

Classic Poetry Series

Erica Jong
- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Erica Jong(26 March 1942)

Erica Jong is an American author and teacher best known for her fiction and poetry.

Career

A 1963 graduate of Barnard College, and with an M.A. in 18th century English Literature from Columbia University (1965), Jong is best known for her first novel, *Fear of Flying* (1973), which created a sensation with its frank treatment of a woman's sexual desires. Although it contains many sexual elements, the book is mainly the account of a young, hypersensitive woman, in her late twenties, trying to find who she is and where she is going. It contains many psychological, humorous, descriptive elements, and rich cultural and literary references. The book tries to answer the many conflicts arising in women in today's world, of womanhood, femininity, love, one's quest for freedom and purpose.

Personal Life

Jong was born and grew up in New York City. She is the middle daughter of Seymour Mann (né Nathan Weisman, died 2004), a drummer turned businessman of Polish Jewish ancestry who owned a gifts and home accessories company known as "one of the world's most acclaimed makers of collectible porcelain dolls". Born in England of a Russian immigrant family, her mother, Eda Mirsky (born 1911), was a painter and textile designer who also designed dolls for her husband's company. Jong has an elder sister, Suzanna, who married Lebanese businessman Arthur Daou, and a younger sister, Claudia, a social worker who married Gideon S. Oberweger (the chief executive officer of Seymour Mann Inc. until his death in 2006). Among her nephews is Peter Daou, who writes "The Daou Report" for and was one-half of the dance-music group The Daou.

Jong has been married four times. Her first two marriages, to college sweetheart Michael Werthman and to Allan Jong, a Chinese American psychiatrist, share many similarities to those of the narrator described in *Fear of Flying*. [citation needed] Her third husband was Jonathan Fast, a novelist and social work educator, and son of novelist Howard Fast (this marriage was described in *How to Save Your Own Life and Parachutes and Kisses*). She has a daughter from her third marriage, Molly Jong-Fast. Jong is now married to Kenneth David Burrows, a New York litigation attorney. In the late 1990s Jong wrote an article about her

current marriage in the magazine *Talk*.

Jong lived for three years, 1966–69, in Heidelberg, Germany, with her second husband, while he was stationed at an army base there. She was a frequent visitor to Venice, and wrote about that city in her novel, *Shylock's Daughter*. Jong is mentioned in the Bob Dylan song "Highlands."

In 2007, her literary archive was acquired by Columbia University in New York City.

Awards

Poetry Magazine's Bess Hokin Prize (1971)

Sigmund Freud Award For Literature (1975)

United Nations Award For Excellence In Literature (1998)

Deauville Award For Literary Excellence In France

A Bespectacled Artist Called Lear

A bespectacled artist called Lear
First perfected this smile in a sneer.
He was clever and witty;
He gave life to this ditty -
That original author called Lear.

Erica Jong

A Reading

The old poet
with his face full of lines,
with iambs jumping in his hair like fleas,
with all the revisions of his body
unsaying him,
walks to the podium.

He is about to tell us
how he came to this.

Erica Jong

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

Alcestis On The Poetry Circuit

(In Memoriam Marina Tsvetayeva, Anna Wickham, Sylvia Plath, Shakespeare's sister, etc., etc.)

The best slave
does not need to be beaten.
She beats herself.

Not with a leather whip,
or with stick or twigs,
not with a blackjack
or a billyclub,
but with the fine whip
of her own tongue
& the subtle beating
of her mind
against her mind.

For who can hate her half so well
as she hates herself?
& who can match the finesse
of her self-abuse?

Years of training
are required for this.
Twenty years
of subtle self-indulgence,
self-denial;
until the subject
thinks herself a queen
& yet a beggar -
both at the same time.
She must doubt herself
in everything but love.

She must choose passionately
& badly.
She must feel lost as a dog
without her master.
She must refer all moral questions

to her mirror.
She must fall in love with a cossack
or a poet.

She must never go out of the house
unless veiled in paint.
She must wear tight shoes
so she always remembers her bondage.
She must never forget
she is rooted in the ground.

Though she is quick to learn
& admittedly clever,
her natural doubt of herself
should make her so weak
that she dabbles brilliantly
in half a dozen talents
& thus embellishes
but does not change
our life.

If she's an artist
& comes close to genius,
the very fact of her gift
should cause her such pain
that she will take her own life
rather than best us.

& after she dies, we will cry
& make her a saint.

Erica Jong

Another Language

The whole world is flat
& I am round.
Even women avert their eyes,
& men, embarrassed
by the messy way
that life turns into life,
look away,
forgetting they themselves
were once this roundness
underneath the heart,
this helpless fish
swimming in eternity.

The sound of O,
not the sound of I
embarrasses the world.
My friends, who voluntarily have made
their bodies flat,
their writings flat as grief,
look at me in disbelief.
What is this large unseemly thing-
a pregnant poet?
an enormous walking O?
Oh take all the letters of the alphabet but that!
We speak the Esperanto of the flat!

Condemned to sign
language & silence, pregnant poems
for men to snicker at,
for women to denounce,
I live alone.
My world is round
& bounded by the mountain of my fear;
while all the great geographers agree
the world is flat
& roundness cannot be.

Erica Jong

Anti-Conception

Could I unthink you,
little heart,
what would I do?
throw you out
with last night's garbage,
undo my own decisions,
my own flesh
& commit you to the void
again?

Fortunately,
it is not my problem.
You hold on, beating
like a little clock,
Swiss in your precision,
Japanese in your tenacity,
& already having
your own karma,

while I, with my half-
hearted maternal urges,
my uncertainty that any creature
ever really creates
another (unless it be
herself) know you
as God's poem
& myself merely as publisher,
as midwife,
as impresario,
oh, even, if you will,
as loathèd producer
of your Grand Spectacle:
you are the star,
& like your humblest fan,
I wonder
(gazing at your image
on the screen)
who you really are.

Anti-Matter

I am not interested
in my body-
the part that stinks
& rots & brings forth
life,
the part that the ground
swallows,
death giving birth
to death-
all of life,
considered
from the body's
point of view,
is a downhill slide
& all our small
preservatives
& griefs
cannot reverse the trend.

All sensualists
turn puritan
at the end-
turning up lust's soil
& finding bones
beneath the rich volcanic
dirt.

Some sleep in shrouds
& some in coffins;
some swear off
procreation, others turn
vegetarian, or worse:
they live on air-
on sheer platonic meals
of pure ideas;
once gluttons of the flesh,
they now become
gourmets of the mind.
How to resist that

when the spacious earth
swallows her children
so insatiably,
when all our space-age gods
are grounded,
& only the moan of pleasure
or the rasp of pain
can ever satisfy
the body's appetite?

& yet my body,
in its dubious wisdom,
led to yours;
& you may
puzzle out
this mystery in your turn.
Choose mind, choose body,
choose to wed the two;
many have tried
but few have done the deed.

Through you, perhaps,
I may at last succeed.

Erica Jong

At The Edge Of The Body

At the edge of the body
there is said to be
a flaming halo-
yellow, red, blue
or pure white,
taking its color
from the state
of the soul.

Cynics scoff.
Scientists make graphs
to refute it.
Editorial writers,
journalists, & even
certain poets,
claim it is only mirage,
trumped-up finery,
illusory feathers,
spiritual shenanigans,
humbug.

But in dreams
we see it,
& sometimes even waking.
If the spirit is a bride
about to be married to God,
this is her veil.

Do I believe it?
Do I squint
& regard the perimeter
of my lover's body,
searching for some sign
that his soul
is about to ignite
the sky?

Without squinting,
I almost see it.

An angry red aura
changing to white,
the color of peace.

I gaze at the place where he turns into air
& the flames of his skin
combine
with the flames of the sky,
proving
the existence
of both.

Erica Jong

At The Museum Of Natural History

The lessons we learned here
(fumbling with our lunchbags,
handkerchiefs
& secret cheeks of bubblegum)

were graver than any
in the schoolroom:
the dangers of a life
frozen into poses.

Trilobites in their
petrified ghettos,
lumbering dinosaurs
who'd outsized themselves

told how nature was
an endless morality play
in which the cockroach
(& all such beadyeyed

exemplars of adjustment)
might well recite the epilogue.
No one was safe
but stagnation was

the surest suicide.
To mankind's Hamlet,
what six-legged creature would play
Fortinbras? It made you scratch

your head & think
for about two minutes.
Going out, I remember
how we stopped to look at
Teddy Roosevelt,
(Soldier, Statesman, Naturalist,
Hunter, Historian,
et cetera, et cetera).

His bronze bulk (four times life size)
bestrode Central Park West
like a colossus.
His monumental horse

snorted towards the park.
Oh, we were full of Evolution & its lessons
When (the girls giggling madly,

the boys blushing) we peeked
between those huge legs to see
those awe-inspiring
Brobdingnagian balls.

Erica Jong

Aura

I sit in the black leather chair
meditating
on the plume of smoke that rises
in the air,
riffing the pages of my life
as if it were a book of poems,
flipping through
past & future.

If I go back, back, back,
riding the plume of smoke,
I find I died
in childbirth in another life,
died by fire in the life before that,
died by water twice, or more.

I pick out days
& relive them
as if I were trying on dresses.

When the future beckons,
I follow,
riding another plume of smoke,
feeling the barrier
between skin & air
evaporate,
& my body disappear
like the myth it is.

My cheeks burn against the air,
flaming where two elements collide
& intermingle
becoming one.

Oh explosion at the body's edge!
I live on a ledge of time,
gazing
at the infinite.

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

Baby Witch

Baby-witch,
my daughter,
my worship of the Goddess
alone
condemns you to the fire. . .

I blow upon
your least fingernail
& it flares cyclamen & rose.
I suck flames from your ears.
I touch your perfect nostrils
& they, too, flame gently
like that pale rose
called 'sweetheart'.

Your eyelids are tender purple
like the base of the flame
before it blues.

O child of fire,
O tiny devotee of the Goddess-

I wished for you
to be born a daughter
though we know
that daughters
cannot but be

born for burning
like the fatal
tree.

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

Because I Would Not Admit

And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.
-William Blake

Because I would not admit
that I had nurtured
an enemy within my breast-

a lover who wanted to gnaw
my secret rose,
a lover who wanted to press me
between the covers of a book,
then burn it,
a lover-usurper who wanted
to take my soul-

I nearly died,
running my car upon rocks
like a badly steered sloop,
crashing into trees
like a hurricane gale,
burning my arms in ovens
(when I thought I was only
baking bread). . . .

To admit the betrayal
was worse than
the fact of betrayal-
for I loved him
as leaves love sun,
turning my face to him,
turning my hips, my womb
to be filled with a dream
of children, a dream of books
& babies sprouting like leaves
from a spring tree,
a dream of trees that leaked blood
instead of sap. . . .

The dream¹s the thing-
the dream we die for,
turning our faces to the sun,
eyes closed, never seeing it has
gone out:
dead star, it blazes coldly
over a dead planet
while we bask in its afterglow,
now remembered in the mind.

He was fond
of stars & telescopes;
fond of machines, fond
of building the most complex
contraptions
to scale the clouds.
But Icarus flies
near the sun with waxen wings,
& does not think of gears
or motors.

Trees rise up at him
as he falls; the earth
rushes to meet him
like a lover
raising her writhing hips;
the wings weep their waxy tears
& fall apart;
the sun is hot
on his face.

But even as he falls
he is in ecstasy;
his sun has not
gone out.

Erica Jong

Becoming A Nun

For Jennifer Josephy

On cold days
it is easy to be reasonable,
to button the mouth against kisses,
dust the breasts
with talcum powder
& forget
the red pulp meat
of the heart.

On those days
it beats
like a digital clock-
not a beat at all
but a steady whirring
chilly as green neon,
luminous as numerals in the dark,
cool as electricity.

& I think:
I can live without it all-
love with its blood pump,
sex with its messy hungers,
men with their peacock strutting,
their silly sexual baggage,
their wet tongues in my ear
& their words like little sugar suckers
with sour centers.

On such days
I am zipped in my body suit,
I am wearing seven league red suede boots,
I am marching over the cobblestones
as if they were the heads of men,

& I am happy
as a seven-year-old virgin
holding Daddy's hand.

Don't touch.
Don't try to tempt me with your ripe persimmons.
Don't threaten me with your volcano.
The sky is clearer when I'm not in heat,
& the poems
are colder.

Erica Jong

Birthdays

Next birthday
I am thirty-six,
& formed (for all intents
& purposes)
in tooth & claw.
Six books
have peeled away
all that I am
& all
that I am not;
I turn back pages now
in history's dog-eared
book, & write
of other lives.

& here you come,
pink as dawn,
rosy as the aurora borealis
blooming over Yorkshire
& the ruined abbeys
of the Lake District,
curly as a baby sheep,
hungry as a little billy
goat, cuddly
as a lap dog,
able to flex your spine
to fit inside my own,
& born
between piss
& shit.

I welcome you
with all my breath
& guts;
I hallelujah
to your eyes, your heart,
your tender toes.
May I keep growing younger
with your years

until, when you are just my age,
or more, I have gone back to zero
& am ready,
perhaps then,
to be reborn.

Erica Jong

Blood & Honey

I began by loving women
& the love turned
to bitterness.

My mother, the bitter,
whose bitter lesson-
trust no one,
especially no male-
caused me to be naive
for too many years,
in mere rebellion
against that bitterness.

If she was Medea,
I would be Candide
& bleed in every sexual war,
& water my garden with menstrual blood
& grow the juiciest fruits.

(Like the woman
who watered her roses with blood
& won all the prizes,
though no one knew why.)

If she was Lady Macbeth,
I would be Don Quixote-
& never pass up a windmill
without a fight,
& never choose discretion
over valor.

My valor was often foolish.
I was rash
(though others called me brave).
My poems were red flags
To lure the bulls.
The picadors smelled blood
& jabbed my novels.

I had only begun
by loving women-
& ended by hating their deceit,
hating the hate
they feed their daughters,
hating the self-hate
they feed themselves,
hating the contempt
they feed their men,
as they claim weakness-
their secret strength.

For who can be crueler
than a woman
who is cruel
out of her impotence?
& who can be meaner
than a woman
who desires
the only room with a view?

Even in chess
she shouts:
'Off with their heads!'
& the poor king
walks one step forward,
one step back.

But I began
by loving women,
loving myself
despite my mother's lesson,
loving my ten fingers,
ten toes, my puckered navel,
my lips that are too thick
& my eyes the color of ink.

Because I believed in them,
I found gentle men.
Because I loved myself,
I was loved.
Because I had faith,

the unicorn licked my arm,
the rabbit nestled in my skirts,
the griffin slept
curled up at the bottom
of my bed.

Bitter women,
there is milk under this poem.
What you sow in blood
shall be harvested in honey.

Erica Jong

Books

The universe (which others call the library). . .

-Jorge Luis Borges

Books which are stitched up the center with coarse white thread

Books on the beach with sunglass-colored pages

Books about food with pictures of weeping grapefruits

Books about baking bread with browned corners

Books about long-haired Frenchmen with uncut pages

Books of erotic engravings with pages that stick

Books about inns whose stars have sputtered out

Books of illuminations surrounded by darkness

Books with blank pages & printed margins

Books with fanatical footnotes in no-point type

Books with book lice

Books with rice-paper pastings

Books with book fungus blooming over their pages

Books with pages of skin with flesh-colored bindings

Books by men in love with the letter O

Books which smell of earth whose pages turn

Erica Jong

By Train From Berlin

A delicate border. A nonexistent country.
The train obligingly dissolves in smoke.
The G.I. next to me is talking war.
I don't 'know the Asian mind,' he says.

