be gone,
My quick wrath spent, I stared at your tear-despoiled face,
My heart a stone.

Together we stood in the lane — yet stood we alone :
Passionless, dumb —
Yearning to speak those exculpatory words
Which would not come !

DUST

ON the unfrequented road
The dust settles;
On the flowers at its verge —
Campions, nettles,
Ragwort, convolvulus,
Hawksbit and vetch ;
On the lolling leathery docks
In the deep-dug ditch.

The clean white country dust
Spills in a cloud,
Acrid, impalpable —
A summer shroud.
Spring and her rainbowed rout
Of colours fade,
Accept the cerement
And seek the shade.

This cloud, this cerement
Recalls the hue
An ageing face assumes
When life wears through.
Soon will green turn to gray,
Red change to rust:
Even in these brief lines
Dust speaks to dust.

THE RETURN OF THE CHILDREN

(For Harold Nicolson)

WHEN war is finished and the fighting done,
The trumpet sharing silence with the drum ;
When home again at last the children come
To live in peace beneath a kindlier sun ;

Will then repatriate hearts with rapture glow
To see the star-eclipsing street lamps gleam
In misty Thames, and to behold the grim
Utilitarian ugliness of Bow —

Or will they from an alien city turn ;
And, kindling memory's capricious fire,
Recall the country's incantatory moods;

Recall the sun-warmed pungency of fern,
The faint nostalgic fragrance of the briar,
And foxes barking through October woods ?

1942

MRS. DOBBS DIES

Hic jacet Jane Amelia Dobbs,
Of whom 'twas said : ' If you want jobs
Quickly, competently done,
Mrs. Dobbs is just the one !'
She spent her life in opening doors,
Kneeling down and scrubbing floors,
Saying ' Sir ', and mumbling ' M'm ',
Otherwise remaining dumb,
Minding her place and not presuming.
But now that hard-won Death is coming,
She cares no more what things are said,
Since soon she hopes to join the dead
And be at one with sceptred queens
And know what her life's travail means ;
For Death's a democrat who'll strike
At prince and prostitute alike.
She'll need no more to scrub or sew,
And all her aches and pains will go :
Come, kindly Death, and bring release !
She thinks : ' I wonder if they'll miss
Me at the friendly pubs I've known :
" The Rising Sun ", " The Rose & Crown ",
" The Cock " " The Spotted Dog ", " The Fox " ?
Yes; when I'm in my elmwood box,
I hope my friends'll sigh for me,
Wherever I may chance to be ;
And " Poor old girl," I hope they'll say,
" She was a caution in her day ! "
And then I hope that they'll begin
To drink my spirit's health in gin
Or else in brown and nutty ale.
How sad to think my tongue should fail
To relish gin or mellow beer !

I'm old ; I'm tired ; I'm feeling queer.
 I'd love to toddle down the street,
 Forgetting that there Judgment Seat,
 And rout out cronies that I knew,
 And drain a pint, or maybe two . . . !
 So she muses through the day
 While her lifeblood ebbs away.
 So she lies, released from pain,
 Glad to think that ne'er again
 Need she rise before the light
 After a short and sleepless night;
 Suffer no clutchings at the heart,
 No swollen chilblained hands to smart,
 No strange swift summer-lightning pains
 To shoot through sinews, nerves, and veins;
 But be as fresh and sweet, they say,
 As any maid who died that day.
 Lying silently in bed,
 Snowy pillows under head,
 Thus her random fancies range :
 * Lord, it wouldn't half be strange
 If, when I get where I'm to go,
 I met the folks I used to know.
 If I should meet my poor old man,
 I'd say I'm sorry I began
 To quarrel on the day he died —
 Though, God knows, I was sorely tried !
 I'd teU him of our children, too :
 Bob was the only one he knew.
 Bob's run away and gone to sea,
 So only one is left, and she,
 Pretty as paint but sadly silly,
 Plies her trade in Piccadilly. . . . !

On this drab earth, she dwells alone,

So tired, she wishes she were gone
To those green pastures, where, she's told,
The Shepherd keeps his flock in fold.
But to her plain and literal mind,
The pastured flock, the Shepherd kind
Seem but a pretty fairy-tale —
Pretty, but vain ; of no avail.
The queerest things, she thinks, are done
In that dim land beyond the sun ;
Though kindly clergymen grow cross
When Mrs. Dobbs is at a loss
To guess what joys will soon be hers
In meadows fresh with fadeless flowers.
It seems so odd to her — but then
She's not like serious clergymen
Who come to see her in the wards.
She thinks: ' How queer to strike great chords
Upon them golden harps all day !
I'd rather pop across the way
And hob and nob with my old friends.
I doubt if Heaven'll make amends
For never seeing lamplight shine
Over that shabby room of mine
That shared for, ah, how many years
A poor old woman's hopes and fears.
And as for harps — well, any day,
I heard old Tom across the way
Playing his barrel-organ : how,
Hearing him, my heart would glow !
He played the tunes I liked the best:
" Abide with Me ", " Thou art my Rest",
" Parted " — you know the kind of thing !
Hearing him, my heart would sing. . . .

