**\**Rossetti and I* \***

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***Into the Small Hours***

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***Rossetti and I***

***Into the Small Hours***

*His house in Cheyne Walk. We have been drinking.*

*(Gabriel died 1882, Elizabeth Siddal, 1862—a suicide.)*

1.

*Has she moved on to the Beyond?*

*The Afterlife, What’s-Next, the Yonder…*

*Look at her! Isn’t she a wonder?*

*Dead, they say. I was rather fond Lizzie Siddal lies on her deathbed. He holds*

*a feather to her mouth. It does not move.*

*Of her, my Lizzie. Lizzie Siddal.*

*Lizzie Rossetti, a good wife.*

 *Most brilliant woman in my life.*

*Look at her. Isn’t she a riddle?*

She sleeps! Place on the pillow there

Beside her gold-enhalo’d head

That golden treasury of the dead,

Your *Willowwood*.—*O willow, where?*

In the initials of the dead *Beata Beatrix, aware of her impending death.*

Beloved, the crudely outlined heart *A bird, death’s messenger, places a poppy*

In the bark, skewered by Cupid’s dart. *in her hand. Dante stands in the shadows.*

Lean over her and kiss her head.

There. That much, and no more. Now let her,

Like Erda, sleep the deathless sleep

Of Wisdom, doom-drenched, dark, and deep.

Weep, but be calm. This way is better.

2.

*Forsake-me-nots I pick to redden*

*I-care-not-to-rememberries.*

*Add dominant eau de nil to these,*

*Than poppies quicker pain to deaden.*

Let poppy tears be all I shed,

To harden into what I smoke

To wrap around myself a cloak

Of statuary rapture, dead.

And may I find a guardian Sphinx

That he may endless vigil keep

Over the stone that is my sleep.

*Where nothing is, there nothing thinks.*

3. *Gabriel Whispers in my Ear*



*PERSONA in a dream came to me*

*Swiftly, ah, light as any verse,*

*His whispering, shimmering wing-feathèrs!*

*He cried, ‘Why do these ghosts pursue me?’*

*‘Fear not, they are my ghosts’, I said.*

*‘The ghosts of those I loved and failed’.*

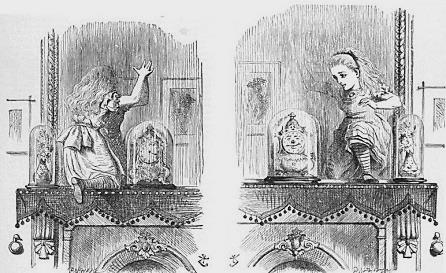
*I opened up my mouth and wailed*

*That I, too, was among these dead.*

*‘You wish to give your Grief a face*

*And make of me her Mask of Sorrow,*

*Her thoughts today, her moods tomorrow*

*You’d have me lend a mystery’s grace.*

*‘What boots it then to multiply*

*Her puzzling hurts, as in a hall*

*Of mirrors, and confound them all*

*Till you forget the reason why?’*

*And on His way into the night*

*He fled, and with one feather brushed*

*My cheek. Downcast I was, and crushed*

*To feel a thing so airy-light.*

*And if my Grief were given voice*

*How should she speak but as a vapour*

*Of cries wafting from parchment paper?*

*A whisper drifting. Insect noise.*

4.

I threw my family away!

What stealthy, riotous hours I kept!

Whilst my wife sat at home and wept,

Helplessly waiting for the day

When I would cease to make her suffer,

When I would be myself again.

She thought me mad, and I was, then.

Ah, the excuses that I offer

The face of Conscience in the mirror!

It sounds like ‘Constance’, and resembles

Cyril’s. I stare, the image trembles

Like water, I see nothing clear or

Clean in the rummage of my soul,

It seems so haunted and forsaken.

How long it is, the wrong road taken!

If I could reach out and console

You! But the truth of the sad matter

Is that it is too late, too late,

And it no longer matters. Wait,

Says Hope. Till I completely shatter?

