

MARK VAN DOREN

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FL 9782

READS FROM HIS COLLECTED AND NEW POEMS

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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MARK VAN DOREN

Collected and New Poems

Mark Van Doren now lives on an old Connecticut farm to which he retired from Columbia University in 1959. But he had spent much time there before that year -- summers, weekends in the spring and fall, Christmas whenever possible, and all of his sabbaticals. The first of these was in 1932-1933, when he lived there for sixteen months with his wife and two young sons. A record of this survives in his famous long poem, A Winter Diary, which recites all the details of a year he has always looked back to with nostalgia. The snow, the ponies, the woods, the fields, the frozen ground, the dog, the cats, the fireplace, the kerosene lamps by which late reading was done at night, the games, the trips to town, the troubles with the car, the visitors -- everything is here, in a work now to be found in his Narrative Poems (1964). No poem of Mark Van Doren's more completely illustrates his interest in every living thing, in every possible experience.

But he has not always lived in Connecticut (he bought this farm in 1923). His youth was spent in Illinois, at first on a farm and then in a neighboring town, Urbana, to which his father, a country doctor, had moved in order to be near good schools for his five sons. The University of Illinois was in this town, and all five of the sons, beginning with Carl, the oldest, studied there after attending the local elementary school and high school. Mark Van Doren left for New York in 1915, to do graduate work in English at Columbia and later to teach English at that university for nearly forty years. His residences then have been mainly three: Illinois, New York City, and Cornwall, Connecticut. He returns to Illinois whenever he can, for he has never ceased to love it; but his life has largely been spent elsewhere.

Poetry has been his lifelong occupation. He has taught it, he has criticized it, and above all he has written it. In addition to the many short poems in the volume Collected and New Poems he has written several long narrative poems and five verse plays. The first of his plays, The Last Days of Lincoln (1959), is only half in verse, however, since the leading character speaks prose. Mark Van Doren has also written more than a hundred short stories -- which he prefers to think of as poems also, though they are in prose. He considers poetry to be his life work -- poetry, and the

subject of it, life itself. In 1940 he was given the Pulitzer Prize for his Collected Poems of the previous year.

The range of his subjects is very wide: children, animals, people of every sort, day and night, sun and snow, love, memory, and the poets he particularly loves -- Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, Herrick, Thomas Hardy. His prose book, Shakespeare, is widely read in schools and colleges, as is his Introduction to Poetry and his book on epic poetry, The Noble Voice (now in paperback under the title Great Poems of Western Literature). He believes that students should read as many great books as they can, and he said so in his book Liberal Education, now frequently consulted. In other words, his subject matter is the life of the mind as well as the life of the senses; neither to him is more important than the other; both are necessary for a full life.

He likes to travel, he likes to be at home, he likes the city, he likes the country, he likes people, he likes animals (particularly cats), he likes life. And his poems prove this.

His wife, the novelist Dorothy Van Doren, has written about their life together in The Country Wife and The Professor and I. Mark Van Doren insists that he is a fictional character in both books, but he cannot deny the accuracy of many details.

The Autobiography of Mark Van Doren (1958) tells his story and that of his family and friends. It might be consulted for further information.

INTRODUCTION

The thirty-two poems in this album were selected by the author from a much greater number in Collected and New Poems. The first five of them:

O World
Morning Worship
Prophet
Undersong
The God of Galaxies

present views of the whole world considered as one thing. He believes that it is one thing, no matter how numerous and various its parts may

be; and he loves it, no matter how difficult that is. O World states the difficulty; Morning Worship names the parts, or at any rate attempts a list of those he would most miss; Prophet pays tribute to one who sees the truth of things and speaks it plainly; Undersong tells how existence organizes itself for the poet himself; and The God of Galaxies considers the problem posed by astronomy for one who would worship the maker, not of the world as it once was known, but of the innumerable universes which whirl in unimaginable space.

The next eight:

He Loves Me
The Bird Desire
Sonnet XXVIII
Soft, Soft, Soft
My Poor Love
The Sign in the Sky
Unresponsive
Woman Few of Words

are love poems, though their range over the subject is so wide as to make any generalization about them incomplete. He Loves Me deals with the incomprehensible fact of God's love for an individual who feels its force. The Bird Desire suggests that man's own love can become a god. Sonnet XXVIII celebrates love at first sight. Soft, Soft, Soft and My Poor Love speak -- or rather, sing -- for the humble lover whose loved one is far away. The Sign in the Sky tells a story of two lovers who ran to meet each other on a remarkable day. Unresponsive confesses a man's incapacity to be as articulate as the woman whom he loves, and who loves him, untiringly. Woman Few of Words speaks briefly for itself.

