

# *Poems*



**Karen Mary Berr**

**Indelible**

Give me back  
the green glass of the waves breaking,  
the moon-bound sea that misses nothing.  
Two, three days more of living  
in perfect inescapability,  
crushed to bone by a sharp love  
among chalky shells.

Give me back the salty winds  
and the whole ocean curled up  
in confetti at my lover's feet.  
The rock where he stood  
as the tidal blood beat loud,  
like a white leash,  
clear and rhythmic.

Give it all back,  
the foam, the sound, the light,  
and let me take a long look at him.  
His fadeless smile cuts like a knife,  
I didn't know it would be the last.  
Then leave me washed, bleached, nameless  
under a steel blue indifference,  
until my heart stops beating, beating, beating.

## **Trains of Austerlitz**

I've been here before,  
I'm a backslider,  
a terrible joy keeps me  
going, going, like the trains' beat  
unadjusted to Life.  
As if it could not end,  
could never wilt,  
could repeat forever.

Boxed in a silver cabin,  
my heartbeat is hardly mine,  
just a weird music  
through steel wheels  
coming, coming.  
What a sweet lie  
in this metallic pulse,  
it simply sings 'gone'  
and the inevitable agonies  
dissolve into citylights,  
leaving threads of amber  
all over the windows.

The heart pounds, knowing  
trains of Austerlitz  
carry only pillars of salt  
to turn them back into lovers.  
If they stopped completely  
the world would be corpse-white.  
And Paris makes no mistake  
at the end of the road.  
Circled by leashes of silver,  
he's waiting in velvet and smoke  
as on the first day.  
He is the reason why,  
in his pride of ash,  
the touch, the yes,  
the – at last.  
He is the deviating part  
the bend in the railway line  
from where I slip out of view.

One flash and the world goes blank  
no more vain war,  
no worthless wound.  
Only his clever fingers  
to undo me –  
burning as pain

burning but alive,  
with the impatience of life.

<https://soundcloud.com/karenmary/trains-of-austerlitz>

## To the East

We died among twigs in bloom,  
long before we were done.  
Like stars falling and burning  
on a clear night,  
far from home.  
Forgotten with these wars  
nobody ever won.  
Wrong love, it is called,  
lost before it's found.  
Yet still breathing,  
the way roots calmly breathe.  
My one and only East,  
so far, so gone,  
I own your pale hands  
like two perfect lies.  
They live on my skin  
where you left them,  
drifting.  
At night I lay down on the cold,  
cold ground,  
the way we never were  
– alone.  
My bones are full of distances,  
languages between us  
unknown.  
In the middle,  
the weightless child,  
who never learnt to speak  
at all.  
There is nothing more  
I can lose,  
nothing more to prove.  
My joy forever belongs  
to your sexual soul.  
For my sins,  
I need no pardon,  
no last call.  
Broken hopes  
never had wings,  
even less apotheosis.  
When I close my eyes  
the music of your body  
is enough,  
I hang on  
the red clockwork of your pulse,  
that sweet sound of life.

<https://soundcloud.com/karenmary/to-the-east>

## Winter

Where have you gone Father, how far ?  
Here, in the solid snow, the seven-days snow,  
your shadow walks ahead of me.  
I wear your thin lips in mirrors like a whore  
and your brisk smile like the shape of a war.  
Time finds no asylum in me,  
the past strangely grew roots of light,  
nothing's dark, nothing's buried,  
I haven't slept for years.  
Between the madhouse and the grave,  
the massive drugs and plastic knives,  
do you remember me ?  
Does any music bruise your lethargy?  
Did you unlearn all the songs  
that multiplied like cells  
in your daughter's body,  
before the schizophrenic detonator  
convulsed your steel-blue eyes ?  
You should know, you have to know,  
they play silently at your door.  
Every day, I watch the wooden arms of trees  
dance in the cold air, and what my hands  
want to say to yours, they let go.  
You lie, unawakened, immensely dead  
in your double-edged cruelty,  
guilty of nothing, devoted to no one.  
In your sleep, you drool like a baby,  
while the photographic chamber of night  
develops pictures you don't recognize.  
Oh daddy, where have you gone ?  
How far ? To which dark address  
have you sent your heart ?  
Even the night cannot tolerate  
such senseless black.  
See, I wear your lips bright red in mirrors  
and swathe your blood in my veins  
like the loud noise of impossibility,  
Hoping one day, the space you dissolve into  
will take forever this version of me.

