

Classic Poetry Series

Hilda Doolittle

- poems -

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Acon

Bear me to Dictaeus,
and to the steep slopes;
to the river Erymanthus.

I choose spray of dittany,
cyperum, frail of flower,
buds of myrrh,
all-healing herbs,
close pressed in calathes.

For she lies panting,
drawing sharp breath,
broken with harsh sobs.
she, Hyella,
whom no god pities.

Hilda Doolittle

Adonis

1.

Each of us like you
has died once,
has passed through drift of wood-leaves,
cracked and bent
and tortured and unbent
in the winter-frost,
the burnt into gold points,
lighted afresh,
crisp amber, scales of gold-leaf,
gold turned and re-welded
in the sun;

each of us like you
has died once,
each of us has crossed an old wood-path
and found the winter-leaves
so golden in the sun-fire
that even the live wood-flowers
were dark.

2.

Not the gold on the temple-front
where you stand
is as gold as this,
not the gold that fastens your sandals,
nor thee gold left
through your chiselled locks,
is as gold as this last year's leaf,
not all the gold hammered and wrought
and beaten
on your lover's face.
brow and bare breast
is as golden as this:

each of us like you
has died once,
each of us like you
stands apart, like you
fit to be worshipped.

Hilda Doolittle

At Baia

I should have thought
in a dream you would have brought
some lovely, perilous thing,
orchids piled in a great sheath,
as who would say (in a dream),
"I send you this,
who left the blue veins
of your throat unknissed."

Why was it that your hands
(that never took mine),
your hands that I could see
drift over the orchid-heads
so carefully,
your hands, so fragile, sure to lift
so gently, the fragile flower-stuff--
ah, ah, how was it

You never sent (in a dream)
the very form, the very scent,
not heavy, not sensuous,
but perilous--perilous--
of orchids, piled in a great sheath,
and folded underneath on a bright scroll,
some word:

"Flower sent to flower;
for white hands, the lesser white,
less lovely of flower-leaf,"

or

"Lover to lover, no kiss,
no touch, but forever and ever this."

Hilda Doolittle

At Ithaca

Over and back,
the long waves crawl
and track the sand with foam;
night darkens, and the sea
takes on that desperate tone
of dark that wives put on
when all their love is done.

Over and back,
the tangled thread falls slack,
over and up and on;
over and all is sewn;
now while I bind the end,
I wish some fiery friend
would sweep impetuously
these fingers from the loom.

My weary thoughts
play traitor to my soul,
just as the toil is over;
swift while the woof is whole,
turn now, my spirit, swift,
and tear the pattern there,
the flowers so deftly wrought,
the borders of sea blue,
the sea-blue coast of home.

The web was over-fair,
that web of pictures there,
enchantments that I thought
he had, that I had lost;
weaving his happiness
within the stitching frame,
weaving his fire and frame,
I thought my work was done,
I prayed that only one
of those that I had spurned
might stoop and conquer this
long waiting with a kiss.

But each time that I see
my work so beautifully
inwoven and would keep
the picture and the whole,
Athene steals my soul.
Slanting across my brain,
I see as shafts of rain
his chariot and his shafts,
I see the arrows fall,
I see the lord who moves
like Hector lord of love,
I see him matched with fair

bright rivals, and I see
those lesser rivals flee.

Hilda Doolittle

Cassandra

O Hymen king.

Hymen, O Hymen king,
what bitter thing is this?
what shaft, tearing my heart?
what scar, what light, what fire
searing my eye-balls and my eyes with flame?
nameless, O spoken name,
king, lord, speak blameless Hymen.

Why do you blind my eyes?
why do you dart and pulse
till all the dark is home,
then find my soul
and ruthless draw it back?
scaling the scaleless,
opening the dark?
speak, nameless, power and might;
when will you leave me quite?
when will you break my wings
or leave them utterly free
to scale heaven endlessly?

A bitter, broken thing,
my heart, O Hymen lord,
yet neither drought nor sword
baffles men quite,
why must they feign to fear
my virgin glance?
feigned utterly or real
why do they shrink?
my trance frightens them,
breaks the dance,
empties the market-place;
if I but pass they fall
back, frantically;
must always people mock?
unless they shrink and reel
as in the temple
at your uttered will.

O Hymen king,
lord, greatest, power, might,
look for my face is dark,
burnt with your light,
your fire, O Hymen lord;
is there none left
can equal me
in ecstasy, desire?
is there none left
can bear with me
the kiss of your white fire?

is there not one,
Phrygian or frenzied Greek,
poet, song-swept, or bard,
one meet to take from me
this bitter power of song,
one fit to speak, Hymen,
your praises, lord?

