



In memoriam
Barbara Jean Brouse
(née Taylor)
1932~2005

Selected poems by Barbara Brouse
Read at her memorial service
February 27, 2005

THIS IS MY DRESS

These are the rags and tatters of my years.
Do I hear some jeers?
A disgrace, you say?
Then out of my way!
This is my dress.
Should I feel shame that it's a mess?
Well, I do, that's true, but... Damn you anyway!

THIS IS MY DRESS

It's not much of a garment, but it's no disgrace.
I've worn it half a century, and by now it suits my face.
It's overly used, but it can't be shed
For it's bonded with the crazy glue that's in my head.
I'm familiar with the patches and the crooked seams;
I wear them every moment – even naked in my dreams.
The hem's slashed off; it had to go
When I ripped it up for bandages, long ago.
There's grime that all the washing in the world hasn't cured,
And a little spilt blood...

But the dress endured.

It can hardly be presented without a spot
When I've laughed in it a little, and cried in it a lot.
It's taken lots of living and laboring in,
And I've hated it heartily – and also loved it thin
So that some of the fabric's worn through to the skin.
Do you see this tear held together by a pin?
This unholy gash right over the breast?
It isn't pretty, but it's how I've dressed
Since I tripped on my life and took a fall
When the dress was too big and I too small.
(But I stood up after, and walked alone,
And my dress walked with me and it is MY OWN.)

So hands off my unpressed mess of a dress!
We're old history, me and it;
If I grow some more, it may even fit.
Once I was at pains
To hide the stains;
But in fifty-odd years, how strange it would be
If my dress didn't show a little of me.
Perhaps in the end
It will be an old friend.
And then, oh then, please humor my views
If I should wear the damn thing inside out
And shout:
Look at me! Look at me!
THIS IS MY DRESS

A ROOM OF MY OWN

Picture a room beneath the eaves,
A windowful of sky and leaves.
To say it measures such and such
Doesn't sound like very much,
So call it several comforts wide
And some smiles long. I'm satisfied
That's room enough to spread my wings.

Shall I tell you of my things?
I sleep upon a simple bed,
No pride of headboard at my head.
I tread the polished planks of pine
And think of olden amber wine
Cool to my toes; no rug has lent
Feelings so luxuriant.
The worldly things that I possess
Are harboured in a wooden chest
As richly plain as all the rest.
Rare beauty, that! On it you see
The patina of history.
And my own labours found the glow
Beneath the painted layers, so...
In that I do take pride.
What else? A plant that nearly died.
It stands along the window side
Rooting itself into my room.
I loved it back to life, you see,
And so its green is part of me.

My tortoise-mottled mirror shows
A soft distorted image. Those
Antiques weren't made to flatter
Skin! It is no matter.
If I should care to see myself,
I gaze upon the open shelf
Where sit the fragments of my heart.
My shelf! This is the proudest part.
A lovely treasury of all
The things that children give, when small:
Pincushions, pots and pencil stands
All made with love and chubby hands.
Some well-thumbed books wherein I've found
New riches, every time around;
Two floppy dolls; a china cat
That's smugly good for looking at;
A jewelled box; some photographs
Of passing years, of tears and laughs,
Where I can see, however dim,
The chubby fingers, grown to slim.
A yellowed card that someone penned:
"For my dear and valued friend" ...
No need of gifts, I think, when mere
Enclosure cards can read so clear!
That gift...? I quite forget the thing
And yet, this memory's fresh as spring.

Such is my room. How can one measure
The length and breadth of such a pleasure?
Like the greening plant I prize,
Every day it grows in size.

RESOLVE

This the woman
I will be:
Someone who is
Plainly me,
But growing into,
On the way,
Something more
Than yesterday.
Starting now,
Age sixty-two,
These the things
I choose to do:

Clean my closets,
Sort my drawers,
Open windows
To outdoors;
Mend my fences
When they're broken;
Let no cruelties
Be spoken.
Make no causes
Out of grudges;
Abjure gossip's
Winks and nudges;

Clean the wax
From brain and ear
So I can listen
Loud and clear,
Unbarriered
To praise or pique,
And hear what friends
Or foes may speak
Not with their lips
But with their hearts.
Accept the tributes
With the darts.

Tap no one else's
Tune. Instead
Follow the drummer
In my head,
And have the gut
To let the feet
Keep in step
To a different beat.
Walk a glad mile
Every day
And think a poem
Along the way.

Laugh as often
As I've cried
To exorcise
Old ghosts inside,
Remembering that
Those tears were shed
To wash the sorrows
From my head.
Invite some sun
To chase the rains
Of all those tardy
Growing pains.

Love the coward
In my heart;
Remember, she is
Just a part
Of what is there.
Accept, then, this:
Without the quake
Of cowardice
No courage lives.
- And truth to tell,
I know I have
Been brave as well.

