

*Perilous  
balance*

POEMS BY ARNOLD STEIN

## Perilous Balance

*If I stay man and keep the perilous balance  
Of a man, I shall remember through the storms  
Of hate and steel that they are the passing dream  
Of life, not life . . .*

*This page intentionally left blank*

POEMS BY ARNOLD STEIN

Perilous  
balance

University of Minnesota Press, *Minneapolis*

1945

*Copyright 1945 by the*  
**UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA**

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the publisher. Permission is hereby granted to reviewers to quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a magazine or newspaper.

*Printed at the Lund Press, Inc., Minneapolis*



**For Bess**

# Table of Contents

- SINGLE BED MADE IN THE U.S.A., 1937, *page 1*
- CONSOLATION TO A WOMAN WHOSE INFANT HAS  
BEEN DEVOURED BY THE FIERCEST OF JUNGLE  
ANIMALS, *page 2*
- GRACE, *page 3*
- SOME DOGS AND I, *page 4*
- SPRING: 1942, *page 5*
- THE APPLE RIVER CANYON, *page 6*
- NIGHT BOMBERS, *page 7*
- TO MY SISTER, *page 8*
- TO BESS, *page 9*
- REMEMBER, LOVE? *page 10*
- GOODBYE, *page 11*
- WINONA HILLS IN DECEMBER, *page 12*
- REFLECTION IN THE MIDST OF WAR, *page 13*
- LOVE IN APRIL, *page 15*
- FOR THE SECOND JUNE 20TH, *page 16*
- SMALL AND ORDINARY, *page 17*
- A SOLDIER TO HIS WIFE, *page 20*
- SLEEP. AND WAKE. *page 21*
- DEATH OF A HERO, *page 22*
- ESTHETICS, *page 29*

PITY THE POOR SOLDIER . . . *page 31*  
EASTER AT CASSINO: THE 1944TH YEAR, *page 32*  
ARTILLERY MANEUVERS: JUNE DAY, *page 33*  
SOLDIER'S DAWN, *page 34*  
THAT HAS BEEN THE POEM, *page 35*  
SEPTEMBER FURLOUGH, *page 36*  
SWEETEST LOVE . . . *page 37*  
THE TIDE, *page 38*  
LETTER IN WARTIME, *page 39*  
SONS OF MAN, *page 41*  
FEBRUARY SPRING, *page 42*  
A THING OF BEAUTY, *page 43*  
CONSIDER THE RHINE, *page 44*  
THE WORLD'S THINGS LIVE AND HUNGER,  
*page 46*  
MONOLOGUE IN NÜRNBERG, *page 48*



*This page intentionally left blank*

## Single Bed Made in the U.S.A., 1937

In my comfortable bed  
I lie with armies of the dead:  
Those who fresh today were slain  
And come, still warm, from sunny Spain,  
Thousands of them, and increased  
By newly slaughtered from the East.  
There we are; and how it's done  
In a bed that's built for one  
I cannot say; but certainly  
There's precious little sleep for me.  
And so I am a bit severe:  
"You have no business over here,"  
I say. But there's no answer, none,  
In a bed that's built for one.  
They only lie and bleed a bit  
From the places they were hit.  
"I'm short of sympathy," say I.  
"Go back, please, where you ought to lie,  
The other side of all those waves,  
And occupy your private graves  
And let me sleep; I cannot care  
For woes that happen everywhere."  
And this is true; but certainly  
There's precious little sleep for me.

Consolation to a woman whose infant  
has been devoured by the fiercest  
of jungle animals

Chinese mother, do not weep.

He could not help but eat your child.

A tiger's stomach is so deep

It is no wonder if he's wild.

In his environment, the beast

Has had no social education.

He's had no teacher nor a priest,

But just his natural vocation.

And this it seems is but to eat,

And quite as often as he can.

He's learned no other use for meat.

He has not been to school with man.

*1939*

## Grace

“Lord bless our bread and all the rest  
And those who are not so well blessed,”  
My father says, and then we reach  
To take our soup spoons and we each  
Amen out loud and, as they say,  
We clear our throats. With this away  
We spoon unspeaking through the soup:  
Strange little circles in a group:  
The radius of every soul  
Within the compass of a bowl.  
My father leads by half a lap,  
Having increased the handicap  
Of filial amens, and thus  
Can spare the breath to speak for us.  
“O Lord,” he says, “with how much ease  
We can forget the poor Chinese,  
The Poles, the French, and all the rest  
Of those who are not so well blessed!  
So confident an appetite,  
O Lord, we know it is not right  
To have. And yet a man must eat.”  
And then my mother brings the meat.

*1940*

## Some Dogs and I

The tourniquets of pride loosened release  
    The choking seal.  
The pain sweeps in upon a flood of peace,  
    For I can feel.  
Think of the shivering miserable freight  
    You saw tonight:  
The long-eared hounds, each in a narrow crate,  
    Sickened with fright,  
Hunger and filth and cringing hopelessness,  
    Blinking and dumb.  
But dogs and I are sturdy flesh, ah yes,  
    And more's to come.  
Outside these crushing bars the world's the same,  
    Nor will it change.  
And we, oh yet, shall scour the brush for game,  
    Eagerly range  
With undiminished thoughtlessness and pace,  
    And bay the moon,  
And sing through every minute of the chase,  
    And soon, and soon.

## Spring: 1942

The fields are filled with the sounds of spring.

    The spring is early this year,  
And the warm winds promising  
    Have summoned the music here.

