

Classic Poetry Series

**Lizette Woodworth Reese**  
**- poems -**

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## Lizette Woodworth Reese(January 9, 1856 – December 17, 1935)

Born in the Waverly section of Baltimore, Maryland, she was a school teacher from 1873 to 1918 at the Western High School in Baltimore. During the 1920s, she became a prominent literary figure, receiving critical praise and recognition, in particular from H. L. Mencken, himself from Baltimore.

Her poetry, remarkable for its intensity and concision, has been compared to that of Emily Dickinson. She is probably best remembered for the sonnet "Tears." Her volumes of poetry include *A Branch of May* (1887), *A Handful of Lavender* (1891), *A Quiet Road* (1896), *Spicewood* (1920), and *Selected Poems* (1926).

# A Christmas Folk-Song

The little Jesus came to town;  
The wind blew up, the wind blew down;  
Out in the street the wind was bold;  
Now who would house Him from the cold?

Then opened wide a stable door,  
Fair were the rushes on the floor;  
The Ox put forth a horned head :  
'Come, Little Lord, here make Thy bed.'

Up rose the Sheep were folded near:  
'Thou Lamb of God, come, enter here.'  
He entered there to rush and reed,  
Who was the Lamb of God, indeed.

The little Jesus came to town;  
With Ox and Sheep He laid Him down;  
Peace to the byre, peace to the fold,  
For that they housed Him from the cold!

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# A Flower Of Mullein

I am too near, too clear a thing for you,  
A flower of mullein in a crack of wall,  
The villagers half see, or not at all;  
Part of the weather, like the wind or dew.  
You love to pluck the different, and find  
Stuff for your joy in cloudy loveliness;  
You love to fumble at a door, and guess  
At some strange happening that may wait behind.

Yet life is full of tricks, and it is plain,  
That men drift back to some worn field or roof,  
To grip at comfort in a room, a stair;  
To warm themselves at some flower down a lane:  
You, too, may long, grown tired of the aloof,  
For the sweet surety of the common air.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# A Haunting Memory

Wild rockets blew along the lane;  
The tall white gentians too were there;  
The mullein stalks were brave again;  
Of blossoms was the bramble bare;  
And toward the pasture bars below  
The cows went by me, tinkling slow.

Straight through the sunset flew a thrush,  
And sang the only song he knew,  
Perched on a ripening elder bush;  
(Oh, but to give his song its due!)  
Sang it, and ceased, and left it there  
To haunt bush, blade, and golden air.

Oh, but to make it plain to you!  
My words were wrought for grosser stuff;  
To give that lonely tune its due,  
Never a word is sweet enough;  
A thing to think on when 'twas past,  
As is the first rose or the last.

The lad, driving his cows along,  
Strode whistling through the windy grass;

The little pool the shrubs among  
Lay like a bit of yellow glass;  
A window in the farmhouse old,  
Turned westward, was of glaring gold.

I have forgotten days and days,  
And much well worth the holding fast;  
Yet not the look of those green ways,  
The bramble with its bloom long past,  
The tinkling cows, the scent, the hush—  
Still on the eider sings that thrush.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# A Holiday

Along the pastoral ways I go,  
To get the healing of the trees,  
The ghostly news the hedges know;  
To hive me honey like the bees,  
Against the time of snow.

The common hawthorn that I see,  
Beside the sunken wall astir,  
Or any other blossoming tree,  
Is each God's fair white gospeller,  
His book upon the knee.

A gust-broken bough; a pilfered nest;  
Rumors of orchard or of bin;  
The thrifty things of east and west,—  
The countryside becomes my Inn,  
And I its happy guest.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# A Little Song Of Life

Glad that I live am I;  
That the sky is blue;  
Glad for the country lanes,  
And the fall of dew.

After the sun the rain;  
After the rain the sun;  
This is the way of life,  
Till the work be done.

All that we need to do,  
Be we low or high,  
Is to see that we grow  
Nearer the sky.

Lizette Woodworth Reese



# A Song For Candlemas

There's never a rose upon the bush,  
And never a bud on any tree;  
In wood and field nor hint nor sign  
Of one green thing for you or me.  
Come in, come in, sweet love of mine,  
And let the bitter weather be!

Coated with ice the garden wall;  
The river reeds are stark and still;  
The wind goes plunging to the sea,  
And last week's flakes the hollows fill.  
Come in, come in, sweet love, to me,  
And let the year blow as it will!

