SELECTED POEMS

by
Hazel Hall

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These poems were previously published in three volumes by Hazel Hall: ***Curtains***, ***Walkers***, and ***Cry of Time***.

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Contents

Introduction by *Beth Bentley* iii

I. from ***Curtains*** (1921)

Floor of a Room 1
The Hand-Glass 2
Stairways 3
Counterpanes 4
Unseen 5
Shadows 6
Ecstasy 7
Cowardice 8
The Answer 9
Sands 10
Monograms 11
Mending 13
Seams 14
A Baby's Dress 15
Lingerie 16
Filet Crochet 17
Summer Sewing 18
Made of Crêpe de Chine 19
Instruction 20
The Listening Macaws 21
After Embroidering 22
Late Sewing 23

II. from ***Walkers*** (1923)

Walkers at Dusk 27
Middle-Aged 28

III. from ***Cry of Time*** (1928)

White Day's Death 31
Inheritance 32
Light Sleep 33
Rain 34
For a Woman Grown Cold 35
For a Broken Needle 36
Woman Death 37
The Relinquisher 39

Introduction

There are a number of reasons why poets fall into obscurity after enjoying initial recognition, setting aside the question of fad or fashion. A poet may disappear from public view because of a limited output, extended residence in a foreign country, or a lack of influential friends in the literary world. American poets as different as Trumbull Stickney, Laura Riding, and Weldon Kees all suffered varying degrees of neglect after having enjoyed early success.

Hazel Hall, a poet of the early twenties, also had a long period of obscurity after relative distinction. Her three short volumes of verse—the last posthumous—were never reprinted. Her poems disappeared from anthologies sometime in the thirties, and only an occasional study mentions her name.

Hall had an exceptionally short period of productivity. Born in 1886, she published her first poem at the age of thirty, her first book at thirty-five. In her peak publishing year of 1923, however, she had more than forty-five poems published in such magazines as ***Poetry***, ***Dial***, ***Harpers***, ***Yale Review***, ***The Nation***, ***Literary Review***, ***Lyric***, ***Contemporary Verse***, and ***Bookman***. And such diverse critics as William Troy, Ridgely Torrence, Clement Stone, and Harriet Monroe found high praise for her poetry. Two collections of poems were published while she lived, ***Curtains*** (New York: John Lane Co., 1921), and ***Walkers*** (New York: Dodd, Mead Co., 1923). Dutton published her posthumous book, ***Cry of Time***, in 1928, four years after her death.

The most likely cause for her neglect, however, was not this relatively small output; it was her sequestered life. Hazel Hall was an invalid, confined to a wheelchair from the age of twelve after a bout with scarlet fever. Her days were spent in an upstairs room of a large house at 52 Lucretia Place in Portland, Oregon. She never left this room. Although she corresponded with admirers such as William Braithwaite of the ***Boston Transcript***, who published her poems in ***Contemporary Verse***, Harold Vinal, who invited her to become a contributing editor of ***Voices***, and Harriet Monroe, who awarded her the Young Poet's Prize from ***Poetry*** magazine in 1921, she had no literary friends.

There was little literary activity in Portland after World War I compared to that burgeoning in such cities as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. Hall hoped vainly for a visit from another Western poet, Vachel Lindsay, who was living in Spokane, and was crushed when his visit did not materialize. Her correspondence with editors was modest and reticent. With friends, too, her relationships were limited. She lived with her mother and sister, who worked, and Hazel herself labored to help support the small family. She took in sewing, or rather, needlework, a more genteel occupation though more demanding, since it consisted of the close work of embroidery, hem-stitching, monogramming,

and applique. This, too, set her apart from the other women poets of her generation, few of whom found it necessary to work for a living. The needlework which was to inspire some of her most unique poems was responsible for the sharp diminution of her eyesight in 1921, which forced her to give up not only her sewing but much of her reading. In her isolation, she was thrown back almost entirely on her own imagination and sensibility.

Hazel Hall's lifespan, 1886 to 1924, places her in a group named "Interim poets" by Zaturenska and Gregory in their ***History of American Poetry from 1900 till 1940***. Such poets as Lizette Woodworth Reese, Adelaide Crapsey, Louise Guiney, and Sara Teasdale fall into this category. Sometimes called Georgian, these poets wrote in traditional modes, heavily dependent on quatrains and hymnbook metrics. But even though Hall's prosody places her among these refined and somewhat limited poets, her subject matter, strength of character, and realism advance her into more modern company.

