OSCAR WILDE

Sonnet: On the Sale by Auction of Keats’ Love Letters

These are the letters which Endymion¹ wrote
To one he loved in secret and apart,
And now the brawlers of the auction-mart
Bargain and bid for each tear-blotted note,
Aye! for each separate pulse of passion quote
The merchant’s price! I think they love not art
Who break the crystal of a poet’s heart,
That small and sickly eyes may glare or gloat.

Is it not said, that many years ago,
In a far Eastern town some soldiers ran
With torches through the midnight, and began
To wrangle for mean raiment, and to throw
Dice for the garments of a wretched man,
Not knowing the God’s wonder, or His woe?

¹ 1886

Symphony in Yellow¹

An omnibus across the bridge
Crawls like a yellow butterfly,
And, here and there, a passerby
Shows like a little restless midge.

Big barges full of yellow hay
Are moored against the shadowy wharf,
And, like a yellow silken scarf,
The thick fog hangs along the quay.

The yellow leaves begin to fade
And flutter from the Temple² elms,
And at my feet the pale green Thames
Lies like a rod of rippled jade.

¹ 1889

¹. Young hero of Keats’s long poem *Endymion* (1817). The letters were to Fanny Brawne; most of them had been published in 1878.
². Site of two of the Inns of Court, formerly occupied by the Knights Templars.
Hélas

To drift with every passion till my soul
Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,
Is it for this that I have given away
Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control?

Methinks my life is a twice-written scroll
Scrawled over on some boyish holiday
With idle songs for pipe and virelay,¹
Which do but mar the secret of the whole.
Surely there was a time I might have trod
The sunlit heights, and from life’s dissonance
Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God.
Is that time dead? lo! with a little rod
I did but touch the honey of romance—
And must I lose a soul’s inheritance?²

1881

E Tenebris

Come down, O Christ, and help me! reach thy hand,
For I am drowning in a stormier sea
Than Simon on thy lake of Galilee:²
The wine of life is spilt upon the sand,
My heart is as some famine-murdered land
Whence all good things have perished utterly,
And well I know my soul in Hell must lie
If I this night before God’s throne should stand.
“He sleeps perchance, or rideth to the chase,
Like Baal, when his prophets howled that name
From morn to noon on Carmel’s smitten height.”³
Nay, peace, I shall behold, before the night,
The feet of brass,⁴ the robe more white than flame,
The wounded hands, the weary human face.

1881

1. “Alas!”
2. A song or short lyric in stanzas.
3. Perhaps referring to 1 Samuel 14:24–46. To ensure victory over the Philistines, King Saul orders his army to fast. His son Jonathan fails to hear the order and reaches out the tip of his staff to take some honey. Saul later discovers this and orders his son’s death, but the people intervene to save him.
4. Cf. Revelation 1.13–16, where the “Son of man” is seen in a vision, “his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace.”