

Classic Poetry Series

Dorothea Mackeller

- poems -

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Burning Off

They're burning off at the Rampadells,
The tawny flames uprise,
With greedy licking around the trees;
The fierce breath sears our eyes.

From cores already grown furnace-hot -
The logs are well alight!
We fling more wood where the flameless heart
Is throbbing red and white.

The fire bites deep in that beating heart,
The creamy smoke-wreaths ooze
From cracks and knot-holes along the trunk
To melt in greys and blues.

The young horned moon has gone from the sky,
And night has settled down;
A red glare shows from the Rampadells,
Grim as a burning town.

Full seven fathoms above the rest
A tree stands, great and old,
A red-hot column whence fly the sparks,
One ceaseless shower of gold.

All hail the king of the fire before
He sway and crack and crash
To earth - for surely tomorrow's sun
Will see him white fine ash.

The king in his robe of falling stars,
No trace shall leave behind,
And where he stood with his silent court,
The wheat shall bow to the wind.

Dorothea Mackeller

Fire

This life that we call our own
Is neither strong nor free;
A flame in the wind of death,
It trembles ceaselessly.

And this all we can do
To use our little light
Before, in the piercing wind,
It flickers into night:

To yield the heat of the flame,
To grudge not, but to give
Whatever we have of strength,
That one more flame may live.

Dorothea Mackeller

In a Southern Garden

WHEN the tall bamboos are clicking to the restless little breeze,
And bats begin their jerky skimming flight,
And the creamy scented blossoms of the dark pittosporum trees,
Grow sweeter with the coming of the night.

And the harbour in the distance lies beneath a purple pall,
And nearer, at the garden's lowest fringe,
Loud the water soughs and gurgles 'mid the rocks below the wall,
Dark-heaving, with a dim uncanny tinge

Of a green as pale as beryls, like the strange faint-coloured flame
That burns around the Women of the Sea:
And the strip of sky to westward which the camphorlaurels frame,
Has turned to ash-of-rose and ivory—

And a chorus rises valiantly from where the crickets hide,
Close-shaded by the balsams drooping down—
It is evening in a garden by the kindly water-side,
A garden near the lights of Sydney town!

Dorothea Mackeller

My Country

My Country

The love of field and coppice
Of green and shaded lanes,
Of ordered woods and gardens
Is running in your veins.
Strong love of grey-blue distance,
Brown streams and soft, dim skies
I know, but cannot share it,
My love is otherwise.

I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains.
I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel-sea,
Her beauty and her terror
The wide brown land for me!

The stark white ring-barked forests,
All tragic to the moon,
The sapphire-misted mountains,
The hot gold hush of noon,
Green tangle of the brushes
Where lithe lianas coil,
And orchids deck the tree-tops,
And ferns the warm dark soil.

Core of my heart, my country!
Her pitiless blue sky,
When, sick at heart, around us
We see the cattle die
But then the grey clouds gather,
And we can bless again
The drumming of an army,
The steady soaking rain.

Core of my heart, my country!
Land of the rainbow gold,
For flood and fire and famine
She pays us back threefold.
Over the thirsty paddocks,
Watch, after many days,
The filmy veil of greenness
That thickens as we gaze ...

An opal-hearted country,
A wilful, lavish land
All you who have not loved her,
You will not understand
though Earth holds many splendours,

Wherever I may die,
I know to what brown country
My homing thoughts will fly.

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Dorothea Mackeller

The Open Sea

From my window I can see,
Where the sandhills dip,
One far glimpse of open sea.
Just a slender slip
Curving like a crescent moon—
Yet a greater prize
Than the harbour garden-fair
Spread beneath my eyes.

Just below me swings the bay,
Sings a sunny tune,
But my heart is far away
Out beyond the dune;
Clearer far the sea-gulls' cry
And the breakers' roar,
Than the little waves beneath
Lapping on the shore.

For that strip of sapphire sea
Set against the sky
Far horizons means to me—
And the ships go by
Framed between the empty sky
And the yellow sands,
While my freed thoughts follow them
Out to other lands.

All its changes who can tell?
I have seen it shine
Like a jewel polished well,
Hard and clear and fine;
Then soft lilac—and again
On another day
Glimpsed it through a veil of rain,
Shifting, drifting grey.

When the livid waters flee,
Flinching from the storm,
From my window I can see,
Standing safe and warm,
How the white foam tosses high
On the naked shore,
And the breakers' thunder grows
To a battle-roar...

Far and far I look—Ten miles?
No, for yesterday
Sure I saw the Blessed Isles
Twenty worlds away.
My blue moon of open sea,
Is it little worth?
At the least it gives to me

Keys of all the earth

Dorothea Mackeller