ILIZA GWA ROBERT SWANDAKA

# Love Woems

of

# ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

and

## ROBERT BROWNING

Selected, and with a Foreword, by

LOUIS UNTERMEYER



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## A Foreword

The story of the Brownings is one of the strangest love stories of literature. Elizabeth Barrett was a thirty-nine-year-old invalid when Robert Browning, six years younger than she, stormed impetuously into her life. She was already a well-known author; he was a rising but scarcely recognized poet.

Born in Durham, March 6, 1806, the eldest of eleven children, Elizabeth was extraordinarily precocious. She read Greek at eight; at twelve she wrote an "epic" in four books, The Battle of Marathon, which her father had printed. At fifteen she injured her spine, either by a fall from a horse or by a strain caused by tightening the saddle girths. A persistent cough kept her confined in London with occasional visits to the seashore. The death of a beloved brother by drowning and her father's jealous possessiveness plunged her into a half real, half-enforced melancholy. Approaching her forties, she seemed destined for a life of shrouded invalidism.

Her father, Edward Moulton Barrett, has been pictured as a cruel and almost tyrannical parent. Besier's popular play, The Barretts of Wimpole Street, presents him in the light of a villain, violent and even vindictive, a man from whom his children shrank in fear and who commanded their obedience but not their love. The disciples of Freud have made much of a subconscious incestuous attachment and have rung changes on the paradox of fascination and fear, of loving and loathing. But Elizabeth, Barrett's oldest

child and his favorite daughter, was not, as we might be led to believe, revolted by her father's love. She returned his affection not only with the unreckoning simplicity of a child but with the full understanding of a constant companion. A collection of her poems carried this straightforward tribute:

#### DEDICATION

# To My Father

When your eyes fall upon this page of dedication, and you start to see to whom it is inscribed, your first thought will be of the time far off when I was a child and wrote verses, and when I dedicated them to you, who were my public and my critic. Of all that such a recollection implies of saddest and sweetest to both of us, it would become neither of us to speak before the world: nor would it be possible for us to speak of it to one another, with voices that did not falter. Enough, that what is in my heart when I write thus, will be fully known to yours.

And my desire is that you, who are a witness how if this art of poetry had been a less earnest object to me, it must have fallen from exhausted hands before this day,—that you, who have shared with me in things bitter and sweet, softening or enhancing them every day—that you, who hold with me over all sense of loss and transiency, one hope by one Name,—may accept the inscription of these volumes, the exponents of a few years of an existence which has been sustained and comforted by you as well as given. Somewhat more faint-

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hearted than I used to be, it is my fancy thus to seem to return to a visible personal dependence on you, as if indeed I were a child again; to conjure your beloved image between myself and the public, so as to be sure of one smile,—and to satisfy my heart while I sanctify my ambition, by associating with the great pursuit of my life, its tenderest and holiest affection.

#### Your

E. B. B.

It might be surmised that this dedication was a youthful quid pro quo, the filial repayment of a girl just out of her teens. But this is far from chronological fact. The volume that contained this acknowledgment of glad dependence, loyalty and admiration was published in 1844, when Elizabeth Barrett was thirty-eight years old.

Just a year later Robert Browning was brought to her home. He was already in love with her, even before he saw her. She had praised some of his lines in a poem, "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," and his first letter to her began, "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett." Then, after a page or two of literary compliments, he added boyishly, "And I love you too." In spite of her father's disapproval, the young poet practically forced his way into the forbidding house, courted Elizabeth swiftly and tempestuously, and challenged the very authority of her father. To counteract Browning's growing influence, Mr. Barrett made plans to move the entire family to the country. Browning was now aroused to act; on September 12, 1846, he persuaded Elizabeth to slip from the house and marry

him secretly in Marylebone Church. A week later, accompanied only by her maid Wilson and her dog Flush—the pet spaniel given to her by her friend Mary Russell Mitford, author of *Our Village*—the married poets crossed the channel, passed to Paris, to Pisa, and finally to Florence where they began a new life.

П

In ITALY Mrs. Browning made an almost miraculous recovery. In spite of a frail body, she grew almost robust; at forty-three she gave birth to a son. Husband and wife luxuriated in a climate which gave them energy as well as happiness. Theirs was a long and industrious idyl.

Although the body of her work is scholarly to the point of solemnity, it is enlivened by wit and warmed by a pervasive sentiment. Time and again she gives us glimpses of her youth and its surroundings. Her poem "The Pet-Name" tells of a diminutive given to her in childhood by her brother, although the name itself (the contraction "Ba") is never given. She was a tiny person; "I am little, and like little things," she said, referring to her collection of miniature books, and she retained her fondness for the abbreviated pet-name throughout her life. When Browning used it after their marriage, she wrote, "I am glad you do not despise my own name too much, because I never was called Elizabeth by anyone who loved me at all." She enlarged upon the theme in sonnet xxxIII in Sonnets from the Portuguese.

