

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

4 *Sister Rosa: A Ballad*

I

The death-bell beats! —  
The mountain repeats  
The echoing sound of the knell;  
And the dark Monk now  
Wraps the cowl round his brow, 5  
As he sits in his lonely cell.

II

And the cold hand of death  
Chills his shuddering breath,  
As he lists to the fearful lay  
Which the ghosts of the sky, 10  
As they sweep wildly by,  
Sing to departed day.  
And they sing of the hour  
When the stern fates had power  
To resolve Rosa's form to its clay. 15

III

But that hour is past;  
And that hour was the last  
Of peace to the dark Monk's brain.  
Bitter tears, from his eyes, gushed silent and fast;  
And he strove to suppress them in vain. 20

IV

Then his fair cross of gold he dashed on the floor,  
When the death-knell struck on his ear. —  
'Delight is in store  
For her evermore;  
But for me is fate, horror, and fear.' 25

V

Then his eyes wildly rolled,  
When the death-bell tolled,  
And he raged in terrific woe.  
And he stamped on the ground, —  
But when ceased the sound, 30  
Tears again began to flow.

VI

And the ice of despair  
Chilled the wild throb of care,  
And he sate in mute agony still;  
Till the night-stars shone through the cloudless air, 35  
And the pale moonbeam slept on the hill.

VII

Then he knelt in his cell: —  
And the horrors of hell  
Were delights to his agonized pain,  
And he prayed to God to dissolve the spell, 40  
Which else must for ever remain.

VIII

And in fervent pray'r he knelt on the ground,  
Till the abbey bell struck One:  
His feverish blood ran chill at the sound:  
A voice hollow and horrible murmured around — 45  
'The term of thy penance is done!'

IX

Grew dark the night;  
The moonbeam bright  
Waxed faint on the mountain high;  
And, from the black hill, 50  
Went a voice cold and still, —  
'Monk! thou art free to die.'

X

Then he rose on his feet,  
And his heart loud did beat,

And his limbs they were palsied with dread; 55  
    Whilst the grave's clammy dew  
    O'er his pale forehead grew;  
And he shuddered to sleep with the dead.

XI

And the wild midnight storm  
    Raved around his tall form, 60  
As he sought the chapel's gloom:  
    And the sunk grass did sigh  
    To the wind, bleak and high,  
As he searched for the new-made tomb.

XII

And forms, dark and high, 65  
    Seemed around him to fly,  
And mingle their yells with the blast:  
    And on the dark wall  
    Half-seen shadows did fall,  
As enhorrored he onward passed. 70

XIII

And the storm-fiends wild rave  
    O'er the new-made grave,  
And dread shadows linger around.  
    The Monk called on God his soul to save,  
And, in horror, sank on the ground. 75

XIV

Then despair nerved his arm  
    To dispel the charm,  
And he burst Rosa's coffin asunder.  
    And the fierce storm did swell  
    More terrific and fell, 80  
And louder pealed the thunder.

XV

And laughed, in joy, the fiendish throng,  
    Mixed with ghosts of the mouldering dead:

And their grisly wings, as they floated along,  
Whistled in murmurs dread. 85

XVI

And her skeleton form the dead Nun reared  
Which dripped with the chill dew of hell.  
In her half-eaten eyeballs two pale flames appeared,  
And triumphant their gleam on the dark Monk glared,  
As he stood within the cell. 90

XVII

And her lank hand lay on his shuddering brain;  
But each power was nerved by fear. —  
'I never, henceforth, may breathe again;  
Death now ends mine anguished pain. —  
The grave yawns, — we meet there.' 95

XVIII

And her skeleton lungs did utter the sound,  
So deadly, so lone, and so fell,  
That in long vibrations shuddered the ground;  
And as the stern notes floated around,  
A deep groan was answered from hell. 100

1811

(From *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*.  
Ed. Thomas Hutchinson. 1905; Oxford UP, 1934)