The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems

by Edna St. Vincent Millay

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE HARP-WEAVER, AND OTHER POEMS ***

THE HARP-WEAVER

AND OTHER POEMS

BY EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

RENASCENCE AND OTHER POEMS A FEW FIGS FROM THISTLES SECOND APRIL THREE PLAYS ARIA DA CAPO TWO SLATTERNS AND A KING THE LAMP AND THE BELL THE KING'S HENCHMAN

TO MY MOTHER

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PART ONE

MY HEART, BEING HUNGRY

My heart, being hungry, feeds on food The fat of heart despise. Beauty where beauty never stood, And sweet where no sweet lies I gather to my querulous need, Having a growing heart to feed. It may be, when my heart is dull, Having attained its girth, I shall not find so beautiful The meagre shapes of earth, Nor linger in the rain to mark The smell of tansy through the dark.

AUTUMN CHANT

Now the autumn shudders In the rose's root. Far and wide the ladders Lean among the fruit. Now the autumn clambers Up the trellised frame, And the rose remembers The dust from which it came. Brighter than the blossom On the rose's bough Sits the wizened, orange, Bitter berry now; Beauty never slumbers; All is in her name; But the rose remembers

NUIT BLANCHE

I am a shepherd of those sheep That climb a wall by night, One after one, until I

sleep, Or the black pane goes white. Because of which I cannot see A flock upon a hill, But doubts come tittering up to me That should by day be still. And childish griefs I have outgrown Into my eyes are thrust, Till my dull tears go dropping down Like lead into the dust.

THREE SONGS FROM THE LAMP AND THE BELL

I

Oh, little rose tree, bloom! Summer is nearly over. The dahlias bleed, and the phlox is seed. Nothing's left of the clover. And the path of the poppy no one knows. I would blossom if I were a rose. Summer, for all your guile, Will brown in a week to Autumn, And launched leaves throw a shadow below Over the brook's clear bottom,-- And the chariest bud the year can boast Be brought to bloom by the chastening frost.

II

Beat me a crown of bluer metal; Fret it with stones of a foreign style: The heart grows weary after a little Of what it loved for a little while. Weave me a robe of richer fibre; Pattern its web with a rare device. Give away to the child of a neighbor This gold gown I was glad in twice. But buy me a singer to sing one song-- Song about nothing--song about sheep-- Over and over, all day long;

III

Rain comes down And hushes the town. And where is the voice that I heard crying? Snow settles Over the nettles. Where is the voice that I heard crying? Sand at last On the drifting mast. And where is the voice that I heard crying? Earth now On the busy brow. And where is the voice that I heard crying?

THE WOOD ROAD

If I were to walk this way Hand in hand with Grief, I should mark that maple-spray Coming into leaf. I should note how the old burrs Rot upon the ground. Yes, though

Grief should know me hers While the world goes round, It could not in truth be said This was lost on me; A rock-maple showing red, Burrs beneath a tree.

FEAST

I drank at every vine. The last was like the first. I came upon no wine So wonderful as thirst. I gnawed at every root. I ate of every plant. I came upon no fruit So wonderful as want. Feed the grape and bean To the vintner and monger; I will lie down lean With my thirst and my hunger.

SOUVENIR

Just a rainy day or two In a windy tower, That was all I had of you-- Saving half an hour. Marred by greeting passing groups In a cinder walk, Near some naked blackberry hoops Dim with purple chalk. I remember three or four Things you said in spite, And an ugly coat you wore, Plaided black and white. Just a rainy day or two And a bitter word. Why do I remember you As a singing bird?

SCRUB

If I grow bitterly, Like a gnarled and stunted tree, Bearing harshly of my youth Puckered fruit that sears the mouth; If I make of my drawn boughs An inhospitable house, Out of which I never pry Towards the water and the sky, Under which I stand and hide And hear the day go by outside; It is that a wind too strong Bent my back when I was young, It is that I fear the rain Lest it blister me again.

THE GOOSE-GIRL

Spring rides no horses down the hill, But comes on foot, a goose-girl still. And all the loveliest things there be Come simply, so, it seems to me. If ever I said, in grief or pride, I tired of honest things, I lied; And should be cursed forevermore With Love in laces, like a whore, And neighbors cold, and friends unsteady, And Spring on horseback, like a lady!

THE DRAGONFLY

I wound myself in a white cocoon of singing, All day long in the brook's uneven bed, Measuring out my soul in a mucous thread; Dimly now to the brook's green bottom clinging, Men behold me, a worm spun-out and dead, Walled in an iron house of silky singing. Nevertheless at length, O reedy shallows, Not as a plodding nose to the slimy stem, But as a brazen wing with a spangled hem, Over the jewel-weed and the pink marshmallows, Free of these and making a song of them, I shall arise, and a song of the reedy shallows!