### The Pet-Name

Which from THEIR lips seemed a caress.

MISS MITFORD'S Dramatic Scenes.

I HAVE a name, a little name, Uncadenced for the ear, Unhonored by ancestral claim, Unsanctified by prayer and psalm The solemn font anear.

It never did to pages wove
For gay romance, belong.
It never dedicate did move
As "Sacharissa," unto love—
"Orinda," unto song.

Though I write books, it will be read
Upon the leaves of none,
And afterward, when I am dead,
Will ne'er be graved for sight or tread
Across my funeral stone.

This name, whoever chance to call,
Perhaps your smile may win.
Nay, do not smile! mine eyelids fall
Over mine eyes, and feel withal
The sudden tears within.

Is there a leaf that greenly grows
Where summer meadows bloom
But gathereth the winter snows,
And changeth to the hue of those,
If lasting till they come?

Is there a word, or jest, or game,
But time encrusteth round
With sad associate thoughts the same?
And so to me my very name
Assumes a mournful sound.

My brother gave that name to me When we were children twain; When names acquired baptismally Were hard to utter as to see That life had any pain.

No shade was on us then, save one
Of chestnuts from the hill—
And through the word our laugh did run
As part thereof. The mirth being done,
He calls me by it still.

Nay, do not smile! I hear in it
What none of you can hear!
The talk upon the willow seat,
The bird and wind that did repeat
Around, our human cheer.

I hear the birthday's noisy bliss,
My sister's woodland glee,—
My father's praise, I did not miss,
When stooping down he cared to kiss
The poet at his knee;—

And voices, which to name me, aye
Their tenderest tones were keeping!—
To some I never more can say
An answer, till God wipes away
In heaven those drops of weeping.

My name to me a sadness wears;
No murmurs cross my mind;
Now God be thanked for these thick tears,
Which show, of those departed years,
Sweet memories left behind!

Now God be thanked for years enwrought
With love which softens yet!
Now God be thanked for every thought
Which is so tender it has caught
Earth's guerdon of regret!

Earth saddens, never shall remove,
Affections purely given;
And e'en that mortal grief shall prove
The immortality of love,
And brighten it with Heaven.

Ш

FLUSH was an important member of the household. Never could Elizabeth forget his almost human devotion to her when she lay ill and weak and "he watched beside a bed—day and night unweary." "To Flush, My Dog" is a loving eulogy to a "gentle fellow-creature" and "sportive friend." As Elizabeth herself wrote in an unusually sprightly note: "The Flushes have their laurels as well as the Caesars—the chief difference (at least the very head and front of it) consisting, perhaps, in the bald head of the latter under the crown."

# To Flush, My Dog

LOVING friend, the gift of one
Who her own true faith hath run,
Through thy lower nature;
Be my benediction said
With my hand upon thy head,
Gentle fellow-creature!

Like a lady's ringlets brown, Flow thine silken ears adown Either side demurely Of thy silver-suited breast Shining out from all the rest Of thy body purely.

Darkly brown thy body is,
Till the sunshine striking this
Alchemise its dullness;
When the sleek curls manifold
Flash all over into gold,
With a burnished fulness.

Underneath my stroking hand, Startled eyes of hazel bland Kindling, growing larger, Up thou leapest with a spring, Full of prank and curveting, Leaping like a charger.

Leap! thy broad tail waves a light; Leap! thy slender feet are bright, Canopied in fringes.

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Leap-those tasselled ears of thine Flicker strangely, fair and fine, Down their golden inches.

Yet, my pretty, sportive friend,
Little is't to such an end
That I praise thy rareness!
Other dogs may be thy peers
Haply in those drooping ears,
And this glossy fairness.

But of thee it shall be said,
This dog watched beside a bed
Day and night unweary,—
Watched within a curtained room,
Where no sunbeam brake the gloom
Round the sick and dreary.

Roses gathered for a vase,
In that chamber died apace,
Beam and breeze resigning—
This dog only, waited on,
Knowing that when light is gone,
Love remains for shining.

Other dogs in thymy dew
Tracked the hares and followed through
Sunny moor or meadow—
This dog only, crept and crept
Next a languid cheek that slept,
Sharing in the shadow.

Other dogs of loyal cheer Bounded at the whistle clear, Up the woodside hyingThis dog only, watched in reach Of a faintly uttered speech, Or a louder sighing.

And if one or two quick tears
Dropped upon his glossy ears,
Or a sigh came double,—
Up he sprang in eager haste,
Fawning, fondling, breathing fast,
In a tender trouble.

And this dog was satisfied

If a pale thin hand would glide

Down his dewlaps sloping,—

Which he pushed his nose within,

After,—platforming his chin

On the palm left open.

