**Chapter Sixteen**

**Evaluating Poetry 2**

**The Canonization**

**Ode on a Grecian Urn**

**There’s a certain Slant of light**

**Home Burial**

**The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock**

**Sunday Morning**

**The Fish**

**The Virgins**

**The Canonization
John Donne
(1572-1631)**

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,

 Or chide my palsy, or my gout,

My five gray hairs, or ruined fortune flout,

 With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,

 Take you a course, get you a place,

 Observe his honor, or his grace,

Or the king's real, or his stampèd face

 Contemplate; what you will, approve,

 So you will let me love.

Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?

 What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned?

Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?

 When did my colds a forward spring remove?

 When did the heats which my veins fill

 Add one more to the plaguy bill?

Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still

 Litigious men, which quarrels move,

 Though she and I do love.

Call us what you will, we are made such by love;

 Call her one, me another fly,

We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,

 And we in us find the eagle and the dove.

 The phœnix riddle hath more wit

 By us; we two being one, are it.

 So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.

 We die and rise the same, and prove

 Mysterious by this love.

We can die by it, if not live by love,

 And if unfit for tombs and hearse

Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;

 And if no piece of chronicle we prove,

 We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;

 As well a well-wrought urn becomes

 The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,

 And by these hymns, all shall approve

 Us canonized for Love.

And thus invoke us: "You, whom reverend love

Made one another's hermitage;

You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;

 Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove

 Into the glasses of your eyes

 (So made such mirrors, and such spies,

That they did all to you epitomize)

 Countries, towns, courts: beg from above

 A pattern of your love!"

**Ode on a Grecian Urn
John Keats
(1795-1821)**

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,

 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape

 Of deities or mortals, or of both,

 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,

 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave

 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;

 Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,

Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;

 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,

 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed

 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;

And, happy melodist, unwearied,

 For ever piping songs for ever new;

More happy love! more happy, happy love!

 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,

 For ever panting, and for ever young;

All breathing human passion far above,

 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,

 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,

Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,

 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

What little town by river or sea shore,

 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,

 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell

 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede

 Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;

 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

 When old age shall this generation waste,

 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

 "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

**There’s a certain Slant of light
Emily Dickinson
(1830-1886)**

There’s a certain Slant of light,

Winter Afternoons –

That oppresses, like the Heft

Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –

We can find no scar,

But internal difference,

Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –

‘Tis the Seal Despair –

An imperial affliction

Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –

Shadows – hold their breath –

When it goes, ‘tis like the Distance

On the look of Death –

**Home Burial
Robert Frost
(1874-1963)**

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs

Before she saw him. She was starting down,

Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.

She took a doubtful step and then undid it

To raise herself and look again. He spoke

Advancing toward her: ‘What is it you see

From up there always—for I want to know.’

She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,

And her face changed from terrified to dull.

He said to gain time: ‘What is it you see,’

Mounting until she cowered under him.

‘I will find out now—you must tell me, dear.’

She, in her place, refused him any help

With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.

She let him look, sure that he wouldn’t see,

Blind creature; and awhile he didn’t see.

But at last he murmured, ‘Oh,’ and again, ‘Oh.’

‘What is it—what?’ she said.

 ‘Just that I see.’

‘You don’t,’ she challenged. ‘Tell me what it is.’

‘The wonder is I didn’t see at once.

 I never noticed it from here before.

I must be wonted to it—that’s the reason.

The little graveyard where my people are!

So small the window frames the whole of it.

Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?

There are three stones of slate and one of marble,

Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight

On the sidehill. We haven’t to mind those.

But I understand: it is not the stones,

But the child’s mound—’

 ‘Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t,’ she cried.

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm

That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;

And turned on him with such a daunting look,

He said twice over before he knew himself:

‘Can’t a man speak of his own child he’s lost?’

‘Not you! Oh, where’s my hat? Oh, I don’t need it!