Moving through old arguments.

At Potsdam (a globe-shaped dome,
a pink canal reflecting sepia trees)
we pull next to a broken-down old train
with REICHSBahn lettered on its flank.

Thirty years sheer away leaving bare cliff.

This is a country I don't recognize.
Bone-pale girls who have nothing to do with home.
Everyone's taller than me, everyone naked.
'Life's cheap there,' he says.

But why are we screaming over a track
which runs between a barbed wire corridor?
And why has it grown so dark outside,
so bright in here

that even the pared moon is invisible?

In the window we can only see ourselves,
America we carry with us,
two scared people talking death
on a train which can't stop.

Erica Jong

Catching Up

We sit on a rock
to allow our souls
to catch up with us.

We have been traveling
a long time.

Behind us are forests of books
with pages green as leaves.
A blood sun stares
over the horizon.

Our souls are slow.
They walk miles behind
our long shadows.

They do not dance.
They need all their strength
merely to follow us.

Sometimes we run too fast
or trip climbing
the rotten rungs
in fame's ladder.

Our souls know
it leads nowhere.

They are not afraid
of losing us.

Erica Jong

Cheever's People

These beautifully grown men. These hungerers.
Look at them looking!
They're overdrawn on all accounts but hope
& they've missed
(for the hundredth time) the express
to the city of dreams
& settled, sighing, for a desperate local;
so who's to blame them
if they swim through swimming pools of twelve-
year-old scotch, or fall
in love with widows (other than their wives)
who suddenly can't ride
in elevators? In that suburb of elms
& crabgrass (to which
the angel banished them) nothing is more real
than last night's empties.

So if they pack up, stuff their vitals
in a two-suiter,
& (with passports bluer than their eyes)
pose as barons
in Kitzbuhel, or poets in Portofino,
something in us sails
off with them (dreaming of bacon-lettuce-
and-tomato sandwiches).
Oh, all the exiles of the twenties knew
that America
was discovered this way: desperate men,
wearing nostalgia
like a hangover, sailed out, sailed out
in search of passports,
eyes, an ancient kingdom, beyond the absurd
suburbs of the heart.

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

Continental Divide

Handcuffed by time,
I travel across this broad
beautiful America-
mesas, deserts,
peaks with clouds caught
upon them,
the Continental Divide
where a dropp of rain
must decide
whether to roll east or west
like the rest of us.

I speak to a group
of avid, aging Californians
about daring to embrace
the second half of life.
The passions of the old
are deeper
than any wells
the young can plumb.

Meanwhile, you are dying
in New York Hospital-
your beautiful face drained
of blood,
your arms too heavy

to seize the day,

your shining eyes
dimmed by pain
& drugs to dull it.

You have boycotted food,
yet all you can do is apologize
to your grieving children
for the trouble you cause
by dying.

'Don't worry, I'm fine,'
you say, eternal mother.

Solitary as you will ever be,
our love cannot save you
from this last loneliness,
this last sea voyage

where no one
dresses for dinner.

Meanwhile
I am listening to a doctor
who claims we can all live
to be a hundred,
a hundred and twenty,
If only we expand
our arteries with exercise,
our genitals with sex,
our brains with crossword puzzles,
poems & proverbs . . .

Wingless, we can fly
over death
if only the body
-that laggard-
consents.

I suppose the dropp of rain decided
to roll west with the setting sun,
taking you along.

The Californian doctor is quoting
Victor Hugo now:
the eyes of the young show flame,
the eyes of the old, light.

More light, Doctor!
How can we accept
time's jagged jaws
even as we are being eaten?
How can we accept

the extinguishing of eyes?

Doctor-
is death the aberration.
or is life?

And as for love-

why is it never enough
to save us?

Erica Jong

Dear Anne Sexton

On line at the supermarket
waiting for the tally,
the blue numerals
tattooed
on the white skins
of paper,
I read your open book
of folly
and take heart,
poet of my heart.

The poet as a housewife!
Keeper of steak & liver,
keeper of keys, locks, razors,
keeper of blood & apples,
of breasts & angels,
Jesus & beautiful women,
keeper also of women
who are not beautiful-

you glide in from Cape Ann
on your winged broomstick-
the housewife's Pegasus.

You are sweeping the skies clear
of celestial rubbish.
You are placing a child there,
a heart here. . . .
You are singing for your supper.

Dearest wordmother & hunger-teacher,
full professor of courage,
dean of women
in my school of books,
thank you.

I have checked out
pounds of meat & cans of soup.
I walk home laden,

light with writing you.

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

Dear Keats

Already six years past your age!
The steps in Rome,
the house near Hampstead Heath,
& all your fears
that you might cease to be
before your pen had glean'd. . . .

My dear dead friend,
you were the first to teach me
how the dust could sing.
I followed in your footsteps
up the Heath.
I listened hard
for Lethe's nightingale.

& now at 31, I want to live.
Oblivion holds no adolescent charms.
& all the 'souls of poets
dead & gone,'
& all the 'Bards
of Passion & Mirth'
cannot make death-
its echo, its damp earth-
resemble birth.

You died in Rome-
in faltering sunlight-
Bernini's watery boat still sinking
in the fountain in the square below.
When Severn came to say
the roses bloomed,
you did not 'glut thy sorrow,'
but you wept-
you wept for them
& for your posthumous life.

& yet we all lead posthumous lives somehow.
The broken lyre,
the broken lung,

the broken love.
Our names are writ in newsprint
if not water.

'Don't breathe on me-' you cried,
'it comes like ice.'

×

Last words.
(I can't imagine mine.
Perhaps some muttered dream,
some poem, some curse.)

Three months past 25,
you lived on milk.
They reeled you backward
in the womb of love.

×

A tepid February Roman Spring.
Fruit trees in bloom
& Hampstead still in snow
& Fanny Brawne receives a hopeful note
when you are two weeks dead.

A poet's life:
always awaiting mail.

×

For God's sake
kick against the pricks!
There aren't very many roses.
Your life was like an hourglass
with no sand.
The words slid through
& rested under glass;
the flesh decayed
to moist Italian clay.

×

At autopsy,
your lungs were wholly gone.
Was that from too much singing?
Too many rifts of ore?
You spent your life breath
breathing life in words.
But words return no breath
to those who write.

Letters, Life, & Literary Remains . . .

'I find that I cannot exist without poetry. . . .'

'O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!'

'What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth. . . .'

'We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us. . . .'

'Sancho will invent a Journey heavenwards as well as anybody. . . .'

'Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul.'

'Why should we kick against the Pricks when we can walk on the Roses?'

'Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses. . . .'

'Until we are sick, we understand not. . . .'

'Sorrow is Wisdom. . . .'

'Wisdom is folly. . . .'

×

Too wise
& yet not wise enough
at 25.
Sick, you understood
& understanding

were too weak to write.

Proved on the pulse: poetry.

If sorrow is wisdom
& wisdom is folly
then too much sorrow
is folly.

I find that I cannot exist without sorrow
& I find that sorrow
cannot exist without poetry. . . .

What the imagination seizes as beauty
must be poetry. . . .

What the imagination seizes must be. . . .

×

You claimed no lust for fame
& yet your burned.
'The faint conceptions I have of poems to come brings
the blood frequently into my forehead.'

I burn like you
until it often seems
my blood will break
the boundaries of my brain
& issue forth in one tall fountain
from my skull.

×

A spume of blood from the forehead: poetry.

A plume of blood from the heart: poetry.

Blood from the lungs: alizarin crimson words.

×

'I will not spoil my love of gloom
by writing an Ode to Darkness. . . .'

The blood turns dark;
it stiffens on the sheet.
At night the childhood walls
are streaked with blood-
until the darkness seems awash with red
& children sleep behind two blood-branched lids.

×

'My imagination is a monastery
& I am its monk . . .'

At five & twenty,
very far from home,
death picked you up
& sorted to a pip.
& 15 decades later,
your words breathe:
syllables of blood.

A strange transfusion
for my feverish verse.

I suck your breath,
your rhythms & your blood,
& all my fiercest dreams are sighed away.

I send you love,
dear Keats,
I send you peace.
Since flesh can't stay
we keep the breath aloft.

Since flesh can't stay,
we pass the words along.

Erica Jong

Dearest Man-In-The-Moon

Dearest man-in-the-moon,
ever since our lunch of cheese
& moonjuice
on the far side of the sun,
I have walked the craters of New York,
a trail of slime
ribboning between my legs,
a phosphorescent banner
which is tied to you,
a beam of moonlight
focused on your navel,
a silver chain
from which my body dangles,
& my whole torso chiming
like sleigh bells in a Russian novel.

Dearest man-on-the-moon,
I used to fear moonlight
thinking her my mother.
I used to dread nights
when the moon was full.
I used to scream
'Pull down the shade!'
because the moonface leered at me,
because I felt her mocking,
because my fear lived in me
like rats in a wheel of cheese.

You have eaten out my fear.
You have licked
the creamy inside of the moon.
You have kissed
the final crescent of my heart
& made it full.

Erica Jong

Demeter At Dusk

At dusk Demeter
becomes afraid
for baby Persephone
lost in that hell
which she herself created
with her love.

Excess of love-
the woman's curse,
the curse of loving
that which causes pain,
the curse of bringing forth
in pain,
the curse of bearing,
bearing always pain.

Demeter pauses, listening for her child-
this fertile goddess
with her golden hair, bringing forth
wheat and fruit and wildflowers
knee-high.
This apple-breasted goddess
whose sad eyes
will bless the frozen world,
bring spring again-
all because she once
walked through the night
and loved a man, half-demon,
angel tongued,
who gave her
everything she needed to be wise:
a daughter,
hell's black night,
then endless
spring.

Erica Jong

Depression In Early Spring

Meathooks, notebooks,
the whole city sky palely flaming
& spectral bombs
hitting that patch of river
I see from my eastern window.

The poets are dead, the city dying.
Anne, Sylvia, Keats
with his passionate lungs,
Berryman jumping from the bridge & waving,
all the dreamers dead
of their own dreams.

Why have I stayed on as Horatio?
Anne sends poems from the grave,
Sylvia, letters.
John Keats's ghostly cough
comes through the wall board.
What am I doing here?
Why contend?

I am a corpse who moves a pen that writes.
I am a vessel for a voice that echoes.
I write a novel & annihilate whole forests.
I rearrange the cosmos by an inch.

Erica Jong

Driving Me Away

Driving me away
is easier
than saying
goodbye-

kissing the air,
the last syllable
of truth
being always
two lips compressed
around
emptiness-

the emptiness
you dread
yet return to
as just punishment,
just reward.

Who
loved you
so relentlessly?
Who lost you
in that howling void
between infancy
and death?

It is punctuated
by the warm bodies
of women,
who hold you for a while
then run
down that echoing corridor
doing
as they are told.

Erica Jong

Egyptology

I am the Sphinx.
I am the woman buried in sand
up to her chin.
I am waiting for an archaeologist
to unearth me,
to dig out my neck & my nipples,
bare my claws
& solve my riddle.

No one has solved my riddle
since Oedipus.

I face the pyramids which rise
like angular breasts
from the dry body of Egypt.
My fertile river is flowing down below-
a lovely lower kingdom.
Every woman should have a delta
with such rich silt-
brown as the buttocks
of Nubian queens.

O friend, why have you come to Egypt?
Aton & Yahweh
are still feuding.
Moses is leading his people
& speaking of guilt.
The voice out of the volcano
will not be still.

A religion of death,
a woman buried alive.
For thousands of years
the sand drifted over my head.
My sex was a desert,
my hair more porous than pumice,
& nobody sucked my lips
to make me tell.

The pyramid breasts, though huge,
will never sag.
In the center of each one,
a king lies buried.
In the center of each one,
a darkened chamber. . .
a tunnel,
dead men's bones,
malignant gold.

Erica Jong

Empty

. .Who shall measure the heat and
violence of the poet's heart when caught
and tangled in a woman's body?

-Virginia Woolf

Every month,
the reminder of emptiness
so that you are tuned
to your bodyharp,
strung out on the harpsichord
of all your nerves
& hammered bloody blue
as the crushed fingers
of the woman pianist
beaten by her jealous lover.

Who was she?
Someone I invented
for this poem,
someone I imagined. . .

Never mind,
she is me, you-

tied to that bodybeat,
fainting on the rack of blood,
moving to the metronome-
empty, empty, empty.

No use.
The blood is thicker
than the roots of trees,
more persistent than my poetry,
more baroque than her bruised music.
It gilds the sky above the Virgin's head.
It turns the lilies white.

Try to run:
the blood still follows you.

Swear off children,
seek a quiet room
to practice your preludes & fugues.
Under the piano,
the blood accumulates;
eventually it floats you both away.

Give in.
Babies cry & music is your life.
Darling, you were born to bleed
or rock.
& the heart breaks
either way.

Erica Jong

Eveningsong At Bellosguardo

Chi vuol esser lieto, sia:
di doman non c'e certezza.
-Lorenzo di Medici

In the poplars' lengthening shadows on this hill,
amid the rows of marigolds and earth,
and through the boxhedge labyrinth we walk,
together, to the choring twilight bells.
Their fugue of echoes echoes through the hills
and sings against this time-streaked, flowering wall
where breezes coax the potted lemon trees,
the pendant, yellow fruit and shiny leaves.
Beneath the flaming watercolor sky,
the cultivated, terraced dropp of hill,
a gleaming city with its towers and domes,
the Arno shimmering as its drowns the sun.

Chameleon-like, I am tranformed by light,
and wine has blurred the edges of the night.
What gifts I give on this or any night
may be refracted in another light.
You understnad this in a foreign tongue,
but vaguely, for these things will not translate.
I feel it in the cadence of your walk:
you are not whom moonlight can create.
And you will think the loosening of these thighs,
the sudden, urging whiteness of the throat
are muted but distinctly pagan cries
and in your triumph you will fairly gloat.

Tonight the unplucked lemons almost gleam.
And with their legs, the crickets harmonize.
The trees are rustling an uncertain hymn,
and unseen birds contribute trembling cries.
When did the summer censor choring things?
We know the blood is brutal though it sings.

Erica Jong

Flight To Catalina

On a darkening planet
speeding
toward our death,
we pierce a rosy cloud
& hit clean air,
we glide above
the red infernal smog,
we leave the mammon city
far behind.

Here - where the air is clear
as nothing,
where cactus pads
are prickly as stars,
where buffalo chips
are gilded by the sun
& the moon tastes like a peppermint-
we land.

'Have we flown to heaven?'
I inquired
(& meant it).
The airport was a leveled
mountaintop.
We took the cloudbank
at a tilt
& bumped the runway
just ten degrees from crashing,
certain death.

If I'm to die, God,
let me die flying!
Fear is worse than death-
I know that now.
The cloudbanks of my life
have silver linings.
Beyond them:
cactus pads,
clear earth,

dear sky.

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 All Those Who Died

For all those who died-
stripped naked, shaved, shorn.

For all those who screamed
in vain to the Great Goddess
only to have their tongues
ripped out at the root.

For all those who were pricked, racked, broken on the wheel
for the sins of their Inquisitors.

For all those whose beauty
stirred their torturers to fury;
& for all those whose ugliness did the same.

For all those who were neither ugly nor beautiful,
but only women who would not submit.

