

Odes and Echoes

Paul Bjarnason

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ODES and ECHOES

By

PAUL BJARNASON

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TO THE READER

Some learned and reputable writers have said that the Icelanders are a nation of poets, or at least rhymesters; that anyone who has the inclination can write some sort of passable verse. That is not quite true. Undoubtedly they do write more verse per capita than any other people, and most of the product is remarkably good from the standpoint of workmanship. But only a certain proportion of it, of course, can be classed as poetry: an artistic composition with a message.

The main reason for this penchant of the Icelandic people very probably lies in the facility of their language. Being highly inflected it lends itself well to concise and pithy phrasing, so difficult in a tongue requiring modifiers, aids and articles to "round up" and corral an idea. Being also almost inexhaustible in wealth of word formation and shades of expression, more often resembling hints than statements, it is a vehicle peculiarly well suited to the poets' art. Perhaps no other medium can so well bring out the alliteration, metre and music that so long has distinguished poetry from prose.

Due to the difficulties in this regard in the field of English, many eminent writers and critics of recent years have advanced the propaganda that poetry is, or rather should be, altogether independent of form and style and melody. In fact they have gone so far as to encourage a studied avoidance of anything suggestive of symmetry and order, either in thought or form. Long-deprecated defects, deliberately multiplied, are hailed and exalted as points of merit. A product most "stunning" and exotic in construction is often featured as a piece of art and the author eulogized as a new star in the poets' galaxy.

This interpretation, resulting in a trend that threatens to become rather more than a passing phase, springs mostly, I think, from a painful sense of frustration. Not having an adequate instrument of expression for their particular need, the argument supplies an escape. Instead of lowering the scale of values to allow for higher marks, a new and arbitrary objective is accepted for evaluation.

The English language is an excellent medium of expression both in public and private life and serves well in all classes of prose literature. But

it definitely has its shortcomings in the field of poetry, and most acutely so when it comes to interpreting the strict and intricate style of Icelandic verse. It is therefore with a great deal of trepidation that I submit these samples to the random reader. In some cases I have adhered strictly to the Icelandic form, in regard to both alliteration and the rhyming; but for the most part I have compromised to a degree, in deference to idiom and clarity.

A few of these poems (like the Northern Lights, by St. G. St.) are constructed to a form that is exclusively Icelandic, where assonance (near-rhyming) and rhyming occur in alternate lines. The rhyming in both cases is confined to each individual line, the first or second accented syllable being made to near-rhyme or rhyme with the last, as the case may be. To one who is wholly unacquainted with such versification the effect may be in a great measure lost, especially in regard to the near-rhyming, unless it is pointed out.

Obviously only the more simple works have been attempted in this collection, and yet I know they have lost much in the translation. It is a great responsibility to do over a piece of art. But if these specimens can serve to throw one gleam of Icelandic poesy beyond its present narrow confines, my object will have been attained and I shall feel fully rewarded for the effort. And possibly it may prove just enough to spur others, who are better equipped, to take on the work and finally present to the world a tolerably fair example of a sizable store of literature, in many respects both unique and worthy, but still almost entirely unknown.

—P. B.

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ODES

—Assembled from stray
thoughts picked up
on the byways of life.

MOODS

Spring, lovely spring! Thou art
In Nature's files
The cheery counterpart
Of human smiles.

Summer, so gaily guised!
Life's chronograph
In thee has symbolized
The merry laugh.

Autumn, so bleak and brown!
On Nature's chart—
As on a face—the frown
Of Time thou art.

Winter! Time's icy shell!
On Life's quick page
Thou art the parallel
Of human rage.

The seasons, one by one,
The moods we feel,
Are but the skeins upon
Life's spinning wheel.

1934

REMOTE CONTROL

“God is in His Heaven”
And things are far from right.
We slave from seven to seven
For shelter through the night.
Our plans to pots are driven
By press and racketeer,
For God is in His Heaven
And doesn’t seem to hear.

The shelves with goods are swaying;
The shops are full of meat.
Yet many a man is praying
For more to wear and eat.
Our wheat is sent to Sweden,
While bread is very dear;
For God is up in Eden
And doesn’t interfere.

The birds are blithely singing
And bravely flying north.
A vernal breeze is bringing
The buds and crocus forth.
Just man, the wise, must wonder
And worry what to do;
For God is still up Yonder.
—I think He’s puzzled too.

No beast will stalk another
Within the selfsame clan,
Nor prey upon a brother,
As man does unto man.
If Nature is to leaven
Our daily bread of fear,
God’s place is not in Heaven.
I think He should be here.

1935.

THE BITTERSWEET

I know a lovely maiden—
A minx I wished to say—
Who charms and tantalizes
With her sweet, confounded way.

Her neck is like the opal.
Her hair is soft as silk.
Her cheeks resemble roses
Upon a sea of milk.

Her eyes are either cruel
Or else with pathos melt.
Behind her hot caresses
A hardness may be felt.

A cupid's bow her mouth is,
But sometimes upside down.
Her pouting ends with laughter.
Her smiles begin a frown.

At times she is so lovely
And looks so pleased and good.
—And then she turns sarcastic
And seems so cold and rude.

I like her and I loathe her;
My love blows cold and hot.
And sometimes I am happy;
And sometimes I am not.

And though I cannot leave her,
I often wish I had.
I know I shall be sorry.
I know I shall be glad.

1899.

A REVERIE

Our cells have not forgotten
The time we lived in caves,
When tribal feuds were rampant
And all the gods were knaves;
When warriors were the masters
And all the rest were slaves.

Our ruins grim and hoary
Depict the castle age,
When every mother's hopeful
Became a serf or page,
And every knight, hysteric,
Was on a pilgrimage.

It is a long, long story
Of fears and hates and pain,
Where every saint was tortured
And all the "reds" were slain.
—And yet in every protest
There was a little gain.

For in this age of science
And wealth and ether waves,
When Art obeys her master
And Nature, led, behaves,
The burden shall be lifted,
At last, from all the slaves.

And Earth shall be an Eden
Where mankind, happy, dwells;
Where no one bows to Worry
And none his honor sells;
Where every serf is willing
And love, not fear, compels.

I know they stone the dreamers

Whose dreams are young and bold.
But this one is a day-dream
That daring men behold,
Of better things than poet
Or prophet ever told.

In truth it is a vision
Of wiser things to do;
A kindly invitation
Of Fate to me and you,
—And what remains is only
To make the dream come true.

1931.

THE UNALOGUE

In spite of Moses, Abraham,
The Ark and Genesis,
God's one advice—instead of ten—
To man, was simply this:

“I've made a world for thy delight.
Its goodness I bespeak.
The treasures may be hard to find,
But thine, if thou wilt seek.

“Go help thyself. Dispel the doubts
That so confuse thee now.
Should'st thou forget, the master key
Is limned upon thy brow.”

1934.

THE PEACE PROBLEM

A hundred years of chronic peace
Beneath the Bridge of Time has flowed
Since Hate, enslaved to Fear's decrees,
Beside our frontiers grimly strode.

No Christian aims inspired the "plutes"
To send the strutting robots home:
Brave Greed, their master, saw the fruits
That might be gathered from the loam.

Their minds, diverted, quite forgot
The menace just beyond the line;
And so each busy patriot
Beheld no more the foe's design.

And now the Brain Trust of the state,
With experts from the titled class,
Is laboring to investigate
How such a thing could come to pass.

That worthy group has sweated blood
For two long years without surcease;
And still it is as clear as mud
What may account for such a peace.

For though they're wise and from the East,
The problem baffles all their lore.
They ask a few more years at least
This knotty question to explore.

And when their findings are proclaimed
At last, and stated to be sound,
Another bureau must be named
To try to ravel what they found.

But meanwhile doubts must give us pause
And leave us trembling at the knees;
For should they fail to find the cause,
This land must suffer on in peace.

1934.

THE CRIME OF '98

Thou wert to me the land of liberty,
Where lust for conquest would be deemed a sin.
I knew the weak would kneel in trust to thee,
And nursed the hope that justice would begin.

It was a dream. My lips no longer shape
A lover's tribute to thy stainless fame.
Adaze, with trembling hands I hang the crepe
That hides my country's dread, beloved name.

The strong and wise may argue as they will
That other races need the white man's rod;
But though they rule the dupes that dread their skill,
They dare not whisper such a lie to God.

Our hypocrites with shrewdness say, "We keep
The simple, for their own good, thus at bay."
Ah fools! Should men be kept in dungeons deep
And dark, to fit them for the light of day?

1899.

THE DOXOLOGY

I rose and found the dawn unchanged,
The sunrise as of old.
The morning had its maiden blush,
The midday still its gold.
I knew the evening's quiet touch,
The sunset's crimson hue.
The stars at twilight winked at me
Just as they used to do.

I walked afield and found the lea
Still fragrant, thick and green.
The trees still waved their leafy arms,
In manner quite serene.
The robin sang, the brook still played,
The breeze felt just the same.
The cows at eve with udders taut
Looked innocent and tame.

I wondered. It was all so strange.
I knew the people's needs.
I thought the food plants and the grass
Had turned to useless weeds.
I thought that nature and the earth
Had suffered grievous change;
That rains had ceased, the soil had struck
And cows died on the range.

I looked about and saw what seemed
A mummy in the rain,
Who with a span of mangy mules
Was plowing down the grain.
I asked him why, in face of want,
He wouldn't save the wheat.
He smiled with sympathy and said:
"With lots there's less to eat."

Again I looked. A squad of men
Was stationed all around,
Intent, I thought, on dumping grain
In tons upon the ground.
I asked my friend why this might be.
He spread his bony chest
And said: "These worthy men are here
To fight the 'hopper pest."

Once more I looked. I saw afar
Where ships at anchor lay,
Whose crews were busy pitching out
Their cargoes in the bay.
Again I quizzed. My friend replied:
"It's plain as plain can be,
If apples grow too well they must
Be dumped into the sea."

It was not plain to me; but then
I thought it must be so.
I felt appeased; yet one thing more
I wanted still to know.
I asked my friend to tell me straight
If we were in B.C.
He froze me with a sneer and said:
"Wake up! This is A.D."

I said no more and turned to go,
When on my startled ear
A soul-requiting anthem broke
In accents sweet and clear.
Methought I saw a great white dome,
And on its portico
An angel sang: "The Lord be praised
From Whom all blessings flow!"

1934.

THE PROGRESS

When time was young men learned to know
That cows give milk where grasses grow;
That fruits and nuts and goodly grains
Will grow abundant if it rains.

They thought it well for all to eat.
They even stored the surplus wheat.
For Nature, rich and often kind,
Was now and then a little blind.

They had no labor-saving tools.
They hadn't thought of using mules.
But through the spirit of the hive
The rugged managed to survive.

In time they learned to fashion rafts.
They came to know the simple crafts.
The schemers hoarded on the sly,
And some grew wealthy by and by.

So when the first depression came
They started up the profit game.
They made the hungry sweat, to wit,
For just enough to keep them fit.

And thus the age of slaves began.
Thus came "The Master and the Man."—
A system fraught with sin and grief,
Where centuries brought no relief.

At last through dreams and discontent
The toilers grew belligerent.
'Twas then the wily master clan
Devised a new and better plan.

They said. "We'll lend you chips for use

To buy from us what you produce.”
And lo! The witless, weary slaves
Took up the yoke—and praised the Knaves!

But all the chips could not re-buy
The rank and meagre food supply,
For mothers and the new-born slaves
Were not considered by the knaves.

Yet that indeed was not the worst:
The chips were borrowed from the first;
So all the toilers ever use
Is owed to those who don't produce.

No matter how the fathers bled,
We slaves are always in the red.
The chattel serf who died was through;
Our debts must follow me and you.

So when it comes to judgment day,
Should we be called and asked to pay,
With costs and interest all applied,
Then I, for one, will suicide.

For though my bleeding back is strong,
Eternity is far too long
To labor on account—and yet
Not long enough to square the debt.

1934.

THE PEACE GARDEN

There are wars in the oldest story.
There are wars in the Land of Nod.
There are wars for the sake of glory
And wars for the grace of God.
There are wars on the upland ranges.
There are wars on the deep blue seas.
There's a war that the souls estranges
—But only a prayer for peace.

There's an arch to the oldest bully.
There's an arch to the newest cad.
There's an arch to the most unruly
Who struck when the world was mad.
There's an arch to the boldest raider,
Who forced the weak to their knees.
There's an arch to the keenest trader
—And now there's an Arch of Peace.

They plant by the gates a garden
To greet when the brave returns,
To comfort the hearts that harden
Where hell on the earth still burns.
With busts of the new-time Neros
They tip its chevaux-de-frise,
—Not one for the patient heroes
Who worked in the cause of peace.

Since Eve in the Garden of Eden
Her ears to the Tempter lent,
Some turks of the times or a Hedin
Our temples of peace have rent.
And so for a sinner's pardon
We sue on our bended knees
And offer a Goodwill Garden
To grow in the cause of peace.

—We fenced in the land with frigates
And forts in the long ago,
And stationed a band of brigades
To battle the so-called foe.
But strangely we found that the faster
We fired the whole police,
Instead of a grave disaster
It gave us continued peace.

The forts with the mold have mingled.
We've melted the guns into plows.
The swords that the sentries jingled
Will serve us to prune the boughs.
The "foe" that we harmed and hated
Are helping to plant the trees;
For blindly we both awaited
This bond of eternal peace.

1932.

FRIENDSHIP

As long as the sun has brilliance,
As long as the years endure,
As long as a saint has virtue,
As long as the truth is pure,
As long as the heart has feeling
And the mind has a thought to spare,
A friend will have friends aplenty,
And friends for each other care.

1930.

OUR SHIP OF STATE (In the hungry thirties)

You've read about the Roosevelt deal,
The Douglas plan, inflation
And other nostrums said to heal
And help a floundering nation.

You've heard our doughty captain speak
—His hands and face uplifting,—
“No statesman would estop a leak
While still at sea and drifting.

“You know I've had to watch and wait
Until the storms abated.
By sitting tight I've saved the State,
Through seas most agitated.

“For nothing, save the grace of God,
Can guide the fearless skipper.
But once our frozen funds are thawed
I'll fix the blasted clipper.

“I'll stamp my trusty iron heel
On all the Reds about me,
Who state there is a steering wheel
And stir the mob to flout me.

“O where are now the pioneers
Who plowed the land unaided?
They never preyed upon their peers.
They simply hewed and spaded.

“They never asked the State, when licked,
To be a sort of mother
To wet-nurse every derelict
As if he were a brother.

“Alas! I fear the day is dead
That bred the old go-getters.
Today the ‘beggars’ ask for bread,
And even doubt their betters.

“I know the system seems to be
In some ways rather flooey.
But if you plug and pray for me
I’ll patch it up; no hooley!”

1935.

EVENING

The sun was gliding earth's far rim below.
The glint that erstwhile played upon the deep
Was stilled, as if the waves had gone to sleep.
Meanwhile the sky took on a crimson glow
That softly spread and faded as I gazed,
From gold to rose, from rose to pearly gray,
As if some unseen master hand at play
A color-dream upon the sky had traced.
Soon Night approached with soft and stealthy tread
And gently drew the drapes of twilight to.
She tucked the earth, as if her child, to bed
And slaked its fever with her cooling dew;
Then wiped the frescoes from the vaulted wall
And spread her shadow blanket over all.

1937.

OUR HEROES

We praise the flock that freely went to battle
And fast in death beneath the poppies lies.
We glorify the dolts that, dumb as cattle,
We drove unwilling to the sacrifice.

We build a lofty marble cairn or column
And carve it deep with “slush” to those who fell;
And once a year with faces sad and solemn
We show regret for making Earth a hell.

We sent them forth to fight their distant brothers
In foreign lands, where things were new and strange,
And when they fell we mollified the mothers
With make-believe and promises of change.

But some returned and sought the recognition
We seemed at first so anxious to give.
And that brought on a nasty new condition
—We never really thought they’d need to live.

The banks provided dearly for their dying,
—Our dumb-bells had already signed the note.
But when they ask for something satisfying,
Our saviors with the funds are all remote.

To kill a single soldier in the trenches
Was said to cost some five and twenty grand.
The derelicts returned, like toiling wenches,
Get twenty cents a day I understand.

Of course we know the overhead is heavy.
We hear it costs the realm a dollar ten
—Beside the graft that goes with such a levy—
To get each twenty pennies to the men.

1936.

NOT GUILTY

His father was born on the banks of the Clyde.
His Bengalese mother was darker of hide.
For neither was he the causation.
A comfortless hut was the home that he knew
And hunger and cold were his lot as he grew
Like a weed in the wilds of creation.

With urchins and paupers he played in the street;
He played in the storm and the rain and the heat,
A target for taunts and abuses.
A stranger to kindness, a cuff on the ear,
And curses, inured him to hatred and fear.
Let him give account that accuses.

At school he was ordered to push and compete,
To prey on the weaker and strive for a seat
Where honor and ease were the prizes.
In church he was told that the Christian goal
Was to capture a berth for his own little soul,
And pray as the preacher advises.

He learned from his cronies to lie and deceive,
To lurk in the darkness and by-ways to thieve,
A course that his conduct was shaping.
No father commanded, no mother implored;
By most of the "great" he was shunned and ignored.
What chance had his class of escaping?

Ye judges, I ask who is innocent here?
Who offered a lead to a nobler career,
That the best of his bents might awaken?
Who showed him the path to his portion of earth,
The plenty the toilers had left him at birth,
And his purse that the pirates had taken?

His parents were wealthy and born to the blood.
No beggar was he in the slums and the mud.
Not much was denied him that money could buy.
His mates in the play were the rich and the high.
So when he in turn threw his hat in life's ring,
Of hardship and troubles he knew not a thing.