The next two:

The Deepest Dream
Born Brothers

are political in a broad sense. The Deepest Dream is of a country or a world whose governors have gone mad. Born Brothers accepts as an absolute the doctrine of equality, and says that any falling away from it leads to chaos.

The next three:

Dialogue in December
Civil War
This Amber Sunstream

are a group only to the extent that their success as poems has been widely recognized. Dialogue in December is a Christmas poem that takes its departure from the deep darkness of the winter solstice. Civil War represents the dead of 1861-1865 as still desiring to come home. This Amber Sunstream makes animate the last light that enters the west windows of a silent room in winter.

The next eight:

The Child at Winter Sunset
After Dry Weather
To a Child with Eyes
Goodnight
The Plague
Family Prime
Homer, Sidney, Philo
He's Coming

are concerned with children. The Child at Winter Sunset expresses the grief of a little girl who for the first time in her life watches a day die in the West. After Dry Weather welcomes long-needed rain in a city where barehead boys play under the eaves. To a Child with Eyes, an early poem, enumerates the wonders of the world which continue to be visible even though fairy tales are no longer to be believed. Goodnight announces the coming of moonlight into a bedroom where old or young -- it may not matter which -- can be soothed by its presence. The Plague is a dialogue between an old man and a small boy who keeps his distance because he fears that age is a disease which can be caught like any other. Family Prime raises the question through how much time a remembered happiness actually endured; in this case it is the happiness of the children in a family; the prime or climax of it seems long in memory, but may have been brief in fact. Homer, Sidney, Philo recites memories of three small Illinois towns which are stirred in the mind of a man who knew them long ago and now is passing through them on a train. He's Coming communicates the excitement of parents whose son has sent word that he is discharged from the Army and is about to take a train home from somewhere in the South.

The next two:

The First Snow of the Year
Sleep, Grandmother

are about old people remembering their youth. The First Snow of the Year is a conversation between an aged, ailing man and his more able-bodied wife; he recalls the winter day when they first kissed, and tries to discover how well she recalls it; her response, briefer than he might have liked, satisfies him nevertheless. Sleep, Grandmother is a lullaby for an old lady who rocks and remembers the time when her husband still lived and her children were young.

The next group:

Dunce Songs

stands quite by itself. The singer is a dunce only in the sense that he is simple in the extreme; he has no status in the world because he chooses to have none, and in nine songs the mastery of whose rhythms has been called "absolute" he makes this clear to anybody who will listen. Not that he cares whether anybody does, for in a sense he is singing to himself. Yet he sings for others also, in the

depths of their minds where they are simple too, as perhaps everyone secretly is. He would like to live in a world that was always light (1, 2, 3); he thinks he can become an animal (4); he has no enemies, and wonders if he should apologize for this (5); he has a sweetheart (6); he has no wife, but considers how it would be to have one (7); he has an old woman as poor as he is (8); and he has his own ideas about what it is that makes love last (9). These songs are the author's best-known lyrics; he has read them everywhere, always to responsive and delighted audiences.

The final group:

When the World Ends

Epitaph

Farewell and Thanksgiving

consists of three farewell poems. When the World Ends is a dream of universal death under a perpetual falling of autumn leaves. Epitaph requires no commentary. Farewell and Thanksgiving says good-by to the poet's muse, whom he asks to forgive him for not having written about every subject under the sun.

"A master of contemporary poetry." --
Dudley Fitts, The New York Times.

"Some of the best and most enduring poetry of this century." -- Allen Tate.

"Grandeur and power." -- Christian Science Monitor.

"One of the best American poets now writing."
-- David Daiches.

"There is a fearful power in his poetry that could only derive from an experience touching the roots of the poet's being."
-- Babette Deutsch.

"How good it is to find a poet who can write about happiness. His happiness is not a matter of circumstance; rather, it is something achieved, and it has more than a little to do with both the goodness and the wisdom that illuminate the poems.... The Dunce Songs are marvels of both evanescence and concentration. They suggest the luminous moments that are Shakespeare's songs, and also the cunning of the mad speeches. The mastery of rhythms is absolute." --
Henry Rago.

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Side A, Band 1

O World

O world, my friend, my foe,
My deep dark stranger, doubtless
Unthinkable to know;
My many and my one,
Created when I was and doomed to go
Back into the same sun;

O world, my thought's despair,
My heart's companion, made by love
So intimate, so fair,
Stay with me till I die—
O air,
O stillness, O great sky.

