The Poetry of John Gray

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The Long Road

1926
The Long Road 1926

Sanctae Margaretae Reginae *

*amore in pauperes et voluntaria paupertate insigni

Saint Margaret, the winds of yore
Oppressed the barque that carried thee;
And drove a treasure from the sea
On Scotland's wild and barren shore.

The providence of God is strong
To rule the tempest and the tide;
It gave the king a gracious bride,
And thee a folk to dwell among.

The beggar Babe of Bethlehem
Had not a thing to call His own;
He set a pearl in Malcolm's crown,
On Scotland's brow a diadem.

Of virtue who could undertake
To tell Thy sweet unending store,
And all thy love for Scotland's poor,
And poverty for Jesus' sake.

Beseech the King of endless days
To bless the land in breadth and length;
To clothe its sons with godly strength,
And valiant women with their praise.

The Immaculate Conception

God from all eternity
Made thee, Mary, fair and free;
Stains of sin are not in thee.

Fairest woman, thou'rt alone
White as snow on Lebanon;
And thy face is like the sun.

Virgin, hear the ages tell
All thy praise in Israel;
Hear thy people praise thee well.
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God thy maker knows thy worth;  
He has blessed thee from thy birth;  
Blessed thee more than all on earth.

Where thy fragrant beauty leads  
One among the lilies feeds.  
Draw us to the dewy meads.

Decora Lux

The light eternal floods with glorious rays  
Of blessed hue the chief of golden days,  
Wherein the Princes of the Church are crowned,  
That grace may reign and clemency abound.

Doctor of earth and Master of the keys,  
Founders of Rome and all men's Judges these;  
One by the cross, the other by the sword,  
Have life, the victors' infinite reward.

O happy Rome, of glorious renown,  
Thy Princes' blood begems thy ancient crown;  
Empurpled by their martyrdom, alone  
The beauty of the world thou hast outshone.

O blessed Peter, graciously receive  
The humble prayer, and guilty men reprieve;  
To whom the power is given by the Lord  
To shut or open heaven by a word.

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In Thy Name and dread,  
VIATOR, those who start at peace  
with other men essay the ease  
of measured stride and supple knees;  
their road lies ahead.

The son Israel  
passed dryfoot through the cloven sea;  
again, the wise mysterious three  
were guided by a star to Thee.  
May we journey well.

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If thus things may be,
grant us, dispensed from all alarm,
protected from conspicuous harm,
to stretch at evening, fed and warm,
and drink merrily;

worn, resolute,
to enter once, nor over late,
in easy trim and blest estate,
by that desired, eternal gate,
where proffered cup and towel wait,
and winged guards salute.

Awind through the hills;
across a variegated plain,
a swampy patch, a bridge, a lane;
and into wooded hills again,
where rocks fringe the ghylls.

Now steep paths ascend
loose-pebbled, once by pack-beasts found,
to broader space of mightier ground:
the moor, by blackening rainclouds bound,
and far mountains penned.

The life past a dream,
when beauty strides from hill to hill,
when lungs and eyes have drunk their fill;
to-morrow's moor is lovelier still;
to-day's moor supreme.

You see fleet and fair
gazelles by hippocritons torn,
a wild curvetting unicorn
across a cherry-coloured morn
the day the rivulet was born
and forth set to fare.

It creeps from the moss;
and all at once its liquid feet
impetuously run to meet
its Yarrow, Teviot or Tweed;
its slow Applecross.
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Rip ropple ho;
it stumbles in a girlish fright,
reflects the sun in pin-head light,
and sweeps the stones it polished bright
a long time ago.

The flowers at its brink
season by season are and thrive;
for things organically live
are just beginning to arrive,
to think, drink and blink.

The Windrush, the Kenn,
the Whiteadder, the A'on, the Usk,
the Teme, the Tummel, Nene and Dusk
preserve their cadence in the dusk
of worn tongues of men.

The streams will be young
when each has found a mother’s son,
a Denham, Pope or Aldington,
to sing its beauties one by one
in best limpid song.

Over the second hill,
a curious outline; do you see?
beyond the solitary tree,
to left. It's people; there are three;
they seem very still.

That farmhouse, you said.
I think some honey, bread or cake
might help to keep me half-awake.
A cigarette. Let's overtake
the couple ahead.

