



Mother, Margaret (née Miller) Davidson (1787-1844), left, with her two courageous and gifted daughters (from center to right) Margaret Miller Davidson (1823-1838) and Lucretia Maria Davidson (1808-1835). Courtesy of The Library Company of Philadelphia. The pictures of the two daughters can also be found in the Duyckincks' *Cyclopedia of American Literature* (1854).

THE DAVIDSON SISTERS IN RETROSPECT

When Edgar Allen Poe came to review¹ the poetical “remains” Lucretia (1808-1825) and Margaret Davdison (1823-1838), victims of tuberculosis at a very young age, he rightly refused to let the tragic circumstances of their brief lives and untimely deaths hold undue sway over his literary judgment; and as he was inclined to think had, albeit perhaps understandably, been the case with Robert Southey, Catherine Sedgwick, and Washington Irving. Although ostensibly moved like everyone else over the two sisters sad end,² he was not *so* especially impressed by their poems; noting that he had seen verse of better quality written by other youngsters and yet who (presumably) garnered nothing like the sympathetic notoriety the Davidson’s received. Yes, the girls distinctly showed encouraging promise. Yet the fact remained they had not, in their writings, attained quite to the level of excellence attributed to them, but which perhaps they *might* have achieved had they lived long enough. Moreover, Poe must have felt, as perhaps did Washington Irving (Margaret’s biographer) also, that readers were being manipulated into unduly favoring the girls’ writings simply out of pity for them; possibly suspecting that the mother, in her pride, grief, and ambition, was forcing the matter. That so many of the girls poems morbidly deal with mortality and the fleetingness of life only contributes to this impression.³

Yet even if the poetry of the Davidson girls taken by itself was usually and not, all in all, exactly stupendous, their tale is nonetheless remains an engrossing one. As well as being a priceless and unusual record of what it was like being a young American girl in the early part of the nineteenth century, there is something not a little stirring and heroic in Margaret’s effort to please her mother, memorialize her elder sister and mourn other lost siblings, while facing death herself so prematurely. To compound matters, it seems further not altogether implausible that the Davidsons found themselves, unwittingly or no, possibly contending with other-worldly personages intruding upon their lives. In reading Lucretia’s biography, she strikes one as having been a haunted child of sorts; in one instance, secretly drawing pictures with cryptic letters written on the reverse side of them and which she didn’t want her mother to see (and then later burning after the mother did discover them), and at other times reportedly falling into strange trances. As for Margaret, the mother states:

“Her visions were usually of an unearthly cast, -- about heaven and angels. She was wandering among the stars; her sainted sisters were her pioneers; her cherub brother walked hand-in-hand with her

¹ See *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Rufus Wilmot Griswold (1850-1856); Volume III: *The Literati, &c.*, pp. 219-228; available at: <http://www.eapoe.org/works/criticism/dvdson.htm>

² For the text of Washington Irving’s biographical sketch of Margaret Davidson (found in *Biographies and Miscellanies* (1866) published by his brother Pierre), and written with no inconsiderable assistance from Margaret’s mother, see: <http://archive.org/details/MargaretMillerDavidsonByWashingtonIrving>

³ Is it only a coincidence that Margaret’s would-be magnum opus was named “Leonore,” and that Poe much later used the name “Lenore” for his dearly departed (poetical) love who’d found a home with “the angels?” On the other hand, German poet Gottfried August Bürger’s (1747–1794) famous ballad “Lenore” (1773) could very likely have been the original source for both Davidson and Poe’s use of that title name.

through the gardens of Paradise! I was always an early riser; but after Margaret began to decline I never disturbed her until time to rise for breakfast, a season of social intercourse in which she delighted to unite, and from which she was never willing to be absent. Often when I have spoken to her she would exclaim, 'Mother, you have disturbed the brightest visions that ever mortal was blessed with! I was in the midst of such scenes of delight! Cannot I have time to finish my dream?' And when I told her how long it was until breakfast, 'It will do, she would say, and again lose herself in her bright imaginings; for I considered these as moments of inspiration rather than sleep. She told me it was not sleep. I never knew but one, except Margaret, who enjoyed this delightful and mysterious source of happiness; that one was her departed sister Lucretia. When awaking from these reveries, an almost ethereal light played about her eye, which seemed to irradiate her whole face. A holy calm pervaded her manner, and in truth she looked more like an angel who had been communing with kindred spirits in the world of light, than anything of a grosser nature."⁴

