

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Desnos
- poems -

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Robert Desnos(1900 - 1945)

Robert Desnos, the son of a café owner, was born on July 4, 1900, in Paris.

He attended commercial college, and then worked as a clerk before becoming a literary columnist for the newspaper Paris-Soir.

He first published poems in the Dadaist magazine *Littérature* in 1919, and in 1922 he published his first book, *Prose Selavy*, a collection of surrealistic aphorisms. While on leave in Morocco from his mandatory two years in the French Army, Desnos befriended poet Andre Breton. Together with writers Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard, Breton and Desnos would form the vanguard of literary surrealism.

They practiced a technique known as "automatic writing," and many hailed Desnos as the most accomplished practitioner. Breton, in the *Manifesto of Surrealism*, 1924, singled out Desnos for particular praise. The technique involved drifting into a trance and then recording the associations and leaps of the subconscious mind.

Desnos' poems from this time are playful (often using puns and homonyms), sensual, and serious. The 1920s were an extremely creative period for Desnos; between 1920 and 1930, he published more than eight books of poetry, including *Language cuit* (1923), *Deuil pour deuil* (1924), *Journal d'une apparition* (1927), and *The Night of Loveless Nights* (1930).

In the 1930s, Desnos diverged slightly from his Surrealist peers. Breton, in his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, 1930, would criticize Desnos for straying from the movement and for his journalistic work. In part, Desnos had simply grown tired of his own excesses—both in his creative and personal life. It was at this time that he married Youki Foujita and took on more commercial writing assignments for French radio and television.

His poems became more direct and musical, though still maintaining some of their earlier adventurous style. Desnos continued to write throughout the decade; in 1936 he wrote a poem per day for the entire year. His published works from this time include *Corps et biens* (1930), and *Le sans cou* (1934).

In 1939 at the onset of World War II, Desnos again served in the French Army. During the German occupation, he returned to Paris and under pseudonyms such as Lucien Gallois and Pierre Andier, Desnos published a series of essays that

subtly mocked the Nazis. These articles combined with his work for the French Resistance led to his arrest. Desnos was sent first to Auschwitz, and then transferred to a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. Although the Allies liberated this camp in 1945, Desnos had contracted typhoid. He died on June 8, 1945.

Cascade

What sort of arrow split the sky and this rock?
It's quivering, spreading like a peacock's fan
Like the mist around the shaft and knot less feathers
Of a comet come to nest at midnight.

How blood surges from the gaping wound,
Lips already silencing murmur and cry.
One solemn finger holds back time, confusing
The witness of the eyes where the deed is written.

Silence? We still know the passwords.
Lost sentinels far from the watch fires
We smell the odor of honeysuckle and surf
Rising in the dark shadows.

Distance, let dawn leap the void at last,
And a single beam of light make a rainbow on the water
Its quiver full of reeds,
Sign of the return of archers and patriotic songs.

Robert Desnos

Dove In The Arch

Cursed!

be the father of the bride
of the blacksmith who forged the iron for the axe
with which the woodsman hacked down the oak
from which the bed was carved
in which was conceived the great-grandfather
of the man who was driving the carriage
in which your mother met your father.

Robert Desnos

Ebony Life

A frightening stillness will mark that day
And the shadow of streetlights and fire-alarms will exhaust the light
All things, the quietest and the loudest, will be silent
The suckling brats will die
The tugboats the locomotives the wind will glide by in silence
We will hear the great voice which coming from far away will pass over the city
We will wait a long time for it
Then at the rich man's time of day
When the dust the stones the missing tears
form the sun's robe on the huge deserted squares
We shall finally hear the voice.
It will growl at doors for a long while
It will pass over the town tearing up flags and breaking windowpanes.
We will hear it
What silence before it, but still greater the silence
it will not disturb but will hold guilty will brand and denounce
Day of sorrows and joys
The day the day to come when the voice will pass over the city
A ghostly seagull told me she loved me as much as I loved her
That this great terrible silence was my love
That the wind carrying the voice was the great revolt of the world
And that the voice would look kindly on me.

Robert Desnos

Epitaph

I lived in those times. For a thousand years
I have been dead. Not fallen, but hunted;
When all human decency was imprisoned,
I was free amongst the masked slaves.

I lived in those times, yet I was free.
I watched the river, the earth, the sky,
Turning around me, keeping their balance,
The seasons provided their birds and their honey.