The man sixty-one;
the woman, far from commonplace,
black-eyed and pale; the stamp of race
upon her twenty years of grace;
the boy eight, and grown;

and wise as they went;
a slight, erect King Oberon;
as if the yellow head had thrown
upon the air a flowery crown
of vast, starred extent.
So thoughts idly ran.
A gentle girl; a boy of eight;
it’s meddlesome to speculate
on strangers’ ages, rank or state:
a child, maid and man.

And yet, all the same,
big hat, loose suit and no cigar,
it might have been Professor Ker,
or Ruskin, or the Ginger Jar,
or some household name.

PSEUDO-RUSKIN:
Composed as I am,
the vision which I see as clear
as if the very thing were here
consists of omelette and beer
and gurkins and ham.

VESTAL:
Just listen to that.
You know as well you cannot get,
and wouldn’t eat, an omelette.
I’ll see you have one; don’t forget;
both soufflée and flat.

And then, as to beer . . .

PSEUDO-RUSKIN:
No, this is what I really see:
a most abominable tea,
with scarcely buttered toast for three,
and fearfully dear.

VESTAL: Do you like the bread?

PSEUDO-RUSKIN:
It’s better toasted.

OBERON: Caroline

VESTAL: What quantities of

OBERON: Caroline
VESTAL:

toast you men eat.

OBERON: Caroline

I take milk instead.

I know what he’ll say:
"Good morning; (it was afternoon)
"I see you’re bound for Coniston;
"keep to the left; you’ll have the moon;
it’s steep all the way."

Observe Norman Wright,
the handsome road by which we come
is Banbury Road, not to, but from;
be thanks to God for every crumb
of favour to-night.

Please do not ring
unless an answer be required
protects the villa uninspired,
desirable and undesired,
unless—Shall we ring?

You see, going about,
the slow constructions of the past;
the venerable faults of taste,
the silly penury and waste,
which just cheek it out.

A vast unity;
proportion seeming undesigned
of form and aspect thrice refined;
the resolution of the mind
projected; carried through; and signed;
as grave things should be.

Enough facts controlled
for those who care to contemplate,
to order, shape and illustrate;
to give the soul sufficient state
to be, have and hold.

The bust on the stair
appears at least to underrate
a former undergraduate;
or some child's mother knew the state of unmixed despair

Be dumb, other bells, while Tom is booming overhead
the memory uncomforted
of more than half forgotten dead, now called something else.

May I be forgiven,
o Member; tell me more and more,
who know, among your other lore,
what universities are for, why M.A.'s are given.

Well you see; then
these licences are given to teach
the arts and sciences—or preach—or both—or neither—each to each;
licet: amen.

Just hunger and cold demand then; if the most of inns are kept and furnished for our sins, and dear at half a row of pins, the story is old.

Even, wealthy Reader, you are fortunate to know a score the kingdom's length, form shore to shore, deserving praise; a little more perhaps three or two.

And here some are named both where you have and haven't stated, or where you wouldn't have delayed for fifty times the bill you paid. For you were jolly-well afraid; and still feel ashamed.

The Maid's Head; the Forge; the Radegonde; the Gallows Inn; The Salutation; Harlequin; the Cat Hole Keld; the Trout; the Queen; the Bladebone; the George.
The Magpie; the Chough;  
the Red, the Dun, the Dapple Cow;  
The Fish; the Boot and Shoe; the Plough;  
the Just in Time; the Barley Mow;  
the Woodcock; the Dove;  
the Plum Pudding; Wheel;  
the Merry Mouth; the Duck; the Fleece;  
the Apple, Oak and Cocoa Trees;  
the Hatchet Inn; the Compasses;  
and Bells by Rings and Eights and Threes,  
the Blue Bell, the Bell;  
and so on and so.  
But in the empire of the blest  
where inns are old and gala-dressed  
their signs are not among the least  
of things good to know:  
the Wild Palm; the Flame;  
the Little Rose; the Not for Me;  
the King and Queen of Barbary;  
the Violin; the Hat; the Dee;  
the What's in a Name;  
the Wise Smile; the Pen;  
the Mouse; the Pinnacle; the Sword;  
the Push the Bell; the Prophet's Gourd;  
the Virtue is its Own Reward;  
the Twice Five are Ten;  
the Piecequilt; the Bolt;  
the Flying Horse (but see above);  
the Cure for All; the Boy in Love;  
the Djinn; the Dimple and the Dove;  
the Young Mare and Colt;  
the Last Mile; the Nonce;  
the Commonsense; the Marigold,  
the Pink are neither new nor old,  
nor tediously manifold,  
like Bulls, Bears and Swans.  
the Cockpit; the Styx;  
the Open Arms; the Man at Ease;  
the Quartermast; the Half a Breeze;
The Coronel of Lemon Trees;
the Red Box of Tricks.

