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Roberta Holloway
POEMS

San José Studies



Roberta Holloway

portrait by Ernst Stolz

Roberta Holloway

POEMS

Edited by

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San José Studies

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Some of the poems in this collection have appeared in the following publications, to whose editors grateful acknowledgment is made: *The Nation*, *The New English Weekly*, *The Midland*, *Palms*, *Poetry*, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *The Tower*; and *The Best Poems of 1924* (Ed. Braithwaite. Boston: B. J. Brinner Company), *The Best Poems of 1926, British and American* (New York: Dodd Mead); *The Best Poems of 1927* (Selected by Thomas Moulton. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company); *The Best Poems of 1927, British and American* (London: Jonathan Cape); *The Best Poems of 1928* (Ed. Braithwaite. Boston: B. J. Brinner Company); *The City Day* (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1929); *Continent's End* (San Francisco: J. H. Nash, 1925); *Poetry of Today: A Quarterly 'Extra' of The Poetry Review* (London, 1938).

Dr. Holloway did not keep complete records of her publications, and our research may not have revealed all of them. If we have overlooked any publication, we offer our apologies, and would be grateful to receive bibliographical information.

The Editors

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Roberta
Holloway

POEMS

Sleep-Design

Why do the white swans crowd my dream
Upon the smooth waters, the low and lovely level waters?
My waking pulses flare to the monkey's scream,
To shaking tiger-colored jungle flowers,
To jagged mountain scar and abrupt chasm
Of torn skies thrusting emeralds and azures,
To lion's rude mane, shrill-blazoned cock, cascading flame
Of midnight-lighting lava, to the beam
In orange pony's bright malevolent eye—times, hours
Dyed, stained, ornate, cerise, magenta, and vermillion.

Why do the white swans crowd my dream
Moving moveless on the low and level waters?
Are they the same and not the same
That, whitely, masked and patient as they seem,
Against the margent's green compose my dream?

Eagle's Flight and the Rise of Civilization

Swiftly from burnished peaks of mountain stone
Sheer up the jagged sky his great wing whirred
Black, till its crosswise shadow scored the sun.
The sky was narrowed in the bitter arc.

Now from the mountain-stillness we have heard
The eagle's beauty, though our eyes are dark.
So from stone's pluméd image once was broken
Incredible quietude; from flint the spark
Struck brief and violent; the Word spoken.
Then, barely godless, our bright fathers ran
Fleeing their fear along the forest lane.
They hid their vexed and smoke-dark eyes, and made
Stone knees to hold the marvel of their pain.
Yet would the skin-gold and the leaf-gold fade
And fail from beauty in the thankless air:
They sucked the wind, they wept in mangled cries;
Lost mother-words adorned their breath; they caught
Their dark cascading blood in whipped surprise,
And meshed the slow corruscant nerve to bear
The pale insistent perishing of thought.

To a Harley Street Physician Who Wrote a Prescription
for a Lacerated Eye

Most learnedly you searched with your small light
My eye's perplexed tissue; civilly
You found support for my elbow that would not
Stay still. Toy-like and lemon-colored were
The circles, spirals, arabesques I saw
Making patterns as of a puppet's
Oriental bazaar.
When your light was tired dancing
You brought out puzzle games to bet on.
And I had money—hundreds and hundreds of round
Counters of glass, smaller than dollars
And somehow musical. We played
For up and down and to and fro. We played
For near and far. We played for blobs,
Blurs, lines, angles, ratchety-crochety shapes,
And the wonderful plump bulges B and P.
Suddenly I was reading the Lord's Prayer
And knew I'd won.
You never let on.
Polite as a mandarin you gave
Me priceless artificial tears, knowing
These were the last things in Kubla Khan's wide kingdom
I then had need of.

The Hero

When he walks into the room
Our eyes blow out like lights.
It is as if we started suddenly upon a night train
To a destination far from home.
When he steps near
We tear up our past like scraps of paper
And honor him with a moment's blaze.
When he has gone from us
Our distress crawls witlessly after,
Sniffing creature-like the old
Anonymous ground,
Where his footfalls have designed no
Shape or sound.

Praising an Ascendant Hour

One whose life was clear and vain
Therefore drew my spirit in,
Sucked my languor through his mouth
And spat a phrase corrupt and fine.
Another's vagueness made a curtain
Whereon objects might hang known:
Clocks and candles, else uncertain,
Unslid from shadow to importance,
Loomed against my hand and shone
With some lustre in the darkness.

From accidental gospels fell
This moment, reticent and late,
When ceremonial wafers spell
My hunger for the rougher wheat.
The bowl-light from a sugar spoon
Splinters upon a bowl of brass.
I count how many angels swoon
Earthward on needle-points of bliss.

Now my index finger writes
Flowing letters on the air.
The gonged and weighted clock repeats
Perversely the round characters—
Till a disputed hour shall strike
With a fierce and sudden heat
From the belled air and the veiled lights
A cataclysm sharp and sweet.

