

# **Selected Poems -- Robert Browning**

Robert Browning

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# Selected Poems

## Robert Browning

### *ABT VOGLER*

Would that the structure brave, the manifold music I build,  
Bidding my organ obey, calling its keys to their work,  
Claiming each slave of the sound, at a touch, as when Solomon willed  
Armies of angels that soar, legions of demons that lurk,  
Man, brute, reptile, fly,—alien of end and of aim,  
Adverse, each from the other heaven—high, hell—deep removed,—  
Should rush into sight at once as he named the ineffable Name,  
And pile him a palace straight, to pleasure the princess he loved!

Would it might tarry like his, the beautiful building of mine,  
This which my keys in a crowd pressed and importuned to raise!  
Ah, one and all, how they helped, would dispart now and now combine,  
Zealous to hasten the work, heighten their master his praise!  
And one would bury his brow with a blind plunge down to hell,  
Burrow awhile and build, broad on the roots of things,  
Then up again swim into sight, having based me my palace well,  
Founded it, fearless of flame, flat on the nether springs.

And another would mount and march, like the excellent minion he was,  
Ay, another and yet another, one crowd but with many a crest,  
Raising my rampired walls of gold as transparent as glass,  
Eager to do and die, yield each his place to the rest:  
For higher still and higher (as a runner tips with fire,  
When a great illumination surprises a festal night—  
Outlining round and round Rome's dome from space to spire)  
Up, the pinnacled glory reached, and the pride of my soul was in sight.

In sight? Not half! for it seemed, it was certain, to match man's birth,  
Nature in turn conceived, obeying an impulse as I;  
And the emulous heaven yearned down, made effort to reach the earth,  
As the earth had done her best, in my passion, to scale the sky:  
Novel splendours burst forth, grew familiar and dwelt with mine,  
Not a point nor peak but found and fixed its wandering star;  
Meteor—moons, balls of blaze: and they did not pale nor pine,  
For earth had attained to heaven, there was no more near nor far.

Nay more; for there wanted not who walked in the glare and glow,  
Presences plain in the place; or, fresh from the Protoplast,  
Furnished for ages to come, when a kindlier wind should blow,  
Lured now to begin and live, in a house to their liking at last;  
Or else the wonderful Dead who have passed through the body and gone,  
But were back once more to breathe in an old world worth their new:

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What never had been, was now; what was, as it shall be anon;  
And what is,—shall I say, matched both? for I was made perfect too.

All through my keys that gave their sounds to a wish of my soul,  
All through my soul that praised as its wish flowed visibly forth,  
All through music and me! For think, had I painted the whole,  
Why, there it had stood, to see, nor the process so wonder—worth:  
Had I written the same, made verse—still, effect proceeds from cause,  
Ye know why the forms are fair, ye hear how the tale is told;  
It is all triumphant art, but art in obedience to laws,  
Painter and poet are proud in the artist—list enrolled:—

But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,  
Existent behind all laws, that made them and, lo, they are!  
And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,  
That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.  
Consider it well: each tone of our scale in itself is nought;  
It is everywhere in the world—loud, soft, and all is said:  
Give it to me to use! I mix it with two in my thought:  
And, there! Ye have heard and seen: consider and bow the head!

Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I reared;  
Gone! and the good tears start, the praises that come too slow;  
For one is assured at first, one scarce can say that he feared,  
That he even gave it a thought, the gone thing was to go.  
Never to be again! But many more of the kind  
As good, nay, better, perchance: is this your comfort to me?  
To me, who must be saved because I cling with my mind  
To the same, same self, same love, same God: ay, what was, shall be.

Therefore to whom turn I but to thee, the ineffable Name?  
Builder and maker, thou, of houses not made with hands!  
What, have fear of change from thee who art ever the same?  
Doubt that thy power can fill the heart that thy power expands?  
There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall live as before;  
The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound;  
What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more;  
On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round.

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;  
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power  
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist  
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.  
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,  
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,  
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;  
Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by and by.

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence  
For the fulness of the days? Have we withered or agonized?  
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue thence?

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Why rushed the discords in, but that harmony should be prized?  
Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,  
Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe:  
But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;  
The rest may reason and welcome; 'tis we musicians know.

Well, it is earth with me; silence resumes her reign:  
I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce.  
Give me the keys. I feel for the common chord again,  
Sliding by semitones till I sink to the minor,—yes,  
And I blunt it into a ninth, and I stand on alien ground,  
Surveying awhile the heights I rolled from into the deep;  
Which, hark, I have dared and done, for my resting-place is found,  
The C Major of this life: so, now I will try to sleep.

*LOVE AMONG THE RUINS*

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles,  
Miles and miles  
On the solitary pastures where our sheep  
Half-asleep  
Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight, stray or stop  
As they crop—  
Was the site once of a city great and gay,  
(So they say)  
Of our country's very capital, its prince  
Ages since  
Held his court in, gathered councils, wielding far  
Peace or war.

Now the country does not even boast a tree,  
As you see,  
To distinguish slopes of verdure, certain rills  
From the hills  
Intersect and give a name to, (else they run  
Into one)  
Where the domed and daring palace shot its spires  
Up like fires  
O'er the hundred-gated circuit of a wall  
Bounding all  
Made of marble, men might march on nor be prest  
Twelve abreast.

And such plenty and perfection, see, of grass  
Never was!  
Such a carpet as, this summer-time, o'er-spreads  
And embeds  
Every vestige of the city, guessed alone,

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Stock or stone--  
Where a multitude of men breathed joy and woe  
Long ago;  
Lust of glory pricked their hearts up, dread of shame  
Struck them tame;  
And that glory and that shame alike, the gold  
Bought and sold.

Now--the single little turret that remains  
On the plains,  
By the caper overrooted, by the gourd  
Overscored,  
While the patching houseleek's head of blossom winks  
Through the chinks--  
Marks the basement whence a tower in ancient time  
Sprang sublime,  
And a burning ring, all round, the chariots traced  
As they raced,  
And the monarch and his minions and his dames  
Viewed the games.

And I know, while thus the quiet-coloured eve  
Smiles to leave  
To their folding, all our many-tinkling fleece  
In such peace,  
And the slopes and rills in undistinguished grey  
Melt away--  
That a girl with eager eyes and yellow hair  
Waits me there  
In the turret whence the charioteers caught soul  
For the goal,  
When the king looked, where she looks now, breathless, dumb  
Till I come.

But he looked upon the city, every side,  
Far and wide,  
All the mountains topped with temples, all the glades'  
Colonnades,  
All the causeys, bridges, aqueducts,--and then  
All the men!  
When I do come, she will speak not, she will stand,  
Either hand  
On my shoulder, give her eyes the first embrace  
Of my face,  
Ere we rush, ere we extinguish sight and speech  
Each on each.

In one year they sent a million fighters forth  
    South and North,  
And they built their gods a brazen pillar high  
    As the sky  
Yet reserved a thousand chariots in full force—  
    Gold, of course.  
O heart! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns!  
    Earth's returns  
For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!  
    Shut them in,  
With their triumphs and their glories and the rest!  
    Love is best.

*MY LAST DUCHESS*

**FERRARA**

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said  
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not  
Her husband's presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps  
Frà Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps  
Over my Lady's wrist too much," or "Paint  
Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
Half-flush that dies along her throat"; such stuff  
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough  
For calling up that spot of joy. She had  
A heart . . . how shall I say? . . . too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace—all and each

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Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good; but thanked  
Somehow . . . I know not how . . . as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill  
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will  
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this  
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let  
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set  
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,  
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I chuse  
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,  
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without  
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
As if alive. Will 't please you rise? We'll meet  
The company below, then. I repeat,  
The Count your Master's known munificence  
Is ample warrant that no just pretence  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go  
Together down, Sir! Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.

*THE BISHOP ORDERS HIS TOMB AT SAINT PRAXED'S CHURCH ROME, 15--*

Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!  
Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?  
Nephews—sons mine . . . ah God, I know not! Well—  
She, men would have to be your mother once,  
Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!  
What's done is done, and she is dead beside,  
Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since,  
And as she died so must we die ourselves,  
And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream.  
Life, how and what is it? As here I lie  
In this state-chamber, dying by degrees,  
Hours and long hours in the dead night, I ask  
"Do I live, am I dead?" Peace, peace seems all.  
Saint Praxed's ever was the church for peace;  
And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought  
With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know:  
—Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;  
Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner South  
He graced his carrion with, God curse the same!



