

Robert Browning Anthology

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The Laboratory

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?

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.

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.

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?

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!

 Soon, at the King's, 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!

25 Quick—is it finished? The colour's too grim!
Why not soft like the phial's, enticing and dim?
Let it brighten her drink, let her turn it and stir,
And try it and taste, ere she fix and prefer!

30 What a drop! She's not little, no minion 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.

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,
Shrivelled; she fell not; yet this does it all!

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!

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?

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!

My Last Duchess

FERRARA

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now; Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
5 Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
10 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
15 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek; perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat." Such stuff
20 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say?— too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
25 Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
30 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
35 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let
40 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse—
E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
45 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence

50 Is ample warrant that no just pretense
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
 At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
 Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
55 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
 Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Porphyria's Lover

The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:
5 I listened with heart fit to break.
When glided in Porphyria; straight
She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;
10 Which done, she rose, and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
And laid her soiled gloves by, untied
Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
And, last, she sat down by my side
15 And called me. When no voice replied,
She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
20 And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
Murmuring how she loved me — she
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
25 And give herself to me for ever.
But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain:
30 So, she was come through wind and rain.
Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
35 While I debated what to do.
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good: I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
40 Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her. No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain.
As a shut bud that holds a bee,
I warily oped her lids: again
45 Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
And I untightened next the tress
About her neck; her cheek once more
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:
I propped her head up as before,
50 Only, this time my shoulder bore
Her head, which droops upon it still:

55 The smiling rosy little head,
So glad it has its utmost will,
 That all it scorned at once is fled,
55 And I, its love, am gained instead!
Porphyria's love: she guessed not how
 Her darling one wish would be heard.
And thus we sit together now,
 And all night long we have not stirred,
60 And yet God has not said a word!

Confessions

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!

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.

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?

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

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.

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."

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 Oes,

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

35 And stood by the rose-wreathed gate. Alas,
 We loved, sir—used to meet:
How sad and bad and mad it was—
 But then, how it was sweet!

Prospice

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! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest!

Meeting at Night

I

The grey 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.

II

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, thro' its joys and fears,
Than the two hearts beating each to each!

Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister

Gr-r-r--there go, my heart's abhorrence!
Water your damned flower-pots, do!
If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
God's blood, would not mine kill you!
5 What? your myrtle-bush wants trimming?
Oh, that rose has prior claims--
Needs its leaden vase filled brimming?
Hell dry you up with its flames!

At the meal we sit together;
10 Salve tibi! I must hear
Wise talk of the kind of weather,
Sort of season, time of year:
Not a plenteous cork crop: scarcely
Dare we hope oak-galls, I doubt;
15 What's the Latin name for "parsley"?
What's the Greek name for "swine's snout"?

Whew! We'll have our platter burnished,
Laid with care on our own shelf!
With a fire-new spoon we're furnished,
20 And a goblet for ourself,
Rinsed like something sacrificial
Ere 'tis fit to touch our chaps--
Marked with L. for our initial!
(He-he! There his lily snaps!)

Saint, forsooth! While Brown Dolores
25 Squats outside the Convent bank
With Sanchicha, telling stories,
Steeping tresses in the tank,
Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs,
30 --Can't I see his dead eye glow,
Bright as 'twere a Barbary corsair's?
(That is, if he'd let it show!)

When he finishes refection,
Knife and fork he never lays
35 Cross-wise, to my recollection,
As do I, in Jesu's praise.
I the Trinity illustrate,
Drinking watered orange pulp--
In three sips the Arian frustrate;
40 While he drains his at one gulp!

Oh, those melons! if he's able
 We're to have a feast; so nice!
 One goes to the Abbot's table,
 All of us get each a slice.
 45 How go on your flowers? None double?
 Not one fruit-sort can you spy?
 Strange!--And I, too, at such trouble,
 Keep them close-nipped on the sly!

There's a great text in Galatians,
 50 Once you trip on it, entails
 Twenty-nine district damnations,
 One sure, if another fails;
 If I trip him just a-dying,
 Sure of heaven as sure can be,
 55 Spin him round and send him flying
 Off to hell, a Manichee?

