

# Alastor

## The Spirit of Solitude

Percy Bysshe Shelley

1816

Earth, Ocean, Air, beloved brotherhood!  
If our great Mother has imbued my soul  
With aught of natural piety to feel  
Your love, and recompense the boon with mine;  
If dewy morn, and odorous noon, and even,  
With sunset and its gorgeous ministers,  
And solemn midnight's tingling silentness;  
If autumn's hollow sighs in the sere wood,  
And winter robing with pure snow and crowns  
Of starry ice the grey grass and bare boughs;  
If spring's voluptuous pantings when she breathes  
Her first sweet kisses, have been dear to me;  
If no bright bird, insect, or gentle beast  
I consciously have injured, but still loved  
And cherished these my kindred; then forgive  
This boast, beloved brethren, and withdraw  
No portion of your wonted favour now!

Mother of this unfathomable world!  
Favour my solemn song, for I have loved  
Thee ever, and thee only; I have watched  
Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,  
And my heart ever gazes on the depth  
Of thy deep mysteries. I have made my bed  
In charnels and on coffins, where black death  
Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,  
Hoping to still these obstinate questionings  
Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost,  
Thy messenger, to render up the tale  
Of what we are. In lone and silent hours,  
When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness,  
Like an inspired and desperate alchemist  
Staking his very life on some dark hope,  
Have I mixed awful talk and asking looks  
With my most innocent love, until strange tears,  
Uniting with those breathless kisses, made  
Such magic as compels the charmed night  
To render up thy charge:...and, though ne'er yet  
Thou hast unveiled thy inmost sanctuary,  
Enough from incommunicable dream,  
And twilight phantasms, and deep noon-day thought,  
Has shone within me, that serenely now  
And moveless, as a long-forgotten lyre  
Suspended in the solitary dome  
Of some mysterious and deserted fane,  
I wait thy breath, Great Parent, that my strain  
May modulate with murmurs of the air,  
And motions of the forests and the sea,  
And voice of living beings, and woven hymns  
Of night and day, and the deep heart of man.

There was a Poet whose untimely tomb  
No human hands with pious reverence reared,  
But the charmed eddies of autumnal winds  
Built o'er his mouldering bones a pyramid  
Of mouldering leaves in the waste wilderness:—  
A lovely youth,—no mourning maiden decked  
With weeping flowers, or votive cypress wreath,  
The lone couch of his everlasting sleep:—  
Gentle, and brave, and generous,—no lorn bard  
Breathed o'er his dark fate one melodious sigh:  
He lived, he died, he sung in solitude.  
Strangers have wept to hear his passionate notes,  
And virgins, as unknown he passed, have pined  
And wasted for fond love of his wild eyes.  
The fire of those soft orbs has ceased to burn,  
And Silence, too enamoured of that voice,  
Locks its mute music in her rugged cell.

By solemn vision, and bright silver dream  
His infancy was nurtured. Every sight  
And sound from the vast earth and ambient air,  
Sent to his heart its choicest impulses.  
The fountains of divine philosophy  
Fled not his thirsting lips, and all of great,  
Or good, or lovely, which the sacred past  
In truth or fable consecrates, he felt  
And knew. When early youth had passed, he left  
His cold fireside and alienated home  
To seek strange truths in undiscovered lands.  
Many a wide waste and tangled wilderness  
Has lured his fearless steps; and he has bought  
With his sweet voice and eyes, from savage men,  
His rest and food. Nature's most secret steps  
He like her shadow has pursued, where'er  
The red volcano overcanopies  
Its fields of snow and pinnacles of ice  
With burning smoke, or where bitumen lakes  
On black bare pointed islets ever beat  
With sluggish surge, or where the secret caves,  
Rugged and dark, winding among the springs  
Of fire and poison, inaccessible  
To avarice or pride, their starry domes  
Of diamond and of gold expand above  
Numberless and immeasurable halls,  
Frequent with crystal column, and clear shrines  
Of pearl, and thrones radiant with chrysolite.  
Nor had that scene of ampler majesty  
Than gems or gold, the varying roof of heaven  
And the green earth lost in his heart its claims  
To love and wonder; he would linger long  
In lonesome vales, making the wild his home,  
Until the doves and squirrels would partake  
From his innocuous hand his bloodless food,  
Lured by the gentle meaning of his looks,  
And the wild antelope, that starts where'er  
The dry leaf rustles in the brake, suspend  
Her timid steps, to gaze upon a form  
More graceful than her own.

