

The Defeat of Youth, Aldous Huxley

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I. UNDER THE TREES.

There had been phantoms, pale-remembered shapes
Of this and this occasion, sisterly
In their resemblances, each effigy
Crowned with the same bright hair above the nape's
White rounded firmness, and each body alert
With such swift loveliness, that very rest
Seemed a poised movement: ... phantoms that impressed
But a faint influence and could bless or hurt
No more than dreams. And these ghost things were she;
For formless still, without identity,
Not one she seemed, not clear, but many and dim.
One face among the legions of the street,
Indifferent mystery, she was for him
Something still uncreated, incomplete.

II.

Bright windy sunshine and the shadow of cloud
Quickened the heavy summer to new birth
Of life and motion on the drowsing earth;
The huge elms stir, till all the air is loud
With their awakening from the muffled sleep
Of long hot days. And on the wavering line
That marks the alternate ebb of shade and shine,
Under the trees, a little group is deep
In laughing talk. The shadow as it flows
Across them dims the lustre of a rose,
Quenches the bright clear gold of hair, the green
Of a girl's dress, and life seems faint. The light
Swings back, and in the rose a fire is seen,
Gold hair's aflame and green grows emerald bright.

III.

She leans, and there is laughter in the face
She turns towards him; and it seems a door
Suddenly opened on some desolate place
With a burst of light and music. What before
Was hidden shines in loveliness revealed.
Now first he sees her beautiful, and knows
That he must love her; and the doom is sealed
Of all his happiness and all the woes
That shall be born of pregnant years hereafter.
The swift poise of a head, a flutter of laughter—
And love flows in on him, its vastness pent
Within his narrow life: the pain it brings,
Boundless; for love is infinite discontent
With the poor lonely life of transient things.

IV.

Men see their god, an immanence divine,

Smile through the curve of flesh or moulded clay,
In bare ploughed lands that go sloping away
To meet the sky in one clean exquisite line.
Out of the short-seen dawns of ecstasy
They draw new beauty, whence new thoughts are born
And in their turn conceive, as grains of corn
Germ and create new life and endlessly
Shall live creating. Out of earthly seeds
Springs the aerial flower. One spirit proceeds
Through change, the same in body and in soul—
The spirit of life and love that triumphs still
In its slow struggle towards some far-off goal
Through lust and death and the bitterness of will.

V.

One spirit it is that stirs the fathomless deep
Of human minds, that shakes the elms in storm,
That sings in passionate music, or on warm
Still evenings bosoms forth the tufted sleep
Of thistle-seeds that wait a travelling wind.
One spirit shapes the subtle rhythms of thought
And the long thundering seas; the soul is wrought
Of one stuff with the body-matter and mind
Woven together in so close a mesh
That flowers may blossom into a song, that flesh
May strangely teach the loveliest holiest things
To watching spirits. Truth is brought to birth
Not in some vacant heaven: its beauty springs
From the dear bosom of material earth.

VI. IN THE HAY-LOFT.

The darkness in the loft is sweet and warm
With the stored hay ... darkness intensified
By one bright shaft that enters through the wide
Tall doors from under fringes of a storm
Which makes the doomed sun brighter. On the hay,
Perched mountain-high they sit, and silently
Watch the motes dance and look at the dark sky
And mark how heartbreakingly far away
And yet how close and clear the distance seems,
While all at hand is cloud-brightness of dreams
Unrealisable, yet seen so clear,
So only just beyond the dark. They wait,
Scarce knowing what they wait for, half in fear;
Expectance draws the curtain from their fate.

VII.

The silence of the storm weighs heavily
On their strained spirits: sometimes one will say
Some trivial thing as though to ward away
Mysterious powers, that imminently lie
In wait, with the strong exorcising grace
Of everyday's futility. Desire
Becomes upon a sudden a crystal fire,
Defined and hard:—If he could kiss her face,

Could kiss her hair! As if by chance, her hand
Brushes on his ... Ah, can she understand?
Or is she pedestalled above the touch
Of his desire? He wonders: dare he seek
From her that little, that infinitely much?
And suddenly she kissed him on the cheek.

