

Haste

SELECTED  
POEMS

THE SELECTED POEMS  
OF  
GWENDOLEN HASTE

Ahsahta Press  
Boise State University  
Boise, Idaho

Versions of some of the poems contained in this volume have appeared in **Young Land** and in various periodicals from 1922 to 1959; "Dialog" and "Legend" were provided by the Billings, Montana, Public Library.

Poems selected and edited by Orvis C. Burmaster

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Poems are dated in italics to indicate probably year of composition, or in boldface to indicate year of first publication.

# Introduction

Even though Gwendolen Haste has lived and worked in New York City since 1925, she is still a Western poet. She spent a number of her most productive years in Billings, Montana, helping her father edit the **Scientific Farmer**; and her best poems picture the lives of ranchers—men, women, and children—in the years when the West was being settled. She was born December 4, 1889, in Streator, Illinois, and grew up in Wisconsin; after graduating from the University of Chicago in 1912, she worked with her father first in Lincoln, Nebraska, later in Billings. Except for the year 1918 spent in the East as a munitions worker during World War I, she remained in Billings from 1915 to 1925. In the mid-twenties Ms. Haste moved East permanently, first to join the editorial staff of **Survey** magazine and later to work with the Consumer Service Department of General Foods Corporation. She was secretary of the Poetry Society of America during 1928-29 and remained on its board of directors until 1935. In 1936 she was married to Marlin Douglass Hennesey of Hillsboro, N.H. In 1955-1956, she served as secretary of the Westerners, a group of writers, artists, librarians, publishers' representatives, and hobbyists with western and historical interests.

Her poems were published in numerous national magazines; one titled "The Ranch in the Coulee" shared **The Nation** poetry prize in 1922. Her one volume of poetry, **Young Land** (Coward-McCann, 1930), contains the series "Montana Wives," which includes some of her most vivid and precise works, calling up the bleak, wind-swept landscapes of the barren Montana rangeland, and the bleak and barren—TV and movies notwithstanding—lives of many who lived there.

Forty and more years later, these Western poems still speak strongly of and to the experience of women anywhere—on a ranch, in a suburb, in a city. Perhaps this is because they speak of a loneliness, an isolation, a boredom that is localized in the poems, and yet universal. Many of Ms. Haste's readers have noted this universality and immediacy in the poems; for example, a New England housewife wrote her to say "That woman might have been myself" of the Montana wife in "The Ranch in the Coulee" who goes mad, hemmed in by her limited horizon and opportunities.

Certainly it is this ability to combine a strong local flavor with universal human feeling that makes Ms. Haste such an original figure in her own day and such a remarkable one in ours. As with so many poems written by women, and lost, forgotten, or ignored after an initial success, we are

apt to see them today and say, "When was this written?" Her feelings about women are "right" and her details of the West are right: the June river running at full flood, the play of sun on a single cottonwood, the feeling of anticipation as one comes toward the crest of a hill on a dusty back road, "What's ahead?"

As Ms. Haste's poetry shows no danger of succumbing to the illusions of the feminine mystique, so too it rejects the stereotypes of all those rugged, hearty, and hardy ranch wives, hands raised over suntanned brows as they gaze courageously westward, the indomitable spirits. Surely Ms. Haste's depiction of ranch women is at least as close to reality as the sanitized, commercialized version, for between moments when the indomitable spirit was operating, there must have been long hours when "one by one her little hopes had fled/ Down through those racking, windy, drouth-filled years." "The Stoic" is certainly a memorial to both sides of the ranch woman's life, her pride and her endurance, as well as her suffering and her despair. Along with "The Stoic," where the vision is grim but not hopeless, there are poems about those who cannot endure, who break under the strain, losing their sanity, like the wife in "Ranch in the Coulee," or the woman in "Exotic," who has grown sour, bitter, her soul "withered like last year's weeds."

Ms. Haste expresses much of the same bleakness, the same loneliness, the same deadening effect of endless drudgery as does her contemporary Willa Cather in her novels and short stories of Middle Western farm life. The sonnet "Nostalgia," for example, recalls both in subject and in tone Cather's "A Wagner Matinee." And the desperate weariness of the wife in "The Reason" is reminiscent of Susan Glaspell's short story "A Jury of Her Peers" (1917), in which more contented wives understand and protect one whose loneliness and desperation has driven her to murder.

Still, though she is most strongly aware of the difficulties of ranch life, occasionally Ms. Haste's work suggests its beauties, there for those who can see them. Alas, in "Vengeance," the efficient farm wife sees nothing of the beauty and drama of the sunrise, the storm clouds over the mountains, the virginal dance of a single cottonwood tree. One wonders, indeed, if Ms. Haste's ranch women survive best in being least sensitive—to both beauty and barrenness.

Ms. Haste seems to have produced her best work under the control of rhyme and meter, and for the most part her best poems are her Western ones. In them she seems most in touch with the land and with people. Some of her later "Eastern" poems tend to abstraction and lack of focus, though they still contain the occasional striking image.

