

only but a gentle "Not yet, love,"
your lip, and a shake of your he
I whispered, how oft have I sue
Paul's question of "When shall i
w long and how many I've woe
e world that you're waiting for m
ome, where the fairies might dwe
the myrtle, the rose, and the vine,
to me is a mere hermit's cell, lov
ill be dull till the flowers are th
ht gold, which I gaze on when lo
Hope's eloquence, "When will it
"M... will

classic
women's
poetry

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Introduction

Across the centuries women have struggled and succeeded in recording their voices, their life experience, their world view. From Sappho's philosophical bent to the future to the aching sadness of Christina Rossetti's stark verse; from a simple joy in a kiss to the valuing of friendship, this collection of poems reflects and celebrates women's diversities and is a history through female eyes.

Much poetry comes from powerful, personal trauma. Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë are all represented in this anthology, and words are lent beauty through the family's pattern of loss; eldest Charlotte's heart-breaking survival of Anne, Emily and brother Branwell.

Other writing arises from society's inequities. The boarding school established by Anna Laetitia Barbauld and her adoption of a son inspired in her both affection and a deep political and social anxiety, this latter arguably prompting some of her most powerful and stirring work, as her unabashed pride for her gender was made apparent.

All the poets of this volume write with intelligence, clarity, an awareness of life's hardships, yet, more than anything, a sense of what it means and feels like to be a woman. As Rahel Morpurgo wrote:

*Wherever you go, you will hear all around:
The wisdom of woman to the distaff is bound.*

UNTITLED

Drat my hateful birthday
to be spent in the boring old country.
It's going to be a day of mourning
without Cerinthus to hug.
Oh the joys of city life!
Is a musty old country house
Any fit place for a girl?
And that freezing river at Arezzo!
Please, sweet Messalla relax,
too anxious, as ever, for my comfort!
Banish this grim expedition
totally out of your mind.
If I'm to be snatched away
I'll leave heart and soul behind here,
Since I'm not to be granted
licence to run my life.

I'm grateful, really grateful
for the favour you've just done me.
You've saved me from being a fool,
and rushing into your arms.
Go chasing whores as you will
seducing maids from their sewing,
So much better prospects, I'm sure,
than the daughter of Servius Sulpicius!
The main thing prompting
the kind friend who told on you

Was the pain of seeing me lost out
to a love-couch of no standing.

Let your longing for me, my love,
lose the heat of a few days ago
If I have ever before committed
in the whole of my youthful life
As stupid a mistake as this
or one I've regretted more.
I left you yesterday night,
ran off and left you alone –
Honestly, love, it was only
that I didn't dare show my passion.

Sulpicia

from EIGHTEEN VERSES SUNG TO A TARTAR REED WHISTLE

1

I was born in a time of peace,
But later the mandate of Heaven
Was withdrawn from the Han Dynasty.

Heaven was pitiless.
It sent down confusion and separation.
Earth was pitiless.
It brought me to birth in such a time.
War was everywhere. Every road was dangerous.
Soldiers and civilians everywhere
Fleeing death and suffering.
Smoke and dust obscured the land
Overrun by the ruthless Tartar bands.
Our people lost their will-power and integrity.
I can never learn the ways of the barbarians.
I am daily subject to violence and insult.
I sing one stanza to my lute and a Tartar horn.
But no one knows my agony and grief.

2

A Tartar chief forced me to become his wife,
And took me far away to Heaven's edge.
Ten thousand clouds and mountains
Bar my road home.
And whirlwinds of dust and sand

Blow for a thousand miles.
Men here are as savage as giant vipers,
And strut about in armour, snapping their bows.
As I sing the second stanza I almost break the lutestrings,
Will broken, heart broken, I sing to myself.

Ts'ai Yen

UNTITLED

My lover capable of terrible lies
at night lay close to me
in a dream
that lies like truth.

I woke up, still deceived,
and caressed the bed
thinking it my lover.

It's terrible. I grow lean
in loneliness,
like a water-lily
gnawed by a beetle.

Kaccipçttu Nannâkaiyâr

WHAT SHE SAID

The rains, already old,
have brought new leaf upon the fields.
The grass spears are trimmed and blunted
by the deer.