## Mnemosyne or The Unexpected Death Of Virginia Woolf

Here she is, here again,  
that woman you once were,  
that sum of memories  
you drowned in purple wine.  
The nostalgic beast who lurks  
in the lacery of your mind,  
opening your still eyes  
in this last day you are a life,  
returning you to reality  
as you enter water.  
You feel the electric world  
the raw nerve of the world,  
throbbing, throbbing,  
through her blood-heat.

When you came tonight  
that red clock had shrunk  
with all the grapes of summer.  
The river was kind, static  
to the point of blackness,  
lying in a self-absorbed luster.  
Its dark bed was bottomless  
– nothing lower could be looked to.  
It was just like the long lie  
your fever bathes into  
since all stars have failed.  
You thought you'd burn with them,  
cold, neutral,  
your sex petrified in crystal.

But now every drop of milk  
in your skin of lotus flower,  
changes into indelible ink.  
The white disk of the sun  
stretches flat on water  
strewing turbulent blue mirrors.  
There's a clatter under your feet,  
the sound of remembering,  
round stones, like chains.  
Mud slips between your toes,  
soft, pleasurable,  
as some new uterine blood.  
And your heart is turning green  
like a cruel joke.

You thought it would sink  
and fossilize without a face.

A porous rock bedded in clay,  
careless of its own ache.  
You thought you'd be free, at least,  
to enjoy your mineral end.  
A colorless dot in a colorless vein  
running to a colorless sea.  
How you needed that rubbish.  
And surely a heart of water for this life  
would have been a better heart.  
Now in the lucid blue current  
all the love comes back too clearly  
and it whirls again like a fury.

You thought today was your last death,  
your last fight.  
Well. It is your last death.  
Nothing was any closer to you  
than these sunken strata of rock.  
Or the willow that bleeds honey,  
and the past all sealed in its rings.  
They have collected the lost songs,  
the forgotten names, the cummy words.  
And suddenly it is right.  
Your naked soul and the whole river  
curled up at your feet.  
The stones in your pockets  
take down the blue breath of your mouth,  
whistling " Write, write ! Remember !"



## Numbness

Maybe in some otherworld,  
where no blood drips, and flesh  
is just one flash from a derelict past,  
where tears lie silent and dry  
as placentas of salt,  
where everything has a soul  
but no nerves and no stomach,  
men could find a form of ecstasy  
in this awful stillness.

Maybe if we were all mad,  
hysterical and naked, howling  
like sex-wolves of the sixties,  
but not inert as plants  
retracting in a triumphant mist,  
if we were not provided  
with vacant eyes and defeated hearts,  
a horizon could brutally break  
through computers' screens.

But we return from drunkenness  
with no dream, no vision.  
We're immune to revolutions,  
the past runs in our veins for amusement  
and future eats it like a tumor.  
Today has once again been cancelled.  
It opened gently like the fist of a baby  
eager to grab some brand-new toy,  
now moves, blind, a blade above the wrist.

Hope floats like a gigantic organ in a jar,  
with no way to sink  
into this salt-saturated water,  
bitter as sorrow, bitter as the Sea of Asphalt.  
There's neither end nor awakening.  
Memory continually bumps against defeat,  
and awakens cold  
as though she slept with someone dead  
— lusting for a bed she has never been to.

## Eastern Peach

*after "The Price of Sex"*

Was I ever a woman ?  
 Have I ever lived by my own light ?  
 Whose heart was it, this tulip  
 out of its cup of blood,  
 cheated by its own thirst ?

There is a star, to the southeast,  
 so glorious it makes me faint.  
 It is rosy and pulsing  
 like an image of my young body.  
 Unlike me, it disquiets the dark.

I've been there once, under its wink,  
 with an age and a name,  
 but no memories, except of parting.  
 No one told me what changed my country  
 into a dead zone. Money was gone,  
 streets unrecognizable,  
 cafés full of life, closed.

Only the weather felt like being kissed,  
 and the morning looked like a shining fruit  
 when hope took me, then sold me,  
 it's a truth of youth.  
 Hope. Nothing else,  
 transplanted me.

I remember the first room,  
 my legs stretched out, uprooted,  
 men used to come unconcerned.  
 Years shed their skins like snakes  
 exposing the same cold shame.  
 For whom should I paint my lips red now ?  
 Now I'm blacker than night  
 daughters of Jerusalem,  
 too dark for you all.

Tell the boys, tell them,  
 I wish one of them was the first,  
 to have someone to think of,  
 or the second, to die of desire,  
 but not the third, who is just there,  
 and can't hurt anymore  
 because what difference does it make ?

Tell them that when birds

rise and fly in the clear air  
I want to kiss the ground.  
I wish only a different sky  
could remember me.  
Days, hours, pass  
without news from life.  
Nothing.  
Sex, work.  
Sex, work.