Be Not So Solemn

Be not so solemn as to say
That we must always, always play
In tones of basalt and obsidian
That no child be born.
The dark green sheen of leaves of bay and myrtle
Mirror the scythe as clear as grass, but be
Not so solemn as to say
It is always holly-winking, holly day.
When the star-fish of papier-mache
Is bashed by icicle teeth, fay
Always-eyes sleep in the green grotto,
The myrtle leaves shine in their wet varnish.
The old inventor who would let no one see
Within his room, the cat-woman who called
“Do not let kitty out of here,” and strolled
With Tom on leash to paint-pots of perdition,
Pulse through the purple wrist. Be not so solemn.
The red vat wine, bathtubs full and blood aplenty,
Would be Christmas colors with the green myrtle
And the glass knowing sex would be no sex nor death either.
Mirrors fool mirrors. Say
Be not so solemn as to say be not so solemn,
For there is always seaweed and the oyster,
Always the starfish, always the star in the side.

Campaign

I'll set a mirror in my head
Where brains should be.
Instead

Of curious crosses intersecting
In fire and light,
Projecting

Their narrow shades abortively
In a dimmed, wild
Asymmetry—

Instead of tunnels deep and white,
Limned with dark symbols of
Delight,

Wherein, murderously lovely, piled
In heaps lie the rich bones
Beguiled

Of luckless lovers who did not prove
Themselves sufficing fair
To love—

Instead of burnished copper cones,
And crucibles, and fine-spun
Stones

Perfectly chisled with a rare
Charactery thin
As air—

Instead of any benison,
My parrot, you will find
But one

Untroubled expanse in me, wherein
Your impeccable graces shall
Have been

Mirrored both in size and kind.
O incontinent
And blind—

You will be flattered and will fall
In love unreasoningly.
A tall

Gorgeously plumed, magnificent
Strutting blue-jay, drunk,
Satient

Of his own noise, you will be
Wooed with your own charm
Cunningly.

How Many Miles to Babylon?

Love is not a mystic syllable, or one
That will release the spirit from the tongue—
But a nursery riddle-rhyme, with two answers known
To the heart and the hands that open and fold down.
You know love well enough if your hands have learned
To shift the daylight from a shuttered blind—
Well enough if, unbidden, your heart has burned
All night in a stranger's house, until it is blown
Dark by a breath from lips you did not find,
Leaving a shape of chaos soft and warm
As you widen or close the circle of your arm.

There Lives a Lady

There lives a lady whose pale body,
Cream, and white, and shell-pink pearl,
Folded to slimness in scintillant textiles,
Fondled in tinsels that float and curl,

Lilting and careless, glides over the thresholds
Of silken tomorrows, and twines time in a mesh
As though the whole world were a cool bed of satin
For the lissom, arrogant ritual of flesh.

Her smooth feet move in amber-hued sandals;
A dew-coloured jewel glimmers like a candle
At her throat; and the faint, voluptuous fragrance
Of her hair enwraps her in a misty mantle.

Her white limbs drowse in their tissued shell,
And over them passes a frail, frosty chain
Of moments; but sleeping, she may not tell
What fair links grow dark ere she wakens again.

She is secure in the arms of her lovers
As a wingless moth in a brown cocoon,
Untroubled by the snowy, wild circling of days,
And the nights, black eagles that plunge to the moon.

Geology of a Lovers' Room

Often he read her out of his handy-book
How the shapes of the earth unfolded—
(He wished, he said, to teach her what he could)—
How reluctantly constrained into the hardy rock
Countless energies subdued
From amorphous shapes were moulded.

She sits in their room while the hard clock ticks all day
So, just so, as they used to hear it,
While the baffling mirror seems not to contain
Its evidence of him, lest an atom cast away,
Lest some waste of him remain
Uncrystallized in her soft spirit.

Creation of Woman

Jahveh made heaven first, and the earth.
He let light be, dividing night from day.
Morning and evening at his word walked forth.
He made the sapling and the dark yew tree.
His hand lay on the flowing sky and wrote
The seasonal stars, and goldenly the sun,
Blown like a bubble of his breath, he set
That reliquary company among.
The seas divided he, and laid the whale
Within the foaming trough, deep at their bed
Made creatures multiform of claw and scale,
On land, stood cattle in the steamy shade.
The many-footed vine to whispering growth
He called, and in the curled leaf laid the sleeping moth.

Jahveh made Adam first, and later Eve.
The fine dust clouded in the flaming garden,
And shapely Adam, risen from that grove,
Jahveh admiring viewed, and set as warden.
Then on dark Adam sleeping, Jahveh stole,
Cut near the quiet heart; in perilous haste
He lifted up a rib trembling and pale,
And made a woman white of limbs and face.
Jahveh, the surgeon, had not cleansed his hand.
Some shadow from before the time of light
He left with Adam in the sealed wound—
And Eve— some shape of chaos in her sight.
But Adam knew it not, and woke in pride
To see a woman smile and shudder sleeping at his side.

