

A Green Bough, William Faulkner

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A Green Bough

I

WE SIT drinking tea

Beneath the lilacs on a summer afternoon

Comfortably, at our ease

With fresh linen on our knees,

And we sit, we three

In diffident contentedness

Lest we let each other guess

How happy we are

Together here, watching the young moon

Lying shyly on her back, and the first star.

There are women here:

Smooth-shouldered creatures in sheer scarves, that pass

And eye us strangely as they pass.

One of them, our hostess, pauses near:

— Are you quite all right, sir? she stops to ask.

— You are a bit lonely, I fear.

Will you have more tea? cigarettes? No? —

I thank her, waiting for her to go:

To us they are like figures on a masque.

— Who? — shot down

Last spring — Poor chap, his mind

.… doctors say … hoping rest will bring —

Busy with their tea and cigarettes and books

Their voices come to us like tangled rooks.

We sit in silent amity.

— It was a morning in late May:

A white woman, a white wanton near a brake,

A rising whiteness mirrored in a lake;

And I, old chap, was out before the day

In my little pointed-eared machine,

Stalking her through the shimmering reaches of the sky.

I knew that I could catch her when I liked

For no nymph ever ran as swiftly as she could.

We mounted, up and up

And found her at the border of a wood:

A cloud forest, and pausing at its brink

I felt her arms and her cool breath.

The bullet struck me here, I think

In the left breast

And killed my little pointed-eared machine. I saw it fall

The last wine in the cup.…

I thought that I could find her when I liked,

But now I wonder if I found her, after all.

One should not die like this

On such a day,

From angry bullet or other modern way.

Ah, science is a dangerous mouth to kiss.

One should fall, I think, to some Etruscan dart

In meadows where the Oceanides

Flower the wanton grass with dancing,

And, on such a day as this

Become a tall wreathed column: I should like to be

An ilex on an isle in purple seas.

Instead, I had a bullet through my heart —

— Yes, you are right:

One should not die like this,

And for no cause nor reason in the world.

’Tis well enough for one like you to talk

Of going in the far thin sky to stalk

The mouth of death: you did not know the bliss

Of home and children; the serene

Of living and of work and joy that was our heritage.

And, best of all, of age.

We were too young.

Still — he draws his hand across his eyes

— Still, it could not be otherwise.

We had been

Raiding over Mannheim. You’ve seen

The place? Then you know

How one hangs just beneath the stars and sees

The quiet darkness burst and shatter against them

And, rent by spears of light, rise in shuddering waves

Crested with restless futile flickerings.

The black earth drew us down, that night

Out of the bullet-tortured air:

A great black bowl of fireflies.…

There is an end to this, somewhere:

One should not die like this —

One should not die like this.

His voice has dropped and the wind is mouthing his words

While the lilacs nod their heads on slender stalks,

Agreeing while he talks,

Caring not if he is heard or is not heard.

One should not die like this.

Half audible, half silent words

That hover like gray birds

About our heads.

We sit in silent amity.

I am cold, for now the sun is gone

And the air is cooler where we three

Are sitting. The light has followed the sun

And I no longer see

The pale lilacs stirring against the lilac-pale sky.

They bend their heads toward me as one head.

— Old man — they say — How did you die?

I — I am not dead.

I hear their voices as from a great distance — Not dead

He’s not dead, poor chap; he didn’t die —

II

LAXLY reclining, he watches the firelight going

Across the ceiling, down the farther wall

In cumulate waves, a golden river flowing

Above them both, down yawning dark to fall

Like music dying down a monstrous brain.

Laxly reclining, he sees her sitting there

With firelight like a hand laid on her hair,

With firelight like a hand upon the keys

Playing a music of lustrous silent gold.

Bathed in gold she sits, upon her knees

Her silent hands, palm upward, lie at ease,

Filling with gold at each flame’s spurting rise,

Spilling gold as each flame sinks and sighs,

Watching her plastic shadow on the wall

In unison with the firelight lift and fall

To the music by the firelight played

Upon the keys from which her hands had strayed

And fallen.

A pewter bowl of lilies in the room

Seems to him to weigh and change the gloom

Into a palpable substance he can feel

Heavily on his hands, slowing the wheel

The firelight steadily turns upon the ceiling.

The firelight steadily hums, steadily wheeling

Until his brain, stretched and tautened, suddenly cracks.

Play something else.

And laxly sees his brain

Whirl to infinite fragments, like brittle sparks,

Vortex together again, and whirl again.

Play something else.