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Yet still my niche is not so cramped but thence  
One sees the pulpit o' the epistle-side,  
And somewhat of the choir, those silent seats,  
And up into the aery dome where live  
The angels, and a sunbeam's sure to lurk:  
And I shall fill my slab of basalt there,  
And 'neath my tabernacle take my rest,  
With those nine columns round me, two and two,  
The odd one at my feet where Anselm stands:  
Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe  
As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse.  
—Old Gandolf with his paltry onion-stone,  
Put me where I may look at him! True peach,  
Rosy and flawless: how I earned the prize!  
Draw close: that conflagration of my church  
—What then? So much was saved if aught were missed!  
My sons, ye would not be my death? Go dig  
The white-grape vineyard where the oil-press stood,  
Drop water gently till the surface sink,  
And if ye find . . . Ah God, I know not, I! ...  
Bedded in store of rotten fig-leaves soft,  
And corded up in a tight olive-frail,  
Some lump, ah God, of lapis lazuli,  
Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,  
Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast ...  
Sons, all have I bequeathed you, villas, all,  
That brave Frascati villa with its bath,  
So, let the blue lump poise between my knees,  
Like God the Father's globe on both His hands  
Ye worship in the Jesu Church so gay,  
For Gandolf shall not choose but see and burst!  
Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years:  
Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?  
Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black—  
'Twas ever antique-black I meant! How else  
Shall ye contrast my frieze to come beneath?  
The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me,  
Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance  
Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,  
The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,  
Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan  
Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off,  
And Moses with the tables . . . but I know  
Ye mark me not! What do they whisper thee,  
Child of my bowels, Anselm? Ah, ye hope  
To revel down my villas while I gasp  
Bricked o'er with beggar's mouldy travertine  
Which Gandolf from his tomb-top chuckles at!  
Nay, boys, ye love me—all of jasper, then!  
'Tis jasper ye stand pledged to, lest I grieve.  
My bath must needs be left behind, alas!

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One block, pure green as a pistachio-nut,  
There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world--  
And have I not Saint Praxed's ear to pray  
Horses for ye, and brown Greek manuscripts,  
And mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs?  
--That's if ye carve my epitaph aright,  
Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word,  
No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line--  
Tully, my masters? Ulpian serves his need!  
And then how I shall lie through centuries,  
And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,  
And see God made and eaten all day long,  
And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste  
Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!  
For as I lie here, hours of the dead night,  
Dying in state and by such slow degrees,  
I fold my arms as if they clasped a crook,  
And stretch my feet forth straight as stone can point,  
And let the bedclothes, for a mortcloth, drop  
Into great laps and folds of sculptor's-work:  
And as yon tapers dwindle, and strange thoughts  
Grow, with a certain humming in my ears,  
About the life before I lived this life,  
And this life too, popes, cardinals and priests,  
Saint Praxed at his sermon on the mount,  
Your tall pale mother with her talking eyes,  
And new-found agate urns as fresh as day,  
And marble's language, Latin pure, discreet,  
--Aha, ELUCESCEBAT quoth our friend?  
No Tully, said I, Ulpian at the best!  
Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage.  
All lapis, all, sons! Else I give the Pope  
My villas! Will ye ever eat my heart?  
Ever your eyes were as a lizard's quick,  
They glitter like your mother's for my soul,  
Or ye would heighten my impoverished frieze,  
Piece out its starved design, and fill my vase  
With grapes, and add a vizor and a Term,  
And to the tripod ye would tie a lynx  
That in his struggle throws the thyrsus down,  
To comfort me on my entablature  
Whereon I am to lie till I must ask  
"Do I live, am I dead?" There, leave me, there!  
For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude  
To death--ye wish it--God, ye wish it! Stone--  
Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat  
As if the corpse they keep were oozing through--  
And no more lapis to delight the world!  
Well, go! I bless ye. Fewer tapers there,  
But in a row: and, going, turn your backs  
--Ay, like departing altar-ministrants,

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And leave me in my church, the church for peace,  
That I may watch at leisure if he leers--  
Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone,  
As still he envied me, so fair she was!

*ANDREA DEL SARTO (CALLED "THE FAULTLESS PAINTER")*

But do not let us quarrel any more,  
No, my Lucrezia; bear with me for once:  
Sit down and all shall happen as you wish.  
You turn your face, but does it bring your heart?  
I'll work then for your friend's friend, never fear,  
Treat his own subject after his own way,  
Fix his own time, accept too his own price,  
And shut the money into this small hand  
When next it takes mine. Will it? tenderly?  
Oh, I'll content him,--but to-morrow, Love!  
I often am much wearier than you think,  
This evening more than usual, and it seems  
As if--forgive now--should you let me sit  
Here by the window with your hand in mine  
And look a half-hour forth on Fiesole,  
Both of one mind, as married people use,  
Quietly, quietly the evening through,  
I might get up to-morrow to my work  
Cheerful and fresh as ever. Let us try.  
To-morrow, how you shall be glad for this!  
Your soft hand is a woman of itself,  
And mine the man's bared breast she curls inside.  
Don't count the time lost, neither; you must serve  
For each of the five pictures we require:  
It saves a model. So! keep looking so--  
My serpentine beauty, rounds on rounds!  
--How could you ever prick those perfect ears,  
Even to put the pearl there! oh, so sweet--  
My face, my moon, my everybody's moon,  
Which everybody looks on and calls his,  
And, I suppose, is looked on by in turn,  
While she looks--no one's: very dear, no less.  
You smile? why, there's my picture ready made,  
There's what we painters call our harmony!  
A common greyness silvers everything,--  
All in a twilight, you and I alike  
--You, at the point of your first pride in me  
(That's gone you know),--but I, at every point;  
My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down  
To yonder sober pleasant Fiesole.  
There's the bell clinking from the chapel-top;  
That length of convent-wall across the way  
Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside;

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The last monk leaves the garden; days decrease,  
And autumn grows, autumn in everything.  
Eh? the whole seems to fall into a shape  
As if I saw alike my work and self  
And all that I was born to be and do,  
A twilight-piece. Love, we are in God's hand.  
How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead;  
So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!  
I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie!  
This chamber for example--turn your head--  
All that's behind us! You don't understand  
Nor care to understand about my art,  
But you can hear at least when people speak:  
And that cartoon, the second from the door  
--It is the thing, Love! so such things should be--  
Behold Madonna!--I am bold to say.  
I can do with my pencil what I know,  
What I see, what at bottom of my heart  
I wish for, if I ever wish so deep--  
Do easily, too--when I say, perfectly,  
I do not boast, perhaps: yourself are judge,  
Who listened to the Legate's talk last week,  
And just as much they used to say in France.  
At any rate 'tis easy, all of it!  
No sketches first, no studies, that's long past:  
I do what many dream of, all their lives,  
--Dream? strive to do, and agonize to do,  
And fail in doing. I could count twenty such  
On twice your fingers, and not leave this town,  
Who strive--you don't know how the others strive  
To paint a little thing like that you smeared  
Carelessly passing with your robes afloat,--  
Yet do much less, so much less, Someone says,  
(I know his name, no matter)--so much less!  
Well, less is more, Lucrezia: I am judged.  
There burns a truer light of God in them,  
In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,  
Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt  
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine.  
Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,  
Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,  
Enter and take their place there sure enough,  
Though they come back and cannot tell the world.  
My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here.  
The sudden blood of these men! at a word--  
Praise them, it boils, or blame them, it boils too.  
I, painting from myself and to myself,  
Know what I do, am unmoved by men's blame  
Or their praise either. Somebody remarks  
Morello's outline there is wrongly traced,  
His hue mistaken; what of that? or else,

