

“The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point” (1846; 1848, 1850)
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

I.

I stand on the mark beside the shore
Of the first white pilgrim's bended knee,
Where exile turned to ancestor,
And God was thanked for liberty.
I have run through the night, my skin is as dark,
I bend my knee down on this mark...
I look on the sky and the sea.

II.

O pilgrim-souls, I speak to you!
I see you come out proud and slow
From the land of the spirits pale as dew. . .
And round me and round me ye go!
O pilgrims, I have gasped and run
All night long from the whips of one
Who in your names works sin and woe.

III.

And thus I thought that I would come
And kneel here where I knelt before,
And feel your souls around me hum
In undertone to the ocean's roar;
And lift my black face, my black hand,
Here, in your names, to curse this land
Ye blessed in freedom's evermore.

IV.

I am black, I am black;
And yet God made me, they say.
But if He did so, smiling back
He must have cast His work away
Under the feet of His white creatures,
With a look of scorn,--that the dusky features
Might be trodden again to clay.

V.

And yet He has made dark things
To be glad and merry as light.
There's a little dark bird sits and sings;
There's a dark stream ripples out of sight;
And the dark frogs chant in the safe morass,
And the sweetest stars are made to pass
O'er the face of the darkest night.

VI.

But we who are dark, we are dark!
Ah, God, we have no stars!
About our souls in care and cark
Our blackness shuts like prison bars:
The poor souls crouch so far behind,
That never a comfort can they find
By reaching through the prison-bars.

VII.

Indeed, we live beneath the sky,...
That great smooth Hand of God, stretched out
On all His children fatherly,
To bless them from the fear and doubt,
Which would be, if, from this low place,
All opened straight up to His face
Into the grand eternity.

VIII.

And still God's sunshine and His frost,
They make us hot, they make us cold,
As if we were not black and lost:
And the beasts and birds, in wood and fold,
Do fear and take us for very men!
Could the weep-poor-will or the cat of the glen
Look into my eyes and be bold?

IX.

I am black, I am black!--
But, once, I laughed in girlish glee;
For one of my colour stood in the track
Where the drivers drove, and looked at me--
And tender and full was the look he gave:
Could a slave look so at another slave?--
I look at the sky and the sea.

X.

And from that hour our spirits grew
As free as if unsold, unbought:
Oh, strong enough, since we were two
To conquer the world, we thought!
The drivers drove us day by day;
We did not mind, we went one way,
And no better a liberty sought.

XI.

In the sunny ground between the canes,
He said "I love you" as he passed:
When the shingle-roof rang sharp with the rains,
I heard how he vowed it fast:
While others shook, he smiled in the hut
As he carved me a bowl of the cocoa-nut,
Through the roar of the hurricanes.

XII.

I sang his name instead of a song;
Over and over I sang his name--
Upward and downward I drew it along
My various notes; the same, the same!
I sang it low, that the slave-girls near
Might never guess from aught they could hear,
It was only a name.

XIII.

I look on the sky and the sea--
We were two to love, and two to pray,--
Yes, two, O God, who cried to Thee,
Though nothing didst Thou say.
Coldly Thou sat'st behind the sun!
And now I cry who am but one,
How wilt Thou speak to-day?--

XIV.

We were black, we were black!
We had no claim to love and bliss:
What marvel, if each turned to lack?
They wrung my cold hands out of his,--
They dragged him... where?... I crawled to touch
His blood's mark in the dust!... not much,
Ye pilgrim-souls,... though plain as this!

XV.

Wrong, followed by a deeper wrong!
Mere grief's too good for such as I.
So the white men brought the shame ere long
To strangle the sob of my agony.
They would not leave me for my dull
Wet eyes!--it was too merciful
To let me weep pure tears and die.

XVI.

I am black, I am black!--
I wore a child upon my breast
An amulet that hung too slack,
And, in my unrest, could not rest:
Thus we went moaning, child and mother,
One to another, one to another,
Until all ended for the best:

XVII.

For hark ! I will tell you low... Iow...
I am black, you see,--
And the babe who lay on my bosom so,
Was far too white... too white for me;
As white as the ladies who scorned to pray
Beside me at church but yesterday;
Though my tears had washed a place for my knee.

XVIII.

My own, own child! I could not bear
To look in his face, it was so white.
I covered him up with a kerchief there;
I covered his face in close and tight:
And he moaned and struggled, as well might be,
For the white child wanted his liberty--
Ha, ha! he wanted his master right.

XIX.

