

Dante Alighieri

Selected Rime

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'Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io'

(To Guido Cavalcanti)

Guido, I wish that Lapo, you, and I,
by some enchantment could be bound
set aboard a ship, with all winds found
to sail the seas as you might wish or I.

So no misfortune or worsening weather
might prove for us the least impediment
but we'd live there in mutual assent,
desiring close companionship forever.

And Monna Vana, Monna Lagia too,
with she who's also numbered in the thirty,
placed there thanks to the good enchanter,

and there we'd talk about love forever,
and each of them would be truly happy,
as Lapo would, I think, and I and you.

(Guido is Guido Cavalcanti, Lapo is Lapo di Gianni. Their respective ladies, Vanna and Lagia, with Beatrice are numbered among the thirty most beautiful women of the day.)

'Voi che savete ragionar d'Amore'

You who know the languages of Love,
to my piteous ballad listen closely,
since it speaks of a disdainful lady,
who with her worth my heart does move.

She so disdains whoever gazes on her,
he must lower his eyes at once in fear,
since round hers there seems forever,
an image of all cruelty hovering near;
yet within they hold a lovely figure
that makes the gentle soul cry: Mercy!,
so virtuously, when their eyes thus see,
men's sighs rise, from the heart, above.

'I will not be humble' she seems to say,
'to those who gaze straight into my eyes,
for there it is that noble lord resides,
who made me feel his arrows every way.'
And this I know is how she likes to gaze,
viewing them herself as she pleases,
in the way on which a true lady seizes,
gazing, and wishing all might approve.

I'd not think that she through her kindness,
would ever allow others a single glance,
so harsh is this lady in her loveliness,
who in her eyes there sees Love's dance.
But let her gaze at will, what may chance,
though I find blessing there never an hour;
so long as my desire acquires some power
against disdain that my sighs does move.

'Io son venuto al punto de la rota'

I have reached that point of the circuit
where the horizon, when the sun sets,
gives birth to the twin-ruled heavens,
and Love's planet is remote from us,
because of the bright rays crossing her
slantwise, making of themselves a veil:
while the planet that solaces the frost
shows itself fully from the great arch
in which the Seven cast little shadow:
and yet not one of all the thoughts of love
with which I'm burdened, eases my mind
that seems so much harder than a stone,
gripped firmly by such images of stone.

Lifted high from Ethiopian sands,
those wandering winds that stir the air,
warmed now by the sun's bright sphere;
cross the waves, carrying in their wake,
such deep fog, which, if nothing clears,
shuts in and darkens all this hemisphere;
and then dissolves, falls in white flakes
of freezing snow and a noxious sleet,
with which the air saddened weeps:
yet Love, who furls his net on high,
because of the power of the winds,
quits me not; such is the lovely lady,
the cruel one, he grants me for my lady.

Some birds chase the warmth, and flee
from European lands that never fail
to see the Seven ever-frozen stars;
the voices of the rest have fallen silent,
not to sing again until green spring,
unless some harshness makes them cry;
and all the creatures carefree by nature,
are freed of love, because their spirits
are wholly deadened by the wintry cold:
yet I feel love within me more than ever,
for those sweet thoughts are neither taken
from me, nor given me for lengths of time,
my lady grants to one with little time.

Leaves the power of the Ram engendered,
to adorn the world, fulfil their hour,
all the grass is dead, and all the green
the foliage of all the trees lost to us,
unless in laurel, in the pines or firs,
or frozen in some other evergreen;
so fierce and bitter is the season,
it kills all the flowers of the field,
that cannot tolerate the biting frost:
yet Love does not intend to draw
this cruel thorn from out my heart;
which I determine to bear forever
as long as I live, were that forever.

The streams run with smoke-laden water,
because of vapours deep underground,
that rise on high from the buried chasms;
so the path that pleased me on fine days
has turned into a river, and so will run
as long as winter's dire assault shall last;
the earth is floored now as with enamel,
and the dull water changed to glass,
by cold air that seals it from without:
yet I've not deviated by a single step
from this war of mine, nor wish I to,
for if anguish is a kind of sweetness,
death must exceed every other sweetness.

Song, what will become of me, now,
in the sweet new season, in which love
rains down on earth from the whole sky.
if love lives on in me alone, despite
this frost, and yet is nowhere else alive?
Surely I will become a man of marble,
if this girl keeps within a heart of marble.

'Al poco giorno e al gran cerchio d'ombra' - Sestina

I have come, alas, to the great circle of shadow,
to the short day and the whitening hills,
when the colour is all lost from the grass,
though my desire will not lose its green,
so rooted is it in this hardest stone,
that speaks and feels as though it were a woman.

And likewise this heaven-born woman
stays frozen, like the snow in shadow,
and is unmoved, or moved like a stone,
by the sweet season that warms all the hills,
and makes them alter from pure white to green,
so as to clothe them with the flowers and grass.

