

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Nichols
- poems -

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Robert Nichols(1893 - 1944)

Robert Nichols (1893-1944) was the wartime author of *Ardours and Endurances*; Also, *A Faun's Holiday and Poems & Phantasies*, a collection of war poetry published in 1917.

Nichols, who struck up friendships with fellow war poets Siegfried Sassoon and Rupert Brooke (the latter was killed in action in 1915), was a Winchester and Oxford-educated Georgian poet.

Nichols' First World War military service - which lasted from from 1914-16 - saw him participate in the Battle of Loos in 1915 in the role of artillery officer.

His front-line service was however brief - after just a few weeks serving in the trenches he was invalided home with shell shock; an illness which caused him to be sent home to England in 1916. Subsequently serving with the British Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Information, he went on to pen war poetry that he often read to large gatherings, which included tours of America.

Ardours and Endurances; Also, *A Faun's Holiday & Poems & Phantasies*, published in 1917, perhaps Nichols' best known collection, represented his attempt to paint a canvas of the war on an epic scale.

The name of Robert Nichols has its place on the memorial in Westminster Abbey to poets of the First World War, and his first collections, *Invocation* (1915) and *Ardours and Endurances* (1917), speaking directly to the mood of a nation in the throes of war, achieved real popular success.

He went on to produce three more volumes of poetry, four plays that reached the London stage, and two novels. But these works of his maturity have been out of print for fifty years and until recently there was no biography of him.

Now Anne and William Charlton have produced an authoritative study, *Putting Poetry First: A Life of Robert Nichols 1893-1944*. This is based on an extensive archive of unpublished papers and letters to and from him which had been preserved by the Nichols family.

It starts with his childhood in a literary and artistic household privileged socially but overshadowed by his mother's mental ill health. Nichols was a rebel at school but at Oxford and in later life came to be on friendly terms with many of the best known writers, composers, artists and actors of his day.

Although his health was always poor he was accepted for the Field Artillery in September 1914. After a year's training he reached the Western Front just before the Battle of Loos in September 1915. He was shell-shocked and the following year invalided out; and this gave him more time for writing and reflecting on the war than other poets who were either killed or kept in the trenches.

In 1918 he was sent to America as a kind of representative of British war poets and artists. The book shows that the end of the war was not the end either of Nichols's creative work or of his adventures.

An affair with Nancy Cunard was the inspiration for his next book *Aurelia* (1920). He taught English Literature in Tokyo from 1921 to 1924, and took part in one of the most exciting periods in the development of the cinema in Hollywood from 1924 to 1926.

In 1928 his play *Wings Over Europe*, which foretold the splitting of the atom and the consequences that would follow, was a success in New York. In 1933-4 he was in Austria and Germany, and quotations from the long weekly letters he wrote to Henry Head, the neurologist under whose care he had been for shell-shock, give a graphic eye-witness account of the rise of Hitler.

As a result of chronic disorder both in his emotional and in his financial affairs, at the end of the 1930s he settled in France just in time to see the German occupation, and in June 1940 he was on the last ship to carry British refugees from the Cote d'Azur.

Finally the book describes his work as a writer, broadcaster and inventor in the Second World War down to his death in 1944 at the age of 51. His life had been a turbulent one with alternating moods of infectious elation and deep unhappiness and indecision; but this book shows that one thing remained constant, his determination to pursue his vocation as a poet.

He believed he was born to write poetry and for him that always came first.

Nichols died in 1944.

Address To The Sunset

Exquisite stillness! What serenities
Of earth and air! How bright atop the wall
The stonecrop's fire and beyond the precipice
How huge, how hushed the primrose evenfall!
How softly, too, the white crane voyages
Yon honeyed height of warmth and silence,
whence
He can look down on islet, lake and shore
And crowding woods and voiceless promontories
Or, further gazing, view the magnificence
Of cloud- like mountains and of mountainous cloud
Or ghostly wrack below the horizon rim
Not even his eye has vantage to explore.
Now, spirit, find out wings and mount to him,
Wheel where he wheels, where he is soaring soar.
Hang where now he hangs in the planisphere -
Evening's first star and golden as a bee
In the sun's hair - for happiness is here!

Robert Nichols

At The Wars

Now that I am ta'en away
And may not see another day
What is it to my eye appears?
What sound rings in my stricken ears?
Not even the voice of any friend
Or eyes beloved-world-without-end,
But scenes and sounds of the country-side
In far England across the tide:
An upland field when spring's begun,
Mellow beneath the evening sun....
A circle of loose and lichened wall
Over which seven red pines fall....
An orchard of wizen blossoming trees
Wherein the nesting chaffinches
Begin again the self-same song
All the late April day-time long....
Paths that lead a shelving course
Between the chalk scarp and the gorse
By English downs; and oh! too well
I hear the hidden, clanking bell
Of wandering sheep.... I see the brown
Twilight of the huge, empty down
Soon blotted out! for now a lane
Glitters with warmth of May-time rain.
And on a shooting briar I see
A yellow bird who sings to me.

O yellow-hammer, once I heard
Thy yaffle when no other bird
Could to my sunk heart comfort bring;
But now I could not have thee sing
So sharp thy note is with the pain
Of England I may not see again!
Yet sing thy song: there answereth
Deep in me a voice which saith:

'The gorse upon the twilit down,
The English loam so sunset brown,

The bowed pines and the sheep-bells' clamour,
The wet, lit lane and the yellow-hammer,
The orchard and the chaffinch song
Only to the Brave belong.
And he shall lose their joy for aye
If their price he cannot pay.
Who shall find them dearer far
Enriched by blood alter long war.
,

Robert Nichols

Battery Moving Up To A New Position From Rest Camp:Dawn

Not a sign of life we rouse
In any square close-shuttered house
That flanks the road we amble down
Toward far trenches through the town.

The dark, snow-slushy, empty street....
Tingle of frost in brow and feet....
Horse-breath goes dimly up like smoke.
No sound but the smacking stroke

As a sergeant flings each arm
Out and across to keep him warm,
And the sudden splashing crack
Of ice-pools broken by our track.

More dark houses, yet no sign
Of life....And axle's creak and whine....
The splash of hooves, the strain of trace....
Clatter: we cross the market place.

Deep quiet again, and on we lurch
Under the shadow of a church:
Its tower ascends, fog-wreathed and grim;
Within its aisles a light burns dim....

When, marvellous! from overhead,
Like abrupt speech of one deemed dead,
Speech-moved by some Superior Will,
A bell tolls thrice and then is still.

And suddenly I know that now
The priest within, with shining brow,
Lifts high the small round of the Host.
The server's tingling bell is lost

In clash of the greater overhead.
Peace like a wave descends, is spread,

While watch the peasants' reverent eyes....

The bell's boom trembles, hangs, and dies.

O people who bow down to see
The Miracle of Cavalry,
The bitter and the glorious,
Bow down, bow down and pray for us.

Once more our anguished way we take
Towards our Golgotha, to make
For all our lovers sacrifice.
Again the troubled bell tolls thrice.

And slowly, slowly, lifted up
Dazzles the overflowing cup.

O worshipping, fond multitude,
Remember us too, and our blood.

Turn hearts to us as we go by,
Salute those about to die,
Plead for them, the deep bell toll:
Their sacrifice must soon be whole.

Entreat you for such hearts as break
With the premonitory ache
Of bodies, whose feet, hands, and side,
Must soon be torn, pierced, crucified.

Sue for them and all of us
Who the world over suffer thus,
Who have scarce time for prayer indeed,
Who only march and die and bleed.

The town is left, the road leads on,
Bluey glaring in the sun,
Toward where in the sunrise gate
Death, honour, and fierce battle wait.

Robert Nichols

Battle

1.

Noon

It is midday; the deep trench glares....
A buzz and blaze of flies....
The hot wind puffs the giddy airs....
The great sun rakes the skies.

