



# Sonnet Reflections

by Angie

*How do I love thee, let me count the ways ....*  
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Valentine's Day evening had arrived at last, after a day of gentle games and a special meal with treats for the children and adults in the dining hall. Now couples and lovers had retired to their chambers for their private recognition of the day.

Catherine and Vincent were laying on his bed. They had decided to stay below rather than return to their brownstone.

Catherine always found Vincent's chamber most romantic. After all, she had been in it often and it always seemed to evoke beautiful dreams - dreams that were now a reality.

Catherine wore a soft tunnel nightgown and Vincent a nightshirt that reached almost to his ankles. It was chilly in the chamber, although the brazier was lit. But neither was cold.

For this evening, they had decided to delve into Elizabeth Barrett Browning's love sonnets, finding much that resonated with them. It seemed theirs was not the only love affair that had its ups and downs.

Catherine had suggested they take turns reading a line or two from a sonnet, challenging the other to find a match in another one. Each sonnet could be used only once, either as the challenge or as the

reply. They would keep a tally of the ones used. The one who could not match a challenge would have to pay a penalty, the nature of which would be decided by the winner.

“Ladies first,” Vincent remarked, smiling at Catherine. She picked two lines from the first sonnet, then crossed out the number on their list

*“Guess now who holds thee?” --- ‘Death,’ I said. But, there,  
The silver answer rang, --- ‘Not Death, but Love.’ (I)*

Vincent looked at her. He knew the sonnets well, often feeling that they could have been addressing himself as much as Robert Browning. He paged through the book, seeking the passage he recalled. Then he recited it to her.

*“A heavy heart, Belovèd, have I borne  
From year to year until I saw thy face,” (XXV)*

He crossed out the appropriate number and considered what to use to challenge Catherine. Ah! He crossed out his choice.

*“Men could not part us with their worldly jars,  
Nor the seas change us, nor the tempests bend;” (II)*

Catherine looked into Vincent eyes and riffled through the book, finding a suitable reply.

*“Met in thee, and from out thee overcame  
My soul with satisfaction of all wants” (XXVI)*

Catherine looked at the third sonnet and smiled her challenge as she read her choice.

*“A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through  
The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?” (III)*

Vincent mouth twitched, but he answered quickly from the next sonnet.

*“Of desolation! there’s a voice within  
that weeps ... as thou must sing ... alone, aloof.” (IV)*

He decided two could play the chronological game.

*“What a great heap of grief lay hid in me,  
And how the red wild sparkles dimly burn” (V)*

Catherine’s brow creased as she searched for a rejoinder. She wasn’t worried yet. There were, after all, 44 sonnets.

*“For frequent tears have run  
The colours from my life,” (VIII)*

She decided to try a little harder to stump Vincent.

*“Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand  
Henceforward in thy shadow.” (VI)*

Well, at least she had given up choosing passages in order, he thought. But there were still many more to delve into. He found a suitable couplet.

*“I love thee ... mark! ... I love thee---in thy sight  
I stand transfigured, glorified aright,” (X)*

Vincent countered with his own challenge.

*“The face of all the world is changed, I think,  
Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul” (VII)*

Catherine smiled.

*“Instruct me how to thank thee! Oh, to shoot  
My soul’s full meaning into future years.” (XLI)*

Well, perhaps they were too well-matched, she thought. She sought a more difficult one for him.

*“But love me for love’s sake, that evermore  
Thou mayst love on, through love’s eternity” (XIV)*

Vincent regarded Catherine and spoke softly.

*“And write me new my future’s epigraph,  
New angel mine, unhopèd for in the world!” (XLII)*

Catherine looked at him and felt her heart swell with love.

He read his next challenge to her, his heart full as he mused how appropriate it was.

*“To come and touch my hand ... a simple thing,  
Yet I wept for it!” (XXVIII)*

Catherine didn’t miss the catch in his voice. They had long ago retired his fear about his hands, but the memory could not be so easily forgotten. She found a rejoinder.

*“Can it be right to give what I can give?  
To let thee sit beneath the fall of tears” (IX)*

Oh, very good, Catherine,” Vincent remarked, remembering that seminal moment on her balcony - a she had too, obviously. She smiled at him and recited her challenge.

*“O Belovèd, it is plain  
I am not of thy worth nor for thy place!” (XI)*

Vincent replied quickly with *“Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth.” (XVI)*

He considered what to challenge her with next. Maybe it was time for a little strategy. He found one that reminded him of the days before Catherine.

*“What time I sat alone here in the snow  
And saw no footprint, heard the silence sink” (XXI)*

Catherine caught the reference and she frowned. It took her a little longer, but she found a response.

*“A place to stand and love in for a day” (XXII)*

Vincent grunted. He had not expected her to find that one!

Meanwhile, Catherine looked for a more difficult one. She noticed that the list of sonnets was much reduced and sighed. Ah, there was one. It could have been written by her.

