

# A Child Asleep

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)

How he sleepeth! having drunken  
Weary childhood's mandragore,  
From his pretty eyes have sunken  
Pleasures, to make room for more—  
Sleeping near the withered nosegay, which he pulled  
the day before.

Nosegays! leave them for the waking:  
Throw them earthward where they grew.  
Dim are such, beside the breaking  
Amaranths he looks unto—  
Folded eyes see brighter colours than the open ever  
do.

Heaven-flowers, rayed by shadows golden  
From the paths they sprang beneath,  
Now perhaps divinely holden,  
Swing against him in a wreath—  
We may think so from the quickening of his bloom  
and of his breath.

Vision unto vision calleth,  
While the young child dreameth on.  
Fair, O dreamer, thee befalleth  
With the glory thou hast won!  
Darker wert thou in the garden, yestermorn, by  
summer sun.

We should see the spirits ringing  
Round thee,—were the clouds away.  
'Tis the child-heart draws them, singing  
In the silent-seeming clay—  
Singing!—Stars that seem the mutest, go in music all  
the way.

As the moths around a taper,  
As the bees around a rose,  
As the gnats around a vapour,—  
So the Spirits group and close  
Round about a holy childhood, as if drinking its  
repose.

Shapes of brightness overlean thee,—  
Flash their diadems of youth  
On the ringlets which half screen thee,—  
While thou smilest, . . . not in sooth  
Thy smile . . . but the overfair one, dropt from some  
aethereal mouth.

Haply it is angels' duty,  
During slumber, shade by shade:  
To fine down this childish beauty  
To the thing it must be made,  
Ere the world shall bring it praises, or the tomb shall  
see it fade.

Softly, softly! make no noises!  
Now he lieth dead and dumb—  
Now he hears the angels' voices  
Folding silence in the room—  
Now he muses deep the meaning of the  
Heaven-words as they come.

Speak not! he is consecrated—  
Breathe no breath across his eyes.  
Lifted up and separated,  
On the hand of God he lies,  
In a sweetness beyond touching—held in cloistral  
sanctities.

Could ye bless him—father—mother ?  
Bless the dimple in his cheek?  
Dare ye look at one another,  
And the benediction speak?  
Would ye not break out in weeping, and confess  
yourselves too weak?

He is harmless—ye are sinful,—  
Ye are troubled—he, at ease:  
From his slumber, virtue winful  
Floweth outward with increase—  
Dare not bless him! but be blessed by his peace—and  
go in peace.