PART TWO

DEPARTURE

It's little I care what path I take, And where it leads it's little I care; But out of this house, lest my heart break, I must go, and off somewhere. It's little I know what's in my heart, What's in my mind it's little I know, But there's that in me must up and start, And it's little I care where my feet go. I wish I could walk for a day and a night, And find me at dawn in a desolate place With never the rut of a road in sight, Nor the roof of a house, nor the eyes of a face. I wish I could walk till my blood should spout, And drop me, never to stir again, On a shore that is wide, for the tide is out, And the weedy rocks are bare to the rain. But dump or dock, where the path I take Brings up, it's little enough I care; And it's little I'd mind the fuss they'll make, Huddled dead in a ditch somewhere. "Is something the matter, dear," she said, "That you sit at your work so silently?" "No, mother, no, 'twas a knot in my thread. There goes the kettle, I'll make the tea."

THE RETURN FROM TOWN

As I sat down by Saddle Stream To bathe my dusty feet there, A boy was standing on the bridge Any girl would meet there. As I went over Woody Knob And dipped into the hollow, A youth was coming up the hill Any maid would follow. Then in I turned at my own gate,-- And nothing to be sad for-- To such a man as any wife Would pass a pretty lad for.

A VISIT TO THE ASYLUM

Once from a big, big building, When I was small, small, The queer folk in the windows Would smile at me and call. And in the hard wee gardens Such pleasant men would hoe: "Sir, may we touch the little girl's hair?"-- It was so red, you know. They cut me colored asters With shears so sharp and neat, They brought me grapes and plums and pears And pretty cakes to eat. And out of all the windows, No matter where we went, The merriest eyes would follow me And make me compliment. There were a thousand windows, All latticed up and down. And up to all the windows, When we went back to town, The queer folk put their faces, As gentle as could be; "Come again, little girl!" they called, and I Called back, "You come see me!"

THE SPRING AND THE FALL

In the spring of the year, in the spring of the year, I walked the road beside my dear. The trees were black where the bark was wet. I see them yet, in the spring of the year. He broke me a bough of the blossoming peach That was out of the way and hard to reach. In the fall of the year, in the fall of the year, I walked the road beside my dear. The rooks went up with a raucous trill. I hear them still, in the fall of the year. He laughed at all I dared to praise, And broke my heart, in little ways. Year be springing or year be falling, The bark will drip and the birds be calling. There's much that's fine to see and hear In the spring of a year, in the fall of a year. 'Tis not love's going hurts my days, But that it went in little ways.

THE CURSE

Oh, lay my ashes on the wind That blows across the sea. And I shall meet a fisherman Out of Capri, And he will say, seeing me, "What a strange thing! Like a fish's scale or a Butterfly's wing." Oh, lay my ashes on the wind That blows away the fog. And I shall meet a farmer boy Leaping through the bog, And he will say, seeing me, "What a strange thing! Like a peat-ash or a Butterfly's wing." And I shall

blow to your house And, sucked against the pane, See you take your sewing up And lay it down again. And you will say, seeing me, "What a strange thing! Like a plum petal or a Butterfly's wing." And none at all will know me That knew me well before. But I will settle at the root That climbs about your door, And fishermen and farmers May see me and forget, But I'll be a bitter berry In your brewing yet.

KEEN

Weep him dead and mourn as you may, Me, I sing as I must: Blessed be Death, that cuts in marble What would have sunk to dust! Blessed be Death, that took my love And buried him in the sea, Where never a lie nor a bitter word Will out of his mouth at me. This I have to hold to my heart, This to take by the hand: Sweet we were for a summer month As the sun on the dry white sand; Mild we were for a summer month As the wind from over the weirs. And blessed be Death, that hushed with salt The harsh and slovenly years! Who builds her a house with love for timber Builds her a house of foam. And I'd rather be bride to a lad gone down Than widow to one safe home.

THE BETROTHAL

Oh, come, my lad, or go, my lad, And love me if you like. I shall not hear the door shut Nor the knocker strike. Oh, bring me gifts or beg me gifts, And wed me if you will. I'd make a man a good wife, Sensible and still. And why should I be cold, my lad, And why should you repine, Because I love a dark head That never will be mine? I might as well be easing you As lie alone in bed And waste the night in wanting A cruel dark head. You might as well be calling yours What never will be his, And one of us be happy. There's few enough as is.

HUMORESQUE

"Heaven bless the babe!" they said. "What queer books she must have read!" (Love, by whom I was beguiled, Grant I may not bear a child.) "Little does she guess to-day What the world may be!" they say. (Snow, drift deep and cover Till the spring my

murdered lover.)

THE POND

In this pond of placid water, Half a hundred years ago, So they say, a farmer's daughter, Jilted by her farmer beau, Waded out among the rushes, Scattering the blue dragon-flies; That dried stick the ripple washes Marks the spot, I should surmise. Think, so near the public highway, Well frequented even then! Can you not conceive the sly way,-- Hearing wheels or seeing men Passing on the road above,-- With a gesture feigned and silly, Ere she drowned herself for love, She would reach to pluck a lily?

