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S52E

ESSAYS IN VERSE

ESSAYS IN VERSE

BY

SHAHID SUHRAWARDY

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1937

TO
ROBERT C. TREVELYAN

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

These verses are experiments in a language which is not the author's mother-tongue. They were written at different periods through many years of changing allegiance to various English and continental literary tendencies. Some of them have already appeared in Oxford publications and in English and American periodicals.

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NEW POEMS

UNDER THE TREES

I was reading a book
About old things,
When a flutter of wings
On the high trees
Drew me out of my room,
And as I unresisting lay
Under the green boughs
Shaded from the keen sun,
I loved the thought
That I was alive this day,
And not when starved kings
And frail queens with storm-torn looks,
With narrow brows held in low crowns
And gem-besprinkled cloaks,
And long eyes and large stare,
Lived in the gloom
Of painted room,
And passion swirled around them
Like blood fresh-shed.
And so with my unfinished book
As pillow to my head,
Unregretting the dead,

NEW POEMS

I mused away,
While the birds I love
In a commingled throng
Sang through my dreams
Their heedless song.

NEW POEMS

TO MY DOG

When we are old,
And sausages dangling at your nose
Won't raise the ancient appetite,
Nor the keen apprisèd sight
Of a fleet-limbed female add
To your muscular thighs an iron strain,
And the surly herd of your young foes
Will make you hide beneath my overcoat;
When we'll be sad,
And the warm sun will seem to us cold
As we stumble through the street,
Friend leading friend,
And no more meet
The gladsome sympathy in every eye;
When bent down with all kinds of disease
You will rheumatically trail your wasted limbs,
And I be saddled with a chronic lymph,
Or an eternal coughing choke my throat,
To which you'll gurgle out a bark by rote;
When we'll be tottering to our end—
Shall we not think then of this opalescent sky?
Will not remembrance wake in our endangered brain
Of these green lawns

NEW POEMS

Where humble flowers broke in bloom on your swift track?
Or will our faculties have grown so slack
That we shall muddle joy with pain?
And at the stroke of ruthless memories
Again you'll disappear,
And I will be searching you in bush and underwood;
The loving names by which I'll call
Intentionally you will not hear,
And for my unshared solitude
You will not care at all.
You might be lying somewhere dead,
Curving your tired head
As in deep sleep.
I shall not weep—
You might be looking for a long-lost ball.
Who knows if in a last obstreperous mood
You might be consummating in a ditch
Your agonising orgies with a bitch?

NEW POEMS

THE ASOKA TREE

The legend goes that in the days of yore,
A tree, named after a meek Emperor,
With gnarled root and trunk and branches dried
And no sap feeding its heart's core,
Would at the touch of a girl's bare feet
Break into tumultuous bloom
Of red and scarlet red.
Love, day in day out
I sit apart,
Harkening into the gloom
For your approaching feet
Within my empty heart.

NEW POEMS

A MILLION MEN SURROUND ME

A million men surround me ;
Through the night
I hear them march,
Beasts neighing to the fray,
And in the gloom of trees
I see the frosty glint of steel
Narrowing the circle round
My obstreperous heart.
O friend!
Through all this din,
Like humble rain
Falling on the quickening land,
I know your nearing steps,
And feel upon my hand
The lightness of your lonely hand.

NEW POEMS

WHEN YOU ARISE

When you arise
And go your way,
As you will one day,
And the gay tenderness of your eyes
Will change to hate,
I shall bend low
Nor utter any word,
But abating my sense
With that vile wisdom life has taught
Pretend indifference,
And like some lone bird
Brooding over my pain
Watch your supple gait,
And the proud tower of your youth
Standing once again
Beside the primrose landslides of the South.

O Friend, if now,
When every look of yours
Strews sparks of loveliness,
In happy mood,
Like warm guests at a feast,
We suddenly take leave

NEW POEMS

Of brimful oft-repeated cups,
Nor know the anguish nor the dull despair
Of implacable fate—
O Friend, if the hour would strike now
—As strike it must—
And you gathering your heavy hair,
Shaking intoxication from your brow,
Trample my longing in the dust—
And not turning once
Walk your triumphal way
To-day....

