

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Katha Pollitt**  
**- poems -**

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# Katha Pollitt()

Katha Pollitt (born October 14, 1949) is an American feminist poet, essayist and critic. She is the author of four essay collections and two books of poetry. Her writing focuses on political and social issues, including abortion rights, racism, welfare reform, feminism, and poverty.

Pollitt is best known for her bimonthly column "Subject to Debate" in *The Nation* magazine which *The Washington Post* called "the best place to go for original thinking on the left." Pollitt has contributed to *The Nation* since 1980, first serving as editor for the Books & the Arts section before becoming a regular columnist in 1995. She has also published in numerous other periodicals, including *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Ms. Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, *Glamour*, *Mother Jones*, and the *London Review of Books*. Her poetry has been republished in many anthologies and magazines, including *The New Yorker* and *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* (2006). She has appeared on NPR's *Fresh Air* and *All Things Considered*, *Charlie Rose*, *The McLaughlin Group*, *CNN*, *Dateline NBC* and the *BBC*.

Much of Pollitt's writing is in defense of contemporary feminism and other forms of 'identity politics' and tackles perceived misimpressions by critics from across the political spectrum; other frequent topics include abortion, the media, U.S. foreign policy, the politics of poverty (especially welfare reform), and human rights movements around the world. Her more controversial writings include "Not Just Bad Sex" (1993), a negative review of Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus*, and "Put Out No Flags" (2001), a *Nation* essay on post-9/11 America in which she explained her refusal to fly an American flag out of her living room window.

In addition to her writing, Pollitt is a well-known public speaker and has lectured at dozens of colleges and universities, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brooklyn College, UCLA, the University of Mississippi and Cornell. She has taught poetry at Princeton, Barnard and the 92nd Street Y, and women's studies at the New School University. Pollitt is the recipient of several prestigious awards, including the National Magazine Award (1992, 2003), the American Book Award "Lifetime Achievement Award" (2010), and the National Book Critics Circle Award (1983). She has been awarded grants and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Fulbright Program.

In 2003 she was one of the signers of the Humanist Manifesto.

Pollitt earned a B.A. in philosophy from Radcliffe College in 1972 and an M.F.A. in writing from Columbia University in 1975. She is currently working on a book about abortion politics.

# Amor Fati

Everywhere I look I see my fate.  
In the subway. In a stone.  
On the curb where people wait for the bus in the rain.  
In a cloud. In a glass of wine.

When I go for a walk in the park it's a sycamore leaf.  
At the office, a dull pencil.  
In the window of Woolworth's my fate looks back at me  
through the shrewd eyes of a dusty parakeet.

Scrap of newspaper, dime in a handful of change,  
down what busy street do you hurry this morning,  
an overcoat among overcoats,

with a train to catch, a datebook full of appointments?  
If I called you by my name would you turn around  
or vanish round the corner,  
leaving a faint odor of orange-flower water,  
tobacco, twilight, snow?

Katha Pollitt

# Job

Worse than the boils and sores  
and the stench and the terrible flies  
was the nattering: Think.  
You must have done something.  
Things happen for a reason.  
What goes around.

His life swept off in a whirlwind of camels and children!  
Still, he knew enough to shut up  
when his skin cleared pink as a baby's  
and overnight lambs blanketed the burnt fields.  
People even said he looked taller  
in his fine new robes: You see?  
When one door closes, two doors open.

Nobody wanted to hear  
about the rain or its father  
or leviathan slicing the deeps  
at the black edge of the world  
under the cold blue light of the Pleiades.

The new sons were strong and didn't ask difficult questions,  
the new daughters beautiful, with glass-green eyes.

Katha Pollitt

# LUNARIA

Now that I am  
all done with spring  
rampant in purple  
and ragged leaves

and summer too  
its great green moons  
rising through  
the breathless air  
pale dusted like  
the Luna's wings  
I'd like to meet  
October's chill

like the silver moonplant  
Honesty  
that bears toward winter  
its dark seeds

a paper lantern  
lit within  
and shining in  
the fallen leaves.

