

A. C. Swinburne (1837-1909)

4 *The Ballad of Dead Men's Bay*

The sea swings owre the slants of sand,  
All white with winds that drive;  
The sea swirls up to the still dim strand,  
Where nae man comes alive.

At the grey soft edge of the fruitless surf 5  
A light flame sinks and springs;  
At the grey soft rim of the flowerless turf  
A low flame leaps and clings.

What light is this on a sunless shore,  
What gleam on a starless sea? 10  
Was it earth's or hell's waste womb that bore  
Such births as should not be?

As lithe snakes turning, as bright stars burning,  
They bicker and beckon and call;  
As wild waves churning, as wild winds yearning, 15  
They flicker and climb and fall.

A soft strange cry from the landward rings —  
“What ails the sea to shine?”  
A keen sweet note from the spray's rim springs —  
“What fires are these of thine?” 20

A soul am I that was born on earth  
For ae day's waesome span:  
Death bound me fast on the bourn of birth  
Ere I were christened man.

“A light by night, I fleet and fare 25  
Till the day of wrath and woe;  
On the hems of earth and the skirts of air  
Winds hurl me to and fro.”

“O well is thee, though the weird be strange  
That bids thee flit and flee; 30  
For hope is child of the womb of change,  
And hope keeps watch with thee.

“When the years are gone, and the time is come,  
God’s grace may give thee grace;  
And thy soul may sing, though thy soul were dumb, 35  
And shine before God’s face.

“But I, that lighten and revel and roll  
With the foam of the plunging sea,  
No sign is mine of a breathing soul  
That God should pity me. 40

“Nor death, nor heaven, nor hell, nor birth  
Hath part in me nor mine:  
Strong lords are these of the living earth  
And loveless lords of thine.

“But I that know nor lord nor life 45  
More sure than storm or spray,  
Whose breath is made of sport and strife,  
Whereon shall I find stay?”

“And wouldst thou change thy doom with me,  
Full fain with thee would I: 50  
For the life that lightens and lifts the sea  
Is more than earth or sky.

“And what if the day of doubt and doom  
Shall save nor smite not me?  
I would not rise from the slain world’s tomb 55  
If there be no more sea.

“Take he my soul that gave my soul,  
And give it thee to keep;  
And me, while seas and stars shall roll

Thy life that falls on sleep.” 60

That word went up through the mirk mid sky,  
 And even to God’s own ear:  
 And the Lord was ware of the keen twin cry,  
 And wroth was he to hear.

He’s tane the soul of the unsained child 65  
 That fled to death from birth;  
 He’s tane the light of the wan sea wild,  
 And bid it burn on earth.

He’s given the ghaist of the babe new-born  
 The gift of the water-sprite, 70  
 To ride on revel from morn to morn  
 And roll from night to night.

He’s given the sprite of the wild wan sea  
 The gift of the new-born man,  
 A soul for ever to bide and be 75  
 When the years have filled their span.

When a year was gone and a year was come,  
 O loud and loud cried they —  
 “For the lee-lang year thou hast held us dumb  
 Take now thy gifts away!” 80

O loud and lang they cried on him,  
 And sair and sair they prayed:  
 “Is the face of thy grace as the night’s face grim  
 For those thy wrath has made!”

A cry more bitter than tears of men 85  
 From the rim of the dim grey sea; —  
 “Give me my living soul again,  
 The soul thou gavest me,  
 The doom and the dole of kindly men,  
 To bide my weird and be!” 90

A cry more keen from the wild low land  
Than the wail of waves that roll; —  
“Take back the gift of a loveless hand,  
Thy gift of doom and dole,  
The weird of men that bide on land; 95  
Take from me, take my soul!”

The hands that smite are the hands that spare;  
They build and break the tomb;  
They turn to darkness and dust and air  
The fruits of the waste earth’s womb; 100  
But never the gift of a granted prayer,  
The dole of a spoken doom.

Winds may change at a word unheard,  
But none may change the tides:  
The prayer once heard is a God’s own word; 105  
The doom once dealt abides.

And ever a cry goes up by day,  
And ever a wail by night;  
And nae ship comes by the weary bay  
But her shipmen hear them wail and pray, 110  
And see with earthly sight

The twofold flames of the twin lights play  
Where the sea-banks green and the sea-floods gray  
Are proud of peril and fain of prey,  
And the sand quakes ever; and ill fare they 115  
That look upon that light.

1889

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