

August 24, 1943  
Malaventano (Gerbini #10), Sicily

McLaughlin, Beetem, Frieze, and I hitch-hiked to Lentini and Syracuse and back yesterday. It was easy enough to catch rides, but the roads were the roughest, most patched-up affairs I've seen in quite awhile. Convoys of landing barges and trucks moving up toward Messina didn't facilitate matters much. (I imagine the Italian landing is not far off.)

All of these towns are filthy, and most of the people seem to be living in at least as poor conditions as the Arabs in Tunisia. Of course, some parts of most of the towns have better living conditions, but slum districts are prevalent in all of them. Going into Syracuse (Siracusa) we saw many caves in the sides of rocky hills with people living in them. Wandering down the side streets of Syracuse we looked right into the houses, which seemed to consist of one room in which the whole family slept on beds and pallets on the floor, and saw tired, stolid-looking people sitting around their room, with dirty, naked babies playing on the floor about them. They lived, ate, and slept in the one room evidently.

Public urinals for men (I don't know what the women do) are one of the interesting sights in Sicilian towns (they're prominent in Africa, too). These institutions are very open affairs at both top and bottom and the entrances. Even the casual observer of the users of these public facilities could pick out the various colors of water let--if he were so inclined--they are that open to public view.

Along the road between here and Syracuse were many "pillboxes," most of them horribly smashed into bits by artillery and bombs. One large one which had controlled a sharp turn in the main road was nothing but bits of stone. It took three days to dig out all the bodies for burial.

We got back too late for supper, and that ended the trip to Syracuse.

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Some of the boys who have been to the airdrome this side of Catania say it is one of the worst sights they've seen yet. Dead bodies are still in many of the ruined planes, and the stench is terrible. The Germans booby-trapped the bodies (according to the British stationed near there); so, rather than get themselves killed by the German dead, the British are just leaving the bodies there. Preventing burial of their own dead seems to me to be one of the most inhumane tricks in this war.

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Another item noted in our wanderings yesterday: We saw several Italian soldiers wandering around carrying rifles. These same men had been shooting at our forces a few days before. Of all the screwy wars, this one takes the cake! I think these guys had been turned loose because they are Sicilians, but I still don't get the point--their guns still shoot. If I wander about this island any more, I'm going armed.

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D. Tolle

10-21-43

The "If's" of War

On the mission today Captain Gualtiere's plane was shot up by flak, putting his hydraulic system out of commission. When he came in for the landing, he found that his nose wheel wouldn't lock; so he circled again, trying to force the wheel to lock by diving and throwing it forward. Abie (Carroll Abrahamson) was in the nose, and he decided he'd rather risk a crash-landing than to bail out. So Capt. Gualtiere brought the plane in to try to land it successfully.

As soon as he touched ground, he eased the plane back on the tail and let it skid in order to protect Abie. Everything was going fine until the left landing gear folded, causing the plane to crash into a parked plane. Abie was instantly killed. The other three got out with minor cuts and bruises.

The little "if's" of this war are what make it so hard to take sometimes. "If" that landing gear hadn't folded; "if" that plane hadn't been parked at just that spot; "if" Abie could have gotten in only three more missions, he would have been automatically grounded for having 50 missions. I guess that's just war or fate or something, but it's pretty hard to comprehend.

Abie plastered the target on his last bomb run.

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11-1-43

On the mission today there wasn't much flak near the 97th formation, but one of those freak disasters happened anyway. Either an ack-ack shell exploded in a wing tank or a piece of flak hit a fuse on a bomb before it cleared the plane; but, whatever the reason, Lt. Bruce's plane exploded in mid-air and went into a spin. Two people tried to bail out, but only one chute opened; the other trailed out behind without opening. The wing had folded over the cockpit, so Lt. Bruce could hardly have bailed out. Either Albers or Manzie probably landed safely and became a prisoner of war--the other fell to his death trailing a useless parachute.

Correction: Nov. 5, 1943

Albers came in this evening after having landed safely behind enemy lines. His face was burned painfully but not seriously. He'll be O.K. The other two were definitely killed.

December 1, 1943

36th General Hospital  
Caserta, Italy

Capt. McRae sent me to the hospital yesterday morning with malaria. I started out on a litter in our ambulance because I was pretty weak. Lt. Moore was on the other litter, and two other lieutenants and two other enlisted men were on the bench.

On the way to Naples there was an accident right in front of us due to the wet road. A large British truck hauling a cannon skidded, and the front end of the truck ran over the edge of a high cliff. One of the Canadian soldiers, thinking it was going on over, jumped and fractured his skull on the road. There was no first aid equipment in our ambulance, but we put the boy in on my stretcher and drove into the next town looking for a hospital.

