

To Our Ladies of Death¹

By James Thomson

“Tired with all these, for restful death I cry.”—SHAKESPEARE: *Sonnet 66*.

Weary of erring in this desert Life,
Weary of hoping hopes for ever vain,
Weary of struggling in all-sterile strife,
Weary of thought which maketh nothing plain,
I close my eyes and calm my panting breath,
And pray to Thee, O ever-quiet Death!
To come and soothe away my bitter pain.

The strong shall strive,—may they be victors crowned;
The wise still seek,—may they at length find Truth;
The young still hope,—may purest love be found
To make their age more glorious than their youth.
For me; my brain is weak, my heart is cold,
My hope and faith long dead; my life but bold
In jest and laugh to parry hateful ruth.

Over me pass the days and months and years
Like squadrons and battalions of the foe
Trampling with thoughtless thrusts and alien jeers
Over a wounded soldier lying low:
He grips his teeth, or flings them words of scorn
To mar their triumph: but the while, outworn,
Inwardly craves for death to end his woe.

Thus I, in secret, call, O Death! to Thee,
Thou youngest of the solemn Sisterhood,
Thou Gentlest of the mighty Sisters Three
Whom I have known so well since first endued
By Love and Grief with vision to discern
What spiritual life doth throb and burn
Through all our world, with evil powers and good.

The Three whom I have known so long, so well,

¹ The Three Ladies suggested by the sublime sisterhood of Our Ladies of Sorrow, in the “*Suspiria de Profundis*” of De Quincey.

By intimate communion, face to face,
In every mood, of Earth, of Heaven, of Hell,
In every season and in every place,
That joy of Life has ceased to visit me,
As one estranged by powerful witchery,
Infatuate in a Siren's weird embrace.

First Thou, O priestess, prophetess, and queen,
Our Lady of Beatitudes, first Thou:
Of mighty stature, of seraphic mien,
Upon the tablet of whose broad white brow
Unvanquishable Truth is written clear,
The secret of the mystery of our sphere,
The regnant word of the Eternal Now.

Thou standest garmented in purest white;
But from thy shoulders wings of power half-spread
Invest thy form with such miraculous light
As dawn may clothe the earth with: and, instead
Of any jewel-kindled golden crown,
The glory of thy long hair flowing down
Is dazzling noonday sunshine round thy head.

Upon a sword thy left hand resteth calm,
A naked sword, two-edged and long and straight;
A branch of olive with a branch of palm
Thy right hand proffereth to hostile Fate.
The shining plumes that clothe thy feet are bound
By knotted strings, as if to tread the ground
With weary steps when thou wouldst soar elate.

Twin heavens uplifted to the heavens, thine eyes
Are solemn with unutterable thought
And love and aspiration; yet there lies
Within their light eternal sadness, wrought
By hope deferred and baffled tenderness:
Of all the souls whom thou dost love and bless,
How few revere and love thee as they ought!

Thou leadest heroes from their warfare here
To nobler fields where grander crowns are won;
Thou leadest sages from this twilight sphere
To cloudless heavens and an unsetting sun;
Thou leadest saints unto that purer air
Whose breath is spiritual life and prayer!
Yet, lo! they seek thee not, but fear and shun!

Thou takest to thy most maternal breast
Young children from the desert of this earth,
Ere sin hath stained their souls, or grief opprest,
And bearest them unto an heavenly birth,
To be the Vestals of God's Fane above
And yet their kindred moan against thy love,
With wild and selfish moans in bitter dearth.

Most holy Spirit, first Self-conqueror;
Thou Victress over Time and Destiny
And Evil, in the all-deciding war
So fierce, so long, so dreadful I—Would that me
Thou hadst upgathered in my life's pure morn!
Unworthy then, less worthy now, forlorn,
I dare not, Gracious Mother, call on Thee.

Next Thou, O sibyl, sorceress and queen,
Our Lady of Annihilation, Thou!
Of mighty stature, of demoniac mien;
Upon whose swarthy face and livid brow
Are graven deeply anguish, malice, scorn,
Strength ravaged by unrest, resolve forlorn
Of any hope, dazed pride that will not bow.

Thy form is clothed with wings of iron gloom;
But round about thee, like a chain, is rolled,
Cramping the sway of every mighty plume,
A stark constringent serpent fold on fold:
Of its two heads, one sting is in thy brain,
The other in thy heart; their venom-pain
Like fire distilling through thee uncontrolled.

A rod of serpents wieldeth thy right hand;
Thy left a cup of raging fire, whose light
Burns lurid on thyself as thou dost stand;
Thy lidless eyes tenebriously bright;
Thy wings, thy vestures, thy dishevelled hair
Dark as the Grave; thou statue of Despair,
Thou Night essential radiating night.

