

PoetrySlabs @ FEAST

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LIGHTEN UP!

THE POETRY OF DOROTHY PARKER & DON MARQUIS

INTRODUCTION

New York City in the 1920s and 1930s was by far the most eye-popping concentration of concrete and glass on the planet, and the quality of the writing that its hyper-energetic and super-sophisticated authors and journalists were turning out with a consistency that made genius somehow seem easy was never to be surpassed. The modern literature of the New World was coming into its own with the aid of a trusty typewriter and more than a few stiff drinks – usually a Martini or a Manhattan. John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway were mining their experiences in World War One for the novels and novellas that proved foundational to their careers – *Three Soldiers* and *A Farewell to Arms*, for example – while arbiters of taste like Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, and Mary McCarthy were establishing their credentials as the sharpest pens in the business of criticism. Sparkling on the surface of this cocktail-fuelled Niagara of serious thinking, however, there could also be found scintillas of eccentrically edgy humorous and satirical writing, for the most part personified by Don Marquis and Dorothy Parker, who, like many New Yorkers, had been born somewhere else – Marquis in Illinois, Parker in New Jersey.

Born in 1893, **Dorothy Parker** (née Rothschild) sold her first poem in 1914, worked at *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, and, in 1917, married Wall Street stockbroker Edwin Parker. In 1918, along with writer-journalists Robert Benchley and Robert E. Sherwood, she became a founder member of the Algonquin Round Table, a lunch club named for the Algonquin Hotel, where it met. By 1930, Parker had become a national byword for merciless wit, writing consistently eye-catching poems and short stories for *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, the *New Yorker*, the *New Republic*, and *Life*. The *Nation* described her verse as ‘caked with a salty humor, rough with splinters of disillusion, and tarred with a bright black authenticity’. In her ‘Constant Reader’ book-review column in the *New Yorker*, her response to AA Milne’s *The House at Pooh Corner* read: ‘Tonstant Weader fwowed up.’ (She attributed this particular fit of pique to Milne’s constant use of the word ‘tummy’.) Parker and her husband divorced in 1928, and Dorothy subsequently threw herself into political activism, protesting the death sentences handed down to the Italian-American anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, campaigning in support of civil liberties and civil rights, co-founding the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League in 1936, and, during the Spanish Civil War, chairing the Anti-Fascist Rescue Committee – which arranged to

transport anti-Franco veterans to Mexico – and heading Spanish Children’s Relief. She was also a highly successful Hollywood writer and penned the screenplay for the Judy Garland classic *A Star Is Born*. Following her second husband’s death – in 1963 – she left the West Coast and moved back to New York, where she died in 1967. In her will, she bequeathed her estate to Martin Luther King Jr. Following King’s assassination, her estate was passed on to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which built a memorial garden for her outside its headquarters in Baltimore and dedicated it to ‘her noble spirit’.

Don Marquis – poet, novelist, playwright, newspaper columnist, born in 1878 – was a bird of a different feather but, in his own way, no less memorable. If you talk to an educated (probably at Columbia) Big Apple bookworm in his or her forties today, he or she will not only turn out to know their Dorothy Parker fairly well but will, in some instances, also have made what one critic has termed ‘the pilgrimage to Marquis’, whose greatest creations are Archy (a free-verse poet, reincarnated as a cockroach, who can only type by throwing himself at the keys – lowercase only because he can’t budge the ‘shift’ key) and his lady friend Mehitabel (an alley cat with uptown pretensions who claims to be a reincarnation of Cleopatra). The Archy and Mehitabel poems (still in print on both sides of the Atlantic) made Marquis’s name and are every bit as sardonically amusing as Dorothy Parker’s less sulphuric excursions. Marquis’s critters have their heads screwed on – whereas the people they see in the streets and on the subway always have several screws loose. Archy’s free verse is as free as free gets ... and then some – this is light entertainment as only a dyed-in-the-wool and smart-as-a-whip New Yorker could write it.

THE LITTLE OLD LADY IN LAVENDER SILK

By Dorothy Parker

I was seventy-seven, come August,
I shall shortly be losing my bloom;
I've experienced zephyr and raw gust
And (symbolical) flood and simoom.¹

When you come to this time of abatement,
To this passing from Summer to Fall,
It is manners to issue a statement
As to what you got out of it all.

