

I shall forget you presently, my dear,  
So make the most of this, your little day,  
Your little month, your little half a year,  
Ere I forget, or die, or move away,  
And we are done forever; by and by  
I shall forget you, as I said, but now,  
If you entreat me with your loveliest lie  
I will protest you with my favorite vow.  
I would indeed that love were longer-lived,  
And vows were not so brittle as they are,  
But so it is, and nature has contrived  
To struggle on without a break thus far,  
Whether or not we find what we are seeking  
Is idle, biologically speaking.

**Edna St. Vincent Millay, 1922**

I, being born a woman and distressed  
By all the needs and notions of my kind,  
Am urged by your propinquity to find  
Your person fair, and feel a certain zest  
To bear your body's weight upon my breast:  
So subtly is the fume of life designed,  
To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,  
And leave me once again undone, possessed.  
Think not for this, however, the poor treason  
Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,  
I shall remember you with love, or season  
My scorn with pity, – let me make it plain:  
I find this frenzy insufficient reason  
For conversation when we meet again.

**Edna St. Vincent Millay, 1923**

Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink  
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;  
Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink  
And rise and sink and rise and sink again;  
Love cannot fill the thickened lung with breath,  
Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;  
Yet many a man is making friends with death  
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.  
It well may be that in a difficult hour,  
Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,  
Or nagged by want past resolution's power,  
I might be driven to sell your love for peace,  
Or trade the memory of this night for food.  
It well may be. I do not think I would.

**Edna St. Vincent Millay, 1931**

### **Unfortunate Coincidence**

By the time you swear you're his,  
Shivering and sighing,  
And he vows his passion is  
Infinite, undying —  
Lady, make a note of this:  
One of you is lying.

**Dorothy Parker, 1926**

### **The Red Dress**

I always saw, I always said  
If I were grown and free,  
I'd have a gown of reddest red  
As fine as you could see,

To wear out walking, sleek and slow,  
Upon a Summer day,  
And there'd be one to see me so  
And flip the world away.

And he would be a gallant one,  
With stars behind his eyes,  
And hair like metal in the sun,  
And lips too warm for lies.

I always saw us, gay and good,  
High honored in the town.  
Now I am grown to womanhood....  
I have the silly gown.

**Dorothy Parker, 1928**

### **The Lady's Reward**

Lady, lady, never start  
Conversation toward your heart;  
Keep your pretty words serene;  
Never murmur what you mean.  
Show yourself, by word and look,  
Swift and shallow as a brook.  
Be as cool and quick to go  
As a drop of April snow;  
Be as delicate and gay  
As a cherry flower in May.  
Lady, lady, never speak  
Of the tears that burn your cheek-  
She will never win him, whose  
Words had shown she feared to lose.  
Be you wise and never sad,  
You will get your lovely lad.  
Never serious be, nor true,  
And your wish will come to you-  
And if that makes you happy, kid,  
You'll be the first it ever did.

**Dorothy Parker, 1936**

### Funeral Blues

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,  
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,  
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

**W. H. Auden, 1936**

### Lullaby

Lay your sleeping head, my love,  
Human on my faithless arm;  
Time and fevers burn away  
Individual beauty from  
Thoughtful children, and the grave  
Proves the child ephemeral:  
But in my arms till break of day  
Let the living creature lie,

Mortal, guilty, but to me  
The entirely beautiful.

Soul and body have no bounds:  
To lovers as they lie upon  
Her tolerant enchanted slope  
In their ordinary swoon,  
Grave the vision Venus sends  
Of supernatural sympathy,  
Universal love and hope;  
While an abstract insight wakes  
Among the glaciers and the rocks  
The hermit's carnal ecstasy.

