

FOUR POEMS BY MALCOLM LOWRY

Quartermaster at the Wheel

The Harkness light! Another hour spelled out,
 Struck by myself with unction but with doubt.
 A man is killed but does not hear the shot
 Which kills him; four bells kills me.
 Lucky to hear it if I killed myself,—
 Whose age haunts calendars upon the screen;
 The heroine born in nineteen eighteen,
 Who yesterday was born in nineteen eight.
 A pile of magazines assess dead love
 On shore, where one light burns no love will wait.
 —Past years are volcanoes beyond the wake,
 Tomorrow is the sea and then the sea,
 To both least faithless when we most forsake,
 The one unscaled, the other vomitless
 Of Jonah to his gourd or Nineveh
 It is a straw to tickle bloodshot eyes
 Of quartermasters soldered to darkness,
 The stiff wheel and the remembrance of the drowned,
 For sinking men to suck at or to claw,
 The thought that what we saw we often hear
 Too late or not at all, or cannot bear
 To know resounding eardrums register . . .
 Our siren now! What ugliest ship has not
 Borne heart from heart with that deep plangency,
 Sadder than masthead's light, a soul
 In mourning whose voice is grief gone by.
 Roll on, you witless, dark brown ocean, roll,
 And light light years and grey ones let us live
 Within that gracious nexus of reprieve
 Between the fated sight and fatal sound
 —Now leave the world to Harkness and to me.

[This Bitterest Coast]

This is the end but since it is the end,
 You are happy at least in this one certainty,
 As you were in the eternity
 Of childhood's blue summer with seagull and yacht for friend,
 When God was good; love, true; sea, sea; land, land.
 Yet dare not to base immunity
 From baseness on this triviality!
 The murdered once gathered sea poppies with a hand
 To be scarleter, to be pressed to the blacker
 And less amorous heart of death . . . Oh, Christ,
 Wash up some bone-clear memory on this bitterest coast
 Where is no wreck, dead beak nor feather
 Though none venture here without disaster. Give at the last
 One half-passionate tryst with the past;
 Some little joy to gather to my salt grey breast
 Though children were betrayed, and money was kissed first.

[This Dead Letter]

When I am in the purgatory of the unread,
 Of the backward, of those with wandering attention,
 What survives must go back to Pier Head
 To mingle with the bereaved, with those who weep
 As freighters bear their hearts out with the tide.
 It will not be a spirit worthy of mention,
 Not one to recommend the down-and-out sailor:
 Nor will it be a ghost to help my father
 Struggling in the gale with his poor newspaper
 Or flying behind his bowler hat to work,
 As once before to race his new school cap.
 I shall not be looking for anyone to help;
 The salt grey prop looks after itself.
 I shall not stir a metaphor in a poet's head
 Grown greyer than my book on his top shelf:
 I spoke too much of wounds that never mend,

Of ships sailing in rain that never come back.
 Still I shall watch them sail, but turn my back
 To Saigon, the equator or Port Said.
 I lived with sadness: I shall be stern
 As this dead letter, I shall never send.

[*Whirlpool*]

Resurgent sorrow is a sea in the cave
 Of the mind—just as in the poem
 It gluts it—though no nymphs will quire a hymn;
 Abandon it! . . . Take a trip to the upper shore. Lave
 Yourself in sand; gather poppies; brave
 The fringe of things, denying that inner chasm.
 Why, the hush of the sea's in the seashell; in the limb
 Of the smashed ship, its tempest; and your grave
 The sand itself if you'd have it so. Yet glare
 Through a sky of love all day, still must you receive
 In that cave the special anguish of your life;
 With the skull of the seagull and the wrck you may fare
 Well enough, but will not escape that other surf,
 Remorse, your host, who haunts the whirlpool where
 The past's not washed up dead and black and dry
 But whirls in its gulf forever, to no relief.

NOTES

The poetry of Malcolm Lowry (1909-1957), whose novel *Under the Volcano* (1947) has received much attention, is now being edited and prepared for publication by Earle Birney, the Canadian poet and novelist, and Mrs. Margerie Lowry, Malcolm Lowry's widow. The editors of *The Dalhousie Review* are pleased to join other Canadian journals in the publication of some of Lowry's posthumous poems. The following notes have been supplied by Mr. Birney:

Quartermaster at the Wheel. Begun in Mexico about 1936. This poem springs from Lowry's early voyages as a sailor and experiences utilized in his first novel, *Ultramarine*. See *Jonah* 4:6.

This bitterest coast. Written in Mexico; revised at Dollarton, Lowry's beach home near Vancouver.

This dead letter. Written at Dollarton.

Whirlpool. Written at Dollarton.