Katha Pollitt

# Mind-Body Problem

When I think of my youth I feel sorry not for myself  
but for my body. It was so direct  
and simple, so rational in its desires,  
wanting to be touched the way an otter  
loves water, the way a giraffe  
wants to amble the edge of the forest, nuzzling  
the tender leaves at the tops of the trees. It seems  
unfair, somehow, that my body had to suffer  
because I, by which I mean my mind, was saddled  
with certain unfortunate high-minded romantic notions  
that made me tyrannize and patronize it  
like a cruel medieval baron, or an ambitious  
English-professor husband ashamed of his wife—  
Her love of sad movies, her budget casseroles  
and regional vowels. Perhaps  
my body would have liked to make some of our dates,  
to come home at four in the morning and answer my scowl  
with 'None of your business!' Perhaps  
it would have liked more presents: silks, mascaras.  
If we had had a more democratic arrangement  
we might even have come, despite our different backgrounds,  
to a grudging respect for each other, like Tony Curtis  
and Sidney Poitier fleeing handcuffed together,  
instead of the current curious shift of power  
in which I find I am being reluctantly  
dragged along by my body as though by some  
swift and powerful dog. How eagerly  
it plunges ahead, not stopping for anything,  
as though it knows exactly where we are going.

Katha Pollitt

# Night Subway

The nurse coming off her shift at the psychiatric ward  
nodding over the Post, her surprisingly delicate legs  
shining darkly through the white hospital stockings,  
and the Puerto Rican teens, nuzzling, excited  
after heavy dates in Times Square, the girl with green hair,  
the Hasid from the camera store, who mumbles  
over his prayerbook the nameless name of God,  
sitting separate, careful no woman should touch him,  
even her coat, even by accident,  
the boy who squirms on his seat to look out the window  
where signal lights wink and flash like the eyes of dragons  
while his mother smokes, each short, furious drag  
meaning Mens no good they tell you anything -

How not think of Xerxes, how he reviewed his troops  
and wept to think that of all those thousands of men  
in their brilliant armour, their spearpoints bright in the sun,  
not one would be alive in a hundred years?

O sleepers above us, river  
rejoicing in the moon, and the clouds passing over the moon.

Katha Pollitt



## November Fifth, Riverside Drive

The sky a shock, the ginkgoes yellow fever,  
I wear the day out walking. November, and still  
light stuns the big bay windows on West End  
Avenue, the park brims over with light like a bowl  
and on the river  
a sailboat quivers like a white leaf in the wind.

How like an eighteenth-century painting, this  
year 's decorous decline: the sun  
still warms the aging marble porticos  
and scrolled pavilions past which an old man,  
black-coated apparition of Voltaire,  
flaps on his constitutional. 'Clear air,  
clear mind' -as if he could outpace  
darkness scything home like a flock of crows.

Katha Pollitt

# Old

No one left to call me Penelope,  
mourned the old countess, on being informed of the death  
of her last childhood friend. Did she sit long

in the drafty hall, thinking, That's it then,  
nobody left but hangers-on and flunkeys,  
why go on? Death can't help but look friendly  
when all your friends live there, while more and more

each day's like a smoky party  
where the music hurts and strangers insist that they know you  
till you blink and smile and fade into the wall  
and stare at your drink and take a book off the shelf

and close your eyes for a minute and suddenly  
everyone you came in with has gone  
and people are doing strange things in the corners.  
No wonder you look at your watch

and say to no one in particular  
If you don't mind, I think I'll go home now.

Katha Pollitt

# Silent Letter

It's what you don't hear  
that says struggle  
as in wrath and wrack  
and wrong and wrench and wrangle.

The noiseless wriggle  
of a hooked worm  
might be a shiver of pleasure  
not a slow writhing

on a scythe from nowhere.  
So too the seeming leisure  
of a girl alone in her blue  
bedroom late at night

who stares at the bitten  
end of her pen  
and wonders how to write  
so that what she writes

stays written.

