

San Juan de la Cruz

Seven Spiritual Poems

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Song of the Soul that Delights in Reaching the Supreme State

*of perfection, that is, the union with God,
by the path of spiritual negation.*

Upon a darkened night
on fire with all love's longing
– O joyful flight! –
I left, none noticing,
my house, in silence, resting.

Secure, devoid of light,
by secret stairway, stealing
– O joyful flight! –
in darkness self-concealing,
my house, in silence, resting.

In the joy of night,
in secret so none saw me,
no object in my sight
no other light to guide me,
but what burned here inside me.

Which solely was my guide,
more surely than noon-glow,
to where he does abide,
one whom I deeply know,
a place where none did show.

O night, my guide!
O night, far kinder than the dawn!
O night that tied
the lover to the loved,
the loved in the lover there transformed!

On my flowering breast,
that breast I kept for him alone,
there he took his rest
while I regaled my own,
in lulling breezes from the cedars blown.

The breeze, from off the tower,
as I sieved through its windings,
with calm hands, that hour,
my neck, in wounding,
left all my senses hanging.

Self abandoned, self forgot,
my face inclined to the beloved one:
all ceased, and I was not,
my cares now left behind, and gone:
there among the lilies all forgotten.

Verses on the Ecstasy of Deep Contemplation

*I entered where there is no knowing,
and unknowing I remained,
all knowledge there transcending.*

I

Where no knowing is I entered,
yet when I my own self saw there
without knowing where I rested
great things I understood there,
yet cannot say what I felt there,
since I rested in unknowing,
all knowledge there transcending.

II

Of peace and of holy good
there was perfect knowing,
in profoundest solitude
the only true way seeing,
yet so secret is the thing
that I was left here stammering,
all knowledge there transcending.

III

I was left there so absorbed,
so entranced, and so removed,
that my senses were abroad,
robbed of all sensation proved,
and my spirit then was moved
with an unknown knowing,
all knowledge there transcending.

IV

He who reaches there in truth
from himself is parted though,
and all that before he knew
seems to him but base below,
his knowledge increases so
that knowledge has an ending,
all knowledge there transcending.

V

The higher he climbs however
the less he'll ever understand,
because the cloud grows darker
that lit the night on every hand:
whoever visits this dark land
rests forever in unknowing,
all knowledge there transcending.

VI

This knowledge of unknowing
is of so profound a power
that no wise men arguing
will ever supersede its hour:
their wisdom cannot reach the tower
where knowing has an ending,
all knowledge there transcending.

VII

It is of such true excellence
this highest understanding,
no science, no human sense,
has it in its grasping,
yet he who, by self-conquering
grasps knowing in unknowing,
goes evermore transcending.

VIII

And in the deepest sense,
this highest knowledge lies,
of the divine essence,
if you would be wise:
his mercy so it does comprise,
each one leaving in unknowing,
all knowledge there transcending.

Song of the Soul in Intimate Communication of Union with God's Love

O flame of living love,
that at its deepest centre
wounds now my soul with tenderness!
Since you no more remove,
end then, if you intend to;
tear now the veil of mutual sweetness!

O cautery so sweet!
O wound's caress!
O soothing hand! O delicate the touching,
that signals life complete,
pays every debt,
changes death to life in its ending!

O fiery light,
in whose resplendencies
deep caves of purest feeling,
that once were eyeless night,
with rarest beauties
shed warmth and light on the loving.

How lovingly, how gently
you return now to my breast
where you live all secret and alone
and filled with virtue's glory
how your sweetest breath
delicately pierces to the bone!

Spiritual Verses

*Seeking love always
with hope that cannot falter
I flew ever higher
till I overtook my prey.*

I

So I might seize the prey
in this divine venture
I flew ever higher
from sight was forced to stray,
yet love so far did fly
that though in my flight
I faltered in the height
I caught the prey on high.

II

As higher I ascended
so the hardest conquest
came about in darkness,
all my sight was dazzled:
yet since love was my prey
from blind dark a leaper
I flew on ever higher
till I overtook the prey.