He graded all men as the good and the bad.
The good were the smug and the idle who had.
The poor were to him as the ass or the ox,
Just an ancient need, like the goose to the fox.
So when he developed a craving to kill,
His conscience felt but an innocent thrill.

He had, like the other, been often misled.
He honestly thought he had paid for his bread.
He thought that the buying of bonds on the mart,
And bleeding the toilers, was doing his part.
So when you are tempted to censure his sin,
Be sure that you probe where the errors begin.

The game as designed has a system of rules,
Where some may disport at the cost of the fools.
The masses, we know, are but pawns in the play;
Yet prelates and kings are as helpless as they.
It is wrong and unwise for a brother to blame.
'Tis better to alter the rules of the game.

1936.

CHRISTABEL

(An hypothetical ending to Coleridge's
unfinished poem)

Bard Bracy to Roland's castle sped
And bravely his liege's message read,
Though ringed about by a hostile band,
To die perchance at the first command.

The haughty baron turned ghastly pale
As Bracy unfolded the gruesome tale.
Burning within was the grim old feud,
A rancour that both had nursed and rued.
At first deep hatred with pride combined
To harden his eye and betray his mind;
But slowly in turn, as the tale unwound,
Sir Roland bowed in thought profound.
It warmed his heart to feel a hand
Extended by an old-time friend.

"To horse!" he cried, "ye gallants mine;
We ride to greet Sir Leoline."

Sir Leoline was at the gate
As Roland crossed the bridge in state.
The two embraced with sighs and tears
For friendship lost those many years.
The castle doors stood warm and wide
To welcome all the guests inside.
The tables groaned with meats and wine
And Christabel and Geraldine
Expectant stood with arms apart,
More radiant now and light of heart.

The instant that the foes embraced.

And friendship all their bonds unlaced,
The spell that held fair Geraldine
Had broken like a strand of twine;
And Christabel again was free
To seek her own fair destiny.
The hate the former friends had nursed
Had made their souls in part accursed;
And so the taint—as next in line—
Descended on fair Geraldine.
Her doom was to impersonate,
Without intent, that spell of hate.
—But in the words of Christabel:
“It broke, and all will yet be well.”

1943.

ICELAND

(A class poem)

Where lazy mornings greet the gladsome hills
And grey-blue valleys tremble in the haze;
Where glaciers, weeping, start the rippling rills
That riven lowlands in the distance glaze;
Where grassy slopes amid defiant snags
Rise slowly, meekly to their destined height,
Contrasting, as it were, the jaunty crags
With the omnipotence of gentle might;
Where heaven's fireworks send a silver stream
To swathe the landscape in its pallid light,
And summits in their pearly parkas gleam,
To people every by-room of the night;
Where every whisper that thy lips may leave
In loud, deep echoes fills thy startled ear,
And cascades from the waves of ether weave
A wonder legend that the poets hear;
Thou knowest well it is our Thulean isle
—An Eden that all praises but defile.

1900.

ECHOES

—From the Icelandic
of various authors,
both in America and
the homeland.

MILLENNIAL HYMN
(Iceland's national anthem)

—M. Jochumsson—

God of our land! Our land's great God!
With lauds we emblazon Thy all-holy name.
Time's legions, the centuries, shaped Thee a crown
From the suns in the heavens aflame.
One day at Thy throne is a thousand years,
A thousands years only a day:
A meek little flower of time with its tears
That trembles and passes away.
 Iceland's thousand years:
A meek little flower of time with its tears
That trembles and passes away.

O God above! On bended knees
We bare Thee, as children, our deep-burning soul.
We tender Thee, Father from age unto age,
As earnest, our holiest toll.
We stammer and thank Thee a thousand years,
And throng to Thy refuge as one.
We stammer and thank Thee with tremulous tears
The trials our destiny spun.
 Iceland's thousand years
Were the morning's deep-icicled measure of tears
That melt in the rays of the sun.

God of our land! Our land's great God!
Our life is a quivering, quivering reed.
Forsaken we perish. For prowess and faith
We pray unto Thee in our need.
O, be Thou each morning the life-giving light
To last through the day of our strife;
Our comfort and guard in the gloom of the night;
Our guide on the highway of life.
 Iceland's thousand years
Shall prosper the nation, repay all our tears
And purchase the kingdom of life.

OUR MOTHER TONGUE

—M. Jochumsson—

Strung beneath the ocean's anger
Are the ties that man devised:
That in lands so long estrangèd
Link the minds of humankind.
Yet a mightier tie and token,
Tended by the gods, may send
Through our souls a deeper solace,
Sung in our own mother tongue;

A tongue that stood the strain of ages,
Steeled to all that man can feel:
Ice and hunger, fire and fury,
Fear and breathless siege of death—
Wondrous tongue of song and saga,
Surely modelled by the gods,
Laughing in the odes of gladness,
Or it sobs with hearts athrob.

Through the wear of weary ages
It was a mentor Heaven-sent,
Nectar for the nights of hunger,
Nursed us when we lay athirst;
Light within the lowly cottage,
Long our winters' evensong;
Mouthpiece for the news of nations,
Nestor of the dizzy past.

Firm it stood through storm and earthquake,
Stood the iron test of fire;
On the bitter field of battle
Bought the freedom that we sought.
Cultured land of light, thou wilt be
Long remembered in our songs,
With thy viking-soul unshaken,

Self-commanded hero-land.

“Tell me, do our women wonder
We are thin and yellow-skinned?”
Asked a bard, and made immortal
Master-dirges to the past.
Bleeding through the bold and giddy
Battle clangor, Hedin sang.
Thorir and the mighty muttered
Maxims while they swung the axe.

Sturla mused in bitter battles.
Bleak was time when Snorri rhymed.
Inspiration lifted Loftur.
Lilja grew among the ruins.
Arason with soul undaunted
Shook the headsman with a look.
Hallgrim with his holy passion
Helped to brace a dying race.

What’s the tongue? An aimless, empty,
Odd absurdity of words?
No, ’tis art, alert with living
Light and soul of wondrous might;
Mind’s incarnate mantle, shining;
Memory’s bastions of the past;
Life astream in rippling runnels;
Rhyming symphonies of time.

Long preserved in stirring story
Stand the annals of the land:
Frantic pain and searing sorrow;
Songs of glorious days of yore;
Budding love and fearless fury;
Fate’s relentless punishments;
Peaceful homes in happy image;
Hallowed times that live in rhyme.

Vision, traits and language linger
Longest in the common song.
Those who themed our thousand ditties

Through the years have been the peers.
Hear ye, bards that fable fondly:
Freedom ceases, left in peace.
If ye find the tales they tell us
Truthful praise—beware, O youth!

Meet unbowed, with might and vigor,
Mammon's long and cruel wrongs,
With thy hapless lot delighted.
Luck impersons every curse.
What is freedom? Froth and twaddle;
False unless it spells success.
Earth becomes a sorry shambles
Should we moulder where we stood.

Lend thy peaks, O land of Thule!
Loan me once thy godly throne!
Other vistas every-whither
Offer grandeur, wonder-land!
Guilty age with golden altars,
God commends thee to the sod.
Fear success, but force the issue.
—Friendless are the wealthy lands.

Hear ye, bards of bleakest Thule,
Bare your standard to the air!
To your care—so hear me Heaven!—
Handed is the motherland.
And the Harp, though bent and broken,
Blanched in storm and avalanche,
Singed in fire through songless ages,
Shall arise from lullabies.

By the sun that shines in heaven,
Sacred honor and the dawn,
Let the young in living chorus
Long preserve their mother tongue!
Write amain, with runes of fire,
Reason—that it may increase.
Man, aspiring through the spirit,
Spells eternal life. Farewell!

THE ROAD

—Th. Erlingsson—

Supposing with firmness we force right ahead,
 Though faced with the steeps of Resistance?
For though we have plodded and patiently bled,
No path that we found in the open has led
 To the land of our dreams in the distance.

It's setting our pulse and our patience aboil
 How pithless and few is our number.
But it would embitter each son of the soil
To seek for the fruits of our clamor and toil,
 And find but the crypts we encumber.

Beyond the long road to that ravishing land
 The riches we seek are abiding.
That freehold awaits the unfaltering band,
With flashing rewards in each liberal hand,
 Yet over the hills ever hiding.

How well you remember the tear-laden tale
 They tell of humanity's stages!
You've seen the enthusiast falter and fail,
While forth the bold pioneer blazed the new trail
 In the jungles of earth, through the ages.

How many a bowlder was bathed in the gore
 Of the brave whom the multitude followed!
But every new martyr enabled a score
To enter the breach where he struggled before,
 For the rocks by his hot blood were hollowed.

While the darkness of old, in the depth of its night,
 Like death o'er the fastnesses lowered,
The only relief in that faith-killing fight
Was fixing the gaze on that region of light

Where the sun-mantled tops gaily towered.

'Twas ever the hope of that heavenly goal
That heartened the chief to the dashes,
While heads of the church threatened Hell for his soul
And hirelings of despotism sought the last toll
As they burned his live body to ashes.

Thou charmed the first heroes, O On-coming Age,
With the arch of thy brow still aglitter!
And one day the lowly who live by a wage
At last will emerge from the slavery stage.
What a day that will be for the bitter!

Then all the blue sky will be cloudless and clear,
For our cause will be heard by a master
Whom mankind can love without mixture of fear,
Who misses no heartbeat, a sigh or a tear,
Nor hounds us with Hell and disaster.

And then the poor weaklings can weather the blast
On the wind-beaten ridge where they cower;
For after the trials and toil of the past
The tempting new vistas imbue them at last
With visions of pleasure and power.

What a bliss for the weary to wake up anew
In that wonderful age, when the masses
Can safely embrace and retell what is true,
Without taking a chance on the rack or the screw
And the verdict that Piety passes!

I vision the time when the victor shall stand
And view the rich sweep of The Valley,
And greet the long-coveted goshen of land,
While gambolling hordes from the battle-scarred band
With shouts to its rendezvous rally.

They'd fought through the desert with faith-given poise;
For freedom indeed is the leaven.
And master and peon shall mingle their voice,

Demanding the deed to the land of their choice
From the despots, both here and in Heaven.

However acute be the cost and the pain,
That cross will be light as a feather,
When the settlers file into their sunny domain,
Where servants of Truth and Equality reign,
And sing their hosannas together.

I know that we comrades may fall in the fight
Before the last pathway is beaten.
But hail to the first one who forces the height
And feasts on the prospect revealed to the sight,
Though his last day that scene is to sweeten.

We've only a handful of hearts in the game,
But the whole of our strength we are giving.
We know what a tribute the trail is to claim,
But trust that the Future will nail up each name,
Though our graves may be lost to the living.

Though many a cliff on the course may debar
Or crush me betimes in the races,
Undaunted I head for the highlands afar,
And hail with delight every toiler and car
That the way to the wilderness faces.

And though you'll make fun of the fool on the hill
Who falls by the wayside defeated,
Don't doubt for an instant that others, athrill,
Will enter the ranks and continue until
The last rift in the road is completed.

I believe that thy triumph, O Truth, in the end
Will attend to the final equation.
That's why, O King, to thy bidding I bend,
And bravely await what the future may send,
In the fullness of Freedom's invasion.

Then rise all ye quitters and come to the fight!
Our cause will be lost if we dally.

For Pluck is the beacon, the beckoning light,
That brought us through Tyranny's negative night
—And the god who will give us The Valley.

1923

THE TERMS

—Th. Erlingsson—

If you can watch the hordes of Hell upheave and rebel,
With Dignity atremble in the toils of its spell,
And every prop that holds the heavens whittled in two—
Then I will calmly sing my song and share it with you.

If you will hate the haughty knave who hog-ties your soul
And forces you to act as if you honored his role,
And buys applause from peons that his powers subdue—
Then I will lend my heart to wholesome hatred with you.

If you can love the lonely slave who leans on his chains
And will not kiss the hand that holds the whip, as he strains,
And to the bitter end unbowing battles it through—
Then I will to my dying day adore him with you.

And should you wish to solve the wondrous secrets of life,
Beginning on the alphabet as aid in the strife,
And scorn to look through others' eyes—so often askew—
Then I would also like to learn my lessons with you.

If you embark and breast the foam when breakers run high,
Without a private passage to the Port in the sky,
And keep your pace and purpose with your peril in view—
Then over all the seven seas I'll sail it with you.

And when you face the night of nights with no land in sight,
And murky billows beat upon the boat in its flight,
If you can hold the helm, no matter what may ensue—
Then out upon that dismal deep I'll dare it with you.

THE DEATH OF SUMMER

—E. P. Jonsson—

There's a dismal knell on the ambient air.
The echoing forest in bleak despair
Resounds to the surf's intoning.
A cloudful of misery hangs on high,
There's a hint of fear in the morning sky,
And the city itself is groaning.

The beacons of summer are burning low.
Abend you see in the afterglow
The tops of the trees aquiver.
I feel in the moan of the sounding surge
The solemn tones of the funeral dirge
For the last of the leaves ashiver.

The people that hunger for love and light
Have lost their way in the chilly night,
And hurry, they know not whither.
Their hearts are filled with the fear-blent doubt
That Fate compels, as they look about
On the wind-swept leaves that wither.

Everything seems to be doomed today.
There's a doleful sound to the poet's lay,
That erst was so free and airy,
Each sylvan bower is sere and bare.
It seems like a funeral everywhere,
For the earth her own must bury.

The landscape fades as the fury grows;
Yet the faith that the summer of life bestows
Lives on through the tireless ages.
The autumn winds off the Arctic zone
From out of the prairies force a groan,
And the blizzard about us rages.

~

The sickles are piling row on row.
For rule in heaven and earth, we know,
Two forces are fast contending:
The falling leaves and the fear of death,
And faith in the summer's eternal breath,
Its hand to our hopes extending.

1930

WINTER

—E. P. Jonsson—

Thou comest afar from the frigid spaces
To fill up the land with snow.
The surge of thy lusty song embraces
Assault on our peace, I know;
But also in human hearts it places
A hint of the summer-glow.

Thy mantle enshrouds the bays and beaches
And buries the flowers deep.
The sound of thy healthy harp-string reaches
Each harbor that lies asleep.
The glow that enhaloes thy heart impeaches
The howl of thy chilly sweep.

Many a prank we have played together
As pals in my native land.
I heard in the call of thy coldest weather
A kindly but stern command,
And saw thee abroad, with thy broken tether
—A broadsword in either hand.

Many have wished for thy death, O Winter,
From weakness and lack of heart.
No runes like thine could the proudest printer
Impress on his eager chart;
Nor would the hand of a Titian tinter
Attempt such a work of art.

Thy voice, at times with its tone of ire,
Is tender beneath and sweet.
Thy fury is dulled by the dream-desire
To dwell on thy 'prisoned heat.
I hear in thy breast, as I hear in fire,
The heart of Eternity beat.

1930

BREAKERS

—E. P. Jonsson—

The seas on the bars are beating.
About, on the sand dunes, lie
The flanks of the fated vessels
That foundered in years gone by.

Though most of the rafts are riven
And the writing is worn and old,
Man's tortuous road to reason
The wrecks on the beach unfold.

The surf by the capes is crowding.
It creeps on the rising lith
And hugs to its breast each billow
That broke on the scarry frith.

The breakers resemble Saga.
They sweep to the fore again
A coastful of ancient cargoes
And corpses of long-dead men.

Yet out to the tameless ocean
The eyes of the fearless turn,
To vision afar, in fancy,
The fringe of a new day burn.

—A soul from the source eternal
Must seek where the storms are rife.
We rot in the dreamy doldrums;
To dare is the food of life.

1932

AT MY MOTHER'S GRAVE

—E. P. Jonsson—

How still the eve! Yet o'er thy grave's quiescence,
From out the deeps of thought a voice is calling.
Meseems a holy dew in drops is falling
Adown the visage of the bower's Presence.

Here both the living and the dead are dreaming.
A dying glow the templed silence kisses.
How oft a soul with learning's largess misses
The living truths that on this bourne are teeming!

Slabs with Nordic runes—in rows—engraven,
Arise above the meadow's far expanses;
Preserving ever true, though time advances,
Returning gleams of light from Story's haven.

Our joys and tears, like rains, when all is over,
Must end their journeys in the self-same ocean.
Thy mound, a legacy to love's devotion,
Is laden with the rose and four-leaf clover.

That morns and noons must wane away is certain.
A westering shaft the gathered haze is cleaving.
I feel a mystic hand my web unweaving.
Thy weary son eftsoons will draw the curtain.

Voiceless night. The moody murk is weeping.
My muse's theme reposes in the dingle.
Here, where the nations' dust-remains commingle,
The Memories come to bivouac with the sleeping.

LIKE A CHILD

—J. M. Bjarnason—

I've rambled o'er the road of life
Unreconciled,
And to the last I've laughed and whimpered
Like a child.

Yet I have sought for life and light
And looked about,
A child of faith that fought the bane
Of fear and doubt.

Throughout the pleasing park of life
I've played my fill,
And broken all my bonny toys,
As babies will.

I've weeded every hill of hope
On hands and knees,
And sung my little poem-prayers
To plants and trees.

But trees have lost their charming coats
And colors gay;
And seared is every shoot of hope
Beside the way.

And so I leave my land of dreams
With lyric sighs,
Just like a boy that loves to croon
His lullabies.

May Heaven's light so lead me on,
Though lure-beguiled,
That I may end my life just like
A little child.

1941

THE BUCKSTER

—J. M. Bjarnason—

Come sit on the bar of my sawbuck a while;
It is safe as a rock, I trow.
Although it is worn and withered and old
It will not complain, I know.
No, I am the one that is weary and spent
In the work that I have to do.
The strength of my arms is ebbing away,
As even my soul is, too.

