

AFTER HEARING MUSIC

Give me a breath of air!
There is too much of sweetness here,
Too much of pain, pain blent with loveliness.
I am allured from all that we call living
And sickened of the harsh necessities.
The earth again! the earth where sweat is poured
To rise in bronze ripe undulant fields of grain,
Where here and now is sinewed hardihood
And intertwining effort vain and vast.
What now is Avalon, or purple ships that plow
The dim blue evening full of mists and tears?
Give me a breath of air, a sound of voices,
For I am drugged with dreams
And smothered with the smoke of old disasters.
Of what avail dead lovers laid in Avalon
Or purple ships outbound?

IN THE COLD BRIGHT WIND

Merlin, Merlin's gone away
With a limmer witch for spouse,
He's gone to spend a sorry year
In the Queen o' Fairies' house.

For gear he's took the sapphire bird
Wi' the bubble in his throat;
His hat was prinked wi' the wee wet flowers
That gaud daft April's coat.

Sunny-cold the bold wind blew
As he strode off down the hill;
His red cloak bellied out and swirled,
His eyes burned gray and chill.

For promise of a warm high bed
And spiced renewing drink
He's footed it to Fairyland
Where love's the only swink.

He's gone away, and not alone —
Brightly, oh, he sinned!
His red cloak glimmers on the thorn
And his laughter on the wind.

THE GREEN BIRD SEETH ISEULT

A green bird on a golden bush,
And the leaves chimed out and spake:
“What have you seen, what heard, green bird,
Since you heard the blue day break?”

“A sea, a sea, a saffron sea,
And a creamy warm full sail
Floating beneath me as I flew,
And my shadow stamped the sail
Like a clover leaf, a green clover leaf,
Blown from an Irish dale.”

“Did lovers pale stand by the sail
That furrowed the Irish sea?
Did you catch the glimmer of golden mail
And the glimmer of hair blown free?”

“Golden each scale of his burnished mail
And her hair was bronze and gold:
From an emerald cup I saw them sup
That their four hands scarce could hold.”

“Delight and woe, delight and woe,
Bird of the Irish sea —
These they drank up from the emerald cup
On the sun-swooned saffron sea.”

“ Only delight, only delight,
While the beautiful burning blue daylight
Was dappled by me
With the green leaf-shadow shapen in three.
Delight I saw, delight I heard! ”
Sang the sunlight-aureoled emerald bird
To the golden tree
Deliriously.

AVERNEL

From Averno the hills flow down
And leave it near the sky,
And it has birds and bells and trees
And fauns that never die.

When coral-pink azaleas fill
Its roomy woods with sweet,
And lilac spills of violets wait
For violet-veined swift feet;

When moths are budded by the oaks'
Uncrinkling rose and red
And high, high up, green butterflies
Reveal the poplars' head;

When shaggy clouds in single bliss
Blaze up the sea-blue air,
Spilling their shadow-amethyst
Along the hills' wide stair;

Then there is singing in the sun
And whispering in the shade
And dancing till the stars slope down
Their murmurous arcade.

In love's half sleep the curly faun's
Uncertain if he sees
Orion or first fireflies
Between the clear dark trees.

CANOPUS

When February brings the hopeless days
And there's no cranny of the silent world
Where grass is green or boughs are fresh
Or birds recall their litanies of love,
And earth seems but a place where graves are dug
And dug too tardily —
Then turn for peace to those forgotten stars
That change not with the changes of the year,
But still pursue their purposed ministries
In the cold night,
Though loveliness lies dead upon the ground.
Then their serene proud ranks receive
From thick-starred equatorial climes
A lone and flaming guest,
The lord and love of all the southern sky.
Above, aye, just above the black horizon
When the first dark is clear,
You see him rise, superb and alien,
The fiery-haired Canopus, surging from the south.
But one vast scornful stare he flings
Across the full curve of the northern night
Wherein Arcturus and Aldebaran
Marshal the bright-helmed sons of heaven;
Then, meeting the blue gaze of Sirius,
Turns, and retreating down the crystal dark
Hides from our eyes his haughty slow return.
The serpentining Amazon

And many a lost lagoon, flamingo-stirred,
Mirror his golden shaggy hair;
The wide-palmed plantain-leaves
Receive in sleep his tread,
And glimmer, dreaming that the moon glows past;
In their rough pastures
Bronze Peruvian shepherds mark his course
And call his name, and vainly call.
For he strides on in his dim godly wrath
Past Ecuador
And the long samite carpet of the Argentine,
Past the incredible drear rooms of stone
The Incas built, by night, to helpless gods,
On precipices of the fearful Andes;
Nor stays his step till he descries, far down,
The ghostly mountainous antipodes,
Mute with blue cold.
There, trembling in his wreath of flames, he halts
And gazes on the glistening nether pole
Where his reflection shakes —
Contemplative
And sunk in his own thought.
But then our land is gay with polished leaves
And birds are nesting in the calm sweet sun.

