

Classic Poetry Series

Gwendolyn Brooks

- poems -

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A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother burns bacon

From the first it had been like a
Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood.
A wildness cut up, and tied in little bunches,
Like the four-line stanzas of the ballads she had never quite
understood--the ballads they had set her to, in school.

Herself: the milk-white maid, the "maid mild"
Of the ballad. Pursued
By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince.
The Happiness-Ever-After.
That was worth anything.
It was good to be a "maid mild."
That made the breath go fast.

Her bacon burned. She
Hastened to hide it in the step-on can, and
Drew more strips from the meat case. The eggs and sour-milk biscuits
Did well. She set out a jar
Of her new quince preserve.

. . . But there was something about the matter of the Dark Villain.
He should have been older, perhaps.
The hacking down of a villain was more fun to think about
When his menace possessed undisputed breath, undisputed height,
And best of all, when history was cluttered
With the bones of many eaten knights and princesses.

The fun was disturbed, then all but nullified
When the Dark Villain was a blackish child
Of Fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty,
And a mouth too young to have lost every reminder
Of its infant softness.

That boy must have been surprised! For
These were grown-ups. Grown-ups were supposed to be wise.
And the Fine Prince--and that other--so tall, so broad, so
Grown! Perhaps the boy had never guessed
That the trouble with grown-ups was that under the magnificent shell of adulthood, just
under,
Waited the baby full of tantrums.
It occurred to her that there may have been something
Ridiculous to the picture of the Fine Prince
Rushing (rich with the breadth and height and
Mature solidness whose lack, in the Dark Villain, was impressing her,
Confronting her more and more as this first day after the trial
And acquittal (wore on) rushing
With his heavy companion to hack down (unhorsed)

That little foe. So much had happened, she could not remember now what that foe had done
Against her, or if anything had been done.
The breaks were everywhere. That she could think
Of no thread capable of the necessary
Sew-work.

She made the babies sit in their places at the table.
Then, before calling HIM, she hurried
To the mirror with her comb and lipstick. It was necessary
To be more beautiful than ever.
The beautiful wife.
For sometimes she fancied he looked at her as though
Measuring her. As if he considered, Had she been worth it?
Had she been worth the blood, the cramped cries, the little stirring bravado, The
gradual dulling of those Negro eyes,
The sudden, overwhelming little-boyness in that barn?
Whatever she might feel or half-feel, the lipstick necessity was something apart. HE
must never conclude
That she had not been worth it.

HE sat down, the Fine Prince, and
Began buttering a biscuit. HE looked at HIS hands.
More papers were in from the North, HE mumbled. More maddening headlines.
With their pepper-words, "bestiality," and "barbarism," and
"Shocking."
The half-sneers HE had mastered for the trial worked across
HIS sweet and pretty face.

What HE'd like to do, HE explained, was kill them all.
The time lost. The unwanted fame.
Still, it had been fun to show those intruders
A thing or two. To show that snappy-eyed mother,
That sassy, Northern, brown-black--

Nothing could stop Mississippi.
HE knew that. Big fella
Knew that.
And, what was so good, Mississippi knew that.
They could send in their petitions, and scar
Their newspapers with bleeding headlines. Their governors
Could appeal to Washington . . .

"What I want," the older baby said, "is 'lasses on my jam."
Whereupon the younger baby
Picked up the molasses pitcher and threw
The molasses in his brother's face. Instantly

The Fine Prince leaned across the table and slapped
The small and smiling criminal.
She did not speak. When the HAND
Came down and away, and she could look at her child,
At her baby-child,
She could think only of blood.
Surely her baby's cheek
Had disappeared, and in its place, surely,
Hung a heaviness, a lengthening red, a red that had no end.
She shook her head. It was not true, of course.
It was not true at all. The
Child's face was as always, the
Color of the paste in her paste-jar.

She left the table, to the tune of the children's lamentations, which were shriller
Than ever. She
Looked out of a window. She said not a word. That
Was one of the new Somethings--
The fear,
Tying her as with iron.

