

LEDA

Aldous Huxley

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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LEDA

LEDA

BROWN and bright as an agate, mountain-cool,
Eurotas singing slips from pool to pool;
Down rocky gullies; through the cavernous pines
And chestnut groves; down where the terraced vines
And gardens overhang; through valleys grey
With olive trees, into a soundless bay
Of the Ægean. Silent and asleep
Lie those pools now: but where they dream most deep,
Men sometimes see ripples of shining hair
And the young grace of bodies pale and bare,
Shimmering far down—the ghosts these mirrors hold
Of all the beauty they beheld of old,
White limbs and heavenly eyes and the hair's river of gold,
For once these banks were peopled: Spartan girls
Loosed here their maiden girdles and their curls,
And stooping o'er the level water stole
His darling mirror from the sun through whole
Rapturous hours of gazing.

The first star

Of all this milky constellation, far
Lovelier than any nymph of wood or green,
Was she whom Tyndarus had made his queen
For her sheer beauty and subtly moving grace—
Leda, the fairest of our mortal race.

Hymen had lit his torches but one week
About her bed (and still o'er her young cheek
Passed rosy shadows of those thoughts that sped
Across her mind, still virgin, still unwed,

For all her body was her own no more),
When Leda with her maidens to the shore
Of bright Eurotas came, to escape the heat
Of summer noon in waters coolly sweet.
By a brown pool which opened smooth and clear
Below the wrinkled water of a weir
They sat them down under an old fir-tree
To rest: and to the laughing melody
Of their sweet speech the river's rippling bore
A liquid burden, while the sun did pour
Pure colour out of heaven upon the earth.
The meadows seethed with the incessant mirth
Of grasshoppers, seen only when they flew
Their curves of scarlet or sudden dazzling blue.
Within the fir-tree's round of unpierced shade
The maidens sat with laughter and talk, or played,
Gravely intent, their game of knuckle-bones;
Or tossed from hand to hand the old dry cones
Littered about the tree. And one did sing
A ballad of some far-off Spartan king,
Who took a wife, but left her, well-away!
Slain by his foes upon their wedding-day.
"That was a piteous story," Leda sighed,
"To be a widow ere she was a bride."
"Better," said one, "to live a virgin life
Alone, and never know the name of wife
And bear the ugly burden of a child
And have great pain by it. Let me live wild,
A bird untamed by man!" "Nay," cried another,
"I would be wife, if I should not be mother.
Cypris I honour; let the vulgar pay
Their gross vows to Lucina when they pray.
Our finer spirits would be blunted quite
By bestial teeming; but Love's rare delight
Wings the rapt soul towards Olympus' height."
"Delight?" cried Leda. "Love to me has brought
Nothing but pain and a world of shameful thought.

When they say love is sweet, the poets lie;
'Tis but a trick to catch poor maidens by.
What are their boasted pleasures? I am queen
To the most royal king the world has seen;
Therefore I should, if any woman might,
Know at its full that exquisite delight.
Yet these few days since I was made a wife
Have held more bitterness than all my life,
While I was yet a child." The great bright tears
Slipped through her lashes. "Oh, my childish years!
Years that were all my own, too sadly few,
When I was happy—and yet never knew
How happy till to-day!" Her maidens came
About her as she wept, whispering her name,
Leda, sweet Leda, with a hundred dear
Caressing words to soothe her heavy cheer.
At last she started up with a fierce pride
Upon her face. "I am a queen," she cried,
"But had forgotten it a while; and you,
Wenches of mine, you were forgetful too.
Undress me. We would bathe ourself." So proud
A queen she stood, that all her maidens bowed
In trembling fear and scarcely dared approach
To do her bidding. But at last the brooch
Pinned at her shoulder is undone, the wide
Girdle of silk beneath her breasts untied;
The tunic falls about her feet, and she
Steps from the crocus folds of drapery,
Dazzlingly naked, into the warm sun.
God-like she stood; then broke into a run,
Leaping and laughing in the light, as though
Life through her veins coursed with so swift a flow
Of generous blood and fire that to remain
Too long in statted queenliness were pain
To that quick soul, avid of speed and joy.
She ran, easily bounding, like a boy,
Narrow of haunch and slim and firm of breast.

Lovelier she seemed in motion than at rest,
If that might be, when she was never less,
Moving or still, than perfect loveliness.
At last, with cheeks afire and heaving flank,
She checked her race, and on the river's bank
Stood looking down at her own echoed shape
And at the fish that, aimlessly agape,
Hung midway up their heaven of flawless glass,
Like angels waiting for eternity to pass.
Leda drew breath and plunged; her gasping cry
Splashed up; the water circled brokenly
Out from that pearly shudder of dipped limbs;
The glittering pool laughed up its flowery brims,
And everything, save the poor fish, rejoiced:
Their idiot contemplation of the Moist,
The Cold, the Watery, was in a trice
Ended when Leda broke their crystal paradise.

Jove in his high Olympian chamber lay
Hugely supine, striving to charm away
In sleep the long, intolerable noon.
But heedless Morpheus still withheld his boon,
And Jove upon his silk-pavilioned bed
Tossed wrathful and awake. His fevered head
Swarmed with a thousand fancies, which forecast
Delights to be, or savoured pleasures past.
Closing his eyes, he saw his eagle swift,
Headlong as his own thunder, stoop and lift
On pinions upward labouring the prize
Of beauty ravished for the envious skies.
He saw again that bright, adulterous pair,
Trapped by the limping husband unaware,
Fast in each other's arms, and faster in the snare—
And laughed remembering. Sometimes his thought
Went wandering over the earth and sought
Familiar places—temples by the sea,
Cities and islands; here a sacred tree

And there a cavern of shy nymphs.

He rolled

About his bed, in many a rich fold
Crumpling his Babylonian coverlet,
And yawned and stretched. The smell of his own sweat
Brought back to mind his Libyan desert-fane
Of mottled granite, with its endless train
Of pilgrim camels, reeking towards the sky
Ammonian incense to his hornèd deity;
The while their masters worshipped, offering
Huge teeth of ivory, while some would bring
Their Ethiop wives—sleek wineskins of black silk,
Jellied and huge from drinking asses' milk
Through years of tropical idleness, to pray
For offspring (whom he ever sent away
With prayers unanswered, lest their ebon race
Might breed and blacken the earth's comely face).
Noon pressed on him a hotter, heavier weight.
O Love in Idleness! how celibate
He felt! Libido like a nemesis
Scourged him with itching memories of bliss.
The satin of imagined skin was sleek
And supple warm against his lips and cheek,
And deep within soft hair's dishevelled dusk
His eyelids fluttered; like a flowery musk
The scent of a young body seemed to float
Faintly about him, close and yet remote—
For perfume and the essence of music dwell
In other worlds among the asphodel
Of unembodied life. Then all had flown;
His dream had melted. In his bed, alone,
Jove sweating lay and moaned, and longed in vain
To still the pulses of his burning pain.
In sheer despair at last he leapt from bed,
Opened the window and thrust forth his head
Into Olympian ether. One fierce frown
Rifted the clouds, and he was looking down

Into a gulf of azure calm; the rack
Seethed round about, tempestuously black;
But the god's eye could hold its angry thunders back.
There lay the world, down through the chasméd blue,
Stretched out from edge to edge unto his view;
And in the midst, bright as a summer's day
At breathless noon, the Mediterranean lay;
And Ocean round the world's dim fringes tossed
His glaucous waves in mist and distance lost;
And Pontus and the livid Caspian Sea
Stirred in their nightmare sleep uneasily.
And 'twixt the seas rolled the wide fertile land,
Dappled with green and tracts of tawny sand,
And rich, dark fallows and fields of flowers aglow
And the white, changeless silences of snow;
While here and there towns, like a living eye
Unclosed on earth's blind face, towards the sky
Glanced their bright conscious beauty. Yet the sight
Of his fair earth gave him but small delight
Now in his restlessness: its beauty could
Do nought to quench the fever in his blood.
Desire lends sharpness to his searching eyes;
Over the world his focused passion flies
Quicker than chasing sunlight on a day
Of storm and golden April. Far away
He sees the tranquil rivers of the East,
Mirrors of many a strange barbaric feast,
Where un-Hellenic dancing-girls contort
Their yellow limbs, and gibbering masks make sport
Under the moons of many-coloured light
That swing their lantern-fruitage in the night
Of overarching trees. To him it seems
An alien world, peopled by insane dreams.
But these are nothing to the monstrous shapes—
Not men so much as bastardy of apes—
That meet his eyes in Africa. Between
Leaves of grey fungoid pulp and poisonous green,

White eyes from black and browless faces stare.
Dryads with star-flowers in their woolly hair
Dance to the flaccid clapping of their own
Black dangling dugs through forests overgrown,
Platted with writhing creepers. Horrified,
He sees them how they leap and dance, or glide,
Glimpse after black glimpse of a satin skin,
Among unthinkable flowers, to pause and grin
Out through a trellis of suppurating lips,
Of mottled tentacles barbed at the tips
And bloated hands and wattles and red lobes
Of pendulous gristle and enormous probes
Of pink and slashed and tasselled flesh . . .