Morning Worship

I wake and hear it raining.
Were I dead, what would I give
Lazily to lie here,
Like this, and live?

Or better yet: birdsong,
Brightening and spreading—
How far would I come then
To be at the world's wedding?

Now that I lie, though,
Listening, living,
(Oh, but not forever,
Oh, end arriving)

How shall I praise them:
All the sweet beings
Eternally that outlive
Me and my dying?

Mountains, I mean; wind, water, air;
Grass, and huge trees; clouds, flowers,
And thunder, and night.

Turtles, I mean, and toads; hawks, herons, owls;
Graveyards, and towns, and trout; roads, gardens,
Red berries, and deer.

Lightning, I mean, and eagles; fences; snow;
Sunrise, and ferns; waterfalls, serpents,
Green islands, and sleep.

Horses, I mean; butterflies, whales;
Mosses, and stars; and gravelly
Rivers, and fruit.

Oceans, I mean; black valleys; corn;
Brambles, and cliffs; rock, dirt, dust, ice;
And warnings of flood.

How shall I name them?
And in what order?
Each would be first.
Omission is murder.

Maidens, I mean, and apples; needles; leaves;
Worms, and planets, and clover; whirlwinds; dew;
Bulls; geese—

Stop. Lie still.
You will never be done.
Leave them all there,
Old lover. Live on.

Prophet

He did not say anything utterly strange,
At any rate to a thoughtful person.
Why then do we honor him, and call him prophet?

Because he said what we had always understood
When we were alone, when we were thoughtful.
We honor him because he made us remember,

Why, that we ourselves were serious once,

That we were children, and loved peace.
He gave us again the quietness of our minds.

The only strange thing was, his wild look.
But of course it was terrible to be where he had been:
To have dug those utterly simple sentences out of the
soul's grave.

Side A, Band 2

Undersong

1

In wonderment I walk to music pouring
Out of so dark a source it makes no sound:
Not waterfalls, not wind, not eagles soaring
On wings that whistle insult to the ground;
Not insect whine at which the flower rejoices;
Not instruments, not voices;
Not, taciturn, those numbers where they wheel
While the fixed stars, creation's counterpoises,
Sing in deep throats a song of commonweal
More ancient than mankind, than beast or bird
Coeval with the Word:
No, none of these is what I overhear
In wonderment, in walking every day.
A harmony more hidden, as midway
Of the whole world it hums, and yet more near,
More secret in my ear,
Keeps coming to me, coming, and I know
As long as I go forth it shall be so.

2

Each day I walk in is made slyly one
By symmetries whose names I never seek.
For if I did, and found them, and were done
With listening, with looking, and could speak
Love's language with the subtlety they do,
It might no more be true.
For it is music's language, meant to please

No mind except its own, and if I too
 Attempted it the melody would cease;
 As birds do in the forest if a foot
 Too suddenly is put
 On pathways saved for silence, or for such
 Plumed echoes as are proper to the place.
 The music is not mine in any case;
 I only let it come, by sight, by touch,
 As often as by hearing; though the ghost
 Of sound is innermost;
 And mightiest, as if the great one there
 Had burst his heart and scattered it in air.

3

Down it falls, that wild unfigured tune
 Which nevertheless reorders all my earth.
 I walk, and every acre is bestrewn
 With witnesses of morning in slow birth,
 And of the sky's contentment that things be
 Just as they are to see.
 Different were deadly, something sings
 In a low voice as of a leafy tree
 Preoccupied with shade, and two sure wings
 That aim at it to enter by and by
 When the half-day shall die,
 And perfect sunlight shall hang due above
 Like a dark lantern swinging. Something says,
 Barely aloud, in less than sentences:
 Just as they are, together in their love,
 The whirlwind, the dove,
 The contraries. Listen. That rough chord:
 It is his breathing, it is our overlord.

4

In times of tempest when disorder seems
 Order itself, the very rule of motion,
 And moaning as they bend, the trees and streams,
 In horror at their own perverse devotion
 To chaos come alive, strain not to shatter
 Form, and the first matter
 Of which all possibility was made;
 But then the roar increases, and winds batter
 Winds above the world as fields are flayed
 And savage grasses, blowing, strip the bones
 Even of sunk stones;
 In times of tumult when the lines should snap
 That lead like silk from note to kissing note,
 And the sweet song should strangle in the throat,
 There it still is, miles above thunderclap,
 As audible as when on halcyon days
 It mastered the same ways;
 Compounded of all tones, including these
 Of stricken ground and hideous green seas.