There in the tidal perfume of the flowers,
Eager above the languorous ground, Eve ran
To set her foot upon the sleeping ores,
To touch the bdellium and the onyx stone,
To suck the long-stemmed reeds and hear, half wroth,
Their answering moan, to bite the berried vine
Whose bright juice trickled darkly from her mouth,
To crush the fern, to braid the grasses thin,
To press the oil from heavy leaves, and feel
Its easement at her temple or within
The drowsy arm-pit, and to cool her heel
In pools of water shaded from the sun.
And she would turn from Adam's mild caress
To watch the shining serpent glide and glitter in the grass.

Eurydice's Song to Orpheus

Beloved, thou art mine and I am thine.
Strangely we wandered from the shores below,
Left Pluto's realm and patient Proserpine
Weeping unheeded in the fields of woe.
Beloved, thou art mine and I am thine.

Beloved, thou art mine and I am thine.
How bright the earth and air and the wide meadow
Where soft-stemmed flowers sway in the warm sunshine
And bliss is shadowless as light on snow.
Beloved, thou art mine and I am thine.

O pluck sweet stems and grasses, and entwine
The living limbs of love! No least echo
Shall shatter the shell of joy; no haunting fine
Filament of misery subdued
The crystal heart or darken the cloudless brow.
Beloved, thou art mine and I am thine.

We have forgotten, and we shall not know
How we stumbled, heavy with Lethal wine,
Up the waste weary way—we shall not turn
Again from ecstasy, or ever go
Back to the lightless caverns, where the brine
And bitter blood flows darkly and is slow.
Beloved, thou art mine and I am thine.

A Non-Trojan Woman

She crosses the slippery street tonight among
Wet taxis, trucks, and limousines. The squeals
Of brakes announce her and the traffic gong.
She, tall and foolish on her narrow heels,
Reaches the safety zone and sees the stark
And tubular lights behind her make a lane
Toward distant mountains and imagined dark.
The taxis do good business in the rain.
Never with red-eyed women from a wall
Has she looked down on macerated plain
Or heard the shriek of battle-death, where fall
Good sons and lovers not to rise again.
Absurdly on the corner and alone
She hails a jitney from the safety zone.

A Happy Father

He, who believes in freedom of the will,
Has stored his happiness beneath dry eaves,
Has owned a roof, a door, a window sill,
A rake to tidy up the torpid leaves.
One comfortable night he well begot
A son, whose staunch and three-dimensioned name
Will look in stone upon the family lot
As well as his, because it is the same.
But though, curtained and candled, he forget
The tale of Caliban (and how uncouth
He stood, his peaked hands twitching for a fire),
His son, whose willed hands clutch at air, may yet
Demonstrate error in so neat a truth
As fatherhood, considering the sire.

The Well-Tempered Wife

Though she seems yielding and unrude,
Pricks and thorns are in her blood.

Her glance is smooth as any woman's,
But secret ire that glance illumines.

Her flesh against his flesh is gentle,
But to a tigress it is mantle.

The breast at which her lover fawns
Is shield of flesh to strength of bronze.

Once he was firm, and she was brittle;
Now she is tempered to fine metal.

Though she seems yielding, she is not taken;
A heart so soft is too hard to be broken.

After-Lovers

They have left off their roving ways, to house
Their love, now that rain falls and night is by.
They do not trouble that the stone-black boughs
Endure against a recollected sky.
The lamplight gives them shape in the night's shadow.
They breathe dry air, although the corruptive rain,
Halting a casual seed in a far meadow,
Procures the hazardous cycle of the grain.
So housed, they keep less boldly in the slow
Discipline of decay, that they may find
Their solvent bodies mystical, who know
Annihilate change waits only for the mind.
They speak with visible lips till they have heard
Their certain breath abate the uncertain word.

Day and Night Song

Break, spirit, for the world is small
And made of ice; its crystal wall
Shatters the heart beneath its fall.

Breathe, spirit, for the world is old;
Its lanes of light obscure the cold
Confusion where the stars unfold.

Die, spirit, for the world is narrow,
No stronger than the bone's thin marrow,
Slight as the footprints of a sparrow.

Be, body, though thy spirit spends
Its courage quick as candle ends,
Burnt till the last fine smoke of pride
Is laid like frost at thy rattling side.

Address to a Piece of Paper

If there were a living soul to whom I might speak
I would not address my words to paper, not put them down.
If there were any creature whose hand I might take
I would not shrink to words and the pencilled line.
But there is none, none, to whom I may say
“Here, here, fullness, freshness, breath, being: take
Of it, bathe in it, joy of it for loveliness’ sake.”
I cannot look at another save to beg grace—
“Ah, can you hear and pity me or must I decently hide my
face?”
The others judge me behind eyes: only the cruel ones laugh:
“Do you really think you can *live* in the fixity of a
photograph?”
Ah, my power of love is no more than the gesture of an old
lady
Who takes an ailing friend a pot of calvesfoot jelly.
And do you know, Paper, why so many people have loved
God?
They can adore him eternally. He will neither shake his head
nor nod
And he will never stare back with blazing, enraged eyes,
“Why must you love *me*? Aren’t there plenty of other guys?”

