

Classic Poetry Series

Gaius Valerius Catullus

- poems -

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Gaius Valerius Catullus (?84-54 BC)

Gaius Valerius Catullus was the son of a wealthy citizen of Verona. His father owned a villa at Sirmio on Lake Garda. He lived in Rome and was a friend of Cicero, and (speculatively) lover of Clodia Metelli (Lesbia). Little more is known of him, other than that he travelled to Bithynia in the Black Sea region as one of Caius Memmius Gemellus's suite. There he visited the grave of his drowned brother, in the Troad.

A Warning: to Aurelius

I commend myself and my love to you,
Aurelius. I ask for modest indulgence,
so, if you've ever had a desire in your mind
you've pursued chastely and purely,
keep this boy of mine modestly safe,
I don't speak to the masses – nothing to fear
from those who pass to and fro in the streets
occupied with their business –
truly the fear's of you and your cock
dangerous to both good and bad boys.
Shake it about as you please, and with as much
force as you please, wherever you choose, outside:
I except him from that, with modesty, I think.
But if tempests of mind, and mad passion
impel you to too much sin, you wretch,
so you fill my boy's head with deceptions,
then let misery, and evil fate, be yours!
Of him whom, with feet dragged apart, an open door,
radishes and mullets pass through.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Advice: to himself

Sad Catullus, stop playing the fool,
and let what you know leads you to ruin, end.
Once, bright days shone for you,
when you came often drawn to the girl
loved as no other will be loved by you.
Then there were many pleasures with her,
that you wished, and the girl not unwilling,
truly the bright days shone for you.
And now she no longer wants you: and you
weak man, be unwilling to chase what flees,
or live in misery: be strong-minded, stand firm.
Goodbye girl, now Catullus is firm,
he doesn't search for you, won't ask unwillingly.
But you'll grieve, when nobody asks.
Woe to you, wicked girl, what life's left for you?
Who'll submit to you now? Who'll see your beauty?
Who now will you love? Whose will they say you'll be?
Who will you kiss? Whose lips will you bite?
But you, Catullus, be resolved to be firm.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Atalanta

It's as pleasing to me as, they say,
that golden apple was to the swift girl,
that loosed her belt, too long tied.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Ave atque Vale

Through many countries and over many seas
I have come, Brother, to these melancholy rites,
to show this final honour to the dead,
and speak (to what purpose?) to your silent ashes,
since now fate takes you, even you, from me.
Oh, Brother, ripped away from me so cruelly,
now at least take these last offerings, blessed
by the tradition of our parents, gifts to the dead.
Accept, by custom, what a brother's tears drown,
and, for eternity, Brother, 'Hail and Farewell'.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Back from Spain: to Veranius

Veranius, first to me of all
my three hundred thousand friends,
have you come home to your own house
your harmonious brothers, and old mother?
You're back. O happy news for me!
I'll see you safe and sound and listen
to your tales of Spanish places that you've done,
and tribes, as is your custom, and
hang about your neck, and kiss
your lovely mouth and eyes.
O who of all men is happier
than I the gladdest and happiest?

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Flavius's Girl: to Flavius

Flavius, unless your delights
were tasteless and inelegant,
you'd want to tell, and couldn't be silent.
Surely you're in love with some feverish
little whore: you're ashamed to confess it.
Now, pointlessly silent, you don't seem to be
idle of nights, it's proclaimed by your bed
garlanded, fragrant with Syrian perfume,
squashed cushions and pillows, here and there,
and the trembling frame shaken,
quivering and wandering about.
But being silent does nothing for you.
Why? Spread thighs blab it's not so,
if not quite what foolishness you commit.
How and whatever you've got, good or bad,
tell us. I want to name you and your loves
to the heavens in charming verse.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

