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SOUR GRAPES



# SOUR GRAPES

*A Book of Poems*

*William Carlos Williams*

*Green*



BOSTON

THE FOUR SEAS COMPANY

1921

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To  
ALFRED KREYMBORG

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SOUR GRAPES



## THE LATE SINGER

Here it is spring again  
and I still a young man!  
I am late at my singing.  
The sparrow with the black rain on his breast  
has been at his cadenzas for two weeks past:  
What is it that is dragging at my heart?  
The grass by the back door  
is stiff with sap.  
The old maples are opening  
their branches of brown and yellow moth-flowers.  
A moon hangs in the blue  
in the early afternoons over the marshes.  
I am late at my singing.

## MARCH

### I

Winter is long in this climate  
and spring—a matter of a few days  
only,—a flower or two picked  
from mud or from among wet leaves  
or at best against treacherous  
bitterness of wind, and sky shining  
teasingly, then closing in black  
and sudden, with fierce jaws.

### II

March,

you remind me of  
the pyramids, our pyramids—  
stript of the polished stone  
that used to guard them!

March,

you are like Fra Angelico  
at Fiesole, painting on plaster!

March,

you are like a band of  
young poets that have not learned  
the blessedness of warmth  
(or have forgotten it).

At any rate—

I am moved to write poetry  
for the warmth there is in it  
and for the loneliness—  
a poem that shall have you  
in it March.



### III

See!

Ashur-ban-i-pal,  
the archer king, on horse-back,  
in blue and yellow enamel!  
with drawn bow—facing lions  
standing on their hind legs,  
fangs bared! his shafts  
bristling in their necks!

Sacred bulls—dragons  
in embossed brickwork  
marching—in four tiers—  
along the sacred way to  
Nebuchadnezzar's throne hall!  
They shine in the sun,  
they that have been marching—  
marching under the dust of  
ten thousand dirt years.

Now—

they are coming into bloom again!

See them!

marching still, bared by  
the storms from my calendar  
—winds that blow back the sand!

winds that enfilade dirt!

winds that by strange craft  
have whipt up a black army  
that by pick and shovel

bare a procession to

the god, Marduk!

Natives cursing and digging  
for pay unearth dragons with

upright tails and sacred bulls  
 alternately—  
                           in four tiers—  
 lining the way to an old altar!  
 Natives digging at old walls—  
 digging me warmth—digging me  
                           sweet loneliness—  
 high enamelled walls.

#### IV

My second spring—  
 passed in a monastery  
 with plaster walls—in Fiesole  
 on the hill above Florence.

My second spring—painted  
 a virgin—in a blue aureole  
 sitting on a three-legged stool,  
 arms crossed—  
 she is intently serious,  
   and still  
 watching an angel  
 with coloured wings  
 half kneeling before her—  
 and smiling—the angel's eyes  
 holding the eyes of Mary  
 as a snake's holds a bird's.  
 On the ground there are flowers,  
 trees are in leaf.

#### V

But! now for the battle!  
 Now for murder—now for the real thing!  
 My third springtime is approaching!

Winds!  
lean, serious as a virgin,  
seeking, seeking the flowers of March.

Seeking  
flowers nowhere to be found,  
they twine among the bare branches  
in insatiable eagerness—  
they whirl up the snow  
seeking under it—  
they—the winds—snakelike  
roar among yellow reeds  
seeking flowers—flowers.

I spring among them  
seeking one flower  
in which to warm myself!

I deride with all the ridicule  
of misery—  
my own starved misery.

Counter-cutting winds  
strike against me  
refreshing their fury!

Come, good, cold fellows!  
Have we no flowers?  
Defy then with even more  
desperation than ever—being  
lean and frozen!

But though you are lean and frozen—  
think of the blue bulls of Babylon.

Fling yourselves upon  
    their empty roses—  
        cut savagely!

But—  
think of the painted monastery  
    at Fiesole.

## BERKET AND THE STARS

A day on the boulevards chosen out of ten years of student poverty! One best day out of ten good ones. Berket in high spirits—"Ha, oranges! Let's have one!" And he made to snatch an orange from the vender's cart.

Now so clever was the deception, so nicely timed to the full sweep of certain wave summits, that the rumor of the thing has come down through three generations—which is relatively forever!

## A CELEBRATION

A middle-northern March, now as always—  
gusts from the south broken against cold winds—  
but from under, as if a slow hand lifted a tide,  
it moves—not into April—into a second March,  
the old skin of wind-clear scales dropping  
upon the mould: this is the shadow projects the tree  
upward causing the sun to shine in his sphere.