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# A Violin At Dusk

Stumble to silence, all you uneasy things,  
That pack the day with bluster and with fret.  
For here is music at each window set;  
Here is a cup which drips with all the springs  
That ever bud a cowslip flower; a roof  
To shelter till the argent weathers break;  
A candle with enough of light to make  
My courage bright against each dark reproof.  
A hand's width of clear gold, unraveled out  
The rosy sky, the little moon appears;  
As they were splashed upon the paling red,  
Vast, blurred, the village poplars lift about.  
I think of young, lost things: of lilacs; tears;  
I think of an old neighbor, long since dead.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# After

Oh, the littles that remain!  
Scent of mint out in the lane;  
Flare of window; sound of bees; —  
These, but these.

Three times sitting down to bread;  
One time climbing up to bed;  
Table-setting o'er and o'er;  
Drying herbs for winter's store;  
This thing; that thing;—nothing more.

But just now out in the lane,  
Oh, the scent of mint was plain!

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# All Hallows Night

Two things I did on Hallows Night:—  
Made my house April-clear;  
Left open wide my door  
To the ghosts of the year.

Then one came in. Across the room  
It stood up long and fair—  
The ghost that was myself—  
And gave me stare for stare.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Anne

Her eyes be like the violets,  
Ablow in Sudbury lane;  
When she doth smile, her face is sweet  
As blossoms after rain;  
With grief I think of my gray hairs,  
And wish me young again.

In comes she through the dark old door  
Upon this Sabbath day;  
And she doth bring the tender wind  
That sings in bush and tree;  
And hints of all the apple boughs  
That kissed her by the way.

Our parson stands up straight and tall,  
For our dear souls to pray,  
And of the place where sinners go  
Some grewsome things doth say:  
Now, she is highest Heaven to me;  
So Hell is far away.

Most stiff and still the good folk sit  
To hear the sermon through;  
But if our God be such a God,  
And if these things be true,  
Why did He make her then so fair,  
And both her eyes so blue?

A flickering light, the sun creeps in,  
And finds her sitting there;  
And touches soft her lilac gown,  
And soft her yellow hair;  
I look across to that old pew,  
And have both praise and prayer.

Oh, violets in Sudbury lane,  
Amid the grasses green,  
This maid who stirs ye with her feet  
Is far more fair, I ween!

I wonder how my forty years  
Look by her sweet sixteen!

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Daffodils

Fathered by March, the daffodils are here.  
First, all the air grew keen with yesterday,  
And once a thrush from out some hollow gray  
On a field's edge, where whitening stalks made cheer,  
Fluted the last unto the budding year;  
Now that the wind lets loose from orchard spray  
Plum bloom and peach bloom down the dripping way,  
Their punctual gold through the wet blades they rear.  
Oh, fleet and sweet! A light to all that pass  
Below, in the cramped yard, close to the street,  
Long-stemmed ones flame behind the palings bare,  
The whole of April in a tuft of grass.  
Scarce here, soon will it be—oh, sweet and fleet!—  
Gone like a snatch of song upon the stair.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Herbs

A serviceable thing  
Is fennel, mint, or balm,  
Kept in the thrifty calm  
Of hollows, in the spring;  
Or by old houses pent.  
Dear is its ancient scent  
To folk that love the days forgot,  
Nor think that God is not.

Sage, lavender, and rue,  
For body's hurt and ill,  
For fever and for chill;  
Rosemary, strange with dew,  
For sorrow and its smart,  
For breaking of the heart.  
Yet pain, dearth, tears, all come to dust,  
As even the herbs must.

Life-everlasting, too,  
Windless, poignant, and sere,  
That blows in the old year,  
Townsmen, for me and you.  
Why fret for wafting airs?  
Why haste to sell our wares?  
Captains and clerks, this shall befall;  
This is the end of all.

Oh, this the end indeed!  
Oh, unforgotten things,

Gone out of all the springs;  
The quest, the dream, the creed!  
Gone out of all the lands,  
And yet safe in God's hands; —  
For shall the dull herbs live again,  
And not the sons of men?

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Immortality

Battles nor songs can from oblivion save,  
But Fame upon a white deed loves to build:  
From out that cup of water Sidney gave,  
Not one drop has been spilled.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

## In Time Of Grief

Dark, thinned, beside the wall of stone,  
The box dripped in the air;  
Its odor through my house was blown  
Into the chamber there.

Remote and yet distinct the scent,  
The sole thing of the kind,  
As though one spoke a word half meant  
That left a sting behind.