For all those quick fingers
broken in the vise.

For all those soft arms
pulled from their sockets.

For all those budding breasts
ripped with hot pincers.

For all those midwives killed merely for the sin
of delivering man
to an imperfect world.

For all those witch-women, my sisters,
who breathed freer
as the flames took them,

knowing as they shed
their female bodies,
the seared flesh falling like fruit
in the flames,

that death alone would cleanse them
of the sin for which they died

the sin of being born a woman,
who is more than the sum
of her parts.

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

For Claudia, Against Narrowness

Narrowing life because of the fears,
narrowing it between the dust motes,
narrowing the pink baby
between the green-limbed monsters,
& the drooling idiots,
& the ghosts of the Thalidomide infants,
narrowing hope,
always narrowing hope.

Mother sits on one shoulder hissing:
Life is dangerous.
Father sits on the other sighing:
Lucky you.
Grandmother, grandfather, big sister:
You'll die if you leave us,
you'll die if you ever leave us.

Sweetheart, baby sister,
you'll die anyway
& so will I.
Even if you walk the wide greensward,
even if you
& your beautiful big belly
embrace the world of men & trees,
even if you moan with pleasure,
& smoke the sweet grass
& feast on strawberries in bed,
you'll die anyway-
wide or narrow,
you're going to die.

As long as you're at it,
die wide.
Follow your belly to the green pasture.
Lie down in the sun's dapple.
Life is not as dangerous
as mother said.
It is more dangerous,
more wide.

Erica Jong

For Howard Moss

Already six years past your age!
The steps in Rome,
the house near Hampstead Heath,
& all your fears
that you might cease to be
before your pen had glean'd. . . .

My dear dead friend,
you were the first to teach me
how the dust could sing.
I followed in your footsteps
up the Heath.
I listened hard
for Lethe's nightingale.

& now at 31, I want to live.
Oblivion holds no adolescent charms.
& all the 'souls of poets
dead & gone,'
& all the 'Bards
of Passion & Mirth'
cannot make death-
its echo, its damp earth-
resemble birth.

You died in Rome-
in faltering sunlight-
Bernini's watery boat still sinking
in the fountain in the square below.
When Severn came to say
the roses bloomed,
you did not 'glut thy sorrow,'
but you wept-
you wept for them
& for your posthumous life.

& yet we all lead posthumous lives somehow.
The broken lyre,
the broken lung,

the broken love.
Our names are writ in newsprint
if not water.

'Don't breathe on me-' you cried,
'it comes like ice.'

×

Last words.
(I can't imagine mine.
Perhaps some muttered dream,
some poem, some curse.)

Three months past 25,
you lived on milk.
They reeled you backward
in the womb of love.

×

A tepid February Roman Spring.
Fruit trees in bloom
& Hampstead still in snow
& Fanny Brawne receives a hopeful note
when you are two weeks dead.

A poet's life:
always awaiting mail.

×

For God's sake
kick against the pricks!
There aren't very many roses.
Your life was like an hourglass
with no sand.
The words slid through
& rested under glass;
the flesh decayed
to moist Italian clay.

×

At autopsy,
your lungs were wholly gone.
Was that from too much singing?
Too many rifts of ore?
You spent your life breath
breathing life in words.
But words return no breath
to those who write.

Letters, Life, & Literary Remains . . .

'I find that I cannot exist without poetry. . . .'

'O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!'

'What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth. . . .'

'We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us. . . .'

'Sancho will invent a Journey heavenwards as well as anybody. . . .'

'Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul.'

'Why should we kick against the Pricks when we can walk on
the Roses?'

'Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses. . . .'

'Until we are sick, we understand not. . . .'

'Sorrow is Wisdom. . . .'

'Wisdom is folly. . . .'

×

Too wise
& yet not wise enough
at 25.
Sick, you understood

& understanding
were too weak to write.

Proved on the pulse: poetry.

If sorrow is wisdom
& wisdom is folly
then too much sorrow
is folly.

I find that I cannot exist without sorrow
& I find that sorrow
cannot exist without poetry. . . .

What the imagination seizes as beauty
must be poetry. . . .

What the imagination seizes must be. . . .

×

You claimed no lust for fame
& yet your burned.
'The faint conceptions I have of poems to come brings
the blood frequently into my forehead.'

I burn like you
until it often seems
my blood will break
the boundaries of my brain
& issue forth in one tall fountain
from my skull.

×

A spume of blood from the forehead: poetry.

A plume of blood from the heart: poetry.

Blood from the lungs: alizarin crimson words.

×

'I will not spoil my love of gloom
by writing an Ode to Darkness. . . .'

The blood turns dark;
it stiffens on the sheet.
At night the childhood walls
are streaked with blood-
until the darkness seems awash with red
& children sleep behind two blood-branched lids.

×

'My imagination is a monastery
& I am its monk . . .'

At five & twenty,
very far from home,
death picked you up
& sorted to a pip.
& 15 decades later,
your words breathe:
syllables of blood.

A strange transfusion
for my feverish verse.

I suck your breath,
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& all my fiercest dreams are sighed away.

I send you love,
dear Keats,
I send you peace.
Since flesh can't stay
we keep the breath aloft.

Since flesh can't stay,
we pass the words along.

Erica Jong

For Molly

You-the purest pleasure
of my life,
the split pit
that proves
the ripeness of the fruit,
the unbroken center
of my broken hopes-

O little one,
making you
has centered my lopsided life

so that if I know
a happiness
that reason never taught,
it is because of your small
unreasonably wrigglish
limbs.

Daughter, little bean,
sprout, sproutlet, smallest
girleen,
just saying your name
makes me grin.

I used to hate the word Mother,
found it obscene,
& now I love it
since that is me
to you.

Erica Jong

For Molly, Concerning God

Is God the one who eats the meat
off the bones of dead people?
-Molly Miranda Jong-Fast, age 3 1/2

God is the one,
Molly,
whether we call him
Him,
or Her,
treeform or spewing
volcano,
Vesuvius or vulva,
penis-rock,
or reindeer-on-cave-wall,
God is the one
who eats
our meat,
Molly,
& we yield
our meat
up willingly.

Meat is our
element,
meat is our
lesson.

When our bodies fill
with each other,
when our blood swells
in our organs
aching for another,
body of meat,
heart of meat,
soul of meat,
we are only doing
what God wants
us to—
meat joining meat

to become insubstantial air,
meat fusing
with meat
to make
a small wonder
like you.
The wonder of you
is that you push
our questions
along into
the future—
so that I know
again
the wonder of meat
through you,
the wonder of meat
turning to philosophy,
the wonder of meat
transubstantiated
into poetry,
the wonder of
sky-blue meat
in your roundest eyes,
the wonder of
dawn-colored meat
in your cheeks & palms,
the wonder of meat
becoming
air.

You
are my theorem,
my proof,
my meaty metaphysics,
my little questioner,
my small Socrates
of the nursery-schoolyard.

To think that
such wonder
can come from meat!

Well then,
if God is hungry—
let Him eat,
let Her eat.

Erica Jong

For My Husband

You sleep in the darkness,
you with the back I love
& the gift of sleeping
through my noisy nights of poetry.

I have taken other men into my thoughts
since I met you.
I have loved parts of them.
But only you sleep on through the darkness
like a mountain where my house is planted,
like a rock on which my temple stands,
like a great dictionary holding every word-
even some
I have never spoken.

You breathe.
The pages of your dreams are riffled
by the winds of my writing.
The pillow creases your cheek
as I cover pages.

Element in which I swim
or fly,
silent muse, backbone, companion-
it is unfashionable
to confess to marriage-
yet I feel no bondage
in this air we share.

Erica Jong

Fracture

This constant ache
is my leg's message to me.
'Hello. Hello. Hello.
You're getting there,' it says,
'step by step.'

Legs aren't stars
which sputter out
& go on gleaming anyway.
I've lived, of course,
with phantom limbs

but this fracture
doesn't point to
amputation. No.
It hisses at something
much more final.

Skin lantern,
necklace of teeth,
the bones & sinews
are in revolt against us.
We keep them down

with little bribes:
vitamins, penicillin,
& now these pounds of plaster,
but they will bury us,
good Bolsheviks,

& know it.
So they've got time to bide.
Meanwhile: spread-eagle
on these crutches, a cripple
sucking the ground with rubber

nipples, or else a knight,
up to my ass in armor,
I limp & swing my way

across the street
& up the steps,

moving, here & now,
step by step,
towards the future,
that incurable
fracture.

Erica Jong

Gardener

I am in love with my womb
& jealous of it.

I cover it tenderly
with a little pink hat
(a sort of yarmulke)
to protect it from men.

Then I listen for the gentle ping
of the ovary:
a sort of cupid's bow
released.
I'm proud of that.
& the spot of blood
in the little hat
& the egg so small
I cannot see it
though I pray to it.

I imagine the inside
of my womb to be
the color of poppies
& bougainvillea
(though I've never seen it).

But I fear the barnacle
which might latch on
& not let go
& fear the monster
who might grow
to bite the flowers
& make them swell & bleed.

So I keep my womb empty
& full of possibility.

Each month
The blood sheets down
like good red rain.

I am the gardener.
Nothing grows without me.

Erica Jong

Gazing Out, Gazing In

Because I am here
anchoring you
to the passionate darkness,
you gaze out the window
at the light.

My love is the thing
that frees you
to follow your eyes,

as your love,
a sword made of moonlight
and blood,
and smelling of sex
and salt marshes,
frees me to gaze
with a calm inward
eye.

In all your frenzied searching
you never stood
calmly at the window.

But now the sea,
the city and the sky
are all seen
as if from a perch
at the edge of the cosmos,
where I sit behind you
gazing
at the fire.

Erica Jong

Going To School In Bed

If it is impossible to promise
absolute fidelity,
this is because
we learn so much geography
from the shifting of one body
on another.

If it is impossible to promise
absolute fidelity,
this is because
we learn so much history
from the lying of one body
on another.

If it is impossible to promise
absolute fidelity,
this is because
we learn so much psychology
from the dreaming of one body
of another.

Life writes so many letters
on the naked bodies of lovers.
What a tattoo artist!
What an ingenious teacher!

Is it any wonder we appear
like schoolchildren dreaming:
naked
& anxious to learn?

Erica Jong

Good Carpenters

I mourn a dead friend, like myself, a good carpenter.
-Pablo Neruda about César Vallejo

I looked at the book.
'It will stand,' I thought.
Not a palace
built by a newspaper czar,
nor a mud hovel
that the sea will soften,
but a good house of words
near the sea
with everything plumb.
That is the most I can ask.

I have cut the wood myself
from my own forests,
I have sanded it smooth
with the grain.
I have left knotholes
for the muse to whistle through
-old siren that she is.

At least the roof does not leak.
& the fireplace is small
but it draws.
The wind whips the house
but it stands.
& the waves lick
the pilings
with their tongues
but at least they do not suck me
out to sea.
The sea is wordless
but it tries to talk to us.
We carpenters are also translators.
We build with sounds, with whispers & with wind.
We try to speak the language of the sea.

We want to build to last

yet change forever.
We want to be as endless as the sea.
& yet she mocks us
with her barnacle & rust stains;
she tells us what we build will also fall.

Our words are grains of sand,
our walls are wood,
our windowpanes are sprayed with solemn salt.
We whisper, as we build, 'Forever please,'
-by which we mean at least for thirty years.

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.

Her Broom, Or The Ride Of The Witch

My broom
with its tufts of roses
beckoning at the black,
with its crown of thistles,
prickling the sky,
with its carved crescents
winking silverly
at Diana,
with its thick brush
of peacock feathers
sweeping the night,
with its triangle
of glinting fur.

I ride
over the roofs
of doom.
I ride
while he thinks me safe
in our bed.
My forehead
he thinks that scraggly
other broom,
my hips that staff,
my sex that stump
of blackthorn
& of twine.

Ah, I will ride
over the skies-
orange as apricots

Erica Jong

Here Comes

(a flip through BRIDE's)

The silver spoons
were warbling
their absurd musical names
when, drawing back
her veil (illusion),

she stepped into
the valentine-shaped bathtub,
& slid her perfect bubbles
in between
the perfect bubbles.

Oh brilliantly complex as
compound interest,
her diamond gleams
(Forever) on the edge
of a weddingcake-shaped bed.

What happens there
is merely icing since
a snakepit of dismembered
douchebag coils (all writhing)
awaits her on the tackier back pages.

Dearly beloved, let's hymn
her (& Daddy) down
the aisle with
epithalamia composed
for Ovulen ads:

'It's the right
of every (married) couple
to wait to space to wait'
-& antistrophes
appended by the Pope.

Good Grief-the groom!

Has she (or we)
entirely forgot?
She'll dream him whole.
American type with ushers

halfbacks headaches drawbacks backaches
& borrowed suit
stuffed in a borrowed face
(or was it the reverse?)
Oh well. Here's he:

part coy pajamas
part mothered underwear
& of course
an enormous prick
full of money.

Erica Jong

His Silence

He still wears the glass skin of childhood.
Under his hands, the stones turn mirrors.
His eyes are knives.

Who froze the ground to his feet?
Who locked his mouth into an horizon?
Why does the sun set when we touch?

I look for the lines between the silences.
He looks only for the silences.

Cram this page under his tongue.
Open him as if for surgery.
Let the red knife love slide in

Erica Jong

His Tuning Of The Night

All night he lies awake tuning the sky,
tuning the night with its fat crackle of static,
with its melancholy love songs crooning
across the rainy air above Verdun
& the autobahn's blue suicidal dawn.

Wherever he lives there is the same unwomaned bed,
the ashtrays overflowing their reproaches,
his stained fingers on the tuning bar, fishing
for her voice in a deep mirrorless pond,
for the tinsel & elusive fish
(brighter than pennies in water & more wished upon)-
the copper-colored daughter of the pond god.

He casts for her, the tuning bar his rod,
but only long-dead lovers with their griefs
haunt him in Piaf's voice-
(as if a voice could somehow only die
when it was sung out, utterly).

He finally lies down and drowns the light
but the taste of her rises, brackish,
from the long dark water of her illness
& his grief is terrible as drowning
when he reaches for the radio again.

In the daytime, you hardly know him;
he walks in a borrowed calm.

You cannot sense
his desperation in the dawn
when the abracadabras of the birds
conjure another phantom day.

He favors cities which blaze all night,
hazy mushrooms of light under the blue
& blinking eyes of jets.
But when the lamps across the way go under,
& the floorboards settle,

& the pipes fret like old men gargling-
he is alone with his mouthful of ghosts,
his tongue bitter with her unmourned death,
& the terrible drowning.

I watch from my blue window
knowing he does not trust me,
though I know him as I know my ghosts,
though I know his drowning,
though, since that night when all harmony broke for me,
I have been trying to tune the sky.

Erica Jong

Hotel Rooms

'Hotel rooms constitute a separate moral universe.'

-Tom Stoppard

A bed, a telephone, the cord
to the world
beyond the womb . . .
Here lovers meet, have met,
will meet again behind different faces
while the icy pictures
look on,
seeing nothing.

Hotel rooms see nothing.

Business transacted,
prostitutes killed,
marriages silently shaken;
what happens here
is off the record;
there is no record
when the sheets
are changed
every night
for other guests.

& you my darling
my lover, my reader,
ultimately
myself,
why are you hungering so,
why are you opening
abysses in yourself
before you rush off
to the next appointment?

