In Memory of Walter Savage Landor

Back to the flower-town, side by side,
The bright months bring,
Newborn, the bridegroom and the bride,
Freedom and spring.

The sweet land laughs from sea to sea,
Filled full of sun;
All things come back to her, being free;
All things but one.

In many a tender wheaten plot
Flowers that were dead
Live, and old suns revive; but not
That holier head.

By this white wandering waste of sea,
Far north, I hear
One face shall never turn to me
As once this year;

Shall never smile and turn and rest
On mine as there,
Nor one most sacred hand be pressed
Upon my hair.

I came as one whose thoughts half linger,
Half run before;
The youngest to the oldest singer
That England bore.

I found him whom I shall not find
Till all grief end,
In holiest age our mightiest mind,
Father and friend.

But thou, if anything endure,
If hope there be
O spirit that man’s life left pure,
Man’s death set free,

1. Swinburne’s reverence for Landor as a writer had been enhanced by a meeting with the old man shortly before his death in 1864 in the “flower-town” of Florence.
Not with disdain of days that were
Look earthward now;
Let dreams revive the reverend hair,
The imperial brow;
Come back in sleep, for in the life
Where thou art not
We find none like thee. Time and strife
And the world’s lot
Move thee no more; but love at least
And reverent heart
May move thee, royal and released,
Soul, as thou art.
And thou, his Florence, to thy trust
Receive and keep,
Keep safe his dedicated dust,
His sacred sleep.
So shall thy lovers, come from far,
Mix with thy name
As morning star with evening star
His faultless fame.

An Interlude

In the greenest growth of the Maytime,
I rode where the woods were wet,
Between the dawn and the daytime;
The spring was glad that we met.

There was something the season wanted,
Though the ways and the woods smelt sweet;
The breath at your lips that panted,
The pulse of the grass at your feet.

You came, and the sun came after,
And the green grew golden above;
And the flag flowers lightened with laughter,
And the meadowsweet shook with love.

Your feet in the full-grown grasses
Moved soft as a weak wind blows;
You passed me as April passes,
With face made out of a rose.

By the stream where the stems were slender,
Your bright foot paused at the sedge;
It might be to watch the tender
Light leaves in the springtime hedge,

On boughs that the sweet month blanches
With flowery frost of May:
It might be a bird in the branches,
It might be a thorn in the way.

I waited to watch you linger
With foot drawn back from the dew,
Till a sunbeam straight like a finger
Struck sharp through the leaves at you.

And a bird overhead sang Follow,
And a bird to the right sang Here;
And the arch of the leaves was hollow,
And the meaning of May was clear.

I saw where the sun's hand pointed,
I knew what the bird's note said;
By the dawn and the dewfall anointed,
You were queen by the gold on your head.

As the glimpse of a burnt-out ember
Recalls a regret of the sun,
I remember, forget, and remember
What Love saw done and undone.

I remember the way we parted,
The day and the way we met;
You hoped we were both brokenhearted,
And knew we should both forget.

And May with her world in flower
Seemed still to murmur and smile
As you murmured and smiled for an hour;
I saw you turn at the stile.

A hand like a white wood-blossom
You lifted, and waved, and passed
With head hung down to the bosom,
And pale, as it seemed, at last.

And the best and the worst of this is
That neither is most to blame
If you've forgotten my kisses
And I've forgotten your name.

1866
In the Orchard

(Provençal Burden)¹

Leave go my hands, let me catch breath and see,
Let the dew-fall drench either side of me;
Clear apple leaves are soft upon that moon
Seen sidelong like a blossom in the tree;
   Ah God, ah God, that day should be so soon.

The grass is thick and cool, it lets us lie.
Kissed upon either cheek and either eye,
   I turn to thee as some green afternoon
Turns toward sunset, and is loth to die;
   Ah God, ah God, that day should be so soon.

Lie closer, lean your face upon my side,
Feel where the dew fell that has hardly dried,
   Hear how the blood beats that went nigh to swoon;
The pleasure lives there when the sense has died;
   Ah God, ah God, that day should be so soon.