No sound in all the stagnant trench
Where forty standing men
Endure the sweat and grit and stench,
Like cattle in a pen.

Sometimes a sniper's bullet whirs
Or twangs the whining wire,
Sometimes a soldier sighs and stirs
As in hell's frying fire.

From out a high, cool cloud descends
An aeroplane's far moan,
The sun strikes down, the thin cloud rends....
The black speck travels on.

And sweating, dazed, isolate
In the hot trench beneath,
We bide the next shrewd move of fate
Be it of life or death.

2.

Night Bombardment

Softly in the silence the evening rain descends....
The soft wind lifts the rain-mist, flurries it, and spends
Itself in mournful sighs, drifting from field to field,
Soaking the draggled sprays which the low hedges wield
As they labour in the wet and the load of the wind.
The last light is dimming. Night comes on behind.

I hear no sound but the wind and the rain,
And trample of horses, loud and lost again
Where the wagons in the mist rumble dimly on
Bringing more shell.
The last gleam is gone.
It is not day or night; only the mists unroll
And blind with their sorrow the sight of my soul.
I hear the wind weeping in the hollow overhead:
She goes searching for the forgotten dead
Hidden in the hedges or trodden into muck
Under the trenches or maybe limply stuck
Somewhere in the branches of a high, lonely tree -
He was a sniper once. They never found his body.

I see the mist drifting. I hear the wind, the rain,
And on my clammy face the oozed breath of the slain
Seems to be blowing. Almost I have heard
In the shuddering drift the lost dead's last word:
Go home, go home, go to my house,
Knock at the door, knock hard, arouse
My wife and the children - that you must do -
What d' you say? - Tell the children too -
Knock at the door, knock hard, and arouse
The living. Say: the dead won't come back to this house.
Oh... but it's cold - I soak in the rain -
Shrapnel found me - I shan't go home again.
No, not home again - The mourning voices trail
Away into rain, into darkness... the pale
Soughing of the night drifts on in between.

The Voices were as if the dead had never been.

O melancholy heavens, O melancholy fields!
The glad, full darkness grows complete and shields
Me from your appeal.

With a terrible delight
I hear far guns low like oxen, at the night.

Flames disrupt the sky. The work is begun.
'Action!' My guns crash, flame, rock, and stun
Again and again. Soon the soughing night

Is loud with their clamour and leaps with their light.

The imperative chorus rises sonorous and fell:

My heart glows lighted as by fires of hell,

Sharply I pass the terse orders down.

The guns stun and rock. The hissing rain is blown

Athwart the hurtling shell that shrilling, shrilling goes

Away into the dark to burst a cloud of rose

Over their trenches.

A pause: I stand and see

Lifting into the night like founts incessantly,

The pistol-lights' pale spores upon the glimmering air...

Under them furrowed trenches empty, pallid, bare....

And rain snowing trenchward ghostly and white,

O dead in the hedges, sleep ye well to-night!

Robert Nichols

Comrades An Episode

Before, before he was aware
The 'Verey' light had risen... on the air
in hung glistering..
And he could not stay his hand
From moving to the barbed wire's broken strand.
A rifle cracked.
He fell.
Night waned. He was alone. A heavy shell
Whispered itself passing high, high overhead.
His wound was wet to his hand: for still it bled
On the glimmering ground.
Then with a slow, vain smile his wound be bound,
Knowing, of course, he'd not see home again -
Home, whose thought he put away.
His men
Whispered, 'Where's Mister Gates?' 'Out on the wire.'
'I'll get him,' said one....
Dawn blinked and the fire
Of the Germans heaved up and down the line.
'Stand to!'
Too late! 'I'll get him.' 'Oh the swine,
When we might get him in yet safe and whole!'
'Corp'ral didn't see um fall out on patrol
Or he'd a got um.' 'Ssssh'...
'No talking there.'
A whisper: "A went down at the last flare.'
Meanwhile the Maxims toc-toc-tocked: their swish
Of bullets told death lurked against the wish.
No hope for him!
His corporal, as one shamed,
Vainly and helplessly his ill-luck blamed.

Then Gates slowly saw the morn
Break in a rose peace through the lone thorn
By which he lay, and felt the dawn-wind pass
Whispering through the pallid, stalky grass
Of No-Man's Land...
And the tears came
Scaldingly sweet, more lovely than a flame.

He closed his eyes: he thought of home
And grit his teeth. He knew no help could come...

The silent sun over the earth held sway,
Occasional rifles cracked, and far away
A heedless speck, a 'plane, slid on alone
Like a fly traversing a cliff of stone.

'I must get back,' said Gates aloud, and heaved
At his body. But it lay bereaved
Of any power. He could not wait till night....
And he lay still. Blood swam across his sight.
Then with a groan:
'No luck ever. Well! I must die alone.'

Occasional rifles cracked. A cloud that shone,
Gold-rimmed, blackened the sun and then was gone...
The sun still smiled. The grass sang in its play.
Some one whistled, 'Over the hills and far away.'
Gates watched silently the swift, swift sun
Burning his life before it was begun....

Suddenly he heard Corporal Timmins' voice: 'Now, then,
'Urry up with that tea.'
'Hin Ginger!' 'Bill.' His men!
Timmins and Jones and Wilkinson ('the bard')
And Hughes and Simpson. It was hard
Not to see them: Wilkinson, stubby, grim,
With his 'No, sir,' 'Yes, sir,' and the slim
Simpson, 'Indeed, sir?' [while it seemed he winked
Because his smiling left eye always blinked]
And Corporal Timmins, straight and blonde and wise,
With his quiet-scanning, level, hazel eyes,
And all the others... tunics that didn't fit....
A dozen different sorts of eyes. Oh, it
Was hard to lie there! Yet he must. But no:
'I've got to die. I'll get to them. I'll go.'

Inch by inch he fought, breathless and mute,
Dragging his carcass like a famished brute....
His head was hammering and his eyes were dim,
A bloody sweat seemed to ooze out of him

And freeze along his spine... then he'd lie still
Before another effort of his will
Took him one nearer yard.

The parapet was reached.
He could not rise to it. A look-out screeched,
'Mr. Gates!'
Three figures in one breath
Leaped up. Two figures fell in toppling death;
And Gates was lifted in. 'Who's hit?' said he.
'Timmins and Jones.' 'Why did they that for me?
I'm gone already!' Gently they laid him prone
And silently watched.
He twitched. They heard him moan,
'Why for me?' His eyes roamed round and none replied.
'I see it was alone I should have died.'
They shook their heads. Then, 'Is the doctor here?'
'He's comin', sir, he's hurryin', no fear.'
'No good....'
'Lift me.' They lifted him.
He smiled and held his arms out to the dim,
And in a moment passed beyond their ken,
Hearing him whisper, 'O my men, my men!'

Robert Nichols

Evenstar

Evenstar, still evenstar
If this twilight thou dost shine
On a more unhappy head,
On tears lonelier than mine,
Vainer prayers and deepest sighs,
Take, sweet spirit, thou that art
Comforter of our despairs
All the prayers perforce unsaid,
All the sighs I cannot sigh,
All the tears I cannot shed;
Fill his eyes and flood his heart,
Who, my everlasting kin,
Broods, afar, unknown, apart.
Bring, ah bring him that surcease
From unsootheable pain,
Which nor prayers, nor tears, nor sighs,
No, nor even the divine
Presence of thy eternal peace
Can, O evenstar, make mine.

Robert Nichols

Farewell

For the last time, maybe, upon the knoll
I stand. The eve is golden, languid, sad.
Day like a tragic actor plays his role
To the last whispered word and falls gold-clad.
I, too, take leave of all I ever had.

They shall not say I went with heavy heart:
Heavy I am, but soon I shall be free,
I love them all, but oh I now depart
A little sadly, strangely, fearfully,
As one who goes to try a mystery.

