

Classic Poetry Series

James Stephens

- 40 poems -

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James Stephens (9 February 1882–26 December 1950)

James Stephens was an Irish novelist and poet.

James Stephens produced many retellings of Irish myths and fairy tales. His retellings are marked by a rare combination of humor and lyricism (Deirdre, and Irish Fairy Tales are often especially praise). He also wrote several original novels (Crock of Gold, Etched in Moonlight, Demi-Gods) based loosely on Irish fairy tales. "Crock of Gold," in particular, achieved enduring popularity and was reprinted frequently throughout the author's lifetime. Stephens began his career as a poet with the tutelage of "Æ" ([George William Russell](http://www.poemhunter.com/george-william-a-e-russell-2/)). His first book of poems, "Insurrections," was published during 1909. His last book, "Kings and the Moon" (1938), was also a volume of verse.

During the 1930s, Stephens had some acquaintance with [James Joyce](http://www.poemhunter.com/james-joyce/), who found that they shared a birth year (and, Joyce mistakenly believed, a birthday). Joyce, who was concerned with his ability to finish what later became Finnegans Wake, proposed that Stephens assist him, with the authorship credited to JJ & S (James Joyce & Stephens, also a pun for the popular Irish whiskey made by John Jameson & Sons). The plan, however, was never implemented, as Joyce was able to complete the work on his own. During the last decade of his life, Stephens found a new audience through a series of broadcasts on the BBC.

Timeline of Stephens's Life

1880 (9 February). Possible date of birth of James Stephens in Dublin.

1882 (2 February). Date of birth used by Stephens.

1886-96 Attended Meath Protestant Industrial School for Boys.

1896 Employed as a clerk by a Dublin solicitor, Mr Wallace.

1901 Part of a gymnastic team which won the Irish Shield. Employed by Reddington & Sainsbury, solicitors.

1906 Employed as a clerk-typist in the office of T. T. Mecedry & Son, solicitors.

1907 Began regular contributions to Sinn Féin. Birth of stepdaughter, Iris, on 14 June; soon thereafter announced that he had a wife, "Cynthia" (Millicent Josephine Gardiner Kavanagh, 22 May 1882-18 December 1960). Discovered by George W. Russell (Æ).

1909 Insurrections. Acted in the Theatre of Ireland's two productions of Seumas O'Kelly's *The Shuiler's Child*. Birth of son, James Naoise, on 26 October.

1910 Acted in the Theatre of Ireland production of Gerald h Macnamara's *The SPurious Sovereign*. He was associated with David Houston, Thomas

MacDonagh, and Padraic Colum in founding and editing the Irish Review (published March 1911-November 1914).

1911 Acted in Pádraic Ó Conaire's Bairbre Ruadh. The Marriage of Julia Elizabeth produced by the Theatre of Ireland.

1912 The Charwoman's Daughter, The Hill of Vision, Crock of Gold.

1912 Poems In the Poppy Field, In the Cool of the Evening, The Lonely God all from The Hill of Vision are included by Edward Marsh in his collection Georgian Poetry.

1913 Here Are Ladies, Five New Poems. Received a commission from The Nation (London) to write a series of short stories. Moved to Paris. Another production of The Marriage of Julia Elizabeth at the Hardwicke Street Theatre. Crock of Gold awarded the Polignac Prize.

1914 The Demi-Gods.

1915 Songs from the Clay, The Adventures of Seumas Beg/The Rocky Road to Dublin. Elected Unestablished Registrar of the National Gallery of Ireland.

1915 Poems The Rivals, The Goatpaths, The Snare, In Woods and Meadows, Deirdre all from Songs from the Clay are included by Edward Marsh in his collection Georgian Poetry.

1916 Green Branches, The Insurrection in Dublin.

1917 Poems The Fifteen Acres, Check, Westland Row, The Turn of the Road, A Visit from Abroad all from The Adventures of Seumas Beg are included by Edward Marsh in his collection Georgian Poetry.

1918-24 Appointed Registrar of the National Gallery of Ireland

1918 Reincarnations.

1919 Married "Cynthia" (then a widow) in London on 14 May.

1920 Irish Fairy Tales. The Wooing of Julia Elizabeth (identical to The Marriage of Julia Elizabeth) produced at the Abbey Theatre by the Dublin Drama League. One of a series of operations for gastric ulcers.

1922 Arthur Griffith: journalist and Statesman.

1923 Deirdre.

1924 Little Things, In the Land of Youth. Deirdre presented the medal for fiction at the Aonach Tailteann festival. Resigned from the National Gallery.

1925 A Poetry Recital, Danny Murphy, Christmas in Freeland. On lecture tour in America. Returned to London; soon thereafter settled in the Kingsbury suburb of London. To America for another lecture tour.

1926 Collected Poems.

1927 Friendship with James Joyce commenced. Joyce suggested that Stephens complete Finnegans Wake if Joyce was unable to do so; this proposal made more formally during 1929.

1928 Etched in Moonlight, On Prose and Verse. First BBC broadcast. Lecturer at the Third International Book Fair in Florence.

1929 Julia Elizabeth: A Comedy, in one act, The Optimist, The Outcast. In Romania; met Queen Marie. Visit to America; stay with W. T. H. Howe.

