

Volcano: Edna St. Vincent Millay

TESS CHAKKALAKAL Literary houses are, like, the Disney Land of literature.

BROCK CLARKE I get the attraction of writers' houses. It's a thing you do when you're extraordinarily bored. Is that thing you experience, though, when going to writers' houses? Like, do you have the-the version—

TESS Do you know I-what my experience is, like "God, some of these writers were rich!"

[BROCK LAUGHS]

BROCK This is *Dead Writers*, a show about great American authors and where they lived.

TESS I'm Tess Chakkalakal.

BROCK And I'm Brock Clarke.

TESS A decade ago, I became obsessed with saving Harriet Beecher Stowe's house in Maine. And I did save it. And I'm still obsessed with literary houses—not just Stowe's.

BROCK I wrote a novel called *An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England*, because I couldn't figure out why anyone goes to writers' homes, let alone tries to save them.

TESS You'd think I'd hate Brock.

BROCK But you're my colleague. You can't hate me.

TESS It's true. That would be awkward.

BROCK So instead of hating each other, we made this show.

TESS What does this say? **[READING]** "For Aunty Ken, a smiling me, Vincent". She signed her name Vincent.

BROCK Huh.

TESS That's what she really went by.

BROCK That's interesting.

TESS There's a corner cabinet at the Whitehall Inn in Camden Maine devoted to Edna St. Vincent Millay. There are clipped out articles, high school diplomas and framed photos of Millay. Or, at least, that's what we think they are.

BROCK Are you sure that's her? I mean, I know that's her...but that's her. Yeah. Who's it signed to?

TESS [READING]...Auntie?

BROCK How's your eye? How are your eyes?

TESS It says for Auntie Ken or Kim. For Auntie Kim.

BROCK And what's in quotation marks there?

TESS "A smiling me."

[BROCK LAUGHS]

BROCK I like it. It's barely a smiling her.

TESS She doesn't smile very often.

BROCK No, like a "skeptical me" pictures. Oh yeah. Right. [READING] "We'll give you the scoop." I am going to read it. [READING] "The Pulitzer Prize winning poet...Who is Vincent?...Pulitzer prize winning poet Edna St. Vincent. Millay was discovered at Whitehall Inn in 1912. Right here in this room." Yeah, I like that. "We'll give you the scoop."

TESS We're here to take in the scene, to get a feel for where it all started for Edna St. Vincent Millay who won the pulitzer in 1923 for her volume of verse called *The Ballad of The Harp-weaver: A Few Figs From Thistles: Eight Sonnets in American Poetry*. She published this collection this same year T.S. Eliot published his landmark modernist

poem “The Wasteland.” I’m not just saying that Millay was on par with Eliot. I’m saying that we should be reading her poetry the same way we read Eliot: as one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century.

TESS And here we are in Camden, Maine, where her career began. We’re at the Whitehall on High Street in Camden. It’s a beautiful old inn. The room is grand but empty when we visited in March before the summer season begins. The inn opened its doors just for us. It’s freezing inside and all the fire alarm batteries are chirping, but you still get a sense for how festive it can be. Peering through the window is a little glimpse of the bay.

[EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY READING *RENASCENCE*] “All I could see from where I stood/ Was three long mountains and a wood; /I turned and looked another way/ And saw three islands in a bay.”

TESS That’s Millay reading from *Renascence*, a poem she read one evening at a talent show at the Whitehall Inn in 1912. We’re told she read it in front of the grand piano that still stands in the corner. She was just 20 then but had already been a published poet since she was 15 when her writing was included in *St. Nicholas Magazine*, an incredibly popular children’s magazine at the turn of the 20th century. Her writing was already helping to support her mom and sister. But most importantly for Millay, poetry was her ticket out of small town Maine and poverty.

[EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY READING CONT.] “But, sure, the sky is big, I said;/ Miles and miles above my head;/ So here upon my back I’ll lie/ And look my fill into the sky.”

TESS Wealthy arts patron Caroline B. Dow was also at the Whitehall Inn that night of the talent show. She heard Millay and was so moved by her reading that she offered to pay for Millay’s tuition at Vassar College. And from Vassar, Millay threw herself into the arts scene of New York City.

[MUSIC]

TESS This was the height of the roaring ‘20s. Life in the U.S. was quickly changing. The economy was booming, and there were real breaks with society as it had been before World War one. And New York City was at the center of a lot of that cultural change. It was the home of Jazz and the Harlem Renaissance. Radios and cars blared on the streets. The androgynous and freewheeling flapper was the style of the moment. And Edna St. Vincent Millay was smack in the middle of it all.