THE BALLAD OF THE HARP-WEAVER

"Son," said my mother, When I was knee-high, "You've need of clothes to cover you, And not a rag have I. "There's nothing in the house To make a boy breeches, Nor shears to cut a cloth with Nor thread to take stitches. "There's nothing in the house But a loaf-end of rye, And a harp with a woman's head Nobody will buy," And she began to cry. That was in the early fall. When came the late fall, "Son," she said, "the sight of you Makes your mother's blood crawl,-- "Little skinny shoulder-blades Sticking through your clothes! And where you'll get a jacket from God above knows. "It's lucky for me, lad, Your daddy's in the ground, And can't see the way I let His son go around!" And she made a queer sound. That was in the late fall. When the winter came, I'd not a pair of breeches Nor a shirt to my name. I couldn't go to school, Or out of doors to play. And all the other little boys Passed our way. "Son," said my mother, "Come, climb into my lap, And I'll chafe your little bones While you take a nap." And, oh, but we were silly For half an hour or more, Me with my long legs Dragging on the floor, A-rock-rock-rocking To a mother-goose rhyme! Oh, but we were happy For half an hour's time! But there was I, a great boy, And what would folks say To hear my mother singing me To sleep all day, In such a daft way? Men say the winter Was bad that year; Fuel was scarce,

And food was dear. A wind with a wolf's head Howled about our door, And we burned up the chairs And sat upon the floor. All that was left us Was a chair we couldn't break, And the harp with a woman's head Nobody would take, For song or pity's sake. The night before Christmas I cried with the cold, I cried myself to sleep Like a two-year-old. And in the deep night I felt my mother rise, And stare down upon me With love in her eyes. I saw my mother sitting On the one good chair, A light falling on her From I couldn't tell where, Looking nineteen, And not a day older, And the harp with a woman's head Leaned against her shoulder. Her thin fingers, moving In the thin, tall strings, Were weav-weav-weaving Wonderful things. Many bright threads, From where I couldn't see, Were running through the harp-strings Rapidly, And gold threads whistling Through my mother's hand. I saw the web grow, And the pattern expand. She wove a child's jacket, And when it was done She laid it on the floor And wove another one. She wove a red cloak So regal to see, "She's made it for a king's son," I said, "and not for me." But I knew it was for me. She wove a pair of breeches Quicker than that! She wove a pair of boots And a little cocked hat. She wove a pair of mittens, She wove a little blouse, She wove all night In the still, cold house. She sang as she worked, And the harp-strings spoke; Her voice never faltered, And the thread never broke. And when I awoke,-- There sat my mother With the harp against her shoulder, Looking nineteen And not a day older, A smile about her lips, And a light about her head, And her hands in the harp-strings Frozen dead. And piled up beside her And toppling to the skies, Were the clothes of a king's son, Just my size.

PART THREE

NEVER MAY THE FRUIT BE PLUCKED

Never, never may the fruit be plucked from the bough And gathered into barrels. He that would eat of love must eat it where it hangs. Though the branches bend like reeds, Though the ripe fruit splash in the grass or wrinkle on the tree, He that would

eat of love may bear away with him Only what his belly can hold, Nothing in the apron, Nothing in the pockets. Never, never may the fruit be gathered from the bough And harvested in barrels. The winter of love is a cellar of empty bins, In an orchard soft with rot.

THE CONCERT

No, I will go alone. I will come back when it's over. Yes, of course I love you. No, it will not be long. Why may you not come with me?-- You are too much my lover. You would put yourself Between me and song. If I go alone, Quiet and suavely clothed, My body will die in its chair, And over my head a flame, A mind that is twice my own, Will mark with icy mirth The wise advance and retreat Of armies without a country, Storming a nameless gate, Hurling terrible javelins down From the shouting walls of a singing town Where no women wait! Armies clean of love and hate, Marching lines of pitiless sound Climbing hills to the sun and hurling Golden spears to the ground! Up the lines a silver runner Bearing a banner whereon is scored The milk and steel of a bloodless wound Healed at length by the sword! You and I have nothing to do with music. We may not make of music a filigree frame, Within which you and I, Tenderly glad we came, Sit smiling, hand in hand. Come now, be content. I will come back to you, I swear I will; And you will know me still. I shall be only a little taller Than when I went.

HYACINTH

I am in love with him to whom a hyacinth is dearer Than I shall ever be dear. On nights when the field-mice are abroad he cannot sleep: He hears their narrow teeth at the bulbs of his hyacinths. But the gnawing at my heart he does not hear.

TO ONE WHO MIGHT HAVE BORNE A MESSAGE

Had I known that you were going I would have given you messages for her, Now two years dead, Whom I shall always love. As it is, should she entreat you how it goes with me, You must reply, as well as with most, you fancy; That I love easily,

and pass the time. And she will not know how all day long between My life and me her shadow intervenes, A young thin girl, Wearing a white skirt and a purple sweater And a narrow pale blue ribbon about her hair. I used to say to her, "I love you Because your face is such a pretty color, No other reason." But it was not true. Oh, had I only known that you were going, I could have given you messages for her!

