

---

 ROBERT BROWNING

## Up at a Villa—Down in the City

(AS DISTINGUISHED BY AN ITALIAN PERSON OF QUALITY)

## 1

Had I but plenty of money, money enough and to spare,  
 The house for me, no doubt, were a house in the city square;  
 Ah, such a life, such a life, as one leads at the window there!

## 2

5 Something to see, by Bacchus, something to hear, at least!  
 There, the whole day long, one's life is a perfect feast;  
 While up at a villa one lives, I maintain it, no more than a beast.

## 3

Well now, look at our villa! stuck like the horn of a bull  
 Just on a mountain edge as bare as the creature's skull,  
 Save a mere shag of a bush with hardly a leaf to pull!  
 10 —I scratch my own,<sup>1</sup> sometimes, to see if the hair's turned wool.

## 4

But the city, oh the city—the square with the houses! Why?  
 They are stone-faced, white as a curd, there's something to  
     take the eye!  
 Houses in four straight lines, not a single front awry;  
     You watch who crosses and gossips, who saunters, who hurries by;  
 Green blinds, as a matter of course, to draw when the sun  
 15 gets high;  
 And the shops with fanciful signs which are painted properly.

## 5

What of a villa? Though winter be over in March by rights,  
 'Tis May perhaps ere the snow shall have withered well off  
     the heights:  
 You've the brown plowed land before, where the oxen steam  
     and wheeze,  
 20 And the hills over-smoked behind by the faint gray olive trees.

## 6

Is it better in May, I ask you? You've summer all at once;  
 In a day he leaps complete with a few strong April suns.  
 'Mid the sharp short emerald wheat, scarce risen three  
     fingers well,  
 The wild tulip, at end of its tube, blows out its great red bell  
 25 Like a thin clear bubble of blood, for the children to pick and sell.

1. I.e., my own skull.

## 7

Is it ever hot in the square? There's a fountain to spout and splash!  
 In the shade it sings and springs; in the shine such foam-bows flash  
 On the horses with curling fish-tails, that prance and paddle and pash  
 Round the lady atop in her conch—fifty gazers do not abash,  
 Though all that she wears is some weeds round her waist in a sort of  
 30 sash.

## 8

All the year long at the villa, nothing to see though you linger,  
 Except yon cypress that points like death's lean lifted forefinger.  
 Some think fireflies pretty, when they mix i' the corn and mingle,  
 Or third<sup>2</sup> the stinking hemp till the stalks of it seem a-tingle.  
 35 Late August or early September, the stunning cicala is shrill,  
 And the bees keep their tiresome whine round the resinous firs on  
 the hill.  
 Enough of the seasons—I spare you the months of the fever and  
 chill.

## 9

Ere you open your eyes in the city, the blessed church bells begin:  
 No sooner the bells leave off than the diligence<sup>3</sup> rattles in:  
 40 You get the pick of the news, and it costs you never a pin.  
 By-and-by there's the traveling doctor gives pills, lets blood, draws  
 teeth;  
 Or the Pulcinello-trumpet<sup>4</sup> breaks up the market beneath.  
 At the post office such a scene-picture<sup>5</sup>—the new play, piping hot!  
 And a notice how, only this morning, three liberal thieves<sup>6</sup> were shot.  
 45 Above it, behold the Archbishop's most fatherly of rebukes,  
 And beneath, with his crown and his lion, some little new  
 law of the Duke's!  
 Or a sonnet with flowery marge, to the Reverend Don So-and-so  
 Who is Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarca, Saint Jerome, and Cicero,  
 "And moreover," (the sonnet goes rhyming) "the skirts of Saint  
 Paul has reached,  
 50 Having preached us those six Lent-lectures more unctuous than ever  
 he preached."  
 Noon strikes—here sweeps the procession; our Lady borne smiling  
 and smart  
 With a pink gauze gown all spangles, and seven swords<sup>7</sup> stuck in her  
 heart!  
*Bang-whang-whang* goes the drum, *tootle-te-tootle* the fife;  
 No keeping one's haunches still: it's the greatest pleasure in life.

## 10

55 But bless you, it's dear—it's dear! fowls, wine, at double the rate.  
 They have clapped a new tax upon salt, and what oil pays passing  
 the gate<sup>8</sup>

2. Thread their way through.

3. Stagecoach.

4. Trumpet announcing the puppet show, in which Pulcinello is the clown.

5. Picture advertising a coming play.

6. The men were republicans, opposed to Austrian

rule, but "thieves" in the eyes of the speaker.

7. The swords symbolize the seven sorrows of Our Lady, the Virgin Mary.

8. Inside the gates of the city, produce was subject to special taxes.

It's a horror to think of. And so, the villa for me, not the city!  
 Beggars can scarcely be choosers: but still—ah, the pity, the pity!  
 Look, two and two go the priests, then the monks with cowls and  
 60 sandals,  
 And the penitents dressed in white shirts, a-holding the yellow  
 candles;  
 One, he carries a flag up straight, and another a cross with handles,  
 And the Duke's guard brings up the rear, for the better prevention  
 of scandals:  
*Bang-whang-whang* goes the drum, *tootle-te-tootle* the fife.  
 65 Oh, a day in the city square, there is no such pleasure in life!

1855

## In a Year

## I

Never any more,  
 While I live,  
 Need I hope to see his face  
 As before.  
 5 Once his love grown chill,  
 Mine may strive:  
 Bitterly we re-embrace,  
 Single still.

## 2

Was it something said,  
 10 Something done,  
 Vexed him? was it touch of hand,  
 Turn of head?  
 Strange! that very way  
 Love begun:  
 15 I as little understand  
 Love's decay.

## 3

When I sewed or drew,  
 I recall  
 How he looked as if I sung  
 20 —Sweetly too.  
 If I spoke a word,  
 First of all  
 Up his cheek the color sprung,  
 Then he heard.

## 4

25 Sitting by my side,  
 At my feet,  
 So he breathed but air I breathed,  
 Satisfied!

I, too, at love's brim  
 30 Touched the sweet:  
 I would die if death bequeathed  
 Sweet to him.

5

"Speak, I love thee best!"  
 He exclaimed:  
 35 "Let thy love my own foretell!"  
 I confessed:  
 "Clasp my heart on thine  
 Now unblamed,  
 Since upon thy soul as well  
 40 Hangeth mine!"

6

Was it wrong to own,  
 Being truth?  
 Why should all the giving prove  
 His alone?  
 45 I had wealth and ease,  
 Beauty, youth:  
 Since my lover gave me love,  
 I gave these.

7

That was all I meant  
 50 —To be just,  
 And the passion I had raised,  
 To content.  
 Since he chose to change  
 Gold for dust,  
 55 If I gave him what he praised  
 Was it strange?

8

Would he loved me yet,  
 On and on,  
 While I found some way undreamed  
 60 —Paid my debt!  
 Gave more life and more,  
 Till, all gone,  
 He should smile, "She never seemed  
 Mine before.

9

65 "What, she felt the while,  
 Must I think?  
 Love's so different with us men!"  
 He should smile:  
 "Dying for my sake—  
 70 White and pink!  
 Can't we touch these bubbles then  
 But they break?"

