

## "MY LAST DUCHESS"

That's my last duchess painted on the wall.  
She looks just like she's still alive, doesn't she?  
I think it's a marvelous piece of work. I hired this man,  
Friar Pandolf, to do it. Took him all day,  
And there you have her.  
Why don't you sit and look at her for a while?  
I mention Friar Pandolf deliberately, because,  
you see,  
Whenever strangers like you take a look at her face,  
And see the depth and passion of her earnest glance,  
They always turn to me (since no one draws aside this curtain but me)  
And seem like they want to ask me, if they dared,  
What exactly put that look on her face.  
Yes, you were thinking it too, weren't you?  
You're not the first to wonder. Well, sir, I can tell you,  
It wasn't just her husband who called that spot of joy to the Duchess's cheek.  
Who knows? Maybe Friar Pandolf had just asked her  
To lift her sleeve up over her wrist a little bit,  
Or maybe he'd just made some flattering comment about how paint  
Could never capture the natural flush of her skin.  
She'd think he was just being polite, of course,  
And that would be enough to make her smile and blush.  
She had a heart — how shall I say? — too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed. She liked whatever she looked on,  
And her looks went everywhere.  
Everything was the same to her! Whether it was some gift I'd given her to wear,  
Or the sun setting in the West, or a branch of cherries some idiot servant brought her,  
Or the white mule she liked she ride around on the terrace—  
All got the same reaction, the same smile,  
Or at the very least, that blush.

I mean, sure, it was fine for her to thank men — that's fine!  
But she had this way of thanking them — I don't even know —  
It was like my gift of a nine-hundred year old title  
Was no different to her than anyone's gift!  
Who would lower themselves to put up with such nonsense?  
Even if you were good with words — which I am not —  
And you could explain to her that you wanted her to stop,  
And say, "You know, dear, these little things you do just sort of disgust me,"  
Or, "You know, you sometimes go too far, or not far enough,"  
And even if she would *listen* to you, and didn't try to argue or make excuses,  
Even then you'd still be stooping, to an extent,  
And I make a point of *never* stooping.  
Oh, sure, she always smiled at me when I passed her by.  
But who *didn't* she smile at?  
And this just went on and on. So I gave some commands,  
And all those smiles... stopped.  
And now there she is, just like she was alive.  
Anyway, let's go and meet up with everyone downstairs.  
Like I said before, your master the Count is known for his generosity,  
And I know he wouldn't disallow anything I asked for dowry —  
Though of course, as I've made clear from the start,  
It's his daughter herself I'm mainly interested in.  
No, no, we'll go together. Oh, but look! There's my bronze statue of Neptune  
Taming a seahorse. Quite rare, they say!  
I had it made specially for me by Claus of Innsbruck...

## SOLILOQUY OF THE SPANISH CLOISTER

Grr! Go on, my hated nemesis!  
Go and water your damned flowerpots!  
Ooh Brother Lawrence, if hate could kill,  
God's blood, mine would kill you so hard!  
Oh, what, your myrtle-bush needs trimming?  
Oh no, the rose was first in line!  
It needs its vase filled to the brim, huh?  
I hope you burn in hell!

At lunchtime we have to sit together.  
"Greetings, brother!" I have to hear,  
And he goes on and on about the weather, the  
season, the time of year,  
*"Hmm, the cork-crop's not doing so well!  
No, we can hardly hope for oak-galls this year!  
Hey, what's the Latin name for 'parsley'?"*  
What's the Greek name for SHUT YOUR  
STUPID PIG FACE.

Whoo, you got your fancy plate all polished,  
And carefully laid on your own special shelf!  
You've even got your own brand new spoon  
And a goblet all for you,  
Rinsed nice and clean like it's the freaking Holy  
Grail  
Before it's fit to touch your perfect mouth!  
And of course, marked with an "L" for Lawrence!  
(Ha, not so pure after all, are you?)

Saint, indeed! While Sister Dolores  
And Sister Sanchicha squat together,  
Gossiping outside the Convent,  
Washing their hair —  
Their long, lustrous, thick black hair —  
I know that pervert's dead eye glows  
Just as bright as a barbarian pirate's!  
(That is, it would if he'd let it show.)

And whenever he's done eating,  
As far as I recall, he never lays his knife and fork  
crosswise,  
Like I do to praise Jesus.  
I illustrate the Trinity whenever I drink my orange  
juice,  
By drinking it three sips at a time,  
But he drinks his down all in one gulp!

