

# The Prelude By William Wordsworth

—Was it for this  
That one, the fairest of all Rivers, lov'd  
To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song,  
And from his alder shades and rocky falls,  
And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice  
That flow'd along my dreams? For this, didst Thou,  
O Derwent! travelling over the green Plains  
Near my 'sweet Birthplace', didst thou, beauteous Stream  
Make ceaseless music through the night and day  
Which with its steady cadence, tempering  
Our human waywardness, compos'd my thoughts  
To more than infant softness, giving me,  
Among the fretful dwellings of mankind,  
A knowledge, a dim earnest, of the calm  
That Nature breathes among the hills and groves.  
When, having left his Mountains, to the Towers  
Of Cockermouth that beauteous River came,  
Behind my Father's House he pass'd, close by,  
Along the margin of our Terrace Walk.  
He was a Playmate whom we dearly lov'd.  
Oh! many a time have I, a five years' Child,  
A naked Boy, in one delightful Rill,  
A little Mill-race sever'd from his stream,

Made one long bathing of a summer's day,  
Bask'd in the sun, and plunged, and bask'd again  
Alternate all a summer's day, or cours'd  
Over the sandy fields, leaping through groves  
Of yellow grunsel, or when crag and hill,  
The woods, and distant Skiddaw's lofty height,  
Were bronz'd with a deep radiance, stood alone  
Beneath the sky, as if I had been born  
On Indian Plains, and from my Mother's hut  
Had run abroad in wantonness, to sport,  
A naked Savage, in the thunder shower.

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up  
Foster'd alike by beauty and by fear;  
Much favour'd in my birthplace, and no less  
In that beloved Vale to which, erelong,  
I was transplanted. Well I call to mind  
( 'Twas at an early age, ere I had seen  
Nine summers ) when upon the mountain slope  
The frost and breath of frosty wind had snapp'd  
The last autumnal crocus, 'twas my joy  
To wander half the night among the Cliffs  
And the smooth Hollows, where the woodcocks ran  
Along the open turf. In thought and wish  
That time, my shoulder all with springes hung,  
I was a fell destroyer. On the heights

Scudding away from snare to snare, I plied  
My anxious visitation, hurrying on,  
Still hurrying, hurrying onward; moon and stars  
Were shining o'er my head; I was alone,  
And seem'd to be a trouble to the peace  
That was among them. Sometimes it befel  
In these night-wanderings, that a strong desire  
O'erpower'd my better reason, and the bird  
Which was the captive of another's toils  
Became my prey; and, when the deed was done  
I heard among the solitary hills  
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds  
Of undistinguishable motion, steps  
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.  
Nor less in springtime when on southern banks  
The shining sun had from his knot of leaves  
Decoy'd the primrose flower, and when the Vales  
And woods were warm, was I a plunderer then  
In the high places, on the lonesome peaks  
Where'er, among the mountains and the winds,  
The Mother Bird had built her lodge. Though mean  
My object, and inglorious, yet the end  
Was not ignoble. Oh! when I have hung  
Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass  
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock  
But ill sustain'd, and almost, as it seem'd,

Suspended by the blast which blew amain,  
Shouldering the naked crag; Oh! at that time,  
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,  
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind  
Blow through my ears! the sky seem'd not a sky  
Of earth, and with what motion mov'd the clouds!

The mind of Man is fram'd even like the breath  
And harmony of music. There is a dark  
Invisible workmanship that reconciles  
Discordant elements, and makes them move  
In one society. Ah me! that all  
The terrors, all the early miseries  
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes, that all  
The thoughts and feelings which have been infus'd  
Into my mind, should ever have made up  
The calm existence that is mine when I  
Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end!  
Thanks likewise for the means! But I believe  
That Nature, oftentimes, when she would frame  
A favor'd Being, from his earliest dawn  
Of infancy doth open out the clouds,  
As at the touch of lightning, seeking him  
With gentlest visitation; not the less,  
Though haply aiming at the self-same end,  
Does it delight her sometimes to employ  
Severer interventions, ministry  
More palpable, and so she dealt with me.