We come in from Mass
with thoughts of Bread beyond desire,
of Bread not only fired but Fire,
of joy than all rejoicing higher,
of great Things which pass.

In God's Name. Amen.
Nos peccatores benedic
et dona Tua haec, et sic
perstemus uti decet, hic
et semper. Amen.

A rare breakfast suit.
The tablecloth of heaven's blue;
you see the dark-brown table through
a lace-worked pond and duck or two
and reeds worked to suit.

And skyblue as well,
without embroidery, the warm
crisp napkins cock a mitre form
and take the appetite by storm,
as who needs to tell.

The fair cutlery:
glass-handled knives of stainless steel,
and forks by Meredith and Neil,
lie even as a king's yacht's keel;
and spoons as should be.

But now out of fear
of greediness we call a halt,
and mention merely there is salt;
and everything without a fault;
the bell-button near.

The great staff of life,
the loaf upon a noble board,
to slice for need, caprice, reward,
and hand before the tea is poured
or hot things arrive.
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The true Chin Kiang,
the tea is in a cattytin
of fifteen sides, of white shagreen,
and lined with polished cypressine.
The lid has a tang.

Jean's special boast,
fresh oatcake cut in pentagons;
Kirsty's more than flower-show scones;
meditative butter swans;
well-girdled toast.

A scant egg display;
no bechamel; no portugaise;
no "one of 13,000 ways";
but scrambled eggs on holidays;
and poached eggs today.

And sliced Bradenham.
There stretch undaunted miles between
the client and the least sardine
or paté, pie or galantine.
Just tea, eggs and jam;

just plain jam for boys;
mulberry jam; rose marmalade,
of tinted apple-shivers made;
the ruby juice of pomegrenade;
and no other choice.

Perhaps, for the great,
the delicacy from the down,
so ivorywhite, so sepiabrown,
abundant as in Malmesbury town;
and not gathered late.

A minute tureen
of honey, made, by honest bees,
of sugar, found on plants and trees,
and not from Carribean seas;
not trade glycerine.

The Genetic curse
lies unabated on the blacks
who own the town of philokaks,
of ball-flower ornament and quacks;
yet all might be worse?
We must not decline,
we cripples, who were born in sin
and love to be confirmed therein,
to lodge in this abysmal inn,
and dismally dine:

Potage Barcelone;
a little dish for golliwogs;
a dish both meat and drink for dogs;
a sweet composed of snarligogs.
The wine's name was Beaune.

Hotel So-and-so.
Do not devote the cook to flame,
nor wish the waiter whence he came,
nor mutter words like "England's shame,"
but pack up and go.

Reflect, if you mind,
that were it not for such as these
the road would not be what it is;
that * * *'s antipodes
is somewhere to find.

On Cotswold-the Crown-
nearer the latter place, between
Fairford and Ciren, entering in
the low-lintelled little inn
sits bareheaded down

to wait what he seeks,
the man who clumps about and drums,
appeals in whistles, coughs and hums.
A garden-hatted woman comes,
with flat, patient cheeks.

No drab, dreary stare
receives the minimum request.
Be seated; I've a little best.
The wanderer becomes a guest
with few words to spare

Or Fairford-the Bull
The CoIn, for twenty miles or so,
of all most exquisitely slow,
perhaps of all the streams that flow,
of all streams most full,

with sweet waters swollen.
The Bull is what you wish; and if
some farmers tell their stories stiff,
-reiteration past belief-
they farm near the Coln.

A place built to please
your fisher men for nights and days;
its breezy passages and ways
beyond the scope of travellers' praise;
its sweet peace and ease.

In good order laid,
the somewhat stately country board,
not over prim or pinafored,
displays what country means afford
of home-grown and made.

The bell's brazen voice
is hoarse with clanging: Come and dine
You know it's useless to repine
for rose- or sunset-coloured wine,
or anything called superfine;
but what is is choice,

and worth waiting for.
Thus: Soup as Adam ordered it;
a chicken roasted at the spit,
and good as long as there's a bit
to say: Have some more.

