Classic Poetry Series

John Crowe Ransom

- 55 poems -

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John Crowe Ransom (30 April 1888 - 3 July 1974)

John Crowe Ransom was an American poet, essayist, magazine editor, and professor.

Life

Ransom was the third of four children of a Methodist minister. His family was highly literate. As a child, he read his family's library and engaged his father in passionate discussions. He published five main books of poetry, four books of essays, and edited three anthologies. He also published one textbook on writing, A College Primer of Writing (1943).

Ransom was home schooled until age ten, and entered Vanderbilt University at fifteen, graduating first in his class in 1909. He interrupted his studies for two years to teach sixth and seventh grades in Taylorsville, Mississippi and Latin and Greek in Lewisburg, Tennessee.
After teaching one more year in Lewisburg, Ransom was selected as a Rhodes Scholar. He attended Oxford University's Christ Church, 1910–13, where he read "Greats", as the course in Greek and Latin classics is called.

After one year teaching Latin in the Hotchkiss School, Ransom was appointed to the English department at Vanderbilt University in 1914. During the First World War, he served as an artillery officer in France. After the war, he returned to Vanderbilt. In 1920, he married Robb Reavill; they raised three children.

In 1937, Ransom accepted a position at Kenyon College in Ohio. He was the founding editor of the Kenyon Review, and continued as editor until his retirement in 1959. In 1966, Ransom was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His ashes were buried behind the Chalmers Library at Kenyon College.

Ransom has few peers among 20th century American university teachers of humanities; his distinguished students included Donald Davidson, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, Andrew Lytle, Allen Tate, Peter Taylor, Robie Macauley, Robert Penn Warren, E.L. Doctorow, Cleanth Brooks, Richard M. Weaver, and Constantinos Patrides (himself a Rhodes Scholar, who dedicated his monograph on John Milton's Lycidas to Ransom's memory).

Poet

At Vanderbilt, Ransom was a founding member of the Fugitives, a Southern literary group of 16 writers that functioned primarily as a kind of poetry workshop and included <a

href="http://www.poemhunter.com/donald-davidson/">Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. Under their influence, Ransom, whose first interest had been philosophy (specifically John Dewey and American pragmatism) began writing poetry. His first volume of poems, Poems about God (1919), was praised by Robert Frost and Robert Graves. The Fugitive Group had a special interest in Modernist poetry and, under Ransom's editorship, started a short-lived but highly influential magazine, called The Fugitive, which published American Modernist poets, mainly from the South (though they also published Northerners like Hart Crane). Out of all the Fugitive poets, Norton poetry editors Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair opined that, "[Ransom's poems were] among the most remarkable," characterizing his poetry as "quirky" and "at times eccentric."

Ransom's literary reputation is based chiefly on two collections of poetry, Chills and Fever (1924) and Two Gentlemen in Bonds (1927). Believing he had no new themes upon which to write, his subsequent poetic activity consisted almost entirely of revising ("tinkering", he called it) his earlier poems. Hence Ransom's reputation as a poet is based on the fewer than 160 poems he wrote and published between 1916 and 1927. In 1963, the poet/critic and former Ransom student Randall Jarrell published an essay in which he highly praised Ransom's poetry:

In John Crowe Ransom's best poems every part is subordinated to the whole, and the whole is accomplished with astonishing exactness and thoroughness. Their economy, precision, and restraint gives the poems, sometimes, an original yet impersonal perfection. . .And sometimes their phrasing is magical--light as air, soft as dew, the real old-fashioned enchantment. The poems satisfy our nostalgia for the past, yet themselves have none. They are reports . .of our world's old war between power and love, between those who efficiently and practically know and those who are "content to feel/ What others understand." And these reports of battles are, somehow, bewitching. . .Ransom's poems profess their limitations so candidly, almost as a principle of style, that it is hardly necessary to say they are not poems of the largest scope or the greatest intensity. But they are some of the most original poems ever written, just as Ransom is one of the best, most original, and most sympathetic poets alive; it is easy to see that his poetry will always be cared for, since he has written poems that are perfectly realized and occasionally almost perfect."

Despite the brevity of his poetic career and output, Ransom won the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1951. His 1963 Selected Poems received the National Book Award the following year.

Ransom primarily wrote short poems examining the ironic and unsentimental nature of life (with domestic life in the American South being a major theme). An example of his Southern style is his poem "Janet Waking", which "mixes modernist with old-fashioned country rhetoric."

Ransom was noted as a strict formalist, using both regular rhyme and meter in almost all of his poems. He also occasionally employed archaic diction. Ellman and O'Clair note that "[Ransom] defends formalism because he sees in it a check on bluntness, on brutality. Without formalism, he insists, poets simply rape or murder their subjects."

Criticism

Ransom was a leading figure of the school of literary criticism known as the New Criticism, which gained its name from his 1941 volume of essays The New Criticism. The New Critical theory, which dominated American literary thought throughout the middle 20th century, emphasized close reading, and criticism based on the texts themselves rather than on non-textual bias or non-textual history.

In his seminal 1937 essay, "Criticism, Inc." Ransom laid out his ideal form of literary criticism stating that, "criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic." To this end, he argued that personal responses to literature, historical scholarship, linguistic scholarship, and what he termed "moral studies" should not influence literary criticism. He also argued that literary critics should regard a poem as an aesthetic object.

Many of the ideas that Ransom explained in this essay would become very important in the development of The New Criticism. "Criticism, Inc." and a number of Ransom's other theoretical essays set forth some of guiding principles that the New Critics would build upon. Still, Ransom's former students, specifically Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren, had a greater hand in developing many of the key concepts (like "close reading") that later came to define the New Criticism.

Ransom remained an active essayist until his death even though, by the 1970's, the popularity and influence of the New Critics had seriously diminished.

Agrarian theorist

In 1930, Ransom along with 11 other Southern Agrarians published the conservative, Agrarian manifesto I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition, which assailed the tide of industrialism that appeared to be sweeping away traditional Southern culture. The Agrarians believed that the Southern tradition, rooted in the pre-Civil War agricultural model, was the answer to the South's economic and cultural problems.

Ransom's contribution to I'll Take My Stand is his essay "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" which starts the book and lays out the Southern Agrarians' basic argument. In various essays influenced by his Agrarian beliefs, Ransom defended the manifesto's assertion that modern industrial capitalism was a dehumanizing force that the South should reject in favor of an agrarian economic model. However, by the late 1930's he began to distance himself from the movement, and in 1945, he publicly criticized it.

Works:

A College Primer of Writing (1943)
I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (1930)
The New Criticism (1941)
Chills and Fever (1924)
Two Gentlemen in Bonds (1927)
Selected Poems (1963)

A Christmas Colloquy

THE country farmer has his joys
Of little city girls and boys
When brother Thomas brings his brood
Of motherless brats in Christmas mood
To try our country air and food.
And O what splendid pies and cakes
Their pleased and pretty grandma makes!
And O what squeals and stomach-aches!

Poor Thomas shepherds him a flock
Of city souls as hard as rock,
And though they will not fill his larder
He only preaches Christ the harder.
But Ann, though seven years my niece,
Is still a pagan little piece,
And as she often hints to me
She hates the sound of piety.
Fair Inez is my ancient setter
Who lies by the fire when we will let her:
Alas, this amiable dog
Heard all the bitter dialogue
That passed between my niece and brother
Misunderstanding one another.

ANN:
Father, what will there be for me
To-morrow on the Christmas tree?
Have you told Santa what to bring,
My pony, my doll, and everything?

THOMAS:
My daughter, Santa will know best
What to bring you, and what the rest.
But father and his little girl
And everybody in the world
Should dwell to-night on higher things,
For hark! the herald angel sings,
And in a manger poor and lowly
Lies little Jesus, high and holy.

ANN:
Father, don't talk of little Jesus,
You're only doing it to tease us,
It isn't nearly time for bed,
And I want to know what Santa said.

THOMAS:

Jesus is better than any toys
For little sinning girls and boys,
For Jesus saves, but sin destroys.

And O, it gives him sad surprise,
There must be tears in Jesus' eyes,
When little girls with bad behavior
Forget to own their Lord and Savior.

ANN:
I didn't, you know it isn't true!
I say my prayers, I always do,
I know about Jesus very well,
And God the Father, Heaven, and Hell.
O please don't say it any more,
You've said it so many times before,
But tell me all about Santa instead,
And about the horns on his reindeer's head,
And what he will bring me on his sled.

THOMAS:
This night he was born on earth for us,
And can my daughter mock him thus,
And care more for her worldly pleasures
Than Jesus' love and heavenly treasures?
For Jesus didn't like to be
So crowned with thorns and nailed to tree,
But there was a sinful world to free,
And out he went to Gethsemane--

ANN:
And left the twelve and went apart--
O father, I know it off by heart,
Please, father, please don't finish it out,
There's so much else to talk about!
I ask about Santa, and there you go,
And now you're spoiling my Christmas so,
And you are the wickedest man I know!

Disgraceful scenes require the curtain,
But lest the moral be uncertain,
I briefly bring the good report
That valiant Thomas held the fort,
And wicked Ann was quite defeated,
In vain denied, in vain entreated,
In vain she wailed, in vain she wept,
And said a briny prayer, and slept.

While Inez, who had been perplexed
To see good kinsfolk so much vexed,
When peace descended on the twain,
Lay down beside the fire again.