You who live, what have you made of your luck?
Do you regret the time when I struggled?
Have you cultivated for the common harvest?
Have you enriched the town I lived in?

Living men, think nothing of me. I am dead.
Nothing survives of my spirit or my body.

Robert Desnos

Fairy Tale

Many times upon a time
There was a man who loved a woman.
Many times upon a time
There was a woman who loved a man.
Many times upon a time
There was a man and there was a woman
Who did not love the ones who loved them.

Once upon a time
Perhaps only once
A man and a woman who loved each other.

Robert Desnos

I Have Dreamed Of You So Much

I have dreamed of you so much that you are no longer real.
Is there still time for me to reach your breathing body, to kiss your mouth and
make
your dear voice come alive again?

I have dreamed of you so much that my arms, grown used to being crossed on
my
chest as I hugged your shadow, would perhaps not bend to the shape of your
body.
For faced with the real form of what has haunted me and governed me for so
many
days and years, I would surely become a shadow.

O scales of feeling.

I have dreamed of you so much that surely there is no more time for me to wake
up.
I sleep on my feet prey to all the forms of life and love, and you, the only one
who
counts for me today, I can no more touch your face and lips than touch the lips
and
face of some passerby.

I have dreamed of you so much, have walked so much, talked so much, slept so
much
with your phantom, that perhaps the only thing left for me is to become a
phantom
among phantoms, a shadow a hundred times more shadow than the shadow the
moves and goes on moving, brightly, over the sundial of your life.

Robert Desnos

Identity Of Images (IdentitÉ Des Images)

I am fighting furiously with animals and bottles
In a short time perhaps ten hours have passed one
after another
The beautiful swimmer who was afraid of coral wakes
this morning
Coral crowned with holly knocks on her door
Ah! coal again always coal
I conjure you coal tutelary genius of dreams and my
solitude let me let me speak again of the beautiful
swimmer who was afraid of coral
No longer tyrannize this seductive subject of my
dreams
The beautiful swimmer was reposing in a bed of lace
and birds
The clothes on a chair at the foot of the bed were
illuminated by gleams the last gleams of coal
The one that had come from the depths of the sky and
earth and sea was proud of its coral beak and great
wings of crape
All night long it had followed divergent funerals toward
suburban cemeteries
It had been to embassy balls marked white satin gowns with
its imprint a fern leaf
It had risen terribly before ships and the ships had not
returned
Now crouched in the chimney it was watching for the
waking of foam and singing of kettles
Its resounding step had disturbed the silence of nights
in streets with sonorous pavements
Sonorous coal coal master of dreams coal
Ah tell me where is that beautiful swimmer the swimmer
who was afraid of coral?
But the swimmer herself has gone back to sleep
And I remain face to face with the fire and shall remain
through the night interrogating the coal with wings of
darkness that persists in projecting on my monotonous
road the shadow of its smoke and the terrible
reflections of its embers
Sonorous coal coal pitiless coal

Robert Desnos

If You Only Knew

Far from me and like the stars, the sea and all the trappings of poetic myth,
Far from me but here all the same without your knowing,
Far from me and even more silent because I imagine you endlessly.
Far from me, my lovely mirage and eternal dream, you cannot know.
If you only knew.

Far from me and even farther yet from being unaware of me and still unaware.
Far from me because you undoubtedly do not love me or, what amounts to the
same thing, that I doubt you do.
Far from me because you consciously ignore my passionate desires.
Far from me because you are cruel.

If you only knew.

Far from me, joyful as a flower dancing in the river at the tip of its aquatic stem,
sad as seven p.m. in a mushroom bed.
Far from me yet silent in my presence and still joyful like a stork-shaped hour
falling from on high.
Far from me at the moment when the stills are singing, at the moment when the
silent and loud sea curls up on its white pillows.

If you only knew.

Far from me, o my ever-present torment, far from me in the magnificent noise of
oyster shells crushed by a night owl passing a restaurant at first light.

If you only knew.

Far from me, willed, physical mirage.

Far from me there's an island that turns aside when ships pass.

Far from me a calm herd of cattle takes the wrong path, pulls up stubbornly at
the

edge of a steep cliff, far from me, cruel woman.

Far from me, a shooting star falls into the poet's nightly bottle.

He corks it right away and from then on watches the star enclosed in the glass,
the

constellations born on its walls, far from me, you are so far from me.

If you only knew.

Far from me a house has just been built.