Or, my scrofulous French novel
 On grey paper with blunt type!
 Simply glance at it, you grovel
 60 Hand and foot in Belial's gripe;
 If I double down its pages
 At the woeful sixteenth print,
 When he gathers his greengages,
 Ope a sieve and slip it in't?

65 Or, there's Satan!--one might venture
 Pledge one's soul to him, yet leave
 Such a flaw in the indenture
 As he'd miss till, past retrieve,
 Blasted lay that rose-acacia
 70 We're so proud of! Hy, Zy, Hine...
 'St, there's Vespers! Plena gratia
 Ave, Virgo! Gr-r-r--you swine!

How It Strikes a Contemporary

YOU saw go up and down Valladolid,
 A man of mark, to know next time you saw.
 His very serviceable suit of black
 Was courtly once and conscientious still,
 5 And many might have worn it, though none did:
 The cloak that somewhat shone and showed the threads
 Had purpose, and the ruff, significance.
 He walked and tapped the pavement with his cane,
 Scenting the world, looking it full in face,
 10 An old dog, bald and blindish, at his heels.
 They turned up, now, the alley by the church,
 That leads no whither; now, they breathed themselves
 On the main promenade just at the wrong time.
 You 'd come upon his scrutinizing hat,
 15 Making a peaked shade blacker than itself
 Against the single window spared some house
 Intact yet with its mouldered Moorish work;
 Or else surprise the ferrel of his stick
 Trying the mortar's temper 'tween the chinks
 20 Of some new shop a-building, French and fine.
 He stood and watched the cobbler at his trade,
 The man who slices lemons into drink,
 The coffee-roaster's brazier, and the boys
 That volunteer to help him turn its winch.
 25 He glanced o'er books on stalls with half an eye,
 And fly-leaf ballads on the vender's string,
 And broad-edged bold-print posters by the wall.
 He took such cognizance of men and things,
 If any beat a horse, you felt he saw;
 30 If any cursed a woman, he took note;
 Yet stared at nobody,—they stared at him,
 And found, less to their pleasure than surprise,
 He seemed to know them and expect as much.
 So, next time that a neighbor's tongue was loosed,
 35 It marked the shameful and notorious fact,
 We had among us, not so much a spy,
 As a recording chief-inquisitor,
 The town's true master if the town but knew!
 We merely kept a Governor for form,
 40 While this man walked about and took account
 Of all thought, said, and acted, then went home,
 And wrote it fully to our Lord the King,
 Who has an itch to know things, he knows why,
 And reads them in his bedroom of a night.

Love among the Ruins

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles,
Miles and miles
On the solitary pastures where our sheep
Half-asleep
5 Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight, stray or stop
As they crop—
Was the site once of a city great and gay,
(So they say)
Of our country's very capital, its prince
10 Ages since
Held his court in, gathered councils, wielding far
Peace or war.

Now the country does not even boast a tree,
As you see,
15 To distinguish slopes of verdure, certain rills
From the hills
Intersect and give a name to, (else they run
Into one)
Where the domed and daring palace shot its spires
20 Up like fires
O'er the hundred-gated circuit of a wall
Bounding all
Made of marble, men might march on nor be prest
Twelve abreast.

25 And such plenty and perfection, see, of grass
Never was!
Such a carpet as, this summer-time, o'er-spreads
And embeds
Every vestige of the city, guessed alone,
30 Stock or stone—
Where a multitude of men breathed joy and woe
Long ago;
Lust of glory pricked their hearts up, dread of shame
Struck them tame;
35 And that glory and that shame alike, the gold
Bought and sold.

Now—the single little turret that remains
On the plains,
By the caper overrooted, by the gourd
40 Overscored,
While the patching houseleek's head of blossom winks
Through the chinks—
Marks the basement whence a tower in ancient time
Sprang sublime,
45 And a burning ring, all round, the chariots traced
As they raced,
And the monarch and his minions and his dames
Viewed the games.