And those melons he grows? He says if he's  
able,  
We're to have a feast — oh, how nice of him!  
Of course the Abbot gets a *whole* melon,  
While the rest of us only get a slice.  
How are your flowers doing, bro? Not great?  
You aren't growing any fruit?  
Huh, that's so weird! And here I've been working  
so hard to clip them when you weren't looking!

There's this great verse in Galatians  
Where if you violate it, you'll bring 29 separate  
damnations upon yourself.  
You're bound to be brought down by one of  
them.  
And if I can trip you up right as you're dying,  
So sure you're gonna go straight to heaven,  
I'll spin you around 180 degrees  
And send you flying straight to hell!

Or, maybe I'll leave my scandalous French novel  
lying around somewhere.  
One glance at it, and you'll be groveling  
At the feet of the Prince of Darkness!  
And if I fold it open to page sixteen —  
Oh man, *page sixteen* — that'll get him!  
Maybe I'll just slip it into his basket one day  
while he's out picking his plums.

Of course, I could always ask Satan to help me  
bring you down!  
In theory, I could pledge my soul to him, but  
leave a loophole in the contract,  
And he wouldn't figure out till it was too late  
And we'd already destroyed that precious  
rose-acacia you're so dang proud of!  
*Hy, Zy, Hine...* Oh crap, it's time for evening  
prayer!  
Uh, ahem, *Ave Mary Blah Blah, Whatever.*  
Grr, you swine!

## CALIBAN UPON SETEBOS

For context: in *The Tempest*, Caliban is the half-human, half-beast son of a witch named Sycorax, who worshiped the demon-god Setebos. He & his mother arrived on the island way before the beginning of the play and enslaved the fairy-sprites that lived there. Then, after Sycorax's death, the sorcerer Prospero and his daughter Miranda arrive on the island, and Prospero basically enslaves Caliban. Also, Caliban talks in 3rd-person. Just something to keep in mind.

[Thinking]"Will sprawl on his belly in the mud, now that the heat of the day is at its peak,  
With his elbows wide, fists clenched to prop up his chin, and his feet kicking up slush  
And little lizard things crawling about his spine and tickling his arms,  
And the pumpkin-vine above his head that covers the cave-top like an eyebrow over an eye  
Creeps down and brushes against Caliban's hair —  
And here's a flower with a bee, and here's a fruit for Caliban to munch on —  
Caliban looks out over the sea where the sunbeams cross like threads of spider-web  
And talks to himself, and says whatever he wants about Setebos, his mother's god,  
Setebos doesn't like it when Caliban talks about him — ha, but he doesn't have to know!  
Anyway, Prospero and Miranda are both asleep, trusting that Caliban is doing his chores,  
It's fun to cheat them, and let my tongue say what it wants!

Setebos, Setebos and Setebos!

I think he lives on the dark side of the moon, and I think he made the moon, with the sun to match.  
But not the stars — no, the stars came from somewhere else.  
He only made the clouds, winds, meteors, those sorts of things, and this island too & everything on it,  
And the snaky sea that goes around the world and ends where it began.

I think he made all this because he was bored and miserable.  
He was just mad he couldn't change his cold nature or make himself feel better.  
I once saw a cold fish that wanted to escape the icy stream it lived in and thaw itself in the salty ocean  
In the place where the stream shot out, like a crystal spike between the warm waves,  
But when she got to the salt water, she got sick and flounced back from the water because she couldn't  
breathe in it,  
And in her old stream she buried herself in despair, both hating & loving the warm salt water.  
That's what Setebos is like.

I think he made the sun, and this island, and all the trees and birds and animals here,  
That otter with its sleek body, that sea-bird with its burning eye, that badger I've watched hunt in the  
moonlight, and that magpie that eats worms out of the trees but won't eat the ants — and the ants too,  
who build up walls around their homes —  
Setebos made all this and more, and me, out of pure spite. Why else would he make it?  
He couldn't make another Setebos to be his mate, and he wouldn't want to make something he finds ugly  
or worthless  
So, out of envy, boredom or sport, he made what he wished he could be, in a way —  
A creation that's weaker than him in some aspects, stronger in others,  
Worthy, and yet nothing but his playthings, which he both admires and mocks.  
Because, even though we're better than him, it doesn't matter — he can torment us however he wants.  
Look now, I'm smashing this gourd into mush and mixing it up with honey and pods,  
And when it gets frothy I'm gonna drink it all down till maggots scamper through my brain  
And then throw myself flat on my back in the thyme and wish I were born a bird.

