

DARK SOIL

ARTHUR STRINGER



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DARK SOIL

By
ARTHUR STRINGER

Author of
HEPHÆSTUS AND OTHER POEMS, THE WOMAN IN THE RAIN,
A WOMAN AT DUSK, OUT OF ERIN,
AND OTHER POEMS

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DARK SOIL

THE EARTHQUAKE

The old giant drowsed
With his bones in the sun.
Over the sleeper,
So stolid and wrinkled and still,
The pigmies swarmed
With their cobwebs of steel
And their trickles of stone.
“For all time,” said the pigmy swarm,
“These things shall endure!”

The tired old giant,
Where a flurry of cities freckled his skin,
Moved a muscle,
And sighed,
And resumed his sleep.

THE SKY-WRITER

I saw the crowd in the noonday street
Stand with uplifted faces,
Reverent and oddly silent.
And for a fleeting moment I wondered
If men still sought for God.
But the thing that held them rapt
Was a sky-writer, weaving his letters of smoke,
High up in the limitless azure,—
Zooming and wheeling and banking again,
A lonely mote in the blue,
In the infinite blue
Where an Angel's wings might hover
Or a Prophet sit on a cloud:
Yet 'twas nothing more than a man,
A goggled man and a motor,
Where God should have been.

MAN AND WOMAN

A rind of light hangs low
On the rim of the world;
A sound of feet disturbs
The quiet of the cell
And proclaims the awaited guard
Where a rope and a beam looms high
At the end of the yard.

But in the lightening dusk
Of that walled yard waits a woman;
And as the Thing from its cell,
Still shackled and bruised and bound,
Crosses that pitiful space,
Silent, for ten brief steps,
A woman hangs on his neck.

*And that walk from a cell to a sleep
Is commonly known as Life,
And those lingering ten
Reluctant steps
Of tangled rapture and tears
Is known as Love to men.*

TWO IN A MEADOW

Below me,
In the blue-shadowed valley,
I see a far-off scythe-man
Felling his swathes of grain.
From side to side he swings
On a tilted shelf of gold,
And the sun leans over him
And there is no sound at all.
But abruptly he stops in his work,
Stands black in the opal light,
To whet his arrested blade.
The loud clangor of the stone
Along the resounding steel
Startles the quiet meadows.
Then the keen knife swings again,
And no sound comes up to us.

*O Dear-To-Me,
Let us be silent too,
With the reaping that wakes no echo,
With the sheaf that makes no sound,
Forgetting the voluble clangor
Where stone against steel is song,
And men who know little of love
Talk of love too long!*

MAPLE LEAVES IN OCTOBER

Let me learn from you, Leaves,
That sing in the dusk
And dance in the autumn wind;
Lend me your valor, Leaves,
And teach me to turn
A face as laughing and light
To the passing of wonder,
The coming of winter
And Night.

Let me learn from you, Leaves,
Since we go alike
To the same far home
And sleep for so long
In the same quiet loam,—
Let me learn, in the end,
That this crimson of courage,
This valorous scarlet
That brightens the West,
This laugh before leaving,
This song before silence,
Is best!

PHILOSOPHIES

The cell seemed very dark
And as I groped about in a daze,
Exploring unfriendly walls
And the steel bars bastioned in stone,
Something fragile and small
Crunched under my feet.
When I stopped and stooped low
I found on the granite floor
A little heap of cherry-stones,
Carved cherry-stones,
Patiently tooled and polished
By a lifer who'd lived and died
With so little to do and know
In the darkness.

THE VICTOR

The man I hated,
As he hated me,
Lies dead to-day.
Mine enemy of old has gone,
And I remain.
That means the steel is sheathed,
The life-long battle ends,
The rancor falls away.
No more shall his black scorn
Shadow my tumbled dreams.
No more, from those cold lips,
Shall fall the flippant sneer,
The hot words flecked with fire.
He died, they tell me, died last night;
And I—I should be glad
That he no longer harries me
And sours my life with hate.
Yet I, the victor, who should hold the field,
Sit numbed with a new defeat.
For he, forlornly valorous,
He, triumphant to the last,
Has fared into a far country
Where I erewhile must go,
Must go with a whisper on my lips,
Gropingly, asking of the Dark
If any friend dwell there.

A SUMMER NIGHT

Mournful the summer moon
Rose from the quiet sea.
Golden and sad and full of regret
As though it would ask of earth
Where all her lovers had vanished
And whither had gone the rose-red lips
That had sighed to her light of old.
Then I caught a pulse of music,
Brokenly, out at the pier-end,
And I heard the voices of girls
Going home in the dark,
Laughing along the sea-wall
Over a lover's word!

APPLE BLOSSOMS

I saw a woman stand
Under the seas of bloom,
Under the waves of color and light,
The showery snow and rose of the odorous trees
That made a glory of earth.
She stood where the petals fell,
And her hands were on her breast,
And her lips were touched with wonder,
And her eyes were full of pain—
For pure she was, and young,
And it was Spring!

THE TOBOGGAN

Under each moccasined heel
The snow is crisp as charcoal;
There is no moon,
But the night is crystal-clear,
And above the blue-white drifts
The maples stand black;
The orange lamps in the valley
Blink up from another world.

On their corded wisp of wood,
In moccasin, jersey and toque,
The tobogganers arrange themselves.
A motley chorus of color,
They sit expectant,
They move,
Leaning forward a little
As their barque goes over the brink,
Gathering speed as it takes the dip.

In a smother of snow,
In a screaming glitter of ice,
It sinks to that lower world
Where the orange lamps are waiting,
A fall that is softened to flight,
A flight that dies down to a flow,
An arrow that sings through the gloom
To its target of Joy,
A plowshare that rips the belly of Fear
Open to laughter!

AUTUMN

The thin gold of the sun lies slanting on the hill;
In the sorrowful grays and muffled violets of the old orchard
A group of girls are quietly gathering apples.
Through the mingled gloom and green they scarcely speak at all,
And their broken voices rise and fall unutterably sad.
There are no birds,
And the goldenrod is gone.
And a child calls out, far away, across the autumn twilight;
And the sad gray of the dusk grows slowly deeper,
And all the world seems old!

ONE NIGHT IN THE NORTHWEST

When they flagged our train because of a broken rail,
I stepped down out of the crowded car,
With its clamor and dust and heat and babel of broken talk.
I stepped out into the cool, the velvet cool, of the night,
And felt the balm of the prairie-wind on my face,
And somewhere I heard the running of water,
I felt the breathing of grass,
And I knew, as I saw the great white stars,
That the world was made for good!

