

Classic Poetry Series

Erica Jong

- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

After the Earthquake

After the first astounding rush,
after the weeks at the lake,
the crystal, the clouds, the water lapping the rocks,
the snow breaking under our boots like skin,
& the long mornings in bed. . .

After the tangos in the kitchen,
& our eyes fixed on each other at dinner,
as if we would eat with our lids,
as if we would swallow each other. . .

I find you still
here beside me in bed,
(while my pen scratches the pad
& your skin glows as you read)
& my whole life so mellowed & changed

that at times I cannot remember
the crimp in my heart that brought me to you,
the pain of a marriage like an old ache,
a husband like an arthritic knuckle.

Here, living with you,
love is still the only subject that matters.
I open to you like a flowering wound,
or a trough in the sea filled with dreaming fish,
or a steaming chasm of earth
split by a major quake.

You changed the topography.
Where valleys were,
there are now mountains.
Where deserts were,
there now are seas.

We rub each other,
but we do not wear away.

The sand gets finer
& our skins turn silk.

Erica Jong

Autobiographical

The lover in these poems
is me;
the doctor,
Love.
He appears
as husband, lover
analyst & muse,
as father, son
& maybe even God
& surely death.

All this is true.

The man you turn to
in the dark
is many men.

This is an open secret
women share
& yet agree to hide
as if
they might then
hide it from themselves.

I will not hide.

I write in the nude.
I name names.
I am I.
The doctor's name is Love.

Erica Jong

Autumn Perspective

Now, moving in, cartons on the floor,
the radio playing to bare walls,
picture hooks left stranded
in the unsoiled squares where paintings were,
and something reminding us
this is like all other moving days;
finding the dirty ends of someone else's life,
hair fallen in the sink, a peach pit,
and burned-out matches in the corner;
things not preserved, yet never swept away
like fragments of disturbing dreams
we stumble on all day. . .
in ordering our lives, we will discard them,
scrub clean the floorboards of this our home
lest refuse from the lives we did not lead
become, in some strange, frightening way, our own.
And we have plans that will not tolerate
our fears-- a year laid out like rooms
in a new house--the dusty wine glasses
rinsed off, the vases filled, and bookshelves
sagging with heavy winter books.
Seeing the room always as it will be,
we are content to dust and wait.
We will return here from the dark and silent
streets, arms full of books and food,
anxious as we always are in winter,
and looking for the Good Life we have made.

I see myself then: tense, solemn,
in high-heeled shoes that pinch,
not basking in the light of goals fulfilled,
but looking back to now and seeing
a lazy, sunburned, sandaled girl
in a bare room, full of promise
and feeling envious.

Now we plan, postponing, pushing our lives forward
into the future--as if, when the room
contains us and all our treasured junk
we will have filled whatever gap it is
that makes us wander, discontented
from ourselves.

The room will not change:
a rug, or armchair, or new coat of paint
won't make much difference;
our eyes are fickle
but we remain the same beneath our suntans,
pale, frightened,
dreaming ourselves backward and forward in time,
dreaming our dreaming selves.

I look forward and see myself looking back.

Erica Jong

Beast, Book, Body

I was sick of being a woman,
sick of the pain,
the irrelevant detail of sex,
my own concavity
uselessly hungering
and emptier whenever it was filled,
and filled finally
by its own emptiness,
seeking the garden of solitude
instead of men.

The white bed
in the green garden--
I looked forward
to sleeping alone
the way some long
for a lover.

Even when you arrived,
I tried to beat you
away with my sadness,
my cynical seductions,
and my trick of
turning a slave
into a master.

And all because
you made
my fingertips ache
and my eyes cross
in passion
that did not know its own name.

Bear, beast, lover
of the book of my body,
you turned my pages
and discovered
what was there
to be written
on the other side.

And now
I am blank
for you,
a tabula rasa
ready to be printed
with letters
in an undiscovered language
by the great press
of our love.

Erica Jong

Climbing You

I want to understand the steep thing
that climbs ladders in your throat.
I can't make sense of you.
Everywhere I look you're there--
a vast landmark, a volcano
poking its head through the clouds,
Gulliver sprawled across Lilliput.

