

**Classic Poetry Series**

**James Stephens**  
**- poems -**

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# James Stephens(9 February 1882 - 26 December 1950)

James Stephens was an Irish novelist and poet.

James Stephens produced many retellings of Irish myths and fairy tales. His retellings are marked by a rare combination of humor and lyricism (Deirdre, and Irish Fairy Tales are often especially praise). He also wrote several original novels (Crock of Gold, Etched in Moonlight, Demi-Gods) based loosely on Irish fairy tales. "Crock of Gold," in particular, achieved enduring popularity and was reprinted frequently throughout the author's lifetime.

Stephens began his career as a poet with the tutelage of "Æ" ([George William Russel](http://www.poemhunter.com/george-william-a-e-russell-2/)). His first book of poems, "Insurrections," was published during 1909. His last book, "Kings and the Moon" (1938), was also a volume of verse.

During the 1930s, Stephens had some acquaintance with [James Joyce](http://www.poemhunter.com/james-joyce/), who found that they shared a birth year (and, Joyce mistakenly believed, a birthday). Joyce, who was concerned with his ability to finish what later became Finnegans Wake, proposed that Stephens assist him, with the authorship credited to JJ & S (James Joyce & Stephens, also a pun for the popular Irish whiskey made by John Jameson & Sons). The plan, however, was never implemented, as Joyce was able to complete the work on his own.

During the last decade of his life, Stephens found a new audience through a series of broadcasts on the BBC.

## **Timeline of Stephens's Life**

1880 (9 February). Possible date of birth of James Stephens in Dublin.

1882 (2 February). Date of birth used by Stephens.

1886-96 Attended Meath Protestant Industrial School for Boys.

1896 Employed as a clerk by a Dublin solicitor, Mr Wallace.

1901 Part of a gymnastic team which won the Irish Shield. Employed by Reddington & Sainsbury, solicitors.

1906 Employed as a clerk-typist in the office of T. dy & Son, solicitors.

1907 Began regular contributions to Sinn Féin. Birth of stepdaughter, Iris, on 14 June; soon thereafter announced that he had a wife, "Cynthia" (Millicent

Josephine Gardiner Kavanagh, 22 May 1882-18 December 1960). Discovered by George W. Russell (Æ).

1909 Insurrections. Acted in the Theatre of Ireland's two productions of Seumas O'Kelly's *The Shuiler's Child*. Birth of son, James Naoise, on 26 October.

1910 Acted in the Theatre of Ireland production of Gerald h Macnamara's *The SPurious Sovereign*. He was associated with David Houston, Thomas MacDonagh, and Padraic Colum in founding and editing the *Irish Review* (published March 1911-November 1914).

1911 Acted in Pádraic Ó Conaire's *Bairbre Ruadh*. *The Marriage of Julia Elizabeth* produced by the Theatre of Ireland.

1912 *The Charwoman's Daughter*, *The Hill of Vision*, *Crock of Gold*.

1912 Poems *In the Poppy Field*, *In the Cool of the Evening*, *The Lonely God* all from *The Hill of Vision* are included by Edward Marsh in his collection *Georgian Poetry*.

1913 *Here Are Ladies*, *Five New Poems*. Received a commission from *The Nation* (London) to write a series of short stories. Moved to Paris. Another production of *The Marriage of Julia Elizabeth* at the Hardwicke Street Theatre. *Crock of Gold* awarded the Polignac Prize.

1914 *The Demi-Gods*.

1915 *Songs from the Clay*, *The Adventures of Seumas Beg/The Rocky Road to Dublin*. Elected Unestablished Registrar of the National Gallery of Ireland.

1915 Poems *The Rivals*, *The Goatpaths*, *The Snare*, *In Woods and Meadows*, *Deirdre* all from *Songs from the Clay* are included by Edward Marsh in his collection *Georgian Poetry*.

1916 *Green Branches*, *The Insurrection in Dublin*.

1917 Poems *The Fifteen Acres*, *Check*, *Westland Row*, *The Turn of the Road*, *A Visit from Abroad* all from *The Adventures of Seumas Beg* are included by Edward Marsh in his collection *Georgian Poetry*.

1918-24 Appointed Registrar of the National Gallery of Ireland

1918 *Reincarnations*.

1919 Married "Cynthia" (then a widow) in London on 14 May.

1920 *Irish Fairy Tales*. *The Wooing of Julia Elizabeth* (identical to *The Marriage of Julia Elizabeth*) produced at the Abbey Theatre by the Dublin Drama League. One of a series of operations for gastric ulcers.

1922 Arthur Griffith: journalist and Statesman.

1923 *Deirdre*.

1924 *Little Things*, *In the Land of Youth*. *Deirdre* presented the medal for fiction at the Aonach Tailteann festival. Resigned from the National Gallery.

1925 *A Poetry Recital*, Danny Murphy, *Christmas in Freelands*. On lecture tour in America. Returned to London; soon thereafter settled in the Kingsbury suburb of London. To America for another lecture tour.

1926 *Collected Poems*.

1927 Friendship with James Joyce commenced. Joyce suggested that Stephens complete *Finnegans Wake* if Joyce was unable to do so; this proposal made more formally during 1929.

1928 *Etched in Moonlight, On Prose and Verse*. First BBC broadcast. Lecturer at the Third International Book Fair in Florence.

1929 *Julia Elizabeth: A Comedy, in one act, The Optimist, The Outcast*. In Romania; met Queen Marie. Visit to America; stay with W. T. H. Howe.

1930 *Theme and Variations*. Visit to America; stay with Howe.

1931 *How St. Patrick Saves the Irish, Stars Do Not Make a Noise, Strict Joy*. Visit to America; stay with Howe.