THE DEAD ASTRONOMER

This traveler
Who trod the hills of Mars
And headed often out where Algol waits,
This searcher of the skies
Who fared past ruddy Antares,
And walked with Regulus,
And was most friendly with grim Betelgeux,—
Who herded time-shy comets through the Void,
And gipsied down the garden-paths of Pollux,
And paddled often in the Milky Way,—
Who chummed with Arcturus,
And wandered on his tilted tube
Up through the Magellanic Clouds,—
Who hailed Aldebaran the Red
And knew Orion as a friend
And waved a hand to Mira,—
Who called on cold-eyed Procyon,
And waded boy-like in the Star-Drift,
And bumped his head against the Asteroids,
And, homing through the Planets,
Would brush the star-dust from his knees
And so raptly talk of light-years,—

How still he lies

In this small room,

Where in those shuttered eyes

That sought all far-off light

There is no answering light!

THE SHADOW

Close to each light-hearted woman
Who kisses her lover
And laughs and retreats,
Reluctant yet melting,
At war with herself,
Withholding yet warm,
Enkindled yet cold,
Stands a shadow,
The sentinel ghost of a ghost
Who whispers past pulsing of blood
And panting of breast:
“All I ask of you, fool,
Is a seed in this soil,
Is a thread for the loom.
Grow pale with your rapture,
Poor quivering tool,
But leave me a link for the chain,
A child in the womb!”

WINTER LUMBERMEN

Ours is a dark country
When winter closes in.
The leaves are gone,
And the lakes give up their laughter,
And the snows come down,
And the tumbling streams turn quiet,
And there are no birds to sing.
Blue-white the bald hills stand
In that new-born hush,
When there is no wind,
And the world seems lost in sleep,
And the twilight sets in early
Where the saw-toothed edge of the pinelands
Gnaws at its rind of gold
Low down in the West.

Ours is a dark country,
But into its gloomy valleys
And its windrowed slopes of white
The loggers and teamsters come;
And the snow-muffled silence awakes
To the clang of the echoing ax,
The clank-clank-clink of the peavies,
The creak and whine of the log-chains
Where the great teams, rimed with frost,
Move slowly along the ice
To the crack of indignant whips
And the scream of the iron-shod runners
And the clangor of loosened chains
And the shouts of red-toqued drivers,
Snow-splashed and feathered with frost,
Where the silence is beaten back
By men at their toil.

But mostly between the hills
We hear the appeasing sound
Of their bells;
Bells through the blue-hilled morning,
Bells through the white-hilled day,
Bells through the lone long dusk
And the gathering twilight,
Deep-tongued and jubilant bells
Commingling in tone
And fading to far-off chimes;
The clamorous bells of the teamsters,
On slow-moving sleigh-tongues,
On shaken neck-yokes and hame-points,
Persistent, silvery sweet,
Oddly forlorn and musical;
Bells on horse-collars whitened with hoar,
Valorous and jocund bells
On the buckles of straining tugs;
Bells that chime and carol and sing
Through the lonely winter woodlands
Where the lonely stars come out
And men must have their music
In the midst of toil.

THE CLASH

The song of the white-throat
Bubbled like water up from its breast,
Cascaded and curved and flashed
Like a glistening blade of joy
In the curving blue
Of the sky.

But sharper still was the curve
Of the gray hawk out of the blue,
And the curve of the bloodied beak
That struck like a bolt
And shattered the blade of song.

THE WOLF-CALL

Close about my shack,
My shack in the little clearing,
Glooms the immeasurable forest.
But my box is heaped with birch-wood,
My lamp is alight on the table,
My kettle sings in the quiet,
And close to the fire
My lean bitch sleeps,—
Sleeps for a spell and wakens
And studies with gentle eyes
The answering eyes of Man.

But into this place of peace,
Where my bitch has her bone
And I have a book,
A call comes out of the night,
A challenge,
A wailing of want,
Where a timber-wolf skulks and waits
At the edge of our clearing.

And my bitch,
Who loves both me
And her appointed place by the fire,
Stirs in her sleep.
She rouses,
And walks to the door and whines,
Whines with something afar from hate
In her eye that evades my eye,
Forgetful of shelter and fire,
Forgetful of houses and men,
Ready to mate on a wind-swept hill
And suckle a half-starved litter
In a hole in a rock,
And forage and drag her kill
To a moldy den!

THE SOD-BREAKER

Solemn and slow they move
As one together,
Plowman and plow and straining team,
Dark-shadowed on the ground-swells,
Ant-like against the wash
Of tawny light.
They wheel and crawl again
Across the pulsing prairie-rim
Where the plowshare tears implacably
At the tangled roots of life
And the mold-board hides away
Bunch-grass and crocus-bloom and prairie-rose
And leaves blank waves of black.

Silent and utterly alone
The plowman widens that long aisle
Of umber loam and emptiness.
Yet not alone he goes,
And still majestic he moves
Along each conquering furrow
That flings its promise back
Where a thousand sheaves of grain
Like a thousand girls with golden hair
Are singing at his side!

A SON IS BORN

The air is warm
In the white-walled room
Where the white bed waits,
And the meaningless flowers
Have wilted a little.

Far down in the rain-swept drive
I can see a ghostly row
Of motor-cars, side by side,
Oblongs of meaningless black
In a meaningless mist.

It is very quiet,—
So quiet that the sound of steps
In the corridor dusk
Stirs a flutter of hope
Where a door is opened and closed,
And a murmur of voices fails,
And the odor of ether creeps
Out to the hall.

The wind-blown rain
Grows louder against blurred glass
And lessens again;
Phantasmal and very far off
A bell rings twice;
And somebody laughs
In a distant room.

They can laugh,
When the woman I love,
When that proud and regal body
Once warm with the wine of joy
And wise in the ways of life

And wise in the ways of life,
Is a tortured bundle of bones
Under a turned-back sheet!
They can laugh,
When the last of hope
Hangs on the rotten thread
Of a fluttering pulse!

Then a mounded thing on wheels
Moves slowly down the hall,
And a tired-eyed girl in white
Stops with a tired smile
And whispers over her shoulder:
“Everything’s fine!”
And from the sudden light of the doorway
A deeper voice booms out:
“*You’ve got a boy!*”

MILKWEED

The blue, blue sea,
And the drone of waves,
And the wheeling swallows,
And the sun on the opal sails,
And the misty and salt-bleached headlands,
And the milkweed thick at my feet,
And the milkweed held in the hand of a child
Who dreams on the misty cliff-edge,
Watching the fading sails
And the noonday blue
Of the lonely sea!

Was it all years ago,
Or was it but yesterday?
I only know that the scent
Of the milkweed brings it back,
Back with a touch of pain:
The child and the pallid headlands,
The drone of the dark blue sea,
And the opal sails
In the sun!

HOME THOUGHTS

I am tired of the dust
And the fever and noise
And the meaningless faces of men;
And I want to go home!
Oh, day after day I get thinking of home
Where the black firs fringe the sky-line,
And the birds wheel down the silence,
And the hemlocks whisper peace,
And the hill-winds cool the blood,
And the dusk is crowned with glory,
And the lone horizon softens,
And the world's at rest with Time!
Oh, I want to go there!
I want to go home!

