

## 26 SPARE A THOUGHT FOR LIZZIE (August 2020)

Perhaps it would be a crude contrast to make that if Dante Gabriel dabbled with earthly pleasures of the body, his purer-minded sister Christina dealt with heavenly treasures of the soul. I grew up not really knowing anything about either of these poets, though I *had* noticed, as I was in the choir at school, that Christina wrote “In the Bleak Midwinter” for which there were not just one, but two lovely settings. Her name meant nothing more to me.

I first came across Dante Gabriel Rossetti, through an interest in his later friend and business partner, ‘Topsy’ or William Morris. Morris I found more interesting, with his beautiful designs for tiles, fabrics and furnishings, his Icelandic sagas, his socialism, his poems, his printing press and his factory turning out beautifully crafted goods in a world where industrialisation had spread its dark tentacles across so much of the land. As I write this, I’m drinking tea from a cup with a Morris design, in a room with long curtains in William Morris “Willow” pattern. He had a glorious vision of what life could be like even under the pall of industrialisation and laissez-faire capitalism. But William Morris looked up too much to ‘the *real artist*’ whom he began idolising somewhat, around 1855. Dante Gabriel, his Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood friend and now business partner was an inveterate womaniser, who around 1857 became infatuated with Jane Burden, after Morris, who had spotted her first, had engaged her as his model, and later married her. ‘Janey’ Morris, however, became DGR’s ‘spiritual muse’, where other models like Elizabeth Siddal, Fanny Cornforth or Alexa Wilding had appealed more for their purely physical allure. Although deeply hurt, Morris was generous enough to allow DGR and Jane (for the time being) the freedom at Kelmscott Manor to pursue their love for each other.

I came to all of this late, of course. At school, and even at university, Victorian studies were somehow *unthinkable*, a niche area where only very uncool *weirdos* delved. Ruskin and the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were far too precious and ‘up themselves’, and their attempts to create an art form that was somehow *photographically detailed* in an age where photography was just starting up was entirely missing the boat, surely? All that swoony *mediaeval* business? Now Turner, on the other hand, leading the charge so inspiringly towards Impressionism, was more the ticket (in spite of John Ruskin’s enthusiasm for him). Crude distinctions, but then my education had always been rather crude. Neither DGR’s poetry, nor his sister’s, were on any of the syllabuses (the Leavisite canon) and I had little time for, or interest in, reading either.

The pendulum has swung since then. I have had to teach Christina's strange, other-worldly poetry (I still find much of it too intense and sentimental) up to A Level standard. How could anyone *not* remember old heart-string-tugging "Remember"? And I've had to wrestle like everyone else with the feminist implications of the weird and guilty eroticism of



"Goblin Market", amongst her other well-known poems.

But nowadays my readings of her poetry and prose, for she also wrote some interesting short stories, are coloured by the unkindness that she and the other members of the Rossetti family showed towards Elizabeth Siddal, her brother's 'must-have'

model and mistress. In 1855, at a tea-party that had been arranged to introduce her properly to the family after she and DGR had been together some years, and after John Ruskin, the leading art critic of the era, had recently become so enthusiastic about her, Christina, her mother and her older sister *froze out* the poor, vulnerable girl in an abhorrent display of snobbish, prudish breach of good manners. Christina's later "good work" with fallen women doesn't in my eyes redeem her lack of charity nearer home, then and on other occasions before that meeting.

Like many, I had come across Elizabeth (Lizzie) Siddal in two particularly resonant



paintings. One was the famous John Everett Millais painting of "Ophelia", almost too well-known to show (above). The other was "Beata Beatrix", painted by DGR over several years as a tribute to his dead wife, whom he now immortalised by equating her with Dante Alighieri's "Beatrice" in "La Vita Nuova" and the "Divine Comedy".

Lizzie Siddal has always exerted a fascination as *the* most erotically charged model of that era, and her tragic death at the age of 32, barely two years after DGR

finally did the proper thing and made her his wife, only added to the mystique surrounding her. I hadn't realised, however, that far from being simply a passive model of haunting beauty, Lizzie also wrote poetry and wanted to gain recognition as a self-taught artist. DGR did in the end come to love her deeply, but he had been far too careless and unwilling to commit to marriage; he also hurt her with his many infidelities with Annie Miller, Fanny Cornforth and Jane Morris. So, here I want to trace her literary and artistic path a little.

The Rossetti family were first and foremost those dreadful people that the current Tory party simply cannot stand: *immigrants*. The father, Gabriele Rossetti, was an Italian nobleman and poet, from the 'Kingdom of the Two Sicilies' in the south. He sided with Sicilian liberation and his revolutionary political views forced him into exile, fleeing to Malta in 1820. There, an English admiral in 1826 managed to get him to London where Rossetti began teaching and later became Professor of Italian (1831-47) at King's College in the very newly established University of London. In 1826 he married Frances Polidori, the sister of



the way, of the very *first* vampire novel (!) called quite simply, "The Vampyre". The Polidoris had come to Britain earlier and Frances, who had been well educated, served as a governess in some top-drawer English families.

