

# Most Ancient Verse

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*Selected and translated*

*by*

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*and*

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*With an Introduction by David Grene*

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## *Introduction*

The years since the Second War have seen a great many English translations of ancient literature, and a most gratifying degree of interest in them. The Greek and Latin classics were a natural first choice. Indeed, since the Renaissance, every era that has consciously differentiated itself culturally from its past has retranslated them, and in our new versions of our basic texts we are only registering our conviction that we *are* a new generation. But most of the poems translated by Professors Jacobsen and Wilson have, as far as I know, never appeared in English before. They contribute something quite new to our knowledge of our past tradition and its relation to the present. Because of the great antiquity of the originals and the tremendous barriers to understanding that exist between us and them, the task of these two scholars must have been one that called for an immense expenditure of loving care.

Furthermore, this is a collection of poems. The intrinsic effect of poetry, even that composed before the division of prose and poetry as we understand the two, is probably largely the same, and the translators had therefore to render the poetic values truly, and that is something that goes far beyond the relatively simple equivalence of prose sentences.

Probably everyone would agree that the first task of the translator of poetry is to produce an effect in the new language as striking and effective as that of the original. This of course is the counsel of perfection; few translators are as good poets as the men they translate, and nearly every translator is haunted by the sad disproportion be-



tween what he knows is in his material and what he has made of it. However, after the initial agreement on the main purpose of translation, there is a great difference of opinion amongst translators of poetry on the necessity of likeness, in form and expression, between the original and the language into which it is rendered. Some hold that the exact impression, for instance a tendency to archaism or ritualism, must be retained. Some think that such a treatment fetters the translator too much, and sacrifices to pedantry effects which are hard enough to achieve even with less self-consciousness. Good examples of the two methods in the translation of Greek poetry are T. E. Lawrence's *Odyssey* and the version of the nineteenth century translators, Butcher and Lang.

Professor Jacobsen belongs to the latter school, at least in these selections from Sumerian poetry. He has set himself a very hard task, that of trying to write poetry that not only has an effect comparable with his original, but which shows a character which is a deliberate imitation of it. He has had a considerable degree of success. At times—and I do not believe that any translator can do more than hit off the effect he desires from time to time—this volume gives the reader some genuine poetry; and this poetry creates an impression peculiarly its own, which I take it is intended to recall the Sumerian. The repetitions and echoes of rhythms and the formulaic phrases presumably show Professor Jacobsen adopting English forms which he thinks most expressive of the original.

It is a bold venture and one can congratulate Professor Jacobsen on the daring with which he undertook it. In



English the value of the repetitions and the formulaic phrases is bound up with their musical associations. (Joyce's experiments show this very clearly.) The succession of musical phrases has of course peculiar emotional effects in each language. But it is impossible in the case of a language like Greek and I assume a fortiori in Sumerian to be sure that the effect of the rhythms is equivalent since we do not have the evidence of our ears as to how the original language sounded. For instance the semi-proverbialisms of Hesiod's poetry may be very inadequately rendered by our rattling English emphases. But the appearance in writing of the same words repeated, and, more dubiously, what appear to be repeated climaxes in rhythm tempt the translator to some parallel violence in effect although he is all at sea as to the exact relationship of sound and emotion in the original. I am certain that these difficulties must be much greater for the translator of Sumerian than Greek. All the more credit to Professor Jacobsen for achieving so powerful an effect by the means he has chosen to employ. It must have needed great scholarship, great confidence, and great linguistic gifts. A brilliant example of the workmanship is the poem entitled "Deadly Diseases":

The shivers and chills of death that fritter the sum of things,  
     spawn of the god of Heaven, spawned on an evil spirit,  
 The death warrants, beloved sons of the storm-god  
     born of the queen of the nether world,  
 Who were torn out of Heaven and hurled from the Earth as  
     castoffs  
     Are creatures of Hell, all.

.....

