

Hymen

H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), 1886-1961

Transcriber's Note

Obvious typographical errors have been corrected in this text. For a complete list, please see [the bottom of this document](#).

By

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FOR BRYHER AND PERDITA

*They said:
she is high and far and blind
in her high pride,
but now that my head is bowed
in sorrow, I find
she is most kind.*

*We have taken life, they said,
blithely, not groped in a mist
for things that are not—
are if you will, but bloodless—
why ask happiness of the dead?
and my heart bled.*

*Ah, could they know
how violets throw strange fire,
red and purple and gold,
how they glow
gold and purple and red
where her feet tread.*

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CONTENTS

hymen	7
demeter	15
simaetha	19
thetis	20
circe	21
leda	23

hippolytus temporizes	24
cuckoo song	25
the islands	27
at baia	30
sea heroes	31
"not honey"	33
evadne	34
song	35
why have you sought	36
the whole white world	37
phaedra	38
she contrasts with herself hippolyta	40
she rebukes hippolyta	42
egypt	44
helios	45
prayer	47

[7]

HYMEN

As from a temple service, tall and dignified, with slow pace, each a queen, the sixteen matrons from the temple of Hera pass before the curtain—a dark purple hung between Ionic columns—of the porch or open hall of a palace. Their hair is bound as the marble hair of the temple Hera. Each wears a crown or diadem of gold.

They sing—the music is temple music, deep, simple, chanting notes:

From the closed garden
Where our feet pace
Back and forth each day,
This gladiolus white,
This red, this purple spray—
Gladiolus tall with dignity
As yours, lady—we lay
Before your feet and pray:

Of all the blessings—
Youth, joy, ecstasy—
May one gift last
(As the tall gladiolus may
Outlast the wind-flower,
Winter-rose or rose),
One gift above,
Encompassing all those;

For her, for him,
For all within these palace walls,
Beyond the feast,
Beyond the cry of Hymen and the torch,
Beyond the night and music
Echoing through the porch till day.

[8]*The music, with its deep chanting notes, dies away. The curtain hangs motionless in rich, full folds. Then from this background of darkness, dignity and solemn repose, a flute gradually detaches itself, becomes clearer and clearer, pipes alone one shrill, simple little melody.*

From the distance, four children's voices blend with the flute, and four very little girls pass singly before the curtain, small maids or attendants of the sixteen matrons. Their hair is short and curls at the back of their heads like the hair of the chryselephantine Hermes. They sing:

Where the first crocus buds unfold
We found these petals near the cold
Swift river-bed.

Beneath the rocks where ivy-frond
Puts forth new leaves to gleam beyond
Those lately dead:

The very smallest two or three
Of gold (gold pale as ivory)
We gathered.

When the little girls have passed before the curtain, a wood-wind weaves a richer note into the flute melody; then the two blend into one song. But as the wood-wind grows in mellowness and richness, the flute gradually dies away into a secondary theme and the wood-wind alone evolves the melody of a new song.

Two by two—like two sets of medallions with twin profiles distinct, one head slightly higher, bent forward a little—the four figures of four slight, rather fragile taller children, are outlined with sharp white contour against the curtain.

The hair is smooth against the heads, falling to the shoulders but slightly waved against the nape of the neck. They are looking down, each at a spray of winter-rose. The tunics fall to the knees in sharp marble folds. They sing:

Never more will the wind
Cherish you again,
Never more will the rain.

Never more
Shall we find you bright
In the snow and wind.
[9]

The snow is melted,
The snow is gone,
And you are flown:

Like a bird out of our hand,
Like a light out of our heart,
You are gone.

As the wistful notes of the wood-wind gradually die away, there comes a sudden, shrill, swift piping.

Free and wild, like the wood-maidens of Artemis, is this last group of four—very straight with heads tossed back. They sing in rich, free, swift notes. They move swiftly before the curtain in contrast to the slow, important pace of the first two groups. Their hair is loose and rayed out like that of the sun-god. They are boyish in shape and gesture. They carry hyacinths in baskets, strapped like quivers to their backs. They reach to draw the flower sprays from the baskets, as the Huntress her arrows.

As they dart swiftly to and fro before the curtain, they are youth, they are spring—they are the Chelidonia, their song is the swallow-song of joy:

Between the hollows
Of the little hills
The spring spills blue—
Turquoise, sapphire, lapis-lazuli
On a brown cloth outspread.

Ah see,

How carefully we lay them now,
Each hyacinth spray,
Across the marble floor—
A pattern your bent eyes
May trace and follow
To the shut bridal door.

Lady, our love, our dear,
Our bride most fair,
They grew among the hollows
Of the hills;
As if the sea had spilled its blue,
As if the sea had risen
From its bed,
And sinking to the level of the shore,
Left hyacinths on the floor.
[10]

There is a pause. Flute, pipe and wood-wind blend in a full, rich movement. There is no definite melody but full, powerful rhythm like soft but steady wind above forest trees. Into this, like rain, gradually creeps the note of strings.

