

Classic Poetry Series

Jean Valentine
- poems -

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Jean Valentine(27 April 1934)

Jean Valentine is an American poet, and currently the New York State Poet (2008–2010). Her poetry collection, *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems, 1965–2003*, was awarded the 2004 National Book Award for Poetry.

Her most recent book *Break the Glass* (Copper Canyon Press, 2010) was a finalist for the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Her first book, *Dream Barker*, won the Yale Series of Younger Poets competition in 1965. She has published poems widely in literary journals and magazines, including *The New Yorker*, and *Harper's Magazine*, and *The American Poetry Review*. Valentine was one of five poets including Charles Wright, Russell Edson, James Tate and Louise Gluck, whose work Lee Upton considered critically in *The Muse of Abandonment: Origin, Identity, Mastery in Five American Poets* (Bucknell University Press, 1998). She has held residencies from Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony, Ucross, and the Lannan foundation, among others.

She was born in Chicago, USA, received bachelor of arts and a master of arts degrees at Radcliffe College, and has lived most of her life in New York City. She has taught with the Graduate Writing Program at New York University, at Columbia University, at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan, and at Sarah Lawrence College. She is a faculty member at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. She was married to the late American historian James Chace from 1957–1968, and they have two daughters, Sarah and Rebecca.

Awards

2004 National Book Award for Poetry (for *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems, 1965–2003*)

1999 Shelley Memorial Award

1991 Maurice English Poetry Award

1988 Beatrice Hawley Award (for *Home Deep Blue: New and Selected Poems*)

1976 Guggenheim Fellowship

1972 National Endowment for the Arts - Literature Fellowship in Poetry

1965 Yale Series of Younger Poets

Dream Barker

We met for supper in your flat-bottomed boat.
I got there first: in a white dress: I remember
Wondering if you'd come. Then you shot over the bank,
A Virgilian Nigger Jim, and poled us off
To a little sea-food barker's cave you knew.

What'll you have? you said. Eels hung down,
Bamboozled claws hung up from the crackling weeds.
The light was all behind us. To one side
In a dish of ice was a shell shaped like a sand-dollar
But worked with Byzantine blue and gold. What's that?

Well, I've never seen it before, you said,
And I don't know how it tastes.
Oh well, said I, if it's bad,
I'm not too hungry, are you? We'd have the shell...
I know just how you feel, you said.

And asked for it; we held out our hands.
Six Dollars! barked the barker, For This Beauty!
We fell down laughing in your flat-bottomed boat, .

And then I woke up: in a white dress:
Dry as a bone on dry land, Jim,
Bone dry, old, in a dry land, Jim, my Jim. .

Jean Valentine

Elegy For Jane Kenyon (2)

Jane is big
with death, Don
sad and kind - Jane
though she's dying
is full of mind

We talk about the table
the little walnut one
how it's like
Emily Dickinson's

But Don says No
Dickinson's
was made of iron. No
said Jane
Of flesh.

Jean Valentine

Eleventh Brother

one arm still a swan's wing
The worst had happened before:
love—before I knew it was mine—
turned into a wild swan
and flew across the rough water
Outsider seedword until I die
I will be open to you as
an egg speechless red

Jean Valentine

Father Lynch Returns From The Dead

There's one day a year
they can return, if they want.
He says he won't again.
I ask what it's like—
he quotes St. Paul:
'Now hope is sweet.
' Then in his own voice.
Oh well it's a great scandal,
the naked are easier to kill. -

Jean Valentine

Fellini in Purgatory

He was shoveling sand
at the edge of the water, his heavy black glasses
glittered with rain:

"Don't you see how much like a woman I am?"
Shovel, shovel.

His throat was wrapped in water,
and the water flowered with milt.

Shoveler, are you eating the earth?
Earth eating you?

Teach me
what I have to have
to live in this country.

And he, as calm as calm, though he was dead:
"Oh,—milt,—and we're all of us milt."

Jean Valentine

Friend

Friend I need your hand every morning
but anger and beauty and hope
these roses make one rose.

Friend I need a hand every evening
but anger and hope and beauty
are three roses
that make one rose.

Let's fix our bed it's in splinters
and I want to stay all year.

Let's fix our bed it's in splinters
and I want to stay all year.

Did you hear what that woman on Grafton Street was saying?

You won't be killed today.

We don't even know we're born

Jean Valentine

Friend 2

You came in a dream, yesterday —
The first day we met you showed me
your dark workroom off the kitchen,
your books, your notebooks.
Reading our last, knowing-last letters —
the years of our friendship
reading our poems to each other,
I would start breathing again.
Yesterday, in the afternoon,
more than a year since you died,
some words came into the air.
I looked away a second,
and they were gone, six lines,
just passing through.

Jean Valentine

Ghost Elephants

In the elephant field tall green ghost elephants
with your cargo of summer leaves
at night I heard you breathing
at the window Don't you ever
think I'm not crying since
you're away from me
Don't ever think I went free
At first the goodbye had a lilt to it—
maybe just a couple of months—
but it was a beheading.
Ghost elephant,
reach down, cross me over—

Jean Valentine

Hospital: Strange Lights

I needed a friend but
I was in the other room —
not just the other room,
another frame dragging blue
or brighter blue: strange lights:
The doctor singing from The Song
of Songs 'in the secret places
of the stairs' Us standing there
In the past as we were in
life you turning and turning my coat buttons

Jean Valentine

I Have Lived In Your Face

I have lived in your face.
Have I been you?
Your mother?
giving you birth —
this pain whenever I say
goodbye to thee —
up to now I always
wanted it but not this

Jean Valentine

In Prison

In prison
without being accused

or reach your family
or have a family You have

conscience
heart trouble

asthma
manic-depressive

(we lost the baby)
no meds

no one
no window

black water
nail-scratched walls

your pure face turned away
embarrassed

you
who the earth was for.