10

Dear, the pang is brief,  
 Do thy part,  
 75 Have thy pleasure! How perplexed  
 Grows belief!  
 Well, this cold clay clod  
 Was man's heart:  
 Crumble it, and what comes next?  
 80 Is it God?

1855

## Respectability

1

Dear, had the world in its caprice  
 Deigned to proclaim "I know you both,  
 Have recognized your plighted troth,  
 Am sponsor for you: live in peace!"—  
 5 How many precious months and years  
 Of youth had passed, that speed so fast,  
 Before we found it out at last,  
 The world, and what it fears?

2

How much of priceless life were spent  
 10 With men that every virtue decks,  
 And women models of their sex,  
 Society's true ornament—  
 Ere we dared wander, nights like this,  
 Through wind and rain, and watch the Seine,  
 15 And feel the Boulevard break again  
 To warmth and light and bliss?

3

I know! the world proscribes not love;  
 Allows my fingers to caress  
 Your lips' contour and downiness,  
 20 Provided it supply a glove.  
 The world's good word!—the Institute!<sup>1</sup>  
 Guizot receives Montalembert!  
 Eh? Down the court three lampions<sup>2</sup> flare:  
 Put forward your best foot!

ca. 1852

1855

1. A building in Paris, which the lovers are approaching in their walk. The speaker is reminded that at a meeting of the French Academy, held in the Institute, occurred a glaring instance of the hypocrisy which he thinks is characteristic of all social rela-

tions. In 1852, François Guizot had delivered a flowery speech of welcome in honor of Charles Montalembert, an author whom Guizot had heart despised. 2. Ornamental lamps illuminating the courtyard of the Institute.

## Confessions

1

What is he buzzing in my ears?  
 "Now that I come to die,  
 Do I view the world as a vale of tears?"  
 Ah, reverend sir, not I!

2

5 What I viewed there once, what I view again  
 Where the physic bottles stand  
 On the table's edge—is a suburb lane,  
 With a wall to my bedside hand.

3

10 That lane sloped, much as the bottles do,  
 From a house you could descry  
 O'er the garden wall: is the curtain blue  
 Or green to a healthy eye?

4

15 To mine, it serves for the old June weather  
 Blue above lane and wall;  
 And that farthest bottle labeled "Ether"  
 Is the house o'ertopping all.

5

20 At a terrace, somewhere near the stopper,  
 There watched for me, one June,  
 A girl: I know, sir, it's improper,  
 My poor mind's out of tune.

6

Only, there was a way . . . you crept  
 Close by the side to dodge  
 Eyes in the house, two eyes except:  
 They styled their house "The Lodge."

7

25 What right had a lounge up their lane?  
 But, by creeping very close,  
 With the good wall's help—their eyes might strain  
 And stretch themselves to O's,

8

30 Yet never catch her and me together,  
 As she left the attic, there,  
 By the rim of the bottle labeled "Ether,"  
 And stole from stair to stair,

9

And stood by the rose-wreathed gate. Alas,  
 We loved, sir—used to meet:

35       How sad and bad and mad it was—  
               But then, how it was sweet!

ca. 1859

1864

## The Householder<sup>1</sup>

[*Epilogue to Fifine at the Fair*]

### I

Savage I was sitting in my house, late, lone:  
       Dreary, weary with the long day's work:  
       Head of me, heart of me, stupid as a stone:  
       Tongue-tied now, now blaspheming like a Turk;  
 5    When, in a moment, just a knock, call, cry,  
       Half a pang and all a rapture, there again were we!—  
       “What, and is it really you again?” quoth I:  
       “I again, what else did you expect?” quoth She.

### 2

“Never mind, hie away from this old house—  
 10    Every crumbling brick embrowned with sin and shame!  
       Quick, in its corners ere certain shapes arouse!  
       Let them—every devil of the night—lay claim,  
       Make and mend, or rap and rend, for me! Good-by!  
       God be their guard from disturbance at their glee,  
 15    Till, crash, comes down the carcass in a heap!” quoth I:  
       “Nay, but there's a decency required!” quoth She.

### 3

“Ah, but if you knew how time has dragged, days, nights!  
       All the neighbor-talk with man and maid—such men!  
       All the fuss and trouble of street sounds, window sights:  
 20    All the worry of flapping door and echoing roof; and then,  
       All the fancies . . . Who were they had leave, dared try  
       Darker arts that almost struck despair in me?  
       If you knew but how I dwelt down here!” quoth I:  
       “*And was I so better off up there?*” quoth She.

### 4

25    “Help and get it over! *Reunited to his wife*  
       (How draw up the paper lets the parish-people know?)  
       *Lies M., or N., departed from this life,*  
       *Day the this or that, month and year the so and so.*  
       What i' the way of final flourish? Prose, verse? Try!  
 30    *Affliction sore long time he bore, or, what is it to be?*

1. This dialogue with the spirit of Browning's dead wife can be compared with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel*. The “neighbor-talk” in stanza 3 probably refers to the gossip in London in

1869 over the fact that Browning was turned down when he proposed marriage to Lady Ashburton, a bewitching and wealthy widow.

*Till God did please to grant him ease. Do end!*" quoth I:  
 "I end with—Love is all and Death is naught!" quoth She.

1872

1872

## The Laboratory

*Ancien Régime*<sup>1</sup>

1

Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,  
 May gaze thro' these faint smokes curling whitely,  
 As thou pliest thy trade in this devil's-smithy—  
 Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?

2

5 He is with her, and they know that I know  
 Where they are, what they do: they believe my tears flow  
 While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled to the drear  
 Empty church, to pray God in, for them!—I am here.

3

10 Grind away, moisten and mash up thy paste,  
 Pound at thy powder—I am not in haste!  
 Better sit thus, and observe thy strange things,  
 Than go where men wait me and dance at the King's.

4

15 That in the mortar—you call it a gum?  
 Ah, the brave tree whence such gold oozings come!  
 And yonder soft phial, the exquisite blue,  
 Sure to taste sweetly, is that poison too?

5

20 Had I but all of them, thee and thy treasures,  
 What a wild crowd of invisible pleasures!  
 To carry pure death in an earring, a casket,  
 A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket!

6

Soon, at the King's,<sup>2</sup> a mere lozenge to give,  
 And Pauline should have just thirty minutes to live!  
 But to light a pastile, and Elise, with her head  
 And her breast and her arms and her hands, should drop dead!

7

25 Quick—is it finished? The color's too grim!  
 Why not soft like the phial's, enticing and dim?

1. The regime in France before the Revolution of 1789.

2. Probably King Louis XIV of France (1643–1715). In the 1670s, a police investigation disclosed that an extraordinary number of women and men

attached to the king's court had been disposing of rivals and enemies by poisonings. Some thirty-six of the accused courtiers and the dealers from whom they had purchased poisons were punished by torture and burnt to death.

Let it brighten her drink, let her turn it and stir,  
And try it and taste, ere she fix and prefer!