NEW POEMS

LETTER FOR THE NEW YEAR 1933

Whilst I live brooding o'er the part
That Fate in its relentlessness
Has kept for both of us in store,
You gourmandise your fickle heart
With ecstasy galore,
And in your naivety you bless
The dialectic platitudes
Which aggrandise your vanity.
As in a play you love to see
The smoothness of the spirit break
In acrobatic attitudes.
I fancy you sitting before
The Sacerdotal Charlatan,
The Hypochondriac Bore,
Sipping nonchalantly your tea;
Rhapsodic 'twixt a scone and cake,
You fabricate a monstrous plan
To save the soul of Man.

O Friend, in buoyant mood
Of haughty repentlessness,
Truthfully acknowledging
Your mind's inaptitude,

NEW POEMS

Were you but suddenly to awake
And cast the spells away
That lured to vain beatitude,
And hold the world once more in sway-
If only for the sake
Of your irrational loveliness!

NEW POEMS

SINCE YOU REGRET

Since you regret that I am still alive,
And living was a pain borne solely for your sake,
No longer shall I strive
To piece each slackening hour on the loom,
And of my autumn days a pattern make
Obsequious to your ever-changing taste.
Because you have coldly spoken out my doom,
Knowing that when I die
No tear will glint your eye,
No sudden movement break
The proud tranquillity of your hand,
Nor memories stir within your dullard heart,
I make haste to depart,
Praying, O nunc dimittis, Lord!
Perhaps one day you'll understand
(If love will ever light your muddled brain)
That when you thought you were pricking me with pain,
You struck at me the liberating sword.

NEW POEMS

WHEN YOU UNLOOSE YOUR HAIR

When you unloose your hair to-night
And let fall this flower,
Languorous with the evening's revelry
Where with fleeting heel
You chased hour after hour
In glad exuberance of love's company;
Too tired to pick it up again,
Or for your heart to feel
In drowsiness' half-light
The soft design of pain
That folded in it lay;
Think then on me,
Who with blank eyes and unrelieved despair
Mutter wild blessings in your care-free hair
Till break of day.

NEW POEMS

POEMS FROM THE CHINA SEA

I

Lines written for an album

Had I, like you, the heart of a boy,
I would have left my sleepless bed
To gaze at Amoy.
But the urgency of joy
Within my breast is dead.
I ride on a dream ship
Across lone skies
Which change from amaranth to purpureal red.
Unhurriedly I skip
Lands, mountains, seas,
The aerial dome of space.
No furrow, no trace
Reveals our shoreless enterprise.
Friend,
My journey is without end.

II

Seas change to the colour of jade;
Mountains hold in a vague embrace
Lagoons of blue;

NEW POEMS

And you,
Leaning your mournful face
Athwart the crenellated skies
In pitiless harmony
Of unavailing dream. . . .
Troy's bitter pageantry
Crashes in one large flame—
Veil upon burning veil
Cast in untrammelled ease
On implacable memories.
Friend, all these
The gods in their foresight made
For the vain acceptance of your eyes.

III

All is quiet again,
The mirth and the merriment,
The soft ritornels of pain—
Only a spark unspent
Lying along the edge of a gleam
Radiant on a foam,
A wish only remains for an unchanging dream
In a last home.

NEW POEMS

FOAM OF THE SEA

Foam of the sea, dissolving, remaking!
(Youth, O my youth, whither art thou flown?)
Far have they winged the white birds of my dreaming,
And left me forlorn and alone.

Ceaselessly ageing and endlessly new,
Tenderness and warmth of the sea to the shore!
The white birds have perished and dead is their singing;
To me they will come back no more.

NEW POEMS

MOON IN THE SKY

Moon in the sky,
Why dost thou shiver
Like a lone heart?
Thou hast no sorrows,
O keen-browed;
Thou but knowest
The rise and the fall
Of thy pale river,
Not how love comes
Nor how it goes.

NEW POEMS

TO JAYA G. (aged four)

You to whom each day doth bring
Growth, loveliness and joy;
For the treading of whose feet
Fields spread out in a glittering sheet
Textured with the humble flowerlets of Spring;
The playful Sun himself
Puffing with fire and pelf
Rolls itself into a ball,
Becomes for you a toy.
To you a New Year's Day
Is just another day
To spend in careless play.
Sweet, at your age
Why should it mark
A swift-recurring stage
Along the inevitable way
Towards the dark?

