PART III
ENZIO'S KINGDOM, AND OTHER POEMS

II
DELTA SKETCHES
IN THE DELTA

The river country's wide and flat
And blurred ash-blue with sun,
And there all work is dreams come true.
   All dreams are work begun.

The silted river made for us
   The black and mellow soil
And taught us as we conquered him
   Courage and faith and toil.

The river town that water oaks
   And myrtles hide and bless
Has broken every law except
   The law of kindliness.

And north and south and east the fields
   Of cotton close it round,
Where golden billows of the sun
   Break with no shade or sound.

Dear is the town, but in the fields
   A little house could be,
If built with care and auspices,
   A heart's felicity.
O friend, who love not much indoors
Or lamp-lit, peopled ways,
What of a field and house to pass
Our residue of days?

We'd learn of fret and labor there
A patience that we miss
And be content content to be
Nor wish nor hope for bliss.

With the immense untrammelled sun
For brother in the fields,
And every night the stars' crusade
Flashing to us their shields,

We'd meet, perhaps, some dusk as we
Turned home to well-earned rest,
Unhurried Wisdom, tender-eyed,
A pilgrim and our guest.
GREENVILLE TREES

THE LOMBARDY POPLARS:
Captive in this drab alien land,
We dreamed of all the great and wise
Who took the roads, our shadows spanned
With song on lips and sword on thighs.

King Richard fared, one morn of May,
Our leafy lane to Palestine
With Blondel following. Well-a-day,
They sang of God and love and wine!

We leaned to pity once that girl
Who left the Loire one dripping spring,
So red of mouth, so brown of curl,
To be love's slave and Scotland's king.

Crusaders, knights, and troubadours
Rode through our golden-panelled shade:
We never thought these songless shores
Could rival that dead cavalcade.

But, petulant of simple joys,
Loving Death's mother, blind Romance,
We watched the passionate Delta boys
Stride down the street that leads to France.
THE CHINA-BERRIES:

Thousands of years ago,
We were weaving in moonlit Manchu gardens
Webs and arabesques of purple
On the moon-gray pebbled paths
For slender empresses,
In silver, lavender, and rose,
To tread on with their fuchsia-tinted sandals.
And one, on such a night,
Paused in our falling veils of subtle fragrance
And lifted up her arms
To the weary, much-prayed-to moon,
And wept for love.
But we have never seen these pale new people
Lift their arms to the exquisite moon
Or linger in our perfume.
They seem unconscious
Of the marvel of our blossoms,
Our stamens purpler-black than clematis,
Our delicate wisteria-tinged corolla.
Yet slender-fingered undulant princesses
Have bit their coral lips
And slain in anger
Prostrate imperial attendants
Because no loom could match our secret dyes.

Here we must tolerate small girls
With strange, sun-colored hair
Who thread our blossoms
And loop them with coarse clover-chains
About their throats.
Or worse, near summer-time,
Small boys, with eyes that have no darkness,
Will clamber into our branches,
Wounding our tender bark of satin,
Snapping our wonderful patterned leaves,
And pull our berries,
Hard, green, with infinitesimal speckles;
Then filling our indignant shade with laughter,
Jolly, uncouth, immoderate,
Mash them into their popguns
And frighten the sparrows even
And the reverent ancient negroes
With their insolent bombardment. . . .

Only the winter robins love us,
And then our boughs are naked,
And our shrivelled berries
Hang down in milky yellow clusters,
Fingered by faded winds,
Against a gray interminable sky.
Yet then too we are beautiful!

THE LOCUSTS:
In vain we fill the winter’s palms
With rush of round, thin, golden alms.
The winter has no care for us
But breaks our brittle branches thus,
   Abjuring calms.
Yet one week of the year is ours:
We sun our creamy, scented flowers
And madden all the town. Oh, they
Are powerless, though prim, to stay
Our fragrant powers.

The crowded church we bloom before
Leaves carelessly an open door:
Young sinners’ eyes desert their books
And meet with long-lashed pagan looks
And read no more.

Ah, watch for them, when shadows wait,
Walking the levee, slow, sedate!
But blush to guess the darling sights
When perfumes are the only lights,
And it grows late.

THE WATER OAKS:

Once in our branches
Swarms of green parakeets in seething turmoil settled,
Chattering north from the sweltering rank pampas,
Clothing us doubly in delightful leaves,
And suddenly departing.
But long ago, one violet spring,
We watched their wavering throngs melt down the south
To come again no more. . . .
We have been darkened by clouds of pigeons
Weltering like a cyclone
Across the watery rose sunset.
But some great death
Slew them: they come no more. . . .
More beautiful than all the wings that fly in beauty,
The wild swans,
Noble and full of fellowship,
Came in old days
Down the broad curves and brimming tremble of the river,
Or overland, at night, against the stars.
Oppressed with solemn joy
And ever-urgent purpose undisclosed,
They hovered in the twilight of cool autumn
Or mounted on the sunrise, trumpeting
And glad of rest, though brief.
For all their beauty
Each year we saw their glistening ranks dissolve,
Dissolve and waste, till now
Once in a winter and with pain
We spy perhaps a lone white wanderer,
Mateless and without friend,
Circling uncertainly and with hoarse pitcous cries,
Till mercifully, with no thought of mercy,
The gray-eyed hunter on the river bars,
Making of murder sport, deprives
Him of his loneliness, the deep sky of a swan.
So too the races passed that lived beneath our leaves —
The patient, thought-pressed builders of the mounds
That came from mystery,
Returning whence they came;
The stealthy copper tribes
Whose arrows slit the blue beyond our heights,
Who, making moonlight haggard with their fires,
Danced in bad triumph at their brothers' death,
But in the end found never a cause to dance.
So too shall pass their pallid conquerors
Who now in slaying us have made the land
Naked and without loveliness of shade.
Though they have planted seed where once we towered
And hemmed the river's strength
And wedged us in their curveless hot-floored towns,
They too shall pass,
And we shall watch them die.