1932 Visit to America; stay with Howe. A founder member of the Irish Academy of Letters.

1933-35 Yearly lecture tours to America; visits with Howe.

1937 Began regular series of BBC broadcasts. Accidental death of his son, James Naoise, on 24 December.

1938 *Kings and the Moon*.

1940 Moved to Woodside Chapel in Gloucestershire.

1942 Awarded British Civil List Pension.

1945 Returned to London.

1947 Awarded honorary D. Litt. degree from Dublin University (Trinity College).

1950 Final BBC broadcast. Death at Eversleigh on 26 December.

# A Visit From Abroad

A speck went blowing up against the sky  
As little as a leaf: then it drew near  
And broadened. -- ' It's a bird,' said I,  
And fetched my bow and arrows. It was queer!  
It grew up from a speck into a blot,  
And squattered past a cloud; then it flew down  
All crumply, and waggled such a lot  
I thought the thing would fall.--It was a brown  
Old carpet, where the man was sitting snug,  
Who, when he reached the ground, began to sew  
A big hole in the middle of the rug,  
And kept on peeping everywhere to know  
Who might be coming -- then he gave a twist  
And flew away . . . . I fired at him but missed.

James Stephens

# April Showers

The leaves are fresh after the rain,  
The air is cool and clear,  
The sun is shining warm again,  
The sparrows hopping in the lane  
Are brisk and full of cheer.

And that is why we dance and play,  
And that is why we sing,  
Calling out in voices gay,  
We will not go to school to-day  
Or learn anything:

It is a happy thing, I say,  
To be alive on such a day.

James Stephens

# Behind The Hill

Behind the hill I met a man in green  
Who asked me if my mother had gone out?  
I said she had. He asked me had I seen  
His castle where the people sing and shout  
From dawn to dark, and told me that he had  
A crock of gold inside a hollow tree,  
And I could have it.—I wanted money bad  
To buy a sword with, and I thought that he  
Would keep his solemn word; so, off we went.  
He said he had a pound hid in the crock,  
And owned the castle too, and paid no rent  
To any one, and that you had to knock  
Five hundred times. I asked, 'Who reckoned up?'  
And he said, 'You insulting little pup!'

James Stephens

# Blue-Blood

We thought at first, this man is a king for sure,  
Or the branch of a mighty and ancient and famous lineage—  
That silly, sulky, illiterate, black-avised boor  
Who was hatched by foreign vulgarity under a hedge.

The good men of Clare were drinking his health in a flood,  
And gazing with me in awe at the princely lad,  
And asking each other from what bluest blueness of blood  
His daddy was squeezed, and the pa and the da of his dad ?

We waited there, gaping and wondering, anxiously,  
Until he'd stop eating and let the glad tidings out,  
And the slack-jawed booby proved to the hilt that he  
Was lout, son of lout, by old lout, and was da to a lout !

James Stephens



# Breakfast Time

The sun is always in the sky  
Whenever I get out of bed,  
And I often wonder why  
It's never late.—My sister said  
She did not know who did the trick,  
And that she did not care a bit,  
And I should eat my porridge quick.  
... I think it's mother wakens it.

James Stephens

# Check

The night was creeping on the ground;  
She crept and did not make a sound  
Until she reached the tree, and then  
She covered it, and stole again  
Along the grass beside the wall.

I heard the rustle of her shawl  
As she threw blackness everywhere  
Upon the sky and ground and air,  
And in the room where I was hid:  
But no matter what she did  
To everything that was without,  
She could not put my candle out.

So I stared at the night, and she  
Stared back solemnly at me.

James Stephens

# Hate

My enemy came nigh,  
And I  
Stared fiercely in his face.  
My lips went writhing back in a grimace,  
And stern I watched him with a narrow eye.  
Then, as I turned away, my enemy,  
That bitter heart and savage, said to me:  
"Some day, when this is past,  
When all the arrows that we have are cast,  
We may ask one another why we hate,  
And fail to find a story to relate.  
It may seem then to us a mystery  
That we should hate each other."

Thus said he,  
And did not turn away,  
Waiting to hear what I might have to say,  
But I fled quickly, fearing had I stayed  
I might have kissed him as I would a maid.

James Stephens

# I Heard A Bird At Dawn

I heard a bird at dawn  
Singing sweetly on a tree,  
That the dew was on the lawn,  
And the wind was on the lea;  
But I didn't listen to him,  
For he didn't sing to me.

I didn't listen to him,  
For he didn't sing to me  
That the dew was on the lawn  
And the wind was on the lea;  
I was singing at the time  
Just as prettily as he.

I was singing all the time,  
Just a prettily as he,  
About the dew upon the lawn  
And the wind upon the lea;  
So I didn't listen to him  
As he sang upon a tree.

James Stephens

## In The Cool Of The Evening

I thought I heard Him calling. Did you hear  
A sound, a little sound? My curious ear  
Is dinned with flying noises, and the tree  
Goes -- whisper, whisper, whisper silently  
Till all its whispers spread into the sound  
Of a dull roar. Lie closer to the ground,  
The shade is deep and He may pass us by.  
We are so very small, and His great eye,  
Customed to starry majesties, may gaze  
Too wide to spy us hiding in the maze;  
Ah, misery! the sun has not yet gone  
And we are naked: He will look upon  
Our crouching shame, may make us stand upright  
Burning in terror -- O that it were night!  
He may not come . . . what! listen, list now --  
He is here! lie closer . . . Adam, where art thou?

James Stephens

# In The Orchard

There was a giant by the Orchard Wall  
Peeping about on this side and on that,  
And feeling in the trees: he was as tall  
As the big apple tree, and twice as fat:  
His beard was long, and bristly-black, and there  
Were leaves and bits of grass stuck in his hair.

