BY THE NORTH SEA

1

A land that is lonelier than ruin;
A sea that is stranger than death:
Far fields that a rose never blew in,
Wan waste where the winds lack breath;
Waste endless and boundless and flowerless
But of marsh-blossoms fruitless as free:
Where earth lies exhausted, as powerless
To strive with the sea.

2

Far flickers the flight of the swallows,
Far flutters the weft of the grass
Spun dense over desolate hollows
More pale than the clouds as they pass:
Thick woven as the weft of a witch is
Round the heart of a thrall that hath sinned,
Whose youth and the wrecks of its riches
Are waifs on the wind.
3

The pastures are herdless and sheepless,
   No pasture or shelter for herds:
The wind is relentless and sleepless,
   And restless and songless the birds;
Their cries from afar fall breathless,
   Their wings are as lightnings that flee;
For the land has two lords that are deathless:
   Death's self, and the sea.

4

These twain, as a king with his fellow,
   Hold converse of desolate speech:
And her waters are haggard and yellow
   And crass with the scurf of the beach:
And his garments are grey as the hoary
   Wan sky where the day lies dim;
And his power is to her, and his glory,
   As hers unto him.

5

In the pride of his power she rejoices,
   In her glory he glows and is glad:
In her darkness the sound of his voice is,
   With his breath she dilates and is mad:
"If thou slay me, O death, and outlive me,
   Yet thy love hath fulfilled me of thee."
"Shall I give thee not back if thou give me,
   O sister, O sea?"
BY THE NORTH SEA

6

And year upon year dawns living,
And age upon age drops dead:
And his hand is not weary of giving,
And the thirst of her heart is not fed:
And the hunger that moans in her passion,
And the rage in her hunger that roars,
As a wolf's that the winter lays lash on,
Still calls and implores.

7

Her walls have no granite for girder,
No fortalice fronting her stands:
But reefs the bloodguiltiest of murder
Are less than the banks of her sands:
These number their slain by the thousand;
For the ship hath no surety to be,
When the bank is abreast of her bows and
Aflush with the sea.

8

No surety to stand, and no shelter
To dawn out of darkness but one,
Out of waters that hurtle and welter
No succour to dawn with the sun,
But a rest from the wind as it passes,
Where, hardly redeemed from the waves,
Lie thick as the blades of the grasses
The dead in their graves.
A multitude noteless of numbers,
     As wild weeds cast on an heap:
And sounder than sleep are their slumbers,
     And softer than song is their sleep;
And sweeter than all things and stranger
     The sense, if perchance it may be,
That the wind is divested of danger
     And scatheless the sea.

That the roar of the banks they breasted
     Is hurtless as bellowing of herds,
And the strength of his wings that invested
     The wind, as the strength of a bird's;
As the sea-mew's might or the swallow's
     That cry to him back if he cries,
As over the graves and their hollows
     Days darken and rise.

As the souls of the dead men disburdened
     And clean of the sins that they sinned,
With a lovelier than man's life guerdoned
     And delight as a wave's in the wind,
And delight as the wind's in the billow,
     Birds pass, and deride with their glee
The flesh that has dust for its pillow
     As wrecks have the sea.
BY THE NORTH SEA

12

When the ways of the sun wax dimmer,
Wings flash through the dusk like beams;
As the clouds in the lit sky glimmer,
The bird in the graveyard gleams;
As the cloud at its wing's edge whitens
When the clarions of sunrise are heard,
The graves that the bird's note brightens
Grow bright for the bird.

13

As the waves of the numberless waters
That the wind cannot number who guides
Are the sons of the shore and the daughters
Here lulled by the chime of the tides:
And here in the press of them standing
We know not if these or if we
Live truest, or anchored to landing
Or drifted to sea.

