

SONNETS FOR A SECOND SUMMER
By Margaret Menamin



Flaming June by Frederic, Lord Leighton

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**To Christopher
Who led me to the Hundred-Acre Wood**

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SONNETS FOR A SECOND SUMMER

1

I only meant to taste your laughing mouth
and turn again, untroubled by your light,
to my unchanging log of day and night,
my safe geography of north and south.

One sweet, wild taste, I said, however splendid,
and I will turn away;—oh, how mistaken
was I, who left your arms afraid and shaken,
unable to recall what I intended!

So is the addict made, who marks each day
and tells each rosary by what he craves;
Such is the lot of opium-driven slaves
who, left unguarded, will not run away.

So is the fly by honey snared; the same
the moth that rushes back to die in flame.

And when I drank the nectar of your tongue
I tasted splendid madness, sucked the core
of immortality, and evermore
was rendered volant. Hence I float among

vast brilliant gardens redolent of clove
and orchards heavy-scented with wild plum;
obsessed as any driven bee, I come
and come again to drink my fill of love.

And drunk with you and reeling in the light,
I do not fall but ride this effervescence
and tease the air with my quicksilver presence.
released from substance into dazzling flight,

I soar as your elixir spreads and spills:
I do believe your mouth could cure all ills.

3

There was such fervent magic in your mouth
that I no sooner slipped within its portals
than I was lost and most bewitched of mortals.
I found all reasoning reversed, all youth

returned, all wisdom fled. You telegraphed
Your kiss to my remotest capillary
and then, impenitent incendiary,
surveyed your burning sacrifice and laughed.

And while your laughter splintered in my flesh
you blew the splinters into further flame
and every motion of your mouth became
another brand that burned in me afresh.

And I had not the magic to require
the words of you that would have quenched the fire.

Oh, laugh again!—and let me hear the stars
rolling like opals down the milky aisles
of startled heaven. Braid the wind in smiles
and weave it like fine whispers through the bars

that cage my hidden heart; on such a strand,
lighter than cobweb, bright as rainbow risen,
I will escape my safe, familiar prison
and trace your laughter's path. And when I stand

before you, lost and shivering and possessed,
will you, thus having caught me, laugh again,
pouring the sound like silver singing rain
into the thirsty desert of my breast,

or will you still your throat and stop the sound
that took me like a sweet and welcome wound?

Now is no quiet in my wicked heart,
once having seen, like lightning on your face,
one brilliant brief illuminating trace
of that wild secret self you hold apart

and take with you alone to quiet haunts
and share with none but wind and field and stone.
Once having glimpsed you totally alone,
my heart is stung by beauty, and it wants

your solitude laid open in my path,
that I might walk the corners of your soul
and pause, and touch, and marvel at the whole.
But knowing such exposure would be death,

like any peeping tom I take your measure
unseen, so I do not destroy my treasure.

6

And now, disoriented by the sight
and scent and touch of you, I try to find
a path to safety. Like a creature blind
from looking too directly at the light

I stumble through my unfamiliar halls
and cannot breathe the air that yesterday
sustained me. All the doors have shrunk away;
I beat my hands against unyielding walls.

I cannot find my face. My words resound
with echoes and fall foreign on my ear.
my bones are lava, and my veins run clear
with old, old rivers. So I go to ground,

afraid to move, with nothing left to do
except hold out my hands and wait for you.

You are a phantom spread upon the air
who touch your fingers to my sleeping eyes
and wait beside my bed and catechize
my motion as I stir and grow aware

of time and light, who move with me as one
across the scented morning, down the day.
Not more than half a whisper's width away,
invisible but palpable as stone,

you tease my ears with stirring, fragrant breath
and grace my thoughts with vivid conversation.
Oh, most articular articulation,
oh, most attentive and delicious wraith!

Why, subject to this intimate sweet haunting,
do I still miss you? Why this constant wanting?

And am I then bewitched? Beset, bemused
by this fierce intimacy of the air
that wears your mobile form, I scarcely dare
move suddenly lest one of us be bruised

in this intense invisible embrace.
Your arms surround my shoulders like a cape
drawn closely, and your mouth's enchanting shape
burns like a brand against my startled face.