Eternity is just
a hotel room-
deluxe or seedy
as the fates allow,

lonely as the loneliest
one-night stand,
& with no telephone.

Or is it the body?
Is the body the hotel room after all?
O let us inhabit it amply, crying
& screaming & embracing
before we

check out.

Erica Jong

How To Name Your Familiar

When the devil brings him,
like a Christmas puppy,
examine his downy fur & smell
his small paws for the scent
of sulphur.

Is he a child of hell?
O clearly those soft brown eyes
speak volumes
of deviltry.
O surely those small pink teats
could suckle witches.
O those floppy ears
hear only the devil's hissing.
O that small pink tongue
will lick & lick at your heart
until only Satan may
slip in.

A fuzzy white dog?
Name him Catch.
A little black kitten?
She is Jamara.
A tiny brown rabbit?
Call her Pyewackett.

Beware, beware-
the soft, the innocent,
the kingdom of cuddly ones-
All these
expose you to the jealous tongues
of neighbors' flames,
all these
are the devil's snares!

Familiars familiars-
there is hellfire lurking
in the softest fur,
brimstone in the pinkest tongue,

damnation everlasting
in a purr.

Erica Jong

I Live In New York

I am happiest
near the ocean,
where the changing light
reminds me of my death
& the fact that it need not be fatal-

yet I perch here
in the midst of the city
where the traffic dulls my senses,
where my ears scream at sirens,
where transistor radio blasts
invade my poems
like alien war chants.

But I never walk
the streets of New York
without hoping for the end
of the world.

How many years
before the streets return to flowers?
How many centuries
before the towers fall?

In my mind's eye,
New York falls to ruins.
Butterflies alight upon stones
and poppies spring
out of the asphalt fields.

Why do I stay here
when I love the ocean?
Because the ocean lulls me
with its peace.
Eternity is coming soon enough.
As monks sleep
in their own coffins,

I live in New York.

Erica Jong

I Sit At My Desk Alone

I sit at my desk alone
as I did on many Sunday
afternoons when you came
back to me,
your arms aching for me,
though they smelled
of other women
and your sweet head bowed
for me to rub
and your heart bursting
with things to tell me,
and your hair
and your eyes
wild.

We would embrace
on the carpet
and leave
the imprint of our bodies
on the floor.
My back is still sore
where you pressed me
into the rug,
a sweet soreness I would never
lose.

I think of you always
on Sunday afternoons,
and I try to conjure you
with these words
as if you might
come back to me
at twilight
but you are never coming back
never.

The truth is
you no longer exist.
Oh you walk the world

sturdily enough:
one foot in front
of the other.
But the lover you were,
the tender shoot
springing within me,
trusting me with your dreams,
has hardened
into fear and cynicism.

Betrayal does that
betrays the betrayer.

I want to hate you
and I cannot.
But I cannot
love you either.

It is our old love
I love,
as one loves
certain images
from childhood
shards
shining in
the street
in the shit.

Shards of light
in the darkness.

Erica Jong

I Sleep With

I sleep with double pillows since you're gone.
Is one of them for you-or is it you?
My bed is heaped with books of poetry.
I fall asleep on yellow legal pads.

Oh the orgies in stationery stores!
The love of printer's ink & think new pads!
A poet has to fall in love to write.
Her bed is heaped with papers, or with men.

I keep your pillow pressed down with my books.
They leave an indentation like your head.
If I can't have you here, I'll take cold type-
& words: the warmest things there are-
but you.

Erica Jong

I Try To Keep

I try to keep
falling in love
if only to keep
death

at bay.

I know
that the burned
witches,
that the seared flesh
of the enemy-

O we are all
each other's
enemies,
even sometimes those
who lately
were

lovers-

are not
to be reconstituted
nor healed

by my
falling
in love;

& yet
here is
the paradox:

love drives
the poem-

& the poem
is

hope.

Erica Jong

If God Is A Dog

If God is a dog drowsing,
contemplating
the quintessential dogginess
of the universe, of the whole
canine race, why are we
uneasy?

No dog I know
would hurl thunderbolts,
or plant plague germs,
or shower us with darts
of pox or gonococci.
No. He lies on his back
awaiting
the cosmic belly rub.
He wags his tail signifying
universal love.
He frolics and cavorts
because he has just
taken a galactic shit
& found it good.
All dogs are blessed;
they live in the now.

But God is all too human.
Somehow we have spelled his name
wrong, got it backward,
aroused his growl.

God drowns
like a lazy old man
bored
with our false
alarms.

Erica Jong

In Praise Of Clothes

If it is only for the taking off-
the velvet cloak,
the ostrich feather boa,
the dress which slithers to the floor
with the sound of strange men sighing
on imagined street corners. . .

If it is only for the taking off-
the red lace bra
(with rosewindows of breasts),
the red lace pants
(with dark suggestion
of Venus' first name),
the black net stockings
cobwebby as fate,
criscrossed like our lives,
the silver sandals
glimmering as rain-

clothes are necessary.
Oh bulky barrier between soul & soul,
soul & self-
how it comforts us
to take you down!
How it heartens us to strip you off!

& this is no matter of fashion.

Erica Jong

In The Glass-Bottomed Boat

In the glass-bottomed boat
of our lives, we putter along
gazing at the other world
under the sea-
that world of flickering
yellow-tailed fish,
of deadly moray eels, of sea urchins
like black stars
that devastate great brains
of coral,
of fish the color
of blue neon,
& fish the color
of liquid silver
made by Indians
exterminated
centuries ago.

We pass, we pass,
always looking down.
The fish do not
look up at us,
as if they knew
somehow
their world
for the eternal one,
ours for
the merely time-bound.

The engine sputters.
Our guide-a sweet
black boy with skin
the color of molten chocolate-
asks us of the price of jeans
& karate classes
in the States.
Surfboards too
delight him-
& skateboards.

He wants to sail, sail, sail,
not putter
through the world.

& so do we,
so do we,
wishing for the freedom
of the fish
beneath the reef,
wishing for the crevices
of sunken ship
with its rusted eyeholes,
its great ribbed hull,
its rotted rudder,
its bright propeller
tarnishing beneath the sea.

'They sunk this ship
on purpose,'
says our guide-
which does not surprise
us,
knowing how life
always imitates
even the shabbiest
art.
Our brains forged
in shark & seawreck epics,
we fully expect to see
a wreck like this one,
made on purpose
for our eyes.

But the fish swim on,
intimating death,
intimating outer space,
& even the oceans
within the body
from which we come.

The fish are uninterested
in us.

What hubris to think
a shark concentrates
as much on us
as we on him!

The creatures of the reef
spell death, spell life,
spell eternity,
& still we putter on
in our leaky little boat,
halfway there,
halfway there.

Erica Jong

Insomnia & Poetry

Sweet muse
with bitter milk,
I have lain
between your breasts,
put my ear
to your sea-shell-whispering navel,
& strained the salty marshes
of your sex
between my milk teeth.
Then I've slept at last,
my teeming head
against your rocking thigh.

Gentle angry mother
poetry,
where could I turn
from the terror of the night
but to your sweet maddening
ambivalence?
Where could I rest
but in your hurricane?
who would always take me home
but you,
sweeping off the sooty stoop
of your wind-filled shack
on the edge
of the volcano?

Erica Jong

January In New York

Black ship of night
sailing through the world
& the moon an orange slice
tangy to the teeth
of lovers who lie
under it,
sucking it.

Somewhere there are palm trees;
somewhere the sea
bluey gathers itself up
& lets itself fall again
into green;
somewhere the spangles
of light on the ocean
dazzle the eyes;
but here in the midnight city,
the black ship of night
has docked
for a long, dark stay,
& even the citrus moon
with its pockets of juice
cannot sweeten the dark.

Then the snow begins,
whirling over the Pole,
gathering force over Canada,
sprinkling the Great Lakes with sugar
which drowns in their deep black cups;
it is drawn to the spires of New York
& the flurries come
scampering at first,
lighthearted, crystalline, white,
but finally
sucked into the city
as into a black hole
in space.

The sky is suddenly pink-

pink as flesh: breasts,
babies' bottoms. Night is
day; day is whiter than the desert;
the city stops like a heart;
pigeons dip & veer
& come to rest
under the snow-hatted
watertanks.

Erica Jong

Knives

The women he has had are all faces
without eyes.

He has entered them blind
as a cut worm.

He has swum their oceans
like a wounded fish
looking for home.

At nights when he can't sleep,
he dreams of weaving
backward up that river
where the banks
are fringed with mouths,
& weedy hair
grows amid the dark crusts
of ancient blood.

Tonight he is afraid & lonely
in a city of meat & knives.
I would go under his knife
& move so willingly
that his heart
might turn to butter
in his mouth.

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

Letter To Myselfes

You can be hurt
because you want too much;
because in your face it says:
love me, nurture me;
because in your teeth it says:
sugar flows to us;
because in your tongue it says:
drive in the spike.

You can be hurt
because you care too much
because your ribs swing out like shutters
& your heart
glows like a night light.

You can be hurt
because you need too much
because your skin comes off in streamers
& your veins
twang like guitar strings.
You can be hurt that way.

You made your head
a wind tunnel for death.
You made your womb
the world's confessional.
You made your heart
a lump of burning clay.

You, me-
we can be hurt that way.

Erica Jong

Living Happily Ever After

We used to strike sparks
off each other.
Our eyes would meet
or our hands,
& the blue lightning of love
would sear the air.

Now we are soft.
We loll
in the same sleepy bed,
skin of my skin,
hair of my head,
sweat of my sweat-
you are kin,
brother & mother
all in one,
husband, lover, muse & comforter;
I love you even better
without sparks.

We are pebbles in the tide
rolling against each other.
The surf crashes above us;
the irregular pulse
of the ocean drives our blood,
but we are growing smooth
against each other.

Are we living happily ever after?
What will happen
to my love of cataclysms?
My love of sparks & fire,
my love of ice?

Fellow pebble,
let us roll
against each other.
Perhaps the sparks are clearer
under water.

Erica Jong

Middle Aged Lovers, I

Unable to bear
the uncertainty
of the future,
we consulted seers,
mediums, stock market gurus,
psychics who promised
happiness on this
or another planet,
astrologists of love,
seekers of the Holy Grail.

Looking for certainty
we asked for promises,
lover's knots, pledges, rings,
certificates, deeds of ownership,
when it was always enough
to let your hand
pass over my body,
your eyes find the depths of my own,
and the wind pass over our faces
as it will pass
through our bones,
sooner than we think.

The current is love,
is poetry,
the blood beat
in the thighs,
the electrical charge
in the brain.

Our long leap
into the unknown
began nearly
a half century ago
and is almost
over.

I think of the

amphorae of stored honey
at Paestum
far out-lasting
their Grecian eaters,
or of the furniture
in a pharoah's tomb
on which
no one sits.

Trust the wind,
my lover,
and the water.

They have the
answers
to all your questions

and mine.

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

Monkshood

Most beautiful of poisons,
border-plant,
wearing your small green cowl,
little friar, little murderer,
aconitine flows
from your roots
to your deep purple flowers,
small deceiver,
centerpiece
for a poisonous
feast.

A few leaves
in the salad,
a few seeds
in the soup,
a thick root
to flavor
the stock-
& it is all over.

Let the lover beware
who buys you
for love philters.
The dose is deceptive.
One pinch leads to passion
but two will surely lead
to death.

Yet you twinkle
little blue bell
at the edge
of the garden,
wearing no warning
about your slim green neck.

Wolfsbane, Friar's cap,
Chariot of Venus-

how many may claim
to be poisonous
head to toe?

That honor-
Friar Death-
belongs to you.

Erica Jong

Morning Madness

Exploring each other's
depths,
that surge of connection
which makes the world
seem sane,
that exchange of spirit
in the guise of flesh,
that morning hallelujah,
that hook
to eternity. . . .

All day I bear you
between my legs,
& in my heart.
Powered by your love,
there is no hill
too high to climb,
no paragraph
I cannot write,
no hosanna
I cannot howl. . . .

Shall we wear it down
with habit?
Shall that combustible connection
become, in time, homier
than fresh bread,
nourishing but unsurprising?

O my lover
meet me in the hollow
of a red thigh,
by mountains
which resemble
spouting cocks. . . .
We will keep
the madness fresh-
the red madness
that keeps us

sane.

Erica Jong

Mother

Ash falls on the roof
of my house.

I have cursed you enough
in the lines of my poems
& between them,
in the silences which fall
like ash-flakes
on the watertank
from a smog-bound sky.

I have cursed you
because I remember
the smell of Joy
on a sealskin coat
& because I feel
more abandoned than a baby seal
on an ice floe red
with it's mother's blood.

I have cursed you
as I walked & prayed
on a concrete terrace
high above the street
because whatever I pulled down
with my bruised hand
from the bruising sky,
whatever lovely plum
came to my mouth
you envied
& spat out.

Because you saw me in your image,
because you favored me,
you punished me.

It was only a form of you
my poems were seeking.
Neither of us knew.

For years
we lived together in a single skin.

We shared fur coats.
We hated each other
as the soul hates the body
for being weak,
as the mind hates the stomach
for needing food,
as one lover hates the other.

I kicked
in the pouch of your theories
like a baby kangaroo.

I believed you
on Marx, on Darwin,
on Tolstoy & Shaw.
I said I loved Pushkin
(you loved him).
I vowed Monet
was better than Bosch.

Who cared?

I would have said nonsense
to please you
& frequently did.

This took the form,
of course,
of fighting you.

We fought so gorgeously!

We fought like one boxer
& his punching bag.
We fought like mismatched twins.
We fought like the secret sharer
& his shade.

Now we're apart.
Time doesn't heal
the baby to the womb.
Separateness is real
& keeps on growing.

One by one the mothers
dropp away,
the lovers leave,
the babies outgrow clothes.

Some get insomnia -
the poet's disease -
& sit up nights
nursing
at the nipples
of their pens.

I have made hot milk
& kissed you where you are.
I have cursed my curses.
I have cleared the air.
& now I sit here writing,
breathing you.

Erica Jong

Mute Marriages

Mute marriages:
the ten-ton block of ice
obstructing the throat, the heart,
the red filter of the liver,
the clogged life.

It is a glacier
in which frozen children swim
ground round with boulders,
pebbles, bits of stone
from other ice ages.

Here a lapis glitters,
here a shard of bottle glass-
valuables & junk:
the history of a house
told in its garbage cans,
the history of a life
in its nightmares.

Speak the dream.
Follow the red thread
of the images.
Defrost the glacier
with the live heat
of your breath,
propelled by the heart's
explosion.

Erica Jong

My Death

'Death is our eternal companion,' Don Juan said with a most serious air. 'It is always to our left, at an arm's length . . . It has always been watching you. It always will until the day it taps you.'

-Carlos Castaneda

My death
looks exactly like me.
She lives to my left,
at exactly an arm's length.
She has my face, hair, hands;
she ages
as I grow older.

Sometimes, at night,
my death awakens me
or else appears in dreams
I did not write.
Sometimes a sudden wind
blows from nowhere,
& I look left
& see my death.

Alive, I write
with my right hand only.
When I am dead,
I shall write with my left.

But later I will have to write
through others.
I may appear
to future poets
as their deaths.

Erica Jong

My Love Is Too Much

My love is too much-
it embarrasses you-
blood, poems, babies,
red needs that telephone
from foreign countries,
black needs that spatter
the pages
of your white papery heart.