THE PILOT

I lounge on the deck of the river-steamer,
Homeward bound with its load,
Churning from headland to headland,
Through moonlight and silence and dusk.
And the decks are alive with laughter and music and singing,
And I see the forms of the sleepers
And the shadowy lovers that lean so close to the rail,
And the romping children behind,
And the dancers amidships.
But high above us there in the gloom,
Where the merriment breaks like a wave at his feet,
Unseen of lover and dancer and me,
Is the Pilot, impassive and stern,
With his grim eyes watching the course.

SOME DAY, O SEEKER OF DREAMS

Some day, O Seeker of Dreams, they will seek even us!
Some day they will wake, Fellow Singer, and hunger and want
For the Ways to the Lonelier Height!
So let us, Shy Weaver of Beauty, take heart,
For out of their dust they will call to us yet!
Let us wait, and sing, and be wise,
As the sea has waited and sung,
As the hills through the night have been wise!
For we are the Bringers of Light, and the Voices of Love,
Aye, we are the Soothers of Pain, the Appeasers of Death,
The Dusk and the Star and the Gleam and the Loneliest Peak!
And when they have found and seen, and know not whither they trend,
They will come to us, crying aloud like a child in the night;
And when they have learned of our lips,
Still back to our feet they will grope
For that ultimate essence and core of all song,
To usher them empty and naked, then, out to the unanswering stars,
Where Silence and Dreaming and Music are one!

CHAINS

I watched the men at work on the stubborn rock,
But mostly the one man poised on a drill
Above the steam that hissed and billowed about him
White in the frosty air,
Where the lordly house would stand.

Majestic, muscular, high like a god,
He stood,
And controlled and stopped
And started his thundering drill,
Offhand and careless and lordly as Thor,
Begrimed and solemn and crowned with sweat,
Where the great steel chains swung over the buckets of rock.

Then out of a near-by house came a youth,
All gloved and encased in fur and touched with content,
Thin-shouldered and frail and finished,
Leading a house-dog out on a silver chain.

He peered at the figure that fought with the drill
Above the billowing steam and tumult of sound,
Peered up for a moment impassive,
With almost pitying eyes,
And then went pensively down the Avenue's calm,
In the clear white light of the noonday sun,
Not holding, but held by his silvery chain!

BLACK HOURS

I have drunk deep
Of the well of bitterness.
Black hours have harried me,
Blind fate has bludgeoned my bent head,
And on my brow the iron crown
Of sorrow has been crushed.
And being mortal, I have cried aloud
At anguish ineluctable.
But over each black hour has hung
Forlorn this star of knowledge:
The path of pain too great to be endured
Leads always unto peace;
And when the granite road of anguish mounts
Up and still up to its one ultimate
And dizzy height of torture,
Softly it dips and meets
The valley of endless rest!

SAPPHO'S TOMB

I

In an old and ashen island,
Beside a city gray with death,
They are seeking Sappho's tomb!

II

Beneath a vineyard ruinous
And a broken-columned temple
They are delving where she sleeps!
There between a lonely valley
Filled with noonday silences
And the headlands of soft violet
Where the sapphire seas still whisper,
Whisper with her sigh;
Through a country sad with wonder
Men are seeking vanished Sappho,
Men are searching for the tomb
Of muted Song!

III

They will find a Something there,
In a cavern where no sound is,
In a room of milky marble
Walled with black amphibolite
Over-scored with faded words
And stained with time!

IV

Sleeping in a low-roofed chamber,
With her phials of perfume round her,
In a terra-cotta coffin
With her image on the cover,
Childish echo of her beauty
Etched in black and gold barbaric—
Lift it slowly, slowly, seekers,
Or your search will end in dust!

V

With a tiny nude Astarte,
Bright with gilt and gravely watching
Over grass-green malachite,
Over rubies pale, and topaz,
And the crumbled dust of pearls!

VI

With her tarnished silver mirror,
With her rings of beaten gold,
With her robes of faded purple,
And the stylus that so often
Traced the azure on her eyelids,—
Eyelids delicate and weary,
Drooping, over-wise!
And at her head will be a plectron
Made of ivory, worn with time,
And a flute and gilded lyre
Will be found beside her feet,
And two little yellow sandals,
And crude serpents chased in silver
On her ankle rings—
And a cloud of drifting dust
All her shining hair!

VII

In that lost and lonely tomb
They may find her;
Find the arms that ached with rapture,
Softly folded on a breast
That for ever more is silent;
Find the eyes no longer wistful,
Find the lips no longer singing,
And the heart, so hot and wayward
When that ashen land was young,
Cold through all the mists of time,
Cold beneath the Lesbian marble
In the low-roofed room
That drips with tears!

BEFORE RENEWAL

Summer is dead.
And love is gone.
And life is glad of this.
For sad were both, with having given much;
And bowed were both, with great desires fulfilled;
And both were grown too sadly wise
Ever to live again.
Too aged with hours o'er-passionate,
Too deeply sung by throats
That took no thought of weariness,
Moving too madly toward the crest of things,
Giving too freely of the fountaining sap,
Crowding too gladly into grass and leaves,
Breathing too blindly into flower and song!
Again the lyric hope may thrill the world,
Again the sap may sweeten into leaves,
Again will gray-eyed April come
With all her choiring throats;
But not to-day—
For the course is run,
And the cruse is full,
And the loin ungirt,
And the hour ordained!
And now there is need of rest;
And need of renewal there is;
And need of silence,
And need of sleep.
Too clear the light
Now lies on hill and valley;
And little is left to say,
And nothing is left to give.
Summer is dead;
And love is gone!

HILLTOP HOURS

I am through with regret.
No more shall I kennel with pain.
I have called to this whimpering soul,
This soul that is sodden with tears
And sour with the reek of the years!
And now we shall glory in light!
Like a tatter of sail in the wind,
Like a tangle of net on the sand,
Like a hound stretched out in the heat,
My soul shall lie in the sun,
And be drowsy with peace,
And not think of the past!

THE DRUMS

A village wrapped in slumber,
Silent between the hills,
Empty of moon-lit market-place,
Empty of moving life—
Such is my quiet heart.
Shadowy-walled it rests,
Sleeping its heavy sleep;
But sudden across the dark
Tingles a sound of drums!
The drums, the drums, the distant drums.
The throb of the drums strikes up,
The beat of the drums awakes!
Then loud through the little streets,
And strange to the startled roofs,
The drums, the drums approach and pound,
And throb and clamor and thrill and pass,
And between the echoing house-walls
All swart and grim they go,
The battalions of regret,
After the drums, the valiant drums
That die away in the night!

