



ELECTED
POEMS OF
AMY LOWELL

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So are we sport of others' blindness,
 We who could see right well alone.
 What were you made of—wood or stone?
 Yet I remember you with kindness.

You gave this book to me to ease
 The smart in me you could not heal.
 Your gift a mirror—woe or weal.
 We sat beneath the apple-trees.

And I remember how they rang,
 These words, like bronze cathedral bells
 Down ancient lawns, or citadels
 Thundering with gongs where choirs sang.

Silent the sea, the earth, the sky,
 And in my heart a silent weeping.
 Who has not sown can know no reaping!
 Bitter conclusion and no lie.

O heart that sorrows, heart that bleeds,
 Heart that was never mine, your words
 Were like the pecking autumn birds
 Stealing away my garnered seeds.

No future where there is no past!
 O cherishing grief which laid me bare,
 I wrapped you like a wintry air
 About me. Poor enthusiast!

How strange that tumult, looking back.
 The ink is pale, the letters fade.
 The verses seem to be well made,
 But I have lived the almanac.

And you are dead these drifted years,
 How many I forget. And she

Who wrote the book, her tragedy
 Long since dried up its scalding tears.

I read of her death yesterday,
 Frail lady whom I never knew
 And knew so well. Would I could strew
 Her grave with pansies, blue and grey.

Would I could stand a little space
 Under a blowing, brightening sky,
 And watch the sad leaves fall and lie
 Gently upon that lonely place.

So cried her heart, a feverish thing.
 But clay is still, and clay is cold,
 And I was young, and I am old,
 And in December what birds sing!

Go, wistful book, go back again
 Upon your shelf and gather dust.
 I've seen the glitter through the rust
 Of old, long years, I've known the pain.

I've recollected both of you,
 But I shall recollect no more.
 Between us I must shut the door.
 The living have so much to do.

The Atlantic Monthly, March 1926

THE SISTERS

Taking us by and large, we're a queer lot
 We women who write poetry. And when you think
 How few of us there've been, it's queerer still.
 I wonder what it is that makes us do it,
 Singles us out to scribble down, man-wise,

The fragments of ourselves. Why are we
 Already mother-creatures, double-bearing,
 With matrices in body and in brain?
 I rather think that there is just the reason
 We are so sparse a kind of human being;
 The strength of forty thousand Atlases
 Is needed for our every-day concerns.
 There's Sappho, now I wonder what was Sappho.
 I know a single slender thing about her:
 That, loving, she was like a burning birch-tree
 All tall and glittering fire, and that she wrote
 Like the same fire caught up to Heaven and held there,
 A frozen blaze before it broke and fell.
 Ah, me! I wish I could have talked to Sappho,
 Surprised her reticences by flinging mine
 Into the wind. This tossing off of garments
 Which cloud the soul is none too easy doing
 With us to-day. But still I think with Sappho
 One might accomplish it were she in the mood
 To bare her loveliness of words and tell
 The reasons, as she possibly conceived them,
 Of why they are so lovely. Just to know
 How she came at them, just to watch
 The crisp sea sunshine playing on her hair,
 And listen, thinking all the while 'twas she
 Who spoke and that we two were sisters
 Of a strange, isolated little family.
 And she is Sappho—Sappho—not Miss or Mrs.,
 A leaping fire we call so for convenience;
 But Mrs. Browning—who would ever think
 Of such presumption as to call her "Ba."
 Which draws the perfect line between sea-cliffs
 And a close-shuttered room in Wimpole Street.
 Sappho could fly her impulses like bright
 Balloons tip-tilting to a morning air
 And write about it. Mrs. Browning's heart
 Was squeezed in stiff conventions. So she lay

Stretched out upon a sofa, reading Greek
 And speculating, as I must suppose,
 In just this way on Sappho; all the need,
 The huge, imperious need of loving, crushed
 Within the body she believed so sick.
 And it was sick, poor lady, because words
 Are merely simulacra after deeds
 Have wrought a pattern; when they take the place
 Of actions they breed a poisonous miasma
 Which, though it leave the brain, eats up the body.
 So Mrs. Browning, aloof and delicate,
 Lay still upon her sofa, all her strength
 Going to uphold her over-topping brain.
 It seems miraculous, but she escaped
 To freedom and another motherhood
 Than that of poems. She was a very woman
 And needed both.

If I had gone to call,
 Would Wimpole Street have been the kindlier place,
 Or Casa Guidi, in which to have met her?
 I am a little doubtful of that meeting,
 For Queen Victoria was very young and strong
 And all-pervading in her apogee
 At just that time. If we had stuck to poetry,
 Sternly refusing to be drawn off by mesmerism
 Or Roman revolutions, it might have done.
 For, after all, she is another sister,
 But always, I rather think, an older sister
 And not herself so curious a technician
 As to admit newfangled modes of writing—
 "Except, of course, in Robert, and that is neither
 Here nor there for Robert is a genius."
 I do not like the turn this dream is taking,
 Since I am very fond of Mrs. Browning
 And very much indeed should like to hear her
 Graciously asking me to call her "Ba."
 But then the Devil of Verisimilitude