He tries to keep his tone

Lightly natural, watching the shadows thrown,

Watching the timid shadows near her throat

Link like hands about her from the dark.

His eyes like hurried fingers fumble and fly

About the narrow bands with which her dress is caught

And lightly trace the line of back and thigh.

He sees his brain disintegrate, spark by spark.

Play something else, he says.

And on the dark

His brain floats like a moon behind his eyes,

Swelling, retreating enormously. He shuts them

As one concealed suppresses two loud cries

And on the troubled lids a vision sees:

It is as though he watched her mount a stair

And rose with her on the suppleness of her knees,

Saw her skirts in swirling line on line,

Saw the changing shadows ripple and rise

After the flexing muscles; subtle thighs,

Rhythm of back and throat and gathered train.

A bursting moon, wheels spin in his brain.

As through a corridor rushing with harsh rain

He walks his life, and reaching the end

He turns it as one turns a wall

She plays, and softly playing, sees the room

Dissolve, and like a dream the still walls fade

And sink, while music softly played

Softly flows through lily-scented gloom.

She is a flower lightly cast

Upon a river flowing, dimly going

Between two silent shores where willows lean,

Watching the moon stare through the willow screen.

The hills are dark and cool, clearly remote,

Within whose shadow she has paused to rest.

Could she but stay here forever, where grave rain slants above them,

Rain as slow as starlight on her breast;

Could she but drift forever along these ways

Clearly shadowed, barred with veils of rain,

Beneath azure fields with stars in choired processional

To chant the silence from her heart again.

Laxly reclining, he feels the firelight beating

A clamor of endless waves upon the dark,

A swiftly thunderous surf swiftly retreating.

His brain falls hissing from him, a spark, a spark,

And his eyes like hurried fingers fumble and fly

Among the timid shadows near her throat,

About the narrow bands with which her dress is caught,

And lightly trace the line of back and thigh.

He sees his brain disintegrate, spark by spark,

And she turns as if she heard two cries.

He stands and watches her mount the stair

Step by step, with her subtle suppleness,

That nervous strength that was ever his surprise;

The lifted throat, the thin crisp swirl of dress

Like a ripple of naked muscles before his eyes.

A bursting moon: wheels spin in his brain,

And whirl in a vortex of sparks together again.

At the turn she stops, and trembles there,

Nor watches him as he steadily mounts the stair.

III

THE cave was ribbed with dark. Then seven lights

Like golden bats windy along the eaves

Awoke and slipped inverted anchorage

In seven echoes of an unheard sound.

The cave is ribbed with music. Rumored far

The gate behind the moonwashed sentinel

Clangs to his lifted mace. Then all the bats

Of light slant whirring down the inclined air.

The cave no more a cave is: ribs of music

Arch and crack the walls, the uncaged bats

From earth’s core break its spun and floating crust.

Hissing seas rage overhead, and he

Staring up through icy twilight, sees

The stars within the water melt and sweep

In silver spears of streaming burning hair.

The seas roar past, shuddering rocks in seas

Mutter away like hoarse and vanquished horns.

Now comes dark again, he thinks, but finds

A wave of gold breaking a jewelled crest

And he is walled with gold. About him snored

Kings and mitred bishops tired of sin

Who dreamed themselves of heaven wearied,

And now may sleep, hear rain, and snore again.

One among them walks, whose citadel

Though stormed by sleep, is still unconquered.

In crimson she is robed, her golden hair,

Her mouth still yet unkissed, once housed her in

The sharp and quenchless sorrows of the world.

Kings in hell, robed in icy flame

Panted to crown them with her dreamless snows;

Glutted bishops, past the sentinel,

Couched in heaven, mewed for paradise.

Amid the dead walks she who, musicfleshed,

Whose mouth, two notes laid one on other for

A honeyed parting on the hived store;

Whose throat a sweetened reed had blown to be;

Whose breast was harped of silver and of two

Grave small singing birds uncaged; the chant

Of limbs to one another tuned and wed

That, as she walked, the air with music filled;

Now she, for whose caress once duke and king

And scarlet cardinal broke cords of fate,

From couch to couch her restless slumber seeks

And strokes indifferent lead with moaning hands.

The citied dead snore past, the hissing seas

Roar overhead again, and bows of coral

Whip gleaming fish in darts of unmouthed colors:

Trees of coral strip their colored leaves

Of fish, and each leaf has two bats of light

Where eyes would be, while other golden bats

Slipping among them, gleam their curving sides.

Thundering rocks crash down; spears of starlight

Shatter and break among them. Water-stallions

Neighing, crest the foaming rush of tides.

