

Classic Poetry Series

Celia Thaxter

- poems -

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A Tryst

From out the desolation of the North
An iceberg took it away,
From its detaining comrades breaking forth,
And traveling night and day.

At whose command? Who bade it sail the deep
With that resistless force?
Who made the dread appointment it must keep?
Who traced its awful course?

To the warm airs that stir in the sweet South,
A good ship spread her sails;
Stately she passed beyond the harbor's mouth,
Chased by the favoring gales;

And on her ample decks a happy crowd
Bade the fair land good-by;
Clear shone the day, with not a single cloud
In all the peaceful sky.

Brave men, sweet women, little children bright
For all these she made room,
And with her freight of beauty and delight
She went to meet her doom.

Storms buffeted the iceberg, spray was swept
Across its loftiest height;
Guided alike by storm and calm, it kept
Its fatal path aright.

Then warmer waves gnawed at its crumbling base,
As if in piteous plea;
The ardent sun sent slow tears down its face
Soft flowing to the sea.

Dawn kissed it with her tender rose tints. Eve
Bathed it in violet,
The wistful color o'er it seemed to grieve
With a divine regret.

Whether Day clad its clefts in rainbows dim
And shadowy as a dream,
Or Night through lonely spaces saw it swim
White in the moonlight's gleam,

Ever Death rode upon its solemn heights,
Ever his watch he kept;
Cold at its heart through changing days and nights
Its changeless purpose slept.

And where afar a smiling coast it passed,
Straightway the air grew chill;

Dwellers thereon perceived a bitter blast,
A vague report of ill.

Like some imperial creature, moving slow,
Meanwhile, with matchless grace,
The stately ship, unconscious of her foe,
Drew near the trysting place.

For still the prosperous breezes followed her,
And half the voyage was o'er;
In many a breast glad thoughts began to stir
Of lands that lay before.

And human hearts with longing love were dumb,
That soon should cease to beat,
Thrilled with the hope of meetings soon to come,
And lost in memories sweet.

Was not the weltering waste of water wide
Enough for both to sail?
What drew the two together o'er the tide,
Fair ship and iceberg pale?

There came a night with neither moon nor star,
Clouds draped the sky in black;
With fluttering canvas reefed at every spar,
And weird fire in her track,

The ship swept on; a wild wind gathering fast
Drove her at utmost speed.
Bravely she bent before the fitful blast
That shook her like a reed.

O helmsman, turn thy wheel! Will no surmise
Cleave through the midnight drear?
No warning of the horrible surprise
Reach thine unconscious ear?

She rushed upon her ruin. Not a flash
Broke up the waiting dark;
Dully through wind and sea one awful crash
Sounded, with none to mark.

Scarcely her crew had time to clutch despair.
So swift the work was done:
Ere their pale lips could frame a speechless prayer,
They perished, every one!

Celia Thaxter

Compensation

In that new world toward which our feet are set,
Shall we find aught to make our hearts forget
Earth's homely joys and her bright hours of bliss?
Has heaven a spell divine enough for this?
For who the pleasure of the spring shall tell
When on the leafless stalk the brown buds swell,
When the grass brightens and the days grow long,
And little birds break out in rippling song?

O sweet the dropping eve, the blush of morn,
The starlit sky, the rustling fields of corn,
The soft airs blowing from the freshening seas,
The sunflecked shadow of the stately trees,
The mellow thunder and the lulling rain,
The warm, delicious, happy summer rain,
When the grass brightens and the days grow long,
And little birds break out in rippling song!

O beauty manifold, from morn till night,
Dawn's flush, noon's blaze and sunset's tender light!
O fair, familiar features, changes sweet
Of her revolving seasons, storm and sleet
And golden calm, as slow she wheels through space,
From snow to roses, - and how dear her face,
When the grass brightens, when the days grow long,
And little birds break out in rippling song!

O happy earth! O home so well beloved!
What recompense have we, from thee removed?
One hope we have that overtops the whole, -
The hope of finding every vanished soul,
We love and long for daily, and for this
Gladly we turn from thee, and all thy bliss,
Even at thy loveliest, when the days are long,
And little birds break out in rippling song.

Celia Thaxter

Connoisseurs

O look at the horses and people!
How they hurry and trample and fight!
And the smoke blowing over the steeple,--
O look, how the guns shine bright!
See this one, this soldier, he's swinging
His sword over head in the air;
How the shot must be leaping and stinging!
See the men falling down everywhere!
Isn't this what the white folks call the war?
I wonder what they are doing it for.