ANESTHESIA

I caught the smell of ether
From the glass-roofed room
Where the hospital stood.
Suddenly all about me
I felt a mist of anguish
And the old, old hour of dread
When Death had shambled by.

Yellow with time it is,
This letter on which I look;
But up from it comes a perfume
That stabs me still to the heart;
And suddenly, at the odor,
Through a ghostlike mist I know
Rapture and love and wild regret
When Life and You went by.

THE WILD SWANS PASS

In the dead of the night
You turned in your troubled sleep
As you heard the wild swans pass;
And then you slept again.

You slept——
While a new world swam beneath
That army of eager wings,
While plainland and slough and lake
Lay wide to those outstretched throats,
While the far lone Lights allured
That phalanx of passionate breasts.

And I who had loved you more
Than a homing bird loves flight,—
I watched with an ache for freedom,
I rose with a need for life,
Knowing that love had passed
Into its unknown North!

AT NOTRE DAME

I

Odor of incense, pride of purple and gold,
Burst of music and praise, and passion of flute and pipe!
O voices of silver o'er-sweet, and soothing antiphonal chant!
O Harmony, ancient, ecstatic, a-throb to the echoing roof,
With tremulous roll of awakened reverberant tubes, and thunder of sound!
And illusion of mystical song and outclangor of jubilant bell,
And glimmer of gold and taper, and throbbing, insistent pipe—
If song and emotion and music were all—
Were it only all!

II

For see, dark heart of mine,
How the singers have ceased and gone!
See, how all of the music is lost and the lights are low,
And how, as our idle arms, these twin ineloquent towers
Grope up through the old inaccessible Night to His stars!
How in vain we have stormed on the bastions of Silence with sound!
How in vain with our music and song and emotion assailed the Unknown,
How beat with the wings of our worship on Earth's imprisoning bars!
For the pinions of Music have wearied, the proud loud tubes have tired,
Yet still grim and taciturn stand His immutable stars,
And, lost in the gloom, to His frontiers old I turn
Where glimmer those sentinel fires,
Beyond which, Dark Heart, we two
Some night must steal us forth,
Quite naked, and alone!

DOORS

Listen!
Footsteps
Are they,
That falter through the gloom,
That echo through the lonely chambers
Of our house of life?

Listen!
Did a door close?
Did a whisper waken?
Did a ghostly something
Sigh across the dusk?

From the mournful silence
Something, something went!
Far down some shadowy passage
Faintly closed a door—
And O how empty lies
Our house of life!

SPRING FLOODS

You stood alone
In the dusky window,
Watching the racing river.
Touched with a vague unrest,
And if tired of loving too much
More troubled at heart to find
That the flame of love could wither
And the wonder of love could pass,
You kneeled at the window-ledge
And stared through the black-topped maples
Where an April robin fluted,—
Stared idly out
At the flood-time sweep of the river,
Touched with vague unrest,
Silver and paling gold
In the ghostly April twilight.

Shadowy there in the dusk
You watched with shadowy eyes
The racing, sad, unreasoning
Hurrying torrent of silver
Seeking its far-off sea.
Faintly I heard you sigh,
And faintly I heard the robin's flute,
And faintly from rooms remote
Came a broken murmur of voices.
And life, for a breath, stood bathed
In a wonder crowned with pain,
And immortal the moment hung;
And I know that the thought of you
There at the shadowy window,
And the matted black of the maples,
And the sunset call of a bird,
And the sad wide reaches of silver,
Will house in my haunted heart
Till the end of Time!

THE TURN OF THE YEAR

The pines shake and the winds wake,
And the dark waves crowd the sky-line!
The birds wheel out on a troubled sky,
The widening road runs white and long,
And the page is turned,
And the world is tired!

So I want no more of twilight sloth,
And I want no more of resting,
And of all the earth I ask no more
Than the green sea, the great sea,
The long road, the white road,
And a change of life for me!

IF I LOVE YOU

If I love you, woman of rose
And warmth and wondering eyes,
If it so fall out
That you are the woman I choose,
Oh, what is there left to say,
And what should it matter to me,
Or what can it mean to you?
For under the two white breasts
And the womb that makes you woman
The call of the ages whispers
And the countless ghosts awaken,
And stronger than sighs and weeping
The urge that makes us one,
And older than hate or loving or shame
This want that builds the world!

WHAT SHALL I CARE?

What shall I care for the ways
Of these idle and thin-flanked women in silk
And the lipping men-shadows that trail at their heels?
What are they worth in my world
Or the world that I want,
These flabby-armed, indolent, delicate women
And these half-women daring to call themselves men
Yet afraid to get down to the earth
And afraid of the wind,
Afraid of the truth,
And so sadly afraid of themselves?
How can they help me in trouble and death?
How can they keep me from hating my kind?
Oh, I want to get out of their confining rooms,
I want to walk free with a man,
A man who has lived and dared
And swung through the cycle of life!
God give me a man for a friend
To the End,
Give me a man with his heel on the neck of Hate,
With his fist in the face of Death,
A man not fretted with womanish things,
Unafraid of the light,
Of the worm in the lip of a corpse,
Unafraid of the call from the cell of his heart,—
God give me a man for friend!

HUNTER AND HUNTED

I

When the sun is high,
And the hills are happy with light,
Then virile and strong I am!
Then ruddy with life I fare,
The fighter who feels no dread,
The roamer who knows no bounds,
The hunter who makes the world his prey,
And shouting and swept with pride,
Still mounts to the lonelier height!

II

In the cool of the day,
When the huddling shadows swarm,
And the ominous eyes look out
And night slinks over the swales
And the silence is chill with death,
Then I am the croucher beside the coals,
The lurker within the shadowy cave,
Who listens and mutters a charm
And trembles and waits,
A hunted thing grown
Afraid of the hunt,
A silence enisled in silence,
A wonder enwrapped in awe!

ULTIMATA

I am desolate,
Desolate because of a woman.
When at midnight walking alone
I look up at the slow-wheeling stars,
I see only the eyes of this woman.
In bird-haunted valleys and byways secluded,
Where once I sought peace,
I find now only unrest
And this one unaltering want.
When the dawn-wind stirs in the pine-tops
I hear only her voice's whisper.
When by day I gaze into the azure above me
I see only the face of this woman.
In the sunlight I can not find comfort,
Nor can I find peace in the shadows.
Neither can I take joy in the hill-wind,
Nor find solace on kindlier breasts;
For deep in the eyes of all women I watch
I see only her eyes stare back.
Nor can I shut the thought of her out of my heart
And the ache for her out of my hours.
Ruthlessly now she invades even my dreams
And wounds me in sleep;
And my body cries out for her,
Early and late and for ever cries out for her,
And her alone,—
And I want this woman!