He held a great big club in his right hand,  
And with the other felt in every tree  
For something that he wanted. You could stand  
Beside him and not reach up to his knee  
So mighty big he was—I feared he would  
Turn round, and trample down to where I stood.

I tried to get away, but, as I slid  
Under a bush, he saw me, and he bent  
Far down and said, 'Where is the Princess hid?'  
I pointed to a place, and off he went—  
But while he searched I turned and simply flew  
Round by the lilac bushes back to you.

James Stephens

# In The Poppy Field

Mad Patsy said, he said to me,  
That every morning he could see  
An angel walking on the sky;  
Across the sunny skies of morn  
He threw great handfuls far and nigh  
Of poppy seed among the corn;  
And then, he said, the angels run  
To see the poppies in the sun.

A poppy is a devil weed,  
I said to him - he disagreed;  
He said the devil had no hand  
In spreading flowers tall and fair  
Through corn and rye and meadow land,  
by garth and barrow everywhere:  
The devil has not any flower,  
But only money in his power.

And then he stretched out in the sun  
And rolled upon his back for fun:  
He kicked his legs and roared for joy  
Because the sun was shining down:  
He said he was a little boy  
And would not work for any clown:  
He ran and laughed behind a bee,  
And danced for very ecstasy.

James Stephens

# Insurrections

I saw God. Do you doubt it?  
Do you dare to doubt it?  
I saw the Almighty Man. His hand  
Was resting on a mountain, and  
He looked upon the World and all about it:  
I saw Him plainer than you see me now,  
You mustn't doubt it.  
He was not satisfied;  
His look was all dissatisfied.  
His beard swung on a wind far out of sight  
Behind the world's curve, and there was light  
Most fearful from His forehead, and He sighed,  
'That star went always wrong, and from the start  
I was dissatisfied.'  
He lifted up His hand-  
I say He heaved a dreadful hand  
Over the spinning Earth, then I said 'Stay,  
You must not strike it, God; I'm in the way;  
And I will never move from where I stand.'  
He said, 'Dear child, I feared that you were dead,'  
And stayed His hand.

James Stephens



# Midnight

And then I wakened up in such a fright;  
I thought I heard a movement in the room  
But did not dare to look; I snuggled right  
Down underneath the bedclothes—then the boom  
Of a tremendous voice said, 'Sit up, lad,  
And let me see your face.' So up I sat,  
Although I didn't want to. I was glad  
I did though, for it was an angel that  
Had called me, and he said, he'd come to know  
Was I the boy who wouldn't say his prayers  
Nor do his sums, and that I'd have to go  
Straight down to hell because of such affairs.  
... I said I'd be converted and do good  
If he would let me off—he said he would.

James Stephens

# O'Bruaidar

I will sing no more songs: the pride of my country I sang  
Through forty long years of good rhyme, without any avail;  
And no one cared even as much as the half of a hang  
For the song or the singer, so here is an end to the tale.

If a person should think I complain and have not got the cause,  
Let him bring his eyes here and take a good look at my hand,  
Let him say if a goose-quill has calloused this poor pair of paws  
Or the spade that I grip on and dig with out there in the land?

When the great ones were safe and renowned and were rooted and tough,  
Though my mind went to them and took joy in the fortune of those,  
And pride in their pride and their fame, they gave little enough,  
Not as much as two boots for my feet, or an old suit of clothes.

I ask a Craftsman that fashioned the fly and the bird,  
Of the Champion whose passion will lift me from death in a time,  
Of the Spirit that melts icy hearts with the wind of a word,  
That my people be worthy, and get, better singing than mine.

I had hoped to live decent, when Ireland was quit of her care,  
As a bailiff or steward perhaps in a house of degree,  
But my end of the tale is, old brogues and old britches to wear,  
So I'll sing no more songs for the men that care nothing for me.

James Stephens

# Righteous Anger

THE lanky hank of a she in the inn over there  
Nearly killed me for asking the loan of a glass of beer:  
May the devil grip the whey-faced slut by the hair,  
And beat bad manners out of her skin for a year.

That parboiled imp, with the hardest jaw you will see  
On virtue's path, and a voice that would rasp the dead,  
Came roaring and raging the minute she looked on me,  
And threw me out of the house on the back of my head!

If I asked her master he'd give me a cask a day;  
But she, with the beer at hand, not a gill would arrange!  
May she marry a ghost and bear him a kitten, and may  
The High King of Glory permit her to get the mange.

James Stephens

## Strict Joy

To-day i felt as poor O'Brien did  
When, turning from all else that was not his,  
He took himself to that which was his own  
— He took him to his verse — for other all he had not,  
And (tho' man will crave and seek)  
Another all than this he did not need

So, pen in hand he tried to tell the whole tale of his woe  
In rhyming; lodge the full weight of his grief in versing: and so did:  
Then — when his poem had been connd and cared,  
And all put in that should not be left out — did he not find and with  
astonishment,

That grief had been translated, or was come  
Other and better than it first looked to be:  
And that this happened, because all things transfer  
From what they seem to what they truly are  
When they are innocently brooded on  
— And, so, The poet makes grief beautiful.

"Behold me now, with my back to the wall,  
Playing music to empty pockets!"  
So, Raferty, tuning a blind mans plight,  
Could sing the cark of misery away:  
And know, in blindness and in poverty,  
That woe was not of him, nor kind to him.

And Egan Rahilly begins a verse —  
"My heart is broken, and my mind is sad ..."  
'Twas surely true when he began his song,  
And was less true when he had finished it:  
— Be sure, his heart was buoyant, and his grief  
Drummed and trumpeted as grief was sung!

For, as he meditated misery  
And cared it into song — Strict Care, Strict Joy!  
Caring for grief he cared his grief away:  
And those sad songs, tho' woe be all the theme,  
Do not make us grieve who read them now —

Because the poet makes grief beautiful.