14

In the valley he named of decision
No denser were multitudes met
When the soul of the seer in her vision
Saw nations for doom of them set;
Saw darkness in dawn, and the splendour
Of judgment, the sword and the rod;
But the doom here of death is more tender
And gentler the god.
And gentler the wind from the dreary
   Sea-banks by the waves overlapped,
Being weary, speaks peace to the weary
   From slopes that the tide-stream hath sapped;
And sweeter than all that we call so
   The seal of their slumber shall be
Till the graves that embosom them also
   Be sapped of the sea.
II

1

For the heart of the waters is cruel,
   And the kisses are dire of their lips,
   And their waves are as fire is to fuel
   To the strength of the sea-faring ships,
Though the sea's eye gleam as a jewel
   To the sun's eye back as he dips.

2

Though the sun's eye flash to the sea's
   Live light of delight and of laughter,
   And her lips breathe back to the breeze
   The kiss that the wind's lips waft her
From the sun that subsides, and sees
   No gleam of the storm's dawn after.

3

And the wastes of the wild sea-marches
   Where the borderers are matched in their might—
Bleak fens that the sun's weight parches,
   Dense waves that reject his light—
Change under the change-coloured arches
   Of changeless morning and night.
4

The waves are as ranks enrolled
   Too close for the storm to sever:
The fens lie naked and cold,
   But their heart fails utterly never:
The lists are set from of old,
   And the warfare endureth for ever.
III

1

Miles, and miles, and miles of desolation!
Leagues on leagues on leagues without a change!
Sign or token of some eldest nation
Here would make the strange land not so strange.
Time-forgotten, yea since time's creation,
Seem these borders where the sea-birds range.

2

Slowly, gladly, full of peace and wonder
Grows his heart who journeys here alone.
Earth and all its thoughts of earth sink under
Deep as deep in water sinks a stone.
Hardly knows it if the rollers thunder,
Hardly whence the lonely wind is blown.

3

Tall the plumage of the rush-flower tosses,
Sharp and soft in many a curve and line
Gleam and glow the sea-coloured marsh-mosses
Salt and splendid from the circling brine.
Streak on streak of glimmering seashine crosses
All the land sea-saturate as with wine.
BY THE NORTH SEA

4
Far, and far between, in divers orders,
Clear grey steeples cleave the low grey sky;
Fast and firm as time-unshaken warders,
Hearts made sure by faith, by hope made high.
These alone in all the wild sea-borders
Fear no blast of days and nights that die.

5
All the land is like as one man's face is,
Pale and troubled still with change of cares.
Doubt and death pervade her clouded spaces:
Strength and length of life and peace are theirs;
Their alone amid these weary places,
Seeing not how the wild world frets and fares.

6
Firm and fast where all is cloud that changes
Cloud-clogged sunlight, cloud by sunlight thinned,
Stern and sweet, above the sand-hill ranges
Watch the towers and tombs of men that sinned
Once, now calm as earth whose only change is
Wind, and light, and wind, and cloud, and wind.

7
Out and in and out the sharp straits wander,
In and out and in the wild way strives,
Starred and paved and lined with flowers that
squander
Gold as golden as the gold of hives,
Salt and moist and multiform: but yonder
See, what sign of life or death survives?
Seen then only when the songs of olden
   Harps were young whose echoes yet endure,   
Hymned of Homer when his years were golden,       
   Known of only when the world was pure, 
Here is Hades, manifest, beholden,               
   Surely, surely here, if aught be sure!

Where the border-line was crossed, that, sundering
   Death from life, keeps weariness from rest,       
None can tell, who fares here forward wondering;
   None may doubt but here might end his quest.     
Here life’s lightning joys and woes once thundering
   Sea-like round him cease like storm suppressed.

Here the wise wave-wandering steadfast-hearted
   Guest of many a lord of many a land
Saw the shape or shade of years departed,
   Saw the semblance risen and hard at hand,
Saw the mother long from love’s reach parted,
   Anticleia, like a statue stand.

