

FIRST POEMS

EDWIN MUIR

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FIRST POEMS

EDWIN MUIR

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POEMS

CHILDHOOD

Long time he lay upon the sunny hill,
 To his father's house below securely bound.
Far off the silent, changing sound was still,
 With the black islands lying thick around.

He knew each separate height, each vaguer hue,
 Where the massed isles more distant rolled away;
But though all ran together in his view,
 He knew that unseen straits between them lay.

Sometimes he wondered what new shores were there:
 In thought he saw the still light on the sand,
The shallow water clear in tranquil air,
 And walked through it in joy from strand to strand.

Oft o'er the sound a ship so slow would pass
 That in the black hills' gloom it seemed to lie;
The evening sound was smooth like sunken glass,
 And time seemed finished ere the ship passed by.

Grey tiny rocks slept round him where he lay,
 Moveless as they; more still when evening came.
The grasses threw straight shadows far away,
 And from the house his mother called his name.

THE LOST LAND

And like a mist ere morning I am gone;
My whispering prow through silence furrows on.
I fare far in through circles vast and dim,
Till a grey steeple lifts above the rim,

From which a chime falls far across the waves.
I see wind-lichened walls the slow tide laves;
The houses waver towards me, melt and run,
And open out, in ranks, and one by one.

I see the prickly weeds, the flowers small,
The moss like magic on the creviced wall,
The doors wide open where the wind comes in,
And is a whispering presence, salt and thin;

The still church standing lonely on the mound,
The leaning tombs which slumber with no sound.
Here would I stay, thus dreaming, evermore,
And watch the white ships flocking to the shore.

I look again. Alas! I do not know
This place, and alien people come and go.
Ah, this is not my haven; oft before
I have stood here and wept for the other shore.

And now it lies ten leagues across the sea,

And smiles, and calls on me perpetually;
But mountains and abysses lie between,
And I must fare by uplands coarse and lean,

Where towering cliffs hem in the thin-tongued strait,
And far below like battling dragons wait
The serpent-fangéd caves which gnash the sea,
And make a hollow barking constantly;

And where in pale moon-charméd valleys stay
Dreadful and lovely mists at full noon-day.
I gather giant orchids, light and dead,
And make a pallid garland for my head,

And sleep upon a green and watching mound
Which some child's wizardry has girdled round;
And I have been here many times before,
And shall return hereafter many more,

While past huge mountains and across great seas
That haven lies, and my long-sought release.
There tranquil spirits stand forevermore,
And watch the white ships flocking to the shore.

REMEMBRANCE

O places I have seen upon the earth,
Your silence is not virginal any more,

For one still wanders there whose mortal birth
Was mine. And now, gaze bent on buried lore,

A child, a youth, a man—O is it I?—
In silence stands by every lake and tree,
Or leans lost poring face where flickering by
The bright stream moves on to another sea.

And all is changed, the shining fields, the host
Of shapes who were myself years long ago.
'Tis these who live! And I am but a ghost
Exiled from their sole light and jealous glow.

Ah no, it was not I who, laughing there,
Walked with the crowd, and there, in solitude,
Wandered a summer's day through windless air,
In a once-visited far-northern wood.

It was not I from morn till noon who went
The white road's length to the white noisy town
So many years ago. That light is spent,
And he who saw it, long since fallen down.

And he no less, the child who, walking grave,
Saw beauty of tiny weed, of moss and stone;
And all his comrades, diffident and brave—
They each have perished, silent and alone.

I can no more have speech with them, nor know
The light which lights them. Vaster than the sea,
The yawning distances o'er which we go
On our frail paths of sundering destiny.

HORSES

Those lumbering horses in the steady plough,
On the bare field—I wonder why, just now,
They seemed so terrible, so wild and strange,
Like magic power on the stony grange.

Perhaps some childish hour has come again,
When I watched fearful, through the blackening rain,
Their hooves like pistons in an ancient mill
Move up and down, yet seem as standing still.

Their conquering hooves which trod the stubble down
Were ritual which turned the field to brown,
And their great hulks were seraphim of gold,
Or mute ecstatic monsters on the mould.

And oh the rapture, when, one furrow done,
They marched broad-breasted to the sinking sun!
The light flowed off their bossy sides in flakes;
The furrows rolled behind like struggling snakes.

But when at dusk with steaming nostrils home
They came, they seemed gigantic in the gloam,
And warm and glowing with mysterious fire,
Which lit their smouldering bodies in the mire.

Their eyes as brilliant and as wide as night

Gleamed with a cruel apocalyptic sight.
Their manes the leaping ire of the wind
Lifted with rage invisible and blind.

