

BRITTEN: Canticles I–V • The Heart of the Matter

8.557202

[1] Cantic I, Op. 40 – My Beloved is Mine

Text: Francis Quarles (1592–1644)

Ev'n like two little bank divided brooks
That wash the pebbles with their wanton streams,
And having ranged and searched a thousand nooks
Meet both at length at silver breasted Thames
Where in a greater current they conjoin,
So I my best beloved's am,
So he is mine!

Ev'n so we met and after long pursuit
Ev'n so we joined. We both became entire.
No need for either to renew a suit
For I was flax, and he was flames of fire.
Our firm united souls did more than twine.
So I my best beloved's am,
So he is mine.

If all those glittering monarchs, that command
The servile quarters of this earthly ball
Should tender in exchange their shares of land
I would not change my fortunes for them all;
Their wealth is but a counter to my coin:
The world's but theirs;
But my beloved's mine.

Nor time, nor place, nor chance, nor death can bow
My least desires unto the least remove.
He's firmly mine by oath, I his by vow.
He's mine by faith and I am his by love.
He's mine by water, I am his by wine:
Thus I my best beloved's am,
Thus he is mine.

He is my altar, I his holy place,
I am his guest and he my living food.
I'm his by penitence, he mine by grace,
I'm his by purchase, he is mine by blood.
He's my supporting elm and I his vine:
Thus I my best beloved's am,
Thus he is mine.

He gives me wealth: I give him all my vows:
I give him songs, he gives me length of days.
With wreaths of grace he crowns my longing brows
And I his temples with a crown of praise
Which he accepts; an everlasting sign
That I my best beloved's am,
That he is mine.

[2] Cantic II, Op. 51 – Abraham and Isaac

*Text: from the Chester Miracle Play,
Histories of Lot and Abraham*

God:
Abraham, my servant, Abraham,
Take Isaac, thy son by name,
That thou lovest the best of all,
And in sacrifice offer him to me
Upon that hill there besides thee.
Abraham, I will that so it be
For ought that may befall.

Abraham:
My Lord, to Thee is mine intent
Ever to be obedient.
That son that Thou to me hast sent
Offer I will to Thee
Thy bidding done shall be.

Here Abraham, turning to his son Isaac, saith:

Make thee ready, my dear darling,
For we must do a little thing.
This woode do on thy back it bring,
We may no longer abide.
A sword and fire that I will take,
For sacrifice me behoves to make;
God's bidding will I not forsake,
But ever obedient be.

Here Isaac speaketh to his father, and taketh a bundle of sticks and beareth after his father, and saith:

Isaac:
Father, I am all ready
To do your bidding most meekely,
And to bear this wood full bayn am I,
As you commanded me.

Here they both go to the place to do sacrifice:

Abraham:
Now, Isaac son, go we our way
To yonder mount if that we may.

Isaac:
My dear father, I will essay
To follow you full fain.

Abraham being minded to slay his son Isaac, lifts up his hands, and saith the following:

Abraham:
O! My heart will break in three,
To hear thy words I have pitye
As Thou wilt, Lord, so must it be,
To Thee I will be bayn.
Lay down thy faggot, my own son dear.

Isaac:
All ready father, lo, it is here.
But why make you such heavy cheer?
Are you anything adread?

Abraham:
Ah! Dear God! That me is woe!

Isaac:
Father, if it be your will,
Where is the beast that we shall kill?

Abraham:
Thereof, son, is none upon this hill.

Isaac:
Father, I am full sore affeered
To see you bear that drawne sword.

Abraham:
Isaac, son, peace, I pray thee,
Thou breakest my heart even in three.

Isaac:
I pray you, father, layn nothing from me,
But tell me what you think.

Abraham:
Ah! Isaac, Isaac, I must kill thee!

Isaac:
Alas! Father, is that your will,
Your owne child for to kill

Upon this hill's brink?
 If I have trespassed in any degree,
 With a yard you may beat me;
 Put up your sword, if your will be,
 For I am but a child.
 Would God my mother were here with me!
 She would kneel down upon her knee,
 Praying you, father, if it may be, For to save my life.

Abraham:
 O Isaac, son, to thee I say
 God hath commanded me today
 Sacrifice, this is no nay,
 To make of thy bodye.

Isaac:
 Is it God's will I shall be slain?

Abraham:
 Yes, son, it is not for to layn.

Here Isaac asketh his father's blessing on his knees, and saith:

Isaac:
 Father, seeing you muste' needs do so,
 Let it pass lightly and over go;
 Kneeling on my kneeye's two,
 Your blessing on me spread.