We finally found an Italian doctor who started working on the Canadian. Then the Canadian Medical Officer came along and did his bit. They put the injured boy back in our ambulance (he had never regained consciousness), and the M.O. got in too.

So Dillon and I had to ride in the Canadian medical truck. They were supposed to take us on in to Naples to the hospital where our ambulance had gone, but it seemed that that wasn't the way things were going to work out.

The road was terribly rough, and it was pretty cool riding in the truck. I had another malarial chill; so they covered me up with blankets on the litter, and I got all right (except that the bumps nearly knocked me out of the thing every few feet). Finally we stopped at an American First Aid Station, and they turned us over to them.

We were then taken to this hospital at Caserta. Dillon and I were put in different wards because he has yellow jaundice and I have malaria. Dillon's field bag (containing everything he brought with him) and my overcoat went on with our ambulance. So everything is just lovely; nobody knows where we are, and we can't get in touch with anybody.

I wanna go home!!!

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12-6-43

Ode to a Nurse

Sweet Angel of Mercy and soft tenderness,  
Spreading sunshine with smiles that are like a caress,  
You're really a wonderful institution;  
But someone should write in the Constitution  
A law that would make it a major infraction  
To wear dresses that drive patients like me to distraction!

Saturday Morning  
 April Third  
 1943

S I R O C C O

Out of the hills, from the Arab haunts,  
 With a rush and a roar through the African grass  
 Comes Sirocco on one of his merciless jaunts  
 Spreading power, bruising power over mountain and pass.

The thundering surge of a murderous sea  
 Transformed to invisible, unleashed T.N.T.--  
 A maniacal, goading Sirocco is he  
 As he shrieks at man's misery in devilish glee.

This demonian, dour devil of dire destiny  
 Deals destruction and death despite dervishes' dancing.  
 Proud people past praying are pale, pleading piteously  
 While pounded to powder by Pan's playful prancing.

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 (And a little after-bit:

You're walking along with a peaceful mien,  
 No trouble of any description foreseen,  
 When, socko! Sirocco appears on the scene.)  
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(Souk el Arba, Tunisia)

4-19-43

Monday Evening in the Cool

How lovely it is in the evening to sit--  
 In the cool of the After-the-Sunset to sit,  
 With your Love by your side--there to sit.

How lovely it is to have nothing to do  
 In the cool of the dusk when the long day is through  
 But to sit with your Loved One--just sit, bill, and coo.  
 (Oh, to have nothing to do but to sit, bill, and coo!)

Such was the Time of the Time before this,  
 In the cool of the night with my Sweet Little Miss  
 There to sit, hold her hand, and to bill, coo, and kiss.  
 (Oh, how lovely 'twill be in the Time after This 'un  
 Returning to 'billin', to cooin', and kissin'!)

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## Variations on a Theme

The sweetest smell is that of ground  
When Jerry spreads his bombs around.

The man with nothing left but soul  
Is he who didn't reach his hole  
When Jerry laid his eggs.

The man whose bones have lost their dash  
Is he whose foxhole's filled with trash.

The sweetest scent I know is earth  
When Jerry's bomb-bay doors give birth.

Now some might think that I'm afraid,  
Just judging by the hole I've made.  
But really now, I'm not so fearful--  
Just, my Dear, exceeding 'keerful'.

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(Un-dated, un-placed, un-finished, and  
better left un-said to begin with)

Here in the dark of night,  
With neither moon- nor star-light  
To break the gloom,  
I stand on guard.

Not long ago this same dark night  
Would have found me bathed in light  
Of some bright party room.

A war has caused this change of life  
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(Another one better left to obscurity)

I've been gloomy, I've been blue;  
Had the sniffles, had the flu.  
Lice have had a go at me,  
And fleas are something hard to flee.  
Food's monotonous, tastes the same.  
Lost my dough in a poker game.  
But as misery givers, they're all a dud  
Compared to this damned African mud!

I've seen it hail, I've seen it snow,  
But this mud beats them from the go.  
It's slick and slimy, sticky stuff  
That makes you want to yell, "Enough!"  
'Twon't let you run--go snail's pace in it.  
I've tried to hurry--slid my face in it.  
But at the end--to summarize:  
This mud's the antonym to paradise.

June 13, 1943  
Soliman, Tunisia

I feel like poeming some tonight,  
But Captain C. wants to typewrite;  
So poesy waits on his Might!