Faced with the realities of illness, pain, poverty, and loneliness, Hall responded not with the sentimentality typical of her generation, but with irony and detachment. She succumbed neither to the easy optimism and religious bromides of the Georgians, nor to the more sophisticated and often heavy-handed worldliness of such poets as Elinor Wylie and Edna St. Vincent Millay. The intensity of her emotion as well as the genuineness of it make her work as vital today as when it was written. The somewhat affected gloom or "tristesse" that pervades Teasdale's poetry cannot stand up against Hall's perceptive insights into the lives of working women, as well as the understated despair that shaped and pruned her last poems.

In her first book, ***Curtains***, Hall began with poems about her immediate environment. Cloistered as she was, her room was her world. She tells about using a hand glass at her window to extend her view into the street: "I am holding up a mirror / To look at life; in my hand-glass / I see a strange, hushed street below me / Where people pass. / The street is coloured like a picture." But the picture does not satisfy her: "Looking at life in a mirror / Is a distortion. I must see / Through the paint the flimsy canvas, / O eyes that must learn from a mirror, / Search for dust and bitterness!"

It is in "Needlework," the second section of this book, that Hall shows the qualities that mark her as an original. She writes about sewing the way Theodore Roethke wrote about greenhouses, in poems distinguished by emotional intensity, associative insights, and sense perceptions fresh and acute as those of a child. Through the tactile sense especially she intuits a range of experience otherwise denied her. In "Lingerie," she writes of "the cool-finger touch of thin linen, / Yards of soft, folded nainsook / a piece of lawn / marbled with light," and of

> the delicate pleasure
> Of white-handed women

Who like to touch smooth linen handkerchiefs,
And of the baby's tactual surprise
In closing its fist
Over a handful of nainsook,
And even something of the secret pride of the girl
As the folds of her fine lawn nightgown
Breathe against her body.

Hall's frank enjoyment of the sensuous is different in degree and kind from that expressed in poems written by the emancipated women of the twenties. They wrote about their love affairs, but seldom about sensual pleasures. Hall's physical impairment freed her from such hypocrisies. But these poems are never purely sensual; the immediacy of her experiences catapults her imagination into others' lives. In "A Baby's Dress," her associations lead her far beyond the conventional: "It is made of finest linen—/ Sheer as wasp-wings," she begins, "All overrun with fagot-stitched bow-knots / Holding hours and hours / Of fairy-white forget-me-nots" (Hall frequently equates the fineness of her work with the hours she has spent doing it)—then she shifts onto a different plane:

Tonight, crisp with pressing,
It lies stiffly in its pasteboard box,
Smothered in folds of tissue paper
Which envelop it like a shroud—
In its coffin-shaped pasteboard box.

Hall often strikes a portentous note from objects usually sentimentalized. From her post as detached observer of the human scene, she sees our rituals and forms as giving little warmth or protection against the exigencies of life. White, for Hall, becomes a symbol of death, representing sterility, rather than purity. In "Monograms," she contemplates a bride's linens which she is initialling "ninety-one times," dedicating one day of her life to every napkin for the bride. The linen is frigid, "its shining coolness flaunts design / Of death-white poppies, trailing ferns / Ghost-flowers. / Cold, cold" While she embroiders, her own longing for death confronts her: "In the lifeless flax my stitches cry / With life my hands may not put by." Soon, in the secrecy of the bridal chest there will be something of hers: "The bulk of a season's smothered wonder, / My ninety-one days stitched under and under."

The poems in ***Curtains*** express a tension between Hall's evident delight in the sensory and her often bitter realism; her second book, ***Walkers***, expresses an equally intense sympathy for the lives of others. These poems are primarily about the people she sees passing under her window on Lucretia Street. With a prosody that picks up their rhythms, she evokes the straining of a desperate pedestrian, the rush of a heedless child, the staccato heels of a

panicky woman, the confidence and ease of a detached stranger. In these poems her empathy with the working class, and especially the working woman, emerges. Her poem "Walkers at Dusk" won the Order of the Bookfellow's Prize in 1922.

A tone of despair surfaces in poems addressed to other women; her sense of identification with their unfulfilled lives is too strong to disguise. In "Middle-Aged," she writes: "I know / I should not listen to your feet / Thinking to hear accents of grace. / pass on," she says, "before my ear / Catches your footsteps' lowest sound-- / Pass on if I am not to hear / The truth your feet speak to the ground."