5

And if there be those who would mock me, saying:
 Music? None is here save in your head;
 Noises, yes, delectable, dismaying,
 But not in measure, as if more were said
 Than owls and larks will tell you, or mad crows,
 Or the wind-ravished rose,
 Or human chatter, changeless year by year;
 Then soberly I say to such as those:
 The sound is one, and is not sinister.
 It is an honest music through and through.
 And so the chatter, too,
 And so the silences that wait sometimes
 Like a tired giant thinking, so they all
 Return and go, then come again and fall,
 Evenly, unevenly, as rhymes
 Rival the pure chimes
 Of never-ending truth, that for so long
 Has sung to such as me this undersong.

Side A, Band 3

The God of Galaxies

The god of galaxies has more to govern
 Than the first men imagined, when one mountain
 Trumpeted his anger, and one rainbow,

Red in the east, restored them to his love.
 One earth it was, with big and lesser torches,
 And stars by night for candles. And he spoke
 To single persons, sitting in their tents.

Now streams of worlds, now powdery great whirlwinds
 Of universes far enough away
 To seem but fog-wisps in a bank of night
 So measureless the mind can sicken, trying—
 Now seas of darkness, shoreless, on and on
 Encircled by themselves, yet washing farther
 Than the last triple sun, revolving, shows.

The god of galaxies—how shall we praise him?
 For so we must, or wither. Yet what word
 Of words? And where to send it, on which night
 Of winter stars, of summer, or by autumn
 In the first evening of the Pleiades?
 The god of galaxies, of burning gases,
 May have forgotten Leo and the Bull.

But God remembers, and is everywhere.
 He even is the void, where nothing shines.
 He is the absence of his own reflection
 In the deep gulf; he is the dusky cinder
 Of pure fire in its prime; he is the place
 Prepared for hugest planets: black idea,
 Brooding between fierce poles he keeps apart.

Those altitudes and oceans, though, with islands
 Drifting, blown immense as by a wind,
 And yet no wind; and not one blazing coast
 Where thought could live, could listen—oh, what word
 Of words? Let us consider it in terror,
 And say it without voice. Praise universes
 Numberless. Praise all of them. Praise Him.

He Loves Me

That God should love me is more wonderful
 Than that I so imperfectly love him.
 My reason is mortality, and dim
 Senses; his—oh, insupportable—
 Is that he sees me. Even when I pull
 Dark thoughts about my head, each vein and limb
 Delights him, though remembrance in him, grim
 With my worst crimes, should prove me horrible.

And he has terrors that he can release.
 But when he looks he loves me; which is why
 I wonder; and my wonder must increase
 Till more of it shall slay me. Yet I live,
 I live; and he has never ceased to give
 This glance at me that sweetens the whole sky.

The Bird Desire

I took my gun,
 I walked a mile,
 And shot and killed
 The bird desire.

Still it flew.
 I shot again.
 It fell to ground.
 Desire was dead.

What then is this
 That dips so near,
 And on not two
 But twenty wings?

No, a hundred.
 Thousands now.
 Where shall I hide?
 Should I be proud?
 I gave a mortal
 Thing this life.
 I made a god.
 He multiplies.

Side A, Band 4

XXVIII

Never to be renewed or to increase,
 And never to be changed from what it was:
 The love that was the maker of this lease
 Was love-upon-first-sight, whom all the laws
 Of happiness obey, and kingdoms coming
 Choose to be the glory of their thrones.
 He is the oldest love, he is the humming
 Of these incessant bees among my bones;
 He is the senses' king; my youngest thought
 He molds before I know it has been born;
 He is the flesh's despot; the inwrought,
 Deep joy; or in my side the sudden thorn.
 Oh, strange that on that day I was so strong,
 Bearing him all at once; and now so long!

Soft, Soft, Soft

Soft, soft, soft
 Is her gazing when I leave her and am gone;
 When I leave her;
 Soft is her coming, coming where I am,
 By sunlight or by moonlight, halfway around the world.

Soft is my truelove's
 Looking when she listens, listens to my name;
 Just listens;
 Soft is how she ever is, coming, staying.
 By sleepy night, by sleepy noon, my fair love.

Strong, strong, strong
 Is her softness that will never, never change;
 Never change;
 As water to be water, as air being air,
 Firm, firm, firm is the purpose of my love.
 But never, never hard
 Is the looking of my love, lonesome love,
 When I come;
 Soft is the waiting, the waiting of her eyes
 Halfway around the water world and sweet dry land.

My Poor Love

Keep up your humming, west wind, and your silly
 Songs, you birds; and all you trees, half bent
 With sound, keep whispering to the grass, the ground.