But since I can't be a bird, maybe I'll just make a bird out of clay, my own little mini-Caliban —  
I'd make my clay bird better than myself, give it wings, and an impressive crest, and a stinger to harm its  
enemies — and I'd bring it to life,  
And I'd tell it to fly up to that rock up there and nip me off the antennae of some crickets just because.  
And if his clay leg snapped in the process of trying to do this, I'd just laugh.  
And if he saw me laughing and started crying, begging me to help and fix up his leg for him,  
Well, I don't know, maybe I would or maybe I wouldn't. I *might* hear his prayer and give him three new  
legs to replace the broken one,  
Or maybe I'd just pull his other leg off and leave him there, legless, like a stupid egg rolling around.  
And then he'd know he was *mine* and he was nothing but worthless clay.  
Wouldn't that be fun, lying here in the thyme, getting wasted, making and breaking clay on a whim?  
That's what Setebos is like.

I don't think this means that Setebos is right or wrong, good or evil. He's just strong and in charge.  
I'm strong too, compared to those crabs over there who are marching to the sea.  
How about I let twenty crabs pass by unharmed, and then smash the twenty-first with a rock!  
Not out of love or hate, but just because.  
Maybe the first crab with spots that comes by, I'll twist one of its pincers off.  
But this little bruised crab over here will get a worm, and that one with the red-tipped claws will get two.  
Whatever I feel like each time, I do.  
That's what Setebos is like.

Well then, I guess he's mostly good, and you could get on his good side if you learned his ways,  
Though he's still a lot meaner than his creation, that's for sure!  
Oh, he's made his creation better than himself, and he's envious that we do more good than he does.  
What other consolation does he have other than the thought that, if it wasn't for him, we couldn't do  
anything, and therefore we must submit to him?  
What other use would he have for us?  
I once cut a hollow tree branch that, when I blew into it, made a sound exactly like a bluejay when you  
pluck the feathers from her wings,  
And whenever I played that pipe, other little birds that hate the bluejays would come flocking around, glad  
that their enemy was hurt.  
That pipe could justifiably boast, "Hey, I'm the one who catches the birds, I'm the clever thing, I make the  
cry that my maker can't make."  
But you know what I'd do? I'd smash that pipe under my foot.  
That's what Setebos is like.

But why is he so rough, so cold and miserable? Ah, that is a question!  
If we wanted to know the answer, we'd have to ask whatever is *over* Setebos,  
The Quiet Something over his head that created him — or maybe fought him and beat him down,  
The Quiet that Setebos can't reach, which feels neither joy nor grief, since both come from weakness.  
I feel joy when the quails come, but if I could bring the quails here whenever I wanted I wouldn't feel  
anything.  
And this Quiet, whatever it wants to do, it just does.  
I would guess the stars are the outposts of its realm, but I don't think or care about that much.  
I only care about Setebos, who makes himself feared through what he does,  
Who looks up to the Quiet and sees he'll never be able to soar up that high, to reach that happiness,  
So instead looks down and makes this world his plaything to take out his frustration.

It's comforting to make toys and play with them.  
Once I was spying on Prospero at his books — careless and lofty, lord of the island —  
I watched him stitch together a book and write a bunch of fancy words in it,  
Make himself a magic wand, wear a wildcat's skin for his wizard robes.  
He used his magic to control a serpent, make it cower or snarl and hold his gaze.  
I too have a crane I keep that I force to catch fish, and a sea beast that I blinded and split its toe-webs,  
And now I keep it in a hole in the rocks and call it Caliban:  
A bitter heart that bides its time and bites.  
That's how I pretend I'm Prospero, in a way, and find some happiness in make-believe.  
That's what Setebos is like.

My mother believed that the Quiet created all things, and Setebos only messed with his creation.  
I don't think so, though. I think Setebos made us — he made us weak so he could mess with us easier.  
If that wasn't his intention, he could have made us way better: given us eyes that couldn't be blinded, and  
heads that could fend off the snow, and scaled flesh like armor.  
But that would ruin his fun!  
That's why it only makes sense that he's the one who made us like this.

