

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Graves
- poems -

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Robert Graves(1895 - 1985)

Robert Graves was born in 1895 in Wimbledon, a suburb of London. Graves was known as a poet, lecturer and novelist. He was also known as a classicist and a mythographer. Perhaps his first known and revered poems were the poems Graves wrote behind the lines in World War One. He later became known as one of the most superb English language 'Love' poets. He then became recognised as one of the finest love poets writing in the English language.

Members of the poetry, novel writing, historian, and classical scholarly community often feel indebted to the man and his works. Robert Graves was born into an interesting time in history. He actually saw Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee procession at the age of two or three. His family was quite patriotic, educated, strict and upper middle class. He saw his father as an authoritarian. He was not liked by his peers in school, nor did he care much for them. He attended British public school. He feared most of his Masters at the school. When he did seek out company, it was of the same sex and his relationships were clearly same sex in orientation.

Although he had a scholarship secured in the classics at Oxford, he escaped his childhood and Father through leaving for the Great War. Graves married twice, once to Nancy Nicholson, and they had four children, and his second marriage to Beryl Pritchard brought forth four more children. Graves married Nancy Nicholson before the war.

Graves' own poetry and prose is the best source for a description of his war experiences. It suffices to say that Graves never found what he was looking for leaving for war, but rather, terror and madness in the war. He was wounded, left for dead and pronounced dead by his surgeon in the field and his commanding officer in a telegram to his parents but subsequently recovered to read the report of his own demise in The Times. He amazingly recovered and was given home service for the rest of the war, like many of his fellow soldiers who were disabled by war, he could not get over the guilt he had leaving the other soldiers to fight without him. Somehow, he insisted he be posted back to the front lines. The military surgeon threatened him with court martial if he didn't get off the front. Graves returned to England trained troops, while maintaining contact with his poet friends behind the lines. In this way he was able to save one friend from court martial after he published an antiwar manifesto.

Though their relationship was initially happy and productive (Nancy and Robert worked on a children's book together), the stress of family life, little money and

Robert's continual shell-shocked condition caused them troubles. Laura Ridding arriving on the scene finished off their Riding and Robert Graves' relationship was immensely influential upon both of their lives and careers. After Riding's arrival in England, she began to exert an influence on more than just Graves' writing. Following a sequence of events so crazy that they seem more suitable to fiction than reality (including, for example, Laura Riding leaping from a third floor window and breaking her pelvic bone in three places), Graves abandoned his family and moved with Riding from England to Spain. The events of this period were so momentous that all three biographers that have covered his story, dedicate a large part of their studies to this couple. It's easy to vilify Laura Riding. Graves was but one victim of her controlling personality and her ambition. But then, Graves had his victims too. What cannot be questioned is the value of some of the work that they did together. Much of it remains important to both literary history as well as to scholarship.

In 1943 Robert Graves received the news that his son, David, was missing in action. While he and Nancy held out hope that he would be found alive or that he might have been taken prisoner, later reports suggested otherwise. David, Robert and Nancy learned, had been shot while attempting to single-handedly take out a well-defended enemy position. The chances that he had survived were not 1946 as England and Europe began to survey its post-War state, Graves managed to secure transport for his family back to Majorca. Once safely back there, then other than annual trips to England, occasional visits to the continent and even rarer trips to America, the Graves' made Deya their home for good. After 1948 and the publication of *The White Goddess*, as Graves' fame and celebrity grew, Graves began a period of discovering muses who provided him with a flesh-and-blood manifestation of his poetic and mythic muse. Some of these relationships were short, others seemed largely innocent and more flirtatious than serious or deeply poetic; however, four were, without doubt, significant to Graves' life and, subsequently, to his work.

Graves' first muse after Nancy Nicholson, Laura Riding and Beryl Graves, the first after he his *White Goddess* theories, was Judith Bledsoe. Judith was a naïve young girl who found in the older Graves something of a father figure Graves found in her the embodiment of the White s had many celebrity friends including film stars like Ava Gardner and Ingrid Bergman, fellow writers like T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein. Robert Graves ceased writing after his 80th birthday and his celebrity status slowly began to fade. However, where his own career stopped, the critical and academic industry was just beginning. He died in 1985 in Deja, a Majorcan village that he had moved to and lived in since 1929.

1805

At Viscount Nelson's lavish funeral,
While the mob milled and yelled about St Paul's,
A General chatted with an Admiral:

"One of your colleagues, Sir, remarked today
That Nelson's exit, though to be lamented,
Falls not inopportunately, in it's way"

"He was a thorn in our flesh', came the reply-
'The mot bird-witted, unaccountable,
Odd little runt that ever I did spy".

"One arm, one peeper, vain as Pretty Poll,
A meddler too, in foreign politics
And gave his heart in pawn to a plain moll.

"He would dare lecture us Sea Lords, and then
Would treat his ratings as though men of honour
And play leap-frog with his midshipmen!

We tried to box him down, but up he popped,
And when he banged Napoleon on the Nile
Became too much the hero to be dropped.

"You've heard that Copenhagen 'blind eye' story?
We'd tied him to Nurse Parker's apron- strings-
By G-d, he snipped them through and snatched the glory!"

"Yet", cried the General, 'sic-and-twenty sail
Captured or sunk by him off Trafalgar-
That writes a handsome finis to the tale"

"Handsome enough. The seas are England's now.
That fellow's foibles need no longer plague us
He died most creditably, I'll allow."

"And Sir, the secret of his victories?"
"By his unServicelike, familiar ways, Sir,
He made the whole Fleet love him, damn his eyes!"

Robert Graves

1915

I've watched the Seasons passing slow, so slow,
In the fields between La Bassée and Bethune;
Primroses and the first warm day of Spring,
Red poppy floods of June,
August, and yellowing Autumn, so
To Winter nights knee-deep in mud or snow,
And you've been everything.

Dear, you've been everything that I most lack
In these soul-deadening trenches—pictures, books,
Music, the quiet of an English wood,
Beautiful comrade-looks,
The narrow, bouldered mountain-track,
The broad, full-bosomed ocean, green and black,
And Peace, and all that's good.

Robert Graves

A Ballad Of Nursery Rhyme

Strawberries that in gardens grow
Are plump and juicy fine,
But sweeter far as wise men know
Spring from the woodland vine.

No need for bowl or silver spoon,
Sugar or spice or cream,
Has the wild berry plucked in June
Beside the trickling stream.

One such to melt at the tongue's root,
Confounding taste with scent,
Beats a full peck of garden fruit:
Which points my argument.

May sudden justice overtake
And snap the froward pen,
That old and palsied poets shake
Against the minds of men;

Blasphemers trusting to hold caught
In far-flung webs of ink
The utmost ends of human thought,
Till nothing's left to think.

But may the gift of heavenly peace
And glory for all time
Keep the boy Tom who tending geese
First made the nursery rhyme.

By the brookside one August day,
Using the sun for clock,
Tom whiled the languid hours away
Beside his scattering flock,

Carving with a sharp pointed stone
On a broad slab of slate
The famous lives of Jumping Joan,
Dan Fox and Greedy Kate;

Rhyming of wolves and bears and birds,
Spain, Scotland, Babylon,
That sister Kate might learn the words
To tell to Toddling John.

But Kate, who could not stay content
To learn her lesson pat,
New beauty to the rough lines lent
By changing this or that;

And she herself set fresh things down
In corners of her slate,
Of lambs and lanes and London Town.
God's blessing fall on Kate!

The baby loved the simple sound,
With jolly glee he shook,
And soon the lines grew smooth and round
Like pebbles in Tom's brook,

From mouth to mouth told and retold
By children sprawled at ease
Before the fire in winter's cold,
In June beneath tall trees;

Till though long lost are stone and slate,
Though the brook no more runs,
And dead long time are Tom, John, Kate,
Their sons and their sons' sons;

Yet, as when Time with stealthy tread
Lays the rich garden waste,
The woodland berry ripe and red
Fails not in scent or taste,

So these same rhymes shall still be told
To children yet unborn,
While false philosophy growing old
Fades and is killed by scorn.

A Boy In Church

"Gabble-gabble,... brethren,... gabble-gabble!"
My window frames forest and heather.
I hardly hear the tuneful babble,
Not knowing nor much caring whether
The text is praise or exhortation,
Prayer or thanksgiving, or damnation.

Outside it blows wetter and wetter,
The tossing trees never stay still.
I shift my elbows to catch better
The full round sweep of heathered hill.
The tortured copse bends to and fro
In silence like a shadow-show.

The parson's voice runs like a river
Over smooth rocks. I like this church:
The pews are staid, they never shiver,
They never bend or sway or lurch.
"Prayer," says the kind voice, "is a chain
That draws down Grace from Heaven again."

I add the hymns up, over and over,
Until there's not the least mistake.
Seven-seventy-one. (Look! there's a plover!
It's gone!) Who's that Saint by the lake?
The red light from his mantle passes
Across the broad memorial brasses.

It's pleasant here for dreams and thinking,
Lolling and letting reason nod,
With ugly serious people linking
Sad prayers to a forgiving God....
But a dumb blast sets the trees swaying
With furious zeal like madmen praying.

Robert Graves

A Child's Nightmare

Through long nursery nights he stood
By my bed unwearying,
Loomed gigantic, formless, queer,
Purring in my haunted ear
That same hideous nightmare thing,
Talking, as he lapped my blood,
In a voice cruel and flat,
Saying for ever, "Cat! ... Cat! ... Cat!..."

That one word was all he said,
That one word through all my sleep,
In monotonous mock despair.
Nonsense may be light as air,
But there's Nonsense that can keep
Horror bristling round the head,
When a voice cruel and flat
Says for ever, "Cat! ... Cat! ... Cat!..."

He had faded, he was gone
Years ago with Nursery Land,
When he leapt on me again
From the clank of a night train,
Overpowered me foot and head,
Lapped my blood, while on and on
The old voice cruel and flat
Says for ever, "Cat! ... Cat! ... Cat!..."

Morphia drowsed, again I lay
In a crater by High Wood:
He was there with straddling legs,
Staring eyes as big as eggs,
Purring as he lapped my blood,
His black bulk darkening the day,
With a voice cruel and flat,
"Cat! ... Cat! ... Cat! ... Cat!..." he said, "Cat! ... Cat!..."

When I'm shot through heart and head,
And there's no choice but to die,
The last word I'll hear, no doubt,

Won't be "Charge!" or "Bomb them out!"
Nor the stretcher-bearer's cry,
"Let that body be, he's dead!"
But a voice cruel and flat
Saying for ever, "Cat! ... Cat! ... Cat!"

Robert Graves

A Dead Boche

To you who'd read my songs of War
And only hear of blood and fame,
I'll say (you've heard it said before)
"War's Hell! " and if you doubt the same,
Today I found in Mametz Wood
A certain cure for lust of blood:

Where, propped against a shattered trunk,
In a great mess of things unclean,
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
With clothes and face a sodden green,
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

Robert Graves

A First Review

Love, Fear and Hate and Childish Toys
Are here discreetly blent;
Admire, you ladies, read, you boys,
My Country Sentiment.

But Kate says, 'Cut that anger and fear,
True love's the stuff we need!
With laughing children and the running deer
That makes a book indeed.'

Then Tom, a hard and bloody chap,
Though much beloved by me,
'Robert, have done with nursery pap,
Write like a man,' says he.

Hate and Fear are not wanted here,
Nor Toys nor Country Lovers,
Everything they took from my new poem book
But the flyleaf and the covers.

Robert Graves

A Frosty Night

Mother: Alice, dear, what ails you,
Dazed and white and shaken?
Has the chill night numbed you?
Is it fright you have taken?

Alice: Mother I am very well,
I felt never better;
Mother, do not hold me so,
Let me write my letter.

Mother: Sweet, my dear, what ails you?

Alice: No, but I am well.
The night was cold and frosty,
There's no more to tell.

Mother: Ay, the night was frosty,
Coldly gaped the moon,
Yet the birds seemed twittering
Through green boughs of June.

Soft and thick the snow lay,
Stars danced in the sky.
Not all the lambs of May-day
Skip so bold and high.

Your feet were dancing, Alice,
Seemed to dance on air,
You looked a ghost or angel
In the starlight there.

Your eyes were frosted starlight,
Your heart, fire, and snow.
Who was it said 'I love you? '

Alice: Mother, let me go!

A Lover Since Childhood

Tangled in thought am I,
Stumble in speech do I?
Do I blunder and blush for the reason why?
Wander aloof do I,
Lean over gates and sigh,
Making friends with the bee and the butterfly?

If thus and thus I do,
Dazed by the thought of you,
Walking my sorrowful way in the early dew,
My heart cut through and through
In this despair of you,
Starved for a word or a look will my hope renew:

give then a thought for me
Walking so miserably,
Wanting relief in the friendship of flower or tree;
Do but remember, we
Once could in love agree,
Swallow your pride, let us be as we used to be.

Robert Graves

A Pinch Of Salt

When a dream is born in you
With a sudden clamorous pain,
When you know the dream is true
And lovely, with no flaw nor stain,
O then, be careful, or with sudden clutch
You'll hurt the delicate thing you prize so much.

Dreams are like a bird that mocks,
Flirting the feathers of his tail.
When you seize at the salt-box,
Over the hedge you'll see him sail.
Old birds are neither caught with salt nor chaff:
They watch you from the apple bough and laugh.

Poet, never chase the dream.
Laugh yourself, and turn away.
Mask your hunger; let it seem
Small matter if he come or stay;
But when he nestles in your hand at last,
Close up your fingers tight and hold him fast.

Robert Graves

A Rhyme Of Friends

Listen now this time
Shortly to my rhyme
That herewith starts
About certain kind hearts
In those stricken parts
That lie behind Calais,
Old crones and aged men
And young children.
About the Picardais,
Who earned my thousand thanks,
Dwellers by the banks
Of mournful Somme
(God keep me therefrom
Until War ends)--
These, then, are my friends:
Madame Averlant Lune,
From the town of Bethune;
Good Professeur la Brune
From that town also.
He played the piccolo,
And left his locks to grow.
Dear Madame Hojdes,
Sempstress of Saint Fe.
With Jules and Susette
And Antoinette.
Her children, my sweethearts,
For whom I made darts
Of paper to throw
In their mimic show,
'La guerre aux tranches.'
That was a pretty play.

There was old Jacques Caron,
Of the hamlet Mailleton.
He let me look
At his household book,
'Comment vivre cent ans.'
What cares I took
To obey this wise book,

I, who feared each hour
Lest Death's cruel power
On the popped plain
Might make cares vain!

By Noeus-les-mines
Lived old Adelphine,
Withered and clean,
She nodded and smiled,
And used me like a child.
How that old trot beguiled
My leisure with her chatter,
Gave me a china platter
Painted with Cherubim
And mottoes on the rim.
But when instead of thanks
I gave her francs
How her pride was hurt!
She counted francs as dirt,
(God knows, she was not rich)
She called the Kaiser bitch,
She spat on the floor,
Cursing this Prussian war,
That she had known before
Forty years past and more.

There was also 'Tomi,'
With looks sweet and free,
Who called me cher ami.
This orphan's age was nine,
His folk were in their graves,
Else they were slaves
Behind the German line
To terror and rapine--
O, little friends of mine
How kind and brave you were,
You smoothed away care
When life was hard to bear.
And you, old women and men,
Who gave me billets then,
How patient and great-hearted!
Strangers though we started,

Yet friends we ever parted.
God bless you all: now ends
This homage to my friends.

Robert Graves

A Slice Of Wedding Cake

Why have such scores of lovely, gifted girls
Married impossible men?
Simple self-sacrifice may be ruled out,
And missionary endeavour, nine times out of ten.

Repeat 'impossible men': not merely rustic,
Foul-tempered or depraved
(Dramatic foils chosen to show the world
How well women behave, and always have behaved).

Impossible men: idle, illiterate,
Self-pitying, dirty, sly,
For whose appearance even in City parks
Excuses must be made to casual passers-by.

Has God's supply of tolerable husbands
Fallen, in fact, so low?
Or do I always over-value woman
At the expense of man?
Do I?
It might be so.