This dog, if a friendly voice

Called him now to blither choice

Than such a chamber-keeping,

"Come out!" praying from the door,—

Presseth backward as before,

Up against me leaping.

Therefore to this dog will I,
Tenderly not scornfully,
Render praise and favor:
With my hand upon his head,
Is my benediction said,
Therefore, and forever.

And because he loves me so, Better than his kind will do Often, man or woman, Give I back more love again Than dogs often take of men, Leaning from my Human.

Blessings on thee, dog of mine, Pretty collars make thee fine, Sugared milk make fat thee! Pleasures wag on in thy tail— Hands of gentle motion fail Nevermore, to pat thee!

Downy pillow take thy head,
Silken coverlid bestead,
Sunshine help thy sleeping!
No fly's buzzing wake thee up—
No man break thy purple cup,
Set for drinking deep in.

Whiskered cats arointed flee—
Sturdy stoppers keep from thee
Cologne distillations;
Nuts lie in thy path for stones,
And thy feast-day macaroons
Turn to daily rations!

Mock I thee, in wishing weal?—
Tears are in my eyes to feel
Thou art made so straightly,
Blessing needs must straighten too,—
Little canst thou joy or do,
Thou who lovest greatly.

Yet be blessed to the height Of all good and all delight Pervious to thy nature,

# Only loved beyond that line, With a love that answers thine, Loving fellow-creature!

Often sentiment and humor are combined in a kind of mock-classicism. A sonnet entitled "Flush or Faunus" compares the golden-eyed little spaniel to the shaggy-coated god of the Arcadian woodlands. Mrs. Browning's mood had been a somber one, when suddenly a drooping ear flapped across her face to dry her tears and change sadness to pleased surprise.

## Flush or Faunus

YOU see this dog. It was but yesterday
I mused forgetful of his presence here,
Till thought on thought drew downward tear on tear;
When from the pillow, where wet-cheeked I lay,
A head as hairy as Faunus, thrust its way
Right sudden against my face,—two golden-clear
Great eyes astonished mine,—a drooping ear
Did flap me on either cheek to dry the spray!
I started first, as some Arcadian,
Amazed by goatly god in twilight grove:
But as my bearded vision closelier ran
My tears off, I knew Flush, and rose above
Surprise and sadness; thanking the true Pan,
Who, by low creatures, leads to heights of love.

IV

THE FIXED devotion and unbroken compatibility of the Brownings is surprising when viewed in the light of the many differences in their backgrounds and temperaments. Although Mrs. Browning came from a large family, she was a delicate and always withdrawing introvert. Browning, on the other hand, though he had no brothers and only one sister, and was almost entirely privately educated, was a buoyant extrovert. Blessed with bounding health and a spirit which was not only happy but blindly optimistic, untroubled by financial worries, Browning was reared in comfort. He continued to live in an atmosphere of luxury and, after his marriage, in a growing expanse of affection. He and Elizabeth wrote with renewed fecundity. They grew deeply interested in Italian art and politics; intensities shared in common stimulated a richer poetry than either had hitherto created.

Their mutual love was accompanied by repeated tributes in verse. Besides the highly personal lyrics and dramatic monologues, Robert presented his wife with dozens of poems, objective and subjective, tracing the multiple variations and mutations of love. Upon completion of the richly detailed *Men and Women*, he added an "explanatory" poem entitled "One Word More" and dedicated it to his wife and co-worker. Part I of *The Ring and the Book* ends on a rhapsodic note which is a personal panegyric. It is so self-sufficing a passage—an unrhymed lyric—that it might be lifted from its context and entitled "To Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in Heaven."

O lyric Love, half angel and half bird, And all a wonder and a wild desire,— Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun, Took sanctuary within the holier blue, And sang a kindred soul out to his face; -Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart-When the first summons from the darkling earth Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched their blue, And bared them of the glory-to drop down, To toil for man, to suffer or to die,-This is the same voice: can thy soul know change? Hail then, and hearken from the realms of help! Never may I commence my song, my due To God who best taught song by gift of thee, Except with bent head and beseeching hand-That still, despite the distance and the dark, What was, again may be; some interchange Of grace, some splendour once thy very thought, Some benediction anciently thy smile: -Never conclude, but raising hand and head Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn For all hope, all sustainment, all reward, Their utmost up and on,-so blessing back In those thy realms of help, that heaven thy home, Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud, Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall!

V

ELIZABETH'S love was a combination of tenderness and veneration, humility and idolatry. Literature is rich in the outpouring of passion, but no woman had ever expressed her affection more warmly and more poignantly than Mrs. Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese, forty-four interlocking poems which she had written secretly with no thought of publication. According to the English critic Edmund Gosse, who heard the story from Browning him-

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