As the strings grow stronger and finally dominate the whole, the bride-chorus passes before the curtain. There may be any number in this chorus. The figures—tall young women, clothed in long white tunics—follow one another closely, yet are all distinct like a procession of a temple frieze.

The bride in the center is not at first distinguishable from her maidens; but as they begin their song, the maidens draw apart into two groups, leaving the veiled symbolic figure standing alone in the center.

The two groups range themselves to right and left like officiating priestesses. The veiled figure stands with her back against the curtain, the others being in profile. Her head is swathed in folds of diaphanous white, through which the features are visible, like the veiled Tanagra.

When the song is finished, the group to the bride's left turns about; also the bride, so that all face in one direction. In processional form they pass out, the figure of the bride again merging, not distinguishable from the maidens.

Strophe

But of her
Who can say if she is fair?
Bound with fillet,
Bound with myrtle
Underneath her flowing veil,
Only the soft length
(Beneath her dress)
Of saffron shoe is bright
As a great lily-heart
In its white loveliness.

Antistrophe

But of her
We can say that she is fair.
We bleached the fillet,
Brought the myrtle;
To us the task was set
Of knotting the fine threads of silk:
We fastened the veil,
And over the white foot
Drew on the painted shoe
Steeped in Illyrian crocus.

[11]

Strophe

But of her,
Who can say if she is fair?
For her head is covered over
With her mantle
White on white,
Snow on whiter amaranth,
Snow on hoar-frost,
Snow on snow,
Snow on whitest buds of myrrh.

Antistrophe

But of her,
We can say that she is fair;
For we know underneath
All the wanness,
All the heat
(In her blanched face)
Of desire
Is caught in her eyes as fire
In the dark center leaf
Of the white Syrian iris.

The rather hard, hieratic precision of the music—its stately pause and beat—is broken now into irregular lilt and rhythm of strings.

Four tall young women, very young matrons, enter in a group. They stand clear and fair, but this little group entirely lacks the austere precision of the procession of maidens just preceding them. They pause in the center of the stage; turn, one three-quarter, two in profile and the fourth full face; they stand, turned as if confiding in each other like a Tanagra group.

They sing lightly, their flower trays under their arms.

Along the yellow sand
Above the rocks
The laurel-bushes stand.
Against the shimmering heat
Each separate leaf
Is bright and cold,
And through the bronze
Of shining bark and wood
Run the fine threads of gold.

[12]

Here in our wicker-trays,
We bring the first faint blossoming
Of fragrant bays:

Lady, their blushes shine
As faint in hue
As when through petals
Of a laurel-rose
The sun shines through,
And throws a purple shadow
On a marble vase.

(Ah, love,

So her fair breasts will shine
With the faint shadow above.)

The harp chords become again more regular in simple definite rhythm. The music is not so intense as the bride-chorus; and quieter, more sedate, than the notes preceding the entrance of the last group.

Five or six slightly older serene young women enter in processional form; each holding before her, with precise bending of arms, coverlets and linen, carefully folded, as if for the bride couch. The garments are purple, scarlet and deep blue, with edge of gold.

They sing to blending of wood-wind and harp.

From citron-bower be her bed,
Cut from branch of tree a-flower,
Fashioned for her maidenhead.

From Lydian apples, sweet of hue,
Cut the width of board and lathe.
Carve the feet from myrtle-wood.

Let the palings of her bed
Be quince and box-wood overlaid
With the scented bark of yew.

That all the wood in blossoming,
May calm her heart and cool her blood
For losing of her maidenhood.

The wood-winds become more rich and resonant. A tall youth crosses the stage as if seeking the bride door. The music becomes very rich, full of color.[13]

The figure itself is a flame, an exaggerated symbol; the hair a flame; the wings, deep red or purple, stand out against the curtains in a contrasting or almost clashing shade of purple. The tunic, again a rich purple or crimson, falls almost to the knees. The knees are bare; the sandals elaborately strapped over and over. The curtain seems a rich purple cloud, the figure, still brighter, like a flamboyant bird, half emerged in the sunset.

Love pauses just outside the bride's door with his gift, a tuft of black-purple cyclamen. He sings to the accompaniment of wood-winds, in a rich, resonant voice:

The crimson cover of her bed
Is not so rich, nor so deeply bled
The purple-fish that dyed it red,
As when in a hot sheltered glen
There flowered these stalks of cyclamen:

(Purple with honey-points
Of horns for petals;
Sweet and dark and crisp,
As fragrant as her maiden kiss.)

There with his honey-seeking lips
The bee clings close and warmly sips,
And seeks with honey-thighs to sway
And drink the very flower away.

(Ah, stern the petals drawing back;
Ah rare, ah virginal her breath!)

