

# POEMS

1940-1953

KARL SHAPIRO



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**P O E M S**

**1940 - 1953**

*Also*

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*Karl Shapiro:*

*Person, Place and Thing*

*V-Letter and other Poems*

*Essay on Rime*

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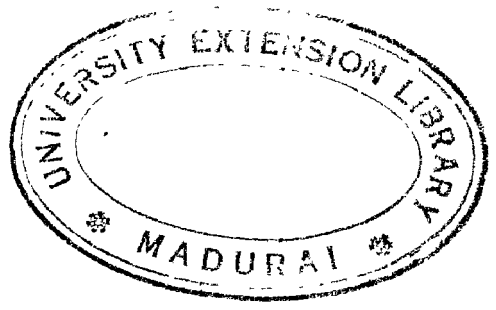
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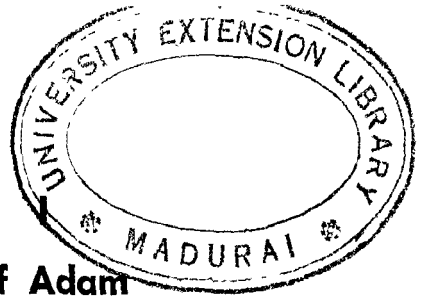
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**POEMS**

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# ADAM AND EVE



## The Sickness of Adam

In the beginning, at every step, he turned  
As if by instinct to the East to praise  
The nature of things. Now every path was learned  
He lost the lifted, almost flower-like gaze

Of a temple dancer. He began to walk  
Slowly, like one accustomed to be alone.  
He found himself lost in the field of talk;  
Thinking became a garden of its own.

In it were new things: words he had never said,  
Beasts he had never seen and knew were not  
In the true garden, terrors, and tears shed  
Under a tree by him, for some new thought.

And the first anger. Once he flung a staff  
At softly coupling sheep and struck the ram.  
It broke away. And God heard Adam laugh  
And for his laughter made the creature lame.

And wanderlust. He stood upon the Wall  
To search the unfinished countries lying wide  
And waste, where not a living thing could crawl,  
And yet he would descend, as if to hide.

His thought drew down the guardian at the gate,  
To whom man said, 'What danger am I in?'  
And the angel, hurt in spirit, seemed to hate  
The wingless thing that worried after sin,

For it said nothing but marvelously unfurled  
Its wings and arched them shimmering overhead,  
Which must have been the signal from the world  
That the first season of our life was dead.

Adam fell down with labor in his bones,  
And God approached him in the cool of day  
And said, 'This sickness in your skeleton  
Is longing. I will remove it from your clay.'

He said also, 'I made you strike the sheep.'  
It began to rain and God sat down beside  
The sinking man. When he was fast asleep  
He wet his right hand deep in Adam's side

And drew the graceful rib out of his breast.  
Far off, the latent streams began to flow  
And birds flew out of Paradise to nest  
On earth. Sadly the angel watched them go.

## The Recognition of Eve

Whatever it was she had so fiercely fought  
Had fled back to the sky, but still she lay  
With arms outspread, awaiting its assault,  
Staring up through the branches of the tree,  
The fig tree. Then she drew a shuddering breath  
And turned her head instinctively his way.  
She had fought birth as dying men fight death.

Her sigh awakened him. He turned and saw  
A body swollen, as though formed of fruits,  
White as the flesh of fishes, soft and raw.  
He hoped she was another of the brutes  
So he crawled over and looked into her eyes,  
The human wells that pool all absolutes.  
It was like looking into double skies.

And when she spoke the first word (it was *thou*)  
He was terror-stricken, but she raised her hand  
And touched his wound where it was fading now,  
For he must feel the place to understand.  
Then he recalled the longing that had torn  
His side, and while he watched it whitely mend,  
He felt it stab him suddenly like a thorn.

He thought the woman had hurt him. Was it she  
Or the same sickness seeking to return;  
Or was there any difference, the pain set free  
And she who seized him now as hard as iron?  
Her fingers bit his body. She looked old  
And involuted, like the newly-born.  
He let her hurt him till she loosed her hold.

Then she forgot him and she wearily stood  
And went in search of water through the grove.

Adam could see her wandering through the wood,  
Studying her footsteps as her body wove  
In light and out of light. She found a pool  
And there he followed shyly to observe.  
She was already turning beautiful.



### III

## The Kiss

The first kiss was with stumbling fingertips.  
Their bodies grazed each other as if by chance  
And touched and untouched in a kind of dance.  
Second, they found out touching with their lips.

Some obscure angel, pausing on his course,  
Shed such a brightness on the face of Eve  
That Adam in grief was ready to believe  
He had lost her love. The third kiss was by force.

Their lips formed foreign, unimagined oaths  
When speaking of the Tree of Guilt. So wide  
Their mouths, they drank each other from inside.  
A gland of honey burst within their throats.

But something rustling hideously overhead,  
They jumped up from the fourth caress and hid.

**The Tree of Guilt**

Why, on her way to the oracle of Love,  
Did she not even glance up at the Tree  
Of Life, that giant with the whitish cast  
And glinting leaves and berries of dull gray,  
As though covered with mold? But who would taste  
The medicine of immortality,  
And who would 'be as God'? And in what way?

So she came breathless to the lowlier one  
And like a priestess of the cult she knelt,  
Holding her breasts in token for a sign,  
And prayed the spirit of the burdened bough  
That the great power of the tree be seen  
And lift itself out of the Tree of Guilt  
Where it had hidden in the leaves till now.

Or did she know already? Had the peacock  
Rattling its quills, glancing its thousand eyes  
At her, the iridescence of the dove,  
Stench of the he-goat, everything that joins  
Told her the mystery? It was not enough,  
So from the tree the snake began to rise  
And dropt its head and pointed at her loins.

She fell and hid her face and still she saw  
The spirit of the tree emerge and slip  
Into the open sky until it stood  
Straight as a standing-stone, and spilled its seed.  
And all the seed were serpents of the good.  
Again he seized the snake and from its lip  
It spat the venomous evil of the deed.

And it was over. But the woman lay  
Stricken with what she knew, ripe in her thought

Like a fresh apple fallen from the limb  
And rotten, like a fruit that lies too long.  
This way she rose, ripe-rotten in her prime  
And spurned the cold thing coiled against her foot  
And called her husband, in a kind of song.

## The Confession

As on the first day her first word was *thou*.  
He waited while she said, 'Thou art the tree.'  
And while she said, almost accusingly,  
Looking at nothing, 'Thou art the fruit I took.'  
She seemed smaller by inches as she spoke,  
And Adam wondering touched her hair and shook,  
Half understanding. He answered softly, 'How?'

And for the third time, in the third way, Eve:  
'The tree that rises from the middle part  
Of the garden.' And almost tenderly, 'Thou art  
The garden. *We*.' Then she was overcome,  
And Adam coldly, lest he should succumb  
To pity, standing at the edge of doom,  
Comforted her like one about to leave.

She sensed departure and she stood aside  
Smiling and bitter. But he asked again,  
'How did you eat? With what thing did you sin?'  
And Eve with body slackened and uncouth,  
'Under the tree I took the fruit of truth  
From an angel. I ate it with my other mouth.'  
And saying so, she did not know she lied.

It was the man who suddenly released  
From doubt, wept in the woman's heavy arms,  
Those double serpents, subtly winding forms  
That climb and drop about the manly boughs;  
And dry with weeping, fiery and aroused,  
Fell on her face to slake his terrible thirst  
And bore her body earthward like a beast.

## VI

### Shame

The hard blood falls back in the manly fount,  
The soft door closes under Venus' mount,  
The ovoid moon moves to the Garden's side  
And dawn comes, but the lovers have not died.  
They have not died but they have fallen apart  
In sleep, like equal halves of the same heart.

How to teach shame? How to teach nakedness  
To the already naked? How to express  
Nudity? How to open innocent eyes  
And separate the innocent from the wise?  
And how to re-establish the guilty tree  
In infinite gardens of humanity?

By marring the image, by the black device  
Of the goat-god, by the clown of Paradise,  
By fruits of cloth and by the navel's bud,  
By itching tendrils and by strings of blood,  
By ugliness, by the shadow of our fear,  
By ridicule, by the fig-leaf patch of hair.

Whiter than tombs, whiter than whitest clay,  
Exposed beneath the whitening eye of day,  
They awoke and saw the covering that reveals.  
They thought they were changing into animals.  
Like animals they bellowed terrible cries  
And clutched each other, hiding each other's eyes.

## VII

### Exile

The one who gave the warning with his wings,  
Still doubting them, held out the sword of flame  
Against the Tree of Whiteness as they came  
Angrily, slowly by, like exiled kings,

And watched them at the broken-open gate  
Stare in the distance long and overlong,  
And then, like peasants, pitiful and strong,  
Take the first step toward earth and hesitate.

For Adam raised his head and called aloud,  
'My Father, who has made the garden pall,  
Giving me all things and then taking all,  
Who with your opposite nature has endowed

Woman, give us your hand for our descent.  
Needing us greatly, even in our disgrace,  
Guide us, for gladly do we leave this place  
For our own land and wished-for banishment.'

But woman prayed, 'Guide us to Paradise.'  
Around them slunk the uneasy animals,  
Strangely excited, uttering coughs and growls,  
And bounded down into the wild abyss.

And overhead the last migrating birds,  
Then empty sky. And when the two had gone  
A slow half-dozen steps across the stone,  
The angel came and stood among the shards

And called them, as though joyously, by name.  
They turned in dark amazement and beheld  
Eden ablaze with fires of red and gold,  
The garden dressed for dying in cold flame,

And it was autumn, and the present world.

## AUTO WRECK

Its quick soft silver bell beating, beating,  
And down the dark one ruby flare  
Pulsing out red light like an artery,  
The ambulance at top speed floating down  
Past beacons and illuminated clocks  
Wings in a heavy curve, dips down,  
And brakes speed, entering the crowd.  
The doors leap open, emptying light;  
Stretchers are laid out, the mangled lifted  
And stowed into the little hospital.  
Then the bell, breaking the hush, tolls once,  
And the ambulance with its terrible cargo  
Rocking, slightly rocking, moves away,  
As the doors, an afterthought, are closed.

We are deranged, walking among the cops  
Who sweep glass and are large and composed.  
One is still making notes under the light.  
One with a bucket douches ponds of blood  
Into the street and gutter.  
One hangs lanterns on the wrecks that cling,  
Empty husks of locusts, to iron poles.

Our throats were tight as tourniquets,  
Our feet were bound with splints, but now,  
Like convalescents intimate and gauche,  
We speak through sickly smiles and warn  
With the stubborn saw of common sense,  
The grim joke and the banal resolution.  
The traffic moves around with care,  
But we remain, touching a wound  
That opens to our richest horror.  
Already old, the question Who shall die?  
Becomes unspoken Who is innocent?  
For death in war is done by hands;  
Suicide has cause and stillbirth, logic;  
And cancer, simple as a flower, blooms.

But this invites the occult mind,  
Cancels our physics with a sneer,  
And spatters all we knew of denouement  
Across the expedient and wicked stones.



## BALLET MECANIQUE

The hand involves the wheel that weaves the hand  
Without the kiss of kind; the digits flick,  
The cranks obedient to no command  
Raise on their iron shoulders the dead weight  
For which no forges cheer. Nothing is late,  
Nothing behind, excited, or too quick.  
The arm involves the treadle and the wheel  
Winds wakeless motion on a tireless reel.

The kiss of kind remembers wood and wool  
To no cold purpose, anciently, afar:  
The wheel forgets the hand that palpitates  
The danceless power, and the power waits  
Coiled in the tension tower for the pull  
That freezes the burnt hand upon the bar.

## THE BED

Your clothes of snow and satin and pure blood  
Are surplices of many sacraments  
Full of the woven musk of birth and death,  
Full of the wet wild-flower breath of marriages,  
The sweat, the slow mandragora of lust.

Meadow of sleep, table of sour sickness,  
Infinite road to travel, first of graves,  
Your square and subtle presence rules the house,  
And little wincing hurts of everyday  
Clutch at your white skirt and are comforted.

What matter if you are wise or if you know?  
A third of life is yours, all that we learn  
We tell you, and you dream us night by night.  
We take your advice, confess in sharp detail,  
Add to your knowledge, yet can teach you nothing.  
“Lie here”, you say, and whoever we bring you, sad,  
Ashamed or delighted, you take in the spirit we give.

Let me not know too much, and let your soul  
Not lead me farther on than sleep and love,  
For her I marry is more white than you.  
Some day, as if with ancient torches stand  
And fill the walls with fires around her head,  
And let your gown be fresh as April grass,  
And let your prothalamium be sweet.

## BIRTHDAY POEM

Five hundred nights and days ago  
We kissed goodbye at the iron gates  
Of the terminal, two of a crowd of twos,  
Half of us mobbed away below  
Where the engine pants and pants and waits,  
Half of us trailing back in the snow  
In taxis and cars to wait for news,  
And like an enormous sign, a pair  
Of blurred lips hung in the smoky air.

So far, so long, what can I say  
To help commemorate your today,  
What can I ever give to prove,  
If proof were ever needed, love?  
We are too used to words; we think  
In terms of Anna, Virginia Woolf,  
At times approach that dreaded brink  
And stare into the selfsame gulf  
That drew their splendid souls away.

We are too rich with books, our blood  
Is heavy with over-thoughtful food,  
Our minds are gravid—and yet to try  
To backtrack to simplicity  
Is fatal. Every Walden fails;  
Those cynical ladies of Versailles  
With silken frocks and silver pails  
Playing at milkmaid sicken us.  
We have our war to quicken us.

Still to be proud, still to be neat  
Of smile and phrase is not for us.  
The ladies of *Vogue* so vacuous,  
The lips well-tailored and effete  
Belong to a world that never was;  
And—not to test the extremes of Swift—  
The *inter faeces et urinas*

Comes to my mind, however sweet  
The token of a birthday gift.

Far from the ads of gloss and glass  
Of all the cities of East and West,  
Today I carved with a jungle knife  
An artefact of the native class,  
As innocent, undemonstrative.  
Blisters, sandpaper, and the best  
Of scanty craftsmanship I give,  
A bit of lumber cut from life,  
And not to be called a primitive.

Things we step over, stones we kick  
How often excel in perfect form  
The treasures of miles of galleries.  
I send you, darling, a polished stick  
To open letters, hold in your hand.  
The lovely markings smooth and warm  
Grew in a palm by silent seas;  
Forests of uncut trinkets stand  
In groves of already perfect trees.

My trinket is more than a kiss and less,  
More than a hand's twofold caress,  
More than the journey it must make  
Thousands of miles for remembrance' sake,  
More than the world-encircling pang,  
And less than the world from which it sprang,  
Less than the journeying I've seen,  
Less than the war of red and green,  
Less than the total love I mean.

## BLINDMEN

Consider them, my soul, the frightful blind!  
Like mannikins, ridiculous, unbowed,  
Singular, terrible, like somnambulists,  
Darting their eyeballs overcast with cloud.

Their eyes from which the holy light has fled  
As if far off they see, always look up;  
Upon the stones of streets never look down  
Inclining wearily their weighted heads . . . .

This way traverse the ever-enduring Dark,  
Brother of Silence.—O Metropolis,  
When all about you laugh and shout your song

With pleasure seized before this very wrong,  
I cry, "I also drag myself behind!  
What do they seek in Heaven, the truly blind?"

*(Baudelaire translation)*

## BOY-MAN

England's lads are miniature men  
To start with, grammar in their shiny hats,  
And serious: in America who knows when  
Manhood begins? Presidents dance and hug  
And while the kind King waves and gravely chats  
America wets on England's old green rug.

The boy-man roars. Worry alone will give  
This one the verisimilitude of age.  
Those white teeth are his own, for he must live  
Longer, grow taller than the Texas race.  
Fresh are his eyes, his darkening skin the gauge  
Of bloods that freely mix beneath his face.

He knows the application of the book  
But not who wrote it; shuts it like a shot.  
Rather than read he thinks that he will look,  
Rather than look he thinks that he will talk,  
Rather than talk he thinks that he will not  
Bother at all; would rather ride than walk.

His means of conversation is the joke,  
Humor his language underneath which lies  
The undecoded dialect of the folk.  
Abroad he scorns the foreigner: what's old  
Is worn, what's different bad, what's odd unwise.  
He gives off heat and is enraged by cold.

Charming, becoming to the suits he wears,  
The boy-man, younger than his eldest son,  
Inherits the state; upon his silver hairs  
Time like a panama hat sits at a tilt  
And smiles. To him the world has just begun  
And every city waiting to be built.

Mister, remove your shoulder from the wheel  
And say this prayer, "Increase my vitamins,

Make my decisions of the finest steel,  
Pour motor oil upon my troubled spawn,  
Forgive the Europeans for their sins,  
Establish them, that values may go on.”

## **BUICK**

As a sloop with a sweep of immaculate wing on her delicate  
spine  
And a keel as steel as a root that holds in the sea as she leans,  
Leaning and laughing, my warm-hearted beauty, you ride,  
you ride,  
You tack on the curves with parabola speed and a kiss of  
goodbye,  
Like a thoroughbred sloop, my new high-spirited spirit, my  
kiss.

As my foot suggests that you leap in the air with your hips  
of a girl,  
My finger that praises your wheel and announces your  
voices of song,  
Flouncing your skirts, you blueness of joy, you flirt of polite-  
ness,  
You leap, you intelligence, essence of wheelness with silvery  
nose,  
And your platinum clocks of excitement stir like the hairs of  
a fern.