NEW POEMS

I SAT AT YOUR HEARTH

I sat at your hearth,
You of the satin hair,
And watched the fire
Leap in a dark despair
Behind your burnished hair,
Till flame of singing wine
In eternity caught
Your melting line
In the frenzy-enwrought
Tracery of my thought.

NEW POEMS

LINES WRITTEN FOR AN ALBUM

When you come up the stairs
And see these empty halls
Where I have lived,
Grieve not, but smile, and say:
“He whom the gods have curst,
Here found a whole month’s rest,
Ere once again he roamed
And never, never found a home
This side the tomb.”

NEW POEMS

IN THE EARTH UNBROKEN AND SAVAGE

In the earth unbroken and savage,
In the heart's unquenchable need,
In the sea's long barren furrows,
Eternal, Thou hast cast a seed.

My love, which is for a mortal,
Is a bridge to the heart of Thee,
My woods, a song to Thy praises,
A glass to Thy beauty, my sea.

NEW POEMS

To M.A.

Friend,
Within the soundless corridors of your heart,
Wherein you sit apart,
It were unwise of me to raise a cry
Frightening the image,
Secretive and shy,
You cherish in the hopelessness of pain
Caged in your lonely brain.

Yet life is brief,
And there's a bourne even to grief;
For ere we die,
O, wine and women yet are sweet,
Though bitter-sweet,
Ere one by one,
And last you and I,
Reluctantly we rise
Our company undone,
And like the whisperings of grass
Into the breezes pass
That sway the spectres of the earth and skies.

NEW POEMS

FRAGMENT

Ah who would dare, ah who would dare
Suddenly to unloose her hair,
To smite her breast
And bare a thunderous heart,
Sprinkling with blood of faith
That critical hour,
And like the cglantine
The riot cover
With wandering flower?
Who would sink so far below despair,
Or soar so far above
To apostate young love,
And fix upon her lover
An ancient far-gone stare,
Feel frenzy like a spear
Strike from her being all fear,
In the unkempt pageantry of youth
Assert the Truth?

O lovely Jewish girl,
If you were there,
You'd bend your ardent face
As often on the tumult of my brain,

NEW POEMS

Tranquilly unfurl
The pent-up tenderness of your race
Appeasing pain!
Ruth singing waist-high midst my lands,
Reaping with candid hands
The lean harvest of my hazardous plight!
O Shulamite, my Shulamite,
Holding within abundant eyes a hope,
Like a pure blade reposing in a sheath,
Of the heart's unending scope!
Alone of all your tribe, alone
Flowing to the crowd a precious stream
The patient noon-tide skies beneath,
Rounding the haggard stones
That men have made of their faith,
Soothing them to a dream!

How long, how long yet,
Before we finally forget,
Will the Rose of my Jerusalem
Stay its bursting flame
From hearts with ignorance beset!

NEW POEMS

LETTER FROM O'NI

To E.T. at The Shiffolds

A Fu

I lie content in my poor fields
With the young spring sun warming my bones.
The bamboo shoots out its sprays,
Stands like a mighty fishing rod
To catch the new-come birds.
The blue-throated peacock screeches on the lawn;
The oriole sings a love-song on the high branch.
My paper house stands a little on one side
Because of last winter's winds:
The thatch on it has gathered towards the front,
Like a fringe upon a bald man's head.
The heavy dog, fat from his wintry sleep
Gradually is regaining his nimbleness,
Noses about the damp earth
And barks at the sun without intent or thought.

While I lie in the little fields
That kindly fate has given me for my banishment,
I dream of the great hubbub town of Ch'ang-an,
Where reign the sons of the ungrateful Chu,
And I think on the days

NEW POEMS

Which, not far from Ch'ang-an—
Sixty li in all—
I passed in the pleasant land of Shi-fo.
There in the marble palace
I would lie in bed soft with swan's feathers,
My freezing feet resting on a bottle of jade,
And in the light softly pouring from the ceiling
The naughty "Birds" of To-fan flitted through my sleep,
Or the night through I shared in the noble wisdom of Fla-tun;
Or was merged in that most fascinating writing,
Great Ssuma-Kien's Grand Encyclopaedia.
In the evening in that lovely palace
(Where lacquered boxes are set on tall trees
For tits to home with the first arrival of Spring,
Such is the friendly disposition of my noble protectors)
The stately Li-zu, lady of the house,
Reads out in a voice more sweet than ivory flute
The tales of that pale man, Che-kho;
While Bo-bo, more learned than those
Who after long travail
And many attempts at suicide
Have passed the Civil Service,
Pares his scholarly nails,
Thinking of holy Flan-si talking to a ghost
Or mourning o'er Chiao Chung Ching's faithful wife.