They had four children, all clever and all taught at home by their mother, Frances - sister of a vampire *enthusiast!* - 2nd from right in Lewis Carroll's portrait. Christina is between her and DGR, two years older than her. William Michael, the younger son is on the right. DGR and he had gone on to board at King's College School, when it was still in the Strand. DGR aspired to be a poet and an artist, studying at the Antique



*The Eve of St Agnes by William Holman Hunt*

School of the Royal Academy, and later under Ford Madox Brown, who became a firm friend. DGR was particularly struck by William Holman Hunt's "The Eve of St Agnes" and in 1848 the two of them, with John Everett Millais and four others including his brother, launched the group of painters known as the 'Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood' or PRB.

Rossetti's interest in the group was always going to be leaning to the literary, as he was so interested in poetry as well. The group wanted to return to a purer form of colour and detail and they disliked the influence of Sir Joshua Reynolds ("Sir *Sloshua* Reynolds") with what they saw as the "*sloshy*" mannerisms of academic painting dating back to Raphaël. It was always a very high-minded approach to art, linked to an interest in Quattrocento art, mediaevalism and religious spirituality (an odd fit, you *might* think, in Rossetti's case).

The Brotherhood were fairly typical of their age and their interest in women could be puerile and exploitative. They went after models who were, in their eyes, "*stunners*". One such "*stunner*", red-haired Elizabeth Siddal, had been found working in a milliner's shop in 1850 by the father of Walter Deverell, a young American painter living in London. Deverell was loosely



associated with, but never actually joined, the "PRB". She modelled for Viola (above) in Deverell's painting of a scene from "Twelfth Night". Most famously, of course, she modelled for John Everett Millais' painting (above) of the drowned "Ophelia", posing for days on end in a badly heated, long bathtub with candles underneath, which resulted in her developing pneumonia (the price of realism!). Rossetti also painted her, fell for her and she soon became his lover.

Lizzie Siddal, however, is really interesting in her own right. Though uneducated and working class, she too wanted to write poetry and paint. Becoming a model was going to be helpful

both economically and in opening up new horizons, but it was no way then to gain acceptance in society. As Dante Gabriel's mistress, as well as model, she was shunned by the Rossetti family (though, ironically, her grave in Highgate Cemetery is in the plot with most of his family - but not with DGR himself, who was buried at Birchington-on-Sea, in Kent).

Her mysterious illnesses (not just the pneumonia she developed from modelling "Ophelia") were largely, I think, mental and probably linked to anxiety and depression, from which she suffered much of her short life. She used these bouts of illnesses quite effectively in the end to control Rossetti, though he brought all of this upon himself, and it served him right. Her pain and unhappiness, however, led to her growing dependence on laudanum, a standard "medicine" of the time and her addiction really set her on a downward path.

In 1855, DGR happened to show her sketches and paintings to John Ruskin, who, as a friend of the PRB had been helping Rossetti with his uncertain finances by getting him a teaching job in Ruskin's Working Men's College in Camden. Surprisingly, perhaps, Ruskin was thrilled with her work, and particularly with Lizzie herself when he met her. He bought up all of her drawings and paintings and also offered her a *salary* of £150 a year, a solid sum for those days. Not just that, but Ruskin's unexpected patronage promised openings for the future. He advised DGR, however, to marry Lizzie as soon as possible. Their relationship needed to be socially acceptable. Unfortunately, that advice went unheeded.

Both DGR and Lizzie were unstable personalities, and there were plenty of upsets, recriminations and worries, but they grew much closer as the years went by, years that must have been terribly frustrating for Lizzie, who had been half-promised marriage. As the illnesses mounted, so did the dependence on laudanum. They finally married in 1860.

Tragically, Lizzie had a stillborn child in 1861 and then became pregnant again just before her death. Their time together as a wedded couple was short-lived and Lizzie's death in February 1862, from a laudanum overdose, was really a hushed-up suicide. The note she left was almost certainly burnt at the home of their good friends, the Ford Madox Browns, to avoid scandal.



A study of Lizzie Siddal for "Ophelia" by Millais

Why did she commit suicide? Nobody really knows. DGR left the house when they got home, to give a lesson at the College.

Perhaps they had rowed. Perhaps she

suspected another woman (which wasn't the case, that evening at least). Perhaps she simply despaired of ever kicking the habit of laudanum and becoming well, never having really got over the death of the little stillborn daughter. She was anorexic, very weak and utterly worn out with illness. He returned later to find her dead.

