

THE
DARK HILLS UNDER

BY SHIRLEY BARKER

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EDITED BY STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT



THE DARK HILLS UNDER

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THE
DARK HILLS UNDER

BY SHIRLEY BARKER

WITH A FOREWORD BY

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT



NEW HAVEN
YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
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FOR MY FATHER, WILL TILDEN BARKER

Foreword.

IT is an unusual thing to find in a first book by a young poet so much unity of mood and subject as is evident in *The Dark Hills Under*. Everybody begins by echoing and adapting—there are echoes in this book and the reader will note them. But, behind the echoes, there are other things. There is a decided narrative gift and a shrewd sense of characterization. There is fluency, variety of technique, and in such poems as “Question” and “Portrait,” a knowing when to stop which is admirable and a gift of the gods—most young poets, even when gifted, are apt to go past their point for the sake of a pleasant line or an interesting rhyme. And there is New England earth.

Except for “The Story of Liza,” and, perhaps, one or two of the lyrics, the New England strain runs throughout the book, persistent, stubborn and hardy as Queen Anne’s lace. I have no bones to pick with “The Story of Liza”—it is an excellent undergraduate poem and contains two remarkable imitations, one of Drayton and one of William Browne. But when Miss Barker says:

A thousand maple-shaded streets there are,
Veining New England like a withered leaf;
A thousand picket fences, gates ajar;
A thousand strips of lawn, close-cut and brief;
A thousand houses, small and smug, and white,
With bleakly shining panes where women sit,
Turned from the heresy of April night
To a bright hearth, and quietly hating it,

or again, in speaking of a hill-scene,

There was not loveliness nor fortune there
In that gnarled countryside, austere and plain;
For there was always autumn in the air,

she is not being a talented undergraduate, she is speaking with the authenticity of birthright. There is nothing forced and no attempt to beat the big drum. But the note is unmistakable, and native.

Also and throughout and to be noted, it is New England seen through a woman’s eyes, not a man’s. We haven’t had much of that—though we have had one great poet—perhaps the greatest of the New England line—who saw its hillsides so. But her eyes were a mystic’s as well. Miss

Barker's, as yet, are not. But what she sees, she sees clearly and sometimes with astonishing flashes of intuition as in

My mother sits and babbles by the fire
Of youthful passion and a man long dead,
And here my daughter on the other hand
Sits reading of the wicked Argive queen
Who ran away to Troy and caused a war
In which brave men were killed. *She's glad to find
At last a woman quite as bad as she.
I think that it's a pity girls don't know
To be a Helen isn't hard at all:
They ought to play Griselda for a while—*

The italics are mine, but the thought in the italics is rather more than youthful. It is entirely in the character of the speaker, but not exactly what one expects from an author still in college.

These are poems upon not unusual subjects—love, a countryside, the loss of love, wind and weather, human beings, names on old gravestones, poets? Yes. They are written in the older forms of verse, not the free forms? Yes. There is a sonnet-sequence? Yes. You will notice that the sonnet-sequence does what few sonnet-sequences do—it mounts steadily toward the end. You will notice that when Miss Barker says “Memorial to strength and lack of wit,” she says it so unobtrusively that you have read the line and are going on to the next one before you feel the sting. You will notice the Twenty-First and Twenty-Second sonnets of the sequence, the last one in the sequence, and the end of the poem called “Girl in the Mirror.” I am afraid these things are intentional. I fear that, in the older forms, which, as you will remark, have been used by others, Miss Barker knows how to construct. And I very much fear that she knows how to express an emotion that she has not yet experienced, such as age.

Nothing very much can be done about a person who can do these things and is determined upon doing them. Sometimes they even attain positions of relative importance and give occupation to graduate-students after they are dead. I do not suggest that such a future is necessarily Miss Barker's. But I do suggest that her poetry is worth reading in itself, not merely as an interesting sample of contemporary undergraduate verse. She is, at present, a Junior at the University of New Hampshire and this is her first appearance in print. But I doubt very much indeed if it will be her last.

August 15, 1933.

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Old Voices.

N O Puritans can die. Their manner still
Lives on, and must, till all their kind are clay.
Restraining hands reach out from Burial Hill
To quiet the sunset, and to draw a gray
And pallid shadow down on all their land;
To tear the scarlet leaves away too soon;
To wall the gardens where their daughters stand,
And fling cold fog between them and the moon.

When I am gay because some lad has smiled,
Beneath my quickened pulse they stir and move.
A Great-aunt Prudence whispers, "Caution, Child."
A Grand-dame Martha asks, "Would God approve?"
But louder speaks some shameless Kate or Flo—
"Rejoice, but do not let the Elders know."

Question.

YOUR father's father built the wall just here
Where the sharp fragrant pine-spills meet the grass—
A thrifty man who kept his boundaries clear
And well defined, nor let one acre pass

Unfenced with stone. And so, since you are one
Of his same blood and breed—tall, lean, and brown—
It is your lot to labor in the sun,
Replacing boulders that have toppled down.

Oh will these stubborn stones outlast us all,
Memorial to strength and lack of wit?
And will your children's children mend this wall?
And do I want my children mending it?

Girl in the Mirror.

O GIRL in the Mirror,
Two beings are we,
But when I draw nearer
You melt into me.

You laugh with my laughter,
Your eyes glint and shine,
Your hands follow after
The motions of mine.

O Girl in the Mirror,
Come down from the wall—
Be stronger and clearer,
Or nothing at all.

“Come Vere, put on your coat, it’s time to go.
Your father won’t wait long. He’s walking far
Across the wood-lot in this heavy snow,
You won’t get back before the evening star.
Don’t stand before that glass and watch your face,
Like some great glutton set before a feast.
Such vainness in a child is out of place.
A body’d think you were sixteen at least!”

A banging door; high voices growing faint;
The crunch of snow; a whistle at her side;
Quiet woods that loomed in black and green; the plaint
Of noisy squirrels; then the low divide
Of barbed-wire fence. “Be careful, Vere! Now see!
You’ve left a lock of hair around that hook!
Why, you’ll be balder than a cypress tree,
With all the wires this side of Willowbrook.”

“Cypress? And what’s a cypress? Like a pine
Or like an elm?” He laughed, “Like neither while

They live, and both when they are dead. They shine
Like gray-white ghosts of trees for mile on mile
Of southern swamp. Some day you'll know them, Vere.
You must know many lands. Your eyes must see
The town where Caesar learned to bear a spear,
The barren reaches of the wine-dark sea,

And that old harbor on the Breton shore
Whence Norman William crossed the narrow main,
Bearing the bowmen down toward Agincourt,
The Devon captains to the doom of Spain—
And other days and customs." Vere was still,
Trudging behind him on the frozen crust,
Struck with a power that could stir at will
Fire from the embers, roses from the dust.