I must get out of here. I must get air.

I don’t know rightly whether any man can.

‘Amy! Don’t go to someone else this time.

Listen to me. I won’t come down the stairs.’

He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.

‘There’s something I should like to ask you, dear.’

‘You don’t know how to ask it.

 ‘Help me, then.’

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

‘My words are nearly always an offense.

I don’t know how to speak of anything

So as to please you. But I might be taught

I should suppose. I can’t say I see how.

A man must partly give up being a man

With women-folk. We could have some arrangement

By which I’d bind myself to keep hands off

Anything special you’re a-mind to name.

Though I don’t like such things ’twixt those that love.

Two that don’t love can’t live together without them.

But two that do can’t live together with them.’

She moved the latch a little. ‘Don’t—don’t go.

Don’t carry it to someone else this time.

Tell me about it if it’s something human.

Let me into your grief. I’m not so much

Unlike other folks as your standing there

Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.

I do think, though, you overdo it a little.

What was it brought you up to think it the thing

To take your mother-loss of a first child

So inconsolably—in the face of love.

You’d think his memory might be satisfied—

‘There you go sneering now!’

 ‘I’m not, I’m not!

You make me angry. I’ll come down to you.

God, what a woman! And it’s come to this,

 A man can’t speak of his own child that’s dead.’

‘You can’t because you don't know how to speak.

If you had any feelings, you that dug

With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;

I saw you from that very window there,

Making the gravel leap and leap in air,

Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly

And roll back down the mound beside the hole.

I thought, Who is that man? I didn’t know you.

And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs

To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.

Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice

Out in the kitchen, and I don’t know why,

But I went near to see with my own eyes.

You could sit there with the stains on your shoes

Of the fresh earth from your own baby’s grave

And talk about your everyday concerns.

You had stood the spade up against the wall

Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.’

‘I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I’m cursed. God, if I don’t believe I’m cursed.’

‘I can repeat the very words you were saying:

“Three foggy mornings and one rainy day

Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.”

Think of it, talk like that at such a time!

What had how long it takes a birch to rot

To do with what was in the darkened parlor?

You couldn’t care! The nearest friends can go

With anyone to death, comes so far short

They might as well not try to go at all.

No, from the time when one is sick to death,

One is alone, and he dies more alone.

Friends make pretense of following to the grave,

But before one is in it, their minds are turned

And making the best of their way back to life

And living people, and things they understand.

But the world’s evil. I won’t have grief so

If I can change it. Oh, I won’t, I won’t!’

‘There, you have said it all and you feel better.

You won’t go now. You’re crying. Close the door.

The heart’s gone out of it: why keep it up.

Amy! There’s someone coming down the road!’

‘You—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—

 Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—’

‘If—you—do!’ She was opening the door wider.

‘Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.

I’ll follow and bring you back by force. I will!—’

**The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock**

**T.S Eliot
(1888-1965)**

*S’io credesse che mia risposta fosse*

*A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,*

*Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.*

*Ma percioche giammai di questo fondo*

*Non torno vivo alcun, s’i’odo il vero,*

*Senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,

When the evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table;

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,

The muttering retreats

Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels

And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument

Of insidious intent

To lead you to an overwhelming question ...

Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”

Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go

Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,

The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,

Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,

Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,

Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,

Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,

And seeing that it was a soft October night,

Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time

For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,

Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;

There will be time, there will be time

To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;

There will be time to murder and create,

And time for all the works and days of hands

That lift and drop a question on your plate;

Time for you and time for me,

And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go

Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time

To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”

Time to turn back and descend the stair,

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —

(They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”)

My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,

My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —

(They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”)

Do I dare

Disturb the universe?

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:

Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,

I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;

I know the voices dying with a dying fall

Beneath the music from a farther room.

 So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,

When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,

Then how should I begin

To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

 And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—

Arms that are braceleted and white and bare

(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)

Is it perfume from a dress

That makes me so digress?

Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.

 And should I then presume?

 And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets

And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...

I should have been a pair of ragged claws

Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!

Smoothed by long fingers,

Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers,

Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.

Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,

Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,

Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,

I am no prophet — and here’s no great matter;

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,

And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,

And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,

After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,

Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,

Would it have been worth while,

To have bitten off the matter with a smile,

To have squeezed the universe into a ball

To roll it towards some overwhelming question,

To say: “I am Lazarus, come from the dead,

Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all”—

If one, settling a pillow by her head

 Should say: “That is not what I meant at all;

 That is not it, at all.”

And would it have been worth it, after all,

Would it have been worth while,

After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,

After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—

And this, and so much more?—

It is impossible to say just what I mean!

But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:

Would it have been worth while

If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,

And turning toward the window, should say:

 “That is not it at all,

 That is not what I meant, at all.”

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;

Am an attendant lord, one that will do

To swell a progress, start a scene or two,

Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,

Deferential, glad to be of use,

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;

Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;

At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—

Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves

Combing the white hair of the waves blown back

When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea

By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown

Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

**Sunday Morning
Wallace Stevens
(1879-1955)**

1

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late

Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,

And the green freedom of a cockatoo

Upon a rug mingle to dissipate

The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.

She dreams a little, and she feels the dark

Encroachment of that old catastrophe,

As a calm darkens among water-lights.

The pungent oranges and bright, green wings

Seem things in some procession of the dead,

Winding across wide water, without sound.

The day is like wide water, without sound,

Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet

Over the seas, to silent Palestine,

Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

2

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?

What is divinity if it can come

Only in silent shadows and in dreams?

Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,

In pungent fruit and bright green wings, or else

In any balm or beauty of the earth,

Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?

Divinity must live within herself:

Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;

Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued

Elations when the forest blooms; gusty

Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;

All pleasures and all pains, remembering

The bough of summer and the winter branch.

These are the measure destined for her soul.

3

Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth.

No mother suckled him, no sweet land gave

Large-mannered motions to his mythy mind.

He moved among us, as a muttering king,

Magnificent, would move among his hinds,

Until our blood, commingling, virginal,

With heaven, brought such requital to desire

The very hinds discerned it, in a star.

Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be

The blood of paradise? And shall the earth

Seem all of paradise that we shall know?

The sky will be much friendlier then than now,

A part of labor and a part of pain,

And next in glory to enduring love,

Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

4

She says, 'I am content when wakened birds,

Before they fly, test the reality

Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;

But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields

Return no more, where, then, is paradise?'

There is not any haunt of prophecy,

Nor any old chimera of the grave,

Neither the golden underground, nor isle

Melodious, where spirits gat them home,

Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm

Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured

As April's green endures; or will endure

Like her remembrance of awakened birds,

Or her desire for June and evening, tipped

By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

5

She says, 'But in contentment I still feel

The need of some imperishable bliss.'

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,

Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams

And our desires. Although she strews the leaves

Of sure obliteration on our paths,

The path sick sorrow took, the many paths

Where triumph rang its brassy phrase, or love

Whispered a little out of tenderness,

She makes the willow shiver in the sun

For maidens who were wont to sit and gaze

Upon the grass, relinquished to their feet.

She causes boys to pile new plums and pears

On disregarded plate. The maidens taste

And stray impassioned in the littering leaves.

6

Is there no change of death in paradise?

Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs

Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,

Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,

With rivers like our own that seek for seas

They never find, the same receding shores

That never touch with inarticulate pang?

Why set pear upon those river-banks

Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?

Alas, that they should wear our colors there,

The silken weavings of our afternoons,

And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,

Within whose burning bosom we devise

Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.

7

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men

Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn

Their boisterous devotion to the sun,

Not as a god, but as a god might be,

Naked among them, like a savage source.

Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,

Out of their blood, returning to the sky;

And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,

The windy lake wherein their lord delights,

The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,

That choir among themselves long afterward.

