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ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

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How Do I Love Thee?

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.  
I love thee to the level of every day's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.  
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;  
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise;  
I love thee with the passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints—I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears of all my life!—and, if God choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death.

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JAROLD RAMSEY

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The Tally Stick

Here from the start, from our first of days, look:  
I have carved our lives in secret on this stick  
of mountain mahogany the length of your arms  
outstretched, the wood clear red, so hard and rare.  
It is time to touch and handle what we know we share.

Near the butt, this intricate notch where the grains  
converge and join: it is our wedding.  
I can read it through with a thumb and tell you now  
who danced, who made up the songs, who meant us joy.  
These little arrowheads along the grain,  
they are the births of our children. See,  
they make a kind of design with these heavy crosses,  
the deaths of our parents, the loss of friends.

Over it all as it goes, of course, I  
have chiseled Events, History—random  
hashmarks cut against the swirling grain.  
See, here is the Year the World Went Wrong,  
we thought, and here the days the Great Men fell.  
The lengthening runes of our lives run through it all.

See, our tally stick is whittled nearly end to end;  
delicate as scrimshaw, it would not bear you up.  
Regrets have polished it, hand over hand.  
Yet let us take it up, and as our fingers  
like children leading on a trail cry back  
our unforgotten wonders, sign after sign,  
we will talk softly as of ordinary matters,  
and in one another's blameless eyes go blind.

"How Do I Love Thee?" + "The Tally Stick"

The first poem is direct, but fairly abstract. It lists several ways in which the poet feels love and connects them to some noble ideas of higher obligations—to justice (line 7), for example, and to spiritual aspiration (lines 2–4). It suggests a wide range of things that love can mean and notices a variety of emotions. It is an ardent statement of feeling and asserts a permanence that will extend even beyond death. It contains admirable thoughts and memorable phrases that many lovers would like to hear said to themselves. What it does not do is say very much about what the relationship between the two lovers is like on an everyday basis, what experiences they have had together, what distinguishes their relationship from that of other devoted or ideal lovers. Its appeal is to our general sense of what love is like and how intense feelings can be; it does not offer everyday details. Love may differ from person to person and even from moment to moment, and so can poems about love.

"The Tally Stick" is much more concrete. The whole poem concentrates on a single object that, like "How Do I Love Thee?", "counts" or "tallies" the ways in which this couple love one another. This stick stands for their love and becomes a kind of physical reminder of it: its natural features—the notches and arrowheads and cross marks (lines 6, 10, and 12) along with the marks carved on it (lines 15–16, 20–21)—indicate events in the story of the relationship. (We could say that the stick symbolizes their love; later on, we will look at a number of terms like this that can be used to make it easier to talk about some aspects of poems, but for now it is enough to notice that the stick serves the lovers as a reminder of some specific details of their love.) It is a special kind of reminder to them because its language is "secret" (line 2), something they can share privately (except that we as readers of the poem are sort of looking over their shoulders, not intruding but sharing their secret). The poet interprets the particular features of the stick as standing for particular events—their wedding and the births of their children, for example—and carves marks into it as reminders of other events (lines 15ff.). The stick itself becomes a very personal object, and in the last stanza of the poem it is as if we watch the lovers touching the stick together and reminiscing over it, gradually dissolving into their emotions and each other as they recall the "unforgotten wonders" (line 25) of their lives together.

EZRA POUND

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The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter

(after Rihaku<sup>1</sup>)

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead  
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.  
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,  
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.  
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:  
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.  
I never laughed, being bashful.  
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.  
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,  
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours  
For ever and for ever and for ever.  
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,  
You went into far Ku-to-yen, by river of swirling eddies,  
And you have been gone five months.  
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.  
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,  
Too deep to clear them away!  
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.  
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August  
Over the grass in the West garden;  
They hurt me. I grow older,  
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,  
Please let me know beforehand,  
And I will come out to meet you  
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

1. The Japanese name for Li Po, an 8th-century Chinese poet. Pound's poem is a loose paraphrase of Li Po's.

*"The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter"*

The "letter" tells us only a few facts about the nameless merchant's wife: that she is about sixteen and a half years old, that she married at fourteen and fell in love with her husband a year later, that she is now very lonely. And about their relationship we know only that they were childhood playmates in a small Chinese village, that their marriage originally was not a matter of personal choice, and that the husband unwillingly went away on a long journey five months ago. But the words tell us a great deal about how the young wife feels, and the simplicity of her language suggests her sincere and deep longing. The daily noises she hears seem "sorrowful" (line 18), and she worries about the dangers of the far-away place where her husband is, thinking of it in terms of its perilous "river of swirling eddies" (line 16). She thinks of how moss has grown up over the unused gate, and more time seems to her to have passed than actually has (lines 22-25). Nostalgically she remembers their innocent childhood, when they played together without deeper love or commitment (lines 1-6), and contrasts that with her later satisfaction in their love (lines 11-14) and with her present anxiety, loneliness, and desire. We do not need to know the details of the geography of the river Kiang or how far Cho-fu-Sa is to sense that her wish to see him is very strong, that her desire is powerful enough to make her venture beyond the ordinary geographical bounds of her existence so that their reunion will come sooner. The closest she comes to a direct statement about her love is her statement that she desired that her dust be mingled with his "For ever and for ever and for ever" (lines 12-13). But her single-minded vision of the world, her perception of even the beauty of nature as only a record of her husband's absence and the passage of time, and her plain, apparently uncalculated language about her rejection of other suitors and her shutting out of the rest of the world all show her to be committed, desirous, nearly desperate for his presence. In a different sense, she has also counted the ways that she loves her man.