Certainty, fidelity  
On the stroke of midnight pass  
Like vibrations of a bell  
And fashionable madmen raise  
Their pedantic boring cry:  
Every farthing cost,  
All the dreaded cards foretell,  
Shall be paid, but from this night  
Not a whisper, not a thought,  
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:  
Let the winds of dawn that blow  
Softly round your dreaming head  
Such a day of welcome show  
Eye and knocking heart may bless,  
Find our mortal world enough;  
Noons of dryness find you fed  
By the involuntary powers,  
Nights of insult let you pass  
Watched by every human love.

W. H. Auden, 1937

## The Sunlight on the Garden

The sunlight on the garden  
Hardens and grows cold,  
We cannot cage the minute  
Within its nets of gold;  
When all is told  
We cannot beg for pardon.

Our freedom as free lances  
Advances towards its end;  
The earth compels, upon it  
Sonnets and birds descend;  
And soon, my friend,  
We shall have no time for dances.

The sky was good for flying  
Defying the church bells  
And every evil iron  
Siren and what it tells:  
The earth compels,  
We are dying, Egypt, dying

And not expecting pardon,  
Hardened in heart anew,  
But glad to have sat under  
Thunder and rain with you,  
And grateful too  
For sunlight on the garden.

Louis MacNeice, 1937

## An Arundel Tomb

Side by side, their faces blurred,  
The earl and countess lie in stone,  
Their proper habits vaguely shown  
As jointed armour, stiffened pleat,

And that faint hint of the absurd –  
The little dogs under their feet.

Such plainness of the pre-baroque  
Hardly involves the eye, until  
It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still  
Clasped empty in the other; and  
One sees, with a sharp tender shock,  
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

They would not think to lie so long.  
Such faithfulness in effigy  
Was just a detail friends would see:  
A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace  
Thrown off in helping to prolong  
The Latin names around the base.

They would not guess how early in  
Their supine stationary voyage  
The air would change to soundless damage,  
Turn the old tenantry away;  
How soon succeeding eyes begin  
To look, not read. Rigidly, they

Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths  
Of time. Snow fell, undated. Light  
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright  
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same  
Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths  
The endless altered people came,

Washing at their identity.  
Now, helpless in the hollow of  
An unarmorial age, a trough  
Of smoke in slow suspended skeins  
Above their scrap of history,  
Only an attitude remains:

Time has transfigured them into  
Untruth. The stone fidelity

They hardly meant has come to be  
Their final blazon, and to prove  
Our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love.

**Philip Larkin, 1956**

### **High Windows (1967)**

When I see a couple of kids  
And guess he's fucking her and she's  
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,  
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives—  
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side  
Like an outdated combine harvester,  
And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. I wonder if  
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,  
And thought, *That'll be the life;*  
*No God any more, or sweating in the dark*

*About hell and that, or having to hide*  
*What you think of the priest. He*  
*And his lot will all go down the long slide*  
*Like free bloody birds.* And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:  
The sun-comprehending glass,  
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows  
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

**Philip Larkin, 1967**

## **Hey, That's No Way To Say Goodbye**

I loved you in the morning, our kisses deep and warm,  
your hair upon the pillow like a sleepy golden storm,  
yes, many loved before us, I know that we are not new,  
in city and in forest they smiled like me and you,  
but now it's come to distances and both of us must try,  
your eyes are soft with sorrow,  
Hey, that's no way to say goodbye.

I'm not looking for another as I wander in my time,  
walk me to the corner, our steps will always rhyme  
you know my love goes with you as your love stays with me,  
it's just the way it changes, like the shoreline and the sea,  
but let's not talk of love or chains and things we can't untie,  
your eyes are soft with sorrow,  
Hey, that's no way to say goodbye.

I loved you in the morning, our kisses deep and warm,  
your hair upon the pillow like a sleepy golden storm,  
yes many loved before us, I know that we are not new,  
in city and in forest they smiled like me and you,  
but let's not talk of love or chains and things we can't untie,  
your eyes are soft with sorrow,  
Hey, that's no way to say goodbye.