But how alien you are from the booming belts of your birth  
and the smoke  
Where you turned on the stinging lathes of Detroit and  
Lansing at night  
And shrieked at the torch in your secret parts and the amor-  
ous tests,  
But now with your eyes that enter the future of roads you  
forget;  
You are all instinct with your phosphorous glow and your  
streaking hair.

And now when we stop it is not as the bird from the shell  
that I leave  
Or the leathery pilot who steps from his bird with a sneer of  
delight,



And not as the ignorant beast do you squat and watch me  
depart,  
But with exquisite breathing you smile, with satisfaction of  
love,  
And I touch you again as you tick in the silence and settle  
in sleep.

## A CALDER

To raise an iron tree  
Is a wooden irony,  
But to cause it to sail  
In a clean perpetual way  
Is to play  
Upon the spaces of the scale.  
Climbing the stairs we say,  
Is it work or is it play?

Alexander Calder made it  
Work and play:  
Leaves that will never burn  
But were fired to be born,  
Twigs that are stiff with life  
And bend as to the magnet's breath,  
Each segment back to back,  
The whole a hanging burst of flak.

Still the base metals,  
Touched by autumnal paint  
Fall through no autumn  
But, turning, feint  
In a fall beyond trees,  
Where forests are not wooded,  
There is no killing breeze,  
And iron is blooded.

## CARTE POSTALE

It is so difficult not to go with it  
Once it is seen. It tears the mind agape  
With butcher force, with intellectual rape,  
And the body hangs by a hair above the pit.

In whose brain, when the order was destroyed,  
Did it take form and pose, and when the eye  
Clicked, was he guillotined into the void  
Where the vile emulsion hangs in strips to dry?

It rose with obvious relish to be viewed,  
And lay at a sewer's mouth in the grainy dawn  
Where a cop found it. It seemed a platitude  
Like a bad postcard of the Parthenon.

I know its family tree, its dossier,  
Its memory older than Pompeian walls.  
Not that it lives but that it looks at day  
Shocks. In the night, wherever it is, it calls,

And never fades, but lies flat and uncurled  
Even in blast furnace at the fire's core,  
Feeding fat tallow to our sunken world  
Deep in the riches of our father's drawer.

## CHRISTMAS EVE: AUSTRALIA

The wind blows hot. English and foreign birds  
And insects different as their fish excite  
The would-be calm. The usual flocks and herds  
Parade in permanent quiet out of sight,  
And there one crystal like a grain of light  
Sticks in the crucible of day and cools.  
A cloud burnt to a crisp at some great height  
Sips at the dark condensing in deep pools.

I smoke and read my Bible and chew gum,  
Thinking of Christ and Christmas of last year,  
And what those quizzical soldiers standing near  
Ask of the war and Christmases to come,  
And sick of causes and the tremendous blame  
Curse lightly and pronounce your serious name.

## THE CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

The gates clanged and they walked you into jail  
More tense than felons but relieved to find  
The hostile world shut out, the flags that dripped  
From every mother's windowpane, obscene  
The bloodlust sweating from the public heart,  
The dog authority slavering at your throat.  
A sense of quiet, of pulling down the blind  
Possessed you. Punishment you felt was clean.

The decks, the catwalks, and the narrow light  
Composed a ship. This was a mutinous crew  
Troubling the captains for plain decencies,  
A Mayflower brim with pilgrims headed out  
To establish new theocracies to west,  
A Noah's ark coasting the topmost seas  
Ten miles above the sodomites and fish.  
These inmates loved the only living doves.

Like all men hunted from the world you made  
A good community, voyaging the storm  
To no safe Plymouth or green Ararat;  
Trouble or calm, the men with Bibles prayed,  
The gaunt politicals construed our hate.  
The opposite of all armies, you were best  
Opposing uniformity and yourselves;  
Prison and personality were your fate.

You suffered not so physically but knew  
Maltreatment, hunger, ennui of the mind.  
Well might the soldier kissing the hot beach  
Erupting in his face damn all your kind.  
Yet you who saved neither yourselves nor us  
Are equally with those who shed the blood  
The heroes of our cause. Your conscience is  
What we come back to in the armistice.

## CONSTRUCTION

The confines of a city block  
Cut to a monument, exact,  
At all points rectilinear,  
From air a perfect square intact,

As trim as Plato thought or Eu-  
clid drew with stick. What thinker put  
This idea into cubes to sell  
At fifty cents a cubic foot?

O neat, O dead, what feeling thing  
Could buy so bare! O dead, O neat,  
What beating heart could sink to buy  
The copy of the die complete!

## THE CONTRABAND

I dreamed I held a poem and knew  
The capture of a living thing.  
Boys in a Grecian circle sang  
And women at their harvesting.

Slowly I tried to wake and draw  
The vision after, word by word,  
But sleep was covetous: the song  
The singers and the singing blurred.

The paper flowers of everynight  
All die. Day has no counterpart,  
Where memory writes its boldface wish  
And swiftly punishes the heart.

## CONSCRIPTION CAMP

Your landscape sickens with a dry disease  
Even in May, Virginia, and your sweet pines  
Like Frenchmen runted in a hundred wars  
Are of a child's height in these battlefields.

For Wilson sowed his teeth where generals prayed  
—High-sounding Lafayette and sick-eyed Lee—  
The loud Elizabethan crashed your swamps  
Like elephants and the subtle Indian fell.

Is it for love, you ancient-minded towns,  
That on the tidy grass of your great graves  
And on your roads and riverways serene  
Between the corn with green flags in a row,

Wheat amorous as hair and hills like breasts  
Each generation, ignorant of the last,  
Mumbling in sheds, embarrassed to salute,  
Comes back to choke on etiquette of hate?

You manufacture history like jute—  
Labor is cheap, Virginia, for high deeds,  
But in your British dream of reputation  
The black man is your conscience and your cost.

Here on the plains perfect for civil war  
The clapboard city like a weak mirage  
Of order rises from the sand to house  
These thousands and the paranoid Monroe;

The sunrise gun rasps in the throat of heaven;  
The lungs of dawn are heavy and corrupt;  
We hawk and spit; our flag walks through the air  
Breathing hysteria thickly in each face.

Through the long school of day, absent in heart,  
Distant in every thought but self we tread,  
Wheeling in blocks like large expensive toys  
That never understand except through fun.



To steal aside as aimlessly as curs  
Is our desire; to stare at corporals  
As sceptically as boys; not to believe  
The misty-eyed letter and the cheap snapshot.

To cross the unnatural frontier of your name  
Is our free dream, Virginia, and beyond,  
White and unpatriotic in our beds,  
To rise from sleep like driftwood out of surf.

But stricter than parole is this same wall  
And these green clothes, a secret on the fields,  
In towns betray us to the arresting touch  
Of lady-wardens, good and evil wives.

And far and fabulous is the word "Outside"  
Like "Europe" when the midnight liners sailed,  
Leaving a wake of ermine on the tide  
Where rubies drowned and eyes were softly drunk.

Still we abhor your news and every voice  
Except the Personal Enemy's, and songs  
That pumped by the great central heart of love  
On tides of energy at evening come.

Instinctively to break your compact law  
Box within box, Virginia, and throw down  
The dangerous bright habits of pure form  
We struggle hideously and cry for fear.

And like a very tired whore who stands  
Wrapped in the sensual crimson of her art  
High in the tired doorway of a street  
And beckons half-concealed the passerby,

The sun, Virginia, on your Western stairs  
Pauses and smiles away between the trees,  
Motioning the soldier overhill to town  
To his determined hungry burst of joy.

## A CUT FLOWER

I stand on slenderness all fresh and fair,  
I feel root-firmness in the earth far down,  
I catch in the wind and loose my scent for bees  
That sack my throat for kisses and suck love.  
What is the wind that brings thy body over?  
Wind, I am beautiful and sick. I long  
For rain that strikes and bites like cold and hurts.  
Be angry, rain, for dew is kind to me  
When I am cool from sleep and take my bath.

Who softens the sweet earth about my feet,  
Touches my face so often and brings water?  
Where does she go, taller than any sunflower  
Over the grass like birds? Has she a root?  
These are great animals that kneel to us,  
Sent by the sun perhaps to help us grow.  
I have seen death. The colors went away,  
The petals grasped at nothing and curled tight.  
Then the whole head fell off and left the sky.

She tended me and held me by my stalk.  
Yesterday I was well, and then the gleam,  
The thing sharper than frost cut me in half.  
I fainted and was lifted high. I feel  
Waist-deep in rain. My face is dry and drawn.  
My beauty leaks into the glass like rain.  
When first I opened to the sun I thought  
My colors would be parched. Where are my bees?  
Must I die now? Is this a part of life?

## D. C.

The bad breed of the natives with their hates  
That border on a Georgian night,  
The short vocabulary, the southern look  
That writes a volume on your past, the men  
Freeholders of the city-state, the women  
Polite for murder—these happen to be;  
The rest arrive and never quite remain.

The rest live with an easy homelessness  
And common tastelessness, their souls  
Weakly lit up blazing screens and tales  
Told by a newspaper. Holidays the vast  
Basilicas of the railroad swallow up  
Hundreds of thousands, struggling in the tide  
For home, the one identity and past.

The noble riches keep themselves, the miles  
Of marble breast the empty wind,  
The halls of books and pictures manufacture  
Their deep patinas, the fountains coldly splash  
To the lone sailor, the boulevards stretch out  
Farther than Arlington, where all night long  
One living soldier marches for the dead.

Only the very foreign, the very proud,  
The richest and the very poor  
Hid in their creepy purlieus white or black  
Adore this whole Augustan spectacle,  
And chancelleries perceive the porch of might  
Surmounted by the dome in which there lies  
No Bonaparte, no Lenin, but a floor.

Yet those who govern live in quaintness, close  
In the Georgian ghetto of the best;  
What was the simplest of the old becomes  
The exquisite palate of the new. Their names  
Are admirals and paternalists, their ways  
The ways of Lee who, having lost the slaves,  
Died farther south, a general in the wrong.

# DEATH OF EMMA GOLDMAN

Triumphant at the final breath,  
Their senile God, their cops,  
All the authorities and friends pro tem  
Passing her pillow, keeping her concerned.  
But the cowardly obit was already written:  
Morning would know she was a common slut.

Russians who stood for tragedy  
Were sisters all around;  
Dark conscience of the family, down she lay  
To end the career of passion, brain a bruise;  
And mother-wonder filled her like a tide,  
Rabid and raging discipline to bear.

In came the monarchist, a nurse,  
And covered up her eyes;  
Volkstaat of hate took over: suddenly  
The Ego gagged, the Conscious overpowered,  
The Memory beaten to a pulp, she fell.  
It remained to hide the body, or make it laugh.

Yet not to sink her name in coin  
Like Caesar was her wish,  
To come alive like Frick, conjecture maps,  
Or speak with kings of low mentality,  
But to be left alone, a law to scorn  
Of all, and none more honored than the least.

This way she died, though premature  
Her clarity for others;  
For it was taught that, listening, the soul  
Lost track and merged with trespasses and spies  
Whose black renown shook money like a rat  
And showed up grass a mortmain property.

## THE DIRTY WORD

The dirty word hops in the cage of the mind like the Pondicherry vulture, stomping with its heavy left claw on the sweet meat of the brain and tearing it with its vicious beak, ripping and chopping the flesh. Terrified, the small boy bears the big bird of the dirty word into the house, and grunting, puffing, carries it up the stairs to his own room in the skull. Bits of black feather cling to his clothes and his hair as he locks the staring creature in the dark closet.

All day the small boy returns to the closet to examine and feed the bird, to caress and kick the bird, that now snaps and flaps its wings savagely whenever the door is opened. How the boy trembles and delights at the sight of the white excrement of the bird! How the bird leaps and rushes against the walls of the skull, trying to escape from the zoo of the vocabulary! How wildly snaps the sweet meat of the brain in its rage.

And the bird outlives the man, being freed at the man's death-funeral by a word from the rabbi.

But I one morning went upstairs and opened the door and entered the closet and found in the cage of my mind the great bird dead. Softly I wept it and softly removed it and softly buried the body of the bird in the hollyhock garden of the house I lived in twenty years before. And out of the worn black feathers of the wing have I made pens to write these elegies, for I have outlived the bird, and I have murdered it in my early manhood.

## THE DOME OF SUNDAY

With focus sharp as Flemish-painted face  
In film of varnish brightly fixed  
And through a polished hand-lens deeply seen,  
Sunday at noon through hyaline thin air  
Sees down the street,  
And in the camera of my eye depicts  
Row-houses and row-lives:  
Glass after glass, door after door the same,  
Face after face the same, the same,  
The brutal visibility the same;

As if one life emerging from one house  
Would pause, a single image caught between  
Two facing mirrors where vision multiplies  
Beyond perspective,  
A silent clatter in the high-speed eye  
Spinning out photo-circulars of sight.

I see slip to the curb the long machines  
Out of whose warm and windowed rooms pirouette  
Shellacked with silk and light  
The hard legs of our women.  
Our women are one woman, dressed in black.  
The carmine printed mouth  
And cheeks as soft as muslin-glass belong  
Outright to one dark dressy man,  
Merely a swagger at her curvy side.  
This is their visit to themselves:  
All day from porch to porch they weave  
A nonsense pattern through the even glare,  
Stealing in surfaces  
Cold vulgar glances at themselves.

And high up in the heated room all day  
I wait behind the plate glass pane for one,  
Hot as a voyeur for a glimpse of one,  
The vision to blot out this woman's sheen;

All day my sight records expensively  
Row-houses and row-lives.

But nothing happens; no diagonal  
With melting shadow falls across the curb:  
Neither the blinded negress lurching through fatigue,  
Nor exiles bleeding from their pores,  
Nor that bright bomb slipped lightly from its rack  
To splinter every silvered glass and crystal prism,  
Witch-bowl and perfume bottle  
And billion candle-power dressing-bulb,  
No direct hit to smash the shatter-proof  
And lodge at last the quivering needle  
Clean in the eye of one who stands transfixed  
In fascination of her brightness.

## DRUG STORE

*I do remember an apothecary,  
And hereabouts 'a dwells*

It baffles the foreigner like an idiom,  
And he is right to adopt it as a form  
Less serious than the living-room or bar;  
    For it disestablishes the cafe,  
Is a collective, and on basic country.

Not that it praises hygiene and corrupts  
The ice-cream parlor and the tobacconist's  
Is it a center; but that the attractive symbols  
    Watch over puberty and leer  
Like rubber bottles waiting for sick-use.

Youth comes to jingle nickels and crack wise;  
The baseball scores are his, the magazines  
Devoted to lust, the jazz, the Coca-Cola,  
    The lending-library of love's latest.  
He is the customer; he is heroized.

And every nook and cranny of the flesh  
Is spoken to by packages with wiles.  
"Buy me, buy me," they whimper and cajole;  
    The hectic range of lipsticks pouts,  
Revealing the wicked and the simple mouth.

With scarcely any evasion in their eye  
They smoke, undress their girls, exact a stance;  
But only for a moment. The clock goes round;  
    Crude fellowships are made and lost;  
They slump in booths like rags, not even drunk.



## DRUID HILL PARK

Be good and with me walk  
The old devalued park  
Where autumn has set in  
The sad colors run  
And a foolish East built on  
The very simplest of hills  
Leads us away from work  
And drinks our laughter through its walls

Nor need we laugh who have  
An anger fit to live  
Something to build upon  
That from our Conscious warm  
Developed like a pun  
Knows what to see and hurt  
But never really raved  
Being book bred to lie apart

Our Moorish no one asks  
For mother's easy risks  
Not here the lovers sin  
To modify their ban  
Some knowledge leaking in  
Has rusted the roof like rain  
And the whisper in the mosque  
Is gone with hearts of the common run

Earth just as sweetly rots  
Digesting its own fruits  
Torpor adjusts to roots  
And cannas set in hearts  
Are lifted from their beds  
O falls like winged seeds  
The cry of living things  
Upon whose house their death prevails

With you to apprehend  
All seasons left behind

I am as child who hears  
And loves what best he knows  
Show me disease of bronze  
Say it shall soon be gone  
The poison in the wind  
Removed leaving the wind alone

But for a just return  
Take over hills we scorn  
From years of private waste  
Decades of trial and caste  
Harvest our true response  
To everything that grieves  
To the cold light that burns  
This brilliant dynasty of leaves

And give to sober sight  
Now life removes his hat  
Exactitude of aim  
Not heavily to dream  
Take all their fictions down  
Like summer overthrown  
Laugh in their face, show fight  
Darling tell what it is to own

How lands declined like this  
Abandoned piece by piece  
And tax-free beautiful  
Better than armies fell  
O colder is just as well  
We shall not hear them say  
Here nature broke her lease  
Here many another lover lay

# EGO

Ego is not persona: in childhood  
He rules the little senses, plays at eyes,  
Better the nose, learns warm and soft and cold,  
Reacts but cannot act. Ego is old:  
He fights but neither laughs nor cries,  
Stares but is neither bad nor good.

Ego is not narcissus: if in youth  
He lingers at the mirror, he is clear,  
Is not in love and never seeks a friend,  
Makes all dependent yet does not depend,  
Inspects, indulges, does not fear,  
Remembers all. Ego is truth.

Ego does not desire or acquire,  
Is not the mouth and not the reaching hand,  
Dreams never, sleeps at bedtime, rises first,  
Sees that the hell of darkness is dispersed,  
Is pale in winter, in summer tanned,  
Functions alike in ice and fire.

