

## **Mckay: Harlem Shadows**

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## TO ONE COMING NORTH

At first you'll joy to see the playful snow,  
Like white moths trembling on the tropic air,  
Or waters of the hills that softly flow  
Gracefully falling down a shining stair.

And when the fields and streets are covered white  
And the wind-worried void is chilly, raw,  
Or underneath a spell of heat and light  
The cheerless frozen spots begin to thaw,

Like me you'll long for home, where birds' glad  
song  
Means flowering lanes and leas and spaces  
dry,  
And tender thoughts and feelings fine and strong,  
Beneath a vivid silver-flecked blue sky.

But oh! more than the changeless southern isles,  
When Spring has shed upon the earth her  
charm,

You'll love the Northland wreathed in golden  
smiles

By the miraculous sun turned glad and warm.

## AMERICA

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,  
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,  
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess  
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!  
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,  
Giving me strength erect against her hate.  
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.  
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,  
I stand within her walls with not a shred  
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.  
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,  
And see her might and granite wonders there,  
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,  
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

ALFONSO, DRESSING TO WAIT AT TABLE

Alfonso is a handsome bronze-hued lad  
Of subtly-changing and surprising parts;  
His moods are storms that frighten and make  
glad,  
His eyes were made to capture women's hearts.

Down in the glory-hole Alfonso sings  
An olden song of wine and clinking glasses  
And riotous rakes; magnificently flings  
Gay kisses to imaginary lasses.

Alfonso's voice of mellow music thrills  
Our swaying forms and steals our hearts with  
joy;  
And when he soars, his fine falsetto trills  
Are rarest notes of gold without alloy.

But, O Alfonso! wherefore do you sing  
Dream-songs of carefree men and ancient  
places?

Soon we shall be beset by clamouring  
Of hungry and importunate palefaces.

## THE TROPICS IN NEW YORK

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,  
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,  
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,  
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories  
Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,  
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies  
In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;  
A wave of longing through my body swept,  
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,  
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

## FLAME-HEART

So much have I forgotten in ten years,  
So much in ten brief years! I have forgot  
What time the purple apples come to juice,  
And what month brings the shy forget-me-not.  
I have forgot the special, startling season  
Of the pimento's flowering and fruiting;  
What time of year the ground doves brown the  
fields  
And fill the noonday with their curious fluting.  
I have forgotten much, but still remember  
The poinsettia's red, blood-red in warm December.

I still recall the honey-fever grass,  
But cannot recollect the high days when  
We rooted them out of the ping-wing path  
To stop the mad bees in the rabbit pen.  
I often try to think in what sweet month  
The languid painted ladies used to dapple  
The yellow by-road mazing from the main,  
Sweet with the golden threads of the rose-apple.  
I have forgotten—strange—but quite remember  
The poinsettia's red, blood-red in warm December.



What weeks, what months, what time of the mild  
year

We cheated school to have our fling at tops?  
What days our wine-thrilled bodies pulsed with  
joy

Feasting upon blackberries in the copse?  
Oh some I know! I have embalmed the days,  
Even the sacred moments when we played,  
All innocent of passion, uncorrupt,

At noon and evening in the flame-heart's shade.  
We were so happy, happy, I remember,  
Beneath the poinsettia's red in warm December.

## AFTER THE WINTER

Some day, when trees have shed their leaves  
And against the morning's white  
The shivering birds beneath the eaves  
Have sheltered for the night,  
We'll turn our faces southward, love,  
Toward the summer isle  
Where bamboos spire to shafted grove  
And wide-mouthed orchids smile.

And we will seek the quiet hill  
Where towers the cotton tree,  
And leaps the laughing crystal rill,  
And works the droning bee.  
And we will build a cottage there  
Beside an open glade,  
With black-ribbed blue-bells blowing near,  
And ferns that never fade.

## HARLEM SHADOWS

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass

In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall  
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass

To bend and barter at desire's call.

Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet

Go prowling through the night from street to  
street!

Through the long night until the silver break

Of day the little gray feet know no rest;

Through the lone night until the last snow-flake

Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's  
white breast,

The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet

Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way

Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,

Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,

The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!

Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet

In Harlem wandering from street to street.

## ENSLAVED

Oh when I think of my long-suffering race,  
For weary centuries despised, oppressed,  
Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place  
In the great life line of the Christian West;  
And in the Black Land disinherited,  
Robbed in the ancient country of its birth,  
My heart grows sick with hate, becomes as lead,  
For this my race that has no home on earth.  
Then from the dark depths of my soul I cry  
To the avenging angel to consume  
The white man's world of wonders utterly:  
Let it be swallowed up in earth's vast womb,  
Or upward roll as sacrificial smoke  
To liberate my people from its yoke!

## I SHALL RETURN

I shall return again; I shall return  
To laugh and love and watch with wonder-eyes  
At golden noon the forest fires burn,  
Wafting their blue-black smoke to sapphire skies.  
I shall return to loiter by the streams  
That bathe the brown blades of the bending  
    grasses,  
And realize once more my thousand dreams  
Of waters rushing down the mountain passes.  
I shall return to hear the fiddle and fife  
Of village dances, dear delicious tunes  
That stir the hidden depths of native life,  
Stray melodies of dim remembered runes.  
I shall return, I shall return again,  
To ease my mind of long, long years of pain.

## AFRICA

The sun sought thy dim bed and brought forth  
light,  
The sciences were sucklings at thy breast;  
When all the world was young in pregnant night  
Thy slaves toiled at thy monumental best.  
Thou ancient treasure-land, thou modern prize,  
New peoples marvel at thy pyramids!  
The years roll on, thy sphinx of riddle eyes  
Watches the mad world with immobile lids.  
The Hebrews humbled them at Pharaoh's name.  
Cradle of Power! Yet all things were in vain!  
Honor and Glory, Arrogance and Fame!  
They went. The darkness swallowed thee again.  
Thou art the harlot, now thy time is done,  
Of all the mighty nations of the sun.

## THE HARLEM DANCER

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes  
And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;  
Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes  
Blown by black players upon a picnic day.  
She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,  
The light gauze hanging loose about her form;  
To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm  
Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.  
Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls  
Luxuriant fell; and tossing coins in praise,  
The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the  
girls,  
Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze;  
But looking at her falsely-smiling face,  
I knew her self was not in that strange place.

## I KNOW MY SOUL

I plucked my soul out of its secret place,  
And held it to the mirror of my eye,  
To see it like a star against the sky,  
A twitching body quivering in space,  
A spark of passion shining on my face.  
And I explored it to determine why  
This awful key to my infinity  
Conspires to rob me of sweet joy and grace.  
And if the sign may not be fully read,  
If I can comprehend but not control,  
I need not gloom my days with futile dread,  
Because I see a part and not the whole.  
Contemplating the strange, I'm comforted  
By this narcotic thought: I know my soul.



## IF WE MUST DIE

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one death-  
    blow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly  
    pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

## SUMMER MORN IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

All yesterday it poured, and all night long  
I could not sleep; the rain unceasing beat  
Upon the shingled roof like a weird song,  
Upon the grass like running children's feet.  
And down the mountains by the dark cloud kissed,  
Like a strange shape in filmy veiling dressed,  
Slid slowly, silently, the wraith-like mist,  
And nestled soft against the earth's wet breast.

But lo, there was a miracle at dawn!

The still air stirred at touch of the faint breeze,  
The sun a sheet of gold bequeathed the lawn,  
The songsters twittered in the rustling trees.  
And all things were transfigured in the day,  
But me whom radiant beauty could not move;  
For you, more wonderful, were far away,  
And I was blind with hunger for your love.

## A RED FLOWER

Your lips are like a southern lily red,  
Wet with the soft rain-kisses of the night,  
In which the brown bee buries deep its head,  
When still the dawn's a silver sea of light.

Your lips betray the secret of your soul,  
The dark delicious essence that is you,  
A mystery of life, the flaming goal  
I seek through mazy pathways strange and new.

Your lips are the red symbol of a dream.  
What visions of warm lilies they impart,  
That line the green bank of a fair blue stream,  
With butterflies and bees close to each heart!

Brown bees that murmur sounds of music rare,  
That softly fall upon the languorous breeze,  
Wafting them gently on the quiet air  
Among untended avenues of trees.

O were I hovering, a bee, to probe  
    Deep down within your scented heart, fair  
        flower,  
Enfolded by your soft vermilion robe,  
    Amorous of sweets, for but one perfect hour!

## WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

— What are we waiting for, assembled in the Forum?

