

Edwin Muir (1887-1959)

4 *Ballad of the Soul*

I

I did not know whence came my breath
Nor where had hid my clay,
Until my soul stood by my side
As on my bed I lay.

I looked across a dark blue shore 5
Under a dark blue sky,
The light came from no wandering star,
The sun had not passed by.

Faintly uprose like graven mist
A wraith upon the sea — 10
Woman or wraith or mist — I thought
It made a sign to me.

The waters rose, down sank the land,
The sea closed in like lead,
The waves like leopards tumbled on 15
Far above my head.

There closed the mesh and waxed the flesh
That brought my soul to birth.
I rose, the sky was white as snow,
As ashes black the earth. 20

The ashes of memorial fires
Extinguished utterly;
In towering blocks the twisted rocks
Stuck up above the sea.

And now I swam, a moving thing 25
On the vast and moveless mere,
And headless things swam all around;
I saw and did not fear

Till when I reached the saving shore
A soft sea-creature caught 30
My bonéd hand with boneless hand;
For all a day I fought.

And it was gone. I walked alone
Over sands and barren dunes;
The low-browed voiceless animals 35
Were my companions.

II

What next I saw I cannot tell
And ill can understand,
Though well I know that once I went
Through that hollow land. 40

It was a waste of jagged rock
(No beast nor bird was by),
And there what seemed a palace lay
Like ruins of the sky.

I stood without, I stood within; 45
Far down the toppling ledge,
Scaffolds of wood, scaffolds of wood
From edge to yawning edge.

And spiders wove and silence lay
On each deserted wall; 50
I poured myself from beam to beam,
Dived deep and knew my fall,

And that one beam would hold me there
And then like spouted light
That I should climb from beam to beam 55
Until I scaled the height.

But now the roof with final seal
Lay full upon my head;
My body like a battering ram
Beat on it, beat and bled, 60

The blood dyed me head to foot
Like a fierce fury red.

And the dumb stone shuddered and cried,
Turned back and made a way.
The sky leapt up, the stars showered out, 65
In peace the planets lay.

III

Now day came on me and I saw
A tarn, a little mound,
And rushes like an army's spears
Stood as at watch around. 70

Then on the white field of the sky
Two clouds like phantoms fell.
They grew, they moved together like
Two armies terrible.

They met, they broke in fiery smoke, 75
A red ball in the sky,
A ball of fire, it raged and turned
To ashes suddenly.

In the white sky a round black sun
In furious circles whirled, 80
From which two serpents broke and shook
Their flames over the world.

Their pennon fires shot out and in
And split the cracking mail;
You'd say all hell with plumes of fire 85
Upon the air did sail.

That sun drank up its fires, it stood
In heaven immovably;
As if some fear had clamped it there
It stood immovably. 90

But now its rage in furious spawn
A hundred legs gave birth;

Like a great spider down the air
It clambered to the earth.

Its head was like a wooden prow 95
That had voyaged silently
Over the seas of perished worlds:
It smiled disdainfully.

I stood; a sword was in my hand
Fallen from the empty sky. 100
I struck the beast full on the brow,
It did not move nor cry,

But like an image melting slow
It softly, softly smiled.
My body was a storm wherethrough 105
The sword in lightnings wild
Rove and rent: *it* sideways bent
Obedient as a child.

The sword streamed out in running fire,
The hard mail burst in two, 110
The white-robed white-winged spirit up
In wavering circles flew.

Hastily sank the empty mail
Deep in the secret ground.
Nothing was there but trampled grass, 115
The tarn, the watching mound.

IV

Then as I looked above I saw
The sweet sky rain with wings.
I was so happy I longed to be
With one of these fair things. 120

And now they flew over seas so clear
That their bright wraiths below
Like mute and pilgrimaging thoughts
Obediently did go.