*Constance appears. She speaks*

*\* of her first visit to me in prison.*

*You were behind a screen. I could*

*Not see you and I could not touch you.*

*I scarcely spoke. I know how much you*

*Suffer. Why wouldn’t you be good?*

***Rossetti and I***

***A Moment’s Monument***

*Dinner at his house, 16 Cheyne Walk,*

*Chelsea.* *A toucan wearing a tiny cowboy*

*\ hat is riding a llama around the table.*

1.

Ah, Dante Gabriel Rossetti!

What an array of sumptuous dishes!

Everything here looks so delicious…

Anticlerical strozzapreti! *Lit., ‘priest-strangler’, a pasta*

*of unusually large size.—*[Mr V]

Your cook can do miraculous things.

A true Artusi, dear, a paragon!

*Parsley, sage, rosemary and—*tarragon!

I’m a man for all seasonings. *The meal finished, we linger over wine. The talk*

*turns to poetry, how and whether it can preserve*

*the moment or win it back once gone. He reads the*

2. *prefatory sonnet to* The House of Life. *I respond.*

‘A moment’s monument’: a moment

Enlarged a little by addition

Of letters? Poetry’s saving vision: *Moment becomes mo(nu)ment,*

Does it reduce to a smart comment *which becomes ‘new’ again.*

On language? Say a monument

Composed of letters holds, contains

 The moment: still, is what remains

More than *remains*, the life-breath spent?

Ah, we would make the moment new

Again, reborn in naked flesh,

The infant of the instant, fresh

As on the grass the morning dew,

Quivering, beaded, rainbow-coloured, *Rossetti and Watts-Dunton.*

Cooled by a breeze upon the lawn,

Basks in the keen, sweet smell of dawn!

When time has grown a doting dullard,

And all its tarnished coinage faded,

Can a new currency be minted,

And all things shine that merely glinted

And quicken senses numb and jaded

To eager peaks of ecstasy

And still-more eager expectation?

How to sustain a soul’s elation

In all its natal poetry, *A Wordsworthian problem, poetry’s problem.*

How to perpetuate the minute

In its minutiae, the timbre

Of her low voice, the mellow amber

Of the sunlight, moats floating in it,

As it sifts down upon her hair

And mingles with the red the gold?

*Why* must light fade and youth grow old?

Why must the leafy trees grow bare? *Sighing, I pour us both another glass of wine.*

*I snub out my cigarette and light another.*

Ah, monochronos hedone!

A god can press immortal flowers

Into the yellowing Book of Hours

And timelessness into a day,

And we as well could do the trick,

Though *brotoi*, dying ones, had we

Time enough for eternity.

But clocks will tock, and tocks will tick. *The grandfather clock ticks in the corner;* *its* *hands, interestingly, are moving backwards.*

3. *Rossetti* *speaks in italics.*

*Why must the keen sense in the gaze*

*She gives you as her fingers stroke*

*Your cheek become a thing of smoke*

*Viewed through a dim, abstracted haze?*

*Why must the meaning in a look*

*That summed up all the Heaven in*

*The world for you, become as thin*

*As propositions in a book*

*Of obsolete theology?*

*And Beauty, fresh and rose-leaf-lipped,*

*Illuminate a manuscript*

*Whose theme is Beauty’s Brevity?*

*If you could dig it up again,*

*Love’s body, and amid such bleak*

*Corruption rescue words that speak*

*Of Resurrection’s joy, amen!*

*If joy in flesh proved to be made*

*Of more than flesh, and Lizzy Siddal*

*Opened her eyes, and solved the riddle,*

Then *letter might for spirit trade,*

*If Willowwood were Willow Is*

*And Love could make, in the cool mirror*

*Of Dream Well, a dream-face draw nearer*

*And greet me with a bubbling kiss!*

4.