Ah now it fades! it fades! and I must pine
Again for that dread country crystalline,
Where the blank field and the still-standing tree
Were bright and fearful presences to me.

HOUSES

The far house shines so clear, it seems to come
Towards me across the green estranging land.
The chimneys clustering watch; a tiny hum
Fills the closed rooms; the mute walls listening stand.

When as a child I walked upon the earth,
In burning inquisition, half afraid,
Too empty seemed the wide horizon's girth,
But there were nooks with magic thick inlaid.

But most where in a house in one green place
Doors opened wide to low voice of a stream,
Where through still-standing days I seemed to pace,
As if the years were tarrying in a dream.

There was a line around on every side,
And all within spoke to me and was home.

Beyond, the empty fields spread waste and wide,
To the dark sea where ships cut white the foam.

How long, how long I pored on stone and tree,
In happy inward dream day after day!
Slow lifting up my heavy head to see
Tall men walk on the white roads far away,

And houses standing still in sun and rain,
With dreamt-of rustlings filled from roof to floor,—
Then I would watch for hours to see again
The folk go out and in about the door.

Now I can see once more, once more can feel
That human magic on the stony earth.
See, through their struggling web of stone and steel,
Those distant houses shine with grief and mirth!

MAYA

Ah, could I put this viewless strife aside,
And lie forever on a sunny hill,
And see the unregarded river glide
Through the small plain, and it be morning still! . . .

I watch the clear blank houses standing low,
Their windows gleaming black in the pale sun.
The walls grow brighter; unseen ripples flow

Up to the eaves, where smoky shadows run.

Around, the fields are greener, and the trees
Their slowly wakening branches bend more down;
Unquiet memories stir beneath the leas,
Whose knolls rise like a green deserted town.

Along the roads the tiny people move,
Between the shining meadows, far and clear.
They go towards the mountains; and above
The ridge the fresh young firmament looks near.

Now from the hills a slow unwinding sound
Comes of bells swinging in a distant dale.
Through unseen valleys nearer it is wound,
Loudens, and falls upon the sunlit vale. . . .

And all at once those fields and mountains seem
A little gleaming strip of grass and light,
Bordering the million-fold and shapeless dream
Which keeps our souls apart in strangest night.

We seek in inner cloud our formless way,
In mystery without ground, beginning, end.
And when we lift our eyes we see the day
Astonished, and stand motionless, and attend.

THE ENCHANTED PRINCE

Here lying on the ancient mount,
Through days grown stagnant and too rich,
My half-raised eyes keep sleepy count
Of wild weeds springing in the ditch,

Of turf so quiet and so clean,
The sun's light seems more ancient there,
As if the chill and slumbering green
Had grown indifferent to the air.

And all worn smooth 'neath deadened years
Which have forgotten that they roll,
Though at its secret term appears
The lawful grass upon the knoll.

Here is the peace of ended toil
Heavy and rich, too rich, as though
A race were mingled with the soil,
And could no more rise up and go.

A willow hangs above the vale,
Here at my foot, and I have sight,
Through twisted branches dusty pale,
Of distant hills in different light.

So inaccessible and so clear;
The houses gleam on every hill!
The silent valley tumbles sheer,
Like an abyss where time is still.

Yet here upon the enchanted mount
I look out towards the farther heights,
And, lost far onward, strive to count

Ambiguous shapes in shifting lights,

Till, where peaks battle in the haze
In mortal strife without a cry,
Upon unnameable things I gaze,
And dragons rearing at the sky.

If now, turned back, I think again
That all those lines which heaved and strove
Just now, were quiet earth, I fain
Would perish of a boundless love.

Here lying on the ancient mount,
Through days grown stagnant and too rich,
My heart is dust, the while I count
The wild weeds springing in the ditch.

OCTOBER AT HELLBRÜNN

The near-drawn changeless sky, closed in and grey,
Broods o'er the garden, and the turf is still.
The dim lake shines; oppressed the fountains play;
And shadowless weight lies on the wooded hill.

The close-ranked trees rise separate, as if deep
They listened dreaming through the hollow ground,
Each in a single, far-divided sleep,
While few sad leaves fall heedless with no sound.

The marble cherubs in the wavering lake
Stand up more still, as if they held all there,
The trees, the plots, in thrall. Their shadows make
The water clear and hollow as the air.

So still they stand, the statues and the trees,
On the brown path the leaves so moveless lie,
My footfalls end, and motionless as these,
I stand self-tranced between the earth and sky.

For the earth is dumb and empty, and no weight,
Save the shut sky, curved steep, a stone-smooth tomb,
Weighs on it, and no ground upholds its great
Load of tired land and sea, save empty doom.