John Crowe Ransom

An American Addresses Philomela

Procne, Philomela, and Itylus,
Your names are liquid, your improbable tale
Is recited in the classic numbers of the nightingale.
Ah, but our numbers are not felicitous,
It goes not liquidly for us!

Perched on a Roman ilex and duly apostrophised,
The nightingale descanted unto Ovid;
She has even appeared to the Teutons, the swilled and gravid;
At Fontainebleau it may be the bird was gallicised;
Never was she baptised.

To England came Philomela with her strain,
Fleeing the hawk her husband ; querulous ghost,
She wanders when he sits heavy on his roost,
Utters herself in the original again,
The untranslatable refrain.

Not to these shores she came, this other Thrace,
Environ barbarous to the royal Attic;
How could her delicate dirge run democratic,
Delivered in a cloudless boundless public place
To a hypermuscular race?

I pernoctated with the Oxford students once,
And in the quadrangles, in the cloisters, on the Cher,
Precociously knocked at antique doors ajar,
Fatuously touched the hems of the Hierophants,
Sick of my dissonance;

I went out to Bagley Wood, I climbed the hill,
Even the moon had slanted off in a twinkling,
I heard the sepulchral owl and a few bells tinkling,
There was no more villainous day to unfulfill,
The diuturnity was still;

Up from the darkest wood where Philomela sat,
Her fairy numbers issued; what then ailed me?
My ears are called capacious, but they failed me,
Her classics registered a little flat!
I rose, and venomously spat.

Philomela, Philomela, lover of song,
I have despaired of thee and am unworthy,
My scene is prose, this people and I are earthy;
Unto more beautiful, persistently more young
Thy fabulous provinces belong.

John Crowe Ransom

April

SAVOR of love is thick on the April air,
The blunted boughs dispose their lacy bloom,
And many sorry steeds dismissed to pasture
Toss their old forelocks, flourish heavy heels.
Where is there any unpersuaded poet
So angry still against the wrongs of winter
Which caused the dainty earth to droop and die,
So vengeant for his vine and summer song,
As to decline the good releasing thaw?
Poets have temperature and follow seasons,
And covenants go out at equinox.

The champions! For Heaven, riding high
Above the icy death, considered truly;
'My agate icy work, I thought it fair;
Yet I have lacked that pretty lift of praise
That mounted once from these emaciate minstrels.
They will not sing, and duty drops away
And I must turn and make a soft amend!'
At once he showered April down, until
The bleak twigs bloom again; and soon, I swear,
He shall receive his praise.

John Crowe Ransom

April Treason

So he took her as anointed
In the part he had appointed,
She was lips for smiling faintly,
Eyes to look and level quaintly,
Length of limb and splendors of the bust
Which he honored as he must.

Queen of women playing model,
Pure of brow but brain not idle,
Sitting in her silence meetly,
Let her adjective be stately;
So he thought his art would manage right
In the honest Northern light.

But he fashioned it too coldly,
April broke-and-entered boldly,
Thinking how to suit the season's
Odor, savor, heats and treasons:
Painter! do not stoop and play the host
Lest the man come uppermost.

Yet he knew that he was altered
When the perfect woman faltered,
Languish in her softly speaking,
Anguish, even, in her looking:
All the art had fled his fingertips
So he bent and kissed her lips.

He and Venus took their pleasure,
Then he turned upon his treasure,
Took and trampled it with loathing,
Flung it over cliffs to nothing;
Glittering in the sunlight while it fell
Like a lovely shattered shell.

Strict the silence that came onward
As they trod the foothill downward,
One more mocking noon of April,
Mischief always is in April;
Still she touched his fingers cold as ice
And recited, "It was nice."

John Crowe Ransom

Bells For John Whiteside's Daughter

There was such speed in her little body,
And such lightness in her footfall,
It is no wonder her brown study Astonishes us all

Her wars were bruited in our high window.
We looked among orchard trees and beyond
Where she took arms against her shadow,
Or harried unto the pond

The lazy geese, like a snow cloud
Dripping their snow on the green grass,
Tricking and stopping, sleepy and proud,
Who cried in goose, Alas,

For the tireless heart within the little
Lady with rod that made them rise
From their noon apple-dreams and scuttle
Goose-fashion under the skies!

But now go the bells, and we are ready,
In one house we are sternly stopped
To say we are vexed at her brown study,
Lying so primly propped.

John Crowe Ransom

Blue Girls

Twirling your blue skirts, travelling the sward
Under the towers of your seminary,
Go listen to your teachers old and contrary
Without believing a word.

Tie the white fillets then about your hair
And think no more of what will come to pass
Than bluebirds that go walking on the grass
And chattering on the air.

Practice your beauty, blue girls, before it fail;
And I will cry with my loud lips and publish
Beauty which all our power shall never establish,
It is so frail.

For I could tell you a story which is true;
I know a woman with a terrible tongue,
Blear eyes fallen from blue,
All her perfections tarnished -- yet it is not long
Since she was lovelier than any of you.

John Crowe Ransom

By The Riverside

A GREAT green spread of meadow land,
(Must rest his weight on an ample base),
A secret water moving on,
A clean blue air for his breathing-space,
A pair of willows bending down
In double witness to his grace,
And on the rock his sinner sprawls
And looks the Strong One face to face.

The sinner's mocking tongue is dry,
Wonder is on that mighty jeerer,
He loves, and he never loved before,
He wants the glowing sky no nearer,
He likes the willows to be two,
He would not have the water clearer,
He thinks that God is perfect once:
Heaven, rejoice! a new God-fearer.

And now each quiet thing awakes
And dances madly, wavers, dips;
These are God's motions on the air,
His Pulse for the sinner's finger-tips,
His arrows shot across the blue,
His love-words dropping from his lips,
And who ever heard such whisperings,
Who ever saw such fellowships?

John Crowe Ransom

Captain Carpenter

Captain Carpenter rose up in his prime
Put on his pistols and went riding out
But had got wellnigh nowhere at that time
Till he fell in with ladies in a rout.

It was a pretty lady and all her train
That played with him so sweetly but before
An hour she'd taken a sword with all her main
And twined him of his nose for evermore.

Captain Carpenter mounted up one day
And rode straightway into a stranger rogue
That looked unchristian but be that as may
The Captain did not wait upon prologue.

But drew upon him out of his great heart
The other swung against him with a club
And cracked his two legs at the shinny part
And let him roll and stick like any tub.

Captain Carpenter rode many a time
From male and female took he sundry harms
He met the wife of Satan crying "I'm
The she-wolf bids you shall bear no more arms.

Their strokes and counters whistled in the wind
I wish he had delivered half his blows
But where she should have made off like a hind
The bitch bit off his arms at the elbows.

And Captain Carpenter parted with his ears
To a black devil that used him in this wise
O Jesus ere his threescore and ten years
Another had plucked out his sweet blue eyes.

Captain Carpenter got up on his roan
And sallied from the gate in hell's despite
I heard him asking in the grimmest tone
If any enemy yet there was to fight?

"To any adversary it is fame
If he risk to be wounded by my tongue
Or burnt in two beneath my red heart's flame
Such are the perils he is cast among.

"But if he can he has a pretty choice
From an anatomy with little to lose
Whether he cut my tongue and take my voice
Or whether it be my round red heart he choose. "

It was the neatest knave that ever was seen
Stepping in perfume from his lady's bower

Who at this word put in his merry mien
And fell on Captain Carpenter like a tower.

I would not knock old fellows in the dust
But there lay Captain Carpenter on his back
His weapons were the old heart in his bust
And a blade shook between rotten teeth alack.

The rogue in scarlet and grey soon knew his mind.
He wished to get his trophy and depart
With gentle apology and touch refined
He pierced him and produced the Captain's heart.

God's mercy rest on Captain Carpenter now (a,
I thought him Sirs an honest gentleman
Citizen husband soldier and scholar enow
Let jangling kites eat of him if they can.

But God's deep curses follow after those
That shore him of his goodly nose and ears
His legs and strong arms at the two elbows
And eyes that had not watered seventy years.

The curse of hell upon the sleek upstart
That got the Captain finally on his back
And took the red red vitals of his heart
And made the kites to whet their beaks clack clack.

John Crowe Ransom

Conrad in Twilight

Conrad, Conrad, aren't you old
To sit so late in your mouldy garden?
And I think Conrad knows it well,
Nursing his knees, too rheumy and cold
To warm the wraith of a Forest of Arden.

Neuralgia in the back of his neck,
His lungs filling with such miasma,
His feet dipping in leafage and muck:
Conrad! you've forgotten asthma.

Conrad's house has thick red walls,
The log on Conrad's hearth is blazing,
Slippers and pipe and tea are served,
Butter and toast are meant for pleasing!
Still Conrad's back is not uncurved
And here's an autumn on him, teasing.

Autumn days in our section
Are the most used-up thing on earth
(Or in the waters under the earth)
Having no more color nor predilection
Than cornstalks too wet for the fire,
A ribbon rotting on the byre,
A man's face as weathered as straw
By the summer's flare and winter's flaw.

John Crowe Ransom

Darkness

WHEN hurrying home on a rainy night
And hearing tree-tops rubbed and tossed,
And seeing never a friendly star
And feeling your way when paths are crossed:
Stop fast and turn three times around
And try the logic of the lost.

Where is the heavenly light you dreamed?
Where is your hearth and glowing ash?
Where is your love by the mellow moon?
Here is not even a lightning-flash,
And in a place no worse than this
Lost men shall wail and teeth shall gnash.

