

began long before the move to Wimpole Street. She was just 15 when she began to suffer from prolonged headaches, fainting spells and crippling spinal pains which eventually left her unable to walk. Her illness was never diagnosed but there was probably a large psychosomatic element in her many ailments. Like many woman of her class at that time, her life was so rigidly regulated that she was compelled to live in a gilded cage. In 1940, the poet's beloved brother, Edward drowned and this aggravated her condition and for five years, she rarely left her bedroom and saw very few people. The only way in which Elizabeth was able to cope with her mental and physical pain was to dose herself with large quantities of laudanum which contains opium and was widely available at the time. For most of her life, she was essentially a drug addict.

However, her father for all his many faults did everything within his power to encourage his daughter's writing and he paid for the publication of her earlier essays and poems. To the modern reader, many of Elizabeth's poems seemed strident and sentimental but that suited the tastes of her time. Her reputation grew and she had many influential admirers, not least, Robert Browning who wrote expressing his passion for her verse. He had been seduced by what he called the *fresh strange music* and the *exquisite pathos and true new brave thought* of her verse. Elizabeth instantly replied to that first letter and there began a love affair between the two carried out almost entirely through correspondence. In the space of a year or so of daily letters, Elizabeth left the house in Wimpole Street for the first time in decades in order to elope with her secret lover. She gave up everything to be with Robert as her father disinherited her and her brothers rejected her for bringing such shame upon the family. The two poets lived in Italy for the rest of their lives. In one of her *Sonnets From The*

Portuguese, Elizabeth expresses her deep gratitude towards her husband who she feels has set her free from a living death

*My own Beloved, who hast lifted me
From this drear flat of earth where I was thrown,
And, in betwixt the languid ringlets, blown
A life-breath, till the forehead hopefully
Shines out again, as all the angels see,
Before thy saving kiss ! My own, my own,
Who camest to me when the world was gone,
And I who looked for only God, found thee!
I find thee; I am safe, and strong, and glad.
As one who stands in dewless asphodel
Looks backward on the tedious time he had
In the upper life,--so I, with bosom-swell,
Make witness, here, between the good and bad,
That Love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well.*

Their life together was not always completely harmonious. Elizabeth was never able to overcome the deep sense of grief occasioned by the loss of her brother and she sought solace in spiritualism which Robert thought was not so much profound as loopy. He could also not share in his wife's desire to help bring about through her writing the unification of their adopted country. Nonetheless, they were mostly happy together and Elizabeth's health improved so much that she was able to walk again and she gave birth to a son who they appropriately named Pen as his parents were brought together entirely by the power of the written word. In his beautiful, tender poem entitled *Two In The Campagna*, Robert described their life together in Italy.

*I wonder do you feel to-day
As I have felt since, hand in hand,
We sat down on the grass, to stray
In spirit better through the land,
This morn of Rome and May?
The champaign with its endless fleece
Of feathery grasses everywhere!
Silence and passion, joy and peace,
An everlasting wash of air—
Rome's ghost since her decease.
Such life here, through such lengths of hours,
Such miracles performed in play,
Such primal naked forms of flowers,
Such letting nature have her way
While heaven looks from its towers!*

In the early summer of 1861, Elizabeth died in her husband's loving arms; she is said to have died with a smile on her lips.