"Not in these hills whose rings draw closer in
As you grow older. I have seen the flame
Of fifty autumns burn these woodlands thin,
And I would never have you count the same.
There is the well that I could never taste,
The mountain-top that I could never scale.
Now you in turn must travel through the waste,
But I would have you tell a fairer tale

When you are old. There is so much to see
This side of death. Take up the burning quest,
Before they lay you straight in piety,
Turned from the ancient glamor of the west."
And he was still. "I'll go," thought Vere, "he'll see!"
And clenched her little hands, blue with the cold
Of sharpening twilight. "He'll be proud of me,
And all the things I'll know when I am old."

Girl in the Mirror, will you betray
Word to a dead man, given long?
Set your feet in a smoother way?
Shape your lips in a quieter song?

Tear the veil from your shining hair!
Run where the wind can blow it free!
Never again! You do not dare!
You are bound, and will always be.

Never to gaze on a fairy linn,
Cornish castles or Grecian plinths—
You are the slave of a stubborn chin,
And two eyes bluer than hyacinths.

“And will you never finish dressing, Vere?
Come put away those peacock airs of yours.
You’ll have no time for them next week, I fear,
What with the cooking meals and sweeping floors.
And Tom won’t stand for trifling. There, hold still!
You look real nice. Put up your head and smile.
Tom’ll be mighty happy, that he will,
To see your frown come marching up the aisle!”

Her mother bustled out. A rainy wind
Heavy with sodden petals smote the pane.
Farewell to Carcassonne, Cathay and Ind,
Good-bye to Avon and to Aquitaine.
She saw the gray road stretch its April mud
A mile between her old home and her new,
And felt the conflict of the wandering blood
With the set heart whose hammer-strokes ring true

And always in one spot. I am a slave,
She thought—but not to him! He could not bind
Me here against my will. I could be brave;
Withstand the wish of kin, the call of kind.
It is myself and my own love that holds
The deeper faith that life be found in him,
Rather than in old lands whose glamor molds;
Whose tale is writ in letters long grown dim.

Ulysses well might tarry on fierce shores,

And wait unfriendly tides to rise and ebb,
But women meet the dark with bolted doors,
Penelope's it was to spin the web.
It is an ancient jest that tries the young—
This trouble for the seeking of far realms;
This hatred of the songs their fathers sung;
This urge to drop the plows and seize the helms.

These hills can shut out evil like a wall,
And make our valley one familiar room.
We know the furrows where the apples fall;
We know which tree will yield the thickest bloom.
And here I shall abide. Not that I plead
My frailty or the failing of my youth!
No search for truth and beauty do they need,
When they have found the beauty and the truth.

Let fifty summers yellow in these fields,
Let fifty winters' wind these branches break—
I have a harvest meadows cannot yield,
A tower earthly tempests cannot shake.
The guests were gathered and the candles lit,
They waited her. She heard the clamor cease,
And smoothed her gown and went downstairs to fit
The unquiet heart into the mold of peace.

Tell me, Girl in the Mirror, how did you come by these—
This thin gray lusterless hair, these wrinkles under the eyes?
You were young and you ran like a wind that runs through the trees,
You were strong and you toiled, and looked no more at the skies.

Age is a snow, my girl, that falls unaware in the night;
Age is a frost that binds the busy muscle and bone;
Never an April thaw can loose it with showers bright,
Or melt the armor of death, that circles the flesh with stone.

You gave your life to prove what your father told you was true,
And made it your task to turn a furrow already plowed;

And cry as your fathers cried, "To you, my child, to you
Leave I the burning quest of the spirit troubled and proud."

"Granny"—the childish treble shattered dream—

"Why do you stare into the mirror so,
Like poor Narcissus peering in the stream
To watch his own reflection come and go?
You told me all about him. Mother says
That he's a pagan, and I'm not to mind
The things you say. She thinks your better days
Are gone, and you're a little queer and blind."

How strange, thought Vere, and moved her thin old hands
Like russet leaves that falter on the air,
These folk who fear a heart that understands
Of loveliness, and see that it must bear
The weight of ugliness to make it march
In time with their slow paces; hide the spring
It seeks to drink from. Rather would they parch
Than drain a cup that boasts no hallowing.

Beyond the pane comes autumn twilight down;
Across the stubble field the men plod home;
The woods are brave in purple and in brown,
But quiet and empty of the elf and gnome
My childhood knew there. Can a silver birch
Be more idolatrous and not so fair
As whitened vestments in a somber church,
Or spirits conjured at the hest of prayer?

This race is of me, yet it is not mine.
They have my eyes—or eyes of hyacinth;
My father's way of walking, or the whine
My grand-dame spoke with. In the labyrinth
That I have trod, they tread. They carry on
The flesh of me, the leaping blood, the bone.
These acres shall be theirs when I have gone,
Such hoarded trinkets as they care to own.

But they can hear no whispers in the dawn,
Of fortresses by armored knights attacked.
They hold no longings from their lives withdrawn,
But guide their pilgrimage from fact to fact.
I feel oblivion in the shadows lurk.
I shall be lost and nameless. I can see
My eldest son take up his father's work;
My youngest daughter name her child for me—

And hold a heritage I cannot give
For lack of heirs. Men say there is a crown.
I cannot make the conquest while I live,
Nor can I, dying, fling the challenge down.
The dark drew in. Her kindred laughed and talked
Around the fireside in their idle way,
And Vere, like to a weary sculptor, walked
Unsatisfied among her shapes of clay.

Ballad of Betsy Staire.

UNDER the crossroads my body lies,
A handful of dust in a mildewed chain;
But I am the sunlight that mellows the skies,
The frozen fog on the window pane.

I am the cry of the crag-cut surf,
The wind in the willows along the coast,
The stunted bush in the salt-soaked turf,
And the shadow cast by a Salem ghost—

A ghost that dreams of a Sussex down,
Of timbered taverns and taproom cheer,
When a swaggering Stuart wore his crown
With the rakish tilt of the cavalier;

A ghost that remembers its one-time kin,
A cropped-haired sire and his godly dame
Who sailed away from the land of sin
To save their souls from the curse of flame;

A ghost that longs for its gown of flesh
That maids found hateful and men found fair,
And the glowing locks in a tangled mesh
That bound the forehead of Betsy Staire.

For I was Betsy a long time since,
Wooed in New England as in the old,
But my true love died for the Stuart Prince,
And withered my heart to a pinch of mold.

So I lived in Salem where shadows crawl
On sterile meadows and stony sea,
And a wisp of his yellow hair was all
Of love and Sussex I brought with me.

In Salem church I bowed in prayer,

I gossiped there with Salem folk;
I lived in a house with a musty air,
And walked the streets in a homespun cloak.

And I cast off youth as a tattered glove,
When age was a garment more fit to wear;
I had lived my life, I had loved my love,
And at last grown weary of Betsy Staire.

But a madness settled on Salem town;
They slew old women on dark complaints.
I watched them cutting the witches down,
Where some died devils and some died saints—

Till they heard me murmur a love word low
To the tress of hair that I treasured still.
They swore I was working a spell of woe,
And they hanged my body on Gallows Hill.