When her head wears a crown of grass
she draws the mind from any other woman,
because she blends her gold hair with the green
so well that Amor lingers in their shadow,
he who fastens me in these low hills,
more certainly than lime fastens stone.

Her beauty has more virtue than rare stone.
The wound she gives cannot be healed with grass,
since I have travelled, through the plains and hills,
to find my release from such a woman,
yet from her light had never a shadow
thrown on me, by hill, wall, or leaves' green.

I have seen her walk all dressed in green,
so formed she would have sparked love in a stone,
that love I bear for her very shadow,
so that I wished her, in those fields of grass,
as much in love as ever yet was woman,
closed around by all the highest hills.

The rivers will flow upwards to the hills
before this wood, that is so soft and green,
takes fire, as might ever lovely woman,
for me, who would choose to sleep on stone,
all my life, and go eating grass,
only to gaze at where her clothes cast shadow.

Whenever the hills cast blackest shadow,
with her sweet green, the lovely woman
hides it, as a man hides stone in grass.

(The sestina is a 'closed' verse form where the six words ending the lines of each verse cycle in a pre-determined order. The line-end words 1,2,3,4,5,6 of each verse become the line endings of the next verse, in the order 6,1,5,2,4,3, and so on through the six main verses. The final seventh, three-line verse contains all six words, in the order 1,6,2,3,4,5 relative to the preceding sixth verse.)

'Amor, tu vedi ben che questa donna' – Double Sestina

Love you may see how truly this lady
disregards your power all of the time,
deeming herself the only lovely lady;
and since she realised she was my lady,
when your ray filled my face with light,
she made herself of every cruelty lady;
so her heart seemed not that of a lady
but of some fierce thing, loveless, cold;
for in the warmest weather or in cold
I only see the semblance of a lady
which seems as if made of lovely stone
by the most skilful hand that carves in stone.

And I, who am more enduring than stone
in serving you, for the beauty of a lady,
carry the hidden mark of this stone,
since you strike me as you would a stone
that had annoyed you some length of time.
your blow landing on my heart of stone.
Yet no one could ever find a stone
that from splendour of sun or inner light
had such power or such shining light
to help defend me against this stone,
so it might not strike me with its cold
whereby of death I would feel the cold.

Lord, you know how the freezing cold
changes the water into crystal stone
there in the north where it's truly cold,
and the air becomes elemental cold
so that the water seems to be the lady
of all those parts by reason of the cold:
so that with her face that breathes out cold
she freezes the blood within me all the time,
and my every thought cut off by time
becomes inside me a body of cold,
that issues from me in the midst of light
there at the entry point of pitiless light.

In her there gathers every lovely light;
just as of every cruelty the cold
runs to her heart, devoid of your light:
so beautiful to my eyes is the light
when I see her, that I see it in stone,
or anything I gaze on in the light.
From her eyes issues the sweet light
that makes me care for no other lady:
would she were a more merciful lady
to me, who call her name in dark and light,
simply to serve her in each place and time!
For none else I live and occupy my time.

Therefore, Power who are beyond all time,
beyond all motion and all sense of light,
have pity on me, in an evil time,
enter into her heart, for it is time
that you should dispel all the cold
that grants to me and others no time:
for if it finds me, your endless time,
in this state, then that gentle stone
will see me, in a while, laid in stone,
never to rise, unless there comes a time
when I shall see, if ever, there lives lady
as lovely in this world as that harsh lady.

Song, I have in my mind a lady
who though she's hard to me as any stone,
makes me bold, where other men seem cold:
so that I dare to make from that cold,
this new form that from you takes its light,
one not conceived by any other time.

‘Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro’

I wish my speech to be as harsh
as this fair stone is in her actions,
she who is forever growing
harder and crueller in nature,
who clothes herself all in adamant
so that by it, or her retreat,
never an arrow leaves the bow
that shall find her undefended:
she kills, there's no use in hiding,
or fleeing from the mortal blow,
that, as if its flight was winged,
finds all and shatters every armour;
leaving no defence for me to make.

No shield I find she cannot pierce,
nor place to hide from her features;
for as a stem supports the flower,
so she the heights of my intellect.
She is less troubled by my pain
than is a ship riding a tranquil sea;
and the weight that drags me down,
is greater than any rhyme can tell.
Oh, relentless, pitiless, you rasp,
that heedlessly wears my life away,
why is it that you cannot refrain
from gnawing bit by bit at my heart,
nor I naming him who gives you power?

My heart beats faster when I think
of her when other eyes are on me,
and I fear my thought may prove
so transparent as to be seen outside,
more than I fear this death, that tears
at every sense with the teeth of Love;
such that my every thought destroys
my senses' force, their power fails.
Love felled me, and stands over me
clasping the sword that killed Dido,
so that I cry aloud to him for mercy,
and pray to him with humble prayer;
but no drop of mercy from him appears.

