

XI

THE SOLITARY BIRD

From the summit of yonder ancient tower,
 O solitary bird, unto the fields
 You sing and sing until the daylight dies;
 And through the valley the sweet notes are wandering.
 Spring with a bright sheen fills
 The air around and riots through the land,
 So that the heart is touched to tender joy.
 Listen! flocks are bleating, cattle lowing.
 The other birds contend delightedly
 In a thousand circling flights through the free sky,
 Welcoming so the season of their gladness.
 Aloof you watch them wistfully: for you
 No playmates, no swift flights;
 For merriment you care not, sport you shun;
 You sing, and thus in song
 Spend the fair flower of the year and of your life.

Alas, how like to yours
 My way of life would seem! Pastime and laughter,
 Those sweet companions of our early years,
 And thou, Youth's twin-born brother, Love, thou bitter
 Regret of our autumnal days, for you
 I care naught, why I know not; nay from them
 Fain would I flee afar;
 Almost a hermit, strange
 To my own native place,
 Thus do I pass the springtide of my life.
 This day, now fading into night, our town
 Is wont to celebrate with festal welcome.
 Listen! upon the stillness a bell peals.
 Listen! echoing from distant farm to farm
 The sound of guns shot off again and again.

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THE SOLITARY BIRD

In festival attire
Forth from the houses troop
Maidens and youths, and scatter through the streets,
Merry at heart, to see and to be seen.
I, going forth alone
To this secluded spot among the fields,
Put off all sport, all joy
Until some other time. Meanwhile a glance
Traversing the bright air
Reaches me from the sun, who mid far mountains
After the tranquil day
Sinks down and disappears, and seems to warn us
That happy youth likewise must fade away.

Poor solitary bird, when you shall come
To the foredestined evening of your life,
Sure you will not regret
Your loneliness; for in you all your longings
By nature are implanted.
To me, if fate forbids me
To escape the abhorred threshold
Of old age, when my eyes
To the hearts of others shall be mute, when empty
The world shall seem, and yet more foul and tedious
The morrow than today—how then to me
Will this longing for loneliness,
This my sad youth, and my own self, appear?
Ah me, remorsefully
Often shall I look back, and find no comfort.

XII

THE INFINITE

Dear to me always was this lonely hill,
And this hedge that excludes so large a part
Of the ultimate horizon from my view.
But as I sit and gaze, my thought conceives
Interminable vastnesses of space
Beyond it, and unearthly silences,
And profoundest calm; whereat my heart almost
Becomes dismayed. And as I hear the wind
Blustering through these branches, I find myself
Comparing with this sound that infinite silence;
And then I call to mind eternity,
And the ages that are dead, and this that now
Is living, and the noise of it. And so
In this immensity my thought sinks drowned:
And sweet it seems to shipwreck in this sea.

XVIII
TO HIS LADY

Dear beauty, that from afar
Or with face veiled inspirest me with love,
Save when my heart thou thrill'st,
A divine shade, in sleep,
Or mid the fields when earth
And heaven with their loveliest smiles are glowing;
Perhaps thou once didst bless
That innocent age we call golden, and now
Dost flit, a light-winged phantom,
Among men? or does grudging fate from us
Conceal, and for some future age reserve thee?

To see thee in living shape
No longer do I hope;
Save then perchance, when naked and alone
By an unfamiliar path my spirit shall reach
A strange far-off abode. Once at the dawning
Of my uncertain gloomy day, I fancied
That thou upon this barren soil mightst be
A fellow-traveller. But on earth is nothing
Resembling thee; and though in face, in gesture,
In speech someone were found not unlike thee,
Whate'er the likeness, she would be less fair.

If, despite all the woes
That fate decrees for human life, some man
Should love thee here on earth, in thy true essence,
Such as my thought pictures thee, for him blissful
This life would yet appear:
And I see clearly how the love of thee
Might prompt me still, as in my earliest years,

TO HIS LADY

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To pursue praise and virtue. But no comfort
Has heaven granted us to assuage our sorrows;
Though, blessed by thee, mortal life would resemble
That which in heaven renders our joy divine.

In valleys, where the song
Of the toil-wearied husbandman resounds,
And where I sit lamenting
The illusions of my youth that will not stay;
And on the hills, where I disconsolately
Recall my lost desires, and the lost hopes
That cheered my days; wakened by thoughts of thee,
My heart beats faster. And would I might preserve,
In this dark age and poisonous atmosphere,
Thy sovereign image; for, since I am robbed
Of thy true self, thy phantom must content me.

If thou art one of those
Eternal ideas, which the eternal wisdom
Permits not to be clothed in bodily form,
And amid perishing creatures
To endure the miseries of a death-doomed life;
Or if some other earth, in the upper spheres
Mid worlds innumerable, be thine abode;
If by some neighbouring star, than the Sun fairer,
Illumined, thou dost breathe a kindlier aether;
From this place, where men's years are sad and brief,
Hear and accept this hymn of an unknown lover.