His wandering step,  
Obedient to high thoughts, has visited  
The awful ruins of the days of old:  
Athens, and Tyre, and Balbec, and the waste  
Where stood Jerusalem, the fallen towers  
Of Babylon, the eternal pyramids,  
Memphis and Thebes, and whatsoe'er of strange,  
Sculptured on alabaster obelisk,  
Or jasper tomb, or mutilated sphynx,  
Dark Aethiopia in her desert hills  
Conceals. Among the ruined temples there,  
Stupendous columns, and wild images  
Of more than man, where marble daemons watch  
The Zodiac's brazen mystery, and dead men  
Hang their mute thoughts on the mute walls around,  
He lingered, poring on memorials  
Of the world's youth: through the long burning day  
Gazed on those speechless shapes; nor, when the moon  
Filled the mysterious halls with floating shades  
Suspended he that task, but ever gazed  
And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind  
Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw  
The thrilling secrets of the birth of time.

Meanwhile an Arab maiden brought his food,  
Her daily portion, from her father's tent,  
And spread her matting for his couch, and stole  
From duties and repose to tend his steps,  
Enamoured, yet not daring for deep awe  
To speak her love:—and watched his nightly sleep,  
Sleepless herself, to gaze upon his lips  
Parted in slumber, whence the regular breath  
Of innocent dreams arose; then, when red morn  
Made paler the pale moon, to her cold home  
Wildered, and wan, and panting, she returned.

The Poet, wandering on, through Arabie,  
And Persia, and the wild Carmanian waste,  
And o'er the aerial mountains which pour down  
Indus and Oxus from their icy caves,  
In joy and exultation held his way;  
Till in the vale of Cashmire, far within  
Its loneliest dell, where odorous plants entwine  
Beneath the hollow rocks a natural bower,  
Beside a sparkling rivulet he stretched  
His languid limbs. A vision on his sleep  
There came, a dream of hopes that never yet  
Had flushed his cheek. He dreamed a veiled maid  
Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.  
Her voice was like the voice of his own soul  
Heard in the calm of thought; its music long,  
Like woven sounds of streams and breezes, held  
His inmost sense suspended in its web  
Of many-coloured woof and shifting hues.  
Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,  
And lofty hopes of divine liberty,  
Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,  
Herself a poet. Soon the solemn mood  
Of her pure mind kindled through all her frame  
A permeating fire; wild numbers then  
She raised, with voice stifled in tremulous sobs  
Subdued by its own pathos; her fair hands  
Were bare alone, sweeping from some strange harp  
Strange symphony, and in their branching veins  
The eloquent blood told an ineffable tale.  
The beating of her heart was heard to fill  
The pauses of her music, and her breath  
Tumultuously accorded with those fits  
Of intermitted song. Sudden she rose,  
As if her heart impatiently endured  
Its bursting burthen: at the sound he turned,  
And saw by the warm light of their own life  
Her glowing limbs beneath the sinuous veil  
Of woven wind, her outspread arms now bare,  
Her dark locks floating in the breath of night,  
Her beamy bending eyes, her parted lips  
Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly.  
His strong heart sunk and sickened with excess  
Of love. He reared his shuddering limbs and quelled  
His gasping breath, and spread his arms to meet  
Her panting bosom:...she drew back a while,  
Then, yielding to the irresistible joy,  
With frantic gesture and short breathless cry 6  
Folded his frame in her dissolving arms.  
Now blackness veiled his dizzy eyes, and night  
Involved and swallowed up the vision; sleep,  
Like a dark flood suspended in its course,  
Rolled back its impulse on his vacant brain.

Roused by the shock he started from his trance—  
The cold white light of morning, the blue moon  
Low in the west, the clear and garish hills,  
The distinct valley and the vacant woods,  
Spread round him where he stood. Whither have fled  
The hues of heaven that canopied his bower  
Of yesternight? The sounds that soothed his sleep,  
The mystery and the majesty of Earth,  
The joy, the exultation? His wan eyes  
Gaze on the empty scene as vacantly  
As ocean's moon looks on the moon in heaven.  
The spirit of sweet human love has sent  
A vision to the sleep of him who spurned  
Her choicest gifts. He eagerly pursues  
Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade;  
He overleaps the bounds. Alas! Alas!  
Were limbs, and breath, and being intertwined  
Thus treacherously? Lost, lost, for ever lost  
In the wide pathless desert of dim sleep,  
That beautiful shape! Does the dark gate of death  
Conduct to thy mysterious paradise,  
O Sleep? Does the bright arch of rainbow clouds  
And pendent mountains seen in the calm lake,  
Lead only to a black and watery depth,  
While death's blue vault, with loathliest vapours hung,  
Where every shade which the foul grave exhales  
Hides its dead eye from the detested day,  
Conducts, O Sleep, to thy delightful realms?  
This doubt with sudden tide flowed on his heart;  
The insatiate hope which it awakened, stung  
His brain even like despair.