## 8

30 What a drop! She's not little, no minion<sup>3</sup> like me!  
That's why she ensnared him: this never will free  
The soul from those masculine eyes—say, "no!"  
To that pulse's magnificent come-and-go.

## 9

35 For only last night, as they whispered, I brought  
My own eyes to bear on her so, that I thought  
Could I keep them one half minute fixed, she would fall  
Shriveled; she fell not; yet this does it all!

## 10

40 Not that I bid you spare her the pain;  
Let death be felt and the proof remain:  
Brand, burn up, bite into its grace—  
He is sure to remember her dying face!

## 11

Is it done? Take my mask off! Nay, be not morose;  
It kills her, and this prevents seeing it close:  
The delicate droplet, my whole fortune's fee!  
If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt me?

## 12

45 Now, take all my jewels, gorge gold to your fill,  
You may kiss me, old man, on my mouth if you will!  
But brush this dust off me, lest horror it brings  
Ere I know it—next moment I dance at the King's!

ca. 1844

1844

## Home-Thoughts, from Abroad

## I

Oh, to be in England  
Now that April's there,  
And whoever wakes in England  
Sees, some morning, unaware,  
5 That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf  
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,  
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough  
In England—now!

## 2

10 And after April, when May follows,  
And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!  
Hark, where my blossomed peartree in the hedge

3. A dainty and delicate person.

Leans to the field and scatters on the clover  
 Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray's edge—  
 That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,  
 15 Lest you should think he never could recapture  
 The first fine careless rapture!  
 And though the fields look rough with hoary dew,  
 All will be gay when noontide wakes anew  
 The buttercups, the little children's dower  
 20 —Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower!

ca. 1845

1845

### Home-Thoughts, from the Sea

Nobly, nobly Cape Saint Vincent to the northwest died away;  
 Sunset ran, one glorious blood-red, reeking into Cadiz Bay;  
 Bluish 'mid the burning water, full in face Trafalgar lay;  
 In the dimmest northeast distance dawned Gibraltar grand  
 and gray;  
 5 "Here and here did England help me: how can I help  
 England?"—say,  
 Whoso turns as I, this evening, turn to God to praise and pray,  
 While Jove's planet rises yonder, silent over Africa.

1844

1845

### Meeting at Night<sup>1</sup>

I

The gray sea and the long black land;  
 And the yellow half-moon large and low;  
 And the startled little waves that leap  
 In fiery ringlets from their sleep,  
 5 As I gain the cove with pushing prow,  
 And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

2

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;  
 Three fields to cross till a farm appears;  
 A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch  
 10 And blue spurt of a lighted match,  
 And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,  
 Than the two hearts beating each to each!

1845

1. This poem and the one that follows it appeared originally under the single title *Night and Morning*. The speaker in both is a man.

## Parting at Morning

Round the cape of a sudden came the sea,  
 And the sun looked over the mountain's rim:  
 And straight was a path of gold for him,<sup>o</sup> *the sun*  
 And the need of a world of men for me.

1845

Memorabilia<sup>1</sup>

1

Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,  
 And did he stop and speak to you  
 And did you speak to him again?  
 How strange it seems and new!

2

5 But you were living before that,  
 And also you are living after;  
 And the memory I started at—  
 My starting moves your laughter.

3

10 I crossed a moor, with a name of its own  
 And a certain use in the world no doubt,  
 Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone  
 'Mid the blank miles round about:

4

15 For there I picked up on the heather  
 And there I put inside my breast  
 A molted feather, an eagle feather!  
 Well, I forget the rest.

ca. 1851

1855

## The Last Ride Together

1

I said—Then, dearest, since 'tis so,  
 Since now at length my fate I know,  
 Since nothing all my love avails,  
 Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,  
 5 Since this was written and needs must be—  
 My whole heart rises up to bless

1. Things worth remembering. Browning reports that he once met a stranger in a bookstore who mentioned having talked with Shelley. "Suddenly the stranger paused, and burst into laughter as he

observed me staring at him with blanched face. . . . I still vividly remember how strangely the presence of a man who had seen and spoken with Shelley affected me."

Your name in pride and thankfulness!  
 Take back the hope you gave—I claim  
 Only a memory of the same,  
 10 —And this beside, if you will not blame,  
       Your leave for one more last ride with me.

## 2

My mistress bent that brow of hers;  
 Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs  
 When pity would be softening through,  
 15 Fixed me a breathing-while or two  
       With life or death in the balance: right!  
 The blood replenished me again;  
 My last thought was at least not vain:  
 I and my mistress, side by side  
 20 Shall be together, breathe and ride,  
 So, one day more am I deified.  
       Who knows but the world may end tonight?

## 3

Hush! if you saw some western cloud  
 All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed  
 25 By many benedictions—sun's  
 And moon's and evening star's at once—  
       And so, you, looking and loving best,  
 Conscious grew, your passion drew  
 Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too,  
 30 Down on you, near and yet more near,  
 Till flesh must fade for heaven was here!—  
 Thus leant she and lingered<sup>1</sup>—joy and fear!  
       Thus lay she a moment on my breast.

## 4

Then we began to ride. My soul  
 35 Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll  
 Freshening and fluttering in the wind.  
 Past hopes already lay behind.  
       What need to strive with a life awry?  
 Had I said that, had I done this,  
 40 So might I gain, so might I miss.  
 Might she have loved me? just as well  
 She might have hated, who can tell!  
 Where had I been now if the worst befell?  
       And here we are riding, she and I.

## 5

Fail I alone, in words and deeds?  
 45 Why, all men strive and who succeeds?  
 We rode; it seemed my spirit flew,  
 Saw other regions, cities new,  
       As the world rushed by on either side.

1. Before she mounted her horse.

50 I thought—All labor, yet no less  
 Bear up beneath their unsuccess.  
 Look at the end of work, contrast  
 The petty done, the undone vast,  
 This present of theirs with the hopeful past!  
 55 I hoped she would love me; here we ride.

## 6

What hand and brain went ever paired?  
 What heart alike conceived and dared?  
 What act proved all its thought had been?  
 What will but felt the fleshly screen?  
 60 We ride and I see her bosom heave.  
 There's many a crown for who can reach.  
 Ten lines, a statesman's life in each!<sup>2</sup>  
 The flag stuck on a heap of bones,  
 A soldier's doing! what atones?  
 65 They scratch his name on the Abbey stones.<sup>3</sup>  
 My riding is better, by their leave.

## 7

What does it all mean, poet? Well,  
 Your brains beat into rhythm, you tell  
 What we felt only; you expressed  
 70 You hold things beautiful the best,  
 And pace them in rhyme so, side by side.  
 'Tis something, nay 'tis much: but then,  
 Have you yourself what's best for men?  
 Are you—poor, sick, old ere your time—  
 75 Nearer one whit your own sublime  
 Than we who never have turned a rhyme?  
 Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride.

