

# The Cruel Solstice

Sidney Keyes  
1944

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THE CRUEL  
SOLSTICE

*by Sidney Keyes*

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TO  
John Heath Stubb

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Though not precisely a sequence, the poems have been arranged in a rough order of thought; and should be read consecutively, with the section of *Legends* as a sort of interlude.

S. K.

# LANDSCAPES AND FIGURES

## Four Postures of Death

### I. DEATH AND THE MAIDEN

*He said, "Dance for me", and he said,  
"You are too beautiful for the wind  
To pick at, or the sun to burn". He said,  
"I'm a poor tattered thing, but not unkind  
To the sad dancer and the dancing dead".*

*So I smiled and a slow measure  
Mastered my feet and I was happy then.  
He said, "My people are gentle as lilies  
And in my house there are no men  
To wring your young heart with a foolish pleasure".*

*Because my boy had crossed me in a strange bed  
I danced for him and was not afraid.  
He said, "You are too beautiful for any man  
To finger; you shall stay a maid  
For ever in my kingdom and be comforted".*

*He said, "You shall be my daughter and your feet move  
In finer dances, maiden; and the hollow  
Halls of my house shall flourish with your singing".  
He beckoned and I knew that I must follow  
Into the kingdom of no love.*

### II. DEATH AND THE LOVERS

The Lover: *The briars fumble with the moon;  
Far have I come, O far away  
And heartsick sore, my own sweeting.*

The Woman: *I stand before the ordered prison room.  
I can give you no lover's greeting.*

The Lover: *Wind cracks the clouds, so has my face cracked open  
With longing all this while, my cold face turning  
Hopelessly to you, like a hound's blind muzzle  
Turned to the moon.*

The Woman: *O you bring in a sickly moon  
And you bring in the rain:  
I will not open, my true love is gone,*

*You are his ghost. O never come again.*

The Lover: *My feet are bleeding, you called me and your face  
Called me a daylong dreary journeying.*

The Woman: *Get back, get back into your likely place.  
The time is past for all this havoring.*

The Lover: *I am a poor boy, pity  
A poor boy on the roads, after your love.*

The Woman: *It is too late: seek out a storied city  
To house your silliness. Oh, my lost love . . .*

Death: *Is here behind you. Get you in  
Out of that muscular salacious wind.  
Lie down by me: I have an art  
To comfort you and still your restless mind.*

The Woman: *I'll close the window; and God send  
We are damned easily . . .*

Death: *Lie down by me, be gentle: at the end  
Of time, God's quiet hands will kill your fantasy.*

The Lover: *And strangle me, God's horny fingers, huge  
Fingers of broken cloud, great creaking hands  
That so beset me; briar-nails tear free  
My soul into your wisdom, ravish me  
Since she will not . . .*

The Woman: *I am afraid, your hands are strong and cold.  
Are you my enemy, or my forsaken lover?*

Death: *Lie soft, lie still. I am sleep's cruel brother.*

### *III. DEATH AND THE LADY*

*O quietly I wait by the window and my frayed fine hand  
Rests in the autumn sunlight.*

*Quietly*

*The garden trees shake down their crown of leaves.  
I have no fear because I have no lover.*

*I was never acquisitive, never would bind  
Any man for myself: so from this brown and golden  
Season of loneliness let him call me softly—  
Expecting my compliance, not my welcome.*

*It may be an hour's play, this waiting for the word—  
He will speak softly, for they all spoke softly—  
Or I may fill an autumn with contrition  
And waiting for the arm across my shoulders.*

*Yet he must use no lover's talk to me,  
Nor shall his hand be ringed, even with sapphires.  
He need not dance, for I have danced with others.  
O let him come as bare and white as winter.*

*The wind comes and goes. The leaves and clouds  
Fall through the branches. In a dream  
Or perhaps a picture, quite without surprise  
I turn to meet the question in his eyes.*

#### *IV. DEATH AND THE PLOWMAN*

The Rider: *O don't, don't ever ask me for alms:  
The winter way I'm riding. Beggar, shun  
My jingling bonebag equipage, beware  
My horse's lifted hoof, the sinewed whip.  
I am the man started a long time since  
To drive into the famous land some call  
Posterity, some famine, some the valley  
Of bones, valley of bones, valley of dry  
Bones where a critical wind is always searching  
The poor dried marrow for a drop of truth.  
Better for you to ask no alms, my friend.*

The Plowman: *It's only the wind holds my poor bones together;  
So take me with you to that famous land.  
There I might wither, as I'm told some do,  
Out of my rags and boast at last  
The integrated skeleton of truth.*

The Rider: *The wind creeps sharper there, my hopeful friend,  
Than you imagine. There the crooked trees*

*Bend like old fingers; and at Hallowmass  
The Lord calls erring bones to dance a figure.*

The Plowman: *What figure, friend? Why should I fear that dancing?*

The Rider: *No man may reasonably dance  
That figure, friend. One saw it, one Ezekiel  
Was only spared to tell of it. That valley  
Is no man's proper goal, but some must seek it.*

The Plowman: *I might get clothing there. A skeleton  
Cannot go naked.*

The Rider: *Naked as the sky  
And lonely as the elements, the man  
Who knows that land. The drypoint artist there  
Scrabbles among the wreckage; poets follow  
The hard crevasses, silly as starved gulls  
That scream behind the plow. Don't stop me, friend,  
Unless you are of those, and your fool's pride  
Would lure you to that land. . . .*

The Plowman: *I will go with you.  
Better plow-following, the searching wind  
About my bones than this nonentity.*

The Rider: *Then get you up beside me, gull-brained fool.*

Both: *We're driving to the famous land some call  
Posterity, some famine, some the valley  
Of bones, valley of bones, valley of dry  
Bones where there is no heat nor hope nor dwelling:  
But cold security, the one and only  
Right of a workless man without a home.*

## Cervières

*Look, Aimée, and you, Victor; look—  
The birds have taken all our cherries—  
Down in the brown-walled orchard on the hillside  
The cherry-trees are weeping for their fruit;  
Only the clusters of green stalks  
Remain; the stones are scattered on the grass.  
There will be no more cherries, not this summer  
Nor next, if we get another. God!  
It's beyond bearing that they eat our cherries  
And fly away and leave the trees in mourning.  
Soon an invader will be taking more than cherries:  
They'll be stealing our dreams or breaking up  
Our history for firewood.*