Suddenly she felt his hands upon her. He had followed her
To the window. The children were whimpering now.
Such bits of tots. And she, their mother,
Could not protect them. She looked at her shoulders, still
Gripped in the claim of his hands. She tried, but could not resist the idea
That a red ooze was seeping, spreading darkly, thickly, slowly,
Over her white shoulders, her own shoulders,
And over all of Earth and Mars.

He whispered something to her, did the Fine Prince, something about love and night
and intention.
She heard no hoof-beat of the horse and saw no flash of the shining steel.

He pulled her face around to meet
His, and there it was, close close,
For the first time in all the days and nights.
His mouth, wet and red,
So very, very, very red,
Closed over hers.

Then a sickness heaved within her. The courtroom Coca-Cola,
The courtroom beer and hate and sweat and drone,
Pushed like a wall against her. She wanted to bear it.
But his mouth would not go away and neither would the
Decapitated exclamation points in that Other Woman's eyes.

She did not scream.
She stood there.
But a hatred for him burst into glorious flower,
And its perfume enclasped them--big,
Bigger than all magnolias.

The last bleak news of the ballad.
The rest of the rugged music.
The last quatrain.

Gwendolyn Brooks

A Sunset of the City

Already I am no longer looked at with lechery or love.
My daughters and sons have put me away with marbles and dolls,
Are gone from the house.
My husband and lovers are pleasant or somewhat polite
And night is night.

It is a real chill out,
The genuine thing.
I am not deceived, I do not think it is still summer
Because sun stays and birds continue to sing.

It is summer-gone that I see, it is summer-gone.
The sweet flowers indrying and dying down,
The grasses forgetting their blaze and consenting to brown.

It is a real chill out. The fall crisp comes
I am aware there is winter to heed.
There is no warm house
That is fitted with my need.

I am cold in this cold house this house
Whose washed echoes are tremulous down lost halls.
I am a woman, and dusty, standing among new affairs.
I am a woman who hurries through her prayers.

Tin intimations of a quiet core to be my
Desert and my dear relief
Come: there shall be such islanding from grief,
And small communion with the master shore.
Twang they. And I incline this ear to tin,
Consult a dual dilemma. Whether to dry
In humming pallor or to leap and die.

Somebody muffed it?? Somebody wanted to joke.

Gwendolyn Brooks

Garbageman: The Man With The Orderly Mind

What do you think of us in fuzzy endeavor, you whose directions are
sterling, whose lunge is straight?

Can you make a reason, how can you pardon us who memorize the rules and never
score?

Who memorize the rules from your own text but never quite transfer them to the
game,

Who never quite receive the whistling ball, who gawk, begin to absorb the crowd's own
roar.

Is earnest enough, may earnest attract or lead to light;

Is light enough, if hands in clumsy frenzy, flimsy whimsically, enlist;

Is light enough when this bewilderment crying against the dark shuts down the
shades?

Dilute confusion. Find and explode our mist.

Gwendolyn Brooks

Kitchenette Building

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" mate, a giddy sound, not strong
Like "rent", "feeding a wife", "satisfying a man".

But could a dream sent up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms,

Even if we were willing to let it in,
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

Gwendolyn Brooks

My Dreams, My Works, Must Wait Till After Hell

I hold my honey and I store my bread
In little jars and cabinets of my will.
I label clearly, and each latch and lid
I bid, Be firm till I return from hell.
I am very hungry. I am incomplete.
And none can give me any word but Wait,
The puny light. I keep my eyes pointed in;
Hoping that, when the devil days of my hurt
Drag out to their last dregs and I resume
On such legs as are left me, in such heart
As I can manage, remember to go home,
My taste will not have turned insensitive
To honey and bread old purity could love.

Gwendolyn Brooks

Sadie and Maud

Maud went to college.
Sadie stayed home.
Sadie scraped life
With a fine toothed comb.

She didn't leave a tangle in
Her comb found every strand.
Sadie was one of the livingest chicks
In all the land.

