

# THE NARROW PLACE

EDWIN MUIR

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# THE NARROW PLACE

*by*  
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# THE NARROW PLACE

**TO J. F. H. (1897-1934)**

Shot from the sling into the perilous road,  
The hundred mile long hurtling bowling alley,  
To-day I saw you pass full tilt for the jack.  
Or it seemed a race beyond Time's gate you rode,  
Trussed to the motor cycle, shoulder and head  
Fastened to flying fate, so that your back  
Left nothing but a widening wake of dumb  
Scornful oblivion. It was you, yet some  
Soft finger somewhere turned a different day,  
The day I left you in that narrow valley,  
Close to my foot, but already far away;  
And I remembered you were seven years dead.

Yet you were there so clearly, I could not tell  
For a moment in the hot still afternoon  
What world I walked in, since it held us two,  
A dead and a living man. Had I cracked the shell  
That hides the secret souls, had I fallen through,  
I idly wondered, and in so falling found  
The land where life's untraceable truants run  
Hunting a halting stage? Was this the ground  
That stretched beyond the span-wide world-wide ditch,  
So like the ground I knew, yet so unlike,  
Because it said 'Again', all this again,  
The flying road, the motionless house again,

And, stretched between, the tension of your face—  
As you ran in dust the burning comet's race  
Athirst for the ease of ash—the eating itch  
To be elsewhere, nowhere, the driving pain  
Clamping the shoulders back? Was death's low dike  
So easy to leap as this and so commonplace,  
A jump from here through here straight into here,  
An operation to make you what you were  
Before, no better or worse? And yet the fear?

The clock-hand moved, the street slipped into its place,  
Two cars went by. A chance face flying past  
Had started it all and made a hole in space,  
The hole you looked through always. I knew at last  
The sight you saw there, the terror and mystery  
Of unrepeatable life so plainly given  
To you half wrapped still in eternity,  
Who had come by such a simple road from heaven;  
So that you did not need to have the story  
Retold, or bid the heavy world turn again,  
But felt the terror of the trysting place,  
The crowning test, the treachery and the glory.

## **THE WAYSIDE STATION**

Here at the wayside station, as many a morning,  
I watch the smoke torn from the fummy engine  
Crawling across the field in serpent sorrow.



Flat in the east, held down by stolid clouds,  
The struggling day is born and shines already  
On its warm hearth far off. Yet something here  
Glimmers along the ground to show the seagulls  
White on the furrows' black unturning waves.

But now the light has broadened.  
I watch the farmstead on the little hill,  
That seems to mutter: 'Here is day again'  
Unwillingly. Now the sad cattle wake  
In every byre and stall,  
The ploughboy stirs in the loft, the farmer groans  
And feels the day like a familiar ache  
Deep in his body, though the house is dark.  
The lovers part  
Now in the bedroom where the pillows gleam  
Great and mysterious as deep hills of snow,  
An inaccessible land. The wood stands waiting  
While the bright snare slips coil by coil around it,  
Dark silver on every branch. The lonely stream  
That rode through darkness leaps the gap of light,  
Its voice grown loud, and starts its winding journey  
Through the day and time and war and history.

## **THE RIVER**

The silent stream flows on and in its glass  
Shows the trained terrors, the well-practised partings:

The old woman standing at the cottage gate,  
Her hand upon her grandson's shoulder. He,  
A bundle of clouts creased as with tribulations,  
Bristling with spikes and spits and bolts of steel,  
Bound in with belts, the rifle's snub-nosed horn  
Peering above his shoulder, looks across  
From this new world to hers and tries to find  
Some ordinary words that share her sorrow.  
The stream flows on  
And shows a blackened field, a burning wood,  
A bridge that stops half-way, a hill split open  
With scraps of houses clinging to its sides,  
Stones, planks and tiles and chips of glass and china  
Strewn on the slope as by a wrecking wave  
Among the grass and wild-flowers. Darkness falls,  
The stream flows through the city. In its mirror  
Great oes and capitals and flourishes,  
Pillars and towers and fans and gathered sheaves  
Hold harvest-home and Judgment Day of fire.  
The houses stir and pluck their roofs and walls  
Apart as if in play and fling their stones  
Against the sky to make a common arc  
And fall again. The conflagrations raise  
Their mountainous precipices. Living eyes  
Glaze instantly in crystal change. The stream  
Runs on into the day of Time and Europe,  
Past the familiar walls and friendly roads,  
Now thronged with dumb migrations, gods and altars  
That travel towards no destination. Then  
The disciplined soldiers come to conquer nothing,  
March upon emptiness and do not know  
Why all is dead and life has hidden itself.