A bricklayer in white coveralls at the top of the scaffolding sings a very sad little
song and, suddenly, in the tray full of mortar, the future of the house appears:
lovers' kisses and double suicides nakedness in the bedrooms strange beautiful
women

and their midnight dreams, voluptuous secrets caught in the act by the parquet
floors.

Far from me, If you only knew.

If you only knew how I love you and, though you do not love me, how happy I am, how strong and proud I am, with your image in my mind, to leave the universe.

How happy I am to die for it.

If you only knew how the world has yielded to me.

And you, beautiful unyielding woman, how you too are my prisoner.

O you, far-from-me, who I yield to.

If you only knew.

Robert Desnos

Long Long Ago

Long long ago I went through the castle of leaves
Yellowing slowly in the moss
And far away barnacles clung desperately to rocks in the sea
Your memory better still your tender presence was there too
Transparent and mine
Nothing had changed but everything had aged at the same rate as my temples
and
my eyes
Don't you just love that platitude? Let me go it's so rare for me this ironic
satisfaction
Everything had aged except your presence
Long long ago I went through the surf on a lonely day
The waves were unreal even then
The hulk of the shipwreck you knew about - remember that night of storms and
kisses? - was it a ship or a delicate woman's hat rolled by the wind in the spring
rain? - was there too
After that its happiness and dancing in the hawthornes!
The aperitifs had changed the names and colors
Of the rainbows framing the mirrors.

Long long ago you loved me.

Robert Desnos

Lying Down

To the right, the sky, to the left, the sea.
And before your eyes, the grass and its flowers.
A cloud, the road, follows its vertical way
Parallel to the plumb line of the horizon,
Parallel to the rider.
The horse races towards its imminent fall
And the other climbs interminably.
How simple and strange everything is.
Lying on my left side
I take no interest in the landscape
And I think only of things that are very vague,
Very vague and very pleasant,
Like the tired look you walk around with
Through this beautiful summer afternoon
To the right, to the left,
Here, there,
In the delirium of uselessness.

Robert Desnos

No, Love Is Not Dead

No, love is not dead in this heart these eyes and this mouth
that announced the start of its own funeral.

Listen, I've had enough of the picturesque, the colorful
and the charming.

I love love, its tenderness and cruelty.

My love has only one name, one form.

Everything disappears. All mouths cling to that one.

My love has just one name, one form.

And if someday you remember

O you, form and name of my love,

One day on the ocean between America and Europe,

At the hour when the last ray of light sparkles

on the undulating surface of the waves, or else a stormy night

beneath a tree in the countryside or in a speeding car,

A spring morning on the boulevard Malesherbes,

A rainy day,

Just before going to bed at dawn,

Tell yourself-I order your familiar spirit-that

I alone loved you more and it's a shame

you didn't know it.

Tell yourself there's no need to regret: Ronsard

and Baudelaire before me sang the sorrows

of women old or dead who scorned the purest love.

When you are dead

You will still be lovely and desirable.

I'll be dead already, completely enclosed in your immortal body,

in your astounding image forever there among the endless marvels

of life and eternity, but if I'm alive,

The sound of your voice, your radiant looks,

Your smell the smell of your hair and many other things

will live on inside me.

In me and I'm not Ronsard or Baudelaire

I'm Robert Desnos who, because I knew

and loved you,

Is as good as they are.

I'm Robert Desnos who wants to be remembered

On this vile earth for nothing but his love of you.

A la mysterieuse

Robert Desnos

Sky Song

The flower of the Alps told the seashell: "You're shining"

The seashell told the sea: "You echo"

The sea told the boat: "You're shuddering"

The boat told the fire: "You're glowing brightly"

The fire told me: "I glow less brightly than her eyes"

The boat told me: "I shudder less than your heart does when she appears"

The sea told me: "I echo less than her name does in your love-making"

The seashell told me: "I shine less brightly than the phosphorus of desire in your hollow dream"

The flower of the Alps told me: "She's beautiful"

I said: "She's beautiful, so beautiful, she moves me."

Robert Desnos

Sleep Spaces

In the night there are of course the seven wonders
of the world and the greatness tragedy and enchantment.
Forests collide with legendary creatures hiding in thickets.
There is you.

In the night there are the walker's footsteps the murderer's
the town policeman's light from the street lamp and the ragman's lantern
There is you.

In the night trains go past and boats
and the fantasy of countries where it's daytime. The last breaths
of twilight and the first shivers of dawn.
There is you.