Sadie bore two babies
Under her maiden name.
Maud and Ma and Papa
Nearly died of shame.

When Sadie said her last so-long
Her girls struck out from home.
(Sadie left as heritage
Her fine-toothed comb.)

Maud, who went to college,
Is a thin brown mouse.
She is living all alone
In this old house.

Gwendolyn Brooks

Speech to the Young : Speech to the Progress-Toward

Say to them,
say to the down-keepers,
the sun-slappers,
the self-soilers,
the harmony-hushers,
"even if you are not ready for day
it cannot always be night."
You will be right.
For that is the hard home-run.

Live not for battles won.
Live not for the-end-of-the-song.
Live in the along.

Gwendolyn Brooks

The Ballad of Rudolph Reed

Rudolph Reed was oaken.
His wife was oaken too.
And his two good girls and his good little man
Oakened as they grew.

"I am not hungry for berries.
I am not hungry for bread.
But hungry hungry for a house
Where at night a man in bed

"May never hear the plaster
Stir as if in pain.
May never hear the roaches
Falling like fat rain.

"Where never wife and children need
Go blinking through the gloom.
Where every room of many rooms
Will be full of room.

"Oh my home may have its east or west
Or north or south behind it.
All I know is I shall know it,
And fight for it when I find it."

The agent's steep and steady stare
Corroded to a grin.
Why you black old, tough old hell of a man,
Move your family in!

Nary a grin grinned Rudolph Reed,
Nary a curse cursed he,
But moved in his House. With his dark little wife,
And his dark little children three.

A neighbor would look, with a yawning eye
That squeezed into a slit.
But the Rudolph Reeds and children three
Were too joyous to notice it.

For were they not firm in a home of their own
With windows everywhere
And a beautiful banistered stair
And a front yard for flowers and a back for grass?

The first night, a rock, big as two fists.
The second, a rock big as three.
But nary a curse cursed Rudolph Reed.
(Though oaken as man could be.)

The third night, a silvery ring of glass.
Patience arched to endure,

But he looked, and lo! small Mabel's blood
Was staining her gaze so pure.

Then up did rise our Roodolph Reed
And pressed the hand of his wife,
And went to the door with a thirty-four
And a beastly butcher knife.

He ran like a mad thing into the night
And the words in his mouth were stinking.
By the time he had hurt his first white man
He was no longer thinking.

By the time he had hurt his fourth white man
Rudolph Reed was dead.
His neighbors gathered and kicked his corpse.
"Nigger--" his neighbors said.

Small Mabel whimpered all night long,
For calling herself the cause.
Her oak-eyed mother did no thing
But change the bloody gauze.

Gwendolyn Brooks

The Bean Eaters

They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.
Dinner is a casual affair.
Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,
Tin flatware.

Two who are Mostly Good.
Two who have lived their day,
But keep on putting on their clothes
And putting things away.

And remembering . . .
Remembering, with twinklings and twinges,
As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that
is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths,
tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.

Gwendolyn Brooks

The Crazy Woman

I shall not sing a May song.
A May song should be gay.
I'll wait until November
And sing a song of gray.

I'll wait until November
That is the time for me.
I'll go out in the frosty dark
And sing most terribly.

And all the little people
Will stare at me and say,
"That is the Crazy Woman
Who would not sing in May."

Anonymous submission.

Gwendolyn Brooks

The Good Man

The good man.
He is still enhancer, renouncer.
In the time of detachment,
in the time of the vivid heather and affectionate evil,
in the time of oral
grave grave legalities of hate - all real
walks our prime registered reproach and seal.
Our successful moral.
The good man.

Watches our bogus roses, our rank wreath, our
love's unreliable cement, the gray
jubilees of our demondom.
Coherent
Counsel! Good man.
Require of us our terribly excluded blue.
Constrain, repair a ripped, revolted land.
Put hand in hand land over.
Reprove
the abler droughts and manias of the day
and a felicity entreat.
Love.
Complete
your pledges, reinforce your aides, renew
stance, testament.

