

“Italia Mia” in *Il canzoniere* - a canzone by Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), ~1344

My Italy, though words cannot heal
the mortal wounds
so dense, I see on your lovely flesh,
at least I pray that my sighs might bring
some hope to the Tiber and the Arno,
and the Po, that sees me now sad and grave.
Ruler of Heaven, I hope
that the pity that brought You to earth,
will turn you towards your soul-delighting land.
Lord of courtesy, see
such cruel wars for such slight causes:
and hearts, hardened and closed
by proud, fierce Mars,
and open them, Father, soften them, set them free:
and, whatever I may be, let your Truth
be heard in my speech.

You lords to whose hands Fortune entrusts the reins
of the beautiful region
for which you seem to show no pity,
what is the purpose of these foreign swords?
Why is our green land
so stained with barbarous blood?
Vain error flatters you:
you see little, and think you see much,
if you look for love or loyalty in venal hearts.
He who has more troops
has more enemies under his command.
O waters gathered
from desert lands
to inundate our sweet fields!
If our own hands
have done it, who can rescue us now?

Nature provided well for our defence,
setting the Alps as a shield
between us and the German madness:
but blind desire, contrary to its own good,
is so ingenious,
that it brings plague to a healthy body.
Now wild beasts
and gentle flocks sleep in one pen
so the gentler always groan:
and this, to add to our grief,
from that race, that lawless people,
of whom, as we read,
Marius so pierced their flank,
that the memory of the deed can never fade,
how thirsty and weary
he no longer drank river water but blood!

I'll say nothing of Caesar
who painted the grass crimson
with their blood, where he raised the sword.
Now it seems, no one knows by what evil star,
heaven hates us:
mercy, oh you who so beset us.
Your warring wills
waste the better part of the world.
For what fault, by what justice, through what fate,
do you trouble your poor
neighbours, and persecute those afflicted
by fortune, and scattered, and search
out foreign people and accept them,
they who spill blood and sell their souls for money?
I speak to tell the truth,
not in hatred of anyone, nor scorn.

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Are you still ignorant of German deceit,
with so many clear examples,
they who lift their fingers in mock surrender?
Their scorn is worse, it seem to me, than their harm:
while your blood flows
more freely, as other's anger flails you.
From matins to tierce
think to yourself, consider how
any can care for others who behave so vilely.
People of Latin blood,
free yourself from this harmful burden:
don't make an idol of a name
empty, and without substance:
that the berserkers from there, that backward race,
defeat our intelligence
is our sin, and not nature's.

Is this not the earth that I first touched?
Is this not my nest
where I was so sweetly nourished?
Is this not the land I trust,
benign and gentle mother,
that covers both my parents?
By God, let this move you
a little, and gaze with pity
at the tears of your sad people,
who place their hopes in you
next to God: if only you show
signs at least of pity,
virtue will take up arms
against madness, and cut short the warring:
if ancient courage
is not yet dead in Italian hearts.

Lords, see how time flies,
and how life
flies too, and death is at our shoulder.
You are here now: but think of the parting:
how the naked lonely soul
must arrive at the dangerous pass.
As you go through this valley
of tears, lay aside hatred and anger,
running counter to a peaceful life:
and all the time you spend
causing others pain, is more worthy
of actions or thought
in which there is sweet praise,
in which honest study is involved:
so there is joy down here,
and the way to heaven will be open.

Song, I advise you
to speak with courteous words,
since you must go among proud people,
whose will is already
formed by ancient, adverse custom,
always inimical to truth.
Seek your fortune
among those favourable to true peace.
Say to them: 'Who will defend me?
I go calling out: Peace, peace, peace.'

“ODE ON VENICE” - by Lord Byron, 1818

I.
Oh Venice! Venice! when thy marble walls
Are level with the waters, there shall be
A cry of nations o'er thy sunken halls,
A loud lament along the sweeping sea!
If I, a northern wanderer, weep for thee,
What should thy sons do?—anything but weep:
And yet they only murmur in their sleep.
In contrast with their fathers—as the slime,
The dull green ooze of the receding deep,
Is with the dashing of the spring-tide foam, 10
That drives the sailor shipless to his home,
Are they to those that were; and thus they creep,
Crouching and crab-like, through their sapping streets.
Oh! agony—that centuries should reap
No mellow harvest! Thirteen hundred years
Of wealth and glory turned to dust and tears;
And every monument the stranger meets,
Church, palace, pillar, as a mourner greets;
And even the Lion all subdued appears,
And the harsh sound of the barbarian drum, 20
With dull and daily dissonance, repeats
The echo of thy Tyrant's voice along
The soft waves, once all musical to song,
That heaved beneath the moonlight with the throng
Of gondolas—and to the busy hum
Of cheerful creatures, whose most sinful deeds
Were but the overbeating of the heart,
And flow of too much happiness, which needs
The aid of age to turn its course apart
From the luxuriant and voluptuous flood. 30
Of sweet sensations, battling with the blood.
But these are better than the gloomy errors,
The weeds of nations in their last decay,