Again and again he lifts his hand to me,
against my failing strength, perversely,
forcing me backwards to the ground,
too lacking in power even to writhe:
then cries of terror rise in my mind,
and the blood, rushing in my veins,
flows to the heart that calls on it;
so that I am left blanched and pale.
He wounds me so under the left arm
that the fresh pain tremors in my heart:
I say, if he lifts his hand once more,
Death himself will have conquered me,
mercifully, before his blow descends.

Oh if I might see him strike the heart
of that most cruel one who shatters mine!
only then the death to which her beauty
drives me would seem less dark to me:
for from this thieving thankless murderess,
no good appears by sunlight or by shade.
Alas, why does she not howl for me
as I do for her in this fiery chasm?
I'd soon cry: 'See me rushing to your aid';
and do it willingly, as others would,
thrusting my hand, to retrieve her there,
deep into her blond hair that Love
has curled and gilded to consume me.

If I could seize those lovely tresses,
that have become lashing whips to me,
I'd haul on them fiercely like bell-ropes
from early morning till the fall of night:
and I would show no pity nor be kind,
but treat her as a bear might do in play;
and since Love yet sets his whip on me,
I would revenge myself a thousand-fold.
And in those eyes, whence sparks emerge
to inflame this deadened heart I bear,
I would gaze fixedly and closely,
to avenge the flight she made me take,
and then lovingly make peace with her.

Song, go swiftly to that lady
who wounded my heart and yet hides
now from me what I yet most long for,
and strike her with an arrow to the heart:
for great honour is acquired by revenge.

‘A ciascun’alma presa e gentil core’

(From the Vita Nuova)

To every single gentle heart and loving,
whom these present verses may reach,
so that I might have true reply of each,
in our lord’s name, who is Love, greetings.

Almost upon us was the third hour
of the time where stars shine brightly
when suddenly Love appeared to me,
whose essence I still recall with terror.

Joyously, Love seemed to be holding,
my heart in his hand, and my lady
in his arms, wrapped in a cloak, sleeping.

Then he awakened her, and that burning
heart he made her, fearful, eat of, humbly:
till finally I saw him vanish weeping.

(Dante sent this sonnet to ‘many who were famous troubadours’ hoping to obtain an interpretation in verse. Guido Cavalcanti replied with the sonnet ‘Vedeste, al mio parere, onne valore’.)

‘Spesse fiata vegnonmi a la mente’

(From the Vita Nuova)

Frequently I muse within my mind
on the dark quality Love grants me,
and pity comes, so that I often cry:
‘Alas, has any known this previously?’

For Love assails me, so suddenly,
that my days seem almost through:
only one living spirit’s left to me,
remaining here, for it speaks of you.

Eager to aid myself, I act in longing;
pallid, and all devoid of any virtue,
I come to you, thinking to be healed:

but if I raise my eyes to you, gazing,
my heart begins to tremble so, anew,
that from every vein the spirit steals.

'Amore e 'l cor gentil sono una cosa'

(From the Vita Nuova)

Love and the gentle heart are one thing,
even as the poet says in his verse,
each from the other one as well divorced
as reason from the mind's reasoning.

Nature craves love, and then creates love king,
making the heart a palace where he'll stay,
breathing quietly, gently slumbering.

Then beauty in a virtuous woman's face
makes the eyes yearn, and strikes the heart,
so that the eyes' desire's reborn again,

and often, rooting there with longing, stays,
Till love, at last, out of its dreaming starts.
Woman's moved likewise by a virtuous man.

(Dante refers to Guido Guinicelli's poem 'Of the Gentle Heart' – 'No
love, in Nature, before the gentle heart, nor the gentle heart before
Love')

'Io mi senti' svegliar dentro a lo core'

(From the Vita Nuova)

Within my heart I felt the sudden stir
of a loving spirit that lay sleeping:
and saw Love then, coming from afar,
so joyously that I scarcely knew him,

he said: 'Think only now of honouring me,'
and his every word was uttered smiling.
Then standing with my lord I could see,
as I gazed in the direction of his coming,

my lady Vanna and my Lady Beatrice
approach the place where I was standing,
one following the other marvellously;

and, as even now my mind recalls this,
Love said to me: 'The first is Spring,
the second Love, she so resembles me'.

(Mona Vanna was Guido Cavalcanti's lady, her nickname being Primavera, or the Spring.)

‘Gentil pensiero che parla di vui’

(From the Vita Nuova)

There is a gentle thought that often springs
to life in me, because it speaks of you.
Its reasoning of love’s so sweet and true,
the heart is conquered, and accepts these things.

‘Who is this’ the mind asks of the heart,
‘who comes here to seduce our intellect?
Is his power so great we must reject
every other intellectual art?’