I knew not Grief would go from me,  
And naught of it be plain,  
Except how keen the box can be  
After a fall of rain.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Keats

An English lad, who, reading in a book,  
A ponderous, leathern thing set on his knee,  
Saw the broad violet of the Egean Sea  
Lap at his feet as it were village brook.  
Wide was the east; the gusts of morning shook;  
Immortal laughter beat along that shore;  
Pan, crouching in the reeds, piped as of yore;  
The gods came down and thundered from that book.  
He lifted his sad eyes; his London street  
Swarmed in the sun, and strove to make him heed;  
Boys spun their tops, shouting and fair of cheek:  
But, still, that violet lapping at his feet,—  
An English lad had he sat down to read;  
But he rose up and knew himself a Greek.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Love Came Back At Fall O' Dew

Love came back at fall o' dew,  
Playing his old part;  
But I had a word or two  
That would break his heart.

'He who comes at candlelight,  
That should come before,  
Must betake him to the night  
From a barred door.'

This the word that made us part  
In the fall o' dew;  
This the word that brake his heart --  
Yet it brake mine, too.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Lydia

Break forth, break forth, O Sudbury town,  
And bid your yards be gay  
Up all your gusty streets and down,  
For Lydia comes to-day!

I hear it on the wharves below;  
And if I buy or sell,  
The good folk as they churchward go  
Have only this to tell.

My mother, just for love of her,  
Unlocks her carvèd drawers;  
And springs of withered lavender  
Drop down upon the floors.

For Lydia's bed must have the sheet  
Spun out of linen sheer,  
And Lydia's room be passing sweet  
With odors of last year.

The violet flags are out once more  
In lanes salt with the sea;  
The thorn-bush at Saint Martin's door  
Grows white for such as she.

So, Sudbury, bid your gardens blow,  
For Lydia comes to-day;  
Of all the words that I do know,  
I have but this to say.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Lydia Is Gone This Many A Year

Lydia is gone this many a year,  
Yet when the lilacs stir,  
In the old gardens far or near,  
The house is full of her.

They climb the twisted chamber stair;  
Her picture haunts the room;  
On the carved shelf beneath it there,  
They heap the purple bloom.

A ghost so long has Lydia been,  
Her cloak upon the wall,  
Brodered, and gilt, and faded green,  
Seems not her cloak at all.

The book, the box on mantel laid,  
The shells in a pale row,  
Are those of some dim little maid,  
A thousand years ago.

And yet the house is full of her;  
She goes and comes again;  
And longings thrill, and memories stir,  
Like lilacs in the rain.

Out in their yards the neighbors walk,  
Among the blossoms tall;  
Of Anne, of Phyllis, do they talk,  
Of Lydia not at all.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

## Mid-March

It is too early for white boughs, too late  
For snows. From out the hedge the wind lets fall  
A few last flakes, ragged and delicate.  
Down the stripped roads the maples start their small,  
Soft, 'wildering fires. Stained are the meadow stalks  
A rich and deepening red. The willow tree  
Is woolly. In deserted garden-walks  
The lean bush crouching hints old royalty,  
Feels some June stir in the sharp air and knows  
Soon 'twill leap up and show the world a rose.

The days go out with shouting; nights are loud;  
Wild, warring shapes the wood lifts in the cold;  
The moon's a sword of keen, barbaric gold,  
Plunged to the hilt into a pitch black cloud.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Oh, Gray And Tender Is The Rain

Oh, gray and tender is the rain,  
That drips, drips on the pane!  
A hundred things come in the door,  
The scent of herbs, the thought of yore.

I see the pool out in the grass,  
A bit of broken glass;  
The red flags running wet and straight,  
Down to the little flapping gate.

Lombardy poplars tall and three,  
Across the road I see;  
There is no loveliness so plain  
As a tall poplar in the rain.

But oh, the hundred things and more,  
That come in at the door! --  
The smack of mint, old joy, old pain,  
Caught in the gray and tender rain.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Reserve

Keep back the one word more,  
Nor give of your whole store;  
For, it may be, in Art's sole hour of need,  
Lacking that word, you shall be poor indeed.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Spicewood

The spicewood burns along the gray, spent sky,  
In moist unchimneyed places, in a wind,  
That whips it all before, and all behind,  
Into one thick, rude flame, now low, now high,  
It is the first, the homeliest thing of all--  
At sight of it, that lad that by it fares,  
Whistles afresh his foolish, town-caught airs--  
A thing so honey-colored, and so tall!