The enormous winding frontier walls fall down,  
Leaving anonymous stone and vacant grass.  
The stream flows on into what land, what peace,  
Far past the other side of the burning world?

## **THEN**

There were no men and women then at all,  
But the flesh lying alone,  
And angry shadows fighting on a wall  
That now and then sent out a groan  
Buried in lime and stone,  
And sweated now and then like tortured wood  
Big drops that looked yet did not look like blood.

And yet as each drop came a shadow faded  
And left the wall.  
There was a lull  
Until another in its shadow arrayed it,  
Came, fought and left a blood-mark on the wall;  
And that was all; the blood was all.

If there had been women there they might have wept  
For the poor blood, unowned, unwanted,  
Blank as forgotten script.  
The wall was haunted  
By mute maternal presences whose sighing  
Fluttered the fighting shadows and shook the wall

As if that fury of death itself were dying.

## **THE REFUGEES**

A crack ran through our hearthstone long ago,  
And from the fissure we watched gently grow  
The tame domesticated danger,  
Yet lived in comfort in our haunted rooms.  
Till came the Stranger  
And the great and the little dooms.

We saw the homeless waiting in the street  
Year after year,  
The always homeless,  
Nationless and nameless,  
To whose bare roof-trees never come  
Peace and the house martin to make a home.  
We did not fear  
A wrong so dull and old,  
So patiently told and patiently retold,  
While we sat by the fire or in the window-seat.  
Oh what these suffered in dumb animal patience,  
That we now suffer,  
While the world's brow grows darker and the world's hand  
rougher.  
We bear the lot of nations,  
Of times and races,  
Because we watched the wrong

Last too long  
With non-committal faces.  
Until from Europe's sunset hill  
We saw our houses falling  
Wall after wall behind us.  
What could blind us  
To such self-evident ill  
And all the sorrows from their caverns calling?

This is our punishment. We came  
Here without blame, yet with blame,  
Dark blame of others, but our blame also.  
This stroke was bound to fall,  
Though not to fall so.  
A few years did not waste  
The heaped up world. The central pillar fell  
Moved by no living hand. The good fields sickened  
By long infection. Oh this is the taste  
Of evil done long since and always, quickened  
No one knows how  
While the red fruit hung ripe upon the bough  
And fell at last and rotted where it fell.

For such things homelessness is ours  
And shall be others'. Tenement roofs and towers  
Will fall upon the kind and the unkind  
Without election,  
For deaf and blind  
Is rejection bred by rejection  
Breeding rejection,  
And where no counsel is what will be will be.  
We must shape here a new philosophy.

## SCOTLAND 1941

We were a tribe, a family, a people.  
Wallace and Bruce guard now a painted field,  
And all may read the folio of our fable,  
Peruse the sword, the sceptre and the shield.  
A simple sky roofed in that rustic day,  
The busy corn-fields and the haunted holms,  
The green road winding up the ferny brae.  
But Knox and Melville clapped their preaching palms  
And bundled all the harvesters away,  
Hoodicrow Peden in the blighted corn  
Hacked with his rusty beak the starving haulms.  
Out of that desolation we were born.

Courage beyond the point and obdurate pride  
Made us a nation, robbed us of a nation.  
Defiance absolute and myriad-eyed  
That could not pluck the palm plucked our damnation.  
We with such courage and the bitter wit  
To fell the ancient oak of loyalty,  
And strip the peopled hill and the altar bare,  
And crush the poet with an iron text,  
How could we read our souls and learn to be?  
Here a dull drove of faces harsh and vexed,  
We watch our cities burning in their pit,  
To salve our souls grinding dull lucre out,  
We, fanatics of the frustrate and the half,

Who once set Purgatory Hill in doubt.  
Now smoke and dearth and money everywhere,  
Mean heirlooms of each fainter generation,  
And mummied housegods in their musty niches,  
Burns and Scott, sham bards of a sham nation,  
And spiritual defeat wrapped warm in riches,  
No pride but pride of pelf. Long since the young  
Fought in great bloody battles to carve out  
This towering pulpit of the Golden Calf,  
Montrose, Mackail, Argyle, perverse and brave,  
Twisted the stream, unhooped the ancestral hill.  
Never had Dee or Don or Yarrow or Till  
Huddled such thriftless honour in a grave.

