

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82)

5 *My Sister's Sleep*

She fell asleep on Christmas Eve.  
At length the long-ungranted shade  
Of weary eyelids overweigh'd  
The pain nought else might yet relieve.

Our mother, who had leaned all da 5  
Over the bed from chime to chime,  
Then raised herself for the first time,  
And as she sat her down, did pray.

Her little work-table was spread  
With work to finish. For the glare 10  
Made by her candle, she had care  
To work some distance from the bed.

Without, there was a cold moon up,  
Of winter radiance sheer and thin;  
The hollow halo it was in 15  
Was like an icy crystal cup.

Through the small room, with subtle sound  
Of flame, by vents the fireshine drove  
And reddened. In its dim alcove  
The mirror shed a clearness round. 20

I had been sitting up some nights,  
And my tired mind felt weak and blank;  
Like a sharp strengthening wine it drank  
The stillness and the broken lights.

Twelve struck. That sound, by dwindling years 25

Heard in each hour, crept off; and then  
The ruffled silence spread again,  
Like water that a pebble stirs.

Our mother rose from where she sat:  
Her needles, as she laid them down, 30  
Met lightly, and her silken gown  
Settled: no other noise than that.

“Glory unto the Newly Born!”  
So, as said angels, she did say;  
Because we were in Christmas Day, 35  
Though it would still be long till morn.

Just then in the room over us  
There was a pushing back of chairs,  
As some who had sat unawares  
So late, now heard the hour, and rose. 40

With anxious softly-stepping haste  
Our mother went where Margaret lay,  
Fearing the sounds o’erhead- should they  
Have broken her long watched-for rest!

She stopped an instant, calm, and turned; 45  
But suddenly turned back again;  
And all her features seemed in pain  
With woe, and her eyes gazed and yearned.

For my part, I but hid my face,  
And held my breath, and spoke no word: 50  
There was none spoken; but I heard  
The silence for a little space.

Our mother bowed herself and wept:  
And both my arms fell, and I said,  
“God knows I knew that she was dead.” 55

And there, all white, my sister slept.

Then kneeling, upon Christmas morn

A little after twelve o'clock,

We said, ere the first quarter struck,

“Christ’s blessing on the newly born!”

60

1847

(From *The Collective Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Ed.  
with Preface and Notes by William M. Rossetti. 2 vols.  
London: Ellis and Elvey, 1890)