DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

From The House of Life

4. Lovesight

When do I see thee most, belovèd one?
When in the light the spirits of mine eyes
Before thy face, their altar, solemnize
The worship of that Love through thee made known?

Or when in the dusk hours (we two alone)
Close-kissed and eloquent of still replies
Thy twilight-hidden glimmering visage lies,
And my soul only sees thy soul its own?

O love, my love! if I no more should see
Thyself, nor on the earth the shadow of thee,
Nor image of thine eyes in any spring—
How then should sound upon Life’s darkening slope
The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,
The wind of Death’s imperishable wing?

49. Willowwood—1

I sat with Love upon a woodside well,
Leaning across the water, I and he;
Nor ever did he speak nor looked at me,
But touched his lute wherein was audible
The certain secret thing he had to tell.

Only our mirrored eyes met silently
In the low wave; and that sound came to be
The passionate voice I knew; and my tears fell.

And at their fall, his eyes beneath grew hers;
And with his foot and with his wing feathers
He swept the spring that watered my heart’s drouth.
Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,
And as I stooped, her own lips rising there
Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth.

50. Willowwood—2

And now Love sang: but his was such a song,
So meshed with half-remembrance hard to free,
As souls disused in death’s sterility
May sing when the new birthday tarries long.

And I was made aware of a dumb throng

1. The title refers to the setting of this sequence of four sonnets: a grove of weeping willows. These trees are traditionally associated with grief for the loss of someone beloved.
That stood aloof, one form by every tree,
All mournful forms, for each was I or she,
The shades of those our days that had no tongue.

They looked on us, and knew us and were known;
While fast together, alive from the abyss,
Clung the soul-wrung implacable close kiss;
And pity of self through all made broken moan
Which said, “For once, for once, for once alone!”
And still Love sang, and what he sang was this:—

51. Willowwood—3

“O ye, all ye that walk in Willowwood,
That walk with hollow faces burning white;
What fathom-depth of soul-struck widowhood,
What long, what longer hours, one lifelong night,
Ere ye again, who so in vain have wooed
Your last hope lost, who so in vain invite
Your lips to that their unforgotten food,
Ere ye, ere ye again shall see the light!

Alas! the bitter banks in Willowwood,
With tear-spurge wan, with bloodwort\(^3\) burning red:
Alas! if ever such a pillow could
Steep deep the soul in sleep till she\(^4\) were dead,—
Better all life forget her than this thing,
That Willowwood should hold her wandering!”

52. Willowwood—4

So sang he: and as meeting rose and rose
Together cling through the wind's wellaway\(^5\)
Nor change at once, yet near the end of day
The leaves drop loosened where the heart-stain glows,—
So when the song died did the kiss unclose;
And her face fell back drowned, and was as gray
As its gray eyes; and if it ever may
Meet mine again I know not if Love knows.

Only I know that I leaned low and drank
A long draft from the water where she sang,
Her breath and all her tears and all her soul:
And as I leaned, I know I felt Love's face
Pressed on my neck with moan of pity and grace,
Till both our heads were in his aureole.

\(^2\) I.e., as souls unused while in death's sterility may sing when waiting for the second coming (i.e., "new birthday").

\(^3\) "Tear-spurge" and "bloodwort" are varieties of plants.

\(^4\) I.e., the soul, as also in line 14; "her" in line 13 refers to the beloved.

\(^5\) Lament.
63. Inclusiveness

The changing guests, each in a different mood,
   Sit at the roadside table and arise;
   And every life among them in like wise
Is a soul’s board set daily with new food.

What man has bent o’er his son’s sleep, to brood
   How that face shall watch his when cold it lies?—
   Or thought, as his own mother kissed his eyes,
Of what her kiss was when his father wooed?

May not this ancient room thou sitt’st in dwell
   In separate living souls for joy or pain?
   Nay, all its corners may be painted plain
Where Heaven shows pictures of some life spent well;
   And may be stamped, a memory all in vain,
Upon the sight of lidless eyes in Hell.

71. The Choice—I

Eat thou and drink; tomorrow thou shalt die.
   Surely the earth, that’s wise being very old,
   Needs not our help. Then loose me, love, and hold
Thy sultry hair up from my face; that I

May pour for thee this golden wine, brim-high,
   Till round the glass thy fingers glow like gold.
   We’ll drown all hours: thy song, while hours are tolled,
Shall leap, as fountains veil the changing sky.

Now kiss, and think that there are really those,
   My own high-bosomed beauty, who increase
   Vain gold, vain lore, and yet might choose our way!
Through many years they toil; then on a day
   They die not—for their life was death—but cease;
And round their narrow lips the mold falls close.

72. The Choice—II

Watch thou and fear; tomorrow thou shalt die.
   Or art thou sure thou shalt have time for death?
   Is not the day which God’s word promiseth
To come man knows not when? In yonder sky,

Now while we speak, the sun speeds forth; can I
   Or thou assure him of his goal? God’s breath
Even at this moment haply quickeneth
The air to a flame; till spirits, always nigh

Though screened and hid, shall walk the daylight here.
   And dost thou prate of all that man shall do?
   Canst thou, who hast but plagues, presume to be
   Glad in his gladness that comes after thee?
Will his strength slay thy worm in Hell? Go to:
Cover thy countenance, and watch, and fear.
73. The Choice—III

Think thou and act; tomorrow thou shalt die.
Outstretched in the sun’s warmth upon the shore,
Thou say’st: “Man’s measured path is all gone o’er:
Up all his years, steeply, with strain and sigh,
Man clomb until he touched the truth; and I,
Even I, am he whom it was destined for.”
How should this be? Art thou then so much more
Than they who sowed, that thou shouldst reap thereby?