They shall know well the heavenly fellowship

Of men that perish and of summer morn.

And whence they came and whither they shall go

The dew upon their feet shall manifest.

8

She hears, upon that water without sound,

A voice that cries, 'The tomb in Palestine

Is not the porch of spirits lingering.

It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay.'

We live in an old chaos of the sun,

Or old dependency of day and night,

Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,

Of that wide water, inescapable.

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail

Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;

Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;

And, in the isolation of the sky,

At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make

Ambiguous undulations as they sink,

Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

**The Fish**

**Elizabeth Bishop
(1911-1979)**

I caught a tremendous fish

and held him beside the boat

half out of water, with my hook

fast in a corner of his mouth.

He didn’t fight.

He hadn’t fought at all.

He hung a grunting weight,

battered and venerable

and homely. Here and there

his brown skin hung in strips

like ancient wallpaper,

and its pattern of darker brown

was like wallpaper:

shapes like full-blown roses

stained and lost through age.

He was speckled with barnacles,

fine rosettes of lime,

and infested

with tiny white sea-lice,

and underneath two or three

rags of green weed hung down.

While his gills were breathing in

the terrible oxygen

—the frightening gills,

fresh and crisp with blood,

that can cut so badly—

I thought of the coarse white flesh

packed in like feathers,

the big bones and the little bones,

the dramatic reds and blacks

of his shiny entrails,

and the pink swim-bladder

like a big peony.

I looked into his eyes

which were far larger than mine

but shallower, and yellowed,

the irises backed and packed

with tarnished tinfoil

seen through the lenses

of old scratched isinglass.

They shifted a little, but not

to return my stare.

—It was more like the tipping

of an object toward the light.

I admired his sullen face,

the mechanism of his jaw,

and then I saw

that from his lower lip

—if you could call it a lip—

grim, wet, and weaponlike,

hung five old pieces of fish-line,

or four and a wire leader

with the swivel still attached,

with all their five big hooks

grown firmly in his mouth.

A green line, frayed at the end

where he broke it, two heavier lines,

and a fine black thread

still crimped from the strain and snap

when it broke and he got away.

Like medals with their ribbons

frayed and wavering,

a five-haired beard of wisdom

trailing from his aching jaw.

I stared and stared

and victory filled up

the little rented boat,

from the pool of bilge

where oil had spread a rainbow

around the rusted engine

to the bailer rusted orange,

the sun-cracked thwarts,

the oarlocks on their strings,

the gunnels—until everything

was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!

And I let the fish go.

**The Virgins
Derek Walcott
(b. 1930)**

Down the dead streets of sun-stoned Frederiksted,

 the first free port to die for tourism,

 strolling at funeral pace, I am reminded

 of life not lost to the American dream;

5 but my small-islander’s simplicities

 can’t better our new empire’s civilized

 exchange of cameras, watches, perfumes, brandies

 for the good life, so cheaply underpriced

 that only the crime rate is on the rise

10 in streets blighted with sun, stone arches

 and plazas blown dry by the hysteria

 of rumor. A condominium drowns

 in vacancy; its bargains are dusted,

 but only a jeweled housefly drones

15 over the bargains. The roulettes spin

 rustily to the wind—the vigorous trade

 that every morning would begin afresh

 by revving up green water round the pierhead

 heading for where the banks of silver thresh.

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs

Before she saw him. She was starting down,

Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.

She took a doubtful step and then undid it

To raise herself and look again. He spoke

Advancing toward her: ‘What is it you see

From up there always—for I want to know.’

She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,

And her face changed from terrified to dull.

He said to gain time: ‘What is it you see,’

Mounting until she cowered under him.

‘I will find out now—you must tell me, dear.’

She, in her place, refused him any help

With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.

She let him look, sure that he wouldn’t see,

Blind creature; and awhile he didn’t see.