I've toiled it for seventy summers on end
—For seventy and five, my lad.
While some of them may have been mild and bright,
Yet most of the lot were bad.
Each year in its turn, since I wandered west,
Was the worst of the endless string;
For what have I earned in this land of light
But labor and want—not a thing.

In silence I've trudged with my saw and the buck,
Like a sheep on a barren plain.
I've snooped, like a thief, in the loathsome lanes
And looked as a rule in vain,
To see if there wasn't a pile on the place
Or a pole I could sever in two,
That people might know I was willing to work
—For wages or food, 'tis true.

In the burning rays of the summer sun
I've sweated and toiled amain.
In winter my ill-clad feet would freeze,
Though flushed with the grinding strain.

Where I happen in time, with a trembling hand
I tap on the master's door;

But the hardest task and the trial is
 To tell what I want, once more.
All I can say is “Kind sir, cut wood?”
 And it sounds, I’m afraid, like a prayer—
And then I explain by shaking the saw
 As swiftly as ever I dare.
At last when he sees what my errand is
 And offers to make a deal,
If I mention “A dollar to cut one cord”
 He cringes and squirms like an eel.
He puffs and he blusters and pushes me off,
 Till the price is the one he’d choose;
For “profit” was made for the men of ease,
 And mine is to slave and lose.

To make it still harder I’ve had to compete
 With the headstrong impractical fools,
Who offer their service so shamefully cheap
 That I saunter away with my tools.
And no one has felt like a friend in need,
 Or furthered my case if he did.
My silvery locks were a sign to most
 To serve me the lowest bid.

—And yet I have met with some friendly folk
 (A few) where I made a call,
Who gave me a handout of butter and bread
 —To beg is the worst of all.
This cloak that I wear is a wonderful gift
 From a woman across the street.
I know that her husband wore it once;
 It’s warm and so strong and neat.
These boots—like a prince’s!—the tapster took
 And tossed in my path one night.
He looks like a rake of the careless kind,
 But the core of his heart is right.

In every place there are some good souls
 Who seek to improve your lot.
But who wants to beg like a brazen cur,
 Or bend to a pauper’s cot?

For him who was once quite well-to-do
And willing to spend his cheque,
It is hard to accept a daily dole
And drift like a human wreck.

You ask if I have not a sister or son,
To see that I'm housed and clad.
No. All my relations and fellows and friends
Are faded and gone, my lad.

One day with my Bertha and Katie I came;
But Katie took sick and died.
The climate out here is so cold and dry,
And comforts were not supplied.
The work in the laundry was lengthy and hard,
And a little, frail girl was she.
For reading and leisure her life was meant—
To learn was an ecstasy.
So gentle and loyal, I loved her the best—
The last of my children five.
My sad, old days would be sunny again
And sweet, were she still alive.

My Bertha was always so bold and so free,
But beautiful as a queen.
The life in the taverns enticed her fast
And tainted her mind, I ween.
She lost her heart to a handsome crook
And hastily ran away.
He stole her, in fact, with his stylish ways.
She is starving, I fear, today.

You ask if there wasn't a son. Yes, sir.
Their souls are a gospel to me.
There never were better or manlier men,
So manly they were—all three.

They say that young Benny was stronger than Steve,
Whose strength was enough for three;
But Raven, if taunted, the twain could hold,
So terribly strong was he.

All of them longed for a life on the sea
—The land was so dull and tame—
To match their strength with the stormy deep
And strive for the boldest fame.
But many a cruise on the main was rough
—Too much in the end for me!
They perished at last, my poor little boys
—My poor little boys—all three.

I've often been happy and overly rich,
But all that I had is gone.
I sway in the blast like an aged oak,
With even its sap withdrawn.

1931

SANDY BAR

—G. J. Guttormsson—

Long I strolled, though late the hour.
Lightnings set the skies aglower,
While a drenching summer shower
Swiftly filled each step ajar.
Through the aspen arbors gleaming
On I sauntered, vaguely dreaming,
'Till I came upon a quiet
Camping ground at Sandy Bar;
Where the pioneers, in passing,
Pitched their tents at Sandy Bar.

Silence reigned. All signs have faded
Since the early fathers waded
Through the leagues of lakes that made it
Like an ocean near and far.
Death, that in their dreams abided,
Darkly o'er the floods presided,
Casting 'neath his falcon feathers
Fateful gloom on Sandy Bar,—
From his wings, so broad, a baleful
Black-out over Sandy Bar.

Sturdy fathers, fey and ailing,
Feared the Summoning Angel's hailing
Ere they could be set for sailing
Safely to life's Port afar.
Sick for weeks on ships a-tossing
Souls were not prepared for crossing.
Standing face to face with terror
Few could rest at Sandy Bar.
Pressed for time, on pins and needles
People walked at Sandy Bar.

All their tragic toil and scourging

To my heart like pain came surging;
For the old remains emerging
Marred the foreground like a scar.
As I looked the lightning flashes
Lit the scattered heaps and ashes,
Where exhausted men and mothers
Mutely rest at Sandy Bar;
Where the immigrants so gamely
Gave their all at Sandy Bar.

Those who came to seek and settle
Showed their earnest will and mettle,
Well content to wage a battle
With conditions under par.
Since the hour of immigration
All their mass-determination
Was to make their way to freedom,
Westward bound from Sandy Bar;
Blaze a trail through bog and jungle
Branching out from Sandy Bar.

Thoughts of old within me straining
On my heart their darts were training,
As if cosmic eyes were raining
All the tears of pain there are.
Shafts of lightning, like a token,
Left the highest trees all broken,
As if spirit hopes were hewing
Highways out of Sandy Bar,
Hewing lanes to life and glory
Leading out from Sandy Bar.

Thus the braves who fell a-fighting
From their graves the path are lighting,
All the willing ones uniting
With their long-abandoned car.
Every hope shall earn fruition
In each mind that has ambition
To take up the uncompleted
Exodus from Sandy Bar,
To pursue the ever-onward

Aims that grew at Sandy Bar.

He who makes new paths, and passes,
Plants ambition with the masses,
Bringing forth, like frosted grasses,
From the soil an avatar.
Though some active urge decreases
In each living thing that freezes,
In my fancy ice encrusted
All the grass at Sandy Bar.
Plants still green with frozen fragrance
Filled the air at Sandy Bar.

Shining spectral shades, I doubt me,
Sent a stream of warmth throughout me.
Phantom gleams on graves about me
Glittered faintly like a star.
All the brawn that blessed the sleeping
Buried now the earth is keeping,
Where it lies forever idle
In the ground at Sandy Bar.
All that death could overpower
Is interred at Sandy Bar.

As the beating rain abated,
Breezes kind, so long awaited,
Crowding on the clouds so freighted
Cleared the sky for every star.
Routed packs with fury flashing
Farther to the north were dashing,
Till a riftless reach of heaven
Rested over Sandy Bar.
Heaven, where the leaders landed,
Looked with peace on Sandy Bar.

1943

ROOSEVELT

—Sig. Jul. Johannesson—

“Thy long-sought land of Promise
I lay before thy gaze,
The land wherein thy people
Shall dwell in coming days.
But o’er its sacred border
Thy foot shall never tread.
Anear the goal thy spirit
Shall gather with the dead.”

Thus long ago to Moses,
The man, Jehovah spake
—A doom that mixed forebodings
Of life and death awake.

Moses led his people
A long and toilsome way,
Till gleaming in the offing
The fields of Goshen lay.
Jehovah spared his servant
For one enraptured look;
Then signed his earthly chapter
And closed his mortal book.

Roosevelt led his people
A long and toilsome way,
Until his land of promise
In brilliant prospect lay.
God blessed him with an image
Of all its features grand;
A land of peace and plenty,
The peoples’ freedom-land.

Oft with his trusty Fala
Beside the hearth he sat,

While with the earth's far peoples
He shared his weekly chat.
And all the troubled millions
That listened, far and near,
Could feel his vibrant power
Dispel their chronic fear.

Some men of strength and valor
Among the dross are born.
An innate trend to goodness
Some others may adorn.
But few among the masters
—As human records state—
Are gifted with the nature
That makes them good *and* great.

Roosevelt's hope and vision
For home and world embrace
The faith that peace eternal
May bless the human race.
An eager world had listened
Through many an hour of fear,
While o'er the void he sent them
His messages of cheer.

Now this our mighty Moses,
So noble, wise and true,
Has scaled life's highest summit
And waved his last "adieu."
His feet the Lord has guided
Across the desert wild,
As any loving mother
Will guide her stumbling child.

And all the mighty nations
Stand awed and thunderstruck,
As if the hopes of mankind
Were trampled in the muck.

Across the foaming ocean
Love's tribute to his worth

Is wafted from the heart of
The smallest state on earth.

One hope, nay, one conviction,
From out the chaos stands:
That pilgrims, fired with purpose,
From all betroubled lands
Will seek for truth and courage
And visions new and brave,
And find that inspiration
Beside his hallowed grave.

“Ægir’s daughters” softly
Sing their lullabies.
Beneath a rain of roses
A child in slumber lies.

1945

OUR FATHERLAND

—Sig. Jul. Johannesson—

Amuse, in His glory, when God surveyed
Our great but unfinished sphere,
Of matter He found He had made enough,
But most of it out of gear.
As over the lands from place to place
His piercing gaze He ran,
To find in the world a worthy home
To welcome His chosen man
—'Twas here that He paused to plan.

Though Nature in silence must play her part
In patience, at God's command,
Each atom astir from year to year
Must yield to His mighty hand.
His vision is still the same, it seems—
The same as it first began,—
So when He fashions a finer soul
To finish His super-man
—'Tis here that He has to plan.

No graver duty was given to man
By God, than His sweet command:
That every Thulean battle his best
To better his fatherland.
Each son abroad, while he dwells adrift,
Must dream, like the exile can,
Of the joy of lending a hand at home
And helping the Artisan
To perfect His wondrous plan.

ICELAND

—Sig. Jul. Johannesson—

A fire of hate throughout the earth is burning,
As if King Death dictated all our learning
—As if life's sunny day to dusk were turning.

The lords of war write every act that passes,
Each edict that would starve the poorer classes.
Like witless sheep, they fool and fleece the masses.

The deadly strife is high and low alarming.
Each land prepared the cause of man is harming;
For, strange to say, our hope lies in disarming.

Our motherland that lesson now is teaching,
While long-embattled states continue preaching
Of wars, and strive each other overreaching.

Dear isle, thou art a haven consecrated,
A country by the god of peace located,
Where human rights, not raids, are emulated.

I know thy sons their swords at one time rattled.
The sagas much about their valor prattled.
But now they stand for better things embattled.

The age-old ways of other lands thou breakest;
From errors seen a lesson new thou takest;
From broken rafts a bridge to Heaven makest.

No race nor clan on earth our own transcended.
Some innate law our sturdy growth attended.
From kings and slaves our blood was truly blended.

Remember, then, thy destiny and dower,
Thy duty to the world each pregnant hour:

To be a guiding light to peace and power.

God bless thee, mother by the outer ocean,
And all thy hundred thousand souls' devotion
To peace and art and every true emotion.

May countless "Jons" be born to be thy geni,
To bless thee with a halo deep and sheeny
—But never a "Hitler," never a "Mussolini."

1940

A ROMANCE OF THE ROAD

—K. N. Julius—

In pensive mood beside the road
I flung an empty flask,
But fancied that my thirst was undiminished.
I fumbled for another one.
You needn't stop to ask—
I never leave a thing like that unfinished.

My head grew weak and dizzy;
The day resembled night,
And duly everything began to flutter.
I tumbled over headlong;
I tumbled up aright
—And tumbled off again into the gutter.

I lay there in a swoon,
Just a limp and sleepy soak;
And loafers hurried by me as if glad to.
I thought I must have died
In the dark, and had a stroke
—Or drunk a little more than I had had to.

But I managed to recover,
As you certainly can see,
And Satan lost a prize he might have landed.
So at last the fact is proven,
Through Lazarus and me,
That Life can beat the Devil single-handed.

From “VERSES”

—K. N. Julius—

Worthy Elis, all unstrung,
In his cell is groaning:
“Go to hell and hold your tongue!”
He is telephoning.

Should I be caught without a fork or shovel,
He who notes my normal cares
Will know that dung is getting scarce.

With other riches running low,
I wring a measure
From out my secret soul—and throw
To swine the treasure.

That this hulky hog is you
I hate implying.
Honestly though it is true
That I am lying.

I must confess that frequently,
With few or none to hear and see,
And empties scattered all agley,
I ask my God to succor me.

Too much the muse exacted
From me so ill-content.
No inspiration acted
On only “two per cent.”

THE CRIME

—P. S. Palsson—

In dreamy contentment the day was enjoyed
And drew to a close like the rest.
Her soul was alight with a love that is pure
And license had never oppressed.
Her mind, like a babe at the bosom of dreams,
Went back to her earliest days;
And memory's ties with her kindred and kith
Were kind as the morning's first rays.

She sensed in the starlight the sorrows of life,
Assessed on the ages gone by.
But none of the evils that come with the clouds
Of crime ever darkened her sky.
For sun-gilded lands with their summers of faith
Her soul with bright memories filled.
Her morning of life with its mystical wand
Its magic of hope had distilled.

She felt no alarm as she passed through the park,
At peace with all humans at large.
Through years of devotion she'd yearned to anneal
The young that were placed in her charge.
She loved, always loved, every creature and child
That conquered the threshold of life.
Her mind was a stranger to darkness and doubt
And dread of the murderer's knife.

Alas, all in vain proved her visions and faith:
A villain her byway patrolled,
A serpent in ambush to sully her life.
The sequel may never be told,
How dauntless in spirit she duelled the foe
Till death was her only release.
Her heart valued honor much higher than life.
Sweet heroine, rest thou in peace!

YOU ALONE

—P. S. Palsson—

I thank my God that he gave me you,
A goddess of beauty rare.
No other could help me to hold in view
The heavens, so calm and fair.

No other could show me the simple way
The seeker for truth must go;
And only to you do I owe today
For all that I feel and know.

No other could tune up my tiny harp
That timid and idle lay,
Nor whisper with tact if my tones were sharp,
And tell me the theme to play.

No other could free me from fear and doubt,
In face of the cosmic strife,
Nor help me to feel in a faith devout
The facts of eternal life.

I thank my God for His gift to me:
A goddess to love and prize,
Who raised me to heights from which to see
Our Heavenly Paradise.

1950

SMILES

—P. S. Palsson—

A friendly smile awakens love and light
And laughter in a heart devoid of ease;
It makes the glow on furrowed faces bright
And fills the soul with happiness and peace.

A smile of scorn can build within the best
A blaze of hate no will can long conceal;
It tears the finest tendons in the breast
That time can never quite amend or heal.

A kindly smile may quicken strength anew
And kindle faith that erst was still and dead;
It makes the hapless hunger to pursue
The hidden wonder-realms that lie ahead.

Each hour that gave us dreams and daily breath
Is dimmed and tainted by the cynic's sneer.
It turns a song into a dirge of death
And drowns our longings in a sea of fear.

1950

THE JOURNEY

—Orn Arnarson—

Starting forth on Fate's long journey
Fired with hope the eager lad.
Brand-new shoes and some provisions
Satisfied and made him glad.
But some wonder-wine of courage
Was the best thing that he had.

Having reached life's hilly stages,
Hemmed about with sleet and snow,
On a drift the swain now seated
Says in accents weak and low:
"Lunch kit empty, outworn shoes,
And the road gets worse, I know."

"Barefoot and without provisions
It is hard to trudge the snow.
Yet, were anything in the bottle
I'd bestir myself and go.
Heaven is now my hope and stay.
Hast Thou not, O Lord, I pray,
A drop to fill that flask of mine?
I feel I'm through without the wine."

"Utter silence everywhere!
Is even prohibition There?"

1948

THE PARSON'S CONFESSION

—David Stefansson—

For thirty long years I have served, unsighing.
No silence atones for the guilty past.
The inner man in his mask is dying.
Remorse impels me to shrive at last.
My conscience duly its debts confesses.
I dread the impending bugle call.
I hear the wails of the misled masses,
The millions that kneel in the judgment hall.

II

I studied the texts with a weak aversion;
There was no pressure from inner need.
I felt no desire to seek incursion.
My soul was untouched by a holy creed.
I drifted about like a beast unthinking
And blandly ignored the mind's arrears,
—And yet stray hopes in my heart were linking
Some heavenly bliss with our earthly tears.

At length I was duly ordained a pastor.
One day I accepted a modest call.
I saw in the stories how many a master
Had managed to shine in a dingy hall.
I looked into mothers' confiding faces.
I felt the deep yearning of pious men
And hungering souls in the simplest places,
—I see it now, if I did not then.
Men hastened my errors with earnest praises,
And even proclaimed me a gifted youth,
Who'd lead their souls through the lightless mazes,
Who loved his God and the simple truth.

III

My messages all were an aimless chatter
And every service besmirched the cloth.
I was like the rhymesters who rave and clatter
And ream out cantos of tasteless froth;
A blind man to point out the path that matters;
A peon who thinks we are much too free;
A father who sends out a son in tatters
To seek live coals on a snowy lea.
—I buried and catechised, christened and married
And quietly did what the rules declare.
I gazed on the skies as I prayed and parried
And piously feigned that my heart was there.

I was but Hypocrisy, primmed in a cassock;
A parvenu, dressed in a cleric's gown.
I lied in the pulpit, I lied on the hassock.
I lured to the fold all the wrecks in town.
I followed the rites of a ritual hoary;
I rattled the scriptures thick and fast.
In meekness I tendered to God the glory
When groups found peace in their work at last.
But what was the right, and the way to win it,
Was one thing I never desired to press.
I numbered each pew and the people in it.
They prayed for little; I gave them less.
I spoke like a mentor and posed like a power.
I promised redemption for those who fall.
I proffered the Gospel each godless hour;
I gabbled and fumed—about nothing at all.