When Vice walks forth with her unsoftened terrors,
And Mirth is madness, and but smiles to slay;
And Hope is nothing but a false delay,
The sick man's lightning half an hour ere Death,
When Faintness, the last mortal birth of Pain,
And apathy of limb, the dull beginning
Of the cold staggering race which Death is winning, 40
Steals vein by vein and pulse by pulse away;
Yet so relieving the o'er-tortured clay,
To him appears renewal of his breath,
And freedom the mere numbness of his chain;
And then he talks of Life, and how again
He feels his spirit soaring—albeit weak,
And of the fresher air, which he would seek;
And as he whispers knows not that he gasps,
That his thin finger feels not what it clasps,
And so the film comes o'er him—and the dizzy. 50
Chamber swims round and round—and shadows busy,
At which he vainly catches, flit and gleam,
Till the last rattle chokes the strangled scream,
And all is ice and blackness,—and the earth
That which it was the moment ere our birth.

II.
There is no hope for nations!—Search the page
Of many thousand years—the daily scene,
The flow and ebb of each recurring age,
The everlasting to be which hath been,
Hath taught us nought or little: still we lean. 60
On things that rot beneath our weight, and wear
Our strength away in wrestling with the air;
For 't is our nature strikes us down: the beasts
Slaughtered in hourly hecatombs for feasts
Are of as high an order—they must go

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Even where their driver goads them, though to slaughter.
Ye men, who pour your blood for kings as water,
What have they given your children in return?

A heritage of servitude and woes,
A blindfold bondage, where your hire is blows.. 70

What! do not yet the red-hot ploughshares burn,
O'er which you stumble in a false ordeal,
And deem this proof of loyalty the real;

Kissing the hand that guides you to your scars,
And glorying as you tread the glowing bars?
All that your Sires have left you, all that Time
Bequeaths of free, and History of sublime,
Spring from a different theme!—Ye see and read,
Admire and sigh, and then succumb and bleed!

Save the few spirits who, despite of all, 80

And worse than all, the sudden crimes engendered
By the down-thundering of the prison-wall,
And thirst to swallow the sweet waters tendered,
Gushing from Freedom's fountains—when the crowd,
Maddened with centuries of drought, are loud,
And trample on each other to obtain

The cup which brings oblivion of a chain

Heavy and sore,—in which long yoked they ploughed

The sand,—or if there sprung the yellow grain,

'Twas not for them, their necks were too much bowed, 90

And their dead palates chewed the cud of pain:—

Yes! the few spirits—who, despite of deeds

Which they abhor, confound not with the cause

Those momentary starts from Nature's laws,

Which, like the pestilence and earthquake, smite

But for a term, then pass, and leave the earth

With all her seasons to repair the blight

With a few summers, and again put forth

Cities and generations—fair, when free—

For, Tyranny, there blooms no bud for thee! 100

III.

Glory and Empire! once upon these towers

With Freedom—godlike Triad! how you sate!

The league of mightiest nations, in those hours

When Venice was an envy, might abate,

But did not quench, her spirit—in her fate

All were enwrapped: the feasted monarchs knew

And loved their hostess, nor could learn to hate,

Although they humbled—with the kingly few

The many felt, for from all days and climes

She was the voyager's worship;—even her crimes 110

Were of the softer order, born of Love—

She drank no blood, nor fattened on the dead,

But gladdened where her harmless conquests spread;

For these restored the Cross, that from above

Hallowed her sheltering banners, which incessant

Flew between earth and the unholy Crescent,

Which, if it waned and dwindled, Earth may thank

The city it has clothed in chains, which clank

Now, creaking in the ears of those who owe

The name of Freedom to her glorious struggles; 120

Yet she but shares with them a common woe,

And called the "kingdom"[10] of a conquering foe,—

But knows what all—and, most of all, we know—

With what set gilded terms a tyrant juggles!

IV.