[MUSIC]

GILLIAN OSBORNE [SORTING ARCHIVES] Maybe...Okay! Oh, here's this giant box of stuff. There might actually be two of them. Let's see. Okay. Let's see if Edna is in here, or if it's just horrible old journals and photographs I took as a teenager. Looks like a lot of photo things [BABY CRYING] Okay, let's see if the baby will go in the crib. [TO BABY] Do you want to go in here with the dog?

TESS Gillian Osborne is a poet and educator. We caught up with her during a recent visit to her parents' place in upstate New York while she was going through old papers in the closet and rediscovering her, uh, infatuation with Edna St. Vincent Millay. Keeping her company as she's rummaging through the old papers and notebooks is her 18 month old baby, Remi.

GILLIAN OSBORNE Let's see what we can find. So it's funny because I can remember really liking Millay in high school when I read her, but what was that about? She seemed kind of snarky and bold and confident and funny. And I think at the time, actually, I was already really into poetry. I had this amazing English teacher my freshman year in school who read a bunch of poems with me, and she, particularly, I think, had me memorize some sonnets, like Elizabeth Barrett, Browning sonnets. And Millay wrote a lot of sonnets, amazing sonnets. So I think I was impressed with her formal capabilities. Okay. I'm not finding any books, but I am all of these notebooks that I used to make out of cereal boxes. Oh my God, look at this. Okay. This one's called "Poetry". [READING] "This journal is only for poetry, both mine and others. Gillian Osborne, May 15th, 1996." This one's made from a cereal box and covered with silver paper. Oh my God. This poem is called "Raging Passion". I don't think I need to read that one out loud. "WHOOOF!" So I think one of the things I liked about Edna St. Vincent Millay was, yeah, she was actually a really sexy poet too. And people were—men, women—just falling in love with her left and right. Once she got to New York, I guess.

TESS Gillan teaches Millay to her students. And it seems like the tone of Millay still resonates with young people today, especially young women. They're drawn to her self-control and empowerment. I mean, listen to this diss that she begins one of her poems with.

ELLA JONES [READING EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY'S "I SHALL FORGET YOU PRESENTLY MY DEAR (SONNET IV)] "I shall forget you presently, my dear,/ So make the most of this, your little day, /Your little month, your little half a year/ Ere I forget, or die, or move away, / And we are done forever; by and by/ I

shall forget you, as I said, but now,/ If you entreat me with your loveliest lie/ I will protest you with my favorite vow./ I would indeed that love were longer-lived,/ And vows were not so brittle as they are,/ But so it is, and nature has contrived/ To struggle on without a break thus far,—/ Whether or not we find what we are seeking/ Is idle, biologically speaking.”

TESS I mean, ouch! She starts a love poem by saying that she’s a bit of a player?! That kind of behavior probably didn’t go over so well in Rockland, Maine, in the early 20th century. A very different set of rules applied for women there than in the artsy circle of New York City.

GILLIAN OSBORNE So thinking about her in Maine, she was kind of in this pent up moment before leaving home with a lot of power and desire, and maybe that felt like something I could relate too. I also think, I mean, maybe she was a little under stimulated and bored where she was living. I think I was—the town where I lived felt very small when I was growing up there.

[MUSIC]

TESS We’re waiting outside of the Millay House Rockland where she was born. It’s a duplex on one of Rockland’s busier streets, which isn’t saying much. Rockland is small and sleepy in the off season. We’re here to meet more M/illay fans who have made this pretty average looking house into a “Millay House.” The first one to show up is Meg Weston. She has one of those Subaru SUVs that’s so common in Maine with a rather suggestive vanity license plate...

BROCK Can I ask why your license plate is “volcano”?

MEG WESTON You can.

BROCK Will you tell me?

MEG WESTON Sure. I’ve had a passion for volcanoes since I was a little girl, and I’ve traveled all over the world and photograph volcanoes, and they appear in a lot of my writing. I teach workshops in geologically active hotspots like Hawaii and Iceland.

BROCK Iceland. Yeah. Wow. I’m glad I asked. That’s a much more interesting—I thought it was like something like your grandkids called you because of—

MEG WESTON Right, right. I think it frightens people on the road.

BROCK It does. You don't tailgate a car with a—

MEG WESTON That says “volcano”. No, you don't.

BROCK Anyway, sorry. We got off track there.