**Leonard Cohen. 1967**

## Wuthering Heights

The horizons ring me like faggots,  
Tilted and disparate, and always unstable.  
Touched by a match, they might warm me,  
And their fine lines singe  
The air too orange  
Before the distances they pin evaporate,  
Weighting the pale sky with a solider color.  
But they only dissolve and dissolve  
Like a series of promises, as I step forward.

There is no life higher than the grassstops  
Or the hearts of sheep, and the wind  
Pours by like destiny, bending  
Everything in one direction.  
I can feel it trying  
To funnel my heat away.  
If I pay the roots of the heather  
Too close attention, they will invite me  
To whiten my bones among them.

The sheep know where they are,  
Browsing in their dirty wool-clouds,  
Gray as the weather.  
The black slots of their pupils take me in.  
It is like being mailed into space,  
A thin, silly message.  
They stand about in grandmotherly disguise,  
All wig curls and yellow teeth  
And hard, marbly baas.

I come to wheel ruts, and water  
Limpid as the solitudes  
That flee through my fingers.  
Hollow doorsteps go from grass to grass;  
Lintel and sill have unhinged themselves.

Of people and the air only  
Remembers a few odd syllables.  
It rehearses them moaningly:  
Black stone, black stone.

The sky leans on me, me, the one upright  
Among all horizontals.  
The grass is beating its head distractedly.  
It is too delicate  
For a life in such company;  
Darkness terrifies it.  
Now, in valleys narrow  
And black as purses, the house lights  
Gleam like small change.

**Sylvia Plath, 1961**

Walter was guide. His mother's cousin  
Inherited some Bronte soup dishes.  
He felt sorry for them. Writers  
Were pathetic people. Hiding from it  
And making it up. But your transatlantic elation  
Elated him. He effervesced  
Like his rhubarb wine kept a bit too long:  
A vintage of legends and gossip  
About those poor lasses. Then,  
After the Rectory, after the chaise longue  
Where Emily died, and the midget hand-made books,  
The elvish lacework, the dwarfish fairy-work shoes,  
It was the track for Stanbury. That climb  
A mile beyond expectation, into  
Emily's private Eden. The moor  
Lifted and opened its dark flower  
For you too. That was satisfactory.  
Wilder, maybe, than ever Emily knew it.  
With wet feet and nothing on her head

She trudged that climbing side towards friends  
Probably. Dark redoubt  
On the skyline above. It was all  
Novel and exhilarating to you.  
The book becoming a map. Wuthering Heights  
Withering into perspective. We got there  
And it was all gaze. The open moor,  
Gamma rays and decomposing starlight  
Had repossessed it  
With a kind of blackening smoulder. The centuries  
Of door-bolted comfort finally amounted  
To a forsaken quarry. The roofs'  
Deadfall slabs were flaking, but mostly in place,  
Beam and purlins softening. So hard  
To imagine the life that had lit  
Such a sodden, raw-stone cramp of refuge.  
The floors were a rubble of stone and sheep droppings.  
Doorframes, windowframes—  
Gone to make picnickers' fires or evaporated.  
Only the stonework—black. The sky—blue.  
And the moor-wind flickering.

The incomings.  
The outgoings—how would you take up now  
The clench of that struggle? The leakage  
Of earnings off a few sickly bullocks  
And a scatter of crazed sheep. Being cornered  
Kept folk here. Was that crumble of wall  
Remembering a try at a garden? Two trees  
Planted for company, for a child to play under.  
And to have something to stare at. Sycamores—  
The girth and spread of valley twenty-year-olds.  
They were probably ninety.

You breathed it all in  
With jealous, emulous sniffings. Weren't you  
Twice as ambitious as Emily? Odd

To watch you, such a brisk pendant  
Of your globe-circling aspirations.  
Among those burned-out, worn-out remains  
of failed efforts, failed hopes—  
Iron beliefs, iron necessities,  
Iron bondage, already  
Crumbling back to the wild stone.