He moaned and beat with his head and feet,
His little feet that never grew--
He struck them out, as it was meet,
Against my heart to break it through.
I might have sung and made him mild--
But I dared not sing to the white-faced child
The only song I knew.

XX.

I pulled the kerchief very close:
He could not see the sun, I swear,
More, then, alive, than now he does
From between the roots of the mango... where
... I know where. Close! a child and mother
Do wrong to look at one another,
When one is black and one is fair.

XXI.

Why, in that single glance I had
Of my child's face,... I tell you all,
I saw a look that made me mad...
The master's look, that used to fall
On my soul like his lash... or worse!
And so, to save it from my curse,
I twisted it round in my shawl.

XXII.

And he moaned and trembled from foot to head,
He shivered from head to foot;
Till, after a time, he lay instead
Too suddenly still and mute.
I felt, beside, a stiffening cold,...
I dared to lift up just a fold...
As in lifting a leaf of the mango-fruit.

XXIII.

But my fruit... ha, ha!--there, had been
(I laugh to think on't at this hour!...)
Your fine white angels, who have seen
Nearest the secret of God's power,...
And plucked my fruit to make them wine,
And sucked the soul of that child of mine,
As the humming-bird sucks the soul of the flower.

XXIV.

Ha, ha, for the trick of the angels white!
They freed the white child's spirit so.
I said not a word, but, day and night,
I carried the body to and fro;
And it lay on my heart like a stone... as chill.
--The sun may shine out as much as he will:
I am cold, though it happened a month ago.

XXV.

From the white man's house, and the black man's hut,
I carried the little body on,
The forest's arms did round us shut,
And silence through the trees did run:
They asked no question as I went,--
They stood too high for astonishment,--
They could see God sit on His throne.

XXVI.

My little body, kerchiefed fast,
I bore it on through the forest... on:
And when I felt it was tired at last,
I scooped a hole beneath the moon.
Through the forest-tops the angels far,
With a white sharp finger from every star,
Did point and mock at what was done.

XXVII.

Yet when it was all done aright,...
Earth, 'twixt me and my baby, strewed,
All, changed to black earth,... nothing white,...
A dark child in the dark,--ensued
Some comfort, and my heart grew young:
I sate down smiling there and sung
The song I learnt in my maidenhood.

XXVIII.

And thus we two were reconciled,
The white child and black mother, thus:
For, as I sang it, soft and wild
The same song, more melodious,
Rose from the grave whereon I sate!
It was the dead child singing that,
To join the souls of both of us.

XXIX.

I look on the sea and the sky!
Where the pilgrims' ships first anchored lay,
The free sun rideth gloriously;
But the pilgrim-ghosts have slid away
Through the earliest streaks of the morn.
My face is black, but it glares with a scorn
Which they dare not meet by day.

XXX.

Ah!--in their 'stead, their hunter sons!
Ah, ah! they are on me--they hunt in a ring--
Keep off! I brave you all at once--
I throw off your eyes like snakes that sting!
You have killed the black eagle at nest, I think:
Did you never stand still in your triumph, and shrink
From the stroke of her wounded wing?

XXXI.

(Man, drop that stone you dared to lift!--)
I wish you, who stand there five a-breast,
Each, for his own wife's joy and gift,
A little corpse as safely at rest
As mine in the mangos!--Yes, but she
May keep live babies on her knee,
And sing the song she liketh best.

XXXII.

I am not mad: I am black.
I see you staring in my face--
I know you, staring, shrinking back--
Ye are born of the Washington-race:
And this land is the free America:
And this mark on my wrist... (I prove what I say)
Ropes tied me up here to the flogging-place.

XXXIII.

You think I shrieked then? Not a sound!
I hung, as a gourd hangs in the sun.
I only cursed them all around,
As softly as I might have done
My very own child!--From these sands
Up to the mountains, lift your hands,
O slaves, and end what I begun!

XXXIV.

Whips, curses; these must answer those!
For in this UNION, you have set
Two kinds of men in adverse rows,
Each loathing each: and all forget
The seven wounds in Christ's body fair;
While HE sees gaping everywhere
Our countless wounds that pay no debt.

XXXV.

Our wounds are different. Your white men
Are, after all, not gods indeed,
Nor able to make Christs again
Do good with bleeding. We who bleed...
(Stand off!) we help not in our loss!
We are too heavy for our cross,
And fall and crush you and your seed.

XXXVI.

I fall, I swoon! I look at the sky:
The clouds are breaking on my brain;
I am floated along, as if I should die
Of liberty's exquisite pain--
In the name of the white child, waiting for me
In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree,
White men, I leave you all curse-free
In my broken heart's disdain!