Sonnets from the Portuguese

by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE ***

SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE

BY ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

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INDEX OF FIRST LINES

I

I thought once how Theocritus had sung

II

But only three in all God’s universe

III

Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart!

IV

Thou hast thy calling to some palace-floor

V

I lift my heavy heart up solemnly

VI

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand

VII

The face of all the world is changed, I think

VIII

What can I give thee back, O liberal

IX

Can it be right to give what I can give?

X

Yet, love, mere love, is beautiful indeed

XI

And therefore if to love can be desert

XII

Indeed this very love which is my boast

XIII

And wilt thou have me fashion into speech

XIV

If thou must love me, let it be for nought

XV

Accuse me not, beseech thee, that I wear

XVI

And yet, because thou overcomest so

XVII

My poet thou canst touch on all the notes

XVIII

I never gave a lock of hair away

XIX

The soul’s Rialto hath its merchandize

XX

Beloved, my beloved, when I think

XXI

Say over again, and yet once over again

XXII

When our two souls stand up erect and strong

XXIII

Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead

XXIV

Let the world’s sharpness like a clasping knife

XXV

A heavy heart, Beloved, have I borne

XXVI

I lived with visions for my company

XXVII

My own Beloved, who hast lifted me

XXVIII

My letters! all dead paper, mute and white!

XXIX

I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud

XXX

I see thine image through my tears to-night

XXXI

Thou comest! all is said without a word

XXXII

The first time that the sun rose on thine oath

XXXIII

Yes, call me by my pet-name! let me hear

XXXIV

With the same heart, I said, I’ll answer thee

XXXV

If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange

XXXVI

When we met first and loved, I did not build

XXXVII

Pardon, oh, pardon, that my soul should make

XXXVIII

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed

XXXIX

Because thou hast the power and own’st the grace

XL

Oh, yes! they love through all this world of ours!

XLI

I thank all who have loved me in their hearts

XLII

My future will not copy fair my past

XLIII

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways

XLIV

Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers

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.”

II

But only three in all God’s universe Have heard this word thou hast said,—Himself, beside Thee speaking, and me listening! and replied One of us . . . that was God, . . . and laid the curse So darkly on my eyelids, as to amerce My sight from seeing thee,—that if I had died, The death-weights, placed there, would have signified Less absolute exclusion. “Nay” is worse From God than from all others, O my friend! Men could not part us with their worldly jars, Nor the seas change us, nor the tempests bend; Our hands would touch for all the mountain-bars: And, heaven being rolled between us at the end, We should but vow the faster for the stars.

III

Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart! Unlike our uses and our destinies. Our ministering two angels look surprise On one another, as they strike athwart Their wings in passing. Thou, bethink thee, art A guest for queens to social pageantries, With gages from a hundred brighter eyes Than tears even can make mine, to ply thy part Of chief musician. What hast thou to do With looking from the lattice-lights at me, A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree? The chrism is on thine head,—on mine, the dew,— And Death must dig the level where these agree.

IV

Thou hast thy calling to some palace-floor, Most gracious singer of high poems! where The dancers will break footing, from the care Of watching up thy pregnant lips for more. And dost thou lift this house's latch too poor For hand of thine? and canst thou think and bear To let thy music drop here unaware In folds of golden fulness at my door? Look up and see the casement broken in, The bats and owlets builders in the roof! My cricket chirps against thy mandolin. Hush, call no echo up in further proof Of desolation! there's a voice within That weeps . . . as thou must sing . . . alone, aloof.

V

I lift my heavy heart up solemnly, As once Electra her sepulchral urn, And, looking in thine eyes, I over-turn The ashes at thy feet. Behold and see What a great heap of grief lay hid in me, And how the red wild sparkles dimly burn Through the ashen greyness. If thy foot in scorn Could tread them out to darkness utterly, It might be well perhaps. But if instead Thou wait beside me for the wind to blow The grey dust up, . . . those laurels on thine head, O my Belovëd, will not shield thee so, That none of all the fires shall scorch and shred The hair beneath. Stand further off then! go!

