

Collected Poems

Frances Cornford
1954

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Title: Collected Poems

Date of first publication: 1954

Author: Frances Cornford (1886-1960)

Date first posted: May 4, 2015

Date last updated: May 4, 2015

Faded Page eBook #20150508

This ebook was produced by: Barbara Watson, Al Haines, Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpca.net>

FRANCES CORNFORD

COLLECTED
POEMS

LONDON

THE CRESSET PRESS

First published in September 1954 by the Cresset Press Ltd
11 Fitzroy Square, London, W1
Second impression, January 1955

Printed in Great Britain by the Shenval Press Ltd
London, Hertford and Harlow

TO THE MEMORY
OF MY OLD FRIEND AND MENTOR
EDDIE MARSH

PREFACE

This collection contains all the poems I wish to preserve from my previously published work. It starts with a poem I wrote in 1902 when I was sixteen, and ends with several written during the past twelve months. I have slightly revised some of my earlier work in places where I was originally most dissatisfied with it, and yet found myself, at the time, incapable of emending it. No poems included in the last group have appeared in book form before. My thanks are due to the editors of TIME AND TIDE, THE LISTENER, PUNCH and THE NEW STATESMAN AND NATION for permission to reprint some of these. Messrs Bowes & Bowes Publishers Ltd., The Hogarth Press and the Cambridge University Press have each, in the past, published volumes of my verse, and I am grateful for their kind permission to select from these.

Once more I wish to thank Mr John Hayward for the vigilant care with which he has gone through the whole book, and Mr David Castillejo for his practical aid and for his understanding, without which I should never have succeeded in preparing it for the press. It was to have been dedicated to Sir Edward Marsh who, through all the last years of his life, helped me over every stray poem, with an unflagging friendship and skill. Instead, I must dedicate it to his memory.

November 1953

F. C. C.

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JUVENILIA: From *POEMS* (1910)

AUTUMN MORNING AT CAMBRIDGE

I ran out in the morning, when the air was clean and new
And all the grass was glittering and grey with autumn dew,
I ran out to an apple-tree and pulled an apple down,
And all the bells were ringing in the old grey town.

Down in the town off the bridges and the grass,
They are sweeping up the leaves to let the people pass,
Sweeping up the old leaves, golden-reds and browns,
Whilst the men go to lecture with the wind in their gowns.

October 1902

THE WATCH

I wakened on my hot, hard bed,
Upon the pillow lay my head;
Beneath the pillow I could hear
My little watch was ticking clear.
I thought the throbbing of it went
Like my continual discontent;
I thought it said in every tick:
I am so sick, so sick, so sick;
O Death, come quick, come quick, come quick,
Come quick, come quick, come quick, come quick.

THE CERTAIN KNOT OF PEACE

So, my proud soul, so you, whose shining force
Could gallop with me to eternity,
Stand now, appealing like a tired horse:
 Unharness me.

O passionate world! O faces of my friends!
O half-grasped meanings, intricate and deep!
Sudden, as with a child, the tumult ends,
 Silenced by sleep.

1907

PRE-EXISTENCE

I laid me down upon the shore
And dreamed a little space;
I heard the great waves break and roar
The sun was on my face.

My idle hands and fingers brown
Played with the pebbles grey;
The waves came up, the waves went down,
Both thundering and gay.

The pebbles smooth and salt and round
Were warm upon my hands,
Like little people I had found
Sitting among the sands.

The grains of sand completely small
Soft through my fingers ran;
The sun shone down upon us all,
And so my dream began:

How all of this had been before,
How ages far away
I lay on some forgotten shore
As here I lie today.

The waves came shining up the sands,
As here today they shine;
And in my pre-Pelasgian hands
The sand was warm and fine.

I have forgotten whence I came
Or where my home might be,
Or by what strange and savage name
I called that thundering sea.

I only know the sun shone down
As still it shines today,
And friendly in my fingers brown
The little pebbles lay.

1907

YOUTH

A young Apollo, golden-haired,
Stands dreaming on the verge of strife
Magnificently unprepared
For the long littleness of life.

TO A FAT LADY SEEN FROM THE TRAIN

TRIOLET

O why do you walk through the fields in gloves,
Missing so much and so much?

O fat white woman whom nobody loves,
Why do you walk through the fields in gloves,
When the grass is soft as the breast of doves
And shivering-sweet to the touch?

O why do you walk through the fields in gloves,
Missing so much and so much?

LONDON STREETS

VILLANELLE

‘The blundering and cruel ways of nature’

CHARLES DARWIN

O Providence, I will not praise,
Neither for fear nor joy of gain,
Your blundering and cruel ways.

This city where the dun fog stays,
These tired faces in the rain,
O Providence, I will not praise.

Here in the mud and wind that slays
In the cold streets, I scan again
Your blundering and cruel ways.

And all men’s miserable days,
And all their ugliness and pain,
O Providence, I will not praise.

I will not join the hymns men raise
Like slaves who would avert, in vain,
Your blundering and cruel ways.

At least, in this distracted maze,
I love the truth and see it plain;
O Providence, I will not praise
Your blundering and cruel ways.

1908

DAWN

So begins the day,
Solid, chill, and grey,
But my heart will wake
Happy for your sake;
Singing like a child,
No more tossed and wild,
Quiet as a flower
In this first grey hour.

So my heart will wake
Happy, for your sake.

From *SPRING MORNING* (1915)

A RECOLLECTION

My father's friend came once to tea.
He laughed and talked. He spoke to me.
But in another week they said
That friendly pink-faced man was dead.

'How sad . . .' they said, 'the best of men . . .'
So I said too, 'How sad'; but then
Deep in my heart I thought, with pride,
'I know a person who has died'.

A WASTED DAY

I spoiled the day;
Hotly, in haste,
All the calm hours
I gashed and defaced.

Let me forget,
Let me embark,
Sleep for my boat,
And sail through the dark.

Till a new day
Heaven shall send
Whole as an apple,
And kind as a friend.

IN DORSET

From muddy road to muddy lane
I plodded through the falling rain;
For miles and miles was nothing there
But mist, and mud, and hedges bare.

At length approaching I espied
Two gipsy women side by side;
They turned their faces broad and bold
And brown and freshened by the cold,
And stared at me in gipsy wise
With shrewd, unfriendly, savage eyes.

No word they said, no more dared I,
And so we passed each other by,
The only living things that met
In all those miles of mist and wet.

NIGHT SONG

On moony nights the dogs bark shrill
Down the valley and up the hill.

There's one is angry to behold
The moon so unafraid and cold,
That makes the earth as bright as day,
But yet unhappy, dead, and grey.

Another in his strawy lair
Says: 'Who's a-howling over there?
By heavens I will stop him soon
From interfering with the moon.'

So back he barks, with throat upthrown:
'You leave our moon, our moon alone.'
And other distant dogs respond
Beyond the fields, beyond, beyond.

From *AUTUMN MIDNIGHT* (1923)

To Jacques and Gwen Raverat

AUTUMN MIDNIGHT

Why is it grown so suddenly cold at night?
The handles of the chest-of-drawers are bright
And round, and hard, and like a usurer's eyes—
Perhaps it is the moon's cold from the skies?
I wish I had not woken thus alone—
I think she pours a coldness of her own
On each loved leaf upon the garden trees,
So that they never can recover. These
And ruined starry daisies all will say:
'Queen of the garden, now we go away,
Now we have known the cold of the moon that kills
And though tomorrow all the heaven fills
With golden light until the chill sun's set,
Though for an hour the midges minuet,
Though for an hour we glisten in the sun,
Our day, our day is done.'

I'll sleep again in this warm cave of bed;
Tomorrow all the flowers will be dead.

BETTER

The air is still grey,
The buds are still cold;
The sun sets early
In a pool of dazzling gold.

But my Mamma got up today and fastened on her gown,
And on the sheltered terraces went walking up and down.

Violets blue, violets white,
We found one of each;
She touched with her fingers
The buds on the peach;
A cold-stalked snow-drop I put into her hand,
And we were both more glad than we could say, or understand.

THE NEW-BORN BABY'S SONG

When I was twenty inches long,
I could not hear the thrushes' song;
The radiance of morning skies
Was most displeasing to my eyes.

For loving looks, caressing words,
I cared no more than sun or birds;
But I could bite my mother's breast,
And that made up for all the rest.

THE COUNTRY BEDROOM

My room's a square and candle-lighted boat,
In the surrounding depths of night afloat;
My windows are the portholes, and the seas
The sound of rain on the dark apple-trees.

Seamonster-like beneath, an old horse blows
A snort of darkness from his sleeping nose,
Below, among drowned daisies. Far off, hark!
Far off one owl amidst the waves of dark.

A COUNTRY LEGACY

Gold-headed rose for bees to sup,
And vetch and varnished buttercup,
And hemlock, with its hollow stalk, are up.

Blue speedwell lovely as the dew
And old brown-headed plantains too—
Before I knew myself, these friends I knew.

O child to be, though my life ends
And change or chance your spirit rends,
With the same faces, these will be your friends.

THE PRINCESS AND THE GYPSIES

As I looked out one May morning
I saw the tree-tops green;
I said: 'My crown I will lay down
And live no more a queen.'

Then I tripped down my golden steps
Dressed in my silken gown,
And when I stood in the open wood
I met some gypsies brown.

'O gentle, gentle gypsies
That roam the wide world through,
Because I hate my crown and state,
O let me come with you!

'My councillors are old and grey
And sit in narrow chairs,
But you can hear the birds sing clear
And your hearts are as light as theirs.'