Villanelle of London Taxis

Whatever else may roll on wheel and axis,
Brougham, landau, coupe, or runabout,
The world's best vehicles are London taxis.

Black as a beetle polished well with wax is
Our bright exterior, to put to rout
Whatever else may roll on wheel and axis.

Not crushed in foetal crouch, the head relaxes,
Turns on its stem, and proudly looks about.
The world's best vehicles are London taxis.

What boon to thighs and knees and aching backs is
The high and sturdy seat, the legs stretched out.
The world's best vehicles are London taxis.

Not Phoebus' flaming car or bold Ajax's
Swift chariot of war was half so stout.
Whatever else may roll on wheel and axis,
The world's best vehicles are London taxis.

The Nun in the Park

The costume's black gashes the living green.
The arm sweeps scythe-like its macabre arc.
The wide skirts brush and crush the tingling lawn,
Mocking the blossoms of the burgeoning park.

The torso blocks with black the reeling light.
The hooded head hinged on the spinal chord
Hangs heavy; heavy the limbs; but very sweet
Is the singing of an unregenerate bird.

Black and opaque is shade of yew or myrtle.
Black is a mouth agape with curse to utter.
Black is a raven feeding after battle.
Black is a sharp reef hid in sliding water.

Garbed in such horrid blackness, march in June
The pride of colleges. Their feet have found
Ends of green campuses. Now line on line
They blacken the blue sky with a needless wound.

Some lucky few brushed by the sparkling air
May learn, since not all need be thought impure,
How to subdue with eye and lip and ear
The terror of a symbol and its power.

Maze at Midnight

Like a cocoon my life is curled
To the dark leaf, while slow winds swell
Shaking the forest of the world.
Now from the sky three pale stars fall.

Over this house the wide airs move.
The pale light burns beyond my hand.
The sky is vacuous and grave
As panic midnight comes to end.

Trembling, I set my tiny ear
Against familiar walls, and start
With struggling breath that I must hear
The muffled clangor of my heart.

Now in my veins blood like a song
Shudders too sweet to be endured,
But flesh holds still that has for long
Strained to the redeeming chord.

Heavy against the doors of sleep
Tomorrow leans, and vainly I
At midnight have designed to keep
No promises with what shall be

For fear of the look that stops my breath
When old men stare from infants' eyes,
And vividly the hues of death
Blaze on the wings of butterflies,

And ladies' faces in a glass
Blur like the patterns of the snow
That lost its purpose in the grass
Vainly to flourish, vainly go.

And while tomorrow fiercely climbs
The steeps of sky, pale stars are quelled,
And fear from my eyes a thousand times
Weans the colors of the world.

A Psychiatrist

Some patients tell me that they go
From him quite cleansed of private woe,
Owe peace and wisdom to his skill,
Since deep cuts, sterile, need not kill.
Others who tear, knit, tear again
Envy the barbarously slain.

To a Passionate Lover

Hell is mortally warm and winter is cold in the skies,
And willing angels fall in the wintry darkness,
Hoping for flame and fire. They are tired of ice.
Softly as shadowy snow they fall. No one harkens
To them, nor to taut stars humming, their fellow drones,
Bending their cautious smiles on the idle snow.
But fires are mortal things. Hell's blackened stones
Dream of Orpheus gone from the icy gardens.
O cool and careful at last, our eyes shall go
White in the ghastly dark, and their flame be pardoned.
Shall we see, do you think, from our vantage-ground below
How, with their charry stumps, the fire-hardened
Angels beat the black embers, sick to smell
Voluptuous smoke that drifts no more in hell?

If the Heart Be Intricate

If the heart be intricate, bliss is a strange thing
Scarcely to be realized, scarcely to be known,
Remote as forest flowers where light is thin,
Elusive as their fragrance gone.
As powdered fern glints to the forest floor,
As leaf-mould wavers on the bright sun beam,
So softly must the electric mind restore
A healing darkness to make bright this flame.
Wind at the bough will be gentle as the sound of a shell,
And the leaves whisper multiply,
And the weaving forest remember the ocean-spell
And its voices be many—
The heart, like a bell struck, will ring: *Golden Ashtaroth*,
The brook waters, breaking, echo: *Nazareth*.

His Soul Traverses a Period of Desolation

Wherefore has vanished the beloved ecstasy
That once, like a fire, purified my soul?—
Like a bird of fire on a flaming wind,
Prodigal of joy, smote with glittering wings
The shadowy, tremulous confines of my soul. . .
Why was it put away forever from its dwelling-place—
That beloved ecstasy—mystical, without name?
I am newly consigned to the deep-walled prison;
From its dark-sealed chamber there is no release.

Wherefore has vanished the beloved ecstasy
That once, like a bell, resounded within me?—
Like the surge of a many-throated golden bell
Tumultuously unbound my soul from its sleep.

Day neither dawns, nor night falls, in its absence—
But always there lingers the level of evening,
And I am held in the hush and sway
Of an indolent world that rocks and slumbers.
And all my vision is like a long mirror
That reflects the pale color of oblivion.