One evening (surely I was led by her)  
I went alone into a Shepherd's Boat,  
A Skiff that to a Willow tree was tied  
Within a rocky Cave, its usual home.  
'Twas by the shores of Patterdale, a Vale  
Wherein I was a Stranger, thither come  
A School-boy Traveller, at the Holidays.  
Forth rambled from the Village Inn alone  
No sooner had I sight of this small Skiff,  
Discover'd thus by unexpected chance,  
Than I unloos'd her tether and embark'd.  
The moon was up, the Lake was shining clear  
Among the hoary mountains; from the Shore  
I push'd, and struck the oars and struck again  
In cadence, and my little Boat mov'd on  
Even like a Man who walks with stately step  
Though bent on speed. It was an act of stealth  
And troubled pleasure; not without the voice  
Of mountain-echoes did my Boat move on,  
Leaving behind her still on either side  
Small circles glittering idly in the moon,  
Until they melted all into one track  
Of sparkling light. A rocky Steep uprose  
Above the Cavern of the Willow tree  
And now, as suited one who proudly row'd  
With his best skill, I fix'd a steady view  
Upon the top of that same craggy ridge,

The bound of the horizon, for behind  
Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.  
She was an elfin Pinnacle; lustily  
I dipp'd my oars into the silent Lake,  
And, as I rose upon the stroke, my Boat  
Went heaving through the water, like a Swan;  
When from behind that craggy Steep, till then  
The bound of the horizon, a huge Cliff,  
As if with voluntary power instinct,  
Uprear'd its head. I struck, and struck again  
And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff  
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,  
With measur'd motion, like a living thing,  
Strode after me. With trembling hands I turn'd,  
And through the silent water stole my way  
Back to the Cavern of the Willow tree.  
There, in her mooring-place, I left my Bark,  
And, through the meadows homeward went, with grave  
And serious thoughts; and after I had seen  
That spectacle, for many days, my brain  
Work'd with a dim and undetermin'd sense  
Of unknown modes of being; in my thoughts  
There was a darkness, call it solitude,  
Or blank desertion, no familiar shapes  
Of hourly objects, images of trees,

Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;  
But huge and mighty Forms that do not live  
Like living men mov'd slowly through the mind  
By day and were the trouble of my dreams.

Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!  
Thou Soul that art the eternity of thought!  
That giv'st to forms and images a breath  
And everlasting motion! not in vain,  
By day or star-light thus from my first dawn  
Of Childhood didst Thou intertwine for me  
The passions that build up our human Soul,  
Not with the mean and vulgar works of Man,  
But with high objects, with enduring things,  
With life and nature, purifying thus  
The elements of feeling and of thought,  
And sanctifying, by such discipline,  
Both pain and fear, until we recognize  
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.

Nor was this fellowship vouchsaf'd to me  
With stinted kindness. In November days,  
When vapours, rolling down the valleys, made  
A lonely scene more lonesome; among woods  
At noon, and 'mid the calm of summer nights,  
When, by the margin of the trembling Lake,

Beneath the gloomy hills I homeward went  
In solitude, such intercourse was mine;  
'Twas mine among the fields both day and night,  
And by the waters all the summer long.

And in the frosty season, when the sun  
Was set, and visible for many a mile  
The cottage windows through the twilight blaz'd,  
I heeded not the summons:—happy time  
It was, indeed, for all of us; to me  
It was a time of rapture: clear and loud  
The village clock toll'd six; I wheel'd about,  
Proud and exulting, like an untired horse,  
That cares not for its home.—All shod with steel,  
We hiss'd along the polish'd ice, in games  
Confederate, imitative of the chace  
And woodland pleasures, the resounding horn,  
The Pack loud bellowing, and the hunted hare.  
So through the darkness and the cold we flew,  
And not a voice was idle; with the din,  
Meanwhile, the precipices rang aloud,  
The leafless trees, and every icy crag  
Tinkled like iron, while the distant hills  
Into the tumult sent an alien sound  
Of melancholy, not unnoticed, while the stars,  
Eastward, were sparkling clear, and in the west  
The orange sky of evening died away.

