

Classic Poetry Series

Stephen Vincent Benet
- poems -

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Stephen Vincent Benét(1898 - 1943)

Stephen Vincent Benét was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, into an army family. His father, Colonel J. Walker Benét, served as a commanding officer of ordinance posts in California and Georgia. Frances Neill (Rose) Benét, Stephen's mother, was a descendant of an old Kentucky military family. Because his father was an avid reader, Benét grew up in home, where reading literature was valued and enjoyed.

At the age about ten, Benét was sent to the Hitchcock Military Academy. He did not like the brutality of the school and later wrote about it in his poem about Shelley at Eton: "His pile of books scattered about his feet, / Stood Shelley while two others held him fast, / And the clods beat upon him." Benét's first book, FIVE MEN AND POMPEY (1915), a collection of verse, was published when he was 17. It showed the romantic influence of William Morris as well as the influence of modern realism.

Benét was rejected from the army because of his defective vision.

In Washington he worked as a cipher-clerk in the same department as James Thurber. Benét graduated from Yale in 1919, submitting his third volume of poems instead of a thesis. In Yale his contemporaries included Thornton Wilder and Archibald MacLeish.

Benét's first novel, the autobiographical THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM, appeared in 1921. He continued his studies at Sorbonne, France, where he met his wife, the writer Rosemary Carr. In 1923 he returned to the United States. During the 1920s he wrote three other novels, YOUNG PEOPLE'S PRIDE (1922), JEAN HUGUENOT (1923), and SPANISH BAYONET (1926), a historical novel about the 18th-century Florida. It focused on Benét's ancestors. JAMES SHORE'S DAUGHTER (1934), a story about wealth and responsibility, is usually considered among Benét's best novels. .

In 1926 Benét went back to France, where he lived for four years, and worked on his poem about the Civil War, John Brown's Body. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1929. "So, from a hundred visions, I make one, And out of darkness build my mocking sun." Seen from the perspective of a young, small town boy, it interweaved the stories of historical and fictional figures to produce a richly textured account of the war, from the raid of Harper's Ferry to General Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House.

Before starting any new work, Benét published a collection of ballads and poems, written over a period of fifteen years. It celebrated American names and people, such as William Sycamore, whose "... father, he was a mountaineer / His fist was a knotty hammer..."

In the 1930s Benét published among others A BOOK OF AMERICANS (1933) with his wife Rosemary Carr Benét. THE BURNING CITY (1936) included the poem 'Litany for Dictatorships'. THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN (1937) was an one-act play. A short story collection, THIRTEEN O'CLOCK (1937), included the famous 'The Devil and Daniel Webster'. The story was later made into a play, and opera (music by Douglas Moore), and a motion picture entitled All That Money Can Buy. Benét also made a number of radio broadcasts and worked in Hollywood as a screenwriter. His short stories, produced during these years, were often written under pressure to pay bills. Benét popular poem, 'American Names', appeared first in BALLADS AND POEMS (1931). The poem ends with the line 'Bury my heart at Wounded Knee'.

In the early 1940s Benét was a strong advocate of America's entry into the war - in the United Nations Day speech President Roosevelt read a prayer specially composed by the author. Benét died in New York City, on March 13, 1943. He was posthumously awarded in 1944 the Pulitzer Prize for his volume of verse WESTERN STAR. The epic poem, part of large but unfinished work, reflected the view that the frontier was the dominant force in American history.

1936

All night they marched, the infantrymen under pack,
But the hands gripping the rifles were naked bone
And the hollow pits of the eyes stared, vacant and black,
When the moonlight shone.

The gas mask lay like a blot on the empty chest,
The slanting helmets were spattered with rust and mold,
But they burrowed the hill for the machine-gun nest
As they had of old.

And the guns rolled, and the tanks, but there was no sound,
Never the gasp or rustle of living men
Where the skeletons strung their wire on disputed ground ...
I knew them, then.

'It's eighteen years,' I cried. 'You must come no more.'
'We know your names. We know that you are the dead.
Must you march forever from France and the last, blind war?'

'Fool! From the next!'
they said.

Stephen Vincent Benet

A Minor Poet

I am a shell. From me you shall not hear
The splendid trappings of insistent drums,
The orb'd gold of the viol's voice that comes,
Heavy with radiance, languorous and clear.
Yet, if you hold me close against the ear,
A dim, far whisper rises clamorously,
The thunderous beat and passion of the sea,
The slow surge of the tides that drown the mere.

Others with subtle hands may pluck the strings,
Making even Love in music audible,
And earth one glory. I am but a shell
That moves, not of itself, and moving sings;
Leaving a fragrance, faint as wine new-shed,
A tremulous murmur from great days long dead.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Alexander VI Dines With The Cardinal Of Capua

Next, then, the peacock, gilt
With all its feathers. Look, what gorgeous dyes
Flow in the eyes!
And how deep, lustrous greens are splashed and spilt
Along the back, that like a sea-wave's crest
Scatters soft beauty o'er th' emblazoned breast!

A strange fowl! But most fit
For feasts like this, whereby I honor one
Pure as the sun!
Yet glowing with the fiery zeal of it!
Some wine? Your goblet's empty? Let it foam!
It is not often that you come to Rome!

You like the Venice glass?
Rippled with lines that float like women's curls,
Neck like a girl's,
Fierce-glowing as a chalice in the Mass?
You start -- 'twas artist then, not Pope who spoke!
Ave Maria stella! -- ah, it broke!

'Tis said they break alone
When poison writhes within. A foolish tale!
What, you look pale?
Caraffa, fetch a silver cup! . . . You own
A Birth of Venus, now -- or so I've heard,
Lovely as the breast-plumage of a bird.

Also a Dancing Faun,
Hewn with the lithe grace of Praxiteles;
Globed pearls to please
A sultan; golden veils that drop like lawn --
How happy I could be with but a tithe
Of your possessions, fortunate one! Don't writhe

But take these cushions here!
Now for the fruit! Great peaches, satin-skinned,
Rough tamarind,
Pomegranates red as lips -- oh they come dear!

But men like you we feast at any price --
A plum perhaps? They're looking rather nice!

I'll cut the thing in half.
There's yours! Now, with a one-side-poisoned knife
One might snuff life
And leave one's friend with -- "fool" for epitaph!
An old trick? Truth! But when one has the itch
For pretty things and isn't very rich. . . .

There, eat it all or I'll
Be angry! You feel giddy? Well, it's hot!
This bergamot
Take home and smell -- it purges blood of bile!
And when you kiss Bianca's dimpled knee,
Think of the poor Pope in his misery!

Now you may kiss my ring!
Ho there, the Cardinal's litter! -- You must dine
When the new wine
Is in, again with me -- hear Bice sing,
Even admire my frescoes -- though they're nought
Beside the calm Greek glories you have bought!

Godspeed, Sir Cardinal!
And take a weak man's blessing! Help him there
To the cool air! . . .
Lucrezia here? You're ready for the ball?
-- He'll die within ten hours, I suppose --
Mhm! Kiss your poor old father, little rose!

Stephen Vincent Benet

American Names

I have fallen in love with American names,
The sharp names that never get fat,
The snakeskin-titles of mining-claims,
The plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat,
Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat.

Seine and Piave are silver spoons,
But the spoonbowl-metal is thin and worn,
There are English counties like hunting-tunes
Played on the keys of a postboy's horn,
But I will remember where I was born.

I will remember Carquinez Straits,
Little French Lick and Lundy's Lane,
The Yankee ships and the Yankee dates
And the bullet-towns of Calamity Jane.
I will remember Skunktown Plain.

I will fall in love with a Salem tree
And a rawhide quirt from Santa Cruz,
I will get me a bottle of Boston sea
And a blue-gum nigger to sing me blues.
I am tired of loving a foreign muse.

Rue des Martyrs and Bleeding-Heart-Yard,
Senlis, Pisa, and Blindman's Oast,
It is a magic ghost you guard
But I am sick for a newer ghost,
Harrisburg, Spartanburg, Painted Post.

Henry and John were never so
And Henry and John were always right?
Granted, but when it was time to go
And the tea and the laurels had stood all night,
Did they never watch for Nantucket Light?

I shall not rest quiet in Montparnasse.
I shall not lie easy at Winchelsea.
You may bury my body in Sussex grass,

You may bury my tongue at Champmedy.
I shall not be there. I shall rise and pass.
Bury my heart at Wounded Knee.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Army Of Northern Virginia

Army of Northern Virginia, army of legend,
Who were your captains that you could trust them so surely?
Who were your battle-flags?
Call the shapes from the mist,
Call the dead men out of the mist and watch them ride.
Tall the first rider, tall with a laughing mouth,
His long black beard is combed like a beauty's hair,
His slouch hat plumed with a curled black ostrich-feather,
He wears gold spurs and sits his horse with the seat
Of a horseman born.
It is Stuart of Laurel Hill,
'Beauty' Stuart, the genius of cavalry,
Reckless, merry, religious, theatrical,
Lover of gesture, lover of panache,
With all the actor's grace and the quick, light charm
That makes the women adore him-a wild cavalier
Who worships as sober a God as Stonewall Jackson,
A Rupert who seldom drinks, very often prays,
Loves his children, singing, fighting spurs, and his wife.
Sweeney his banjo-player follows him.
And after them troop the young Virginia counties,
Horses and men, Botetort, Halifax,
Dinwiddie, Prince Edward, Cumberland, Nottoway,
Mecklenburg, Berkeley, Augusta, the Marylanders,
The horsemen never matched till Sheridan came.
Now the phantom guns creak by. They are Pelham's guns.
That quiet boy with the veteran mouth is Pelham.
He is twenty-two. He is to fight sixty battles
And never lose a gun.
The cannon roll past,
The endless lines of the infantry begin.
A. P. Hill leads the van. He is small and spare,
His short, clipped beard is red as his battleshirt,
Jackson and Lee are to call him in their death-hours.
Dutch Longstreet follows, slow, pugnacious and stubborn,
Hard to beat and just as hard to convince,
Fine corps commander, good bulldog for holding on,
But dangerous when he tries to think for himself,
He thinks for himself too much at Gettysburg,

But before and after he grips with tenacious jaws.
There is D. H. Hill-there is Early and Fitzhugh Lee-
Yellow-haired Hood with his wounds and his empty sleeve,
Leading his Texans, a Viking shape of a man,
With the thrust and lack of craft of a berserk sword,
All lion, none of the fox.

When he supersedes
Joe Johnston, he is lost, and his army with him,
But he could lead forlorn hopes with the ghost of Ney.
His bigboned Texans follow him into the mist.

Who follows them?

These are the Virginia faces,
The Virginia speech. It is Jackson's footcavalry,
The Army of the Valley,
It is the Stonewall Brigade, it is the streams
Of the Shenandoah, marching.

Ewell goes by,

The little woodpecker, bald and quaint of speech
With his wooden leg stuck stiffly out from his saddle,
He is muttering, 'Sir, I'm a nervous Major-General,
And whenever an aide rides up from General Jackson
I fully expect an order to storm the North Pole.'
He chuckles and passes, full of crotchets and courage,
Living on frumenty for imagined dyspepsia,
And ready to storm the North Pole at a Jackson phrase.

Then the staff-then little Sorrel-and the plain

Presbyterian figure in the flat cap,

Throwing his left hand out in the awkward gesture
That caught the bullet out of the air at Bull Run,
Awkward, rugged and dour, the belated Ironside
With the curious, brilliant streak of the cavalier
That made him quote Mercutio in staff instructions,
Love lancet windows, the color of passion-flowers,
Mexican sun and all fierce, tautlooking fine creatures;
Stonewall Jackson, wrapped in his beard and his silence,
Cromwell-eyed and ready with Cromwell's short
Bleak remedy for doubters and fools and enemies,
Hard on his followers, harder on his foes,
An iron sabre vowed to an iron Lord,
And yet the only man of those men who pass
With a strange, secretive grain of harsh poetry
Hidden so deep in the stony sides of his heart

That it shines by flashes only and then is gone.
It glitters in his last words.
He is deeply ambitious,
The skilled man, utterly sure of his own skill
And taking no nonsense about it from the unskilled,
But God is the giver of victory and defeat,
And Lee, on earth, vicegerent under the Lord.
Sometimes he differs about the mortal plans
But once the order is given, it is obeyed.
We know what he thought about God. One would like to know
What he thought of the two together, if he so mingled them.
He said two things about Lee it is well to recall.
When he first beheld the man that he served so well,
'I have never seen such a fine-looking human creature.'
Then, afterwards, at the height of his own fame,
The skilled man talking of skill, and something more.
'General Lee is a phenomenon,
He is the only man I would follow blindfold.'
Think of those two remarks and the man who made them
When you picture Lee as the rigid image in marble.
No man ever knew his own skill better than Jackson
Or was more ready to shatter an empty fame.
He passes now in his dusty uniform.
The Bible jostles a book of Napoleon's Maxims
And a magic lemon deep in his saddlebags.

And now at last,
Comes Traveller and his master. Look at them well.
The horse is an iron-grey, sixteen hands high,
Short back, deep chest, strong haunch, flat legs, small head,
Delicate ear, quick eye, black mane and tail,
Wise brain, obedient mouth.
Such horses are
The jewels of the horseman's hands and thighs,
They go by the word and hardly need the rein.
They bred such horses in Virginia then,
Horses that were remembered after death
And buried not so far from Christian ground
That if their sleeping riders should arise
They could not witch them from the earth again
And ride a printless course along the grass
With the old manage and light ease of hand.

The rider, now.
He too, is iron-grey,
Though the thick hair and thick, blunt-pointed beard
Have frost in them.
Broad-foreheaded, deep-eyed,
Straight-nosed, sweet-mouthed, firmlipped, head cleanly set,
He and his horse are matches for the strong
Grace of proportion that inhabits both.
They carry nothing that is in excess
And nothing that is less than symmetry,
The strength of Jackson is a hammered strength,
Bearing the tool marks still. This strength was shaped
By as hard arts but does not show the toil
Except as justness, though the toil was there.
-And so we get the marble man again,
The head on the Greek coin, the idol image,
The shape who stands at Washington's left hand,
Worshipped, uncomprehended and aloof,
A figure lost to flesh and blood and bones,
Frozen into a legend out of life,
A blank-verse statue-
How to humanize
That solitary gentleness and strength
Hidden behind the deadly oratory
Of twenty thousand Lee Memorial days,
How show, in spite of all the rhetoric,
All the sick honey of the speechifiers,
Proportion, not as something calm congealed
From lack of fire, but ruling such a fire
As only such proportion could contain?

