

Classic Poetry Series

Amy Clampitt
- poems -

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Amy Clampitt(15 June 1920 - 10 September 1994)

Amy Clampitt was born on June 15, 1920, and brought up in New Providence, Iowa. She wrote poetry in high school, but then ceased and focused her energies on writing fiction instead. She graduated from Grinnell College, and from that time on lived mainly in New York City. To support herself, she worked as a secretary at the Oxford University Press, a reference librarian at the Audubon Society, and a freelance editor.

Not until the mid-1960s, when she was in her forties, did she return to writing poetry. Her first poem was published by *The New Yorker* in 1978. In 1983, at the age of sixty-three, she published her first full-length collection, *The Kingfisher*.

In the decade that followed, Clampitt published five books of poetry, including *What the Light Was Like* (1985), *Archaic Figure* (1987), and *Westward* (1990). Her last book, *A Silence Opens*, appeared in 1994. The recipient in 1982 of a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 1984 of an Academy Fellowship, she was made a MacArthur Foundation Fellow in 1992. She was also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and taught at the College of William and Mary, Amherst College, and Smith College. She died of cancer in September 1994.

A Catalpa Tree On West Twelfth Street

While the sun stops, or
seems to, to define a term
for the indeterminable,
the human aspect, here
in the West Village, spindles
to a mutilated dazzle—

niched shards of solitude
embedded in these brownstone
walkups such that the Hudson
at the foot of Twelfth Street
might be a thing that's
done with mirrors: definition

by deracination—grunge,
hip-hop, Chinese takeout,
co-ops—while the globe's
elixir caters, year by year,
to the resurgence of this
climbing tentpole, frilled and stippled

yet again with bloom
to greet the solstice:
What year was it it over-
took the fire escape? The
roof's its next objective.
Will posterity (if there

is any) pause to regret
such layerings of shade,
their cadenced crests' trans-
valuation of decay, the dust
and perfume of an all
too terminable process?

Amy Clampitt

A Cure At Porlock

For whatever did it—the cider
at the Ship Inn, where the crowd
from the bar that night had overflowed
singing into Southey's Corner, or

an early warning of appendicitis—
the remedy the chemist in the High Street
purveyed was still a dose of kaopectate
in morphine—the bane and the afflatus

of S.T.C. when Alph, the sacred river,
surfaced briefly in the unlikely
vicinity of Baker Farm, and as quickly
sank again, routed forever by the visitor

whose business, intent and disposition—
whether ill or well is just as immaterial—
long ago sunk Lethewards, a particle
of the unbottled ultimate solution.

I drank my dose, and after an afternoon
prostrate, between heavens, on the
coldly purgatorial tiles of the W.C.,
found it elysium simply to recline,

sipping flat ginger beer as though it were
honeydew, in that billowy bed,
under pink chenille, hearing you read
The Mystery of Edwin Drood! For whether

the opium was worth it for John Jasper,
from finding being with you, even sick
at Porlock, a rosily addictive picnic,

I left less likely ever to recover.

Amy Clampitt

A Hedge Of Rubber Trees

The West Village by then was changing; before long the rundown brownstones at its farthest edge would have slipped into trendier hands. She lived, impervious to trends, behind a potted hedge of rubber trees, with three cats, a canary—refuse from whose cage kept sifting down and then germinating, a yearning seedling choir, around the saucers on the windowsill—and an inexorable cohort of roaches she was too nearsighted to deal with, though she knew they were there, and would speak of them, ruefully, as of an affliction that might once, long ago, have been prevented.

Unclassifiable castoffs, misfits, marginal cases: when you're one yourself, or close to it, there's a reassurance in proving you haven't quite gone under by taking up with somebody odder than you are. Or trying to. 'They're my friends,' she'd say of her cats—Mollie, Mitzi and Caroline, their names were, and she was forever taking one or another in a cab to the vet—as though she had no others. The roommate who'd become a nun, the one who was Jewish, the couple she'd met on a foliage tour, one fall, were all people she no longer saw. She worked for a law firm, said all the judges were alcoholic, had never voted.

But would sometimes have me to dinner—breaded veal, white wine, strawberry Bavarian—and sometimes, from what she didn't know she was saying, I'd snatch a shred or two of her threadbare history. Baltic cold. Being sent home in a troika when her feet went numb. In summer, carriage rides. A swarm of gypsy children driven off with whips. An octogenarian father, bishop of a dying schismatic sect. A very young mother who didn't want her. A half-brother she met just once. Cousins in Wisconsin, one of whom phoned her from a candy store, out of the blue, while she was living in Chicago.

