



LEROY MACLEOD

Driven

THE COMPLETE 1929 POETRY COLLECTION

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS:
EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

A TEXT-TECH PAPERS PROJECT

Extremes and Moderations

Early Southern California Poetry

Extremes and Moderations is a Text-Tech Papers project devoted to recovering poetry written, published, and circulated in Los Angeles and Southern California. Each volume brings neglected books and poems back into view through carefully prepared texts, archival images, biographical context, and a clear record of the surviving sources.

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

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LEROY MACLEOD

Driven

CRITICAL READING EDITION

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Extremes and Moderations

Extremes and Moderations: Early Southern California Poetry

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INTRODUCTION

The farms, cities, and many working lives of LeRoy MacLeod

LeRoy MacLeod carried the farms of Browns Valley through several lives: newspaper reporter, Los Angeles advertising partner, poet, Midwestern novelist, public-utility executive, victory-garden organizer, daylily breeder, and tireless newspaper correspondent. He began writing verse in 1924, and *Driven* appeared in New York and London five years later. Its short farm poems have the hard weather and bodily pressure that made the English poet Robert Nichols hear a Hardy-like quality in him; at its center is “Drouth,” where heat, work, family grievance, and the need to escape gather into a single rural tragedy. MacLeod soon turned mainly to fiction, publishing *Three Steeples*, *The Years of Peace*, and *The Crowded Hill*. He returned to poetry late with *A Lover’s Album* (1977), a scarce thirty-five-page book unavailable for this edition. The present volume resets the complete 1929 collection and adds “The Wall” from *The Lyric West*, following the original order, stanza divisions, and internal sequences while correcting clear typographical and OCR damage.

Indiana beginnings

LeRoy Oliver MacLeod was born on October 20, 1893, in Anderson, Indiana, and died on July 28, 1983, in Johnson City, New York. Later reference sources name his parents as David Penn MacLeod and Agnes Jones MacLeod. A 1931 hometown profile instead called them “Mr. and Mrs. Leslie McLeod,” an isolated discrepancy that has not been corroborated. MacLeod associated his imaginative beginnings less with industrial Anderson than with the family’s farm country around Browns Valley in Montgomery County. That landscape—cornfields, plowing, livestock, burial ground, drought, creek bed, and the pressures of inheritance—became the durable setting of both his poetry and his fiction.

He earned an A.B. from DePauw University in 1915. That year he married Irene Ruth Miller. Their son, Vaughn Roderick MacLeod, was born on July

17, 1916 and was generally known as Roderick. The 1920 census placed LeRoy and Irene in Brown Township, Montgomery County, where he described himself as a farmer working his own farm. The marriage later ended in divorce. By 1940 Irene was living in Monrovia, California, teaching school. MacLeod married Finin Geraldine Seelemire in 1928; their daughters were Camilla and Jeanne (the latter also appears as Jean in reference sources). MacLeod's obituary described the marriage to Finin as lasting fifty-five years.

Newspapers and advertising

MacLeod's route west ran through newspaper work. Biographical notices place him as a reporter and night editor in Colorado Springs and in California between 1919 and 1921. A 1931 Los Angeles profile recalled that he came to the city from Colorado Springs in 1921 and then moved into advertising copy. He worked briefly in a large agency before helping establish Waters & MacLeod. Notices from the 1920s and 1930 show the firm operating in Los Angeles and leasing additional office space; contemporary profiles treated its success as the financial base that allowed him to write.

In 1929 MacLeod withdrew from daily agency work to become a full-time author. The parallel with Sherwood Anderson—the advertising man who left commerce for Midwestern fiction—was made almost immediately by reviewers. Yet advertising remained part of MacLeod's professional life. After periods in California, Indiana, and Minnesota, he moved to the Binghamton, New York, area in 1940 and organized the advertising department of New York State Electric & Gas. He became the utility's advertising manager, won professional awards, and remained there until his retirement in 1958. Earlier reference sources also associate him with Weyerhaeuser in Saint Paul and with public-utility promotion.

The making of *Driven*

MacLeod said he began writing verse in 1924. Within a few years his poems were appearing in little magazines and national journals. “Sequoia” and “The Wall” appeared in *The Lyric West* in 1926; *Poetry* printed two sonnets drawn from the developing “Adolescence” sequence in March 1927. Those periodical witnesses show him revising punctuation, diction, and lineation before the book. They also clarify that “A Boy Plowing” and “Adolescent” were not separate late discoveries but early states of movements later numbered within “Adolescence.”

Driven was issued in 1929 in two forms: Covici, Friede published the New York edition used here, while Alfred A. Knopf issued the London edition. The American book comprises eighteen works. Brief seasonal and farm poems open the volume, followed by the sixteen-part “Adolescence.” Its center is “Drouth,” a book-length “symphonic narrative” in which an Indiana family’s physical and emotional enclosure is brought to crisis by heat. The volume closes with longer meditations—“Nocturne for Wakefulness,” “Sequoia,” and the four-part sea poem “The Gull.” Reviewers recognized the severity of its rural world even when they disagreed about its rhetoric. Robert Malise Bowyer Nichols, the English poet and MacLeod’s friend, described him as the only American poet he knew with a quality like Thomas Hardy’s. The comment was repeated in *TIME*’s 1931 profile and helped frame MacLeod’s early reputation.

The surviving first edition is bibliographically secure but textually awkward for present-day reading: narrow pages create hanging wraps, ornamental spacing can resemble OCR debris, and the central narrative is frequently interrupted by running titles and folios. This edition returns the poems to continuous reading form. “The Wall,” omitted from *Driven* though published during its gestation, is added in a separate periodical section rather than silently folded into the 1929 collection.

The Indiana novels

Poetry quickly gave way to fiction. MacLeod's first novel, *Three Steeples* (1931), offered a broad portrait of a rural Midwestern community organized around the life and death of a severe farmer and his minister son. MacLeod insisted that the book was not a tract against religion but a landscape inhabited by men and women trying to read the earth under the "quandary" of the sky. *TIME* called the novel serious, ambitious, sympathetic, and richly populated. A Los Angeles profile reported that its first draft had been written in six weeks, followed by substantial work at home. Christopher Morley's papers at the Harry Ransom Center preserve MacLeod correspondence from this period, evidence of his participation in a wider literary network.

The Years of Peace followed in 1932. Its long view of farm life and family continuity brought MacLeod national notice: his 1983 obituary remembered it as a Book League of America or Literary Guild selection, while a contemporary *TIME* review praised its quiet fullness. *The Crowded Hill* (1934), published by Reynal & Hitchcock, returned to two related Indiana farm families sharing one house in the 1870s. *The New Yorker* called it slow-moving but persuasive and singled out the characterization of Tyler Peck. Local profiles expected further novels, and the obituary credited MacLeod with seven, but fresh catalogue searches have identified only these three published titles. The larger number may include unpublished manuscripts or books issued under titles not yet connected to him; it should be treated as an obituary claim rather than a verified bibliography.

Binghamton, gardens, and public life

MacLeod's move to the Binghamton area in 1940 did not end his public writing. His utility work joined advertising technique to civic information, and after retirement he became a frequent letter writer to the local press. James F. Minehan, a public-information manager quoted in the obituary, remembered him as an alert participant in community affairs. During the Second World War MacLeod served as chairman of Broome County's Victory Gardens program, translating rural knowledge into a home-front campaign.

Gardening became a second form of authorship. MacLeod hybridized daylilies at his Hillcrest home, and his crosses circulated beyond the region. The obituary's pairing of novelist, poet, reporter, advertising executive,

gardener, and correspondent is unusually accurate: he repeatedly turned the close observation of ordinary environments into professional or literary work. A neighbor, Betty Savidge, remembered the affection and respect surrounding him. At his death he was living at 1163 Chenango Street and was survived by Finin, Roderick, Camilla, and Jeanne. The family chose a private memorial without calling hours.

Late poetry and the surviving record

MacLeod returned to print poetry with *A Lover's Album: Observations and Testimony*, issued in Clearwater, Florida, by Eldnar Press in 1977. The thirty-five-page book is recorded by Open Library from a Binghamton University copy but has not been digitized, and no copy was found in the project archive or in the online repositories searched for this edition. Its absence matters: the obituary's statement that MacLeod wrote two poetry books is correct, even though only *Driven* can presently be reset in full. A future supplement should begin by consulting the Binghamton copy and the MacLeod correspondence in the Christopher Morley Collection.

MacLeod's published poetry has fallen between regional and generic histories. He was Indiana-born, formed his literary career in Los Angeles, and spent the last four decades of his life in upstate New York. His major poem belongs at once to the farm novel, the narrative poem, and the California little-magazine world that first printed his lyrics. The mixed spelling of his surname in contemporary sources—MacLeod on his books, McLeod in several periodicals and clippings—has further scattered the record. Restoring *Driven* and identifying “The Wall” do not complete that record, but they make its central achievement accessible again and establish a reliable base for the recovery of the late book and any surviving manuscripts.

ARCHIVAL IMAGES

The book, the novelist, and the Binghamton years

LEROY MACLEOD

DRIVEN

MCMXXIX
COVICI • FRIEDE • *publishers* • NEW YORK

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Title page of Driven, Covici, Friede's New York edition, 1929.



Portrait and headline from "Novelist in Bid for Fame with Opus," *Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 1931.

MacLeod, author, poet, dies at age 89

LeRoy Oliver MacLeod, award-winning advertising executive, novelist, reporter, and gardener, died yesterday at C.S. Wilson Memorial Hospital in Johnson City at the age of 89.

MacLeod, of 1163 Chenango St., Hillcrest, is survived by his wife of 55 years, Finin, two daughters, Camilla and Jeanne, and a son, Roderick.

"He was a person who everyone admired," said his neighbor of 18 years, Betty Savidge, 1155 Chenango St.

After working as a reporter and in Colorado and California, and being a partner in a Los Angeles advertising agency, MacLeod moved to Binghamton in 1940 and organized the advertising department for the New York State Electric and Gas Corp. His work there received numerous awards and recognitions.

Between 1931 and 1934, three of MacLeod's novels, *Three Steeples*, *The Years of Peace* and *The Crowded Hill*, were published. In 1929, Alfred Knopf published *Driven*, a collection of MacLeod's poems. *Three Steeples* was listed by a Rutgers University professor as one of the top 10 novels published in the United States before 1940.

Years of Peace was a selection of the Book League of America, now called the Literary Guild.

In all, MacLeod wrote seven novels and two books of poetry.

During World War II, he was chairman of the Broome County Victory Gardens. For many years he cross-bred day lilies, some of the species of which are now being grown nationally.

After his retirement in 1958, MacLeod was a frequent contributor of letters to the editor of the *Evening Press*.

"Leroy MacLeod was a respected advertising man," James F. Minehan, manager of public information for NYSEG, said today. "He believed in the



LeRoy O. MacLeod
...in 1974 photo

value of sharing opinions on important community issues. His ads and his letters to the editor gained wide following. He will long be remembered."

There will be no calling hours. A private memorial service will be held at the convenience of the family. Those wishing may make contributions to their favorite charity in his memory.

MacLeod's obituary in the Press & Sun-Bulletin, July 29, 1983, with a 1974 portrait.

EDITORIAL NOTE AND SOURCES

Corpus, source control, and reading-text policy

The reading text is reset from the complete Stanford University copy of *Driven* digitized by Google Books, not from the inherited selected-poems PDF or the inherited partial scan. The partial scan and the periodical appearances in *The Lyric West* and *Poetry* were used as collation witnesses. Every poem begins on a new page. The order, stanza divisions, section numbers, and meaningful relative indents of the 1929 book are retained; narrow-page hanging wraps are rejoined.

Obvious OCR corruption, scan artifacts, duplicated drop-cap letters, broken words, and unmistakably damaged punctuation are silently corrected against the page images. Running titles and source folios are removed. Expressive ellipses and MacLeod's unusual compound words remain. The periodical signature "McLeod" is catalogued as printed, while the author's book spelling, "MacLeod," is used throughout this edition.

The first section contains all eighteen works in *Driven*. The second adds "The Wall," published in *The Lyric West* during the book's formation but not collected there. "Adolescent," "A Boy Plowing," and "Sequoia" survive in periodical form but are not duplicated because MacLeod incorporated them into "Adolescence" or reprinted them in *Driven*. *A Lover's Album* (1977) is bibliographically verified but unavailable in readable form and is therefore described rather than reconstructed.

Driven

The complete 1929 collection

Driven

Along the yellow road the brown hogs go
Between the thin woods stained with summer's death—
Waving the little banners of their breath
Above their round backs' undulating flow.

Their ears are blinders and their gaze too low
To see how like a lidless bloodshot eye
Pressed to the frosted pane of morning sky
A sly sun coldly watches where they go.

Their ears are blinders and they only see
The road is freedom, where their feet may go.
They nose the dust, the air, and do not know
The gate is shut and latched that set them free.

The road spreads on; the poles hum overhead.
The brown hogs snuff their way and do not know
The leaf-stained roadside brook that does not flow
Is no more cold than warm blood quieted.

But no such happy ignorance is given
To us who put our feet upon their tracks!
We know too well how there behind our backs
A gate is shut and we are also driven.

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 3–4.

The Wake

Around the house, as April dusk comes creeping,
His collie treads the walk... and stops to bark.
The lamps are lighted and the man is sleeping
In the cold musty parlor he kept dark.

With clicking paws the quiet porch is shaken...
And the dog, rearing, stares in through the pane
At the weird form of one who will not waken
To tell how fangs' close guarding was in vain.

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 5.

November Cornfield

The wan morning shivers by a burnt-out sun.
The silence is brittle as stalks under frost,
And snaps like ice, and clangs like a gun
When the wagon-boards stop each rough ear tossed.
... The team burrows on—is lost.

Lady is left quiet as the shucked corn rows,
And deaf as morning that couldn't hear the groans.
The wagon-wheels creak...and the full load goes.
And a worn collar presses on younger shoulder-bones.

The wagon rumbles back—the harvest can't wait.
A gray snow whitens where Old Lady lies.
A crow's wing blackens the cornfield gate,
And the tardy flakes hurry to foil greedy eyes.
... A fed crow caws... and flies.

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 6.

March Lamb

In the dark fold, night, a lamb keeps crying
With the weak lost wail of loneliness,
 Just a day old.

The edged air grips a young ewe lying
With her teeth set tight on feebleness
 Against the cold.

And beneath a rime shroud will soon be found
A ewe's courage fixed in a marble stress
 On the hard March ground.

In the gray fold, dawn, the lamb stops crying...
Would you suck stone, lamb? Would you try to feed
 On milk from a rock?

Is the cold warm, lamb?—Then better early dying
Than to grow for the shears, or bleat and bleed
 With the rest of the flock.

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 7.

Winter Burial

Lift... and walk!... They will shut the door for us.
That must be his child crying—
None she ever bore for us.
... She was light before for us;
Now a cold lover's weight on hers is lying.

Crunch... on snow!... Four of us can carry her,
And one can follow weeping.
Only one could marry her;
All of us will bury her...
And a cold lover's bed is hers for sleeping.

Lower...deep!... None of us may lie with her.
We wooed her lips with burning;
Four in turn would try with her;
One would live and die with her...
But her cold lover Death was more discerning.

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 8.