## 8

And you, great sculptor—so, you gave  
 A score of years to Art, her slave,  
 80 And that's your Venus, whence we turn  
 To yonder girl that fords the burn!<sup>4</sup>  
 You acquiesce, and shall I repine?  
 What, man of music, you grown gray  
 With notes and nothing else to say,  
 85 Is this your sole praise from a friend,  
 "Greatly his opera's strains intend,  
 But in music we know how fashions end!"  
 I gave my youth; but we ride, in fine.<sup>o</sup>

*in short*

## 9

Who knows what's fit for us? Had fate  
 90 Proposed bliss here should sublimate

2. If a man tries hard enough, he may be crowned with what seems to be success. He might become, for example, an eminent "statesman." Yet his only memorial would be a short sketch of his career ("ten

lines") in some history or biographical dictionary.

3. I.e., he is honored by burial in Westminster Abbey.

4. Crosses the brook.

My being—had I signed the bond—  
 Still one must lead some life beyond,  
     Have a bliss to die with, dim-descried.  
 This foot once planted on the goal,  
 95 This glory-garland round my soul,  
 Could I descry such? Try and test!  
 I sink back shuddering from the quest.  
 Earth being so good, would Heaven seem best?<sup>5</sup>  
     Now, Heaven and she are beyond this ride.

## 10

100 And yet—she has not spoke so long!  
 What if heaven be that, fair and strong  
 At life's best, with our eyes upturned  
 Whither life's flower is first discerned,  
     We, fixed so, ever should so abide?  
 105 What if we still ride on, we two  
 With life forever old yet new,  
 Changed not in kind but in degree,  
 The instant made eternity—  
 And heaven just prove that I and she  
 110 Ride, ride together, forever ride?

1855

## Two in the Campagna

## 1

I wonder do you feel today  
     As I have felt since, hand in hand,  
 We sat down on the grass, to stray  
     In spirit better through the land,  
 5 This morn of Rome and May?

## 2

For me, I touched a thought, I know,  
     Has tantalized me many times,  
 (Like turns of thread the spiders throw  
     Mocking across our path) for rhymes  
 10 To catch at and let go.

## 3

Help me to hold it! First it left  
     The yellowing fennel, run to seed  
 There, branching from the brickwork's cleft,  
     Some old tomb's ruin: yonder weed  
 15 Took up the floating weft,

5. If fate had decreed that he could possess his mistress fully, life on earth would have been so blissful that heaven could offer nothing for him to

look forward to after death. Hence (he argues) to preserve "a bliss to die with" (line 93), it is better that she never really became his on earth.

## 4

Where one small orange cup amassed  
 Five beetles—blind and green they grope  
 Among the honey-meal: and last,  
 Everywhere on the grassy slope  
 20 I traced it. Hold it fast!

## 5

The champaign with its endless fleece  
 Of feathery grasses everywhere!  
 Silence and passion, joy and peace,  
 An everlasting wash of air—  
 25 Rome's ghost since her decease.

## 6

Such life here, through such lengths of hours,  
 Such miracles performed in play,  
 Such primal naked forms of flowers,  
 Such letting nature have her way  
 30 While heaven looks from its towers!

## 7

How say you? Let us, O my dove,  
 Let us be unashamed of soul,  
 As earth lies bare to heaven above!  
 How is it under our control  
 35 To love or not to love?

## 8

I would that you were all to me,  
 You that are just so much, no more.  
 Nor yours nor mine, nor slave nor free!  
 Where does the fault lie? What the core  
 40 O' the wound, since wound must be?

## 9

I would I could adopt your will,  
 See with your eyes, and set my heart  
 Beating by yours, and drink my fill  
 At your soul's springs—your part my part  
 45 In life, for good and ill.

## 10

No. I yearn upward, touch you close,  
 Then stand away. I kiss your cheek,  
 Catch your soul's warmth—I pluck the rose  
 And love it more than tongue can speak—  
 50 Then the good minute goes.

## 11

Already how am I so far  
 Out of that minute? Must I go

Still like the thistle-ball, no bar,  
 Onward, whenever light winds blow,  
 55 Fixed by no friendly star?

12

Just when I seemed about to learn!  
 Where is the thread now? Off again!  
 The old trick! Only I discern—  
 Infinite passion, and the pain  
 60 Of finite hearts that yearn.

1854

1855

### Prospice<sup>1</sup>

Fear death?—to feel the fog in my throat,  
 The mist in my face,  
 When the snows begin, and the blasts denote  
 I am nearing the place,  
 5 The power of the night, the press of the storm,  
 The post of the foe;  
 Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,  
 Yet the strong man must go:  
 For the journey is done and the summit attained,  
 10 And the barriers fall,  
 Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,  
 The reward of it all.  
 I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,  
 The best and the last!  
 15 I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,  
 And bade me creep past.  
 No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers  
 The heroes of old,  
 Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears  
 20 Of pain, darkness, and cold.  
 For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,  
 The black minute's at end,  
 And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,  
 Shall dwindle, shall blend,  
 25 Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,  
 Then a light, then thy breast,  
 O thou soul of my soul!<sup>2</sup> I shall clasp thee again,  
 And with God be the rest!

ca. 1861

1864

1. The title means "Look forward."

2. Browning's wife.

Women and Roses<sup>1</sup>

## 1

I dream of a red-rose tree.  
And which of its roses three  
Is the dearest rose to me?

## 2

Round and round, like a dance of snow  
5 In a dazzling drift, as its guardians, go  
Floating the women faded for ages,  
Sculptured in stone, on the poet's pages.  
Then follow women fresh and gay,  
Living and loving and loved today.  
10 Last, in the rear, flee the multitude of maidens,  
Beauties yet unborn. And all, to one cadence,  
They circle their rose on my rose tree.

## 3

Dear rose, thy term is reached,  
Thy leaf hangs loose and bleached:  
15 Bees pass it unimpeached.<sup>2</sup>

## 4

Stay then, stoop, since I cannot climb,  
You, great shapes of the antique time!  
How shall I fix you, fire you, freeze you,  
Break my heart at your feet to please you?  
20 Oh, to possess and be possessed!  
Hearts that beat 'neath each pallid breast!  
Once but of love, the poesy, the passion,  
Drink but once and die!—In vain, the same fashion,  
They circle their rose on my rose tree.

## 5

25 Dear rose, thy joy's undimmed,  
Thy cup is ruby-rimmed,  
Thy cup's heart nectar-brimmed.

## 6

Deep, as drops from a statue's plinth<sup>3</sup>  
The bee sucked in by the hyacinth,  
30 So will I bury me while burning,  
Quench like him at a plunge my yearning,  
Eyes in your eyes, lips on your lips!  
Fold me fast where the cincture<sup>4</sup> slips,  
Prison all my soul in eternities of pleasure,

1. Like Chaucer in the *Romaunt of the Rose* and also like Tennyson in *Maud*, the speaker in the following dream lyric associates roses with fair women and a garden of roses with the garden of love. The beautiful women of the past are first evoked (stanzas 3, 4), then those of the present (stanzas 5, 6), and finally those of the future (stanzas 7, 8). All, however, elude him. William Morris noted in 1855

that the poem's "concentrated thought" cannot be paraphrased because in such poems "there are so many exquisitely small and delicate turns of thought running through the music and along with it."