I climb into your eyes, looking.
The pupils are black painted stage flats.
They can be pulled down like window shades.
I switch on a light in your iris.
Your brain ticks like a bomb.

In your offhand, mocking way
you've invited me into your chest.
Inside: the blur that poses as your heart.
I'm supposed to go in with a torch
or maybe hot water bottles
& defrost it by hand
as one defrosts an old refrigerator.
It will shudder & sigh
(the icebox to the insomniac).

Oh there's nothing like love between us.
You're the mountain, I am climbing you.
If I fall, you won't be all to blame,
but you'll wait years maybe
for the next doomed expedition.

Erica Jong

Colder

*He was six foot four, and forty-six
and even colder than he thought he was*
James Thurber, The Thirteen Clocks

Not that I cared about the other woman.
Those perfumed breasts with hearts
of pure rock salt.
Lot's wives-
all of them.

I didn't care
if they fondled him at parties,
eased him in at home
between a husband & a child,
sucked him dry
with vacuum cleaner kisses.

It was the coldness that I minded,
though he's warned me.
"I'm cold," He said- (as if that helped any).
But he was colder
than he thought he was.

Cold sex.
A woman has to die
& be exhumed
four times a week
to know the meaning of it.

His hips are razors
his pelvic bones are knives,
even his elbows could cut butter.

Cold flows from his mouth
like a cloud of carbon dioxide.
His penis is pure dry ice
which turns to smoke.
His face hands over my face-
An ice carving.

One of these days
he'll shatter
or
he'll melt.

Erica Jong

Dear Colette

Dear Colette,
I want to write to you
about being a woman
for that is what you write to me.

I want to tell you how your face
enduring after thirty, forty, fifty. . .
hangs above my desk
like my own muse.

I want to tell you how your hands
reach out from your books
& seize my heart.

I want to tell you how your hair
electrifies my thoughts
like my own halo.

I want to tell you how your eyes
penetrate my fear
& make it melt.

I want to tell you
simply that I love you--
though you are "dead"
& I am still "alive."

Suicides & spinsters--
all our kind!

Even decorous Jane Austen
never marrying,
& Sappho leaping,
& Sylvia in the oven,
& Anna Wickham, Tsvetaeva, Sara Teasdale,
& pale Virginia floating like Ophelia,
& Emily alone, alone, alone. . . .

But you endure & marry,
go on writing,
lose a husband, gain a husband,
go on writing,
sing & tap dance
& you go on writing,
have a child & still
you go on writing,
love a woman, love a man
& go on writing.
You endure your writing
& your life.

Dear Colette,

I only want to thank you:

for your eyes ringed
with bluest paint like bruises,
for your hair gathering sparks
like brush fire,
for your hands which never willingly
let go,
for your years, your child, your lovers,
all your books. . . .

Dear Colette,
you hold me
to this life.

Erica Jong

Flying at Forty

You call me
courageous,
I who grew up
gnawing on books,
as some kids
gnaw
on bubble gum,

who married disastrously
not once
but three times,
yet have a lovely daughter
I would not undo
for all the dope
in California.

Fear was my element,
fear my contagion.
I swam in it
till I became
immune.
The plane takes off
& I laugh aloud.
Call me courageous.

I am still alive.

Erica Jong

For an Earth-Landing

the sky sinks its blue teeth
into the mountains.

Rising on pure will

(the lurch & lift-off,
the sudden swing
into wide, white snow),

I encourage the cable.

Past the wind
& crossed tips of my skis
& the mauve shadows of pines
& the spoor of bears
& deer,

I speak to my fear,

rising, riding,
finding myself

the only thing
between snow & sky,

the link
that holds it all together.

Halfway up the wire,
we stop,
slide back a little
(a whirr of pulleys).

Astronauts circle above us today
in the television blue of space.

But the thin withers of alps
are waiting to take us too,
& this might be the moon!

We move!

Friends, this is a toy
merely for reaching mountains

merely
for skiing down.

& now we're dangling
like charms on the same bracelet

or upsidedown tightrope people

(a colossal circus!)

or absurd winged walkers,
angels in animal fur,

with mittened hands waving
& fear turning

& the mountain
like a fisherman,

reeling us all in.

