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265 When autumn comes: which I mean to do
 One day, as I said before.
 —1855

*An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical
 Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician*¹

Karshish,² the picker-up of learning's crumbs,
 The not-incurious in God's handiwork
 (This man's-flesh he hath admirably made,
 Blown like a bubble, kneaded like a paste,
 5 To coop up and keep down on earth a space
 That puff of vapour from his mouth, man's soul)³
 —To Abib, all-sagacious in our art,
 Breeder in me of what poor skill I boast,
 Like me inquisitive how pricks and cracks
 10 Befall the flesh through too much stress and strain,
 Whereby the wily vapour fain would slip
 Back and rejoin its source before the term,—
 And aptest in contrivance (under God)
 To baffle it by deftly stopping such:—
 15 The vagrant Scholar to his Sage at home
 Sends greeting (health and knowledge, fame with
 peace)
 Three samples of true snakestone⁴—rarer still,
 One of the other sort, the melon-shaped,
 (But fitter, pounded fine, for charms than drugs)
 20 And writeth now the twenty-second time.

My journeyings were brought to Jericho:⁵
 Thus I resume. Who studious in our art
 Shall count a little labour⁴ unrepaid?
 I have shed sweat enough, left flesh and bone

¹ Karshish and his master Abib are Browning's inventions. The story of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead is from John 11:1–44.

² Arabic for "one who gathers."

³ a reference to the old doctrine that the soul leaves the body with the last breath in the form of vapour. As in "Fra Lippo Lippi," l. 186.

⁴ a stone used in treating snake bites.

⁵ the city east of Jerusalem.

25 On many a flinty furlong of this land.
 Also, the country-side is all on fire
 With rumours of a marching hitherward:
 Some say Vespasian⁶ cometh, some, his son.
 A black lynx snarled and pricked a tufted ear;
 30 Lust of my blood inflamed his yellow balls:⁷
 I cried and threw my staff and he was gone.
 Twice have the robbers stripped and beaten me,
 And once a town declared me for a spy;
 But at the end, I reach Jerusalem,
 35 Since this poor covert where I pass the night,
 This Bethany,⁸ lies scarce the distance thence
 A man with plague-sores at the third degree
 Runs till he drops down dead. Thou laughest here!
 'Sooth, it elates me, thus reposed and safe,
 40 To void the stuffing of my travel-scrip⁹
 And share with thee whatever Jewry yields.
 A viscid choler¹⁰ is observable
 In tertians,¹¹ I was nearly bold to say;
 And falling-sickness¹² hath a happier cure
 45 Than our school wots of: there's a spider here
 Weaves no web, watches on the ledge of tombs,
 Sprinkled with mottles on an ash-grey back;
 Take five and drop them...but who knows his mind,
 The Syrian runagate¹³ I trust this to?
 50 His service payeth me a sublimate¹⁴
 Blown up his nose to help the ailing eye.
 Best wait: I reach Jerusalem at morn,
 There set in order my experiences,

⁶ Roman Emperor (70–79). He invaded Palestine in 66; his son, Titus, did the same in 70.

⁷ eyeballs.

⁸ a small village near Jerusalem, the home of Lazarus.

⁹ A "scrip" is a small bag.

¹⁰ sticky bile.

¹¹ fevers recurring every other day.

¹² epilepsy.

¹³ vagabond.

¹⁴ product of a refining process.

55 Gather what most deserves, and give thee all—
 Or I might add, Judea's gum-tragacanth¹
 Scales off in purer flakes, shines clearer-grained,
 Cracks 'twixt the pestle and the porphyry,²
 In fine exceeds our produce. Scalp-disease
 Confounds me, crossing so with leprosy—
 60 Thou hadst admired one sort I gained at Zoar—³
 But zeal outruns discretion. Here I end.