Yet forever I am haunted by a radiance subdued,
Hidden in the dark, confused thicket of memory;
Faintly it illumines the deep well of unrest.
. . . O that the rush of joy again might pierce me,
Might unfetter my soul from its moky tendrils!

Though Love Is Blind in Legend

Though love is blind in legend, heretofore
My heart, steadfast, has hazarded command,
Whether to list its heat in haughty war
Or seek for umbrage in a thorny land.
And my slow head has labored to obey,
Has marshalled trappings like an anxious squire,
Nervous for glory on a gallant day,
Yet dexterous at a summons to retire.
But when the fury of the heart is spent,
And shouting blood incredibly is still,
And the last roses of the tournament
Lost to the wind that sweeps the trampled hill—
No dignity, not even of disaster,
Bids ruing slave lead home the ruined master.

ROBERTA HOLLOWAY

September 4, 1902 – January 30, 1978















Lover Away

The ghosts of rhetoric stood
Each in forensic hood
Around my bed and said: "Survey
The Zero Word—your echoing clay
Craves it only in lieu of stone, earth, wood,
Love-seed to feed your blood."
Yet there was day.
And the night sweated through
Is a live word. I know
It flowers sometimes Bach-like and most whole.
There is deed for the soul
Not to haunt you, not kiss
Ghost-wise, as giving up is.

Mirror

It would be pleasant to believe that you,
My sweet, and I,
And all things near to us—
Other men's bodies, earth, the floating blue
Slope of the sky,
Soft worms ravenous

And eager in the dark, white whirling snow,
Crisp insects, grass,
And the glistering air—
Are tenuous semblances that waken, glow,
Sparkle, or pass
In mist away, or reappear

Again in the swift thought of some one Being;
That we are crystal phantoms
Fluttering in a room
Whose walls are too strange, too distant for our seeing.
. . . And thus the anthems
We chanted in the gentle gloom

Of churches, are but echoes of an echoing.
All our wise books
And beads and worshipping
Are but reflections twice reflected of a Thing
That, thinking, looks
Into a well of space, a glittering spring,
And wills the image of Its thought—perfect, unwavering.

Sweet, it would be good so to believe, for then
All things near to us
That we have seen or dreamed
Or half forgot—beasts, dying men,
Slow stars, and rust,
Frost that has gleamed

Through the low-bending night on a black-stemmed bush—
All these would grow
Together in warm communion.
For would not the level sea with its windless hush
And your voice and my voice know
Each other as kindred echoes in the mind of One
That shadows Itself alike in clouds and in mountains of stone?

Fantasy

(to describe a figure in one of Blake's drawings)

Fly out in your chariot or iced, white wind,
And sting the heaven;
Leave a fine path, cut like a diamond, high
And narrow as the forehead of God.
Pierce like a nettle the jovial blue,
And shiver the sun with the wind of your passing.

O I can see your eyes, frozen with light!
I can see your standing body, pointed like a sword,
Cleaving the air, parting in twain the fleece of heaven,
Which froths and billows behind you like the foam of a sea.
Your hair gleams pale as phosphorus,
Writhing, coiling in the wind.
You ride more swiftly than a shaft of thunder,
And straight as light.
Noiselessly you devour the space of heaven;
Your iced, white winds lick away the tawny clouds;
And in your flesh the moon of laughter gleams.

For the Somnambulist

O the lust of the mind shall sicken and fade
In the lust of the eye—
In the curled lash, the renegade
Spent purpose die.

No fibred framework built strong-grained
From the brain's groove
Toughens its action, yet untrained
The heart must move.

Roused, the somnambulist, staring,
Still half adream,
Sees arm uplift, cruel knife baring,
Wrist writhe, gleam.

Men awake, swarming, are baited and bruised,
Slain with their brothers.
When will the sleeping horror be loosed
From the heart it smothers?

Not till in terror the still-safe blood
Sparkle and gleam,
Not till the blessed eat angry food
And dare not dream.

The Schoolman's Lesson

Instruct the sweet and questing flesh: be meek,
Find anchorage in clinging to the bone.
Heedless of singing winds and waters, seek
The austere harboring of earth and stone.
Ignite the alluring image, lest it be
Whole in the mind's dark vault. Curb and control
The flame of this fantastic chemistry
To refine the heavy substance of the soul.
But if this strange ordeal should endlessly
Continue in its beauty and its malice,
Abandon fear, for certain remedy
Has long compounded in the thin heart's chalice:
The trite and golden liquor of agony
Will char the embers in completed solace.

Spring Evening Within

Wood-smoke scents the room. The open window
Is wide; the air like flesh feels warm and chill.
The evening is violet. These flowers
That blossomed with the rain now sickly fill
Low copper bowls unseen in the almost dark.
The marvel never heard, the nightingale,
Stirs in the dark Tree; now the invisible bough
Sways; each leaf is shaken—the song, the stain,
The silver thorn—the sweetness shuddering down
Anciently. In the windowed sky the moon,
The thin moon is the April thorn whereon
The impaled sky shall faint away. Small-eyed
Violets shut in the wood-smoke of the room;
And in breath the imagined never heard
Song perishes.