Adolescence

I

From cool green shadows blown along the ground
You ran with April sunlight over grass—
Hiding behind warm trees to let them pass,
Trembling in mock alarm when you were found.
Again, through blinking fires of dusk and dew
You fled in feigned despair, with wild appeals—
Taunting imagined fear to speed your heels,
Breathless to hear your own heart stalking you.

How still you stand now under sober skies
Watching the wild geese wedging distantly,
And, through their wake of far transparency,
Fate spinning cobwebs to confuse your eyes!
Something you cannot flee has come at last,
Chaining your feet like blown leaves frozen fast.

II

Over a pasture loud with chortled glee,
With gay heels flung to soberness and age,
You raced to gates—not knowing you were free.
Then came that presence to your pasturage
Judging you old enough at last to break;
And on the twitching mane was laid a hand
No leap could dodge, no toss of wild head shake.
A trembling colt, O Boy, wide-eyed you stand
Beneath Time's heavy discipline of soul!
This sudden mystery, this weight, this dread
Is no mere snowfall on a frightened foal;
Not something you can shelter from, and shed...
Bridled you are, and harnessed, and must go;
And where, you know not—why, you do not know.

III

Like iridescence blown, now here, now there,
Were your perceptions; and they veered and flew
Unmindful of the body borne on air
Till this cold wind of change bedraggled you.
Then strangely troubled at the larger weight,
In Time's bleared April pool you peered, and found
How rude flesh held you, and fled desperate,
Shamed by a wall of mirrors round and round.

Still must you seek to flee this nakedness—
As a caught wildling covers trap and chain;
That strides out boldly, and in sharp distress
Is jerked and thrown, and frantic tries in vain
Yet more!... and cowers at last to wait in dread,
Mocked by the jays in old boughs overhead.

IV

Tired from the sweaty tension of the day,
How often have you felt your gaze-drawn pace
Lighten toward home, and shown upon your face
That at each step some burden fell away!
How often have you, hurt at work or play,
Rushed inward to the comfort of that place
And left the pain with one whose warm embrace
Clad you at once in humors bravely gay!

Thus to your parent self you now return
From man's apprenticeship, intent to find
Relief of burdens and a smile to wear,
However wryly, over bruise and burn—
Only to cross the threshold of your mind
And halt abashed before a stranger there.

V

By its own impulse to a dungeon sea
The freshet, that once gorged this bank, is gone!
And your exuberance, thus racing on,
Is chained with some far tide—no longer free.
Like the thin stream that here so warily
Follows its spindling way, you have withdrawn
Into yourself—and thoughts are netted spawn
That drouth holds tight in dark perplexity.

But where the flood was, bright fins circle yet,
 Flashing at times as if the hidden eyes
 Forgot their dread—as if, a moment bold,
 They rose within the shrinking pool to set
 Their stare on beauty, as on the butterflies
 Round these green margins of encroaching mould.

VI

A brook's own humor tumbles from your throat
 When May morns have their lusty will with you;
 A tilted brook's—whose sunbeams dance afloat
 To running measures, worn, yet ever new.
 And often when your noons of older mood
 Linger too long and wear a shade too cool,
 Your rebel whistle breaks the interlude
 Like a quick pebble shattering a pool.

Sometimes, when the dusk comes and all things change:
 When day is shadow lengthening behind,
 And birds are bats, and even you are strange—
 A creature neither boy nor man—you find
 Breath still for tunes, though each go lost beyond
 Like a skipped rock across a darkened pond.

VII

[A Young Trapper]

How loud with movement did your feet intrude
 Where trails of pantomime run to and fro
 Still sacred of the moon! Across the snow,
 An alien in a silver solitude,
 You came impatient for a tryst with death;
 And in your eye star-glint for dawn to see,
 And in your breast a stone of cruelty—
 Or was it fear that weighted down your breath?

With what chill-fingered shiverings you kneel
 Now by the stiffened stream!—How awed to find
 Death foiled—the furtive warmth escaped and free,
 Leaving to you the wound that cannot heal,
 Taking the pain that left cold flesh behind
 As numb to footprints as your own will be!

VIII

A strange thing, that a lark and robin sky
Should drop a wild duck on a little pond
Where cattle drink! Strange that a duck should fly
Down here, when there are lakes a day beyond!
Slowly it drags across the silken green
Two silver threads...and fastens them quite near
As if the seam were done—Perhaps the sheen,
Reflecting an old moonlight, drew it here.

Strange that your eye should waver on the sight,
When it has guided death so oft before
To innocence as wild! And stranger still
A wild duck should withhold its wings from flight!—
As if it had no heart for flying more,
And calmly waited, knowing you would kill.

IX

Machinery of muscles needs no mind
When truant hands have memorized the plow—
And vagrant feet, their narrow path behind
The traces' rhythm. Then will thought unbrow
Itself, to wander wide with blackbird eyes
Over the crumbled secrets of the earth...
All tanged and moist out of its tomb, here lies
With Time what once was trees, what on their girth
Was lichens that they suckled; and with these
What after them upreared their mould to grain—
Unvestiged!—Dust of dust!... Oh thought that flees
On frantic killdeer wings, why turn again
To ask, when each cold clod keeps answering:
You must dissolve to be a deathless thing?

X

More than a cold sharp-flattened piece of stone,
This arrow-flint your eyes and hand have found!
Frost and the plow have brought up from the ground
Thought-animated ghosts of flesh and bone.
They move among the trees you never knew,
Where you are an illusion and not they.
Here in the resurrected yesterday
This path is not—the now is not—nor you!

The unborn moment screams into the past!
And long you think how thus your fate will sever
Finite you from time to which you cleave;
And long you think how deeds you dream to leave
May be as flints when you are dust at last,
Or only winter footprints lost for ever.

XI

It seems a short hour since the heavy sun
Splashed red behind the pasture-distant town;
Since you, although too proud of shoes to run,
Were all but running where this path dips down—
Parting the pungent sheep as wind a cloud,
And laying wide a swath of grasshoppers—
While Sunday evening bells were no more loud
Than your heart calling to its tryst with hers.

And now the sun's pale ghost, a midnight moon,
Watches your slow pace homeward through the dew;
A frog-choir listens, and resumes its tune;
A small breeze comes and sighs and touches you—
And sound and shadow join to make this seem
Another world, and her late kiss a dream.

XII

Not like the rounding wave a stone has made,
Rousing from hidden deeps a hoarsened sound;
Nor like the faint stir when a leaf, all browned,
Is by a breeze on cool smooth water laid;
Nor like pool-dimples when it rains at last;
Nor like the little wake so quick to follow
The swift kiss of a mirrored evening swallow—
Was the strange smile that moved your face... and passed.

Mirthless it was, in one stark moment seen;
More like an upsurge on a somber pond
When, down beneath, a shape we never know
Flounders and dives in haste to denser green.
And all the while your unlit gaze beyond
Was dark with secrets as the depths below.

XIII

Nor that your scythe has strewn on yellow dust
Feathery little shreds of open sky
Caught on these ironweeds, and golden rust
Froned on green where speed-blind wheels go by;
Not that your hoe has found their mortal core
And laid the thistles' purple pompons low,
Brave tufts of sunset cloud that wave no more
Over the tender grass where cattle go;
Not that such wake of seeming cruelty
Follows your footsteps, do they pity you—
But that some shadow falling on your days
Should leave your heart a numb and silent tree,
And your now disillusioned mind should view
Beauty as but a weed in other ways.

XIV

Oh it is lonely and bewildering
Treading the rustled aisle through forest corn!—
Lonely to feel the green warm quiet cling
So close; to feel your entity forlorn
As any drooping shadow's on the ground—
Your questing thoughts as prodigally vain
As pollen, golden pollen dropped around
Your feet poor dust that might have fathered grain!

But there is yet a lonelier solitude:
In the numb aisle, where stalks are old and bowed;
In the crisp aisle, and edged, where time has sown
A sterile silver!—Awful to intrude
Among the rifled husks, and in a crowd
Of shadows hear no footfalls but your own!

XV

Something about old paths is always luring,
No matter where they lead. And something stays,
After the feet have followed once, that weighs
To make the first adventured prints enduring
Though they are buried and the graves erased.
Not little cloven hooves of sheep, nor leaf,
Nor even winter's spoor in iced relief
Can quite obliterate... There still is traced
Over the pasture knoll, indelibly,
The pressure of dead steps. Yet here it rends
Beneath a log!—and by that bluff-edge...ends!
Whatever in old paths feet would obey
Comes to this grief at last: a fallen tree,
A high bank caved and crumbed and washed away.

XVI

The trees are gone... and the brown pasture road.
In sunken parallels beneath this green
Is graved the pressure of each rolling load
That passes here no more. And I have seen
No footprints in the new dust over there
That I might follow you. And I have had
No answer from the fields to tell me where
To find you. You are gone... and I am glad.

Here is the pond, and on its pane the skies,
And in the skies dun clouds around a face—
A lean face, bitter-lipped, with baffled eyes.
Yours? No, not yours!... A tossed rock will erase
The image here—but not the shivered pond
And gray stumps and a stranger's house beyond!

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 9–24.

Wild Hares at Night

Under a shady, shaken water
Sunbeams dance at noon,
In green veils over golden,
To rhythms with no tune.
Phantom the motion, and ended soon!—
But weird... weird is the dance in winter
Of hares beneath the moon!

Sired of a silence gray and frozen;
Wombed of an ambush waiting low—
They dance on shrouds of silver:
Four quick turns, and go.
And all that is left the watcher,
Who creeps there as a foe,
Is the drumming heart they dance to—
The cold—the shade the moon: and snow.

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 25.

Answers for My Son

Where has the dark Night gone?
Look up the hollow in some old tree—
Musty as bone meal, and chimney black.
Squint up where the beetles gnaw—and see.

Where is the Night at noon?
Peer down the mouth of the groundhog's den
Deep in the hill-clay that smells of him—
Where sound blown in comes out again.

Where does the Night keep house?
Look back of the hay in the web-hung mow.
There by the rafters, upside down,
Her children, the bats, are sleeping now.

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 26.

As March Would Say

Bare not your teeth to curse the wind, my friend,
Though it should fling you gasping from your path!
Think not the wind is frightened by your wrath
When it has mocked the maddened seas that send
Their frothing hound-waves leaping at its heels;
When it has chortled at the frenzied trees
That lash its flanks, and tumble to their knees
On broken whips at last—when it but squeals
In glee when angry mountains think to close
Their towering gates on it. And even you
The wind will mock; so do not curse it, lest
It snatch your tender life out of your chest!
Yield it your path, or do as those clouds do:
Lean on its mane and ride it where it goes.

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Drouth

A Symphonic Narrative

Prelude

Are you who ride that swift intruding train,
 Halving the solitude with smoke and din,
 Sick of the heated solids and the turfless ways?—
 Sick of the rigid verticals your daily gaze
 Has battered wings upon?— Your flight is vain.
 The hardness of your city is a chain
 Whose clangor even now you travel in.
 And your escape across the sweltering plain
 Drags the foul city breath behind you, pennant thin.
 Do you hunt freedom from the links of pain?
 They'll not be broken here.
 Would you drink happiness from this wide view?
 The drink is dear.
 Bitter cannot be washed with bitterness—ride by.
 Thirst is not quenched with thirst. A drouth more dry
 Than you have fled is watching you.
 ... Distance paints out the train with one quick stroke.
 The haggard Quiet, that awoke
 And propped her head on ancient palms to hear
 A foreign sound that passed too near,
 Sinks back upon her belly and resumes her dreams.
 There in the gaping furnace of the sky
 The white sun melts, and man's weak eye
 Turns from the torture of the molten beams
 To look at black suns falling—falling—through the heat.
 Over the fields a small wind drags its feet,
 And pants and moves from shade to shade
 Too tired to bend one slender leaf or blade.
 The cooling brook of May is now a wound a wound to bare
 The very bones of earth to summer's glare.
 The thirsty trees stand hopeless in their tracks;
 And under them the wretched sheep breathe audibly,
 And horses, drooping jowls to tails,
 Stomp the gray dust and switch the lean flies wearily;
 And bony cows lick down their welted backs
 And chew their cuds dejectedly...

The withered grass is hot, the dust is hot—the heat assails
The northern bark that never knows the sun.
Heat lies in pressing waves on wilting corn,
On yellow stubble, where, unsheltered and forlorn,
The little mouse-eared stems of clover
Keep listening for rain and hearing none.
No cloud or bird goes drifting over,
Whose shadow might be soothing to the ground.
And through this aching solitude at summer noon
There runs no saving rivulet of song.
In feathered throats all springs of tune
Have shrunk and dried from panting breath so long
Blown over them.

Now in the dense air far around
All sounds have dwindled to a drone
Of unseen wings in dismal monotone.

I

Here is an ancient farmhouse smothered in
By pine and maple green, and lidded down by tin.
Out from the grayed walls, clumping stolidly,
Jarring the silence with the click of shut screen door,
A man comes, and a youth who wears maturity.
Under the drooped arms of a tree
They bend like weeds that will be straight no more—
Retrieve their worn hats from the clean-swept ground,
And force tired strides across a backyard oven-browned.

This youth could swagger—but not now;
Could whistle, but the sun, intently grim,
Has stitched his lips together, and his young soul lies
Bitter and cowed behind the shaded eyes.
Mute as the shadow under him
That hugs and drags as though to trip his slow dead feet,
He enters the old stable—under the sagged mow—
... Behind the pungent stalls of dusk and heat.
Far back he seeks a lonely mare,
Whose twitching hide and swung tail keep
A vigil for the flies that thirst around her sleep.
The head bowed on the manger in the pose of prayer
May dream the swarm a stinging weather;
Maybe a dream takes off the burning leather
From brine-incrusted neck and back—takes off the years,
The eighteen hot Julys since colthood, and she feels
Hot blood of freedom urge her heels.

Whatever dream, it soon becomes a blur
 Through which intrudes the dull reality she hears:
 A scuffed foot and a bridle nearing her.
 The mare and youth greet silently. Each speaks
 What needs no whinny and no word.
 Her bent neck speaks, and more is heard
 Than he could ever translate to his tongue.
 Fingers that feed a hard bit now to crease her mouth
 Speak and are understood—mute comment on the drouth
 And its unbroken heat and labor never done—
 Dumb comment on the years and months and weeks
 That aged her and have left him young,
 Though foaled on the same night of pain.

Slowly, in time to clink and clank of chain,
 She follows woodenly outdoors to face the sun.
 In the green trough where day on day
 That panting star has pressed his lips,
 Trying to ease the thirst of fire in vain,
 She noses back the tepid scum, and sips and sips—
 ...

And wakes a school of darting beams below,
 Spawned there to spoil the pump's cool flow.
 She drinks pretendingly, to gain delay,
 And lingers, mouth-immersed, till she is dragged away.

Stern as the glare that presses on his back,
 The bronzed man waits—a guard with shouldered hoe
 Who keeps the warped gate wide for them to pass.
 It bangs, the traces jangle, and they go—
 And yellow dust puffs up like smoke along their track,
 And blurs the road and chokes the pleading grass.

II

Men must be named?—The words are spread
 ... Too thinly on the breathing and the dead.
 As well to label every fly, and know a fly!
 William is baby, old man, boy half grown—
 Is dark and fair, and short and tall.
 And who can tell, if he should call
 A stranger's name until it echo wall to wall,
 Whether the man can answer it again.
 All names are weak enough, but names of men
 Wither into a breath, a scrawl,
 And gray enigmas scarred on stone.