While daylight held  
The sky, the Poet kept mute conference  
With his still soul. At night the passion came,  
Like the fierce fiend of a distempered dream,  
And shook him from his rest, and led him forth  
Into the darkness.—As an eagle, grasped  
In folds of the green serpent, feels her breast  
Burn with the poison, and precipitates  
Through night and day, tempest, and calm, and cloud,  
Frantic with dizzying anguish, her blind flight  
O'er the wide aery wilderness: thus driven  
By the bright shadow of that lovely dream,  
Beneath the cold glare of the desolate night,  
Through tangled swamps and deep precipitous dells,  
Startling with careless step the moonlight snake,  
He fled. Red morning dawned upon his flight,  
Shedding the mockery of its vital hues  
Upon his cheek of death. He wandered on  
Till vast Aornos seen from Petra's steep  
Hung o'er the low horizon like a cloud;  
Through Balk, and where the desolated tombs  
Of Parthian kings scatter to every wind  
Their wasting dust, wildly he wandered on,  
Day after day a weary waste of hours,  
Bearing within his life the brooding care  
That ever fed on its decaying flame.  
And now his limbs were lean; his scattered hair,  
Sered by the autumn of strange suffering  
Sung dirges in the wind; his listless hand  
Hung like dead bone within its withered skin;  
Life, and the lustre that consumed it, shone  
As in a furnace burning secretly  
From his dark eyes alone. The cottagers,  
Who ministered with human charity  
His human wants, beheld with wondering awe  
Their fleeting visitant. The mountaineer,  
Encountering on some dizzy precipice  
That spectral form, deemed that the Spirit of wind  
With lightning eyes, and eager breath, and feet  
Disturbing not the drifted snow, had paused  
In its career: the infant would conceal  
His troubled visage in his mother's robe  
In terror at the glare of those wild eyes,  
To remember their strange light in many a dream  
Of after-times; but youthful maidens, taught  
By nature, would interpret half the woe  
That wasted him, would call him with false names  
Brother and friend, would press his pallid hand  
At parting, and watch, dim through tears, the path  
Of his departure from their father's door.



At length upon the lone Chorasman shore  
He paused, a wide and melancholy waste  
Of putrid marshes. A strong impulse urged  
His steps to the sea-shore. A swan was there,  
Beside a sluggish stream among the reeds.  
It rose as he approached, and, with strong wings  
Scaling the upward sky, bent its bright course  
High over the immeasurable main.  
His eyes pursued its flight:—"Thou hast a home,  
Beautiful bird; thou voyagest to thine home,  
Where thy sweet mate will twine her downy neck  
With thine, and welcome thy return with eyes  
Bright in the lustre of their own fond joy.  
And what am I that I should linger here,  
With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes,  
Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned  
To beauty, wasting these surpassing powers  
In the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven  
That echoes not my thoughts?" A gloomy smile  
Of desperate hope wrinkled his quivering lips.  
For sleep, he knew, kept most relentlessly  
Its precious charge, and silent death exposed,  
Faithless perhaps as sleep, a shadowy lure,  
With doubtful smile mocking its own strange charms.

Startled by his own thoughts he looked around.  
There was no fair fiend near him, not a sight  
Or sound of awe but in his own deep mind.  
A little shallop floating near the shore  
Caught the impatient wandering of his gaze.  
It had been long abandoned, for its sides  
Gaped wide with many a rift, and its frail joints  
Swayed with the undulations of the tide.  
A restless impulse urged him to embark  
And meet lone Death on the drear ocean's waste;  
For well he knew that mighty Shadow loves  
The slimy caverns of the populous deep.

The day was fair and sunny; sea and sky  
Drank its inspiring radiance, and the wind  
Swept strongly from the shore, blackening the waves.  
Following his eager soul, the wanderer  
Leaped in the boat, he spread his cloak aloft  
On the bare mast, and took his lonely seat,  
And felt the boat speed o'er the tranquil sea  
Like a torn cloud before the hurricane.