Such wasted bravery idle as a song,  
Such hard-won ill might prove Time's verdict wrong,  
And melt to pity the annalist's iron tongue.

## **THE LETTER**

Tried friendship must go down perforce  
Before the outward eating rage  
And murderous heart of middle age,  
Killing kind memory at its source,  
If it were not for mortality,  
The thought of that which levels all  
And coldly pillows side by side  
The tried friend and the too much tried.

Then think of that which will have made  
Us and all else contemporary.  
Look long enough and you must see  
The dead fighting with the dead.  
Now's the last hour for chivalry,  
Now we can still escape the shame  
Of striking the unanswering head,  
Before we are changed put off the blame.

But should this seem a niggardly  
And ominous reconciliation,  
Look yet again until you see,  
Fixed in the body's final station,  
The features of immortality.  
Try to pursue this quarrel then.  
You cannot. This is less than man  
And more. That more is our salvation.  
Now let us seize it. Now we can.

## **THE HUMAN FOLD**

Here penned within the human fold  
No longer now we shake the bars,  
Although the ever-moving stars  
Night after night in silence rolled  
Rebuke this stationary farce.  
There's no alternative here but love,  
So far as genuine love can be



Where there's no genuine liberty  
To give or take, to lose or have,  
And having rots with wrong, and loss  
Itself has no security  
Except in the well-managed grave,  
And all we do is done to prove  
Content and discontent both are gross.  
Yet sometimes here we still can see  
The dragon with his tears of gold,  
The bat-browed sphinx  
Shake loose her wings  
That have no hold and fan no air,  
All struck dead by her stare.  
Hell shoots its avalanche at our feet,  
In heaven the souls go up and down,  
And we can see from this our seat  
The heavenly and the hellish town,  
The green cross growing in a wood  
Close by old Eden's crumbling wall,  
And God Himself in full manhood  
Riding against the Fall.  
All this; but here our sight is bound  
By ten dull faces in a round,  
Each with a made-to-measure glance  
That is in misery till it's found.  
Yet looking at each countenance  
I read this burden in them all:  
'I lean my cheek from Eternity  
For Time to slap, for Time to slap.  
I gather my bones from the bottomless clay  
To lay my head in the light's lap.'

By what long way, by what dark way,  
From what unpredetermined place,  
Did we creep severally to this hole  
And bring no memory and no grace  
To furnish evidence of the soul,  
Though come of an ancient race?  
All gone, where now we cannot say,  
Altar and shrine and boundary stone,  
And of the legends of our day  
This one remains alone:  
'They loved and might have loved for ever,  
But public trouble and private care  
Faith and hope and love can sever  
And strip the bed and the altar bare'.  
Forward our towering shadows fall  
Upon the naked nicheless wall,  
And all we see is that shadow-dance.  
Yet looking at each countenance  
I read this burden in them all:  
'I lean my cheek from Eternity  
For Time to slap, for Time to slap.  
I gather my bones from the bottomless clay  
To lay my head in the light's lap'.

## **THE NARROW PLACE**

How all the roads creep in.  
This place has grown so narrow,

You could not swing a javelin,  
And if you shot an arrow,  
It would skim this meagre mountain wall  
And in some other country  
Like a lost meteor fall.  
When first this company  
Took root here no one knows,  
For nothing comes and goes  
But the bleak mountain wind,  
That so our blood has thinned  
And sharpened so our faces—  
Unanswerably grave  
As long-forsaken places—  
They have lost all look of hate or love  
And keep but what they have.  
The cloud has drawn so close,  
This small much-trodden mound  
Must, must be very high  
And no road goes by.  
The parsimonious ground  
That at its best will bear  
A few thin blades as fine as hair  
Can anywhere be found,  
Yet is so proud and niggardly  
And envious, it will trust  
Only one little wild half-leafless tree  
To straggle from the dust.

Yet under it we sometimes feel such ease  
As if it were ten thousand trees  
And for its foliage had  
Robbed half the world of shade.