His Boat

This boat you see, friends, will tell you
that she was the fastest of craft,
not to be challenged for speed
by any vessel afloat, whether
driven by sail or the labour of oars.
The threatening Adriatic coast won't deny it,
nor the isles of the Cyclades,
nor noble Rhodes, nor fearful Bosphorus,
nor the grim bay of the Black Sea
where, before becoming a boat, she was
leafy wood: for on the heights of Cytorus
she often hissed to the whispering leaves.
The boat says these things were well known to you,
and are, Amastris and box-wood clad Cytorus:
she says from the very beginning she stood
on your slope, that she dipped her oars
in your water, and carried her owner from there
over so many headstrong breakers,
whether the wind cried from starboard
or larboard, or whether Jupiter struck at the sheets
on one side and the other, together:
and no prayers to the gods of the shore were offered
for her, when she came from a foreign sea
here, as far as this limpid lake.
But that's past: now hidden away here
she ages quietly and offers herself to you,
Castor and his brother, heavenly Twins.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Home Truths for Varus's girl: to Varus

Varus drags me into his affairs
out of the Forum, where I'm seen idling:
to a little whore I immediately saw,
not very inelegant, not unattractive,
who, when we came there, met us
with varied chatter, including, how might
Bithynia stand now, what's it like, and where
might the benefit have been to me in cash.
I told her what's true, nothing at all,
while neither the praetors nor their aides,
return any the richer, especially since
our Praetor, Memmius, the bugger,
cared not a jot for his followers.
'But surely,' they said, you could have bought
slaves they say are made for the litter there.'
I, so the girl might take me to be wealthy,
said 'no, for me things weren't so bad,
that coming across one bad province,
I couldn't buy eight good men.'
But I'd no one, neither here nor there,
who might even raise to his shoulder
the shattered foot of an old couch.
At this she, like the shameless thing she was, said
'I beg you, my dear Catullus, for the loan of them,
just for a while: I'd like to be carried
to Serap's temple.' 'Wait' I said to the girl,
'what I just said was mine, isn't actually in
my possession: my friend Cinna, that's Gaius,
purchased the thing for himself.
Whether they're his or mine, what difference to me?
I use them just as well as if I'd bought them myself.
But you are quite tasteless, and annoying,
you with whom no inexactness is allowed.'

Gaius Valerius Catullus

How Many Kisses: to Lesbia

Lesbia, you ask how many kisses of yours
would be enough and more to satisfy me.
As many as the grains of Libyan sand
that lie between hot Jupiter's oracle,
at Ammon, in resin-producing Cyrene,
and old Battiades sacred tomb:
or as many as the stars, when night is still,
gazing down on secret human desires:
as many of your kisses kissed
are enough, and more, for mad Catullus,
as can't be counted by spies
nor an evil tongue bewitch us.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Invitation: to Fabullus

You'll dine well, in a few days, with me,
if the gods are kind to you, my dear Fabullus,
and if you bring lots of good food with you,
and don't come without a pretty girl
and wine and wit and all your laughter.
I say you'll dine well, and charmingly,
if you bring all that: since your Catullus's
purse alas is full of cobwebs.
But accept endearments in return for the wine
or whatever's sweeter and finer:
since I'll give you a perfume my girl
was given by the Loves and Cupids,
and when you've smelt it, you'll ask the gods
to make you, Fabullus, all nose.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Ionic

That we've broken their statues,
that we've driven them out of their temples,
doesn't mean at all that the gods are dead.
O land of Ionia, they're still in love with you,
their souls still keep your memory.
When an August dawn wakes over you,
your atmosphere is potent with their life,
and sometimes a young ethereal figure
indistinct, in rapid flight,
wings across your hills.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Ithaka

As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon--don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon--you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind--
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Lesbia's Sparrow

All you Loves and Cupids cry
and all you men of feeling
my girl's sparrow is dead,
my girl's beloved sparrow.
She loved him more than herself.
He was sweeter than honey, and he
knew her, as she knows her mother.
He never flew out of her lap,
but, hopping about here and there,
just chirped to his lady, alone.
Now he is flying the dark
no one ever returns from.
Evil to you, evil Shades
of Orcus, destroyers of beauty.
You have stolen the beautiful sparrow from me.
Oh sad day! Oh poor little sparrow!
Because of you my sweet girl's eyes
are red with weeping, and swollen.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Let's Live and Love: to Lesbia

Let us live, my Lesbia, let us love,
and all the words of the old, and so moral,
may they be worth less than nothing to us!
Suns may set, and suns may rise again:
but when our brief light has set,
night is one long everlasting sleep.
Give me a thousand kisses, a hundred more,
another thousand, and another hundred,
and, when we've counted up the many thousands,
confuse them so as not to know them all,
so that no enemy may cast an evil eye,
by knowing that there were so many kisses.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