NEW POEMS

Sweet airy noises from abodes unseen
Fill the spacious ceremonial Hall,
And the fire leaps up to devour the cold—
For the sake of that house
I even love the winter.

Away, away, O dreams of roasted golden fowl
And silvered papyrus-scrolls cut from the side of the well-fed hog,
And gaudy fruit soaked in perfumed cream!
I wish to be content as now I lie,
Waiting for my simple herbal diet
Which the amiable Ma-li and the young Dru-sha
Are preparing amid loud talk
But with great gentleness of mind.

The white cranes of my years
Are circling overhead.
My nose is lengthening,
The empty patch on my head is spreading towards the ears.
The bundle of my pains bows down my back.
Yesterday the rain, driven by the wind,
Was lashing at my windows.
To-day I watched the moisture
Gather into whole drops
And softly trickle down the window-panes.

OSNY (s. cf. O.) :

❧ EARLY POEMS ❧

EARLY POEMS

NARCISSE: MALLARMÉEEN

Your eyes to me are moonlit seas
where rove my sea-gull dreams like souls,
where coral roses keep their tryst
with large translucent bees,
where sea-weeds held in amber bowls
whisper like eager girls,
where leaves of lily-pearls
wander amongst cold gleaming eyes,
and where the dream-entranced skies
tremble, grape-coloured, starlight-kist.
But in your inmost eye I see a boy,
a wondrous fair-limbed flower-bodied boy,
gazing into an amethyst.

1915

EARLY POEMS

CHINOISERIE: SAMAINESQUE

The Spring is come, Belovèd; we shall float
White lotus lamps upon the gloaming stream,
And watch the sunset's splendour waste and fade,
An amber dream.

I'll weave thee jasmine garlands for thy throat,
Enmesh bold poppies in thy stormy hair,
And heap thy lap with tender blossoms snowed
By the tall pear.

But oh to-night, Belovèd, play thy lute,
And lean thy cheek to mine and softly sing
A fragile princess in her springtime dead
And a lone king. . . .

Love, through thy finger-lattices I see
Full of desire thy passionate lengthening eyes,
And lo! the moon like an impetuous flower
Bursts in the skies.

1915

EARLY POEMS

WHEN THUNDERCLOUDS ABOUT ME BREAK

When thunderclouds about me break
My thoughts become a raving storm;
But naught can agitate the lake
Of your sweet soul's unchanging form—

Sheltered, wine-coloured waters sway
Fast-locked within an amethyst,
And change from purple night to day
Obedient to an Empress' wrist—

Whilst I sit darkling in my room,
Beating against the prison-bar,
You come and fling into the gloom
A bright inconsequential star.

You think and dream and live as much
As leaves, or brooks or sun-flecked birds,
Nor fight through endless nights to touch
The balsam shed from healing words.

Your soul is wholly of the light,
As of the keen unshaded noon;
You fill against the hastening night
The onyx pitchers of the moon.

EARLY POEMS

And suffering, such as baffles far
The mad imaginings of a king,
You pluck, a radiant nenuphar,
And press it to your breast and sing.

When dark is rushing into dark
Amid the threnody of doom,
Your soul and mine will strike the spark
To thread the loneliness of the tomb;

And shadow mingling with the scent
Will drift down corridors of Time,
And sing upon the firmament
The unsung Sempiternal Rhyme.

1914

EARLY POEMS

THE LADY OF SYMBOLS

To M.N.G.

A lady walketh forth into the night
When a hushed fragrance lies upon the street,
And the walls are quiet and shadowy
And the lake a gleaming sheet.

Bendsome and tall and straight in brocade she is,
Stepping out of faded tapestry;
And looking on her one is sorrowful,
As on old emblazonry.