VI

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore Alone upon the threshold of my door Of individual life, I shall command The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand Serenely in the sunshine as before, Without the sense of that which I forbore— Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine With pulses that beat double. What I do And what I dream include thee, as the wine Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue God for myself, He hears that name of thine, And sees within my eyes the tears of two.

VII

The face of all the world is changed, I think, Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul Move still, oh, still, beside me, as they stole Betwixt me and the dreadful outer brink Of obvious death, where I, who thought to sink, Was caught up into love, and taught the whole Of life in a new rhythm. The cup of dole God gave for baptism, I am fain to drink, And praise its sweetness, Sweet, with thee anear. The names of country, heaven, are changed away For where thou art or shalt be, there or here; And this . . . this lute and song . . . loved yesterday, (The singing angels know) are only dear Because thy name moves right in what they say.

VIII

What can I give thee back, O liberal And princely giver, who hast brought the gold And purple of thine heart, unstained, untold, And laid them on the outside of the wall For such as I to take or leave withal, In unexpected largesse? am I cold, Ungrateful, that for these most manifold High gifts, I render nothing back at all? Not so; not cold,—but very poor instead. Ask God who knows. For frequent tears have run The colours from my life, and left so dead And pale a stuff, it were not fitly done To give the same as pillow to thy head. Go farther! let it serve to trample on.

IX

Can it be right to give what I can give? To let thee sit beneath the fall of tears As salt as mine, and hear the sighing years Re-sighing on my lips renunciative Through those infrequent smiles which fail to live For all thy adjurations? O my fears, That this can scarce be right! We are not peers So to be lovers; and I own, and grieve, That givers of such gifts as mine are, must Be counted with the ungenerous. Out, alas! I will not soil thy purple with my dust, Nor breathe my poison on thy

Venice-glass, Nor give thee any love—which were unjust. Beloved, I only love thee! let it pass.

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.

XI

And therefore if to love can be desert, I am not all unworthy. Cheeks as pale As these you see, and trembling knees that fail To bear the burden of a heavy heart,— This weary minstrel-life that once was girt To climb Aornus, and can scarce avail To pipe now 'gainst the valley nightingale A melancholy music,—why advert To these things? O Belovëd, it is plain I am not of thy worth nor for thy place! And yet, because I love thee, I obtain From that same love this vindicating grace To live on still in love, and yet in vain,— To bless thee, yet renounce thee to thy face.

XII

Indeed this very love which is my boast, And which, when rising up from breast to brow, Doth crown me with a ruby large enow To draw men's eyes and prove the inner cost,— This love even, all my worth, to the uttermost, I should not love withal,

unless that thou Hadst set me an example, shown me how, When first thine earnest eyes with mine were crossed, And love called love. And thus, I cannot speak Of love even, as a good thing of my own: Thy soul hath snatched up mine all faint and weak, And placed it by thee on a golden throne,— And that I love (O soul, we must be meek!) Is by thee only, whom I love alone.

XIII

And wilt thou have me fashion into speech The love I bear thee, finding words enough, And hold the torch out, while the winds are rough, Between our faces, to cast light on each?— I drop it at thy feet. I cannot teach My hand to hold my spirits so far off From myself—me—that I should bring thee proof In words, of love hid in me out of reach. Nay, let the silence of my womanhood Commend my woman-love to thy belief,— Seeing that I stand unwon, however wooed, And rend the garment of my life, in brief, By a most dauntless, voiceless fortitude, Lest one touch of this heart convey its grief.

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, Belovëd, 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.

XVI

And yet, because thou overcomest so, Because thou art more noble and like a king, Thou canst prevail against my fears and fling Thy purple round me, till my heart shall grow Too close against thine heart henceforth to know How it shook when alone. Why, conquering May prove as lordly and complete a thing In lifting upward, as in crushing low! And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword To one who lifts him from the bloody earth, Even so, Belovëd, I at last record, Here ends my strife. If thou invite me forth, I rise above abasement at the word. Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth!