Many of Rossetti's friends (and family) were glad she had left the scene, but Swinburne, their close friend, who had been dining out with the couple on the last evening, wrote:

*"To one at least who knew her better than most of her husband's friends, the memory of all her marvellous charms of mind and person - her matchless grace, loveliness, courage, endurance, wit, humour, heroism and sweetness - it is too dear and sacred to be profaned by any attempt at expression."*

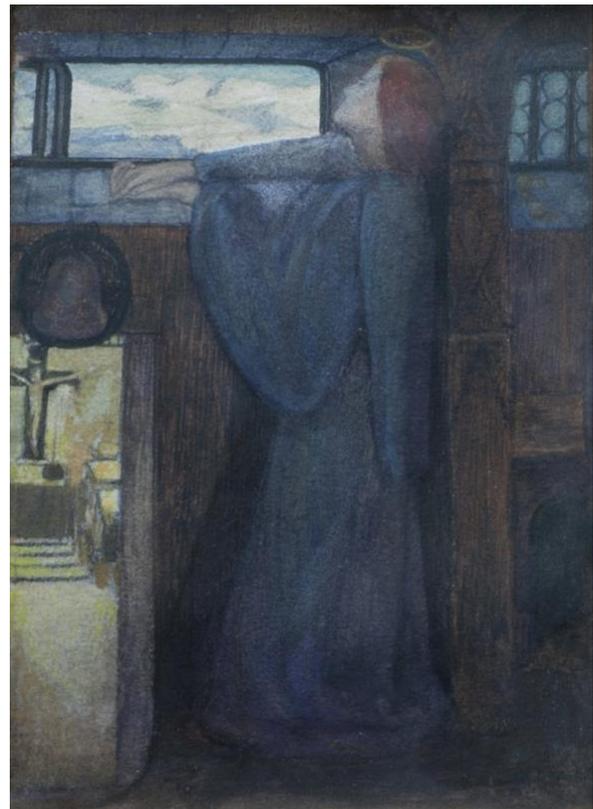
Here are two poems, "Early Death" and "Dead Love", which she wrote during her last months. For someone without a writerly background, they are, I think, pretty good and have the advantages of being shorter and far *simpler* than most of DGR's own soul-wrenching verse. They're perhaps a little conventional and like so much of Victorian poetry (think only of "In Memoriam", the poems of Emily Brontë and Christina Rossetti's own poems) almost wallow, sentimentally, in the idea of 'Death'. The verses, however, gain in intensity retrospectively foreshadowing, as they did, her own tragically early death.

### **Early Death**

Oh grieve not with thy bitter tears  
The life that passes fast;  
The gates of heaven will open wide  
And take me in at last.

Then sit down meekly at my side  
And watch my young life flee;  
Then solemn peace of holy death  
Come quickly unto thee.

But true love, seek me in the throng  
Of spirits floating past,  
And I will take thee by the hands  
And know thee mine at last.



St Agnes's Eve - Elizabeth Siddal

### **He and She and Angels Three**

Ruthless hands have torn her  
From one that loved her well;  
Angels have upborn her,  
Christ her grief to tell.

She shall stand to listen,  
She shall stand and sing,  
Till three winged angels  
Her lover's soul shall bring.

He and she and the angels three  
Before God's face shall stand;  
There they shall pray among themselves  
And sing at His right hand.

### **Dead Love**

Oh never weep for love that's dead  
Since love is seldom true  
But changes his fashion from blue to red,  
From brightest red to blue,  
And love was born to an early death  
And is so seldom true.

Then harbour no smile on your bonny face  
To win the deepest sigh.  
The fairest words on truest lips  
Pass on and surely die,  
And you will stand alone, my dear,  
When wintry winds draw nigh.

Sweet, never weep for what cannot be,  
For this God has not given.  
If the merest dream of love were true  
Then, sweet, we should be in heaven,  
And this is only earth, my dear,  
Where true love is not given.



The Haunted Wood - Elizabeth Siddal

The irony is that Lizzie's paintings and drawings, although few, are, as Ruskin rightly understood, far more interesting than they might otherwise have been given credit for. They are actually quite modernist in approach and their 'primitive' naivety only adds to that. In "The Haunted Wood", for example, the girl seems ambiguously both to be reaching for, as well as fleeing from, the ghostly apparition. Both these gouaches have a touching simplicity but also considerable assurance. If she had lived and had the opportunity to develop her talents, it's fascinating to think of what she might have gone on to do.

Her own drawing (below) for the story of "Sister Helen", based on a very long and tedious poem of DGR's, is far more striking and instantly memorable than the poem. (You can find the poem at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45024/sister-helen> .)



Below this is a picture of her done by Dante Gabriel as a 'marriage portrait', "Regina Cordium" or "The Queen of Hearts", and a poem entitled "The Portrait" (though that refers to a fictitious portrait), again foreshadowing poor Lizzie's early death. This is, however, one of many poems he wrote *before* her death, and all of these poems, in a fit of romantic remorse, he buried with her inside her coffin at Highgate Cemetery. Infamously, DGR arranged years later in August 1869 to have the grave dug up again to recover these poems, which were now considered

to be worth a bit, according to his agent, Charles Howell, who unscrupulously encouraged him to unearth the poems secretly and who was present (unlike DGR) at the disinterment.