The liquid whistlings lift and fall  
    And cross; every note is clear  
And proud in the harmony of all.  
    The spring is early this year.

The roots of man begin to stir.  
    The spring is early this year.  
And the silent tug of things that were  
    Meets the wrench of things that are near.

The world of man cannot pause for breath  
    Nor listen for what it can hear.  
Great armies gird themselves for death.  
    The spring is early this year.

## The Apple River Canyon

The river sang with hushed unwearied tones  
The music of its same low quiet notes  
In working through a hundred feet of rock.  
Above, where once had been the river's edge,  
Amid last autumn's leaves, awaiting sleep,  
I thought of music along other streams:  
The sudden roars, too loud to comprehend  
As sounds, possible only to remember  
As numbing pressure on the flesh and nerves,  
One crushing grip; and in the interval  
Some lesser roars, and whining grinding sounds  
Of active steel; and the flat toneless notes  
Of the swift casual bullets: suddenly,  
The crushing grip again. Some felt, forgetting,  
And would not feel the next. But friends and lovers,  
Thousands of miles away, would see the flash,  
And feel the sudden blinding numbing roar:  
But once: incomprehensible: only  
To be endured, along with lesser things.

“Oh music tireless in the night, for us  
What will it be, oh what for us who tire?”  
The river sang with hushed unwearied tones  
The music of its same low quiet notes  
In working through a hundred feet of rock.

## Night Bombers

Into the night they spring, graceful and sure:  
Concerted thunder draws them driving through  
The beaten passageways of air and cloud  
Steadily forward, buoyant on the currents  
But little yielding, grim, controlling power  
To sing straight on with yet unopened ranges,  
A lower-higher-louder-growing chord  
Of straining metal and explosive thrusting  
Apart the twisted fingers of the wind:  
Onward, a flight of little worlds through space,  
Beautiful man-made worlds, onward unsouled.



## To My Sister

Not these alone: the bond between us needs  
No strengthening by word or gift. It is  
A thing of love, earthy and sure, and yet  
Mysterious.

I shall be there within a phrase of music,  
A line of verse, an eager leap of rhythm;  
And you will see me in a color.

Something about the wind, the scents it carries,  
The way it pulls your hair, its far-off voice,  
Mocking, aloof, and yet not so, not so.

Whatever warms your blood in thoughtless love  
Towards fellow creature sharing in the tears  
And laughter of this brave hopeless adventure:  
I shall be there with you, a part of you,  
And of the beauty of the world and man.

## To Bess

No fall of tears, no sigh;  
We kiss and say goodbye  
Cleanly and well.  
And there is nothing in the touch  
Nor in the eye  
To show how fiercely and how much  
Squeezed hearts can swell.

The wheels turn and we tear  
In two the roots we share.  
We have no hands:  
We are but ghosts, torn off from sense,  
Moved by the bare  
Spirit of love, sure and intense,  
By thin strong strands.

*Boston South Station  
June 26, 1942*

## Remember, love?

*Remember, love, how we would lie awake  
All sense a night like this? Remember, love?*

Listen: the rush of wind, of rain: they sing.  
Millions of little notes ripple through air;  
Millions of pearls upon a broken string  
Slip through the darkness down in streams and bear  
A music for the earth. To breathe, to hear —  
It is to live now: to have the sense of wood,  
Of green, of earth, of stone; to know the clear  
Wet night; to know that living things are good.

# Goodbye

## I

Mother!—Mother!—In the dark groping—Mother!  
Reach through! Reach through alone! I cannot help,  
As you once helped *me* struggling for the light:  
Helpless the gift of bone, of nerve, of muscle,  
The subtleties of mind, of sense, of heart:  
They cannot reach the swimmer struggling up  
Alone through the weight of gray-green water up,  
Lungs bursting for the world of air and light,  
Alone, alone.

Look up! The loving hands  
That strain blindly into the night for you,  
They are your son's, look up!

Back, back into the night of endless nothing  
Gone.

And the day, again, is not for you.

## II

But there, between two struggles— one to reach,  
One to return— are the good long years of light:  
When you were nerved and strung and keyed for doing,  
A child intent upon the thing in hand;  
When you, rejoicing in your fine mad ways,  
Converted time upon the clock to living,  
Knit minutes into years— a bright brave pattern!

Oh it will ease the empty days to come,  
The strange new speaking silence of the house,  
To know that life was dear to you, and that  
The stir of things made music in your soul.  
Oh it was good!— the ache, the rapture, and  
A million daily humdrum things to do.

July 1942

## Winona Hills in December

These are the hills that we have seen together:  
The warm sun beating upon the brown of rocks,  
The green of trees; catching the thin bright colors  
Clearly, intensely, singly; making the depth  
Of darker colors glow and expand — in the eye,  
In the heart. These are the hills.

Oh we were quick to see the beautiful,  
To share as only lovers can its warmth.  
It was our day, the rhythm of our lives  
Keyed for a world of seconds, and for us  
Our grain of time was vast eternity.  
The cool swim underneath our hills, our sky,  
The long drink at the pump. Creatures of sense  
We were, and happily.

These are the hills: dull gray against the gray  
Of heavy winter sky, against the gray  
That is within me now — no brief retreat  
Ready to spring again in color at a touch  
Of warmth. Oh thoughtless patient hills, I see  
Myself; I never have seen you; the season  
Is nothing: you would be beautiful again  
If we again were setting out.