Here in a sweltering forest of pale green,
Where three months earlier was nothing but the ground,
A man, Ed Morgan, tensed upon his hoe.
Few could have found
The man Ed Morgan underneath that name,
As no one, peering from the field-edge, could have seen
His bending body far along the row—
Shouldering another afternoon of flame
Like a swayed bush years of wilting drouth
Have stunted out of shape and left to grow.
The lean stalks, crowding east and west and north and south,
Hid him like any shadow deep within their mass,
Hid him as any thicket of the grass
Will hide a rabbit from a hound—
But could not hide him from that hawking pupil of the sky.
That blazing center bored in day's wide eye
Seemed to be focussed on this field of all around...
On this corn only, and these weeds, this man, this ground.
Ed Morgan's shoulders rocked beneath the heat.
His body lurched. The dust he stirred with hoe and feet
Clung to his pores as if the ooze were good.
Each dowdy ragweed, cut and torn
By angry steel from its forbidden place
Between the burnt shins of the corn,
Bled its small drop and fell upon its face.

The shrinking corn around this havoc stood
Still as its dry and dwindled shade—
Stood with the pennant of each blade,
That tier by tier had been unfurled to swing and glisten
Along the tender columns of their growing,
Now dull and half-refurled and limp and drawn.
The corn's young pride was gone, its music gone—
A memory like the rustling wake of dawn,
Silent as drouth now... drouth and no wind blowing.

Had any cupped ear stooped a rod away to listen
It would have caught no sound
But the hot thwacking of a hoe on weeds and ground—
Like the harsh crackle of a fire that mows
A swath of ash to drop where stubble stood.
There was a rhythm in this stride of death.
But Morgan heard one that no other could—
Hate's rhythm in his blood—hard sullen blows
That drummed and drummed to the accompaniment of breath.
The hoe-blade was an instrument of hate

With which he beat defiance to the sun, the drouth,
 And the hard Sower of seeds, unwanted seeds.
 His arms kept time. He panted through his mouth.
 The hunched and cowering weeds
 Toughened to little trees against their stormy fate,
 Clung fast, and gave the ugly life they cherished so
 With a dry gasping sound beneath the hoe.
 These bastard children of the wind, that mocked man's plow,
 Their evil breathing spent, were now
 Softened at last—as tame and weak
 As the gaunt litter they had crowded cheek to cheek
 Along the feverish impartial breast.

... Hate-driven muscles begged for rest.
 But hate is iron. Whether it break or bend
 Hate is still hard—it must be melted or be worn away.
 Straightening, the man looked backward to the dim field-end,
 Gloating upon the disarray
 Of limp weeds strewn to where he stood.
 Their pungency was good. Stains on his hoe were good.
 Yet, though his hate were doubled on these dead
 To shred their bodies into bits and trample on—
 Though the condemned and yet to die were spread
 In one long carpet, hate would not be gone—
 Would not be budged a thought-pace from his mind.
 Weeds?—Weeds were so much work to put behind
 Out of the fields of dry years yet untended.
 It was not weeds he hated, nor the drouth
 Whose ash for days had been a lye to sear his mouth,
 Nor the great sire of thirst whose own thirst never ended.
 These drew his anger only because his aim
 Failed to draw bead on what was more to blame.

He stared before him—stared with squinted eye
 As if that target, suddenly,
 Might leap from the invisible into the sky—
 Leap as a bold star does, a twilight star.
 Over the field the taller grown
 Lifted the first of tassels near and far,
 Pale slender fingers reaching timidly
 As though to try the hotness of the upper air
 Or find which way the wind blew, had it blown;
 More as though, awed, the stalks were standing there
 Pointing—pointing to what they saw and he could not.

Ed Morgan's gaze fell back from where it ranged
 Under the sun's glare, fixing on a spot

Of blankness level with his eyes.

The corn was changed.

The cornfield was a green lake risen to his chin—
A lake whose surface kept the secret of the floor,
Hiding the underlying knolls of saffron clay
The dusky draws, all contours known before.
The stagnant shallow he was standing in
Could still be waded from, but off a little way
Where a thick scum of tassels lay
A man who could not swim would drown.
That scum would leave no trace of going down,
And the last breath would raise no bubble.
When fall knives drained this lake to stubble
And the hot depths were gone,
There would be barren stalks to stumble on.

Out from the tasselled patch a rustle came,
And a voice came. The glisten of a hame
Flashed, and its knob was like a bubble on a stream.
And then a mane showed, and the old mare's head,
Not stretched before her as a horse should swim,
But nodding—nodding as if her skull were stone
Desiring its return to the moist bed.
A straw hat floated after... and it came to him:
What if these things were real, and not his crazy dream
Out of a hot brow too full of blood?
What if his son were gone and he were left alone?
Alone!—That was a thought to melt the iron of hate—
... A thought to break the dam and loose the flood
From aching temple veins.
What then would be the use of the eventful rains
Bathing the parched face of this beseeching earth?
And what would the saved crop be worth?

The thought that Bob, his son, would sometime go
From the old farm of Morgans to another field,
Not by death's gate but by a gate
Like death's, was added weight upon whatever hoe
Or ax or scythe or fork he had to wield—
More sobering than summer drouth,
Or the brown fall of leaves, or the gray fall of snow,
Or a late spring whose cloudy grieving is disconsolate.

The sun lapped at the field's undrinkable green lake
 Although he could not lower it one inch, or slake
 The mad thirst of white fire by one degree.
 Morgan looked down. He saw how many weeds were standing yet
 To trip his feet or make a carpet for their ache.
 His forehead dripped—neck, belly, thighs were wet
 With pungent water as though risen from a sea.
 Cloth slid upon a lubricant of sweat
 As he resumed his rhythm there along the row—
 Bending and flailing with a heavy hoe,
 Tired arms more heavy implements to make it go.

III

No public wheels, no strange hooves, pass
 This knoll-top and its foliage nest
 Where the old house of Morgans, turkey-wise,
 Smothers a mould of long-forgotten grass.
 And no dust rides the northwind or the west
 So far back off the road to mock its eyes.
 The speeding birds; the hot suns plodding home to rest;
 Gaunt moons and moons with child, who light
 Paths for the small stars limping by their sides.
 Are all the travelers by day or night
 To peer into the secrets that it hides.
 Over the farm it stares as one whose hair is white
 Stares through the present to some past he sees.
 And the most intimate memories
 Of all that it has seen since birth
 Would be no safer kept by heavy doors of earth.
 A musty parlor where the dawn is kept
 At twilight through the noon till darkness falls
 Is the last stand of coolness here in time of drouth—
 A room that must be swept
 But never lived in, save by ghosts around the walls
 Eyeing the closed front door but answering no knock.
 The livingroom of Morgans not yet dead
 Is the wide kitchen facing south—
 Hung with the sober features of a clock,
 And calendars where Time's lean spider crawls and crawls
 Over the web-caught days till each is bled.

Cooped in these walls, a hot roof overhead,
Belle Morgan stood and walked her miles and tended
A field where drouth was never ended.
Dews could not help her chore-crop, nor the rains.
Though a cool wet should blear the window-panes
And the mad sun grope shivering down the sky
With caught breath, two flames would not die—
Heat would be red still in the stove and in her veins.

Risen from mopping now on aching knees,
Her head's fire roared. She swayed on aching feet.
Her smothery damp hair flowed this way and that
Like a light grass made heavy with the heat—
A grass hoof-tangled by a withered breeze
Into a limp and sorry mat.
Like weathered straw around a dewy stack
It clung upon her flushed wet face
Till forking fingers combed it back,
Shifting a pin by habit to a firmer place.
Over the dark pool in a wooden pail
She loosed a brown gourd from its nail,
And dipped, and drank a wet warmth that her tongue
Forgot before the gourd was hung.
Then with a mending sack, the heavy hoard
Of wear the week had saved for her,
She plodded to the screen porch—where no stir
Of half-expected coolness greeted her;
Where no sound greeted, but the dry plaint of a board
When her slumped weight awoke a chair,
That and the voice of flies to plague her there.

Sweetpeas, with small hands fisted on the bars of twine
Between her cell of shade and theirs of shine,
Looked in and listened to her dismal rock—
Looked in and watched her stretch a sock
Over her palm, and knit the hole shut in the heel.
Their poor flushed faces drooped, and she could feel
Their dumb plea for the night, for drink.
But the worn socks plead with her to think
More of her son's and husband's feet
That ground the shabby threads and wore them through,
Wading the field's dust and the heat,
And then at evening dragged the stains indoors to her.
All stains of labor came indoors to her.

These socks, she thought, how like they were!
The empty foot-clothes paired, she hardly knew

Which were her son's and which the other's—
As she could hardly tell the voices of the two
In the still darkness after lamps were blown.
Father and son were brothers!
Robert was not her child since he had grown—
Grown as a lean stalk after rain
Leaps suddenly mature before the eyes.
Though her torn womb had long forgot its pain,
A travail was still poignant in her brain.
Robert a man, was hard to realize—
But not so hard as for delivering thought to rise
And find a still-born dream where it had lain...
Daily to rise and fondle what was dead.
Was it too much to pray for, that she prayed in vain?
Did God rebuke her, giving Morgan blood
This power to mark out hers, as a dark flood
Muddies the spring's flow it has wed?
The new stream which her joining blood had fed
Now mocked her—mocked her as a mirror, blurred
With frozen swirls and fixed impressions of a rain,
Mocks with a stranger on its pane.
No likeness of herself was registered
In any eye-glimpse, any moving trait.
Robert had all his father's looks, his talk, his gait.
He had the same queer ways
Of smiling as a dog does, or a caught raccoon
That squints beneath the white glare of a noon
And laughs with the mock eyes of yellow brows—
Laughs only with the brows, the wrinkles—while the gaze
Broods or peeps cornerwise
For a crouched fear behind the eyes.
And after the rare smiles a tautness lay
On their dark features like a frozen pall.
And silence, like a shadow's fall,
Like the long quiet of a winter night
After the brief and windy sparkle of its day,
Wrapped their communion tight.
Nothing to do, then, but go groping with no light—
Groping to find their hearts...and touch a wall.
It was as still when they were with her as when gone,
And lonely as this solitude she stared upon.

A panting hen and plaintive brood
Came round the porch-end like a bunch of leaves,
To where the willow stooped beside the milkhouse eaves
And dabbled with her fingers on the ground,

Coaxing to tepid water and dry food.
Three pungent sheep in lassitude
Lay close outside the yard beneath the pine,
The rapid bellows'-pressure of their sides
Shaking the glistening fence-wire all around
Until the rhythm of its wavy line
Was like the heat's own—heat in dizzy tides.
She heard an old ewe's molars grind,
Making a parched and dismal sound
As if a file were edged across the solitude.
Each way she looked or listened she could find
No cooling brace to fortitude,
Nothing to ease the hot thirst in her mind.

The sweetpeas pitied her and begged for pity in return.
They leaned in close as though afraid
They might be withered like the grass by the sun's burn;
Or that their pink and lavender might fade
Like dandelion gold upon the lawn—
Bleach to the dull gray of the gingham she had on,
And every sign of youth, like hers, be gone.

Youth? When was youth?—When was she ever young?
Seeing her hands of age, her dress that clung
On thighs of age, could half convince the eye
Her youth was but a slumber's pretty lie.
The dreams of silk a slim girl had caressed
Were cotton now in the mind's chest.
And dreams of pearls dissolved to beads of sweat
Rolled to the bony level of her breast.
Only the price of pearls and silk was yet
A dream unwaked from—only gold still bright
Of the old wishes wished in childhood's play
On the first star to open out its light
In each great flowerbed of night.

Reminded of that want brought worry's dark again—
A night in day as starless as the day.
Why did good fortune touch this farm and turn away?
Why did the Morgans fail so?—And she thought of men
Who took the interest of sown gold with a laugh,
A whole crop to their half.

The drouth sucked equally at each farm.
And the flood's hand in spring, and the fall frost,
And the wind's breath worked equal harm.
Where in between the earth's bin and their own
Was so much yellow gold and brown gold lost?
And would they save it were this known?
Not Ed—for he would lay the blame on Providence

...

And pull the silence of his dark mood like a shirt
Over his head, and button it upon a hurt.
Not Robert—he would copy him.
Adding a hat jerked on with violence
To hide an eye-glare in the shadow of its brim.
Over a heel she pulled the last thread taut.
But the tired needle of her thought
Went forward, shuttling without end
Round the worn heels of worry she could never mend.

The mad sun stooped to glare beneath the eaves,
And Belle could feel the flush that rouged her face
Burn wider; and the flesh in clinging sleeves
And under the worn dress in every hidden place
Felt red, as though a scald were laid
Clear to the skin's end on her feet.
Stiff muscles moved her into shade,
But the sun's breath followed her retreat.

She wondered if the pine there by the fence,
Standing between the sheep so carefully,
So rock-erect upon its shadow, so alone
Among the native boughs' indifference,
Was patient as it looked. Or was it tense
With a drawn hardness rosin-bitter as her own?
She felt a kinship in that tree
Transplanted from the far ground it had known,
And in the willow by the milkhouse that had grown
From a young branch thrust into this earth.
Often she felt as if they three
Were sisters from the same soil of birth.

When the wind moved they talked to her.
The pine would moan in sympathy
And the sad willow wring its hands for things that were.
Now they were unresponsive in the heat.
One facing heaven and one bowing low, they stood
Like women rapt in prayer—

Repeating to their hearts in spite of drouth's despair
How God was just, how God was good.
Thus they rebuked her heart to pray, again entreat
God's pity on her motherhood,
And try to grow a lusty hope once more
Out of the stump of one that spread before
And now was ashes under the wind's feet.
There still was Little David, barely four,
Whom she had dreaded fifteen years to meet.
He might be hers, be all her son!
Surely his love was not a lamb's love for its ewe—

...

Weaned like the lips as soon as dugs were dry!
David would cherish her with dreams brought true
Out of this earth, under this sky!
He must! If he was like the older one,
Then it would be too late for her -.
Too late for all ambition but to die
Braving her heart to say "God's will be done" ...
How did old women say "God's will be done?"
She sought the pine for comfort, and the willow—
And could not find them, found and lost them in a blur
Of steely day too burnished for the eye.
She yearned to a small head upon its pillow—
Rolling, perhaps, from cheek to fevered cheek
In the hot bedroom where he took his nap.
She put the mending from her lap
And rose to go to him,
Leaving a creak of bones in the chair's creak.
She stood a moment in a pent twilight
Dark as a night's end to her narrowed sight,
And watched a dawn-revelment grow less dim
As the blinds leaked at every veiny crack-...
Watched how the hot day filled the room
In spite of hands that strove to hold it back,
Small hands of maple leaves in silhouette.
She saw him now, deep in the fading gloom,
Moist with a stagnant dew of sweat;
Saw the bare feet sprawled off the pallet on the floor,
Feet that had kicked so in her womb
Impatient for a romp on earth;
And the flushed lips, now dry and curled apart—
Lips that a short hour after birth
Met smacking round the nipple, till the heart
Itself was tugged at and made sore.

Four years!—It did not seem a day ago
 That he would squeeze the empty breast for more,
 And peep at her and stretch and make a gurgly crow,
 And fall asleep as now he slept
 With the fat fingers curving to a fist.
 With clumsy tip-toe stealth she crept
 To the old dresser for a palm fan lying there;
 Crept back and knelt, and fearful lest he stir
 Kissed him—and took a taste of tears from where she kissed.
 She fanned a breeze as soft as breath among his hair,
 And wondered what the dreams beneath it were,
 And searched his features for her own—
 Wondering if he would still be wearing them when grown.