You would rather have a girl
with simpler needs:
lunch, sex, undemanding
loving,
dinner, wine, bed,
the occasional blow-job
& needs that are never
red as gaping wounds
but cool & blue
as television screens
in tract houses.

Oh my love,
those simple girls
with simple needs
read my books too.

They tell me they feel
the same as I do.

They tell me I transcribe
the language of their hearts.
They tell me I translate
their mute, unspoken pain
into the white light
of language.

Oh love,
no love
is ever wholly undemanding.

It can pretend coolness
until the pain comes,
until the first baby comes,
howling her own infant need
into a universe
that never summoned her.

The love you seek
cannot be found
except in the white pages
of recipe books.

It is cooking you seek,
not love,
cooking with sex coming after,
cool sex
that speaks to the penis alone,
& not the howling chaos
of the heart.

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

Near The Black Forest

Living in a house
near the Black Forest,
without any clocks,
she's begun

to listen to the walls.
Her neighbors have clocks,
not one
but twenty clocks apiece.

Sometimes
a claque of clocks
applauds
the passing of each day.

Listen to the walls
& wind your watch.
Poor love, poor love,
have they caught you

by the pendulum?
Do they think they've
got you stopped?
Have you

already gathered how,
living near the Black Forest,
she gets by
on cups of borrowed time?

Erica Jong

New England Winter

Testing the soul's mettle,
the frost heaves
holes in the roads
to the heart,
the glass forest
raises up its branches
to praise all things
that catch the light
then melt.

The forest floor is white,
but here & there a boulder rises
with its glacial arrogance
& brooks that bubble
under the sheets of ice
remind us that the tundra of the soul
will soften
just a little
towards the spring.

Erica Jong

Nobody Believes

Nobody believes in love-
not even me.

Love is the thing
you wait
to end.

Love is the thing
that will not,
cannot work.

Love is the thing
they warn you of-
the dire parents,
the friends
with their dead
marriages,
their crushed hopes.

Nothing crushes hope
but the will to make
the heart
like rock.

That will is strong.

The rock-heart stands
when the love songs crumble,
their yellowing sheet music
kept in a drawer,
their sweet hugs & tugs
forgotten,
like the merest air
of an old New England
spring.

Spring comes again
& again,
& the rock-hearts

feel the sap rising
thinking it is sex,
thinking the glands alone
cause this tumult
to the innards,
this hidden spring,
this secret river
which is hope.

Let them put it down
to sex!

Let them say
we worship Dionysus,
Bacchus, Pan,
but not the proper
gods.

Let them have
the proper gods-
Jahweh
with his heart like rock,
Christ with his blood
& thorns,
Mammon with his stock certificates,
his rates, his rates,
his bull markets,
& his late rallies.

We are rallying
alone.
We spit our love
into the wind.

Nobody can bear
to watch
our love.

Except the muse
who smiles
& sends

these
poems.

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

On Reading A Vast Anthology

Love, death, sleeping
with somebody else's husband
or wife-this
is what poetry is
about-Eskimo, Aztec,
or even Italian
Rinascimento,
or even the high falutin Greeks
or noble Roman-O's.

O the constant turmoil
of the human species-
beds, graves, Spring with its
familiar rosebuds, the wrong beds,
the wrong graves, wars
unremembered & boundaries gained
only to be lost & lost
again
& lost roses whose lost
petals
reminded poets to carpe, carpe
diem with whoever's wife
or husband happened to
be handiest!

O Turmoil & Confusion-
you are my Muses!
O longing for a world
without death, without beds
divided by walls between houses!
All the beds float out to sea!
All the dying lovers wave
to the other dying lovers!
One of them writes on his mistress's skin as he floats.

He is the poet.
Not for this
will his life be spared.

On The Avenue

Male?
Female?
God doesn't care
about sex
& the long tree-shaded avenue
toward death.

God says
the worm is as beautiful
as the apple it eats
& the apple as lovely
as the thick trunk
of the tree,
& the trunk of the tree
no more beautiful
than the air
surrounding it.

God doesn't care
about the battle
between the sexes
with which we amuse ourselves
on our way toward death.

God says:
there are no sexes;
& still we amuse ourselves
arguing about whether or not
She is male
or He

female.

Erica Jong

On The First Night

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.

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& you are four weeks old.
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the color of blood.

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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

Pane Caldo

Rising in the morning
like warm bread,
from a bed
in America,
the aroma
of my baking
reaches you
in Italy,
rocking in your boat
near the Ponte Longo,
cutting through the glitter
of yesterday's moonlight
on your sunstruck
canal.

My delicious baker-
it is you
who have made
this hot bread
rise.
It is you
who have split the loaf
and covered it with butter.

I prayed to the moon
streaking the still lagoon
with her skyblue manna;
I prayed for you
to sail into my life,
parting the waters,
making them whole.

And here you come,
half captain, half baker-

& the warm aroma of bread
crosses
the ocean
we share.

Erica Jong

Paper Chains

The first snow of the year
& you lying between my breasts
in my husband's house
& the snow gently rising in my throat
like guilt,
& the windows frosted over
as if etched by acid.

You have come from the desert
& have left a little sand
between my legs
where it rubs & rubs
& secretes a milky fluid,
finally a poem
or a pearl.

I am your oyster shell,
your mother of pearl
gleaming like oil on water
for two hours on a snowy day.

'Poets fall in love to write about it!'
I said in my brittle way,
& told you about other loves to tempt you
& heard your siren songs of old affairs.

I fall in love as a kind of research project.
You fall in love as some men go to war.

What tanks!
What bombs!
What storms of index cards!

I am binding up your legs with carbon ribbon.
I tied you to the bed with paper chains.

Erica Jong

Paper Cuts

Endless duplication of lives and objects....

-Theodore Roethke

I have known the imperial power of secretaries,
the awesome indifference of receptionists,
I have been intimidated by desk & typewriter,
by the silver jaws of the stapler
& the lecherous kiss of the mucilage,
& the unctuousness of rubber cement
before it dries.

I have been afraid of telephones,
have put my mouth to their stale tobacco breath,
have been jarred to terror
by their jangling midnight music,
& their sudden blackness
even when they are white.

I have been afraid in elevators
amid the satin hiss of cables
& the silky lisp of air conditioners
& the helicopter blades of fans.
I have seen time killed in the office jungles
of undeclared war.

My fear has crept into the paper guillotine
& voyaged to the Arctic Circle of the water cooler.
My fear has followed me into the locked Ladies Room,
& down the iron fire stairs
to the postage meter.

I have seen the mailroom women like lost letters
frayed around the edges.
I have seen the Xerox room men
shuffling in & out among each other
like cards in identical decks.

I have come to tell you I have survived.
I bring you chains of paperclips instead of emeralds.

I bring you lottery tickets instead of poems.
I bring you mucilage instead of love.

I lay my body out before you on the desk.
I spread my hair amid a maze of rubber stamps.
RUSH. SPECIAL DELIVERY. DO NOT BEND.
I am open-will you lick me like an envelope?
I am bleeding-will you kiss my paper cuts?

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

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

Playing With The Boys

All the boring tedious young men
with dead eyes & dirty hair . . .
all the mad young men who hate their mothers,
all the squalling baby boys . . .

have grown up
& now write book reviews
or novels about the life
of the knife-fighter,
or movies in which grown men
torture each other-

all the squalling boring baby boys!

I am not part of their game.
I have no penis.
I have a pen, two eyes
& I bleed monthly.

When the moon shines on the sea
I see the babies
riding on the moonwaves
asking to be born.

Does everything else in nature hate
its mother?
Does the chick fling
bits of eggshell at the hen?
Does the pear spit
its seeds against the pear tree?

Who made all these squalling baby boys?

I am a reasonable, hardworking woman.
I sit at my desk & write
from eight to three.
When I emerge I do not ask your blessing.
What have I done but bleed
to get your curse?

Erica Jong

Poem For Molly's Fortieth Birthday

'Why do you
have stripes
in your forehead,
Mama?
Are you
old?'

Not old.
But not so
young
that I cannot
see
the world contracting
upon itself
& the circle
closing
at the end.

As the furrows
in my brow
deepen,
I can see
myself
sinking back
into that childhood
street
I walked along
with my grandfather,
thinking he was old
at sixty-three
since I was four,
as you are four
to my forty.

Forty years
to take
the road out . . .
Will another forty
take me

back?

Back to the street
I grew up on,
back to
my mother's breast.
back to the second
world war
of a second
child,
back
to the cradle
endlessly
rocking?

I am young
as you are
Molly-
yet with stripes
in my brow;
I earn my youth
as you must earn
your age.

These stripes
are decorations
for my valor-
forty years
of marching
to a war
I could not declare,
nor locate,
yet have somehow
won.

Now,
I begin
to unwind,
unravelling
the sleeves
of care
that have

stitched up
this brow,
unravelling
the threads
that have kept
me scared,
as I pranced
over the world,
seemingly fearless,
working
without a net,
knowing
if I fell
it would
only be
into that same
childhood street,
where I dreaded
to tread
on the lines-
not knowing
the lines
would someday
tread
on me.

Molly,
when you are forty,
read this poem
& tell me:
have we won
or lost
the war?

Erica Jong

Poem To Kabir

Kabir says
the breath inside the breath
is God

& I say to Kabir
you are the breath inside that breath
which is not to say
that the poet is God-

but only that God
uses the poet
as the wind
uses
a sail.

Erica Jong

Regret For Mimi Bailin

Regret is the young girl who sits in the snow
& stares at her hands.

They are bluer than shadows in snow.
They are bloodless as fear.
Her fingernail moons are white.

She wants to crawl into the palm
of her own hand.
She wants extra fingers to cover
the shame of her eyes.

She wants to follow her lifeline where it leads
but it plunges deeper
than the Grand Canyon.

She stands on the edge
still hoping
she can fly.

Erica Jong

Sailing Home

In the redwood house sailing off
into the ocean,
I sleep with you-
our dreams mingling,
our breath coming & going
like gusts of wind
trifling with the breakers,
our arms touching
& our legs & our hair
reaching out like tendrils
to intertwine.

The first time
I slept in your arms,
I knew I had come home.
Your body was a ship
& I rocked in it,
utterly safe in the breakers,
utterly sure of this love.
I fit into your arms
as a ship fits into water,
as a cactus roots in sand,
as the sun nestles into the blazing horizon.

The house sails all night.
Our dreams are the flags
of little ships,
your penis the mast
of one of the breeziest sailboats,
& my breasts floating,
half in & half out
of the water,
are like messages in bottles.

There is no point to this poem.
What the sea loses
always turns up again;
it is only a question of shores.

Self-Portrait

She was not a slender woman,
but her skin was milk
mixed in with strawberry jam
& between her legs the word purple was born
& her hair was the color of wheat & yellow butter.

Her eyes were dark as the North Atlantic sea.

She learned the untranslatable words of dawn.
She studied her own fear & wrote its verses.
She used the hole in her heart to play wind-music.
She built her book-houses over her empty cellar.

She nursed on the muse at first,
then became her own mother.

Erica Jong

Self-Portrait In Shoulder Stand

Old bag of bones
upside down,
what are you searching for
in poetry,
in meditation?

The mother you never had?

The child in you
that you did not conceive?

Death?

Ease from fear of death?

Revelation?

Dwelling in the house of clouds
where you imagine
you once lived?

'Born alone,
we depart alone.'
Someone said that
during meditation
& I nearly wept.

Oh melancholy lady
behind your clown face,
behind your wisecracks-
how heady it is
to let the ideas rush to your brain!

But even upside down,
you are sad.

Even upside down,
you think of your death.
Even upside down,

you curse the emptiness.

Meditating

on the immobile lotus,
your mind takes flight
like a butterfly
& dabbles in bloodred poppies
& purple heather.

Defying gravity,
defying death,
what makes you think
the body's riddle
is better solved
upside down?

Blood rushes to your head
like images that come too fast
to write.
After a life held in the double grips
of gravity & time,
after a headfirst birth
out of your mother's bowels
& into the earth,
you practice for the next.

You make your body light
so that in time,
feet first,
you will be born
into the sky.

Erica Jong

Sexual Soup

A man so sick that the sexual soup
cannot save him -

the chicken soup of sex
which cures everything:
tossed mane of noodles,
bits of pale white meat.
the globules of yellow fat
like love...

But he is a man so sick
no soup can save him.

His throat has healed into a scar.
Rage fills his guts.
He wants to diet on dust.

I offered to feed him
(spoon by spoon)
myself.

I offered my belly as a bowl.
I offered my hands as spoons,
my knees as tongs,
my breasts as the chafing dish
to keep us warm

I offered my navel
as a brandy snifter.

"My tongue is gone," he said,
"I have no teeth.
My mouth is with my mother in the grave.
I've offered up my hunger to the air,
my nostrils to the wind,
my sex to death,
my eyes to nothingness & dust."

"What do you lust for then?"

I asked.

"I lust for nothing."

Erica Jong

She Leaps

She leaps into the alien heart
of the passerby, the drunk,
the girl who spouts Freudian talk
over Szechuan food.

She is part herself,
part everyone.
'Thank you for writing the story of my life,'
her mash notes read.
& 'Can you tell me how to leave my husband?'
& 'Can you tell me how to find a husband?'
& 'Can you tell me how to write,
or how to feel,
or how to save my life?'

She knows nothing
but how to leap.
She has no answers for herself
or anyone.

One foot after another,
she flies through the air. . . .

She leaps over cracks
& breaks
her father's back.

Erica Jong

Sleep

I love to go to sleep,
When bed takes me like a lover
wrapping my limbs in
cool linen, soothing
the fretfulness
of day glaring like
the Cyclops' eye
in a forehead
of furrows.

But I wake
always reluctantly, brushing
the dreamcrumbs
from my lids,
walking sideways underwater
like a crab
spilling coffee,
knocking the mug
to the floor
where it shatters
in a muddy river
to my continuo of
'Shit, shit, shit!'

What if death
is only a forgetting
to wake in the morning,
a dream that goes on
into other corridors,
other chambers
draped with other silks,
libraries of unwritten books
whose kaleidoscopic pages
can be read
only by the pinneal eye,
music that can only be heard
by the seventh sense
or the eighth or ninth,
until we possess

an infinity of senses-
none of them
dependent on flesh?

What if our love of sleep
is only a foretaste
of the bliss that awaits us
when we do not have to wake again?

What frightens us so
about falling?
To drop the body and fly
should be as natural
as drifting into a dream.
But we are insomniacs
tossing on soaked sheets,
hanging on
to our intricate pain
while God with her sweet
Mona Lisa smile
sings lullabies
the ears of the living
cannot hear.

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

Statue

Cement up to the neck
& my head packed
with unsaid words.
A gullet full of pebbles,
a mouth
of cast concrete-
I am stuck
in a lovelessness so thick,
it seems my natural element.
My mouth closes
on stones.

Hand frozen to my chin,
my back a question mark,
my heart soldered
to its arteries,
my feet planted
in grass that cannot grow,
The Thinker ponders
ten more years of this:
a woman
living the life
of a statue.

Break free!
Melt the metal
in love's cauldron,
open doors, eyes, heart,
those frozen ventricles,
those stuck tongues,
those stuttering dependencies.

When the statue walks,
will the world dissolve?
When she shakes her shoulders,
will the sky shrug
& skitter off in space?

Or will the clouds cluster

to cover her,
& the blue wind gather
at her shoulders
& the men streak by
like jet trails in the air,
utterly ephemeral?

