100 POEMS TO BREAK YOUR HEART

EDWARD HIRSCH

AUTHOR OF *HOW TO READ A POEM AND FALL IN LOVE WITH POETRY*

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In memory of

Irma Hirsch (1928–2019)

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In a murderous time
the heart breaks and breaks
and lives by breaking.

— Stanley Kunitz, "The Testing-Tree"

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

"Surprised by joy — impatient as the Wind"

(1815, 1820)

On the night of June 4, 1812, William Wordsworth's daughter Catherine died suddenly after a series of convulsions. She was not quite four years old. To make matters worse, both her parents were away, and Wordsworth did not even learn about his daughter's death until a week later, when she was already buried in Grasmere. In December the parents were struck again when their son Thomas died of measles and was buried next to his sister. He was six years old.

"Surprised by joy" was, as Wordsworth recollected, "Suggested by my daughter Catherine, long after her death." It was the only piece he wrote for her. The poet is clearly the speaker of this poem, which commemorates the two worst "pangs" of his life.

> Surprised by joy — impatient as the Wind
> I turned to share the transport — Oh! With whom
> But Thee, deep buried in the silent tomb,
> That spot which no vicissitude can find?
> Love, faithful love recalled thee to my mind —

But how could I forget thee? — Through what power,
Even for the least division of an hour,
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind
To my most grievous loss? — That thought's return
Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,
Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,
Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;
That neither present time, nor years unborn
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.

Wordsworth's sonnet unfolds in fourteen regular iambic pentameter lines. Inspired by the Petrarchan sonnet form, the rhyme scheme is tight: *abbaaccadedede.* Many of Wordsworth's sonnets are grandly rhetorical, fit for public declamation, but this poem is different, tender and filled with self-reproach. It begins emphatically with an indelible phrase, "Surprised by joy," which carries a sense of radical unexpectedness. Wordsworth's poems are filled with serendipitous moments, and here the poet is startled into delight over something he has just seen, which leads him to turn toward his companion in order to share that delight.

"Joy" was one of Wordsworth's favorite words. For example, he used it nearly fifty times in *The Prelude,* where joy almost always expresses a feeling of infinity revealed through nature, a spot of time. Wordsworth's pantheistic spirit, which usually came to him in solitude, is all the more poignant here because he so naturally wants to share it with his daughter and cannot. Thus, the shock of loss replaces the feeling of joy. In *The Story of Joy* the scholar Adam Potkay recognizes that "Wordsworth's sonnet of joy is his great poem of sorrow."

The poem's combination of intensity and formal control reflects both Wordsworth's character and his behavior, which were, as his friend Henry Crabb Robinson put it, "that which became a man both of feeling and strength of mind." As a thinker, Wordsworth was composed and confidently declared: "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquility." This statement is so definitive and forceful that it is easy to forget what he went on to say — that "the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears." From a vantage point achieved by the passage of time, the poet can contemplate past emotion, examine and articulate it. By reliving it in memory,

the poet can also express the rawness of the feeling as if experiencing it anew, thereby combining the immediacy of emotion with the perspective of intellect.

Wordsworth's editing choices show how his intellect focused his emotions. For example, in the first version of this sonnet he wrote, "I wished to share the transport," but later amended it to "I turned to share the transport," which changes an aspiration into an action, an abrupt pivot toward the missing companion, the lost daughter. I see the speaker physically turn to where he thinks she is, and then realize that she has no vital physical being anymore.

Wordsworth also changed "long" to "deep" in the third line. To be "long buried" is a more abstract temporal description; however, to be "deep buried" brings the burial into the realm of the concrete, which creates the greater shock of a subterranean or bottomless finality. He contrasts his intense responses, his surprise and impatience, with the impenetrability of the tomb, "That spot which no vicissitude can find." *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines *vicissitude* as "a change or variation; mutability."

The poem's first two lines accelerate with an enjambment that pushes the poem forward. The dashes create a feeling both of rapidity and spontaneity, only to be broken off by a sudden exclamation, the hollowness of "Oh! With whom . . ." The exclamatory "Oh!" suggests the O-shape of the speaker's open mouth when he realizes his daughter is not standing next to him. The word "whom" ends the second line and seems to pose a question, soon answered in the third line, with "But Thee, deep buried in the silent tomb," which also indicates that he is addressing an absence. Read retrospectively then, "whom" seems ordained to rhyme with "tomb." Because Wordsworth wrote this poem a few years after Catherine's death, he had started to move on, forgetting his enormous sadness, but then got wrenched back into it.

