



**ELIZABETH  
BARRETT  
BROWNING  
SONNETS**

**Elizabeth Barrett Browning**

# **Sonnets**

Selected from *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

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**Fundacja FESTINA LENTE**

## I

I thought once how Theocritus had sung  
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,  
Who each one in a gracious hand appears  
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:  
And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,  
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,  
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,  
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung  
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,  
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move  
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;  
And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,—  
“Guess now who holds thee!”—“Death,” I said, But, there,  
The silver answer rang, “Not Death, but Love.”

## X

Yet, love, mere love, is beautiful indeed  
And worthy of acceptation. Fire is bright,  
Let temple burn, or flax; an equal light  
Leaps in the flame from cedar-plank or weed:  
And love is fire. And when I say at need  
I love thee . . . mark! . . . I love thee—in thy sight  
I stand transfigured, glorified aright,  
With conscience of the new rays that proceed  
Out of my face toward thine. There's nothing low  
In love, when love the lowest: meanest creatures  
Who love God, God accepts while loving so.  
And what I feel, across the inferior features  
Of what I am, doth flash itself, and show  
How that great work of Love enhances Nature's.

#### XIV

If thou must love me, let it be for nought  
Except for love's sake only. Do not say  
"I love her for her smile—her look—her way  
Of speaking gently,—for a trick of thought  
That falls in well with mine, and certes brought  
A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—  
For these things in themselves, Beloved, may  
Be changed, or change for thee,—and love, so wrought,  
May be unwrought so. Neither love me for  
Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry,—  
A creature might forget to weep, who bore  
Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!  
But love me for love's sake, that evermore  
Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity.

#### XV

Accuse me not, beseech thee, that I wear  
Too calm and sad a face in front of thine;  
For we two look two ways, and cannot shine  
With the same sunlight on our brow and hair.  
On me thou lookest with no doubting care,  
As on a bee shut in a crystalline;  
Since sorrow hath shut me safe in love's divine,  
And to spread wing and fly in the outer air  
Were most impossible failure, if I strove  
To fail so. But I look on thee—on thee—  
Beholding, besides love, the end of love,  
Hearing oblivion beyond memory;  
As one who sits and gazes from above,  
Over the rivers to the bitter sea.

## XX

Beloved, my Beloved, when I think  
That thou wast in the world a year ago,  
What time I sat alone here in the snow  
And saw no footprint, heard the silence sink  
No moment at thy voice, but, link by link,  
Went counting all my chains as if that so  
They never could fall off at any blow  
Struck by thy possible hand,—why, thus I drink  
Of life's great cup of wonder! Wonderful,  
Never to feel thee thrill the day or night  
With personal act or speech,—nor ever cull  
Some prescience of thee with the blossoms white  
Thou sawest growing! Atheists are as dull,  
Who cannot guess God's presence out of sight.

## XXI

Say over again, and yet once over again,  
That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated  
Should seem a “cuckoo-song,” as thou dost treat it,  
Remember, never to the hill or plain,  
Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain  
Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.  
Beloved, I, amid the darkness greeted  
By a doubtful spirit-voice, in that doubt's pain  
Cry, “Speak once more—thou lovest!” Who can fear  
Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,  
Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?  
Say thou dost love me, love me, love me—toll  
The silver iterance!—only minding, Dear,  
To love me also in silence with thy soul.

### **XXIII**

Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead,  
Wouldst thou miss any life in losing mine?  
And would the sun for thee more coldly shine  
Because of grave-damps falling round my head?  
I marvelled, my Beloved, when I read  
Thy thought so in the letter. I am thine—  
But . . . so much to thee? Can I pour thy wine  
While my hands tremble? Then my soul, instead  
Of dreams of death, resumes life's lower range.  
Then, love me, Love! look on me—breathe on me!  
As brighter ladies do not count it strange,  
For love, to give up acres and degree,  
I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange  
My near sweet view of heaven, for earth with thee!

### **XXVI**

I lived with visions for my company  
Instead of men and women, years ago,  
And found them gentle mates, nor thought to know  
A sweeter music than they played to me.  
But soon their trailing purple was not free  
Of this world's dust, their lutes did silent grow,  
And I myself grew faint and blind below  
Their vanishing eyes. Then thou didst come—to be,  
Beloved, what they seemed. Their shining fronts,  
Their songs, their splendours, (better, yet the same,  
As river-water hallowed into fonts)  
Met in thee, and from out thee overcame  
My soul with satisfaction of all wants:  
Because God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.

### **XXXIII**

Yes, call me by my pet-name! let me hear  
The name I used to run at, when a child,  
From innocent play, and leave the cowslips plied,  
To glance up in some face that proved me dear  
With the look of its eyes. I miss the clear  
Fond voices which, being drawn and reconciled  
Into the music of Heaven's undefiled,  
Call me no longer. Silence on the bier,  
While I call God--call God!--so let thy mouth  
Be heir to those who are now exanimate.  
Gather the north flowers to complete the south,  
And catch the early love up in the late.  
Yes, call me by that name,--and I, in truth,  
With the same heart, will answer and not wait.

### **XXXV**

If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange  
And be all to me? Shall I never miss  
Home-talk and blessing and the common kiss  
That comes to each in turn, nor count it strange,  
When I look up, to drop on a new range  
Of walls and floors, another home than this?  
Nay, wilt thou fill that place by me which is  
Filled by dead eyes too tender to know change  
That's hardest. If to conquer love, has tried,  
To conquer grief, tries more, as all things prove,  
For grief indeed is love and grief beside.  
Alas, I have grieved so I am hard to love.  
Yet love me—wilt thou? Open thy heart wide,  
And fold within, the wet wings of thy dove.

### **XLIII**

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.  
I love thee to the level of everyday's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.  
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;  
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.  
I love thee with the passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death.

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