

# Sonnets from the Portuguese



Sonnets from the Portuguese

by

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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## I

I thought once how Theocritus had sung  
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,  
Who each one in a gracious hand appears  
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:  
And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,  
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,  
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,  
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung  
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,  
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move  
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;  
And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,—  
"Guess now who holds thee!"—"Death," I said, But, there,  
The silver answer rang, "Not Death, but Love."

## II

But only three in all God's universe  
Have heard this word thou hast said,—Himself, beside  
Thee speaking, and me listening! and replied  
One of us...*that* was God,...and laid the curse  
So darkly on my eyelids, as to amerce  
My sight from seeing thee,—that if I had died,  
The death-weights, placed there, would have signified  
Less absolute exclusion. "Nay" is worse  
From God than from all others, O my friend!  
Men could not part us with their worldly jars,  
Nor the seas change us, nor the tempests bend;  
Our hands would touch for all the mountain-bars:  
And, heaven being rolled between us at the end,  
We should but vow the faster for the stars.

### III

Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart!

Unlike our uses and our destinies.

Our ministering two angels look surprise  
On one another, as they strike athwart  
Their wings in passing. Thou, bethink thee, art  
A guest for queens to social pageantries,  
With gages from a hundred brighter eyes  
Than tears even can make mine, to play thy part  
Of chief musician. What hast *thou* to do

With looking from the lattice-lights at me,

A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through

The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?

The chrism is on thine head,—on mine, the dew,—

And Death must dig the level where these agree.

#### IV

Thou hast thy calling to some palace-floor,  
    Most gracious singer of high poems! where  
    The dancers will break footing, from the care  
Of watching up thy pregnant lips for more.  
And dost thou lift this house's latch too poor  
    For hand of thine? and canst thou think and bear  
    To let thy music drop here unaware  
In folds of golden fulness at my door?  
    Look up and see the casement broken in,  
    The bats and owlets builders in the roof!  
My cricket chirps against thy mandolin.  
    Hush, call no echo up in further proof  
Of desolation! there's a voice within  
    That weeps...as thou must sing...alone, aloof.

## V

I lift my heavy heart up solemnly,  
As once Electra her sepulchral urn,  
And, looking in thine eyes, I over-turn  
The ashes at thy feet. Behold and see  
What a great heap of grief lay hid in me,  
And how the red wild sparkles dimly burn  
Through the ashen greyness. If thy foot in scorn  
Could tread them out to darkness utterly,  
It might be well perhaps. But if instead  
Thou wait beside me for the wind to blow  
The grey dust up,...those laurels on thine head,  
O my Beloved, will not shield thee so,  
That none of all the fires shall scorch and shred  
The hair beneath. Stand further off then! go!

VI

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand  
Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore  
Alone upon the threshold of my door  
Of individual life, I shall command  
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand  
Serenely in the sunshine as before,  
Without the sense of that which I forbore—  
Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land  
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine  
With pulses that beat double. What I do  
And what I dream include thee, as the wine  
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue  
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,  
And sees within my eyes the tears of two.

## VII

The face of all the world is changed, I think,  
    Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul  
    Move still, oh, still, beside me, as they stole  
Betwixt me and the dreadful outer brink  
Of obvious death, where I, who thought to sink,  
    Was caught up into love, and taught the whole  
    Of life in a new rhythm. The cup of dole  
God gave for baptism, I am fain to drink,  
    And praise its sweetness, Sweet, with thee anear.  
    The names of country, heaven, are changed away  
For where thou art or shalt be, there or here;  
    And this...this lute and song...loved yesterday,  
(The singing angels know) are only dear  
    Because thy name moves right in what they say.

## VIII

What can I give thee back, O liberal  
    And princely giver, who hast brought the gold  
    And purple of thine heart, unstained, untold,  
And laid them on the outside of the wall  
For such as I to take or leave withal,  
    In unexpected largesse? am I cold,  
    Ungrateful, that for these most manifold  
High gifts, I render nothing back at all?  
    Not so; not cold,—but very poor instead.  
    Ask God who knows. For frequent tears have run  
The colours from my life, and left so dead  
    And pale a stuff, it were not fitly done  
To give the same as pillow to thy head.  
    Go farther! let it serve to trample on.

IX

Can it be right to give what I can give?  
    To let thee sit beneath the fall of tears  
    As salt as mine, and hear the sighing years  
Re-sighing on my lips renunciative  
Through those infrequent smiles which fail to live  
    For all thy adjurations? O my fears,  
    That this can scarce be right! We are not peers  
So to be lovers; and I own, and grieve,  
    That givers of such gifts as mine are, must  
    Be counted with the ungenerous. Out, alas!  
I will not soil thy purple with my dust,  
    Nor breathe my poison on thy Venice-glass,  
Nor give thee any love—which were unjust.  
    Beloved, I only love thee! let it pass.

X

Yet, love, mere love, is beautiful indeed  
And worthy of acceptance. Fire is bright,  
Let temple burn, or flax; an equal light  
Leaps in the flame from cedar-plank or weed:  
And love is fire. And when I say at need  
*I love thee...mark!...I love thee*—in thy sight  
I stand transfigured, glorified aright,  
With conscience of the new rays that proceed  
Out of my face toward thine. There's nothing low  
In love, when love the lowest: meanest creatures  
Who love God, God accepts while loving so.  
And what I *feel*, across the inferior features  
Of what I *am*, doth flash itself, and show  
How that great work of Love enhances Nature's.

