

'THE WATERS AND THE WILD'

BY R. J. WATHEN

Come away, O human child
 To the waters and the wild
 With a faery, hand in hand,
 For the world's more full of weeping
 than you can understand.

W. B. Yeats, 'The Stolen Child'

First Dream: THE CITY

OF ALL THE QUESTIONS which inspire the mind,
 Enrich the talk, and salt the witless jest
 When pompous men declare: 'We know what's best'
 And 'If you'd only think like us, you'd find
 What's in, what's out, who's normal and who's queer,
 Or what in politics and Church is right,
 And what is born of wickedness and night',
 As impishly they spread the subtle smear
 And hound and harry, blast and burn and curse,
 Jeering at poets, misfits, odd-men-out
 And those who muck the status quo about
 And play the one-man-band, or who (what's worse)
 Don't work in offices or drink in clubs,
 Don't live in Birmingham or Hull or Leeds,
 Mow lawns, grow roses, exorcise the weeds,
 Watch television in the slicker pubs;—
 —Of all the hatreds which make sour these minds,
 None pleases better than to pose the sneer:
 'What moves, what prompts the cuckoo Mountaineer,
 The Explorer, and Eccentrics of all kinds?'

I dreamt one night—as restlessly I slept
 Oppressed by lack of exercise and sun—
 Of cities, factories, football crowds, and One
 Who jealous eye upon their pleasures kept:

Policeman, scoffer, clown (I do not know)
 This man sat hawking tickets at the gate:
 'Not coming in?' he said—'stripe me, there ought
 To be a Law against the likes of you

That's always wanting to be different,
 With all your fancy hikes. Now look 'ere, mate,
 We're sick of you—you and your ruddy sport.
 I'll take my pub: you keep yer bleeding tent!

Second Dream: ANTARCTICA

I turned from him, and shifted in my sleep
 To mountains, caves, and seas and polar snow,
 Where blacklegs, discontents, and proud men go—
 —Black night was violent, humming with deep

Winds. Suddenly a lull. Five men drew near,
 Five men whom book and legend have made known
 To us, who marvel that they braved alone
 The polar silence and the mountain fear:

'I was with Shackleton at the white world's end',
 'And I with Amundsen'—'And I with Byrd',
 'And I that day with Atkinson we heard
 Scott giving orders to his men: 'Descend

'The glacier from the hut. Through five long weeks
 'We'll climb the Beardmore—if the sledges run—
 'And cold October lengthening into sun
 'Will find us skirting through the mountain peaks;

'Against the stars and tempest let us fight
 'And come, so God be with us, to the Pole'—
 I interrupted them: 'What good's this goal
 That makes you battle with antarctic night?'

'You ask me' said another of this group,
 'What price the struggle and what worth the goal?
 I'll tell you, stranger, why we sought the Pole
 And chose to live on pemmican and soup,

Ate dried potatoes, penguin guts and rice,
 Lost fingers, toes and eartips in the frost
 And, heedless of the energy it cost,
 Endured five hundred marches in the ice—'

He stopped—for all the wind-wild air was restive
 with a voice resounding from the heights above:
 'Love is for the Lover, let him love;
 'Life is for the Living, let us live'.

Third Dream: COMMONWEALTH EXPEDITION, 1956-59

Slowly the echo from the Voice on high,
 Sadder than laughter, yet more sweet than tears,
 Re-echoed and receded from my ears,
 Then died away into the southern sky.

Men of a younger time now came in sight,
 Well-stocked with food and scientific things,
 And geiger-counters, ropes and belay-slings,
 And tractors, planes, and artificial light:

Men of an Age where life has quickened pace;
 Survival now depends on nerves of metal
 as we rush about like bubbles in a kettle
 Lest death should catch us midway in the race.

'We did not suffer from the storms' they said,
 These men so recently returned from hell;
 'We have no nasty tragedies to tell,
 Behind us in the South we've left no dead.

'We did not play the standard hero's role,
 Nor die like gentlemen to save our friends,
 —As on the Plateau where the White World ends,
 When Titus started on his midnight stroll.

'Their's was no cosy Sunday trip—but we,
 We crossed in comfort with our heated tents,
 Not true explorers in the proper sense.
 These others knew the naked, unquiet sea

'With black, black day dismembered by the gales,
 Ice grinding, bellying about their stern,
 Their decks the sanctuary by day for tern,
 And the softer night wind snoring in the sails—

'—But if you say that we were brave, you lie.
 Is not this warning of the wind enough?
 —That Love is for the lover, let him love
 'For life, if made too soft, will quickly die'.

Fourth Dream: CHAMONIX—MT. BLANC

Bad news came winging through the long night's frost,
 Came whistling darkly down the northern air,
 'Go home, you mad one, there is no life here,
 'Another climber has been killed or lost'.

A cry of terror rends the alpine night
 As high on the mountain's mile-wide mighty wall
 I see two tiny dots begin to fall:
 Two tiny stones, I reckon, small and light—

—But as they cartwheel past me down the hill
 I see the blood, I smell the splintered bones,
 I hear them whimper with strange natal moans,
 Like baby foxes that the huntsmen kill.

I watch the glacier and the moonwhite snow
 Turn scarlet round the things which once were men.
 Ice crystals tinkle down the couloir. Then:—
 Silence shuts up the Cwm below.

The dawn that lightened on that night of death
 Was damp and raw, indifferent to the price,
 The loveless, cold, conclusive sacrifice
 Of men scrubbed out within a quarter breath.

Death, dawn, and danger are the red earth's wound:
 The lion is Danger with his itchy paw,
 Dawn is the blue dove creeping through the air
 From death-dark shadow, into death-dark sun.

No doubt, if they had lived, we could have told
 How two more climbers with their wild oats reaped
 Had learnt this lesson of the Welfare State:
 'Better by far the Coward who grows old'.

But as the sun rose larger in the sky
 A shiver thrilled the cornices above:
 'Life is for the living, let us live;
 Death is for the dead men: Let them die'.

Fifth Dream: CONQUISTADORES

Our dream grows ripe. . . . Along the sea's wide shore
 The ghost of a man walks—dead three hundred years.
 'I was the Prisoner in the Tower' he says,
 'Whose crime was, having all, I asked for more.

'My only fault was this: I climbed too high.
 I ranged the empires of the western sea,
 But dirt and darkness lay in wait for me,
 The convict's lonely curse, the scaffold sigh;

'And all that from Amerigo I took,
 Of power and feathers, riches, pride and fame,
 Time took from me—that fat deceiver Time
 Which kept in trust, then broke, my spring-day-clock'.

Now melancholy clouds his gravehot eyes
 And infinite the sadness of his heart,
 As earlier heroes thunder into sight,
 So like the vultures when a traveller dies:

Out of mist Pizarro's Army rides,
 Wild and brutal messengers of Spain,
 Heading for the gorge beyond the yellow plain:
 To Ollantaytambo where Manco Capac hides.

Lonely altar, mountain wind in the hall,
 Where a fat woman of Manhattan stumbles
 And leans heavily on the guide, who mumbles:
 'That's where they're buried—under the new hotel';

Windy call of the mountain, voice of the wild,
 What are you singing in your cloud on high?
 And echoing through the world comes back the cry
 That 'Solitude is best for human child';

And shouting from the snowy camp above,
 No other answer can the wind-voice give:
 'Love is for the Lover, let him live,
 'Life is for the living, let us love'.

[An earlier version of this poem was awarded the Vice-Chancellor's Poetry Prize, Trinity College, Dublin, 1958. EDITOR.]