

**Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Mother and Poet" (1861)**

*Turin, after News from Gaeta, 1861*

**I.**

Dead ! One of them shot by the sea in the east,  
And one of them shot in the west by the sea.  
Dead ! both my boys ! When you sit at the feast  
And are wanting a great song for Italy free,  
Let none look at *me* ! 5

**II.**

Yet I was a poetess only last year,  
And good at my art, for a woman, men said;  
But *this* woman, *this*, who is agonized here,  
— The east sea and west sea rhyme on in her head  
For ever instead. 10

**III.**

What art can a woman be good at ? Oh, vain!  
What art *is* she good at, but hurting her breast  
With the milk-teeth of babes, and a smile at the pain?  
Ah boys, how you hurt ! you were strong as you pressed,  
And I proud, by that test. 15

**IV.**

What art's for a woman ? To hold on her knees  
Both darlings ! to feel all their arms round her throat,  
Cling, strangle a little ! to sew by degrees  
And 'broider the long-clothes and neat little coat;  
To dream and to doat. 20

**V.**

To teach them ... It stings there ! *I* made them indeed  
Speak plain the word *country*. *I* taught them, no doubt,  
That a country's a thing men should die for at need.  
*I* prated of liberty, rights, and about  
The tyrant cast out. 25

## VI.

And when their eyes flashed ... O my beautiful eyes! ...  
I exulted ; nay, let them go forth at the wheels  
Of the guns, and denied not. But then the surprise  
When one sits quite alone ! Then one weeps, then one kneels!  
God, how the house feels! 30

## VII.

At first, happy news came, in gay letters moiled  
With my kisses, — of camp-life and glory, and how  
They both loved me ; and, soon coming home to be spoiled  
In return would fan off every fly from my brow  
With their green laurel-bough. 35

## VIII.

Then was triumph at Turin : Ancona was free!  
And some one came out of the cheers in the street,  
With a face pale as stone, to say something to me.  
My Guido was dead ! I fell down at his feet,  
While they cheered in the street. 40

## IX.

I bore it ; friends soothed me ; my grief looked sublime  
As the ransom of Italy. One boy remained  
To be leant on and walked with, recalling the time  
When the first grew immortal, while both of us strained  
To the height he had gained. 45

## X.

And letters still came, shorter, sadder, more strong,  
Writ now but in one hand, I was not to faint, —  
One loved me for two — would be with me ere long:  
And *Viva l' Italia !* — *he* died for, our saint,  
Who forbids our complaint." 50

## XI.

My Nanni would add, he was safe, and aware  
Of a presence that turned off the balls, — was imprest  
It was Guido himself, who knew what I could bear,  
And how 'twas impossible, quite dispossessed,  
To live on for the rest." 55

## XII.

On which, without pause, up the telegraph line  
Swept smoothly the next news from Gaeta : — *Shot.*  
*Tell his mother.* Ah, ah, his, ' their ' mother, — not mine,  
No voice says "My mother" again to me. What!  
You think Guido forgot? 60

## XIII.

Are souls straight so happy that, dizzy with Heaven,  
They drop earth's affections, conceive not of woe?  
I think not. Themselves were too lately forgiven  
Through THAT Love and Sorrow which reconciled so  
The Above and Below. 65

## XIV.

O Christ of the five wounds, who look'dst through the dark  
To the face of Thy mother ! consider, I pray,  
How we common mothers stand desolate, mark,  
Whose sons, not being Christs, die with eyes turned away,  
And no last word to say! 70

## XV.

Both boys dead ? but that's out of nature. We all  
Have been patriots, yet each house must always keep one.  
'Twere imbecile, hewing out roads to a wall;  
And, when Italy 's made, for what end is it done  
If we have not a son? 75

## XVI.

Ah, ah, ah ! when Gaeta's taken, what then?  
When the fair wicked queen sits no more at her sport  
Of the fire-balls of death crashing souls out of men?  
When the guns of Cavalli with final retort  
Have cut the game short? 80

## XVII.

When Venice and Rome keep their new jubilee,  
When your flag takes all heaven for its white, green, and red,  
When *you* have your country from mountain to sea,  
When King Victor has Italy's crown on his head,  
(And *I* have my Dead) — 85

## XVIII.

What then ? Do not mock me. Ah, ring your bells low,  
And burn your lights faintly ! *My* country is *there*,  
Above the star pricked by the last peak of snow:  
My Italy 's THERE, with my brave civic Pair,  
To disfranchise despair! 90

## XIX.

Forgive me. Some women bear children in strength,  
And bite back the cry of their pain in self-scorn;  
But the birth-pangs of nations will wring us at length  
Into wail such as this — and we sit on forlorn  
When the man-child is born. 95

## XX.

Dead ! One of them shot by the sea in the east,  
And one of them shot in the west by the sea.  
Both ! both my boys ! If in keeping the feast  
You want a great song for your Italy free,  
Let none look at *me!* 100