

Snake

A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.

In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark carob-tree
I came down the steps with my pitcher
And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough
before me.

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down, over the edge
of the stone trough
And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
Silently.

Someone was before me at my water-trough,
And I, like a second comer, waiting.

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and mused a moment,
And stooped and drank a little more,
Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of the earth
On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking.

The voice of my education said to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous.

And voices in me said, If you were a man
 You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.

But must I confess how I liked him,
 How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-
 trough
 And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankless,
 Into the burning bowels of this earth?

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
 Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?
 Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
 I felt so honoured.

And yet those voices:
If you were not afraid, you would kill him!

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,
 But even so, honoured still more
 That he should seek my hospitality
 From out the dark door of the secret earth.^{115}

He drank enough
 And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,
 And dickered his tongue like a forked night on the air, so black,
 Seeming to lick his lips,
 And looked around like a god, unseeing, into the air,
 And slowly turned his head,
 And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,
 Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round
 And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face.

And as he put his head into that dreadful hole,
 And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered
 farther,

A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing into that
 horrid black hole,
 Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing himself after,
 Overcame me now his back was turned.

I looked round, I put down my pitcher,
 I picked up a clumsy log
 And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter.

I think it did not hit him,
 But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed in
 undignified haste,
 Writhed like lightning, and was gone
 Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-front,
 At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.

And immediately I regretted it.
 I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
 I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.

And I thought of the albatross,
 And I wished he would come back, my snake.

For he seemed to me again like a king,
 Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
 Now due to be crowned again.

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
 Of life.
 And I have something to expiate;
 A pettiness.

Taormina.

Man and Bat

When I went into my room, at mid-morning,
 Say ten o'clock ...
 My room, a crash-box over that great stone rattle
 The Via de' Bardi....

When I went into my room at mid-morning
Why?... a bird!

A bird
 Flying round the room in insane circles.

In insane circles!
 ... *A bat!*

A disgusting bat
 At mid-morning!...

Out! Go out!

Round and round and round
 With a twitchy, nervous, intolerable flight,
 And a neurasthenic lunge,
 And an impure frenzy;
 A bat, big as a swallow.

Out, out of my room!

The Venetian shutters I push wide
 To the free, calm upper air;
 Loop back the curtains....

Now out, out from my room!

So to drive him out, flicking with my white handkerchief: *Go!*
But he will not.

Round and round and round
In an impure haste,
Fumbling, a beast in air,
And stumbling, lunging and touching the walls, the bell-wires
About my room!

Always refusing to go out into the air
Above that crash-gulf of the Via de' Bardi,
Yet blind with frenzy, with cluttered fear.

At last he swerved into the window bay,
But blew back, as if an incoming wind blew him in again.
A strong intrushing wind.

And round and round and round!
Blundering more insane, and leaping, in throbs, to clutch at a corner,
At a wire, at a bell-rope:
On and on, watched relentless by me, round and round in my room,
Round and round and dithering with tiredness and haste and increasing
delirium
Flicker-splashing round my room.

I would not let him rest;
Not one instant cleave, cling like a blot with his breast to the wall
In an obscure corner.
Not an instant!

I flicked him on,
Trying to drive him through the window.

Again he swerved into the window bay
And I ran forward, to frighten him forth.
But he rose, and from a terror worse than me he flew past me
Back into my room, and round, round, round in my room

Clutch, cleave, stagger,
 Dropping about the air
 Getting tired.

Something seemed to blow him back from the window
 Every time he swerved at it;
 Back on a strange parabola, then round, round, dizzy in my room.

He *could* not go out,
 I also realised....
 It was the light of day which he could not enter,
 Any more than I could enter the white-hot door of a blast-furnace.

He could not plunge into the daylight that streamed at the window.
 It was asking too much of his nature.

Worse even than the hideous terror of me with my handkerchief
 Saying: *Out, go out!...*
 Was the horror of white daylight in the window!

So I switched on the electric light, thinking: *Now*
The outside will seem brown....

But no.
 The outside did not seem brown.
 And he did not mind the yellow electric light.

Silent!
 He was having a silent rest.
But never!
Not in my room.

Round and round and round
 Near the ceiling as if in a web,
 Staggering;
 Plunging, falling out of the web,
 Broken in heaviness,

Lunging blindly,
 Heavier;
 And clutching, clutching for one second's pause,
 Always, as if for one drop of rest,
 One little drop.

And I!
Never, I say....
Go out!

Flying slower,
 Seeming to stumble, to fall in air.
 Blind-weary.

Yet never able to pass the whiteness of light into freedom ...
 A bird would have dashed through, come what might.

Fall, sink, lurch, and round and round
 Flicker, flicker-heavy;
 Even wings heavy:
 And cleave in a high corner for a second, like a clot, also a prayer.

But no.
Out, you beast.

Till he fell in a corner, palpitating, spent.
 And there, a clot, he squatted and looked at me.
 With sticking-out, bead-berry eyes, black,
 And improper derisive ears,
 And shut wings,
 And brown, furry body.

Brown, nut-brown, fine fur!
 But it might as well have been hair on a spider; thing
 With long, black-paper ears.

So, a dilemma!
 He squatted there like something unclean.

No, he must not squat, nor hang, obscene, in my room!

Yet nothing on earth will give him courage to pass the sweet fire of day.

What then?
 Hit him and kill him and throw him away?

Nay,
 I didn't create him.
 Let the God that created him be responsible for his death ...
 Only, in the bright day, I will not have this clot in my room.

Let the God who is maker of bats watch with them in their unclean
 corners....
 I admit a God in every crevice,
 But not bats in my room;
 Nor the God of bats, while the sun shines.

So out, out you brute!...
 And he lunged, flight-heavy, away from me, sideways, *a sghembo!*
 And round and round and round my room, a clot with wings,
 Impure even in weariness.

Wings dark skinny and flapping the air,
 Lost their flicker.
 Spent.

He fell again with a little thud
 Near the curtain on the floor.
 And there lay.

Ah death, death
 You are no solution!
 Bats must be bats.

Only life has a way out.
 And the human soul is fated to wide-eyed responsibility
 In life.

So I picked him up in a flannel jacket,
 Well covered, lest he should bite me.
 For I would have had to kill him if he'd bitten me, the impure one....
 And he hardly stirred in my hand, muffled up.

Hastily, I shook him out of the window.

And away he went!
 Fear craven in his tail.
 Great haste, and straight, almost bird straight above the Via de' Bardi.
 Above that crash-gulf of exploding whips,
 Towards the Borgo San Jacopo.

And now, at evening, as he flickers over the river
 Dipping with petty triumphant flight, and tittering over the sun's departure,
 I believe he chirps, pipistrello, seeing me here on this terrace writing:
There he sits, the long loud one!
But I am greater than he ...
I escaped him....

Florence.