The barbarians are to arrive today.

— Why then such inactivity in the Senate?  
Why do the Senators sit back and do not legislate?

Because the barbarians will arrive today. 5  
What sort of laws now can Senators enact?  
When the barbarians come, they'll do the legislating.

— Why is our emperor up and about so early,  
and seated at the grandest gate of our city,  
upon the throne, in state, wearing the crown? 10

Because the barbarians will arrive today.  
And the emperor expects to receive their leader.  
Indeed, he has prepared to present him  
with a parchment scroll. Thereon he has  
invested him with many names and titles. 15

— Why have our two consuls and the praetors come out  
today in their purple, embroidered togas;  
why did they put on bracelets studded with amethysts,  
and rings with resplendent, glittering emeralds;  
why are they carrying today precious staves 20  
carved exquisitely in gold and silver?

Because the barbarians will arrive today;  
and such things dazzle the barbarians.

- And why don't our worthy orators, as always, come out  
to deliver their speeches, to have their usual say? 25

Because the barbarians will arrive today;  
and they get bored with eloquence and orations.

- Why has there suddenly begun all this commotion,  
and this confusion? (How solemn people's faces have become).  
Why are the streets and the squares emptying so swiftly, 30  
and everyone is returning home in deep preoccupation?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.  
And some people have arrived from the frontiers,  
and said that there are no barbarians anymore.

- 
- And now, what will become of us without barbarians? 35  
Those people were some sort of a solution.

[MONOTONY]

For the text, see *Poems (1905-1915)*, p. 37.

## THE CITY

You said: 'I'll go to another land, I'll go to another sea.  
 Another city will be found, a better one than this.  
 My every effort is doomed by destiny  
 and my heart—like a dead man—lies buried.  
 How long will my mind languish in such decay? 5  
 Wherever I turn my eyes, wherever I look,  
 the blackened ruins of my life I see here,  
 where so many years I've lived and wasted and ruined.'

Any new lands you will not find; you'll find no other seas.  
 The city will be following you. In the same streets 10  
 you'll wander. And in the same neighbourhoods you'll age,  
 and in these same houses you will grow grey.  
 Always in this same city you'll arrive. For elsewhere—do not  
 hope—  
 there is no ship for you, there is no road.  
 Just as you've wasted your life here, 15  
 in this tiny niche, in the entire world you've ruined it.

## SATRAPY

What a misfortune, though you're made  
 for noble and prodigious deeds,  
 this unjust fate of yours always  
 denies you encouragement and success;  
 and you're encumbered by base habits, 5  
 and by pettiness and by indifference.  
 And what a frightful day when you give in,  
 (the day when you let go and give in)  
 and you depart, a wayfarer, for Susa,\*  
 and you go to the monarch Artaxerxes, 10  
 who favourably places you in his court  
 and offers you satrapies and the like.

## THE GOD FORSAKES ANTONY

When suddenly, at the midnight hour  
 an invisible company is heard going past,  
 with exquisite music, with voices—  
 your fate that's giving in now, your deeds  
 that failed, your life's plans that proved to be 5  
 all illusions, do not needlessly lament.  
 As one long since prepared, as one courageous,  
 bid farewell to the Alexandria that's leaving.  
 Above all, don't be misled, don't say it was  
 a dream, that your ears deceived you; 10  
 don't deign to foster such vain hopes.  
 As one long since prepared, as one courageous,  
 as befits you who were deemed worthy of such a city,  
 move with steady steps toward the window  
 and listen with deepest feeling, yet not 15  
 with a coward's entreaties and complaints,  
 listen as an ultimate delight to the sounds,  
 to the exquisite instruments of the mystical company,  
 and bid farewell to the Alexandria you are losing.

## THEODOTUS

If you are one of the truly elect,  
 be careful how you attain your dominance.  
 No matter how much you are glorified, how much  
 your Italian and Thessalian exploits  
 are acclaimed by the city-states, 5  
 how many honorific decrees  
 are issued for you in Rome by your admirers,  
 neither your happiness nor your triumph will last,  
 nor will you feel like a superior being—superior indeed—  
 when, in Alexandria, Theodotus brings you 10  
 upon a bloodstained tray  
 the wretched Pompey's head.



And do not rest assured that in your life,  
 circumscribed, settled, and mundane,  
 such spectacular and dreadful things do not exist. 15  
 Perhaps at this very hour, in some neighbour's  
 neat and tidy home, enters—  
 invisible, incorporeal—Theodotus,  
 bearing just such a ghastly head.

## MONOTONY

One monotonous day follows another  
 identically monotonous. The selfsame  
 things will happen again and again—  
 similar moments find us and leave us.

A month goes by and brings another month. 5  
 The things about to come, one can readily surmise:  
 they are those boring ones of yesterday.  
 And the morrow resembles a morrow no more.

## ITHACA

When you set out on the journey to Ithaca,\*  
 pray that the road be long,  
 full of adventures, full of knowledge.  
 The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,\*  
 the raging Poseidon do not fear: 5  
 you'll never find the likes of these on your way,  
 if lofty be your thoughts, if rare emotion  
 touches your spirit and your body.  
 The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,  
 the fierce Poseidon you'll not encounter, 10  
 unless you carry them along within your soul,  
 unless your soul raises them before you.

Pray that the road be long;  
 that there be many a summer morning,  
 when with what delight, what joy, 15  
 you'll enter into harbours yet unseen;  
 that you may stop at Phoenician emporia  
 and acquire all the fine wares,  
 mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,  
 and sensuous perfumes of every kind, 20  
 as many sensuous perfumes as you can;  
 that you may visit many an Egyptian city,  
 to learn and learn again from lettered men.

Always keep Ithaca in your mind.  
 To arrive there is your final destination. 25  
 But do not rush the voyage in the least.  
 Better it last for many years;  
 and once you're old, cast anchor on the isle,  
 rich with all you've gained along the way,  
 expecting not that Ithaca will give you wealth. 30

Ithaca gave you the wondrous voyage:  
 without her you'd never have set out.  
 But she has nothing to give you any more.

If then you find her poor, Ithaca has not deceived you.  
 As wise as you've become, with such experience, by now 35  
 you will have come to know what Ithacas really mean.

## AS BEST YOU CAN

Even if you cannot make your life the way you want,  
 try this, at least,  
 as best you can: do not demean it  
 by too much contact with the crowd,  
 by too much movement and idle talk. 5

## THE RETINUE OF DIONYSUS

Damon the craftsman (there is none more skilled  
 in the Peloponnese) is fashioning  
 in Parian marble the retinue of Dionysus.  
 The god, in sublime glory,  
 with vigorous stride to the fore. 5  
 Akrotos\* follows behind. At Akrotos' side,  
 Methe pours for the satyrs wine  
 from an amphora wreathed with ivy-vine.  
 Near them the effete Hedyoinos soporific,  
 with his eyes half-closed. 10  
 And then follow the singers,  
 Molpos and Hedymeles, and Comus,  
 who never lets go out the procession's sacred torch  
 which he holds; and most modest Teleté.—  
 These Damon is elaborating. And while so doing, 15  
 his mind ponders now and then  
 on his remuneration from the King  
 of Syracuse, three talents, a goodly sum.  
 When this is added to the rest of his money,  
 he'll live grandly henceforth like a prosperous man, 20  
 and he'll be able to dabble in politics—what joy!—  
 he too in the Boule, he too in the Agora.

## THE BATTLE OF MAGNESIA

He's lost his former ardour, his audacity.  
 To his tired, almost ailing body,  
  
 he'll mainly devote attention. And the remainder  
 of his life will pass without a care. So Philip  
  
 at least maintains. Tonight he plays dice; 5  
 he's eager for amusements. On the table

let's put a lot of roses! What of it, if Antiochus  
met ruin in Magnesia. They say disaster

fell on the splendid army's multitudes.  
They might have exaggerated; it cannot all be true. 10

Let's hope so; for though an enemy, they were of our race.  
Well! One 'let's hope so' is enough. Maybe too much!

Philip, of course, will not postpone the feast.  
No matter how intense has been his life's exhaustion,

one good thing he's retained: he hasn't lost his memory at all. 15  
He recalls just how they wept in Syria, what sort of sorrow

they feigned when their mother Macedonia was humbled.—  
Let the banquet begin. Slaves: the flutes, the lights.