Lightning is quick and perilous,
The dawn comes on too slow and pale,
Your love brings only a yellow lamp,
Yet of these lights one shall avail:
The dark shall break for one of these,
I've never known this thing to fail.

John Crowe Ransom

Dead Boy

The little cousin is dead, by foul subtraction,
A green bough from Virginia's aged tree,
And none of the county kin like the transaction,
Nor some of the world of outer dark, like me.

A boy not beautiful, nor good, nor clever,
A black cloud full of storms too hot for keeping,
A sword beneath his mother's heart—yet never
Woman bewept her babe as this is weeping.

A pig with a pasty face, so I had said,
Squealing for cookies, kinned by poor pretense
With a noble house. But the little man quite dead,
I see the forbears' antique lineaments.

The elder men have strode by the box of death
To the wide flag porch, and muttering low send round
The bruit of the day. O friendly waste of breath!
Their hearts are hurt with a deep dynastic wound.

He was pale and little, the foolish neighbors say;
The first-fruits, saith the Preacher, the Lord hath taken;
But this was the old tree's late branch wrenched away,
Grieving the sapless limbs, the short and shaken.

John Crowe Ransom

Dumb-Bells

DUMB-BELLS left, dumb-bells right,
Swing them hard, grip them tight!
Thirty fat men of the town
Must sweat their filthy paunches down.
Dripping sweat and pumping blood
They try to make themselves like God.

One and two, three and four,
Cleave the air and smite the floor!
Five and six, seven and eight,
Legs apart, shoulders straight!
Thirty fat men grunt and puff,
Thirty bellies plead, Enough!

Dumb-bells up, dumb-bells down,
Dumb-bells front, dumb-bells ground!
Thirty's God has just the girth
To pull the levers of the earth,
They made him sinewy and lean
And washed him glittering white and clean.

Dumb-bells in, dumb-bells out,
Count by fours and face about!
Put by dumb-bells for to-day,
Wash the stinking sweat away
And go out clean. But come again;
Worship's every night at ten.

John Crowe Ransom

Eclogue

JANE SNEED BEGAN IT: My poor John, alas,
Ten years ago, pretty it was in a ring
To run as boys and girls do in the grass—
At that time leap and hollo and skip and sing
Came easily to pass.

JOHN BLACK SAID: I'll interpret what you mean.
Our infant selves played happily with our others,
The cunning me and mine came not between
Which like a sword is, O sweethearts and brothers
Numberless, who have seen.

JANE SNEED: I tell you what I used to do.
For joy I used to run by river or wood
To see with what speed all came trooping too;
Those days I could not quit you if I would,
Nor yet quit me could you.

JOHN BLACK RETURNED: But now, Jane, it appears
We are sly travelers, keeping good lookout
Against the face whose ravage cries for tears;
Old friends, ill met; and supposing I call out,
"Draw nigh, friend of those years"—

Before he think of any reason why,
The features of that man resolve and burn
For one long look—but then the flame must die.
The cold hearts in us mortally return,
We must not fructify.

JANE SNEED SAID BITTERLY: Why, John, you are right.
We were spendthrifts of joy when we were young,
But we became usurious, and in fright
Conceived that such a waste of days was wrong
For marchers unto night.

JOHN BLACK SAID: Yes, exactly, that was when
It happened. For Time involved us: in his toils
We learned to fear. And every day since then
We are mortals teasing for immortal spoils,
Desperate women and men.

JANE SNEED CONSENTED: It was nothing but this.
Love suffereth long, is kind—but not in fear.
For boys run banded, and simple sweethearts kiss,

Till in one day the dream of Death appear—
Then metamorphosis.

JOHN BLACK SAID: To explain mistrust and wars,
Theogony has a black witch with hell's broth;
Or a preposterous marriage of fleshless stars;
Or the Fiend's own naked person; or God wroth
Fingering his red scars.

And philosophy, an art of equal worth,
Tells of a flaw in the firmament—spots in the sun—
A Third Day's error when the upheaving earth
Was young and prime—a Fate reposed upon
The born before their birth.

JANE SNEED WITH GRIM LIPS MOCKED HIM: Who can tell—
Not I, not you—about those mysteries!
Something, John Black, came flapping out of hell
And wrought between us, and the chasm is
Digged, and it digged it well.

JOHN BLACK IN DEPRECATION SAID: Be sure
That love has suffered a most fatal eclipse;
All brotherhoods, filialities insecure;
Lovers compounding honey on their lips
With deep doubts to endure.

JANE SNEED SIGHED SLOWLY: I suppose it stands
Just so. Yet I can picture happiness—
Perhaps there wander lovers in some lands
Who when Night comes, when it is fathomless,
Consort their little hands;

And well, John Black, the darkened lovers may,
The hands hold much of heat in little storage,
The eyes are almost torches good as day,
And one flame to the other flame cries Courage,
When heart to heart slide they;

JOHN BLACK'S THE LAST SAY THEN: O innocent dove,
This is a dream. We lovers mournfully
Exchange our bleak despairs. We are one part love
And nine parts bitter thought. As well might be
Beneath ground as above.

John Crowe Ransom

Emily Hardcastle, Spinster

We shall come tomorrow morning, who were not to have her love,
We shall bring no face of envy but a gift of praise and lilies
To the stately ceremonial we are not the heroes of.

Let the sisters now attend her, who are red-eyed, who are wroth;
They were younger, she was finer, for they wearied of the waiting
And they married them to merchants, being unbelievers both.

I was dapper when I dangled in my pepper-and-salt;
We were only local beauties, and we beautifully trusted
If the proud one had to tarry, one would have her by default.

But right across the threshold has her grizzled Baron come;
Let them robe her, Bride and Princess, who'll go down a leafy archway
And seal her to the Stranger for his castle in the gloom.

John Crowe Ransom

Friendship

I VIEWED him well, the visible fat fool,
And yet I took him in; for I contended,
Friends are not sent in order of our choosing,
They come unsuited like the gifts of God.
I would not do a perfidy to friendship,
I let him past the private inner gate
And made him be at home among my treasures
Like my true friend.

Now I am ground with a grim torture daily
That I have been befriended by a fool.
He forages at will upon my garden,
He noses all its pretty secrets out,
And still the fool finds nothing to his liking.
Meeting a modest velveteen affair,
Peevish he hangs his sad and silly head:
'Alas! such unsubstantial gaudy goods!'
Thus he meets pansies; meeting zinnias,
He nearly faints at such a rioting:
'Alas! what fruit will these red wantons bear?'

And not a perfume spills upon the air
But his malicious nose suspects a poison,
As he goes browsing like an ancient ass,
An old distempered ass.

I'd almost rather be a friendless man
And have my house my own. The prying fool
Asks me the queerest idiotic questions:
'O friend, is this the harvest of your hands?
How will you stand before the lord of harvests?
These are the gardens of your idleness;
Where is the vineyard, friend?'

John Crowe Ransom

Geometry

My window looks upon a wood
That stands as tangled as it stood
When God was centuries too young
To care how right he worked, or wrong,
His patterns in obedient trees,
Unprofited by the centuries
He still plants on as crazily
As in his drivelling infancy.

Poor little elms beneath the oak!
They thrash their arms around and poke
At tyrant throats, and try to stand
Straight up, like owners of the land;
For they expect the vainest things,
And even the boniest have their flings.

Hickory shoots unnumbered rise,
Sallow and wasting themselves in sighs,
Children begot at a criminal rate
In the sight of a God that is profligate.

The oak-trees tower over all,
They seem to rise above the brawl,
They seem--but just observe the hoax,
They are obscured by other oaks!
They laugh the weaklings out of mind,
And fight forever with their kind.

For oaks are spindling too, and bent,
And only strong by accident;
And if there is a single tree
Of half the size it ought to be,
It need not give him thanks for that,
He did not plan its habitat.

When tree-tops go to pushing so,
There's every evil thing below;
There's clammy fungus everywhere,
And poison waving on the air,
A plague of insects from the pool
To sting some ever-trusting fool,
Serpents issuing from the foot
Of oak-trees rotten at the root,
Owls and frogs and whippoorwills,
Cackling of all sorts of ills.

Imagine what a pretty thing
The slightest landscape-gardening
Had made of God's neglected wood!
I'm glad man has the hardihood
To tamper with creation's plan
And shape it worthier of man.
Imagine woods and sun-swept spaces,
Shadows and lights in proper places,
Trees just touching friendly-wise,
Bees and flowers and butterflies.

An easy thing to improve on God,
Simply the knowing of even from odd,
Simply to count and then dispose
In patterns everybody knows,
Simply to follow curve and line
In geometrical design.

Gardeners only cut their trees
For nobler regularities.
But from my window I have seen
The noblest patch of quivering green
Lashed till it never quivered again.
God had a fit of temper then,
And spat shrill wind and lightning out
At twinges of some godly gout.

But as for me, I keep indoors
Whenever he starts his awful roars.
What can one hope of a crazy God
But lashings from an aimless rod?

John Crowe Ransom

Grace

WHO is it beams the merriest
At killing a man, the laughing one?
You are the one I nominate,
God of the rivers of Babylon.

A hundred times I've taken the mules
And started early through the lane,
And come to the broken gate and looked,
And there my partner was again,
Sitting on top of a sorrel horse
And picking the burrs from its matted mane,
Saying he thought he'd help me work
That field of corn before the rain;
And I never spoke of the dollar a day,
It's no use causing hired men pain,
But slipped it into his hand at dark
While he undid the coupling chain;
And whistled a gospel tune, and knew
He'd join in strong on the refrain.

