

Five Villanelles to My Father

Villanelle # 1

You did not understand when I was young,
But thought I was a rebel, nothing more.
We seemed to speak, each one, a different tongue.

The times had changed, the pendulum had swung,
The clock had struck an hour unstruck before.
You did not understand when I was young.

You could not sing the song that I had sung,
An anthem that the spirit in me bore.
We seemed to speak, each one, a different tongue.

As long as I had breath in but one lung
I had to sing my soul, a troubadour.
You did not understand when I was young.

My vocal chords would have to come unstrung
Before I could stop singing from that score.
We seemed to speak, each one, a different tongue.

You could not feel the depths from which there sprung
The oath of faithfulness to self I swore.
You did not understand when I was young;
We seemed to speak, each one, a different tongue.

Villanelle # 2

So, tell me, was it worth the fight you fought
For nothing more than reputation's sake?
You cared too much for what the neighbors thought.

You paid too high a price for what you bought
And lost the bet you made at such a stake.
So, tell me, was it worth the fight you fought?

You stepped into a vipers' pit and, caught,
At once were bitten by so vain a snake.
You cared too much for what the neighbors thought.

As ties that bound you close to them grew taut,
Could you not tell our tensing bonds would break?
So, tell me, was it worth the fight you fought?

And could you not foresee the grief you wrought?
For forty years now I have felt the ache.
You cared too much for what the neighbors thought.

But in the end it still was all for naught:
I took the pathway that I had to take.
So, tell me, was it worth the fight you fought?
You cared too much for what the neighbors thought.

Villanelle # 3

You thought you had to be in such control
And make your stern authority be felt.
But did you really have to play that role?

Your lording-over took a heavy toll:
It brought me to my knees, and there I knelt.
You thought you had to be in such control.

You don't know how you bruised my teenage soul,
Although you never lifted hand or belt.
But did you really have to play that role?

You left me banished to a counter pole,
And there the polar caps may never melt.
You thought you had to be in such control.

Before you'd dug us both in such a hole,
You might have seen the cold and void it spelt.
But did you really have to play that role?

You won the battle, if it was your goal,
But lost in war the son with whom you dwelt.
You thought you had to be in such control.
But did you really have to play that role?

Villanelle # 4

It takes a man to learn from his mistakes.
And learn you did, though after I had left.
I wish you'd learned before, for both our sakes.

It isn't everyone who sleeps and wakes
That gains in wisdom—only those more deft.
It takes a man to learn from his mistakes.

But wisdom gained from things one wrongly takes
Does not, all by itself, make good the theft.
I wish you'd learned before, for both our sakes.

And it is good to right wrong turns one makes,
Though one's abandoned child is still bereft.
It takes a man to learn from his mistakes.

Although that man may heal from bonds he breaks,
That doesn't mend the other heart he's cleft.
I wish you'd learned before, for both our sakes.

For still the boyhood heart within me aches,
Its fabric torn across its warp and weft.
It takes a man to learn from his mistakes.
I wish you'd learned before, for both our sakes.

Villanelle # 5

You were not then the man that you would be,
A man whom I would never come to know,
And now your death has stolen you from me.

What others later saw I did not see;
Perhaps it only needed time to show.
You were not then the man that you would be.

Although I knew your door, I had no key;
I never felt how warm your hearth could glow,
And now your death has stolen you from me.

Had I known how to voice my speechless plea,
Would you have heard and answered long ago?
You were not then the man that you would be.

When all four boughs had withered on your tree,
The rivers of your speech then ceased to flow,
And now your death has stolen you from me.

God, in your patient silence, set you free
By two short gasps for air, your final throe.
At last you were the man that you would be;
But now your death has stolen you from me.