Robert Graves

A Song For Two Children

'Make a song, father, a new little song,
All for Jenny and Nancy.'
Balow lalow or Hey derry down,
Or else what might you fancy?

Is there any song sweet enough
For Nancy and for Jenny?
Said Simple Simon to the pieman,
'Indeed I know not any.'

'I've counted the miles to Babylon,
I've flown the earth like a bird,
I've ridden cock-horse to Banbury Cross,
But no such song have I heard.'

'Some speak of Alexander,
And some of Hercules,
But where are there any like Nancy and Jenny,
Where are there any like these?'

Robert Graves

A Valentine

The hunter to the husbandman
Pays tribute since our love began,
And to love-loyalty dedicates
The phantom kills he meditates.
Let me embrace, embracing you,
Beauty of other shape and hue,
Odd glinting graces of which none
Shone more than candle to your sun;
Your well-kissed hand was beckoning me
In unfamiliar imagery.
Smile your forgiveness: each bright ghost
Dives in love's glory and is lost
Yielding your comprehensive pride
A homage, even to suicide.

Robert Graves

After The Play

Father

Have you spent the money I gave you to-day?

John

Ay, father I have.

A fourpence on cakes, two pennies that away

To a beggar I gave.

Father

The lake of yellow brimstone boil for you in Hell,
Such lies that you spin.

Tell the truth now, John, ere the falsehood swell,

Say, where have you been?

John

I'll lie no more to you, father, what is the need?

To the Play I went,

With sixpence for a near seat, money's worth indeed,

The best ever spent.

Grief to you, shame or grief, here is the story--

My splendid night!

It was colour, scents, music, a tragic glory,

Fear with delight.

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, title of the tale:

He of that name,

A tall, glum fellow, velvet cloaked, with a shirt of mail,

Two eyes like flame.

All the furies of fate circled round the man,

Maddening his heart,

There was old murder done before play began,

Ay, the ghost took part.

There were grave-diggers delving, they brought up bones,

And with rage and grief

All the players shouted in full, kingly tones,
Grand, passing belief.

Oh, there were ladies there radiant like day,
And changing scenes:
Great sounding words were tossed about like hay
By kings and queens.

How the plot turned about I watched in vain,
Though for grief I cried,
As one and all they faded, poisoned or slain,
In great agony died.

Father, you'll drive me forth never to return,
Doubting me your son--

Father

So I shall, John

John

--but that glory for which I burn
Shall be soon begun.

I shall wear great boots, shall strut and shout,
Keep my locks curled.
The fame of my name shall go ringing about
Over half the world.

Father

Horror that your Prince found, John may you find,
Ever and again
Dying before the house in such torture of mind
As you need not feign.

While they clap and stamp at your nightly fate,
They shall never know
The curse that drags at you, until Hell's gate.
You have heard me. Go!

Allie

Allie, call the birds in,
The birds from the sky.
Allie calls, Allie sings,
Down they all fly.
First there came
Two white doves
Then a sparrow from his nest,
Then a clucking bantam hen,
Then a robin red-breast.

Allie, call the beasts in,
The beasts, every one.
Allie calls, Allie sings,
In they all run.
First there came
Two black lambs,
Then a grunting Berkshire sow,
Then a dog without a tail,
Then a red and white cow.

Allie, call the fish up,
The fish from the stream.
Allie calls, Allie sings,
Up they all swim.
First there came
Two gold fish,
A minnow and a miller's thumb,
Then a pair of loving trout,
Then the twisted eels come.

Allie, call the children,
Children from the green.
Allie calls, Allie sings,
Soon they run in.
First there came
Tom and Madge,
Kate and I who'll not forget
How we played by the water's edge
Till the April sun set.

Robert Graves

An English Wood

This valley wood is pledged
To the set shape of things,
And reasonably hedged:
Here are no harpies fledged,
No rocs may clap their wings,
Nor gryphons wave their stings.
Here, poised in quietude,
Calm elementals brood
On the set shape of things:
They fend away alarms
From this green wood.
Here nothing is that harms -
No bulls with lungs of brass,
No toothed or spiny grass,
No tree whose clutching arms
Drink blood when travellers pass,
No mount of glass;
No bardic tongues unfold
Satires or charms.
Only, the lawns are soft,
The tree-stems, grave and old;
Slow branches sway aloft,
The evening air comes cold,
The sunset scatters gold.
Small grasses toss and bend,
Small pathways idly tend
Towards no fearful end.

Robert Graves

An Old Twenty-Third Man

"Is that the Three-and-Twentieth, Strabo mine,
Marching below, and we still gulping wine?"
From the sad magic of his fragrant cup
The red-faced old centurion started up,
Cursed, battered on the table. "No," he said,
"Not that! The Three-and-Twentieth Legion's dead,
Dead in the first year of this damned campaign—
The Legion's dead, dead, and won't rise again.
Pity? Rome pities her brave lads that die,
But we need pity also, you and I,
Whom Gallic spear and Belgian arrow miss,
Who live to see the Legion come to this,
Unsoldierlike, slovenly, bent on loot,
Grumblers, diseased, unskilled to thrust or shoot.
O, brown cheek, muscled shoulder, sturdy thigh!
Where are they now? God! watch it struggle by,
The sullen pack of ragged ugly swine.
Is that the Legion, Gracchus? Quick, the wine!"
"Strabo," said Gracchus, "you are strange tonight.
The Legion is the Legion; it's all right.
If these new men are slovenly, in your thinking,
God damn it! you'll not better them by drinking.
They all try, Strabo; trust their hearts and hands.
The Legion is the Legion while Rome stands,
And these same men before the autumn's fall
Shall bang old Vercingetorix out of Gaul."

Robert Graves

Apples And Water

Dust in a cloud, blinding weather,
Drums that rattle and roar!
A mother and daughter stood together
Beside their cottage door.

'Mother, the heavens are bright like brass,
The dust is shaken high,
With labouring breath the soldiers pass,
Their lips are cracked and dry.'

'Mother, I'll throw them apples down,
I'll bring them pails of water.'
The mother turned with an angry frown
Holding back her daughter.

'But mother, see, they faint with thirst,
They march away to die,'
'Ah, sweet, had I but known at first
Their throats are always dry.'

'There is no water can supply them
In western streams that flow,
There is no fruit can satisfy them
On orchard trees that grow.'

'Once in my youth I gave, poor fool,
A soldier apples and water,
So may I die before you cool
Your father's drouth, my daughter.'

Robert Graves

Babylon

The child alone a poet is:
Spring and Fairyland are his.
Truth and Reason show but dim,
And all's poetry with him.
Rhyme and music flow in plenty
For the lad of one-and-twenty,
But Spring for him is no more now
Than daisies to a munching cow;
Just a cheery pleasant season,
Daisy buds to live at ease on.
He's forgotten how he smiled
And shrieked at snowdrops when a child,
Or wept one evening secretly
For April's glorious misery.
Wisdom made him old and wary
Banishing the Lords of Faery.
Wisdom made a breach and battered
Babylon to bits: she scattered
To the hedges and ditches
All our nursery gnomes and witches.
Lob and Puck, poor frantic elves,
Drag their treasures from the shelves.
Jack the Giant-killer's gone,
Mother Goose and Oberon,
Bluebeard and King Solomon.
Robin, and Red Riding Hood
Take together to the wood,
And Sir Galahad lies hid
In a cave with Captain Kidd.
None of all the magic hosts,
None remain but a few ghosts
Of timorous heart, to linger on
Weeping for lost Babylon.

Robert Graves

Baloo Loo For Jenny

Sing baloo loo for Jenny
And where is she gone?
Away to spy her mother's land,
Riding all alone.

To the rich towns of Scotland,
The woods and the streams,
High upon a Spanish horse
Saddled for her dreams.

By Oxford and by Chester,
To Berwick-on-the-Tweed,
Then once across the borderland
She shall find no need.

A loaf for her at Stirling,
A scone at Carlisle,
Honeyed cakes at Edinbro'--
That shall make her smile.

At Aberdeen clear cider,
Mead for her at Nairn,
A cup of wine at John o' Groats--
That shall please my bairn.

Sing baloo loo for Jenny,
Mother will be fain
To see her little truant child
Riding home again.

Robert Graves

Big Words

I've whined of coming death, but now, no more!
It's weak and most ungracious. For, say I,
Though still a boy if years are counted, why!
I've lived those years from roof to cellar-floor,
And feel, like grey-beards touching their fourscore,
Ready, so soon as the need comes, to die:
And I'm satisfied.
For winning confidence in those quiet days
Of peace, poised sickly on the precipice side
Of Lliwedd crag by Snowdon, and in war
Finding it familiar with me than before;
Winning a faith in the wisdom of God's ways
That once I lost, finding it justified
Even in this chaos; winning love that stays
And warms the heart like wine at Easter-tide;
Having earlier tried
False loves in plenty; oh! my cup of praise
Brims over, and I know I'll feel small sorrow,
Confess no sins and make no weak delays
If death ends all and I must die to-morrow.'
But on the firestep, waiting to attack,
He cursed, prayed, sweated, wished the proud words back.

Robert Graves

Brittle Bones

Though I am an old man
With my bones very brittle,
Though I am a poor old man
Worth very little,
Yet I suck at my long pipe
At peace in the sun,
I do not fret nor much regret
That my work is done.

If I were a young man
With my bones full of marrow,
Oh, if I were a bold young man
Straight as an arrow,
And if I had the same years
To live once again,
I would not change their simple range
Of laughter and pain.

If I were a young man
And young was my Lily,
A smart girl, a bold young man,
Both of us silly.
And though from time before I knew
She'd stab me with pain,
Though well I knew she'd not be true,
I'd love her again.

If I were a young man
With a brisk, healthy body,
Oh, if I were a bold young man
With love of rum toddy,
Though I knew that I was spiting
My old age with pain,
My happy lip would touch and sip
Again and again.

If I were a young man
With my bones full of marrow,
Oh, if I were a bold young man

Straight as an arrow,
I'd store up no virtue
For Heaven's distant plain,
I'd live at ease as I did please
And sin once again.

Robert Graves

Call It A Good Marriage

Call it a good marriage -
For no one ever questioned
Her warmth, his masculinity,
Their interlocking views;
Except one stray graphologist
Who frowned in speculation
At her h's and her s's,
His p's and w's.

Though few would still subscribe
To the monogamic axiom
That strife below the hip-bones
Need not estrange the heart,
Call it a good marriage:
More drew those two together,
Despite a lack of children,
Than pulled them apart.

Call it a good marriage:
They never fought in public,
They acted circumspectly
And faced the world with pride;
Thus the hazards of their love-bed
Were none of our damned business -
Till as jurymen we sat on
Two deaths by suicide.

Robert Graves

Careers

Father is quite the greatest poet
That ever lived anywhere.
You say you're going to write great music—
I chose that first: it's unfair.
Besides, now I can't be the greatest painter and
do Christ and angels, or lovely pears
and apples and grapes on a green dish,
or storms at sea, or anything lovely,
Because that's been taken by Claire.

It's stupid to be an engine-driver,
And soldiers are horrible men.
I won't be a tailor, I won't be a sailor,
And gardener's taken by Ben.
It's unfair if you say that you'll write great
music, you horrid, you unkind (I simply
loathe you, though you are my
sister), you beast, cad, coward, cheat,
bully, liar!
Well? Say what's left for me then!

But we won't go to your ugly music.
(Listen!) Ben will garden and dig,
And Claire will finish her wondrous pictures
All flaming and splendid and big.
And I'll be a perfectly marvellous carpenter,
and I'll make cupboards and benches
and tables and ... and baths, and
nice wooden boxes for studs and
money,
And you'll be jealous, you pig!

Robert Graves

Cherry-Time

Cherries of the night are riper
Than the cherries pluckt at noon
Gather to your fairy piper
When he pipes his magic tune:

Merry, merry,
Take a cherry;
Mine are sounder,
Mine are rounder,
Mine are sweeter
For the eater
Under the moon.

And you'll be fairies soon.

In the cherry pluckt at night,
With the dew of summer swelling,
There's a juice of pure delight,
Cool, dark, sweet, divinely smelling.

Merry, merry,
Take a cherry;
Mine are sounder,
Mine are rounder,
Mine are sweeter
For the eater
In the moonlight.

And you'll be fairies quite.

When I sound the fairy call,
Gather here in silent meeting,
Chin to knee on the orchard wall,
Cooled with dew and cherries eating.

Merry, merry,
Take a cherry;
Mine are sounder,
Mine are rounder,
Mine are sweeter.
For the eater
When the dews fall.

And you'll be fairies all.

Cherry-Time

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Merry, merry,
Take a cherry;
Mine are sounder,
Mine are rounder,
Mine are sweeter.
For the eater
When the dews fall.

And you'll be fairies all.

Corporal Stare

Back from the line one night in June,
I gave a dinner at Bethune—
Seven courses, the most gorgeous meal
Money could buy or batman steal.
Five hungry lads welcomed the fish
With shouts that nearly cracked the dish;
Asparagus came with tender tops,
Strawberries in cream, and mutton chops.
Said Jenkins, as my hand he shook,
“They’ll put this in the history book.”
We bawled Church anthems in choro
Of Bethlehem and Hermon snow,
With drinking songs, a jolly sound
To help the good red Pommard round.
Stories and laughter interspersed,
We drowned a long La Bassée thirst—
Trenches in June make throats damned dry.
Then through the window suddenly,
Badge, stripes and medals all complete,
We saw him swagger up the street,
Just like a live man—Corporal Stare!
Stare! Killed last May at Festubert.
Caught on patrol near the Boche wire,
Torn horribly by machine-gun fire!
He paused, saluted smartly, grinned,
Then passed away like a puff of wind,
Leaving us blank astonishment.
The song broke, up we started, leant
Out of the window—nothing there,
Not the least shadow of Corporal Stare,
Only a quiver of smoke that showed
A fag-end dropped on the silent road.

Robert Graves

Counting The Beats

You, love, and I,
(He whispers) you and I,
And if no more than only you and I
What care you or I ?

Counting the beats,
Counting the slow heart beats,
The bleeding to death of time in slow heart beats,
Wakeful they lie.

Cloudless day,
Night, and a cloudless day,
Yet the huge storm will burst upon their heads one day
From a bitter sky.

Where shall we be,
(She whispers) where shall we be,
When death strikes home, O where then shall we be
Who were you and I ?

Not there but here,
(He whispers) only here,
As we are, here, together, now and here,
Always you and I.

Counting the beats,
Counting the slow heart beats,
The bleeding to death of time in slow heart beats,
Wakeful they lie.

Robert Graves

Country At War

And what of home--how goes it, boys,
While we die here in stench and noise?
'The hill stands up and hedges wind
Over the crest and drop behind;
Here swallows dip and wild things go
On peaceful errands to and fro
Across the sloping meadow floor,
And make no guess at blasting war.
In woods that fledge the round hill-shoulder
Leaves shoot and open, fall and moulder,
And shoot again. Meadows yet show
Alternate white of drifted snow
And daisies. Children play at shop,
Warm days, on the flat boulder-top,
With wildflower coinage, and the wares
Are bits of glass and unripe pears.
Crows perch upon the backs of sheep,
The wheat goes yellow: women reap,
Autumn winds ruffle brook and pond,
Flutter the hedge and fly beyond.
So the first things of nature run,
And stand not still for any one,
Contemptuous of the distant cry
Wherewith you harrow earth and sky.
And high French clouds, praying to be
Back, back in peace beyond the sea,
Where nature with accustomed round
Sweeps and garnishes the ground
With kindly beauty, warm or cold--
Alternate seasons never old:
Heathen, how furiously you rage,
Cursing this blood and brimstone age,
How furiously against your will
You kill and kill again, and kill:
All thought of peace behind you cast,
Till like small boys with fear aghast,
Each cries for God to understand,
'I could not help it, it was my hand.'