The beer (in a glass;
a taper goblet, slim and sleek)
exactly neither strong nor weak,
is palatable with the leek,
and green sparrow-grass.

The cook did her best.
When Susan laid another plate
the jellies trembled for their fate;
but cherry tart was what we ate;
and so did the rest.
The place lighted up
suggests an hygienic stroll
to soothe the body as a whole,
and just the least revive the soul.
A small parting cup;

then, scarce needing light,
a pair of walkers, young and wise,
who reach the rooms called Paradise,
need no extraneous advice
to Sleep well; good night.

If eyes half awake
discern the buttressed Bibury mill
reflected in the river still
at Fairford small, reluctant wheel,
a day's-end mistake.

Or thinking of flies,
proposed, so praised afar and nigh,
and watered by the wriggling Wye,
an ambit of excursion, try
where Hoarwithy lies.

Here, once on a time,
Comes shuffling in from some long mile,
by twos at most, in straggling style,
an uncommunicative file
of men, boys and grime;

unless staff and chain,
without a stick or rag of pack,
nor even nothing in a sack
to load upon a woman's back.
And last in the train,

of much ursine grace,
a beast with ringed and muzzled nose,
not slightly turning in her toes.

I go where that procession goes
said Hugh Fier de Bras.

By slow mile on mile
a gang that goes a thousand years
and leads for generations bears
is seldom taken unawares
or even deigns to smile.
As now, on the route
when from an unsuspected nook
the hero of the story-book
flung out, nor by your leave, and took
a seat astride the brute:

_Eh bien, laissez faire._

A family accretion-grown,
where no man's father's no man's son,
as briefly named and simply known
as whohoups: The Bear.

The well-meaning Wye
will never tie a lover's knot;
let Monmouth still be what it's not;
let roofless abbeys wait and rot,
and well-fallen lie.

Nay, stroll off like bears
and those who lead them half-asleep;
the route is swampy, squishy deep,
with path and pathless in a heap;
as who careless fares.

Bend, curve and loop,
the idle, everlasting stream
they parcel see and parcel dream;
vistas roll, unroll and ream;
and great willows droop.

Where hop-tangles grow,
high hedges daft with clematis-
cascades; they see and hear the bees;
the bear observing hollowed trees.
And do-dilly-do.

With some fair excuse
a man or woman, boy or girl,
collateral of Mr. Kyrle,
read "kidnapped" in the look and curl,
and flashed back the news.

Say one word of thanks,
to Boy, that fate should thus afford
a day no chronicles record
in green steep-rolling Hereford,
by Wye's restless banks.
So home rumbling late,  
the father's features not serene  
nor sullen either, but between;  
this Hugh, aetatis suae ten;  
and Fred only eight.

*Let no one be cross,*  
is all Clarinda has to say.  
*Forget those gypsies on their way  
to end a melancholy day  
by this hour at Ross.*

The heart leaps at Ross.  
May many things be shut and gone  
before the inn at Ross, the Swan,  
and down to rest a head upon;  
let elves sleep on moss.

We shall not forget  
how up to Grisedale Tarn we went;  
and Sunday Crag was what was meant;  
but down we took the wrong descent  
in dark, wind and wet.

And some sign of rain  
made graver what was mere mischance,  
if not exactly ignorance.  
The truth requires no second glance  
that rain stands for rain.

Now, should there be rain,  
a walk the walker never planned  
to take by night in Cumberland  
enables him to understand  
"A much-needed rain."

A wild water-game:  
the heavens descending with a shout  
of clouds gyrating inside out,  
a veritable waterspout;  
or what seems the same.
On all hands the din
runs up a steep chromatic scale
and down the slopes to Patterdale
of pebbly torrents lashed with hail
till (yes) 'tis the inn.

The girl uses art
to shield the light and hold the door:
a stoup of beer and nothing more,
for shelter sake from rush and roar;
humiliated garments pour
their products to the flagstone floor
till shame says: Depart.

To squelch forth again
till boots regurgitate the rain;
till every organ but the brain
seems filled with undiluted rain;
or rain mixed with rain.

A short spell of grace,
a vast umbrella seems the sky;
the air like blotting-paper dry;
nor far what yet is not so nigh:
the kind sleeping place;
the kind feeding place.
While garments hang and drip ham-high,
motley men eat giant pie.
Another few potatoes?—Try!
These good cakes amaze.