'If you would come along with us
Then you must count the cost,
For though in Spring the sweet birds sing,
In Winter comes the frost.

'Your ladies serve you all the day
With courtesy and care,
Your fine-shod feet they tread so neat
But a gypsy's feet go bare.

'You wash in water running warm
Through basins all of gold;
The streams where we roam have silvery foam,
But the streams, the streams are cold.

‘And barley bread is bitter to taste,
Whilst sugary cakes they please.
Which will you choose, O which will you choose,
Which will you choose of these?’

‘For if you choose the mountain streams
And barley bread to eat,
Your heart will be free as the birds in the tree
But the stones will cut your feet.’

‘The mud will spoil your silken gown
And stain your insteps high,
The dogs in the farm will wish you harm
And bark as you go by.’

‘And though your heart grow deep and gay
Your heart grow wise and rich,
The cold will make your bones to ache
And you will die in a ditch.’

‘O gentle, gentle gypsies
That roam the wide world through,
Although I praise your wandering ways
I dare not come with you.’

I hung about their fingers brown
My ruby rings and chain,
And with my head as heavy as lead
I turned me back again.

As I went up the palace steps
I heard the gypsies laugh;
The birds of spring so sweet did sing,
It broke my heart in half.

SUSAN TO DIANA

VILLANELLE

Your youth is like a water-wetted stone,
A pebble by the living sea made rare,
Bright with a beauty that is not its own.

Behold it flushed like flowers newly-blown,
Miraculously fresh beyond compare,
Your youth is like a water-wetted stone.

For when the triumphing tide recedes, alone
The stone will stay, and shine no longer there
Bright with a beauty that is not its own.

But lie and dry as joyless as a bone,
Because the sorceress sea has gone elsewhere.
Your youth is like a water-wetted stone.

Then all your lovers will be children, shown
Their treasure only transitory-fair,
Bright with a beauty that is not its own.

Remember this before your hour is flown;
O you, who are so glorious, beware!
Your youth is like a water-wetted stone,
Bright with a beauty that is not its own.

A LODGING FOR THE NIGHT

I am an old woman, comfortable, calm and wise
Often I see the spirits of the dead with my own eyes.
They come into my house. I am no more afraid
Than of the coal-scuttle or my breakfast newly laid.
One night over the fields the wind blew wild,
And I thought I heard in it the ravaging voice of a child.
I thought I heard in it, sweeping the cold lands,
The voice of a child who suddenly misses those only hands
That understood to make him safe, usual, and warm.
It cried unceasingly until I knew it was not the voice of the storm.
I tried to fall asleep; but how could I sleep,
And hear that creature in despair continually weep?
Then to the grown spirits imploringly I said:
'Friends, give me here that new spirit who is lately dead,
Who will not enter your new world of light
Because he misses the hands of his mother this first night,
And she, poor soul, lies weeping tear on tear
And cannot pierce the night with love. But I hear.
Give me her wandering child!' Then, as I lay in bed,
Against my breast I felt a small and blunt-nosed head,
A cold sob-quivering body growing calm
And toes like round cold buds that warmed inside my palm.
Soon in the hushing night and darkness deep,
That comforted safe spirit sighed and fell asleep,
And I slept too, most satisfied, until
I woke and saw to-morrow's dawn, everywhere cold and still.
But out of my white bed where morning shone
Out of my arms, away, the new-born spirit was gone.

CONTEMPORARIES

Can it be possible when we grow old
And Time destroys us, that your image too,
The timeless beauty that your youth bestowed
(As though you'd lain a moment since by the river
Thinking and dreaming under the grey sky
When May was in the hedges) will dissolve?
This unique image now we hold: your smile,
Which kept a secret sweetness like a child's
Though you might be most sad, your frowning eyes,
Can they be drowned in Time, and nothing left
To the revolving hard, enamelled world,
Full, full forever of fresh fears and births
And busyness, of all you were? Perhaps
A thousand years ago some Greek boy died,
So lovely-bodied, so adored, so young,
Like us, his lovers treasured senseless things,
And laughed with tears remembering his laughter,
And there was friendship in the very sound
Of his forgotten name to them. Of him
Now we know nothing, nothing is altered now
Because of all he was. Most loved, on you
Can such oblivion fall? Then, if it can,
How futile, how absurd the life of man.

April 1915

AN ALLEGORY

I dreamt Death called my friend. And I
Went too, for both of us must die.

But neither of us dared alone
To face him sitting on his throne;

And so we called, both I and he,
On our Good Deeds for company.

I took a trumpet and a drum
And proudly summoned mine to come.

I thought they could not hear at first;
I beat my drum until it burst,

I blew my trumpet, till at last
From that walled city of the past.

(Where in the inmost citadel
In luxury I let them dwell)

A little postern was undone
And out they straggled, one by one.

In thin procession on they came
They all seemed weak and mostly lame,

Their faces, smug and strained and small,
They turned to me. I knew them all.

Then spoke my comrade, haltingly:
'If you exist, O come to me.'

And suddenly, as swift as flame,

A host of dancing children came,
And like the waves, without an end
They danced and leapt about my friend.

He stared. He said: 'For Heaven's sake,
Who are you? Here is some mistake.'

But like the sea upon the shores
They thundered: 'Father, we are yours!'

And even then the trumpet spoke:
'Come both before your Judge!'

—I woke.

From *DIFFERENT DAYS* (1928)

To William Rothenstein

LINCOLNSHIRE REMEMBERED

Gold as the hair of fairy-story queens,
The ricks stand squarely in the weathered farm.
There the first star on still September eves
Stabs through pure waters of the sky, to shine
On their grave foreheads. Round their bases broad,
Brisk-gallivanting cocks and hens proclaim:
'Look! Look! Our ricks!' and of the long-roofed barns
(Darkening, majestical, where wagons sleep
Noble as Agamemnon's chariot), 'Look!
Look!' they say, 'our barns! What barns! Look! Look!'

And there, across the gate, the old white horse
(Hooved like Leviathan, sea-monster-lipped)
Bestirs himself and answers: 'Hens know less
Than the blue-bottles on my morning nose.
For all the world, the farm, the dung, the grass,
The fields of bean and corn, the far-off church,
The reeds, the dykes, the ever-breaking sea,
The thistly dunes, and I myself, belong
To the sky only: because only sky
Covers us all for ever, as the ground
Covers the dead.' He moves as though before
Man sliced the vast of time in fretful hours;
And the wide sky on the old farm looks down.

Mellow, grey-red, those bricks the pear-tree holds
With strong round stem. His topmost leaves are friends
With the paint-faded window-sill; they see
All happenings of the hidden shadowed room;
They know at midnight how the cold moon throws
Slabs of eternity across the quilt,
The jug, and breathing mounds that will be men
When unborn Morrow breaks. They peep and know
How of its baptism, still the white quilt keeps

A frugal faint remembrance through the day.

Mellow, grey-red, the tiles of the old roof.
They have drunk in all the September suns,
All the grey-growing eves when lovers strayed
And browsing sheep cared not that they had kissed,
Or, raising heads, indifferently knew
That this was wise and usual, like the birds
Finding invisible pathways through the air,
Or as the sea that sounds for ever there.

So, as it darkens, leave the farm to rest,
My lingering thoughts, in quiet on the plain.
There autumn winds grow cold, and by the gate
A scythe hangs waiting in a sycamore tree.
But not a man who heaves along the road
In corduroys, cares what the shadows hide.
For country people know, though they have not read,
And need no emblem of mortality.
The lichen on the grave-stones and the roofs,
November sleet, the smell of the church aisle
Speak without words, and in their hearts they hear:
Sceptre and crown must tumble down, these say,
And come at last in the cold, earthen clay
To equal the poor crooked scythe and spade.

Nor, if they have finished work, are they afraid.

WORDS FOR MUSIC

‘Time stands still
With gazing on her face,’
Sang Dowland to his lute,
Full of courtly grace.

Now that his musician’s face
And her face are dust,
Still I cry, Stand still;
Still cry I must.

Stand still, Time;
Hold, hold your pace;
Stiller stand than the smile
On Pharaoh’s face.

Stiller than December’s frost
That takes the heart with wonder,
Or the pause that comes between
Lightning and thunder.

Time, stand still;
Hush now your tread,
Stand, stiller than a room
Where lie the sheeted dead.

Where, in the busy noon,
None comes and goes;
Where the tree of endless peace
To the ceiling grows.

O Time, Time,
Stark and full of pain,
Why drag me into space,
A dog upon a chain?

I who would float with you,
A ship sailing white,
Who cannot tell which power is hers,
Or which the wind's delight.

So my refreshèd soul
Time would adore,
If for one moment's space
Time were no more.

Now with Dowland's broken lute
And his forgotten rhyme,
Still I cry, Stand still,
Stand still, Time.

APARTMENTS

Now the forgiving sun, with beams aslope,
Who, in pure sky where not a chimney smokes,
Rose over green, umbrageous, rooted oaks,
Enters the city room, that has no pride,
Goldenly, with fresh morning airs allied,
And to the blistered washing-stand says: Hope.

THE OLD FRIEND

The wrong you did is gentle, like the trust
 You put in us, and like your voice and air,
The wrong you have done is very quiet, just
 Not being there.

AT NIGHT

This is your nursing mother, this is sleep,
And milk of darkness. Dedicated lie
With graspless hands. Or is this the bottom of the sea?