Yet stay: my Syrian blinketh gratefully,
 Protesteth his devotion is my price—
 Suppose I write what harms not, though he steal?
 65 I half resolve to tell thee, yet I blush,
 What set me off a-writing first of all.
 An itch I had, a sting to write, a tang!⁴
 For, be it this town's barrenness—or else
 The Man had something in the look of him—
 70 His case has struck me far more than 'tis worth.
 So, pardon if—(lest presently I lose
 In the great press of novelty at hand
 The care and pains this somehow stole from me)
 I bid thee take the thing while fresh in mind,
 75 Almost in sight—for, wilt thou have the truth?
 The very man is gone from me but now,
 Whose ailment is the subject of discourse.
 Thus then, and let thy better wit help all!

'Tis but a case of mania—subinduced⁵
 80 By epilepsy, at the turning-point
 Of trance prolonged unduly some three days:⁶
 When by the exhibition⁷ of some drug
 Or spell, exorcization, stroke of art

¹ a salve.

² a hard rock.

³ town north of the Dead Sea.

⁴ sting.

⁵ brought about as a result of something else.

⁶ actually four days: John 11:17, 39; an incorrect "fact."

⁷ administration.

Unknown to me and which 'twere well to know,
 85 The evil thing out-breaking all at once
 Left the man whole and sound of body indeed,—
 But, flinging (so to speak) life's gates too wide,
 Making a clear house of it too suddenly,
 The first conceit⁸ that entered might inscribe
 90 Whatever it was minded on the wall
 So plainly at that vantage, as it were,
 (First come, first served) that nothing subsequent
 Attaineth to erase those fancy-scrawls
 The just-returned and new-established soul
 95 Hath gotten now so thoroughly by heart
 That henceforth she will read or these or none.
 And first—the man's own firm conviction rests
 That he was dead (in fact they buried him)
 —That he was dead and then restored to life
 100 By a Nazarene physician of his tribe:
 —'Sayeth, the same bade "Rise," and he did rise.
 "Such cases are diurnal," thou wilt cry.
 Not so this figment!—not, that such a fume,⁹
 Instead of giving way to time and health,
 105 Should eat itself into the life of life,
 As saffron tingeth flesh, blood, bones and all!
 For see, how he takes up the after-life.
 The man—it is one Lazarus a Jew,
 Sanguine,¹⁰ proportioned, fifty years of age,¹¹
 110 The body's habit wholly laudable,¹²
 As much, indeed, beyond the common health
 As he were made and put aside to show.
 Think, could we penetrate by any drug
 And bathe the wearied soul and worried flesh,
 115 And bring it clear and fair, by three days' sleep!
 Whence has the man the balm that brightens all?
 This grown man eyes the world now like a child.

⁸ fancy.

⁹ hallucination.

¹⁰ robust.

¹¹ Karshish's "facts" are often wrong: Lazarus would have been well over sixty.

¹² healthy.

ROBERT BROWNING

Some elders of his tribe, I should premise,
 Led in their friend, obedient as a sheep,
 120 To bear my inquisition. While they spoke,
 Now sharply, now with sorrow, -told the case,—
 He listened not except I spoke to him,
 But folded his two hands and let them talk,
 Watching the flies that buzzed: and yet no fool.
 125 And that's a sample how his years must go.
 Look, if a beggar, in fixed middle-life,
 Should find a treasure,—can he use the same
 With straitened habits and with tastes starved small,
 And take at once to his impoverished brain
 130 The sudden element that changes things,
 That sets the undreamed-of rapture at his hand
 And puts the cheap old joy in the scorned dust?
 Is he not such an one as moves to mirth—
 Warily parsimonious, when no need,
 135 Wasteful as drunkenness at undue times?
 All prudent counsel as to what befits
 The golden mean, is lost on such an one:
 The man's fantastic will is the man's law.
 So here—we call the treasure knowledge, say,
 140 Increased beyond the fleshly faculty—
 Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,
 Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven:
 The man is witless of the size, the sum,
 The value in proportion of all things,
 145 Or whether it be little or be much.
 Discourse to him of prodigious armaments
 Assembled to besiege his city now,
 And of the passing of a mule with gourds—
 'Tis one! Then take it on the other side,
 150 Speak of some trifling fact,—he will gaze rapt
 With stupor at its very littleness,
 (Far as I see) as if in that indeed
 He caught prodigious import, whole results;
 And so will turn to us the bystanders
 155 In ever the same stupor (note this point)
 That we too see not with his opened eyes.
 Wonder and doubt come wrongly into play,
 Preposterously, at cross-purposes.