Just pictures of my youth  
fading on the hard earth  
and washed by the rain.

## Metamorphosis

It's all happening without mercy  
on time and inevitably  
like breathing.  
Shadows in full blossom  
suddenly pierce your crackled heart  
in that blue hour before dark.  
Before washing the dust out  
of the day in the sink,  
before lighting a cigarette  
and smoking the world away  
or simply getting undressed.  
No matter what you've been doing before,  
now you're the one naked,  
the one alone.  
You can clothe yourself in chain mail  
you are naked,  
but no one can see you.  
Faces and words retire  
behind soft padded walls.  
Senses derive in their own cage,  
under synthetic lights.  
Each night there's less and less  
carmine, less and less dope  
in your favorite wine.  
Then, here you are,  
unable to lie or hide –  
and all that breathes and sighs  
slips on your skin.  
Solitude has silked your body, entire.  
Oh what a dirty little secret  
is the chamber of your dissolution.  
You lie there like a peeled fruit  
birds keep singing,  
milk oozing from trees,  
but your eye still opened  
has no meaning,  
your pulse not stopping  
is a vain trance.  
Yet a tender rustling  
comes along with it,  
no louder than cigarette paper  
unfolding.  
As if buried within your cells  
lodged a capacity for wings.  
Maybe nothing of you will remain  
except that frail music,  
maybe like the moth

there's nothing else to save  
outside the chrysalis.  
Life, before it liquefied  
was just a tight net.  
Now some voices in the dark  
have the gall to call  
you winged.  
Oh please don't stop,  
mystify them.

**Jana**

*“I know the sun would wane seeing our souls’ minerals shine  
Veins and muscles are truer than prayer”  
– Mayakovsky.*

Fresh as droplets of sperm  
are the things that never come back.  
You were alive – this morning –  
You were alive – and sun shocked –  
Your body- equal to a charge of light –  
Your womb of peach- swarming-  
Eight months, now, brimming with life  
Young girl, such a metamorphosis is love  
I know- we, women,  
are the beasts at the end of the kiss.

To your walk across the poppy fields,  
they substracted their stolid souls.  
They came with broken bottles,  
shaky kittens and stabbing hands,  
they came with perforated skulls  
to reduce your hearts to none.  
We, demons – this race we belong to  
– we’d better not know.

Ensnaring the last sunrays,  
your hair in the dust is a lake of honey,  
your womb a butcher’s shop – emptied.  
Eight months, now, deprived of life,  
eight months -sucked by soil,  
aside.  
– At eight, you already have a name-  
– At eight, it reduces God’s to none-

I saw your name on the report today  
two blood colored kittens- sticky paws,  
tried to escape by your left rib.  
Your name, girl, tasted as  
my bones had been removed.  
– Do nuns have overdoses, slash their wrists  
Do they hang themselves- simply? –

I don’t know- we, women,  
Is it better not to shout and hit?  
No one talks about you, Jana,

no one except this red stain on your soil  
and all it can say is:  
“Harder days are coming”.

(For Jana, 25 years old, and eight months pregnant Croatian girl mentioned in the Trešnjevka Women’s Group report “Women and War” -1992)

*Little Eden*



## The Garden

It was a dream we had, a dream of green,  
green to the point of vertigo.  
Like a berylline sea with a lilac  
scent, turning sand  
into grass.  
We had enough of grey shores,  
we stayed too long at the east of eden.  
We could hear that dream saying :  
Now, it's my turn.

And truly it was such a curious one,  
not afraid by its own improbability.  
It started to grow one root in the ground,  
the other in the sky,  
and before we knew,  
trees were caught up in constellations,  
stars peeled like icy bells.  
From dawn to dusk, waves  
unfolded petal by petal, changing  
from emerald to coral.

We forgot about death.  
We forgot everything on this earth  
was hard work.  
We just sat and watched the bushes  
scatter news from life  
like little pieces of their hearts.

## The Oak

He slept, almost insular,  
in a warmth of thorns,  
coiling years in his center  
as if he were a chronicler.  
Higher, heavier than the snow  
that once killed all wildflowers  
or the heat that burnt the ferns.  
Waiting for the mauve dawn  
of heathers he saw in his sleep  
to break.

He, without a word or an I,  
became such a presence to us,  
such a call. Not that he  
was a greater miracle  
than elephants or whales,  
in their architecture of bones,  
for whom children open  
their mouths and eyes.  
But his body had the bare shape  
of memory.

The stylus of time, core-tied,  
pursued its ring dance,  
like a wish, like a litany  
to let him delight  
in rustling forever,  
and when our minds seemed  
to collapse under their own weight,  
a string of notes waved.