The man was loved, the man was idolized,
The man had every just and noble gift.
He took great burdens and he bore them well,
Believed in God but did not preach too much,
Believed and followed duty first and last
With marvellous consistency and force,
Was a great victor, in defeat as great,
No more, no less, always himself in both,
Could make men die for him but saved his men
Whenever he could save them-was most kind
But-was not disobeyed-was a good father,

A loving husband, a considerate friend:
Had little humor, but enough to play
Mild jokes that never wounded but had charm,
Did not seek intimates, yet drew men to him,
Did not seek fame, did not protest against it,
Knew his own value without pomp or jealousy
And died as he preferred to live-sans praise,
With commonsense, tenacity and courage,
A Greek proportion-and a riddle unread.
And everything that we have said is true
And nothing helps us yet to read the man,
Nor will he help us while he has the strength
To keep his heart his own.
For he will smile
And give you, with unflinching courtesy,
Prayers, trappings, letters, uniforms and orders,
Photographs, kindness, valor and advice,
And do it with such grace and gentleness
That you will know you have the whole of him
Pinned down, mapped out, easy to understand-
And so you have.
All things except the heart
The heart he kept himself, that answers all.
For here was someone who lived all his life
In the most fierce and open light of the sun,
Wrote letters freely, did not guard his speech,
Listened and talked with every sort of man,
And kept his heart a secret to the end
From all the picklocks of biographers.

He was a man, and as a man he knew
Love, separation, sorrow, joy and death.
He was a master of the tricks of war,
He gave great strokes and warded strokes as great.
He was the prop and pillar of a State,
The incarnation of a national dream,
And when the State fell and the dream dissolved
He must have lived with bitterness itself-
But what his sorrow was and what his joy,
And how he felt in the expense of strength,
And how his heart contained its bitterness,
He will not tell us.

We can lie about him,
Dress up a dummy in his uniform
And put our words into the dummy's mouth,
Say 'Here Lee must have thought,' and 'There, no doubt,
By what we know of him, we may suppose
He felt-this pang or that-' but he remains
Beyond our stagecraft, reticent as ice,
Reticent as the fire within the stone.

Yet-look at the face again-look at it well-
This man was not repose, this man was act.
This man who murmured 'It is well that war
Should be so terrible, if it were not
We might become too fond of it-' and showed
Himself, for once, completely as he lived
In the laconic balance of that phrase;
This man could reason, but he was a fighter,
Skilful in every weapon of defence
But never defending when he could assault,
Taking enormous risks again and again,
Never retreating while he still could strike,
Dividing a weak force on dangerous ground
And joining it again to beat a strong,
Mocking at chance and all the odds of war
With acts that looked like hairbread'th recklessness -
We do not call them reckless, since they won.
We do not see him reckless for the calm
Proportion that controlled the recklessness-
But that attacking quality was there.
He was not mild with life or drugged with justice,
He gripped life like a wrestler with a bull,
Impetuously. It did not come to him
While he stood waiting in a famous cloud,
He went to it and took it by both horns
And threw it down.
Oh, he could bear the shifts
Of time and play the bitter loser's game,
The slow, unflinching chess of fortitude,
But while he had an opening for attack
He would attack with every ounce of strength.
His heart was not a stone but trumpet-shaped
And a long challenge blew an anger through it

That was more dread for being musical
First, last, and to the end.
Again he said
A curious thing to life.
'I'm always wanting something.'
The brief phrase
Slides past us, hardly grasped in the smooth flow
Of the well-balanced, mildly-humorous prose
That goes along to talk of cats and duties,
Maxims of conduct, farming and poor bachelors,
But for a second there, the marble cracked
And a strange man we never saw before
Showed us the face he never showed the world
And wanted something-not the general
Who wanted shoes and food for ragged men,
Not the good father wanting for his children,
The patriot wanting victory-all the Lees
Whom all the world could see and recognize
And hang with gilded laurels-but the man
Who had, you'd say, all things that life can give
Except the last success-and had, for that,
Such glamor as can wear sheer triumph out,
Proportion's son and Duty's eldest sword
And the calm mask who-wanted something still,
Somewhere, somehow and always.
Picklock biographers,
What could he want that he had never had?

He only said it once-the marble closed-
There was a man enclosed within that image.
There was a force that tried Proportion's rule
And died without a legend or a cue
To bring it back. The shadow-Lees still live.
But the first-person and the singular Lee?

The ant finds kingdoms in a foot of ground
But earth's too small for something in our earth,
We'll make a new earth from the summer's cloud,
From the pure summer's cloud.
It was not that,
It was not God or love or mortal fame.

It was not anything he left undone.

-What does Proportion want that it can lack?

-What does the ultimate hunger of the flesh

Want from the sky more than a sky of air?

He wanted something. That must be enough.

Now he rides Traveller back into the mist.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Before An Examination

The little letters dance across the page,
Flaunt and retire, and trick the tired eyes;
Sick of the strain, the glaring light, I rise
Yawning and stretching, full of empty rage
At the dull maunderings of a long dead sage,
Fling up the windows, fling aside his lies;
Choosing to breathe, not stifle and be wise,
And let the air pour in upon my cage.

The breeze blows cool and there are stars and stars
Beyond the dark, soft masses of the elms
That whisper things in windy tones and light.
They seem to wheel for dim, celestial wars;
And I -- I hear the clash of silver helms
Ring icy-clear from the far deeps of night.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Campus Sonnets: Before An Examination

The little letters dance across the page,
Flaunt and retire, and trick the tired eyes;
Sick of the strain, the glaring light, I rise
Yawning and stretching, full of empty rage
At the dull maunderings of a long dead sage,
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Stephen Vincent Benet

Campus Sonnets: May Morning

I lie stretched out upon the window-seat
And doze, and read a page or two, and doze,
And feel the air like water on me close,
Great waves of sunny air that lip and beat
With a small noise, monotonous and sweet,
Against the window - and the scent of cool,
Frail flowers by some brown and dew-drenched pool
Possesses me from drowsy head to feet.

This is the time of all-sufficing laughter
At idiotic things some one has done,
And there is neither past nor vague hereafter.
And all your body stretches in the sun
And drinks the light in like a liquid thing;
Filled with the divine languor of late spring.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Campus Sonnets: Return - 1917

'The College will reopen Sept. -.'
'Catalogue'.

I was just aiming at the jagged hole
Torn in the yellow sandbags of their trench,
When something threw me sideways with a wrench,
And the skies seemed to shrivel like a scroll
And disappear . . . and propped against the bole
Of a big elm I lay, and watched the clouds
Float through the blue, deep sky in speckless crowds,
And I was clean again, and young, and whole.

Lord, what a dream that was! And what a doze
Waiting for Bill to come along to class!
I've cut it now - and he - Oh, hello, Fred!
Why, what's the matter? - here - don't be an ass,
Sit down and tell me! - What do you suppose?
I dreamed I . . . am I . . . wounded? 'You are dead.'

Stephen Vincent Benet

Campus Sonnets: Talk

Tobacco smoke drifts up to the dim ceiling
From half a dozen pipes and cigarettes,
Curling in endless shapes, in blue rings wheeling,
As formless as our talk. Phil, drawling, bets
Cornell will win the relay in a walk,
While Bob and Mac discuss the Giants' chances;
Deep in a morris-chair, Bill scowls at 'Falk',
John gives large views about the last few dances.

And so it goes - an idle speech and aimless,
A few chance phrases; yet I see behind
The empty words the gleam of a beauty tameless,
Friendship and peace and fire to strike men blind,
Till the whole world seems small and bright to hold -
Of all our youth this hour is pure gold.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Colors

(For D. M. C.)

The little man with the vague beard and guise
Pulled at the wicket. "Come inside!" he said,
"I'll show you all we've got now -- it was size
You wanted? -- oh, dry colors! Well" -- he led
To a dim alley lined with musty bins,
And pulled one fiercely. Violent and bold
A sudden tempest of mad, shrieking sins
Scarlet screamed out above the battered gold
Of tins and picture-frames. I held my breath.
He tugged another hard -- and sapphire skies
Spread in vast quietude, serene as death,
O'er waves like crackled turquoise -- and my eyes
Burnt with the blinding brilliance of calm sea!
"We're selling that lot there out cheap!" said he.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Dedication

To W. R. B.

And so, to you, who always were
Perseus, D'Artagnan, Lancelot
To me, I give these weedy rhymes
In memory of earlier times.
Now all those careless days are not.
Of all my heroes, you endure.

Words are such silly things! too rough,
Too smooth, they boil up or congeal,
And neither of us likes emotion --
But I can't measure my devotion!
And you know how I really feel --
And we're together. There, enough . . .

Stephen Vincent Benet

Difference

My mind's a map. A mad sea-captain drew it
Under a flowing moon until he knew it;
Winds with brass trumpets, puffy-cheeked as jugs,
And states bright-patterned like Arabian rugs.
"Here there be tygers." "Here we buried Jim."
Here is the strait where eyeless fishes swim
About their buried idol, drowned so cold
He weeps away his eyes in salt and gold.
A country like the dark side of the moon,
A cider-apple country, harsh and boon,
A country savage as a chestnut-rind,
A land of hungry sorcerers.
Your mind?

—Your mind is water through an April night,
A cherry-branch, plume-feathery with its white,
A lavender as fragrant as your words,
A room where Peace and Honor talk like birds,
Sewing bright coins upon the tragic cloth
Of heavy Fate, and Mockery, like a moth,
Flutters and beats about those lovely things.
You are the soul, enchanted with its wings,
The single voice that raises up the dead
To shake the pride of angels.
I have said.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Dinner In A Quick Lunch Room

Soup should be heralded with a mellow horn,
Blowing clear notes of gold against the stars;
Strange entrees with a jangle of glass bars
Fantastically alive with subtle scorn;
Fish, by a plopping, gurgling rush of waters,
Clear, vibrant waters, beautifully austere;
Roast, with a thunder of drums to stun the ear,
A screaming fife, a voice from ancient slaughters!

Over the salad let the woodwinds moan;
Then the green silence of many watercresses;
Dessert, a balalaika, strummed alone;
Coffee, a slow, low singing no passion stresses;
Such are my thoughts as -- clang! crash! bang! -- I brood
And gorge the sticky mess these fools call food!

Stephen Vincent Benet

Elegy For An Enemy

(For G. H.)

Say, does that stupid earth
Where they have laid her,
Bind still her sullen mirth,
Mirth which betrayed her?
Do the lush grasses hold,
Greenly and glad,
That brittle-perfect gold
She alone had?

Smugly the common crew,
Over their knitting,
Mourn her -- as butchers do
Sheep-throats they're slitting!
She was my enemy,
One of the best of them.
Would she come back to me,
God damn the rest of them!

Damn them, the flabby, fat,
Sleek little darlings!
We gave them tit for tat,
Snarlings for snarlings!
Squashy pomposities,
Shocked at our violence,
Let not one tactful hiss
Break her new silence!

Maids of antiquity,
Look well upon her;
Ice was her chastity,
Spotless her honor.
Neighbors, with breasts of snow,
Dames of much virtue,
How she could flame and glow!
Lord, how she hurt you!

She was a woman, and

Tender -- at times!
(Delicate was her hand)
One of her crimes!
Hair that strayed elfinly,
Lips red as haws,
You, with the ready lie,
Was that the cause?

Rest you, my enemy,
Slain without fault,
Life smacks but tastelessly
Lacking your salt!
Stuck in a bog whence naught
May catapult me,
Come from the grave, long-sought,
Come and insult me!

WE knew that sugared stuff
Poisoned the other;
Rough as the wind is rough,
Sister and brother!
Breathing the ether clear
Others forlorn have found --
Oh, for that peace austere
She and her scorn have found!

Stephen Vincent Benet

Ghosts Of A Lunatic Asylum

Here, where men's eyes were empty and as bright
As the blank windows set in glaring brick,
When the wind strengthens from the sea -- and night
Drops like a fog and makes the breath come thick;

By the deserted paths, the vacant halls,
One may see figures, twisted shades and lean,
Like the mad shapes that crawl an Indian screen,
Or paunchy smears you find on prison walls.

Turn the knob gently! There's the Thumbless Man,
Still weaving glass and silk into a dream,
Although the wall shows through him -- and the Khan
Journeys Cathay beside a paper stream.

A Rabbit Woman chitters by the door --
-- Chilly the grave-smell comes from the turned sod --
Come -- lift the curtain -- and be cold before
The silence of the eight men who were God!

Stephen Vincent Benet

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Stephen Vincent Benet

Going Back To School

The boat ploughed on. Now Alcatraz was past
And all the grey waves flamed to red again
At the dead sun's last glimmer. Far and vast
The Sausalito lights burned suddenly
In little dots and clumps, as if a pen
Had scrawled vague lines of gold across the hills;
The sky was like a cup some rare wine fills,
And stars came as he watched
-- and he was free
One splendid instant -- back in the great room,
Curled in a chair with all of them beside
And the whole world a rush of happy voices,
With laughter beating in a clamorous tide. . . .
Saw once again the heat of harvest fume
Up to the empty sky in threads like glass,
And ran, and was a part of what rejoices
In thunderous nights of rain; lay in the grass
Sun-baked and tired, looking through a maze
Of tiny stems into a new green world;
Once more knew eves of perfume, days ablaze
With clear, dry heat on the brown, rolling fields;
Shuddered with fearful ecstasy in bed
Over a book of knights and bloody shields . . .
The ship slowed, jarred and stopped. There, straight ahead,
Were dock and fellows. Stumbling, he was whirled
Out and away to meet them -- and his back
Slumped to the old half-tinge, his hands fell slack;
A big boy's arm went round him -- and a twist
Sent shattering pain along his tortured wrist,
As a voice cried, a bloated voice and fat,
"Why it's Miss Nancy! Come along, you rat!"

Stephen Vincent Benet

Lonely Burial

There were not many at that lonely place,
Where two scoured hills met in a little plain.
The wind cried loud in gusts, then low again.
Three pines strained darkly, runners in a race
Unseen by any. Toward the further woods
A dim harsh noise of voices rose and ceased.
-- We were most silent in those solitudes --
Then, sudden as a flame, the black-robed priest,

The clotted earth piled roughly up about
The hacked red oblong of the new-made thing,
Short words in swordlike Latin -- and a rout
Of dreams most impotent, unwearying.
Then, like a blind door shut on a carouse,
The terrible bareness of the soul's last house.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Love In Twilight

There is darkness behind the light -- and the pale light drips
Cold on vague shapes and figures, that, half-seen loom
Like the carven prows of proud, far-triumphing ships --
And the firelight wavers and changes about the room,

As the three logs crackle and burn with a small still sound;
Half-blotting with dark the deeper dark of her hair,
Where she lies, head pillowed on arm, and one hand curved round
To shield the white face and neck from the faint thin glare.