Through some organ's fault
the rover stretches every limb
as though it were the whole of him.
A ward, at once both bright and dim
You've nothing but to lie and dream;
and just call a halt.

I feel better now.
Insured against the least surprise,
invariably kind and wise,
the doctor's penetrating eyes.
80, 82.
By day, night and day,
a cool and autocratic lass
has something in a little glass.
Detached, imperious women pass;
a man like Herod Antipas;
and life ticks away.

The night nurse's shoes
gliding along the polished floor
as stealthily as on the moor
the creatures wage primeval war
without pause or truce,
and brocks, foxes prowl;
her blueness as the last of light,
as soft as is a summer night,
her movement as an even flight,
but blue and dark as his is white,
the great, ghostly owl.

According to scope
the human frame, no longer racked
with pain and dread, if not intact,
is marching back to work and fact,
and tread-wheel of hope.

Along Wenlock Edge
the apple, plum and cherry dress
their sooty stems with loveliness
as huddled as a swarm of bees,
and first deck the hedge.

Tuft, tassel, spike;
ah, what the old wind-sifter knows
of many other fruits than sloes,
and flowers than the English rose,
not twice pink alike.

Or near Castle Combe,
the bright plantation, roofless fane,
is madly carpeted again
with little springflowers' starry stain
as thick as is room.
The fair needle-tree, 
the larch, which surely not the worst 
of men, or critics either, cursed, 
its emerald bundles newly burst, 
and bright flowers free;

flowers round and rose; 
flowers ecstatically hung 
on pendant twigs a fathom long 
in well-measured rows.

Now hell's youngest son, 
the belching devil of the road, 
proceeding in the Burnley mode, 
and rolling to its pillion load, 
is heard, seen and gone;

to leave men alone. 
Where ivy grips the drybuilt wall 
once wool-bale-laden waggons crawl; 
one harmony comprises all 
of green, gold and stone.

The path deeply strown 
with coral, orange, cinnamon; 
with aloe, benjamin and myrrh; 
which, heaped and burning, scent the air 
with thoughts past and gone.

A still afternoon 
among the hills to rest the eyes 
on tender northern winter skies, 
gold brightness, blue varieties, 
until the moonless pallor dies 
on grim Auchindoun.

The fields under snow, 
we choose the risk to learn the charm 
of striking Tullochallum farm; 
and there, attempting to be warm, 
is Hay, whom we know.

His sad, shaggy head. 
He does not smile on being told 
of ducks like pale transparent gold; 
he'd not deny the wind was cold; 
had kelty been fed?
The goose-gaggle's strength
defined by cackling overhead
of broods on Kebnekajse bred
by one lithe bird a century led
in great shimmering length.

Or set out at noon;
or take the road by rosy light;
or woo the cool and velvet night
to gather fodder for the sight;
it all passes soon.

As cut off in time,
your history is soon compiled:
a flower observed; a playing child;
the hemispheric undefiled
where white cloudlets climb.

Why number days
when verdure at the height of day
torrentially rolls away
along the deep-descending Bray
and so into space;

and fond vision clings
to flattering lines where green earth heaves
above arterial clouds of leaves,
and never shock or gibe receives
or less worthy things?

Familiar, strange,
the line of man and utter need;
his well-aimed path of joy and greed;
by every pore to drink and bleed;
and hunger for change;

that each go his own,
and get what not another hath;
and jealously possess the path
from Challacombe to Simonsbath;
and each go alone.
Destiny's slave,  
and master of unnumbered fates;  
the minister of loves and hates,  
which neither stirs, nor neither waits,  
for magistrates, for runagates,  
nor mirthful, nor grave.

The known yet to know;  
a river gliding from and hence  
in utmost calm to thought and sense;  
the effort and its recompense  
at once ebb and flow.

The long-aged road  
is tough, resilient and young;  
becomingly abashed among  
the singing streams of earth, so sung;  
the scored, sacred road.

Its void's counterpart:  
its breadth with huddling forms replete,  
and ghosts of those these trudged to meet;  
incessant thunder of their feet  
and slow beating heart.

Some graveyards are gay;  
a wicket or a kissingstile  
invites the guest, with beck and smile;  
or Stride the dyke in easy style;  
but don't go away.