1930 Theme and Variations. Visit to America; stay with Howe.

1931 How St. Patrick Saves the Irish, Stars Do Not Make a Noise, Strict Joy. Visit to America; stay with Howe.

1932 Visit to America; stay with Howe. A founder member of the Irish Academy of Letters.

1933-35 Yearly lecture tours to America; visits with Howe.

1937 Began regular series of BBC broadcasts. Accidental death of his son, James Naoise, on 24 December.

1938 Kings and the Moon.

1940 Moved to Woodside Chapel in Gloucestershire.

1942 Awarded British Civil List Pension.

1945 Returned to London.

1947 Awarded honorary D. Litt. degree from Dublin University (Trinity College).

1950 Final BBC broadcast. Death at Eversleigh on 26 December.

Works:

Crock of Gold
 Etched in Moonlight
 Demi-Gods
 Deirdre
 Irish Fairy Tales
 Kings and the Moon (1938)

A Visit from Abroad

A speck went blowing up against the sky
As little as a leaf: then it drew near
And broadened. -- ' It's a bird,' said I,
And fetched my bow and arrows. It was queer!
It grew up from a speck into a blot,
And squattered past a cloud; then it flew down
All crumply, and waggled such a lot
I thought the thing would fall.--It was a brown
Old carpet, where the man was sitting snug,
Who, when he reached the ground, began to sew
A big hole in the middle of the rug,
And kept on peeping everywhere to know
Who might be coming -- then he gave a twist
And flew away I fired at him but missed.

James Stephens

April Showers

The leaves are fresh after the rain,
The air is cool and clear,
The sun is shining warm again,
The sparrows hopping in the lane
Are brisk and full of cheer.

And that is why we dance and play,
And that is why we sing,
Calling out in voices gay,
We will not go to school to-day
Or learn anything:

It is a happy thing, I say,
To be alive on such a day.

James Stephens

Behind the Hill

Behind the hill I met a man in green
Who asked me if my mother had gone out?
I said she had. He asked me had I seen
His castle where the people sing and shout
From dawn to dark, and told me that he had
A crock of gold inside a hollow tree,
And I could have it.—I wanted money bad
To buy a sword with, and I thought that he
Would keep his solemn word; so, off we went.
He said he had a pound hid in the crock,
And owned the castle too, and paid no rent
To any one, and that you had to knock
Five hundred times. I asked, 'Who reckoned up?'
And he said, 'You insulting little pup!'

James Stephens

Blue-Blood

We thought at first, this man is a king for sure,
Or the branch of a mighty and ancient and famous lineage—
That silly, sulky, illiterate, black-avised boor
Who was hatched by foreign vulgarity under a hedge.

The good men of Clare were drinking his health in a flood,
And gazing with me in awe at the princely lad,
And asking each other from what bluest blueness of blood
His daddy was squeezed, and the pa and the da of his dad ?

We waited there, gaping and wondering, anxiously,
Until he'd stop eating and let the glad tidings out,
And the slack-jawed booby proved to the hilt that he
Was lout, son of lout, by old lout, and was da to a lout !

James Stephens

Breakfast Time

The sun is always in the sky
Whenever I get out of bed,
And I often wonder why
It's never late.—My sister said
She did not know who did the trick,
And that she did not care a bit,
And I should eat my porridge quick.
... I think it's mother wakens it.

James Stephens

Check

The night was creeping on the ground;
She crept and did not make a sound
Until she reached the tree, and then
She covered it, and soe again
Along the grass beside the wall.

I heard the rustle of her shawl
As she threw blackness everywhere
Upon the sky and ground and air,
And in the room where I was hid:
But no matter what she did
To everything that was without,
She could not put my candle out.

So I stared at the night, and she
Stared back solemnly at me.

James Stephens

Hate

My enemy came nigh,
And I
Stared fiercely in his face.
My lips went writhing back in a grimace,
And stern I watched him with a narrow eye.
Then, as I turned away, my enemy,
That bitter heart and savage, said to me:
"Some day, when this is past,
When all the arrows that we have are cast,
We may ask one another why we hate,
And fail to find a story to relate.
It may seem then to us a mystery
That we should hate each other."

Thus said he,
And did not turn away,
Waiting to hear what I might have to say,
But I fled quickly, fearing had I stayed
I might have kissed him as I would a maid.

James Stephens

I heard a bird at dawn

I heard a bird at dawn
Singing sweetly on a tree,
That the dew was on the lawn,
And the wind was on the lea;
But I didn't listen to him,
For he didn't sing to me.

I didn't listen to him,
For he didn't sing to me
That the dew was on the lawn
And the wind was on the lea;
I was singing at the time
Just as prettily as he.

I was singing all the time,
Just as prettily as he,
About the dew upon the lawn
And the wind upon the lea;
So I didn't listen to him
As he sang upon a tree.

James Stephens

In The Cool Of The Evening

I thought I heard Him calling. Did you hear
A sound, a little sound? My curious ear
Is dinned with flying noises, and the tree
Goes -- whisper, whisper, whisper silently
Till all its whispers spread into the sound
Of a dull roar. Lie closer to the ground,
The shade is deep and He may pass us by.
We are so very small, and His great eye,
Customed to starry majesties, may gaze
Too wide to spy us hiding in the maze;
Ah, misery! the sun has not yet gone
And we are naked: He will look upon
Our crouching shame, may make us stand upright
Burning in terror -- O that it were night!
He may not come . . . what! listen, list now --
He is here! lie closer . . . Adam, where art thou?