From the man's embrace they lead off the wife,  
 From the man's knee they make the child get up.  
 And the youth they fetch out of the house of his in-laws;  
 They are the numbness, the daze  
     that treads on the heels of man.

Here the echoes and repetitions of the English, the half-personal, half-incantatory language strongly suggest a certain kind of formulaic poetry. The music and the meaning are blended to enchantment. On the other hand

Under Nanna's moon—a girl under Nanna's moon, alone  
     I lie,  
 Under Nanna's moon drifting over the pure mountains alone  
     I lie  
 Under the mountains of the cedars where sleeps Mullil alone  
     I lie

is not so good. Here the musical effect is very marked, but the content of the words is not dense or weighty enough. The poetry is not there, and the final effect is one of a false simplicity which is merely flat.

All the imagination and devotion of the translator—and very great they are—are needed for what appears to the layman to be the chief characteristic of this selection of poems. This is a most elusive combination of qualities which seem to us opposites. This is a blend of the personal and the traditional, realism and ritual, of directness and the inexplicitness of the proverbial formula. When I read these poems, I was often reminded of the adaptation of the ballad which Yeats employed in his last phase, but this may have been of course because Professor Jacobsen was also familiar with the ballads and so half consciously this likeness in the rendering took shape. In any case the

likeness in no sense deprives these versions of the decisiveness of the character of real poetry. Here is one of the best poems, which illustrates what I mean:

I am not one who can answer my mother who cries for me in  
the desert,

Who makes the cry for me echo in the desert,

She will not be answered.

I am not the grass, may not grow up again for her;

I am not the waters, may not rise again for her;

I am not the grass sprouting in the desert,

I am not the new grass, growing up in the desert.

Here the generic images are used in such a way that the effect is strongly personal. It is a surprise to read in Professor Jacobsen's note to this poem that it "is from a long lament for the god Damu, a figure related to that of Dumuzi. His mother is seeking him in the desert; he speaks from the dead," for it makes us realize that here again the Sumerian has apparently combined what would be for us, of the rest of the Western tradition, two opposite poles of feeling. If there is one attribute of divinity which would seem common to our thought it is the freedom from death, in the sense that death applies to humans. Yet it seems that among the Sumerians divinity cannot be separated from humanity even in this regard. Not only can the god be subject to death, but his death can inspire in his wife and mother exactly the emotion that would be valid in a human wife and mother. Even among Homer's very human gods the death of a god is unthinkable, and so all the terrors, the resignation or defiance associated with the mortal state, are not native to them. That Homer's gods know neither death nor old age is in-

herent in their being. How hard it is for the Christian mystery of the God-who-died to be accepted, the long series of controversies over the dual personality of Christ bears witness. But here and in the beautiful poem "The Wild Bull, Who Has Lain Down" it is impossible to distinguish, at least from the translation, any differences between the gods concerned and their human counterparts. Apparently the Sumerian in his worship thought of the god as in all respects identical with himself, when it comes to the experience of supreme emotion and the forces which provoke it.

The last poems in the collection, for which Professor Wilson is responsible, show great skill and delicacy on the part of the translator. They are more easily comprehensible than the Sumerian poems, and altogether seem more familiar. The themes of *carpe diem*, the meditations on death and suicide, and one or two love poems are more like their later Western counterparts. Perhaps, because of this, one is inclined to think less of them. But it is very hard to render a tradition fairly by a few poems, and these mostly in excerpts. "The Good Land of Eternity" is remarkable for its simple directness, as also is the reflection on death, which Professor Wilson has entitled ". . . Or Not To Be." This volume is also clearly intended to show the difference in the kind of poetry in the two traditions, Sumerian and Egyptian, and this is not the least of its interest.

In the best of the poems of this volume there is an extraordinary impression of hardness and purity. It is a great achievement for a translator to have enabled us to reach this, which must surely be the core of the original.