And there's the big flag flying splendid,
White stars pretty red, pretty blue,
All torn. Do you think 'twill be mended,
And fly out again, good as new?
See the blue coats and gray coats, --I'm sorry
They bleed and they suffer and die;
What made all the fighting and worry?
Can you think of the reason why
They killed each other, the gray and the blue?
O dusky children, it was for you!

Celia Thaxter

Dust

Here is a problem, a wonder for all to see.
Look at this marvelous thing I hold in my hand!
This is a magic surprising, a mystery
Strange as a miracle, harder to understand.

What is it? Only a handful of earth: to your touch
A dry rough powder you trample beneath your feet,
Dark and lifeless; but think for a moment, how much
It hides and holds that is beautiful, bitter, or sweet.

Think of the glory of color! The red of the rose,
Green of the myriad leaves and the fields of grass,
Yellow as bright as the sun where the daffodil blows,
Purple where violets nod as the breezes pass.

Think of the manifold form, of the oak and the vine,
Nut, and fruit, and cluster, and ears of corn;
Of the anchored water-lily, a thing divine,
Unfolding its dazzling snow to the kiss of morn.

Think of the delicate perfumes borne on the gale,
Of the golden willow catkin's odor of spring,
Of the breath of the rich narcissus waxen-pale,
Of the sweet pea's flight of flowers, of the nettle's sting.

Strange that this lifeless thing gives vine, flower, tree,
Color and shape and character, fragrance too;
That the timber that builds the house, the ship for the sea,
Out of this powder its strength and its toughness drew!

That the cocoa among the palms should suck its milk
From this dry dust, while dates from the self-same soil
Summon their sweet rich fruit: that our shining silk
The mulberry leaves should yield to the worm's slow toil.

How should the poppy steal sleep from the very source
That grants to the grapevine juice that can madden or cheer?
How does the weed find food for its fabric coarse
Where the lilies proud their blossoms pure uprear?

Who shall compass or fathom God's thought profound?
We can but praise, for we may not understand;
But there's no more beautiful riddle the whole world round
Than is hid in this heap of dust I hold in my hand.

Celia Thaxter

Guests

Sunflower tall and hollyhock, that wave in the
wind together,
Corn-flower, poppy, and marigold, blossoming
fair and fine,
Delicate sweet-peas, glowing bright in the quiet
autumn weather,
While over the fence, on fire with bloom,
climbs the nasturtium vine!

Quaint little wilderness of flowers, straggling
hither and thither -
morning-glories tangled about the larkspur
gone to seed,
Scarlet runners that burst all bounds, and wan-
der, heaven knows whither,
And lilac spikes of bergamot, as thick as any
weed.

And oh, the bees and the butterflies, the hum-
ming-birds and sparrows,
That over the garden waver and chirp and
flutter the livelong day!
Humming-birds, that dart in the sun like green
and golden arrows,
Butterflies like loosened flowers blown off by
the wind in play.

Look at the red nasturtium flower, drooping,
bending, and swaying;
Out the gold-banded humble-bee breaks and
goes booming anew!
Hark, what the sweet-voiced fledgling sparrows
low to themselves are saying,
Pecking my golden oats where the corn-flowers
gleam so blue!

Welcome, a thousand times welcome, ye dear
and delicate neighbors -
Bird and bee and butterfly, and humming-bird
fairy fine!
Proud am I to offer you a field for your grace-
ful labors;
All the honey and all the seeds are yours in
this garden of mine.

I sit on the door-step and watch you. Beyond
lies the infinite ocean,
Sparkling, shimmering, whispering, rocking itself
to rest;
And the world is full of perfume and color and
beautiful motion,
And each new hour of this sweet day the

happiest seems and best.

Celia Thaxter

Karen

At her low quaint wheel she sits to spin,
Deftly drawing the long, light rolls
Of carded wool through her finders thin,
By the fireside at the Isles of Shoals.

She is not pretty, she is not young,
Poor homesick Karen, who sits and spins,
Humming a song in her tongue,
That falters and stops, and again begins,

While her wheel flies fast, with its drowsy hum,
And she makes a picture of pensive grace
As thoughts of her well-loved Norway come
And deepen the shadows across her face.