Your fingers on my wrist accelerate
the dances of my blood; you walk so near
that we must move together, and I hear
the rhythm of my steps in duplicate.

I wear you, breathe you and, at day's end, rest
bearing your body's weight upon my breast.

The earth is sweet with summer and with you.
Through filigree of walnut leaves the sun
dapples my skin, and small swift shudders run
deliciously across me as they do

when you drop kisses there. There comes to me
across mown fields the scent of recent rain
and I inhale your fragrant breath again
and drink your nectar like a drunken bee.

The clouds are far white whispers overhead
too high for me to catch, and I am teased
with hints of your soft words. My feet are seized
by paths that promise Pan's primeval bed.

Thus garmented by you, by summer shod,
almost I think I could believe in God.

I feel you in my fingertips. Your breath
enriches their dark valleys, stirs their heights,
wakens their field to blossoming delights.
Against my face my hands are fragrant with

your bright vitality. Their paths and lanes,
translucent from your radiance within,
are luminary: through my lighted skin
I watch you dance in my bewildered veins.

my palms are wells that catch your voice, that drink
your laughter and reflect your vivid light.
You have bewitched my hands!—and when I write
you seize my fingers, stain them with such ink

that in my fingerprints I see the trace
of your most piquant and enchanting face.

With cold Erato I have often lain,
coaxing and caressing, cursing her by turn,
begging her favors, bribing her to burn
her messages into my barren brain,

and she has scorned my prayers and mocked my pleas,
abandoned me when I most sought her grace.
No more I wipe her spittle from my face,
I go to her no more upon my knees.

I will not keep another empty tryst
with that ill-named and frigid mistress when
I feel another's fingers on my pen,
another's guiding hand upon my wrist.

Then hang Erato! She has had her due.
I have a sweeter muse: I write for you.

Oh, sweet my love! Oh, dear beyond all saying ,
how can these weary words reduce to rhyme
your essence singing in me all the time,
your silver voice, your laughter always playing

like bright enchanted fountains on my ear?
—these words that were my friends and served me well
before I had such sorcery to tell,
that speak forever less than you should hear?

Then each new poem, built of blood and breath,
must seek its own destruction, must arise
an ash-born phoenix, newly winged, that flies
to be eclipsed again by brilliant death.

Thus is an endless murder in this thing:
The king is dead, alas!—long live the king.

Your name is like a drumming in my limbs
that sets my pace from my first waking glance,
calling the steps to which my heart must dance,
marking the cadence for my prayers and hymns.

Your name! oh, syllable most lyrical
and downbeat of delicious melody
that floods my veins with music constantly
and pulses toward the light. Oh, miracle

I must not name aloud, although within
my ribs it pounds and batters me with blows
of exquisite intensity, and shows
in blazoned bruises bleeding through my skin:

I must not say your name, I must not say
your name, I must not give your name away.

How could I know that at my summer's end
this flood of vivid light would overrun
my heart's dry bed, as if the melting sun
had liquefied and poured along the wind

a brilliant amber torrent, in which grow
unheard-of blossoms and consuming vines
that mold my landscape into strange designs?
Full past my harvest season, could I know

that in the face of autumn I would feel
a second summer taking joyous root
within my bones, and bear this urgent fruit?
This soil will not now rest or sleep or heal,

and winter's deadly ice must one day form
on scarlet flowers blowing in this storm.

How strange that in this season of my life
I am thrown open to the singing earth
as if I had again been given birth.
How strange that beauty cuts me like a knife

and where I bleed are flowers on my skin
and secret pathways, cool and darkly ferned.
you see in me a garden newly turned
and rich, and ready to be planted in.

And will you seed and tend this paradise
and keep this Eden from a wasting drouth?
The valley of my breast desires your mouth;
I need your sweet wet kisses on my eyes.,

Drench me with love, as rain bathes thirsty ground
and then may I be harvested, or drowned.

About my limbs I felt sweet thunder beat
and met straight on the avalanche of joy
whose onslaught felled and threatened to destroy
this clay that reeled and crumbled at your feet.