SIEGE

This I do, being mad: Gather baubles about me, Sit in a circle of toys, and all the time Death beating the door in. White jade and an orange pitcher, Hindu idol, Chinese god,-- Maybe next year, when I'm richer-- Carved beads and a lotus pod.... And all this time Death beating the door in.

THE CAIRN

When I think of the little children learning In all the schools of the world, Learning in Danish, learning in Japanese That two and two are four, and where the rivers of the world Rise, and the names of the mountains and the principal cities, My heart breaks. Come up, children! Toss your little stones gaily On the great cairn of Knowledge! (Where lies what Euclid knew, a little gray stone, What Plato, what Pascal, what Galileo: Little gray stones, little gray stones on a cairn.) Tell me, what is the name of the highest mountain? Name me a crater of fire! a peak of snow! Name me the mountains on the moon! But the name of the mountain that you climb all day, Ask not your teacher that.

SPRING SONG

I know why the yellow forsythia Holds its breath and will not bloom, And the robin thrusts his beak in his wing. Want me to tell you? Think you can bear it? Cover your eyes with your hand and hear it. You know how cold the days are still? And everybody saying how late the Spring is? Well--cover your eyes with your hand--the thing is, There isn't going to be any Spring. No parking here! No parking here! They said to Spring: No parking here! Spring came on as she always does, Laid her hand

on the yellow forsythia,-- Little boys turned in their sleep and smiled, Dreaming of marbles, dreaming of agates; Little girls leapt from their beds to see Spring come by with her painted wagons, Colored wagons creaking with wonder-- Laid her hand on the robin's throat; When up comes you-know-who, my dear, You-know-who in a fine blue coat, And says to Spring: No parking here! No parking here! No parking here! Move on! Move on! No parking here! Come walk with me in the city gardens. (Better keep an eye out for you-know-who) Did ever you see such a sickly showing?-- Middle of June, and nothing growing; The gardeners peer and scratch their heads And drop their sweat on the tulip-beds, But not a blade thrusts through. Come, move on! Don't you know how to walk? No parking here! And no back-talk! Oh, well--hell, it's all for the best. She certainly made a lot of clutter, Dropping petals under the trees, Taking your mind off your bread and butter. Anyhow, it's nothing to me. I can remember, and so can you. (Though we'd better watch out for you-know-who, When we sit around remembering Spring). We shall hardly notice in a year or two. You can get accustomed to anything.

MEMORY OF CAPE COD

The wind in the ash-tree sounds like surf on the shore at Truro. I will shut my eyes . . . hush, be still with your silly bleating, sheep on Shillingstone Hill . . . They said: Come along! They said: Leave your pebbles on the sand and come along, it's long after sunset! The mosquitoes will be thick in the pine-woods along by Long Nook, the wind's died down! They said: Leave your pebbles on the sand, and your shells, too, and come along, we'll find you another beach like the beach at Truro. Let me listen to wind in the ash ... it sounds like surf on the shore.

PART FOUR

SONNETS

IV-I WHEN YOU, THAT AT THIS MOMENT

When you, that at this moment are to me Dearer than words on paper, shall depart, And be no more the warder of my heart, Whereof again myself shall hold the key; And be no more--what now you seem to be-- The sun, from which all excellences start In a round nimbus, nor a broken dart Of moonlight, even, splintered on the sea; I shall remember only of this hour-- And weep somewhat, as now you see me weep-- The pathos of your love, that, like a flower, Fearful of death yet amorous of sleep, Droops for a moment and beholds, dismayed, The wind whereon its petals shall be laid.

IV-II THAT LOVE AT LENGTH SHOULD FIND

That Love at length should find me out and bring This fierce and trivial brow unto the dust, Is, after all, I must confess, but just; There is a subtle beauty in this thing, A wry perfection; wherefore now let sing All voices how into my throat is thrust, Unwelcome as Death's own, Love's bitter crust, All criers proclaim it, and all steeples ring. This being done, there let the matter rest. What more remains is neither here nor there. That you requite me not is plain to see; Myself your slave herein have I confessed: Thus far, indeed, the world may mock at me; But if I suffer, it is my own affair.

IV-III LOVE IS NOT BLIND

Love is not blind. I see with single eye Your ugliness and other women's grace. I know the imperfection of your face,-- The eyes too wide apart, the brow too high For beauty. Learned from earliest youth am I In loveliness, and cannot so erase Its letters from my mind, that I may trace You faultless, I must love until I die. More subtle is the sovereignty of love: So am I caught that when I say, "Not fair," 'Tis but as if I said, "Not here--not there-- Not risen--not writing letters." Well I know What is this beauty men are babbling of; I wonder only why they prize it so.

IV-IV I KNOW I AM BUT SUMMER

I know I am but summer to your heart, And not the full four seasons of the year;

And you must welcome from another part Such noble moods as are not mine, my dear. No gracious weight of golden fruits to sell Have I, nor any wise and wintry thing; And I have loved you all too long and well To carry still the high sweet breast of Spring. Wherefore I say: O love, as summer goes, I must be gone, steal forth with silent drums, That you may hail anew the bird and rose When I come back to you, as summer comes. Else will you seek, at some not distant time, Even your summer in another clime.