Drowning waves, airward rushing, crash

Columned upward, rake the stars and hear

A humming chord within the heavens bowled,

Then plunging back, they lose between the rocks

A dying rumor of the chanting stars.

The cave is ribbed with music; threads of sound

Gleam on the whirring wings of bats of gold,

Loop from the grassroots to the roots of trees

Thrust into sunlight, where the song of birds

Spins silver threads to gleam from bough to bough.

Grass in meadows cools his fancy’s feet:

Dew is on the grass, and birds in hedges

Weave the sunlight with sharp streaks of flight.

Bees break apple bloom, and peach and clover

Sing in the southern air where aimless clouds

Go up the sky-hill, cropping it like sheep,

And startled pigeons, like a wind beginning,

Fill the air with sucking silver sound.

He would leave the cave, before the bats

Of light grow weary, to their eaves return,

While music fills the dark as wind fills sails

And Silence like a priest on thin gray feet

Tells his beads of minutes on beside.

The cave is ribbed with dark, the music flies,

The bats of light are eaved and dark again.

Before him as, the priest of Silence by

And all the whispering nuns of breathing blent

With Silence’s self, he walks, the door beside

Stands the moonwashed sentinel to break

Its lichened sleep. Here halts the retinue.

The priest between his fingers lets his beads

Purr down. The nuns the timeless interval

Fill with all the still despair of breath.

He gateward turns. The sentinel his mace

Lifts in calm indifference. At the stroke

The sleeping gate wakes yawning back upon

Where gaunt Orion, swinging by his knees,

Crashes the arcing moon among the stars.

IV

and let

within the antiseptic atmosphere

of russel square grown brisk and purified

the ymca (the american express for this sole purpose too)

let lean march teasing the breasts of spring

horned like reluctant snails within

pink intervals

a brother there

so many do somanydo

from out the weary courtesy of time

fate a lady shopper takes her change

brightly in coppers somanydo

with soaped efficiency english food agrees

even with thos cook

here is a

tunnel a long one like a black period

with kissing punctuate on our left we see

forty poplars like the breasts of girls

taut with running

on our left we see

that blanched plateau wombing cunningly

hushing his brilliant counterattack saying

shhhhhh to general blah in the year mille

neufcentvingtsomethingorother

may five years defunct

in a patient wave of sleep till natures

stomach settles hearing their sucking boots

their brittle sweat harshly evaporating carrying

dung there was no time to drop

the general himself

is now on tour somewhere in the states

telling about the war

and here

battalioned crosses in a pale parade

the german burned his dead (which goes to show

god visited him with proper wrath)

o spring

above unsapped convolvulae of hills april

a bee sipping perplexed with pleasure o spring

o wanton o cruel

o bitter and new as fire

baring to the curved and hungry hand

of march your white unsubtle thighs

grass his feet no longer trouble grows

lush in lanes he

sleeps quietly decay

makes death a cuckold yes lady

8 rue diena we take care of that yes

in amiens youll find 3 good hotels

V

THERE is no shortening-breasted nymph to shake

The tickets that stem up the lidless blaze

Of sunlight stiffening the shadowed ways,

Nor does the haunted silence even wake

Nor ever stir.

No footfall trembles in the smoky brush

Where bright leaves flicker down the dappled shade:

A tapestry that cloaks this empty glade

And shudders up to still the pulsing thrush

And frighten her

With the contact of its unboned hands

Until she falls and melts into the night

Where inky shadows splash upon the light

Crowding the folded darkness as it stands

About each grave

Whose headstone glimmers dimly in the gloom

Threaded by the doves’ unquiet calls,

Like memories that swim between the walls

And dim the peopled stillness of a room

Into a nave

Where no light breaks the thin cool panes of glass

To falling butterflies upon the floor;

While the shadows crowd within the door

And whisper in the dead leaves as they pass

Along the ground.

Here the sunset paints its wheeling gold

Where there is no breast to still in strife

Of joy or sadness, nor does any life

Flame these hills and vales grown sharp and cold

And bare of sound.

VI

MAN comes, man goes, and leaves behind

The bleaching bones that bore his lust;

The palfrey of his loves and hates

Is stabled at the last in dust.

He cozened it and it did bear

Him to wishing’s utmost rim;

But now, when wishing’s gained, he finds

It was the steed that cozened him.

VII

TRUMPETS of sun to silence fall

On house and barn and stack and wall.

Within the cottage, slowly wheeling,

The lamplight’s gold turns on the ceiling.