Crimson, with honey-seeking lips,
The sun lies hot across his back,
The gold is decked across his wings.

Quivering he sways and quivering clings
(Ah, rare her shoulders drawing back!)
One moment, then the plunderer slips
Between the purple flower-lips.

Love passes out with a crash of cymbals. There is a momentary pause and the music falls into its calm, wave-like rhythm.

A band of boys passes before the curtain. They pass from side to side, crossing and re-crossing; but their figures never confuse one another, the outlines are never blurred. They stand out against the curtain with symbolic gesture, stooping as if to gather up the wreaths, or swaying with long stiff branch as if to sweep the fallen petals from the floor.[14]

There is no marked melody from the instruments, but the boys' voices, humming lightly as they enter, gradually evolve a little dance song. There are no words but the lilt up and down of the boys' tenor voices.

Then, as if they had finished the task of gathering up the wreaths and sweeping the petals, they stand in groups of two before the pillars where the torches have been placed. They lift the torches from the brackets. They hold them aloft between them, one torch to each two boys. Their figures are cut against the curtain like the simple, triangular design on the base of a vase or frieze—the boys' heads on a level, the torches above them.

They sing in clear, half-subdued voices.

Where love is king,
Ah, there is little need
To dance and sing,
With bridal-torch to flare
Amber and scatter light
Across the purple air,
To sing and dance
To flute-note and to reed.

Where love is come
(Ah, love is come indeed!)
Our limbs are numb
Before his fiery need;
With all their glad
Rapture of speech unsaid,
Before his fiery lips
Our lips are mute and dumb.

Ah, sound of reed,
Ah, flute and trumpet wail,
Ah, joy decreed—
The fringes of her veil
Are seared and white;
Across the flare of light,
Blinded the torches fail.
(Ah, love is come indeed!)

At the end of the song, the torches flicker out and the figures are no longer distinguishable in the darkness. They pass out like shadows. The purple curtain hangs black and heavy.

The music dies away and is finally cut short with a few deep, muted chords.

[15]

DEMETER

Men, fires, feasts,
steps of temple, fore-stone, lintel,
step of white altar, fire and after-fire,
slaughter before,
fragment of burnt meat,
deep mystery, grapple of mind to reach
the tense thought,
power and wealth, purpose and prayer alike,
(men, fires, feasts, temple steps)—useless.

Useless to me who plant
wide feet on a mighty plinth,
useless to me who sit,
wide of shoulder, great of thigh,
heavy in gold, to press
gold back against solid back
of the marble seat:
useless the dragons wrought on the arms,
useless the poppy-buds and the gold inset
of the spray of wheat.

Ah they have wrought me heavy
and great of limb—
she is slender of waist,
slight of breast, made of many fashions;
they have set *her* small feet
on many a plinth;
she they have known,
she they have spoken with,
she they have smiled upon,
she they have caught
and flattered with praise and gifts.

But useless the flattery
of the mighty power
they have granted me:
for I will not stay in her breast
the great of limb,
though perfect the shell they have
fashioned me, these men!
[16]

Do I sit in the market place—
do I smile, does a noble brow
bend like the brow of Zeus—
am I a spouse, his or any,
am I a woman, or goddess or queen,
to be met by a god with a smile—and left?

II

Do you ask for a scroll,
parchment, oracle, prophecy, precedent;
do you ask for tablets marked with thought
or words cut deep on the marble surface,
do you seek measured utterance or the mystic trance?

Sleep on the stones of Delphi—
dare the ledges of Pallas
but keep me foremost,

keep me before you, after you, with you,
never forget when you start
for the Delphic precipice,
never forget when you seek Pallas
and meet in thought
yourself drawn out from yourself
like the holy serpent,
never forget
in thought or mysterious trance—
I am greatest and least.

Soft are the hands of Love,
soft, soft are his feet;
you who have twined myrtle,
have you brought crocuses,
white as the inner
stript bark of the osier,
have you set
black crocus against the black
locks of another?
[17]

III

Of whom do I speak?

Many the children of gods
but first I take
Bromios, fostering prince,
lift from the ivy brake, a king.

Enough of the lightning,
enough of the tales that speak
of the death of the mother:
strange tales of a shelter
brought to the unborn,
enough of tale, myth, mystery, precedent—
a child lay on the earth asleep.

Soft are the hands of Love,
but what soft hands
clutched at the thorny ground,
scratched like a small white ferret
or foraging whippet or hound,
sought nourishment and found
only the crackling of ivy,
dead ivy leaf and the white
berry, food for a bird,
no food for this who sought,
bending small head in a fever,
whining with little breath.

Ah, small black head,
ah, the purple ivy bush,
ah, berries that shook and spilt
on the form beneath,
who begot you and left?