50 And I know, while thus the quiet-coloured eve
Smiles to leave
To their folding, all our many-tinkling fleece
In such peace,
And the slopes and rills in undistinguished grey
Melt away—
55 That a girl with eager eyes and yellow hair
Waits me there
In the turret whence the charioteers caught soul
For the goal,
When the king looked, where she looks now, breathless, dumb
60 Till I come.

But he looked upon the city, every side,
Far and wide,
All the mountains topped with temples, all the glades'
Colonnades,
65 All the causeys, bridges, aqueducts,—and then
All the men!
When I do come, she will speak not, she will stand,
Either hand
On my shoulder, give her eyes the first embrace
70 Of my face,
Ere we rush, ere we extinguish sight and speech
Each on each.

In one year they sent a million fighters forth
South and North,
75 And they built their gods a brazen pillar high
As the sky
Yet reserved a thousand chariots in full force—
Gold, of course.
O heart! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns!
80 Earth's returns
For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!
Shut them in,
With their triumphs and their glories and the rest!
Love is best.

The Last Ride Together

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 seem'd meant for, fails,
5 Since this was written and needs must be—
My whole heart rises up to bless
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.

My mistress bent that brow of hers,
Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs
When pity would be softening through,
15 Fix'd me a breathing-while or two
With life or death in the balance: right!
The blood replenish'd 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 to-night?

Hush! if you saw some western cloud
All billowy-bosom'd, over-bow'd
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 linger'd—joy and fear!
Thus lay she a moment on my breast.

Then we began to ride. My soul
35 Smooth'd itself out, a long-cramp'd 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.

45 Fail I alone, in words and deeds?
Why, all men strive and who succeeds?

We rode; it seem'd my spirit flew,
Saw other regions, cities new,
As the world rush'd by on either side.
50 I thought,—All labour, 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.

What hand and brain went ever pair'd?
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!
The flag stuck on a heap of bones,
A soldier's doing! what atones?
65 They scratch his name on the Abbey-stones.
My riding is better, by their leave.

What does it all mean, poet? Well,
Your brains beat into rhythm, you tell
What we felt only; you express'd
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 turn'd a rhyme?
Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride.

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!
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,
Put in music we know how fashions end!'
I gave my youth: but we ride, in fine.

Who knows what's fit for us? Had fate
90 Proposed bliss here should sublimate
My being—had I sign'd the bond—
Still one must lead some life beyond,
Have a bliss to die with, dim-described.
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?
Now, heaven and she are beyond this ride.

100 And yet—she has not spoke so long!
What if heaven be that, fair and strong
At life's best, with our eyes upturn'd
Whither life's flower is first discern'd,
We, fix'd so, ever should so abide?
105 What if we still ride on, we two
With life for ever 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, for ever ride?

Two in the Campagna

I

I wonder do you feel to-day
 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?

II

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.

III

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,

IV

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!

V

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.

VI

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!

VII

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?

VIII

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?

IX

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.

X

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.

XI

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?

XII

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.

The Patriot

An Old Story

IT was roses, roses, all the way,
With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:
The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,
5 A year ago on this very day.

The air broke into a mist with bells,
The old walls rocked with the crowd and cries.
Had I said, "Good folk, mere noise repels—
But give me your sun from yonder skies!"
10 They had answered, "And afterward, what else?"

Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun
To give it my loving friends to keep!
Naught man could do, have I left undone:
And you see my harvest, what I reap
15 This very day, now a year is run.

There's nobody on the house-tops now—
Just a palsied few at the windows set;
For the best of the sight is, all allow,
At the Shambles' Gate—or, better yet,
20 By the very scaffold's foot, I trow.

I go in the rain, and, more than needs,
A rope cuts both my wrists behind;
And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,
For they fling, whoever has a mind,
25 Stones at me for my year's misdeeds.

Thus I entered, and thus I go!
In triumphs, people have dropped down dead.
"Paid by the world, what dost thou owe
Me?"—God might question; now instead,
30 'Tis God shall repay: I am safer so.