I guess maybe he might like things that profit him, just like I do. But why, though?  
I mean, / don't get any good otherwise.  
This blinded sea beast I have imprisoned likes anyone who gives it some meat, but if it had eyes and  
could help itself, it wouldn't like anyone.  
Setebos has eyes, and he can do what he wants, so why would he care about anything?  
I myself have tasted no finer good, when everything is going right and there's nothing to worry about, than  
trying to make something with my own wit and strength.  
I've piled up rocks, squared them off and scratched a little moon symbol on them, and set up spikes of  
trees with dead sloth skulls on top. It was pointless, but it was fun — work for work's sake.  
One day I'll just knock it all down again.  
That's what Setebos is like.

I said he's terrible, just look at what he's done for proof!  
One hurricane will spoil six months of hope. He particularly hates me, that I know, just like he particularly  
likes Prospero. Who knows why?  
That's just how it is.  
I spent have the winter weaving twigs together, building a fence to stop the she-tortoises from crawling up  
on the shore to lay their eggs.  
Then one wave came by, and Setebos stepped on its neck, and it spat out its watery tongue and wiped  
out all my hard work. Thanks, Setebos.  
On the other hand, I saw a meteorite come down recently, just over there, where I'd been sleeping only  
half an hour before. I could have died, but Setebos spared me! Now *that's* power.  
Once I dug up a newt that Setebos probably envied once, because it was shut up inside a stone.  
Is there a way to please him and prevent this from happening to me?  
Maybe whatever Prospero does, if only he'd share his secrets with me! But he won't.  
That's the game, after all: figure it out or die!  
But not everything dies. We're all at his mercy, and the ones that please him most... well...  
It seems like the secret is to never try pleasing him the same way twice!  
If you try, he might get mad and strike you down. You have to always assume you don't know what he  
wants, never think you can predict him.

I've done the same thing myself: I once spared a squirrel who stole a nut from me and bit at me in self-defense, and at the same time I once spared a sea urchin that curled up into a ball and played dead.

- Fight back or play dead? Both ways pleased me, but what would have made me mad would be if either one of those creatures felt entitled to live, if they said in their hearts, "Hey, this worked yesterday, or it worked for some other animal, so it must work for me."
- Oh yeah? I'd teach them what "must" means! *I do what I want!*

That's what Setebos is like.

I expect everything will continue this way forever, and we'll just have to keep living in fear of him as long as he's still around.

Nothing will change, unless one day he creates a new world that he likes better, at which point he may get bored with us and we'll be able to relax.

Or maybe one day he'll try to attack the Quiet itself... Or maybe he'll *become* the Quiet, like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly.

But until that happens, here we are, and there he is, and there's no help for any of us anywhere.

I believe pain only stops at death. My mother thought differently, though: she thought that after death, Setebos tortured his enemies and rewarded his friends.

Nonsense! Setebos does his worst while we're alive, saving the worst pain for last — i.e. death.

Meanwhile, the best way to avoid pissing him off is to *never seem like you're too happy*.

I myself have seen two flies basking happily on the pumpkin plant, and I killed them both.

I also saw two black beetles struggling to roll their ball as if their lives depended on it, and I moved a stick out of their way to help them out.

In the same way, I'd prefer if Setebos didn't see the truth about me. I'd prefer if he thought I was working really hard and having a terrible time,

And above all else, that he thought I envied him.

And I'd only dance when it's dark and laugh in holes, and speak my mind when I was sure he wasn't listening, but then moan & curse whenever I'm out in the sunlight.

If Setebos caught me here and heard what I was saying, and asked, "What are you laughing at?"

I'd cut off one of my own fingers to appease him, or burn one of my yearlings, or let the apples rot on the trees, or feed my blind sea beast to the orcs,

And then I'd make a fire and sing a song of praise to Setebos, and hope that the small injuries I'd given myself would heal in time,

And maybe one day the Quiet would conquer Setebos, or more likely he'd just grow old and doze off and finally stop bothering us down here on earth.

[*Thinking*] Oh crap, everything's gone dark and the crickets have gone silent!

And there's his raven — oh no, it's gonna tattle on me!

Ugh, I'm such an idiot, rambling on like his! Yikes, the wind is stirring up a dust storm,

There's a fire burning up the trees — there, there, there, there, there!

That's his thunder in the distance! Ah, I'm so stupid!

Gotta lie down flat on the ground — show Setebos I love him —

I'll let my quails go free, and I'll skip eating shellfish this month,

So hopefully Setebos will spare me!