So we land
on the windy peak,
touch skis to snow,
are married to our purple shadows,
& ski back down
to the unimaginable valley

leaving no footprints.

Erica Jong

Henry James in the Heart of the City

<i>We have a small sculpture of Henry James on our terrace in New York City.</i>

Nothing would surprise him.
The beast in the jungle was what he saw--
Edith Wharton's obfuscating older brother. . .

He fled the demons
of Manhattan
for fear they would devour
his inner ones
(the ones who wrote the books)
& silence the stifled screams
of his protagonists.

To Europe
like a wandering Jew--
WASP that he was--
but with the Jew's
outsider's hunger. . .

face pressed up
to the glass of sex
refusing every passion
but the passion to write
the words grew
more & more complex
& convoluted
until they utterly imprisoned him
in their fairytale brambles.

Language for me
is meant to be
a transparency,
clear water gleaming
under a covered bridge. . .
I love his spiritual sister
because she snatched clarity
from her murky history.

Tormented New Yorkers both,
but she journeyed
to the heart of light--
did he?

She took her friends on one last voyage,
through the isles of Greece
on a yacht chartered with her royalties--
a rich girl proud to be making her own money.

The light of the Middle Sea
was what she sought.
All denizens

of this demonic city caught
between pitch and black
long for the light.

But she found it
in a few of her books. . .
while Henry James
discovered
what he had probably
started with:
that beast, that jungle,
that solipsistic scream.

He did not join her
on that final cruise.
(He was on his own final cruise).
Did he want to?
I would wager yes.

I look back with love and sorrow
at them both--
dear teachers--
but she shines like Miss Liberty
to Emma Lazarus' hordes,
while he gazes within,
always, at his own
impenetrable jungle.

Erica Jong

Letter to My Lover After Seven Years

You gave me the child
that seamed my belly
& stitched up my life.

You gave me: one book of love poems,
five years of peace
& two of pain.

You gave me darkness, light, laughter
& the certain knowledge
that we someday die.

You gave me seven years
during which the cells of my body
died & were reborn.

Now we have died
into the limbo of lost loves,
that wreckage of memories
tarnishing with time,
that litany of losses
which grows longer with the years,
as more of our friends
descend underground
& the list of our loved dead
outstrips the list of the living.

Knowing as we do
our certain doom,
knowing as we do
the rarity of the gifts we gave
& received,
can we redeem
our love from the limbo,
dust it off like a fine sea trunk
found in an attic
& now more valuable
for its age & rarity
than a shining new one?

Probably not.
This page is spattered
with tears that streak the words
lose, losses, limbo.

I stand on a ledge in hell
still howling for our love

Erica Jong

LoveSpell: Against Endings

All the endings in my life
rise up against me
like that sea of troubles
Shakespeare mixed
with metaphors;
like Vikings in their boats
singing Wagner,
like witches
burning at
the stake--
I submit
to my fate.

I know beginnings,
their sweetnesses,
and endings,
their bitternesses--
but I do not know
continuance--
I do not know
the sweet demi-boredom
of life as it lingers,
of man and wife
regarding each other
across a table of shared witnesses,
of the hand-in-hand dreams
of those who have slept
a half-century together
in a bed so used and familiar
it is rutted
with love.

I would know that
before this life closes,
a soulmate to share my roses--
I would make a spell
with long grey beard hairs
and powdered rosemary and rue,
with the jacket of a tux
for a tall man
with broad shoulders,
who loves to dance;
with one blue contact lens
for his bluest eyes;
with honey in a jar
for his love of me;
with salt in a dish
for his love of sex and skin;
with crushed rose petals
for our bed;
with tubes of cerulean blue
and vermilion and rose madder

for his artist's eye;
with a dented Land-Rover fender
for his love of travel;
with a poem by Blake
for his love of innocence
revealed by experience;
with soft rain
and a bare head;
with hand-in-hand dreams on Mondays
and the land of fuck
on Sundays;
with mangoes, papayas
and limes,
and a house towering
above the sea.

Muse, I surrender
to thee.
Thy will be done,
not mine.

