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Six Sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay



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for mezzo-soprano and piano (2012)

First performed by Lore Lixenberg accompanied by the composer at Arnolfini, Bristol
Friday 11 May 2012



Portrait of Millay: Vassar Collage photo

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Poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay (c) 1917, 1945. The composer gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Edna St. Vincent Millay Society at Steepletop, Austerlitz, New York, USA. www.millay.org

These 6 sonnets first appeared in 1917 as part of a collection entitled "Renascence and Other Poems", the first volume of poems published by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950). Their clear metrical structure, their brevity, their use of simple language and their directness of emotional expression make them ideal for setting to music. They are an intense expression of love, loss and bereavement. They read like dramatic soliloquys rather than literary poems and seem to follow in a dramatic sequence. It is for this reason that I have set the poems n the same order as they are printed..

During the 1920s Millay was popularly regarded as a cynic, rebel and feminist. Her marriage to Eugen Jan Boissevain which began in 1923 was famously "open" and both had several lovers. As a "liberated woman" Millay was bisexual, a fact evidenced in the 6 sonnets. Five of them are about lost love but the lover's gender is sometimes female and sometimes male or perhaps deliberately ambiguous.

The first sonnet is ironic, even sarcastic in tone with its opening line: "Thou art not lovelier than lilacs...". Assuming that her lover is indeed female, Millay seems to be comparing lesbian love with heterosexual love. Love for a woman is like a poison that can "destroy some men" to which the poet, as another woman, is immune. The second sonnet is a heart-rendingly poignant expression of grief after the death of male lover. The third is a nostalgic evocation of a beautiful affair that has come to an end without grief or rancour. The lover's gender is ambiguous but phrases like "But you were something more than young and sweet and fair..." suggests a lesbian relationship. The fourth sonnet presents a desolate landscape of the soul, bereft of love. The fifth is about social taboos concerning the public expression of grief. Millay imagines how she would react in a public place such as the New York subway to the surprise news of her male lover's death. Finally the sixth sonnet – the only one to bear a title: "Bluebeard" – shows love turned to hatred. This is Bluebeard with a difference. Millay assumes the persona of a female version of the serial wife beater and murderer of legend. The mysterious door and the forbidden room do not conceal the familiar chamber of horrors. Instead they stand as a symbol of a personal private mental space. An over-possessive lover is rejected because he or she has become too inquisitive, prying into the inner secrets of the poet's soul.

I thank my American daugther-in-law Christine for first introducing me to the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Cover image: The grave site of Millay and Boissevain at Steepletop, Austerlitz.

Jolyon Laycock, 1 April 2011

6 Sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay

I

Thou art not lovelier than lilacs, — no, Nor honeysuckle; thou art not more fair Than small white single poppies, — I can bear They beauty; though I bend before thee, though From left to right, not knowing where to go, I turn my troubled eyes, nor here nor there Find any refuge from thee, yet I swear So has it been with mist, — and moonlight so.

Like him who day by day unto his draught Of delicate poison adds him one drop more Till he may drink unharmed the death of ten, Even so, inured to beauty, who have quaffed Each hour more deeply than the hour before, I drink – and live – what has destroyed some men.

П

Time does not bring relief; you all have lied Who told me time would ease me of my pain! I miss him in the weeping of the rain; I want him at the shrinking of the tide; The old snows melt from every mountainside, And last year's leaves are smoke in every lane; But last year's bitter loving must remain Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide!

There are a hundred places where I fear To go, – so with his memory they brim! And entering with relief some quiet place Where never fell his foot or shone his face I say, "There is no memory of him here!" And so stand stricken, so remembering him!

Ш

Mindful of you the sodden earth in spring,
And all the flowers that in the springtime grow,
And dusty roads, and thistles, and the slow
Rising of the round moon, and all throats that sing
The summer through, and each departing wing,
And all the nests that the bared branches show,
And all winds that in any weather blow,
And all the storms that the four seasons bring.

You go no more on your exultant feet
Up paths that only mist and morning knew,
Or watch the wind, or listen to the beat
Of a bird's wings too high in air to view, —
But you were something more than young and sweet
And fair, — and the long year remembers you.

IV

Not in this chamber only at my birth — When the long hours of that mysterious night Were over, and the morning was in sight — I cried, but in strange places, steppe and firth I have not seen, through alien grief and mirth; And never shall one room contain me quite Who in so many rooms first saw the light, Child of all mothers, native of the earth.

So is no warmth for me at any fire Today, when the world's fire has burned so low; I kneel, spending my breath in vain desire, At that cold hearth which one time roared so strong, And straighten back in weariness, and long To gather up my little gods and go.

V

If I should learn in some quite casual way,
That you were gone, not to return again –
Read from the back page of a paper, say,
Held by a neighbour in a subway train,
How at the corner of this avenue
And such a street (so are the papers filled)
A hurrying man – who happened to be you –
At noon today had happened to be killed,

I should not cry aloud – I could not cry Aloud, or wring my hands in such a place – I should but watch the station lights rush by With a more careful interest on my face, Or raise my eyes and read with greater care Where to store furs and how to treat the hair.