All the woods in grief  
Bowed down by leaf and bird and leaf  
From all their branches could not weep  
A sleep such as that sleep.

Sleep underneath the tree.  
It is your murdering eyes that make  
The sterile hill, the standing lake,  
And the leaf-breaking wind.  
Then shut your eyes and see,  
Sleep on and do not wake  
Till there is movement in the lake,  
And the club-headed water-serpents break  
In emerald lightnings through the slime,  
Making a mark on Time.

## **THE RECURRENCE**

All things return, Nietzsche said,  
The ancient wheel revolves again,  
Rise, take up your numbered fate;  
The cradle and the bridal bed,  
Life and the coffin wait.  
All has been that ever can be,  
And this sole eternity  
Cannot cancel, cannot add  
One to your delights or tears,  
Or a million million years

Tear the nightmare from the mad.

Have no fear then. You will miss  
Achievement by the self-same inch,  
When the great occasion comes  
And they watch you, you will flinch,  
Lose the moment, be for bliss  
A footlength short. All done before.  
Love's agonies, victory's drums  
Cannot huddle the Cross away  
Planted on its future hill,  
The secret on the appointed day  
Will be made known, the ship once more  
Hit upon the waiting rock  
Or come safely to the shore,  
Careless under the deadly tree  
The victim drowse, the urgent warning  
Come too late, the dagger strike,  
Strike and strike through eternity,  
And worlds hence the prison clock  
Will toll on execution morning,  
What is ill be always ill,  
Wretches die behind a dike,  
And the happy be happy still.

But the heart makes reply:  
This is only what the eye  
From its tower on the turning field  
Sees and sees and cannot tell why,  
Quarterings on the turning shield,  
The great non-stop heraldic show.  
And the heart and the mind know,

What has been can never return,  
What is not will surely be  
In the changed unchanging reign,  
Else the Actor on the Tree  
Would loll at ease, miming pain,  
And counterfeit mortality.

## **THE GOOD MAN IN HELL**

If a good man were ever housed in Hell  
By needful error of the qualities,  
Perhaps to prove the rule or shame the devil,  
Or speak the truth only a stranger sees,

Would he, surrendering quick to obvious hate,  
Fill half eternity with cries and tears,  
Or watch beside Hell's little wicket gate  
In patience for the first ten thousand years,

Feeling the curse climb slowly to his throat  
That, uttered, dooms him to rescindless ill,  
Forcing his praying tongue to run by rote,  
Eternity entire before him still?

Would he at last, grown faithful in his station,  
Kindle a little hope in hopeless Hell,  
And sow among the damned doubts of damnation,  
Since here someone could live and could live well?

One doubt of evil would bring down such a grace,  
Open such a gate, all Eden could enter in,  
Hell be a place like any other place,  
And love and hate and life and death begin.

## **THE WHEEL**

How can I turn this wheel that turns my life,  
Create another hand to move this hand  
Not moved by me, who am not the mover,  
Nor, though I love and hate, the lover,  
The hater? Loves and hates are thrust  
Upon me by the acrimonious dead,  
The buried thesis, long since rusted knife,  
Revengeful dust.

A stony or obstreperous head,  
Though slain so squarely, can usurp my will  
As I walk above it on the sunny hill.

Then how do I stand?  
How can I here remake what there made me  
And makes and remakes me still?  
Set a new mark? Circumvent history?  
Nothing can come of history but history,  
The stationary storm that cannot bate  
Its neutral violence,  
The transitory solution that cannot wait,  
The indecisive victory

That is like loss read backwards and cannot bring  
Relief to you and me,  
The jangling  
Of all the voices of plant and beast and man  
That have not made a harmony  
Since first the great controversy began,  
And cannot sink to silence  
Unless a grace  
Come of itself to wrap our souls in peace  
Between the turning leaves of history and make  
Ourselves ourselves, winnow the grudging grain,  
And take  
From that which made us that which will make us again.

## **THE FACE**

See me with all the terrors on my roads,  
The crusted shipwrecks rotting in my seas,  
And the untroubled oval of my face  
That alters idly with the moonlike modes  
And is unfathomably framed to please  
And deck the angular bone with passing grace.