Nay, come up hither. From this wave-washed mound
Unto the furthest flood-brim look with me;
Then reach on with thy thought till it be drowned.
Miles and miles distant though the last line be,
And though thy soul sail leagues and leagues beyond—
Still, leagues beyond those leagues, there is more sea.

97. A Superscription

Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been;
I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell;
Unto thine ear I hold the dead-sea shell
Cast up thy Life’s foam-fretted feet between;
Unto thine eyes the glass° where that is seen
Which had Life’s form and Love’s, but by my spell
Is now a shaken shadow intolerable,
Of ultimate things unuttered the frail screen.

Mark me, how still I am! But should there dart
One moment through thy soul the soft surprise
Of that winged Peace which lulls the breath of sighs—
Then shalt thou see me smile, and turn apart
Thy visage to mine ambush at thy heart
Sleepless with cold commemorative eyes.

101. The One Hope

When vain desire at last and vain regret
Go hand in hand to death, and all is vain,
What shall assuage the unforgotten pain
And teach the unforgetful to forget?

Shall Peace be still a sunk stream long unmet—
Or may the soul at once in a green plain
Stoop through the spray of some sweet life-fountain
And cull the dew-drenched flowering amulet?°

Ah! when the wan soul in that golden air
Between the scriptured petals softly blown
Peers breathless for the gift of grace unknown,
Ah! let none other alien spell soe’er

4. A charm to protect the wearer from harm.
But only the one Hope's one name be there—
Not less nor more, but even that word alone.

She Bound Her Green Sleeve

A FRAGMENT

She bound her green sleeve on my helm,
Sweet pledge of love's sweet meed;¹
Warm was her bared arm round my neck
As well she bade me speed;
And her kiss clings still between my lips,
Heart's beat and strength at need.

The Woodspurge

The wind flapped loose, the wind was still,
Shaken out dead from tree and hill;
I had walked on at the wind's will—
I sat now, for the wind was still.

Between my knees my forehead was—
My lips, drawn in, said not Alas!
My hair was over in the grass,
My naked ears heard the day pass.

My eyes, wide open, had the run
Of some ten weeds to fix upon;
Among those few, out of the sun,
The woodspurge flowered, three cups in one.

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory;
One thing then learned remains to me—
The woodspurge has a cup of three.

The Sea-Limits

Consider the sea's listless chime:
Time's self it is, made audible—

¹. Reward.
The murmur of the earth’s own shell.
Secret continuance sublime
5 Is the sea’s end: our sight may pass
No furlong further. Since time was,
This sound hath told the lapse of time.

No quiet, which is death’s—it hath
The mournfulness of ancient life,
10 Enduring always at dull strife.
As the world’s heart of rest and wrath,
Its painful pulse is in the sands.
Last utterly, the whole sky stands,
Gray and not known, along its path.

Listen alone beside the sea,
Listen alone among the woods;
Those voices of twin solitudes
Shall have one sound alike to thee:
Hark where the murmurs of thronged men
20 Surge and sink back and surge again—
Still the one voice of wave and tree.

Gather a shell from the strown beach
And listen at its lips: they sigh
The same desire and mystery,
25 The echo of the whole sea’s speech.
And all mankind is thus at heart
Not anything but what thou art:
And Earth, Sea, Man, are all in each.

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The Orchard-Pit

A Fragment

Piled deep below the screening apple branch
They lie with bitter apples in their hands:
And some are only ancient bones that blanch,

“They lie in heaps beneath the screen of boughs,
with her apples bitten in their hands; and some are
no more than ancient bones now, and some seem
dead but yesterday. She stands over them in the
glen, and sings for ever, and offers her apple still.
This dream shows me no strange place. I know the
glen, and have known it from childhood, and heard
many tales of those who have died there by the
Siren’s spell.

“I pass there often now, and look at it as one
might look at a place chosen for one’s grave. I see
nothing, but I know that it means death for me.”
2 There is some evidence that Rossetti wrote “bit-
ten” rather than “bitter”—a misprint that would
affect our interpretation of the poem. See Oswald

1. Rossetti never completed this poem, but he left
a prose account of the projected work that begins
as follows: “Men tell me that sleep has many
dreams; but all my life I have dreamt one dream
alone.

“I see a glen whose sides slope upward from the
deep bed of a dried-up stream, and either slope is
covered with wild apple-trees. In the largest tree,
within the fork whence the limbs divide, a fair,
golden-haired woman stands and sings, with one
white arm stretched along a branch of the tree,
and with the other holding forth a bright red apple,
as if to some one coming down the slope. Below her
feet the trees grow more and more tangled, and
stretch from both sides across the deep pit below:
and the pit is full of the bodies of men.
And some had ships that last year’s wind did launch,
And some were yesterday the lords of lands.

In the soft dell, among the apple trees,
High up above the hidden pit she stands,
And there forever sings, who gave to these,
That lie below, her magic hour of ease,
And those her apples holden in their hands.

This in my dreams is shown me; and her hair
Crosses my lips and draws my burning breath;
Her song spreads golden wings upon the air,
Life’s eyes are gleaming from her forehead fair,
And from her breasts the ravishing eyes of Death.

Men say to me that sleep hath many dreams,
Yet I knew never but this dream alone:
There, from a dried-up channel, once the stream’s,
The glen slopes up; even such in sleep it seems
As to my waking sight the place well known.

My love I call her, and she loves me well:
But I love her as in the maelstrom’s cup
The whirled stone loves the leaf inseparable
That clings to it round all the circling swell,
And that the same last eddy swallows up.

4. According to legend a sorceress might have eyes in her breasts as well as in her forehead.