MEG WESTON That's alright,

TESS So you were saying also that you came to Millay, it sounds like her poetry too, sort of late only, after you became involved in the house.

MEG WESTON Yeah. Yeah.

TESS So what was that like?

MEG WESTON So I'm a poet, but I'm not usually drawn to rhymed verse or metrical verse. So I don't have a long history of poetry from earlier times. I'm really more drawn to contemporary poets.

TESS Who's your favorite poet?

MEG WESTON Well, you know, I have a lot of favorite poets...

TESS And Meg's interest and support of contemporary poets is really why she's there. Meg got involved in the Millay house to create a writer's residence. A dead writer's house that is also a living writer's house.

MEG WESTON So the house is a duplex, and one side we rent to an artist year round.

TESS Oh, that's who lives in...

MEG WESTON Yeah, that's who lives on the left hand side, and on the right hand side, the idea is that we will host events and things like that. But we will do two writers in resid—juried writers in residency programs with a stipend. So we're accepting submissions right now for our first one.

TESS The residency program might make it the first time a writer lives there. Vincent didn't do any writing in that house herself. Her parents rented it when Millay was just a newborn, and financial hardships made them move after only six months in Rockland. The Millays weren't the only ones living on 200 Broadway who would fall on hard times. In 2015, before the organization Millay House Rockland was founded, the building was in danger of foreclosure, condemnation, and demolition.

TESS Who was living here before?

ANN MORRIS A family that had, I think, five children, and they repaired cars in the backyard.

MICHELLE GIFFORD And it was a bit of a distress situation for them. And it was really unfortunate.

TESS That's Michelle Gifford and Ann Morris, the President and Vice President of the Millay House Rockland. Michelle grew up in the area, and, as a longtime realtor in town, she pretty much knows every home and everyone. And she's always been keeping an eye on the old Millay house. Seeing its poor condition was both a tragedy and an opportunity for her.

ANN MORRIS And Michelle, and Terry Pinto, who lives across the street, were dying to save this landmark. And, of course, I love history, and I was anxious to help them, but we couldn't buy it. We couldn't afford to buy it.

TESS Ann Morris was the curator of the Rockland Historical Society at the time. She had all the preservation and nonprofit experience to add to the effort of saving the Millay House. But still no money to buy it.

MICHELLE GIFFORD Andy O'Brien, who was the editor of *The Free Press* here in town, he wrote the article, really wonderful article, talking about the reasons why we should keep the house, why it was important, what we were trying to accomplish. And I think Roxanne Quimby read that article and called me and drove up on—right after Thanksgiving that fall. And we spent a good afternoon here and went back to my office, and she really was very wonderful as a philanthropist and said she'd like to help. And she did so.

TESS If you know Maine, you probably know Roxanne Quimby, the founder of Burt's Bees Skin Care. The help of her money allowed them to finally buy the thing. Now eight years, many fundraising events, renovations and lockdowns later, Michelle, Ann and

Meg are getting the house ready to welcome the first writer in residence. They show us around the writer's digs.

TESS I bet the water pressure's good

BROCK Writers require good water pressure. Everyone knows that.

TESS Because they're so dirty! Where'd you find this old typewriter? This old Royal typewriter.

ANN MORRIS Michelle!

MICHELLE GIFFORD Actually, my husband bought it, and it is like the Royal that we've seen in photographs of the typewriter—she has a Steeple Top. And so, another board member's husband restores typewriters, to our good fortune, and he restored it. It's beautiful.

TESS What a team.

MICHELLE GIFFORD I know!

BROCK I was going to say you got a lot of people involved in this.

MICHELLE GIFFORD It's a big community project.

BROCK Yeah, it seems like it!

MICHELLE GIFFORD And I think the more time goes on, the more people are willing to step up, and they're proud of it. As I say, I think that my goal is everybody who visits Rockland will leave knowing that Edna St. Vincent Millay was born here.

BROCK So I have a question. We've been talking a lot about her house and her but very little about her poetry. I wonder if you all could speak to what you like the poetry.

MICHELLE GIFFORD It's incredible poetry. She was very significant as a traditional poet, American poet. I think more my interest was that she had an extraordinary life, and she came from very poor background, and she persevered, and—

TESS Made it big.

MICHELLE GIFFORD And made it, not only big, but she influenced specifically women of her time.

TESS Did she influence you?

MICHELLE GIFFORD Well, yeah. I mean I think she had a great life and came from poor beginnings. So it is very inspiring.