The slow dumb afternoon draws in, and dark
The trees rise up; grown heavier is the ground.
And, breaking through the silence of the park,
Farther the viewless fountain flings its sound.

REVERIE

The dark road journeys to the darkening sky,
The twilight settles like a circling pool,
The railway bridge is lifted up on high,
And the unerring lines are beautiful.

A soldier and his girl in casual walk

Pass heavily, their garments creased with woe,
Like stiff, slow-labouring statues; yet they talk
In peace, and gather comfort as they go.

In the small cabin by the railway-side
A lonely concertina by some priest
Of guileless joy is played; its sound goes wide,
Like the blunt brumming of a vague-voiced beast.

I stand, and thin-toned anguish frets my heart
Over the cabin boy who all the night
Sits in his thoughtless paradise apart,
And in his lonely monologue finds delight;

And over those two, who, in half-dumb talk,
With broken gestures, and half-shapen speech,
In unintelligible rapture walk,
Too far for vain and longing thought to reach.

O why should fading form and falling sound
Such sculptured shapes of deep division take?
Why do we walk with muted footsteps round
In this strong trance called life from which none wake?

Whither do these blind-journeying lovers go?
What does he wait, the boy with idle hands?
And I who stand in idle questioning so?
We walk all four in strange and different lands.

Those lovers never will return again.
That sound has died long since within the gloam.
Why do I wait still with my foolish pain?
All, all at last must take their sorrow home.

ON THE MEDITERRANEAN

Now it comes back again, the thought of peoples
In populous lands, who live and doubt and die,
Comes here in this small town with trivial steeples,
On the still gulf, beneath the foreign sky.

Dark-featured children gambol in the ocean,
The blistering light burns on the stony hills,
And tranquil women pass with cloud-like motion
O'er the wet sands; and pain my spirit fills

For stubborn silence of those rocky highlands,
Those simple fields I cannot understand,
And those half-glimpsed and enigmatic islands,
Which hang, a torment teasing the vexed land.

I think of thousand-citied, distant races,
Who in one baffling image ever change;
The hieroglyphic silence of old places
Our listening makes more taciturn and strange;

Of oceans, deserts, rivers, forests, mountains,
Seen but by vacant night, incurious day;
Deserted temples, palaces, gardens, fountains,
Left lying like wrecks of interrupted play.

Why in our lonely, swiftly-ended passion

Should we o'er such gigantic pathways move?
Stretch featureless space around us as a fashion,
And feel the fathomless tides of hate and love?

Why are all these in wild mutation shaken?
See, the sun, sinking, stains the ocean red.
In flames the vineyards sleep, the mountains waken,
And common crimson gilds each casual head!

We know not Him Who stretched in rapture o'er us
Mystery and Beauty; and with fear is fanned
Our trembling memory of the Hour which bore us,
And shut us 'twixt the bastions of the land.

AN ANCIENT SONG

I thought of all the passions men have known:
Despair which hardens to a moveless stone;
Rage running round and round until it falls,
And fallen, deaf and blind, in narrow stalls
Is fastened, self-consenting, unappeased;
Bereavement which, by deathless Memory teased,
Pores o'er the same, forever-altered track,
Turns, ever on the old lost way turns back;
Lost Love which flies aghast it knows not where,
And finds no foothold but the dreadful air;
Deep Misery which knows not its own cries;
And sightless Hope with ever straining eyes:

Yet this, this, for ages long
Will turn to story and sweet song.

BETRAYAL

Sometimes I see, caught in a snare,
One with a foolish lovely face,
Who stands with scattered moon-struck air
Alone, in a wild woody place.

She was entrapped there long ago.
Yet fowler none has come to see
His prize; though all the tree-trunks show
A front of silent treachery.

And there she waits, while in her flesh
Small joyless teeth fret without rest.
But she stands smiling in the mesh,
The while she is duped and dispossessed.

I know her name; for it is told
That Beauty is a prisoner,
And that her gaoler, bleak and bold,
Scores her fine flesh, and murders her.

He slays her with invisible hands,
And inly wastes her flesh away,
And strangles her with stealthy bands;

Melts her as snow day after day.

Within his thicket life decays

And slow is changed by hidden guile;

And nothing now of Beauty stays,

Save her divine and witless smile.

For still she smiles, and does not know

Her feet are in the snaring lime.

He who entrapped her long ago,

And kills her, is unpitied Time.

ANATOMY

My feet walk to a hidden place

Whence no path issues, my eyes range

Through immobility of space.

Towards changelessness my members change.