*The inviting smiles the stranger beams*

*Across the room, the glasses clinking,*

*The promise in a blue eye’s winking,*

*Are as a lighted house that gleams*

*Upon a dim, receding shore.*

*Absences crowd the cenotaph*

*Of memory. A Cheshire-laugh*

*Dies down an empty corridor. The llama stops circling the table. The toucan*

*flies to a cabinet in the corner. He perches*

*there, in his cowboy hat, looking depressed.*

5.

The moment is a thievish thing.

It pockets all its proffered pelf—

But ah! is not desire itself

Invested in its vanishing,

That one brief pleasure may give way

To others, and variety

Nourish the hunger of the eye?

Sufficient, then, unto the day

The laughter and the lust thereof.

When night comes, and Minerva’s owl

Flits bat-like, time then for the howl

Of Sorrow keening for lost Love,

For ever. I took Sorrow’s bronze

And carved therein, for-evermore,

The Pleasure that Abideth for

A Moment—and awoke in bonds.

In bonds I wake, and having found *Ruskin and Rossetti at Oxford.*

That Sorrow can in iron shape

Its image, and in chains can scrape

And clank along the frozen ground,

[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/saint_saens_swan.mp3)I swivel my tired eyes, I peer

Around at blank and barren walls

Of space, and like a curtain falls

The light, because the drop is sheer.

Sunbeams are rods of bronze in air.

That blinding mirror of my sorrow:

Who will lift it to the sky to-morrow?

Who will hang that heavy pendant there?

♫

What mighty crane will hoist that ball

Of metal aloft? The sky is steep.

The sun would rather fall asleep

And let the shadows cover all.

That burning clock, that tells the same

Old tale from dawn to dusk to dawn

Again, would with a gaping yawn

Sink into darkness, salve its flame

In waters of oblivion,

Scatter in seas and lakes and ponds.

Then who shall tell the tale that once

Upon a time there was a sun?

*He who demands of life a true love*

*Kisses illusion, clasps a ghost,*

*And weeps to hear time’s heartless toast:*

*‘Ring out the old, ring in the new love’. ‘New love’, ‘newlove’… Oh yes, Henry*

*Newlove, one of the ‘perverted telegraph boys’.*

*Memory still serves. The toucan squawks.*

6. *The Swan of Tuonela*



Quite a splendid menagerie!

But why not add a swan to your

Collection? They are going for

A swan song these days. *That would be*

*The mute swan, then,* Cygnus olor?

*Is that the one you have in mind?*

The *Agamemnon*’s where we find

The first use of the metaphor

Of the swan song, in that scene where

Cassandra, drawing her last breath,

Is likened to the swan whose death

Draws out both soul into the air

[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/sibelius_swan.mp3)And sad lament. Chaucer writes of

‘The Ialous swan, ayens his deth

That syngeth’. *Deep, oh deep beneath*

♫

*The earth, far from the songs of love,*

*The shouts of hate, circles a swan*

*Around the Isle Tuonela, Land*

*Of Death. Mysterious, pale and grand*

*Amid the gloom she glides upon*

*The water. Deathless is her song*

*As death is endless, and releasing.*

*Voice of an oboe sadly pleasing,* If Rossetti is referring to Sibelius’

*She pauses, sings again. Along* *The Swan of Tuonela*, this should

be an English horn, Oscar.—[Mr V]

*The shores the shades are listening, listening, A Finnish swan with the voice of an*

*Startled alive in hearing’s nerve. English horn! Really, Mr V, consider*

*As graceful as her neck the curve the exigencies of both sound and sense!*

[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/liebesbotschaft.mp3)*Of melody, and pale and glistening*

*In the mist is the sombre vision.*

*The music is a dying fall,*

*And sweetest at the close of all.*

*Orphic immortal, death’s musician!*

\* \* \*

*Schubert’s publisher called his last*

♫

*Songs* Schwanengesang. *How could Fate*

*Rob us so early of so great*

*A man, of promise still more vast?*

His is the Spirit of Water in motion,

Rippling, bubbling, eddying,

But ever a downward-flowing thing

Returning home, to Mother Ocean. *His eyes moisten, as do mine. I try to*

*modulate the discussion to a lighter key.*

[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/lohengrin.mp3)7.