The bell is sounding down in Dedham vale:
Be still, O bell: too often standing here
When all the air was tremulous, fine and pale,
Thy golden note so calm, so still, so clear,
Out of my stony heart has struck a tear.

And now tears are not mine. I have release
From all the former and the later pain,
Like the mid sea I rock in boundless peace
Soothed by the charity of the deep-sea rain....
Calm rain! Calm sea! Calm found, long sought in vain!

O bronzen pines, evening of gold and blue,
Steep mellow slope, brimmed twilit pools below,
Hushed trees, still vale dissolving in the dew,
Farewell. Farewell. There is no more to do.
We have been happy. Happy now I go.

Robert Nichols

Fulfilment

Was there love once? I have forgotten her.
Was there grief once? Grief yet is mine.
Other loves I have, men rough, but men who stir
More grief, more joy, than love of thee and thine.

Faces cheerful, full of whimsical mirth,
Lined by the wind, burned by the sun;
Bodies enraptured by the abounding earth,
As whose children we are brethern: one.

And any moment may descend hot death
To shatter limbs! Pulp, tear, blast
Belovèd soldiers who love rough life and breath
Not less for dying faithful to the last.

O the fading eyes, the grimed face turned bony,
Oped mouth gushing, fallen head,
Lessening pressure of a hand, shrunk, clammed and stony!
O sudden spasm, release of the dead!

Was there love once? I have forgotten her.
Was there grief once? Grief yet is mine.
O loved, living, dying, heroic soldier,
All, all my joy, my grief, my love, are thine.

Robert Nichols

I Must Remember Now

I must remember now how once I woke
To find the harsh lamplight stream upon her bed,
The ceiling tremble in its giddy smoke,
And on the wall the agile spider spread,
To hear the reverberate vault of silence shake
Beneath the hollow crash of midnight's toil,
Whose profound strokes waned impotent to break
The charnel stillness of the city's soul.
These I remember, but would more forget
What is most fixed, whereby I am undone,
How white, how still you lay, though shuddering yet
In the last luxury of oblivion,
As if of Death you had taken love long denied,
With on your face the bliss of suicide.

Robert Nichols

Nearer

Nearer and ever nearer...
My body, tired but tense,
Hovers 'twixt vague pleasure
And tremulous confidence.

Arms to have and to use them
And a soul to be made
Worthy, if not worthy;
If afraid, unafraid.

To endure for a little,
To endure and have done:
Men I love about me,
Over me the sun!

And should at last suddenly
Fly the speeding death,
The four great quarters of heaven
Receive this little breath.

Robert Nichols

Night Rhapsody

How beautiful it is to wake at night,
When over all there reigns the ultimate spell
Of complete silence, darkness absolute,
To feel the world, tilted on axle-tree,
In slow gyration, with no sensible sound,
Unless to ears of unimagined beings,
Resident incorporeal or stretched
In vigilance of ecstasy among
Ethereal paths and the celestial maze.
The rumour of our onward course now brings
A steady rustle, as of some strange ship
Darkling with soundless sail all set and amply filled
By volume of an ever-constant air,
At fullest night, through seas for ever calm,
Swept lovely and unknown for ever on.

How beautiful it is to wake at night,
Embalmed in darkness watchful, sweet, and still,
As is the brain's mood flattered by the swim
Of currents circumvolvent in the void,
To lie quite still and to become aware
Of the dim light cast by nocturnal skies
On a dim earth beyond the window-ledge,
So, isolate from the friendly company
Of the huge universe which turns without,
To brood apart in calm and joy awhile
Until the spirit sinks and scarcely knows
Whether self is, or if self only is,
For ever....

How beautiful to wake at night,
Within the room grown strange, and still, and sweet,
And live a century while in the dark
The dripping wheel of silence slowly turns;
To watch the window open on the night,
A dewy silent deep where nothing stirs,
And, lying thus, to feel dilate within
The press, the conflict, and the heavy pulse
Of incommunicable sad ecstasy,

Growing until the body seems outstretched
In perfect crucifixion on the arms
Of a cross pointing from last void to void,
While the heart dies to a mere midway spark.

All happiness thou holdest, happy night,
For such as lie awake and feel dissolved
The peaceful spice of darkness and the cool
Breath hither blown from the ethereal flowers
That mist thy fields! O happy, happy wounds,
Conditioned by existence in humanity,
That have such powers to heal them! slow sweet sighs
Torn from the bosom, silent wails, the birth
Of such long-treasured tears as pain his eyes,
Who, waking, hears the divine solitudes
Of midnight with ineffable purport charged.

How beautiful it is to wake at night,
Another night, in darkness yet more still,
Save when the myriad leaves on full-fledged boughs,
Filled rather by the perfume's wandering flood
Than by dispersion of the still sweet air,
Shall from the furthest utter silences
In glimmering secrecy have gathered up
An host of whisperings and scattered sighs,
To loose at last a sound as of the plunge
And lapsing seethe of some Pacific wave,
Which, risen from the star-thronged outer troughs,
Rolls in to wreath with circling foam away
The flutter of the golden moths that haunt
The star's one glimmer daggered on wet sands.

So beautiful it is to wake at night!
Imagination, loudening with the surf
Of the midsummer wind among the boughs,
Gathers my spirit from the haunts remote
Of faintest silence and the shades of sleep,
To bear me on the summit of her wave
Beyond known shores, beyond the mortal edge
Of thought terrestrial, to hold me poised
Above the frontiers of infinity,
To which in the full reflux of the wave

Come soon I must, bubble of solving foam,
Borne to those other shores — now never mine
Save for a hovering instant, short as this
Which now sustains me ere I be drawn back —
To learn again, and wholly learn, I trust,
How beautiful it is to wake at night.

Robert Nichols

November

As I walk the misty hill
All is languid, fogged, and still;
Not a note of any bird
Nor any motion's hint is heard,
Save from soaking thickets round
Trickle or water's rushing sound,
And from ghostly trees the drip
Of runnel dew or whispering slip
Of leaves, which in a body launch
Listlessly from the stagnant branch
To strew the marl, already strown,
With litter sodden as its own,

A rheum, like blight, hangs on the briars,
And from the clammy ground suspires
A sweet frail sick autumnal scent
Of stale frost furring weeds long spent;
And wafted on, like one who sleeps,
A feeble vapour hangs or creeps,
Exhaling on the fungus mould
A breath of age, fatigue, and cold.

Oozed from the bracken's desolate track,
By dark rains havocked and drenched black.
A fog about the coppice drifts,
Or slowly thickens up and lifts
Into the moist, despondent air.

Mist, grief, and stillness everywhere....

And in me, too, there is no sound
Save welling as of tears profound,
Where in me cloud, grief, stillness reign,
And an intolerable pain
Begins.
Rolled on as in a flood there come
Memories of childhood, boyhood, home,
And that which, sudden, pangs me most,
Thought of the first-belov'd, long lost,

Too easy lost! My cold lips frame
Tremulously the familiar name,
Unheard of her upon my breath:
'Elizabeth. Elizabeth.'

No voice answers on the hill,
All is shrouded, sad, and still ...
Stillness, fogged brakes, and fog on high.
Only in me the waters cry
Who mourn the hours now slipped for ever,
Hours of boding, joy, and fever,
When we loved, by chance beguiled,
I a boy and you a child —
Child! but with an angel's air,
Astonished, eager, unaware,
Or elfin's, wandering with a grace
Foreign to any fireside race,
And with a gaiety unknown
In the light feet and hair backblown,
And with a sadness yet more strange,
In meagre cheeks which knew to change
Or faint or fired more swift than sight,
And forlorn hands and lips pressed white,
And fragile voice, and head downcast,
Hiding tears, lifted at the last
To speed with one pale smile the wise
Glance of the grey immortal eyes.