Ego domesticated serves the man  
But is no servant, stands aside for will,  
Gives no advice, takes none. Ego can fail,  
Pampered he softens, struck withdraws like snail.  
Trust him to know and to keep still,  
Love him as much as brother can.

# ELEGY FOR A DEAD SOLDIER

## I

A white sheet on the tail-gate of a truck  
Becomes an altar; two small candlesticks  
Sputter at each side of the crucifix  
Laid round with flowers brighter than the blood,  
Red as the red of our apocalypse,  
Hibiscus that a marching man will pluck  
To stick into his rifle or his hat,  
And great blue morning-glories pale as lips  
That shall no longer taste or kiss or swear.  
The wind begins a low magnificat,  
The chaplain chats, the palmtrees swirl their hair,  
The columns come together through the mud.

## II

We too are ashes as we watch and hear  
The psalm, the sorrow, and the simple praise  
Of one whose promised thoughts of other days  
Were such as ours, but now wholly destroyed,  
The service record of his youth wiped out,  
His dream dispersed by shot, must disappear.  
What can we feel but wonder at a loss  
That seems to point at nothing but the doubt  
Which flirts our sense of luck into the ditch?  
Reader of Paul who prays beside this fosse,  
Shall we believe our eyes or legends rich  
With glory and rebirth beyond the void?

## III

For this comrade is dead, dead in the war,  
A young man out of millions yet to live,  
One cut away from all that war can give,  
Freedom of self and peace to wander free.  
Who mourns in all this sober multitude  
Who did not feel the bite of it before  
The bullet found its aim? This worthy flesh,  
This boy laid in a coffin and reviewed—

Who has not wrapped himself in this same flag,  
Heard the light fall of dirt, his wound still fresh,  
Felt his eyes closed, and heard the distant brag  
Of the last volley of humanity?

IV

By chance I saw him die, stretched on the ground,  
A tattooed arm lifted to take the blood  
Of someone else sealed in a tin. I stood  
During the last delirium that stays  
The intelligence a tiny moment more,  
And then the strangulation, the last sound.  
The end was sudden, like a foolish play,  
A stupid fool slamming a foolish door,  
The absurd catastrophe, half-prearranged,  
And all the decisive things still left to say.  
So we disbanded, angrier and unchanged,  
Sick with the utter silence of dispraise.

V

We ask for no statistics of the killed,  
For nothing political impinges on  
This single casualty, or all those gone,  
Missing or healing, sinking or dispersed,  
Hundreds of thousands counted, millions lost.  
More than an accident and less than willed  
Is every fall, and this one like the rest.  
However others calculate the cost,  
To us the final aggregate is *one*;  
One with a name, one transferred to the blest;  
And though another stoops and takes the gun,  
We cannot add the second to the first.

VI

I would not speak for him who could not speak  
Unless my fear were true: he was not wronged,  
He knew to which decision he belonged

But let it choose itself. Ripe in instinct,  
Neither the victim nor the volunteer,  
He followed, and the leaders could not seek  
Beyond the followers. Much of this he knew;  
The journey was a detour that would steer  
Into the Lincoln Highway of a land  
Remorselessly improved, excited, new,  
And that was what he wanted. He had planned  
To earn and drive. He and the world had winked.

## VII

No history deceived him, for he knew  
Little of times and armies not his own;  
He never felt that peace was but a loan,  
Had never questioned the idea of gain.  
Beyond the headlines once or twice he saw  
The gathering of a power by the few  
But could not tell their names; he cast his vote,  
Distrusting all the elected but not law.  
He laughed at socialism; on mourrait  
Pour les industriels? He shed his coat  
And not for brotherhood, but for his pay.  
To him the red flag marked the sewer main.

## VIII

Above all else he loathed the homily,  
The slogan and the ad. He paid his bill  
But not for Congressmen at Bunker Hill.  
Ideals were few and those there were not made  
For conversation. He belonged to church  
But never spoke of God. The Christmas tree,  
The Easter egg, baptism, he observed,  
Never denied the preacher on his perch,  
And would not sign Resolved That or Whereas.  
Softness he had and hours and nights reserved  
For thinking, dressing, dancing to the jazz.  
His laugh was real, his manners were home made.

## IX

Of all men poverty pursued him least;  
 He was ashamed of all the down and out,  
 Spurned the panhandler like an uneasy doubt,  
 And saw the unemployed as a vague mass  
 Incapable of hunger or revolt.  
 He hated other races, south or east,  
 And shoved them to the margin of his mind.  
 He could recall the justice of the Colt,  
 Take interest in a gang-war like a game.  
 His ancestry was somewhere far behind  
 And left him only his peculiar name.  
 Doors opened, and he recognized no class.

## X

His children would have known a heritage,  
 Just or unjust, the richest in the world,  
 The quantum of all art and science curled  
 In the horn of plenty, bursting from the horn,  
 A people bathed in honey, Paris come,  
 Vienna transferred with the highest wage,  
 A World's Fair spread to Phoenix, Jacksonville,  
 Earth's capitol, the new Byzantium,  
 Kingdom of man—who knows? Hollow or firm,  
 (No man can ever prophesy until  
 Out of our death some undiscovered germ,  
 Whole toleration or pure peace is born.)

## XI

(The time to mourn is short that best becomes  
 The military dead. We lift and fold the flag,  
 Lay bare the coffin with its written tag,  
 And march away. Behind, four others wait  
 To lift the box, the heaviest of loads.  
 The anesthetic afternoon benumbs,  
 Sickens our senses, forces back our talk.  
 (We know that others on tomorrow's roads

Will fall, } ourselves perhaps, the man beside,  
Over the world the threatened, all who walk:  
And could we mark the grave of him who died  
We would write this beneath his name and date:

√ EPITAPH

Underneath this wooden cross there lies  
A Christian killed in battle. } You who read,  
Remember that this stranger died in pain; }  
And passing here, if you can lift your eyes  
Upon a peace kept by a human creed,  
Know that one soldier has not died in vain.



## ELEGY FOR TWO BANJOS

Haul up the flag, you mourners,  
Not half-mast but all the way;  
The funeral is done and disbanded;  
The devil's had the final say.

O mistress and wife too pensive,  
Pallbearers and priestly men,  
Put your black clothes in the attic,  
And get up on your feet again.

Death did his job like a scholar,  
A most unusual case,  
Death did his job like a gentleman;  
He barely disturbed the face.

You packed him in a handsome carton,  
Set the lid with silver screws;  
You dug a dark pit in the graveyard  
To tell the white worms the news.

Now you've nothing left to remember,  
Nothing but the words he wrote,  
But they'll never let you remember,  
Only stick like a bone in your throat.

O if I'd been his wife or mistress,  
His pallbearer or his parish priest,  
I'd have kept him at home forever—  
Or as long as bric-a-brac at least.

I would have burned his body  
And salvaged a sizeable bone  
For a paper-weight or a door-stop  
Or a garden flagstone.

I would have heaped the fire  
And boiled his beautiful skull.

It was laden like a ship for travels  
And now is but an empty hull.

I would have dried it off in linens,  
Polished it with a chamois cloth  
Till it shone like a brand-new quarter  
And felt smooth as the nose of a moth.

Or I'd have hung it out in the garden  
Where everything else is alive,  
Put a queen-bee in the brain case  
So the bees could build a hive.

Maybe I'd have wired the jawbone  
With a silver spring beneath,  
Set it in the cradle with baby  
So baby could rattle the teeth.

O you didn't do right by William  
To shove him down that filthy hole,  
Throw him a lot of tears and Latin  
And a cheap "God bless your soul."

You might as well leave off mourning,  
His photograph is getting dim,  
So you'd better take a long look at it  
For it's all you'll ever see of him.

Haul up the flag, you mourners,  
Not half-mast but all the way;  
The funeral is done and disbanded;  
The devil's had the final say.

## ELEGY WRITTEN ON A FRONTPORCH

The sun burns on its sultry wick;  
Stratus and cumulus unite.  
I who am neither well nor sick  
Sit in a wicker chair and write.

A hot wind presses at my lips.  
I peel. Am totally undressed.  
Pinkish, as through a part-eclipse,  
Heat licks upon my naked breast.

Angles in quick succession rise.  
Eyesight is stereopticon  
As roof and roof geometrize  
Perspective deviously drawn.

I face a heaven half-destroyed,  
A skyscape alabaster, dead.  
One living shadow on the void,  
A Flying Fortress drones ahead.

Motion and fixity take shape;  
The fallow rays intensify  
Distinctness. Nothing can escape  
The clean hard focus of the eye.

Noise into humming noise constricts;  
The traffic mumbles deeper down.  
Only a trolley contradicts,  
Ticks by neurotically to town.

Stretched taut upon the light I scorch,  
Writhe in my sweat and smoke and sun.  
The evening paper hits the porch;  
My honeymoon of peace is done.

Unmasticated pulp of life . . .  
Decision finds me blind and deaf.

I do not finger for the strife  
Of Delano and Mutt and Jeff,

Or bend upon my nudity's  
Umbilicus, the fact of facts,  
As one who drowns in light and sees  
The newsreel of his private acts.

I do not hug my feet with glee  
And smile into my cul-de-sac  
Enamoured of the dignity  
Of facing forward moving back.

But set my wired sight, reclaim  
The rotted friendship and the fresh;  
Tune in on him who changed his name  
And her who stultified the flesh.

I see who came to marriage raw  
With poverty and self-abuse;  
Defendants to the general law,  
Their ignorance was no excuse.

Instructors, graduates I see,  
Scholars who sneered into their books,  
The female doctors pouring tea,  
Hundreds of victims of their looks.

The money-poise of some, the pride  
Of those who whored on easy checks,  
Sons of The Business, dressy, snide,  
Disfigured in expensive wrecks.

Believers in the songhit, thin  
With pounding to the hebroid jazz;  
The studious drinkers feeding in  
The cloaca of the middle-class.

I see too many who romanced  
Defeat, unmasculine, debased;  
The striptease puritans who danced  
The long lewd ritual of waste.

All these I bury out of sight  
Sans benefit of epitaph.  
I turn my legs into the light,  
Punch out a cigarette and laugh.

For one, the best against that rout,  
Deserted, obdurate to see  
Their weakly literate wear out  
The old Horatian fallacy;

Spoke of the beauty-to-obey,  
The life-expectancy of bone.  
She turned her back upon the day  
But will not lie at night alone.

## EMPORIUM

He must have read Aladdin who rubbed his head  
And brought this out of space; some genie came  
With bolts of lawn and rugs of heavy red,  
Shoes for white boxes, gems for velvet trays;  
For who could authorize in his right name  
Such pricelessness of time and recklessness of days?

Not Faust, who longed for Hell, would sell his light  
For moving stairs and mirrors set in miles  
Where wives might wander with their sex in sight;  
Rage and rat's-logic this man must have known  
Who built these buttresses on rotted piles,  
Initialed every brick, and carved his lips in stone.

As if the ancient principle obtained  
And solvent time would underwrite his debt,  
Or the strong face of flesh were not profaned  
For mannikins with hair of cloth-of-gold;  
As if no tongue had ever questioned yet  
Who buys and who is bought, who sells and who is sold.

But those politely dressed in normal drab  
Shall think of him remotely, think with shame  
How of their skill, their goodness and their gab  
He trained his joys to be obsequious Jews;  
At last not even wives shall goad his name  
To feats of wealth, humility, and sickness-news;

So that, with rounded ruins honored, like Stonehenge,  
Time shall have time, and he his impotent revenge.

## EPITAPH FOR JOHN AND RICHARD

There goes the clock; there goes the sun;  
Greenwich is right with Arlington;  
The signal's minutes are signifying  
That somebody old has finished dying,  
That somebody young has just begun.

What do you think you earned today  
Except the waste, except the pay,  
Except the power to be spending?  
And now your year is striking, ending,  
What do you think you have put away?

Only a promise, only a life  
Squandered in secret with a wife  
In bedtime feigning and unfeigning;  
The blood has long since ceased complaining;  
The clock has satisfied the strife.

They will not cast your honored head  
Or say from lecterns what you said,  
But only keep you with them all  
Committed in the City Hall;  
*Once born, once married, and once dead.*

## THE FIGUREHEAD

Watching my paralytic friend  
Caught in the giant clam of himself  
Fast on the treacherous shoals of his bed,  
I look away to the place he had left  
Where at a decade's distance he appeared  
To pause in his walk and think of a limp.  
One day he arrived at the street bearing  
The news that he dragged an ancient foot:  
The people on their porches seemed to sway.

Though there are many wired together  
In this world and the next, my friend  
Strains in his clamps. He is all sprung.  
And locked in the rust of inner change.  
The therapist who plucks him like a harp  
Is a cold torture: the animal bleats  
And whimpers on its far seashore  
As she leans to her find with a smooth hunger.

Somewhere in a storm my pity went down:  
It was a wooden figurehead  
With sea-hard breasts and polished mouth.  
But women wash my friend with brine  
From shallow inlets of their eyes,  
And women rock my friend with waves  
That pulsate from the female moon.  
They gather at his very edge and haul  
My driftwood friend toward their fires.

Speaking of dancing, joking of sex,  
I watch my paralytic friend  
And seek my pity in those wastes where he  
Becomes my bobbing figurehead.  
Then as I take my leave I wade  
Loudly into the shallows of his pain,  
I splash like a vacationer,  
I scare his legs and stir the time of day  
With rosy clouds of sediment.



## FIREWORKS

In midsummer darkness when primeval silences close  
On the women in linen and children and husbands in  
blouses

We gather in laughter and move with a current that flows  
Through the intimate suburbs of ice-cream and talkative  
houses

To a fabulous field of the night of the rainbows of ages  
Where blindness is dyed with the blooms and the tints of  
desire,

And the wars of our boyhood rise up from the oldest of pages  
With heroes erected on billboards of fuses and wire.

In the garden of pleistocene flowers we wander like Alice  
Where seed sends a stalk in the heavens and pops from a  
pod

A blue blossom that hangs on the distance and opens its  
chalice

And falls in the dust of itself and goes out with a nod.

How the hairy tarantulas crawl in the soft of the ether  
Where showers of lilies explode in the jungle of creepers;  
How the rockets of sperm hurtle up to the moon and beneath  
her

Deploy for the eggs of the astral and sorrowful sleepers!

And the noble bombardment that bursts in the depth of our  
ears

Lifts the hair of our heads and interprets in absolute noises  
The brimstone of total destruction, the doom of our years.  
O the Judgement that shatters the rose of our secrets and  
poises!

In Niagaras of fire we leak in the luminous aura  
And gasp at the portrait of Lincoln alive on the lattice.  
Our history hisses and spits in the burning Gomorrah,  
The volcanoes subside; we are given our liberty gratis.

## THE FLY

O hideous little bat, the size of snot,  
With polyhedral eye and shabby clothes,  
To populate the stinking cat you walk  
The promontory of the dead man's nose,  
Climb with the fine leg of a Duncan-Phyfe  
    The smoking mountains of my food  
    And in a comic mood  
In mid-air take to bed a wife.

Riding and riding with your filth of hair  
On gluey foot or wing, forever coy,  
Hot from the compost and green sweet decay,  
Sounding your buzzer like an urchin toy—  
You dot all whiteness with diminutive stool,  
    In the tight belly of the dead  
    Burrow with hungry head  
And inlay maggots like a jewel.

At your approach the great horse stomps and paws  
Bringing the hurricane of his heavy tail;  
Shod in disease you dare to kiss my hand  
Which sweeps against you like an angry flail;  
Still you return, return, trusting your wing  
    To draw you from the hunter's reach  
    That learns to kill to teach  
Disorder to the tinier thing.

My peace is your disaster. For your death  
Children like spiders cup their pretty hands  
And wives resort to chemistry of war.  
In fens of sticky paper and quicksands  
You glue yourself to death. Where you are stuck  
    You struggle hideously and beg  
    You amputate your leg  
Imbedded in the amber muck.

But I, a man, must swat you with my hate,  
Slap you across the air and crush your flight,

Must mangle with my shoe and smear your blood,  
Expose your little guts pasty and white,  
Knock your head sidewise like a drunkard's hat,  
Pin your wings under like a crow's,  
Tear off your flimsy clothes  
And beat you as one beats a rat.

Then like Gargantua I stride among  
The corpses strewn like raisins in the dust,  
The broken bodies of the narrow dead  
That catch the throat with fingers of disgust.  
I sweep. One gyrates like a top and falls  
And stunned, stone blind, and deaf  
Buzzes its frightful F  
And dies between three cannibals.

## F. O. MATTHIESSEN: AN ANNIVERSARY

To learn the meaning of his leap to death  
What need to know the wounds he carried down  
To his crushing sleep? For the shocked town,  
Bombed by his suicide, the ejaculation of blood,  
Summarized it neatly in the shibboleth  
Of mutual forgiveness: Matthiessen was good.

Yet there remained a reminder on the stair  
Of nothing: high on the ledge of that hotel  
Where an unbalanced soldier heard the yell  
Of the depraved unchristian mob to leap,  
But could not, being imperfect in despair,  
Jump at their will into a hell so deep,

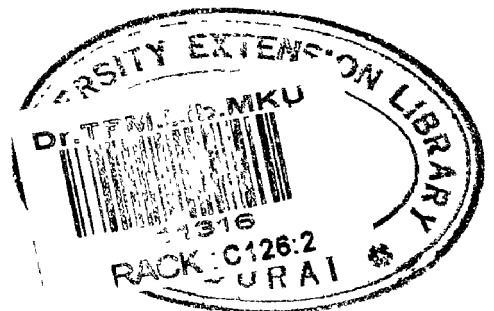
And fell back finally in the waiting arms  
Of a traffic cop, a blond girl, and a priest.  
And thus the loud and thousand-handed beast  
Melted away. — What mob did Matthiessen  
Hear chanting in rhythm, and what uniforms  
Tried to retrieve him to the world of men?