My flesh a ripening fruit, my blood

A crimson brook which tends towards death;

My reins a black and secret bud

Which breaks in everlasting breath.

My lusts, a beauty-bearing tide,

Move stealthily as if bent on crime.

My heart, self-moved, against my side

Beats, like Eternity in Time.

LOGOS

Over the slumbering ocean
With wavering feet I travel.

Far back, the land, a leaden
Blue shadow slowly melting,
Sinks in the gnawing circle.
The hills are eaten
Away in silence.

The smooth-backed serpent-hided ocean
Under my footfall whispers.
Pale gossamer lies upon the billows,
And far it sounds a crystal tinkling.
The strengthless sun is smouldering
In the soft sky, drained and wounded.

Thou heaven, bent twice around me,
Keep still! Mounts fast my terror.
On the bright silence rocking,
The chalk-pale heavens reel; in silence
The ocean streams to the white horizon.
I fall through blackness.

End and Beginning!
Thy tides are warm and stagnant.
In caverns, snow-white giants

Sprawl on great rocks, and the currents
Lift and let fall their foam-soft crumbling
Limbs, and their eyes more clear than water
Laugh when the waves comb out their tresses.
Their hands are vague and careless
As lazy tree-tops swaying.
On their huge breasts hang generations
Asleep, like sunless forests.
Light shall bear these, whom darkness ripened.
They shall know naught save that in slumber
Mysterious fingers
Touched them, and their blood yearned upward,
Chafing against sealed ears and eyelids.

Amazed they rise. The ocean
Is strewn with silent forms which, standing,
Blaze on the gulf. Before them
They see the outspread and soundless morning,
And their immense eternal pathway.

WHEN THE TREES GROW BARE ON THE HIGH HILLS

When the trees grow bare on the high hills,
And through still glistening days
The wrinkled sun-memoried leaves fall down
From black tall branches
Through the gleaming air,

And wonder is lost,
Dissolving in space,
My heart grows light like the bare branches,
And thoughts which through long months
Have lain like lead upon my breast,
Heavy, slow-ripening thoughts,
Grow light and sere,
And fall at last, so empty and so beautiful.

And I become
Mere memory, mere fume
Of my own strife, my loud wave-crested clamour,
An echo caught
From the mid-sea
On a still mountain-side.
The leaves fall faster,
Like a slow unreturning fountain of red gold.
The billow of summer breaks at last
In far-heard whispering.
And in mere memory, mere dream,
Attainment breathes itself out,
Perfect and cold.

AUTUMN NEAR PRAGUE

The ripe fruit rests here,
On the chill ground,
In the sterile air.

All meanings have fallen into your lap,
Uncomprehending earth.

The stubble shines in the dry field,
Gilded by the pale sun.
The trees, unburdened, with light limbs,
Shiver in the cold light.
In the meadow the goat-herd,
A young girl,
Sits with bent head,
Blind, covered head,
Bowed to the earth,
Like a tree
Dreaming a long-held dream.

The gossamers forge their frail cables
Between the grasses,
Secure,
So still the blue air hangs its great sea,
That mighty sea, so still!
The earth, like a great god,
Far withdrawn,
Lies asleep.

SALZBURG—NOVEMBER

The bells are chiming in the town.
It's four; and on the darkening streets

The mountains scatter chilling down
The wintry dusk. The shrill bell beats

And stops. Startling our footsteps ring;
Our voices sound more sharp and clear;
The bright shop windows burn and sting:
Around, the snow-streaked hills come near.

We had been walking all the day
Through miry lanes, 'twixt fields new-ploughed.
White peaks drew near and dropped away
On either hand, and one pale cloud

Covered the sky and closed it up.
The world seemed small; we could but see
The black wet fields in their wet cup:
The roadside brook flowed drearily.

But when at dusk the town drew nigh
We saw it glittering dark and bright,
And one near spire stood up so high
It showed above the distant height.

The church, the mountain, side by side,
Stood there as childish pictures stand;
The great spanned roof rose, curved and wide
And clear and tiny lay the land.

We gazed; as on we trudged again
The small green landscape drank us in.
A great brown horse stood in a wain,
His nostrils smoking silvery thin.

Gleaming he seemed to warm the air;
His warm bright bridle jingled high;
He stood so solitary there,
There seemed naught else beneath the sky.

Then through chill narrow streets to see
From bright doors clattering men burst out
One breath the door swung brilliantly,
Then the dark street rang with the shout.

Now night has fallen, and far up
The hills climb back into the sky.
The valley is a misted cup;
The sparkling city walks on high.