Creeps in and forces me to know she wouldn't.
 Convention again, and how it chafes my nerves,
 For we are such a little family
 Of singing sisters, and as if I didn't know
 What those years felt like tied down to the sofa.
 Confound Victoria, and the slimy inhibitions
 She loosed on all us Anglo-Saxon creatures!
 Suppose there hadn't been a Robert Browning,
 No "Sonnets from the Portuguese" would have been written.
 They are the first of all her poems to be,
 One might say, fertilized. For, after all,
 A poet is flesh and blood as well as brain
 And Mrs. Browning, as I said before,
 Was very, very woman. Well, there are two
 Of us, and vastly unlike that's for certain.
 Unlike at least until we tear the veils
 Away which commonly gird souls. I scarcely think
 Mrs. Browning would have approved the process
 In spite of what had surely been relief;
 For speaking souls must always want to speak
 Even when bat-eyed, narrow-minded Queens
 Set prudishness to keep the keys of impulse.
 Then do the frowning Gods invent new banes
 And make the need of sofas. But Sappho was dead
 And I, and others, not yet peeped above
 The edge of possibility. So that's an end
 To speculating over tea-time talks
 Beyond the movement of pentameters
 With Mrs. Browning.

But I go dreaming on,
 In love with these my spiritual relations.
 I rather think I see myself walk up
 A flight of wooden steps and ring a bell
 And send a card in to Miss Dickinson.
 Yet that's a very silly way to do.
 I should have taken the dream twist-ends about
 And climbed over the fence and found her deep

Engrossed in the doings of a humming-bird
 Among nasturtiums. Not having expected strangers,
 She might forget to think me one, and holding up
 A finger say quite casually: "Take care.
 Don't frighten him, he's only just begun."
 "Now this," I well believe I should have thought,
 "Is even better than Sappho. With Emily
 You're really here, or never anywhere at all
 In range of mind." Wherefore, having begun
 In the strict centre, we could slowly progress
 To various circumferences, as we pleased.
 We could, but should we? That would quite depend
 On Emily. I think she'd be exacting,
 Without intention possibly, and ask
 A thousand tight-rope tricks of understanding.
 But, bless you, I would somersault all day
 If by so doing I might stay with her.
 I hardly think that we should mention souls
 Although they might just round the corner from us
 In some half-quizzical, half-wistful metaphor.
 I'm very sure that I should never seek
 To turn her parables to stated fact.
 Sappho would speak, I think, quite openly,
 And Mrs. Browning guard a careful silence,
 But Emily would set doors ajar and slam them
 And love you for your speed of observation.

Strange trio of my sisters, most diverse;
 And how extraordinarily unlike
 Each is to me, and which way shall I go?
 Sappho spent and gained; and Mrs. Browning,
 After a miser girlhood, cut the strings
 Which tied her money-bags and let them run;
 But Emily hoarded—hoarded—only giving
 Herself to cold, white paper. Starved and tortured,
 She cheated her despair with games of patience
 And fooled herself by winning. Frail little elf,

The lonely brain-child of a gaunt maturity,
 She hung her womanhood upon a bough
 And played ball with the stars—too long—too long—
 The garment of herself hung on a tree
 Until at last she lost even the desire
 To take it down. Whose fault? Why let us say,
 To be consistent, Queen Victoria's.
 But really, not to over-rate the Queen,
 I feel obliged to mention Martin Luther,
 And behind him the long line of Church Fathers
 Who draped their prurience like a dirty cloth
 About the naked majesty of God.
 Good-bye, my sisters, all of you are great,
 And all of you are marvellously strange,
 And none of you has any word for me.
 I cannot write like you, I cannot think
 In terms of Pagan or of Christian now.
 I only hope that possibly some day
 Some other woman with an itch for writing
 May turn to me as I have turned to you
 And chat with me a brief few minutes. How
 We lie, we poets! It is three good hours
 I have been dreaming. Has it seemed so long
 To you? And yet I thank you for the time
 Although you leave me sad and self-distrustful,
 For older sisters are very sobering things.
 Put on your cloaks, my dears, the motor's waiting.
 No, you have not seemed strange to me, but near,
 Frightfully near, and rather terrifying.
 I understand you all, for in myself—
 Is that presumption? Yet indeed it's true—
 We are one family. And still my answer
 Will not be any one of yours, I see.
 Well, never mind that now. Good night! Good night!

North American Review, June 1922

ADAPTED ASIAN FORMS AND TRANSLATIONS FROM THE CHINESE

To be introduced to a new and magnificent literature, not through the medium of the usual more or less accurate translation, but directly, as one might burrow it out for one's self with the aid of a dictionary, is an exciting and inspiring thing. . . . I hold that it is more important to reproduce the perfume of a poem than its metrical form, and no translation can possibly reproduce both.

—Amy Lowell, preface to *Fir-Flower Tablets*

ALIENS

The chatter of little people
 Breaks on my purpose
 Like the water-drops which slowly wear the rocks to powder.
 And while I laugh
 My spirit crumbles at their teasing touch.

Poetry, September 1915

THE POND

Cold, wet leaves
 Floating on moss-coloured water
 And the croaking of frogs—
 Cracked bell-notes in the twilight.

Poetry, March 1916