Older than the moon or the forest she is,
Yea, older than the gray slow-wending brook,
A picture of one that kings have loved,
Fallen from a curious book.

She speaks not, gliding, makes no gesture,
No light springs up in her cavernous eyes,
And yet men have loved her,
And filled the world with their sighs.

Sun-hearted men have given their lives gladly
For a rose she had touched with her fingers,
And the glory of being sung by poets
In her bearing lingers.

EARLY POEMS

But now she is worthy of no one's heed;
Strong passionate men their faces cover,
And draw their cloaks more closely still;
No man dare be her lover.

In the silent street she walks past me,
And her mouth is a large dead flower;
She smiles me a smile of knowledge
At the midnight hour.

I, of all mortal men, adore and love her,
Though her beauty makes me bitter-sad;
And the wise turning their faces murmur:
Lo, another is gone mad.

1917

EARLY POEMS

O THOU BEYOND ALL SPEECH

O thou beyond all speech,
Beyond all song,
My faltering accents ne'er can reach
The subtle perfection of thy grace.
Through nights of agonics,
In healing dawns I have sought long
But to suggest thy beauteous line
Of hair and brow and face,
O Life within my life.

As children in a ceaseless play
Bring forth their soldiers gay,
To win with them large coloured lands
Placing their men in serious array,
And then, tired, with folded hands they sit,
As if they suddenly half-guess
Their task to be a uselessness,
I too each day have marshalled forth my words,
My painted, empty, vaunting words,
Wherewith thy beauty to express.

EARLY POEMS

YOU WILL NOT MISS ME

You will not miss me
When I am dead,
Like a careless flower
Dropped from your head.

But some stormy day
By some firelight hour,
I'll stir in your soul
Like an opening flower.

You will smile and think,
And let fall your book,
And bend o'er the fire
With a far-off look.

EARLY POEMS

THE COTSWOLDS

Friend, I keep my word with you
In the many-peopled street,
And seeing you I pass you by
On swift-reluctant feet,
As if I knew you not—I
Who hold you by the chain
Of unnameable desires
In the darkest dungeon of my brain.

But come not upon these hills
In the evening when the sunset's gold
The ravines with its treasure fills,
And stillness creeps from wold to wold,
When the sky is a far-winged golden bird
And the brook is flowing with purple wine—
Come not, I cannot keep my word;
We cannot from such beauty turn away,
And you look North and I remembering look South.
O Love, should sullen reason hold its sway?
I'll take your hands and kiss your eyes and mouth.

EARLY POEMS

IN RUSSIA

On the wooden roof of my chamber
Incessantly rain-drops beat.
I sit alone and fancy
The patter of angels' feet.

O Heart, crucified in thy pain,
Thy wastes of sorrow will know
The Night with her harvest of stars
And the tenderness of snow.

EARLY POEMS

MY THOUGHTS FLOCK TO THEE

My thoughts flock to thee, one by one,
Tired of wandering in the West,
Stained with the blood of the wounded sun,
To find in thee their rest.

One is a sun-drunk mounting lark
Mating the corn with the stars above,
And one a wild strong bird with eyelets dark,
And one a dove.

EARLY POEMS

HOLD OUT, MY HEART

Hold out, my heart, hold out,
And through the waters strange and dark,
Thou frail unruddered bark,
Cleave to the shores, be stout.

Tho' she heap sufferings
Such as no heart till now hath borne,
And cruel night shroud thee
Of moon and star forlorn,

Tho' the almond-tree be withered,
High symbol of thy spring,
Tho' the breeze in the corn be still,
And no bird of thy passion sing,

Curse not, curse not thy Love,
But sigh again in her tresses,
Praising the while thy faith
And her faithlessnesses.

Till life itself depart,
Hold out my sullen heart.

EARLY POEMS

OXFORD PASTICCIO

To H.A.K.

Though whisky makes you frisky, and beer of good cheer,
There's something good as whisky and better far than beer.

That drink is mellow Friendship, which has lain far underground;
It's golden as the cider and strong as can be found.

The lovely Oxford City stands still with tower and spire,
With the river glimmering softly through all the greeny shire,

And the streets one must remember, the Turl, the Broad, the High,
Where you can get long credit—but "When's ye goin' to p'y?"