I should have worn a terror-mask, should be  
A sight to frighten hope and faith away,  
Half charnel field, half battle and rutting ground.  
Instead I am a smiling summer sea  
That sleeps while underneath from bound to bound



The sun- and star-shaped killers gorge and play.

## **THE LAW**

O you my Law  
Which I serve not,  
O you my Good  
Which I prize not,  
O you my Truth  
Which I seek not:

Where grace is beyond desert  
Thanks must be thanklessness;  
Where duty is past performance  
Disservice is only service;  
Where truth is unsearchable  
All seeking is straying.

If I could know ingratitude's  
Bounds I should know gratitude;  
And disservice done  
Would show me the law of service;  
And the wanderer at last  
Learns his long error.

If I could hold complete  
The reverse side of the pattern,  
The wrong side of Heaven,

O then I should know in not knowing  
My truth in my error.

## THE CITY

Day after day we kept the dusty road,  
And nearer came small-towered Jerusalem,  
Nearer and nearer. Lightened of the goad,  
Our beasts went on as if the air wafted them.

We saw the other troops with music move  
Between the mountain meadows, far and clear,  
Onward towards the city, and above  
The ridge the fresh young firmament looked near.

All stood so silent in the silent air,  
The little houses set on every hill,  
A tree before each house. The people were  
Tranquil, not sad nor glad. How they could till

Their simple fields, here, almost at the end,  
Perplexed us. We were filled with dumb surprise  
At wells and mills, and could not understand  
This was an order natural and wise.

We looked away. Yet some of us declared:  
'Let us stay here. We ask no more than this,'  
Though we were now so close, we who had dared

Half the world's spite to hit the mark of bliss.

So we went on to the end. But there we found  
A dead land pitted with blind whirling places  
And crowds of angry men who held their ground  
With blank blue eyes and raging rubicund faces.

We drew our swords and in our minds we saw  
The streets of the holy city running with blood,  
And centuries of fear and power and awe,  
And all our children in the deadly wood.

## **THE GROVE**

There was no road at all to that high place  
But through the smothering grove,  
Where as we went the shadows wove  
Adulterous shapes of animal hate and love,  
The idol-crowded nightmare Space,  
Wood beyond wood, tree behind tree,  
And every tree an empty face  
Gashed by the casual lightning mark  
The first great Luciferian animal  
Scored on clay and leaf and bark.  
This was, we knew, the heraldic ground,  
And therefore now we heard our footsteps fall  
With the true legendary sound,  
Like secret trampling behind a wall,

As if they were saying: To be: to be.

And oh the silence, the drugged thicket dozing  
Deep in its dream of fear,  
The ring closing  
And coming near,  
The well-bred self-sufficient animals  
With clean rank pelts and proud and fetid breath,  
Screaming their arrogant calls,  
Their moonstone eyes set straight at life and death.  
Did we see or dream it? And the jungle cities—  
For there were cities there and civilizations  
Deep in the forest; powers and dominations  
Like shapes begotten by dreaming animals,  
Proud animal dreams uplifted high,  
Booted and saddled on the animal's back  
And staring with the arrogant animal's eye:  
The golden dukes, the silver earls, and gleaming black  
The curvetting knights sitting their curvetting steeds,  
The sweet silk-tunicked eunuchs singing ditties,  
Swaying like wandering weeds,  
The scarlet cardinals,  
And lions high in the air on the banner's field,  
Crowns, sceptres, spears and stars and moons of blood,  
And sylvan wars in bronze within the shield,  
All quartered in the wide world's wood,  
The smothering grove where there was place for pities.

We trod the maze like horses in a mill,  
And then passed through it  
As in a dream of the will.  
How could it be? There was the stifling grove,

Yet here was light; what wonder led us to it?  
How could the blind road go  
To climb the crag and top the towering hill,  
And all that splendour spread? We know  
There was no road except the smothering grove.

## THE GATE

We sat, two children, warm against the wall  
Outside the towering stronghold of our fathers  
That frowned its stern security down upon us.  
We could not enter there. That fortress life,  
Our safe protection, was too gross and strong  
For our unpractised palates. Yet our guardians  
Cherished our innocence with gentle hands,  
(They, who had long since lost their innocence,)  
And in grave play put on a childish mask  
Over their tell-tale faces, as in shame  
For the fine food that plumped their lusty bodies  
And made them strange as gods. We sat that day  
With that great parapet behind us, safe  
As every day, yet outcast, safe and outcast  
As castaways thrown upon an empty shore.  
Before us lay our well-worn scene, a hillock  
So small and smooth and green, it seemed intended  
For us alone and childhood, a still pond  
That opened upon no sight a quiet eye,  
A little stream that tinkled down the slope.

