“What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why”

By Edna St. Vincent Millay

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.

Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

Source: Vanity Fair (November, 1920)

Born in Rockland, Maine, Edna St. Vincent Millay as a teenager entered a national poetry contest sponsored by The Lyric Year magazine; her poem “Renascence” won fourth place and led to a scholarship at Vassar College. Millay was as famous during her lifetime for her red-haired beauty, unconventional lifestyle, and outspoken politics as for her poetry. Yet her passionate, formal lyrics are cherished by many readers today, years after her death.

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