

Episodes.

I used to bang on the floor
When I had a giddy fit
Which came from loneliness
Among so many monuments, of streets
And roofs and railings dark
Like those in cemeteries,
And the boy with the trembling arm
In the flat underneath
Would call out, 'Yeah?'
And in his uncertain voice
Always so near to panic,
At home with his dirty pictures
In the grimness of the afternoon
In his cold, dark room
With clouds touching roof-tops outside
And no hope walking abroad in the streets,
No trace of freedom walking
By the roof-tops, in his uncertain voice
I squeezed out my comfort,
Came back to friendless earth again.

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I terrified him once
By telling him what the coming war would be like,
And he trembled all over for a day,

And couldn't walk, until his mother came upstairs
And said, 'What's this your boy's
Been telling mine?' He used to sniff salt water
Up his nose, to get the phlegm down,
After dinner, in the afternoon;
And then take his rest.
All day the rooms would lie silent and dark,
With the clang of a tram, in the distance.
Outside the window the streets
Would say nothing; never offer comment
On the trembling of life
From day to day
In silent rooms.

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When a rat-tat-tat
Came on the door it might be the Rent Man,
It might be the Coal Man, or else
The man from the School Board.
That sharp rat-tat-tat
Gave you feathers in the belly;
They were dark men and heavy men,
I never saw them, hiding upstairs;
They came for money, or armed with law,
And made the street like a camp
Where people are shot
And their bodies left out
As an example. That's all over now,
They say: settled by the war.
Except that it isn't.

It's all underneath now: the wages are good,
The wallpaper's chic and a car sits outside
And Saturdays are off;
But underneath
The three grim men are there,
And they're invisible, they're in the air,
They're everywhere.

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Sometimes my mother said 'Sssh!'
When they knocked and stood very quiet
Where she was, and I had to stand there too,
With only the cracking of her shoe
As she breathed and swayed a little
In the silence. And the man would stamp
In the cold outside, we might hear him sigh,
And then at least he'd turn away,
And be gone, and slowly the morning
Would revive again, and flowers would come out,
And the sky would blow again
And talk to the gardens as it had before.

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The vinegar-man used to come on Friday nights
After dark and make strange cries
At the back of his throat, and his horse
Had the same kind of face,
Deep and absorbed with glasses on, not given at all
To the street but always the stranger

Whose cries never changed
But yet were intimate. He would go round
The back of his cart where there were wooden taps,
And fill people's bottles with vinegar, oil,
And inside the cart was like a wooden room
In the glow of a lamp with everything there
From matches to brushes. The horse
Was blinkered and had the same trick
Of never quite looking at anyone passing.
The street-lamps were silver, but the glow
In the cart was yellow and dim.
They stood together, and meant Friday nights
When my father came home late
With parcels of food from the works
And my mother went shopping
And brought home treasures for the week,
And the fireplace crackled and blazed
Like a special tune to welcome
The end of the week. The street
Had a special Friday-night look
And smelled of the coming week-end;
Friday night was light seen through leaves
And the shining of railings and trams
That went past, and the quick step of feet
On the pavement outside, going to Saturday.

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The vinegar-man and his cart were neat
And all made of wood, and the horse
Had glasses on like the man;
And the grating sound of the wheels
And the clop of the hoofs and the gurgling sounds
Of the man in the street below
Were like twinkling lights and a few little notes
Before the curtain went up on Saturday morning.

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Up the hill where oak-trees were
Was always Christmas-time;
The streets were new and stretched like stables
End to end with golden lights
And had new people in them too
Sitting and smiling in the gold of their lights
While we sang Christmas carols outside
In the frost, and the streets
Were quiet like country there
Without the clang of a tram
But the rush of a train as it sped
Downhill on its silver flight
Like an angel touching the edge of the night
Where oak-trees were;