

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Yvor Winters**  
**- poems -**

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## Yvor Winters(1900 - 1968)

Yvor Winters was born in Chicago in 1900 and died Palo Alto, California in 1968. He was studying at the University of Chicago when he was diagnosed as tubercular and had to relocate to Santa Fe, New Mexico, for his health. His early experimental poems, the striking one-line works in the imagist mode as well as the formalist works of his first two books, published in 1921 and 1922, were all written at a tuberculosis sanitarium. In 1923-24 he taught in the grade school and high school in the coal-mining camp towns of Madrid, and Cerillo, New Mexico. About that experience he remarked, in an introduction to his early poems, in 1966: "Accidents, many fatal, were common in the mines, from which union organizers were vigorously excluded and sometimes removed; drunken violence was a daily and nightly occurrence in both towns; mayhem and murder were discussed with amusement." Winters's 15-part Fire Sequence, published in American Caravan in 1927, was a Williams-like exploration in free verse of aspects of this devastated community. The sequence caught the attention of, among others, Hart Crane and Allen Tate.

In 1925, Winters enrolled at the University of Colorado (Boulder) where he obtained a B.A. and an M .A. in Romance languages. He married the poet and novelist Janet Lewis in 1926. His taught at University of Idaho in Moscow for two years, then entered Stanford University as a graduate student in 1927.

In the 1930s for literary scholars to attempt to criticize the work of their contemporaries was looked upon as bizarre and strange, and possibly even irresponsible and subversive. English departments were dominated by philologists and grammarians who saw their goal as instructing students in ways to write properly and by scholars whose life work often resulted in the production of an annotated edition. Like his distinguished contemporary in England, F. R. Leavis (whose professional future at Cambridge was severely damaged by his 1930 book on Eliot, Pound and Hopkins), Winters's career did not proceed smoothly as a result of his interest in contemporary experimental poetry. The chair of the English Department at Stanford, in a notorious confrontation, denounced Winters for having written works that were a "disgrace to the department."

Ironically, the studies that proved so disruptive to philologists, grammarians and scholars of the British tradition – Primitivism and Decadence (1937), Maule's Curse (1938) and The Anatomy of Nonsense (1943) – were themselves harsh in their appraisal of both the poets of the 1920s and the 1930s and the texts that have now become American "classics." Winters developed a criticism that morally

engaged with authors. For him, formal balance was the product of an ethical stability. From that perspective, both the free verse by Williams ("By the Road") and the blank verse by Crane ("The Dance") could fall under suspicion, inadvertently displaying a variety of flaws that pointed beyond the text to a culture that inadequately transmitted proper moral guidance. Winters could be disarmingly blunt and remarkably judgmental. His harsh review of *The Bridge in Poetry* devastated Hart Crane (though not enough to discourage Crane from writing a dazzling reply). Winters agreed with D. H. Lawrence's assessment of much of American literature, which he saw as heavily burdened with a self-indulgent romanticism. And yet even as Winters's readings condemned these works, his energetic presentations paradoxically made them remarkably engaging. It was not simply that Winters was a useful critic with whom to disagree: rather, he himself seemed to be always on the edge of converting himself as he displayed such interest in what he termed aberrant. His expanded review of *The Bridge*, appended to a collection of his first three books of criticism in 1947 in *In Defense of Reason*, ends with an astonishing reversal in which he embraces the vitality and courage of a poet whose work he has just spent the last 20 pages denouncing. As Winters aged, however, his focus hardened, and in his final books he was adamant in his insistence on the aptness of only a handful of works, many by figures others deemed marginal.

Though Winters's own interest in writing poetry dwindled as he grew older, his role as a remarkable teacher of young poets expanded. Stanford had, in the 1950s, one of the few programs that openly encouraged young poets to write within a scholarly program. Iowa, Washington and Utah had similar programs, but Stanford was where the MFAs from these programs went for further study. A number of poets emerged from the Stanford program, some with admiration for Winters, others with dislike of what they perceived as his autocracy: Thom Gunn, Philip Levine, Robert Pinsky are among the most well-known

# A Song In Passing

Where am I now? And what  
Am I to say portends?  
Death is but death, and not  
The most obtuse of ends.

No matter how one leans  
One yet fears not to know.  
God knows what all this means!  
The mortal mind is slow.