I hung by the neck until I was dead
In the purple hush of a sultry day,
When the stars came out over Marblehead
And a dirge blew up from the singing spray.

I am that dirge of the singing spray
On the quick, wet lips of the thirsty sand,
The sinking ship in the stormy bay,
And the stubborn ledges of flinty land.

Under the crossroads my body lies,
But I go free as a sailor's boast;
For I am the wind of the Salem skies
And the shadow cast by a Salem ghost.

Portrait.

“WHICH grandmother is that?” we used to say,
Standing a little back and looking up
At the calm face within the walnut frame.
She seemed no kin to anything about:
To other pictures on the parlor walls,
Or thin-lipped boys already eyeing death,
And frail young girls whose hair was never gray;
Nor to the riot of life that ran below—
Our pattering feet, the crackling of the fire,
The gossip of the neighbors come to call.

“Which grandmother is that?” we used to ask,
Nor caring much, half-curious to know
Whose was the dark looped hair, the curving mouth,
High cheek-boned face and unrevealing eyes;
Whose hands laid straight the lace about that throat.
So little that was hers came down the years;
She kept her fragile immortality
Only in those sparse words which Father said:
“My father’s mother, born Maria Hayes.
Taught school at Merrill’s Corner for awhile—
Quick wits, they say—I don’t remember her.”

Why is it, when these trees are starred with buds
Of gold and green and red on wet black bark;
When I can lift my face to this soft rain,
Be glad of life, and youth, and April night—
That all my thoughts go back through space and time
To a dead woman’s picture on a wall?
All these fair things were hers, as they are mine,
Things that she knew and loved and laughed about,
And then without a protest laid aside—
And who am I to think of keeping more?
Rise where I can, by fame, or fight, or love,

The time will come when I shall only be
A calm gray face behind a walnut frame,
To which a child will lift appraising eyes
And lightly ask, "Which grandmother is that?"

Across the Green Maytime.

A CROSS the green maytime
Twixt hedges of white,
Down blue miles of daytime
And black miles of night,

Through dull lanes of autumn
Where storm makes the skies
A river's dark bottom,
A face without eyes,

I swiftly go faring
To find my delight
In leaves' scarlet daring
And daffodils' might;

For living soon passes
And leaves us to be
Dry bread for the grasses,
Cold wine for a tree.

Advice.

DIES the bright moment, darkens the glad day,
The year will smite the leaf buds from this bough;
Our voices shall be still, our flesh decay,
But do not grieve yourself about it now.

Take what spring offers you—gold willow trees,
A warm blue wind, the grasses' frail green tips.
Take what I give you, complement to these—
My careless comradeship and laughing lips.

Oh, do not bar your windows and your doors
To shut out sunlight and the sound of song!
Take anything that is one moment yours,
Although you know you will not have it long.

Lovers' Meeting.

NOT for the joy of faring forth, I went;
Not for the autumn hills that flame and fall
From clear-cut sky to stony valleys bent
Around black rivers; not for that high call
That drew a race across a continent;
Not for that homesick urge that men deride
But ever feel—the half-ashamed intent
To seek again the hearths they played beside.
Not as to Mecca or Jerusalem,
Nor in defiance to the ranging crags;
To glut no shrine; to kiss no garment's hem;
To lead no armies going forth with flags;
To still no challenge and to fling no dare—
I only went because my love was there.

These level meadows and these towers old,
These swaying bells, these paths young feet have made,
This roof so wont to shield me from the cold,
This window where I watched the stars displayed

In higher windows, all the laughing horde
So quick to task or tumult—these must bide.
And I must go. Again the flaming sword
Makes end to Eden; ushers Eve outside.

Those who have schooled me wisely, I forswear;
Those who have loved me truly, I betray.
No hand that laid a blessing on my hair,
Would point me forth on such a perilous way.
Their thoughts are kindly and their counsels wise,
But I love wisdom less than hair and eyes.

Black road that winds between the knotted firs,
Slow-rising land that swells and lifts ahead,
East-blowing wind that scatters chestnut burrs,

And frees the maple of her brilliant dead;

Thin yellow grass behind a meadow wall,
Dry stalks—the deathless spirit of all grain,
White-steepled towns where children laugh and call,
Strewn amber chips behind a lumber wain;

These in the morning sun are more than earth,
More than the reaches of a hill-bound shire—
These are my kindred, lean and sparse of mirth,
And run in sober molds pricked out with fire.
These are my veins and all their living flow,
The urge to tarry and the will to go.

Back, yellow river, harrying the soil,
You are a mongrel cur to run at heel;
Where men have crossed you with the paddle's toil,
They cross you still, but with a span of steel.

Slink in the marshes and the willow sedge,
And lap the bricks behind our tallest town.
I need not linger on a sloping ledge
To wait until your meager floods go down.

You and your city now I leave behind
In the warm noon before the sun is spent;
The columned temple of a people's mind;
The steam and steel to keep that mind content.
Through the quiet meadows where spring clover died,
I go, rejoicing that the world is wide.

Oh never in the country whence I came
Were hills so steep and sudden, towns so few;
But ever westward fares the sun's great flame,
Even beyond these slopes I journey to.

And I shall follow though the mountains mock,
Having that stubborn spirit in my clay,
That held the fathers firm as Plymouth Rock,

And sent their sons across the Santa Fé.

Now from the last long granite ridge I peer
Over the tree-tops in the wine-dark gloom.
I see the church spires, each a fragile spear;
The shadowed chimneys, each beneath a plume.
This town I visioned in the morning air,
And fared till dusk to try my welcome there.

Griselda, patient in her pale desire,
Would shake her head and fail to understand;
Helen would boast in setting Troy afire
She did not stir a foot or lift a hand.

If their traditions perish, others hold;
Love has the changes of the moon and tide,
But only these. This tale is true and old,
For journeys ended thus by Avon side.

My footprints on the long dark way are lost,
Upon no milestone did I write my name,
But there are tokens cut in fire and frost
Upon two hearts to show the way I came—
That lonely way by which no maid will fare
To any land, unless her love is there.

Second Love.

TALK in your sleep of Lilith,
And say that she was fair.
If such a dream beguileth
Your heart, I do not care.

Be sober in your waking
Because you long for her,
Nor fear my prattle breaking
The stillness you prefer.

When shrewish and deriding,
I make my wrath your woe,
I do not mind your chiding
That Lilith was not so.

When I turn cold to kissing,
It does not make me sad
To hear you talk of missing
The fire that Lilith had.

But when the twilights cover
My strangeness, cease to grieve!
O Lilith's faithful lover,
Forget that I am Eve.

A Plea Unheard.

YOU will not doff, for bright words or for tears,
Your stolid mask of caution, nor reveal
The cowering army crouched behind the spears,
The heart within the mind's cool sheath of steel.