Katha Pollitt

## Small Comfort

Coffee and cigarettes in a clean cafe,  
forsythia lit like a damp match against  
a thundery sky drunk on its own ozone,

the laundry cool and crisp and folded away  
again in the lavender closet-too late to find  
comfort enough in such small daily moments

of beauty, renewal, calm, too late to imagine  
people would rather be happy than suffering  
and inflicting suffering. We're near the end,

but O before the end, as the sparrows wing  
each night to their secret nests in the elm's green dome  
O let the last bus bring

love to lover, let the starveling  
dog turn the corner and lope suddenly  
miraculously, down its own street, home.

Katha Pollitt

# The Old Neighbors

The weather's turned, and the old neighbors creep out  
from their crammed rooms to blink in the sun, as if  
surprised to find they've lived through another winter.  
Though steam heat's left them pale and shrunken  
like old root vegetables,  
Mr. and Mrs. Tozzi are already  
hard at work on their front-yard mini-Sicily:  
a Virgin Mary birdbath, a thicket of roses,  
and the only outdoor aloes in Manhattan.  
It's the old immigrant story,  
the beautiful babies  
grown up into foreigners. Nothing's  
turned out the way they planned  
as sweethearts in the sinks of Palermo. Still,  
each waves a dirt-caked hand  
in geriatric fellowship with Stanley,  
the former tattoo king of the Merchant Marine,  
turning the corner with his shaggy collie,  
who's hardly three but trots  
arthritically in sympathy. It's only  
the young who ask if life's worth living,  
not Mrs. Sansanowitz, who for the last hour  
has been inching her way down the sidewalk,  
lifting and placing  
her new aluminum walker as carefully  
as a spider testing its web. On days like these,  
I stand for a long time  
under the wild gnarled root of the ancient wisteria,  
dry twigs that in a week  
will manage a feeble shower of purple blossom,  
and I believe it: this is all there is,  
all history's brought us here to our only life  
to find, if anywhere,  
our hanging gardens and our street of gold:  
cracked stoops, geraniums, fire escapes, these old  
stragglers basking in their bit of sun.

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## Two Cats

It's better to be a cat than to be a human.  
Not because of their much-noted grace and beauty—  
their beauty wins them no added pleasure, grace is  
only a cat's way

of getting without fuss from one place to another—  
but because they see things as they are. Cats never mistake a  
saucer of milk for a declaration of passion  
or the crook of your knees for

a permanent address. Observing two cats on a sunporch,  
you might think of them as a pair of Florentine bravoes  
awaiting through slitted eyes the least lapse of attention—  
then slash! the stiletto

or alternately as a long-married couple, who hardly  
notice each other but find it somehow a comfort  
sharing the couch, the evening news, the cocoa.  
Both these ideas

are wrong. Two cats together are like two strangers  
cast up by different storms on the same desert island  
who manage to guard, despite the utter absence  
of privacy, chocolate,

useful domestic articles, reading material,  
their separate solitudes. They would not dream of  
telling each other their dreams, or the plots of old movies,  
or inventing a bookful

of coconut recipes. Where we would long ago have  
frantically shredded our underwear into signal  
flags and be dancing obscenely about on the shore in  
a desperate frenzy,

they merely shift on their haunches, calm as two stoics  
weighing the probable odds of the soul's immortality,  
as if to say, if a ship should happen along we'll  
be rescued. If not, not.

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## What I Understood

When I was a child I understood everything  
about, for example, futility. Standing for hours  
on the hot asphalt outfield, trudging for balls  
I'd ask myself, how many times will I have to perform  
this pointless task, and all the others? I knew  
about snobbery, too, and cruelty—for children  
are snobbish and cruel—and loneliness: in restaurants  
the dignity and shame of solitary diners  
disabled me, and when my grandmother  
screamed at me, 'Someday you'll know what it's like!'  
I knew she was right, the way I knew  
about the single rooms my teachers went home to,  
the pictures on the dresser, the hoard of chocolates,  
and that there was no God, and that I would die.  
All this I understood, no one needed to tell me.  
the only thing I didn't understand  
was how in a world whose predominant characteristics  
are futility, cruelty, loneliness, disappointment  
people are saved every day  
by a sparrow, a foghorn, a grassblade, a tablecloth.  
This year I'll be  
thirty-nine, and I still don't understand it.

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