But suddenly all seemed old  
And dull and shrunken, shut within itself  
In a sullen dream. We were outside, alone.  
And then behind us the huge gate swung open.

## **THE LITTLE GENERAL**

Early in spring the little General came  
    Across the sound, bringing the island death,  
And suddenly a place without a name,  
    And like the pious ritual of a faith,

Hunter and quarry in the boundless trap,  
    The white smoke curling from the silver gun,  
The feather curling in the hunter's cap,  
    And clouds of feathers floating in the sun,

While down the birds came in a deafening shower,  
    Wing-hurricane, and the cattle fled in fear.

Up on the hill a remnant of a tower  
    Had watched that single scene for many a year,

Weaving a wordless tale where all were gathered  
    (Hunter and quarry and watcher and fabulous field),  
A sylvan war half human and half feathered,  
    Perennial emblem painted on the shield

Held up to cove a never-conquered land

Fast in the little General's fragile hand.

## **THE PRIZE**

Did we come here, drawn by some fatal thing,  
Fly from Eternity's immaculate bow  
Straight to the heart of Time's great turning ring,  
That we might win the prize that took us so?

Was it some ordinary sight, a flower,  
The white wave falling, falling upon the shore,  
The blue of the sky, the grasses' waving green?

Or was it one sole thing, a certain door  
Set in a wall, a half-conjectured scene  
Of men and women moving as in a play,  
A turn in the winding road, a distant tower,  
A corner of a field, a single place  
Apart, a single house, a single tree,  
A look upon one half-averted face  
That has been once, or is, or is to be?

We hurried here for some such thing and now  
Wander the countless roads to seek our prize,  
That far within the maze serenely lies,  
While all around each trivial shape exclaims:  
'Here is your jewel; this is your longed for day',  
And we forget, lost in the countless names.

## **THE SHADES**

The bodiless spirits waiting chill  
In the ports of black Nonentity  
For passage to the living land,  
Without eyes strive to see,  
Without ears strain to hear,  
Stretch an unincarnate hand  
In greeting to the hollow hill  
Above the insubstantial sea,  
The billow curving on the sand,  
The bird sitting on the tree;  
And in love and in fear  
Ensnare the smile, condense the tear,  
Rehearse the play of evil and good,  
The comedy and the tragedy.  
Until the summoned ghosts appear  
In patterned march around the hill  
Against the hoofed and horned wood.

## **THE RING**

We were long since a family, a people,  
The legends say; an old kind-hearted king



Was our foster father, and our life a fable.

Nature in wrath broke through the grassy ring  
Where all our gathered treasures lay in sleep—  
Many a rich and many a childish thing.

She filled with hoofs and horns the quiet keep.  
Her herds beat down the turf and nosed the shrine  
In bestial wonder, bull and adder and ape,

Lion and fox, all dressed by fancy fine  
In human flesh and armed with arrows and spears;  
But on the brow of each a secret sign

That haughtily put aside the sorrowful years  
Or struck them down in stationary rage;  
Yet they had tears that were not like our tears,

And new, all new, for Nature knows no age.  
Fatherless, sonless, homeless haunters, they  
Had never known the vow and the pilgrimage,

Poured from one fount into the faithless day.  
We are their sons, but long ago we heard  
Our fathers or our fathers' fathers say

As in a dream the half-remembered word  
That rounded again the ring where sleeping lay  
Our treasures, still unruined and unmarred.

# POSTSCRIPT

## ISAIAH

Isaiah from his ledge could see  
Angel and man and animal  
At their everlasting play.

He saw the crack in the palace wall  
Open and shut like a mouth jerking,  
Spitting out teeth of stone.  
He and the Three were all alone  
With Time and with Time's working.

The Three were one, the One was three,  
For his eyes could never see  
This or that, so quick its passing.  
But the triple shadows crossing  
Framed an image in their fall,  
A shape against the breaking wall.