Abraham:
 My blessing, dear son, give I to thee
 And thy mother's with heart free;
 The blessing of the Trinity,
 My dear son, on thee light.

Hence Isaac riseth and cometh to his father, and he taketh him, and bindeth and layeth him upon the altar to sacrifice him, and saith:

Abraham:
 Isaac, Isaac, blessed must thou be.
Isaac:
 Father, greet well my brethren young,
 And pray my mother of her blessing,
 I come no more under her wing,
 Farewell for ever and aye.

Here Abraham doth kiss his son Isaac, and binds a kerchief about his head.

Abraham:
 Farewell, my sweet son of grace!

Isaac:
 I pray you, father, turn down my face,
 For I am sore adread.

Abraham:
 Lord, full loth were I him to kill!

Isaac:
 Ah, mercy, father, why tarry you so?

Abraham:
 Jesu! on me have pity,
 That I have most in mind

Isaac:
 Now, father, I see that I shall die:
 Almighty God in majesty!
 My soul I offer unto Thee!

Abraham:
 To do this deed I am sorrye.

Here let Abraham make a sign as though he would cut off his son Isaac's head with his sword; then GOD speaks:

God:
 Abraham, my servant dear,

Lay not thy sword in no manere
 On Isaac, thy dear darling.
 For thou darest me, well wot I,
 That of thy son hast no mercy,
 To fulfil my bidding.

Abraham:
 Ah, Lord of heaven and King of bliss,
 Thy bidding shall be done, i -wis!
 A horned wether here I see,
 Among the briars tied is he,
 To Thee offered shall he be
 Anon right in this place.

Then let Abraham take the lamb and kill him.

Abraham:
 Sacrifice here sent me is,
 And all, Lord, through Thy grace.

Envoi:
 Such obedience grant us, O Lord!
 Ever to Thy most holy word.
 That in the same we may accord
 As this Abraham was bayn;
 And then altogether shall we
 That worthy king in heaven see,
 And dwell with him in great glorye
 For ever and ever.
 Amen.

The Heart of the Matter

*Text: Edith Sitwell (1887–1964)
 from The Two Loves
 (1956, rev. Peter Pears, 1983)*

[3] Prologue Fanfare

Where are the seeds of the Universal Fire
 To burn the roots of Death in the world's cold heart?
 When in this world will the cold heart take fire?

[4] Reading

The earth of my heart was broken and gaped low
 As the fires beneath the equator of my veins.
 And I thought the seeds of Fire should be let loose
 Like the solar rains -
 The light that lies deep in the heart of the rose;
 And that the bloom from the fallen
 spring of the world
 Would come again to the cheek
 grown famine-white
 As winter frost -
 Would come again to the heart
 whose courage is lost
 From hunger. When in this world
 Will the cold heart take fire?
Fanfare

[5] Reading

In the hour when the sapphire of the bone -
 That hard and precious fire wrung from the earth,
 And the sapphire tears the heavens weep
 shall be made one.
 But, in the summer,
 great should be the sun of the heart
 And great is the heat of the fires from elementary
 and terrestrial nature -
 Ripening the kernel of amethysts
 in the sun of the peach -
 The dancing seas in the heart of the apricot.
 The earth, the sun, the heart, have so many fires
 It is a great wonder
 That the whole world is not consumed.

[6] Song

We are the darkness in the heat of the day,
 The rootless flowers in the air, the coolness:
 we are the water
 Lying upon the leaves before Death, our sun,
 And its vast heat has drunken us...
 Beauty's daughter,
 The heart of the rose, and we are one.

We are the summer's children,
 the breath of evening, the days
 When all may be hoped for –
 we are the unreturning
 Smile of the lost one,
 seen through the summer leaves -
 That sun and its false light scorning.