James Stephens

In the Orchard

There was a giant by the Orchard Wall
Peeping about on this side and on that,
And feeling in the trees: he was as tall
As the big apple tree, and twice as fat:
His beard was long, and bristly-black, and there
Were leaves and bits of grass stuck in his hair.

He held a great big club in his right hand,
And with the other felt in every tree
For something that he wanted. You could stand
Beside him and not reach up to his knee
So mighty big he was—I feared he would
Turn round, and trample down to where I stood.

I tried to get away, but, as I slid
Under a bush, he saw me, and he bent
Far down and said, 'Where is the Princess hid?'
I pointed to a place, and off he went—
But while he searched I turned and simply flew
Round by the lilac bushes back to you.

James Stephens

In The Poppy Field

Mad Patsy said, he said to me,
That every morning he could see
An angel walking on the sky;
Across the sunny skies of morn
He threw great handfuls far and nigh
Of poppy seed among the corn;
And then, he said, the angels run
To see the poppies in the sun.

A poppy is a devil weed,
I said to him - he disagreed;
He said the devil had no hand
In spreading flowers tall and fair
Through corn and rye and meadow land,
by garth and barrow everywhere:
The devil has not any flower,
But only money in his power.

And then he stretched out in the sun
And rolled upon his back for fun:
He kicked his legs and roared for joy
Because the sun was shining down:
He said he was a little boy
And would not work for any clown:
He ran and laughed behind a bee,
And danced for very ecstasy.

James Stephens

Insurrections

I saw God. Do you doubt it?
Do you dare to doubt it?
I saw the Almighty Man. His hand
Was resting on a mountain, and
He looked upon the World and all about it:
I saw Him plainer than you see me now,
You mustn't doubt it.
He was not satisfied;
His look was all dissatisfied.
His beard swung on a wind far out of sight
Behind the world's curve, and there was light
Most fearful from His forehead, and He sighed,
'That star went always wrong, and from the start
I was dissatisfied.'
He lifted up His hand-
I say He heaved a dreadful hand
Over the spinning Earth, then I said 'Stay,
You must not strike it, God; I'm in the way;
And I will never move from where I stand.'
He said, 'Dear child, I feared that you were dead,'
And stayed His hand.

James Stephens

Midnight

And then I wakened up in such a fright;
I thought I heard a movement in the room
But did not dare to look; I snuggled right
Down underneath the bedclothes—then the boom
Of a tremendous voice said, 'Sit up, lad,
And let me see your face.' So up I sat,
Although I didn't want to. I was glad
I did though, for it was an angel that
Had called me, and he said, he'd come to know
Was I the boy who wouldn't say his prayers
Nor do his sums, and that I'd have to go
Straight down to hell because of such affairs.
... I said I'd be converted and do good
If he would let me off—he said he would.

James Stephens

O'Bruaidar

I will sing no more songs: the pride of my country I sang
Through forty long years of good rhyme, without any avail;
And no one cared even as much as the half of a hang
For the song or the singer, so here is an end to the tale.

If a person should think I complain and have not got the cause,
Let him bring his eyes here and take a good look at my hand,
Let him say if a goose-quill has calloused this poor pair of paws
Or the spade that I grip on and dig with out there in the land?

When the great ones were safe and renowned and were rooted and tough,
Though my mind went to them and took joy in the fortune of those,
And pride in their pride and their fame, they gave little enough,
Not as much as two boots for my feet, or an old suit of clothes.

I ask a Craftsman that fashioned the fly and the bird,
Of the Champion whose passion will lift me from death in a time,
Of the Spirit that melts icy hearts with the wind of a word,
That my people be worthy, and get, better singing than mine.

I had hoped to live decent, when Ireland was quit of her care,
As a bailiff or steward perhaps in a house of degree,
But my end of the tale is, old brogues and old britches to wear,
So I'll sing no more songs for the men that care nothing for me.

James Stephens

Righteous Anger

THE lanky hank of a she in the inn over there
Nearly killed me for asking the loan of a glass of beer:
May the devil grip the whey-faced slut by the hair,
And beat bad manners out of her skin for a year.

That parboiled imp, with the hardest jaw you will see
On virtue's path, and a voice that would rasp the dead,
Came roaring and raging the minute she looked on me,
And threw me out of the house on the back of my head!

If I asked her master he'd give me a cask a day;
But she, with the beer at hand, not a gill would arrange!
May she marry a ghost and bear him a kitten, and may
The High King of Glory permit her to get the mange.

James Stephens

Strict Joy

To-day i felt as poor O'Brien did
When, turning from all else that was not his,
He took himself to that which was his own
— He took him to his verse — for other all he had not,
And (tho' man will crave and seek)
Another all than this he did not need

So, pen in hand he tried to tell the whole tale of his woe
In rhyming; lodge the full weight of his grief in versing: and so did:
Then — when his poem had been conned and cared,
And all put in that should not be left out — did he not find and with astonishment,

That grief had been translated, or was come
Other and better than it first looked to be:
And that this happened, because all things transfer
From what they seem to what they truly are
When they are innocently brooded on
— And, so, The poet makes grief beautiful.