For I would pitch the treble high,
'Down at the cross where my Savior died,'
And then he rolled along the bass,
'There did I bury my sin and pride.'

Sinful pride of a hired man!
Out of a hired woman born!
I'm thinking now how he was saved
One day while plowing in the corn.
We plowed that steamy morning through,
I with the mule whose side was torn,
And keeping an eye on the mule I saw
That the sun looked high and the man looked worn;
I would take him home to dinner with me,
And there! my father's dinner horn.

The sun blazed after dinner so
We sat a while by the maple trees,
Thinking of mother's pickles and pies
And smoking a friendly pipe at ease.
I broached a point of piety,
For pious men are quick to tease:
Was it really true John dipped his crowd
Down in the muddy Jordan's lees?

And couldn't the Baptists backslide too
If only they went on Methodist sprees?

And finally back to the field we went,
The corn was well above my knees,
The weeds were more than ankle high,
And dangerous customers were these.
We went to work in the heat again,
I hoped we'd get a bit of breeze
And thought the hired man was used
To God's most blazing cruelties.

Sundays, the hired man would pray
To live in the sunshine of his face;
Now here was answer come complete,
Rather an overdose of grace!

He fell in the furrow, an honest place
And an easy place for a man to fall.
His horse went marching blindly on
In a beautiful dream of a great fat stall.
And God shone on in merry mood,
For it was a foolish kind of sprawl,
And I found a hulk of heaving meat
That wouldn't answer me at all
And a fresh breeze made the young corn dance
To a bright green, glorious carnival.

And really, is it not a gift
To smile and be divinely gay,
To rise above a circumstance
And smile distressing scenes away?

But this was a thing that I had said,
I was so forward and untamed:
'I will not worship wickedness
Though it be God's--I am ashamed!
For all his mercies God be thanked
But for his tyrannies be blamed!
He shall not have my love alone,
With loathing too his name is named.'

I caught him up with all my strength
And with a silly stumbling tread
I dragged him over the soft brown dirt
And dumped him down beside the shed.

I thought of the prayers the fool had prayed
To his God, and I was seeing red,

When all of a sudden he gave a heave
And then with shuddering--vomited!
And God, who had just received full thanks
For all his kindly daily bread,

Now called it back again--perhaps
To see that his birds of the air were fed.
Not mother's dainty dinner now,
A rather horrible mess instead,
Yet all of it God required of him
Before the fool was duly dead.

Even of deaths there is a choice,
I've seen you give a good one, God,
But he in his vomit laid him down,
Denied the decency of blood.

If silence from the dead, I swore,
There shall be cursing from the quick!
But I began to vomit too,
Cursing and vomit ever so thick;
The dead lay down, and I did too,
Two ashy idiots: take your pick!
A little lower than angels he made us,
(Hear his excellent rhetoric),
A credit we were to him, half of us dead,
The other half of us lying sick.

The little clouds came Sunday-dressed
To do a holy reverence,
The young corn smelled its sweetest too,
And made him goodly frankincense,
The thrushes offered music up,
Choired in the wood beyond the fence.

And while his praises filled the earth
A solitary crow sailed by,
And while the whole creation sang
He cawed--not knowing how to sigh.

John Crowe Ransom

Janet Waking

Beautifully Janet slept
Till it was deeply morning. She woke then
And thought about her dainty-feathered hen,
To see how it had kept.

One kiss she gave her mother,
Only a small one gave she to her daddy
Who would have kissed each curl of his shining baby;
No kiss at all for her brother.

"Old Chucky, Old Chucky!" she cried,
Running on little pink feet upon the grass
To Chucky's house, and listening. But alas,
Her Chucky had died.

It was a transmogrifying bee
Came droning down on Chucky's old bald head
And sat and put the poison. It scarcely bled,
But how exceedingly

And purply did the knot
Swell with the venom and communicate
Its rigour! Now the poor comb stood up straight
But Chucky did not.

So there was Janet
Kneeling on the wet grass, crying her brown hen
(Translated far beyond the daughters of men)
To rise and walk upon it.

And weeping fast as she had breath
Janet implored us, "Wake her from her sleep!"
And would not be instructed in how deep
Was the forgetful kingdom of death.

John Crowe Ransom

Judith Of Bethulia

Beautiful as the flying legend of some leopard
She had not chosen yet her captain, nor Prince
Depositary to her flesh, and our defense;
A wandering beauty is a blade out of its scabbard.
You know how dangerous, gentlemen of threescore?
May you know it yet ten more.

Nor by process of veiling she grew less fabulous.
Grey or blue veils, we were desperate to study
The invincible emanations of her white body,
And the winds at her ordered raiment were ominous.
Might she walk in the market, sit in the council of soldiers?
Only of the extreme elders.

But a rare chance was the girl's then, when the Invader
Trumpeted from the South, and rumbled from the North,
Beleaguered the city from four quarters of the earth,
Our soldiery too craven and sick to aid her—
Where were the arms could countervail this horde?
Her beauty was the sword.

She sat with the elders, and proved on their blear visage
How bright was the weapon unrusted in her keeping,
While he lay surfeiting on their harvest heaping
Wasting the husbandry of their rarest vintage—
And dreaming of the broad-breasted dames for concubine?
These floated on his wine.

He was lapped with bay-leaves, and grass and fumiter weed,
And from under the wine-film encountered his mortal vision,
For even within his tent she accomplished his derision,
Loosing one veil and another, she stood unafraid;
So he perished. Nor brushed her with even so much as a daisy?
She found his destruction easy.

The heathen have all perished. The victory was furnished.
We smote them hiding in vineyards, barns, annexes,
And now their white bones clutter the holes of foxes,
And the chieftain's head, with grinning sockets, and varnished—
Is it hung on the sky with a hideous epitaphy?
No, the woman keeps the trophy.

May God send unto our virtuous lady her Prince!
It is stated she went reluctant to that orgy,
Yet a madness fevers our young men, and not the clergy
Nor the elders have turned them unto modesty since.
Inflamed by the thought of her nakedness with desire?

Yes, and chilled with fear and despair.

John Crowe Ransom

Men

'How many goodly creatures are there here!'
Miranda doted on the sight of seamen,
The very casual adventurers
Who took a flood as quickly as a calm,
And kept their blue eyes blue to any weather.
This was the famous manliness of men;
And when she saw it on the dirty strangers,
She clapped her pretty hands in sudden joy:
'O brave new world!'

John Crowe Ransom

Miriam Tazewell

When Miriam Tazewell heard the tempest bursting
And his wrathy whips across the sky drawn crackling
She stuffed her ears for fright like a young thing
And with heart full of the flowers took to weeping.

But the earth shook dry his old back in good season,
He had weathered storms that drenched him deep as this one,
And the sun, Miriam, ascended to his dominion,
The storm was withered against his empyrean.

After the storm she went forth with skirts kilted
To see in the hot sun her lawn deflowered,
Her tulip, iris, peony strung and pelted,
Pots of geranium spilled and the stalks naked.

The spring transpired in that year with no flowers
But the regular stars went busily on their courses,
Suppers and cards were calendared, and some bridals,
And the birds demurely sang in the bitten poplars.

To Miriam Tazewell the whole world was villain,
The principle of the beast was low and masculine,
And not to unstop her own storm and be maudlin,
For weeks she went untidy, she went sullen.

John Crowe Ransom

Moonlight

HE feigned a fine indifference
To be so prodigal of light,
Knowing his piteous twisted things
Would lose the crooked marks of spite
When only moonbeams fit the dusk
And made his wicked world seem right.

But we forget so soon the shame,
Conceiving sweetness if we can
Heaven the citadel itself
Illumined on the lunar plan;
And I the chief of sinners, I
The middlemost Victorian!

Now I shall ride the misty lake
With my own love, and speak so low
That not a fishy thing shall hear
The secrets passing to and fro
Amid the moonlight poetries.
O moonshine, how unman us so?

John Crowe Ransom

Morning

THE skies were jaded, while the famous sun
Slack of his office to confute the fogs
Lay sick abed; but I, inured to duty,
Sat for my food. Three hours each day we souls,
Who might be angels but are fastened down
With bodies, most infuriating freight,
Sit fattening these frames and skeletons
With filthy food, which they must cast away
Before they feed again.

John Crowe Ransom

Necrological

The friar had said his paternosters duly
And scourged his limbs, and afterwards would have slept;
But with much riddling his head became unruly,
He arose, from the quiet monastery he crept.

Dawn lightened the place where the battle had been won.
The people were dead -- it is easy he thought to die --
These dead remained, but the living were all gone,
Gone with the wailing trumps of victory.

The dead men wore no raiment against the air,
Bartholomew's men had spoiled them where they fell;
In defeat the heroes' bodies were whitely bare,
The field was white like meads of asphodel.

Not all were white; some gory and fabulous
Whom the sword had pierced and then the grey wolf eaten;
But the brother reasoned that heroes' flesh was thus.
Flesh fails, and the postured bones lie weather-beaten.

The lords of chivalry lay prone and shattered.
The gentle and the bodyguard of yeomen;
Bartholomew's stroke went home -- but little it mattered,
Bartholomew went to be stricken of other foemen.

Beneath the blue ogive of the firmament
Was a dead warrior, clutching whose mighty knees
Was a leman, who with her flame had warmed his tent,
For him enduring all men's pleasantries.