## Reflection in the Midst of War

It is the wind, it cannot reach me, the wind  
Blindly hurtling past roof and side and corner,  
Searching, driving the needles of the hail.  
I hear and shiver, safe  
In an ecstasy of warmth. It cannot reach me.

My little world is here, within the house,  
Within these arms that hold me now, within  
The love that strengthens and secures against  
The storms that sweep the earth.  
There have been nights I have awakened, warm  
In a cold world, peaceful amidst the agony  
Reaching out from beyond the barriers of  
Your love; and I, unthinking, have moved closer,  
Have held you, small and soft in my arms, have held you  
And felt the strength and comfort that are in you.

And I have thought: I am a man and men  
Suffer tonight. How can I lie here thus?  
Millions, cut from themselves, have lingered floating  
In the vast solitude of pain, and quietly  
Let drop like ebbing blood their joys and fears,  
Their memories and hopes, unfelt, unmissed.

I am a man and men suffer as always,  
But not enough to choke the good from life.  
It does not need a war to make men hurt  
Or to make those unhurt quiver in joy  
To feel in their veins the singing of the blood.  
And life is dear to those who run the human risk.

This upstart moral sense that drives me forth  
Against my will has fixed its roots in me.  
Yet there are deeper roots: man's ancient duty —  
It cuts across all codes — to rejoice at life.  
Let those who write the peace remember this.  
The soldier safely coming through the steel  
Remembers, nor did he ever quite forget.

My turn will come. I will not be less brave  
Than they who struggle in the dark tonight.  
If I stay man and keep the perilous balance  
Of a man, I shall remember through the storms  
Of hate and steel that they are the passing dream  
Of life, not life; that they are the reverence  
Man pays to man, not life. For the joy of life  
Endures the storm, is present in the storm  
To him who knows. This world is my pasture,  
I shall not want.

*April 1943*

## Love in April

We drift off slowly into yielding shadows  
That close upon the shores grown dim and silent,  
And we are drawn from the weight of world and self.  
I float on the quiet movements of your breath  
In gentle rocking waves upon the stream  
Of sleep: a child suspended on the tide  
Of peace: a man aware of tides, aware  
And blessed beyond a child, knowing my gift.



## For the Second June 20th

The fine line of your chin; your mouth; the hair  
Playful upon your forehead; the look that glows  
Within your eyes when — I can remember these,  
Singly. I have no power to summon them  
Together, an image for the mind to hold  
Unwavering while the heart draws strength and sweetness.  
The mind blurs like eyes straining into the wind.  
Thought will not hold it still: the image trembles.

The senses have no senses of their own  
And no intelligence outside themselves.  
Their beauty is in movement, like a stream  
That curls into a waiting reservoir.

And so it is, remembering other things:  
I cannot hear the velvet of your voice,  
Nor feel the warm firm pressure of your hand.  
Yet I remember how my heart has stirred,  
At your hand, your voice, as my heart stirs now, and spreads  
The memory of your presence through my being.

The incommunicable image of you  
Pulsates within me — articulate within me.

## Small and Ordinary

The men were prisoners; you didn't need  
To see the guard, or the hip weighted with  
The forty-five. They worked like men with hopes  
Deferred, as if their bodies had been sentenced  
And their souls held in keeping till their discharge.  
Scraping of feet, of boxes, on the wharf;  
No other sound. You even felt the men  
Were silent inside. The corporal of the guard  
Stood by, quick soul chafing against the weight  
Of the slow hours retreating towards dinner.  
He yawned, stretching, then passed his right hand  
down

Softly over the roughened wood of the grip,  
Over the length of the heavy leather holster,  
To scratch his thigh. Looked at his watch, grunted,  
Drew in a breath sharply, held it,  
And yelled: "Come on, get a move on, you men.  
Step on it now. We haven't got all day."  
No one looked up or changed a rhythm. The guard  
Looked off vaguely, his thoughts moving with the  
water

Nowhere and back and about. One of the men  
Put down what he was carrying and stood  
Looking at it. A small man, ordinary.  
He wheeled and threw himself over the wharf.  
There was no sound until he hit the water,  
Hard, with the splash of a great struggling fish.  
The guard came running, automatic out  
And cocked. He was an Expert; he liked to shoot.  
He'd tell the prisoners the scores he'd made.  
He waved the other men off to one side,  
Where they stood quietly staring at the river.

At first there was no sign; then there he was,  
A dark head turned away, with the look somehow  
Of finality. He wasn't coming back.  
"Come back," the guard shouted. "You goddam fool,  
You haven't got a chance." And then he fired,  
Carefully aiming ahead. The gun roared,  
Echoing with a long flat sound as the slug  
Opened a round menacing hole in the water,  
Six inches from the head, which jerked away  
Not to pass over the hole still gaping there.  
Another shot, another. Yet he swam,  
With slow strong churning strokes, arms under water,  
Like a large dog, or like a deer. "Come back,  
You goddam fool. You know that I can hit you.  
Come back, or I'll put the next one in your shoulder."  
He did. There was no hole, no long flat echo:  
There was nothing for a second; then  
The head came up, still moving off, slowly.  
And you could see him swimming with one arm.  
Ten yards ahead there was a little island,  
A narrow sandy beach with a clump of trees  
A few feet from the water. Inch at a time  
The head drew close. "It's seventy yards," the guard  
Said to his gun. "That's pretty far. Let's see."  
He aimed at the beach, aimed high, and slowly, gently  
Squeezed. The pistol roared and leaped. "Still more."  
He aimed a little higher and had the range.  
He put a fresh clip in and stood there waiting.  
The prisoners at their end of the wharf  
Stood waiting. The head came close, stopped for a moment,  
And then the whole man crept up on the beach,  
On hand and knees. The guard took swift sure aim  
And fired at the dark target broad against  
The sand. The figure flattened at the shock  
And then began to crawl, one cheek in the sand,