Should his child sicken unto death,—why, look
 160 For scarce abatement of his cheerfulness,
 Or pretermission¹ of the daily craft!
 While a word, gesture, glance from that same child
 At play or in the school or laid asleep,
 Will startle him to an agony of fear,
 165 Exasperation, just as like. Demand
 The reason why—" 'tis but a word," object—
 "A gesture"—he regards thee as our lord
 Who lived there in the pyramid alone,
 Looked at us (dost thou mind?) when, being young,
 170 We both would unadvisedly recite
 Some charm's beginning, from that book of his,
 Able to bid the sun throb wide and burst
 All into stars, as suns grown old are wont.
 Thou and the child have each a veil alike
 175 Thrown o'er your heads, from under which ye both
 Stretch your blind hands and trifle with a match
 Over a mine of Greek fire,² did ye know!
 He holds on firmly to some thread of life—
 (It is the life to lead perforcedly)
 180 Which runs across some vast distracting orb
 Of glory on either side that meagre thread,
 Which, conscious of, he must not enter yet—
 The spiritual life around the earthly life:
 The law of that is known to him as this,
 185 His heart and brain move there, his feet stay here.
 So is the man perplexed with impulses
 Sudden to start off crosswise, not straight on,
 Proclaiming what is right and wrong across,
 And not along, this 'black thread through the blaze—
 190 "It should be" balked by "here it cannot be."
 And oft the man's soul springs into his face
 As if he saw again and heard again
 His sage that bade him "Rise" and he did rise.
 Something, a word, a tick³ o' the blood within
 195 Admonishes: then back he sinks at once

¹ neglecting.

² an incendiary mixture, but not used until the seventh century.

³ pulse-beat.

To ashes, who was very fire before,
 In sedulous recurrence to his trade
 Whereby he earneth him the daily bread;
 And studiously the humbler for that pride,
 200 Professedly the faultier that he knows
 God's secret, while he holds the thread of life.
 Indeed the especial marking of the man
 Is prone submission to the heavenly will—
 Seeing it, what it is, and why it is.
 205 'Sayeth, he will wait patient to the last
 For that same death which must restore his being
 To equilibrium, body loosening soul
 Divorced even now by premature full growth:
 He will live, nay, it pleaseth him to live
 210 So long as God please, and just how God please.
 He even seeketh not to please God more.
 (Which meaneth, otherwise) than as God please.
 Hence, I perceive not he affects to preach
 The doctrine of his sect whate'er it be,
 215 Make proselytes as madmen thirst to do:
 How can he give his neighbour the real ground,
 His own conviction? Ardent as he is—
 Call his great truth a lie, why, still the old
 "Be it as God please" reassureth him.
 220 I probed the sore as thy disciple should:
 "How, beast," said I, "this stolid carelessness
 Sufficeth¹ thee, when Rome is on her march
 To stamp out like a little spark thy town,
 Thy tribe, thy crazy tale and thee at once?"
 225 He merely looked with his large eyes on me.
 The man is apathetic, you deduce?
 Contrariwise, he loves both old and young,
 Able and weak, affects² the very brutes
 And birds—how say I? flowers of the field—
 230 As a wise workman recognizes tools
 In a master's workshop, loving what they make.
 Thus is the man, as harmless as a lamb:
 Only impatient, let him do his best,

¹ may it satisfy.

² his affection for.

At ignorance and carelessness and sin—
 235 An indignation which is promptly curbed:
 As when in certain travels I have feigned
 To be an ignoramus in our art
 According to some preconceived design,
 And happed to hear the land's practitioners
 240 Steeped in conceit sublimed³ by ignorance,
 Prattle fantastically on disease,
 Its cause and cure—and I must hold my peace!