"Behold me now, with my back to the wall,
Playing music to empty pockets!"
So, Raferty, tuning a blind mans plight,
Could sing the cark of misery away:
And know, in blindness and in poverty,
That woe was not of him, nor kind to him.

And Egan Rahilly begins a verse —
"My heart is broken, and my mind is sad ..."
'Twas surely true when he began his song,
And was less true when he had finished it:
— Be sure, his heart was buoyant, and his grief
Drummed and trumpeted as grief was sung!

For, as he meditated misery
And cared it into song — Strict Care, Strict Joy!
Caring for grief he cared his grief away:
And those sad songs, tho' woe be all the theme,
Do not make us grieve who read them now —
Because the poet makes grief beautiful.

And I, myself, conning a lonely heart
— Full lonely 'twas, and 'tis as lonely now
Turned me, by proper, to my natural,
And, now too long her vagrant, wooed my muse:
Then to her — let us look more close to these,
And, seeing, know; and, knowing, be at ease.

Seeing the sky o'erblast, and that the rain had
Plashed the window, and would plash again:
Seeing the summer lost, and the winter nigh:
Seeing inapt, and sad, and fallen from good:
Seeing how will was weak, and wish o'erbearing:

Seeing inconstant, seeing timidity:
Seeing too small, too poor in this and yon:
Seeing life, daily, grow more difficult:
Seeing all that moves away — moving away
... And that all seeing is a blind-mans treat,
And that all getting is a beggars dole,
And that all having is bankruptcy ...

All these, sad all! I told to my good friend,
Told Raferty, O'Brien, Rahilly,
Told rain, and frosted blossom, and the summer gone,
Told poets dead, and captains dead, and kings!
— And we cared naught that these were mournful things,
For, caring them, we made them beautiful.

James Stephens

The Ancient Elf

I am the maker,
The builder, the breaker,
The eagle-winged helper,
The speedy forsaker!

The lance and the lyre,
The water, the fire,
The tooth of oppression,
The lip of desire!

The snare and the wing,
The honey, the sting!
When you seek for me--look
For a different thing!

I, careless and gay,
Never mean what I say,
For my thoughts and my eyes
Look the opposite way!

James Stephens

The Cherry Tree

Come from your bed my drowsy gentleman!
And you, fair lady, rise and braid your hair,
And let the children wash, if wash they can;
If not, assist you them, and make them fair
As is the morning and the morning sky,
And every tree and bush and bird in air.

The sun climbed on the heights three hours ago,
He laughed above the hills and they were glad;
With bubbled pearl he made the rivers flow
And laced their mists in silver, and he clad
The meads in fragrant pomp of green and gold,
And bade the world forget it had been sad.

So lift yourself, good sir! and you, sweet dame,
Unlash your evening eyes of pious grey;
Call on the children by each loved name,
And set them on the grass and let them play;
And play with them a while, and sing with them
Beneath the cherry bush a roundelay.

James Stephens

The Coolun

Come with me, under my coat,
And we will drink our fill
Of the milk of the white goat,
Or wine, if it be thy will;
And we will talk until
Talk is a truble, too,
Out in the side of the hill,
And nothing is left to do,
But an eye to look into an eye
And a hand in a hand to slip,
And a sigh to answer a sigh,
And a lip to find out a lip:
What if the night be black
And the air on the mountain chill,
Where the goat lies down in her track
And all but the fern is still!
Stay with me under my coat,
And we will drink our fill
Of the milk of the white goat
Out on the side of the hill.

James Stephens

The Coral Island

His arms were round a chest of oaken wood,
It was clamped with brass and iron studs, and seemed
An awful weight. After a while he stood
And I stole near to him.—His white eyes gleamed
As he peeped secretly about; he laid
The oaken chest upon the ground, then drew
A great knife from his belt, and stuck the blade
Into the ground and dug. The clay soon flew
In all directions underneath a tree,
And when the hole was deep he put the box
Down there, and threw the clay back cunningly,
Stamping the ground quite flat; then like a fox
He crept among the trees.... I went next day
To dig the treasure up, but I lost my way.

James Stephens

The Cow

Cow, Cow!
I and thou
Are looking at each other's eyes
You are lying on the grass
Eating every time I pass,
And you do not seem to be
Ever in perplexity:
You are good I'm sure, and not
Fit for nothing but the pot:
For your bearing is so kind,
And your quietness so wise:
Cow, Cow!
I and thou
Are looking at each other's eyes.

James Stephens

The Daisies

IN THE scented bud of the morning—O,
When the windy grass went rippling far,
I saw my dear one walking slow,
In the field where the daisies are.

We did not laugh and we did not speak
As we wandered happily to and fro;
I kissed my dear on either cheek,
In the bud of the morning—O.

A lark sang up from the breezy land,
A lark sang down from a cloud afar,
And she and I went hand in hand
In the field where the daisies are.

James Stephens

The Devil's Bag

I saw the Devil walking down the lane
Behind our house.—There was a heavy bag
Strapped tightly on his shoulders, and the rain
Sizzled when it hit him. He picked a rag
Up from the ground and put it in his sack,
And grinned and rubbed his hands.
There was a thing
Moving inside the bag upon his back—
It must have been a soul! I saw it fling
And twist about inside, and not a hole
Or cranny for escape! Oh, it was sad!
I cried, and shouted out, 'Let out that soul!'
But he turned round, and, sure, his face went mad,
And twisted up and down, and he said 'Hell!'
And ran away.... Oh, mammy! I'm not well.