*“I lean upon thee, Dear, without alarm,  
And feel as safe as guarded by a charm” (XXIV)*

Vincent thought about that one for a few moments. He didn't miss the allusion and reflected how he loved to feel her leaning on him. But he had to concentrate on the game. He located a one liner.

*“I find thee; I am safe, and strong, and glad.” (XXVII)*

Nuts, Catherine thought. He's too good at this. I bet he knows them all by heart! Nevertheless, she wasn't going to give up. She smiled at him and caught the twinkle in his eyes.

*“The love I bear thee ....  
I drop it at thy feet. I cannot teach  
My hand to hold my spirit so far off” (XIII)*

Vincent's eyebrows rose. “That's three lines, Catherine.”

“Then you can do the same, Vincent. You have to admit the three lines could not be separated and still make sense,” she replied.

Vincent sighed, too melodramatically. “Very well.”

He replied almost too quickly, she thought as he recited his reply.

*“Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee  
And breathe within thy shadow a new air,  
I do not think of thee---I am too near thee.” (XXIX)*

He grinned at her, daring her to say something. Her mouth twitched in response. It was his turn again and the choices were many less. But he found one.

*“I could not wear here, plainer to my sight,  
Than that first kiss,” (XXXVIII),* he challenged her.

Catherine's mouth rose at one corner as she sought an answer from the unused sonnets. She made a sigh of relief as she found a response.

*“This mutual kiss drop down between us both”(XXXVI)*

Vincent frowned. “Tenuous, Catherine. But I’ll allow it.”  
She gazed at the remaining sonnets and chose an excerpt she thought might challenge him.

*“And that I love (O soul, we must be meek!)  
Is by thee only, whom I love alone.” (XII)*

Vincent replied almost as quickly as before.

*“I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life!”(XLIII)*

Vincent recited his next challenge and smiled at her.

*“And from my poet’s forehead to my heart  
Receive this lock which outweighs argosies,” (XIX)*

Catherine’s brow creased. Surely this was too easy. She sighed, but knew there was no choice.

*“I never gave a lock of hair away  
To a man, Dearest, except this to thee,’ (XVIII)”*

She looked carefully at the remaining sonnets. Vincent was a superb chess player, so he definitely had a plan. Well, let him try this one, she thought.

*“Accuse me not, beseech thee, that I wear  
Too calm and sad a face in front of thine” (XV)*

Vincent replied almost too quickly.

*“I see thine image through my tears to-night,  
And yet to-day I saw thee smiling.”( XXX)*

He recited his own challenge.

*“Then love me, Love! look on me---breathe on me!” (XXIII)*

Catherine realized there could be more than one answer to this, and after a little consideration chose her answer.

*“To glance up in some face that proved me dear  
With the look of its eyes.” (XXXIII)*

Vincent nodded. She was holding up remarkably well, he thought.  
What would she give him now? Ah, here it came.

*“My poet, thou canst touch on all the notes”(XVII)*

Vincent frowned slightly, trying not to think of her touching him. Reluctantly, he reined himself and looked at the remaining choices. Then he read his reply.

*“Thou comest! all is said without a word.” (XXXI)*

Catherine grunted. He did that one well. Notes weren't words. Bother! She waited worriedly for what he would choose as her challenge.

*“Say over again, and yet once over again,  
That thou dost love me.” (XX)*

Catherine found a reply to that almost too easily. She frowned as she again wondered at his strategy.

*“Yet love me---wilt thou? Open thine heart wide,” (XXXV)*

His head went up and she gave herself a kudo for that reply. She looked for one to give him pause. Ah!

*“Instruct thine eyes to keep their colours true,  
And tell thy soul, their roots are left in mine.” (XLIV)*

Vincent thought of her green eyes and felt it was about time they finished the game. They seemed to be too well matched. He chose a couplet in reply.

*“A lover, my Belovèd! thou canst wait  
Through sorrow and sickness, to bring souls to touch,” (XL)*

He scanned the remainder and picked one for Catherine.

*“Yet still my heart goes to thee---ponder how---  
Not as to a single good, but all my good!” XXXIV*

Catherine was finding herself distracted by his seductive voice reading the beautiful lines. Soon, she promised herself. First let's get this over with. She gave a small inward sigh of relief when she finally found a response.

*“Nothing repels thee, Dearest, teach me so  
To pour out gratitude, as thou dost, good!” (XXXIX)*

Vincent nodded and reflected that this challenge had gone on longer than he had expected. He was hungry.

Oh what the heck, Catherine thought. There were not many choices. She recited her challenge.

*“Their doubt and dread, and blindly to forsake  
Thy purity of likeness and distort  
Thy worthiest love to a worthless counterfeit.” (XXXVII)*

Vincent chuckled. “Three lines again? Catherine!” She shrugged, then tensed a little as he found a reply and read it slowly and seductively.