Oh I may plead until my throat is stiff,
And you may yearn to me till heaven fall;
Your mouth remains a crevice in a cliff,
Your eyes two shuttered windows in a wall.

O Wind That Walks in Purple.

O WIND that walks in purple,
O mist that goes in gray
Down highroads bare at midnight,
Down teeming roads by day—

Touch my love's lids at morning
And be to them my lips;
Or stir his hair at twilight,
As with my finger tips.

And bear me back the tidings,
If he be sad or gay—
O wind that walks in purple,
O mist that goes in gray.

Relicts.

A THOUSAND maple-shaded streets there are,
Veining New England like a withered leaf;
A thousand picket fences, gates ajar;
A thousand strips of lawn, close-cut and brief;
A thousand houses, small, and smug, and white,
With bleakly shining panes where women sit,
Turned from the heresy of April night
To a bright hearth, and quietly hating it.

Stray down but one of these uncounted roads,
Come up the path to one forbidding door;
Peer at the worn brass plate that time corrodes,
To see whose dwelling place you stand before;
Read, *Thomas Knight*, and lift the knocker so,
With a slow care, lest sudden rap alarm;
For Thomas died a full ten years ago,
But here his women guard their fading charm.

Here Nancy Winter spreads her wrinkled hands
To firelight, careless of the moon outside;
Smooths the white wimple of her hair's sparse strands,
And dreams of that lost day she was a bride.
And here sits Laura, weaving endless lace—
Old Nancy's daughter, Tom's surviving spouse;
A fragile beauty might have lit her face
Had she been glad one moment in this house.

Here Laura's daughter Sybil calms the cries
Of heart too warm to be content with cold,
And bends her bright young head and hard young eyes
Above the book her ringless fingers hold.
Life has been here, although she did not stay.
There are no untried hearts around this flame:
These are not virgins grown austere and gray,
Keeping themselves for men who never came.

Watch how the firelight wakes a dancing elf
Of light in Laura's needles; how a gust
Moves Sybil's page; hear Nancy tell herself
Old sorry tales of dead men gone to dust.

My daughter boasts of face and form,
White hands with dainty bones
That stuffed no chinks against a storm,
Nor cleared a field of stones.

My daughter's daughter knows the tales
Of Britain or Brazil;
She does not know the forest trails
Around the nearest hill.

The rustle of a silken dress,
The clink of coin they know,
But not the homespun's rough caress,
Bare feet against the snow;

Nor how, when harvest moons came up,
Love walked among the sheaves,
Or rain clouds spilled their ebon cup
Above my courting eyes.

The men they loved were tall and wise,
As good as dew in drouth:
They did not have Dan Winter's eyes,
Dan Winter's curving mouth.

Though time has caught him in its whirl,
And hid him in the mist,
I pity still each luckless girl
Dan Winter never kissed.

He married me one April day,
When trees poured petals down,
And went to sleep alone in clay
Before the leaves were brown.

But those who work from need, not choice,
Have little time to weep;
And tears must never choke the voice
That sings a child to sleep.

I soon forgot what youth was for,
Nor thought of Dan again;
No more than soldier come from war
Will probe his wounds to pain:

Till one cold dawn I woke to find
A quietude past belief—
That I was old and did not mind
The sting of ancient grief.

Now peace begins when fails desire;
No fairer days I've known
As lass beside my father's fire,
Or bride before my own.

Still maids are fair and men are bold,
But life is kinder far,
Than when we wished for love and gold
On every evening star.

My daughter says I'm less than wise,
Her child agrees 'tis so—
But I could build me paradise
Of things they'll never know.

Old tongues are loudest, younger lips are still;
And Laura speaks no word above her lace.
She seems a faded beauty, struck with chill
From guarding treasures in a frozen place.
Past is the time when she was fickle, vain,
Sworn to capriciousness, too often vexed.
She is a link in that unending chain
That binds one generation to the next.

Look down those eyes that have no wish to tell
The things they know; nor longing to reveal
Delight or torment. Can we pierce the shell
That clamps itself on broken hearts which heal?

My mother sits and babbles by the fire
Of youthful passion and a man long dead,
And here my daughter on the other hand
Sits reading of the wicked Argive queen
Who ran away to Troy and caused a war
In which brave men were killed. She's glad to find
At last a woman quite as bad as she.
I think that it's a pity girls don't know
To be a Helen isn't hard at all:
If they want some new part to try their strength,
They ought to play Griselda for a while—
It's no small thing to be a patient one.
I know. I've waited over thirty years
To see an old mistake be blotted out,
An old misunderstanding wiped away,
And greet my love with kindness again.
It will not happen so. The boy I hurt
Is now the man who hates me. Here alone
I sit, too old for love, too young for death,
And chide myself to think the fault is mine—
Yes, wholly mine. But I was younger then.
And what young thing is wise enough to know
That not from empty words of idle lads,
But from the look of love on one man's face,
A woman learns all sorrow—all delight?

I was the fairest girl in town, they said,
And I've no doubt that I looked well enough
With chastened curls, full leg o'mutton sleeves,
Those wide dull, sweeping skirts, contrived to show
An arching instep or an ankle's curve—
And on my hand the ring of Stephen Dale.

A summer night; a dance; a frock of lace
With Stephen's flowers; groups of strange young men
With eager eyes too swift to find my own
Behind the dubious shelter of a fan;
Swaying with one, then others, in the waltz;
Blushing and laughing, dizzy from their praise;
The long walk home with Stephen frowning, hushed;
Quick words—my groping hand without its ring!
These things shall I remember till I lie
Again with Thomas Knight, this time beneath
A never-lifted coverlid of dust.

It was my mother's wisdom brought about
So good a match for one who faded young,
And though I've lived my life behind these panes
For those bright moments Stephen Dale went by,
I've been a true wife, a good mother—that's
Enough for any woman in her time.
But here at night between this old content
And sharp young tragedy, I sometimes feel
A little weak and foolish and afraid
That I'm a ghost who never lived at all.

Let youth take words; the stricken sparrow cry
In first flight wounded. Sybil's gaze is straight
And keen as cold bright flash of autumn sky;
Her little pointed chin as firm as fate;
Her words a desperate rush of shining spears
Too newly forged to wear the sheaths of rust,
Or daggers flaunted in the face of tears
And back into her willing bosom thrust.

If I had never varied from my course,
Nor laid my armor for one moment by;
Or, better, turned and fled from that dark force
That cast me down and shut me from the sky;
If I had stayed within the house of dream,
Nor fared into reality alone;

Or held my early wisdom—that the gleam
Of love is less than sunlight on a stone—
Still would I sit here, patient in the dusk,
But dreaming soon to be a prince's bride,
With pulsing heart and not this withered husk
That stirs unevenly against my side;
Still would the firelight warm these bones and skin,
Although a different woman dwelt within.