The name of Commonwealth is past and gone

O'er the three fractions of the groaning globe;

Venice is crushed, and Holland deigns to own

A sceptre, and endures the purple robe;

If the free Switzer yet bestrides alone

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His chainless mountains, 't is but for a time, 130
For Tyranny of late is cunning grown,
And in its own good season tramples down
The sparkles of our ashes. One great clime,
Whose vigorous offspring by dividing ocean
Are kept apart and nursed in the devotion
Of Freedom, which their fathers fought for, and
Bequeathed—a heritage of heart and hand,
And proud distinction from each other land,
Whose sons must bow them at a Monarch's motion,
As if his senseless sceptre were a wand 140
Full of the magic of exploded science—
Still one great clime, in full and free defiance,
Yet rears her crest, unconquered and sublime,
Above the far Atlantic!—She has taught
Her Esau-brethren that the haughty flag,
The floating fence of Albion's feeble crag,
May strike to those whose red right hands have bought
Rights cheaply earned with blood.—Still, still, for ever
Better, though each man's life-blood were a river,
That it should flow, and overflow, than creep 150
Through thousand lazy channels in our veins,
Dammed like the dull canal with locks and chains,
And moving, as a sick man in his sleep,
Three paces, and then faltering:—better be
Where the extinguished Spartans still are free,
In their proud charnel of Thermopylæ,
Than stagnate in our marsh,—or o'er the deep
Fly, and one current to the ocean add,
One spirit to the souls our fathers had,
One freeman more, America, to thee! 160

“Lines Written among the Euganean Hills” - By Percy Busshe Shelley, published in 1819

Many a green isle needs must be
In the deep wide sea of Misery,
Or the mariner, worn and wan,
Never thus could voyage on
Day and night, and night and day,
Drifting on his dreary way,
With the solid darkness black
Closing round his vessel's track;
Whilst above, the sunless sky,
Big with clouds, hangs heavily,
And behind, the tempest fleet
Hurries on with lightning feet,
Riving sail, and cord, and plank,
Till the ship has almost drank
Death from the o'er-brimming deep;
And sinks down, down, like that sleep
When the dreamer seems to be
Weltering through eternity;
And the dim low line before
Of a dark and distant shore
Still recedes, as ever still
Longing with divided will,
But no power to seek or shun,
He is ever drifted on
O'er the unrepousing wave
To the haven of the grave.
What, if there no friends will greet;
What, if there no heart will meet
His with love's impatient beat;
Wander wheresoe'er he may,
Can he dream before that day
To find refuge from distress
In friendship's smile, in love's caress?
Then 'twill wreak him little woe

Whether such there be or no:
Senseless is the breast and cold
Which relenting love would fold;
Bloodless are the veins and chill
Which the pulse of pain did fill;
Every little living nerve
That from bitter words did swerve
Round the tortur'd lips and brow,
Are like sapless leaflets now
Frozen upon December's bough.

On the beach of a northern sea
Which tempests shake eternally,
As once the wretch there lay to sleep,
Lies a solitary heap,
One white skull and seven dry bones,
On the margin of the stones,
Where a few gray rushes stand,
Boundaries of the sea and land:
Nor is heard one voice of wail
But the sea-mews, as they sail
O'er the billows of the gale;
Or the whirlwind up and down
Howling, like a slaughter'd town,
When a king in glory rides
Through the pomp of fratricides:
Those unburied bones around
There is many a mournful sound;
There is no lament for him,
Like a sunless vapour, dim,
Who once cloth'd with life and thought
What now moves nor murmurs not.

Ay, many flowering islands lie

In the waters of wide Agony:
To such a one this morn was led
My bark, by soft winds piloted:
'Mid the mountains Euganean
I stood listening to the paean
With which the legion'd rooks did hail
The sun's uprise majestic;
Gathering round with wings all hoar,
Through the dewy mist they soar
Like gray shades, till the eastern heaven
Bursts, and then, as clouds of even,
Fleck'd with fire and azure, lie
In the unfathomable sky,
So their plumes of purple grain,
Starr'd with drops of golden rain,
Gleam above the sunlight woods,
As in silent multitudes
On the morning's fitful gale
Through the broken mist they sail,
And the vapours cloven and gleaming
Follow, down the dark steep streaming,
Till all is bright, and clear, and still,
Round the solitary hill.

Beneath is spread like a green sea
The waveless plain of Lombardy,
Bounded by the vaporous air,
Islanded by cities fair;
Underneath Day's azure eyes
Ocean's nursling, Venice lies,
A peopled labyrinth of walls,
Amphitrite's destin'd halls,
Which her hoary sire now paves
With his blue and beaming waves.

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Lo! the sun upsprings behind,
Broad, red, radiant, half-reclin'd
On the level quivering line
Of the water crystalline;
And before that chasm of light,
As within a furnace bright,
Column, tower, and dome, and spire,
Shine like obelisks of fire,
Pointing with inconstant motion
From the altar of dark ocean
To the sapphire-tinted skies;
As the flames of sacrifice
From the marble shrines did rise,
As to pierce the dome of gold
Where Apollo spoke of old.