TESS So it's kind of like a rise to riches kind of story.

MICHELLE GIFFORD That's right. Very strong woman.

TESS Yeah. Do you have a favorite poem, or anything like that?

MICHELLE GIFFORD I don't know. I like them all.

TESS You like them all?

MICHELLE GIFFORD Yeah. *Renascence* is wonderful..."

TESS Michelle is clearly more comfortable talking about Millay's house than her poetry. That's fine. The house—the restoration of it, the funding of it—is her thing, her passion. That's why she's here in this podcast. And Gillian Osborne is here to talk about her passion: poetry.

[MUSIC]

TESS Gillian has left the house. And gone for a walk to be alone with Millay's poetry, just like she did as a teenager when she first read these works.

GILLIAN So the first sonnet that is in *Renascence*, I think I definitely read, and I'm never taught this one, but I quite love it. It starts out [READING "THOU ART NOT LOVELIER THAN LILACS" BY EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY] "Thou are not lovelier than lilacs. No, nor honeysuckle. Thou art not more fair than small, white, single poppies. I can bear thy beauty."

TESS When other modernists, and that was the style of writing that was most popular at the time that Millay was working, were going wild with experimenting with form, Millay often wrote in the old fashioned sonnet form and put her own, very modern twist on it.

GILLIAN Yeah, just the negation that she begins with. When we think of all the famous sonnets that are about—you know, Shakespeare, “Shall I compare these to Summer's day, thou art more lovely”. She's saying, “I'm not going to do that. Actually you're not that great. You're not that beautiful. The lilacs are better than you”. And, yet, she feels like the power of this lover over her. It's like this real struggle of the lover's seduction and her power. [READING] Like, “I can bear thy beauty”. And then it says “though I bend before thee, though from left to right, not knowing where to go, I turn my troubled eyes; nor here nor there find any refuge from thee. Yet, I swear so has it been with mist, with moonlight.” So it's so good, and it's just this whole waffling back and forth: “you're not so great. I have the power, but actually I bend before you and I can't stand how attracted I am to you and how in love I am with you.” So it's a wonderful poem, and she builds the tension into all these breaks and contorted pauses in the middle.”Find any refuge from thee ‘comma’. Yet, I swear, ‘line break’. So has it been with mist, ‘dash’, with moonlight.” So they're just very dynamic lines. Someone was telling me, a painter friend, that if you want to create a lot of energy in a painting, you need to create lots of conflicting lines, kind of pivots in different directions. And that's what she's doing in this sonnet. So it still feels very punchy and fun and it's addressed very firmly to you. It's outward looking, but it's also about just the play and the dynamic quality of the words themselves.

TESS It's this play and dynamic quality of the words. The clear voice and the tension between desire and power is what has kept Millay a favorite of Gillian's from her teenage years up until today.

[MUSIC]

TESS Edna St. Vincent Millay didn't just write sonnets. I mean, she wrote *a lot* of sonnets. And the love sonnets were definitely the ones that made her a literary super star at the time. But she also wrote lyric verse, like *Renascence*, an anti-war play, and even a libretto for an opera. There was one poem that kept popping up in my mind as we were walking around the Millay House in Rockland, this place where she was born but her parents were too broke to stay. It made me think of the poem “Childhood is the Kingdom Where Nobody Dies.”

[EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY READING "CHILDHOOD IS THE KINGDOM WHERE NOBODY DIES"] "Childhood is not from birth to a certain age and at a certain age/ The child is grown, and puts away childish things./ Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies.// Nobody that matters, that is. Distant relatives of course/ Die, whom one never has seen or has seen for an hour,/ And they gave one candy in a pink-and-green striped bag, or a jack-knife,/ And went away, and cannot really be said to have lived at all.// And cats die. They lie on the floor and lash their tails, And their reticent fur is suddenly all in motion/ With fleas that one never knew were there,/ Polished and brown, knowing all there is to know,/ Trekking off into the living world.//You fetch a shoe-box, but it's much too small, because she won't curl up now: / So you find a bigger box, and bury her in the yard, and weep. /But you do not wake up a month from then, two months / A year from then, two years, in the middle of the night / And weep, with your knuckles in your mouth, and say Oh, God! Oh, God! / Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies that matters, / —mothers and fathers don't die."