In the beginning there were three
And in the end there shall be only three:
The trees, the river,
And the outspread lonely tree of heaven,
Whose boughs are blossomy apple-wreaths at dawn,
Autumnal red and purple in the sunset,
And laden, night long, with the fruitage of the stars,
A harvest for some still-delaying husbandman.
THE HOLY WOMEN

I have seen Mary at the cross
   And Mary at the tomb
And Mary weeping as she spread her hair
   In a leper's room.

But it was not in Bethany
   Or groping up Calvary hill
I learned how women break their hearts to ease
   Another's ill.

Compassionate and wise in pain,
   Most faithful in defeat,
The holy Marys I have watched and loved
   Live on our street.
A BURNISHED CALM

If I could be as calm as willow branches
When the sunlight turns them copper-pink and gold
And they lift their slender wands in the winter sunshine
From out the red-brown coffee-weeds into the blueness;
If I could know the calm of willow branches
When the hollows of the woods hold azure smoke
And the southern winter blurs and tarnishes;
If I could feel their passive unstrained certainty
As they wait the still-uneager, leaf-laden springtime,
Not fearing it will never come or come
Less beautiful, not doubting the return in time
Of downy buds and wrinkled burgeoning
And all the filmy lustre of warm days;
If I could be like willows by the river-bank in winter,
I think that wars remembered and presaged,
The drugging sense of doom and old disaster,
Would not oppress and strangle me as now.
But I should have a faith unflawed by these,
Discerning through the mad inclement now
The right's august recurrence in the race,
And like the leafless willows by the river
Wait in the winter sunshine trustfully
And with a burnished calm.
LEVEE NOCTURNE

A swan hangs brooding where the light
Is colorless and cool —
Or is it but the moon above
Her amethystine pool?

The powdered dusk is sifting down,
The purple willows blur,
The air awaits its stars and bats
And unseen moths that whir.

The houses light their lamps of gold
Where bread is blessed and broken;
The noises of the day seem but
A foolish word once spoken.

Only the quietness remains,
So tender and so deep,
When the weary, weary pent-in-life
Escape awhile in sleep.
A MEMORY

I saw four days of spring come floating down
Among the hard-gray lonely days of winter.
They came with full-blown warmth down the blue air
Like four pink petals shook from a loose wild rose
Or four pink clouds crossing an April sunrise
Or four young pilgrims stole in misty rose,
Smelling of musk and with an Eastern grace.
And as they fell, softly, one after one,
On the shrivelled earth, delight returned, long absent:
The single trees in the fields, the many trees
In the woods, wrapped them in webs of rainbow gauze;
Lads dreamed of braided tresses, and the breeze
Of clear, clear water falling in pure sunlight;
Violets came, the purple and the gray
Wild sort that flaunt themselves and have no smell;
The jonquils trooped out in their sky-gold dresses,
Nodding and whispering like girls from school;
The great oaks seemed a haze the breeze might scatter,
Though blackbirds creaked and coughed on every bough;
The weeping willows, amber gales at anchor,
Danced in the rhythm of spring waterfalls;
And there was wistfulness and joy four days and nights.
Then came the frost:
The wizened buds lay speckled on the ground,
Winter came back, more bitter for its going.
Four days of spring and of a spring long past!
You ask me why I should remember them?
If you had ever loved and been beloved,
Even so briefly as four days and nights,
You would remember many things perhaps
That now I think you do not even see.
SONG

Sorrowful leaves of the winter oak
That cannot fall and cannot flutter,
Clutching, with love too deep to utter,
The branches that loved you when green was
your cloak —
Fall, fall, for your green is gone,
And none loves love for itself alone,
And a faithful lover's a worrisome thing
In the spring, the spring, the tender spring.
OUTCAST

A summer's twilight ramble brought me where
I too shall sleep, if prayers are answered still.
No sad particular errand led me there,
But thoughts I let, that evening, have their will.

The graves are very quiet in that light,
Simple, despite their angels and their urns;
"Asleep in Jesus," "Rest in Peace," the trite
Poor epitaphs, seem then the due one earns.

Each bore its name and date, and so appealed
To cherish what already was forgot;
Some still could boast of wreaths, some, hardly healed,
Of withered flowers and a mown grass-plot.

I passed with half a smile and half a sigh,
And came to those wild grasses where they too,
With no rememberer to tend them, lie
With equal peace in hammocked rags of dew.

I found there, by a purple iron-weed
Hung with black beetles, one lone slab that bore
No name, no date, but only this strange screech:
"Nature, who played the trick, can laugh no more."

Whether that outcast grave was tenanted
Or waits for one still walking earth's wide floor
I knew not, yet in fear I stooped and read:
"Nature, who played the trick, can laugh no more."
THE DELTA AUTUMN

Give me an ebbing sunset of the fall
With chilly flare of cosmos-colored light,
A white-winged moon in frozen, downward flight,
Ethereal, naked trees where no birds call;
Leave me to watch my infinite, gaunt river,
Its solemn width, its willow-purpled coil,
Its floor of hammered brass and azure oil,
Its silence where far strands of wild geese quiver —
And I'll not miss the hopeful, passionate spring,
Spring that knows naught of thought or masterful will
Or conquered grief or peace when cold winds chill,
But sings and struts with sunlight-dabbled wing
And is too sweet where men yet hate and kill.
Autumn as autumn comes in my dim-lustered land —
Of that be my dreaming under the fennel-crusted sand.