James Stephens

The Fifteen Acres

I
I cling and swing
On a branch, or sing
Through the cool, clear hush of Morning, O!
Or fling my wing
On the air, and bring
To sleepier birds a warning, O!
That the night's in flight,
And the sun's in sight,
And the dew is the grass adorning, O!
And the green leaves swing
As I sing, sing, sing,
Up by the river,
Down the dell,
To the little wee nest,
Where the big tree fell,
So early in the morning, O!

II
I flit and twit
In the sun for a bit
When his light so bright is shining, O!
Or sit and fit
My plumes, or knit
Straw plaits for the nest's nice lining, O!
And she with glee
Shows unto me
Underneath her wings reclining, O!

And I sing that Peg
Has an egg, egg, egg,
Up by the oat-field,
Round by the mill,
Past the meadow,
Down the hill,
So early in the morning, O!

III
I stoop and swoop
On the air, or loop
Through the trees, and then go soaring, O!
To group with a troop
On the gusty poop
While the wind behind is roaring, O!
I skim and swim
By a cloud's red rim
And up to the azure flooring, O!
And my wide wings drip
As I slip, slip, slip,
Down through the rain-drops,
Back where Peg
Broods in the nest

On the little white egg,
So early in the morning, O!

James Stephens

The Glass Of Beer

The lanky hank of a she in the inn over there
Nearly killed me for asking the loan of a glass of beer:
May the devil grip the whey-faced slut by the hair
And beat bad manners out of her skin for a year.
That parboiled imp, with the hardest jaw you will ever see
On virtue's path, and a voice that would rasp the dead,
Came roaring and raging the minute she looked at me,
And threw me out of the house on the back of my head.

If I asked her master he'd give me a cask a day;
But she with the beer at hand, not a gill would arrange!
May she marry a ghost and bear him a kitten and may
The High King of Glory permit her to get the mange.

James Stephens

The Goat Paths

The crooked paths go every way
Upon the hill - they wind about
Through the heather in and out
Of the quiet sunniness.
And there the goats, day after day,
Stray in sunny quietness,
Cropping here and cropping there,
As they pause and turn and pass,
Now a bit of heather spray,
Now a mouthful of the grass.

In the deeper sunniness,
In the place where nothing stirs,
Quietly in quietness,
In the quiet of the furze,
For a time they come and lie
Staring on the roving sky.

If you approach they run away,
They leap and stare, away they bound,
With a sudden angry sound,
To the sunny quietude;
Crouching down where nothing stirs
In the silence of the furze,
Couching down again to brood
In the sunny solitude.

If I were as wise as they
I would stray apart and brood,
I would beat a hidden way
Through the quiet heather spray
To a sunny solitude;
And should you come I'd run away,
I would make an angry sound,
I would stare and turn and bound
To the deeper quietude,
To the place where nothing stirs
In the silence of the furze.

In that airy quietness
I would think as long as they;
Through the quiet sunniness
I would stray away to brood
By a hidden beaten way
In a sunny solitude.

I would think until I found
Something I can never find,
Something lying on the ground,
In the bottom of my mind.

James Stephens

The Horse

A sparrow hopped about the street,
And he was not a bit afraid;
He flew between a horse's feet,
And ate his supper undismayed:
I think myself the horse knew well
The bird came for the grains that fell.

For his eye was looking down,
And he danced the corn about
In his nose-bag, till the brown
Grains of corn were tumbled out;
And I fancy that he said,
'Eat it up, young Speckle-Head!'

The driver then came back again,
He climbed into the heavy dray;
And he tightened up the rein,
Cracked his whip and drove away.
But when the horse's ribs were hit,
The sparrow did not care a bit.

James Stephens

The Lonely God

So Eden was deserted, and at eve
Into the quiet place God came to grieve.
His face was sad, His hands hung slackly down
Along his robe; too sorrowful to frown
He paced along the grassy paths and through
The silent trees, and where the flowers grew
Tended by Adam. All the birds had gone
Out to the world, and singing was not one
To cheer the lonely God out of His grief --
The silence broken only when a leaf
Tapt lightly on a leaf, or when the wind,
Slow-handed, swayed the bushes to its mind.

And so along the base of a round hill,
Rolling in fern, He bent His way until
He neared the little hut which Adam made,
And saw its dusky roof-tree overlaid
With greenest leaves. Here Adam and his spouse
Were wont to nestle in their little house
Snug at the dew-time: here He, standing sad,
Sighed with the wind, nor any pleasure had
In heavenly knowledge, for His darlings twain
Had gone from Him to learn the feel of pain,
And what was meant by sorrow and despair, --
Drear knowledge for a Father to prepare.

There he looked sadly on the little place;
A beehive round it was, without a trace
Of occupant or owner; standing dim
Among the gloomy trees it seemed to Him
A final desolation, the last word
Wherewith the lips of silence had been stirred.
Chaste and remote, so tiny and so shy,
So new withal, so lost to any eye,
So pac't of memories all innocent
Of days and nights that in it had been spent
In blithe communion, Adam, Eve, and He,
Afar from Heaven and its gaudery;
And now no more! He still must be the God
But not the friend; a Father with a rod
Whose voice was fear, whose countenance a threat,
Whose coming terror, and whose going wet
With penitential tears; not evermore
Would they run forth to meet Him as before
With careless laughter, striving each to be
First to His hand and dancing in their glee
To see Him coming -- they would hide instead
At His approach, or stand and hang the head,
Speaking in whispers, and would learn to pray
Instead of asking, 'Father, if we may.'