Now let my fancy wander a little while.
I am a rock a thousand fathoms sunk,
Dark and for ever immobile. My thoughts
Like droves of silvery, soundless fish appear
And visit me, and pass, who wave-lapped lie.

When I was a child, I used to think the elves
So curled round safely in the centre of flowers.
White, perfect-petalled roses lapped them round
Through all night's darkness; with the light they woke
And shook the pollen from their heads, and danced
On tippytoes.

Or, next, I am that Princess
I dreamed in youth, with eyes like hazel pools
And gold-encircled head. She has left the lawns
Where peacocks with their furred embroidered tails
Sleep on the balustrades; left far behind
Lit galleries and gallants, lutanists,
And long-curled princes with their captured eyes.
She has laid aside her green embroideries,
With slender fingers lifted off her crown
And won this wealth of solitude. Yet she,
So lovely, lying in her silken sheets,
Is no more safe than I am.

I am safe
As all wild creatures. In their burrows deep,
Rooty and dark, the furred rabbits lie
Safe till to-morrow's dewy nibbling dawn,
And somewhere, unimaginably far,
Striped tigers with their sleep-enchanted paws

In eastern caverns.

Why, I am so safe
That if an ichthyosaurus came outside
In the bright moon, and with soft primitive paws
Snuffed at the window-pane, I should not stir!
I should not stir though all the garden filled
With monsters humping to the star-strewn sky;
I am too remotely safe in this dark bed.

I think my bed is a fortress on a rock.
Now faintly, as I lie unreachable,
I hear the wash and roar of the waves of care,
I hear the retreating shingle of desire
Pour away, far off. O this falling night,
Coming to me, the haggard, as to a child,
A child with sealed eyes, innocent as a flower,
Hearing with tender ears what soundless truth?
Absorbing wisdom, what strange wisdom is it?

Sleep, both are yours and my entire need,
My sustenance and peace. In the chaos of day
On far tomorrow's shore I shall come in vain,
Rootless and starved, unless I taste them now;
Now as my phantasies foldward drift like sheep
Receive another child, my mother Sleep.

AT THE END

The day my great-aunt Sarah died, how I remember well,
She lay alone with daffodils and never rang her bell.
She lay as quiet as her chair and books upon her shelf.
She gave no trouble to her nurse, no trouble to herself.
She was more quiet than the bare, ploughed fields that lay outside.
The knowledge in her listening face as certain was, and wide.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE

The stacks, like blunt impassive temples, rise
Across flat fields against the autumnal skies.
The hairy-footed horses plough the land,
Or as in prayer and meditation stand
Upholding square, primeval, dung-stained carts,
With an unending patience in their hearts.

Nothing is changed. The farmer's gig goes by
Against the horizon. Surely, the same sky,
So vast and yet familiar, grey and mild,
And streaked with light like music, I, a child,
Lifted my face from leaf-edged lanes to see,
Late-coming home, to bread-and-butter tea.

A GLIMPSE

O grasses wet with dew, yellow fallen leaves,
Smooth-shadowed waters Milton loved, green banks,
Arched bridges, rooks, and rain-leaved willow-trees,
Stone, serious familiar colleges,
Cambridge, my home:
The figure of a scholar carrying back
Books to the library, absorbed, content,
Seeming as everlasting as the elms
Bark-wrinkled, puddled round their roots, the bells,
And the far shouting in the football fields.

The same since I was born, the same to be
When all my children's children grow old men.

FÉRI BEKASSY^[1]

We, who must grow old and staid,
Full of wisdom, much afraid,
In our hearts like flowers keep
Love for you until we sleep.

You the brave, and you the young
You of a thousand songs unsung,
Burning brain, and ardent word,
You the lovely and absurd.

Say, on that Galician plain
Are you arguing again?
Does a trench or ruined tree
Hear your—‘O, I *don't* agree!’

We, who must grow staid and old,
Full of caution, worn and cold,
In our hearts, like flowers keep
Your image, till we also sleep.

1915

[1] Fèrenz Bekassy (1891-1915) Hungarian poet, scholar of Kings College, Cambridge, killed in action on the Eastern Front, 1915.

MEDITERRANEAN MORNING

Brekekoax the night-frogs said, while I
Slept in my southern room. But now I lie
And through the pale green-slitted shutters see
Another day, fine unbelievably
(So a child looks, to know its mother's mind
Not clouded, but miraculously kind.)

How virgin and majestic stands the hill,
How warm the sun upon the window-sill,
How clear the summit's rocky shadow shows,
Blue and at peace, yet promising what, who knows?
(Something the heart expects in youth and will
At sight of mountains till its beat be still.)

Life's every noise is happy in the sun,
Bells, bees, wheels, voices, all with day begun.
And now the sun splashes its largesse through
The cool, soft-dusted plane-tree avenue,
And shows how white the children's frocks and shoes,
How like a lilac flower the washerwoman's blouse.

WORDS FOR A SONG

‘Through all these days and all these weeks,
So often you have kissed my cheeks,
I sometimes think they must have grown
To silver, gold, and precious stone.’

‘O, cheeks of silver and of gold,
My dearest, would be hard and cold,
I would not kiss them, even so,
To say Good-night, before I go.’

SHE WARNS HIM

I am a lamp, a lamp that is out;
I am shallow stream;
In it are neither pearls or trout,
Nor one of the things that you dream.

Why do you smile and deny, my lover?
I will not be denied.
I am book, a book with a cover,
And nothing at all inside.

Here is the truth, and you must grapple,
Grapple with what I have said.
I am a dumpling without any apple,
I am a star that is dead.

ANCESTORS

I have forgotten the country in the North, where my people lived before me.
The stone walls curving over green hills; the air as pure as spirits could breathe
in heaven, but much more cold.

The cry of the curlews, like a voice given to the sky; the dark bogs and the
stones.

The brown streams, always talking to the lonely sheep.

My people before me had brown eyes like the streams, and bodies built to
endure the battering wind like walls. And their forgotten faces, I think,
were shy, resolved, and fresh.

They lived in stone houses, under the black-shadowing sycamores.

They knew the rent sky sweeping over the moors on stormy days, like passion
in unspeaking hearts.

And I, in this protected house, breathing the hot air, I have forgotten that my
people came from the North.

A STRANGER IN PROVENCE

The olive boughs are black, like blinding hair
Of tree-nymphs who at noon, when no one's there
A sleeping shepherd in cool arms uphold.
The olive-leaves are silver and so old,
A thousand years the sun has visited these;
They are like immortal spirits of other trees.

A hundred, hundred years ancestral hands
Have built the terraced hills of southern lands,
A thousand aeons, where their summits rise,
The idle sun-enchanted butterflies
Have shown the stone and lavender their wings,
Receiving light with all created things.

O, as the basking lizards quick to flee
And earth-brown goats, and the far perfect sea
And terraced nearer hills accept the light,
Receive, my heart; receive, as here at night
The wide-mouthing glass receives the country wine;
And make this ancient bounty also mine.

The polished crimson cherries on the bough
Accept their rounded bright fulfilment now,
The square-slabbed water-tanks receive the sky
To plunge in their cold bosoms. Tell me why
Receive the fountains and the figs' green leaves,
And all Provence, except my heart, receives?

THE WOMAN WITH THE BABY TO THE PHILOSOPHERS

How can I dread you, O portentous wise,
When I consider you were once this size?
How cringe before the sage who understands,
Who once had foolish, perfect, waving hands,
As small as these are? How bow down in dread,
When I conceive your warm, domed, downy head
Smelling of soap? O you—from North to South
Renowned—who put your toes inside your mouth.

THE SICK QUEEN

I hear my children come. They trample with their feet,
Fetched from their play to kiss my thin-boned hands lying on the sheet,
Fresh as young colts with every field before them,
With gazing apple-faces. Can it be this body bore them?
This poor body like an outworn glove,
That yet subdues a spirit which no more knows that it can love.
All day is theirs. I belong to night,
The brown surrounding caverns made of dream. The long failing fight,
On and on with pain. Theirs is sweet sleep
And morning breakfast with bright yellow butter. They can laugh and weep
Over a tiny thing, a toy, a crumb, a letter.
Tomorrow they will come again and say: '*Now are you better?*'
'Better, my lords, today', the Chamberlain replies;
And I shall be too tired and too afraid to cry out that he lies.

From *MOUNTAINS AND MOLEHILLS*
(1934)

For Francis Cornford

ON AUGUST THE THIRTEENTH

(At The Mount, Marsden, Bucks)

Out of this seemliness, this solid order,
At half-past four to-day,
When down below
Geraniums were bright
In the contented glow,
Whilst Williams planted seedlings all about,
Supremely geometrically right
In your herbaceous border,
You had to go
Who always liked to stay.
Before Louisa sliced the currant roll,
And re-arranged the zinnias in the bowl,
All in a rhythm reachless by modernity,
Correct and slow,
And brought the tea and tray,
At half-past four on Friday you went out:
To the unseemly, seemly,
Dateless, whole
Light of Eternity
You went away.

THE OLD SERVANT

I cannot but believe, though you were dead,
Lying stone-still, and I came in and said
Having been out perhaps in mud and rain:
'O dear, O look, I have torn my skirt again,'
That you would rise with the old simple ease,
And say, 'Yes, child', and come to me. And there
In your white crackling apron, on your knees
With your quick hands, rough with the washing-up
Of every silver spoon and cherished cup,
And bending head, coiled with the happy hair
Your own child should have pulled for you (but no,
Your child who might have been, you did not bear,
Because the endless riches of your care
Were all for us) you would mend and heal my tear—
Mend, touch and heal; and stitching all the while,
Your cottons on the floor, look up and show
The sudden light perpetual of your smile—
Then, with your darning finished, being dead
Go back and lie, like stone, upon your bed.