The jasmine creeper is showing its buds
through their delicate calyx
like the laugh of a wildcat.

In jasmine country, it is evening
for the hovering bees,
but look, he hasn't come back.

He left me and went in search
of wealth.

Okkûr Mâcâtti

ADVICE TO A NEIGHBOUR GIRL

Afraid of the sunlight,
You cover your face with your silk sleeves.
Tired out with spring melancholy,
You neglect your make-up.
It is easier to get priceless jewels
Than to find a man with a true heart.
Why wet your pillow with secret tears?
Why hide your heartbreak in the flowers?
Go, seek a handsome famous man like Sung Yü.
Don't long for someone who will never come back.

Yü Hsüan-chi

SONNETS

XX

A seer foretold that I would love one day –
a certain man – and thus with words she drew him.
I had no other image, but I knew him,
recognised my lover straight away.

Then I saw him love me fatally,
and pitied his sad amorous mischance,
and urged my nature on relentlessly
till I loved with the same extravagance.

Who would suppose a passion wouldn't thrive
that fates and gods together did contrive?
But when I see such ominous preparation,

Cruel winds gathering to a violent storm,
I think, perhaps, hell sent the invitation,
long ago, to watch my bark go down.

XXIV

Don't scold me, Ladies, if I have loved,
if I have felt a thousand burning fires,
a thousand pains, a thousand unfulfilled desires,
if, weeping, I have thus my time consumed.
Let not my name be blackened by your blame.
If I have failed, I have my punishment,
don't deepen wounds already violent.

Remember that Love, above all else,
could make you fall in love, if he but wished,
without a Vulcan's ardour to excuse,
without Adonis' beauty to accuse.
And with occasion less than mine
and yet a passion stranger and as deep,
take care: your eyes still more than mine may weep.

Louise Labé

UNTITLED

O what transparent waves, what a tranquil sea
my speedy vessel travelled through,
laden, adorned with richest freight,
the clear air and breezes aiding it!

The sky that now hides its beautiful lamps
rayed soft light then, erased most shadows.
How one must fear who happily proceeds! –
for the end is not always like the beginning.

Regard how fickle and impious Fortune,
uncovering her wicked, angry face,
gives rise in her fury to a vast tempest.

But though she collects wind, rain, and arrows
and sends wild beasts to devour me,
the soul still catches sight of its faithful star.

Vittoria Colonna

UNTITLED

I cut in two
A long November night, and
Place half under the coverlet,
Sweet-scented as a spring breeze.
And when he comes, I shall take it out,
Unroll it inch by inch, to stretch the night.

Hwang Chin-I

UNTITLED

Mountains are steadfast but the mountain streams
Go by, go by,
And yesterdays are like the rushing streams,
They fly, they fly,
And the great heroes, famous for a day,
They die, they die.

Hwang Chin-I

THE DREAM

All trembling in my arms Aminta lay,
Defending of the bliss I strove to take;
Raising my rapture by her kind delay,
Her force so charming was and weak.
The soft resistance did betray the grant,
While I pressed on the heaven of my desires;
Her rising breasts with nimbler motions pant;
Her dying eyes assume new fires.
Now to the height of languishment she grows,
And still her looks new charms put on;
- Now the last mystery of Love she knows,
We sigh, and kiss: I waked, and all was done.

'Twas but a dream, yet by my heart I knew,
Which still was panting, part of it was true:
Oh how I strove the rest to have believed;
Ashamed and angry to be undeceived!

Aphra Behn

REFLECTIONS

1

Why rejoice in beauty? What
In all the world is half so vain?
Nay, there is naught
Gives so much pain.
I know that over hearts her rule is sore,
While one is beautiful that she
May have of passion and of lovers store:
But that has little time to be
And a long time to be no more.

2

Pathetic plaything of a witless chance,
Victim of evils and of laws,
Man, who in whatever cause,
Must suffer life's impertinence,
Still, after all that's past,
Whence comes it that you fear the power of death?
Coward! regard it with unhurried breath,
And know this outrage for the last.

Madame Deshoulières