Statue? nay, nor tissued image woven
   Fair on hangings in his father’s hall;
Nay, too fast her faith of heart was proven,
   Far too firm her loveliest love of all;
Love wherethrough the loving heart was cloven,
   Love that hears not when the loud Fates call.
BY THE NORTH SEA

12
Love that lives and stands up re-created
Then when life has ebbed and anguish fled;
Love more strong than death or all things fated,
Child's and mother's, lit by love and led;
Love that found what life so long awaited
Here, when life came down among the dead.

13
Here, where never came alive another,
Came her son across the sundering tide
Crossed before by many a warrior brother
Once that warred on Ilion at his side;
Here spread forth vain hands to clasp the mother
Dead, that sorrowing for his love's sake died.

14
Parted, though by narrowest of divisions,
Clasp he might not, only might implore,
Sundered yet by bitterest of derisions,
Son, and mother from the son she bore—
Here? But all dispeopled here of visions
Lies, forlorn of shadows even, the shore.

15
All too sweet such men's Hellenic speech is,
All too fain they lived of light to see,
Once to see the darkness of these beaches,
Once to sing this Hades found of me
Ghostless, all its gulfs and creeks and reaches,
Sky, and shore, and cloud, and waste, and sea.
BY THE NORTH SEA

IV

1
But aloft and afront of me faring
Far forward as folk in a dream
That strive, between doubting and daring,
Right on till the goal for them gleam,
Full forth till their goal on them lighten,
The harbour where fain they would be,
What headlands there darken and brighten?
What change in the sea?

2
What houses and woodlands that nestle
Safe inland to lee of the hill
As it slopes from the headlands that wrestle
And succumb to the strong sea's will?
Truce is not, nor respite, nor pity,
For the battle is waged not of hands
Where over the grave of a city
The ghost of it stands.

3
Where the wings of the sea-wind slacken,
Green lawns to the landward thrive,
Fields brighten and pine-woods blacken,
And the heat in their heart is alive;

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They blossom and warble and murmur,
    For the sense of their spirit is free:
But harder to shoreward and firmer
    The grasp of the sea.

4

Like ashes the low cliffs crumble,
    The banks drop down into dust,
The heights of the hills are made humble,
    As a reed's is the strength of their trust:
As a city's that armies environ,
    The strength of their stay is of sand:
But the grasp of the sea is as iron,
    Laid hard on the land.

5

A land that is thirstier than ruin;
    A sea that is hungrier than death;
Heaped hills that a tree never grew in;
    Wide sands where the wave draws breath;
All solace is here for the spirit
    That ever for ever may be
For the soul of thy son to inherit,
    My mother, my sea.

6

O delight of the headlands and beaches!
    O desire of the wind on the wold,
More glad than a man's when it reaches
    That end which it sought from of old
BY THE NORTH SEA

And the palm of possession is dreary
   To the sense that in search of it sinned;
But nor satisfied ever nor weary
   Is ever the wind.

7

The delight that he takes but in living
   Is more than of all things that live:
For the world that has all things for giving
   Has nothing so goodly to give:
But more than delight his desire is,
   For the goal where his pinions would be
Is immortal as air or as fire is,
   Immense as the sea.

8

Though hence come the moan that he borrows
   From darkness and depth of the night,
Though hence be the spring of his sorrows,
   Hence too is the joy of his might;
The delight that his doom is for ever
   To seek and desire and rejoice,
And the sense that eternity never
   Shall silence his voice.

9

That satiety never may stifle
   Nor weariness ever estrange
Nor time be so strong as to rifle
   Nor change be so great as to change
BY THE NORTH SEA

His gift that renews in the giving,
The joy that exalts him to be
Alone of all elements living
The lord of the sea.

10
What is fire, that its flame should consume her?
More fierce than all fires are her waves:
What is earth, that its gulsfs should entomb her?
More deep are her own than their graves.
Life shrinks from his pinions that cover
The darkness by thunders bedidden:
But she knows him, her lord and her lover
The godhead of wind.

11
For a season his wings are about her,
His breath on her lips for a space;
Such rapture he wins not without her
In the width of his worldwide race.
Though the forests bow down, and the mountains
Wax dark, and the tribes of them flee,
His delight is more deep in the fountains
And springs of the sea.