How strange it was that we should dare
Compound a miracle so rare
As, 'twixt this pace and Time's next pace,
Each to discern th' elected's face!
Yet stranger that the high sweet fire,
In hearts nigh foreign to desire,
Could burn, sigh, weep, and burn again
As oh, it never has since then!
Most strange of all that we so young
Dared learn but would not speak love's tongue,
Love pledged but in the reveries
Of our sad and dreaming eyes....

Now upon such journey bound me,

Grief, disquiet, and stillness round me,
As bids me where I cannot tell,
Turn I and sigh, unseen, farewell.
Breathe the name as soft as mist,
Lips, which nor kissed her nor were kissed!
And again — a sigh, a death —
'Elizabeth. Elizabeth.'

No voice answers; but the mist
Glow for a moment amethyst
Ere the hid sun dissolves away,
And dimness, growing dimmer grey,
Hides all ... till nothing can I see
But the blind walls enclosing me,
And no sound and no motion hear
But the vague water throbbing near,
Sole voice upon the darkening hill
Where all is blank and dead and still.

Robert Nichols

O Nightingale My Heart

O Nightingale my heart
How sad thou art!
How heavy is thy wing,
Desperately whirrèd that thy throat may fling
Song to the tingling silences remote!
Thine eye whose ruddy spark
Burned fiery of late,
How dead and dark!
Why so soon didst thou sing,
And with such turbulence of love and hate?

Learn that there is no singing yet can bring
The expected dawn more near;
And thou art spent already, though the night
Scarce has begun;
What voice, what eyes wilt thou have for the light
When the light shall appear,
And O what wings to bear thee t'ward the Sun?

Robert Nichols

Pæan

upon seeing a portrait of Blake

Something moves in his dust,
Flame sleeps beneath the crust;
O whence had he those eyes
Lit with celestial surprise?
From what world blew that gust?
Are we near to Paradise?

Gather a chaplet of five stars
And the opalescent hue
Of the aureole brightness cast —
Red, hardly red, and blue, scarce blue, —
Round th' immaculate frosty moon,
Splintering light in glacial spars,
When November's loudening blast
Sweeps heaven's floor till burnished
More crystal than at August noon,
So we fit radiance may cast
Before his feet, around his head.

How visits he an earthly place,
Wanders among a mortal race?
How were his footsteps led
That still about his face
Lingers a ghostly trace
Of a secret influence shed
By a Hand the world denies,
In a land her most son flies,
As a gift upon him thrust
For an end he knoweth not,
Yet will shine because he must,
Shine and sing because he must
Reap a wrong he soweth not
Of contempt anger and distrust
For a world which boweth not
To the Flame which binds our dust.

Go net the moon, go snare the sun,
Set them upon his either hand!
Beneath his heels Leviathan
Roll your thick coils! His head be spanned
By rainbows tripled! Set a gem
At the Cross-scabbard of his sword
Whiter than lambwool or lilystem!
Place on his brow the diadem
Given the warrior of the Lord,
The crown-turrets of Jerusalem!

Robert Nichols

Seventeen

All the loud winds were in the garden wood,
All shadows joyfuller than lissom hounds
Doubled in chasing, all exultant clouds
That ever flung fierce mist and eddying fire
Across heavens deeper than blue polar seas
Fled over the sceptre-spikes of the chestnuts,
Over the speckle of the wych-elms' green.
She shouted; then stood still, hushed and abashed
To hear her voice so shrill in that gay roar,
And suddenly her eyelashes were dimmed,
Caught in tense tears of spiritual joy;
For there were daffodils which sprightly shook
Ten thousand ruffling heads throughout the wood,
And every flower of those delighting flowers
Laughed, nodding to her, till she clapped her hands
Crying 'O daffies, could you only speak!'

But there was more. A jay with skyblue shaft
Set in blunt wing, skimmed screaming on ahead.
She followed him. A murrey squirrel eyed
Her warily, cocked upon tail-plumed haunch,
Then, skipping the whirligig of last-year leaves,
Whisked himself out of sight and reappeared
Leering about the hole of a young beech;
And every time she thought to corner him
He scrambled round on little scratchy hands
To peek at her about the other side.
She lost him, bolting branch to branch, at last —
The impudent brat! But still high overhead
Flight on exuberant flight of opal scud,
Or of dissolving mist, florid as flame.

Scattered in ecstasy over the blue. And she
Followed, first walking, giving her bright locks
To the cold fervour of the springtime gale,
Whose rush bore the cloud shadow past the cloud
Over the irised wastes of emerald turf.
And still the huge wind volleyed. Save the gulls,
Goldenly in the sunny blast careering

Or on blue-shadowed underwing at plunge,
None shared with her who now could not but run
The splendour and tumult of th' onrushing spring.

And now she ran no more: the gale gave plumes.
One with the shadows whirled along the grass,
One with the onward smother of veering gulls,
One with the pursuit of cloud after cloud,
Swept she. Pure speed coursed in immortal limbs;
Nostrils drank as from wells of unknown air;
Ears received the smooth silence of racing floods;
Light as of glassy suns froze in her eyes;
Space was given her and she ruled all space.

Spring, author of twifold loveliness,
Who flittest in the mirth of the wild folk,
Profferest greeting in the faces of flowers,
Blowest in the firmamental glory,
Renewest in the heart of the sad human
All faiths, guard thou the innocent spirit
Into whose unknowing hands this noontide
Thou pourest treasure, yet scarce recognised,
That unashamed before man's glib wisdom,
Unabashed beneath the wrath of chance,
She accept in simplicity of homage
The hidden holiness, the created emblem
To be in her, until death shall take her,
The source and secret of eternal spring.

Robert Nichols

The Approach

1.

In the Grass: Halt by the Wayside

In my tired, helpless body
I feel my sunk heart ache;
But suddenly, loudly
The far, the great guns shake.

Is it sudden terror
Burdens my heart? My hand
Flies to my head. I listen...
And do not understand.

Is death so near, then?
From this blazing light,
Do I plunge suddenly
Into vortex? Night?

Guns again! the quiet
Shakes at the vengeful voice...
It is terrible pleasure
I do not fear; I rejoice.

2.

On the Way Up

The battery grinds and jingles,
Mile succeeds to mile;
Shaking the noonday sunshine,
The guns lunge out a while
And then are still a while.

We amble along the highway;
The reeking, powdery dust
Ascends and cakes our faces,
With a striped, sweaty crust.

Under the still sky's violet
The heat throbs in the air...
The white road's dusty radiance,
Assumes a dark glare.

With a head hot and heavy,
And eyes that cannot rest,
And a black heart burning
In a stifled breast,

I sit in the saddle,
I feel the road unroll,
And keep my senses straightened
Toward to-morrow's goal.

There over unknown meadows,
Which we must reach at last,
Day and night thunders
A black and chilly blast.

Heads forget heaviness,
Hearts forget spleen,
For by that mighty winnowing
Being is blown clean.

Light in the eyes again,
Strength in the hand,
A spirit dares, dies, forgives
And can understand.

And best! Love comes back again
After grief and shame,
And along the wind of death
Throws a clean flame!

The battery grinds and jingles;
Mile succeeds to mile;
Suddenly battering the silence
The guns burst out a while.

I lift my head and smile.

3.

Nearer

Nearer and ever nearer....
My body tired but tense
Hovers 'twixt vague pleasure
And tremulous confidence.

Arms to have and to use them,
And a soul to be made
Worthy if not worthy;
If afraid, unafraid!

To endure for a little.
To endure and have done:
Men I love about me,
Over me the sun!

And should at last suddenly
Fly the speeding death:
The four great quarters of heaven
Receive this little breath.