It is as though the young Year, ere he pass,  
To the white riot of the cherry tree,  
Would fain accustom us, or here, or there,  
To his new sudden ways with bough and grass,  
So starts with what is humble, plain to see,  
And all familiar as a cup, a chair.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Tears

When I consider Life and its few years --  
A wisp of fog betwixt us and the sun;  
A call to battle, and the battle done  
Ere the last echo dies within our ears;  
A rose choked in the grass; an hour of fears;  
The gusts that past a darkening shore do beat;  
The burst of music down an unlistening street, --  
I wonder at the idleness of tears.  
Ye old, old dead, and ye of yesternight,  
Chieftains, and bards, and keepers of the sheep,  
By every cup of sorrow that you had,  
Loose me from tears, and make me see aright  
How each hath back what once he stayed to weep:  
Homer his sight, David his little lad!

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Telling The Bees

A Colonial Custom

Bathsheba came out to the sun,  
Out to our wallèd cherry-trees;  
The tears adown her cheek did run,  
Bathsheba standing in the sun,  
Telling the bees.

My mother had that moment died;  
Unknowing, sped I to the trees,  
And plucked Bathsheba's hand aside;  
Then caught the name that there she cried  
Telling the bees.

Her look I never can forget,  
I that held sobbing to her knees;  
The cherry-boughs above us met;  
I think I see Bathsheba yet  
Telling the bees.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# That Day You Came

Such special sweetness was about  
That day God sent you here,  
I knew the lavender was out,  
And it was mid of year.

Their common way the great winds blew,  
The ships sailed out to sea;  
Yet ere that day was spent I knew  
Mine own had come to me.

As after song some snatch of tune  
Lurks still in grass or bough,  
So, somewhat of the end o' June  
Lurks in each weather now.

The young year sets the buds astir,  
The old year strips the trees;  
But ever in my lavender  
I hear the brawling bees.

For me the jasmine buds unfold  
And silver daisies star the lea,  
The crocus hoards the sunset gold,  
And the wild rose breathes for me.  
I feel the sap through the bough returning,  
I share the skylark's transport fine,  
I know the fountain's wayward yearning,  
I love, and the world is mine!

I love, and thoughts that sometime grieved,  
Still well remembered, grieve not me;  
From all that darkened and deceived  
Upsoars my spirit free.  
For soft the hours repeat one story,  
Sings the sea one strain divine;  
My clouds arise all flushed with glory --  
I love, and the world is mine!



# The Deserted House

To the sweet memory of Sidney Lanier

The old house stands deserted, gray,  
With sharpened gables high in air,  
And deep-set lattices, all gay  
With massive arch and framework rare;  
And o'er it is a silence laid,  
That feeling, one grows sore afraid.

The eaves are dark with heavy vines;  
The steep roof wears a coat of moss;  
The walls are touched with dim designs  
Of shadows moving slow across;  
The balconies are damp with weeds,  
Lifting as close as streamside reeds.

The garden is a loved retreat  
Of melancholy flowers, of lone  
And wild-mouthed herbs, in companies sweet,  
'Mid desolate green grasses thrown;  
And in its gaps the hoar stone wall  
Lets sprays of tangled ivy fall.

The pebbled paths drag, here and there,  
Old lichened faces, overspun  
With silver spider-threads—they wear  
A silence sad to look upon:  
It is so long since happy feet  
Made them to thrill with pressure sweet.

'Mid drear but fragrant shrubs there stands  
A saint of old made mute in stone,  
With tender eyes and yearning hands,  
And mouth formed in a sorrow lone;  
'Tis thick with dust, as long ago  
'Twas thick with fairest blooms that grow.

Swallows are whirring here and there;  
And oft a little soft wind blows

A hundred odors down the air;  
The bees hum 'round the red, last rose;  
And ceaselessly the crickets shrill  
Their tunes, and yet, it seems so still.

Or else, from out the distance steals,  
Half heard, the tramp of horses, or  
The bleak and harsh stir of slow wheels  
Bound cityward; but more and more,  
As these are hushed, or yet increase,  
About the old house clings its peace.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# The Good Joan

A long the thousand roads of France,  
Now there, and here, swift as a glance,  
A cloud, a mist blown down the sky,  
Good Joan of Arc goes riding by.

In Domremy at candlelight,  
The orchards blowing rose and white  
About the shadowy houses lie;  
And Joan of Arc goes riding by.

