

# **POEMS OF 1844: SONNETS**

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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# POEMS OF 1844: SONNETS

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## A THOUGHT FOR A LONELY DEATH-BED

INSCRIBED TO MY FRIEND E. C.

IF God compel thee to this destiny,  
To die alone, with none beside thy bed  
To ruffle round with sobs thy last word said  
And mark with tears the pulses ebb from thee,—  
Pray then alone, 'O Christ, come tenderly!  
By thy forsaken Sonship in the red  
Drear wine-press,—by the wilderness out-spread,—

And the lone garden where thine agony  
Fell bloody from thy brow,—by all of those  
Permitted desolations, comfort mine!  
No earthly friend being near me, interpose  
No deathly angel 'twixt my face and thine,  
But stoop Thyself to gather my life's rose,  
And smile away my mortal to Divine! '

## ADEQUACY

NOW, by the verdure on thy thousand hills,  
Beloved England, doth the earth appear  
Quite good enough for men to overbear  
The will of God in, with rebellious wills!  
We cannot say the morning—sun fulfils  
Ingloriously its course, nor that the clear  
Strong stars without significance insphere  
Our habitation: we, meantime, our ills  
Heap up against this good and lift a cry  
Against this work—day world, this ill—spread feast,  
As if ourselves were better certainly  
Than what we come to. Maker and High Priest,  
I ask thee not my joys to multiply,—  
Only to make me worthier of the least.

## AN APPREHENSION

IF all the gentlest—hearted friends I know  
Concentred in one heart their gentleness,  
That still grew gentler till its pulse was less  
For life than pity,—I should yet be slow  
To bring my own heart nakedly below  
The palm of such a friend, that he should press  
Motive, condition, means, appliances,

My false ideal joy and fickle woe,

Out full to light and knowledge; I should fear  
Some plait between the brows, some rougher chime  
In the free voice. O angels, let your flood  
Of bitter scorn dash on me! do ye hear  
What I say who hear calmly all the time  
This everlasting face to face with GOD ?

## CHEERFULNESS TAUGHT BY REASON

I THINK we are too ready with complaint  
In this fair world of God's. Had we no hope  
Indeed beyond the zenith and the slope  
Of yon gray blank of sky, we might grow faint  
To muse upon eternity's constraint  
Round our aspirant souls; but since the scope  
Must widen early, is it well to droop,  
For a few days consumed in loss and taint ?  
O pusillanimous Heart, be comforted  
And, like a cheerful traveller, take the road  
Singing beside the hedge. What if the bread  
Be bitter in thine inn, and thou unshod  
To meet the flints ? At least it may be said  
'Because the way is short, I thank thee, God. '

## COMFORT

SPEAK low to me, my Saviour, low and sweet  
From out the hallelujahs, sweet and low  
Lest I should fear and fall, and miss Thee so  
Who art not missed by any that entreat.  
Speak to me as to Mary at thy feet!  
And if no precious gums my hands bestow,  
Let my tears drop like amber while I go  
In reach of thy divinest voice complete

In humanest affection — thus, in sooth,  
To lose the sense of losing. As a child,  
Whose song—bird seeks the wood for evermore  
Is sung to in its stead by mother's mouth  
Till, sinking on her breast, love—reconciled,  
He sleeps the faster that he wept before.

## DISCONTENT

LIGHT human nature is too lightly tost  
And ruffled without cause, complaining on—  
Restless with rest, until, being overthrown,  
It learneth to lie quiet. Let a frost  
Or a small wasp have crept to the inner—most  
Of our ripe peach, or let the wilful sun  
Shine westward of our window,—straight we run  
A furlong's sigh as if the world were lost.  
But what time through the heart and through the brain  
God hath transfixed us,—we, so moved before,  
Attain to a calm. Ay, shouldering weights of pain,  
We anchor in deep waters, safe from shore,  
And hear submissive o'er the stormy main  
God's chartered judgments walk for evermore.

## EXAGGERATION

WE overstate the ills of life, and take  
Imagination (given us to bring down  
The choirs of singing angels overshone  
By God's clear glory) down our earth to rake  
The dismal snows instead, flake following flake,  
To cover all the corn; we walk upon  
The shadow of hills across a level thrown,  
And pant like climbers: near the alder brake

We sigh so loud, the nightingale within  
Refuses to sing loud, as else she would.  
O brothers, let us leave the shame and sin  
Of taking vainly, in a plaintive mood,  
The holy name of GRIEF!--holy herein  
That by the grief of ONE came all our good.