Close by the sable stream that purged the plain
Lay the white stallion and his rider thrown,
The great beast had spilled there his little brain,
And the little groin of the knight was spilled by a stone.

The youth possessed him then of a crooked blade
Deep in the belly of a lugubrious wight;
He fingered it well, and it was cunningly made;
But strange apparatus was if for a Carmelite.

Then he sat upon a hill and bowed his head
As under a riddle, and in deep surmise
So still that he likened himself unto those dead
Whom the kites of Heaven solicited with sweet cries.

John Crowe Ransom

Noonday Grace

MY good old father tucked his head,
(His face the color of gingerbread)
Over the table my mother had spread,
And folded his leathery hands and said:

'We thank thee, Lord, for this thy grace,
And all thy bounties to the race;
Turn not away from us thy face
Till we come to our final resting-place.'

These were the words of the old elect,
Or others to the same effect.

I love my father's piety,
I know he's grateful as can be,
A man that's nearly seventy
And past his taste for cookery.
But I am not so old as he,
And when I see in front of me
Things that I like uncommonly,

(Cornfield beans my specialty,
When every pod spills two or three),
Then I forget the thou and thee
And pray with total fervency:

Thank you, good Lord, for dinner-time!
Gladly I come from the sweat and grime
To play in your Christian pantomime.

I wash the black dust from my face,
I sit again in a Christian's place,
I hear the ancient Christian's grace.

My thanks for clean fresh napkin first,
With faint red stain where the fruit-jar burst.

Thanks for a platter with kind blue roses,
For mother's centerpiece and posies,
A touch of art right under our noses.

Mother, I'll thank you for tumbler now
Of morning's milk from our Jersey cow.

And father, thanks for a generous yam,
And a helping of home-cured country ham,
(He knows how fond of it I am.)

For none can cure them as can he,
And he won't tell his recipe,
But God was behind it, it seems to me.

Thank God who made the garden grow,
Who took upon himself to know
That we loved vegetables so.
I served his plan with rake and hoe,
And mother, boiling, baking, slow
To her favorite tune of Old Black Joe,
Predestined many an age ago.

Pearly corn still on the cob,
My teeth are aching for that job.

Tomatoes, one would fill a dish,
Potatoes, mealy as one could wish.

Cornfield beans and cucumbers,
And yellow yams for sweeteners.

Pickles between for stepping-stones,
And plenty of cornmeal bread in pones.

Sunday the preacher droned a lot
About a certain whether or not:

Is God the universal friend,
And if men pray can he attend
To each man's individual end?

They pray for individual things,
Give thanks for little happenings,
But isn't his sweep of mighty wings
Meant more for businesses of kings
Than pulling small men's petty strings?

He's infinite, and all of that,
The setting sun his habitat,
The heavens they hold by his fiat,
The glorious year that God begat;
And what is creeping man to that,
O preacher, valiant democrat?

'The greatest of all, his sympathy,
His kindness, reaching down to me.'

Like mother, he finds it his greatest joy
To have big dinners for his boy.

She understands him like a book,
In fact, he helps my mother cook,
And slips to the dining-room door to look;

And when we are at our noon-day meal,
He laughs to think how fine we feel.

An extra fork is by my plate,
I nearly noticed it too late!

Mother, you're keeping a secret back!
I see the pie-pan through the crack,
Incrusted thick in gold and black.

There's no telling what that secret pair
Have cooked for me in the kitchen there,

There's no telling what that pie can be,
But tell me that it's blackberry!

As long as I keep topside the sod,
I'll love you always, mother and God.

John Crowe Ransom

November

THERE'S a patch of trees at the edge of the field,
And a brown little house that is kept so warm,
And a woman waiting by the hearth
Who still keeps most of a woman's charm.

She traffics in her woman's goods
And is my woman of affairs.
Yet not so fast, my moral men,
November's most poetic airs
Are heavy with old lovers' tales,
How hearths are holy with their prayers,
How women give their fragrance up
And give their love to the man that dares.
Now who goes heedless hearing that?
At last we trade, we laissez-faires.

O moralizers, it is hard
When I am not a candidate
For holy wedlock's offices,
That mother has picked me out a mate,

And couldn't have made a sorrier choice
Than that same Smiley's daughter Kate,
Who prays for the sinners of the town
And never comes to meeting late,
Who sings soprano in the choir
And swallows Christian doctrine straight.
Of all the girls deliver me
From the girl you haven't the heart to hate!
Piety: O what a hideous thing!
And thirty-odd pounds she's underweight.

The winds of late November droop
(Poor little failures) very low,
As up and down the farm they pass,
Pass up and down, and to and fro,
And look for a home they are not to find,
For they were homeless years ago..

But years ago I knew a girl,
Beautiful, fit for a Grand Vizier's,
A girl with laughing on her lips
And in her eyes the quickest tears,
And low of speech, as when one finds
A mother cooing to her dears.
I took the note into my heart,
And so did other cavaliers.

If God had heard my prayer then,
The good folk couldn't point and say
As mother says they're pointing now:
Behold, one stands in the sinners' way!
The stiffest sceptic bends his neck
And stands on no more vain parley
If such as she would have him come,
Worship with her in the Baptist way,
Accept the fables as he can,
A Jewish God, a Passion Play;
And such a lover never comes
To fondling dirty drabs for pay.
But God had another man for her,
He cannot answer all that pray.

November winds are weak and cold,
They lie at last beneath the blue
And sleep in the fields as cold as they.
I know but one good thing to do,
So hearken, all ye mutineers:
Every man to his rendezvous!

My woman waits by the hearth, I say,
And what is a scarlet woman to you?
Her sins are scarlet if you will,
Her lips are hardly of that hue,

And many a time I've seen her sit
Beside the hearth an hour or two,
And set the pot upon the fire
And wait until she's spoken to.
A hateful owl is roosting near
Who mocks my woman, Hoo, Hoo, Hoo,
But the pot sings back just as shrill as it can,
And the angry fire-log crashes through;
And there the woman waits and I,
ponder the ways of God--and rue!

John Crowe Ransom

One Who Rejects Christ

There's farmers and there's farmers,
There's many a field and field,
But none of the farmers round about
Can haul such harvest-wagons out
As I from an acre's yield.

There's plenty and plenty of farmers
That leave the ground by the fence,
Thinking it's nice if a patch of roses
Should scratch out the hay and tickle their noses
With nice little wild-rose scents.

I'm not like other farmers,
I make my farming pay;
I never go in for sentiment,
And seeing that roses yield no rent
I cut the stuff away.

A very good thing for farmers
If they would learn my way;
For crops are all that a good field grows,
And nothing is worse than a sniff of rose
In the good strong smell of hay.

John Crowe Ransom

Overtures

My dear and I, we disagreed
When we had been much time together.
For when will lovers learn to sail
From sailing always in good weather?

She said a hateful little word
Between the pages of the book.
I bubbled with a noble rage,
I bruised her with a dreadful look,

And thanked her kindly for the word
Of such a little silly thing;
Indeed I loved my poet then
Beyond my dear, or anything.

And she, the proud girl, swept away,
How swift and scornfully she went!
And I the frightened lover stayed,
And have not had one hour's content

Until to-day; until I knew
That I was loved again, again;
Then hazard how this thing befel,
Brother of women and of men?

'Perhaps a gallant gentleman
Accomplished it, who saw you bleed;
Perhaps she wrote upon the book
A riddling thing that you could read;

'Perhaps she crept to you, and cried,
And took upon her all the blame.'
O no, do proud girls creep and cry?
'Perhaps she whispered you your name.'

O no, she walked alone, and I
Was walking in the rainy wood,
And saw her drooping by the tree,
And saw my work of widowhood.

John Crowe Ransom

Painted Head

By dark severance the apparition head
Smiles from the air a capital on no
Column or a Platonic perhaps head
On a canvas sky depending from nothing;

Stirs up an old illusion of grandeur
By tickling the instinct of heads to be
Absolute and to try decapitation
And to play truant from the body bush;

But too happy and beautiful for those sorts
Of head (homekeeping heads are happiest)
Discovers maybe thirty unwidowed years
Of not dishonoring the faithful stem;

Is nameless and has authored for the evil
Historian headhunters neither book
Nor state and is therefore distinct from tart
Heads with crowns and guilty gallery heads;

Wherefore the extravagant device of art
Unhousing by abstraction this once head
Was capital irony by a loving hand
That knew the no treason of a head like this;

Makes repentance in an unlovely head
For having vinegarly traduced the flesh
Till, the hurt flesh recusing, the hard egg
Is shrunken to its own deathlike surface;

And an image thus. The body bears the head
(So hardly one they terribly are two)
Feeds and obeys and unto please what end?
Not to the glory of tyrant head but to

The estate of body. Beauty is of body.
The flesh contouring shallowly on a head
Is a rock-garden needing body's love
And best bodiness to colorify

The big blue birds sitting and sea-shell cats
And caves, and on the iron acropolis
To spread the hyacinthine hair and rear
The olive garden for the nightingales.

John Crowe Ransom

Piazza Piece

-- I am a gentleman in a dustcoat trying
To make you hear. Your ears are soft and small
And listen to an old man not at all,
They want the young men's whispering and sighing.
But see the roses on your trellis dying
And hear the spectral singing of the moon;
For I must have my lovely lady soon,
I am a gentleman in a dustcoat trying.

-- I am a lady young in beauty waiting
Until my truelove comes, and then we kiss.
But what grey man among the vines is this
Whose words are dry and faint as in a dream?
Back from my trellis, Sir, before I scream !
I am a lady young in beauty waiting.