Eighth Deadly Sin

Wasting our substance, we have slain thus soon
Our days with anguish, and have beheld our nights
Drag their bruised bellies from the groundless moon—
While the fecund heaven, filled with light,
Sways at our shoulders, and quick stars stream down
To propagate illusion in our hearts.
The clouds have claimed us, and the sea brought forth
Her nacreous lamenting tides. The earth
Has caught our ravaged thighs in tangled vines.
We have feasted on dead birds; our blood is bright.
To the profusion of our destiny
We have submitted in a natural time
Our lips and hands, our bodies and our eyes,
Spending our lucid hour to defeat
Serenity with the ardor of our lies,
While our heels, hardy with running, dance
On bloodless inches of indifference.

She Above All Women

She above all women known
Has a courage in her bone,
Prisoning her skeleton
In the lime of love foredone,
Quickening dead nerves to bear
The endless ravage of despair,
Creating clever quips and lies
For the mummied voice, and eyes
Which, all bright with slaughter, blur
With no hint of massacre.

Veteran in Composition Class

Sits dogged in class dazed day on, on,
Johnson who never before knew of noun and verb—
A mass of troubled movings. Worry is in him—
Thick frame, blunt thigh, heavy bear-paw hand and all.
Hand looks too strong
To veer and steer the brittle incongruous pen.
Who might have thought him? Epstein. Johnson is sized
For breaking boulders, knocking buildings down,
Uprooting trees and fighting with the weather.
He frowns deep in face, in mind, with the worry of it,
Marvelling yet how the word seduced him.
Stubbled hair-shock falls, falls, falls. Wildered eye
Wonders and wanders, looks out, looks down, back, in,
Askance too. Lips move and swell, move and swell with the word
When reading is silent. Shaved face shows
Dark stain of beard at nine o'clock of the morning.
Yes, no kidding, early as that.
Bad cess, by the way, to the local haberdasher
For the college-type sweater he sells in his avenue shop,
Of blue ground and interwoven large white buffalo
And some few red presumably distant ranges rolling
In lumps and hummocks on Johnson's matted chest:
This garment on all and hottest days he wears bravely.
Did Johnson maybe *choose* the sweater for emblem?
Choose it aduly, manfully, to declare
His purpose, which is undeniably learning,
His institution, which is now the college,
His country, whose colors are the same?

He is never not there and he never seems not listening.
Doesn't boggle at vexing task assigned.
No, never heard of Thomas Carlyle or Jeremy Bentham
Nor of Lamarque, Kepler, Mill, Harvey, Linnaeus, Bacon.
Darwin and Newton has heard of; Wagner's name, Shakespeare's
name knows.
Of Chaucer not sure; perhaps heard the name once.
These splintered bits are Johnson's wounds for wisdom:
With provident care he endures them for time coming,
One of them (thinks) might someday grow a pearl.

To have found out how.
To have made something whole.
To have uttered a good thing freely with no lie.

To a Friend Who Died in His Prime

Your old philosophy professor told you,
To choose is to reject.
Your family, colleagues, friends all told you,
One must have Either/Or.
You countered Why, said No, No, No.
Alternatives are foolish: this you said.
To save the parsnip, damn the chokecherry?
Fix a stylite's ass to a stone pillar?
Loosen the twirling limbs of a dervish?
Alternatives are foolish: this you said.
Give me Both/And.

And so it was, O rare, rare friend—
The life of you, the death.

Another September

Through the deep blood and through the hidden tissue
The seasons pass that tire the steadfast sun,
Though thin and frequent afternoons reissue
The brittle gold of summer in new coin.
And passive ground requires a bitter toll
For the late dew whereby the rose was fresh,
And the high, tyrannous moon will not control
Its pull upon the faint imperilled flesh.
Then let the fever of the soul remind
The cooling blood to an excess of worth,
And the wide air receive the brief imprint
Of a body upright on the crusted earth,
Whose white limbs dance the way the wind has gone
Against the rhythm of time a rhythm of bone.

The Lovely Children

They shall go, with their warm faces—
The shining and resolute ones—
Down in the leafy darkness;
They shall be with the cool stones
While slowly defiling above them
Step the inscrutable suns.

Peter's Wife

*Peter, Peter, Pumpkin-Eater,
Had a wife and couldn't keep her.
He put her in a pumpkin shell
And there he kept her very well.*

When all of her outwardly had died
And echo-voiced and empty-eyed
She watched the stranger in her glass
Become familiar and could pass
The ruin by as a slight thing
Not worth further marvelling—
Still her unwilled female pride
Drove her, though the world was wide,
To roving in her pumpkin shell
And making modest charts of hell.

Nocturne

I hunt with panthers and with famished tigers
Through poisonous jungles thicketed with thorns.
Glutted on darkness, we are thirsty for
The cool white moon and her celebrated horns.
Our angry eyes forage the gloom; we prowl
Exhaustively through the light-forsaken wood.
Back over black and thwarted trails, we crawl
To dusty dens and the dismal feast of blood.