So we will put on our pink felt hat—new last year!  
—newer this by virtue of brown eyes turning back  
the seasons—and let us walk to the orchid-house,  
see the flowers will take the prize to-morrow  
at the Palace.

Stop here, these are our oleanders.  
When they are in bloom—

You would waste words  
It is clearer to me than if the pink  
were on the branch. It would be a searching in  
a coloured cloud to reveal that which now, huskless,  
shows the very reason for their being.

And these the orange-trees, in blossom—no need  
to tell with this weight of perfume in the air.  
If it were not so dark in this shed one could better  
see the white.

It is that very perfume  
has drawn the darkness down among the leaves.  
Do I speak clearly enough?  
It is this darkness reveals that which darkness alone  
loosens and sets spinning on waxen wings—  
not the touch of a finger-tip, not the motion  
of a sigh. A too heavy sweetness proves  
its own caretaker.

And here are the orchids!

Never having seen  
such gaiety I will read these flowers for you:  
This is an odd January, died—in Villon's time.  
Snow, this is and this the stain of a violet  
grew in that place the spring that foresaw its own  
doom.

And this, a certain July from Iceland:  
a young woman of that place  
breathed it toward the south. It took root there.  
The colour ran true but the plant is small.

This falling spray of snowflakes is  
a handful of dead Februarys  
prayed into flower by Rafael Arevalo Martinez  
of Guatemala.

Here's that old friend who  
went by my side so many years: this full, fragile  
head of veined lavender. Oh that April  
that we first went with our stiff lusts  
leaving the city behind, out to the green hill—  
May, they said she was. A hand for all of us:  
this branch of blue butterflies tied to this stem.

June is a yellow cup I'll not name; August  
the over-heavy one. And here are—  
russet and shiny, all but March. And March?  
Ah, March—

Flowers are a tiresome pastime.  
One has a wish to shake them from their pots  
root and stem, for the sun to gnaw.

Walk out again into the cold and saunter home,  
to the fire. This day has blossomed long enough.  
I have wiped out the red night and lit a blaze  
instead which will at least warm our hands  
and stir up the talk.

I think we have kept fair time.  
Time is a green orchid.



## APRIL

If you had come away with me  
into another state  
we had been quiet together.  
But there the sun coming up  
out of the nothing beyond the lake was  
too low in the sky,  
there was too great a pushing  
against him,  
too much of sumac buds, pink  
in the head  
with the clear gum upon them,  
too many opening hearts of  
lilac leaves,  
too many, too many swollen  
limp poplar tassels on the  
bare branches!  
It was too strong in the air.  
I had no rest agaist that  
springtime!  
The pounding of the hoofs on the  
raw sods  
stayed with me half through the night.  
I awoke smiling but tired.

## A GOODNIGHT

Go to sleep—though of course you will not—to tideless waves thundering slantwise against strong embankments, rattle and swish of spray dashed thirty feet high, caught by the lake wind, scattered and strewn broadcast in over the steady car rails! Sleep, sleep! Gulls' cries in a wind-gust broken by the wind; calculating wings set above the field of waves breaking.

Go to sleep to the lunge between foam-crests, refuse churned in the recoil. Food! Food! Offal! Offal! that holds them in the air, wave-white for the one purpose, feather upon feather, the wild chill in their eyes, the hoarseness in their voices—sleep, sleep . . . .

Gentlefooted crowds are treading out your lullaby. Their arms nudge, they brush shoulders, hitch this way then that, mass and surge at the crossings—

lullaby, lullaby! The wild-fowl police whistles, the enraged roar of the trafic, machine shrieks: it is all to put you to sleep, to soften your limbs in relaxed postures, and that your head slip sidewise, and your hair loosen and fall over your eyes and over your mouth, brushing your lips wistfully that you may dream, sleep and dream—

A black fungus springs out about lonely church doors—sleep, sleep. The Night, coming down upon the wet boulevard, would start you awake with his message, to have in at your window. Pay no heed to him. He storms at your sill with cooings, with gesticulations, curses!

You will not let him in. He would keep you from sleeping.

He would have you sit under your desk lamp brooding, pondering; he would have you slide out the drawer, take up the ornamented dagger and handle it. It is late, it is nineteen-nineteen—go to sleep, his cries are a lullaby; his jabbering is a sleep-well-my-baby; he is a crackbrained messenger.

The maid waking you in the morning when you are up and dressing, the rustle of your clothes as you raise them—it is the same tune.

At table the cold, greenish, split grapefruit, its juice on the tongue, the clink of the spoon in your coffee, the toast odors say it over and over.

The open street-door lets in the breath of the morning wind from over the lake.

The bus coming to a halt grinds from its sullen brakes—

lullaby, lullaby. The crackle of a newspaper, the movement of the troubled coat beside you—sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep . . .

It is the sting of snow, the burning liquor of the moonlight, the rush of rain in the gutters packed with dead leaves: go to sleep, go to sleep. And the night passes—and never passes—

# OVERTURE TO A DANCE OF LOCOMOTIVES

## I

Men with picked voices chant the names  
of cities in a huge gallery: promises  
that pull through descending stairways  
to a deep rumbling.

The rubbing feet  
of those coming to be carried quicken a  
grey pavement into soft light that rocks  
to and fro, under the domed ceiling,  
across and across from pale  
earthcoloured walls of bare limestone.

Covertly the hands of a great clock  
go round and round! Were they to  
move quickly and at once the whole  
secret would be out and the shuffling  
of all ants be done forever.

A leaning pyramid of sunlight, narrowing  
out at a high window, moves by the clock:  
disaccordant hands straining out from  
a center: inevitable postures infinitely  
repeated—

## II

Two — twofour — twoeight!  
Porters in red hats run on narrow platforms.  
This way ma'm!

—important not to take  
the wrong train!

Lights from the concrete  
ceiling hang crooked but—

Poised horizontal  
on glittering parallels the dingy cylinders  
packed with a warm glow—inviting entry—  
pull against the hour. But brakes can  
hold a fixed posture till—

The whistle!

Not twoeight. Not twofour. Two!

Gliding windows. Colored cooks sweating  
in a small kitchen. Taillights—

In time: twofour!

In time: twoeight!

—rivers are tunneled: trestles  
cross oozy swampland: wheels repeating  
the same gesture remain relatively  
stationary: rails forever parallel  
return on themselves infinitely.

The dance is sure.

## ROMANCE MODERNE

Tracks of rain and light linger in  
the spongy greens of a nature whose  
flickering mountain—bulging nearer,  
ebbing back into the sun  
hollowing itself away to hold a lake,—  
or brown stream rising and falling  
at the roadside, turning about,  
churning itself white, drawing  
green in over it,—plunging glassy funnels  
fall—

And—the other world—  
the windshield a blunt barrier:  
Talk to me. Sh! they would hear us.  
—the backs of their heads facing us—  
The stream continues its motion of  
a hound running over rough ground.

Trees vanish—reappear—vanish:  
detached dance of gnomes—as a talk  
dodging remarks, glows and fades.  
—The unseen power of words—  
And now that a few of the moves  
are clear the first desire is  
to fling oneself out at the side into  
the other dance, to other music.  
Peer Gynt. Rip Van Winkle. Diana.

If I were young I would try a new alignment—  
alight nimbly from the car, Good-bye!—  
Childhood companions linked two and two  
criss-cross: four, three, two, one.  
Back into self, tentacles withdrawn.  
Feel about in warm self-flesh.  
Since childhood, since childhood!

Childhood is a toad in the garden, a  
happy toad. All toads are happy  
and belong in gardens. A toad to Diana!

Lean forward. Punch the steersman  
behind the ear. Twirl the wheel!  
Over the edge! Screams! Crash!  
The end. I sit above my head—  
a little removed—or  
a thin wash of rain on the roadway  
—I am never afraid when he is driving,—  
interposes new direction,  
rides us sideswise, unforseen  
into the ditch! All threads cut!  
Death! Black. The end. The very end—

I would sit separate weighing a  
small red handful: the dirt of these parts,  
sliding mists sheeting the alders  
against the touch of fingers creeping  
to mine. All stuff of the blind emotions.  
But— stirred, the eye seizes  
for the first time—The eye awake!—  
anything, a dirt bank with green stars  
of scrawny weed flattened upon it under  
a weight of air—For the first time!—  
or a yawning depth: Big!  
Swim around in it, through it—  
all directions and find  
vitreous seawater stuff—  
God how I love you!—or, as I say,  
a plung into the ditch. The end. I sit  
examining my red handful. Balancing  
—this—in and out—agh.

Love you? It's  
a fire in the blood, willy-nilly!

It's the sun coming up in the morning.  
Ha, but it's the grey moon too, already up  
in the morning. You are slow.  
Men are not friends where it concerns  
a woman? Fighters. Playfellows.  
White round thighs! Youth! Sighs—!  
It's the fillip of novelty. It's—

Mountains. Elephants humping along  
against the sky—indifferent to  
light withdrawing its tattered shreds,  
worn out with embraces. It's  
the fillip of novelty. It's a fire in the blood.