O my fair lord, I charge you leave me this:
Is it not sweeter than a foolish kiss?
   Nay take it then, my flower, my first in June,
My rose, so like a tender mouth it is:
   Ah God, ah God, that day should be so soon.

Love, till dawn sunder night from day with fire,
Dividing my delight and my desire,
   The crescent life and love the plenilune,²
Love me though dusk begin and dark retire;
   Ah God, ah God, that day should be so soon.

Ah, my heart fails, my blood draws back; I know,
When life runs over, life is near to go;
   And with the slain of love love’s ways are strewn,
And with their blood, if love will have it so;
   Ah God, ah God, that day should be so soon.

Ah, do thy will now; slay me if thou wilt;
There is no building now the walls are built,
   No quarrying now the cornerstone is hewn,
No drinking now the vine’s whole blood is split;
   Ah God, ah God, that day should be so soon.

Nay, slay me now; nay, for I will be slain;
Pluck thy red pleasure from the teeth of pain,
   Break down thy vine ere yet grape-gatherers prune,
Slay me ere day can slay desire again;
   Ah God, ah God, that day should be so soon.

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1. The refrain in the final line of each stanza (termed a burden) is used here in the manner of poets of southeastern France (Provence) during the medieval period.
2. Full moon.
Yea, with thy sweet lips, with thy sweet sword; yea,
Take life and all, for I will die, I say;
Love, I gave love, is life a better boon?
For sweet night’s sake I will not live till day;
Ah God, ah God, that day should be so soon.

Nay, I will sleep then only; nay, but go.
Ah sweet, too sweet to me, my sweet, I know
Love, sleep, and death go to the sweet same tune;
Hold my hair fast, and kiss me through it so.
Ah God, ah God, that day should be so soon.

Choruses from Atalanta in Calydon

When the Hounds of Spring

When the hounds of spring are on winter’s traces,
The mother of months in meadow or plain
Fills the shadows and windy places
With lisp of leaves and ripple of rain;
And the brown bright nightingale amorous
Is half assuaged for Itylus,
For the Thracian ships and the foreign faces,
The tongueless vigil and all the pain.

Come with bows bent and with emptying of quivers,
Maiden most perfect, lady of light,
With a noise of winds and many rivers,
With a clamor of waters, and with might;
Bind on thy sandals, O thou most fleet,
Over the splendor and speed of thy feet;
For the faint east quickens, the wan west shivers,
Round the feet of the day and the feet of the night.

Where shall we find her, how shall we sing to her,
Fold our hands round her knees, and cling?
O that man’s heart were as fire and could spring to her,
Fire, or the strength of the streams that spring!
For the stars and the winds are unto her
As raiment, as songs of the harp player;
For the risen stars and the fallen cling to her,
And the southwest wind and the west wind sing.

For winter’s rains and ruins are over,
And all the season of snows and sins;
The days dividing lover and lover,

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1. This choral hymn, with which Swinburne’s tragedy opens, is addressed to Artemis (or Diana), virgin goddess and huntress. Artemis was also goddess of the moon and hence, as affecting the seasons, the “mother of months” (line 2).

2. Philomela, after being raped by her brother-in-law and having her tongue cut out, was changed into a nightingale. To obtain revenge, her sister, Procne, killed her own son, Itylus, and fed the child’s body to her husband, Tereus, a Thracian king.
The light that loses, the night that wins;
And time remembered is grief forgotten,
And frosts are slain and flowers begotten,
And in green underwood and cover
Blossom by blossom the spring begins.

The full streams feed on flower of rushes,
Ripe grasses trammel a traveling foot,
The faint fresh flame of the young year flushes
From leaf to flower and flower to fruit;
And fruit and leaf are as gold and fire,
And the oat is heard above the lyre,
And the hoofèd heel of a satyr crushes
The chestnut husk at the chestnut root.

And Pan by noon and Bacchus by night,
Fleeter of foot than the fleet-foot kid,
Follows with dancing and fills with delight
The Maenad and the Bassarid;
And soft as lips that laugh and hide,
The laughing leaves of the trees divide,
And screen from seeing and leave in sight
The god pursuing, the maiden hid.