IV

I sensed what I was. I had wished for glory
And weakly forgave what I did amiss:
An erring shepherd—the same old story—
Who shirks and falls for a traitor's kiss.
I lacked the manhood to make retraction.
I muddled along for thirty years,
And offered, in signal of satisfaction,
The silvery locks that the mob reveres.

There is many a flaw in the cup and caster,
Though quite unseen in the temple's glare.
But why should a gray and godless pastor
Deglaze the blemish and lay it bare?
—For men must grovel to gain to power.
My gown of sable could hide its thrall.
I preached on each Sabbath the selfsame hour,
Received my stipends—and that was all.

V

What am I? A sanctified arch-deceiver
Who serves the lust of his will, for pay;
Who rapes the soul of the rote-believer
—A racketeer on the holy way.
He prowls and evades and sells deception
And sums his gains in the dead of night.
He trades in things that entail surreption
And touches the pure with a deadly blight.
He's called to arouse, but he soothes the seeker
With soapy unction and lullabies.
He should not hinder, but help the weaker
And hearten the temper that dignifies.
His efforts should be to unbend the erring
And burn their sins in the fires of right.
His lamp should brighten, instead of blurring.
His bulk is most when he stops the light.
To rule in the church is his chief ambition;
To crush the values the fathers prized;
His penchant: inaction and inanition;
His occupation—betraying Christ.

VI

Thirty years spent—and the spell is breaking.
My spirit, through grace, is unchained at last.
My soul is cloven, my conscience aching.
I've conquered the trammels that held me fast.
Laid open, my bosom its faults confesses.
I fear the impending bugle call.

I hear the wails of the misled masses,
The millions that kneel in the judgment hall.

1933

THE BEGGAR WOMAN

—Gestur Palsson—

She huddled on the stoop on a cold and stormy day
And shrank into herself till a crumpled heap she lay.
A bony hand was groping and reaching all about
Her tatters, in the vain attempt to keep the weather out.

Her eyes were cold and dim, as if the light within had died
Out in the killing blasts that sweep Life's unforgiving tide.
They shifted to and fro with a blank and aimless stare,
But saw and sought for nothing through the windows of despair.

Her sallow brow was wrinkled, where furrow furrow crossed;
The cruel memorandum of sorrow's awful cost.
For who can tell the anguish, the pain and bitter tears,
The derelicts of mankind must suffer through the years.

She may have been a diamond, a bright and lovely thing,
That fell out of its setting in Luck's bejewelled ring,
Or else a pearl that someone had tossed into the deep
—A dull and worthless fragment now on Life's dank refuse heap.

1936

THE LYRE

—B. Grondal—

From mystic realms, by Heaven consecrated,
Now casts the sun to earth his parting gleams.
Bedewed, a fairer land has long awaited,
Where lilies fondly kiss the purling streams.
There dwells a maid 'mid din of fall and river
And dreams, aweave upon the purple haze.
The northern lights like silken curtains quiver.
Across the sky the moon forever plays.

Above, in airy halls that cannot crumble,
The colonnades resound with melody.
Below, the thunders of the earth, arumble,
In undertones support the rhapsody.
Æolian strings with amber hues aglitter,
Forever play the music of the spheres,
In lands of peace no bloody feuds embitter:
Abodes of light my fairy domineers.

1929

POVERTY

—Jon Thorlaksson—

Through all the years that I remember
Stark Want has been my paramour.
From life's young May to late December
That luckless bond has held secure.
How long we shall continue thus
He knows Who first united us.

1936

THE DESERT

—Jon Runolfsson—

With silver steeples shining gleams
The city of my boyhood dreams,
Beyond the sand-plain, sere and bare.
The serried palms will guide me there.

There, glinting in the sun, I see
The symbol of my destiny.
Beyond this ruddy sea of sand
My soul beholds the promised land.

No threat or menace may avail
To march me off the beaten trail,
And no compulsion, path or sway
—The palms are there to show the way.

—The journey finished, far and drear
I find the selfsame desert here:
A parched and withered waste of land.
My weary eyes are filled with sand!

1930

THE NEW WORLD

—E. H. Kvaran—

Other lands may live on ancient glory
And lean their destinies on past renown;
May dig among the fossils, far and hoary,
To find the pearl of life and honor's crown.
Not so with thee, whose sons are up and doing
And sing amain their happy roundelay,
Each manly task with noble zeal pursuing.
Thy sun was never brighter than—today.

Other lands to sham their souls are giving,
To seek the glamor in the halls of state.
Here thy sons must seek an honest living,
And service is the hall-mark of the great.
Upon thy shores the sun of freedom playing
Outshines the brilliant globoid in the sky;
And every thrall for independence praying
Upon thy smile of welcome must rely.

O land of faith and freedom's holy dower,
That fate reserved for youth and purity,
Imbue us all with manhood's mighty power
To meet unbowed each fell conspiracy!
Yea, give us strength to soar each sacred hour
To sunny peaks of love and charity,
O land of faith and freedom's holy dower
That fate reserved for youth and purity!

THE FORDING

—Pall Olafsson—

I stood aghast with awe indeed
As angry forth the river sprang.
It would devour my starving steed.
Astang the floes beneath me sang.

But vowing still to ford the flow,
I fought the pack the current brought,
Allowed my horse a “half a show.”
O what’s a task if that is not?

1928

THE CALL

—Hjalmar Jonsson—

Friends are passing fast away,
Fate's insistent call obey.
Perhaps I, too, am due today,
With dented armor, shield aspley,
A broken helmet, shattered sword and sins to pay.

1932

THINKING ALOUD

—Hjalmar Jonsson—

Full well I know the bang and boom
Of bells that toll so near.
Fast approaching Death and Doom
Are dinning in my ear.

Visions float in front of me
For future contemplation.
With dying eyes I dimly see
The drama of creation.

1940

BIRDS IN A CAGE

—H. Hafstein—

O how it pains me through and through
To think of the birds in cages,
Torn away from the boundless blue,
Its breath of life and the thrills they knew,
And the fears that are freedom's wages!
Ye poor little playthings of Error!
How plaintive your cry and your terror!

Don't flutter your wings, just sit and sigh.
Insult them not by trying.
The bars of the cage your claims defy;
And could ye escape, the walls deny
Any further attempt at flying.
To those that have wings and a vision
'Tis weary to live in a prison.

But minds that have always refused to fly,
Unflinching look, without anguish,
On the free-born pent in a puny sty,
In the pitch of life, till they mope and die
—Condemned to their level to languish.
Ye poor little playthings of Error,
With your plaintive cry and your terror!

1929

JUST LIKE THE TENDER FLOWER

—Hallgr. Petursson—

Just like the tender flower
That grows beside the way
And greets the morning hour
In nature's bright array
Before the reaper falleth
To earth and withered lies,
So, when the Angel calleth,
Man, young or aged, dies.

All men to higher forces
Must answer soon or late.
On life's uncertain courses
They meet the selfsame fate.
And no one, poor or wealthy,
Can buy a day's reprieve.
When summoned, weak or healthy
Without delay must leave.

To me, as to the sower,
King Death, it seemeth plain,
Is like the tireless mower
Who cuts the standing grain.
And roses, reeds and sedges
Fall victims with the grass
Before the sickle's edges,
Wherever he may pass.

Mankind impatient races,
Nor ever hesitates,
Right into Death's embraces.
Beyond the grave awaits.
The multitudes keep milling
To one predestined goal;
And all, both loath and willing,

Must go—there's no parole.

For neither wealth nor station
Can turn grim Death aside.
No bribe nor supplication
Can buy a single stride.
All human power faileth
His lifted hand to still.
No prayer nor threat availeth
Against his iron will.

Men, ever dazed and fickle
With doubt, are unaware
How Death may swing his sickle,
On whom or when or where.
By one accustomed highway
Into this life we come,
But many a devious byway
Appears to lead therefrom.

Since Death all men arraigneth
And marketh for his own,
No sanguine hope remaineth
He'd spare but me alone.
And as we still inherit
Old Adam's native lust,
I know I truly merit
To be returned to dust.

No right the mind espouseth
Can make this life my own.
The soul my body houseth
Abides there as a loan.
The Lord, whene'er He pleaseth,
May claim His goods in fee;
And Death, His servant, seizeth
What hath been lent to me.

Content in Jesus' keeping
With meekness I obey,
Less worthy than the sleeping,

Whose last remains are clay.
Whene'er the call resoundeth,
No strength nor pleas avail;
But when the night surroundeth,
My courage shall not fail.

My Saviour now resideth
Amongst the pure Above
And in His wisdom guideth
All things with perfect love.
While ending death's fell power
He on the crosstree died,
That I might from that hour
For aye with Him abide.

He conquered death by dying
And set the spirit free.
While on His strength relying
No harm can come to me.
Though deep in earth be hidden
My bones, for timeless rest,
My soul will bide unchidden
In Heaven among the blest.

Christ dwells with me each minute.
In Him my trust I keep,
Outside the house or in it,
Awake or when asleep.
Without Him hope were sterile
And hollow in the strife.
Through Him, in spite of peril,
We gain eternal life.

In Jesus' name I'm biding;
In Jesus' name I'll die.
With Him my footsteps guiding
No fate can terrify.
So, Death, though I be near thee
And foul has been my guilt,
I say: "I do not fear thee.
Come hail whene'er thou wilt!"

THULE'S LAMENT

(To her homing war sons)

—St. G. Stephansson—

My tongue a plaint composes,
My heart compels a tear,
On greeting you exhausted
From the battle's grim career,
With broken shields and sabres
With kindred blood asmeared.

A blessing high—without intent—
Was rendered me by him,
Who first disarmed my eager sons,
Unscathed of heart and limb.
Our friendly shores, at peace with all,
No fears may since bedim.

But thrice accursed be the knaves
My errant sons beguile
To war, with blinded eyes, upon
A neighbor's domicile;
As Hoth, with tragic innocence,
Obeyed a tempter's wile.

About the graves of No-man's-land
May peace be with the slain;
And may the stains of clotted gore
Conceal the marks of Cain.
But oh, to view the human wrecks
That wander back again
Repletes a mother's pain!

LONE PEAK

—St. G. Stephansson—

Lone Peak rears his bust to the beautiful sky,
And the bulrushes gaze on astounded.
The copsewood refuses to clamber so high
And the creepers lose footing around it.
And though the cold blasts ever beat without ruth
On his brow, in the strife he engages,
Unconquered he stands, as if courage and truth
Were carved from the rock of the ages.

1924

NORTHERN LIGHTS

—St. G. Stephansson—

Gleaming through the gloaming,
Geysers, wild, arising,
Tip the rocks with tapers,
Twos and more afusing.
Lambent rays illumine
Living bows aquiver.

Rainbows, lined with lanterns,
Light the way so brightly,
'Round the summits running
Rills of golden spillings.

Winter's hand, in hundreds,
Heaves the flares at even.
Icy cones, like candles,
Quicken till they flicker.
Spangles thrown asprinkle
Spray the night with daylight.

Glossy reaches glisten,
Glasslike, to the flashes
Of the fireworks' fury
Far beyond the Arctic.

1930

ELOI LAMMA SABAHKTHANI

—St. G. Stephansson—

No horns were blown nor havoc made
When He was in the Manger laid.
No diary the date has shown;
His day of birth is still unknown.

And even yet our age is blind
To excellence in humankind.
But somewhere Nature's twirling Tide
Will tender payment, multiplied.

His Time, we know, would not agree
To name His anniversary,
And let each current Christmas lay
Acclaim, instead, the longer day.

His catechism was common toil,
His copy-book the living soil,
Where nature, old, yet all abloom,
In every knoll concealed a tomb

Of poet, whom the people spurned,
Or prophet, later stoned or burned;
Where fathers broke each others' bones,
And builded sons memorial stones.

Amid those scenes there came the call
That comes to leaders, one and all:
To mend the ills that cause decay
And cure the blunders of the day.

In whispers low the human flood
Said "Here's a prophet in the bud."
The mother-heart, that hoped and yearned,
The hallmark on His brow discerned.

He saw what ailed society.
That sin was not impiety;
Not penury that pinched the folk
In part, nor yet the Roman yoke.

He saw that narrow selfishness
Was searing all our happiness;
That the burden of each citizen
Was saddled on by fellowmen—

Men of craft and cruelty,
Who clamored for servility;
Who took on faith the favored guess
That faking may beget success.

He preached that human love, alone,
Could lead the way to Heaven's throne;
That all our deepest wisdom went
To waste, if lacking good intent.

His text upon the profiteer
And penny-slave had thin veneer;
But every sinner found defence
Whose fault was just incompetence.

He charged a cankered ministry,
With creed-enslaved mentality,
Who fear the light and sell their soul
For softer jobs and more control.

O'er the crowd He cast a spell
That charmed the groping infidel;
For something in a soul divine
Can serve a thought that words confine.

And every truth His soul was sent
He seemed to think self-evident;
Forgetting that the mind of man
Is multi-cosmopolitan.

But how remiss the multitude
His message found, He understood,
When, after all His soul had sown,
They sought for Him the local throne.

For men believed that vision was
The work of schools, alone, because
Some brands, at least, were brought or sent
In book-form to the ignorant.

But she's your own soul, eloquent
With insight, hope and sentiment;
Like his, who sat beside her door
And served ten thousand years before.

II

To fail in building brotherhood
Embittered Him upon the rood.
It broke His heart of hearts to see
How hopeless such a task would be.

And His complaint upon the cross
Comes peeling down the years to us,
When Bigotry and blinded Hate
About His standard congregate.

III

But evermore the gods beget,
And gospel themes are written yet;
And from the self-same source is hurled
Each servant that improves the world.

And there are always mighty men;
And mundane culture, now and then,
And Fancy's bright, effulgent whole
Are focused in a godly soul.

But every martyr, man or saint,
Has made in turn the same complaint:

That when his heart and hope were spent
The harvest seemed a punishment.

That pain of mind the preacher draws
Who pleads for better faiths and laws,
And dies, with all his efforts banned,
An outcast in his fatherland.

And 'tis the leader's lot to see
His labors' sad futility,
When mankind, full of self-deceit,
Keep signing up their own defeat.

And the poet's portion is
To perish in the chrysalis,
And carry to the bier, unborn,
The budding visions of the morn.

And even the peasant pioneer,
Who plows the glebe beside the mere,
Succumbs ere he, himself, can see
His service to humanity.

1924

WHEN I WAS AN EDITOR

—St. G. Stephansson—

So maudlin, with pity and pathos I stood
If someone who erred got the lashes;
If hanged, I'd weep over the ashes.
With vocal dispraise such injustice I viewed.

But somehow as soon as the war-craze ensued,
When slaughter en masse was the popular mood
And corpses all over the planet were strewed,
With dumb indecision I stood.

For there was the problem of friendships and food
—One's sympathies nobody cashes.
To dampen my conscience-clashes
The cracks in my honor I artfully glued
With unctuous lies that I hastily brewed
—And cheered just as loud as I could.

1953

THE BROTHERS' DESTINY

—St. G. Stephansson—

For ages the growth had been garnered.
The ground was still blowing away.
And closer and closer each farmer
Had cut down the trees and the hay.
Each tenant, in turn, that departed
Had taken his pound since he started
And timed the last take to the day.

Each son that succeeded his elders
Received a less fruitful estate.
The longer the line of the fathers
The less would the heritage rate.
The last of the lot were two brothers
To live on the desert the others
Had looted and left to its fate.

They blamed all their forebears and fathers
For faithless and shameful neglect.
On nostrums and needs they debated,
But never agreed in effect.
Yet faster than language could frame it,
They felt that they had to reclaim it,
Or flee from a region so wrecked.

One brother, less sanguine, decided
To search at the borders for gold.
He deemed that there must be some metals
In mountains so rugged and old.
At night he had noted a glimmer,
A nebulous kind of a shimmer,
From underground treasures untold.

The other one went on the warpath
To wake up the glade and the field,

To coax the young birch from the border
And better the ground and the yield,
To lure the tough ling up the highlands,
To liven the pines on the dry-lands
And sew up the sward till it healed.

They parted; for pride and ambition
So pull at the ties of the clan.
No other enticements can answer
When Honor has called to the man
Who gears not his work to his wages,
But wills the result to the ages
And plans to improve what he can.

As brothers they talked at the table
And teamed at the games of the day.
As foes on the commons they quarreled
On questions of state, as we say.
But always the better-fixed brother
Would be the same friend to the other
And share both his house and his hay.

II

In centuries progress is patterned
And proved, not in days or in years;
And visions that time found the truest
Betoken which epoch endears.
But always the people are proudest
And play up their freedoms the loudest
Whenever no author appears.

Though both of the brothers have vanished
And buried the story now lies,
And none of the tales that are told us
The text of their lives may comprise.
The will and the work they expended
To worthwhile improvements have tended
And paths that would open the eyes.

III

In sooth there's a fable or folklore
Some few are repeating today
That deep in the past when the people
Were poorer and full of dismay,
A skeleton bleaching and broken
Had been to the finder a token
That tempting rich treasures there lay.

Who froze there in raiments so ragged
The rock-slide alone could retell.
One forearm, though brittle, still beckoned
To breaks in the side of the fell.
In frost-cracks that long had been littered
The loadstones in particles glittered
Like ghost-eyes a gleam in a cell.

And much of the precious metal
The mob that came after had found;
For Toil, ever tempted by profit,
Kept tearing the wealth from the ground.
The mountains, now mined to their bases,
Were moved through the gaps in their faces
And yielded up stores that astound.