Forward by jerking agonizing inches.  
“You son of a bitch,” the guard whispered and emptied  
His clip. He stood there with the gun still pointed  
While the trembling air floated away  
And silence came closing around him. They stood  
On the wharf, all facing where the dead man faced,  
And as silent. And there he lay on the beach:  
There were six holes in his back — nothing  
In front. The guard spoke to the others: “Damn him,  
He must have known he didn’t have a chance.  
What was the matter with him? He must have known.”

He must have known. Even in flinging off  
The social habit, in diving wildly from  
The man-made wharf, in swimming out, away  
From the safety of his kind, from the safety of  
Their reasonable ways — he must have known.  
Poor creature in a sudden ecstasy  
Preferred to be a free creature hunted  
To death, yet free — for an agonizing instant.  
He must have known. What do we know?

## A Soldier to His Wife

The clouds and the bright blue of the fall sky

And my love not here.

And the first leaves yet green are in the field,

The scouts already dead of a strange army

About to die and wheeling silently

In their maneuver. Up! up all at once,

The line deploying in a burst of breeze

Across the level grass; up, up at once!

Now those on the flank! Now down in rhythmical

Succession. And my throat swells with the beauty of it.

And my love not here.

And the sun that warms the shirt whipped by the wind

Feels friendly and it tells you winter's coming

And the sun and not the wind will be your friend.

And you will wake in darkness, lonely, cold,

And work through the short gray days and the long nights.

And your love not here.

Not here. And the summer turns to fall and the heart

Feels winter coming and dares not think of spring

And your love not here.

Oh think not of the season or the slow

Rolling of the days: think of your love.

Think of her! — and the deadened weight of winter

And the bursting fragrance of the spring become

Nothing. Think of your love and what she brings:

The grace of all the seasons: the warm sun

And the cool breeze, the rain, the snow, rebirth

And harvest. Think of her, oh think, think:

And your love is here.

## Sleep. And Wake.

All you weary soldiers lying down,  
Whether in mud or dust or blood, or in  
The fresh white sheets of comfort and protection —  
Sleep: creep from your soldier selves and give  
Your souls at ease, rest. Take up the dreams  
That you were living once, before *this* dream  
Began; this dream that holds you fast in a  
Hazy tramp of days, the left toe reaching  
After the left heel that goes before, always  
Before — pivoting in the same place  
How many times? how many times? Sleep.  
And wake the human being who was born,  
Not to march and kill, and to press all his  
Humanity back along the dark path  
From which it came. Sleep. This is the dream  
And you will wake: to the breadth and light and music  
Of human life, and you will love again and live.  
Take up the dreams that you were living once  
And you will live again. Sleep. And wake.

# Death of a Hero

## I. THE HERO

One moment they were there, a pattern of lights  
Reaching up into the grayness to him, binding him  
To the companionship below, to the steel  
And the flesh that make a ship, to the place and people  
He loved, and was bound to only by the ship.  
Then they were gone. And there was only gray  
And he and a plane and the gas creeping down  
The walls of the tank. There had been one last word,  
"Enemy planes." He still could feel the ring  
Of the voice in his ears. Because the light was faster?  
Or were the chains of light more cleanly cut,  
More final? There wasn't time to think it out.  
That was the luxury of weariness,  
When tightly twisted nerves were slack in comfort  
And the mind could stumble up a path and still  
Turn back again for there was time safely.  
Not now. And the weight slipped from his mind and body,  
And he felt now as he had felt all day,  
Unencumbered, light, with perfect faith  
In the thinking of his muscles, in the swiftness  
Of their moves and countermoves. And then he saw them.  
They were flying together, close and low,  
Like ducks in the dim gray of an autumn dusk.  
He watched them as they turned and dipped and rose  
With the easy motion of a wave. He watched:  
They had not seen the ship, not yet. He watched,  
His mind cool and free and sweet, as if a breeze  
Were blowing through. And he felt the rhythm, like music,  
Of the planes below. And he kept the time and waited,  
Then moved into the rhythm, deftly, surely.

## II. THE SHIP

They stood and felt the steel beneath them tremble,  
And the steady, low, muffled vibrations drove  
Them through the darkening gray, and their feet could hear  
And measure the mighty throbbing pulse of the monster  
Who was home and life and love and absolute master.  
Below, the men were having coffee, and Jack  
Might still have something in the bottle. And they  
Were feeling the warmth again of being together,  
Warm together after the danger alone.  
But on the deck the little group stood cold  
And could not give themselves to the ship or each other.  
They heard the solitary motor singing,  
Unseeing and unseen. And their souls were there,  
Riding the rhythm of that lonely music  
Above, deaf to the rhythm of the ship.  
Then they heard the new murmur coming,  
Uncertain — like the first drop of rain, then steady  
And growing and creeping across the rhythm their souls  
Were tuned to. And they ached with the strain of hearing  
both.

And then the two sounds moved together without  
A ripple of unrest — two themes of music  
Becoming one and floating off in the night,  
Less and slowly less to straining ears  
And aching hearts that would not let them go.

