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,
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
Refall 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:—
The vagrant Scholar to his Sage at home
Sends greeting (health and knowledge, fame with peace)
Three samples of true snakestone 4 —rarer still,
One of the other sort, the melon-shaped,
(But fitter, pounded fine, for charms than drugs)
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 labour unrewarded?
I have shed sweat enough, left flesh and bone

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 Vespasian’s cometh, some, his son.
A black lynx snarled and pricked a tufted ear;
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,

30 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,
To void the stuffing of my travel-scrip 9
And share with thee whatever Jewry yields.
A viscid choler 10 is observable
In tertians, 11 I was nearly bold to say;
And falling-sickness 12 hath a happier cure
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 runagate 13 I trust this to? 14
His service payeth me a sublimate 14
Blown up his nose to help the ailing eye.

35 Best wait. I reach Jerusalem at morn,
There set in order my experiences,

4 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.
Gather what most deserves, and give thee all—
Or I might add, Judea’s gum-tragacanth
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—
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?
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—
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,
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—subinduced 5
By epilepsy, at the turning-point
Of trance prolonged unduly some three days; 6
When by the exhibition ’of some drug
Or spell, exorcization, stroke of art

Unknown to me and which ’twere well to know,
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 concit 8 that entered might inscribe
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
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
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 pigment—not, that such a fume, 9
Instead of giving way to time and health,
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
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,
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.

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.
8 fancy.
9 hallucination.
10 robust.
11 Karshish’s “facts” are often wrong; Lazarus would have been well over sixty.
12 healthy.
Some elders of his tribe, I should premise,
Led in their friend, obedient as a sheep,
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.

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
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,
Wasteful as drunkenness at undute 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,
Increased beyond the fleshy faculty—
Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,
Earth forced on a soul’s use while seeing heaven:
The man is wisest of the size, the sum,
The value in proportion of all things,
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,
Speak of some trifling fact,—he will gaze rapt
With stupor at its very liteness,
(Far as I see) as if in that indeed
He caught prodigious import, whole results;
And so will turn to us the bystanders
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
For scarce abatement of his cheerfulness,
Or pretermission 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,
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,
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
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, did ye know!
He holds on firmly to some thread of life—
(It is the life to lead perforcefully)
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,
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—
“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 tick of the blood within
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,  
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.

'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  
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,

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.

I probed the sore as thy disciple should:  
"How, beast," said I, "this stolid carelessness  
Sufficeth 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?"

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, affects the very brutes  
And birds—how say I? flowers of the field—

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,

At ignorance and carelessness and sin—
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 hapless to hear the land's practitioners  
Steepled in conceit sublime 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  
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,

Rebellion, to the setting up a rule  
And creed prodigious 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  
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!

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?)

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,

That came and dwelt in flesh on it awhile!

1 may it satisfy.
2 his affection for.
3 fancy refined by.
4 monstrous.
—'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,
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?
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
Unduly dwelt on, proxility 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
Had wrought upon me first. I met him thus:
I crossed a ridge of sharp 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:
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.
Consider it as a chance, a matter risked
To this ambiguous Syrian—he may lose,
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?
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too—
So, through the thunder comes a human voice

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,
But love I gave thee, with myself to love,
And thou must love me who have died for thee!"
The madman saith He said so: it is strange.
—1855

"Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" ³
(See Edgar's song in Lear)

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
Suppression of the glove, that purséd 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,
And ask the road? I guessed what skull-like laugh
Would break, what crutch 'gin write my epitaph
For pastime in the dusty thoroughfare,

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

3 The capital "H" could suggest that Rasheesh 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 child is a candidate for longevity. 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.