A BACK VIEW

Now when his hour shall strike
For this old man,
And he arrives in Heaven late
He can
To Peter and the Angel Gabriel,
Having completely known,
Completely tell
What it was like
To lean upon a gate;
And knowing one thing well
He need not fear his fate.

ODE ON THE WHOLE DUTY OF PARENTS

The spirits of children are remote and wise,
They must go free
Like fishes in the sea
Or starlings in the skies,
Whilst you remain
The shore where casually they come again.
But when there falls the stalking shade of fear,
You must be suddenly near,
You, the unstable, must become a tree
In whose unending heights of flowering green
Hangs every fruit that grows, with silver bells;
Where heart-distracting magic birds are seen
And all the things a fairy-story tells;
Though still you should possess
Roots that go deep in ordinary earth,
And strong consoling bark
To love and to caress.

Last, when at dark
Safe on the pillow lies an up-gazing head
And drinking holy eyes
Are fixed on you,
When, from behind them, questions come to birth
Insistently,
On all the things that you have ever said
Of suns and snakes and parallelograms and flies,
And whether these are true,
Then for a while you'll need to be no more
That sheltering shore
Or legendary tree in safety spread,
No, then you must put on
The robes of Solomon,
Or simply be
Sir Isaac Newton sitting on the bed.

AFTER A LATIN EPITAPH IN MADINGLEY CHURCH

[The monument bears no name or date]

Bring roses, singing girls, soft pansies strew
To decorate these little ashes new;
Nor with one cry or longing tears invade
The sleeping stillness of an infant maid,
Who in one showery day was here and gone,
To God's invariable peace passed on.
He whispered to her soul; without a stain,
She, to his goodness, gave it back again.

TAPESTRY SONG

O here is Paradise for me
With white does bounding,
And here the fair immortal Tree
With various fruits abounding.

Hesperidean apples gold,
And apples red as wine,
And gourds that show like moons below,
And silver pears that shine.

O sweeter, sweeter, every one
Than mead the gods have drunk,
And all are for the Shepherd's Son
Who leans against the trunk.

And there he'll stay, the timeless day,
Where no harsh wind can find him,
His crook among the strawberry leaves,
And woven woods behind him.

There roam the strange and savage beasts;
No peace their fear will grant them
Until he play his roundelay
And music shall enchant them.

Now, in the dark arcaded wood
Every creature still is stood;
Each one pricks a happy ear,
Tirlee, Tirlow, his song to hear.

Out of the branching wood come they
All for his silver roundelay,
Out of the wood on dancing feet
So to obey his music sweet.

Here the gentled Tiger goes
By the delicate, dancing Does;
Here the Stag with golden horns
And the prancing Unicorns.

Conies gambol out of the rocks,
Leveret with tawny Fox;
Leaping Lambs desert their folds,
Frogs dance out of the marigolds.

Here appear in lumbering bounds
Great King Theseus' dew-lapped Hounds;
Here his white, unharnessed Steed
Comes curveting over the mead.

Here with jewelled tails aglow
Peacocks gloriously go;
Here the swinging Monkey gets
Purple grapes for castanets.

Caterpillars striped and green
Measuring up the twigs are seen;
Asp with spotted Adder weaves,
Harmless, in and out the leaves.

Dove and Hawk with folded wing
On the fruited branches swing;
Hovering, dipping, dancing rise
Honey-bees and Butterflies.

All Creation, safe and free,
Sings around the Happy Tree.
Tirlee, Tirlow, and Ut Hoy,
Play for ever, Shepherd Boy.

NEIGHBOURS

Old Mrs Thompson down the road is dead.
The maids knew first from what the milkman said,
He heard on Sunday she was very bad,
And as they dust, they are sorry, stirred, and glad.

One day soon I shall die,
As still as Mrs Thompson I shall lie;
And in her house that April day
The maids of the new family will say
That Mrs Jones, who was me, has passed away.
They will know first, because the fish-boy heard;
And as they dust, be sorry, glad, and stirred.

THE MADMAN AND THE CHILD

‘Where have you been? You look queer,
You look black.’ ‘O my dear,
All alone to Hell and back,
By my known, my desert track;
Though once I might, like you, have gone
By candlelight to Babylon.’

‘What have you seen?’ ‘No flame or fires,
But such a stream of terrors and desires.
O my child, nothing’s there
Like your fingers, like your hair,
Nor this table, nor this chair;
Nothing certain but despair.’

AFTER THE EUMENIDES

Long ago, in stony Greece,
The human heart knew no peace.
In its darkness it was torn,
And cursed, as now, the fate of being born;
And hoped to heal its agony with song.

O Lord, how long?

THE PAST

When we would reach the anguish of the dead,
Whose bones alone, irrelevant, are dust,
Out of ourselves we know we must, we must
To some obscure but ever-bleeding thing
Unreconciled, a needed solace bring,
Like a resolving chord, like daylight shed.
Or do we through thick time reach back in vain
To inaccessible pain?

YAMA AND YAMI

[From the Veda]

The first created pair possessed a world
 Where darkness was unknown;
Till Yama died, and left in endless light
 Yami, his twin, alone.

The high Gods tried to comfort her distress,
 But all in vain they tried.
She would not listen to their wisest words;
 She said: 'Today he died.'

Then were the Gods confounded, for her grief
 Troubled their equal sight;
They said: 'In this way she will not forget.
 We must create the Night.'

So they created Night. And after Night
 Came into being Morrow;
And she forgot him. Thus it is they say:
 'The days and nights make men forget their sorrow.'

NIGHT-NURSERY THOUGHTS

O sometimes when I wake at night
I think the moon so round and bright
That it must fall for very light.

That lovely, lovely liquid fall
Would make the stars cry out and call,
But would not burn my hands at all.

Now even raindrops off the tip
Of leaves and twigs, soft, softly drip;
But if the moon should suddenly slip,

You would not hear the softest sup
And nobody could scrape it up;
It could not stay in any cup.

The moon would fall without a sound
Without a stain upon the ground,
And in the morning not be found.

COURSEGOULES

Beside the road to Coursegoules
Are shepherdess and sheep.
The sun is hot. The shade is cool
Beside the road to Coursegoules,
And every man's a fool, a fool
Who does not fall asleep
Beside the road to Coursegoules
And shepherdess and sheep.

THE LAKE AND THE INSTANT

Have you not seen
The dove-grey waters' undulating sheen
Whereon a bird can rest
Its rounded, slowly, slowly heaving breast,
Whilst all the blue-aired delicate mountains round
Attend, without a sound?
So, freed from fear, man's first primeval crime,
A heart might rest upon the lap of time.

CAMBRIDGE AUTUMN

For long, so long, this timeless afternoon
My body has lain in sun-receiving fields
On the wood's border, by the bounteous elms,
An unbeliever in approaching night
And the cold, winter-prophesying dew,
Heedless of all, forgetting all but now.

So when the creaking of a country cart
Reaches my wind-hushed heart, my thought divines
Its red and faded wheels, its Saxon self,
But gropingly, I have forgotten carts.
The seated driver towering on its side,
Who jolts at leisure down the long, low road
Towards the dun-thatched village, fares too far
For my lulled sense to follow. Even the old
Labourer sunning in a Windsor chair
With pink and purple asters at his door,
Who, as I passed this morning, stirred awake
My fathers' fathers' long-acquainted loves,
Even his image is too hard to hold
Lapped as I lie in this Lethean gold.

This hushing wind on every side, as though
The world's invisible sails swelled softly out
And bore me to Eternity, laid low,
Like the dead knights and nobles of the north,
When their last battle had gone well with them,
Among Northumbrian boulders quite at rest;
Or as they lie, pure-effigied in sleep
And stone in shadowed aisles. Yet nowhere pours
This consecrating warmth but out of doors.

Now lift your lids and turn from dreams away,
And watch, more perfectly, as here you may,

The dear progression of a country day,
That friendliness which never had a name,
Serene, eventful. Look, two pheasants came!
Among the faded thistles bleached and brown,
They foot it feately picking silver down;
They sun their long soft tails, they disappear
Behind the elm-boles. Hips and haws are here
Contented (it would seem they had almost said)
To know another day of turning red.

Sudden, an echoing bang, a farmer's gun.
The settled rooks rise circling, one by one
From the tall elm. The undistracted skies
Fill with an old cacophony of cries:

I spy, I can,
A dog. A man.
What? Where? Which one?
A man. A gun.
He's here. He's where?
He's gone. Beware.
Cry out. Cry on.
He's gone.

Then, suavely slow and gradually dumb,
Back in a circling saraband they come
Each to his elm-bough, neither fast nor soon,
Black judges of the golden afternoon.

The new-born calf lies down to sleep again
In the long, growing shadows of the plain;
His swing-tail mother feeds, and now and then
To guard his safety in a world of men
Turns a slow gazing head; whilst gazing I
At peace upon this rounded planet lie.
This planet soon from the benignant sun
And so sure-seeming amplitude of light
To turn away, and like a great horse plunge
Deep in submerging lapping seas of cold

And ever-darkening space.

I saw last night

A streak of sunset over mounded stacks
Bleak as the eyes of ghosts; and mist comes soon.
Even this last largesse, these blackberries
Warm on the hedge, are purple-dark as storms,
Storms that will wake the safely-sleeping child
In midnight terror, sway the blackened elms
In gulfs of night, and the clear stars devour.
And these rich fields will darken in an hour.

