

How shall my animal

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I hold a beast, an angel, and a madman in me, and my enquiry is as to their working, and my problem is their subjugation and victory, down-throw & upheaval, and my effort is their self-expression. The new poem I enclose, 'How Shall My Animal', is a detailed enquiry; and the poem too is the result of the enquiry, and is the furthest I can, at present, reach or hope for. The poem is, as all poems are, its own question and answer, its own contradiction, its own agreement. I ask only that my poetry should be taken literally. The aim of a poem is the mark that the poem itself makes; it's the bullet and the bullseye, the knife, the growth, and the patient. A poem moves only towards its own end, which is the last line.

—Letter to Henry Treece, 16 May 1938[‡]

How shall my animal
Whose wizard shape I trace in the cavernous skull,
Vessel of abscesses and exultation's shell,
Endure burial under the spelling wall,
5 The invoked, shrouding veil at the cap of the face,
Who should be furious,
Drunk as a vineyard snail, flailed like an octopus,
Roaring, crawling, quarrel
With the outside weathers,
10 The natural circle of the discovered skies
Draw down to its weird eyes?
How shall it magnetize,

* *Collected Poems 1934–1953*, J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd: London (1989). ISBN 0-460-01747-0

[‡] *Collected Letters*, J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd: London (1985). ISBN 0-460-04635-7

Towards the studded male in a bent, midnight blaze
 That melts the lionhead's heel and horseshoe of the heart,
 15 A brute land in the cool top of the country days
 To trot with a loud mate the haybeds of a mile,
 Love and labour and kill,
 In quick, sweet, cruel light till the locked ground sprout out,
 The black, burst sea rejoice,
 20 The bowels turn turtle,
 Claw of the crabbed veins squeeze from each red particle
 The parched and raging voice?

 Fishermen of mermen
 Creep and harp on the tide, sinking their charmed, bent pin
 25 With bridebait of gold bread, I with a living skein,
 Tongue and ear in the thread, angle the temple-bound
 Curl-locked and animal cavepools of spells and bone,
 Trace out a tentacle,
 Nailed with an open eye, in the bowl of wounds and weed
 30 To clasp my fury on ground
 And clap its great blood down;
 Never shall beast be born to atlas the few seas
 Or poise the day on a horn.

 Sigh long, clay cold, lie shorn,
 35 Cast high, stunned on gilled stone; sly scissors ground in frost
 Clack through the thicket of strength, love hewn in pillars drops
 With carved bird, saint, and sun, the wrackspiked maided mouth
 Lops, as a bush plumed with flames, the rant of the fierce eye,
 Clips short the gesture of breath.
 40 Die in red feathers when the flying heaven's cut,
 And roll with the knocked earth:
 Lie dry, rest robbed, my beast.
 You have kicked from a dark den, leaped up the whinnying light,
 And dug your grave in my breast.