So I'll say, though reflection unnerves me
And pronouncements I dodge as I can,
That I think (if my memory serves me)
There was nothing more fun than a man!

In my youth, when the crescent was too wan
To embarrass with beams from above,
By the aid of some local Don Juan
I fell into the habit of love.

And I learned how to kiss and be merry – an
Education left better unsung.
My neglect of the waters Pierian²
Was a scandal, when Grandma was young.

Though the shabby unbalanced the splendid,
And the bitter outmeasured the sweet,
I should certainly do as I then did,
Were I given the chance to repeat.

For contrition is hollow and wraithful,³
And regret is no part of my plan,
And I think (if my memory's faithful)
There was nothing more fun than a man!

¹ A hot, dry, dust-laden wind associated with Arabia.

² In Greek mythology, the Pierian Spring in Macedonia was sacred to the Muses. As the metaphorical source of knowledge of art and science, it was popularised by a couplet in Alexander Pope's poem "An Essay on Criticism" (1711): "A little learning is a dang'rous thing; / Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring."

³ A coined word designed to rhyme with 'faithful' (in the third line of the verse), playing on 'wrathful', and implying that contrition will summon up too many wraiths from the past.

MEHITABEL FINDS A HOME

By Don Marquis

well now it
looks as if
mehitabel the cat
might be on the
way toward a
reform or if not
a reform at least
on the way toward
domestication of some
sort some young
artists who live in
their studio
in the Greenwich
village section
of new york city
have taken pity
on her destitution
and have adopted
her this is the
life archy she says
I am living on
condensed milk and
synthetic⁴ gin hoopla
for the vie de boheme
exclamation point

there's nothing bourgeois
about those people
that have taken
me in archy i
have been there
a week and have
not yet seen them
go to bed
except in the daytime
a party every night
and neither

⁴ Prohibition (the banning of alcohol within the United States) was in force at the time of writing.

the piano lid
nor the ice-box lid
ever closed
kitty said my new
mistress to me
yesterday you are
welcome here so long
as you don't
raise a family
but the first
kitten that i hear
mewing on these
premises back to
the alley for you
it is a comfort to
know there are some
live ones left in
these melancholy days
and while the
humans are dancing
in the studio
I get some of my
feline friends
and we sing
and dance on the
skylight to gehenna⁵
with the bourgeois
bunch that locks
their ice boxes
archy when i lead my
gang into the
apartment at
four in the morning
there are no bolts
or bars anywhere
and not an
inhibition on the place
I feel little
archy that I have
come home to my own
kith and kin
again after
years of fruitless
wandering

⁵ In rabbinic literature and Christian and Islamic scripture, Gehenna is a destination of the wicked.

WOMEN: A HATE SONG

By Dorothy Parker

I hate women.

They get on my nerves.

There are the domestic ones.

They are the worst.

Every moment is packed with Happiness.

They breathe deeply

And walk with large strides, eternally hurrying home

To see about dinner.

They are the kind

Who say, with a tender smile, "Money's not everything."

They are always confronting me with dresses,

Saying, "I made this myself."

They read women's pages and try out the recipes.

Oh, how I hate that kind of woman.

Then there are the human Sensitive Plants;

The Bundles of Nerves.

They are different from everybody else; they even tell you so.

Someone is always stepping on their feelings.

Everything hurts them – deeply.

Their eyes are forever filling with tears.

They always want to talk to me about the Real Things,

The things that Matter.

Yes, they know they could write.

Conventions stifle them.

They are always longing to get away – Away from It All!

– I wish to Heaven they would.

And then there are those who are always in Trouble.

Always.

Usually they have Husband-trouble.

They are Wronged.

They are the women whom nobody – understands.

They wear faint, wistful smiles.

And, when spoken to, they start.

They begin by saying they must suffer in silence.

No one will ever know –

And then they go into the details.

There are the ones who simply cannot Fathom

Why all the men are mad about them.

They say they've tried and tried.

They tell you about someone's husband;
What he said
And how he looked when he said it.
And then they sigh and ask,
"My dear, what is there about me?"
- Don't you hate them?