IV-V I PRAY YOU IF YOU LOVE ME

I pray you if you love me, bear my joy A little while, or let me weep your tears; I, too, have seen the quavering Fate destroy Your destiny's bright spinning--the dull shears Meeting not neatly, chewing at the thread,-- Nor can you well be less aware how fine, How staunch as wire, and how unwarranted Endures the golden fortune that is mine. I pray you for this day at least, my dear, Fare by my side, that journey in the sun; Else must I turn me from the blossoming year And walk in grief the way that you have gone. Let us go forth together to the spring: Love must be this, if it be anything.

IV-VI PITY ME NOT

Pity me not because the light of day At close of day no longer walks the sky; Pity me not for beauties passed away From field and thicket as the year goes by; Pity me not the waning of the moon, Nor that the ebbing tide goes out to sea, Nor that a man's desire is hushed so soon, And you no longer look with love on me. This have I known always: Love is no more Than the wide blossom which the wind assails, Than the great tide that treads the shifting shore. Strewing fresh wreckage gathered in the gales; Pity me that the heart is slow to learn What the swift mind beholds at every turn.

IV-VII SOMETIMES WHEN I AM WEARIED

Sometimes when I am wearied suddenly Of all the things that are the outward you,

And my gaze wanders ere your tale is through To webs of my own weaving, or I see Abstractedly your hands about your knee And wonder why I love you as I do, Then I recall, "Yet Sorrow thus he drew"; Then I consider, "Pride thus painted he." Oh, friend, forget not, when you fain would note In me a beauty that was never mine, How first you knew me in a book I wrote, How first you loved me for a written line: So are we bound till broken is the throat Of Song, and Art no more leads out the Nine.

IV-VIII OH, OH, YOU WILL BE SORRY

Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word! Give back my book and take my kiss instead. Was it my enemy or my friend I heard, "What a big book for such a little head!" Come, I will show you now my newest hat, And you may watch me purse my mouth and prink! Oh, I shall love you still, and all of that. I never again shall tell you what I think. I shall be sweet and crafty, soft and sly; You will not catch me reading any more: I shall be called a wife to pattern by; And some day when you knock and push the door, Some sane day, not too bright and not too stormy, I shall be gone, and you may whistle for me.

IV-IX HERE IS A WOUND

Here is a wound that never will heal, I know, Being wrought not of a dearness and a death, But of a love turned ashes and the breath Gone out of beauty; never again will grow The grass on that scarred acre, though I sow Young seed there yearly and the sky bequeath Its friendly weathers down, far underneath Shall be such bitterness of an old woe. That April should be shattered by a gust, That August should be levelled by a rain, I can endure, and that the lifted dust Of man should settle to the earth again; But that a dream can die, will be a thrust Between my ribs forever of hot pain.

IV-X I SHALL GO BACK AGAIN

I shall go back again to the bleak shore And build a little shanty on the sand, In such a way that the extremest band Of brittle seaweed will escape my door But by a yard

or two; and nevermore Shall I return to take you by the hand; I shall be gone to what I understand, And happier than I ever was before. The love that stood a moment in your eyes, The words that lay a moment on your tongue, Are one with all that in a moment dies, A little under-said and over-sung. But I shall find the sullen rocks and skies Unchanged from what they were when I was young.

IV-XI SAY WHAT YOU WILL

Say what you will, and scratch my heart to find The roots of last year's roses in my breast; I am as surely riper in my mind As if the fruit stood in the stalls confessed. Laugh at the unshed leaf, say what you will, Call me in all things what I was before, A flutterer in the wind, a woman still; I tell you I am what I was and more. My branches weigh me down, frost cleans the air, My sky is black with small birds bearing south; Say what you will, confuse me with fine care, Put by my word as but an April truth-- Autumn is no less on me that a rose Hugs the brown bough and sighs before it goes.

IV-XII WHAT'S THIS OF DEATH

What's this of death, from you who never will die? Think you the wrist that fashioned you in clay, The thumb that set the hollow just that way In your full throat and lidded the long eye So roundly from the forehead, will let lie Broken, forgotten, under foot some day Your unimpeachable body, and so slay The work he most had been remembered by? I tell you this: whatever of dust to dust Goes down, whatever of ashes may return To its essential self in its own season, Loveliness such as yours will not be lost, But, cast in bronze upon his very urn, Make known him Master, and for what good reason.

IV-XIII I SEE SO CLEARLY

I see so clearly now my similar years Repeat each other, shod in rusty black, Like one hack following another hack In meaningless procession, dry of tears, Driven empty, lest the noses sharp as shears Of gutter-urchins at a hearse's back Should

sniff a man died friendless, and attack With silly scorn his deaf triumphant ears; I see so clearly how my life must run One year behind another year until At length these bones that leap into the sun Are lowered into the gravel, and lie still, I would at times the funeral were done And I abandoned on the ultimate hill.

