

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.

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

Dream

Close to the
door in
my dream the
small signs

I saw a brown
sign with wisdom
on it
I saw a brown
one leaning
with wisdom
on it

fringe of a mirror
my mother
leaning over a pond
cupping water

leaning against
the moulding
cardboard or
wood which materials do you

does your wisdom prefer

which a-
partment in a summer
with someone
I felt brave to
have touched
her love the screen
door and the dogs
and the cats always
getting out. That
was the fear
two signs
fading but recalling
they had faded like words
fade in stone because

of the rain and the days
and waking and the dream
is leaving with every
step leaning over the meat
because I do not want
you to have died in vain
kissing the turkey and
the neck of? my dog
all animals am I.
all dreams, all stone
all message am I.

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 circled 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

London Exchange

I have utmost
respect for you
but in that
moment if I
were to
get out of
your way
instead of
walking up the stairs
to my home
I would have
no respect
for myself.
I didn't know
why you couldn't
understand this
when I told
you. Instead
you screamed
at me and
told me I
was rude. And
then you
said someone
of my
age should
know meaning
that you
were adding
to my crime
the fact
that I am
older than you.
What am I
to do. How
many days
have passed
and I
have no

reason to think
that
your ancestors
were stolen
from their
home in A-
frica
and because
of my not
knowing that this
is true
but thinking
that it
is possible
it makes
me certain
that respect
next time
would be
for me
to step around.
Maybe
I could say
quietly joining you
for a moment
in your
vast and
ancient
sorrow
that was
my home

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

Our Happiness

was when the
lights were
out

the whole city
in darkness

& we drove north
to our friend's
yellow apt.
where she had
power & we
could work

later we stayed
in the darkened
apt. you sick
in bed & me
writing ambitiously
by candle light
in thin blue
books

your neighbor had
a generator &
after a while
we had a little
bit of light

I walked the
dog & you
were still
a little bit
sick

we sat on a stoop
one day in the
late afternoon
we had very little

money. enough for
a strong cappuccino
which we shared
sitting there &
suddenly the
city was lit.

Eileen Myles

Peanut Butter

I am always hungry
& wanting to have
sex. This is a fact.
If you get right
down to it the new
unprocessed peanut
butter is no damn
good & you should
buy it in a jar as
always in the
largest supermarket
you know. And
I am an enemy
of change, as
you know. All
the things I
embrace as new
are in
fact old things,
re-released: swimming,
the sensation of
being dirty in
body and mind
summer as a
time to do
nothing and make
no money. Prayer
as a last re-
sort. Pleasure
as a means,
and then a
means again
with no ends
in sight. I am
absolutely in opposition
to all kinds of
goals. I have
no desire to know
where this, anything

is getting me.
When the water
boils I get
a cup of tea.
Accidentally I
read all the
works of Proust.
It was summer
I was there
so was he. I
write because
I would like
to be used for
years after
my death. Not
only my body
will be compost
but the thoughts
I left during
my life. During
my life I was
a woman with
hazel eyes. Out
the window
is a crooked
silo. Parts
of your
body I think
of as stripes
which I have
learned to
love along. We
swim naked
in ponds &
I write be-
hind your
back. My thoughts
about you are
not exactly
forbidden, but
exalted because
they are useless,

not intended
to get you
because I have
you & you love
me. It's more
like a playground
where I play
with my reflection
of you until
you come back
and into the
real you I
get to sink
my teeth. With
you I know how
to relax. &
so I work
behind your
back. Which
is lovely.
Nature
is out of control
you tell me &
that's what's so
good about
it. I'm immoderately
in love with you,
knocked out by
all your new
white hair

why shouldn't
something
I have always
known be the
very best there
is. I love
you from my
childhood,
starting back
there when
one day was

just like the
rest, random
growth and
breezes, constant
love, a sand-
wich in the
middle of
day,
a tiny step
in the vastly
conventional
path of
the Sun. I
squint. I
wink. I
take the
ride.

Eileen Myles

Snakes

I was 6 and
I lost my snake.

The table shook
I can do better
than this
and shambled
to the kitchen
to the scene
of the crime

I was green
I put my sneaker
down, little shoe

I felt the cold
metal tap
my calf

moo and everything
began to change.
I am 6
turned into lightning
wrote on the night

At 6, I was feathers
scales, I fell into
the slime of it, lit

You think you are six,
it yelled. I am face
to face with a frog
a woman alone
in bed. The square
of the window
persists. I am 6.

The phone rings
It's my sister

blamm I dropped
a plate. Sorry.

Now the clouds slide
by afraid, awake
my feet are cold
but I'm fearless

I am 6.

Under here
with bottle caps
and stars
adults and low
moans, busses

slamming on brakes
I am 6

the cake is lit
it's round
the children
sing. I will never
return. We are
so small.

My husband turns
his fevered
face. I put
the medicine
down. Click.
I am 6.

The movie rolls on.
Tramping feet,
music blaring
at the end of
the war. I
am frightened
hold my hand

The round face

of the woman
upstairs, moving
the faucets, strips
of vegetable

slithering down,
her reptile child
will never
return. The telephone
rings. It's me.
I'm six.

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

The Honey Bear

Billie Holiday was on the radio
I was standing in the kitchen
smoking my cigarette of this
pack I plan to finish tonight
last night of smoking youth.
I made a cup of this funny
kind of tea I've had hanging
around. A little too sweet
an odd mix. My only impulse
was to make it sweeter.
Ivy Anderson was singing
pretty late tonight
in my very bright kitchen.
I'm standing by the tub
feeling a little older
nearly thirty in my very
bright kitchen tonight.
I'm not a bad looking woman
I suppose O it's very quiet
in my kitchen tonight I'm squeezing
this plastic honey bear a noodle
of honey dripping into the odd sweet
tea. It's pretty late
Honey bear's cover was loose
and somehow honey dripping down
the bear's face catching
in the crevices beneath
the bear's eyes O very sad and sweet
I'm standing in my kitchen O honey
I'm staring at the honey bear's face.

Eileen Myles

Uppity

Roads around mountains
cause we can't drive
through

That's Poetry
to Me.

Eileen Myles