Though I begot no man child
all my days,

the child of my heart and spirit,
is the child the gods desert
alike and the mother in death—
the unclaimed Dionysios.
[18]

IV

*What of her—
mistress of Death?*

Form of a golden wreath
were my hands that girt her head,
fingers that strove to meet,
and met where the whisps escaped
from the fillet, of tenderest gold,
small circlet and slim
were my fingers then.

Now they are wrought of iron
to wrest from earth
secrets; strong to protect,
strong to keep back the winter
when winter tracks too soon
blanch the forest:
strong to break dead things,
the young tree, drained of sap,
the old tree, ready to drop,
to lift from the rotting bed
of leaves, the old
crumbling pine tree stock,
to heap bole and knot of fir
and pine and resinous oak,
till fire shatter the dark
and hope of spring
rise in the hearts of men.

*What of her—
mistress of Death—
what of his kiss?*

Ah, strong were his arms to wrest
slight limbs from the beautiful earth,
young hands that plucked the first
buds of the chill narcissus,
soft fingers that broke
and fastened the thorny stalk
with the flower of wild acanthus.

Ah, strong were the arms that took
(ah evil, the heart and graceless,)
but the kiss was less passionate!

[19]

SIMAETHA

Drenched with purple,

drenched with dye, my wool,
bind you the wheel-spokes—
turn, turn, turn my wheel!

Drenched with purple,
steeped in the red pulp
of bursting sea-sloes—
turn, turn, turn my wheel!

(Ah did he think
I did not know,
I did not feel—
what wrack, what weal for him:
golden one, golden one,
turn again Aphrodite with the yellow zone,
I am cursed, cursed, undone!
Ah and my face, Aphrodite,
beside your gold,
is cut out of white stone!)

Laurel blossom and the red seed
of the red vervain weed,
burn, crackle in the fire,
burn, crackle for my need!
Laurel leaf, O fruited
branch of bay,
burn, burn away
thought, memory and hurt!

(Ah when he comes,
stumbling across my sill,
will he find me still,
fragrant as the white privet,
or as a bone,
polished in wet and sun,
worried of wild beaks,
and of the whelps' teeth—
worried of flesh,
left to bleach under the sun,
white as ash bled of heat,
white as hail blazing in sheet-lightning,
white as forked lightning
rending the sleet?)

[20]

THETIS

I

On the paved parapet
you will step carefully
from amber stones to onyx
flecked with violet,
mingled with light,
half showing the sea-grass
and sea-sand underneath,
reflecting your white feet

and the gay strap crimson
as lily-buds of Arion,
and the gold that binds your feet.

II

You will pass
beneath the island disk
(and myrtle-wood,
the carved support of it)
and the white stretch
of its white beach,
curved as the moon crescent
or ivory when some fine hand
chisels it:
when the sun slips
through the far edge,
there is rare amber
through the sea,
and flecks of it
glitter on the dolphin's back
and jewelled halter
and harness and bit
as he sways under it.

[21]

CIRCE

It was easy enough
to bend them to my wish,
it was easy enough
to alter them with a touch,
but you
adrift on the great sea,
how shall I call you back?

Cedar and white ash,
rock-cedar and sand plants
and tamarisk
red cedar and white cedar
and black cedar from the inmost forest,
fragrance upon fragrance
and all of my sea-magic is for nought.

It was easy enough—
a thought called them
from the sharp edges of the earth;
they prayed for a touch,
they cried for the sight of my face,
they entreated me
till in pity
I turned each to his own self.

Panther and panther,
then a black leopard
follows close—
black panther and red

and a great hound,
a god-like beast,
cut the sand in a clear ring
and shut me from the earth,
and cover the sea-sound
with their throats,
and the sea-roar with their own barks
and bellowing and snarls,
and the sea-stars
and the swirl of the sand,
and the rock-tamarisk
and the wind resonance—
but not your voice.

[22]

It is easy enough to call men
from the edges of the earth.
It is easy enough to summon them to my feet
with a thought—
it is beautiful to see the tall panther
and the sleek deer-hounds
circle in the dark.

It is easy enough
to make cedar and white ash fumes
into palaces
and to cover the sea-caves
with ivory and onyx.

But I would give up
rock-fringes of coral
and the inmost chamber
of my island palace
and my own gifts
and the whole region
of my power and magic
for your glance.

[23]

LEDA

Where the slow river
meets the tide,
a red swan lifts red wings
and darker beak,
and underneath the purple down
of his soft breast
uncurls his coral feet.

Through the deep purple
of the dying heat
of sun and mist,
the level ray of sun-beam
has caressed
the lily with dark breast,
and flecked with richer gold
its golden crest.

Where the slow lifting
of the tide,
floats into the river
and slowly drifts
among the reeds,
and lifts the yellow flags,
he floats
where tide and river meet.

Ah kingly kiss—
no more regret
nor old deep memories
to mar the bliss;
where the low sedge is thick,
the gold day-lily
outspreads and rests
beneath soft fluttering
of red swan wings
and the warm quivering
of the red swan's breast.