And since upon whatever gods I call,
Or call on none, my fortune is the same,
Better some lost delights I should recall
Than sit a vestal virgin by this flame.
Happy am I that in my hands I took
Whatever came to me, and made no cry
Above its passing; gave no backward look
After the time had come to lay it by.
I am apart from all the merry ones
Whose voices pass my window, shy and clear;
I am a sister to the fallen suns,
Neglected flowers, and the waning year—
But folk live sixty years and die,
Still knowing less of ecstasy than I.

I can remember spring was late that year,
The apple trees wore ice instead of bloom,
Till warm wind triumphed, sweeping heaven clear,
And making every twig a golden plume.
I can remember how our glances met,
How first our fingers came to touch and cling:
The wonder in our hearts is with me yet—
Neither could credit such a lovely thing.
I shall not see when time has made you old,
Dulled your brief tawny locks with gray eclipse,
Reshaped your features in a coarser mold,
And blurred the taut thin hardness of your lips.
Small matter if I did. No knight will trade

His worn-out saber for a bright new blade.

I never meant a man should love my face,
Or run possessing fingers through my hair,
Or take me to him in some secret place
Where there were only stars and wind to care.

I never thought to lose the aid of pride,
And fling myself upon the ground and pray
For his caresses, once they were denied—
For his returning, since he could not stay.

I never wished to take one little part
Of what another woman called her own,
Nor would I try by honesty or art
Continued trespass in forbidden zone.

“Take him,” I told her, with a shrug and smile,
“He’s none the worse for loving me awhile.”

How rarely do we break the mold of life,
How little can we reach our hand to change!
Most rebels falter in their foolish strife,
And stumble back into the narrow range
Decreed for them. If I have flung away
My only heritage, it cannot be
That any heads but mine will grow more gray,
Repentance trouble anyone but me.

My folly done, I take the punishment
And bear it proudly for the folly’s sake—
Glad that I never sat in feigned content,
Desiring things I did not dare to take.
Peace is the lot of all men in the grave,
But none are happy but the quick and brave.

A thousand maple-shaded streets there are,
Veining New England like a withered leaf,
A thousand picket fences, gates ajar;
A thousand strips of lawn, close-cut and brief,
A thousand paths of air where life may go
Above the houses, small, and smug, and white,

And bend toward them when the lamps are low,
To feel her deep pulse beating in the night.

A Mood for Autumn.

THESE prim fenced fields are hardly worth the sowing;
These opulent dahlia beds but fettered flames.
Who cares to know where gravel paths are going?
Or taste the fruit of vines that climb on frames?

Oh turn your back on trampled harvest stubble;
This is the time to glean a lighter good—
To watch the moon, a vast gold bloated bubble,
And race a lilting wind through a brown wood!

Phillips Exeter Academy, November, 1931.

A CROSS this crescent yard now drifted white,
Beneath these elms that beat against dark skies,
You trod this path another winter's night
With the same thoughts as mine behind your eyes.
By yonder lighted pane half glazed with sleet,
A lad bends down to scan a printed line;
Before my look his profile melts to meet
My memory of yours. This is a shrine
Forever to the studies and the sports
You found and left here, to your school-boy youth,
Your conquered armies and your captured forts,
Your little space of wrestling with the truth.
These are your footprints black upon the snow,
Pointing the only way your kind may go.

Priscilla Penwick.

1780

“**O** *H come again to Rivermouth, my dear,
Come as a lad, the way I loved you most;
Come as a falling star when skies are clear;
Or come to me a drowned man’s foggy ghost!”*

The candles flicker on these high dark walls,
A winter tempest blackens on the sea;
Bare branches droop with sleet; cold twilight falls;
Tall ships may sink, but what is that to me?

Bleak huts along the lanes of frozen mire
Must shelter ill the shivering folk in town;
But I am mistress of a lusty fire,
On heavy rugs I trail my velvet gown.

It was not always so. When I was young
I knew the snowflakes tumbling through the thatch,
The sleet that scourges with a bitter tongue,
The sea-wind’s restless fingers at the latch.

I was Priscilla Pride of Poor Man’s Lane,
To whom Jim Winslow sang his sailor tunes—
His eyes were blue as heaven after rain,
His laugh was like the wind across the dunes.

But love, though quick and warm, can have no lure
To hold a man who hears the running tide.
Oh sail away to Spain or Singapore,
And in these clover meadows I will bide.

“But I’ll come back to Rivermouth,” he said,
“Before the grapes are purple on the vine;
Before the new-sown crop is harvested,
I shall come back to ask for what is mine.”

He sailed away. Before the summer died,
 John Penwick tied his horse in Poor Man's Lane,
And haggled with my father for a bride—
 Their wills were stubborn and their speech was plain.

I said, "Oh let me keep my faith with Jim,
 And let John Penwick keep what gold he hath."
My lover's voice was far away and dim,
 And louder spoke my father's chilling wrath:

"Our spring is dry, our field as waste of sand;
 We've scarce enough to feed your brothers on.
You'll wed the first to ask me for your hand,
 No matter if his name be Jim or John."

I wore a dress of satin sleek and fine,
 The autumn day that John and I were wed—
Before the grapes were purple on the vine,
 Before the new-sown crop was harvested.

Jim never came. Perhaps he heard the tale
 How I was married in a brocade gown;
Perhaps he perished in a winter gale,
 Or wed a fair girl in some foreign town.

But on these nights too dark for stars and moons,
 When tempests beat black wings against the pane,
I hear a laugh like wind across the dunes,
 And see two eyes like heaven after rain.

*"Oh come again to Rivermouth, my dear,
 Come back again to her who loved you most;
Come as a falling star when skies are clear,
 Or come to me a drowned mans foggy ghost."*

The Story of Liza Who Washed the Mugs in the Mermaid Tavern.

I MIND me how the rain came down that day,
As if some tavern-keeper in the sky
Had left the taps all running, and a gray
Sad mist was everywhere. The men would dry
Their boots before the hearth, and curse, and chafe
Their sodden hands, and swear they never saw
A colder April; that it wasn't safe
To stay outside for long in wind so raw.
All day the poor blue maid above the door
Dripped water down from every shining scale;
A damp fog filled her every wooden pore;
The sharp wind smote her carven fins and tail
That used to glint so bravely in the sun.
But I had little time to con her grief,
There were my master's errands I must run,
The guests who must be served with ale and beef,
And constant searching for dry rags to pin
Round that loose casement where the rain blew in.

And when the dusk came down in Friday Street,
All Cheapside was a blackness and a blur
Of lights on water, sounding with the beat
Of storm at roof and pane. Our tables were
All empty, save the one before the fire,
And here three men were sitting in the thick
Dull ruddiness that swallowed the white spire
Of slender flame above the candlestick.
The Scottish gentleman was tall and lean;
I liked his coarse gray hair, his swift blue eye.
He smiled at me as if I were the queen,
Whenever humble duties took me by.
And one was old, and tired, and sharp of tongue,

His clothing patched at elbows and at knees;
And one was quiet, and worshipful, and young,
And in his silence studied how to please.
Wise poets—but in the times of which I speak,
All men were writing verse and reading Greek.