As one that in a silver vision floats  
Obedient to the sweep of odorous winds  
Upon resplendent clouds, so rapidly  
Along the dark and ruffled waters fled  
The straining boat.—A whirlwind swept it on,  
With fierce gusts and precipitating force,  
Through the white ridges of the chafed sea.  
The waves arose. Higher and higher still  
Their fierce necks writhed beneath the tempest's scourge  
Like serpents struggling in a vulture's grasp.  
Calm and rejoicing in the fearful war  
Of wave ruining on wave, and blast on blast  
Descending, and black flood on whirlpool driven  
With dark obliterating course, he sate:  
As if their genii were the ministers  
Appointed to conduct him to the light  
Of those beloved eyes, the Poet sate,  
Holding the steady helm. Evening came on,  
The beams of sunset hung their rainbow hues  
High 'mid the shifting domes of sheeted spray  
That canopied his path o'er the waste deep;  
Twilight, ascending slowly from the east,  
Entwined in duskier wreaths her braided locks  
O'er the fair front and radiant eyes of day;  
Night followed, clad with stars. On every side  
More horribly the multitudinous streams  
Of ocean's mountainous waste to mutual war  
Rushed in dark tumult thundering, as to mock  
The calm and spangled sky. The little boat  
Still fled before the storm; still fled, like foam  
Down the steep cataract of a wintry river;  
Now pausing on the edge of the riven wave;  
Now leaving far behind the bursting mass  
That fell, convulsing ocean: safely fled—  
As if that frail and wasted human form,  
Had been an elemental god.

At midnight  
The moon arose; and lo! the ethereal cliffs  
Of Caucasus, whose icy summits shone  
Among the stars like sunlight, and around  
Whose caverned base the whirlpools and the waves  
Bursting and eddying irresistibly  
Rage and resound forever.—Who shall save?—  
The boat fled on,—the boiling torrent drove,—  
The crags closed round with black and jagged arms,  
The shattered mountain overhung the sea,  
And faster still, beyond all human speed,  
Suspended on the sweep of the smooth wave,  
The little boat was driven. A cavern there  
Yawned, and amid its slant and winding depths  
Ingulfed the rushing sea. The boat fled on  
With unrelaxing speed.—"Vision and Love!"  
The Poet cried aloud, "I have beheld  
The path of thy departure. Sleep and death  
Shall not divide us long."

The boat pursued  
The windings of the cavern. Daylight shone  
At length upon that gloomy river's flow;  
Now, where the fiercest war among the waves  
Is calm, on the unfathomable stream  
The boat moved slowly. Where the mountain, riven,  
Exposed those black depths to the azure sky,  
Ere yet the flood's enormous volume fell  
Even to the base of Caucasus, with sound  
That shook the everlasting rocks, the mass  
Filled with one whirlpool all that ample chasm:  
Stair above stair the eddying waters rose,  
Circling immeasurably fast, and laved  
With alternating dash the gnarled roots  
Of mighty trees, that stretched their giant arms  
In darkness over it. In the midst was left,  
Reflecting, yet distorting every cloud,  
A pool of treacherous and tremendous calm.  
Seized by the sway of the ascending stream,  
With dizzy swiftness, round, and round, and round,  
Ridge after ridge the straining boat arose,  
Till on the verge of the extremest curve,  
Where, through an opening of the rocky bank,  
The waters overflow, and a smooth spot  
Of glassy quiet mid those battling tides  
Is left, the boat paused shuddering.—Shall it sink  
Down the abyss? Shall the reverting stress  
Of that resistless gulf embosom it?  
Now shall it fall?—A wandering stream of wind,  
Breathed from the west, has caught the expanded sail,  
And, lo! with gentle motion, between banks  
Of mossy slope, and on a placid stream,  
Beneath a woven grove it sails, and, hark!  
The ghastly torrent mingles its far roar,  
With the breeze murmuring in the musical woods.  
Where the embowering trees recede, and leave  
A little space of green expanse, the cove  
Is closed by meeting banks, whose yellow flowers  
For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes,  
Reflected in the crystal calm. The wave  
Of the boat's motion marred their pensive task,  
Which naught but vagrant bird, or wanton wind,  
Or falling spear-grass, or their own decay  
Had e'er disturbed before. The Poet longed  
To deck with their bright hues his withered hair,  
But on his heart its solitude returned,  
And he forbore. Not the strong impulse hid 13  
In those flushed cheeks, bent eyes, and shadowy frame  
Had yet performed its ministry: it hung  
Upon his life, as lightning in a cloud  
Gleams, hovering ere it vanish, ere the floods  
Of night close over it.