Gently she breathes -- and the long limbs lie at ease,
And the rise and fall of the young, slim, virginal breast
Is as certain-sweet as the march of slow wind through trees,
Or the great soft passage of clouds in a sky at rest.

I kneel, and our arms enlace, and we kiss long, long.
I am drowned in her as in sleep. There is no more pain.
Only the rustle of flames like a broken song
That rings half-heard through the dusty halls of the brain.

One shaking and fragile moment of ecstasy,
While the grey gloom flutters and beats like an owl above.
And I would not move or speak for the sea or the sky
Or the flame-bright wings of the miraculous Dove!

Stephen Vincent Benet

May Morning

I lie stretched out upon the window-seat
And doze, and read a page or two, and doze,
And feel the air like water on me close,
Great waves of sunny air that lip and beat
With a small noise, monotonous and sweet,
Against the window -- and the scent of cool,
Frail flowers by some brown and dew-drenched pool
Possesses me from drowsy head to feet.

This is the time of all-sufficing laughter
At idiotic things some one has done,
And there is neither past nor vague hereafter.
And all your body stretches in the sun
And drinks the light in like a liquid thing;
Filled with the divine languor of late spring.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Metropolitan Nightmare

I rained quite a lot, that spring. You woke in the morning
And saw the sky still clouded, the streets still wet,
But nobody noticed so much, except the taxis
And the people who parade. You don't, in a city.
The parks got very green. All the trees were green
Far into July and August, heavy with leaf,
Heavy with leaf and the long roots were boring and spreading,
But nobody noticed that but the city gardeners
And they didn't talk.

Oh, on Sundays, perhaps, you'd notice:
Walking through certain blocks, by the shut, proud houses
With the windows boarded, the people gone away,
You'd suddenly see the queerest small shoots of green
Poking through cracks and crevices in the stone
And a bird-sown flower, red on the balcony,
But then you made jokes about grass growing in the streets
And politics and grass-roots -- and there were songs
And gags and a musical show called 'Hot and Wet.'
It all made a good box for the papers. When the flamingo
Flew into a meeting of the Board of Estimate,
The new Mayor acted at once and called the photographers.
When the first green creeper crawled over the Brooklyn Bridge,
They thought it was ornamental. They let it stay.

There was the year the termites came to New York
And they don't do well in cold climates -- but listen, Joe,
They're only ants and ants are nothing but insects.
It was funny and yet rather wistful, in a way
(As Heywood Broun pointed out in the
World-Telegram,
)
To think of them looking for wood in a steel city.
It made you feel about life. It was too divine.
There were funny pictures by all the smart, funny artists
And Macy's ran a terribly clever ad:
'The Widow's Termite' or something.

There was no

Disturbance. Even the Communists didn't protest
And say they were Morgan hirelings. It was too hot,
Too hot to protest, too hot to get excited,
An even, African heat, lush, fertile and steamy,
That soaked into bones and mind and never once broke.
The warm rain fell in fierce showers and ceased and fell.
Pretty soon you got used to its always being that way.

You got used to the changed rhythm, the altered beat,
To people walking slower, to the whole bright
Fierce pulse of the city slowing, to men in shorts,
To the new sun-helmets from Best's and the cops' white uniforms,
And the long noon-rest in the offices, everywhere.
It wasn't a plan or anything. It just happened.
The fingers tapped the keys slower, the office-boys
Dozed on their benches, the bookkeeper yawned at his desk.
The A. T. & T. was the first to change the shifts
And establish a siesta-room,
But they were always efficient. Mostly it just
Happened like sleep itself, like a tropic sleep,
Till even the Thirties were deserted at noon
Except for a few tourists and one damned cop.
They ran boats to see the big lilies on the North River
But it was only the tourists who really noticed
The flocks of rose-and-green parrots and parrakeets
Nesting in the stone crannies of the Cathedral.
The rest of us had forgotten when they first came.

There wasn't any real change, it was just a heat spell,
A rain spell, a funny summer, a weather-man's joke,
In spite of the geraniums three feet high
In the tin-can gardens of Hester and Desbrosses.
New York was New York. It couldn't turn inside out.
When they got the news from Woods Hole about the Gulf Stream,
The
Times
ran an adequate story.
But nobody reads those stories but science-cranks.

Until, one day, a somnolent city-editor
Gave a new cub the termite yarn to break his teeth on.
The cub was just down from Vermont, so he took the time.

He was serious about it. He went around.
He read all about termites in the Public Library
And it made him sore when they fired him.

So, one evening,
Talking with an old watchman, beside the first
Raw girders of the new Planetopolis Building
(Ten thousand brine-cooled offices, each with shower)
He saw a dark line creeping across the rubble
And turned a flashlight on it.

'Say, buddy,' he said,
'You'd better look out for those ants. They eat wood, you know,
They'll have your shack down in no time.'

The watchman spat.
'Oh, they've quit eating wood,' he said, in a casual voice,
'I thought everyone knew that.'

-- and reaching down,
He pried from the insect's jaw the bright crumb of steel.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Minor Litany

This being a time confused and with few clear stars,
Either private ones or public,
Out of its darkness I make a litany
For the lost, for the half-lost, for the desperate,
For all those who suffer, not in the flesh,
I will say their name, but not yet.

This is for those
Who talk to the bearded man in the quiet office,
Sensibly, calmly, explaining just how it was,
And suddenly burst into noisy, quacking tears;
For those who live through the party, wishing for death;
For those who take the sensible country walks,
Wondering if people stare;
For those who try to hook rugs in the big, bright room
And do it badly and are pleased with the praise;
For the night and the fear and the demons of the night;
For the lying back on the couch and the wincing talk.

This is for those
Who work and those who may not,
For those who suddenly come to a locked door,
And the work falls out of their hands;
For those who step off the pavement into hell,
Having not observed the red light and the warning signals
Because they were busy or ignorant or proud.

This is for those
Who are bound in the paper chains
That are stronger than links of iron; this is for those
Who each day heave the papier-mâché rock
Up the huge and burning hill,
And there is no rock and no hill, but they do not know it.

This is for those
Who wait till six for the drink,
Till eleven for the tablet;
And for those who long for the darkness but do not go,
Who walk to the window and see the body falling,

Hear the thud of air in the ears,
And then turn back to the room and sit down again,
None having observed the occurrence but themselves.

Christ, have mercy upon us.
Freud, have mercy upon us.
Life, have mercy upon us.

This is for those
Who painfully haul the dark fish out of the dark,
The child's nightmare, embalmed in its own pain,
And, after that, get well or do not get well,
But do not forget the sulphur in the mouth
Or the time when the world was different, not for awhile.
And for those also, the veterans
Of another kind of war,
Who say 'No thanks' to the cocktails, who say 'No thanks.
Well, yes, give me Coca-Cola' with the trained smile,
Those who hid the bottles so cleverly in the trunk,
Who bribed the attendant, who promised to be good,
Who woke in the dirty bed in the unknown town.
They are cured, now, very much cured.
They are tanned and fine. Their eyes are their only scars.

This is for those
With the light white scars on the wrists,
Who remember the smell of gas and the vomiting,
And it meant little and it is a well-known symptom
And they were always careful to phone, before.
Nevertheless, they remember.

This is for those
Who heard the music suddenly get too loud,
Who could not alter their fancy when it came.

Chloral, have mercy upon us.
Amytal, have mercy upon us.
Nembutal, have mercy upon us.

This occurs more or less than it did in the past times.
There are statistics. There are no real statistics.
There is also no heroism. There is merely

Fatigue, pain, great confusion, sometimes recovery.

The name, as you know, is Legion.

What's your name, friend? Where are you from and how did you get here?

The name is Legion. It's Legion in the case history.

Friends, Romans, countrymen,
Mr. and Mrs., legion is the name.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Music

My friend went to the piano; spun the stool
A little higher; left his pipe to cool;
Picked up a fat green volume from the chest;
And propped it open.
Whitely without rest,
His fingers swept the keys that flashed like swords,
. . . And to the brute drums of barbarian hordes,
Roaring and thunderous and weapon-bare,
An army stormed the bastions of the air!
Dreadful with banners, fire to slay and parch,
Marching together as the lightnings march,
And swift as storm-clouds. Brazen helms and cars
Clanged to a fierce resurgence of old wars
Above the screaming horns. In state they passed,
Trampling and splendid on and sought the vast --
Rending the darkness like a leaping knife,
The flame, the noble pageant of our life!
The burning seal that stamps man's high indenture
To vain attempt and most forlorn adventure;
Romance, and purple seas, and toppling towns,
And the wind's valiance crying o'er the downs;
That nerves the silly hand, the feeble brain,
From the loose net of words to deeds again
And to all courage! Perilous and sharp
The last chord shook me as wind shakes a harp!
. . . And my friend swung round on his stool, and from gods we were men,
"How pretty!" we said; and went on with our talk again.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Nightmare Number Three

We had expected everything but revolt
And I kind of wonder myself when they started thinking--
But there's no dice in that now.
I've heard fellow say
They must have planned it for years and maybe they did.
Looking back, you can find little incidents here and there,
Like the concrete-mixer in Jersey eating the wop
Or the roto press that printed 'Fiddle-dee-dee!'
In a three-color process all over Senator Sloop,
Just as he was making a speech. The thing about that
Was, how could it walk upstairs? But it was upstairs,
Clicking and mumbling in the Senate Chamber.
They had to knock out the wall to take it away
And the wrecking-crew said it grinned.
It was only the best
Machines, of course, the superhuman machines,
The ones we'd built to be better than flesh and bone,
But the cars were in it, of course . . .
and they hunted us
Like rabbits through the cramped streets on that Bloody Monday,
The Madison Avenue busses leading the charge.
The busses were pretty bad--but I'll not forget
The smash of glass when the Duesenberg left the show-room
And pinned three brokers to the Racquet Club steps
Or the long howl of the horns when they saw men run,
When they saw them looking for holes in the solid ground . . .

I guess they were tired of being ridden in
And stopped and started by pygmies for silly ends,
Of wrapping cheap cigarettes and bad chocolate bars
Collecting nickels and waving platinum hair
And letting six million people live in a town.
I guess it was tha, I guess they got tired of us
And the whole smell of human hands.
But it was a shock
To climb sixteen flights of stairs to Art Zuckow's office
(Noboby took the elevators twice)
And find him strangled to death in a nest of telephones,
The octopus-tendrils waving over his head,

And a sort of quiet humming filling the air. . . .
Do they eat? . . . There was red . . . But I did not stop to look.
I don't know yet how I got to the roof in time
And it's lonely, here on the roof.
For a while, I thought
That window-cleaner would make it, and keep me company.
But they got him with his own hoist at the sixteenth floor
And dragged him in, with a squeal.
You see, they coöperate. Well, we taught them that
And it's fair enough, I suppose. You see, we built them.
We taught them to think for themselves.
It was bound to come. You can see it was bound to come.
And it won't be so bad, in the country. I hate to think
Of the reapers, running wild in the Kansas fields,
And the transport planes like hawks on a chickenyard,
But the horses might help. We might make a deal with the horses.
At least, you've more chance, out there.
And they need us, too.
They're bound to realize that when they once calm down.
They'll need oil and spare parts and adjustments and tuning up.
Slaves? Well, in a way, you know, we were slaves before.
There won't be so much real difference--honest, there won't.
(I wish I hadn't looked into the beauty-parlor
And seen what was happening there.
But those are female machines and a bit high-strung.)
Oh, we'll settle down. We'll arrange it. We'll compromise.
It won't make sense to wipe out the whole human race.
Why, I bet if I went to my old Plymouth now
(Of course you'd have to do it the tactful way)
And said, 'Look here! Who got you the swell French horn?'
He wouldn't turn me over to those police cars;
At least I don't think he would.
Oh, it's going to be jake.
There won't be so much real difference--honest, there won't--
And I'd go down in a minute and take my chance--
I'm a good American and I always liked them--
Except for one small detail that bothers me
And that's the food proposition. Because, you see,
The concrete-mixer may have made a mistake,
And it looks like just high spirits.
But, if it's got so they like the flavor . . . well . . .

Nos Immortales

Perhaps we go with wind and cloud and sun,
Into the free companionship of air;
Perhaps with sunsets when the day is done,
All's one to me -- I do not greatly care;
So long as there are brown hills -- and a tree
Like a mad prophet in a land of dearth --
And I can lie and hear eternally
The vast monotonous breathing of the earth.

I have known hours, slow and golden-glowing,
Lovely with laughter and suffused with light,
O Lord, in such a time appoint my going,
When the hands clench, and the cold face grows white,
And the spark dies within the feeble brain,
Spilling its star-dust back to dust again.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Poor Devil!

Well, I was tired of life; the silly folk,
The tiresome noises, all the common things
I loved once, crushed me with an iron yoke.
I longed for the cool quiet and the dark,
Under the common sod where louts and kings
Lie down, serene, unheeding, careless, stark,
Never to rise or move or feel again,
Filled with the ecstasy of being dead. . . .

I put the shining pistol to my head
And pulled the trigger hard -- I felt no pain,
No pain at all; the pistol had missed fire
I thought; then, looking at the floor, I saw
My huddled body lying there -- and awe
Swept over me. I trembled -- and looked up.
About me was -- not that, my heart's desire,
That small and dark abode of death and peace --
But all from which I sought a vain release!
The sky, the people and the staring sun
Glared at me as before. I was undone.
My last state ten times worse than was my first.
Helpless I stood, befooled, betrayed, accursed,
Fettered to Life forever, horribly;
Caught in the meshes of Eternity,
No further doors to break or bars to burst!

Stephen Vincent Benet

Portrait Of A Baby

He lay within a warm, soft world
Of motion. Colors bloomed and fled,
Maroon and turquoise, saffron, red,
Wave upon wave that broke and whirled
To vanish in the grey-green gloom,
Perspectiveless and shadowy.
A bulging world that had no walls,
A flowing world, most like the sea,
Compassing all infinity
Within a shapeless, ebbing room,
An endless tide that swells and falls . . .
He slept and woke and slept again.
As a veil drops Time dropped away;
Space grew a toy for children's play,
Sleep bolted fast the gates of Sense --
He lay in naked impotence;
Like a drenched moth that creeps and crawls
Heavily up brown, light-baked walls,
To fall in wreck, her task undone,
Yet somehow striving toward the sun.
So, as he slept, his hands clenched tighter,
Shut in the old way of the fighter,
His feet curled up to grip the ground,
His muscles tautened for a bound;
And though he felt, and felt alone,
Strange brightness stirred him to the bone,
Cravings to rise -- till deeper sleep
Buried the hope, the call, the leap;
A wind puffed out his mind's faint spark.
He was absorbed into the dark.
He woke again and felt a surge
Within him, a mysterious urge
That grew one hungry flame of passion;
The whole world altered shape and fashion.
Deceived, befooled, bereft and torn,
He scourged the heavens with his scorn,
Lifting a bitter voice to cry
Against the eternal treachery --
Till, suddenly, he found the breast,

And ceased, and all things were at rest,
The earth grew one warm languid sea
And he a wave. Joy, tingling, crept
Throughout him. He was quenched and slept.