Their talk was of bright doings in the court—
How Anne the Queen was fond of plays and masks;
And how her husband shut himself from sport,
To dull his prime with slow pedantic tasks.
“Not often do I leave Kinaldie now,”
Said old Sir Robert, “but I would forsake
Placidity with gladness, could the prow
Of the good *Golden Hind* go bearing Drake
Again on gallant seas to singe the beard
Of Philip’s kinsman at the door of Spain.
I would face much that men have shunned and feared,
To hear Kit Marlowe turn a stave again.”
“I could,” said Drayton of the faded coat,
“Had James one share of Glorianna’s wit,
Die with his deathless praises in my throat.
And Ben, though rare, is scarce a match for Kit.
To that old day—the time of songs and ships!”
The ripe canary crossed their silent lips.

“And where is Ben?” the young man shyly spoke,
“You say that he can help me if he will”—
When in the storm a fiercer tumult broke:
The scraping of rough boots against the sill;
The door thrown back until the hinges strained;
A gust of wind and wet, a roaring call,
“Ods, what a night! God’s Blood, girl, how’t has rained!
Bring me some wine before I curse you all!”
Great, gross, and bloated, red with cold and wrath,
And tired with tramping through the gloom and rain,
He lumbered to the fire. A little path
Of muddy water showed his footsteps plain.

He shook himself until the drops flew out
From coat and beard to strike the burning log
With snap and sizzle. Then he looked about,
And settled like a tired old hunting dog.
The Mermaid's fairest gem back in her crown—
Ben Jonson had come home from Stratford town!

He eyed the leathern aprons on the pegs,
The pewter mugs around the tables ranged,
The age-dark timbers and the iron-bound kegs,
And smacked his lips to find that naught had changed.
“More wine, my girl. Put eels upon the spit,
And from the kitchen bring a peacock pie.
But first the liquor! I've a thirst that's fit
To make a fellow drink this tavern dry.”
I filled his glass. “Good Liza,” then he quoth,
“A fair name, ‘Liza.’ One has made us bow,
And one has served our drinks. I love you both—
But you the more. And you are living now
And hence the fairer. Comrades, to the toast!
Drink to this Liza, humble and unsung;
To that old Liza, now a royal ghost;
To Lizas that we loved when we were young.
Drink and be gay, lads—Devil take the groats!”
The ripe canary wet their silent throats.

I laid a letter by his trencher side,
One that a boy had brought the day before.
He did not read it. With a gesture wide
Of his great hand he struck it to the floor,
Turned to Sir Robert waiting in the gloom—
“Come now, Rob, troll a catch! No page I'll scan
Before I hear a rhyme; before this room
Mellows with song. How grows the heather, man?”
Sir Robert laughed, “Ye'll ken no air of mine,
While I'm about to catch your jesting hot.
I made you once a tune of auld lang syne,

And well remember that you liked it not.”
“Aye, Rob, ’twas bad—the stupid sort of tune
Men sing a little week and then forget.
Come, Drayton, you can shame this idle loon?
You’ve put no finish to your rhyming yet?”
“Not I,” said Drayton, “I’ve a sonnet here,
Made like Will’s sonnets, from the Mermaid’s beer.”

“Lay by thy laughter, and forswear thy scorn,
Or find another heart to wrench and wring.
Perhaps your lips are redder than the morn,
But not in any song that I shall sing.
Perhaps your hairs be wove in crown of gold,
Your eyes two mirrors for the stars to scan
Their shining selves—but since your heart is cold,
I gladly yield you to some other man.
Some stripling youth or careful Florentine
Who casts his lot with Ghibelline or Guelph,
May hymn past my poor verse that face of thine,
And make a wrapt adorer of himself.
Before your feet I laid my frankincense,
But since you spurn us both, I bear it thence.”

“A worthy piece,” yawned Ben. “It brings me cheer
To feel your heart is safe from ‘wring and wrench,’
But think you that a man of fifty year
Should still be writing rhymes about a wench?”
“Aye, Ben”—the quip was pleasant-voiced, but came
Like a lean wolf upon a wanderer’s throat—
“*You* make full many rhymes about that dame
Who played at Venus in the mask you wrote.
No matter! Here’s a lad would try his skill
In poesy. Hear him out before you mock.
A poet, or poetaster if you will.
His name? Young William Browne of Tavistock.
Come, Will, those verses that ye sang last night—
No thing of golden hair and bleeding hearts.

I tell you, Ben, when this lad gets his right,
The world will know him for a man of parts.”
The young man read sweet lines with foreign names,
In the hushed music of the dying flames.

“Soft streams of Alpheus and Aretheuse,
Where Corydon and Phyllis leaned to see
Their faces in the flood; where Maro’s muse
Brought heaven’s music down to Italy;
When hamadryads laughed from tree to tree
Before the men of bronze and iron could choose
To make an end of golden Arcady—
Oh antique rivers, will you still refuse
The Taw and Tavy place, their younger grace abuse?”

There is a loveliness untouched with stain
Of courtly ways; unhemmed with gilded walls.
It hangs like ivy on a ruined fane,
Glints like the sun on leaping waterfalls.
It is the echo where a sweet voice calls;
The ghostly arch that follows summer rain;
The pallid stars above the lighted halls—
A beauty native to the Argive strain,
But blooming white and fair in every Devon lane.”

The young man paused. Ben drained his mug and drew
Across his lips a thick and battered hand
With broken nails, and great veins showing through,
And thumb disfigured with the Tyburn brand.
“’Tis silly stuff,” he rumbled in his beard,
And stroked its red confusion free from wine.
“Scarce fit for mummers when the green is cleared.
In court—the meanest wit hath brighter shine.
It is a backward look into the dark;
A spilling of warm blood to ape the dead.
It minds me strangely of a Munster clerk
Who died in King Street for the lack of bread.
But out upon it! When your beard has grown,

You'll learn, young man, to write in sterner strain.
Liza, this tankard's dryer than the bone
Of some dead pilgrim. Fetch the wine again."
The young man smiled. His elders ceased to frown;
The ripe canary sparkled and went down.

"I'm home from Stratford," Ben took up the tale,
"A dull place too. I'd not have stayed the night
Save that I'd promised Will. He serves good ale,
But Avon fish are scarce and slow to bite.
We angled half a day for one poor trout,
And then Will caught him. Yes, the land was fair
With coming spring. The crab trees blossomed out
Like white-browed girls, a day while I was there.
But I'd a yearning for the courtly shows—
Even to bait the dull wits of the king;
To see the actors strutting at the Rose,
And look in vain for Henslowe in the wing.
I longed for tavern-talk and London air;
The clatter of brave wits above a can."
"Yes," jested Drayton, "and for that young fair
Who plays your Venus to delight Queen Anne."
Ben Jonson laughed and shook his shaggy head,
Picked up his letter from the floor, and read.