Weed my garden
In the spring -
And when the crab
Is blossoming,
Find some space
To sit and hour
And watch the twisted
Branches flower,
Contemplating,
As I drink,
How ancient twigs
Can sprout such pink.

Waste no regard
That's unreturned.
From now, give love
When love is earned;
No more in mournful
Musings dwell
On those who loved me
Less than well.
Know only that
This much is true:
For some who don't
Are more who do.

In conversation
With myself,
Put no truths
Upon the shelf.
Undusted mirrors,
Given time
Will change the image
Into grime.
But let the *mea*
Culpas end;
That's but a burden
To a friend.

May no night fall
When I can't say:
"I bettered someone
Else's day."
Even if nothing
Else is right,
That should allow
Good sleep this night,
Spooned in comfort
With the me
Who's someone I
Would want to be.

This is my polestar
When I steer:
Be more today
Than yesteryear;
And if I might
Be, if I may,
Be more tomorrow
Than today,
So I can say
The hour I die:
"I looked me squarely
In the eye,

"I saw the wrinkles
If the years,
The hurts, the pains,
The fears, the tears;
I saw myself
Unprettified
Except by what
Survived inside;
I saw the good lines
And the sad.
And what I saw
was not so bad."

(1994)

TO MY CHILDREN, ON DYING

Enough of sackcloth and of keening,
Death should have a kinder meaning:
A lick of flame, a crossing over,
A flowered journey on a river.
So let me go, remembering
That death should be a simple thing.

Hang no crepe
On windowsills
Nor wreath of rue
Upon your grilles.
Don no armbands,
Rend no flax,
Bear no crosses
On your backs;
Beat no brows and
Clash no symbols,
Sew no hairshirts
With your thimbles.
The only thing
That I would mind
Is leaving, leaving
Guilt behind.
If life held anything to rue,
It was not you, it was not you.
So let me go, remembering
That death's a most absolving thing.

Lock no tresses
Into lockets;
Keep no keepsakes
In your pockets —
There is no need,
For I am lined
In deeper pockets
Of your mind.
Make no shrine
Upon a shelf;
I will endure
In you, yourself.
Carve no marble,
Tool no oak;
I'd liever live in
Candlesmoke
Enjoying a sometime rendezvous
Between your memories and you.
So set me free, remembering
That death is not a vanishing.

When the perfumes
Of the pyre
Lift like frankincense
And myrrh
To free my rosined
Essence, know
That I am not
So sad to go.
These my bones
That are no more
Are risen now
In vapour, for
I have dispersed
Into the air.
Feel: when you breathe,
That I am there.
What lingers of my residue,
It is in you, it is in you.
So let me go, remembering
That death is but an altering.

Think: I am pure
And clean and young,
A phoenix, risen
In your lung.
So keep no prison
Of an urn
For the powder
Of the burn;
Those mindless
Minerals that were me
Would rather go untidily
Dispersing as
All atoms must,
Ash to ash and
Dust to dust.
All of spirit that I knew,
Is still with you, is still with you.
So let me go, remembering
That death's a very freeing thing.

Let no hands wring
And no teeth gnash.
Dusty dust
And drift of ash
Are only earthy
Other-matter,
Freed by fire
And the wind's scatter.
What was me is
Me disguised,
Inhaled, infused,
Internalized.
My altered atoms
Are not fled;
They are the whisper
In your head.
I will not say a last adieu.
I am with you, I am with you.
So let me go, remembering
That death is but an entering
Into a deeper stream of thought.
The dying's over; I am not.

PEACE

Come with me in spirit: lie
And watch the silent clouds on high
In the tissue-papered sky,
Earth's own gift wraps floating by,
Pillow your head in the green dawn
And contemplate the come-and-gone
Of seasons; hear the quiet, strong
Slow pulse of your own unity
With earth, and air, and long
Infinity...

The lake beside you lies like glass,
Silent mirror to the mass
Of silent sky. Unbroken hush:
And then, a golden birdsong rush
Expands the quiet.

Peace descends
And takes you softly by the hands,
And bathes your brow, and gives you balm,
And leads you into realms of calm
Where poppies of the spirit wait
To gentle you with opiate.
In spirit, come, and find respite
Dawn unto dusk; dusk unto night

Until the lamps of dark awake
And move across the silvered lake.
Moon; planets; stars: how marvelous
That every particle of us
Was once a particle of them,
And will be starstuff once again.
We hold, to see those darkling skies,
A million light years in our eyes.
Tarrying through space, we own
Dawn of creation in our bone;
And journeying through time, embrace
Within ourselves that darkling space:
For we are starstuff, you and I,
Born where our greater longings lie.
Of star we come; returned to star
We change - and changing, changeless are.

(1986)