Beneath the stark and windless vane

Cattle stamp and munch their grain;

Below the starry apple bough

Leans the warped and clotted plow.

The moon rolls up, while far away

And thin with sorrow, the sheepdog’s bay

Fills the valley with lonely sound.

Slow leaves of darkness steal around.

The watch the watchman, Death, will keep

And man in amnesty may sleep.

The world is still, for she is old

And many’s the bead of a life she’s told.

Her gossip there, the watching moon

Views hill and stream and wave and dune

And many’s the fair one she’s seen wither:

They pass and pass, she cares not whither; —

Lovers’ vows by her made bright,

The outcast cursing at her light;

Mazed within her lambence lies

All the strife of flesh that dies.

Then through the darkened room with whispers speaking

There comes to man the sleep that all are seeking.

The lurking thief, in sharp regret

Watches the far world, waking yet,

But which in sleep will soon be still;

While he upon his misty hill

Hears a dark bird briefly cry

From its thicket on the sky,

And curses the moon because her light

Marks every outcast under night.

Still swings the murderer, bent of knees

In a slightly strained repose,

Nor feels the faint hand of the breeze:

He now with Solomon all things knows:

That, lastly, breath is to a man

But to want and fret a span.

VIII

HE FURROWS the brown earth, doubly sweet

To a hushed great passage of wind

Dragging its shadow. Beneath his feet

The furrow breaks, and at its end

He turns. With peace about his head

Traverses he again the earth: his own,

Still with enormous promises of bread

And the clean smell of its strength upon him blown.

Against the shimmering azure of the wood

A blackbird whistles, cool and mellow;

And there, where for a space he stood

To fill his lungs, a spurting yellow

Rabbit bursts, its flashing scut

Muscled in erratic lines

Of fright from furrow hill to rut.

He shouts: the darkly liquid pines

Mirror his falling voice, as leaf

Raises clear brown depths to meet its falling self;

Then again the blackbird, thief

Of silence in a burnished pelf.

Inscribes the answer to all life

Upon the white page of the sky:

The furious emptiness of strife

For him to read who passes by.

Beneath the marbled sky go sheep

Slow as clouds on hills of green;

Somewhere waking waters sleep

Beyond a faintleaved willow screen.

Wind and sun and air: he can

Furrow the brown earth, doubly sweet

With his own sweat, since here a man

May bread him with his hands and feet.

IX

THE sun lies long upon the hills,

The plowman slowly homeward wends;

Cattle low, uneased of milk,

The lush grass to their passing bends.

Mockingbirds in the ancient oak

In golden madness swing and shake;

Sheep like surf against a cliff

Of green hills, slowly flow and break.

Then sun sank down, and with him went

A pageantry whose swords are sheathed

At last, as warriors long ago

Let fall their storied arms and breathed

This air and found this peace as he

Who across this sunset moves to rest,

Finds but simple scents and sounds;

And this is all, and this is best.

X

BeYOND the hill the sun swam downward

And he was lapped in azure seas;

The dream that hurt him, the blood that whipped him

Dustward, slowed and gave him ease.

Behind him day lay stark with labor

Of him who strives with earth for bread;

Before him sleep, tomorrow his circling

Sinister shadow about his head.

But now, with night, this was forgotten:

Phantoms of breath round man swim fast;

Forgotten his father, Death; Derision

His mother, forgotten by her at last.

Nymph and faun in this dusk might riot

Beyond all oceaned Time’s cold greenish bar

To shrilling pipes, to cymbals’ hissing

Beneath a single icy star

Where he, to his own compulsion

— A terrific figure on an urn —

Is caught between his two horizons,

Forgetting that he cant return.

XI

WHEN evening shadows grew around

And a thin moon filled the lane,

Their slowing breath made scarce a sound

Where Richard lay with Jane.

The world was empty of all save they

And Spring itself was snared,

And well’s the fare of any day

When none has lesser fared:

Young breasts hollowed out with fire,

A singing fire that spun

The gusty tree of his desire

Till tree and gale were one;

And a small white belly yielded up

That they might try to make

Of youth and dark and spring a cup

That cannot fail nor slake.

XII

YOUNG Richard, striding toward town,

Felt life within him grown

Taut as a silver wire on which

Desire’s sharp winds were blown

To a monstrous sound that lapped him close

With a rain of earth and fire,

Flaying him exquisitely

With whips of living wire.

Under the arch where Mary dwelt

And nights were brief and sharp,

Her ancient music fell with his

As cythern falls with harp

And Richard’s fire within her fire

Swirled up into the air,

And polarised was all breath when

A girl let down her hair.