There is a pallor that the ruddy wear
In time of grief, more dreadful than the white
Of dead men's skin. There is a dulling stare
Most terrible in eyes that have been bright;
A shaking hand whose steady grasp we knew;
A silence in the garrulous and gay;
A time when living men must feel the yew
Of graveyards cast thick shadows on their play.
His words were hollow beating drums, "My friends,
Will Shakespeare lieth dead in Stratford town.
The drouth of dust is where our journey ends,
Let us, the living, quaff the good wine down.

We had a deathless man to friend a space.
Drink to that friendship, though the dregs lack mirth,
Drink to the highest glory of our race,
The soul of poetry parting from the earth.”
They drank, and all about them lay a stark
And stricken England, mourning in the dark.

I

GO tell the floods their freedom is unwise,
Direct their beauty in an ordered groove;
Upbraid the winds for sporting in the skies,
And say mankind does not at all approve.
Cries of high-circling birds attempt to quell,
Forbid the trees from budding in the spring,
Or try to caution me—you might as well
Be doing this as any futile thing.
Though I should dash my head against a stone,
Or climb a cliff and plunge into the sea,
That gives you no excuse to leave your own
More prudent practices and hinder me.
Say what you will, I hold your words among
Old errors babbled in a foreign tongue.

II

AFTER these arches fall, these roofs lie bare
No longer to the black and silver night;
When in this place no towers climb the air,
No windows spill their floods of sound and light;
When these gray trees have gone to build a wall,
A house, a ship, a coffin for a king;
When grass shall flourish where these pathways crawl,
And yonder in the stream no waters sing—
Still must a little of this sweetness stay,
As holiness remains in hallowed ground.
When we are two whom time has laid away,
Those who come here shall find the thing we found:
This brief delighting in a love as soon
To perish as the waning April moon.

III

THESE were so many ways to do the thing,
Such varied means to humble me with pain:
Blunt nails to tear my palms, and thorns to sting
The flesh to madness stronger than the brain;
Lashes to lay black bands along the skin;
Cold knives to carve your likeness on my heart;
Caldrons of boiling oil to cast me in,
And racks of steel to wrench my bones apart.
There were so many subtle ways and wise,
For one inclined the torturer's part to play—
Why did you choose to wear the lover's guise
And smite me in the immemorial way?
Were you aware, in leading with a kiss,
That I could parry any thrust but this?

IV

AS myself can bind you with no charm;
You have no need to love me late or soon.
I hold you with the whiteness of an arm
Not wholly mine; with eyes that catch the moon
The way another's did one younger spring.
I cannot call to you; I cannot stir
Your heart, save through that unforgotten thing—
The living memory of your love for her.
And so with me, when other springs are fair,
And other lads come seeking me alone,
I shall be kind to those who have your hair,
Your lips, your eyes, and laughter like your own;
And loving you in them, more clearly see
How you could love another girl in me.

V

I HAVE known lads who sought me for a song,
And duly did I frame their love in rime;
It cost no qualms, was neither hard nor wrong

Thus to amuse them for a little time.
Nor have I slighted that more common kind
Who sought to rule the heart and not the head—
Who cared to wring no music from my mind,
But followed me because my lips were red.
These are my gifts, the only things I own:
The gay caresses and the singing word.
You scan them critically with eyes of stone
And hand them back to me, unfelt, unheard.
These are more deeply I than blood and bone,
And yet they leave you tranquil and unstirred.

VI

NO other girl will ever give you this
Same twain of sweets that to my love belong,
But you can be contented with a kiss
From lips that cannot likewise frame a song.
Some other love will yield her mortal part,
Not her deep self, to bind you who were free;
While I have gaily given you my heart,
Nor sought to trade it for fidelity.
I think you will forget when this is done,
The charm of things you could not understand;
Exchange this fog wreath shifting in the sun
For dust that you can compass with your hand,
And pride yourself how wise you were to flout
A love that you were happier without.

VII

THIS moment have I had, come now what may—
Come life with fulness, or come death with lack—
Although no word of mine can bid it stay,
No miracle can ever bring it back.
Though any sun may rise to find you gone
In search of brighter eyes and softer hair,

I have this rock to build my fortress on,
This torch for gloom which we no longer share.
Think not that tears will never sting my face,
Nor that my heart will go untouched with scars,
When hands that clung to substance clutch at space,
And no dark profile shuts me from the stars;
But know this moment's memory is a sword
With which I challenge pain and all his horde.

VIII

O TIME, take from me nothing of this place;
O heart and mind, give up this memory last:
Leave me these hoarse dark birds that wheel and race
Through the warm air, these tangled boughs that cast
Their weaving profiles where hushed waters creep,
Blue in the shadow, amber in the sun;
Even these rough brown pine-spills I would keep—
This patch of earth, till earth and I are one.
Quicker would I those oldest sights forego,
Of towns that lift their spires to cold pale sky;
Or yield my place beneath that double row
Of maple trees and headstones tipped awry:
For youth and death have chosen other lands,
But love came here to kiss my lips and hands.

IX

REACH up your arms among the moving boughs,
Twist the tough stalks and strip a petaled spray
Of shimmering purple stars, since life allows
No truer contact with the heart of May.
The turf of these quiet fields will never lose
Its still reality, come good or grief.
These ways are mine to wander when I choose—
Only your laughing presence here is brief.
There will be lilacs here in other springs,

When this old house thrusts out its frail cockade
Of smoky lace into the weed-grown lane;
There will be silken leaves astir with wings
Caught in the labyrinth of sun and shade—
But never lit by your bright hair again.

X

THROUGH matter we may strike at death and time.
You rear these clumsy walls against the weather,
That till they fall may shield the endless mime
Of other lovers growing old together.
And I shall set frail stitches in this mesh
Of coarse dull wool, and hem a kindly cover
To keep the winds of night from shivering flesh
When I need warmth from neither robe nor lover.
We shall be shadows straying past the pane,
Or rise from turf as fog-wreaths lean and ashen,
To find these stolid, homely works remain—
But not our blood, our breath, our living passion.
I break my thread. Your hammer cease to swing.
Let us do worship to the transient thing.

XI

SMALL good for you to sit and stare at me,
And little gain have I from scanning you.
The symbols of a broken ecstasy
Cannot suffice to build the dream anew.
We shall be comrades: each of us has lost
The dearest thing he owned, the one bright pearl
Of untried passion—I the boy uncrossed
In willfulness, and you the shy-lipped girl.
Oh do not think to meet again with her,
Since you have held her hand and seen her die;
Nor shall I mourn above the sepulcher
Wherein I watched my youngest lover lie.

Remembrance has little joy to give
These two bewildered ghosts that breathe and live.