Wordsworth was not characteristically a self-questioning poet, but here, three questions appear in the poem's first eight lines. The first two are directed to the daughter, but the third one the speaker turns on himself, wondering "Through what power" he could have been "so beguiled as to be blind / To my most grievous loss?" Notice how he makes the short but mortifying leap from "beguiled" to "be blind," with the subtle repetitions of *b, l,* and *d* sounds, the assonance of the long *e* and long *i,* and the lopping off of *be* from "beguiled" to form two words, "be blind." So too the turn toward Catherine is enacted through three words timed to recur at key points in the sonnet: "recalled," "return," "restore." This repetition of the prefix *re-,* which means "back" or

"again," drives home the poem's shattering realization that the speaker can never go back nor see his beloved daughter ever again.

After eight and a half lines roiled by dashes and questions, the final sestet unrolls in a single sentence, the pace calmer, more meditative:

> That thought's return
> Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,
> Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,
> Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;
> That neither present time, nor years unborn
> Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.

We hear the steep echo chamber of triple rhymes: "return" / "forlorn" / "unborn" and "bore" / "more" / "restore," as well as the close assonant rhyming of all six final lines. This relentless sonic repetition — hear the drumbeat of similar *o* and *n* sounds in "Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn" — seems to enact the speaker's denial about the loss of his daughter, so that in these last lines he must repeat what he cannot accept. Neither the present nor the future can "restore" his daughter's "heavenly face." There is a hint of Christianity in the word "heavenly" without any real sense of redemption.

In the end, after Wordsworth turns to speak to his daughter and instead must address her absence, he is forced to face the oppressive silence of death. The heartbreak of the poem is also the answer to its final question and its last pang — that time has the power to make the living forget their griefs, that time consigns the dead to the past and drags the living back to life, where they can be surprised by joy.

JOHN KEATS

"This living hand"

(1819)

It was December 1819, and John Keats's health was perilous. The wastage of his body was becoming apparent. The poet Leigh Hunt remembered that his friend, who was just twenty-five years old, often looked at his hand, "which was faded, and swollen in the veins, and say it was the hand of a man of fifty." Keats had received his death warrant from tuberculosis, and the great poems were behind him — the sonnets and the odes, including "To Autumn," which may be the most perfect poem in English. He was working on a comic poem to be called "The Cap and Bells; or, The Jealousies." He never finished this fairy tale, the weakest of his mature poems, whose Spenserian stanzas he churned out with remarkable fluency to earn some money for his publisher; but at some point while he was writing it, he broke off and jotted down some lines in a blank space on the manuscript. He turned from stanza 51 — "*Cupid, I / Do thee defy!*" — and marked this untitled eight-line fragment where there was room on the page:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd — see, here it is —
I hold it towards you.

It was once thought that these lines were addressed to Keats's great love, his fiancée, Fanny Brawne, but most scholars now agree that Keats meant them for use in a later poem or play. They weren't published until 1898, when they appeared in the sixth edition of H. B. Forman's one-volume edition of Keats's work. Once encountered, though, this fragment of consciousness can't be ignored or forgotten.

The poem begins with an arresting image of a "warm and capable" hand that seems somehow detached from the rest of the body. This image is so vivid that the poem feels straightforward, utterly direct, though the verb tenses are a little tricky. In the middle of the second line Keats introduces the conditional tense with the word "would," set off by commas, indicating a proposition or a hypothetical statement about the hand. The poet imagines the warm hand "cold" and ends the line on this enjambment. The third line elaborates on the hand's coldness: "And in the icy silence of the tomb." In "The Fall of Hyperion" Keats had already foreseen a similar moment: "When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave." Here he makes explicit that the warm detached hand is also a scribe, the instrument by which the poet's thoughts get transposed to the page in the form of a poem.

The detached "hand" of the poem can refer both to the physical hand depicted in it and to the handwriting, the written material that constitutes the poem. The mystery and eeriness of the detached hand are represented by the mystery and eeriness of the poem itself. The hand seems disconnected from the body even as it is memorializing itself in the poem; in an essay on Keats and the uncanny, the scholar Brooke Hopkins points out that, likewise, "the poem gives the appearance of being detached from some larger text."