What had brought her there, or when, remained unclear.

As did much else. We'd met in church. I noticed first a big, soaring soprano with a wobble in it, then the thickly wreathed and braided crimp in the mouse-gold coiffure. Old? Young? She was of no age. Through rimless lenses she looked out of a child's, or a doll's, globular blue. Wore Keds the year round, tended otherwise to overdress. Owned a mandolin. Once I got her to take it down from the mantel and plink out, through a warm fuddle of sauterne, a lot of giddy Italian airs from a songbook whose pages had started to crumble. The canary fluffed and quivered, and the cats, amazed, came out from under the couch and stared.

What could the offspring of the schismatic age and a reluctant child bride expect from life? Not much. Less and less. A dream she'd had kept coming back, years after. She'd taken a job in Washington with some right-wing lobby, and lived in one of those bow-windowed mansions that turn into roominghouses, and her room there had a full-length mirror: oval, with a molding, is the way I picture it. In her dream something woke her, she got up to look, and there in the glass she'd had was covered over—she gave it a wondering emphasis—with gray veils.

The West Village was changing. I was changing. The last time I asked her to dinner, she didn't show. Hours— or was it days? —later, she phoned to explain: she hadn't been able to find my block; a patrolman had steered her home. I spent my evenings canvassing for Gene McCarthy. Passing, I'd see her shades drawn, no light behind the rubber trees. She wasn't out, she didn't own a TV. She was in there, getting gently blotto. What came next, I wasn't brave enough to know. Only one day, passing, I saw new shades, quick-chic matchstick bamboo, going up where the waterstained old ones had been, and where the seedlings—
O gray veils, gray veils—had risen and gone down.

Amy Clampitt

A Hermit Thrush

Nothing's certain. Crossing, on this longest day,
the low-tide-uncovered isthmus, scrambling up
the scree-slope of what at high tide
will be again an island,

to where, a decade since well-being staked
the slender, unpremeditated claim that brings us
back, year after year, lugging the
makings of another picnic—

the cucumber sandwiches, the sea-air-sanctified
fig newtons—there's no knowing what the slamming
seas, the gales of yet another winter
may have done. Still there,

the gust-beleaguered single spruce tree,
the ant-thronged, root-snelled moss, grass
and clover tuffet underneath it,
edges frazzled raw

but, like our own prolonged attachment, holding.
Whatever moral lesson might commend itself,
there's no use drawing one,
there's nothing here

to seize on as exemplifying any so-called virtue
(holding on despite adversity, perhaps) or
any no-more-than-human tendency—
stubborn adherence, say,

to a wholly wrongheaded tenet. Though to
hold on in any case means taking less and less
for granted, some few things seem nearly
certain, as that the longest day

will come again, will seem to hold its breath,
the months-long exhalation of diminishment
again begin. Last night you woke me
for a look at Jupiter,

that vast cinder wheeled unblinking
in a bath of galaxies. Watching, we traveled
toward an apprehension all but impossible
to be held onto—

that no point is fixed, that there's no foothold
but roams untethered save by such snells,
such sailor's knots, such stays
and guy wires as are

mainly of our own devising. From such an
empyrean, aloof seraphic mentors urge us
to look down on all attachment,
on any bonding, as

in the end untenable. Base as it is, from
year to year the earth's sore surface
mends and rebinds itself, however
and as best it can, with

thread of cinquefoil, tendril of the magenta
beach pea, trammel of bramble; with easings,
mulchings, fragrances, the gray-green
bayberry's cool poultice—

and what can't finally be mended, the salt air
proceeds to buff and rarefy: the lopped carnage
of the seaward spruce clump weathers
lustrous, to wood-silver.

Little is certain, other than the tide that
circumscribes us that still sets its term
to every picnic—today we stayed too long
again, and got our feet wet—

and all attachment may prove at best, perhaps,
a broken, a much-mended thing. Watching
the longest day take cover under
a monk's-cowl overcast,

with thunder, rain and wind, then waiting,

we dropp everything to listen as a
hermit thrush distills its fragmentary,
hesitant, in the end

unbroken music. From what source (beyond us, or
the wells within?) such links perceived arrive—
diminished sequences so uninsistingly
not even human—there's

hardly a vocabulary left to wonder, uncertain
as we are of so much in this existence, this
botched, cumbersome, much-mended,
not unsatisfactory thing.