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### Spring Love

Ah, Spring, ah, Love, L'amour and stuff,  
My love is like a powderpuff,  
Which, lightly touching here and there,  
Dissolves its content into air.

Caressing cheeks with loving touch  
But harkening passion not too much;  
For passion, when too soon aborning,  
Makes me hate me in the morning!

Some day my love will surely light  
and tarry longer than a night;  
But ere that happens, let me speak--  
I'm sure it wouldn't last a week!

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(And a little after-bit, forty-two years later:

Now I confess, amidst your jeers,  
To date it's lasted forty years.)

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### G E R M S

If I were wrapped in cellophane  
And saturated in champagne,  
I still would feel no less immune  
To germs of all descriptions.  
Call me hypochondriac;  
Say I'm too much on my back--  
You still can't shake my firm belief  
In doctors and prescriptions.  
Germs cause a multitude of ills,  
And so, I'm sure, without my pills  
I'd shake with aches and pains and chills  
And catch one finally that kills.

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June 22, 1943  
(Grombalia--Soliman,  
Tunisia)

### I Need Love!

I'm feeling in a devilish vein.  
Some pious mind I'd like to pain  
With some Khayyamish, ribald quatrain--  
Something slightly lewd and profane.

For I'm fed up with things mundane;  
If I don't get love, I'll blow a brain.  
O, Kindly Friend, lend me a Jane  
Just for tonight till the moon does wane.  
I'll send her back on the midnight train  
Wrapped up in perfumed cellophane  
(And as added thanks, some good champagne).

Yes, to taste of love I now would fain;  
All else besides is surely inane.  
My lips have known no lipstick stain  
Since last I saw homeland terrain.

This be my sad and last refrain:  
I'm not insane, insane, insane.

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### Rain on Canvas

Outside it's cold and wet, uncomfortable drizzle  
Permeating, penetrating through to shrinking skin.  
Gray overcast with promises of snow and hail with rain.  
Gloomy, silent hills surrounding, cupping Heaven's weeping  
Into streaming rivulets and clinging mud.

But that's outside.  
In here the nastiness of the rain's transformed  
Into something soothing as it beats upon the canvas--outside.  
The turbulence of my soul grows tranquil with the rain.

D. Tolle  
March 29th  
1943  
Canrobert, Algeria

36th General Hospital, Caserta, Italy

12-7-43

Ward SE 2

When Nurse Dunham walks by,  
They turn every eye,  
The boys in Ward SE 2;  
For her walk is the kind  
That puts them in mind  
Of each one's own Sally and Sue.

Now it's really a shame,  
But still it's life's game  
(At least in Ward SE 2)  
That nurses can't mingle  
With us whose nerves tingle  
For love, here in Ward SE 2.

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The Patient in Cot Sixty-one

I'm the patient in Cot Sixty-one.  
Up to now I've had my share of fun.  
But I sit here and huddle  
Small fish in big puddle,  
No longer Dame Fortune's own son.

I've lost all distinction of name;  
To doctor and nurse I'm the same  
As a serial number.  
Awake or in slumber  
I'm nothing in this little game.

But to me the worst of this curse  
Is this: To the pretty night nurse  
I have no identity,  
I'm just a nonentity.  
Could anything be any worse?

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70th Station Hospital, Naples, Italy

Jan. 28, 1944

The nurse just came in and asked, "Did you have a B.M. today?"  
I said, "What do you mean, 'B.M.'?" She said impatiently, "Bowel  
movement; bowel movement." I said, "Yes, I defecated thoroughly today."  
Then I said, "How old are you, Nurse?" She said, "Don't get personal,  
Soldier."

2-18-44  
 Vesuvius, A/D, Italy  
 D. Tolle

### Vesuvius and I

Vesuvius sits there in peace,  
 It seems to casual eye,  
 Like an old watchman smoking his pipe,  
 Tranquilly watching the frantic antics of men at war.

But underneath that outward mien of calm  
 Vesuvius seethes and writhes in agony of suppressed emotion,  
 Burning, bursting to explode upon the world and thus be free.  
 As cow gone long unmilked, in mortal pain,  
 So is Vesuvius.

I am like Vesuvius.  
 A turbulence and thunderhead of hot, unknowing passions  
 Have grown within me as irritating pus within a boil.  
 As one violently straining against restraining strait-jacket,  
 So strain my emotions within me.

Some day Vesuvius shall erupt,  
 And as the molten lava leaves that burning bosom,  
 Be free.

-----and so shall I.

\* \* \* \* \*

(Note: One month and three days after I wrote the above, Vesuvius  
did erupt--violently. You don't suppose my poetry  
 caused it, do you?)