The dark mortal fantasy of this fragment continues by bringing in an addressee, perhaps a specific person or some future reader. Whichever one Keats imagined, the fourth line lays out this person's hypothetical condition: to be

haunted by the cold hand, which would "chill thy dreaming nights" with nightmares of death. This recalls the "cold" hand and the "icy silence of the tomb."

In the fifth and sixth lines, which proceed without punctuation and with increasing fury, the speaker of the poem further elaborates on this strange fantasy. He suggests that the reader will be so haunted and chilled by the cold, dead hand "That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood / So in my veins red life might stream again." Understanding that he would be dead by the time this reader encountered these lines, the speaker is enraged in advance by the fact of his mortality. Therefore, he proposes this impossible bargain: that the reader trade places with him, life for death, a last desperate gesture as he confronts his imminent demise. He even indicates in the following line that the person who takes him up on this bargain will be "conscience-calm'd," as if the imagined future reader will share the speaker's outrage that death will soon rob the hand of its warmth. Surely, as the poet Mary Ruefle puts it, "there is no greater accusatory poem in existence."

At the end of this penultimate line the poem's single sentence breaks off from the conditional with a simple statement in the present tense, set off by dashes — "see, here it is" — a declaration that the hand is still alive, still warm. The sentence continues in the last line with another simple statement in the present tense: "I hold it towards you." It is as if the speaker is reaching out with the hand, alive and warm, to prove that it can still grasp. He is almost challenging the reader to shake that hand and make contact. After seven lines of regular blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) the last line is cut in half, the way the speaker's life will be cut short; it ends on the word "you," signifying the reader, the only one who remains to see the poem. This "you," an intentional change from the formal "thou" used earlier, lends intimacy to this final plea.

Keats's fragment begins with writing and ends with reading. He suggests that he would like to cheat death by haunting you, the reader, troubling your waking hours and your dreams at night, devastating you so thoroughly that you will sacrifice yourself by trading places with him. The impossible blackmail is a last desperate gesture. He once lifted a living hand. It reaches out to us still, but now through words. Here it is — this made work, this living thing. Look, he is holding out his hand. He is daring you, whoever you are, to grasp it.

JOHN CLARE

"I am"

(c. 1847)

John Clare was one of the great originals of nineteenth-century rural England, an agricultural laborer and lower-class poet who wrote poems in what he called a "language that is ever green." I am focusing on his anguished asylum poem "I am," but it's worthwhile to recall that it was written by a local poet who found his poetry in the woods and fields, in the wilds and waste places of nature. He wrote some thirty-five hundred poems, and most of them chronicle a world he loved. "Poets love nature and themselves are love," he wrote in a late sonnet.

Clare was a prodigious walker, a solitary who rambled through the countryside with a notebook in his pocket. Socially, he didn't really fit in anywhere. In London, he was taken up and condescended to as "the Northamptonshire Peasant Poet." At home, his neighbors considered him peculiar. He empathized with outsiders, such as the Romani, and identified with shy, vulnerable creatures, such as the snipe, the marten, the badger, the field mouse. I've always been heartened by his lyric determination, the precision and exuberance with which he chronicled a world that was rapidly disappearing because of industri-

alization, as well as the privatization, and subsequent fencing off, of formerly open public lands.

Clare suffered from debilitating physical and mental troubles, which eventually got the better of him. His biographer Jonathan Bate suggests that Clare "conforms to the classic pattern . . . of manic depression or 'bipolar affective disorder.'" He was most likely schizophrenic. He had periods of lucidity mixed with bouts of depression and episodes of mania. He also suffered from hallucinations, as well as aberrant behavior related to his illness.

In 1837, Clare was certified insane and taken to Dr. Matthew Allen's private asylum at High Beach in Epping Forest, Essex, on the northeast edge of London. In July 1841, he escaped from the asylum and headed on foot for his home in Northborough. Lonely and broke, sleeping in the rough and sometimes eating grass, he walked more than eighty miles in four days. He left an extraordinary prose account of this nightmarish trip, "Journey out of Essex." "Having only honest courage and myself in my army," he said, "I led the way and my troops soon followed."

