Classic Poetry Series

Eileen Myles

- poems -

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Eileen Myles (1949-)

Eileen Myles is an American poet who has also worked in fiction, non-fiction, and theater. She won a 2010 Shelley Memorial Award.

Early Life and Career

Eileen Myles grew up and attended Catholic schools in Arlington, Massachusetts and graduated from U. Mass (Boston) in 1971.

Arriving in New York in 1974, Myles gave her first reading at CBGB and attended workshops at St. Mark’s Poetry Project, studying alongside Alice Notley, Ted Berrigan, and Bill Zavatsky. She developed as a part of the poetry and queer art scene that developed in Manhattan's East Village. She worked as assistant to poet James Schuyler; met Allen Ginsberg at the Nuyorican Poets Café.

Her first performances and theater pieces (Joan of Arc: a spiritual entertainment, Patriarchy, a play, Feeling Blue Pts. 1, 2 7 3 and Modern Art and Our Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz) at the St. Mark's Poetry Project, P.S. 122 and The WOW Café. Myles has performed her work at colleges, performance spaces, and bookstores across North America as well as in, Iceland, Ireland and Russia. She lives in New York.

Myles's works include poetry, fiction, articles, plays and libretti, including: Hell (an opera with composer Michael Webster).

Professional Life

In 1992 Myles conducted a female-led write-in campaign for President of the United States. In the 1980s she was Artistic Director of St. Mark's Poetry Project. In 1997 and again in 2007 Eileen toured with Sister Spit, a post-punk female performance troupe.

Myles is Professor Emerita of Writing and Literature, and taught at University of California, San Diego from 2002 to 2007. She continues to teach during summers at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, and was the Hugo Writer at University of Montana for the spring of 2010. She contributes to several publications, recently including Parkett, aNother Magazine, the Believer, H.O.W journal and Provincetown Arts. During summer 2009 she contributed regularly to the Poetry Foundation's "Harriet" blog.

Critical Reception

Bust Magazine has called Myles "the rock star of modern poetry", and

Holland Cotter in The New York Times described her as "a cult figure to a generation of post-punk female writer-performers." Of her poetry book Sorry, Tree, the Chicago Review wrote: "Her politics are overt, her physicality raw, yet it is the subtle gentle noticing in her poems that overwhelms."

In 2010, her novel Inferno won the Lambda Literary Award for Best Lesbian Fiction.

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Works

The Irony of the Leash. Jim Brodey Books, 1978.

Polar Ode (with Anne Waldman). New York: Dead Duke Books, 1979.

A Fresh Young Voice from the Plains. New York: Power Mad Press, 1981. ASIN B0013BI3CM

Sappho's Boat. Los Angeles: Little Caesar, 1982. ASIN B000KW4H9I

Bread and Water (stories). New York: Hanuman Books, 1986. ISBN 978-0937815021

1969 (fiction). New York: Hanuman Books, 1989. ISBN 978-0937815250

Not Me. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991. ISBN 9780936756677

Chelsea Girls (fiction). ISBN 0876859325 Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1994.

Maxfield Parrish: Early and New Poems. Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press. 1995. ISBN 9780876859766.

The New Fuck You: Adventures in Lesbian Reading (co-edited with Liz Kotz). ISBN 1570270570 New York: Semiotext(e), MIT Press, 1995.

School of Fish, ISBN 157423031X Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1997.

Cool for You (novel). ISBN 188712859X New York: Soft Skull Press, 2000.

Skies: Poems. Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press. 2001. ISBN 157423174X.

On My Way, ISBN 0971037132 Cambridge, MA: Faux Press, 2001.

Tow (with drawings by artist Larry C. Collins), New York: Lospeccio Press, 2005.

Sorry, Tree (poems). ISBN 978-1933517209 2007, Wave Books.

The Importance of Being Iceland (art writing). ISBN 978-1584350668 New York: Semiotext(e), MIT Press, 2009.

Inferno: a poet's novel. OR Books. 2010. ISBN 9781935928041.

Snowflake (new poems) and different streets (newer poems) (forthcoming from Wave Books, 2012)

An American Poem

I was born in Boston in
1949. I never wanted
this fact to be known, in
fact I've spent the better
half of my adult life
trying to sweep my early
years under the carpet
and have a life that
was clearly just mine
and independent of
the historic fate of
my family. Can you
imagine what it was
like to be one of them,
to be built like them,
to talk like them
to have the benefits
of being born into such
a wealthy and powerful
American family. I went
to the best schools,
had all kinds of tutors
and trainers, traveled
widely, met the famous,
the controversial, and
the not-so-admirable
and I knew from
a very early age that
if there were ever any
possibility of escaping
the collective fate of this famous
Boston family I would
take that route and
I have. I hopped
on an Amtrak to New
York in the early
'70s and I guess
you could say
my hidden years
began. I thought
Well I'll be a poet.
What could be more
foolish and obscure.
I became a lesbian.
Every woman in my
family looks like
a dyke but it's really
stepping off the flag
when you become one.
While holding this ignominious
pose I have seen and
I have learned and

