

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal**

**- 14 poems -**

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## **Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal (25 July 1829 - 11 February 1862)**

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal was an English artists' model, poet and artist who was painted and drawn extensively by artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, including Walter Deverell, William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais (including Millais' 1852 painting Ophelia) and most of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's early paintings of women.

### Early Life

Named Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall, after her mother, Lizzie was born on 25 July 1829, at the family's home at 7 Charles Street, Hatton Garden. She was born to Charles Crooke Siddall, who claimed that his family descended from nobility, and Eleanor Evans, a family of both English and Welsh descent. At the time of Lizzie's birth, her parents were not poverty stricken: her father had his own cutlery-making business. Around 1831, the Siddall family moved to the borough of Southwark, in south London, a less salubrious area than Hatton Garden. It was in Southwark that the rest of Lizzie's siblings were born: Lydia, to whom Lizzie was particularly close, Mary, Clara, James and Henry. Although there is no record of her having attended school, Lizzie was able to read and write, presumably having been taught by her parents. She developed a love of poetry at a young age, after discovering a poem by Tennyson on a scrap of newspaper that had been used to wrap a pat of butter; this discovery was one of Lizzie's inspirations to start writing her own poetry.

### Model for the Pre-Raphaelites

Siddal, whose name was originally spelt 'Siddall' (it was Rossetti who dropped the second 'l') was first noticed by Deverell in 1849, while she was working as a milliner in Cranbourne Alley, London. Neither she nor her family had any artistic aspirations or interests. She was employed as a model by Deverell and through him was introduced to the Pre-Raphaelites. William Michael Rossetti, her brother-in-law, described her as "a most beautiful creature with an air between dignity and sweetness with something that exceeded modest self-respect and partook of disdainful reserve; tall, finely-formed with a lofty neck and regular yet somewhat uncommon features, greenish-blue unsparkling eyes, large perfect eyelids, brilliant complexion and a lavish heavy wealth of coppery golden hair."

At the start of her modelling career, Siddal was in the enviable position of being allowed to remain working at Mrs. Tozer's millinery part-time. In this was she was ensured a regular salary even if modelling did not work out, an unusual opportunity for a woman of her time.

While posing for Millais' *Ophelia* (1852), Siddal had floated in a bathtub full of water to model the drowning Ophelia. Millais painted daily into the winter with Siddal modelling. He put lamps under the tub to warm the water. On one occasion the lamps went out and the water slowly became icy cold. Millais was absorbed by his painting and did not notice. Siddal did not complain. After this session she became very sick with a severe cold or pneumonia. Her father held Millais responsible, and forced him to pay compensation for her doctor's bills. It was long thought that she suffered from tuberculosis, but some historians now believe that an intestinal disorder was more likely. Some have suggested that she might have been an anorexic, while others attribute her poor health to an addiction to laudanum or to a combination of ailments. In his 2010 book *At Home*, author Bill Bryson suggests that Elizabeth may have suffered from poisoning, because she was a "devoted swallower" of Fowler's Solution, a so-called complexion improver made from dilute arsenic.

Elizabeth Siddal was the primary muse for Dante Gabriel Rossetti throughout most of his youth. After he met her he began to paint her to the exclusion of almost all other models and stopped her from modelling for the other Pre-Raphaelites. These drawings and paintings culminated in *Beata Beatrix*, painted in 1863, one year after Siddal's death. She was used as a model for this painting, which shows a praying Beatrice (from Dante Alighieri).

#### Life with Rossetti

Beginning in 1853, with his watercolour, *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice*, Rossetti painted her in many works. In this piece, Lizzie portrays a regal woman, who visits the distinguished Dante as he writes his autobiography. Too absorbed with his overwhelming passion for Beatrice, Dante initially fails to notice the other people present in the room. Wearing a long, tailored blue gown and a teal headdress, Lizzie clearly occupies a position of considerable rank and beauty. Following this work, Rossetti used Lizzie in other Dante-related pieces, including *Dante's Vision of Rachel and Leah* (1855) and *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies him her Salutation* (1851). In the latter painting, Lizzie represented Dante's obsession, Beatrice, and again wore a distinguished, long green dress and possessed exquisite beauty. Surrounded by throngs of supporters, she confronts Dante with a defiance that attests to her authority.

