

# FRENCH NORA MAY

POEMS

Nora French

**Poems**

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# Nora May French

## Poems

### THE OUTER GATE <sup>1</sup>

**LIFE** said: "My house is thine with all its store;  
Behold, I open shining ways to thee —  
Of every inner portal make thee free:  
O child, I may not bar the outer door.  
Go from me if thou wilt, to come no more;  
But all thy pain is mine, thy flesh of me;  
And must I hear thee, faint and woefully,  
Call on me from the darkness and implore?"

Nay, mother, for I follow at thy will.  
But oftentimes thy voice is sharp to hear,  
Thy trailing fragrance heavy on the breath;  
Always the outer hall is very still,  
And on my face a pleasant wind and clear  
Blows straitly from the narrow gate of Death.

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<sup>1</sup> This poem, so distinctly prophetic, was written a year and four months before her death.

## RAIN

**THE** rain was grey before it fell,  
And through a world where light had died  
There ran a mournful little wind  
That shook the trees and cried.

The rain was brown upon the earth,  
In turbid stream and tiny seas —  
In swift and slender shafts that beat  
The flowers to their knees.

The rain is mirror to the sky,  
To leaning grass in image clear,  
And drifting in the shining pools  
The clouds are white and near.

## BEST-LOVED

**IT** was a joy whose stem I did not break —  
A little thing I passed with crowded hands,  
And gave a backward look for beauty's sake.

Of all I pulled and wove and flung aside,  
Was any hue preferred above the rest?  
I only know they pleased me well, and died.

But this – it lives distinct in Memory's sight,  
A little thing, incurving like a pearl.  
I think its heart had never seen the light.

## THE ROSE <sup>2</sup>

AY, pluck a jonquil when the May's a-wing!  
Or please you with a rose upon the breast,  
A sweeter violet chosen from the rest,  
To match your mood with blue caprice of spring —  
Leave windy vines a tendril less to swing.  
Why, what's a flower? A day's delight at best,  
A perfume loved, a faded petal pressed,  
A whimsey for an hour's remembering.

But wondrous careful must he draw the rose  
From jealous earth, who seeks to set anew  
Deep root, young leafage, with a gardener's art —  
To plant her queen of all his garden close,  
And make his varying fancy wind and dew,  
Cloud, rain, and sunshine for one woman's heart.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Rose" was written for Mr. Porter Garnett on the occasion of his marriage.



## BETWEEN TWO RAINS

**IT** is a silver space between two rains;  
The lulling storm has given to the day  
An hour of windless air and riven grey;  
The world is drained of color; light remains.  
Beyond the curving shore a gull complains;  
Unceasing, on the bastions of the bay,  
With gleam of shields and veer of vaporing spray  
The long seas fall, the grey tide wars and wanes.

It is a silver space between two rains:  
A mood too sweet for tears, for joy too pale —  
What stress has swept or nears us, thou and I?  
This hour a mist of light is on the plains,  
And seaward fares again with litten sail  
Our laden ship of dreams adown the sky.

## THE MESSAGE <sup>3</sup>

**SO** might it brush my cheek with errant wings,  
So might it speak with thrilling touch and light  
Of answering eyes, of dim, unuttered things —  
A moth from hidden gardens of the night.

So, in a land of hills, where twilight lay,  
Might come a sudden bird-call to the ear,  
Across the canyons, faint and far away...  
O Heart, how sweet ... half heard and wholly dear.

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<sup>3</sup> These lines were in response to a long telegram dispatched at night by a distant friend.

## BY THE HOSPITAL

**WHO** goes to meet the windy night  
With unseen comrades shouting by,  
Who grips a bough in swift delight  
To let it dip and loose and fly;

Who runs for rest that running gives,  
Runs till his throbbing muscles speak;  
Who bends to feel how keenly lives  
The joyous grass beneath his cheek —

With sudden tears his eyes shall fill,  
With quick-drawn breath he sees them plain —  
Those bodies that must lie so still,  
So tired – in the House of Pain.

## **“OH, DRYAD THOUGHTS”**

**OH**, Dryad thoughts of lovely yesterday! —  
You melted through a sunny wood like mist,  
With here a wind of laughter, there a stray  
Pleased flower, tipped and kissed.