Sun-girt City, thou hast been
Ocean's child, and then his queen;
Now is come a darker day,
And thou soon must be his prey,
If the power that rais'd thee here
Hallow so thy watery bier.
A less drear ruin than now,
With thy conquest-branded brow
Stooping to the slave of slaves
From thy throne, among the waves
Wilt thou be, when the sea-mew
Flies, as once before it flew,
O'er thine isles depopulate,
And all is in its ancient state,
Save where many a palace gate
With green sea-flowers overgrown
Like a rock of Ocean's own,
Topples o'er the abandon'd sea

As the tides change sullenly.
The fisher on his watery way,
Wandering at the close of day,
Will spread his sail and seize his oar
Till he pass the gloomy shore,
Lest thy dead should, from their sleep
Bursting o'er the starlight deep,
Lead a rapid masque of death
O'er the waters of his path.
Those who alone thy towers behold
Quivering through aerial gold,
As I now behold them here,
Would imagine not they were
Sepulchres, where human forms,
Like pollution-nourish'd worms,
To the corpse of greatness cling,
Murder'd, and now mouldering:
But if Freedom should awake
In her omnipotence, and shake
From the Celtic Anarch's hold
All the keys of dungeons cold,
Where a hundred cities lie
Chain'd like thee, ingloriously,
Thou and all thy sister band
Might adorn this sunny land,
Twining memories of old time
With new virtues more sublime;
If not, perish thou and they,
Clouds which stain truth's rising day
By her sun consum'd away—
Earth can spare ye! while like flowers,
In the waste of years and hours,
From your dust new nations spring
With more kindly blossoming.

Perish—let there only be
Floating o'er thy hearthless sea
As the garment of thy sky
Clothes the world immortally,
One remembrance, more sublime
Than the tatter'd pall of time,
Which scarce hides thy visage wan:
That a tempest-cleaving Swan
Of the sons of Albion,
Driven from his ancestral streams
By the might of evil dreams,
Found a nest in thee; and Ocean
Welcom'd him with such emotion
That its joy grew his, and sprung
From his lips like music flung
O'er a mighty thunder-fit,
Chastening terror: what though yet
Poesy's unfailing river,
Which through Albion winds forever
Lashing with melodious wave
Many a sacred Poet's grave,
Mourn its latest nursling fled!
What though thou with all thy dead
Scarce can for this fame repay
Aught thine own, oh, rather say
Though thy sins and slaveries foul
Overcloud a sunlike soul!
As the ghost of Homer clings
Round Scamander's wasting springs;
As divinest Shakespeare's might
Fills Avon and the world with light
Like omniscient power which he
Imag'd 'mid mortality;

"Lines Written among the Euganean Hills" - By Percy Busshe Shelley, published in 1819

As the love from Petrarch's urn
Yet amid yon hills doth burn,
A quenchless lamp by which the heart
Sees things unearthly; so thou art,
Mighty spirit: so shall be
The City that did refuge thee.

Lo, the sun floats up the sky
Like thought-winged Liberty,
Till the universal light
Seems to level plain and height;
From the sea a mist has spread,
And the beams of morn lie dead
On the towers of Venice now,
Like its glory long ago.
By the skirts of that gray cloud
Many-domed Padua proud
Stands, a peopled solitude,
'Mid the harvest-shining plain,
Where the peasant heaps his grain
In the garner of his foe,
And the milk-white oxen slow
With the purple vintage strain,
Heap'd upon the creaking wain,
That the brutal Celt may swill
Drunken sleep with savage will;
And the sickle to the sword
Lies unchang'd though many a lord,
Like a weed whose shade is poison,
Overgrows this region's foison,
Sheaves of whom are ripe to come
To destruction's harvest-home:
Men must reap the things they sow,
Force from force must ever flow,

Or worse; but 'tis a bitter woe
That love or reason cannot change
The despot's rage, the slave's revenge.

Padua, thou within whose walls
Those mute guests at festivals,
Son and Mother, Death and Sin,
Play'd at dice for Ezzelin,
Till Death cried, 'I win, I win!'
And Sin curs'd to lose the wager,
But Death promis'd, to assuage her,
That he would petition for
Her to be made Vice-Emperor,
When the destin'd years were o'er,
Over all between the Po
And the eastern Alpine snow,
Under the mighty Austrian.
Sin smil'd so as Sin only can,
And since that time, ay, long before,
Both have rul'd from shore to shore,
That incestuous pair, who follow
Tyrants as the sun the swallow,
As Repentance follows Crime,
And as changes follow Time.