If this love spell
pleases you,
send me this lover,
this husband,
this dancing partner
for my empty bed
and let him fill me
from now
until I die.
I offer my bones,
my poems,
my luck with roses,
and the secret garden
I have found
walled in my center,
and the sunflower
who raises her head
despite her heavy seeds.

I am ready now, Muse,
to serve you faithfully
even with
a graceful dancing partner--
for I have learned
to stand alone.

Give me your blessing.
Let the next
epithalamion I write
be my own.
And let it last

more than the years
of my life--
and without the least
strain--
two lovers bareheaded
in a summer rain.

Erica Jong

Middle Aged Lovers, II

You open to me
a little,
then grow afraid
and close again,
a small boy
fearing to be hurt,
a toe stubbed
in the dark,
a finger cut
on paper.

I think I am free
of fears,
enraptured, abandoned
to the call
of the Bacchae,
my own siren,
tied to my own
mast,
both Circe
and her swine.

But I too
am afraid:
I know where
life leads.

The impulse
to join,
to confess all,
is followed
by the impulse
to renounce,

and love--
imperishable love--
must die,
in order
to be reborn.

We come
to each other
tentatively,
veterans of other
wars,
divorce warrants
in our hands
which we would beat
into blossoms.

But blossoms
will not withstand

our beatings.

We come
to each other
with hope
in our hands--
the very thing
Pandora kept
in her casket
when all the ills
and woes of the world
escaped.

Erica Jong

Narcissus, Photographer

*"...a frozen memory, like any photo,
where nothing is missing, not even,
and especially, nothingness..."*
-- Julio Cortázar, "Blow Up"

Mirror-mad,
he photographed reflections:
sunstorms in puddles,
cities in canals,

double portraits framed
in sunglasses,
the fat phantoms who dance
on the flanks of cars.

Nothing caught his eye
unless it bent
or glistered
over something else.

He trapped clouds in bottles
the way kids
trap grasshoppers.
Then one misty day

he was stopped
by the windshield.
Behind him,
an avenue of trees,

before him,
the mirror of that scene.
He seemed to enter
what, in fact, he left.

Erica Jong

Nursing You

On the first night
of the full moon,
the primeval sack of ocean
broke,
& I gave birth to you
little woman,
little carrot top,
little turned-up nose,
pushing you out of myself
as my mother
pushed
me out of herself,
as her mother did,
& her mother's mother before her,
all of us born
of woman.

I am the second daughter
of a second daughter
of a second daughter,
but you shall be the first.
You shall see the phrase
"second sex"
only in puzzlement,
wondering how anyone,
except a madman,
could call you "second"
when you are so splendidly
first,
conferring even on your mother
firstness, vastness, fullness
as the moon at its fullest
lights up the sky.

Now the moon is full again
& you are four weeks old.
Little lion, lioness,
yowling for my breasts,
rowling at the moon,
how I love your lustiness,
your red face demanding,
your hungry mouth howling,
your screams, your cries
which all spell life
in large letters
the color of blood.

You are born a woman
for the sheer glory of it,
little redhead, beautiful screamer.
You are no second sex,
but the first of the first;

& when the moon's phases
fill out the cycle
of your life,
you will crow
for the joy
of being a woman,
telling the pallid moon
to go drown herself
in the blue ocean,
& glorying, glorying, glorying
in the rosy wonder
of your sunshining wondrous
self.

Erica Jong

Ordinary Miracles

Spring, rainbows,
ordinary miracles
about which
nothing new can be said.

The stars on a clear night
of a New England winter;
the soft air of the islands
along the old
Spanish Main;
pirate gold shining
in the palm;
the odor of roses
to the lover's nose. . .

There is no more poetry
to be written
of these things.
The rainbow's sudden revelation--
behold!
The cliché is true!
What can one say
but that?

So too
with you, little heart,
little miracle,

but you are
no less miracle
for being ordinary.

Erica Jong

Parable Of The Four-Poster

Because she wants to touch him,
she moves away.
Because she wants to talk to him,
she keeps silent.
Because she wants to kiss him,
she turns away
& kisses a man she does not want to kiss.

He watches
thinking she does not want him.
He listens
hearing her silence.
He turns away
thinking her distant
& kisses a girl he does not want to kiss.