The ivy falls with the Bacchanal’s hair
Over her eyebrows hiding her eyes;
The wild vine slipping down leaves bare
Her bright breast shortening into sighs;
The wild vine slips with the weight of its leaves,
But the berried ivy catches and cleaves
To the limbs that glitter, the feet that scare
The wolf that follows, the fawn that flies.

Before the Beginning of Years

Before the beginning of years
There came to the making of man
Time, with a gift of tears;
Grief, with a glass that ran;
Pleasure, with pain for leaven;
Summer, with flowers that fell;
Remembrance fallen from heaven,
And madness risen from hell;
Strength without hands to smite;
Love that endures for a breath;
Night, the shadow of light,
And life, the shadow of death.

And the high gods took in hand
Fire, and the falling of tears,

3. Musical pipe made from an oaten straw.
4. Participants in the spring festival honoring Dionysus (or Bacchus). Such festivals sometimes developed into frenzied sexual orgies.
And a measure of sliding sand
   From under the feet of the years;
And froth and drift of the sea;
   And dust of the laboring earth;
And bodies of things to be
   In the houses of death and of birth;
And wrought with weeping and laughter,
   And fashioned with loathing and love,
With life before and after
   And death beneath and above,
For a day and a night and a morrow,
   That his strength might endure for a span
With travail and heavy sorrow,
   The holy spirit of man.

From the winds of the north and the south
   They gathered as unto strife;
They breathed upon his mouth,
   They filled his body with life;
Eyesight and speech they wrought
   For the veils of the soul therein,
A time for labor and thought,
   A time to serve and to sin;
They gave him light in his ways,
   And love, and a space for delight,
And beauty and length of days,
   And night, and sleep in the night.
His speech is a burning fire;
   With his lips he travaileth;
In his heart is a blind desire,
   In his eyes foreknowledge of death;
He weaves, and is clothed with derision;
   Sows, and he shall not reap;
His life is a watch or a vision
   Between a sleep and a sleep.

1865

The Garden of Proserpine

Here, where the world is quiet;
   Here, where all trouble seems
Dead winds' and spent waves' riot
   In doubtful dreams of dreams;
I watch the green field growing

1. Or Proserpina, the goddess who was carried off by Hades (or Pluto) to be queen of the lower world. According to some accounts, she had there a garden of ever-blooming flowers. The Greek and Roman festivals honoring her and her mother, Ceres, emphasized Proserpine’s return to the upper world in spring. In Swinburne’s poems, however, the emphasis is on her role as goddess of death and eternal sleep. Swinburne also associates her with the sea, which he usually represents as eternally unchanging despite its surface changefulness.
For reaping folk and sowing,
For harvest time and mowing,
A sleepy world of streams.

I am tired of tears and laughter,
And men that laugh and weep;
Of what may come hereafter
For men that sow to reap;
I am weary of days and hours,
Blown buds of barren flowers,
Desires and dreams and powers
And everything but sleep.

Here life has death for neighbor,
And far from eye or ear
Wan waves and wet winds labor,
Weak ships and spirits steer;
They drive adrift, and whither
They wot not who make thither;
But no such winds blow hither,
And no such things grow here.

No growth of moor or coppice,
No heather flower or vine,
But bloomless buds of poppies,
Green grapes of Proserpine,
Pale beds of blowing rushes,
Where no leaf blooms or blushes
Save this whereout she crushes
For dead men deadly wine.

Pale, without name or number,
In fruitless fields of corn,°
They bow themselves and slumber
All night till light is born;
And like a soul belated,
In hell and heaven unmated,
By cloud and mist abated
Comes out of darkness morn.

Though one were strong as seven,
He too with death shall dwell,
Nor wake with wings in heaven,
Nor weep for pains in hell;
Though one were fair as roses,
His beauty clouds and closes;
And well though love reposes,
In the end it is not well.

Pale, beyond porch and portal,
Crowned with calm leaves, she stands
Who gathers all things mortal
With cold immortal hands;
Her languid lips are sweeter
Than love’s who fears to greet her
To men that mix and meet her
From many times and lands.

She waits for each and other,
She waits for all men born;
Forgets the earth her mother;
The life of fruits and corn;
And spring and seed and swallow
Take wing for her and follow
Where summer song rings hollow
And flowers are put to scorn.