And what role the mother, not to mention the father, physician Oliver Davidson, acted in all that transpired is potentially a telling question. Was the mother, despite her own protestations and denials, exerting undue pressure on Margaret to emulate her sister while at the same time trying unwisely, albeit actuated by benevolent intention, to promote and campaign for the latter's status as a literary celebrity; thus adding to the already strenuous and unnatural stresses placed on Margaret? It is wrenchingly touching as we follow the mother and Irving's account of Margaret to see the latter attempting to brave the cruel and merciless storms of a very brief life through poetry and being a good and dutiful girl. Herself trapped, faced with death, what was she to do? And yet in hindsight she did marvelously,⁵ and it is this it turns out that makes some of the Davidson's sisters better poems worth remembering. Not, as Poe feared, out of pity, but because the poems are an integral part of a real life drama that is a supreme and humbling inspiration of its kind.

The poems are largely imitative in voice, and the girls not infrequently resort to mechanically formulated apostrophes, stale 19th century wordings, and stiff antiquated phrasing ("Brother!" used in a vocative sense, for example.) Lucretia seems to have been markedly influenced by Byron; often has a certain brooding quality, and an inventive turn such that she might, for purposes of conveniently differentiating the two, be considered moody and imaginative Coleridge in contrast to Margaret's optimistic and affectionate Wordsworth. While it is only well and prudent, as Poe did, to downplay the superiority of the girls' poems, and taking the *poems of themselves*, still a number are notwithstanding passing good, or better than, and do show admirable talents, intelligence, and imaginations; which, had the girls survived, might have justly earned them a place among or near the world's great poets: this in combination with the part (as mentioned) the poems play in helping to tell the astonishing, curious and poignant story of their lives. A story that as a life lesson, as Samuel F. B. Morse (one of Lucretia's biographers), Southey, Segwick and Irving realized, that is assuredly worth the hearing. To illustrate, I've collected here a number of pieces of both Lucretia and Margaret that reflect and help to convey these merits.

Selected poems of LUCRETIA DAVIDSON

ON AN AEOLIAN HARP.

What heavenly music strikes my ravished ear,
So soft, so melancholy, and so clear?
And do the tuneful Nine then touch the lyre,
To fill each bosom with poetic fire?

⁴ And Margaret herself in a letter to a friend wrote: "You ask what I think of animal magnetism? My dear Hetty, I have not troubled my head about it. I hear of it from every quarter, and mentioned so often with contempt, that I have thought of it only as an absurdity. If I understand it rightly, the leading principle is the influence of one mind upon another; there is undoubtedly such an influence, to a reasonable degree, but as to throwing one into a magnetic sleep -- presenting visions before their eyes of scenes passing afar off, it seems almost too ridiculous! Still it may all be *true!*"

⁵ If occasionally stumbling (or impelled to stumble at someone else's prompting) when it came to public relations; where, for instance, in a letter to a friend of her own age, Margaret clumsily affects laughter in praising *Legend of Sleepy Hollow* -- reading of which missive probably made Irving wince a little in embarrassment.

Or does some angel strike the sounding strings,
Catching from echo the wild note he sings?
But hark! another strain, how sweet, how wild!
Now rising high, now sinking low and mild.

And tell me now, ye spirits of the wind,
O, tell me where those artless notes to find!
So lofty now, so loud, so sweet, so clear,
That even angels might delighted hear!

But hark! those notes again majestic rise,
As though some spirit, banished from the
Had hither fled to charm Aeolus wild,
And teach him other music sweet and mild.

Then hither fly, sweet mourner of the air,
Then hither fly, and to my harp repair;
At twilight chant the melancholy lay,
And charm the sorrows of thy soul away.