Eternity is here.  
There is no other place.  
The only thing I fear  
Is the Almighty Face.

Yvor Winters

# Alone

I, one who never speaks,  
Listened days in summer trees,  
Each day a rustling leaf.

Then, in time, my unbelief  
Grew like my running -  
My own eyes did not exist,  
When I struck I never missed.

Noon, felt and far away -  
My brain is a thousand bees.

Yvor Winters

# An October Nocturne

The night was faint and sheer;  
Immobile, road and dune.  
Then, for a moment, clear,  
A plane moved past the moon.

O spirit cool and frail,  
Hung in the lunar fire!  
Spun wire and brittle veil!  
And tremblingly slowly higher!

Pure in each proven line!  
The balance and the aim,  
Half empty, half divine!  
I saw how true you came.

Dissevered from your cause,  
Your function was your goal.  
Oblivious of my laws,  
You made your calm patrol.

Yvor Winters

# At The San Francisco Airport

This is the terminal: the light  
Gives perfect vision, false and hard;  
The metal glitters, deep and bright/  
Great planes are waiting in the yard-  
They are already in the night.

And you are here beside me, small.  
Contained and fragile, and intent  
On things that I but half recall-  
Yet going whither you are bent.  
I am the past, and that is all.

But you and I in part are one:  
The frightened brain, the nervous will,  
The knowledge of what must be done,  
The passion to acquire the skill  
To face that which you dare not shun.

The rain of matter upon sense  
Destroys me momentarily. The score:  
There comes what will come. The expense  
Is what one thought, and something more-  
One's being and intelligence.

This is the terminal, the break.  
Beyond this point, on lines of air,  
You take the way that you must take;  
And I remain in light and stare-  
In light, and nothing else, awake.

Yvor Winters

# By The Road To The Air Base

The calloused grass lies hard  
Against the cracking plain:  
Life is a grayish stain;  
The salt-marsh hems my yard.

Dry dikes rise hill on hill;  
In sloughs of tidal slime  
Shellfish deposit lime,  
Wild seafowl creep at will.

The highway, like a beach,  
Turns whiter, shadowy, dry:  
Loud, pale against the sky,  
The bombing planes hold speech.

Yet fruit grows on the trees;  
Here scholars pause to speak;  
Through gardens bare and Greek  
I hear my neighbor's bees.

Yvor Winters

# Dark Spring

My mother  
Foresaw deaths  
And walked among  
Chrysanthemums,  
Wincolored,  
Withered rose,  
The earthy blossoms.

My very breath  
Disowned  
In nights of study,  
And page by page  
I came on spring.

The rats run on the roof,  
These words come hard---  
Sadder than cockcrow  
In a dreamless, earthen sleep.  
The Christ, eternal  
In the scented cold; my love,  
Her hand on the sill  
White, as if out of earth;  
And spring, the sleep of the dead.

Yvor Winters

# John Sutter

I was the patriarch of the shining land,  
Of the blond summer and metallic grain;  
Men vanished at the motion of my hand,  
And when I beckoned they would come again.

The earth grew dense with grain at my desire;  
The shade was deepened at the springs and streams;  
Moving in dust that clung like pillared fire,  
The gathering herds grew heavy in my dreams.

Across the mountains, naked from the heights,  
Down to the valley broken settlers came,  
And in my houses feasted through the nights,  
Rebuilt their sinews and assumed a name.

In my clear rivers my own men discerned  
The motive for the ruin and the crime—  
Gold heavier than earth, a wealth unearned,  
Loot, for two decades, from the heart of Time.

Metal, intrinsic value, deep and dense,  
Preanimate, inimitable, still,  
Real, but an evil with no human sense,  
Dispersed the mind to concentrate the will.

Grained by alchemic change, the human kind  
Turned from themselves to rivers and to rocks;  
With dynamite broke metal unrefined;  
Measured their moods by geologic shocks.

With knives they dug the metal out of stone;  
Turned rivers back, for gold through ages piled,  
Drove knives to hearts, and faced the gold alone;  
Valley and river ruined and reviled;

Reviled and ruined me, my servant slew,  
Strangled him from the figtree by my door.  
When they had done what fury bade them do,  
I was a cursing beggar, stripped and sore.