In ***Cry of Time*** this note of unflinching realism about her own life and those of other working women is maintained. In "Inheritance," Hall writes: "Over and over again I lose myself in sorrow; / sorrow does not die, sorrow only gathers / Weight about itself—a clay that bakes to stone. / When your own share of sorrow has worn itself to slumber / Then every woman's sorrow is your own."

In poems like "Light Sleep" and "For a Woman Grown Cold," she evokes women worn out, afraid of death. "Mumbling themselves to peace," or "Clasping an amulet of words to keep / The leaning dark away." She thinks pain preferable to resignation. When despair is gone, woman is "colorless as stone, / dispassionate as in a grave." In "Woman Death," Hall recognizes death as something women foreknow, inherent in their already oppressed lives: "Many a woman has lain. / Submerged where the damp light falls. / Wanting her hands held down. / Finding it strange that they / Alone refuse to drown."

Hazel Hall intuited the nearness of her own death. With her diminished eyesight, her other senses became even more acute, and she became aware of the running-down of her own vital signs. Throughout her poems, images of hands, the tactile members of the body, occur. Earlier, they are images of joy and use, an extension of her world. Later, she sees them as images of impotence and despair. She examines this "handling" of life. As if they were detached from her, she watches her hands reach out to feel the rain. "Yet what have I given rain," she asks, "Who have felt the edge of rain / Fray my fingers, who have striven / To give much, what have I given / But a little moving pain?" Near the end of ***Cry of Time*** she writes as one resigned to the inevitable, in "The Relinquisher":

> You rid your blood of the sound of sea,
> You hush your boasting heart and make
> Your flesh as meek as your ash will be.
> Cooling it well for your hands' hot sake,
> Until your hands lie still together
> Like one were stone and the other feather.

Louise Nicholl writes in the preface to ***Cry of Time*** that many of the poems were written in the final weeks of Hall's life, and that Hall had had a premonitory dream of her death. But Hall seems determined to experience every facet of her death with the same lucidity she accorded her life. "White Day's Death" is an example of the calm, lyric movement, the pared-down, restrained quality of her late poems.

Hall belongs to the modern generation. Though she was not especially innovative in technique, it is her steady, hard look at the world that saves her poems from the excesses of romanticism. She accepted the facts of her life, damaging though they were, compensating for them through the acuteness and intensity of her encounters. Channeling her despair, at the last, into fine spare poems, she gives us a sense of a distinct and forceful personality. She is never vague nor trite. She is a lyric poet, primarily, and her best work combines the music and emotional force that distinguishes lyric poetry in every generation. In one of those unsatisfactory interviews conducted by mail, Hazel Hall wrote: "Even more elusive than the meaning of life is the meaning of poetry; the latter is but the mirror so placed that the shadows of the former may occasionally fall across it."

As the mirror she used in her second-floor bedroom, Hall's poems reflect her solitary and intense spirit, and should be welcomed back into the world to enhance our own vital experiences.

Beth Bentley
Seattle
April, 1980

I. from ***Curtains*** (1921)

Floor of a Room

The walls and windows of my room,
With stolid constancy
Spreading checkered light or gloom,
Belong to me.
Of all my room the floor alone
Is not my own.

Days, like armfuls of fresh flowers
Slowly . . . I scatter there;
Yet for my offering of hours
I may share
Only the cold, disquiet rest
Of a passing guest.

Always I must waive my rights
To feet, who, strange and still,
Press their claims on windy nights;
And not until
I come again, another ghost,
Shall I be host.

The Hand-Glass

I am holding up a mirror
To look at life; in my hand-glass
I see a strange, hushed street below me
Where people pass.
The street is coloured like a picture,
And people passing there
Move with the majesty of story,
And are less real and wise than fair.

Looking at life in a mirror
Is distortion. I must see
Through the paint the flimsy canvas,
I must be
Cynical, and judge no passer
By the colour of a dress—
O eyes that must learn from a mirror,
Search for dust and bitterness!

Stairways

Why do I think of stairways
With a rush of hurt surprise?
Wistful as forgotten love
In remembered eyes;
And fitful as the flutter
Of little draughts of air
That linger on a stairway
As though they loved it there.