Female Hymn

Now in the torpor of a dream is time
From the sharp atoms of the flesh to unchain
The less persistent spirit, and to sing
The seasons of the amorphous female heart.
Now let the sluggard moon unbind
The ocean tides, and vapors film the earth.
Now let the belled unshadowed sky
Release its progeny of stars.
O Earth, immortal mother, succour us
Whom thou hast created in abiding lust.
From thy sullen thighs we sprang,
And to thy absolute altar we return
Thy sacrificial sons.

Thou hast hung our fragrance from the steaming boughs
Of Spring, and fed male eyes with our delight.
Our vigor is ripened by the murderous sun;
And through the heady summer, wasps have stung
Our shining skins, and sucked the healing spice.
In the blaze of autumn harvesters cut us down,
Crush from our stained cores the acrid seed
And renew us for another blossoming.

We have no choice of seasons, but resume
The cycles thou hast ceded us. Behold
Thy lovers come from land and sea to explore
In us the mystery of thy dust.
Few are content
To accept from thee alone that ravishment.

O Mother Earth, thou hast beggared us of pride.
The ox tramples thy dark furrows, and feeds
Thy crops with dung. Surely without remorse
We may go, when we are old, crying for love,
Permitting the sons of our blood to pity us,
And frightening the gravemakers of bliss
With our sullen female heaviness.

Recollection of Love

Shreds of night-pitched fancies cling
Already to the movement of tomorrow.
There is no end, no unlacing
One feathered moment from another.
Circles dropping from my eyes
Dissolve, widening, before and after.
Horizons move with me; I cannot see
Where the waves break, smoking, on disaster.
My arms wheel windmill circles, and birds wheel
Unstopped past each circumference of air;
Faces and limbs like lightning streak my brain
And blood flows dark in ecstasy and fear.

There is no sorting daylight from my eyes,
Nor other eyes from mine. The tangled Tree
From countless foliating boughs lets down
Occasional leaves upon the rain,
Which, fallen, feather-soft, have lain
Concealing roots within the drifted ground—
Never presuming that Death be
Equipped with cool partitions to surprise
Such rapt confusion of identity!

Song of a True Love

I am nothing to you now, neither humble nor proud,
That I lay before you the purpose of my heart.
To hide it is not choice, nor to speak it aloud,
Since it thrives not by your favor or by your hurt.
This love has no meaning, for it is only true,
Existing, simply, without reason or claim
To be fixed any way in your life, or learned through and through,
Or judged in rancor or arrogance or shame.
There is a time of autumn, and then later, spring:
The leaves fall, and the snow falls, and the flowers glide
From the ground to our feet, to our knees; the skies turning
Moist and tender, quicken; and the rains fall wide.
This love is like breath, much overpassing me,
Whether you take it, perhaps, or let it be.

On a Reader Who Fell Asleep in the British Museum

Drowsing over his texts sits a white-haired scholar.
His head sways on its stem like a withered aster.
Perhaps the crowded page darkened his fancy
Or he drank, last night, oblivion from a bottle.
By three o'clock Homer nods in the British Museum
And Memory seems too far a place to go to.

Perhaps there's a bright pasture his thoughts would go to—
A harness and bells for the discipline of the scholar,
Or a leathered room making a private museum
With walls papered in printed patterns of aster
And a photograph, propped up against his bottle,
Of a pony and five children dressed up fancy.

If jars of time long lost in Proustian fancy
Could be unsealed, which fragrance would he go to?
Which self would rise like a jinnee from a bottle
To sweeten the fainting thoughts of the tired scholar—
Odors of primrose and spring or of autumn and aster
Scented before the head became a museum?

Static and still are the treasures of a museum;
Won't leap and laugh for the wildest flute of fancy.
A fine dry grit as from pressed petals of aster
Clings to the page of the rarest tome you go to
And is a sentiment proper for a scholar
Who finds no jinnee smoking from his bottle.

Dry is the powdery ink in the huge ink-bottle.
Rusty the pen on the desk of the British Museum,
Emptied the brain-pan of the exhausted scholar
Who cannot ride a cock horse even in fancy
And at night has only bed and sleep to go to,
Though in the late sky winks a prickly aster.

An urchin strikes with a stick the head of an aster.
An infant sucks his thumb or a cloudy bottle.
Dogs and cats have important places to go to
Unless they are merely statues in a museum
Where the high pretense of sorting fact from fancy
Stiffens the peccable bones of the failing scholar.

Wisdom's a scholar maybe only in fancy,
Haunts no museum, has some place else to go to,
Frolics a bottle and dreams a real live aster.

Atavistic Room

Within this room, half dark, half bright,
There gathers an event, which will flower
When the pendulum sways into the light
And the bronze disc gleams in the rough hour.
On an opaque petal of the potted cyclamen
A water-drop is released from its pear shape.
Now the dust whirls in the sunshaft; soon
A breath will dissolve the air into escape.
All mute things of the room this instant strangles
To crashing climax, subtracting immense time,
As swiftly bare, the surfaces and angles
Drained of their history become
Abruptly new, now raging to contain
These barbarous shapes of bliss and pain.

