

Edwin Muir (1887-1959)

1 *Ballad of Everyman*

I

Stout Everyman set out to meet
His brothers gathered from every land,
And make a peace for all the earth
And link the nations hand to hand.

He came into a splendid hall 5
And there he saw a motionless dove
Swung from the roof, but for the rest
Found little sign of peace or love.

Two days he listened patiently,
But on the third got up and swore: 10
“Nothing but slaves and masters here:
Your dove’s a liar and a whore.

“Disguised police on the high seats,
In every corner pimps and spies.
Goodbye to you; I’d rather be 15
With friends in Hell or Paradise”.

The great room turned to watch him go,
But oh the deadly silence then.
From that day brave Everyman
Was never seen by friend again. 20

II

Night after night I dream a dream
That I am flying through the air
On some contraption old and lame
As Icarus’ unlucky chair.

And first I see the empty fields — 25
No sign of Everyman anywhere —
And then I see a playing field

And two great sides in combat there.

And then they change into a beast
With iron hoofs and scourging tail 30
That treads a bloody harvest down
In readiness for the murdering flail.

And then a rash of staring eyes
Covers the beast, back, sides and head,
And stare as if remembering 35
Something that long ago was said.

And the beast is gone, and nothing's there
But murderers standing in a ring,
And at the centre Everyman.
I never saw so poor a thing. 40

Curses upon the traitorous men
Who brought our good friend Everyman down,
And murder peace to bring their peace,
And flatter and rob the ignorant clown.

1960

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