XXI

TO SILVIA

Silvia, do you still
Remember the season of your mortal life,
When beauty shone so bright
Within your laughing, shyly glancing eyes,
And you joyously, pensively were nearing
The threshold of your youth?

The tranquil rooms, and all
The neighbouring lanes resounded
With your perpetual song,
While you intent upon some feminine task
Were seated, well content
With that fair future that entranced your mind.
It was sweet-scented May: and in this wise
Hours on hours would you spend.

Sometimes, laying aside
The genial labours of my studious pen,
Whereon my years of youth
And what in me was noblest had been spent,
I from the balcony of my father's house
Would listen to the music of your voice,
And to your hand that swiftly
Tirelessly over the web ran to and fro.
On the calm sky I gazed,
The golden lanes, the gardens,
The far-off sea yonder, and there the mountains.
What then within me I felt
Mortal tongue may not tell.

TO SILVIA

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What tender thoughts, what hopes,
What passions, O my Silvia, then were ours!
How wondrous then appeared
The life of man, and fate!
When I remember those magnificent hopes,
A cruel unconsolable
Despair crushes my soul,
And once more for my evil plight I grieve.
O Nature, Nature, why
Do you not now fulfil
What then you promised? Why so ruthlessly
Do you deceive your children?

Before winter had seared the grass, assailed
And vanquished by some hidden malady,
Your tender youth perished. Ne'er did you see
The blossoming of your years;
Nor ever was your heart
Caressed by sweet praise, now of your black hair,
Now of the shy love-glances of your eyes;
Never did your companions on feast-days
Talk with you of their loves.

In me likewise the power
Of sweet hope soon had perished: to my years
Likewise the fates denied
The boon of youth. Ah how,
How art thou passed away,
Thou dear companion of my tender age,
My Hope, whose loss I mourn!
Is this that world? Are these
The joys, the love, the toils, the tasks achieved,
Whereof so often we discoursed together?

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Excerpt
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TO SILVIA

Is this indeed the lot of human kind?
When truth appeared, alas,
Thou didst sink down, my Hope; and with thy hand
Didst show me cold death and a naked tomb
Far off awaiting me.

XXII

MEMORIES

Lovely stars of the Bear, I had not thought
Again as was my wont to gaze upon you
Glittering down upon my father's garden,
And talk with you from the windows of this house,
Which was my home when I was a young lad,
And where I saw the ending of my joys.
How many fantasies and romantic dreams
Did my thought once create at sight of you
And of your bright companion stars, while I,
Seated in silence on the grassy turf,
Would pass whole evenings, hour after hour
Contemplating the sky and listening
To the frog's chant from far across the plain!
Around the hedges and above the flower-beds
Flitted the fire-fly, while in the scented alleys
And beyond in the grove of cypresses
Whispered the wind; and from our house were heard
Alternate voices, of the servants busied
About their tranquil tasks. With what vast thoughts,
What sweet dreams did the vision of that far sea
Inspire me, and those blue mountains, which my eyes
Discover dimly yonder, and which I thought
Some day to cross, imagining for my life
Hidden worlds, hidden happiness beyond them!
Ignorant of my fate, and of how often
This life of mine, so sorrowful and barren,
Willingly soon with death would I exchange.

Nor had my heart then warned me that my doom
Would be to waste, here in this heartless town
Where I was born, my youth's green spring, mid folk

10 TRANSLATIONS FROM LEOPARDI

Boorish and vile, to whom learning and knowledge
 Were unfamiliar names, often mere themes
 For laughter and mockery; who hate and shun me,
 Yet not through envy, since they do not hold me
 Superior to themselves, but deem that such
 I judge myself at heart, though outward sign
 Of this belief to none do I ever show.
 Here do I pass my years, forsaken, obscure,
 Without love, without life; and I perforce
 Grow harsh and bitter among this spiteful crew:
 Here charity and virtue I put from me,
 And make myself a scorner of mankind,
 Taught by the herd around me. And meanwhile
 The dear season of youth is flying, dearer
 Than fame or laurel, dearer than the pure
 Light of day and the breath of life. Here then
 In this inhuman place, without one joy
 Unprofitably mid cares and griefs I lose thee,
 O thou sole flower of a barren life.

Borne on the wind from the town clock-tower comes
 The sound that strikes the hour. I well remember
 How that sound was my comfort through those long
 Night hours, when as a boy, in my dark room,
 A prey to ceaseless terrors I lay awake
 Sighing for dawn. Here there is nothing seen
 Or heard, that does not bring some image back
 Within me, or waken some sweet memory—
 Sweet in itself; but painful thoughts creep in
 Of the present, a vain longing for the past
 (Though that was sad too), and the cry “I have lived”
 That loggia yonder, facing the last rays
 Of daylight, and these frescoed walls, the herds