2. Unhindered.

3. Base.

4. Ornamental belt worn by women, usually across the hips.

35 Girdle me for once! But no—the old measure,  
They circle their rose on my rose tree.

7

Dear rose without a thorn,  
Thy bud's the babe unborn:  
First streak of a new morn.

8

40 Wings, lend wings for the cold, the clear!  
What is far conquers what is near.  
Roses will bloom nor want beholders,  
Sprung from the dust where our flesh molders.  
What should arrive with the cycle's change?  
45 A novel grace and a beauty strange.  
I will make an Eve, be the artist that began her,  
Shaped her to his mind!—Alas! in like manner  
They circle their rose on my rose tree.

1852

1855

### A Toccata of Galuppi's

1

Oh, Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find!  
I can hardly misconceive you; it would prove me deaf and blind;  
But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!

2

Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.  
5 What, they lived once thus at Venice where the merchants  
were the kings,  
Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea  
with rings?

3

Aye, because the sea's the street there; and 'tis arched by . . . what  
you call  
. . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept the carnival:  
I was never out of England—it's as if I saw it all.

4

10 Did young people take their pleasure when the sea was  
warm in May?  
Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to midday,  
When they made up fresh adventures for the morrow, do you say?

5

Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red—  
On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bellflower on its bed,  
15 O'er the breast's superb abundance where a man might  
base his head?

## 6

Well, and it was graceful of them—they'd break talk off and afford  
—She, to bite her mask's black velvet—he, to finger on his sword,  
While you sat and played toccatas, stately at the clavichord?

## 7

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh  
on sigh,  
20 Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—  
“Must we die?”  
Those commiserating sevenths—“Life might last! we can but try!”

## 8

“Were you happy?”—“Yes.”—“And are you still as happy?”—  
“Yes. And you?”  
—“Then, more kisses!”—“Did *I* stop them, when a million  
seemed so few?”  
Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!

## 9

25 So, an octave struck the answer. Oh, they praised you,  
I dare say!  
“Brave Galuppi! that was music; good alike at grave and gay!  
I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!”

## 10

Then they left you for their pleasure: till in due time, one by one,  
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well  
undone,  
30 Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see  
the sun.

## 11

But when I sit down to reason, think to take my stand nor swerve,  
While I triumph o'er a secret wrung from nature's close reserve,  
In you come with your cold music till I creep through every nerve.

## 12

Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was  
burned:  
35 “Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what  
Venice earned.  
The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be discerned.

## 13

“Yours for instance: you know physics, something of geology,  
Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their degree;  
Butterflies may dread extinction—you'll not die, it cannot be!”

## 14

40 “As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,  
Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were  
the crop:  
What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?”

15

“Dust and ashes!” So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.  
 Dear dead women, with such hair, too—what’s become of all the gold  
 45 Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old.

ca. 1847

1855

## A Woman’s Last Word

1

Let’s contend no more, Love,  
 Strive nor weep:  
 All be as before, Love,  
 —Only sleep!

2

5 What so wild as words are?  
 I and thou  
 In debate, as birds are,  
 Hawk on bough!

3

10 See the creature stalking  
 While we speak!  
 Hush and hide the talking,  
 Cheek on cheek!

4

15 What so false as truth is,  
 False to thee?  
 Where the serpent’s tooth is  
 Shun the tree—

5

20 Where the apple reddens  
 Never pry—  
 Lest we lose our Edens,  
 Eve and I.

6

Be a god and hold me  
 With a charm!  
 Be a man and fold me  
 With thine arm!

7

25 Teach me, only teach, Love!  
 As I ought  
 I will speak thy speech, Love,  
 Think thy thought—

8

30 Meet, if thou require it,  
 Both demands,

Laying flesh and spirit  
 In thy hands.

9

That shall be tomorrow  
 Not tonight:  
 35 I must bury sorrow  
 Out of sight:

10

—Must a little weep, Love  
 (Foolish me!),  
 And so fall asleep, Love,  
 40 Loved by thee.

1855

### Youth and Art

1

It once might have been, once only:  
 We lodged in a street together,  
 You, a sparrow on the housetop lonely,  
 I, a lone she-bird of his feather.

2

5 Your trade was with sticks and clay,  
 You thumbed, thrust, patted, and polished,  
 Then laughed, "They will see some day  
 Smith made, and Gibson<sup>1</sup> demolished."

3

10 My business was song, song, song;  
 I chirped, cheeped, trilled, and twittered,  
 "Kate Brown's on the boards ere long,  
 And Grisi's<sup>2</sup> existence embittered!"

4

I earned no more by a warble  
 Than you by a sketch in plaster;  
 15 You wanted a piece of marble,  
 I needed a music master.

5

We studied hard in our styles,  
 Chipped each at a crust like Hindoos,  
 For air looked out on the tiles,  
 20 For fun watched each other's windows.

1. John Gibson (1790–1866), English sculptor.

2. Giulia Grisi (1811–1869), Italian soprano.

6

You lounged, like a boy of the South,  
 Cap and blouse—nay, a bit of beard, too;  
 Or you got it, rubbing your mouth  
 With fingers the clay adhered to.

7

25 And I—soon managed to find  
 Weak points in the flower-fence facing,  
 Was forced to put up a blind  
 And be safe in my corset lacing.

8

No harm! It was not my fault  
 30 If you never turned your eye's tail up,  
 As I shook upon E *in alt*,<sup>3</sup>  
 Or ran the chromatic scale up:

9

For spring bade the sparrows pair,  
 And the boys and girls gave guesses,  
 35 And stalls in our street looked rare  
 With bulrush and watercresses.

10

Why did not you pinch a flower  
 In a pellet of clay and fling it?  
 Why did not I put a power  
 40 Of thanks in a look, or sing it?

11

I did look, sharp as a lynx  
 (And yet the memory rankles)  
 When models arrived, some minx  
 Tripped upstairs, she and her ankles.

12

45 But I think I gave you as good!  
 "That foreign fellow—who can know  
 How she pays, in a playful mood,  
 For his tuning her that piano?"

13

Could you say so, and never say  
 50 "Suppose we join hands and fortunes,  
 And I fetch her from over the way,  
 Her, piano, and long tunes and short tunes"?

14

No, no: you would not be rash,  
 Nor I rasher and something over:  
 55 You've to settle yet Gibson's hash,  
 And Crisi yet lives in clover.

3. High E.

15

But you meet the Prince<sup>4</sup> at the Board,  
 I'm queen myself at *bals-paré*,<sup>5</sup>  
 I've married a rich old lord,  
 60 And you're dubbed knight and an R. A.

16

Each life unfulfilled, you see;  
 It hangs still, patchy and scrappy:  
 We have not sighed deep, laughed free,  
 Starved, feasted, despaired—been happy.