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Rightly traced and well ordered; what of that?  
Speak as they please, what does the mountain care?  
Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's a heaven for? All is silver-grey,  
Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!  
I know both what I want and what might gain,  
And yet how profitless to know, to sigh  
"Had I been two, another and myself,  
"Our head would have o'erlooked the world!" No doubt.  
Yonder's a work now, of that famous youth  
The Urbinate who died five years ago.  
('Tis copied, George Vasari sent it me.)  
Well, I can fancy how he did it all,  
Pouring his soul, with kings and popes to see,  
Reaching, that heaven might so replenish him,  
Above and through his art—for it gives way;  
That arm is wrongly put—and there again—  
A fault to pardon in the drawing's lines,  
Its body, so to speak: its soul is right,  
He means right—that, a child may understand.  
Still, what an arm! and I could alter it:  
But all the play, the insight and the stretch—  
(Out of me, out of me! And wherefore out?  
Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,  
We might have risen to Rafael, I and you!  
Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think—  
More than I merit, yes, by many times.  
But had you—oh, with the same perfect brow,  
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,  
And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird  
The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare —  
Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind!  
Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged  
"God and the glory! never care for gain.  
"The present by the future, what is that?  
"Live for fame, side by side with Agnolo!  
"Rafael is waiting: up to God, all three!"  
I might have done it for you. So it seems:  
Perhaps not. All is as God over-rules.  
Beside, incentives come from the soul's self;  
The rest avail not. Why do I need you?  
What wife had Rafael, or has Agnolo?  
In this world, who can do a thing, will not;  
And who would do it, cannot, I perceive:  
Yet the will's somewhat—somewhat, too, the power—  
And thus we half-men struggle. At the end,  
God, I conclude, compensates, punishes.  
'Tis safer for me, if the award be strict,  
That I am something underrated here,  
Poor this long while, despised, to speak the truth.  
I dared not, do you know, leave home all day,

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For fear of chancing on the Paris lords.  
The best is when they pass and look aside;  
But they speak sometimes; I must bear it all.  
Well may they speak! That Francis, that first time,  
And that long festal year at Fontainebleau!  
I surely then could sometimes leave the ground,  
Put on the glory, Rafael's daily wear,  
In that humane great monarch's golden look,--  
One finger in his beard or twisted curl  
Over his mouth's good mark that made the smile,  
One arm about my shoulder, round my neck,  
The jingle of his gold chain in my ear,  
I painting proudly with his breath on me,  
All his court round him, seeing with his eyes,  
Such frank French eyes, and such a fire of souls  
Profuse, my hand kept plying by those hearts,--  
And, best of all, this, this, this face beyond,  
This in the background, waiting on my work,  
To crown the issue with a last reward!  
A good time, was it not, my kingly days?  
And had you not grown restless... but I know--  
'Tis done and past: 'twas right, my instinct said:  
Too live the life grew, golden and not grey,  
And I'm the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt  
Out of the grange whose four walls make his world.  
How could it end in any other way?  
You called me, and I came home to your heart.  
The triumph was--to reach and stay there; since  
I reached it ere the triumph, what is lost?  
Let my hands frame your face in your hair's gold,  
You beautiful Lucrezia that are mine!  
"Rafael did this, Andrea painted that;  
"The Roman's is the better when you pray,  
"But still the other's Virgin was his wife--"  
Men will excuse me. I am glad to judge  
Both pictures in your presence; clearer grows  
My better fortune, I resolve to think.  
For, do you know, Lucrezia, as God lives,  
Said one day Agnolo, his very self,  
To Rafael . . . I have known it all these years . . .  
(When the young man was flaming out his thoughts  
Upon a palace-wall for Rome to see,  
Too lifted up in heart because of it)  
"Friend, there's a certain sorry little scrub  
"Goes up and down our Florence, none cares how,  
"Who, were he set to plan and execute  
"As you are, pricked on by your popes and kings,  
"Would bring the sweat into that brow of yours!"  
To Rafael's!--And indeed the arm is wrong.  
I hardly dare . . . yet, only you to see,  
Give the chalk here--quick, thus, the line should go!

Selected Poems — Robert Browning

Ay, but the soul! he's Rafael! rub it out!  
Still, all I care for, if he spoke the truth,  
(What he? why, who but Michel Agnolo?  
Do you forget already words like those?)  
If really there was such a chance, so lost,—  
Is, whether you're—not grateful—but more pleased.  
Well, let me think so. And you smile indeed!  
This hour has been an hour! Another smile?  
If you would sit thus by me every night  
I should work better, do you comprehend?  
I mean that I should earn more, give you more.  
See, it is settled dusk now; there's a star;  
Morello's gone, the watch-lights show the wall,  
The cue-owls speak the name we call them by.  
Come from the window, love,—come in, at last,  
Inside the melancholy little house  
We built to be so gay with. God is just.  
King Francis may forgive me: oft at nights  
When I look up from painting, eyes tired out,  
The walls become illumined, brick from brick  
Distinct, instead of mortar, fierce bright gold,  
That gold of his I did cement them with!  
Let us but love each other. Must you go?  
That Cousin here again? he waits outside?  
Must see you—you, and not with me? Those loans?  
More gaming debts to pay? you smiled for that?  
Well, let smiles buy me! have you more to spend?  
While hand and eye and something of a heart  
Are left me, work's my ware, and what's it worth?  
I'll pay my fancy. Only let me sit  
The grey remainder of the evening out,  
Idle, you call it, and muse perfectly  
How I could paint, were I but back in France,  
One picture, just one more—the Virgin's face,  
Not yours this time! I want you at my side  
To hear them—that is, Michel Agnolo—  
Judge all I do and tell you of its worth.  
Will you? To-morrow, satisfy your friend.  
I take the subjects for his corridor,  
Finish the portrait out of hand—there, there,  
And throw him in another thing or two  
If he demurs; the whole should prove enough  
To pay for this same Cousin's freak. Beside,  
What's better and what's all I care about,  
Get you the thirteen scudi for the ruff!  
Love, does that please you? Ah, but what does he,  
The Cousin! what does he to please you more?  
I am grown peaceful as old age to-night.  
I regret little, I would change still less.  
Since there my past life lies, why alter it?  
The very wrong to Francis!—it is true

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

I took his coin, was tempted and complied,  
And built this house and sinned, and all is said.  
My father and my mother died of want.  
Well, had I riches of my own? you see  
How one gets rich! Let each one bear his lot.  
They were born poor, lived poor, and poor they died:  
And I have laboured somewhat in my time  
And not been paid profusely. Some good son  
Paint my two hundred pictures--let him try!  
No doubt, there's something strikes a balance. Yes,  
You loved me quite enough. it seems to-night.  
This must suffice me here. What would one have?  
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance--  
Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,  
Meted on each side by the angel's reed,  
For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me  
To cover--the three first without a wife,  
While I have mine! So--still they overcome  
Because there's still Lucrezia,--as I choose.

Again the Cousin's whistle! Go, my Love.

*FRA LIPPO LIPPI*

I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!  
You need not clap your torches to my face.  
Zooks, what's to blame? you think you see a monk!  
What, 'tis past midnight, and you go the rounds,  
And here you catch me at an alley's end  
Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar?  
The Carmine's my cloister: hunt it up,  
Do,--harry out, if you must show your zeal,  
Whatever rat, there, haps on his wrong hole,  
And nip each softling of a wee white mouse,  
Weke, weke, that's crept to keep him company!  
Aha, you know your betters! Then, you'll take  
Your hand away that's fiddling on my throat,  
And please to know me likewise. Who am I?  
Why, one, sir, who is lodging with a friend  
Three streets off--he's a certain . . . how d'ye call?  
Master--a ...Cosimo of the Medici,  
I' the house that caps the corner. Boh! you were best!  
Remember and tell me, the day you're hanged,  
How you affected such a gullet's-gripe!  
But you, sir, it concerns you that your knaves  
Pick up a manner nor discredit you:  
Zooks, are we pilchards, that they sweep the streets  
And count fair price what comes into their net?



Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

He's Judas to a tittle, that man is!  
Just such a face! Why, sir, you make amends.  
Lord, I'm not angry! Bid your hang-dogs go  
Drink out this quarter-florin to the health  
Of the munificent House that harbours me  
(And many more beside, lads! more beside!)  
And all's come square again. I'd like his face--  
His, elbowing on his comrade in the door  
With the pike and lantern,--for the slave that holds  
John Baptist's head a-dangle by the hair  
With one hand ("Look you, now," as who should say)  
And his weapon in the other, yet unwiped!  
It's not your chance to have a bit of chalk,  
A wood-coal or the like? or you should see!  
Yes, I'm the painter, since you style me so.  
What, brother Lippo's doings, up and down,  
You know them and they take you? like enough!  
I saw the proper twinkle in your eye--  
'Tell you, I liked your looks at very first.  
Let's sit and set things straight now, hip to haunch.  
Here's spring come, and the nights one makes up bands  
To roam the town and sing out carnival,  
And I've been three weeks shut within my mew,  
A-painting for the great man, saints and saints  
And saints again. I could not paint all night--  
Ouf! I leaned out of window for fresh air.  
There came a hurly of feet and little feet,  
A sweep of lute strings, laughs, and whiffs of song, --  
Flower o' the broom,  
Take away love, and our earth is a tomb!  
Flower o' the quince,  
I let Lisa go, and what good in life since?  
Flower o' the thyme--and so on. Round they went.  
Scarce had they turned the corner when a titter  
Like the skipping of rabbits by moonlight,--three slim shapes,  
And a face that looked up . . . zooks, sir, flesh and blood,  
That's all I'm made of! Into shreds it went,  
Curtain and counterpane and coverlet,  
All the bed-furniture--a dozen knots,  
There was a ladder! Down I let myself,  
Hands and feet, scrambling somehow, and so dropped,  
And after them. I came up with the fun  
Hard by Saint Laurence, hail fellow, well met,--  
Flower o' the rose,  
If I've been merry, what matter who knows?  
And so as I was stealing back again  
To get to bed and have a bit of sleep  
Ere I rise up to-morrow and go work  
On Jerome knocking at his poor old breast  
With his great round stone to subdue the flesh,  
You snap me of the sudden. Ah, I see!

Selected Poems — Robert Browning

Though your eye twinkles still, you shake your head—  
Mine's shaved—a monk, you say—the sting 's in that!  
If Master Cosimo announced himself,  
Mum's the word naturally; but a monk!  
Come, what am I a beast for? tell us, now!  
I was a baby when my mother died  
And father died and left me in the street.  
I starved there, God knows how, a year or two  
On fig-skins, melon-parings, rinds and shucks,  
Refuse and rubbish. One fine frosty day,  
My stomach being empty as your hat,  
The wind doubled me up and down I went.  
Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,  
(Its fellow was a stinger as I knew)  
And so along the wall, over the bridge,  
By the straight cut to the convent. Six words there,  
While I stood munching my first bread that month:  
"So, boy, you're minded," quoth the good fat father  
Wiping his own mouth, 'twas refection-time,—  
"To quit this very miserable world?  
Will you renounce" . . . "the mouthful of bread?" thought I;  
By no means! Brief, they made a monk of me;  
I did renounce the world, its pride and greed,  
Palace, farm, villa, shop, and banking-house,  
Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici  
Have given their hearts to—all at eight years old.  
Well, sir, I found in time, you may be sure,  
'Twas not for nothing—the good bellyful,  
The warm serge and the rope that goes all round,  
And day-long blessed idleness beside!  
"Let's see what the urchin's fit for"—that came next.  
Not overmuch their way, I must confess.  
Such a to-do! They tried me with their books:  
Lord, they'd have taught me Latin in pure waste!  
Flower o' the clove.  
All the Latin I construe is, "amo" I love!  
But, mind you, when a boy starves in the streets  
Eight years together, as my fortune was,  
Watching folk's faces to know who will fling  
The bit of half-stripped grape-bunch he desires,  
And who will curse or kick him for his pains,—  
Which gentleman processional and fine,  
Holding a candle to the Sacrament,  
Will wink and let him lift a plate and catch  
The droppings of the wax to sell again,  
Or holla for the Eight and have him whipped,—  
How say I?—nay, which dog bites, which lets drop  
His bone from the heap of offal in the street,—  
Why, soul and sense of him grow sharp alike,  
He learns the look of things, and none the less  
For admonition from the hunger-pinch.

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

I had a store of such remarks, be sure,  
Which, after I found leisure, turned to use.  
I drew men's faces on my copy-books,  
Scrawled them within the antiphonary's marge,  
Joined legs and arms to the long music-notes,  
Found eyes and nose and chin for A's and B's,  
And made a string of pictures of the world  
Betwixt the ins and outs of verb and noun,  
On the wall, the bench, the door. The monks looked black.  
"Nay," quoth the Prior, "turn him out, d'ye say?  
In no wise. Lose a crow and catch a lark.  
What if at last we get our man of parts,  
We Carmelites, like those Camaldolese  
And Preaching Friars, to do our church up fine  
And put the front on it that ought to be!"  
And hereupon he bade me daub away.  
Thank you! my head being crammed, the walls a blank,  
Never was such prompt disemburdening.  
First, every sort of monk, the black and white,  
I drew them, fat and lean: then, folk at church,  
From good old gossips waiting to confess  
Their cribs of barrel-droppings, candle-ends,—  
To the breathless fellow at the altar-foot,  
Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there  
With the little children round him in a row  
Of admiration, half for his beard and half  
For that white anger of his victim's son  
Shaking a fist at him with one fierce arm,  
Signing himself with the other because of Christ  
(Whose sad face on the cross sees only this  
After the passion of a thousand years)  
Till some poor girl, her apron o'er her head,  
(Which the intense eyes looked through) came at eve  
On tiptoe, said a word, dropped in a loaf,  
Her pair of earrings and a bunch of flowers  
(The brute took growling), prayed, and so was gone.  
I painted all, then cried " `T#is ask and have;  
Choose, for more's ready!"—laid the ladder flat,  
And showed my covered bit of cloister-wall.  
The monks closed in a circle and praised loud  
Till checked, taught what to see and not to see,  
Being simple bodies,——"That's the very man!  
Look at the boy who stoops to pat the dog!  
That woman's like the Prior's niece who comes  
To care about his asthma: it's the life!"  
But there my triumph's straw-fire flared and funk'd;  
Their betters took their turn to see and say:  
The Prior and the learned pulled a face  
And stopped all that in no time. "How? what's here?  
Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!  
Faces, arms, legs, and bodies like the true

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

As much as pea and pea! it's devil's-game!  
Your business is not to catch men with show,  
With homage to the perishable clay,  
But lift them over it, ignore it all,  
Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.  
Your business is to paint the souls of men--  
Man's soul, and it's a fire, smoke . . . no, it's not . . .  
It's vapour done up like a new-born babe--  
(In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)  
It's . . . well, what matters talking, it's the soul!  
Give us no more of body than shows soul!  
Here's Giotto, with his Saint a-praising God,  
That sets us praising--why not stop with him?  
Why put all thoughts of praise out of our head  
With wonder at lines, colours, and what not?  
Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!  
Rub all out, try at it a second time.  
Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts,  
She's just my niece . . . Herodias, I would say,--  
Who went and danced and got men's heads cut off!  
Have it all out!" Now, is this sense, I ask?  
A fine way to paint soul, by painting body  
So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further  
And can't fare worse! Thus, yellow does for white  
When what you put for yellow's simply black,  
And any sort of meaning looks intense  
When all beside itself means and looks nought.  
Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn,  
Left foot and right foot, go a double step,  
Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,  
Both in their order? Take the prettiest face,  
The Prior's niece . . . patron-saint--is it so pretty  
You can't discover if it means hope, fear,  
Sorrow or joy? won't beauty go with these?  
Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue,  
Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,  
And then add soul and heighten them three-fold?  
Or say there's beauty with no soul at all--  
(I never saw it--put the case the same--)  
If you get simple beauty and nought else,  
You get about the best thing God invents:  
That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have missed,  
Within yourself, when you return him thanks.  
"Rub all out!" Well, well, there's my life, in short,  
And so the thing has gone on ever since.  
I'm grown a man no doubt, I've broken bounds:  
You should not take a fellow eight years old  
And make him swear to never kiss the girls.  
I'm my own master, paint now as I please--  
Having a friend, you see, in the Corner-house!  
Lord, it's fast holding by the rings in front--