DAVID GRENE

## Sumerian Verse

*An incantation, part of a magic ritual of healing in which the kishkanu was used, and for which it was consecrated by this recounting of its holy origin. Enki was the god of the sweet waters and son of Nammu, goddess of pools. His sacred city was Eridu in southern Babylonia, built on a lake or a fresh-water lagoon.*

*The two rivers mentioned are the Tigris and the Euphrates. The gods named in the last stanza were minor deities in Enki's service.*

*From Nineveh, Ashurbanipal's library, about 600 B.C., but the poem was composed much earlier and probably goes back at least to about 1700 B.C.*

## The Kishkanu of White Magic

This dark kishkanu tree, grown forth in Eridu  
in a holy place,  
Was to behold as clear (blue) lapis lazuli  
stretching out above the Deep.

Full of bounty are Enki's haunts in Eridu,  
In his seat is the place of the portals  
to the nether world,  
On a couch in the bedroom is Nammu,  
From his holy dwelling the shadows fall  
as from a forest—inside no man may go with him,  
Inside are the sun-god and Ama-ushumgal-anna,  
between the mouths of the two rivers.

The gods Kahegal, Igihegal, and Kanabdu of Eridu  
Have dug out that kishkanu, have laid into it  
the spell of the Deep.



*As it stands, the stanza comes from a formal lament by  
the grain-goddess about the destruction of her temple.  
That lament, however, clearly builds on a folk song,  
the plaint of a young girl longing for her lover.*

*Findspot unknown.*

## Girl under the Moon

Under Nanna's moon—a girl under Nanna's moon, alone  
I lie,  
Under Nanna's moon drifting over the pure mountains  
alone I lie,  
Under the mountains of the cedars where sleeps Mullil  
alone I lie.

*In the spring the shepherds took to the desert in search  
of grazing for their flocks. The description of  
Geshtin-anna, sister of the god of flocks and herds,  
Dumuzi, here given shows Sumerian pastoral life from  
its idyllic side. It is taken from a longer poem  
about Dumuzi.*

*From Nippur, about 1700 B.C. or earlier.*

## Bucolic

His sister of the sweet-voiced lyre,  
Maid Geshtin-anna, sits in the fold,  
She milks the ewe and gives to the lamb,  
She milks the goat and gives to the kid,  
In her right hand she carries the churn,  
In her left the young woman has a lyre  
and a harp.

*Inanna, goddess of the morning and evening star, and  
Dumuzi, the shepherd god in love with her, are not  
very different from young people anywhere.*

*Geshtin-anna, Dumuzi's sister, is the  
breathless little gossip who can hardly wait to  
tell her brother that her girl friend is in love with  
him. The beginning and end of the text are too  
broken to be intelligible.*

*From Nippur, about 1700 B.C. or earlier.*

## The Sister as Matchmaker

“The fair Inanna gives you (this) gift;  
She has met you, my beloved one,  
When I was away on an errand,  
And is charmed with you and delighted in you,  
And—my brother—she had me come into her house  
And she lay down on the quilt of the bed  
And when the sweet darling was lying next to my heart  
And we were chatting one to the other, one to the other,  
She began moaning about my good-looking brother  
And sighed for him like one who is faint,  
And she was overcome with trembling  
    from the ground up, exceedingly,  
And—my brother—smiting her hips (in anguish)  
Does the sweet darling pass the time of day.”

*Shu-Suen was the last king but one of the famous Third Dynasty of Ur. The love song to him of which we here give the first stanzas is placed in the mouth of his young and impatient bride. Who she was does not appear, but it is tempting to identify her with Shu-Suen's concubine Kubatum, who figures in another love song which has the form of a dialogue with the king. These two songs, and two others that look as if they might be from the same hand, stand so far alone in Sumerian literature; they were probably the work of a gifted woman at Shu-Suen's court, either Kubatum herself or a girl in her entourage. That her work appealed to Sumerian taste may be gathered from the fact that it was still copied by scribes in Nippur some 300 years later.*

*From Nippur, about 1700 B.C. or earlier.*



## Love Song to King Shu-Suen

Youth of my heart, my beloved one,  
O that to sweeten still more  
your charms, which are sweetness,  
are honey—

Lad of my heart, my beloved one,  
O that to sweeten still more  
your charms, which are sweetness,  
are honey

You, my own warrior, might march against me—  
I would flee before you, youth,  
into the bed.