17

65 And nobody calls you a dunce,  
 And people suppose me clever:  
 This could but have happened once,  
 And we missed it, lost it forever.

ca. 1860

1864

Dîs Aliter Visum; or, Le Byron de Nos Jours<sup>1</sup>

1

Stop, let me have the truth of that!  
 Is that all true? I say, the day  
 Ten years ago when both of us  
 Met on a morning, friends—as thus  
 5 We meet this evening, friends or what?—

2

Did you—because I took your arm  
 And sillily smiled, “A mass of brass  
 That sea looks, blazing underneath!”  
 While up the cliff-road edged with heath,  
 10 We took the turns nor came to harm—

4. Perhaps Prince Albert, a patron of the arts. Now that the sculptor has acquired a title and is an “R.A.” (a member of the respectable Royal Academy of Arts), he serves on committees or boards with the prince.

5. Fancy-dress balls.

1. The first half of the title, from Virgil's *Aeneid* 2.428, is a comment on the slaying of a good man who seemingly deserved a better fate but “the gods willed it otherwise.” The second half of the title presumably points out the difference between Byron's impetuous conduct as a lover and the timid behavior of the poet who is his latter-day successor, the Byron of *our* days. At least two 19th-century French poets had been called the French Byron (Alphonse Lamartine and Alfred de Musset), but Browning does not seem to have had a special model in mind.

This monologue is Browning's most complex treatment of a situation frequently recurrent in his

poems: that of a person who looks back on a lost opportunity of establishing a love relationship. The speaker, a woman in her early thirties, encounters an elderly French poet with whom she had fallen in love ten years earlier. At the hotel on the coast of France where they meet, as the poem opens, the poet has been reminding her of their previous acquaintance. She stops his narrative to offer her own vehemently expressed version of why he had rejected the chance of loving her as a young girl. Her analysis of his motives involves her imagining what his thoughts had been ten years earlier, and these imagined thoughts include speeches that he supposes *she* might make. Because her indictment of him is expressed in terms that echo ideas of love and heaven frequently expressed in other poems by Browning, we get the impression that she is the author's spokeswoman, but this impression is complicated by our judgment of the distortion imposed by the intensity of her hatred.

## 3

Did you consider "Now makes twice  
 That I have seen her, walked and talked  
 With this poor pretty thoughtful thing,  
 Whose worth I weigh: she tries to sing;  
 15 Draws, hopes in time the eye grows nice;<sup>2</sup>

## 4

"Reads verse and thinks she understands;  
 Loves all, at any rate, that's great,  
 Good, beautiful; but much as we  
 Down at the bath-house love the sea,  
 20 Who breathe its salt and bruise its sands:

## 5

"While . . . do but follow the fishing-gull  
 That flaps and floats from wave to cave!  
 There's the sea-lover, fair my friend!<sup>3</sup>  
 What then? Be patient, mark and mend!  
 25 Had you the making of your skull?"

## 6

And did you, when we faced the church  
 With spire and sad slate roof, aloof  
 From human fellowship so far,  
 Where a few graveyard crosses are,  
 30 And garlands for the swallows' perch,—

## 7

Did you determine, as we stepped  
 O'er the lone stone fence, "Let me get  
 Her for myself, and what's the earth  
 With all its art, verse, music, worth—  
 35 Compared with love, found, gained, and kept?"

## 8

"Schumann's our music-maker now;  
 Has his march-movement youth and mouth?  
 Ingres's the modern man that paints;  
 Which will lean on me, of his saints?  
 40 Heine<sup>4</sup> for songs; for kisses, how?"

## 9

And did you, when we entered, reached  
 The votive frigate,<sup>5</sup> soft aloft  
 Riding on air this hundred years,  
 Safe-smiling at old hopes and fears,—  
 45 Did you draw profit while she preached?

2. Discriminating.

3. In these lines the woman imagines what the poet might think: that the amateurish quality of the girl's involvement with art and literature is similar to the bathers' relative ignorance of the true nature of the sea. The bathers are acquainted only with the sea's fringes, as contrasted with the gull, who is fully immersed in his element.

4. Heinrich Heine (1800–1856), German poet. Robert Schumann (1810–1856), German composer.

Jean August Ingres (1780–1867), French painter.  
 5. Model of a ship hanging in the church as a thanksgiving offering for the safe return of sailors from a stormy voyage. The ship "preached" (line 45) assurances to the man about the possible risks involved in a relationship with the girl.

## 10

Resolving, "Fools we wise men grow!  
 Yes, I could easily blurt out curt  
 Some question that might find reply  
 As prompt in her stopped lips, dropped eye,  
 50 And rush of red to cheek and brow:

## 11

"Thus were a match made, sure and fast,  
 'Mid the blue weed-flowers round the mound  
 Where, issuing, we shall stand and stay  
 For one more look at baths and bay,  
 55 Sands, seagulls, and the old church last—

## 12

"A match 'twixt me, bent, wiggled and lamed,  
 Famous, however, for verse and worse,  
 Sure of the Fortieth spare Armchair<sup>6</sup>  
 When gout and glory seat me there,  
 60 So, one whose love-freaks pass unblamed,—

## 13

"And this young beauty, round and sound  
 As a mountain-apple, youth and truth  
 With loves and doves, at all events  
 With money in the Three per Cents;<sup>7</sup>  
 65 Whose choice of me would seem profound:—

## 14

"She might take me as I take her.  
 Perfect the hour would pass, alas!  
 Climb high, love high, what matter? Still,  
 Feet, feelings, must descend the hill:  
 70 An hour's perfection can't recur.

## 15

"Then follows Paris and full time  
 For both to reason: 'Thus with us!'<sup>8</sup>  
 She'll sigh, 'Thus girls give body and soul  
 At first word, think they gain the goal,  
 75 When 'tis the starting-place they climb!

## 16

"My friend makes verse and gets renown;  
 Have they all fifty years, his peers?  
 He knows the world, firm, quiet and gay;  
 Boys will become as much one day:  
 80 They're fools; he cheats, with beard less brown.

6. One of the forty seats in the French Academy to which famous writers are elected when a vacancy occurs through death of a member.

7. Her private income is from safe investments in government bonds.

8. Here again, the woman imagines what the man

might suppose they would say or think of each other if, after their "hour's perfection," they descended to the everyday realities of living in Paris together. What she *might* have said (stanzas 15–18) leads to his resolution to break off the relationship.

17

“‘For boys say, *Love me or I die!*  
 He did not say, *The truth is, youth*  
*I want, who am old and know too much;*  
*I'd catch youth: lend me sight and touch!*  
 85 *Drop heart's blood where life's wheels grate dry!*”

18

“While I should make rejoinder”—(then  
 It was, no doubt, you ceased that least  
 Light pressure of my arm in yours)  
 “I can conceive of cheaper cures  
 90 For a yawning-fit o'er books and men.

19

“‘What? All I am, was, and might be,  
 All, books taught, art brought, life's whole strife,  
 Painful results since precious, just  
 Were fitly exchanged, in wise disgust,  
 95 For two cheeks freshened by youth and sea?

20

“‘All for a nosegay!—what came first;  
 With fields on flower, untried each side;  
 I rally, need my books and men,  
 And find a nosegay': drop it, then,  
 100 No match yet made for best or worst!”