XI

And therefore if to love can be desert,  
    I am not all unworthy. Cheeks as pale  
    As these you see, and trembling knees that fail  
To bear the burden of a heavy heart,—  
This weary minstrel-life that once was girt  
    To climb Aornus, and can scarce avail  
    To pipe now 'gainst the valley nightingale  
A melancholy music,—why advert  
    To these things? O Beloved, it is plain  
    I am not of thy worth nor for thy place!  
And yet, because I love thee, I obtain  
    From that same love this vindicating grace  
To live on still in love, and yet in vain,—  
    To bless thee, yet renounce thee to thy face.

## XII

Indeed this very love which is my boast,  
And which, when rising up from breast to brow,  
Doth crown me with a ruby large enow  
To draw men's eyes and prove the inner cost,—  
This love even, all my worth, to the uttermost,  
I should not love withal, unless that thou  
Hadst set me an example, shown me how,  
When first thine earnest eyes with mine were crossed,  
And love called love. And thus, I cannot speak  
Of love even, as a good thing of my own:  
Thy soul hath snatched up mine all faint and weak,  
And placed it by thee on a golden throne,—  
And that I love (O soul, we must be meek!)  
Is by thee only, whom I love alone.

**XIII**

And wilt thou have me fashion into speech  
    The love I bear thee, finding words enough,  
    And hold the torch out, while the winds are rough,  
Between our faces, to cast light on each?—  
I drop it at thy feet. I cannot teach  
    My hand to hold my spirits so far off  
    From myself—me—that I should bring thee proof  
In words, of love hid in me out of reach.  
Nay, let the silence of my womanhood  
    Commend my woman-love to thy belief,—  
Seeing that I stand unwon, however wooed,  
    And rend the garment of my life, in brief,  
By a most dauntless, voiceless fortitude,  
    Lest one touch of this heart convey its grief.

XIV

If thou must love me, let it be for nought  
    Except for love's sake only. Do not say  
    "I love her for her smile—her look—her way  
Of speaking gently,—for a trick of thought  
That falls in well with mine, and certes brought  
    A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—  
    For these things in themselves, Beloved, may  
Be changed, or change for thee,—and love, so wrought,  
    May be unwrought so. Neither love me for  
    Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry,—  
A creature might forget to weep, who bore  
    Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!  
But love me for love's sake, that evermore  
    Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity.

## XV

Accuse me not, beseech thee, that I wear  
    Too calm and sad a face in front of thine;  
    For we two look two ways, and cannot shine  
With the same sunlight on our brow and hair.  
On me thou lookest with no doubting care,  
    As on a bee shut in a crystalline;  
    Since sorrow hath shut me safe in love's divine,  
And to spread wing and fly in the outer air  
    Were most impossible failure, if I strove  
    To fail so. But I look on thee—on thee—  
Beholding, besides love, the end of love,  
    Hearing oblivion beyond memory;  
As one who sits and gazes from above,  
    Over the rivers to the bitter sea.

XVI

And yet, because thou overcomest so,  
    Because thou art more noble and like a king,  
    Thou canst prevail against my fears and fling  
Thy purple round me, till my heart shall grow  
Too close against thine heart henceforth to know  
    How it shook when alone. Why, conquering  
    May prove as lordly and complete a thing  
In lifting upward, as in crushing low!  
    And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword  
    To one who lifts him from the bloody earth,  
Even so, Beloved, I at last record,  
    Here ends my strife. If *thou* invite me forth,  
I rise above abasement at the word.  
    Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth!

**XVII**

My poet, thou canst touch on all the notes  
God set between His After and Before,  
And strike up and strike off the general roar  
Of the rushing worlds a melody that floats  
In a serene air purely. Antidotes  
Of medicated music, answering for  
Mankind's forlornest uses, thou canst pour  
From thence into their ears. God's will devotes  
Thine to such ends, and mine to wait on thine.  
How, Dearest, wilt thou have me for most use?  
A hope, to sing by gladly? or a fine  
Sad memory, with thy songs to interfuse?  
A shade, in which to sing—of palm or pine?  
A grave, on which to rest from singing? Choose.

## XVIII

I never gave a lock of hair away  
    To a man, Dearest, except this to thee,  
    Which now upon my fingers thoughtfully  
I ring out to the full brown length and say  
"Take it." My day of youth went yesterday;  
    My hair no longer bounds to my foot's glee,  
    Nor plant I it from rose- or myrtle-tree,  
As girls do, any more: it only may  
    Now shade on two pale cheeks the mark of tears,  
    Taught drooping from the head that hangs aside  
Through sorrow's trick. I thought the funeral-shears  
    Would take this first, but Love is justified,—  
Take it thou,—finding pure, from all those years,  
    The kiss my mother left here when she died.

**XIX**

The soul's Rialto hath its merchandize;  
I barter curl for curl upon that mart,  
And from my poet's forehead to my heart  
Receive this lock which outweighs argosies,—  
As purply black, as erst to Pindar's eyes  
The dim purpureal tresses gloomed athwart  
The nine white Muse-brows. For this counterpart,...  
The bay crown's shade, Beloved, I surmise,  
Still lingers on thy curl, it is so black!  
Thus, with a fillet of smooth-kissing breath,  
I tie the shadows safe from gliding back,  
And lay the gift where nothing hindereth;  
Here on my heart, as on thy brow, to lack  
No natural heat till mine grows cold in death.

XX

Beloved, my Beloved, when I think  
That thou wast in the world a year ago,  
What time I sat alone here in the snow  
And saw no footprint, heard the silence sink  
No moment at thy voice, but, link by link,  
Went counting all my chains as if that so  
They never could fall off at any blow  
Struck by thy possible hand,—why, thus I drink  
Of life's great cup of wonder! Wonderful,  
Never to feel thee thrill the day or night  
With personal act or speech,—nor ever cull  
Some prescience of thee with the blossoms white  
Thou sawest growing! Atheists are as dull,  
Who cannot guess God's presence out of sight.