XIII

WHEN I was young and proud and gay

And flowers in fields were thicking,

There was Tad and Ralph and Ray

All waiting for my picking.

And who, with such a page to spell

And the hand of Spring to spread it,

Could like the tale told just as well

By another who had read it?

Ah, not I! and if I had

— When I was young and pretty —

Not learned to spell, then there was Tad

And Ralph and Ray to pity.

There was Tad and Ray and Ralph,

And field and lane were sunny;

And ah! I spelled my page myself

Long ere I married Johnny.

XIV

HIS mother said: I’ll make him

A lad has never been

(And rocked him closely, stroking

His soft hair’s yellow sheen)

His bright youth will be metal

No alchemist has seen.

His mother said: I’ll give him

A brave and high desire,

‘Till all the dross of living

Burns clean within his fire.

He’ll be strong and merry

And he’ll be clean and brave,

And all the world will rue it

When he is dark in grave.

But dark will treat him kinder

Than man would anywhere

(With barren winds to rock him

— Though now he doesn’t care —

And hushed and haughty starlight

To stroke his golden hair)

Mankind called him felon

And hanged him stark and high

Where four winds could watch him

Troubled on the sky.

Once he was quick and golden,

Once he was clean and brave.

Earth, you dreamed and shaped him:

Will you deny him grave?

Being dead he will forgive you

And all that you have done,

But he’ll curse you if you leave him

Grinning at the sun.

XV

BONNY earth and bonny sky

And bonny was the sweep

Of sun and rain in apple trees

While I was yet asleep.

And bonny earth and bonny sky

And bonny’ll be the rain

And sun among the apple trees

When I’ve long slept again.

XVI

BEHOLD me, in my feathered cap and doublet,

strutting across this stage that men call living:

the mirror of all youth and hope and striving.

Even you, in me, become a grimace.”

“Ay, in that belief you too are but a mortal,

thinking that peace and quietude and silence

are but the shadows of your little gestures

upon the wall of breathing that surrounds you.”

“Ho, old spectre, solemnly ribbed with wisdom!

D’ye think that I must feel your dark compulsions

and flee with kings and queens in whistling darkness?

I am star, and sun, and moon, and laughter.”

“What star is there that falls, with none to watch it?

What sun is there more permanent than darkness?

What moon is there that cracks not? ay, what laughter,

what purse is there that empties not with spending?”

“Ho.… One grows weary, posturing and grinning,

aping a dream to a house of peopled shadows!

Ah, ’twas you who stripped me bare and set me

gibbering at mine own face in a mirror.”

“Yes, it is I who, in the world’s clear evening

with a silver star like a rose in a bowl of lacquer,

when you have played your play and at last are quiet,

will wait for you with sleep, and you can drown.”

XVII

o atthis

for a moment an aeon i pause plunging

above the narrow precipice of thy breast

what before thy white precipice the eagle

sharp in the sunlight and cleaving

his long blue ecstasy and what

wind on hilltops blond with the wings of the morning

what wind o atthis sweeping the april to lesbos

whitening the seas

XVIII

ONCE upon an adolescent hill

There lay a lad who watched amid the piled

And silver shapes of aircarved cumulae

A lone uncleaving eagle, and the still

Serenely blue dissolving of desire.

Easeful valleys of the earth had been: he looked not back,

Not down, he had not seen

Lush lanes of vernal peace, and green

Unebbing windless tides of trees; no wheeling gold

Upon the lamplit wall where is no speed

Save that which peaceful tongue ‘twixt bed and supper wrought.

Here still the blue, the headlands; here still he

Who did not waken and was not awaked.

The eagle sped its lonely course and tall;

Was gone. Yet still upon his lonely hill the lad

Winged on past changing headlands where was laked

The constant blue

And saw the fleeing canyons of the sky

Tilt to banshee wire and slanted aileron,

And his own lonely shape on scudding walls

Where harp the ceaseless thunders of the sun.

XIX

GREEN is the water, green

The grave voluptuous music of the sun;

The pale and boneless fingers of a queen

Upon his body stoop and run.

Within these slow cathedralled corridors

Where ribs of sunlight drown

He joins in green caressing wars

With seamaids red and brown

And chooses one to bed upon

And lapped and lulled is he

By dimdissolving music of the sun

Requiemed down through the sea.

XX

HERE he stands, while eternal evening falls

And it is like a dream between gray walls

Slowly falling, slowly falling

Between two walls of gray and topless stone,

Between two walls with silence on them grown.