Never again to Eden would He haste

At cool of evening, when the sun had paced
Back from the tree-tops, slanting from the rim
Of a low cloud, what time the twilight dim
Knit tree to tree in shadow, gathering slow
Till all had met and vanished in the flow
Of dusky silence, and a brooding star
Stared at the growing darkness from afar,
While haply now and then some nested bird
Would lift upon the air a sleepy word
Most musical, or swing its airy bed
To the high moon that drifted overhead.

'Twas good to quit at evening His great throne,
To lay His crown aside, and all alone
Down through the quiet air to stoop and glide
Unkenned by angels: silently to hide
In the green fields, by dappled shades, where brooks
Through leafy solitudes and quiet nooks
Flowed far from heavenly majesty and pride,
From light astounding and the wheeling tide
Of roaring stars. Thus does it ever seem
Good to the best to stay aside and dream
In narrow places, where the hand can feel
Something beside, and know that it is real.
His angels! silly creatures who could sing
And sing again, and delicately fling
The smoky censer, bow and stand aside
All mute in adoration: thronging wide,
Till nowhere could He look but soon He saw
An angel bending humbly to the law
Mechanic; knowing nothing more of pain,
Than when they were forbid to sing again,
Or swing anew the censer, or bow down
In humble adoration of His frown.
This was the thought in Eden as He trod --
. . . It is a lonely thing to be a God.

So long! afar through Time He bent His mind,
For the beginning, which He could not find,
Through endless centuries and backwards still
Endless forever, till His 'stonied will
Halted in circles, dizzied in the swing
Of mazy nothingness. -- His mind could bring
Not to subjection, grip or hold the theme
Whose wide horizon melted like a dream
To thinnest edges. Infinite behind
The piling centuries were trodden blind
In gulfs chaotic -- so He could not see
When He was not who always had To Be.

Not even godly fortitude can stare
Into Eternity, nor easy bear

The insolent vacuity of Time:
It is too much, the mind can never climb
Up to its meaning, for, without an end,
Without beginning, plan, or scope, or trend
To point a path, there nothing is to hold
And steady surmise: so the mind is rolled
And swayed and drowned in dull Immensity.
Eternity outfaces even Me
With its indifference, and the fruitless year
Would swing as fruitless were I never there.

And so for ever, day and night the same,
Years flying swiftly nowhere, like a game
Played random by a madman, without end
Or any reasoned object but to spend
What is unspendable -- Eternal Woe!
O Weariness of Time that fast or slow
Goes never further, never has in view
An ending to the thing it seeks to do,
And so does nothing: merely ebb and flow,
From nowhere into nowhere, touching so
The shores of many stars and passing on,
Careless of what may come or what has gone.

O solitude unspeakable! to be
For ever with oneself! never see
An equal face, or feel an equal hand,
To sit in state and issue reprimand,
Admonishment or glory, and to smile
Disdaining what has happened the while!
O to be breast to breast against a foe!
Against a friend! to strive and not to know
The laboured outcome: love nor be aware
How much the other loved, and greatly care
With passion for that happy love or hate,
Nor know what joy or dole was hid in fate.
For I have ranged the spacy width and gone
Swift north and south, striving to look upon
An ending somewhere. Many days I sped
Hard to the west, a thousand years I fled
Eastwards in fury, but I could not find
The fringes of the Infinite. Behind
And yet behind, and ever at the end
Came new beginnings, paths that did not wend
To anywhere were there: and ever vast
And vaster spaces opened -- till at last
Dizzied with distance, thrilling to a pain
Unnameable, I turned to Heaven again.
And there My angels were prepared to fling
The cloudy incense, there prepared to sing
My praise and glory -- O, in fury I
Then roared them senseless, then threw down the sky

And stamped upon it, buffeted a star
With my great fist, and flung the sun afar:
Shouted My anger till the mighty sound
Rung to the width, frightening the furthest bound
And scope of hearing: tumult vaster still,
Throning the echo, dinning My ears, until
I fled in silence, seeking out a place
To hide Me from the very thought of Space.

And so, He thought, in Mine own Image I
Have made a man, remote from Heaven high
And all its humble angels: I have poured
My essence in his nostrils: I have cored
His heart with My own spirit; part of Me,
His mind with laboured growth unceasingly
Must strive to equal Mine; must ever grow
By virtue of My essence till he know
Both good and evil through the solemn test
Of sin and retribution, till, with zest,
He feels his godhead, soars to challenge Me
In Mine own Heaven for supremacy.

Through savage beasts and still more savage clay,
Invincible, I bid him fight a way
To greater battles, crawling through defeat
Into defeat again: ordained to meet
Disaster in disaster; prone to fall,
I prick him with My memory to call
Defiance at his victor and arise
With anguished fury to his greater size
Through tribulation, terror, and despair.
Astounded, he must fight to higher air,
Climb battle into battle till he be
Confronted with a flaming sword and Me.