Selected Poems — Robert Browning

Those great rings serve more purposes than just  
To plant a flag in, or tie up a horse!  
And yet the old schooling sticks, the old grave eyes  
Are peeping o'er my shoulder as I work,  
The heads shake still—"It's art's decline, my son!  
You're not of the true painters, great and old;  
Brother Angelico's the man, you'll find;  
Brother Lorenzo stands his single peer:  
Fag on at flesh, you'll never make the third!"  
Flower o' the pine,  
You keep your mistr ... manners, and I'll stick to mine!  
I'm not the third, then: bless us, they must know!  
Don't you think they're the likeliest to know,  
They with their Latin? So, I swallow my rage,  
Clench my teeth, suck my lips in tight, and paint  
To please them—sometimes do and sometimes don't;  
For, doing most, there's pretty sure to come  
A turn, some warm eve finds me at my saints—  
A laugh, a cry, the business of the world—  
(Flower o' the peach  
Death for us all, and his own life for each!)  
And my whole soul revolves, the cup runs over,  
The world and life's too big to pass for a dream,  
And I do these wild things in sheer despite,  
And play the fooleries you catch me at,  
In pure rage! The old mill-horse, out at grass  
After hard years, throws up his stiff heels so,  
Although the miller does not preach to him  
The only good of grass is to make chaff.  
What would men have? Do they like grass or no—  
May they or mayn't they? all I want's the thing  
Settled for ever one way. As it is,  
You tell too many lies and hurt yourself:  
You don't like what you only like too much,  
You do like what, if given you at your word,  
You find abundantly detestable.  
For me, I think I speak as I was taught;  
I always see the garden and God there  
A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,  
The value and significance of flesh,  
I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards.  
You understand me: I'm a beast, I know.  
But see, now—why, I see as certainly  
As that the morning-star's about to shine,  
What will hap some day. We've a youngster here  
Comes to our convent, studies what I do,  
Slouches and stares and lets no atom drop:  
His name is Guidi—he'll not mind the monks—  
They call him Hulking Tom, he lets them talk—  
He picks my practice up—he'll paint apace.  
I hope so—though I never live so long,

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

I know what's sure to follow. You be judge!  
You speak no Latin more than I, belike;  
However, you're my man, you've seen the world  
--The beauty and the wonder and the power,  
The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,  
Changes, surprises,--and God made it all!  
--For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,  
For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,  
The mountain round it and the sky above,  
Much more the figures of man, woman, child,  
These are the frame to? What's it all about?  
To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,  
Wondered at? oh, this last of course!--you say.  
But why not do as well as say,--paint these  
Just as they are, careless what comes of it?  
God's works--paint any one, and count it crime  
To let a truth slip. Don't object, "His works  
Are here already; nature is complete:  
Suppose you reproduce her--(which you can't)  
There's no advantage! you must beat her, then."  
For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love  
First when we see them painted, things we have passed  
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;  
And so they are better, painted--better to us,  
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;  
God uses us to help each other so,  
Lending our minds out. Have you noticed, now,  
Your cullion's hanging face? A bit of chalk,  
And trust me but you should, though! How much more,  
If I drew higher things with the same truth!  
That were to take the Prior's pulpit--place,  
Interpret God to all of you! Oh, oh,  
It makes me mad to see what men shall do  
And we in our graves! This world's no blot for us,  
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:  
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.  
"Ay, but you don't so instigate to prayer!"  
Strikes in the Prior: "when your meaning's plain  
It does not say to folk--remember matins,  
Or, mind you fast next Friday!" Why, for this  
What need of art at all? A skull and bones,  
Two bits of stick nailed crosswise, or, what's best,  
A bell to chime the hour with, does as well.  
I painted a Saint Laurence six months since  
At Prato, splashed the fresco in fine style:  
"How looks my painting, now the scaffold's down?"  
I ask a brother: "Hugely," he returns--  
"Already not one phiz of your three slaves  
Who turn the Deacon off his toasted side,  
But's scratched and prodded to our heart's content,  
The pious people have so eased their own

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

With coming to say prayers there in a rage:  
We get on fast to see the bricks beneath.  
Expect another job this time next year,  
For pity and religion grow i' the crowd--  
Your painting serves its purpose!" Hang the fools!  
--That is--you'll not mistake an idle word  
Spoke in a huff by a poor monk, God wot,  
Tasting the air this spicy night which turns  
The unaccustomed head like Chianti wine!  
Oh, the church knows! don't misreport me, now!  
It's natural a poor monk out of bounds  
Should have his apt word to excuse himself:  
And hearken how I plot to make amends.  
I have bethought me: I shall paint a piece  
... There's for you! Give me six months, then go, see  
Something in Sant' Ambrogio's! Bless the nuns!  
They want a cast o' my office. I shall paint  
God in the midst, Madonna and her babe,  
Ringed by a bowery, flowery angel-brood,  
Lilies and vestments and white faces, sweet  
As puff on puff of grated orris-root  
When ladies crowd to Church at midsummer.  
And then i' the front, of course a saint or two--  
Saint John' because he saves the Florentines,  
Saint Ambrose, who puts down in black and white  
The convent's friends and gives them a long day,  
And Job, I must have him there past mistake,  
The man of Uz (and Us without the z,  
Painters who need his patience). Well, all these  
Secured at their devotion, up shall come  
Out of a corner when you least expect,  
As one by a dark stair into a great light,  
Music and talking, who but Lippo! I!--  
Mazed, motionless, and moonstruck--I'm the man!  
Back I shrink--what is this I see and hear?  
I, caught up with my monk's--things by mistake,  
My old serge gown and rope that goes all round,  
I, in this presence, this pure company!  
Where's a hole, where's a corner for escape?  
Then steps a sweet angelic slip of a thing  
Forward, puts out a soft palm--"Not so fast!"  
--Addresses the celestial presence, "nay--  
He made you and devised you, after all,  
Though he's none of you! Could Saint John there draw--  
His camel-hair make up a painting brush?  
We come to brother Lippo for all that,  
Iste perfectit opus! So, all smile--  
I shuffle sideways with my blushing face  
Under the cover of a hundred wings  
Thrown like a spread of kirtles when you're gay  
And play hot cockles, all the doors being shut,

Till, wholly unexpected, in there pops  
The hothead husband! Thus I scuttle off  
To some safe bench behind, not letting go  
The palm of her, the little lily thing  
That spoke the good word for me in the nick,  
Like the Prior's niece . . . Saint Lucy, I would say.  
And so all's saved for me, and for the church  
A pretty picture gained. Go, six months hence!  
Your hand, sir, and good-bye: no lights, no lights!  
The street's hushed, and I know my own way back,  
Don't fear me! There's the grey beginning. Zooks!

*CALIBAN UPON SETEBOS OR, NATURAL THEOLOGY IN THE ISLAND*

[Will sprawl, now that the heat of day is best,  
Flat on his belly in the pit's much mire,  
With elbows wide, fists clenched to prop his chin.  
And, while he kicks both feet in the cool slush,  
And feels about his spine small eft-things course,  
Run in and out each arm, and make him laugh:  
And while above his head a pompion-plant,  
Coating the cave-top as a brow its eye,  
Creeps down to touch and tickle hair and beard,  
And now a flower drops with a bee inside,  
And now a fruit to snap at, catch and crunch,—  
He looks out o'er yon sea which sunbeams cross  
And recross till they weave a spider-web  
(Meshes of fire, some great fish breaks at times)  
And talks to his own self, howe'er he please,  
Touching that other, whom his dam called God.  
Because to talk about Him, vexes—ha,  
Could He but know! and time to vex is now,  
When talk is safer than in winter-time.  
Moreover Prosper and Miranda sleep  
In confidence he drudges at their task,  
And it is good to cheat the pair, and gibe,  
Letting the rank tongue blossom into speech.]

Setebos, Setebos, and Setebos!  
'Thinketh, He dwelleth i' the cold o' the moon.

'Thinketh He made it, with the sun to match,  
But not the stars; the stars came otherwise;  
Only made clouds, winds, meteors, such as that:  
Also this isle, what lives and grows thereon,  
And snaky sea which rounds and ends the same.



Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

'Thinketh, it came of being ill at ease:  
He hated that He cannot change His cold,  
Nor cure its ache. 'Hath spied an icy fish  
That longed to 'scape the rock-stream where she lived,  
And thaw herself within the lukewarm brine  
O' the lazy sea her stream thrusts far amid,  
A crystal spike 'twixt two warm walls of wave;  
Only, she ever sickened, found repulse  
At the other kind of water, not her life,  
(Green-dense and dim-delicious, bred o' the sun)  
Flounced back from bliss she was not born to breathe,  
And in her old bounds buried her despair,  
Hating and loving warmth alike: so He.

