Canto One

Towards the Black Void

So was she left alone in the huge wood,
Surrounded by a dim unthinking world,
Her husband’s corpse on her forsaken breast.
In her vast silent spirit motionless
She measured not her loss with helpless thoughts,
Nor rent with tears the marble seals of pain:
She rose not yet to face the dreadful god.
Over the body she loved her soul leaned out
In a great stillness without stir or voice,
As if her mind had died with Satyavan.
But still the human heart in her beat on.
Aware still of his being near to hers,
Closely she clasped to her the mute lifeless form
As though to guard the oneness they had been
And keep the spirit still within its frame.
Then suddenly there came on her the change
Which in tremendous moments of our lives
Can overtake sometimes the human soul
And hold it up towards its luminous source.
The veil is torn, the thinker is no more:
Only the spirit sees and all is known.
Then a calm Power seated above our brows
Is seen, unshaken by our thoughts and deeds,
Its stillness bears the voices of the world:
Immobile, it moves Nature, looks on life.
It shapes immutably its far-seen ends;
Untouched and tranquil amid error and tears
And measureless above our striving wills,
Its gaze controls the turbulent whirl of things.
To mate with the Glory it sees, the spirit grows:
The voice of life is tuned to infinite sounds,
The moments on great wings of lightning come
And godlike thoughts surprise the mind of earth.
Into the soul’s splendour and intensity
A crescent of miraculous birth is tossed,
Whose horn of mystery floats in a bright void.
As into a heaven of strength and silence thought
Is ravished, all this living mortal clay
Is seized and in a swift and fiery flood
Of touches shaped by a Harmonist unseen.
A new sight comes, new voices in us form
A body of the music of the Gods.
Immortal yearnings without name leap down,
Large quiverings of godhead seeking run
And weave upon a puissant field of calm
A high and lonely ecstasy of will.
This in a moment’s depths was born in her.
Now to the limitless gaze disclosed that sees
Things barred from human thinking’s earthly lids,
The Spirit who had hidden in Nature soared
Out of his luminous nest within the worlds:
Like a vast fire it climbed the skies of night.
Thus were the cords of self-oblivion torn:
Like one who looks up to far heights she saw,
Ancient and strong as on a windless summit
Above her where she had worked in her lone mind
Labouring apart in a sole tower of self,
The source of all which she had seemed or wrought,
A power projected into cosmic space,
A slow embodiment of the aeonic will,
A starry fragment of the eternal Truth,
The passionate instrument of an unmoved Power.
A Presence was there that filled the listening world;
A central All assumed her boundless life.
A sovereignty, a silence and a swiftness,
One brooded over abysses who was she.
As in a choric robe of unheard sounds
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A Force descended trailing endless lights;
Linking Time’s seconds to infinity,
Illimitably it girt the earth and her:
It sank into her soul and she was changed.
Then like a thought fulfilled by some great word
That mightiness assumed a symbol form:
Her being’s spaces quivered with its touch,
It covered her as with immortal wings;
On its lips the curve of the unuttered Truth,
A halo of Wisdom’s lightnings for its crown,
It entered the mystic lotus in her head,
A thousand-petalled home of power and light.
Immortal leader of her mortality,
Doer of her works and fountain of her words,
Invulnerable by Time, omnipotent,
It stood above her calm, immobile, mute.