Later that year Clare was again certified insane and committed to the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum. Some of his most enduring works were asylum poems: "A Vision"; a sonnet addressed to his son and namesake; and two disconcerting self-revelations that begin with the words "I am," one a sonnet ("I feel I am — I only know I am"), the other a lyric that stands as his most haunting memorial. It was transcribed and preserved by William Knight, the asylum steward who befriended him. Thomas Inskip, a watch- and clockmaker who sometimes advised Clare, arranged for its publication in the *Bedford Times.* I like to think of local readers opening the newspaper on New Year's Day, 1848, and finding this poem.

I am

I am — yet what I am none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:
I am the self-consumer of my woes —
They rise and vanish in oblivion's host,
Like shadows in love-frenzied stifled throes —
And yet I am and live — like vapours tossed

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams
Where there is neither sense of life or joys
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
Even the dearest that I love the best
Are strange — nay, rather, stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man hath never trod,
A place where woman never smiled or wept,
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie,
The grass below — above, the vaulted sky.

This well-designed eighteen-line lyric consists of three six-line stanzas in a steady iambic pentameter. The first stanza hinges on two rhymes: *ababab.* The second two stanzas alternate rhymes in the first four lines, as in the first stanza, but end with a rhyming couplet. All but one of the rhyme-words ("esteems") are one-syllable words, which gives an emphatic rhythm to the rhymes. For example, in the first stanza there is special insistence in rhyming the words "knows," "woes," and "throes." In the second stanza, the word "noise" clangs with "joys."

The feeling of desolation in this poem is overwhelming. The first line opens with a taut assertion — "I am" — which is followed by a dash, a pause, and then a plaintive logical claim: "I am — yet what I am none cares or knows." The line is especially forceful because it is end-stopped. This declaration has the rhetoric of argumentation: I am — *yet.* The speaker of the poem exists, he reminds himself (and us), though his friends have ostracized him, and he is left to console himself in his loneliness. He thus simultaneously declares his existence, his visibility to himself, and his nonexistence, his invisibility to others.

The poem's first two stanzas comprise one long sentence, a series of images and abstractions that dramatizes the speaker's feeling of death in life. At the end of the first stanza he declares that he lives, but "like vapours tossed" — an enjambed line that then breaks to the second stanza:

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams,

Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems . . .

There is an agitated, confusing, almost hallucinatory quality to these lines as he tries to explain his mental anguish, his sense of being completely unmoored. The abstractions pile up and the language almost falls apart under the weight of alienation.

It's worth mentioning that Clare's sensibility here is decidedly Romantic and pre-modern. He is doing precisely what Ezra Pound argues against in his modernist credo "A Few Don'ts" (1913). "Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of peace,'" Pound declares. "It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol." John Clare certainly knew the natural world, the natural object, but he is not trying to portray it here. By pairing a concrete image (a "vast shipwreck") with an abstraction ("my life's esteems") he is summarizing a situation, a general state, a cast of mind. The sense of doom and disorientation is not something we are meant to visualize, as in an Imagist poem, but to feel and understand.

There is a sense of radical alienation in the concluding two lines of the second stanza: "Even the dearest that I love the best / Are strange — nay, rather, stranger than the rest." Note the correction here, the argumentative precision. It's not just that the people close to the speaker are now "strange" — it's that they are now "stranger," as in both "peculiar" and "more remote" than everyone else. Such is the depth of his human disconnection.

The writing calms down in the final stanza, the poem's second sentence, woven across six lines. There's calculated force in pairing "trod" and "God," "wept" and "slept"; there's finality in the closing couplet's rhyme of "lie" and "sky." The agitation gives way to a language that is totally transparent, un-antagonized. The desire for relief and repose from the inevitable pain and rejection of being in a social world becomes palpable. In the end, Clare's speaker longs for some lost Eden-like garden where he can recapture the innocence of childhood, a place where he can rest, alone with God, under "the vaulted sky," a cathedral-shaped heaven. He longs for an almost womblike space, free from the taint of the human, a world outside of time.

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

In Memoriam, VII

(c. 1848)

In the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892–1935* (1936), the poet W. B. Yeats declares that "Victorianism has been defeated." Yeats uses Tennyson's *In Memoriam* to illustrate the shortcomings of that era's poetry, citing the critical response of the French poet Paul Verlaine: "The revolt against Victorianism meant to the young poet a revolt against irrelevant descriptions of nature, the scientific and moral discursiveness of *In Memoriam* — 'When he should have been broken-hearted,' says Verlaine, 'he had many reminiscences.'"