But whatever the shortcomings of some of her late works, her best are of excellent quality: the reflections of a woman, not herself a ranch wife, but one entirely in touch with the feelings and experiences of women everywhere, especially women of the West.

*Carol Mullaney*  
Boise State University  
March, 1976



# I. The New Land

# In A New Land

It stands forlorn  
Under dying trees  
Among little houses all bright with paint  
Where hopes are fresh  
And children young  
Where years and living have left no taint.

Those who built it  
Died long ago  
When that cottonwood tree was tender in leaf.  
They came and went  
But they left their ghosts,  
Old ghosts from lands that are dark with grief.

These little houses  
Just learning life  
Will their porches sag and their lawns grow thin?  
Will spirits crowd  
In their dusty rooms  
To cry old sorrow and mourn old sin?

**1924**

# Montana Wives

## *The Ranch In The Coulee*

He built the ranch house down a little draw,  
So that he should have wood and water near.  
The bluffs rose all around. She never saw  
The arching sky, the mountains lifting clear;  
But to the west the close hills fell away  
And she could glimpse a few feet of the road.  
The stage to Roundup went by every day,  
Sometimes a rancher town-bound with his load,  
An auto swirling dusty through the heat,  
Or children trudging home on tired feet.

At first she watched it as she did her work,  
A horseman pounding by gave her a thrill,  
But then within her brain began to lurk  
The fear that if she lingered from the sill  
Someone might pass unseen. So she began  
To keep the highroad always within sight,  
And when she found it empty long she ran  
And beat upon the pane and cried with fright.  
The winter was the worst. When snow would fall  
He found it hard to quiet her at all.

**1922**

# *The Old Farm Wife*

Grin toothlessly up at the sun  
    Spring's begun.  
Winter wheat, now snow is gone  
    Coming on;  
And the plow has cut each field  
    Quick to yield  
Rippling harvest, tall and mellow,  
    Green and yellow.  
Now what difference make the years  
    Grey with tears,  
Or the body marred with toil  
    On the soil?  
What is age and what is pain  
    When the rain  
Peacefully blots out the sun  
    With plowing done.

**1922**

# *The Wind*

The cabin sits alone far up a hill  
Where all the year the mournful wind blows shrill.

She used to tell him sometimes: "No one knows  
How hard it is to listen while it blows."

He never touched a plow again, they say,  
After he found her there, but went away.

And tenants wouldn't live upon the place  
Because, the neighbors said, they saw her face

Pressed close against the little window-pane  
Watching the twisting storm clouds in the rain,

And in the night time they could hear her cry  
And moan and whimper if the gale was high.

So now through barren fields the great winds blow  
Where fan weed and the purple wild pea grow.

They said she had no cause to die, but still  
The wind was always blowing on that hill.

**1922**

# Vengeance

The sun came up with a nice display  
Of amber and rose;  
And at end of day  
There was orange or crimson or amethyst  
Whichever you chose.  
But she never saw.  
The storms hurried up from behind the mountains  
And spread great clouds  
Like boiling fountains  
And covered the fresh blue sky with shrouds.  
She only said "Pshaw!"  
And went out to gather the clothes from the line.  
Then the cottonwood tree in the yard  
Danced like a virgin before a shrine.  
She looked at it hard  
And said "Cottonwood trees are so messy."  
At last she died  
And was buried in black, very dressy.  
Her relations cried;  
But the sunset poured out scarlet and blue,  
Purple and gold;  
While the cottonwood danced the whole day through  
When they put her away to mould.

1922

## *Deliverance*

The screaming kingbirds in the poplars woke her,  
And since lately there had been no joy in waking,  
She thought it well to end such things, together  
With floors to scrub and baking.

So instead of lifting up the pails, she turned  
Down to the river rushing brown in flood  
And watched a moment the June sunlight sifting  
Through a lone cottonwood.

An easy way it was to end all wakings,  
To hear no more the flooded river's strife,  
Nor noisy birds at dawn, nor cows at milk-time,  
Nor any voice of life.

**1922**

## *The Stoic*

She guessed there wasn't any time for tears  
Because her heart had held them all unshed  
While one by one her little hopes had fled  
Down through those racking, windy, drouth-  
filled years,  
The frozen winter when the cattle died,  
The year the hail bent flat the tender wheat,  
The thirsty summers with their blazing heat—  
She met them all with wordless, rigid pride.

But when, sometimes, the children in the spring  
Searching through barren hill or ragged butte,  
Would heap her lap with loco blooms, and bring  
Clouds of blue larkspur and bright bitter-root,  
Then would she run away to hide her pain  
For memory of old gardens drenched with rain.

**1921**



# Horizons

I had to laugh,  
For when she said it we were sitting by the door,  
And straight down was the Fork,  
Twisting and turning and gleaming in the sun.  
And then your eyes carried across to the purple  
    bench beyond the river  
With the Beartooth Mountains fairly screaming  
    with light and blue and snow,  
And fold and turn of rimrock and prairie as far  
    as your eye could go.