The deed was thoroughly illegal as DGR's mother, Frances, who owned the plot was not even consulted. Here is the gruesome story as recounted by Lizzie's recent biographer, Lucinda Hawksley,

*Rossetti's feelings of guilt did not allow him to attend the exhumation. He remained at Howell's home in Fulham, nervously awaiting news and being attended to by Howell's wife, Kitty. There were very few people present at the cemetery. In addition to the diggers, there were only Howell and the official lawyer, who had the ironic name, for an observer of such a deed, of Mr Virtue Tebbs. So as not to upset visitors to the cemetery or mourners, the deed had to be carried out at night.*

*There was no light in that part of the graveyard so a large fire was built to help the diggers see what they were doing, as well as to keep the observers warm. Howell declared that, when the coffin was opened, Lizzie remained fully preserved. She was not a skeleton, he claimed, she was as beautiful as she had ever been in life and her hair, which had kept growing after death, now filled the coffin and was as brilliantly copper-coloured as it had been in life, glinting mesmerizingly in the firelight.*

The details were, of course, clearly a complete prevarication, made up by Howell, an inveterate fraudster, perhaps to take away from the horror of this act and to comfort DGR, or else fabricated just to preserve the dazzling mystique of Lizzie Siddal's death - its mythic quality.

### **The Portrait**

BY DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

This is her picture as she was:  
It seems a thing to wonder on,  
As though mine image in the glass  
Should tarry when myself am gone. I  
gaze until she seems to stir,—  
Until mine eyes almost aver  
That now, even now, the sweet lips part To  
breathe the words of the sweet heart:—  
And yet the earth is over her.

Alas! even such the thin-drawn ray  
That makes the prison-depths more rude,—  
The drip of water night and day  
Giving a tongue to solitude.  
Yet only this, of love's whole prize,  
Remains; save what in mournful guise  
Takes counsel with my soul alone,—  
Save what is secret and unknown,  
Below the earth, above the skies.



The Queen of Hearts - by DGR  
The poem 'The Portrait' is based on a fictitious portrait

In painting her I shrin'd her face  
 Mid mystic trees, where light falls in  
 Hardly at all; a covert place  
 Where you might think to find a din  
 Of doubtful talk, and a live flame  
 Wandering, and many a shape whose name  
 Not itself knoweth, and old dew,  
 And your own footsteps meeting you,  
 And all things going as they came.

A deep dim wood; and there she stands  
 As in that wood that day: for so  
 Was the still movement of her hands  
 And such the pure line's gracious flow.  
 And passing fair the type must seem,  
 Unknown the presence and the dream.  
 'Tis she: though of herself, alas!  
 Less than her shadow on the grass  
 Or than her image in the stream.

That day we met there, I and she  
 One with the other all alone;  
 And we were blithe; yet memory  
 Saddens those hours, as when the moon  
 Looks upon daylight. And with her  
 I stoop'd to drink the spring-water,  
 Athirst where other waters sprang;  
 And where the echo is, she sang,—  
 My soul another echo there.

But when that hour my soul won strength  
 For words whose silence wastes and kills,  
 Dull raindrops smote us, and at length  
 Thunder'd the heat within the hills.  
 That eve I spoke those words again  
 Beside the pelted window-pane;  
 And there she hearken'd what I said,  
 With under-glances that survey'd  
 The empty pastures blind with rain.

Next day the memories of these things, Like  
 leaves through which a bird has flown, Still  
 vibrated with Love's warm wings;  
 Till I must make them all my own  
 And paint this picture. So, 'twixt ease  
 Of talk and sweet long silences,



More studies of Lizzie by DGR



She stood among the plants in bloom  
 At windows of a summer room,  
 To feign the shadow of the trees.

Photograph by Frederick Hollyer

And as I wrought, while all above  
 And all around was fragrant air, In  
 the sick burthen of my love  
 It seem'd each sun-thrill'd blossom there  
 Beat like a heart among the leaves.  
 O heart that never beats nor heaves,  
 In that one darkness lying still,  
 What now to thee my love's great will  
 Or the fine web the sunshine weaves?



For now doth daylight disavow  
 Those days,—nought left to see or hear.  
 Only in solemn whispers now  
 At night-time these things reach mine ear;  
 When the leaf-shadows at a breath  
 Shrink in the road, and all the heath,  
 Forest and water, far and wide,  
 In limpid starlight glorified,  
 Lie like the mystery of death.

Last night at last I could have slept,  
 And yet delay'd my sleep till dawn,  
 Still wandering. Then it was I wept:  
 For unawares I came upon  
 Those glades where once she walk'd with me:  
 And as I stood there suddenly,  
 All wan with traversing the night,  
 Upon the desolate verge of light  
 Yearn'd loud the iron-bosom'd sea.