While bolt, bar and chain  
make private some, as though the gate  
were shut in irony or hate  
until the heir come, soon or late,  
and proudly again;

dim-shaded earth,  
dark cypresses and darker yews  
attribute thoughts to those who choose  
their place of rest, and do not use  
accents of mirth.

In dull undertones,  
with arms unequal to the end,  
the living and the dead contend;
keep silence; laugh, but try to bend
each other's bones.

The dead, numerous,
and many of the better sort,
have arguments beyond retort
we cannot merrily support:
Why not join with us?

So brisk living men
try varied gestures, to placate
what they can neither love nor hate,
to give the dead a certain state—
and well fastened pen.

An elbow of stream
is rampart to the man who dwells
(would he have said?) among the fells
and dales for him like nothing else
in this world or dream.

And James Hogg; so rough
to the outer eye; what snowdrops spread
a counterpane above the bed
where sober lies the farmer's head,
and well lodged enough.

The God's-acre charm
is aptly reached where, marked from birth,
rest shreds of much-disputed worth;
and tumbled troubled waves of earth
connote no alarm.

At times (thank the dead;
their soft, fierce grip upon their waste)
what, ruined, could not be replaced,
exists to please a man of taste,
if not overfed.

Thus: Greyfriars ground
squeezes the longest drop of dread,
of life and love of living bred;
ah, no one there lies shamming dead,
in long garments wound.
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The slow pollen showers.
Blue geranium to my knee
and scabiouses; chicory
with wondrous eyes is watching me.
O sweet God, the flowers.

This green; sultriness;
this swelling ecstasy of earth
is rising to unruly worth;
the clay were yet for length and girth
a clean sober dress.

To ends known, unknown,
perhaps where summits of desire
are touched by uncreated fire
and joy is as a just man's hire
the road passes on.

Magnae Deus potentiae
qui fertili natos aqua
partim relinis gurgiti
partim levatis in aera.

The Flying Fish  *

I

Myself am Hang the buccaneer,
whom children love and brave men fear,
master of courage, come what come,
master of craft, and called Sea-scum;

student of wisdom and waterways,
course of moons and birth of days;
to him in whose heart all things be
I bring my story of the sea.
The same am I as that sleek Hang
whose pattens along the stone quay clang
in sailing time, whose pile is high
on the beach when merchants come to buy.

Am he who cumbers his lowly hulk
with refuse bundles of feeble bulk;
turns sailor's eyes to the weather skies;
bows low to the Master of Merchandise;

who hoists his sails with the broken slats;
whose lean crew are scarcely food for his rats;
am he who creeps from tower-top ken
and utmost vision of all men:

ah then, am he who changeth line,
and which man knoweth that course of mine?
Am he, sir Sage, who sails to the sea
where an island and other wonders be.

After six days we sight the coast,
and my palace top, should a sailor boast;
sails rattle down; and then we ride,
mean junk and proud, by my palace side.

For there lives a junk in that ancient sea
where the gardens of Hang and his palace be,
o my fair junk! which once aboard
the pirate owns no living lord.

Its walls are painted water-green
like the green sea's self, both shade and sheen,
lest any mark it. The pirate's trade
is to hover swiftly and make afraid.

Its sails are fashioned of lithe bamboo,
all painted blue as the sky is blue,
so it be not seen till the prey be nigh.
Hang loves not that the same should fly.

In midst of the first a painted sun
gleams gold like the celestial yon;
in midst of the second a tender moon,
that a lover might kiss his flute and swoon;
or maid touch lute at sight of the third,
pictured with all the crystal herd;
so the silly ships are mazed at sight
of night by day and day by night.

For wind and water a goodlier junk
than any that ever sailed or sunk;
which junk was theirs; none fiercer than
my fathers since the fall of man.

So cotton rags lays Hang aside:
lays bare the sailor’s gristly hide;
and wraps his body in vests of silk;
ilk is as beautiful as ilk.

Then Hang puts on his ancient mail,
silver and black, and scale on scale
like dragons’, which his grandsire bore
before him, and his grandsire before.

He binds his legs with buskins grim,
tawny and gold for the pride of him;
his feet are bare like his who quelled
the dragon, his feet are feet of eld.

His head is brave with a lacquered casque,
the donning which is a heavy task;
its flaps are feathered like Yuen Yin;
‘tis strapped with straps of tiger-skin.