I am sick at heart because of this woman;
I am lost to shame because of my want;
And mine own people have come to mean naught to me;
And with many about me still am I utterly alone,
And quite solitary now I take my way
Where men are intent on busy things

where men are intent on petty things
And phantasmal legions pace!
And a wearisome thing is life,
And for ever the shadow of this one woman
Is falling across my path.
The turn in the road is a promise of her.
The twilight is thronged with her ghosts;
The grasses speak only of her,
The leaves whisper her name for ever;
The odorous fields are full of her.
Her lips, I keep telling myself,
Are a cup from which I must drink;
Her breast is the one last pillow
Whereon I may ever find peace!
Yet she has not come to me,
And being denied her, everything stands denied,
And all men who have waited in vain for love
Cry out through my desolate heart;
And the want of the hungering world
Runs like fire through my veins
And bursts from my throat in the cry
That I want this woman!

I am possessed of a great sickness
And likewise possessed of a great strength,
And the ultimate hour has come.
I will arise and go unto this woman,
And with bent head and my arms about her knees
I shall say unto her: "Beloved beyond all words,
Others have sought your side,
And many have craved your kiss,
But none, O body of flesh and bone,
Has known a hunger like mine!
And though evil befall, or good,
This hunger is given to me,
And is now made known to you,—
For I must die,
Or you must die

Or you must die,
Or Desire must die
This night!”

YOU BID ME TO SLEEP

You bid me to sleep,—
But why, O Daughter of Beauty,
Was beauty thus born in the world?
Since out of these shadowy eyes
The wonder shall pass!
And out of this surging and passionate breast
The dream shall depart!
And out of these delicate rivers of warmth
The fire shall wither and fail!
And youth like a bird from your body shall fly!
And Time like a fang on your flesh shall feed!
And this perilous bosom that pulses with love
Shall go down to the dust from which it arose,—
Yet Daughter of Beauty, close,
Close to its sumptuous warmth
You hold my sorrowing head,
And smile with shadowy eyes,
And bid me to sleep again!

THE HOUSE OF LIFE

Quietly I closed the door.
Then I said to my soul:
“I shall never come back,
Back to this haunted room
Where Sorrow and I have slept.”
I turned from that hated door
And passed through the House of Life,
Through its ghostly rooms and glad
And its corridors dim with age.
Then lightly I crossed a threshold
Where the casements showed the sun
And I entered an unknown room,—
And my heart went cold,
For about me stood that Chamber of Pain
I had thought to see no more!

THE LAST OF SUMMER

The opal afternoon
Is cool, and very still.
A wash of tawny air,
Sea-green that melts to gold,
Bathes all the sky-line, hill by hill.
Out of the black-topped pinelands
A black crow calls,
And the year seems old!
A woman from a doorway sings,
And from the valley-slope a sheep-dog barks,
And through the umber woods the echo falls.
Then silence on the still world lies,
And faint and far the birds fly south,
And behind the dark pines drops the sun,
And a small wind wakes and sighs,
And Summer, see, is done!

AT CHARING-CROSS

Alone amid the Rockies I have stood;
Alone across the prairie's midnight calm
Full often I have fared
And faced the hushed infinity of night;
Alone I have hung poised
Between a quietly heaving sea
And quieter sky,
Aching with isolation absolute;
And in Death's Valley I have walked alone
And sought in vain for some appeasing sign
Of life or movement,
While over-desolate my heart called out
For some befriending face
Or some assuaging voice!
But never on my soul has weighed
Such loneliness as this,
As here amid the seething London tides
I look upon these ghosts that come and go,
These swarming restless souls innumerable,
Who through their million-footed dirge of unconcern
Must know and nurse the thought of kindred ghosts
As lonely as themselves,
Or else go mad with it!

PRESCIENCE

I

“The sting of it all,” you said, as you stooped low over your roses,
“The worst of it is, when I think of Death,
That Spring by Spring the Earth shall still be beautiful,
And Summer by Summer be lovely again,
—And I shall be gone!”

II

“I would not care, perhaps,” you said, watching your roses,
“If only ’twere dust and ruin and emptiness left behind!
But the thought that Earth and April
Year by casual year
Shall waken around the old ways, soft and beautiful,
Year by year when I am away,
—This, this breaks my heart!”

THE STEEL WORKERS

I watched the workers in steel,
The Pit-like glow of the furnace,
The rivers of molten metal,
The tremulous rumble of cranes,
The throb of the Thor-like hammers
On sullen and resonant anvils!
I saw the half-clad workers
Twisting earth's iron to their use,
Shaping the steel to their thoughts;
And, in some way, out of the fury
And the fires of mortal passion,
It seemed to me,
In some way, out of the torture
And tumult of inchoate Time,
The hammer of sin is shaping
The soul of man!

THE CHILDREN

The city is old in sin,
And children are not for cities,
And, wan-eyed woman, you want them not,
You say with a broken laugh.
Yet out of each wayward softness of voice,
And each fulness of breast,
And each flute-throated echo of song,
Each flutter of lace and quest of beautiful things,
Each coil of entangling hair built into its crown,
Each whisper and touch in the silence of night,
Each red unreasoning mouth that is lifted to mouth,
Each whiteness of brow that is furrowed no more with thought,
Each careless soft curve of lips that can never explain,
Arises the old and the inappeasable cry!
Every girl who leans from a tenement sill
And flutters a hand to a youth,
Every woman who waits for a man in the dusk,
Every harlotous arm flung up to a drunken heel
That would trample truth down in the dust,
Reaches unknowingly out for its own,
And blind to its heritage waits
For its child!

THE WILD GEESE

Over my homesick head,
High in the paling light
And touched with the sunset's glow,
Soaring and strong and free,
The unswerving phalanx sweeps,
The honking wild geese go,—
Go with a flurry of wings
Home to their norland lakes
And the sedge-fringed tarns of peace
And the pinelands soft with Spring!

I can not go as the geese go,
But into the steadfast North,
The North that is dark and tender,
My homesick spirit wings,—
Wings with a flurry of longing thoughts
And nests in the tarns of youth.

THE DAY

I

Dim-lit and dewy lawn-slopes,
Is this the day she comes?
O wild-flower face of Morning,
Must you never wake?
Silvery, silvery sea-line,
Does she come to-day?
O murmurous, murmurous birch-leaves,
Beneath your whispering shadow
She will surely pass;
And thrush beneath the black-thorn
And white-throat in the pine-top,
Sing as you have never sung,
For she will surely come!

II

The lone green of the lawn-slope,
The gray light on the sky-line,
The mournful stir of birch-leaves,
The thin note of the brown thrush,
And the call of troubled white-throats
Across the afternoon!—
Ah, Summer now is over,
And for us the season closed,
For she who came an hour ago
Has gone again—
Has gone!