Even so, where Heaven holds breath and hears  
 The beating heart of Love's own breast,—  
 Where round the secret of all spheres  
 All angels lay their wings to rest,—  
 How shall my soul stand rapt and aw'd,  
 When, by the new birth borne abroad  
 Throughout the music of the suns,  
 It enters in her soul at once  
 And knows the silence there for God!

Here with her face doth memory sit  
 Meanwhile, and wait the day's decline,  
 Till other eyes shall look from it,  
 Eyes of the spirit's Palestine,  
 Even than the old gaze tenderer:  
 While hopes and aims long lost with her  
 Stand round her image side by side,  
 Like tombs of pilgrims that have died  
 About the Holy Sepulchre.

As always, with Rossetti, unless he is using the sonnet form which restricts him to 14 lines, he writes *far too much*. It's really all about *him*, his glibly rhetorical turns of phrase, his tormented feelings, *his* portrait of *his* great love. I find a lot of the phrasing forced and self-conscious ("Yearned loud the iron-bosom'd sea" ... etc).

The sonnet that follows, written seven years after her death, is shorter and his feelings less self-directed (perhaps?) or at least less overblown.

### ***The House of Life 53: Without Her***

What of her glass without her? The blank gray  
 There where the pool is blind of the moon's face.  
 Her dress without her? The tossed empty space  
 Of cloud-rack whence the moon has passed away.  
 Her paths without her? Day's appointed sway  
 Usurped by desolate night. Her pillowed place  
 Without her? Tears, ah me! for love's good grace,  
 And cold forgetfulness of night or day.

What of the heart without her? Nay, poor heart,  
 Of thee what word remains ere speech be still?  
 A wayfarer by barren ways and chill,  
 Steep ways and weary, without her thou art,  
 Where the long cloud, the long wood's counterpart,  
 Sheds doubled darkness up the labouring hill.

This sonnet forms part of a huge cycle of sonnets he called "The House of Life". This cycle, in two parts, attracted considerable attention, particularly as it contained several poems that were criticised as being too risqué (the so-called "Fleshly School of Poetry"). It may be true that the 101 sonnets written over 34 years represent a massive artistic undertaking, recording his "soul's" response to his marriage to Lizzie, her death and his feelings of loss,

his awakening love for Jane Morris and his “recovery”, but I find the style (compared to Lizzie’s) overdone and self-regarding.

Reading DGR, and even Christina Rossetti’s verse, alongside Lizzie Siddal’s poetry, I’m struck by how much less *wordy* she is. She may be (or may seem to be) more conventionally Christian in outlook, certainly more so than DGR, with pleas for God to have mercy on her and answer her prayers, but there is a refreshing lack of convolutedness in her utterance.

On the topic of love and desire, for example, here is Lizzie’s own poem on sexual infidelity - in it she imagines her lover’s selfish carelessness:

### **The Lust of the Eyes**

I care not for my Lady’s soul  
Though I worship before her smile;  
I care not where be my Lady’s goal  
When her beauty shall lose its wile.

Low sit I down at my Lady’s feet  
Gazing through her wild eyes  
Smiling to think how my love will fleet  
When their starlike beauty dies.

I care not if my Lady pray  
To our Father which is in Heaven  
But for joy my heart’s quick pulses play  
For to me her love is given.

Then who shall close my Lady’s eyes  
And who shall fold her hands?  
Will any hearken if she cries

Up to the unknown lands?

Compare that sort of simple restraint with DGR’s sonnet on desire. Here is one of the sonnets in the “House of Life” cycle, overtly sexual, for which he was criticised. Also called “Placata Venere”, it’s about two lovers falling asleep having made love. All the business, however, of “souls” sinking and rising and “the tide of dreams” etc, I’m afraid leaves me cold (and my “bosom” *unsundered*).



An illustration for the ballad of “Clerk Saunders”, murdered by his lover’s brothers he returns to her as a ghost - by Lizzie Siddal

## NUPTIAL SLEEP.

At length their long kiss severed, with sweet smart:  
 And as the last slow sudden drops are shed  
 From sparkling eaves when all the storm has fled,  
 So singly flagged the pulses of each heart.  
 Their bosoms sundered, with the opening start  
 Of married flowers to either side outspread  
 From the knit stem; yet still their mouths, burnt red,  
 Fawned on each other where they lay apart.  
 Sleep sank them lower than the tide of dreams,  
 And their dreams watched them sink, and slid away.  
 Slowly their souls swam up again, through gleams  
 Of watered light and dull drowned waifs of day;  
 Till from some wonder of new woods and streams  
 He woke, and wondered more: for there she lay.

Not all of his poetry, luckily, is quite so - dare one say it - *immature*?

Here is the beginning of an extended poetic account of a train journey he made with friends in 1849 to visit Paris. Rail travel, particularly in France, had only just got going. This ‘verse-diary’, in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameters) and freshly observed, written on the spot *while* the journey was unfolding (with times noted!), is far more to my taste. The extract is quite long, but I don’t apologise as it’s such fun to read, if only to see what rail travel was like in those days.