What end impersonal, what breathless age,  
Incontinent of quiet and of years,  
What calm catastrophe will yet assuage  
This final drouth of penitential tears?

Yvor Winters



# Much In Little

Amid the iris and the rose,  
The honeysuckle and the bay,  
The wild earth for a moment goes  
In dust or weed another way.

Small though its corner be, the weed  
Will yet intrude its creeping beard;  
The harsh blade and the hairy seed  
Recall the brutal earth we feared.

And if no water touch the dust  
In some far corner, and one dare  
To breathe upon it, one may trust  
The spectre on the summer air:

The risen dust alive with fire,  
The fire made visible, a blur  
Interrate, the pervasive ire  
Of foxtail and of hoarhound burr.

Yvor Winters

# Night Of Battle

Europe: 1944  
as regarded from a great distance

Impersonal the aim  
Where giant movements tend;  
Each man appears the same;  
Friend vanishes from friend.

In the long path of lead  
That changes place like light  
No shape of hand or head  
Means anything tonight.

Only the common will  
For which explosion spoke;  
And stiff on field and hill  
The dark blood of the folk.

Yvor Winters

# On A View Of Pasadena From The Hills

From the high terrace porch I watch the dawn.  
No light appears, though dark has mostly gone,  
Sunk from the cold and monstrous stone. The hills  
Lie naked but not light. The darkness spills  
Down the remoter gulleys; pooled, will stay  
Too low to melt, not yet alive with day.  
Below the windows, the lawn, matted deep  
Under its close-cropped tips with dewy sleep,  
Gives off a faint hush, all its plushy swarm  
Alive with coolness reaching to be warm.  
Gray windows at my back, the massy frame  
Dull with the blackness that has not a name;  
But down below, the garden is still young,  
Of five years' growth, perhaps, and terrace-hung,  
Drop by slow drop of seeping concrete walls.  
Such are the bastions of our pastorals!

Here are no palms! They once lined country ways,  
Where old white houses glared down dusty days,  
With small round towers, blunt-headed through small trees.  
Those towers are now the hiving place of bees.  
The palms were coarse; their leaves hung thick with dust;  
The roads were muffled deep. But now deep rust  
Has fastened on the wheels that labored then.  
Peace to all such, and to all sleeping men!  
I lived my childhood there, a passive dream  
In the expanse of that recessive scheme.

Slow air, slow fire! O deep delay of Time!  
That summer crater smoked like slaking lime,  
The hills so dry, so dense the underbrush,  
That where I pushed my way the giant hush  
Was changed to soft explosion as the sage  
Broke down to powdered ash, the sift of age,  
And fell along my path, a shadowy rift.

On these rocks now no burning ashes drift;  
Mowed lawn has crept along the granite bench;  
The yellow blossoms of acacia drench  
The dawn with pollen; and, with waxen green,  
The long leaves of the eucalypti screen  
The closer hills from view—lithe, tall, and fine,  
And nobly clad with youth, they bend and shine.  
The small dark pool, jutting with living rock,  
Trembles at every atmospheric shock,  
Blurred to its depth with the cold living ooze.  
From cloudy caves, heavy with summer dew,  
The shyest and most tremulous beings stir,  
The pulsing of their fins a lucent blur,  
That, like illusion, glances off the view.  
The pulsing mouths, like metronomes, are true,

This is my father's house, no homestead here  
That I shall live in, but a shining sphere  
Of glass and glassy moments, frail surprise,  
My father's phantasy of Paradise;  
Which melts upon his death, which he attained  
With loss of heart for every step he gained.  
Too firmly gentle to displace the great,  
He crystallized this vision somewhat late;  
Forbidden now to climb the garden stair,  
He views the terrace from a window chair.  
His friends, hard shaken by some twenty years,  
Tremble with palsy and with senile fears,  
In their late middle age gone cold and gray.  
Fine men, now broken. That the vision stay,  
They spend astutely their depleted breath,  
With tired ironic faces wait for death.

Below the garden the hills fold away.  
Deep in the valley, a mist fine as spray,  
Ready to shatter into spinning light,  
Conceals the city at the edge of night.  
The city, on the tremendous valley floor,  
Draws its dream deeper for an instant more,  
Superb on solid loam, and breathing deep,

Poised for a moment at the edge of sleep.