What was he saying in his heavy fall  
Through space, so broken by the hand of stone?  
What word was that stopped like a telephone  
Torn with its nervous wire from the wall?  
Does not the condemned man raise his voice to call  
His phrase of justice down the empty hall?

And who betrayed him finally. Was it I?  
Some poet who turned his praises into blame,  
Or some historian of the parlor game  
Of war? Or the easy capture of the schloss  
By Slavs? The Americanization of the spy?  
The death of a friend? Was there no further loss?

Left with no ground except the ground that kills,  
He mourned the death of politics and died.

It was, as it were, a statesman's suicide,  
For when out of the window he had flung  
His life upon those uncharitable hills,  
Did he not will his charity to the young?



## FRANKLIN

The star of Reason, Ben, reposed in you  
Octagon spectacles, a sparking kite,  
Triggers and jiggers, bobbins, reels and screws,  
And aphorisms spelled in black and white.

Wiseacre, editor, and diplomat,  
First of the salesmen, hero of the clerk,  
The logic of invention led to bells  
Joyous for George and terrible for Burke.

Poor Richard prospers and the grocery man  
Has your disarming prose and pays his tax.  
Sir, what is the reason for this bird  
That sings and screams and coos and crows and quacks?

Two-penny buns, a whistle for the boy,  
Rare Ben, the printer's devil used you well.  
Lenin and Freud embroider left and right  
And Curtis beats The Independence Bell.

## FULL MOON: NEW GUINEA

These nights we fear the aspects of the moon,  
Sleep lightly in the radiance falling clear  
On palms and ferns and hills and us; for soon  
The small burr of the bombers in our ear  
Tickles our rest; we rise as from a nap  
And take our helmets absently and meet,  
Prepared for any spectacle or mishap,  
At trenches fresh and narrow at our feet.

Look up, look up, and wait and breathe. These nights  
We fear Orion and the Cross. The crowd  
Of deadly insects caught in our long lights  
Glitter and seek to burrow in a cloud  
Soft-mined with high explosive. Breathe and wait,  
The bombs are falling darkly for our fate.

## GIANTESS

When Nature once in lustful hot undress  
Conceived gargantuan offspring, then would I  
Have loved to live near a young giantess,  
Like a voluptuous cat at a queen's feet.

To see her body flower with her desire  
And freely spread out in its dreadful play,  
Guess if her heart concealed some heavy fire  
Whose humid smokes would swim upon her eye;

To feel at leisure her stupendous shapes,  
Crawl on the cliffs of her enormous knees,  
And, when the unhealthy summer suns fatigued,

Have her stretch out across the plains and so  
Sleep in the shadows of her breasts at ease  
Like a small hamlet at a mountain's base.

*(Baudelaire translation)*



## GLASS POEM

The afternoon lies glazed upon the wall  
And on the window shines the scene-like bay,  
And on the dark reflective floor a ray  
Falls, and my thoughts like ashes softly fall.

And I look up as one who looks through glass  
And sees the thing his soul clearly desires,  
Who stares until his vision flags and tires,  
But from whose eye the image fails to pass;

Until a wish crashes the vitreous air  
And comes to your real hands across this space,  
Thief-like and deeply cut to touch your face,  
Dearly, most bitterly to touch your hair.

And I could shatter these transparent lights,  
Could thrust my arms and bring your body through,  
Break from the subtle spectrum the last hue  
And change my eyes to dark soft-seeing nights.

But the sun stands and the hours stare like brass  
And day flows thickly into permanent time,  
And toward your eyes my threatening wishes climb  
Where you move through a sea of solid glass.

## THE GLUTTON

The jowls of his belly crawl and swell like the sea  
When his mandibles oily with lust champ and go wide;  
Eternal, the springs of his spittle leak at the lips  
Suspending the tongue like a whale that rolls on the tide.

His hands are as rotten fruit. His teeth are as corn.  
Deep are the wells of his eyes and like navels, blind.  
Dough is the brain that supplies his passion with bread.  
Dough is the loose-slung sack of his great behind.

Will his paps become woman's? He dreams of the yielding  
of milk,  
Despising the waste of his stool that recalls him to bread;  
More than passion of sex and the transverse pains of disease  
He thinks of starvation, the locked-up mouth of the dead.

I am glad that his stomach will eat him away in revenge,  
Digesting itself when his blubber is lain in the earth.  
Let the juice of his gluttony swallow him inward like lime  
And leave of his volume only the mould of his girth.

## GOING TO SCHOOL

What shall I teach in the vivid afternoon  
With the sun warming the blackboard and a slip  
Of cloud catching my eye?

Only the cones and sections of the moon  
Out of some flaking page of scholarship,  
Only some foolish heresy  
To counteract the authority of prose.  
The ink runs freely and the dry chalk flows  
Into the silent night of seven slates  
Where I create the universe as if  
It grew out of some old rabbinic glyph  
Or hung upon the necessity of Yeats.

O dry imaginations, drink this dust  
That grays the room and powders my coat sleeve,  
For in this shaft of light  
I dance upon the intellectual crust  
Of our own age and hold this make-believe  
Like holy-work before your sight.  
This is the list of books that time has burned,  
These are the lines that only poets have learned,  
The frame of dreams, the symbols that dilate;  
Yet when I turn from this dark exercise  
I meet your bright and world-considering eyes  
That build and build and never can create.

I gaze down on the garden with its green  
Axial lines and scientific pond  
And watch a man in white  
Stiffly pursue a butterfly between  
Square hedges where he takes it overhand  
Into the pocket of his net.  
Ah psyche, sinking in the bottled fumes,  
Dragging your slow wings while the hunt resumes.  
I say, "He placed an image on the pool  
Of the Great Mind to float there like a leaf  
And then sink downward to the dark belief  
Of the Great Memory of the Hermetic School."

I say, "Linnaeus drowned the names of flowers  
With the black garlands of his Latin words;  
The gardens now are his,  
The drug-bright blossoms of the glass are ours.  
I think a million taxidermist's birds  
Sing in the mind of Agassiz  
Who still retained one image of the good,  
Who said a fish is but a thought of God.  
—This is the flat world circled by its dogs,  
This is the right triangle held divine  
Before bald Euclid drew his empty line  
And shame fell on the ancient astrologues."

The eyes strike angles on the farther wall,  
Divine geometry forms upon the page,  
I feel a sense of shame.

Then as the great design begins to pall  
A cock crows in a laboratory cage  
And I proceed. "As for the name,  
It is the potency itself of thing,  
It is the power-of-rising of the wing;  
Without it death and feathers, for neither reed  
Of Solomon nor quill of Shakespeare's goose  
Ever did more or less than to deduce  
Letter from number in our ignorant creed."

And what if he who blessed these walls should walk  
Invisibly in the room? — My conscience prates,  
"The great biologist  
Who read the universe in a piece of chalk  
Said all knowledge is good, all learning waits,  
And wrong hypotheses exist  
To order knowledge and to set it right.  
We burn, he said, that others may have light.  
These are the penetralia of the school  
Of the last century. Under a later sky  
We call both saint and fool to prophesy  
The second cycle brimming at the full."

Then the clock strikes and I erase the board,  
Clearing the cosmos with a sweep of felt,  
Voiding my mind as well.

Now that the blank of reason is restored  
And they go talking of the crazy Celt  
And ghosts that sipped his muscatel,  
I must escape their laughter unaware  
And sidle past the question on the stair  
To gain my office. Is the image lost  
That burned and shivered in the speculum  
Or does it hover in the upper room?  
Have I deceived the student or the ghost?

Here in the quiet of the book-built dark  
Where masonry of volumes walls me in  
I should expect to find,  
Returning to me on a lower arc,  
Some image bodying itself a skin,  
Some object thinking forth a mind.  
This search necessitates no closer look.  
I close my desk and choose a modern book  
And leave the building. Low, as to astound,  
The sun stands with its body on the line  
That separates us. Low, as to combine,  
The sun touches its image to the ground.

## GUINEAPIG

What do you care, dear total stranger,  
For the successful failure of my safest danger,  
My pig in the poke or dog in the manger,

Or who does what in the where of his chamber  
Probing for his gallstones and the rods of amber  
When the succubae sing and the accusers clamber?

Tooth for a Tooth, O why will you wander  
After somebody's anybody's body to squander?  
Do the heads grow bald as the hands grow fonder?

Thank you. Your kiss of conditional surrender  
Reminds me of the case of dubious gender  
Who died on the verge of gaining a defender.

Then read it and weep, dear lovelorn panther;  
Change your pajamas and fill the decanter;  
Down with the dreamwork and long live the banter.

# THE GUN

You were angry and manly to shatter the sleep of your  
throat;

The kiss of your blast is upon me, O friend of my fear,  
And I savour your breath like a perfume as salt and austere  
As the scent of the thunder of heaven that brims in the  
moat!

I grip you. We lie on the ground in the thongs of our clasp  
And we stare like the hunter who starts at a tenuous cry;  
We have wounded the wind with a wire and stung in the  
sky

A white hole that is small and unseen as the bite of the asp.

The smooth of your cheek—Do you sight from the depth of  
your eye

More faultless than vision, more true than the aiming of  
stars?

Is the heart of your hatred the target of redness of Mars  
Or the roundness of heart of the one who must stumble and  
die?

O the valley is silent and shocked. I absolve from your name  
The exaction of murder, my gun. It is I who have killed.  
It is I whose enjoyment of horror is fine and fulfilled.  
You are only the toy of my terror, my emblem of blame.

Come with me. We shall creep for his eyes like the sweat of  
my skin,

For the wind is repaired and the fallen is calling for breath.  
You are only the means of the practical humor of death  
Which is savage to punish the dead for the sake of my sin!

## HAIRCUT

O wonderful nonsense of lotions of Lucky Tiger,  
Of savory soaps and oils of bottle-bright green,  
The gold of liqueurs, the unguents of Newark and Niger,  
Powders and balms and waters washing me clean;

In mirrors of marble and silver I see us forever  
Increasing, decreasing the puzzles of luminous spaces  
As I turn, am revolved and am pumped in the air on a lever,  
With the backs of my heads in chorus with all of my faces.

Scissors and comb are mowing my hair into neatness,  
Now pruning my ears, now smoothing my neck like a plain;  
In the harvest of hair and the chaff of powdery sweetness  
My snow-covered slopes grow dark with the wooly rain.

And the little boy cries, for it hurts to sever the curl,  
And we too are quietly bleating to part with our coat.  
Does the barber want blood in a dish? I am weak as a girl,  
I desire my pendants, the fatherly chin of a goat.

I desire the pants of a bear, the nap of a monkey  
Which trousers of friction have blighted down to my skin.  
I am bare as a tusk, as jacketed up as a flunkey,  
With the chest of a moth-eaten camel growing within.

But in death we shall flourish, you summer-dark leaves of  
my head,  
While the flesh of the jaw ebbs away from the shores of my  
teeth;  
You shall cover my sockets and soften the boards of my bed  
And lie on the flat of my temples as proud as a wreath.



## HILL AT PARRAMATTA

Just like a wave, the long green hill of my desire  
Rides to the shore-like level here to engulf us all  
Who work and joke in the hollow grave and the shallow  
    mire  
Where we must dig or else the earth will truly fall.

Long as a comber, green as grass, taut as a tent,  
And there far out like specks the browsing cattle drift,  
And sweet sweet with the green of life and the downhill  
    scent,  
O sweet at the heart such heavy loveliness to lift!

And you know best the void of the world, the blue and  
    green,  
And the races departing single file to the west to die—  
But all your memory shines on the tiny deaths you have  
    seen  
No more nor less than the point of light in the tear of my  
    eye:

So proud of the wave, my womanly hill, to lean on the shore  
And tumble the sands and flatness of death with your silent  
    roar.

# HOLLYWOOD

Farthest from any war, unique in time  
Like Athens or Baghdad, this city lies  
Between dry purple mountains and the sea.  
The air is clear and famous, every day  
Bright as a postcard, bringing bungalows  
And sights. The broad nights advertise  
For love and music and astronomy.

Heart of a continent, the hearts converge  
On open boulevards where palms are nursed  
With flare-pots like a grove, on villa roads  
Where castles cultivated like a style  
Breed fabulous metaphors in foreign stone,  
And on enormous movie lots  
Where history repeats its vivid blunders.

Alice and Cinderella are most real.  
Here may the tourist, quite sincere at last,  
Rest from his dream of travels. All is new,  
No ruins claim his awe, and permanence,  
Despised like customs, fails at every turn.  
Here where the eccentric thrives,  
Laughter and love are leading industries.

Luck is another. Here the bodyguard,  
The parasite, the scholar are well paid,  
The quack erects his alabaster office,  
The moron and the genius are enshrined,  
And the mystic makes a fortune quietly;  
Here all superlatives come true  
And beauty is marketed like a basic food.

O can we understand it? Is it ours,  
A crude whim of a beginning people,  
A private orgy in a secluded spot?  
Or alien like the word *harem*, or true

Like hideous Pittsburgh or depraved Atlanta?  
Is adolescence just as vile  
As this its architecture and its talk?

Or are they parvenus, like boys and girls?  
Or ours and happy, cleverest of all?  
Yes. Yes. Though glamorous to the ignorant  
This is the simplest city, a new school.  
What is more nearly ours? If soul can mean  
The civilization of the brain,  
This is a soul, a possible proud Florence.

# HOMECOMING

Lost in the vastness of the void Pacific  
My thousand days of exile, pain,  
Bid me farewell. Gone is the Southern Cross  
To her own sky, fallen a continent  
Under the wave, dissolved the bitterest isles  
In their salt element,  
And here upon the deck the mist encloses  
My smile that would light up all darkness  
And ask forgiveness of the things that thrust  
Shame and all death on millions and on me.

We bring no raw materials from the East  
But green-skinned men in blue-lit holds  
And lunatics impounded between-decks;  
The mighty ghoulish-ship that we ride exhales  
The sickly-sweet stench of humiliation,  
And even the majority, untouched by steel  
Or psychoneurosis, stare with eyes in rut,  
Their hands a rabble to snatch the riches  
Of glittering shops and girls.

Because I am angry at this kindness which  
Is both habitual and contradictory  
To the life of armies, now I stand alone  
And hate the swarms of khaki men that crawl  
Like lice upon the wrinkled hide of earth,  
Infesting ships as well. Not otherwise  
Could I lean outward piercing fog to find  
Our sacred bridge of exile and return.  
My tears are psychological, not poems  
To the United States; my smile is prayer.

Gnawing the thin slops of anxiety,  
Escorted by the ground swell and by gulls,  
In silence and with mystery we enter  
The territorial waters. Not till then  
Does that convulsive terrible joy, more sudden

And brilliant than the explosion of a ship,  
Shatter the tensions of the heaven and sea  
To crush a hundred thousand skulls  
And liberate in that high burst of love  
The imprisoned souls of soldiers and of me.

# HONKYTONK

Taken as diagram of Mind that marks,  
Led by an arrow, green perimeters  
Where thoughts sip peace and garden; inward then  
To suffering junctions, slums kicked by a boot,  
    Arpeggios of porches:  
    Decision, Anger, Pride,  
Like Self-Reproach the city points to this  
Its maudlin slapping heart, our origin.

Then at the outskirts of our Conscious, No  
From old high-over offices beats down  
On standard faces Business-mad, and girls,  
Grass under sullen stone, grown pale with work;  
    Yet shields with shadow this  
    Disgraced like genitals  
Ghetto of local sin, laughable Hell,  
Night's very alley, loathed but let alone.

I say to harass projects of decorum  
This is maintained by kids, police, douceurs,  
And ravenous for marvels, rancid Jews.  
Callow as brass, their eyes on nipples snagged,  
    Snagged in the jaded hair,  
    Goaded by silken legs,  
They mill around, bacterial and bright,  
Seeking outbreaks of pain, their bitter milk.

Who needs Revenge or Fear can buy: in bars  
Murals of lust, and talk; movies for men;  
A waxworks of syphilitics; shooting range,  
Phrenologist and tattoo artist; all  
    Quacks who apprehend  
    And speak the dirty word.  
But oh, ridiculously lost those four  
Hymning salvation at the Burlesk door.

How elemental ions of pure joy  
Convert to deadly sins, and bump like trucks

Uptown to roads instinctive to the young,  
I only ask. But in and out they go  
Satanic to discover  
Imago of Unrest  
Whose Ultima Thule is a general low  
And obscene civics of our self-distrust.

# HOSPITAL

Inside or out, the key is pain. It holds  
The florist to your pink medicinal rose,  
The nickname to the corpse. One wipes it from  
Blue German blades or drops it down the drain;  
The novelist with a red tube up his nose  
Gingerly pets it. Nurse can turn it off.

This is the Oxford of all sicknesses.  
Kings have lain here and fabulous small Jews  
And actresses whose legs were always news.  
In this black room the painter lost his sight,  
The crippled dancer here put down her shoes,  
And the scholar's memory broke, like an old clock.

These reached to heaven and inclined their heads  
While starchy angels reached them into beds:  
These stooped to hell to labor out their time,  
Or choked to death in seas of glaucous slime:  
All tasted fire, and then, their hate annealed,  
Ate sad ice-cream and wept upon a child.

What church is this, what factory of souls  
Makes the bad good and fashions a new nose,  
And the doctors reel with Latin and even the dead  
Expect the unexpected? For O the souls  
Fly back like heavy homing-birds to roost  
In long-racked limbs, filling the lonely boughs.