XVII

My poet, thou canst touch on all the notes God set between His After and Before, And strike up and strike off the general roar Of the rushing worlds a melody that floats In a serene air purely. Antidotes Of medicated music, answering for Mankind's forlornest uses, thou canst pour From thence into their ears. God's will devotes Thine to such ends, and mine to wait on thine. How, Dearest, wilt thou have me for most use? A hope, to sing by gladly? or a fine Sad memory, with thy songs to interfuse? A shade, in which to sing—of palm or pine? A grave, on which to rest from singing? Choose.

XVIII

I never gave a lock of hair away To a man, Dearest, except this to thee, Which now upon my fingers thoughtfully I ring out to the full brown length and say “Take it.” My day of youth went yesterday; My hair no longer bounds to my foot’s glee, Nor plant I it from rose- or myrtle-tree, As girls do, any more: it only may Now shade on two pale cheeks the mark of tears, Taught drooping from the head that hangs aside Through sorrow’s trick. I thought the funeral-shears Would take this first, but Love is justified,— Take it thou,—finding pure, from all those years, The kiss my mother left here when she died.

XIX

The soul’s Rialto hath its merchandize; I barter curl for curl upon that mart, And from my poet’s forehead to my heart Receive this lock which outweighs argosies,— As purply black, as erst to Pindar’s eyes The dim purpureal tresses gloomed athwart The nine white Muse-brows. For this counterpart, . . . Thy bay crown’s shade, Belovëd, I surmise, Still lingers on thy curl, it is so black! Thus, with a fillet of smooth-kissing breath, I tie the shadows safe from gliding back, And lay the gift where nothing hindereth; Here on my heart, as on thy brow, to lack No natural heat till mine grows cold in death.

XX

Belovëd, my Belovëd, 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. Belovëd, 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.

XXII

When our two souls stand up erect and strong, Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher, Until the lengthening wings break into fire At either curvëd point,—what bitter wrong Can the earth do to us, that we should not long Be here contented? Think! In mounting higher, The angels would press on us and aspire To drop some golden orb of perfect song Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay Rather on earth, Belovëd,—where the unfit Contrarious moods of men recoil away And isolate pure spirits, and permit A place to stand and love in for a day, With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.

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 Belovëd, 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!

XXIV

Let the world's sharpness like a clasping knife Shut in upon itself and do no harm In this close hand of Love, now soft and warm, And let us hear no sound of human strife After the click of the shutting. Life to life— I lean upon thee, Dear, without alarm, And feel as safe as guarded by a charm Against the stab of worldlings, who if rife Are weak to injure. Very whitely still The lilies of our lives may reassure Their blossoms from their roots, accessible Alone to heavenly dews that drop not fewer; Growing straight, out of man's reach, on the hill. God only, who made us rich, can make us poor.

XXV

A heavy heart, Belovëd, have I borne From year to year until I saw thy face, And sorrow after sorrow took the place Of all those natural joys as lightly worn As the stringed pearls, each lifted in its turn By a beating heart at dance-time. Hopes apace Were changed to long despairs, till God's own grace Could scarcely lift above the world forlorn My heavy heart. Then thou didst bid me bring And let it drop adown thy calmly great Deep being! Fast it sinketh, as a thing Which its own nature does precipitate, While thine doth close above it, mediating Betwixt the stars and the unaccomplished fate.

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, Belovëd, 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.

XXVII

My own Belovëd, who hast lifted me From this drear flat of earth where I was thrown, And, in betwixt the languid ringlets, blown A life-breath, till the forehead hopefully Shines out again, as all the angels see, Before thy saving kiss! My own, my own, Who camest to me when the world was gone, And I who looked for only God, found thee! I find thee; I am safe, and strong, and glad. As one who stands in dewless asphodel, Looks backward on the tedious time he had In the upper life,—so I, with bosom-swell, Make witness, here, between the good and bad, That Love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well.