Dead Cow Farm

An ancient saga tells us how
In the beginning the First Cow
(For nothing living yet had birth
But Elemental Cow on earth)
Began to lick cold stones and mud:
Under her warm tongue flesh and blood
Blossomed, a miracle to believe:
And so was Adam born, and Eve.
Here now is chaos once again,
Primeval mud, cold stones and rain.
Here flesh decays and blood drips red,
And the Cow's dead, the old Cow's dead.

Robert Graves

Dew-Drop And Diamond

The difference between you and her
(whom I to you did once prefer)
Is clear enough to settle:
She like a diamond shone, but you
Shine like an early drop of dew
Poised on a red rose petal.

The dew-drop carries in its eye
Mountain and forest, sea and sky,
With every change of weather;
Contrariwise, a diamond splits
The prospect into idle bits
That none can piece together.

Robert Graves

Dicky

Mother

Oh, what a heavy sigh!
Dicky, are you ailing?

Dicky

Even by this fireside, mother,
My heart is failing.

To-night across the down,
Whistling and jolly,
I sauntered out from town
With my stick of holly.

Bounteous and cool from sea
The wind was blowing,
Cloud shadows under the moon
Coming and going.

I sang old roaring songs,
Ran and leaped quick,
And turned home by St. Swithin's
Twirling my stick.

And there as I was passing
The churchyard gate
An old man stopped me, 'Dicky,
You're walking late.'

I did not know the man,
I grew afeared
At his lean lolling jaw,
His spreading beard.

His garments old and musty,
Of antique cut,
His body very lean and bony,
His eyes tight shut.

Oh, even to tell it now
My courage ebbs...
His face was clay, mother,
His beard, cobwebs.

In that long horrid pause
'Good-night,' he said,
Entered and clicked the gate,
'Each to his bed.'

Mother

Do not sigh or fear, Dicky,
How is it right
To grudge the dead their ghostly dark
And wan moonlight?

We have the glorious sun,
Lamp and fireside.
Grudge not the dead their moonshine
When abroad they ride.

Robert Graves

Double Red Daisies

Double red daisies, they're my flowers,
Which nobody else may grow.
In a big quarrelsome house like ours
They try it sometimes—but no,
I root them up because they're my flowers,
Which nobody else may grow.

*Claire has a tea-rose, but she didn't plant it;
Ben has an iris, but I don't want it.
Daisies, double red daisies for me,
The beautifulest flowers in the garden.*

Double red daisy, that's my mark:
I paint it in all my books!
It's carved high up on the beech-tree bark,
How neat and lovely it looks!
So don't forget that it's my trade mark;
Don't copy it in your books.

*Claire has a tea-rose, but she didn't plant it;
Ben has an iris, but I don't want it.
Daisies, double red daisies for me,
The beautifulest flowers in the garden.*

Robert Graves

Down, Wanton, Down!

Down, wanton, down! Have you no shame
That at the whisper of Love's name,
Or Beauty's, presto! up you raise
Your angry head and stand at gaze?

Poor bombard-captain, sworn to reach
The ravelin and effect a breach--
Indifferent what you storm or why,
So be that in the breach you die!

Love may be blind, but Love at least
Knows what is man and what mere beast;
Or Beauty wayward, but requires
More delicacy from her squires.

Tell me, my witless, whose one boast
Could be your staunchness at the post,
When were you made a man of parts
To think fine and profess the arts?

Will many-gifted Beauty come
Bowing to your bald rule of thumb,
Or Love swear loyalty to your crown?
Be gone, have done! Down, wanton, down!

Robert Graves

Escape

August 6, 1916.—Officer previously reported died of wounds, now reported wounded: Graves, Captain R., Royal Welch Fusiliers.)

...but I was dead, an hour or more.
I woke when I'd already passed the door
That Cerberus guards, and half-way down the road
To Lethe, as an old Greek signpost showed.
Above me, on my stretcher swinging by,
I saw new stars in the subterrene sky:
A Cross, a Rose in bloom, a Cage with bars,
And a barbed Arrow feathered in fine stars.
I felt the vapours of forgetfulness
Float in my nostrils. Oh, may Heaven bless
Dear Lady Proserpine, who saw me wake,
And, stooping over me, for Henna's sake
Cleared my poor buzzing head and sent me back
Breathless, with leaping heart along the track.
After me roared and clattered angry hosts
Of demons, heroes, and policeman-ghosts.
"Life! life! I can't be dead! I won't be dead!
Damned if I'll die for any one!" I said....

Cerberus stands and grins above me now,
Wearing three heads—lion, and lynx, and sow.
"Quick, a revolver! But my Webley's gone,
Stolen!... No bombs ... no knife.... The crowd swarms on,
Bellows, hurls stones.... Not even a honeyed sop...
Nothing.... Good Cerberus!... Good dog!... but stop!
Stay!... A great luminous thought ... I do believe
There's still some morphia that I bought on leave."
Then swiftly Cerberus' wide mouths I cram
With army biscuit smeared with ration jam;

And sleep lurks in the luscious plum and apple.
He crunches, swallows, stiffens, seems to grapple
With the all-powerful poppy ... then a snore,
A crash; the beast blocks up the corridor
With monstrous hairy carcase, red and dun—

Too late! for I've sped through.
O Life! O Sun!

Robert Graves

Faun

Here down this very way,
Here only yesterday

King Faun went leaping.

He sang, with careless shout
Hurling his name about;
He sang, with oaken stock
His steps from rock to rock

In safety keeping,
"Here Faun is free,
Here Faun is free!"

Today against yon pine,
Forlorn yet still divine,

King Faun leant weeping.

"They drank my holy brook,
My strawberries they took,
My private path they trod."
Loud wept the desolate God,

Scorn on scorn heaping,
"Faun, what is he?
Faun, what is he?"

Robert Graves

Finland

Feet and faces tingle
In that frore land:
Legs wobble and go wingle,
You scarce can stand.

The skies are jewelled all around,
The ploughshare snaps in the iron ground,
The Finn with face like paper
And eyes like a lighted taper
Hurls his rough rune
At the wintry moon
And stamps to mark the tune.

Robert Graves

Flying Crooked

The butterfly, the cabbage white,
(His honest idiocy of flight)
Will never now, it is too late,
Master the art of flying straight,
Yet has — who knows so well as I? —
A just sense of how not to fly:
He lurches here and here by guess
And God and hope and hopelessness.
Even the aerobatic swift
Has not his flying-crooked gift.

Robert Graves

Fox's Dingle

Take now a country mood,
Resolve, distil it: —
Nine Acre swaying alive,
June flowers that fill it,

Spicy sweet-briar bush,
The uneasy wren
Fluttering from ash to birch
And back again.

Milkwort on its low stem,
Spread hawthorn tree,
Sunlight patching the wood,
A hive-bound bee....

Girls riding nim-nim-nim,
Ladies, trot-trot,
Gentlemen hard at gallop,
Shouting, steam-hot.

Now over the rough turf
Bridles go jingle,
And there's a well-loved pool,
By Fox's Dingle,

Where Sweetheart, my brown mare,
Old Glory's daughter,
May loll her leathern tongue
In snow-cool water.

Robert Graves

Free Verse

I now delight
In spite
Of the might
And the right
Of classic tradition,
In writing
And reciting
Straight ahead,
Without let or omission,
Just any little rhyme
In any little time
That runs in my head;
Because, I've said,
My rhymes no longer shall stand arrayed
Like Prussian soldiers on parade
That march,
Stiff as starch,
Foot to foot,
Boot to boot,
Blade to blade,
Button to button,
Cheeks and chops and chins like mutton.
No! No!
My rhymes must go
Turn 'ee, twist 'ee,
Twinkling, frosty,
Will-o'-the-wisp-like, misty;
Rhymes I will make
Like Keats and Blake
And Christina Rossetti,
With run and ripple and shake.
How pretty
To take
A merry little rhyme
In a jolly little time
And poke it,
And choke it,
Change it, arrange it,
Straight-lace it, deface it,

Pleat it with pleats,
Sheet it with sheets
Of empty conceits,
And chop and chew,
And hack and hew,
And weld it into a uniform stanza,
And evolve a neat,
Complacent, complete,
Academic extravaganza!

Robert Graves

Full Moon

As I walked out one harvest night
About the stroke of One,
The Moon attained to her full height
Stood beaming like the Sun.
She exorcised the ghostly wheat
To mute assent in Love's defeat
Whose tryst had now begun.

The fields lay sick beneath my tread,
A tedious owlet cried;
The nightingale above my head
With this or that replied,
Like man and wife who nightly keep
Inconsequent debate in sleep
As they dream side by side.

Your phantom wore the moon's cold mask,
My phantom wore the same,
Forgetful of the feverish task
In hope of which they came,
Each image held the other's eyes
And watched a grey distraction rise
To cloud the eager flame.

To cloud the eager flame of love,
To fog the shining gate:
They held the tyrannous queen above
Sole mover of their fate,
They glared as marble statues glare
Across the tessellated stair
Or down the Halls of State.

And now cold earth was Arctic sea,
Each breath came dagger keen,
Two bergs of glinting ice were we,
The broad moon sailed between;
There swam the mermaids, tailed and finned,
And Love went by upon the wind
As though it had not been.

Robert Graves

Ghost Raddled

'Come, surly fellow, come! A song!
What, madmen? Sing to you?
Choose from the clouded tales of wrong
And terror I bring to you.

Of a night so torn with cries,
Honest men sleeping
Start awake with glaring eyes,
Bone-chilled, flesh creeping.

Of spirits in the web hung room
Up above the stable,
Groans, knockings in the gloom,
The dancing table.

Of demons in the dry well
That cheep and mutter,
Clanging of an unseen bell,
Blood choking the gutter.

Of lust frightful, past belief,
Lurking unforgotten,
Unrestrainable endless grief
From breasts long rotten.

A song? What laughter or what song
Can this house remember?
Do flowers and butterflies belong
To a blind December?

Robert Graves

Give Us Rain

'Give us Rain, Rain,' said the bean and the pea,
'Not so much Sun,
Not so much Sun.'
But the Sun smiles bravely and encouragingly,
And no rain falls and no waters run.

'Give us Peace, Peace,' said the peoples oppressed,
'Not so many Flags,
Not so many Flags.'
But the Flags fly and the Drums beat, denying rest,
And the children starve, they shiver in rags.

Robert Graves

Goliath And David

Yet once an earlier David took
Smooth pebbles from the brook:
Out between the lines he went
To that one-sided tournament,
A shepherd boy who stood out fine
And young to fight a Philistine
Clad all in brazen mail. He swears
That he's killed lions, he's killed bears,
And those that scorn the God of Zion
Shall perish so like bear or lion.
But ... the historian of that fight
Had not the heart to tell it right.

Striding within javelin range,
Goliath marvels at this strange
Goodly-faced boy so proud of strength.
David's clear eye measures the length;
With hand thrust back, he cramps one knee,
Poises a moment thoughtfully,
And hurls with a long vengeful swing.
The pebble, humming from the sling
Like a wild bee, flies a sure line
For the forehead of the Philistine;
Then ... but there comes a brazen clink,
And quicker than a man can think
Goliath's shield parries each cast.
Clang! clang! and clang! was David's last.
Scorn blazes in the Giant's eye,
Towering unhurt six cubits high.
Says foolish David, "Damn your shield!
And damn my sling! but I'll not yield."
He takes his staff of Mamre oak,
A knotted shepherd-staff that's broke
The skull of many a wolf and fox
Come filching lambs from Jesse's flocks.
Loud laughs Goliath, and that laugh
Can scatter chariots like blown chaff
To rout; but David, calm and brave,
Holds his ground, for God will save.

Steel crosses wood, a flash, and oh!
Shame for beauty's overthrow! 40
(God's eyes are dim, His ears are shut.)
One cruel backhand sabre-cut—
"I'm hit! I'm killed! " young David cries,
Throws blindly forward, chokes ... and dies.
And look, spike-helmeted, grey, grim,
Goliath straddles over him.

Robert Graves

Hate Not - Fear Not

Kill if you must, but never hate:
Man is but grass and hate is blight,
The sun will scorch you soon or late,
Die wholesome then, since you must fight.

Hate is a fear, and fear is rot
That cankers root and fruit alike,
Fight cleanly then, hate not, fear not,
Strike with no madness when you strike.

Fever and fear distract the world,
But calm be you though madmen shout,
Through blazing fires of battle hurled,
Hate not, strike, fear not, stare Death out!

Robert Graves

Haunted

Gulp down your wine, old friends of mine,
Roar through the darkness, stamp and sing
And lay ghost hands on everything,
But leave the noonday's warm sunshine
To living lads for mirth and wine.

I met you suddenly down the street,
Strangers assume your phantom faces,
You grin at me from daylight places,
Dead, long dead, I'm ashamed to greet
Dead men down the morning street.

Robert Graves

Hawk And Buckle

Where is the landlord of old Hawk and Buckle,
And what of Master Straddler this hot summer weather?
He's along in the tap-room with broad cheeks a-chuckle,
And ten bold companions all drinking together.

Where is the daughter of old Hawk and Buckle,
And what of Mistress Jenny this hot summer weather?
She sits in the parlour with smell of honeysuckle,
Trimming her bonnet with red ostrich feather.

Where is the ostler of old Hawk and Buckle,
And what of Willy Jakeman this hot summer weather?
He is rubbing his eyes with a slow and lazy knuckle
As he wakes from his nap on a bank of fresh heather.

Where is the page boy of old Hawk and Buckle,
And what of our young Charlie this hot summer weather?
He is bobbing for tiddlers in a little trickle-truckle,
With his line and his hook and his breeches of leather.

Where is the grey goat of old Hawk and Buckle,
And what of pretty Nanny this hot summer weather?
She stays not contented with little or with muckle,
Straining for daisies at the end of her tether.

For this is our motto at old Hawk and Buckle,
We cling to it close and we sing all together,
'Every man for himself at our old Hawk and Buckle,
And devil take the hindmost this hot summer weather.'

Robert Graves

Here They Lie

Here they lie who once learned here
All that is taught of hurt or fear;
Dead, but by free will they died:
They were true men, they had pride.

Robert Graves

I Wonder What It Feels Like To Be Drowned?

Look at my knees,
That island rising from the steamy seas!
The candles a tall lightship; my two hands
Are boats and barges anchored to the sands,
With mighty cliffs all round;
They're full of wine and riches from far lands....
<i>I wonder what it feels like to be drowned?</i>

I can make caves,
By lifting up the island and huge waves
And storms, and then with head and ears well under
Blow bubbles with a monstrous roar like thunder,
A bull-of-Bashan sound.
The seas run high and the boats split asunder....
<i>I wonder what it feels like to be drowned?</i>

The thin soap slips
And slithers like a shark under the ships.
My toes are on the soap-dish—that's the effect
Of my huge storms; an iron steamer's wrecked.
The soap slides round and round;
He's biting the old sailors, I expect....
<i>I wonder what it feels like to be drowned?</i>

Robert Graves

I'D Love To Be A Fairy's Child

Children born of fairy stock
Never need for shirt or frock,
Never want for food or fire,
Always get their hearts desire:
Jingle pockets full of gold,
Marry when they're seven years old.
Every fairy child may keep
Two ponies and ten sheep;
All have houses, each his own,
Built of brick or granite stone;
They live on cherries, they run wild--
I'd love to be a Fairy's child.

Robert Graves

In Broken Images

He is quick, thinking in clear images;
I am slow, thinking in broken images.

He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images;
I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images.

Trusting his images, he assumes their relevance;
Mistrusting my images, I question their relevance.

Assuming their relevance, he assumes the fact;
Questioning their relevance, I question the fact.

When the fact fails him, he questions his senses;
When the fact fails me, I approve my senses.

He continues quick and dull in his clear images;
I continue slow and sharp in my broken images.

He in a new confusion of his understanding;
I in a new understanding of my confusion.