#### THE DISPLEASURE OF THE SELEUCID

The Seleucid king Demetrius\*  
was displeased to hear that in Italy  
a Ptolemy arrived in such a wretched state;  
with three or four slaves only,  
shabbily dressed and on foot. At this rate, 5  
their dynasties will eventually become  
the laughing-stock, the plaything of Rome.  
Deep down the Seleucid knows that they've  
become a sort of servant to the Romans;  
that the Romans are those who give and take away 10  
their thrones at will, as they please; that he knows!  
But in their appearance they should  
preserve at least some dignity,  
and not forget that they are kings still,  
that they (alas!) are still called kings. 15

## IONIC

Even though we have broken their statues,  
 even though we drove them out of their temples,  
 in no wise did the gods die for all that.  
 O land of Ionia, it is you they love still,  
 it is you their souls still remember. 5  
 When upon you dawns an August morn,  
 some vigour of their life pervades your atmosphere,  
 and once in a while, an ethereal, youthful form,  
 indistinct, in rapid stride,  
 passes above your hills. 10

## AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE CAFÉ

My attention was directed, by something said beside me,  
 toward the entrance of the café.  
 And I saw the lovely body that appeared  
 as if created by Eros in his consummate experience—  
 fashioning its well-proportioned limbs with joy; 5  
 raising a sculpted posture;  
 fashioning the face with deep emotion  
 and bestowing, by the touch of his hands,  
 a feeling upon the brow, the eyes, and the lips.

## ONE NIGHT

The room was shabby and sordid,  
 concealed above the seedy tavern.  
 From the window you could see the alley,  
 squalid and narrow. From below  
 came the voices of some workmen 5  
 playing cards and revelling.

And there, upon the lowly, humble bed  
 I had the body of love, I had the lips,  
 the sensuous, rosy, intoxicating lips—  
 the rosy lips of such sensual ecstasy that even now, 10  
 as I am writing, after so many years,  
 in my lonely home, I feel drunk again.

## COME BACK

Come back often and take hold of me,  
 beloved sensation, come back and take hold of me—  
 when the memory of the body is aroused,  
 and past desire flows into the blood again;  
 when the lips and the skin remember, 5  
 and the hands feel as if they are touching again.

Come back often, and take hold of me in the night,  
 when the lips and the skin remember . . .

## FAR AWAY

I'd like to put this memory into words . . .  
 Yet it has faded so by now . . . as if but nothing remains—  
 for it lies far away, in the years of my earliest youth.

Skin as if made of jasmine . . .  
 In that August—was it August?—night . . . 5  
 Barely can I recall by now the eyes; they were, I think, deep  
 blue . . .  
 Ah yes, deep blue; a sapphire blue.

## HE VOWS

He vows, every so often,      to start a better life.  
 But come the night      with its own counsel,  
 its own compromises,      its own promises;  
 but come the night      with its own potent allure  
 of the body that desires and demands, he returns      5  
 once more, lost, to the same fateful pleasure.

## I WENT

I did not restrain myself. I let go completely and went.  
 To those pleasures that were partly real,  
 partly swirling in my mind,  
 I went, into the lighted night.  
 And drank of potent wines, such as      5  
 the fearless in their sensual pleasure drink.

## CHANDELIER

In a chamber empty and small, four walls only  
 and draped with lengths of bright green cloth,  
 a lovely chandelier shines and glows,  
 and in its every single flame, simmering grows  
 a lustful passion, a lustful urge.      5

Within the small chamber, that gleams alight  
 from the fiery heat of the chandelier,  
 what emerges is no ordinary light.  
 It is not made for timid bodies,  
 the sensual rapture of this heat.      10

## SINCE NINE O'CLOCK—

Half past twelve. The hours have passed quickly  
 since nine o'clock when I lit the lamp  
 and sat down here. I've been sitting without reading,  
 without talking. To whom could I talk,  
 all alone within this house!

5

The image of my young body,  
 since nine o'clock when I lit the lamp,  
 came and found me and reminded me  
 of closed, perfumed rooms  
 and past sensual pleasure—what audacious pleasure!  
 And also brought before my eyes  
 streets that have since become unrecognizable;  
 night clubs full of life that now are closed,  
 and theatres and cafés that once used to be.

10

The image of my young body  
 came back and brought to mind also sad memories;  
 family mournings, separations,  
 feelings of my dear ones, feelings  
 of the dead, so little appreciated.

15

Half past twelve. How the hours have passed.  
 Half past twelve. How have the years gone by.

20

## PERCEPTION

The years of my youth, my sensuous life—  
 how clearly I see their meaning now!

What useless, what futile repentances . . .

But I couldn't see their meaning then.



## TO SENSUAL PLEASURE

Joy and balm of my life: the memory of the hours  
 when I found and held onto sensual pleasure as I wished.  
 Joy and balm of my life: for me who spurned  
 every delight of routine amours.

## SO LONG I GAZED—

So long I gazed on beauty,  
 that it completely fills my vision.

Lines of the body. Red lips. Sensuous limbs.  
 Hair as if taken from Grecian statues,  
 always lovely, even when uncombed  
 and falling a little over the white temples. 5  
 Faces of love, as my poetry  
 fancied them . . . within the nights of my youth,  
 within my own nights, secretly encountered . . .

## IN THE STREET

His appealing face somewhat wan,  
 his chestnut eyes seem drawn;  
 twenty-five years old, but could pass for twenty;  
 with an artistic flair in his mode of dress  
 —in the tint of the tie, in the shape of the collar— 5  
 he is walking aimlessly down the street,  
 still as if in a trance, from the deviant pleasure,  
 from so much deviant pleasure he'd possessed.

with his ideal lips that bring  
 sensual delight to the beloved body;  
 with his ideal limbs, created for beds  
 that everyday morality labels shameless. 15

## IN DESPAIR

He lost his friend completely. And now he tries to find  
 upon the lips of every other new paramour  
 his former lover's lips. He tries in the union  
 with each new paramour to make himself believe  
 he's found that same young lover, and that he yields to him. 5

He lost his friend completely, as if he ceased to exist.  
 Because he wanted—so he said— he wanted to be saved  
 from such a stigmatized, wasteful carnal pleasure,  
 from such a stigmatized, carnal pleasure of shame.  
 There was still time—so he said— for him to save himself. 10

He lost his friend completely, as if he ceased to exist.  
 Through his imagination, through his hallucinations,  
 upon the lips of other youths he seeks his lover's lips;  
 endeavouring to experience his lover's love once more.

## JULIAN, NOTICING NEGLIGENCE

'Noticing, therefore, that there is much negligence  
 among us towards the gods'—he states in a solemn manner.  
 Negligence. What did he expect then?  
 Let him undertake religious organization, as much as he liked;  
 or write, as much as he liked, to the High Priest of Galatia, 5  
 or to others such as he, encouraging and counselling.  
 His friends were not Christians;

## BEFORE THEY ARE CHANGED BY TIME

They were so very sad      during their separation.  
 It was not what they wanted;      it was circumstances.  
 Necessities of life      forced one of them to leave  
 and travel far away—      New York or Canada.  
 Their love for sure was not      what it once used to be;      5  
 the sexual attraction      had gradually waned,  
 the sexual attraction      had been reduced a lot.  
 Yet to be separated      was not what they wanted.  
 It was circumstances.—      Or perhaps Destiny  
 appeared like an artist,      separating them now,      10  
 before their feeling fades,      before they are changed by Time;  
 each of them for the other      will then remain forever  
 a twenty-four-year-old      and beautiful young man.

## HE CAME TO READ—

He came to read. Two or three books  
 are open; historians and poets.  
 But he didn't read more than ten minutes  
 and gave it up. He is dozing  
 on the couch. He is entirely devoted to books—      5  
 but he's only twenty-three years old, and very handsome;  
 and this afternoon Love passed through  
 his ideal flesh, his lips.  
 Through his flesh that is so full of beauty  
 passed the erotic fever;      10  
 with no silly modesty about the nature of the pleasure . . .

## OF COLOURED GLASS

I'm deeply touched by a certain detail  
 in the coronation, at Blachernae, of John Cantacuzenus\*  
 and Irene, daughter of Andronicus Asan.\*  
 Since they possessed but a few precious stones  
 (so great was the poverty of our wretched State) 5  
 they put on false ones. A lot of pieces made of glass,  
 red, green, or blue. There is  
 nothing humble or undignified,  
 I believe, about those pieces  
 of coloured glass. On the contrary, 10  
 they seem to be a pitiful protest  
 against the unjust misery of those being crowned.  
 They're symbols of what it befitted them to have,  
 of what, by all means, was proper for them to have  
 at their coronation, a Lord such as John Cantacuzenus 15  
 and a Lady such as Irene, daughter of Andronicus Asan.