THE REVOLT

God knows that I've tinkled and jingled and strummed,
That I've piped it and jigged it until I'm fair sick of the game,
That I've given them slag and wasted the silver of song,
That I've thrown them the tailings and they've taken them up content!
But now I want to slough off the bitterness born of it all,
I want to throw off the shackles and chains of time,
I want to sit down with my soul and talk straight out,
I want to make peace with myself,
And say what I have to say,
While still there is time!

Yea, I will arise and go forth, I have said,
To the uplands of truth, to be free as the wind,
Rough and unruly and open and turbulent-throated!
Yea, I will go forth and fling from my soul
The shackles and chains of song!

But, lo, on my wrists are the scars,
And here on my ankles the chain-galls,
And the cell-pallor, see, on my face!
And my throat seems thick with the cell-dust,
And for guidance I grope to the walls,
And after my moment of light
I want to go back to the Dark,
Since the Open still makes me afraid,
And silence seems best in the sun,
And song in the dusk!

MARCH TWILIGHT

Black with a batter of mud
Stippled with silvery pools
Stands the pavement at the street-end;
And the gutter snow is gone
From cobble and runneling curb;
And no longer the ramping wind
Is rattling the rusty signs;
And moted and soft and misty
Hangs the sunlight over the cross-streets,
And the home-bound crowds of the city
Walk in a flood of gold.

And suddenly out of the dusk
There comes the ancient question:
Can it be that I have lived
In earlier worlds unknown?
Or is it that somewhere deep
In this husk that men call Me
Are kenneled a motley kin
I never shall know or name,—
Are housed still querulous ghosts
That sigh and awaken and move,
And sleep once more?

FACES

I tire of these empty masks,
These faces of city women
That seem so vapid and well-controlled.
I get tired of their guarded ways
And their eyes that are always empty
Of either passion or hate
Or promise or love,
And that seem to be old
And are never young!
I think of the homelier faces
That I have seen,
The vital and open faces
In the byways of the world:
A Polish girl who met
Her lover one wintry morning
Outside the jail at Ossining;
A lean young Slav violinist
And the steerage women about him,
Held by the sound of his music;
A young and deep-bosomed Teuton
Suckling her shawl-wrapped child
On a gray stone bridge in Detmold;
A group of girls from Ireland,
Crowding the steps of a colonist-car
And singing half-sadly together
As their train rocked on and on
Over the sun-bathed prairie;
A mournful Calabrian mother
Standing and staring out
Past the mists of Ischia
After a fading steamer;
A Nautch girl held by a sailor
Who'd taken a knife from her fingers
But not the fire from her eyes.

But not the life from her eyes,
And a silent Sicilian mother
Standing alone in the Marina
Awaiting her boy who had been
Long years away!—
These I remember!
And of these
I never tire!

THERE IS STRENGTH IN THE SOIL

There is strength in the soil;
In the earth there is laughter and youth.
There is solace and hope in the upturned loam.
And lo, I shall plant my soul in it here like a seed!
And forth it shall come to me as a flower of song;
For I know it is good to get back to the earth
That is orderly, placid, all-patient!
It is good to know how quiet
And non-committal it breathes,
This ample and opulent bosom
That must some day nurse us all!

LIFE-DRUNK

On opal Aprilian mornings like this
I seem dizzy and drunk with life.
I waken and wander and laugh in the sun;
With some mystical knowledge enormous
I lift up my face to the light.
Drunk with a gladness stupendous I seem;
With some wine of Immensity god-like I reel;
And my arm could fling Time from his throne;
I could pelt the awed taciturn arch
Of Morning with music and mirth;
And I feel, should I find but a voice for my thought,
That the infinite orbits of all God's loneliest stars
That are weaving vast trceries out on the fringes of Night
Could never stand more than a hem on the robe of my Song!

MY HEART STOOD EMPTY

My heart stood empty and bare,
So I hung it with thoughts of a woman.
The remembered ways of this woman
Hung sweet in my heart.
So I followed where thought should lead,
And it led to her feet.
But the mouth of this woman was pain,
And the love of this woman, regret;
And now only the thought
Of all those remembered thoughts
Of remembered ways,
Is shut in my heart!

DREAMERS

There's a poet tombed in you,
Man of blood and iron!
There's a dreamer dead and buried
Deep beneath your cynic frown.

And deep beneath my music,
There's a strong man stirs in me;
There's a ghost of blood and granite
Confined in this madness
Carpentered of Song!

You live your day and drain it;
I weave my dream and lose it;
But the red blood lost in me awakens still at times,
At all your city's sky-line,
At all your roaring market-place,
At all its hum of power—
And the poet dead within you stirs
Still at the plaintive note or two
Of a dreamer's plaintive song!

THE QUESTION

I

Glad with the wine of life,
Reeling I go my way,
Drunk with the ache of living
And mouthing my drunken song!
Then comes the lucid moment
And the shadow across the lintel;
And I hear the ghostly whisper,
And I glimpse with startled eyes
The Door beyond the doorway,
And I see the small dark house
Where I must sleep.

II

Then song turns sour on my lips,
And the warmth goes out of my blood,
And I turn me back to the beaker,
And redraining my cup of dream,
I drown the whispering voices,
I banish the ghostly question
As to which in the end is true:
The wine and the open road?
Or the waiting Door?

THE GIFT OF HATE

Empty it seems, at times, their cry about Love,
Their claim that love is the only thing that survives.
For I who am born of my centuries strewn with hate,
Who was spewed into life from a timeless tangle of sin,
I can hate as strong and as long as I love!

There are hours and issues I hate;
There are creeds and deeds and doubts I hate;
There are men I hate to the uttermost;
And although in their graves they listen and weep,
Earth's mothers and wistful women who cried for peace,
I hate this King of Evil who has crowned my heart with Hate!

THE DREAM

I lay by your side last night.
By you, in my dreams,
I felt the damp of the grave.
I was dead with you—
And my bones still ache with Death.
For my hand went out and I touched your lips,
And I found them fallen away,
Wasted and lost!
Those lips once warm with life
Were eaten and gone!
And my soul screamed out in the dark
At the intimate blackness of Death.
And then I arose from the dead
And returned to the day;
And my bones and my heart still ache with it all,
And I hunger to hear the relieving babble of life,
The crowd in the hurrying street,
The tumult and laughter and talk,
To make me forget!

ONE ROOM IN MY HEART

One room in my heart shall be closed, I said;
One chamber at least in my soul shall be secret and locked!
I shall hold it my holy of holies, and no one shall know it!
But you, calm woman predestined, with casual hands,
You came with this trivial key,
And ward by obdurate ward the surrendering lock fell back,
And disdainfully now you wander and brood and wait
In this room that I thought was my own!

THE VEIL

You have said that I sold
My life for a song;
Laid bare my heart
That men might listen
And go their ways—
My inchoate heart
That I dare not plumb,
That goes unbridled
To the depths of Hell,
That sings in the sun
To the brink of Heaven!
I have tossed you the spindrift
Born of its fretting
On its shallowest coast,
But over the depths of it
Bastioned in wonder
And silent with fear
God sits with me!