In thine halls the lamp of learning,
Padua, now no more is burning;
Like a meteor, whose wild way
Is lost over the grave of day,
It gleams betray'd and to betray:
Once remotest nations came
To adore that sacred flame,
When it lit not many a hearth
On this cold and gloomy earth:

Now new fires from antique light
Spring beneath the wide world's might;
But their spark lies dead in thee,
Trampled out by Tyranny.
As the Norway woodman quells,
In the depth of piny dells,
One light flame among the brakes,
While the boundless forest shakes,
And its mighty trunks are torn
By the fire thus lowly born:
The spark beneath his feet is dead,
He starts to see the flames it fed
Howling through the darken'd sky
With myriad tongues victoriously,
And sinks down in fear: so thou,
O Tyranny, beholdest now
Light around thee, and thou hearest
The loud flames ascend, and fearest:
Grovel on the earth; ay, hide
In the dust thy purple pride!

Noon descends around me now:
'Tis the noon of autumn's glow,
When a soft and purple mist
Like a vaporous amethyst,
Or an air-dissolved star
Mingling light and fragrance, far
From the curv'd horizon's bound
To the point of Heaven's profound,
Fills the overflowing sky;
And the plains that silent lie
Underneath, the leaves unsodden
Where the infant Frost has trodden
With his morning-winged feet,

“Lines Written among the Euganean Hills” - By Percy Busshe Shelley, published in 1819

Whose bright print is gleaming yet;
And the red and golden vines,
Piercing with their trellis'd lines
The rough, dark-skirted wilderness;
The dun and bladed grass no less,
Pointing from his hoary tower
In the windless air; the flower
Glimmering at my feet; the line
Of the olive-sandall'd Apennine
In the south dimly islanded;
And the Alps, whose snows are spread
High between the clouds and sun;
And of living things each one;
And my spirit which so long
Darken'd this swift stream of song,
Interpenetrated lie
By the glory of the sky:
Be it love, light, harmony,
Odour, or the soul of all
Which from Heaven like dew doth fall,
Or the mind which feeds this verse
Peopling the lone universe.

Noon descends, and after noon
Autumn's evening meets me soon,
Leading the infantine moon,
And that one star, which to her
Almost seems to minister
Half the crimson light she brings
From the sunset's radiant springs:
And the soft dreams of the morn
(Which like winged winds had borne
To that silent isle, which lies
Mid remember'd agonies,

The frail bark of this lone being)
Pass, to other sufferers fleeing,
And its ancient pilot, Pain,
Sits beside the helm again.

Other flowering isles must be
In the sea of Life and Agony:
Other spirits float and flee
O'er that gulf: even now, perhaps,
On some rock the wild wave wraps,
With folded wings they waiting sit
For my bark, to pilot it
To some calm and blooming cove,
Where for me, and those I love,
May a windless bower be built,
Far from passion, pain and guilt,
In a dell mid lawny hills,
Which the wild sea-murmur fills,
And soft sunshine, and the sound
Of old forests echoing round,
And the light and smell divine
Of all flowers that breathe and shine:
We may live so happy there,
That the Spirits of the Air,
Envyng us, may even entice
To our healing paradise
The polluting multitude;
But their rage would be subdu'd
By that clime divine and calm,
And the winds whose wings rain balm
On the uplifted soul, and leaves
Under which the bright sea heaves;
While each breathless interval
In their whisperings musical

The inspired soul supplies
With its own deep melodies,
And the love which heals all strife
Circling, like the breath of life,
All things in that sweet abode
With its own mild brotherhood:
They, not it, would change; and soon
Every sprite beneath the moon
Would repent its envy vain,
And the earth grow young again.

“Wild Broom, or Desert Flower” [La ginestra, o il fiore del deserto], by Giacomo Leopardi, 1836

Fragrant broom,
content with deserts:
here on the arid slope of Vesuvius,
that formidable mountain, the destroyer,
that no other tree or flower adorns,
you scatter your lonely
bushes all around. I've seen before
how you beautify empty places
with your stems, circling the City
once the mistress of the world,
and it seems that with their grave,
silent, aspect they bear witness,
reminding the passer-by
of that lost empire.
Now I see you again on this soil,
a lover of sad places abandoned by the world,
a faithful friend of hostile fortune.
These fields scattered
with barren ash, covered
with solid lava,
that resounds under the traveller's feet:
where snakes twist, and couple
in the sun, and the rabbits return
to their familiar cavernous burrows:
were once happy, prosperous farms.
They were golden with corn, echoed
to lowing cattle:
there were gardens and palaces,
the welcome leisure retreats
for powerful, famous cities,
which the proud mountain crushed
with all their people, beneath the torrents
from its fiery mouth. Now all around
is one ruin,

where you root, gentle flower, and as though
commiserating with others' loss, send
a perfume of sweetest fragrance to heaven,
that consoles the desert. Let those
who praise our existence visit
these slopes, to see how carefully
our race is nurtured
by loving Nature. And here
they can justly estimate
and measure the power of humankind,
that the harsh nurse, can with a slight
movement,
obliterate one part of, in a moment, when we
least fear it, and with a little less gentle
a motion, suddenly,
annihilate altogether.
The 'magnificent and progressive fate'
of the human race
is depicted in this place.

