quoted in the first part of this essay, it seems a somewhat glib inversion of sentiment. Some sort of a lake beneath the moon, in which she swam a little, losing sight of shore; and how the boy, who was at home.

Simple enough, not different from the rest, wrote a pleasant essay as he went, which seemed to her an honest enough text. Whether she loved him, and she was content. So loud, so loud the million cricketers’ chor... So sweet the night, so long-drawn-out and late.

And if the man were not her spirit’s mate, Why was her body sluggish with desire? Stark on the open field the moonlight fell, But the oak tree’s shadow was deep and black and secret as a well.

This is from “Sonnets to an Ungratified Tree,” a series of poems written in the voice of a woman who finds herself taken care of a dying man she’s never truly loved, though it seems she’s spent most of her life with him. There’s more density of experience in these poems than anywhere else in Millay. Gone is the tendency to stamp an epigram, gone the obvious biographical context (one that I can find, at any rate: neither of her most recent biographers even mentions this sequence). The language is still merely gestural in places (“mystery,” “sweet,” “secret”) and there’s that familiar trope of losing sight of shore, but this, again, is simply how a Millay poem works. She takes the bluntest materials and occasionally makes some cut sharper than you could have expected, uses stock poetic images and ideas and somehow renders some truth of feeling as stark and unphrasable as this poem’s closing image.

Randall Jarrell once famously defined a great poet as someone who, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, managed to get struck by lightning five or six times; double that and you were great enough, presumably, charred.

The truth is, though, that Millay wrote some twenty poems well worth remembering—barring no single poem, with complex concision, or singularity of voice, or reach, 

Flamenco

I once met a guitarist, in Spain, in Granada, an American, of all things, and on top of that, Jewish, who played flamenco like a friend.

He called himself “Juan,” then something with an “S,” not the “S” it was once, but Saxters or something; whatever: he played like a friend.

He lived in a seedy hotel, which was really a whorehouse, he told me, though mostly what he told me were lies: still, he did play like a friend.

That he was a drug addict he didn’t say, but he’d often have to go for a shoot, he said because he was sick, but who cared when he played like a friend?

Or perhaps I should say played like a fiend when he played, because often as they say he was “noodling,” and no one like that plays like a fiend.

He lived in a whorehouse, did drugs, and lied. How had it happened? It came to him, it could have to you or to me, and I for one never played anything like a friend.

—C. K. Williams

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