VI

Bluebeard

This door you might not open, and you did; So enter now, and see for what slight thing You are betrayed... Here is no treasure hid, No cauldron, no clear crystal mirroring The sought-for truth, no heads of women slain For greed like yours, no writhings of distress, But only what you see... Look yet again – An empty room, cobwebbed and comfortless.

Yet this alone out of my life I kept Unto myself, lest any know me quite; And you did so profane me when you crept Unto the threshold of this room tonight That I must never more behold your face. This now is yours. I seek another place.









9





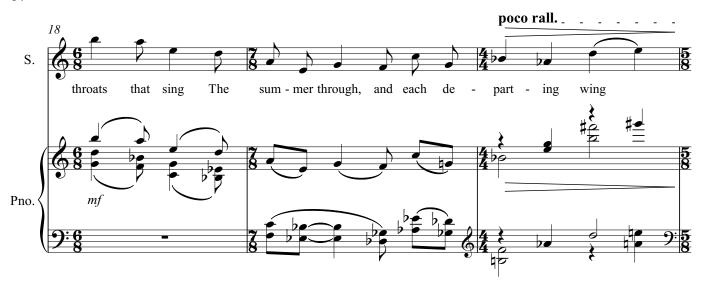


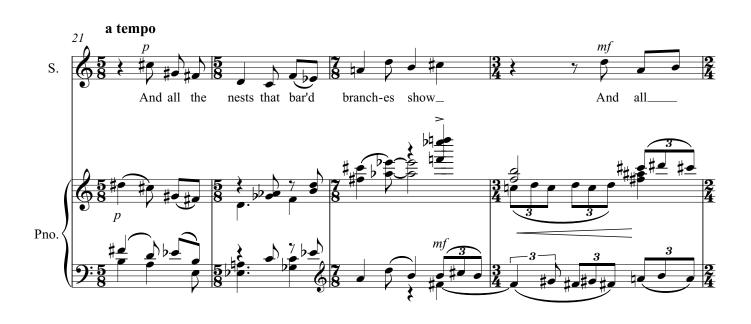




Sonnet III













Sonnet IV













sub - way train,

pa - per,





Sonnet VI "Bluebeard"













Biographical notes

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1894-1950) is one of America's most important national poets. She used the pseudonym **Nancy Boyd** for her prose work. Millay's fame began in 1912 when she entered her poem *Renascence* in a poetry contest in *The Lyric Year*. The poem was widely considered the best submission and when it was ultimately awarded fourth place it created a scandal which brought Millay publicity. Millay described her life in New York as "very, very poor and very, very merry." Her poetry is immortalised by a quotation from *Recuerdo* (1919) reproduced above the entrance to the Staten Island ferry:

We were very tired, we were very merry – We had gone back and forth all night upon the ferry.

Millay was popularly regarded as a cynic, rebel and feminist. Her marriage to Eugen Jan Boissevain, which began in 1923, was famously "open". Both had several lovers over the 26 years until Boissevain's death in 1949. Openly bisexual, Millay counted among her close friends the writer Floyd Dell and the critic Edmund Wilson, both of whom proposed marriage to her and were refused. Her 1920 collection *A Few Figs From Thistles* drew controversy for its novel exploration of female sexuality and feminism. In 1923 she became only the third woman to win the Pulitzer Prize with *The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver*.

In 1925, Boissevain and Millay bought *Steepletop* near Austerlitz, New York, formerly a 635-acre blueberry farm. *Steepletop* is now the home of the Millay Colony for the Arts, an artist residency programme offering residencies to visual artists, writers, poets and composers. It was founded in 1973 by the poet's sister Norma Millay Ellis, and her husband, Charles Frederick Ellis, a painter and actor. Millay's former house and gardens, maintained by the Edna St. Vincent Millay Society, are a National Historical Landmark. Steepletop is named after a pink, conical wildflower that grows there.

Jolyon Laycock was born in Bath in 1946 and studied for B.Mus. and M.Phil. in composition at the University of Nottingham. His composition teachers included Henri Pousseur and Cornelius Cardew. Later in life he studied for his Ph.D. at York University under Nicola Lefanu. During the 1970s he pursued a freelance career as an experimental sound artist based at the Birmingham Arts Laboratory and Spectro Arts Workshop, Newcastle. In 1979 he took up the post of Music and Dance Co-ordinator at the Arnolfini, running a programme of contemporary music and dance regarded as one of the most innovative outside London. In 1990 he became Concert Director at the University of Bath and at the newly opened Michael Tippett Centre at Bath Spa University College where he founded the award-winning concert series *Rainbow over Bath*. He left the University in 2000 to complete his book *A Changing Role for the Composer in Society*. In 2004 he was appointed Senior Lecturer in Arts Management at Oxford Brookes University until 2010. He has been Chairmanof the Severnside Composers Alliance since 2010.

In 2012 he won the EPSS Jubilee Song Competition with his setting of Philip Larkin's *The North Ship* which led to a collaboration with Sarah Leonard resulting in the composition of *Dark Seas*, a setting of five poems of Philip Larkin for soprano, clarinet and piano. Other song settings include *Three Shakespeare Sonnets* and *Mountains of the Mind*, a cycle of 12 poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins www.jolyonlaycock.uk