Proud, foolish century, look,
and see yourself reflected,
you who've abandoned
the path, marked by advancing thought
till now, and reversed your steps,
boasting of this regression
you call progress.
All the intellectuals, whose evil fate
gave them you for a father,
praise your babbling, though
they often make a mockery
of you, among themselves. But I'll
not vanish into the grave in shame:
As far as I can, I'll demonstrate,

the scorn for you, openly,
that's in my heart,
though I know oblivion crushes
those hated by their own time.
I've already mocked enough
at that fate I'll share with you.
You pursue Freedom, yet want thought
to be slave of a single age again:
by thought we've risen a little higher
than barbarism, by thought alone civilisation
grows, only thought guides public affairs
towards the good.
The truth of your harsh fate
and the lowly place Nature gave you
displease you so. Because of it
you turn your backs on the light
that illuminated you: and in flight,
you call him who pursues it vile,
and only him great of heart
who foolishly or cunningly mocks himself
or others, praising our human state above the
stars.

A man generous and noble of soul,
of meagre powers and weak limbs,
doesn't boast and call himself
strong and rich in possessions,
doesn't make a foolish pretence
of splendid living or cutting a fine
figure among the crowd:
but allows himself to appear
as lacking wealth and power,
and says so, openly, and gives
a true value to his worth.

“Wild Broom, or Desert Flower” [La ginestra, o il fiore del deserto], by Giacomo Leopardi, 1836

I don't consider a man
a great-hearted creature, but stupid,
who, born to die, nurtured in pain,
says he is made for joy,
and fills pages with the stench
of pride, promising
an exalted destiny on earth,
and a new happiness, unknown to heaven
much less this world, to people
whom a surging wave, a breath
of malignant air, a subterranean tremor,
destroys so utterly that they
scarcely leave a memory behind.
He has a noble nature
who dares to raise his voice
against our common fate,
and with an honest tongue,
not compromising truth,
admits the evil fate allotted us,
our low and feeble state:
a nature that shows itself
strong and great in suffering,
that does not add to its miseries with fraternal
hatred and anger, things worse
than other evils, blaming mankind
for its sorrows, but places blame
on Her who is truly guilty, who is the mother
of men in bearing them, their stepmother in
malice.
They call her enemy:
and consider
the human race
to be united, and ranked against her,
from of old, as is true,

judge all men allies, embrace
all with true love, offering sincere
prompt support, and expecting it
in the various dangers and anguish
of the mutual war on her. And think
it as foolish to take up arms against men
and set up nets and obstacles
against their neighbours as it would be in war,
surrounded by the opposing army, in the most
intense heat of battle,
to start fierce struggles with friends,
forgetting the enemy,
to incite desertion, and wave their swords
among their own forces.
If such thoughts were revealed
to the crowd, as they used to be,
along with the horror that first
brought men together in social contract
against impious Nature,
then by true wisdom
the honest, lawful intercourse
of citizens would be partly renewed,
and justice and piety, would own
to another root than foolish pride,
on which the morals of the crowd
are as well founded
as anything else that's based on error.

Often I sit here, at night,
on these desolate slopes,
that a hardened lava-flow has clothed
with brown, and which seem to undulate still,
and over the gloomy waste,
I see the stars flame, high

in the purest blue,
mirrored far off by the sea:
the universe glittering with sparks
that wheel through the tranquil void.
And then I fix my eyes on those lights
that seem pin-pricks,
yet are so vast in form
that earth and sea are really a pin-prick
to them: to whom man,
and this globe where man is nothing,
are completely unknown: and gazing
at those still more infinitely remote,
knots, almost, of stars,
that seem like mist to us, to which
not only man and earth but all
our stars, infinite in number and mass,
with the golden sun,
are unknown, or seem like points
of misted light, as they appear
from earth: what do you seem like,
then, in my thoughts, O children
of mankind? And mindful of
your state here below, of which
the ground I stand on bears witness,
and that, on the other hand, you believe
that you've been appointed the master
and end of all things: and how often
you like to talk about the creators
of all things universal, who descended
to this obscure grain of sand called earth,
for you, and happily spoke to you, often:
and that, renewing these ridiculous dreams,
you still insult the wise, in an age
that appears to surpass the rest

“Wild Broom, or Desert Flower” [La ginestra, o il fiore del deserto], by Giacomo Leopardi, 1836

in knowledge and social customs: what feeling
is it,
then, wretched human race, what thought
of you finally pierces my heart?
I don't know if laughter or pity prevails.