Keep noisy, world; yet leave one little crack
 For silence to slip through you, one thin cleft,
 One hollow vein that my poor love can follow.
 My poor love, it cannot cry—not loud
 It cannot, nor so sweet as those small sparrows,
 Piping, nor so warm as her eyes, weeping.

There she waits—oh, I know where—and truly
 Listens—O my love, she truly leans
 And listens; for my silence here she listens.

Let it go then, wind and thunder, let it
 Pass between you, songbirds, let it pierce you,
 Trees, like words upon the wing—oh, these.

Side A, Band 5

The Sign in the Sky

Look, he said aloud,
 My love across the Hollow in your father's
 House—look, look! The sky is all one blackest cloud
 Filled suddenly with fire, soft fire.
 Look, my love, look now!

This was long ago,
 And the man is dead. But on that day of days
 She too was at her window, wondering; and so
 She saw—and cried to him across the Hollow,
 Look, dear love, look now!

Time even then was old,
 And she is dead. But there has never been
 Another day like that one, when a rain of gold,
 Falling without falling, woke two lovers:

Now! Let it be now!

They were but neighbors then,
And both are dead. But at that burning hour,
With all the world around them rosy red, they ran
And ran, and met midway the Hollow meadows:
Now! My darling, now!

The moment never stays.
Nobody now remembers them as one
From that day on to death, that darkest day of days
When suddenly high fire consumed their doubt
And now! each answered, now!

Unresponsive

I love you as a bee loves
Plums. Please look at me, she said.
All these years, and almost never
Have you even turned your head.

My life! But he couldn't say it so she heard.
This busy frown, this stiff
Walking away from the one sound
That moved him most—
I love you more than Jupiter or Mars—
It was perverse,
Or worse.

Her very eyes were stars,
And he did not look up.
Her voice was purest music,
And he stood like stone.
When would it break out of him,
The fire of his delight?
Some time it might.

Be careful, though, after so many years.
She is still with me, warm and bright,
By day, by night.
Better not step too suddenly
Out of twilight.

Woman Few of Words

Lady, excellently brief
(Let me be too),
The sweet things you say
Are salt also,
For true.

It takes my very breath, the mixing,
As if I tried
To be both hot and cold
Together; lived,
And died.

As if within a summer sky
Some lightning hid;
Not to be found except
As on love's day
You did.

Side A, Band 6

The Deepest Dream

The deepest dream is of mad governors.
Down, down we feel it, till the very crust
Of the world cracks, and where there was no dust,
Atoms of ruin rise. Confusion stirs,
And fear; and all our thoughts—dark scavengers—
Feed on the center's refuse. Hope is thrust
Like wind away, and love sinks into lust
For merest safety, meanest of levelers.

And then we wake. Or do we? Sleep endures
More than the morning can, when shadows lie
Sharper than mountains, and the cleft is real
Between us and our kings. What sun assures
Our courage, and what evening by and by
Descends to rest us, and perhaps to heal?

Born Brothers

Equality is absolute or no.
Nothing between can stand. We are the sons
Of the same sire, or madness breaks and runs
Through the rude world. Ridiculous our woe
If single pity does not love it. So
Our separate fathers love us. No man shuns
His poorest child's embrace. We are the sons
Of such, or ground and sky are soon to go.

Nor do born brothers judge, as good or ill,
Their being. Each consents and is the same,
Or suddenly sweet winds turn into flame
And floods are on us—fire, earth, water, air
All hideously parted, as his will
Withdraws, no longer fatherly and there.

Dialogue in December

In so much dark no light is little.
But can light be at the end of the year?
Only listen. It will come.
And put out dying? And put out fear?
Yes, but listen. Good heart, listen.
I do, I do—I see, I hear.

That star is enough in this much night.
It glitters. But a child has cried.
He is the first one in the world.
Even the old world, that died?
Even the new—he is all the living.
And all the dead—are they satisfied?

Listen and look. Is there any weeping?
Only for comfort, only for joy.
Only for love. But the child that was crying—
He is a beautiful, strange boy.
He is little and weak, this lord of the world.
But oh, too strong, too strong to destroy.

Side B, Band 1

Civil War

The country is no country I have seen,
And no man goes there who is now alive, and no man
Ever is going to leave there. But they try;
Waving a million beards that on pale faces
Blacken with time and spread.
It is a field of bodies of blue boys,
And grey boys, grown half way into the ground.
The wind is dark that sways them;
All of them bending with it, south or north,
All of them straining here; but no one knowing
Of any fellow by who gazes too.
It is a field of legless bearded boys
With bright unnecessary buttons on their breasts,
And skirts of coats that hold them in the sod.
The bodies twist,
The circular, small eyes are mad with being;
A million mouths fly open without sound;
But none can tear his coat up, that must come
With roots and worms or come not up at all.