They marry each other -
A four-way mistake.
He goes to bed with his wife
thinking of her.
She goes to bed with her husband
thinking of him.
-& all this in a real old-fashioned four-poster bed.

Do they live unhappily ever after?
Of course.
Do they undo their mistakes?
Never.
Who is the victim here?
Love is the victim.
Who is the villain?
Love that never dies.

Erica Jong

Penis Envy

I envy men who can yearn
with infinite emptiness
toward the body of a woman,

hoping that the yearning
will make a child,
that the emptiness itself
will fertilize the darkness.

Women have no illusions about this,
being at once
houses, tunnels,
cups & cupbearers,
knowing emptiness as a temporary state
between two fullnesses,
& seeing no romance in it.

If I were a man
doomed to that infinite emptiness,
& having no choice in the matter,
I would, like the rest, no doubt,
find a woman
& christen her moonbelly,
madonna, gold-haired goddess
& make her the tent of my longing,
the silk parachute of my lust,
the blue-eyed icon of my sacred sexual itch,
the mother of my hunger.

But since I am a woman,
I must not only inspire the poem
but also type it,
not only conceive the child
but also bear it,
not only bear the child
but also bathe it,
not only bathe the child
but also feed it,
not only feed the child
but also carry it
everywhere, evertwhere...

while men write poems
on the mysteries of motherhood.

I envy men who can yearn
with infinite emptiness

Erica Jong

People Who Live

People who live by the sea
understand eternity.
They copy the curves of the waves,
their hearts beat with the tides,
& the saltiness of their blood
corresponds with the sea.

They know that the house of flesh
is only a sandcastle
built on the shore,
that skin breaks
under the waves
like sand under the soles
of the first walker on the beach
when the tide recedes.

Each of us walks there once,
watching the bubbles
rise up through the sand
like ascending souls,
tracing the line of the foam,
drawing our index fingers
along the horizon
pointing home.

Erica Jong

Smoke

Smoke, it is all smoke
in the throat of eternity. . . .
For centuries, the air was full of witches
Whistling up chimneys
on their spiky brooms
cackling or singing more sweetly than Circe,
as they flew over rooftops
blessing & cursing their
kind.

We banished & burned them
making them smoke in the throat of god;
we declared ourselves
"enlightened."
"The dark age of horrors is past,"
said my mother to me in 1952,
seven years after our people went up in smoke,
leaving a few teeth, a pile of bones.

The smoke curls and beckons.
It is blue & lavender
& green as the undersea world.
It will take us, too.

O let us not go sheepishly
clinging to our nakedness.
But let us go like witches sucked heavenward
by the Goddess' powerful breath
& whistling, whistling, whistling
on our beautiful brooms.

Erica Jong

Sunday Afternoons

I sit at home
at my desk alone
as I used to do
on many sunday afternoons
when you came back to me,
your arms ached for me,
and your arms would close me in
though they smelled of other women.

I think of you
on Sunday afternoons.

Your sweet head would bow,
like a child somehow,
down to me -
and your hair and your eyes were wild.

We would embrace on the floor-
You see my back's still sore.
You knew how easily I bruised,
It's a soreness I would never lose.

I think of you
on Sunday afternoons.

Erica Jong

The Artist as an Old Man

If you ask him he will talk for hours--
how at fourteen he hammered signs, fingers
raw with cold, and later painted bowers
in ladies' boudoirs; how he played checkers
for two weeks in jail, and lived on dark bread;
how he fled the border to a country
which disappeared wars ago; unfriended
crossed a continent while this century
began. He seldom speaks of painting now.
Young men have time and theories; old men work.
He has painted countless portraits. Sallow
nameless faces, made glistening in oil, smirk
above anonymous mantelpieces.
The turpentine has a familiar smell,
but his hand trembles with odd, new palsies.
Perched on the maulstick, it nears the easel.

He has come to like his resignation.
In his sketch books, ink-dark cossacks hear
the snorts of horses in the crunch of snow.
His pen alone recalls that years ago,
one horseman set his teeth and aimed his spear
which, poised, seemed pointed straight to pierce the sun.