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#### PETITION OF OLD COMB<sup>6</sup>

Dear mistress, I am old and poor,  
My teeth decayed and gone;  
Oh! give me but one moment's rest,  
For mark, I'm tott'ring down.

Thy raven locks for many a day,  
I've bound around thy brow;  
And now that I am old and lame,  
I prithee let me go.

Have I not, many a weary hour,  
Peep'd o'er thy book or pen;  
And seen what this poor mangled form  
Will ne'er behold again?

A faithful servant I have been,  
But ah! my day is past;  
And all my hope, and all my wish,  
Is liberty at last.

Mark but the glittering well fill'd shelf,  
Where my companions lie;  
Are they not fairer than myself,  
And younger far than I?

Oh! then in pity hie thee there,  
Where thousands wait thy call,  
And twine one in thy raven hair,  
To shroud my shameful fall.

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<sup>6</sup> This was written as an allegorical message of sorts to her mother; though quite what Lucretia meant to impart or communicate we leave to others to speculate.

My days are hast'ning to their close,  
Crack! crack! goes every tooth;  
A thousand pains, a thousand woes,  
Remind me of my youth.

Adieu then -- in distress I die --  
My last hold fails me now;  
Adieu, and may thy elf locks fly,  
For ever 'round thy brow.

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#### THE LAST FLOWER OF THE GARDEN.

*(Written in her thirteenth year.)*

The last flower of the garden was blooming alone,  
The last rays of the sun on its blushing leaves shone;  
Still a glittering drop on its bosom reclined,  
And a few half-blown buds 'midst its leaves were entwined.

Say, lonely one, say, why ling'rest thou here?  
And why on thy bosom reclines the bright tear?  
'T is the tear of a zephyr -- for summer 'twas shed,  
And for all thy companions now withered and dead.

Why ling'rest thou here, when around thee are strown  
The flowers once so lovely, by Autumn blasts blown?  
Say, why, sweetest flowret, the last of thy race,  
Why ling'rest thou here the lone garden to grace?

As I spoke, a rough blast, sent by Winter's own hand,  
Whistled by me, and bent its sweet head to the sand;  
I hastened to raise it -- the dew-drop had fled,  
And the once lovely flower was withered and dead.

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#### ON THE BIRTH OF A SISTER.<sup>7</sup>

*(Written in her fifteenth year.)*

Sweet babe, I cannot hope that thou'lt be freed  
From woes, to all, since earliest time, decreed;  
But mayst thou be with resignation blessed,  
To bear each evil, howsoe'er distressed.

May Hope her anchor lead amid the storm,  
And o'er the tempest rear her angel form!  
May sweet Benevolence, whose words are peace,  
To the rude whirlwinds softly whisper "cease!"

And may Religion, Heaven's own darling child,

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<sup>7</sup> i.e., Margaret.

Teach thee at human cares and griefs to smile;  
Teach thee to look beyond this world of wo,  
To Heaven's high fount, whence mercies ever flow.

And when this vale of tears is safely passed,  
When Death's dark curtain shuts the scene at last,  
May thy freed spirit leave this earthly sod,  
And fly to seek the bosom of thy God.

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## PROPHECY II.

### *TO ANOTHER LADY.*

(Written in her sixteenth year.)

I have told a maiden of hours of grief,  
Of a bleeding heart, of a joyless life;  
I have read her a tale of future wo;  
I have marked her a pathway of sorrow below;  
I have read on the page of her blooming cheek,  
A darker doom than my tongue dare speak.  
Now, maiden, for thee, I will turn mine eye  
To a brighter path through futurity.  
The clouds shall pass from thy brow away,  
And bright be the closing of life's long day;  
The storms shall murmur in silence to sleep,  
And angels around thee their watches shall keep;  
Thou shalt live in the sunbeams of love and delight,  
And thy life shall flow on 'till it fades into night;  
And the twilight of age shall come quietly on;  
Thou wilt feel, yet regret not, that daylight hath flown;  
For the shadows of evening shall melt o'er thy soul,  
And the soft dreams of Heaven around thee shall roll,  
'Till sinking in sweet, dreamless slumber to rest,  
In the arms of thy loved one, still blessing and blest,  
Thy soul shall glide on to its harbour in Heaven,  
Every tear wiped away -- every error forgiven.