He turns

Northward his sickened sight. The desert burns
All life away. Here in the forkéd shade
Of twin-humped towering dromedaries laid,
A few gaunt folk are sleeping; fierce they seem
Even in sleep, and restless as they dream.
He would be fearful of a desert bride
As of a brown asp at his sleeping side,
Fearful of her white teeth and cunning arts.
Further, yet further, to the ultimate parts
Of the wide earth he looks, where Britons go
Painted among their swamps, and through the snow
Huge hairy snuffling beasts pursue their prey—
Fierce men, as hairy and as huge as they.

Bewildered furrows deepen the Thunderer's scowl;
This world so vast, so variously foul—
Who can have made its ugliness? In what
Revolting fancy were the Forms begot
Of all these monsters? What strange deity—
So barbarously not a Greek!—was he
Who could mismake such beings in his own
Distorted image. Nay, the Greeks alone
Were men; in Greece alone were bodies fair,

Minds comely. In that all-but-island there,
Cleaving the blue sea with its promontories,
Lies the world's hope, the seed of all the glories
That are to be; there, too, must surely live
She who alone can medicinably give
Ease with her beauty to the Thunderer's pain.
Downwards he bends his fiery eyes again,
Glaring on Hellas. Like a beam of light,
His intent glances touch the mountain height
With passing flame and probe the valleys deep,
Rift the dense forest and the age-old sleep
Of vaulted antres on whose pebbly floor
Gallop the loud-hoofed Centaurs; and the roar
Of more than human shouting underground
Pulses in living palpable waves of sound
From wall to wall, until it rumbles out
Into the air; and at that hollow shout
That seems an utterance of the whole vast hill,
The shepherds cease their laughter and are still.
Cities asleep under the noonday sky
Stir at the passage of his burning eye;
And in their huts the startled peasants blink
At the swift flash that bursts through every chink
Of wattled walls, hearkening in fearful wonder
Through lengthened seconds for the crash of thunder—
Which follows not: they are the more afraid.
Jove seeks amain. Many a country maid,
Whose sandalled feet pass down familiar ways
Among the olives, but whose spirit strays
Through lovelier lands of fancy, suddenly
Starts broad awake out of her dream to see
A light that is not of the sun, a light
Darted by living eyes, consciously bright;
She sees and feels it like a subtle flame
Mantling her limbs with fear and maiden shame
And strange desire. Longing and terrified,
She hides her face, like a new-wedded bride

Who feels rough hands that seize and hold her fast;
And swooning falls. The terrible light has passed;
She wakes; the sun still shines, the olive trees
Tremble to whispering silver in the breeze
And all is as it was, save she alone
In whose dazed eyes this deathless light has shone:
For never, never from this day forth will she
In earth's poor passion find felicity,
Or love of mortal man. A god's desire
Has seared her soul; nought but the same strong fire
Can kindle the dead ash to life again,
And all her years will be a lonely pain.

Many a thousand had he looked upon,
Thousands of mortals, young and old; but none—
Virgin, or young ephebus, or the flower
Of womanhood culled in its full-blown hour—
Could please the Thunderer's sight or touch his mind;
The longed-for loveliness was yet to find.
Had beauty fled, and was there nothing fair
Under the moon? The fury of despair
Raged in the breast of heaven's Almighty Lord;
He gnashed his foamy teeth and rolled and roared
In bull-like agony. Then a great calm
Descended on him: cool and healing balm
Touched his immortal fury. He had spied
Young Leda where she stood, poised on the river-side.

Even as she broke the river's smooth expanse,
Leda was conscious of that hungry glance,
And knew it for an eye of fearful power
That did so hot and thunderously lour,
She knew not whence, on her frail nakedness.
Jove's heart held but one thought: he must possess
That perfect form or die—possess or die.
Unheeded prayers and supplications fly,
Thick as a flock of birds, about his ears,

And smoke of incense rises; but he hears
Nought but the soft falls of that melody
Which is the speech of Leda; he can see
Nought but that almost spiritual grace
Which is her body, and that heavenly face
Where gay, sweet thoughts shine through, and eyes are bright
With purity and the soul's inward light.
Have her he must: the teasel-fingered burr
Sticks not so fast in a wild beast's tangled fur
As that insistent longing in the soul
Of mighty Jove. Gods, men, earth, heaven, the whole
Vast universe was blotted from his thought
And nought remained but Leda's laughter, nought
But Leda's eyes. Magnified by his lust,
She was the whole world now; have her he must, he must . . .
His spirit worked; how should he gain his end
With most deliciousness? What better friend,
What counsellor more subtle could he find
Than lovely Aphrodite, ever kind
To hapless lovers, ever cunning, too,
In all the tortuous ways of love to do
And plan the best? To Paphos then! His will
And act were one; and straight, invisible,
He stood in Paphos, breathing the languid air
By Aphrodite's couch. O heavenly fair
She was, and smooth and marvellously young!
On Tyrian silk she lay, and purple hung
About her bed in folds of fluted light
And shadow, dark as wine. Two doves, more white
Even than the white hand on the purple lying
Like a pale flower wearily dropped, were flying
With wings that made an odoriferous stir,
Dropping faint dews of bakkaris and myrrh,
Musk and the soul of sweet flowers cunningly
Ravished from transient petals as they die.
Two stripling cupids on her either hand
Stood near with winnowing plumes and gently fanned

Her hot, love-fevered cheeks and eyelids burning.
Another, crouched at the bed's foot, was turning
A mass of scattered parchments—vows or plaints
Or glad triumphant thanks which Venus' saints,
Martyrs and heroes, on her altars strewed
With bitterest tears or gifts of gratitude.
From the pile heaped at Aphrodite's feet
The boy would take a leaf, and in his sweet,
Clear voice would read what mortal tongues can tell
In stammering verse of those ineffable
Pleasures and pains of love, heaven and uttermost hell.
Jove hidden stood and heard him read these lines
Of votive thanks—

Cypris, this little silver lamp to thee
I dedicate.

It was my fellow-watcher, shared with me
Those swift, short hours, when raised above my fate
In Sphenura's white arms I drank
Of immortality.

“A pretty lamp, and I will have it placed
Beside the narrow bed of some too chaste
Sister of virgin Artemis, to be
A night-long witness of her cruelty.
Read me another, boy,” and Venus bent
Her ear to listen to this short lament.

Cypris, Cypris, I am betrayed!
Under the same wide mantle laid
I found them, faithless, shameless pair!
Making love with tangled hair.

“Alas,” the goddess cried, “nor god, nor man,
Nor medicinale balm, nor magic can
Cast out the demon jealousy, whose breath
Withers the rose of life, save only time and death.”
Another sheet he took and read again.

Farewell to love, and hail the long, slow pain
Of memory that backward turns to joy.
O I have danced enough and enough sung;

My feet shall be still now and my voice mute;
Thine are these withered wreaths, this Lydian flute,
Cypris; I once was young.

And pîetous Aphrodite wept to think
How fadingly upon death's very brink
Beauty and love take hands for one short kiss—
And then the wreaths are dust, the bright-eyed bliss
Perished, and the flute still. "Read on, read on."
But ere the page could start, a lightning shone
Suddenly through the room, and they were 'ware
Of some great terrible presence looming there.
And it took shape—huge limbs, whose every line
A symbol was of power and strength divine,
And it was Jove.

"Daughter, I come," said he,
"For counsel in a case that touches me
Close, to the very life." And he straightway
Told her of all his restlessness that day
And of his sight of Leda, and how great
Was his desire. And so in close debate
Sat the two gods, planning their rape; while she,
Who was to be their victim, joyously
Laughed like a child in the sudden breathless chill
And splashed and swam, forgetting every ill
And every fear and all, save only this:
That she was young, and it was perfect bliss
To be alive where suns so goldenly shine,
And bees go drunk with fragrant honey-wine,
And the cicadas sing from morn till night,
And rivers run so cool and pure and bright . . .
Stretched all her length, arms under head, she lay
In the deep grass, while the sun kissed away
The drops that sleeked her skin. Slender and fine
As those old images of the gods that shine
With smooth-worn silver, polished through the years
By the touching lips of countless worshippers,
Her body was; and the sun's golden heat

Clothed her in softest flame from head to feet
And was her mantle, that she scarcely knew
The conscious sense of nakedness. The blue,
Far hills and the faint fringes of the sky
Shimmered and pulsed in the heat uneasily,
And hidden in the grass, cicadas shrill
Dizzied the air with ceaseless noise, until
A listener might wonder if they cried
In his own head or in the world outside.
Sometimes she shut her eyelids, and wrapped round
In a red darkness, with the muffled sound
And throb of blood beating within her brain,
Savoured intensely to the verge of pain
Her own young life, hoarded it up behind
Her shuttered lids, until, too long confined,
It burst them open and her prisoned soul
Flew forth and took possession of the whole
Exquisite world about her and was made
A part of it. Meanwhile her maidens played,
Singing an ancient song of death and birth,
Seed-time and harvest, old as the grey earth,
And moving to their music in a dance
As immemorial. A numbing trance
Came gradually over her, as though
Flake after downy-feathered flake of snow
Had muffled all her senses, drifting deep
And warm and quiet.

