

John Davidson (1857-1909)

3 *A Ballad of a Poet Born*

Upon a ruddy ember eve
They feasted in the hall;
By custom bound they handed round
The harp to each and all.

While still the smoky rafters rang 5
With burdens loud and long,
There rose a blushing youth and sang
A wonderful new song.

For he had lounged among the flowers,
Beside the mountain streams, 10
Deep-dyeing all the rosy hours
With rosier waking dreams.

And lurked at night in seaside caves,
Or rowed o'er harbour-bars,
Companion of the winds and waves 15
Companion of the stars.

Therefore as searching sweet as musk
The words were and the tune,
The while he sang of dawn and dusk,
Of midnight and of noon. 20

'No longer shall more gifted lands
Cast hither words of scorn.
Behold!' they said, and clapped their hands,
'We have a poet born!

'Go forth with harp and scrip,' they cried, 25
'And sing by land and sea,
In lanes and streets; the world is wide
For errant minstrelsy.

'Accept their lot in every clime
Who win the poet's name, 30
Homeless and poor, but rich in rhyme,
And glittering with fame.'

'Forth would I go without all fear,
Gladly to meet my fate;
But in the house my mother dear 35
And my three sisters wait.

'My father's dead; my mother's eyes
Are overcast with woe;
I hear my sisters' hungry cries;
I dare not rise and go.' 40

They jeered him for a craven lout:
'What care is this of thine?
Thou speakest now, without a doubt,
Like some false Philistine!

'No poet can to others give: 45
Leave folk to starve alone.'
He said, 'I dare not while I live;
She has no other son.'

His sweetheart whispered in his ear
'And me, love! what of me?' 50
He shook her off. 'Of you, enough,'
He sighed; 'I set you free.'

He herded sheep, he herded kine;
He rose before the day;
He ploughed and sowed and reaped and mowed, 55
To keep the wolf at bay.

His harp, it rusted on the wall;
His hands, his heart, grew hard;
The wine of life was turned to gall
Because the song was marred. 60

So stubborn the accursed soil,

So poor his pastoral lore,
With all his weary task and toil
The wolf still pawed the door.

His mother died uncomforted; 65
His sisters, one by one,
By beggars born were wooed and wed,
And all his hopes undone.

Haggard and worn he took his harp;
The sun shone broad and low: 70
'At dawn of night there shall be light;
I now may rise and go.'

As he went o'er the plain he met
The sweetheart of his youth:
'Whither away at close of day? 75
Now answer me in sooth.'

'My kin have left me; it is time
To win the poet's name;
Homeless and poor, but rich in rhyme,
I go to conquer fame.' 80

'Oh, once you throned me in your heart
All other maids above;
Sing to me here, before we part,
Your sweetest song of love.'

He said, 'I'll play and sing a lay 85
The sweetest ever sung.'
Then fumbled with his knotted hands
The rusty strings among.

His quivering lips gave forth no song,
His harp no silver sound; 90
Deep like a boy he blushed, and long
He looked upon the ground.

He gnashed his teeth: 'Hell has begun,'
He thought; 'I feel its blaze.'

With that he faced the setting sun, 95
And then the woman's gaze.

'We two,' she said, 'must never part
Till one shall reach death's goal.'
Her burning tears blistered his heart;
Her pity flayed his soul. 100

'Sweetheart,' she pled, 'we can unite
Life's torn and ravelled weft;
We yet may know love's deep delight:
I have some beauty left.'

'But I am old—half dead; alack! 105
I know the double loss
Of song and love!' He warned her back,
And broke his harp across.

She stretched her arms: her pleading eyes,
Her pleading blush were vain; 110
He fled towards the sunset skies
Across the shadowed plain.

For years he wandered far and near,
And begged in silence sad;
The children shrank from him in fear; 115
The people called him mad.

Upon a ruddy ember eve
They feasted in the hall:
The old broken man, with no one's leave,
Sat down among them all. 120

And while the swarthy rafters rang
With antique praise of wine,
There rose a conscious youth and sang
A ditty new and fine.

Of Fate's mills, and the human grist 125
They grind at, was his song;
He cursed the canting moralist

Who measures right and wrong.

‘The earth, a flying tumour, wends
Through space all blotched and blown 130
With suns and worlds, with odds and ends
Of systems seamed and sewn;

‘Beneath the sun it froths like yeast;
Its fiery essence flares;
It festers into man and beast; 135
It throbs with flowers and tares.

‘Behold! ’tis but a heap of dust,
Kneaded by fire and flood;
While hunger fierce, and fiercer lust,
Drench it with tears and blood. 140

‘Yet why seek after some new birth?
For surely, late or soon,
This ague-fit we call the earth
Shall be a corpse-cold moon.

‘Why need we, lacking help and hope, 145
By fears and fancies tossed,
Vainly debate with ruthless Fate,
Fighting a battle lost?

‘Fill high the bowl! We are the scum
Of matter; fill the bowl; 150
Drink scathe to him, and death to him,
Who dreams he has a soul.’

They clinked their cans and roared applause;
The singer swelled with pride.
‘You sneer and carp! Give me the harp,’ 155
The old man, trembling, cried.

They laughed and wondered, and grew still,
To see one so aghast
Smiting the chords; but all his skill
Came back to him at last. 160

And lo, as searching-sweet as musk
The words were and the tune,
The while he sang of dawn and dusk,
Of midnight and of noon;

Of heaven and hell, of times and tides; 165
Of wintry winds that blow,
Of spring that haunts the world and hides
Her flowers among the snow;

Of summer, rustling green and glad,
With blossoms purpled fair; 170
Of autumn's wine-stained mouth and sad,
Wan eyes, and golden hair;

Of Love, of Love, the wild sweet scent
Of flowers, and words, and lives,
And loyal Nature's urgent bent 175
Whereby the world survives;

Of magic Love that opes the ports
Of sense and soul, that saith
The moonlight's meaning, and extorts
The fealty of Death. 180

He sang of peace and work that bless
The simple and the sage;
He sang of hope and happiness,
He sang the Golden Age.

And the shamed listeners knew the spell 185
That still enchants the years,
When the world's commonplaces fell
In music on their ears.

'Go, bring a wreath of glossy bay
To place upon his head! 190
A poet born!' Woe worth the day,
They crowned a poet dead!

Dead, while upon the pulsing string
Still beat his early rhyme —
The song the poet born shall sing 195
Until the end of Time!

1895

(From *The Poems of John Davidson*. 2 vols. Ed. Andrew
Turnbull. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic P, 1973)