*Children, see*

*The avenues of cherry-trees are broken  
And trampled boughs crawl in the dust. See, Victor,  
How the sun bouncing off the mountain strikes  
Christ's wooden throat above the cemetery:  
Flesh broken like our cherry-trees and ravished.  
The path runs open and smiling down the hill;  
It leaps the walls and hides behind the ruins.*

*Now take this moment and create its image  
Impregnable to time or trespasser,  
And turn your mind to realise your loss.  
The cherry-trees are broken and their fruit  
Sown on the indecipherable mountains.  
Realise your loss and take it in your hands  
And turn it like a pebble. You perceive  
It has a stone's dumb smell; its patterns  
Plot some forgotten map. Regard your loss.*

*Planting this lump of pain, perhaps a flower  
Might burst from it; perhaps a cherry-tree,  
Perhaps a world or a new race of men.*

*Regard your loss. The blossoms of the cherry  
Are rotten now; the branch is violated;  
The fruit is stolen and our dreams have failed.  
Yet somewhere—O beyond what bitter ranges?—  
A seed drops from the sky and like a bomb  
Explodes into our orchard's progeny,  
And so our care may colonise a desert.  
They cannot break our trees or waste our dreams,  
For their despoiling is a kind of sowing.*

*Aimée and Victor, stop crying. Can't you understand*

*They cannot steal our cherries or our joy?  
Let them take what they want, even our dreams.  
Somewhere our loss will plant a better orchard.*

## Advice for a Journey

*The drums mutter for war and soon we must begin  
To seek the country where they say that joy  
Springs flowerlike among the rocks, to win  
The fabulous golden mountain of our peace.*

*O my friends, we are too young  
For explorers, have no skill nor compass,  
Nor even that iron certitude which swung  
Our fathers at their self-fulfilling North.*

*So take no rations, remember not your homes—  
Only the blind and stubborn hope to track  
This wilderness. The thoughtful leave their bones  
In windy foodless meadows of despair:*

*Never look back, nor too far forward search  
For the white Everest of your desire;  
The scree rolls underfoot and you will never reach  
Those brittle peaks which only clouds may walk.*

*Others have come before you. The immortal  
Live like reflections and their frozen faces  
Will give you courage to ignore the subtle  
Sneer of the gentian and the iceworn pebble.*

*The fives cry death and the sharp winds call.  
Set your face to the rock; go on, go out  
Into the bad lands of battle, into the cloud-wall  
Of the future, my friends, and leave your fear.*

*Go forth, my friends, the raven is no sibyl;  
Break the clouds' anger with your unchanged faces.  
You'll find, maybe, the dream under the hill—  
But never Canaan, nor any golden mountain.*

# Epithalamium

for R. B. and H. S., October '42

*O you will have no bells and the winter is coming,  
But now the corn lies down to the stumbling thresher,  
The sycamore drops its yellow-winged projectiles  
And winter is coming, but first the season of fruit.*

*Your bells will be the voices of autumn rivers,  
Your wine will be the dew on the fallen apple:  
I sing for you who at the end of summer  
Have crowned the year and come together at last.*

*There's so much burning in the autumn world.  
The flames spread through the stubble, and the wind  
Comes out of Russia with a smell of fire.  
The reapers do not sing, but the sickle whispers  
Among the leaning wheat in the heat of noon.*

*O you have seen, as I have seen, the folly  
Of those who think lost time can be repaid:  
The girl who, mad with sorrow, hung her ring  
On the wind's finger, was not half so vain.  
I sing for you who at the end of summer  
Have crowned the year and come together at last.*

*These nights are kind as the memory of a mother:  
The geese track south across the heavy moon.  
Your winter will be a triumph of clear decision  
And what incredible spring may lie beyond?  
O live and love to see your happy children  
Deny the sorrow of a burning world.*

*Though you will have no bells and the winter is coming  
I sing your courage, who expect the spring.*



# Two Offices of a Sentry

## I. OFFICE FOR NOON

*At the field's border, where the cricket chafes  
His brittle wings among the yellow weed,  
I pause to hear the sea unendingly sifted  
Between the granite fingers of the cape.  
At this twelfth hour of unrelenting summer  
I think of those whose ready mouths are stopped.  
I remember those who crouch in narrow graves.  
I weep for those whose eyes are full of sand.*

## II. OFFICE FOR MIDNIGHT

*The ones who gave themselves to every moment  
Till time grew gentle as a sated lover;  
The young swift-footed and the old keen-eyed,  
Whose roads are freedom and whose stars are constant,  
Stand by me as I watch this empty town.  
I am in love with the wildness of the living.  
I am in love with the rhythms of dead limbs.  
I am in love with all those who have entered  
The night that smells of petals and of dust.*

# Seascape

For R.-J.

*Our country was a country drowned long since,  
By shark-toothed currents drowned:  
And in that country walk the generations,  
The dancing generations with grey eyes  
Whose touch would be like rain, the generations  
Who never thought to justify their beauty.  
There once the flowering cherry grasped the wall  
With childish fingers, once the gull swung crying  
Across the morning or the evening mist;  
Once high heels rattled on the terrace  
Over the water's talk, and the wind lifted  
The hard leaves of the bay; the white sand drifted  
Under the worm-bored rampart, under the white eyelid.*

*Our country was a country washed with colour.  
Its light was good to us, sharp limning  
The lover's secret smile, the fine-drawn fingers;  
It drew long stripes between the pointed jaws  
Of sea-bleached wreckage grinning through the wrack  
And turned cornelian the flashing eyeball.  
For here the tide sang like a riding hero  
Across the rock-waste, and the early sun  
Was shattered in the teeth of shuttered windows.*

*But now we are the gowned lamenters  
Who stand among the junipers and ruins.  
We are the lovers who defied the sea  
Until the tide returning threw us up  
A foreign corpse with blue-rimmed eyes, and limbs  
Drawn limp and racked between the jiggling waves.*