For profit the brother had blasted
The boulders with weakening hands
And torn from the treasures behind them
Their time-honored rock-woven bands.
And man set the mountains ashiver,
To make them consent to deliver
And bow to their master's commands.

And still 'mid the rocks and the ruins
Men root for the glittering dross.
They follow the rut like their rivals
And reap but the toil and the loss.
—It seems like the shade of the brother,
Still shining, reveals to another
The spectre of gold and its gloss.

IV

In Sundale's new farmsteads, so fertile,
By folks it's remembered and told
How gardens had built out their borders
While birches grew stalwart and old.
The barrens got fewer and fewer,
The fatherland better and newer
—A sight for the sons to behold!

A tree in what once was the wasteland
Keeps watch o'er the dale and the steeps,
And under its shadow in silence
'Tis said that the brother now sleeps.
A hillock near-hidden with flowers
Is his, that envisioned these bowers
And sealed up the sandpits for keeps.

And people have faith in the forest
That fondly has sheltered the one
Who fostered the trees and the flowers
And first of the tribe had begun
To bid for more dews for the dry-lands,
To drive the brave furze up the highlands
And temper both shower and sun.

The vessels our seamen are sailing
Were sawn from the timbers at home,
And proud of their part, as a symbol,
They play it wherever they roam.
From ports with the products of labor
They ply to the marts of a neighbor
Or sally afar o'er the foam.

When summer returns on its cycle
And sweeps out the cold and the snow,
It seems that the brother's own being
Still bides in the soil that we hoe,
—Like hope had been sown in the seedlands,
His soul in the beautiful treed-lands,
His mind in the grasses that grow.

V

We see in each fact, not the fable,
As feebly we search and appraise,
That law, if illucid, is stable
And leaves but one prospect to face:
To think not in hours, but in ages,
At eve not to claim *all* our wages,
Will bring out the best in the race.

Through sins that may seem to enfeeble
The sharp will instinctively learn
To change what is best to a better
In building the future we earn—.

It isn't today, with its dancing
And dreams, but the art of advancing,
That buys what the seers can discern.

1953

ARMISTICE

(Written in 1915)

—St. G. Stephansson—

Prologue

Come, sing about the season
Or something for the heart.
Try not to rouse the reason
Or rip the blinds apart.

Epilogue

If reason fails to rule emotion,
When running wild, just like the ocean,
No man can tell what straws will stay it,
What storms of life may turn or sway it;
For in the hands of Ignorance
It is the helpless butt of chance.

* *
*

The shooting for the moment had abated,
The sound of battle faded to a whisper.
The dead and dying o'er the field encattered,
In no-man's-land, prevented further action.
So like a breastwork 'twixt the poisèd armies,
The carrion wall restricted will and vision.
Repellent unto both the feet and senses
In random piles the human flesh was lying,
Inert and maggoty or feebly crawling.
A momentary truce had been agreed on
The while the sappers dug the putrid masses.

That done, as planned, the hard and bitter conflict

Could be resumed with fresh and added vigor.
Meanwhile about the chessboard of the nations
The pawns, each on its spot, were idly resting.
Across the gory space between the trenches,
At normal pitch, the human voice could carry.

*

Beside a tattered tree-bole at the forefront
A tired youth arose upon his haunches.
All day through filth and blood he had been crawling
Beneath a rain of lead and shrapnel flying.
The long night through, uncovered in a shell-hole,
In icy slush he'd lain with fear and shivered.

Still sweet to his unhardened nerves and sinews
Was this brief resurrection to the sunshine.

*

Across the gap a seasoned, greying trooper
With cautious glances rose from out his crater.
His clothes and shoes were wet and blood-bespattered.
Though he himself was hale and still unwounded.

There he had lain for days among the fallen,
Protected by the mounds of dead around him.
Beside him lay his son in death—the youngest—
And on his right a life-time pal lay slaughtered.
The stench of rotting flesh was in his nostrils
And overhead the cloud of bursting shell-fire.
To sit in peace and hang his feet in comfort
Adown his hungry grave a fleeting moment
To him was now a privilege and pleasure.

*

The soldier boy that faced him in the open—
The enemy, the hated foreign terror,
Who surely had so lately tried to kill him
And may have sent the hot and deadly bullet

That killed his son—he now accosted gaily
As one enmeshed without intent or purpose
In lamentable deeds that both detested.

*

“Good day to you!” he said in accents kindly
And, strangely, spoke the language of the other.
“To both of us this lull is welcome, comrade.”

The mother tongue that brought so kind a greeting
To him, so lately torn by fear and hatred,
Assuaged the feelings like a benediction.
The very lameness of the words as uttered
By one whose tongue had clearly been accustomed
To other tones and phrases, while assuring,
An added tinge of kindness imparted—
As when a child with diligence is trying
To copy well the diction of its elders.

*

“Good luck to you!” the puzzled youth responded.
“An erstwhile foe, I greet you for the moment
As father.”

*

“Then a son ’twere meet to call you,
Since you now deign to speak of me as father,
Though yet I cannot as a son consider
Another one but him who lies beside me,
A corpse now in our mutual grave untended.
That is no sign of enmity or hatred
Between us two.”

*

“The while the lull continues,
To him who has so long and well defended
His fatherland, in spite of age, the stripling

Can bow, and unashamed converse with honor.”

*

“My years do not deserve this adulation.
I never owned a foot of my fair country.
Another reason sent me forth to battle.

For ages all my kin were serfs and tenants
Without domain. A haughty native chieftain
Deprived us of our goods and lands and houses
And gave them as a present to a crony
To hold in fee forever. So the story
Is told by those who to their sorrow know it.
Of one thing I am certain: that my master
In peace and quiet dwells within his castle
While I and mine for him like this are dying.
No doubt you own a home that needs protection?”

*

“A house and home? No, I live in a city
And am for sale from day to day to masters
Who set the rates of pay, decide the hours
And own the tools, the shops and vacant spaces.

Perhaps you, father, joined the fray with ardor
Because you people are so proud and warlike,
With none to speak for peace and mediation,
As ours have done. My nation has so many
Who counsel peace and often sing its praises.
They even lend some dollars to preserve it.”

*

“No, I’m not here because our propaganda
For peace was less than yours in pitch or phrasing.
We were the first of all, if you remember,
To get the Nobel Prize, so highly valued.
And yet we shot, as if he were a felon,
The one who tried to stop this Armageddon!

The rich, grown famous for their great possessions,
As death approached vied blindly with each other
To hang upon 'The Tree of Peace,' with unction,
Their hats, packed full of bonds against the public,
That one last decent gesture might engloss them
And save their hated names from due oblivion.

But now again they have reversed the verdict
And term this war a necessary evil.
'A war to end all wars' they glibly name it
And thus attest their will to peace and freedom.
Perchance the tongues of peace among your people
Are not so prone to double-talk and shamming?"

*

"Your spokesmen were, it seems then, like our poets
Who sang to us for half an age in concert
Of peace on earth, of charity and friendship,
Like Christian men: then gladly took to screaming
The martial anthems, each in his best measure,
As quickly as the first loud cannon sounded,
Until the farthest outposts of the nations
In answer rumbled forth. Old politicians
Who long had been advising strife and conquest,
In discord with the attitude prevailing,
Were scarcely heard above the spate that followed,
And stopped—perhaps to listen in, delighted.

An old and faithful comrade in our country
Through all his life had led the dumb providers,
Demanding for the dispossessed and homeless
A modicum of fare and peace and freedom.
The butt of hate and harm from all the mighty,
In weal or woe he bore the flaming banner
Of peace and justice for the ragged masses.

With tongue and pen and faith he fought this madness,
While we, his wards, opposed him in the struggle.
We shook our knotty toiler-hands in anger,
Commanding him, our leader, to be silent.

That vile betrayal broke his heart and courage;
And now a wreck, bereft of hope and reason,
He roams alone, awaiting his last summons.

We hear that all the ancient holy churches
That graced your spacious land in bygone ages
Have lost their hold upon the teeming masses:
That heathendom among you now is rampant.

Perhaps that evil wave has caught you, father,
And forced you, though unwilling, into battle?"

*

"No, it was neither heathendom nor weakness
Within our holy church that drove me hither.
The Christian and the skeptic are united
About this new crusade, and stand together.
Our preachers are, as one, devoutly praying
For more and better weapons for the nations—
Among the lot my own revered confessor,
Who had for fifty years at every Yuletide
Announced in many oily words of welcome
The Prince of Peace—the while there was no fighting
But when the din of warfare shook the welkin,
He blessed the favored signal from the pulpit.
With grave resolve he opened up the Scriptures
To prove that he who would not shoulder musket
With smart goodwill, for God and for the chosen,
Had sadly misinterpreted the Gospel
And fallen prey to blind and heathen thinking.
Conversely, maybe, in your land the clergy
And church—no doubt as powerful as ours is—
Have prayed for peace and deprecated warfare?"

*

"Not so! Our church in every phase and manner
Resembles yours, and many a leading shepherd
Who taught the members all the Christian virtues,
Himself has fallen on the field of battle.

We hear that even our new peerless leader,
The head of church and state in our great empire,
Has carried high before the gathered army
The sacred icon of our true religion,
Thus dedicating all the battle forces
To war, and to our new-found god—to Woden.

The very infidels of old, the godless,
Are flocking to the chapels and repenting.
As throngs refill our erstwhile empty churches,
Revival and reform are in the offing.

Are you perhaps engaged in this fell struggle
To re-instate a creed that has been dying?"

*

“The Church has called and duly consecrated
Our cause, like yours. To me it has no meaning.
A frenzied call to service and repentance
Has left me cold. What profit to abandon
The token peace and brotherhood prevailing,
And then revert to former faiths and customs,
That through the painful centuries have given
The civilizing methods and the culture
To which this grim and bloody field bears witness?
Results are facts. They never have been clearer.

I went to school, in line with laws and custom,
And learned the academic art of killing.
To me that training meant but little, comrade,
Since slaying was a branch of civic duty.
Soon war was kindled up and I conscripted.
Had I refused I would have been arrested,
Condemned to die as if I were a traitor
And shot at dawn—a lesson to the people.

There were some young to feed. I had to struggle
In their behalf. A war is fraught with dangers;
But there, with luck, a wound may not be fatal;
The gun squad's is. The odds decided for me.

A yeoman in a land without conscription,
No doubt you went to war with slight coercion?"

*

“My part as soldier in the forces, father,
Resembles yours. Before the war had started
A wave of deep unrest and strikes impended.
While men in droves were destitute and idle
And millions starved, the goods in stores were rotting.
Distress was said to stem from lack of money
And blamed, we heard, on overmuch production.
The rulers and their wealthy friends together
Had long ago devised a fit solution:
A larger mortgage load upon the people
In loans and bonds was called for, thus enslaving
The unborn too, through all the coming ages,
To pay the magic, self-renewing profit.

Dire poverty within a world of plenty
Has now become the major cause of warfare.
But few there were who foresaw all the horror!
When keyed to war and all it meant, the nation
Ignored the need for civic rights and welfare—
The work and wages that sustain the masses.
The owners stopped production for the people
And offered half a wage to all the healthy
And young who would enlist and join the army
To save the fatherland. The state would feed them.
For me it was the practical solution,
That I might eat and help to feed my mother,
Who is a widow from a former bloodbath.
My father, true, was only gravely wounded
And lingered for a time, in bed and helpless.
When I had grown to boyhood, fit to labor,
The pension he had drawn was discontinued.
The taxes were a cause of much complaining,
And here the masters spied a chance for saving.
They were convinced that I could earn the wherewith
For our support. The solemn promise given

to us, and many another, could be broken.

But now again while I'm alive and fighting
The state allots a stipend to my mother.
As long as there are many thousands wanted
Who seek this livelihood, through need and pressure,
'Tis well to pay at first with grace and honor.

By those, unfit, who stay behind unchallenged,
The youth who never volunteered for service
Is shunned and often openly insulted—
A slam that very few defy undaunted.

Through economic need and fear I've fought you.
You shoot at me because your laws compel it.
The cases match, except that your dictator
Is said to have provoked the tragic crisis.”

*

“Nor am I in this mess because last August
A countryman of mine was seized with panic
And shot a noted duke. The cause lies deeper.
A while ago you named a truer reason
For all this long and murderous disaster.

The people, after long and painful thinking
About their plight, in spite of toil and pinching,
Suspected there was something topsy-turvy.
The doubting spread and all the props of power
Began to tremble o'er the gloomy prospect.
And so they planned—the native and the foreign,
Who always stand together for survival—
A remedy to still the bitter grumbling.
A nation locked in struggle with another
Forgets in time her daily civic worries.
The tyrant changes, in her twisted thinking,
From foe to friend, her hero and defender.
The super-nation blather, as a fillip
To those who want to rule, is also useful.

The first line to show the revised version is

Ine rivalry to snape the varied peoples
In thought and action to their own, regardless—
Albeit only for the passing moment—
Affords a breathing spell for further planning.
The culture in the world of man, emerging,
Can only stem from brave, unfettered thinking
In divers lands, that often clash and differ.

Like this, from childhood, I have found it, comrade.
You could, I fancy, tell the selfsame story.”

*

“Indeed I could. But in the press and pulpit
We call it something else: to guard our freedom!

I well remember when our stolid thousands
In uniform were mustered, due for action,
The mayor said: ‘ ’Tis well you have, my heroes,
Some more important aims and things to ponder
Than wages and the worries of the masses.
The war confers on us a signal blessing.’

And I recall that leaders from the city
Behind the lines took time and leave to travel,
For rest and pleasure, to the front in numbers
If, thanks to luck, the shelling had abated.
They praised us and inquired if we had wishes
That could be met. No boon would be too costly
For us, the brave. But we were all reluctant
To hurt the feelings of these kindly masters
By asking for the one thing they were neither
Empowered nor inclined so soon to grant us:
A world at peace; an end to all this killing.

And then one day, when we were busy clearing
The gory field, like now, the same old question
Was asked by groups that came again to visit.

Our doctor is a kind and clever surgeon
Who binds our wounds with patient care in silence.
But when he heard the oft-repeated question

But when he heard the oft-repeated question
He said with heat: 'Since you are bent on helping,
Roll up your sleeves, pick up a spade or shovel
And go to work, to dig these rotting corpses.
We need the rest. The time allowed us presses.'
How fast it worked! The patriots in a twinkling
Were gone—and have not since returned to cheer us.

I do believe that could you witness, father,
How, come what may, we spare our sick and wounded,
It would amaze you how, against such numbers,
We often stood our ground with pluck and honor.
It's not so hard to show unbounded courage
When victory, through greater strength, is certain."

*

"I care not for the victory you speak of.
A state that wins is not for long the victor.
The vanquished, glum and restive, live for vengeance
And prosper on the sweet anticipation.
And soon or late the victor in his triumph
Will fall a victim to the snare it bought him.

When Rome had spent herself in winning battles
And lost, the while, the flower of her manhood,
The slaves and misfits left to reap the glory
Had neither wit nor will to save the pieces.
Just such a fate awaits our own successes.

My will in such a storm is but a plaything
That's blown about without intent or meaning.

What help or sense, for instance, is in curing
Our wounds and sending us again to battle,
To be the target for another missile?
Such kindness is a blind and cruel error
That just prolongs our pain—or so we found it."

*

"Without much thought I too have wondered, father

without much thought I, too, have wondered, taunted,
About the very things that you have mentioned.
It touched my feelings rather than my reason,
But I can now perceive what you complain of.

When we were promised, as is now the custom,
Security and peace for all this turmoil,
The pride of states, together with the boasting,
Outran the will and power of fulfilment.
And as I saw the afterbirth of action—
The thousands dead and maimed among the ruins—
It struck me that our masters, in their panic,
Had led us, with scant feeling, into error;
That they had, willing, when it came to choices,
Brought home to us the pattern of their Congos.
But as I knew such thoughts were labeled treason,
I ‘passed the buck’ and harbored them in silence.

Not long ago I, too, lay sorely wounded
And suffered much; but kindly care and science
Nursed back to life and strength my ailing body.
I hailed with joy my growing health and vigor,
Unmindful of the fate that might await me.

And yet it was a shock to me what happened
The very day they said I would recover
And sent me back to harden in the trenches.
Upon the bed I rose from, in my presence,
They placed another gravely wounded soldier
Who seemed near death, so wracked with pain and worry.
To cheer him up the doctor said with feeling:
‘A month or two and I will have you mended.
Just look! and—pointing at me—see your comrade!
A while ago he was as dead as you are,
And now you see him just as good as ever
And on his way again to join the fighting.’
With this he meant to brace the gloomy patient.
But, strange to say, the lad rose up in anger
And said; ‘No, never, knave! will I permit you
To cure me for the battlefield and trenches,
To suffer endless thirst and fear and torture.
Much rather will I die here at your pleasure

much rather will I die here at your pleasure,
Whatever method you may choose to end me,
With drug or knife. So do your worst, and welcome!

With startled feelings at his words, I pondered
A fleeting spell, and fled with haste unseemly
To hear no more. Of course the man was raving
—And yet I shuddered at the sense he uttered!

Like ours, no doubt, it is your consolation
That this great conflict, global and exhaustive,
Will be the final military struggle.
For when it stops, a wave of peace ensuing
Will spread, 'tis thought, from pole to pole unbroken.
The fight today, they say, will speed that era.
Our side has banished freedom to acquire it,
And you resist because your faith is lagging.”

*

“Do we, the dupes who have no votes nor voices
To shape our lives according to our wishes,
With tooth and claw contend with one another
About our right to live in peace and freedom?
Such dumb obedience to mobs and masters
Has made us into beasts and cannon-fodder.
The meek are often kicked from post to pillar.