And the men at the guns relaxed and someone said  
Something. And it was over: we knew it was over,  
For he had drawn them skillfully away.  
And it was time to do and not to think  
But we were men. And Jim had saved *his* life —  
An hour ago, and Tom was standing there  
Because of *him*. And somehow we could not think  
Of those who had died that day or other days.



They had died in the blaze of battle, rolled up  
In the insulating second — walled secure  
By their intensity against the flood  
Of thoughts and feelings, happy in the human trap.  
And we were men and knew. We knew what it was  
To fight, to give ourselves unquestioning  
To the discipline of destruction. And that was easy,  
For we were men. But yet we never, fighting,  
Asked ourselves what we were fighting for,  
Though we sometimes did when we had time and strength  
Enough. But still it wasn't easy to know,  
For we were men and better able to do.  
We knew the meaning of the discipline —  
It fought for you, it saved your life in the air.  
But it was nothing in itself to fight for,  
No more than were the slogans we'd all heard.  
But we were fighting for something unexpressed,  
Too deep in us for thought or word, too deep  
For more than feeling. On the deck, the gray  
Closing about us, we felt in *his* deed  
The expression of the unexpressed. We felt,  
And our souls touched, but we did not understand.  
We wondered if *he* understood it now.

### III. THE ENEMY

*See! There! How beautifully he flies!*  
*This is no ordinary airman. Look.*  
*We know the practiced breed, skilled in killing.*  
*Follow him close, but do not shoot; avoid*  
*Encounter. Throttle all feelings in the blood*  
*And let the heart beat true in dedication,*  
*For we are dead already and we ourselves*  
*Must deify ourselves, and pure hate*  
*Is a love worthy of men already gods.*  
*We follow our sunken ship — now soon — into the sea,*

*Our strong-hearted ship that cannot die  
While the Ruler and our State and Destiny  
Traverse the night unwavering as time  
And light the world held fast in our great flooding dawn.*

*There is no need to speak to men like you.  
We know our course. Follow this flying ship  
Through the moonlit skies until he leads us home  
To the ship we live to die upon. He who  
Exhausts his fuel first, farewell for now.*

#### IV. THE HERO

You had done it, you had done it right —  
Out of the cloud, surprised, banking away,  
And just enough to lead them off, unaware  
Of a greater prize — the old fox drawing  
The young excited hounds gently away  
From his warm den. But no, the image was false.  
Strange how the act of thinking it had pleased you,  
As if you'd opened a valve to lighten pressures  
You had not known were there. But they were there.  
And there was nothing left to do but fly  
To the end of time. And part of you was free,  
More free than you had ever been before.  
And there was nothing left to do but fly  
Out of your world of struggle and decision.  
And you were warm inside, thinking of the ship  
And the men: and not of any one, but all.  
And there was nothing left to do but die,  
To follow after those whom you had led.  
You had watched them drop one at a time  
Into the sea, their motors quieted —  
They would follow but they would not kill.  
Not yet. But even they, grim patient creatures,  
Would lose all hope as the moon revealed no ship

And the motors throbbed, drawing the fuel through  
In steady swallows you could almost feel.  
And they would have to fight, those who were left,  
Those three with little fuel and no hope  
Beyond yourself. It would be good, the struggle,  
Nothing to lose and not a thing to gain,  
And you could wait as well as they, and longer —  
You had more gas, you had more certainty.

The moon was lifting through the fringes of a cloud.  
The sureness of its movement held you fast,  
Almost against your will, nearly too long —  
For you had felt it coming and you wrenched  
Away barely in time from their thundering rush.  
And they were back again, three flying as one,  
Reaching out through the bright flashes of their guns  
For you. But you had rolled and twisted away,  
And your nerves vibrated with the wild music  
Of struggle. Then there were only two coming.  
Dry tank — you thought — and moved away nicely  
And spun and held your plane, bucking fiercely  
Behind its roaring guns, true. There was one  
Left, and you were for each other, turning  
In a grim blind charge of mutual death.  
But your bullets reached ahead and the planes barely  
Scraped as he plunged towards the earth beneath the sea.  
And this was over and you were not dead.  
Why had you done the thing, flung your life away?  
If you were there again above the ship  
And they had given you your choice? Still.  
And if you'd thought what being safe meant?  
Or thought of being in her arms again,  
And life stretching out before you, long  
And warm? No. You wouldn't have thought of that,  
Not consciously. No. Things are done

Long before the event. And this was done  
Because of what you were — the man you were,  
Believing in men and things and loving them.  
One did what one had to as a human being,  
And hoped, and one had faith that the cause was right.  
The deed was always right, your own or his.  
The enemy and you, you were not different,  
Only the cause — and not as it was expressed,  
But as it might be, *would* be: and you had faith.  
And you were fighting for *his* people too,  
In the only way you *could* fight, being a man.  
And you were dying for men, the men on the ship,  
And others, and for hope — the hope for people muddling,  
Who needed time — oh desperately! — and hope.  
And you had held the blood to the soul's decree,  
Though it was easier to die fighting  
Up to a goal, and you were dead-alive.  
You felt the slowly strangled hush of the motor.