There go the loves that wither,
The old loves with wearier wings;
And all dead years draw thither,
And all disastrous things;
Dead dreams of days forsaken,
Blind buds that snows have shaken,
Wild leaves that winds have taken,
Red strays of ruined springs.

We are not sure of sorrow,
And joy was never sure;
Today will die tomorrow;
Time stoops to no man’s lure;
And love, grown faint and fretful,
With lips but half regretful
Sighs, and with eyes forgetful
Weeps that no loves endure.

From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives forever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Then star nor sun shall waken,
Nor any change of light:
Nor sound of waters shaken,
Nor any sound or sight:
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,
Nor days nor things diurnal;
Only the sleep eternal
In an eternal night.
From The Triumph of Time¹

I Will Go Back to the Great Sweet Mother

I will go back to the great sweet mother,
Mother and lover of men, the sea.
I will go down to her, I and none other,
Close with her, kiss her, and mix her with me;
Cling to her, strive with her, hold her fast.
O fair white mother, in days long past
Born without sister, born without brother,
Set free my soul as thy soul is free.

O fair green-girdled mother of mine,
Sea, that art clothed with the sun and the rain,
Thy sweet hard kisses are strong like wine,
Thy large embraces are keen like pain.
Save me and hide me with all thy waves,
Find me one grave of thy thousand graves,
Those pure cold populous graves of thine
Wrought without hand in a world without stain.

I shall sleep, and move with the moving ships,
Change as the winds change, veer in the tide;
My lips will feast on the foam of thy lips,
I shall rise with thy rising, with thee subside;
Sleep, and not know if she² be, if she were,
Filled full with life to the eyes and hair,
As a rose is fulfilled to the roseleaf tips
With splendid summer and perfume and pride.

This woven raiment of nights and days,
Were it once cast off and unwound from me,
Naked and glad would I walk in thy ways,
Alive and aware of thy ways and thee;
Clear of the whole world, hidden at home,
Clothed with the green and crowned with the foam,
A pulse of the life of thy straits and bays,
A vein in the heart of the streams of the sea.

Fair mother, fed with the lives of men,
Thou art subtle and cruel of heart, men say.
Thou hast taken, and shalt not render again;
Thou art full of thy dead, and cold as they.
But death is the worst that comes of thee;

¹ The Triumph of Time is a long autobiographical poem in which the speaker, addressing a woman who has deserted him for another man, meditates on his loss of the love that he feels would have transfigured his life. The selection that we have chosen shows one of the many ways in which he seeks to assuage his grief.
² The woman to whom the poem is addressed.
Thou art fed with our dead, O mother, O sea,
But when hast thou fed on our hearts? or when,
Having given us love, hast thou taken away?

O tender-hearted, O perfect lover,
Thy lips are bitter, and sweet thine heart.
The hopes that hurt and the dreams that hover,
Shall they not vanish away and apart?
But thou, thou art sure, thou art older than earth;
Thou art strong for death and fruitful of birth;
Thy depths conceal and thy gulfs discover;
From the first thou wert; in the end thou art.

The Lake of Gaube

The sun is lord and god, sublime, serene,
And sovereign on the mountains: earth and air
Lie prone in passion, blind with bliss unseen
By force of sight and might of rapture, fair
As dreams that die and know not what they were.
The lawns, the gorges, and the peaks are one
Glad glory, thrilled with sense of unison
In strong compulsive silence of the sun.

Flowers dense and keen as midnight stars aflame
And living things of light like flames in flower
That glance and flash as though no hand might tame
Lightnings whose life outshone their stormlit hour
And played and laughed on earth, with all their power
Gone, and with all their joy of life made long
And harmless as the lightning life of song,
Shine sweet like stars when darkness feels them strong.