Thou wilt object—Why have I not ere this
 Sought out the sage himself, the Nazarene
 245 Who wrought this cure, inquiring at the source,
 Conferring with the frankness that befits?
 Alas! it grieveth me, the learned leech
 Perished in a tumult many years ago,
 Accused,—our learning's fate,—of wizardry,
 250 Rebellion, to the setting up a rule
 And creed prodigious⁴ as described to me.
 His death, which happened when the earthquake fell
 (Prefiguring, as soon appeared, the loss
 To occult learning in our lord the sage
 255 Who lived there in the pyramid alone)
 Was wrought by the mad people—that's their wont!
 On vain recourse, as I conjecture it,
 To his tried virtue, for miraculous help—
 How could he stop the earthquake? That's their way!
 260 The other imputations must be lies:
 But take one, though I loathe to give it thee,
 In mere respect for any good man's fame.
 (And after all, our patient Lazarus
 Is stark mad; should we count on what he says?
 265 Perhaps not: though in writing to a leech
 'Tis well to keep back nothing of a case.)
 This man so cured regards the curer, then,
 As—God forgive me! who but God himself,
 Creator and sustainer of the world,
 270 That came and dwelt in flesh on it awhile!

³ fancy refined by.

⁴ monstrous.

ROBERT BROWNING

—'Sayeth that such as one was born and lived,
 Taught, healed the sick, broke bread at his own house,
 Then died, with Lazarus by, for aught I know,
 And yet was... what I said nor choose repeat,
 275 And must have so avouched himself, in fact,
 In hearing of this very Lazarus
 Who saith—but why all this of what he saith?
 Why write of trivial matters, things of price
 Calling at every moment for remark?
 280 I noticed on the margin of a pool
 Blue-flowering borage,¹ the Aleppo² sort,
 Aboundeth, very nitrous. It is strange!

Thy pardon for this long and tedious case,
 Which, now that I review it, needs must seem
 285 Unduly dwelt on, prolixly set forth!
 Nor I myself discern in what is writ
 Good cause for the peculiar interest
 And awe indeed this man has touched me with.
 Perhaps the journey's end, the weariness
 290 Had wrought upon me first. I met him thus:
 I crossed a ridge of short sharp broken hills
 Like an old lion's cheek teeth. Out there came
 A moon made like a face with certain spots
 Multiform, manifold and menacing;
 295 Then a wind rose behind me. So we met
 In this old sleepy town at unaware,
 The man and I. I send thee what is writ.
 Regard it as a chance, a matter risked
 To this ambiguous Syrian—he may lose,
 300 Or steal, or give it thee with equal good.
 Jerusalem's repose shall make amends
 For time this letter wastes, thy time and mine;
 Till when, once more thy pardon and farewell!

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
 305 So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too—
 So, through the thunder comes a human voice

¹ herb, used medicinally.

² town in northern Syria.

Saying, "O heart I made, a heart beats here!
 Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!
 Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of mine,
 310 But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
 And thou must love me who have died for thee!"
 The madman saith He³ said so: it is strange.
 —1855

"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came"⁴

(See Edgar's song in *Lear*)

I

My first thought was, he lied in every word,
 That hoary cripple, with malicious eye
 Askance to watch the working of his lie
 On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford
 5 Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored
 Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby.

II

What else should he be set for, with his staff?
 What, save to waylay with his lies, ensnare
 All travellers who might find him posted there,
 10 And ask the road? I guessed what skull-like laugh
 Would break, what crutch 'gin write my epitaph
 For pastime in the dusty thoroughfare,

III

If at his counsel I should turn aside
 Into that ominous tract which, all agree,
 15 Hides the Dark Tower. Yet acquiescingly
 I did turn as he pointed: neither pride

³ The capital "H" could suggest that Karshish does not (like Cleon) reject the new religion.

⁴ The title quotes Edgar (playing the role of the madman, Poor Tom) in *King Lear* 3.4.186. A childe is a candidate for knighthood. Frequently questioned about the poem, Browning said that it came upon him "as a kind of dream" that had to be written, that he did not know what it meant, that he was "very fond" of it, that it was "only fantasy" with "no allegorical intention." Asked if it meant that "he that endureth to the end shall be saved," Browning replied, "Just about that." The poem and its meaning and sources, have been extensively debated.