21

That ended me. You judged the porch  
 We left by, Norman:<sup>9</sup> took our look  
 At sea and sky; wondered so few  
 Find out the place for air and view;  
 105 Remarked the sun began to scorch;

22

Descended, soon regained the baths,  
 And then, good-bye! Years ten since then:  
 Ten years! We meet: you tell me, now,  
 By a window-seat for that cliff-brow,  
 110 On carpet-stripes for those sand-paths.

23

Now I may speak: you fool, for all  
 Your lore! Who made things plain in vain?  
 What was the sea for? What, the gray  
 Sad church, that solitary day,  
 115 Crosses and graves and swallows' call?

24

Was there naught better than to enjoy?  
 No feat which, done, would make time break,

9. A style of architecture prevalent in France and England in the 11th and 12th centuries.

And let us pent-up creatures through  
 Into eternity, our due?  
 120 No forcing earth teach heaven's employ?

25

No wise beginning, here and now,  
 What cannot grow complete (earth's feat)  
 And heaven must finish, there and then?  
 No tasting earth's true food for men,  
 125 Its sweet in sad, its sad in sweet?

26

No grasping at love, gaining a share  
 O' the sole spark from God's life at strife  
 With death, so, sure of range above  
 The limits here? For us and love,  
 130 Failure; but, when God fails, despair.<sup>1</sup>

27

This you call wisdom? Thus you add  
 Good unto good again, in vain?  
 You loved, with body worn and weak;  
 I loved, with faculties to seek;  
 135 Were both loves worthless since ill-clad?

28

Let the mere starfish in his vault  
 Crawl in a wash of weed, indeed,  
 Rose-jacynth to the fingertips:  
 He, whole in body and soul, outstrips  
 140 Man, found with either in default.<sup>2</sup>

29

But what's whole, can increase no more,  
 Is dwarfed and dies, since here's its sphere.  
 The devil laughed at you in his sleeve!  
 You knew not? That I well believe;  
 145 Or you had saved two souls: nay, four.

30

For Stephanie sprained last night her wrist,  
 Ankle or something, "Pooh," cry you?  
 At any rate she danced, all say,  
 Vilely; her vogue has had its day.  
 150 Here comes my husband from his whist.

ca. 1862

1864

1. To believe that love, because imperfect, is not worth the risk is a denial of God's role, a blasphemy.  
 2. In its perfect adaptation to a limited earthly

environment the starfish "outstrips" humankind. Our distinctive role, by contrast, is to aspire to the unobtainable.

## Apparent Failure

"We shall soon lose a celebrated building."

PARIS NEWSPAPER

## I

No, for I'll save it! Seven years since,  
 I passed through Paris, stopped a day  
 To see the baptism of your Prince;<sup>1</sup>  
 Saw, made my bow, and went my way:  
 5 Walking the heat and headache off,  
 I took the Seine-side, you surmise,  
 Thought of the Congress, Gortschakoff,  
 Cavour's appeal and Buol's replies,<sup>2</sup>  
 So sauntered till—what met my eyes?

## 2

10 Only the Doric little Morgue!  
 The dead-house where you show your drowned:  
 Petrarch's Vaucluse makes proud the Sorgue,<sup>3</sup>  
 Your Morgue has made the Seine renowned.  
 One pays one's debt in such a case;  
 15 I plucked up heart and entered—stalked,  
 Keeping a tolerable face  
 Compared with some whose cheeks were chalked:  
 Let them! No Briton's to be balked!

## 3

First came the silent gazers; next,  
 20 A screen of glass, we're thankful for;  
 Last, the sight's self, the sermon's text,  
 The three men who did most abhor  
 Their life in Paris yesterday,  
 So killed themselves: and now, enthroned  
 25 Each on his copper couch, they lay  
 Fronting me, waiting to be owned.  
 I thought, and think, their sin's atoned.

## 4

Poor men, God made, and all for that!  
 The reverence struck me; o'er each head  
 30 Religiously was hung its hat,  
 Each coat dripped by the owner's bed,  
 Sacred from touch: each had his berth,  
 His bounds, his proper place of rest,  
 Who last night tenanted on earth  
 35 Some arch, where twelve such slept abreast—  
 Unless the plain asphalt seemed best.

1. Prince Louis, son of Napoleon III, was baptized in June 1856. Browning had witnessed the event.

2. The Congress of Paris that met in 1856 to establish peace terms after the Crimean War. Russia was represented by Prince Alexander Gortschakoff;

Piedmont, by Count Cavour; and Austria, by Count von Buol-Schauenstein.

3. The Sorgue River is renowned because the poet Petrarch lived in Vaucluse, a village on its banks.

## 5

How did it happen, my poor boy?  
 You wanted to be Buonaparte  
 And have the Tuileries<sup>4</sup> for toy,  
 40 And could not, so it broke your heart?  
 You, old one by his side, I judge,  
 Were, red as blood, a socialist,  
 A leveler! Does the Empire grudge  
 You've gained what no Republic missed?  
 45 Be quiet, and unclench your fist!

## 6

And this—why, he was red in vain,  
 Or black<sup>5</sup>—poor fellow that is blue!  
 What fancy was it turned your brain?  
 Oh, women were the prize for you!  
 50 Money gets women, cards and dice  
 Get money, and ill luck gets just  
 The copper couch and one clear nice  
 Cool squirt of water o'er your bust,  
 The right thing to extinguish lust!

## 7

It's wiser being good than bad;  
 It's safer being meek than fierce:  
 It's fitter being sane than mad.  
 My own hope is, a sun will pierce  
 The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;  
 60 That, after Last, returns the First,  
 Though a wide compass round be fetched;  
 That what began best, can't end worst,  
 Nor what God blessed once, prove accursed.

1863

1864

## House

## 1

Shall I sonnet-sing you about myself?  
 Do I live in a house you would like to see?  
 Is it scant of gear, has it store of pelf?  
 "Unlock my heart with a sonnet-key?"

## 2

5 Invite the world, as my betters have done?  
 "Take notice: this building remains on view,  
 Its suites of reception every one,  
 Its private apartment and bedroom too;

4. The palace in Paris where the kings of France had resided.

5. A reference to a gambling game, *rouge-et-noir*, in which red or black may win the stakes.

3

"For a ticket, apply to the Publisher."

- 10 No: thanking the public, I must decline.  
A peep through my window, if folk prefer;  
But, please you, no foot over threshold of mine!

4

- I have mixed with a crowd and heard free talk  
In a foreign land where an earthquake chanced:  
15 And a house stood gaping, naught to balk  
Man's eye wherever he gazed or glanced.

5

- The whole of the frontage shaven sheer,  
The inside gaped: exposed to day,  
Right and wrong and common and queer,  
20 Bare, as the palm of your hand, it lay.

6

The owner? Oh, he had been crushed, no doubt!  
"Odd tables and chairs for a man of wealth!  
What a parcel of musty old books about!  
He smoked—no wonder he lost his health!

7

- 25 "I doubt if he bathed before he dressed.  
A brazier?—the pagan, he burned perfumes!  
You see it is proved, what the neighbors guessed:  
His wife and himself had separate rooms."

8

- Friends, the goodman of the house at least  
30 Kept house to himself till an earthquake came:  
'Tis the fall of its frontage permits you feast  
On the inside arrangement you praise or blame.