And the spring that's blown upon one from out old Hinksey way,
And the proper maids of Summertown with whom you mayn't
make hay,

Unless you be a fresher and don't know Varsity laws
That you may look as much as you like but never come too close,

For the proctor and the bullers are always on your track,
And it isn't really funny to get a down-right sack,

When the month of May is on us and your ardent heart might fly
Down the road that leads to Headington and ends up in the sky.

EARLY POEMS

But of all that wondrous City there's a corner that I love,
When pansies grow below and laburnums wave above:

It's just behind the stables; but when the high bell booms
You hear it ringing through you as you sit within your rooms,

And feel that you are mighty, though only an Undergrad,
For what the devil can you know how the world is hard and bad?

When Mrs C. brings in your meals and it grows dark around,
You can't be feeling sad unless you're stone-deaf to the sound

That's booming from your own heart when youth is fresh and strong,
And friends are crowding round you and the night is full of song

That a blithering idiot's shouting from out across the way,
And you bear it, you can bear all when the month's the month of May.

'Though England be your bugbear, and it can be pretty bad,
You can't help loving England if you were an Undergrad,

If you've been up at Oxford when the hawthorn is in bloom
And thrusting up its shock-head into your very room.

Yes, England's not a bad place if you are quick to find
A field wherein to lie with a lass that's not unkind,

And in the fragrant grasses you push your faces down
And you dream of whey and butter, of cheeses pat and brown,

EARLY POEMS

Till you wake to see a white cow chewing her golden hair,
And holding all the landscape in a large translucent stare.

Even if you hail from India, where Englishmen do rule,
You'd better put that thought away, unless you be a fool;

Unless your heart be sodden, and I don't see why it should,
You'll take a stick, put on your brogues, and doffing cap and hood

You'll go a-ramble heart-free to where the linnet sings
And the underwood is burgeoning amid a stir of wings,

And the twilight like a flower is gathered in the bowl,
With the river flowing brightening across your darkened soul,

Where the sky is all a-glimmer, for what else should it be
When the month of May is on us and the heart is young and free?

It is this Oxford City, tho' long we've lived apart,
That's ever blossoming in our mind and tugging at our heart.

So the cider of our friendship is fuller of good cheer
And friskier than whisky, than beer that's merely beer.

Tho' you may live in India and I in Europe's clime,
We're somehow bound together through all the coming time;

For have we not been treading our varying paths of doom
With the month of May within us and Oxford trees in bloom?

❧ AN OLD MAN'S SONGS ❧

To L. M.

AN OLD MAN'S SONGS

I

Out of the wreckage of my years
What offering shall I make
To the proud destiny of your youth;
What gifts lay at your feet?
Passion drowned on the high seas?
Love thrown to the winds?
An old Man's heart full of tears?
What else, Sweet,
But memories?

AN OLD MAN'S SONGS

II

You make some efforts for my sake,
You part on the side your hair,
You attempt to read Blake:
An old man's whims,
An old man's vanity!
Why do you wish
My heart to swell the pageantry of praise
Which paves your triumphal way?
Old men are not so easily beguiled
By gestures, handmaids of your sanity.
Old men do not allow their hearts to run wild
Beware, my Love, beware,
Lest in your riotous hair
There might not be a dream of mine that sigh
Though you don't note the hunger in my eye

AN OLD MAN'S SONGS

III

Like vultures they lie in wait
For the possession of your supple gait,
To swing you into a dance.
The young have need, perchance,
Of cathartic close-ups,
Of tautological caress.
What are old men to do with their lust?—
Only to stitch their hearts
To the hem of your whirling dress,
And scatter
Into iridescent dust!

AN OLD MAN'S SONGS

IV

God has dowered you with all gifts.
Roses and songs and men's hearts
Lie strewn on your path
For you to step upon.
The prowess of your loveliness,
The onward pressure of your youth
Nothing can thwart.
Why should you then redden your mouth,
Grow poisonous flowers on a pale face,
Completing the girlish grace
Of a beauty too complete?
I do not wish your hand to stray, by chance,
Into my hand.
I understand,
An old man's heart is brittle
And cold his hand.
Bowed down I pick the litter of your charms:
Alms of a word,
Blessings of a glance,
Gestures thrown out with squandering ease.
The riverine cadence of your laughter, Friend,
Might mean an old man's end.