And she says: "Dear Laura, sometimes I feel so  
    sorry for you,  
Shut away from everything—eating out your  
    heart with loneliness.  
When I think of my own full life I wish that you  
    could share it.  
Just pray for happier days to come and bear it."

She goes back to Billings to her white stucco  
    house,  
And looks through net curtains at another white  
    stucco house,  
And a brick house,  
And a yellow frame house,  
And six trimmed poplar trees,  
And little squares of shaved grass.

Oh dear, she stared at me like I was daft!  
I couldn't help it. I just laughed and laughed!

**1922**

## *Dried Out*

This place was the first home we ever had,  
And I was sick of farming for other folks—  
First in Wisconsin and then in Dakota.  
It looked so pretty when he broke sod that day.  
There wa'n't only three sides to the house,  
But what did I care!  
There was sunlight and wet rain and a coulee  
    full of springtime where the children could  
    play.

Seven full years, says the Book, and seven lean—  
And we come in at the end of the full ones, I  
    guess.  
There ain't no crops where they's no rain.  
And the stock died in the big blizzard.  
So now we're goin'  
Back to Dakota to farm for other folks.

Oh God, the nice white ranch house with a floor  
We was to have! The roses by the door!

**1922**

## *For A Lonely Grave*

The wind cannot hurt  
As it beats on her ears—  
They are stopped with dirt.  
And her heart is still  
So it cannot leap  
At the wail of the wolf  
From the top of the hill.  
She will never weep  
As she lies alone.  
Her nights will be quiet  
Beneath this stone.

**1922**

## *Exotic*

Her frightened soul shrank  
When she saw  
The bitter crumbling hills of shale.  
And the high cutbank,  
Gashed and raw,  
Struck her eyes like the wall of a jail.

The years ran by  
Indifferent  
And she never grew used to unfenced land,  
Nor dust blown high,  
Nor scrub pines bent  
In the midst of shuffling wastes of sand.

When she was old  
Her voice was sour  
And her eyes were as hard as small black beads.  
Her mouth was cold  
And twisted and dour  
For her soul had withered like last year's weeds.

**1922**

# The Litle Theatre

They coaxed him from his barren lonely claim  
And taught him how to stride across the stage,  
And how to whisper love, and how to rage,  
And how to smile in treachery's cold game.  
He felt the mounting glory of his fame  
When in the simple eyes beyond the beam  
Of lanterns he could see the answering gleam  
Of that which in his soul was living flame.

Now though the hail has stripped his acres bare  
He watches but the gold of Rosalind's hair.  
The prairie can be withered by the drouth  
He only yearns for Juliet's young mouth;  
And while the blizzard hammers at his door  
He's locked with life and fate at Elsinore.

**1922**

# Nostalgia

He brought the record home with sheepish pride  
And wound the old machine. The crystal notes  
Swirled through the little room like gleaming motes  
In jeweled light. He listened open-eyed;  
But when she wept he tiptoed from her side,  
His own eyes dim for cherry blooms and tears,  
The crimson rapture, the unspoken fears,  
The lyric sorrow of the wistful bride.

He could not know her grief was not for pain  
Of love forsaken, but that far away  
Were scented beauty piled in galleries,  
Wealth, color, silver voices, proud display—  
While here stretched out the long and dusty plain  
With great buttes shouldering the windy skies.

**1923**

# The Reason

She told them when they came and found him there  
That he had tried to kill her with the knife—  
Although she knew that he would never dare  
To threaten her—much less to take her life.  
So they who had seen his rages let her go.  
But brooding on it in the later years  
She felt she might have stood each curse and blow,  
His shouting anger or his brutal jeers,  
But on that day her heart was tired and sore  
With God's austere and high indifference.  
She saw the withered fields beyond the door,  
The rotting barns, the filth, the broken fence,  
And all her faded days, robbed of delight,  
Where everything but weariness had fled,  
So when he came in lowering that night  
She took the rabbit gun and shot him dead.

**1924**

# Prairie Wolf

North of the house there was a graveled range of hills,  
Stubborn and bare with clinging grey dry grass,  
Where, resting sometimes through her vacant days, she watched  
The far swift shadows of the coyotes pass.

She told herself her life was like those stony hills,  
Unfertile, bitter in the blaze of noon,  
Where fearful yellow shapes slipped by uncertainly  
And wailed for sorrow underneath the moon.

**1924**



# Cumae

Right from the very first I felt that fate  
Was hanging round the place.  
It wasn't the fling above us of the butte  
That made it queer.  
I've lived in wilder places and more desolate  
And had no fear.  
But nothing I could do would lift the strangeness from the shack.  
I made white curtains, planted flowers,  
And had a garden out in back.  
I even tried to get a tree to grow!  
Four walls, two windows and a floor—  
You wouldn't think it spooky just to see.  
But I could hardly bear to close the door—  
Looking and waiting—for what I didn't know.

But that grey morning I missed him from the bed  
And went out searching round the house  
And found him in the shed,  
His toes just off the floor—swing—swinging—  
And I flew  
Those three rough miles to town  
My throat torn with a scream,  
Why then—I knew!  
I knew!