May I not wed
as you have wed?
may it not break, beauty,
from out my hands, my head, my feet?
may Love not lie beside me
till his heat
burn me to ash?
may he not comfort me, then,
spent of all that fire and heat,
still, ashen-white and cool
as the wet laurels,
white, before your feet
step on the mountain-slope,
before your fiery hand
lift up the mantle
covering flower and land,
as a man lifts,
O Hymen, from his bride,
(cowering with woman eyes,) the veil?
O Hymen lord, be kind.

Hilda Doolittle

Cities

Can we believe -- by an effort
comfort our hearts:
it is not waste all this,
not placed here in disgust,
street after street,
each patterned alike,
no grace to lighten
a single house of the hundred
crowded into one garden-space.

Crowded -- can we believe,
not in utter disgust,
in ironical play --
but the maker of cities grew faint
with the beauty of temple
and space before temple,
arch upon perfect arch,
of pillars and corridors that led out
to strange court-yards and porches
where sun-light stamped
hyacinth-shadows
black on the pavement.

That the maker of cities grew faint
with the splendour of palaces,
paused while the incense-flowers
from the incense-trees
dropped on the marble-walk,
thought anew, fashioned this --
street after street alike.

For alas,
he had crowded the city so full
that men could not grasp beauty,
beauty was over them,
through them, about them,
no crevice unpacked with the honey,
rare, measureless.

So he built a new city,
ah can we believe, not ironically
but for new splendour
constructed new people
to lift through slow growth
to a beauty unrivalled yet --
and created new cells,
hideous first, hideous now --
spread larve across them,
not honey but seething life.

And in these dark cells,
packed street after street,

souls live, hideous yet --
O disfigured, defaced,
with no trace of the beauty
men once held so light.

Can we think a few old cells
were left -- we are left --
grains of honey,
old dust of stray pollen
dull on our torn wings,
we are left to recall the old streets?

Is our task the less sweet
that the larve still sleep in their cells?
Or crawl out to attack our frail strength:
You are useless. We live.
We await great events.
We are spread through this earth.
We protect our strong race.
You are useless.
Your cell takes the place
of our young future strength.

Though they sleep or wake to torment
and wish to displace our old cells --
thin rare gold --
that their larve grow fat --
is our task the less sweet?

Though we wander about,
find no honey of flowers in this waste,
is our task the less sweet --
who recall the old splendour,
await the new beauty of cities?

*The city is peopled
with spirits, not ghosts, O my love:*

Though they crowded between
and usurped the kiss of my mouth
their breath was your gift, *</i>*
their beauty, your life.

Hilda Doolittle

Evadne

I first tasted under Apollo's lips,
love and love sweetness,
I, Evadne;
my hair is made of crisp violets
or hyacinth which the wind combs back
across some rock shelf;
I, Evadne,
was made of the god of light.

His hair was crisp to my mouth,
as the flower of the crocus,
across my cheek,
cool as the silver-cress
on Eros bank;
between my chin and throat,
his mouth slipped over and over.

Still between my arm and shoulder,
I feel the brush of his hair,
and my hands keep the gold they took,
as they wandered over and over,
that great arm-full of yellow flowers.

Hilda Doolittle

From Citron-Bower

From citron-bower be her bed,
cut from branch of tree a-flower,
fashioned for her maidenhead.

From Lydian apples, sweet of hue,
cut the width of board and lathe,
carve the feet from myrtle-wood.

Let the palings of her bed
be quince and box-wood overlaid
with the scented bark of yew.

That all the wood in blossoming,
may calm her heart and cool her blood,
for losing of her maidenhood.

Hilda Doolittle

Heat

O wind, rend open the heat,
cut apart the heat,
rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop
through this thick air--
fruit cannot fall into heat
that presses up and blunts
the points of pears
and rounds the grapes.

Cut the heat--
plough through it,
turning it on either side
of your path.

Hilda Doolittle

Helen

All Greece hates
the still eyes in the white face,
the lustre as of olives
where she stands,
and the white hands.

All Greece reviles
the wan face when she smiles,
hating it deeper still
when it grows wan and white,
remembering past enchantments
and past ills.

Greece sees, unmoved,
God's daughter, born of love,
the beauty of cool feet
and slenderest knees,
could love indeed the maid,
only if she were laid,
white ash amid funereal cypresses.

Hilda Doolittle

Leda

Where the slow river
meets the tide,
a red swan lifts red wings
and darker beak,
and underneath the purple down
of his soft breast
uncurls his coral feet.

Through the deep purple
of the dying heat
of sun and mist,
the level ray of sun-beam
has caressed
the lily with dark breast,
and flecked with richer gold
its golden crest.

Where the slow lifting
of the tide,
floats into the river
and slowly drifts
among the reeds,
and lifts the yellow flags,
he floats
where tide and river meet.