[24]

HIPPOLYTUS TEMPORIZES

I worship the greatest first—
(it were sweet, the couch,
the brighter ripple of cloth
over the dipped fleece;
the thought: her bones
under the flesh are white
as sand which along a beach
covers but keeps the print
of the crescent shapes beneath:
I thought:
between cloth and fleece,
so her body lies.)

I worship first, the great—
(ah, sweet, your eyes—
what God, invoked in Crete,
gave them the gift to part
as the Sidonian myrtle-flower
suddenly, wide and swart,
then swiftly,
the eye-lids having provoked our hearts—
as suddenly beat and close.)

I worship the feet, flawless,
that haunt the hills—
(ah, sweet, dare I think,
beneath fetter of golden clasp,
of the rhythm, the fall and rise
of yours, carven, slight
beneath straps of gold that keep
their slender beauty caught,
like wings and bodies
of trapped birds.)

I worship the greatest first—
(suddenly into my brain—
the flash of sun on the snow,
the fringe of light and the drift,
the crest and the hill-shadow—
ah, surely now I forget,
ah splendour, my goddess turns:
or was it the sudden heat,
beneath quivering of molten flesh,
of veins, purple as violets?)

[25]

CUCKOO SONG

Ah, bird,
our love is never spent
with your clear note,
nor satiate our soul;
not song, not wail, not hurt,
but just a call summons us
with its simple top-note
and soft fall;

not to some rarer heaven
of lilies over-tall,
nor tuberose set against
some sun-lit wall,
but to a gracious
cedar-palace hall;

not marble set with purple
hung with roses and tall
sweet lilies—such
as the nightingale
would summon for us
with her wail—
(surely only unhappiness
could thrill
such a rich madrigal!)
not she, the nightingale
can fill our souls
with such a wistful joy as this:

nor, bird, so sweet
was ever a swallow note—
not hers, so perfect
with the wing of lazuli
and bright breast—
nor yet the oriole
filling with melody
from her fiery throat
some island-orchard
in a purple sea.

[26]

Ah dear, ah gentle bird,
you spread warm length

of crimson wool
and tinted woven stuff
for us to rest upon,
nor numb with ecstasy
nor drown with death:

only you soothe, make still
the throbbing of our brain:
so through her forest trees,
when all her hope was gone
and all her pain,
Calypso heard your call—
across the gathering drift
of burning cedar-wood,
across the low-set bed
of wandering parsley and violet,
when all her hope was dead.

[27]

THE ISLANDS

I

What are the islands to me,
what is Greece,
what is Rhodes, Samos, Chios,
what is Paros facing west,
what is Crete?

What is Samothrace,
rising like a ship,
what is Imbros rending the storm-waves
with its breast?

What is Naxos, Paros, Milos,
what the circle about Lycia,
what, the Cyclades'
white necklace?

What is Greece—
Sparta, rising like a rock,
Thebes, Athens,
what is Corinth?

What is Euboia
with its island violets,
what is Euboia, spread with grass,
set with swift shoals,
what is Crete?

What are the islands to me,
what is Greece?

II

What can love of land give to me
that you have not—

what do the tall Spartans know,
and gentler Attic folk?

What has Sparta and her women
more than this?

What are the islands to me
if you are lost—
what is Naxos, Tinos, Andros,
and Delos, the clasp
of the white necklace?
[28]

III

What can love of land give to me
that you have not,
what can love of strife break in me
that you have not?

Though Sparta enter Athens,
Thebes wrack Sparta,
each changes as water,
salt, rising to wreak terror
and fall back.

IV

"What has love of land given to you
that I have not?"

I have questioned Tyrians
where they sat
on the black ships,
weighted with rich stuffs,
I have asked the Greeks
from the white ships,
and Greeks from ships whose hulks
lay on the wet sand, scarlet
with great beaks.
I have asked bright Tyrians
and tall Greeks—
"what has love of land given you?"
And they answered—"peace."

V

But beauty is set apart,
beauty is cast by the sea,
a barren rock,
beauty is set about
with wrecks of ships,
upon our coast, death keeps
the shallows—death waits
clutching toward us
from the deeps.

Beauty is set apart;
the winds that slash its beach,

swirl the coarse sand
upward toward the rocks.
[29]

Beauty is set apart
from the islands
and from Greece.

VI

In my garden
the winds have beaten
the ripe lilies;
in my garden, the salt
has wilted the first flakes
of young narcissus,
and the lesser hyacinth,
and the salt has crept
under the leaves of the white hyacinth.

In my garden
even the wind-flowers lie flat,
broken by the wind at last.

VII

What are the islands to me
if you are lost,
what is Paros to me
if your eyes draw back,
what is Milos
if you take fright of beauty,
terrible, torturous, isolated,
a barren rock?