So, lying stricken in the humming sand
with beauty's bruises spreading in my bones,
I listened to the murmuring of stones
and suddenly could hear and understand

the secret song of caves, the throbbing lust
of roused volcanoes rising underground,
the laughing rain, the ardent pulse and pound
of savage rivers soaking thirsty dust.

Then came hot hailstones on me like a flood
and I could read the poems of your blood.

I am a honeycomb whose amber store
glows like a magic lantern from within,
revealing laden cells beneath my skin
in thousandfold abundance as I pour

Slow golden ripples from my honeyed keep,
unable to contain this light and wonder.
Bees tease my mouth for rich midsummer plunder
and, sated, drop away to heavy sleep.

And whence this rising splendor in my hold?
You are the nectared fields that sway and bring
wild treasure welling in me like a spring;
you are the secret cup I drain of gold.

I empty you, and still you give; I fill
and spill, I fill and spill, I fill and spill....

How shall I bear this joy? How rise above
this wondrous deluge when I am so filled
that over my heart's parapet is spilled
a crashing cataract of light and love?

I can no more contain this reservoir
than I can stop its pounding at my walls.
It swells and floods my farthest cells; it falls
upon the earth outside, and so must pour

in rushing rapids to a rising sea.
How shall I breathe? How shall I bear this joy?
Is there no unassailable safe buoy
to ride this maelstrom? Then is left to me

only to lift my arms and drown anon,
clinging to traitorous Poseidon.

If you had never opened me and read
the pages of my heart and bade them sing
I would have been content and sought no thing
beyond contentment. Uninhabited,

my heart's dry archives would have slept below
their comfortable dust and never heard
you turn the key, your swift awakening word,
and, none the wiser, would have let you go.

But you, whose very breath is eloquent,
inscribed my empty pages with your essence,
illuminated me with your bright presence
and filled my chapters with your testament.

Now, with the lore of Eden in my breast,
I know what I knew not, and cannot rest.

I never meant to love you, this I swear.
I thought perhaps to give you smile for smile,
to spend my thoughts upon you for awhile,
perhaps in passing lightly touch your hair.

I meant to learn a little of your heart,
the better to explain you to my own.
I never thought my breath and blood and bone
would shiver in that knowledge, leap and start

in recognition so immediate
of that remembered country in your breast:
I knew your heart already. And the rest—
you know the rest. I turned away too late.

There is no going back. The thing is done.
We are within each other. We are one.

If I might be to you what you have been
this shining season to my hungry heart,
if I might open you and break apart
the long-held lock, an everything between

your heart and my rapt ears come rushing forth
unstemmable as sudden spilling blood,
and poems bloom like lilies in the flood,
oh, I would shout to God to see my worth!

And if in all your poems were one page,
one line that bore my name, one word for me,
of all brows laureate my own would be
most proudly crowned; nor could my heart's tight cage

contain such honor, but must crack and spill
hot joy like freshets breaking from a mill.

There is no ordinary when you speak.
Your voice is music, and must therefore summon
all things you say above the realm of common.
Mention the hour of day or day of week

and there unrolls a carpet of soft notes
on which my spellbound feet pursue the day,
cushioned by scent and light. If you but say
my name aloud, your sweetest of all throats

makes of it a coronet; and crowned
with song and laughter, regent of the air,
I have all April's breath upon my hair.
And when you say you love me—ah, the sound

makes lightning of my marrow, turns my bones
to stars and scatters them like winged stones.

How intimate the world is, after all.
It lies, with room to spare, within my heart
because I love you and you are a part
of all earth's vistas. No peak is too tall

to rest beneath the shelter of my mind,
now you have heightened me; no plain too wide
but I can fit its boundaries inside,
you have so stretched me. Yet I also find

that since you kissed my eyes and opened them
I see a desert in a grain of sand,
I pluck a leaf and watch a grove expand,
I find a spire to heaven in a stem.

Thus does a drop of rain become the sea;
so do I have the ocean's custody.

On every tree I know each leaf by name.
Small pebbles kiss my palms, and are my friends.
All roads caress my feet, and to the ends
of my loose hair, as lightly as they came,

winged seeds make feathery curtsies and are gone
to other darlings. Plaintive piebald birds
compete to charm my ears with minstrel words
set to the earth's green pulse for me alone.

