When a Sparrow Falls

A sparrow, shivering, perched upon the sill
Alone; and in the night unstarred and still,
He cocked his head and blinked his beady eyes
For through the pane he heard the lingering cries
Of Charlotte, pleading in her poppied sleep
For help! And Francis, waiting close to keep
A vigil, lit a candle, put it near
That she might feel its warmth or even hear
The sizzle of the flame and wake to see
The serpentining smoke twine drowsily,
Or phantoms dance upon the olive walls,
And lift her head and smiling pause
To know that life was hers! Then she was still!

The chanting of an unctuous rite began to fill
The air about the black four-poster bed;
The yellow palms from Easter Morn hung overhead
Before a waxen cross; A rosary
Lay shrouded in a shadow's mystery;
A plastic statue of the Virgin stood
With outstretched arms as if it really could
Embrace its importuning penitent,
A nun who knelt there praying; when she bent,
Her jingling beadstring played an eerie song—
A dirge! She clutched a virgin candle; long
She held it to the burning tallow's wick;
Its head aflame, she sought its candlestick;
The fluttering fang lapped near the husband's hand
Which quivered and turned white. Atop the stand
Monseigneur's glistering sacramentals lay;
Their polished metal, flickering in the play
Of fire, reflected in a mirror nailed
Above the bed; and Charlotte's head was veiled
Within a gloomy aura which no eye
Could pierce—They heard her agonizing cry!

(The priest declares that Charlotte is annointed)

The prunemouthed priest vowed, lisping, "She is blessed;
Now her annointed soul can claim its rest
When once immersed in purgatorial fire
To melt the chain of vermeil red desire
That crushed her agued frame to aching death;
The molten penance, clear as angel's breath
Expired in intercession at the throne
Will testify for us on earth; alone
And free from pain she will adore
Her Lord, for peace is hers forevermore."

(Francis expresses his grief to Charlotte)

 Upon her face fell Francis’ unseen tear;
"Whose dainty hand will hold mine everywhere
I wander? Will I feel your winnowing kiss
But by a playful breeze that goes amiss
And spirals from its true ethereal route?
O Charlotte, can you hear me when I doubt
This fettered man can live the seasons of a heart
When through the winter of its grief we are apart
With but the faded shadow of our love to weld
Us one. My life, within these arms I held
Your pulsing body with no thought to cease,
And each to each two hearts beat one in peace.

This incensed room, who calls the censer blessed?
There on her burning brow the dewy oil is pressed
While I who watch behold the jaundiced eyes
And squeeze the wilting hand which crucifies
My peeling heart. What acid, blistering loss!
I gaze in awe that she must bear this cross.

O rasping breath, you fought a losing war
For she will dazzle heaven’s brightest star,
And slipping from the clasp of my embrace
Her fleeting soul will blend in twighlight’s face."

(Francis reprimands the priest)

Now priest, if passion is a staining sin
Then all of us are deeply dyed within
By blemishes of fevered sanguine wills,
For even you, most holy man, have felt the chills
Of hottest nights.—With ruminating looks
You scour your shelved expanse of holy books
For one fresh promise that your Christ loves you;
But as the rose is kissed by morning dew
You are not kissed, nor can you see Him smile
Or feel Him touch your hand; Even while
You weave the tangled threads into His loom
You love alone.—An unpinked, ravelling doom
Is man’s design, so seize the day; we know
That death ends life; No man will ever show
What comes or what foreran the cradling womb,
For even swallowed by the wide-jawed tomb,
The man is Nature's slave.—She lays her head
Upon the bosom of eternity
And deeply breathes its lotus ecstasy;
Can she reclaim her cloyed, yet mortal part
Since her soul pulses now in Nature's heart?"

(The nun objects to Francis' creed)

"Because you drank a cup of bitterness
You pour your thoughts into a deep abyss;
Through moonless nights beneath the naked sky
Can she not hear your desperate cry?
'O Charlotte, why has gluttonous time consumed
Your sweetest fruits and left me listless, doomed
To spade the grave to reach your covered roots
And meet a meal for worms in my pursuits?"

Her petals fell; their fragrance was your breath;
Now will you hear her step? The Bishop Death
Has built an altar, sharply dealt his hit;
Obedient votary, she was stung by it!

You cannot think that it was merely chance
Or threads that spun a web of circumstance
That every silver dawn priests pray the Mass
Or nuns recite their litanies, then pass
To scullery work which God demands of those
Who scour the hidden jasper in the souls
Which start an avalanche of scarring fears
Of afterlife with their eroding tears.

The winds will blow their howling horns; the crowd
Will see her sleeping in her silken shroud
Because the Spirit ordered Nature 'Go
and claim her cancered limbs that men may know
That even should that lowly sparrow fall,
God sees'; He orders Nature, He is all."

—Allen Sutherland