What is Rhodes, Crete,
what is Paros facing west,
what, white Imbros?

What are the islands to me
if you hesitate,
what is Greece if you draw back
from the terror
and cold splendour of song
and its bleak sacrifice?

[30]

AT BAIA

I should have thought
in a dream you would have brought
some lovely, perilous thing,
orchids piled in a great sheath,
as who would say (in a dream)
I send you this,
who left the blue veins
of your throat unknissed.

Why was it that your hands
(that never took mine)
your hands that I could see
drift over the orchid heads
so carefully,
your hands, so fragile, sure to lift
so gently, the fragile flower stuff—
ah, ah, how was it

You never sent (in a dream)
the very form, the very scent,
not heavy, not sensuous,
but perilous—perilous—
of orchids, piled in a great sheath,
and folded underneath on a bright scroll
some word:

Flower sent to flower;
for white hands, the lesser white,
less lovely of flower leaf,

or

Lover to lover, no kiss,
no touch, but forever and ever this.

[31]

SEA HEROES

Crash on crash of the sea,
straining to wreck men, sea-boards, continents,
raging against the world, furious,
stay at last, for against your fury
and your mad fight,
the line of heroes stands, god-like:

Akroneos, Oknolos, Elatreus,
helm-of-boat, loosener-of-helm, dweller-by-sea,
Nauteus, sea-man,
Prumneos, stern-of-ship,
Agchialos, sea-girt,
Elatreus, oar-shaft:
lover-of-the-sea, lover-of-the-sea-ebb,
lover-of-the-swift-sea,
Ponteus, Proreus, Ooos:
Anabesneos, one caught between
wave-shock and wave-shock:
Eurualos, broad sea-wrack,
like Ares, man's death,
and Naubolides, best in shape,
of all first in size:
Phaekous, seas' thunderbolt—
ah, crash on crash of great names—
man-tamer, man's-help, perfect Laodamos:
and last the sons of great Alkinoos,
Laodamos, Halios and god-like Clytomeos.

Of all nations, of all cities,

of all continents,
she is favoured among the rest,
for she gives men as great as the sea,
valorous to the fight,
to battle against the elements and evil:
greater even than the sea,
they live beyond wrack and death of cities,
and each god-like name spoken
is as a shrine in a godless place.

But to name you,
we reverent are breathless,
weak with pain and old loss,
[32] and exile and despair—
our hearts break but to speak
your name, Oknaleos—
and may we but call you in the feverish wrack
of our storm-strewn beach, Eretmeos,
and our hurt is quiet and our hearts tamed,
as the sea may yet be tamed,
and we vow to float great ships,
named for each hero,
and oar-blades, cut out of mountain-trees
as such men might have shaped:
Eretmeos and the sea is swept,
baffled by the lordly shape,
Akroneos has pines for his ship's keel;
to love, to mate the sea?
Ah there is Ponteos,
the very deeps roar,
hailing you dear—
they clamour to Ponteos,
and to Proeos
leap, swift to kiss, to curl, to creep,
lover to mistress.

What wave, what love, what foam,
for Ooos who moves swift as the sea?
Ah stay, my heart, the weight
of lovers, of loneliness
drowns me,
alas that their very names
so press to break my heart
with heart-sick weariness,
what would they be,
the very gods,
rearing their mighty length
beside the unharvested sea?

[33]

"NOT HONEY"

Not honey,
not the plunder of the bee
from meadow or sand-flower
or mountain bush;
from winter-flower or shoot

born of the later heat:
not honey, not the sweet
stain on the lips and teeth:
not honey, not the deep
plunge of soft belly
and the clinging of the gold-edged
pollen-dusted feet.

Not so—
though rapture blind my eyes,
and hunger crisp
dark and inert my mouth,
not honey, not the south,
not the tall stalk
of red twin-lilies,
nor light branch of fruit tree
caught in flexible light branch.

Not honey, not the south;
ah flower of purple iris,
flower of white,
or of the iris, withering the grass—
for fleck of the sun's fire,
gathers such heat and power,
that shadow-print is light,
cast through the petals
of the yellow iris flower.

Not iris—old desire—old passion—
old forgetfulness—old pain—
not this, nor any flower,
but if you turn again,
seek strength of arm and throat,
touch as the god;
neglect the lyre-note;
knowing that you shall feel,
about the frame,
[34] no trembling of the string
but heat, more passionate
of bone and the white shell
and fiery tempered steel.

EVADNE

I first tasted under Apollo's lips
love and love sweetness,
I Evadne;
my hair is made of crisp violets
or hyacinth which the wind combs back
across some rock shelf;
I Evadne
was mate of the god of light.

His hair was crisp to my mouth
as the flower of the crocus,
across my cheek,
cool as the silver cress
on Eros bank;

between my chin and throat
his mouth slipped over and over.