## THE RETURN

The doors flapped open in Ulysses' house,  
The lolling latches gave to every hand,

Let traitor, babblers, tout and bargainer in.  
The rooms and passages resounded  
With ease and chaos of a public market,  
The walls mere walls to lean on as you talked,  
Spat on the floor, surveyed some newcomer  
With an absent eye. There you could be yourself.  
Dust in the nooks, weeds nodding in the yard,  
The thick walls crumbling. Even the cattle came  
About the doors with mild familiar stare  
As if this were their place.  
All round the island stretched the clean blue sea.

Sole at the house's heart Penelope  
Sat at her chosen task, endless undoing  
Of endless doing, endless weaving, unweaving,  
In the clean chamber. Still her loom ran empty  
Day after day. She thought: 'Here I do nothing  
Or less than nothing, making an emptiness  
Amid disorder, weaving, unweaving the lie  
The day demands. Ulysses, this is duty,  
To do and undo, to keep a vacant gate  
Where order and right and hope and peace can enter.  
Oh will you ever return? Or are you dead,  
And this wrought emptiness my ultimate emptiness?'

She wove and unwove and wove and did not know  
That even then Ulysses on the long  
And winding road of the world was on his way.

# ROBERT THE BRUCE

*To Douglas in Dying:*

'My life is done, yet all remains,  
The breath has gone, the image not,  
The furious shapes once forged in heat  
Live on though now no longer hot.

'Steadily the shining swords  
In order rise, in order fall,  
In order on the beaten field  
The faithful trumpets call.

'The women weeping for the dead  
Are not sad now but dutiful,  
The dead men stiffening in their place  
Proclaim the ancient rule.

'Great Wallace's body hewn in four,  
So altered, stays as it must be.  
O Douglas do not leave me now,  
For past your head I see

'My dagger sheathed in Comyn's heart  
And nothing there to praise or blame,  
Nothing but order which must be  
Itself and still the same.

'But that Christ hung upon the Cross,  
Comyn would rot until Time's end  
And bury my sin in boundless dust,

For there is no amend

'In order; yet in order run

All things by unreturning ways.

If Christ live not, nothing is there

For sorrow or for praise.'

So the King spoke to Douglas once

A little while before his death,

Having outfaced three English kings

And kept a people's faith.

## **THE TROPHY**

The wise king dowered with blessings on his throne,

The rebel raising the flag in the market place,

Haunt me like figures on an ancient stone

The ponderous light of history beats upon,

Or the enigma of a single face

Handed unguessed, unread from father to son,

As if it dreamed within itself alone.

Regent and rebel clash in horror and blood

Here on the blindfold battlefield. But there,

Motionless in the grove of evil and good

They grow together and their roots are twined

In deep confederacy far from the air,

Sharing the secret trophy each with other;

And king and rebel are like brother and brother,  
Or father and son, co-princes of one mind,  
Irreconcilables, their treaty signed.

## THE ANNUNCIATION

Now in this iron reign  
I sing the liberty  
Where each asks from each  
What each most wants to give  
And each awakes in each  
What else would never be,  
Summoning so the rare  
Spirit to breathe and live.

Then let us empty out  
Our hearts until we find  
The last least trifling toy,  
Since now all turns to gold,  
And everything we have  
Is wealth of heart and mind,  
That squandered thus in turn  
Grows with us manifold.

Giving, I'd give you next  
Some more than mortal grace,  
But that you deifying  
Myself I might deify,

Forgetting love was born  
Here in a time and place,  
And robbing by such praise  
This life we magnify.

Whether the soul at first  
This pilgrimage began,  
Or the shy body leading  
Conducted soul to soul  
Who knows? This is the most  
That soul and body can,  
To make us each for each  
And in our spirits whole.

## **THE CONFIRMATION**

Yes, yours, my love, is the right human face.  
I in my mind had waited for this long,  
Seeing the false and searching for the true,  
Then found you as a traveller finds a place  
Of welcome suddenly amid the wrong  
Valleys and rocks and twisting roads. But you,  
What shall I call you? A fountain in a waste,  
A well of water in a country dry,  
Or anything that's honest and good, an eye  
That makes the whole world bright. Your open heart,  
Simple with giving, gives the primal deed,  
The first good world, the blossom, the blowing seed,

The hearth, the steadfast land, the wandering sea,  
Not beautiful or rare in every part,  
But like yourself, as they were meant to be.