GRASS

The vague immutable contour of the earth—
This insubstantial phantom of green hills
Which ever falling away forever stand,
Perpetual mirage hung beyond Time's reach—
Is grass, which sets the round world in our sight.
Grass standing thick and still in soundless vales
No eye has seen, or straggling into wastes,
Beat down but spared by winds which tear up oaks;
Green in the sun and beneath smothering mists
Where each moist blade sweats one clear glistening drop;
Grass growing below huge rocks and round lone graves;

Climbing, a tiny host, up mountain-sides;
Hanging on mist-locked keeps above dun lakes;
Tossing on low small islets on the tide,
Soft meadows 'mid the currents of the sea,
Where the green glossy blades drink the blue wave;
Grass waiting in dark 'neath table-lands of snow,
O'er new-riven chasms weaving its light veil,
And quiet fields o'er fallen and jagged peaks:
The invulnerable vesture of the world.

BALLADS

BALLAD OF HECTOR IN HADES

Yes, this is where I stood that day,
Beside this sunlit mound.
The walls of Troy are far behind,
And outward comes no sound.

I wait; on all the empty plain
A burnished silence lies,
Save for the chariot's tinkling sound,
And a few distant cries.

His helmet glitters near. The world
Slowly turns around,
With some strange sleight compels my feet
Far from the fighting ground.

I run. Should I turn back again
The earth must turn with me:
The mountains planted on the plain.
The sky clamped to the sea.

The grasses puff a little dust
Where'er my footsteps fall.
I cast a shadow when I pass
The little wayside wall.

The strip of grass on either hand
Sparkles in the light.

I see naught but that little space
To the left and to the right;

And in that space our shadows run,
His shadow there and mine;
The little flowers, the tiny mounds,
The grasses frail and fine.

But narrower still and narrower!
My course seems shrunk and small,
Yet vast as in a monstrous dream,
And faint the Trojan wall.
The sun up in the vaulted sky
Is alien and tall.

The sky with myriad rankéd eyes
Coldly watches me.
The flowers, the mounds, the flaunting weeds
Wheel slowly round to see.

Each rut within the wagon path
Has eyes as we go by,
Cold earthy eyes which shut again
When we have passed on high.

Two shadows racing o'er the grass,
Silent and so near,
Till his shadow falls like steel on mine,
And I am freed of fear.

In dreadful distance, void and chill,

I hang, and do not care,
While round bright Troy Achilles whirls
The corpse with streaming hair.

BALLAD OF REBIRTH

I flew aloft on frozen wings,
I clove a waveless sea,
And sat upon a glittering star
In glory and penury.

And, lapped round like the Cherubim
With waves of my own fire,
I felt the secret moving lust
For the unmoving mire.

I cast myself in wild disdain
From that vast precipice.
I fell, a splintered lance of light,
On a blank ball of ice.

Snowy and red, with wings outspread,
In palsied trance I lay,
And waited with the unwilling dead
The certain Judgment Day.

The terror drove my spirit forth
Into the quivering air.

The ice heaved, and the sleeping beast
Rose reeling from his lair.

That vast, remorseless, ageless beast,
Heaven-high and ocean-wide,
Came from the ice and looked at me,
Pondered, and pitying cried:

"As light is lost in deeper light,
Gloom swallowed up in gloom,
You must in your own infinite
Your infinite entomb.

"A sprite, you must in mire be dipt,
A worm, take wings and fly;
You must in great indifferent seas
Your purity purify."

Then in the cavern of his maw
He took my limbs and ate,
And turned again, and went behind
The eternal icy gate.

But my soul hovered, trembling still,
On the bleak empty air,
Waited, and feared, and knew full well
What still must happen there.

A lovely youth, jocund and free,
Out of the ribbed ice came,
Across his breast a serpent lay
Like a brown band of flame.

"My limbs are strong as the deep hills.
Set on the enduring slime,
But my eyes were forged in Paradise,
And have forgotten Time!"

BALLAD OF ETERNAL LIFE

I

I knew not whence my breath had streamed,
Nor where had hid my clay,
Until my soul stood by my side
As on my bed I lay.

It showed me Chaos and the Word,
The dust, the moving Hand,
Myself, the many and the one,
The dead, the living land.

Faintly at first I heard the sound,
Far distant, of the sea:
A rushing sound—it filled my ears,
And passéd silently.

I stood beside a dark blue shore,
Beneath a dark blue sky.
The light came from no vanished star,
The sun had not passed by.

Faintly uprist like graven mist
A wraith upon the mere,
Burned clear, and she hung movelessly,
Like a suspended spear.

O strange to see her stand so still
Amid the wallowing sea!
With lifted hand I saw her stand
And make a sign to me.