After becoming engaged to Rossetti, Siddal began to study with him. In contrast to Rossetti's idealized paintings, Siddal's were harsh. This is very evident in her self portrait, pictured above. Rossetti painted and repainted her and drew countless sketches of her. His depictions show a beauty. Her self portrait shows much about the subject, but certainly not the floating beauty that Rossetti painted. This painting is historically very significant because it shows, through her own eyes, a beauty who was idealized by so many famous artists. In 1855 the art critic John Ruskin began to subsidize her career. Ruskin paid £150 per year in exchange for all drawings and paintings that she produced. Siddal produced many sketches but only a single painting. Her sketches are laid out in a fashion similar to Pre-Raphaelite compositions and tend to illustrate Arthurian legend and other idealized Medieval themes. Ruskin also admonished Rossetti in his letters for not marrying Siddal and giving her the security she needed. During this period Siddal also began to write poetry, often with dark themes about lost love or the impossibility of true love. "Her verses were as simple and moving as ancient ballads; her drawings were as genuine in their medieval spirit as much more highly finished and competent works of Pre-Raphaelite art," wrote critic William Gaunt in *The Pre-Raphaelite Dream*.

Rossetti again represented Lizzie as Dante's Beatrice in one of his most famous works, *Beata Beatrix*, (1864–1870) which he painted as a memorial to Lizzie after her death. This piece also mimicked the death of Dante's love in his autobiographical work, *Vita Nuova*. In the work, amidst a yellow haze of relatively indistinct shapes, including Florence's Ponte Vecchio and the figures of Dante and Love, Lizzie sits, representing Dante's Beatrice. With an upturned chin and closed eyes, Lizzie appears keenly aware of her impending fate, death. A bird, which serves as the messenger of death, places a poppy

in her hands. Critics have praised the piece for its emotional resonance, which can be felt simply through the work's moving colouring and composition. The true history of Rossetti and his beloved wife further deepens its meaning; although their love had waned at that point, Lizzie still exerted a powerful influence on the artist.

Perhaps the artist's most abundant and personal works, however, included his pencil sketches of his wife at home. He began these sketches in 1852, when he moved into a home, Chatham Place, with Lizzie, and the two became increasingly anti-social, absorbed in each other's affections. The lovers even coined affectionate nicknames for one another, which included "Guggums" or "Gug" and "Dove" - one of Rossetti's names for Lizzie. Rossetti taught Lizzie to paint and write. Although Lizzie produced mediocre work, due to his complete adoration of her, Rossetti labeled her a creative genius. Rossetti manifested this same idealization of Lizzie in his sketches (most of which he entitled simply, "Elizabeth Siddal"), in which he portrayed her as a woman of leisure, class, and beauty, often situated in comfortable settings.

In both his art and writings, Rossetti exalted Lizzie. In fact, his period of great poetic production began when he met her and ended around the time of her death. (Douchy, 155) His poem, "A Last Confession," in particular, exemplifies his love for Lizzie, whom he personifies as the heroine with eyes, "as of the sea and sky on a grey day." In this piece, a man's affections for a young girl progress from parental to romantic as the girl ages.

Lizzie's prominence in Rossetti's works decreased as their love faded and she became increasingly ill. As Beata Beatrix shows, however, Rossetti never forgot his love for Lizzie, even after her death. Another famous work that he produced toward the end of their marriage was his *Regina Cordium* or *The Queen of Hearts* (1860). Painted as a marriage portrait, this picture features a close-up, vibrantly coloured depiction of Lizzie. Her shiny, golden hair complements the light orange hue of her heart necklace, and, with an upturned chin, she embodies the regal air implied by the title. Such flattering portraits truly reflected Rossetti's undying affection for his wife.