The noonday sun  
Now shone upon the forest, one vast mass  
Of mingling shade, whose brown magnificence  
A narrow vale embosoms. There, huge caves,  
Scooped in the dark base of their aery rocks,  
Mocking its moans, respond and roar for ever.  
The meeting boughs and implicated leaves  
Wove twilight o'er the Poet's path, as led  
By love, or dream, or god, or mightier Death,  
He sought in Nature's dearest haunt some bank,  
Her cradle, and his sepulchre. More dark  
And dark the shades accumulate. The oak,  
Expanding its immense and knotty arms,  
Embraces the light beech. The pyramids  
Of the tall cedar overarching frame  
Most solemn domes within, and far below,  
Like clouds suspended in an emerald sky,  
The ash and the acacia floating hang  
Tremulous and pale. Like restless serpents, clothed  
In rainbow and in fire, the parasites,  
Starred with ten thousand blossoms, flow around  
The grey trunks, and, as gamesome infants' eyes,  
With gentle meanings, and most innocent wiles,  
Fold their beams round the hearts of those that love,  
These twine their tendrils with the wedded boughs  
Uniting their close union; the woven leaves  
Make net-work of the dark blue light of day,  
And the night's noontide clearness, mutable  
As shapes in the weird clouds. Soft mossy lawns  
Beneath these canopies extend their swells,  
Fragrant with perfumed herbs, and eyed with blooms  
Minute yet beautiful. One darkest glen  
Sends from its woods of musk-rose, twined with jasmine,  
A soul-dissolving odour to invite  
To some more lovely mystery. Through the dell,  
Silence and Twilight here, twin-sisters, keep  
Their noonday watch, and sail among the shades,  
Like vaporous shapes half-seen; beyond, a well,  
Dark, gleaming, and of most translucent wave,  
Images all the woven boughs above,  
And each depending leaf, and every speck  
Of azure sky, darting between their chasms;  
Nor aught else in the liquid mirror laves  
Its portraiture, but some inconstant star  
Between one foliated lattice twinkling fair,  
Or painted bird, sleeping beneath the moon,  
Or gorgeous insect floating motionless,       14  
Unconscious of the day, ere yet his wings  
Have spread their glories to the gaze of noon.

Hither the Poet came. His eyes beheld  
Their own wan light through the reflected lines  
Of his thin hair, distinct in the dark depth  
Of that still fountain; as the human heart,  
Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave,  
Sees its own treacherous likeness there. He heard  
The motion of the leaves, the grass that sprung  
Startled and glanced and trembled even to feel  
An unaccustomed presence, and the sound  
Of the sweet brook that from the secret springs  
Of that dark fountain rose. A Spirit seemed  
To stand beside him—clothed in no bright robes  
Of shadowy silver or enshrining light,  
Borrowed from aught the visible world affords  
Of grace, or majesty, or mystery;—  
But, undulating woods, and silent well,  
And leaping rivulet, and evening gloom  
Now deepening the dark shades, for speech assuming,  
Held commune with him, as if he and it  
Were all that was,—only...when his regard  
Was raised by intense pensiveness,...two eyes,  
Two starry eyes, hung in the gloom of thought,  
And seemed with their serene and azure smiles  
To beckon him.

Obedient to the light  
That shone within his soul, he went, pursuing  
The windings of the dell.—The rivulet,  
Wanton and wild, through many a green ravine  
Beneath the forest flowed. Sometimes it fell  
Among the moss with hollow harmony  
Dark and profound. Now on the polished stones  
It danced; like childhood laughing as it went:  
Then, through the plain in tranquil wanderings crept,  
Reflecting every herb and drooping bud  
That overhung its quietness.—"O stream!  
Whose source is inaccessibly profound,  
Whither do thy mysterious waters tend?  
Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness,  
Thy dazzling waves, thy loud and hollow gulfs,  
Thy searchless fountain, and invisible course  
Have each their type in me; and the wide sky.  
And measureless ocean may declare as soon  
What oozy cavern or what wandering cloud  
Contains thy waters, as the universe  
Tell where these living thoughts reside, when stretched  
Upon thy flowers my bloodless limbs shall waste  
I' the passing wind!"