12
There are those too of mortals that love him,
There are souls that desire and require,
Be the glories of midnight above him
Or beneath him the daysprings of fire:
And their hearts are as harps that approve him
And praise him as chords of a lyre.
That were fain with their music to move him
   To meet their desire

To descend through the darkness to grace them,
   Till darkness were lovelier than light:
To encompass and grasp and embrace them,
   Till their weakness were one with his might:
With the strength of his wings to caress them,
   With the blast of his breath to set free;
With the mouths of his thunders to bless them
   For sons of the sea.

For these have the toil and the guerdon
   That the wind has eternally: these
Have part in the boon and the burden
   Of the sleepless unsatisfied breeze,
That finds not, but seeking rejoices
   That possession can work him no wrong:
And the voice at the heart of their voice is
   The sense of his song.

For the wind's is their doom and their blessing;
   To desire, and have always above
A possession beyond their possessing,
   A love beyond reach of their love.
Green earth has her sons and her daughters,
   And these have their guerdons; but we
Are the wind's and the sun's and the water's,
   Elect of the sea.
V

1

For the sea too seeks and rejoices,
Gains and loses and gains,
And the joy of her heart's own choice is
As ours, and as ours are her pains:
As the thoughts of our hearts are her voices,
And as hers is the pulse of our veins.

2

Her fields that know not of dearth
Nor lie for their fruit's sake fallow
Laugh large in the depth of their mirth:
But inshore here in the shallow,
Embroiled with encumbrance of earth,
Their skirts are turbid and yellow.

3

The grime of her greed is upon her,
The sign of her deed is her soil;
As the earth's is her own dishonour,
And corruption the crown of her toil:
She hath spoiled and devoured, and her honour
Is this, to be shamed by her spoil.
BY THE NORTH SEA

4

But afar where pollution is none,
   Nor ensign of strife nor endeavour,
Where her heart and the sun's are one,
   And the soil of her sin comes never,
She is pure as the wind and the sun,
   And her sweetness endureth for ever.
VI

1
Death, and change, and darkness everlasting,
Deaf, that hears not what the daystar saith,
Blind, past all remembrance and forecasting,
Dead, past memory that it once drew breath;
These, above the washing tides and wasting,
Reign, and rule this land of utter death.

2
Change of change, darkness of darkness, hidden,
Very death of very death, begun
When none knows,—the knowledge is forbidden—
Self-begotten, self-proceeding, one,
Born, not made—abhorred, unchained, unhidden,
Night stands here defiant of the sun.

3
Change of change, and death of death begotten,
Darkness born of darkness, one and three,
Ghostly godhead of a world forgotten,
Crowned with heaven, enthroned on land and sea,
Here, where earth with dead men's bones is rotten,
God of Time, thy likeness worships thee.
4
Lo, thy likeness of thy desolation,
Shape and figure of thy might, O Lord,
Formless form, incarnate miscreation,
Served of all things living and abhorred;
Earth herself is here thine incarnation,
Time, of all things born on earth adored.

5
All that worship thee are fearful of thee;
No man may not worship thee for fear:
Prayers nor curses prove not nor disprove thee,
Move nor change thee with our change of cheer:
All at last, though all abhorred thee, love thee,
God, the sceptre of whose throne is here.

6
Here thy throne and sceptre of thy station,
Here the palace paven for thy feet;
Here thy sign from nation unto nation
Passed as watchword for thy guards to greet,
Guards that go before thine exaltation,
Ages, clothed with bitter years and sweet.

7
Here, where sharp the sea-bird shrills his ditty,
Flickering flame-wise through the clear live calm,
Rose triumphal, crowning all a city,
Roofs exalted once with prayer and psalm,
Built of holy hands for holy pity,
Frank and fruitful as a sheltering palm.
Church and hospice wrought in faultless fashion,
    Hall and chancel bounteous and sublime,
Wide and sweet and glorious as compassion,
    Filled and thrilled with force of choral chime,
Filled with spirit of prayer and thrilled with passion,
    Hailed a God more merciful than Time.