II

The billows rose; down sank the land;
The sea closed in like lead;
The waves like leopards tumbled on
Far above my head.

Slow closed the mesh, slow waxed my flesh,
Darkly I came to birth;
I rose; the sky was white as snow,
As ashes black the earth:

The ashes of millennial fires
Extinguished utterly!
In towering blocks the twisted rocks
Stuck up above the sea.

Blithely I swam, a moving thing,
On the vast and moveless mere;
And headless things swam in blind swift rings
Around. I did not fear

Till, when I grasped the flame-scarred rock,
A chill sea-creature caught
My bonéd hand with boneless hand—
Through all a day I fought.

I struck it prone; I walked alone
In alien horizons:
The low-browed voiceless animals
Were my companions.

Asleep, a huge forgotten brood
Lay round like tree-stumps old:
The dragons. From their eyelids fell,
Soft-rayed, the rustling gold.

III

What next I saw ill can I tell,
And ill can understand;
But yet I know that once I went
Through that magic land.

It was a waste of jagged rock
(Nor beast nor shrub was nigh),
Whereon a glittering palace lay
Like ruins of the sky.

I crept within; I stood within.
Far down the toppling ledge
Scaffolds of wood in order stood
From edge to shuddering edge.

And spiders wove and silence lay
On each deserted wall.
Like a wild stream from beam to beam
I fell through that great hall.

Fell, till the last beam held me fast!
And, swift as spouted light,
I sprang—each beam like air did seem—
To the bewildered height.

In clanging words, in shattering words,
Through all my body ran:
"I leave the blind abyss behind,
I battle up to man!"

But soon the roof with final seal
Lay full upon my head.
I beat my face like a blunted mace
Against it, beat and bled;
The torrent dyed shoulder and side,
Like a fierce fury, red.

And the dumb stone did cry and groan,
Slow turned, and made a way!
The sky leapt up, the stars showered out,
Moveless the planets lay.

IV

Day came. The light lay cold upon
The tarn, the watching mound.

The rushes like ranged frozen spears
Were still. There was no sound.

But on the high rim of the sky
Two clouds like phantoms fell.
They grew; they moved together like
Two armies terrible.

They met; they broke in fire-split smoke—
A red ball in the sky!
A ball of fire—it raged, and turned
To ashes suddenly.

In the pale sky a blackened sun
In wide blind circles whirled,
From which bright serpents woke, and shook
Their fanged flames o'er the world.

Their pennon fires shot out in spires
And split the cracking mail!
'Twas as if hell with plumes of fire
Upon the air did sail.

The planet drank its fires; it stood
In heaven immovably.
As if its fear had clamped it there,
It stood immovably;

Till its fear indrawn in furious spawn
A myriad legs gave birth:
A monstrous spider, down the air
It clambered to the earth.

Its head was like a wooden prow
Which has voyaged noiselessly
O'er the white seas of perished worlds;
It smiled disdainfully.

Its brow was like a thin-sheathed flame;
Its eyes were as red as blood;
Its lips were as thin as smirking sin;
Its belly and feet were mud.

Like a fierce bird upflew my sword
Into the towering sky;
I struck the beast upon the brow;
It did not move nor cry;

But, like hard marble melting slow,
It softly, softly smiled.
My body grew a storm wherethrough
The sword in lightnings wild
Rove and rent; *it* sideways bent
Meek as a wistful child.

The white sword streamed in running fire,
The hard mail burst in two,
The white-robed, white-winged spirit up
In wavering circles flew.

Hastily sank the quivering mail
Deep, deep in the darksome ground.
Amazed I saw the trampled grass,
The tarn, the stilly mound.

V

O fair are freedom and victory!
The sweet sky rained with wings.
I was so happy that I seemed
Like one of those fair things.

For, as through still clear waters, fell
Dissolving phantoms white,
Like wavering dreams slow shaken down
From a great fount of light.

And sweetly, sweetly from my flesh
I felt the fetters slip.
With pennons fair on the blue air
I sailed, a white-plumed ship.

Onward I flew o'er seas so clear
That still my wraith below,
Like a mute pilgrimaging thought,
Inexorable did go.

There she who once in Chaos stood,
In the first battling night,
Bloomed silent in the burning air,
Like deeper light in light.

We linked our hands (as one they seemed),
We rose in wavering rings;
Two plumes fell down the glittering well;
We mounted on two wings.

Up, up we fared; the light flew back;

We saw the throne of God.
We stood upon the streets of Heaven:
Our joy rose and abode.

Then, wavering, we turned each to each,
Looked deep, and faltering kissed.
The watching hosts were silent as
A sea at morning whist.