IV

The day burned on, the thirsting eye of drouth
 Intent now on a movement to and fro
 Through the green shallows of the field below—
 Keeping a coiled snake's weaving stare
 On the slow march of Robert Morgan and the mare
 From south to north and back from north to south.
 And no one looking with the same eye could have said
 Whether the youth drove or was led;
 Whether the harrow guided by his hold
 Was dragged by her or was a weight for both;
 Whether his lips, like tight halves of a mold,
 Were hardening a prayer, a groan, an oath.

The harrow clutched along the ground.
 It raked its claws with a dull tearing sound
 Behind the pungent progress of the mare.
 The leather groaned at every stride
 With the hot labor of the tear.
 And Robert followed with a jerking tread—
 Head down, as if his temples' blood were lead,
 As if his gaze, sun-drunk and sweaty-eyed,
 Fixed on a waded fog that sought to rise
 To bathe the gall between his thighs.
 No mist, but heavy dust that smoked the air
 As if the harrow's drag were covering a blaze.
 His hands were fists. His thoughts were fists.
 His gritty teeth
 Pressed hardness into hardness—jaws were numb.
 Yet all this tensity and bitter beyond taste
 Was less from fire long trampled underneath,

Less from a fire-breath of long-burning days,
Than from a drouth his soul now faced.
Flesh could be stoical—all bitted mouths are dumb;
But the hurt soul—unbroken, being young
Would rage to feel how tight fate's harness clung.

Robert could feel a chain's pull at each stride.
The tired mare, with her head a wedge
Splitting the green to rows on either side,
And he behind her in the roiling path
Were slaves in file—linked by the tool and traces.
And the brushed corn, with leaves on edge,
Was flicking him with whips to tease his wrath.
He and the horse kept time with equal paces.
He tried to break the march time—it returned,
As if the feet preferred a habit they had learned.
The squeaking leather and the singletree
Kept time, the lungs kept time, the heart—
Nothing escaped the measure, whole or part.
Life was the measure!—None were free!

Why was he harrowing?—he thought.
The clods were long since powder under foot!
The ragweeds and the foxtail, wise with fear,
Clung round the corn and were not caught.
They knew the claws of steel would not come near
To disentangle root from root.
And harrowing for dampness was as little use—
As if the old rains and the dews,
Long drunk, could be returned to lips once more
And drunk again and found as sweet!
Moisture that he could draw from the deep store
Would only tantalize, it could not slake
The corn's thirst nor relieve its heat.
No field was watered in a drouth
Save by an acrid wet that mocked the mouth
Of each dry plant that tasted—while the dust
Shrinking from that foul water in disgust,
Would writhe and retch beneath the feet.

Why was he harrowing? For no plant's sake!
... He felt the gaunt stalks all around
Plead with his eyes to look at them.
He felt the whole field crowding to condemn
When he refused to lift his tired gaze from the ground.
All this was like a dream he had.
Night after night, each summer since a lad,

He dreamed it—dreamed and woke and still could feel
Stalks crowding, millions every way he faced!...
Lean stalks as near as grass to one another,
Accusing him, and coming close to touch, to smother.
And here that pantomime of dark was unerased,
Was only shown more vivid and more real—
Shown to be life!... And neither sweat nor tear
Nor dawn could wash that from the eyes.
Corn!... Acres yet to face, long year on year!
Wide acres multiplied by rows, by stalks in rows—
Rows to be straddled, to be walked between.
All through his head he felt the pent blood rise
And beat on walls with fisted blows.
... In front the old mare butted through the green.
And on each side the corn moved back to let them pass—
Stepped back, stepped forward in a crowding mass
And drove them like two prisoners tandem-wise.

Then they were stopped, and traces slack.
The brined mare nosed the rail-fence, panting wearily.
And silence panted there beside as wearily.
But the keen ears in Robert's mind
Could hear among the still corn just behind
A slow inaudible approach of feet.
He turned his eyes, his throbbing head, his back—
Turned his whole body—and stood prickly with fear's heat
Watching his heavy-footed track
Come down the glistening aisle to him.
And all around his own track, shadow-dim,
Were others side by side and overlaid—
Footprints of Morgans that were made
In summers long before his feet were born—
Ghosts risen from the dust among the ghosts of corn.

Old crops, old aches, were gone. The feet were gone.
And yet this dirt they'd trampled on
Perhaps could still recall
How many times from spring to fall
It had been cursed by Morgan mouths;
How many Morgan men, in spite of drouths
After the Junes' weed-sowing rains,
Had loved it, bent their backs to it with pride.
All who had loved were free men till they died;
Only the haters had been bound with chains.
Once hating and once bound so, there were none
Whose strength could break them—only one.

His Uncle Grant, his father's twin,
Had cursed the driver and gone free.
Freedom had swallowed him as any bird or bee
Is swallowed by the sky—had taken in
Even that ghost of him, his memory.

... One afternoon like this that shrank and burned
Grant Morgan left a plow beside the row,
A bare horse halted in the stall,
And footprints in the road-dust—That was all
Morgans or neighbors ever learned.
The wheels had written years ago
Over the page of dust, that none might ever know.
Robert had heard this once, no more. And now the name
Itself lay quiet—quiet as though hidden
Under a stone sagged over, or forbidden
Past the tight lips of Morgan shame...

Between the bright rows cowering from the sun
All tracks were graved to him—save one,
Grant Morgan's footprints leading out,
Out of the hot corn and away forever.
His raw eyes followed them. He faced about,
Looking along the field-edge toward the gate.
The toes were in the heel's place and the track returned.
The track was his!... His feet could never
Leave the old dust though freed by files of hate.

The harrow handles burned. Lines round his wet waist burned.
The white flames danced on spike and frame and chain—
Danced on the fly-stung mare that stood
Pegging her shadow down with legs of wood—
Danced on the field beyond, a prickly plain
Of stubble where his tracks were laid.
Grasshoppers played a wailing strain,
Sawing on one string only, as a tune
For flames to dance by—and the crickets made
A little sound of fire along the ground.

His watch, his heart, made echoes of the sound.
On such a blazing afternoon...
He day-dreamed... and the sharp reality
Of thirst, and white heat dancing, seemed
A dream less real than this he dreamed:
Himself emerging from himself, so that he made
Two living shapes—the one that stayed
Here in his last tracks like a boy afraid,

And one there with a man's stride going free—
 One shape that watched and one shape walking free.
 And then they stood together at a leap! He heard
 Chains rattle!—chains that were binding still—
 And suddenly awoke, and had not stirred.
 The mare stood quivering from tail to head,
 Shaking herself, as though to throw
 The riding iron and straps—as though to shed
 All things that bound her save his word;
 But more as if by shrug of will
 Waking her bones to march the next long row.

He pitied her—and yet himself the more.
 The harness and the chains she wore
 Were not to earn a wage with like his wage,
 Nor to repay a kindness though she prick her ears
 And reach her tender nose for it.
 She did not think: these men are kind;
 And since they feed me, roof me well for years,
 I'll let them notch my dumb mouth with a bit,
 And wear the harness willingly,
 And strain and bear and sweat, and then in age
 Bother them only to remove what's left of me.
 She felt no debt, and she obeyed no voice but that behind.
 She did not know how duty drove one through the mind.
 She did not know what the books said;
 Nor did she know how tiny on the earth
 Was fifteen hands... how soon from birth
 Barns would forget her nicker and the fields her tread.
 As if to ask him why he had not stirred
 There by the harrow, or by jerk or word
 Turned her, or why if time to quit and go
 He left her hitched, she pointed ears and whinnied low.
 He went around to her... and felt a scald
 From flanks as wet as if she stood in rain—
 And saw the bay sides painted gray and brown.
 He eased the collar where her neck was galled
 And felt the skin dodge—saw it twitch in pain
 Until the black cascade of mane
 Was jerked awry and part sent tumbling down
 Over the left side out of place.
 He shared the hurt and hugged her bony face—
 Hugged her and murmured boy-talk in her ears,
 Calling her Dolly, Dolly Girl, until the tears,
 Dammed in his throat, made whispers of the name.
 Then he was calmed by sudden shame

Lest he was seen thus acting under years.
He felt her nostrils swell with friendly sighs
Under his cheek—looked up, and cooled his bitter burns
Deep in the tender moss and ferns
And oblong pools of darkness in her eyes.
He longed for deeper pools—a pool to hold
All flesh and blood till they were cold,
A pool of night in which all flame
Would sink and lie immersed till days became
Light without fire, and this hot sun a moon—
A moon adrift among the ice-floes in a sea
Cooling this shore eternally.
The wish was chilling drink that left him soon
More dry, more parched...
On such an afternoon
Grant Morgan found the strength to go—
Found strength to harvest his rebellion—why not he?
Over the glistening field-top he could see
His father's head above a distant row—
Dark as a lump of smut upon a stalk—
No larger than a crow's head, than a fly's
Upon a brush of grass before the eyes.
Too small to be a man's head that could talk
And yawn and sneer and laugh and frown!—
A head with no man's frame to rest upon.
Features could not be seen, and yet he knew the face
Was turned toward his. It stared... and then was gone,
As if a weight had jerked it down.
Commanded by that momentary stare,
His will slid back into the groove—
Muscle and bone slid back. He took his place
Behind the harrow, gripped it—but it did not move.
As in a stupor, then, he shook the lines along the mare
And saw her turning, saw a slackened trace
Trampled beneath her foot and the foot shifted.
And like a scale's end when a weight is lifted
The right end of the singletree
Flew backward, and the one trace dangled free!
The mare stood still, as though for him to see
How easily the chain had come unhooked.
Dizzied as from a blow, he looked...
He stooped. He felt his eager hands unhitching her.
He felt that only—and the ground
... On which he numbly followed where she led,
A stream-bed where he floundered through a blur
After a far-off tinkling sound.

The brown fence on the left, the green corn on the right,
And the loud gate through which they fled
Were blurs—and heat and the white light
Dancing along the pasture road were only space
Through which his thought ran on ahead
Impatient as a wind at the feet's pace.

... They'd reached the stable now—
Though neither feet nor eyes remembered how.
They stood in shade and breathed the pent shade air
Under the smothering hover of the mow.
His hands were sticky with her sweat,
And the moist harness hung upon its peg,
And she was close and odorous and bare—
Bare of all straps but those of salt, that bound her yet
Over the shoulder, back, and down each leg.
Then the full meaning of their presence here
Entered his mind and made the milling senses start
With a quick shock of happiness, of fear—
Of mingled joy and dread, and dread the larger part.
And he could feel his slackened heart
Pounding as if his clinging shirt
Alone were holding back each blow.
Out of a dried-up mouth he spat upon the dirt
As a boy does in scorn of dread,
And smiled to think how he had gotten free.
And yet the thought of freedom perched uneasily
Like a loosed bird not knowing where to go—
Like a freed bird that peers and turns its head
No fonder of the flown to than the fled.

As from a distance or beyond a wall
He heard the old mare nickering to be fed,
And felt her crowd him in the torrid stall,
And saw her leaning and her gaunt head thrust
Into the manger depths as if she drank.
The empty manger was a brimming tank
Whose warm dark drink was lowered not at all
Though her lips sank among the dregs of dust.
Thinking the lips should have their wish of hay,
He clambered past her hot breath to the hall
Where hotter breath than hers or that of day
Came from the yawning mouth-spread of the mow.
The stifling memories of other drouths than now
Breathed from the dry stems and the dry old wood.

Forking the crisp green, crackling where he stood,

The sickle-cut, the sun-sucked and sun-dried
Of the last meadow that had died...
It came to him how there would be no more
Drouth and the crops of drouth to labor over;
How this small wispy bunch of clover
He pronged and lifted from the chaffy floor
Would be the last his forehead sweat would drip upon.
He put the fork back, looking round
At beams, at joists, at bins on which were drawn
The pencil-score of bushels that were gone,
At the poor mare whose sad face of a hound
Watched him and listened as she ate the hay.
Her munching made an echo of the sound
His feet made, crunching on their way
Down to the door...

Light leaped to meet his eye
From dust and the wire fence and leaves and sky—
Light too intense to be a single day's,
As though its glitter and its blaze
Were multiplied by all the yesterdays of drouth.
A thirst of eye as much as thirst of mouth
Led him across the barnlot to the well.
The creaking pump brought deep night's coolness up.
He lingered on the water's look, its feel, its smell—
And one old maple watched him drinking sup by sup
And reached her dusty hands to take the cup.
Drouth-pain was in all life around,
And in the ugly fissures which had burst
Along the parched exposures of the ground.
Yet the same drink that eased his thirst,
And the sipped thought that he was free,
Refreshed the visual world, till he could see
Less and still less of its surrounding pain.
He even smiled where once he would have cursed
At the raincrow he heard predicting rain—
Gulping the syllables as though its throat were dry,
As though ashamed of an old lie
Told in the face of contradicting sky.



A gong of thunder woke the quietude!—...
Thunder far off—no louder than a distant bridge
Rumbling beneath a load of hay.
Again it sounded, not so far away.
Again!—And in the level west a ridge
Lifted an inch, a foot, and spread in magnitude.

Ed Morgan in the listening corn stood still.
He watched a herd of clouds from that dark hill
Run to the plain of dazzling sky,
And scatter there, and walk, and stop to graze.
But seeing nought to signify
The end of his farm's drouth, he dropped his gaze
Upon the weedy row once more—
Feeling the hot air heavier than before.

... And Robert, lingering beside the well
Until the pump-lift in his temples fell,
Heard a hoarse muttering of thunder—
Heard it again—but knew the voice did not foretell
A patter on the bough-roof he was under,
Nor streams between the small green shingles loosely laid
Over the tiny timbers the twigs made.
Often the rain came near, came near enough to smell,
Then veered at last and went on by;
And nothing fell but gleams—a rain that made no sound—
And nothing but a dry light leaked upon this ground.
He listened. But the mutterings had ceased.
He walked across the floor of shade
And stood beneath the ragged eaves, and there surveyed
As much bright space as he could suffer with one eye.
He saw the clouds, like great dim buzzards, floating east
To meet the slow sun half way home from noon—
And turned his back upon that sky.
A prospect he had gloated on
Looked otherwise now he'd be going soon.
The sun could die and day be deaf with thunder
And land be sea when he was gone—
But better a clear sky to travel under.
The end of drouth would come too late
Now he was free of the field's dust!
Thus thinking of the gate he'd put behind
Made him forget another gate,
Latched and with hinges locked in rust,

Till the obstruction stopped his running mind
Stopped it as any colt that races blind
Is brought up bruised and quivering on its knees.
Beyond the lot through wilting locust trees,
As from the ambush of a spreading hand,
The old house eyed him—read the thing he planned!

Behind the barn a thicket grows
Where the last Morgan orchard failed to bear.
Young ash and elms and walnuts press
On the dead trunks still upright there—
Stand whisper-close and crowd to slenderness.
The youth's eyes sought a kindred shade
Deep in this smothery growth—sought it as crows
That often turn there to evade
The old house and its window-stare.