## Greenwich Observatory

*This onion-dome holds all intricacies  
Of intellect and star-struck wisdom; so  
Like Coleridge's head with multitudinous  
Passages riddled, full of strange instruments  
Unbalanced by a touch, this organism  
From wires and dials spins introverted life.  
It never looks, squat on its concrete shoulders  
Down at the river's swarming life, nor sees  
Cranes' groping insect-like activity  
Nor slow procession of funnels past the docks.  
Turning its inner wheels, absorbed in problems  
Of space and time, it never hears  
Birds singing in the park or children's laughter.  
Alive, but in another way, it broods  
On this its Highgate, hypnotised  
In lunar reverie and calculation.  
Yet night awakes it; blind lids open  
Lead to look upon the moon:  
A single goggling telescopic eye  
Enfolds the spheric wonder of the sky.*

## Paul Klee

*The short-faced goblins with their heavy feet  
Trampled your dreams, their spatulate  
Fingers have torn the tracery of your wisdom:  
But childlike you would not cry out, transforming  
Your enemies to little angry phantoms  
In clarity of vision exorcised.  
Until at last they conquered by attrition,  
And draining the last dregs of love away,  
They left you from the angular  
Prison of primary fears no way but flight:  
Yet never could invade your waterworld of spirit  
Since halfdivining there among the dance  
Of shadowed currents lurking ever  
Their unguessed image, luminous with fear.  
And so they stirred the shallows till the sky  
Flew blue in shards and thought sank even deeper,  
Where crouched your passion's residue confined:  
The evil centre of a child's clear mind.*

## War Poet

*I am the man who looked for peace and found  
My own eyes barbed.*

*I am the man who groped for words and found  
An arrow in my hand.*

*I am the builder whose firm walls surround  
A slipping land.*

*When I grow sick or mad*

*Mock me not nor chain me:*

*When I reach for the wind*

*Cast me not down:*

*Though my face is a burnt book*

*And a wasted town.*

## William Yeats in Limbo

*Where folds the central lotus  
Flesh and soul could never seek?  
Under what black-scar'd mountain  
May Pallas with Adonis meet?*

*Spirit-bodies' loveliness  
Cannot expiate my pain:  
How should I learn wisdom  
Being old and profane?*

*My thoughts have swarmed like bees  
In an old ruined tower:  
How should I go to drive them out  
Lacking joy and power?*

*How could I learn youth again,  
With figured symbols weaving  
Truth so easily, now I  
Am old and unbelieving?*

*By what chicanery of time  
May sword and sheath be separated?  
Silent be the singer who thinks of me  
And how I was defeated.*

## Remember Your Lovers

*Young men walking the open streets  
Of death's republic, remember your lovers.*

*When you foresaw with vision prescient  
The planet pain rising across your sky  
We fused your sight in our soft burning beauty:  
We laid you down in meadows drunk with cowslips  
And led you in the ways of our bright city.  
Young men who wander death's vague meadows,  
Remember your lovers who gave you more than flowers.*

*When truth came prying like a surgeon's knife  
Among the delicate movements of your brain  
We called your spirit from its narrow den  
And kissed your courage back to meet the blade—  
Our anaesthetic beauty saved you then.  
Young men whose sickness death has cured at last,  
Remember your lovers and covet their disease.*

*When you woke grave-chilled at midnight  
To pace the pavement of your bitter dream  
We brought you back to bed and brought you home  
From the dark antechamber of desire  
Into our lust as warm as candle-flame.  
Young men who lie in the carven beds of death,  
Remember your lovers who gave you more than dreams.*

*From the sun sheltering your careless head  
Or from the painted devil your quick eye,  
We led you out of terror tenderly  
And fooled you into peace with our soft words  
And gave you all we had and let you die.  
Young men drunk with death's unquenchable wisdom,  
Remember your lovers who gave you more than love.*

## The Gardener

*If you will come on such a day  
As this, between the pink and yellow lines  
Of parrot-tulips, I will be your lover.  
My boots flash as they beat the silly gravel.  
O come, this is your day.*

*Were you to lay your hand like a veined leaf  
Upon my square-cut hand, I would caress  
The shape of it, and that would be enough.  
I note the greenfly working on the rose.  
Time slips between my fingers like a leaf.*

*Do you resemble the silent pale-eyed angels  
That follow children? Is your face a flower?  
The lovers and the beggars leave the park—  
And still you will not come. The gates are closing.*

*O it is terrible to dream of angels.*

## St. John Baptist

*I, John, not reed but root;  
Not vested priest nor saviour but a voice  
Crying daylong like a cricket in the heat,  
Demand your worship. Not of me  
But of the traveller I am calling  
From beyond Jordan and the limestone hills,  
Whose runner and rude servant I am only.  
Not man entirely but God's watchman,  
I dwell among these blistered rocks  
Awaiting the wide dawn, the wonder  
Of His first coming and the Dove's descent.*

## Night Estuary

*And yet the spiked moon menacing  
The great humped dykes, scaring the plaintive seafowl,  
Makes no right image, wakes no assertive echo.  
Though one may stride the dykes with face upturned  
To the yellow inflammation in the sky  
And nostrils full of the living samphire scent,  
There is no kindness in man's heart for these.  
In this place, and at this unmeaning hour,  
There is no home for a man's hope or his sorrow.*

*O you lion-hearted poet's griefs, or griefs  
Wild as the curlew's cry of passage;  
O hope uneasy as the rising ebb  
Among the sedges, cold and questing guest;  
Leave me alone this hour with the restive night.  
Allow me to accept the witless landscape.*

## William Byrd

*I have come very far, Lord. In my time  
Men's mouths have been shut up, the gabble and whine  
Of shot has drowned the singing. You will pardon  
My praise that rises only from a book—  
(How long shall that book be hidden  
Under a scarecrow gown, under evil writings?)  
And you will pardon the tricks, the secret rooms,  
The boarded windows, your house again a stall.  
These things have made my house of praise more holy.  
And so I try to remember how it was  
When lovers sang like finches, and the Word  
Was music.*

*Lord, I am no coward,  
But an old man remembering the candle-flames  
Reflected in the scroll-work, frozen trees  
Praying for Advent, the willow cut at Easter.  
The quires are dumb. My spirit sings in silence.  
You will appoint the day of my arising.*