## FUTURITY

AND, O beloved voices, upon which  
Ours passionately call because erelong  
Ye brake off in the middle of that song  
We sang together softly, to enrich  
The poor world with the sense of love, and witch,  
The heart out of things evil,--I am strong,  
Knowing ye are not lost for aye among

The hills, with last year's thrush. God keeps a niche  
In Heaven to hold our idols; and albeit  
He brake them to our faces and denied  
That our close kisses should impair their white,  
I know we shall behold them raised, complete,  
The dust swept from their beauty,--glorified  
New Memnons singing in the great God-light.

## GRIEF

I TELL you, hopeless grief is passionless;  
That only men incredulous of despair,  
Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air  
Beat upward to God's throne in loud access  
Of shrieking and reproach. Full desertness,  
In souls as countries, lieth silent-bare  
Under the blanching, vertical eye-glare  
Of the absolute Heavens. Deep-hearted man, express

Grief for thy Dead in silence like to death—  
Most like a monumental statue set  
In everlasting watch and moveless woe  
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath.  
Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet:  
If it could weep, it could arise and go.

## INSUFFICIENCY

When I attain to utter forth in verse  
Some inward thought, my soul throbs audibly  
Along my pulses, yearning to be free  
And something farther, fuller, higher, rehearse  
To the individual, true, and the universe,  
In consummation of right harmony:  
But, like a wind-exposed distorted tree,  
We are blown against for ever by the curse  
Which breathes through Nature. Oh, the world is weak!  
The effluence of each is false to all,  
And what we best conceive we fail to speak.  
Wait, soul, until thine ashen garments fall,  
And then resume thy broken strains, and seek  
Fit peroration without let or thrall.

## IRREPARABLENESS

I HAVE been in the meadows all the day  
And gathered there the nosegay that you see  
Singing within myself as bird or bee  
When such do field-work on a morn of May.  
But, now I look upon my flowers, decay  
Has met them in my hands more fatally  
Because more warmly clasped,—and sobs are free



To come instead of songs. What do you say,  
Sweet counsellors, dear friends ? that I should go  
Back straightway to the fields and gather more ?  
Another, sooth, may do it, but not I!  
My heart is very tired, my strength is low,  
My hands are full of blossoms plucked before,  
Held dead within them till myself shall die.

## ON A PORTRAIT OF WORDSWORTH BY B. R. HAYDON

WORDSWORTH upon Helvellyn! Let the cloud  
Ebb audibly along the mountain-wind,  
Then break against the rock, and show behind  
The lowland valleys floating up to crowd  
The sense with beauty. He with forehead bowed  
And humble-lidded eyes, as one inclined  
Before the sovran thought of his own mind,  
And very meek with inspirations proud,  
Takes here his rightful place as poet-priest  
By the high altar, singing prayer and prayer

To the higher Heavens. A noble vision free  
Our Haydon's hand has flung out from the mist:  
No portrait this, with Academic air!  
This is the poet and his poetry.

## PAIN IN PLEASURE

A THOUGHT ay like a flower upon mine heart,  
And drew around it other thoughts like bees  
For multitude and thirst of sweetnesses;  
Whereat rejoicing, I desired the art

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Of the Greek whistler, who to wharf and mart  
Could lure those insect swarms from orange-trees  
That I might hive with me such thoughts and please  
My soul so, always. foolish counterpart  
Of a weak man's vain wishes! While I spoke,  
The thought I called a flower grew nettle-rough  
The thoughts, called bees, stung me to festering:  
Oh, entertain (cried Reason as she woke)  
Your best and gladdest thoughts but long enough,  
And they will all prove sad enough to sting!

### PAST AND FUTURE

MY future will not copy fair my past  
On any leaf but Heaven's. Be fully done  
Supernal Will! I would not fain be one  
Who, satisfying thirst and breaking fast,  
Upon the fulness of the heart at last  
Says no grace after meat. My wine has run  
Indeed out of my cup, and there is none  
To gather up the bread of my repast  
Scattered and trampled; yet I find some good  
In earth's green herbs, and streams that bubble up  
Clear from the darkling ground,—content until  
I sit with angels before better food: —  
Dear Christ! when thy new vintage fills my cup,  
This hand shall shake no more, nor that wine spill

### PATIENCE TAUGHT BY NATURE

'O DREARY life,' we cry, 'O dreary life!'  
And still the generations of the birds  
Sing through our sighing, and the flocks and herds

Serenely live while we are keeping strife  
With Heaven's true purpose in us, as a knife  
Against which we may struggle! Ocean girds  
Unslackened the dry land, savannah—swards  
Unweary sweep, hills watch unworn, and rife  
Meek leaves drop yearly from the forest—trees  
To show, above, the unwasted stars that pass  
In their old glory: O thou God of old,  
Grant me some smaller grace than comes to these!—  
But so much patience as a blade of grass  
Grows by, contented through the heat and cold.