But at last he murmured, ‘Oh,’ and again, ‘Oh.’

‘What is it—what?’ she said.

‘Just that I see.’

‘You don’t,’ she challenged. ‘Tell me what it is.’

‘The wonder is I didn’t see at once.

I never noticed it from here before.

I must be wonted to it—that’s the reason.

The little graveyard where my people are!

So small the window frames the whole of it.

Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?

There are three stones of slate and one of marble,

Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight

On the sidehill. We haven’t to mind *those*.

But I understand: it is not the stones,

But the child’s mound—’

‘Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t,’ she cried.

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm

That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;

And turned on him with such a daunting look,

He said twice over before he knew himself:

‘Can’t a man speak of his own child he’s lost?’

‘Not you! Oh, where’s my hat? Oh, I don’t need it!

I must get out of here. I must get air.

I don’t know rightly whether any man can.’

‘Amy! Don’t go to someone else this time.

Listen to me. I won’t come down the stairs.’

He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.

‘There’s something I should like to ask you, dear.’

‘You don’t know how to ask it.’

‘Help me, then.’

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

‘My words are nearly always an offense.

I don’t know how to speak of anything

So as to please you. But I might be taught

I should suppose. I can’t say I see how.

A man must partly give up being a man

With women-folk. We could have some arrangement

By which I’d bind myself to keep hands off

Anything special you’re a-mind to name.

Though I don’t like such things ’twixt those that love.

Two that don’t love can’t live together without them.

But two that do can’t live together with them.’

She moved the latch a little. ‘Don’t—don’t go.

Don’t carry it to someone else this time.

Tell me about it if it’s something human.

Let me into your grief. I’m not so much

Unlike other folks as your standing there

Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.

I do think, though, you overdo it a little.

What was it brought you up to think it the thing

To take your mother-loss of a first child

So inconsolably—in the face of love.

You’d think his memory might be satisfied—’

‘There you go sneering now!’

‘I’m not, I’m not!

You make me angry. I’ll come down to you.

God, what a woman! And it’s come to this,

A man can’t speak of his own child that’s dead.’

‘You can’t because you don't know how to speak.

If you had any feelings, you that dug

With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;

I saw you from that very window there,

Making the gravel leap and leap in air,

Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly

And roll back down the mound beside the hole.

I thought, Who is that man? I didn’t know you.

And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs

To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.

Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice

Out in the kitchen, and I don’t know why,

But I went near to see with my own eyes.

You could sit there with the stains on your shoes

Of the fresh earth from your own baby’s grave

And talk about your everyday concerns.

You had stood the spade up against the wall

Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.’

‘I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.

I’m cursed. God, if I don’t believe I’m cursed.’

‘I can repeat the very words you were saying:

“Three foggy mornings and one rainy day

Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.”

Think of it, talk like that at such a time!

What had how long it takes a birch to rot

To do with what was in the darkened parlor?

You *couldn’t* care! The nearest friends can go

With anyone to death, comes so far short

They might as well not try to go at all.

No, from the time when one is sick to death,

One is alone, and he dies more alone.

Friends make pretense of following to the grave,

But before one is in it, their minds are turned

And making the best of their way back to life

And living people, and things they understand.

But the world’s evil. I won’t have grief so

If I can change it. Oh, I won’t, I won’t!’

‘There, you have said it all and you feel better.

You won’t go now. You’re crying. Close the door.

The heart’s gone out of it: why keep it up.

Amy! There’s someone coming down the road!’

‘*You*—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—

Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—’

‘If—you—do!’ She was opening the door wider.

‘Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.

I’ll follow and bring you back by force. I *will!*—’

 He saw her from the bottom of the stairs

Before she saw him. She was starting down,

Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.

She took a doubtful step and then undid it

To raise herself and look again. He spoke

Advancing toward her: ‘What is it you see

From up there always—for I want to know.’

She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,

And her face changed from terrified to dull.