O that you, my own warrior, might march against me—  
I would flee before you, lad,  
into the bed.

O that you might treat me, youth, with all sweetness,  
my sweet and darling one,  
with whom I would speak (words of) honey,  
on the quilt of the bed  
we would rejoice in your charm  
and all your sweetness.

O that you might treat me, lad, with all sweetness,  
my sweet and darling one,  
with whom I would speak (words of) honey—  
youth, I am in love with you!



## The Bride Sings

Speak to my mother, she would let you!

She has given to my father

your (bridegroom's) gifts!

*Part of a procession hymn used in connection with  
the ritual of the sacred marriage between Inanna  
and Ama-ushumgal-anna.*

*Findspot unknown.*

## The Bride Sings

Going to the lad, my young husband  
To my young husband, to whom I cling  
    as the apple to the bough,  
O lad, my young husband, whom I so love,  
To whom I, Inanna, cleave  
    as the date to the date leaf,  
Whom I, the maiden Inanna, so love;  
My young husband, to whom I cling  
    as the grape to the stalk,  
Ama-ushumgal-anna, whom I so love.

*From an incantation against diseases describing the  
death-dealing demons who were thought to be the  
cause of most bodily ills. They are seen as evil  
wind-demons, children of the god of Heaven,  
Anu, and of the storm-god Enlil.*

*From Nineveh, Ashurbanipal's library, about 600 B.C.*

## Deadly Diseases

The shivers and chills (of death) that fritter the sum of  
things,  
spawn of the god of Heaven, spawned on an evil  
spirit,  
The death warrants, beloved sons of the storm-god  
born of the queen of the nether world,  
Who were torn out of Heaven and hurled from the Earth  
as castoffs  
Are creatures of Hell, all.

Up above they roar, down below they cheep,  
They are the bitter venom of the gods,  
They are the great storms let loose from Heaven,  
They are the owl (of ill omen) that hoots in the town,  
Spawn spawned by the god of Heaven, sons born by  
Earth are they.

Over high roofs, over broad roofs like a flood wave they  
surge,  
From house to house they climb over,  
Doors do not hold them, locks do not restrain them,  
Through the doors they glide like snakes,  
Through the hinge boxes they blow like wind.

From the man's embrace they lead off the wife,  
From the man's knee they make the child get up,  
And the youth they fetch out of the house of his in-laws;  
They are the numbness, the daze  
that treads on the heels of man.



*From a lament over Dumuzi by his sister Geshtin-anna.  
The powers who rule the universe, the great gods,  
doomed him, and "his god," that is, his guardian  
angel, was unable to avert his death.*

*Findspot unknown.*

# You Were Too Young To Die

*(The Sister's Lament)*

Before the young wife was yet in his arms  
And my mother could raise a (grand)child on (her)  
knee,  
When (his) father- and mother-in-law had (just) thought  
of him  
And he had got them for father- and mother-in-law,  
When he was accepted among fellows as a friend  
—when he was merely a young soldier—  
(Then) did (the powers) pass sentence upon him  
On the noble young lord,  
And his god let the sentence befall him:  
“A strong one shall hurl the javelin against you”  
—when he was merely a young soldier—  
“A swift one shall speed against you,  
An angry one shall roar against you”  
—when he was (merely) a young soldier—