His hid gaze threaded where his feet once bare
Had bruised the cidery stones—where arms and knees
Had hugged the patient arms of trees,
Now lowered at last to decompose
Where the fruit fell, and leaves were blown.
Always, he thought, man wanted things in rows!—
The fruit in rows, the grain in rows—
All penned by fences straight as those!
But Nature hated line and square.
She would plant over all that man had sown—
Bulge every fence as here she'd done!
The fields he fled, the barnlot naked to the sun,
Earth under the old house as bare...
All would be forest as before.
The Morgan roof would rust and rot upon its floor
And the worn planks be splintered through
With lean young grass and lean young trees.
The fallen house would nourish these—
They'd be the only children that it knew.
Soon as his fleeing stride was out of sight and sound
The wind might have a chance to sow that ground!
The careless hands behind the sky
Might stir a smoky cloud!—the lightning sparks might fall!...

And a last heap of ash would lie
Against the chimney brick...

Then none would call—
Forever from the one wide doorway none would call!
Silence pulled at his heart. He turned around
As hot as though he faced that fire's mad glow—
As though he'd run a long way back to hear his name.

The shiny windows glared with blame.
The love that built that house was dead—dead long ago;
The love whose tree he was was dead.
It was a dust, an ash of love on which he fed.
Then nothing more was owed of ought and must!...
Duty was also burned to dust.
Was freedom selfish now? The thing he dared
Wronged but the greater selfishness that stared
From the old house. That, and not love, reproved!

Somewhere behind those eyes his mother moved,
And David played or slept upon the floor.
She doted on the boy that so completely took
His place with her—gave him the same soft look
That he himself had won before.
The little brother loved her now—but wait!
Wait till he grew to twice or three times four
And saw the iron between the father and the mother,
The chain drawn taut between each other
By their opposing pull and strain!
Wait till he bruised himself upon that chain
And felt himself a prisoner for their sake
To the long sordid field-rows and the dust, the ache!

His flared emotion, plus a wilder heat
In the day's fevered pulse, made scalding pain
Of each pent river in his brain.
He pumped and drank again, by gulp, by sip.
He watched a bee come whining round his feet
And crawl along the well-top for its drink,
And listen at a crack as drip by drip
Fell to a distant plink and plink—
Surely as measured minutes slip
Into the hollow of time's well.
But there was not a pump to raise
And count again the drops that fell
Into that deeper pool, and there were better ways
To spend these minutes than in counting them.
Better to loiter on the road in the free track!

... Yet a great nausea and dizziness
Drugged his resolve and held him back.
He nerved himself with bitterness:
Thinking the goal he least desired
Was just the one his mother'd least condemn.
The city that she painted black
She also painted golden with success.
However much the mother might be fired
With zeal against its "wickedness",
The woman wanted silks to shimmer in.
For him the wealth had no more flavor than the sin;
One measure held them and both weighed
Less than the buildings and the streets in rows.
Hating the near rows, would he run to those?
He smiled to think how none would guess
The road's end nor the roof he chose.
That plot behind the barn where rows decayed,
That little forest, that small wilderness,
Was a bright pattern of the place he'd go!

... A City founded by the wind—sea-wind to blow
Over one roof of many towers
The wispy smokes of no flue but the night;
And a cool rain to whisper at all hours
Although the roof be dry and the days bright—
That was the road's end long in Robert's mind.
He thought: the only road's end for the free!—...
A place to pioneer again, maybe to find
The way his Uncle Grant had gone
And what adventure led him on.
There for a mother he would have the sea
Forever mothering however wild...
And some old hairy-chested peak would be
A dad no harder or more sternly kind
Than he'd been used to since a child.

Cool as the wind in Robert's dreamed retreat
That could not soothe the aching in his brain,
A quick breeze brushed away the heat
Out of the boughs—and mocked his pain
By breaking like a wave against his ear.
Across the gleaming lot a small shade ran,
Like the lorn shadow of a man without the man;
Like a hawk's shadow, when with silent speed
It flies with Death above a groundling Fear.
Another and another shadow came—...

Passed him like water thrown on flame
And put the white flames out on earth and weed,
On leaf and wall. He watched them slide
To the old house and touch each shining eye,
And the eye blink, go blind, and open wide
With the blank stare of one just dead.
He looked down on the shadow of a sky
Where a low tree's was lately spread,
While loneliness and hot rebellion fought
To own him...

Hot rebellion won.

The clouds were but a trick to have him stay!
His loneliness was but a trick—
And the seared brain-wound left him by the sun!
More maddened at his own delay,
He lurched away, dizzy and sick,
Into the stable for his coat.
And flies against his lips, and acrid scent,
And stagnant shade and stagnant thought
Undammed his wretchedness. He leant,
He clung against the door in misery.

But no heart's gall is emptied by the throat.
Wind rocked his head maliciously,
And filled his sweating face with dust.
He cursed the wind—cursed the Great Must
Whose mouth had blown the dusty breath,
Whose breath had sickened him to make him stay,
Who tried to chain him this last way:
Aging his legs till he could hardly stand.
Always, from painful birth to death,
The Great Must with a whip in hand
To turn him, herd him like a sheep
Toward the dark pen down the last steep!—
Ordering him born of this dad and this mother—
Ordering him born to this life and no other...
And then destroyed!...

He swayed erect.

The retching and the nausea were checked.
Hate checked them. No Inexorable would find
A colt here easily broken to Its mind.
If all the sky fell he would go!
If harnessed to a worm's gait he would go!
Even if Great Feet waited for the worm below!

He heard a lonely nickering...
And turned his eyes to hot stalls in a row,
And saw Old Dolly's tail-brush beckoning.
She was not free! She was a prisoner yet
To rows and chains that he was fleeing!
... He touched her, felt her flank still wet
Quivering beneath his palm as their flesh met.
Then he was in her dank cell, by her side,
Pressing against her, and she stood untied.
He led her by the forelock, without seeing-...
And faced the blown dust to the gate, and flung it wide.
He loosed her and she moved away
Over the trod earth, over the cropped grass.
The iron-weed pickets spread to let her pass;
She waved her tail a last time and was gone.

He thought how there were fences further on
To hem her little freedom of a day...
And shut the gate... and faced his lonely world.
Head down he braved it. And the dark storm hurled
A weight of wind to test him as he strode.
It swayed him, tried to drag his feet from under.
And he could feel the heavy tread of thunder
Lumbering to meet him down the distant road.

VI

Covered with cloud-shade and a twilight air,
The gaunt corn ceased to glisten
In its tight armor—ceased to smother—
Ceased to be stupored with despair.
Stalks raised their haggard heads to listen
To the wind's charge and thunder guns
Coming to raise the weary siege of suns.
They trembled close. They nudged each other.
And wild excited whispers ran
From rank to rank, and roused the lonely man
From his loud business with the weeds and dirt.

He listened. He could feel his sweaty shirt
Grow icy, and the skin beneath a four-day beard
Soothed of its smarting—yet was little cheered
By what he heard and felt, or by the skies
He straightened to re-scan without surprise.
Morgan had seen too many dark clouds come and go
And leave the air and dust he fed upon
Only more bitter dry when they had gone.
The storm might bring the rain, or only blow
A rush of dusty breath along the row.
Better to keep on chopping, and pretend
He loved the drouth and never wanted it to end!
Once more he forced his stiffened back to bend...
And wave on green wave broke upon that back
As the seas break on rock in the tide's track.

Spewn from the storm's volcanic mouth
A muddier flood of cloud now overflowed
The sky-plain, and from north to south
Thickened and darkened as it roiled and rushed.
A great wind came and brushed
A mimic cloud from field and path and road,
Till all the air was dyed a ghastly dun
And earth and the mad sky were one.

... Trees at the roadside leaned away
From storm-dark, strangely separate and high,
Strangely alone against the sky.
Their patched coats blown in disarray
Half wrong-side-out by the wind's wrath,
They loomed ahead by Robert's path
Giant and human-awful. And as they
Grew at approach and ever loomed more tall
His own leant body shrank more small,
And shivered with a boy's dismay
Hearing the tall wood creak from unaccustomed sway.

... Invisible hands went round the Morgan yard
Shutting the dry gates hard—
Banged them, and doors in echo banged.
The 'phone wire to the old house twanged
Like a harp-string beneath a thumb.
Leaves became cymbals in their clash and hum;
And the loose roof-tin where the wind beat under
Became a rolling kettle drum
Mocking the great bass drums of thunder.
Amid this wild orchestral sound

Bewildered hens with feathers blown awry
Were lifted with the dust along the ground.
... Rowing in vain against the current swirling by,
The weary crows went backward down the sky.
Into the kitchen round the bedroom door
Crept little vowels of sound, pressed thin
Between the syllables of wind and din.
Belle Morgan peeped into that room
And saw her child immersed in cooling gloom
Watching the tree-sway and leaf-crash.
He nosed the screen beneath a flopping blind
And answered the wind's boast in kind—
While his glad feet upon the floor
Applauded the bravado on his tongue.
Going within to close the window sash,
She tried to play she was as young
And never'd seen the like before.
She couldn't. And she stood behind,
After the storm was muffled to a distant roar,
Asking herself why she had lost the wonder
It buoyed her out of depths to see was his.
Had chain of days so dragged her feet from under?...
Or had she given him her all of this
When he had been a weight beneath her heart,
Leaving but disillusion for her part?
As though still undelivered of that weight;
As though her body, forced to mate
With memory of burdens she had known,
Was now long pregnant with a heavy stone,
She sagged and sat upon the bed.
She thought how this, two times her rack of pain,
Where she had braced in sweating dread
And with her tautened arms and limbs outspread
Hurried the rending strain with strain—
How this would sometime be her peaceful bier.
She thought of other women who had lain
Like her in ache or listening slumber here—
Thought of their bodies, young and old,
Blood-warm, and fever-hot, and cold
With the last, the all-purifying cold—
Bodies of Morgan wives made virginal again
And safe as strangers from their men.

The storm outside increased. In wave on wave
It passed the window—dark, more dark,
Until the closed room was a cave

In which the very breath had been a wild remark
Had not the wind's lips hungrily
Sucked all the sound away—stole it and blown
It forth in shrieking echoes of its own.
Past the small form that awe had quieted
Belle saw the willow bow and toss and whirl,
Enjoying its free body like a girl.
Fortunate tree, unwedded and yet wed!...
Complete without the lewdness of love's night—
Fearing no travail with a constant dread!
She saw the tree stop dancing and with hair outspread
Lean in mad stationary flight—
And saw her overtaken in a swirl of dust
By fierce invisible arms—and saw her swung around
And bent and broken to the ground,
And shared each throe of ravishment
Before the passion of the wind was spent...
She moved her gaze away. It sank upon the bed.
She thought how many times, pretending lust,
She'd borne the storm of flesh for Ed.
No, not for Ed!—for God! For God who said:
This is your wifely duty and you must.
Her body now was God's, not his.
And what she did for God's sake—every kiss
Returned by hot unwilling skin—
Couldn't that change the seed that entered in,
And make it also God's instead?
Couldn't it be?—And David, sprout of this,
Be only hers and God's—hers and no kin
To the dark Morgan blood so sure to stain?
She reached and drew the fair warm head
Against her own, and like one crazed with pain
Rocked with it back and forth—until the child,
Half frightened, turned and sought her eyes,
Eyes that were weeping in a face that smiled.

A livid tree of flame was thrown
Leafless upon the black screen of the skies.
And thunder, that till now had been
Only a rumble in the throat of storm,
Ripped out with sharp explosive din.
It made the old house rock and reel
Like a tossed vessel balanced on its keel.
It steadied—while the little form
Backed from the window shuddering.
A soft hand clutched a roughened one
Until the jarred heart ceased to run
And the taut fingers scorned to cling.

Belle heard a sudden impact on the pane
And watched two vagrant drops of rain,
The first her weary eyes had seen in weeks,
Slip and run down like tears on dusty cheeks.
Reminded of an upstairs window wide,
Of foolish chickens that had drowned
Unless she shooed them in to hide
Under more shelter than a wing-tent on the ground,
She must retrieve for small realities
Her senses groping inward to profundities.

. . .

... The bleared horizon and the glowering sky
Closed in upon the narrow world
As if to blot it from man's eye.
Corn was no more than weeds to the storm's breath,
No more than grass that the wind swirled;
Trees were no more than dizzy corn.
The great oaks stood upon a brink of death
Only a stubborn balance could defy.
Leaves, prematurely plucked and torn,
Were thrown away and lost—were left to lie
Where leaves were never meant to lie:
In foreign places where no boughs would mourn.
The murmuring horizon crept upon the trees
And threw a gray obliterating cape
Over each taut or struggling shape.
Rain took them all, and with a roar of mighty bees
Swarmed wide upon the heels of drouth.

Ed Morgan in the cornfield—in the loud
 Clamor of the dry waves where he bowed—
 Could hear the flood-wave coming. He could smell
 Its coming; springs awakened in his mouth
 Rinsed his dry tongue with a rain taste.
 And still he bent and still he faced
 The blown dust, and the hoe-blade rose and fell
 With greater vengeance and more speed,
 As though the brake of his fatigue was now released
 At the drouth's end—as though his old hate was increased
 Since rain that saved the corn would intercede
 Also for every thieving weed.

In the storm's eyes the drouth and he were paired.
 A guilt was shared, and so they shared
 The sudden icy arrows the wind shot—
 And the same lashing drove them from the spot,
 Drove them at a mad run along the row.
 Though chilled, though flesh would be more wet
 With the cold rain than ever with his sweat,
 The man was stubborn-legged, loath to go.
 Corn and the earth seemed loath to have him go—

...

One reaching horny palms to hold him back,
 One gripping shoes to keep him in his track.
 Now held so, and now driven from behind,
 Morgan went stumbling and storm-blind—
 Blind as a man whose eyes are overgrown
 Till light is but a lesser dark to blunder in.
 He struck the rail-fence, climbed, and heavy as a stone
 Slid from the slippery top, fell prone,
 And rose upon the rain-stabbed ground
 Dizzied again by rocking thunder-din.

Old fears of lightning by that sound
 Were roused in him, and drove him on to reach
 Tree-shelter in the pasture—made him choose a beech
 Though farthest of the near trees to be found.
 Lightning might strike an oak, a walnut, or an ash.
 Old lumpy scars were often left on each,
 And now and then one died from the fire-lash—
 But beeches were never touched, men said.
 Here where the lowered branches' even spread
 Made a beamed ceiling, and a rug of dust
 Still lay as cringing as a shade
 Back of the smooth wide pillar the trunk made,

The man stood close. He watched the rain in gust on gust
Pass him, and watched the heavy water drip
And blow and creep upon that dusty strip,
That last of drouth forsaken by the sun.
It writhed around his feet as though it drank
An acid—writhed and edged away and shrank
Like old snow when the tongue of Spring
Licks round the tree it hides behind.
Thoughts fumbled in the dark of Morgan's mind:
Water to dust was fire, and fire the only thing
To water out such flames—and here was none.
The elements were mixed, and he had run
With fire's child when he'd sought the other one.