## THE 25TH YEAR OF HIS LIFE

He visits regularly the tavern  
 where they had met each other the previous month.  
 He asked around; but they had nothing to tell him.  
 From what they said, he gathered that his friend  
 got to know a totally unknown individual, 5  
 one of several unknown and shady  
 young faces that came in and out of the place.  
 But he visits the tavern regularly at night,  
 and sits and gazes towards the doorway,  
 and gazes till he tires, towards the doorway. 10  
 His friend might come in. Tonight, he might come.

That's what he's been doing for almost three weeks.  
 His mind is suffering from lovesickness.  
 The kisses linger on his mouth.

To his hot-air utterances about false gods,  
 to his tedious self-glorification;  
 his childish phobia of the theatre;  
 his awkward prudery; his ridiculous beard.

Well, of course they preferred the CHI, 15  
 of course, they preferred the KAPPA; a hundred times over.

## ANNA DALASSENE

In the chrysobull issued by Alexius Comnenus,  
 to honour his mother eminently,  
 that highly intelligent Lady Anna Dalassene—  
 noteworthy for her deeds and her morality—  
 there are several expressions of praise: 5  
 let us relate one of them here,  
 a nice and courteous phrase:  
 “‘mine” or “‘thine””: those cold words she never uttered.’

## DAYS OF 1896

He was disgraced completely. A sexual inclination  
 of his, strongly forbidden, and much despised  
 (nevertheless innate) happened to be the reason:  
 society was indeed prudish to the extreme.  
 He gradually lost his meagre capital 5  
 and then his social standing, and then his reputation.  
 He was nearing thirty without having lasted  
 a year in any job, at least an honest one.  
 From time to time he earned his living by acting as  
 a go-between in deals which are considered shameful. 10  
 He ended up a type that were you seen with him  
 too often, you'd no doubt be most greatly compromised.

But this, though, is not everything;      else it would not be fair.  
 The memory of his beauty      indeed is worth much more.  
 There is a different aspect;      seen from that point of view,      15  
 he would appear as likeable;      he would appear a simple  
 and genuine child of Eros,      who without hesitation,  
 has placed above his honour,      above his reputation,  
 the pure sensual pleasure      of his pure sensual flesh.

Above his reputation?      Well, society that was      20  
 prudish to the extreme,      made stupid correlations.

#### TWO YOUNG MEN, 23 TO 24 YEARS OLD

He'd been in the café since ten-thirty  
 waiting for him to show up soon.  
 Midnight came and he was waiting still.  
 It was nearing one-thirty; the café  
 had emptied almost completely.      5  
 He got tired of reading newspapers  
 absentmindedly. Of his paltry three shillings,  
 a single one was left; whilst waiting all this time,  
 he'd spent the rest on coffee and cognac.  
 He smoked all his cigarettes.      10  
 He was exhausted by such lengthy anticipation. Because,  
 as he was alone for hours, he began  
 to be seized by disturbing thoughts  
 about his life, which had gone astray.

But as soon as he saw his friend come in—      15  
 fatigue, boredom, and ill thoughts vanished at once.

His friend brought unexpected news.  
 He had won sixty pounds in a card game.

Their lovely faces, their exquisite youth,  
 the sensitive affection they held for each other      20

a highly humiliating, unbecoming thing.  
 And he kept visiting her; and always wavered.  
 And always started to say something; and always stopped.

But that wonderful lady saw through him  
 (some rumours about it had reached her as well), 10  
 and she encouraged him to speak out.  
 And she laughed and said, of course she'd go,  
 and as a matter of fact, she was glad to be  
 still useful to Sparta in her old age.

As for the humiliation—well, she couldn't care less. 15  
 A Lagid, a king of only yesterday, was of course  
 unable to grasp the Spartan spirit;  
 wherefore his demand could not truly  
 humble such a Distinguished Lady  
 as she; mother of a Spartan king. 20

PORTRAIT OF A 23-YEAR-OLD MAN, PAINTED  
 BY A FRIEND OF THE SAME AGE, AN AMATEUR ARTIST

He finished the portrait	yesterday at noon. And now	
he examines it in detail.	He painted him wearing	
a grey unbuttoned coat,	dark grey; without any	
waistcoat or necktie;	with a rose-pink shirt	
partly undone so that	a little could be glimpsed	5
of his beautiful chest,	of his beautiful neck.	
The right side of the forehead	is for the most part	
covered by his hair,	his truly lovely hair	
(done in the fashion	that he prefers this year).	
The whole thing is pervaded	by the hedonistic tone	10
he intended to convey	in painting the eyes,	
in painting the lips . . .	His mouth and his lips,	
made for consummations	of choice eroticism.	

Well, possibly the time may not, as yet, be ripe.  
 Let's not be hasty; rashness is a hazardous thing.  
 Untimely measures foster regrets. To be sure,  
 there is, unfortunately, a lot that's out of place in the Colony.  
 But is there anything human devoid of imperfection? 35  
 And, well, one way or another we are moving along.

## THE POTENTATE FROM WESTERN LIBYA

He was generally liked in Alexandria  
 during the ten days he sojourned there,  
 the potentate from Western Libya,  
 Aristomenes, son of Menelaus.  
 As with his name, his dress properly Greek. 5  
 He gladly accepted the honours, but  
 didn't solicit them; he was modest.  
 He bought books in Greek,  
 particularly on history and philosophy.  
 But above all, he was a man of few words. 10  
 He must be profound of thought, it was rumoured,  
 and such people have it in their nature not to say much.

He was neither profound of thought, nor anything.  
 Just an ordinary, silly man.  
 He assumed a Greek name, he dressed like a Greek, 15  
 taught himself to behave—more or less—like a Greek;  
 and trembled in his soul lest  
 he mar the tolerable impression  
 by speaking Greek with dreadful barbarisms,  
 and have the Alexandrians poke fun at him, 20  
 as is their habit—awful people.

And for this reason, he confined himself to a few words,  
 fearfully paying attention to the declensions and the accent;  
 and he got bored no end, having  
 so many things to say piled up inside him. 25



THE FIRST ELEGY

And if I cried, who'd listen to me in those angelic  
orders? Even if one of them suddenly held me  
to his heart, I'd vanish in his overwhelming  
presence. Because beauty's nothing  
but the start of terror we can hardly bear, [5]  
and we adore it because of the serene scorn  
it could kill us with. Every angel's terrifying.

So I control myself and choke back the lure  
of my dark cry. Ah, who can we turn to,  
then? Neither angels nor men, [10]  
and the animals already know by instinct  
we're not comfortably at home  
in our translated world. Maybe what's left  
for us is some tree on a hillside we can look at  
day after day, one of yesterday's streets, [15]  
and the perverse affection of a habit  
that liked us so much it never let go.

And the night, oh the night when the wind  
full of outer space gnaws at our faces; that wished for,  
gentle, deceptive one waiting painfully for the lonely [20]  
heart — she'd stay on for anyone. Is she easier on lovers?  
But they use each other to hide their fate.

You *still* don't understand? Throw the emptiness in  
your arms out into that space we breathe; maybe birds

6 • Duineser Elegien: Die Erst Elegie

[25] die erweiterte Luft fühlen mit innigerem Flug.

