

“The Lilacs”

I We sit drinking tea
Beneath the lilacs on a summer afternoon
Comfortably, at our ease
With fresh linen napkins on our knees
We are in Blighty
And we sit, we three,
In diffident contentedness
Lest we let each other guess
How pleased we are
Together here, watching the young moon
Lying shyly on her back, and the first
star.

II There are women here,

Smooth shouldered creatures in sheer
Scarves, that pass
And eye me strangely as they pass.
One of them, my hostess, pauses near.
—Are you quite all right, sir?—she stops
to ask.
Will you have more tea? Cigarettes?
No?—
I thank her, waiting for them to go,
To me they are as figures on a masque.
—Who?—Shot down—
Yes, shot down—Last spring—
Poor chap—Yes, his mind—
Hoping rest will bring—
Their voices come to me like tangled
rooks

III Busy with their tea and cigarettes
and books.
We sit in silent amity

IV —It was a morning in late May
A white woman,
A white wanton at the edge of a brake
A rising whiteness mirrored in a lake
And I, old chap, was out before the
day
Stalking her through the shimmering
reaches of the sky
In my little pointed-eared machine.
I knew that we could catch her
when we liked

V For no nymphs ran as swiftly as
they could.
We mounted up and up,
And found her at the border of a wood
A cloud forest,
And pausing at its brink
We felt her arms and her cool breath
A red rose on white snows, the kiss
of Death.

The bullet struck me here, I think,
In my left breast
And killed my little pointed-eared
machine. I watched it fall
The last wine in a cup....
I thought that we could find her when
we liked.
But now I wonder if I found her, after
all.

VI One should not die like this
On such a day
From hot angry bullets, or other mod-
ern way. From angry bullets
One should fall I think to some
Etruscan dart

On such a day as this
And become a tall wreathed column;
 I should like to be
An ilex tree on some white lifting
 isle.
Instead, I had a bullet through my heart—

VII —Yes, you are right
One should not die like this,
And for no cause nor reason in the
 world.
Tis right enough for one like you to
 talk
Of going into the far thin sky to stalk
The mouth of Death, you did not
 know the bliss
Of home and children and the serene
Of living, and of work and joy that
 was our heritage,
And best of all, of age.
We were too young.

VIII Still—he draws his hand across
 his eyes
—Still, it could not be otherwise.

We had been
Raiding over Mannheim. You've seen
The place? Then you know
How one hangs just beneath the stars
 and seems to see
The incandescent entrails of the Hun.
The great earth drew us down, that
 night. The black earth drew us
Out of the bullet tortured air
A black bowl of fireflies...

IX There is an end to this, somewhere;
One should not die like this—

One should not die like this—
His voice has dropped and the wind
 is mouthing his words
While the lilacs nod their heads on
 slender stalks,
Agreeing while he talks
And care not if he is heard, or is
 not heard.
One should not die like this—
Half audible, half silent words
That hover like grey birds
About our heads

X We sit in silent amity
I shiver, for the sun is gone
And the air is cooler where we three
Are sitting. The light has followed
 the sun,
And I no longer see
The pale lilacs stirring against the
lilac-pale sky.

XI They bend their heads toward me
 as one head
—Old man—they say—
 When did you die?...

XII I—I am not dead.
 I hear their voices as from a great
 distance—Not dead

He's not dead, poor chap; he didn't
 die—
We sit, drinking tea.

(Underlines and Roman numbers are by the author. The lines indicate citation in the text.)