VI

These things my soul showed clear to me
As in a trance I lay;
And I shall know them while I live,
Through day and night and day.

BALLAD OF THE NIGHTINGALE

In his book on *German Philosophy and Religion* Heine relates that in the May of 1433, at the time of the Ecumenical Council, a party of ecclesiastics took a walk in a grove near Basle. In the midst of their discourse "they paused transfixed before a blooming linden tree, on which sat a nightingale, trilling and trolling the sweetest and tenderest strains." For a time they were ravished by the sweetness of the song; but finally one of them had the sagacious thought that the nightingale might be the devil,

who was trying to interrupt their pious conversation. He proceeded to exorcise it, and the bird did in fact reply, "Yes, I am the devil!" and flew away laughing. This ballad is an imaginary continuation of the incident.

The priest sleeps, he sleeps soundly;
The bell strikes the midnight.
See, on the blank wall brightening,
A flame, a wavering sprite?
In the bare cell,
Weaving a spell,
A gentle, gambolling light?

It mounts, a moveless column,
And One is standing there.
Straight as a flame is lifted
From His bright head His hair;
Like strings of fire
On a burning lyre,
A cresset of quivering hair.

He does not touch the sleeper;
He draws him with His eyes.
With one slow sliding motion
The priest begins to rise:
Nor sound, nor word,
Like a tight cord,
To his full height doth rise.

They pass the moon-ribbed cloister,
And walk the throngéd street;
They move like souls in slumber

Which know not those they meet:
Their eyes as far
Voyagers' are,
And soundless are their feet.

Lo, the sun stands straight in heaven,
For it is full noon-day.
The folk march with loud shouting,
But yet as tranced are they:
With garlanded hair,
They smile as 'twere
Some strange redemption day.

And murderers in red raiment
Move as the blessed move:
Their eyes like frozen daggers
Are fixed, still-held, above,
As quivering
Unwavering
Pulses of naked love.

And harlots robed for bridal
Bring peace on all who see:
Their brows have naught left on them
Save first virginity.
As risen from deep
Clear gulfs of sleep
Their eyes are pure and free.

And ribbed wood-scented creatures
Stalk noiseless here and there:
The mountain-headed lion,

The doe, star-browed and fair:
By their blunt heads
A maiden leads
Two tigers stark and bare.

The beasts lift up their faces
Like statues, and adore;
They seem as they would never
Look earthwards any more.
So still they are,
They look like far
Cliffs on some quiet shore.

But they rise like ranked waves rising;
The birds' song bursts like a gale;
The priest stands still and listens
To hear the nightingale;
His ear-drums burst
For dreadful thirst
Of the songless nightingale.

Songless! and all slow-turning,
Gaze at him silently.
Their eyes burn in so deeply,
They are as one great eye
Of some mystical
Huge animal.
He shrieks: "'Tis I! 'Tis I!"

And 'neath the farthest circle
They sweep wild-voiced away.
The day is void, is perished,

And it is but our day.
The priest awakes,
With numb hand takes
Back, back his torpid clay.

BALLAD OF THE MONK

I wandered in the woods my lane;
I heard a wind did sab and mane.

A dowie wind passed me by,
Yet there was nae wind in earth or sky.

I sat me doon beside a tree;
The eerie ghaist shak waefully.

It soomed the swounding air upon;
It was a snaw-white skeleton.

It picked its banes oot ane by ane,
And cast them doon wi' sab and mane.

It cast and cast them dreamfully,
Like light leaves frae a late hairst tree.

It cast them doon fell and fast,
As it wad lose its banes at last.

But the sma' banes were fu' o' grace;

They moved each to his rightfu' place.

They gathered like a rank o' men;
They knit themsels in ane again.

They claihted themsels in dowie flesh,
Weel-woven like a wabster's mesh.

They covered the heid wi' close-weaved hair;
They set twa eyes to blink and stare.

And the puir clay to move began:
It was a coal-black naked man.

It cam' and stood before the tree,
And spak, the tear fell frae its e'e:

"I was a monk o' the order white,
But noo I'm black as the midmost night.

"I gave my lands, I gave my board,
And a' that blythe sinners sweetly hoard.

"And my eternal part I gave,
For I was minded my saul to save.

"But my fause flesh I couldna gi'e,
And I maun live anither day,

"And I maun live forevermair!"
It lap awa' through the mirky air.

BALLAD OF THE FLOOD

"Last night I dreamed a gashly dream,
Before the dirl o' day.
A twining worm cam oot the wast;
Its back was like the slae.

"It ganted wide, as deid men gant,
Turned three times on its tail,
And wapped itsel' the world around
Till ilka rock did wail.