'Thinketh, He made thereat the sun, this isle,  
Trees and the fowls here, beast and creeping thing.  
Yon otter, sleek-wet, black, lithe as a leech;  
Yon auk, one fire-eye in a ball of foam,  
That floats and feeds; a certain badger brown  
He hath watched hunt with that slant white-wedge eye  
By moonlight; and the pie with the long tongue  
That pricks deep into oak warts for a worm,  
And says a plain word when she finds her prize,  
But will not eat the ants; the ants themselves  
That build a wall of seeds and settled stalks  
About their hole--He made all these and more,  
Made all we see, and us, in spite: how else?  
He could not, Himself, make a second self  
To be His mate; as well have made Himself:  
He would not make what He dislikes or slights,  
An eyesore to Him, or not worth His pains:  
But did, in envy, listlessness or sport,  
Make what Himself would fain, in a manner, be--  
Weaker in most points, stronger in a few,  
Worthy, and yet mere playthings all the while,  
Things He admires and mocks too,--that is it.  
Because, so brave, so better though they be,  
It nothing skills if He begin to plague.  
Look, now, I melt a gourd-fruit into mash,  
Add honeycomb and pods, I have perceived,  
Which bite like finches when they bill and kiss,--  
Then, when froth rises bladdery, drink up all,  
Quick, quick, till maggots scamper through my brain;  
Last, throw me on my back i' the seeded thyme,  
And wanton, wishing I were born a bird.  
Put case, unable to be what I wish,  
I yet could make a live bird out of clay:  
Would not I take clay, pinch my Caliban  
Able to fly?--for, there, see, he hath wings,  
And great comb like the hoopoe's to admire,  
And there, a sting to do his foes offence,

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

There, and I will that he begin to live,  
Fly to yon rock-top, nip me off the horns  
Of grigs high up that make the merry din,  
Saucy through their veined wings, and mind me not.  
In which feat, if his leg snapped, brittle clay,  
And he lay stupid-like,—why, I should laugh;  
And if he, spying me, should fall to weep,  
Beseech me to be good, repair his wrong,  
Bid his poor leg smart less or grow again,—  
Well, as the chance were, this might take or else  
Not take my fancy: I might hear his cry,  
And give the mankin three sound legs for one,  
Or pluck the other off, leave him like an egg  
And lessoned he was mine and merely clay.  
Were this no pleasure, lying in the thyme,  
Drinking the mash, with brain become alive,  
Making and marring clay at will? So He.

'Thinketh, such shows nor right nor wrong in Him,  
Nor kind, nor cruel: He is strong and Lord.  
'Am strong myself compared to yonder crabs  
That march now from the mountain to the sea;  
'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first,  
Loving not, hating not, just choosing so.  
'Say, the first straggler that boasts purple spots  
Shall join the file, one pincer twisted off;  
'Say, this bruised fellow shall receive a worm,  
And two worms he whose nippers end in red;  
As it likes me each time, I do: so He.

Well then, 'supposeth He is good i' the main,  
Placable if His mind and ways were guessed,  
But rougher than His handiwork, be sure!  
Oh, He hath made things worthier than Himself,  
And envieth that, so helped, such things do more  
Than He who made them! What consoles but this?  
That they, unless through Him, do nought at all,  
And must submit: what other use in things?  
'Hath cut a pipe of pithless elder-joint  
That, blown through, gives exact the scream o' the jay  
When from her wing you twitch the feathers blue:  
Sound this, and little birds that hate the jay  
Flock within stone's throw, glad their foe is hurt:  
Put case such pipe could prattle and boast forsooth  
'I catch the birds, I am the crafty thing,  
I make the cry my maker cannot make  
With his great round mouth; he must blow through mine!  
Would not I smash it with my foot? So He.

But wherefore rough, why cold and ill at ease?  
Aha, that is a question! Ask, for that,

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

What knows,—the something over Setebos  
That made Him, or He, may be, found and fought,  
Worsted, drove off and did to nothing, perchance.  
There may be something quiet o'er His head,  
Out of His reach, that feels nor joy nor grief,  
Since both derive from weakness in some way.  
I joy because the quails come; would not joy  
Could I bring quails here when I have a mind:  
This Quiet, all it hath a mind to, doth.  
'Esteemeth stars the outposts of its couch,  
But never spends much thought nor care that way.  
It may look up, work up,—the worse for those  
It works on! 'Careth but for Setebos  
The many-handed as a cuttle-fish,  
Who, making Himself feared through what He does,  
Looks up, first, and perceives he cannot soar  
To what is quiet and hath happy life;  
Next looks down here, and out of very spite  
Makes this a bauble-world to ape yon real,  
These good things to match those as hips do grapes.  
'Tis solace making baubles, ay, and sport.  
Himself peeped late, eyed Prosper at his books  
Careless and lofty, lord now of the isle:  
Vexed, 'stitched a book of broad leaves, arrow-shaped,  
Wrote thereon, he knows what, prodigious words;  
Has peeled a wand and called it by a name;  
Wearth at whiles for an enchanter's robe  
The eyed skin of a supple oncelot;  
And hath an ounce sleeker than youngling mole,  
A four-legged serpent he makes cower and couch,  
Now snarl, now hold its breath and mind his eye,  
And saith she is Miranda and my wife:  
'Keeps for his Ariel a tall pouch-bill crane  
He bids go wade for fish and straight disgorge;  
Also a sea-beast, lumpish, which he snared,  
Blinded the eyes of, and brought somewhat tame,  
And split its toe-webs, and now pens the drudge  
In a hole o' the rock and calls him Caliban;  
A bitter heart that bides its time and bites.  
'Plays thus at being Prosper in a way,  
Taketth his mirth with make-believes: so He.  
His dam held that the Quiet made all things  
Which Setebos vexed only: 'holds not so.  
Who made them weak, meant weakness He might vex.  
Had He meant other, while His hand was in,  
Why not make horny eyes no thorn could prick,  
Or plate my scalp with bone against the snow,  
Or overscale my flesh 'neath joint and joint  
Like an orc's armour? Ay,—so spoil His sport!  
He is the One now: only He doth all.

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

'Saith, He may like, perchance, what profits Him.  
Ay, himself loves what does him good; but why?  
'Gets good no otherwise. This blinded beast  
Loves whoso places flesh--meat on his nose,  
But, had he eyes, would want no help, but hate  
Or love, just as it liked him: He hath eyes.  
Also it pleaseth Setebos to work,  
Use all His hands, and exercise much craft,  
By no means for the love of what is worked.  
'Tasteth, himself, no finer good i' the world  
When all goes right, in this safe summer--time,  
And he wants little, hungers, aches not much,  
Than trying what to do with wit and strength.  
'Falls to make something: 'piled yon pile of turfs,  
And squared and stuck there squares of soft white chalk,  
And, with a fish--tooth, scratched a moon on each,  
And set up endwise certain spikes of tree,  
And crowned the whole with a sloth's skull a--top,  
Found dead i' the woods, too hard for one to kill.  
No use at all i' the work, for work's sole sake;  
'Shall some day knock it down again: so He.

'Saith He is terrible: watch His feats in proof!  
One hurricane will spoil six good months' hope.  
He hath a spite against me, that I know,  
Just as He favours Prosper, who knows why?  
So it is, all the same, as well I find.  
'Wove wattles half the winter, fenced them firm  
With stone and stake to stop she--tortoises  
Crawling to lay their eggs here: well, one wave,  
Feeling the foot of Him upon its neck,  
Gaped as a snake does, lolled out its large tongue,  
And licked the whole labour flat: so much for spite.  
'Saw a ball flame down late (yonder it lies)  
Where, half an hour before, I slept i' the shade:  
Often they scatter sparkles: there is force!  
'Dug up a newt He may have envied once  
And turned to stone, shut up Inside a stone.  
Please Him and hinder this?--What Prosper does?  
Aha, if He would tell me how! Not He!  
There is the sport: discover how or die!  
All need not die, for of the things o' the isle  
Some flee afar, some dive, some run up trees;  
Those at His mercy,--why, they please Him most  
When . . . when . . . well, never try the same way twice!  
Repeat what act has pleased, He may grow wroth.  
You must not know His ways, and play Him off,  
Sure of the issue. 'Doth the like himself:  
'Spareth a squirrel that it nothing fears  
But steals the nut from underneath my thumb,  
And when I threat, bites stoutly in defence:

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

'Spareth an urchin that contrariwise,  
Curls up into a ball, pretending death  
For fright at my approach: the two ways please.  
But what would move my choler more than this,  
That either creature counted on its life  
To-morrow and next day and all days to come,  
Saying, forsooth, in the inmost of its heart,  
"Because he did so yesterday with me,  
And otherwise with such another brute,  
So must he do henceforth and always."--Ay?  
Would teach the reasoning couple what "must" means!  
'Doth as he likes, or wherefore Lord? So He.