But, one sullen wintry day,

That heart of Mrs. Dobbs gives way,
And, with a soft expiring breath,
She plumbs the unkennd deeps of Death.
Now she is Mrs. Dobbs no more ;
But one with king and emperor.
At last she has attained her goal ;
But as for Mrs. Dobbs's soul,
I know no more than Plato knew —
Nor, reader of my rhyme, do you !
With sunken mouth and chiselled chin,
Hands devoutly crossed on thin
Cadaverous breast lies Mrs. Dobbs,
Who lent a hand and did odd jobs,
And loved to sip her spot of gin
With chosen cronies at an inn,
And all her life remained so poor ;
But money she requires no more,
Save for the pennies on her eyes
To frank her fare to Paradise.

LAPFORD

' LAPFORD ! Lapford !' I hear the porter shouting :
In the darkness of dawn comes the harsh reiterant sound ;
And by force of association I picture the lapwings
Crouched in the fields, their soft breasts kissing the ground.

These olive-dark, prim-crested birds, with their broad pied
wings have
Become a symbol of the Devon I've learned to love.
Low in the lonely fields I've watched them; then, at a signal,
I've seen them wheel into the sky above —

Into the chilled-steel sky of interminable winter,
Filling the air with their most mournful cries.
In the darkness of dawn, in the darkness of dusk I've heard
them,
When light's conceived, and before the last light dies.

I can seldom think of lapwings without seeing a field that's
Freshly ploughed, with its furrows rigidly drawn.
To-day I'll see them again, since I listen to the porter
Shouting ' Lapford ! Lapford !' to the unresponsive dawn.

I'll see them again, and again my heart will respond to
Their thrilling, toneless, melancholy call.
Surely they speak to the hearts of all who are listening,
As over Asia the shadows of warfare fall;

And over the world fall the lugubrious shadows of winter:
Stiff is the grass, icebound the useless pond.
Birds starve in the trees; and the mind of man refuses
To heed more than to-day, for fear of what lies beyond.

December, 1941

LOVE IN WINTER

SNOW fell lately,
Lately lightly
Masking moors where the peewits wheel.
Hoar-frost followed
To freeze the fallowed
Furrowed farmland in a vice of steel.

In fretful weather
The last leaves wither,
Autumn's ensigns come whirling down.
And they now begin,
With their rich tints gone,
To paint the pathways in tones of brown.

Sheep still feeding
In swiftly-fading
Hueless glimmers of the heartless day,
Show by their posture
How poor's their pasture,
Now that the green grass turns to gray.

Tired of roaming,
I turn to rhyming,
While strictly the evening keeps its tryst.
Lost in shadow,
The tree-lined meadow
Merges in dim Medusian mist.

Yet, though December
The cold earth cumber,
Little I dread its dreariest night.
Since you, my fair,
Are a flame, a fire ;
And, in a lighdess world, you're Light.

EXHORTATION

SAVOUR the perfumed rose
While yet the perfume's sweet :
Savour its sweetness now ;
Then, if you can, forget.

Scrap letters; bid farewell
To all constraining friends,
As you'll have gone before
This evening draws its blinds.

Smile, poet, on the spring
In immemorial green :
Smile, but then turn away,
Lest smile become a grin.

Girl with the shadowed eyes
Avert those eyes from fear.
Love longer if you must;
Though that's your own affair.

Kiss, lover, while you may
Your heart's elusive guest:
Kiss, lover, then be done,
Or you embrace a ghost.

Since against Time's advance
No stratagem avails,
Hasten, for fear your foe
Stamp upon laggard heels !

WORTH MATRAVERS

WAS it here that you came,
Where the sea flounces in foam
Against the creviced shale,
Within whose fissures coal-
Black, hump-beaked puffins hide ?
Was it here you came, to add
The perfection of your face
To that of the seas and skies ?

And was it here you came,
Where the crisp wind, like a comb,
Winnows unravelled hair ?
And was it towards this shore
You strode with your dogs in leash
Over the humming, harsh,
Bent-covered promontory
With its skirt of sand below ?