The twilight is severed with waters always falling

And heavy with budded flowers that never die,

And a voice that is forever calling

Sweetly and soberly.

Spring wakes the walls of a cold street,

Sows silver remembered seed in frozen places:

Upon meadows like still and simply smiling faces,

and wrinkled streams, and grass that knew her feet.

Here he stands, without the gate of stone

Between two walls with silence on them grown,

And littered leaves of silence on the floor;

Here, in a solemn silver of ruined springs

Among the smooth green buds, before the door

He stands and sings.

XXI

WHAT sorrow, knights and gentles? scroll and

Harp will prop the shaken sky

With the bronzehard fame of Roland

Who was not bronze, and so did die.

And ladies fair, why tears? why sighs?

There’s still many a champion that’ll

Feel the sharp goads of your eyes

As Roland did, in love and battle.

And be of cheer, ye valiant foemen.

Woman bore you: though amain

Life’s gale may blow, there’s born of woman

One who’ll give you sleep again.

Weep not for Roland: envy him

Whose fame is fast in song and story,

While he, with myriad cherubim

Is lapped in ease, asleep in glory.

XXII

I SEE your face through the twilight of my mind,

A dusk of forgotten things, remembered things;

It is a corridor dark and cool with music

And too dim for sight,

That leads me to a door which brings

You, clothed in quiet sound for my delight.

XXIII

SOMEWHERE a moon will bloom and find me not,

Then wane the windless gardens of the blue;

Somewhere a lost green hurt (but better this

Than in rich desolation long forgot)

Somewhere a sweet remembered mouth to kiss —

Still, you fool; lie still: that’s not for you.

XXIV

HOW canst thou be chaste, when lonely nights

And nights I lay beside in intimate loveliness

Thy grave beauty, girdle-slacked; and grief

So long my own was gone, and there was peace

Like azure wings my body along to lie

Wherein thy name like muted silver bells

Breathed over me, and found

Less joy, but less of grief than waking thou didst stir?

Then I did need but turn to thee, and then

My hand dreamed on thy little breast. Then flowed

Beneath my hand thy body’s curve, and turned

To me within the famished lonely dark

Thy sleeping kiss.

XXV

WAS this the dream?

Thus: It seemed I lay

Upon a beach where sand and water kiss

With endless kissing in a dying fall. The moon

Walked in the water, trod with silver shoon

The quavering sands: naught else but this.

And then and soon, O soon

What wind

Shaped thee in Cnydos? shaped

Thy graven music? whence such guise

Doth starlight take nor beauty never taken

Yet hand so hungry for?

O I have seen

The ultimate hawk unprop the ultimate skies,

And with the curving image of his fall

Locked beak to beak. And waked

And waked. And then the moon

And quavering sands where kissing crept and slaked

And that was all.

(Or had I slept

And in the huddle of its fading, wept

That long waking ere I should sleep again?)

XXVI

STILL, and look down, look down:

Thy curious withdrawn hand

Unprobes, now spirit and sense unblend, undrown,

Knit by a word and sundered by a tense

Like this: Is: Was: and Not. Nor caught between

Spent beaches and the annealed insatiate sea

Dost myriad lie, cold and intact Selene,

On secret strand or old disastrous lee

Behind the fading mistral of the sense.

XXVII

THE Raven bleak and Philomel

Amid the bleeding trees were fixed.

His hoarse cry and hers were mixed

And through the dark their droppings fell

Upon the red erupted rose,

Upon the broken branch of peach

Blurred with scented mouths, that each

To another sing, and close.

‘Mid all the passionate choristers

Of time and tide and love and death,

Philomel with jewelled breath

Dreams of flight, but never stirs.

On rose and peach their droppings bled;

Love a sacrifice has lain,

Beneath his hand his mouth is slain,

Beneath his hand his mouth is dead.

Then the Raven, bleak and blent

With all the slow despair of time,

Lets Philomel about him chime

Until her quiring voice is spent.

Philomel, on pain’s red root

Bloomed and sang, and pain was not;

When she has sung and is forgot,

The Raven speaks, no longer mute.

The Raven bleak and Philomel

Amid the bleeding trees were fixed.

His hoarse cry and hers were mixed,

On rose and peach their droppings fell.

XXVIII

OVER the world’s rim, drawing bland November

Reluctant behind them, drawing the moons of cold:

What do their lonely voices wake to remember

In this dust ere ’twas flesh? what restless old

Dream a thousand years was safely sleeping

Wakes my blood to sharp unease? what horn

Rings out to them? Was I free once, sweeping

Their wild and lonely skies ere I was born?