THE MAN OF DREAMS

All my lean life
I garnered nothing but a dream or two.
These others gathered harvests
And grew fat with grain.
But no man lives by bread,
And bread alone.
So, forgetful of their scorn,
When starved, they cried for life,
I gave them my last dreams,
I bared for them my heart,
That they might eat!

APRIL ON THE RIALTO

A canyon of granite and steel,
A river of grim unrest,
And over the fever and street-dust
Arches the azure of dream.
And fretting along the tumult,
Threading the iron curbs,
Tawdry in tinsel and feather
Drift the daughters of pleasure,
The sad-eyed traders in song,
The makers of joy,
The Columbines of the city
Seeking their ends!
But under the beaded eyelash,
Under the lip with its rouge,
Under the mask of white
Splashed with geranium-red,
As God's own arch of azure
Leans softly over the street,
Surely, this day, runs warmer
The blood through a wasted breast!

THE PASSING

Ere the thread is loosed,
And the sands run low,
And the last hope fails,
Wherever we fare,
O Fond and True,
May it fall that we come in the end,
Come back to the crimson valleys,
Back to the Indian Summer,
Back to the northern pinelands,
And the gray lakes draped with silence,
And the sunlight thin and poignant,
And the leaf that flutters earthward,
And the sky-line green and lonely,
And the ramparts of the dead world
Ruddy with wintry rose!
May we fare, O Fond and True,
Through our soft-houred Indian Summer,
Through the paling twilight weather,
And facing the lone green uplands,
And greeting the sun-warmed hills,
Step into the pineland shadows
And enter the sunset valley
And go as the glory goes
Out of the dreaming autumn,
Out of the drifting leaf
And the dying light!

PROTESTATIONS

If I tire of you, beautiful woman,
I know that the fault is mine;
Yet not all mine the failure
And not all mine the loss.
In loveliness still you walk;
But I have walked with sorrow.
I have threaded narrows,
And I have passed through perils
That you know nothing of.
And I in my grief have gazed
In eyes that were not yours;
And my emptier hours have known
The sigh of kindlier bosoms,
The kiss of kindlier mouths.
Yet the end of all is written,
And nothing, O rose-leaf woman,
You ever may dream or do
Henceforth can bring me anguish
Or crown my days with joy!
Three tears, soft-smiling woman,
You said could float your soul,
So little a thing it seemed!
Yet all that's left of life
I'd give to know your love,
I'd give to show my love,
And feel your kiss again!

I SAT IN THE SUNLIGHT

I sat in the sunlight thinking of life;
I sat there, dreaming of Death.
And a moth alit on the sun-dial's face,
And the birds sang sleepily,
And the leaves stirred,
And the sun lay warm on the hills,
And the afternoon grew old.

So, some day I knew the birds would sing,
And the leaves would stir,
And the afternoon grow old—
And I would not be there.
And the warmth went out of the day,
And a wind blew out of the West where I sat,
And the birds were still!

THE END

AN AFTERWORD

(ON THE MATTER OF RHYTHM AND RHYME)

Along with the newer *Vers Libre* between these covers I have ventured to reprint a number of poems from my earlier volume of *Free Verse*, first published in 1914. Two decades ago, at any rate, we proudly spoke of it as "Free Verse." But Time brings its changes, altering even the poet's dolorously enduring and apparently unending struggle between formal obligation and freedom. The Futurists are not yet in complete control of the future. And fewer lances, now that the battle-line has formed on other fronts, are now broken in the cause of the Imagists. Many experimenters, especially in English *Vers Libre*, who may have regarded themselves as pioneers in a new form can now be looked upon as the grizzled veterans of a war so remote we find it hard to recall either the occasion or the original cause of the conflict. For *Free Verse*, as the century has grown older, has become less of a novelty. The audacities of yesterday, as so often befalls, have scaled down to the commonplaces of to-day.

I am not claiming that the movement is, or was, as important as we once thought it, interesting as the battle-cry of youth must always remain. We can now detect, I'm afraid, a touch of fanaticism in that earlier and over-enthusiastic Eighteenth Amendment against Rhyme. For, like alcohol, the foreordained outline and the expectation fulfillment of formalized verse, dangerous as it may be as an intoxicant, is not entirely valueless as a stimulant. So when I venture to quote from the earlier Foreword of my earlier volume, I must be forgiven for doing so with something not unlike the grim-eyed tolerance of a battered old General taking the salute from a march-past of his youngest and rawest militia. For Art, after all, is long. And Time teaches us that this shifted fetter known as Freedom is not always the final solution of the artist's problem.

Yet what I have said in my earlier Preface may still be worth quoting, if not as the final word on prosody, then at least as the fossil evidence of an all but vanished faith. So I herewith reprint a goodly portion of that Foreword, even though I can no longer subscribe to all its claims or concur in all its conclusions.

"To even the casual reader of poetry who may chance to turn to the following pages," I wrote a good many years ago, "it will be evident that the lyrics contained therein have been written without what is commonly known as end-rhyme. It may also be claimed by this reader that the lyrics before him are without rhythm. As such,

it may at first seem that they mark an effort in revolt against two of the primary assets of modern versification.

“All art, of course, has its ancestry. While it is the duty of poetry both to remember and to honor its inherited grandeurs, the paradoxical fact remains that even this most convention-ridden medium of emotional expression is a sort of warfare between the embattled soul of the artist, seeking articulation, and the immuring traditions with which time and the prosodian have surrounded him.

“In painting and in music, as in sculpture and the drama, there has been a movement . . . to achieve what may be called formal emancipation, a struggle to break away from the restraints and the technical obligations imposed upon the worker by his artistic predecessors. In one case this movement may be called Futurism, and in another it may be termed Romanticism, but the tendency is the same. The spirit of man is seen in rebellion against a form that has become too intricate or too fixed to allow him freedom of utterance.

“Poetry alone, during the last century, seems to have remained stable, in the matter of structure. Few new forms have been invented, and with one or two rare exceptions success has been achieved through ingeniously elaborating on an already established formula. This has resulted, on the one hand, in a technical dexterity which often enough resembles the strained postures of acrobatism, and, on the other, in that constantly reiterated complaint as to the aloofness of modern poetry. Yet this poetry is remote and insincere, not because the modern spirit is incapable of feeling, but because what the singer of to-day has felt has not been directly and openly expressed. His apparel has remained medieval. He must still don mail to face Mausers, and wear chain-armor against machine-guns. He must scout through the shadowy hinterlands of consciousness in attire that may be historic, yet at the same time is distressingly conspicuous. And when he begins his assault on those favoring moments or inspirational moods which lurk in the deeper valleys and byways of sensibility, he must begin it as a marked man, pathetically resplendent in that rigid steel which is an anachronism and no longer an armor.