1925

# Winter Homecoming

The white night of the winter stretches wide.  
The black night of the winter presses low.  
Outside the open barn door stands the team  
With chilly breath rising above the snow.

The yellow lantern throws a little light  
Upon them and the open swinging door,  
A man and woman slow and dumb with cold,  
A winter-barren tree and nothing more.

The stars are worlds of flame but they are far,  
Pricking the blackness of the bitter night.  
They cannot warm these winter-frozen ones  
Within that wavering circle of pale light.

**1926**

# Borgia

From one end of the valley to the other  
You still hear word of them.  
Although some secret startling death  
Has snatched them all, brother and brother,  
Long years away from that grey ranch house by the river,  
Yet they exist in tales.

Not tales that have a right to cling  
To this young land,  
Of wolves and shooting irons and gambling,  
Of men ruthless as savages and young as gods;  
But troubling tales,  
Strange as those told of venomous princes  
In plotting capitals of desperate states,  
Tales threaded through with jeweled poisonous fates.  
Tales that are honey-colored by mad sins.

What was their heritage?  
What horrid stains  
Came with them in their journey through the plains  
To soil their turbulent blood?  
Nobody knows.  
The stories only tell of this hot rage  
Of life begun in cruelty and woes  
Ending in scarlet violence and the grave.

Yet the house stands beside the noisy stream,  
A little hidden by grey cottonwoods,  
Peacefully vacant—smiling in its dream;  
The house where one was born whose life snapped out  
Among perfumes and sandalwood and spring;  
The home in the childhood of that twisted soul  
Whose deeds are whispered by the shattered coal,  
Scarce understood by those whose slow lives rust  
In sheep and marketing,  
And careful lust.

There was a garden here,  
So long ago.  
Somebody planted lilac trees and phlox.  
These hollyhocks  
Trembled when one was driven out to die,  
Raving among the heedless empty hills,  
So that blanched sheep herders still hear his cry.

The wind quivers among the cottonwoods  
And draws a pleasant murmur from that pine.  
Is there no taint where the mild sunlight spills?  
No drifting murk along these hovering hills?  
No sign?

**1926**

# Vanished

Why did she go,  
Quickly between morning and twilight,  
Making no sign,  
Leaving the wash beating the line,  
The lettuce ungathered?  
Was it because the mountains were suddenly too bare,  
Lying like gray wrinkled elephants along the sky?  
Or did she tire of the wheat field's yellow stare?  
Or was it because that night  
The wind rose  
And fled through the hills with a singing cry?

**1926**

# The Solitary

Whenever she's in town she leaves the shops  
And wanders off to beauty on a street  
Shaded by pleasant trees, where bungalows  
Are white and green, where clover lawns are neat,  
Where zinnias and bright nasturtiums bloom.  
Each house is built close to another one  
So women every afternoon can sit  
Upon the porches when their work is done,  
And talk to other women and crochet.  
Autos rush by. A cheerful phonograph  
Sends sudden music, while across the lawns  
A group of noisy children play and laugh.

Then she goes back and climbs into the Ford  
To ride long miles out where there is no sound  
Except the wind, a rooster's crow, the hens,  
The eternal crickets singing from the ground,  
And past the further hillside a faint smoke—  
All that she sees of any other folk.

**1926**

# The Mocker

The cowboy comes to town  
Scornful.

He wears his orange wool chaps  
And scarlet handkerchief,  
And embroidered boots;  
Under him is his beautiful silver-mounted  
saddle.

He meets his friends down by the tracks  
In a huddle of old buildings  
That were there before the railroad.  
But sometimes he rides his pony out on Spencer  
Avenue.

He digs his spurs in the pony's side,  
And the pony bucks,  
And the cowboy whoops most insolent and con-  
temptuous  
Outside the fine brick residence of the President  
of the First State Bank.

Almost the cowboy would urge his pony over the  
brick coping among the shrubbery and  
perennials

But that sacrilege is forbidden—  
Even to cowboys.

**1927**

# The Outlander's Wife

She married young  
A man from down the river  
With odd and twisted ways—  
Not ours—  
And foreign tongue.  
Her children gabble like young jays.  
Her house is strange.  
Her very pigs and chickens queer.  
She has to spend her wifely days  
Learning to cook  
Unfriendly dishes.  
She has a look  
That seems to say  
I do not understand.  
Why am I here?  
How have I strayed,  
To what far desperate land?

**1927**



# He's Taken Her Back Again

She has come back,  
And we peer behind the curtains,  
And whisper in the store.  
She has come back  
And has washed her curtains,  
And is buying flour and butter at the store.  
She has wistful hazel eyes,  
And a crooked smile.  
Now she irons, sweeps and fries,  
And hangs out clothes on Monday.  
For marriage time is reckoned from Sunday to Sunday,  
And for her who has returned  
It is all one day;  
With curtains between her and a time that is dead,  
And trips to the store for a loaf of bread.