So, while the moon made broad her ring,
He slept and cried and was a king.
So, worthily, he acted o'er
The endless miracle once more.
Facing immense adventures daily,
He strove still onward, weeping, gaily,
Conquered or fled from them, but grew
As soil-starved, rough pine-saplings do.
Till, one day, crawling seemed suspect.
He gripped the air and stood erect
And splendid. With immortal rage
He entered on man's heritage!

Stephen Vincent Benet

Portrait Of A Boy

After the whipping he crawled into bed,
Accepting the harsh fact with no great weeping.
How funny uncle's hat had looked striped red!
He chuckled silently. The moon came, sweeping
A black, frayed rag of tattered cloud before
In scorning; very pure and pale she seemed,
Flooding his bed with radiance. On the floor
Fat motes danced. He sobbed, closed his eyes and dreamed.

Warm sand flowed round him. Blurts of crimson light
Splashed the white grains like blood. Past the cave's mouth
Shone with a large, fierce splendor, wildly bright,
The crooked constellations of the South;
Here the Cross swung; and there, affronting Mars,
The Centaur stormed aside a froth of stars.
Within, great casks, like wattled aldermen,
Sighed of enormous feasts, and cloth of gold
Glowed on the walls like hot desire. Again,
Beside webbed purples from some galleon's hold,
A black chest bore the skull and bones in white
Above a scrawled "Gunpowder!" By the flames,
Decked out in crimson, gemmed with syenite,
Hailing their fellows with outrageous names,
The pirates sat and diced. Their eyes were moons.
"Doubloons!" they said. The words crashed gold. "Doubloons!"

Stephen Vincent Benet

Rain After A Vaudeville Show

The last pose flickered, failed. The screen's dead white
Glared in a sudden flooding of harsh light
Stabbing the eyes; and as I stumbled out
The curtain rose. A fat girl with a pout
And legs like hams, began to sing "His Mother".
Gusts of bad air rose in a choking smother;
Smoke, the wet steam of clothes, the stench of plush,
Powder, cheap perfume, mingled in a rush.
I stepped into the lobby -- and stood still
Struck dumb by sudden beauty, body and will.
Cleanness and rapture -- excellence made plain --
The storming, thrashing arrows of the rain!
Pouring and dripping on the roofs and rods,
Smelling of woods and hills and fresh-turned sods,
Black on the sidewalks, gray in the far sky,
Crashing on thirsty panes, on gutters dry,
Hurrying the crowd to shelter, making fair
The streets, the houses, and the heat-soaked air, --
Merciful, holy, charging, sweeping, flashing,
It smote the soul with a most iron clashing! . . .
Like dragons' eyes the street-lamps suddenly gleamed,
Yellow and round and dim-low globes of flame.
And, scarce-perceived, the clouds' tall banners streamed.
Out of the petty wars, the daily shame,
Beauty strove suddenly, and rose, and flowered. . . .
I gripped my coat and plunged where awnings lowered.
Made one with hissing blackness, caught, embraced,
By splendor and by striving and swift haste --
Spring coming in with thunderings and strife --
I stamped the ground in the strong joy of life!

Stephen Vincent Benet

Return - 1917

"The College will reopen Sept. --."`
`Catalogue'.

I was just aiming at the jagged hole
Torn in the yellow sandbags of their trench,
When something threw me sideways with a wrench,
And the skies seemed to shrivel like a scroll
And disappear . . . and propped against the bole
Of a big elm I lay, and watched the clouds
Float through the blue, deep sky in speckless crowds,
And I was clean again, and young, and whole.

Lord, what a dream that was! And what a doze
Waiting for Bill to come along to class!
I've cut it now -- and he -- Oh, hello, Fred!
Why, what's the matter? -- here -- don't be an ass,
Sit down and tell me! -- What do you suppose?
I dreamed I . . . am I . . . wounded? "You are dead."

Stephen Vincent Benet

Road And Hills

I shall go away
To the brown hills, the quiet ones,
The vast, the mountainous, the rolling,
Sun-fired and drowsy!

My horse snuffs delicately
At the strange wind;
He settles to a swinging trot; his hoofs tramp the dust.
The road winds, straightens,
Slashes a marsh,
Shoulders out a bridge,
Then --
Again the hills.
Unchanged, innumerable,
Bowing huge, round backs;
Holding secret, immense converse:
In gusty voices,
Fruitful, fecund, toiling
Like yoked black oxen.

The clouds pass like great, slow thoughts
And vanish
In the intense blue.

My horse lopes; the saddle creaks and sways.
A thousand glittering spears of sun slant from on high.
The immensity, the spaces,
Are like the spaces
Between star and star.

The hills sleep.
If I put my hand on one,
I would feel the vast heave of its breath.
I would start away before it awakened
And shook the world from its shoulders.
A cicada's cry deepens the hot silence.
The hills open
To show a slope of poppies,
Ardent, noble, heroic,

A flare, a great flame of orange;
Giving sleepy, brittle scent
That stings the lungs.
A creeping wind slips through them like a ferret; they bow and dance,
answering Beauty's voice . . .

The horse whinnies. I dismount
And tie him to the grey worn fence.
I set myself against the javelins of grass and sun;
And climb the rounded breast,
That flows like a sea-wave.
The summit crackles with heat, there is no shelter, no hollow from
the flagellating glare.

I lie down and look at the sky, shading my eyes.
My body becomes strange, the sun takes it and changes it, it does not feel,
it is like the body of another.
The air blazes. The air is diamond.
Small noises move among the grass . . .

Blackly,
A hawk mounts, mounts in the inane
Seeking the star-road,
Seeking the end . . .
But there is no end.

Here, in this light, there is no end. . .

Stephen Vincent Benet

Robert E. Lee

The man was loved, the man was idolized,
The man had every just and noble gift.
He took great burdens and he bore them well,
Believed in God but did not preach too much,
Believed and followed duty first and last
With marvellous consistency and force,
Was a great victor, in defeat as great,
No more, no less, always himself in both,
Could make men die for him but saved his men
Whenever he could save them was most kind
But was not disobeyed was a good father,
A loving husband, a considerate friend.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Talk

Tobacco smoke drifts up to the dim ceiling
From half a dozen pipes and cigarettes,
Curling in endless shapes, in blue rings wheeling,
As formless as our talk. Phil, drawling, bets
Cornell will win the relay in a walk,
While Bob and Mac discuss the Giants' chances;
Deep in a morris-chair, Bill scowls at "Falk",
John gives large views about the last few dances.

And so it goes -- an idle speech and aimless,
A few chance phrases; yet I see behind
The empty words the gleam of a beauty tameless,
Friendship and peace and fire to strike men blind,
Till the whole world seems small and bright to hold --
Of all our youth this hour is pure gold.

Stephen Vincent Benet

The Ballad Of William Sycamore [1790-1871]

My father, he was a mountaineer,
His fist was a knotty hammer;
He was quick on his feet as a running deer,
And he spoke with a Yankee stammer.

My mother, she was merry and brave,
And so she came to her labor,
With a tall green fir for her doctor grave
And a stream for her comforting neighbor.

And some are wrapped in the linen fine,
And some like a godling's scion;
But I was cradled on twigs of pine
And the skin of a mountain lion.

And some remember a white, starched lap
And a ewer with silver handles;
But I remember a coonskin cap
And the smell of bayberry candles.

The cabin logs, with the bark still rough,
And my mother who laughed at trifles,
And the tall, lank visitors, brown as snuff,
With their long, straight squirrel-rifles.

I can hear them dance, like a foggy song,
Through the deepest one of my slumbers,
The fiddle squeaking the boots along
And my father calling the numbers.

The quick feet shaking the puncheon-floor,
And the fiddle squealing and squealing,
Till the dried herbs rattled above the door
And the dust went up to the ceiling.

There are children lucky from dawn till dusk,
But never a child so lucky!
For I cut my teeth on 'Money Musk'
In the Bloody Ground of Kentucky!

When I grew tall as the Indian corn,
My father had little to lend me,
But he gave me his great, old powder-horn
And his woodsman's skill to befriend me.

With a leather shirt to cover my back,
And a redskin nose to unravel
Each forest sign, I carried my pack
As far as a scout could travel.

Till I lost my boyhood and found my wife,
A girl like a Salem clipper!
A woman straight as a hunting-knife
With as eyes as bright as the Dipper!

We cleared our camp where the buffalo feed,
Unheard-of streams were our flagons;
And I sowed my sons like the apple-seed
On the trail of the Western wagons.

They were right, tight boys, never sulky or slow,
A fruitful, a goodly muster.
The eldest died at the Alamo.
The youngest fell with Custer.

The letter that told it burned my hand.
Yet we smiled and said, 'So be it!'
But I could not live when they fenced the land,
For it broke my heart to see it.

I saddled a red, unbroken colt
And rode him into the day there;
And he threw me down like a thunderbolt
And rolled on me as I lay there.

The hunter's whistle hummed in my ear
As the city-men tried to move me,
And I died in my boots like a pioneer
With the whole wide sky above me.

Now I lie in the heart of the fat, black soil,

Like the seed of a prairie-thistle;
It has washed my bones with honey and oil
And picked them clean as a whistle.

And my youth returns, like the rains of Spring,
And my sons, like the wild-geese flying;
And I lie and hear the meadow-lark sing
And have much content in my dying.

Go play with the towns you have built of blocks,
The towns where you would have bound me!
I sleep in my earth like a tired fox,
And my buffalo have found me.

Stephen Vincent Benet

The Breaking Point

It was not when temptation came,
Swiftly and blastingly as flame,
And seared me white with burning scars;
When I stood up for age-long wars
And held the very Fiend at grips;
When all my mutinous body rose
To range itself beside my foes,
And, like a greyhound in the slips,
The Beast that dwells within me roared,
Lunging and straining at his cord. . . .
For all the blusterings of Hell,
It was not then I slipped and fell;
For all the storm, for all the hate,
I kept my soul inviolate!

But when the fight was fought and won,
And there was Peace as still as Death
On everything beneath the sun.
Just as I started to draw breath,
And yawn, and stretch, and pat myself,
-- The grass began to whisper things --
And every tree became an elf,
That grinned and chuckled counsellings:
Birds, beasts, one thing alone they said,
Beating and dinning at my head.
I could not fly. I could not shun it.
Slimily twisting, slow and blind,
It crept and crept into my mind.
Whispered and shouted, sneered and laughed,
Screamed out until my brain was daft. . . .
One snaky word, "What if you'd done it?"

And I began to think . . .
Ah, well,
What matter how I slipped and fell?
Or you, you gutter-searcher say!
Tell where you found me yesterday!

The City Revisited

The grey gulls drift across the bay
Softly and still as flakes of snow
Against the thinning fog. All day
I sat and watched them come and go;
And now at last the sun was set,
Filling the waves with colored fire
Till each seemed like a jewelled spire
Thrust up from some drowned city. Soon
From peak and cliff and minaret
The city's lights began to wink,
Each like a friendly word. The moon
Began to broaden out her shield,
Spurting with silver. Straight before
The brown hills lay like quiet beasts
Stretched out beside a well-loved door,
And filling earth and sky and field
With the calm heaving of their breasts.

Nothing was gone, nothing was changed,
The smallest wave was unestranged
By all the long ache of the years
Since last I saw them, blind with tears.
Their welcome like the hills stood fast:
And I, I had come home at last.

So I laughed out with them aloud
To think that now the sun was broad,
And climbing up the iron sky,
Where the raw streets stretched sullenly
About another room I knew,
In a mean house -- and soon there, too,
The smith would burst the flimsy door
And find me lying on the floor.
Just where I fell the other night,
After that breaking wave of pain. --
How they will storm and rage and fight,
Servants and mistress, one and all,
"No money for the funeral!"

I broke my life there. Let it stand
At that.
The waters are a plain,
Heaving and bright on either hand,
A tremulous and lustral peace
Which shall endure though all things cease,
Filling my heart as water fills
A cup. There stand the quiet hills.
So, waiting for my wings to grow,
I watch the gulls sail to and fro,
Rising and falling, soft and swift,
Drifting along as bubbles drift.
And, though I see the face of God
Hereafter -- this day have I trod
Nearer to Him than I shall tread
Ever again. The night is dead.
And there's the dawn, poured out like wine
Along the dim horizon-line.
And from the city comes the chimes --

We have our heaven on earth -- sometimes!

Stephen Vincent Benet

The Congressmen Came Out To See Bull Run

The congressmen came out to see Bull Run,
The congressmen who like free shows and spectacles.
They brought their wives and carriages along,
They brought their speeches and their picnic-lunch,
Their black constituent-hats and their devotion:
Some even brought a little whiskey, too.
(A little whiskey is a comforting thing
For congressmen in the sun, in the heat of the sun.)
The bearded congressmen with orator's mouths,
The fine, clean-shaved, Websterian congressmen,
Come out to see the gladiator's show
Like Iliad gods, wrapped in the sacred cloud
Of Florida-water, wisdom and bay-rum,
Of free cigars, democracy and votes,
That lends such portliness to congressmen.
(The gates fly wide, the bronze troop marches out
Into the stripped and deadly circus-ring,
'Ave, Caesar!' the cry goes up, and shakes
The purple awning over Caesar's seat.)
'Ave, Caesar! Ave, O congressmen,
We who are about to die
Salute you, congressmen!
Eleven States,
New York, Rhode Island, Maine,
Connecticut, Michigan, and the gathered West,
Salute you, congressmen!
The red-fezzed Fire-Zouaves, flamingo-bright,
Salute you, congressmen!
The raw boys still in their civilian clothes,
Salute you, congressmen!
The Second Wisconsin in its homespun grey,
Salute you, congressmen!
The Garibaldi Guards in cocksfeather hats,
Salute you, congressmen!
The Second Ohio with their Bedouin-caps,
Salute you, congressmen!
Sherman's brigade, grey-headed Heintzelman,
Ricketts' and Griffin's doomed and valiant guns,
The tough, hard-bitten regulars of Sykes

Who covered the retreat with the Marines,
Burnside and Porter, Wilcox and McDowell,
All the vast, unprepared, militia-mass
Of boys in red and yellow Zouave pants,
Who carried peach-preserves inside their kits
And dreamt of being generals overnight;
The straggling companies where every man
Was a sovereign and a voter-the slack regiments
Where every company marched a different step;
The clumsy and unwieldy-new brigades
Not yet distempered into battle-worms;
The whole, huge, innocent army, ready to fight
But only half-taught in the tricks of fighting,
Ready to die like picture-postcard boys
While fighting still had banners and a sword
And just as ready to run in blind mob-panic,
Salutes you with a vast and thunderous cry,
Ave, Caesar, Ave, O congressmen,
Ave, O Iliad gods who forced the fight!
You bring your carriages and your picnic-lunch
To cheer us in our need.
You come with speeches,
Your togas smell of heroism and bay-rum.
You are the people and the voice of the people
And, when the fight is done, your carriages
Will bear you safely, through the streaming rout
Of broken troops, throwing their guns away.
You come to see the gladiator's show,
But from a high place, as befits the wise:
You will not see the long windrows of men
Strewn like dead pears before the Henry House
Or the stone-wall of Jackson breathe its parched
Devouring breath upon the failing charge,
Ave, Caesar, ave, O congressmen,
Cigar-smoke wraps you in a godlike cloud,
And if you are not to depart from us
As easily and divinely as you came,
It hardly matters.
Fighting Joe Hooker once
Said with that tart, unbridled tongue of his
That made so many needless enemies,
'Who ever saw a dead cavalryman?'