New and shining stairways,
Stairways worn and old,
Where rooms are prison places
And corridors are cold,
You intrigue with fancy,
You challenge with a lore
Elusive as a moon's light
Shadowing a floor.

You speak to me not only
With the lure of storied art—
For wonder of old footsteps
Lies lightly on my heart;
And more than the reminiscence
Of yesterday's renown—
Laughter that might have floated up,
Echoes that should drift down.

Counterpanes

I will make myself new thought;
My own is worn and old.
And old counterpanes will not
Keep out the wind and cold.

From borrowed thought I will choose
Pieces, and, row on row,
Patch a quilt of many hues
Like the quilts of long ago.

It cannot be so fine
As what the years have thinned,
But I dread the smothered whine
Of four grey walls' grey wind.

I will patch me a counterpane,
For mine is worn to scars,
And I fear the iron rain
Of a ceiling's splashing stars.

Unseen

Often I am awaked from sleep to see—
Framed like a picture by the dark of night—
The sweep of space above a frozen height,
Or, lifting from a skyline, one dead tree.
Again it is the full tide leaping free
Over black rocks, or breaking blue and white.
Again, a rill that in leaf-filtered light,
With words of rustling water, calls to me.

These are not dreams of beauty I have known.
Nor mine the interest remembrance brings:
Only my fancy knows the tides' deep tone,
Only my longing seeks the tangled springs . . .
And yet they make a clearer, wilder call
Than if a fond remembering were all.

Shadows

One shadow on my wall, an intimate
Of dusk, comes only when it comes alone.
It lifts out of new dark and spreads a great
Wing of quiet where once the sun has shone,
Cooling the air like rain on stone.

Such shadow might find entrance to a tomb,
And be at home in places where the dead
Are fitful sleepers; moving through the gloom
It might lay benediction on a head
That death has left uncomforted.

Ecstasy

For moments of this life's swift cycle made
Commemorable with you, O Ecstasy,
Shall we be reconciled in worlds to be,
Shall we find recompense when death is paid?
I can imagine in eternal shade
Solace for tired dreams, and in the sea
Equivalent for moods of stress or glee,
In stars an old unrest merged and allayed.

What element can give us, in your name,
Redress which is appreciable before
The concept of the universal mind?
You, who are multiform, to one a flame,
Soul-scourging, to another are defined
In sudden earth-breaths through an opened door.

Cowardice

Discomfort sweeps my quiet as a wind
Leaps at trees and leaves them cold and thinned.
Not that I fear again the mastery
Of winds, for holding my indifference dear
I do not feel illusions stripped from me.
And yet this is a fear—
A fear of old discarded fears, of days
That cried out at irrevocable ways.
I cower for my own old cowardice,
For hours that beat upon the wind's broad breast
With hands as impotent as leaves are: this
Robs my new hour of rest.

I thought my pride had covered long ago
All the old scars, like broken twigs in snow.
I thought to luxuriate in rich decay,
As some far-seeing tree upon a hill:
But startled into shame for an old day
I find that I am but a coward still.

The Answer

I asked the watchful corners of a ceiling,
And the little darkened cracks the years scrawled there,
Why there are suns, and if there is a purpose
Behind this mask of life that people wear.

I asked some gnarled and patient shadows groping
Like wise hands of old blind men, on my wall:
And everything I asked answered my question
With that one answer which does well for all.

Sands

My days are like sands; colourless,
Each matched to each, unerringly
They drift. The salt bleach of a sea
Has washed them clean and lustreless;
The teeth of rock on ragged strands
Have ground them to an even grey,
And one wind blows them a one way.

But Oh, the slow making of sands.

All is here; forgotten things
Mix with the unforgettable,
Granite blends with tinted shell,
And nothing so stable that it clings
To its stability. Had there
Been more of marble, more of gold,
The sands would hide in their grim hold
Nothing more wise, nothing more fair.

But Oh, the slow making of sands.

Grain on grain of even grey,
Slowly they drift in the one way
Covering the wreck that stands
Against my beach of life. One mast
Cuts at the sky, the hull is fast
In sand—the slow-made sands that pull
With the wind . . . covering . . .
And leaving every broken thing
Hushed and coldly beautiful.

Monograms

I am monogramming
Seven dozen napkins,
With tablecloths to match,
For a bride.

Ninety-one times my needle shall trace
The leaf-like scrolls that interlace
Each other: up the padded side
Of the monogram my eye shall guide
For ninety-one days where the stitches run;
And every day one more is done.

