



Edna St. Vincent Millay

(1892-1950)

What Lips My Lips Have Kissed (1923)

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,  
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain  
Under my head till morning; but the rain  
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh  
Upon the glass and listen for reply;  
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain  
For unremembered lads that not again  
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.

Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,  
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,  
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:  
I cannot say what loves have come and gone;  
I only know that summer sang in me  
A little while, that in me sings no more.

ANALYSIS

Whatever else Edna St. Vincent Millay was, she was a voice of the 1920's--a period that witnessed a revolt against conventional moral values, a stress upon emancipated youth, and a high disregard among the young for everything false, stuffy, hypocritical, or merely prudential, everything that restrained intense living or inhibited the full expression of feeling and personality.

No doubt there is much that is false or mistaken about this attitude, just as there was in the values against which it was a revolt. In her sonnet we recognize a pose of sophisticated amorality that is perhaps too sophisticated to be truly sophisticated. But however we judge the attitude, we cannot deny the plangency with which it and its attendant emotions are expressed. With exquisite precision Miss Millay strikes the chords of bittersweet nostalgia and romantic self-pity that provide the tone of her poem.

Miss Millay is particularly noted for her sonnets, and this one is among her best. The first eight lines--the octave--using only two rhymes, lay out the dramatic situation. The last six lines--the sestet--employing three rhymes, sum up the lyric and emotional significance of the situation. The language and sentence structure are natural and unforced, yet effective and memorable. But this sonnet's chief distinction is its three figurative expressions: the ghosts that 'tap' and 'sigh' in the rain, the lonely winter tree from which the birds have vanished, and the brilliantly substituted 'summer' for 'birds' in the last two lines. In that word *summer* (a synecdoche using the whole for the part) are concentrated all the qualities--melody, warmth, bloom, richness, vigor, love--which the speaker now finds missing from her life.

Laurence Perrine  
*100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century*  
(Harcourt 1966)  
with James M. Reid