Her collar is white as the drifted snow,
And she spun and wove her blue gown fine
With those busy hands. See, a flitting glow
Makes her pale cheek burn and her dark eyes shine!

Left you a lover in that far land,
O Karen sad, that you pine so long?
Would I could unravel and understand
That sorrowful, sweet Norwegian song!

When the spring wind blew, the "America wind,"
As your people call it, that bears away
Their youths and maidens a home to find
In this distant country, could you not stay

And live in that dear Norway still,
And let the emigrant crowd sail West
Without you? Well, you have had your will.
Why would you fly from your sheltering nest?

O homesick Karen, listen to me:
You are not young and you are not fair,
But Waldemar no one else can see,
For he carries your image everywhere.

Is he too boyish a lover for you,
With all his soul in his frank blue eyes?
Feign you unconsciousness? Is it true
You know not his heart in your calm hand lies?

Handsome and gentle and good is he;
Loves you, Karen, better than life;
But do consider him, can't you see
What a happy woman would be his wife?

You won't be merry? You can't be glad?
Still must you mourn for that home afar?

Well, here is an end of a hope I had,
And I am sorry for Waldemar!

Celia Thaxter

Land-Locked

Black lie the hills; swiftly doth daylight flee;
And, catching gleams of sunset's dying smile,
Through the dusk land for many a changing mile
The river runneth softly to the sea.

O happy river, could I follow thee!
O yearning heart, that never can be still!
O wistful eyes, that watch the steadfast hill,
Longing for level line of solemn sea!

Have patience; here are flowers and songs of birds,
Beauty and fragrance, wealth of sound and sight,
All summer's glory thine from morn till night,
And life too full of joy for uttered words.

Neither am I ungrateful; but I dream
Deliciously how twilight falls to-night
Over the glimmering water, how the light
Dies blissfully away, until I seem

To feel the wind, sea-scented, on my cheek,
To catch the sound of dusky flapping sail
And dip of oars, and voices on the gale
Afar off, calling low, -- my name they speak!

O Earth! Thy summer song of joy may soar
Ringing to heaven in triumph. I but crave
The sad, caressing murmur of the wave
That breaks in tender music on the shore.

Celia Thaxter

Lars

"Tell us a story of these Isles," they said,
The daughters of the West, whose eyes had seen
For the first time the circling sea, instead
Of the blown prairie's waves of grassy green:

"Tell us of wreck and peril, storm and cold,
Wild as the wildest." Under summer stars
With the slow moonrise at our back, I told
The story of the young Norwegian, Lars.

That youth with the black eyebrows sharply drawn
In strong curves like some sea-bird's wings outspread
O'er his dark eyes, is Lars, and this fair dawn
Of womanhood, the maiden he will wed.

She loves him for the dangers he has past.
Her rosy beauty glowed before his stern
And vigilant regard, until at last
Her sweetness vanquished Lars the taciturn.

For he is ever quiet, strong, and wise;
Wastes nothing, not a gesture nor a breath;
Forgets not, gazing in the maiden's eyes,
A year ago it was not love, but death,

That clasped him, and can hardly learn as yet
How to be merry, haunted by that pain
And terror, and remembering with regret
The comrade he can never see again.

Out from the harbor on that winter day
Sailed the two men to set their trawl together.
Down swept the sudden snow-squall o'er the bay,
And hurled their slight boat onward like a feather.

They tossed they knew not whither, till at last,
Under the lighthouse cliff they found a lee,
And out the road-lines of the trawl they cast
To moor her, is so happy they might be.

But quick the slender road-lines snapt in twain
In the wild breakers, and once more they tossed
Adrift; and, watching from his misty pane,
The lighthouse keeper muttered, "They are lost!"

Lifted the snow: night fell; swift cleared the sky;
The air grew sharp as death with polar cold;
Raged the insensate gale, and flashing high
In starlight keen the hissing billows rolled.

Driven before the winds incessant scourge
All night they fled, -- one dead ere morning lay.

Lars saw his strange, drawn countenance emerge
In the fierce sunrise light of that drear day,

And thought, "A little space and I shall be
Even as he," and, gazing in despair
O'er the wide, weltering waste, no sign could see
Of hope, of help, or comfort, anywhere.

Two hundred miles before the hurricane
The dead and living drove across the sea.
The third day dawned. His dim eyes saw again
The vast green plain, breaking eternally

In ghastly waves. But in the early light,
On the horizon glittering like a star,
Fast growing, looming tall, with canvas white,
Sailed his salvation southward from afar!