And every faun and fern wears your wild face,
your breath decrees the slant of stem and blade;
The song of you rings clear in every glade,
the groves recite sweet ballads of your grace.

All touches leave your fingerprints; each note
of every summer song is from your throat.

You are my love; the never-ending fountain
whence springs the blood that wills my heart awake,
the wine I drink, the nourishment I take,
the light by which I scale the crystal mountain,

the brilliant air that shakes me at its crest
as, gasping, I encounter beauty pure.
I am your mirror and your signature:
I wear you on my face; you brand my breast.

And so absorbed by you, and so betrayed
by your bright image flaming on my brow,
I stand unmasked before creation now
and in my nakedness I am afraid

of what must surely show like burns on me;
of who I am and must forever be.

Attended by an aura not my own,
I move within a restless radiance
of shifting suns that veer and whirl and dance.
What is this light that puts no shadow down?

I wade in melting light. My feet splash gold.
Finches invade my hair and sing of Fand.
I catch a shimmering fragment in my hand
and think it is an angel that I hold.

What is this light? What is its origin
that pulls me to its core without a word
like some small nova to her brilliant lord?
I close upon the sun: You burn my skin,

consume my flesh with such unceasing fire
that I become a laughing, singing pyre.

Oh, burn me! With your incandescent face
laid flaming on the tinder of my breast
burn to my hidden bone, nor let me rest
from this sweet torment. Burn until no trace

remains of any touch but yours, no scar
of any other knowledge; let your hand
write moving fire across my flesh, and brand
your signature upon me like a star.

And may your lambent whispers lick like flame,
ignite me, kindle me to holocaust
until, so immolated, I am tossed
to darkness, light the heavens with your name

and thus become a spinning satellite
illuminating you throughout the night.

I speak of you in metaphors of light:
you the fair dawn, whose earliest overture
wooed me to wakeful worship, who ensure
a radiant earth uncurtained to my sight;

you morning's window on my eager eyes
and noon's bright fever burning in my blood;
you the slow sunset, bathing in a flood
of molten gold and crimson memories;

you winking fireflies and the answering stars;
you laughing lamps along the midnight street
that splash small golden pools about my feet;
you the seductive moon behind pale bars.

I see all things through you, live by your flame,
and call the sun by your beloved name.

How like poor Clytie, coveting the sun,
I reach for light my hands cannot contain
and turn to you and raise my eyes in vain
as once she twisted, mad with love for one

who passed her, waking heaven as ye rode,
but had no pity for her wakened heart.
Oh, wretched Clytie, pierced by beauty's dart
and so tormented by her cruel god!

And she from whom Apollo turned his sight
had not the will herself to turn away
and so forever pivots with the day,
her petals following the changing light.

So do I lift my face your light to meet
and feel strange roots like chains about my feet.

I want to bring you treasures, fill your hands
with all my childhood's best beloved goods:
the fragrant fields, the dim and whispering woods
wherein I wandered, craggy wilderlands

where twig and stone were lesson book and toy.
I want to give you every book I read
and laughed or wept for, burrowed in my bed,
and every lovely thing that gave me joy.

And I would also offer for your taking
all poems that I ever read and loved,
all music that has caught my heart and moved
my eyes to sudden tears, my heart to aching.

Oh, useless, useless! In your breath unite
all poetry, all music, all delight.

Superfluous, I know, to bring you sweets
who sweeten all the morning with your eyes,
whose voice is nectar. I apologize
for all the small unnecessary treats

I lay before you like a penitent,
eager to have you bless my offerings
that are not bribe or sacrifice, but things
to coax your blithe mouth open, where is pent

such feasting! Such ambrosia now I need,
once having tasted more than common fare,
so free your kisses, spill upon the air
your sweetest words, that I may dine, indeed

devour your mouth stained dark with cherry juice
and drink of wine too prodigal for Zeus.

I cannot offer you that lissome girl
who wore these bones like lamps in other days,
who moved with grace and gathered fleeting praise,
that child whose name is said to mean a pearl,

who cast herself so young in front of swine.
Absent the firm white breast, the supple flesh,
the limbs no longer lithe, the brow now fresh,
what can I give you now that then was mine?

