Jeanne Robert Foster
- poems -

Publication Date:
2012

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive
Jeanne Robert Foster (1879 - 1970)

Jeanne Robert Foster was an American poet from the Adirondack Mountains. She was born Julia Elizabeth Oliver in Johnsburg, New York.

In 1896 she married Matlock Foster, and lived in Rochester, New York. She studied drama at the Stanhope-Wheatcroft Dramatic School, and worked in magazine journalism. She became a leading fashion model. The couple then moved to Boston; she continued to work as a journalist there and in New York, becoming literary editor of the American Review of Reviews.

In 1916 she began to publish narrative verse about the Adirondacks. From this period she travelled in Europe, met important figures of modernism, and cooperated with the collector John Quinn in building up his contemporary art collection. After Quinn's death in 1924 Jeanne helped prepare the collection of his letters that became the John Quinn Memorial Collection at the New York Public Library. The collection includes an extensive correspondence with Joseph Conrad.

In 1932 she moved to Schenectady, where she worked as a social worker.


She is buried near her friend John Butler Yeats, the painter and father of William Butler Yeats, in the Chestertown Rural Cemetery in the Adirondacks. Her own papers can be found in the Jeanne R. Foster-William M. Murphy Collection at the New York Public Library and at Harvard University’s Houghton Library, which holds her correspondence with poet and author Ezra Pound.
The Bitter Herb

O bitter herb, Forgetfulness,
I search for you in vain;
You are the only growing thing
Can take away my pain.

When I was young, this bitter herb
Grew wild on every hill;
I should have plucked a store of it,
And kept it by me still.

I hunt through all the meadows
Where once I wandered free,
But the rare herb, Forgetfulness,
It hides away from me.

O bitter herb, Forgetfulness,
Where is your drowsy breath?
Oh, can it be your seed has blown
Far as the Vales of Death?

Jeanne Robert Foster
The William P. Frye

I saw her first abreast the Boston Light
At anchor; she had just come in, turned head,
And sent her hawsers creaking, clattering down.
I was so near to where the hawse-pipes fed
The cable out from her careening bow,
I moved upon the swell, shut steam and lay
Hove to in my old launch to look at her.
She'd come in light, a-skimming up the Bay
Like a white ghost with topsails bellying full;
And all her noble lines from bow to stern
Made music in the wind; it seemed she rode
The morning air like those thin clouds that turn
Into tall ships when sunrise lifts the clouds
From calm sea-courses.

There in smoke-smudged coats,
Lay funnelled liners, dirty fishing-craft,
Blunt cargo-luggers, tugs, and ferry-boats.
Oh, it was good in that black-scuttled lot
To see the Frye come lording on her way
Like some old queen that we had half forgot
Come to her own. A little up the Bay
The Fort lay green, for it was springtime then;
The wind was fresh, rich with the spicy bloom
Of the New England coast that tardily
Escapes, late April, from an icy tomb.
The State-house glittered on old Beacon Hill,
Gold in the sun. . . . 'Twas all so fair awhile;
But she was fairest - this great square-rigged ship
That had blown in from some far happy isle
On from the shores of the Hesperides.

They caught her in a South Atlantic road
Becalmed, and found her hold brimmed up with wheat;
'Wheat's contraband,' they said, and blew her hull
To pieces, murdered one of our staunch fleet,
Fast dwindling, of the big old sailing ships
That carry trade for us on the high sea
And warped out of each harbor in the States.
It wasn't law, so it seems strange to me -
A big mistake. Her keel's struck bottom now
And her four masts sunk fathoms, fathoms deep
To Davy Jones. The dank seaweed will root
On her oozed decks, and the cross-surges sweep
Through the set sails; but never, never more
Her crew will stand away to brace and trim,
Nor sea-blown petrels meet her thrashing up
To windward on the Gulf-Stream's stormy rim;
Never again she'll head a no'theast gale
Or like a spirit loom up, sliding dumb,
And ride in safe beyond the Boston Light,
To make the harbor glad because she's home.

Jeanne Robert Foster