Gwendolyn Brooks

The Independent Man

Now who could take you off to tiny life
In one room or in two rooms or in three
And cork you smartly, like the flask of wine
You are? Not any woman. Not a wife.
You'd let her twirl you, give her a good glee
Showing your leaping ruby to a friend.
Though twirling would be meek. Since not a cork
Could you allow, for being made so free.

A woman would be wise to think it well
If once a week you only rang the bell.

Gwendolyn Brooks

The Lovers of the Poor

arrive. The Ladies from the Ladies' Betterment
League
Arrive in the afternoon, the late light slanting
In diluted gold bars across the boulevard brag
Of proud, seamed faces with mercy and murder hinting
Here, there, interrupting, all deep and debonair,
The pink paint on the innocence of fear;
Walk in a gingerly manner up the hall.
Cutting with knives served by their softest care,
Served by their love, so barbarously fair.
Whose mothers taught: You'd better not be cruel!
You had better not throw stones upon the wrens!
Herein they kiss and coddle and assault
Anew and dearly in the innocence
With which they baffle nature. Who are full,
Sleek, tender-clad, fit, fiftyish, a-glow, all
Sweetly abortive, hinting at fat fruit,
Judge it high time that fiftyish fingers felt
Beneath the lovelier planes of enterprise.
To resurrect. To moisten with milky chill.
To be a random hitching post or plush.
To be, for wet eyes, random and handy hem.
Their guild is giving money to the poor.
The worthy poor. The very very worthy
And beautiful poor. Perhaps just not too swarthy?
Perhaps just not too dirty nor too dim
Nor--passionate. In truth, what they could wish
Is--something less than derelict or dull.
Not staunch enough to stab, though, gaze for gaze!
God shield them sharply from the beggar-bold!
The noxious needy ones whose battle's bald
Nonetheless for being voiceless, hits one down.
But it's all so bad! and entirely too much for them.
The stench; the urine, cabbage, and dead beans,
Dead porridges of assorted dusty grains,
The old smoke, heavy diapers, and, they're told,
Something called chitterlings. The darkness. Drawn
Darkness, or dirty light. The soil that stirs.
The soil that looks the soil of centuries.
And for that matter the general oldness. Old
Wood. Old marble. Old tile. Old old old.
Note homekind Oldness! Not Lake Forest, Glencoe.
Nothing is sturdy, nothing is majestic,
There is no quiet drama, no rubbed glaze, no
Unkillable infirmity of such
A tasteful turn as lately they have left,
Glencoe, Lake Forest, and to which their cars
Must presently restore them. When they're done
With dullards and distortions of this fistic
Patience of the poor and put-upon.
They've never seen such a make-do-ness as
Newspaper rugs before! In this, this "flat,"

Their hostess is gathering up the oozed, the rich
 Rugs of the morning (tattered! the bespattered . . .),
 Readies to spread clean rugs for afternoon.
 Here is a scene for you. The Ladies look,
 In horror, behind a substantial citizeness
 Whose trains clank out across her swollen heart.
 Who, arms akimbo, almost fills a door.
 All tumbling children, quilts dragged to the floor
 And tortured thereover, potato peelings, soft-
 Eyed kitten, hunched-up, haggard, to-be-hurt.
 Their League is allotting largesse to the Lost.
 But to put their clean, their pretty money, to put
 Their money collected from delicate rose-fingers
 Tipped with their hundred flawless rose-nails seems . . .
 They own Spode, Lowestoft, candelabra,
 Mantels, and hostess gowns, and sunburst clocks,
 Turtle soup, Chippendale, red satin "hangings,"
 Aubussons and Hattie Carnegie. They Winter
 In Palm Beach; cross the Water in June; attend,
 When suitable, the nice Art Institute;
 Buy the right books in the best bindings; saunter
 On Michigan, Easter mornings, in sun or wind.
 Oh Squalor! This sick four-story hulk, this fibre
 With fissures everywhere! Why, what are bringings
 Of loathe-love largesse? What shall peril hungers
 So old old, what shall flatter the desolate?
 Tin can, blocked fire escape and chitterling
 And swaggering seeking youth and the puzzled wreckage
 Of the middle passage, and urine and stale shames
 And, again, the porridges of the underslung
 And children children children. Heavens! That
 Was a rat, surely, off there, in the shadows? Long
 And long-tailed? Gray? The Ladies from the Ladies'
 Betterment League agree it will be better
 To achieve the outer air that rights and steadies,
 To hie to a house that does not holler, to ring
 Bells elsetime, better presently to cater
 To no more Possibilities, to get
 Away. Perhaps the money can be posted.
 Perhaps they two may choose another Slum!
 Some serious sooty half-unhappy home!--
 Where loathe-lover likelier may be invested.
 Keeping their scented bodies in the center
 Of the hall as they walk down the hysterical hall,
 They allow their lovely skirts to graze no wall,
 Are off at what they manage of a canter,
 And, resuming all the clues of what they were,
 Try to avoid inhaling the laden air.