*The herders in the desert, far from the protection of the towns, were ever in danger from raiding bandits descending upon them from the mountains in the east. In the stories about the herder-god Dumuzi his death is often laid to such a raid on his fold. There is, however, also a deeper level of meaning: in the mountains was, according to Sumerian beliefs, the realm of the dead; the powers of death itself reach out for him. In the present poem these powers are symbolized by the Bison—bisons roamed the foothills bordering the Mesopotamian plain in prehistoric and early historic times—and his followers. Although Dumuzi appears in this poem as a shepherd, he is called—as son of the cow-goddess Ninsun—"the wild bull" and once, perhaps as a caritative, "Ababa." Inanna, searching for him in the desert, has found him dead, "asleep," his fold raided, the servants he had with him and his flocks killed. In her anguish she asks for him of the hills only to be told that the Bison has led him, that is, his shade, captive into the mountains, that is, into the realm of the dead. Where Dumuzi's camp had been now roam undisturbed and unafraid the wild animals of the desert.*

*Findspot unknown.*

## The Wild Bull, Who Has Lain Down

The wild bull, who has lain down, lives no more,  
the wild bull who has lain down, lives no more,  
Dumuzi, the wild bull, who has lain down, lives no  
more,  
the wild bull, who has lain down, lives no more.

O you wild bull, how fast you sleep!  
How fast sleep ewe and lamb!  
O you wild bull, how fast you sleep!  
How fast sleep goat and kid!

I will ask the hills and the valleys,  
I will ask the hills of the Bison:  
“Where is the young man, my husband?”  
I will say,  
“He whom I no longer serve food”  
I will say,  
“He whom I no longer give to drink”  
I will say,  
“And my lovely maids”  
I will say,  
“And my lovely young men?”

“The Bison has taken thy husband away  
up into the mountains!”  
“The Bison has taken thy young man away,  
up into the mountains!”



“Bison of the mountains, with the mottled eyes!  
Bison of the mountains, with the crushing teeth!  
Bison!—He sleeps sweetly, he sleeps sweetly,  
He whom I no longer serve food sleeps sweetly,  
He whom I no longer give to drink sleeps sweetly,  
My lovely maids sleep sweetly,  
My lovely young men sleep sweetly!”

“My young man who perished from me  
    (at the hands of) your men,  
My young Ababa who perished from me  
    (at the hands of) your men,  
Will never more calm me (with) his loving glance  
Will never more unfasten his lovely bright clasp  
    (at night)  
On his couch you made the jackals lie down,  
In my husband's fold you made the raven dwell,  
His reed pipe—the wind plays it,  
My husband's songs—the north wind sings them.”

*The situation underlying this lament is similar to that of the preceding one. Dumuzi, pasturing his flocks in the desert, had sent words to his wife, Inanna, his mother, Ninsun, and his sister Geshtin-anna to join him in the desert. On arriving they find the fold raided, Dumuzi dead.*

*From Nippur, about 1700 B.C.*



## My Heart Plays a Reed Pipe

A reed pipe, of dirges—

My heart plays a reed pipe, (the instrument) of  
dirges, for him in the desert,

I, the mistress of Eanna, who lay waste the mountains,  
And I, Ninsun, mother of the (young) lord,  
And I, Geshtin-anna, daughter-in-law of Heaven.

My heart plays a reed pipe, of dirges  
for him in the desert,

Plays where the lad dwelt,

Plays where Dumuzi dwelt,

In Arali, on the Shepherd's Hill,

—My heart plays a reed pipe, of dirges  
for him in the desert—

Where the lad dwelt, he who is captive,

Where Dumuzi dwelt, he who is bound,

Where the ewe surrendered the lamb,

—My heart plays a reed pipe, of dirges,  
for him in the desert,

Where the goat surrendered the kid.

Treacherous are you, numen of that place,

Where, though he said to me: "May my mother join  
me"

—My heart plays a reed pipe,  
for him in the desert—

He may not move toward me his prostrate hands,

He may not move toward me his prostrate feet.