Still between my arm and shoulder,
I feel the brush of his hair,
and my hands keep the gold they took
as they wandered over and over
that great arm-full of yellow flowers.

[35]

SONG

You are as gold
as the half-ripe grain
that merges to gold again,
as white as the white rain
that beats through
the half-opened flowers
of the great flower tufts
thick on the black limbs
of an Illyrian apple bough.

Can honey distill such fragrance
as your bright hair—
for your face is as fair as rain,
yet as rain that lies clear
on white honey-comb,
lends radiance to the white wax,
so your hair on your brow
casts light for a shadow.

[36]

WHY HAVE YOU SOUGHT

Why have you sought the Greeks, Eros,
when such delight was yours
in the far depth of sky:
there you could note bright ivory
take colour where she bent her face,
and watch fair gold shed gold
on radiant surface of porch and pillar:
and ivory and bright gold,
polished and lustrous grow faint
beside that wondrous flesh
and print of her foot-hold:
Love, why do you tempt the Grecian porticoes?

Here men are bent with thought
and women waste fair moments
gathering lint and pricking coloured stuffs
to mar their breasts,
while she, adored,
wastes not her fingers,
worn of fire and sword,
wastes not her touch

on linen and fine thread,
wastes not her head
in thought and pondering,
Love, why have you sought the horde
of spearsmen, why the tent
Achilles pitched beside the river-ford?

[37]

THE WHOLE WHITE WORLD

The whole white world is ours,
and the world, purple with rose-bays,
bays, bush on bush,
group, thicket, hedge and tree,
dark islands in a sea
of grey-green olive or wild white-olive,
cut with the sudden cypress shafts,
in clusters, two or three,
or with one slender, single cypress-tree.

Slid from the hill,
as crumbling snow-peaks slide,
citron on citron fill
the valley, and delight
waits till our spirits tire
of forest, grove and bush
and purple flower of the laurel-tree.

Yet not one wearies,
joined is each to each
in happiness complete
with bush and flower:
ours is the wind-breath
at the hot noon-hour,
ours is the bee's soft belly
and the blush of the rose-petal,
lifted, of the flower.

[38]

PHAEDRA

Think, O my soul,
of the red sand of Crete;
think of the earth; the heat
burnt fissures like the great
backs of the temple serpents;
think of the world you knew;
as the tide crept, the land
burned with a lizard-blue
where the dark sea met the sand.

Think, O my soul—
what power has struck you blind—
is there no desert-root, no forest-berry
pine-pitch or knot of fir

known that can help the soul
caught in a force, a power,
passionless, not its own?

So I scatter, so implore
Gods of Crete, summoned before
with slighter craft;
ah, hear my prayer:

Grant to my soul
the body that it wore,
trained to your thought,
that kept and held your power,
as the petal of black poppy,
the opiate of the flower.

For art undreamt in Crete,
strange art and dire,
in counter-charm prevents my charm
limits my power:
pine-cone I heap,
grant answer to my prayer.

No more, my soul—
as the black cup, sullen and dark with fire,
burns till beside it, noon's bright heat
is withered, filled with dust—
[39] and into that noon-heat
grown drab and stale,
suddenly wind and thunder and swift rain,
till the scarlet flower is wrecked
in the slash of the white hail.

The poppy that my heart was,
formed to blind all mortals,
made to strike and gather hearts
like flame upon an altar,
fades and shrinks, a red leaf
drenched and torn in the cold rain.

[40]

SHE CONTRASTS WITH HERSELF HIPPOLYTA

Can flame beget white steel—
ah no, it could not take
within my reins its shelter;
steel must seek steel,
or hate make out of joy
a whet-stone for a sword;
sword against flint,
Theseus sought Hippolyta;
she yielded not nor broke,
sword upon stone,
from the clash leapt a spark,
Hippolytus, born of hate.

What did she think
when all her strength

was twisted for his bearing;
did it break,
even within her sheltered heart, a song,
some whispered note,
distant and faint as this:

*Love that I bear
within my breast
how is my armour melted
how my heart:
as an oak-tree
that keeps beneath the snow,
the young bark fresh
till the spring cast
from off its shoulders
the white snow
so does my armour melt.*

*Love that I bear
within my heart, O speak;
tell how beneath the serpent-spotted shell,
the cygnets wait,
how the soft owl
opens and flicks with pride,
eye-lids of great bird-eyes,
when underneath its breast
the owlets shrink and turn.*
[41]

You have the power,
(then did she say) Artemis,
benignity to grant
forgiveness that I gave
no quarter to an enemy who cast
his armour on the forest-moss,
and took, unmatched in an uneven contest,
Hippolyta who relented not,
returned and sought no kiss.

Then did she pray: Artemis,
grant that no flower
be grafted alien on a broken stalk,
no dark flame-laurel on the stricken crest
of a wild mountain-poplar;
grant in my thought,
I never yield but wait,
entreating cold white river,
mountain-pool and salt:
let all my veins be ice,
until they break
(strength of white beach,
rock of mountain land,
forever to you, Artemis, dedicate)
from out my reins,
those small, cold hands.