Cement roads mark the hills, wide, bending free  
Of cliff and headland. Dropping toward the sea,  
Through suburb after suburb, vast ravines  
Swell to the summer drone of fine machines.  
The driver, melting down the distance here,  
May cast in flight the faint hoof of a deer  
Or pass the faint head set perplexedly.  
And man-made stone outgrows the living tree,  
And at its rising, air is shaken, men  
Are shattered, and the tremor swells again,  
Extending to the naked salty shore,  
Rank with the sea, which crumbles evermore.

Yvor Winters

# On Teaching The Young

The young are quick of speech.  
Grown middle-aged, I teach  
Corrosion and distrust,  
Exacting what I must.

A poem is what stands  
When imperceptive hands,  
Feeling, have gone astray.  
It is what one should say.

Few minds will come to this.  
The poet's only bliss  
Is in cold certitude—  
Laurel, archaic, rude.

Yvor Winters

# One Ran Before

I could tell  
Of silence where  
One ran before  
Himself and fell  
Into silence  
Yet more fair.

And this were more  
A thing unseen  
Than falling screen  
Could make of air.

Yvor Winters

# Sir Gawaine And The Green Knight

Reptilian green the wrinkled throat,  
Green as a bough of yew the beard;  
He bent his head, and so I smote;  
Then for a thought my vision cleared.

The head dropped clean; he rose and walked;  
He fixed his fingers in the hair;  
The head was unabashed and talked;  
I understood what I must dare.

His flesh, cut down, arose and grew.  
He bade me wait the season's round,  
And then, when he had strength anew,  
To meet him on his native ground.

The year declined; and in his keep  
I passed in joy a thriving yule;  
And whether waking or in sleep,  
I lived in riot like a fool.

He beat the woods to bring me meat.  
His lady, like a forest vine,  
Grew in my arms; the growth was sweet;  
And yet what thoughtless force was mine!

By practice and conviction formed,  
With ancient stubbornness ingrained,  
Although her body clung and swarmed,  
My own identity remained.

Her beauty, lithe, unholy, pure,  
Took shapes that I had never known;  
And had I once been insecure,  
Had grafted laurel in my bone.

And then, since I had kept the trust,  
Had loved the lady, yet was true,  
The knight withheld his giant thrust  
And let me go with what I knew.

I left the green bark and the shade,  
Where growth was rapid, thick, and still;  
I found a road that men had made  
And rested on a drying hill.

Yvor Winters

# Song

Where I walk out  
to meet you on the  
cloth of burning  
fields

the goldfinches  
leap up about my  
feet like angry  
dandelions

quiver like a  
heartbeat in the  
air and are  
no more

Yvor Winters

# Sonnet To The Moon

Now every leaf, though colorless, burns bright  
With disembodied and celestial light,  
And drops without a movement or a sound  
A pillar of darkness to the shifting ground.

The lucent, thin, and alcoholic flame  
Runs in the stubble with a nervous aim,  
But, when the eye pursues, will point with fire  
Each single stubble-tip and strain no higher.

O triple goddess! Contemplate my plight!  
Opacity, my fate! Change, my delight!  
The yellow tom-cat, sunk in shifting fur,  
Changes and dreams, a phosphorescent blur.

Sullen I wait, but still the vision shun.  
Bodiless thoughts and thoughtless bodies run.

Yvor Winters

# The Empty Hills

The grandeur of deep afternoons,  
The pomp of haze on marble hills,  
Where every white-walled villa swoons  
Through violence that heat fulfills,

Pass tirelessly and more alone  
Than kings that time has laid aside.  
Safe on their massive sea of stone  
The empty tufted gardens ride.

Here is no music, where the air  
Drives slowly through the airy leaves.  
Meaning is aimless motion where  
The sinking humming bird conceives.

No book nor picture has inlaid  
This life with darkened gold, but here  
Men passionless and dumb invade  
A quiet that entrances fear.

Yvor Winters

# The Fable

Beyond the steady rock the steady sea,  
In movement more immovable than station,  
Gathers and washes and is gone. It comes,  
A slow obscure metonymy of motion,  
Crumbling the inner barriers of the brain.  
But the crossed rock braces the hills and makes  
A steady quiet of the steady music,  
Massive with peace.

And listen, now:

The foam receding down the sand silvers  
Between the grains, thin, pure as virgin words,  
Lending a sheen to Nothing, whispering.