IV-XIV YOUR FACE IS LIKE A CHAMBER

Your face is like a chamber where a king Dies of his wounds, untended and alone, Stifling with courteous gesture the crude moan That speaks too loud of mortal perishing, Rising on elbow in the dark to sing Some rhyme now out of season but well known In days when banners in his face were blown And every woman had a rose to fling. I know that through your eyes which look on me Who stand regarding you with pitiful breath, You see beyond the moment's pause, you see The sunny sky, the skimming bird beneath, And, fronting on your windows hopelessly, Black in the noon, the broad estates of Death.

IV-XV THE LIGHT COMES BACK

The light comes back with Columbine; she brings A touch of this, a little touch of that, Coloured confetti, and a favour hat, Patches, and powder, dolls that work by strings And moons that work by switches, all the things That please a sick man's fancy, and a flat Spry convalescent kiss, and a small pat Upon the pillow,--paper offerings. The light goes out with her; the shadows sprawl. Where she has left her fragrance like a shawl I lie alone and pluck the counterpane, Or on a dizzy elbow rise and hark-- And down like dominoes along the dark Her little silly laughter spills again!

IV-XVI LORD ARCHER, DEATH

Lord Archer, Death, whom sent you in your stead? What faltering prentice fumbled at your bow, That now should wander with the insanguine dead In whom forever the bright blood must flow? Or is it rather that impairing Time Renders yourself so random, or so dim? Or are you sick of shadows and would climb A while to light, a

while detaining him? For know, this was no mortal youth, to be Of you confounded, but a heavenly guest, Assuming earthly garb for love of me, And hell's demure attire for love of jest: Bringing me asphodel and a dark feather, He will return, and we shall laugh together!

IV-XVII LOVING YOU LESS THAN LIFE

Loving you less than life, a little less Than bitter-sweet upon a broken wall Or brush-wood smoke in autumn, I confess I cannot swear I love you not at all. For there is that about you in this light-- A yellow darkness, sinister of rain-- Which sturdily recalls my stubborn sight To dwell on you, and dwell on you again. And I am made aware of many a week I shall consume, remembering in what way Your brown hair grows about your brow and cheek, And what divine absurdities you say: Till all the world, and I, and surely you, Will know I love you, whether or not I do.

IV-XVIII I, BEING BORN A WOMAN

I, being born a woman and distressed By all the needs and notions of my kind, Am urged by your propinquity to find Your person fair, and feel a certain zest To bear your body's weight upon my breast: So subtly is the fume of life designed, To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind, And leave me once again undone, possessed. Think not for this, however, the poor treason Of my stout blood against my staggering brain, I shall remember you with love, or season My scorn with pity,--let me make it plain: I find this frenzy insufficient reason For conversation when we meet again.

IV-XIX WHAT LIPS MY LIPS HAVE KISSED

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why, I have forgotten, and what arms have lain Under my head till morning; but the rain Is full of ghosts to-night, that tap and sigh Upon the glass and listen for reply, And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain For unremembered lads that not again Will turn to me at midnight with a cry. Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree, Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one, Yet knows its boughs more silent than before: I cannot say what loves have come

and gone, I only know that summer sang in me A little while, that in me sings no more.

IV-XX STILL WILL I HARVEST BEAUTY

Still will I harvest beauty where it grows: In coloured fungus and the spotted fog Surprised on foods forgotten; in ditch and bog Filmed brilliant with irregular rainbows Of rust and oil, where half a city throws Its empty tins; and in some spongy log Whence headlong leaps the oozy emerald frog. . . . And a black pupil in the green scum shows. Her the inhabiter of divers places Surmising at all doors, I push them all. Oh, you that fearful of a creaking hinge Turn back forevermore with craven faces, I tell you Beauty bears an ultra fringe Unguessed of you upon her gossamer shawl!

IV-XXI HOW HEALTHILY THEIR FEET

How healthily their feet upon the floor Strike down! These are no spirits, but a band Of children, surely, leaping hand in hand, Into the air in groups of three and four, Wearing their silken rags as if they wore Leaves only and light grasses, or a strand Of black elusive seaweed oozing sand, And running hard as if along a shore. I know how lost forever, and at length How still these lovely tossing limbs shall lie, And the bright laughter and the panting breath; And yet, before such beauty and such strength, Once more, as always when the dance is high, I am rebuked that I believe in death.

IV-XXII EUCLID ALONE HAS LOOKED

Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare. Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace, And lay them prone upon the earth and cease To ponder on themselves, the while they stare At nothing, intricately drawn nowhere In shapes of shifting lineage; let geese Gabble and hiss, but heroes seek release From dusty bondage into luminous air. O blinding hour, O holy, terrible day, When first the shaft into his vision shone Of light anatomized! Euclid alone Has looked on Beauty bare.

Fortunate they Who, though once only and then but far away, Have heard her massive sandal set on stone.