Are we not both, without our own approval,
Sent hither by our self-appointed masters?
To both they give the very same assignment;
The difference only how the ranks are facing.

Within, I know, we had been contemplating
A life of peace. But tired now and older
We are too spent to think about it longer.
But what of youth, the brave and enterprising,
Who faced with hope a long and pleasant future?
Killed off! In heaps star-scattered 'round the trenches!
And so the coming epoch will be peopled
By aged duds and self-centred wretches.
The peace—if peace will come to those now living—

The peace — if peace will come to those now living
Will be the peace of impotence and error:
A truce that swims in failures and lost causes.
For such a life the payment is excessive!

In times gone by the diplomats of nations
Spoke each to each in soft and honeyed phrases.
They practised well the subtle art of talking
With tongue in cheek, and drafting fake agreements.
Today with every crime they charge each other,
The daily papers burn with accusations
And all the great and wise have joined the wrangling.
It could be lucky for the lesser nations
That stand apart from all the strife and fury,
If all the powers left them uninvaded—
To prove each other base and wilful liars,
When charging that they harbor such intentions.

Could you have, son, refrained, if you had chosen,
From fighting me, since you possessed the power
And also were convinced you had to conquer?
My actions were not voluntary either.

For even peace-time rivals to each other
Will pledge our goods and lives in every crisis.
Behind the scenes they hide their vile collusion
Until they start to fight about the booty.
The citizens, who dream about their freedom,
Are sold in bulk to serve abroad whenever
It suits the whim or will of either tyrant.”

*

“Thus we have likewise often found it, father.
Our allies seem at times to be unwilling
To die like flies on foreign soil embattled.
In spite of claims, we know they lack the fire
That drives the man defending home and country.
We know they feel, down deep within their being,
That they were tricked into the sorry bargain.

Still we believe that all the world's best culture

Can we conceive that all the world's best culture,
As represented by the side we favor,
By crafty foes is threatened with extinction
And stands undaunted fighting for survival.

Your side has seldom been the first to forward
The aims of man, or do the pioneering
In this our age of science and invention.

A stagnant world of famine and depression
Would be our sorry lot if you should triumph,
And all the gains of ages would be cancelled.
You have aspired to total domination,
And in your haste forgot to build your fences.

In lands like yours it never could be easy
To see the many aims and undercurrents
That ebb and flow in ever-growing volume
Beneath the surface of the war-psychosis.”

*

“Quite true. I lack the knack and native talent
To scan the value of each rumor-story.
My purview has indeed a small horizon.

I well remember, though, that in my homeland
The people bled for thirty years profusely.

The reason was perhaps of little moment;
The question only: whether it were proper
To seek for God with methods of the reason
Or let our preachers douse the public conscience
With dope and holy-water disinfectant.

And now there is another church accepted,
Much richer and if possible more vicious
In aim and content than the Roman species.
Between the two the policies are fashioned.
With reason misapplied, the toiling public
Is kept in want while merchant kings are fighting
Amongst themselves about the dwindling markets

In backward, needy, undeveloped regions,
To feed their parasites and spineless stooges.
The wars pertain to commerce, not to freedom.

Our culture and our much-admired inventions,
Applied by misfits in a planless era,
Instead of blessing us with peace and plenty,
Have brought the sorry mess we see about us.

And will perhaps the destiny of mankind,
With all its pride, at last be self-destruction?
Will men persist in planning and producing
Machines of death from which there's no escaping,
By either side, with victory or honor?
Or will they be compelled to stop, exhausted,
Beneath the weight of their own machinations?

Has not your nation, proud and often envied,
Pursued this course and more than any other
Induced the rest, the more reserved and timid,
To emulate and follow her example?

Regardless though of where the blame attaches,
Perhaps this spate of blood will break our fetters.”

*

“That thought reminds me of a thing that happened
The other day, when we were caught short-handed
Defending our prize military weapon
From capture by your overwhelming forces.
‘Big Bertha’ was our greatest, most effective
Machine of death constructed since creation.
Against the onslaught of your teeming numbers
Our choice was flight, or mass annihilation.
Our captain, raving mad, in desperation
Sent wave on wave in vain into the battle.
Though head to heel our fighters fell in layers
He grimly drove them on without compunction.
But when your bandits broke our last battalion
And blew the ‘wonder’ into bits and pieces

Our doughty captain wept just like a baby.

Though hard repressed like other sons of peasants
You, father, may have dreamt of fame and fortune
And felt that you were born to be a leader.
You may have thought the arts of war the answer.

To youth the stories of our war-famed heroes
Are captivating tales, not soon forgotten.”

*

“Win fame through war!—for us the pawns, so puny,
Whom hidden hands that play the game for profit
Can move and sacrifice in flocks at pleasure?
The masters even sell their valued key-men
Upon the board of play, if in the long run
The strategy will trap—in their opinion—
The other side, and mate it at the finish.
They send us forth to certain death as decoys.
A herd of sheep, in essence, we are gathered
And driven in a body to the barracks,
Not knowing which are to be shorn or slaughtered.
Nor do the owners care which strain or portion
Is left alive to forage through the winter.
The metal cross and other gaudy baubles
By accident may hit, just like the bullet.

In former ages gallantry and courage
Were personal and sacred to the hero,
A trait by friend and foe alike admitted.
The fame he earned, attacking or defending,
Was his by right, to relish and remember.
The fighters met each other in the open,
Both wild and free, and strength and skill were noted.
The killers now are unseen lethal agents,
Like epidemics sweeping through the nations.”

*

“Undoubtedly the glittering adventures

Are gone from wars that men today are waging.

Yet I can tell a simple tale of valor
About a youth back home who had resisted
The call to arms and disobeyed the masters.
Cajoled and threatened, pleaded with and pestered,
Despised and shunned and said to stain and blacken
The honored name of brave and loyal fathers,
A craven renegade afraid of dying,
He steadfastly refused to join the army.
But then one day, as fateful luck would have it,
We learned that one of your advance divisions
Had pierced our lines without intent or orders
And would escape unless we could surround it.
The strange terrain was rugged and uncharted,
So we engaged this youth to lead our columns
The best and quickest way. He knew the lay-out.

But after hours of hard and weary going
Our captain, now suspicious, took his rifle
And, aiming at the youth who faced him, thundered:
'Unless we reach our goal within the hour,
I'll shoot you like a dog! Now, laggard, hurry!'
The boy looked at the gun and, smiling, answered:
'Too late! I cannot now, sir, take your offer.
You never will hereafter find your quarry.
I've led you far astray with tact and purpose
To save some lives, if only for the moment,
For mine—and now you, sir, may shoot, and welcome!'

A score of rifles spoke and tore to tatters
The gallant youth. And there in peace they left him.

A short time later, when I told the story
To one who had been captured from your forces—
We both were in the mood for reminiscing
About the things that happen in the armies—
He thought a while and then burst out in laughter.

'O now at last,' he said, 'I know the reason
Why Falkenheyn so quickly was promoted!

His title, that of general, was given
For skill and forethought in that great withdrawal—
He was the officer in that adventure—
They soon bedecked his breast with stars and crosses,
Although he modestly objected, saying
That he was not entitled to the glory:
The march had been his normal speed of movement!

The modesty shown by the old commander
Was much acclaimed. His deep reserve and candor
Was known and counted on throughout the nation.
Appearances would indicate, I fancy,
That he would be the last of all our leaders
To want the doubtful symbol of distinction
Required to wear that lie as decoration
If he could know to whom the signal honor
Belonged—to wit: your boy, the brave dissenter.’

Do you believe, as I do also, father,
That when this senseless slaughter will be ended
The ghosts of many such, among the ruins,
Will stand revealed to many eyes now blinded—
That, rising from this rank abomination,
The wrongs unveiled will shame us into thinking?

Perhaps by reason of this cloud of hatred
The little nations standing by as neutrals—
But reaping none-the-less their share of losses—
May profit through the over-all disaster.”

*

“What state is neutral, son, when powers wrangle?
Have we not published to the whole of mankind—
To our own glory and the foe’s discomfort—
That we can keep the costly warfare going
From year to year on end, without impairing
Our goods and lands? The profit from investments
Abroad, so long pursued, will pay the piper.

What land is neutral, since the scattered peoples

Co-operate in paying for the business?

Of course you also tap the selfsame sources
To meet the bill. The world at large pays tribute
To both of us, as agents in the wrecking.

If any nation sitting on the sidelines
Could still so shape her course that all the flower
Of her young people would escape the slaughter,
Her culture might survive. She might adventure
To build anew—and maybe earn a future.

The only key to that desired condition
Is just the will to see the silver lining
In centuries to come—and fortify it
With faith and deeds, in spite of other outlook.

Events instil into the major powers
The craze for war. Its high proponents gaily
Direct the moves. They welcome every error
That leads to civic strife among the classes
And use the fears and turmoil as a pretext
To arm the state, in readiness for action.

The ones who set the world aflame so foully
Use every ruse to win and gain as allies
The states that are attempting to be neutral.
They promise, press, decry, appeal and threaten
—As they have need—assistance or destruction.
With more ill-will than quoted in the Scriptures
About the rich man, groaning in his torment,
Who wished to warn and save his friends and brothers
From such a cruel fate as he had suffered,
They want to plunge the world to death and ruin.
The story of the rich man may be garbled,
But never in the hell of human warfare
Has there been any sign of love or kindness.

And what has been the fate of faithful leaders,
The few who would not break their solemn pledges
For peace, and gamely stood by their convictions?

One simply falls a prey to the assassin.
Another is maligned among his fellows
And duly charged with treason and convicted.
A third, gone mad, avoided and abandoned,
With aimless tread is hobbling to oblivion.
The Roman prince himself who rules, on paper,
Complaining says: ‘Behold the man, ye judges!’

We weep and pray for those who die in battle,
The martyrs who are through with pain and worry.
But all the hate and misery remaining
Are more entitled to our aid and pity.
At times one hopeful thought has made me wonder;
If all this murder-lust among the nations
Would strike at every household under Heaven
And slay a husband, father, son or brother—
With Sorrow breaking in through every doorway
And sitting, most unwelcome, there forever—
The common loss might unify the victims
And make them feel anew their ties of kinship,
The sharpest tongue of truth is our experience.

But first we both must die, and many another.
—And now I see the field is being readied!”

*

“Our rest, in truth, is almost finished, father.
The dead no more obstruct the line of vision.

But I forgot that in my little knapsack
I have some food. For though I felt some hunger,
The things you’ve said have held me so attentive
That I forgot. But now I shall be eating.”

*

“A minute, son, just while I change my posture!
It isn’t good for me to see your dainties.”

*

“Here, catch this morsel! You have long been starving.
I well can do without until the evening.
Look, father! I have thrown the parcel over.”

“No, eat it, son; for you are also hungry.”

*

“That may be true, but I have lost the feeling.
I now recall that you have lain there famished
For many days and nights and held your crater
Against our fire, while we have alternated
For sleep and rest and now and then a mouthful.”

*

“For all your native kindness shown, I thank you!
That it survives—at least among the privates,
The mob—here in this filthy cess of hatreds,
Gives hope. But as for me, it matters little
What comes or goes. The end, I ween, approaches.
I dared not, laddie, look upon you eating.
The wolf of hunger in an empty stomach,
So tempted under arms, could not be trusted.
Determined not to harm you, with intention,
I asked for leave to turn, the while you feasted.”

*

“Our momentary time of truce is ended.
I hear our trumpets calling loud for action.”

*

“Our drums are droning orders for resistance!”

*

“Beware! My hand is on the weapon, father.”

*

“Then welcome, son, into the grave here with me!”

1953

THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

—Einar Benediktsson—

Has man ever gazed on a grander sight
Than the gods' high realm in a blaze of glory,
Resplendent with torches in tier and storey?
—What toper could revel on such a night?
Like a maiden the earth is without a blight
In its alban kirtle of frosted roses.
Each granule of sand is a cinder, bright.
Ensilvered the winding brooklet dozes.
The Arctic at night is alustre with light
That the living aurora imposes.

From the highest plane to the sombre sea
The scene is enacted without a shutter.
Each sylph asplutter with flounce a-flutter
Is falling and rising in ecstasy.
Some hand with its fingers of filigree
The fiery ocean of ether splashes.
From here below to the life-to-be
We look amazed while the drama flashes.
And the glaciers on high are agaze with each eye
That gleams in their crystal sashes.

In the light of that wonder our problems appear
So petty and mean that they vanish unbidden.
Though roughly I'm chidden my rancor is hidden;
At rest with the masses, no slight can sear,
For the vaulting above is so bright and clear.
Each blazing star is a magic pinion.
It lifts our hopes to a higher sphere,
Where Heaven recharges each lowly minion.
We are sensing tonight and asserting our right
As servants in Light's dominion.

How vast is the infinite ocean of space

And eerie the barks that its waters are plying!
Each skipper on high to a haven is flying,
Whether he veers or goes onward apace.
But blind is the urge that the eye obeys
And the author his light in the dark composes.
With bended knees and a burning face
We bide at the wall the temple encloses.
But into the garden the gateway is barred,
And God in His sanctum reposes.

1925

A FOG AT SEA

—E. Benediktsson—

Above the ocean, formless, huge and hollow,
The heightless void my dusky barque surrounds.
No vista greets the eye; no song of swallow
The silence breaks, as night the day impounds.
The lazy air its bated breath is holding.
About me lies, without a sign of molding,
The nameless highway that the nations follow.

As if a shadow-hood on high were trailing
From heaven's rim, the darkening west returns
The lowering cloud, that, calmly 'round me sailing.
In creeping, ghostly fog the sea interns;
While dark of mien, with dripping hair and bosom,
The "daughter of the atmosphere," so gruesome,
With clammy fingers fondles deck and railing.

The halting boat its head is calmly rolling
And holds its dripping neck above the waves.
Alarum bells in warning tones are tolling.
A tireless eye of light the darkness braves.
The sail to yard, like cloak to arm, is clinging,
A cloudy breath the wheezy stack is flinging.
Aft you feel the spurs the speed controlling.

The thick and woolly fog that fills the alleys
A fearful monster places everywhere.
The crew resembles giants from the galleys,
The genial swain a troll, the dog a bear.
And towering in the mist the mast is fading.
The mainsail, spar and boom in haze are wading,
While snowy crests divide the water-valleys.

Around the ship no fish nor fowl is wending.
No fitful sounds a living thing reveal.

The yeast beneath the p̄row no life is lending.
The lifeless words upon the tongue congeal.
But no restraint can tame the trackless ocean;
Between two worlds the billows are in motion.
And Hoth of Storms again his bow is bending.

Below the clouds a saving gleam presages
A sunny welcome, though the fog rebels.
The course a magic finger guides and gauges.
A giant arm of steel the boat propels.
Afar, we know, the land of Leif is bidding,
Whose lovely maiden name the Fates are hiding
—A day-bright world of dead, forgotten ages.

1930

MY MOTHER

—E. Benediktsson—

Mother, I've sailed o'er the seas afoam.
To southward the lands are fading.
A scarf for my isle with the icy dome
The afterglow is braiding.
At last my ship is heading for home.
My heart is the bill of lading.

From stolid crowds that the streets infest
I steer for thy spires so conely.
I find no men where the mobs congest,
Nor music in noises only;
But he is the welcome and willing guest
Who visits himself when lonely.

Abroad in the storm and the times that try
Thy truths with my heart were pleading.
I dreamt of the past, when I played thee nigh,
And peacefully thou wert reading.
If seas were calm or the surf ran high
My soul on the dream was feeding.

At every step along Bifrost burned
A beacon our minds erected.
From thee, with pleasure and love, I learned
The language our isle protected;
For that's where the gods, in trust, interned
Each tone that a thought affected.

We heard in the lilt of her lullabies
The language our fancy teaches
And the ages honed from its hardy guise,
'Mid hills and on sandy reaches.
From nature's morning to reason's rise
It wrote on the manless beaches.

The rhymes I loved and the lullabies,
Though lost, with my dreams are blending.
A mountain swan, in my fancy, flies
Afar, with his song unending.
And a mother stands by the ocean-ice,
Her arms to her son extending.

Aloft the wings of thy faith have flown
Where the frosted rose was lying.
The swell of thy first young force was thrown
When Fate each heart was trying.
—No keener pain in my soul was sown
Than to see that thy hopes were dying.

Whenever I flee with a fallen crest
Thy faith new courage giveth.
The burdens lift at thy hope's behest.
Thy hardy spirit liveth.
And thine, on the earth, is the only breast
That all my sins forgiveth.

Wherever my ship on the billows swung,
In search of a deeper learning,
Unmarred forever thy image clung
And into my soul was burning.
Thou placed my hand on thy harp, bestrung,
When my heart for the muse was yearning.

Thy life and the songs that my soul regaled
Are seas that the minds are laving.
Mother, my lines that so long had failed
At last on thy shield are graven—
The reason I boarded, the reason I sailed,
The reason I'm back to the haven.

1930

UNDER THE STARS

—E. Benediktsson—

Bright the silvery sands are gleaming.
Souls renew their waning might.
Sleepy reefs and dunes are dreaming.
Dance the sylphs, with torches beaming.
Fast propelled, a ship in sight
Sweeps into the magic night.
Softly 'round its sides are leaping
Silver-crested billows, weeping.
Even the deep is dumb tonight;
Death his secret thoughts is keeping.

Glorious scene! A silver spire
Sits upon a granite bar.
Earth beneath a nameless fire
Kneels to wonders that inspire.
Greetings pass from star to star;
Steep in dreams the glinty spar.
Forth amain the mind is faring.
Many a soul above is staring.
Fateful, sizzling suns afar
Silent wonder-hosts are snaring.