**1927**

# Ophidia

Lifting dark beside the trail,  
Blotched by the pale  
Sunlight sifting down cedars;  
Mark of beast—stir of bee—  
But here no least foot of man has beaten track,  
And the traveler shudders back  
From the narrow needled floor.  
This is a door into legend,  
Tales of men caught among patterned horror.  
Before caverns painted with sun,  
With clubbed gun a slack weapon  
Rasping a last breath  
In swollen death.

Let the mild cedars roar  
Over the cushioned floor  
While the tales pour  
Down the wind from that place of bright caverns,  
Down paths known only to wild feet and the dead—  
The dread touch of life that lies in the sunlight alone,  
Warm on a stone.

**1929**

# Outcast

Old man Carver  
Came from the East.  
He never sat  
At their thundering feast.

He never knew  
Their whiskeyed nights.  
He was farming stones  
While they hunted fights.

When they told of bloody  
Barroom rows,  
Carver could only  
Speak of cows.

His words of seed corn  
Were nothing beside  
The story of Jed  
And the grey wolf's hide.

So he sat dumb  
In the crossroad store  
While they spun shattering  
Tales of gore.

They granted Carver  
Could farm like hell,  
But he had no beautiful  
Lies to tell.

**1930**

# The Horseman

Dust on the trail—then a blot—  
Somebody coming. It's not  
Usual here in this spot  
Off the main highway—forgot  
By the world. But he's nearer. He rides  
At a trot on the level. He hides  
Where the shoulder of sandstone obscures  
The white cloud of his passing. He lures  
Our eyes from the harrow and churn.  
We taste of his coming. We yearn  
For his voice, for the word of the trail,  
For the pipefuls, the leisurely hail  
And farewell of the dwellers alone  
On the skirts of the high peaks of stone.  
One more turn and he'll be at the door.  
Quick, catch up the pail from the floor,  
His horse will be thirsty, and set  
The bench in the shadow, and get  
Some food on the stove. "Step right down;  
Take a seat. What's the good news from town?"  
But he answers us shortly—a drink  
For his horse from the spring—do we think  
He can make Canyon City by dark?  
We point out a blue ridge to mark.  
He is cold and apart from our words.  
He looks over the mountains—the birds  
Are not more incurious. He shakes  
The reins; the horse moves; silence breaks  
On the hills, the thin trail, the tilled field.  
He is gone. He will nevermore yield  
Cheerful secrets of where he has been,  
What has done, what has said, what has seen,  
His name and his station—his flight  
Has gathered them all. In the light  
We watch him ascending the height,  
More strange than the mountains and night.

1930

# Prayer of the Homesteader

Dear Lord, we are afraid.  
We do not know this land.  
These mountains are too cold and tall and bare.  
Within their flanks the grey wolf has his lair.  
Safety lay thick upon the fields  
And friendly hilltops of our youth.  
Lord, you will understand  
We are not cowards  
But we do not like this land.

We were taught simple things when we were young.  
We know the path a plow makes in black loam,  
The way of pleasant showers on April days,  
The soft winds of our home.  
We know the healing rains of summer nights,  
And the gold plenty of the harvesting.  
But this land fights.  
Its hard brown sod protests against the plow,  
Its stubborn grasses cling.  
Our young crops are beat flat by roaring hail,  
And when the rains should visit us in spring  
There comes a hot strange gale,  
Like desert wind blown over glittering sand  
That dries the little wheat.  
Lord, did you mean that men should farm this land?

Lord, this is not a land where men should live.  
Our minds rake up a harvest of old tales  
Whispered around old fires,  
And butte and coulee ring with chattering wails.  
Upon these iron benches Things have stalked.  
When morning breaks we are afraid to look  
For fear great feet have walked  
And left crushed tracks upon the buffalo grass.  
These creeping nights of ghosts were never made  
For man and sleep.  
Dear Lord, we are afraid.

Lord, can it be that this is not your land?  
Your ways are peaceful ways through country lanes,  
But you have never walked upon these plains,  
We never see your face beneath these skies.  
Come to us, Lord.  
Man should not live alone within the world;  
He is not strong nor wise.  
Bless our thin crops.  
Teach the small trees to grow.  
Stretch us your kindly hand.  
We must have comfort in this alien land.

**1922**

## II. Later Poems

## After Appomattox

Let there be heavier fruit large among leaves,  
A golden heaping of sun on earth.  
This will be a year of reaping,  
When the warm body soft under leaf shadow  
Will tremble beneath urging hands.  
Let no cloud hide this fire of summer.

Forget that which has been lived  
And was called girlhood.  
Girl days should flutter with hidden loves—  
Happiness of early arbutus and birds among the evening trees.  
That which is over  
Has been terrible with enduring,  
Loverless, noisy with the names of the dead.  
Thrust the years of drouth away.  
Remember only childhood with apples and sunlight.  
Tears are not good to remember.