To-day among the noises of the street,  
The press of faces, sullen, gay, and wise,  
I hear you calling, calling me; I meet  
Your clear, untroubled eyes.

## MUSIC IN THE PAVILION

**FACES** that throng and stare and come and go —  
The air a-quiver as the voices meet;  
And loud Humanity in mingled flow  
Passes with jarring tread of many feet.

But over all the chatter of the crowd  
(The background for its delicate relief)  
Now trembling in a thread, now wild and loud,  
The violin laughs and sings, and cries its grief.

Then, through it all, and round it all, the sea;  
A solemn heart with never-ceasing beat,  
Bearing an undertone of mystery  
The harsh and lovely notes, the shrill and sweet.

Surely it is my life – of plodding days,  
With one Ideal holding clear and good;  
And sounding over, under, through my ways,  
Something apart – and never understood.

## REBUKE

**THE** tortured river-banks, the toiling piers —  
I walked thereby as older grew the day,  
And sick with sorry clamor in mine ears,  
Heart-weary turned my steps and went my way.

“O place full-voiced of wretchedness!” I cried.  
(The sun had set, the dusk was closing in)  
“O place where laboring Life goes heavy-eyed,  
Compound of grime and discord, strife and sin!”

I turned me back, and lo, a miracle!  
For misty violet lay along the land.  
The shining river in mysterious spell  
(Divinely touched by some transmuting hand).

A path of wonder was, and on it stirred,  
(Black-shaped, and jeweled with a crimson spark)  
A ship that slowly moved; and, faintly heard,  
A cheery song rose blithely to the dark.

## IN CAMP

### I

**AS** down I bent with eager lips  
Above the stones and cresses cool —  
The yellow tent, the little moon,  
I found within my twilight pool.

The fringing trees, the floating moon,  
The bubble tent – I passed them by,  
And sipped a tiny, shattered star,  
Deep drinking from that mirrored sky.

### II

**MY** tent is shadowed day and night  
With leaves that shift in moon and sun;  
Across its walls of lucent white  
The lovely varied tracings run;

And black and slender, quickly sped,  
I watch the little feet at dawn —  
A sudden oriole overhead,  
A darting linnet come and gone.

## THE NYMPH

**FROM** forest paths we turned us, nymphs, new-made,  
And, lifting eyes abashed with great desire  
Before high Jove, the gift of souls we prayed.

Whereat he said: "O perfect as new leaves  
New glossed and veined with blood of perfect days  
And stirred to murmured speech in fragrant eves,

"Still ask ye souls? Behold, I give instead  
Into each breast a bird with fettered wings,  
A bird fast holden with a silken thread:

"To fall from trial of flight with strength swift spent,  
To sing of mating and the brooding grass,  
To turn thy being earthward to content."

Within me sudden wrath and terror strove,  
And, casting forth his gift I cried aloud:  
"I pray thee for a soul in truth, great Jove!"

Then smiled he slowly, lifting to my look  
A fabric where the rippled lustre played  
And shifted like the humor of a brook —

All prism-hued, as upward eyes may see  
The sun through dazzled lashes. Straight I cried:  
"I know not this!" "Thy soul," he answered me.

But when my joy had seized it, "Nay," he said,  
And cast it gleaming to the scattering wind —  
Hues green and golden, blue and fervent red.

Within his hand the brightest shred of all —  
The very heart and secret of the web —  
That held he fast and loosed he not at all;

But to me said: "O thou who scorned the dole  
That gave thee peace of days and long content,  
Do now *my* will. Go forth and find thy soul."

To earth we went, nor knew I from that hour  
My sister's joy or pain; but on great morns  
When low light slept above a world in flower,

Through drowsing noons where heat and color lie



In ever wavering tides of airy seas,  
Winged by the darting ships of dragon-flies —

Through these and twilight peace I went, and rid  
My steps of comrades. Lonely must I find  
The silent places where my soul was hid.

In sheltered ways with summer showers sweet  
I wandered on a day, and singing found  
The very green I sought beneath my feet.

In leafing forests when the year was new,  
And heaven ribboned in the crossing boughs,  
I gathered marvelous strip on strip of blue.