Birds of all kind dangled  
in his net like souvenirs  
from a blue land we left behind,  
singing how every one of us now  
had nothing more to lose.

## Heathers

Mauve, lilac, purple, pink.  
They bloom, oblique  
like amethyst crystals  
turning from stone to flower,  
As if color could no longer  
rest, only burst, only burst  
into irrepressible laughter.

It's a thin, silly message  
every bud unfurls,  
it claims love  
is a lust for wings.  
It rolls along bare legs  
with a touch of feather  
and the unexpected  
crackling of fire.

There's no silence  
in flora, so silent.  
Grasshoppers whip  
leaves like tiny flames,  
butterflies, dragonflies,  
flap their skins of bronze  
or cellophane, and bees  
whirl, drunk on gold.

Now the shadows of summer  
can't believe their inks,  
violet ones, velvet ones,  
like those filling Monet's eyes  
to the brim, like cups.  
Heaven comes back,  
for a moment, fragmented.  
Black doesn't exist,  
there's only light.

## Magnolias

The earth secretes veins of milk.  
The earth swells warm  
beneath petals and dew.  
Its white pulse runs along twigs,  
denuding fat opals,  
from egg-size to chalice,  
which pop then clot like sugar.

It is April's sole harm —  
Sweetness. As the moon lacquers  
facets dividing their globes,  
beetles, punctual as pollen,  
sink into lactescent wells  
almost too candied to breathe.  
— Air itself is a love-charm.

In this phosphoric quiet  
blue spruces get bluer,  
roses on tightropes sigh  
and the creamy plumage of dogwoods  
sways as if echoing tides.

Magnolias pregnant with light  
do not hope the world to end.  
They secrete no Revelation.  
Their blank pages, tinged with blush,  
let believe earth, is the right place  
for grace.

## Water Lilies

They come in flames  
over the ponds,  
pointing their tender blades  
at an orange sky.  
They are like psalms  
written before water  
divided from fire.

Clear-cut as jewels,  
they open in the early heat  
to attune light and shadow.  
Each flower crowning  
an islet of green umbrellas,  
each leaf its dark pendant,  
perfect yin to yang.

This is where the sun  
bows down. Not to  
the willow-leaved magnolia  
shedding its smell of lemon,  
not to heathers and pines  
feigning a mauve Provence,  
not even on the red carpet  
of fallen needles.

There, to the tiny star  
of summer, rosy  
upon the caress of water,  
whose delicate geometry  
hides a life more full  
and clement than can be.  
There, to the true  
eccentricity of beauty.

## The Roses

Get lost. Unlearn the way back.  
Supplant thoughts by feelings.  
Some scents need you  
to be more vulnerable,  
more gone, wanting  
their music more.  
Some scents are siren songs.

They call at night from the labyrinth,  
their red lips in a perpetual opening.  
They seem to be made of pure silk,  
each of them a perfect tangle  
of Ariadne's thread, circling  
a truth. Listen to them.  
Go inward to find the way out.

It's simple and clear like perfume.  
It's an open heart in the open air,  
freshly cut, chanting,  
I am lost.  
I am lost.

## The Second Blooming

Time was all our dream needed  
to undream itself. It ceded  
to the wind, to the chill of reality,  
leaving its red heart just in sight,  
unwoven, bare, as one should be.

The sun leaned its arc on the trees  
blowing out flowers like candles  
until the berylline sea, too receded.  
The whole sky began to pearl  
as mirrors blur, reflecting nothing.

We thought life might be leaving us.  
Hypnotized, we watched her  
drape a flaming scarf over the twigs,  
but felt no death in her kiss,  
it was simply too rouge.

The first snow came, unwhite,  
from maples, walnuts,  
burning bushes fleeing themselves.  
Their tiny souls slowed  
and swirled in the silent air,  
bright and vital as blood drops.

Surely this was the other life  
we were meant to live, full of joy  
and fire, surely the sound  
of creased paper was just that  
of our sins' — Oh, it is.

To lay our bruised selves  
upon leaves,  
rejoice  
and sing. It is time —

## Karen Mary Berr

Karen Mary Berr was born in France, where she studied Applied Arts and Art History. She lived in Bosnia, Lebanon and Canada, before returning to France in 2004. Short films based on her poetry have been featured on Moving Poems, Hypocrite Design Magazine and File Electronic Language International (Highlike) and screened in festivals. Her poems have been published in Lost Coast, El Aleph Press, Deep Water Journal, Construction, and other reviews.

<https://vimeo.com/karenmaryberr>

<https://soundcloud.com/karenmary>