A mute swan is a paradox:

For doesn’t ‘swan’ mean ‘sound’? Her breath

Shapes only hisses, until death

♫

Inspires her: Ah, *then* she unlocks

Her throat, and pours forth melody!

For when death’s tonic note resolves

Our dissonances, life dissolves

Into the essential poetry

It was. The swan, symbol of faith

In love and God, Lohengrin’s ferry,

Does not invariably marry

For life. Divorce happens (so saith

The ornithologist, and shoots

Down one more beautiful old myth,

A heedless Parsifal armed with

Binoculars, in Wellington boots.)

Sheer Beauty cast in pantomime

Upon the mirror of a stream,

Like the white shadow of a dream

The swan is with herself a rhyme.



Juvenal calls the virtuous woman

A *rara avis*, rare as a

Black swan. But in Australia,

I hear, black swans are not uncommon.

Great Zeus preferred to play the swan

In courting Leda. Urgency

Takes on wings, grasping bill, and see!

‘Tis over—ah, much further on

The sequel… Fate can bide its time,

But action in the present moment

Sometimes proceeds too fast for comment.

Back to the sky we watch him climb

On broad but somewhat hurried wings.

 Let politics and history wend

Their slow ways to one tragic end.

Zeus has moved on to other things.

The Trojans’ hecatombs pique not

His nostrils. With his Ganymede

To play with, why should he pay heed?

Let Troy in its charred ruin rot.

(Still, he’s a sentimentalist:

He takes stray stars and makes them spell, in

The sky, a Swan, when born is Helen,

The fateful issue of his tryst.)

No, it’s a myth, the mute swan’s silence;

It simply has no trumpet call,

No ‘theme song’ for its flight, saves all

For that Grand Tour round mythic islands.

*Your Aengus found his love among Caer Ibormeith, beautiful daughter of*

*The swans, and with her flew away, Prince Ethal Anbuail of Sid Uamuin.*

*A swan himself.* Indeed, they say

There was enchantment in their song.

*Let’s not forget the albatross!*

*Here’s to the floppy, flappy, bloody*

*Old albatross!* Well, in your study

Of Baudelaire you’ve come across,

No doubt, his version of the myth?

Where sailors capture the great bird

And watch him flap about, absurd *.*

And clumsy; mock his limp, and with *,*

A clay pipe tease his beak? *Of course. Ah, Coleridge’s admirable*

*Algernon’s mad about it. Pass nightmare-ballad, with quaint*

*The wine this way, could you?* Alas, *annotations somewhat like mine. I believe it should be*

I feel its force. I feel its force. *the other way around,*

*Oscar!* —[Mr V]



*‘The poet is this Prince of Clouds*

*Who, stranded among earthly things,*

*Encumbered by his giant wings,*

*Must limp among the jeering crowds’.*

Not bad, my friend, for an impromptu.

Of Baudelidge and Coleraire

Now sing a medley. Fuse the pair.

The toucan or the swan will prompt you.

*I am too deeply in my cups.*

*I am not up to it.* You *do it,*

*Oscar, my dreamy Irish poet.*

Ah, no*. I’ll prompt you with hiccups.*

*But I am silent, lost in*

*some wistful thought.*

8.

*I have forgotten how to paint,*

*And, oh, I was an amateur.*

*Chasing the tarts: how that hurt* her*!*

*Care for some chloral? (I feel faint.)*

No thank you, for I am in thrall

To the opium-tainted cigarette.

By the last puff one can forget

Everything and imagine all.

*I miss her still, that’s what hurts most.*

*Do you miss Bosie, ever?* Always.

On dim side streets. In hotel hallways.

He is, and always was, a ghost.

Better, therefore, to say I’m haunted.

One can’t be disillusioned when

Illusion’s what one craves. Amen.

It was the dream *qua* dream I wanted.