She neared the desert—neared the desert—  
the mother in the desert, O what loss has she  
suffered!

She reached the desert, where the lad dwelt,  
Reached the desert, where Dumuzi dwelt,  
—The mother in the desert, O what loss has she suffered!  
She looks at her slain (young) bull,  
Looks at his face,  
—The mother in the desert, O what loss has she suffered!  
How she shudders . . .

. . . . .  
—The mother in the desert, O what loss has she suffered!

“It is you” she says to him,  
“You look different” she says to him,  
—O what loss has she suffered,  
In woe for the house, in grief for her chamber.

*From a long lament for the god Damu, a figure  
related to that of Dumuzi. His mother is seeking  
him in the desert; he speaks from the dead.*

## The Dead Son to His Mother

I am not one who can answer my mother, who cries  
for me in the desert,

Who makes the cry for me echo in the desert,

She will not be answered.

I am not the grass, may not grow up (again) for her,

I am not the waters, may not rise (again) for her,

I am not the grass sprouting in the desert,

I am not the new grass, growing up in the desert.



# Song of the Homecoming Army Egyptian Verse

From the Book of the  
Homecoming Army  
The army has returned in safety,  
After killing many of the  
The army has returned in safety,  
After killing many of the  
The army has returned in safety,  
After killing many of the  
The army has returned in safety,  
After killing many of the

*Extract from the Sixth Dynasty inscription of a certain  
Uni (Cairo Museum 1435), about 2300 B.C.  
Among his many duties as an Egyptian official, Uni  
led an army against the "Sand-Dwellers," that is,  
the Asiatic Bedouin of Sinai and Palestine.*



## Song of the Homecoming Army

This army has returned in safety,  
    After hacking up the land of the Sand-Dwellers.  
This army has returned in safety,  
    After crushing the land of the Sand-Dwellers.  
This army has returned in safety,  
    After overthrowing their enclosure walls.  
This army has returned in safety,  
    After throwing fire into all their houses.  
This army has returned in safety,  
    After killing tens of thousands of their troops.  
This army has returned in safety,  
    After taking a great multitude of living captives.

*Berlin Papyrus 3024 dates to about 2000 B.C. and contains a man's arguments about suicide as a release from the lonely terrors of a time of anarchy. In the final group of stanzas, "yonder" is the world of the dead, where the released spirit might join the service of the sun-god Re.*

## ... Or Not To Be

With whom can I speak today?

One's companions are evil;

The friends of today do not love.

With whom can I speak today?

Hearts are filled with greed;

Every man seizes his neighbor's goods.

With whom can I speak today?

The gentle man has disappeared,

But the violent is accepted everywhere. . . .

With whom can I speak today?

I am weighted down with misery

For lack of an intimate friend.

With whom can I speak today?

The evil which roams the earth,

It is without end.

Death is in my sight today

Like the recovery of a sick man,

Like the first going-out after an illness.

Death is in my sight today

Like the fragrance of myrrh,

Like sitting under an awning on a breezy day. . . .

Death is in my sight today

Like the passing-away of rain clouds,

Like the homecoming of men from a trip. . . .

Death is in my sight today

Like the longing of a man to see his home

After long years spent in captivity.



Why surely, he who is yonder  
Will be a living god,  
Able to punish the sins of wrongdoers.  
Why surely, he who is yonder  
Will stand in the boat of the sun-god,  
Assigning the best therefrom to the temples.  
Why surely, he who is yonder  
Will be a man of wisdom,  
Free to voice his appeal to Re.

*This is also called the "Song of the Harper," because it was sung at banquets to the accompaniment of the harp. Translated from British Museum Papyrus 10061, dated about 1300 B.C. The theme is: We cannot know about the next world; even the great sages Imhotep and Hordedef went to an unknown fate; let us therefore forget death and enjoy today.*

## There Is None Who Returns from Over There

Generations pass away and others remain

Since the time of the forefathers.