Ja, die Frühlinge brauchten dich wohl. Es muteten manche  
Sterne dir zu, daß du sie spürtest. Es hob  
sich eine Woge heran im Vergangenen, oder  
da du vorüberkamst am geöffneten Fenster,  
[30] gab eine Geige sich hin. Das alles war Auftrag.  
Aber bewältigtest du's? Warst du nicht immer  
noch von Erwartung zerstreut, als kündigte alles  
eine Geliebte dir an? (Wo willst du sie bergen,  
da doch die großen fremden Gedanken bei dir  
[35] aus und ein gehn und öfters bleiben bei Nacht.)  
Sehnt es dich aber, so singe die Liebenden; lange  
noch nicht unsterblich genug ist ihr berühmtes Gefühl.  
Jene, du neidest sie fast, Verlassenen, die du  
so viel liebender fandst als die Gestillten. Beginn  
[40] immer von neuem die nie zu erreichende Preisung;  
denk: es erhält sich der Held, selbst der Untergang war  
ihm  
nur ein Vorwand, zu sein: seine letzte Geburt.  
Aber die Liebenden nimmt die erschöpfte Natur  
in sich zurück, als wären nicht zweimal die Kräfte,  
[45] dieses zu leisten. Hast du der Gaspara Stampa  
denn genügend gedacht, daß irgend ein Mädchen,  
dem der Geliebte entging, am gesteigerten Beispiel  
dieser Liebenden fühlt: daß ich würde wie sie?  
Sollen nicht endlich uns diese ältesten Schmerzen  
[50] fruchtbarer werden? Ist es nicht Zeit, daß wir liebend  
uns vom Geliebten befreien und es bebend bestehn:  
wie der Pfeil die Sehne besteht, um gesammelt im  
Absprung

will feel the air thinning as they fly deeper into themselves. [25]

Yes, Springs needed you. Many stars  
waited for you to see them. A wave  
that had broken long ago swelled toward you,  
or when you walked by an open window, a violin  
gave itself. All that was your charge. [30]

But could you live up to it? Weren't you always  
distracted by hope, as if all this promised  
you a lover? (Where would you have hidden her,  
with all those strange and heavy thoughts  
flowing in and out of you, often staying overnight?) [35]

When longing overcomes you, sing about great lovers;  
their famous passions still aren't immortal enough.  
You found that the deserted, those you almost envied,  
could love you so much more than those you loved.

Begin again. Try out your impotent praise again; [40]  
think about the hero who lives on: even his fall  
was only an excuse for another life, a final birth.

But exhausted nature draws all lovers back  
into herself, as if there weren't the energy  
to create them twice. Have you remembered [45]

Gaspara Stampa well enough? From that greater love's  
example, any girl deserted by her lover  
can believe: "If only I could be like her!"  
Shouldn't our ancient suffering be more  
fruitful by now? Isn't it time our loving freed [50]

us from the one we love and we, trembling, endured:  
as the arrow endures the string, and in that gathering  
momentum

mehr zu sein als er selbst. Denn Bleiben ist nirgends.

- Stimmen, Stimmen. Höre, mein Herz, wie sonst nur  
[55] Heilige hörten: daß sie der riesige Ruf  
aufhob vom Boden; sie aber knieten,  
Unmögliche, weiter und achtetens nicht:  
So waren sie hörend. Nicht, daß du *Gottes* erträgest  
[60] die Stimme, bei weitem. Aber das Wehende höre,  
die ununterbrochene Nachricht, die aus Stille sich bildet.  
Es rauscht jetzt von jenen jungen Toten zu dir.  
Wo immer du eintratst, redete nicht in Kirchen  
zu Rom und Neapel ruhig ihr Schicksal dich an?  
Oder es trug eine Inschrift sich erhaben dir auf,  
[65] wie neulich die Tafel in Santa Maria Formosa.  
Was sie mir wollen? leise soll ich des Unrechts  
Anschein abtun, der ihrer Geister  
reine Bewegung manchmal ein wenig behindert.

- Freilich ist es seltsam, die Erde nicht mehr zu bewohnen,  
[70] kaum erlernte Gebräuche nicht mehr zu üben,  
Rosen, und andern eigens versprechenden Dingen  
nicht die Bedeutung menschlicher Zukunft zu geben;  
das, was man war in unendlich ängstlichen Händen,  
nicht mehr zu sein, und selbst den eigenen Namen  
[75] wegzulassen wie ein zerbrochenes Spielzeug.  
Seltsam, die Wünsche nicht weiterzuwünschen. Seltsam,  
alles, was sich bezog, so lose im Raume  
flattern zu sehen. Und das Totsein ist mühsam  
und voller Nachholen, daß man allmählich ein wenig  
[80] Ewigkeit spürt. — Aber Lebendige machen

becomes more than itself. Because to stay is to be nowhere.

Voices, voices. My heart, listen as only  
saints have listened: until some colossal [55]

sound lifted them right off the ground; yet,  
they listened so intently that, impossible  
creatures, they kept on kneeling. Not that you could  
endure the voice of God! But listen to the breathing,  
the endless news growing out of silence, [60]

rustling toward you from those who died young.  
Whenever you entered a church in Rome or Naples,  
didn't their fate always softly speak to you?  
Or an inscription raised itself to reach you,  
like that tablet in Santa Maria Formosa recently. [65]

What do they want from me? That I gently wipe away  
the look of suffered injustice sometimes  
hindering the pure motion of spirits a little.

It's true, it's strange not living on earth  
anymore, not using customs you hardly learned, [70]  
not giving the meaning of a human future  
to roses and other things that promise so much;  
no longer being what you used to be  
in hands that were always anxious,

throwing out even your own name like a broken toy. [75]

It's strange not to wish your wishes anymore. Strange  
to see the old relationships now loosely fluttering  
in space. And it's hard being dead and straining  
to make up for it until you can begin to feel  
a trace of eternity. But the living are wrong [80]

10 • Duineser Elegien: Die Erste Elegie

alle den Fehler, daß sie zu stark unterscheiden.  
Engel (sagt man) wüßten oft nicht, ob sie unter  
Lebenden gehn oder Toten. Die ewige Strömung  
reißt durch beide Bereiche alle Alter

[85] immer mit sich und übertönt sie in beiden.

Schließlich brauchen sie uns nicht mehr, die Früheentrückten,  
man entwöhnt sich des Irdischen sanft, wie man den Brüsten  
milde der Mutter entwächst. Aber wir, die so große  
Geheimnisse brauchen, denen aus Trauer so oft

[90] seliger Fortschritt entspring — : *könnten* wir sein ohne sie?

Ist die Sage umsonst, daß einst in der Klage um Linos  
wagende erste Musik dürre Erstarrung durchdrang;  
daß erst im erschrockenen Raum, dem ein beinah göttlicher  
Jüngling

plötzlich für immer enttrat, das Leere in jene

[95] Schwingung geriet, die uns jetzt hinreißt und tröstet und hilft.

\*

to make distinctions that are too absolute.  
Angels (they say) often can't tell whether  
they move among the living or the dead.  
The eternal torrent hurls all ages through  
both realms forever and drowns out their voices in both. [85]

At last, those who left too soon don't need us anymore;  
we're weaned from the things of this earth as gently  
as we outgrow our mother's breast. But we, who need  
such great mysteries, whose source of blessed progress  
so often is our sadness — could we exist without them? [90]  
Is the story meaningless, how once during the lament for

Linus,

the first daring music pierced the barren numbness,  
and in that stunned space, suddenly abandoned  
by an almost godlike youth, the Void first felt  
that vibration which charms and comforts and helps us [95]  
now?

\*

THE EIGHTH ELEGY

*Dedicated to Rudolf Kassner*

All other creatures look into the Open  
with their whole eyes. But our eyes,  
turned inward, are set all around it like snares,  
trapping its way out to freedom.  
We know what's out there only from the animal's [5]  
face; for we take even the youngest child,  
turn him around and force him to look  
at the past as formation, not that openness  
so deep within an animal's face. Free from death,  
we only see it; the free animal [10]  
always has its destruction behind  
and god ahead, and when it moves,  
it moves toward eternity like running springs.

Not for a single day, no, never have we had  
that pure space ahead of us, in which flowers [15]  
endlessly open. It is always World  
and never Nowhere without No:  
that pure, unguarded space we breathe,  
always know, and never crave. As a child,  
one may lose himself in silence and be [20]  
shaken out of it. Or one dies and *is* it.  
Once near death, one can't see death anymore  
and stares out, maybe with the wide eyes of animals.  
If the other weren't there blocking the view,  
lovers come close to it and are amazed . . . [25]  
It opens up behind the other, almost



hinter dem andern . . . Aber über ihn  
kommt keiner fort, und wieder wird ihm Welt.  
Der Schöpfung immer zugewendet, sehn  
[30] wir nur auf ihr die Spiegelung des Frein,  
von uns verdunkelt. Oder daß ein Tier,  
ein stummes, aufschaut, ruhig durch uns durch.  
Dieses heißt Schicksal: gegenüber sein  
und nichts als das und immer gegenüber.

[35] Wäre Bewußtheit unsrer Art in dem  
sicheren Tier, das uns entgegenzieht  
in anderer Richtung — , riß es uns herum  
mit seinem Wandel. Doch sein Sein ist ihm  
unendlich, ungefaßt und ohne Blick  
[40] auf seinen Zustand, rein, so wie sein Ausblick.  
Und wo wir Zukunft sehn, dort sieht es Alles  
und sich in Allem und geheilt für immer.