## PERPLEXED MUSIC

AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED TO E. J.

EXPERIENCE, like a pale musician, holds  
A dulcimer of patience in his hand,  
Whence harmonies, we cannot understand,  
Of God; will in his worlds, the strain unfolds  
In sad—perplexed minors: deathly colds  
Fall on us while we hear, and countermand  
Our sanguine heart back from the fancyland  
With nightingales in visionary wolds.  
We murmur 'Where is any certain tune  
Or measured music in such notes as these ?'  
But angels, leaning from the golden seat,  
Are not so minded their fine ear hath won  
The issue of completed cadences,  
And, smiling down the stars, they whisper—  
SWEET.

## SUBSTITUTION

## POEMS OF 1844: SONNETS

WHEN some beloved voice that was to you  
Both sound and sweetness, faileth suddenly,  
And silence, against which you dare not cry,  
Aches round you like a strong disease and new—  
What hope ? what help ? what music will undo  
That silence to your sense ? Not friendship's sigh,  
Not reason's subtle count; not melody  
Of viols, nor of pipes that Faunus blew;  
Not songs of poets, nor of nightingales  
Whose hearts leap upward through the cypress—trees  
To the clear moon; nor yet the spheric laws  
Self—chanted, nor the angels'sweet 'All hail,'  
Met in the smile of God: nay, none of these.  
Speak THOU, availing Christ!—and fill this pause.

## TEARS

THANK God, bless God, all ye who suffer not  
More grief than ye can weep for. That is well—  
That is light grieving! lighter, none befell  
Since Adam forfeited the primal lot.  
Tears! what are tears ? The babe weeps in its cot,  
The mother singing, at her marriage—bell  
The bride weeps, and before the oracle  
Of high—famed hills the poet has forgot  
Such moisture on his cheeks. Thank God for grace,  
Ye who weep only! If, as some have done,  
Ye grope tear—blinded in a desert place

And touch but tombs,—look up I those tears will run  
Soon in long rivers down the lifted face,  
And leave the vision clear for stars and sun

## THE LOOK

The Saviour looked on Peter. Ay, no word,  
 No gesture of reproach; the Heavens serene  
 Though heavy with armed justice, did not lean  
 Their thunders that way: the forsaken Lord  
 Looked only, on the traitor. None record  
 What that look was, none guess; for those who have seen  
 Wronged lovers loving through a death-pang keen,  
 Or pale-cheeked martyrs smiling to a sword,  
 Have missed Jehovah at the judgment-call.  
 And Peter, from the height of blasphemy—  
 'I never knew this man'—did quail and fall  
 As knowing straight THAT GOD; and turned free  
 And went out speechless from the face of all  
 And filled the silenc, weeping bitterly.

## THE MEANING OF THE LOOK

I think that look of Christ might seem to say—  
 'Thou Peter! art thou then a common stone  
 Which I at last must break my heart upon  
 For all God's charge to his high angels may  
 Guard my foot better ? Did I yesterday  
 Wash thy feet, my beloved, that they should run  
 Quick to deny me 'neath the morning sun ?  
 And do thy kisses, like the rest, betray ?  
 The cock crows coldly.—GO, and manifest  
 A late contrition, but no bootless fear!  
 For when thy final need is dreariest,  
 Thou shalt not be denied, as I am here;  
 My voice to God and angels shall attest,  
 Because I KNOW this man, let him be clear.'

## THE PRISONER

I count the dismal time by months and years  
Since last I felt the green sward under foot,  
And the great breath of all things summer—  
Met mine upon my lips. Now earth appears  
As strange to me as dreams of distant spheres  
Or thoughts of Heaven we weep at. Nature's lute  
Sounds on, behind this door so closely shut,  
A strange wild music to the prisoner's ears,  
Dilated by the distance, till the brain  
Grows dim with fancies which it feels too  
While ever, with a visionary pain,  
Past the precluded senses, sweep and Rhine  
Streams, forests, glades, and many a golden train  
Of sunlit hills transfigured to Divine.