Oh get a flannel shirt, white flannel  
or pongee. You'd look so well!  
I married you because I liked your nose.  
I wanted you! I wanted you  
in spite of all they'd say—

Rain and light, mountain and rain,  
rain and river. Will you love me always?  
—A car overturned and two crushed bodies  
under it.—Always! Always!  
And the white moon already up.  
White. Clean. All the colors.  
A good head, backed by the eye—awake!  
backed by the emotions—blind—  
River and mountain, light and rain—or  
rain, rock, light, trees—divided:  
rain-light counter rocks-trees or  
trees counter rain-light-rocks or—

Myriads of counter processions  
crossing and recrossing, regaining  
the advantage, buying here, selling there  
—You are sold cheap everywhere in town!—



lingering, touching fingers, withdrawing  
gathering forces into blares, hummocks,  
peaks and rivers—river meeting rock  
—I wish that you were lying there dead  
and I sitting here beside you.—  
It's the grey moon—over and over.  
It's the clay of these parts.

## THE DESOLATE FIELD

Vast and grey, the sky  
is a simulacrum  
to all but him whose days  
are vast and grey, and—  
In the tall, dried grasses  
a goat stirs  
with nozzle searching the ground.  
—my head is in the air  
but who am I . . . ?  
And amazed my heart leaps  
at the thought of love  
vast and grey  
yearning silently over me.

## WILLOW POEM

It is a willow when summer is over,  
a willow by the river  
from which no leaf has fallen nor  
bitten by the sun  
turned orange or crimson.  
The leaves cling and grow paler,  
swing and grow paler  
over the swirling waters of the river  
as if loath to let go,  
they are so cool, so drunk with  
the swirl of the wind and of the river—  
oblivious to winter,  
the last to let go and fall  
into the water and on the ground.

## APPROACH OF WINTER

The half stripped trees  
struck by a wind together,  
bending all,  
the leaves flutter drily  
and refuse to let go  
or driven like hail  
stream bitterly out to one side  
and fall  
where the salvias, hard carmine,—  
like no leaf that ever was—  
edge the bare garden.

## JANUARY

Again I reply to the triple winds  
running chromatic fifths of derision  
outside my window:

Play louder.

You will not succeed. I am  
bound more to my sentences  
the more you batter at me  
to follow you.

And the wind,  
as before,, fingers perfectly  
its derisive music.

## BLIZZARD

Snow:  
years of anger following  
hours that float idly down—  
the blizzard  
drifts its weight  
deeper and deeper for three days  
or sixty years, eh? Then  
the sun! a clutter of  
yellow and blue flakes—  
Hairy looking trees stand out  
in long alleys  
over a wild solitude.  
The man turns and there—  
his solitary track stretched out  
upon the world.

## TO WAKEN AN OLD LADY

Old age is  
a flight of small  
cheeping birds  
skimming  
bare trees  
above a snow glaze.  
Gaining and failing  
they are buffeted  
by a dark wind—  
But what?  
On harsh weedstalks  
the flock has rested,  
the snow  
is covered with broken  
seedhusks  
and the wind tempered  
by a shrill  
piping of plenty.

## WINTER TREES

All the complicated details  
of the attiring and  
the disattiring are completed!  
A liquid moon  
moves gently among  
the long branches.  
Thus having prepared their buds  
against a sure winter  
the wise trees  
stand sleeping in the cold.



## COMPLAINT

They call me and I go  
It is a frozen road  
past midnight, a dust  
of snow caught  
in the rigid wheeltracks.  
The door opens.  
I smile, enter and  
shake off the cold.  
Here is a great woman  
on her side in the bed.  
She is sick,  
perhaps vomiting,  
perhaps laboring  
to give birth to  
a tenth child. Joy! Joy!  
Night is a room  
darkened for lovers,  
through the jalousies the sun  
has sent one gold needle!  
I pick the hair from her eyes  
and watch her misery  
with compassion.

## THE COLD NIGHT

It is cold. The white moon  
is up among her scattered stars—  
like the bare thighs of  
the Police Seargent's wife—among  
her five children . . .

No answer. Pale shadows lie upon  
the frosted grass. One answer:  
It is midnight, it is still  
and it is cold . . . !

White thighs of the sky! a  
new answer out of the depths of  
my male belly: In April . . .  
In April I shall see again—In April!  
the round and perfect thighs  
of the Police Seargent's wife  
perfect still after many babies.  
Oya!

## SPRING STORM

The sky has given over  
its bitterness.  
Out of the dark change  
all day long  
rain falls and falls  
as if it would never end.  
Still the snow keeps  
its hold on the ground.  
But water, water  
from a thousand runnels!  
It collects swiftly,  
dappled with black  
cuts a way for itself  
through green ice in the gutters.  
Drop after drop it falls  
from the withered grass-stems  
of the overhanging embankment.