Away in Carolina, Maine, Wisconsin,
Boys who kept their legs walked long and long.
They set their feet in furrows, or in aisles;
They strolled with girls, were taken, and were fathers;
Had old companionship; and last were covered
Quietly with smooth boards, and grass, and stone.
Stiffly now they hold society;
Forever thus they lie without a want.

In the forbidden country where the sod
Grows down and down, with restless blue roots, grey roots,
In the dark windy land no one can leave,
Separate necks yearn homeward;
Separate hungry shoulders pull and pull.
Wind, oh wind, I did not come to stay;
I must be there tomorrow, not to miss—
But the dark wind is earless, and the day

Is endless, and the grasses hiss and hiss.

This Amber Sunstream

This amber sunstream, with an hour to live,
Flows carelessly, and does not save itself;
Nor recognizes any entered room—
This room; nor hears the clock upon a shelf,
Declaring the lone hour; for where it goes
All space in a great silence ever flows.

No living man may know it till this hour,
When the clear sunstream, thickening to amber,
Moves like a sea, and the sunk hulls of houses
Let it come slowly through, as divers clamber,
Feeling for gold. So now into this room
Peer the large eyes, unopen to their doom.

Another hour and nothing will be here.
Even upon themselves the eyes will close.
Nor will this bulk, withdrawing, die outdoors
In night, that from another silence flows.
No living man in any western room
But sits at amber sunset round a tomb.

Side B, Band 2

The Child at Winter Sunset

The child at winter sunset,
Holding her breath in adoration of the peacock's tail
That spread its red—ah, higher and higher—
Wept suddenly. "It's going!"

The great fan folded;
Shortened; and at last no longer fought the cold, the dark.
And she on the lawn, comfortless by her father,
Shivered, shivered. "It's gone!"

"Yes, this time. But wait,
Darling. There will be other nights—some of them
even better."

"Oh, no. It died." He laughed. But she did not.
It was her first glory.

Laid away now in its terrible
Lead coffin, it was the first brightness she had ever
Mourned. "Oh, no, it's dead." And he her father
Mourned too, for more to come.

After Dry Weather

If the people under that portico
Are happy, and point at the pattering drops;
If barehead boys are parading below
Musical eaves of tall house-tops;

If you lean out of the window here,
Contented so with the pavement's shine,
And laugh as the covers of cabs appear
With passengers in them dressed to dine;

If all of the stones that we can see
Are licking their lips, that waited so long,
A meadow I know to the north of me
By a hundred miles has caught the song.

I am certain the clover has lifted its head
For dark, intemperate draughts of rain.
Once even I thought I had heard the tread
Of a plunging horse with a sodden mane.

To a Child with Eyes

Footprints now on bread or cake
Merely are what a mouse can make.
You cannot open any door
And find a brownie on the floor,
Or on the window where he went,
A fork, a spoon, a finger-dent.
Farmers climbing from the mow
Surprise no imp beneath a cow,

Milking madly. Breakfast bells
Are never tinkled from dry wells.
The commonwealth is gone that shut
Its felons in a hazelnut.
Forests are no longer full
Of fairy women who can pull
A leaf around them, and can dance
Upon the very breath of plants.
River rocks are bare of men
Who wring their beards and dive again.
Is there nothing left to see?
There is the squirrel. There is the bee.
There is the chipmunk on the wall,
And the first yellow every fall.
There is the hummingbird, the crow.
There is the lantern on the snow.
There is the new-appearing corn.
There is the colt a minute born.
Run and see, and say how many.
There are more if there is any.

Good Night

This moonlight lies
Like a lovely death
On the darkening eyes,
On the yielded breath

Of the earth, that turns
So quietly now;
Letting its burns
Be soothed somehow

In the widening bloom,
In the tender blight.
It has entered our room.
We sleep tonight.

Side B, Band 3

The Plague

"Little boy, what ails me, that you walk
So fearfully and far around?
You stare at this white hair
As at a ghost come out of ground.
I am not dead," the old man said;
And smiled, and frowned.

"Oh no, but it is catching, what you have."
He watched him from the windward side.
"I run like anyone;
I keep the distance good and wide."
So you ought, the old man thought,
And inly sighed.

Outly, though, he laughed and looked away.
"Little doctor, this disease—
You know it is but snow
And frosty blood and wits afreeze.
Yet not for you"—he searched him through—
"Save by degrees."