Thus have I seen thee in thine actual form;
Not thus can see thee those whom thou dost sway,
Inscrutable Enchantress: young and warm,
Pard-beautiful and brilliant, ever gay;
Thy cup the very Wine of Life, thy rod

The wand of more voluptuous spells than God
Can wield in Heaven; thus charmest thou thy prey.

The selfish, fatuous, proud, and pitiless,
All who have falsified life's royal trust;
The strong whose strength bath basked in idleness,
The great heart given up to worldly lust,
The great mind destitute of moral faith;
Thou scourgest down to Night and utter Death,
Or penal spheres of retribution just.

O mighty Spirit, fraudulent and malign,
Demon of madness and perversity!
The evil passions which may make me thine
Are not yet irrepressible in me;
And I have pierced thy mark of riant youth,
And seen thy form in all its hideous truth:
I will not, Dreadful Mother, call on Thee.

Last Thou, retired nun and throneless queen,
Our Lady of Oblivion, last Thou:
Of human stature, of abstracted mien;
Upon whose pallid face and drooping brow
Are shadowed melancholy dreams of Doom,
And deep absorption into silent gloom,
And weary bearing of the heavy Now.

Thou art all shrouded in a gauzy veil,
Sombrous and cloudlike; all, except that face
Of subtle loveliness though weirdly pale.
Thy soft, slow-gliding footsteps leave no trace,
And stir no sound. Thy drooping hands infold
Their frail white fingers; and, unconscious, hold
A poppy-wreath, thine anodyne of grace.

Thy hair is like a twilight round thy head:
Thine eyes are shadowed wells, from Lethe-stream
With drowsy subterranean waters fed;
Obscurely deep, without a stir or gleam;
The gazer drinks in from them with his gaze
An opiate charm to curtain all his days,
A passive languor of oblivious dream.

Thou hairntest twilight regions, and the trance
Of moonless nights when stars are few and wan:
Within black woods; or over the expanse

Of desert seas abysmal; or upon
Old solitary shores whose populous graves
Are rocked in rest by ever-moaning waves;
Or through vast ruined cities still and lone.

The weak, the weary, and the desolate,
The poor, the mean, the outcast, the opprest,
All trodden down beneath the march of Fate,
Thou gatherest, loving Sister, to thy breast,
Soothing their pain and weariness asleep;
Then in thy hidden Dreamland hushed and deep
Dost lay them, shrouded in eternal rest.

O sweetest Sister, and sole Patron Saint
Of all the humble eremites who flee
From out life's crowded tumult, stunned and faint,
To seek a stern and lone tranquillity
In Libyan wastes of time: my hopeless life
With famished yearning craveth rest from strife
Therefore, thou Restful One, I call on Thee!

Take me, and lull me into perfect sleep;
Down, down, far-hidden in thy duskiest cave;
While all the clamorous years above me sweep
Unheard, or, like the voice of seas that rave
On far-off coasts, but murmuring o'er my trance,
A dim vast monotone, that shall enhance
The restful rapture of the inviolate grave.

Ungathered thus in thy divine embrace,
Upon mine eyes thy soft mesmeric hand,
While wreaths of opiate odour interlace
About my pulseless brow; babe-pure and bland,
Passionless, senseless, thoughtless, let me dream
Some ever-slumbrous, never-varying theme,
Within the shadow of thy Timeless Land.

That when I thus have drunk my inmost fill
Of perfect peace, I may arise renewed;
In soul and body, intellect and will,
Equal to cope with Life whate'er its mood;
To sway its storm and energise its calm;
Through rhythmic years evolving like a psalm
Of infinite love and faith and sanctitude.

But if this cannot be, no less I cry,

Come, lead me with thy terrorless control
Down to our Mother's bosom, there to die
By abdication of my separate soul:
So shall this single, self-impelling piece
Of mechanism from lone labour cease,
Resolving into union with the Whole.

Our Mother feedeth thus our little life,
That we in turn may feed her with our death:
The great Sea sways, one interwoven strife,
Wherefrom the Sun exhales a subtle breath,
To float the heavens sublime in form and hue,
Then turning cold and dark in order due
Rain weeping back to swell the Sea beneath.

One part of me shall feed a little worm,
And it a bird on which a man may feed;
One lime the mould, one nourish insect-sperm;
One thrill sweet grass, one pulse in bitter weed;
This swell a fruit, and that evolve in air;
Another trickle to a springlet's lair,
Another paint a daisy on the mead:

With cosmic interchange of parts for all,
Through all the modes of being numberless
Of every element, as may befall.
And if earth's general soul bath consciousness,
Their new life must with strange new joy be thrilled,
Of perfect law all perfectly fulfilled;
No sin, no fear, no failure, no excess.

Weary of living isolated life,
Weary of hoping hopes for ever vain,
Weary of struggling in all-sterile strife,
Weary of thought which maketh nothing plain,
I close my eyes and hush my panting breath,
And yearn for Thee, divinely tranquil Death,
To come and soothe away my bitter pain.