Und doch ist in dem wachsam warmen Tier  
Gewicht und Sorge einer großen Schwermut.  
[45] Denn ihm auch haftet immer an, was uns  
oft überwältigt, — die Erinnerung,  
als sei schon einmal das, wonach man drängt,  
näher gewesen, treuer und sein Anschluß  
unendlich zärtlich. Hier ist alles Abstand,  
[50] und dort wars Atem. Nach der ersten Heimat  
ist ihm die zweite zwitterig und windig.

O Seligkeit der *kleinen* Kreatur,  
die immer *bleibt* im Schooße, der sie austrug;  
o Glück der Mücke, die noch *innen* hüpft,

an oversight . . . but no one gets past  
the other, and the world returns again.  
Always facing creation, all we see  
is the reflection of the free and open [30]  
that we've darkened, or some mute animal  
raising its calm eyes and seeing through us,  
and through us. This is destiny: to be opposites,  
always, and nothing else but opposites.

If this sure animal approaching us [35]  
from a different direction had our kind  
of consciousness, he'd drag us around  
in his wake. But to the animal, his being  
is infinite, incomprehensible, and blind  
to his condition, pure, like his outward gaze. [40]  
And where we see the future, he sees  
all, himself in all, and whole forever.

And yet the weight and care of one great sadness  
lies on this warm and watching creature.  
Because what often overwhelms us [45]  
also clings to him — the memory  
that what we so strive for now may have been  
nearer, truer, and its attachment to us  
infinitely tender, once. Here all is distance,  
there it was breath. After that first home, [50]  
the second seems drafty and a hybrid.

Oh, blessed are the tiny creatures  
who stay in the womb that bore them forever;  
oh the joy of the gnat that can still leap *within*,

- [55] selbst wenn sie Hochzeit hat: denn Schooß ist Alles.  
Und sieh die halbe Sicherheit des Vogels,  
der beinah beides weiß aus seinem Ursprung,  
als wär er eine Seele der Etrusker,  
aus einem Toten, den ein Raum empfang,  
[60] doch mit der ruhenden Figur als Deckel.  
Und wie bestürzt ist eins, das fliegen muß  
und stammt aus einem Schooß. Wie vor sich selbst  
erschreckt, durchzuckts die Luft, wie wenn ein Sprung  
durch eine Tasse geht. So reißt die Spur  
[65] der Fledermaus durchs Porzellan des Abends.

Und wir: Zuschauer, immer, überall,  
dem allen zugewandt und nie hinaus!  
Uns überfüllts. Wir ordnens. Es zerfällt.  
Wir ordnens wieder und zerfallen selbst.

- [70] Wer hat uns also umgedreht, daß wir,  
was wir auch tun, in jener Haltung sind  
von einem, welcher fortgeht? Wie er auf  
dem letzten Hügel, der ihm ganz sein Tal  
noch einmal zeigt, sich wendet, anhält, weilt — ,  
[75] so leben wir und nehmen immer Abschied.

even on its wedding day; for the womb is all! [55]

And look at the half-certainty of the bird  
almost aware of both from birth,  
like one of the Etruscan souls rising  
from the dead man enclosed inside the space  
for which his reclining figure forms a lid. [60]

And how confused is anything that comes  
from a womb and has to fly. As if afraid  
of itself, it darts through the air  
like a crack through a cup, the way a wing  
of a bat crazes the porcelain of night. [65]

And we: spectators, always, everywhere,  
looking *at* everything and never *from*!  
It floods us. We arrange it. It decays.  
We arrange it again, and we decay.

Who's turned us around like this, [70]  
so that whatever we do, we always have  
the look of someone going away? Just as a man  
on the last hill showing him his whole valley  
one last time, turns, and stops, and lingers —  
so we live, and are forever leaving. [75]

DIE NEUNTE ELEGIE

Warum, wenn es angeht, also die Frist des Daseins  
hinzubringen, als Lorbeer, ein wenig dunkler als alles  
andere Grün, mit kleinen Wellen an jedem  
Blattrand (wie eines Windes Lächeln) — : warum dann  
[5] Menschliches müssen — und, Schicksal vermeidend,  
sich sehnen nach Schicksal? . . .

Oh, *nicht*, weil Glück *ist*,  
dieser voreilige Vorteil eines nahen Verlusts.  
Nicht aus Neugier, oder zur Übung des Herzens,  
[10] das auch im Lorbeer *wäre* . . .

Aber weil Hiersein viel ist, und weil uns scheinbar  
alles das Hiesige braucht, dieses Schwindende, das  
seltsam uns angeht. Uns, die Schwindendsten. *Ein Mal*  
jedes, nur *ein Mal*. *Ein Mal* und nichtmehr. Und wir auch  
[15] *ein Mal*. Nie wieder. Aber dieses  
*ein Mal* gewesen zu sein, wenn auch nur *ein Mal*:  
*irdisch* gewesen zu sein, scheint nicht widerrufbar.

Und so drängen wir uns und wollen es leisten,  
wollens enthalten in unsern einfachen Händen,  
[20] im überfüllteren Blick und im sprachlosen Herzen.  
Wollen es werden. — Wem es geben? Am liebsten  
alles behalten für immer . . . Ach, in den andern Bezug,  
wehe, was nimmt man hinüber? Nicht das Anschauen, das  
hier

THE NINTH ELEGY

Why, when this short span of being could be spent  
like the laurel, a little darker than all  
the other green, the edge of each leaf fluted  
with small waves (like the wind's smile) — why,  
then, do we have to be human and, avoiding fate, [5]  
long for fate?

Oh, not because happiness,  
that quick profit of impending loss, really exists.  
Not out of curiosity, not just to exercise the heart  
— that could be in the laurel, too . . . [10]

But because being here means so much, and because all  
that's here, vanishing so quickly, seems to need us  
and strangely concerns us. Us, to the first to vanish.  
*Once* each, only *once*. *Once* and no more. And us too,  
*once*. Never again. But to have been [15]  
*once*, even if only *once*,  
to have been on *earth* just *once* — that's irrevocable.

And so we keep on going and try to realize it,  
try to hold it in our simple hands, in  
our overcrowded eyes, and in our speechless heart. [20]  
Try to become it. To give it to whom? We'd rather  
keep all of it forever . . . Ah, but what can we take across  
into that other realm? Not the power to see we've learned

- langsam erlernte, und kein hier Ereignetes. Keins.
- [25] Also die Schmerzen. Also vor allem das Schwersein,  
also der Liebe lange Erfahrung, — also  
lauter Unsägliches. Aber später,  
unter den Sternen, was solls: *die* sind *besser* unsäglich.  
Bringt doch der Wanderer auch vom Hange des Bergrands
- [30] nicht eine Hand voll Erde ins Tal, die Allen unsäglich,  
sondern  
ein erworbenes Wort, reines, den gelben und blaun  
Enzian. Sind wir vielleicht *hier*, um zu sagen: Haus,  
Brücke, Brunnen, Tor, Krug, Obstbaum, Fenster, —  
höchstens: Säule, Turm . . . aber zu *sagen*, verstehs,
- [35] oh zu sagen *so*, wie selber die Dinge niemals  
innig meinten zu sein. Ist nicht die heimliche List  
dieser verschwiegenen Erde, wenn sie die Liebenden  
drängt,  
daß sich in ihrem Gefühl jedes und jedes entzückt?  
Schwelle: was ists für zwei
- [40] Liebende, daß sie die eigne ältere Schwelle der Tür  
ein wenig verbrauchen, auch sie, nach den vielen vorher  
und vor den künftigen . . . , leicht.
- Hier* ist des *Säglichen* Zeit, *hier* seine Heimat.  
Sprich und bekenn. Mehr als je
- [45] fallen die Dinge dahin, die erlebbaren, denn,  
was sie verdrängend ersetzt, ist ein Tun ohne Bild.  
Tun unter Krusten, die willig zerspringen, sobald  
innen das Handeln entwächst und sich anders begrenzt.  
Zwischen den Hämmern besteht
- [50] unser Herz, wie die Zunge

so slowly here, and nothing that's happened here.  
Nothing. And so, the pain; above all, the hard [25]  
work of living; the long experience of love —  
those purely unspeakable things. But later,  
under the stars, what then? That's better left unsaid.  
For the wanderer doesn't bring a handful of that  
unutterable earth from the mountainside down to the valley, [30]  
but only some word he's earned, a pure word, the yellow  
and blue gentian. Maybe we're here only to say: *house,*  
*bridge, well, gate, jug, olive tree, window* —  
at most, *pillar, tower* . . . but to say them, remember, [35]  
oh, to say them in a way that the things themselves  
never dreamed of existing so intensely. When this silent  
earth urges lovers on, isn't it her secret reason  
to make everything shudder with ecstasy in them?  
Doorsill: how much it means to a pair of lovers  
to wear down the sill of their own [40]  
door a little more, them too, after so many  
before them, and before all those to come . . . gently.