9

- Outside should suffice for evidence:  
And whoso desires to penetrate  
35 Deeper, must dive by the spirit-sense—  
No optics like yours, at any rate!

10

- "Hoity toity! A street to explore,  
Your house the exception! 'With this same key  
Shakespeare unlocked his heart,' once more!"<sup>1</sup>  
40 Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!

1874

1876

1. The quotation is from Wordsworth's *Scorn Not the Sonnet*, which praises the sonnet form as the one in which Shakespeare had revealed his true self. In theory, if not in practice, Browning strongly disapproved of a poet who "unlocked his heart" in public. A striking example of this failing was *The House of Life*, a sonnet sequence by D. G. Rossetti, published

in 1870. It has been conjectured that the glimpses into the intimacies of domestic life and love relations, featured in Rossetti's sonnets, probably prompted Browning to present his case on behalf of an artist's right to privacy and need for reticence. He himself rarely used the sonnet form.

To Edward FitzGerald<sup>1</sup>

I chanced upon a new book yesterday;  
 I opened it, and, where my finger lay  
     "Twixt page and uncut page, these words I read—  
 Some six or seven at most—and learned thereby  
 5 That you, FitzGerald, whom by ear and eye  
     She never knew, "thanked God my wife was dead."  
 Aye, dead! and were yourself alive, good Fitz,  
 How to return you thanks would task my wits—  
     Kicking you seems the common lot of curs—  
 10 While more appropriate greeting lends you grace,  
 Surely to spit there glorifies your face—  
     Spitting from lips once sanctified by hers.

1889

1889

## Abt Vogler

*(After he has Been Extemporizing Upon  
 the Musical Instrument of His Invention)*

## I

Would that the structure brave, the manifold music I build,  
     Bidding my organ obey, calling its keys to their work,  
 Claiming each slave of the sound, at a touch, as when Solomon  
     willed  
     Armies of angels that soar, legions of demons that lurk,  
 5 Man, brute, reptile, fly—alien of end and of aim,  
     Adverse, each from the other heaven-high, hell-deep removed—  
 Should rush into sight at once as he named the ineffable Name,  
     And pile him a palace straight, to pleasure the princess he loved!

## 2

Would it might tarry like his, the beautiful building of mine,  
 10 This which my keys in a crowd pressed and importuned to raise!  
 Ah, one and all, how they helped, would dispart now and now  
     combine,  
     Zealous to hasten the work, heighten their master his praise!  
 And one would bury his brow with a blind plunge down to hell,  
     Burrow awhile and build, broad on the roots of things,  
 15 Then up again swim into sight, having based me my palace well,  
     Founded it, fearless of flame, flat on the nether springs.

## 3

And another would mount and march, like the excellent minion  
 he was,

1. In 1861 FitzGerald wrote to a friend: "Mrs. Browning's death is rather a relief to me, I must say: no more *Aurora Leighs*. . . . She and her sex had better mind the kitchen and the children." Browning discovered the passage among FitzGerald's posthumously published letters and in white

heat wrote this rejoinder, which was published in the *Athenaeum*. In defense of his poem, Browning wrote a long and eloquent letter to the Tennysons (who had been close friends of FitzGerald), which was published in the *Times Literary Supplement* (June 3, 1965) 464.

Aye, another and yet another, one crowd but with many a crest,  
 Raising my rampired walls of gold as transparent as glass,  
 20 Eager to do and die, yield each his place to the rest:  
 For higher still and higher (as a runner tips with fire,  
 When a great illumination surprises a festal night—  
 Outlining round and round Rome's dome from space to spire)  
 Up, the pinnacled glory reached, and the pride of my soul was  
 in sight.

## 4

25 In sight? Not half! for it seemed, it was certain, to match  
 man's birth,  
 Nature in turn conceived, obeying an impulse as I;  
 And the emulous heaven yearned down, made effort to reach  
 the earth,  
 As the earth had done her best, in my passion, to scale the sky:  
 Novel splendors burst forth, grew familiar and dwelt with mine,  
 30 Not a point nor peak but found and fixed its wandering star;  
 Meteor-moons, balls of blaze: and they did not pale nor pine,  
 For earth had attained to heaven, there was no more near nor far.

## 5

Nay more; for there wanted not who walked in the glare and glow,  
 Presences plain in the place; or, fresh from the Protoplast,  
 35 Furnished for ages to come, when a kindlier wind should blow,  
 Lured now to begin and live, in a house to their liking at last;  
 Or else the wonderful Dead who have passed through the body  
 and gone,  
 But were back once more to breathe in an old world worth  
 their new:  
 What never had been, was now; what was, as it shall be anon;  
 40 And what is—shall I say, matched both? for I was made  
 perfect too.

## 6

All through my keys that gave their sounds to a wish of my soul,  
 All through my soul that praised as its wish flowed visibly forth,  
 All through music and me! For think, had I painted the whole,  
 Why, there it had stood, to see, nor the process so wonderworth:  
 45 Had I written the same, made verse—still, effect proceeds  
 from cause,  
 Ye know why the forms are fair, ye hear how the tale is told;  
 It is all triumphant art, but art in obedience to laws,  
 Painter and poet are proud in the artist-list enrolled—

## 7

But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,  
 50 Existent behind all laws, that made them and, lo, they are!  
 And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,  
 That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.  
 Consider it well: each tone of our scale in itself is naught;  
 It is everywhere in the world—loud, soft, and all is said:  
 55 Give it to me to use! I mix it with two in my thought:  
 And, there! Ye have heard and seen: consider and bow the head!

## 8

Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I reared;  
 Gone! and the good tears start, the praises that come too slow;  
 For one is assured at first, one scarce can say that he feared,  
 60 That he even gave it a thought, the gone thing was to go.  
 Never to be again! But many more of the kind  
 As good, nay, better perchance: is this your comfort to me?  
 To me, who must be saved because I cling with my mind  
 To the same, same self, same love, same God: aye, what was,  
 shall be.

## 9

65 Therefore to whom turn I but to thee, the ineffable Name?  
 Builder and maker, thou, of houses not made with hands!  
 What, have fear of change from thee who art ever the same?  
 Doubt that thy power can fill the heart that thy power expands?  
 There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall live as before;  
 70 The evil is null, is naught, is silence implying sound;  
 What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more;  
 On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round.

## 10

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;  
 Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power  
 75 Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist  
 When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.  
 The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,  
 The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,  
 Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;  
 80 Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by-and-by.

## 11

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence  
 For the fullness of the days? Have we withered or agonized?  
 Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might  
 issue thence?  
 Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should be prized?  
 85 Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,  
 Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe:  
 But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;  
 The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians know.

## 12

Well, it is earth with me; silence resumes her reign:  
 90 I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce.  
 Give me the keys. I feel for the common chord again,  
 Sliding by semitones, till I sink to the minor—yes,  
 And I blunt it into a ninth, and I stand on alien ground,  
 Surveying awhile the heights I rolled from into the deep;  
 95 Which, hark, I have dared and done, for my resting place is found,  
 The C Major of this life: so, now I will try to sleep.