*Suddenly I am very sad.*

9.

*Another glass?* Good Lord, is that

A naked Algy sliding down

The staircase banister? The clown!

*He’d look good in a cowboy hat.*

*He keeps babbling about BY-RON*

*And incest. So he f\*cked his sister!*

*Who cares just* where *or when he kissed her,*

*Which breast he lay a hot hand on?*

*Does Algy want his drinky-tinky,*

*His boozy-woozy? Ask nice, Algy.*

*MY EPILEPTICO-NEURALGY!*

*Now don’t go trying something stinky.*

*Algy, put your clothes back on! Show a*

*Bit of restraint! Put on your clothes!*

*More than a drunk Noah, one loathes*

*A drunk buck f\*cking naked Noah!*



10.

*The thrush out in the garden! Can*

*You hear him? As plain as can be .*

*That little b\*stard’s mocking me.*

*I’d punch him, if he were a man!*

*He says I that I am a brain-sick*

*Murderer and a chloral-fiend.*

You must feel very much demeaned.

*My neighbours taught him this neat trick.*

Come, Gabriel: I doubt the bird’s

Remarks have anything to do

With you. *Now he’s insulting you!*

I think you misconstrue his words.

I’d hate to see you come to blows,

You two. Why not simply agree

To disagree? Let be, let be.

*Ah, well: my nerves are raw, God knows.*

Recite that poem you’re working on.

Ignore that thrush, the impertinent bird!

I will hang on your every word,

Fitting aubade, for look: the dawn!

[](http://inmemoriamc33.com/ravel_alborada.mp3)

♫

***Musical Program***

**Page 9**

Saint-Saens, “The Swan,” from *Carnival of the Animals*. Yo-Yo Ma, cello.

**Page 10**

Sibelius, *The Swan of Tuonela* (*Four Legends*), op. 22. Oslo Philharmonic, Mariss Jansons, conductor.

Schubert, “Liebesbotschaft,” from *Schwanengesang*. Text by Ludwig Rellstab. Wolfgang Holzmair, tenor, Imogen Cooper, piano.

Rauschendes Bächlein,

So silbern und hell,

Eilst zur Geliebten

So munter und schnell?

Ach, trautes Bächlein,

Mein Bote sei du;

Bringe die Grüße

Des Fernen ihr zu.

All ihre Blumen,

Im Garten gepflegt,

Die sie so lieblich

Am Busen trägt,

Und ihre Rosen

In purpurner Glut,

Bächlein, erquicke

Mit kühlender Flut.

Wenn sie am Ufer,

In Träume versenkt,

Meiner gedenkend

Das Köpfchen hängt,

Tröste die Süße

Mit freundlichem Blick,

Denn der Geliebte

Kehrt bald zurück.

Neigt sich die Sonne

Mit rötlichem Schein,

Wiege das Liebchen

In Schlummer ein.

Rausche sie murmelnd

In süße Ruh,

Flüstre ihr Träume

Der Liebe zu.

**Love’s Message**

Murmuring brooklet,

So silvery bright,

Hurry to my beloved

So fast and light,

Oh friendly brooklet,

Be my messenger fair,

Bring my distant greetings

to her.

All the flowers

She tends in her garden,

Which she sweetly

Bears on her bosom,

And her roses

In a purple glow,

Brooklet, refresh them

With cooling flow.

When on the bank,

Immersed in dreams,

Remembering me,

She hangs her head,

Comfort my sweetheart

With a friendly glance,

For her beloved

Will soon come back.

When the sun sets

With reddening glow,

Rock my loved one

To slumber,

Murmur for her

Sweet sleep,

And whisper dreams

Of Love to her.

Trans. Richard Morris

Wagner, *Lohengrin*, Prelude to Act I. Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Bernard Haitink, conductor.

**Page 14**

Ravel, *Alborado del* *Gracioso* [*Morning Song of the Jester)*, from *Miroirs.* Alicia de Larrocha, piano.