

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>