*“The first time that the sun rose on thine oath  
To love me, I looked forward to the moon  
To slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon” (XXXII)*

And there are no more sonnets, Catherine,” Vincent remarked, holding up the list to demonstrate his point. “I believe we have a draw.”

“You knew that would happen,” she accused him.

“I knew that it might,” he admitted. “And since you started, I would be last, since there are an even number of sonnets

“Humph,” she replied. “So now what do we do? Do we penalize each other?”

“I have a suggestion, Catherine. Not a penalty, but a treat. This has been ... wearying. We need something to boost our energy. I have it here.”

He brought out a what she had assumed to be a pot of water. Inside it though was a glass dish resting on a block of ice, keeping it cold.

“What is it?” she asked, her mouth watering. It looked wonderful - a thick layer of whipped cream topped something a dusty ruby in colour.

“It’s a trifle, Catherine, one William learned a long time ago. It’s an old, simple recipe from New Zealand. If it has a name, he never heard it. William calls it ‘Seat-of-the-Pants Trifle’.”

Catherine laughed. “What a name. What’s in it?”

Vincent chuckled, “William likes to keep his recipes secret, but he let me help make this one, because he said we might want to try it in our own kitchen.

“But Catherine, I think we should eat this before it warms up. I’ll tell you about it as we eat.”

Catherine moved to sit at the table next to Vincent and regarded the trifle wonderingly.

“It certainly looks like nothing I’ve seen before,” she remarked as he handed her a glass dish with a large serving, and a spoon, then gave himself the same.

Catherine didn’t wait on formalities and quickly scooped up a spoonful and put it in her mouth. Her eyes closed and she licked her lips with delight. When she opened them, she saw Vincent licking his mouth as well. A little cream had found its way into his cleft. She couldn’t take her eyes off it. She leaned over and licked the cream off while he sat still, stunned.

“Sorry. Just had to do that,” she mumbled, gazing into his eyes, which had gone dark with desire. This would never do. She wanted to finish this dessert. There was still plenty of time for other amusements.

“So tell me about this recipe, Vincent,” she requested, to distract herself and him.

“I’ll tell you how we made it, with his comments,” Vincent replied, getting himself under control.

He smiled as he remembered his session in the kitchen the previous evening, He had tried not to relay anything along the bond that would let Catherine know he was up to something. William had been in a good humour.

“First he took a couple of round sponge cakes and broke them into small pieces. Then he had me crumble them with a fork and put them into this glass dish,” Vincent began.



“Then he told me to mix a jar of raspberry jam into the crumbs.”

Catherine listened intently, picturing a bowl filled with reddish mush. She wasn't sure what to think of that.

“Next he mixed some dry sherry Peter left for the purpose, with twice as much milk.

“It looked awful, Catherine, and I told him so. His reply was ‘who cares?’”

Vincent looked mildly affronted when Catherine giggled. He continued.

“Then he told me to mix the milk mixture into the jam and sponge slowly, so that the result was cake-like, as he called it. He said it needs to be at least three inches thick. I think it's all of that,” Vincent remarked, looking at what remained in the glass bowl.



“Um,” Catherine grunted around another mouthful.

“Then he had me smooth it out and put it on ice in the larder. After lunch, I added whipped cream to it and put in this pot to keep cool.”

Vincent paused to take a mouthful. Too much talk, not enough eating, he berated himself.

“When did you do this?” Catherine asked, curious.

“Last night. William said it would taste much better the next day.”

“I would never argue with William,” Catherine mumbled, her mouth again full of trifle. “It's scrumptious.”

“It is,” Vincent agreed. “And I also have some more of that sherry. Would you like some?”

“Oh yes,” Catherine replied. Sherry always warmed her to her toes and the dry ones were her favourite.

Vincent reached behind a stack of books and brought up a small tray with a bottle of dry sherry and two cranberry-coloured glasses. He poured them both a generous serving.

“To us,” Catherine toasted and they clinked glasses. “A jug of sherry, a dish of trifle, and thou,” she misquoted.

“*And wilderness were paradise enow,*” Vincent added.

Both sighed.

“Browning may have written the best love sonnets, good soul food,” Catherine said softly, “but I think Omar Khayyam must be credited for combining love with less esoteric things.”

“Yes,” Vincent agreed. “Love is wonderful, but it cannot survive long without something to fuel it.”

“And we will need our energy soon, Vincent.”

“Yes.”

“But first we must finish what we started,” she whispered.

“Indeed, Catherine. One must always do that.”

He scooped out a final, generous helping each, which they happily matched with more sherry.

They both sighed when they regarded the empty bowl.

“Whew, Vincent, now I need to work some of this off.”

He gave her a feral grin in answer.

And in due course, after a suitable pause to let their dessert digest, and more Elizabeth Barrett Browning, they indulged in their favourite work-out.

END

