

Poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

This Lime Tree Bower My Prison¹

Addressed to Charles Lamb, of the India House, London²

Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
This lime tree bower my prison! I have lost
Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
5 Had dimmed mine eyes to blindness! They,
meanwhile,
Friends, whom I never more may meet again,
On springy heath, along the hilltop edge,
Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,
To that still roaring dell, of which I told;
10 The roaring dell, o' wooded, narrow, deep,
And only speckled by the midday sun;
Where its slim trunk the ash from rock to rock
Flings arching like a bridge—that branchless ash,
Unsunned and damp, whose few poor yellow leaves
15 Ne'er tremble in the gale, yet tremble still,
Fanned by the waterfall! and there my friends
Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,
That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)
Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge
Of the blue clay stone.
20 Now, my friends emerge
Beneath the wide wide Heaven—and view again
The many-steepled tract magnificent
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
With some fair bark,³ perhaps, whose sails light up
25 The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles

Of purple shadow! Yes! they wander on
In gladness all; but thou, methinks, most glad,
My gentle-hearted Charles! for thou hast pined
And hungered after Nature, many a year,
30 In the great City pent, winning thy way
With sad yet patient soul, through evil and pain
And strange calamity!⁴ Ah! slowly sink
Behind the western ridge, thou glorious Sun!
Shine in the slant beams of the sinking orb,
35 Ye purple heath flowers! richer burn, ye clouds!
Live in the yellow light, ye distant groves!
And kindle, thou blue Ocean! So my friend
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
40 Less gross than bodily; and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when yet he makes
Spirits perceive his presence.

A delight

45 Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
As I myself were there! Nor in this bower,
This little lime tree bower, have I not marked
Much that has soothed me. Pale beneath the blaze
Hung the transparent foliage; and I watched
Some broad and sunny leaf, and loved to see
50 The shadow of the leaf and stem above
Dappling its sunshine! And that walnut tree
Was richly tinged, and a deep radiance lay
Full on the ancient ivy, which usurps
Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
55 Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
Through the late twilight: and though now the bat

¹ The occasion of the poem is stated this way: “In the June of 1797 some long-expected friends paid a visit to the author’s cottage; and on the morning of their arrival, he met with an accident, which disabled him from walking during the whole time of their stay. One evening, when they had left him for a few hours, he composed the following lines in the garden bower.” The punctuation of the poem has been modernized.

² As he states in his essay “The Superannuated Man,” Charles Lamb worked for the East India Tea Company in London, discontent with his occupation for thirty-six years when his employers offered him a generous pension. Lamb and Coleridge were friends and had a lively correspondence. They were schoolmates at Christ’s Hospital in London, a charity school. (*Britannica*. “Samuel Taylor Coleridge.” <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Taylor-Coleridge>. Accessed on December 14, 2024.)

³ bark ship

⁴ *strange calamity*. the strange circumstances surrounding the recent death of Charles Lamb’s mother. Charles was twenty-years old at the time.

Wheels silent by, and not a swallow twitters,
 Yet still the solitary humblebee⁵
 60 Sings in the bean flower! Henceforth I shall know
 That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
 No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
 No waste so vacant, but may well employ
 Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
 Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes
 65 'Tis well to be bereft of promised good,
 That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
 With lively joy the joys we cannot share.
 My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook
 Beat its straight path along the dusky air
 70 Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing
 (Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
 Had crossed the mighty Orb's dilated glory,
 While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still,
 Flew creaking o'er thy head, and had a charm
 For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
 No sound is dissonant which tells of Life.

Frost at Midnight⁶

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
 Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
 Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
 5 The inmates of my cottage,⁷ all at rest,
 Have left me to that solitude, which suits
 Abstruser musings: save that at my side
 My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
 'Tis calm indeed! so calm that it disturbs
 And vexes meditation with its strange
 10 And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
 This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
 With all the numberless goings-on of life,

Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame
 Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
 15 Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
 Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
 Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
 Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
 Making it a companionable form,
 20 Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
 By its own moods interprets, everywhere
 Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
 And makes a toy of Thought.
 But O! how oft,
 How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
 25 Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
 To watch that fluttering *stranger!* and as oft
 With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
 Of my sweet birthplace,⁸ and the old church tower,
 Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
 30 From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
 So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
 With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
 Most like articulate sounds of things to come!
 So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
 35 Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!
 And so I brooded all the following morn,
 Awed by the stern preceptor's⁹ face, mine eye
 Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
 Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
 A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
 40 For still I hoped to see the *stranger's* face,
 Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
 My playmate when we both were clothed alike!
 Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
 45 Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,
 Fill up the intersperséd vacancies

⁵ *humblebee* bumblebee

⁶ The punctuation of the poem has been modernized.

⁷ *inmates of my cottage* those dwelling in his cottage in Somerset. (Britannica. "Samuel Taylor Coleridge." <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Taylor-Coleridge>. Accessed on December 14, 2024.) At the time that this poem was published in February, 1798, Coleridge had been married to Sara Fricker for several years. Sara was the sister of Southey's wife, Edith Fricker.

⁸ Coleridge was born in 1772 in Devonshire, located in southwest England. (Bridgwater, p. 449 and 568)

⁹ *preceptor* instructor at school

And momentary pauses of the thought!
My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
50 And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
And in far other scenes! For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
55 By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
60 The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.
65 Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple tree, while the night that
70 Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.