One thing inside that mobile cage hid deep
from eyes that coveted my lucent youth;
I harbored it in secrecy and truth
until you came and nudged it from its sleep.

So wakens to you now an untouched spirit
except by you, who dared to venture near it.

Darling, you know I am no innocent.
There have been those before you, but I swear
it has been long and long since I found fair
another face, or heard with such content

another voice, or plumbed another heart.
And I, who had so rashly eaten of
the insubstantial sweets that pass for love,
still hungered, nor had known the smallest part

of heaven's own ambrosia on my tongue
until you found your way between my lips
and nourished me with long, delicious sips
of that wild draught that keeps the old gods young.

So have I been reborn who so had died;
now am I changeling, novice, nymph and bride.

Each careful step that brought us nearer love
was first my own. You followed where I led—
so quick you were!—while I, a pace ahead,
held back my hand and signaled every move.

How well you learned, how easily came to tell
each hunger of my heart, fed out the store
within your own; the more I asked, the more
you nourished me. Oh, love, I taught so well!

And you, who have me spinning in my skin
and flung before you like a suppliant,
you taught me hunger, molded me to want
and shaped me to the net you hold me in.

When did you, my apprentice, seize the day,
or were you always master, I the clay?

I, who by loving you was so undone
and by your loving me was recreated,
must walk with care, who now am separated
from all I was, for now I have begun

to fear the stranger burning in my bone.
As if awakened from an alien sleep
that leaves no past or memory, I keep
a trembling closeness with a self unknown

who leads me into jungles vined with stars
and galaxies of sounds too high and clear
for hearing by the unrenascent ear.
Now days not chronicled on calendars

unpage before me, rich with consequence,
and angels clamor for my audience.

One tree stands flaming out of all the wood,
as you among all men. How like you are
to this rare majesty, how similar
to sovereign splendor rich as royal blood.

Oh, singular and individual
bright monarch, shining crowned above the rest,
arrayed in summerglow and proudly dressed
in regal robes of brilliant cardinal,

I dare not look on beauty so acute
lest my heart's landscape bleed. I sink and bow
as to my lucent emperor I vow
my tribute: You shall know my absolute

And ceaseless worship and, if you command,
my blood spilled scarlet in your noble hand.

Slowly the yellow leaves make pilgrimage
to straitened earth, and millioned goldenrod
strews largess like a prodigal or god
along the beggared byways. Thus the wage

of surly winter is too early tendered
as summer's coffers spill upon the land.
I sift this reckless coinage through my hand
and grieve to see the season's wealth surrendered.

For summer brought me riches far more rare
when you became my treasure and my love.
and now you go, and leave me nothing of
my Midas hoard. My fingers gather air

And, like a miser haunted by lost pelf,
I chant your name but cannot ease myself.

Now comes the famine, comes the time bereft
of your sweet presence, days of empty hands
when I stand hungry in my idle lands
and scan the barren road by which you left.

My mouth is parched with longing for your own.
I wait, as upturned leaves await the rain,
for you to come and wet my mouth again;
I thirst with every hour that you are gone.

Oh, I remember when with every pore
I drank your presence and devoured your touch
and, drunk with beauty, said “too much, too much,”
but stretched my greedy hands and wanted more.

Now I have neither voice nor touch nor laugh
to nourish me, nor even photograph.

Bewildered by your absence, I return
to where I saw you last, as if the air
still held some sweet vibration of you there
and I could put my hand forth and discern

the architecture of your mouth, your hair
half covering your exquisite grey eyes;
as if I might thus summon you to rise
and come to me from this familiar chair

with arms outstretched. Now, standing in this place
where last I saw you, I am habit-bound
to listen where there is no answering sound
and move my fingers over formless space.

Like rootless exiles after cities burn,
bewildered by your absence, I return.

To know that we may never have one day
to lie together in the summer grass
and watch slow clouds to see white legends pass,
one day to say whatever we would say

if we were not constrained by listening walls
to trade brief urgent whispers when we meet;
not one whole day to walk on any street
and wave to children chasing colored balls—

oh, darling! Not one precious day entire
of our remaining days, to draw out slowly
each other's childhood, not one evening wholly
to lose ourselves in music by a fire:

I thought of this last night before I slept,
and pressed the pillow to my mouth and wept.