## THE DELICACIES

The hostess, in pink satin and blond hair—dressed high—shone beautifully in her white slippers against the great silent bald head of her little-eyed husband!

Raising a glass of yellow Rhine wine in the narrow space just beyond the light-varnished woodwork and the decorative column between dining-room and hall, she smiled the smile of water tumbling from one ledge to another.

We began with a herring salad: delicately flavoured saltiness in scallops of lettuce-leaves.

The little owl-eyed and thick-set lady with masses of grey hair has smooth pink cheeks without a wrinkle. She cannot be the daughter of the little red-faced fellow dancing about inviting lion-headed Wolff the druggist to play the piano! But she is. Wolff is a terrific smoker: if the telephone goes off at night—so his curled-haired wife whispers—he rises from bed but cannot answer till he has lighted a cigarette.

Sherry wine in little conical glasses, dull brownish yellow, and tomatoes stuffed with finely cut chicken and mayonnaise!

The tall Irishman in a Prince Albert and the usual striped trousers is going to sing for us. (The piano is in a little alcove with dark curtains.) The hostess's sister—ten years younger than she—in black net and velvet, has hair like some filmy haystack, cloudy about the eyes. She will play for her husband.

My wife is young, yes she is young and pretty when she cares to be—when she is interested in a discussion: it is the little dancing mayor's wife telling her of the Day nursery in East Rutherford, 'cross the track, divided from us by the railroad—and disputes as to precedence. It is in this town the saloon flourishes, the saloon of my friend on the right whose wife has twice offended with chance words. Her English is atrocious! It is in this town that the saloon is situated, close to the railroad track, close as may be, this side being dry, dry, dry: two people listening on opposite sides of a wall!—The Day Nursery had sixty-five babies the week before last, so my wife's eyes shine and her cheeks are pink and I cannot see a blemish.

Ice-cream in the shape of flowers and domestic objects: a pipe for me since I do not smoke, a doll for you.

The figure of some great bulk of a woman disappearing into the kitchen with a quick look over the shoulder. My friend on the left who has spent the whole day in a car the like of which some old fellow would give to an actress: flower-holders, mirrors, curtains, plush seats—my friend on the left who is chairman of the Streets committee of the town council—and who has spent the whole day studying automobile fire-engines in neighbouring towns in view of purchase,—my friend, at the Elks last week at the breaking-up hymn, signalled for them to let Bill—a familiar friend of the saloon-keeper—sing out all alone to the organ—and he did sing!

• Salz-rolls, exquisite! and Rhine wine *ad libitum*.  
A masterly caviare sandwich.

The children flitting about above stairs. The councilman has just bought a National eight—some car!

For heaven's sake I mustn't forget the halves of green peppers stuffed with cream cheese and whole walnuts!

## THURSDAY

I have had my dream—like others—  
and it has come to nothing, so that  
I remain now carelessly  
with feet planted on the ground  
and look up at the sky—  
feeling my clothes about me,  
the weight of my body in my shoes,  
the rim of my hat, air passing in and out  
at my nose—and decide to dream no more.

Pooh

## THE DARK DAY

A three-day-long rain from the east—  
an interminable talking, talking  
of no consequence—patter, patter, patter.  
Hand in hand little winds  
blow the thin streams aslant.  
Warm. Distance cut off. Seclusion.  
A few passers-by, drawn in upon themselves,  
hurry from one place to another.  
Winds of the white poppy! there is no escape!—  
An interminable talking, talking,  
talking . . . it has happened before.  
Backward, backward, backward.



## TIME THE HANGMAN

Poor old Abner, old white-haired nigger!  
I remember when you were so strong  
you hung yourself by a rope round the neck  
in Doc Hollister's barn to prove you could beat  
the faker in the circus—and it didn't kill you.  
Now your face is in your hands, and your elbows  
are on your knees, and you are silent and broken.

## TO A FRIEND

Well, Lizzie Anderson! seventeen men—and  
the baby hard to find a father for!

What will the good Father in Heaven say  
to the local judge if he do not solve this problem?  
A little two pointed smile and—pouff!—  
the law is changed into a mouthful of phrases.

## THE GENTLE MAN

I feel the caress of my own fingers  
on my own neck as I place my collar  
and think pityingly  
of the kind women I have known.

## THE SOUGHING WIND

Some leaves hang late, some fall  
before the first frost—so goes  
the tale of winter branches and old bones.

## SPRING

O my grey hairs!  
You are truly white as plum blossoms.

## PLAY

Subtle, clever brain, wiser than I am,  
by what devious means do you contrive  
to remain idle? Teach me, O master.

## LINES

Leaves are greygreen,  
the glass broken, bright green.