FRENCH BLUE

There's a blue flower grows in France
A tattered roadside thing,
Like flowers cut, by little girls,
Of paper while they sing,

Which when I see so far from home
I feel tears almost rise,
For it is blue with just the blue
Of one dear lady's eyes.

FOR A POET'S BIRTHDAY

The plowman breaks the smelling earth
And birds are in his wake;
He scatters seed for harvesting,
They, song for singing's sake.

His heedful heart is happy as
Their hearts that take no heed —
But happiest the furrow's heart
Where song is sown with seed.

A PORTRAIT

When I see you I think of Mary, the mother of God,
Before she was a mother. But you are older,
Though young, so young that when I think of Calvary
I do not see you fainting at the cross
But bending over her who faints, your arms
About her, your tears upon her face, your voice
Comforting, were there comfort in the world.
Yet there's no beauty of the sweet-aired earth
Not reminiscent to my heart of you:
Water, the very pure winds of heaven, and the dew,
Birds at their matins, all limpid-colored flowers,
Not those that blaze in peacock opulence,
But such compassionate and candid blooms
As hurt the throat: branches of half-blushed peach,
Anemones that have a just-born air,
Miraculous, blue, breathless morning-glories,
Crocuses far too cool to be like flames,
And cosmos only of the autumn host.
These certainly I know to be your kin.
Yet this, your outward self, could dull and tarnish
And still your loveliness would be no less
And still men could not fail to see in you
That which they always hope to find in women —
The unnameable gay goodness that they love,
Attained in tears, most evident in smiles,
And more worth dying for than creed or crown. . . .
No wonder, seeing you, I think of Mary,
The mother of God, before she was a mother.

RAIN PATER

The lambs are sleeping in the rain
Cuddled two and two together,
One alone might sleep in pain
On the hillside in such weather.
In the spring rain slow and steady,
Just before the leaves are ready,
Walking is contentment's gain,
That is, walking with another,
Best a lover, then heart's brother —
All alone might waken pain.
Come then, dear, be wise again,
Ramble with me in the soft spring rain —
Walking is contentment's gain!
We'll see weeping willow's mane
Beaded with the moonstone rain,
Then the oat-field's emerald stain,
Then a brambled dripping lane
Where johnny-jump-ups, pert and plain,
Are common as the inch-high grain.
If walking's more than going's art
Unaided by curt car or cart,
Your eyes a thief, a sleuth your heart,
We'll find, I have no doubt at all,
Right in the cold wood's hollow cove
Branches of blurry pink I love —
(The red-bud always has his anguish out
Before the leaves are there to laugh and flout).

We'll surely see a redbird fall
And hear, if you'll not breathe at all,
The tentative self-conscious call
Of the young mockingbird who slyly
Practises when he sings not shyly
At windows and from garden borders
When what he sings is what he orders.
(But men have lived and died quite near
And never heard his muted fear,
So exquisite and faint and clear.)
What if I should show to you
A plum tree and a cherry too,
Both white as lilies Mary grew,
And hazed about with rain?
Oh, if we go as I like best,
Haphazardly and with a zest,
You'll have no need to seek for pleasure
In lands that other daytimes measure,
But every bush will be your treasure!
Come out, come out, be wise again
Before the spring begins to wane—
There's nothing gladder, I maintain,
Than walking together in the rain!

MEDITATING A JOURNEY

The swallows curling in the sky,
Less wishful to be gone than I,
Well know the land whereto they fly
 In fickle flight.

To bathe in sun-soothed southern air,
Where one cloud-shadow is as rare
As true love, is their only care
 And sole delight.

But I, what south could I attain
That would not seem a journey vain
When all my sun doth here remain,
 How coldly bright!

ITALIAN SUMMER

Tiberius is in his grave,
But where that is who's saying?
It's long and long since hereabouts
Poppaea went a-maying.

Oh, all the hearts that on this breeze
Brush by like motes of gold!
The many a tear, the many a kiss
No secret to this mold!