There are the unfailingly Cheerful ones.
They are usually unmarried.
They are always busy making little Gifts
And planning little surprises.
They tell me to be, like them, always looking on the Bright Side.
They ask me what they would do without their sense of humor?
I sometimes yearn to kill them.
Any jury would acquit me.

*I hate women.
They get on my nerves.*

THE ROBIN AND THE WORM

By Don Marquis

a robin said to an
angleworm as he ate him
I am sorry but a bird
has to live somehow the
worm being slow witted could
not gather his
dissent into a wise crack
and retort he was
effectually swallowed
before he could turn
a phrase
by the time he had
reflected long enough
to say but why must a
bird live he felt the beginnings
of a gradual change
invading him
some new and disintegrating
influence
was stealing along him
from his positive
to his negative pole
and he did not have
the mental stamina

of a jonah to resist the
insidious
process of assimilation
which comes like a thief
in the night⁶
demons and fishhooks
he exclaimed
I am losing my personal
identity as a worm
my individuality
is melting away from me
odds crawl i am becoming
part and parcel of
this bloody robin
so help me i am thinking
like a robin and not
like a worm any
longer yes yes I even
find myself agreeing
that a robin must live
i still do not
understand with my mentality
why a robin must live
and yet I swoon into a
condition of belief
yes yes by heck that is
my dogma and i shout it a
robin must live
amen said a beetle who had
preceded him into the
interior that is the way i
feel myself is it not
wonderful when one arrives
at the place
where he can give up his
ambitions and resignedly
nay even with gladness
recognize that it is a far
far better thing⁷ to be
merged harmoniously
in the cosmic all
and this comfortable situation

⁶ This phrase echoes 1 Thessalonians 5:2 in the New Testament.

⁷ 'a far far better thing' echoes the words of Charles Dickens' Sydney Carton - 'it is a far, far better thing that I do' - moments before his execution at the heartbreaking ending of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

in his midst
so affected the marauding
robin that he perched
upon a blooming twig
and sang until the
blossoms shook with ecstasy
he sang
i have a good digestion
and there is a god after all
which i was wicked
enough to doubt
yesterday when it rained
breakfast breakfast
i am full of breakfast
and they are at breakfast
in heaven
they breakfast in heaven
all s well with the world
so intent was this pious and
murderous robin
on his own sweet song
that he did not notice
mehitabel the cat
sneaking toward him
she pounced just as he
had extended his larynx
in a melodious burst of
thanksgiving and
he went the way of all
flesh fish and good red herring
a ha purred mehitabel
licking the last
feather from her whiskers
was not that a beautiful
song he was singing
just before i took him to
my bosom
they breakfast in heaven
all s well with the world
how true that is
and even yet his song
echoes in the haunted
woodland of my midriff
peace and joy in the world
and over all the
provident skies

how beautiful is the universe
when something digestible meets
with an eager digestion
how sweet the embrace
when atom rushes to the arms
of waiting atom
and they dance together
skimming with fairy feet
along a tide of gastric juices
of feline cosmos you were
made for cats
and in the spring
old cosmic thing
i dine and dance with you
i shall creep through
yonder tall grass
to see if peradventure
some silly fledgling thrushes
newly from the nest
be not floundering therein
i have a gusto this
morning i have a hunger
i have a yearning to hear
from my stomach
further music in accord with
the mystic chanting
of the spheres of the stars that
sang together in the dawn of
creation prophesying food
for me i have a faith
that providence has hidden for me
in yonder tall grass
still more
ornithological delicatessen
oh gaily let me strangle
what is gaily given
well well boss there is
something to be said
for the lyric and imperial
attitude
believe that everything is for
you until you discover
that you are for it
sing your faith in what you
get to eat right up to the
minute you are eaten

for you are going
to be eaten
will the orchestra please
strike up that old
tutankhamen jazz while I dance
a few steps i learnt from an
Egyptian scarab and some day i
will narrate to you the most
merry light headed wheeze
that the skull of yorick put
across in answer to the
melancholy of the dane and also
what the ghost of
hamlet s father replied to the skull
not forgetting the worm that
wriggled across one of the picks
the grave diggers had left behind
for the worm listened and winked
at horatio while the skull and the
ghost and the prince talked
saying there are more things
twixt the vermiform⁸ appendix
and nirvana than are dreamt of
in thy philosophy horatio
fol de riddle fol de rol
must every parrot be a poll

MEN: A HATE SONG

By Dorothy Parker

I hate Men.

