

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Mark Van Doren**  
**- poems -**

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## Mark Van Doren(June 13, 1894 – December 10, 1972)

Nationally famous as a novelist, playwright, critic, editor, and poet (his *Collected Poems* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1940), at the College Van Doren is also remembered as the quintessential great teacher. In his nearly four decades at Columbia, Van Doren introduced generations to Western literature and became a trusted friend and advisor to students and fellow teachers.

Born in Hope, Illinois, Van Doren came to Columbia just as the College was reinventing its curriculum after the war. Van Doren was at the core of the original band of young scholars who taught Erskine's General Honors course in the early 1920s. Years later, as a professor, Van Doren headed a crucial planning committee for Humanities A. Then he not only chaired the program during its formative phase, but continued to teach the course for seventeen years, remarking that it was the most fun he ever had with undergraduates. No less famous were his other courses-on poetry, Shakespeare, and Cervantes.

In the 1930s, Van Doren joined his former Columbia colleague Mortimer Adler in establishing the great books program at St. John's College in Annapolis, serving frequently as a visiting lecturer. After his retirement from full-time teaching at Columbia in 1959, Van Doren lectured at Harvard University. To the general public, Van Doren remained a great man of letters from a remarkable literary family. He served as literary editor of the *Nation*. The author of numerous short stories, novels, and plays, Van Doren was above all a poet and a teacher. As Thomas Merton said in a letter to Van Doren, "You always used your gifts to make people admire and understand poetry and good writing and truth."

With Carl Van Doren he wrote *American and British Literature since 1890* (1939). He wrote critical studies of various authors, including John Dryden (1920) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (1949), compiled several anthologies, and collected his lectures on poetry in *The Noble Voice* (1946). As a poet Van Doren was deeply influenced by Wordsworth. Among his volumes of poems are *Collected Poems, 1922–1938* (1939; Pulitzer Prize) and *Morning Worship and Other Poems* (1959). Other writings include novels and a play, *The Last Days of Lincoln* (1959). He also wrote the influential *Liberal Education* (1943).

See his collected stories (3 vol., 1962–68) and collected poems (1963 and 1969); his autobiography (1958); the memoirs of his wife, Dorothy Graffe Van Doren, *The Professor and I* (1959).

# After Long Drought

After long drought, commotion in the sky;  
After dead silence, thunder. Then it comes,  
The rain. It slashes leaves, and doubly drums  
On tin and shingle; beats and bends awry  
The flower heads; puddles dust, and with a sigh  
Like love sinks into grasses, where it hums  
As bees did once, among chrysanthemums  
And asters when the summer thought to die.

The whole world dreamed of this, and has it now.  
Nor was the waking easy. The dull root  
Is jealous of its death; the sleepy brow  
Smiles in its slumber; and a heart can fear  
The very flood it longed for, roaring near.  
The spirit best remembers being mute.

Mark Van Doren

# Born Brothers

Equality is absolute or no.  
Nothing between can stand. We are the sons  
Of the same sire, or madness breaks and runs  
Through the rude world. Ridiculous our woe  
If single pity does not love it. So  
Our separate fathers love us. No man shuns  
His poorest child's embrace. We are the sons  
Of such, or ground and sky are soon to go.

Nor do born brothers judge, as good or ill,  
Their being. Each consents and is the same,  
Or suddenly sweet winds turn into flame  
And floods are on us--fire, earth, water, air  
All hideously parted, as his will  
Withdraws, no longer fatherly and there.

Mark Van Doren

## Dunce Songs : 9

Love me little, love me long,  
Then we neither can be wrong:  
You in giving, I in taking;  
There is nor a heart breaking  
But remembers one touch,  
Or maybe seven, of too much.

Love me more than halfway, though.  
Let me think, then let me know.  
And I promise you the same:  
A little wild, a little tame;  
Lest it ever seem long:  
Tick, tock, ding, dong.

Mark Van Doren

# Farewell And Thanksgiving

Whatever I have left unsaid  
When I am dead  
O'muse forgive me.  
You were always there,  
like light, like air.  
Those great good things  
of which the least bird sings,  
So why not I?  
Yet thank you even then,  
Sweet muse, Amen.