## Early Spring

*Now that the young buds are tipped with a falling sun—  
Each twig a candle, a martyr, St. Julian's branched stag—  
And the shadows are walking the cobbled square like soldiers  
With their long legs creaking and their pointed hands  
Reaching the railings and fingering the stones  
Of what expended, unprojected graves:  
The soil's a flirt, the lion Time is tamed,  
And pain like a cat will come home to share your room.*

## Hopes for a Lover

*I'd have you proud as red brocade  
And such a sight as Venus made  
Extravagantly stepping from a shell.*

*I'd have you clear your way before  
With such a look as Aias wore  
On his way back from hell.*

*I'd have you strong as spider's strand  
And all volcanic as the land  
Where the nymph fooled that cunning Ulysses.*

*I'd have you arrogantly ride  
Love's flurry, as the turning seas  
Bore Arion upon a fish.  
My last and dearest wish—  
That you should let the arrows of my pride  
Come at you again and again and never touch you.*

## North Sea

*The evening thickens. Figures like a frieze  
Cross the sea's face, their cold unlifted heads  
Disdainful of the wind that pulls their hair.  
The brown light lies along the harbour wall.*

*And eastward looking, eastward wondering  
I meet the eyes of Heine's ghost, who saw  
His failure in the grey forsaken waves  
At Rulenstein one autumn. And between  
Rises the shape in more than memory  
Of Düsseldorf, the ringing, river-enfolding  
City that brought such sorrow on us both.*

## A Hope for Those Separated by War

*They crossed her face with blood,  
They hung her heart.  
They dragged her through a pit  
Full of quick sorrow.  
Yet her small feet  
Ran back on the morrow.*

*They took his book and caged  
His mind in a dark house.  
They took his bright eyes  
To light their rooms of doubt.  
Yet his thin hands  
Crawled back and found her out.*

## Song: The Heart's Assurance

*O never trust the heart's assurance—  
Trust only the heart's fear:  
And what I'm saying is, Go back, my lovely—  
Though you will never hear.*

*O never trust your pride of movement—  
Trust only pride's distress:  
The only holy limbs are the broken fingers  
Still raised to praise and bless.*

*For the careless heart is bound with chains  
And terribly cast down:  
The beast of pride is hunted out  
And baited through the town.*

## Design for a Monument

*The stone doves settle on the lady's tomb.*

*Grey scrolls of lettering upon her eyes  
Will never hide the image of regret;  
And she who walked in a rich robe of safety  
Now shrinks beneath the rough immodest shroud.*

*O elegies are empty as the waiting  
Of timid ancestors and scraping parents  
Who worked so long towards that ruined face.  
All walks at evening among the stolid yews,  
And mornings at high windows, are forgotten  
Like folds in a gold robe laid out to rot.  
The lovers who rode with her lie scattered  
Among their horses' big-eyed skulls in the meadow;  
The yellow charlock scratches at her door.*

*It is not easy to lament a lady  
Whose past was greater than the singer's age.  
They who fly falcons at the angry sun  
Or ride black horses through the armoured night  
Have wept for her a day, then fallen sick  
And laid their bones in cold heraldic houses:  
And I am left to pause before her tomb  
Where grey doves cover her with granite leaves.*

# THE CRUEL SOLSTICE

## The Cruel Solstice

*To-night the stranger city and the old  
Moon that stands over it proclaim  
A cruel solstice, coming ice and cold  
Thoughts and the darkening of the heart's flame.*

*"Stand up", speaks soul, "let wisdom turn the time  
Into an image of your day's despite";  
O clever soul, we were born separate,  
Held only in hard glance or studied rhyme.*

*"Sleep then, tired singer, stop the mouth  
Of the unhappy month and take your rest."  
O cunning voice, I have not strength enough,  
Being no stranger here, but uncouth guest.*

*So must I walk or falter by the wall  
Wondering at my impotence  
Of thought and action; at the fall  
Of love and cities and the heart's false diligence.*

*To-night I cannot speak, remembering  
For all my daily talk, I dare not enter  
The empty month; can only stand and think  
Of you, my dearest, and the approaching winter.*

## A Renunciation

*Strong angels bear God's canopy,  
Strong horsemen ride the loose immoderate wind:  
But O my dark girl from her balcony  
Laughs down and puts their glory out of mind.*

*Sharp stars are wiser than the astronomer,  
The stinking goat more potent than the great  
Lover of girls, that cold Casanova:  
And righteous wars forget the cause of hate.*

*The high djinn-master Solomon  
Could never understand his women's talk:  
So I would be an unobservant man  
Frequenting gardens where dark women walk.*

# Lover's Complaint

## I. NOCTURNE

*The trains cry and are frightened  
Far from my distraction; spare  
My peace, my voice, my city  
Of desolation, desolate because you are there.*

*There was a month and two people walked in it  
But were not you or I:  
My sight is broken and the signs are taken  
That kept me safe in abject poetry.*

*Spare too my willing mind  
That served your images:  
There is a night and two people lie in it,  
And the green planet rages.*

*Were I to pass now on the creaking stair  
You would not know my face:  
The months and the night and my own mind  
Have taken a ghost's grace.*

*For my private streets and summers  
Are any alien comer's;  
And the tall miraculous city  
That I walked in will never house me.*

## II. AUBADE

*O sing, caged lark, sing caged  
Poetical bird, you liar;  
Sing high to-day, your female  
Rapture, your cagebird fire  
Won't fool me now, the day's already aged  
Ten years and your voice falls stale.*

*O sing, erotic season, sing  
Dream-heavy mind;  
Light's terrible ministry  
Perform, clear morning wind.  
But my ears have aged and everything  
Has turned round wretchedly.*



## The Migrant

*Slimmer than thrush, the ringneck ousel  
Haunts these black becks, recalling chalk-ribbed downs  
You walk this month; the heavy wrack  
Stumbling across them in the winter dusk;  
The gulls' extended shadows on the turf;  
A Hampshire naturalist seeking, noting  
The flocks, the fluting birds, (was it indeed  
Migration brought them, or mere Providence?)  
The ringnecked birds in autumn on those downs.  
So by the millrace and the stony ridge  
I look for something different, for a sign  
That love has flown into another country,  
Migrating from this frost—not, as I fear,  
Frozen and starved. The quick bird calls  
Thinly among the willows, and I think  
Of spring and of that winter friend. O voice,  
O bird-throat, bird-throat, you know not  
My deeper fear of time, my silly hope  
That spring may find us eager and unchanged.*