Robert Nichols

The Assault

The beating of the guns grows louder.
'Not long, boys, now.'
My heart burns whiter, fearfuller, prouder;
Hurricanes grow
As guns redouble their fire.
Through the shaken periscope peeping
I glimpse their wire:
Black earth, fountains of earth rise, leaping,
Spouting like shocks of meeting waves.
Death's fountains are playing,
Shells like shrieking birds rush over;
Crash and din rises higher.
A stream of lead raves
Over us from the left... (we safe under cover!)
Crash. Reverberation. Crash!
Acrid smoke billowing. Flash upon flash.
Black smoke drifting. The German line
Vanishes in confusion, smoke. Cries, and cry
Of our men, 'Gah! yer swime,
You're for it,' die
In a hurricane of shell....
One cry;
'We're comin' soon! look out!'
There is opened hell
Over there. Fragments fly,
Rifles and bits of men whirled at the sky:
Dust, smoke, thunder. A sudden bout
Of machine-guns chattering....
And redoubled battering
As if in fury at their daring....

No good staring.

Time soon now... home... house on a sunlit hill....

Gone like a flickered page.
Time soon now... zero... will engage...

A sudden thrill.

'Fix bayonets.'
Gods! we have our fill
Of fear, hysteria, exultation, rage -
Rage to kill....

My heart burns hot, whiter and whiter,
Contracts tighter and tighter,
Until I stifle with the will
Long forged, now used -
(Though utterly strained)
O pounding heart,
Baffled, confused,
Heart panged, head singing dizzily pained -
To do my part.

Blindness a moment. Sick.
There the men are.
Bayonets ready: click!
Time goes quick;
A stumbled prayer... somehow a blazing star
In a blue night... where?
Again prayer.
The tongue trips. Start:
How's time? Soon now. Two minutes or less.
The guns' fury mounting higher.
Their utmost. I lift a silent hand. Unseen I bless
Those hearts will follow me.
And beautifully
Now beautifully my will grips.
Soul calm and round and filmed and white!

A shout! 'Men, no such order as retire!'
I nod.
The whistle's twixt my lips....
I catch
A wan, worn smile at me.
Dear men!
The pale wrist-watch....
The quiet hand ticks on amid the din.
The guns again
Rise to a last fury, to a rage, a lust:
Kill! Pound! Kill! Pound! Pound!

Now comes the thrust,
My part... dizziness... will... but trust
These men. The great guns rise.
Their fury seems to burst the earth and skies!

They - lift!

Gather, heart, all thoughts that drift;
Be steel, soul.
Compress thyself
Into a round, bright whole.

I cannot speak.

Time! Time!

I hear my whistle shriek
Between teeth set,
I fling an arm up,
Scramble up the grime
Over the parapet!

I'm up. Go on.
Something meets us.
Head down into the storm that greets us.
A wail!
Lights. Blurr.
Gone.
On, on. Lead. Lead. Hail.
Spatter. Whirr. Whirr.
'Toward that patch of brown,
Direction left.' Bullets: a stream.
Devouring thought crying in a dream;
Men, crumpled, going down....
Go on. Go.
Deafness, Numbness. The loudening tornado.
Bullets. Mud. Stumbling and skating.
My voice's strangled shout:-
'Steady pace, boys!'
The still light: gladness.
'Look, sir, look out!-'
Ha! Ha! Bunched figures waiting.

Revolver levelled: quick!
Flick! Flick!
Red as blood.
Germans. Germans.
Good! Oh, good!

Cool madness.

Robert Nichols

The Day's March

The battery grides and jingles,
Mile succeeds to mile;
Shaking the noonday sunshine
The guns lunge out awhile,
And then are still awhile.

We amble along the highway;
The reeking, powdery dust
Ascends and cakes our faces
With a striped, sweaty crust.

Under the still sky's violet
The heat throbs on the air....
The white road's dusty radiance
Assumes a dark glare.

With a head hot and heavy,
And eyes that cannot rest,
And a black heart burning
In a stifled breast,

I sit in the saddle,
I feel the road unroll,
And keep my senses straightened
Toward to-morrow's goal.

There, over unknown meadows
Which we must reach at last,
Day and night thunders
A black and chilly blast.

Heads forget heaviness,
Hearts forget spleen,
For by that mighty winnowing
Being is blown clean.

Light in the eyes again,
Strength in the hand,
A spirit dares, dies, forgives,

And can understand!

And, best! Love comes back again
After grief and shame,
And along the wind of death
Throws a clean flame.

The battery grides and jingles,
Mile succeeds to mile;
Suddenly battering the silence
The guns burst out awhile....

I lift my head and smile.

Robert Nichols

The Flower Of Flame

I

AS round the cliff I came alone
The whole bay bared its blaze to me;
Loud sang the wind, the wild sun shone
The tumbled clouds fled scattering on,
Light shattered on wave and winking stone,
And in the glassy midst stood one
Brighter than sun or cloud or sea.

She with flame-vehement hair untied,
Virginal in her fluttering dress,
Watched, deafened and all dazzle-eyed,
Each opulent breaker's crash and glide
And now flung arms up high and wide
As if, possessing all, she cried
Her beauty, youth and happiness.

Loud rang the waves and higher, higher
The surge in chains of light was flung,
The wind as in a wild desire
Licked round her form—she seemed a spire
Of sunny drift ! a fount of fire!
The hymn of some triumphant lyre
Which sounded when the world was young!

Purified by the scalding glare,
Swept clear by the salty sea-wind's flow,
My eyes knew you for what you are—
The daemon thing for which we dare,
Which breaks us, which we bid not spare.
The life, the light, the heavenly snare,
The turreted city's overthrow,
Helen, I knew you standing there!

II

The long, low wavelets of summer
Glide in and glitter along the sand;
The fitful breezes of summer

Blow fragrantly from the land.

Side by side we lie silent
Between sunned cliffs and blown seas:
Our eyes more bright than sea ripples,
Our breaths more light than the breeze.

When a gust meets a wave that advances
The wave leaps, flames, falls with a hiss
So lightly, so brightly each heart leaps
When our dumb lips touch in a kiss.

III

Foamless the gradual waters well
From the sheer deep, where darkness lies,
Till to the shoulder rock they swell
With a slow cumulance of sighs.

O, waters gather up your strength
From the blind caves of your unrest,
Loose your load utterly at length
Over the moonlight-marbled breast.

There sleep, diffused, the long dim hours,
Nor let your love-locks be withdrawn
Till round the world-horizon glowers
The wrath and chaos of the dawn.

IV

She picked a whorled shell from the beach
And laid it close beside her ear;
Then held it, frightened, at full reach
Toward my face that I might hear.

And while she leaned and while I heard
Our dumb eyes dared not meet for shame,
Our hearts within us sickly stirred,
Our limbs ran wax before the flame.

For in the despairing voice and meek

An echo to our hearts we found
Who through love-striving vainly seek
To coop the infinite in bound.

V

All is estranged to-day.
Chastened and meek,
Side by side taking our way,
With what anguish we seek
To dare each to face the other or even to speak!

The sun like an opal drifts
Through a vapourous shine
Or overwhelms itself in dark rifts,
On the sea's far line
Sheer light falls in a single sword like a sign.

The sea, striving in its bed
Like a corpse that awakes,
Slowly heaves up its lustreless head,
Crowned with weeds and snakes,
To strike at the shore bareing fangs as it breaks.

Something threatening earth
Aims at our love;—
Gone is our ignorant mirth,
Love like speech of the dove;
The Sword and the Snake have seen and proclaim now
'Enough!'

VI

The narrow pathway winds its course
Through dwarfish oaks and junipers
Till suddenly beyond the gorse
We glimpse the copse of stunted firs,

That tops the headland, round whose base
The cold tide flings a drowned man's bones
All day against the cliff's sheer face,
All night prolongs his lasting groans.