I felt your presence instantly I came
among the crowd: My heart leaped like a trout
that dares a waterfall and darted out
against all wisdom, glinting with your name.

I raised my eyes to where you stood, a god
or some bright sun above its lesser spheres;
my voice was lost before it reached your ears.
I thought you looked at me; you did not nod.

The crowd rolled forward in a heaving sea
while I stood anchored like an island beach
and watched you move beyond my anguished reach
without a touch, without a word from me.

So Tantalus, eternally accursed,
stood chained in water and went mad with thirst.

Oh, yes, love, I am capable of rage:
rage at the clock that will not slow its hands,
rage and the unequivocal demands
of the harsh calendar that, page by page,

blots our awakened blood like wasted wine
as, just beyond each other's starving reach,
precisely tethered and forbidden speech,
we look upon the feast but may not dine.

I have hurled pleas at heedless heaven, cries
to cruel God for one day of our own,
have beaten my fists bloody to the bone
against the bolted gates of paradise.

For this I earn one minute, now and then,
more telling than the lifetime of some men.

Not in this world or any other, love,
can we be separate. How can there be
such cruel gods as arbitrarily
would part us, when we manifestly prove

our oneness? When you sing within my mind
and make my thoughts your anthems? When you race
in all my veins and glisten on my face?
I cannot think the gods are so unkind.

No; somewhere written in eternal stone
this entry stands: A marriage has been done.
Henceforth this man and woman are as one
and neither he nor she is one alone,

and neither time nor distance nor sharp death
shall separate this single blood and breath.

Age shall not touch us! Laughing, we will flee
its arrogant hand like children who have snatched
sweet apples, left the pantry door unlatched,
and hurried to escape our penalty.

Over the silver hills below the moon
let us go swiftly, swiftly as we can
after the high and distant pipes of Pan.
swiftly, I say!—for age will follow soon.

And you, who have all childhood in your eyes,
love me defiantly and long and slowly
and I will promise you, by all that's holy,
that age shall never have you. You shall rise

from our embraces younger than the air
and death will weep to summon one so fair.

I cannot bear that ever your sweet voice
should speak no more, that suddenly should fall
a silence on the earth so epical
no thrush dare sing, no giddy lark rejoice

but, pierced, sit anthemless in stricken sleep,
and no stilled dove recall his elegy.
I cannot bear that all your music die
when you have gone to dreams too long and deep

for me to enter; I want not to move
about a world in which there cannot be
your softest whisper. Therefore pity me
whose ears cannot forgot the sound of love

and give your voice to keeping on this wire
that you may always be not ash but fire.

If they should come and tell me you were dead
I would not let them watch my soul go out.
I'd lock my face and slowly turn about
and say "I'm sorry" and incline my head,

and I would carefully pick up my pen
and go on writing, word on senseless word—
a list of ancient cities, some absurd
old scrap of verse—until they left again.

Then I would walk to that small chamber where
I last had been with you, and lock the door
and drop my body on the hateful floor
and lay my face in anguish on your chair.

And there would die the wretched faltering flame
amid the whispered echoes of your name.

No! When your form no longer lights the land
and death has carried out his bitter joke,
I will not let you leave. I will invoke
your presence still, reach forth and find your hand

and hold you fast! Nor will I ever free
you into that oblivious desert where
the loves that are becomes the loves that were.
And you will map your new milieu for me

that I may find you quickly and, God please,
may come to you at once when I am dead.
Then, holding hands like children as we tread
the far white fields of dancing galaxies,

we'll over turn the ageless stars like gravel
and, laughing, watch eternity unravel.

When hand in hand along the arch of heaven
we hurry, not accustomed to forever
and fearing that an envious God might sever
our mingled souls, or claim your presence even,

perhaps the first few centuries of time
we will forget that still the earth moves round
without our breath, until some high clear sound
reminds us of an old forgotten rhyme.

Then we will slip away from heaven's edges
and steal a holiday among the groves
where strange new trees give shade to strange new loves,
and hear their signs and listen to their pledges,

and walk unseen among them and be proud
to hear them read these ancient lines aloud.