The dead cry *life* and stagger up the hill;  
But is there still the incorrigible city where  
The well enjoy their poverty and the young  
Worship the gutter? Is Wednesday still alive  
And Tuesday wanting terribly to sin?  
Hush, there are many pressing the oak doors,

Saying, "Are boys and girls important fears?  
Can you predict the elections by my guts?"



But the rubber gloves are deep in a deep wound,  
Stitching a single heart. These far surpass  
Themselves, their wives, and the removed goitre;  
Are, for the most part, human but unbandaged.

## THE INTELLECTUAL

*What should the wars do with these jiggling fools?*

The man behind the book may not be man,  
His own man or the book's or yet the time's,  
But still be whole, deciding what he can  
In praise of politics or German rimes;

But the intellectual lights a cigarette  
And offers it lit to the lady, whose odd smile  
Is the merest hyphen—lest he should forget  
What he has been resuming all the while.

He talks to overhear, she to withdraw  
To some interior feminine fireside  
Where the back arches, beauty puts forth a paw  
Like a black puma stretching in velvet pride,

Making him think of cats, a stray of which  
Some days sets up a howling in his brain,  
Pure interference such as this neat bitch  
Seems to create from listening disdain.

But talk is all the value, the release,  
Talk is the very fillip of an act,  
The frame and subject of the masterpiece  
Under whose film of age the face is cracked.

His own forehead glows like expensive wood,  
But back of it the mind is disengaged,  
Self-sealing clock recording bad and good  
At constant temperature, intact, unaged.

But strange, his body is an open house  
Inviting every passerby to stay;  
The city to and fro beneath his brows  
Wanders and drinks and chats from night to day.

Think of a private thought, indecent room  
Where one might kiss his daughter before bed!  
Life is embarrassed; shut the family tomb,  
Console your neighbor for his recent dead;

Do something! die in Spain or paint a green  
Gouache, go into business (Rimbaud did),  
Or start another Little Magazine,  
Or move in with a woman, have a kid.

Invulnerable, impossible, immune,  
Do what you will, your will will not be done  
But dissipate the light of afternoon  
Till evening flickers like the midnight sun,

And midnight shouts and dies: I'd rather be  
A milkman walking in his sleep at dawn  
Bearing fat quarts of cream, and so be free,  
Crossing alone and cold from lawn to lawn.

I'd rather be a barber and cut hair  
Than walk with you in gilt museum halls,  
You and the puma-lady, she so rare  
Exhaling her silk soul upon the walls.

Go take yourselves apart, but let me be  
The fault you find with everyman. I spit,  
I laugh, I fight; and you, *l'homme qui rit*,  
Swallow your stale saliva, and still sit.

## THE INTERLUDE

I

Much of transfiguration that we hear,  
The ballet of the atoms, the second law  
Of thermo-dynamics, Isis, and the queer

Fertilization of fish, the Catholic's awe  
For the life-cycle of the Nazarene,  
His wife whom sleeping Milton thought he saw;

Much of the resurrection that we've seen  
And taken part in, like the Passion Play,  
All of autumnal red and April green,

To those who walk in work from day to day,  
To economic and responsible man,  
All, all is substance. Life that lets him stay

Uses his substance kindly while she can  
But drops him lifeless after his one span.

What lives? the proper creatures in their homes?  
 A weed? the white and giddy butterfly?  
 Bacteria? necklaces of chromosomes?

What lives? the breathing bell of the clear sky?  
 The crazed bull of the sea? Andean crags?  
 Armies that plunge into themselves to die?

People? A sacred relic wrapped in rags,  
 The ham-bone of a saint, the winter rose,  
 Do these?—And is there not a hand that drags

The bottom of the universe for those  
 Who still perhaps are breathing? Listen well,  
 There lives a quiet like a cathedral close

At the soul's center where substance cannot dwell  
 And life flowers like music from a bell.

Writing, I crushed an insect with my nail  
And thought nothing at all. A bit of wing  
Caught my eye then, a gossamer so frail

And exquisite, I saw in it a thing  
That scorned the grossness of the thing I wrote.  
It hung upon my finger like a sting.

A leg I noticed next, fine as a mote,  
“And on this frail eyelash he walked,” I said,  
“And climbed and walked like any mountain-goat.”

And in this mood I sought the little head,  
But it was lost; then in my heart a fear  
Cried out, “A life—why beautiful, why dead!”

It was a mite that held itself most dear,  
So small I could have drowned it with a tear.

## IN THE WAXWORKS

At midday when the light rebukes the world,  
Searching the seams of faces, cracks of walls  
And each fault of the beautiful,  
Seized by a panic of the street I fled  
Into a waxworks where the elite in crime  
And great in fame march past in fixed parade.  
How pale they were beneath their paint, how pure  
The monsters gleaming from the cubicles!

When, as in torsion, I beheld  
These malformations of the evil mind  
I grew serene and seemed to fall in love,  
As one retiring to a moving picture  
Or to a gallery of art. I saw  
The basest plasm of the human soul  
Here turned to sculpture, fingering,  
Kissing, and corrupting life.

So back and forth among the leers of wax  
I strutted for the idols of the tribe,  
Aware that I was on display, not they,  
And that I had come down to pray,  
As one retires to a synagogue  
Or to a plaster saint upon the wall.  
Why were these effigies more dear to me  
Than haughty mannikins in a window-shop?

I said a rosary for the Presidents  
And fell upon my knees before  
The Ripper and an exhibit of disease  
Revolting more in its soft medium  
Than in the flesh. I stroked a prince's hand,  
Leaving a thumbprint in the palm. I swore  
Allegiance to the suicide whose wrists  
Of tallow bled with admirable red.

Why were these images more dear to me  
Than faïence dolls or gods of smooth Pentelikon?

Because all statuary turns to death  
And only half-art balances.  
The fetish lives, idolatry is true,  
The crude conception of the putrid face  
Sticks to my heart. This criminal in wan  
Weak cerement of translucent fat

Is my sweet saint. O heretic, O mute,  
When broils efface the Metropolitan  
And swinish man from some cloaca creeps  
Or that deep midden, his security,  
Coming to you in brutish admiration  
May he look soft into your eyes;  
And you, good wax, may you not then despise  
Our sons and daughters, fallen apes.



# ISRAEL

When I think of the liberation of Palestine,  
When my eye conceives the great black English line  
Spanning the world news of two thousand years,  
My heart leaps forward like a hungry dog,  
My heart is thrown back on its tangled chain,  
My soul is hangdog in a Western chair.

When I think of the battle for Zion I hear  
The drop of chains, the starting forth of feet  
And I remain chained in a Western chair.  
My blood beats like a bird against a wall,  
I feel the weight of prisons in my skull  
Falling away; my forebears stare through stone.

When I see the name of Israel high in print  
The fences crumble in my flesh; I sink  
Deep in a Western chair and rest my soul.  
I look the stranger clear to the blue depths  
Of his unclouded eye. I say my name  
Aloud for the first time unconsciously.

Speak of the tillage of a million heads  
No more. Speak of the evil myth no more  
Of one who harried Jesus on his way  
Saying, *Go faster*. Speak no more  
Of the yellow badge, *secta nefaria*.  
Speak the name only of the living land.

# ISRAFEL

*la tombe de Poe éblouissante*

Picture the grave in his diabolical dream  
Where death would come with clues and scenery,  
The bulbous forehead and the crooked mouth  
Leaking a poison, the translucent hands.

Perhaps like Juliet he could come alive  
To hate Longfellow and to outrage life,  
But dare not from his wretched rusty stone,  
Landmark for girls developing in slums.

Here he is local color, another crank;  
Pawnshops and whores and sour little bars  
Accept him. Neither alarming nor prophetic,  
He pleases like a wop or a jack-o-lantern.

Others uptown forgive his nasty eyes  
Because he was sick and had a mind to err;  
But he was never dirty like Hawthorne,  
But boyish with his spooks and funerals

And clammy virgins. What else were his codes  
But diagrams of hideouts of the mind  
Plugged up with corpses and expensive junk,  
Prosopopoeia to keep himself at bay?

Think of him as a cicerone with data  
False as a waxworks and that understood  
Ask pitifully for pain. Or think that now  
Four cities claim him as France recommended.

## JEFFERSON

If vision can dilate, my noble lord,  
Farther than porticos, Italian cells,  
Newtonian gardens, Haydn, and cuisine,  
Tell us, most serious of all our poets,  
Why is the clock so low?

I see the tender gradient of your will;  
Virginia is the Florence of your soul,  
Yes, ours. The architecture of your hands  
Quiets ambition and revives our skill  
And buys our faithlessness.

So temperate, so remote, so sure of phrase,  
Your music sweeps a continent, a sphere,  
Fashions a modern language for a war  
And by its cadence makes responsible  
Our million names to you.

When you were old the god of government  
Seemed to recede a pace, and you were glad.  
You watched the masons through your telescope  
Finish your school of freedom. Death itself  
Stood thoughtful at your bed.

And now the surfaces of mind are rubbed  
Our essence starts like serum from our eyes.  
How can you not assume the deities  
That move behind the bloodshot look and lean  
Like saints and Salem devils?

## THE LEG

Among the iodoform, in twilight-sleep,  
*What have I lost?* he first inquires,  
Peers in the middle distance where a pain,  
Ghost of a nurse, hazily moves, and day,  
Her blinding presence pressing in his eyes  
And now his ears. They are handling him  
With rubber hands. He wants to get up.

One day beside some flowers near his nose  
He will be thinking, *When will I look at it?*  
And pain, still in the middle distance, will reply,  
*At what?* and he will know it's gone,  
O where! and begin to tremble and cry.  
He will begin to cry as a child cries  
Whose puppy is mangled under a screaming wheel.

Later, as if deliberately, his fingers  
Begin to explore the stump. He learns a shape  
That is comfortable and tucked in like a sock.  
This has a sense of humor, this can despise  
The finest surgical limb, the dignity of limping,  
The nonsense of wheel-chairs. Now he smiles to the wall:  
The amputation becomes an acquisition.

For the leg is wondering where he is (all is not lost)  
And surely he has a duty to the leg;  
He is its injury, the leg is his orphan,  
He must cultivate the mind of the leg,  
Pray for the part that is missing, pray for peace  
In the image of man, pray, pray for its safety,  
And after a little it will die quietly.

The body, what is it, Father, but a sign  
To love the force that grows us, to give back  
What in Thy palm is senselessness and mud?  
Knead, knead the substance of our understanding  
Which must be beautiful in flesh to walk,  
That if Thou take me angrily in hand  
And hurl me to the shark, I shall not die!

## LORD, I HAVE SEEN TOO MUCH

Lord, I have seen too much for one who sat  
In quiet at his window's luminous eye  
And puzzled over house and street and sky,  
Safe only in the narrowest habitat;  
Who studied peace as if the world were flat,  
The edge of nature linear and dry,  
But faltered at each brilliant entity  
Drawn like a prize from some magician's hat.

Too suddenly this lightning is disclosed:  
Lord, in a day the vacuum of Hell,  
The mouth of blood, the ocean's ragged jaw,  
More than embittered Adam ever saw  
When driven from Eden to the East to dwell,  
The lust of godhead hideously exposed!

## LOVE FOR A HAND

Two hands lie still, the hairy and the white,  
And soon down ladders of reflected light  
The sleepers climb in silence. Gradually  
They separate on paths of long ago,  
Each winding on his arm the unpleasant clew  
That leads, live as a nerve, to memory.

But often when too steep her dream descends,  
Perhaps to the grotto where her father bends  
To pick her up, the husband wakes as though  
He had forgotten something in the house.  
Motionless he eyes the room that glows  
With the little animals of light that prowl

This way and that. Soft are the beasts of light  
But softer still her hand that drifts so white  
Upon the whiteness. How like a water-plant  
It floats upon the black canal of sleep,  
Suspended upward from the distant deep  
In pure achievement of its lovely want!

Quietly then he plucks it and it folds  
And is again a hand, small as a child's.  
He would revive it but it barely stirs  
And so he carries it off a little way  
And breaks it open gently. Now he can see  
The sweetness of the fruit, his hand eats hers.

## MAGICIAN

Tall in his top hat, tall and alone in the room  
Of aerial music, electric light  
And the click of tables, the mephistophelian man  
Toys with a wand and the wonders happen—for whom  
And to what end the gleam of the shellacked  
Trick within trick, as plain as black and white,  
And all too clever, all too matter-of-fact  
Like the sudden neatness of a shutting fan?

And somewhat sinister, like a millionaire  
Or a poet or a street-corner quack  
With a dollar bottle of cure . . . We are drawn to his eye  
Only to stop at the eye we dare not dare;  
We suspect and believe; *he* looks us out of face  
And seems to say that magic is the knack  
Of showing the result without a trace  
Of the cause, end without means, what without why.

If now the amusing audience could see  
His mangey unicorn that crops  
The shabby velvet of his weariness,  
An inch from the abyss of villainy,  
The applause would freeze, the dust settle like snow,  
And long before the asbestos curtain drops  
Even the children would get up to go,  
Be sick in the lobby, sob with young distress;

But fortunately they cannot. We proceed  
Beyond the fire-eating, doves,  
Padlocks, confetti, disappearing ropes,  
To personal murder, the necessary deed  
Of sawing a woman in half. We want her heart.  
The sable executioner in gloves  
Labors, but *hoc est corpus!* quite apart  
She stands; we applaud our disappointed hopes.

And backstage somewhere, peeling his moustache,  
He muses that he is an honest man

And wonders dramatically why. Deep in his ear  
At times there sounds the subterranean plash  
Of Alf and Phlegeton where tides revolve  
With eyes of evil. There he first began;  
There is the task he can no longer solve  
But only wait for till his dying year.



## MELBOURNE

The planted palms will keep the city warm  
In any winter, and the toy Yarra flow  
With boats and lovers down the grass. From walls  
The flowers spring to sack the very streets  
And wrought-iron tendrils curl upon the air.  
The family's sex is English, and all their pain  
More moderate than a long-expected death.

Yet the lipstick is poor, the girls consent  
To lose their teeth and hips, and language whines  
Raising the pitch to shrill humility.  
At five o'clock the pubs roar on the world  
And milk bars trickle pardon, as the mobs  
Lunge, worse than Chicago, for the trains  
Dispersing life to gardens and to tea.

Also in suburbs there is want of vice,  
And even the dogs are well-behaved and nice.  
Who has extracted violence like the fang,  
Leaving in early minds the simile  
*Castration?* Who watching at night the film  
Suffers the technicolor King to spread  
Exalted, motionless, into their dream?

For blue and diluted is this nation's eye,  
Wind-worn with herding and great distances  
That were not made for cities. This was a land  
Laid for the park of loneliness of Earth,  
And giant imagination and despair.  
Who reared this sweet metropolis abides  
By his own error, more profound than war.

Only my love can spare the wasted race  
That worships sullenly the sordid sheep.  
She shall be governor with her golden hair!  
And teach the landscape laughter and destroy  
With her free naked foot the matchwood quay:  
Buildings themselves shall topple where she dances  
And leap like frogs into the uproarious sea!

## MIDNIGHT SHOW

The year is done, the last act of the vaudeville,  
The last top hat and patent leather tappity-tap  
Enclosed in darkness. Pat. Blackout. Only the organ  
Groans, groans, its thousand golden throats in love;  
While blue lowlight suffuses mysteries of sleep  
Through racks of heads, and smoothly parts the gauzy veil  
That slips, the last pretense of peace, into the wings.

With a raucous crash the music rises to its feet,  
And pouring from the hidden eye like God the Light  
The light white-molten cold fills out the vacant field  
With shattered cities, striped ships, and maps with lines  
That crawl—symbols of horror, symbols of obscenity;  
A girl astride a giant cannon, holding a flag;  
Removal of stone and stained glass saints from a known  
cathedral.

And the Voice, the loving and faithful pointer, trots beside  
Reel after reel, taking death in its well-trained stride.  
The Voice, the polite, the auctioneer, places his hints  
Like easy bids. The lab assistant, the Voice, dips  
Their pity like litmus papers into His rancid heart.—  
Dream to be surfeited, nerves clogged up with messages,  
And, backed up at the ganglion, the news refused.

Dream to be out in snow where every corner Santa,  
Heart of one generation's dreams, tinkles a bell.  
We know him too. He is the Unemployed, but clowns  
As the Giver, receiving pennies in a cast-iron pot.  
Dream to be cold with Byrd at the world's bottom. Dream  
To be warm in the Vatican, photographing a manuscript.  
Dream to be there, a cell in Europe's poisoned blood.

Revulsion cannot rouse our heads for pride or protest.  
The eye sees as the camera, a clean moronic gaze,  
And to go is not impossible but merely careless.

O wife, what shall we tell the children that we saw?  
O son, what shall we tell our father? And O my friend,  
What shall we tell our senses when the lights go up  
And noiselessly the golden curtains crash together!

## THE MINUTE

The office building treads the marble dark,  
The mother-clock with wide and golden dial  
Suffers and glows. Now is the hour of birth  
Of the tremulous egg. Now is the time of correction.  
O midnight, zero of eternity,  
Soon on a million bureaus of the city  
Will lie the new-born minute.

The new-born minute on the bureau lies,  
Scratching the glass with infant kick, cutting  
With diamond cry the crystal and expanse  
Of timelessness. This pretty tick of death  
Etches its name upon the air. I turn  
Titanically in distant sleep, expelling  
From my lungs the bitter gas of life.