And I, myself, conning a lonely heart  
— Full lonely 'twas, and 'tis as lonely now  
Turned me, by proper, to my natural,  
And, now too long her vagrant, wooed my muse:  
Then to her — let us look more close to these,  
And, seeing, know; and, knowing, be at ease.

Seeing the sky o'ercast, and that the rain had  
Plashed the window, and would plash again:  
Seeing the summer lost, and the winter nigh:  
Seeing inapt, and sad, and fallen from good:  
Seeing how will was weak, and wish o'erbearing:  
Seeing inconstant, seeing timidity:  
Seeing too small, too poor in this and yon:  
Seeing life, daily, grow more difficult:  
Seeing all that moves away — moving away  
... And that all seeing is a blind-mans treat,  
And that all getting is a beggars dole,  
And that all having is bankruptcy ...

All these, sad all! I told to my good friend,  
Told Raferty, O'Brien, Rahilly,  
Told rain, and frosted blossom, and the summer gone,  
Told poets dead, and captains dead, and kings!  
— And we cared naught that these were mournful things,  
For, caring them, we made them beautiful.

James Stephens

# The Ancient Elf

I am the maker,  
The builder, the breaker,  
The eagle-winged helper,  
The speedy forsaker!

The lance and the lyre,  
The water, the fire,  
The tooth of oppression,  
The lip of desire!

The snare and the wing,  
They honey, the sting!  
When you seek for me--look  
For a different thing!

I, careless and gay,  
Never mean what I say,  
For my thoughts and my eyes  
Look the opposite way!

James Stephens

# The Cherry Tree

Come from your bed my drowsy gentleman!  
And you, fair lady, rise and braid your hair,  
And let the children wash, if wash they can;  
If not, assist you them, and make them fair  
As is the morning and the morning sky,  
And every tree and bush and bird in air.

The sun climbed on the heights three hours ago,  
He laughed above the hills and they were glad;  
With bubbled pearl he made the rivers flow  
And laced their mists in silver, and he clad  
The meads in fragrant pomp of green and gold,  
And bade the world forget it had been sad.

So lift yourself, good sir! and you, sweet dame,  
Unlash your evening eyes of pious grey;  
Call on the children by each loved name,  
And set them on the grass and let them play;  
And play with them a while, and sing with them  
Beneath the cherry bush a roundelay.

James Stephens

# The Coolun

Come with me, under my coat,  
And we will drink our fill  
Of the milk of the white goat,  
Or wine, if it be thy will;  
And we will talk until  
Talk is a truble, too,  
Out in the side of the hill,  
And nothing is left to do,  
But an eye to look into an eye  
And a hand in a hand to slip,  
And a sigh to answer a sigh,  
And a lip to find out a lip:  
What if the night be black  
And the air on the mountain chill,  
Where the goat lies down in her track  
And all but the fern is still!  
Stay with me under my coat,  
And we will drink our fill  
Of the milk of the white goat  
Out on the side of the hill.

James Stephens



# The Coral Island

His arms were round a chest of oaken wood,  
It was clamped with brass and iron studs, and seemed  
An awful weight. After a while he stood  
And I stole near to him.—His white eyes gleamed  
As he peeped secretly about; he laid  
The oaken chest upon the ground, then drew  
A great knife from his belt, and stuck the blade  
Into the ground and dug. The clay soon flew  
In all directions underneath a tree,  
And when the hole was deep he put the box  
Down there, and threw the clay back cunningly,  
Stamping the ground quite flat; then like a fox  
He crept among the trees.... I went next day  
To dig the treasure up, but I lost my way.

James Stephens

# The Cow

Cow, Cow!

I and thou

Are looking at each other's eyes

You are lying on the grass

Eating every time I pass,

And you do not seem to be

Ever in perplexity:

You are good I'm sure, and not

Fit for nothing but the pot:

For your bearing is so kind,

And your quietness so wise:

Cow, Cow!

I and thou

Are looking at each other's eyes.

James Stephens

# The Daisies

IN THE scented bud of the morning—O,  
When the windy grass went rippling far,  
I saw my dear one walking slow,  
In the field where the daisies are.

We did not laugh and we did not speak  
As we wandered happily to and fro;  
I kissed my dear on either cheek,  
In the bud of the morning—O.

A lark sang up from the breezy land,  
A lark sang down from a cloud afar,  
And she and I went hand in hand  
In the field where the daisies are.

James Stephens

# The Devil's Bag

I saw the Devil walking down the lane  
Behind our house.—There was a heavy bag  
Strapped tightly on his shoulders, and the rain  
Sizzled when it hit him. He picked a rag  
Up from the ground and put it in his sack,  
And grinned and rubbed his hands.  
There was a thing  
Moving inside the bag upon his back—  
It must have been a soul! I saw it fling  
And twist about inside, and not a hole  
Or cranny for escape! Oh, it was sad!  
I cried, and shouted out, 'Let out that soul!'  
But he turned round, and, sure, his face went mad,  
And twisted up and down, and he said 'Hell!'  
And ran away.... Oh, mammy! I'm not well.

James Stephens

# The Fifteen Acres

I

I cling and swing  
On a branch, or sing  
Through the cool, clear hush of Morning, O!  
Or fling my wing  
On the air, and bring  
To sleepier birds a warning, O!  
That the night's in flight,  
And the sun's in sight,  
And the dew is the grass adorning, O!  
And the green leaves swing  
As I sing, sing, sing,  
Up by the river,  
Down the dell,  
To the little wee nest,  
Where the big tree fell,  
So early in the morning, O!