So growing age by age to greater strength,
To greater beauty, skill and deep intent:
With wisdom wrung from pain, with energy
Nourished in sin and sorrow, he will be
Strong, pure and proud an enemy to meet,
Tremendous on a battle-field, or sweet
To walk by as friend with candid mind.
--Dear enemy or friend so hard to find,
I yet shall find you, yet shall put My breast
In enmity or love against your breast:
Shall smite or clasp with equal ecstasy
The enemy or friend who grows to Me.

The topmost blossom of his growing I
Shall take unto Me, cherish and lift high
Beside myself upon My holy throne: --
It is not good for God to be alone.

The perfect woman of his perfect race
Shall sit beside Me in the highest place
And be my Goddess, Queen, Companion, Wife,
The rounder of My majesty, the life
Of My ambition. She will smile to see
Me bending down to worship at her knee
Who never bent before, and she will say,
'Dear God, who was it taught Thee how to pray?'

And through eternity, adown the slope
Of never-ending time, compact of hope,
Of zest and young enjoyment, I and She
Will walk together, sowing jollity
Among the raving stars, and laughter through
The vacancies of Heaven, till the blue
Vast amplitudes of space lift up a song,
The echo of our presence, rolled along
And ever rolling where the planets sing
The majesty and glory of the King.
Then conquered, thou, Eternity, shalt lie
Under My hand as little as a fly.

I am the Master: I the mighty God
And you My workshop. Your pavilions trod
By Me and Mine shall never cease to be,
For you are but the magnitude of Me,
The width of My extension, the surround
Of My dense splendour. Rolling, rolling round,
To steeped infinity, and out beyond
My own strong comprehension, you are bond
And servile to My doings. Let you swing
More wide and ever wide, you do but fling
Around the instant Me, and measure still
The breadth and proportion of My Will.

Then stooping to the hut -- a beehive round --
God entered in and saw upon the ground
The dusty garland, Adam, (learned to weave)
Had loving placed upon the head of Eve
Before the terror came, when joyous they
Could look for God at closing of the day
Profound and happy. So the Mighty Guest
Rent, took, and placed the blossoms in His breast.
'This,' said He gently, 'I shall show My queen
When she hath grown to Me in space serene,
And say "'twas worn by Eve.'" So, smiling fair,
He spread abroad His wings upon the air.

James Stephens

The Old Man

An old man sat beneath a tree
Alone;
So still was he
That, if he had been carved in stone,
He could not be
More quiet or more cold:
He was an ancient man
More than
A thousand ages old.

James Stephens

The Secret

I was frightened, for a wind
Crept along the grass to say
Something that was in my mind
Yesterday—

Something that I did not know
Could be found out by the wind,
I had buried it so low
In my mind.

James Stephens

The Shell

AND then I pressed the shell
Close to my ear
And listened well,
And straightway like a bell
Came low and clear
The slow, sad murmur of the distant seas,
Whipped by an icy breeze
Upon a shore
Wind-swept and desolate.
It was a sunless strand that never bore
The footprint of a man,
Nor felt the weight
Since time began
Of any human quality or stir
Save what the dreary winds and waves incur.
And in the hush of waters was the sound
Of pebbles rolling round,
For ever rolling with a hollow sound.
And bubbling sea-weeds as the waters go
Swish to and fro
Their long, cold tentacles of slimy grey.
There was no day,
Nor ever came a night
Setting the stars alight
To wonder at the moon:
Was twilight only and the frightened croon,
Smitten to whimpers, of the dreary wind
And waves that journeyed blind-
And then I loosed my ear ... O, it was sweet
To hear a cart go jolting down the street.

James Stephens

The Snare

I hear a sudden cry of pain!
There is a rabbit in a snare:
Now I hear the cry again,
But I cannot tell from where.

But I cannot tell from where
He is calling out for aid!
Crying on the frightened air,
Making everything afraid!

Making everything afraid!
Wrinkling up his little face!
And he cries again for aid;
- and I cannot find the place!

And I cannot find the place
Where his paw is in the snare!
Little One! Oh, Little One!
I am searching everywhere!

James Stephens

The Spring In Ireland: 1916

I

Do not forget my charge I beg of you ;
That of what flow'rs you find of fairest hue
And sweetest odor you do gather those
Are best of all the best — a fragrant rose,
A tall calm lily from the waterside,
A half-blown poppy leaning at the side
Its graceful head to dream among the corn,
Forget-me-nots that seem as though the morn
Had tumbled down and grew into the clay,
And hawthorn buds that swing along the way
Easing the hearts of those who pass them by
Until they find contentment. — Do not cry,
But gather buds, and with them greenery
Of slender branches taken from a tree
Well bannered by the spring that saw them fall:
Then you, for you are cleverest of all
Who have slim fingers and are pitiful,
Brimming your lap with bloom that you may cull,
Will sit apart, and weave for every head
A garland of the flow'rs you gathered.

II

Be green upon their graves, O happy Spring,
For they were young and eager who are dead;
Of all things that are young and quivering
With eager life be they remembered :
They move not here, they have gone to the clay,
They cannot die again for liberty;
Be they remembered of their land for aye;
Green be their graves and green their memory.