Robert Graves

In The Wilderness

Christ of His gentleness
Thirsting and hungering,
Walked in the wilderness;
Soft words of grace He spoke
Unto lost desert-folk
That listened wondering.
He heard the bitterns call
From ruined palace-wall,
Answered them brotherly.
He held communion
With the she-pelican
Of lonely piety.
Basilisk, cockatrice,
Flocked to his homilies,
With mail of dread device,
With monstrous barbéd slings,
With eager dragon-eyes;
Great rats on leather wings
And poor blind broken things,
Foul in their miseries.
And ever with Him went,
Of all His wanderings
Comrade, with ragged coat,
Gaunt ribs—poor innocent—
Bleeding foot, burning throat,
The guileless old scapegoat;
For forty nights and days
Followed in Jesus' ways,
Sure guard behind Him kept,
Tears like a lover wept.

Robert Graves

It's A Queer Time

It's hard to know if you're alive or dead
When steel and fire go roaring through your head.

One moment you'll be crouching at your gun
Traversing, mowing heaps down half in fun:
The next, you choke and clutch at your right breast -
No time to think - leave all - and off you go...
To Treasure Island where the Spice winds blow,
To lovely groves of mango, quince and lime -
Breathe no good-bye, but ho, for the Red West!
It's a queer time.

You're charging madly at them yelling 'Fag!'
When somehow something gives and your feet drag.
You fall and strike your head; yet feel no pain
And find... you're digging tunnels through the hay
In the Big Barn, 'cause it's a rainy day.
Oh, springy hay, and lovely beams to climb!
You're back in the old sailor suit again.
It's a queer time.

Or you'll be dozing safe in your dug-out -
A great roar-the trench shakes and falls about
You're struggling, gasping, struggling, then... hullo!
Elsie comes tripping gaily down the trench,
Hanky to nose-that lyddite makes a stench -
Getting her pinafore all over grime.
Funny! because she died ten years ago!
It's a queer time.

The trouble is, things happen much too quick;
Up jump the Boches, rifles thump and click,
You stagger, and the whole scene fades away:
Even good Christians don't like passing straight
From Tipperary or their Hymn of Hate
To Alleluiah-chanting, and the chime

Of golden harps... and... I'm not well to-day...
It's a queer time.

Robert Graves

Jane

As Jane walked out below the hill,
She saw an old man standing still,
His eyes in tranced sorrow bound
On the broad stretch of barren ground.

His limbs were knarled like aged trees,
His thin beard wrapt about his knees,
His visage broad and parchment white,
Aglint with pale reflected light.

He seemed a creature fall'n afar
From some dim planet or faint star.
Jane scanned him very close, and soon
Cried, "Tis the old man from the moon."

He raised his voice, a grating creak,
But only to himself would speak.
Groaning with tears in piteous pain,
'O! O! would I were home again.'

Then Jane ran off, quick as she could,
To cheer his heart with drink and food.
But ah, too late came ale and bread,
She found the poor soul stretched stone-dead.
And a new moon rode overhead.

Robert Graves

John Skelton

What could be dafter
Than John Skelton's laughter?
What sound more tenderly
Than his pretty poetry?
So where to rank old Skelton?
He was no monstrous Milton,
Nor wrote no "Paradise Lost,"
So wondered at by most,
Phrased so disdainfully,
Composed so painfully.
He struck what Milton missed,
Milling an English grist
With homely turn and twist.
He was English through and through,
Not Greek, nor French, nor Jew,
Though well their tongues he knew,
The living and the dead:
Learned Erasmus said,
Hic 'unum Britannicarum
Lumen et decus literarum.
But oh, Colin Clout!
How his pen flies about,
Twiddling and turning,
Scorching and burning,
Thrusting and thrumming!
How it hurries with humming,
Leaping and running,
At the tipsy-topsy Tunning
Of Mistress Eleanor Rummyng!
How for poor Philip Sparrow
Was murdered at Carow,
How our hearts he does harrow
Jest and grief mingle
In this jangle-jingle,
For he will not stop
To sweep nor mop,
To prune nor prop,
To cut each phrase up
Like beef when we sup,

Nor sip at each line
As at brandy-wine,
Or port when we dine.
But angrily, wittily,
Tenderly, prettily,
Laughingly, learnedly,
Sadly, madly,
Helter-skelter John
Rhymes serenely on,
As English poets should.
Old John, you do me good!

Robert Graves

Jonah

A purple whale
Proudly sweeps his tail
Towards Nineveh;
Glassy green
Surges between
A mile of roaring sea.

"O town of gold,
Of splendour multifold,
Lucre and lust,
Leviathan's eye
Can surely spy
Thy doom of death and dust."

On curving sands
Vengeful Jonah stands.
"Yet forty days,
Then down, down,
Tumbles the town
In flaming ruin ablaze."

With swift lament
Those Ninevites repent.
They cry in tears,
"Our hearts fail!"
The whale, the whale!
Our sins prick us like spears."

Jonah is vexed;
He cries, "What next? what next?"
And shakes his fist.
"Stupid city,
The shame, the pity,
The glorious crash I've missed."

Away goes Jonah grumbling,
Murmuring and mumbling;
Off ploughs the purple whale,
With disappointed tail.

Robert Graves

Knowledge Of God

So far from praising he blasphemes
Who says that God has been or is,
Who swears he met with God in dreams
Or face to face in woods and streams,
Meshed in their boundaries.

'Has been' and 'is' the seasons bind,
(Here glut of bread, there lack of bread).
The mill-stones grumble as they grind
That if God is, he must be blind,
Or if he was, is dead.

Can God with Danae sport and kiss,
Or God with rebel demons fight,
Making a proof as Jove or Dis,
Force, Essence, Knowledge, that or this,
Of Godhead infinite?

The caterpillar years-to-come
March head to tail with years-that-were
Round and around the cosmic drum,
To time and space they add their sum
But how is Godhead there?

Weep, sleep, be merry, vault the gate
Or down the evening furrow plod,
Hate, and at length withhold your hate,
Rule, or be ruled by certain fate,
But cast no net for God.

Robert Graves

Letter To S.S. From Mametz Wood

I never dreamed we'd meet that day
In our old haunts down Fricourt way,
Plotting such marvellous journeys there
For jolly old "Après-la-guerre."

Well, when it's over, first we'll meet
At Gweithdy Bach, my country seat
In Wales, a curious little shop
With two rooms and a roof on top,
A sort of Morlancourt-ish billet
That never needs a crowd to fill it.
But oh, the country round about!
The sort of view that makes you shout
For want of any better way
Of praising God: there's a blue bay
Shining in front, and on the right
Snowden and Hebog capped with white,
And lots of other jolly peaks
That you could wonder at for weeks,
With jag and spur and hump and cleft.
There's a grey castle on the left,
And back in the high Hinterland
You'll see the grave of Shawn Knarlbrand,
Who slew the savage Buffaloon
By the Nant-col one night in June,
And won his surname from the horn
Of this prodigious unicorn.
Beyond, where the two Rhinogs tower,
Rhinog Fach and Rhinog Fawr,
Close there after a four years' chase
From Thessaly and the woods of Thrace,
The beaten Dog-cat stood at bay
And growled and fought and passed away.
You'll see where mountain conies grapple
With prayer and creed in their rock chapel
Which Ben and Claire once built for them;
They call it Söar Bethlehem.
You'll see where in old Roman days,
Before Revivals changed our ways,

The Virgin 'scaped the Devil's grab,
Printing her foot on a stone slab
With five clear toe-marks; and you'll find
The fiendish thumbprint close behind.
You'll see where Math, Mathonwy's son,
Spoke with the wizard Gwydion
And bad him from South Wales set out
To steal that creature with the snout,
That new-discovered grunting beast
Divinely flavoured for the feast.
No traveller yet has hit upon
A wilder land than Meirion,
For desolate hills and tumbling stones,
Bogland and melody and old bones.
Fairies and ghosts are here galore,
And poetry most splendid, more
Than can be written with the pen
Or understood by common men.

In Gweithdy Bach we'll rest awhile,
We'll dress our wounds and learn to smile
With easier lips; we'll stretch our legs,
And live on bilberry tart and eggs,
And store up solar energy,
Basking in sunshine by the sea,
Until we feel a match once more
For anything but another war.

So then we'll kiss our families,
And sail across the seas
(The God of Song protecting us)
To the great hills of Caucasus.
Robert will learn the local bat
For billeting and things like that,
If Siegfried learns the piccolo
To charm the people as we go.

The jolly peasants clad in furs
Will greet the Welch-ski officers
With open arms, and ere we pass
Will make us vocal with Kavassee.
In old Bagdad we'll call a halt

At the Sâshuns' ancestral vault;
We'll catch the Persian rose-flowers' scent,
And understand what Omar meant.
Bitlis and Mush will know our faces,
Tiflis and Tomsk, and all such places.
Perhaps eventually we'll get
Among the Tartars of Thibet.
Hobnobbing with the Chungs and Mings,
And doing wild, tremendous things
In free adventure, quest and fight,
And God! what poetry we'll write!

Robert Graves

Like Snow

She, then, like snow in a dark night,
Fell secretly. And the world waked
With dazzling of the drowsy eye,
So that some muttered 'Too much light',
And drew the curtains close.
Like snow, warmer than fingers feared,
And to soil friendly;
Holding the histories of the night
In yet unmelted tracks.

Robert Graves

Lost Love

His eyes are quickened so with grief,
He can watch a grass or leaf
Every instant grow; he can
Clearly through a flint wall see,
Or watch the startled spirit flee
From the throat of a dead man.
Across two counties he can hear
And catch your words before you speak.
The woodlouse or the maggot's weak
Clamour rings in his sad ear,
And noise so slight it would surpass
Credence--drinking sound of grass,
Worm talk, clashing jaws of moth
Chumbling holes in cloth;
The groan of ants who undertake
Gigantic loads for honour's sake
(Their sinews creak, their breath comes thin);
Whir of spiders when they spin,
And minute whispering, mumbling, sighs
Of idle grubs and flies.
This man is quickened so with grief,
He wanders god-like or like thief
Inside and out, below, above,
Without relief seeking lost love.

Robert Graves

Love And Black Magic

To the woods, to the woods is the wizard gone;
In his grotto the maiden sits alone.
She gazes up with a weary smile
At the rafter-hanging crocodile,
The slowly swinging crocodile.
Scorn has she of her master's gear,
Cauldron, alembic, crystal sphere,
Phial, philtre—"Fiddlededee
For all such trumpery trash!" quo' she.
"A soldier is the lad for me;
Hey and hither, my lad!

"Oh, here have I ever lain forlorn:
My father died ere I was born,
Mother was by a wizard wed,
And oft I wish I had died instead—
Often I wish I were long time dead.
But, delving deep in my master's lore,
I have won of magic power such store
I can turn a skull—oh, fiddlededee
For all this curious craft!" quo' she.
"A soldier is the lad for me;
Hey and hither, my lad!

"To bring my brave boy unto my arms,
What need have I of magic charms—
'Abracadabra!' and 'Prestopuff'?
I have but to wish, and that is enough.
The charms are vain, one wish is enough.
My master pledged my hand to a wizard;
Transformed would I be to toad or lizard
If e'er he guessed—but fiddlededee
For a black-browed sorcerer, now," quo' she.
"Let Cupid smile and the fiend must flee;
Hey and hither, my lad."

Robert Graves

Love Without Hope

Love without hope, as when the young bird-catcher
Swept off his tall hat to the Squire's own daughter,
So let the imprisoned larks escape and fly
Singing about her head, as she rode by.

Robert Graves

Loving Henry

Henry, Henry, do you love me?
Do I love you, Mary?
Oh, can you mean to liken me
To the aspen tree.
Whose leaves do shake and vary,
From white to green
And back again,
Shifting and contrary?

Henry, Henry, do you love me,
Do you love me truly?
Oh, Mary, must I say again
My love's a pain,
A torment most unruly?
It tosses me
Like a ship at sea
When the storm rages fully.

Henry, Henry, why do you love me?
Mary, dear, have pity!
I swear, of all the girls there are
Both near and far,
In country or in city,
There's none like you,
So kind, so true,
So wise, so brave, so pretty.

Robert Graves

Manticor In Arabia

(The manticors of the montaines
Mighte feed them on thy braines.--Skelton.)

Thick and scented daisies spread
Where with surface dull like lead
Arabian pools of slime invite
Manticors down from neighbouring height
To dip heads, to cool fiery blood
In oozy depths of sucking mud.
Sing then of ringstraked manticor,
Man-visaged tiger who of yore
Held whole Arabian waste in fee
With raging pride from sea to sea,
That every lesser tribe would fly
Those armed feet, that hooded eye;
Till preying on himself at last
Manticor dwindled, sank, was passed
By gryphon flocks he did disdain.
Ay, wyverns and rude dragons reign
In ancient keep of manticor
Agreed old foe can rise no more.
Only here from lakes of slime
Drinks manticor and bides due time:
Six times Fowl Phoenix in yon tree
Must mount his pyre and burn and be
Renewed again, till in such hour
As seventh Phoenix flames to power
And lifts young feathers, overnice
From scented pool of steamy spice
Shall manticor his sway restore
And rule Arabian plains once more.

Robert Graves

Marigolds

With a fork drive Nature out,
She will ever yet return;
Hedge the flowerbed all about,
Pull or stab or cut or burn,
She will ever yet return.

Look: the constant marigold
Springs again from hidden roots.
Baffled gardener, you behold
New beginnings and new shoots
Spring again from hidden roots.
Pull or stab or cut or burn,
They will ever yet return.

Gardener, cursing at the weed,
Ere you curse it further, say:
Who but you planted the seed
In my fertile heart, one day?
Ere you curse me further, say!
New beginnings and new shoots
Spring again from hidden roots.
Pull or stab or cut or burn,
Love must ever yet return.

Robert Graves

Mermaid, Dragon, Fiend

In my childhood rumors ran
Of a world beyond our door-
Terrors to the life of man
That the highroad held in store.

Of mermaids' doleful game
In deep water I heard tell,
Of lofty dragons belching flame,
Of the hornèd fiend of Hell.

Tales like these were too absurd
For my laughter-loving ear:
Soon I mocked at all I heard,
Though with cause indeed for fear.

Now I know the mermaid kin
I find them bound by natural laws:
They have neither tail nor fin,
But are deadlier for that cause.

Dragons have no darting tongues,
Teeth saw-edged, nor rattling scales;
No fire issues from their lungs,
No black poison from their tails:

For they are creatures of dark air,
Unsubstantial tossing forms,
Thunderclaps of man's despair
In mid-whirl of mental storms.

And there's a true and only fiend
Worse than prophets prophesy,
Whose full powers to hurt are screened
Lest the race of man should die.

Ever in vain will courage plot
The dragon's death, in coat of proof;
Or love abjure the mermaid grot;
Or faith denounce the cloven hoof.

Mermaids will not be denied
The last bubbles of our shame,
The Dragon flaunts an unpierced hide,
The true fiend governs in God's name.

Robert Graves

Morning Phoenix

In my body lives a flame,
Flame that burns me all the day;
When a fierce sun does the same,
I am charred away.

Who could keep a smiling wit,
Roasted so in heart and hide,
Turning on the sun's red spit,
Scorched by love inside?

Caves I long for and cold rocks,
Minnow-peopled country brooks,
Blundering gales of Equinox,
Sunless valley-nooks,

Daily so I might restore
Calcined heart and shrivelled skin,
A morning phoenix with proud roar
Kindled new within.

Robert Graves

Mr. Philosopher

Old Mr. Philosopher
Comes for Ben and Claire,
An ugly man, a tall man,
With bright-red hair.

The books that he's written
No one can read.
"In fifty years they'll understand:
Now there's no need.

"All that matters now
Is getting the fun.
Come along, Ben and Claire;
Plenty to be done."

Then old Philosopher,
Wisest man alive,
Plays at Lions and Tigers
Down along the drive—

Gambolling fiercely
Through bushes and grass,
Making monstrous mouths,
Braying like an ass

Twisting buttercups
In his orange hair,
Hopping like a kangaroo,
Growling like a bear.

Right up to tea-time
They frolic there.
"My legs *are* wingle,"
Says Ben to Claire.

Robert Graves

Nebuchadnezzar's Fall

Frowning over the riddle that Daniel told,
Down through the mist hung garden, below a feeble sun,
The King of Persia walked: oh, the chilling cold!
His mind was webbed with a grey shroud vapour-spun.