## THE POOR

By constantly tormenting them  
with reminders of the lice in  
their children's hair, the  
School Physician first  
brought their hatred down on him,  
But by this familiarity  
they grew used to him, and so,  
at last,  
took him for their friend and adviser.



## COMPLETE DESTRUCTION

It was an icy day.  
We buried the cat,  
then took her box  
and set fire to it  
in the back yard.  
Those fleas that escaped  
earth and fire  
died by the cold.

## MEMORY OF APRIL

You say love is this, love is that:  
Poplar tassels, willow tendrils  
the wind and the rain comb,  
tinkle and drip, tinkle and drip—  
branches drifting apart. Hagh!  
Love has not even visited this country.

## EPITAPH

An old willow with hollow branches  
slowly swayed his few high bright tendrils  
and sang:

Love is a young green willow  
shimmering at the bare wood's edge.

## DAISY

The dayseye hugging the earth  
in August, ha! Spring is  
gone down in purple,  
weeds stand high in the corn,  
the rainbeaten furrow  
is clotted with sorrel  
and crabgrass, the  
branch is black under  
the heavy mass of the leaves—  
The sun is upon a  
slender green stem  
ribbed lengthwise.  
He lies on his back—  
it is a woman also—  
he regards his former  
majesty and  
round the yellow center,  
split and creviced and done into  
minute flowerheads, he sends out  
his twenty rays—a little  
and the wind is among them  
to grow cool there!

One turns the thing over  
in his hand and looks  
at it from the rear: brownedged,  
green and pointed scales  
armor his yellow.  
But turn and turn,  
the crisp petals remain  
brief, translucent, greenfastened,  
barely touching at the edges:  
blades of limpid seashell.

## PRIMROSE

Yellow, yellow, yellow, yellow!

It is not a color.

It is summer!

It is the wind on a willow,  
the lap of waves, the shadow  
under a bush, a bird, a bluebird,  
three herons, a dead hawk  
rotting on a pole—

Clear yellow!

It is a piece of blue paper  
in the grass or a threecluster of  
green walnuts swaying, children  
playing croquet or one boy  
fishing, a man  
swinging his pink fists  
as he walks—

It is ladythumb, forgetmenots  
in the ditch, moss under  
the flange of the carrail, the  
wavy lines in split rock, a  
great oaktree—

It is a disinclination to be  
five red petals or a rose, it is  
a cluster of birdsbreast flowers  
on a red stem six feet high,  
four open yellow petals  
above sepals curled  
backward into reverse spikes—  
Tufts of purple grass spot the  
green meadow and clouds the sky.

## QUEEN-ANN'S-LACE

Her body is not so white as  
anemony petals nor so smooth—nor  
so remote a thing. It is a field  
of the wild carrot taking  
the field by force; the grass  
does not raise above it.  
Here is no question of whiteness,  
white as can be, with a purple mole  
at the center of each flower.  
Each flower is a hand's span  
of her whiteness. Wherever  
his hand has lain there is  
a tiny purple blemish. Each part  
is a blossom under his touch  
to which the fibres of her being  
stem one by one, each to its end,  
until the whole field is a  
white desire, empty, a single stem,  
a cluster, flower by flower,  
a pious wish to whiteness gone over—  
or nothing.

## GREAT MULLEN

One leaves his leaves at home  
being a mullen and sends up a lighthouse  
to peer from: I will have my way,  
yellow—A mast with a lantern, ten  
fifty, a hundred, smaller and smaller  
as they grow more—Liar, liar, liar!  
You come from her! I can smell djer-kiss  
on your clothes. Ha, ha! you come to me,  
you—I am a point of dew on a grass-stem.  
Why are you sending heat down on me  
from your lantern?—You are cowdung, a  
dead stick with the bark off. She is  
squirting on us both. She has had her  
hand on you!—Well?—She has defiled  
ME.—Your leaves are dull, thick  
and hairy.—Every hair on my body will  
hold you off from me. You are a  
dungcake, birdlime on a fencerail.—  
I love you, straight, yellow  
finger of God pointing to—her!  
Liar, broken weed, duncake, you have—  
I am a cricket waving his antennae  
and you are high, grey and straight. Ha!

## WAITING

When I am alone I am happy.  
The air is cool. The sky is  
flecked and splashed and wound  
with color. The crimson phalloi  
of the sassafrass leaves  
hang crowded before me  
in shoals on the heavy branches.  
When I reach my doorstep  
I am greeted by  
the happy shrieks of my children  
and my heart sinks.  
I am crushed.

Are not my children as dear to me  
as falling leaves or  
must one become stupid  
to grow older?  
It seems much as if Sorrow  
had tripped up my heels.  
Let us see, let us see!  
What did I plan to say to her  
when it should happen to me  
as it has happened now?