~\*\*\*~

### TO A STAR.

(Written in her fifteenth year.)

Thou brightly-glittering star of even,  
Thou gem upon the brow of Heaven,  
Oh! were this fluttering spirit free,  
How quick 't would spread its wings to thee.

How calmly, brightly dost thou shine,  
Like the pure lamp in Virtue's shrine!  
Sure the fair world which thou mayst boast  
Was never ransomed, never lost.

There, beings pure as Heaven's own air,

Their hopes, their joys together share;  
While hovering angels touch the string,  
And seraphs spread the sheltering wing.

There cloudless days and brilliant nights,  
Illumed by Heaven's refulgent lights;  
There seasons, years, unnoticed roll,  
And unregretted by the soul.

Thou little sparkling star of even,  
Thou gem upon an azure Heaven,  
How swiftly will I soar to thee,  
When this imprisoned soul is free.

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TO A FRIEND,
WHOM I HAD NOT SEEN SINCE MY CHILDHOOD.

(Written in her sixteenth year.)

And thou hast marked, in childhood's hour,
The fearless boundings of my breast,
When fresh as Summer's opening flower,
I freely frolicked, and was blessed.

Oh! say, was not this eye more bright?
Were not these lips more wont to smile?
Methinks that then my heart was light,
And I a fearless, joyous child.

And thou didst mark me gay and wild,
My careless, reckless laugh of mirth;
The simple pleasures of a child,
The holiday of man on earth.

Then thou hast seen me in that hour,
When every nerve of life was new,
When pleasures fanned youth's infant flower,
And Hope her witcheries round it threw.

That hour is fading, it has fled,
And I am left in darkness now;
A wand'rer towards a lowly bed,
The grave, that home of all below.

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AMERICA.

*(Written in her seventeenth year.)*

And this was once the realm of nature, where  
Wild as the wind, tho' exquisitely fair,  
She breath'd the mountain breeze, or bow'd to kiss  
The dimpling waters with unbounded bliss.

Here in this Paradise of earth, where first  
 Wild mountain liberty began to burst,  
 Once Nature's temple rose in simple grace,  
 The hill her throne, the world her dwelling place.  
 And where are now her lakes so still and lone,  
 Her thousand streams with bending shrubs o'ergrown?  
 Where her dark cat'racts tumbling from on high,  
 With rainbow arch aspiring to the sky?  
 Her tow'ring pines with fadeless wreaths entwin'd,  
 Her waving alders streaming to the wind?  
 Nor these alone, -- her own, -- her fav'rite child,  
 All fire; all feeling; man untaught and wild;  
 Where can the lost, lone son of nature stray?  
 For art's high car is rolling on its way;  
 A wand'rer of the world, he flies to drown  
 The thoughts of days gone by and pleasures flown,  
 In the deep draught, whose dregs are death and woe,  
 With slavery's iron chain conceal'd below.  
 Once thro' the tangled wood, with noiseless tread  
 And throbbing heart, the lurking warrior sped,  
 Aim'd his sure weapon, won the prize, and turn'd  
 While his high heart with wild ambition burn'd,  
 With song and war-whoop to his native tree,  
 There on its bark to carve the victory.  
 His all of learning did that act comprise,  
 But still in *nature*'s volume doubly wise.

The wayward stream which once with idle bound,  
 Whirl'd on resistless in its foaming round,  
 Now curb'd by art flows on, a wat'ry chain  
 Linking the snow-capp'd mountains to the main.  
 Where once the alder in luxuriance grew,  
 Or the tall pine its tow'ring branches threw  
 Abroad to Heav'n, with dark and haughty brow,  
 There mark the realms of plenty smiling now;  
 There the full sheaf of Ceres richly glows,  
 And Plenty's fountain blesses as it flows;  
 And man, a brute when left to wander wild,  
 A reckless creature, nature's lawless child,  
 What boundless streams of knowledge rolling now,  
 From the full hand of art around him flow!  
 Improvement strides the surge, while from afar,  
 Learning rolls onward in her silver car;  
 Freedom unfurls her banner o'er his head,  
 While peace sleeps sweetly on her native bed.  
 The muse arises from the wildwood glen,  
 And chants her sweet and hallow'd song again,  
 As in those Halcyon days, which bards have sung,  
 When hope was blushing, and when life was young.  
 Thus shall she rise, and thus her sons shall rear  
 Her sacred temple *here*, and only *here*,  
 While Percival, her lov'd and chosen priest,  
 For ever blessing, tho' himself unblest,  
 Shall fan the fire that blazes at her shrine,  
 And charm the ear with numbers half divine.

