

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



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)