II

I flit and twit  
In the sun for a bit  
When his light so bright is shining, O!  
Or sit and fit  
My plumes, or knit  
Straw plaits for the nest's nice lining, O!  
And she with glee  
Shows unto me  
Underneath her wings reclining, O!

And I sing that Peg  
Has an egg, egg, egg,  
Up by the oat-field,  
Round by the mill,  
Past the meadow,  
Down the hill,  
So early in the morning, O!

III

I stoop and swoop

On the air, or loop  
Through the trees, and then go soaring, O!  
To group with a troop  
On the gusty poop  
While the wind behind is roaring, O!  
I skim and swim  
By a cloud's red rim  
And up to the azure flooring, O!  
And my wide wings drip  
As I slip, slip, slip,  
Down through the rain-drops,  
Back where Peg  
Broods in the nest  
On the little white egg,  
So early in the morning, O!

James Stephens

# The Glass Of Beer

The lanky hank of a she in the inn over there  
Nearly killed me for asking the loan of a glass of beer:  
May the devil grip the whey-faced slut by the hair  
And beat bad manners out of her skin for a year.  
That parboiled imp, with the hardest jaw you will ever see  
On virtue's path, and a voice that would rasp the dead,  
Came roaring and raging the minute she looked at me,  
And threw me out of the house on the back of my head.

If I asked her master he'd give me a cask a day;  
But she with the beer at hand, not a gill would arrange!  
May she marry a ghost and bear him a kitten and may  
The High King of Glory permit her to get the mange.

James Stephens

# The Goat Paths

The crooked paths go every way  
Upon the hill - they wind about  
Through the heather in and out  
Of the quiet sunniness.  
And there the goats, day after day,  
Stray in sunny quietness,  
Cropping here and cropping there,  
As they pause and turn and pass,  
Now a bit of heather spray,  
Now a mouthful of the grass.

In the deeper sunniness,  
In the place where nothing stirs,  
Quietly in quietness,  
In the quiet of the furze,  
For a time they come and lie  
Staring on the roving sky.

If you approach they run away,  
They leap and stare, away they bound,  
With a sudden angry sound,  
To the sunny quietude;  
Crouching down where nothing stirs  
In the silence of the furze,  
Couching down again to brood  
In the sunny solitude.

If I were as wise as they  
I would stray apart and brood,  
I would beat a hidden way  
Through the quiet heather spray  
To a sunny solitude;  
And should you come I'd run away,  
I would make an angry sound,  
I would stare and turn and bound  
To the deeper quietude,  
To the place where nothing stirs  
In the silence of the furze.



In that airy quietness  
I would think as long as they;  
Through the quiet sunniness  
I would stray away to brood  
By a hidden beaten way  
In a sunny solitude.

I would think until I found  
Something I can never find,  
Something lying on the ground,  
In the bottom of my mind.

James Stephens

# The Horse

A sparrow hopped about the street,  
And he was not a bit afraid;  
He flew between a horse's feet,  
And ate his supper undismayed:  
I think myself the horse knew well  
The bird came for the grains that fell.

For his eye was looking down,  
And he danced the corn about  
In his nose-bag, till the brown  
Grains of corn were tumbled out;  
And I fancy that he said,  
'Eat it up, young Speckle-Head!'

The driver then came back again,  
He climbed into the heavy dray;  
And he tightened up the rein,  
Cracked his whip and drove away.  
But when the horse's ribs were hit,  
The sparrow did not care a bit.

James Stephens

# The Lonely God

So Eden was deserted, and at eve  
Into the quiet place God came to grieve.  
His face was sad, His hands hung slackly down  
Along his robe; too sorrowful to frown  
He paced along the grassy paths and through  
The silent trees, and where the flowers grew  
Tended by Adam. All the birds had gone  
Out to the world, and singing was not one  
To cheer the lonely God out of His grief --  
The silence broken only when a leaf  
Tapt lightly on a leaf, or when the wind,  
Slow-handed, swayed the bushes to its mind.

And so along the base of a round hill,  
Rolling in fern, He bent His way until  
He neared the little hut which Adam made,  
And saw its dusky roof-tree overlaid  
With greenest leaves. Here Adam and his spouse  
Were wont to nestle in their little house  
Snug at the dew-time: here He, standing sad,  
Sighed with the wind, nor any pleasure had  
In heavenly knowledge, for His darlings twain  
Had gone from Him to learn the feel of pain,  
And what was meant by sorrow and despair, --  
Drear knowledge for a Father to prepare.

There he looked sadly on the little place;  
A beehive round it was, without a trace  
Of occupant or owner; standing dim  
Among the gloomy trees it seemed to Him  
A final desolation, the last word  
Wherewith the lips of silence had been stirred.  
Chaste and remote, so tiny and so shy,  
So new withal, so lost to any eye,  
So pac't of memories all innocent  
Of days and nights that in it had been spent  
In blithe communion, Adam, Eve, and He,  
Afar from Heaven and its gaudery;  
And now no more! He still must be the God

But not the friend; a Father with a rod  
Whose voice was fear, whose countenance a threat,  
Whose coming terror, and whose going wet  
With penitential tears; not evermore  
Would they run forth to meet Him as before  
With careless laughter, striving each to be  
First to His hand and dancing in their glee  
To see Him coming -- they would hide instead  
At His approach, or stand and hang the head,  
Speaking in whispers, and would learn to pray  
Instead of asking, 'Father, if we may.'

Never again to Eden would He haste  
At cool of evening, when the sun had paced  
Back from the tree-tops, slanting from the rim  
Of a low cloud, what time the twilight dim  
Knit tree to tree in shadow, gathering slow  
Till all had met and vanished in the flow  
Of dusky silence, and a brooding star  
Stared at the growing darkness from afar,  
While haply now and then some nested bird  
Would lift upon the air a sleepy word  
Most musical, or swing its airy bed  
To the high moon that drifted overhead.