Erica Jong

The End of the World

Here, at the end of the world,
the flowers bleed
as if they were hearts,
the hearts ooze a darkness
like india ink,
& poets dip their pens in
& they write.

"Here, at the end of the world,"
they write,
not knowing what it means.
"Here, where the sky nurses on black milk,
where the smokestack feed the sky,
where the trees tremble in terror
& people come to resemble them. . . ."

Here, at the end of the world,
the poets are bleeding.
Writing & bleeding
are thought to be the same;
singing & bleeding
are thought to be the same.

Write us a letter!
Send us a parcel of food!
Comfort us with proverbs or candied fruit,
with talk of one God.
Distract us with theories of art
no one can prove.

Here at the end of the world
our heads are empty,
& the wind walks through them
like ghosts
through a haunted house.

Erica Jong

The Poem Cat

Sometimes the poem
doesn't want to come;
it hides from the poet
like a playful cat
who has run
under the house
& lurks among slugs,
roots, spiders' eyes,
ledge so long out of the sun
that it is dank
with the breath of the Troll King.

Sometimes the poem
darts away
like a coy lover
who is afraid of being possessed,
of feeling too much,
of losing his essential
loneliness-which he calls
freedom.

Sometimes the poem
can't requite
the poet's passion.

The poem is a dance
between poet & poem,
but sometimes the poem
just won't dance
and lurks on the sidelines
tapping its feet-
iamb, trochee-
out of step with the music
of your mariachi band.

If the poem won't come,
I say: sneak up on it.
Pretend you don't care.
Sit in your chair
reading Shakespeare, Neruda,
immortal Emily
and let yourself flow
into their music.

Go to the kitchen
and start peeling onions
for homemade sugo.

Before you know it,
the poem will be crying
as your ripe tomatoes
bubble away

with inspiration.

When the whole house is filled
with the tender tomato aroma,
start kneading the pasta.

As you rock
over the damp sensuous dough,
making it bend to your will,
as you make love to this manna
of flour and water,
the poem will get hungry
and come
just like a cat
coming home
when you least
expect her.

Erica Jong

The Poet Fears Failure

The poet fears failure
& so she says
"Hold on pen--
what if the critics
hate me?"
& with that question
she blots out more lines
than any critic could.

The critic is only doing his job:
keeping the poet lonely.
He barks
like a dog at the door
when the master comes home.

It's in his doggy nature.
If he didn't know the poet
for the boss,
he wouldn't bark so loud.

& the poet?
It's in her nature
to fear failure
but not to let that fear
blot out

her lines.

Erica Jong

The Poet Says 'Never'

Fuck the future.
-- Margaret Atwood

I read my poems
to you.

The most frequent
word
in them
is: 'never'

Never, never, never, never, never.
I am younger
than King Lear
yet already share
his philosophy.

& what are
all these 'nevers'?
Protective magic?
A secret way
of saying
'always'?
A wish
to make you
fill me up
with promises
of love?

Teleological wretch
that I am--
I want to say
'always,'
so I say
'never.'

Always
is never
forever.

In the beginning
is
the end.

But in
the end
is also
the beginning.

We live
balanced
on a ledge

called 'now,'
over
a chasm
called 'then,'
below
a sky
called 'when.'

When will
'when' come?

We hope
soon.

Meanwhile
we fiddle with our
nevers--
never believing
for a second
that denying
our wish
for permanent,
possible
love
will work.

Endings
will come
when they must--
or not.

& all our nevers
will not drain them
of their
sharp, peculiar
pain--
nor drain
beginnings
of their special, heedless
joy.

The bridge
between
these curious two
is: 'never.'

The poet walks
this bridge.

She whistles
in the dark.

Erica Jong

To My Brother Poet, Seeking Peace

People wish to be settled. Only as long as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.

-- Thoreau

My life has been
the instrument
for a mouth
I have never seen,
breathing wind
which comes
from I know not
where,
arranging and changing
my moods,
so as to make
an opening
for his voice.

Or hers.
Muse, White Goddess
mother with invisible
milk,
androgynous god
in whose grip
I struggle,
turning this way and that,
believing that I chart
my life,
my loves,
when in fact
it is she, he,
who charts them--
all for the sake
of some
as yet unwritten poem.