I don't much care for the pat sentimentalism that creeps in toward the end of *In Memoriam,* which is part of what makes it a representative Victorian poem, but I disagree with Verlaine's characterization because I believe that Tennyson's elegy for his friend Arthur Hallam is profoundly heartfelt. It is not all "reminiscences"; much of it expresses genuine grief. Hallam died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1833, and Tennyson's mournfulness was ongoing. He wrote *In Memoriam* over a period of many years and, given its intensity of feeling, worried about making it public.

Canto VII — *In Memoriam* consists of 133 cantos — depicts Tennyson's dis-

tress over his friend's death in an especially acute way. He most likely wrote this section sometime between 1848 and 1850 — in other words, at least fifteen years after Hallam's death. He then placed it near the beginning of the sequence.

VII

Dark house, by which once more I stand
Here in the long unlovely street,
Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasp'd no more —
Behold me, for I cannot sleep,
And like a guilty thing I creep
At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day.

This poem, which consists of just two sentences, three quatrains, a mere twelve lines, uses a clever stanzaic pattern that Tennyson employed for all the poems that comprise *In Memoriam.* The pattern is a quatrain in iambic tetrameter: ˘ / | ˘ / | ˘ / | ˘ /. Its envelope rhyme scheme, *abba,* begins with an expectation and concludes by looking back. This makes it self-enfolding. Tennyson didn't invent this stanza, as he thought — Ben Jonson used it in his 1640 poem "An Elegy" ("Though beauty be the mark of praise") — but Tennyson turned it to such powerful use that it is now referred to as the "In Memoriam stanza."

Tennyson uses it here to great effect. He also varies the meter. Notice, for example, how he starts the first three lines of the poem with heavy stresses, a spondee or a trochee instead of an iamb, to emphasize four significant words, "Dárk hóuse," "Hére," and "Dóors." That the speaker has returned to a "Dark house" indicates that where once he found a welcoming light, he now encounters a somber threshold and is barred from entering. The "Here" of the sec-

ond line refers to 67 Wimpole Street (the "long unlovely street") in London, where Hallam had lived. The speaker remembers how he once waited in that street, at those "Doors," his heart beating in anticipation. The stanza's last line, in regular iambic tetrameter, explains that his heart beats "So quickly, waiting for a hand." One might interpret this "waiting for a hand" to mean "waiting for help."

However, the second stanza clarifies that he waits for "A hand that can be clasp'd no more." This absent physical hand recalls the disembodied hand in Keats's "This living hand," a hand once "capable / Of earnest grasping," which Keats then envisions as lifeless. Though Keats's poem was not a direct influence—the fragment was published after Tennyson died—it's not surprising that both poets use the hand as a powerful metonym, or stand-in, for the whole person. In the clasp or grasp of a handshake two people feel the intimacies of each other's skin, each other's warmth, strength, pulse. The dead or missing hand just as powerfully represents the absence of the other, the permanent losses of death.

The second line of the second stanza begins with an imperative: "Behold me . . ." Now we see that the intentionally stressed "Dark house" and "Doors" of the first stanza serve not just as details of the setting but also as objects the speaker is addressing. This apostrophe to the house, the doors themselves, seems like a displacement of the speaker's grief. He is asking them to look at him precisely because his friend cannot. He tells the house that he cannot sleep, "And like a guilty thing I creep / At the earliest morning to the door." He returns like the ghost in *Hamlet* ("And then it started like a guilty thing," act 1, scene 1, line 148). Given that Hallam was just twenty-two years old when he died, the speaker's experience of grief is complicated by the guilt felt by a survivor. He understands that, now that his friend is gone, he has become a sort of trespasser in the neighborhood where he was once a familiar presence.

In the first line of the last stanza ("He is not here; but far away") one scholar finds an allusion to Luke 24:6, where the angel stands before Jesus's empty sepulcher ("He is not here, but is risen"). Tennyson's use of a semicolon after "here," rather than a comma as in Luke, is the clue that "far away" doesn't refer to where "He" is, that the hope of a resurrection will not be fulfilled. Indeed, the enjambment between lines 1 and 2 of this stanza joins "far away" to "The noise of life begins again." The word "noise" suggests something ugly and irritating, something hard to take. That "noise of life," the new day, inevitably excludes his friend.