#### Relationship with Rossetti's Family

As Siddal came from a working-class family, Rossetti feared introducing her to his parents. Lizzie was also the victim of harsh criticism from Rossetti's sisters. The knowledge that the family would not approve the marriage contributed to Rossetti putting it off. Siddal also appears to have believed, with some justification, that Rossetti was always seeking to replace her with a younger muse, which contributed to her later depressive periods and illness.

Rossetti's relationship with Siddal is also explored by Christina Rossetti in her poem "In an Artist's Studio":

One face looks out from all his canvases,  
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:  
We found her hidden just behind those screens,  
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.  
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,  
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,  
A saint, an angel -- every canvas means  
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.  
He feeds upon her face by day and night,  
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,  
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:  
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;  
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;  
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

#### Marriage, ill-health and death

Siddal travelled to Paris and Nice for several years for her health. She returned to England in 1860 to marry Rossetti. The wedding took place on

Wednesday, May 23, 1860, at St. Clement's Church in the seaside town of Hastings. They had no family or friends present, just a couple of witnesses whom they had asked in Hastings. At the time of their wedding, she was so frail from illness that she had to be carried to the church, despite it being a 5 minute walk from where she was staying. There is a sanctuary lamp in the church commemorating the wedding and a memorial to Rossetti.

After the wedding, as soon as Lizzie was well enough, the Rossettis left for their honeymoon in France.

In the previous ten years he had been engaged to her and then broken it off at the last minute several times. Stress from those incidents had affected her. She was now severely depressed and her long illness had given her access to and addiction to laudanum. In 1861, Siddal became pregnant. She was overjoyed about this, but the pregnancy ended in a stillborn daughter. Siddal overdosed in 1862 on laudanum shortly after becoming pregnant for a second time. Rossetti discovered her unconscious and dying in bed. Although her death was ruled accidental by the coroner, there are suggestions that Rossetti found a suicide note. Consumed with grief and guilt Rossetti went to see Ford Madox Brown who is supposed to have instructed him to burn the note – under the law at the time suicide was both illegal and immoral and would have brought a scandal on the family as well, as suicide would bar Siddal from a Christian burial.

Overcome with grief, Rossetti enclosed in Elizabeth's coffin a small journal containing the only copies he had of his many poems. He purportedly slid the book into Elizabeth's red hair. She was then interred at Highgate Cemetery in London. By 1869, Rossetti was chronically addicted to drugs and alcohol. He convinced himself that he was going blind and couldn't paint. He began to write poetry again. Before publishing his newer poems he became obsessed with retrieving the poems he had slipped into Elizabeth's hair. Rossetti and his agent, the notorious Charles Augustus Howell, applied to the Home Secretary for an order to have her coffin exhumed to retrieve the manuscript. This was done in the dead of night so as to avoid public curiosity and attention, and Rossetti was not present. Howell reported to Rossetti that her corpse was remarkably well preserved and her delicate beauty intact. Her hair was said to have continued to grow after death so that the coffin was filled with her flowing coppery hair. The manuscript was retrieved although a worm had burrowed through the book so that some of the poems were difficult to read. Rossetti published the old poems with his newer ones; they were not well received by some critics because of their eroticism, and he was haunted by the exhumation through the rest of his life.

Seven years after Lizzie's death, Rossetti published a collection of sonnets entitled *The House of Life*; contained within it was the poem, "Without Her". It is a reflection on life once love has departed:

What of her glass without her? The blank grey  
There where the pool is blind of the moon's face.  
Her dress without her? The tossed empty space  
Of cloud-rack whence the moon has passed away.

Her paths without her? Day's appointed sway  
Usurped by desolate night. Her pillowed place  
Without her? Tears, ah me! For love's good grace,  
And cold forgetfulness of night or day.

What of the heart without her? Nay, poor heart,  
Of thee what word remains ere speech be still?  
A wayfarer by barren ways and chill,  
Steep ways and weary, without her thou art,  
Where the long cloud, the long wood's counterpart,  
Sheds doubled up darkness up the labouring hill.