Still in the vise-grip of his hand
He felt the strange hard handle of the hoe,
And looked at it, and could not understand
How it had come there. Yet long long ago
He now remembered wielding it.
Muscles still held the memory of its weight,
The memory of the measured lift and hit.
And through his mind there stalked the ghost of hate—

Hate of an unrelenting sky that would not rain.
And now he was besieged by rain!
This brought the hate to life, the pain.
Deep in its grave of scars that sense
Dug and redug in battles with the elements,
Pain woke and beat a door of sod.
Hate woke, and mouthed its grievance to a God
Who loosed a winter flood in May,
Rotting the seed till he must plant it over;
Who turned a June to April till the clover
Moulded along the windrow, spoiled for hay;
Who stopped his cultivation of the row
Till the wind's crop could grow,
Then breathed a fire-breath that would dry and scorch
And roll each corn-leaf to a torch!
Man should be growing weeds, he thought—
Ragweeds instead of corn, thistles instead of hay.
He thought how all the weeds that he had slain
Might now be resurrected by the rain...
Yet hating, too, was a hot labor come to naught.
Around the tied leaves and the anchored limb
The waves of blown rain dashed,
And darker waves above them reared and clashed.

And over all the voice of thunder, like the grim
Word of the Morgan God;
And over all the weight of thunder as it trod
And stomped a ponderous deck of cloud.
And the storm laughed. It howled with laughter,
And whipped the plunging seas in front and after
With lightning gunfire—plowed and plowed
Their dark wet sides with lashes.

And deep below a lorn man stood
In a dry cleft beyond the storm's long reach.
Close in the root-spread of a beech
Fathoms below, a small man bowed
His shivering frame against the stone-hard wood,
And saw between the dark gusts and the blinding flashes
The blown corn beaten in the field—
Beaten and broken by the driving lashes.
Before the storm in blurry rank on rank
Corn fled and stayed and lurched and reeled.
And nothing man could do!—
Nothing but cower here where now he shrank,
And watch the havoc—watch, and hug his own dry place
And listen to the raving overhead:
As though storm rage were God's and flood God's prank—
As though God turned to earth and said,
"You wanted drink—here, drink then, you! "—
Roared it, and dashed a great cold cupful in her face.

And earth endured it, though the hot face steamed.
Each feature newly burned and seamed
Gave off a foggy breath, which all around
Bent to the heavy rain and drowned.
Earth can be patient, the hard Mother!
But man's not patient. Even the mute dead
Rebel at last at the long wait,
Rebel at the dark womb and thrust the head
Out to familiar arms of fate—
Beg for new life though mortal as the other.

Behind a wet tree like a coral spire
Deep at the roiling bottom of the sky,
Ed Morgan leaned and sheltered as he could;
Shrank in a root-cleft now no longer dry
And listened to the din increase, as though storm's ire
Found target now—as though the scattered aims
Of all its pronging tongues of fire,
Of hot thought splintered into flames,

Were now converging where he stood.
As rigid as the trunk he stood,
As though his skin were bark and sinew wood.
None would have thought how in his mind
Fire stabbed, flood crashed, and darkness bulged behind.
None would have seen the seam of his disguise
At the thin lips which habit had compressed.
Even though edging round the tree squirrel-wise
To peer more close, none would have seen -...
 none would have guessed
The wild and rainy anger caged
Behind that calm horizon at the eyes.

But the cage brakes if hate is not assuaged—
Breaks and the sky beyond it fills.
The eyes ran over with that ruin in the field.
And Morgan looked the other way, at the brown rills
Along the path, where bubbles rode from bank to bank
And little mouths of water snapped and sank—
Looked at the blowing grass, whose yield
Was not reduced, whose back had known
Hooves sharper than the rain's, yet rose erect
After the pawing and galloping were checked—
Looked at the iron-weed stems that bent and weaved,
Now shuddering bows whose shafts had flown,
Then quick themselves, the arrowy shapes retrieved—
Looked at the trees, so dimly leaved
The lowering clouds were foliage, and yet all
Paying for drink and glad to pay;
Paying with leaves and a clattering fall
Of limbs stripped naked to the bone.
He with his tender crop was here alone
Hater of storm and storm's rough play!—
The only being not too small
To draw storm's aim—the only earth-son worth God's spite!

There was no comfort in the sight
Of revelling weeds and grass and trees—
Save for his flinty hate that here could bed
And breed new lightning from its weakening spark.
And Morgan turned his eyes from these
Up to the noisy tangle overhead;
Leaned with a calloused hand on calloused bark
And sent his climbing sight to hunt the top—
Leaned as against the newel of a circling stair
And watched the wet green hangings drag and flop

At each dark turn of the weird steep—
 Leaned as against a great cold stone
 From which a ladder rose into the stricken air
 Twisted and slippery and blown:
 As though he were a second Jacob gone to sleep,
 And this a nightmare ladder which a mad God flung
 And left unfooted rung by rung!

The trunk was clammy. It was chill
 As sun-forsaken rock, the shank-bone of a hill
 That night has made her den behind.
 He straightened from the propping hand, and let it slide
 Of its own weight along the hard tree side...
 And felt a roughness there, and like one blind
 Read it with agile fingers left to right.
 Quick as a shaken drop, his sight
 Came tumbling from above and read—
 Spelled out as from an ancient stone
 The name GRANT MORGAN, and a carved date overgrown,
 Blurred like a mossy record of the dead.
 Under the name two letters of his own
 Were scarred—a terse, abbreviated ED—
 As if a common grave had been prepared
 Because of the dark womb they'd shared.
 He looked into a grave. He stared
 Sickly into the coffin where their past was laid.
 Womb shared, name shared, youth shared...
 a knife was shared
 On the spring day these scars were made.

... Half gingerly, on soft feet newly bared
 To the cool, tickling fingers of the grass,
 They raced among the trees. And Grant, who led,
 Stepped quick behind this beech and let him pass,
 And let him search and call and turn his head
 To face a creeping loneliness on every side.
 He stood so long the red squirrels came
 Out of their holes again, and mocked, or spied
 On his taut stillness not for aim.
 Then a loud voice recalled their fear
 And each was gone like a snuffed flame
 Before his windy haste to find Grant here
 Proudly intent before this name.
 Envy would have him cut his own below.
 He sank the blade, and, two bold letters done,
 Rested and watched the clear blood ooze and run

Till Grant, impatient that he loitered so,
Begged for the knife's return to carve the date.
The figures slashed, he had his chance again—too late.
A stern shout rang, and they must go.

These features of the dead event
Had never paled, had never shrunk though long interred.
And memory's echo of the shouted word
That woke the heart's rebellion as they went
Was plain as if the shout itself were heard.
The swish of leaf on leaf, the whine of rain,
Even the thunder thuds were not more plain.
And yet the father's throat and tongue
Were quiet now, and Grant he pictured young
Was old as he was or both old and dead.

He stared at the knife's brand upon the beech—
Stared like a helpless hawk at a snake's head.
He could not wrench his vision free
From the scar's lips, on which he read
Haunting yet piteous dumb speech—
On which he sickly read and yet would see
More and still more although as miserable and dread.
The past, of late grown merciful to him,
Was now no longer muffled, was not dim,
Held back no cruelty of voice or form.
The years that he and this loved brother,
As comrade as the hands to one another,
Fought with the drouth and flood and storm—
And after Grant was gone, the years alone
(How many years alone!)
Till in his son he found a new twin strength
To brother with his own—
Each buried year in all its jointed length
Was shown to him—was flung across his eyes
In one wild ghastly memory-flash
That staggered like a lightning, like the storm's keen lash
Cracking on clouds now milling in the skies.

And yet he did not flinch in flesh or glance.
One would have said the drenched man stood
A mere spectator of the outward flames,
A calm spectator like the ants
Loitering along the firm dark wood.
He watched them walk unheeding past the names—
Watched how they touched the scars unheedingly.
And half he felt the names were none he knew,

Felt them as strange as though he read
 An alien tomb-score of two alien dead
 Doubly estranged by time...

Grant Morgan, who was he?
 And Ed—was he a Morgan too?—
 Or some poor half-wit bastard of no name?
 A bitter fancy, when if there was shame
 The shame was Grant's who ran away!—
 The shame was Grant's who mocked the Morgan name
 By running like a coward!
 ... Yet why blame
 Grant or the fortune that was Grant's?—
 Why blame when he who had to stay
 Had gone too, with a different turn of chance?
 God's was the fault!—the God who bent man's knee

...

And tied his feet with duty for a parent's sake!
 Freedom was never offered him when right to take:
 The father dead, Belle took his place
 As warden of the jail this farm could be—
 A wife whose only love was on her face;
 Whose body was as cold as this proud tree,
 Weeping yet unresponsive as a stone.
 God's was the fault and God's alone
 That he was prisoner to this doom!—
 That he had come the weaker from the womb,
 An Esau-twin less favored in God's eye!
 Born beaten—yet forbade to curse and die!
 Hoping he knew in vain, yet made to hope—...
 Fighting in vain, yet made to fight,
 To stretch a long defeat while Fate, for God's delight,
 Extended him one paw with which to cope.
 If this was blasphemy, whole thought could reach
 Far as though bitten into speech.
 Let God's ears burn with it! Let God's great head
 Stoop glowering through the bursted cloud
 And hear his heart blaspheme aloud!
 Let veins and nerves be whips to goad God's ire
 Till God lean thunderous and strike him dead—
 Withdraw exemption from the sheltering beech
 And strike it like a weed with hoes of fire!
 He dared God to! He faced the sky and breathed the dare
 Blindly and fervently as prayer.
 ... Over the clouds a ponderous tread
 Stopped short. The wind was held like breath.
 Rain that had been so thickly spread

Was thinned as though a flinging hand
Were closed into a fist above the land.
And the old beech in seeming fear of death
Stood as one doomed—in a cold sweat—
Her dark unbreathing torso clammy wet,
While beads from her hid brow fell dismally around.
He looked down quickly on the ground,
As if a thing were lost that must be found
Now while the place was marked, or never;
As if a precious thing were thrown away
In a mad fit and might be lost forever.
He saw his body on the ground.
He saw the eye-stare and the burn that lay
Like a whip's mark across the cheek;
And lips where death, to stop a shriek,
Had laid her icy hush and numbed the agony.
He saw the backward hands of those who came
To lift this residue of flame—
Saw how they covered it, and yet could see
How one stiff arm, determined to be free,
Wore the hard print of earth indelibly.

And they, struck dumb, would take this dumbness home to Belle
For her to stare on, cry on...

Globes of leaf-rain fell
And broke on his bare arm and sleeve.
And clothes, already drenched, were like a second skin—
Dead skin for living flesh to shiver in.
... His wife would have a cold man then, whose kiss
Meant nothing more. And she would turn and grieve,
Loving him there in Death's depriving arm—
Yet sadder for her own end than for his.
While he, unyearning, would have peace.
All warring with the elements would cease—
Those that his frown had faced and those behind the frown.
His peace would be the peace of stone—
Of fine stone dust in which no seed is sown;
The peace of sun gone out, of universe run down
Like a stopped clock in a dark room.
No more would he be lonely on this farm...
There'd be no joy in such a doom?
Joy would be dead like pain?—Let it be dead!—
A thing he'd never miss.
Sleep was enough.

A rainy blow

Wakened his shoulder-sleep... Who, after this,
Would tend the crops he fled?
Who would defend them with the plow and hoe?
If Bob, then Bob would never go
From the old furrow as was certainly his plan.
And time would turn a page of mould
And hide the plan—time's passing share would fold
Waves on the feet until they could not run.
Or if, when David hoarsened to a man,
One of the two then went as Grant had done
What would be left the other son
But loneliness and a closed gate?
... And he bequeathed it!

 No!—Death-peace must wait;
His loneliness must not be handed on!—
Must all be spent before he died!
He could be miserly till both were gone,
Then he must spend—and interest beside.
He raised his eyes as to a blurry pane—
And saw a thin woods thickened with the rain,
A pasture curtained off, a view
Impenetrable as Fate was pointing to.
Slowly, as though a close look might reveal
One rent to let his vision through,
He faced each way—and each way he could feel
Tree shoulders and tree backs, see tree heads shaken,
See lank weed children crowd and stare.
Each way hemmed in by unconcern, forsaken,
Left to his end, if that should be
To die at God's hand now or live more misery!
And he would live. God would ignore his dare—
Scorn him, or think how pain of year on year
Could stretch the second's agony
And punish him with deaths until his bones wore bare.

But God was deaf! God never heard man's prayer—
How could a curse unstop his ear?—
A curse half born, with yet no words to hear,
And a weak dare half buried in the breath?
And reason whispered to his fear
How anyway the tree was safe, as men had said—
How Fate, that nosed his trail since born,
Would feed enough on ruined corn
And pass his body by, or fail to see
Under the luck of the broad tree.
And courage chid him, courage laughed...and death
Was far as though his youth stood here instead.

Then thunder, like a footshift overhead,
Like a throat cleared for roaring speech,
Made caution out of courage and he went.
His head erect and body stiffly leant,
He faced a gust that stooped beneath the beech.
He walked. He forced his feet to walk, to plod—
Feet that were frantic to escape from God.

A surf of splattering hooves broke near
Out of the mist. The horses shied...
And one stopped short, whose halting slide
Dug up the yet unconquered dust—
One who stood taut, as if her ear
Felt jarring hooves along the ground
Bringing an awful stallion to her side.
Morgan passed by with shame's tight rein on fear—
That rein alone to keep the chin out-thrust.
Then a whip cracked! It knifed the air with flame.
No air was left but flame!
No brain could hold the sight, the sound!
Earth reeled. Earth tipped. The level path became
A peak he could not climb—yet must.

VII

Hail-seed from the wind's hand
Sang through the drizzled air like sand.
The Morgan premises were sown with crystal grain.
It pelted the roof-drum and the wet leaves.
It plinked among the wee stones under eaves.
It tick-tacked on the windowpane.
David, with yearning fingers on the glass,
Stood close to watch the solid rain
Drifting to silver gravel in the grass.
Then the room's eye alone was staring wide,
As with a clattering milking-pail
Now at his heels and now beside
The child ran out bareheaded in the storm
To gather bounding marbles made of ice.

Belle, bringing in a chick to warm,
Saw from the woodshed how precise
His calm selection of the hail—
Breathed the cool wake of a drouth gone—
Thought of the other drouth hopes rained upon,
And joy was almost near enough to touch,
Lacked but a reach of being near enough to clutch.

She could have laughed at the small harvester.
She could have cried. It seemed to her
Hail softened to a rain around his play
Or parted its gray wave to either side
As if God watched his own—as if a father-pride
Kept the brute elements away.
A wren that fussed before a pile of wood
Left its wee chores and perched near where she stood,
And quite unconscious of its size
Looked in her face with serious eyes
And chirped a neighbory comment on the weather,
And looked at David with a shared delight
As if they two were women here together.

She wanted him to see his audience—
But the rough storm held back by reverence
Was loosed between them in a jealous spite,
Banged on the roof to drown her call,
And mocked her with a screening pebble-fall!
Half dazed, she saw him through the walling blur
Bending heroic in a world apart,
Oblivious to the pelting from above—

Oblivious to the storm-beat of her heart!—
Asking no word, no glance, no help of love!
She called her loudest—he was deaf to her.
As if forever weaned away;
As if a sweeter voice than love's were in his ear,
And a more beckoning hand
Spoke to his eyes and bade his legs obey,
He left the wind to fill his pail
And rose and ran. It chilled her with strange fear
To watch him going through the rain and hail,
But she was like a tree, compelled to stand—
Compelled to see him growing dim
As the wan figure grief would draw
If he were really gone and only memory saw!
The corner of the house he passed was like a door
Shut in her face!—Then seeing him no more

...