From this all-but sleep
She started into life again; the sky
Was full of a strange tumult suddenly—
Beating of mighty wings and shrill-voiced fear
And the hoarse scream of rapine following near.
In the high windlessness above her flew,
Dazzlingly white on the untroubled blue,
A splendid swan, with outstretched neck and wing
Spread fathom wide, and closely following

An eagle, tawny and black. This god-like pair
Circled and swooped through the calm of upper air,
The eagle striking and the white swan still
'Scaping as though by happy miracle
The imminent talons. For the twentieth time
The furious hunter stooped, to miss and climb
A mounting spiral into the height again.
He hung there poised, eyeing the grassy plain
Far, far beneath, where the girls' upturned faces
Were like white flowers that bloom in open places
Among the scarcely budded woods. And they
Breathlessly watched and waited; long he lay,
Becalmed upon that tideless sea of light,
While the great swan with slow and creaking flight
Went slanting down towards safety, where the stream
Shines through the trees below, with glance and gleam
Of blue aerial eyes that seem to give
Sense to the sightless earth and make it live.
The ponderous wings beat on and no pursuit:
Stiff as the painted kite that guards the fruit,
Afloat o'er orchards ripe, the eagle yet
Hung as at anchor, seeming to forget
His uncaught prey, his rage unsatisfied.
Still, quiet, dead . . . and then the quickest-eyed
Had lost him. Like a star unsphered, a stone
Dropped from the vault of heaven, a javelin thrown,
He swooped upon his prey. Down, down he came,
And through his plumes with a noise of wind-blown flame
Loud roared the air. From Leda's lips a cry
Broke, and she hid her face—she could not see him die,
Her lovely, hapless swan.

Ah, had she heard,
Even as the eagle hurtled past, the word
That treacherous pair exchanged. "Peace," cried the swan;
"Peace, daughter. All my strength will soon be gone,
Wasted in tedious flying, ere I come
Where my desire hath set its only home."

“Go,” said the eagle, “I have played my part,
Roused pity for your plight in Leda’s heart
(Pity the mother of voluptuousness).
Go, father Jove; be happy; for success
Attends this moment.”

On the queen’s numbed sense

Fell a glad shout that ended sick suspense,
Bidding her lift once more towards the light
Her eyes, by pity closed against a sight
Of blood and death—her eyes, how happy now
To see the swan still safe, while far below,
Brought by the force of his eluded stroke
So near to earth that with his wings he woke
A gust whose sudden silvery motion stirred
The meadow grass, struggled the sombre bird
Of rage and rapine. Loud his scream and hoarse
With baffled fury as he urged his course
Upwards again on threshing pinions wide.
But the fair swan, not daring to abide
This last assault, dropped with the speed of fear
Towards the river. Like a winged spear,
Outstretching his long neck, rigid and straight,
Aimed at where Leda on the bank did wait
With open arms and kind, uplifted eyes
And voice of tender pity, down he flies.
Nearer, nearer, terribly swift, he sped
Directly at the queen; then widely spread
Resisting wings, and breaking his descent
’Gainst his own wind, all speed and fury spent,
The great swan fluttered slowly down to rest
And sweet security on Leda’s breast.
Menacingly the eagle wheeled above her;
But Leda, like a noble-hearted lover
Keeping his child-beloved from tyrannous harm,
Stood o’er the swan and, with one slender arm
Imperiously lifted, waved away
The savage foe, still hungry for his prey.

Baffled at last, he mounted out of sight
And the sky was void—save for a single white
Swan's feather moulted from a harassed wing
That down, down, with a rhythmic balancing
From side to side dropped sleeping on the air.
Down, slowly down over that dazzling pair,
Whose different grace in union was a birth
Of unimagined beauty on the earth:
So lovely that the maidens standing round
Dared scarcely look. Couched on the flowery ground
Young Leda lay, and to her side did press
The swan's proud-arching opulent loveliness,
Stroking the snow-soft plumage of his breast
With fingers slowly drawn, themselves caressed
By the warm softness where they lingered, loth
To break away. Sometimes against their growth
Ruffling the feathers inlaid like little scales
On his sleek neck, the pointed finger-nails
Rasped on the warm, dry, puckered skin beneath;
And feeling it she shuddered, and her teeth
Grated on edge; for there was something strange
And snake-like in the touch. He, in exchange,
Gave back to her, stretching his eager neck,
For every kiss a little amorous peck;
Rubbing his silver head on her gold tresses,
And with the nip of horny dry caresses
Leaving upon her young white breast and cheek
And arms the red print of his playful beak.
Closer he nestled, mingling with the slim
Austerity of virginal flank and limb
His curved and florid beauty, till she felt
That downy warmth strike through her flesh and melt
The bones and marrow of her strength away.
One lifted arm bent o'er her brow, she lay
With limbs relaxed, scarce breathing, deathly still;
Save when a quick, involuntary thrill
Shook her sometimes with passing shudderings,

As though some hand had plucked the aching strings
Of life itself, tense with expectancy.
And over her the swan shook slowly free
The folded glory of his wings, and made
A white-walled tent of soft and luminous shade
To be her veil and keep her from the shame
Of naked light and the sun's noonday flame.

Hushed lay the earth and the wide, careless sky.
Then one sharp sound, that might have been a cry
Of utmost pleasure or of utmost pain,
Broke sobbing forth, and all was still again.

THE BIRTH OF GOD

NIGHT is a void about me; I lie alone;
And water drips, like an idiot clicking his tongue,
Senselessly, ceaselessly, endlessly drips
Into the waiting silence, grown
Emptier for this small inhuman sound.
My love is gone, my love who is tender and young.
O smooth warm body! O passionate lips!
I have stretched forth hands in the dark and nothing found:
The silence is huge as the sky—I lie alone—
My narrow room, a darkness that knows no bound.

How shall I fill this measureless
Deep void that the taking away
Of a child's slim beauty has made?
Slender she is and small, but the loneliness
She has left is a night no stars allay,
And I am cold and afraid.

Long, long ago, cut off from the wolfish pack,
From the warm, immediate touch of friends and mate,
Lost and alone, alone in the utter black
Of a forest night, some far-off, beast-like man,
Cowed by the cold indifferent hate
Of the northern silence, crouched in fear,
When through his bleared and suffering mind
A sudden tremor of comfort ran,
And the void was filled by a rushing wind,
And he breathed a sense of something friendly and near,
And in privation the life of God began.

Love, from your loss shall a god be born to fill
The emptiness, where once you were,
With friendly knowledge and more than a lover's will
To ease despair?
Shall I feed longing with what it hungers after,
Seeing in earth and sea and air
A lover's smiles, hearing a lover's laughter,
Feeling love everywhere?

The night drags on. Darkness and silence grow,
And with them my desire has grown,
My bitter need. Alas, I know,
I know that here I lie alone.

ON HAMPSTEAD HEATH

BENEATH the sunlight and blue of all-but Autumn
The grass sleeps goldenly; woodland and distant hill
Shine through the gauzy air in a dust of golden pollen,
And even the glittering leaves are almost still.

Scattered on the grass, like a ragman's bundles carelessly dropped,
Men sleep outstretched or, sprawling, bask in the sun;
Here glows a woman's bright dress and here a child is sitting,
And I lie down and am one of the sleepers, one

Like the rest of this tumbled crowd. Do they all, I wonder,
Feel anguish grow with the calm day's slow decline,
Longing, as I, for a shattering wind, a passion
Of bodily pain to be the soul's anodyne?

SYMPATHY

THE irony of being two . . . !
Grey eyes, wide open suddenly,
Regard me and enquire; I see a face
Grave and unquiet in tenderness.
Heart-rending question of women—never answered:
“Tell me, tell me, what are you thinking of?”
Oh, the pain and foolishness of love!
What can I do but make my old grimace,
Ending it with a kiss, as I always do?

MALE AND FEMALE CREATED HE THEM

DIAPHENIA, drunk with sleep,
Drunk with pleasure, drunk with fatigue,
Feels her Corydon's fingers creep—
Ring-finger, middle finger, index, thumb—
Strummingly over the smooth sleek drum
Of her thorax.

Meanwhile Händel's Gigue
Turns in Corydon's absent mind
To Yakka-Hoola.

She can find
No difference in the thrilling touch
Of one who, now, in everything
Is God-like. "Was there ever such
Passion as ours?"

His pianoing
Gives place to simple arithmetic's
Simplest constataions:—six
Letters in Gneiss and three in Gnu:
Luncheon to-day cost three and two;
In a year—he couldn't calculate
Three-sixty-five times thirty-eight,
Figuring with printless fingers on
Her living parchment.

"Corydon!
I faint, faint, faint at your dear touch.
Say, is it possible . . . to love too much?"

FROM THE PILLAR

SIMEON, the withered stylete,
Sat gloomily looking down
Upon each roof and skylight
In all the seething town.

And in every upper chamber,
On roofs, where the orange flowers
Make weary men remember
The perfume of long-dead hours,

He saw the wine-drenched riot
Of harlots and human beasts,
And how celestial quiet
Was shattered by their feasts.

The steam of fetid vices
From a thousand lupanars,
Like smoke of sacrifices,
Reeked up to the heedless stars.

And the saint from his high fastness
Of purity apart
Cursed them and their unchasteness,
And envied them in his heart.