Down she bore, rushing o'er the hills of brine,
Straight for his feeble signal. As she passed,
Out from the schooner's deck they flung a line,
And o'er his head the open noose was cast.

Clutching with both his hands the bowline knot
Caught at his throat, swift drawn through fire he seemed,
Whelmed in the icy sea, and he forgot
Life, death, and all things, -- yet he thought he dreamed

A dread voice cried, "We've lost him!" and a sting
Of anguish pierced his clouded senses through;
A moment more, and like a lifeless thing
He lay among the eager pitying crew.

Long time he swooned, while o'er the ocean vast
The dead man tossed alone, they knew not where:
But youth and health triumphant were at last,
And here is Lars, you see, and here the fair

Young snow-and-rose-bloom maiden he will wed.
His face is kindly, thought it seems so stern.
Death passed him by, and life begins instead,
For Thora sweet and Lars the taciturn.

Celia Thaxter

Off Shore

Rock, little boat, beneath the quiet sky,
Only the stars behod us where we lie, -
Only the stars and yonder brightening moon

On the wide sea to-night alone are we;
The sweet, bright summer day dies silently,
Its glowing sunset will have faded soon.

Rock softly, little boat, the while I mark
The far off gliding sails, distinct and dark,
Across the west pass steadily and slow.

But on the eastern waters sad, they change
And vanish, dream-like, gray, and cold, and strange
And no one knoweth whither they may go.

We care not, we, drifting with wind and tide,
While glad waves darken upon either side,
Save where the moon sends silver sparkles down

And yonder slender stream of changing light,
Now white, now crimson, tremulously bright,
Where dark the lighthouse stands, with fiery crown.

Thick falls the dew, soundless on sea and shore:
It shines on little boat and idle oar,
Wherever moonbeams touch with tranquil glow.

The waves are full of whispers wild and sweet;
They call to me, - incessantly they beat
Along the boat from stern to curvéd prow

Comes the careering wind, blows back my hair,
All damp with dew, to kiss me unaware,
Murmuring "Thee I love," and passes on.

Sweet sounds on rocky shores the distant rote;
O could we float forever, little boat,
Under the blissful sky drifting alone!

Celia Thaxter

Slumber Song

Thou little child, with tender, clinging arms,
Drop thy sweet head, my darling, down and rest
Upon my shoulder, rest with all thy charms;
Be soothed and comforted, be loved and blessed.

Against thy silken, honey-colored hair
I lean a loving cheek, a mute caress;
Close, close I gather thee and kiss thy fair
White eyelids, sleep so softly doth oppress.

Dear little face, that lies in calm content
Within the gracious hollow that God made
In every human shoulder, where He meant
Some tired head for comfort should be laid!

Most like a heavy-folded rose thou art,
In summer air reposing, warm and still.
Dream thy sweet dreams upon my quiet heart;
I watch thy slumber; naught shall do thee ill.

Celia Thaxter

The Sandpiper

Across the lonely beach we flit,
One little sandpiper and I,
And fast I gather, but by bit,
The scattered drift-wood, bleached and dry.
The wild waves reach their hands for it,
The wild wind raves, the tide runs high,
As up and down the beach we flit,
One little sandpiper and I.

Above our heads the sullen clouds
Scud, black and swift, across the sky:
Like silent ghosts in misty shrouds
Stand out the white light-houses high.
Almost as far as eye can reach
I see the close-reefed vessels fly,
As fast we flit along the beach,
One little sandpiper and I.

I watch him as he skims along,
Uttering his sweet and mournful cry;
He starts not at my fitful song,
Nor flash of fluttering drapery.
He has no thought of any wrong,
He scans me with a fearless eye;
Stanch friends are we, well tried and strong,
The little sandpiper and I.

Comrade, where wilt thou be to-night,
When the loosed storm breaks furiously?
My drift-wood fire will burn so bright!
To what warm shelter canst thou fly?
I do not fear for thee, though wroth
The tempest rushes through the sky;
For are we not God's children both,
Thou, little sandpiper, and I?

Celia Thaxter

The Shag

"What is that great bird, sister, tell me,
Perched high on the top of the crag?"
"T is the cormorant, dear little brother;
The fishermen call it the shag."

"But what does it there, sister, tell me,
Sitting lonely against the black sky?"
"It has settled to rest, little brother;
It hears the wild gale wailing high."