## A TRIP TO PARIS AND BELGIUM

I

### LONDON TO FOLKESTONE

( *Half-past one to half-past five* )

A constant keeping-past of shaken trees,  
 And a bewildered glitter of loose road;  
 Banks of bright growth, with single blades atop  
 Against white sky; and wires—a constant chain—

That seem to draw the clouds along with them  
(Things which one stoops against the light to see  
Through the low window; shaking by at rest,  
Or fierce like water as the swiftness grows);  
And, seen through fences or a bridge far off,  
Trees that in moving keep their intervals  
Still one 'twixt bar and bar; and then at times  
Long reaches of green level, where one cow,  
Feeding among her fellows that feed on,  
Lifts her slow neck, and gazes for the sound.  
There are six of us: I that write away;  
Hunt reads Dumas, hard-lipped, with heavy jowl  
And brows hung low, and the long ends of hair  
Standing out limp. A grazier at one end  
(Thank luck not my end!) has blocked out the air,  
And sits in heavy consciousness of guilt.  
The poor young muff who's face to face with me  
Is pitiful in loose collar and black tie,  
His latchet-button shaking as we go.  
There are flowers by me, half upon my knees,  
Owned by a dame who's fair in soul, no doubt:  
The wind that beats among us carries off  
Their scent, but still I have them for my eye.  
Fields mown in ridges; and close garden-crops  
Of the earth's increase; and a constant sky  
Still with clear trees that let you see the wind;  
And snatches of the engine-smoke, by fits  
Tossed to the wind against the landscape, where  
Rooks stooping heave their wings upon the day.  
Brick walls we pass between, passed so at once  
That for the suddenness I cannot know  
Or what, or where begun, or where at end.  
Sometimes a Station in grey quiet; whence,  
With a short gathered champing of pent sound,  
We are let out upon the air again.  
Now nearly darkness; knees and arms and sides

Feel the least touch, and close about the face  
 A wind of noise that is along like God.  
 Pauses of water soon, at intervals,  
 That has the sky in it;—the reflexes  
 O' the trees move towards the bank as we go by,  
 Leaving the water's surface plain. I now  
 Lie back and close my eyes a space; for they  
 Smart from the open forwardness of thought  
 Fronting the wind—  
 —I did not scribble more,  
 Be certain, after this; but yawned, and read,  
 And nearly dozed a little, I believe;  
 Till, stretching up against the carriage-back,  
 I was roused altogether, and looked out  
 To where, upon the desolate verge of light,  
 Yearned, pale and vast, the iron-coloured sea.

#### BOULOGNE TO AMIENS AND PARIS

(3 to 11 P.M.; 3rd class)

Strong extreme speed, that the brain hurries with,  
 Further than trees, and hedges, and green grass  
 Whitened by distance,—further than small pools  
 Held among fields and gardens,—further than  
 Haystacks and windmill-sails and roofs and herds,—  
 The sea's last margin ceases at the sun.  
 The sea has left us, but the sun remains.  
 Sometimes the country spreads aloof in tracts  
 Smooth from the harvest; sometimes sky and land  
 Are shut from the square space the window leaves  
 By a dense crowd of trees, stem behind stem  
 Passing across each other as we pass:  
 Sometimes tall poplar-wands stand white, their heads  
 Outmeasuring the distant hills. Sometimes  
 The ground has a deep greenness; sometimes brown

In stubble; and sometimes no ground at all,  
 For the close strength of crops that stand unreaped.  
 The water-plots are sometimes all the sun's,—  
 Sometimes quite green through shadows filling them,  
 Or islanded with growths of reeds,—or else  
 Masked in grey dust like the wide face o' the fields.  
 And still the swiftness lasts; that to our speed  
 The trees seem shaken like a press of spears.  
 There is some count of us:—folks travelling-capped,  
 Priesthood, and lank hard-featured soldiery,  
 Females (no women), blouses, Hunt, and I.  
 We are relayed at Amiens. The steam  
 Snorts, chafes, and bridles, like three-hundred horse,  
 And flings its dusky mane upon the air.  
 Our company is thinned, and lamps alight:  
 But still there are the folks in travelling-caps—  
 No priesthood now, but always soldiery,  
 And babies to make up for show in noise,  
 Females (no women), blouses, Hunt, and I.  
 Our windows at one side are shut for warmth;  
 Upon the other side, a leaden sky,  
 Hung in blank glare, makes all the country dim,  
 Which too seems bald and meagre,—be it truth, Or  
 of the waxing darkness. Here and there  
 The shade takes light, where in thin patches stand  
 The unstirred dregs of water.