They irritate me.

I

There are the Serious Thinkers—
There ought to be a law against them.
They see life, as through shell-rimmed glasses, darkly.
They are always drawing their weary hands
Across their wan brows.
They talk about Humanity
As if they had just invented it;
They have to keep helping it along.

⁸ resembling or having the form of a worm

They revel in strikes
And they are eternally getting up petitions.
They are doing a wonderful thing for the Great Unwashed, –
They are living right down among them.
They can hardly wait
For “The Masses”⁹ to appear on the newsstands,
And they read all those Russian novels—
The sex best sellers.

II

There are the Cave Men, –
The Specimens of Red-Blooded Manhood.
They eat everything very rare,
They are scarcely ever out of their cold baths,
And they want everybody to feel their muscles.
They talk in loud voices,
Using short Anglo-Saxon words.¹⁰
They go around raising windows,
And they slap people on the back,
And tell them what they need is exercise.
They are always just on the point of walking to San Francisco,
Or crossing the ocean in a sailboat,
Or going through Russia on a sled –
I wish to God they would!

III

And then there are the Sensitive Souls
Who do interior decorating, for Art’s sake.
They always smell faintly of vanilla
And put drops of sandalwood on their cigarettes.
They are continually getting up costume balls
So that they can go
As something out of the “Arabian Nights.”
They give studio teas
Where people sit around on cushions
And wish they hadn’t come.
They look at a woman languorously, through half-closed eyes,
And tell her, in low, passionate tones,
What she ought to wear.

⁹ An influential New York-based radical magazine widely read in American left-wing circles during the first half of the 20th century.

¹⁰ A polite way of saying that they made conspicuous use of one four-letter Anglo-Saxon word in particular.

Colour is everything to them, – everything;
The wrong shade of purple
Gives them a nervous breakdown.

IV

Then there are the ones
Who are Simply Steeped in Crime.
They tell you how they haven't been to bed
For four nights.
They frequent those dramas
Where the only good lines
Are those of the chorus.
They stagger from one cabaret to another,
And they give you the exact figures of their gambling debts.
They hint darkly at the terrible part
That alcohol plays in their lives.
And then they shake their heads
And say Heaven must decide what is going to become of them, –
I wish I were Heaven!

*I hate men.
They irritate me.*

THE WAIL OF ARCHY

By Don Marquis

damned be this transmigration
doubledamned be the boob¹¹ pythagoras¹²
the gink that went and invented it
i hope that his soul for a thousand
turns of the wheel of existence
bides in the shell of a louse
dodging a fine toothed comb

i once was a vers libre¹³ poet
i died and my spirit migrated
into the flesh of a cockroach
gods how i yearn to be human
neither a vers libre poet
nor yet the inmate of a cockroach

¹¹ meaning 'bonehead' in American slang

¹² Ancient Greek philosopher and mathematician whose belief in the 'transmigration of souls', or reincarnation, influenced Plato.

¹³ free verse

a six footed scurrying cockroach
given to bastard hexameters
longfellowish¹⁴ sprawling hexameters
rather had i been a starfish
to shoot a heroic pentameter

gods i am pent in a cockroach
i with the soul of a dante
am mate and companion of fleas
i with the gift of a homer
must smile when a mouse calls me pal
tumble bugs¹⁵ are my familiars
this is the punishment meted
because i have written vers libre
here i abide in the twilight
neither a man nor an insect
any ghosts of the damned that await
a word from the core of the cosmos
to pop into bodies grotesque
are all the companions i have
with intellect more than a bug s

ghosts of the damned under sentence
to crawl into maggots and live there
or work out a stretch as a rat
cheerful companions to pal with

I with the brain of a milton
fell into the mincemeat at christmas
and was damned near baked in a pie
i with the touch of a chaucer
to be chivvied out of a sink
float through a greasy drain pipe
into the hell of a sewer

i with the tastes of a byron
expected to live upon garbage
gods what a charnel existence
curses upon that pythagoras
i hope that he dwells for a million
turns of the wheel of life

¹⁴ A reference to the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose somewhat portentous and ploddingly rhythmic verse was popular among the Victorians.