JONAH

A CREAM of phosphorescent light
Floats on the wash that to and fro
Slides round his feet—enough to show
Many a pendulous stalactite
Of naked mucus, whorls and wreaths
And huge festoons of mottled tripes
And smaller palpitating pipes
Through which a yeasty liquor seethes.

Seated upon the convex mound
Of one vast kidney, Jonah prays
And sings his canticles and hymns,
Making the hollow vault resound
God's goodness and mysterious ways,
Till the great fish spouts music as he swims.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

S WAN, Swan,
Yesterday you were
The whitest of things in this dark winter.
To-day the snow has made of your plumes
An unwashed pocket handkercher,
An unwashed pocket handkercher . . .
“Lancashire, to Lancashire!”—
Tune of the antique trains long ago:
Each summer holiday a milestone
Backwards, backwards:—
Tenby, Barmouth, and year by year
All the different hues of the sea,
Blue, green and blue.
But on this river of muddy jade
There swims a yellow swan,
And along the bank the snow lies dazzlingly white.

A MELODY BY SCARLATTI

HOW clear under the trees,
How softly the music flows,
Rippling from one still pool to another
Into the lake of silence.

A SUNSET

O VER against the triumph and the close—
 Amber and green and rose—
 Of this short day,
The pale ghost of the moon grows living-bright
 Once more, as the last light
 Ebbs slowly away.
Darkening the fringes of these western glories
 The black phantasmagories
 Of cloud advance
With noiseless footing—vague and villainous shapes,
 Wrapped in their ragged fustian capes,
 Of some grotesque romance.
But overhead where, like a pool between
 Dark rocks, the sky is green
 And clear and deep,
Floats windlessly a cloud, with curving breast
 Flushed by the fiery west,
 In god-like sleep . . .
And in my mind opens a sudden door
 That lets me see once more
 A little room
With night beyond the window, chill and damp,
 And one green-lighted lamp
 Tempering the gloom,
While here within, close to me, touching me
 (Even the memory
 Of my desire
Shakes me like fear), you sit with scattered hair;
 And all your body bare
 Before the fire
Is lapped about with rosy flame. . . . But still,
 Here on the lonely hill,
 I walk alone;
Silvery green is the moon's lamp overhead,
 The cloud sleeps warm and red,
 And you are gone.

LIFE AND ART

YOU have sweet flowers for your pleasure;
You laugh with the bountiful earth
In its richness of summer treasure:
Where now are your flowers and your mirth?
Petals and cadenced laughter,
Each in a dying fall,
Droop out of life; and after
Is nothing; they were all.

But we from the death of roses
That three suns perfume and gild
With a kiss, till the fourth discloses
A withered wreath, have distilled
The fulness of one rare phial,
Whose nimble life shall outrun
The circling shadow on the dial,
Outlast the tyrannous sun.

FIRST PHILOSOPHER'S SONG

A POOR degenerate from the ape,
Whose hands are four, whose tail's a
limb,
I contemplate my flaccid shape
And know I may not rival him,

Save with my mind—a nimbler beast
Possessing a thousand sinewy tails,
A thousand hands, with which it scales,
Greedy of luscious truth, the greased

Poles and the coco palms of thought,
Thrifs easily through the mangrove maze
Of metaphysics, walks the taut
Frail dangerous liana ways

That link across wide gulfs remote
Analogies between tree and tree;
Outruns the hare, outhops the goat;
Mind fabulous, mind sublime and free!

But oh, the sound of simian mirth!
Mind, issued from the monkey's womb,
Is still umbilical to earth,
Earth its home and earth its tomb.

SECOND PHILOSOPHER'S SONG

I F, O my Lesbia, I should commit,
Not fornication, dear, but suicide,
My Thames-blown body (Pliny vouches it)
Would drift face upwards on the oily tide
With the other garbage, till it putrefied.

But you, if all your lovers' frozen hearts
Conspired to send you, desperate, to drown—
Your maiden modesty would float face down,
And men would weep upon your hinder parts.

'Tis the Lord's doing. Marvellous is the plan
By which this best of worlds is wisely planned.
One law He made for woman, one for man:
We bow the head and do not understand.

FIFTH PHILOSOPHER'S SONG

A MILLION million spermatozoa,
All of them alive:
Out of their cataclysm but one poor Noah
Dare hope to survive.

And among that billion minus one
Might have chanced to be
Shakespeare, another Newton, a new Donne—
But the One was Me.

Shame to have ousted your betters thus,
Taking ark while the others remained outside!
Better for all of us, froward Homunculus,
If you'd quietly died!

NINTH PHILOSOPHER'S SONG

GOD'S in His Heaven: He never issues
 (Wise Man!) to visit this world of ours.
Unchecked the cancer gnaws our tissues,
 Stops to lick chops and then again devours.

Those find, who most delight to roam
 'Mid castles of remotest Spain,
That there's, thank Heaven, no place like home;
 So they set out upon their travels again.

Beauty for some provides escape,
 Who gain a happiness in eyeing
The gorgeous buttocks of the ape
 Or Autumn sunsets exquisitely dying.

And some to better worlds than this
 Mount up on wings as frail and misty
As passion's all-too-transient kiss
 (Though afterwards—oh, *omne animal triste!*)

But I, too rational by half
 To live but where I bodily am.
Can only do my best to laugh.
 Can only sip my misery dram by dram.

While happier mortals take to drink,
 A dolorous dipsomaniac,
Fuddled with grief I sit and think,
 Looking upon the bile when it is black.

Then brim the bowl with atrabilious liquor!
 We'll pledge our Empire vast across the flood:
For Blood, as all men know, than Water's thicker,
 But water's wider, thank the Lord, than Blood.

MORNING SCENE

LIGHT through the latticed blind
Spans the dim intermediate space
With parallels of luminous dust
To gild a nuptial couch, where Goya's mind
Conceived those agonising hands, that hair
Scattered, and half a sunlit bosom bare,
And, imminently above them, a red face
Fixed in the imbecile earnestness of lust.

VERREY'S

HERE, every winter's night at eight,
Epicurus lies in state,
Two candles at his head and two
Candles at his feet. A few
Choice spirits watch beneath the vault
Of his dim chapel, where default
Of music fills the pregnant air
With subtler requiem and prayer
Than ever an organ wrought with notes
Spouted from its tubal throats.
Black Ethiopia's Holy Child,
The Cradled Bottle, breathes its mild
Meek spirit on the ravished nose,
The palate and the tongue of those
Who piously partake with me
Of this funereal agape.

FRASCATI'S

BUBBLE-BREASTED swells the dome
Of this my spiritual home,
From whose nave the chandelier,
Schaffhausen frozen, tumbles sheer.
We in the round balcony sit,
Lean o'er and look into the pit
Where feed the human bears beneath,
Champing with their gilded teeth.
What negroid holiday makes free
With such priapic revelry?
What songs? What gongs? What nameless rites?
What gods like wooden stalagmites?
What steam of blood or kidney pie?
What blasts of Bantu melody?
Ragtime. . . . But when the wearied Band
Swoons to a waltz, I take her hand.
And there we sit in blissful calm,
Quietly sweating palm to palm.

FATIGUE

THE mind has lost its Aristotelian elegance of shape: there is only a darkness where bubbles and inconsequent balloons float up to burst their luminous cheeks and vanish.

A woman with a basket on her head: a Chinese lantern quite askew: the vague bright bulging of chemists' window bottles; and then in my ears the distant noise of a great river of people. And phrases, phrases—

It is only a question of saddle-bags,
Stane Street and Gondibert,
Foals in Iceland (or was it Foals in aspic?).

As that small reddish devil turns away with an insolent jut of his hindquarters, I become aware that his curling pug's tail is an electric bell-push. But that does not disquiet me so much as the sight of all these polished statues twinkling with high lights and all of them grotesque and all of them colossal.

THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

THE machine is ready to start. The symbolic beasts grow resty, curveting where they stand at their places in the great blue circle of the year. The Showman's voice rings out. "Montez, mesdames et messieurs, montez. You, sir, must bestride the Ram. You will take the Scorpion. Yours, madame, is the Goat. As for you there, blackguard boy, you must be content with the Fishes. I have allotted you the Virgin, mademoiselle." . . . "Polisson!" "Pardon, pardon. Evidemment, c'est le Sagittaire qu'on demande. Ohé, les dards! The rest must take what comes. The Twins shall counterpoise one another in the Scales. So, so. Now away we go, away."

Ha, what keen air. Wind of the upper spaces. Snuff it deep, drink in the intoxication of our speed. Hark how the music swells and rings. . . . sphony music, music of every vagabond planet, every rooted star; sound of winds and seas and all the simmering millions of life. Moving, singing . . . so with a roar and a rush round we go and round, for ever whirling on a ceaseless Bank Holiday of drunken life and speed.

But I happened to look inwards among the machinery of our roundabout, and there I saw a slobbering cretin grinding at a wheel and sweating as he ground, and grinding eternally. And when I perceived that he was the author of all our speed and that the music was of his making, that everything depended on his grinding wheel, I thought I would like to get off. But we were going too fast.