Here for the pride of his soaring eagle heart,
Here for his great hand searching the skies for food,
Here for his courtship of Heaven's high stars he shall smart,
Nebuchadnezzar shall fall, crawl, be subdued.

Hot sun struck through the vapour, leaf strewn mould
Breathed sweet decay: old Earth called for her child.
Mist drew off from his mind, Sun scattered gold,
Warmth came and earthy motives fresh and wild.

Down on his knees he sinks, the stiff-necked King,
Stoops and kneels and grovels, chin to the mud.
Out from his changed heart flutter on startled wing
The fancy birds of his Pride, Honour, Kinglihood.

He crawls, he grunts, he is beast-like, frogs and snails
His diet, and grass, and water with hand for cup.
He herds with brutes that have hooves and horns and tails,
He roars in his anger, he scratches, he looks not up.

Robert Graves

Neglectful Edward

Nancy

'Edward back from the Indian Sea,
What have you brought for Nancy?'

Edward

'A rope of pearls and a gold earring,
And a bird of the East that will not sing.
A carven tooth, a box with a key--'

Nancy

'God be praised you are back,' says she,
'Have you nothing more for your Nancy?'

Edward

'Long as I sailed the Indian Sea
I gathered all for your fancy:
Toys and silk and jewels I bring,
And a bird of the East that will not sing:
What more can you want, dear girl, from me?'

Nancy

'God be praised you are back,' said she,
'Have you nothing better for Nancy?'

Edward

'Safe and home from the Indian Sea,
And nothing to take your fancy?'

Nancy

'You can keep your pearls and your gold earring,
And your bird of the East that will not sing,
But, Ned, have you nothing more for me

Than heathenish gew-gaw toys?' says she,
'Have you nothing better for Nancy?'

Robert Graves

Nine O'Clock

I.

Nine of the clock, oh!
Wake my lazy head!
Your shoes of red morocco,
Your silk bed-gown:
Rouse, rouse, speck-eyed Mary
In your high bed!
A yawn, a smile, sleepy-starey,
Mary climbs down.
'Good-morning to my brothers,
Good-day to the Sun,
Halloo, halloo to the lily-white sheep
That up the mountain run.'

II.

Good-night to the meadow, farewell to the nine o'clock Sun,
'He loves me not, loves me, he loves me not' (O jealous one!)
'He loves me, he loves me not, loves me'--O soft nights of June,
A bird sang for love on the cherry-bough: up swam the Moon.

Robert Graves

Not Dead

Walking through trees to cool my heat and pain,
I know that David's with me here again.
All that is simple, happy, strong, he is.
Caressingly I stroke
Rough bark of the friendly oak.
A brook goes bubbling by: the voice is his.
Turf burns with pleasant smoke;
I laugh at chaffinch and at primroses.
All that is simple, happy, strong, he is.
Over the whole wood in a little while
Breaks his slow smile.

Robert Graves

Not To Sleep

Not to sleep all the night long, for pure joy,
Counting no sheep and careless of chimes
Welcoming the dawn confabulation
Of birch, her children, who discuss idly
Fanciful details of the promised coming -
Will she be wearing red, or russet, or blue,
Or pure white? - whatever she wears, glorious:
Not to sleep all the night long, for pure joy,
This is given to few but at last to me,
So that when I laugh and stretch and leap from bed
I shall glide downstairs, my feet brushing the carpet
In courtesy to civilized progression,
Though, did I wish, I could soar through the open window
And perch on a branch above, acceptable ally
Of the birds still alert, grumbling gently together.

Robert Graves

On Giving

Those who dare give nothing
Are left with less than nothing;
Dear heart, you give me everything,
Which leaves you more than everything-
Though those who dare give nothing
Might judge it left you less than nothing.

Giving you everything,
I too, who once had nothing,
Am left with more than everything
As gifts for those with nothing
Who need, if not our everything,
At least a loving something.

Robert Graves

Outlaws

Owls: they whinney down the night,
Bats go zigzag by.
Ambushed in shadow out of sight
The outlaws lie.

Old gods, shrunk to shadows, there
In the wet woods they lurk,
Greedy of human stuff to snare
In webs of murk.

Look up, else your eye must drown
In a moving sea of black
Between the tree-tops, upside down
Goes the sky-track.

Look up, else your feet will stray
Towards that dim ambuscade,
Where spider-like they catch their prey
In nets of shade.

For though creeds whirl away in dust,
Faith fails and men forget,
These aged gods of fright and lust
Cling to life yet.

Old gods almost dead, malign,
Starved of their ancient dues,
Incense and fruit, fire, blood and wine
And an unclean muse.

Banished to woods and a sickly moon,
Shrunk to mere bogey things,
Who spoke with thunder once at noon
To prostrate kings.

With thunder from an open sky
To peasant, tyrant, priest,
Bowing in fear with a dazzled eye
Towards the East.

Proud gods, humbled, sunk so low,
Living with ghosts and ghouls,
And ghosts of ghosts and last year's snow
And dead toadstools.

Robert Graves

Pot And Kettle

Come close to me, dear Annie, while I bind a lover's knot.
A tale of burning love between a kettle and a pot.
The pot was stalwart iron and the kettle trusty tin,
And though their sides were black with smoke they bubbled love within.

Forget that kettle, Jamie, and that pot of boiling broth,
I know a dismal story of a candle and a moth.
For while your pot is boiling and while your kettle sings
My moth makes love to candle flame and burns away his wings.

Your moth, I envy, Annie, that died by candle flame,
But here are two more lovers, unto no damage came.
There was a cuckoo loved a clock and found her always true.
For every hour they told their hearts, 'Ring! ting! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!'

As the pot boiled for the kettle, as the kettle for the pot,
So boils my love within me till my breast is glowing hot.
As the moth died for the candle, so could I die for you.
And my fond heart beats time with yours and cries, 'Cuckoo! Cuckoo!'

Robert Graves

Recalling War

Entrance and exit wounds are silvered clean,
The track aches only when the rain reminds.
The one-legged man forgets his leg of wood
The one-armed man his jointed wooden arm.
The blinded man sees with his ears and hands
As much or more than once with both his eyes.
Their war was fought these twenty years ago
And now assumes the nature-look of time,
As when the morning traveller turn and views
His wild night-stumbling carved into a hill.

What, then, was war? No mere discord of flags
But an infection of the common sky
That sagged ominously upon the earth
Even when the season was the airiest May.
Down pressed the sky, and we, oppressed, thrust out
Boastful tongue, clenched fist and valiant yard.
Natural infirmities were out of mode,
For Death was young again: patron alone
Of healthy dying, premature fate-spasm.

Fear made fine bed-fellows. Sick with delight
At life's discovered transitoriness,
Out youth became all-flesh and waived the mind.
Never was such antiqueness of romance,
Such tasty honey oozing from the heart.
And old importances came swimming back &mdash
Wine, meat, log-fires, a roof over the head,
A weapon at the thigh, surgeons at call.
Even there was a use again for God &mdash
A word of rage in lack of meat, wine, fire,
In ache of wounds beyond all surgeoning.

War was return of earth to ugly earth,
War was foundering of sublimities,
Extinction of each happy art and faith
By which the world had still kept head in air,
Protesting logic or protesting love,
Until the unendurable moment struck &mdash

The inward scream, the duty to run mad.

And we recall the merry ways of guns &mdash
Nibbling the walls of factory and church
Like a child, piecrust; felling groves of trees
Like a child, dandelions with a switch.
Machine-guns rattle toy-like from a hill,
Down in a row the brave tin-soldiers fall:
A sight to be recalled in elder days
When learnedly the future we devote
To yet more boastful visions of despair.

Robert Graves

Retrospect: The Jests Of The Clock

He had met hours of the clock he never guessed before-
Dumb, dragging, mirthless hours confused with dreams and fear,
Bone-chilling, hungry hours when the Gods sleep and snore,
Bequeathing earth and heaven to ghosts, and will not hear,
And will not hear man groan chained to the sodden ground,
Rotting alive; in feather beds they slumbered sound.

When noisome smells of day were sicklied by cold night,
When sentries froze and muttered; when beyond the wire
Blank shadows crawled and tumbled, shaking, tricking the sight,
When impotent hatred of Life stifled desire,
Then soared the sudden rocket, broke in blanching showers,
O lagging watch! O dawn! O hope-forsaken hours!

How often with numbed heart, stale lips, venting his rage
We swore he'd be a dolt, a traitor, a damned fool,
If, when the guns stopped, ever again from youth to age
He broke the early rising, early sleeping rule.
No, though more bestial enemies roused a fouler war
Never again would he hear this, no never more!

'Rise with the cheerful sun, go to bed with the same,
Work in your field or kailyard all the shining day,
But,' he said, 'never more in quest of wealth, honour, fame,
Search the small hours of night before the East goes grey.
A healthy mind, an honest heart, a wise man leaves
Those ugly impious times to ghosts, devils, soldiers, thieves.'

Poor fool, knowing too well deep in his heart
That he'll be ready again: if urgent orders come,
To quit his rye and cabbages, kiss his wife and part
At the first sullen rapping of the awakened drum,
Ready once more to sweat with fear and brace for the shock,
To greet beneath a falling flare the jests of the clock.

Robert Graves

Rocky Acres

This is a wild land, country of my choice,
With harsh craggy mountain, moor ample and bare.
Seldom in these acres is heard any voice
But voice of cold water that runs here and there
Through rocks and lank heather growing without care.
No mice in the heath run nor no birds cry
For fear of the dark speck that floats in the sky.

He soars and he hovers rocking on his wings,
He scans his wide parish with a sharp eye,
He catches the trembling of small hidden things,
He tears them in pieces dropping from the sky:
Tenderness and pity the land will deny,
Where life is but nourished from water and rock,
A hardy adventure, full of fear and shock.

Time has never journeyed to this lost land,
Crakeberries and heather bloom out of date,
The rocks jut, the streams flow singing on either hand,
Careless if the season be early or late.
The skies wander overhead, now blue now slate:
Winter would be known by his cold cutting snow
If June did not borrow his armour also.

Yet this is my country beloved by me best,
The first land that rose from Chaos and the Flood,
Nursing no fat valleys for comfort and rest,
Trampled by no hard hooves, stained with no blood
Bold immortal country whose hill-tops have stood
Strongholds for the proud gods when on earth they go,
Terror for fat burghers in far plains below.

Robert Graves

She Tells Her Love

She tells her love while half asleep,
In the dark hours,
With half-words whispered low:
As Earth stirs in her winter sleep
And puts out grass and flowers
Despite the snow,
Despite the falling snow.

Robert Graves

She Tells Her Love

She tells her love while half asleep,
In the dark hours,
With half-words whispered low:
As Earth stirs in her winter sleep
And put out grass and flowers
Despite the snow,
Despite the falling snow.

Robert Graves

Smoke-Rings

BOY

Most venerable and learned sir,
Tall and true Philosopher,
These rings of smoke you blow all day
With such deep thought, what sense have they?

PHILOSOPHER

Small friend, with prayer and meditation
I make an image of Creation.
And if your mind is working nimble
Straightway you'll recognize a symbol
Of the endless and eternal ring
Of God, who girdles everything—
God, who in His own form and plan
Moulds the fugitive life of man.
These vaporous toys you watch me make,
That shoot ahead, pause, turn and break—
Some glide far out like sailing ships,
Some weak ones fail me at my lips.
He who ringed His awe in smoke,
When He led forth His captive folk,
In like manner, East, West, North, and South,
Blows us ring-wise from His mouth.

Robert Graves

Song: One Hard Look

Small gnats that fly
In hot July
And lodge in sleeping ears,
Can rouse therein
A trumpet's din
With Day-of-Judgement fears.

Small mice at night
Can wake more fright
Than lions at midday.
An urchin small
Torments us all
Who tread his prickly way.

A straw will crack
The camel's back,
To die we need but sip,
So little sand
As fills the hand
Can stop a steaming ship.

One smile relieves
A heart that grieves
Though deadly sad it be,
And one hard look
Can close the book
That lovers love to see--

Robert Graves

Sorley's Weather

When outside the icy rain
Comes leaping helter-skelter,
Shall I tie my restive brain
Snugly under shelter?

Shall I make a gentle song
Here in my firelit study,
When outside the winds blow strong
And the lanes are muddy?

With old wine and drowsy meats
Am I to fill my belly?
Shall I glutton here with Keats?
Shall I drink with Shelley?

Tobacco's pleasant, firelight's good:
Poetry makes both better.
Clay is wet and so is mud,
Winter rains are wetter.

Yet rest there, Shelley, on the sill,
For though the winds come frorely,
I'm away to the rain-blown hill
And the ghost of Sorley.

Robert Graves

Sospan Fach

(The Little Saucepan)

Four collier lads from Ebbw Vale
Took shelter from a shower of hail,
And there beneath a spreading tree
Attuned their mouths to harmony.

With smiling joy on every face
Two warbled tenor, two sang bass,
And while the leaves above them hissed with
Rough hail, they started 'Aberystwyth.'

Old Parry's hymn, triumphant, rich,
They changed through with even pitch,
Till at the end of their grand noise
I called: 'Give us the 'Sospan' boys!'

Who knows a tune so soft, so strong,
So pitiful as that 'Saucepan' song
For exiled hope, despaired desire
Of lost souls for their cottage fire?

Then low at first with gathering sound
Rose their four voices, smooth and round,
Till back went Time: once more I stood
With Fusiliers in Mametz Wood.

Fierce burned the sun, yet cheeks were pale,
For ice hail they had leaden hail;
In that fine forest, green and big,
There stayed unbroken not one twig.

They sang, they swore, they plunged in haste,
Stumbling and shouting through the waste;
The little 'Saucepan' flamed on high,
Emblem of hope and ease gone by.

Rough pit-boys from the coaly South,

They sang, even in the cannon's mouth;
Like Sunday's chapel, Monday's inn,
The death-trap sounded with their din.

The storm blows over, Sun comes out,
The choir breaks up with jest and shout,
With what relief I watch them part--
Another note would break my heart!

Robert Graves

Star-Talk

'Are you awake, Gemelli,
This frosty night?'
'We'll be awake till reveillé,
Which is Sunrise,' say the Gemelli,
'It's no good trying to go to sleep:
If there's wine to be got we'll drink it deep,
But rest is hopeless to-night,
But rest is hopeless to-night.'

'Are you cold too, poor Pleiads,
This frosty night?'
'Yes, and so are the Hyads:
See us cuddle and hug,' say the Pleiads,
'All six in a ring: it keeps us warm:
We huddle together like birds in a storm:
It's bitter weather to-night,
It's bitter weather to-night.'

'What do you hunt, Orion,
This starry night?'
'The Ram, the Bull and the Lion,
And the Great Bear,' says Orion,
'With my starry quiver and beautiful belt
I am trying to find a good thick pelt
To warm my shoulders to-night,
To warm my shoulders to-night.'

'Did you hear that, Great She-bear,
This frosty night?'
'Yes, he's talking of stripping me bare
Of my own big fur,' says the She-bear,
'I'm afraid of the man and his terrible arrow:
The thought of it chills my bones to the marrow,
And the frost so cruel to-night!
And the frost so cruel to-night!'

'How is your trade, Aquarius,
This frosty night?'
'Complaints is many and various

And my feet are cold,' says Aquarius,
'There's Venus objects to Dolphin-scales,
And Mars to Crab-spawn found in my pails,
And the pump has frozen to-night,
And the pump has frozen to-night.'

Robert Graves

Strong Beer

"What do you think
The bravest drink
Under the sky?"
"Strong beer," said I.

"There's a place for everything,
Everything, anything,
There's a place for everything
Where it ought to be:
For a chicken, the hen's wing;
For poison, the bee's sting;
For almond-blossom, Spring;
A beerhouse for me."

"There's a prize for every one
Every one, any one,
There's a prize for every one,
Whoever he may be:
Craggs for the mountaineer,
Flags for the Fusilier,
For English poets, beer!
Strong beer for me!"