Yes: it was here you came
Under the sky's chill dome,
Where pinpoint kestrels swing
With never a snatch of song.
Where the league-long breakers crash,
You came with your dogs in leash —
And leashed, O to its hurt,
My fond, resentful heart !

THE FOURTH WINTER

DUSK closes in on the fourth winter,
The fourth winter of war :
Our patient granary of fortitude
Is plundered of its store ;
And, of dead-sea fruit, the acrid apple of discord
Is bitten to the core.

Now, with the drawing of slow curtains,
Summer's rout's complete;
Yet upon our suburban plateau
The air, though sharp, is sweet;
While fallen freckled leaves from the plane-trees
Frolic about our feet.

Blue arc the twilit hills of Surrey
Where gray and green divide ;
Black the poplars against the plain where
Sidereal squadrons ride
Which brilliantly fulfil the promise
Of light at eventide.

Misty dawns devoid of menace
Breaking on London town
Prove an elixir to drooping spirits,
To hearts that are cast down —
Hearts and spirits rejoice together,
However Fate may frown.

The changeful sky, the streamlined poplar,
The bronzed autumnal leaf:
Not without thanks should we these emblems,
These amulets receive
Against that hour when man no longer
Need squander Time in grief.

ANTON TCHEHOV

HE wields a scalpel in his wasted hand
That brings a score of frailties to light;
And, as his world deploys before my sight,
I lose myself in a fantastic land

Of crinolines and Oriental creeds;
Of schoolmasters and lonely dying priests,
Breathing an alien atmosphere that tastes
Of samovars and nutty sunflower-seeds.

Though far removed from ours that land appears,
With fly-plagued heat and paralytic cold,
Russia claims no monopoly of tears.

Bereavement plumbs communicable deeps;
While sorrow's wind that scours the icy steppes
Awakens echoes on an English wold.

FAME

SOME there are
Who like to get their names into the papers,
And have their opinions quoted on topical questions.
They cultivate Cabinet Ministers,
Air Marshals, Ambassadors,
And roll around in limousines
As lacquered and lordly as themselves.
They live lives which are brisk and eventful;
And they crave notoriety
Under the impression that it is fame.
But fame reserves its trumpet
For other deeds than theirs.
This they come privily to acknowledge ;
And when fame proves elusive,
They console themselves by saying :
' Though the weeks pass, the months pass, the years pass ;
Though soon we become the last generation but one ;
Yet we've cut a dash with our lives: we're people of
importance !'
And they are right.
They surmount their trumpety Everests,
Addressing each other haughtily,
Ignoring the animalculæ on the plains below.
They are hard, confident, assertive ;
And if they ever do have any misgivings,
These they keep to themselves.

In the company of such persons,
I feel mean — predestined
To utter, ignominious failure :
Not to any kind of sensational failure,
But to seedy-suited,
Unbrushed bowler-hatted,

Leaky-booted, dirty-lined failure.
I feel I am predestined
To eke out my anonymous existence
In some obscure suburban street
Where rain's for ever drizzling
On to slabs of seal-gray pavement;
Where every house is alike ;
Where every house possesses
Its gross green aspidistra,
Outrageously prolific,
Set in the place of honour
Between retracted Nottingham lace curtains;
An obscure suburban street
Where it is always raining,
And of which these successful people have never heard.

As for myself, I am not jealous,
Or very rarely jealous of these people —
These lacquered, leisured and luxurious people.
I covet no limousine or five-figure income ;
Nor am I gregarious.
I prefer my own company,
And like to ruminate in solitude
In some overgrown and long-neglected garden,
Where I can lie on my back and watch the sunlight
Dappling drooping leaves.
Or to sit in a punt
Making pretence to fish,
With my slack line dangling in the slow green water,
Watching the float as it gets entangled
In emerald scum and clustered virginal crowsfoot.
There I sit till the moon rises —
The moon that rose on Carthage, Babylon —
And the nightingale sings in a near-by thicket.
There I sit,

Like a Chinese philosopher,
And watch the moon in the silent river.
The moon is smiling,
As though it mistakes me for one of those people
Who fish for fame ;
Who grow costive and querulous fishing for fame,
With a slack line dangling in the water,
The slow and shadowy water,
The shadowy, silken unresponsive water
Which men call Time.

SPANISH REQUIEM

(In Memory of John Cornford)

THE hills that surround Huesca
Beyond the Pyrenees
Are of sunbaked brown, and silver
Are the wind-kissed olive-trees.
And the dark-eyed women of Huesca,
White against black mantillas,
Recline on low verandahs
Taking their noontide ease.