## **THE COMMEMORATION**

I wish I could proclaim  
My faith enshrined in you  
And spread among a few  
Our high but hidden fame,  
That we new life have spun  
Past all that's thought and done,  
And someone or no one  
Might tell both did the same.

Material things will pass  
And we have seen the flower  
And the slow falling tower  
Lie gently in the grass,  
But meantime we have stored  
Riches past bed and board  
And nursed another hoard  
Than callow lad and lass.

Invisible virtue now  
Expands upon the air  
Although no fruit appear  
Nor weight bend down the bough,



And harvests truly grown  
For someone or no one  
Are stored and safely won  
In hollow heart and brow.

How can one thing remain  
Except the invisible,  
The echo of a bell  
Long rusted in the rain?  
This strand we weave into  
Our monologue of two,  
And time cannot undo  
That strong and subtle chain.

## **THE OLD GODS**

Old gods and goddesses who have lived so long  
Through time and never found eternity,  
Fettered by wasting wood and hollowing hill,

You should have fled our ever-dying song,  
The mound, the well, and the green trysting tree  
They are forgotten, yet you linger still.

Goddess of caverned breast and channelled brow  
And cheeks slow hollowed by millennial tears,  
Forests of autumns fading in your eyes,

Eternity marvels at your counted years  
And kingdoms lost in time, and wonders how  
There could be thoughts so bountiful and wise

As yours beneath the ever-breaking bough,  
And vast compassion curving like the skies.

## **THE BIRD**

Adventurous bird walking upon the air,  
Like a schoolboy running and loitering, leaping and springing,  
Pensively pausing, suddenly changing your mind  
To turn at ease on the heel of a wing-tip. Where  
In all the crystalline world was there to find  
For your so delicate walking and airy winging  
A floor so perfect, so firm and so fair,  
And where a ceiling and walls so sweetly ringing,  
Whenever you sing, to your clear singing?

The wide-winged soul itself can ask no more  
Than such a pure, resilient and endless floor  
For its strong-pinioned plunging and soaring and upward  
and upward springing.

## THE GUESS

We buried them beneath the deep green hill—  
A little Ark full, women, men and cattle,  
Children and household pets, engrossed by war.  
And then one morning they were back again  
And held as once before their little reign.  
All joys and sorrows but the last were there:  
That day erased: no pit or mound of battle.  
They lay as by some happy chance reborn  
An hour or two before the birth of ill,  
And ere ill came they'd be away again.  
Quick leave and brief reward, so lightly worn.

I watched them move between sleep and awake.  
It was a dream and could not be fulfilled,  
For all these ghosts were blessed. Yet there seemed  
Nothing more natural than blessedness,  
Nor any life as true as this I dreamed,  
So that I did not feel that I had willed  
These forms, but that a long forgotten guess  
Had shown, past chaos, the natural shape we take.

## THE SWIMMER'S DEATH

He lay outstretched upon the sunny wave,  
That turned and broke into Eternity.  
The light showed nothing but a glassy grave

Among the trackless tumuli of the sea.  
Then over his buried brow and eyes and lips  
From every side flocked in the homing ships.

## **THE QUESTION**

Will you, sometime, who have sought so long and seek  
Still in the slowly darkening hunting ground,  
Catch sight some ordinary month or week  
Of that strange quarry you scarcely thought you sought—  
Yourself, the gatherer gathered, the finder found,  
The buyer, who would buy all, in bounty bought—  
And perch in pride on the princely hand, at home,  
And there, the long hunt over, rest and roam?

## **THE DAY**

If, in the mind of God or book of fate,  
This day that's all to live lies lived and done,  
And there already like Griseldas wait  
My apprentice thoughts and actions, still untried;  
If, where I travel, some thing or some one  
Has gone before me sounding through the wide  
Immensity of nothingness to make

A region and a road where road was none,  
Nor shape, nor shaping hand; if for my sake  
The elected joy grows there and the chosen pain  
In the field of good and ill, in surety sown:  
Oh give me clarity and love that now  
The way I walk may truly trace again  
The in eternity written and hidden way;  
Make pure my heart and will, and me allow  
The acceptance and revolt, the yea and nay,  
The denial and the blessing that are my own.

[The end of *The Narrow Place* by Edwin Muir]