Girlhood lived with death;  
But now there is no death,  
Only the sweet wild plum ripening,  
The corn tasseling in the steamy heat.  
Now there is a seeping into the land,  
A return of that which has been gone.  
There will be thin leaping men in farmhouses,  
Voices that burn.  
No longer the blurred notes of old men nor the clatter of women.  
There will be shouts and whistling in the fields.

It is a summer for ripeness.  
Put aside the close dress,  
Smooth the hid ribbon.  
This is a summer for glancing and laughter.  
Remember the ways of dancing,  
The words of bright songs.  
Quicken your tongue to answer.  
There will be questions.



It is for this that the live breast pulls the bodice,  
For this flesh is cool and honey-pale.  
Take the flecked sun on cheek and lip—  
A woman is passive before the intruder.  
Listen for a foot on the roadway,  
A voice at the wide door.

**1933**

# Dialog

The cold flows thickly round the house. It turns  
The hills to brittle shards. There is no soul  
In our warmth or the fire's that speaks in words  
It knows. I hate its cruelty and disregard.

Within the bed those furnaces our bodies  
Lie consuming life. We plot to burn  
An ever-leaping fire. What difference  
to us the cold learns nothing of it?

This land is like a bride, fleshless and wild,  
But never fat with child. It has two virtues,  
Beauty and pride, but to a woman these  
Are neither virtues. Yet you seem to love it.

The living seize each other on the plains.  
I find my breath struggling with the cattle,  
Beating through blizzard to the feeding pens,  
And with the rains I yearn over the wheat.

Rains and the spring are far. They hardly smooth  
The thing I mean. You buy yourself  
With crops and calving, but that face uncouth  
Behind the wheat is what you've never seen.

The wind has changed while we've been talking. Hear  
That friend of ranches in the winter humming  
Above our roof. The cold is gone. The eaves  
Will smoke with comfort after the sunrise.

Oh, little man, impressed with kindness,  
There is no heart in that wind's dripping cheer!  
This land is ruthless as the universe.  
The circling stars cannot be more malign  
Than these flat plains and fearful peaks and skies.

1938

# Legend

The summer breeze drove Madoc gently west.  
His bitter sailors clung about the stern  
Seeing the crest of Wales turn into cloud.  
The blind, infernal water shone below.  
Madoc, scatheless of devils, hunted peace.

On that sad coast where the keel hung at last  
Forest and prairie fell behind his feet,  
Until, above a tumbling curve of green,  
The Shining Mountains broke upon the sky.

“Here will be peace,” said Madoc.  
Where the high streams feed the Missouri  
Madoc’s men stretched roofs and raised their sons.  
The moccasin stopped at the breath of Wales  
Clashing among the cedars.

Gazing at snow, plucking the mountain lily,  
Madoc rolled peace upon his tongue  
till death.

1939

# Bedroom

This is the place where living does not come,  
Where the equipment of the day is never brought.  
Neatness may have its way here. This high room  
Will stand reminding us what sun has taught—  
The best of life may still be sleep. Draw  
The pale sheet over the solemn rectangle,  
See that the curtains keep the window's law.  
Let nothing be askew or dangle.  
So that one coming in from the distress  
Of day will watch receding the last beams  
Of living; with but one duty, to undress,  
And cope with the faint necessities of dreams.

**1940**

# Death of the Grandmother

It is almost forgotten . . . the stepping down from swinging  
light  
To the night crossed by the shape of trees; grumble of  
motion  
And the smell of horses, dull penumbras of light and tall  
blackness.  
There is no home in these streets, only recollections of odor,  
light,  
Motion, from days when things broke in the mind to foam-  
ing outlines.  
Far back in the sleepy brain a faintly known remembering  
Swings with the creak of the omnibus and iron shoes on  
brick pavement.

This is a return through saved memories to the slippered  
scuffle.  
Long since the large grace of the Persian Lilac was old with  
the grapevine  
Bending on its trellis. Ponies that once stamped in the barn  
Died long ago; ridden no more by girls now lost in taffeta  
And emerald-glinting hands, passing the frail cup,  
Tipping the brass shine above the spirit lamp.  
Go back . . . renew yourself in these colored wells.

Lamps shed paleness spilling on dark cupboards, painted  
glass doors  
Holding all that has gone. The catalpas have dropped green  
pencils  
Now dry-patterned brown on cold lawn. Nothing is left of  
the peonies  
But a round death. As sleep curtains the mind there are  
bells,  
Minor clangings that fall through the catalpa boughs . . .  
The whistle at crossing . . . the muffled voice of the  
shunting . . .  
Dreams in this strange yet remembered house circled by  
bells.

For the young the old die with ease, a ceasing in quiet of one  
Who was kind hands. Too early to learn death. The habit  
Of funeral strikes queerly . . . a loss not felt but remem-  
bered in pictures  
Crude with infancy, before that face had changed to the  
remote glance  
From the sheet or the voice was stilled by the death-coming.  
Pictures that lie  
In the remembering mind while the eyes watch an old man  
lost in deafness  
And grief who speaks of a past known only to the blood not  
the memory.

