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Rabbi Ben Ezra

BY ROBERT BROWNING

Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life, for which the first was made:  
Our times are in His hand  
Who saith "A whole I planned,  
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"

Not that, amassing flowers,  
Youth sighed "Which rose make ours,  
Which lily leave and then as best recall?"  
Not that, admiring stars,  
It yearned "Nor Jove, nor Mars;  
Mine be some figured flame which blends, transcends them all!"

Not for such hopes and fears  
Annulling youth's brief years,  
Do I remonstrate: folly wide the mark!  
Rather I prize the doubt  
Low kinds exist without,  
Finished and finite clods, untroubled by a spark.

Poor vaunt of life indeed,  
Were man but formed to feed  
On joy, to solely seek and find and feast:  
Such feasting ended, then  
As sure an end to men;  
Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed beast?

Rejoice we are allied  
To That which doth provide  
And not partake, effect and not receive!  
A spark disturbs our clod;  
Nearer we hold of God  
Who gives, than of His tribes that take, I must believe.

Then, welcome each rebuff  
That turns earth's smoothness rough,  
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!  
Be our joys three-parts pain!  
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;  
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!

For thence,—a paradox  
Which comforts while it mocks,—  
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:  
What I aspired to be,  
And was not, comforts me:  
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i' the scale.

What is he but a brute  
Whose flesh has soul to suit,  
Whose spirit works lest arms and legs want play?  
To man, propose this test—  
Thy body at its best,  
How far can that project thy soul on its lone way?

Yet gifts should prove their use:  
I own the Past profuse  
Of power each side, perfection every turn:  
Eyes, ears took in their dole,  
Brain treasured up the whole;  
Should not the heart beat once "How good to live and learn?"

Not once beat "Praise be Thine!  
I see the whole design,  
I, who saw power, see now love perfect too:  
Perfect I call Thy plan:  
Thanks that I was a man!  
Maker, remake, complete,—I trust what Thou shalt do!"

For pleasant is this flesh;

Our soul, in its rose-mesh  
Pulled ever to the earth, still yearns for rest;  
Would we some prize might hold  
To match those manifold  
Possessions of the brute,—gain most, as we did best!

Let us not always say,  
"Spite of this flesh to-day  
I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!"  
As the bird wings and sings,  
Let us cry "All good things  
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!"

Therefore I summon age  
To grant youth's heritage,  
Life's struggle having so far reached its term:  
Thence shall I pass, approved  
A man, for aye removed  
From the developed brute; a god though in the germ.

And I shall thereupon  
Take rest, ere I be gone  
Once more on my adventure brave and new:  
Fearless and unperplexed,  
When I wage battle next,  
What weapons to select, what armour to indue.

Youth ended, I shall try  
My gain or loss thereby;  
Leave the fire ashes, what survives is gold:  
And I shall weigh the same,  
Give life its praise or blame:  
Young, all lay in dispute; I shall know, being old.

For note, when evening shuts,  
A certain moment cuts  
The deed off, calls the glory from the grey:

A whisper from the west  
Shoots—"Add this to the rest,  
Take it and try its worth: here dies another day."

So, still within this life,  
Though lifted o'er its strife,  
Let me discern, compare, pronounce at last,  
This rage was right i' the main,  
That acquiescence vain:  
The Future I may face now I have proved the Past."

For more is not reserved  
To man, with soul just nerved  
To act to-morrow what he learns to-day:  
Here, work enough to watch  
The Master work, and catch  
Hints of the proper craft, tricks of the tool's true play.

As it was better, youth  
Should strive, through acts uncouth,  
Toward making, than repose on aught found made:  
So, better, age, exempt  
From strife, should know, than tempt  
Further. Thou waitedst age: wait death nor be afraid!

Enough now, if the Right  
And Good and Infinite  
Be named here, as thou callest thy hand thine own  
With knowledge absolute,  
Subject to no dispute  
From fools that crowded youth, nor let thee feel alone.

Be there, for once and all,  
Severed great minds from small,  
Announced to each his station in the Past!  
Was I, the world arraigned,  
Were they, my soul disdained,

Right? Let age speak the truth and give us peace at last!

Now, who shall arbitrate?  
Ten men love what I hate,  
Shun what I follow, slight what I receive;  
Ten, who in ears and eyes  
Match me: we all surmise,  
They this thing, and I that: whom shall my soul believe?

Not on the vulgar mass  
Called "work," must sentence pass,  
Things done, that took the eye and had the price;  
O'er which, from level stand,  
The low world laid its hand,  
Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice:

But all, the world's coarse thumb  
And finger failed to plumb,  
So passed in making up the main account;  
All instincts immature,  
All purposes unsure,  
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's amount:

Thoughts hardly to be packed  
Into a narrow act,  
Fancies that broke through language and escaped;  
All I could never be,  
All, men ignored in me,  
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

Ay, note that Potter's wheel,  
That metaphor! and feel  
Why time spins fast, why passive lies our clay,—  
Thou, to whom fools propound,  
When the wine makes its round,  
"Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone, seize to-day!"

Fool! All that is, at all,  
Lasts ever, past recall;  
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:  
What entered into thee,  
*That* was, is, and shall be:  
Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure.

He fixed thee mid this dance  
Of plastic circumstance,  
This Present, thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:  
Machinery just meant  
To give thy soul its bent,  
Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

What though the earlier grooves,  
Which ran the laughing loves  
Around thy base, no longer pause and press?  
What though, about thy rim,  
Skull-things in order grim  
Grow out, in graver mood, obey the sterner stress?

Look not thou down but up!  
To uses of a cup,  
The festal board, lamp's flash and trumpet's peal,  
The new wine's foaming flow,  
The Master's lips a-glow!  
Thou, heaven's consummate cup, what need'st thou with earth's wheel?

But I need, now as then,  
Thee, God, who moulded men;  
And since, not even while the whirl was worst,  
Did I,—to the wheel of life  
With shapes and colours rife,  
Bound dizzily,—mistake my end, to slake Thy thirst:

So, take and use Thy work:  
Amend what flaws may lurk,

What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the aim!  
My times be in Thy hand!  
Perfect the cup as planned!  
Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same!