John Crowe Ransom

Prayer

SHE would not keep at home, the foolish woman,
She would not mind her precious girls and boys,
She had to go, for it was Sunday morning,
Down the hot road and to the barren pew
And there abuse her superannuate knees
To make a prayer.

She had a huge petition on her bosom--
A heavy weight for such a lean old thing--
Her youngest boy made merry in the village
And had not entered into the communion;
And having labored with him long for nothing
She meant to ask of God to save him yet.
Thank God she asked that favor!

The manner of it echoes still in Heaven.
Before she dared to utter her desire
The strange old woman made approach to God
With many a low obeisance and abasement,
As having done so many things she ought not,

And left undone so many things she ought,
And being altogether very wicked;
She testified she had not kept his temple,
Which was her heart, all swept and white and ready;
She testified it--O the shameless woman,
The spotless housekeeper!

Now God sat beaming on his burnished throne
And swept creation with appraising eye,
Finding, I fear, not all was free from blemish,
Yet keeping his magnificent composure;
But wearing certain necessary airs,
To suit with such incumbency of court,
He still at heart was quite a gentleman;
For when he saw that aged lady drooping
And wearying her bones with genuflections
For her unworthiness, he fell ashamed
To think how hard it went with holy women
To ease their poor predicaments by prayer:
There on his heaven, and heard of all the hosts,
He groaned, he made a mighty face so wry
That several seraphin forgot their harping
And scolded thus: 'O what a wicked woman,
To shrew his splendid features out of shape!'

John Crowe Ransom

Prelude to an Evening

Do not enforce the tired wolf
Dragging his infected wound homeward
To sit tonight with the warm children
Naming the pretty kings of France.

The images of the invaded mind
Being as the monsters in the dreams
Of your most brief enchanted headful,
Suppose a miracle of confusion:

That dreamed and undreamt become each other
And mix the night and day of your mind;
And it does not matter your twice crying
From mouth unbeautied against the pillow

To avert the gun of the same old soldier;
For cry, cock-crow, or the iron bell
Can crack the sleep-sense of outrage,
Annihilate phantoms who were nothing.

But now, by our perverse supposal,
There is a drift of fog on your mornings;
You in your peignoir, dainty at your orange cup,
Feel poising round the sunny room

Invisible evil, deprived and bold.
All day the clock will metronome
Your gallant fear; the needles clicking,
The heels detonating the stair's cavern

Freshening the water in the blue bowls
For the buck berries, with not all your love,
You shall he listening for the low wind,
The warning sibilance of pines.

You like a waning moon, and I accusing
Our too banded Eumenides,
While you pronounce Noes wanderingly
And smooth the heads of the hungry children.

John Crowe Ransom

Romance Of A Youngest Daughter

Who will wed the Dowager's youngest daughter,
The Captain? filled with ale?
He moored his expected boat to a stake in the water
And stumbled on sea-legs into the Hall for mating,
Only to be seduced by her lady-in-waiting,
Round-bosomed, and not so pale.

Or the thrifty burgher in boots and fancy vest
With considered views of marriage?
By the tidy scullery maid he was impressed
Who kept that house from depreciation and dirt,
But wife does double duty and takes no hurt,
So he rode her home in his carriage.

Never the spare young scholar antiquary
Who was their next resort;
They let him wait in the crypt of the Old Library
And found him compromised with a Saxon book,
Claiming his truelove Learning kept that nook
And promised sweet disport.

Desirée (of a mother's christening) never shall wed
Though fairest child of her womb;
"We will have revenge," her injured Ladyship said,
"Henceforth the tightest nunnery be thy bed
By the topmost stair! When the ill-bred lovers come
We'll say, She is not at home."

John Crowe Ransom

Roses

I entered dutiful, God knows,
The room in which I was to sit
With dreary unbelieving books.
It was surprising, I suppose,
To find such happy change in it:
There stood a most celestial rose
And looked the flower that my love looks
Who, where she turns her smiling face
Makes heavy earth a hopeful place.

I blessed the heart that wished me well
When I had been bereft of much,
And brought such word of beauty back.
I went like one escaping hell
To drink its fragrance and to touch,
And stroked, O ludicrous to tell!
A horrid thing of bric-a-brac,
A make-believe, a mockery,
And nothing that a rose should be.

Red real roses keep a thorn,
And save their loveliness a while
And in their perfect date unfold.
But you, beyond all women born,
Have spent so easily your smile,
That I am not the less forlorn
Nor these ironic walls less cold,
Because it smiles, the chilly rose,
As you are smiling, I suppose.

John Crowe Ransom

Sickness

THE toughest carcass in the town
Fell sick at last and took to bed,
And on that bed God waited him
With cool, cool hands for his frantic head,
And while the fever did its dance
They talked, and a good thing was said:
'See, I am not that Scriptural!
A lesser, kinder God instead.'

Fever must run its course, and God
Could not do much for the countryman.
At least he saved him certain dreams:
'I die! O save me if you can,
I am a bruised, a beaten slave,
I march in a blistering caravan,
They dash a stone upon my head--
Ah no, but that is God's white hand.'

God plucked him back, and plucked him back,
And did his best to smoothe the pain.
The sick man said it was good to know
That God was true, if prayer was vain.

'O God, I weary of this night,
When will you bring the dawn again?'
The night must run its course, but God
Was weary too with watching-strain.

A cluck of tuneless silly birds,
A guilty gray, and it was dawn.
The sick man thumped across the floor
And slid the curtain that was drawn:
'O pale wet dawn! O let it shine
Lustrous and gold on the good green lawn!
The lustre, Lord!' Alas, God knows
When sad conclusions are foregone.

The sick man leant upon his Lord,
On that imperfect break of day,
'Now, Lord, I die: is there no word,
No countervail that God can say?'
No word. But tight upon his arm,
Was God, and drew not once away
Until his punctual destiny.
To whom could God repair to pray?

Now God be thanked by dying men
Who comrades them in times like these,
Who dreads to see the doom come down
On these black midnight canopies
And on this poisonous glare of dawns.
The whole world crumples in disease,
But God is pitying to the end,
And gives an office to my knees.

John Crowe Ransom

Spectral Lovers

By night they haunted a thicket of April mist,
Out of that black ground suddenly come to birth,
Else angels lost in each other and fallen on earth.
Lovers they knew they were, but why unclasped, unkissed?
Why should two lovers be frozen apart in fear?
And yet they were, they were.

Over the shredding of an April blossom
Scarcely her fingers touched him, quick with care,
Yet of evasions even she made a snare.
The heart was bold that clanged within her bosom,
The moment perfect, the time stopped for them,
Still her face turned from him.

Strong were the batteries of the April night
And the stealthy emanations of the field;
Should the walls of her prison undefended yield
And open her treasure to the first clamorous knight?
"This is the mad moon, and shall I surrender all?
If he but ask it I shall."

And gesturing largely to the moon of Easter,
Mincing his steps and swishing the jubilant grass,
Beheading some field-flowers that had come to pass,
He had reduced his tributaries faster
Had not considerations pinched his heart
Unfitly for his art.

"Do I reel with the sap of April like a drunkard?
Blessed is he that taketh this richest of cities;
But it is so stainless the sack were a thousand pities.
This is that marble fortress not to be conquered,
Lest its white peace in the black flame turn to tinder
And an unutterable cinder."

They passed me once in April, in the mist.
No other season is it when one walks and discovers
Two tall and wandering, like spectral lovers,
White in the season's moon-gold and amethyst,
'Who touch quick fingers fluttering like a bird
Whose songs shall never be heard.

John Crowe Ransom

Street Light

The shine of many city streets
Confuses any countryman;
It flickers here and flashes there,
It goes as soon as it began,
It beckons many ways at once
For him to follow if he can.

Under the lamp a woman stands,
The lamps are shining equal well,
But in her eyes are other lights,
And lights plus other lights will tell:
He loves the brightness of that street
Which is the shining street to hell.

There's light enough, and strong enough,
To lighten every pleasant park;
I'm sorry lights are held so cheap,
I'd rather there were not a spark
Than choose those shining ways for joy
And have them lead me into dark.

John Crowe Ransom

Sunset

I know you are not cruel,
And you would not willingly hurt anything in the world.
There is kindness in your eyes,
There could not very well be more of it in eyes
Already brimful of the sky.
I thought you would some day begin to love me,
But now I doubt it badly;
It is no man-rival I am afraid of,
It is God.

The meadows are very wide and green,
And the big field of wheat is solid gold,
Or a little darker than gold.
Two people never sat like us by a fence of cedar rails
On a still evening
And looked at such fat fields.
To me it is beautiful enough,
I am stirred,

I say grand and wonderful, and grow adjectival,
But to you
It is God.

Cropping the clover are several spotted cows.
They too are kind and gentle,
And they stop and look round at me now and then
As if they would say:
'How good of you to come to see us!
Please pardon us if we seem indifferent,
But we have not much time to talk with you now,
And really nothing to say.'
Then they make their bow,
Still kind and calm,
And go their way again
Towards the sunset.
I suppose they are going to God.

Your eyes are not regarding me,
Nor the four-leaf clovers I picked for you,
(With a prayer and a gentle squeeze for each of them),
Nor are they fretting over dress, and shoes,
And image in the little glass,
Restlessly,
Like the eyes of other girls.