"Tell us, now, how and when
We may find the bravest men?"
"A sure test, an easy test:
Those that drink beer are the best,
Brown beer strongly brewed,
English drink and English food."

Oh, never choose as Gideon chose
By the cold well, but rather those
Who look on beer when it is brown,
Smack their lips and gulp it down.
Leave the lads who tamely drink
With Gideon by the water brink,
But search the benches of the Plough,
The Tun, the Sun, the Spotted Cow,
For jolly rascal lads who pray,

Pewter in hand, at close of day,
"Teach me to live that I may fear
The grave as little as my beer."

Robert Graves

Sullen Moods

Love, do not count your labour lost
Though I turn sullen, grim, retired
Even at your side; my thought is crossed
With fancies by old longings fired.

And when I answer you, some days
Vaguely and wildly, do not fear
That my love walks forbidden ways,
Breaking the ties that hold it here.

If I speak gruffly, this mood is
Mere indignation at my own
Shortcomings, plagues, uncertainties;
I forget the gentler tone.

'You,' now that you have come to be
My one beginning, prime and end,
I count at last as wholly 'me,'
Lover no longer nor yet friend.

Friendship is flattery, though close hid;
Must I then flatter my own mind?
And must (which laws of shame forbid)
Blind love of you make self-love blind?

... Do not repay me my own coin,
The sharp rebuke, the frown, the groan;
No, stir my memory to disjoin
Your emanation from my own.

Help me to see you as before
When overwhelmed and dead, almost,
I stumbled on that secret door
Which saves the live man from the ghost.

Be once again the distant light,
Promise of glory not yet known
In full perfection — -wasted quite
When on my imperfection thrown.

Robert Graves

Symptoms Of Love

Love is universal migraine,
A bright stain on the vision
Blotting out reason.

Symptoms of true love
Are leanness, jealousy,
Laggard dawns;

Are omens and nightmares -
Listening for a knock,
Waiting for a sign:

For a touch of her fingers
In a darkened room,
For a searching look.

Take courage, lover!
Could you endure such pain
At any hand but hers?

Robert Graves

The

One moonlit night a ship drove in,
A ghost ship from the west,
Drifting with bare mast and lone tiller,
Like a mermaid drest
In long green weed and barnacles:
She beached and came to rest.

All the watchers of the coast
Flocked to view the sight,
Men and women streaming down
Through the summer night,
Found her standing tall and ragged
Beached in the moonlight.

Then one old woman looked and wept
'The 'Alice Jean'? But no!
The ship that took my Dick from me
Sixty years ago
Drifted back from the utmost west
With the ocean's flow?

'Caught and caged in the weedy pool
Beyond the western brink,
Where crewless vessels lie and rot
in waters black as ink.
Torn out again by a sudden storm
Is it the 'Jean', you think?'

A hundred women stared agape,
The menfolk nudged and laughed,
But none could find a likelier story
For the strange craft.
With fear and death and desolation
Rigged fore and aft.

The blind ship came forgotten home
To all but one of these
Of whom none dared to climb aboard her:
And by and by the breeze

Sprang to a storm and the 'Alice Jean'
Foundered in frothy seas.

Robert Graves

The Assault Heroic

Down in the mud I lay,
Tired out by my long day
Of five damned days and nights,
Five sleepless days and nights,...
Dream-snatched, and set me where
The dungeon of Despair
Looms over Desolate Sea,
Frowning and threatening me
With aspect high and steep—
A most malignant keep.
My foes that lay within
Shouted and made a din,
Hooted and grinned and cried:
“Today we’ve killed your pride;
Today your ardour ends
We’ve murdered all your friends;
We’ve undermined by stealth
Your happiness and your health.
We’ve taken away your hope;
Now you may droop and mope
To misery and to Death.”
But with my spear of Faith,
Stout as an oaken rafter,
With my round shield of laughter,
With my sharp, tongue-like sword
That speaks a bitter word,
I stood beneath the wall
And there defied them all.
The stones they cast I caught
And alchemized with thought
Into such lumps of gold
As dreaming misers hold.
The boiling oil they threw
Fell in a shower of dew,
Refreshing me; the spears
Flew harmless by my ears,
Struck quivering in the sod;
There, like the prophet’s rod,
Put leaves out, took firm root,

And bore me instant fruit.
My foes were all astounded,
Dumbstricken and confounded,
Gaping in a long row;
They dared not thrust nor throw.
Thus, then, I climbed a steep
Buttress and won the keep,
And laughed and proudly blew
My horn, *"Stand to! Stand to!
Wake up, sir! Here's a new
Attack! Stand to! Stand to!"*

Robert Graves

The Beach

Louder than gulls the little children scream
Whom fathers haul into the jovial foam;
But others fearlessly rush in, breast high,
Laughing the salty water from their mouths-
Heroes of the nursery.

The horny boatman, who has seen whales
And flying fishes, who has sailed as far
As Demerara and the Ivory Coast,
Will warn them, when they crowd to hear his tales,
That every ocean smells of tar.

Robert Graves

The Beacon

The silent shepherdess,
She of my vows,
Here with me exchanging love
Under dim boughs.

Shines on our mysteries
A sudden spark--
'Dout the candle, glow-worm,
Let all be dark.

'The birds have sung their last notes,
The Sun's to bed,
Glow-worm, dout your candle.'
The glow-worm said:

'I also am a lover;
The lamp I display
Is beacon for my true love
Wandering astray.

'Through the thick bushes
And the grass comes she
With a heartload of longing
And love for me.

'Sir, enjoy your fancy,
But spare me harm,
A lover is a lover,
Though but a worm.'

Robert Graves

The Bough Of Nonsense

<i>AN IDYLL</i>

Back from the Somme two Fusiliers
Limped painfully home; the elder said,
S. "Robert, I've lived three thousand years
This Summer, and I'm nine parts dead."
R. "But if that's truly so," I cried, "quick, now,
Through these great oaks and see the famous bough

"Where once a nonsense built her nest
With skulls and flowers and all things queer,
In an old boot, with patient breast
Hatching three eggs; and the next year..."
S. "Foaled thirteen squamous young beneath, and rid
Wales of drink, melancholy, and psalms, she did."

Said he, "Before this quaint mood fails,
We'll sit and weave a nonsense hymn,"
R. "Hanging it up with monkey tails
In a deep grove all hushed and dim...."
S. "To glorious yellow-bunched banana-trees,"
R. "Planted in dreams by pious Portuguese,"

S. "Which men are wise beyond their time,
And worship nonsense, no one more."
R. "Hard by, among old quince and lime,
They've built a temple with no floor,"
S. "And whosoever worships in that place,
He disappears from sight and leaves no trace."

R. "Once the Galatians built a fane
To Sense: what duller God than that?"
S. "But the first day of autumn rain
The roof fell in and crushed them flat."
R. "Ay, for a roof of subtlest logic falls
When nonsense is foundation for the walls."

I tell him old Galatian tales;

He caps them in quick Portuguese,
While phantom creatures with green scales
Scramble and roll among the trees.
The hymn swells; on a bough above us sings
A row of bright pink birds, flapping their wings.

Robert Graves

The Boy In Church

'Gabble-gabble . . . brethren . . . gabble-gabble!'
My window glimpses larch and heather.
I hardly hear the tuneful babble,
Not knowing nor much caring whether
The text is praise or exhortation,
Prayer of thanksgiving or damnation.

Outside it blows wetter and wetter,
The tossing trees never stay still;
I shift my elbows to catch better
The full round sweep of heathered hill.
The tortured copse bends to and fro
In silenece like a shadow-show.

The parson's voice runs like a river
Over smooth rocks. I like this church.
The pews are staid, they never shiver,
They never bend or sway or lurch.
'Prayer,' says the kind voice, 'is a chain
That draws down Grace from Heaven again.'

I add the hymns up over and over
Until there's not the least mistake.
Seven-seventy-one. (Look! there's a plover!
It's gone!) Who's that Saint by the Lake?
The red light from his mantle passes
Across the broad memorial brasses.

It's pleasant here for dreams and thinking.
Lolling and letting reason nod,
With ugly, serious people linking
Prayer-chains for a forgiving God.
But a dumb blast sets the trees swaying
With furious zeal like madmen praying.

Robert Graves

The Boy Out Of Church

As Jesus and his followers
Upon a Sabbath morn
Were walking by a wheat field
They plucked the ears of corn.

They plucked it, they rubbed it,
They blew the husks away,
Which grieved the pious pharisees
Upon the Sabbath day.

And Jesus said, 'A riddle
Answer if you can,
Was man made for the Sabbath
Or Sabbath made for man?'

I do not love the Sabbath,
The soapsuds and the starch,
The troops of solemn people
Who to Salvation march.

I take my book, I take my stick
On the Sabbath day,
In woody nooks and valleys
I hide myself away.

To ponder there in quiet
God's Universal Plan,
Resolved that church and Sabbath
Were never made for man.

Robert Graves

The Caterpillar

Under this loop of honeysuckle,
A creeping, coloured caterpillar,
I gnaw the fresh green hawthorn spray,
I nibble it leaf by leaf away.

Down beneath grow dandelions,
Daisies, old-man's-looking-glasses;
Rooks flap croaking across the lane.
I eat and swallow and eat again.

Here come raindrops helter-skelter;
I munch and nibble unregarding:
Hawthorn leaves are juicy and firm.
I'll mind my business: I'm a good worm.

When I'm old, tired, melancholy,
I'll build a leaf-green mausoleum
Close by, here on this lovely spray,
And die and dream the ages away.

Some say worms win resurrection,
With white wings beating flitter-flutter,
But wings or a sound sleep, why should I care?
Either way I'll miss my share.

Under this loop of honeysuckle,
A hungry, hairy caterpillar,
I crawl on my high and swinging seat,
And eat, eat, eat—as one ought to eat.

Robert Graves

The Cool Web

Children are dumb to say how hot the day is,
How hot the scent is of the summer rose,
How dreadful the black wastes of evening sky,
How dreadful the tall soldiers drumming by.

But we have speech, to chill the angry day,
And speech, to dull the rose's cruel scent.
We spell away the overhanging night,
We spell away the soldiers and the fright.

There's a cool web of language winds us in,
Retreat from too much joy or too much fear:
We grow sea-green at last and coldly die
In brininess and volubility.

But if we let our tongues lose self-possession,
Throwing off language and its watery clasp
Before our death, instead of when death comes,
Facing the wide glare of the children's day,
Facing the rose, the dark sky and the drums,
We shall go mad no doubt and die that way.

Robert Graves

The Cottage

Here in turn succeed and rule
Carter, smith, and village fool,
Then again the place is known
As tavern, shop, and Sunday-school;
Now somehow it's come to me
To light the fire and hold the key,
Here in Heaven to reign alone.

All the walls are white with lime,
Big blue periwinkles climb
And kiss the crumbling window-sill;
Snug inside I sit and rhyme,
Planning, poem, book, or fable,
At my darling beech-wood table
Fresh with bluebells from the hill.

Through the window I can see
Rooks above the cherry-tree,
Sparrows in the violet bed,
Bramble-bush and bumble-bee,
And old red bracken smoulders still
Among boulders on the hill,
Far too bright to seem quite dead.

But old Death, who can't forget,
Waits his time and watches yet,
Waits and watches by the door.
Look, he's got a great new net,
And when my fighting starts afresh
Stouter cord and smaller mesh
Won't be cheated as before.

Nor can kindness of Spring,
Flowers that smile nor birds that sing,
Bumble-bee nor butterfly,
Nor grassy hill nor anything
Of magic keep me safe to rhyme
In this Heaven beyond my time.
No! for Death is waiting by.

Robert Graves

The Cruel Moon

The cruel Moon hangs out of reach
Up above the shadowy beech.
Her face is stupid, but her eye
Is small and sharp and very sly.
Nurse says the Moon can drive you mad?
No, that's a silly story, lad!
Though she be angry, though she would
Destroy all England if she could,
Yet think, what damage can she do
Hanging there so far from you?
Don't heed what frightened nurses say:
Moons hang much too far away.

Robert Graves

The Cupboard

Mother: What's in that cupboard, Mary?

Mary: Which cupboard, mother dear?

Mother: The cupboard of red mahogany
With handles shining clear.

Mary: That cupboard, dearest mother,
With shining crystal handles?

There's nought inside but rags and jags
And yellow tallow candles.

Mother: What's in that cupboard, Mary?

Mary: Which cupboard, mother mine?

Mother: That cupboard stands in your sunny chamber,
The silver corners shine.

Mary: There's nothing there inside, mother,
But wool and thread and flax,
And bits of faded silk and velvet
And candles of white wax.

Mother: What's in that cupboard, Mary?

And this time tell me true.

Mary: White clothes for an unborn baby, mother..
But what's the truth to you?

Robert Graves

The Dead Fox Hunter

We found the little captain at the head;
His men lay well-aligned.
We touched his hand &mdash stone cold &mdash and he was dead,
And they, all dead behind,
Had never reached their goal, but they died well;
They charged in line, and in the same line fell.

They well-known rosy colours of his face
Were almost lost in grey.
We saw that, dying and in hopeless case,
For others' sake that day
He'd smothered all rebellious groans: in death
His fingers were tight clenched between his teeth.

For those who live uprightly and die true
Heaven has no bars or locks,
And serves all taste...or what's for him to do
Up there, but hunt the fox?
Angelic choirs? No, Justice must provide
For one who rose straight and in hunting died.

So if Heaven had no Hunt before he came,
Why, it must find one now:
If any shirk and doubt they know the game,
There's one to teach them how:
And the whole host of Seraphim complete
Must jog in scarlet to his opening Meet.

Robert Graves

The Frog And The Golden Ball

She let her golden ball fall down the well
And begged a cold frog to retrieve it;
For which she kissed his ugly, gaping mouth -
Indeed, he could scarce believe it.

And seeing him transformed to his princely shape,
Who had been by hags enchanted,
She knew she could never love another man
Nor by any fate be daunted.

But what would her royal father and mother say?
They had promised her in marriage
To a cousin whose wide kingdom marched with theirs,
Who rode in a jeweled carriage.

'Our plight, dear heart, would appear past human hope
To all except you and me: to all
Who have never swum as a frog in a dark well
Or have lost a golden ball.'

'What then shall we do now?' she asked her lover.
He kissed her again, and said:
'Is magic of love less powerful at your Court
Than at this green well-head?'

Robert Graves

The General Elliott

He fell in victory's fierce pursuit,
Holed through and through with shot,
A sabre sweep had hacked him deep
Twixt neck and shoulderknot....

The potman cannot well recall,
The ostler never knew,
Whether his day was Malplaquet,
The Boyne or Waterloo.

But there he hangs for tavern sign,
With foolish bold regard
For cock and hen and loitering men
And wagons down the yard.

Raised high above the hayseed world
He smokes his painted pipe,
And now surveys the orchard ways,
The damsons clustering ripe.

He sees the churchyard slabs beyond,
Where country neighbours lie,
Their brief renown set lowly down;
His name assaults the sky.

He grips the tankard of brown ale
That spills a generous foam:
Oft-times he drinks, they say, and winks
At drunk men lurching home.

No upstart hero may usurp
That honoured swinging seat;
His seasons pass with pipe and glass
Until the tale's complete.

And paint shall keep his buttons bright
Though all the world's forgot
Whether he died for England's pride
By battle, or by pot.

Robert Graves

The God Called Poetry

Now I begin to know at last,
These nights when I sit down to rhyme,
The form and measure of that vast
God we call Poetry, he who stoops
And leaps me through his paper hoops
A little higher every time.

Tempts me to think I'll grow a proper
Singing cricket or grass-hopper
Making prodigious jumps in air
While shaken crowds about me stare
Aghast, and I sing, growing bolder
To fly up on my master's shoulder
Rustling the thick strands of his hair.

He is older than the seas,
Older than the plains and hills,
And older than the light that spills
From the sun's hot wheel on these.
He wakes the gale that tears your trees,
He sings to you from window sills.