No. 101

Driven across many nations, across many oceans,
I am here, my brother, for this final parting,
to offer at last those gifts which the dead are given
and to speak in vain to your unspeaking ashes,
since bitter fortune forbids you to hear me or answer,
O my wretched brother, so abruptly taken!
But now I must celebrate grief with funeral tributes
offered the dead in the ancient way of the fathers;
accept these presents, wet with my brotherly tears, and
now & forever, my brother, hail & farewell.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

No. 101 (On His Brother's Death)

By ways remote and distant waters sped,
Brother, to thy sad grave-side am I come,
That I may give the last gifts to the dead,
And vainly parley with thine ashes dumb:
Since she who now bestows and now denies
Hath ta'en thee, hapless brother, from mine eyes.
But lo! these gifts, the heirlooms of past years,
Are made sad things to grace thy coffin shell;
Take them, all drenched with a brother's tears,
And, brother, for all time, hail and farewell!

Gaius Valerius Catullus

No. 11

Aurelius & Furius, true comrades,
whether Catullus penetrates to where in
outermost India booms the eastern ocean's
wonderful thunder;

whether he stops with Arabs or Hyrcani,
Parthian bowmen or nomadic Sagae;
or goes to Egypt, which the Nile so richly
dyes, overflowing;

even if he should scale the lofty Alps, or
summon to mind the mightiness of Caesar
viewing the Gallic Rhine, the dreadful Britons
at the world's far end--

you're both prepared to share in my adventures,
and any others which the gods may send me.
Back to my girl then, carry her this bitter
message, these spare words:

May she have joy & profit from her cocksmen,
go down embracing hundreds all together,
never with love, but without interruption
wringing their balls dry;

nor look to my affection as she used to,
for she has left it broken, like a flower
at the edge of a field after the plowshare
brushes it, passing.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

No. 51

To me that man seems like a god in heaven,
seems--may I say it?--greater than all gods are,
who sits by you & without interruption
watches you, listens

to your light laughter, which casts such confusion
onto my senses, Lesbia, that when I
gaze at you merely, all of my well-chosen
words are forgotten

as my tongue thickens & a subtle fire
runs through my body while my ears deafened
by their own ringing & at once my eyes are
covered in darkness!

Leisure, Catullus. More than just a nuisance,
leisure: you riot, overmuch enthusing.
Fabulous cities & their sometime kings have
died of such leisure.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

No. 51 (To Lesbia)

Him rival to the gods I place,
Him loftier yet, if loftier be,
Who, Lesbia, sits before thy face,
Who listens and who looks on thee;

Thee smiling soft. Yet this delight
Doth all my sense consign to death;
For when thou dawnest on my sight,
Ah, wretched! flits my labouring breath.

My tongue is palsied. Subtly hid
Fire creeps me through from limb to limb:
My loud ears tingle all unbid:
Twin clouds of night mine eyes bedim.

Ease is my plague: ease makes thee void,
Catullus, with these vacant hours,
And wanton: ease that hath destroyed
Great kings, and states with all their powers.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Sirmio

Sirmio, you jewel of all peninsulas
and all the islands of the crystal lakes
and the great oceans Neptune circles,
how delightedly, how gladly, I return,
hardly believing myself I've safely left
Thynia and those Black Sea shores behind.

What is better than to be free from care
when the mind throws off its load and, at last,
from foreign journeys, we reach our own home,
sink back to rest on the one bed we longed for?
This is reward enough for all our efforts.
You, welcome sight, O lovely Sirmio, be happy,
and you too, Lydian Lake Garda's waters,
laugh, with whatever gleaming laughter you have.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Sparrow, the Special Delight of My Girl

Sparrow, the special delight of my girl,
whom often she teases and holds on her lap
and pokes with the tip of her finger, provoking
counterattacks with your mordant beak,
whenever my luminous love desires
something or other, innocuous fun,
a bit of escape, I suppose, from her pain,
a moment of peace from her turbulent passion,
I wish I could play like she does with you
and lighten the cares of my sorrowful soul.
It thrills me as much as the nimble girl
in the story was thrilled by the gilded apple
that finally uncinched her virginal gown.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Stop Stealing the Napkins! : to Asinius Marrucinus