Released her, drove her under flung stones after him.
Out by the front gate's limit of retreat
He stopped beneath the shelter of a limb
And let the grass flow round his feet,
And looked at small gray eggs the sky had laid
In a deep nest the wind had made.
He squatted to admire them, unafraid
Of the hail's peck and the wind's flop.
She halted at his rapture—but she could not stop
The hungry current in her brain.
She clutched him, hugged him to her knee...
And felt him struggling to be free,
Repeating don'ts as if her touch were pain.
She curved a hand beneath his stubborn jaw,
And tilted up his face... and saw...
A Morgan mouth and Morgan eyes,
A Morgan hate behind the eyes—
Saw, and let go his head...

As one, no more a girl,
May tempt a creaking rope to break
Swinging too far, too near the skies,
Then suddenly steps on earth and feels it whirl,
She fought to keep a stiffness in her bones.
She fought to keep a sickening ache
Out of her throat. And the pine's moans
Were all the sound she heard—no sound but pain
Broke a great silence all around,
Through which the last of hail and rain
Streaked to the dotted ground...

She took him by the hand. She braced her weariness,
And went into the house to face her loneliness.

VIII

This day is not yet quenched. Not yet
Is the drouth gone from earth and sky,
Though one is washed and one is dripping wet.
A last low cloud is raised a tree-top high,
And there the brilliant embers lie
Where the sun passed with undimmed rays—
Or now approaches in return.
Whichever sun, tomorrow's or today's,
And whether night will be the smoke from ash or blaze,
One rain cannot assuage the burn.

But this is nothing to the homing cows
That file along the path, and browse
Of the dry grass made juicy with the damp;
Nothing to them that their leisured tramp
Discovers, when a creaking hoof digs deep,
Drouth like a dusty mole asleep.
Nothing to them the limbs the storm has shorn,
And all the ribboned blades of corn!
The broken stalks are nothing to the crows
That caw above the stricken rows;
And nothing to the shuttling swallows—high and high!...
Seaming the torn tarpaulin of the sky.

Behind the cows, a long way back,
The watchful crows curb tongues, and rise
Out of an aim's way. But the herder's eyes
Are on a spoor of thought beside his track.
Nor on his shoulder or his arm
Is there the stick to thunder harm—
Only a coat that drips and clinging shirt,
Heavy, but not so heavy as the flesh and bone—
Heavy, but not so heavy as the stone
He wears beneath the ribs, a pressing hurt.
Nothing to him the crows' dark flight!
Nothing to him the swallows' wing-dance of delight!
The fragrance of an earth refreshed with rain
Is naught to him.

 The taunting bait
Of storm has ceased to lead him on by hate.
The slack is taken up in Robert's chain—

...

Hand over hand pulled in—and stride by stride
This colt returns where he was tied.

Before the herd a screaming killdeer flees—
It flings a loop of screams around the trees.
And there the cows break rank and turn aside.
Where like a feeding rack a torn tree lies
They taste a bitter hay, and brush their flies;
And then jerk back, and staring-eyed
Sniff toward a form beyond and make a wide detour.
. And Robert comes. On feet as reverent as knees
He comes around a beech, a knife-cut signature,
A tomb made holy by his worship there
And now henceforth a shrine for his despair.
He lifts his head—and here the riven ash
Confronts him, and a horse unnaturally prone
As the turned leaves and splinters white as bone.
He stops as though air's memory of the fiery lash
Has put a swift eclipse upon his sight,
As though a terrible echo of the crash
Stuns him a breath.

Then slowly he goes near—
Goes close to scrutinize away his fear,
As one who braves a shadowy night
To prove a horror but a shade.
Not here! Horror is only made
Inexorably clear!... The bony head—
Lips that have nuzzled his cupped hand—
The shoulder marked with labor's brand—
The flank smooth-curried by the rain—
The quiet flank!—the quiet tail and mane
Each in a slender swath outspread—
The whole body in a swath outspread!
These proofs convincing unbelief
Are the swift blows that bring a daze of grief—
Blows that the battered mind would fly.
He turns. But round the corner of his eye
A view of Dolly's dark tail creeps.
It seems to move, to wave—and vision leaps
Hoping a foolish hope!... The motion sleeps.
Motion forever sleeps.

A while ago the waving tail was true—
Would still be, had he let her stay
Tied to the manger when he ran away!
Why had he tried to free her too?
He yearns to be forgiven that mistake—
Has a wild wish to put the plea to her,
Cup her deaf ear around a moan
And fill it with his grief, make her awake
And nicker once!—let his heart break,
Break like a ten-year-old's!

Then the desire
Tightens his throat to curse her murderer.
But how can he curse fire?—What's back of fire?
And how can he curse God?—What's back of God?
Whose is the shadow on this sod?

With a clenched mouth
Against the rain that might have comforted his drouth,
Robert turns home.

And no man sees him go.
The treed eyes that were watching him
Turn to their nests. And slow and slow
The dusk, like a leaf from a shaken limb,
Like a dark feather, falls...and the path grows dim.

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 29–121.

A Letter to C. R.

After six years whatever goal it was
That brought me here is like a sunken star—
Like Venus, which a month of evenings past
Glowed in its crescent setting of a moon,
But now is lost in the deep sea of nether skies.

After six years I cease to tire my eyes
With searching faces. Down the canyon street
I walk as in a weird and thundering shade—
Threading my way as through a frantic brush,
As through an alien field of blown impersonal corn.

Six years would serve to rear a hedge of thorn
Over a path of friendship travelled less
Than ours, and more than half a continent
Could be as wide—wide and impassable—
As the bleak plains of Death in the horizoned Past.
And yet our letters seem as bottles cast
On the wild outward current of a wave;
And that they carry and invoke reply
Seems half uncanny and a miracle—
Being such disembodied thoughts, and so unsaid.

What speech have letters written or letters read!
If you would hear from me, go down the fields
And place your feet in contact with the ground
That knew me, and my pressure and my salt!
Go there, and close your eyes and listen—I will come.

Letters are mutes. But earth is never dumb.
It keeps the figure, gesture, pose, and voice...
The very presence of the absent one.
What if the plowshares overturn that ground!—
They only resurrect more eloquence of me.

Go to the fields, then—they have news of me.
Or, when the fields are overgrown with dark,
And the fed team and milk-eased cows are still,
Sit where I've sat and I will talk to you—
About the next election or the calf that died.
... Wish I could find you here!—Although I've tried
To trace inflections—comforted myself
Thinking you share with me the sun and moon—
Nothing of you responds and nothing breathes,
Nothing of you is met but a cold track of ink.

After six years I cease to wake and think:
Where am I?—Exiled to the canyon street
I walk as in a weird and thundering shade—
Threading my way as through a frantic brush,
As through an alien field of blown impersonal corn.

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 122–124.

Across the Street

Spring came around to the door with noon,
And the Old One stirred within.
She stood in the doorway gaunt and thin
As the skeleton tree on the lawn.
(Spring came to the door too soon!)
The fleshed bones drew the black shawl on,
And crept to the porch... and leaned on the wall...
And peered like a cormorant left and right...
And looked at the sky with a hand on the light.

...

 The old old tree with the cold bones bare
And the old old woman leaning there
Soaked up the warmth till the warmth was gone.
Then the one shrank back in her shawl,
Shrank back in the house-dark out of sight.
—And the tree shrank back in the night.

...

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 125.

Scrub Oak

Tree, from a seed far-blown and flung
By fate's cool-armed discarding gesture
Here on the cliff-ledge—have you tongue
And symbols to revile the moisture
And warmth of days that wombed your groping
And blunted it at birth on stone?
Or is your tense grip on this dizzy sloping
Less than the sap-urge you have known?

Tree, in a crouching clutch grown numb,
With tendons drawn forever tightly
In sculpture of the aches now dumb—
Whence is the rest you borrow nightly?
Whence is the rest when not from sleeping?
What crevice larder makes you strong
To rear your stunted length in vain-yearred creeping
Up toward the height for which you long?

Tree, by the wind bereft of mold,
Of green turned brown that else might cover
Knuckles and ankles from the cold—
How bravely next the cliff you hover!...
When it would be such easy ending
To loose your hold... and sway... and fall.
You shrink!—You tremble!—Is it fear of rending
Holds you, not courage after all?

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 126–127.

Nocturne for Wakefulness

A Fragment

I

Night kneels along cool walls and under trees
To gather up the veils she dropped at dawn,
Pulls them from anchorage, and slips them on
To hide the ancient face that no one sees.
At last she lifts her gradual silhouette
In day's wide exit...sighs...and shuts the door.
Then, with the clothes the sleepy garden wore
All tucked away, she croons: Forget!... Forget!

II

Forget!—The word is but the count of time
Joined to the rhythm of a stubborn heart.
And sleep is but a door that shuts apart
For muffled intervals the thought and rhyme—
A door ajar unto remembering
For those who keep alert to hear it close.
Forget?—The word is but a sound that throws
Rebounding echoes for awakening.

III

The quiet testifies how all have gone
To Night's cool-covered pillowing and sleep.
But my thought is a hound that out and on
Chases a phantom hare on feet that creep.
There is no thought but mine!—My thought surrounds
The universe—there is no universe but it!
It is both hound and hare, and when they quit
All paths converge within its bounds.

IV

From starry pinnacles to which it yearns
 Till one small pupil holds immensity,
 Always my tongue-distended thought returns
 Careening to a pin-point entity—
 A den of refuge where a trap is set,
 Held by a chain of sense Will cannot sever;
 A kennel walled of flesh, where thought may fret
 Till quick of wakefulness be numbed forever.

V

Within my reaching ears Night's whispering
 Is gentle as kind silence, and would soothe
 A lesser beast to find bed-nettles smooth.
 Yet dins I hear which have long ceased to ring,
 As one arrived from rigid traveling
 Still braces sense against a noisy sway.
 Though deaf my ears would keep remembering
 My wakeful equilibrium of clay.

VI

Coiled with desire, fatigue, ache, hunger, thirst,
 I lie within a cumbrous muscle-heap—
 One with all flesh Night's inky milk has nursed,
 One with all flesh in her wide arms asleep.
 This common mother knows no sex, no race;
 Turns all blood black, till pulses are like breath
 Which might be man's or brute's. To so efface
 Identities she must herself be Death!

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 128–133.

Futilities

Brute waves, treadmill on the sand!—
Flick your fetlocks up the shore—
Hoove the earth-edge where I stand
In the long night, unmuscled now, and sore!

Year-long minutes have I burned
Futile feet to treadmill earth,
That it might be overturned
And horizons relighted on its girth.

Darkness!—Blindness!... Earth remains
Axis-frozen as before.
Stumble-hooved, with sweaty manes,
Here the tired waves still labor on the shore!

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 134.

Sequoia

Now manzanita's sleek arms, stained with wine,
Beckon in vain—for this is sober ground.
Unawed by arrowy heights of fir and pine,
I faced this round...and leaned back, upward-peering,
Until my climbing senses hurtled and were drowned
As in a great silence vibrant after cheering.

Such pillared height!—Such age!—Is this a tree?

Wide boughs that sheltered legions over Gaul
Are felled—more slain than Cæsar. Mutiny
Of fire and wind and worms has left them all
No more remembered by the moon or sun
Than the last shade on grass that eased their fall,
Than blades' thin shadows on each skeleton.
And the young cedars left on Lebanon
When Hiram cut the temple beams are dead—
Dead as the slaves that built for Solomon.

Where, save in symbols whence all pulse is fled,
May one today encounter ancient trees?
... Three thousand years are layered on the youth
Of this proud wood—and youth five centuries!
Here lives the legend, while it yet is truth,
Of all the traveling air and stars have told!

Sequoia, if my tongue could be as bold
As my enquiring thought, perhaps I'd hear
Tales of my unknown fathers...

But I fear

To ask—I touched you now, and found you cold.
Is your pale bloodstream shrinking now at last
To a weak flow beneath the ice of death?
Old Giant, does the bellows of your breath
But weakly stir the heart beneath your past?
Are you aware, soon even you must die
And be forgotten? No, this is pride instead.
Complacent in your heritage, you sigh
No pities for these struggling weaker-bred,
Scorning each feeble-seeded generation
That lifts the lost-cause banners of the dead.
And little man who comes, as now, to wonder
And pay a heart-awe's tribute of libation
Shivers from your aloofness—Even man

Whose hand has made the livid nerve of thunder
One of his own, to answer Will and span
The moving sky you measure—man who can
Dismember you and form another way
To prove how great his godship of a day.

Yet no, I cannot let myself believe
What my rebelling mind would have me see:
That you are arrogant, that you are free
As rock—exempt from passion to achieve
In the vain struggle other life must meet.
My heart is not so mountain-cowed with awe
But it conceives a kindred warmth to thaw
Portals unto your soul through this conceit.

Those arms you lifted through long centuries,
Hoping some day to rear your palms as high
As yonder peak, to feel and heft the sky—
Those arms at last by cruel surgeries
Chastened to stumps—does no deluding ache
Surge through them when a cloud comes nigh,
Mocking the shortened gestures that you make?
Veteran of lightning wars—this ugly scar
Where ancient fires have vandalled deep
Into your fluted column, with a mar
Still raw—... does this not burn again to keep
Memory as fresh a wound?

Perhaps this sun
Unbanks that terror:—shock and jar and flame—
The heat chaotic—and then one by one
Slain comrades crashing red, till each became
A steaming gash beneath a quiet shroud!
And when the stars and moon are blanketed,
And silence is a heart alone and loud,
You may relive your wake beside those dead
Through the long years before they rose again.

Calm bronzed Philosopher who could not die!...
Giant of Life, so towering over men!—
What comforts you for all the hopes once high,
Proud green that fell like snowflakes to the ground?
What comforts you for all that's buried in this mound?

What comforts him, O Sky?

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 135–138.

Tyrol Serenader

A Guitar Song for the Mouth of a Little Wooden Statue Given to Finin

Turn not from the scarred face.

 Come near me!

Look not at the drawn mouth,

 But hear me.

Eyes shut, but the wide ears

 Admit me.

They're blind that the worn clothes

 Ill fit me.

Bend... listen!...

These scars where a knife slipped—

 Who made them?

These rags where the bones hide—

 Who frayed them?

These tunes that my soul weeps—

 Who played them?

Not I, Friend!

So turn not from the scarred face,

 Nor fear me;

Nor look at the drawn mouth,

 But hear me.

Think!—Holding the one note

 Without end!

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 139–140.

The Gull

I

In the roofed car they drifted round the hill's curved shelf,
Riding the droning motion as though swept
Onward and upward by no ordering of his will,
By no machinery his hands could ever still—
Floating as on the current of desire itself—

...

Needing no power but the flow itself.
He saw each curving finger and each thumb
Like carvings on the wheel-rim where they slept.
He saw her hands like lovers on her knee—
Embracing, tense, and lying quiet on her knee.
He saw the upward hillside, and the downward, come
And part and pass on either side—but did not see
More than their coming and their passing by.
His gaze kept roving thus, now forward, and now turned
Like the warm sun's lowering in the sky
To slant beneath the torment of her eye
And rest upon her hands. And there it burned.
He knew, if he should look on more,
Impending vertigo might loose the wheel
And hurl them in the canyon by the curved road's side—...
Bed them like stones on the uprushing canyon floor.
Yet he could almost feel—

...

Knowing how close the peak of passion is to death—
That it were sweeter if they clung and died,
Sweeter to live in the last mating of their breath
Than skirt the dizzy edge of death... and ride...and ride.