'Conceiveth all things will continue thus,  
And we shall have to live in fear of Him  
So long as He lives, keeps His strength: no change,  
If He have done His best, make no new world  
To please Him more, so leave off watching this,--  
If He surprise not even the Quiet's self  
Some strange day,--or, suppose, grow into it  
As grubs grow butterflies: else, here are we,  
And there is He, and nowhere help at all.

'Believeth with the life, the pain shall stop.  
His dam held different, that after death  
He both plagued enemies and feasted friends:  
Idly! He doth His worst in this our life,  
Giving just respite lest we die through pain,  
Saving last pain for worst,--with which, an end.  
Meanwhile, the best way to escape His ire  
Is, not to seem too happy. 'Sees, himself,  
Yonder two flies, with purple films and pink,  
Bask on the pompion-bell above: kills both.  
'Sees two black painful beetles roll their ball  
On head and tail as if to save their lives:  
Moves them the stick away they strive to clear.

Even so, 'would have Him misconceive, suppose  
This Caliban strives hard and ails no less,  
And always, above all else, envies Him;  
Wherefore he mainly dances on dark nights,  
Moans in the sun, gets under holes to laugh,  
And never speaks his mind save housed as now:  
Outside, 'groans, curses. If He caught me here,  
O'erheard this speech, and asked "What chucklest at?"  
'Would, to appease Him, cut a finger off,  
Or of my three kid yearlings burn the best,  
Or let the toothsome apples rot on tree,  
Or push my tame beast for the orc to taste:  
While myself lit a fire, and made a song  
And sung it, "*What I hate, be consecrate*

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

*To celebrate Thee and Thy state, no mate  
For Thee; what see for envy in poor me?"*  
Hoping the while, since evils sometimes mend,  
Warts rub away and sores are cured with slime,  
That some strange day, will either the Quiet catch  
And conquer Setebos, or likelier He  
Decrepit may doze, doze, as good as die.

[What, what? A curtain o'er the world at once!  
Crickets stop hissing: not a bird--or, yes,  
There scuds His raven that has told Him all!  
It was fool's play, this prattling! Ha! The wind  
Shoulders the pillared dust, death's house o' the move,  
And fast invading fires begin! White blaze--  
A tree's head snaps--and there, there, there, there,  
His thunder follows! Fool to gibe at Him!  
Lo! 'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!  
'Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip,  
Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month  
One little mess of whelks, so he may 'scape!]

**RABBI BEN EZRA**

Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life, for which the first was made:  
Our times are in His hand  
Who saith "A whole I planned,  
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"

Not that, amassing flowers,  
Youth sighed "Which rose make ours,  
Which lily leave and then as best recall?"  
Not that, admiring stars,  
It yearned "Nor Jove, nor Mars;  
Mine be some figured flame which blends, transcends them all!"

Not for such hopes and fears  
Annulling youth's brief years,  
Do I remonstrate: folly wide the mark!  
Rather I prize the doubt  
Low kinds exist without,  
Finished and finite clods, untroubled by a spark.

Poor vaunt of life indeed,  
Were man but formed to feed  
On joy, to solely seek and find and feast:  
Such feasting ended, then  
As sure an end to men;  
Irks care the crop--full bird? Frets doubt the maw--crammed beast?

Selected Poems — Robert Browning

Rejoice we are allied  
To That which doth provide  
And not partake, effect and not receive!  
A spark disturbs our clod;  
Nearer we hold of God  
Who gives, than of His tribes that take, I must believe.

Then, welcome each rebuff  
That turns earth's smoothness rough,  
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!  
Be our joys three-parts pain!  
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;  
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!

For thence,—a paradox  
Which comforts while it mocks,—  
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:  
What I aspired to be,  
And was not, comforts me:  
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i' the scale.

What is he but a brute  
Whose flesh has soul to suit,  
Whose spirit works lest arms and legs want play?  
To man, propose this test—  
Thy body at its best,  
How far can that project thy soul on its lone way?

Yet gifts should prove their use:  
I own the Past profuse  
Of power each side, perfection every turn:  
Eyes, ears took in their dole,  
Brain treasured up the whole;  
Should not the heart beat once "How good to live and learn?"

Not once beat "Praise be Thine!  
I see the whole design,  
I, who saw power, see now love perfect too:  
Perfect I call Thy plan:  
Thanks that I was a man!  
Maker, remake, complete,—I trust what Thou shalt do!"

For pleasant is this flesh;  
Our soul, in its rose-mesh  
Pulled ever to the earth, still yearns for rest;  
Would we some prize might hold  
To match those manifold  
Possessions of the brute,—gain most, as we did best!

Let us not always say,  
"Spite of this flesh to-day

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!"  
As the bird wings and sings,  
Let us cry "All good things  
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!"

Therefore I summon age  
To grant youth's heritage,  
Life's struggle having so far reached its term:  
Thence shall I pass, approved  
A man, for aye removed  
From the developed brute; a god though in the germ.

And I shall thereupon  
Take rest, ere I be gone  
Once more on my adventure brave and new:  
Fearless and unperplexed,  
When I wage battle next,  
What weapons to select, what armour to indue.

Youth ended, I shall try  
My gain or loss thereby;  
Leave the fire ashes, what survives is gold:  
And I shall weigh the same,  
Give life its praise or blame:  
Young, all lay in dispute; I shall know, being old.

For note, when evening shuts,  
A certain moment cuts  
The deed off, calls the glory from the grey:  
A whisper from the west  
Shoots—"Add this to the rest,  
Take it and try its worth: here dies another day."

So, still within this life,  
Though lifted o'er its strife,  
Let me discern, compare, pronounce at last,  
This rage was right i' the main,  
That acquiescence vain:  
The Future I may face now I have proved the Past."

For more is not reserved  
To man, with soul just nerved  
To act to-morrow what he learns to-day:  
Here, work enough to watch  
The Master work, and catch  
Hints of the proper craft, tricks of the tool's true play.

As it was better, youth  
Should strive, through acts uncouth,  
Toward making, than repose on aught found made:  
So, better, age, exempt



Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

From strife, should know, than tempt  
Further. Thou waitedst age: wait death nor be afraid!

Enough now, if the Right  
And Good and Infinite  
Be named here, as thou callest thy hand thine own  
With knowledge absolute,  
Subject to no dispute  
From fools that crowded youth, nor let thee feel alone.

Be there, for once and all,  
Severed great minds from small,  
Announced to each his station in the Past!  
Was I, the world arraigned,  
Were they, my soul disdained,  
Right? Let age speak the truth and give us peace at last!

Now, who shall arbitrate?  
Ten men love what I hate,  
Shun what I follow, slight what I receive;  
Ten, who in ears and eyes  
Match me: we all surmise,  
They this thing, and I that: whom shall my soul believe?

Not on the vulgar mass  
Called "work," must sentence pass,  
Things done, that took the eye and had the price;  
O'er which, from level stand,  
The low world laid its hand,  
Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice:

But all, the world's coarse thumb  
And finger failed to plumb,  
So passed in making up the main account;  
All instincts immature,  
All purposes unsure,  
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's amount:

Thoughts hardly to be packed  
Into a narrow act,  
Fancies that broke through language and escaped;  
All I could never be,  
All, men ignored in me,  
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

Ay, note that Potter's wheel,  
That metaphor! and feel  
Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay,--  
Thou, to whom fools propound,  
When the wine makes its round,  
"Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone, seize to-day!"

Fool! All that is, at all,  
Lasts ever, past recall;  
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:  
What entered into thee,  
That was, is, and shall be:  
Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure.

He fixed thee mid this dance  
Of plastic circumstance,  
This Present, thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:  
Machinery just meant  
To give thy soul its bent,  
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

What though the earlier grooves,  
Which ran the laughing loves  
Around thy base, no longer pause and press?  
What though, about thy rim,  
Skull—things in order grim  
Grow out, in graver mood, obey the sterner stress?

Look not thou down but up!  
To uses of a cup,  
The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,  
The new wine's foaming flow,  
The Master's lips a-glow!  
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what need'st thou with earth's wheel?

But I need, now as then,  
Thee, God, who moulded men;  
And since, not even while the whirl was worst,  
Did I,—to the wheel of life  
With shapes and colours rife,  
Bound dizzily,—mistake my end, to slake Thy thirst:

So, take and use Thy work:  
Amend what flaws may lurk,  
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim!  
My times be in Thy hand!  
Perfect the cup as planned!  
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!