When on a lonely stream the moon was bright,  
A Naiad from her treasure plucked me forth  
Such gold as bound my web with threads of light.

And red. Ah, love! thou knowest how I came  
Unto thy fluting in the breathless eve,  
And burned my heart's pale flower to scarlet flame!..

One morn I found within a drop of dew  
My very soul: a crystal world it was  
Wherein the varied earth and heaven's blue

And myself gazing glassed in perfect sphere —  
But long above it was my wonder bent,  
And lo! it dried more swiftly than a tear.

Now is this truth, O Jove, that I have won  
And woven all the shreds thou gav'st the wind?  
But how, I pray thee, can my task be done

Unless thou ope thine hand, unless thou loose  
The very heart and secret of the web  
Where every thread may end and know its use?

Joy hast thou not withheld, nor love denied,  
Nor any beauty dimmed on earth or sky,  
Yet by thy will I roam unsatisfied.

But couldst thou hear again that earliest plea,  
Again my choice would flout the lesser gift,  
And willing take this task thou grantest me —

To search the heart and secret of the whole,  
To twine the eager hues of varied days,

And to its bright perfection weave a soul.

## VIVISECTION

**WE** saw unpitying skill  
In curious hands put living flesh apart,  
Till, bare and terrible, the tiny heart  
Pulsed, and was still.

We saw Grief's sudden knife  
Strip through the pleasant flesh of soul-disguise —  
Lay for a second's space before our eyes  
A naked life.

## THE STRANGER

**SHE** sat so quiet day by day,  
The sweet withdrawal of a nun,  
With busy hands and downward eyes —  
The shyest thing beneath the sun.

Nor knew we, tossing each to each  
Our rapid speech, our careless words,  
That through them, always, half-afraid,  
Her thoughts had gone like seeking birds,

Plucking a twig, a shining straw,  
A happy thread with silken gleams,  
To carry homeward to her heart,  
And weave a hidden nest of dreams.

## THE CONSTANT ONES

**THE** tossing trees had every flag unfurled  
To hail their chief, but now the sun is set,  
And in the sweet new quiet on the world  
The king is dead, the fickle leaves forget.

A placid earth, an air serene and still;  
In misty blue the gradual smoke is thinned —  
Only the grasses, leaning to his will,  
The grasses hold a memory of wind.

## INSTINCT

**TO** Reason with the praise of one I go  
To fall back, silent, at her whispered “No.”

And always of the other says she, “Trust —  
He doeth thus and thus, O thou unjust!”

Yet meet one eye to eye and queries end —  
An eager hand goes out to greet a friend,

And let the other please me, soon or late  
Wakes with a hiss the little snake of hate.

## SAN FRANCISCO NEW YEAR'S, 1907

**SAID** the Old Year to the New: "They will never welcome you  
As they sang me in and rang me in upon my birthday night —  
All above the surging crowd, bells and voices calling loud —  
A throng attuned to laughter and a city all alight.

"Kind had been the years of old, drowsy-lidded, zoned with gold;  
They swept their purples down the bay and sped the homeward keel;  
The years of fruits and peace, smiling days and rich increase —  
Too indolent with wine and sun to grasp the slaying steel.

"As my brothers so I came, panther-treading, silken, tame;  
The sword was light within my hand, I kept it sheathed and still —  
The jeweled city prayed me and the laughing voices stayed me —  
A little while I pleased them well and gave them all their will.

"As a panther strikes to slay, so I wrenched my shuddering prey.  
I lit above the panic throng my torches' crimson flare;  
For they made my coming bright and I gave them light for light —  
I filled the night with flaming wings and Terror's streaming hair.

"They were stately walls and high — as I felled them so they lie —  
Lie like bodies torn and broken, lie like faces seamed with scars;  
Here where Beauty dwelt and Pride, ere my torches flamed and died,  
The empty arches break the night to frame the tranquil stars.

"Though of all my brothers scorned, I, betrayer, go unmourned,  
It is I who tower shoulder-high above the level years;  
You who come to build anew, joy will live again with you,  
But mightiest I who walked with Death and taught the sting of tears!"

## THE POPPY FIELD

**BEYOND** the tangled poppies lies a lake;  
And ever sings to him who muses here



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