AN OLD MAN'S SONGS

v

Out of the row of those
Bound to the chariot of your vanity,
With the apt perversion of your years
You have picked me out for show,
To hold my love to shame,
Glittering in the harness of your mockery.
Your friends are in the know
Of this amusing game.
Pampered with wine and rose
I too am pleased to exhibit.
What greater joy for me?
At least I am fit
To pander to your phantasy.
In other times, glistening your merry eyes,
You would have hurled me to the wild beasts' den
And proved my steadfastness.

O Love, Love!
I bless your cruelty.
But surely you realise,
The lives of old men,
Old men's loyalty,
Are but poor proof
Of your imperious loveliness.

AN OLD MAN'S SONGS

VI

You pass from flirt to flirt
On the billows of unsuccumbing youth.
You lightly tiptoe on men's pain.
What need have you of this?
Were you to spread out your skirt
You would gather a lapful of hearts;
So many long only for the bliss
Of your untrammelled glance.
Of course,
I know it is the right of youth
To lead vassals on a chain
To the holocaust of Chance.

Friend, being so self-contained,
At rest
In the crystal halo of your years,
Why must you fashion a gem
Out of an old man's tears
To cling to your breast?

AN OLD MAN'S SONGS

VII

Around your innocence
A net I laid
Pieced out of bits
Of vile experience:
The parenthetic phrase,
Ambiguous words,
Sharp hits,
The undulating gaze,
In short, all the tricks of the trade,
Which in former times had ensnared birds.
Love, to-day I unloose the strings
To the heavy tumult of your fate,
To the flutter of your anxious wings.
My pride is soothed.
They say, an old man's pride,
When all things go,
Is his sole preoccupation.
Others will hold your hands;
Others will kiss your mouth:
I am content to know
That technical skill
Still
Outbids the insolence of youth.

AN OLD MAN'S SONGS

VIII

You move in stateliness
Untroubled by the fickle course of fate,
Conscious alone of youth
And self-sufficing loveliness.
Men's hearts trail in your wake,
Men's sufferings cling to your hem,
But, for their sake,
You never turn your head,
Nor smile nor sigh.
Why should you?
Pity is no virtue in your years.
Why should you pity, Love,
An old man's cares, an old man's fears?

AN OLD MAN'S SONGS

IX

I blame you for the way
In which you make each day a sacrifice
To an intransigent whim.
Tennis to slim;
Dancing to scatter the frivolous hours away;
Eyes, limbs, surrendered to extravagance.
Friend, pay no heed
To an old man's need
Of saying unpleasant truths.
I love the grand inconsequence of your youth.
Time hangs heavy on your hands.
Old men dare not take part
In the abandon of your heart.

AN OLD MAN'S SONGS

x

AT TENNIS

We sat upon the scented grass, sweet Friend:
The love which had no beginning, we talked about its end.
You said: "The sum of loss and gain
Will work out in the round
To the Eternal Same.
You must have heard the silly tale
Of how a nightingale in vain
Sitting on a high chair
Once sang of his love to a rose.
The nightingale had a large nose,
And the nightingale wore gray hair,
But the rose was young and sane.
Come, let us have a game.
Listen, the racquet's twang
Sinks in hollow hollowness of sound."

Friend, the world smashes in my brain—
Girders and plinths, limbs and stars!
In the sudden upheaval of unbidden centuries
The lands convulse with cataclysmal speed.
Flaming wide-nostrilled monsters plunge
Across the convex of the skies.

AN OLD MAN'S SONGS

I stretch torn hands to reach your piteous hands;
I seek through tattered space your ample eyes.

But you,
Stranger to apocalyptic needs,
In the narrow orb of your accurate mind
Rotate from hour to hour:
Dinner for two;
Tennis at four;
Odol and powder before going out to friends;
Cautious caresses;
Honourable amends;
Lips painted to the crimson of a wound
After sentimental flutters;—
Whatever happens one should go to sleep
Carefully drawing to the shutters. . . .

Oh, Passion lion-hearted, that ruled calamitous wilds,
Browses on well-laid lawns, a weary sheep.

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