In undreamed summers when new lovers lie
in long cool grass beneath concealing boughs
and, mouth on tender mouth, cement their vows
and, breast on breast, probe immortality

let us not weight our souls with dry regret
for thirsty years unfreshened by our mating.
Let us forgive the hollow, hungry waiting;
we may ignite new constellations yet.

Let us move swiftly to their fervent bedding,
enter them urgently and spur their deed,
shaking the firmament with our long need,
drenching the air with liquor of our wedding.

Let us eclipse the cold fixed galaxy
that pitiless looked upon our poverty.

And if I gave my body as a grace
for your sweet gifts, it would be no light thing
but fiercely done, with joy and reveling,
in some enchanted and most holy place.

And you could keep that knowledge while you live
and I affirm it with my dying breath,
yet it would die with us, and with our death
would die all memory of the gift I give.

I give you then, the words you sired in me.
Now see, dear love, the children we have made,
whose voices shout death down and will not fade.
My womb will never bear your progeny

but these my words will live beyond all odds
and be your monument among the gods.

OTHER SONNETS



Pygmalion and Galatea by Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones

A DEFENSE OF LOVERS IN ALLEYS

For Thomas McAfee

When lovers meet in alleys let them be.
The ripping wind is kinder to them there
than on the wide-mouthed harlot thoroughfare
that inland coaxes hurricanes from sea

and seaward tempts lost hearts. What cost to me
if lovers lie on cobblestones and swear
their secret oaths beside some cellar-stair
pungent with rot and rich in wet debris?

Better to bed with silverfish and flea,
squinting in murky light and musty air,
than come together on the road somewhere
and walk away in freedom but unfree.

Always the loves that left me left me hard
whistling along the sunlit boulevard.

GRAVITY

Step right up, folks, and get a ringside sight
of gravity, the ancient juggler said,
whirling the colored globes above his head:
here's your opponent in the final fight.

Here is what rides your shoulders day and night,
drawing you down to queasy dreams of dread,
drags your reluctant body from the bed,
pulls you to ledges, cackles at your fright.

You cling to ladders, spend yourselves in flight,
retreat to towers,—still you are misled;
you are not safe. The fingers of the dead
reach up for you, no matter what the height

and draw you six feet under, in the end,
as near the summons as you can descend.

SEPARATION

Nothing can bond so tightly to the skin
as separation. Patient and discreet,
it keeps its distance rather than compete
with any blooded thing, then wedges in

without a warning. Skeletal and thin
I feel its mouldy bones that rub and beat
against my own, the footsteps that repeat
its presence like the echo of a twin.

Unwelcome as some sullen squatter kin,
tenacious as the shadow at my feet,
your absence moves beside me on the street:
so does the dreary partnership begin.

So do I touch a ghost each time I place
my hand before me, looking for your face.

THANK YOU FOR THE WILD APPLE

To Paul

I thank you for this apple from the wood.
You found a poem winking at your feet
through frosty grass, picked up a crimson treat
to pique my tongue. As if you understand

the ceremony, know my womanhood
is wrapped in apple skin, as if the sweet
scarce wine of all my summers lay complete
within this fragrant sphere, as if you could

uncover Eden in this perfect food,
you offer perfumed manna, and I eat.
Ah, comfort me with apples, let there beat
The destiny of blossom in my blood.

I bite deep into my own heart. I bleed
wild cider, spit out rhyme and apple seed.

GALATEA

It was the stone in me that struck your soul,
Pygmalion. The softness I became
could not ignite the chisel's edge to flame
and light your godhead. With my breath I stole

your right to breathe. I damned you when I stepped
from that cold pedestal and cracked the air
that cupped its iron fingers on my hair.
Blood sings articulate in limbs that slept,

I carve sweet motion from my mobile thought.
I strive for constellations with my hand,
float in my paths. You cannot understand
this exquisite mortality, who sought

to animate a fierce and fixed desire.
Your hands grow cold before the moving fire.