Gwendolyn Brooks

The Mother

Abortions will not let you forget.
You remember the children you got that you did not get,
The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,
The singers and workers that never handled the air.
You will never neglect or beat
Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.
You will never wind up the sucking-thumb
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.
You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed
children.

I have contracted. I have eased
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.
I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized
Your luck
And your lives from your unfinished reach,
If I stole your births and your names,
Your straight baby tears and your games,
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches,
and your deaths,
If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.
Though why should I whine,
Whine that the crime was other than mine?--
Since anyhow you are dead.
Or rather, or instead,
You were never made.
But that too, I am afraid,
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?
You were born, you had body, you died.
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

Believe me, I loved you all.
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you
All.

Gwendolyn Brooks

the sonnet-ballad

Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?
They took my lover's tallness off to war,
Left me lamenting. Now I cannot guess
What I can use an empty heart-cup for.
He won't be coming back here any more.
Some day the war will end, but, oh, I knew
When he went walking grandly out that door
That my sweet love would have to be untrue.
Would have to be untrue. Would have to court
Coquettish death, whose impudent and strange
Possessive arms and beauty (of a sort)
Can make a hard man hesitate--and change.
And he will be the one to stammer, "Yes."
Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?

Gwendolyn Brooks

To Be In Love

To be in love
Is to touch with a lighter hand.
In yourself you stretch, you are well.
You look at things
Through his eyes.
A cardinal is red.
A sky is blue.
Suddenly you know he knows too.
He is not there but
You know you are tasting together
The winter, or a light spring weather.
His hand to take your hand is overmuch.
Too much to bear.
You cannot look in his eyes
Because your pulse must not say
What must not be said.
When he
Shuts a door-
Is not there_
Your arms are water.
And you are free
With a ghastly freedom.
You are the beautiful half
Of a golden hurt.
You remember and covet his mouth
To touch, to whisper on.
Oh when to declare
Is certain Death!
Oh when to apprise
Is to mesmerize,
To see fall down, the Column of Gold,
Into the commonest ash.

Anonymous submission.

Gwendolyn Brooks

to the Diaspora

you did not know you were Afrika

When you set out for Afrika
you did not know you were going.
Because
you did not know you were Afrika.
You did not know the Black continent
that had to be reached
was you.

I could not have told you then that some sun
would come,
somewhere over the road,
would come evoking the diamonds
of you, the Black continent--
somewhere over the road.
You would not have believed my mouth.

When I told you, meeting you somewhere close
to the heat and youth of the road,
liking my loyalty, liking belief,
you smiled and you thanked me but very little believed me.

Here is some sun. Some.
Now off into the places rough to reach.
Though dry, though drowsy, all unwillingly a-wobble,
into the dissonant and dangerous crescendo.
Your work, that was done, to be done to be done to be done.

Gwendolyn Brooks

We Real Cool

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Gwendolyn Brooks