She is tall and fair,
She will be married
In June . . .

The linen is fine as satin is fine:
Its shining coolness flaunts design
Of death-white poppies, trailing ferns
Rioting richly from Grecian urns.

Ghost-flowers,
Cold, cold . . .

All these patterned splendours fade
Before the crest my hands have made:
In the lifeless flax my stitches cry
With life my hands may not put by.

June . . .
Real flowers,
Moist and warm to touch,
Like flesh . . .

And by and by with all the rest
Of intimate things in her bridal-chest,
Gentle muslins and secret lace,
Something of mine will have a place;
Caught in these scrolls and filigrees
There will be that which no eye sees,
The bulk of a season's smothered wonder,
My ninety-one days stitched under and under.

They will be decking an altar
With white roses,
And lacing an aisle
With white ribbon . . . .

Mending

Here are old things:
Fraying edges.
Raveling threads;
And here are scraps of new goods.
Needles and thread.
An expectant thimble.
A pair of silver-toothed scissors.

Thimble on a finger.
New thread through an eye;
Needle, do not linger.
Hurry as you ply.
If you ever would be through
Hurry, scurry, fly!

Here are patches.
Felled edges.
Darned threads.
Strengthening old utility.
Pending the coming of the new.

Yes, I have been mending . . .
But also.
I have been enacting
A little travesty on life.

Seams

I was sewing a seam one day—
Just this way—
Flashing four silver stitches there
With thread, like this, fine as a hair.
And then four here, and there again.
When
The seam I sewed dropped out of sight . . .
I saw the sea come rustling in,
Big and grey, windy and bright . . .
Then my thread that was as thin
As hair, tangled up like smoke
And broke.
I threaded up my needle, then—
Four here, four there, and here again.

A Baby's Dress

It is made of finest linen—
Sheer as wasp-wings;
It is made with a flowing panel
Down the front,
All overrun with fagot-stitched bow-knots
Holding hours and hours
Of fairy-white forget-me-nots.

And it is finished.
To-night, crisp with new pressing
It lies stiffly in its pasteboard box
Smothered in folds of tissue paper
Which envelop it like a shroud—
In its coffin-shaped pasteboard box.

To-morrow a baby will wear it at a christening;
To-morrow the dead-white of its linen
Will glow with the tint of baby skin;
And out of its filmy mystery
There will reach
Baby hands . . . .

But to-night the lamplight plays over it and finds it cold,
Like the flower-husk of a little soul,
Which, new-lived, has fluttered to its destiny,
It lies in its coffin-shaped pasteboard box.

To-morrow will make it what hands cannot:
Limp and warm with babyness,
A hallowed thing,
A baby's dress.

Lingerie

To-day my hands have been flattered
With the cool-finger touch of thin linen.
And I have unwound
Yards of soft, folded nainsook
From a stiff bolt.
Also I have held a piece of lawn
While it marbled with light
In a sudden quiver of sun.

So to-night I know of the delicate pleasure
Of white-handed women
Who like to touch smooth linen handkerchiefs.
And of a baby's tactual surprise
In closing its fist
Over a handful of nainsook.
And even something of the secret pride of the girl
As the folds of her fine lawn nightgown
Breathe against her body.

Filet Crochet

I make a band of filet crochet,
And this is the pattern I never forget:
A rose, a wreath and the latticed net
Of fine filet crochet.

Thread over needle, and over again:
Lattice, a wreath and a single rose—
That is the way the pattern goes
Over and over again.

Finish the rose and start the wreath,
And careful lest, O hurrying thread,
Something climbs over the lattice instead
Of a single rose and a wreath.

Finish the wreath and start the rose,
And pull in, needle, strangling tight,
Choking out anything else that might
Climb with a wreath and a rose.

Under, needle; and over, thread;
Something may grow by a garden wall,
Yet nothing must grow in a pattern at all
But a rose and a wreath of thread.

So thread over needle, and over again,
Until there is nothing else that grows—
Only a wreath and a thready rose
Over and over again.

Summer Sewing

Lengths of lawn and dimities,
Dainty, smooth and cool,
In their possibilities
Beautiful,

Stretch beneath my hand in sheets,
Fragrant from the loom,
Like a field of marguerites
All in bloom.

Where my scissors' footsteps pass
Fluttering furrows break,
As the scythe trails through the grass
Its deep wake.