Oh, let's not let the lovely dead
Distract us from our passion —
They are so dead, so soon we'll be
Love passes like a fashion.

Palazzo di Tiberio

DELIGHT

Delight it is has kept me
From thinking much, I fear,
And I'd have loved more wisely
Had not delight been near;
And tears a few he's cost me,
But saved me many a tear.

O friends that I have clung to
To save me from time's spite,
O loves of mine whom kissing
I've wished all time were night —
I'd keep you all, but lose you
Before I'd lose delight!

ADVICE IN SPRINGTIME

When evening skies are smoked with rose,
And dubious spring behind the hill
To come or not a thistle blows,
And buds amaze wet puckered snows —
Then watch your will, your lazy will,
For then he loves to sleep his fill.

He yawns if yearning's in the breeze,
Nods at violets paused before,
And should you watch with soft unease
The sad blood-pink of Judas trees,
He's sleeping sure, content to snore
At warm temptation's very door.

To nunneries, you maidens all!
You old despairs of saving grace,
Young men so lusty-limbed and tall,
To desert caves and diets small!
For earth's a shameful, sighful place
Beneath the unwimpled spring's embrace.

INSOMNIA

O little boats of Capri
That fish a mile from town
And nick the dark with torches
Till heaven is upside-down,

I may forget these brown warm eyes,
These brown throats as they turn,
These girls with burdens on their heads
Like Greek girls on an urn;

Their dark-lashed, rascal sweetness,
Their smiles I may forget, —
But not your constellations
Splashed gold on miles of jet.

Above you Mars and Spica
Curve down into the sea,
Springing from you the Scorpion's vine
Festoons the heavenly tree.

May all your nets be silver-choked,
May all your sails win through!
In each of you were sleepless eyes
When mine were sleepless, too.

SUBLIMATION

Lock your sin in a willow cage,
Cover the key with clay:
Hanging beneath your rafters' shade
He'll sing for you some day.

Outside your good deeds cluck and strut,
But small's the joy they bring.
It's only a wistful prisoner bird
With a wicked heart can sing.

Break not the lock, bend not the withes!
Escaping through some chink,
His song will cease — in your live heart
His beak will take its drink.

FOUR CAPRI IMPROMPTUS

1

Sweet as the furze flower fainting in the noon heat,
The yellow furze flower tufted in a cliff above the ocean,
Floating its too sweet perfume over the peacock waters
And weakening the diving swallows half down the air —
So sweet, so weakening the breath of you comes to me, beloved,
When I lean over you, or even, even when I dream of you, my
flower.

2

Mournful and miraculous beauty bathes the sea
When the rose-misted sun melts out,
And for one perfect moment —
While two swallows can eddy and plunge their white breasts
From the cliff-crest to the beach —
The waters are misty rose for infinite miles
Save for the silver chariot-tracks of the winds;
Curving and leading nowhere and always silver,
But edged, how strangely, with keen victorious green.

3

Just over the gray cliffs
In the blue brumal air
Glistens a faint unwilling Hesper,
His curls bound with a fillet of white fire.
Along the sky his steps seem slow

Like a young sulky god's,
So I should see him as he stands a moment
Dreamily on the cliff top, between the two twisted stone-pines.
There he may pause and watch the blue lilies of the twilight
Like sleep-flowers on the fields of the still sea,
Blue-gray like sleep-flowers on the mountain flanks
And the coves of the unwindy coming night.
There I have stood on other evenings
Watching a long time the lonely twilight.
But the young Hesper has no heart to look.
Barely I saw his silver instep touch the top
And he was gone —
Running, running, not pausing for a glance,
Down the dark other side of the sheep-strewn cliff.
He is no shepherd:
He had no tawny wisp of net over his arm,
No net to cast in the foam-flowered breakers from the beach
Like a fisher-boy.
I think he has some love far down on the tilted side in the darkness
To whom he hurries —
A nymph perhaps, maybe another star
With floating hair and a girl's silver body.
Surely with such a single amorous haste
Before the night is over,
Even before the Pleiads tremble up,
He will be with her,
Lying, I dare say, greedily,
The sweat-beads pearling still the curve of his shoulders
And his breast still heaving.