As a little apple that falls from a tree:
late autumn ripeness,
and nothing else, bringing it to earth:
crushes, wastes, and covers
in a moment, the sweet nests
of a tribe of ants, carved out
of soft soil, with vast labour,
and the works, the wealth,
that industrious race had vied
to achieve, with such effort,
and created in the summer: so the cities
of the farthest shores
that the sea bathed,
were shattered, confounded, covered
in a few moments, by a night of ruin,
by ashes, lava and stones,
hurled to the heights of heaven
from the womb of thunder,
falling again from above,
mingled in molten streams,
or by the vast overflow
of liquefied masses,
metals and burning sand,
descending the mountainside
racing over the grass: so that now
the goats graze above them,
and new cities rise beside them, whose base
is their buried, demolished walls

that the cruel mountain seems to crush
underfoot.
Nature has no more love or care
for the seed of man
than for the ants: and if the destruction
of one is rarer than that of the other,
it's for no other reason
than that mankind is less rich in offspring.

Fully eighteen hundred years
have passed, since those once-populated cities
vanished, crushed by fiery force,
yet the farmer intent
on his vines, this dead
and ashen soil barely nourishes,
still lifts his gaze
with suspicion,
to the fatal peak
that sits there brooding,
no gentler than ever, still threatening
to destroy him, his children, and his
meagre possessions. And often
the wretch, lying awake
on the roof of his house, where
the wandering breezes blow at night,
jumps up now and again, and checks
the course of the dreadful boiling,
that pours from that inexhaustible lap
onto its sandy slopes, and illuminates
the bay of Capri, the ports
of Naples and Mergellina.
And if he sees it nearing, or hears
the water bubbling, feverishly, deep
in the well, he wakes his children, quickly

wakes his wife, and fleeing, with whatever
of their possessions they can grasp,
watches from the distance, as his familiar
home, and the little field
his only defence against hunger,
fall prey to the burning tide,
crackling as it arrives, inexorably
spreading over all this, and hardening.
Lifeless Pompeii returns to the light of heaven
after ancient oblivion, like a buried
skeleton, that piety or the greed
for land gives back to the open air:
and, from its empty forum,
through the ranks of broken
columns, the traveller contemplates
the forked peak and the smoking summit,
that still threatens the scattered ruins.
And, like night's secret horror,
through the empty theatres,
the twisted temples, the shattered
houses, where the bat hides its brood,
like a sinister brand
that circles darkly through silent palaces,
the glow of the deathly lava runs,
reddening the shadows
from far away, staining the region round.
So, indifferent to man, and the ages
he calls ancient, and the way descendants
follow on from their ancestors,
Nature, always green, proceeds instead
by so long a route
she seems to remain at rest. Meanwhile
empires fall,
peoples and tongues pass: She does not see:

“Wild Broom, or Desert Flower” [La ginestra, o il fiore del deserto], by Giacomo Leopardi, 1836

and man lays claim to eternity's merit.

And you, slow-growing broom,
who adorn this bare landscape
with fragrant thickets,
you too will soon succumb
to the cruel power of subterranean fire,
that, revisiting places
it knows, will stretch its greedy margin
over your soft forest. And you'll bend
your innocent head, without a struggle,
beneath that mortal burden:
yet a head that's not been bent in vain
in cowardly supplication
before a future oppressor: nor lifted
in insane pride towards the stars,
or beyond the desert, where
you were born and lived,
not through intent, but chance:
and you'll have been so much wiser
so much less unsound than man, since you
have never believed your frail species,
can be made immortal by yourself, or fate.



CASA GUIDI

CASA GUIDI WINDOWS BY
ELIZABETH BARRETT
BROWNING WITH
INTRODUCTION
BY A. MARY F.
ROBINSON



JOHN LANE: THE BODLEY HEAD
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and lost sight of the probable consequences of some obvious popular defects. If the discrepancy should be painful to the reader, let him understand that to the writer it has been more so. But such discrepancy we are called upon to accept at every hour by the conditions of our nature . . . the discrepancy between aspiration and performance, between faith and disillusion, between hope and fact.

“O trusted, broken prophecy,
O richest fortune sourly crost,
Born for the future, to the future lost!”

Nay, not lost to the future in this case. The future of Italy shall not be disinherited.

FLORENCE, 1851.