The hand that shaped my body, that gave me vision,

Made me a slave to clay for a fee of breath.

Sweep on, O wild and lonely: mine the derision,

Then the splendor and speed, the cleanness of death.

Over the world’s rim, out of some splendid noon,

Seeking some high desire, and not in vain,

They fill and empty the red and dying moon

And, crying, cross the rim of the world again.

XXIX

AS to an ancient music’s hidden fall

Her seed in the huddled dark was warm and wet

And three cold stars were riven in the wall:

Rain and fire and death above her door were set.

Her hands moaned on her breast in blind and supple fire,

Made light within her cave: she saw her harried

Body wrung to a strange and bitter lyre

Whose music once was pure strings simply married.

One to another in sleepy difference

Her thin and happy sorrows once were wed,

And what tomorrow’s chords are recompense

For yesterday’s single song unravished?

Three stars in her heart when she awakes

As winter’s sleep breaks greening in soft rain,

And in the caverned earth spring’s rumor shakes

As in her loins, the tilled and quickened grain.

XXX

GRAY the day, and all the year is cold,

Across the empty land the swallows’ cry

Marks the southflown spring. Naught is bowled

Save winter, in the sky.

O sorry earth, when this bleak bitter sleep

Stirs and turns and time once more is green,

In empty path and lane grass will creep

With none to tread it clean.

April and May and June, and all the dearth

Of heart to green it for, to hurt and wake;

What good is budding, gray November earth?

No need to break your sleep for greening’s sake.

The hushed plaint of wind in stricken trees

Shivers the grass in path and lane

And Grief and Time are tideless golden seas —

Hush, hush! He’s home again.

XXXI

HE WINNOWED it with bayonets

And planted it with guns,

And now the final cannonade

Is healed with rains and suns

He looks about — and leaps to stamp

The stubborn grinning seeds

Of olden plantings back beneath

His field of colored weeds.

XXXII

look, cynthia,

how abelard evaporates

the brow of time, and paris

tastes his bitter thumbs —

the worm grows fat, eviscerate,

but not on love, o cynthia.

XXXIII

DID I know love once? Was it love or grief,

This grave body by where I had lain,

And my heart, a single stubborn leaf

That will not die, though root and branch be slain?

Though warm in dark between the breasts of Death,

That other breast forgot where I did lie,

And from the tree are stripped the leaves of breath,

There’s still one stubborn leaf that will not die

But restless in the sad and bitter earth,

Gains with each dawn a death, with dusk a birth.

XXXIV

THE ship of night, with twilightcolored sails,

Dreamed down the golden river of the west,

And Jesus’ mother mused the sighing gales

While Jesus’ mouth shot drinking on her breast.

Her soft doveslippered eyes strayed in the dusk

Creaming backward from the fallen day,

And a haughty star broke yellow musk

Where dead kings slept the long cold years away.

The hushed voices on the stair of heaven

Upward mounting, wake each drowsing king;

The dawn is milk to swell her breast, her seven

Sorrows crown her with a choiring ring;

A star to fleck young Jesus’ eyes is given,

And white winds in the duskfilled sails to sing.

XXXV

THE courtesan is dead, for all her subtle ways,

Her bonds are loosed in brittle and bitter leaves;

Her last long backward look’s to see who grieves

The imminent night of her reverted gaze.

Another will reign supreme, now she is dead

And winter’s lean clean rain sweeps out her room,

For man’s delight and anguish: with old new bloom

Crowning his desire, garlanding his head.

Thus the world, turning to cold and death

When swallows empty the blue and drowsy days

And lean rain scatters the ghost of summer’s breath —

The courtesan that’s dead, for all her subtle ways —

Spring will come! rejoice! But still is there

An old sorrow sharp as woodsmoke on the air.

XXXVI

GUSTY trees windily lean on green

eviscerated skies, the stallion, Wind,

against the sun’s gold collar stamps, to lean

his weight. And once the furrowed day behind,

the golden steed browses the field he breaks

and full of flashing teeth where he has been

trees, the waiting mare his neighing shakes,

hold his heaving shape a moment seen.

Upon the hills, clashing the stars together,

stripping the tree of heaven of its blaze,

stabled, richly grained with golden weather —

within the trees that he has reft and raped

his fierce embrace by riven boughs in shaped,

while on the shaggy hills he stamps and neighs.