On Avignon there falls a hush,  
Brief as the singing of a thrush  
Across old gardens April-high;  
And Joan of Arc goes riding by.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Thomas À Kempis

Brother of mine, good monk with cowlèd head,  
Walled from that world which thou hast long since fled,  
And pacing thy green close beyond the sea,  
I send my heart to thee.

Down gust-sweet walks, bordered by lavender,  
While eastward, westward, the mad swallows whir,  
All afternoon poring thy missal fair,  
Serene thou paces there.

Mixed with the words and fitting like a tune,  
Thou hearest distantly the voice of June,—  
The little, gossiping noises in the grass,  
The bees that come and pass.

Fades the long day; the pool behind the hedge  
Burns like a rose within the windy sedge;  
The lilies ghostlier grow in the dim air;  
The convent windows flare.

Yet still thou lingerest; from pastures steep,  
Past the barred gate the shepherd drives his sheep;  
A nightingale breaks forth, and for a space  
Makes sweeter the sweet place.

Then the gray monks by hooded twos and threes  
Move chapelward beneath the flaming trees;  
Closing thy book, back by the alleys fair  
Thou followest to prayer.

Born to these brawling days, this work-sick age,  
Oft long I for thy simpler heritage;  
A thought of thee is like a breath of bloom  
Blown through a noisy room.

For thou art quick, not dead. I picture thee  
Forever in that close beyond the sea;  
And find, despite this weather's headlong stir,  
Peace and a comforter.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# To A Town Poet

Snatch the departing mood;  
Make yours its emptying reed, and pipe us still  
Faith in the time, faith in our common blood,  
Faith in the least of good:  
Song cannot fail if these its spirits fill!

What if your heritage be  
The huddled trees along the smoky ways;  
At a street's end the stretch of lilac sea;  
The vender, swart but free,  
Crying his yellow wares across the haze?

Your verse awaits you there;  
For Love is Love though Latin swords be rust,  
The keen Greek driven from gossiping mall and square;  
And Care is still but Care  
Though Homer and his seven towns are dust.

Thus Beauty lasts, and, lo!  
Now Proserpine is barred from Enna's hills,  
The flower she plucked yet makes an April show,  
Sets some town still a-glow,  
And yours the Vision of the Daffodils.

The Old-World folk knew not  
More surge-like sounds than urban winters bring  
Up from the wharves at dusk to every spot;  
And no Sicilian plot  
More fire than heaps our tulips in the spring.

Strait is the road of Song,  
And they that be the last are oft the first;  
Fret not for fame; the years are kind though long;  
You, in the teasing throng,  
May take all time with one shrewd lyric burst.

Be reverend and know  
Ill shall not last, or waste the ploughed land;  
Or creeds sting timid souls; and naught at all,

Whatever else befall,  
Can keep us from the hollow of God's hand.

Let trick of words be past;  
Strict with the thought, unfearful of the form,  
So shall you find the way and hold it fast,  
The world hear, at the last,  
The horns of morning sound above the storm.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Trust

I am thy grass, O Lord!  
I grow up sweet and tall  
But for a day; beneath Thy sword  
To lie at evenfall.

Yet have I not enough  
In that brief day of mine?  
The wind, the bees, the wholesome stuff  
The sun pours out like wine.

Behold, this is my crown;  
Love will not let me be;  
Love holds me here; Love cuts me down;  
And it is well with me.

Lord, Love, keep it but so;  
Thy purpose is full plain;  
I die that after I may grow  
As tall, as sweet again.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

# Wise

An apple orchard smells like wine;  
A succory flower is blue;  
Until Grief touched these eyes of mine,  
Such things I never knew.

And now indeed I know so plain  
Why one would like to cry  
When spouts are full of April rain—  
Such lonely folk go by!

So wise, so wise—that my tears fall  
Each breaking of the dawn;  
That I do long to tell you all—  
But you are dead and gone.

Lizette Woodworth Reese

## Writ In A Book Of Welsh Verse

This is the house where I was bred:  
The wind blows through it without stint,  
The wind bitten by the roadside mint;  
Here brake I loaf, here climbed to bed.

The fuchsia on the window sill;  
Even the candlesticks a-row,  
Wrought by grave men so long ago —  
I loved them once, I love them still.

Southward and westward a great sky! —  
The throb of sea within mine ear —  
Then something different, more near,  
As though a wistful foot went by.

Ghost of a ghost down all the years! —  
In low-roofed room, at turn of stair,  
At table-setting, and at prayer,  
Old wars, old hungers, and old tears!

Lizette Woodworth Reese