Ah, less mighty, less than Time prevailing,
    Shrunk, expelled, made nothing at his nod,
Less than clouds across the sea-line sailing,
    Lies he, stricken by his master's rod.
"Where is man?" the cloister murmurs wailing;
    Back the mute shrine thunders—"Where is God?"

Here is all the end of all his glory—
    Dust, and grass, and barren silent stones.
Dead, like him, one hollow tower and hoary
    Naked in the sea-wind stands and moans,
Filled and thrilled with its perpetual story:
    Here, where earth is dense with dead men's bones.

Low and loud and long, a voice for ever,
    Sounds the wind's clear story like a song.
Tomb from tomb the waves devouring sever,
    Dust from dust as years relapse along;
Graves where men made sure to rest, and never
    Lie dismantled by the seasons' wrong.
BY THE NORTH SEA

12

Now displaced, devoured and desecrated,
   Now by Time's hands darkly disinterred,
These poor dead that sleeping here awaited
   Long the archangel's re-creating word,
Closed about with roofs and walls high-gated
   Till the blast of judgment should be heard,

13

Naked, shamed, cast out of consecration,
   Corpse and coffin, yea the very graves,
Scoffed at, scattered, shaken from their station,
   Spurned and scourged of wind and sea like slaves,
Desolate beyond man's desolation,
   Shrink and sink into the waste of waves.

14

Tombs, with bare white piteous bones protruded,
   Shroudless, down the loose collapsing banks,
Crumble, from their constant place detruded,
   That the sea devours and gives not thanks.
Graves where hope and prayer and sorrow brooded
   Gape and slide and perish, ranks on ranks.

15

Rows on rows and line by line they crumble,
   They that thought for all time through to be.
Scarce a stone whereon a child might stumble
   Breaks the grim field paced alone of me.
Earth, and man, and all their gods wax humble
   Here, where Time brings pasture to the sea.
VII

1

But afar on the headland exalted,
    But beyond in the curl of the bay,
From the depth of his dome deep-vaulted
    Our father is lord of the day.
Our father and lord that we follow,
    For deathless and ageless is he;
And his robe is the whole sky's hollow,
    His sandal the sea.

2

Where the horn of the headland is sharper,
    And her green floor glitters with fire,
The sea has the sun for a harper,
    The sun has the sea for a lyre.
The waves are a pavement of amber,
    By the feet of the sea-winds trod
To receive in a god's presence-chamber
    Our father, the God.

3

Time, haggard and changeful and hoary,
    Is master and God of the land:
But the air is fulfilled of the glory
    That is shed from our lord's right hand.
BY THE NORTH SEA

O father of all of us ever,
   All glory be only to thee
From heaven, that is void of thee never,
   And earth, and the sea.

4

O Sun, whereof all is behelden,
   Behold now the shadow of this death,
This place of the sepulchres, olden
   And emptied and vain as a breath.
The bloom of the bountiful heather
   Laughs broadly beyond in thy light
As dawn, with her glories to gather,
   At darkness and night.

5

Though the Gods of the night lie rotten
   And their honour be taken away
And the noise of their names forgotten,
   Thou, Lord, art God of the day.
Thou art father and saviour and spirit,
   O Sun, of the soul that is free
And hath grace of thy grace to inherit
   Thine earth and thy sea.

6

The hills and the sands and the beaches,
   The waters adrift and afar,
The banks and the creeks and the reaches,
   How glad of thee all these are!
BY THE NORTH SEA

The flowers, overflowing, overcrowded,
   Are drunk with the mad wind's mirth:
The delight of thy coming unclouded
   Makes music of earth.

7

I, last least voice of her voices,
   Give thanks that were mute in me long
To the soul in my soul that rejoices
   For the song that is over my song.
Time gives what he gains for the giving
   Or takes for his tribute of me;
My dreams to the wind everliving,
   My song to the sea.