## The Doubtful Season

*The doubtful season of the brain's black weather  
Blew through me, but you waited for its end.  
My months were all named backwards till you showed me  
That even the mind is not deceived for ever.*

*O in October it would be the blazoned  
Leaves of the chestnut on the cobbled pavement:  
And we would seek in the corridors of autumn  
Denial of faith and of the summer's achievement.*

*And in the early year it was another  
Sign of evasion when the poplars clattered  
To sharpened ears above the metal river—  
And I would turn to find your eyes were shuttered.*

*Even that almost parting on the stair  
I could not understand, nor why the candles  
Sprouted such flowers between our sculptured faces:  
Nor why the river glinted in your hair.*

*O in July it was our love was started  
Like any hare among the watchful grasses;  
Its running is my song, my only story  
How time turns back and the doubtful season passes.*

# The Promised Landscape

For R.-J.

*How shall I sing for you—  
Sharing only  
The scared dream of a soldier:  
A young man's unbearable  
Dream of possession?  
How shall I sing for you  
With the foul tongue of a soldier?*

*We march through new mountains  
Where crows inhabit  
The pitiful cairns.  
At morning, the rock-pools  
Are matted with ice.  
But you are the mountains  
And you the journey.*

*We lie in a ruined farm  
Where rats perform  
Marvels of balance  
Among the rafters.  
And rain kisses my lips  
Because you are the sky  
That bends always over me.*

*How shall I sing for you  
Knowing only  
The explorer's sorrow,  
The soldier's weariness?  
New ranges and rivers  
Are never quite revealing  
Your promised figure.*

*How dare I sing for you  
I the least worthy  
Of lovers you've had:  
You the most lovely  
Of possible landscapes?*

September, 1942

## The Kestrels

*When I would think of you, my mind holds only  
The small defiant kestrels—how they cut  
The raincloud with sharp wings, continually circling  
About a storm-rocked elm, with passionate cries.  
It was an early month. The plow cut hard.  
The may was knobbed with chilly buds. My folly  
Was great enough to lull away my pride.*

*There is no virtue now in blind reliance  
On place or person or the forms of love.  
The storm bears down the pivotal tree, the cloud  
Turns to the net of an inhuman fowler  
And drags us from the air. Our wings are clipped.  
Yet still our love and luck lies in our parting:  
Those cries and wings surprise our surest act.*

## Medallion

*Bull-chested and iron-eyed heroes  
And weeping women  
Surround me while I sleep;  
Waking, I meet the continual procession  
Of hawk-headed, bird-clawed women  
And weeping men.*

# LEGENDS

## The Glass Tower in Galway

### I

*One was an eye and others  
Snake-headed travesties; one high-legged and mincing  
As a stork. And there were whining small ones  
Like sickly children. O they were a beastly  
Sea-born race, spawned on the rocks of Galway  
Among the dried shark-eggs and the dirty froth.  
They moved and cried and the wind blew hard from the West,  
Ruffling the treacherous pale places over the reefs.  
They cried, "Ours is the land",  
And the gulls dared not dispute them  
Nor even the old falcon circling the misty cape.  
They took the crooked fields and straggling coasts  
Of Galway, spreading later East and South  
Through heather-topped hills and the stinking bogs of Connaught,  
To caper lastly on the inland pastures  
Where only the moon and the waving grasses mocked them.  
But where the sea had retched them up  
They built a tower, above the cross-grained tides  
And wheezing potholed beaches, on a headland;  
Of glass they reared it, riveted askew,  
Sustained by witchcraft; in the autumn gales  
Ringing like a goblet till the mountains quivered.  
It was their shrine, and cruel sea-rites  
Went forward there while they possessed the land:  
Sometimes it shook with screaming and children's corpses  
Drifted southward, mauled by the grumbling seals.  
Yet still on summer nights impassively  
It faced the empty West with its inane transparency.*

### II

*But as the inhuman years neared their completion  
A race came from the South; sun-bronzed  
Cloud-riding Danaan people out of Egypt.  
And there were battles. First among the ravaged  
Hills and then raging by the stony beaches.  
Wars passed; the sea took many dead, the tower  
Fell and its rites were celebrated  
Now only in the deep sea caverns where its masters  
Sought refuge; now the fretful tide  
Coughed round those altars without sacrifice;  
Outlawed by history, the sea-born race  
Rotting off Galway, the Atlantic shark  
And groping spider-crab their only heir.  
Those reefs and beaches now lay shadowless  
Under the moon; the wheeling falcon saw  
A new age coming, like the early sun  
Gilding the spindrift, bronze on the wet sand.*

### III

*But even that age is dead and songs  
Forget its buried kings who lie  
Under high cairns, their requiem the curlews'  
Insatiable crying, their epitaph  
In lichens written, and great deeds engraved  
On buried shards of bronze. For history  
Despises even them, turning their prowess  
Into a tale of ogres, fame and truth  
Lost in the wreck of their enormous bones.*

### IV

*Bats roost in the high white halls  
And the heroes are finished.*

*Their swords are stacked for scrap  
In the cold waste places.*

*Their tombs scattered and broken  
Nourish the blue thistle.*

*For time will never repent  
Nor the seasons pity them.*

*There's no hope in hoping now:  
God has left us like a girl.*

## The Bards

*Now it is time to remember the winter festivals  
Of the old world, and see their rafted halls  
Hung with hard holly; tongues' confusion; slow  
Beat of the heated blood in those great palaces  
Decked with the pale and sickled mistletoe;  
And voices dying when the blind bard rises  
Robed in his servitude, and the high harp  
Of sorrow sounding, stills those upturned faces.*

*O it is such long learning, loneliness  
And dark despite to master  
The bard's blind craft; in bitterness  
Of heart to strike the strings and muster  
The shards of pain to harmony, not sharp  
With anger to insult the merry guest.  
O it is glory for the old man singing  
Dead valour and his own days coldly cursed.*