'Twas good to quit at evening His great throne,  
To lay His crown aside, and all alone  
Down through the quiet air to stoop and glide  
Unkenned by angels: silently to hide  
In the green fields, by dappled shades, where brooks  
Through leafy solitudes and quiet nooks  
Flowed far from heavenly majesty and pride,  
From light astounding and the wheeling tide  
Of roaring stars. Thus does it ever seem  
Good to the best to stay aside and dream  
In narrow places, where the hand can feel  
Something beside, and know that it is real.  
His angels! silly creatures who could sing  
And sing again, and delicately fling  
The smoky censer, bow and stand aside  
All mute in adoration: thronging wide,  
Till nowhere could He look but soon He saw

An angel bending humbly to the law  
Mechanic; knowing nothing more of pain,  
Than when they were forbid to sing again,  
Or swing anew the censer, or bow down  
In humble adoration of His frown.  
This was the thought in Eden as He trod --  
. . . It is a lonely thing to be a God.

So long! afar through Time He bent His mind,  
For the beginning, which He could not find,  
Through endless centuries and backwards still  
Endless forever, till His 'stonied will  
Halted in circles, dizzied in the swing  
Of mazy nothingness. -- His mind could bring  
Not to subjection, grip or hold the theme  
Whose wide horizon melted like a dream  
To thinnest edges. Infinite behind  
The piling centuries were trodden blind  
In gulfs chaotic -- so He could not see  
When He was not who always had To Be.

Not even godly fortitude can stare  
Into Eternity, nor easy bear  
The insolent vacuity of Time:  
It is too much, the mind can never climb  
Up to its meaning, for, without an end,  
Without beginning, plan, or scope, or trend  
To point a path, there nothing is to hold  
And steady surmise: so the mind is rolled  
And swayed and drowned in dull Immensity.  
Eternity outfaces even Me  
With its indifference, and the fruitless year  
Would swing as fruitless were I never there.

And so for ever, day and night the same,  
Years flying swiftly nowhere, like a game  
Played random by a madman, without end  
Or any reasoned object but to spend  
What is unspendable -- Eternal Woe!  
O Weariness of Time that fast or slow  
Goes never further, never has in view  
An ending to the thing it seeks to do,

And so does nothing: merely ebb and flow,  
From nowhere into nowhere, touching so  
The shores of many stars and passing on,  
Careless of what may come or what has gone.

O solitude unspeakable! to be  
For ever with oneself! never see  
An equal face, or feel an equal hand,  
To sit in state and issue reprimand,  
Admonishment or glory, and to smile  
Disdaining what has happened the while!  
O to be breast to breast against a foe!  
Against a friend! to strive and not to know  
The laboured outcome: love nor be aware  
How much the other loved, and greatly care  
With passion for that happy love or hate,  
Nor know what joy or dole was hid in fate.  
For I have ranged the spacy width and gone  
Swift north and south, striving to look upon  
An ending somewhere. Many days I sped  
Hard to the west, a thousand years I fled  
Eastwards in fury, but I could not find  
The fringes of the Infinite. Behind  
And yet behind, and ever at the end  
Came new beginnings, paths that did not wend  
To anywhere were there: and ever vast  
And vaster spaces opened -- till at last  
Dizzied with distance, thrilling to a pain  
Unnameable, I turned to Heaven again.  
And there My angels were prepared to fling  
The cloudy incense, there prepared to sing  
My praise and glory -- O, in fury I  
Then roared them senseless, then threw down the sky  
And stamped upon it, buffeted a star  
With my great fist, and flung the sun afar:  
Shouted My anger till the mighty sound  
Rung to the width, frightening the furthest bound  
And scope of hearing: tumult vaster still,  
Throning the echo, dinned My ears, until  
I fled in silence, seeking out a place  
To hide Me from the very thought of Space.

And so, He thought, in Mine own Image I  
Have made a man, remote from Heaven high  
And all its humble angels: I have poured  
My essence in his nostrils: I have cored  
His heart with My own spirit; part of Me,  
His mind with laboured growth unceasingly  
Must strive to equal Mine; must ever grow  
By virtue of My essence till he know  
Both good and evil through the solemn test  
Of sin and retribution, till, with zest,  
He feels his godhead, soars to challenge Me  
In Mine own Heaven for supremacy.

Through savage beasts and still more savage clay,  
Invincible, I bid him fight a way  
To greater battles, crawling through defeat  
Into defeat again: ordained to meet  
Disaster in disaster; prone to fall,  
I prick him with My memory to call  
Defiance at his victor and arise  
With anguished fury to his greater size  
Through tribulation, terror, and despair.  
Astounded, he must fight to higher air,  
Climb battle into battle till he be  
Confronted with a flaming sword and Me.

So growing age by age to greater strength,  
To greater beauty, skill and deep intent:  
With wisdom wrung from pain, with energy  
Nourished in sin and sorrow, he will be  
Strong, pure and proud an enemy to meet,  
Tremendous on a battle-field, or sweet  
To walk by as friend with candid mind.  
--Dear enemy or friend so hard to find,  
I yet shall find you, yet shall put My breast  
In enmity or love against your breast:  
Shall smite or clasp with equal ecstasy  
The enemy or friend who grows to Me.

The topmost blossom of his growing I  
Shall take unto Me, cherish and lift high  
Beside myself upon My holy throne: --

It is not good for God to be alone.  
The perfect woman of his perfect race  
Shall sit beside Me in the highest place  
And be my Goddess, Queen, Companion, Wife,  
The rounder of My majesty, the life  
Of My ambition. She will smile to see  
Me bending down to worship at her knee  
Who never bent before, and she will say,  
'Dear God, who was it taught Thee how to pray?'