"But I am afraid of it, sister,
For over the sea and the land
It gazes, so black and so silent!"
"Little brother, hold fast to my hand."

"Oh, what was that, sister? The thunder?
Did the shag bring the storm and the cloud,
The wind and the rain and the lightning?"
"Little brother, the thunder roars loud."

"Run fast, for the rain sweeps the ocean;
Look! over the light-house it streams;
And the lightning leaps red, and above us
The gulls fill the air with their screams."

O'er the beach, o'er the rocks, running swiftly,
The little white cottage they gain;
And safely they watch from the window
The dance and the rush of the rain.

But the shag kept his place on the headland,
And when the brief storm had gone by,
He shook his loose plumes, and they saw him
Rise splendid and strong in the sky.

Clinging fast to the gown of his sister,
The little boy laughed as he flew;
"He is gone with the wind and the lightning!
And -- I am not frightened, -- are you?"

Celia Thaxter

The Spaniards' Graves

O sailors, did sweet eyes look after you
The day you sailed away from sunny Spain?
Bright eyes that followed fading ship and crew,
Melting in tender rain?

Did no one dream of that drear night to be,
Wild with the wind, fierce with the stinging snow,
When on yon granite point that frets the sea,
The ship met her death-blow?

Fifty long years ago these sailors died:
(None know how many sleep beneath the waves)
Fourteen gray headstones, rising side by side,
Point out their nameless graves,-

Lonely, unknown, deserted, but for me,
And the wild birds that flit with mournful cry,
And sadder winds, and voices of the sea
That moans perpetually.

Wives, mothers, maidens, wistfully, in vain
Questioned the distance for the yearning sail,
That leaning landward, should have stretched again
White arms wide on the gale,

To bring back their beloved. Year by year,
Weary they watched, till youth and beauty passed,
And lustrous eyes grew dim and age drew near,
And hope was dead at last.

Still summer broods o'er that delicious land,
Rich, fragrant, warm with skies of golden glow:
Live any yet of that forsaken band
Who loved so long ago?

Spanish women, over the far seas,
Could I but show you where your dead repose!
Could I send tidings on this northern breeze
That strong and steady blows!

Dear dark-eyed sisters, you remember yet
These you have lost, but you can never know
One stands at their bleak graves whose eyes are wet
With thinking of your woe!

Celia Thaxter

Thora

Come under my cloak, my darling!
Thou little Norwegian main!
Nor wind, nor rain, nor rolling sea
Shall chill or make thee afraid.

Come close, little blue-eyed maiden,
Nestle within my arm;
Thought the lightning leaps and the thunder peals,
We shall be safe from harm.

Swift from the dim horizon
The dark sails scud for the land.
Look, how the rain-cloud drops its fringe
About us on either hand!

And high from our plunging bowsprit
Dashes the cold white spray,
And storm and tumult fill the air
And trouble the summer day.

But thou fearest nothing, darling,
Thought the tempest mutter and brood,
Though the wild wind tosses thy bright brown locks,
And flutters thy grass-green snood.

I kiss thy wise wide forehead,
While the thunder rolls so grand;
And I hold the curve of thy lovely cheek
In the hollow of my hand;

And I watch the sky and the ocean,
And I study thy gentle face --
Its lines of sweetness and power,
Thy type of thy strong Norse race.

And I wonder what thy life will be,
Thou dear and charming child,
Who hast drifted so far across the world
To a home so lone and wild.

Rude and rough and sad, perhaps;
Anxious and full of toil;
But I think no sorrow or hardship
Thine inner peace can spoil.

For better than kingly fortunes
Is the wealth that thou dost hold --
A nature perfectly balanced,
A beauty of heart untold.

Thou wilt open the door of patience,
When sorrow shall come and knock;

But to every evil, unworthy thing
Wilt thou the gates fast lock.

So shall thy day be blessed,
Whatever may be thy lot.
But what I am silently pondering
Thou understandest not,

And liftest to me thy steadfast eyes,
Calm as if heaven looked through.
Do all the maidens in Norway
Have eyes so clear and blue?

See, darling, where, in the distance,
The cloud breaks up in the sky,
And lets a ray of sunshine fall
Where our far-off islands lie!

White they gleam, and the sea grows bright
And silver shines the foam.
A little space, and our anchor drops
In the haven of Love and Home!

Celia Thaxter