XXXVII

The race’s splendor lifts her lip, exposes

Amid her scarlet smile her little teeth;

The years are sand the wind plays with; beneath,

The prisoned music of her deathless roses.

Within frostbitten rock she’s fixed and glassed;

Now man may look upon her without fear.

But her contemptuous eyes back through him stare

And shear his fatuous sheep when he has passed.

Lilith she is dead and safely tombed

And man may plant and prune with naught to bruit

His heired and ancient lot to which he’s doomed,

For quiet drowse the flocks when wolf is mute —

Ay, Lilith she is dead, and she is wombed,

And breaks his vine, and slowly eats the fruit.

XXXVIII

LIPS that of thy weary all seem weariest,

And wearier for the curled and pallid sly

Still riddle of thy secret face, and thy

Sick despair of its own ill obsessed;

Lay no hand to heart, do not protest

That smiling leaves thy tired mouth reconciled,

For swearing so keeps thee but ill beguiled

With secret joy of thine own flank and breast.

Weary thy mouth with smiling: canst thou bride

Thyself with thee, or thine own kissing slake?

Thy belly’s waking doth itself deride

With sleep’s sharp absence, coming so awake;

And near thy mouth thy twinned heart’s grief doth hide

For there’s no breast between: it cannot break.

XXXIX

LIKE to the tree that, young, reluctant yet

While sap’s but troubled rumor of green spring;

Like to the leaf that in warm bud does cling

In maidened sleep unreft though passionate;

Or like the cloud that, quicked and shaped for rain

But flees it in a silver hot despair;

The bird that dreams of flight and does not dare,

The sower who fears to sow and reaps no grain.

Beauty or gold or scarlet, then long sleep:

All this does buy brave trafficking with breath,

That though gray cuckold Time be horned by Death,

Then Death in turn is cuckold, unawake.

But sown cold years the stolen bread you reap

By all the Eves unsistered since the Snake.

XL

LADY, unawares still bride of sleep,

To thine own self sweet prisoner and fell

Thrall to the vassalled garrison that keep

Thy soft unguarded breast’s white citadel;

Alas, oft-cozened maid, who’d not be twain

Yet self-confounded, while importunates

The foe repulsed, and single, dost remain

The frequent darling of the gods and fates.

Thou chaste? Why, I’ve lain lonely nights that fled

No swifter than thou came and brided me

Who held thee as the fabric of thy bed

Where, turning on thy pillow’s cheek, thy kiss

Took in thy citadel an enemy

Against whose mouth thy mouth sleeps on — like this.

XLI

HER unripe shallow breast is green among

The windy bloom of drunken apple trees,

And seven fauns importunate as bees

To sip the thin young honey of her tongue.

The old satyr, leafed and hidden, dreams her kiss

His beard amid, leaving his mouth in sight;

Dreams her body in a moony night

Shortening and shuddering into his;

Then sees a faun, bolder than the rest,

Slide his hand upon her sudden breast,

And feels the life in him go cold, and pass

Until the fire that kiss had brought to be

Gutters and faints away; ’tis night, and he

Laughing wrings the bitter wanton grass.

XLII

BENEATH the apple tree Eve’s tortured shape

Glittered in the Snake’s, her riven breast

Sloped his coils and took the sun’s escape

To augur black her sin from east to west.

In winter’s night man may keep him warm

Regretting olden sins he did omit;

With fetiches the whip of blood to charm,

Forgetting that with breath he’s heir to it.

But old gods fall away, the ancient Snake

Is throned and crowned instead, and has for minion

That golden apple which will never slake

But ever feeds man’s crumb of fire, when plover

And swallow and shrill northing birds whip over

Nazarene and Roman and Virginian.

XLIII

lets see I’ll say — between two brief balloons

of skirts I saw grave chalices of knees

and momently the cloyed and cloudy bees

where hive her honeyed thighs those little moons

these slender moons’ unsunder I would break

so soft I’d break that hushed virginity

of sleep that in her narrow house would she

find me drowsing when she came awake —

no — madam I love your daughter — I will say

from out some leafed dilemma of desire

the wind hales yawning spring still half undressed

the hand that once did short to sighs her breast

now slaps her white behind to rosy fire

— sir your health your money how are they —

XLIV

IF THERE be grief, then let it be but rain,

And this but silver grief for grieving’s sake,

If these green woods be dreaming here to wake

Within my heart, if I should rouse again.

But I shall sleep, for where is any death

While in these blue hills slumbrous overhead

I’m rooted like a tree? Though I be dead,

This earth that holds me fast will find me breath.

The Eng