Amy Clampitt

A Silence

past parentage or gender
beyond sung vocables
the slipped-between
the so infinitesimal
fault line
a limitless
interiority

beyond the woven
unicorn the maiden
(man-carved worm-eaten)
God at her hip
incipient
the untransfigured
cottontail
bluebell and primrose
growing wild a strawberry
chagrin night terrors
past the earthlit
unearthly masquerade

(we shall be changed)

a silence opens

*

the larval feeder
naked hairy ravenous
inventing from within
itself its own
raw stuffs'
hooked silk-hung
relinquishment

behind the mask
the milkfat shivering
sinew isinglass
uncrumpling transient

greed to reinvest

*

names have been
given (revelation
kif nirvana
syncope) for
whatever gift
unasked
gives birth to

torrents
fixities
reincarnations of
the angels
Joseph Smith
enduring
martyrdom

a cavernous
compunction driving
founder-charlatans
who saw in it
the infinite
love of God
and had
(George Fox
was one)
great openings

Amy Clampitt

Athena

Force of reason, who shut up the shrill
foul Furies in the dungeon of the Parthenon,
led whimpering to the cave they live in still,

beneath the rock your city foundered on:
who, equivocating, taught revenge to sing
(or seem to, or be about to) a kindlier tune:

mind that can make a scheme of anything—
a game, a grid, a system, a mere folder
in the universal file drawer: uncompromising

mediatrix, virgin married to the welfare
of the body politic: deific contradiction,
warbonnet-wearing olive-bearer, author

of the law's delays, you who as talisman
and totem still wear the aegis, baleful
with Medusa's scowl (though shrunken

and self-mummified, a Gorgon still): cool
guarantor of the averted look, the guide
of Perseus, who killed and could not kill

the thing he'd hounded to its source, the dread
thing-in-itself none can elude, whose counter-
feit we halfway hanker for: aware (gone mad

with clarity) we have invented all you stand for,
though we despise the artifice—a space to savor
horror, to pre-enact our own undoing in—
living, we stare into the mirror of the Gorgon.

Amy Clampitt

Beach Glass

While you walk the water's edge,
turning over concepts
I can't envision, the honking buoy
serves notice that at any time
the wind may change,
the reef-bell clatters
its treble monotone, deaf as Cassandra
to any note but warning. The ocean,
cumbered by no business more urgent
than keeping open old accounts
that never balanced,
goes on shuffling its millenniums
of quartz, granite, and basalt.

It behaves

toward the permutations of novelty—
driftwood and shipwreck, last night's
beer cans, spilt oil, the coughed-up
residue of plastic—with random
impartiality, playing catch or tag
ot touch-last like a terrier,
turning the same thing over and over,
over and over. For the ocean, nothing
is beneath consideration.

The houses

of so many mussels and periwinkles
have been abandoned here, it's hopeless
to know which to salvage. Instead
I keep a lookout for beach glass—
amber of Budweiser, chrysoprase
of Almadén and Gallo, lapis
by way of (no getting around it,
I'm afraid) Phillips'
Milk of Magnesia, with now and then a rare
translucent turquoise or blurred amethyst
of no known origin.

The process

goes on forever: they came from sand,
they go back to gravel,
along with treasuries

of Murano, the buttressed
astonishments of Chartres,
which even now are readying
for being turned over and over as gravely
and gradually as an intellect
engaged in the hazardous
redefinition of structures
no one has yet looked at.

Amy Clampitt

Brought From Beyond

The magpie and the bowerbird, its odd
predilection unheard of by Marco Polo
when he came upon, high in Badakhshan,
that blue stone's

embedded glint of pyrites, like the dance
of light on water, or of angels
(the surface tension of the Absolute)
on nothing,

turned, by processes already ancient,
into pigment: ultramarine, brought from
beyond the water it's the seeming
color of,

and of the berries, blooms and pebbles
finickingly garnishing an avian
shrine or bower with the rarest hue
in nature,

whatever nature is: the magpie's eye for
glitter from the clenched fist of
the Mesozoic folding: the creek sands,
the mine shaft,

the siftings and burnishings, the ingot,
the pagan artifact: to propagate
the faith, to find the metal, unearth it,
hoard it up,

to, by the gilding of basilicas,
transmute it: O magpie, O bowerbird,
O Marco Polo and Coronado, where do

these things, these

fabrications, come from—the holy places,
ark and altarpiece, the aureoles,
the seraphim—and underneath it all
the howling?