*"CHILDE ROLAND TO THE DARK TOWER CAME"*

My first thought was, he lied in every word,  
That hoary cripple, with malicious eye  
Askance to watch the working of his lie  
On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford  
Suppression of the glee that pursed and scored

Selected Poems — Robert Browning

Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby.

What else should he be set for, with his staff?  
What, save to waylay with his lies, ensnare  
All travellers who might find him posted there,  
And ask the road? I guessed what skull-like laugh  
Would break, what crutch 'gin write my epitaph  
For pastime in the dusty thoroughfare,

If at his counsel I should turn aside  
Into that ominous tract which, all agree,  
Hides the Dark Tower. Yet acquiescingly  
I did turn as he pointed: neither pride  
Nor hope rekindling at the end descried,  
So much as gladness that some end might be.

For, what with my whole world-wide wandering,  
What with my search drawn out thro' years, my hope  
Dwindled into a ghost not fit to cope  
With that obstreperous joy success would bring,  
I hardly tried now to rebuke the spring  
My heart made, finding failure in its scope.

As when a sick man very near to death  
Seems dead indeed, and feels begin and end  
The tears and takes the farewell of each friend,  
And hears one bid the other go, draw breath  
Freelier outside ("since all is o'er," he saith,  
"And the blow fallen no grieving can amend";)

While some discuss if near the other graves  
Be room enough for this, and when a day  
Suits best for carrying the corpse away,  
With care about the banners, scarves and staves:  
And still the man hears all, and only craves  
He may not shame such tender love and stay.

Thus, I had so long suffered in this quest,  
Heard failure prophesied so oft, been writ  
So many times among "The Band"—to wit,  
The knights who to the Dark Tower's search addressed  
Their steps—that just to fail as they, seemed best,  
And all the doubt was now—should I be fit?

So, quiet as despair, I turned from him,  
That hateful cripple, out of his highway  
Into the path he pointed. All the day  
Had been a dreary one at best, and dim  
Was settling to its close, yet shot one grim  
Red leer to see the plain catch its estray.

Selected Poems — Robert Browning

For mark! no sooner was I fairly found  
Pledged to the plain, after a pace or two,  
Than, pausing to throw backward a last view  
O'er the safe road, 'twas gone; grey plain all round:  
Nothing but plain to the horizon's bound.  
I might go on; nought else remained to do.

So, on I went. I think I never saw  
Such starved ignoble nature; nothing throve:  
For flowers—as well expect a cedar grove!  
But cockle, spurge, according to their law  
Might propagate their kind, with none to awe,  
You'd think; a burr had been a treasure—trove.

No! penury, inertness and grimace,  
In some strange sort, were the land's portion. "See  
Or shut your eyes," said Nature peevishly,  
"It nothing skills: I cannot help my case:  
'Tis the Last Judgment's fire must cure this place,  
Calcine its clods and set my prisoners free."

If there pushed any ragged thistle—stalk  
Above its mates, the head was chopped; the bents  
Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents  
In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to baulk  
All hope of greenness? 'tis a brute must walk  
Pashing their life out, with a brute's intents.

As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair  
In leprosy; thin dry blades pricked the mud  
Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood.  
One stiff blind horse, his every bone a—stare,  
Stood stupefied, however he came there:  
Thrust out past service from the devil's stud!

Alive? he might be dead for aught I know,  
With that red gaunt and colloped neck a—strain,  
And shut eyes underneath the rusty mane;  
Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe;  
I never saw a brute I hated so;  
He must be wicked to deserve such pain.

I shut my eyes and turned them on my heart.  
As a man calls for wine before he fights,  
I asked one draught of earlier, happier sights,  
Ere fitly I could hope to play my part.  
Think first, fight afterwards—the soldier's art:  
One taste of the old time sets all to rights.

Not it! I fancied Cuthbert's reddening face  
Beneath its garniture of curly gold,

Selected Poems — Robert Browning

Dear fellow, till I almost felt him fold  
An arm in mine to fix me to the place  
That way he used. Alas, one night's disgrace!  
Out went my heart's new fire and left it cold.

Giles then, the soul of honour—there he stands  
Frank as ten years ago when knighted first.  
What honest men should dare (he said) he durst.  
Good—but the scene shifts—faugh! what hangman hands  
In to his breast a parchment? His own bands  
Read it. Poor traitor, spit upon and curst!

Better this present than a past like that;  
Back therefore to my darkening path again!  
No sound, no sight as far as eye could strain.  
Will the night send a howlet or a bat?  
I asked: when something on the dismal flat  
Came to arrest my thoughts and change their train.

A sudden little river crossed my path  
As unexpected as a serpent comes.  
No sluggish tide congenial to the glooms;  
This, as it frothed by, might have been a bath  
For the fiend's glowing hoof—to see the wrath  
Of its black eddy bespate with flakes and spumes.

So petty yet so spiteful! All along  
Low scrubby alders kneeled down over it;  
Drenched willows flung them headlong in a fit  
Of mute despair, a suicidal throng:  
The river which had done them all the wrong,  
Whate'er that was, rolled by, deterred no whit.

Which, while I forded,—good saints, how I feared  
To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek,  
Each step, or feel the spear I thrust to seek  
For hollows, tangled in his hair or beard!  
—It may have been a water-rat I speared,  
But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek.

Glad was I when I reached the other bank.  
Now for a better country. Vain presage!  
Who were the strugglers, what war did they wage,  
Whose savage trample thus could pad the dank  
Soil to a splash? Toads in a poisoned tank,  
Or wild cats in a red-hot iron cage—

The fight must so have seemed in that fell cirque.  
What penned them there, with all the plain to choose?  
No foot-print leading to that horrid mews,  
None out of it. Mad brewage set to work

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

Their brains, no doubt, like galley--slaves the Turk  
Pits for his pastime, Christians against Jews.

And more than that--a furlong on--why, there!  
What bad use was that engine for, that wheel,  
Or brake, not wheel--that harrow fit to reel  
Men's bodies out like silk? with all the air  
Of Tophet's tool, on earth left unaware,  
Or brought to sharpen its rusty teeth of steel.

Then came a bit of stubbed ground, once a wood,  
Next a marsh, it would seem, and now mere earth  
Desperate and done with; (so a fool finds mirth,  
Makes a thing and then mars it, till his mood  
Changes and off he goes!) within a rood--  
Bog, clay and rubble, sand and stark black dearth.

Now blotches rankling, coloured gay and grim,  
Now patches where some leanness of the soil's  
Broke into moss or substances like boils;  
Then came some palsied oak, a cleft in him  
Like a distorted mouth that splits its rim  
Gaping at death, and dies while it recoils.

And just as far as ever from the end!  
Nought in the distance but the evening, nought  
To point my footstep further! At the thought,  
A great black bird, Apollyon's bosom--friend,  
Sailed past, nor beat his wide wing dragon--penned  
That brushed my cap--perchance the guide I sought.

For, looking up, aware I somehow grew,  
'Spite of the dusk, the plain had given place  
All round to mountains--with such name to grace  
Mere ugly heights and heaps now stolen in view.  
How thus they had surprised me,--solve it, you!  
How to get from them was no clearer case.

Yet half I seemed to recognise some trick  
Of mischief happened to me, God knows when--  
In a bad dream perhaps. Here ended, then,  
Progress this way. When, in the very nick  
Of giving up, one time more, came a click  
As when a trap shuts--you're inside the den!

Burningly it came on me all at once,  
This was the place! those two hills on the right,  
Crouched like two bulls locked horn in horn in fight;  
While to the left, a tall scalped mountain . . . Dunce,  
Dotard, a--dozing at the very nonce,  
After a life spent training for the sight!

Selected Poems -- Robert Browning

What in the midst lay but the Tower itself?  
The round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart  
Built of brown stone, without a counterpart  
In the whole world. The tempest's mocking elf  
Points to the shipman thus the unseen shelf  
He strikes on, only when the timbers start.

Not see? because of night perhaps?--why, day  
Came back again for that! before it left,  
The dying sunset kindled through a cleft:  
The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay  
Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay,--  
"Now stab and end the creature--to the heft!"

Not hear? when noise was everywhere! it tolled  
Increasing like a bell. Names in my ears  
Of all the lost adventurers my peers,--  
How such a one was strong, and such was bold,  
And such was fortunate, yet each of old  
Lost, lost! one moment knelled the woe of years.

There they stood, ranged along the hillsides, met  
To view the last of me, a living frame  
For one more picture! in a sheet of flame  
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet  
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,  
And blew. "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.*"