Family Prime

Our golden age was then, when lamp and rug
Were one and warm, were globe against the indifferent
Million of cold things a world contains.
None there. A light shone inward, shutting out
All that was not corn yellow and love young.

Like winter bears we moved, our minds, our bodies
Jointed to fit the roundness of a room:
As sluggish, and as graceful, whether couch
Or table intercepted, or if marbles
Clicked on the floor and hunched us into play.

How long? I do not know. Before, a blank.
And after, all this oldness, them and me,
With the wind slicing in from everywhere,
And figures growing small. I may remember
Only a month of this. Or a God's hour.

Yet I remember, and my father said
He did: the moment spherical, that age
Fixes and gilds; eternity one evening
Perfect, such as maybe my own sons,
And yours, will know the taste of in their time.

Homer, Sidney, Philo

Homer, Sidney, Philo,
Strung along the Wabash:
Beads in the black land.
Corn grows, but no change
In these little towns.

After forty springtimes
Nothing to look out at.
Seven miles, eight miles—
Strangers in the blue express
Yawn and despise them.

So would I, certainly,
Except that I remember
Homer Park on hot days.
We took the interurban.
We kissed in the shade.

Sidney was our junction;
Six trains a week there.
We rode the dusty local—
Opening all windows—
Then to Detroit.

Philo we drove through,
Cold nights, with horses.
Once there was a dim lamp
Showing, and my father
Stopped for oyster stew.

After forty autumns,
Only I am different.
Here they are as always;
They cannot remember
Themselves as I do.

He's Coming

He's coming. He just called. Said he was coming,
Maybe, right away. O southern river,
Kiss that trestle sweetly,
Rub that upright gently,
And keep no train from home.

He's coming. Said all papers would be signed
By Sunday. O you honeysuckle timber,
Wrap those tulips, redbuds,
Hold those oaks from falling
Down on the right of way.

He's coming. Said expect him. There! what music
Rails already make, and pounded switches:
Wheels inside the south wind.
Where? O you the south wind,
Keep soft and strong today.

Side B, Band 4

The First Snow of the Year

The old man, listening to the careful
Steps of his old wife as up she came,
Up, up, so slowly, then her slippered
Progress down the long hall to their door—

Outside the wind, wilder suddenly,
Whirled the first snow of the year; danced
Round and round with it, coming closer
And closer, peppering the panes; now here she was—

Said "Ah, my dear, remember?" But his tray
Took all of her attention, having to hold it
Level. "Ah, my dear, don't you remember?"
"What?" "That time we walked in the white woods."

She handed him his napkin; felt the glass
To make sure the milk in it was warm;
Sat down; got up again; brought comb and brush
To tidy his top hair. "Yes, I remember."

He wondered if she saw now what he did.
Possibly not. An afternoon so windless,
The huge flakes rustled upon each other,
Filling the woods, the world, with cold, cold—

They shivered, having a long way to go,
And then their mittens touched; and touched again;
Their eyes, trying not to meet, did meet;
They stopped, and in the cold held out their arms
Till she came into his: awkwardly,
As girl to boy that never kissed before.
The woods, the darkening world, so cold, so cold,
While these two burned together. He remembered,

And wondered if she did, how like a sting,
A hidden heat it was; while there they stood
And trembled, and the snow made statues of them.
"Ah, my dear, remember?" "Yes, I do."

She rocked and thought: he wants me to say something.
But we said nothing then. The main thing is,
I'm with him still; he calls me and I come.
But slowly. Time makes sluggards of us all.

"Yes, I do remember." The wild wind
Was louder, but a sweetness in her speaking
Stung him, and he heard. While round and round
The first snow of the year danced on the lawn.

Sleep, Grandmother

Sleep, grandmother, sleep.
The rocking chair is ready to go,
And harness bells are hung in a row
As once you heard them
In soft snow.

Sleep, grandmother, sleep.
Your sons are little and silly again;
Your daughters are five and seven and ten;
And he that is gone
Was not gone then.

Sleep, grandmother, sleep.
The sleigh comes out of the winter woods
And carries you all in boots and hoods
To town for candy
And white dress goods.

Sleep, grandmother, sleep.
The rocking chair is old as the floor,
But there he nods, at the noisy door,
For you to be dancing
One dance more.

Side B, Band 5

Dunce Songs

1

Where is the bell, the horn,
I hear as I go by,
Go by the invisible wall
That holds up half the sky,
The sky whose other half
Falls down like gold wheat chaff
And sprinkles all the air,
And powders my dull hair?
So people cry and cry:
Who wears that glittery crown,
That crown? And I say I.
Oh, what a falling down
As I go by, go by.