VIII. MOUNTAINS.

A stronger gust catches the cloud and twists
A spindle of rifted darkness through its heart,
A gash in the damp grey, which, thrust apart,
Reveals black depths a moment. Then the mists
Shut down again; a white uneasy sea
Heaves round the climbers and beneath their feet.
He strains on upwards through the wind and sleet,
Poised, or swift moving, or laboriously
Lifting his weight. And if he should let go,
What would he find down there, down there below
The curtain of the mist? What would he find
Beyond the dim and stifling now and here,
Beneath the unsettled turmoil of his mind?
Oh, there were nameless depths: he shrank with fear.

IX.

The hills more glorious in their coat of snow
Rise all around him, in the valleys run
Bright streams, and there are lakes that catch the sun,
And sunlit fields of emerald far below
That seem alive with inward light. In smoke
The far horizons fade; and there is peace
On everything, a sense of blessed release
From wilful strife. Like some prophetic cloak
The spirit of the mountains has descended
On all the world, and its unrest is ended.
Even the sea, glimpsed far away, seems still,
Hushed to a silver peace its storm and strife.
Mountains of vision, calm above fate and will,
You hold the promise of the freer life.

X. IN THE LITTLE ROOM.

London unfurls its incense-coloured dusk
Before the panes, rich but a while ago
With the charred gold and the red ember-glow
Of dying sunset. Houses quit the husk
Of secrecy, which, through the day, returns
A blank to all enquiry: but at nights
The cheerfulness of fire and lamp invites
The darkness inward, curious of what burns
With such a coloured life when all is dead—
The daylight world outside, with overhead
White clouds, and where we walk, the blaze
Of wet and sunlit streets, shops and the stream
Of glittering traffic—all that the nights erase,
Colour and speed, surviving but in dream.

XI.

Outside the dusk, but in the little room
All is alive with light, which brightly glints
On curving cup or the stiff folds of chintz,
Evoking its own whiteness. Shadows loom,
Bulging and black, upon the walls, where hang
Rich coloured plates of beauties that appeal
Less to the sense of sight than to the feel,
So moistly satin are their breasts. A pang,
Almost of pain, runs through him when he sees
Hanging, a homeless marvel, next to these,
The silken breastplate of a mandarin,
Centuries dead, which he had given her.
Exquisite miracle, when men could spin
Jay's wing and belly of the kingfisher!

XII.

In silence and as though expectantly
She crouches at his feet, while he caresses
His light-drawn fingers with the touch of tresses
Sleeked round her head, close-banded lustrously,
Save where at nape and temple the smooth brown
Sleeves out into a pale transparent mist
Of hair and tangled light. So to exist,
Poised 'twixt the deep of thought where spirits drown
Life in a void impalpable nothingness,
And, on the other side, the pain and stress
Of clamorous action and the gnawing fire
Of will, focal upon a point of earth—even thus
To sit, eternally without desire
And yet self-known, were happiness for us.

XIII.

She turns her head and in a flash of laughter
Looks up at him: and helplessly he feels
That life has circled with returning wheels
Back to a starting-point. Before and after
Merge in this instant, momentarily the same:
For it was thus she leaned and laughing turned
When, manifest, the spirit of beauty burned
In her young body with an inward flame,
And first he knew and loved her. In full tide
Life halts within him, suddenly stupefied.
Sight blackness, lightning-struck; but blindly tender
He draws her up to meet him, and she lies
Close folded by his arms in glad surrender,
Smiling, and with drooped head and half closed eyes.

XIV.

"I give you all; would that I might give more."
He sees the colour dawn across her cheeks
And die again to white; marks as she speaks
The trembling of her lips, as though she bore
Some sudden pain and hardly mastered it.
Within his arms he feels her shuddering,

Piteously trembling like some wild wood-thing
Caught unawares. Compassion infinite
Mounts up within him. Thus to hold and keep
And comfort her distressed, lull her to sleep
And gently kiss her brow and hair and eyes
Seems love perfected—templed high and white
Against the calm of golden autumn skies,
And shining quenchlessly with vestal light.

XV.

But passion ambushed by the aerial shrine
Comes forth to dance, a hoofed obscenity,
His satyr's dance, with laughter in his eye,
And cruelty along the scarlet line
Of his bright smiling mouth. All uncontrolled,
Love's rebel servant, he delights to beat
The maddening quick dry rhythm of goatish feet
Even in the sanctuary, and makes bold
To mime himself the godhead of the place.
He turns in terror from her trance-calmed face,
From the white-lidded languor of her eyes,
From lips that passion never shook before,
But glad in the promise of her sacrifice:
"I give you all; would that I might give more."