You perched  
In one of the two trees  
Just where the snapshot shows you.  
Doing as Emily never did. You  
Had all the liberties, having life.  
The future had invested in you—  
As you might say of a jewel  
So brilliantly faceted, refracting  
Every tint, where Emily had stared  
Like a dying prisoner.  
And a poem unfurled from you  
Like a loose frond of hair from your nape  
To be clipped and kept in a book. What would stern  
Dour Emily have made of your frisky glances  
And your huge hope? Your huge  
Mortgage of hope. The moor-wind  
Came with its empty eyes to look at you.  
And the clouds gazed sidelong, going elsewhere,  
The heath-grass, fidgeting in its fever,  
Took idiot notice of you. And the stone,  
Reaching to touch your hand, found you real  
And warm, and lucent, like that earlier one.  
And maybe a ghost, trying to hear your words,  
Peered from the broken mullions  
And was stilled. Or was suddenly aflame  
With the scorch of doubled envy. Only  
Gradually quenched in understanding.

Ted Hughes, 1998

### Variations on the Word *Sleep*

I would like to watch you sleeping,  
which may not happen.

I would like to watch you,  
sleeping. I would like to sleep  
with you, to enter  
your sleep as its smooth dark wave  
slides over my head

and walk with you through the lucent  
wavering forest of bluegreen leaves  
with its watery sun & three moons  
towards the cave where you must descend,  
towards your worst fear

I would like to give you the silver  
branch, the small white flower, the one  
word that will protect you  
from the grief at the center  
of your dream, from the grief  
at the center. I would like to follow  
you up the long stairway  
again & become  
the boat that would row you back  
carefully, a flame  
in two cupped hands  
to where your body lies  
beside me, and you enter  
it as easily as breathing in

I would like to be the air  
that inhabits you for a moment  
only. I would like to be that unnoticed  
& that necessary.

Margaret Atwood, 1981

## Warming Her Pearls

*for Judith Radstone*

Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress  
bids me wear them, warm them, until evening  
when I'll brush her hair. At six, I place them  
round her cool, white throat. All day I think of her,

resting in the Yellow Room, contemplating silk  
or taffeta, which gown tonight? She fans herself  
whilst I work willingly, my slow heat entering  
each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope.

She's beautiful. I dream about her  
in my attic bed; picture her dancing  
with tall men, puzzled by my faint, persistent scent  
beneath her French perfume, her milky stones.

I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,  
watch the soft blush seep through her skin  
like an indolent sigh. In her looking-glass  
my red lips part as though I want to speak.

Full moon. Her carriage brings her home. I see  
her every movement in my head.... Undressing,  
taking off her jewels, her slim hand reaching  
for the case, slipping naked into bed, the way

she always does.... And I lie here awake,  
knowing the pearls are cooling even now  
in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night  
I feel their absence and I burn.

Carol Ann Duffy, 1987

### **Artichoke**

The nubbed leaves  
come away  
in a tease of green, thinning  
down to the membrane:  
the quick, purpled  
beginnings of the male.

Then the slow hairs of the heart:  
the choke that guards its trophy,  
its vegetable goblet.  
The meat of it lies, displayed  
up-ended, al-dente,  
the stub-root aching in its oil.

**Robin Robertson, 1997**

### **Eros**

I had drawn my chair to the hotel window, to watch the rain.

I was in a kind of dream or trance—  
in love, and yet  
I wanted nothing.

It seemed unnecessary to touch you, to see you again.  
I wanted only this:  
the room, the chair, the sound of the rain falling,  
hour after hour, in the warmth of the spring night.

I needed nothing more; I was utterly sated.  
My heart had become small; it took very little to fill it.  
I watched the rain falling in heavy sheets over the darkened city-

You were not concerned; I could let you  
live as you needed to live.

At dawn the rain abated. I did the things  
one does in daylight, I acquitted myself,  
but I moved like a sleepwalker.

It was enough and it no longer involved you.  
A few days in a strange city.  
A conversation, the touch of a hand.  
And afterward, I took off my wedding ring.

That was what I wanted: to be naked.

**Louise Glück, 2000**