The poem turns in the final stanza from the darkness of early morning to the "ghastly" light of a new day. The predawn hour, a liminal space between night and day, darkness and light, serves as the setting for a type of poem called the aubade, which comes from the Spanish *alba,* meaning "dawn." The aubade is traditionally a dawn song expressing the regret of lovers parting at daybreak, as in the famous balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet.* It remembers the ecstasy of their union and describes their sadness at separating. Given the quickly beating heart of the speaker standing in his friend's street, his intense longing to clasp that absent hand, his guilty creeping to the darkened door — all of which point to a homoerotic undercurrent that runs through the entire sequence — combined with his desolation at the new day, the canto can be read as a sort of aubade, in which dawn reminds the poet that death has parted the deeply bonded friends forever.

Tennyson's speaker sees the despised signs of life returning to the street through a veil of rain. Everything is obscured by the loss of his friend. The aggressive and almost numbing drumbeat of the alliterative *b* sound, as well as the consonance of *l, d, k,* and *s* sounds in the last line — "On the *b*a*ld s*treet *b*rea*ks* the *bl*an*k d*ay" — sonically reflect the bleakness of both the speaker's state of mind and the city scene at daybreak. The poet literally breaks the word "daybreak" into "breaks" and "day" and reverses their order, inserting "the blank" between them. There is a feeling of utter desolation, exposure, and emptiness. As a new day begins, the speaker is left not with "reminiscences," but with a broken heart.

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

"Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend"

(1889)

By 1885, Gerard Manley Hopkins had written his great poems of praise and exultation, such as "God's Grandeur" ("The world is charged with the grandeur of God"), "The Windhover" ("I caught this morning morning's minion"), and "Pied Beauty" ("Glory be to God for dappled things"). Behind him too were the six so-called terrible sonnets, time capsules of spiritual sterility and religious anguish, such as "Carrion Comfort" and "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day." After five years of teaching Greek to desultory students at University College in Dublin, which Hopkins considered wasted years, the Jesuit priest took a retreat at the Irish novitiate at Tullabeg. He was forty-four years old and did not waver in his allegiance to the church. But he was desolate. On New Year's Day, 1889, he wrote in a notebook: "I began to enter on that course of loathing and helplessness which I have often felt before, which made me fear madness and led me to give up the practice of meditation except, as now, in retreat and here it is again. I could therefore do no more than repeat *Justus es, Domine, et rectum judicium tuum . . .*"

To console himself he was reciting Psalm 119, verse 137 — "Righteous art

thou, O Lord, and upright are thy judgments" — from the Vulgate, the late-fourth-century translation of the Bible, which he dearly loved.

Three months later Hopkins used a similar statement as the title and epigraph of a sonnet: "*Justus quidem tu es, Domine, si disputem tecum*"; he sent it in a letter to his friend Robert Bridges. This time the poet cites the prophet Jeremiah, who echoes Psalm 119 in his indignant cry. The first three lines are thus Hopkins's literal translation of Jeremiah 12:1, which the King James Version renders as "Righteous thou art, O LORD, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments: Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? Wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?"

This is one of the last three poems Hopkins completed before he died of typhoid fever in June 1889. He dated it March 17 and informed Bridges that it should be read "*adagio molto* [very slowly] and with great stress."

Justus quidem tu es, Domine, si disputem tecum; verumtamen
justa loquar ad te: Quare via impiorum prosperatur? &c.

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end?
    Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust
Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,
Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes
Now, leavèd how thick! lacèd they are again
With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes
Them; birds build — but not I build; no, but strain,
Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.

Hopkins utilizes the argumentative form of a Petrarchan, or Italian, sonnet for his anguished quarrel with God. The poem rhymes *abbaabbacdcdcd*. Like Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, the speaker of the poem acknowledges the Lord as "just" but begins with a mournful complaint. Unlike the King

James Version, which translates the word *disputem* as "plead," Hopkins chose the word "contend," which suggests a quarrel, a rivalry, as well as an appeal. Notice how he employs an honorific, "sir," in directing his complaint, though no such title appears in the Bible verse. It's a respectful term one might use with a colleague or an elder, and it's notable that the poet doesn't capitalize it here, bringing his divine addressee down to the level of the human. Theirs is a thwarted intimacy — a gulf has opened between a frustrated petitioner and an unresponsive deity.