XVI.

He is afraid, seeing her lie so still,
So utterly his own; afraid lest she
Should open wide her eyes and let him see
The passionate conquest of her virgin will
Shine there in triumph, starry-bright with tears.
He thrusts her from him: face and hair and breast,
Hands he had touched, lips that his lips had pressed,
Seem things deadly to be desired. He fears
Lest she should body forth in palpable shame
Those dreams and longings that his blood, aflame
Through the hot dark of summer nights, had dreamed
And longed. Must all his love, then, turn to this?
Was lust the end of what so pure had seemed?
He must escape, ah God! her touch, her kiss.

XVII. IN THE PARK.

Laughing, "To-night," I said to him, "the Park
Has turned the garden of a symbolist.
Those old great trees that rise above the mist,
Gold with the light of evening, and the dark
Still water, where the dying sun evokes
An echoed glory—here I recognize
Those ancient gardens mirrored by the eyes
Of poets that hate the world of common folks,
Like you and me and that thin pious crowd,
Which yonder sings its hymns, so humbly proud
Of holiness. The garden of escape
Lies here; a small green world, and still the bride
Of quietness, although an imminent rape

Roars ceaselessly about on every side."

XVIII.

I had forgotten what I had lightly said,
And without speech, without a thought I went,
Steeped in that golden quiet, all content
To drink the transient beauty as it sped
Out of eternal darkness into time
To light and burn and know itself a fire;
Yet doomed—ah, fate of the fulfilled desire!—
To fade, a meteor, paying for the crime
Of living glorious in the denser air
Of our material earth. A strange despair,
An agony, yet strangely, subtly sweet
And tender as an unpassionate caress,
Filled me ... Oh laughter! youth's conceit
Grown almost conscious of youth's feebleness!

XIX.

He spoke abrupt across my dream: "Dear Garden,
A stranger to your magic peace, I stand
Beyond your walls, lost in a fevered land
Of stones and fire. Would that the gods would harden
My soul against its torment, or would blind
Those yearning glimpses of a life at rest
In perfect beauty—glimpses at the best
Through unpassed bars. And here, without, the wind
Of scattering passion blows: and women pass
Glitter-eyed down putrid alleys where the glass
Of some grimed window suddenly parades—
Ah, sickening heart-beat of desire!—the grace
Of bare and milk-warm flesh: the vision fades,
And at the pane shows a blind tortured face."

XX. SELF-TORMENT.

The days pass by, empty of thought and will:
His thought grows stagnant at its very springs,
With every channel on the world of things
Dammed up, and thus, by its long standing still,
Poisons itself and sickens to decay.
All his high love for her, his fair desire,
Loses its light; and a dull rancorous fire,
Burning darkness and bitterness that prey
Upon his heart are left. His spirit burns
Sometimes with hatred, or the hatred turns
To a fierce lust for her, more cruel than hate,
Till he is weary wrestling with its force:
And evermore she haunts him, early and late,
As pitilessly as an old remorse.

XXI.

Streets and the solitude of country places
Were once his friends. But as a man born blind,
Opening his eyes from lovely dreams, might find

The world a desert and men's larval faces
So hateful, he would wish to seek again
The darkness and his old chimeric sight
Of beauties inward—so, that fresh delight,
Vision of bright fields and angelic men,
That love which made him all the world, is gone.
Hating and hated now, he stands alone,
An island-point, measureless gulfs apart
From other lives, from the old happiness
Of being more than self, when heart to heart
Gave all, yet grew the greater, not the less.

XXII. THE QUARRY IN THE WOOD.

Swiftly deliberate, he seeks the place.
A small wind stirs, the copse is bright in the sun:
Like quicksilver the shine and shadow run
Across the leaves. A bramble whips his face,
The tears spring fast, and through the rainbow mist
He sees a world that wavers like the flame
Of a blown candle. Tears of pain and shame,
And lips that once had laughed and sung and kissed
Trembling in the passion of his sobbing breath!
The world a candle shuddering to its death,
And life a darkness, blind and utterly void
Of any love or goodness: all deceit,
This friendship and this God: all shams destroyed,
And truth seen now.
Earth fails beneath his feet.

The end