April, and nothing will hinder the catalpa from urging her  
rich blossom,  
Nor will the blue grape ever cease, and the locust  
Over the herringbone drive has an eternity with the house.  
Only years will mix shingles and graceful dish, the catalpa  
and the clap of hooves  
And the sad harmony of the bells with this dead who  
returns diffidently  
In dream to a home romantically enlarged by dream-  
ing . . .  
Rooms sheathed in walnut . . . halls singular with  
shadow . . .

Where the dreamer walks certain of destination, lighting  
Her rapid journey with bobbing candle through rooms and  
stairs  
Brought into night-dark being by that light, reflecting now  
The panel shine of a closed alcove bed where dreams say  
Lie those two so long past dreaming, now sleeping as they  
rested  
In that time behind a closed green-painted door  
Where a child might tiptoe not disturbing the fluid slumber  
of old age.

There lies in the mind as that dream lay in sleep, the jewel  
of the beginnings,  
That which is ancestral, curtained by the catalpa, the high  
swell of the locust,  
And the tune of the circling bells. Rejoice it shall never be  
lost,  
For losing it life would be a faint thing shuddering vainly in  
the day.

**1941**

# Tomorrow Is A Birthday

Eighty years ago a woman passed  
Heavily from shelf to table. Winter  
Was thick on the land. Through the small glass  
Snow glanced at her distorted curve.  
Eighty years ago pain swerved her  
Foreboding the night at hand. This I know.  
This is not a figure flowing up through fable.  
This birth happened as I tell it now.

And as all birth, this was a beginning  
And an ending. She who was lightened  
Of that guerdon knew no further rending  
And watched few more snows burdening the pines,  
Sifting upon the earth. Eyes I have never seen  
Were closed. A body my memory cannot call back  
Reposed. Yet this has lived with me  
That she lived and was dissolved.

From that bearing came vigor drawn from the robust ground  
By hard generations, pouring toward age—  
Toward eight round decades which would make a life,  
The finished sound of them calling for cerement.  
Yet the full eight were not tied compactly  
But jaggedly rent and again there was an unbinding  
And life stopped with difficult secret wailing.

Close to the mind, warm to the nerve,  
These decades have turned; interlaced with the past,  
Hard and exact with my weight when it enters the circle.  
And the circle will haste, and the birthdays will go;  
Other decades will form, and again will a body  
Be racked. There will be a dissolving. Once more bones  
That tasted pleasure from this earth will lie down.  
The whirl will be marred. This I know.

**1941**



# The Return

Those the tavern remembered stamped its boards  
When coaches groaned over the dust. It was shaken  
Then, now more tilted, more unsteady.  
Its pictures were of cider and venison—the tall  
Words of backwoodsmen poured in whiskey—flight  
Of pigeons through walnut twilight.

The churchyard knew only the names within its acre  
And there were no graves of their race to call them. They read  
The ancient numbers—Cawthorne—Fisher—neighbors  
Who died while they were thoughtless of their deathbeds.  
Now they would wish them upright again to speak  
A word to those who seek.

Did the mill know them? It spoke their tongues of bees,  
Cattails and water. It had been given over  
To children then and was fresh for secret planning.  
Wasps walked the panes. All infancy  
Had rested here. Was this the end of yearning,  
A timeless spot returning?

Today that house held lipping indolence—  
A bleached last son bearing her kindly name.  
He strove to find accurate echoes of her  
Only to end in his own music. And although  
Her reticent belongings cried to the children *pause*  
*Remember with us,*

Yet they could not stay but closed the door  
On darkness and mahogany. Oh, go!  
This is the past. Nothing is left beside  
The voice of summer in the mill. Turn  
From this lost hillroad blinded in bees and clover  
That today streams over.

1942

# Revisit I

## *Peace at Midnight*

In those years above a rooftop,  
Serenely shingled, raftered in safety,  
Stars locked in their harmonious patterns;  
A breeze drove gently from the lake.  
Fettered evil exploded never  
Over those houses exact in the darkness  
Where wrapped in comfort the sleeper lay.  
That bed was angeled, that roof strong.

But through those nights the room was beleaguered,  
Armies of horror moved in the shadow.  
Heads subtly built of sunless hours  
And arctic terror reared in corners.  
Silent paws ripped at the rug  
Clawing the quilt. The young sleeper moved  
Followed by nightmare—the faceless vision  
Seen in a moonray over the shoulder.

Who shall certify peace at midnight?  
What hand make sterile the seeds of violence  
While blindness inhabits the soul primitive  
Drawn through dream from glacial beginnings?  
Will the vast of tomorrow erase this image?  
Some day will the mind no longer trouble  
When the curtain of skin before the entrance  
Shudders at twilight with more than wind?

**1942**

## Revisit IV

### *Words on Departure*

The road which years should have rolled to a stiff chain  
Rushed over by gasoline ends in dead flowers  
And unrented homes. They blew that iridescent  
Bubble too full when their hearts were new  
Leaving idleness and black weeds pressing apart  
Old machinery of hope. We of the forties  
Remark sadly on their contentions. The rubble  
Which was once the hotel is a gash in the heart.