The loathsome minute grows in length and strength,  
Bending its spring to forge an iron hour  
That rusts from link to link, the last one bright,  
The late one dead. Between the shining works  
Range the clean angels, studying that tick  
Like a strange dirt, but will not pick it up  
Nor move it gingerly out of harm's way.

An angel is stabbed and is carried aloft howling,  
For devils have gathered on a ruby jewel  
Like red mites on a berry; others arrive  
To tend the points with oil and smooth the heat.  
See how their vicious faces, lit with sweat,  
Worship the train of wheels; see how they pull  
The tape-worm Time from nothing into thing.

I with my distant heart lie wide awake  
Smiling at that Swiss-perfect engine room  
Driven by tiny evils. Knowing no harm  
Even of gongs that loom and move in towers  
And hands as high as iron masts, I sleep,  
At which sad sign the angels in a flock  
Rise and sweep past me, spinning threads of fear.

## MONGOLIAN IDIOT

A dog that spoke, a monster born of sheep  
We mercilessly kill, and kill the thought,  
Yet house the parrot and let the centaur go,  
These being to their nature and those not.  
We laugh at apes, that never quite succeed  
At eating soup or wearing hats.

Adam had named so many but not this,  
This that would name a curse when it had come,  
Unfinished man, or witch, or myth, or sin,  
Not ever father and never quite a son.  
Ape had outstripped him, dog and darling lamb  
And all the kindergarten beasts.

Enter the bare room of his mind and count  
His store of words with letters large and black;  
See how he handles clumsily those blocks  
With swans and sums; his colored picture books.  
At thirty-five he squeals to see the ball  
Bounce in the air and roll away.

Pity and fear we give this innocent  
Who maimed his mother's beautiful instinct;  
But she would say, "My body had a dog;  
I bore the ape and nursed the crying sheep.  
He is my kindness and my splendid gift  
Come from all life and for all life."

## MY GRANDMOTHER

My grandmother moves to my mind in context of sorrow  
And, as if apprehensive of near death, in black;  
Whether erect in chair, her dry and corded throat ha-  
rangued by grief,  
Or at ragged book bent in Hebrew prayer,  
Or gentle, submissive, and in tears to strangers;  
Whether in sunny parlor or back of drawn blinds.

Though time and tongue made any love disparate,  
On daguerreotype with classic perspective  
Beauty I sigh and soften at is hers.  
I pity her life of deaths, the agony of her own,  
But most that history moved her through  
Stranger lands and many houses,  
Taking her exile for granted, confusing  
The tongues and tasks of her children's children.

## NECROPOLIS

Even in death they prosper; even in the death  
Where lust lies senseless and pride fallow  
The mouldering owners of rents and labor  
Prosper and improve the high hill.

For theirs is the stone whose name is deepest cut,  
Theirs the facsimile temple, theirs  
The iron acanthus and the hackneyed Latin,  
The boxwood rows and all the birds.

And even in death the poor are thickly herded  
In intimate congestion under streets and alleys.  
Look at the standard sculpture, the cheap  
Synonymous slabs, the machined crosses.

Yes, even in death the cities are unplanned.  
The heirs govern from the old centers;  
They will not remove. And the ludicrous angels,  
Remains of the poor, will never fly  
But only multiply in the green grass.

## THE NEW RING

The new ring oppresses the finger, embarrasses the hand, encumbers the whole arm. The free hand moves to cover the new ring, except late-at-night when the mouth reaches to kiss the soft silver, a sudden thought.

In the lodge of marriage, the secret society of love, the perfect circle binds and separates, moves and is stationary.

Till the ring becomes the flesh, leaving a white trench, and the finger is immune. For the brand is assumed. Till the flesh of the encumbered hand grows over the ring, as living wood over and around the iron spike. Till the value of the reason of the gift is coinworn, and the wound heals.

And until the wound heals, the new ring is a new nail driven through the hand upon the living wood, and the body hangs from the nail, and the nail holds.



## NIGGER

And did ever a man go black with sun in a Belgian swamp,  
On a feathery African plain where the sunburnt lioness lies,  
And a cocoanut monkey grove where the cockatoos scratch  
the skies,  
And the zebras striped with moonlight grasses gaze and  
stomp?

With a swatch of the baboon's crimson bottom cut for a lip,  
And a brace of elephant ivories hung for a tusky smile,  
With the muscles as level and lazy and long as the lifting  
Nile,  
And a penis as loaded and supple and limp as the slaver's  
whip?

Are you beautiful still when you walk downtown in a knife-  
cut coat  
And your yellow shoes dance at the corner curb like a  
brand new car,  
And the buck with the arching pick looks over the new-laid  
tar  
As you cock your eye like a cuckoo bird on a two-o'clock  
note?

When you got so little in steel-rim specs, when you taught  
that French,  
When you wrote that book and you made that speech in the  
bottom south,  
When you beat that fiddle and sang that role for Othello's  
mouth,  
When you blew that horn for the shirt-sleeve mob and the  
snaky wench?

When you boxed that hun, when you raped that trash that  
you didn't rape,  
When you caught that slug with a belly of fire and a face of  
gray,

When you felt that loop and you took that boot from a KKK,  
And your hands hung down and your face went out in a  
blast of grape?

Did the Lord say yes, did the Lord say no, did you ask the  
Lord

When the jaw came down, when the cotton blossomed out  
of your bones?

Are you coming to peace, O Booker T. Lincoln Roosevelt  
Jones,

And is Jesus riding to raise your wage and to cut that cord?

## NOSTALGIA

My soul stands at the window of my room,  
And I ten thousand miles away;  
My days are filled with Ocean's sound of doom,  
Salt and cloud and the bitter spray.  
*Let the wind blow, for many a man shall die.*

My selfish youth, my books with gilded edge,  
Knowledge and all gaze down the street;  
The potted plants upon the window ledge  
Gaze down with selfish lives and sweet.  
*Let the wind blow, for many a man shall die.*

My night is now her day, my day her night,  
So I lie down, and so I rise;  
The sun burns close, the star is losing height,  
The clock is hunted down the skies.  
*Let the wind blow, for many a man shall die.*

Truly a pin can make the memory bleed,  
A word explode the inward mind  
And turn the skulls and flowers never freed  
Into the air, no longer blind.  
*Let the wind blow, for many a man shall die.*

Laughter and grief join hands. Always the heart  
Clumps in the breast with heavy stride;  
The face grows lined and wrinkled like a chart,  
The eyes bloodshot with tears and tide.  
*Let the wind blow, for many a man shall die.*

## OCTOBER 1

That season when the leaf deserts the bole  
And half-dead see-saws through the October air  
Falling face-downward on the walks to print  
The decalcomania of its little soul—  
Hardly has the milkman's sleepy horse  
On wooden shoes echoed across the blocks,  
When with its back jaws open like a dredge  
The van comes lumbering up the curb to someone's door  
and knocks.

And four black genii muscular and shy  
Holding their shy caps enter the first room  
Where someone hurriedly surrenders up  
The thickset chair, the mirror half awry,  
Then to their burdens stoop without a sound.  
One with his bare hands rends apart the bed,  
One stuffs the china-barrel with stale print,  
Two bear the sofa toward the door with dark funereal tread.

The corner lamp, the safety eye of night,  
Enveloped in the sun blinks and goes blind  
And soon the early risers pick their way  
Through kitchenware and pillows bolt upright.  
The bureau on the sidewalk with bare back  
And wrinkling veneer is most disgraced,  
The sketch of Paris suffers in the wind,  
Only the bike, its nose against the wall, does not show haste.

Two hours—the movers mop their necks and look,  
Filing through dust and echoes back and forth.  
The halls are hollow and all the floors are cleared  
Bare to the last board, to the most secret nook;  
But on the street a small chaos survives  
That slowly now the leviathan ingests,  
And schoolboys and stenographers stare at  
The truck, the house, the husband in his hat who stands and  
rests.

He turns with miserable expectant face  
And for the last time enters. On the wall  
A picture-stain spreads from the nail-hole down.  
Each object live and dead has left its trace.  
He leaves his key; but as he quickly goes  
This question comes behind: Did someone die?  
Is someone rich or poor, better or worse?  
What shall uproot a house and bring this care into his eye?

## THE PHENOMENON

How lovely it was, after the official fright,  
To walk in the shadowy drifts, as if the clouds  
Saturated with the obscurity of night  
Had died and fallen piecemeal into shrouds.

What crepes there were, what sables heaped on stones,  
What soft shakos on posts, tragically gay!  
And oil-pool flooded fields that blackly shone  
The more black under the liquid eye of day!

It was almost warmer to the touch than sands  
And sweeter-tasting than the white, and yet  
Walking, the children held their fathers' hands  
Like visitors to a mine or parapet.

Then black it snowed again and while it fell  
You could see the sun, an irritated rim  
Wheeling through smoke; each from his shallow hell  
Experienced injured vision growing dim.

But one day all was clear, and one day soon,  
Sooner than those who witnessed it had died,  
Nature herself forgot the phenomenon,  
Her faulty snowfall brilliantly denied.

## PIANO

The perfect ice of the thin keys must break  
And fingers crash through stillness into sound,  
And through the mahogany darkness of the lake  
Splinter the muteness where all notes are found.  
O white face floating upwards amidst hair!  
Sweet hands entangled in the golden snare,  
                    Escape, escape, escape,  
Or in the coils of joy be drowned.

What is the cabinet that holds such speech  
And is obedient to caresses strange  
As tides that stroke the long-deserted beach,  
And gales that scourge the Peruvian mountain range?  
O flesh of wood with flanks aglow with suns,  
O quivering as at the burst of monstrous guns,  
                    Subside, subside, subside,  
Or into dust and atoms change.

Nor can the note-shaped heart, nor can the ear  
Withstand your praise, O numbers more appalling  
Than ringed and voyaging on the atmosphere  
Those heavy flocks of fallen angels falling;  
You strike with fists of heaven against the void  
Where all but choring music is destroyed,  
                    And light, and light, and light,  
Bursts into voice forever calling.

## POET

*Il arrive que l'esprit demande la poesie*

Left leg flung out, head cocked to the right,  
Tweed coat or army uniform, with book,  
Beautiful eyes, who is this walking down?  
Who, glancing at the pane of glass looks sharp  
And thinks it is not he—as when a poet  
Comes swiftly on some half-forgotten poem  
And loosely holds the page, steady of mind,  
Thinking it is not his?

And when will *you* exist?—Oh, it is I,  
Incredibly skinny, stooped, and neat as pie,  
Ignorant as dirt, erotic as an ape,  
Dreamy as puberty—with dirty hair!  
Into the room like kangaroo he bounds,  
Ears flopping like the most expensive hound's;  
His chin receives all questions as he bows  
Mouthing a green bon-bon.

Has no more memory than rubber. Stands  
Waist-deep in heavy mud of thought and broods  
At his own wetness. When he would get out,  
To his surprise he lifts in air a phrase  
As whole and clean and silvery as a fish  
Which jumps and dangles on his damned hooked grin,  
But like a name-card on a man's lapel  
Calls him a conscious fool.

And child-like he remembers all his life  
And cannily constructs it, fact by fact,  
As boys paste postage stamps in careful books,  
Denoting pence and legends and profiles,  
Nothing more valuable.—And like a thief,  
His eyes glassed over and congealed with guilt,  
Fondles his secrets like a case of tools,  
And waits in empty doors.



By men despised for knowing what he is,  
And by himself. But he exists for women.  
As dolls to girls, as perfect wives to men,  
So he to women. And to himself a thing,  
All ages, epicene, without a trade.  
To girls and wives always alive and fated;  
To men and scholars always dead like Greek  
    And always mistranslated.

Towards exile and towards shame he lures himself,  
Tongue winding on his arm, and thinks like Eve  
By biting apple will become most wise.  
Sentio ergo sum: he feels his way  
And words themselves stand up for him like Braille  
And punch and perforate his parchment ear.  
All language falls like Chinese on his soul,  
    Image of song unsounded.

This is the coward's coward that in his dreams  
Sees shapes of pain grow tall. Awake at night  
He peers at sounds and stumbles at a breeze.  
And none holds life less dear. For as a youth  
Who by some accident observes his love  
Naked and in some natural ugly act,  
He turns with loathing and with flaming hands,  
    Seared and betrayed by sight.

He is the business man, on beauty trades,  
Dealer in arts and thoughts who, like the Jew,  
Shall rise from slums and hated dialects  
A tower of bitterness. Shall be always strange,  
Hunted and then sought after. Shall be sat  
Like an ambassador from another race  
At tables rich with music. He shall eat flowers,  
Chew honey and spit out gall. They shall all smile  
    And love and pity him.

His death shall be by drowning. In that hour  
When the last bubble of pure heaven's air  
Hovers within his throat, safe on his bed,  
A small eternal figurehead in terror,  
He shall cry out and clutch his days of straw  
Before the blackest wave. Lastly, his tomb  
Shall list and founder in the troughs of grass  
And none shall speak his name.

# THE POTOMAC

The thin Potomac scarcely moves  
But to divide Virginia from today;  
Rider, whichever is your way  
You go due south and neither South improves;  
Not this, of fractured columns and queer rents  
And rags that charm the nationalist,  
Not that, the axle of the continents,  
Nor the thin sky that flows unprejudiced  
This side and that, cleansing the poisoned breath.

For Thomas died a Georgian death  
And now the legion bones of Arlington  
Laid out in marble alphabets  
Stare on the great tombs of the capitol  
Where heroes calcified and cool  
Ponder the soldier named Unknown  
Whose lips are guarded with live bayonets.

Yet he shall speak though sentries walk  
And columns with their cold Corinthian stalk  
Shed gold-dust pollen on Brazil  
To turn the world to Roman chalk;  
Yet he shall speak, yet he shall speak  
Whose sulphur lit the flood-lit Dome,  
Whose hands were never in the kill,  
Whose will was furrows of Virginia loam.

But not like London blown apart by boys  
Who learned the books of love in English schools,  
His name shall strike the fluted columns down;  
These shall lie buried deep as fifty Troys,  
The money fade like leaves from green to brown,  
And embassies dissolve to molecules.

## THE PROGRESS OF FAUST

He was born in Deutschland, as you would suspect,  
And graduated in magic from Cracow  
In Fifteen Five. His portraits show a brow  
Heightened by science. The eye is indirect,  
As of bent light upon a crooked soul,  
And that he bargained with the Prince of Shame  
For pleasures intellectually foul  
Is known by every court that lists his name.

His frequent disappearances are put down  
To visits in the regions of the damned  
And to the periodic deaths he shammed,  
But, unregenerate and in Doctor's gown,  
He would turn up to lecture at the fair  
And do a minor miracle for a fee.  
Many a life he whispered up the stair  
To teach the black art of anatomy.

He was as deaf to angels as an oak  
When, in the fall of Fifteen Ninety-four,  
He went to London and crashed through the floor  
In mock damnation of the playgoing folk.  
Weekending with the scientific crowd,  
He met Sir Francis Bacon and helped draft  
"Colours of Good and Evil" and read aloud  
An obscene sermon at which no one laughed.

He toured the Continent for a hundred years  
And subsidized among the peasantry  
The puppet play, his tragic history;  
With a white glove he boxed the devil's ears  
And with a black his own. Tired of this,  
He published penny poems about his sins,  
In which he placed the heavy emphasis  
On the white glove which, for a penny, wins.

Some time before the hemorrhage of the Kings  
Of France, he turned respectable and taught;

Quite suddenly everything that he had thought  
Seemed to grow scholars' beards and angels' wings.  
It was the Overthrow. On Reason's throne  
He sat with the fair Phrygian on his knees  
And called all universities his own,  
As plausible a figure as you please.

Then back to Germany as the sages' sage  
To preach comparative science to the young  
Who came from every land in a great throng  
And knew they heard the master of the age.  
When for a secret formula he paid  
The Devil another fragment of his soul,  
His scholars wept, and several even prayed  
That Satan would restore him to them whole.

Backwardly tolerant, Faustus was expelled  
From the Third Reich in Nineteen Thirty-nine.  
His exit caused the breaching of the Rhine,  
Except for which the frontier might have held.  
Five years unknown to enemy and friend  
He hid, appearing on the sixth to pose  
In an American desert at war's end  
Where, at his back, a dome of atoms rose.

# RECAPITULATIONS

## I

I was born downtown on a wintry day  
And under the roof where Poe expired;  
Tended by nuns my mother lay  
Dark-haired and beautiful and tired.

Doctors and cousins paid their call,  
The rabbi and my father helped.  
A crucifix burned on the wall  
Of the bright room where I was whelped.

At one week all my family prayed,  
Stuffed wine and cotton in my craw;  
The rabbi blessed me with a blade  
According to the Mosaic Law.

The white steps blazed in Baltimore  
And cannas and white statuary.  
I went home voluble and sore  
Influenced by Abraham and Mary.

## II

At one the Apocalypse had spoken,  
Von Moltke fell, I was housebroken.

At two how could I understand  
The murder of Archduke Ferdinand?

France was involved with history,  
I with my thumbs when I was three.

A sister came, we neared a war,  
Paris was shelled when I was four.

I joined in our peach-kernel drive  
For poison gas when I was five.

At six I cheered the big parade,  
Burned sparklers and drank lemonade.

At seven I passed at school though I  
Was far too young to say *Versailles*.

At eight the boom began to tire,  
I tried to set our house on fire.

The Bolsheviki had drawn the line,  
Lenin was stricken, I was nine.

—What evils do not retrograde  
To my first odious decade?

III

Saints by whose pages I would swear,  
My Zarathustra, Edward Lear,  
Ulysses, Werther, fierce Flaubert,  
Where are my books of yesteryear?