CASA GUIDI WINDOWS

PART I

I

I HEARD last night a little child go singing
'Neath Casa Guidi windows, by the church,
“*O bella libertà, O bella!*” stringing
The same words still on notes he went in
search
So high for, you concluded the upspringing
Of such a nimble bird to sky from perch
Must leave the whole bush in a tremble green;
And that the heart of Italy must beat,
While such a voice had leave to rise serene
'Twixt church and palace of a Florence street!—
A little child, too, who not long had been
By mother's fingers steadied on his feet;
And still *O bella libertà* he sang.

A

II

Then I thought, musing, of the innumerable
 Sweet songs which for this Italy outrang
 From older singers' lips, who sang not thus
 Exultingly and purely, yet, with pang
 Sheathed into music, touched the heart of us
 So finely that the pity scarcely pained !
 I thought how Filicaja led on others,
 Bewailers for their Italy enchained,
 And how they called her childless among mothers,
 Widow of empires, ay, and scarce refrained
 Cursing her beauty to her face, as brothers
 Might a shamed sister,—“ Had she been less fair
 She were less wretched,”—how, evoking so
 From congregated wrong and heaped despair
 Of men and women writhing under blow,
 Harrowed and hideous in their filthy lair,
 A personating Image, wherein woe
 Was wrapt in beauty from offending much,
 They called it Cybele, or Niobe,
 Or laid it corpse-like on a bier for such,
 Where the whole world might drop for Italy
 Those cadenced tears which burn not where they
 touch,—
 “ Juliet of nations, canst thou die as we ?
 And was the violet crown that crowned thy head

So over large, though new buds made it rough,
 It slipped down and across thine eyelids dead,
 O sweet, fair Juliet ? ”—Of such songs enough ;
 Too many of such complaints ! Behold, instead,
 Void at Verona, Juliet's marble trough !
 And void as that is, are all images
 Men set between themselves and actual wrong,
 To catch the weight of pity, meet the stress
 Of conscience ; though 'tis easier to gaze long
 On personations, masks, and effigies,
 Than to see live weak creatures crushed by strong.

III

For me who stand in Italy to-day,
 Where worthier poets stood and sang before,
 I kiss their footsteps, yet their words gainsay :
 I can but muse in hope upon this shore
 Of golden Arno, as it shoots away
 Straight through the heart of Florence, 'neath the four
 Bent bridges, seeming to strain off like bows,
 And tremble, while the arrowy undertide
 Shoots on and cleaves the marble as it goes,
 And strikes up palace-walls on either side,
 And froths the cornice out in glittering rows,
 With doors and windows quaintly multiplied,

And terrace-sweeps, and gazers upon all,
 By whom if flower or kerchief were thrown out,
 From any lattice there, the same would fall
 Into the river underneath, no doubt,—
 It runs so close and fast 'twixt wall and wall.
 How beautiful! The mountains from without
 Listen in silence for the word said next,
 (What word will men say?) here where Giotto planted
 His campanile, like an unperplexed
 Question to Heaven, concerning the things granted
 To a great people, who, being greatly vexed
 In act, in aspiration keep undaunted!
 (What word says God?) The sculptor's Night and
 Day,
 And Dawn and Twilight, wait in marble scorn,
 Like dogs couched on a dunghill, on the clay
 From whence the Medicean stamp's outworn,—
 The final putting off of all such sway
 By all such hands, and freeing of the unborn
 In Florence, and the world outside his Florence.
 That's Michel Angelo! his statues wait
 In the small chapel of the dim St Lawrence?
 Day's eyes are breaking bold and passionate
 Over his shoulder, and will flash abhorrence
 On darkness, and with level looks meet fate
 When once loose from that marble film of theirs:
 The Night has wild dreams in her sleep; the Dawn

Is haggard as the sleepless: Twilight wears
 A sort of horror: as the veil withdrawn
 'Twixt the artist's soul and works had left them
 heirs
 Of the deep thoughts which would not quail nor fawn,
 His angers and contempts, his hope and love;
 For not without a meaning did he place
 Princely Urbino on the seat above
 With everlasting shadow on his face;
 While the slow dawns and twilights disapprove
 The ashes of his long-extinguished race,
 Which never shall clog more the feet of men.

IV

I do believe, divinest Angelo,
 That winter-hour, in Via Larga, when
 Thou wert commanded to build up in snow
 Some marvel of thine art, which straight again
 Dissolved beneath the sun's Italian glow,
 While thine eyes, still broad with the plastic
 passion,
 Thawed, too, in drops of wounded manhood, . . since,
 Mocking alike thine art and indignation,
 Laughed at the palace-window the new prince, . .
 "Aha! this genius needs for exaltation,