The passions of his fathers whelm
the heart of Hang when he wears their helm.
Then Hang grows wrinkled betwixt his eyes;
he frowns like a devil, devil-wise;

his eyeballs start; his mask is red
like his who at last shall judge the dead;
his nostrils gape; his mouth is the mouth
of the fish that swims in the torrid south;

his beard the pirate Hang lets flow;
he lays his hand on his fathers’ bow,
wherewith a cunning man of strength
might shoot an arrow the vessel’s length.
I have another of sun-red lac,
of a great man's height, so the string be slack;
the charge departs with a fiery clang;
'tis drawn with the foot, the foot of Hang.

Such house and harness become me, when
I wait upon the laden merchantmen;
'twixt tears and the sea, 'twixt brine and brine,
they shudder at sight of me and mine.

II

Of birds that fly in the farthest sea
six are stranger than others be:
under its tumble, among the fish,
six are a marvel passing wish.

First is a hawk, exceeding great;
he dwelleth alone; he hath no mate;
his neck is wound with a yellow ring;
on his breast is the crest of a former king.

The second bird is exceeding pale,
from little head to scanty tail;
she is striped with black on either wing,
which is rose-lined, like a princely thing.

Though small the bulk of the brilliant third,
of all blue birds 'tis the bluest bird;
they fly in bands; and, seen by day,
by the side of them the sky is grey.

I mind the fifth, I forget the fourth,
unless that it comes from the east by north.
The fifth is an orange white-billed duck;
he diveth for fish, like the god of Luck;

he hath never a foot on which to stand;
for water yields and he loves not land.
This is the end of many words
save one, concerning marvellous birds.

The great-faced dolphin is first of fish;
he is devil-eyed and devilish;
of all the fishes is he most brave,
he walks the sea like an angry wave.
The second the fishes call their lord;
himself a bow, his face is a sword;
his sword is armed with a hundred teeth,
fifty above and fifty beneath.

The third hath a scarlet suit of mail;
the fourth is naught but a feeble tail;
the fifth is a whip with a hundred strands,
and every arm hath a hundred hands.

The last strange fish is the last strange bird;
of him no sage hath ever heard;
he roams the sea in a gleaming horde
in fear of the dolphin and him of the sword.

He leaps from the sea with a silken swish;
he beats the air does the flying fish.
His eyes are round with excess of fright,
bright as the drops of his pinions’ flight.

In sea and sky he hath no peace;
for the five strange fish are his enemies;
and the five strange fowls keep watch for him;
they know him well by his crystal gleam.

Oftwhiles, sir Sage, on my junk’s white deck
have I seen this fish-bird come to wreck,
oftwhiles (fair deck) ’twixt bow and poop
have I seen this piteous sky-fish stoop.

Scaled bird, how his snout and gills dilate,
all quivering and roseate:
he pants in crystal and mother-of-pearl
while his body shrinks and his pinions furl.

His beauty passes like bubbles blown;
the white bright bird is a fish of stone;
the bird so fair, for its putrid sake,
is flung to the dogs in the junk’s white wake.

III

Have thought, son Pirate, some such must be
as the beast thou namest in yonder sea;
else, bring me a symbol from nature’s gear
of aspiration born of fear.
Hast been, my son, to the doctor's booth
some day when Hang had a qualm to soothe?
Hast noted the visible various sign
of each flask's virtue, son of mine?

Rude picture of insect seldom found,
of plant that thrives in marshy ground,
goblin of east wind, fog or draught,
sign of the phial's potent craft?

'Tis even thus where the drug is sense,
where wisdom is more than frankincense,
wit's grain than a pound of pounded bones,
where knowledge is redder than ruby stones.

Hast thou marked how poppies are sign of sin?
how bravery's mantle is tiger-skin?
how earth is heavy and dumb with care?
how song is the speech of all the air?

A tree is the sign most whole and sure
of aspiration plain and pure;
of the variation one must wend
in search of the sign to the sea's wild end.

Thy fish is the fairest of all that be
in the throbbing depths of yonder sea.
He says in his iridescent heart:
I am gorgeous-eyed and a fish apart;

my back hath the secret of every shell,
the Hang of fishes knoweth well;
scales of my breast are softer still,
the ugly fishes devise my ill.

He prays the Maker of water-things
not for a sword, but cricket's wings,
not to be one of the sons of air,
to be rid of the water is all his prayer;

all his hope is a fear-whipped whim;
all directions are one to him.
There are seekers of wisdom no less absurd,
son Hang, than thy fish that would be a bird.
Quatrains

**Incipit** *

Was born
   full of hope;
now I grope
forlorn.