Yvor Winters

# The Journey

## Snake River Country

I now remembered slowly how I came,  
I, sometime living, sometime with a name,  
Creeping by iron ways across the bare  
Wastes of Wyoming, turning in despair,  
Changing and turning, till the fall of night,  
Then throbbing motionless with iron might.  
Four days and nights! Small stations by the way,  
Sunk far past midnight! Nothing one can say  
Names the compassion they stir in the heart.  
Obscure men shift and cry, and we depart.

And I remembered with the early sun  
That foul-mouthed barber back in Pendleton,  
The sprawling streets, the icy station bench,  
The Round-up pennants, the latrinal stench.  
These towns are cold by day, the flesh of vice  
Raw and decisive, and the will precise;  
At night the turbulence of drink and mud,  
Blue glare of gas, the dances dripping blood,  
Fists thudding murder in the shadowy air,  
Exhausted whores, sunk to a changeless stare.  
Alive in empty fact alone, extreme,  
They make each fact a mortuary dream.

Once when the train paused in an empty place,  
I met the unmoved landscape face to face;  
Smoothing abysses that no stream could slake,  
Deep in its black gulch crept the heavy Snake,  
The sound diffused, and so intently firm,  
It seemed the silence, having change nor term.  
Beyond the river, gray volcanic stone  
In rolling hills: the river moved alone.  
And when we started, charged with mass, and slow,  
We hung against it in an awful flow.

Thus I proceeded until early night,  
And, when I read the station's name aright,  
Descended—at the bidding of a word!  
I slept the night out where the thought occurred,  
Then rose to view the dwelling where I lay.  
Outside, the bare land stretching far away;  
The frame house, new, fortuitous, and bright,  
Pointing the presence of the morning light;  
A train's far screaming, clean as shining steel  
Planing the distance for the gliding heel.  
Through shrinking frost, autumnal grass uncurled,  
In naked sunlight, on a naked world.

Yvor Winters

# The Moralists

You would extend the mind beyond the act,  
Furious, bending, suffering in thin  
And unpoetic dicta; you have been  
Forced by hypothesis to fiercer fact.  
As metal singing hard, with firmness racked,  
You formulate our passion; and behind  
In some harsh moment nowise of the mind  
Lie the old meanings your advance has packed.

No man can hold existence in the head.  
I, too, have known the anguish of the right  
Amid this net of mathematic dearth,  
And the brain throbbing like a ship at night:  
Have faced with old unmitigated dread  
The hard familiar wrinkles of the earth.

Yvor Winters



# The Slow Pacific Swell

Far out of sight forever stands the sea,  
Bounding the land with pale tranquillity.  
When a small child, I watched it from a hill  
At thirty miles or more. The vision still  
Lies in the eye, soft blue and far away:  
The rain has washed the dust from April day;  
Paint-brush and lupine lie against the ground;  
The wind above the hill-top has the sound  
Of distant water in unbroken sky;  
Dark and precise the little steamers ply-  
Firm in direction they seem not to stir.  
That is illusion. The artificer  
Of quiet, distance holds me in a vise  
And holds the ocean steady to my eyes.

Once when I rounded Flattery, the sea  
Hove its loose weight like sand to tangle me  
Upon the washing deck, to crush the hull;  
Subsiding, dragged flesh at the bone. The skull  
Felt the retreating wash of dreaming hair.  
Half drenched in dissolution, I lay bare.  
I scarcely pulled myself erect; I came  
Back slowly, slowly knew myself the same.  
That was the ocean. From the ship we saw  
Gray whales for miles: the long sweep of the jaw,  
The blunt head plunging clean above the wave.  
And one rose in a tent of sea and gave  
A darkening shudder; water fell away;  
The whale stood shining, and then sank in spray.

A landsman, I. The sea is but a sound.  
I would be near it on a sandy mound,  
And hear the steady rushing of the deep  
While I lay stinging in the sand with sleep.  
I have lived inland long. The land is numb.  
It stands beneath the feet, and one may come  
Walking securely, till the sea extends

Its limber margin, and precision ends.  
By night a chaos of commingling power,  
The whole Pacific hovers hour by hour.  
The slow Pacific swell stirs on the sand,  
Sleeping to sink away, withdrawing land,  
Heaving and wrinkled in the moon, and blind;  
Or gathers seaward, ebbing out of mind.