I shall bring you blue morning-glories ribbed with purple,
Or hazy-blue plumbago flowers.
But they will not please you: they have no perfume.
Shall I search higher and twitch a spray of golden gorse?
The bees cannot leave it
And it is sweeter and more golden than their honey.
Or I know a cleft above the sapphire ocean
Where grows one shoot of the wild oleander.
Its flowers are crimson pink:
Some say it is Adonis' blood that they are dipped in,
Others, more rightly, Aphrodite's own.
And their perfume when full open in the noon heats
Has often made a passing dryad drowsy.
Pan never nears their shadow except on tiptoe —
He has made lucky finds in their sleepy shade.
But you — none of these will content you,
Neither the blue morning-glories
Nor ash-blue clusters of plumbago
Nor gorse that is golden yellow
Nor blood-rose oleanders.
How shall I hope that my heart may please you
Which is less lovely than these,
But not less quickly withered?

AN ARCADIAN IDYLL

Far, far from here,
Above Andritsaena,
In the naked hills that paling darkness covers,
A sandalled goatherd climbs the path
Behind his flock.
Vacant the sleeping pastures,
For the bees, too, still are sleeping,
Vacant and thick with dew and flower-strown,
Tempting to bearded goats.
Slowly he follows them,
Thongs criss-cross to his knees,
With short Arcadian skirt,
A stripling, brown and roughened by the sun.
Limpid breezes,
Running slim fingers through his burnt black hair,
Have touselled it to elf-locks;
Slender and straight,
His thighs are hardened to the upward pull.
Companionless he goes, half insolent,
His crook behind his shoulders,
A smile behind his lips,
A tuft of golden crocus buds
In one cold hand.
His arrogant unamorous eyes, brook-brown,
Scorn to laugh, though flickering with laughter.
The pasture ground is reached,
A rocky hillside, rank with asphodel,

Beneath the temple ruin shepherds know —
Bassae, the healing god's gray windy house.
The flock apprise the field with yellow eyes,
Shallow and cold,
Then scatter, some
On hind legs reaching for the wet cool buds
Of stunted trees,
Some browsing where the scentless heliotrope
Patterns the ground with white and lilac bloom.
Below,
The brook sends up a breezy sound
From clustered laurel trees
That gad its mirrory lengths along
To watch the crimson fillets of their buds,
That smell and open to the passionate sun.
He stops, lays down his crook,
Then, catching up the world in one sure glance,
Draws from his leathern belt
The uncouth shepherd's flute,
Perches him on a ledge of seeded grasses
And, knees drawn up,
Fills it with steady breath.
His cheeks swell out;
His neck strains into chords,
Crimsons beneath the tan;
His mischievous eyes tilt upward in delight,
And raucous happy sounds insult the dawn.

Shadows whisk in the temple portico,
Advance on shaggy feet,
Drop down, again advance,

Scurry from bush to bush,
And crowd at last
The crest of hills that half encircle him
Noisy below.
But he pipes on and only hears his piping,
And never sees for all his laughing glances
Flat in the dew, with chin on hand and ears pricked up,
Biting a wisp of feathered grass,
The little wood-gods
Listening.

A BRITTANY IDYLL

Far, far from here,
By Tristan's isle,
The bay awaits the breeze,
Paler than harebells breathed on by the dew,
Paler than turquoise, for the dawn is young
And single stars yet shine above Douarnenez. . . .
An easterly wind at sunset blew the fishing fleet
From its safe harborage beneath the town
Into the sunset.
With single sails they flew,
Yellow and brown and carmine-stained,
Across the blinding mirrors of the bay,
Beneath the tawny sunset flared with blue,
Beyond the western portals of the world.
But where the cold Atlantic waters, hoar and black,
Catch on their sleek enormous rhythms slurs of stars,
They lowered sail, and rocked upon the swell.
Then nets were cast and glimmering sank,
And night long, with few words
But mighty laborings,
The fisher-folk hauled in the flickering catch.
Beneath the stars they toiled, on ocean's floor.