Two Poems

I *Toad*

In a foul and shaded place
I lay half submerged.
Matted in excrement,
My hair oozed out behind.
My limbs were wedged in clay.
A toad sat on my mouth.
I could not utter.

But nude and bird-like in a tree nearby
Perched she who had charmed my only love
Away,
Scraping white fiddle-thighs together,
In a screech of cricket-laughter.

II *Sphere*

I was round as the world—
Huge.
A perfect sphere, I lacked
All excrescences.

Yet I was clothed.
A filamented garment
Enveloped me with shoots
Of wincing joy.

A magic skin, it was
Porous with myriads
Of eye-like mirrors—
Scintillant, glittering with all
Flower-, bird-, fish-, sea-, star-
Colors that ever
Blazed in the universe.

And the million mirrors tinkled
With a mirth of music. Everything
Loved me.

O Sing for Joy!

O sing for joy! Let the old wounds of the heart
Bleed fresh for joy! Let eyes tremble with fire.
Let torn nerves heal for a sharper sundering, and all
The body affirm insistently delight.

There shall be no denial ever of joy; none
Shall darken its procreant flame, or still
Its true, decisive flowering.

Behold the sun over the deep valley, gold
And heavy with light, smoothing the pliant hills—
Over the sea, the sun exuberant
Lashing the curling waves with spears of flame.
When from the day, the bell of twilight swings,
Opens out, closes, and the evening strains
The fierce immediate light, an immense shadow
Tenderly contains the filmed sphere . . .
O then, in multipoise, the shadowless stars
Quicken in flames of violet and rose
With the same excess that struck from fields of flint
Shatterless blossoms, multiple, star-pointed.

SONNETS

I

If there be satisfaction now to know
How fiercely, knowing you, my pulses quicken,
How only death which shall partake of you
Can allay the ecstasy whereof I sicken—
How prodigally, if any violence
Of will could scatter my atoms to the ether,
My spirit would fly from all providence
To bind the figments of your flesh together—
Then know yourself beloved, although that word
Is blackest blasphemy upon my tongue,
Which, faltering from silence, now has blurred
The adoration truest if unsung,
More fitly honoring, if it were stone,
Your quality imperial and alone.

II

Now all my mind is drained of acid doubt—
Even breath, in love, forgotten utterly;
Now wordlessly my last of life runs out
Toward you, as foam to sand or wave to sea.
Amazed, I watch this crest of keening fire
Sweep to my tinder heart and flare upon
Your sharp and stainless image, till desire
Braids with its burning light my nerve and bone.
Mounting through tissue and the ringing cells,
Branching like flame along my arm and hand,
It melts my glassy brain, whose toppled walls
With bright unbearable waves of woe are fanned—
Till my heart, loud beneath you, beats like doom,
Raging with love of you, yet sick for home.

III

Had I belied that sovereign event—
My known election to grave trials of bliss—
How could I mourn as more than accident
Of love, this passion's shameful forgeries!
Or if my body were a thought of joy
That sometimes touched your mind, how could there be
This violence not empowered to destroy
Its own immaculate root of ecstasy!
Surely my casual eyes, emboldened by
The alien light that opened them, have seen
Through films of lesser substance, floating high
Your ultimate clear essence, who have been
Poised in my mind, drawn down from plastic air,
And meshed like nerve in this body of despair.

IV

You said, "Death hides within your smallest bones."
You said, "Like skin, the parched sea bleeds at the shore."
You said, "The earth beneath her frosty zones
Shall split and darken at the iron core."
From love of you I have almost understood
How murderers hope until their hour is up
To share in deed the dark beatitude,
Prophetic anguish for the guileless cup.
Burning in crystal at the brink of the sun
Are spires of brittle ice and waves of snow.
The rage that sharpens the bright serpent's tongue—
This for your love I suffer: be it so.
But if I treasure grief falsely as merit
Then strike me, even my shadow, from your spirit.

V

Into the languor of my blood the clear
And acid evidence of you has bitten,
And deftly on the known entablature
That is my heart your cryptogram is written.
Your constant image, borne in lieu of child,
Freezes my days to salt. My eyes are vain
To fix thus homesickly upon the wild
City that smokes beyond the burning plain.
Yet still, in reason, all of good and true
And beautiful is moulded in that image,
And sweetness never was, unless in you,
For whose strange bitter sake I pay this homage—
To wear the double face of fear, and seal
Love most illusory that is most real.

VI

O if the hardy wisdom of the rock
Broken on Moses' staff in awful love
Might flow like merciful prophecy to unlock
Redeeming wells of anger—words to prove
What stranger thing than that this flesh I wear
Should live, its spirit lost, only to shame me,
That you, sustaining as the lucent air
I breathe, should deem it honor to disclaim me!
For you are gone from me, lost terribly,
Sweet prodigal, beyond all thought of home.
I, too, veer far upon some wretched sea,
Lacking a light to draw me through the foam
Beyond this wave, this fabulous unspent
Love, where sometime lay a continent.



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