-- From Without Her

In Fiction, drama and song

Fiona Mountain's 2002 mystery novel *Pale as the Dead* centres a "genealogical mystery" around the descendants of Elizabeth Siddal and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In the novel, the couple's sickly newborn daughter is not stillborn but is stolen by their family doctor, who was in love with Elizabeth. Elizabeth's mysterious ailments are explained as a genetic heart defect that has been inherited by her great-great granddaughter Bethany, a young woman who is modelling for photographs inspired by the Pre-Raphaelite paintings.

Mollie Hardwick (author of *Upstairs, Downstairs*) wrote a mystery novel entitled *The Dreaming Damozel* in 1990. The plot follows antique dealer Doran Fairweather, who is elated to find a small oil painting she believes to be of Elizabeth Siddal. But she is shocked when she happens upon the body of a young girl, floating dead in a pond. The death scene mimics the Millais painting of Ophelia featuring Elizabeth Siddal. Doran is so excited by the coincidence and mystery that she ignores the advice of her husband, Rodney, who warns her that the story of Rossetti and Siddal was plagued by unhappiness. He feels that any involvement in this mystery will lead to trouble and danger. But Doran is quickly becoming obsessed with the Rossetti/Siddal saga and is making some interesting new friends. She fails to see the trap that is ready to snare her.

In Tim Powers' 2012 novel *Hide Me Among the Graves*, "Lizzie" Siddal is a victim of the vampire John Polidori, her husband's uncle and the author of what is likely the first vampire story. This becomes an explanation for her illness and death, as well as for her husband's exhumation of her grave, which is not to regain his poems but is part of a strategy to defeat the vampire.

Rossetti's relationship with Siddal has been the subject of a number of television dramas, notably *Dante's Inferno* (1967), by Ken Russell, in which she was played by Judith Paris and Rossetti by Oliver Reed; *The Love School* (1975) in which she was played by Patricia Quinn; and *Desperate Romantics* (2009) in which she was played by Amy Manson.

"Ghostland" is a 2001 album by the Seattle neo-psychedelic band The Goblin Market, a side project featuring members of The Green Pajamas. The band is named after a poem by Christina Rossetti, and the album is inspired by the exhumation of Elizabeth Siddal.

## **A Silent Wood**

O silent wood, I enter thee  
With a heart so full of misery  
For all the voices from the trees  
And the ferns that cling about my knees.

In thy darkest shadow let me sit  
When the grey owls about thee flit;  
There will I ask of thee a boon,  
That I may not faint or die or swoon.

Gazing through the gloom like one  
Whose life and hopes are also done,  
Frozen like a thing of stone  
I sit in thy shadow – but not alone.

Can God bring back the day when we two stood  
Beneath the clinging trees in that dark wood?

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## **A Year and a Day**

Slow days have passed that make a year,  
Slow hours that make a day,  
Since I could take my first dear love  
And kiss him the old way;  
Yet the green leaves touch me on the cheek,  
Dear Christ, this month of May.

I lie among the tall green grass  
That bends above my head  
And covers up my wasted face  
And folds me in its bed  
Tenderly and lovingly  
Like grass above the dead.

Dim phantoms of an unknown ill  
Float through my tired brain;  
The unformed visions of my life  
Pass by in ghostly train;  
Some pause to touch me on the cheek,  
Some scatter tears like rain.

A shadow falls along the grass  
And lingers at my feet;  
A new face lies between my hands --  
Dear Christ, if I could weep  
Tears to shut out the summer leaves  
When this new face I greet.

Still it is but the memory  
Of something I have seen  
In the dreamy summer weather  
When the green leaves came between:  
The shadow of my dear love's face --  
So far and strange it seems.

The river ever running down  
Between its grassy bed,  
The voices of a thousand birds  
That clang above my head,  
Shall bring to me a sadder dream  
When this sad dream is dead.