You are looking away over yonder
To where the crooked rail-fence gets to the top

Of the yellow hill
And drops out of sight
Into space.
Is that infinity that catches it?
And do you catch it too in your thoughts?
I know that look;
I have not seen it on another girl;
And it terrifies me,
For I cannot tell what it means,
But I think
It has something to do with God.

We are a mile from home,
And soon it will be getting dark,
And the big farm-bell will be ringing out for supper.
We had better start for the house.
Rover!
O here he is, waiting.
He has chased the rabbits and run after the birds
A thousand miles or so,
And now he is hungry and tired.
But he is a southern gentleman

And will not whimper once
Though you kept him waiting forever.
He knows his mistress' eyes as well as I,
And when to be silent and respectful.
I will try to be as patient as Rover,
And we will be comrades and wait,
Unquestioningly,
Till this lady we love
And her strange eyes
Come home from God.

John Crowe Ransom

The Bachelor

The wind went cold as the day went old,
And I went very sad,
Till I saw something by the road
That brought me round and glad.

The keen wind nipped me northerly
And bent me back almost,
And I was the worst discouraged man
Abroad on any boast,

The road was rocks and wilderness
And never a sign of a town,
It tapered up a wicked hill,
I tried to curse it down,

But like an undefeated man
I mounted, slow and hard:
And round the top was a little house
With a woman in the yard.

She was a housewife in her yard,
Tending her husband's place;
The broom was busy in her hand,
The goodness in her face.

She brushed the yard, she brushed the step,
She made the leaves to spin,
Tidying up her husband's place
Outside as well as in.

I knew no woman and no house
And night was just ahead;
Yet I went cheerful down the hill
Rested and warmed and fed.

For some man had a woman there
To keep his board and bed;
'I have seen women by these bad roads,
Thank God for that,' I said.

John Crowe Ransom

The Christian

I heard a story of a sailing man.
He was a surly sort of mariner,
He used to swear at all the seven seas,
And rode them dauntless up and down the earth.

But when he sickened of the windy wash,
He took to wife a proper village woman
And put her in a precious little house;
And there he weathered many winter seasons,
Knocking the ashes neatly from his pipe
Upon the tended hearth.

And only when he went upon the moors,
And felt the sting and censure of the winds,
And tasted of the salt blown in from sea,
Then only would he curse the marriage morning,
And swear he'd not go skulking back again
To sit that hearth like any broken bitch
Whose running time was over.

John Crowe Ransom

The Cloak Model

'My son,' the stranger thus began,
And drew me to the window side,
'Now here are beauties better than
You ever have dreamed, or ever can.
But yet beware!' he cried.

A tidy citizen was he
Although a dismal daffy one.
'See this one pose and pout for me
And march around magnificently.
But I'm immune, my son.

'Observe how ripe the lady's lips,
How Titianesque the mop of hair,
And where the great white shoulder dips
Beneath its gauzy half-eclipse,
You well may stare and stare.

'When I was young I said as you
Are saying in your sapphic youth,

That ah! such lips were certain cue,
And look! her bosom's rhythm too,
It signified her truth;

'Her broad brow meant intelligence
And something better than a bone,
Her body's curves were spirit's tents,
Her fresh young skin was innocence
Instead of meat that shone.

'I wish the moralists would thresh
(Indeed the thing is very droll)
God's oldest joke, forever fresh:
The fact that in the finest flesh
There isn't any soul.'

John Crowe Ransom

The Equilibrists

Full of her long white arms and milky skin
He had a thousand times remembered sin.
Alone in the press of people traveled he,
Minding her jacinth, and myrrh, and ivory.

Mouth he remembered: the quaint orifice
From which came heat that flamed upon the kiss,
Till cold words came down spiral from the head.
Grey doves from the officious tower illsped.

Body: it was a white field ready for love,
On her body's field, with the gaunt tower above,
The lilies grew, beseeching him to take,
If he would pluck and wear them, bruise and break.

Eyes talking: Never mind the cruel words,
Embrace my flowers, but not embrace the swords.
But what they said, the doves came straightway flying
And unsaid: Honor, Honor, they came crying.

Importunate her doves. Too pure, too wise,
Clambering on his shoulder, saying, Arise,
Leave me now, and never let us meet,
Eternal distance now command thy feet.

Predicament indeed, which thus discovers
Honor among thieves, Honor between lovers.
O such a little word is Honor, they feel!
But the grey word is between them cold as steel.

At length I saw these lovers fully were come
Into their torture of equilibrium;
Dreadfully had forsworn each other, and yet
They were bound each to each, and they did not forget.

And rigid as two painful stars, and twirled
About the clustered night their prison world,
They burned with fierce love always to come near,
But honor beat them back and kept them clear
.
Ah, the strict lovers, they are ruined now!
I cried in anger. But with puddled brow
Devising for those gibbeted and brave
Came I descanting: Man, what would you have?

For spin your period out, and draw your breath,
A kinder saeculum begins with Death.
Would you ascend to Heaven and bodiless dwell?
Or take your bodies honorless to Hell ?

In Heaven you have heard no marriage is,
No white flesh tinder to your lecheries,

Your male and female tissue sweetly shaped
Sublimed away, and furious blood escaped.

Great lovers lie in Hell, the stubborn ones
Infatuate of the flesh upon the bones;
Stuprate, they rend each other when they kiss,
The pieces kiss again, no end to this.

But still I watched them spinning, orbited nice.
Their flames were not more radiant than their ice.
I dug in the quiet earth and wrought the tomb
And made these lines to memorize their doom:—

EPITAPH

Equilibrists lie here; stranger, tread light;
Close, but untouching in each other's sight;
Mouldered the lips arid ashy the tall skull.
Let them lie perilous and beautiful.

John Crowe Ransom

The Four Roses

Four sisters sitting in one house,
I said, these roses on a stem
With bosoms bare. But wayfaring
I went and ravished one of them.

So one was taken. But the three,
They spread their petals just the same,
They turned no decent pale for grief,
They drew no fragrance back for shame.

The canker is on roses too!
I cried, and lifted up the rod
And scourged them bleeding to the ground.
All, all are sinners unto God.

John Crowe Ransom

The Ingrate

By night we looked across my field,
The tasseled corn was fine to see,
The moon was yellow on the rows
And seemed so wonderful to me,
That with an old provincial pride
I praised my moonlit Tennessee,
And thought my poor befriended man
Would never dare to disagree.

He was a frosty Russian man
And wore a bushy Russian beard;
He had two furtive faded eyes
That some old horror once had seared;
I wondered if they ever would
Forget the horrors they had feared;
Yet when I praised my pleasant field
This stupid fellow almost jeered.

'Your moon shines very well, my friend,
Your fields are good enough, I know;
At home our fields in the winter-time
Were always white, and shining so!
Our nights went beautiful like day,
And bitter cold our winds would blow;
And I remember how it looked,
Dear God, my country of the snow!'

John Crowe Ransom

The Lover

I sat in a friendly company
And wagged my wicked tongue so well,
My friends were listening close to hear
The wickedest tales that I could tell.
For many a fond youth waits, I said,
On many a worthless damozel;
But every trusting fool shall learn
To wish them heartily in hell.

And when your name was spoken too,
I did not change, I did not start,
And when they only praised and loved,
I still could play my secret part,
Cursing and lies upon my tongue,
And songs and shouting in my heart.

But when you came and looked at me,
You tried my poor pretence too much.
O love, do you know the secret now
Of one who would not tell nor touch?
Must I confess before the pack
Of babblers, idiots, and such?

Do they not hear the burst of bells,
Pealing at every step you make?
Are not their eyelids winking too,
Feeling your sudden brightness break?
O too much glory shut with us!
O walls too narrow and opaque!
O come into the night with me
And let me speak, for Jesus' sake.

John Crowe Ransom

The Power Of God

If the power of God were mine, and the ample turn,
I never could dwell in my law, which is 'stablished and stern,

But my pity would plague me still! In the fare of my state
I would summon my ministers often to reprobate:

'Do ye see them walk on the unwaked streets of the town?
Are they not of my handmaidens, burdened and bending down?

'It is not yet day, and my tale of the stars not told,
But already they bear of their burdens, and tremble of cold.

'Do ye heed not her, ye stony and reconciled,
One gathering sticks for a fire, who is heavy with child?

'And one was so heavy with sleep that she watched not, and slept
Till it nearly was dawn, and then she arose and wept.

'Previsal I made, and the burning of quenchless gold,
Yet still they bedevil my kingdom, the dark and the cold.

'There is labor appointed, I know not if it shall cease,
Yet anon cometh night, and my daughters shall lie in peace.

'What avoideth my glory of firmaments keeping the way,
If the poor soft flesh must trouble before the day?

'Or spectacular stars, as they race to encircuit the deep,
If my littlest people is driven, and needeth sleep?

'For my absolute heaven is high, and nothing dependeth,

Yet it twitcheth my heart, when weeping of women ascendeth.

'Then arrange ye again how the people's task be done,
There shall no woman toil till they see my sign of the sun.'

John Crowe Ransom

The Resurrection

LONG, long before men die I sometimes read
Their stoic backs as plain as graveyard stones,
An epitaph of poor dead men indeed.
I never pass those old and crooked bones,
Ridden far down with burden and with age,
Stopping the headlong highway till they lean
Aside in honor of my equipage,
But I am sick and shamed that Heaven has been
So clumsy with the inelastic clay!
'What pretty piece of hope then have you spun,
My old defeated traveler,' I say,
'That keeps you marching on? For I have none.
I have looked often and I have not found
Old men bowed low who ever rose up sound.'