How marble-still she sat!—as if all nerves were numb.
Or was she only taut to cover how she, too,
Reeled on that other height to which they now had come—
The pinnacle of love, from which they both could view
The depths of love that they must choose or flee?
Or was her quiet due
To youth's wild awe at what she now could see
At last between the lofty and the deep?
Yet she had only stiffened when he said
"I want you"—as though hearing secrets one must keep
Without a comment in a shame-averted head.
On right and left the sagebrush and the stone
Came crowding by and passed—
...

Gave misery for misery...and passed.
His ache was in the hillside, it was massed
In forms that needed no completing until now—
Needed no kisses but the wind's kiss and the rain's.
His ache was in the red unmated sun that rode alone
Down the steep trail it always rode alone.
His ache was in the dumb car's moan...
Yet love must not allow
Passion to touch her!—it must keep in leash, in chains.
With one free hand he groped into the blur,
The wavering blur that held the warmth of her,
And took her hand and felt the fire behind her calm
Quivering its tongue along her finger-veins—
Pressing its heat against the fuel in his palm.
And here the sad sage passed him, and the stone
Passed him—and there the sun went riding home alone.

In the warm car they drifted to the high hill's crest.
And a cool salt breeze
Came running up to meet them out of space,
Stopping to pluck a ribbon's end along her breast,
And finger up the skirt about her knees,
And lay a moistened palm against his burning face.

The high hill sank, and left them drifting there
 Afloat on droning motion...
 Far down, the warm land's curve lay prone and bare,
 Lay with her warm dune breasts upturned and bare.
 And by her sprawled the gloomed and troubled Ocean
 Desiring her like flame.
 And buoyed above Pacific's darkened air
 A pallid ocean-twin of cloud lay fast asleep—
 Wooing no land but one he touched in sleep,
 A shore where neither ships put out nor wreckage came.
 Was this the real, the high sea, not the deep?—
 The quiet, not the tossed?...
 The calm and dreaming ocean, not the passionate flood?

Hearing her deepened breath, his circling thought was lost
 Like a limp wing in the quick breakers of his blood.
 He stopped the car, and stilled it—turned his head
 And saw, as through a vision-filming haze,
 Her blowing golden hair
 Like strands of sunlight in the tangled and vagrant air—
 Warmer than distant burning rays
 Falling like spray upon the fog-sea's bed.
 Her breathing nearness was a magnet's pull, a spell of space
 That drew his will upon a dizzy brink
 With no more foothold... and he ceased to think,
 Feeling her hair flow round his finger-tips, his face.

II

Out of the lowering fog the dark green breakers raced—...
 Rolled to frosty water-windows...and tumbled roaring,
 And slid up the beach in a wide foamy pouring—
 Till all but their tang of brine was suddenly effaced.

Silent they walked and walked along the glooming beach—
 One slow warm stride together, then a lone stride each...
 Under the hovering fog along the bare land edge.
 They seemed the only man and woman in the world,
 A world no wider than a tilting ledge
 Where earth was crumbled rock by which a chill dark swirled,
 And every footprint slid away to thunder.
 Dunes and the sea were walls, the mist above
 A ceiling that their warmth was hidden under.
 Could she, too, feel it? feel their love
 Throbbing within a secret room where wish and will converged?

There was no other living flesh in all the world!—
Save for a gull that looked along the moistened beach,
And climbed the dusk beyond the ranting Ocean's reach
Till thin gray wings and wide gray fog were merged.

The Ocean writhed in torment—putting out his hand
With lifting lowering knuckles and extending palm,
Stroking with hungry tenderness a scorning land
Numb to her ardent lover's touches—numb and calm.
They walked, and turned and walked their eyes on sliding sand.
... How trivial were man's words before the rhythmic sound
Of elemental passion beating tones upon the shore!
With every step he found
The cool sea-breath he breathed, and that his heart had warmed,
Escaping more and more
The tongue that would have dammed its flow and formed
Symbols of urgent meaning for her ear.
Yet why were words required for man's emotion
When the dark desiring Ocean
Would be as eloquent in silence, were there none to hear?
The dumb wave still would speak, and deaf land hear.
Let touch alone speak his unrest!...
Why did her small mouth tremble under his?
Eyelids as cool and soft as petals—why were they
Shaken beneath his windy breath, his kiss?
Her throat-curve, smoother than a birch's, drew away—

...

All of her body like a blown birch leaned away.

With fevered stealth his palm crept toward her breast—
Curved round and cupped with pressure on her breast.
He felt her small heart hammering to his hand
Like the small heart of a wildling tensed to run;
Felt her release his throbbing fingers one by one,
Until she broke from him and down along the strand
Fled like the shadow of a flying cloud—
Like the lost figure of a woman in a dream.
He heard his caught breath calling-calling her aloud
As if the sea's thick breath were calling her aloud.
No answer...but a thunder and a splash on sand!
No answer but a lone gull scream!
And a lone gull went floating overhead
On the wide wings of drifting mist—
On the fog's own spreading wings above the darkening beach.
Running, he glimpsed her...and again she fled.
At last within the very Ocean's reach,

Close to the great dark glistening hand, he caught her
And held her struggling warmth above the surge of water—
Forcing her chin to let her panting lips be kissed.
Then his wild breath was heaving speech:
"Oh little frightened gull, why shun me so?
The dark sea calls you, and you wing
Quicker to meet the wave than me... Why fear me so?"
He felt her arms fight his no more—
Felt them remember him and leap around his neck and cling.
And she was crying in his ear above the salt waves' roar—
"Oh lover—lover!... Oh forgive!... I do not know."

With dripping strides he bore her limp weight back.
The low wet curtains of the fog brushed round his face,
And fell in dank folds on his track.
Up by the dune's edge in a darkly sheltered place
He laid her down with brutal tenderness,
Falling on drunken knees beside her on the sand.
He felt her cool form yield to his exploring mad caress—
Then leaning low, he put one hand
Down on this strange rough bed...
And pressed on slimy seaweed, and a cold gull—lying dead.
As from a sudden icy flood
Desire was chilled and spent and shrunk,
And the wild flow sheathed over in his blood.
Weaker than from debauch, he rose and stood,
Sick with an old disgust that stunk
Within the very nostrils of his soul, remembering—
And crawled on memory's flesh, remembering.
... Was this the end of love?—
A burial where sweet desire was sunk
In the foul deeps of life beyond recovering?—
Even beyond the wish for its recovering?
Fog-walled and ceilinged by the weighted fog above,
The darkness was a tomb
Choking with his own stench in its low room!
Groping to the resounding surf, he stood alone
Facing his life, and seeing wide before
Only a chill dark over sliding sand along the shore.

He heard her running steps come up behind.
He heard her voice, like some far echo in his mind,
Speaking an alien name, and yet his own.
Shivering, he turned... and there a shadow swayed,
As though a shadow of the dark itself were swayed.
Was this embodied night she whom his love had won?—...
Or the dim shade of one a wage had paid
To be a wretched bier where longing might be laid?
He heard her voice again—a low repeated tone
That in his muffled ears became an anxious plea
Against the contradiction that his eyes must see:
Hair that was no more colored by the sun—
Hair that was black—black—black!

What was it she kept saying through the dark waves' roar?
"We must go back!"
As if they could go back!...
Could love now lift the fog along the shore?
No, it was weighted, and their day lay graved.
Could love reclimb the height it once had braved?
Or if it could, would it remember where it rode before?
Did the moon's tide remember where it reached before?
... A distant foghorn bawled its long prolonging moan—
Anguish gone lost in the wide dark Unknown.
A near horn answered with a bawl abrupt as fear...
And in his heart was both the anguish and the fear.
Skirting the writhing Ocean's loud imploring reach,
He groped with her along the sloping beach;
And in his nostrils clung the smell of Ocean's sweat,
And on his face his own lay clammy cold and wet.

III

After a sleepless age could not atone
For what he was, he fled—as if he might seclude
Self even from himself in some dark solitude.
Deep in a cool wood's dusk he walked alone—
Crunching a thousand years of shade, whose lofty sigh
Was now the Quiet's undertone.
Pillared Sequoias, topped with quivering green,
Propped up the far dim blue of noon beyond his eye;
And jays, like little shreds of midnight sky,
Like the dark thoughts that he had lately known,
Flew in between
The high and low—and perched and mocked as he went by.

The faint words in the boughs, the small wind's moan,
 Were like the echoes of his thought in monotone.
 And tart and heavy odors that were also taste
 Were flavored with his bitterness of heart.
 ... By the clear stream where trees were wide apart
 And the high boughs more loosely interlaced,
 Warm sunlight fell around in strand on yellow strand.
 His eyes upon the brown and shady ground
 Encountered them—and with a soaring bound
 His thought was on the curving hill again—his hand,
 His cheek, against the brightness of her head!
 There was a curling beam along his sleeve
 His fingers would have taken while his stride
 Grew slow to feel her breathing at his side.
 His fingers folded on their empty shade instead—
 Folded into a fist of anguish at his side.
 Only the sun could ever grasp the beam!
 Only the great sun could retrieve
 Beauty so bright and lost, or drive the shadows back!
 Over his life was but a moon of dream;
 His day's high orb hung in eclipse of warmth, of gleam;
 And the black panther, night, came crouching on his track.

Edging the murmuring water, ferns were bending low
 Grooming their sunlit hair above the pane below
 With gentle brushings as the soft wind blew.
 Why must he think of hair?—Why see a head of gold?
 ... And there a wild azalea stood
 Offering a starry flake of summer snow,
 Her last pale bloom, for him to take and hold.
 His fingers touched, and felt, and then withdrew—
 Remembering a bosom softness, kin to snow.
 How could he mar an emblem of the clean, the good!
 Better to die of lust than be so wantonly untrue!
 Let Time defile it if he would!
 That was the pity—Time soon would.

The interlocking shadows of the trees
 Drew in behind and breathed upon his nape
 As though his shadow, multiplied by these,
 Had grown as wide as night and breathed upon his nape.
 With bitter will he forced his feet to turn and go
 Up a steep trail that climbed a listening hill.
 Could lost heights be regained for thought's escape?
 The brown dead foliage lay forever still
 Under the moment's quietude.

Was this his answer— death and quietude?
There in the ancient dust an ant was toiling slow
Up the same path beneath his downcast eye.
Better to be an ant—unpassioned, soon to die—
Than man who lived on love, part beautiful, part lewd!
He saw a slim madrone, blushed and nude,
Lifting her bare round arms to taunt the sky.
And yonder stooped a manzanita, naked, red,
Clasping a shadow lying spent upon her bed.
Why must he thus be seeing passion in a bush, a tree?—
In a tense bush and in a wanton tree?

He knelt upon a mossy rock to ease a sudden thirst
In a dark pool a dripping water made—
In a deep pool of night on which was laid
The charred reflection of his face, his mouth...
God, must he kiss the very image of his thirst?
Better be lost in drouth!...
Better the tongue should blacken and the lips around it burst!

... In panting pause he stood at last
High on the yellow hill where not a shade was cast—
Save under withered grass where insects crawled;
Save under him upon his lonely track.
Sweat was an acrid poultice laid to scald
His upright belly, and his throat, his brow—
Too late to draw the poison that was in him now!
Heat was a nettle-shirt that clung upon his back,
As if he wore the whole hot sky upon his back.
Was there no tearing off the burning flame?—
Wildly he ripped the choking cloth undone.
He yearned to pray—to kneel on his own shadow there
And from his fever light a blaze of prayer—
To whom?—the sun?
His tongue refused him... no words came.
Mute as a twisted cedar, and as taut,
He stood and strained until his reaching thought
Snapped like a weighted twig—and upward-staring eyes
Sheathed to a liquid ore from molten skies.
Weaving, he groped within a darkened world...
And leaned upon a jagged rock, that whirled... and whirled...

The madness cleared. He raised his eyelids on a shock of
...

sight!
 Gray boulder lichens near his leaning head;
 The yellow hill beneath the yellow light;
 Far tawny slopes descending left and right...
 A lowering panoramic view that spread and spread
 Down to a tilted plane, half water and half sky.
 He watched the dim gray waves roll up and lie
 With no more sound than pictured waves, or clouds, or stone—...
 Stone moving nowhere—stone only feigning motion
 When tides of shadow rub its crest.
 His ears were deaf with distance, and his eyes half blind.
 Why was it, climbing feet had not attained
 As great a height for heart, for mind?
 In the dark deep where these had fallen they remained.

Out of his bitterness again he scanned the west. -
 Where was the loud and writhing Ocean,
 Pungent beneath the fog and dark, that he had known?
 How sweetly now Pacific breathed upon the land
 Sunning herself in quietude!
 How worshipping his open hand
 Silvered along her brown form lying prone—
 Her warm brown form that he could never own!
 Was it enough for beauty only to be wooed?
 Was beauty eternal virgin, and should not be wed
 Lest her spent lover lift his weight and find her dead?
 ... Longing must ache forever, then, with passion unappeased—
 Ache, roll and toss upon a lonely bed,
 And only love's desire of this be eased.

IV

High on the yellow hill he stood alone,
 Merging his loneliness with that of rock and ground
 Till reaching disembodied thought was feather-blown
 Back from the wide far quiet of a dim Profound.
 He felt the lowering sun lose heat.
 He saw a fog come out of distance—grow and grow,
 And float on level pinions over sea below,
 Float like a great gull over sea below.
 Turning, he scuffed his feet
 On the descending trail that wound and wound
 Down to a dark green silence that was sound.

Between the ancient pillars of the trees,
 Whose sad religious foliage bowed and hymned

Dirges of loneliness more old than these;
There where the light of day lay dimmed
Over a spiced and cushioned bed,
He saw a brown buck with a doe beside...
A tame brown buck that slowly turned its head,
Pointed its oval ears, and wonder-eyed
Watched how a grim man came with blundering tread
And looked on them...and sobbing without shame
Startled the calm dusk with a woman's name.

Publication. First collected in *Driven* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1929), pp. 141–160.

PERIODICAL POEMS

One independently published poem not collected in Driven

The Wall

When weird and strange things questing Youth is taught!
Along the frontier of my world I thought
 There bulked a giant gateless wall,
 As long as life is, and as high
 As heaven's own eternal sky—
So was I told—and I believed it all.

Believed that wall for my protection stood;
Believed my guarded world held all the good;
 Believed my god the only wise;
 My custom's code, the all-just law!
 Beyond the wall, in shrinking awe
I pictured chaos—ugly sin—and lies.

But came a time my ancient customs palled;
My soul within me languished, being walled
 In like a cellar-yellowed sprout;
 While wisdom of my god, I found
 Was like a fog upon the ground,
Obscuring beauty—shutting all light out.

So intricate with nothings was my creed,
So prisoning my world, so great my need
 For room to breathe and space to grow—
 I hurled a challenge down the sky:
 “Tear down the wall, or else will I
Alone contrive its instant overthrow!”

But when, all frantic with the rude delay,
I'd cleared the brush of little minds away—
 There stood... no wall!—None anywhere!—
 Just crumbled ruins, splintered through
 With glass-blades sheathed in silver dew...
And swift joy came and found me standing there.

Here loomed a world too big for petty thought!
Here Truth, disrobed of error fools had wrought,

And cleansed of selfish creed's disease,
Full-flowered in new beauty stirred.
Here, wide-eyed Justice!... Here I heard
Great God sing through kind hearts and tune-swept trees.

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