*How ten men fell by one heroic sword  
And of fierce foray by the unwatched ford,  
Sing, blinded face; quick hands in darkness groping  
Pluck the sad harp; sad heart forever hoping  
Valhalla may be songless, enter  
The moment of your glory, out of clamour  
Moulding your vision to such harmony  
That drunken heroes cannot choose but honour  
Your stubborn blinded pride, your inward winter.*

## Simon Magus

*The hands affright, it is the cunning hands  
Have driven my weak masters out of doors:  
For a gold piece or healing water-kiss  
Shaped like a cross, make my hands strong as yours.*

*The hand fails because of the unpurged eye.  
The kiss fails because of the cold coin.  
There is no power on earth can circumvent  
The stubborn intellect, proud as a god's pain.*

*Go pray, Simon; hide your noisy heart  
Clapper-tongued and lolling with conceit.  
Meet your master in his house of fire  
And practise wonders on the silly dead.  
For you the mathematics of desire,  
The frigid neophyte, the cold symbolic bed.*

## Don Juan in Winter

*Where once it was under archways  
The legendary two-backed beast and bright  
As younger years the moonlight, dog-legged shadows  
Hunting not then, sparing your hopeful night:*

*Now they run loose about the traitor streets,  
You see in archways waiting the wronged man  
You spitted, and the beast run down and cornered  
Can only howl, harder its hunting than*

*The shame and terror of its own past quarry,  
The cry at midnight. Now the hunt is up  
For every dealer in expensive passion  
And every drinker from the jewelled cup.*

*Alone in winter now, you dare not loiter  
Along old ways, beside the terraced shore:  
Your steps avoid the high-wrought palaces  
Whose keys your fingers were, but are no more.*

*It is not vengefully nor yet in wisdom  
You're punished so. The night will never fail;  
But pretty faces fall and fail and never  
Escape from their tired mirrors. Years as pale*

*As shipwreck are your portion, you once diver;  
Once hunter, hunting. Serenaded windows yawn  
Satirically like old gap-toothed women,  
And age's dunghill cock crows up your dawn.*

## Glaucus

*The various voices are his poem now.*

*Under the currents, under the shifting lights  
Of midway water, rolls his fleshy wreck:  
Its gurnard eye reflects those airy heights  
Where once it noted white Arcturus set.*

*Gull-swift and swerving, the wet spirit freed  
Skims the huge breakers. Watching at the prow  
Of any southbound vessel, sailor, heed  
Never that petrel spirit, cruel as pride.*

*Let no cliff-haunting woman, no girl claim  
Kinship with Glaucus, neither sow  
The tide with daffodils, nor call his name  
Into the wind, for he is glorified—  
And cold Aegean voices speak his fame.*

## Dido's Lament for Aeneas

*He never loved the frenzy of the sun  
Nor the clear seas.  
He came with hero's arms and bullock's eyes  
Afraid of nothing but his nagging gods.  
He never loved the hollow-sounding beaches  
Nor rested easily in carven beds.*

*The smoke blows over the breakers, the high pyre waits.  
His mind was a blank wall throwing echoes,  
Not half so subtle as the coiling flames.  
He never loved my wild eyes nor the pigeons  
Inhabiting my gates.*

## Rome Remember

*The bright waves scour the wound of Carthage.  
The shadows of gulls run spiderlike through Carthage.  
The cohorts of the sand are wearing Carthage  
Hollow and desolate as a turning wave;  
But the bronze eagle has flown east from Rome.*

*Rome remember; remember the seafowls' sermon  
That followed the beaked ships westward to their triumph.  
O Rome, you city of soldiers, remember the singers  
That cry with dead voices along the African shore.*

*Rome remember; the courts of learning are tiled  
With figures from the east like running nooses.  
The desolate bodies of boys in the blue glare  
Of falling torches cannot stir your passion.  
Remember the Greeks who measured out your doom.  
Remember the soft funereal Etruscans.*

*O when the rain beats with a sound like bells  
Upon your bronze-faced monuments, remember  
This European fretful-fingered rain  
Will turn to swords in the hand of Europe's anger.  
Remember the Nordic snarl and the African sorrow.*

*The bronze wolf howls when the moon turns red.  
The trolls are massing for their last assault.  
Your dreams are full of claws and scaly faces  
And the Gothic arrow is pointed at your heart.*

*Rome remember your birth in Trojan chaos.  
O think how savage will be your last lamenters.  
How alien the lovers of your ghost.*

## Lament for Adonis

*I bring you branches and sing scattering branches.  
My feet have never turned this way before.  
My tears are statues in my lighted eyes.  
My mind is a stone with grief going over it  
Like white brook-water in the early year.  
I bring you tears and sing scattering tears.  
My grief for you is cold and heavy as iron.  
Your beauty was a wound in the world's side.*

*I bring you blood and sing scattering blood.*

# Little Drawda

All Souls, '41

*Under the shaken trees, wait O unlucky  
Returner, you rejected one:  
There is no way of comforting you. Wait  
Under the shaken trees and the clock striking one.*

*In the moon's wicked glitter linger now  
You tired ghost:  
You have no stance of safety but shift  
In the moon's glitter, an uprooted ghost.*

*On this strong night, remain you lonely  
Seeker beside me, though my heart is dumb:  
We may together solve the unexpected  
Secret of living, now that the clock is dumb.*

## Timoshenko

*Hour ten he rose, ten-sworded, every finger  
A weighted blade, and strapping round his loins  
The courage of attack, he threw the window  
Open to look on his appointed night.*

*Where lay, beneath the winds and creaking flares  
Tangled like lovers or alone assuming  
The wanton postures of the drunk with sleep,  
An army of twisted limbs and hollow faces  
Thrown to and fro between the winds and shadows.  
O hear the wind, the wind that shakes the dawn.  
And there before the night, he was aware  
Of the flayed fields of home, and black with ruin  
The helpful earth under the tracks of tanks.  
His bladed hand, in pity falling, mimicked  
The crumpled hand lamenting the broken plow;  
And the oracular metal lips in anger  
Squared to the shape of the raped girl's yelling mouth.  
He heard the wind explaining nature's sorrow  
And humming in the wire hair of the dead.*