The gods who lived of old rest in their pyramids,

As also the blessed dead, buried in their pyramids.

And men who once built houses—

Their places are no more.

See what has become of them!

I have heard the words of Imhotep and Hordedef,

Those whose sayings men repeat so much—

But what are their places now?

Their walls are crumbled down,

And their places are no more,

As though they had never been!

There is none who returns from over there,

That he may tell us how they fare,

That he may tell us what they need,

That he may still our hearts,

Until we too travel to the place where they have  
gone.

So give your desires free play,

To let your heart forget the funeral rites for you,

And follow your desire as long as you live.

Put myrrh upon your head

And don clothing of fine linen.





Be anointed with true marvels of god's gift.  
Give increase to the good things of yours,  
Nor let your heart be weary,  
Follow your desire and your good.  
Fulfill your needs upon earth  
After the command of your heart,  
Until there come for you that day of mourning.  
The Weary of Heart will not hear their lamentation,  
Nor does wailing save a man's heart from the  
underworld.

Make holiday, and do not lag therein—  
See, no man can take his property with him!  
See, none who departs comes back again!

*From a tomb at Thebes dated about 1350 B.C. In protest against such doubts as that expressed in the preceding poem, this emphasizes the peaceful eternity of the next world. "The West" is the sunset region of the dead.*

## The Good Land of Eternity

I have heard those songs from the tombs of old  
    And how they magnify life on earth  
    And make light of the next world.  
Why do they do so to the land of eternity,  
    The right and true and free from terrors?  
Quarreling is its abomination,  
    And none there is who girds himself against his  
    fellow.  
This land which has no opponent—  
    All our kinsfolk rest in it  
    Since the first day of time,  
And those who are yet to be,  
    For millions of millions,  
    Will all have come to it.  
There is none who may tarry here in Egypt;  
    There is none who fails to reach yon place.  
  
Now what is done here upon earth  
    Is but a kind of passing dream,  
But they say: "Welcome, safe and sound!"  
    To him who reaches the West.

## The Good Land of Eternity

*The heretic pharaoh Akh-en-Aton (about 1375 B.C.)  
worshiped the sun disk, the maker and sustainer of life.*

*From a tomb at Akh-en-Aton's capital at  
Tell el-Amarna.*

## Hymn to the Sun

When thou settest in the western horizon,  
 The land is in darkness as if in death.  
 Men sleep in a room with heads wrapped up,  
 And no eye sees another.  
 Though all their goods under their heads be stolen,  
 Yet would they not perceive it.  
 Every lion comes forth from his den,  
 And all creeping things sting.  
 Darkness is a shroud and the earth is still,  
 For he who made them rests in his horizon.

At daybreak, when thou risest on the horizon,  
 When thou shinest as the sun disk by day,  
 Thou drivest away darkness and givest thy rays;  
 Then the Two Lands are in daily festivity:  
 Men awake and stand upon their feet,  
 For thou hast raised them up.  
 They wash their bodies and take their clothing,  
 Their arms raised in praise at thy appearing.  
 And all the world, they do their work. . . .

How manifold it is,  
 What thou hast made!  
 It is hidden from the face of man.  
 Thou sole god, without thy like,  
 Thou didst create the world after thy desire,  
 Whilst thou wert alone:  
 All mankind, cattle and wild beasts,  
 Whatever goes by foot upon the earth,  
 Whatever flies on high with wings. . . .



The world came into being by thy hand,  
According as thou didst make them all.  
When thou hast risen they live,  
When thou settest then they die.  
Thou art lifetime thy own self,  
For we live only through thee.  
Eyes are fixed on beauty until thou settest,  
All work is laid aside when thou settest in the west.  
But when thou risest again,  
Then everything is made to flourish. . . .