XII

I SHALL not weep away my youth and prime
When you are gone forever. I shall wed
Some steadfast love, nor think about this time
We walked together, nor these lanes we tread.
I shall have sons to grow up tall and fine,
But lads whose locks are dark where yours were fair;
Nor shall your daughters wear one look of mine,
But boast another woman's eyes and hair.
Though we shall live our lives in different shires,
And wander where we will, the time must be
When we are ancient folk by separate fires,
Remembering this perished ecstasy,
Feeling our old hearts heavy with the woe
Our young hearts charged against them long ago.

XIII

NOW that the careless springtime is no more,
Let thrifty autumn for the snows prepare;
From ready harvests reap a prudent store,
And pluck the withered violets from your hair.
When April moonlight silvered rustling leaves,
You did not grieve that they would dull with frost;
So weep no tears above the golden sheaves
Because the softer tint of buds is lost.
Let flowing waters stiffen in the night;
Let winter do its worst to all you see,
And blast your kingdom with its bitter breath;
Wherever there was bloom must follow blight—
Whether with man or season there must be
A time for life and love—a time for death.

XIV

YOU never would have let them treat me so,
This rout that tears my fairest fortress down.
Through broken gates pours in an alien foe;
Within the walls the traitors fire the town
That knew no treason while you were its king—
You who could keep all men in bounds you set.
Before you would have let them do this thing
You would have hanged them from the parapet.
I shall not throw away my crestless shield,
Nor wait a champion to emerge from air,
But, oh, for strength as sure as yours to wield
Swift weapons in the conflict with despair!
No friend can save this city from its fall—
Only a lover, fighting back to wall.

XV

THERE was not loveliness nor fortune there
In that gnarled countryside, austere and plain;
For there was always autumn in the air,
The twilights settled early and with rain;
A land of trim-kept homes and tidy folk
With spirits sterner than the hillside stone,
Who mocked at things less tangible than smoke
And taught that man can live by bread alone.
But I shall go to look for my heart's kin,
Back from rich cities to these towns forlorn,
And choose a comrade who was born within
The same gray ring of hills where I was born—
Whose laughter is like mine, but forced and thin;
Whose speech is silences, whose wit a thorn.

XVI

HAVE come back here whence I started out,

I Back to this village sprawled between the hills—
One who has followed phantoms with the rout,
Come straggling back to reach for daffodils,
And human hands, and all the things of earth;
Come back to find if love had strength to wait
Broken and bleeding on the barbs of mirth,
Or if his wounds were small and healed with hate.
Yes, here am I, my folly to renew,
Ready to bow the head and bend the knee.
I have betrayed my pride to come to you,
And find you are not here to welcome me.
Oh I shall haunt old doorways in the sun,
Think of the dead, and wish that I were one.

XVII

YOU did not come. We heard the maples grieve
In the black trouble of the winter gale;
That storm or lack of stars should make you fail
To keep your word, we hated to believe.
The quiet gray woman watched the shadows weave
About the house, or smiled to cheer the frail
Old man whose only comment was a wail—
“The children always came on Christmas Eve!”
You did not come. The back-log burned away
And ceased to cast red patterns on the floor;
The ticking clock was like a muffled drum
That beat for loneliness and love’s decay.
I went to trim the wick and lock the door,
Thinking I hated you. You did not come.

XVIII

WHEN you come back no tinsel trumpets scream,
No hands fling roses on the path you plod;
Your mouth is hard, your eyes have lost their dream;
You give me guarded greeting and a nod.

I watch you (oh so slowly!) realize
The miracle that binds *me* with *your* chain—
That I, as well as you, have followed lies,
And found them out, and come back home again.
Warm lip to lip and hand to hand at last!
We missed the roses, but we have the fall—
Brown stubble when the harvest gold has passed,
And scarlet woodbine on a winding wall.
The gods are envious—but what can they do
Against the heart-united strength of two?

XIX

O H you have much to tell me. You have lain
All night in northern cabins rocked by wind;
Toiled up the castled slopes of Aquitaine,
And looted templed groves of tamarind.
I have not anything to say at all;
It is my part to listen and to praise.
I am no more an individual,
But your admiring echo all our days.
Thus shall we dwell beneath this curving sky
The way our fathers did; and by their graves
There will be space enough for us to lie,
When such a bed is all the body craves:
Two who have loved each other best, and clung
Contented to the land where they were young.

XX

I NEVER thought to start another quest,
Having attained the ultimate in you;
Nor gleam nor grail could call me with the zest
Your kisses had to keep me. I was through
With that impetuous, eager, seeking self,
Your love had tamed it to the stolid round
That life demands of those who make their pelf

By dredging furrows in the stony ground.
But only yesterday a lost wind stirred
The goldenrod as you came up the lane.
I turned my eyes away from you and heard
A voice I never thought to hear again—
The whisper in my heart that drives me on
With discontent, with yearnings to be gone.

XXI

A THIN rain seeps along the apple boughs
That scratch and crawl against the windowpane.
You are content; the hay is in the mows,
The storm beats not too harshly on your grain.
Can nothing tempt you out of calm tonight?
Your lazy eyelids brush a tough tanned cheek.
What would you say if I should start upright
With the farewell that it is mine to speak?
Oh I could shake that patient poise of yours
And teach you pain, bewilderment and loss—
Grief of a man who knocks at shuttered doors
Above a sill that was his own to cross.
But since you look so like a weary boy,
I shall be still. The child may keep his toy.

XXII

B REAKS the glad sun upon the steaming soil;
Black hungry birds are calling in the grain.
Oh pause before you hasten forth to toil—
Your fields shall have you to themselves again.
Now shall I tell you love has vanished thus,
Like a swift shadow blown between the trees;
Here must I stand and break our hearts for us,
Carve forth again our blurred identities.
But there is something in the way you stand,
So gaily fearless in the open door—

My thought goes back to that enchanted land
Where your caress was all I hungered for.
You trust in me. Your look is clear and straight.
I have no words; the man may keep his mate.

XXIII

NOW you at last are thrust from paradise;
But you can curl a careless lip and say
In tones that have the ring of iron on ice,
“What matter if a woman go or stay?”
Lips and soft hair are never hard to find;
The one you loved before was just as sweet.
The time I take to sit and con my mind
She’d spend in making meals a man could eat.
Oh never think to see me any more,
Save in the memory of this slain delight,
Or ghost unbidden, slipping through your door
In some tense moment of a windless night.
Strengthen this bright bravado to uphold
Your heart through the long years till you are old.

XXIV

DOWN the black highway where no whisper stirs,
No light leans forth from towers touched with dawn;
One with all unaccompanied wanderers,
I straggle forth by bitter magic drawn.
This conquest into chaos offers more
Than a tight roof with tossing trees above,
Intangible environs to explore—
But you were warm, and breathing, and my love.
Never again shall I ignore a storm
As on those other nights when I have lain
Secure in flesh and mind. I am a form
That haunts unending roadways in the rain,
Or stumbles blindly over desert ground—

Seeking the thing no man has ever found.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this eBook.

[The end of *The Dark Hills Under* by Shirley Barker]