Erica Jong

Still Life With Tulips

Because you did, I too arrange flowers,
Watching the pistils just like insolent tongues
And the hard, red flesh of the petals
Widening beneath my eyes. They move like the hands
Of clocks, seeming not to move except
When I turn my gaze; then savagely
In the white room, they billow and spread
Until their redness engulfs me utterly.

Mother, you are far away and claim
In mournful letters that I do not need you;
Yet here in this sunny room, your tulips
Devour me, sucking hungrily
My watery nourishment, filling my house
Like a presence, like an enemy.

Geared to your intervals as the small hand
Of a clock repeats the larger, I,
Your too-faithful daughter, still drag behind you,
Turning in the same slow circles.

Across the years and distances, my hands
Among these fierce, red blossoms repeat
Your gestures. I hope my daughter never writes:
'Because you did, I too arrange flowers.'

Erica Jong

Student Revolution

After the teach-in
we smeared the walls with
our solidarity,
looked left, & saw
Marx among the angels,
singing the blues.

The students march,
I (spectator)
follow.
Here (as everywhere)
the Polizei
are clean, are clean.

In Frankfurt,
the whores lean out
their windows, screaming:
'Get a job - you dirty
hippies!' Or words
(auf Deutsch) to that effect.

I'm also waiting
for the Revolution,
friends.
Surely, my poems
will get better.
Surely, I'll no longer
fear my dreams.
Surely I won't murder
my capitalist father
each night
just to inherit
his love.

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

Sunjuice

What happens when the juice of the sun
drenches you
with its lemony tang, its tart sweetness
& your whole body stings with singing
so that your toes sing to your mouth
& your navel whistles to your breasts
& your breasts wave to everyone
as you walk down the summer street?

What will you do
when nothing will do
but to throw your arms around trees
& men
& greet every woman as sister
& to run naked in the spray of the fire hydrants
with children of assorted colors?

Will you cover your drenched skin
with woolen clothes?
Will you wear a diaper of herringbone tweed?
Will you piece together a shroud of figleaves
& lecture at the University
on the Lives of the Major Poets,
the History of Despair in Art?

Erica Jong

Tachycardia

In the chest is caged bat
who seeks escape
through the mouth.

He flaps his wings
& the molars shiver.

He flaps his wings
& the thyroid bulges
like a snake
that has swallowed
a mouse.

He flaps his wings
uttering shrill cries
heard only by the ears
of the teeth.

He wants to soar
into the great world.
He is blind
as a bat.

You must convince him
that the chest
is a cradle
& a room
with a view.

Past the tonsils
lies terror.

Past the teeth
lies death.

Past the lips
lie lies,

lies, lies.

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 Bed Of The World

The great bed of the world
arching over graves
over Babi Yar
with its multitude of bones,
with battalions of screams
frozen in a concrete glacier,
with pillows of earth
and comforters of green grass
covering all that dead flesh.

Dead flesh shall live again-
a dream in god's endless night-
rise green out of the earth
as grass, as trees, as tomato stalks
bearing a bright red fruit
and the feuds of man-and womankind
shall be fed again from the same seeds:
the tomato, the mythic pomegranate, the biblical apple
all rising from the grass that springs
out of the screams of stopped mouths.

Sometimes I dream
that my bed is built over a ravine,
the ravine of Babi Yar, any ravine
where thousands died
and I moan in pleasure to propitiate the earth,
to make fruit ripen
and trees wave green leaves like banners
all because love can touch me still.

It is never enough to create.
The beast must feed its meat teeth too.
Out of the screaming mouth of earth
we feed the grass that covers
all our beds.

I wish I did not know all that I know.
Galaxies spin, grass grows, and people kill.
We are the only race to murder for our dreams-

and not for hunger,
hungering for dreams

Erica Jong

The Birth Of The Water Baby

Little egg,
little nub,
full complement of
fingers, toes,
little rose blooming
in a red universe,
which once wanted you less
than emptiness,
but now holds you
fast,
containing your rapid heart
beat under its
slower one
as the earth
contains the sea...

O avocado pit
almost ready to sprout,
tiny fruit tree
within sight
of the sea,
little swimming fish,
little land lover,
hold on!
hold on!

Here, under my heart
you'll keep
till it's time
for us to meet,
& we come apart
that we may come
together,
& you are born
remembering
the wavesound
of my blood,
the thunder of my heart,
& like your mother

always dreaming
of the sea.

Erica Jong

The Book With Four Backs

I put our books face to face
so they could talk.
They whispered about us.

I put yours on top of mine.
They would not mate.

Like poor dumb pandas in the London Zoo,
they would not come together.

I put them back to back.
They would not sleep.

I put them right side up to upside down.
They would not lick each other's wounds.

The night we met
you fed me fish eggs & dark beer.
We spoke of animals & Shakespeare.
You talked about acidic inks & papers.
You told me how our books digest themselves.

You laid the pages of your body over mine.
You printed my face with kisses.
The letters fell into a heap under our bed.
The sheets were dust.
The fish eggs swam our mouths.

Erica Jong

The Buddha In The Womb

Bobbing in the waters of the womb,
little godhead, ten toes, ten fingers
& infinite hope,
sails upside down through the world.

My bones, I know, are only a cage
for death.

Meditating, I can see my skull,
a death's head,
lit from within
by candles
which are possibly the suns
of other galaxies.

I know that death
is a movement toward light,
a happy dream
from which you are loath to awaken,
a lover left
in a country
to which you have no visa,
& I know that the horses of the spirit
are galloping, galloping, galloping
out of time
& into the moment called NOW.

Why then do I care
for this upside-down Buddha
bobbling through the world,
his toes, his fingers
alive with blood
that will only sing & die.

There is a light in my skull
& a light in his.
We meditate on our bones only
to let them blow away
with fewer regrets.

Flesh is merely a lesson.
We learn it
& pass on.

Erica Jong

The Catch

You take me to the restaurant where one
plays God over a fish tank. The fat trout
pace their green cage, waiting to be taken
out of an element. Who knows what they know?
There are thirteen in a tank meant
for goldfish. I don't care which one I eat.

But the waiter expects a performance,
con brio. This is a ritual
solemn as wine-tasting or the Last Judgement.
Eating is never so simple as hunger.
Between the appetite and its satisfaction
falls the net, groping blindly in dark water.

The fish startle and thrash. You make your catch,
flourishing a bit for the waiter
so as not to be thought a peasant. You force
air into the trout's gills as if he were Adam,
and send him squirming toward the kitchen
to be born. Then it's my turn. I surprise

myself with my dexterity, almost
enjoying the game. A liter of wine
later, the fish return, foppishly dressed
in mushrooms and pimentos, their eyes
dreamily hazed. Darling, I am drunk. I watch you pluck

the trout's ribs out of your perfect teeth.

Erica Jong

The Central Passion

What is the central passion
of a life?
To please mummy & daddy?
To find a home for their furniture?
To found a family of one's own,
possibly a dynasty?
To fill the world with more books
that have no readers
or books that have too many
& kill
too many trees?

What is the passion
that drives us
as the wind drives
a winged seed?
To reproduce ourselves,
then die?
To meet God once
if only in a dream?
To reach enlightenment
through pain
or pleasure?

Or perhaps just
to question
as I am doing now,
& to teach by questioning. . .

Yes- this is both passion
& power
enough.

Erica Jong

The Color Of Snow

For David Karetsky (April 14, 1940-March 12, 1991) , killed in an avalanche

Putting the skis down
in the white snow,
the wind singing,
the blizzard of time
going past your eyes,

it is a little
like being snowed in
in the Connecticut house
on a day when the world
goes away

and only the white dog
follows you out
to make fresh tracks
in the long blue shadow
of the mountain.

We are all halfway there,
preferring not
to think about it.

You went down the mountain
first,
in a blaze of light,
reminding us
to seize our lives,
to live with the wind
whistling in our ears,
and the light bedazzling
the tips of our skis

and the people we love
waiting in the lodge below
scribbling lines
on paper the color
of snow,

knowing there is no
holding on
but only the wind singing
and these lines of light
shining
in the fresh snow.

Erica Jong

The Cover Of The Book

The cover of the book
is astral violet,
& within it
are poems,
most of them
earthbound,
but for one
to the poet's
daughter
which soars
into
the empyrean
on umbilical wings.

Oh we poets
are so afraid
of making babies-
& yet
of all
the fleshly chains
that bind us,
our children
are the chains
that bind
most closely
to heaven.

How can that be?

Poetry
is an astral
affliction.

Poets are always
saving themselves
for their poems.
Yet in that saving
there is no grace,
while in the child

there is distraction,
chaos, disorder

& through that fleshly chaos

peace.

Erica Jong

The Death Of Goddesses

It used to be hard
for women,
snowed in their white lives,
white lies,
to write books
with that fine frenzy
which commends genius
to posterity,
yet estranges it
from its closest
friends.

Women were friends to all,
& being too friendly
they could not command
the unfriendly prerogatives
of genius,
though some were
geniuses still,
destroying
only themselves
with the torment
of the unfriendly ghost
trapped in a friendly
form.

Oh the women who died
dissembling friendship
for the world!
Oh the women who turned
the dagger inward
when it wished
to go out,
who impaled themselves
on Womanhood itself!

No vampire
could be
as greedy for blood,

no father or husband
as bullying.
A woman punishing herself
with her own pain
is a fierce opponent indeed.

It is self against self,
dagger to dagger,
blood of her blood,
blood of her daughter,
blood of her mother,
her menses, her moon,
all pooled together,
one crimson sea.

It is the awful auto da fé,
the sublime seppuku,
Sante Sebastiana
as archer
& victim too.

The arrow flies from her bow.
She runs, fleet as Diana,
& stops it
with her breast.

Enough!
cried the Women-Who-Cared.
Henceforth we will turn
our anger where it belongs.
We will banish the whitest lies.
We will speak the black truth as it is.
Our father- we spit back their sperm.
Our husbands- we spit back their names.
Our brothers- we suck back our love.

The self-righteous inherit the earth,
& anger speaks louder than love.
Love is a softness
the weak cannot afford,
& sex a Darwinian bribe.

But who wants the earth as a gift
when it is empty as space,
when women grow hard
as bronze madonnas
& Diana loves only her stag?

When Persephone stays in hell
the entire year,
then how can spring
begin?

Erica Jong

The Dirty Laundry Poem

This is the dirty laundry poem-
because we have traveled from town to town
accumulating soiled linen & sweaty shirts
& blue-jeans caked & clotted with our juice
& teeshirts crumpled by our gloriously messy passion
& underwear made stiff by all our joy.

I have come home to wash my clothes.
They patter on the bathroom floor like rain.
The water drips away the days till you.
The dirty water speaks to me of love.

Steamy in the bubbles of our love,
I have plunged my hands into hot water
as I might plunge them
in your heart.

After years of spots & splatters,
I am finally coming clean.
I will fly to you with a suitcase of fresh laundry,
strip my clothes off, heap them on the floor,
& let you scrub my body with your love.

Erica Jong

The Ecological Apocalypse

Because he dreams of seeding the world with words
his eyes bite
She looks He looks away
He is snow-blind
from staring at her breasts
They make love
This is marked by asterisks
those gaps
disguised as stars

He thinks the future is a mouth
She invites him
into her apple

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 Fork To Take

I had pegged you as
protégé, adoptee,
someone I could save.

The last thing
I needed
was
another lover.

You call yourself
'an accident
looking
for a place
to happen.'
I call you
my sweet, my love,
not only
because you carry knives
for me
& want to beat up
all my
ex-husbands-
but because
you can laugh
at yourself
for wanting to.

We dream
of the baby
we will never have.
The little Jewish WASP
with golden blue eyes,
poems on the tip of his tongue.
your height, my hair,
& jokes that hit
their targets
on a slant.

He will never be

in the Social Register.
But will he know
which fork to take-
as you did
when you drove
off my road,
slyly taking the wrong fork
in order to stay
the night?

O you are sly,
my sweet wheat
looking for
a harvest.

Shall I reap you?
Shall I do to you
what the hurricane
does with the waving
grain?
Shall I thresh & bind you,
run barefoot
through your body
trying to stamp out
death?

Or shall I merely
let you
lift me up
like the wind spinning
an errant seed,

& let it
take me
where it will,
right fork,
wrong fork,
no fork
at all,
since we will take
the same path
through

the air
after all?

Erica Jong

The Heart, The Child, The World

Out in the world, the child
cries for the mother
as the wound cries for salt
as the lover cries
for her unrequited lover
as the ice cries out
for melting in the spring.

My heart is a spring
that pumps red blood.
I would give my child,
my girl child, my daughter
the vision of a mother
who does not flinch
when the heavy heel of man
comes down,
who loves the penis
when it pumps rich red blood
but values the wholeness
of her heart
above that battering organ,
that dumb implement,
which can so easily turn
from kind to cruel.

My heart is out in the world
like an orphan howling
on a street corner.
I want a warm, safe place
to hide my books, my child,
my heart
that is scarred,
seamed like a belly
which has given birth
to an imperious baby Caesar

but still,
despite its bursting fullness,

The Keys

Broken ivories
playing
the blue piano
of the sea.

We have come
from the bitter city
to heal ourselves.
We have come
looking for a patch of beach
not yet built into a fortress
of real-estate greed,
a coral reef
not yet picked clean
of buried treasure,
not yet bare of birds.

The first night in the Keys,
I dreamed I was a bird
soaring over a hilly city,
soaring & dipping
like a gull or egret.
& I thought:
'Ah- this is a flying dream!
Enjoy it.'

But I really think
that my soul
has been transported
for a night
into the body of
a bird
& I was flying.

I woke up
exhausted,
arms weary,
eyes red.
The beach was dazzling

with its white sand,
the sun blinding,
& I seemed to know the palm trees
from above
as well as below.

They root in the sand
with elephant feet,
yet they also root
their delicate fronds
in air.
& these are a comfort
as you fly
half bird, half human
through a dream of sky.

Everything was new
to a spirit
so divided
between two kingdoms.
The water was alive
with fish,
the air with birds
& palm fronds,
clouds, thunderous presences
of rain
gathering & parting,
& fiery sun playing through.

I knew
that I stood
on a patch of earth
connected to the sky,
that my heart beat
with the sea,
that my arms moved
with the clouds,
that my flesh
was finally irrelevant
though it surrounded me
as the case of a piano
surrounds its strings,

while the fingers play
on the ivory keys
& the human music
rises to the sky.

Erica Jong

The Long Tunnel Of Wanting You

This is the long tunnel of wanting you.
Its walls are lined with remembered kisses
wet & red as the inside of your mouth,
full & juicy as your probing tongue,
warm as your belly against mine,
deep as your navel leading home,
soft as your sleeping cock beginning to stir,
tight as your legs wrapped around mine,
straight as your toes pointing toward the bed
as you roll over & thrust your hardness
into the long tunnel of my wanting,
seeding it with dreams & unbearable hope,
making memories of the future,
straightening out my crooked past,
teaching me to live in the present present tense
with the past perfect and the uncertain future
suddenly certain for certain
in the long tunnel of my old wanting
which before always had an ending
but now begins & begins again
with you, with you, with you.

Erica Jong

The Man Giving Birth In The Dark

The man giving birth in the dark
has died
& come back
to life again,

is stretching out his arms
in the dark
as if to embrace
favorite ghosts.

His heart stops
& starts.
Once more
he has been pardoned

for nothing.
It is my father
making the darkness
into daughters.