The Drowned—who in the copse once stood
Waiting the Dead: to end both vows—
Heard, as we hear, the split of wood
And shrieking of the writhen boughs

Grow shrill and shriller. Pass the spot,
The strained boughs arch toward collapse.
A whistle and—CRACK! there's the shot!
Or is it but a bough which snaps?

Ever, when we have left the gorse
And through the copse each hastening hies,
We, lovers on the self-same course,
Dare not look in each other's eyes.

VII

Before I woke I knew her gone
Though nothing nigh had stirred,
Now by the curtain inward blown
She stood not seen but heard
Where the faint moonlight dimmed or shone . . .
And neither spoke a word.

One hand against her mouth she pressed,
But could not staunch its cry,
The other knocked upon her breast
Impotently . . . while I
Glared rigid, labouring, possessed
And dared not ask her why.

VIII

Noon : and now rocks the summer sea
All idleness, one gust alone
Skates afar off and soundlessly
Is gone from me as you are gone.

No hull creeps on th' horizon's rim
No pond of smoke wreathes the far sky,
Only the dazzling sinuous swim

Of the fierce tide-maze scalds the eye.

Alone, aloft, unendingly
A peering gull on moveless wing
Floats silent by and again by
In search for some indefinite thing.

Each wave-line glittering through its run
Gives, in its splash where still pools lie
Upstaring at the downstaring sun,
A single harsh and sudden sigh.

And Oh, more lonely blows the breeze,
More empty shines the perfect sky,
More solitary sound the seas
Where two watched, where now watch but I!

IX

I love a flower which has no lover
The yellow sea-poppy is its name;
Spined leaves its glaucous green stem cover
Its flower is a yellow fitful flame.

Stung by the spray which leaps the shingle,
Torn by the winds that scour the beach,
Its roots with the salt sea-wrack mingle
Its leaves upon the bleached stones bleach.

Its desperate growth but few remember,
None misses it when it has died—
Scorched by the sun to a scant ember
Or wholly ravaged by the tide.

Yet I elect this weed to cherish
Nor any other would desire
Than this which must so shortly perish
Tortured by sea-foam or sky-fire.

Above this flower we too once bended,
Drawn to it by a subtle spell,
On whom the fire of heaven descended

Over whom the wave arose from hell.

Frantic, she snatched the ragged blossom,
Kissed it then with a wild, fierce kiss,
Pressed spine and flame into her bosom,
Crying, 'The flower! our love is this!'

The grey waves crash. The wind whirls over.
The flower is withered from the beach,
Whose waves divide the loved and lover,
Whose wind blows louder than their speech.

X

The moon behind high tranquil leaves
Hides her sad head;
The dwindled water tinkles and grieves
In the stream's black bed
And where now, where are you sleeping?
The shadowy nightjar, hawking gnats,
Flickers or floats;
High in still air the flurrying bats
Repeat their wee notes,
And where now, where are you sleeping?

Silent lightning flutters in heaven,
Where quiet crowd
By the toil of an upper whirlwind driven
Dark legions of cloud;
In whose arms now are you sleeping?
The cloud makes, lidding the sky's wan hole,
The world a tomb;
Far out at sea long thunders roll
From gloom to dim gloom;
In whose arms now are you sleeping?

Rent clouds, like boughs, in darkness hang
Close overhead;
The foreland's bell-buoy begins to clang
As if for the dead:
Awake they, where you are sleeping?
The chasms crack; the heavens revolt;

With tearing sound
Bright bolt volleys on flaring bolt,
Wave and cloud clash; through deep, through vault
Huge thunders rebound!
But they wake not where you are sleeping.

Robert Nichols

The Last Salute

In a far field, away from England, lies
A boy I friended with a care like love;
All day the wide earth aches, the keen wind cries,
The melancholy clouds drive on above.

There, separate from him by a little span
Two eagle cousins, generous, reckless, free,
Two Grenfells, lie, and my boy is made man,
One with these elder knights of chivalry.

Boy, who expected not this dreadful day,
Yet leaped, a soldier, at the sudden call,
Drank as your fathers, deeper though than they,
The soldier's cup of anguish, blood, and gall.

Not now as friend, but as a soldier, I
Salute you fallen. For the soldier's name
Our greatest honour is, if worthily
These wayward hearts assume and bear the same

The Soldier's is a name none recognise
Saving his fellows. Deeds are all his flower.
He lives, he toils, he suffers, and he dies,
And if not vainly spent, this is his dower.

The Soldier is the Martyr of a nation,
Expresses but is subject to its will,
His is the Pride ennobles Resignation
As his the rebel Spirit-to-fulfil.

Anonymous, he takes his country's name,
Becomes its blindest vassal - though its lord
By force of arms-its shame is called his shame,
As its the glory gathered by his sword.

Lonely he is: he has nor friend nor lover,
Sith in his body he is dedicate...
His comrades only share his life and offer
Their further deeds to one more heart oblate.

Living, lie's made an 'Argument Beyond'
For others' peace; but when hot wars have birth,
For all his brothers' safety he is bond
To Fate or Whatsoever sways this Earth.

Dying, his mangled body, to inter it,
He doth bequeath him into comrade hands,
His soul he renders to some Captain Spirit
That knows, admires, pities, and understands!

All this you knew by that which doth reside
Deeper than learning; by apprehension
Of ancient, dark, and melancholy pride;
You were a Soldier true and died as one!...

All day the long wind cries, the clouds unroll,
But to the cloud and wind I cry, 'Be still!'
What need of comfort has the heroic soul?
What soldier finds a soldier's grave is chill?

Robert Nichols

The Naiads' Music: From A Faun's Holiday

Come, ye sorrowful, and steep
Your tired brows in a nectarous sleep:
For our kisses lightlier run
Than the trceries of the sun
By the lolling water cast
Up grey precipices vast,
Lifting smooth and waem and steep
Out of the palely shimmering deep.

Come, ye sorrowul, and take
Kisses that are but half awake:
For here are eyes O softer far
Than the blossom of the star
Upon the mothy twilit waters,
And here are mouths whose gentle laughters
Are but the echoes of the deep
Laughing and murmuring in its sleep.

Come, ye sorrowful, and see
The raindrops flaming goldenly
On the stream's eddies overhead
And dragonflies with drops of red
In the crisp surface of each wing
Threading slant rains that flash and sing,
Or under the water-lily's cup,
From darkling depths, roll slowly up
The bronze flanks of ancient bream
Into the hot sun's shattered beam,
Or over a sunk tree's bubbled bole
The perch stream in a golden shoal:
Come, ye sorrowful; our deep
Holds dreams lovelier than sleep.

But if ye sons of Sorrow come
Only wishing to be numb:
Our eyes are sad as bluebell posies,
Our breasts are soft as silken roses,
And our hands are tenderer
Than he breaths that scarce can stir

The sunlit eglantine that is
Murmurous with hidden bees.
Come, ye sorrowful, and steep
Your tired brows in a nectarous sleep.

Come, ye sorrowful, for here
No voices sound but fond and clear
Of mouths as lorn as is the rose
That under water doth disclose,
Amid her crimson petals torn,
A heart as golden as the morn;
And here are tresses langourous
As the weeds wander over us,
And brows as holy and as bland
As the honey-coloured sand
Lying sun-entranced below
The lazy water's limpid flow:
Come, ye sorrowful, and steep
Your tired brows in a nectarous sleep.

Robert Nichols

The Nocturne: Address To The Sunset

Exquisite stillness! What serenities
Of earth and air! How bright atop the wall
The stonecrop's fire and beyond the precipice
How huge, how hushed the primrose evenfall!
How softly, too, the white crane voyages
Yon honeyed height of warmth and silence,
whence
He can look down on islet, lake and shore
And crowding woods and voiceless promontories
Or, further gazing, view the magnificence
Of cloud- like mountains and of mountainous cloud
Or ghostly wrack below the horizon rim
Not even his eye has vantage to explore.
Now, spirit, find out wings and mount to him,
Wheel where he wheels, where he is soaring soar.
Hang where now he hangs in the planisphere -
Evening's first star and golden as a bee
In the sun's hair - for happiness is here!