A piano tune, a shout.

A door slams. A clock.

And not only beings and things and physical sounds.

But also me chasing myself or endlessly going beyond me.

There is you the sacrifice, you that I'm waiting for.

Sometimes at the moment of sleep strange figures are born and disappear.

When I shut my eyes phosphorescent blooms appear and fade
and come to life again like fireworks made of flesh.

I pass through strange lands with creatures for company.

No doubt you are there, my beautiful discreet spy.

And the palpable soul of the vast reaches.

And perfumes of the sky and the stars the song of a rooster

from 2000 years ago and piercing screams in a flaming park and kisses.

Sinister handshakes in a sickly light and axles grinding on paralyzing roads.

No doubt there is you who I do not know, who on the contrary I do know.

But who, here in my dreams, demands to be felt without ever appearing.

You who remain out of reach in reality and in dream.

You who belong to me through my will to possess your illusion

but who brings your face near mine only if my eyes are closed in dream as well
as

in reality.

You who in spite of an easy rhetoric where the waves die on the beach
where crows fly into ruined factories, where the wood rots
crackling under a lead sun.

You who are at the depths of my dreams stirring up a mind
full of metamorphoses leaving me your glove
when I kiss your hand.

In the night there are stars and the shadowy motion of the sea,

of rivers, forests, towns, grass and the lungs
of millions and millions of beings.

In the night there are the seven wonders of the world.

In the night there are no guardian angels, but there is sleep.

In the night there is you.

In the daylight too.

Robert Desnos

The Ring Of Stars

In order to make a star with five branches
Where six would have been the same
A circle must first be drawn
In order to make a star with five branches ...

A ring!

One did not take so many precautions
In order to make a tree from many branches
Trees that hide the stars
Trees!
You, full of nests and song birds
Covered with branches and leaves
That you lift as far as the stars!

Robert Desnos

The Voice Of Robert Desnos

So like a flower and a current of air
the flow of water fleeting shadows
the smile glimpsed at midnight this excellent evening
so like every joy and every sadness
it is the midnight past lifting its naked body above belfries and poplars
I call to me those lost in the fields
old skeletons young oaks cut down
scraps of cloth rotting on the ground and linen drying in farm country
I call tornadoes and hurricanes
storms typhoons cyclones
tidal waves
earthquakes
I call the smoke of volcanoes and the smoke of cigarettes
the rings of smoke from expensive cigars
I call lovers and loved ones
I call the living and the dead
I call gravediggers I call assassins
I call hangmen pilots bricklayers architects
assassins
I call the flesh
I call the one I love
I call the one I love
I call the one I love
the jubilant midnight unfolds its satin wings and perches on my bed
the belfries and the poplars bend to my wish
the former collapse the latter bow down
those lost in the fields are found in finding me
the old skeletons are revived by my voice
the young oaks cut down are covered with foliage
the scraps of cloth rotting on the ground and in the earth
snap to at the sound of my voice like a flag of rebellion
the linen drying in farm country clothes adorable women
whom I do not adore
who come to me
obeying my voice, adoring
tornadoes revolve in my mouth
hurricanes if it is possible redden my lips
storms roar at my feet
typhoons if it is possible ruffle me

I get drunken kisses from the cyclones
the tidal waves come to die at my feet
the earthquakes do not shake me but fade completely
at my command
the smoke of volcanoes clothes me with its vapors
and the smoke of cigarettes perfumes me
and the rings of cigar smoke crown me
loves and love so long hunted find refuge in me
lovers listen to my voice
the living and the dead yield to me and salute me
the former coldly the latter warmly
the gravediggers abandon the hardly-dug graves
and declare that I alone may command their nightly work
the assassins greet me
the hangmen invoke the revolution
invoke my voice
invoke my name
the pilots are guided by my eyes
the bricklayers are dizzied listening to me
the architects leave for the desert
the assassins bless me
flesh trembles when I call

the one I love is not listening
the one I love does not hear
the one I love does not answer.

Robert Desnos

Under Cover Of Night

To slip into your shadow under cover of night.
To follow your footsteps, your shadow at the window.
That shadow at the window is you and no one else;
it's you.
Do not open that window behind whose curtains you're moving.
Shut your eyes.
I'd like to shut them with my lips.
But the window opens and the breeze, the breeze
which strangely balances flame and flag surrounds my escape
with its cloak.
The window opens: it's not you.
I knew it all along.

Robert Desnos