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A SONG.

*(Written in her fifteenth year.)*

Life is but a troubled ocean,  
Hope a meteor, love a flower  
Which blossoms in the morning beam,  
And withers with the evening hour.

Ambition is a dizzy height,  
And glory, but a lightning gleam;  
Fame is a bubble, dazzling bright,  
Which fairest shines in fortune's beam.

When clouds and darkness veil the skies,  
And sorrow's blast blows loud and chill,  
Friendship shall like a rainbow rise,  
And softly whisper -- peace, be still.

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A VIEW OF DEATH.

When bending o'er the brink of life,  
My trembling soul shall stand,  
Waiting to pass death's awful flood,  
Great God! at thy command;

When weeping friends surround my bed,  
To close my sightless eyes,  
When shattered by the weight of years  
This broken body lies;

When every long lov'd scene of life  
Stands ready to depart,  
When the last sigh which shakes this frame  
Shall rend this bursting heart;

Oh thou great source of joy supreme,  
Whose arm alone can save,  
Dispel the darkness that surrounds  
The entrance to the grave.

Lay thy supporting gentle hand  
Beneath my sinking head,  
And with a ray of love divine,  
Illumine my dying bed.

Leaning on thy dear faithful breast,  
I would resign my breath,  
And in thy loved embraces lose  
The bitterness of death.

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KINDAR BURIAL SERVICE.

VERSIFIED.

We commend our brother to thee, O earth!  
To thee he returns, from thee was his birth!  
Of thee was he formed, he was nourished by thee;  
Take the body, O earth! the spirit is free.

O air! he once breathed thee, through thee he  
survived,  
And in thee and with thee his pure spirit lived;  
That spirit hath fled, and we yield him to thee;  
His ashes be spread, like his soul, far and free.

O fire! we commit his dear relics to thee,  
Thou emblem of purity, spotless and free;  
May his soul, like thy flames, bright and burning  
arise  
To its mansion of bliss, in the star-spangled skies.

O water! receive him; without thy kind aid  
He had parched 'neath the sunbeams or mourned  
in the shade;  
Then take of his body the share which is thine,  
For the spirit hath fled from its mouldering shrine.

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THE WIDE WORLD IS DREAR.

(Written in her sixteenth year.)

O Say not the wide world is lonely and dreary!
O say not that life is a wilderness waste!
There's ever some comfort in store for the weary,
And there's ever some hope for the sorrowful breast.

There are often sweet dreams which will steal o'er
the soul,
Beguiling the mourner to smile through a tear,
That, when waking, the dew-drops of mem'ry may fall,
And blot out, forever, "the wide world is drear."

There is hope for the lost, for the lone one's relief,
Which will beam o'er his pathway of danger and
fear;
There is pleasure's wild throb, and the calm "joy of
grief,"
O then say not the wide world is lonely and drear!

There are fears that are anxious, yet sweet to the
breast,
Some feelings, which language ne'er told to the ear,
Which return to the heart, and there lingering rest,
Soft whispering, this world is not lonely and drear.

'Tis true that the dreams of the evening will fade,
When reason's broad sunbeam shines calmly and
clear;
Still fancy, sweet fancy, will smile o'er the shade,
And say that the world is not lonely and drear.

O then mourn not that life is a wilderness waste!
That each hope is illusive, each prospect is drear,
But remember that man, undeserving, is blest,
And rewarded with smiles for the fall of a tear.

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THE FEAR OF MADNESS.