ADRIENNE RICH

Living in Sin

She had thought the studio would keep itself,  
no dust upon the furniture of love.  
Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,  
the panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,  
a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat  
stalking the picturesque amusing mouse  
had risen at his urging.  
Not that at five each separate stair would writhe  
under the milkman's tramp; that morning light  
so coldly would delineate the scraps  
of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;  
that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers  
a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own—  
envoy from some village in the moldings . . .  
Meanwhile, he, with a yawn,  
sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,  
declared it out of tune, shrugged at the mirror,  
rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;  
while she, jeered by the minor demons,  
pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found  
a towel to dust the table-top,  
and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.  
By evening she was back in love again,  
though not so wholly but throughout the night  
she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming  
like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

*"Living in Sin"*

Here the presence of the lover has just as insistent an effect as absence to "The River-Merchant's Wife." This poem contrasts the expectations of the central figure in the poem (a woman who is living "in sin" with her lover) with actual experience—what her days and nights now are actually like. The high expectations of romance and the old idealized fantasies about living together are set against grimy, cramped, and noisy realities: accumulating dust in the small apartment ("studio," line 1), noisy faucets (line 3), intrusive insects (lines 12–14), dirty windows (line 4), and the clutter of leftover food and empty bottles (lines 9–11). The earlier sense of her lover as a romantic figure in a painting (lines 4–7) disappears into his presence as an unshaven, yawning, impatient man who leaves an unmade bed to seek cigarettes, and the woman finds herself trying to recreate some sense of order, cleanliness, and alertness. Ultimately there is here too some small affirmation of the pleasures of affection and illusion, but the squeaking stairs of intrusion are as "relentless" as mornings and milkmen, and the poem insists on the everyday disillusionments of love and living.

BEN JONSON

On My First Son

Farewell, thou child of my right hand,<sup>2</sup> and joy;  
My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy:  
Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,  
Exacted by thy fate, on the just<sup>3</sup> day.  
O could I lose all father now! for why  
Will man lament the state he should envy,  
To have so soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage,  
And, if no other misery, yet age?  
Rest in soft peace, and asked, say, "Here doth lie  
Ben Jonson his<sup>4</sup> best piece of poetry."  
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such  
As what he loves may never like too much.

2. A literal translation of the son's name, Benjamin.
3. Exact; the son died on his seventh birthday, in 1603.
4. Ben Jonson's (a common Renaissance form of the possessive).

*"On My First Son"*

This poem's attempts to rationalize the boy's death are quite conventional. Although the father tries to be comforted by pious thoughts, his feelings keep showing through. The poem's beginning—with its formal "farewell" and the rather distant-sounding address to the dead boy ("child of my right hand")—cannot be sustained for long; both of the first two lines end with bursts of emotion. It is as if the father is trying to explain the death to himself and to keep his emotions under control, but cannot quite manage it. Even the punctuation suggests the way his feelings compete with conventional attempts to put the death into some sort of perspective that will soften the grief, and the comma near the end of each of the first two lines marks a pause that cannot quite hold back the overflowing emotion. But finally the only "idea" that the poem supports is that the father wishes he did not feel so intensely; in the fifth line he fairly blurts that he wishes he could lose his fatherly emotions, and in the final lines he resolves never again to "like" so much that he can be this deeply hurt. Philosophy and religion offer their useful counsels in this poem, but they prove far less powerful than feeling. Rather than drawing some kind of moral about what death means, the poem presents the actuality of feeling as inevitable and nearly all-consuming.

The Vacuum

The house is so quiet now  
The vacuum cleaner sulks in the corner closet,  
Its bag limp as a stopped lung, its mouth  
Grinning into the floor, maybe at my  
Slovenly life, my dog-dead youth.

I've lived this way long enough,  
But when my old woman died her soul  
Went into that vacuum cleaner, and I can't bear  
To see the bag swell like a belly, eating the dust  
And the woolen mice, and begin to howl

Because there is old filth everywhere  
She used to crawl, in the corner and under the stair.  
I know now how life is cheap as dirt,  
And still the hungry, angry heart  
Hangs on and howls, biting at air.

*"The Vacuum"*

The poem is about a vacuum in the husband's life, but the title refers most obviously to the vacuum cleaner that, like the tally stick we looked at earlier, seems to stand for many of the things that were once important in their life together. The cleaner is a reminder of the dead wife ("my old woman," line 7) because of her devotion to cleanliness. But to the surviving husband buried in the filth of his life it seems as if the machine has become almost human, a kind of ghost of her: it "sulks" (line 2), it has lungs and a mouth (line 3), and it seems to grin, making fun of what has become of him. He "can't bear" (line 8) to see it in action because it then seems too much alive, too much a reminder of her life. The poem records his paralysis, his inability to do more than discover that life is "cheap as dirt" without her ordering and cleansing presence for him. At the end it is *his* angry heart that acts like the haunting machine, howling and biting at air as if he has merged with her spirit and the physical object that memorializes her. This poem puts a strong emphasis on the stillness of death and the way it makes things seem to stop; it captures in words the hurt, the anger, the inability to understand, the vacuum that remains when a loved one dies and leaves a vacant space. But here we do not see the body or hear a direct good-bye to the dead person; rather we encounter the feeling that lingers and won't go away, recalled through memory by an especially significant object, a mere thing but one that has been personalized to the point of becoming nearly human in itself. (The event described here is, by the way, fictional; the poet's wife did not in fact die. Like a dramatist or writer of fiction, the poet may simply *imagine* an event in order to analyze and articulate how such an event might feel in certain circumstances.)