The phrase
Stings with a needle sharpness, just or not,
But even he was never heard to say,
'Who ever saw a dead congressman?'
And yet, he was a man with a sharp tongue.

Stephen Vincent Benet

The Drug-Shop, Or, Endymion In Edmonstoun

"Oh yes, I went over to Edmonstoun the other day and saw Johnny, mooning around as usual! He will never make his way."

Letter of George Keats, 18--

Night falls; the great jars glow against the dark,
Dark green, dusk red, and, like a coiling snake,
Writhing eternally in smoky gyres,
Great ropes of gorgeous vapor twist and turn
Within them. So the Eastern fisherman
Saw the swart genie rise when the lead seal,
Scribbled with charms, was lifted from the jar;
And -- well, how went the tale? Like this, like this? . . .

No herbage broke the barren flats of land,
No winds dared loiter within smiling trees,
Nor were there any brooks on either hand,
Only the dry, bright sand,
Naked and golden, lay before the seas.

One boat toiled noiselessly along the deep,
The thirsty ripples dying silently
Upon its track. Far out the brown nets sweep,
And night begins to creep
Across the intolerable mirror of the sea.

Twice the nets rise, a-trail with sea-plants brown,
Distorted shells, and rocks green-mossed with slime,
Nought else. The fisher, sick at heart, kneels down;
"Prayer may appease God's frown,"
He thinks, then, kneeling, casts for the third time.

And lo! an earthen jar, bound round with brass,
Lies tangled in the cordage of his net.
About the bright waves gleam like shattered glass,
And where the sea's rim was
The sun dips, flat and red, about to set.

The prow grates on the beach. The fisherman

Stoops, tearing at the cords that bind the seal.
Shall pearls roll out, lustrous and white and wan?
Lapis? carnelian?
Unheard-of stones that make the sick mind reel

With wonder of their beauty? Rubies, then?
Green emeralds, glittering like the eyes of beasts?
Poisonous opals, good to madden men?
Gold bezants, ten and ten?
Hard, regal diamonds, like kingly feasts?

He tugged; the seal gave way. A little smoke
Curled like a feather in the darkening sky.
A blinding gush of fire burst, flamed, and broke.
A voice like a wind spoke.
Armored with light, and turbaned terribly,

A genie tramped the round earth underfoot;
His head sought out the stars, his cupped right hand
Made half the sky one darkness. He was mute.
The sun, a ripened fruit,
Drooped lower. Scarlet eddied o'er the sand.

The genie spoke: "O miserable one!
Thy prize awaits thee; come, and hug it close!
A noble crown thy draggled nets have won
For this that thou hast done.
Blessed are fools! A gift remains for those!"

His hand sought out his sword, and lightnings flared
Across the sky in one great bloom of fire.
Poised like a toppling mountain, it hung bared;
Suns that were jewels glared
Along its hilt. The air burnt like a pyre.

Once more the genie spoke: "Something I owe
To thee, thou fool, thou fool. Come, canst thou sing?
Yea? Sing then; if thy song be brave, then go
Free and released -- or no!
Find first some task, some overmastering thing
I cannot do, and find it speedily,
For if thou dost not thou shalt surely die!"

The sword whirled back. The fisherman uprose,
And if at first his voice was weak with fear
And his limbs trembled, it was but a doze,
And at the high song's close
He stood up straight. His voice rang loud and clear.

The Song.

Last night the quays were lighted;
Cressets of smoking pine
Glared o'er the roaring mariners
That drink the yellow wine.

Their song rolled to the rafters,
It struck the high stars pale,
Such worth was in their discourse,
Such wonder in their tale.

Blue borage filled the clinking cups,
The murky night grew wan,
Till one rose, crowned with laurel-leaves,
That was an outland man.

"Come, let us drink to war!" said he,
"The torch of the sacked town!
The swan's-bath and the wolf-ships,
And Harald of renown!

"Yea, while the milk was on his lips,
Before the day was born,
He took the Almayne Kaiser's head
To be his drinking-horn!

"Yea, while the down was on his chin,
Or yet his beard was grown,
He broke the gates of Micklegarth,
And stole the lion-throne!

"Drink to Harald, king of the world,
Lord of the tongue and the troth!

To the bellowing horns of Ostfriesland,
And the trumpets of the Goth!"

Their shouts rolled to the rafters,
The drink-horns crashed and rang,
And all their talk was a clangor of war,
As swords together sang!

But dimly, through the deep night,
Where stars like flowers shone,
A passionate shape came gliding --
I saw one thing alone.

I only saw my young love
Shining against the dark,
The whiteness of her raiment,
The head that bent to hark.

I only saw my young love,
Like flowers in the sun --
Her hands like waxen petals,
Where yawning poppies run.

I only felt there, chrysmal,
Against my cheek her breath,
Though all the winds were baying,
And the sky bright with Death.

Red sparks whirled up the chimney,
A hungry flaught of flame,
And a lean man from Greece arose;
Thrasyllus was his name.

"I praise all noble wines!" he cried,
"Green robes of tissue fine,
Peacocks and apes and ivory,
And Homer's sea-loud line,

"Statues and rings and carven gems,
And the wise crawling sea;
But most of all the crowns of kings,
The rule they wield thereby!

"Power, fired power, blank and bright!
A fit hilt for the hand!
The one good sword for a freeman,
While yet the cold stars stand!"

Their shouts rolled to the rafters,
The air was thick with wine.
I only knew her deep eyes,
And felt her hand in mine.

Softly as quiet water,
One finger touched my cheek;
Her face like gracious moonlight --
I might not move nor speak.

I only saw that beauty,
I only felt that form
There, in the silken darkness --
God wot my heart was warm!

Their shouts rolled to the rafters,
Another chief began;
His slit lips showed him for a Hun;
He was an evil man.

"Sing to the joys of women!" he yelled,
"The hot delicious tents,
The soft couch, and the white limbs;
The air a steam of scents!"

His eyes gleamed, and he wet his lips,
The rafters shook with cheers,
As he sang of woman, who is man's slave
For all unhonored years.

"Whether the wanton laughs amain,
With one white shoulder bare,
Or in a sacked room you unbind
Some crouching maiden's hair;

"This is the only good for man,

Like spices of the South --
To see the glimmering body laid
As pasture to his mouth!

"To leave no lees within the cup,
To see and take and rend;
To lap a girl's limbs up like wine,
And laugh, knowing the end!"

Only, like low, still breathing,
I heard one voice, one word;
And hot speech poured upon my lips,
As my hands held a sword.

"Fools, thrice fools of lust!" I cried,
"Your eyes are blind to see
Eternal beauty, moving far,
More glorious than horns of war!
But though my eyes were one blind scar,
That sight is shown to me!

"You nuzzle at the ivory side,
You clasp the golden head;
Fools, fools, who chatter and sing,
You have taken the sign of a terrible thing,
You have drunk down God with your beeswing,
And broken the saints for bread!

"For God moves darkly,
In silence and in storm;
But in the body of woman
He shows one burning form.

"For God moves blindly,
In darkness and in dread;
But in the body of woman
He raises up the dead.

"Gracile and straight as birches,
Swift as the questing birds,
They fill true-lovers' drink-horns up,
Who speak not, having no words.

"Love is not delicate toying,
A slim and shimmering mesh;
It is two souls wrenched into one,
Two bodies made one flesh.

"Lust is a sprightly servant,
Gallant where wines are poured;
Love is a bitter master,
Love is an iron lord.

"Satin ease of the body,
Fattened sloth of the hands,
These and their like he will not send,
Only immortal fires to rend --
And the world's end is your journey's end,
And your stream chokes in the sands.

"Pleached calms shall not await you,
Peace you shall never find;
Nought but the living moorland
Scourged naked by the wind.

"Nought but the living moorland,
And your love's hand in yours;
The strength more sure than surety,
The mercy that endures.

"Then, though they give you to be burned,
And slay you like a stoat,
You have found the world's heart in the turn of a cheek,
Heaven in the lift of a throat.

"Although they break you on the wheel,
That stood so straight in the sun,
Behind you the trumpets split the sky,
Where the lost and furious fight goes by --
And God, our God, will have victory
When the red day is done!"

Their mirth rolled to the rafters,
They bellowed lechery;

Light as a drifting feather
My love slipped from my knee.

Within, the lights were yellow
In drowsy rooms and warm;
Without, the stabbing lightning
Shattered across the storm.

Within, the great logs crackled,
The drink-horns emptied soon;
Without, the black cloaks of the clouds
Strangled the waning moon.

My love crossed o'er the threshold --
God! but the night was murk!
I set myself against the cold,
And left them to their work.

Their shouts rolled to the rafters;
A bitterer way was mine,
And I left them in the tavern,
Drinking the yellow wine!

The last faint echoes rang along the plains,
Died, and were gone. The genie spoke: "Thy song
Serves well enough -- but yet thy task remains;
Many and rending pains
Shall torture him who dares delay too long!"

His brown face hardened to a leaden mask.
A bitter brine crusted the fisher's cheek --
"Almighty God, one thing alone I ask,
Show me a task, a task!"
The hard cup of the sky shone, gemmed and bleak.

"O love, whom I have sought by devious ways;
O hidden beauty, naked as a star;
You whose bright hair has burned across my days,
Making them lamps of praise;
O dawn-wind, breathing of Arabia!

"You have I served. Now fire has parched the vine,

And Death is on the singers and the song.
No longer are there lips to cling to mine,
And the heart wearies of wine,
And I am sick, for my desire is long.

"O love, soft-moving, delicate and tender!
In her gold house the pipe calls querulously,
They cloud with thin green silks her body slender,
They talk to her and tend her;
Come, piteous, gentle love, and set me free!"

He ceased -- and, slowly rising o'er the deep,
A faint song chimed, grew clearer, till at last
A golden horn of light began to creep
Where the dumb ripples sweep,
Making the sea one splendor where it passed.

A golden boat! The bright oars rested soon,
And the prow met the sand. The purple veils
Misting the cabin fell. Fair as the moon
When the morning comes too soon,
And all the air is silver in the dales,

A gold-robed princess stepped upon the beach.
The fisher knelt and kissed her garment's hem,
And then her lips, and strove at last for speech.
The waters lapped the reach.
"Here thy strength breaks, thy might is nought to stem!"

He cried at last. Speech shook him like a flame:
"Yea, though thou plucked the stars from out the sky,
Each lovely one would be a withered shame --
Each thou couldst find or name --
To this fire-hearted beauty!" Wearily

The genie heard. A slow smile came like dawn
Over his face. "Thy task is done!" he said.
A whirlwind roared, smoke shattered, he was gone;
And, like a sudden horn,
The moon shone clear, no longer smoked and red.

They passed into the boat. The gold oars beat

Loudly, then fainter, fainter, till at last
Only the quiet waters barely moved
Along the whispering sand -- till all the vast
Expanse of sea began to shake with heat,
And morning brought soft airs, by sailors loved.

And after? . . . Well . . .
The shop-bell clangs! Who comes?
Quinine -- I pour the little bitter grains
Out upon blue, glazed squares of paper. So.
And all the dusk I shall sit here alone,
With many powers in my hands -- ah, see
How the blurred labels run on the old jars!
Opium -- and a cruel and sleepy scent,
The harsh taste of white poppies; India --
The writhing woods a-crawl with monstrous life,
Save where the deodars are set like spears,
And a calm pool is mirrored ebony;
Opium -- brown and warm and slender-breasted
She rises, shaking off the cool black water,
And twisting up her hair, that ripples down,
A torrent of black water, to her feet;
How the drops sparkle in the moonlight! Once
I made a rhyme about it, singing softly:

Over Damascus every star
Keeps his unchanging course and cold,
The dark weighs like an iron bar,
The intense and pallid night is old,
Dim the moon's scimitar.

Still the lamps blaze within those halls,
Where poppies heap the marble vats
For girls to tread; the thick air palls;
And shadows hang like evil bats
About the scented walls.

The girls are many, and they sing;
Their white feet fall like flakes of snow,
Making a ceaseless murmuring --
Whispers of love, dead long ago,
And dear, forgotten Spring.

One alone sings not. Tiredly
She sees the white blooms crushed, and smells
The heavy scent. They chatter: "See!
White Zira thinks of nothing else
But the morn's jollity --

"Then Haroun takes her!" But she dreams,
Unhearing, of a certain field
Of poppies, cut by many streams,
Like lines across a round Turk shield,
Where now the hot sun gleams.

The field whereon they walked that day,
And splendor filled her body up,
And his; and then the trampled clay,
And slow smoke climbing the sky's cup
From where the village lay.

And after -- much ache of the wrists,
Where the cords irked her -- till she came,
The price of many amethysts,
Hither. And now the ultimate shame
Blew trumpet in the lists.

And so she trod the poppies there,
Remembering other poppies, too,
And did not seem to see or care.
Without, the first gray drops of dew
Sweetened the trembling air.

She trod the poppies. Hours passed
Until she slept at length -- and Time
Dragged his slow sickle. When at last
She woke, the moon shone, bright as rime,
And night's tide rolled on fast.

She moaned once, knowing everything;
Then, bitterer than death, she found
The soft handmaidens, in a ring,
Come to anoint her, all around,
That she might please the king.