**Reflections** *

Lullabylull.
   Overhead
hangs a bright gull.
   I lie dead.

**Boaster** *

Stood upright
   all day;
then lay
still all night.

**Prophecy** *

In hours of bliss
   (before I thought that I could die)
"were better to be dead" said I;
and so it is.

**Piety** *

My grave is decorated
   with garlands made of beads.
Myself am overrated;
   and simple are my needs.

**Optimist**

Too simply I took
the world as stated;
where nothing is straight,
and little crooked.
The Long Road 1926

King *

The little stream flows slowly
   in its narrow bed
beside the shrine where lowly
   lies my lofty head.

Fool *

Considering the life I led,
the deeds I did, the things I said,
I came not hither a day too soon.
I miss the phases of the moon.

Prelate *

The rest of you enjoy the earth;
   and drink the light, and taste the feast;
while I lie quietly deceased;
ordained to be so from my birth.

What a pity *

Men and boys are singing,
   clouds and birds . .
I am crouching, clinging,
   wanting words.

Seaman

The facts fulfil
   repeated wishes[.]
The supericies
is troubled still.

Laetitia

I feel so pretty
   as here I lie,
and sure that Letty
   will never die.
The Long Road 1926

The door shuts of itself
They whine and slam, the others; but where now I am the door is shut.

Foresight *
They are building themselves delectable dwellings (for cooings and yellings) with cupboards and shelves;

Oversight
Forgetting the shelf and the cupboard designed for the use of their kind and expression of self.

Legstretcher *
Utterly done with roads to be trod, all that the road beguiles, only in fancy stepping abroad, measuring miles on miles.

Summer holidays *
While others sit and count the waves or watch the shining hours I go not out to look at graves and cows and sheets of flowers.

Deo gratias
How my eyes were filled with light. How my ears were drunk with song. With what tremulous delight rippled perfumes on my tongue.
Barrowman *

If yet some shred of me remain
or axe or bowl prolong my tale
another finds and speeds the trail
beneath the sky, across the plain.

Seasons *

Summer and winter as I lie
with the roof so near the floor
never have sung the larks so high
nor the trees so flowered before.

Prosit

Full, you say, as a child’s eyes;
life as full as an English river.
Life, it’s true, isn’t all lies.
Brim it over, successful liver.

The Kennet

The waters all but lie, from bridge to bridge,
All unperturbed; slowly sinuous lines
curve to their final dip along the ridge
oak-masses break, or crown in one design.

And look! in all the level vastness, signs
of hidden channels, pools, a million blades;
and flowers flower-entwined; thick recline
heavily curling nenuphars in shade.

The pondweed leaves, in carpet-fashion spread,
are staunch beneath the feet of fleeing hens
the warning fisher’s flight has made afraid,
where all but air and water tangles dense.

These miniturely ripple in the wash
a vole upraises by its tiny splash.
The Night Nurse Goes Her Round

Droop under doves’ wings silent, breathing shapes
white coverlids dissimulate; in hope
of opiate aid to round the ledge where gapes
the sootblack gulf in which obtuse minds grope
for very nothing, vast and undefined,
in starless depths no astrolabe can probe.
The moving form, as doomed to pass and wind,
unwind and pass anew, in sleep-dyed robe
of firmamental silence more than hue,
waits the doorway of the tired’s escape
only. Fatigue gone on; I left behind
with moths’ feet, wordless whispering; or find
reality, white coiffe and scarlet cape;
and dreams are what a dream should be, or true.

Compunction

Feed me with the bread of tears,
overfill my cup;
pour for me to drink it up
vintage of the bitter years.

Sweep the glen the northern rain;
comb the moor the wind;
come the hours in which I sinned
all to memory again.

Strew with fear my late-sought bed;
sleep no better bring;
twist and wreck the wretched thing
till the pillow loath my head.

May the medicine that heals
only come too late;
and the world with all its weight
hang upon my weary heels.

Let my very friend be stern;
let his features cloud;
let him mutter half aloud:
Take the wages which you earn.
Enough of the World is Mine  *

Enough of the world is mine; more than the envious know. I have dug in a deeper mine than the depths where rubies glow; I have sailed in a fairer ship the rim of a vaster sea than sleep or companionship ever were sweet to me.