Mark Van Doren

# He Loves Me

That God should love me is more wonderful  
Than that I so imperfectly love him.  
My reason is mortality, and dim  
Senses; his--oh, insupportable--  
Is that he sees me. Even when I pull  
Dark thoughts about my head, each vein and limb  
Delights him, though remembrance in him, grim  
With my worst crimes, should prove me horrible.

And he has terrors that he can release.  
But when he looks he loves me; which is why  
I wonder; and my wonder must increase  
Till more of it shall slay me. Yet I live,  
I live; and he has never ceased to give  
This glance at me that sweetens the whole sky.

Mark Van Doren

# Morning Worship

I wake and hearing it raining.  
Were I dead, what would I give  
Lazily to lie here,  
Like this, and live?

Or better yet: birdsong,  
Brightening and spreading --  
How far would I come then  
To be at the world's wedding?

Now that I lie, though,  
Listening, living,  
(Oh, but not forever,  
Oh, end arriving)

How shall I praise them:  
All the sweet beings  
Eternally that outlive  
Me and my dying?

Mountains, I mean; wind, water, air;  
Grass, and huge trees; clouds, flowers,  
And thunder, and night.

Turtles, I mean, and toads; hawks, herons, owls;  
Graveyards, and towns, and trout; roads, gardens,  
Red berries, and deer.

Lightning, I mean, and eagles; fences; snow;  
Sunrise, and ferns; waterfalls, serpents,  
Green islands, and sleep.

Horses, I mean; butterflies, whales;  
Mosses, and stars and gravelly  
Rivers, and fruit.

Oceans, I mean; black valleys; corn;  
Brambles, and cliffs; rock, dirt, dust, ice;  
And warnings of flood.

How shall I name them?  
And in what order?  
Each would be first.  
Omission is murder.

Maidens, I mean, and apples; needles; leaves;  
Worms, and planers, and clover; whirlwinds; dew;  
Bulls; geese --

Stop. Lie still.  
You will never be done.  
Leave them all there.  
Old lover. Live on.

Mark Van Doren

# Nothing Stays

Nothing stays  
not even change,  
That can grow tired  
of it's own name;  
The very thought  
too much for it.

Somewhere in air  
a stillness is,  
So far, so thin-  
But let it alone.  
Whoever we are  
it is not for us

Mark Van Doren

# Our Lady Peace

How far is it to peace, the piper sighed,  
The solitary, sweating as he paused.  
Asphalt the noon; the ravens, terrified,  
Fled carrion thunder that percussion caused.

The envelope of earth was powder loud;  
The taut wings shivered, driven at the sun.  
The piper put his pipe away and bowed.  
Not here, he said. I hunt the love-cool one,

The dancer with the clipped hair. Where is she?  
We shook our heads, parting for him to pass.  
Our lady was of no such trim degree,  
And none of us had seen her face, alas.

She was the very ridges that we must scale,  
Securing the rough top. And how she smiled  
Was how our strength would issue. Not to fail  
Was having her, gigantic, undefiled,

For homely goddess, big as the world that burned,  
Grandmother and taskmistress, frild and town.  
We let the stranger go; but when we turned  
Our lady lived, fierce in each other's frown.

Mark Van Doren

# Spring Thunder

Listen, The wind is still,  
And far away in the night --  
See! The uplands fill  
With a running light.

Open the doors. It is warm;  
And where the sky was clear--  
Look! The head of a storm  
That marches here!

Come under the trembling hedge--  
Fast, although you fumble...  
There! Did you hear the edge  
of winter crumble

Mark Van Doren

# The Deepest Dream

The deepest dream is of mad governors,  
Down, down we feel it, till the very crust  
Of the world cracks, and where there was no dust,  
Atoms of ruin rise. Confusion stirs,  
And fear; and all our thoughts--dark scavengers--  
Feed on the center's refuse. Hope is thrust  
Like wind away, and love sinks into lust  
For merest safety, meanest of levelers.

And then we wake. Or do we? Sleep endures  
More than the morning can, when shadows lie  
Sharper than mountains, and the cleft is real  
Between us and our kings. What sun assures  
Our courage, and what evening by and by  
Descends to rest us, and perhaps to heal?

Mark Van Doren