You trudged the last mile to Huesca
Playing a soldier's part;
Though dust scuffed up from the roadway
Caused English eyes to smart.
You trudged the last mile to Huesca,
Though Death shrilled by at Huesca,
With the fear of fear in your bosom
And the love of mankind in your heart.

Over the streets of Huesca,
Absolved at last from war,
In the goldspun Spanish sunlight
The preening fantails whirr.
Though far away from Huesca,
The silent streets of Huesca,
I think of you tranquilly lying
With Spain for your sepulchre.

Pale are the people of Huesca,
And stale is the golden air ;
Since hunger stalks through Huesca,
Through every street and square.

And I feel, as I ponder on Huesca,
How Death has triumphed at Huesca :
To think there's hunger in Huesca,
And that you no longer care !

1939

HEMLOCK

SNAPPING a hemlock-stalk
In a season of drought,
I watched the hueless ichor
Ooze idly out.
Ah, what a talisman lay
Pooled in my hand —
Misery nullified,
Pain at an end !

If beauty serves as guide,
All should be bliss,
So dreamlike, delicate,
The blossom is.
Yet, though than Eden once
Nought seemed more fair,
Hooded and hideous,
What sin lurked there !

QUIETISM

NEITHER in sacerdotal eloquence,
Nor in the declamation of a choir ;
Neither within the tempest nor the fire
Can be discerned the Spirit's immanence.

But, rather, in a secret place apart,
When evening falls upon a world of strife,
There comes unheralded the breath of life
Rejuvenating the receptive heart.

To those who, unrewarded, yet endure,
This supernatural influence draws nigh —
This vital breath, so quick to salve and save,

As redolent of hope and as austere
As light vouchsafed to a December sky
Or snowdrops to a February grave.

THE TREELESS LAND .

I'VE come from a country
Of heather-brown moorland
Where curlews are crying,
But where are no trees.

It is a land of moors and walls of stone —
Rough walls that shelter in their shade
Such blooms as are ephemeral : harebell, thyme
And toadflax, golden-tongued.

It is a land of moors : a man can see
For fifty miles around —
Yes, fifty miles of moors, with walls of stone
And bushes all wind-writhen.

A man can see
Quite fifty miles around, beneath great skies
Of pearl, that change to azure or to black :
The country is austere, the skies glorious.

Now from a land I've come devoid of trees —
Beautiful but austere — yet Paradise,
Despite its rumoured loveliness, would make me
yearn
For English trees : their roots enclose my heart.

THE WEAPON

How well they understood !
Yes, he had suffered — suffered wantonly
In health, purse, honour, reputation — so
They sought to help him ; help him put things straight,
Wrench back the clock, make all be as before.
So they approached him, murmuring soft words
Words soft as wooing winds in summer heat;
Words kind, as when a laughing mother talks
In baby language to her baby — so
They talked to him ; and they talked sweetly, too,
Sweetly as honey oozing from a comb.

But he
Glowered at their anxious amiability ;
Rejected overtures of friendship ; smote
Bland words from smiling lips.

With faces pained,
And saddened eyes, and murmuring excuses,
They left him to himself— his sullen self—
And turned towards their homes.
'Impossible!' they cried, 'quite, quite impossible! Never,
Never, O never will we try again
To bring within the orbit of our love
One so intractable and so uncouth —
A second Ishmael, if the truth be known !'

But he,
Withdrawn within himself, with brooding eyes,
Pent brows and friendless, indurated heart,
Cherished the ally he had lately forged
And would not cast aside : the shining, keen
And naked steel of his swift weapon — Hate.

HARPSICHORD AIR

THAN in the strains of this enchanted air,
Where grief and beauty meet,
Seldom is sweetness made more sorrowful,
Or sorrow made more sweet.
Insensibly my thoughts to you return
Here in the afterglow,
As hopes, that seemed so buoyant with the dawn,
To evening shipwreck go.

Beauty is yours, no less than sweetness, sweet;
Sorrow alone is mine
As I sit fingering the harpsichord
By fitful candleshine.
And though, with polestar constancy, my thoughts
Strive to express your light,
Remote you rest, for all love's invocations,
Far beyond sound and sight.