## THE HUNTER

In the flashes and black shadows  
of July  
the days, locked in each other's arms,  
seem still  
so that squirrels and colored birds  
go about at ease over  
the branches and through the air.

Where will a shoulder split or  
a forehead open and victory be?

Nowhere.  
Both sides grow older.

And you may be sure  
not one leaf will lift itself  
from the ground  
and become fast to a twig again.

## ARRIVAL

And yet one arrives somehow,  
finds himself loosening the hooks of  
her dress  
in a strange bedroom—  
feels the autumn  
dropping its silk and linen leaves  
about her ankles.  
The tawdry veined body emerges  
twisted upon itself  
like a winter wind . . . !

TO A FRIEND  
CONCERNING SEVERAL LADIES

You know there is not much  
that I desire, a few chrysanthemums  
half lying on the grass, yellow  
and brown and white, the  
talk of a few people, the trees,  
an expanse of dried leaves perhaps  
with ditches among them.

But there comes  
between me and these things  
a letter  
or even a look—well placed,  
you understand,  
so that I am confused, twisted  
four ways and—left flat,  
unable to lift the food to  
my own mouth:  
Here is what they say: Come!  
and come! and come! And if  
I do not go I remain stale to  
myself and if I go—

I have watched  
the city from a distance at night  
and wondered why I wrote no poem.  
Come! yes,  
the city is ablaze for you  
and you stand and look at it.

And they are right. There is  
no good in the world except out of  
a woman and certain women alone  
for certain things. But what if  
I arrive like a turtle  
with my house on my back or  
a fish ogling from under water?

It will not do. I must be  
steaming with love, colored  
like a flamingo. For what?  
To have legs and a silly head  
and to smell, pah! like a flamingo  
that soils its own feathers behind.  
Must I go home filled  
with a bad poem?  
And they say:  
Who can answer these things  
till he has tried? Your eyes  
are half closed, you are a child,  
oh, a sweet one, ready to play  
but I will make a man of you and  
with love on his shoulder—!

And in the marshes  
the crickets run  
on the sunny dike's top and  
make burrows there, the water  
reflects the reeds and the reeds  
move on their stalks and rattle drily.

## YOUTH AND BEAUTY

I bought a dishmop—  
having no daughter—  
for they had twisted  
fine ribbons of shining copper  
about white twine  
and made a trowsled head  
of it, fastened it  
upon a turned ash stick  
slender at the neck  
straight, tall—  
when tied upright  
on the brass wallbracket  
to be a light for me—  
and naked,  
as a girl should seem  
to her father.

## THE THINKER

My wife's new pink slippers  
have gay pom-poms.  
There is not a spot or a stain  
on their satin toes or their sides.  
All night they lie together  
under her bed's edge.  
Shivering I catch sight of them  
and smile, in the morning.  
Later I watch them  
descending the stair,  
hurrying through the doors  
and round the table,  
moving stiffly  
with a shake of their gay pom-poms!  
And I talk to them  
in my secret mind  
out of pure happiness.

## THE DISPUTANTS

Upon the table in their bowl  
in violent disarray  
of yellow sprays, green spikes  
of leaves, red pointed petals  
and curled heads of blue  
and white among the litter  
of the forks and crumbs and plates  
the flowers remain composed.  
Cooly their colloquy continues  
above the coffee and loud talk  
grown frail as vaudeville.

## THE TULIP BED

The May sun—whom  
all things imitate—  
that glues small leaves to  
the wooden trees  
shone from the sky  
through bluegauze clouds  
upon the ground.  
Under the leafy trees  
where the suburban streets  
lay crossed,  
with houses on each corner,  
tangled shadows had begun  
to join  
the roadway and the lawns.  
With excellent precision  
the tulip bed  
inside the iron fence  
upreared its gaudy  
yellow, white and red,  
rimmed round with grass,  
reposedly.



## THE BIRDS

The world begins again!  
Not wholly insufflated  
the blackbirds in the rain  
upon the dead topbranches  
of the living tree,  
stuck fast to the low clouds,  
notate the dawn.  
Their shrill cries sound  
announcing appetite  
and drop among the bending roses  
and the dripping grass.

## THE NIGHTINGALES

My shoes as I lean  
unlacing them  
stand out upon  
flat worsted flowers  
under my feet.  
Nimbly the shadows  
of my fingers play  
unlacing  
over shoes and flowers.

## SPOUTS

In this world of  
as fine a pair of breasts  
as ever I saw  
the fountain in  
Madison Square  
spouts up of water  
a white tree  
that dies and lives  
as the rocking water  
in the basin  
turns from the stonerim  
back upon the jet  
and rising there  
reflectively drops down again.