## THE SERAPH AND POET

THE seraph sings before the manifest  
God—One, and in the burning of the Seven,  
And with the full life of consummate  
Heaving beneath him like a mother's  
Warm with her first-born's slumber in that  
The poet sings upon the earth grave-riven,  
Before the naughty world, soon self-forgiven  
For wronging him,—and in the darkness prest  
From his own soul by worldly weights.

Even so,  
Sing, seraph with the glory! heaven is high;  
Sing, poet with the sorrow! earth is low:  
The universe's inward voices cry  
'Amen' to either song of joy and woe:  
Sing, seraph,—poet,—sing on equally!

## THE SOUL'S EXPRESSION

WITH stammering lips and insufficient sound  
I strive and struggle to deliver right  
That music of my nature, day and night  
With dream and thought and feeling interwound  
And inly answering all the senses round  
With octaves of a mystic depth and height  
Which step out grandly to the infinite  
From the dark edges of the sensual ground.  
This song of soul I struggle to outbear  
Through portals of the sense, sublime and whole,  
And utter all myself into the air:  
But if I did it,—as the thunder—roll  
Breaks its own cloud, my flesh would perish there,  
Before that dread apocalypse of soul.

## THE TWO SAYINGS

Two savings of the Holy Scriptures beat  
Like pulses in the Church's brow and breast;  
And by them we find rest in our unrest  
And, heart deep in salt-tears, do yet entreat  
God's fellowship as if on heavenly seat.  
The first is JESUS WEPT,—whereon is prest  
Full many a sobbing face that drops its best  
And sweetest waters on the record sweet:  
And one is where the Christ, denied and scorned  
LOOKED UPON PETER. Oh, to render plain  
By help of having loved a little and mourned,  
That look of sovran love and sovran pain  
Which HE, who could not sin yet suffered, turned  
On him who could reject but not sustain!

## TO GEORGE SAND: A DESIRE

THOU large-brained woman and large-hearted man,  
Self-called George Sand! whose soul, amid the lions  
Of thy tumultuous senses, moans defiance  
And answers roar for roar, as spirits can:  
I would some mild miraculous thunder ran  
Above the applauded circus, in appliance  
Of thine own nobler nature's strength and science,  
Drawing two pinions, white as wings of swan,  
From thy strong shoulders, to amaze the place  
With holier light! that thou to woman's claim  
And man's, mightst join beside the angel's grace  
Of a pure genius sanctified from blame  
Till child and maiden pressed to thine embrace  
To kiss upon thy lips a stainless fame.

## TO GEORGE SAND: A RECOGNITION

TRUE genius, but true woman! dost deny  
The woman's nature with a manly scorn  
And break away the gauds and armlets worn  
By weaker women in captivity?  
Ah, vain denial! that revolted cry  
Is sobbed in by a woman's voice forlorn, \_  
Thy woman's hair, my sister, all unshorn  
Floats back dishevelled strength in agony  
Disproving thy man's name: and while before  
The world thou burnest in a poet-fire,  
We see thy woman-heart beat evermore  
Through the large flame. Beat purer, heart, and higher,  
Till God unsex thee on the heavenly shore  
Where unincarnate spirits purely aspire!



## WORK

WHAT are we set on earth for ? Say, to toil;  
Nor seek to leave thy tending of the vines  
For all the heat o' the day, till it declines,  
And Death's mild curfew shall from work assoil.  
God did anoint thee with his odorous oil,  
To wrestle, not to reign; and He assigns  
All thy tears over, like pure crystallines,  
For younger fellow-workers of the soil  
To wear for amulets. So others shall  
Take patience, labor, to their heart and hand  
From thy hand and thy heart and thy brave cheer,  
And God's grace fructify through thee to  
The least flower with a brimming cup may stand,  
And share its dew-drop with another near.

## WORK AND CONTEMPLATION

The woman singeth at her spinning-wheel  
A pleasant chant, ballad or barcarole;  
She thinketh of her song, upon the whole,  
Far more than of her flax; and yet the reel  
Is full, and artfully her fingers feel  
With quick adjustment, provident control,  
The lines—too subtly twisted to unroll—  
Out to a perfect thread. I hence appeal  
To the dear Christian Church—that we may do  
Our Father's business in these temples mirk,  
Thus swift and steadfast, thus intent and strong;  
While thus, apart from toil, our souls pursue

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Some high calm spheric tune, and prove our work  
The better for the sweetness of our song.