Erica Jong

The Man Under The Bed

The man under the bed
The man who has been there for years waiting
The man who waits for my floating bare foot
The man who is silent as dustballs riding the darkness
The man whose breath is the breathing of small white butterflies
The man whose breathing I hear when I pick up the phone
The man in the mirror whose breath blackens silver
The boneman in closets who rattles the mothballs
The man at the end of the end of the line

I met him tonight I always meet him
He stands in the amber air of a bar
When the shrimp curl like beckoning fingers
& ride through the air on their toothpick skewers
When the ice cracks & I am about to fall through
he arranges his face around its hollows
he opens his pupilless eyes at me
For years he has waited to drag me down
& now he tells me
he has only waited to take me home
We waltz through the street like death & the maiden
We float through the wall of the wall of my room

If he's my dream he will fold back into my body
His breath writes letters of mist on the glass of my cheeks
I wrap myself around him like the darkness
I breathe into his mouth
& make him real

Erica Jong

The Muse Who Came To Stay

You are the first muse who came to stay.
The others began & ended with a wish,
or a glance or a kiss between stanzas;
the others strode away in the pointed boots of their fear

or were kicked out by the stiletto heels of mine,
or merely padded away in bare feet
when the ground was too hard or cold
or as hot as white sand baked under the noonday sun.

But you flew in on the wings of your smile,
powered by the engine of your cock,
driven by your lonely pumping heart,
rooted by your arteries to mine.

We became a tree with a double apical point,
reaching equally toward what some call heaven,
singing in the wind with our branches,
sharing the sap & syrup
which makes the trunk grow thick.

We are seeding the ground with poems & children.
We are the stuff of books & new-grown forests.
We are renewing the earth with our roots,
the air with our pure oxygen songs,
the nearby seas with leaves we lose
only to grow the greener ones again.

I used to leap from tree to tree,
speaking glibly of Druids,
thinking myself a latter-day dryad,
or a wood nymph from the stony city,
or some other chimerical creature,
conjured in my cheating poet's heart.

But now I stay, knowing the muse is mine,
knowing no books will banish him
& no off-key songs will drive him away.

I being & begin; I whistle in & out of tune.
If the ending is near, I do not think of it.
If the drought comes, we will make our own rain.
If the muse is grounded, I will make him fly,
& if he falls, I will catch him in my arms
until he flies with me again.

Erica Jong

The Other Side Of The Page

I pass to the other side of the page.

-Pablo Neruda

On the other side of the page
where the last days go,
where the lost poems go,
where the forgotten dreams
breaking up like morning fog

go

go

go

I am preparing myself for death.

I am teaching myself emptiness:
the gambler's hunger for love,
the nun's hunger for God,
the child's hunger for chocolate
in the brown hours
of the dark.

I am teaching myself love:
the lean love of marble
kissed away by rain,
the cold kisses of snow crystals
on granite grave markers,

the soul kisses of snow
as it melts in the spring.

On the other side of the page
I lie making a snow angel
with the arcs
of my arms.

I lie like a fallen skier
who never wants to get up.

I lie with my poles, my pens
flung around me in the snow
too far to reach.

The snow seeps
into the hollows of my bones
& the calcium white of the page
silts me in like a fossil.

I am fixed in my longing for speech,
I am buried in the snowbank of my poems,
I am here where you find me

dead

on the other side of the page.

Erica Jong

The Perfect Poet

He says he is a perfect poet.
He lives alone, with his perfect mate.
& sometimes they don't even speak,
So perfectly do they 'communicate.'

He lives alone, his greatest pleasures are
His pipes, his books, his wife's behind-
Which he will often pinch to hear her laugh;
He's got a perfect love for womankind.

He seldom writes, distrusting language as
A clumsy tool, unequal to his thoughts:
He uses it as rarely as he can
(No doubt to punish it for all its faults).

But when he writes, he keeps the upper hand
(On principle, since words are enemies).
He melts them down, then counterfeits his own-
A kind of literary alchemy.

He's fortunate to have a perfect muse.
A live-in muse, who cooks inspiringly;
And sometimes after an ambrosial meal,
He'll grab his pen, composing feverishly

A perfect poem, describing in detail
The salad, wine, the roast in buttery baste.
And reading it, his musing wife agrees
That every line smacks of his perfect taste.

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 As A Feeler Of Pain

What makes a poet?

Many have tried to guess.
Is it a voice
like a conduit,
a plainspokenness to grief,
the hairs of the head
dancing on end,
the blood swarming
with the voices
of all those who have died,
will die,
& will also be born?

Is it a catch
in the throat
that awakens the eyes,
is it in the eyes themselves
or is it something
in the heart?

I think it is pain-
an openness to pain,
so that the least leaf
cuts the hand
& the smallest tear
cuts the cheek
like jagged crystal,

so that the world
is a sick infant
& the poet its mother,
praying, crooning, promising
to be good
if only the cure
takes.

There is, of course,
no cure.

Poetry does not cure
the poet
& the poet
does not cure the world.

Usually he catches
the world's diseases
& dies
even before his time.

But against all odds
& all indifference,
another one is born.
The world must have
someone to feel its pain
& speak of it.

The poet is that mouth.

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 Raspberries In My Driveway

Nature will bear the closest inspection . She invites us to lay our eyes level with her smallest leaf, and take an insect view of its plain.

-Thoreau

The raspberries
in my driveway
have always
been here
(for the whole eleven years
I have owned
but have not owned
this house),
yet
I have never
tasted them
before.

Always on a plane.
Always in the arms
of man, not God,
always too busy,
too fretful,
too worried
to see
that all along
my driveway
are red, red raspberries
for me to taste.

Shiny and red,
without hairs-
unlike the berries
from the market.
Little jewels-
I share them
with the birds!

On one perches
a tiny green insect.

I blow her off.
She flies!
I burst the raspberry
upon my tongue.

In my solitude
I commune
with raspberries,
with grasses,
with the world.

The world was always
there before,
but where
was I?

Ah raspberry-
if you are so beautiful
upon my ready tongue,
imagine
what wonders
lie in store for me!

Erica Jong

The Rose

You gave me a rose
last time we met.

I told myself
if it bloomed
our love would bloom,
& if it died-

O I did not
consider
the possibility.

It died.

Though I cut
the stem
on a slant
as my mother
taught me,
though I dropped
an aspirin
in the water,

it hung its head
like a spent cock
& died.

It stands
on my desk now-
straight green stalk,
blood-red clot
of bud
drooping
like a hanged man's
head.

Does this mean
we are doomed?
Does this mean

all lovers
are doomed?

O my love-
I have not read roses
as amulets
in seven years. . . .

Which doom
is worse?
To love
& lose?

Or to lose
love
altogether
& not care
whether roses

live or die?

Erica Jong

The Sheets

We used to meet
on this corner
in the same wind.
It fought us up the hill
to your house,
blew us in the door.
The elevator rose
on guests of stale air
fed on ancient dinners.
Your room smelled
of roach spray and roses.

In those days
we went to bed with Marvell.
The wind ruffled sheets and pages,
spoke to us through walls.
For hours I used to lie
with my ear to your bare chest,
listening for the sea.

Now the wind is tearing
the building down.
The sheets are rising.

They billow through the air like sails.

White with your semen
holding invisible prints
of the people we were,
the people we might have been,
they said across the country
disguised as clouds.

Momentarily they snag
on the Rocky Mountains,
then rise
shredded into streamers.

Now they are bannered westward

over California
where your existence
is rumored.

Erica Jong

The Surgery Of The Sea

At the furthestmost reach of the sea
where Atlantis sinks under the wake of the waves,
I have come to heal my life.

I knit together like a broken arm.
The salt fills the crevices of bone.
The sea takes all the fragments of my lives
& grinds them home.

I wake up in a waterbed with you.
The sea is singing & my skin
sings against your skin.
The waves are all around us & within.
We sleep stuck to each other's salt.

I am healing in your arms.
I am leaning to write without the loss of love.
I am growing deeper lungs here by the sea.
The waves are knives; they glitter & cut clean.

This is the sea's surgery.
This is the cutting & the healing both.
This is where bright sunlight warms the bone,
& fog erases us, then makes us whole.

Erica Jong

The Truce Between The Sexes

For a long time unhappy
with my man,
I blamed men,
blamed marriage, blamed
the whole bleeding world,
Because I could not lie in bed with him
without lying to him
or else to myself,
& lying to myself
became increasingly hard
as my poems
struck rock.

My life & my poems lived apart;
I had to marry them,
& marrying them
meant divorcing him,
divorcing the lie.

Now I lie in bed
with my poems on the sheets
& a man I love
sleeping or reading
at my side.

Because I love him,
I do not think of him
as 'Men,'
but as my friend.
Hate generalizes;
love is particular.

He is not Men, man, male-
all those maddening m's
muttering like machine-gun spittle,
but only a person like me,
dreaming, vulnerable, scared,
his dreams
opening into rooms

where the chairs
are wishes you can sit on
& the rugs are wonderful
with oriental birds.

The first month we lived together
I was mad with joy,
thinking that a person with a penis
could dream, tell jokes, even cry.
Now I found it usual,
& when other women sputter
of their rage,
I look at them blankly,
half comprehending
those poor medieval creatures
from a dark, dark age.

I wonder about myself.
Was I always so fickle?
Must politics always be personal?
If I struck oil,
would I crusade
for depletion allowances?

Erica, Erica,
you are hard on yourself.
Lie back & enjoy the cease-fire.

Trouble will come again.
Sex will grow horns & warts.
The white sheets of this bed
will be splattered with blood.
Just wait.

But I don't believe it.
There will be trouble enough,
but a different sort.

Erica Jong

The Widower

She left him in death's egg,
the bone sack & the gunny sack,
the bag of down & feathers-all black . . .
Somehow he couldn't get back.

It was night,
a night of shark-faced jets
winking brighter than blue stars,
a night of poisoned cities
mushrooming beneath the eyes of jets,
a night of missile silos
sulking in the desert,
a night of babies howling in the alleys,
a night of cats.

She left a death so huge
his life got lost in it.
She left a bloodstained egg
he had to hatch.

Erica Jong

The Woman Of It

Your slit so like mine:
the woman of it,
the warm womanwide of thigh,
& the comfort of it-
knowing your nipples like mine,
& the likeness of it,
watching the mirror make love,
& the lovematch;
the mirror of you
in me.

I have creamed my hands
in the cave;
I have known my mother.
Years to get past
the barrier reefs of words.
We were natural together
as two little girls in the bath.
We hoped to be women someday,
we hoped to grow up.

Erica Jong

There is a white wood house near Hampstead Heath

There is a white wood house near Hampstead Heath
in whose garden the nightingale still sings.
Though Keats is dead, the bird who sang of death
returns with melodies, on easeful wings.

A lock of hair the poet's love received
remains in the room where first it was shorn;
An heirloom, its history half-believed,
its strands now faded and its ribbon worn.

On polished floors, through squares of summer sun
I felt his footsteps move, as if the elf
- deceiving elf, he called her - had not done
with making mischief to amuse herself.

I saw him clip that tousled lock of hair,
and though he did not offer it to me,
I felt that I was privileged, standing there,
and took his gesture for my legacy.

Erica Jong

There Is Only One Story

There is only one story:
he loved her,
then stopped loving her,
while she did not
stop loving him.

There is only one story:
she loved him,
then stopped loving him,
while he did not
stop loving her.

The truth is simple:
you do not die
from love.

You only wish
you did.

Erica Jong

This Element

Looking for a place
where we might turn off
the inner dialogue,
the monologue
of futures & regrets,
of pasts not past enough
& futures that may never come
to pass,
we found this boat
bobbing in the blue,
this refuge amid reefs,
this white hull
within this azure sibilance of sea,
this central rocking
so like the rocking
before birth.

Venus was born of the waters,
borne over them
to teach us about love-
our only sail
on the seas of our lives
as death is
our only anchor.

If we return again & again
to the sea
both in our dreams
& for our love affairs
it is because
this element alone
understands our pasts
& futures
as she makes them

one.

Erica Jong

Time Leak

For centuries
we have lain like this,
our warmths intermingled,
our hearts beating
the same two-step,
& our breaths
& our limbs
intertwined.

Life after life,
I return to flesh
to join my flesh
to your flesh.
Sometimes I am the woman
& you the man;
sometimes,
the other way around.

It hardly matters.
Flesh after flesh,
our spirits return
to mingle.
Death is no barrier
& life's noisy matinee
where the suburban ladies
cough & sputter
& their programs crackle like kindling
merely goes on & on.

They sit on their deaths
as if they were sitting
on fur coats,
while we touch
for the first time
remembering
the next.

Erica Jong

To A Transatlantic Mirror

When we become truly ourselves, we just become a swinging door. . .
-Suzuki

Sick of the self,
the self-seducing self-
with its games, its fears,
its misty memories, and its prix fixe menu
of seductions (so familiar
even to the seducer)
that he grows sick
of looking at himself
in the mirrored ceiling
before he takes the plunge into this new
distraction from the self
which in fact leads back
to self.

Self-the prison.
Love-the answer and the door.
And yet the self should also be a door,
swinging, letting loves both in and out,
for change
is the world's only fixity, and fixity
her foremost lie.

How to trust love
which has so often
betrayed the betrayer,
seduced the seducer,
and then turned out
to be not even love?
We are jaded,
divorced from our selves
without ever having found
ourselves-and yet we
long for wholeness
if not fixity,
for harmony
if not music of the spheres.

If life is a flood
and there is no ark,
then where do the animals float
two by two?

I refuse to believe
that the flesh falls
from their bones
without ever understanding
ever coming,
and I refuse to believe
that we must leave
this life entirely alone.

Much harumphing
across the ocean,
my brother poet coughs,
clears his throat
(he smokes too much),
and gazes into the murky
depths of his word-processor,
as if it were a crystal ball.
I do not know
all that hides
in his heart of darkness
but I know I love
the thoughts
that cloud the surface
of his crystal ball.

He longs to leap
headlong into his future
and cannot.
This chapter's finished,
his self peels back
a skin.
Snakes hiss,
shedding their scales.
The goddess smiles.
She sends her missives
only to the brave.

Erica Jong

To James Boswell In London

Boswell - you old rake - I have tried to imitate
your style; but it is no use; my dialogues are
all between my selves: and though I sit up late,
make endless notes and jottings that I hope will jar
my memory - it is in vain - for in the end
I have no Dr. Johnson but myself.

The difference is (I think) between our lives. You spend
the morning at the coffee house, nourish yourself
with talk and kippers before proceeding on to dine.
A ramble across London perks the appetite.
Every step is an adventure; the written line
distills itself from life. How can you help but write?

I consort with books while you see men, haunt the shelves
where your London lies buried. Your book once opened,
I become the ghost, a pale phantom who delves
into your life to borrow moments penned
two hundred years ago. I roam your world ignored -
while my own life, waiting outside, questions my motives.

A man should never live more than he can record
you say; but what if he records more than he lives?
My journal swarms with me and even I am bored.
I am all my personae - children, lovers, wives,
philosophers and country-wenches. Though I give them
different robes and wigs to wear, all converse alike;
all reason falsely with the same stratagem;
each suspects the logic of the other, dislikes
him, yet cannot prove him wrong. Petty cavils
grow to monstrous issues, belabored arguments
resolve themselves only in sleep; darkness prevails.
Only the living find solace in common sense.

Safe, preserved from the rape of the world, I grow
dishonest, and pen my crooked words, for one can lie
with ease about those things the world will never know.
Conversation - that clearinghouse for thoughts - denied,
the mind gets gouty and the conscience needs a cane.