MIST

MIST over London:

A chilling, clinging, late-autumnal mist
That sweeps, grandiose, through famous thoroughfares,
Then, trickling furtively
Down winding alleyways,
Loses itself in quiet cobbled courts
Which Dickens knew so well.
Muffled in mist,
Ours is a silent city.
Citizens,
Thronging the pavements, loom out of the mist,
Then disappear in mist,
Like the gray ghosts
Of those who perished in the storm of fire
Which swept this ancient city
Three tragic years ago.
Domed and dominant,
The aldermanic outline of St. Paul's
Appears a mirage,
Immense, impalpable,
As insubstantial as a summer cloud.

On the Embankment,
Dolphins supporting the soot-smirched lamp-posts
Regard all Londoners with languid eyes,
Having seen
So many generations of Londoners
Appear and disappear,
Wreathed in the mist of Time.
And here to-day
The pathway's strewn with haggard plane-tree leaves
Resembling outspread hands with fleshless fingers
For ever trying on new gloves.

On the Embankment,
I lean for awhile over the parapet,
Losing myself in aimless ruminations.
Suddenly,
I hear a whistle —
Loud, imperative —
Shrilling through the mist,
And glance upstream, expecting to see
A ship thresh down the river —
A squat black tug, perhaps, with crimson funnel,
Frivolous foam-frills forming round its bows,
Drawing a train of heavily-laden barges
Towards the open sea.
But I see nothing ;
I hear nothing;
Out of the mist there comes
Nothing.

As I wait for the ship to emerge —
If ever it does emerge —
I think of the mist that lies
On the horizon of the mind of man,
Which, though it hides the enigmatic face of the
future,
Hides as well
The kindling light of the unclouded sun —
Perhaps the Sun of Righteousness Himself.
One gets hints, suggestions, innuendoes,
Faint as vibrations of a spider's web ;
But mist lies thickly on the mind of man.
Then out of the mist there comes. . . .

But what comes out of the mist ?

LOGOS

HARSH is the night in this most harsh of Decembers:
 Brutal and bitter,
The frost-sharpened wind scours snow-burdened clouds from
 the sky —
 How the stars glitter !
And now as the sky I regard, with its myriad constellations
 Conjoined, interlinking,
My heart by its fierce Arctic beauty is suddenly lifted.
 Then fall I to thinking

Of the Word : the unknown philosopher, scientist, poet —
 The Word, whose clear-shining
More constant remains than the moon-governed tides, or
 the sun's
 Advent or declining:
That fathomless Word, whose glory admits of no change,
 Neither shadow of turning ;
Who dwells in the heart of a man, in the heart of the heavens,
 Beyond the sky's burning.

THE MARTYRS

TRAVERSING galleries, observing prints,
Perusing Biblical and like accounts,
I stand amazed — not only at the skill
With which painters depict, narrators tell
The details of those several martyrdoms :
The scarlet blazon of corrosive flames,
The meticulous cross, the rhythm of the lash,
The shining spirit and the cringing flesh —
But chiefly at the courage of these men
Whose lifeblood streaked the lion's ruffled mane ;
Who embraced the gridiron, gloried in the weals
Etched by the scourge, courted corrosive coals,
Flung themselves smilingly upon the blade,
Suffered exultantly — who, in a word,
Played hopscotch with the louring shade of Death,
All for the greater glory of a faith
Engendered by a demagogue, whose speech
Inflamed enslaved Judaea like a torch.
In memorable phrase and paradox,
He demonstrated, all too plainly, cracks
Inherent in the Letter of the Law ;
While hecklers by his barbs were laid so low
That soon none dared cross swords with him. He taught
His wayward followers to seek the light,
And quelled their apprehensive fear of Death
By his contention that it was a myth,
Or, at the most, a wicket-gate to lead
Towards a life new-opened to the dead.
The man had charm, and put his points so well
That mere derision proved of no avail.
He preached with such conviction, with such fire,
And soon created such a dangerous stir
That priest and Levite and centurion —

Resolved that something should be swiftly done
Before the mob, on which none could depend,
Became insurgent and grew out of hand —
Took instant action to allay their fears
And had him put away. A seedy force
Followed their weary Lord to Golgotha ;
And thus the mischief-maker came to die.
A strange death, his, upon that lonely hill:
August, mysterious, and beautiful.
Yet, after all, what was this dying worth ;
And what dark benefaction came to birth
By this effusion of an innocent's blood ?
The martyrs had no doubt: proudly they bled —
Proof there was none ; in Christ their only hope.
Yet imperturbably they dared the leap
Across the chasm ; dared defeat; and drew
Bows at a venture 'gainst the furious sky.