*A love poem from British Museum Papyrus 10060,  
about 1300 B.C. It is spring, and nature calls the  
maiden, but she prefers to remain with the young man.*



## The Voice of the Swallow

The voice of the swallow speaks and says:

“Day is breaking—where will you go?”

O bird, you shall not distract me,

For I have found my loved one in his bed,  
And my heart is more than glad

When he said to me:

“I shall not go afar off,

But my hand is in your hand,  
And I shall stroll about,

Being with you in every pleasant place.”  
So he makes me the foremost of maidens,  
And he injures not my heart.

*A love poem from Papyrus Chester Beatty I,  
about 1160 B.C.*

## Come Swiftly

O that you would come to me swiftly,  
Like a horse belonging to the king,  
Picked from a thousand steeds of every kind,  
The foremost of the stables!  
It is distinguished in its food,  
And its master knows its gaits.  
When it hears the sound of the whip  
It cannot be restrained,  
Nor is there any chief of the grooms  
Who can stand and hold it.

How well my heart knows  
When he is not far from me!

*A love poem from Papyrus Chester Beatty I, about  
1160 B.C. The maiden, going to visit a girl friend,  
accidentally encounters a young man out driving with  
other gallants. She fears that if she betrays her feelings  
for him in such company he may scorn her.*

## The Maiden Demure

My heart intended to see Nefrus,  
    That I might sit in her home.  
But I found Mehhy driving on the road,  
    Together with his dashing friends,  
And I knew not how to take myself away,  
    That I might pass him freely by!  
See, river and road are alike  
    And I know not where to place my feet.  
O my heart, you are very foolish:  
    Why would you make free with Mehhy?  
See, if I should pass by before him  
    I might show him how I flutter  
And thus say to him: "See, I am yours!"  
    Then he would boast of my name  
And turn me over to the first harem  
    Of them who are in his following.

## The Maiden Demure

*From Papyrus Chester Beatty I, about 1160 B.C.*

That I might see him face to face  
And I should know his name  
I sought with his father's house  
And I knew not how to take my way  
That I might see him face to face  
See, never had I seen his like  
And I know not where to find my fate  
O my heart, you are very foolish!  
Why would you make me with Nubia?  
See, if I should see him before him  
I might show him how I found  
And then say to him: "See, I am young!"  
Then he would hear of my name  
And put me over to the first house  
Of them who are in his following.

## The Lovesick Youth

Seven days to yesterday since I have seen my beloved,  
    And a sickness has crept into me.  
My body has become all heavy,  
    And I am forgetful of my own self.  
If the best of doctors come unto me,  
    My heart is not content with their remedies:  
Or the magicians—there is no way out with them;  
    My sickness cannot be fathomed.  
What will revive me is to tell me: "Here she is!"  
    Her name is what will lift me up.  
The coming and going of her messengers  
    Is what will lift me up.  
The coming and going of her messengers  
    Is what will make my heart live again.  
She is better for me than any remedies;  
    She is more to me than the collected writings.  
My health is when she comes in from outside;  
    If I but see her, then I am well again.  
If she but opens her eye, my body feels young;  
    If she but speaks, then I am strong again.  
If I embrace her, she drives the evil from me—  
    But she has gone from me for seven days!

*From a book of proverbs ascribed to a certain  
Amen-em-Opet (British Museum Papyrus 10474,  
perhaps about 700 B.C.). The religiously humble man  
is like a good fruit tree, but the arrogant man is a  
tree good only for destruction.*



## The Good Fruit Tree

Now the hot-tempered man of a temple  
    Is like a tree growing out in the open.  
Of a sudden its foliage is cut,  
    And it reaches its end in the shipyards,  
Or it is floated far from its place,  
    And the flame becomes its burial shroud.

But the truly humble man holds himself apart.  
    He is like a tree growing in an orchard.  
It flourishes and doubles its yield,  
    And it remains before its lord.  
Its fruit is sweet, its shade is pleasant,  
    And it reaches its end in the orchard.