A silence falls upon my heart  
And hushes all its pain.  
I stretch my hands in the long grass  
And fall to sleep again,  
There to lie empty of all love  
Like beaten corn of grain.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## **At Last**

O mother, open the window wide  
And let the daylight in;  
The hills grow darker to my sight  
And thoughts begin to swim.

And mother dear, take my young son,  
(Since I was born of thee)  
And care for all his little ways  
And nurse him on thy knee.

And mother, wash my pale pale hands  
And then bind up my feet;  
My body may no longer rest  
Out of its winding sheet.

And mother dear, take a sapling twig  
And green grass newly mown,  
And lay them on my empty bed  
That my sorrow be not known.

And mother, find three berries red  
And pluck them from the stalk,  
And burn them at the first cockcrow  
That my spirit may not walk.

And mother dear, break a willow wand,  
And if the sap be even,  
Then save it for sweet Robert's sake  
And he'll know my soul's in heaven.

And mother, when the big tears fall,  
(And fall, God knows, they may)  
Tell him I died of my great love  
And my dying heart was gay.

And mother dear, when the sun has set  
And the pale kirk grass waves,  
Then carry me through the dim twilight  
And hide me among the graves.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## **Dead Love**

Oh never weep for love that's dead  
Since love is seldom true  
But changes his fashion from blue to red,  
From brightest red to blue,  
And love was born to an early death  
And is so seldom true.

Then harbour no smile on your bonny face  
To win the deepest sigh.  
The fairest words on truest lips  
Pass on and surely die,  
And you will stand alone, my dear,  
When wintry winds draw nigh.

Sweet, never weep for what cannot be,  
For this God has not given.  
If the merest dream of love were true  
Then, sweet, we should be in heaven,  
And this is only earth, my dear,  
Where true love is not given.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## Early Death

Oh grieve not with thy bitter tears  
The life that passes fast;  
The gates of heaven will open wide  
And take me in at last.

Then sit down meekly at my side  
And watch my young life flee;  
Then solemn peace of holy death  
Come quickly unto thee.

But true love, seek me in the throng  
Of spirits floating past,  
And I will take thee by the hands  
And know thee mine at last.

He and She and Angels Three

Ruthless hands have torn her  
From one that loved her well;  
Angels have upborn her,  
Christ her grief to tell.

She shall stand to listen,  
She shall stand and sing,  
Till three winged angels  
Her lover's soul shall bring.

He and she and the angels three  
Before God's face shall stand;  
There they shall pray among themselves  
And sing at His right hand.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## Fragment of a Ballad

Many a mile over land and sea  
Unsummoned my love returned to me;  
I remember not the words he said  
But only the trees moaning overhead.

And he came ready to take and bear  
The cross I had carried for many a year,  
But words came slowly one by one  
From frozen lips shut still and dumb.

How sounded my words so still and slow  
To the great strong heart that loved me so,  
Who came to save me from pain and wrong  
And to comfort me with his love so strong?

I felt the wind strike chill and cold  
And vapours rise from the red-brown mould;  
I felt the spell that held my breath  
Bending me down to a living death.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## **Gone**

To touch the glove upon her tender hand,  
To watch the jewel sparkle in her ring,  
Lifted my heart into a sudden song  
As when the wild birds sing.

To touch her shadow on the sunny grass,  
To break her pathway through the darkened wood,  
Filled all my life with trembling and tears  
And silence where I stood.

I watch the shadows gather round my heart,  
I live to know that she is gone –  
Gone gone for ever, like the tender dove  
That left the Ark alone.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## **Lord May I Come?**

Life and night are falling from me,  
Death and day are opening on me,  
Wherever my footsteps come and go,  
Life is a stony way of woe.  
Lord, have I long to go?

Hallow hearts are ever near me,  
Soulless eyes have ceased to cheer me:  
Lord may I come to thee?

Life and youth and summer weather  
To my heart no joy can gather.  
Lord, lift me from life's stony way!  
Loved eyes long closed in death watch for me:  
Holy death is waiting for me –  
Lord, may I come to-day?