SHE REBUKES HIPPOLYTA

Was she so chaste?

Swift and a broken rock
clatters across the steep shelf
of the mountain slope,
sudden and swift
and breaks as it clatters down
into the hollow breach
of the dried water-course:
far and away
(through fire I see it,
and smoke of the dead, withered stalks
of the wild cistus-brush)
Hippolyta, frail and wild,
galloping up the slope
between great boulder and rock
and group and cluster of rock.

Was she so chaste,
(I see it, sharp, this vision,
and each fleck on the horse's flanks
of foam, and bridle and bit,
silver, and the straps,
wrought with their perfect art,
and the sun,
striking athwart the silver-work,
and the neck, strained forward, ears alert,
and the head of a girl
flung back and her throat.)

Was she so chaste—
(Ah, burn my fire, I ask
out of the smoke-ringed darkness
enclosing the flaming disk
of my vision)
I ask for a voice to answer:
was she chaste?

Who can say—
the broken ridge of the hills
was the line of a lover's shoulder,
[43] his arm-turn, the path to the hills,
the sudden leap and swift thunder
of mountain boulders, his laugh.

She was mad—
as no priest, no lover's cult
could grant madness;
the wine that entered her throat
with the touch of the mountain rocks
was white, intoxicant:
she, the chaste,
was betrayed by the glint
of light on the hills,
the granite splinter of rocks,
the touch of the stone
where heat melts

toward the shadow-side of the rocks.

[44]

EGYPT

(To E. A. Poe)

Egypt had cheated us,
for Egypt took
through guile and craft
our treasure and our hope,
Egypt had maimed us,
offered dream for life,
an opiate for a kiss,
and death for both.

White poison flower we loved
and the black spike
of an ungarnered bush—
(a spice—or without taste—
we wondered—then we asked
others to take and sip
and watched their death)
Egypt we loved, though hate
should have withheld our touch.

Egypt had given us knowledge,
and we took, blindly,
through want of heart,
what Egypt brought;
knowing all poison,
what was that or this,
more or less perilous,
than this or that.

We pray you, Egypt,
by what perverse fate,
has poison brought with knowledge,
given us this—
not days of trance,
shadow, fore-doom of death,
but passionate grave thought,
belief enhanced,
ritual returned and magic;

Even in the uttermost black pit
of the forbidden knowledge,
[45] wisdom's glance,
the grey eyes following
in the mid-most desert—
great shaft of rose,
fire shed across our path,
upon the face grown grey, a light,
Hellas re-born from death.

HELIOS

*Helios makes all things right:—
night brands and chokes
as if destruction broke
over furze and stone and crop
of myrtle-shoot and field-wort,
destroyed with flakes of iron,
the bracken-stems,
where tender roots were sown,
blight, chaff and waste
of darkness to choke and drown.*

*A curious god to find,
yet in the end faithful;
bitter, the Kyprian's feet—
ah flecks of whited clay,
great hero, vaunted lord—
ah petal, dust and wind-fall
on the ground—queen awaiting queen.*

*Better the weight, they tell,
the helmet's beaten shell,
Athene's riven steel,
caught over the white skull,
Athene sets to heal
the few who merit it.*
[46]

*Yet even then, what help,
should he not turn and note
the height of forehead and the mark of conquest,
draw near and try the helmet;
to left—reset the crown
Athene weighted down,
or break with a light touch
mayhap the steel set to protect;
to slay or heal.*

*A treacherous god, they say,
yet who would wait to test
justice or worth or right,
when through a fetid night
is wafted faint and nearer—
then straight as point of steel
to one who courts swift death,
scent of Hesperidean orange-spray.*

[47]

PRAYER

White, O white face—
from disenchanted days
wither alike dark rose
and fiery bays:
no gift within our hands,
nor strength to praise,
only defeat and silence;
though we lift hands, disenchanted,

of small strength, nor raise
branch of the laurel
or the light of torch,
but fold the garment
on the riven locks,
yet hear, all-merciful, and touch
the fore-head, dim, unlit of pride and thought,
Mistress—be near!
Give back the glamour to our will,
the thought; give back the tool,
the chisel; once we wrought
things not unworthy,
sandal and steel-clasp;
silver and steel, the coat
with white leaf-pattern
at the arm and throat:
silver and metal, hammered for the ridge
of shield and helmet-rim;
white silver with the dark hammered in,
belt, staff and magic spear-shaft
with the gilt spark at the point and hilt.

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Transcriber's Notes

Page [42](#): though amended to through ("through fire I see it, ...")

Hyphenation has generally been standardized. However, when a word appears hyphenated and unhyphenated an equal number of times, both versions have been retained (forehead/fore-head).