All in her mated with that mighty hour,
As if the last remnant had been slain by Death
Of the humanity that once was hers.
Assuming a spiritual wide control,
Making life’s sea a mirror of heaven’s sky,
The young divinity in her earthly limbs
Filled with celestial strength her mortal part.
Over was the haunted pain, the rending fear:
Her grief had passed away, her mind was still,
Her heart beat quietly with a sovereign force.
There came a freedom from the heart-strings’ clutch,
Now all her acts sprang from a godhead’s calm.
Calmly she laid upon the forest soil
The dead who still reposed upon her breast
And bore to turn away from the dead form:
Sole now she rose to meet the dreadful god.
That mightier spirit turned its mastering gaze
On life and things, inheritor of a work
Left to it unfinished from her halting past,
When yet the mind, a passionate learner, toiled
And ill-shaped instruments were crudely moved.
Transcended now was the poor human rule;
A sovereign power was there, a godlike will.
A moment yet she lingered motionless
And looked down on the dead man at her feet;
Then like a tree recovering from a wind
She raised her noble head; fronting her gaze
Something stood there, unearthly, sombre, grand,
A limitless denial of all being
That wore the terror and wonder of a shape.
In its appalling eyes the tenebrous Form
Bore the deep pity of destroying gods;
A sorrowful irony curved the dreadful lips
That speak the word of doom. Eternal Night
In the dire beauty of an immortal face
Pitying arose, receiving all that lives
For ever into its fathomless heart, refuge
Of creatures from their anguish and world-pain.
His shape was nothingness made real, his limbs
Were monuments of transience and beneath
Brows of unwearying calm large godlike lids
Silent beheld the writhing serpent, life.
Unmoved their timeless wide unchanging gaze
Had seen the unprofitable cycles pass,
Survived the passing of unnumbered stars
And sheltered still the same immutable orbs.
The two opposed each other with their eyes,
Woman and universal god: around her,
Piling their void unbearable loneliness
Upon her mighty unaccompanied soul,
Many inhuman solitudes came close.
Vacant eternities forbidding hope
Laid upon her their huge and lifeless look,
And to her ears, silencing earthly sounds,
A sad and formidable voice arose
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Which seemed the whole adverse world’s. “Unclasp”, it cried,
“Thy passionate influence and relax, O slave
Of Nature, changing tool of changeless Law,
Who vainly writh’st rebellion to my yoke,
Thy elemental grasp; weep and forget.
Entomb thy passion in its living grave.
Leave now the once-loved spirit’s abandoned robe:
Pass lonely back to thy vain life on earth.”
It ceased, she moved not, and it spoke again,
Lowering its mighty key to human chords,—
Yet a dread cry behind the uttered sounds,
Echoing all sadness and immortal scorn,
Moaned like a hunger of far wandering waves.
“Wilt thou for ever keep thy passionate hold,
Thyself a creature doomed like him to pass,
Denying his soul death’s calm and silent rest?
Relax thy grasp; this body is earth’s and thine,
His spirit now belongs to a greater power.
Woman, thy husband suffers.” Savitri
Drew back her heart’s force that clasped his body still
Where from her lap renounced on the smooth grass
Softly it lay, as often before in sleep
When from their couch she rose in the white dawn
Called by her daily tasks: now too, as if called,
She rose and stood gathered in lonely strength,
Like one who drops his mantle for a race
And waits the signal, motionlessly swift.
She knew not to what course: her spirit above
On the crypt-summit of her secret form
Like one left sentinel on a mountain crest,
A fiery-footed splendour puissant-winged,
Watched flaming-silent, with her voiceless soul
Like a still sail upon a windless sea.
White passionless it rode, an anchored might,
Waiting what far-ridged impulse should arise
Out of the eternal depths and cast its surge.
Then Death the king leaned boundless down, as leans
Night over tired lands, when evening pales
And fading gleams break down the horizon’s walls,
Nor yet the dusk grows mystic with the moon.
The dim and awful godhead rose erect
From his brief stooping to his touch on earth,
And, like a dream that wakes out of a dream,
Forsaking the poor mould of that dead clay,
Another luminous Satyavan arose,
Starting upright from the recumbent earth
As if someone over viewless borders stepped
Emerging on the edge of unseen worlds.
In the earth’s day the silent marvel stood
Between the mortal woman and the god.
Such seemed he as if one departed came
Wearing the light of a celestial shape
Splendidly alien to the mortal air.
The mind sought things long loved and fell back foiled
From unfamiliar hues, beheld yet longed,
By the sweet radiant form unsatisfied,
Incredulous of its too bright hints of heaven;
Too strange the brilliant phantasm to life’s clasp
Desiring the warm creations of the earth
Reared in the ardour of material suns,
The senses seized in vain a glorious shade:
Only the spirit knew the spirit still,
And the heart divined the old loved heart, though changed.
Between two realms he stood, not wavering,
But fixed in quiet strong expectancy,
Like one who, sightless, listens for a command.
So were they immobile on that earthly field,
Powers not of earth, though one in human clay.
On either side of one two spirits strove;
Silence battled with silence, vast with vast.
But now the impulse of the Path was felt
Moving from the Silence that supports the stars
To touch the confines of the visible world. 
Luminous he moved away; behind him Death 
Went slowly with his noiseless tread, as seen
In dream-built fields a shadowy herdsman glides 
Behind some wanderer from his voiceless herds, 
And Savitri moved behind eternal Death, 
Her mortal pace was equalled with the god’s. 
Wordless she travelled in her lover’s steps, 
Planting her human feet where his had trod, 
Into the perilous silences beyond.