*WRITTEN WHILE CONFINED TO HER BED, DURING HER LAST ILLNESS.*

There is a something which I dread,  
It is a dark, a fearful thing;  
It steals along with withering tread,  
Or sweeps on wild destruction's wing.

That thought comes o'er me in the hour  
Of grief, of sickness, or of sadness;  
'Tis not the dread of death -- 'tis more,  
It is the dread of madness.

Oh! may these throbbing pulses pause,  
Forgetful of their feverish course;  
May this hot brain, which burning, glows  
With all a fiery whirlpool's force,

Be cold, and motionless, and still,  
A tenant of its lowly bed,  
But let not dark delirium steal --

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[ Unfinished.]

*(This was the last piece she ever wrote.)*

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Selected Poems of MARGARET DAVIDSON

TO A FLOWER.

The blighting hand of winter
Has laid thy glories low;
Oh, where is all thy beauty?
Where is thy freshness now!

Summer has pass'd away,
With every smiling scene,

And nature in decay
Assumes a mournful mien.

How like adversity's rude blast
Upon the helpless one,
When hope's gay visions all have pass'd,
And to oblivion gone.

Yet winter has some beauties left,
Which cheer my heart forlorn;
Nature is not of charms bereft,
Though shrouded by the storm.

I see the sparkling snow;
I view the mountain tops;
I mark the frozen lake below,
Or the dark rugged rocks.

How truly grand the scene!
The giant trees are bare,
No fertile meadows intervene,
No hillocks fresh and fair;

But the cloud-capp'd mountains rise,
Crown'd with purest whiteness,
And mingle with the skies,
That shine with azure brightness.

And solitude, that friend so dear
To each reflecting mind,
Her residence has chosen here
To soothe the heart refined.

1831.

HOME.

(Verses written when nine years of age.)

Yonder orb of dazzling light
Sinks beneath the robe of night,
And the moon, so sweetly pale,
Waits to lift her silver veil.
One by one the stars appear,
Glittering in the heavenly sphere,
And sparkling in their bright array,
Welcome in the close of day.
But home, that sacred, pure retreat,
Where dwells my heart in all that's sweet,
And my own stream, where oft I've stray'd,
And mark'd the beams that o'er it play'd,
Is far away, o'er the waters blue,
Far from my fondly straining view.

1832.

STANZAS.

The power of mind, the force of genius,
Oh, what human heart can tell,
Or the deep and stirring thoughts,
Which in the poet's bosom dwell!

The high and holy dreams of heaven,
Which raise the soul above
This world of care, this sphere of sin,
To realms of light and love.

Oh, who can tell its energy?
The spirit's power and might,
When genius, with sublimest force,
Appoints its upward flight,--

And lifts the struggling soul above
This prison-house of clay,
To roam amid the fancied realms
Of glory and of day!

And breathes immortal vigour
To sustain it through this life,
The index of a higher world,
With power and beauty rife.
Oh, how sublime the very thought,
That this frail form of mine
Contains a spirit destined soon
In purer worlds to shine.

T' unfold its infant energies,
In an immortal clime,
And far more glorious become
Each passing hour of time.

That it contains the heavenly germ
Of future being now,
Created there to beautify,
Where clearer waters flow.

And there expand the glowing bud,
'Mid worlds of light and love,
Through the bright realms of ether,
In glory still to rove.

FRAGMENT.

Oh, for a something more than this,
To fill the void within my breast,
A sweet reality of bliss,
A something bright but unexpress'd.

My spirit longs for something higher
Than life's dull stream can e'er supply,
Something to feed this inward fire,
This spark, which never more can die.

I'd dwell with all that nature forms
Of wild or beautiful or gay,
Bow, when she clothes the heaven with storms,
And join her in her frolic play.

I'd hold companionship with all
Of pure, or noble, or divine,
With glowing heart adoring fall,
And kneel at nature's sylvan shrine.

My soul is like a broken lyre,
Whose loudest, sweetest chord is gone,
A note half trembling on the wire,
A heart that wants an echoing tone.

Where shall I find this shadowy bliss,
This shapeless phantom of my mind,
This something words can ne'er express,
So vague, so faint, so undefined?