I am beginning to think
there is no escaping
history. A woman I
am currently having
an affair with said
you know you look
like a Kennedy. I felt
the blood rising in my
cheeks. People have
always laughed at
my Boston accent
confusing "large" for
"lodge," "party"
for "potty." But
when this unsuspecting
woman invoked for
the first time my
family name
I knew the jig
was up. Yes, I am,
I am a Kennedy.
My attempts to remain
obscure have not served
me well. Starting as
a humble poet I
quickly climbed to the
top of my profession
assuming a position of
leadership and honor.
It is right that a
woman should call
me out now. Yes,
I am a Kennedy.
And I await
your orders.
You are the New Americans.
The homeless are wandering
the streets of our nation's
greatest city. Homeless
men with AIDS are among
them. Is that right?
That there are no homes
for the homeless, that
there is no free medical
help for these men. And women.
That they get the message
—as they are dying—
that this is not their home?
And how are your
teeth today? Can
you afford to fix them?
How high is your rent?

If art is the highest
and most honest form
of communication of
our times and the young
artist is no longer able
to move here to speak
to her time…Yes, I could,
but that was 15 years ago
and remember—as I must
I am a Kennedy.
Shouldn't we all be Kennedys?
This nation's greatest city
is home of the business-
man and home of the
rich artist. People with
beautiful teeth who are not
on the streets. What shall
we do about this dilemma?
Listen, I have been educated.
I have learned about Western
Civilization. Do you know
what the message of Western
Civilization is? I am alone.
Am I alone tonight?
I don't think so. Am I
the only one with bleeding gums
tonight. Am I the only
homosexual in this room
tonight. Am I the only
one whose friends have
died, are dying now.
And my art can't
be supported until it is
gigantic, bigger than
everyone else's, confirming
the audience's feeling that they are
alone. That they alone
are good, deserved
to buy the tickets
to see this Art.
Are working,
are healthy, should
survive, and are
normal. Are you
normal tonight? Everyone
here, are we all normal.
It is not normal for
me to be a Kennedy.
But I am no longer
ashamed, no longer
alone. I am not
alone tonight because

we are all Kennedys.
And I am your President.

Eileen Myles

Each Defeat

Please! Keep
reading me
Blake
because you're going to make
me the greatest
poet of
all time

Keep smoothing
the stones in the
driveway
let me fry an egg
on your ass
& I'll pick up
the mail.

I feel your
absence in
the morning
& imagine your
instant mouth
let me move
in with you—
Travelling
wrapping your limbs
on my back
I grow man woman
Child
I see wild wild wild

Keep letting the
day be massive
Unlicensed
Oh please have
my child
    I'm a little
    controlling
    Prose has some
    Magic. Morgan
had a
whore in
her lap. You
Big fisherman
I love my
Friends.

I want to lean
my everything
with you
make home for your hubris
I want to read the words you circld over and over again
A slow skunk walking across the road

Yellow, just kind
of pausing
picked up the warm
laundry. I just saw a coyote
tippy tippy tippy
I didn't tell you about the creature with hair
long hair, it was hit by cars on the highway
Again and again. It had long grey hair
It must've been a dog; it could've been
Ours. Everyone loses their friends.

I couldn't tell anyone about this sight.
Each defeat
Is sweet.

Eileen Myles

Movie

You're like
a little fruit
you're like
a moon I want
to hold
I said lemon slope
about your
hip
because it's one
of my words
about you
I whispered
in bed
this smoothing
the fruit &
then alone
with my book
but writing
in it the pages
wagging
against my knuckles
in the
light like a
sail.

Eileen Myles

Sympathy

She's rubbing his shoulder
and he's reading about
Western birds. There's a scoop
of light just above my knee

it resembles the world, the one I know
a layer of smoke spread thin, a shelf

my mind returns again &
again to the picture
you gave me. In pain.
I'm holding the receiver
in Denver some woman making
human eyes at me from her
blue seat, but I later
conclude she's crazy

I'm helpless, rushing back to fix the
"h," how can I help you

I think we tried this long enough
our cure
we would save us from everybody
else, we "got" it,
us

and now we're another falling down car
complaining animal
empty house

you bleeding & expanding
until

the red night itself
is your endless disappointment
in me
who promised so much
on that hill

O Glory to everybody & everything
that we will fish again & again
& get lucky

Anonymous submission.

Eileen Myles