Hunt can see

A moon, he says; but I am too far back.  
 Still the same speed and thunder. We are stopped  
 Again, and speech tells clearer than in day.  
 Hunt has just stretched to tell me that he fears  
 I and my note-book may be taken for  
 The stuff that goes to make an “émissaire  
 De la perfide.” Let me abate my zeal:  
 There is a stout gendarme within the coach.  
 This cursed pitching is too bad. My teeth

Jingle together in it; and my legs  
 (Which I got wet at Boulogne this good day  
 Wading for star-fish) are so chilled that I  
 Would don my coat, were not these seats too hard  
 To spare it from beneath me, and were not  
 The love of ease less than the love of sloth.  
 Hunt has just told me it is nearly eight:  
 We do not reach till half-past ten. Drat verse,  
 And steam, and Paris, and the fins of Time!  
 Marry, for me, look you, I will go sleep.  
 Most of them slept; I could not—held awake  
 By jolting clamour, with shut eyes; my head  
 Willing to nod and fancy itself vague.  
 Only at Stations I looked round me, when  
 Short silence paused among us, and I felt  
 A creeping in my feet from abrupt calm.  
 At such times Hunt would jerk himself, and then  
 Tumble uncouthly forward in his sleep.  
 This lasted near three hours. The darkness now  
 Stayeth behind us on the sullen road,  
 And all this light is Paris. Dieu merci.

Isn't this far, far better stuff? It's readable, *dammit!* After much sight-seeing at the  
 Louvre, Versailles, the battlefield of Waterloo and other tourism, here is their return to Dover  
 (in sonnet form - nice and *short!*)

### **ASHORE AT DOVER**

On landing, the first voice one hears is from  
 An English police-constable; a man  
 Respectful, conscious that at need he can  
 Enforce respect. Our custom-house at home  
 Strict too, but quiet. Not the foul-mouthed scum  
 Of passport-mongers who in Paris still  
 Preserve the Reign of Terror; not the till  
 Where the King haggles, all through Belgium.

The country somehow seems in earnest here,  
 Grave and sufficient:— *England*, so to speak;  
 No other word will make the thing as clear.  
 “Ah! habit,” you exclaim, “and prejudice!”  
 If so, so be it. One don't care to shriek,  
 “Sir, this shall be!” But one believes it is.

Turning to the cold-hearted sister who believed Lizzie Siddal wasn't good enough for her brother, I think her best poem is “Up-hill”. It's a teasingly ambiguous poem about heaven, though it is very simply written. It's also concise.

## UP-HILL

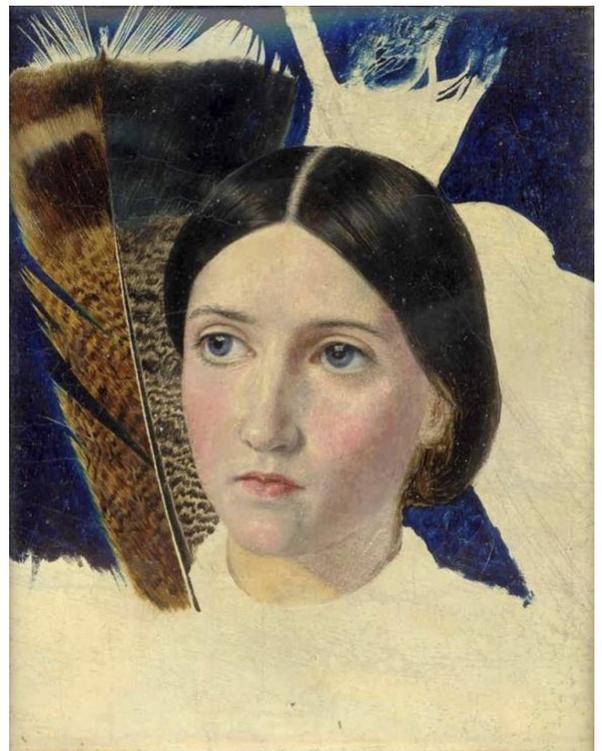
*by Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)*

**D**OES the road wind up-hill all the way?  
 Yes, to the very end.  
 Will the day's journey take the whole long day?  
 From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?  
 A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.  
 May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
 You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?  
 Those who have gone before.  
 Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?  
 They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?  
 Of labour you shall find the sum.  
 Will there be beds for me and all who seek?  
 Yea, beds for all who come. (1858)



Portrait by John Brett, who might have proposed marriage. (See appendix)

Two voices, one anxious and questioning, the other curter but (on the whole) reassuring, set up a sort of litany. The poem is clearly allegorical; the “road” is the ‘road of life’, wearisome, not straightforward (it “wind(s)”) and it will figuratively take the “whole long day” - in other words your life. While the first voice might stand in for the reader, it’s not clear who the second voice is. The “yea” at the end suggests a biblical figure, angelic? Perhaps even God Himself?