And through eternity, adown the slope  
Of never-ending time, compact of hope,  
Of zest and young enjoyment, I and She  
Will walk together, sowing jollity  
Among the raving stars, and laughter through  
The vacancies of Heaven, till the blue  
Vast amplitudes of space lift up a song,  
The echo of our presence, rolled along  
And ever rolling where the planets sing  
The majesty and glory of the King.  
Then conquered, thou, Eternity, shalt lie  
Under My hand as little as a fly.

I am the Master: I the mighty God  
And you My workshop. Your pavilions trod  
By Me and Mine shall never cease to be,  
For you are but the magnitude of Me,  
The width of My extension, the surround  
Of My dense splendour. Rolling, rolling round,  
To steeped infinity, and out beyond  
My own strong comprehension, you are bond  
And servile to My doings. Let you swing  
More wide and ever wide, you do but fling  
Around the instant Me, and measure still  
The breadth and proportion of My Will.

Then stooping to the hut -- a beehive round --  
God entered in and saw upon the ground  
The dusty garland, Adam, (learned to weave)  
Had loving placed upon the head of Eve  
Before the terror came, when joyous they  
Could look for God at closing of the day



Profound and happy. So the Mighty Guest  
Rent, took, and placed the blossoms in His breast.  
'This,' said He gently, 'I shall show My queen  
When she hath grown to Me in space serene,  
And say "'twas worn by Eve.'" So, smiling fair,  
He spread abroad His wings upon the air.

James Stephens

# The Old Man

An old man sat beneath a tree  
Alone;  
So still was he  
That, if he had been carved in stone,  
He could not be  
More quiet or more cold:  
He was an ancient man  
More than  
A thousand ages old.

James Stephens

# The Secret

I was frightened, for a wind  
Crept along the grass to say  
Something that was in my mind  
Yesterday—

Something that I did not know  
Could be found out by the wind,  
I had buried it so low  
In my mind.

James Stephens

# The Shell

AND then I pressed the shell  
Close to my ear  
And listened well,  
And straightway like a bell  
Came low and clear  
The slow, sad murmur of the distant seas,  
Whipped by an icy breeze  
Upon a shore  
Wind-swept and desolate.  
It was a sunless strand that never bore  
The footprint of a man,  
Nor felt the weight  
Since time began  
Of any human quality or stir  
Save what the dreary winds and waves incur.  
And in the hush of waters was the sound  
Of pebbles rolling round,  
For ever rolling with a hollow sound.  
And bubbling sea-weeds as the waters go  
Swish to and fro  
Their long, cold tentacles of slimy grey.  
There was no day,  
Nor ever came a night  
Setting the stars alight  
To wonder at the moon:  
Was twilight only and the frightened croon,  
Smitten to whimpers, of the dreary wind  
And waves that journeyed blind-  
And then I loosed my ear ... O, it was sweet  
To hear a cart go jolting down the street.

James Stephens

# The Snare

I hear a sudden cry of pain!  
There is a rabbit in a snare:  
Now I hear the cry again,  
But I cannot tell from where.

But I cannot tell from where  
He is calling out for aid!  
Crying on the frightened air,  
Making everything afraid!

Making everything afraid!  
Wrinkling up his little face!  
And he cries again for aid;  
- and I cannot find the place!

And I cannot find the place  
Where his paw is in the snare!  
Little One! Oh, Little One!  
I am searching everywhere!

James Stephens

# The Spring In Ireland: 1916

## I

Do not forget my charge I beg of you ;  
That of what flow'rs you find of fairest hue  
And sweetest odor you do gather those  
Are best of all the best — a fragrant rose,  
A tall calm lily from the waterside,  
A half-blown poppy leaning at the side  
Its graceful head to dream among the corn,  
Forget-me-nots that seem as though the morn  
Had tumbled down and grew into the clay,  
And hawthorn buds that swing along the way  
Easing the hearts of those who pass them by  
Until they find contentment. — Do not cry,  
But gather buds, and with them greenery  
Of slender branches taken from a tree  
Well bannered by the spring that saw them fall:  
Then you, for you are cleverest of all  
Who have slim fingers and are pitiful,  
Brimming your lap with bloom that you may cull,  
Will sit apart, and weave for every head  
A garland of the flow'rs you gathered.

## II

Be green upon their graves, O happy Spring,  
For they were young and eager who are dead;  
Of all things that are young and quivering  
With eager life be they remembered :  
They move not here, they have gone to the clay,  
They cannot die again for liberty;  
Be they remembered of their land for aye;  
Green be their graves and green their memory.

Fragrance and beauty come in with the green,  
The ragged bushes put on sweet attire,  
The birds forget how chill these airs have been,  
The clouds bloom out again and move in fire;

Blue is the dawn of day, calm is the lake,  
And merry sounds are fitful in the morn;  
In covert deep the young blackbirds awake,  
They shake their wings and sing upon the morn.

At springtime of the year you came and swung  
Green flags above the newly-greening earth;  
Scarce were the leaves unfolded, they were young,  
Nor had outgrown the wrinkles of their birth:  
Comrades they thought you of their pleasant hour,  
They had but glimpsed the sun when they saw you;  
They heard your songs e'er birds had singing power,  
And drank your blood e'er that they drank the dew.

Then you went down, and then, and as in pain,  
The Spring affrighted fled her leafy ways,  
The clouds came to the earth in gusty rain,  
And no sun shone again for many days:  
And day by day they told that one was dead,  
And day by day the season mourned for you,  
Until that count of woe was finished,  
And Spring remembered all was yet to do.