#### V. THE SEA

He had fallen clear and the wind was pouring past  
Him, a little passive solid hurtling  
Through the vast envelopment of night. He saw  
The face of his wife go by, too fast for the mind  
To hold — again and again, and he reached out  
Blindly. And there was a corner, motionless,  
And he was a little boy and turning the corner  
And there was the florist shop and — just beyond —  
His home. And he was walking up the steps  
And his hand was on the door and it was opening  
And he was calm and safe — oh why had he left?  
And it was opening and he couldn't remember.  
And the wind filled his parachute and jerked  
Hard. And his body floated, gently held  
From above, blood pounding. And he gasped for breath

And reached and freed the straps about his thighs,  
Then seized the clasp in front and held it firm,  
Looking down for the sea rising to meet him,  
Thinking through the movements he must make  
If he were not to drown, caught in the net  
Of tangled ropes and cloth settling above him.  
And more than once he loosened the clasp and drew  
Convulsively a breath into his lungs  
And half slipped from the harness, tense against  
The coldness of the water sweeping up.  
And finally it came and he was ready  
And loose and swimming under water, hard,  
Eyes pulling in their sockets as he swam  
Aching on and on until he burst  
Into the air, and he was free of the net.  
He fumbled for the tube under his jacket  
And blew his breath, between short panting rests,  
Into the life preserver that was there,  
And floated. And it was hard to say when he died.

## Esthetics

“*Jee-sus!* Look at it, Joe. It’s beautiful!”

And you could feel the ground moving beneath you  
And feel the pressure of the roar vibrating against your skin.  
And they were coming over, flight after flight,  
Inflexible, the expression of a will  
Strangely detached. And you looked at them and wondered.  
You had seen the men climb in, climb out;  
And they were always men.  
They needed helping out if they were hurt;  
Sometimes they laughed and joked and shouted — or were  
silent.

But they were always men, and you could know them.  
Not now, as you saw and felt the flights go over,  
And watched the first plane wheel and poise and scream  
On its long, tense, tightening release;  
And you strained and shuddered at the climax, and felt  
A little guilty.  
And there were banks of fighters, loitering,  
Their very casualness intense and fierce.  
And the bombs were dropping in a pattern, you knew.  
And the short black iron throats behind that ridge  
Were carving graceful arcs to the ridge beyond.  
And over your head — the work of tired men  
Like you, turning the cold metal of wheels,  
To numbers obedient — sang the great weights  
Of destined steel. And the tanks were lurching up,  
And that meant how many minutes for you to move into  
the pattern?

“*Jee-sus!* Look at it, Joe. It’s beautiful!”

And it was, you knew it was; and you knew and wondered.  
For there were grace and symmetry of line,  
And there was balance, there was structure built

On the collective wills of millions of nameless people:  
Wills nameless, abstract; yet taking shape,  
And giving shape, and forming patterns like this.  
And you thought of the fears and hopes behind the wills,  
And that was beautiful. But still you wondered.  
And then it came with the next breath and the world  
Was drained of sound. And then the noise broke through  
Again and you saw the structure and did not wonder.  
And you were tender and warm inside and you thought:  
Men — giving themselves (though blindly) to a goal  
(Not understood), and to each other (unknown);  
Moving, working, dying, and together,  
And aware of each other, and feeling the beauty of it.

And you thought: Someday men may give themselves  
Knowing why, feel beauty, knowing why —  
Without an enemy over the ridge to kill.

“Say, Joe, come on, we’re moving up ahead.”

## Pity the poor soldier . . .

Pity the poor soldier walking post  
And not for the rain or mud  
Or the cold that curls in whirlpools through the blood  
And seeps into the bone.  
Pity him not for these the most  
But pity him for being alone,  
A splinter of light  
Between the open jaws of night,  
A ghost  
Silently bearing  
His human remembering.  
Pity the poor soldier walking post.



## Easter at Cassino: the 1944th Year

“A happy Easter to you all,” the chaplain  
Said.  
Those who weren’t asleep, wounded, or dead  
Heard him  
And the echo from the hills. It was loud —  
Public address.  
The chaplains and the engineers felt proud.  
We just looked.  
We lay in our shallow holes and waited, just waited.  
For what?  
For miracles to happen? For Christ to come  
Striding like the dawn across the mountains?  
Anything but.  
We didn’t expect the new day to come free.  
It didn’t make sense, looking down at the city,  
Seeing before our burning eyes the hot  
Blur  
Whirling like a motion-picture film  
Run wild  
Of things that were  
And are  
And have a time and no-time of their own.  
It didn’t make sense.  
No.  
We waited for the spread fingers of steel,  
For the call of shells hurrying in labor.  
Perhaps the Germans did the same.  
No hate and no love came.  
Nothing.

## Artillery Maneuvers: June Day

The sharpsweet odor  
Of injured cedar,  
The young tree trampled out of the Army's way.  
The war proceeds. We play at war all day.  
High upon a hill we sight and measure,  
Prepare,  
Wait  
For the great  
High-flung geyser  
Of earth, at the end of the arc our first long gun will tear.  
Below, the ancient ocean floor  
Is calm in greens and browns.  
We play at war upon an ancient ocean floor  
And smile at time, and measure, and leave unknowns  
Unmeasured.

## Soldier's Dawn

The clean moist air of dawn  
Breathed deep,  
The sun upon  
The thinning mist of sleep.

This earth around me is awake,  
Its creatures noisy in their busyness.  
And I sit up and stretch and shake  
From my spirit the seal that held me fast.  
The soft full emptiness,  
Unquestioning, of night is past.  
I sit up and dress.

And feel the lingering firm pull  
Of sleep and love: the two were one:  
I loved you sleeping. I was full,  
A man complete, before the sun.

I listen to the creatures chattering,  
Doing the things that they  
Have and want to do, and do, and sing.  
I dress to do the duties of the day.