My outward life feels sad and still  
Like lilies in a frozen rill;  
I am gazing upwards to the sun,  
Lord, Lord, remembering my lost one.  
O Lord, remember me!

How is it in the unknown land?  
Do the dead wander hand in hand?  
God, give me trust in thee.

Do we clasp dead hands and quiver  
With an endless joy for ever?  
Do tall white angels gaze and wend  
Along the banks where lilies bend?  
Lord, we know not how this may be:  
Good Lord we put our faith in thee –  
O God, remember me.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## **Love and Hate**

Ope not thy lips, thou foolish one,  
Nor turn to me thy face;  
The blasts of heaven shall strike thee down  
Ere I will give thee grace.

Take thou thy shadow from my path,  
Nor turn to me and pray;  
The wild wild winds thy dirge may sing  
Ere I will bid thee stay.

Turn thou away thy false dark eyes,  
Nor gaze upon my face;  
Great love I bore thee: now great hate  
Sits grimly in its place.

All changes pass me like a dream,  
I neither sing nor pray;  
And thou art like the poisonous tree  
That stole my life away.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## **Shepherd Turned Sailor**

Now Christ ye save yon bonny shepherd  
Sailing on the sea;  
Ten thousand souls are sailing there  
But they belong to Thee.  
If he is lost then all is lost  
And all is dead to me.

My love should have a grey head-stonee  
And green moss at his feet  
And clinging grass above his breast  
Whereon his lambs could bleat,  
And I should know the span of earth  
Where some day I might sleep.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## **The Lust of the Eyes**

I care not for my Lady's soul  
Though I worship before her smile;  
I care not where be my Lady's goal  
When her beauty shall lose its wile.

Low sit I down at my Lady's feet  
Gazing through her wild eyes  
Smiling to think how my love will fleet  
When their starlike beauty dies.

I care not if my Lady pray  
To our Father which is in Heaven  
But for joy my heart's quick pulses play  
For to me her love is given.

Then who shall close my Lady's eyes  
And who shall fold her hands?  
Will any hearken if she cries  
Up to the unknown lands?

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## **The Passing of Love**

O God, forgive me that I ranged  
My life into a dream of love!  
Will tears of anguish never wash  
The passion from my blood?

Love kept my heart in a song of joy,  
My pulses quivered to the tune;  
The coldest blasts of winter blew  
Upon me like sweet airs in June.

Love floated on the mists of morn  
And rested on the sunset's rays;  
He calmed the thunder of the storm  
And lighted all my ways.

Love held me joyful through the day  
And dreaming ever through the night;  
No evil thing could come to me,  
My spirit was so light.

O Heaven help my foolish heart  
Which heeded not the passing time  
That dragged my idol from its place  
And shattered all its shrine.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## **True Love**

Farewell, Earl Richard,  
Tender and brave;  
Kneeling I kiss  
The dust from thy grave.

Pray for me, Richard,  
Lying alone  
With hands pleading earnestly,  
All in white stone.

Soon must I leave thee  
This sweet summer tide;  
That other is waiting  
To claim his pale bride.

Soon I'll return to thee  
Hopeful and brave,  
When the dead leaves  
Blow over thy grave.

Then shall they find me  
Close at thy head  
Watching or fainting,  
Sleeping or dead.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal

## **Worn Out**

Thy strong arms are around me, love  
My head is on thy breast;  
Low words of comfort come from thee  
Yet my soul has no rest.

For I am but a startled thing  
Nor can I ever be  
Aught save a bird whose broken wing  
Must fly away from thee.

I cannot give to thee the love  
I gave so long ago,  
The love that turned and struck me down  
Amid the blinding snow.

I can but give a failing heart  
And weary eyes of pain,  
A faded mouth that cannot smile  
And may not laugh again.

Yet keep thine arms around me, love,  
Until I fall to sleep;  
Then leave me, saying no goodbye  
Lest I might wake, and weep.

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal