**Siren Song**

**By Margaret Atwood**

This is the one song everyone

would like to learn: the song

that is irresistible:

the song that forces men

to leap overboard in squadrons

even though they see the beached skulls

the song nobody knows

because anyone who has heard it

is dead, and the others can't remember.

Shall I tell you the secret

and if I do, will you get me

out of this bird suit?

I don't enjoy it here

squatting on this island

looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs,

I don't enjoy singing

this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,

to you, only to you.

Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!

Only you, only you can,

you are unique

at last. Alas

it is a boring song

but it works every time.

From *Selected Poems* 1965-1975. Copyright © 1974, 1976 by Margaret Atwood. Reprinted with the permission of the author and Houghton Mifflin Company.  
Source: *Poetry* (February 1974).

**Helen**

**By HD (Hilda Doolittle)**

All Greece hates

the still eyes in the white face,

the lustre as of olives

where she stands,

and the white hands.

All Greece reviles

the wan face when she smiles,

hating it deeper still

when it grows wan and white,

remembering past enchantments

and past ills.

Greece sees unmoved,

God’s daughter, born of love,

the beauty of cool feet

and slenderest knees,

could love indeed the maid,

only if she were laid,

white ash amid funereal cypresses.

H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), “Helen” from *Collected Poems 1912-1944*. Copyright © 1982 by The Estate of Hilda Doolittle. Reprinted with the permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

**To Helen**

**By Edgar Allan Poe 1809–1849**

Helen, thy beauty is to me

   Like those Nicéan barks of yore,

That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,

   The weary, way-worn wanderer bore

   To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,

   Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,

Thy Naiad airs have brought me home

   To the glory that was Greece,

   And the grandeur that was Rome.

Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche

   How statue-like I see thee stand,

The agate lamp within thy hand!

   Ah, Psyche, from the regions which

   Are Holy-Land!

**Myth**

**By Muriel Rukeyser**

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the  
roads.       He smelled a familiar smell.       It was  
the Sphinx.       Oedipus said, “I want to ask one question.  
Why didn’t I recognize my mother?”        “You gave the  
wrong answer,” said the Sphinx.      “But that was what  
made everything possible,” said Oedipus.     “No,” she said.  
“When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning,  
two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered,  
Man.      You didn’t say anything about woman.”  
“When you say Man,” said Oedipus, “you include women  
too. Everyone knows that.”       She said, “That’s what  
you think.”

Originally published in *Breaking Open* (1973)

**Penelope**

**By Dorothy Parker**

In the pathway of the sun,

In the footsteps of the breeze,

Where the world and sky are one,

He shall ride the silver seas,

He shall cut the glittering wave.

I shall sit at home, and rock;

Rise, to heed a neighbor's knock;

Brew my tea, and snip my thread;

Bleach the linen for my bed.

They will call him brave.

From *Sunset Gun* (1928)

**Medusa**

**By Louise Bogan**

I had come to the house, in a cave of trees,

Facing a sheer sky.

Everything moved,—a bell hung ready to strike,

Sun and reflection wheeled by.

When the bare eyes were before me

And the hissing hair,

Held up at a window, seen through a door.

The stiff bald eyes, the serpents on the forehead

Formed in the air.

This is a dead scene forever now.

Nothing will ever stir.

The end will never brighten it more than this,

Nor the rain blur.

The water will always fall, and will not fall,

And the tipped bell make no sound.

The grass will always be growing for hay

Deep on the ground.

And I shall stand here like a shadow

Under the great balanced day,

My eyes on the yellow dust, that was lifting in the wind,

And does not drift away.

From *Body of this Death: Poems* (1923), http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnLine/60322/ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**The City**

**By Edgar Lee Masters**

The Sun hung like a red balloon  
As if he would not rise;  
For listless Helios drowsed and yawned.  
He cared not whether the morning dawned,  
The brother of Eos and the Moon  
Stretched him and rubbed his eyes.

He would have dreamed the dream again  
That found him under sea:  
He saw Zeus sit by Hera's side,  
He saw Hæphestos with his bride;  
He traced from Enna's flowery plain  
The child Persephone.

There was a time when heaven's vault  
Cracked like a temple's roof.  
A new hierarchy burst its shell,  
And as the sapphire ceiling fell,  
From stern Jehovah's mad assault,  
Vast spaces stretched aloof:

Great blue black depths of frozen air  
Engulfed the soul of Zeus.  
And then Jehovah reigned instead.  
For Judah was living and Greece was dead.  
And Hope was born to nurse Despair,  
And the Devil was let loose.

\* \* \* \* \*

Far off in the waste empyrean  
The world was a golden mote.  
And the Sun hung like a red balloon,  
Or a bomb afire o'er a barracoon.  
And the sea was drab, and the sea was green  
Like a many colored coat.

The sea was pink like cyclamen,  
And red as a blushing rose.  
It shook anon like the sensitive plant,  
Under the golden light aslant.  
The little waves patted the shore again  
Where the restless river flows.

And thus it has been for ages gone--  
For a hundred thousand years;  
Ere Buddha lived or Jesus came,  
Or ever the city had place or name,  
The sea thrilled through at the kiss of dawn  
Like a soul of smiles and tears.

When the city's seat was a waste of sand,  
And the hydra lived alone,  
The sound of the sea was here to be heard,  
And the moon rose up like a great white bird,  
Sailing aloft from the yellow strand  
To her silent midnight throne.

Now Helios eyes the universe,  
And he knows the world is small.  
Of old he walked through pagan Tyre,  
Babylon, Sodom destroyed by fire,  
And sought to unriddle the primal curse  
That holds the race in thrall.

So he stepped from the Sun in robes of flame  
As the city woke from sleep.  
He walked the markets, walked the squares,  
He walked the places of sweets and snares,  
Where men buy honor and barter shame,  
And the weak are killed as sheep.

He saw the city is one great mart  
Where life is bought and sold.  
Men rise to get them meat and bread  
To barter for drugs or coffin the dead.  
And dawn is but a plucked-up heart  
For the dreary game of gold.

"Ho! ho!" said Helios, "father Zeus  
Would never botch it so.  
If he had stolen Joseph's bride,  
And let his son be crucified  
The son's blood had been put to use  
To ease the people's woe."

"He of the pest and the burning bush,  
Of locusts, lice, and frogs,  
Who made me stand, veiling my light,  
While Joshua slaughtered the Amorite,  
Who blacked the skin of the sons of Cush,  
And builded the synagogues."

"And Jehovah the great is omnipotent,  
While Zeus was bound by Fate.  
But Athens fell when Peter took Rome,  
And Chicago is made His hecatomb.  
And since from the hour His son was sent  
The hypocrite holds the state."

Helios traversed the city streets  
And this is what he saw:  
Some sold their honor, some their skill,  
The soldier hired himself to kill,  
The judges bartered the judgment seats  
And trafficked in the law.

The starving artist sold his youth,  
The writer sold his pen;  
The lawyer sharpened up his wits  
Like a burglar filing auger bits,  
And Jesus' vicar sold the truth  
To the famished sons of men.

In every heart flamed cruelty  
Like a little emerald snake.  
And each one knew if he should stand  
In another's way the dagger-hand  
Would make the stronger the feofee  
Of the coveted wapentake.

There's not a thing men will not do  
For honor, gold, or power.  
We smile and call the city fair,  
We call life lovely and debonair,  
But Proserpina never grew  
So deadly a passion flower.

Go live for an hour in a tropic land  
Hid near a sinking pool:  
The lion and tiger come to drink,  
The boa crawls to the water's brink,  
The elephant bull kneels down in the sand  
And drinks till his throat is cool.

Jehovah will keep you awhile unseen  
As you lie behind the rocks.  
But go, if you dare, to slake your thirst,  
Though Jesus died for our life accursed  
Your bones by the tiger will be licked clean  
As he licks the bones of an ox.

And the sky may be blue as fleur de lis,  
And the earth be tulip red;  
And God in heaven, and life all good  
While you lie hid in the underwood:  
And the city may leave you sorrow free  
If you ask it not for bread.

One day Achilles lost a horse  
While the pest at Troy was rife,  
And a million maggots fought and ate  
Like soldiers storming a city's gate,  
And Thersites said, as he looked at the corse,  
"Achilles, that is life."

\* \* \* \* \*

Day fades and from a million cells  
The office people pour.  
Like bees that crawl on the honeycomb  
The workers scurry to what is home,  
And trains and traffic and clanging bells  
Make the cañon highways roar.

Helios walked the city's ways  
Till the lights began to shine.  
Then the janitor women start to scrub  
And the Pharisees up and enter the club,  
And the harlot wakes, and the music plays  
And the glasses glow with wine.

Now we're good fellows one and all,  
And the buffet storms with talk.  
"The market's closed and trade's at end  
We had our battle, now I'm your friend."  
And thanks to the spirit of alcohol  
Men go for a ride or walk.

Oh but traffic is not all done  
Nor everything yet sold.  
There's woman to win, and plots to weave,  
There's a heart to hurt, or one to deceive,  
And bargains to bind ere rise of Sun  
To garner the morrow's gold.

The market at night is as full of fraud  
As the market kept by day.  
The courtesan buys a soul with a look,  
A dinner tempers the truth in a book,  
And love is sold till love is a bawd,  
And falsehood froths in the play.

And men and women sell their smiles  
For friendship's lifeless dregs.  
For fear of the morrow we bend and bow  
To moneybags with the slanting brow.  
For the heart that knows life's little wiles  
Seldom or never begs.

"Poor men," sighed Helios, "how they long  
For the ultimate fire of love.  
They yearn, through life, like the peacock moth,  
And die worn out in search of the troth.  
For love in the soul is the siren song  
That wrecks the peace thereof."

\* \* \* \* \*

Helios turned from the world and fled  
As the convent bell tolled six.  
For he caught a glimpse of an agéd crone  
Who knelt beside a coffin alone;  
She had sold her cloak to shrive the dead  
And buy a crucifix!