*This* is the time for what can be said. *Here*  
is its country. Speak and testify. The things  
we can live with are falling away more [45]  
than ever, replaced by an act without symbol.  
An act under crusts that will easily rip  
as soon as the energy inside outgrows  
them and seeks new limits.  
Our heart survives between [50]



zwischen den Zähnen, die doch,  
dennoch, die preisende bleibt.

- Preise dem Engel die Welt, nicht die unsägliche, *ihm*  
kannst du nicht großtun mit herrlich Erfühltem; im Weltall,  
[55] wo er fühlender fühlt, bist du ein Neuling. Drum zeig  
ihm das Einfache, das, von Geschlecht zu Geschlechtern  
gestaltet,  
als ein Unsriges lebt, neben der Hand und im Blick.  
Sag ihm die Dinge. Er wird staunender stehn; wie du  
standest  
bei dem Seiler in Rom, oder beim Töpfer am Nil.  
[60] Zeig ihm, wie glücklich ein Ding sein kann, wie schuldlos  
und unser,  
wie selbst das klagende Leid rein zur Gestalt sich  
entschließt,  
dient als ein Ding, oder stirbt in ein Ding —, und jenseits  
selig der Geige entgeht. — Und diese, von Hingang  
lebenden Dinge verstehn, daß du sie rühmst; vergänglich,  
[65] traun sie ein Rettendes uns, den Vergänglichsten, zu.  
Wollen, wir sollen sie ganz im unsichtbarn Herzen  
verwandeln  
in — o unendlich — in uns! Wer wir am Ende auch seien.

- Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst: *unsichtbar*  
in uns erstehn? — Ist es dein Traum nicht,  
[70] einmal unsichtbar zu sein? — Erde! unsichtbar!  
Was, wenn Verwandlung nicht, ist dein drängender  
Auftrag?  
Erde, du liebe, ich will. Oh glaub, es bedürfte

hammers, just as the tongue between  
the teeth is still able to praise.

Praise the world to the angel, not what can't be talked  
about.

You can't impress him with your grand emotions. In the  
cosmos  
where he so intensely feels, you're just a novice. So show [55]  
him some simple thing shaped for generation after  
generation

until it lives in our hands and in our eyes, and it's ours.  
Tell him about things. He'll stand amazed, just as you did  
beside the ropemaker in Rome or the potter on the Nile.  
Show him how happy a thing can be, how innocent and  
ours; [60]

how even grief's lament purely determines its own shape,  
serves as a thing, or dies in a thing — and escapes  
in ecstasy beyond the violin. And these things, whose lives  
are lived in leaving — they understand when you praise  
them.

Perishing, they turn to us, the most perishable, for help. [65]  
They want us to change them completely in our invisible  
hearts,  
oh — forever — into us! Whoever we finally may be.

Earth, isn't this what you want: to resurrect  
in us invisibly? Isn't it your dream  
to be invisible one day? Earth! Invisible! [70]  
What's your urgent charge, if not transformation?  
Earth, my love, I will. Oh, believe me, you don't

nicht deiner Frühlinge mehr, mich dir zu gewinnen —,  
*einer,*  
ach, ein einziger ist schon dem Blute zu viel.

[75] Namenlos bin ich zu dir entschlossen, von weit her.  
Immer warst du im Recht, und dein heiliger Einfall  
ist der vertrauliche Tod.

Siehe, ich lebe. Woraus? Weder Kindheit noch Zukunft  
werden weniger . . . Überzähliges Dasein  
[80] entspringt mir im Herzen.

\*

need your Springs to win me anymore — *one*,  
oh, one's already too much for my blood.  
I'm silently determined to be yours, from now on. [75]  
You were always right, and your most sacred  
idea is death, that intimate friend.

Look, I'm alive. On what? Neither childhood nor  
the future grows less . . . More being than I'll ever  
need springs up in my heart. [80]

\*

DIE ZEHNTE ELEGIE

- Dass ich dereinst, an dem Ausgang der grimmigen Einsicht,  
Jubel und Ruhm aufsinge zustimmenden Engeln.  
Daß von den klar geschlagenen Hämmern des Herzens  
keiner versage an weichen, zweifelnden oder  
[5] reißenden Saiten. Daß mich mein strömendes Antlitz  
glänzender mache; daß das unscheinbare Weinen  
blühe. O wie werdet ihr dann, Nächte, mir lieb sein,  
gehärmt. Daß ich euch knieender nicht, untröstliche  
Schwestern,  
hinnahm, nicht in euer gelöstes  
[10] Haar mich gelöster ergab. Wir, Vergeuder der Schmerzen.  
Wie wir sie absehn voraus, in die traurige Dauer,  
ob sie nicht enden vielleicht. Sie aber sind ja  
unser winterwähriges Laub, unser dunkles Sinngrün,  
*eine* der Zeiten des heimlichen Jahres —, nicht nur  
[15] Zeit —, sind Stelle, Siedelung, Lager, Boden, Wohnort.
- Freilich, wehe, wie fremd sind die Gassen der Leid-Stadt,  
wo in der falschen, aus Übertönung gemachten  
Stille, stark, aus der Gußform des Leeren der Ausguß  
prahlt: der vergoldete Lärm, das platzende Denkmal.  
[20] O, wie spurlos zerträte ein Engel ihnen den Trostmarkt,  
den die Kirche begrenzt, ihre fertig gekaufte:  
reinlich und zu und enttäuscht wie ein Postamt am  
Sonntag,  
Draußen aber kräuseln sich immer die Ränder von  
Jahrmarkt.

THE TENTH ELEGY

One day, when this terrifying vision's vanished,  
let me sing ecstatic praise to angels saying yes!  
Let my heart's clear-struck keys ring and not one  
fail because of a doubting, slack, or breaking string.  
Let my streaming face make me more radiant, [5]  
my tiny tears bloom. And then how dear  
you'll be to me, you nights of anguish.  
Sisters of despair, why didn't I kneel lower  
to receive you, surrender myself more loosely  
into your flowing hair. We waste our sufferings. [10]  
We stare into that boring endurance beyond them  
looking for their end. But they're nothing more  
than our winter trees, our dark evergreen, one  
of the seasons in our secret years — not just a season,  
but a place, a settlement, a camp, soil, a home. [15]

But, oh, how strange the streets of the City of Pain  
really are. In the seeming silence of noise against noise,  
violent, like something cast from a mold of the Void,  
the glittering confusion, the collapsing monument swaggers.  
Oh, how an angel could stamp out their market of comforts, [20]  
with the church nearby, bought ready-made, clean,  
shut, and disappointed as a post office on Sunday.  
But on the outskirts there's always the fair's spinning rim.

- Schaukeln der Freiheit! Taucher und Gaukler des Eifers!
- [25] Und des behübschten Glücks figürliche Schießstatt,  
wo es zappelt von Ziel und sich blechern benimmt,  
wenn ein Geschickterer trifft. Von Beifall zu Zufall  
taumelt er weiter; denn Buden jeglicher Neugier  
werben, trommeln und plärren. Für Erwachsene aber
- [30] ist noch besonders zu sehn, wie das Geld sich vermehrt,  
anatomisch,  
nicht zur Belustigung nur: der Geschlechtsteil des Gelds,  
alles, das Ganze, der Vorgang —, das unterrichtet und  
macht  
fruchtbar . . .  
. . . Oh aber gleich darüber hinaus,
- [35] hinter der letzten Planke, beklebt mit Plakaten des  
»Todlos«,  
jenes bitteren Biers, das den Trinkenden süß scheint,  
wenn sie immer dazu frische Zerstreuungen kaun . . . ,  
gleich im Rücken der Planke, gleich dahinter, ists  
*wirklich*.
- Kinder spielen, und Liebende halten einander, — abseits,
- [40] ernst, im ärmlichen Gras, und Hunde haben Natur.  
Weiter noch zieht es den Jüngling; vielleicht, daß er eine  
junge  
Klage liebt . . . Hinter ihr her kommt er in Wiesen. Sie  
sagt:  
— Weit. Wir wohnen dort draußen . . .  
Wo? Und der Jüngling
- [45] folgt. Ihn rührt ihre Haltung. Die Schulter, der Hals —,  
vielleicht  
ist sie von herrlicher Herkunft. Aber er läßt sie, kehrt um

Swings of freedom! High-divers and jugglers of excitement!  
And the lifelike shooting galleries of garish luck: [25]  
targets tumbling off the rack to the ring of tin  
when a good-shot hits one. He reels through applause  
toward more luck; booths that can tempt the queerest  
tastes are drumming and barking. For adults only  
there's something special to see: coins copulating, [30]  
not just acting, but actually, their gold genitals, every  
thing, the whole operation — educational and guaranteed  
to arouse you . . .