All my stitches, running fleet,
Cannot match the tread
Of my thoughts whose winged feet
Race ahead.

They are gathering imagery
Out of time and space,
That a needle's artistry
May embrace:

Hints of dawn and thin blue sky,
Breaths the breezes bear,
Wispy-waspy things that fly
In warm air.

Bolts of dimity I take,
Muslin smooth and cool;
These my fingers love to make
Beautiful.

Made of Crêpe de Chine

A needle running in white crêpe de Chine
Is not the frail servant of utility
It was designed to be;
It is an arrow of silver sunlight
Plunging with a waterfall.

And hands moving in white crêpe de Chine
Are not slaves of the precedent
That governs them;
They are the crouching women of a fountain,
Who have sprung from marble into life
To bathe ecstatically
In the brimming basin.

Instruction

My hands that guide a needle
In their turn are led
Relentless and deftly
As a needle leads a thread.

Other hands are teaching
My needle; when I sew
I feel the cool, thin fingers
Of hands I do not know.

They urge my needle onward,
They smooth my seams, until
The worry of my stitches
Smothers in their skill.

All the tired women,
Who sewed their lives away,
Speak in my deft fingers
As I sew to-day.

The Listening Macaws

Many sewing days ago
I cross-stitched on a black satin bag
Two listening macaws.

They were perched on a stiff branch
With every stitch of their green tails.
Their blue wings, yellow breasts and sharply turned heads.
Alert and listening.

Now sometimes on the edge of relaxation
My thought is caught back,
Like gathers along a gathering thread
To the listening macaws:
And I am amazed at the futile energy
That has kept them,
Alert to the last stitch,
Listening into their black satin night.

After Embroidering

I can take mercerized cotton
And make a never-flower beautiful
By thinking of the tulips growing in window-boxes;
I can work into cloth
A certain hushed softness
From an imagined scrutiny
Of a lily's skin,
And embroider conventional designs the better
For thinking of brick garden paths.

But if I go farther,
If I follow the path,
Fling out the gate,
Plunge one breathless thought over an horizon . . .
My hands lose their cunning.

Late Sewing

There is nothing new in what is said
By either a needle or a thread:
Stitch, says a needle, *Stitch*, says the thread;
Stitch for the living; stitch for the dead;
All seams measure the same.

Garb for the living is light and gay,
While that for the dead is a shrouding grey,
But all things match on a later day
When little worm-stitches in the clay
Finish all seams the same.

II. from ***Walkers*** (1923)

Walkers at Dusk

The street fills slowly with the thin
Night light, and fluid shadows pass
Over the roofs as dark pours in
Like dusky wine into a glass.

Out of the gloom I watch them come—
Linked by an invisible chain,
Reconciled to the yoke and dumb
After the heat of pride or pain.

Nothing of the concerns of noon
Remains for them, or serves for me.
But portent, like the unrisen moon,
Begins to weigh unbearably.

Middle-Aged

I know that you must come and go,
Woman of years, along my street.
I understand your step; I know
I should not listen to your feet
Thinking to hear accents of grace.
I know I should be glad to think
Of grey leaves breaking into space
After much thought of trees that blink
Their leaves, immobile in the sun.
I know, and you know, beauty dies
That it may live, that one by one
New splendors from the old may rise.
We know the hour of sun is worth
The realization of decay—
The old relinquishment to earth.

So, Woman, as you go your way,
Measure your tread out as you must.
Knowing these things shall you or I
Question the efficacy of dust?
Shall we not reason that life's cry
With all its fitfulness suppressed
Under the quiet of your tread
Has found rest from the old unrest
And has been wisely comforted?
Then pass on by before my ear
Catches your footsteps' lowest sound—
Pass on if I am not to hear
The truth your feet speak to the ground.

III. from ***Cry of Time*** (1928)

White Day's Death

Light that streams into the grass
In white rain, light that fills a tree
With radiance like steel, like glass,
Makes me catch my breath to see.

Down, down it pours in cold sun, thinned
To web of crystal; streak on streak
It falls, chastening the wind
And making every small bird meek.

Farther into the ground's black space
Recedes earth's little warmth; earth grown
Unfecund, now is made a place
Of brittle dust and stone.

Silver filters through my eye
Until my very brain is lit
With the glitter of sterility
That is both grave and exquisite.

Inheritance

Over and over again I lose myself in sorrow;
Whatever I have borne I bear again tenfold.
The death of sorrow is a sleep: a newer sorrow
Wakes into flame from ashes of the old.