[7] Reading

In such a heat of the earth, under
 The red bough, the Colossus of
 rubies the first husband –
 man and grave-digger, the red Adam,
 Dug from the earth of his own nature,
 the corn effigy
 Of a long-buried country god,
 encrusted with earth-virtues,
 And brought to a new birth
 The ancient wisdom hiding behind
 heat and laughter,
 Deep-rooted in Death's earth.
 Gone is that heat. But this is the hour of
 brotherhood, the warmth that comes
 To the rejected by Life - the shadow with no eyes –
 Young Icarus with the broken alar bones
 And the sapped and ageing Atlas of the slums
 Devoured by the days until all days are done -
 To the Croesus of the breadline, gold from the sun,
 And the lover seeing in Woman
 the rankness of Nature, -
 A monstrous Life-force, the need of procreation
 Devouring all other life ... or Gravity's force
 Drawing him down to the centre of his earth.
 These sprawl together in the sunlight –
 the negation
 Of Life, fag-ends of Ambition, wrecks of the heart,
 Lumps of the world, and bones left by the Lion.
 Amid the assembly of young laughing roses
 They wait for a re-birth
 Under the democratic sun, enriching all,
 rejecting no one...
 But the smile of youth, the red mouth of the flower
 Seem the open wounds of a hunger
 that is voiceless –
 And on their lips lies the dust of Babel's city;
 And the sound of the heart is changed
 to the noise of revolutions –
 The hammer of Chaos destroying and rebuilding
 Small wingless hopes and fears
 in the light of the Sun.
 Who dreamed when Nature should
 be heightened to a fever –
 The ebullition of her juices and humours –
 The war of creed and creed,
 of starved and starver –
 The light would return to the cheek,
 and a new Word
 Would take the place of the heart?
 We might tell the blind
 The hue of the flower, or the philosopher
 What distance is, in the essence of its being –
 But not the distance between the hearts of Men.

[8] Cantic III, Op. 55 – Still falls the rain

Text: Edith Sitwell, The Raids, 1940.
 Night and Dawn.

Still falls the Rain –
 Dark as the world of man, black as our loss –
 Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails
 Upon the Cross.

Still falls the Rain
 With a sound like the pulse of the heart that is
 changed to the hammer-beat,
 In the Potter's Field,
 and the sound of the impious feet

On the Tomb:
 Still falls the Rain
 In the Field of Blood where the small hopes
 breed and the human brain
 Nurtures its greed,
 that worm with the brow of Cain.

Still falls the Rain –
 At the feet of the Starved Man
 hung upon the Cross.
 Christ that each day, each night,
 nails there, have mercy on us –
 On Dives and on Lazarus:
 Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one.

Still falls the Rain –
 Still falls the Blood from the
 Starved Man's wounded Side:
 He bears in his Heart all wounds –
 those of the light that died,
 The last faint spark
 In the self-murdered heart,
 the wounds of the sad uncomprehending dark,
 The wounds of the baited bear –
 The blind and weeping bear whom the keepers beat
 On his helpless flesh ...
 the tears of the hunted hare.

Still falls the Rain –
 Then - O Ile leape up to my God:
 who pulles me doune –
 See, see where Christ's blood
 streames in the firmament:
 It flows from the Brow we nailed upon the tree
 Deep to the dying, to the thirsting heart
 That holds the fires of the world –
 dark-smirched with pain
 As Caesar's laurel crown.

Then sounds the voice of One
 who like the heart of man
 Was once a child who among beasts has lain –
 'Still do I love, still shed my innocent light,
 my Blood, for thee.'

The Heart of the Matter (cont.)**[9] Reading**

I see Christ's wounds weep in the Rose on the wall.
 Then I who nursed in my earth
 the dark red seeds of Fire –
 The pomegranate grandeur,
 the dark seeds of Death,
 Felt them change to the light
 and fire in the heart of the rose...
 And I thought of the umbilical cords
 that bind us to strange suns
 And causes ... of Smart the madman who was born
 To bless Christ with the Rose and his people,
 a nation
 Of living sweetness ... of Harvey who blessed
 Christ with the solar fire in the veins,

And Linnaeus praising Him with the winged seed!
 Men born for the Sun's need –
 Yet theirs are the hymns to God
 who walks in darkness.
 And thinking of the age-long sleep,
 then brought to the light's birth
 Of terrestrial nature generated far
 From heaven ... the argillaceous clays,
 the zircon and sapphire
 Bright as the tears of heaven, but deep in earth –
 And of the child of the four elements
 The plant - organic water polarised
 to the earth's centre –
 And to the light: - the stem and root,
 the water-plant and earth-plant,
 The leaf, the child of air, the flower,
 the plant of fire –
 And of One who contracted His Immensity
 And shut Himself in the scope of a small flower

Whose root is clasped in darkness ...
 God in the span
 Of the root and light-seeking corolla ...
 with the voice of Fire I cry -
 Will He disdain that flower of the world,
 the heart of Man?

[10] Epilogue

Text: Edith Sitwell from Metamorphosis

Fanfare

So, out of the dark, see our great Spring begins –
 Our Christ, the new Song,
 breaking out in the fields and hedgerows,
 The heart of Man! O, the new temper of Christ,
 in veins and branches!

Canticle III (Still falls the rain)

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The Heart of the Matter

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