O I must go and find my morning way,
The farm, the gate, and the old labourer
Whose image by the cottage door returns,
Though earlier drowned in dreams. His waiting hands
Like tree-roots, resting, and that lifted head,
So soon to know the dark of death, no more
Like this unconquered planet to emerge
On April days renewed with daffodils.

His unexperienced spring will be elsewhere—
Only the dead can tell how strange, how fair,
How certain, like the look their faces bear
After the storm and ravage. Now it seems
Though all creation shares the departing light—
The roads, the shafted waggons put to rest,
The cropping beasts, the rooks in evening flight,
The barns, the stubble golden from the west,
The heavy elms—yet most of all to those
Old patient eyes no temporal spring will bless,
This vast, warm earthly autumn tenderness
Is come to say Amen, before they close.

THE TRUMPET SHALL SOUND

(MESSIAH 1742)

We who are met to celebrate
Grandly today our God and King and State
‘We shall be changed’—but shall not change too far:
Twice as superb will be, and twice as big
Each fair, abounding, and immortal wig;
And every button on our coats, a star.

Where Lords and Commons ever equal are
Each regal coach will grow a wingèd car,
Whose laurelled lackeys in triumphant light
Sing their symmetrical delight;
And link-boys with the flaming cherubim
Dance in their buckled shoes and shout the morning hymn;
Where coachmen crowned with asphodel and moly
Echo the cries of Holy, Holy, Holy;
And disembodied horses fly
With golden trumpeters about the sky.

O we shall change, but with no pangs of birth,
To glorious heaven from this glorious earth.

THE SINGLE WOMAN

Now quenched each midnight window is. Now unimpeded
Darkness descends on roof and tree and slope;
And in my heart the houses that you have not needed
Put out their lights of comfort and of hope.

THE REVELATION

In my dark mind you kicked a stone away.
There in the light, a full-grown Purpose lay;
And half in terror, half in glad surprise
I saw his unknown coils and sleeping eyes.

FAIRY-TALE IDYLL FOR TWO VOICES

O sing or tell a story. What shall I tell?
There was a Princess woke at early dawn,
A Princess in a castle, in the north,
And saw the forests rising tree on tree
Out of her little window, and ran forth
To look for berries in the autumn woods.
O sing of what she found in the woods as well.

She must slip away before the kitchen stirs,
With hooded golden hair, down garden walks,
Past home-faced apples, over the open ground
Where feed her father's herd of cream-white cows,
With swinging tails and delicate, peaceful feet
Among the mountain crocuses, with bells
Like hope and dew, and come to the edge of the woods.
Brave she must be, for in the woods are bears;
The noise of waters fills them like a breath
And footsteps make no sound. At home they tell
The king of the bears is an enchanted Prince
Who waits release. But who shall break the spell?

The forests rise around her tree on tree,
To cloud-high crags; they rise round secret lawns
Where red ash-berries for no human hand
Drop. And she listens. If she listens long
She hears clear voices, voices of surprise,
Wonder and argument and prophecies,
Hid in the streams. For whom to understand?
She only feels a spirit, that is hers,
Tells her to climb, to climb and fear no ills,
To fear no presence in the unpeopled woods,
Or hidden in the caverns of the hills.
She can but tell how swiftly she must start
Up, up the paths where only hunters go,

Running with silver shoes that make no mark,
Quick with a purpose that she cannot know
And singing unawares.

Wet bilberries and scarlet cranberries
Four-leaved Herb Paris with his sorcerer's heart,
Whose home is in the stillness under trees,
And black strange cherries, strange with double stones—
O all of these,
Tell how she plucked them with her weaving hands
To make a wreath of berries bright and dark,
And some that shone like blood in the early sun,
To make a wreath, a wreath for whom begun?
To make a garland for the king of the bears.
And then, O tell
How all at once her singing voice was dumb
And her heart fell.

Fierce-eyed and hairy round a jutting rock
Dark, dark and softly-footing he was there,
The king of the woods, the black enchanted bear,
Unpassably, unconquerably come.
But quickly, now tell this:
How she was brave, how she was not afraid,
She flung the wreath of berries round his neck,
The ripple of her amber-yellow hair
Sweeping his claws and pouring from her hood,
Her young thin arms, her oval cheek in fur,
And made him captive, captive with a kiss.

And suddenly, suddenly, there
Slant-eyed and smiling in the leaf-strewn light,
Silent as moss, and all the streams his speech,
A Prince was standing in the bilberry wood,
Proud and delivered in the world of men.
Right through the trees the sun ascending burned
In wealth of swaying gold his glorious way,

And wrapped in light and shadow each to each
No spoken word need say,
For in the arisen morning there he stands,
Free from his cavern's airless echoing space,
Safe from the dark compulsion of his form.

Sing how he looked at her with eyes returned
From exile to the harbour of her face,
To certainty from storm;
And touched her shoulders with his stranger's hands,
With hands grown more familiar in an hour
Than all her home and years of yesterday,
The unilluminated years before.
O sing and tell of this, and tell no more,
But how, as on the first created day
All things were new,
And through the tall-stemmed forest, far below,
Before they turned in harmony to go,
The clustered berries round their shoulders wound.
Before they reached the fruitful open ground
They heard the bells of feeding flocks, the sound
Like hope and dew.

From *TRAVELLING HOME* (1948)

*To Ada Sharpley
who made so much of the poetry
in my childhood*

TRAVELLING HOME

The train. A hot July. On either hand
Our sober, fruitful, unemphatic land,
This Cambridge country plain beneath the sky
Where I was born, and grew, and hope to die.

Look! where the willows hide a rushy pool,
And the old horse goes squelching down to cool,
One angler's rod against their silvery green,
Still seen today as once by Bewick seen.

A cottage there, thatched sadly, like its earth,
Where crimson ramblers make a shortlived mirth;
Here, only flies the flick-tail cows disturb
Among the shaven meads and willow-herb.

There, rounded hay-ricks solemn in the yard,
Barns gravely, puritanically tarred,
Next heavy elms that guard the ripening grain
And fields, and elms, and corn, and fields again.

Over the soft savannahs of the corn,
Like ships the hot white butterflies are borne,
While clouds pass slowly on the flower-blue dome
Like spirits in a vast and peaceful home.

Over the Dyke I watch their shadows flow
As the Icenian watched them long ago;
So let me in this Cambridge calm July
Fruitfully live and undistinguished die.

WAKING IN THE ATTIC BEDROOM

More innocently born and calmer seems
In its soft summer haze
This Sunday morning than all other days.
No early footsteps walk into my dreams,
A peace is everywhere
As if the whole created world believed in prayer,
Over the solitary fields of wheat,
And down the village street,
And on my folded clothes across the chair.

THE CORNER OF THE FIELD

Here the young lover, on his elbow raised,
Looked at his happy girl with grass surrounded,
And flicked the spotted beetle from her wrist:
She, with her head thrown back, at heaven gazed,
At Suffolk clouds, serene and slow and mounded;
Then calmly smiled at him before they kissed.

THE VISIT

There is a bed-time sadness in this place
That seemed ahead so promising and sweet,
Almost like music calling us from home;

But now the staircase does not need our feet,
The drawer is ignorant of my brush and comb,
The mirror quite indifferent to your face.

EARLY WAKING

‘Does a bird rejoice like me
In this earth-fresh dawn?’

‘Dearest, on a silvery tree
He achieves an ecstasy,
You, in bed, a yawn.’

CHILDHOOD

I used to think that grown-up people chose
To have stiff backs and wrinkles round their nose,
And veins like small fat snakes on either hand,
On purpose to be grand.

Till through the bannisters I watched one day
My great-aunt Etty's friend who was going away,
And how her onyx beads had come unstrung.
I saw her grope to find them as they rolled;
And then I knew that she was helplessly old,
As I was helplessly young.

TO A YOUNG CAT IN THE ORCHARD

Elegant creature with black shoulders bent,
Stalking the bird in song,
To what intent?
Tell what a wild source brims those empty eyes,
What well of shameless light,
Beyond the bounds of Hell or Paradise
Or wrong
Or right.

IN THE BACKS

Too many of the dead, some I knew well,
Have smelt this unforgotten river smell,
Liquid and old and dank;
And on the tree-dark, lacquered, slowly passing stream
Have seen the boats come softly as in dream
Past the green bank.
So Camus, reverend sire, came footing slow
Three hundred years ago,
And Milton paced the avenue of trees
In miracle of sun and shade as now,
The fresh-attempted glorious cadences
Behind his youthful brow.

Milton and Chaucer, Herbert, Herrick, Gray,
Rupert, and you forgotten others, say—
Are there slow rivers and bridges where you have gone away?
What has your spirit found?
What wider lot?
Some days in spring do you come back at will,
And tread with weightless feet the ancient ground?
O say, if not,
Why is this air so sacred and so still?

GONE DOWN

No longer will his name be found
Beside the College stair;
White-lettered on the old black ground
Another name is there.
In the calm court new footsteps sound,
In courts too calm to care.

AFTER THE EXAMINATION

When someone's happy in a house there shows
A chink of honey-coloured light beneath the bedroom door,
Where once a thunder-purple gloom oozed out across the floor;
And even the stairs smell like an early rose.

THE GRANDSON DRESSES UP

James painted black moustaches round his nose,
And in the glass a sneering Satan smiled.
I thought once more how harrowingly glows
Beneath the cork the innocence of a child.