They said that sorrow died and that a sorrow buried
Made your mind a dear place like a grave with grass,
Where you might rest yourself as in a willow's shadow,
And cold and clean, might feel the long world pass.

But sorrow does not die, sorrow only gathers
Weight about itself—a clay that bakes to stone.
When your own share of sorrow has worn itself to slumber
Then every woman's sorrow is your own.

Light Sleep

Women who sing themselves to sleep
Lie with their hands at rest,
Locked over them night-long as though to keep
Music against their breast.

They who have feared the night and lain
Mumbling themselves to peace
Sleep a light sleep lest they forget the strain
That brings them their release.

They dream, who hold beneath the hand
A crumpled shape of song,
Of trembling sound they do not understand,
Yet love the whole night long.

Women who sing themselves to sleep
Must lie in fear till day,
Clasping an amulet of words to keep
The leaning dark away.

Rain

I have raised my hands to rain,
Raised my hands until my lifting
Fingers, like warm snow, seemed drifting
Into rain, becoming rain.

I have given all my hands.
Rain has taken them and made
Out of them a liquid shade
To lay upon a place of sands.

What stirred in my pulse now sighs
In the long sigh of the rain;
What was restlessness will rain
Against some woman's windowpane
And make a woman close her eyes.

What my fingers had of shape
Is a curve of blowing light,
Moving in unhurried flight,
With the rain, to its escape.

Yet what have I given rain,
Who have felt the edge of rain
Fray my fingers, who have striven
To give much, what have I given
But a little moving pain?

And what have I more, what boast
Of a meaning may I keep,
Who am weary as a sheep
And slightly pleasured like a ghost?

For a Woman Grown Cold

Far as near things are when sleep
Blows over you like blackened sand,
Is the hot pain you thought to keep
Warm against your hand.

Grief left you colorless as stone.
You lie beneath night's splintering wave
That once you broke your heart upon
Dispassionate as in a grave.

You rise to face the sun and toss
The pleasure of it from your eyes;
Nor will you think of dawns across
Your mouth, sweet with other skies.

You feel your thin blood pulsing where
It moves unheatedly as rain.
Content to find the chill breath there,
Cold is easier than pain.

For a Broken Needle

Even fine steel thinly made
To hold a raging thread,
Comes to lie with purple shade
In a dreaded bed.

All its chiseled length, its nice
Grip, its moving gleam
That was once like chips of ice
In a heated seam,

Are no more. It is fit
We should chant a strain
Of lament, then tumble it
Out into the rain.

Woman Death

Wash over her, wet light
Of this dissolving room.
Dusk smelling of night,
Lay on her placid gloom.
Wash over her; as waves push back the sands
Fold down her hands.

Many another rain
Of dusk has filled such walls:
Many a woman has lain
Submerged where the damp light falls,
Wanting her hands held down,
Finding it strange that they
Alone refuse to drown.

The mind after its day
Fills like an iron cup
With waters of the night.
The eyes wisely give up
The little they held of light.
Move over her, subdue her, Dark, until
Her hands are still.

Out of the east comes night:
From west, from north, from south,
Gathers the blackened light
To move against her mouth.
Many another has known
These four pressures of space.

Feeling her lips grow stone
And hollows curving her face,
And cared so little to feel,
Her light had never given
More than her dark might steal:

Then for this she had striven:
To feel the quiet moving on her hands
Like thin sea over sands.

Time gathers to break
In arrested thunder, gloom
Comes with thickness to make
Deep ocean of a room,
Comes to soothe and shape
The breathed-out breath.

Some who die escape
The rhythm of their death,
Some may die and know
Death as a broken song,
But a woman dies not so, not so;
A woman's death is long.

The Relinquisher

You rid your blood of the sound of sea,
You hush your boasting heart and make
Your flesh as meek as your ash will be,
Cooling it well for your hands' hot sake,
Until your hands lie still together
Like one were stone and the other feather.

You press all beauty into word
So burning that it may accuse
Like a sorrow, like a sword.
You lose yourself to wear the shoes
Of sleep, and go where is no knowing
And the wind is blind with its own blowing.

If you have what life cannot take,
It is so nearly death's, no name
Will utter it. It is an ache
Grown numb: incurious love of flame
Upon the unseen hearth, the near
Beat of rain you do not hear.

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