The reader is put in the position of overhearing this argument, and its gist is encapsulated in the third and fourth lines: "Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must / Disappointment all I endeavour end?" In the end-rhyme for the fourth line Hopkins ingeniously contracts the word "endeavour" into the word "end," enacting in language the curtailment the speaker feels and foreshadowing the sonnet's repressed main subject, his inability to write. He follows this question with another more pointed one, a grievance even more personal, essentially accusing God of opposing and obstructing him in his desires. "Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend, / How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost / Defeat, thwart me?" The change in address from "sir" to "thou my friend" has a tinge of sarcasm, since God seems to treat the supplicant just as badly as an enemy would. A quiet alliteration ("*d*ost / *D*efeat") crosses enjambed lines, as does another two lines later, with "*s*pend / *S*ir."

The poem dramatizes this argument two more times, first to end the octave and then to begin the sestet. The speaker bitterly observes that those who indulge their desires for alcohol and sex — "the sots and thralls of lust" — flourish more than he does, with his vow of sterile celibacy. This version of the poem's complaint uses a temporal comparison to make its point; that is, the debauched "Do in spare hours more thrive" than "I that spend, / Sir, life upon thy cause." Notice how he uses "spend instead of give," emphasizing the price of his enormous sacrifice.

Hopkins dramatically begins the volta, or structural turn in the poem, with a sudden halt halfway through the ninth line, a Miltonic move. Reminiscent of Keats's "see, here it is" in "This living hand," the poem comes alive with imperatives — *See, look* — indicating that this iteration of the argument will be more active, visual, concrete in its desire to engage the addressee. It is spring and everything bursts to life in the natural world. The very sound and rhythm of the poem become more frenzied and excited:

See, banks and brakes
Now, leavèd how thick! lacèd they are again
With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes
Them; birds build —

So too Hopkins repetitively layers sounds and dislocates the syntax — "*leavèd* how thick! *lacèd* they" — to mimic the fecundity of nature, the aromatic herbs, the nesting birds. This sonorous and lively visual description culminates in the twelfth line with the dash after "birds build." Both words are stressed; both share *b* and *d* sounds. After the dash the argument comes to its final point of comparison, wherein the fecundity of nature mocks the speaker's sterility: "— but not I build; no, but strain." Stresses on most of these crucial one-syllable words create an emphatic rhythm that enacts the very strain he is feeling. Repeated *n* sounds in "not," "no," and "strain" stress his fruitless efforts.

This section of the poem recalls Coleridge's precursor sonnet, "Work without Hope," which the Romantic poet composed on February 21, 1825. It begins:

All Nature seems at work. Slugs leave their lair —
The bees are stirring — birds are on the wing —
And Winter slumbering in the open air,
Wears on his smiling face a dream of Spring!
And I the while, the sole unbusy thing,
Nor honey make, nor pair, nor build, nor sing.

Both Coleridge and Hopkins contrast the busy productivity of nature, specifically in spring, with the "unbusy" nonproductivity of the poet. Unlike the birds, Hopkins's frustrated speaker does not "pair," "build," or "sing." Indeed, the entire poem has a feeling of sexual impotence and confusion, of thwarted desire. In the penultimate line, Hopkins employs the memorable phrase "Time's eunuch," which he borrowed from a letter that he had earlier sent to Bridges: "It kills me to be time's eunuch and never to beget." The *n* sounds in the words "not," "no," and "strain" repeat in "eunuch," as well as in the desolate "*not* breed *one* work that wakes." The fact that the speaker does "not breed" reemphasizes his lack of fecundity. The alliterative *w* sounds of "*one work* that *wakes*" create a sonic echoing that drives this frustration home.

Hopkins's last line is a prayer unto itself. It is also a single sentence, consisting of ten one-syllable words, with six stresses for emphasis: "Míne, O thou lórd of lífe, sénd my róots ráin." This petition begins with the self-asserting "Mine," a contrast to the "sir" and "thou" of previous appeals, and the phrase "my roots" near the end of the line echoes "Mine." The speaker here is claiming the Lord as his intimate. The pattern of *n* sounds starts with the word "not," continues in "mine" and "send," and completes the poem in "rain." The alliteration of "roots" and "rain" links these two key words in the poem's final plea. Like a plant that needs water to grow, the speaker needs, and begs God for, the life-giving grace of inspiration.

Ironically, failed inspiration, this sonnet's repressed complaint and true subject, became the inspiration for one of Hopkins's most enduring works, his last great poem, a skillfully argued and movingly written late devotional.