Yet thoughts of you will sweep across  
The tall bent swaying grass  
To me, and I shall stop and breathe and fling  
My spirit in the wind to soar and sing.

## That Has Been the Poem

I've been loving in a silent speechless way,  
In a language not of sounds but rhythms, colors,  
Lines, feelings: I've been loving in the movement of the wind  
At night; in the quietness of stars and clouds;  
In the steady wheeling splendor of the moon we've watched,  
A thousand miles apart, both watched, both felt;

In the long deep moment in the cedar-shade,  
Cool and fragrant room against the sun;  
In the flower brightly islanded in the brown  
Of sand — high, alone upon the hill;  
And in the sad-faced aimless mule, trotting  
Detached, aloof, along the side of the road;

And in the bright blue bed-sheet hanging bravely  
Outside the run-down hovel of a house.

Whatever thing of beauty quickens me  
Quickens the infinite of love within me,  
And love is poetry — though soundless, though wordless.

I've been loving in a silent speechless way.  
That has been the poem — I translate this.

## September Furlough

Skies never purpled so for me alone.  
There were no lakes like this, with green-blue fringes  
Floating the shadows of their slender spires.

I have liked things alone — the lift of tree and hill,  
The laughter of men, the doing of work, the first  
Releasing of the muscles and nerves in bed  
After the day's long weighing weariness,  
The taste of food, the clear sharp cut of water  
In the thirsty throat — I have liked these and alone.  
These I have liked as the breath of my lungs, the blood  
Of my heart: these I have had to like to live.

The margin that man needs to live is small  
And I am grateful: I have lived on it.  
But this, this respite in September, is life  
Built on the great wide way I knew before  
I left, with no margins less than the spirit  
Of a man could stretch to. And life is limitless  
Here beside you now this little while  
Before I leave again to live contracted  
On a margin edged by memory and hope.

## Sweetest love . . .

Sweetest love, it is the eye  
    And not the heart deceiving.  
Look with your heart and see that I  
    Return, I am not leaving.

See: from this train now moving slow  
    My face turned towards you, yearning  
Closer with every yard I go  
    On the way to my returning.

I go to come: the myth is true:  
    The paths of love go wheeling  
Round the curving earth: they do—  
    And yet this hopeless feeling . . .

## The Tide

The Welsh hills rise up black  
To the rim of gray,  
Curving out from night  
Over the curve of day.

And sweeping up through the valleys  
The new tide flows;  
It is the sea of morning  
That comes and goes

Up past the quilted hills,  
The colored hedge-drawn  
Hills of Wales — to the shore,  
To the water and on

Out over the blind  
Music dancing in the night;  
Freeing the leap of the spindrift  
And the green and white.

The coast is black; the sea  
Sweeps up the shores.  
Over the hills of New England  
The gray tide pours.

My love lies sleeping.  
Her dark head framed with white.  
My heart rides through the curtain  
Upon a wave of light.

## Letter in Wartime

Poor hungry eyes!  
(I was too old. I learned to read.  
I was six and large  
And all the chemicals were there  
Ready for growth  
And I knew already more than I knew.  
I was six years old,  
Easy to teach what I could learn —  
Six years of man,  
The newest bud of an ancient tree.)  
Oh straining aching eyes,  
Where shall you find your hunger's rest?  
What can you build from motions made on paper?  
(For she who made them learned too late,  
Though she was quick to learn and young,  
A brown-bright-shining-eyed girl,  
Eager, as the youngest child of man,  
To inherit all at once herself.  
But all our father-mothers learned too late  
And yet too little while ago.)

Oh poor dumb struggling hand,  
What can you do for hungry eyes?  
The hungers we have inherited are older far  
And stronger far than the crafts we have devised.  
Oh eyes and hands were simple things  
With unlearned ancient ways to see and touch,  
And if two people loved but were apart  
They ached and withered motionless and dumb,  
And darkness lay upon their hopeless eyes.



We struggle to create, to send ourselves,  
To see, to touch. And in the struggle there is pain  
And the sorrow of unfulfillment. Ancient children  
Straining to close a rupture not our own,  
Too old and young, we were born too late and soon.

## Sons of Man

Our saviors dying lose a world they loved  
Once. To them life was unfocused hope  
Shadowless in a dream from which they wake  
Focused in unhope.

They are the sons of man, the heirs of man.  
They die like bitter beaten beasts driven  
By fear and hate and sexual jungleness  
(Shrill cutting whips wrought from the roots of man) —  
Helpless, driven past man and beast and life.

They die and do not want to die and must.  
We have selected them, the sons of man,  
To save their sons. And they, with our machines,  
With our whips and their own, will save their sons.

## February Spring

In Hürtgen Wald the dead men grow,  
Appearing one by one  
Beneath the February sun  
Out of the melting snow.  
In Hürtgen Wald the dead men grow.

Earth and flesh are spring and bold.  
They thaw easily.  
It is not spring to smell or see.  
And heart and mind are cold.  
In Hürtgen Wald the dead men grow.

The seeds of yesterday are set.  
No hyacinth or crocus bud  
Peers palely from the mud.  
It is not their time yet.  
In Hürtgen Wald the dead men grow.