PART FIVE

SONNETS FROM AN UNGRAFTED TREE

V-I SO SHE CAME BACK

So SHE came back into his house again And watched beside his bed until he died, Loving him not at all. The winter rain Splashed in the painted butter-tub outside, Where once her red geraniums had stood, Where still their rotted stalks were to be seen; The thin log snapped; and she went out for wood, Bareheaded, running the few steps between The house and shed; there, from the sodden eaves Blown back and forth on ragged ends of twine, Saw the dejected creeping-jinny vine, (And one, big-aproned, blithe, with stiff blue sleeves Rolled to the shoulder that warm day in spring, Who planted seeds, musing ahead to their far blossoming).

V-II THE LAST WHITE SAWDUST

The last white sawdust on the floor was grown Gray as the first, so long had he been ill; The axe was nodding in the block; fresh-blown And foreign came the rain across the sill, But on the roof so steadily it drummed She could not think a time it might not be-- In hazy summer, when the hot air hummed With mowing, and locusts rising raspingly, When that small bird with iridescent wings And long incredible sudden silver tongue Had just flashed (and yet may be not!) among The dwarf nasturtiums--when no sagging springs Of shower were in the whole bright sky, somehow Upon this roof the rain would drum as it was drumming now.

V-III SHE FILLED HER ARMS WITH WOOD

She filled her arms with wood, and set her chin Forward, to hold the highest stick in place, No less afraid than she had always been Of spiders up her arms and on her face, But too impatient for a careful search Or a less heavy loading, from the heap

Selecting hastily small sticks of birch, For their curled bark, that instantly will leap Into a blaze, nor thinking to return Some day, distracted, as of old, to find Smooth, heavy, round, green logs with a wet, gray rind Only, and knotty chunks that will not burn, (That day when dust is on the wood-box floor, And some old catalogue, and a brown, shriveled apple core).

V-IV THE WHITE BARK WRITHED

The white bark writhed and sputtered like a fish Upon the coals, exuding odorous smoke. She knelt and blew, in a surging desolate wish For comfort; and the sleeping ashes woke And scattered to the hearth, but no thin fire Broke suddenly, the wood was wet with rain. Then, softly stepping forth from her desire, (Being mindful of like passion hurled in vain Upon a similar task, in other days) She thrust her breath against the stubborn coal, Bringing to bear upon its hilt the whole Of her still body... there sprang a little blaze... A pack of hounds, the flame swept up the flue!-- And the blue night stood flattened against the window, staring through.

V-V THE WAGON STOPPED BEFORE THE HOUSE

A wagon stopped before the house; she heard The heavy oilskins of the grocer's man Slapping against his legs. Of a sudden whirred Her heart like a frightened partridge, and she ran And slid the bolt, leaving his entrance free; Then in the cellar way till he was gone Hid, breathless, praying that he might not see The chair sway she had laid her hand upon In passing. Sour and damp from that dark vault Arose to her the well-remembered chill; She saw the narrow wooden stairway still Plunging into the earth, and the thin salt Crusting the crocks; until she knew him far, So stood, with listening eyes upon the empty doughnut jar.

V-VI THEN CAUTIOUSLY SHE PUSHED

Then cautiously she pushed the cellar door And stepped into the kitchen--saw the track Of muddy rubber boots across the floor, The many paper parcels in a stack Upon the dresser; with accustomed care Removed the twine and put the wrappings

by, Folded, and the bags flat, that with an air Of ease had been whipped open skillfully, To the gape of children. Treacherously dear And simple was the dull, familiar task. And so it was she came at length to ask: How came the soda there? The sugar here? Then the dream broke. Silent, she brought the mop, And forced the trade-slip on the nail that held his razor strop.

V-VII ONE WAY THERE WAS

One way there was of muting in the mind A little while the ever-clamorous care; And there was rapture, of a decent kind, In making mean and ugly objects fair: Soft-sooted kettle-bottoms, that had been Time after time set in above the fire, Faucets, and candlesticks, corroded green, To mine again from quarry; to attire The shelves in paper petticoats, and tack New oilcloth in the ringed-and-rotten's place, Polish the stove till you could see your face, And after nightfall rear an aching back In a changed kitchen, bright as a new pin, An advertisement, far too fine to cook a supper in.

V-VIII SHE LET THEM LEAVE THEIR JELLIES

She let them leave their jellies at the door And go away, reluctant, down the walk. She heard them talking as they passed before The blind, but could not quite make out their talk For noise in the room--the sudden heavy fall And roll of a charred log, and the roused shower Of snapping sparks; then sharply from the wall The unforgivable crowing of the hour. One instant set ajar, her quiet ear Was stormed and forced by the full rout of day: The rasp of a saw, the fussy cluck and bray Of hens, the wheeze of a pump, she needs must hear; She inescapably must endure to feel Across her teeth the grinding of a backing wagon wheel.