But now the night is passing,
Leaving a silver wake
And aster petals halfway up the sky.
It is a lover's sunrise:

Lavender and gray and shining pink,
A tilted sea-shell's inner opulence.
Beyond the jetty that the town throws out
For harborage and home to little boats,
The concave waves are dappled with rose leaves
And floats of foam.
At the jetty's end, far out from shore,
Nearest the point where turning in
From open water to calm anchorage
The fishing-fleet sails past,
A girl is standing.
And only she and the sunrise and wavering gulls
See the curves of rustling tide run in
And hear the calm world's breathing.
She is not lonely
For all her loneliness,
There in the summer sunrise,
With her simple peasant's dress of black,
Her meagre shawl of black crochet,
And her peasant's cap, looped and starched and white,
Prim on her pale gold hair.
Her arms are idly spread across the coping,
Her eyes turn always seaward, for she knows
Soon will the ships come home on the gales of morning,
Soon her lover's ship, and her tall brown lover,
The sailor-lad, soft-spoken, who is hers.
And he will smile to her his secret smile,
Tending the tiller as the boat swings past,
And wave to her as if to all he waved,
And meet her eyes with his, then look away.
Her lids are lowered and her lips just smile,

For she is conjuring in dream those eyes —
Bitter and bright and blue,
Like thin-topped waves against the sun,
The eyes men fear —
But she knows they can warm and seem to touch
Resistlessly.

And all the while she hums forgetfully
An old, old song the Breton girls have sung
Since first they loved and feared
And eased their hearts in song
(Perhaps Iseult of Brittany
Was humming the same words in that same place
A thousand years ago,
What time she waited for Lord Tristan
Whom she loved so grievously) :

*My only love is a sailor lad
Whose home is the fickle sea.
To other girls he gives his smiles,
But his mouth he gives to me.*

*On Sunday morning after mass
When he is dressed so fine,
He stops before their open doors,
But at night he comes to mine.*

*O Mary, bless all sailor lads
Whose loves are two and three,
But mine keep safe from other girls —
Or let him die in the sea!*

And as the last line leaves her lips
She pauses, puckers up her mild girl's brow,
Then laughs a low contented laugh,
And sings again, half crooningly.
But summer sunshine, jubilant with cock-crows,
Is rattling open all the shuttered town.
The cross-roads gild, and housewives with their mops
Splash on the family door-step; street by street
Hears emptily the melancholy calls,
Reiterant and shrill, of country women,
Shoving their push-carts full of salad leaves
And gasping fish and lentils, frosty green.
Soon shore and beach and jetty are swarming and laughing
With fishermen's wives and mothers
And fathers and children and friends,
Come down to welcome the fleet:
Old men with cautious, simple eyes
And polished wrinkles carved in wood,
Old women coiffed in white
With wide clean aprons, baskets on their arms,
And little boys with windy looks and sober ways,
Breeched and jumpered in mandarin sail-cloth —
All shuffling in wooden shoes
That clatter and thump on the cobbles —
And the girl at the end of the jetty
Among them and of them,
Laughing the laughter that hides.
At last the black line of the wind appears,
Dragging behind unevenly the fleet.
And instantly the shore is ruffled
With ant-hill runnings up and down,

And pointing hands and voluble, unheeded chatter.
But she is silent,
Clutching her shawl in the freshening breeze,
And pale -- or pale as peasant girls may be --
For the fishing boats are returning
And the sailors return from the sea.
Moth after moth, gold-winged on the golden morning,
Bursting and drinking the light green spray of the tide,
They fly with flashing and splendor out of the ocean,
Straining for waters of calm and the haven they know.
As each ship rounds the mole with sail careening
The girl leans out,
Searching the weathered faces of the crew.
And now her lover's boat flings past,
Wrapped in a dazzle of spray, dripping with brine,
Tilting its saffron sail in the rainbow wash
As it shoulders the mole.
Ah, the girl is a pendent flower!
Her mouth, her eyes, her soul,
Above him, gazing, waiting!
But he, forgetful, wrangles with the ropes,
And never lifts his head, nor waves his hand,
Nor sends one smile
Up to her eager face.
And the last late boat comes home,
And the fishing's done,
And hulls are emptied of their freight --
Mauve and silver-scaled sardines --
And sails are furled
And in the quiet sunlight from the masts
The nets are hung to dry --

The sea-soaked azure nets,
Bluer than filaments of unflawed turquoise.
But the girl alone on the bright deserted jetty
Still stands in the staring sunshine,
Her warm breast leaned against the spray-damp coping
It leaned more warmly on when he passed by.
But now her head is crouched behind her arms,
Her shawl clutched to her mouth,
And out across the hazing sea her wide eyes stare
Unseeingly and full of fear.

And the ancient wind from Tristan's isle comes sighing,
From the isle where long ago
Iseult with white hands folded on her lap,
Night after night,
Before the smouldering faggot fire,
Sat watching for some little tenderness
From Tristan,
Tristan the knight, whose heart to Cornwall clave
Unpityingly,
As all men know.