*Germany, 1945*

## A Thing of Beauty

Beside a hole beneath a tree he lay,  
A quiet bundle of clothes; the clothes were gray.  
A letter — “Feldpost” — and some bits of white,  
Pictures of actresses, were lying bright  
By the gray and brown. “Mein lieber Sohn” it said  
To idle stranger eyes that paused and read  
And raised. My friend poked me. “Say, read the Kraut.  
You read the stuff. What do they write about?  
Look at these girls now will you. Jesus! Whew!  
Look at these Heinie dolls! I’d love to chew  
On those a while. Oh God but she has beauts!  
And this one with the legs and look, she suits  
Me goddamn fine. You know, these Jerry quail  
Would make superdeluxe elegant tail.”  
I looked at the blank neutral beauty bare  
And cold, at the focused curves, the yes-no stare.  
I looked at him, naïvely innocent,  
And I felt old and guilty. I turned and went.  
He did not hear me go — he was intent.

*Germany. 1945*

## Consider the Rhine

Consider the river flashing in the sun: consider.  
The clean green cold is in the wind sweet in your throat.  
The jewels dance along the tightness of your nerves  
Like the rippling of notes into necklaces by fingers on keys.  
Consider: consider the Rhine: liquid, aloof.

*(They crept across the bridge breathing half-breaths,  
The noise of the water filling their ears full.  
Like the long sound of an ignited fuse flowing  
To the explosive. They reached before the flame and some  
Thousands of lives they say were then prolonged.  
And an army began rolling across, driven  
By tight-faced dirty men. And the shells and bombs  
And the planes landed in the water and on the shore and on  
the bridge.  
But the pontoons were moored against the current and built-  
on.  
And the tanks and guns and trucks and feet crossed.  
The oil was thick and soft upon the water.  
But rivers flow.)*

The hills rising nurse the gentle warmth,  
Receive it mirrored from the water's jeweled glass.  
And the little vines run with life, yielding  
To the sweet sharp tug of growth; the grapeskins tauten  
With fullness of juice; and soil and sun and the pale  
Beauty of the distant ribboning water are in the wine.

*(From the hills came the cold whistle of whirling bullets  
And great buds flowering into broken screaming steel.  
They died and lay bloody and ripped. But more  
Came and climbed the hills and the hills rising*

*Like waves behind; and through the millionaires' castles  
And the cool deep cellars lined with slender bottles.  
They rinsed their stomachs with the wine and their intes-  
tines,  
Their mouths working like fishes'.)*

Tirelessly clean between its cradling hills,  
Licking itself, aloof, true to itself,  
Its faith in rain and gravity and time,  
The Rhine flows.

*Remagen. March 1945*

## The World's Things Live and Hunger

The old women swing their scythe across  
The swaying fields. They stop and look beyond you,  
Sharpening the blade. Before them is a town  
Of cellars and walls; behind, a still, black tank.  
They swing their scythe: the world's things live  
and hunger.

Only the men and what they made are dead.

The children wave and pipe, "*Nichts Schokolade?*"  
In hopeful pessimism, and pipe, and peek  
At their fingers to see that only two are up.

The little bare-foot girl controls the oxen  
And beats the near one on the nose with a switch  
and holds  
Them blinking patiently to the side of the road.  
The army truck bulks large and lurches past,  
The dust boiling like a wake from the spinning  
wheels.

It passes and she turns her quiet face  
To the road again. The oxen shuffle forward.

They jolt on westward, standing tightly together.  
They have felt too much, the dead returning:  
Their faces are illegible, like writing  
Written upon and upon. Past the prison,  
Where the women wave and call. The men wave back.  
Past the children looking up from play,  
Piping a shrill mad stream of noise not asking.  
Past the women running out of houses,  
Their eyes hurting, waving their hands in a dream.

The old women rooted in the fields look up,  
Crouched over their scythe. *German soldiers.*  
*German soldiers coming home.* They look  
With illegible face. They straighten their back  
and wave  
Tiredly. The truck turns into town.  
The rubber screeches on the road. The women bend  
Over their scythe.

*Bavaria, June 15, 1945*



## Monologue in Nürnberg

I stood before Sebalduskirche living,  
Soft flesh unharmed among the broken stones  
That set the quiet jewel. Dark against  
The blue of sky, the little scars nothing,  
It rose. And it was stone and symmetry  
And more amid the rage of puzzled men.  
I listened within the temple of myself.

They were doing and done-to because they were men and  
puzzled.  
In them were knots tied in darkness by no hands.  
They followed the whores, the banners, to ease their knots,  
Grew drunk on the sweet fumes of unanimity,  
Erupted with the mad unison of yelling throats,  
Losing themselves in each other and all for love.  
And these were men like us. The whores were different:  
They held a man, uncoiled the bafflements,  
Cunning pilots in the ancient human night.

They huddled in darkness underneath the earth and smelled  
The smoke of their homes. Orgasms of death spat  
In their wombs of night and they were washed by the flames  
but not clean.  
They stumbled into light and blinked at the new world  
Lying about them, blinked and huddled and were sick.  
They were hungry and ate. They looked for food and drink  
And some fought in the dark cellars for what they found.  
And the children scuttled like rats on the cooling trash.

We came with our huge machines and plowed the streets,  
Swept back the rubble like snow and left a path

To drive or walk through. We drove and walked and snapped  
pictures  
That showed what it was to fight in an evil cause  
And lose. And we looked at the well-legged women and  
wondered.  
And some of the women looked back and wondered. And some  
Found out. And there were loaves of bread at the corner  
And there were things to do and the people did them.  
They were tired. In them were no knots. They were not  
puzzled.  
It was too soon. They were not men yet.

*June 26, 1945*