BACK STREETS

BACK streets, gutters of stagnating darkness where men breathe something that is not so much air as a kind of rarefied slime. . . . I look back down the tunnelled darkness of a drain to where, at the mouth, a broader, windier water-way glitters with the gay speed and motion of sunlit life. But around all is dimly rotting; and the inhabitants are those squamous, phosphorescent creatures that darkness and decay beget. Little men, sheathed tightly in clothes of an exaggeratedly fashionable cheapness, hurry along the pavements, jaunty and at the same time furtive. There is a thin layer of slime over all of them. And then there are the eyes of the women, with their hard glitter that is only of the surface. They see acutely, but in a glassy, superficial way, taking in the objects round them no more than my western windows retain the imprint of the sunset that enriches them.

Back streets, exhalations of a difficulty puberty, I once lived on the fringes of them.

LAST THINGS

THERE have been visions, dark in the minds of men, death and corruption dancing across the secular abyss that separates eternity from time to where sits the ineluctable judge, waiting, waiting through the ages, and ponders all his predestinated decrees. There will be judgment, and each, in an agony of shame, reluctant yet compelled, will turn his own accuser. For

Tunc tua gesta noxia
Secreta quoque turpia
Videbunt mille millia
Virorum circumstantia.

There under the unwinking gaze of all the legions of just men made perfect, the poor prisoner will uncover each dirty secret of his heart, will act over again each shameful scene of his life. And those eyes of saints and angels will shine impassively down upon his beastliness, and to him, as he looks at their steady brilliance, they will seem a million of little blazing loopholes slotted in the walls of hell.

Hildebert, this was your vision as you brooded over death and judgment, hell and heaven, in your cloister, a thousand years ago. Do you not envy us our peace of mind who know not four ultimates, but only one? For whom the first of the Last Things is also the last—us, whom death annihilates with all our shame and all our folly, leaving no trace behind.

GOTHIC

SHARP spires pierce upwards, and the clouds are full of tumbling bells. Reckless, breakneck, head over heels down an airy spiral of stairs run the bells. "Upon Paul's steeple stands a tree."

Up again and then once more to the bottom, two steps at a time. "As full of apples as can be."

Up again and down again: centuries of climbing have not worn the crystal smoothness of the degrees.

Along the bellying clouds the little boys of London Town come running, running as best they may, seeing that at every step they sink ankle-deep through the woolly surface into the black heart of thunder beneath.

The apples on the trees are swaying in the wind, rocking to the clamour of bells. The leaves are of bright green copper, and rattle together with a scaly sound. At the roots of the tree sit four gargoyles playing a little serious game with dice. The hunch-backed ape has won from the manticore that crooked French crown with a hole in it which the manticore got from the friar with the strawberry nose; he had it in turn as an alms from the grave knight who lies with crossed legs down there, through the clouds and the dizzy mist of bell-ringing, where the great church is a hollow ship, full of bright candles, and stable in the midst of dark tempestuous seas.

EVENING PARTY

“SANS Espoir, sans Espoir . . .” sang the lady while the piano laboriously opened its box of old sardines in treacle. One detected ptomaine in the syrup.

Sans Espoir . . . I thought of the rhymes—soir, nonchaloir, reposoir—the dying falls of a symbolism grown sadly suicidal before the broad Flemish back of the singer, the dewlaps of her audience. Sans Espoir. The listeners wore the frozen rapture of those who gaze upon the uplifted Host.

Catching one another’s eye, we had a simultaneous vision of pews, of hyenas and hysteria.

Three candles were burning. They behaved like English aristocrats in a French novel—perfectly, impassively. I tried to imitate their milordliness.

One of the candles flickered, snickered. Was it a draught or was it laughter? Flickering, snickering—candles, you betrayed me. I had to laugh too.

BEAUTY

I

THESE is a sea somewhere—whether in the lampless crypts of the earth, or among sunlit islands, or that which is an unfathomable and terrifying question between the archipelagos of stars—there is a sea (and perhaps its tides have filled those green transparent pools that glint like eyes in a spring storm-cloud) which is for ever troubled and in travail—a bubbling and a heaving up of waters as though for the birth of a fountain.

The sick and the crippled lie along the brims in expectation of the miracle. And at last, at last . . .

A funnel of white water is twisted up and so stands, straight and still by the very speed of its motion.

It drinks the light; slowly it is infused with colour, rose and mother-of-pearl. Slowly it takes shape, a heavenly body.

O dazzling Anadyomene!

The flakes of foam break into white birds about her head, fall again in a soft avalanche of flowers. Perpetual miracle, beauty endlessly born.

II

STEAMERS, in all your travelling have you trailed the meshes of your long expiring white nets across this sea, or dipped in it your sliding rail, or balanced your shadow far far down upon its glass-green sand? Or, forgetting the preoccupations of commerce and the well-oiled predestination of your machinery, did you ever put in at the real Paphos?

III

I N the city of Troy, whither our Argonautical voyages had carried us, we found Helen and that lamentable Cressid who was to Chaucer the feminine paradox, untenably fantastic but so devastatingly actual, the crystal ideal—flawed; and to Shakespeare the inevitable trull, flayed to show her physiological machinery and the logical conclusion of every the most heartrendingly ingenuous gesture of maidenhood. (But, bless you! our gorge doesn't rise. We are cynically well up in the damning Theory of woman, which makes it all the more amusing to watch ourselves in the ecstatic practice of her. Unforeseen perversity.)

Fabulous Helen! At her firm breasts they used to mould delicate drinking cups which made the sourest vinegar richly poisonous.

The geometry of her body had utterly outwitted Euclid, and the Philosophers were baffled by curves of a subtlety infinitely more elusive and Eleusinian than the most oracular speculations of Parmenides. They did their best to make a coherent system out of the incompatible, but empirically established, facts of her. Time, for instance, was abolished within the circle of her arms. "It is eternity when her lips touch me," Paris had remarked. And yet this same Paris was manifestly and notoriously falling into a decline, had lost whatever sense or beauty he once possessed, together with his memory and all skill in the nine arts which are memory's daughters. How was it then, these perplexed philosophers wondered, that she could at one and the same moment give eternity like a goddess, while she was vampiring away with that divine thirsty mouth of hers the last dregs of a poor mortal life? They sought an insufficient refuge in Heraclitus' theory of opposites.

Meanwhile Troilus was always to be found at sunset, pacing up and down the walls by the western gate—quite mad. At dusk the Greek camp-fires would blossom along Xanthus banks—one after another, a myriad lights dancing in the dark.

As when the moon, refulgent lamp of night,
O'er heaven's pure azure spreads her something light.

He would repeat the simile to himself, but could never remember the correct epithets. Not that they mattered—any more than anything else.

IV

THESE are fine cities in the world—Manhattan, Ecbatana and Hecatompylus—but this city of Troy is the most fabulous of them all. Rome was seven hills of butcher's meat, Athens an abstraction of marble, in Alexandria the steam of kidney-puddings revolted the cœnobites, darkness and size render London inappreciable, Paris is full of sparrows, the snow lies gritty on Berlin, Moscow has no verisimilitude, all the East is peopled by masks and apes and larvæ. But this city of Troy is most of all real and fabulous with its charnel beauty.

“Is not Helen the end of our search—paradisal little World, symbol and epitome of the Great? Dawn sleeps in the transparent shadow of roses within her ear. The stainless candour of infinity—far-off peaks in summer and the Milky Way—has taken marvellous form in her. The Little World has its meteors, too, comets and shadowy clouds of hair, stars at whose glance men go planet-struck. Meteors—yes, and history it has. The past is still alive in the fragrance of her hair, and her young body breathes forth memories as old as the beginning of life—Eros first of gods. In her is the goal. I rest here with Helen.”

“Fool,” I said, “quote your Faustus. I go further.”

V

FURTHER—but a hundred Liliputian tethers prevent me, the white nerves which tie soul to skin. And the whole air is aching with epidermical magnetism.

Further, further. But Troy is the birthplace of my homesickness. Troy is more than a patriotism, for it is built of my very flesh; the remembrance of it is a fire that sticks and tears when I would pull it off.

But further. One last look at Troilus where he stands by the western gate, staring over the plain. Further. When I have learnt the truth, I will return and build a new palace with domes less ominously like breasts, and there I will invent a safer Helen and a less paradoxical Cressid, and my harem will be a library for enlightenment.

VI

HERE are pagodas of diminishing bells. The leopard sleeps in the depth of his rosy cavern, and when he breathes it is a smell of irresistible sweetness; in the bestiaries he is the symbol of Christ in His sepulchre.

This listening conch has collected all the rumours of pantheism; the dew in this veined cup is the sacrament of nature, while these pale thuribles worship in the dark with yellow lamps and incense.

Everywhere alchemical profusion—the golden mintage of glades and ripples, vigils of passion enriched with silver under the fingers of the moon; everywhere lavishness, colour, music; the smoothness of machinery, incredible and fantastic ingenuities. God has lost his half-hunter in the desert.

But we have not come to worship among these Gothic beeches, for all their pillars and the lace-work of their green windows. We are looking for other things than churches.

VII

TREES, the half-fossilised exuberances of a passionate life, petrified fountains of intemperance—with their abolition begins the realm of reason.