John Crowe Ransom

The School

I WAS not drowsy though the scholars droned.
Hearing the music that they made of Greek,
Whenever Helen's unforgotten face
Sent other young men whisking off to war;
Hearing much mention of the hecatombs,
And Pericles, and fishes that were purple,
Temples in white, and trees that they named olive;
And thinking always of proud Athens shining
Upon her hill, that slanted to her sea:

Equipped with Grecian thoughts, how could I live
Among my father's folk? My father's house
Was narrow and his fields were nauseous.
I kicked his clods for being common dirt,
Worthy a world which never could be Greek;
Cursed the paternity that planted me
One green leaf in a wilderness of autumn;
And wept, as fitting such a fruitful spirit
Sealed in a yellow tomb.

The Lord preserves his saints for Christian uses.
He sent a pair of providential eyes.
They would have sat in any witless head,
Although I deemed them deep as classic seas,
As strange as any woman written smiling,
And much more near; the merest modern eyes,
The first my Athens faced; and yet her lamp,
It flickered rather low.

Then he commanded me to scrutiny
As to a fingered thing of no great matter,
A circumstantial sorry little coin.
A friendly thing, I owned, to lie so warm
Against the side of any friendless man;
And in the hand--O if the happy hand
Accommodate the cunning rounded scepter,
Then is dominion seated in that palm,
And coveting is seated in men's eyes.
Make haste, my hands, about your own inclosures!
And what were dead Greek empires to me then?
Dishonored, by Apollo, and forgot.

John Crowe Ransom

The Swimmer

IN dog-days plowmen quit their toil,
And frog-ponds in the meadow boil,
And grasses on the upland broil,
And all the coiling things uncoil,
And eggs and meats and Christians spoil.

A mile away the valley breaks
(So all good valleys do) and makes
A cool green water for hot heads' sakes,
And sundry sullen dog-days' aches.

The swimmer's body is white and clean,
It is washed by a water of deepest green
The color of leaves in a starlight scene,
And it is as white as the stars between.

But the swimmer's soul is a thing possessed,
His soul is naked as his breast,
Remembers not its east and west,
And ponders this way, I have guessed:

I have no home in the cruel heat
On alien soil that blisters feet.
This water is my native seat,
And more than ever cool and sweet,
So long by forfeiture escheat.

O my forgiving element!
I gash you to my heart's content
And never need be penitent,
So light you float me when breath is spent
And close again where my rude way went.

And now you close above my head,
And I lie low in a soft green bed
That dog-days never have visited.
'By the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread:'
The garden's curse is at last unsaid

What do I need of senses five?
Why eat, or drink, or sweat, or wive?
What do we strive for when we strive?
What do we live for when alive?

And what if I do not rise again,
Never to goad a heated brain
To hotter excesses of joy and pain?

Why should it be against the grain
To lie so cold and still and sane?

Water-bugs play shimmer-shimmer,
Naked body's just a glimmer,
Watch ticks every second grimmer:
Come to the top, O wicked swimmer!

John Crowe Ransom

Two In August

Two that could not have lived their single lives
As can some husbands and wives
Did something strange: they tensed their vocal cords
And attacked each other with silences and words
Like catapulted stones and arrowed knives.

Dawn was not yet; night is for loving or sleeping,
Sweet dreams or safekeeping;
Yet he of the wide brows that were used to laurel
And she, the famed for gentleness, must quarrel.
Furious both of them, and scared, and weeping.

How sleepers groan, twitch, wake to such a mood
Is not well understood,
Nor why two entities grown almost one
Should rend and murder trying to get undone,
With individual tigers in their blood.

She in terror fled from the marriage chamber
Circuiting the dark rooms like a string of amber
Round and round and back,
And would not light one lamp against the black,
And heard the clock that clanged: Remember, Remember.

And he must tread barefooted the dim lawn,
Soon he was up and gone;
High in the trees the night-mastered birds were crying
With fear upon their tongues, no singing nor flying
Which are their lovely attitudes by dawn.

Whether those bird-cries were of heaven or hell
There is no way to tell;
In the long ditch of darkness the man walked
Under the hackberry trees where the birds talked
With words too sad and strange to syllable.

John Crowe Ransom

Under The Locusts

What do the old men say,
Sitting out of the sun?
Many strange and common things,
And so would any one.

Locust trees are sorry shade,
They are good enough;
Locust trees are sweet in spring
For trees so old and tough.

Dick's a sturdy little lad
Yonder throwing stones;
Agues and rheumatic pains
Will fiddle on his bones.

Grinny Bob is out again
Begging for a dime;
Niggers haven't any souls,
Grinning all the time.

Jenny and Will go arm in arm.
He's a lucky fellow;
Jenny's checks are pink as rose,
Her mother's cheeks are yellow.

War is on, the paper says,
Wounds and enemies;
Now young gallivanting bucks
Will know what trouble is.

Parson's coming up the hill,
Meaning mighty well;
Thinks he's preached the doubters down.
And old men never tell.

John Crowe Ransom

Vaunting Oak

He is a tower unleaning. But how he'll break
If Heaven assault him with full wind and sleet,
And what uproar tall trees concumbent make!

More than a hundred years and a hundred feet
Naked he rears against cold skies eruptive,
Only his temporal twigs unsure of seat,

And the frail leaves of a season, who are susceptive
To the mad humors of wind, and turn and flee
In panic round the stem on which they are captive.

Now a certain heart, too young and mortally
Yoked with an unbeliever of bantering brood,
Observed, as an eminent witness of life, the tree;

She exulted, wrapped in a phantasy of good:
"Be the great oak for his long winterings
Our symbol of love, better than summer's brood!"

Then the patient oak, delivered of his pangs,
Put forth profuse his green banners of peace
And testified to her with innumerable tongues.

And what but she fetch me up to the steep place
Where the oak vaunted? A flat where birdsong flew
Had to be traversed, and a quick populace

Of daisies and yellow kinds, and here she knew,
Instructed well by much mortality,
Better than brag in this distraught purlieu.

Above their pied and dusty clumps was he
Standing, sheer on his hill, not much soiled over
By the knobs and broken boughs of an old tree.

She looked and murmured, "Established there, forever!"
But, that her pitiful error be undone,
I knocked upon his house, a sorrowing lover,

And like a funeral came the hollow tone.
"The grand old fellow," I grieved, "holds gallantly,

But before our joy has lapsed, even, will be gone.”

I beat more sternly, and the dolorous cry
Boomed till its loud reverberance outsounded
The singing of bees; or the coward birds that fly

Otherwhere with their songs when summer is sped,
And if they stayed would perish miserably;
Or the weeping girl remembering her dread.

John Crowe Ransom

Winter Remembered

Two evils, monstrous either one apart,
Possessed me, and were long and loath at going:
A cry of Absence, Absence, in the heart,
And in the wood the furious winter blowing.

Think not, when fire was bright upon my bricks,
And past the tight boards hardly a wind could enter,
I glowed like them, the simple burning sticks,
Far from my cause, my proper heat and center.

Better to walk forth in the frozen air
And wash my wound in the snows; that would be healing;
Because my heart would throb less painful there,
Being caked with cold, and past the smart of feeling.

And where I walked, the murderous winter blast
Would have this body bowed, these eyeballs streaming,
And though I think this heart's blood froze not fast
It ran too small to spare one drop for dreaming.

Dear love, these fingers that had known your touch,
And tied our separate forces first together,
Were ten poor idiot fingers not worth much,
Ten frozen parsnips hanging in the weather.

John Crowe Ransom

Worship

I know a quite religious man
Who utters praises when he can.

Now I find God in bard and book,
In school and temple, bird and brook.

But he says God is sweetest of all
Discovered in a drinking-hall.

For God requires no costly wine
But comes on the foam of a crockery stein.

And when that foam is on the lips,
Begin then God's good fellowships.

Cathedrals, synagogues, and kirks
May go to the devil, and all their works.

And as for Christian charity,
It's made out of hilarity.

He gives the beggar all his dimes,
Forgives his brother seven times.

'I love the rain,' says thirsty clod;
So this religious man of God.

For God has come, and is it odd
He praises all the works of God?

'For God has come, and there's no sorrow,'
He sings all night--will he sing to-morrow?

John Crowe Ransom

Wrestling

At last came threshing-time, the manly season.
We kept the thresher thundering by daylight,
And rested all the sweeter after dark,
Telling of tales, and washing in the river.
But one there was, some twenty miles a stranger,
Who boasted that he was a mighty wrestler
And had not met that valiant pair of shoulders
That he could not put down.

We had a champion there. He looked and listened,
He measured off his man, he made his mind up,
And thus he brought great honor to his county:
'My friend, I've heard you bragging, heard you braying,
And now I say, for God's sake come and wrestle.'
And thus appealed, the other came, for God's sake,
And they did wrestle.
They sprang, they gripped, they strained and rocked and twisted,
They pounded much good sod to dust and powder,
They ripped the garments off each other vainly
And showed us many naked bulging muscles,
And still were even.

But while the tide of battle ran so equal,
I heard a sound, I took it for a voice,
I almost saw it, spitting out a passage
Between the haggard jaws of my poor hero,
The voice as of a man almost despairing,
Hoping again though all his hopes had failed:
'By God, I'll have you down in one more minute!'
And it was as he said; for in a minute
He had him down, by God.

John Crowe Ransom