Amy Clampitt

Easter Morning

a stone at dawn
cold water in the basin
these walls' rough plaster
imageless
after the hammering
of so much insistence
on the need for naming
after the travesties
that passed as faces,
grace: the unction
of sheer nonexistence
upwelling in this
hyacinthine freshet
of the unnamed
the faceless

Amy Clampitt

Exmoor

Lost aboard the roll of Kodacolor that was to have superseded all need to remember Somerset were: a large flock

of winter-bedcover-thick-pelted sheep up on the moor; a stile, a church spire, and an excess, at Porlock,

of tenderly barbarous antique thatch in tandem with flowerbeds, relentlessly picturesque, along every sidewalk;

a millwheel; and a millbrook running down brown as beer. Exempt from the disaster. however, as either too quick

or too subtle to put on record, were these: the flutter of, beside the brown water, with a butterfly-like flick

of fan-wings, a bright black-and-yellow wagtail; at Dulverton on the moor, the flavor of the hot toasted teacake

drowning in melted butter we had along with a bus-tour-load of old people; the driver

's way of smothering every r in the wool of a West Country diphthong, and as a Somerset

set man, the warmth he had for

the high, wild, heather-
dank wold he drove us over.

Amy Clampitt

Fog

A vagueness comes over everything,
as though proving color and contour
alike dispensable: the lighthouse
extinct, the islands' spruce-tips
drunk up like milk in the
universal emulsion; houses
reverting into the lost
and forgotten; granite
subsumed, a rumor
in a mumble of ocean.

Tactile

definition, however, has not been
totally banished: hanging
tassel by tassel, panicked
foxtail and needlegrass,
dropseed, furred hawkweed,
and last season's rose-hips
are vested in silenced
chimes of the finest,
clearest sea-crystal.

Opacity

opens up rooms, a showcase
for the hueless moonflower
corolla, as Georgia
O'Keefe might have seen it,
of foghorns; the nodding
campanula of bell buoys;
the ticking, linear
filigree of bird voices.

Amy Clampitt

Gradual Clearing

Late in the day the fog
wrung itself out like a sponge
in glades of rain,
sieving the half-invisible
cove with speartips;
then, in a lifting
of wisps and scarves, of smoke-rings
from about the islands, disclosing
what had been wavering
fishnet plissé as a smoothness
of peau-de-soie or just-ironed
percale, with a tatting
of foam out where the rocks are,
the sheened no-color of it,
the bandings of platinum
and magnesium suffusing,
minute by minute, with clandestine
rose and violet, with opaline
nuance of milkweed, a texture
not to be spoken of above a whisper,
began, all along the horizon,
gradually to unseal
like the lip of a cave
or of a cavernous,
single, pearl-
engendering seashell.

Amy Clampitt

Nothing Stays Put

In memory of Father Flye, 1884-1985

The strange and wonderful are too much with us.
The protea of the antipodes—a great,
globed, blazing honeybee of a bloom—
for sale in the supermarket! We are in
our decadence, we are not entitled.
What have we done to deserve
all the produce of the tropics—
this fiery trove, the largesse of it
heaped up like cannonballs, these pineapples, bossed
and crested, standing like troops at attention,
these tiers, these balconies of green, festoons
grown sumptuous with stoop labor?

The exotic is everywhere, it comes to us
before there is a yen or a need for it. The green-
grocers, uptown and down, are from South Korea.
Orchids, opulence by the pailful, just slightly
fatigued by the plane trip from Hawaii, are
disposed on the sidewalks; alstroemerias, freesias
fattened a bit in translation from overseas; gladioli
likewise estranged from their piercing ancestral crimson;
as well as, less altered from the original blue cornflower
of the roadsides and railway embankments of Europe, these
bachelor's buttons. But it isn't the railway embankments
their featherweight wheels of cobalt remind me of, it's

a row of them among prim colonnades of cosmos,
snapdragon, nasturtium, bloodsilk red poppies,
in my grandmother's garden: a prairie childhood,
the grassland shorn, overlaid with a grid,
unsealed, furrowed, harrowed and sown with immigrant grasses,
their massive corduroy, their wavering feltings embroidered
here and there by the scarlet shoulder patch of cannas
on a courthouse lawn, by a love knot, a cross stitch
of living matter, sown and tended by women,
nurturers everywhere of the strange and wonderful,

beneath whose hands what had been alien begins,
as it alters, to grow as though it were indigenous.

But at this remove what I think of as
strange and wonderful, strolling the side streets of Manhattan
on an April afternoon, seeing hybrid pear trees in blossom,
a tossing, vertiginous colonnade of foam, up above—
is the white petalfall, the warm snowdrift
of the indigenous wild plum of my childhood.
Nothing stays put. The world is a wheel.
All that we know, that we're
made of, is motion.