XXVIII

My letters! all dead paper, mute and white! And yet they seem alive and quivering Against my tremulous hands which loose the string And let them drop down on my knee to-night. This said,—he wished to have me in his sight Once, as a friend: this fixed a day in spring To come and touch my hand . . . a simple thing, Yet I wept for it!—this, . . . the paper's light . . . Said, Dear I love thee; and I sank and quailed As

if God's future thundered on my past. This said, I am thine—and so its ink has paled With lying at my heart that beat too fast. And this . . . O Love, thy words have ill availed If, what this said, I dared repeat at last!

XXIX

I think of thee!—my thoughts do twine and bud About thee, as wild vines, about a tree, Put out broad leaves, and soon there's nought to see Except the straggling green which hides the wood. Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood I will not have my thoughts instead of thee Who art dearer, better! Rather, instantly Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should, Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare, And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee, Drop heavily down,—burst, shattered everywhere! Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee And breathe within thy shadow a new air, I do not think of thee—I am too near thee.

XXX

I see thine image through my tears to-night, And yet to-day I saw thee smiling. How Refer the cause?—Belovëd, is it thou Or I, who makes me sad? The acolyte Amid the chanted joy and thankful rite May so fall flat, with pale insensate brow, On the altar-stair. I hear thy voice and vow, Perplexed, uncertain, since thou art out of sight, As he, in his swooning ears, the choir's amen. Belovëd, dost thou love? or did I see all The glory as I dreamed, and fainted when Too vehement light dilated my ideal, For my soul's eyes? Will that light come again, As now these tears come—falling hot and real?

XXXI

Thou comest! all is said without a word. I sit beneath thy looks, as children do In the

noon-sun, with souls that tremble through Their happy eyelids from an unaverred Yet prodigal inward joy. Behold, I erred In that last doubt! and yet I cannot rue The sin most, but the occasion—that we two Should for a moment stand unministered By a mutual presence. Ah, keep near and close, Thou dove-like help! and when my fears would rise, With thy broad heart serenely interpose: Brood down with thy divine sufficiencies These thoughts which tremble when bereft of those, Like callow birds left desert to the skies.

XXXII

The first time that the sun rose on thine oath To love me, I looked forward to the moon To slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon And quickly tied to make a lasting troth. Quick-loving hearts, I thought, may quickly loathe; And, looking on myself, I seemed not one For such man's love!—more like an out-of-tune Worn viol, a good singer would be wroth To spoil his song with, and which, snatched in haste, Is laid down at the first ill-sounding note. I did not wrong myself so, but I placed A wrong on thee. For perfect strains may float 'Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced,— And great souls, at one stroke, may do and doat.

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.

XXXIV

With the same heart, I said, I'll answer thee As those, when thou shalt call me by my name— Lo, the vain promise! is the same, the same, Perplexed and ruffled by life's strategy? When called before, I told how hastily I dropped my flowers or brake off from a game. To run and answer with the smile that came At play last moment, and went on with me Through my obedience. When I answer now, I drop a grave thought, break from solitude; Yet still my heart goes to thee—ponder how— Not as to a single good, but all my good! Lay thy hand on it, best one, and allow That no child's foot could run fast as this blood.

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.

XXXVI

When we met first and loved, I did not build Upon the event with marble. Could it mean To last, a love set pendulous between Sorrow and sorrow? Nay, I rather thrilled, Distrusting every light that seemed to gild The onward path, and feared to overlean A finger even. And, though I have grown serene And strong since then, I think that God has willed A still renewable fear . . . O love, O troth . . . Lest these

enclaspëd hands should never hold, This mutual kiss drop down between us both As an unowned thing, once the lips being cold. And Love, be false! if he, to keep one oath, Must lose one joy, by his life's star foretold.