“Rhyme, from the first, has been imposed upon him. His only escape from rhyme has been the larger utterance of blank verse. Yet the iambic pentameter of his native tongue, perfected in the sweeping sonority of the later Shakespearean tragedies and left even more intimidatingly austere in the organ-like roll of Milton, has been found by the later singer to be ill-fitted for the utterance of those more intimate moods and those subjective experiences which may be described as characteristically modern. Verse, in the nature of things, has become less epic and racial, and more and more lyric and personal. The poet, consequently, has been forced back into the narrower

domain so formally and so rigidly fenced in by rhyme. And before touching on the limitations resulting from this incarceration, it may be worth while to venture a brief glance back over the history of what Milton himself denominated as ‘the jingling sounds of like endings’ and Goldsmith characterized as ‘a vile monotony’ and even Howells has spoken of as ‘the artificial trammels of verse.’

“It has been claimed that those early poets of Palestine who affected the custom of beginning a number of lines or stanzas with the same letter of the alphabet unconsciously prepared the way for that latter-day ornamental fringe known as end-rhyme. Others have claimed that this insistence on a consonance of terminals is a relique of the communal force of the chant, where the clapping of hands, the stamping of feet, or the twanging of bow-strings, marked the period-ends of prehistoric recitative. The bow-string, of course, later evolved into the musical instrument, and when poetry became a written as well as a spoken language the consonantal drone of rhyming end-words took the place of the discarded instrument which had served to mark a secondary and wider rhythm in the progress of impassioned recitative.

“It must be admitted, however, even in the face of this ingenious pleading, that rhyme is a much more modern invention than it seems. That it is not rudimentary in the race is evidenced by the fact that many languages, such as the Celtic, the Teutonic and the Scandinavian, are quite without it. The Greeks, even in their melic poetry, saw no need for it. The same may be said of the Romans, though with them it will occasionally be found that the semi-feet of the pentameter constitute what may be called accidental rhyme. Rhyming Latin verse, indeed, does not come into existence until the end of the fourth century, and it is not until the time of the Conquest that end-rhyme becomes in any way general in English song. Layman, in translating Wace’s *Le Brut d’Angleterre*, found the original work written in rhymed lines, and in following that early model produced what is probably the first rhymed poem written in England.

“With the introduction of end-rhymes came the discovery that a decoration so formal could convert verse into something approaching the architectural. It gave design to the lyric. With this new definiteness of outline, of course, came a newer rigidity of medium. Form was acknowledged as the visible presentation of this particular art. Formal variations became a matter of studious attention. Efforts were made to leave language in itself instrumental, and in these efforts sound frequently comes perilously near triumphing over sense. The exotic formal growths of other languages were imported into England. No verbal *tour de force* of *troubadour* or *trouvère* or *jongleur* or Ronsardist was too fantastic for imitation and adoption. The

one-time primitive directness of English was overrun by such forms as the ballade, the chant royal, the rondel, the kyrielle, the rondeau and the rondeau redoublé, the virelai and the pantoum, the sestina, the villanelle, and last, yet by no means least, the sonnet.

“But through the immense tangle of our intricate lyric growths it can now be seen that mere mechanics do not always make poetry. While rhyme has, indeed, served its limited purposes, it must be remembered that the highest English verse has been written without rhyme. This verbal embroidery, while it presents to the workman in words a pleasingly decorative form, at the same time imposes on him both an adventitious restraint and an increased self-consciousness. The twentieth-century poet, singing with his scrupulously polished vocalization, usually finds himself content to reëcho what has been said before. He is unable to ‘travel light’; pioneering with so heavy a burden is out of the question. Rhyme and meter have compelled him to sacrifice content for form. It has left him incapable of what may be called abandonment. And the consciousness of his technical impedimenta has limited the roads along which he may adventure. His preoccupation with formal exactions has implanted in him an instinctive abhorrence for anything beyond the control of what he calls common sense. Dominated by this emotional and intellectual timidity, he has attributed to end-rhyme and accentual rhythm the self-sufficiency of mystic rites, in the face of the fact that the fewer the obstacles between feeling and expression the richer the literary product must be, and forgetting, too, that poetry represents the extreme vanguard of consciousness both adventuring and pioneering along the path of future progress.

“For the poet to turn his back on rhythm, as at times he has been able to do with rhyme, is an impossibility. For the rhythmizing instinct is innate and persistent in man, standing for a law which permeates every manifestation of energy. The great heart of Nature itself beats with a regular systole and diastole. But, rhythmically, the modern versifier has been a Cubist without quite comprehending it. He has been viewing the world mathematically. He has been crowding his soul into a geometrically designed mold. He has bowed to a rule-of-thumb order of speech, arbitrarily imposed on him by an ancestry which wrung its ingenuous pleasure out of an ingenuous regularity of stress and accent. To succeed under that law he must practise an adroit form of self-deception, solemnly pretending to fit his lines to a mold which he actually overruns and occasionally ignores. He has not been satisfied with the rhythm of Nature, whose heart-beats in their manifold expressions are omnipresent but never confined to any single sustained pulse or any one limited movement. It is not argued that he should ignore rhythm altogether. To do so, as has already been said, would be

impossible, since life itself is sustained by the rise and fall of mortal breasts and the beat and throb of mortal hearts. Rhythm is in man's blood. The ear of the world instinctively searches for cadences. The poet's efforts toward symphonic phrasing have long since become habitual and imperative. But that he should confine himself to certain manmade laws of meter, that he should be shackled by the prosodian of the past, is quite another matter. His predecessors have fashioned many rhythms that are pretty, many accentual forms that are cunningly intricate, but at a time when his manner of singing has lost its vital swing it is well for man to forget these formal prettinesses and equally well to remember that poetry is not an intellectual exercise but the immortal soul of perplexed mortality seeking expression.

“To abandon fixed rhythm, or meter, for the floating rhythm of the chant may not be an immediate solution of the problem. To follow the Psalms of David, for example, will not suddenly conjure a new school of verse into the world. But to return to the more open movement of the chant, which is man's natural and rudimentary form of song, may constitute a step toward freedom.

“The mere effort toward emancipation, in fact, is not without its value. It may serve to impress on certain minds the fact that poetry is capable of exhausting one particular form of expression, of incorporating and consuming one particular embodiment of perishable matter, and passing on to its newer fields. Being a living organism, it uses up what lies before it, and, to find new vigor, must for ever feed on new forms. Being the product of man's spirit, which is for ever subject to change, verse must not be worshiped for what it has been, but for what it is capable of being. No necrophilic regard for its established conventions must blind the lover of beautiful verse to the fact that the primary function of poetry is both to intellectualize sensation and to elucidate emotional experience.”

A. S.

[The end of *Dark Soil* by Arthur Stringer]