Language! thou never canst portray
The fancies floating o'er my soul,
Thou ne'er canst chase the clouds away,
Which o'er my changing visions roll.

1837.

~***~

FRAGMENT.

Oh, I have gazed on forms of light,
Till life seem'd ebbing in a tear,
Till in that fleeting space of sight,
Were merged the feelings of a year.

And I have heard the voice of song,
Till my full heart gush'd wild and free,
And my rapt soul would float along
As if on waves of melody.

But while I glow'd at beauty's glance,
I long'd to feel a deeper thrill,
And while I heard that dying strain,
I sigh'd for something sweeter still.

I have been happy, and my soul
Free from each sorrow, care, regret,
Yet ever in those hours of bliss,
I long'd to find them happier yet

Oft o'er the darkness of my mind,
Some meteor thought has glanced at will,
'Twas bright -- but ever have I sigh'd
To find a fancy brighter still.

Why are these restless, vain desires,
Which always grasp at something more
To feed the spirit's hidden fires,
Which burn unseen, unnoticed soar!

Well might the heathen sage have known
That earth must fail the soul to bind,
That life, and life's tame joys alone,
Could never chain the ethereal mind.⁸

1837.

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STANZAS.

Oh, who may tell the joy, the bliss,  
Which o'er the realm of fancy streams,  
The varied scenes of light and life,  
Which deck the poet's world of dreams?

The ransom'd soul may speed its flight,  
To live and glow in realms above;  
May bathe in floods of endless light,  
And live eternal years of love.

But oh, what voice hath e'er reveal'd  
The glories of that blest abode,  
Save the faint whisperings of the soul,  
The mystic monitors of God!

Thus may the poet's spirit dance  
And revel in his world of joy,  
May form creations at a glance,  
And myriads at a word destroy.

But mortal ear can never hear  
The music of that seraph band;  
Nought save the faint, unearthly tones  
Just wafted from that spirit-land.

None but the poet's soul can know  
The wild and wondrous beauty there;  
The streams of light, which ever flow,  
The ever music-breathing air.

His spirit seeks this heaven awhile,

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<sup>8</sup> Compare to the closing lines of David Humphreys' "Addressed to My Friends at Yale College on My Leaving Them to Join the Army" (1776).

Entranced in glowing dreams of bliss;  
Lives in the muses' hallow'd smile,  
And bathes in founts of happiness.

Then, when he sinks to earth again,  
His hand awakes the trembling lyre,  
He strives to breathe a burning strain,  
Kindled at fancy's altar-fire.  
But oh, how frail the trembling notes,  
Compared       \*     \*     \*  
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1837.

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LINES

*WRITTEN AFTER SHE HERSELF BEGAN TO FEAR THAT HER DISEASE WAS PAST
REMEDY.*

I once thought life was beautiful,
I once thought life was fair,
Nor deem'd that all its light could fade
And leave but darkness there.

But now I know it could not last --
The fairy dream has fled!
Though thirteen summers scarce have past
Above this youthful head.

Yes, life -- 'twas all a dream -- but now
I see thee as thou art;
I see how slight a thing can shade
The sunshine of the heart.

I see that all thy brightest hours,
Unmark'd, have pass'd away;
And now I feel how sweet they were,
I cannot bid them stay.

In childish love or childish play
My happiest hours were spent,
While scarce my infant tongue could say
What joy or pleasure meant.

And now, when my young heart looks up,
Life's gayest smiles to meet;
Now, when in youth her brightest charms
Would seem so doubly sweet;

Now fade the dreams which bound my soul
As with the chains of truth!
Oh that those dreams had stay'd awhile,
To vanish with my youth!

Oh! once did hope look sweetly down,
To check each rising sigh;
But disappointment's iron frown
Has dimm'd her sparkling eye.

And once I loved a brother too,
Our youngest and our best,
But death's unerring arrow sped,
And laid him down to rest.

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But now I know those hours of peace
Were never form'd to last;
That those fair days of guileless joy
Are past -- for ever past!

January, 1837.

William Thomas Sherman

<http://www.gunjones.com> and http://www.scribd.com/wsherman_1

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