At you he roars, or he will coo,
He shouts and screams when hell is hot,
Riding on the shell and shot.
He smites you down, he succours you,
And where you seek him, he is not.

To-day I see he has two heads
Like Janus--calm, benignant, this;
That, grim and scowling: his beard spreads
From chin to chin' this god has power
Immeasurable at every hour:
He first taught lovers how to kiss,
He brings down sunshine after shower,
Thunder and hate are his also,
He is YES and he is NO.

The black beard spoke and said to me,

'Human frailty though you be,
Yet shout and crack your whip, be harsh!
They'll obey you in the end:
Hill and field, river and marsh
Shall obey you, hop and skip
At the terrour of your whip,
To your gales of anger bend.'

The pale beard spoke and said in turn
'True: a prize goes to the stern,
But sing and laugh and easily run
Through the wide airs of my plain,
Bathe in my waters, drink my sun,
And draw my creatures with soft song;
They shall follow you along
Graciously with no doubt or pain.'

Then speaking from his double head
The glorious fearful monster said
'I am YES and I am NO,
Black as pitch and white as snow,
Love me, hate me, reconcile
Hate with love, perfect with vile,
So equal justice shall be done
And life shared between moon and sun.
Nature for you shall curse or smile:
A poet you shall be, my son.'

Robert Graves

The Kiss

Are you shaken, are you stirred
By a whisper of love,
Spellbound to a word
Does Time cease to move,
Till her calm grey eye
Expands to a sky
And the clouds of her hair
Like storms go by?

Then the lips that you have kissed
Turn to frost and fire,
And a white-steaming mist
Obscures desire:
So back to their birth
Fade water, air, earth,
And the First Power moves
Over void and dearth.

Is that Love? no, but Death,
A passion, a shout,
The deep in-breath,
The breath roaring out,
And once that is flown,
You must lie alone,
Without hope, without life,
Poor flesh, sad bone.

Robert Graves

The Lady Visitor In The Pauper Ward

Why do you break upon this old, cool peace,
This painted peace of ours,
With harsh dress hissing like a flock of geese,
With garish flowers?
Why do you churn smooth waters rough again,
Selfish old skin-and-bone?
Leave us to quiet dreaming and slow pain,
Leave us alone.

Robert Graves

The Last Post

The bugler sent a call of high romance—
“Lights out! Lights out!” to the deserted square.
On the thin brazen notes he threw a prayer,
“God, if it’s this for me next time in France...
O spare the phantom bugle as I lie
Dead in the gas and smoke and roar of guns,
Dead in a row with the other broken ones
Lying so stiff and still under the sky,
Jolly young Fusiliers too good to die.”

Robert Graves

The Leveller

Near Martinpuich that night of hell
Two men were struck by the same shell,
Together tumbling in one heap
Senseless and limp like slaughtered sheep.

One was a pale eighteen-year-old,
Blue-eyed and thin and not too bold,
Pressed for the war not ten years too soon,
The shame and pity of his platoon.

The other came from far-off lands
With bristling chin and whiskered hands,
He had known death and hell before
In Mexico and Ecuador.

Yet in his death this cut-throat wild
Groaned 'Mother! Mother!' like a child,
While the poor innocent in man's clothes
Died cursing God with brutal oaths.

Old Sergeant Smith, kindest of men,
Wrote out two copies and then
Of his accustomed funeral speech
To cheer the womanfolk of each:-

'He died a hero's death: and we
His comrades of 'A' Company
Deeply regret his death: we shall
All deeply miss so true a pal.'

Robert Graves

The Lost Love

His eyes are quickened so with grief,
He can watch a grass or leaf
Every instant grow; he can
Clearly through a flint wall see,
Or watch the startled spirit flee
From the throat of a dead man.
Across two counties he can hear,
And catch your words before you speak.
The woodlouse or the maggot's weak
Clamour rings in his sad ear;
And noise so slight it would surpass
Credence: — drinking sound of grass,
Worm-talk, clashing jaws of moth
Chumbling holes in cloth:
The groan of ants who undertake
Gigantic loads for honour's sake —
Their sinews creak, their breath comes thin:
Whir of spiders when they spin,
And minute whispering, mumbling, sighs
Of idle grubs and flies.
This man is quickened so with grief,
He wanders god-like or like thief
Inside and out, below, above,
Without relief seeking lost love.

Robert Graves

The Naked And The Nude

For me, the naked and the nude
(By lexicographers construed
As synonyms that should express
The same deficiency of dress
Or shelter) stand as wide apart
As love from lies, or truth from art.

Lovers without reproach will gaze
On bodies naked and ablaze;
The Hippocratic eye will see
In nakedness, anatomy;
And naked shines the Goddess when
She mounts her lion among men.

The nude are bold, the nude are sly
To hold each treasonable eye.
While draping by a showman's trick
Their dishabille in rhetoric,
They grin a mock-religious grin
Of scorn at those of naked skin.

The naked, therefore, who compete
Against the nude may know defeat;
Yet when they both together tread
The briary pastures of the dead,
By Gorgons with long whips pursued,
How naked go the sometimes nude!

Robert Graves

The Next War

You young friskies who today
Jump and fight in Father's hay
With bows and arrows and wooden spears,
Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers,
Happy though these hours you spend,
Have they warned you how games end?
Boys, from the first time you prod
And thrust with spears of curtain-rod,
From the first time you tear and slash
Your long-bows from the garden ash,
Or fit your shaft with a blue jay feather,
Binding the split tops together,
From that same hour by fate you're bound
As champions of this stony ground,
Loyal and true in everything,
To serve your Army and your King,
Prepared to starve and sweat and die
Under some fierce foreign sky,
If only to keep safe those joys
That belong to British boys,
To keep young Prussians from the soft
Scented hay of father's loft,
And stop young Slavs from cutting bows
And bendy spears from Welsh hedgerows.
Another War soon gets begun,
A dirtier, a more glorious one;
Then, boys, you'll have to play, all in;
It's the cruellest team will win.
So hold your nose against the stink
And never stop too long to think.
Wars don't change except in name;
The next one must go just the same,
And new foul tricks unguessed before
Will win and justify this War.
Kaisers and Czars will strut the stage
Once more with pomp and greed and rage;
Courtly ministers will stop
At home and fight to the last drop;
By the million men will die

In some new horrible agony;
And children here will thrust and poke,
Shoot and die, and laugh at the joke,
With bows and arrows and wooden spears,
Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers.

Robert Graves

The Patchwork Bonnet

Across the room my silent love I throw,
Where you sit sewing in bed by candlelight,
Your young stern profile and industrious fingers
Displayed against the blind in a shadow-show,
To Dinda's grave delight.

The needle dips and pokes, the cheerful thread
Runs after, follow-my-leader down the seam:
The patchwork pieces cry for joy together,
O soon to sit as a crown on Dinda's head,
Fulfilment of their dream.

Snippets and odd ends folded by, forgotten,
With camphor on a top shelf, hard to find,
Now wake to this most happy resurrection,
To Dinda playing toss with a reel of cotton
And staring at the blind.

Dinda in sing-song stretching out one hand
Calls for the playthings; mother does not hear:
Her mind sails far away on a patchwork Ocean,
And all the world must wait till she touches land;
So Dinda cries in fear,

Then Mother turns, laughing like a young fairy,
And Dinda smiles to see her look so kind,
Calls out again for playthings, playthings, playthings;
And now the shadows make an Umbrian Mary
Adoring, on the blind.

Robert Graves

The Patchwork Quilt

Here is this patchwork quilt I've made
Of patterned silks and old brocade,
Small faded rags in memory rich
Sewn each to each with feather stitch,
But if you stare aghast perhaps
At certain muddied khaki scraps
Or trophy-fragments of field grey,
Clotted and torn, a grim display
That never decked white sheets before,
Blame my dazed head, blame bloody war.

Robert Graves

The Persian Version

Truth-loving Persians do not dwell upon
The trivial skirmish fought near Marathon.
As for the Greek theatrical tradition
Which represents that summer's expedition
Not as a mere reconnaissance in force
By three brigades of foot and one of horse
(Their left flank covered by some obsolete
Light craft detached from the main Persian fleet)
But as a grandiose, ill-starred attempt
To conquer Greece - they treat it with contempt;
And only incidentally refute
Major Greek claims, by stressing what repute
The Persian monarch and the Persian nation
Won by this salutary demonstration:
Despite a strong defence and adverse weather
All arms combined magnificently together.

Robert Graves

The Picture Book

When I was not quite five years old
I first saw the blue picture book,
And Fraulein Spitzenburger told
Stories that sent me hot and cold;
I loathed it, yet I had to look:
It was a German book.

I smiled at first, for she'd begun
With a back-garden broad and green,
And rabbits nibbling there: page one
Turned; and the gardener fired his gun
From the low hedge: he lay unseen
Behind: oh, it was mean!

They're hurt, they can't escape, and so
He stuffs them head-down in a sack,
Not quite dead, wriggling in a row,
And Fraulein laughed, 'Ho, ho! Ho, ho!'
And gave my middle a hard smack,
I wish that I'd hit back.

Then when I cried she laughed again;
On the next page was a dead boy
Murdered by robbers in a lane;
His clothes were red with a big stain
Of blood, he held a broken toy,
The poor, poor little boy!

I had to look: there was a town
Burning where every one got caught,
Then a fish pulled a nigger down
Into the lake and made him drown,
And a man killed his friend; they fought
For money, Fraulein thought.

Old Fraulein laughed, a horrid noise.
'Ho, ho!' Then she explained it all
How robbers kill the little boys
And torture them and break their toys.

Robbers are always big and tall:
I cried: I was so small.

How a man often kills his wife,
How every one dies in the end
By fire, or water or a knife.
If you're not careful in this life,
Even if you can trust your friend,
You won't have long to spend.

I hated it--old Fraulein picked
Her teeth, slowly explaining it.
I had to listen, Fraulein licked
Her fingers several times and flicked
The pages over; in a fit
Of rage I spat at it...

And lying in my bed that night
Hungry, tired out with sobs, I found
A stretch of barren years in sight,
Where right is wrong, but strength is right,
Where weak things must creep underground,
And I could not sleep sound.

Robert Graves

The Pier-Glass

Lost manor where I walk continually
A ghost, while yet in woman's flesh and blood;
Up your broad stairs mounting with outspread fingers
And gliding steadfast down your corridors
I come by nightly custom to this room,
And even on sultry afternoons I come
Drawn by a thread of time-sunk memory.

Empty, unless for a huge bed of state
Shrouded with rusty curtains drooped awry
(A puppet theatre where malignant fancy
Peoples the wings with fear). At my right hand
A ravelled bell-pull hangs in readiness
To summon me from attic glooms above
Service of elder ghosts; here at my left
A sullen pier-glass cracked from side to side
Scorns to present the face as do new mirrors
With a lying flush, but shows it melancholy
And pale, as faces grow that look in mirrors.

Is here no life, nothing but the thin shadow
And blank foreboding, never a wainscot rat
Rasping a crust? Or at the window pane
No fly, no bluebottle, no starveling spider?
The windows frame a prospect of cold skies
Half-merged with sea, as at the first creation,
Abstract, confusing welter. Face about,
Peer rather in the glass once more, take note
Of self, the grey lips and long hair dishevelled,
Sleep-staring eyes. Ah, mirror, for Christ's love
Give me one token that there still abides
Remote, beyond this island mystery,
So be it only this side Hope, somewhere,
In streams, on sun-warm mountain pasturage,
True life, natural breath; not this phantasma.

A rumour, scarcely yet to be reckoned sound,
But a pulse quicker or slower, then I know
My plea is granted; death prevails not yet.

For bees have swarmed behind in a close place
Pent up between this glass and the outer wall.
The combs are founded, the queen rules her court,
Bee-sergeants posted at the entrance-chink
Are sampling each returning honey-cargo
With scrutinizing mouth and commentary,
Slow approbation, quick dissatisfaction —
Disquieting rhythm, that leads me home at last
From labyrinthine wandering. This new mood
Of judgement orders me my present duty,
To face again a problem strongly solved
In life gone by, but now again proposed
Out of due time for fresh deliberation.
Did not my answer please the Master's ear?
Yet, I'll stay obstinate. How went the question,
A paltry question set on the elements
Of love and the wronged lover's obligation?
Kill or forgive? Still does the bed ooze blood?
Let it drip down till every floor-plank rot!
Yet shall I answer, challenging the judgement: —
'Kill, strike the blow again, spite what shall come.'
'Kill, strike, again, again,' the bees in chorus hum.

Robert Graves

The Poet In The Nursery

The youngest poet down the shelves was fumbling
In a dim library, just behind the chair
From which the ancient poet was mum-mumbling
A song about some Lovers at a Fair,
Pulling his long white beard and gently grumbling
That rhymes were beastly things and never there.

And as I groped, the whole time I was thinking
About the tragic poem I'd been writing,...
An old man's life of beer and whisky drinking,
His years of kidnapping and wicked fighting;
And how at last, into a fever sinking,
Remorsefully he died, his bedclothes biting.

But suddenly I saw the bright green cover
Of a thin pretty book right down below;
I snatched it up and turned the pages over,
To find it full of poetry, and so
Put it down my neck with quick hands like a lover,
And turned to watch if the old man saw it go.

The book was full of funny muddling mazes,
Each rounded off into a lovely song,
And most extraordinary and monstrous phrases
Knotted with rhymes like a slave-driver's thong.
And metre twisting like a chain of daisies
With great big splendid words a sentence long.

I took the book to bed with me and gloated,
Learning the lines that seemed to sound most grand;
So soon the pretty emerald green was coated
With jam and greasy marks from my hot hand,
While round the nursery for long months there floated
Wonderful words no one could understand.

Robert Graves

The Promised Lullaby

Can I find True-Love a gift
In this dark hour to restore her,
When body's vessel breaks adrift,
When hope and beauty fade before her?
But in this plight I cannot think
Of song or music, that would grieve her,
Or toys or meat or snow-cooled drink;
Not this way can her sadness leave her.
She lies and frets in childish fever,
All I can do is but to cry
'Sleep, sleep, True-Love and lullaby!'

Lullaby, and sleep again.
Two bright eyes through the window stare,
A nose is flattened on the pane
And infant fingers fumble there.
'Not yet, not yet, you lovely thing,
But count and come nine weeks from now,
When winter's tail has lost the sting,
When buds come striking through the bough,
Then here's True-Love will show you how
Her name she won, will hush your cry
With 'Sleep, my baby! Lullaby!'

Robert Graves

The Shivering Beggar

NEAR Clapham village, where fields began,
Saint Edward met a beggar man.
It was Christmas morning, the church bells tolled,
The old man trembled for the fierce cold.

Saint Edward cried, "It is monstrous sin
A beggar to lie in rags so thin!
An old gray-beard and the frost so keen:
I shall give him my fur-lined gaberdine."

He stripped off his gaberdine of scarlet
And wrapped it round the aged varlet,
Who clutched at the folds with a muttered curse,
Quaking and chattering seven times worse.

Said Edward, "Sir, it would seem you freeze
Most bitter at your extremities.
Here are gloves and shoes and stockings also,
That warm upon your way you may go."

The man took stocking and shoe and glove,
Blaspheming Christ our Saviour's love,
Yet seemed to find but little relief,
Shaking and shivering like a leaf.

Said the saint again, "I have no great riches,
Yet take this tunic, take these breeches,
My shirt and my vest, take everything,
And give due thanks to Jesus the King."

The saint stood naked upon the snow
Long miles from where he was lodged at Bowe,
Praying, "O God! my faith, it grows faint!
This would try the temper of any saint.

"Make clean my heart, Almighty, I pray,
And drive these sinful thoughts away.
Make clean my heart if it be Thy will,
This damned old rascal's shivering still!"

He stooped, he touched the beggar man's shoulder;
He asked him did the frost nip colder?
"Frost!" said the beggar, "no, stupid lad!
'Tis the palsy makes me shiver so bad."

Robert Graves

The Snapped Thread

Desire, first, by a natural miracle
United bodies, united hearts, blazed beauty;
Transcended bodies, transcended hearts.