*He turned, and his great shadow on the wall  
Swayed like a tree. His eyes grew cold as lead.  
Then, in a rage of love and grief and pity  
He made the pencilled map alive with war.*

## Orestes and the Furies

*This self-absorbed Orestes speaking riddles  
Wanders the falling woods of his own past;  
Remembering the pillared house, he weeps for  
A mother murdered and a sister lost.*

*Of Agamemnon felled like groaning timber—  
Alas the day he turned his back on Troy—  
The hunted hero mused, and his mother  
Who made him tremble like a lovestruck boy.*

*The mask of tragic pride upon his features  
Is painted with inexorable art.  
The guilty hands of mother and of sister  
Are both the iron hand upon his heart.*

*Observing shapes of judgment in the sky  
He seeks the dark, yet dare not turn his back  
Upon those shattered mirrors where he sees  
The snake-haired Furies running on his track.*

# THE WILDERNESS

## Time Will Not Grant

*Time will not grant the unlined page  
Completion or the hand respite:  
The Magi stray, the heavens rage,  
The careful pilgrim stumbles in the night.*

*Take pen, take eye and etch  
Your vision on this unpropitious time;  
Faces are fluid, actions never reach  
Perfection but in reflex or in rhyme.*

*Take now, not soon; your lost  
Minutes roost home like curses.  
Nicolo, Martin, every unhoused ghost  
Proclaims time's strange reverses.*

*Fear was Donne's peace; to him,  
Charted between the minstrel cherubim,  
Terror was decent. Rilke tenderly  
Accepted autumn like a rooted tree.  
But I am frightened after every good day  
That all my life must change and fall away.*

# Anarchy

*Rising, the light ran round inside his eyes.  
Then at a later hour, without surprise,  
He noted singing birds that raked the sky  
With pointed rods of sound like surgeons' knives.*

*The walls were scrawled with moss. The trees  
Grabbed at the sun like grey anemones.  
At noon he met a girl whose body sang  
Thin as a cricket, till his eardrums rang.*

*Black dancers crossed his brain. The bearded sun  
Whirled past him, locked with prancing Capricorn.  
A dog began to howl; until he cried  
It was too much. And then his wonder died.*

*Evening found him lost but unafraid  
Surveying the wry landscape in his head.  
Night ravished him, and so was brought to birth  
A great cold passion to destroy the earth.*

## To Keep Off Fears

*Fear of jammed window and of rising footsteps  
Out of fear's stair, where a tall phantom mounts  
Through time and action at the brain:*

*Fear of the enormous mountain leaning  
Across thought's lake, where blinded fishes move  
As cold and intricate as love:*

*Fear of the fisherman  
Who raised Leviathan  
On a steel line from his creative mirror:  
Fear of the moonlight shifting against the door:*

*Fear finally of tripwire and garotte  
Reaching possessive from an easy air:  
These bring the careful man into despair:*

*Then let me never crouch against the wall  
But meet my fears and fight them till I fall.*

## Being Not Proud

*Being not proud to praise a lonely man's  
Heroic loveless dream-humility most often  
Comes to the drunken or the moonstruck mind—  
I seek new pain to soften  
Like rain the stony soul, or careful wind.*

*Moses' great parleying on Sinai  
Brought anger on him and defeat:  
Love, being no frigid stonecrop-flower,  
Blooms not among pride's wrack and sleet  
Nor ornaments an introverted tower.*

*The bones of heroes crowned with stone and statue  
Nourish no flower nor bitter cry;  
Yet groping painfully, love's roots may save  
The dumb soul of a stone, or justify  
The holed heart in a crossroad grave.*

## The Uncreated Images

*The commerce of lithe limbs is fool's delight.*

*O hours and watches, O unending summer  
Within the lover's blood and cloudy blooms  
That nightly rise and break about the body—  
These are the currency of dreams and language,  
The uncreated images of truth.*

*Night's wink is momentary, and dividing  
The coloured shapes of passion which it spawned,  
Night strikes through the membrane to the gristled socket  
And tumbles like a pebble through the skull.*

*There is no speech to tell the shape of love  
Nor any but the wounded eye to see it;  
Whether in memory, or listening to the talk  
Of rain among the gutters; or at dawn  
The sentry's feet striking the chilly yard,  
There is no synonym for love's great word—  
No way of comforting the limbs  
That have lain lovelocked at an earlier season,  
Nor any coin to close the tired eye  
That day chastises with its rods of light.  
The separate limbs perform a faithless task—  
The eye devours created images.*

*The commerce of lithe limbs is fool's delight,  
Cry limb and eyeball, waiting for the night.*

## Against Divination

*Not in the night time, in the weary bed  
Comes wisdom, neither to the wild  
Symbolic leaf of autumn. Never seek  
Your solace from the automatic hand  
Of medium, or lover's partial gaze:  
Truth is not found in book or litten glass  
At midnight. Ghosts are liars. None may turn  
Winter's hard sentence but the silly man,  
The workless plowman or the unhoused poet  
Who walks without a thought and finds his peace  
In tall clouds mounting the unbroken wind,  
In dry leaves beating at the heavens' face.*

## The Expected Guest

*The table is spread, the lamp glitters and sighs;  
Light on my eyes, light on the high curved iris  
And springing from glaze to steel, from cup to knife  
Makes sacramental my poor midnight table,  
My broken scraps the pieces of a god.*

*O when they bore you down, the grinning soldiers,  
Was it their white teeth you could not forget?  
And when you met the beast in the myrtle wood,  
When the spear broke and the blood broke out on your side  
What Syrian Veronica above you  
Stooped with her flaxen cloth as yet unsigned?  
And either way, how could you call your darling  
To drink the cup of blood your father filled?  
We are dying to-night, you in the aged darkness  
And I in the white room my pride has rented.  
And either way, we have to die alone.*

*The laid table stands hard and white as to-morrow  
The lamp sings. The West wind jostles the door.  
Though broken the bread, the brain, the brave body  
There cannot now be any hope of changing  
The leavings to living bone, the bone to bread:  
For bladed centuries are drawn between us.  
The room is ready, but the guest is dead.*