TESS "Childhood is a Kingdom Where Nobody Dies" was first published when Millay was in her late thirties. In a way she didn't have much of a childhood. When her parents divorced in 1904, when Millay was eight, it was unusual and shocking. Millay, who was their oldest, had to take care of her two sisters when their mother, Cora, was at work. I can understand why she never really came back to small town Maine, once she had made it out as a teenager. Her life in Maine as a kid seemed more filled with adult-like responsibility than her rebellious and riotous life in New York. Her literary career was really tied to her persona as a wild and charismatic big city writer. All traces of Maine scrubbed away. And does that matter? Isn't this one of the ways a writer's life might go? You grow up in a small place, and that small place might matter to you, or it might not matter to you at all. But, either way, in order to become a writer you need to leave it behind. Leave it behind and, in Millay's case, never come back. Should that bother those of us who are left behind? It doesn't seem to bother Michelle, Ann, and Meg of the Millay House Rockland. Even the stories of her leaving fascinates them.

MICHELLE GIFFORD Her mother died in Camden when Millay was living with her husband in Steeple Top, and it was a stormy first weekend in February. She drove all the way from New York to pick up the body and drove it back to New York where she was buried. She wasn't buried here. And then apparently Edna St. Vincent Millay never really came back. So it's an interesting story there that we're not quite aware of all the details.

ANN MORRIS But she owned an island off the coast, more south off Harpswell, Ragged Island.

BROCK That does seem like a final act, when you drive someone's body away from a place. It's that hard.

MICHELLE GIFFORD Very dramatic.

BROCK Yeah, right. Yeah. I wonder if it was in the trunk. Where was the body? What kind of vehicle was this?

MICHELLE GIFFORD I don't know!

BROCK Was it open air?

MICHELLE GIFFORD It was one of those big, long, dark cars, and I think they went off the road in a snowstorm on the way home, and someone had to rescue them.

BROCK That's dramatic!

MICHELLE GIFFORD It is a dramatic story.

BROCK It's wonderful.

MICHELLE GIFFORD And interestingly enough, too, Edna St. Vincent Millay inherited a house called the Tufts House on Chestnut. Very nice house, which when she was a child she—

BROCK Here in Rockland or in Camden?

MICHELLE GIFFORD In Camden.

ANN MORRIS Camden.

MICHELLE GIFFORD And when she was notified in New York that she inherited the house, she immediately called a realtor and sold it. So that also is rather dramatic act in saying something about her relationship with Camden. We don't know. But it is an interesting thing.

BROCK Yeah, especially the relationship between, say, New York and Maine where so many people now in the summer from New York come here to this part

of the coast in particular. It's kind of interesting. That's sort of reverse migration with a body in the back of your car. We would all be so lucky if we could depart somewhere so dramatically like that. I would be a fan of that if my body gets stuck in the back of someone's car.

TESS Okay, okay. So Brock, we began this episode with a young poet reading her work for the first time at some historic inn in Maine.

BROCK And we end with a dead body in the back of a car, heading for New York.

TESS It's the circle of life, Brock.

BROCK That's right. "Hakuna Matata."

TESS I don't get that reference.

BROCK It's *The Lion King*. Come on. You know *The Lion King*. Everyone knows *The Lion King*.

TESS Brock, Brock. We're getting off track here. We're talking about Edna St. Vincent Millay here, not Walt freaking Disney. Imagine what it must have been like driving away from Maine with her poor dead mother in the back of her car.

BROCK I love it. It's perfect.

TESS It wasn't for her mother.

BROCK No, not for her mother. But for us, talking about Millay. The drama, the larger-than-life life, the sense that you do something dramatic so that you can write a new poem about it.

TESS Yeah, a new poem in an old form.

BROCK A sonnet, that's right. A sonnet about past and future, about rebirth and death, about leaving an old place for a new one.

TESS And how does that feel? Being left behind in the old place?

BROCK It feels pretty good. It's not my old place. It's my new place.

TESS I guess it's mine too.

BROCK Besides the houses are here in the old place.

TESS I thought you were skeptical of the houses.

BROCK I am, totally. But not if they remind us why the poet still matters.

TESS Does she still matter?

BROCK Sure. Would we be talking about her old house if she didn't?

TESS You have listened to *Dead Writers* with me, Tess Chakkalakal

BROCK And me, Brock Clarke. Our managing producer and editor is Lisa Bartfai.

TESS Cedric Wilson has created our theme music and mixed the show.

BROCK Ella Jones is our web editorial intern. Thanks for listening.

TESS And a very special thanks to our generous sponsors, Bath Savings, and listeners like you.

BROCK You can find more information about the writers, their books, and their houses at our website on MainePublic.org. Thanks for listening.