Robert Nichols

The Philosopher's Oration: A Faun's Holiday

Meanwhile, though nations in distress
Cower at a comet's loveliness
Shaken across the midnight sky;
Though the wind roars, and Victory,
A virgin fierce, on vans of gold
Stoops through the cloud's white smother rolled
Over the armies' shock and flow
Across the broad green hills below,
Yet hovers and will not circle down
To cast t'ward one the leafy crown;
Though men drive galleys' golden beaks
To isles beyond the sunset peaks,
And cities on the sea behold
Whose walls are glass, whose gates are gold,
Whose turrets, risen in an hour,
Dazzle between the sun and shower,
Whose sole inhabitants are kings
Six cubits high with gryphon's wings
And beard and mien more glorious
Than Midas or Assaracus;
Though priests in many a hill-top fane
Lift anguished hands -- and lift in vain --
Toward the sun's shaft dancing through
The bright roof's square of wind-swept blue;
Though 'cross the stars nightly arise
The silver fumes of sacrifice;
Though a new Helen bring new scars
Pyres piled upon wrecked golden cars,
Stacked spears, rolled smoke, and spirits sped
Like a streaked flame toward the dead:
Though all these be, yet grows not old
Delight of sunned and windy wold,
Of soaking downs aglare, asteam,
Of still tarns where the yellow gleam
Of a far sunrise slowly breaks,
Or sunset strews with golden flakes
The deeps which soon the stars will throng.

For earth yet keeps her undersong

Of comfort and of ultimate peace,
That whoso seeks shall never cease
To hear at dawn or noon or night.
Joys hath she, too, joys thin and bright,
Too thin, too bright, for those to hear
Who listen with an eager ear,
Or course about and seek to spy,
Within an hour, eternity.
First must the spirit cast aside
This world's and next his own poor pride
And learn the universe to scan
More as a flower, less as a man.
Then shall he hear the lonely dead
Sing and the stars sing overhead,
And every spray upon the heath,
And larks above and ants beneath;
The stream shall take him in her arms;
Blue skies shall rest him in their calms;
The wind shall be a lovely friend,
And every leaf and bough shall bend
Over him with a lover's grace.
The hills shall bare a perfect face
Full of a high solemnity;
The heavenly clouds shall weep, and be
Content as overhead they swim
To be high brothers unto him.

No more shall he feel pitched and hurled
Uncomprehended into this world;
For every place shall be his place,
And he shall recognize its face.
At dawn he shall upon his path;
No sword shall touch him, nor the wrath
Of the ranked crowd of clamorous men.
At even he shall home again,
And lay him down to sleep at ease,
One with the Night and the Night's peace.
Ev'n Sorrow, to be escaped of none,
But a more deep communion
Shall be to him, and Death at last
No more dreaded than the Past,
Whose shadow in the brain of earth

Informs him now and gave him birth.

Robert Nichols

The Pilgrim

Put by the sun my joyful soul,
We are for darkness that is whole;

Put by the wine, now for long years
We must be thirsty with salt tears;

Put by the rose, bind thou instead
The fiercest thorns about thy head;

Put by the courteous tire, we need
But the poor pilgrim's blackest weed;

Put by — a'beit with tears — thy lute,
Sing but to God or else be mute.

Take leave of friends save such as dare
Thy love with Loneliness to share.

It is full tide. Put by regret.
Turn, turn away. Forget. Forget.

Put by the sun my lightless soul,
We are for darkness that is whole.

Robert Nichols

The Prophetic Bard's Oration: From A Faun's Holiday

'Be warned! I feel the world grow old,
And off Olympus fades the gold
Of the simple passionate sun;
And the Gods wither one by one;
Proud-eyed Apollo's bow is broken,
And throned Zeus nods nor may be woken
But by the song of spirits seven
Quiring in the midnight heaven
Of a new world no more forlorn,
Sith unto it a Babe is born,
That in a propped, thatched stable lies,
While with darkling, reverent eyes
Dusky Emperors, coifed in gold,
Kneel mid the rushy mire, and hold
Caskets of rubies, urns of myrrh,
Whose fumes enwrap the thurifer
And coil toward the high dim rafters
Where, with lutes and warbling laughters,
Clustered cherubs of rainbow feather,
Fanning the fragrant air together,
Flit in jubilant holy glee,
And make heavenly minstrelsy
To the Child their Sun, whose flow
Bathes them His cloudlets from below
Long shall this chimed accord be heard,
Yet all earth hushed to His first word:
Then shall be seen Apollo's car
Blaze headlong like a banished star;
And the Queen of heavenly Loves
Dragged downward by her dying doves;
Vulcan, spun on a wheel, shall track
The circle of the zodiac;
Silver Artemis be lost,
To the polar blizzards tossed;
Heaven shall curdle as with blood;
The sun be swallowed in the flood;
The universe be silent save
For the low drone of winds that lave
The shadowed great world's ashen sides

As through the rustling void she glides.
Then shall there be a whisper heard
Of the Grave's Secret and its Word,
Where in black silence none shall cry
Save those who, dead-affrighted, spy
How from the murmurous graveyards creep
The figures of eternal sleep.

Last: when 'tis light men shall behold,
Beyond the crags, a flower of gold
Blossoming in a golden haze,
And, while they guess Zeus' halls now blaze,
Shall in the blossom's heart descry
The saints of a new hierarchy! '

He ceased . . . and in the morning sky
Zeus' anger threatened murmuously.
I sped away. The lightning's sword
Stabbed on the forest. But the word
Abides with me. I feel its power
Most darkly in the twilit hour,
When Night's eternal shadow, cast
Over earth hushed and pale and vast,
Darkly foretells the soundless Night
In which this orb, so green, so bright,
Now spins, and which shall compass her
When on her rondure nought shall stir
But snow-whorls which the wind shall roll
From the Equator to the Pole
For everlastingly there is
Something Beyond, Behind: I wis
All Gods are haunted, and there clings,
As hounds behind fled sheep, the things
Beyond the Universe's ken:
Gods haunt the Half-Gods, Half-Gods men,
And Man the brute. Gods, born of Night
Feel a blacker appetite
Gape to devour them; Half-Gods dread
But jealous Gods; and mere men tread
Warily lest a Half-God rise
And loose on them from empty skies
Amazement, thunder, stark affright,
Famine and sudden War's thick night,

In which loud Furies hunt the Pities
Through smoke above wrecked, flaming cities.

For Pan, the Unknown God, rules all.
He shall outlive the funeral,
Change, and decay, of many Gods,
Until he, too, lets fall his rods
Of viewless power upon that minute
When Universe cowers at Infinite!

Robert Nichols

The Sprig Of Lime

He lay, and those who watched him were amazed
To see unheralded beneath the lids
Twin tears, new-gathered at the price of pain,
Start and at once run crookedly athwart
Cheeks channelled long by pain, never by tears.
So desolate too the sigh next uttered
They had wept also, but his great lips moved,
And bending down one heard, 'A sprig of lime;
Bring me a sprig of lime.' Whereat she stole
With dumb signs forth to pluck the thing he craved.

So lay he till a lime-twigg had been snapped
From some still branch that swept the outer grass
Far from the silver pillar of the bole
Which mounting past the house's crusted roof
Split into massy limbs, crossed boughs, a maze
Of close-compacted intercontorted staffs
Bowered in foliage wherethrough the sun
Shot sudden showers of light or crystal spars
Or wavered in a green and vitreous flood.
And all the while in faint and fainter tones
Scarce audible on deepened evening's hush
He framed his curious and last request
For 'lime, a sprig of lime.' Her trembling hand
Closed his loose fingers on the awkward stem
Covered above with gentle heart-shaped leaves
And under dangling, pale as honey-wax,
Square clusters of sweet-scented starry flowers.