If rain rose,
And leaves fell upward—
Oh, me, oh, them—
Sky-high together.

That is my house.
Here I am homesick.
Bright, oh, bright,
Forever, ever.
Raindrops, leaves
Round me like mica.
Snow whirls
In a ball of water.

Give it a shake.
That's me in the middle.
White, oh, white—
See now? I am laughing.

Some day,
When the great clock
Of dawn strikes, and keeps on striking—
What's gone wrong, the president will shout, why doesn't
somebody,
Somebody stop it?—

That day,
When the music starts
That no man ever heard before—
Bong, bong, the bells up there, whish, whish,
The windy singing—

That time
Will be my time:
No minutes, years, no coming, going—
Night, poor night, laid out in white—oh, my soul,
The death of darkness—

Whee, whee,
The waking birds.
(Yet I do pity them a little—
Come close, I'm whispering—yes,
I too will miss their brave
Songs at sunset.)

Then I'll be four-footed,
And modest with fur.
All over, all under,
Seemly and still.

Then I'll be patient:
A part of the ground.
I will go slowly,
And lowly—oh, sweet,

Then I'll be one of them
He that made all
Looks after the longest,
And tenderest loves.

Then I'll be quiet—
You can be quick—
And lie down all summer,
All winter, and sleep.

I have no enemy.
If I did,
I would wait for him, in the black dark, and thwack him—
Ha! on the head.

Or else I would grow
A green worm in my heart
And feed it all day till the strength of its poison
Was death to the world.

Yes, but I have none.

All are my lovers—
Harry, and Jack, and even the great ones,
That cause the long wars,
All are my little
Sweet friends that I wait for,
In the warm sun, and stroke them, stroke them—
Ha, my poor head!

Her hand in my hand,
Soft as the south wind,
Soft as a colt's nose,
Soft as forgetting;

Her cheek to my cheek,
Red as the cranberry,
Red as a mitten,
Red as remembering—

Here we go round like raindrops,
Raindrops,
Here we go round
So snug together,

Oh, but I wonder,
Oh, but I know,
Who comforts like raisins,
Who kisses like snow.

If I had a wife
I would love her as kings
Loved queens in the old days, or as princes
Maidens,
Met in the dew, by a stile, of a morning—
"How do you do, my pretty?"
And all of that.

If I had a wife
I would come home sometimes
Dressed like a stranger, and when she stared,
"Lady,"
I'd say, and woo her in wonder—
"How can there be such shining?"
And all of that.

If I had a wife
I would never be done
With remembering how it is now when, oh,
I am lonesome,
And no one is here but my dog and my cat—
"Well, old boys! Hungry?"
And all of that.

Pepper and salt
And summer savory—
Those are for luckier tables and tongues
Than my old woman
And I have.

The sun and the wind,
Those are our seasoning;
With maybe nine drops of rain on a Thursday—
Yes, my old woman's
A smart one.

She holds up her bonnet
Just when He is looking—
Oh, the love in His eyes, oh, the millions of tears.
Even my old woman
Is weeping.

Love me little, love me long,
Then we neither can be wrong:
You in giving, I in taking;
There is not a heart breaking
But remembers one touch,
Or maybe seven, of too much.

Love me more than halfway, though.
Let me think, then let me know.
And I promise you the same:
A little wild, a little tame;
Lest it ever seem long:
Tick, tock, ding, dong.

Side B, Band 6

When the World Ends

When the world ends it is too much to hope,
And yet I do, that neither knife nor rope,
Nor sudden flame, nor worse than sudden freeze,
Is executioner. No less than these
Implacable, what if gold autumn came
And stayed till it was weary—spread the same
Cool hectic over waters and wild boughs
That now arrives for but a week's carouse;
Then winter? What if such a wonder fall
Kept on as if it were the end, the all?
What if it were, and centuries of red
So flushed each field and roof and river bed
That death itself lay down, and nothing died
Till all things did, beneath a shower as wide
As oceans of together-dropping leaves?
What if it were, and still no late reprieves
Canceled the utter end? I do not keep
That hope; and yet I dream of this slow sleep,
This indolent, this all but evermore
October such as never came before.

Epitaph

Let this be true, that I have loved
All men and things both here and gone;
But most the men whose love surpassed
My love, and so lives on and on.

Farewell and Thanksgiving

Whatever I have left unsaid
When I am dead,
O Muse, forgive me. You were always there,
Like light, like air,
Those great good things
Of which the least bird sings,
So why not I? Yet thank you even then,
Sweet Muse. Amen.

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