¹⁵ dung beetles

deep in an oyster crab's belly
stewed in the soup of gehenna

I with the soul of a hamlet
doomed always to wallow in farce

yesterday maddened with sorrow
i leapt from the woolworth tower¹⁶
in an effort to dash out my brains
god what a wretched pathetic
and anti climactic attempt
i fluttered i floated i drifted
i landed as light as a feather
on the top of a bald man s head
whose hat had blown off at the corner
and all of the hooting hundreds
laughed at the comic cockroach

not mine was the suicide s solace
of a dull thud ending it all
gods what a terrible tragedy
not to make good with the tragic

gods what a heart breaking pathos
to be always doomed to the comic
o make me a cockroach entirely
or make me a human once more
give me the mind of a cockroach
or give me the shape of a man

if i were to plan out a drama
great as shakespeare s othello
it would be touched with the cockroach
and people would say it was comic

even the demons i talk with
ghosts of the damned that await
vile incarnation as spiders
affect to consider me comic

wait till their loathsome embodiment
wears into the stuff of the spirit
and then let them laugh if they can

¹⁶ The Woolworth Tower, once New York City's tallest edifice, was eventually dwarfed by the Empire State Building, completed in 1931.

damned be the soul of Pythagoras
who first filled the fates with this notion
of a transmigration of spirits

I hope he turns into a flea
on the back of a hound of hell
and is chased for a million years
with a set of red hot teeth
exclamation point

THE PASSIONATE FREUDIAN TO HIS LOVE¹⁷

By Dorothy Parker

Only name the day, and we'll fly away
In the face of old traditions,
To a sheltered spot, by the world forgot,
Where we'll park our inhibitions.
Come and gaze in eyes where the lovelight lies
As it psychoanalyzes,
And when once you glean what your fantasies mean
Life will hold no more surprises.
When you've told your love what you're thinking of
Things will be much more informal;
Through a sunlit land we'll go hand-in-hand,
Drifting gently back to normal.

While the pale moon gleams, we will dream sweet dreams,
And I'll win your admiration,
For it's only fair to admit I'm there
With a mean interpretation.
In the sunrise glow we will whisper low
Of the scenes our dreams have painted,
And when you're advised what they symbolized
We'll begin to feel acquainted.
So we'll gaily float in a slumber boat
Where subconscious waves dash wildly;
In the stars' soft light, we will say good-night –
And "good-night!" will put it mildly.

¹⁷ The title parodies that of Christopher Marlowe's poem "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love".

Our desires shall be from repressions free –
As it's only right to treat them.
To your ego's whims I will sing sweet hymns,
And *ad libido* repeat them.
With your hand in mine, idly we'll recline
Amid bowers of neuroses,
While the sun seeks rest in the great red west
We will sit and match psychoses.
So come dwell a while on that distant isle
In the brilliant tropic weather;
Where a Freud in need is a Freud indeed,
We'll always be Jung together.

ARCHY AT THE ZOO

By Don Marquis

the centipede adown the street
goes braggartly with scores of feet
a gaudy insect but not neat

the octopus s secret wish
is not to be a formal fish
he dreams that some time he may grow
another set of legs or so
and be a broadway music show

oh do not always take a chance
upon an open countenance
the hippopotamus s smile
conceals a nature full of guile

human wandering through the zoo
what do your cousins think of you

i worry not of what the sphinx
thinks or maybe thinks she thinks

i have observed a setting hen
arise from that same attitude
and cackle forth to chicks and men
some quite superfluous platitude

serious camel sad giraffe
are you afraid that if you laugh
those graceful necks will break in half

a lack of any mental outlet
dictates the young cetacean's spoutlet
he frequently blows like me and you
because there's nothing else to do

when one sees in the austral¹⁸ dawn
a wistful penguin perched upon
a bald man's bleak and desert dome
one knows 'tis yearning for its home

the quite irrational ichneumon¹⁹
is such a fool it's almost human

despite the sleek shark's far flung grin
and his pretty dorsal fin
his heart is hard and black within
even without a dentist's chair
he still preserves a sinister air
a prudent dentist always fills
himself with gas before he drills

¹⁸ referring to the southern hemisphere

¹⁹ a parasitic wasp