# The Wilderness

## I

*The red rock wilderness  
Shall be my dwelling place.*

*Where the wind saws at the bluffs  
And the pebble falls like thunder  
I shall watch the clawed sun  
Tear the rocks asunder:*

*The seven-branched cactus  
Will never sweat wine:  
My own bleeding feet  
Shall furnish the sign.*

*The rock says "Endure".  
The wind says "Pursue".  
The sun says "I will suck your bones  
And afterwards bury you".*

## II

*Here where the horned skulls mark the limit  
Of instinct and intransigent desire  
I beat against the rough-tongued wind  
Towards the heart of fire.*

*So knowing my youth, which was yesterday,  
And my pride which shall be gone to-morrow,  
I turn my face to the sun, remembering gardens  
Planted by others—Longinus, Guillaume de Lorris  
And all love's gardeners, in an early May.  
O sing, small ancient bird, for I am going  
Into the sun's garden, the red rock desert  
I have dreamt of and desired more than the lilac's promise.  
The flowers of the rock shall never fall.*

*O speak no more of love and death  
And speak no word of sorrow:  
My anger's eaten up my pride  
And both shall die to-morrow.*

*Knowing I am no lover, but destroyer,  
I am content to face the destroying sun.  
There shall be no more journeys, nor the anguish  
Of meeting and parting, after the last great parting  
From the images of dancing and the gardens  
Where the brown bird chokes in its song:  
Until that last great meeting among mountains  
Where the metal bird sings madly from the fire.*

*O speak no more of ceremony,  
Speak no more of fame:  
My heart must seek a burning land  
To bury its foolish pain.*

*By the dry river at the desert edge  
I regret the speaking rivers I have known;  
The sunlight shattered under the dark bridge  
And many tongues of rivers in the past.  
Rivers and gardens, singing under the willows,  
The glowing moon. . . .*

*And all the poets of summer  
Must lament another spirit's passing over.*

*O never weep for me, my love,  
Or seek me in this land:  
But light a candle for my luck  
And bear it in your hand.*

### III

*In this hard garden where the earth's ribs  
Lie bare from her first agony, I seek  
The home of the gold bird, the predatory Phœnix.  
O louder than the tongue of any river  
Call the red flames among the shapes of rock:  
And this is my calling. . . .*

*Though my love must sit  
Alone with her candle in a darkened room  
Listening to music that is not present or  
Turning a flower in her childish hands  
And though we were a thousand miles apart . . .  
This is my calling, to seek the red rock desert  
And speak for all those who have lost the gardens,  
Forgotten the singing, yet dare not find the desert—  
To sing the song that rises from the fire.*

*It is not profitable to remember  
How my friends fell, my heroes turned to squalling  
Puppets of history; though I would forget  
The way of this one's failure, that one's exile—  
How the small foreign girl  
Grew crazed with her own beauty; how the poet  
Talks to the wall in a deserted city;  
How others danced until the Tartar wind  
Blew in the doors; or sitting alone at midnight  
Heard Solomon Eagle beat his drum in the streets:  
This is the time to ask their pardon  
For any act of coldness in the past.  
There is no kind of space can separate us:  
No weather, even this cruel sun, can change us;  
No dress, though you in shining satin walk  
Or you in velvet, while I run in tatters  
Against the fiery wind. There is no loss,  
Only the need to forget. This is my calling. . . .*

*But behind me the rattle of stones underfoot,  
Stones from the bare ridge rolling and skidding:  
A voice I know, but had consigned to silence,  
Another calling: my own words coming back. . . .*

*“And I would follow after you  
Though it were a thousand mile:  
Though you crossed the deserts of the world to the kingdom of death, my dear,  
I would follow after you and stand beside you there.”*

### IV

*Who is this lady, flirting with the wind,  
Blown like a tangle of dried flowers through the desert?  
This is my lover whom I left  
Alone at evening between the candles—  
White fingers nailed with flame—in an empty house.  
Here we have come to the last ridge, the river  
Crossed and the birds of summer left to silence.  
And we go forth, we go forth together  
With our lank shadows dogging us, scrambling  
Across the raw red stones.*

*There is no parting  
From friends, but only from the ways of friendship:  
Nor from our lovers, though the forms of love  
Change often as the landscape of this journey  
To the dark valley where the gold bird burns.  
I say, Love is a wilderness and these bones  
Proclaim no failure, but the death of youth.  
We say, You must be ready for the desert  
Even among the orchards starred with blossom,  
Even in spring, or at the waking moment  
When the man turns to the woman, and both are afraid.  
All who would save their life must find the desert—  
The lover; the poet, the girl who dreams of Christ,  
And the swift runner; crowned with another laurel:  
They all must face the sun, the red rock desert,  
And see the burning of the metal bird.  
Until you have crossed the desert and faced that fire  
Love is an evil, a shaking of the hand,  
A sick pain draining courage from the heart.*

*We do not know the end, we cannot tell  
That valley's shape, nor whether the white fire  
Will blind us instantly. . . .*

*Only we go  
Forward, we go forward together, leaving  
Nothing except a worn-out way of loving.*

*Flesh is fire, the fire of flesh burns white  
Through living limbs: a cold fire in the blood.  
We must learn to live without love's food.*

*We shall see the sky without birds, the wind  
Will blow no leaves, will ruffle no new river.  
We shall walk in the desert together.  
Flesh is fire, frost and fire.  
We have turned in time, we shall see  
The Phœnix burning under a rich tree.  
Flesh is fire.*

*Solomon Eagle's drum shall be filled with sand:  
The dancers shall wear out their skilful feet,  
The pretty lady be wrapped in a rough sheet.*

*We go now, but others must follow:  
The rivers are drying, the trees are falling,  
The red rock wilderness is calling.*

*And they will find who linger in the garden  
The way of time is not a river but  
A pilferer who will not ask their pardon.*

*Flesh is fire, frost and fire:  
Flesh is fire in this wilderness of fire  
Which is our dwelling.*

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# TRANSCRIBER NOTES

It was unclear at several page breaks whether a new stanza was started. Our best guess was used.

[The end of *The Cruel Solstice* by Sidney Keyes]