Sixteen and sixty are a pair;  
We twice live by philosophies;  
My marginalia of the hair,  
Are you at one with Socrates?

Thirty subsides yet does not dare,  
Sixteen and sixty bang their fists.  
How is it that I no longer care  
For Kant and the Transcendentalists?

Public libraries lead to prayer,  
EN APXH ἦν ὁ λόγος—still  
Eliot and John are always there  
To tempt our admirari nil.

IV

I lived in a house of panels,  
Victorian, darkly made;

A virgin in bronze and marble  
Leered from the balustrade.

The street was a tomb of virtues,  
Autumnal for dreams and haunts;  
I gazed from the polished windows  
Toward a neighborhood of aunts.

Mornings I practiced piano,  
Wrote elegies and sighed;  
The evenings were conversations  
Of poetry and suicide.

Weltschmerz and mysticism,  
What tortures we undergo!  
I loved with the love of Heinrich  
And the poison of Edgar Poe.

v

My first small book was nourished in the dark,  
Secretly written, published, and inscribed.  
Bound in wine-red, it made no brilliant mark.  
Rather impossible relatives subscribed.

The best review was one I wrote myself  
Under the name of a then-dearest friend.  
Two hundred volumes stood upon my shelf  
Saying my golden name from end to end.

I was not proud but seriously stirred;  
Sorrow was song and money poetry's maid!  
Sorrow I had in many a ponderous word,  
But were the piper and the printer paid?

vi

The third-floor thoughts of discontented youth  
Once saw the city, hardened against truth,



Get set for war. He coupled a last rime  
And waited for the summons to end time.

It came. The box-like porch where he had sat,  
The four bright boxes of a medium flat,  
Chair he had sat in, glider where he lay  
Reading the poets and prophets of his day,

He assigned abstractly to his dearest friend,  
Glanced at the little street hooked at the end,  
The line of poplars lately touched with spring,  
Lovely as Laura, breathless, beckoning.

Mother was calm, until he left the door;  
The trolley passed his sweetheart's house before  
She was awake. The Armory was cold,  
But naked, shivering, shocked he was enrolled.

It was the death he never quite forgot  
Through the four years of death, and like as not  
The true death of the best of all of us  
Whose present life is largely posthumous.

## VII

We waged a war within a war,  
A cause within a cause;  
The glory of it was withheld  
In keeping with the laws  
Whereby the public need not know  
The pitfalls of the status quo.

Love was the reason for the blood:  
The black men of our land  
Were seen to walk with pure white girls  
Laughing and hand in hand.  
This most unreasonable state  
No feeling White would tolerate.

We threw each other from the trams,  
    We carried knives and pipes,  
We sacrificed in self-defense  
    Some of the baser types,  
But though a certain number died  
You would not call it fratricide.

The women with indignant tears  
    Professed to love the Blacks,  
And dark and wooly heads still met  
    With heads of English flax.  
Only the cockney could conceive  
Of any marriage so naïve.

Yet scarcely fifty years before  
    Their fathers rode to shoot  
The undressed aborigines,  
    Though not to persecute.  
A fine distinction lies in that  
They have no others to combat.

By order of the high command  
    The black men were removed  
To the interior and north;  
    The crisis thus improved,  
Even the women could detect  
Their awful fall from intellect.

VIII

I plucked the bougainvillaea  
    In Queensland in time of war;  
The train stopped at the station  
    And I reached it from my door.

I have never kept a flower  
    And this one I never shall  
I thought as I laid the blossom  
    In the leaves of *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

I read my book in the desert  
    In the time of death and fear,  
The flower slipped from the pages  
    And fell to my lap, my dear.

I sent it inside my letter,  
    The purplest kiss I knew,  
And thus you abused my passion  
    With "A most Victorian Jew."

# RED INDIAN

*To Jim Powell*

Purest of breed of all the tribes  
That trekked from time and took the Trail of Tears  
There to the plain beyond the bribes  
Of best advantage, past the rifle's reach,  
Where instinct rests and action disappears  
And the skulls of cattle bleach.

High in the plateaus of their soul  
The silence is reshaped like rocks by wind,  
Their eyes are beads that pay their toll,  
Record the race-long heritage of grief,  
At altitudes where memory is thinned,  
Frown like a wrinkled chief.

The painted feather still upright  
They walk in concrete Tulsa dark and mute,  
Their bravest blankets slashing bright  
The afternoon of progress and of wives;  
Their children glow like some primordial fruit  
Cut from the branch by knives.

Bark-smooth as spears and arrow-straight  
They watch the world like winter trees and grow;  
Forests of them revive and wait,  
In timeless hibernation dream and stir.  
These are the lives that love the soundless snow  
And wear the wind like fur.

Because their pride of nation leaps,  
The august rivers where they yelled and died  
Move with a blood that never sleeps.  
Because their nature suffers the arrest  
Of seed, their silence crowds us like a tide  
And moves their mournful quest.

## A ROBBERY

By day I had dispraised their life,  
Accused foremost the little cheated wives  
Whose hands like trailers ludicrously hitched  
To husbands, over the graph of business bump.  
As often, with my friend, I laughed at them,  
All but their young, whose strenuous anarchy  
    Asked Why and promised war.

So of their legal dark of nights,  
And bed revenge, and competent small births  
That shut us out from marriage, I despaired:  
Men brought home hate like evening papers, maids  
Longed for their slums, the inarticulate clock  
Spoke once, and faces, double-locked and still,  
    Turned to the wall to sleep.

I show that fear unearthed that Boy.  
Into the taut membrane of night, like knives  
A woman screams, rending with rape our rest.  
Bodies are ripped from beds; the snapped dream hangs:  
And quick to plunge the torn portieres of sleep  
We race soft-running Horror the length of halls.  
    Ghouls are at every door.

Down in the hostile dark, as one,  
The heavy faces point, close in, take aim,  
And hands describe centripetal broad Wheels  
Through which unseen a wiry robber moves.  
Voices enlarge, cops clamber from the sky,  
Our sudden symmetry dissolves. We laugh.  
    "Nothing is caught, or lost."

Yet our emergency is lost,  
Which would have, naked in the domestic night,  
Brought us like actual murder to relief.  
Boys have mixed blood and kissed to seal an oath.  
Boys have an oath. O we were close to boys,

The salesman, the real estator, the clerk, and I,  
Their enemy, their poet.

Robber, paid agent of our hate,  
I kiss my hand to you across the roofs  
And jungle of back alleys where you hide.  
You with your guns are like a boy I loved.  
He was born dead and never had a name.  
He was my little son. Night took him off.  
Hard to unlearn is love.

## SATIRE: ANXIETY

Alas, I would be overloved,  
A sign, a Wonder unreprieved,  
A bronze colossus standing high  
As Rhodes or famous Liberty,  
Bridging with my almighty thighs  
A stainless steel metropolis  
Where pigmy men in clothing creep  
To Lilliputian work and sleep,  
And Love with microscopic tears  
Whispers to wee and perfect ears.  
I would obscure the sun and throw  
A shadow with my smallest toe  
That down their teeming canyon files  
Time could be told a hundred miles;  
Lightning would flash within my hand,  
An airman's beacon and sign of land,  
My eyes eclipse the polar star,  
Aldebaran and the flare of war;  
Golden my head and cleanly hewn  
Would sail above the lesser moon  
And dart above the Pleiades  
To peer at new astronomies  
From where the earth, a bluish clod,  
Seems smallest in the eye of God.

But when in lucid morning I  
Survey my bulk and history,  
Composite fool alive in air  
With caecum and vestigial hair,  
A thing of not-too-godly form  
Conversant with the waiting worm,  
Fixed in a span between two shades  
For four or five or six decades,  
Then all my pride and all my hope  
As backward through a telescope  
Diminish: I walk an endless street  
Where topless towers for height compete,

And men of wiser blood and bone  
Destroy me for the things they own—  
Their taxes, vital tubes, and sons  
Submissive in a world of guns.  
I see my hands grow small and clear  
Until they wink and disappear.



# SCYROS

*snuffle and sniff and handkerchief*

The doctor punched my vein  
The captain called me Cain  
Upon my belly sat the sow of fear  
With coins on either eye  
The President came by  
And whispered to the braid what none could hear

High over where the storm  
Stood steadfast cruciform  
The golden eagle sank in wounded wheels  
White Negroes laughing still  
Crept fiercely on Brazil  
Turning the navies upward on their keels

Now one by one the trees  
Stripped to their naked knees  
To dance upon the heaps of shrunken dead  
The roof of England fell  
Great Paris tolled her bell  
And China stunched her milk and wept for bread

No island singly lay  
But lost its name that day  
The Ainu dived across the plunging sands  
From dawn to dawn to dawn  
King George's birds came on  
Strafing the tulips from his children's hands

Thus in the classic sea  
Southeast from Thessaly  
The dynamited mermen washed ashore  
And tritons dressed in steel  
Trolled heads with rod and reel  
And dredged potatoes from the Aegean floor

Hot is the sky and green  
Where Germans have been seen  
The moon leaks metal on the Atlantic fields  
Pink boys in birthday shrouds  
Loop lightly through the clouds  
Or coast the peaks of Finland on their shields

That prophet year by year  
Lay still but could not hear  
Where scholars tapped to find his new remains  
Gog and Magog ate pork  
In vertical New York  
And war began next Wednesday on the Danes

## THE SECOND-BEST BED

In the name of the almighty God, amen,  
I, William Shakespeare, take my pen  
And do bequeath in perfect health  
To Christ my soul and to my kin my wealth  
When I am dead.  
And to Anne, good dame,  
I bequeath my name,  
A table, a chair, and the second-best bed.

To Judith a hundred fifty pounds I give,  
The same if three more years she live,  
And the broad-edge silver bowl. To Joan  
My hose and clothes and all the suits I own  
Both blue and red.  
And to Anne, good dame,  
I bequeath my name,  
A table, a chair, and the second-best bed.

Ten pounds to beggars for their drink and board,  
To Mr. Thomas Cole my sword,  
To Richard Burbage, Cundell, Nash,  
Heminge and Hamlet one pound six in cash,  
And to her I wed  
Who is Anne, good dame,  
I bequeath my name,  
A table, a chair, and the second-best bed.

To Joan also my Stratford house I will,  
For sisters shall not go with nil,  
And to her sons five pounds apiece  
To be paid within a year of my decease.  
And as I have said  
To Anne, good dame,  
I bequeath my name,  
A table, a chair, and the second-best bed.

Last, to my daughter, born Susanna Hall,  
My barns and stables, lands and all,

Tenements, orchards, jewels, and wares,  
And these forever for herself and heirs,  
    Till all are dead;  
    But to Anne, good dame,  
    I bequeath my name,  
A table, a chair, and the second-best bed.

Good wife, bad fortune is to blame  
That I bequeath, when I am dead,  
To you my honor and my name,  
A table, a chair, and the second-best bed.

# SIX RELIGIOUS LYRICS

## I

I sing the simplest flower,  
The earliest quest of day,  
That wears in its white corolla  
The signet of breathing May.

For the envelope of beauty  
Discloses the female part,  
The bending and swollen stigma,  
The sly tongue of the heart.

And the dusty bee for nectar  
Enters and drinks his fill,  
And the wind comes freely, freshly  
To assist the season's will.

I give you the simplest flower,  
The color of air, a dress  
Self-woven and frail and holy,  
The signet of love's distress.

Upstairs the shuttles of the loom  
Ravel and weave the shadow-play;  
Downstairs on endless steps of gloom  
Those souls in sorrowful array . . .

Gentlest decline of inward hills  
That distance lightens and makes fair,  
Valley of instruments that fills  
The sibylline nocturnal air!

What innuendo of their cry  
Will enter life and course the blood,  
That gods and goddesses so high  
May represent our earthly good?

What human kiss can take the place  
Of these of such gigantic scope;  
What joy describe the human face  
Washed down the street in floods of hope?

### III

Dark words, birds of the race  
That voyage time and birth  
To pierce the columns of the East,  
Fossils of prayer and earth:

Grave words, words of the name  
That live from face to face,  
Remembering love's antiquity,  
Exile and dead disgrace;

Iron words, oaths of the war,  
Seed of the seed of Cain,  
Under whose mail and metal dew  
Our thousand youths are lain;

Is Babel there, fallen of heart,  
Unfinished on the sky,  
Can speech renew the tribe of joy  
And Jesus justify?

## IV

The soldier's death occasions  
Seldom a bitter cry:  
We feel in his abrasions  
A death that we deny.

To fall as such another  
And hundreds far and near  
Is true for friend and brother,  
But false for us who fear.

Luck has a wider cover  
Than Justice's or God's;  
Our chances scarcely hover,  
The Exception sees and nods.

Saluting the death of any  
The mass will seldom grieve,  
For out of the fall of many  
The one will rise and leave.



## V

Treasure your anonymity,  
You who remain, however torn,  
Eldest of us and best of us,  
Die silent and be silent born.

At length the elected must subside,  
The honorable and the traitor kind,  
And armies all repose in clay,  
Corpses and booty left behind.

Inviolable and sacred mass,  
You were not good but good enough,  
You nodded at your destinies,  
The last and next-to-last rebuff.

Nation and race and family  
Have built on many a smoking town;  
Samson was also slightly blind  
But brought the roof of Dagon down.

## VI

*for L. Q.*

Witty of heart and pure of heart,  
    In churches cavernous and dim  
You drank the cup of Christ apart  
    And knelt and worshipped Him.

Somewhere I waited for your arm  
    And walked the traffic of broad day  
Sadly, for all the earthly harm  
    From which you turned to pray.

In cloisters where your sisters dwelled  
    You walked in peace and dreamed to die;  
You did not take the veil they held,  
    The kiss to sanctify,

But pleasantly amongst us all  
    Who doubt and shout and depredate  
Live by the charity of Paul  
    And keep the silent gate.

## THE SNOB

At what time in its little history  
Did on the matrix of his brain a blow  
Fall that struck like a relentless die  
And left him speechless; or was it by degrees  
That the algid folds of mind, caught in a pose,  
                    Hardened and set like concrete,  
Printing and fixing a distorted moment?

Nothing but death will smash this ugly cast  
That wears its trade mark big upon its face,  
A scutcheon for Greek-letter brotherhoods  
Where it is weakly sworn by smiles to cow  
Unequals, niggers or just Methodists.  
                    His bearing is a school of thought,  
But he is not funny and not unimportant.

## THE SOUTHERNER

He entered with the authority of politeness  
And the jokes died in the air. A well-made blaze  
Grew round the main log in the fireplace  
Spontaneously. I watched its brightness  
Spread to the altered faces of my guests.  
They did not like the Southerner. I did.  
A liberal felt that someone should forbid  
That soft voice making its soft arrests.

As when a Negro or a prince extends  
His hand to an average man, and the mind  
Speeds up a minute and then drops behind,  
So did the conversation of my friends.  
I was amused by this respectful awe  
Which those hotly deny who have no prince.  
I watched the frown, the stare, and the wince  
Recede into attention, the arms thaw.

I saw my southern evil memories  
Raped from my mind before my eyes, my youth  
Practicing caste, perfecting the untruth  
Of staking honor on the wish to please.  
I saw my honor's paradox:  
Grandpa, the saintly Jew, keeping his beard  
In difficult Virginia, yet endeared  
Of blacks and farmers, although orthodox.

The nonsense of the gracious lawn,  
The fall of hollow columns in the pines,  
Do these deceive more than the rusted signs  
Of Jesus on the road? Can they go on  
In the timeless manner of all gentlefolk  
There in a culture rotted and unweeded  
Where the black yoni of the South is seeded  
By crooked men in denims thin as silk?

They do go on, denying still the fall  
Of Richmond and man, who gently live

On the street above the violence, fugitive,  
Graceful, and darling, who recall  
The heartbroken country once about to flower,  
Full of black poison, beautiful to smell,  
Who know how to conform, how to compel,  
And how from the best bush to receive a flower.

## SYDNEY BRIDGE

Though I see you, O rainbow of iron and rivetted lace  
As a dancer who leaps to the music of music and light,  
And poised on the pin of the moment of marvelous grace  
Holds her breath in the downfall and curve of her motion-  
less flight;

Though you walk like a queen with the stays of your  
womanly steel  
And the pearls of your bodice are heavy with sensual pride,  
And the million come under your notice and graciously  
kneel,  
As the navies of nations come slowly to moor at your side;

Yet your pace is the pace of a man's, and your arms are out-  
spread  
In a trick of endurance to charm the demand of the bays,  
And your tendons are common—the cables are coarse on  
your head,

You are marxist and sweaty! You grind for the labor  
of days;  
And O sphinx of our harbor of beauty, your banner is red  
And outflung at the end of the world like a silvery phrase!

# THE SYNAGOGUE

The synagogue dispirits the deep street,  
Shadows the face of the pedestrian,  
It is the adumbration of the Wall,  
The stone survival that laments itself,  
Our old entelechy of stubborn God,  
Our calendar that marks a separate race.

The swift cathedral palpitates the blood,  
The soul moves upward like a wing to meet  
The pinnacles of saints. There flocks of thanks  
In nooks of holy tracery arrive  
And rested take their message in mid-air  
Sphere after sphere into the papal heaven.

The altar of the Hebrews is a house,  
No relic but a place, Sinai itself,  
Not holy ground but factual holiness  
Wherein the living god is resident.  
Our scrolls are volumes of the thundered law  
Sabbath by sabbath wound by hand to read.

