

THE SCRUB-WOMAN

Bodenheim, Maxwell, 1892-1954

(A Sentimental Poem)

TIME has placed his careful insult
Upon your body.
In other ages Time gave rags
To hags without riches, but now he brings
Cotton, calico, and muslin —
Tokens of his admiration
For broken backs.
Neat nonsense, stamped with checks and stripes,
Fondles the deeply marked sneer
That Time has dropped upon you.
While Time, in one of his well-debated moods
That men call an age, is attending to his manners,
I shall scan the invisible banners
Of meaning that unfurl when you move.

II

WHEN you open your mouths
I see a well, and strangled chastity
At the bottom — not chastity
Of the flesh, but lucid purity
Of the mind choked by a design
Of filth that has slowly turned cold,
Like a sewer intruding
Upon a small, dead face.
This is not repulsive.
Only things alive, with gaudy hollows,
Can repulse, but your death holds
A haggard candour that gently thrusts its way
Into the unimportance of facts.
You are not old: you were never young.

Life caressed your senses
With a heavy sterility,
And you thanked him with the remnant
Of thought that he left behind —
His usual moment of absentminded kindness.
When the muscles of your arm
Punish the brush that rubs upon wood

I see a rollicking mockery —
Rhythm in starved pursuit
Of petrified desire.
When the palms of your hands
Stay flat in dirty water
I can observe your emotions
Welcome refuse as perfume,
Intent upon a last ghastly deception.
When you grunt and touch your hair
I perceive your exhaustion
Reaching for a bit of pity
And carefully rearranging it.

Lift up your pails and go home;
Take the false tenderness of rest;
Drop your clothes, disordered, on the floor.
Vindictive simplicity.