Amy Clampitt

On The Disadvantages Of Central Heating

cold nights on the farm, a sock-shod
stove-warmed flatiron slid under
the covers, mornings a damascene-
sealed bizarrerie of fernwork
decades ago now

waking in northwest London, tea
brought up steaming, a Peak Freen
biscuit alongside to be nibbled
as blue gas leaps up singing
decades ago now

damp sheets in Dorset, fog-hung
habitat of bronchitis, of long
hot soaks in the bathtub, of nothing
quite drying out till next summer:
delicious to think of

hassocks pulled in close, toasting-
forks held to coal-glow, strong-minded
small boys and big eager sheepdogs
muscling in on bookish profundities
now quite forgotten

the farmhouse long sold, old friends
dead or lost track of, what's salvaged
is this vivid diminuendo, unfogged
by mere affect, the perishing residue
of pure sensation

Amy Clampitt

Salvage

Daily the cortege of crumpled
defunct cars
goes by by the lasagna-
layered flatbed
truckload: hardtop

reverting to tar smudge,
wax shine antiqued to crusted
winepress smear,
windshield battered to
intact ice-tint, a rarity

fresh from the Pleistocene.
I like it; privately
I find esthetic
satisfaction in these
ceremonial removals

from the category of
received ideas
to regions where pigeons'
svelte smoke-velvet
limousines, taxiing

in whirligigs, reclaim
a parking lot,
and the bag-laden
hermit woman, disencumbered
of a greater incubus,

the crush of unexamined
attitudes, stoutly
follows her routine,
mining the mountainsides
of our daily refuse

for artifacts: subversive
re-establishing
with each arcane

trash-basket dig
the pleasures of the ruined.

Amy Clampitt

Syrinx

Like the foghorn that's all lung,
the wind chime that's all percussion,
like the wind itself, that's merely air
in a terrible fret, without so much
as a finger to articulate
what ails it, the aeolian
syrinx, that reed
in the throat of a bird,
when it comes to the shaping of
what we call consonants, is
too imprecise for consensus
about what it even seems to
be saying: is it o-ka-lee
or con-ka-ree, is it really jug jug,
is it cuckoo for that matter? —
much less whether a bird's call
means anything in
particular, or at all.

Syntax comes last, there can be
no doubt of it: came last,
can be thought of (is
thought of by some) as a
higher form of expression:
is, in extremity, first to
be jettisoned: as the diva
onstage, all soaring
pectoral breathwork,
takes off, pure vowel
breaking free of the dry,
the merely fricative
husk of the particular, rises
past saying anything, any
more than the wind in
the trees, waves breaking,
or Homer's gibbering
Thespesiae iache:

those last-chance vestiges

above the threshold, the all-
but dispossessed of breath.

Amy Clampitt

The Sun Underfoot Among The Sundews

An ingenuity too astonishing
to be quite fortuitous is
this bog full of sundews, sphagnum-
lines and shaped like a teacup.

A step
down and you're into it; a
wilderness swallows you up:
ankle-, then knee-, then midriff-
to-shoulder-deep in wetfooted
understory, an overhead
spruce-tamarack horizon hinting
you'll never get out of here.

But the sun
among the sundews, down there,
is so bright, an underfoot
webwork of carnivorous rubies,
a star-swarm thick as the gnats
they're set to catch, delectable
double-faced cockleburs, each
hair-tip a sticky mirror
afire with sunlight, a million
of them and again a million,
each mirror a trap set to
unhand believing,

that either
a First Cause said once, 'Let there
be sundews,' and there were, or they've
made their way here unaided
other than by that backhand, round-
about refusal to assume responsibility
known as Natural Selection.

But the sun
underfoot is so dazzling
down there among the sundews,
there is so much light
in that cup that, looking,
you start to fall upward.

Amy Clampitt

Vacant Lot With Pokeweed

Tufts, follicles, grubstake
biennial rosettes, a low-
life beach-blond scruff of
couch grass: notwithstanding
the interglinting dregs

of wholesale upheaval and
dismemberment, weeds do not
hesitate, the wheeling
rise of the ailanthus halts
at nothing—and look! here's

a pokeweed, sprung up from seed
dropped by some vagrant, that's
seized a foothold: a magenta-
girdered bower, gazebo twirls
of blossom rounding into

raw-buttoned, garnet-rodded
fruit one more wayfarer
perhaps may salvage from
the season's frittering,
the annual wreckage.

Amy Clampitt