The deep mild purple flaked with moonbright gold
That makes the scales seem flowers of hardened light,

1. Gaube (rhyming with robe) is a deep glacier-fed lake high in the Pyrenees mountains of France, not far from the setting of Tennyson’s In the Valley of Cauteretz. In the spring of 1862, when mountain flowers were in bloom, Swinburne had hiked up the steep path to the lake where he plunged into the water from a rock and swam across to the opposite bank, “to the horror of the natives,” as Edmund Gosse remarked, “who had a tradition that to bathe in Gaube was to court certain death.” More than thirty years later, Swinburne looked back on this ecstatic experience of being submerged in icy lake water as contrasted with being exposed to the hot life-giving sunlight—a contrast leading to meditations on life, death, art, and humanity’s relation to the world of nature. Nature is variously represented in the poem but most strikingly by the little lizards (salamanders) Swinburne encountered in the area, one of which he tamed as a pet (hence he speaks of its “kindly trust in man”). In his critical essay on the Jacobean dramatist John Ford, Swinburne likened Ford’s poetry “to a mountain lake shut in by solitary highlands, without visible outlet or inlet, seen fitlier by starlight than by sunlight; much such a one as the Lac de Gaube above Cauteretz, steel-blue and somber, with a strange attraction for the swimmer in its cold smooth reticence and breathless calm.”

2. I.e., salamanders, reputed in myth to be imperishable in fire.

3. In an essay, Notes of Travel (1894), Swinburne described the salamander he tamed at Gaube, “the quaintest of dumb four-footed friends,” and spoke of “the beauty of its purple-black coat of scaled armor inlaid with patches of dead-leaf gold, its shining eyes, and its flashing tongue.”
The flamelike tongue, the feet that noon leaves cold,
   The kindly trust in man, when once the sight
   Grew less than strange, and faith bade fear take flight,
   Outlive the little harmless life that shone
   And gladdened eyes that loved it, and was gone
   Ere love might fear that fear had looked thereon.

   Fear held the bright thing hateful, even as fear,
       Whose name is one with hate and horror, saith
   That heaven, the dark deep heaven of water near,
       Is deadly deep as hell and dark as death.
   The rapturous plunge that quickens blood and breath

With pause more sweet than passion, ere they strive
   To raise again the limbs that yet would dive
   Deeper, should there have slain the soul alive.

As the bright salamander in fire of the noonshine exults and is glad of his day,
The spirit that quickens my body rejoices to pass from the sunlight away,
   To pass from the glow of the mountainous flowerage, the high multitudinous bloom,
   Far down through the fathomless night of the water, the gladness of silence and gloom.
   Death-dark and delicious as death in the dream of a lover and dreamer may be,
   It clasps and encompasses body and soul with delight to be living and free:
   Free utterly now, though the freedom endure but the space of a perilous breath,
   And living, though girdled about with the darkness and coldness and strangeness of death:
   Each limb and each pulse of the body rejoicing, each nerve of the spirit at rest,
   All sense of the soul's life rapture, a passionate peace in its blindness blessed.
   So plunges the downward swimmer, embraced of the water unfathomed of man,
   The darkness unplummeted, icier than seas in midwinter, for blessing or ban;
   And swiftly and sweetly, when strength and breath fall short, and the dive is done,
   Shoots up as a shaft from the dark depth shot, sped straight into sight of the sun;
   And sheer through the snow-soft water, more dark than the roof of the pines above,
   Strikes forth, and is glad as a bird whose flight is impelled and sustained of love.
As a sea-mew's4 love of the sea-wind breasted and ridden for rapture's sake

4. Sea gull's.
Is the love of his body and soul for the darkling delight of the soundless lake:
As the silent speed of a dream too living to live for a thought's space more
Is the flight of his limbs through the still strong chill of the darkness from shore to shore.
Might life be as this is and death be as life that casts off time as a robe,
The likeness of infinite heaven were a symbol revealed of the lake of Gaube.

55  Whose thought has fathomed and measured
    The darkness of life and of death,
    The secret within them treasured,
    The spirit that is not breath?
Whose vision has yet beheld
    The splendor of death and of life?
Though sunset as dawn be golden,
    Is the word of them peace, not strife?
Deep silence answers: the glory
    We dream of may be but a dream,
And the sun of the soul wax hoary
    As ashes that show not a gleam.
But well shall it be with us ever
    Who drive through the darkness here,
If the soul that we live by never,
    For aught that a lie saith, fear.

1894, 1904