Through my soul each suasive hour
Seas and light my being claim.
I can feel a phantom power—
Former ages' sacred dower.
Mystic laws from lights aflame
Lead us on to joy or shame.
Magic strength from starry spaces,
Streaming through our hearts, amazes.
All our glowing future fame
From the skyey splendor blazes.

Show me life—and let me share it.

Lock each realm the stars forsake.
Give me strife, and strength to bear it,
Star of Hope, my queen of merit!
Grant my heart a higher stake,
High enough to make or break.
Soon athwart the sylph's caprices
Surly Fate her skein releases.
Life's a chess; you lose or take.
The lead is mine—arrange the pieces.

1930

THE SHEPHERD'S ADVENTURE

—E. Benediktsson—

At dusk the sun with its deepest blushes
Adorns the West.
Whenever love is aroused it rushes
And runs amuck to an unlike breast,
Like a storm afield, or a flood that gushes
From fell to the sea, and rest.

Thus even the magnet in order places
Each atom small,
That, drawn to a certain centre, races,
With swift delight in the ranks to fall—
Where pole, enravished, its pole embraces,
Impelled by its inmost call.

He was the shade at the sunset hour
And she the bright.
Like flavors that mingle the sweet and sour,
She took the darkness and he the light—
A picture of melody's mighty power,
When meekness and strength unite.

About the shepherd with soft oppression
The sweet night played.
Dark as his eye with its deep confession
It draped in shadow the snowy maid.
Though young and tender his powerful passion
The pulse of his heart obeyed.

Each steely mite with a motive burning
The magnet sways,
Till every secret desire is turning
To serve the will of its focal blaze.
But after the magnet gives out the yearning
Is over—and Nature pays.

They met in the grip of the magnet's power
A moment's space,
As night may blend with a cinder shower
And sear the mind with a charm that stays
—With her like a wraith from its hidden bower;
With him like a starry blaze.

1931

A SUNDAY AT MOSSFELL

—E. Benediktsson—

At Mossfell parish, the people say,
The pastor was known to have gone astray,
A prey to his pound of weakness.
He drank, but he sidled through Satan's traps.
His soul was clean, not his vesture wraps.
He served his God—though he sinned perhaps—
Sincere, with a heart of meekness.

It came on a sunny Sabbath day,
When some of the flock had come to pray
And he on his bed lay bibbing.
He was the leader, and lay unfit!
He looked through the window and smiled a bit—
His flagon of wine at his face, to-wit;
His feet on the surplice-ribbing.

“Sunshine! The call of the church is high.
The cocks in the hayfield are turning dry,”
He said, with a shammed elation.
He spoke to the flask with its flashing wine,
“O fountain of pleasure and curse divine!”
Then turned on his pillow and took a stein
—His tempter and consolation.

He heard a rumble that rent the air,
Of running horses that, pair on pair,
Were coming, and coming faster.
His helpmate stood with a whit'ning cheek.
“The high and mighty from Reykjavik”
She whispered, and ran like at hide and seek
With the homespun togs of the pastor.

“Brush up the cassock and bid them in.”
He bit his lip, and he placed his chin

In the cup of his hand, so hollowed.
He sighed in his anguish, but said no word.
A simple prayer in his bosom stirred.
“High-noon” rose from the restless herd.
A ring from the steeple followed.

He grasped the hand of his worthy wife—
The witness and proof of their bygone life—
As she brought him his frock, so faded.
They stood for a moment eye to eye.
“My innate powers are just as high,”
He said, “I will stand though the storm is nigh.
The struggle is mine, unaided.”

They came in their triumph, ten abreast,
His temporal peers and the church’s best,
The country’s pride and power.
Sternly and brusquely the bishop spoke:
“I’ll break this fraud with a single stroke;
The name of the Crown and the Church invoke.
Thy cloak shall be off in an hour.”

Said the pastor: “Be welcome, ye mighty men.”
His manner was proud as he faced the ten
Firmly, yet free from rancor.
And then to each separate soul said he:
“I see no power to fear in thee;
Nor shalt thou, bishop, embarrass me—
Above is my fear, and anchor.”

The bishop raged as he rose to his feet:
“The rector is drunk and is full of conceit,
A sinful and grave transgression.
The service is faulty, the Synod defied,
The sexton is waiting, a case to be tried.”
“Stand back,” said the pastor and brushed them aside.
“Here, bishop, I lead the procession.”

With mangled faith, yet hope in her heart,
The housewife looked for a seat apart,
The end of it all surmising.

His name was soiled with their kin and kith.
Their costly gains were a trampled myth.
—But his voice rang out with power and pith,
And proudly her head was rising.

“Ye would drive and harry the weak to the wall,
The worn and tottering ones till they fall,
And break the reed that is bending.
Ye, men of honor and craft, accuse.
Ye come to judge what the base traduce.
But One is kind. He has called a truce.
We come with an equal standing.

“My church is a lowly and simple shrine;
But souls that come in their pride to shine
Still live in a pauper-prison.
And worldly peers in their wild conceit,
Who worship two, serve their own defeat.
To God there is nothing in man so meet
As meekness and deep contrition.

“Who answers the prayers of the poor with scorn?
Who places the blame on the weak and torn?
Who stones, if the steadfast waver?
And whose is the poisoned hand, so strong?
Whose hopes are based on the deepest wrong?
Yea, where is our court? On the hypocrite’s tongue,
—The hound’s that the rabble favor.

“I sip, it is true, and I break the ban.
I beg for no mercy. Ye look at a man
Who drank, to his shame and sorrow.
But under its magic I often stole
An echo that chimed with the people’s soul.
They come in peace with their punch and bowl
—And I pay to God what I borrow.

“For then I know they are frank and free.
They feel my weakness and bear with me.
I find they are friends, if earthy.
But thou hast the parvenu’s plain conceit;

A painless rock where a heart should beat.
Thy office is known to the oaf in the street
—But art thou, that holds it, worthy?

“The pathway of Error is often hard
And each retreat of our duty barred
On sin’s unholy highways.
But surely the meek for their sins atone.
For something was grief in pleasure sown.
And so in the end will be overthrown
The evils that lurk in the by-ways.

“When summoned to pay for each pound I spent
And I peacefully fold up my spirit’s tent,
The lowest of all the lowly,
I feel that whatever defence is read
By friends, in pleading, it will be said
For words and thoughts that were dumb and dead
In the dens of the rich and holy.”

They winced; for they knew that he told the truth.
He talked his mind without stint or ruth.
He faced them with force and candor.
He spoke to all, but each numskull knew
What knaves he meant, and imposters too,
Who sully the courts and the church undo
With cunning, to which they pander.

He struck at vice in its stealthy nook.
He stood, himself, like an open book.
His sins in the sunlight glistened.
Then he bowed his soul in a sinner’s prayer.
They say that a tear glowed here and there.
His sermon was not a formal affair,
But it found each heart that listened.

Here was a man in a beggarly byre,
Who burned within with a godly fire,
So far from a pawn to pity.
His wondrous power had tamed the ten,
Who turned their steeds to the road again

—And it was a party of modest men
That mosied back to the city.

1930

SNOWLA

—E. Benediktsson—

Among the pearls of maidenhood
Quite many to my heart appealed.
But Fate to me but once revealed
A Venus made of flesh and blood.

To praise her build, her beauty laud,
Would be the height of arrogance.
But I can view in one swift glance
The wondrous miracle of God.

Her voice is like a lullaby
Of love that hugs the trembling strings.
Her merry laugh with music rings.
With metric art her feet go by.

Beaming stars of frost and fire
Flame beneath a brow serene.
This girl of Nordic mind and mien
Is modelled to your heart's desire.

Upon her lord she'd like to wait,
And love to be his slave—and queen.
But, reverent, in her eyes I've seen
She also could have learned to hate.

Many a secret flame I fed,
That fanned my young credulity;
But ever since, with ease, I see
The errors that my youth mis-read.

The gilded dross is gone, for me.
To greater heights the aim I raise.
And now, with poise, I can appraise
A perfect diamond that I see.

—And in thy hardy little hand
My hopes and fortunes I would lay,
And willing face the future way,
A fond and happy contraband.

THULE

—E. Benediktsson—

I

For ages her name was known in rhyme,
Was known wherever the seas were streaming.
She came to the mind if men were dreaming
Of midnight suns in the north, sublime.
Her story, preserved in a southern clime,
As served by the Rovers, at last was teeming
With wonders imagined and most uncanny.
Yet merely the name was left to the many
To link her fate with a former time.

But time goes on with its tireless flow
And turns the minds in a new direction.
The earth is discovered, section by section,
And shoved in the forum for man to know.
Each tittle of fact that the sagas show
Will shine undimmed at the resurrection.
Through empire travel and outlawed races
The eye will learn, as the mind retraces,
The tale of the land with the live-long glow.

A quick-star on high in the heavenly blue,
With hope in her eye sees the Nordics in motion;
Commands them to sail to the edge of the ocean
And open the way to a realm anew.
That guiding eye to the uttermost clue
The Irishmen followed, in search of goshen.
Afar on the deep-sea's foaming acres
They fought their way through the deadly breakers,
Depending on faith—and they found it true.

There sits on the deep, with her diadem bright,

Our dazzling queen, in her robes of glory.
She holds in her arms the unborn story
Her own true sons alone can write.
Her breath with a fragrance fills the night.
There's a fountain of love in her bosom hoary.
Though hardness of mien her hood may lend her,
Her heaving breast is soft and tender.
Her eyes are the glassy lakes, alight.

The deep blue seas encircle her throne.
The shimmering lights of the north are behind her.
Fortune a place in the sun assigned her,
Where the surf is roaring and billows moan.
Currents of warmth from the west atone
If withering floes to the north are unkind.
With a world in the offing either-whither,
Her own is the choice, be it hither or thither.
She sits at the crux of the seas alone.

Our Boreal goddess belongs where she lies
And listens in peace to Nature's singing.
For eons of time in her ears were ringing
The odes of the billows that fall and rise.
And ever the southerly sea-breeze tries
To soften the blast that her cheek is stinging.
—Thule, the bride of the sea, surrenders,
With sorrow and fear in her heart, and tenders
Her hand to the world as a worthy prize.

The landscape clears as the breezes blow
And belly the sails till the fleet is grounded.
The brave adventurers stand astounded
And stare at the virgin land aglow.
Each sheltered cove in the southern bow
In silence mirrors the land around it.
No vandal hand had torn and tattered
The trees and the grassy quilt, and shattered
A stainless freehold and laid it low.

With features bold, as the billows rise
And break in foam on the crags of raven,

She lives in each heart to the furthest haven
Where human course of adventure lies.
In Memory's hall, as the heroes' prize,
Her hallowed image is deeply graven.
And the Mountain-Isle in her maiden beauty,
With meek devotion accepts her duty,
And offers herself as a sacrifice.

Still hidden deep in the dust venter
The dazzling story is yet abiding.
But faithful Science with signs is guiding
The seekers of light who will persevere.
Footprints in number, though faint, appear
And facts that speak in the caves are hiding.
The truth of the pioneers' twice-lost story
And the tale of our Thule's ancient glory
Stand out from the rocks, where they carved them, clear.

II

Still the twilight of the ages
Anchors to the haunted cave.
Still the creepy sea of silence
Swells about the architrave.
Still within the heart are hidden
Hoary fears of shades unbidden—
Shades that here had sought a grave.

Reason's lightning rends the mountain.
Reason makes the vaulting bright.
As if distant swans were singing,
Something echoes through the night.
Dreams that seize my soul with wonder
Seem to tear the dusk asunder.
—To the past I turn a light.

Peaceful still in stormy waters,
Strife's impassive battlefield;
Ice-encrusted fount of fire,
Fairest land the earth revealed;
Land of sorrow, swathed in glory,

Saga-land, thy wondrous story
Early to my pride appealed.

Hither nature's magic many
Monks inveigled to the fold;
Magic that a little later
Lured the warrior strong and bold.
One subdued the will and feeling;
One the heart itself was steeling.
Both were honest "guinea-gold."

One in bold and living letters
Left the imprint of his will,
While the spirit of the other
In the people caused a thrill.
Heralds, both, of blood and fire,
Both had deep and strong desire.
Buried lies the story still.

Spirit-shapes, meseems, are moving
Somewhere in the stony crust.
There a tearful shade in tatters
To the fore, I see, is thrust.
While its palsied hands it raises
High in prayer, its noble face is
Bowing deeply to the dust.

Granite vaulting cold thou keepest
Cryptic ruins of the past.
Army of the soul, I see thee
Sore and tattered in the blast;
Ancient, hallowed hero-sages,
Hidden in the dust of ages,
Fearless leaders to the last.

'Twixt the walls so wide and clammy
Vikings of the cross I see
From the cup of duty drinking
Death distilled them, on the knee—
See them face a far more cruel
Fate than any bloody duel,

Questing for Eternity.

Still thy souls in sunny regions
Serve the Master in the fight.
All thy hidden worth and wisdom
Will be ravelled from the night.
From thy graves infuse the nation;
Fill us with determination,
Squatters in the land of light!

1930

THE SWAN

—E. Benediktsson—

No grace transcends the image of a swan.
His alban coat becharms, his singing thrills.
His dirge each human heart with sorrow fills,
And Heaven itself is then not far withdrawn.
And though his notes a dream of death may bring,
A deeper aim in life their tone imparts.
If voices brave, yet blent with sadness, sing,
The simple dust of listening Nature starts;
And motionless the ambient air awaits
The eager wing that naught intimidates.

Then heaves the breast as white as driven snow,
With haughty neck in many a living wave
And sinuous curve, as silent as the grave,
To soar above the valley-towns below.
In tranquil, sleepy waves he wings alone
The wide conservatory of the sky—
The picture of a song whose silent tone
Assuages like a gentle lullaby;
As if from heaven's open book would fall
An ode whose cadence would thy soul enthrall.

The living soul is like an undertone
That lends a string to chime, if Fate consents.
A heart in tune can sing its sentiments
In silent strains that far transcend the known.
There are so many muted things that live
While mobs their hollow noise with noise disarm.
One little tone, both sweet and sensitive,
Vouchsafes to earthly souls a lasting charm.
A higher force than human thought exprest,
It heals the many ills that life infest.

Life's utter maze the swan himself may dream;

In songs his prowess and his hopes intwine.
From Nature's heart they ravel, line on line,
With lilt of brooks or gush of fall and stream.
He dresses up in daylight's parting ray
And drinks the rosy morning's early breath.
He nurses in his heart each happy day
A hymn of praise to God for life and death,
That echoes from the homes and hills prolong
Till hearts forget to prize a lovely song.

O music's best, most blessed fount of life,
Thou bringest to the heart a treasure grand.
Thou fallest out of fabled Eden-land
To fill with joy the hour of mortal strife.
Through thee a lost and fallen soul may find
The front-door of his sanctum still ajar,
And see, when purged in heart, though halt and blind,
That Heaven's minstrel is the guiding star.
As when a child with angel-glory gleams,
So godlike art awakens holy dreams.

How sweet to glide upon the skyey path
To perfect, clear and lusty strains, or none—
A minstrel poet, paling in the sun,
With proud abandon singing best in death;
To raise a voice that echoes loud and long,
Though life, exhausted on the note, resigns.
Is any aim in life's allure so strong
As looking past the circle that confines,
Or leading, forcing human hearts along
To higher vision with undying song?

1930

WAVE-LIFE

—E. Benediktsson—

He lives who created a lay that survives.
He's lost who rose dumb from the Muse's table;
Who knelt at its head with his heart in gyves,
With a hapless mind and a tongue unable.
The soul is akin to the seas we ply.
Each swell resembles a midget ocean:
Dead if it's still; in the storm 'tis high,
And streams along with a sounding motion.

Billowing surge! Thou hast life; and thy lay,
Though lost, from the core of thy heart was streaming.
Thy force on the sands of the silent bay
Subsided, but firstly thy crest was gleaming.
Ocean's songstress, thou drankest deep
The drafts that rose from thy welling fountain.
The land re-echoed thy sounding sweep,
That sank apace, but aimed at the mountain.

The Morning opens her golden gate.
Her gleaming face at the sash is peering.
The grassy liths for her gaze await.
The gloomy brow of the peak is clearing.
In the ocean's shimmering surface-tide
The Sun-steed with gory curb-rein glasses.
The haunts, where of yore I yearned, abide.
Beyond, in a vision, my dreamland passes.

My heart is an ocean of deep desire
For the day of light that has no ending;
That gathered my song—as my soul afire
Absorbs the force that the strand is bending.
My shackled mind is impatient, pent,
Impounded fast by the sea's dominion.
And what is the eagle's high ascent

To a human soul equipped with a pinion?

I feel in the depths of my soul a surge
That seeks away from this life, so hollow.
The soundless tide of my inmost urge
Is an ardent prayer that I long to follow.
To send a strain through the starry zone,
A stilly wave or a mute oration—
To rise at the foot of the Father's throne
And face the hosts, is my aspiration.

1930

MOUNTAIN AIR

—E. Benediktsson—

A peaceful glow is glebe and croft caressing,
Against the mountain's breast the land is pressing,
With herd and shepherd sunning near the byre,
In sight of glaciers with their snowy tressing.
It is in type a truly Nordic shire,
With tundra fields about, imposing, dire.

But thither every boor and burgher races,
To buy retreat from stagnant seaside places.
From desk and den the failing spirit flees,
To find delight in nature's open spaces.
In contrast with a healthy highland breeze
The hamlet's breath resembles vapid lees.

The landscape rises high above the heather.
A hundred stairs with rugs of green lie nether,
And rifts have cut a railing from the slate,
Where rills, that falling by the score together,
With din and clatter dance in wild estate
Adown the rungs, to seek an open gate.