Geometry, lines and planes, smooth edges, the ordered horror of perspectives. In this country there are pavements bright and sleek as water. The walls are precipices to which giants have nailed a perpetual cataract of marble. The fringes of the sky are scalloped with a pattern of domes and minarets. At night, too, the down-struck lamps are pyramids of phantom green and the perfect circle they make upon the pavement is magical.

Look over the parapet of the Acropolis. The bridges go dizzily down on their swaying catenaries, the gull's flight chained fast. The walls drop clear into the valley, all the millions of basalt blocks calcined into a single red monolith, fluted with thirstily shining organ pipes, which seem for ever wet. There are no crevices for moss and toadflax, and even the claws of the yellow lichen slip on its polished flanks.

The valley is all paved and inlaid with rivers of steel. No trees, for they have been abolished.

“Glorious unnature,” cries the watcher at the parapet. His voice launches into the abyss, following the curve of the bridges. “Glorious unnature. We have triumphed.”

But his laughter as it descends is like a flight of broken steps.

VIII

LET us abandon ourselves to Time, which is beauty's essence. We live among the perpetual degenerations of apotheoses. Sunset dissolves into soft grey snow and the deep ocean of midnight, boundless as forgetfulness or some yet undiscovered Pacific, contracts into the green puddle of the dawn. The flowers burn to dust with their own brightness. On the banks of ancient rivers stand the pitiful stumps of huge towers and the ghosts of dead men straining to return into life. The woods are full of the smell of transience. Beauty, then, is that moment of descent when apotheosis tilts its wings downwards into the gulf. The ends of the curve lose themselves parabolically somewhere in infinity. Our sentimental eyes see only the middle section of this degeneration, knowing neither the upper nor the lower extremes, which some have thought to meet, godhead and annihilation.

Old Curiosity Shops! If I have said "Mortality is beauty," it was a weakness. The sense of time is a symptom of anæmia of the soul, through which flows angelic ichor. We must escape from the dust of the shop.

Cloistered darkness and sleep offer us their lotuses. Not to perceive where all is ugly, eaten into by the syphilis of time, heart-sickening—this is beauty; not to desire where death is the only consummation—wisdom.

Night is a measureless deep silence: daybreak brings back the fœtid gutters of the town. O supreme beauty of a night that knows no limitations—stars or the jagged edges of cock-crowing. Desperate, my mind has desired it: never my blood, whose pulse is a rhythm of the world.

At the other extreme, Beatrice lacks solidity, is as unresponsive to your kisses as mathematics. She too is an oubliette, not a way of life; an oubliette that, admittedly, shoots you upwards into light, not down to death; but it comes to the same thing in the end.

What, then, is the common measure? To take the world as it is, but metaphorically, informing the chaos of nature with a soul, qualifying transience with eternity.

When flowers are thoughts, and lonely poplars fountains of aspiring longing; when our actions are the poem of which all geographies and architectures and every science and all the unclassed individual odds and ends are the words, when even Helen's white voluptuousness matches some candour of the soul—then it will have

been found, the permanent and living loveliness.

It is not a far-fetched, dear-bought gem; no pomander to be smelt only when the crowd becomes too stinkingly insistent; it is not a birth of rare oboes or violins, not visible only from ten to six by state permission at a nominal charge, not a thing richly apart, but an ethic, a way of belief and of practice, of faith and works, mediæval in its implication with the very threads of life. I desire no Paphian cloister of pink monks. Rather a rosy Brotherhood of Common Life, eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage; taking and taken in adultery; reading, thinking, and when thinking fails, feeling immeasurably more subtly, sometimes perhaps creating.

Arduous search for one who is chained by his desires to dead carcasses, whose eyes are dimmed with tears by the slow heart-breaking twilights full of old family ghosts laid in lavender, whose despair cries out for opiate and anodyne, craving gross sleep or a place on the airy unsupported pinnacles which hang in the sterile upper chambers of ether.

Ventre à terre, head in air—your centaurs are your only poets. Their hoofs strike sparks from the flints and they see both very near and immensely far.

SOLES OCCIDERE ET REDIRE POSSUNT

FOREWORD

JOHN RIDLEY, the subject of this poem, was killed in February 1918. “If I should perish,” he wrote to me only five weeks before his death, “if I should perish—and one isn’t exactly a ‘good life’ at the moment—I wish you’d write something about me. It isn’t vanity (for I know you’ll do me, if anything, rather less than justice!), not vanity, I repeat; but that queer irrational desire one has for immortality of any kind, however short and precarious—for frankly, my dear, I doubt whether your verses will be so very much more perennial than brass. Still, they’ll be something. One can’t, of course, believe in any *au-delà* for one’s personal self; one would have first to believe in some kind of a friendly god. And as for being a spiritualist spook, one of those wretched beings who seem to spend their eternity in trying to communicate with the earth by a single telephone, where the number is always engaged, and the line chronically out of order—well, all I can say is, Heaven preserve me from such a future life. No, my only hope is you—and a damned poor guarantee for eternity. Don’t make of me a khaki image, I beg. I’d rather you simply said of me, as Erasmus did of his brother, ‘Strenuus compotor, nec scortator ignavus.’ I sincerely hope, of course, that you won’t have to write the thing at all—hope not, but have very little doubt you will. Good-bye.”

The following poem is a tentative and provisional attempt to comply with his request. Ridley was an adolescent, and suffered from that instability of mind “produced by the mental conflict forced upon man by his sensitiveness to herd suggestion on the one hand and to experience on the other” (I quote from Mr. Trotter’s memorable work on Herd Instinct), that characteristic instability which makes adolescence so feebly sceptical, so inefficient, so profoundly unhappy. I have fished up a single day from Ridley’s forgotten existence. It has a bedraggled air in the sunlight, this poor wisp of Lethan weed. Fortunately, however, it will soon be allowed to drop back into the water, where we shall all, in due course, join it. “The greater part must be content to be as though they had not been.”

I

BETWEEN the drawing of the blind
And being aware of yet another day
There came to him behind
Close, pregnant eyelids, like a flame of blue,
Intense, untroubled by the wind,
A Mediterranean bay,
Bearing a brazen beak and foamless oars
To where, marmoreally smooth and bright,
The steps soar up in one pure flight
From the sea's edge to the palace doors,
That have shut, have shut their valves of bronze—
And the windows too are lifeless eyes.

The galley grated on the stone;
He stepped out—and was alone:
No white-sailed hopes, no clouds, nor swans
To shatter the ocean's calm, to break the sky's.

Up the slow stairs:

Did he know it was a dream?

First one foot up, then the other foot,
Shuddering like a mandrake root
That hears the truffle-dog at work
And draws a breath to scream;
To moan, to scream.

The gates swing wide,
And it is coolly dark inside,
And corridors stretch out and out,
Joining the ceilings to their floors,
And parallels ring wedding bells
And through a hundred thousand doors
Perspective has abolished doubt.

But one of the doors was shut,
And behind it the subtlest lutanist
Was shaking a broken necklace of tinkling notes,
And somehow it was feminine music.
Strange exultant fear of desire, when hearts
Beat brokenly. He laid his hand on the latch—
And woke among his familiar books and pictures;

Real as his dream? He wondered. Ten to nine.
Thursday. Wasn't he lunching at his aunt's?
Distressing circumstance.
But then he was taking Jenny out to dine,
Which was some consolation. What a chin!
Civilized ten thousand years, and still
No better way than rasping a pale mask
With imminent suicide, steel or obsidian:
Repulsive task!
And the more odious for being quotidian.
If one should live till eighty-five . . .
And the dead, do they still shave? The horrible dead, are they alive?

But that lute, playing across his dream . . .
Quick drops breaking the sleep of the water-wheel,
Song and ebbing whisper of a summer stream,
Music's endless inconsequence that would reveal
To souls that listened for it, the all
Unseizable confidence, the mystic Rose,
Could it but find the magical fall
That droops, droops and dies into the perfect close . . .
And why so feminine? But one could feel
The unseen woman sitting there behind
The door, making her ceaseless slow appeal
To all that prowls and growls in the caves beneath
The libraries and parlours of the mind.
If only one were rational, if only
At least one had the illusion of being so . . .

Nine o'clock. Still in bed. Warm, but how lonely!

He wept to think of all those single beds,
Those desperate night-long solitudes,
Those mental Salons full of nudes.
Shelley was great when he was twenty-four.
Eight thousand nights alone—minus, perhaps,
Six, or no! seven, certainly not more.

Five little bits of heaven

(Tum-de-rum, de-rum, de-rum),

Five little bits of Heaven and one that was a lapse,
High-priced disgust: it stopped him suddenly
In the midst of laughter and talk with a tingling down the
(Like infants' impoliteness, a terrible infant's brightness),
And he would shut his eyes so as not to see
His own hot blushes calling him a swine.
Atrocious memory! For memory should be
Of things secure and dead, being past,
Not living and disquieting. At last
He threw the nightmare of his blankets off.

Cloudy ammonia, camels in your bath:
The earth hath bubbles as the water hath:
He was not of them, too, too solidly
Always himself. What foam of kissing lips,
Pouting, parting with the ghost of the seven sips
One smacks for hiccoughs!

Pitiable to be

Quite so deplorably naked when one strips.