Beside the grassy shore  
Of the small stream he went; he did impress  
On the green moss his tremulous step, that caught  
Strong shuddering from his burning limbs. As one  
Roused by some joyous madness from the couch  
Of fever, he did move; yet, not like him,  
Forgetful of the grave, where, when the flame  
Of his frail exultation shall be spent,  
He must descend. With rapid steps he went  
Beneath the shade of trees, beside the flow  
Of the wild babbling rivulet; and now  
The forest's solemn canopies were changed  
For the uniform and lightsome evening sky.  
Grey rocks did peep from the spare moss, and stemmed  
The struggling brook; tall spires of windlestrae  
Threw their thin shadows down the rugged slope,  
And nought but gnarled roots of ancient pines  
Branchless and blasted, clenched with grasping roots  
The unwilling soil. A gradual change was here,  
Yet ghastly. For, as fast years flow away,  
The smooth brow gathers, and the hair grows thin  
And white, and where irradiate dewy eyes  
Had shone, gleam stony orbs:—so from his steps  
Bright flowers departed, and the beautiful shade  
Of the green groves, with all their odorous winds  
And musical motions. Calm, he still pursued  
The stream, that with a larger volume now  
Rolled through the labyrinthine dell; and there  
Fretted a path through its descending curves  
With its wintry speed. On every side now rose  
Rocks, which, in unimaginable forms,  
Lifted their black and barren pinnacles  
In the light of evening, and its precipice  
Obscuring the ravine, disclosed above,  
Mid toppling stones, black gulfs and yawning caves,  
Whose windings gave ten thousand various tongues  
To the loud stream. Lo! where the pass expands  
Its stony jaws, the abrupt mountain breaks,  
And seems, with its accumulated crags,  
To overhang the world: for wide expand  
Beneath the wan stars and descending moon  
Islanded seas, blue mountains, mighty streams,  
Dim tracts and vast, robed in the lustrous gloom  
Of leaden-coloured even, and fiery hills  
Mingling their flames with twilight, on the verge  
Of the remote horizon. The near scene,  
In naked and severe simplicity, 17  
Made contrast with the universe. A pine,  
Rock-rooted, stretched athwart the vacancy  
Its swinging boughs, to each inconstant blast  
Yielding one only response, at each pause  
In most familiar cadence, with the howl  
The thunder and the hiss of homeless streams  
Mingling its solemn song, whilst the broad river

Yet the grey precipice and solemn pine  
And torrent were not all;—one silent nook  
Was there. Even on the edge of that vast mountain,  
Upheld by knotty roots and fallen rocks,  
It overlooked in its serenity  
The dark earth, and the bending vault of stars.  
It was a tranquil spot, that seemed to smile  
Even in the lap of horror. Ivy clasped  
The fissured stones with its entwining arms,  
And did embower with leaves for ever green,  
And berries dark, the smooth and even space  
Of its inviolated floor, and here  
The children of the autumnal whirlwind bore,  
In wanton sport, those bright leaves, whose decay,  
Red, yellow, or ethereally pale,  
Rivals the pride of summer. 'Tis the haunt  
Of every gentle wind, whose breath can teach  
The wilds to love tranquillity. One step,  
One human step alone, has ever broken  
The stillness of its solitude:—one voice  
Alone inspired its echoes;—even that voice  
Which hither came, floating among the winds,  
And led the loveliest among human forms  
To make their wild haunts the depository  
Of all the grace and beauty that endued  
Its motions, render up its majesty,  
Scatter its music on the unfeeling storm,  
And to the damp leaves and blue cavern mould,  
Nurses of rainbow flowers and branching moss,  
Commit the colours of that varying cheek,  
That snowy breast, those dark and drooping eyes.

The dim and horned moon hung low, and poured  
A sea of lustre on the horizon's verge  
That overflowed its mountains. Yellow mist  
Filled the unbounded atmosphere, and drank  
Wan moonlight even to fulness; not a star  
Shone, not a sound was heard; the very winds,  
Danger's grim playmates, on that precipice  
Slept, clasped in his embrace.—O, storm of death!  
Whose sightless speed divides this sullen night:  
And thou, colossal Skeleton, that, still  
Guiding its irresistible career  
In thy devastating omnipotence,  
Art king of this frail world, from the red field  
Of slaughter, from the reeking hospital,  
The patriot's sacred couch, the snowy bed  
Of innocence, the scaffold and the throne,  
A mighty voice invokes thee. Ruin calls  
His brother Death. A rare and regal prey  
He hath prepared, prowling around the world;  
Glutted with which thou mayst repose, and men  
Go to their graves like flowers or creeping worms,  
Nor ever more offer at thy dark shrine  
The unheeded tribute of a broken heart.