Yvor Winters

# Time And The Garden

The spring has darkened with activity.  
The future gathers in vine, bush, and tree:  
Persimmon, walnut, loquat, fig, and grape,  
Degrees and kinds of color, taste, and shape.  
These will advance in their due series, space  
The season like a tranquil dwelling-place.  
And yet excitement swells me, vein by vein:  
I long to crowd the little garden, gain  
Its sweetness in my hand and crush it small  
And taste it in a moment, time and all!  
These trees, whose slow growth measures off my years,  
I would expand to greatness. No one hears,  
And I am still retarded in duress!  
And this is like that other restlessness  
To seize the greatness not yet fairly earned,  
One which the tougher poets have discerned—  
Gascoigne, Ben Jonson, Greville, Raleigh, Donne,  
Poets who wrote great poems, one by one,  
And spaced by many years, each line an act  
Through which few labor, which no men retract.  
This passion is the scholar's heritage,  
The imposition of a busy age,  
The passion to condense from book to book  
Unbroken wisdom in a single look,  
Though we know well that when this fix the head,  
The mind's immortal, but the man is dead.

Yvor Winters

# To A Young Writer

Achilles Holt, Stanford, 1930

Here for a few short years  
Strengthen affections; meet,  
Later, the dull arrears  
Of age, and be discreet.

The angry blood burns low.  
Some friend of lesser mind  
Discerns you not; but so  
Your solitude's defined.

Write little; do it well.  
Your knowledge will be such,  
At last, as to dispel  
What moves you overmuch.

Yvor Winters

# To Emily Dickinson

Dear Emily, my tears would burn your page,  
But for the fire-dry line that makes them burn—  
Burning my eyes, my fingers, while I turn  
Singly the words that crease my heart with age.  
If I could make some tortured pilgrimage  
Through words or Time. or the blank pain of Doom  
And kneel before you as you found your tomb,  
Then I might rise to face my heritage.

Yours was an empty upland solitude  
Bleached to the powder of a dying name;  
The mind, lost in a word's lost certitude  
That faded as the fading footsteps came  
To trace an epilogue to words grown odd  
In that hard argument which led to God.

Yvor Winters

# To The Holy Spirit

Immeasurable haze:  
The desert valley spreads  
Up golden river-beds  
As if in other days.  
Trees rise and thin away,  
And past the trees, the hills,  
Pure line and shade of dust,  
Bear witness to our wills:  
We see them, for we must;  
Calm in deceit, they stay.

High noon returns the mind  
Upon its local fact:  
Dry grass and sand; we find  
No vision to distract.  
Low in the summer heat,  
Naming old graves, are stones  
Pushed here and there, the seat  
Of nothing, and the bones  
Beneath are similar:  
Relics of lonely men,  
Brutal and aimless, then,  
As now, irregular.

These are thy fallen sons,  
Thou whom I try to reach.  
Thou whom the quick eye shuns,  
Thou dost elude my speech.  
But when I go from sense  
And trace thee down in thought,  
I meet thee, then, intense  
And know thee as I ought.  
But thou art mind alone,  
And I, alas, am bound  
Pure mind to flesh and bone  
And flesh and bone to ground.

These had no thought: at most  
Dark faith and blinding earth.

Where is the trammeled ghost?  
Was there another birth?  
Only one certainty  
Beside thine unfleshed eye,  
Beside the spectral tree,  
Can I discern: these die.  
All of this stir of age,  
Though it elude my sense  
Into what heritage  
I know not, seems to fall  
Quiet beyond recall,  
Into irrelevance.

Yvor Winters

# Two Songs Of Advent

I

On the desert, between pale mountains, out cries --  
Far whispers creeping through an ancient shell.

II

Coyote, on delicate mocking feet,  
Hovers down the canyon, among the mountains,  
His voice running wild in the wind's valleys.

Listen! Listen! for I enter now your thought.

Yvor Winters

# Where My Sight Goes

Who knows  
Where my sight goes,  
What your sight shows---  
Where the peachtree blows?

The frogs sing  
Of everything  
And children run  
As leaves swing.

And many women pass  
Dressed in white,  
As thoughts of noon pass  
From sea to sea.

And all these things would take  
My life from me.

Yvor Winters