Jean Valentine

La Chalupa, The Boat

I am twenty,
drifting in la chalupa,
the blue boat painted with roses,
white lilies—
No, not drifting, I am poling
my way into my life. It seems
like another life:
There were the walls of the mind.
There were the cliffs of the mind,
There were the seven deaths,
and the seven bread-offerings—
Still, there was still
the little boat, the chalupa
you built once, slowly, in the yard, after school—

Jean Valentine

Late

Late have I called &
late my
beloved
was blessing me

I was covering
my breasts with my arms

"Those doves"
you said

In the sun I took my arms away

Submitted by Jimmy Lo

Jean Valentine

Poem from the Russian

In a circle of 12 winter trees
I'm hunched
Remembering being fled from

—Who gave me this wool sweater?
So it please you life, we won't go alone—
Next year will be better.
Remember that white tree?

The white underpaint of the government.
The country of bone.

In memory of Michael Brown

Jean Valentine

Red Cloth

Red cloth I lie on the ground
otherwise nothing could hold
I put my hand on the ground
the membrane is gone and
nothing does hold your place
in the ground is all of it
and it is breathing

Jean Valentine

Sanctuary

People pray to each other. The way I say 'you' to someone else,
respectfully, intimately, desperately. The way someone says
'you' to me, hopefully, expectantly, intensely ...

—Huub Oosterhuis

You who I don't know I don't know how to talk to you

—What is it like for you there?

Here ... well, wanting solitude; and talk; friendship—

The uses of solitude. To imagine; to hear.

Learning braille. To imagine other solitudes.

But they will not be mine;

to wait, in the quiet; not to scatter the voices—

What are you afraid of?

What will happen. All this leaving. And meetings, yes. But death.

What happens when you die?

"... not scatter the voices,"

Drown out. Not make a house, out of my own words. To be quiet in
another throat; other eyes; listen for what it is like there. What
word. What silence. Allowing. Uncertain: to drift, in the
restlessness ... Repose. To run like water—

What is it like there, right now?

Listen: the crowding of the street; the room. Everyone hunches in
against the crowding; holding their breath: against dread.

What do you dread?

What happens when you die?

What do you dread, in this room, now?

Not listening. Now. Not watching. Safe inside my own skin.
To die, not having listened. Not having asked ... To have scattered
life.

Yes I know: the thread you have to keep finding, over again, to
follow it back to life; I know. Impossible, sometimes.

Jean Valentine

The Branches

The branches looked first like tepees,
but there was no emptiness.
Like piles of leaves waiting
for fire: at the foot of
the wisewoman trees,
at the foot of the broken General,
next to the tree of the veteran girl
who died this summer slow red cloth

Jean Valentine

The Knife

In my sleep:
Fell at his feet wanted to eat him right up
would have but
even better
he talked to me.

Did I ask you to?
Were those words my blood-sucking too?

Now I will have a body again
move differently, easier back to the plan
a little house a woman and a man

crossed against yours my soul will show
glow through my breastbone:
Back down into the kitchen
yours

Here I will save you
others have failed, even died, but I
will save you you save me devour me away
up

Woke up:
I can cry but I can't wake up
today again don't answer the door
then did couldn't look at you talk
couldn't place the bed in the room, or where the room was
when I closed my eyes

This is the same old knife my knife
I know it as well as I know my own mouth
It will be lying there on the desk if

I open my eyes I will know the room very well
there will be the little thrown-out globe of blood we left
and every molecule of every object here will swell
with life. And someone will be at the door.

The One You Wanted To Be Is The One You Are

She saying, You don't have to do anything
you don't even have to be, you Only who are,
you nobody from nowhere,
without one sin or one good quality,
without one book, without one word,
without even a comb, you!

The one you wanted to be
in the one you are. Come play...

And he saying,
Look at me!
I don't know how...

Their breath like a tree's breath. Their silence
like a deer's silence. Tolstoy
wrote about this: all misunderstanding.

Jean Valentine

To Plath, To Sexton

So what use was poetry
to a white empty house?
Wolf, swan, hare,
in by the fire.
And when your tree
crashed through your house,
what use then
was all your power?
It was the use of you.
It was the flower.

Jean Valentine

To The Black Madonna Of Chartres

Friend or no friend,
darkness or light,
vowels or consonants,
water or dry land,
anything more from you
now is just gravy —
just send me down forgiveness,
send me down bearing
myself a black cupful of light.

Jean Valentine

X

I have decorated this banner to honor my brother.
Our parents did not want his name used publicly
-- from an unnamed child's banner in the AIDS Memorial Quilt.

The boatpond, broken off, looks back at the sky.
I remember looking at you, X, this way,
taking in your red hair, your eyes' light, and I miss you
so. I know,
you are you, and real, standing there in the doorway,
whether dead or whether living, real. -- Then Y
said, "who will remember me three years after I die?
What is there for my eye
to read then?"
The lamb should not have given
his wool.
He was so small. At the end, X, you were so small.
Playing with a stone
on your bedspread at the edge of the ocean.

Submitted by Jimmy Lo

Jean Valentine