

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

22 *The Revisitation*

As I lay awake at night-time
In an ancient country barrack known to ancient cannoneers,
And recalled the hopes that heralded each seeming brave and bright time
Of my primal purple years,

Much it haunted me that, nigh there, 5
I had borne my bitterest loss — when One who went, came not again;
In a joyless hour of discord, in a joyless-hued July there —
A July just such as then.

And as thus I brooded longer,
With my faint eyes on the feeble square of wan-lit window frame, 10
A quick conviction sprung within me, grew, and grew yet stronger
That the month-night was the same,

Too, as that which saw her leave me
On the rugged ridge of Waterstone, the peewits plaining round;
And a lapsing twenty years had ruled that — as it were to grieve me — 15
I should near the once-loved ground.

Though but now a war-worn stranger
Chance had quartered here, I rose up and descended to the yard.
All was soundless, save the troopers' horses tossing at the manger,
And the sentry keeping guard. 20

Through the gateway I betook me
Down the High Street and beyond the lamps, across the battered bridge,
Till the country darkness clasped me and the friendly shine forsook me,
And I bore towards the Ridge,

With a dim unowned emotion 25
Saying softly: "Small my reason, now at midnight, to be here
Yet a sleepless swain of fifty with a brief romantic notion
May retrace a track so dear."

Thus I walked with thoughts half-uttered
Up the lane I knew so well, the grey, gaunt, lonely Lane of Slyre; 30
And at whiles behind me, far at sea, a sullen thunder muttered
As I mounted high and higher.

Till, the upper roadway quitting,
I adventured on the open drouthy downland thinly grassed,
While the spry white scuts of conies flashed before me, earthward flitting, 35
And an arid wind went past.

Round about me bulged the barrows
As before, in antique silence — immemorial funeral piles —
Where the sleek herds trampled daily the remains of flint-tipt arrows
Mid the thyme and chamomiles; 40

And the Sarsen stone there, dateless,
On whose breast we had sat and told the zephyrs many a tender vow,
Held the heat of yester sun, as sank thereon one fated mateless
From those far fond hours till now.

Maybe flustered by my presence 45
Rose the peewits, just as all those years back, wailing soft and loud,
And revealing their pale pinions like a fitful phosphorescence
Up against the cope of cloud,

Where their dolesome exclamations
Seemed the voicings of the self-same throats I had heard when life was green, 50
Though since that day uncounted frail forgotten generations
Of their kind had flecked the scene. —

And so, living long and longer
In a past that lived no more, my eyes discerned there, suddenly,
That a figure broke the skyline — first in vague contour, then stronger, 55
And was crossing near to me.

Some long-missed familiar gesture,
Something wonted, struck me in the figure's pause to list and heed,
Till I fancied from its handling of its loosely wrapping vesture
That it might be She indeed. 60

'Twas not reasonless: below there

In the vale, had been her home; the nook might hold her even yet,
And the downlands were her father's fief; she still might come and go there; —
So I rose, and said, "Agnette!"

With a little leap, half-frightened, 65
She withdrew some steps; then letting intuition smother fear
In a place so long-accustomed, and as one whom thought enlightened,
She replied: "What — *that* voice? — here!"

"Yes, Agnette! — And did the occasion 70
Of our marching hither make you think I *might* walk where we two —"
"O, I often come," she murmured with a moment's coy evasion,
"(Tis not far), — and — think of you."

Then I took her hand, and led her
To the ancient people's stone whereon I had sat. There now sat we;
And together talked, until the first reluctant shyness fled her, 75
And she spoke confidingly.

"It is *just* as ere we parted!"
Said she, brimming high with joy. — "And when, then, came you here, and why?"
"— Dear, I could not sleep for thinking of our trystings when twin-hearted."
She responded, "Nor could I. 80

"There are few things I would rather
Than be wandering at this spirit-hour — lone-lived, my kindred dead —
On this wold of well-known feature I inherit from my father:
Night or day, I have no dread

"O I wonder, wonder whether 85
Any heartstring bore a signal-thrill between us twain or no? —
Some such influence can, at times, they say, draw severed souls together."
I said, "Dear, we'll dream it so."

Each one's hand the other's grasping,
And a mutual forgiveness won, we sank to silent thought, 90
A large content in us that seemed our rended lives reclasping,
And contracting years to nought.

Till I, maybe overweary
From the lateness, and a wayfaring so full of strain and stress

For one no longer buoyant, to a peak so steep and eery, 95
Sank to slow unconsciousness

How long I slept I knew not,
But the brief warm summer night had slid when, to my swift surprise,
A red upedging sun, of glory chambered mortals view not,
Was blazing on my eyes, 100

From the Milton Woods to Dole-Hill
All the spacious landscape lighting, and around about my feet
Flinging tall thin tapering shadows from the meanest mound and mole-hill,
And on trails the ewes had beat.

She was sitting still beside me, 105
Dozing likewise; and I turned to her, to take her hanging hand;
When, the more regarding, that which like a spectre shook and tried me
In her image then I scanned;

That which Time's transforming chisel
Had been tooling night and day for twenty years, and tooled too well, 110
In its rendering of crease where curve was, where was raven, grizzle —
Pits, where peonies once did dwell.

She had wakened, and perceiving
(I surmise) my sigh and shock, my quite involuntary dismay,
Up she started, and — her wasted figure all throughout it heaving — 115
Said, "Ah, yes: I am *thus* by day!

"Can you really wince and wonder
That the sunlight should reveal you such a thing of skin and bone,
As if unaware a Death's-head must of need lie not far under
Flesh whose years out-count your own? 120

"Yes: that movement was a warning
Of the worth of man's devotion! — Yes, Sir, I am *old*," said she,
"And the thing which should increase love turns it quickly into scorning —
And your new-won heart from me!"

Then she went, ere I could call her, 125
With the too proud temper ruling that had parted us before,
And I saw her form descend the slopes, and smaller grow and smaller,

Till I caught its course no more

True; I might have dogged her downward;
— But it *may* be (though I know not) that this trick on us of Time 130
Disconcerted and confused me. — Soon I bent my footsteps townward,
Like to one who had watched a crime.

Well I knew my native weakness,
Well I know it still. I cherished her reproach like physic-wine,
For I saw in that emaciate shape of bitterness and bleakness 135
A nobler soul than mine.

Did I not return, then, ever? —
Did we meet again? — mend all? — Alas, what greyhead perseveres! —
Soon I got the Route elsewhither. — Since that hour I have seen her never:
Love is lame at fifty years. 140

1904

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