Not seldom from the uproar I retired  
Into a silent bay, or sportively  
Glanced sideways, leaving the tumultuous throng,  
To cut across the image of a star  
That gleam'd upon the ice: and oftentimes  
When we had given our bodies to the wind,  
And all the shadowy banks, on either side,  
Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still  
The rapid line of motion; then at once  
Have I, reclining back upon my heels,  
Stopp'd short, yet still the solitary Cliffs  
Wheeled by me, even as if the earth had roll'd  
With visible motion her diurnal round;  
Behind me did they stretch in solemn train  
Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watch'd  
Till all was tranquil as a dreamless sleep.

Ye Presences of Nature, in the sky  
And on the earth! Ye Visions of the hills!  
And Souls of lonely places! can I think  
A vulgar hope was yours when Ye employ'd  
Such ministry, when Ye through many a year  
Haunting me thus among my boyish sports,  
On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills,  
Impress'd upon all forms the characters  
Of danger or desire, and thus did make

The surface of the universal earth  
With triumph, and delight, and hope, and fear,  
Work like a sea?

Not uselessly employ'd,  
I might pursue this theme through every change  
Of exercise and play, to which the year  
Did summon us in its delightful round.

We were a noisy crew, the sun in heaven  
Beheld not vales more beautiful than ours,  
Nor saw a race in happiness and joy  
More worthy of the ground where they were sown.  
I would record with no reluctant voice  
The woods of autumn and their hazel bowers  
With milk-white clusters hung; the rod and line,  
True symbol of the foolishness of hope,  
Which with its strong enchantment led us on  
By rocks and pools, shut out from every star  
All the green summer, to forlorn cascades  
Among the windings of the mountain brooks.  
—Unfading recollections! at this hour  
The heart is almost mine with which I felt  
From some hill-top, on sunny afternoons  
The Kite high up among the fleecy clouds  
Pull at its rein, like an impatient Courser,

Or, from the meadows sent on gusty days,  
Beheld her breast the wind, then suddenly  
Dash'd headlong; and rejected by the storm.

Ye lowly Cottages in which we dwelt,  
A ministrations of your own was yours,  
A sanctity, a safeguard, and a love!  
Can I forget you, being as ye were  
So beautiful among the pleasant fields  
In which ye stood? Or can I here forget  
The plain and seemly countenance with which  
Ye dealt out your plain comforts? Yet had ye  
Delights and exultations of your own.  
Eager and never weary we pursued  
Our home amusements by the warm peat-fire  
At evening; when with pencil and with slate,  
In square divisions parcell'd out, and all  
With crosses and with cyphers scribbled o'er,  
We schemed and puzzled, head opposed to head  
In strife too humble to be named in Verse.  
Or round the naked table, snow-white deal,  
Cherry or maple, sate in close array,  
And to the combat, Lu or Whist, led on  
thick-ribbed Army; not as in the world  
Neglected and ungratefully thrown by  
Even for the very service they had wrought,

But husbanded through many a long campaign.  
Uncouth assemblage was it, where no few  
Had changed their functions, some, plebeian cards,  
Which Fate beyond the promise of their birth  
Had glorified, and call'd to represent  
The persons of departed Potentates.  
Oh! with what echoes on the Board they fell!  
Ironic Diamonds, Clubs, Hearts, Diamonds, Spades,  
A congregation piteously akin.  
Cheap matter did they give to boyish wit,  
Those sooty knaves, precipitated down  
With scoffs and taunts, like Vulcan out of Heaven,  
The paramount Ace, a moon in her eclipse,  
Queens, gleaming through their splendour's last decay,  
And Monarchs, surly at the wrongs sustain'd  
By royal visages. Meanwhile, abroad  
The heavy rain was falling, or the frost  
Raged bitterly, with keen and silent tooth,  
And, interrupting oft the impassion'd game,  
From Esthwaite's neighbouring Lake the splitting ice,  
While it sank down towards the water, sent,  
Among the meadows and the hills, its long  
And dismal yellings, like the noise of wolves  
When they are howling round the Bothnic Main.