Opium -- and the odor dies away,
Leaving the air yet heavy -- cassia -- myrrh --
Bitter and splendid. See, the poisons come,
Trooping in squat green vials, blazoned red
With grinning skulls: strychnine, a pallid dust
Of tiny grains, like bones ground fine; and next
The muddy green of arsenic, all livid,
Likest the face of one long dead -- they creep
Along the dusty shelf like deadly beetles,
Whose fangs are carved with runnels, that the blood
May run down easily to the blind mouth
That snaps and gapes; and high above them there,
My master's pride, a cobwebbed, yellow pot
Of honey from Mount Hybla. Do the bees
Still moan among the low sweet purple clover,
Endlessly many? Still in deep-hushed woods,
When the incredible silver of the moon
Comes like a living wind through sleep-bowed branches,
Still steal dark shapes from the enchanted glens,
Which yet are purple with high dreams, and still
Fronting that quiet and eternal shield
Which is much more than Peace, does there still stand
One sharp black shadow -- and the short, smooth horns
Are clear against that disk?
O great Diana!
I, I have praised thee, yet I do not know
What moves my mind so strangely, save that once
I lay all night upon a thymy hill,
And watched the slow clouds pass like heaped-up foam
Across blue marble, till at last no speck
Blotted the clear expanse, and the full moon
Rose in much light, and all night long I saw
Her ordered progress, till, in midmost heaven,
There came a terrible silence, and the mice
Crept to their holes, the crickets did not chirp,
All the small night-sounds stopped -- and clear pure light
Rippled like silk over the universe,
Most cold and bleak; and yet my heart beat fast,
Waiting until the stillness broke. I know not
For what I waited -- something very great --
I dared not look up to the sky for fear

A brittle crackling should clash suddenly
Against the quiet, and a black line creep
Across the sky, and widen like a mouth,
Until the broken heavens streamed apart,
Like torn lost banners, and the immortal fires,
Roaring like lions, asked their meat from God.
I lay there, a black blot upon a shield
Of quivering, watery whiteness. The hush held
Until I staggered up and cried aloud,
And then it seemed that something far too great
For knowledge, and illimitable as God,
Rent the dark sky like lightning, and I fell,
And, falling, heard a wild and rushing wind
Of music, and saw lights that blinded me
With white, impenetrable swords, and felt
A pressure of soft hands upon my lips,
Upon my eyelids -- and since then I cough
At times, and have strange thoughts about the stars,
That some day -- some day --
Come, I must be quick!
My master will be back soon. Let me light
Thin blue Arabian pastilles, and sit
Like a dead god incensed by chanting priests,
And watch the pungent smoke wreath up and up,
Until he comes -- though he may rage because
They cost good money. Then I shall walk home
Over the moor. Already the moon climbs
Above the world's edge. By the time he comes
She will be fully risen. -- There's his step!

Stephen Vincent Benet

The Falconer Of God

I flung my soul to the air like a falcon flying.
I said, "Wait on, wait on, while I ride below!
I shall start a heron soon
In the marsh beneath the moon—
A strange white heron rising with silver on its wings,
Rising and crying
Wordless, wondrous things;
The secret of the stars, of the world's heart-strings
The answer to their woe.
Then stoop thou upon him, and grip and hold him so!"

My wild soul waited on as falcons hover.
I beat the reedy fens as I trampled put.
I heard the mournful loon
In the marsh beneath the moon.
And then, with feathery thunder, the bird of my desire
Broke from the cover
Flashing silver fire.
High up among the stars I saw his pinions spire.
The pale clouds gazed aghast
As my falcon stooped upon him, and gript and held him fast.

My soul dropped through the air—with heavenly plunder?—
Gripping the dazzling bird my dreaming knew?
Nay! but a piteous freight,
A dark and heavy weight
Despoiled of silver plumage, its voice forever stilled—
All of the wonder
Gone that ever filled
Its guise with glory. O bird that I have killed,
How brilliantly you flew
Across my rapturous vision when first I dreamed of you!

Yet I fling my soul on high with new endeavor,
And I ride the world below with a joyful mind.
I shall start a heron soon
In the marsh beneath the moon—
A wondrous silver heron its inner darkness fledges!
I beat forever

The fens and the sedges.
The pledge is still the same—for all disastrous pledges,
All hopes resigned!
My soul still flies above me for the quarry it shall find!

Stephen Vincent Benet

The Fiddling Wood

Gods, what a black, fierce day! The clouds were iron,
Wrenched to strange, rugged shapes; the red sun winked
Over the rough crest of the hairy wood
In angry scorn; the grey road twisted, kinked,
Like a sick serpent, seeming to environ
The trees with magic. All the wood was still --

Cracked, crannied pines bent like malicious cripples
Before the gusty wind; they seemed to nose,
Nudge, poke each other, cackling with ill mirth --
Enchantment's days were over -- sh! -- Suppose
That crouching log there, where the white light stipples
Should -- break its quiet! WAS THAT CRIMSON -- EARTH?

It smirched the ground like a lewd whisper, "Danger!" --
I hunched my cloak about me -- then, appalled,
Turned ice and fire by turns -- for -- someone stirred
The brown, dry needles sharply! Terror crawled
Along my spine, as forth there stepped -- a Stranger!
And all the pines crooned like a drowsy bird!

His stock was black. His great shoe-buckles glistened.
His fur cuffs ended in a sheen of rings.
And underneath his coat a case bulged blackly --
He swept his beaver in a rush of wings!
Then took the fiddle out, and, as I listened,
Tightened and tuned the yellowed strings, hung slackly.

Ping! Pang! The clear notes swooped and curved and darted,
Rising like gulls. Then, with a finger skinny,
He rubbed the bow with rosin, said, "Your pardon
Signor! -- Maestro Nicolo Paganini
They used to call me! Tch! -- The cold grips hard on
A poor musician's fingers!" -- His lips parted.

A tortured soul screamed suddenly and loud,
From the brown, quivering case! Then, faster, faster,
Dancing in flame-like whorls, wild, beating, screaming,
The music wailed unutterable disaster;

Heartbroken murmurs from pale lips once proud,
Dead, choking moans from hearts once nobly dreaming.

Till all resolved in anguish -- died away
Upon one minor chord, and was resumed
In anguish; fell again to a low cry,
Then rose triumphant where the white fires fumed,
Terrible, marching, trampling, reeling, gay,
Hurling mad, broken legions down to die

Through everlasting hells -- The tears were salt
Upon my fingers -- Then, I saw, behind
The fury of the player, all the trees
Crouched like violinists, boughs crooked, jerking, blind,
Sweeping mad bows to music without fault,
Grey cheeks to greyer fiddles, withered knees.

Gasping, I fled! -- but still that devilish tune
Stunned ears and brain alike -- till clouds of dust
Blotted the picture, and the noise grew dim --
Shaking, I reached the town -- and turned -- in trust --
Wind-smitten, dread, against the sky-line's rim,
Black, dragon branches whipped below a moon!

Stephen Vincent Benet

The General Public

"Ah, did you once see Shelley plain?" -- Browning.
"Shelley? Oh, yes, I saw him often then,"
The old man said. A dry smile creased his face
With many wrinkles. "That's a great poem, now!
That one of Browning's! Shelley? Shelley plain?
The time that I remember best is this --

A thin mire crept along the rutted ways,
And all the trees were harried by cold rain
That drove a moment fiercely and then ceased,
Falling so slow it hung like a grey mist
Over the school. The walks were like blurred glass.
The buildings reeked with vapor, black and harsh
Against the deepening darkness of the sky;
And each lamp was a hazy yellow moon,
Filling the space about with golden motes,
And making all things larger than they were.
One yellow halo hung above a door,
That gave on a black passage. Round about
Struggled a howling crowd of boys, pell-mell,
Pushing and jostling like a stormy sea,
With shouting faces, turned a pasty white
By the strange light, for foam. They all had clods,
Or slimy balls of mud. A few gripped stones.
And there, his back against the battered door,
His pile of books scattered about his feet,
Stood Shelley while two others held him fast,
And the clods beat upon him. `Shelley! Shelley!'
The high shouts rang through all the corridors,
`Shelley! Mad Shelley! Come along and help!'
And all the crowd dug madly at the earth,
Scratching and clawing at the streaming mud,
And fouled each other and themselves. And still
Shelley stood up. His eyes were like a flame
Set in some white, still room; for all his face
Was white, a whiteness like no human color,
But white and dreadful as consuming fire.
His hands shook now and then, like slender cords
Which bear too heavy weights. He did not speak.

So I saw Shelley plain."

"And you?" I said.

"I? I threw straighter than the most of them,
And had firm clods. I hit him -- well, at least
Thrice in the face. He made good sport that night."

Stephen Vincent Benet

The Hemp

(A Virginia Legend.)

The Planting of the Hemp.

Captain Hawk scourged clean the seas
(Black is the gap below the plank)
From the Great North Bank to the Caribbees
(Down by the marsh the hemp grows rank).

His fear was on the seaport towns,
The weight of his hand held hard the downs.
And the merchants cursed him, bitter and black,
For a red flame in the sea-fog's wrack
Was all of their ships that might come back.

For all he had one word alone,
One clod of dirt in their faces thrown,
"The hemp that shall hang me is not grown!"

His name bestrode the seas like Death.
The waters trembled at his breath.

This is the tale of how he fell,
Of the long sweep and the heavy swell,
And the rope that dragged him down to hell.

The fight was done, and the gutted ship,
Stripped like a shark the sea-gulls strip,

Lurched blindly, eaten out with flame,
Back to the land from where she came,
A skimming horror, an eyeless shame.

And Hawk stood upon his quarter-deck,
And saw the sky and saw the wreck.

Below, a butt for sailors' jeers,
White as the sky when a white squall nears,
Huddled the crowd of the prisoners.

Over the bridge of the tottering plank,
Where the sea shook and the gulf yawned blank,
They shrieked and struggled and dropped and sank,

Pinioned arms and hands bound fast.
One girl alone was left at last.

Sir Henry Gaunt was a mighty lord.
He sat in state at the Council board;
The governors were as nought to him.
From one rim to the other rim

Of his great plantations, flung out wide
Like a purple cloak, was a full month's ride.

Life and death in his white hands lay,
And his only daughter stood at bay,
Trapped like a hare in the toils that day.

He sat at wine in his gold and his lace,
And far away, in a bloody place,
Hawk came near, and she covered her face.

He rode in the fields, and the hunt was brave,
And far away his daughter gave
A shriek that the seas cried out to hear,
And he could not see and he could not save.

Her white soul withered in the mire
As paper shrivels up in fire,
And Hawk laughed, and he kissed her mouth,
And her body he took for his desire.

The Growing of the Hemp.

Sir Henry stood in the manor room,
And his eyes were hard gems in the gloom.

And he said, "Go dig me furrows five
Where the green marsh creeps like a thing alive --

There at its edge, where the rushes thrive."

And where the furrows rent the ground,
He sowed the seed of hemp around.

And the blacks shrink back and are sore afraid
At the furrows five that rib the glade,
And the voodoo work of the master's spade.

For a cold wind blows from the marshland near,
And white things move, and the night grows drear,
And they chatter and crouch and are sick with fear.

But down by the marsh, where the gray slaves glean,
The hemp sprouts up, and the earth is seen
Veiled with a tenuous mist of green.

And Hawk still scourges the Caribbees,
And many men kneel at his knees.

Sir Henry sits in his house alone,
And his eyes are hard and dull like stone.

And the waves beat, and the winds roar,
And all things are as they were before.

And the days pass, and the weeks pass,
And nothing changes but the grass.

But down where the fireflies are like eyes,
And the damps shudder, and the mists rise,
The hemp-stalks stand up toward the skies.

And down from the poop of the pirate ship
A body falls, and the great sharks grip.

Innocent, lovely, go in grace!
At last there is peace upon your face.

And Hawk laughs loud as the corpse is thrown,
"The hemp that shall hang me is not grown!"

Sir Henry's face is iron to mark,
And he gazes ever in the dark.

And the days pass, and the weeks pass,
And the world is as it always was.

But down by the marsh the sickles beam,
Glitter on glitter, gleam on gleam,
And the hemp falls down by the stagnant stream.

And Hawk beats up from the Caribbees,
Swooping to pounce in the Northern seas.

Sir Henry sits sunk deep in his chair,
And white as his hand is grown his hair.

And the days pass, and the weeks pass,
And the sands roll from the hour-glass.

But down by the marsh in the blazing sun
The hemp is smoothed and twisted and spun,
The rope made, and the work done.

The Using of the Hemp.

Captain Hawk scourged clean the seas
(Black is the gap below the plank)
From the Great North Bank to the Caribbees
(Down by the marsh the hemp grows rank).

He sailed in the broad Atlantic track,
And the ships that saw him came not back.

And once again, where the wide tides ran,
He stooped to harry a merchantman.

He bade her stop. Ten guns spake true
From her hidden ports, and a hidden crew,
Lacking his great ship through and through.

Dazed and dumb with the sudden death,

He scarce had time to draw a breath

Before the grappling-irons bit deep,
And the boarders slew his crew like sheep.

Hawk stood up straight, his breast to the steel;
His cutlass made a bloody wheel.

His cutlass made a wheel of flame.
They shrank before him as he came.

And the bodies fell in a choking crowd,
And still he thundered out aloud,

"The hemp that shall hang me is not grown!"
They fled at last. He was left alone.

Before his foe Sir Henry stood.
"The hemp is grown, and my word made good!"

And the cutlass clanged with a hissing whir
On the lashing blade of the rapier.

Hawk roared and charged like a maddened buck.
As the cobra strikes, Sir Henry struck,

Pouring his life in a single thrust,
And the cutlass shivered to sparks and dust.

Sir Henry stood on the blood-stained deck,
And set his foot on his foe's neck.

Then from the hatch, where the rent decks slope,
Where the dead roll and the wounded grope,
He dragged the serpent of the rope.

The sky was blue, and the sea was still,
The waves lapped softly, hill on hill,
And between one wave and another wave
The doomed man's cries were little and shrill.

The sea was blue, and the sky was calm;

The air dripped with a golden balm.
Like a wind-blown fruit between sea and sun,
A black thing writhed at a yard-arm.

Slowly then, and awesomely,
The ship sank, and the gallows-tree,
And there was nought between sea and sun --
Nought but the sun and the sky and the sea.

But down by the marsh where the fever breeds,
Only the water chuckles and pleads;
For the hemp clings fast to a dead man's throat,
And blind Fate gathers back her seeds.

Stephen Vincent Benet

The Innovator

(A Pharaoh Speaks.)

I said, "Why should a pyramid
Stand always dully on its base?
I'll change it! Let the top be hid,
The bottom take the apex-place!"
And as I bade they did.

The people flocked in, scores on scores,
To see it balance on its tip.
They praised me with the praise that bores,
My godlike mind on every lip.
-- Until it fell, of course.