V-IX NOT OVER-KIND NOR OVER-QUICK

Not over-kind nor over-quick in study Nor skilled in sports nor beautiful was he, Who had come into her life when anybody Would have been welcome, so in need was she. They had become acquainted in this way: He flashed a mirror in her eyes at

school; By which he was distinguished; from that day They went about together, as a rule. She told, in secret and with whispering, How he had flashed a mirror in her eyes; And as she told, it struck her with surprise That this was not so wonderful a thing. But what's the odds?--It's pretty nice to know You've got a friend to keep you company everywhere you go.

V-X SHE HAD FORGOTTEN

She had forgotten how the August night Was level as a lake beneath the moon, In which she swam a little, losing sight Of shore; and how the boy, that was at noon Simple enough, not different from the rest, Wore now a pleasant mystery as he went, Which seemed to her an honest enough test Whether she loved him, and she was content. So loud, so loud the million crickets' choir . . . So sweet the night, so long-drawn-out and late . . . And if the man were not her spirit's mate, Why was her body sluggish with desire? Stark on the open field the moonlight fell, But the oak tree's shadow was deep and black and secret as a well.

It came into her mind, seeing how the snow Was gone, and the brown grass exposed again, And clothes-pins, and an apron--long ago, In some white storm that sifted through the pane And sent her forth reluctantly at last To gather in, before the line gave way, Garments, board-stiff, that galloped on the blast Clashing like angel armies in a fray, An apron long ago in such a night Blown down and buried in the deepening drift, To lie till April thawed it back to sight, Forgotten, quaint and novel as a gift-- It struck her, as she pulled and pried and tore, That here was spring, and the whole year to be lived through once more.

V-XII TENDERLY, IN THOSE TIMES

Tenderly, in those times, as though she fed An ailing child--with sturdy propping up Of its small, feverish body in the bed, And steadying of its hands about the cup-- She gave her husband of her body's strength, Thinking of men, what helpless things they were, Until he turned and fell asleep at length, And stealthily stirred the night

and spoke to her. Familiar, at such moments, like a friend, Whistled far off the long, mysterious train, And she could see in her mind's vision plain The magic World, where cities stood on end . . . Remote from where she lay--and yet--between, Save for something asleep beside her, only the window screen.

V-XIII FROM THE WAN DREAM

From the wan dream that was her waking day, Wherein she journeyed, borne along the ground Without her own volition in some way, Or fleeing, motionless, with feet fast bound, Or running silent through a silent house Sharply remembered from an earlier dream, Upstairs, down other stairs, fearful to rouse, Regarding him, the wide and empty scream Of a strange sleeper on a malignant bed, And all the time not certain if it were Herself so doing or some one like to her, From this wan dream that was her daily bread, Sometimes, at night, incredulous, she would wake-- A child, blowing bubbles that the chairs and carpet did not break!

V-XIV SHE HAD A HORROR

She had a horror he would die at night. And sometimes when the light began to fade She could not keep from noticing how white The birches looked--and then she would be afraid, Even with a lamp, to go about the house And lock the windows; and as night wore on Toward morning, if a dog howled, or a mouse Squeaked in the floor, long after it was gone Her flesh would sit awry on her. By day She would forget somewhat, and it would seem A silly thing to go with just this dream And get a neighbor to come at night and stay. But it would strike her sometimes, making the tea: She had kept that kettle boiling all night long, for company.

V-XV THERE WAS UPON THE SILL

There was upon the sill a pencil mark, Vital with shadow when the sun stood still At noon, but now, because the day was dark, It was a pencil mark upon the sill. And the mute clock, maintaining ever the same Dead moment, blank and vacant of itself, Was a pink shepherdess, a picture frame, A shell marked Souvenir, there on the

shelf. Whence it occurred to her that he might be, The mainspring being broken in his mind, A clock himself, if one were so inclined, That stood at twenty minutes after three-- The reason being for this, it might be said, That things in death were neither clocks nor people, but only dead.

V-XVI THE DOCTOR ASKED HER

The doctor asked her what she wanted done With him, that could not lie there many days. And she was shocked to see how life goes on Even after death, in irritating ways; And mused how if he had not died at all 'Twould have been easier--then there need not be The stiff disorder of a funeral Everywhere, and the hideous industry, And crowds of people calling her by name And questioning her, she'd never seen before, But only watching by his bed once more And sitting silent if a knocking came . . . She said at length, feeling the doctor's eyes, "I don't know what you do exactly when a person dies."

V-XVII GAZING UPON HIM NOW

Gazing upon him now, severe and dead, It seemed a curious thing that she had lain Beside him many a night in that cold bed, And that had been which would not be again. From his desirous body the great heat Was gone at last, it seemed, and the taut nerves Loosened forever. Formally the sheet Set forth for her to-day those heavy curves And lengths familiar as the bedroom door. She was as one that enters, sly, and proud, To where her husband speaks before a crowd, And sees a man she never saw before-- The man who eats his victuals at her side, Small, and absurd, and hers: for once, not hers, unclassified.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE HARP-WEAVER, AND OTHER POEMS ***

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