There is a flood that comes from farther sources,
And from the upland wastes in torrents courses.
It quenches thirst and brushes leaf and limb,
Whose lungs a-pant renew their waning forces.
The eagles on its upper surface swim,
And swallows frolic in its nether rim.

To live apart, alone, yet never lonely,
Delights the will eternal, pure and only.
I know a comfort in the cleft's abyss
And court the friendly rocks so mute and thronely.
In solitude one finds the fullest bliss.
I feel there's nothing in the world I miss.

It looks as if the shade, itself, is gleaming.
The silex in the vibrant air is beaming.
Here speckled trout and drake, bedizened, spring
And drink the wine of air and water streaming.
The mountain's knitted brows the nest enring
That nurses well the land's most airy wing.

The hurtling current holds reverse mirages
Where heaven's blue in water-colors flashes.
The lofty sweetness that my soul respire
Beside me in the canyon river glasses.
In every part I feel the godly fires
That fill me with the peace my heart requires.

O mountain shire, thy memory lives undying,
Though many a flower beneath thy snows is lying.
Thy spirit has refreshed my sodden soul.
Thy subtle charm my muse is still supplying.
O dumb retreat, the dreamer's happy goal!
O draft divine from life's celestial bowl!

1930

THE THAMES

—E. Benediktsson—

With slackened ropes and rolling lightly
The river boats are cradled in.
There a wheeler, slipping slightly,
Sleeps upon its lazy fin.
One whose stack is hoarse and wheezy,
Hurling cinders on the night,
Down the river, dark and greasy,
Dips and wriggles out of sight.

Half the western wing of twilight
Winds about the parting day,
That behind the highest skylight
Hesitates and moves away.
Hidden deeply under ashes
Embers turn a paler hue.
O'er the threshold Evening passes
Into night and bids adieu.

On the murky, misty cover
Move the spirits of the night.
Baleful 'round the brink they hover,
Blushing in the strands of light,
That, like an angel-army gleaming,
At the darkness slashing burst,
While Stygian ogres stark and teeming
Stand on guard with lights reversed.

With its crowding knaves and noises
Night demands her heritage,
While the misfits' mingled voices
Mark the culture of the age.
The air is thick and dark and dreary.
Day-slaves, crowding, hurry by,
Noisy, grimy, gaunt and weary.

Ghostly breezes 'round them sigh.

All nature seems a chained and churlly
Chattel slave to haughty peers,
Like men who labor late and early,
Listless-eyed throughout the years.
Machines endowed with souls of fire
Seem to think and work and breathe.
Iron-throated spouts suspire,
Like spirit monsters, underneath.

As if steely tongues were telling
Truths about the faith in might,
Of war's forgotten graves, and swelling
Glories purchased in the fight;
While Labor, stripped of freedom's faking,
On fame's gigantic tower stare
And bow before the column quaking,
Conscious of its stony glare.

A wreath this land of wealth is wearing,
Woven by some conquered isle.
Down the lighted streets are staring
Stony sphinxes from the Nile.
A prescient phase of faded glory,
Fell of eye and mute they stand
And tell the world a wonder story
Visioned in a slaver's land.

Beside a statue, sunk in dreaming,
Sits a cast-off, homeless, banned.
Our shadowlands with such are teeming,
Of such are fleet and army manned.
Among the foundlings' ragged regions—
Ridings that the great abhor—
They comb the grime and grope for legions,
Guards for them in peace or war.

Here the mundane heart is beating,
The heart that pumps our blood and gold.
Its core a worm is always eating,

And the stream though black and cold,
Yet ebbs and flows with fuller measure
As Pharaoh's shadow-finger picks
The sinner who has seized our treasure:
Shylock—with the crucifix.

For deep sank Goshen's early glory.
Its god became a willing slave;
Its holy rage a still-born story.
Here stands the tablet from the grave.
Our magic fairy—maid and lion—
Mild of brow with clenched hands,
Obedient keeps her blinded eye on
Both the stone and its commands.

—The river-murmurs sound like sorrow,
Each silvery drop a burning tear.
A bitter sigh precedes the morrow.
Souls are torn with pain and fear.
The friendly breeze afar, unheeding,
Folds its wings behind the light,
And Day, with face and body bleeding,
Bids a restless world "goodnight."

1930

STARKAD'S SOLILOQUY

—E. Benediktsson—

I'm dreaming about an all-immanent soul
That even the stones into bread is turning.
My laughter is grief. On talk and the bowl
I squander the wealth that my heart is earning.
The mead itself has a mouldy taste.
O what have I said that the world enriches?
My days in the land of the living I waste
In search of the light that my heart bewitches.

Thy peaceful heart was a holy shrine.
My reverent soul at thy feet was lying.
Footsore on Destiny's sands that shine,
I found an oasis of rest—while dying.
O tender-eyed, wonderful light of my life,
How sweet to rest at thy bosom, pleading!
My soul is dumb—can thy lips contrive
The word of cheer that my heart is needing?

I wove thee a wreath from the songs of my soul;
But my deepest rapture in bonds awaited.
Together we drank life's celestial bowl;
Yet the thirst of my mind was still unsated.
Like a child in its need at thy bosom I lay
And dreamt in comfort of love and treasures.
The unborn hope in my heart was fey.
O where is the fruit of our short-lived pleasures?

O snowy breast, was my bosom cold?
And were my endearments a bit insipid?
The deeps of my heart with its hopes untold
Are hidden in doubts and conceits that grip it.
Queen of my soul that presides at my board
—In silence I drained each cup of pleasure—
O is there on earth or in Heaven no word

That the depth of my passionate soul can measure?

II

Is the heart empowered to sentence itself,
Or the soul to belittle its own conviction?
No. Life holds the key. One must look and delve,
And light needs the shadow to make depiction.
With doubts and suspicion our strife begins;
And a passing faith is the victor's haven.
No life nor epoch can see its sins.
On Eternity's scroll the facts are graven.

The cup is an oracle. Wine is the key
That opens a world behind the curtains.
The soul burns low or it flashes free,
In due respect to the table's burdens.
The rich on a par with the poor must stay,
For want at the heavenly source is groundless.
—How mean is our life and how little our day;
How tiny the earth—and the Heavens boundless!

The prodigal loses the love he extends.
With fear and reserve speak a guest or a brother.
So shifty of mind are your fellows and friends,
While finding one you have lost another.
If your thoughts were high and your hand was kind
And your tongue excelled, you offended Beauty.
Envy and love fill the selfsame mind;
And Fear is the father and mother of Duty.

I courted but few and admired the men
Who loathed the scene where the mobs attended.
Bored with the laity's long "amen,"
I lauded the one who was least befriended.
I scorned the parodist's poor refrain,
That picked and aped what his betters stated.
—The grovelling spirit that follows fain
The footprints the masses pursued—and hated.

But the beaker is drained—hear the bird of fate!

Faster and nearer the wings are plying.
Love is a memory. Man and his mate
In mouldy crypts by the road are lying.
O guilty hand that could'st force to fame,
Yet faded away in the haying season!
To leave thy worthiest urge and aim
To others—that is the mortal treason.

III

'Twas dawn and the birds in the branches sang.
From the bitter night to the street I wandered.
A tattered swain from the sewer sprang.
I saw he had slept on a stone, and pondered.
I threw him a coin where he crept in the sand.
He cringed; then smiled through his furtive lashes.
As a gleam illumined the gold in his hand—
Abundance in his; in mine but ashes.

The bit looms large in the realm of grief,
Where Mishap and Luck with the Fates are trading.
For seldom may two hold the same belief,
Though the selfsame mask they are both parading.
And yet, though the world may be hard of heart,
Though the haughty win and the Right must cower,
Misfortune that here played a hapless part
In Heaven amasses a princely dower.

A smile may transmute the dusk into day,
As a drop may change the wine in a beaker.
A cross remark drives kindness away;
So care should govern the tongue of the speaker.
A hidden cord in the breast may break
If bitter words, without cause, are spoken.
You cannot erase the wrongs you make.
No ruing can mend a heart that is broken.

A word, just a move: in a moment's space
Immutable trends in our lives are grounded,
Through an artless pun or a pointed phrase
We pass—by listening walls surrounded.

How wise are we children? A cheerful lay
Or a cup may serve when the mead is waning.
O what says the Master?— — — — —
— — — — — In mute array
The morning sun his spears is training.

IV

Chaos is only an empty void
And every stream to its gulf is tending.
The quick are adown to its deeps decoyed,
And Death in his nullity sits unbending.
Each epoch and story go side by side
The selfsame way, like a falling river.
Eternity's laws may alone abide.
Our lapsing time is a mental quiver.

In the halls of pleasure my heart was glum.
The hovel, so lowly, was more inviting.
For dangers lurk in a house a-hum.
The homely virtues are more requiting.
With mortal energy's lees a-lip
I lift the cup, though my hand is failing.
I hear a lay—feel the life-line slip.—
The lights grow brilliant beyond the paling!

I waved the cup with its surface sheen,
While Magic and Fate o'er my life contended.
The first was weaving a garland green;
The other a coal-black shroud extended.
The beaker my decades in drafts will tell.
When drained to the lees 'tis a life-time covered.
A day passed out with each drop that fell.
Death, with the sickle, around me hovered.

In a vision I saw what the worldlings do:
The will that halts if its star is shining;
The joy that dies if its dreams come true;
The deepest gaze to the husk inclining.
O isn't our story a tragic tale,
Where time is speeding from morrow to morrow?

And can there be hope in that heaven for sale
Where hearts are torn between fear and sorrow?

—The night stole in from the Styx afar,
Like a star whose light with the morning blended.
The doors of Heaven were held ajar
And hosts of pages their arms extended.
The nectar of life I gulped with greed.
My guise fell off like a shell of plaster.
My soul from its pagan sark was freed.
In silent wonder I faced the Master.

1930

CALM SEAS

—E. Benediktsson—

Softly moving billow-breast,
Bury all thy joy and sadness.
Rest thyself so bright and blest;
Breezes o'er thee play with gladness.
'Round thy cot they come and go,
Quietly rock thee to and fro.
To wake thee from thy willing sleep were madness.

On thy placid ocean-brow
I can see a hint of billows.
'Neath thy cheeks that glint and glow,
Disguised, a restive monster pillows.
O breast a-swell, thy breathing deep
Is bated like a storm asleep!
Thy playful nymphs are light and lithe as willows.

Chilly, mighty, mystic sea,
Many a dream thy charm presages.
Forces 'neath thy limpid lea
Lift the mind to higher stages.
I can see thy surface spread
Softly like a feather bed,
While the tameless surf in shackles rages.

Lend, O sea, thy soft embrace!
Soothe my heart and 'round me crumble;
Torn with grief, with tear-wet face,
Take my hand with spirit humble.
I can feel the fire beneath
The flouncing of thy chilly sheath—
A power that scorns to rant with rage or grumble.

THE PAWNSHOP

—E. Benediktsson—

The usurer's eyes from place to place
Kept peering 'neath brow-thatch hoary.
The runes cut deep in his fox-like face,
Defying the mask of his sly grimace,
Had written a rascal's story.
All through the line of his lengthy years
He'd lived on the fruits of want and tears
And carried the sum of his sins and fears
To settle in purgatory.

A coy young maiden with doubt and dread
Through the door of the shop advances.
At a harp whose strings are dumb and dead,
In a dusty niche by the wall ahead,
She looks with lingering glances.
The shelves are trammeled with tinsel and gold
To tempt the derelicts, young and old,
That mill in streets, where souls are sold,
And Sin with the tyro dances.

The lights of the city, one by one,
Awake when the daylight ceases.
The glitter and shine of the show goes on
And shadows flee to the slums anon,
Where Sorrow her soul appeases.
—Again in the steel-eyes, stern and keen,
She stares, with a coin in her palm so lean.
The harp was pawned that the heart be clean
When hunger its pangs increases.

REV. ODDUR'S DISAPPEARANCE

—E. Benediktsson—

Recklessly a rider
Races o'er the ice.
Under shoes resounding
Sag the floes and rise.
The charger sniffs, and snorting
Snuggles to the rein.
Briskly mountain breezes
Brush the flowing mane.

Hoofs are hard and steely.
Hoarfrost rimes the lip.
Like a glass-eye gleaming,
To guide the midnight trip,
Through the growing gristle
Gloats a lonely star.
Abed though boors are sleeping,
A bog remains ajar!

Visions fell and fearsome
Fleck the icy lawn.
Highlands, rent and riven,
'Round the valley yawn.
Hummocks coldly crackle.
Clefted mountain sides
Echo dimly, deeply.
Doomed is he who rides!

When the twilight fades it is dull and dark.
Till daylight alarms will thicken.
Shades from the bourne of the night embark
And buried memories quicken.
Though, stricken with panic, the rector rides

To run from the noise that follows,
He cannot escape the crowd that hides
In clefts and the ghostly hollows.

Each sleepless night with its spooky spell
That spectral forms endower,
A guilty mind itself will sell
To sin's avenging power.
It follows thee so fell of eye
And fiercely on thee glowers,
A phantom picture painted by
The pain of lonely hours.

A pointed moon with pallor cold
The plain with light is flooding,
While on the sands thy silhouette bold
Beside the road is scudding.
It seems to grow and gain on thee,
Though gamely thy mount is speeding.
No memory-pang that man can flee
Whose mind surcease is needing.

But this is no time for dreams, indeed.
A demon faces the running steed,
That falls, as if held by the halter;
But jumps to its feet with a jerky bound,
Then jams its toes in the frozen ground
And stands like the stone of Gibraltar.

None can escape till the day he dies
The dying look in his victim's eyes,
That hardened with hatred glower.
Torn with remorse that man is doomed
To meet his sin in the road, exhumed,
Who bowed to its baleful power.

The moon throws a pall with its pearly glare
On pallid brow, on the tousled hair
And a face most fear-impelling.

—Her eyes in the night have a nameless leer;
The neck is slitted from ear to ear,
And blood from the wound is welling.

Clenched in hatred a hand is raised
On high, to strike; the other is placed
On a shining knife beside her.
Abused by him, and a suicide,
She shrieked—and the echoing night replied—
This taunt to the trembling rider:

“Thy vile deceit has ruined my rest.
My role is that of an unclean guest,
And thou art crime-encumbered.
The threat that I swore is soon fulfilled.
My sweet revenge is about distilled,
For now thy days are numbered.”

—But hope revives, for his home is near.
The house stands out in its bright veneer,
And thither his thoughts are fleeing.
With horror he thinks of the bolts that bar—
A baleful wraith in the night can mar
The mind of a mortal being.

The frantic rider, with fury seized,
Flays into action the trembling beast.
The clang of the ice comes after.
The spectre shies with a ghastly grin.
Her giggles mix with the horse's din
And make it a mocking laughter.

Fateful of mien and bleak of brow,
About the thatch is creeping
A shadowy form that holds, somehow,
The house in its ghostly keeping.
Under the sway of that shadow-wight
The servants sleep unchidden.
Their soughing blends with the sighs of night.

All signs of life are hidden.

But it was a haunted house that night.
They heard the rafters creaking;
And Solveig's ghost beside each light
With severed neck was sneaking.
"Sleep until morning, ye men, content.
Tomorrow I have my inning,"
She said, and in through the open vent
From ear to ear was grinning.

"At Magnacroft so much occurs
That men would hardly credit."
With manners bad and manners worse
They meet the thing they dreaded.
—For suddenly on the shutter pane
It seems a weight is falling;
While at the door with might and main
A man in need is calling.

Aroused, in a panic they peer in the dark.
A prayer through the silence quivers.
Each native figure, a statue stark,
And stricken with terror, shivers.
But out in the night to him they hear
No hero forth is racing.
The one outdoors, adaze with fear,
His doom alone is facing.

And when they open the door next day,
At dawn, and look for a token,
Their master's gear and gauntlets lay
In the grass, by the whip-stock broken.
Nor horse nor parson has since been seen.
They say, while the folks were sleeping
An ogress down to her dark demesne
Had dragged them—and both is keeping.

THE OPAL

—E. Benediktsson—

The night has the earth in her grip again;
Her groans in the treetops quiver.
It is silent now where we sang amain.
I sit alone till the candles wane,
Abend o'er the bowl and shiver.
I fondle and stare at a stone so bright,
With its stealthy gleams through the clouds of white:
A curious blending of color and light
Recast by the dark's light-giver.

On the back of my finger it beams tonight,
In bonds, like a doubtful token.
They say that it augurs evil and plight;
But I would call it a harp of light,
With strings that are bruised and broken:
A glimmer of hopes that have gone astray;
Have gone to seed in a better day—
A vision of things that I should not say,
Or something I left unspoken.

The jewel forth like a flambeau shines
From fiery depths, beclouded.
A fountain of ease, like the oldest wines,
Its opal-charm—how it flares and declines,
Transparent, yet so enshrouded!
Its wiles enchant like a stolen kiss—
A cross-tree of faith with its arms amiss!—
And spectres wade in its weird abyss,
Like virtue with secrets crowded.

From “AN ESSAY IN RHYME”

—E. Benediktsson—

—And so, my land, my life shall be
A leaf that in thy garden yearns.
Each little ode I offered thee
An earnest in thy garland burns.
And every surge within my soul
Shall seek amain, and find the goal
—A swell that to its source returns.

1930

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

There are 10 poets who either are not yet in the public domain, or for whom no life date information has yet been found, and therefore can not be included: Gisli Jonsson (1876-1974); Jakobina Johnson (1883-1977); F.H. Berg (????); Kr. (Kristjan) Jonsson (1871-??); Gudm. Magnusson (????); Armann Bjornson (????); Stgr. Arason (????); Sverrir Haraldsson (????); Jon Helgason (1899-1986); and Gudm. Stefansson (????).

[The end of *Odes and Echoes* by Paul Bjarnason]