Fragrance and beauty come in with the green,
The ragged bushes put on sweet attire,
The birds forget how chill these airs have been,
The clouds bloom out again and move in fire;
Blue is the dawn of day, calm is the lake,
And merry sounds are fitful in the morn;
In covert deep the young blackbirds awake,
They shake their wings and sing upon the morn.

At springtime of the year you came and swung
Green flags above the newly-greening earth;
Scarce were the leaves unfolded, they were young,
Nor had outgrown the wrinkles of their birth:
Comrades they thought you of their pleasant hour,
They had but glimpsed the sun when they saw you;
They heard your songs e'er birds had singing power,
And drank your blood e'er that they drank the dew.

Then you went down, and then, and as in pain,
The Spring affrighted fled her leafy ways,
The clouds came to the earth in gusty rain,
And no sun shone again for many days:
And day by day they told that one was dead,
And day by day the season mourned for you,
Until that count of woe was finished,
And Spring remembered all was yet to do.

She came with mirth of wind and eager leaf,
With scampering feet and reaching out of wings,
She laughed among the boughs and banished grief,
And cared again for all her baby things;
Leading along the joy that has to be,
Bidding her timid buds think on the May,
And told that Summer comes with victory,
And told the hope that is all creatures' stay.

Go, Winter, now unto your own abode,
Your time is done, and Spring is conqueror
Lift up with all your gear and take your road,
For she is here and brings the sun with her:
Now are we resurrected, now are we,
Who lay so long beneath an icy hand,
New-risen into life and liberty,
Because the Spring is come into our land.

III

In other lands they may,
With public joy or dole along the way,
With pomp and pageantry and loud lament
Of drums and trumpets, and with merriment
Of grateful hearts, lead into rest and sted
The nation's dead.

If we had drums and trumpets, if we had
Aught of heroic pitch or accent glad
To honor you as bids tradition old,
With banners flung or draped in mournful fold,
And pacing cortege; these would we not bring
For your last journeying.

We have no drums or trumpets ; naught have we
But some green branches taken from a tree,
And flowers that grow at large in mead and vale;
Nothing of choice have we, or of avail
To do you honor as our honor deems,
And as your worth beseems.

Sleep, drums and trumpets, yet a little time;
All ends and all begins, and there is chime
At last where discord was, and joy at last
Where woe wept out her eyes: be not downcast,
Here is prosperity and goodly cheer,
For life does follow death, and death is here.

James Stephens

The Turn of the Road

I was playing with my hoop along the road
Just where the bushes are, when, suddenly,
There came a shout.—I ran away and stowed
Myself beneath a bush, and watched to see
What made the noise, and then, around the bend,
I saw a woman running. She was old
And wrinkle-faced, and had big teeth.—The end
Of her red shawl caught on a bush and rolled
Right off her, and her hair fell down.—Her face
Was awful white, and both her eyes looked sick,
And she was talking queer. 'O God of Grace!'
Said she, 'where is the child?' and flew back quick
The way she came, and screamed, and shook her hands;
... Maybe she was a witch from foreign lands.

James Stephens

The White Wido

The moon comes every night to peep
Through the window where I lie,
And I pretend to be asleep;
But I watch the moon as it goes by,
And it never makes a sound.

It stands and stares, and then it goes
To the house that's next to me,
Stealing on its tippy-toes,
To peep at folk asleep maybe;
And it never makes a sound.

James Stephens

The Wind

The wind stood up and gave a shout.
He whistled on his fingers and
Kicked the withered leaves about
And thumped the branches with his hand
And said that he'd kill and kill,
And so he will and so he will.

James Stephens

The Wood of Flowers

I went to the Wood of Flowers
(No one was with me):
I was there alone for hours.
I was happy as could be
In the Wood of Flowers.

There was grass on the ground,
There were buds on the tree,
And the wind had a sound
Of such gaiety,
That I was as happy
As happy could be,
In the Wood of Flowers.

James Stephens

Westland Row

Every Sunday there's a throng
Of pretty girls, who trot along
In a pious, breathless state
(They are nearly always late)
To the Chapel, where they pray
For the sins of Saturday.

They have frocks of white and blue,
Yellow sashes they have too,
And red ribbons show each head
Tenderly is ringleted;
And the bell rings loud, and the
Railway whistles urgently.

After Chapel they will go,
Walking delicately slow,
Telling still how Father John
Is so good to look upon
And such other grave affairs
As they thought of during prayers.

James Stephens

What the Snake Saw

A little girl and a big ugly man
Went down the road. The girl was crying
And asking to go home, but when she ran
He hit her on the head and sent her flying,
And called her a young imp, and said he'd break
Her neck unless she went with him, and then
He smacked her on the cheek.—I was a snake
At that time crawling through a robber's den,
And diamonds were sticking to my tongue—
(That's the best dodge), but when I saw the way
He beat the little girl I up and flung
A stone at him. My aim was bad that day
Because I hit the girl ... and she did sing!
But he jumped round and cursed like anything.

James Stephens

White Fields

I

In the winter time we go
Walking in the fields of snow;

Where there is no grass at all;
Where the top of every wall,

Every fence, and every tree,
Is as white as white can be.

II

Pointing out the way we came,
-Every one of them the same-

All across the fields there be
Prints in silver filigree;

And our mothers always know,
By the footprints in the snow,

Where it is the children go.

James Stephens