And then they took my body out
From my crushed palace, mad with rage,
-- Well, half the town WAS wrecked, no doubt --
Their crazy anger to assuage
By dragging it about.

The end? Foul birds defile my skull.
The new king's praises fill the land.
He clings to precept, simple, dull;
HIS pyramids on bases stand.
But -- Lord, how usual!

Stephen Vincent Benet

The Lover In Hell

Eternally the choking steam goes up
From the black pools of seething oil. . . .
How merry
Those little devils are! They've stolen the pitchfork
From Bel, there, as he slept . . . Look! -- oh look, look!
They've got at Nero! Oh it isn't fair!
Lord, how he squeals! Stop it . . . it's, well -- indecent!
But funny! . . . See, Bel's waked. They'll catch it now!

. . . Eternally that stifling reek arises,
Blotting the dome with smoky, terrible towers,
Black, strangling trees, whispering obscene things
Amongst their branches, clutching with maimed hands,
Or oozing slowly, like blind tentacles
Up to the gates; higher than that heaped brick
Man piled to smite the sun. And all around
Are devils. One can laugh . . . but that hunched shape
The face one stone, like those Assyrian kings!
One sees in carvings, watching men flayed red
Horribly laughable in leaps and writhes;
That face -- utterly evil, clouded round
With evil like a smoke -- it turns smiles sour!
. . . And Nero there, the flabby cheeks astrain
And sweating agony . . . long agony . . .
Imperishable, unappeasable
For ever . . . well . . . it droops the mouth. Till I
Look up.
There's one blue patch no smoke dares touch.
Sky, clear, ineffable, alive with light,
Always the same . . .
Before, I never knew
Rest and green peace.
She stands there in the sun.
. . . It seems so quaint she should have long gold wings.
I never have got used -- folded across
Her breast, or fluttering with fierce, pure light,
Like shaken steel. Her crown too. Well, it's queer!
And then she never cared much for the harp
On earth. Here, though . . .

She is all peace, all quiet,
All passionate desires, the eloquent thunder
Of new, glad suns, shouting aloud for joy,
Over fresh worlds and clean, trampling the air
Like stooping hawks, to the long wind of horns,
Flung from the bastions of Eternity . . .
And she is the low lake, drowsy and gentle,
And good words spoken from the tongues of friends,
And calmness in the evening, and deep thoughts,
Falling like dreams from the stars' solemn mouths.
All these.

They said she was unfaithful once.
Or I remembered it -- and so, for that,
I lie here, I suppose. Yes, so they said.
You see she is so troubled, looking down,
Sorrowing deeply for my torments. I
Of course, feel nothing while I see her -- save
That sometimes when I think the matter out,
And what earth-people said of us, of her,
It seems as if I must be, here, in heaven,
And she --

. . . Then I grow proud; and suddenly
There comes a splatter of oil against my skin,
Hurting this time. And I forget my pride:
And my face writhes.
Some day the little ladder
Of white words that I build up, up, to her
May fetch me out. Meanwhile it isn't bad. . . .

But what a sense of humor God must have!

Stephen Vincent Benet

The Mountain Whippoorwill

Up in the mountains, it's lonesome all the time,
(Sof' win' slewin' thu' the sweet-potato vine.)
Up in the mountains, it's lonesome for a child,
(Whippoorwills a-callin' when the sap runs wild.)
Up in the mountains, mountains in the fog,
Everythin's as lazy as an old houn' dog.
Born in the mountains, never raised a pet,
Don't want nuthin' an' never got it yet.
Born in the mountains, lonesome-born,
Raised runnin' ragged thu' the cockleburrs and corn.
Never knew my pappy, mebbe never should.
Think he was a fiddle made of mountain laurel-wood.
Never had a mammy to teach me pretty-please.
Think she was a whippoorwill, a-skittin' thu' the trees.
Never had a brother ner a whole pair of pants,
But when I start to fiddle, why, yuh got to start to dance!
Listen to my fiddle -- Kingdom Come -- Kingdom Come!
Hear the frogs a-chunkin' 'Jug o' rum, Jug o' rum!'
Hear that mountain whippoorwill be lonesome in the air,
An' I'll tell yuh how I travelled to the Essex County Fair.
Essex County has a mighty pretty fair,
All the smarty fiddlers from the South come there.
Elbows flyin' as they rosin up the bow
For the First Prize Contest in the Georgia Fiddlers' Show.
Old Dan Wheeling, with his whiskers in his ears,
King-pin fiddler for nearly twenty years.
Big Tom Sergeant, with his blue wall-eye,
An' Little Jimmy Weezer that can make a fiddle cry.
All sittin' roun', spittin' high an' struttin' proud,
(Listen, little whippoorwill, yuh better bug yore eyes!)
Tun-a-tun-a-tunin' while the jedges told the crowd
Them that got the mostest claps'd win the bestest prize.
Everybody waitin' for the first tweedle-dee,
When in comes a-stumblin' -- hill-billy me!
Bowed right pretty to the jedges an' the rest,
Took a silver dollar from a hole inside my vest,
Plunked it on the table an' said, 'There's my callin' card!
An' anyone that licks me -- well, he's got to fiddle hard!'
Old Dan Wheeling, he was laughin' fit to holler,

Little Jimmy Weezer said, 'There's one dead dollar!'
Big Tom Sergeant had a yaller-toothy grin,
But I tucked my little whippoorwill spang underneath my chin,
An' petted it an' tuned it till the jedges said, 'Begin!'
Big Tom Sargent was the first in line;
He could fiddle all the bugs off a sweet-potato vine.
He could fiddle down a possum from a mile-high tree,
He could fiddle up a whale from the bottom of the sea.
Yuh could hear hands spankin' till they spanked each other raw,
When he finished variations on 'Turkey in the Straw.'
Little Jimmy Weezer was the next to play;
He could fiddle all night, he could fiddle all day.
He could fiddle chills, he could fiddle fever,
He could make a fiddle rustle like a lowland river.
He could make a fiddle croon like a lovin' woman.
An' they clapped like thunder when he'd finished strummin'.
Then came the ruck of the bob-tailed fiddlers,
The let's-go-easies, the fair-to-middlers.
They got their claps an' they lost their bicker,
An' they all settled back for some more corn-licker.
An' the crowd was tired of their no-count squealing,
When out in the center steps Old Dan Wheeling.
He fiddled high and he fiddled low,
(Listen, little whippoorwill, yuh got to spread yore wings!)
He fiddled and fiddled with a cherrywood bow,
(Old Dan Wheeling's got bee-honey in his strings).
He fiddled a wind by the lonesome moon,
He fiddled a most almighty tune.
He started fiddling like a ghost.
He ended fiddling like a host.
He fiddled north an' he fiddled south,
He fiddled the heart right out of yore mouth.
He fiddled here an' he fiddled there.
He fiddled salvation everywhere.
When he was finished, the crowd cut loose,
(Whippoorwill, they's rain on yore breast.)
An' I sat there wonderin' 'What's the use?'
(Whippoorwill, fly home to yore nest.)
But I stood up pert an' I took my bow,
An' my fiddle went to my shoulder, so.
An' -- they wasn't no crowd to get me fazed --
But I was alone where I was raised.

Up in the mountains, so still it makes yuh skeered.
Where God lies sleepin' in his big white beard.
An' I heard the sound of the squirrel in the pine,
An' I heard the earth a-breathin' thu' the long night-time.
They've fiddled the rose, and they've fiddled the thorn,
But they haven't fiddled the mountain-corn.
They've fiddled sinful an' fiddled moral,
But they haven't fiddled the breshwood-laurel.
They've fiddled loud, and they've fiddled still,
But they haven't fiddled the whippoorwill.
I started off with a dump-diddle-dump,
(Oh, hell's broke loose in Georgia!)
Skunk-cabbage growin' by the bee-gum stump.
(Whippoorwill, yo're singin' now!)
My mother was a whippoorwill pert,
My father, he was lazy,
But I'm hell broke loose in a new store shirt
To fiddle all Georgia crazy.
Swing yore partners -- up an' down the middle!
Sashay now -- oh, listen to that fiddle!
Flapjacks flippin' on a red-hot griddle,
An' hell's broke loose,
Hell's broke loose,
Fire on the mountains -- snakes in the grass.
Satan's here a-bilin' -- oh, Lordy, let him pass!
Go down Moses, set my people free;
Pop goes the weasel thu' the old Red Sea!
Jonah sittin' on a hickory-bough,
Up jumps a whale -- an' where's yore prophet now?
Rabbit in the pea-patch, possum in the pot,
Try an' stop my fiddle, now my fiddle's gettin' hot!
Whippoorwill, singin' thu' the mountain hush,
Whippoorwill, shoutin' from the burnin' bush,
Whippoorwill, cryin' in the stable-door,
Sing tonight as yuh never sang before!
Hell's broke loose like a stompin' mountain-shoat,
Sing till yuh bust the gold in yore throat!
Hell's broke loose for forty miles aroun'
Bound to stop yore music if yuh don[t sing it down.
Sing on the mountains, little whippoorwill,
Sing to the valleys, an' slap 'em with a hill,
For I'm struttin' high as an eagle's quill,

An' hell's broke loose,
Hell's broke loose,
Hell's broke loose in Georgia!
They wasn't a sound when I stopped bowin',
(Whippoorwill, yuh can sing no more.)
But, somewhere or other, the dawn was growin',
(Oh, mountain whippoorwill!)
An' I thought, 'I've fiddled all night an' lost,
Yo're a good hill-billy, but yuh've been bossed.'
So I went to congratulate old man Dan,
-- But he put his fiddle into my han' --
An' then the noise of the crowd began!

Stephen Vincent Benet

The Quality Of Courage

Black trees against an orange sky,
Trees that the wind shook terribly,
Like a harsh spume along the road,
Quavering up like withered arms,
Writhing like streams, like twisted charms
Of hot lead flung in snow. Below
The iron ice stung like a goad,
Slashing the torn shoes from my feet,
And all the air was bitter sleet.

And all the land was cramped with snow,
Steel-strong and fierce and glimmering wan,
Like pale plains of obsidian.

-- And yet I strove -- and I was fire
And ice -- and fire and ice were one
In one vast hunger of desire.
A dim desire, of pleasant places,
And lush fields in the summer sun,
And logs aflame, and walls, and faces,
-- And wine, and old ambrosial talk,
A golden ball in fountains dancing,
And unforgotten hands. (Ah, God,
I trod them down where I have trod,
And they remain, and they remain,
Etched in unutterable pain,
Loved lips and faces now apart,
That once were closer than my heart --
In agony, in agony,
And horribly a part of me. . . .
For Lethe is for no man set,
And in Hell may no man forget.)

And there were flowers, and jugs, bright-glancing,
And old Italian swords -- and looks,
A moment's glance of fire, of fire,
Spiring, leaping, flaming higher,
Into the intense, the cloudless blue,
Until two souls were one, and flame,
And very flesh, and yet the same!

As if all springs were crushed anew
Into one globed drop of dew!
But for the most I thought of heat,
Desiring greatly. . . . Hot white sand
The lazy body lies at rest in,
Or sun-dried, scented grass to nest in,
And fires, innumerable fires,
Great fagots hurling golden gyres
Of sparks far up, and the red heart
In sea-coals, crashing as they part
To tiny flares, and kindling snapping,
Bunched sticks that burst their string and wrapping
And fall like jackstraws; green and blue
The evil flames of driftwood too,
And heavy, sullen lumps of coke
With still, fierce heat and ugly smoke. . . .
. . . And then the vision of his face,
And theirs, all theirs, came like a sword,
Thrice, to the heart -- and as I fell
I thought I saw a light before.

I woke. My hands were blue and sore,
Torn on the ice. I scarcely felt
The frozen sleet begin to melt
Upon my face as I breathed deeper,
But lay there warmly, like a sleeper
Who shifts his arm once, and moans low,
And then sinks back to night. Slow, slow,
And still as Death, came Sleep and Death
And looked at me with quiet breath.
Unbending figures, black and stark
Against the intense deeps of the dark.
Tall and like trees. Like sweet and fire
Rest crept and crept along my veins,
Gently. And there were no more pains. . . .

Was it not better so to lie?
The fight was done. Even gods tire
Of fighting. . . . My way was the wrong.
Now I should drift and drift along
To endless quiet, golden peace . . .
And let the tortured body cease.

And then a light winked like an eye.
. . . And very many miles away
A girl stood at a warm, lit door,
Holding a lamp. Ray upon ray
It cloaked the snow with perfect light.
And where she was there was no night
Nor could be, ever. God is sure,
And in his hands are things secure.
It is not given me to trace
The lovely laughter of that face,
Like a clear brook most full of light,
Or olives swaying on a height,
So silver they have wings, almost;
Like a great word once known and lost
And meaning all things. Nor her voice
A happy sound where larks rejoice,
Her body, that great loveliness,
The tender fashion of her dress,
I may not paint them.
These I see,
Blazing through all eternity,
A fire-winged sign, a glorious tree!

She stood there, and at once I knew
The bitter thing that I must do.
There could be no surrender now;
Though Sleep and Death were whispering low.
My way was wrong. So. Would it mend
If I shrank back before the end?
And sank to death and cowardice?
No, the last lees must be drained up,
Base wine from an ignoble cup;
(Yet not so base as sleek content
When I had shrunk from punishment)
The wretched body strain anew!
Life was a storm to wander through.
I took the wrong way. Good and well,
At least my feet sought out not Hell!
Though night were one consuming flame
I must go on for my base aim,
And so, perhaps, make evil grow

To something clean by agony . . .
And reach that light upon the snow . . .
And touch her dress at last . . .
So, so,
I crawled. I could not speak or see
Save dimly. The ice glared like fire,
A long bright Hell of choking cold,
And each vein was a tautened wire,
Throbbing with torture -- and I crawled.
My hands were wounds.
So I attained
The second Hell. The snow was stained
I thought, and shook my head at it
How red it was! Black tree-roots clutched
And tore -- and soon the snow was smutched
Anew; and I lurched babbling on,
And then fell down to rest a bit,
And came upon another Hell . . .
Loose stones that ice made terrible,
That rolled and gashed men as they fell.
I stumbled, slipped . . . and all was gone
That I had gained. Once more I lay
Before the long bright Hell of ice.
And still the light was far away.
There was red mist before my eyes
Or I could tell you how I went
Across the swaying firmament,
A glittering torture of cold stars,
And how I fought in Titan wars . . .
And died . . . and lived again upon
The rack . . . and how the horses strain
When their red task is nearly done. . . .

I only know that there was Pain,
Infinite and eternal Pain.
And that I fell -- and rose again.