Heaven is presented as an “inn” (not that I imagine Christina was a great frequenter of taverns) where you will meet others “who have gone before” and generally have a good time. All the elements mount up and convert negative points, like “darkness” into something positive. And, although we are “travel-sore and weak”, are we *all* going to get there? The answer is “Yes”. But what about “comfort” (ie. having a good time)? Ah, here’s the rub! This, I’m afraid, is where Christina shows her true colours (perfectly legitimately in terms of the rather narrow creed she has signed up for) - “*Of labour you shall find the sum.*” Heaven might *seem* pretty democratic - “beds for all” - but in reality, it’s a meritocracy. You will get what you *deserve*. What you get out depends on what you’ve put in. This isn’t quite what Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son promised, but it’s clearly Christina’s hard and uncompromising position. I think the poem is superb but the message is unmistakably harsh. No wonder, then, that poor Lizzie received the full “ice” treatment. What did this cheap, low-class *upstart* want? Some elegant *hussy* who just sat around all day to be drawn (call that *work*?) and using her charms to seduce deserving artists like her brother? Of course, *she*, Christina, worked hard and engaged in charity work - helping poor fallen women...

The last, touching words I leave to Lizzie Siddal herself. The date of the poem isn’t known. As before, she imagines herself from the lover’s point of view. The shortened last lines give a feeling of incompleteness and emphasize her sorrow.



*Photograph of Elizabeth Siddal*

## **Gone**

To touch the glove upon her tender hand,  
To watch the jewel sparkle in her ring,  
Lifted my heart into a sudden song  
As when the wild birds sing.

To touch her shadow on the sunny grass,  
To break her pathway through the darkened  
wood,  
Filled all my life with trembling and tears  
And silence where I stood.

I watch the shadows gather round my heart, I  
live to know that she is gone -  
Gone, gone for ever, like the tender dove  
That left the Ark alone.

## **APPENDIX**

Here is a *very* acerbic poem by Christina Rossetti, possibly directed at John Brett. Nothing is clearly known, but Christina (according to her younger brother William Michael) said of the poem that the *real* “John” was “obnoxious” because he had never “given scope” for such a “No, thank you”! Make of that what you will... Looking at Brett’s portrait, *IF* it really is Christina (on the back there is a note by Brett’s grand-daughter: “Christina Rossetti? Mickleham 1857 - Christina Rossetti”), one can certainly detect a certain hardness in the face under the girlish freshness and demureness.

I like the poem because I feel that here, the mask has dropped. There is quite a lot of pain and venom behind all of this. It is entirely different in tone and substance from the dreamy idealism of “Remember” with its syrupy, self-sacrificing ‘love’. Whew! You feel glad you never came up against *her*. (“*Use your common sense*”!!)

Poor Lizzie!

## No, Thank You, John

I never said I loved you, John:

Why will you tease me, day by day,  
And wax a weariness to think upon  
With always "do" and "pray"?

You know I never loved you, John;

No fault of mine made me your toast:  
Why will you haunt me with a face as wan  
As shows an hour-old ghost?

I dare say Meg or Moll would take

Pity upon you, if you'd ask:  
And pray don't remain single for my sake  
Who can't perform that task.

I have no heart?—Perhaps I have not;

But then you're mad to take offence  
That I don't give you what I have not got:  
Use your common sense.

Let bygones be bygones:

Don't call me false, who owed not to be true:  
I'd rather answer "No" to fifty Johns  
Than answer "Yes" to you.

Let's mar our pleasant days no more,

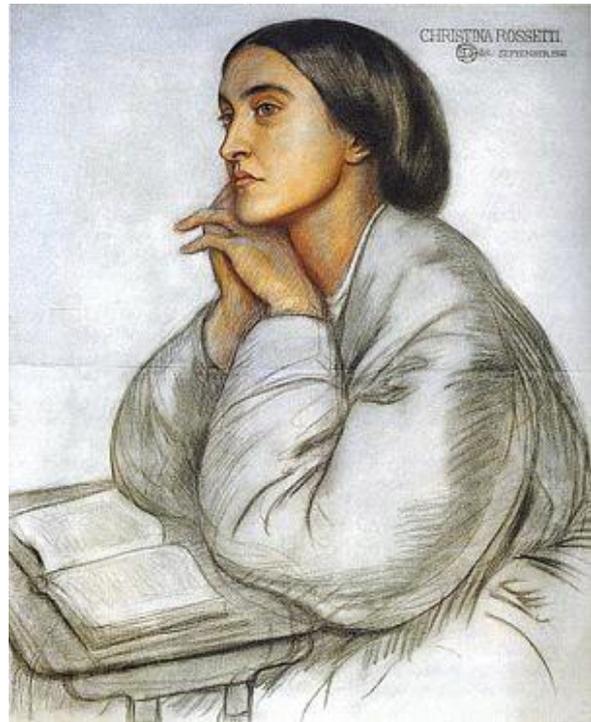
Song-birds of passage, days of youth:  
Catch at to-day, forget the days before:  
I'll wink at your untruth.

Let us strike hands as hearty friends;

No more, no less: and friendship's good:  
Only don't keep in view ulterior ends,  
And points not understood

In open treaty. Rise above

Quibbles and shuffling off and on:  
Here's friendship for you if you like; but love,—  
No, thank you, John.



Portrait of Christina by DGR



Photograph of Lizzie Siddal