She laid his bent arm back upon his breast,
Then watched above white knuckles clenched in prayer.

He never moved. Only at last his eyes
Opened, then brightened in such avid gaze
She feared the coma mastered him again...
But no; strange sobs rose chuckling in his throat,
A stranger ecstasy suffused the flesh
Of that just mask so sun-dried, gouged and old
Which few — too few! — had loved, too many feared.

'Father!' she cried; 'Father!'

He did not hear.

She knelt and kneeling drank the scent of limes,
Blown round the slow blind by a vesperal gust,
Till the room swam. So the lime-incense blew
Into her life as once it had in his,
Though how and when and with what ageless charge
Of sorrow and deep joy how could she know?

Sweet lime that often at the height of noon
Diffusing dizzy fragrance from your boughs,
Tasselled with blossoms more innumerable
Than the black bees, the uproar of whose toil
Filled your green vaults, winning such metheglyn
As clouds their sappy cells, distil, as once
Ye used, your sunniest emanations
Toward the window where a woman kneels —
She who within that room in childish hours
Lay through the lasting murmur of blanch'd noon
Behind the sultry blind, now full now flat,
Drinking anew of every odorous breath,
Supremely happy in her ignorance
Of Time that hastens hourly and of Death
Who need not haste. Scatter your fumes, O lime,
Loose from each hispid star of citron bloom,
Tangled beneath the labyrinthine boughs,
Cloud on such stinging cloud of exhalations
As reek of youth, fierce life and summer's prime,
Though hardly now shall he in that dusk room
Savour your sweetness, since the very sprig,
Profuse of blossom and of essences,
He smells not, who in a paltering hand
Clasps it laid close his peaked and gleaming face
Propped in the pillow. Breathe silent, lofty lime,
Your curfew secrets out in fervid scent
To the attendant shadows! Tinge the air
Of the midsummer night that now begins,
At an owl's oaring flight from dusk to dusk
And downward caper of the giddy bat
Hawking against the lustre of bare skies,
With something of th' unfathomable bliss

He, who lies dying there, knew once of old
In the serene trance of a summer night
When with th' abundance of his young bride's hair
Loosed on his breast he lay and dared not sleep,
Listening for the scarce motion of your boughs,
Which sighed with bliss as she with blissful sleep,
And drinking desperately each honied wave
Of perfume wafted past the ghostly blind
Knew first th' implacable and bitter sense
Of Time that hastes and Death who need not haste.
Shed your last sweetness, limes!
But now no more.
She, fruit of that night's love, she heeds you not,
Who bent, compassionate, to the dim floor
Takes up the sprig of lime and presses it
In pain against the stumbling of her heart,
Knowing, untold, he cannot need it now.

Robert Nichols

The Stranger

Never am I so alone
As when I walk among the crowd —
Blurred masks of stern or grinning stone,
Unmeaning eyes and voices loud.

Gaze dares not encounter gaze,...
Humbled, I turn my head aside;
When suddenly there is a face...
Pale, subdued and grievous-eyed.

Ah, I know that visage meek,
Those trembling lips, the eyes that shine
But turn from that which they would seek
With an air piteous, divine!

There is not a line or scar,
Seal of a sorrow or disgrace,
But I know like sigils are
Burned in my heart and on my face.

Speak! O speak! Thou art the one!
But thou hast passed with sad head bowed;
And never am I so alone
As when I walk among the crowd.

Robert Nichols

The Tower

It was deep night, and over Jerusalem's low roofs
The moon floated, drifting through high vaporous woofs.
The moonlight crept and glistened silent, solemn, sweet,
Over dome and column, up empty, endless street;
In the closed, scented gardens the rose loosed from the stem
Her white showery petals; none regarded them;
The starry thicket breathed odours to the sentinel palm;
Silence possessed the city like a soul possessed by calm.

Not a spark in the warren under the giant night,
Save where in a turret's lantern beamed a grave, still light;
There in the topmost chamber a gold-eyed lamp was lit --
Marvellous lamp in darkness, informing, redeeming it!
For, set in that tiny chamber, Jesus, blessed and doomed,
Spoke to the lone apostles as light to men entombed;
And spreading his hands in blessing, as one soon to be dead,
He put soft enchantment into spare wine and bread.

The hearts of the disciples were broken and full of tears,
Because their lord, the spearless, was hedged about with spears;
And in his face the sickness of departure had spread a gloom,
At leaving his young friends friendless.
They could not forget the tomb.
He smiled subduedly, telling, in tones soft as the voice of the dove,
The endlessness of sorrow, the eternal solace of love;
And lifting the earthly tokens, wine and sorrowful bread,
He bade them sup and remember one who lived and was dead.
And they could not restrain their weeping.
But one rose up to depart,
Having weakness and hate of weakness raging within his heart,
And bowed to the robed assembly whose eyes gleamed wet in the light.
Judas arose and departed: night went out to the night.

Then Jesus lifted his voice like a fountain in an ocean of tears,
And comforted his disciples and calmed and allayed their fears.
But Judas wound down the turret, creeping from floor to floor,
And would fly; but one leaning, weeping, barred him beside the door.
And he knew her by her ruddy garment and two yet-watching men:
Mary of Seven Evils, Mary Magdalen.

And he was frightened at her. She sighed: ' I dreamed him dead.
We sell the body for silver. . . . '
Then Judas cried out and fled
Forth into the night! . . . The moon had begun to set:
A drear, deft wind went sifting, setting the dust afret;
Into the heart of the city Judas ran on and prayed
To stern Jehovah lest his deed make him afraid.

Thus Jesus discoursed, and was silent, sitting upright, and soon
Past the casement behind him slanted the sinking moon;
And, rising for Olivet, all stared, between love and dread,
Seeing the torrid moon a ruddy halo behind his head.

Robert Nichols

Three Songs Of The Enigma

I

SOMETHING

How long I have wished for something I know well,
But what that something is I cannot tell.

So often at sunrise in sad tears I wake
Shivering with longing for its sake;

So often at noontide when the house is still
It sickens me with its unbidden ill;

So often at twilight it does not seem far,
Not further than the first and far-off star;

All, all my life is built towards its token
Yet by its near far-offness I am broken.

For I am ever under something's spell,
But what that something is I cannot tell.

II

A WANDERING THING

The hopeless rain, a sigh, a shadow
Falters and drifts again, again over the meadow,
It wanders lost, drifts hither . . . thither,
It blows, it goes, it knows not whither.

A profound grief, an unknown sorrow
Wanders always my strange life thro',
I know not ever what brings it hither,
Nor whence it comes . . . nor goes it whither.

III

MODERN LOVE SONG

Now that the evenfall is come,
And the sun fills the flaring trees
And everything is mad, lit, dumb,
And in the pauses of the breeze
A far voice seems to call me home
To haven beyond woods and leas.

I feel again how sharply stings
The spell which binds our troubled dust
With hint of divine frustrated things,—
The Soul's deep doubt and desperate trust
That She at sunset shall find wings
To bear her beyond NOW and MUST.

So place your head against my head,
And set your lips upon my lips
That so I may be comforted,—
For Ah ! the world so from me slips,
To the World-Sunset I am sped
Where Soul and Silence come to grips
And Love stands sore-astonished.

Robert Nichols

To

Asleep within the deadest hour of night
And turning with the earth, I was aware
How suddenly the eastern curve was bright,
As when the sun arises from his lair.
But not the sun arose: It was thy hair
Shaken up heaven in tossing leagues of light.

Since then I know that neither night nor day
May I escape thee, O my heavenly hell!
Awake, in dreams, thou springest to waylay;
And should I dare to die, I know full well
Whose voice would mock me in the mourning bell,
Whose face would greet me in hell's fiery way.

Robert Nichols