At first in a blind stress of woods she moved 
With strange inhuman paces on the soil, 
Journeying as if upon an unseen road. 
Around her on the green and imaged earth 
The flickering screen of forests ringed her steps; 
Its thick luxurious obstacle of boughs 
Besieged her body pressing dimly through 
In a rich realm of whispers palpable, 
And all the murmurous beauty of the leaves 
Rippled around her like an emerald robe. 
But more and more this grew an alien sound, 
And her old intimate body seemed to her 
A burden which her being remotely bore. 
Herself lived far in some uplifted scene 
Where to the trance-claimed vision of pursuit, 
Sole presences in a high spaceless dream, 
The luminous spirit glided stilly on 
And the great shadow travelled vague behind. 
Still with an amorous crowd of seeking hands 
Softly entreated by their old desires 
Her senses felt earth’s close and gentle air 
Cling round them and in troubled branches knew 
Uncertain treadings of a faint-foot wind: 
She bore dim fragrances, far callings touched; 
The wild bird’s voice and its winged rustle came
As if a sigh from some forgotten world.
Earth stood aloof, yet near: round her it wove
Its sweetness and its greenness and delight,
Its brilliance suave of well-loved vivid hues,
Sunlight arriving to its golden noon,
And the blue heavens and the caressing soil.
The ancient mother offered to her child
Her simple world of kind familiar things.
But now, as if the body’s sensuous hold
Curbing the godhead of her infinite walk
Had freed those spirits to their grander road
Across some boundary’s intangible bar,
The silent god grew mighty and remote
In other spaces, and the soul she loved
Lost its consenting nearness to her life.
Into a deep and unfamiliar air
Enormous, windless, without stir or sound
They seemed to enlarge away, drawn by some wide
Pale distance, from the warm control of earth
And her grown far: now, now they would escape.
Then flaming from her body’s nest alarmed
Her violent spirit soared at Satyavan.
Out mid the plunge of heaven-surrounded rocks
So in a terror and a wrath divine
From her eyrie streams against the ascending death,
Indignant at its crouching point of steel,
A fierce she-eagle threatened in her brood,
Borne on a rush of puissance and a cry,
Outwinging like a mass of golden fire.
So on a spirit’s flaming outrush borne
She crossed the borders of dividing sense;
Like pale discarded sheaths dropped dully down
Her mortal members fell back from her soul.
A moment of a secret body’s sleep,
Her trance knew not of sun or earth or world;
Thought, time and death were absent from her grasp:
She knew not self, forgotten was Savitri.
All was the violent ocean of a will
Where lived captive to an immense caress,
Possessed in a supreme identity,
Her aim, joy, origin, Satyavan alone.
Her sovereign prisoned in her being’s core,
He beat there like a rhythmic heart,—herself
But different still, one loved, enveloped, clasped,
A treasure saved from the collapse of space.
Around him nameless, infinite she surged,
Her spirit fulfilled in his spirit, rich with all Time,
As if Love’s deathless moment had been found,
A pearl within eternity’s white shell.
Then out of the engulfing sea of trance
Her mind rose drenched to light streaming with hues
Of vision and, awake once more to Time,
Returned to shape the lineaments of things
And live in borders of the seen and known.
Onward the three still moved in her soul-scene.
As if pacing through fragments of a dream,
She seemed to travel on, a visioned shape
Imagining other musers like herself,
By them imagined in their lonely sleep.
Ungrasped, unreal, yet familiar, old,
Like clefts of unsubstantial memory,
Scenes often traversed, never lived in, fled
Past her unheeding to forgotten goals.
In voiceless regions they were travellers
Alone in a new world where souls were not,
But only living moods: a strange hushed weird
Country was round them, strange far skies above,
A doubting space where dreaming objects lived
Within themselves their one unchanged idea.
Weird were the grasses, weird the treeless plains;
Weird ran the road which like fear hastening
Towards that of which it has most terror, passed
Phantasmal between pillared conscious rocks
Sombre and high, gates brooding, whose stone thoughts
Lost their huge sense beyond in giant night.
Enigma of the Inconscient’s sculptural sleep,
Symbols of the approach to darkness old
And monuments of her titanic reign,
Opening to depths like dumb appalling jaws
That wait a traveller down a haunted path
Attracted to a mystery that slays,
They watched across her road, cruel and still;
Sentinels they stood of dumb Necessity,
Mute heads of vigilant and sullen gloom,
Carved muzzle of a dim enormous world.
Then, to that chill sere heavy line arrived
Where his feet touched the shadowy marches’ brink,
Turning arrested luminous Satyavan
Looked back with his wonderful eyes at Savitri.
But Death pealed forth his vast abysmal cry:
“O mortal, turn back to thy transient kind;
Aspire not to accompany Death to his home,
As if thy breath could live where Time must die.
Think not thy mind-born passion strength from heaven
To uplift thy spirit from its earthly base
And, breaking out from the material cage,
To upbuoy thy feet of dream in groundless Nought
And bear thee through the pathless infinite.
Only in human limits man lives safe.
Trust not in the unreal Lords of Time,
Immortal deeming this image of thyself
Which they have built on a Dream’s floating ground.
Let not the dreadful goddess move thy soul
To enlarge thy vehement trespass into worlds
Where it shall perish like a helpless thought.
Know the cold term-stones of thy hopes in life.
Armed vainly with the Ideal’s borrowed might,
Dare not to outstep man’s bound and measured force:
Ignorant and stumbling, in brief boundaries pent,
He crowns himself the world’s mock suzerain,
Tormenting Nature with the works of Mind.
O sleeper, dreaming of divinity,
Wake trembling mid the indifferent silences
In which thy few weak chords of being die.
Impermanent creatures, sorrowful foam of Time,
Your transient loves bind not the eternal gods.”
The dread voice ebbed in the consenting hush
Which seemed to close upon it, wide, intense,
A wordless sanction from the jaws of Night.
The Woman answered not. Her high nude soul,
Stripped of the girdle of mortality,
Against fixed destiny and the grooves of law
Stood up in its sheer will a primal force.
Still like a statue on its pedestal,
Lone in the silence and to vastness bared,
Against midnight’s dumb abysses piled in front
A columned shaft of fire and light she rose.

END OF CANTO ONE