FAMILY LIKENESS

That eager, honouring look
Through microscope or at a picture-book,
That quick, responsive, curious delight—
For half a century I have seen it now
Under the shaggy or the baby brow,
And always blessed the sight.

BEDROOM DAWN

Is this obscurity not quite unbroken,
As though the heart of night had bled away,
This quietness before a bird has spoken
Really the day?

And is this depth of darkness redefined,
The safe diurnal washing-stand and soap,
This first small stir of the awakened mind,
Possibly hope?

THE COAST: NORFOLK

As on the highway's quiet edge
He mows the grass beside the hedge,
The old man has for company
The distant, grey, salt-smelling sea,
A poppied field, a cow and calf,
The finches on the telegraph.

Across his faded back a hone,
He slowly, slowly scythes alone
In silence of the wind-soft air,
With ladies' bedstraw everywhere,
With whitened corn, and tarry poles,
And far-off gulls like risen souls.

BICKER'S COTTAGE

Companionable ticking of the clock;
Collapsing of the coal;
The chair-legs warm;
Tobacco in a bowl;
The door sealed up;
The sooted kettle's hiss;
The firelit loaf, the cocoa-tin; the cup;
Outside, the unplumbed night and patterning storm.
At such an hour as this
A ghost might knock,
Lacking unearthly comfort in its soul.

SUMMER BEACH

For how long known this boundless wash of light,
 This smell of purity, this gleaming waste,
This wind? This brown, strewn wrack how old a sight,
 These pebbles round to touch and salt to taste.

See, the slow marbled heave, the liquid arch,
 Before the waves' procession to the land
Flowers in foam; the ripples' onward march,
 Their last caresses on the pure hard sand.

For how long known these bleaching corks, new-made
 Smooth and enchanted from the lapping sea?
Since first I laboured with a wooden spade
 Against this background of Eternity.

SEASCAPE

The liquid unhorizoned sea
Heaves tranquilly,
As though
Inshore below,
How few feet deep,
A lazy mermaid turned herself in sleep.
That boy, entranced, who quite forgets his spade
To stand and stare,
Might almost wade
And peering find his ankles in her seaweed hair.
But he would rather watch his cork afloat,
Lulled on the lucent, calm expanse above,
Or see the far-off chuffing motor-boat
As white as Noah's dove.

LOVERS IN THE MOUNTAINS

Fresh as the foam of torrents from the snow,
Dark, soft as footsteps in the woods below,
Complete as sunlight falling from above,
New as young vine-leaves, is our virgin love.

MORNING PRAYER

My hands, O Lord, receive the crystal day,
Let me preserve it whole for evermore,
And grey-broomed evening find to sweep away
No fragments on the floor.

BEHIND THE GREEK RESTAURANT

The Cypriot woman, as she closed her dress,
Smiled at the baby on her broad-lapped knee,
Beautiful in a calm voluptuousness
Like a slow sea.

LOST

Because no notice-board was nailed
With clear directing words
That none might stray,
Only my heart could find me out the way
As surely as the migratory birds.
But my heart failed.

LONDON SPRING

The rounded buses loom through softest blue,
The pavement smells of dust but of narcissus too,
The awnings stretch like petals in the sun,
And even the oldest taxis glitter as they run.

Over the sooted secret garden walls
As in another Eden cherry-blossom falls,
Lithe under shadowing lilacs steal the cats,
And even the oldest ladies tilt their summery hats.

BENEFACtors

Still the medieval hunger to atone
Troubles the secret heart of men today,
And still they know no penitence prolonged,
No costly, ornate edifice of stone
Can ever wash the finished past away,
Nor thank the dead they intimately wronged.

THE OLD WOMAN IN SPRING

I envy your contorted bole,
You ancient tree. By every soul
Your youthfulness of heart is seen,
Because you fountain into green.

Unaltered as in winter now
My twisted hands and wrinkled brow;
Yet my heart, too, though none believes,
Is happy with a thousand leaves.

PARTING IN PEACETIME

When we had reached the gate I raised my eyes
And, kissing you good night, I laughed and said
I feared the stars might strike you from the skies,
Like crystal stones on your too happy head.

PARTING IN WARTIME

How long ago Hector took off his plume,
Not wanting that his little son should cry,
Then kissed his sad Andromache goodbye—
And now we three in Euston waiting-room.

FROM A LETTER TO AMERICA ON A VISIT TO SUSSEX: SPRING 1942

How simply violent things
Happen, is strange.
How strange it was to see
In the soft Cambridge sky our Squadron's wings,
And hear the huge hum in the familiar grey.
And it was odd today
On Ashdown Forest that will never change,
To find a gunner in the gorse, flung down,
Well-camouflaged, and bored and lion-brown.
A little further by those twisted trees
(As if it rose on humped preposterous seas
Out of a Book of Hours) up a bank
Like a large dragon, purposeful though drunk,
Heavily lolloped, swayed and sunk,
A tank.
All this because manoeuvres had begun.
But now, but soon,
At home on any usual afternoon,
High overhead
May come the Erinyes winging.
Or here the boy may lie beside his gun,
His mud-brown tunic gently staining red,
While larks get on with their old job of singing.

SOLDIERS ON THE PLATFORM

Look how these young, bare, bullock faces know,
With a simplicity like drawing breath,
That out of happiness we fall on woe
And in the midst of life we are in death.

See how in staring sameness each one stands,
His laden shoulders, and his scoured hands;
But each behind his wall of flesh and bone
Thinks with this secret he is armed alone.

CASUALTIES

This once protected flesh the War-god uses
Like any gadget of a great machine;
This flesh once pitied where a gnat had been,
And kissed with passion on invisible bruises.

AUTUMN BLITZ

Unshaken world! Another day of light
After the human chaos of the night;
Although a heart in mendless horror grieves,
What calmly yellow, gently falling leaves!

FOR M. S.
SINGING *FRÜHLINGSGLAUBE* IN 1945
Nun muss sich alles, alles wenden

Here are the Schubert Lieder. Now begin.

First the accompaniment,
Heart-known and heaven-sent
And so divinely right
The inmost spirit laughs with sure delight.

And now the fountain of the melody.

To your forgiven fields I am entered in,
Spring of my adolescence, Spring of the world,
Where every secret lime-leaf is unfurled,
Where all's made well again, yet more's to be—

Then why this misery?

Because, O enemy alien heart, we fear
That you are lost on your demoniac shore,
And we deny that in your music—here
Is your unchanged, unchanging innocent core.

THE FACE IN THE OPPOSITE CORNER

—Why frown? Why stare?
—My heart's a cell, rock-walled,
Defaced and scrawled,
And there
The secret blood runs down.
That's why I frown.

A FRIEND

On days when you have been
Unhappy, lonely, ill,
Your spirit I have seen
Receiving, listening still.

On mornings when my kind
Seem all a conquered race,
Then I recall to mind
I have seen your risen face.

THE TRUE EVIL

When he was questioned at the time of the trial—
This is a truth I once refused to know—
Peter outside in the yard denied his Master,
And heard, immediately, the cock crow.

But now I have known a more complete disaster,
An empty horror Peter never knew,
When I was questioned, after my denial
No cock crew.

FOR J. R.—ON ELISABETH SINGING

You who, frustrated, died so long ago
In night and pain, but left a child to grow;
Passionate spirit, in the shades rejoice;
All that you suffered and knew is in her voice.

NORTHERN RETURN

Again the cry of black-faced lambs across the brackened hills;
Clouds flowering like dreams on barren crests;
A heart that hears the secret sound of amber-running rills
And in this scent of silence humbly rests.

HOUNDKIRK

Though iron-strong and grey,
The moorland wall gives way,
More grey, more strong on high
The weathering sky.

SUMMER RAIN

What sound more pleasant to the ear from birth
Than evening showers on the orchard leaves?
For then the child in every heart believes
That every thing is solaced on the earth.
Horror, dismay—all evils that men do,
Despair and rage, were never, never true.

How good the dripping of the ivied boughs,
The bolt upon the square Victorian pane,
The unimpassioned running tears of rain,
The dark receiving safety round the house.
Despair and rage and horror and dismay
Were never real, and now are washed away.

NIGHT STORM

Around the eaves a soul unchristened,
A perished child, complains—
The Gabble-ratchet, said my mother,
(Her Yorkshire people told each other)
Lost in the weeping rains.

Like me they must have lain and listened
Since there were window-panes.

LYNE

See where the stones are worn beside the street
By leisured, prosperous, long-departed feet,
And swept again, already smooth and neat,
As swaying shadows of the lilac fall
Over the crumbled, secret garden wall.
Behind that knocker and that kind, green door
Aunt Sarah lived in eighteen-thirty-four.
By then, her father, Robert Pearce, was dead:
'He loved the very stones of Lyne,' she said,
And now each ledge and cornice seem to rise,
Washed by the love of long-acquainted eyes.

Where the church towers to the equal sky,
By the paved path, look where the Pearces lie
Beneath their dignity of tabled stone,
Still by the passers-by revered and known,
And grass grows greenly, as it surely must
From sober, righteous and godly dust.
Friend, like an Orpheus of our latter days,
On this dear seemliness you dare not gaze
Too long or longingly. I warn you, no!
Now take the mass-made motor-bus and go.

VILLAGE BEFORE SUNSET

There is a moment country children know
When half across the field the shadows go
And even the birds sing leisurely and slow.

There's timelessness in every passing tread;
Even the far-off train as it puffs ahead,
Even the voices calling them to bed.