Nor, sedulous as I have been to trace  
How Nature by extrinsic passion first  
Peopled my mind with beauteous forms or grand,  
And made me love them, may I well forget  
How other pleasures have been mine, and joys  
Of subtler origin; how I have felt,  
Not seldom, even in that tempestuous time,  
Those hallow'd and pure motions of the sense  
Which seem, in their simplicity, to own  
An intellectual charm, that calm delight  
Which, if I err not, surely must belong  
To those first-born affinities that fit  
Our new existence to existing things,  
And, in our dawn of being, constitute  
The bond of union betwixt life and joy.

Yes, I remember, when the changeful earth,  
And twice five seasons on my mind had stamp'd  
The faces of the moving year, even then,  
A Child, I held unconscious intercourse  
With the eternal Beauty, drinking in  
A pure organic pleasure from the lines  
Of curling mist, or from the level plain  
Of waters colour'd by the steady clouds.

The Sands of Westmoreland, the Creeks and Bays  
Of Cumbria's rocky limits, they can tell  
How when the Sea threw off his evening shade  
And to the Shepherd's huts beneath the crags  
Did send sweet notice of the rising moon,  
How I have stood, to fancies such as these,  
Engrafted in the tenderness of thought,  
A stranger, linking with the spectacle  
No conscious memory of a kindred sight,  
And bringing with me no peculiar sense  
Of quietness or peace, yet I have stood,  
Even while mine eye has mov'd o'er three long leagues  
Of shining water, gathering, as it seem'd,  
Through every hair-breadth of that field of light,  
New pleasure, like a bee among the flowers.

Thus, often in those fits of vulgar joy  
Which, through all seasons, on a child's pursuits  
Are prompt attendants, 'mid that giddy bliss  
Which, like a tempest, works along the blood  
And is forgotten; even then I felt  
Gleams like the flashing of a shield; the earth  
And common face of Nature spake to me  
Rememberable things; sometimes, 'tis true,  
By chance collisions and quaint accidents

Like those ill-sorted unions, work suppos'd  
Of evil-minded fairies, yet not vain  
Nor profitless, if haply they impress'd  
Collateral objects and appearances,  
Albeit lifeless then, and doom'd to sleep  
Until maturer seasons call'd them forth  
To impregnate and to elevate the mind.  
—And if the vulgar joy by its own weight  
Wearied itself out of the memory,  
The scenes which were a witness of that joy  
Remained, in their substantial lineaments  
Depicted on the brain, and to the eye  
Were visible, a daily sight; and thus  
By the impressive discipline of fear,  
By pleasure and repeated happiness,  
So frequently repeated, and by force  
Of obscure feelings representative  
Of joys that were forgotten, these same scenes,  
So beauteous and majestic in themselves,  
Though yet the day was distant, did at length  
Become habitually dear, and all  
Their hues and forms were by invisible links  
Allied to the affections.

I began

My story early, feeling as I fear,  
The weakness of a human love, for days  
Disown'd by memory, ere the birth of spring  
Planting my snowdrops among winter snows.  
Nor will it seem to thee, my Friend! so prompt  
In sympathy, that I have lengthen'd out,  
With fond and feeble tongue, a tedious tale.  
Meanwhile, my hope has been that I might fetch  
Invigorating thoughts from former years,  
Might fix the wavering balance of my mind,  
And haply meet reproaches, too, whose power  
May spur me on, in manhood now mature,  
To honorable toil. Yet should these hopes  
Be vain, and thus should neither I be taught  
To understand myself, nor thou to know  
With better knowledge how the heart was fram'd  
Of him thou lovest, need I dread from thee  
Harsh judgments, if I am so loth to quit  
Those recollected hours that have the charm  
Of visionary things, and lovely forms  
And sweet sensations that throw back our life  
And almost make our Infancy itself  
A visible scene, on which the sun is shining?

One end hereby at least hath been attain'd,  
My mind hath been revived, and if this mood  
Desert me not, I will forthwith bring down,  
Through later years, the story of my life.  
The road lies plain before me; 'tis a theme  
Single and of determined bounds; and hence  
I chuse it rather at this time, than work  
Of ampler or more varied argument.