XXXVII

Pardon, oh, pardon, that my soul should make Of all that strong divineness which I know For thine and thee, an image only so Formed of the sand, and fit to shift and break. It is that distant years which did not take Thy sovranty, recoiling with a blow, Have forced my swimming brain to undergo Their doubt and dread, and blindly to forsake Thy purity of likeness and distort Thy worthiest love to a worthless counterfeit. As if a shipwrecked Pagan, safe in port, His guardian sea-god to commemorate, Should set a sculptured porpoise, gills a-snort And vibrant tail, within the temple-gate.

XXXVIII

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed The fingers of this hand wherewith I write; And ever since, it grew more clean and white. Slow to world-greetings, quick with its "O, list," When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst I could not wear here, plainer to my sight, Than that first kiss. The second passed in height The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed, Half falling on the hair. O beyond meed! That was the chrism of love, which love's own crown, With sanctifying sweetness, did precede The third upon my lips was folded down In perfect, purple state; since when, indeed, I have been proud and said, "My love, my own."

XXXIX

Because thou hast the power and own'st the grace To look through and behind this

mask of me, (Against which, years have beat thus blanchingly, With their rains,) and behold my soul's true face, The dim and weary witness of life's race,— Because thou hast the faith and love to see, Through that same soul's distracting lethargy, The patient angel waiting for a place In the new Heavens,—because nor sin nor woe, Nor God's infliction, nor death's neighbourhood, Nor all which others viewing, turn to go, Nor all which makes me tired of all, self-viewed,— Nothing repels thee, . . . Dearest, teach me so To pour out gratitude, as thou dost, good!

XL

Oh, yes! they love through all this world of ours! I will not gainsay love, called love forsooth: I have heard love talked in my early youth, And since, not so long back but that the flowers Then gathered, smell still. Mussulmans and Giaours Throw kerchiefs at a smile, and have no ruth For any weeping. Polypheme's white tooth Slips on the nut if, after frequent showers, The shell is over-smooth,—and not so much Will turn the thing called love, aside to hate Or else to oblivion. But thou art not such A lover, my Belovëd! thou canst wait Through sorrow and sickness, to bring souls to touch, And think it soon when others cry "Too late."

XLI

I thank all who have loved me in their hearts, With thanks and love from mine. Deep thanks to all Who paused a little near the prison-wall To hear my music in its louder parts Ere they went onward, each one to the mart's Or temple's occupation, beyond call. But thou, who, in my voice's sink and fall When the sob took it, thy divinest Art's Own instrument didst drop down at thy foot To harken what I said between my tears, . . . Instruct me how to thank thee! Oh, to shoot My soul's full meaning into future years, That they should lend it utterance, and salute Love that endures, from life that disappears!

XLII

My future will not copy fair my past— I wrote that once; and thinking at my side My ministering life-angel justified The word by his appealing look upcast To the white throne of God, I turned at last, And there, instead, saw thee, not unallied To angels in thy soul! Then I, long tried By natural ills, received the comfort fast, While budding, at thy sight, my pilgrim’s staff Gave out green leaves with morning dews impearled. I seek no copy now of life’s first half: Leave here the pages with long musing curled, And write me new my future’s epigraph, New angel mine, unhoped for in the world!

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.

XLIV

Belovëd, thou hast brought me many flowers Plucked in the garden, all the summer through, And winter, and it seemed as if they grew In this close room, nor missed the sun and showers. So, in the like name of that love of ours, Take back these thoughts which here unfolded too, And which on warm and cold days I withdrew From my heart’s ground. Indeed, those beds and bowers Be overgrown with bitter

weeds and rue, And wait thy weeding; yet here's eglantine, Here's ivy!—take them, as I used to do Thy flowers, and keep them where they shall not pine. Instruct thine eyes to keep their colours true, And tell thy soul, their roots are left in mine.

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