He knows Al-Eloah to whom the Arab  
Barefooted falls on sands, on table roofs,  
In latticed alleys underneath the egg  
On wide mosaics, when the crier shrills.  
O profitable curse, most sacred rug,  
Your book is blindness and your sword is rust.

And Judenhetze is the course of time;  
We were rebellious, all but Abraham,  
And skulked like Jonah, angry at the gourd.  
Our days are captives in the minds of kings,  
We stand in tens disjointed on the world  
Grieving the ribbon of a coast we hated.

Some choose the ethics of belief beyond  
Even particular election. Some  
In bland memorial churches modify

The architecture of the state, and heaven  
Disfranchised watches, caput mortuum,  
The human substance eating, voting, smiling.

The Jew has no bedecked magnificent  
But sits in stricken ashes after death,  
Refusing grace; his grave is flowerless,  
He gutters in the tallow of his name.  
At Rome the multiplying tapers sing  
Life endless in the history of art.

And Zion womanless refuses grace  
To the first woman as to Magdalene,  
But half-remembers Judith or Rahab,  
The shrewd good heart of Esther honors still,  
And weeps for almost sacred Ruth, but doubts  
Either full harlotry or the faultless birth.

Our wine is wine, our bread is harvest bread  
That feeds the body and is not the body.  
Our blessing is to wine but not the blood  
Nor to sangreal the sacred dish. We bless  
The whiteness of the dish and bless the water  
And are not anthropaphagous to him.

The immanent son then came as one of us  
And stood against the ark. We have no prophets,  
Our scholars are afraid. There have been friars,  
Great healers, poets. The stars were terrible.  
At the Sadducee court he touched our panic;  
We were betrayed to sacrifice this man.

We live by virtue of philosophy,  
Past love, and have our devious reward.  
For faith he gave us land and took the land,  
Thinking us exiles of all humankind.  
Our name is yet the identity of God  
That storms the falling altar of the world.



## TERMINAL

Over us stands the broad electric face  
With semaphores that flick into the gaps,  
Notching the time on sixtieths of space,  
Springing the traveller through the folded traps  
Downstairs with luggage anywhere to go  
While others happily toil upward too;  
Well-dressed or stricken, banished or restored,  
Hundreds step down and thousands get aboard.

In neat confusion, tickets in our brain  
We press the hard plush to our backs and sigh;  
The brakeman thumbs his watch, the children strain  
The windows to their smeary sight—Goodbye,  
The great car creaks, the stone wall turns away .  
And lights flear past like fishes undersea;  
Heads rolling heavily and all as one  
With languid screams we charge into the sun.

Now through the maelstrom of the town we ride  
Clicking with speed like skates on solid ice;  
Streets drop and buildings silently collide,  
Rails spread apart, converge and neatly splice.  
Through gasping blanks of air we pound and ford  
Bulking our courage forward like a road,  
Climbing the world on long dead-level stairs  
With catwalk stilts and trestles hung by hairs.

Out where the oaks on wide turntables grow  
And constellation hamlets gyre and glow,  
The straight-up bridges dive and from below  
The river's sweet eccentric borders flow;  
Into the culverts sliced like lands of meat,  
Armies of cornstalks on their ragged feet,  
And upward-outward toward the blueback hill  
Where clouds of thunder graze and drink their fill.

And always at our side, swifter than we  
The racing rabbits of the wire lope

And in their blood the words at liberty  
Outspeed themselves; but on our rail we grope  
Drinking from one white wire overhead  
Hot drinks of action and hell's fiery feed.  
Lightly the finger-shaped antennae feel  
And lightly cheer the madness of our wheel.

We turn, we turn, thrumming the harp of sounds  
And all is pleasure's move, motion of joy;  
Now we imagine that we go like hounds  
And now like sleds and now like many a toy  
Coming alive on Christmas Day to crawl  
Between the great world of the floor and wall,  
But on the peak of speed we flag and fall—  
Fixed on the air we do not move at all.

Arrived at space we settle in our car  
And stare like souls admitted to the sky;  
Nothing at length is close at hand or far;  
All feats of image vanish from the eye.  
Upon our brow is set the bursting star,  
Upon the void the wheel and axle-bar,  
The planetary fragments broken lie;  
Distance is dead and light can only die.

## THE TINGLING BACK

Sometimes deeply immured in white-washed tower  
quiet at ink and thinking book,  
    alone with my own smoke,  
the blood at rest, the body far below,  
    swiftly there falls an angry shower  
    of arrows upon my back,  
like bees or electric needles run amok  
    between my flesh and shirt. I know  
    then I have touched the pain  
of amour-propre, of something yesterday  
    I said and I should not have said,  
    I did and must not do.  
These needles wing their insights from my brain  
    and through and through my flesh they play  
    to prick my skin with red  
letters of shame and blue blurs of tattoo.  
    I sweat and take my medicine  
    for one must be sincere  
and study one's sincerity like a crime:  
    to be the very last to smile,  
    the first one to begin  
(when danger streaks the atmosphere) to fear,  
    to pocket praises like a dime,  
    to pet the crocodile,  
to see a foreign agony as stone,  
    to ravel dreams in crowded room,  
    to let the hair grow tall,  
to skin the eye and thrust it to the wind.  
    Yet if I stood with God alone  
    inside the blinding tomb  
I would not feel embarrassment at all  
    nor those hot needles of the mind  
    which are so clean. I'd ask  
not if I'd known the tissue of my will  
    and scarified my body white,  
    but whether, insincere,

I'd grown to the simplicity of a mask;  
and if in natural error still  
whether my fingers might  
destroy the true and keep the error near.

## TO EVALYN FOR CHRISTMAS

Greeting the hostile parents, you or I,  
With sheepish bravery like the young who know  
The exact extent of every household law—  
But who are man and woman, soldier and wife,

Let us again today steal to our chair  
And touch like rightful people in the house  
Our bodies and our deep or trivial news  
And the small fortune of our startled joy.

For your great heart comes over me like sound  
Of Christmas and your look and your bright arms  
Balanced with packages and wreaths throw down  
A heap of tokens for the world's birthday.

For Anno Domini, for the year of War  
Hardness I give, a drop of medicine,  
A tear to take which on your tender tongue  
May be the poison or the dram of strength

To succour destiny or to destroy  
The daily Christian you which is a fir  
Warming the room with odours of surprise  
And hung with points of light and boughs of green.

## TRAVELOGUE FOR EXILES

Look and remember. Look upon this sky;  
Look deep and deep into the sea-clean air,  
The unconfined, the terminus of prayer.  
Speak now and speak into the hallowed dome.  
What do you hear? What does the sky reply?  
*The heavens are taken: this is not your home.*

Look and remember. Look upon this sea;  
Look down and down into the tireless tide.  
What of a life below, a life inside,  
A tomb, a cradle in the curly foam?  
The waves arise; sea-wind and sea agree  
*The waters are taken: this is not your home.*

Look and remember. Look upon this land,  
Far, far across the factories and the grass.  
Surely, there, surely, they will let you pass.  
Speak then and ask the forest and the loam.  
What do you hear? What does the land command?  
*The earth is taken: this is not your home.*

## TROOP TRAIN

It stops the town we come through. Workers raise  
Their oily arms in good salute and grin.  
Kids scream as at a circus. Business men  
Glance hopefully and go their measured way.  
And women standing at their dumbstruck door  
More slowly wave and seem to warn us back,  
As if a tear blinding the course of war  
Might once dissolve our iron in their sweet wish.

Fruit of the world, O clustered on ourselves  
We hang as from a cornucopia  
In total friendliness, with faces bunched  
To spray the streets with catcalls and with leers.  
A bottle smashes on the moving ties  
And eyes fixed on a lady smiling pink  
Stretch like a rubber-band and snap and sting  
The mouth that wants the drink-of-water kiss.

And on through crummy continents and days,  
Deliberate, grimy, slightly drunk we crawl,  
The good-bad boys of circumstance and chance,  
Whose bucket-helmets bang the empty wall  
Where twist the murdered bodies of our packs  
Next to the guns that only seem themselves.  
And distance like a strap adjusted shrinks,  
Tightens across the shoulder and holds firm.

Here is a deck of cards; out of this hand  
Dealer, deal me my luck, a pair of bulls,  
The right draw to a flush, the one-eyed jack.  
Diamonds and hearts are red but spades are black,  
And spades are spades and clubs are clovers—black.  
But deal me winners, souvenirs of peace.  
This stands to reason and arithmetic,  
Luck also travels and not all come back.

Trains lead to ships and ships to death or trains,  
And trains to death or trucks, and trucks to death,

Or trucks lead to the march, the march to death,  
Or that survival which is all our hope;  
And death leads back to trucks and trains and ships,  
But life leads to the march, O flag! at last  
The place of life found after trains and death  
—Nightfall of nations brilliant after war.



## THE TWINS

Likeness has made them animal and shy.  
See how they turn their full gaze left and right,  
Seeking the other, yet not moving close;  
Nothing in their relationship is gross,  
But soft, conspicuous, like giraffes. And why  
Do they not speak except by sudden sight?

Sisters kiss freely and unsubtle friends  
Wrestle like lovers; brothers loudly laugh:  
These in a dreamier bondage dare not touch.  
Each is the other's soul and hears too much  
The heartbeat of the other; each apprehends  
The sad duality and the imperfect half.

The one lay sick, the other wandered free,  
But like a child to a small plot confined  
Walked a short way and dumbly reappeared.  
Is it not all-in-all of what they feared,  
The single death, the obvious destiny  
That maims the miracle their will designed?

For they go emptily from face to face,  
Keeping the instinctive partnership of birth  
A ponderous marriage and a sacred name;  
Theirs is the pride of shouldering each the same  
The old indignity of Esau's race  
And Dromio's denouement of tragic mirth.

# UNIVERSITY

To hurt the Negro and avoid the Jew  
Is the curriculum. In mid-September  
The entering boys, identified by hats,  
Wander in a maze of mannered brick  
    Where boxwood and magnolia brood  
    And columns with imperious stance  
    Like rows of ante-bellum girls  
    Eye them, outlanders.

In whited cells, on lawns equipped for peace,  
Under the arch, and lofty banister,  
Equals shake hands, unequals blankly pass;  
The exemplary weather whispers, "Quiet, quiet"  
    And visitors on tiptoe leave  
    For the raw North, the unfinished West,  
    As the young, detecting an advantage,  
    Practice a face.

Where, on their separate hill, the colleges,  
Like manor houses of an older law,  
Gaze down embankments on a land in fee,  
The Deans, dry spinsters over family plate,  
    Ring out the English name like coin,  
    Humor the snob and lure the lout.  
    Within the precincts of this world  
    Poise is a club.

But on the neighboring range, misty and high,  
The past is absolute: some luckless race  
Dull with inbreeding and conformity  
Wears out its heart, and comes barefoot and bad  
    For charity or jail. The scholar  
    Sanctions their obsolete disease;  
    The gentleman revolts with shame  
    At his ancestor.

And the true nobleman, once a democrat,  
Sleeps on his private mountain. He was one

Whose thought was shapely and whose dream was broad;  
This school he held his art and epitaph.  
    But now it takes from him his name,  
    Falls open like a dishonest look,  
    And shows us, rotted and endowed,  
        Its senile pleasure.

## V-LETTER

I love you first because your face is fair,  
    Because your eyes Jewish and blue,  
Set sweetly with the touch of foreignness  
Above the cheekbones, stare rather than dream.  
Often your countenance recalls a boy  
    Blue-eyed and small, whose silent mischief  
Tortured his parents and compelled my hate  
    To wish his ugly death.  
Because of this reminder, my soul's trouble,  
And for your face, so often beautiful,  
    I love you, wish you life.

I love you first because you wait, because  
    For your own sake, I cannot write  
Beyond these words. I love you for these words  
That sting and creep like insects and leave filth.  
I love you for the poverty you cry  
    And I bend down with tears of steel  
That melt your hand like wax, not for this war  
    The droplets shattering  
Those candle-glowing fingers of my joy,  
But for your name of agony, my love,  
    That cakes my mouth with salt.

And all your imperfections and perfections  
    And all your magnitude of grace  
And all this love explained and unexplained  
Is just a breath. I see you woman-size  
And this looms larger and more goddess-like  
    Than silver goddesses on screens.  
I see you in the ugliness of light,  
    Yet you are beautiful,  
And in the dark of absence your full length  
Is such as meets my body to the full  
    Though I am starved and huge.

You turn me from these days as from a scene  
    Out of an open window far

Where lies the foreign city and the war.  
You are my home and in your spacious love  
I dream to march as under flaring flags  
    Until the door is gently shut.  
Give me the tearless lesson of your pride,  
    Teach me to live and die  
As one deserving anonymity,  
The mere devotion of a house to keep  
    A woman and a man.

Give me the free and poor inheritance  
    Of our own kind, not furniture  
Of education, nor the prophet's pose,  
The general cause of words, the hero's stance,  
The ambitions incommensurable with flesh,  
    But the drab makings of a room  
Where sometimes in the afternoon of thought  
    The brief and blinding flash  
May light the enormous chambers of your will  
And show the gracious Parthenon that time  
    Is ever measured by.

As groceries in a pantry gleam and smile  
    Because they are important weights  
Bought with the metal minutes of your pay,  
So do these hours stand in solid rows,  
The dowry for a use in common life.  
    I love you first because your years  
Lead to my matter-of-fact and simple death  
    Or to our open marriage,  
And I pray nothing for my safety back,  
Not even luck, because our love is whole  
    Whether I live or fail.

## THE VOYAGE

The ship of my body has danced in the dance of the storm  
And pierced to the center the heavy embrace of the tide;  
It has plunged to the bottomless trough with the knife of its  
form

And leapt with the prow of its motion elate from the bride.

And now in the dawn I am salt with the taste of the wave,  
Which lies with itself and suspires, her beauty asleep,  
And I peer at the fishes with jaws that devour and rave  
And hunt in her dream for the wrack of our hands in the  
deep.

But the wind is the odor of love that awakes in the sun  
The stream of our voyage that lies on the belt of the seas,  
And I gather and breathe in the rays of the darkness  
undone,

And drift in her silence of morning and sail at my ease,

Where the sponges and rubbery seaweeds and flowers of  
hair

Uprooted abound in the water and choke in the air.

## WAITRESS

Whoever with the compasses of his eyes  
Is plotting the voyage of your steady shape  
As you come laden through the room and back  
And rounding your even bottom like a Cape  
Crooks his first finger, whistles through his lip  
Till you arrive, all motion, like a ship,

He is my friend—consider his dark pangs  
And love of Niger, naked indigence,  
Dance him the menu of a poem and squirm  
Deep in the juke-box jungle, green and dense.  
Surely he files his teeth, punctures his nose,  
Carves out the god and takes off all his clothes.

For once, the token on the table's edge  
Sufficing, proudly and with hair unpinned  
You mounted the blueplate, stretched out and grinned  
Like Christmas fish and turkey pink and skinned,  
Eyes on the half-shell, loin with parsley stuck,  
Thigh-bones and ribs and little toes to suck.

I speak to you, ports of the northern myth,  
This dame is carved and eaten. One by one,  
God knows what hour, her different parts go home,  
Lastly her pants, and day or night is done;  
But on the restaurant the sign of fear  
Reddens and blazes—"English spoken here."

## WASHINGTON CATHEDRAL

From summer and the wheel-shaped city  
That sweats like a swamp and wrangles on  
Its melting streets, white mammoth Forums,  
And political hotels with awnings, caryatids;  
Past barricaded embassies with trees  
That shed trash and parch his eyes,  
To here, the acres of superior quiet,  
Shadow and damp, the tourist comes,  
And, cooled by stones and darkness, stares.

Tall as a lover's night, the nave  
Broods over him, irradiates,  
And stars of color out of painted glass  
Shoot downward on apostles and on chairs  
Huddled by hundred under altar rails.  
Yet it is only Thursday; there are no prayers,

But exclamations. The lady invokes by name  
The thousand-odd small sculptures, spooks,  
New angels, pitted rods; she gives  
The inventory of relics to his heart  
That aches with history and astonishment:  
He gives a large coin to a wooden coffer.

Outside, noon blazes in his face like guns.  
He goes down by the Bishop's walk, the dial,  
The expensive grass, the Byzantine bench,  
While stark behind him a red naked crane  
Hangs over the unfinished transept,  
A Cubist hen rivalling the Gothic School.

Whether he sees the joke; whether he cares;  
Whether he tempts a vulgar miracle,  
Some deus ex machina, this is his choice,  
A shrine of whispers and tricky penumbras.

Therefore he votes again for the paid  
Clergy, the English hint, the bones of Wilson



Crushed under tons of fake magnificence.  
Nor from the zoo of his instincts  
Come better than crude eagles: now  
He cannot doubt that violent obelisk  
And Lincoln whittled to a fool's colossus.  
This church and city triumph in his eyes.  
He is only a good alien, nominally happy.





## About the Author

Karl Shapiro was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on November 10, 1913, and was educated at the University of Virginia and at Johns Hopkins University. When his first book, *Person, Place and Thing*, was published in 1942, Mr. Shapiro was already with the army in the South Pacific, where he remained until the spring of 1945. In 1946 he was appointed as Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress, and then, in 1947, to the faculty of Johns Hopkins University, where he taught writing courses until he resigned in 1950 to become Editor of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.

The second and third of Mr. Shapiro's books—*V-Letter and Other Poems*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1945, and *Essay on Rime*—were also published while he was on duty in the South Pacific. The fourth and most recent volume, *Trial of a Poet*, appeared in 1947.

During the years from 1940 to 1953 his poems, essays and reviews have appeared in leading literary magazines all over the world.