There was his scar, a panel of old rose
Slashed in the elegant buff of his trunk hose;
Adonis punctured by his amorous boar,
Permanent souvenir of the Great War.
One of God's jokes, typically good,
That wound of his. How perfect that he should
Have suffered it for—what?

II

O H, the dear front page of the *Times*!

Chronicle of essential history:

Marriage, birth, and the sly mysteriousness

Of lovers' greetings, of lovers' meetings,

And dirty death, impartially paid

To courage and the old decayed.

But nobody had been born to-day,

Nobody married that he knew,

Nobody died and nobody even killed;

He felt a little aggrieved—

Nobody even killed.

But, to make up: "Tuesday, Colchester train:

Wanted Brown Eyes' address, with a view to meeting again."

Dear Brown Eyes, it had been nice of her

To talk so friendly to a lonely traveller!

Why is it nobody ever talks to me?

And now, here was a letter from Helen.

Better to open it rather than thus

Dwell in a long muse and maze

Over the scrawled address and the postmark,

Staring stupidly.

Love—was there no escape?

Was it always there, always there?

The same huge and dominant shape,

Like Windsor Castle leaning over the plain;

And the letter a vista cut through the musing forest,

At the end the old Round Tower,

Singing its refrain:

Here we are, here we are, here we are again!

The life so short, so vast love's science and art,

So many conditions of felicity.

“Darling, will you become a part
Of my poor physiology?
And, my beloved, may I have
The latchkey of your history?
And while this corpse is what it is
Dear, we must share geographies.”

So many conditions of felicity.

And now time was a widening gulf and space,
A fixed between, and fate still kept them apart.
Her voice quite gone; distance had blurred her face.
The life so short, so vast love's science and art.

So many conditions—and yet, once,

Four whole days,

Four short days of perishing time,

They had fulfilled them all.

But that was long ago, ah! long ago,

Like the last horse bus, or the Christmas pantomime,

Or the Bells, oh, the Bells, of Edgar Allan Poe.

III

“HELEN, your letter, proving, I suppose,
That you exist somewhere in space, who knows?
Somewhere in time, perhaps, arrives this morning,
Reminding me with a note of Lutheran warning
That faith’s the test, not works. Works!—any fool
Can do them if he tries to; but what school
Can teach one to credit the ridiculous,
The palpably non-existent? So with us,
Votaries of the copulative cult,
In this affair of love, *quicumque vult*,
Whoever would be saved, must love without
Adjunct of sense or reason, must not doubt
Although the deity be far removed,
Remote, invisible; who is not loved
Best by voluptuous works, but by the faith
That lives in absence and the body’s death.
I have no faith, and even in love remain
Agnostic. Are you here? The fact is plain,
Constated by the heavenly vision of you,
Maybe by the mouth’s warm touch; and that I love you,
I then most surely know, most painfully.
But now you’ve robbed the temple, leaving me
A poor invisibility to adore,
Now that, alas, you’re vanished, gone . . . no more;
You take my drift. I only ask your leave
To be a little unfaithful—not to you,
My dear, to whom I was and will be true,
But to your absence. Hence no cause to grieve;
For absence may be cheated of a kiss—
Lightly and laughing—with no prejudice
To the so longed-for presence, which some day

Will crown the presence of

Le Vostre J.

(As dear unhappy Troilus would say).”

IV

O H, the maggots, the maggots in his brains!
Words, words and words.

A birth of rhymes and the strangest,
The most unlikely superfetations—
New deep thoughts begot by a jingle upon a pun,
New worlds glimpsed through the window of a word
That has ceased, somehow, to be opaque.
All the muses buzzing in his head.
Autobiography crystallised under his pen, thus:

“When I was young enough not to know youth,
I was a Faun whose loves were Byzantine
Among stiff trees. Before me naked Truth
Creaked on her intellectual legs, divine
In being inhuman, and was never caught
By all my speed; for she could outrun thought.

Now I am old enough to know I am young,
I chase more plastic beauties, but inspire
Life in their clay, purity in their dung
With the creative breath of my desire.
And utter truth is now made manifest
When on a certain sleeping face and breast

The moonlight dreams and silver chords are strung,
And a god’s hand touches the aching lyre.”
He read it through: a pretty, clinquant thing,
Like bright spontaneous bird-song in the spring,
Instinct with instinct, full of dewy freshness.
Yes, he had genius, if he chose to use it;
If he chose to—but it was too much trouble,
And he preferred reading. He lit his pipe,

Opened his book, plunged in and soon was drowned
In pleasant seas . . . to rise again and find
One o'clock struck and his unshaven face
Still like a record in a musical box,
And Auntie Loo miles off in Bloomsbury.

V

I.

THE Open Sesame of "Master John,"
And then the broad silk bosom of Aunt Loo.
"Dear John, this is a pleasure. How are you?"
"Well, thanks. Where's Uncle Will?" "Your uncle's gone
To Bath for his lumbago. He gets on
As well as anyone can hope to do
At his age—for you know he's seventy-two;
But still, he does his bit. He sits upon

The local Tribunal at home, and takes
Parties of wounded soldiers out in brakes
To see the country. And three times a week
He still goes up to business in the City;
And then, sometimes, at night he has to speak
In Village Halls for the War Aims Committee."

II.

"Well, have you any news about the war?
What do they say in France?" "I daren't repeat
The things they say." "You see we've got some meat
For you, dear John. Really, I think before
To-day I've had no lamb this year. We score
By getting decent vegetables to eat,
Sent up from home. This is a good receipt:
The touch of garlic makes it. Have some more.

Poor Tom was wounded on the twenty-third;
Did you know that? And just to-day I heard

News from your uncle that his nephew James
Is dead—Matilda’s eldest boy.” “I knew
One of those boys, but I’m so bad at names.
Mine had red hair.” “Oh, now, that must be Hugh.”

III.

“Colonel McGillicuddy came to dine
Quietly here, a night or two ago.
He’s on the Staff and very much in the know
About all sorts of things. His special line
Is Tanks. He says we’ve got a new design
Of super-Tank, with big guns, that can go
(I think he said) at thirty miles or so
An hour. That ought to make them whine

For peace. He also said, if I remember,
That the war couldn’t last beyond September,
Because the Germans’ trucks were wearing out
And couldn’t be replaced. I only hope
It’s true. You know your uncle has no doubt
That the whole thing was plotted by the Pope . . .”

“. . . Good-bye, dear John. We *have* had a nice talk.
You must soon come again. Good-bye, good-bye. . . .”

He tottered forth, full of the melancholy
That comes of surfeit, and began to walk
Slowly towards Oxford Street. The brazen sky
Burned overhead. Beneath his feet the stones
Were a grey incandescence, and his bones
Melted within him, and his bowels yearned.

VI

THE crowd, the crowd—oh, he could almost cry
To see those myriad faces hurrying by,
And each a strong tower rooted in the past
On dark unknown foundations, each made fast
With locks nobody knew the secret of,
No key could open: save that perhaps love
Might push the bars half back and just peep in—
And see strange sights, it may be. But for him
They were locked donjons, every window bright
With beckoning mystery; and then, Good Night!
The lamp was out, they were passed, they were gone
For ever . . . ever. And one might have been
The hero or the friend long sought, and one
Was the loveliest face his eyes had ever seen,
(Vanished as soon) and he went lonely on.

Then in a sudden fearful vision he saw
The whole world spread before him—a vast sphere
Of seething atoms moving to one law:
“Be individual. Approach, draw near,
Yes, even touch: but never join, never be
Other than your own selves eternally.”
And there are tangents, tangents of thought that aim
Out through the gaps between the patterned stars
At some fantastic dream without a name
That like the moon shining through prison bars,
Visits the mind with madness. So they fly,
Those soaring tangents, till the first jet tires,
Failing, faltering half-way up the sky,
And breaks—poor slender fountain that aspires
Against the whole strength of the heavy earth

Within whose womb, darkly, it took birth.

Oh, how remote he walked along the street,
Jostling with other lumps of human meat!

He was so tired. The café doors invite.
Caverned within them, still lingers the night
In shadowy coolness, soothing the seared sight.
He sat there smoking, soulless and wholly crass,
Sunk to the eyes in the warm sodden morass
Of his own guts, wearily, wearily
Ruminating visions of mortality—
Memento Moris from the pink alcove,
Nightmare oppressiveness of profane love.
Cesspool within, and without him he could see
Nothing but mounds of flesh and harlotry.
Like a half-pricked bubble pendulous in space,
The buttered leatheriness of a Jew's face
Looms through cigar-smoke; red and ghastly white,
Death's-head women fascinate the sight.
It was the nightmare of a corpse. Dead, dead . . .
Oh, to wake up, to live again! he fled
From that foul place and from himself.

VII

TWIN domes of the Alhambra,
Veiled tenderness of the sky above the Square:
He sat him down in the gardens, under the trees,
And in the dust, with the point of his umbrella,
Drew pictures of the crosses we have to bear.

The poor may starve, the sick have horrible pains—
But there are pale eyes even in the London planes.

Men may make war and money, mischief and love—
But about us are colours and the sky above.

