

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 cow 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]