He said to gain time: ‘What is it you see,’

Mounting until she cowered under him.

‘I will find out now—you must tell me, dear.’

She, in her place, refused him any help

With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.

She let him look, sure that he wouldn’t see,

Blind creature; and awhile he didn’t see.

But at last he murmured, ‘Oh,’ and again, ‘Oh.’

‘What is it—what?’ she said.

‘Just that I see.’

‘You don’t,’ she challenged. ‘Tell me what it is.’

‘The wonder is I didn’t see at once.

I never noticed it from here before.

I must be wonted to it—that’s the reason.

The little graveyard where my people are!

So small the window frames the whole of it.

Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?

There are three stones of slate and one of marble,

Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight

On the sidehill. We haven’t to mind *those*.

But I understand: it is not the stones,

But the child’s mound—’

‘Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t,’ she cried.

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm

That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;

And turned on him with such a daunting look,

He said twice over before he knew himself:

‘Can’t a man speak of his own child he’s lost?’

‘Not you! Oh, where’s my hat? Oh, I don’t need it!

I must get out of here. I must get air.

I don’t know rightly whether any man can.’

‘Amy! Don’t go to someone else this time.

Listen to me. I won’t come down the stairs.’

He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.

‘There’s something I should like to ask you, dear.’

‘You don’t know how to ask it.’

‘Help me, then.’

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

‘My words are nearly always an offense.

I don’t know how to speak of anything

So as to please you. But I might be taught

I should suppose. I can’t say I see how.

A man must partly give up being a man

With women-folk. We could have some arrangement

By which I’d bind myself to keep hands off

Anything special you’re a-mind to name.

Though I don’t like such things ’twixt those that love.

Two that don’t love can’t live together without them.

But two that do can’t live together with them.’

She moved the latch a little. ‘Don’t—don’t go.

Don’t carry it to someone else this time.

Tell me about it if it’s something human.

Let me into your grief. I’m not so much

Unlike other folks as your standing there

Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.

I do think, though, you overdo it a little.

What was it brought you up to think it the thing

To take your mother-loss of a first child

So inconsolably—in the face of love.

You’d think his memory might be satisfied—’

‘There you go sneering now!’

‘I’m not, I’m not!

You make me angry. I’ll come down to you.

God, what a woman! And it’s come to this,

A man can’t speak of his own child that’s dead.’

‘You can’t because you don't know how to speak.

If you had any feelings, you that dug

With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;

I saw you from that very window there,

Making the gravel leap and leap in air,

Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly

And roll back down the mound beside the hole.

I thought, Who is that man? I didn’t know you.

And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs

To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.

Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice

Out in the kitchen, and I don’t know why,

But I went near to see with my own eyes.

You could sit there with the stains on your shoes

Of the fresh earth from your own baby’s grave

And talk about your everyday concerns.

You had stood the spade up against the wall

Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.’

‘I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.

I’m cursed. God, if I don’t believe I’m cursed.’

‘I can repeat the very words you were saying:

“Three foggy mornings and one rainy day

Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.”

Think of it, talk like that at such a time!

What had how long it takes a birch to rot

To do with what was in the darkened parlor?

You *couldn’t* care! The nearest friends can go

With anyone to death, comes so far short

They might as well not try to go at all.

No, from the time when one is sick to death,

One is alone, and he dies more alone.

Friends make pretense of following to the grave,

But before one is in it, their minds are turned

And making the best of their way back to life

And living people, and things they understand.

But the world’s evil. I won’t have grief so

If I can change it. Oh, I won’t, I won’t!’

‘There, you have said it all and you feel better.

You won’t go now. You’re crying. Close the door.

The heart’s gone out of it: why keep it up.

Amy! There’s someone coming down the road!’

‘*You*—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—

Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—’

‘If—you—do!’ She was opening the door wider.

‘Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.

I’ll follow and bring you back by force. I *will!*—’