Yes, here, where the golden domes ring clear,
And the planes patiently, hopefully renew
Their green refrain from year to year
To the dim spring burden of London's husky blue,
Here he could see the folly of it. How?
Confine a boundless possible within
The prison of an ineluctable Now?
Go slave to pain, woo forth original sin
Out of her lair—and all by a foolish Act?
Madness! But now, Wordsworth of Leicester Square,
He'd learnt his lesson, learnt by the mere fact
Of the place existing, so finely unaware
Of syphilis and the restless in and out
Of public lavatories, and evening shout
Of winners and disasters, races and war.

Troubles come thick enough. Why call for more
By suiting action to the divine Word?
His spleen was chronic, true; but he preferred
Its subtle agony to the brute force

That tugged the barbs of deep-anchored remorse.
The sunlight wrapped folds of soft golden silk
About him, and the air was warm as milk
Against his skin. Long sitting still had made
Cramped soreness such a pleasure, he was afraid
To shift his tortured limbs, lest he should mar
Life's evenness. London's noise from afar
Smoothed out its harshness to soothe his thoughts asleep,
Sound that made silence much more calm and deep.
The domes of gold, the leaves, emerald bright,
Were intense, piercing arrows of delight.
He did not think; thought was a shallow thing
To his deep sense of life, of mere being.
He looked at his hand, lying there on his knee,
The blue veins branching, the tendons cunningly
Dancing like jacks in a piano if he shook
A knot-boned finger. Only to look and look,
Till he knew it, each hair and every pore—
It seemed enough: what need of anything more?
Thought, a blind alley; action, which at best
Is cudgelling water that goes back to rest
As soon as you give over your violences.
No, wisdom culls the flowers of the five senses,
Savouring the secret sweetness they afford:
Instead of which he had a Medical Board
Next week, and they would pass him fit. Good Lord!

Well, let all pass.

But one must outdo fate,
Wear clothes more modish than the fashion, run
Faster than time, not merely stand and wait;
Do in a flash what cannot be undone
Through ten eternities. Predestinate?
So would God be—that is, if there were one:
General epidemic which spoils nobody's fun.
Action, action! Quickly rise and do
The most irreparable things; beget,

In one brief consummation of the will,
Remorse, reaction, wretchedness, regret.
Action! This was no time for sitting still.

He crushed his hat down over his eyes
And walked with a stamp to symbolise
Action, action—left, right, left;
Planting his feet with a slabby beat,
Taking strange Procrustean steps,
Lengthened, shortened to avoid
Touching the lines between the stones—
A thing which makes God so annoyed.

Action, action! First of all
He spent three pounds he couldn't afford
In buying a book he didn't want,
For the mere sake of having been
Irrevocably extravagant.
Then feeling very bold, he pressed
The bell of a chance house; it might
Disclose some New Arabian Night
Behind its grimy husk, who knows?
The seconds passed; all was dead.
Arrogantly he rang once more.
His heart thumped on sheer silence; but at last
There was a shuffling; something behind the door
Became approaching panic, and he fled.

VIII

“MISERY,” he said, “to have no chin,
Nothing but brains and sex and taste:
Only ommissively to sin,
Weakly kind and cowardly chaste.

But when the war is over,
I will go to the East and plant
Tea and rubber, and make much money.
I will eat the black sweat of niggers
And flagellate them with whips.
I shall be enormously myself,
Incarnate Chin.”

The anguish of thinking ill of oneself
(St. Paul’s religion, poignant beyond words)
Turns ere you know it to faint minor thirds
Before the ritualistic pomps of the world—
The glass-grey silver of rivers, silken skies unfurled,
Urim and Thummim of dawn and sun-setting,
And the lawn sleeves of a great episcopal cloud,
Matins of song and vesperal murmuring,
Incense of night-long flowers and earth new-ploughed;
All beauties of sweetness and all that shine or sing.
Conscience is smoothed by beauty’s subtle fingers
Into voluptuousness, where nothing lingers
Of bitterness, saving a sorrow that is
Rather a languor than a sense of pain.

So, from the tunnel of St. Martin’s Lane
Sailing into the open Square, he felt
His self-reproach, his good resolutions melt
Into an ecstasy, gentle as balm,

Before the spire, etched black and white on the calm
Of a pale windless sky, St. Martin's spire,
And the shadows sleeping beneath the portico
And the crowd hurrying, ceaselessly, to and fro.
Alas, the bleached and slender tower that aches
Upon the gauzy sky, where blueness breaks
Into sweet hoarseness, veiled with love and tender
As the dove's voice alone in the woods: too slender,
Too finely pencilled—black and bleaching white
On smoky mist, too clear in the keen light
Of utmost summer: and oh! the lives that pass
In one swift stream of colour, too, too bright,
Too swift—and all the lives unknown,

Alone.

Alas. . . .

A truce to summer and beauty and the pain
Of being too consciously alive among
The things that pass and the things that remain,
(Oh, equal sadness!) the pain of being young.

Truce, truce. . . . Once again he fled;—
All his life, it seemed, was a flight;—
Fled and found
Sanctuary in a cinema house.
Huge faces loomed and burst,
Like bubbles in a black wind.
He shut his eyes on them and in a little
Slept; slept, while the pictures
Passed and returned, passed once more and returned.
And he, like God in the midst of the wheeling world,
Slept on; and when he woke it was eight o'clock.
Jenny? Revenge is sweet; he will have kept
Dear Jenny waiting.

IX

ALL straight poplars stand in a meadow;
The wind and sun caress them, dappling
The deep green grass with shine and shadow;
And a little apart one slender sapling
Sways in the wind and almost seems
Conscious of its own supple grace,
And shakes its twin-hued leaves and gleams
With silvery laughter, filling the place
Where it stands with a sudden flash of human
Beauty and grace; till from her tree
Steps forth the dryad, now turned woman,
And sways to meet him. It is she.

Food and drink, food and drink:
Olives as firm and sleek and green
As the breasts of a sea god's daughter,
Swimming far down where the corpses sink
Through the dense shadowy water.
Silver and black on flank and back,
The glossy sardine mourns its head.
The red anchovy and the beetroot red,
With carrots, build a gorgeous stair—
Bronze, apoplexy and Venetian hair—
And the green pallor of the salad round
Sharpens their clarion sound.

De lady take hors d'œuvres? and de gentleman too?

Per due! Due! Echo answers: Du' . . .

“So, Jenny, you've found another Perfect Man.”

“Perfect, perhaps; but not so sweet as you,

Not such a baby.” “Me? A baby. Why,

I am older than the rocks on which I sit. . . .”

Oh, how delightful, talking about oneself!

Golden wine, pale as a Tuscan primitive,
And wine's strange taste, half loathsome, half delicious:
Come, my Lesbia, let us love and live.
What though the mind still think that one thing's vicious
More than another? If the thought can give
This wine's rich savour to our laughing kiss,
Let us preserve the Christian prejudice.
Oh, there are shynesses and silences,
Shynesses and silences!
But luckily God also gave us wine.

“Jenny, adorable—” (what draws the line
At the mere word “love”?) “has anyone the right
To look so lovely as you look to-night,
To have such eyes, such a helmet of bright hair?”
But candidly, he wondered, do I care?

He heard her voice and himself spoke,
But like faint light through a cloud of smoke,
There came, unreal and far away,
Mere sounds utterly empty—like the drone
Of prayers, *crambe repetita*, prayers and praise,
Long, long ago, in the old School Chapel days;
Senseless, but so intrusive on one's own
Interior life one couldn't even think . . .

O sweet, rare, perilous, retchy drink!
Another glass . . .

X

HOW cool is the moonless summer night, how sweet
After the noise and the dizzy choking heat!
The bloodless lamps look down upon their own
Green image in the polished roadway thrown,
And onward and out of sight the great road runs,
Smooth and dark as a river of calm bronze.

Freedom and widening space: his life expands,
Ready, it seems, to burst the iron bands
Of self, to fuse with other lives and be
Not one but the world, no longer "I" but "She."

See, like the dolorous memory
Of happy times in misery,
An aged hansom fills the street
With the superannuated beat
Of hollow hoofs and bells that chime
Out of another quieter time.

"Good-night," the last kiss, "and God bless you, my dear."
So, she was gone, she who had been so near,
So breathing-warm—soft mouth and hands and hair—
A moment since. Had she been really there,
Close at his side, and had he kissed her? It seemed
Unlikely as something somebody else had dreamed
And talked about at breakfast, being a bore:
Improbable, unsubstantial, dim, yet more
Real than the rest of life; real as the blaze
Of a sudden-seen picture, as the lightning phrase
With which the poet-gods strangely create
Their brief bright world beyond the reach of fate.
Yet he could wonder now if he had kissed

Her or his own loved thoughts. Did she exist
Now she was history and safely stowed
Down in the past? There (with a conscious smile),
There let her rest eternal. And meanwhile,
Lamp-fringed towards meeting parallels, the road
Stretched out and out, and the old weary horse,
Come from the past, went jogging his homeward course
Uphill through time to some demoded place,
On ghostly hoofs back to the safe Has-Been:—
But fact returns insistent as remorse;
Uphill towards Hampstead, back to the year of grace
Nineteen hundred and seventeen.

BETWEEN the drawing of the blind
And being aware of yet another day . . .

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.
Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.
A cover was created for this eBook.

[The end of *Leda* by Aldous Leonard Huxley]