Oh, but just outside, behind  
the last billboards plastered with posters of "Deathless," [35]  
the bitter beer so sweet to those who drink it  
while chewing on plenty of fresh distractions —  
just behind the billboards, right behind them, the *real*.  
Children are playing, to one side lovers are holding each  
other,  
earnest in the thinning grass, and dogs are doing nature's  
bidding. [40]  
The young man walks farther on. Maybe he's in love with  
a young  
Lament . . . He follows her into the fields. She says:  
"It's far. We live out there."

Where? And the young man  
follows. He's moved by her ways: her shoulders, her  
neck — [45]  
maybe she comes from a noble family. But he leaves her,  
turns back,



wendet sich, winkt . . . Was solls? Sie ist eine Klage.

Nur die jungen Toten, im ersten Zustand  
zeitlosen Gleichmuts, dem der Entwöhnung,  
[50] folgen ihr liebend. Mädchen  
wartet sie ab und befreundet sie. Zeigt ihnen leise,  
was sie an sich hat. Perlen des Leids und die feinen  
Schleier der Duldung. — Mit Jünglingen geht sie  
schweigend.

[55] Aber dort, wo sie wohnen, im Tal, der Älteren eine, der  
Klagen,  
nimmt sich des Jünglinges an, wenn er fragt: — Wir  
waren,  
sagt sie, ein Großes Geschlecht, einmal, wir Klagen. Die  
Väter  
trieben den Bergbau dort in dem großen Gebirg; bei  
Menschen  
findest du manchmal ein Stück geschliffenes Ur-Leid  
[60] oder, aus altem Vulkan, schlackig versteinerten Zorn.  
Ja, das stammte von dort. Einst waren wir reich. —

Und sie leitet ihn leicht durch die weite Landschaft der  
Klagen,  
zeigt ihm die Säulen der Tempel oder die Trümmer  
jener Burgen, von wo Klage-Fürsten das Land  
[65] einstens weise beherrscht. Zeigt ihm die hohen  
Tränenbäume und Felder blühender Wehmut,  
(Lebendige kennen sie nur als sanftes Blattwerk);  
zeigt ihm die Tiere der Trauer, weidend, — und manchmal

looks around, waves . . . What's the use? She's only a  
Lament.

Only those who die young, those in their first  
moments of timeless serenity, just being weaned,  
follow her lovingly. She waits for girls [50]  
and befriends them. Gently she shows them  
what she's wearing: pearls of pain  
and the fine-spun veils of patience.  
With young men she walks silently.

But there, in the valley where they live, one of the older [55]  
Laments listens to the young man's questions. She says:  
"We were a great clan, once, we Laments. Our fathers  
worked the mines in that mountain range. Sometimes  
you'll find a polished lump of ancient sorrow among men,  
or petrified rage from the slag of some old volcano. [60]  
Yes, that came from there. We used to be rich."

And she gently guides him through the immense Land  
of Lamentation, showing him columns of temples or ruins  
of the castles where the Lords of Lament wisely ruled [65]  
the country long ago. She shows him the tall trees  
of tears, the flowering fields of sadness  
(the living know them only as tender leaves);  
she shows him herds of pasturing grief; and sometimes

schreckt ein Vogel und zieht, flach ihnen fliegend durchs  
Aufschaun,

[70] weithin das schriftliche Bild seines vereinsamten  
Schreis. —

Abends führt sie ihn hin zu den Gräbern der Alten  
aus dem Klage-Geschlecht, den Sibyllen und Warn-Herrn.  
Naht aber Nacht, so wandeln sie leiser, und bald  
mondets empor, das über Alles

[75] wachende Grab-Mal. Brüderlich jenem am Nil,  
der erhabene Sphinx — : der verschwiegenen Kammer  
Antlitz.

Und sie staunen dem krönlichen Haupt, das für immer,  
schweigend, der Menschen Gesicht

[80] auf die Waage der Sterne gelegt.

Nicht erfaßt es sein Blick, im Frühtod  
schwindelnd. Aber ihr Schaun,  
hinter dem Pschent-Rand hervor, scheucht es die Eule.

Und sie,  
streifend im langsamen Abstrich die Wange entlang,  
[85] jene der reifsten Rundung,  
zeichnet weich in das neue  
Totengehör, über ein doppelt  
aufgeschlagenes Blatt, den unbeschreiblichen Umriß.

Und höher, die Sterne. Neue. Die Sterne des Leidlands.  
[90] Langsam nennt sie die Klage: — Hier,  
siehe: den *Reiter*, den *Stab*, und das vollere Sternbild  
nennen sie: *Fruchtkranz*. Dann, weiter, dem Pol zu:  
*Wiege; Weg; Das Brennende Buch; Puppe; Fenster*.

a frightened bird flying across their line of vision  
scrawls the huge glyph of its desolate cry. [70]

In the evening she leads him to the grave of the elders,  
the sybils and prophets of the House of Lamentation.  
But as night comes on, they walk more slowly, and soon  
the tomb that watches over all rises bright  
as moonlight; brother to the one on the Nile, [75]

the stupendous Sphinx: the secret chamber's face.  
And they're stunned by the crowned head  
that has silently poised  
the features of man  
on the scale of stars forever. [80]

Still dizzy from just having died, his look  
can't take it in. But hers frightens  
an owl from behind the double crown's rim.  
And with slow, skimming strokes, the bird brushes  
the cheek, the one with the fullest curve; [85]  
and on the dead's newborn hearing,  
as on facing pages of an opened book,  
he faintly traces the indescribable outline.

And higher, the stars. New ones. Stars of the Land  
of Grief. The Lament slowly names them: "Look, there: [90]  
the *Rider*, the *Staff*, and they call that bigger  
constellation *Garland of Fruit*. Then farther toward  
the Pole: *Cradle*, *Road*, *The Burning Book*, *Doll*, *Window*.

- [95] Aber im südlichen Himmel, rein wie im Innern  
einer gesegneten Hand, das klar erglänzende »M«,  
das die Mütter bedeutet . . . —

Doch der Tote muß fort, und schweigend bringt ihn die  
ältere

- Klage bis an die Talschlucht,  
wo es schimmert im Mondschein:  
[100] die Quelle der Freude. In Ehrfurcht  
nennt sie sie, sagt: — Bei den Menschen  
ist sie ein tragender Strom. —  
Stehn am Fuß des Gebirgs.  
Und da umarmt sie ihn, weinend.

- [105] Einsam steigt er dahin, in die Berge des Ur-Leids.  
Und nicht einmal sein Schritt klingt aus dem tonlosen Los.

- Aber erweckten sie uns, die unendlich Toten, ein Gleichnis,  
siehe, sie zeigten vielleicht auf die Kätzchen der leeren  
Hasel, die hängenden, oder  
[110] meinten den Regen, der fällt auf dunkles Erdreich im  
Frühjahr. —

- Und wir, die an *steigendes* Glück  
denken, empfanden die Rührung,  
die uns beinah bestürzt,  
[114] wenn ein Glückliches *fällt*.

But in the southern sky, pure as the palm  
of a consecrated hand, the bright shining *M* — [95]  
that stands for Mothers . . .”

But the dead must go on, and silently  
the old Lament brings him as far as  
the gorge, where it shines in moonlight:  
the source of joy. Naming it [100]  
reverently, she says: “It is  
an enduring stream among men.”  
They stand at the foot of the mountains.  
And there she embraces him, weeping.

He climbs the mountains of primal pain alone. [105]  
And not once does his step ring from that mute fate.

Yet, if those forever dead were waking an image  
in us, look, they might point to the catkins  
hanging from the empty hazels, or maybe mean  
the rain falling on the dark earth in early spring. [110]

And we, who have always thought of joy  
as *rising*, would feel the emotion  
that almost amazes us  
when a happy thing *falls*. [114]