## BLUEFLAGS

I stopped the car  
to let the children down  
where the streets end  
in the sun  
at the marsh edge  
and the reeds begin  
and there are small houses  
facing the reeds  
and the blue mist  
in the distance  
with grapevine trellises  
with grape clusters  
small as strawberries  
on the vines  
and ditches  
running springwater  
that continue the gutters  
with willows over them.  
The reeds begin  
like water at a shore  
their pointed petals waving  
dark green and light.  
But blueflags are blossoming  
in the reeds  
which the children pluck  
chattering in the reeds  
high over their heads  
which they part  
with bare arms to appear  
with fists of flowers  
till in the air  
there comes the smell  
of calamus  
from wet, gummy stalks.

## THE WIDOW'S LAMENT IN SPRINGTIME

Sorrow is my own yard  
where the new grass  
flames as it has flamed  
often before but not  
with the cold fire  
that closes round me this year.  
Thirtyfive years  
I lived with my husband.  
The plumbtree is white today  
with masses of flowers.  
Masses of flowers  
load the cherry branches  
and color some bushes  
yellow and some red  
but the grief in my heart  
is stronger than they  
for though they were my joy  
formerly, today I notice them  
and turn away forgetting.  
Today my son told me  
that in the meadows,  
at the edge of the heavy woods  
in the distance, he saw  
trees of white flowers.  
I feel that I would like  
to go there  
and fall into those flowers  
and sink into the marsh near them.

## LIGHT HEARTED WILLIAM

Light hearted William twirled  
his November moustaches  
and, half dressed, looked  
from the bedroom window  
upon the spring weather.

Heigh-ya! sighed he gaily  
leaning out to see  
up and down the street  
where a heavy sunlight  
lay beyond some blue shadows.

Into the room he drew  
his head again and laughed  
to himself quietly  
twirling his green moustaches.

## PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR

The birches are mad with green points  
the wood's edge is burning with their green,  
burning, seething—No, no, no.

The birches are opening their leaves one  
by one. Their delicate leaves unfold cold  
and separate, one by one. Slender tassels  
hang swaying from the delicate branch tips—  
Oh, I cannot say it. There is no word.  
Black is split at once into flowers. In  
every bog and ditch, flares of  
small fire, white flowers!—Agh,  
the birches are mad, mad with their green.  
The world is gone, torn into shreds  
with this blessing. What have I left undone  
that I should have undertaken

O my brother, you redfaced, living man  
ignorant, stupid whose feet are upon  
this same dirt that I touch—and eat.  
We are alone in this terror, alone,  
face to face on this road, you and I,  
wrapped by this flame!

Let the polished plows stay idle,  
their gloss already on the black soil.

But that face of yours—!

Answer me. I will clutch you. I  
will hug you, grip you. I will poke my face  
into your face and force you to see me.  
Take me in your arms, tell me the commonest  
thing that is in your mind to say,  
say anything. I will understand you—!  
It is the madness of the birch leaves opening  
cold, one by one.

My rooms will receive me. But my rooms  
are no longer sweet spaces where comfort  
is ready to wait on me with its crumbs.  
A darkness has brushed them. The mass  
of yellow tulips in the bowl is shrunken.  
Every familiar object is changed and dwarfed.  
I am shaken, broken against a might  
that splits comfort, blows apart  
my careful partitions, crushes my house  
and leaves me—with shrinking heart  
and startled, empty eyes—peering out  
into a cold world.

In the spring I would drink! In the spring  
I would be drunk and lie forgetting all things.  
Your face! Give me your face, Yang Kue Fei!  
your hands, your lips to drink!  
Give me your wrists to drink—  
I drag you, I am drowned in you, you  
overwhelm me! Drink!  
Save me! The shad bush is in the edge  
of the clearing. The yards in a fury  
of lilac blossoms are driving me mad with terror.  
Drink and lie forgetting the world.

And coldly the birch leaves are opening one by one.  
Coldly I observe them and wait for the end.  
And it ends.



## THE LONELY STREET

School is over. It is too hot  
to walk at ease. At ease  
in light frocks they walk the streets  
to while the time away.  
They have grown tall. They hold  
pink flames in their right hands.  
In white from head to foot,  
with sidelong, idle look—  
in yellow, floating stuff,  
black sash and stockings—  
touching their avid mouths  
with pink sugar on a stick—  
like a carnation each holds in her hand—  
they mount the lonely street.

## THE GREAT FIGURE

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
in gold  
on a red  
firetruck  
moving  
with weight and urgency  
tense  
unheeded  
to gong clangs  
siren howls  
and wheels rumbling  
through the dark city.



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