She came with mirth of wind and eager leaf,  
With scampering feet and reaching out of wings,  
She laughed among the boughs and banished grief,  
And cared again for all her baby things;  
Leading along the joy that has to be,  
Bidding her timid buds think on the May,  
And told that Summer comes with victory,  
And told the hope that is all creatures' stay.

Go, Winter, now unto your own abode,  
Your time is done, and Spring is conqueror  
Lift up with all your gear and take your road,  
For she is here and brings the sun with her:  
Now are we resurrected, now are we,  
Who lay so long beneath an icy hand,  
New-risen into life and liberty,  
Because the Spring is come into our land.

### III

In other lands they may,  
With public joy or dole along the way,  
With pomp and pageantry and loud lament  
Of drums and trumpets, and with merriment  
Of grateful hearts, lead into rest and sted  
The nation's dead.

If we had drums and trumpets, if we had  
Aught of heroic pitch or accent glad  
To honor you as bids tradition old,  
With banners flung or draped in mournful fold,  
And pacing cortege; these would we not bring  
For your last journeying.

We have no drums or trumpets ; naught have we  
But some green branches taken from a tree,  
And flowers that grow at large in mead and vale;  
Nothing of choice have we, or of avail  
To do you honor as our honor deems,  
And as your worth beseems.

Sleep, drums and trumpets, yet a little time;  
All ends and all begins, and there is chime  
At last where discord was, and joy at last  
Where woe wept out her eyes: be not downcast,  
Here is prosperity and goodly cheer,  
For life does follow death, and death is here.

James Stephens



# The Turn Of The Road

I was playing with my hoop along the road  
Just where the bushes are, when, suddenly,  
There came a shout.—I ran away and stowed  
Myself beneath a bush, and watched to see  
What made the noise, and then, around the bend,  
I saw a woman running. She was old  
And wrinkle-faced, and had big teeth.—The end  
Of her red shawl caught on a bush and rolled  
Right off her, and her hair fell down.—Her face  
Was awful white, and both her eyes looked sick,  
And she was talking queer. 'O God of Grace!'  
Said she, 'where is the child?' and flew back quick  
The way she came, and screamed, and shook her hands;  
... Maybe she was a witch from foreign lands.

James Stephens

# The White Wido

The moon comes every night to peep  
Through the window where I lie,  
And I pretend to be asleep;  
But I watch the moon as it goes by,  
And it never makes a sound.

It stands and stares, and then it goes  
To the house that's next to me,  
Stealing on its tippy-toes,  
To peep at folk asleep maybe;  
And it never makes a sound.

James Stephens

# The Wind

The wind stood up and gave a shout.  
He whistled on his fingers and  
Kicked the withered leaves about  
And thumped the branches with his hand  
And said that he'd kill and kill,  
And so he will and so he will.

James Stephens

# The Wood Of Flowers

I went to the Wood of Flowers  
(No one was with me):  
I was there alone for hours.  
I was happy as could be  
In the Wood of Flowers.

There was grass on the ground,  
There were buds on the tree,  
And the wind had a sound  
Of such gaiety,  
That I was as happy  
As happy could be,  
In the Wood of Flowers.

James Stephens

## Westland Row

Every Sunday there's a throng  
Of pretty girls, who trot along  
In a pious, breathless state  
(They are nearly always late)  
To the Chapel, where they pray  
For the sins of Saturday.

They have frocks of white and blue,  
Yellow sashes they have too,  
And red ribbons show each head  
Tenderly is ringleted;  
And the bell rings loud, and the  
Railway whistles urgently.

After Chapel they will go,  
Walking delicately slow,  
Telling still how Father John  
Is so good to look upon  
And such other grave affairs  
As they thought of during prayers.

James Stephens

# What the Devil Said

It was night time! God, the Father Good,  
Weary of praises, on a sudden stood  
From His great Throne, and leaned upon the sky:  
For He had heard a sound; a little cry,  
Thin as a whisper, climbing up the Steep.

And so He looked to where the Earth, asleep,  
Rocked with the moon: He saw the whirling sea  
Swing round the world in surgent energy,  
Tangling the moonlight in its netted foam;  
And, nearer, saw the white and fretted dome  
Of the ice-capped pole spin back again a ray  
To whistling stars, bright as a wizard's day.

But these He passed, with eyes intently wide,  
Till, closer still, the mountains He espied  
Squatting tremendous on the broad-backed Earth,  
Each nursing twenty rivers at a birth!  
And then, minutely, sought He for the cry  
That had climbed the slant of space so hugely high.

He found it in a ditch outside a town:  
A tattered hungry woman, crouching down  
By a dead babe — So there was nought to do,  
For what is done is done! And sad He drew  
Back to His Heaven of ivory and gold:  
And, as He sat, all suddenly there rolled,  
From where the woman wept upon the sod,  
Satan's deep voice — O thou unhappy God!

James Stephens

# What The Snake Saw

A little girl and a big ugly man  
Went down the road. The girl was crying  
And asking to go home, but when she ran  
He hit her on the head and sent her flying,  
And called her a young imp, and said he'd break  
Her neck unless she went with him, and then  
He smacked her on the cheek.—I was a snake  
At that time crawling through a robber's den,  
And diamonds were sticking to my tongue—  
(That's the best dodge), but when I saw the way  
He beat the little girl I up and flung  
A stone at him. My aim was bad that day  
Because I hit the girl ... and she did sing!  
But he jumped round and cursed like anything.

James Stephens

# White Fields

I

In the winter time we go  
Walking in the fields of snow;

Where there is no grass at all;  
Where the top of every wall,

Every fence, and every tree,  
Is as white as white can be.

II

Pointing out the way we came,  
-Every one of them the same-

All across the fields there be  
Prints in silver filigree;

And our mothers always know,  
By the footprints in the snow,

Where it is the children go.

James Stephens