

Shade Sonnets, Sung

I

When at last the candlelight expired,
 And merriment fatigue let run the fest,
 Adieu I bid, my peers alike retired,
 And traded revelry for restfulness.
 How sticking heat made breathless, swelling air,
 That ruffled sheets were moved to balcony—
 In chasing dawn what sweat perfumed my hair!
 Pray subtle breeze might stir my lethargy.
 There lying canopied by heaven's spheres,
 Ringed by soft cypress' rustling tambourine,
 Myself I found the fount of happy tears
 Called forth in passion by some Muse unseen.
 My heart, sweet instrument of melody,
 Accompanied that evening harmony.

II

I know not if I long in slumber tossed,
 As passing time was dulled to all perception.
 To dreams awake or sleeping I was lost
 In Hypnos bed and rousing relaxation,
 And in that state entranced what caught my ear:
 A voice that rose in sombre minor scale;
 Though pianissimo, its sound was clear
 As bird songs echoing across a dale.
 Fear, not pity, should have promptly moved me
 To seek out safety from my resting place;
 Yet this intruder thought I not to flee—
 Who wounded sang I longed to sweet embrace,
 And, donning slippers, turned my cheek to fright
 And ventured out into the moonlit night.

III

Nocturnal shadows cast a different gloom
 Than those that dawn in fiery Helios' face,
 But crescent's spring had reached her fullest bloom;
 Selene caressed in every creeping place.
 Would that poet's throne had been illumined,
 I had the moth to play to give applause!
 Each crescendo made me swift, determined;
 My footsteps echoed when the voice gave pause.
 This way and that I darted, wanting quick

To reach the music at its solemn source,
 And though the garden dense grew twice as thick,
 Nothing would turn me from desire's course.
 A brief eternity I chased the sound,
 Consumed with one thought: that it must be found.

IV

By chance I happened on an ancient pool
 Filled by clear fountain's fresh and flowing stream.
 I stopped to rest and wet my neck to cool,
 And what should angled on that surface gleam?
 Unearthly statue stood atop a flight
 Of stairs, a tier above that garden sea;
 The mouth—it moved!—a trick of teasing light,
 The downcast face a mask of tragedy;
 Holding lyre and wearing crown of laurel:
 An Orphic vision carved into the rock;
 Marble is said to be of stuff immortal,
 But this were something of *ambrosian* stock.
 If smoke had substance or the dew been air,
 Then living statue had not been as rare.

V

I noticed not at first the song had dulled
 No sooner had reflection flashed the stone,
 And taking in the form my senses lulled.
 The atmosphere assumed a dual tone.
 Mercurial mood!—the night fell haunting still,
 Muted dirge to prelude lamentation;
 In place of panting breath and hunting thrill:
 Sorrow sense companioned celebration
 Even as that melancholy figure
 Lifted its lyre to play for crowd of one,
 As isolation were an overture,
 And I should sadness feel ere song begun.
 Would that my joyousness had run as deep
 And not encompassed been by poet's grief!

VI

Although I made of him not one request,
 Nor sought approach that I might see him near,
 Faint, genteel nature did he yet possess
 And bid me closer that I better hear.
 As he played quietly before he sung,

Each rounded note thrummed down the wires' length.
 With each chord plucked my heart was overcome
 And downed emotion's draught which lends its strength
 To tears. I had not been expecting this
 When first my ear the moving chorus heard:
 That I should weeping come when chance were bliss,
 None save the birds and stars that might disturb.
 The strings entwined with nature's instrument
 And lyrics fit for vocal ornament.

VII

Alas! That ghostly vision slaked my thirst
 Only to parch my lips of words for awe:
 I knew him!—Poet come from circle first,
 Whose book-bound songs of old I had read all!
 Those favoured fragments, fractured lines in bold
 Had lacked key quality which from them rose,
 For *voice*, when singer's tongue his soft verse told,
Had seemed as character as wind that blows.
 Be it curse or blessing: apparition
 Whom Hades lent to sing as once he'd done?
 Strong I felt between us time's partition,
 Which makes thick metal gate where bars are none.
 Wondering what had brought me to this doom,
 I searched the site, but saw no earthly tomb.

VIII

That voice I'd dream of, that morsel sliver,
 A glimpse of portrait of an age gone by—
 Would I wade in the Forgetful River
 Should song from memory be made to hide?
 And yet it was to me the greatest woe
 To think that melody would leave my mind.
 Time seemed to me to be my greatest foe—
 Were that this night a watch I might rewind!
 I'd strain my ears, eternity in vain,
 That I might happen on his poetry.
 Should fortune fair choose bless me twice the same,
 Then I would join in his soliloquy.
 When I explored the grounds by light of day,
 Was no such statue to meet on my way.