Even the wind, that fond enemy, has ripped safety  
From the harbor wall. There is dreadful space  
In the minute pines which once encircled eternity.  
The green chill of the lake pours into sunlight.  
These mills are blind—these wharves unpeopled. Speed  
Familiar to the time slides through the town  
And is gone. The loud word still explores silence  
But echo has deserted to the canyons of deed.

What shall happen when the wide city of youth  
Lies hollow? When progress, our definition of cheer,  
Dies alone? The plan of the past holds no kindness  
For now. There will be weeping tomorrow.  
This is a farewell to belief—a fear of the goal.  
Let the boat, that brave unit of culture, widen  
The space from the broken harbor. No wave strangling  
Could raise such crest of sorrow in the soul.

**1942**

# Transcontinental

The name Skull Rock sounds as a gong  
Among small cedars and the yellow flare  
Of quick water. Yet it will die in the shiver  
Of the Diamond A saloon. Plumb and square  
Make space for the stink of fat. Night and noon  
Wives of doctors, clerks and lawyers step  
The mud in woman gowns. Rinse the song  
From Skull Rock with the sloshing of their washing.

Grasses and the blossom of Easter will hear no more  
The thundering roar of the wilderness. The words  
Of the trapper will go. The Indian speech  
Will be lost like snow. Springs a new greed  
Of beer and rye, steak and coffee—chop house  
Open day and night. Come and buy land,  
Stock and wheat land. Thompson knows about  
Land values. We'll supply every need.

Down from the rimrock those who were the old lovers  
Of the land step soberly to the memorial of tragedy.  
Into this valley swept the pestilence. Here  
On this blank rock the young warriors were sacrificed  
To the morose gods. Their deaths have not  
Been forgotten. Today their children mourn  
Remembering their fathers dead of the pestilence,  
And the young men whose bodies were broken.

But this is Town and in its squares no lot  
For sorrow. Banish old tears and ceremony.  
Finish the wheels, figure the deals, flash  
The loud axes, hurry the taxes, chisel a pavestone.  
A day is near when we shall want men  
Whose virtue does not rise above roof tops,  
Whose thoughts will be churches and rules, ditches and wheat,  
Assessments and schools. Carve on a gravestone.

The solitary of the mountain stares and is gone. The wolf  
Looks down in the star-alive night, his hunting grounds shifts  
To a place of fright black with strange smells.  
The trapper returns with his pack from the cedar-clothed land  
Where the paint pots bubble. Here is a new hot spring  
A troubling well of living. Sage has died  
For road. Tin shines in the blue. There  
Is nothing here now for anyone but man.

The iron creeps, hammer and spike in a clanging  
Song. The end of this building won't be long.  
How shall we sing of Skull Rock on that Monday,  
That day of best grade lumber west of Chi?  
Ragged stock upon the range that  
The wolf has left forever. Though this stagger  
The heart—a blunder of loss with nothing for gain—  
Shall we sing it as a change, as the morning of wonder?

**1946**

# Dorchester Plate

Bound with blue where thirteen stars  
space demurely, crowned by an eagle,  
flecked with marionettes under stiff trees,  
the past climbs to an easy hill.

When could years have shown thus—  
glazed-circular? Yet grandfathers of living  
women darkened this grass with death,  
sweated through that voiceless mill.

So soon does blood shrink to  
the dimensions of a shelf. The gaudy tones  
of passion spill at last on  
this cycle of pottery—this mirror of the unreal.

**1946**

# Language Of Pain

This is our ancestral war, twisted  
Clear and rosy through our web of living,  
Dear to the nerves,  
Savory with the lore  
Of granduncles, parades.

Saplings set the morning Lincoln died  
Retain that sanctity and pride to the  
Last orchard branch.  
The birthday of the old  
Is bright with Gettysburg.

Today gigantic strides us weak.  
Its mechanic roar is not the tongue  
By which we speak  
Of fratricide, disorder  
And the fame of war.

So the translated agony of dream  
Visits one in proud rooms where the sleeper yearns,  
Parting dark folds,  
To watch the hesitant poplar  
Trembling like youth bereaved;

While a tune commonplace with years  
Once more calls tears to one who loves in shadow  
The bearded bluecoat,  
Tenting and sad for peace,  
Within a graceless world.

**1946**

# Over Patras

Galaxies flee forever from each other.  
Their floor today is plotted by the wise.  
Orion had discharged his mysteries,  
Feared by those watchers at the Lion Gate  
Who saw planet and constellation roar  
Over the far and terrible sanctuary.  
Men have dared knowledge, so the sky today  
Unfolds for them with pendulum clarity.

But I am ignorant. For me the Chair  
Hangs in the sky clear and provocative.  
My mind cares nothing for these certitudes.  
My truths are older, so I peer and crouch,  
With stare as shaken as the Mycenaean,  
Seeing the comet flaring over Patras.

**1959**



Haste

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