So she was walking in the road.
And I stood upright like a man,
Once, and fell blind, and heard her cry . . .
And then there came long agony.
There was no pain when I awoke,

No pain at all. Rest, like a goad,
Spurred my eyes open -- and light broke
Upon them like a million swords:
And she was there. There are no words.

Heaven is for a moment's span.
And ever.
So I spoke and said,
"My honor stands up unbetrayed,
And I have seen you. Dear . . ."
Sharp pain
Closed like a cloak. . . .
I moaned and died.

Here, even here, these things remain.
I shall draw nearer to her side.

Oh dear and laughing, lost to me,
Hidden in grey Eternity,
I shall attain, with burning feet,
To you and to the mercy-seat!
The ages crumble down like dust,
Dark roses, deviously thrust
And scattered in sweet wine -- but I,
I shall lift up to you my cry,
And kiss your wet lips presently
Beneath the ever-living Tree.

This in my heart I keep for goad!
Somewhere, in Heaven she walks that road.
Somewhere . . . in Heaven . . . she walks . . . that . . . road. . . .

Stephen Vincent Benet

The White Peacock

(France -- Ancient Regime.)

I.

Go away!

Go away; I will not confess to you!

His black biretta clings like a hangman's cap; under his twitching fingers the beads shiver and click,

As he mumbles in his corner, the shadow deepens upon him;

I will not confess! . . .

Is he there or is it intenser shadow?

Dark huddled coilings from the obscene depths,

Black, formless shadow,

Shadow.

Doors creak; from secret parts of the chateau come the scuffle and worry of rats.

Orange light drips from the guttering candles,

Eddying over the vast embroideries of the bed

Stirring the monstrous tapestries,

Retreating before the sable impending gloom of the canopy

With a swift thrust and sparkle of gold,

Lipping my hands,

Then

Rippling back abashed before the ominous silences

Like the swift turns and starts of an overpowered fencer

Who sees before him Horror

Behind him darkness,

Shadow.

The clock jars and strikes, a thin, sudden note like the sob of a child.

Clock, buhl clock that ticked out the tortuous hours of my birth,

Clock, evil, wizened dwarf of a clock, how many years of agony have you relentlessly measured,

Yardstick of my stifling shroud?

I am Aumaury de Montreuil; once quick, soon to be eaten of worms.

You hear, Father? Hsh, he is asleep in the night's cloak.

Over me too steals sleep.

Sleep like a white mist on the rotting paintings of cupids and gods on the ceiling;

Sleep on the carven shields and knots at the foot of the bed,
Oozing, blurring outlines, obliterating colors,
Death.

Father, Father, I must not sleep!

It does not hear -- that shadow crouched in the corner . . .

Is it a shadow?

One might think so indeed, save for the calm face, yellow as wax, that lifts like
the face of a drowned man from the choking darkness.

II.

Out of the drowsy fog my body creeps back to me.

It is the white time before dawn.

Moonlight, watery, pellucid, lifeless, ripples over the world.

The grass beneath it is gray; the stars pale in the sky.

The night dew has fallen;

An infinity of little drops, crystals from which all light has been taken,

Glint on the sighing branches.

All is purity, without color, without stir, without passion.

Suddenly a peacock screams.

My heart shocks and stops;

Sweat, cold corpse-sweat

Covers my rigid body.

My hair stands on end. I cannot stir. I cannot speak.

It is terror, terror that is walking the pale sick gardens

And the eyeless face no man may see and live!

Ah-h-h-h-h!

Father, Father, wake! wake and save me!

In his corner all is shadow.

Dead things creep from the ground.

It is so long ago that she died, so long ago!

Dust crushes her, earth holds her, mold grips her.

Fiends, do you not know that she is dead? . . .

"Let us dance the pavon!" she said; the waxlights glittered like swords on the polished floor.

Twinkling on jewelled snuffboxes, beaming savagely from the crass gold of candelabra,

From the white shoulders of girls and the white powdered wigs of men . . .

All life was that dance.

The mocking, resistless current,

The beauty, the passion, the perilous madness --

As she took my hand, released it and spread her dresses like petals,

Turning, swaying in beauty,

A lily, bowed by the rain, --

Moonlight she was, and her body of moonlight and foam,

And her eyes stars.

Oh the dance has a pattern!

But the clear grace of her thrilled through the notes of the viols,

Tremulous, pleading, escaping, immortal, untamed,

And, as we ended,

She blew me a kiss from her hand like a drifting white blossom --

And the starshine was gone; and she fled like a bird up the stair.

Underneath the window a peacock screams,

And claws click, scrape

Like little lacquered boots on the rough stone.

Oh the long fantasy of the kiss; the ceaseless hunger, ceaselessly, divinely
appeased!

The aching presence of the beloved's beauty!

The wisdom, the incense, the brightness!

Once more on the ice-bright floor they danced the pavon

But I turned to the garden and her from the lighted candles.

Softly I trod the lush grass between the black hedges of box.

Softly, for I should take her unawares and catch her arms,

And embrace her, dear and startled.

By the arbor all the moonlight flowed in silver

And her head was on his breast.

She did not scream or shudder

When my sword was where her head had lain

In the quiet moonlight;

But turned to me with one pale hand uplifted,

All her satins fiery with the starshine,

Nacreous, shimmering, weeping, iridescent,
Like the quivering plumage of a peacock . . .
Then her head drooped and I gripped her hair,
Oh soft, scented cloud across my fingers! --
Bending her white neck back. . . .

Blood writhed on my hands; I trod in blood. . . .
Stupidly agaze
At that crumpled heap of silk and moonlight,
Where like twitching pinions, an arm twisted,
Palely, and was still
As the face of chalk.

The buhl clock strikes.
Thirty years. Christ, thirty years!
Agony. Agony.

Something stirs in the window,
Shattering the moonlight.
White wings fan.
Father, Father!

All its plumage fiery with the starshine,
Nacreous, shimmering, weeping, iridescent,
It drifts across the floor and mounts the bed,
To the tap of little satin shoes.
Gazing with infernal eyes.
Its quick beak thrusting, rending, devil's crimson . . .
Screams, great tortured screams shake the dark canopy.
The light flickers, the shadow in the corner stirs;
The wax face lifts; the eyes open.

A thin trickle of blood worms darkly against the vast red coverlet and spreads to
a pool on the floor.

Stephen Vincent Benet

Three Day's Ride

'From Belton Castle to Solway side,
Hard by the bridge, is three days' ride.'

We had fled full fast from her father's keep,
And the time was come that we must sleep.

The first day was an ecstasy,
A golden mist, a burgeoning tree;
We rode like gods through a world new-made,
The hawthorn scented hill and glade,
A faint, still sweetness in the air--
And, oh, her face and the wind in her hair!
And the steady beat of our good steeds' hooves,
Bearing us northward, strong and fast,
To my high black tower, stark to the blast,
Like a swimmer stripped where the Solway moves.

And ever, riding, we chanted a song,
Challenging Fortune, loud and long,
'From Belton Castle to Solway side,
Strive as you may, is three days' ride!'

She slept for an hour, wrapped in my cloak,
And I watched her till the morning broke;
The second day--and a harsher land,
And grey bare hills on either hand;
A surly land and a sullen folk,
And a fog that came like bitter smoke.

The road wound on like a twisted snake,
And our horses sobbed as they topped the brake.
Till we sprang to earth at Wyvern Fen,
Where fresh steeds stamped, and were off again.

Weary and sleepless, bruised and worn,
We still had strength for laughter and scorn;
Love held us up through the mire and mist,
Love fed us, while we clasped and kissed,
And still we sang as the night closed in,

Stealthy and slow as a hidden sin,
'From Belton Castle to Solway side,
Ride how you will, is three days' ride.'

My love drooped low on the black mare's back,
Drowned in her hair . . . the reins went slack . . .
Yet she could not sleep, save to dream bad dreams
And wake all trembling, till at last
Her golden head lay on my breast.

At last we saw the first faint gleams
Of day. Dawn broke. A sickly light
Came from the withered sun--a blight
Was on the land, and poisonous mist
Shrouded the rotting trees, unkissed
By any wind, and the black crags glared
Like sightless, awful faces, spared
From death to live accursed for aye.

Dragging slow chains the hours went by.
We rode on, drunk and drugged with sleep,
Too deadly weary now to say
Whether our horses kept the way
Or no--like slaves stretched on a heap
Of poisoned arrows. Every limb
Shot with sharp pain; pain seemed to swim
Like a red cloud before our eyes. . . .

The mist broke, and a moment showed,
Sharp as the Devil's oxen-goad,
The spear-points where the hot chase rode.

Idly I watched them dance and rise
Till white wreaths wiped them out again . . .
My love jerked at the bridle rein;
The black mare, dying, broke her heart
In one swift gallop; for my part
I dozed; and ever in my brain,
Four hoofs of fire beat out refrain,
A dirge to light us down to death,
A silly rhyme that saith and saith,
'From Belton Castle to Solway side,

Though great hearts break, is three days' ride!
The black mare staggered, reeled and fell,
Bearing my love down . . . a great bell
Began to toll . . . and sudden fire
Flared at me from the road, a pyre
It seemed, to burn our bodies in . . .
And I fell down, far down, within
The pit's mouth . . . and my brain went blind. . . .

I woke--a cold sun rose behind
Black evil hills--my love knelt near
Beside a stream, her golden hair
Streaming across the grass--below
The Solway eddied to and fro,
White with fierce whirlpools . . . my love turned. . . .
Thank God, some hours of joy are burned
Into the mind, and will remain,
Fierce-blazing still, in spite of pain!

They came behind us as we kissed,
Stealthily from the dripping mist,
Her brothers and their evil band.
They bound me fast and made me stand.
They forced her down upon her knees.
She did not strive or cry or call,
But knelt there dumb before them all--
I could not turn away my eyes--
There was no fear upon her face,
Although they slew her in that place.
The daggers rent and tore her breast
Like dogs that snarl above a kill,
Her proud face gazed above them still,
Seeking rest--Oh, seeking rest!
The blood swept like a crimson dress
Over her bosom's nakedness,
A curtain for her weary eyes,
A muffling-cloth to stop her sighs . . .

And she was gone--and a red thing lay
Silent on the trampled clay.

Beneath my horse my feet are bound,

My hands are bound behind my back,
I feel the sinews start to crack--
And ever to the hoof-beats' sound,
As we draw near the gallows-tree,
Where I shall hang right speedily,
A crazy tune rings in my brain,
Four hoofs of fire tramp the refrain,
Crashing clear o'er the roaring crowd,
Steadily galloping, strong and loud,
'From Belton Castle to Solway side,
Hard by the bridge, is three days' ride!'

Stephen Vincent Benet

Winged Man

The moon, a sweeping scimitar, dipped in the stormy straits,
The dawn, a crimson cataract, burst through the eastern gates,
The cliffs were robed in scarlet, the sands were cinnabar,
Where first two men spread wings for flight and dared the hawk afar.

There stands the cunning workman, the crafty past all praise,
The man who chained the Minotaur, the man who built the Maze.
His young son is beside him and the boy's face is a light,
A light of dawn and wonder and of valor infinite.

Their great vans beat the cloven air, like eagles they mount up,
Motes in the wine of morning, specks in a crystal cup,
And lest his wings should melt apace old Daedalus flies low,
But Icarus beats up, beats up, he goes where lightnings go.

He cares no more for warnings, he rushes through the sky,
Braving the crags of ether, daring the gods on high,
Black 'gainst the crimson sunset, golden o'er cloudy snows,
With all Adventure in his heart the first winged man arose.

Dropping gold, dropping gold, where the mists of morning rolled,
On he kept his way undaunted, though his breaths were stabs of cold,
Through the mystery of dawning that no mortal may behold.

Now he shouts, now he sings in the rapture of his wings,
And his great heart burns intenser with the strength of his desire,
As he circles like a swallow, wheeling, flaming, gyre on gyre.

Gazing straight at the sun, half his pilgrimage is done,
And he staggers for a moment, hurries on, reels backward, swerves
In a rain of scattered feathers as he falls in broken curves.

Icarus, Icarus, though the end is piteous,
Yet forever, yea, forever we shall see thee rising thus,
See the first supernal glory, not the ruin hideous.

You were Man, you who ran farther than our eyes can scan,
Man absurd, gigantic, eager for impossible Romance,
Overthrowing all Hell's legions with one warped and broken lance.

On the highest steeps of Space he will have his dwelling-place,
In those far, terrific regions where the cold comes down like Death
Gleams the red glint of his pinions, smokes the vapor of his breath.

Floating downward, very clear, still the echoes reach the ear
Of a little tune he whistles and a little song he sings,
Mounting, mounting still, triumphant, on his torn and broken wings!

Stephen Vincent Benet

Young Blood

"But, sir," I said, "they tell me the man is like to die!" The Canon shook his head indulgently. "Young blood, Cousin," he boomed. "Young blood! Youth will be served!"

-- D'Hermonville's Fabliaux.

He woke up with a sick taste in his mouth
And lay there heavily, while dancing notes
Whirled through his brain in endless, rippling streams,
And a grey mist weighed down upon his eyes
So that they could not open fully. Yet
After some time his blurred mind stumbled back
To its last ragged memory -- a room;
Air foul with wine; a shouting, reeling crowd
Of friends who dragged him, dazed and blind with drink
Out to the street; a crazy rout of cabs;
The steady mutter of his neighbor's voice,
Mumbling out dull obscenity by rote;
And then . . . well, they had brought him home it seemed,
Since he awoke in bed -- oh, damn the business!
He had not wanted it -- the silly jokes,
"One last, great night of freedom ere you're married!"
"You'll get no fun then!" "H-ssh, don't tell that story!
He'll have a wife soon!" -- God! the sitting down
To drink till you were sodden! . . .
Like great light
She came into his thoughts. That was the worst.
To wallow in the mud like this because
His friends were fools. . . . He was not fit to touch,
To see, oh far, far off, that silver place
Where God stood manifest to man in her. . . .
Fouling himself. . . . One thing he brought to her,
At least. He had been clean; had taken it
A kind of point of honor from the first . . .
Others might do it . . . but he didn't care
For those things. . . .
Suddenly his vision cleared.
And something seemed to grow within his mind. . . .
Something was wrong -- the color of the wall --

The queer shape of the bedposts -- everything
Was changed, somehow . . . his room. Was this his room?

. . . He turned his head -- and saw beside him there
The sagging body's slope, the paint-smear'd face,
And the loose, open mouth, lax and awry,
The breasts, the bleached and brittle hair . . . these things.
. . . As if all Hell were crushed to one bright line
Of lightning for a moment. Then he sank,
Prone beneath an intolerable weight.
And bitter loathing crept up all his limbs.

Stephen Vincent Benet