Robert Browning’s “A Lovers’ Quarrel” (c.1853; 1855)

I.

Oh, what a dawn of day!
How the March sun feels like May!
   All is blue again
   After last night’s rain,
And the South dries the hawthorn-spray.
   Only, my Love’s away!
I’d as lief that the blue were grey.

II.

Runnels, which rillets swell,
Must be dancing down the dell,
   With a foaming head
   On the beryl bed
Paven smooth as a hermit’s cell;
   Each with a tale to tell
Could my love but attend as well.

III.

Dearest, three months ago!
   When we lived blocked-up with snow,—
   When the wind would edge
   In and in his wedge,
In, as far as the point could go—
   Not to our ingle, though,
Where we loved each the other so!

IV.

Laughs with so little cause!
We devised games out of straws.
   We would try and trace
   One another’s face
In the ash, as an artist draws;
   Free on each other’s flaws,
How we chattered like two church daws!
V.

What’s in the “Times”?—a scold
At the Emperor deep and cold
    He has taken a bride
    To his gruesome side,
That’s as fair as himself is bold:
    There they sit ermine-stoled,
And she powders her hair with gold.

VI.

Fancy the Pampas’ sheen!
Miles and miles of gold and green
    Where the sunflowers blow
    In a solid glow,
And—to break now and then the screen—
    Black neck and eyeballs keen,
Up a wild horse leaps between!

VII.

Try, will our table turn
Lay your hands there light, and yearn
    Till the yearning slips
    Thro’ the finger-tips
In a fire which a few discern,
    And a very few feel burn,
And the rest, they may live and learn!

VIII.

Then we would up and pace,
For a change, about the place,
    Each with arm o’er neck:
    ‘T is our quarter-deck,
We are seamen in woeful case.
    Help in the ocean-space!
Or, if no help, we’ll embrace.
IX.

See, how she looks now, dressed
In a sledging-cap and vest!
‘T is a huge fur cloak—
   Like a reindeer’s yoke
Falls the lappet along the breast:
   Sleeves for her arms to rest,
Or to hang, as my Love likes best.

X.

Teach me to flirt a fan
As the Spanish ladies can,
   Or I tint your lip
   With a burnt stick’s tip
And you turn into such a man!
   Just the two spots that span
Half the bill of the young male swan.

XI.

Dearest, three months ago
When the mesmerizer Snow
   With his hand’s first sweep
Put the earth to sleep:
‘T was a time when the heart could show
   All—how was earth to know,
‘Neath the mute hand’s to-and-fro?

XII.

Dearest, three months ago
When we loved each other so,
   Lived and loved the same
   ‘Till an evening came
When a shaft from the devil’s bow
   Pierced to our ingle-glow,
And the friends were friend and foe!
XIII.

Not from the heart beneath—

'T was a bubble born of breath,
    Neither sneer nor vaunt,
    Nor reproach nor taunt.
See *a word*, how it severeth!
    Oh, power of life and death
In the tongue, as the Preacher saith!

XIV.

Woman, and will you cast

*For a word*, quite off at last
    Me, your own, your You,—
    Since, as truth is true,
I was You all the happy past—
    *Me do you leave aghast*

*With the memories We amassed?*

XV.

Love, if you knew the light

That your soul casts in my sight,
    How I look to you
    For the pure and true
And the beauteous and the right,—
    *Bear with a moment's spite*

*When a mere mote threatens the white!*

XVI.

*What of a hasty word?*

Is the fleshy heart not stirred
    By a worm's pin-prick
    Where its roots are quick?
See the eye, by a fly's foot blurred—
    Ear, when a straw is heard
*Scratch the brain's coat of curd!*
XVII.

Foul be the world or fair
More or less, how can I care?
‘T is the world the same
For my praise or blame,
And endurance is easy there.
Wrong in the one thing rare—
Oh, it is hard to bear!

XVIII.

Here’s the spring back or close,
When the almond-blossom blows:
We shall have the word
In a minor third
There is none but the cuckoo knows:
Heaps of the guilder-rose!
I must bear with it, I suppose.

XIX.

Could but November come,
Were the noisy birds struck dumb
At the warning slash
Of his driver’s-lash—
I would laugh like the valiant Thumb
Facing the castle glum
And the giant’s fee-faw-fum!

XX.

Then, were the world well stripped
Of the gear wherein equipped
We can stand apart,
Heart dispense with heart
In the sun, with the flowers unnipped,—
Oh, the world’s hangings ripped,
We were both in a bare-walled crypt!
XXI.

Each in the crypt would cry
“But one freezes here! and why?
   When a heart, as chill,
     At my own would thrill
Back to life, and its fires out-fly?
   Heart, shall we live or die?
The rest, . . . settle by-and-by!”

XIII.

So, she’d efface the score,
And forgive me as before.
   It is twelve o’clock:
     I shall hear her knock
In the worst of a storm’s uproar,
     I shall pull her through the door,
I shall have her for evermore!

ca. 1853