Two souls, now unalterably one
In whole love always and for ever,
Soar out of twilight, through upper air,
Let fall their sensuous burden.

Is it kind, though, is it honest even,
To consort with none but spirits-
Leaving true-wedded hearts like ours
In enforced night-long separation,
Each to its random bodily inclination,
The thread of miracle snapped?

Robert Graves

The Spoilsport

My familiar ghost again
Comes to see what he can see,
Critic, son of Conscious Brain,
Spying on our privacy.

Slam the window, bolt the door,
Yet he'll enter in and stay;
In tomorrow's book he'll score
Indiscretions of today.

Whispered love and muttered fears,
How their echoes fly about!
None escape his watchful ears,
Every sigh might be a shout.

No kind words nor angry cries
Turn away this grim spoilsport;
No fine lady's pleading eyes,
Neither love, nor hate, nor ... port.

Critic wears no smile of fun,
Speaks no word of blame nor praise,
Counts our kisses one by one,
Notes each gesture, every phrase.

My familiar ghost again
Stands or squats where suits him best;
Critic, son of Conscious Brain,
Listens, watches, takes no rest.

Robert Graves

The Thieves

Lovers in the act despense
With such meum-tuum sense
As might warningly reveal
What they must not pick or steal,
And their nostrum is to say:
'I and you are both away.'

After, when they disentwine
You from me and yours from mine,
Neither can be certain who
Was that I whose mine was you.
To the act again they go
More completely not to know.

Theft is theft and raid is raid
Though reciprocally made.
Lovers, the conclusion is
Doubled sighs and jealousies
In a single heart that grieves
For lost honour among thieves.

Robert Graves

The Three Drinkers

Blacksmith Green had three strong sons,
With bread and beef did fill 'em,
Now John and Ned are perished and dead,
But plenty remains of William.

John Green was a whiskey drinker,
The Land of Cakes supplied him,
Till at last his soul flew out by the hole
That the fierce drink burned inside him.

Ned Green was a water drinker,
And, Lord, how Ned would fuddle!
He rotted away his mortal clay
Like an old boot thrown in a puddle.

Will Green was a wise young drinker,
Shrank from whiskey or water,
But he made good cheer with headstrong beer,
And married an alderman's daughter.

Robert Graves

The Travellers' Curse After Misdirection

(from the Welsh)

May they stumble, stage by stage
On an endless Pilgrimage
Dawn and dusk, mile after mile
At each and every step a stile
At each and every step withal
May they catch their feet and fall
At each and every fall they take
May a bone within them break
And may the bone that breaks within
Not be, for variations sake
Now rib, now thigh, now arm, now shin
but always, without fail, the NECK

Robert Graves

The Troll's Nosegay

A simple nosegay! Was that much to ask?
(Winter still nagg'd, with scarce a bud yet showing.)
He loved her ill, if he resigned the task.
'Somewhere,' she cried, 'there must be blossom blowing.'
It seems my lady wept and the troll swore
By Heaven he hated tears: he'd cure her spleen -
Where she had begged one flower he'd shower fourscore,
A bunch fit to amaze a China Queen.

Cold fog-drawn Lily, pale mist-magic Rose
He conjured, and in a glassy cauldron set
With elvish unsubstantial Mignonette
And such vague blooms as wandering dreams enclose.
But she?
Awed,
Charmed to tears,
Distracted,
Yet -
Even yet, perhaps, a trifle piqued - who knows?

Robert Graves

The Voice Of Beauty Drowned

'Cry from the thicket my heart's bird!
The other birds woke all around;
Rising with toot and howl they stirred
Their plumage, broke the trembling sound,
They craned their necks, they fluttered wings,
'While we are silent no one sings,
And while we sing you hush your throat,
Or tune your melody to our note.'

'Cry from the thicket my heart's bird!
The screams and hootings rose again:
They gaped with raucous beaks, they whirred
Their noisy plumage; small but plain
The lonely hidden singer made
A well of grief within the glade.
'Whist, silly fool, be off,' they shout,
'Or we'll come pluck your feathers out.'

'Cry from the thicket my heart's bird!
Slight and small the lovely cry
Came trickling down, but no one heard;
Parrot and cuckoo, crow, magpie,
Jarred horrid notes, the jangling jay
Ripped the fine threads of song away;
For why should peeping chick aspire
To challenge their loud woodland choir?

Cried it so sweet, that unseen bird?
Lovelier could no music be,
Clearer than water, soft as curd,
Fresh as the blossomed cherry tree.
How sang the others all around?
Piercing and harsh, a maddening sound,
With 'Pretty Poll, Tuwit-tuwoo
Peewit, Caw Caw, Cuckoo-Cuckoo.'

How went the song, how looked the bird?
If I could tell, if I could show
With one quick phrase, one lightning word,

I'd learn you more than poets know;
For poets, could they only catch
Of that forgotten tune one snatch,
Would build it up in song or sonnet,
And found their whole life's fame upon it.

Robert Graves

The White Goddess

All saints revile her, and all sober men
Ruled by the God Apollo's golden mean -
In scorn of which we sailed to find her
In distant regions likeliest to hold her
Whom we desired above all things to know,
Sister of the mirage and echo.

It was a virtue not to stay,
To go our headstrong and heroic way
Seeking her out at the volcano's head,
Among pack ice, or where the track had faded
Beyond the cavern of the seven sleepers:
Whose broad high brow was white as any leper's,
Whose eyes were blue, with rowan-berry lips,
With hair curled honey-coloured to white hips.

The sap of Spring in the young wood a-stir
Will celebrate with green the Mother,
And every song-bird shout awhile for her;
But we are gifted, even in November
Rawest of seasons, with so huge a sense
Of her nakedly worn magnificence
We forget cruelty and past betrayal,
Heedless of where the next bright bolt may fall.

Robert Graves

Thunder At Night

Restless and hot two children lay
Plagued with uneasy dreams,
Each wandered lonely through false day
A twilight torn with screams.

True to the bed-time story, Ben
Pursued his wounded bear,
Ann dreamed of chattering monkey men,
Of snakes twined in her hair...

Now high aloft above the town
The thick clouds gather and break,
A flash, a roar, and rain drives down:
Aghast the young things wake.

Trembling for what their terror was,
Surprised by instant doom,
With lightning in the looking glass,
Thunder that rocks the room.

The monkeys' paws patter again,
Snakes hiss and flash their eyes:
The bear roars out in hideous pain:
Ann prays: her brother cries.

They cannot guess, could not be told
How soon comes careless day,
With birds and dandelion gold,
Wet grass, cool scents of May.

Robert Graves

To An Ungentle Critic

The great sun sinks behind the town
Through a red mist of Volnay wine....
But what's the use of setting down
That glorious blaze behind the town?
You'll only skip the page, you'll look
For newer pictures in this book;
You've read of sunsets rich as mine.

A fresh wind fills the evening air
With horrid crying of night birds....
But what reads new or curious there
When cold winds fly across the air?
You'll only frown; you'll turn the page,
But find no glimpse of your "New Age
Of Poetry" in my worn-out words.

Must winds that cut like blades of steel
And sunsets swimming in Volnay,
The holiest, cruellest pains I feel,
Die stillborn, because old men squeal
For something new: "Write something new:
We've read this poem—that one too,
And twelve more like 'em yesterday"?

No, no! my chicken, I shall scrawl
Just what I fancy as I strike it,
Fairies and Fusiliers, and all
Old broken knock-kneed thought will crawl
Across my verse in the classic way.
And, sir, be careful what you say;
There are old-fashioned folk still like it.

Robert Graves

To Juan At The Winter Solstice

There is one story and one story only
That will prove worth your telling,
Whether as learned bard or gifted child;
To it all lines or lesser gauds belong
That startle with their shining
Such common stories as they stray into.

Is it of trees you tell, their months and virtues,
Or strange beasts that beset you,
Of birds that croak at you the Triple will?
Or of the Zodiac and how slow it turns
Below the Boreal Crown,
Prison to all true kings that ever reigned?

Water to water, ark again to ark,
From woman back to woman:
So each new victim treads unfalteringly
The never altered circuit of his fate,
Bringing twelve peers as witness
Both to his starry rise and starry fall.

Or is it of the Virgin's silver beauty,
All fish below the thighs?
She in her left hand bears a leafy quince;
When, with her right hand she crooks a finger, smiling,
How many the King hold back?
Royally then he barter's life for love.

Or of the undying snake from chaos hatched,
Whose coils contain the ocean,
Into whose chops with naked sword he springs,
Then in black water, tangled by the reeds,
Battles three days and nights,
To be spewed up beside her scalloped shore?

Much snow is falling, winds roar hollowly,
The owl hoots from the elder,
Fear in your heart cries to the loving-cup:
Sorrow to sorrow as the sparks fly upward.

The log groans and confesses:
There is one story and one story only.

Dwell on her graciousness, dwell on her smiling,
Do not forget what flowers
The great boar trampled down in ivy time.
Her brow was creamy as the crested wave,
Her sea-blue eyes were wild
But nothing promised that is not performed.

Robert Graves

To Lucasta On Going To The War - For The Fourth Time

It doesn't matter what's the cause,
What wrong they say we're righting,
A curse for treaties, bonds and laws,
When we're to do the fighting!
And since we lads are proud and true,
What else remains to do?
Lucasta, when to France your man
Returns his fourth time, hating war,
Yet laughs as calmly as he can
And flings an oath, but says no more,
That is not courage, that's not fear—
Lucasta he's a Fusilier,
And his pride sends him here.

Let statesmen bluster, bark and bray,
And so decide who started
This bloody war, and who's to pay,
But he must be stout-hearted,
Must sit and stake with quiet breath,
Playing at cards with Death.
Don't plume yourself he fights for you;
It is no courage, love, or hate,
But let us do the things we do;
It's pride that makes the heart be great;
It is not anger, no, nor fear—
Lucasta he's a Fusilier,
And his pride keeps him here.

Robert Graves

To Robert Nichols

(From Frise on the Somme in February, 1917, in answer to a letter saying: "I am just finishing my 'Faun's Holiday.' I wish you were here to feed him with cherries.")

Here by a snowbound river
In scrapen holes we shiver,
And like old bitterns we
Boom to you plaintively:
Robert, how can I rhyme
Verses for your desire—
Sleek fauns and cherry-time,
Vague music and green trees,
Hot sun and gentle breeze,
England in June attire,
And life born young again,
For your gay goatish brute
Drunk with warm melody
Singing on beds of thyme
With red and rolling eye,
Waking with wanton lute
All the Devonian plain,
Lips dark with juicy stain,
Ears hung with bobbing fruit?
Why should I keep him time?
Why in this cold and rime,
Where even to dream is pain?
No, Robert, there's no reason:
Cherries are out of season,
Ice grips at branch and root,
And singing birds are mute.

Robert Graves

Tom Taylor

On pay-day nights, neck-full with beer,
Old soldiers stumbling homeward here,
Homeward (still dazzled by the spark
Love kindled in some alley dark)
Young soldiers mooning in slow thought,
Start suddenly, turn about, are caught
By a dancing sound, merry as a grig,
Tom Taylor's piccolo playing jig.
Never was blown from human cheeks
Music like this, that calls and speaks
Till sots and lovers from one string
Dangle and dance in the same ring.
Tom, of your piping I've heard said
And seen--that you can rouse the dead,
Dead-drunken men awash who lie
In stinking gutters hear your cry,
I've seen them twitch, draw breath, grope, sigh,
Heave up, sway, stand; grotesquely then
You set them dancing, these dead men.
They stamp and prance with sobbing breath,
Victims of wine or love or death,
In ragged time they jump, they shake
Their heads, sweating to overtake
The impetuous tune flying ahead.
They flounder after, with legs of lead.
Now, suddenly as it started, play
Stops, the short echo dies away,
The corpses drop, a senseless heap,
The drunk men gaze about like sheep.
Grinning, the lovers sigh and stare
Up at the broad moon hanging there,
While Tom, five fingers to his nose,
Skips off...And the last bugle blows.

Robert Graves

True Johnny

Mary: Johnny, sweetheart, can you be true
To all those famous vows you've made?
Will you love me as I love you
Until we both in earth are laid?
Or shall the old wives nod and say
'His love was only for a day,
The mood goes by,
His fancies fly,
And Mary's left to sigh.'

Johnny: Mary, alas, you've hit the truth,
And I with grief can but admit
Hot-blooded haste controls my youth,
My idle fancies veer and flit
From flower to flower, from tree to tree,
And when the moment catches me
Oh, love goes by,
Away I fly,
And leave my girl to sigh.

Mary: Could you but now foretell the day,
Johnny, when this sad thing must be,
When light and gay you'll turn away
And laugh and break the heart in me?
For like a nut for true love's sake
My empty heart shall crack and break,
When fancies fly
And love goes by
And Mary's left to die.

Johnny: When the sun turns against the clock,
When Avon waters upward flow,
When eggs are laid by barn-door cock,
When dusty hens do strut and crow,
When up is down, when left is right,
Oh, then I'll break the troth I plight,
With careless eye
Away I'll fly
And Mary here shall die.

Robert Graves

Two Fusiliers

And have we done with War at last?
Well, we've been lucky devils both,
And there's no need of pledge or oath
To bind our lovely friendship fast,
By firmer stuff
Close bound enough.

By wire and wood and stake we're bound,
By Fricourt and by Festubert,
By whipping rain, by the sun's glare,
By all the misery and loud sound,
By a Spring day,
By Picard clay.

Show me the two so closely bound
As we, by the red bond of blood,
By friendship, blossoming from mud,
By Death: we faced him, and we found
Beauty in Death,
In dead men breath.

Robert Graves

Vain And Careless

Lady, lovely lady,
Careless and gay!
Once when a beggar called
She gave her child away.

The beggar took the baby,
Wrapped it in a shawl,
'Bring her back,' the lady said,
'Next time you call.'

Hard by lived a vain man,
So vain and so proud,
He walked on stilts
To be seen by the crowd.

Up above the chimney pots,
Tall as a mast,
And all the people ran about
Shouting till he passed.

'A splendid match surely,'
Neighbours saw it plain,
'Although she is so careless,
Although he is so vain.'

But the lady played bobcherry,
Did not see or care,
As the vain man went by her
Aloft in the air.

This gentle-born couple
Lived and died apart.
Water will not mix with oil,
Nor vain with careless heart.

Robert Graves

Warning To Children

Children, if you dare to think
Of the greatness, rareness, muchness
Fewness of this precious only
Endless world in which you say
You live, you think of things like this:
Blocks of slate enclosing dappled
Red and green, enclosing tawny
Yellow nets, enclosing white
And black acres of dominoes,
Where a neat brown paper parcel
Tempts you to untie the string.
In the parcel a small island,
On the island a large tree,
On the tree a husky fruit.
Strip the husk and pare the rind off:
In the kernel you will see
Blocks of slate enclosed by dappled
Red and green, enclosed by tawny
Yellow nets, enclosed by white
And black acres of dominoes,
Where the same brown paper parcel -
Children, leave the string alone!
For who dares undo the parcel
Finds himself at once inside it,
On the island, in the fruit,
Blocks of slate about his head,
Finds himself enclosed by dappled
Green and red, enclosed by yellow
Tawny nets, enclosed by black
And white acres of dominoes,
With the same brown paper parcel
Still untied upon his knee.
And, if he then should dare to think
Of the fewness, muchness, rareness,
Greatness of this endless only
Precious world in which he says
he lives - he then unties the string.

When I'M Killed

When I'm killed, don't think of me
Buried there in Cambrin Wood,
Nor as in Zion think of me
With the Intolerable Good.
And there's one thing that I know well,
I'm damned if I'll be damned to Hell!

So when I'm killed, don't wait for me,
Walking the dim corridor;
In Heaven or Hell, don't wait for me,
Or you must wait for evermore.
You'll find me buried, living-dead
In these verses that you've read.

So when I'm killed, don't mourn for me,
Shot, poor lad, so bold and young,
Killed and gone — don't mourn for me.
On your lips my life is hung:
O friends and lovers, you can save
Your playfellow from the grave.

Robert Graves