THE WIND

QUITTING the pleasant house and turning a corner,
I came face to face with winter.
The encounter was not unexpected ;
Nevertheless, it took my breath away.
The air was tranced by frost,
And frost-flowers were engraved on the granite pavement.
The world was silent,
Save for die tumbril-rumble of passing traffic.
No wind blew ; neither did sparrows chirp from the plane-
trees
From which the year's last leaves hung in a sombre arras
Against the crimson sky
Which made the west a rearing wall of flame.
In the east, stars were shining,
Set 'twixt the shadows of imminent night,
Like lights on a Christmas-tree —
Stars were the candles, shadows the spreading branches.
And I fancied that around this heavenly Christmas-tree
Cherubs were smiling — cherubs like those
That Botticelli painted :
Cherubs that once were children
Filling the whole of Europe with their laughter ;
But whom the modern Herod
Intemperately destroyed.
It was winter.

It was winter ; and, around the coffee-stall counter,
The casual talk
Was confined to comments on last year's wind —
That wind from the north, that implacable wind
Which lasted a full seven weeks.
I remembered it well.
Vividly I remembered how the fields

Were ridged and rasped by frost;
How the dingy sheep,
Their wool puffed out to afford them some protection,
Plucked at the iron ground that injured their delicate
 mouths;
And how birds, glued to the branches
Of elms that lined the lower meadow,
Died by the sorry score ;
And how the path
Which led to the farm, glinting rainbow-like in the flaring
 sunset,
Splintered beneath one's boots.
I told my companion of these things
As we sipped our tea, clasping the mugs in our fingers;
As we sipped our tea and stared at the flaming sky.
We held sober carnival around the coffee-stall,
My chance-met friends and I.
It was good talk,
Ripe with countryman's wisdom and Cockney wit.
But it soon finished;
And, with a brief ' Good-night !',
We went our different ways.

Pondering on this talk
As I made tracks for home,
I thought intently of that icy winter
And of the manifold victims of the frost —
Frost that was cruel, like war.
And I thought of the war to-day,
The cold, cruel war ;
Of the captive Russians
Stripped of their coats and boots, and hustled harshly
Into hungry prison-pens;
And of the legions
Of hapless conscripts from Hungary, Rumania,

Who face the Caucasian winter
With no hope of relief.
As I thought of these,
The crimson paled in the west;
And in the east, clouds, like branches, swayed across the sky :
The wind was rising,
Blowing the Christmas-tree branches wildly across the sky.
But now there were no lights on the heavenly Christmas-
tree ;
Since the rising wind,
The rising wind, like war,
Had blown all its candles out.

1942

DEATH

A TAM-O'-SHANTER'S tale
Borne shuddering on the wind ;
A direful rumour hid
In labyrinths of mind :
Such is the thought of Death
To those in love with life,
Who ignorantly wince
Beneath the surgeon's knife.

But Janus-headed Death
Looks otherwise on me :
Nought but beatitude
Upon his face I see.
And, as my steps decline
Towards their certain end,
Whatever guise he wears,
Still will Death prove my friend.

THE LUTANISTS

READING the scores of the Elizabethan lutanists —
 Campion was their king —
I see a group of friends around a table,
 Primed and poised to sing.
Platters are pushed aside, the yellowing, dog's-eared
 Songbooks are unfurled;
While reeking candles set in their pewter holders
 Paint every face with gold.

Both upon furrowed and on flowerlike faces
 The wavering radiance lies;
On stiff-starched ruffs and pearl-decked stomachers,
 On sea-blue, sloe-dark eyes.
Winter may rave beyond the leaded windows
 Turning the roads to mire ;
But here's an oasis of light and harmony
 Warmed by the spirit's fire.

So vivid the scene, it is strange and sad to remember
 How many years have flown
Since that oak-raftered room echoed to bell-like music ;
 Since those brave candles shone.
Only the books remain ; and, as I scan them slowly
 In a retrospective dream,
Time is eclipsed ; and the thought of those lyrical voices
 Makes silence lovelier seem.

A CITY CHURCH, A.D. 1943

SINCE that black night,
This bombed-out church has stood
On its green plat,
Stark to the world and naked to the sky,
Its roof stripped, spine broken, windows bare ;
While splintered saints and chipped-nosed cherubim
Have fallen headlong sheer, like Lucifer.
Adventurous birds,
Impertinent intruders,
Have built rash nests within the idle bells,
And in the aisles
Rubble has barred the pilgrim's path to prayer.
Yet still
Pointing the way to heaven,
The slender steeple stands,
Its weathercock aglint against the sun,
Defiant of the worst
The devil in man can do.