When on the threshold of the green recess  
The wanderer's footsteps fell, he knew that death  
Was on him. Yet a little, ere it fled,  
Did he resign his high and holy soul  
To images of the majestic past,  
That paused within his passive being now,  
Like winds that bear sweet music, when they breathe  
Through some dim latticed chamber. He did place  
His pale lean hand upon the rugged trunk  
Of the old pine. Upon an ivied stone  
Reclined his languid head, his limbs did rest,  
Diffused and motionless, on the smooth brink  
Of that obscurest chasm;—and thus he lay,  
Surrendering to their final impulses  
The hovering powers of life. Hope and despair,  
The torturers, slept; no mortal pain or fear  
Marred his repose; the influxes of sense,  
And his own being unalloyed by pain,  
Yet feebler and more feeble, calmly fed  
The stream of thought, till he lay breathing there  
At peace, and faintly smiling:—his last sight  
Was the great moon, which o'er the western line  
Of the wide world her mighty horn suspended,  
With whose dun beams inwoven darkness seemed  
To mingle. Now upon the jagged hills  
It rests; and still as the divided frame  
Of the vast meteor sunk, the Poet's blood,  
That ever beat in mystic sympathy  
With nature's ebb and flow, grew feebler still:  
And when two lessening points of light alone  
Gleamed through the darkness, the alternate gasp  
Of his faint respiration scarce did stir  
The stagnate night:—till the minutest ray  
Was quenched, the pulse yet lingered in his heart.  
It paused—it fluttered. But when heaven remained  
Utterly black, the murky shades involved  
An image, silent, cold, and motionless,  
As their own voiceless earth and vacant air.  
Even as a vapour fed with golden beams  
That ministered on sunlight, ere the west  
Eclipses it, was now that wondrous frame—  
No sense, no motion, no divinity—  
A fragile lute, on whose harmonious strings  
The breath of heaven did wander—a bright stream  
Once fed with many-voiced waves—a dream  
Of youth, which night and time have quenched for ever,  
Still, dark, and dry, and unremembered now. 20

Oh, for Medea's wondrous alchemy,  
Which wheresoe'er it fell made the earth gleam  
With bright flowers, and the wintry boughs exhale  
From vernal blooms fresh fragrance! O, that God,  
Profuse of poisons, would concede the chalice  
Which but one living man has drained, who now,  
Vessel of deathless wrath, a slave that feels  
No proud exemption in the blighting curse  
He bears, over the world wanders for ever,  
Lone as incarnate death! O, that the dream  
Of dark magician in his visioned cave,  
Raking the cinders of a crucible  
For life and power, even when his feeble hand  
Shakes in its last decay, were the true law  
Of this so lovely world! But thou art fled,  
Like some frail exhalation; which the dawn  
Robes in its golden beams,—ah! thou hast fled!  
The brave, the gentle and the beautiful,  
The child of grace and genius. Heartless things  
Are done and said i' the world, and many worms  
And beasts and men live on, and mighty Earth  
From sea and mountain, city and wilderness,  
In vesper low or joyous orison,  
Lifts still its solemn voice:—but thou art fled—  
Thou canst no longer know or love the shapes  
Of this phantasmal scene, who have to thee  
Been purest ministers, who are, alas!  
Now thou art not. Upon those pallid lips  
So sweet even in their silence, on those eyes  
That image sleep in death, upon that form  
Yet safe from the worm's outrage, let no tear  
Be shed—not even in thought. Nor, when those hues  
Are gone, and those divinest lineaments,  
Worn by the senseless wind, shall live alone  
In the frail pauses of this simple strain,  
Let not high verse, mourning the memory  
Of that which is no more, or painting's woe  
Or sculpture, speak in feeble imagery  
Their own cold powers. Art and eloquence,  
And all the shows o' the world are frail and vain  
To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.  
It is a woe "too deep for tears," when all  
Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,  
Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves  
Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,  
The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;  
But pale despair and cold tranquillity,           21  
Nature's vast frame, the web of human things,  
Birth and the grave, that are not as they were.

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