

## **Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982)**

### **“Not Marble, Nor the Gilded Monuments”**

The praisers of women in their proud and beautiful poems,  
Naming the grave mouth and the hair and the eyes,  
Boasted those they loved should be forever remembered:  
Those were lies.

The words sound but the face in the Istrian sun is forgotten.  
The poet speaks but to her dead ears no more.  
The sleek throat is gone—and the breast that was troubled to listen:  
Shadow from door.

Therefore I will not praise your knees nor your fine walking  
Telling you men shall remember your name as long  
As lips move or breath is spent or the iron of English  
Rings from a tongue.

I shall say you were young, and your arms straight, and your mouth scarlet:  
I shall say you will die and none will remember you:  
Your arms change, and none remember the swish of your garments,  
Nor the click of your shoe.

Not with my hand's strength, not with difficult labor  
Springing the obstinate words to the bones of your breast  
And the stubborn line to your young stride and the breath to your breathing  
And the beat to your haste  
Shall I prevail on the hearts of unborn men to remember.

(What is a dead girl but a shadowy ghost  
Or a dead man's voice but a distant and vain affirmation  
Like dream words most)

Therefore I will not speak of the undying glory of women.  
I will say you were young and straight and your skin fair  
And you stood in the door and the sun was a shadow of leaves on your shoulders  
And a leaf on your hair—

I will not speak of the famous beauty of dead women:  
I will say the shape of a leaf once lay on your hair.  
Till the world ends and the eyes are out and the mouths broken  
Look! It is there!

In case you didn't already know, MacLeish's poem is a reply to this poem, by William Shakespeare:

### Sonnet 55

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;  
But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.  
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,  
And broils root out the work of masonry,  
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn  
The living record of your memory.  
'Gainst death and all oblivious enmity  
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room  
Even in the eyes of all posterity  
That wear this world out to the ending doom.  
    So, till the judgment that yourself arise,  
    You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

5

6. **broils** - disturbances

10

9. **all-oblivious enmity** – the enmity of being forgotten

12. **the ending doom** – Judgment Day

13. **till . . . arise** – until the judgment day when you rise from the dead

14. **this** – this poem