One day, for sure,
This church will be rebuilt.
Glaziers, masons, labourers — all will come.
The roof will be repaired,
The birds' nests broken up,
Saints will return to their niches, angels to their corbels,
And the staid Anglican ritual
Once more will be resumed.

And yet, to-day,
Passing the spot, I thought
How comely it would be
Were Christ to be reborn
Within the confines of this blackened shell :

He who exalts the meek
And spreads his wealth before the humble poor —
He who raised
His throne amidst a starveling stable's manger,
And chose a hill-top for his tabernacle.
Can it be
That he's impatient of the niceties
Of stormproof roofs, swept aisles, and stained-glass
 windows
And loudly-pealing bells:
He who contrives his home within the heart —
That house not made with hands ?

THE SCEPTIC AS LOVER

LIKE a lone caravan that makes its way
Towards some Eldorado in the west,
He seeks such happiness as will allay
The pain that underlies his mind's unrest.

But, though a compass-needle serves to guide
The caravan, nor map, alas, nor chart
Nor steadfast compass-needle helps him read
The unresolved enigma of his heart.

And though at last he gains, through flood and fire,
The Eldorado of his heart's desire,
He trembles, lest an alien whim intrude ;

And lest, within the ambit of his love,
Frustration lurks, to make his rapture prove
The iridescent mirage of a mood.

THE HOURGLASS

FLECKED with red sand, as fields
Are flecked with rime,
Here, in this antique toy,
Is Time.

Turn it, and you will see
The dark grains pass
In unimpeded haste
From glass to glass.

What age this bauble is
Cannot be told ;
But, hazarding a guess,
I deem it old —

Two hundred years or three ;
But what is that
When matched against the grains
You're gazing at ?

Each one can symbolise
Some pregnant hour
When what's now history
Broke into flower.

Each is a panacea
For fear or fret —
Once let sufficient pass,
And you'll forget

That in these antlike grains
You saw your foes
Primed to accelerate
Your beauty's close . . .

Break, if you wish, this toy :
 'Twill be in vain.
Time passes ruthlessly,
 Grain after grain.

Watch, then, this quaint device ;
 Read, love, my rhyme :
Here, glassed between twin globes,
 Is Time.

I

His portrait once I saw
In the National Gallery :
A wavelike lift of hair,
An introspective eye,
With sensual lips apart,
Head poised, as though to catch
^olian music passed
Beyond the common reach.

ii

Beyond the common touch,
He knew what suffering was :
A saddening of the sun,
A frost-seared waste of flowers,
Aridity of heart
Whereon no dews might fall,
A crying in the night
With none to heed his call,
Grief surged around him ; age
Gripped him about the throat,
For all he strove in vain
To cheat that hangman's knot.
Yet from such misery
Of flesh-encumbered soul
Came, like a miracle,
His finest songs of all.

TEARS

BELOVED, weep not so !
Cancel that grief; forget
What taught your heart such woe,
And lent your eyes too bright
A sheen for evening's light,
And made wan cheeks so wet.

Submit to my embrace ;
And let its ardour prove,
E'en as I kiss your face,
That the atoning eyes
You scan with such surmise
Are still the eyes of love.

FIRE

BEHOLD the element
That warms a wintry mood :
Poets and lovers know
How fire transmutes the blood.
Yet its protean strength
Can raze the towers of Troy
Or write an epitaph
In ashes on man's joy.

What compass can be set
To fire's corrosive scope ?
Yet love survives its doom,
Love and her fledgling, hope.
Blest be each influence
No holocaust can tame,
Which, salamander-like,
Transcends the fiercest flame.

NOCTURNE

READING at night when all the world is quiet,
 'Twixt one page and the next
Your face appears — my book lies unregarded,
 Since sorrow blurs the text.

It's always the same, your face — no hint of trouble
 Intimidates your brow :
Perennial childhood's yours ; for in my mind only
 Has it existence now.

So roseate is your face, and, ah, so mirthful
 Are the exultant eyes
I knew so well before death, come to claim you,
 Made them untimely wise.

Yes, you are wise, with immemorial wisdom
 Which is not ours to know.
Yet as a child inveterately I regard you —
 Fain would I have it so.

As life was kind to you, so death came kindly
 To claim you ere you woke.
I swear you knew no sorrow at departure :
 It was our hearts that broke.

Can it be God's device thus to absolve you
 From all regrets and fears —
To keep your joy untinged, and, in his mercy,
 Make all death's terrors ours ?