"Its belly was blacker than the coal,
It wapped sae close aboot,
It brak the hills in pieces sma'
And shut the heavens oot.

"Repent, repent, my folk, repent,
Repent and turn around!
The hills are sinking in the sea,
The world has got a stound."

The braw lads woke beside their makes,
And drowsy were their e'en:
"O I wat this is anither day
As every day has been.

"And we sall joy to-day, my luv,
Sall dance to harp and horn;

And I'll devise anither play
When we walk oot the morn.

"But on the neist high day we twa
Through the kirk door sall gae;
For sair I fear lest we sall brenn
In living fire alway."

They looked around on every wa',
And drowsy were their e'en.
The day rase up aboon the east
As every day had been.

But Noah took a plank o' aik,
Anither o' the pine,
And bigged a hoose for a' his folk
To sail upon the brine.

"Gang oot, gang oot, and ca' the beasts,
Ca' twa o' every kind,
To sail upon this cracking shell
When a' the hills are blind.

"Ca' but, ca' but, and they'll rin fast
As sune's they hear your voice,
For they hae heard amang the hills,
I wat, a boding noise.

"They cry a' night about the hoose,
And I hae ruth to see
Sae mony innocent creatures die
For man's iniquity."

Noah's sons went oot into the fields,
Ca'd twa o' every kind.
They cam frae the east, they cam frae the wast,
And followed close behind.

And some were brighter than the sun,
Some blacker than the coal.
The lark was wiléd frae the sky,
The serpent frae the hole.

And they were as meek as blessed sauls
Assoilzied o' their sin;
They bowed their heids in thankfulness
Whenas they entered in.

"Come in, come in, my people a'!
The sea has drunk the plain.
The hills are falling in the flood;
The sun has doonward gane."

The rain it rained baith day and night,
And the wind cam together.
The water rase like a lang straight line
Frae ae hill to the tither.

The Ark span like a cockle shell,
Ran east and then ran wast.
"Noo, God us save," auld Noah cried,
"The world is sinking fast."

The beasts they hid amang the shaws,
And loud and sair cried they;
They sabbed and maned the leelang night

And focht the leelang day;

That the creatures in the Ark were sair
Astonied at the sound;
They trembled sae they shak the hoose
As it were in a swound.

But syne there was nae crying mair
Across the dowie sea.
"I wat," said Noah, "the warld is sunk
Frae plain to hill-top heigh."

The first day that auld Noah sailed,
The green trees floated by.
The second day that auld Noah sailed,
He heard a woman's cry.

And tables set wi' meats were there,
Gowd beakers set wi' wine,
And twa lovers on a silken couch,
A-sailing on the brine.

They soomed upon the hameless sea,
And sad sad were their e'en:
"O tak' me in thy ship, auld man,
And I'll please thee, I ween."

"Haud off, haud off," auld Noah cried,
"Ye comena in to me!
Droon deep, droon deep, ye harlot fause,
Ye wadna list to me!"

She wrang her hands, she kissed her make,

She lap into the sea.
But Noah turned and laughed fu' loud:
"To hell, I wat, gang ye!

"To hell the hale warld gangs this day,
But and my folk sae gude.
Sail on, sail on, till Ararat
Lifts up aboon the flood."

The third day that auld Noah sailed
There was nae sign ava'.
The water rase on every side
Like a weel-biggéd wa'.

The astonied ships upon the sea
Tacked round and round aboot,
Till the dragons rising frae the glaur
Sucked a' their timbers oot.

Ane after ane, ane after ane,
They sank into the sea;
And there was nane left on the earth
Save the Ark's companie.

But every day the dragons cam
And played the Ark around.
They lay upon the faem and sang:
It was a luvly sound.

"Why stand ye at the window, my sons?
What hope ye there to see?"
"We wad see a gudely ha', faither,
Set in the green countrie.

"But we see naught but water, water,
We've seen this mony a day,
And the silly fishes in the faem
That soom around in play."

"Sail on, sail on," auld Noah cried,
"Sail on, sail on alway!
I wat we'll sail around the world
Until the Judgment Day!"

Noah sent a doo far owre the sea;
It flew into the south;
It stayed four days and cam again
Wi' a leaf within its mouth.

Noah sent a doo far owre the sea;
It to the wast is ta'en;
It tarried late, it tarried lang,
And cam'na back again.

"O what's yon green hill in the wast,
Set round wi' mony a tree?"

"I wat it is Mount Ararat
New risen frae the sea."

He's set the Ark for Ararat,
He's plied her owre the faem,
He's lighted doon at Ararat,
And there he's made his hame.

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[The end of *First Poems* by Edwin Muir]