THE DAY THEY KILLED AND ATE THE UNICORN

It was the hunchback's sullen tongue that sent
the bloodstain on the feast of Michaelmas.
You beggar-skins, how is it come to pass
(he said) that Christian folk give thanks and eat

the crusts of Monday puddings when that meat
rarer than Eden's wine and succulent
with feasting long on rich elysian grass
still dances shadowed groves on hooves of glass?

The beast was mortal from that hour. They went
with spears and dropped him soundless from his feet:
his blood was clear, like crystal. When they spent
their tongues upon his bones and found them sweet

they knew what secret truths their falsehoods meant
and walked their haunted days in discontent.

HAUNTINGS

1

There is a quickening about the air
as if some dance of space or prank of fate
has rendered this still room, this static square
suddenly sentient and animate.

Some presence seeks me here. I am aware
of swift impatient fingers on my arm,
a darting energy about my chair.
Against my back a restless breath falls warm.

Accosted by the fragrance of your hair
I lift my head, and sigh, and turn to face
my trespasser, and there is no one there.
I am discovered in an altered place.

God, I am haunted! I have known it since
I woke and on my mouth were fingerprints.

The morning throws itself against my door
with such intense commotion that I leap
from shipwrecked dreams and reel across the floor
to learn what blow has buffeted my sleep

and serves such tumult. In the wheeling west
the sky flies wild. I fling the windows wide
and breathe this impudence into my breast.
A tempest takes me; I careen outside.

Come, says the wind, and I will show you passion.
My mouth is battened with a pounding kiss,
my ears assailed, regaled in gusty fashion.
I know this voice, I hear my name in this.

Look: I am seized by fervent arms and whirled
about a suddenly remembered world.

3

The light is different here. The tactile air
shapes moteless motional transparencies
of which I am peripherally aware
like glass seen under water. And from these

bright god-shaped intervals of space in space
a fine vibration, like a subtle chime,
seduces me from finite form and place,
draws me to other light and other time.

Your laughter drifts in iridescent bands
and moves me to discoveries of light.
This air that traces you with its white hands
Dances a warm and ever-shifting rite.

I stand transfixed. I dare not turn around
Or shatter this dimension with a sound.

This shift from sun to shadow is no breath
of cloud that flirts with light. Some floating thing
has crossed my day and danced upon my path
light as a whisper, mobile as a wing,

and coaxes me with random darting drift
of light and shade. I chase the checkered air
that bears the message of the noonday gift,
I draw you through my fingers like a fair

Translucent scarf. I cannot fix your grace
or stay your changeful luminosity;
the dark and light of you pervade this place
and I am rooted in inconstancy.

Your resolute disciple, I revolve
Irresolute in my unchanged resolve.

Trees wring their fingers endlessly and sigh
at something free among them. Leaves are shaken
and offer whitened faces to the sky.
I know what moves them. I am not forsaken.

Always I hear you walking in the rain
with secret steps, invisible and certain.
I leave my chair again and yet again
and, troubled, stand and pull aside the curtain

to scan the dripping hedges where you pass
and listen for your whisper in the slow
delicious drenching of the thirsty grass
that sinks beneath your footfalls as you go.

I will come out and walk with you and be
baptized of walls and dusty sanity.

6

Morning knits beads across the dripping air.
Trees blur, become each other, indistinct
as ancient titans imprecisely inked
on sodden canvas. Shrouded thickets wear

torn rags of fog that drift above the hedges
like wind-snatched flotsam flung against the sky.
A hint of motion signals to my eye
some prevalence, some essence without edges.

Fine points of vapor prick my hands like words.
I listen to my skin. At last I lift
my eyes to where a sudden lucent rift
pierces the mist like brilliant guided birds

and you break on my view in garments bright
as scarlet banners streaming in the light.

I must reclaim my voice. I need to take
these rainbow bits of light and jeweled leaf
and turn them in my fingers so they shake
themselves to a kaleidoscope motif

of syllable and spark; so, stroked and stirred,
they breathe in radiant geometries.
I sculpt the stanza, woo the arcane word
Arrange the colors where the music is.

I make no place for you in this endeavor;
it is a task between me and my bone.
I seek no other muse, nor have I ever:
I face the stark uncolored page alone.

You enter me. My hand moves, and I stare
astonished at the revelation there.