Hi There! I see you're enjoying the site, and just wanted to extend an invitation to register for our free site. The members of oldpoetry strive to make this a fun place to learn and share - hope you join us! - Kevin

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Tears for Lesbia's Sparrow

Sparrow, my sweet girl's delight,
whom she plays with, holds to her breast,
whom, greedy, she gives her little finger to,
often provoking you to a sharp bite,
whenever my shining desire wishes
to play with something she loves,
I suppose, while strong passion abates,
it might be a small relief from her pain:
might I toy with you as she does
and ease the cares of a sad mind

Gaius Valerius Catullus

The Death of Lesbia's Sparrow

Mourn, O you Loves and Cupids
and such of you as love beauty:
my girl's sparrow is dead,
sparrow, the girl's delight,
whom she loved more than her eyes.
For he was sweet as honey, and knew her
as well as the girl her own mother,
he never moved from her lap,
but, hopping about here and there,
chirped to his mistress alone.
Now he goes down the shadowy road
from which they say no one returns.
Now let evil be yours, evil shadows of Orcus,
that devour everything of beauty:
you've stolen lovely sparrow from me.
O evil deed! O poor little sparrow!
Now, by your efforts, my girl's eyes
are swollen and red with weeping.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

The Dedication: to Cornelius

To whom do I send this fresh little book
of wit, just polished off with dry pumice?
To you, Cornelius: since you were accustomed
to consider my trifles worth something
even then, when you alone of Italians
dared to explain all the ages, in three learned
works, by Jupiter, and with the greatest labour.
Then take this little book for your own: whatever
it is, and is worth: virgin Muse, patroness,
let it last, for more lives than one.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

The God Abandons Antony

At midnight, when suddenly you hear
an invisible procession going by
with exquisite music, voices,
don't mourn your luck that's failing now,
work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive--don't mourn them uselessly:
as one long prepared, and full of courage,
say goodbye to her, to Alexandria who is leaving.
Above all, don't fool yourself, don't say
it was a dream, your ears deceived you:
don't degrade yourself with empty hopes like these.
As one long prepared, and full of courage,
as is right for you who were given this kind of city,
go firmly to the window
and listen with deep emotion,
but not with the whining, the pleas of a coward;
listen--your final pleasure--to the voices,
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

What a Book! : to Calvus the Poet

If I didn't love you more than my eyes,
most delightful Calvus, I'd dislike you
for this gift, with a true Vatinian dislike:
Now what did I do and what did I say,
to be so badly cursed with poets?
Let the gods send ill-luck to that client
who sent you so many wretches.
But if, as I guess, Sulla the grammarian
gave you this new and inventive gift,
that's no harm to me, it's good and fine
that your efforts aren't all wasted.
Great gods, an amazing, immortal book!
That you sent, of course, to your Catullus,
so he might immediately die,
on the optimum day, in the Saturnalia!
No you won't get away with this crime.
Now when it's light enough I'll run
to the copyists bookstalls, I'll acquire
Caesius, Aquinus, Suffenus,
all of the poisonous ones.
And I'll repay you for this suffering.
Meanwhile farewell take yourself off, there,
whence your unlucky feet brought you,
cursed ones of the age, worst of poets.

Gaius Valerius Catullus

Words against Lesbia: to Furius and Aurelius

Furius and Aurelius, you friends of Catullus,
whether he penetrates farthest India,
where the Eastern waves strike the shore
with deep resonance,
or among the Hyrcanians and supple Arabs,
or Sacians and Parthian bowmen,
or where the seven-mouthed Nile
colours the waters,
or whether he'll climb the high Alps,
viewing great Caesar's monuments,
the waters of Gallic Rhine,
and the furthest fierce Britons,
whatever the will of the heavens
brings, ready now for anything,
tell my girl this in a few
ill-omened words.
Let her live and be happy with her adulterers,
hold all three-hundred in her embrace,
truly love-less, wearing them all down
again and again: let her not look for
my love as before,
she whose crime destroyed it, like the last
flower of the field, touched once
by the passing plough.

Gaius Valerius Catullus