The heart replies ‘O, meditative mind
this is Love’s messenger and newly sent
to bring me all Love’s words and desires.

His life, and all the strength that he can find,
from her sweet eyes are mercifully lent,
who feels compassion for our inner fires.’

'Di donne io vidi una gentile schiera'

Of ladies I saw a noble gathering,
on this All Saint's day that is past,
and one I saw almost preceding
Love, who at her right side passed.

From her glances sprang such a light
it seemed a spirit flaming everywhere;
and I grew bold, gazing in her eyes,
seeing the figure of an angel there,

All who were worthy there were blessed
so sweet and mild did her gestures prove,
filling every heart with virtuousness.

I believe she was once in heaven above,
and came to earth to aid our distress:
blessed be she who at her side does move.

'Onde venite voi così pensose?'

Where are you coming from so pensively?
If it please you, tell me, of courtesy,
for I fear greatly that it's from my lady
you are returning so sorrowfully.

Oh, gentle ladies, do not disdain,
to pause for a moment on the way,
speak to this sad one who would gain
knowledge of his lady every day,

however painful it is for me to hear:
Love has chased me away so completely,
that his every gesture wounds me here.

See if I am not consumed utterly,
look how my spirit soon must disappear,
if no comfort flows from you to me.

'De gli occhi de la mia donna si move'

From my lady's eyes there glows
a light so gentle, that where it flows
things are seen no one can express,
given their nobility and newness:

and from its rays, on my heart, fell
such fear, that it makes me tremble,
and cry: 'I wish never to return there,'
yet then I forget my resolution rare:

I turn again to where I was conquered,
comforting once more my anxious eyes,
the first to know that touch of power.

Yet if her gaze is shuttered, it dies,
the longing that leads me towards her:
oh Love, provide for me in that hour.

'Ne le man vostre, gentil donna mia'

Into your hands, my gentle lady,
I commend my dying spirit:
Love, who reveals the journey to it,
since it goes sadly, looks on with pity.

You bound it to his sovereignty,
so, from then on, it could do nothing,
except to call on him softly saying:
'My Lord, do what you wish with me'.

I know all wrong displeases you:
therefore this death I've not deserved
sinks into my bitter heart more deeply.

My gentle lady, while life's yet preserved,
so I may die consoled and peaceful too,
be not dear to my eyes, nor so completely.

'Due donne in cima de la mente mia'

Two ladies in the depths of my mind
have come to talk of love with me:
the first has, in her, worth and courtesy,
prudence and honesty, with her, I find,

the other has beauty, charm, she is kind
kindness so adorns her honourably:
and I, thanks to my lord, so sweetly
myself to their sovereignty humbly bind.

Beauty and virtue through my intellect move
debating how human heart a path can take
between two women, with a perfect love.

The fount of noble words reply does make,
that beauty may be loved for its delight,
and virtue may be loved in doing right.

'Voi, donne, che pietoso atto mostrate'

You, ladies, who pitying gestures show,
who is this lady lying here so wounded?
Can this be she, who in my heart is painted?
Oh, hide it not, if it is, but tell me so.

So greatly are her features altered though,
and her whole form seems so spent,
she seems no longer to represent
that one who blesses others' beauty so.

'If our lady you failed to recognise,
who is so worn, since such befalls us too
the selfsame way, it yields us no surprise.

But if her gentle aspect you will view,
you'll recognise her still, by her eyes,
cry no more then, or we'll weep for you.'

‘Un dì si venne a me Malinconia’

One day Melancholy came to me
saying: ‘I wish to stay a while with you’,
and it seemed to me she’d with her too
Sorrow and Anger in her company.

I said to her: ‘Off, away from here,’
but like a proud Greek she replied,
and as we spoke, softly on her side,
I gazed, and saw Love drawing near,

dressed anew in a cloak of black,
and with a cap settled on his hair;
and surely he shed true tears, alack.

And I to him then: ‘What ails you, idler?’
And he replied: ‘Grief is at my back,
our lady’s dying, my sweet brother.’

(According to Dante’s narrative in the Vita Nuova, Beatrice’s death
occurred on the 9th of June 1290.)

'Oltre la sfera che più larga gira'

(From the Vita Nuova)

Beyond the sphere that wheels most widely
passes the sigh that issues from my heart;
a new perception grieving Love imparts,
a new Intelligence, leads higher sweetly.

When it has reached the goal of its desires,
it sees a lady who is bathed in honour,
and such light that, amidst her splendour,
the pilgrim spirit gazes and admires.

It sees her such that, when it tells of this,
I cannot comprehend, it speaks so subtly
to the grieving heart that questions here.

Yet I know it speaks of that sweet lady,
because it often mentions Beatrice,
that I might understand, my ladies dear.