Notions unuttered seem to echo through the brain -
and our monologues are doomed to the same end.
We all think better - interrupted by a friend.

Erica Jong

To Jon In October

Knowing our lives a drowse
towards death
(attended by dogs
& children)
how can it not matter
that I remember
(day after day)
that one day
we shall lose
each other,
lose the lights
in each other's eyes
to death,
& drift off
to other universes.

Love shall not save us
from being alone at the end,
& the daughter we made
in that fine high exuberance
of having found each other
shall not save us either.

We shall go off
into the ether alone,
trying to remember
(as the threads unravel
& the brain cells turn
to fluffy cumulus clouds)

that on clear October days
like this one,
when the hills were
red with maple,
gold with oak,
we bumped along in the Jeep
reminding each other:
'Wake up! Wake up!
This will not last forever!'

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 Pablo Neruda

Again & again
I have read your books
without ever wishing to know you.

I suck the alphabet of blood.
I chew the iron filings of your words.
I kiss your images like moist mouths
while the black seeds of your syllables
fly, fly, fly
into my lungs.

Untranslated, untranslatable,
you are rooted inside me-
not you-but the you
of your poems:

the man of his word,
the lover who digs into the alien soil
of one North American woman
& plants a baby-
love-child of Whitman
crossed with the Spanish language,
embryo, sapling, half-breed
of my tongue.

I saw you once-
your flesh-
at Columbia.
My alma mater
& you the visiting soul.

Buddha-like
you sat before a Buddha;
& the audience
craned its neck
to take you in.

Freak show-
visiting poet.

You sat clothed
in your thick
imperious flesh.

I wanted to comfort you
& not to stare.
Our words knew each other.
That was enough.

Now you are dead
of fascism & cancer-
your books scattered,
the oil cruet on the floor.

The sea surges through your house
at Isla Negra,
& the jackboots
walk on water.

Poet of cats & grapefruits,
of elephant saints;
poet of broken dishes
& Machu Picchu;
poet of panthers
& pantheresses;
poet of lemons,
poet of lemony light.

The flies swarm
thicker than print on a page,
& poetry blackens
like overripe bananas.
The fascists you hated,
the communists you loved,
obscure the light, the lemons
with their buzzing.

We were together
on the side of light.
We walked together
though we never met.

The eyes are not political,
nor the tastebuds,
& the flesh tastes salty always
like the sea;
& the sea
turns back the flies.

Erica Jong

To The Goddess

Goddess, I come to you
my neck wreathed with rosebuds,
my head filled with visions of infants,
my palms open to your silver nails,
my eyes open to your rays of illumination,
my vagina & my womb gaping
to be filled by your radiance. . .
O goddess, I would be a worthy vessel.

Impermanence- all is impermanence.
The cock rises to fall again;
the woman fills only to empty
in a convulsion that shakes the world;
the poet grows to become a voice
only to lose that voice when death takes her.
A stroke cancels her upon the page-
& yet I open her book & a chill wind blows from eternity.

Goddess, I come to you
wreathed in tears, in losses, in whistling winds.
I wrap the witch's herbs around my neck
to ward off the impermanence that is our common fate.
The herbs dry & crumble,
as my face grows the map of my anxieties,
& my daughter leaps up like a vine
twining around the trellis of impermanence.

O goddess, teach me to praise loss,
death & the passing of all things- for from this flux
I know your blessings flow.

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

To X. (With Ephemeral Kisses)

I hear you will not fall in love with me
because I come without a guarantee,
because someday I may depart at whim
and leave you desolate, abandoned, grim.
If that's the case, what use to be alive?
In loving life you love what can't survive:
and if you grow too fond and lose your head,
it's all for nought-for someday you'll be dead.
Maintain a cool detachment through the years.
Wear blinders, dear, put cotton in your ears.
Since worms will taste the tongue that tastes the wine,
burst not the grape against your palate fine.
With care, your puny heart will still be whole
the day they come to fetch your tepid soul.
And as that strumpet, Life, deals her last blow,
you'll have this final consolatio:
you'll snap your flippant fingers as you fall,
and say, 'I never cared for her at all!'

Erica Jong

Total Eclipse

Not wanting to write
for fear that anything-
the passion for the page,
the love of carbon ribbons & erasers-
will distract me from your face,
from your eyes green
as the flickering base of flames,
& your tarnished copper hair.

My love is thick as rust
& just as hard to scrape off.
It glows like the green roofs of paris:
it shines in the sun like dropped pennies.

I fix on your face
until I am blurred & bleared,
until my eyes cannot focus
& all words become one.

Oh let me write you into my life!
I am afraid of rust & tarnish,
but even more afraid of this gleam.

When my eyes have taken you in,
when my body has eaten
& spat you out,
when my heart remembers to beat
& my fingers remember the pen-

will I still remember you then,
boyish & sly-
yet a total eclipse of my sun?

Erica Jong

Touch

The house of the body
is a stately manor
open for nothing
never to the public.

But
for the owner of the house,
the key-holder-
the body swings open
like Ali Baba's mountain
glistening with soft gold
& red jewels.

These cannot be stolen
or sold for money.
They only glisten
when the mountain opens
by magic
or its own accord.

The gold triangle of hair,
its gentle ping,
the pink quartz crystals
of the skin,
the ruby nipples,
the lapis
of the veins
that swim the breast. . .

The key-holder
is recognized
by the way he holds
the body.
He is recognized
by touch.

Touch is the first sense to awaken
after the body's little death
in sleep.

Touch is the first sense
to alert the raw red infant
to a world of pain.

The body glimmers
on its dark mountain
pretending ignorance of this.

Erica Jong

Unrequited

Parachuting
down through clouds
shaped like whales & sharks,
dolphins & penguins,
pelicans & gulls,
we reach
the purple hills
of a green-hearted island
ringed
with volcanic rock
bathed
by cobalt waters
reefed
by whitest coral
tenanted
by sea urchins & sponge
& visited
by barracuda
& tourists.

The dictator
of this island
is the sun.
The Secret Police
is the sweet
fragrance of cane.
Frangipani grows
in the uplands;
the salt flats
reek
by the sea.

I want to buy it,
to hide here,
to stay,
to teach all the people
to write,
to orchestrate the stars
in the palm trees

& teach the jellyfish
not to bite.

Oh dark volcanic
wine!
Oh collapsed parachute
filled with kisses!
Oh blue-bottle bits
ground
into jewels
by the sand!

Whoever loves islands
must love the sea,
& the sea
loves no one
but herself.

Erica Jong

Venice, November, 1966

With his head full of Shakespearean tempests
and old notions of poetic justice,
he was ready with his elegies
the day the ocean sailed into the square.

'The sea,' he wrote, 'is a forgiving element,
and history only the old odor of blood.
She will come to rest on the soft floor
of the world, barnacled like a great pirate ship,
and blind fish-mouthing like girls before a glass-
will bump, perhaps, San Marco's brittle bones.'

Pleased with these images, he paused
and conjured visions of a wet apocalypse:
the blown church bobbing like a monstrous water toy,
Doge Dandolo's bronze horses from Byzantium
pawing the black waves, incredulous pigeons
hovering like gulls over the drowning square,
mosaic saints floating gently to pieces.

Then he waited as the wind rose, as gondoliers
were rocking in the long furrows of their boats
and small waves licked the marble lions' eyes.
But still this most improbable of cities
hung on, lewdly enjoying her own smell.

Learning later how Florence, with her brown bells,
her dried-up joke of a river, had played
the ark to all his fantasies of flood,
he felt a little foolish. He was walking
in the gallery then, thinking of the doges:
how they tread on clouds which puff and pucker
like the flesh of their fat Venetian whores;
how thanks to Tintoretto's shrewd, old eyes,
they saw themselves amid the holy saints;
how shrewd, old Tintoretto, for a price,
painted his patrons into paradise.

Walking Through The Upper East Side

All over the district, on leather couches
& brocade couches, on daybeds
& 'professional divans,' they are confessing.
The air is thick with it,
the ears of analysts must be sticky.

Words fill the air above couches & hover there
hanging like smog. I imagine
impossible Steinberg scrolls,
unutterable sounds suspended in inked curlicues
while the Braque print & the innocuous Utrillo
look on look on look on.

My six analysts for example-

the sly Czech who tucked his shoelaces
under the tongues of his shoes,
the mistress of social work with orange hair,
the famous old german who said:
'You sink, zerefore you are,'
the bouncy American who loved to talk dirty,
the bitchy widow of a famous theoretician,
& another-or was it two?-I have forgotten-
they rise like a Greek chorus in my dreams.
They reproach me for my messy life.
They do not offer to refund my money.

& the others-siblings for an hour or so-
ghosts whom I brushed in & out of the door.
Sometimes the couch was warm from their bodies.
Only our coats knew each other,
rubbing shoulders in the dark closet.

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

What You Need To Be A Writer

After the college
reading,
the eager
students gather.

They ask me
what you need
to be a writer

& I, feeling flippant,
jaunty
(because
I am wearing
an 18th century
dress
& think
myself in love
again),
answer:

'Mazel,
determination,
talent, & true
grit.'

I even
believe it-

looking
as I do
like an
advertisement
for easy
success-

designer dress,
sly smile
on my lips
& silver boots

from
Oz.

Suppose
they saw me
my eyes
swollen
like sponges,
my hand
shaking
with betrayal,

my fear
rampant
in the dark?

Suppose they saw
the fear
of never
writing,
the fear
of being
alone,
the money fear,
the fear fear,
the fear
of succumbing
to fear?

& then there's all
I did
not say:

to be
a writer
what you need
is

something
to say:

something

that burns
like a hot coal
in your gut

something
that pounds
like a pump
in your groin

& the courage
to love
like a wound

that never
heals.

Erica Jong

When I Am An Old Lady

When I am an old lady
the young men
will come to me
& sit trembling
at my trembling
feet
saying:

you must have been
beautiful
when you were young;
you must have been
a wonderful lover-
& perhaps
they will still feel
that current
which you say
passes from me
to you
& which you give back
doubled
on our wild
afternoons.

The madness
will still be there-
the current of sex,
of poetry, of heroism-
which is only
another name
for God
passing through us-
God, Goddess,
whoever
we call Her-

that ancient lady
who sits above the world
spinning out

our destinies.

She looped your life
around mine;
she took the weft
of your need
& gave me
the bright threads
to weave you
into my life-

old Circe
playing music on her loom,
& weaving men
into her glittering
tapestry.

Woven into her cloth,
still,
they feel free.
Bewitched by her poems,
still,
they feel strong.
Drunk on her Pramnian wine,
still,
they feel clear-
as if they were marching
through life
alone.

But it is she
who guides them,
leading them
now by their cocks,
now by their hearts,
now by swinishness-

but what does she feel
alone
on her cloud throne?
She feels lonely.
Lonely to know

all she knows
& lonely even being loved
by so many

sleepy
beasts.

Erica Jong

Without Parachutes

The experience of fear is not an observer of it; he is fear itself, the very instrument of fear.

-J. Krishnamurti

In dreams I descend
into the cave of my past:
a child with a morgue-tag
on its toe,
the terrible metal squeaking
of the morgue-drawers,
& the chilly basement
& the slam of doors.

Or else I am setting up dreamhouse,
with the wife
of my second ex-husband.
She complains of him
with breaking sorrow-
& I comfort her.
(She only married him, it seems, for me).

Sometimes I wake up naked
in Beverly Hills-
the table set for ten, a formal dinner-
a studio chief on my left side,
a fabled actor on my right.
Across the table,
Greta Garbo, Scott Fitzgerald,
John F. Kennedy & Marilyn Monroe-

& I alone not properly dressed for dinner,
& besides unprepared
for the final exam,
in which our immortality
will be tested,
& one of us shall perish
as dessert.

Send parachutes & kisses!

Send them quick!
I am descending into the cave
of my own fear.
My feet are weighted
with the leg-irons of the past.
The elevator plummets
in the shaft.

trapped, trapped in the bowels
of my dream,
locked in the cellar
by myself the jailer.
Rats and spiders scuttle
through the coal bin.
I cower in the corner.

I am fear.

Erica Jong

Woman Enough

Because my grandmother's hours
were apple cakes baking,
& dust motes gathering,
& linens yellowing
& seams and hems
inevitably unraveling
I almost never keep house
though really I like houses
& wish I had a clean one.

Because my mother's minutes
were sucked into the roar
of the vacuum cleaner,
because she waltzed with the washer-dryer
& tore her hair waiting for repairmen
I send out my laundry,
& live in a dusty house,
though really I like clean houses
as well as anyone.

I am woman enough
to love the kneading of bread
as much as the feel
of typewriter keys
under my fingers
springy, springy.
& the smell of clean laundry
& simmering soup
are almost as dear to me
as the smell of paper and ink.

I wish there were not a choice;
I wish I could be two women.
I wish the days could be longer.
But they are short.
So I write while
the dust piles up.

I sit at my typewriter

remembering my grandmother
& all my mothers,
& the minutes they lost
loving houses better than themselves
& the man I love cleans up the kitchen
grumbling only a little
because he knows
that after all these centuries
it is easier for him
than for me.

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

You Hate The Telephone

You hate the telephone
but will not see me
face to face
so I am left
beseeching you
long-distance,
trying to thread our love
along the telephone poles
of Vermont,
trying to tunnel it
under the Atlantic
as if it were
a rare fossil
I'd unearthed,
or an offshore pipe
bearing precious oil.

But it is your face
I love,
your funny grin
that now seems
cruel around the edges.
You do not wish to be
cruel-you,
the kindest person in the world,
but driven to curious
rages
when you feel
pressured, frustrated,
saddled with
an albatross of love
like an ancient
mariner
who tells his same sad story
to the wedding guests.

The telephone will not
suffice.
Coleridge would have

loathed it,
& so would his
mariner.
It is our modern
Person from Porlock,
interrupting poems,
interrupting loves
& forever
keeping us at arm's length.

I would look you in the eye
again, saying yes, yes, yes-
we have said no enough,
for the rest
of many lifetimes.

Erica Jong

You Operate

You operate on the afternoon
You perform open heart surgery
on the ghosts
of your suicidal friends

You divorce your parents
before you have time
to be born

You kick out your wife & child
You tell your girlfriend
to go screw herself

This is the solitude you wanted
The silence
is stitching you up
you write

Erica Jong

You Whom I Hoped To Reach By Writing

You whom I hoped to reach by writing,
you beyond the multicolored tangle
of telephone wires,
you with your white paper soul
trampled in transit,
you with kaleidoscope stamps
& black cancellations,
you who put your finger on my heart as I slept,
you whom I jostle in elevators,
you whom I stare at in subways,
you shopping for love in department stores. . .

I write to you
& someone else answers:
the man who hates his wife
& wants to meet me,
the girl who mistakes me for mother. . .
My strange vocation
is to be paid for my nightmares.

I write to you, my love,
& someone else
always answers.

Erica Jong

Zen & The Art Of Poetry

Letting the mind go,
letting the pen, the breath,
the movement of images in & out
of the mouth
go calm, go rhythmic
as the rise & fall of waves,
as one sits in the lotus position
over the world,
holding the pen so lightly
that it scarcely stains the page,
holding the breath
in the glowing cage of the ribs,
until the heart
is only a living lantern
fueled by breath,
& the pen writes
what the heart wills
& the whole world goes out,
goes black,
but for the hard, clear stars
below.

Erica Jong