Ah kingly kiss --
no more regret
nor old deep memories
to mar the bliss;
where the low sedge is thick,
the gold day-lily
outspreads and rests
beneath soft fluttering
of red swan wings
and the warm quivering
of the red swan's breast.

Hilda Doolittle

Oread

Whirl up, sea—
Whirl your pointed pines.
Splash your great pines
On our rocks.
Hurl your green over us—
Cover us with your pools of fir.

Hilda Doolittle

Pear Tree

Silver dust
lifted from the earth,
higher than my arms reach,
you have mounted.
O silver,
higher than my arms reach
you front us with great mass;

no flower ever opened
so staunch a white leaf,
no flower ever parted silver
from such rare silver;

O white pear,
your flower-tufts,
thick on the branch,
bring summer and ripe fruits
in their purple hearts.

Hilda Doolittle

Sea Poppies

Amber husk
fluted with gold,
fruit on the sand
marked with a rich grain,

treasure
spilled near the shrub-pines
to bleach on the boulders:

your stalk has caught root
among wet pebbles
and drift flung by the sea
and grated shells
and split conch-shells.

Beautiful, wide-spread,
fire upon leaf,
what meadow yields
so fragrant a leaf
as your bright leaf?

Hilda Doolittle

Sea Rose

Rose, harsh rose,
marred and with stint of petals,
meagre flower, thin,
sparse of leaf,

more precious
than a wet rose
single on a stem --
you are caught in the drift.

Stunted, with small leaf,
you are flung on the sand,
you are lifted
in the crisp sand
that drives in the wind.

Can the spice-rose
drip such acrid fragrance
hardened in a leaf?

Hilda Doolittle

Sheltered Garden

I have had enough.
I gasp for breath.

Every way ends, every road,
every foot-path leads at last
to the hill-crest --
then you retrace your steps,
or find the same slope on the other side,
precipitate.

I have had enough --
border-pinks, clove-pinks, wax-lilies,
herbs, sweet-cress.

O for some sharp swish of a branch --
there is no scent of resin
in this place,
no taste of bark, of coarse weeds,
aromatic, astringent --
only border on border of scented pinks.

Have you seen fruit under cover
that wanted light --
pears wadded in cloth,
protected from the frost,
melons, almost ripe,
smothered in straw?

Why not let the pears cling
to the empty branch?
All your coaxing will only make
a bitter fruit --
let them cling, ripen of themselves,
test their own worth,
nipped, shrivelled by the frost,
to fall at last but fair
with a russet coat.

Or the melon --
let it bleach yellow
in the winter light,
even tart to the taste --
it is better to taste of frost --
the exquisite frost --
than of wadding and of dead grass.

For this beauty,
beauty without strength,
chokes out life.
I want wind to break,
scatter these pink-stalks,
snap off their spiced heads,

fling them about with dead leaves --
spread the paths with twigs,
limbs broken off,
trail great pine branches,
hurled from some far wood
right across the melon-patch,
break pear and quince --
leave half-trees, torn, twisted
but showing the fight was valiant.

O to blot out this garden
to forget, to find a new beauty
in some terrible
wind-tortured place.

Hilda Doolittle

Stars Wheel in Purple

Stars wheel in purple, yours is not so rare
as Hesperus, nor yet so great a star
as bright Aldeboran or Sirius,
nor yet the stained and brilliant one of War;

stars turn in purple, glorious to the sight;
yours is not gracious as the Pleiads are
nor as Orion's sapphires, luminous;

yet disenchanted, cold, imperious face,
when all the others blighted, reel and fall,
your star, steel-set, keeps lone and frigid tryst
to freighted ships, baffled in wind and blast.

Hilda Doolittle

The Mysteries Remain

The mysteries remain,
I keep the same
cycle of seed-time
and of sun and rain;
Demeter in the grass,
I multiply,
renew and bless
Bacchus in the vine;
I hold the law,
I keep the mysteries true,
the first of these
to name the living, dead;
I am the wine and bread.
I keep the law,
I hold the mysteries true,
I am the vine,
the branches, you
and you.

Hilda Doolittle

The Pool

Are you alive?
I touch you.
You quiver like a sea-fish.
I cover you with my net.
What are you - banded one?

Hilda Doolittle

Wash of Cold River

Wash of cold river
in a glacial land,
Ionian water,
chill, snow-ribbed sand,
drift of rare flowers,
clear, with delicate shell-
like leaf enclosing
frozen lily-leaf,
camellia texture,
colder than a rose;

wind-flower
that keeps the breath
of the north-wind --
these and none other;

intimate thoughts and kind
reach out to share
the treasure of my mind,
intimate hands and dear
drawn garden-ward and sea-ward
all the sheer rapture
that I would take
to mould a clear
and frigid statue;

rare, of pure texture,
beautiful space and line,
marble to grace
your inaccessible shrine.

Hilda Doolittle