ALL SOULS' NIGHT

My love came back to me
Under the November tree
Shelterless and dim.
He put his hand upon my shoulder,
He did not think me strange or older,
Nor I, him.

CITY EVENING

This is the hour when night says to the streets
'I am coming'; and the light is so strange
The heart expects adventure in everything it meets;
Even the past to change.

FOR CARMEN AT AN ENGLISH WINDOW

What's early spring in Spain?
As here, in lightless light, no tender rain
Falls on your terrace in Madrid, I know;
Sun strikes and east wind sears,
And there, like joy through hard and crystal tears
The almond-trees are blossoming in snow.

LATE HOME

The winds are out in the abysm of night;
The blown trees stoop.
But man invented fire and candle-light,
And man invented soup.

POEMS 1948-1953 & OCCASIONAL
VERSES

ON THE CLIFF

O sky, grass, earth!
How calm it is to lie
Stretched here, unloved, unhated,
By your complete indifference reproved.

But earth, grass, sky,
Were we not once by birth
Closely related?

Unquiet creature, No!
Cousins perhaps, yet very long ago
And many, many, many times removed.

DAYBREAK

I heard an ancient sound: a cock that crew
In graying light as I lay warm in bed.
A long metallic cry of dung and dew
And the unearthly dead.

FIGURES ON THE PLATFORM

Travelling at night no man has any home
Beyond the station's melancholy dome.
The giant tired engine starts again
For homeless fields anonymous in rain,
Now it has gone. But that was not our train.
Even the kit-bag and the trundled can
Are cared-for and considered more than man
Who has been travelling since his life began.

His soul, uncomforted by cups of tea,
Envies the soul of the baby on his knee,
Escaped in peace from its small house of sense.
Even his grin for the barmaid was pretence;
And soon his cup will lose its tiny heat
Abandoned on the desert of a seat;
Even the bottom sip was hardly sweet
And held no hope; it tasted sad, of spoon.

O, if our journey's end were coming soon,
But will it ever come in a thousand hours?
We are the prey of adamantine powers,
Remote, uncaring, cold, yet easily crossed;
They may not punish us for being lost
If we remain their puppets, twitched and tossed,
They may not quite malevolently mind
Our presence here, if hopelessly resigned.

THE SPANISH MAIDS IN ENGLAND

‘All the windows in the house are open’

Ascención called up to Salomé.
Leaning from her attic that fine day,
Sun-warmed sills are made to lean upon,
Down smiled Salomé at Ascención.
Ascención in indolence below,
Too content to wish to come or go,
Clasped her washing in a calm surprise,
Sun-bright dazzle pleasant in her eyes.

All the windows in the house were open.

Summer sauntered through the kitchen door,
Feet like blossom on the faded floor;
Heat and stillness harmonized the day,
Ascención smiled up at Salomé.

Neither needed any word of comment,
Gladly in their veins, for one long moment,
Each forgetting severance and pain,
Strong as music flowed the sap of Spain.

All the windows in the house were open.

COUNTRY IDYLL

Deep in the stable tied with rope,
The cow has neither dignity nor hope.

With ugly, puzzled, hot despair
She needs the calf that is not there,
And mourns and mourns him to unheeding air.

But if the sleeping farmer hears,
He pulls the blanket higher round his ears.

THE SCHOLAR

You often went to breathe a timeless air
And walk with those you loved, perhaps the most.
You spoke to Plato. You were native there.
Like one who made blind Homer sing to him,
You visited the caves where sirens swim
Their deep-indented coast.

With us you seemed

A quiet happy sailor come of late
From those strange seas you best could navigate,
Knowing a world that others only dreamed.
Almost we looked for spray upon your hair,
Who met you, silent-footed on the stair,
Like an Elysian ghost.

So on that day

You left us on a deep withdrawing tide,
We dared not beg you, with one sigh, to stay
Or turn from your discoveries aside.

INSCRIPTION FOR A WAYSIDE SPRING

ALL MEN FROM ALL LANDS
KNEEL BEFORE YOU GO
CUP YOUR HANDS
LIKE A BOWL
LET ME OVERFLOW
READ WHAT THESE WORDS TELL
LEAN DOWN AND KNOW
EACH ONE
BESIDE MY BRINK
BEND DOWN LOW
LOST SON
SAD DAUGHTER
BEND DOWN AND DRINK
I AM THE WATER OF THE WELL
THAT MAKES MEN WHOLE
I AM THE COLD WATER
THAT RESTORES YOUR SOUL

THE NIGHT EXPRESS

Who heard a whistle in the night, so far,
Who heard the whistle of the train pass?
—I heard,
 Said a hedge-safe bird,
—And I, said the bleached grass.
—I heard, said the sinking star,
—And I, said the apple, nested on the ground,
—And I, the mooned church-tower said,
—And I, the graves around.
—And you, said the roof of the farm overhead
 To the child in bed,
 You heard the sound.
—I, said the child, asleep almost,
 I heard it plain,
 I heard the whistle, the whistle of the train,
 Like a friend, like a ghost.

CORNISH WAKING

A sea-bird's shadow went across the wall;
My bedroom faced the sea,
A wordless thought I never shall recall
Escaped scot-free.

THE HANDKERCHIEF

When captains are preoccupied
With tackle and supplies,
Unnoticed on the cold quayside
His Sophy's signal flies.

THE CONSCRIPT

In summer months when he was four
And used a wooden spade,
Bill Turner floated from this shore
The boats his father made.

Now he, a soldier, sails from home
On wild December ways,
Remembering the gentle foam
And those protected days.

A WARTIME SKETCH

Drink the unflowing waters with green hair
You Cambridge willows, calm and unaware;
Soon he will vanish like a summer's midge,
That calm-struck soldier leaning on the bridge,
And things be always as they always were.

MR COOPER

For many years he bent above his ground
To dig and drill and dutifully tend,
(While the observant robin hopped around),
Then earth drew down his body out of sight
To lie in equal patience day and night.
And now perhaps his patient soul has found
A heaven, half-familiar, like a friend,
Like Histon Chapel in astounding light.

THE HERD

How calmly cows move to the milking sheds,
How slowly, hieratically along,
How humbly with their moon-surmounted heads,
Though fly-pursued and stained, they pass me by
As gravely as the clouds across the sky,
They being, like the stars ‘preserved from wrong’.

THE OLD WOMAN AT THE FLOWER SHOW

Come inside the swinging gate
And pay your pennies for the Fête,
Where once I strolled with all the rest
In my sash and Sunday best.

Dust and ash the eyes I sought,
Where I strolled and strayed and sat,
And the rose my mother bought
To stick inside my shady hat,
His blue eyes and my bright sash,

Dust and ash.

THE QUARREL

How simple is my burden every day
Now you have died, till I am also dead,
The words ‘Forgive me’, that I could not say,
The words ‘I am sorry’, that you might have said.

TWO YEARS OLD

A child that prospers, carries everywhere
A little dome of pleasant secret air,
We, who receive his unconcerned embrace
 Perceive it, sacred, round the soft-nosed face.

THE GULL

In ritual circles, resolute and high,
He smoothly, purely passed. I almost heard
The music which that sun-perfected bird
Left in the soundless sky.

JUNE INDOORS

The moths of night in vain,
White thoughts of dark,
Fluster the outward pane
But leave no mark.
Must houses always be
Closed tight on mystery?

MIDSUMMER WAKING

The midnight wind pours darkness through the trees,
How huge their mounded presences appear.
The door-knob turns. Whose visiting hands are these?
What are these footsteps that I do not hear?

AUGUST

Our orchard with her wealth of blossoms spent,
Her grass shorn close, her clamour of singing dumb,
Is like a woman, jewelless, content,
Whose time is almost come.

NOVEMBER LANDSCAPE

The lawns, the light, the shrouded trees are grey,
The lake in trance repeats the moveless day;
Yet, like a royal ghostly barge, moves on
In proud insulted thought, a single swan.

AFTER THE PARTY

Banish the scent of sherry and cigars,
Throw back the shutters, quench the cultured light,
Let in the air. O fresher than the stars
The rank, primeval innocent smell of night!

FOR NIJINSKY'S TOMB

Nijinsky's ashes here in peace repose
No more the Faun, the Harlequin, the Rose.

We saw him framed in light before the crowds,
Hushed like a tree that waits the touch of dawn,
A panther ready, or an arrow drawn.
Then music came, the sure, awakening bars,
He leapt beyond the bounds of joy and grief;
His heart conferred in those transfigured hours,
Strength like the sun, precision like the stars;
The sea was his; the buoyancy of clouds,
The sap that flows in every fluted leaf.
The blossoming, in light, of fields of flowers.
Yet later, smiling in applauded grace,
The Faun, the Rose was never wholly ours,
We saw remoteness in the tilted face,
He heard alone, beyond our human ears,
Beyond applause, the Music of the Spheres.

Nijinsky's ashes here in peace are laid
Their perfect tribute to Perfection paid.

A DIPLOMAT

TRIOLET

Into the innocence of out-of-doors
From faithless man I fly.
I fly from polished lies on polished floors
Into the innocence of out-of-doors.
How candid every stone upon the moors,
How like a flute the sky.
Into the innocence of out-of-doors
From faithless man, I fly.

A MONTREUX HOTEL

TRIOLET

The waiter brought a vision by mistake,
I only ordered coffee and a roll.
Breakfast is all you hope for when you wake;
The waiter brought a vision by mistake,
For there, through slatted shutters, was a lake,
O pure, O placid, like a seraph's soul.
The waiter brought a vision by mistake,
I only ordered coffee and a roll.

