

**An Urban Convalescence**

Out for a walk, after a week in bed,  
I find them tearing up part of my block  
And, chilled through, dazed and lonely, join the dozen  
In meek attitudes, watching a huge crane  
Fumble luxuriously in the filth of years.  
Her jaws dribble rubble. An old man  
Laughs and curses in her brain,  
Bringing to mind the close of *The White Goddess*.

As usual in New York, everything is torn down  
Before you have had time to care for it. 10  
Head bowed, at the shrine of noise, let me try to recall  
What building stood here. Was there a building at all?  
I have lived on this same street for a decade.

Wait. Yes. Vaguely a presence rises  
Some five floors high, of shabby stone  
—Or am I confusing it with another one  
In another part of town, or of the world?—  
And over its lintel into focus vaguely  
Misted with blood (my eyes are shut)  
A single garland sways, stone fruit, stone leaves, 20  
Which years of grit had etched until it thrust  
Roots down, even into the poor soil of my seeing.  
When did the garland become part of me?  
I ask myself, amused almost,  
Then shiver once from head to toe,

Transfixed by a particular cheap engraving of garlands  
Bought for a few francs long ago,  
All calligraphic tendril and cross-hatched rondure,  
Ten years ago, and crumpled up to stanch 30  
Boughs dripping, whose white gestures filled a cab,  
And thought of neither then nor since.  
Also, to clasp them, the small, red-nailed hand  
Of no one I can place. Wait. No. Her name, her features

Lie toppled underneath that year's fashions.  
The words she must have spoken, setting her face  
To fluttering like a veil, I cannot hear now,  
Let alone understand.

So that I am already on the stair,  
As it were, of where I lived,  
When the whole structure shudders at my tread 40  
And soundlessly collapses, filling

The air with motes of stone.  
Onto the still erect building next door  
Are pressed levels and hues—  
Pocked rose, streaked greens, brown whites.  
Who drained the pousse-café?  
Wires and pipes, snapped off at the roots, quiver.

Well, that is what life does. I stare  
A moment longer, so. And presently  
The massive volume of the world  
Closes again. 50

Upon that book I swear  
To abide by what it teaches:  
Gospels of ugliness and waste,  
Of towering voids, of soiled gusts,  
Of a shrieking to be faced  
Full into, eyes astream with cold—

With cold?  
All right then. With self-knowledge.

Indoors at last, the pages of *Time* are apt  
To open, and the illustrated mayor of New York,  
Given a glimpse of how and where I work,  
To note yet one more house that can be scrapped. 60

Unwillingly I picture  
My walls weathering in the general view.  
It is not even as though the new  
Buildings did very much for architecture.  
Suppose they did. The sickness of our time requires  
That these as well be blasted in their prime.  
You would think the simple fact of having lasted  
Threatened our cities like mysterious fires. 70

There are certain phrases which to use in a poem  
Is like rubbing silver with quicksilver. Bright  
But facile, the glamour deadens overnight.  
For instance, how “the sickness of our time”

Enhances, then debases, what I feel.  
At my desk I swallow in a glass of water  
No longer cordial, scarcely wet, a pill  
They had told me not to take until much later.

With the result that back into my imagination  
The city glides, like cities seen from the air,  
Mere smoke and sparkle to the passenger 80

Having in mind another destination

Which now is not that honey-slow descent  
Of the Champs-Élysées, her hand in his,  
But the dull need to make some kind of house  
Out of the life lived, out of the love spent.

[1962]

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## Notes

*The White Goddess:*

*The White Goddess: a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* is a book-length essay upon the nature of poetic myth-making by author and poet Robert Graves, first published in 1948. Toward the end of the book, Graves describes the increasingly fraught relation between the poet and the muse in modern times.

calligraphic: calligraphy is the art of fine handwriting (calligraphic is the adjective).

tendrils: a twisting, threadlike structure by which a twining plant, such as a grape or cucumber, grasps an object or a plant for support.

cross-hatched: marked or shaded with two or more sets of intersecting parallel lines.

rondure: a circular or gracefully rounded object.

pousse-café: a small drink served after dinner (especially several liqueurs poured carefully so as to remain in separate layers). [from the French for “coffee chaser”]

*Time*: news periodical.

quicksilver: mercury (the only metal that is liquid at room temperature). If you rub mercury on coins, they will shine like new, but this shine will not last.

the Champs-Élysées: famous wide street in Paris. [French for “Elysian Fields,” the “Fields of the Blest” in ancient myths where the just went after death.]