III

In this highest game,
the further I ascended
the humbler, more subdued
more abased I became.
'None attains it', I did say.
I sank down lower, lower,
yet I rose higher, higher
and so I took the prey.

IV

My one flight in strange manner
surpassed a hundred thousand
for the hope of highest heaven
attains the end it hopes for:
there hope alone did fly
unfaltering in the height:
hope, seeking in its flight,
I caught the prey on high.

Song of the Soul that Delights in Knowing God through Faith

*How well I know that fountain's rushing flow
though it is night!*

I

That fount eternal is a hidden thing.
How well I know where its waters spring,
though it is night!

II

Its source I know not since it has none,
and yet every source from it does come,
though it is night.

III

I know that nothing is as beautiful,
of it earth and heaven there drink full,
though it is night.

IV

I know that it is endlessly deep,
that none across those depths may leap,
though it is night.

V

Its clarity will never be obscured,
I know all light there has its source,
though it is night.

VI

I know its streams so greatly swell
it waters earth, and heaven, and hell,
though it is night.

VII

The flood that flows from out this spring,
I know is full, and conquers everything,
though it is night.

VIII

The flood that from these two proceeds
I know that neither its deep flood exceeds,
though it is night.

IX

And this eternal fountain is concealed,
in the living bread our life to yield,
though it is night.

X

Here it cries aloud to every creature,
to drink of it, though dark its nature,
for it is night.

XI

That living fount that I desire,
within the bread of life, I now admire,
though it is night.

A Gloss with Spiritual Meaning

*With no aid, yet with every aid,
without light, in darkness truly,
I see myself swallowed wholly.*

I

My soul is now severed
from each created thing,
raised on its own wing
to a life of joy forever,
God alone succouring.

II

The thing I most value,
from this it can be said,
is that it sees itself, my soul,
with no aid, yet with every aid.

III

Though darkness I endure
in this my mortal life
yet that is no strife:
though the light's obscure
I have celestial life:
for love such existence,
if blinder, grants more fully,
the soul held in subservience
without light, in darkness truly.

IV

Since I've known it, I confess,
love has worked so within me
whether all goes well or badly
all's touched with a single sweetness,
transforming the soul inside me,
and so in its joyous flames,
those flames I feel within me,
swiftly, so naught remains,
I see myself swallowed wholly.

Verses of the Soul that Pines to See God

*I live without life in me
in such manner longing
that I'm dying of not dying.*

I

In myself I no longer live
without God I can live no longer
himself, myself, having neither,
what can it mean to live?
A thousand deaths I believe,
for my one true life longing
and so dying of not dying.

II

Not life, but deprivation,
is this life I am living,
and so a continual dying,
till meeting is our union.
Hear me, my God, as one,
for this now I have no liking,
that I'm dying of not dying.

III

If I am absent from you
what life shall I know here
except this death I suffer
the bitterest known, it's true?
I have pity on myself too,
since my fate is such, enduring,
that I'm dying of not dying.

IV

A fish that leaps from the water
its relief comes swift and sure,
by the death it must endure,
it is healed in death hereafter.
What death is equal to mine here?
In this pitiful life I'm living,
the more life the longer dying.

V

When I seek for relief too
find you in the Sacrament,
deeper sorrow to me is lent,
I cannot delight in you,
pain grips me through and through,
not seeing you in my sighing,
and so dying of not dying.

VI

And if my Lord I delight
in hopes of seeing you
knowing that I may lose you
doubles my sorrow quite
living in such deep fright
and, as I hope, still hoping,
I die through my not dying.

VII

Raise me from this death
my God, and grant me life:
nor condemn me to this strife
in bonds that stifle breath:
how I long to see your face,
my wretchedness so trying,
that I'm dying of not dying.

VIII

Now for death I cry
and my life lament
while in imprisonment
here for my sins I lie.
O my God, when will I
hear myself truly saying:
now I live beyond all dying?

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