AM KAMIN

WHEN the light's switched on and curtains are drawn, as
token

Of another day lived through,
Again he comes to sit with us by our hearthside,
Just as he used to do,

When, fresh from his bath, he'd stand in the doorway
smiling

(O eyes of burn-bright brown !)
In his slippers of mushroom-red and his striped pyjamas
And his Jaeger dressing-gown.

Dancing into the room, he would find fulfilment
In the crook of my friendly arm ;
We'd chatter and laugh, our faces flecked by the firelight,
Safe (as we thought) from harm.

But that is a picture-simple, but how beguiling ! —
Which Time will not restore.
Never again shall we hear his step on the stairway,
We'll see his face no more.

The crook of my arm is empty, since, in its comfort,
He has no further part —
What heavy change from the time when we lay together,
With heart so close to heart !

The fire is as bright, the room is as warm with welcome
As ever it has been ;
And again he comes to share our nocturnal leisure,
But now unheard, unseen.

Would that he might, if only briefly, appear to us,
Or speak one word, at least —
Just one significant word of reassurance —
To make our fast a feast !

But to each and all of our heartfelt supplications,
Impassive Fate says ' No ' .
And, fearful, I wonder, though my recusancy shames me,
Whether it's better so.

SNOW

A QUIET cascade of snow
Has fallen through the night,
And now the morning's briefly washed
In snow's impartial light.

What green and tender growth
Lies transiently concealed
Beneath the smooth Carthusian crust
On each familiar field !

Prove its enchantment now,
Lest the impulsive sun
Transform the meads and coppices
And bid the snow begone.

Already, see, the spring
Usurps the iron skies:
On the tenacious heart alone
A nightfall's snow still lies.

ON AN AIR BY BACH

(' Schafe können sicher weiden ')

I SAID that I'd seek silence all my days ;
I vowed that I'd abide
Immured within grief's monastery, with
The world locked fast outside.

No books, flowers, music, nay, nor dearest friend
My solitude should share ;
Nor should a single alien thought divert
Myself from my despair.

He whom I mourned with such a leaden heart
Should be for ever mine ;
And, for my golden lad, I soon exchanged
A saint within his shrine.

The sun became a censer ; every star
A taper frosty-bright;
Then fell the rain, like penitential tears,
Dissolving all delight.

So jealously, and with so bleak a mind,
Did I adore my dead,
Small wonder that, from my austere abode,
His childish spirit fled.

What part had he, my bright auroral boy,
In me, his father, grown
So haggard-eyed, whose heart from selfishness.
Had hardened to a stone ?

Although within this winter-mantled world
 Comfort's so hard to find,
Now, with my grief-engendered vows forgone,
 Now, with a calmer mind,

Not without confidence I picture him
 Beneath the gentle gaze
Of One Who guards those holy fields of morn
 Where sheep may safely graze.

SUN AND SHADOW

You were my fabulous sun
Shedding no shadow,
No, not a shadow of shade
Over wood, mere or meadow.
You were my day, without
Corollary of night;
Nothing I knew but bore
Its patina of light.

But since beyond our sphere
You've lately flown,
O rare and radiant one,
How great you've grown ;
For now the wintry earth
Lies bare and cold
Beneath your shadow cast
O'er all our world !

VOX ULTIMA CRUCIS

(For Tom Fender)

COME, turn your back on fame
And bid the world goodbye :
We'll to the hills repair
Seeking an ampler sky.

Your travelling habit don,
Your staff, your scrip assume :
Arise ! nor pause to greet
The stranger to your room.

Our journey cannot wait;
So rise ; and we'll be gone
Before the earliest cock
Heralds approaching dawn.

We'll mount above the plains
With maize but newly-sown ;
Above the cypresses;
Above the homes of men ;

Above the ancient town's
Cathedral dome ; the slim
White campanile's tower;
The peacock-tinted stream;

Above volcanic hills
On the horizon's bar ;
Above the highest hill;
Beyond the furthest star.

Long will our journey prove ;
 Long, slow and steep the climb —
Yet Space must be subdued,
 We needs must vanquish Time.

Strait must the passage be —
 Strait, steep and strown with stones.
Your tears like rain will fall,
 Like thunder be your groans.

And yet — your ear incline —
 Your quest will lead you home ;
So take this hand that's been
 Long scored by martyrdom :

This worn and wounded hand
 Take, my obedient friend ;
Then find the path which leads
 To where all journeys end.

GRIEF

GRIEFS like the crystal argent of the wind
Strewing distress amidst the sterile grasses.
Yet even Grief is ultimately kind ;
Since, like the bleak December wind, Grief passes.

THE END