Twisting in the wind,
twisting like a pirate
dangling in a cage
from a high seawall,
the wind whips
through my bones
making an instrument,
my back a xylophone,
my sex a triangle
chiming,
my lips stretched tight
as drumskins,

I no longer care
who is playing me,
but fear

makes the hairs
stand up
on the backs
of my hands
when I think
that she may stop.

And yet I long
for peace
as fervently as you do--
the sweet connubial bliss
that admits no
turbulence,
the settled life
that defeats poetry,
the hearth before which
children play--
not poets' children,
ragtag, neurotic, demon-ridden,
but the apple-cheeked children
of the bourgeoisie.

My daughter dreams
of peace
as I do:
marriage, proper house,
proper husband,
nourishing dreamless
sex,
love like a hot toddy,
or an apple pie.

But the muse
has other plans
for me
and you.

Puppet mistress,
dangling us
on this dark proscenium,
pulling our strings,
blowing us
toward Cornwall,
toward Venice, toward Delphi,
toward some lurching
counterpane,
a tent upheld
by one throbbing
blood-drenched pole--
her pen, her pencil,
the monolith
we worship,

underneath
the gleaming moon.

Erica Jong

To Whom It May Concern

In Autumn,
as in Spring,
the sap flows,
the sap wishes to race
against heartbeats
before the winter,
before the winter
buries us
in her usual shroud of ice.

I turn to you
knowing that
unrequited love
is good
for poetry,
knowing that pain
will nudge the muse
as well as anything,
knowing that you
are afraid, fettered
to a life
you do not love,
& so unfree
that freedom seems
more fearful even
than the familiar
business
of being
a grumbling slave.

I lived
that way
once,
& I know
that freedom
is its own reward,
that it propagates
itself
by means
of runners,

that nobody
gives it to you,
not even me
to you,

but that you
must seize it
with your own
two quaking hands
& pluck
the strawberry

it bears
in the green
ungrumbling

Spring.

Erica Jong

We Learned

The decorum of fire...
-- Pablo Neruda

We learned the decorum of fire,
the flame's curious symmetry,
the blue heat at the center of the thighs,
the flickering red of the hips,
& the tallow gold of the breasts
lit from within
by the lantern in the ribs.

You tear yourself out of me
like a branch that longs to be grafted
onto a fruit tree,
peach & pear
crossed with each other,
fig & banana served on one plate,
the leaf & the luminous snail
that clings to it.

We learned that the tearing
could be a joining,
that the fire's flickering
could be a kindling,
that the old decorum of love--
to die into the poem,
leaving the lover lonely with her pen--
was all an ancient lie.

So we banished the evil eye:
you have to be unhappy to create;
you have to let love die before it writes;
you have to lose the joy to have the poem--
& we re-wrote our lives with fire.

See this manuscript covered
with flesh-colored words?
It was written in invisible ink
& held up to our flame.

The words darkened on the page
as we sank into each other.

We are ink & blood
& all things that make stains.
We turn each other golden as we turn,
browning each other's skins like suns.

Hold me up to the light;
you will see poems.

Hold me in the dark;

you will see light.

Erica Jong

Wrinkles

For Naomi Lazard

Sometimes I can't wait until I look like Nadezhda Mandelstam.
-- Naomi Lazard

My friends are tired.
The ones who are married are tired
of being married.
The ones who are single are tired
of being single.

They look at their wrinkles.
The ones who are single attribute their wrinkles
to being single.
The ones who are married attribute their wrinkles
to being married.

They have very few wrinkles.
Even taken together,
they have very few wrinkles.
But I cannot persuade them
to look at their wrinkles
collectively.
& I cannot persuade them that being married
or being single
has nothing to do with wrinkles.

Each one sees a deep & bitter groove,
a San Andreas fault across her forehead.
"It is only a matter of time
before the earthquake."
They trade the names of plastic surgeons
like recipes.

My friends are tired.
The ones who have children are tired
of having children.
The ones who are childless are tired
of being childless.

They love their wrinkles.
If only their were deeper
they could hide.

Sometimes I think
(but do not dare to tell them)
that when the face is left alone to dig its grave,
the soul is grateful
& rolls in.

Erica Jong