WORDS FOR A MADRIGAL

Bow down you trees your rich-embroidered boughs,
Bow low,
And softly fold the sleeping shepherd round.
You squirrels in the grove who swing at ease,
And hide your secret nuts where no one sees,
Where none may know,
You doves among the branches make no sound,
The sleeping, sleeping shepherd never rouse,
The happy shepherd sleeping on the ground.
Bow low you trees your rich-embroidered boughs,
Bow down, you trees.

TWO EPITAPHS

FOR CHARLOTTE BRONTË IN HAWORTH CHURCH YARD

The children of my fiery heart and brain
Endure, created, like the wind and rain
Imperishably wild.

But near this stone, and in this iron air,
I died, because my body could not bear
A mortal child.

ON A PET

Florence has lost her joy, her marmoset.
No more those bright world-penetrating eyes
Peer from the sacred cavern of her muff,
Two jewels closely set.
Un-nibbled now the sugared cherry lies,
November sleet whips through the northern skies,
The tiny tropic heart has throbbed enough.

OCCASIONAL VERSES

LINES ON FOREIGN TRAVEL

If any future, Love, were sure
Be ours to hear with rapture pure
Like ‘Open Sesame’ resounding:
Messieurs les voyageurs en voiture.

And, Ah, those sacred wheels that say
Their *Non sporgersi* all the way,
In stern beloved trilingual measure
Nicht hinauslehn night or day.

What shall we find with dawn begun
And Europe’s black effacement done?
Beyond Vallorbe the Alps arising?
The bridge at Avignon in the sun?

1942

RONDEAU ON WINES IN WARTIME

There is no cider at the Traveller's Rest;
But where's your *Graves*? Your *Beaune*? Your *Beaujolais*?
The *Nuits* you prayed for? *Veuve Clicquot*? *Vin d'Ay*?—
And vain as well the simpler suit I pressed:

'Grant me the vin-du-pays of the west,
The amber largesse of a labourer's day!'
There is no cider at the Traveller's Rest
(But where's your *Graves*? Your *Beaune*? Your *Beaujolais*?)

Your every plea seemed sweet as love confessed:
Pommery, Saint Emilion, Montrachet!
Lachryma Christi, Clos Vougeot, Vouvray!
Yet Mars denied each connoisseur request.
Nor has my humble homely prayer been blessed.
There is no cider at the Traveller's Rest.

JOURNEYS END IN LOVERS' MEETING

I AT A DINNER PARTY

—Jean, let me introduce Sir Robert Frazer,
But once in Wiltshire years ago you met,
Don't I remember?

—Yes, I can't forget . . .

Our Hostess acts the imbecile, it pays her.

—You always were so horrid about people.

—And you were always bringing out their best.

—Bob, do behave like any other guest . . .

Do you remember Wagdon Prior steeple
And how it rises out of Salisbury plain?

—I dislike steeples seen at any angle,

—How strange that we should only meet to wrangle.

—Frankly, I hope we never shall again.

—But do say something in this awful lull,
You always had the gift of being dull.

II IN A CAMBRIDGE GARDEN

—Bill, take a cushion on the ground, that's better!

Just how you used to lie ten years ago.

—Tell me one thing I have a right to know,

Why did you never answer my last letter?

—I used to wish when I was seventeen

(You can't chew grass *and* make a noble face)

That I could find that fairy-story place

Where there is everything that might have been.

That treasured kitten grown Eternal Cat,

The plays we meant to act in, you and I,

Even the tears there was never time to cry,

Do you think Heaven was really always that,

Not harps and halos?

—Clare, I know it well

And go there often, but its name is Hell.

CHARM FOR OBTAINING DOMESTIC HELP

SABAÓTH, ZAGOÚRE, PATOÚRE, ELOAÍ.

By these hidden Names I speak
Come and help us through the week!
ABLATHANABLA hear my spell,
Come on Saturdays as well!
By the hidden Names of power,
Come for half-a-crown an hour!

PAPHRO OSORONOPHRIS, BAROUKH, ADONAÍ, ELOAÍ.

ANAGRAM FOR GUY FAWKES NIGHT

G ive me crowding children. A front lawn damp
U nder an angular bejewelled Great Bear:
Y oung hot brothers held to peer through window-bars

F idgeting in vain for rockets due to flare:
A fter altercations round the oily cycle-lamp
W onderful and sudden showers in blackest air,
K ingly gold eclipsing the ineffectual stars.
E very bang expended. One smouldering spark.
S ilence. Smell of sulphur. Re-instated dark.

EPITAPH FOR A REVIEWER

Whoso maintains that I am humbled now
(Who wait the Awful Day) is still a liar;
I hope to meet my Maker brow to brow
And find my own the higher.

INDEX OF FIRST LINES

A child that prospers, carries everywhere
A sea bird's shadow went across the wall
A young Apollo, golden-haired
Again the cry of black-faced lambs across the brackened hills
All men from all lands
All the windows in the house are open
Around the eaves a soul unchristened
As I looked out one May morning
As on the highway's quiet edge

Banish the scent of sherry and cigars
Because no notice-board was nailed
Beside the road to Coursegoules
Bill, take a cushion on the ground, that's better!
Bow down you trees your rich-embroidered boughs
Brekkoax the night-frogs said, while I
Bring roses, singing girls, soft pansies strew

Can it be possible when we grow old
Come inside the swinging gate
Companionable ticking of the clock

Deep in the stable tied with rope
Does a bird rejoice like me
Drink the unflowing waters with green hair

Elegant creature with black shoulders bent

Florence has lost her joy, her marmoset

For how long known this boundless wash of light
For long, so long, this timeless afternoon
For many years he bent above the ground
Fresh as the foam of torrents from the snow
From muddy road to muddy lane

Give me crowding children. A front lawn damp
Gold as the hair of fairy-story queens
Gold-headed rose for bees to sup

Have you not seen
Here are the Schubert Lieder. Now begin
Here the young lover, on his elbow raised
How calmly cows move to the milking sheds
How can I dread you, O portentous wise
How long ago Hector took off his plume
How simple is my burden every day
How simply violent things

I am a lamp, a lamp that is out
I am an old woman, comfortable, calm and wise
I cannot but believe, though you were dead
I dreamt Death called my friend. And I
I envy your contorted bole
I have forgotten the country in the North, where my people lived before me
I heard an ancient sound: a cock that crew
I hear my children come. They trample with their feet
I laid me down upon the shore
I ran out in the morning, when the air was clean and new
I spoiled the day
I used to think that grown-up people chose
I wakened on my hot, hard bed
If any future, Love, were sure
In my dark mind you kicked a stone away

In ritual circles, resolute and high
In summer months when he was four
Into the innocence of out-of-doors
Is this obscurity not quite unbroken

James painted black moustaches round his nose
Jean, let me introduce Sir Robert Frazer

Long ago, in stony Greece
Look how these young, bare, bullock faces know

More innocently born and calmer seems
My father's friend came once to tea
My hands, O Lord, receive the crystal day
My love came back to me
My room's a square and candle-lighted boat

Nijinsky's ashes here in peace repose
No longer will his name be found
Now quenched each midnight window is. Now unimpeded
Now the forgiving sun, with beams aslope
Now when his hour shall strike

O grasses wet with dew, yellow fallen leaves
O here is Paradise for me
O Providence, I will not praise
O sing or tell a story. What shall I tell?
O sky, grass, earth!
O sometimes when I wake at night
O why do you walk through the fields in gloves
Old Mrs Thompson down the road is dead
On days when you have been

On moony nights the dogs bark shrill
Our orchard with her wealth of blossoms spent
Out of this seemliness, this solid order

SABAÓTH, ZAGOÚRE, PATOÚRE, ELOAÍ
See where the stones are worn beside the street
So begins the day
So, my proud soul, so you, whose shining force
Still the medieval hunger to atone

That eager, honouring look
The air is still grey
The children of my fiery heart and brain
The Cypriot woman, as she closed her dress
The day my great-aunt Sarah died
The first created pair possessed a world
The lawns, the light, the shrouded trees are grey
The liquid unhorizoned sea
The midnight wind pours darkness through the trees
The moths of night in vain
The olive boughs are black, like blinding hair
The rounded buses loom through softest blue
The spirits of children are remote and wise
The stacks, like blunt impassive temples, rise
The train. A hot July. On either hand
The waiter brought a vision by mistake
The winds are out in the abysm of night
The wrong you did is gentle, like the trust
There is a bed-time sadness in this place
There is a moment country children know
There is no cider at the Traveller's Rest
This is the hour when night says to the streets
This is your nursing mother, this is sleep
This once protected flesh the War-god uses
Though iron-strong and grey

Through all these days and all these weeks

Time stands still

Too many of the dead, some I knew well

Travelling at night no man has any home

Unshaken world! Another day of light

We who are met to celebrate

We, who must grow old and staid

What's early spring in Spain?

What sound more pleasant to the ear from birth

When captains are preoccupied

When he was questioned at the time of the trial

When I was twenty inches long

When someone's happy in a house there shows

When we had reached the gate I raised my eyes

When we would reach the anguish of the dead

Where have you been? You look queer

Who heard a whistle in the night, so far

Whoso maintains that I am humbled now

Why frown? Why stare?

Why is it grown so suddenly cold at night?

You often went to breathe a timeless air

You who, frustrated, died so long ago

Your youth is like a water-wetted stone

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *Collected Poems* by Frances Cornford]