

Guillaume Apollinaire

1880 -1918

Friend and collaborator of the Cubists and Surrealists and figurehead of the avant-garde in early twentieth century Paris, Apollinaire set out to change the world through experimental use of language. Taking bold personal and artistic risks, he captures and confronts the human condition with an unflinching frankness, and engages critically with major societal concerns of the time: technology, war, and alienation. He subverts established rules of versification and is daring, humorous and playful in his poetic innovation. In his collection *Alcools* there is no punctuation and in *Calligrams* he shapes verse text humorously into objects such as hearts, animals and the Eiffel Tower; a new vision of the transformative power of poetry. I have chosen this poem for its sensitive, understated and honest representation of one of the most powerful of all human experiences.



Le Pont Mirabeau is a bridge in Paris' fifteenth arrondissement that he crossed to visit the artist Marie Laurencin, whom he loved. Their relationship ended and Apollinaire was heartbroken. Much fabulous poetry has been inspired by heartbreak; what is different about this one? Well, Paris is its backdrop, a particularly beautiful setting for this timeless theme of human suffering. In this lyrical ode to a love lost we visualise the poet standing on le Pont Mirabeau, reminiscing nostalgically, remembering romantic walks under the bridge with Marie. The Seine, ever moving, changing and renewing afresh, symbolises the fleeting nature of the many moments that make up the flux of human experience. Without punctuation, the verse flows as an unbroken stream. Feelings come and go, love ebbs and flows, like the river, but here on the solid iron bridge, immutable and permanent, the poet's pain is raw, sharp and unrelenting. Time marches on, the clock chimes the hour, but his inner turmoil remains; notice the repetition of the rhyming couplet, a musical refrain which echoes throughout, with its soft, lingering 'heure' (hour) and 'demeure' (remain), rhyme underlining the connection:

*'Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure
Les jours s'en vont je demeure'*

You'll notice that the poem is arranged in quatrains and couplets, creating a regular, repetitive flow of sounds, the '-nne' endings and open vowels vocalising his reflections in a soft lyrical style at a gentle pace interspersed with long pauses which give the reader space to absorb, empathise and reflect. Notice how his state evolves - despairing in the first stanza but by the third he is feeling more optimistic - '*la vie est lente*' but '*l'Espérance est violente*' - his hope is strong - things can only get better as experience is temporary - his dejection will necessarily diminish and his spirit revive as water flows and time passes. Water based imagery recurs in many literary genres, art forms, thought and belief systems. One of the four elements, human life begins in water and 'is the commonest symbol for the unconscious' (Jung), often featuring in dreams. Wordsworth felt that 'a lake carries you into recesses of feeling otherwise impenetrable' - recesses of the imagination, memory, and the unconscious.

Locked down on our own personal landing pad, ordinary life on hold, we are well placed to contemplate past and future from the bridge that straddles the 'before' and the 'after' of this strange time. The rhythm and rhyme of Apollinaire's verse soothes and calms. The water below and the sky above, both stretching as far as they eye can see, underpin and overarch the turmoil, the lens widens and the perspective broadens as the gaze extends beyond the moment. Emotional states, whilst real, vivid, and entirely valid, will, in time, be scaled down, loosen their grip, and find their rightful place alongside all the other drops in the ocean of our experience.

[I highly recommend listening to this recent reading of the poem \(click here\)](#)

Le Pont Mirabeau

Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine
Et nos amours
Faut-il qu'il m'en souvienne
La joie venait toujours après la peine

Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure
Les jours s'en vont je demeure

Les mains dans les mains restons face à face
Tandis que sous
Le pont de nos bras passe
Des éternels regards l'onde si lasse

Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure
Les jours s'en vont je demeure

L'amour s'en va comme cette eau courante
L'amour s'en va
Comme la vie est lente
Et comme l'Espérance est violente

Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure
Les jours s'en vont je demeure

Passent les jours et passent les semaines
Ni temps passé
Ni les amours reviennent
Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine

Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure
Les jours s'en vont je demeure

Le Pont Mirabeau

Under the Mirabeau flows the Seine
And our amours
Shall I remember it again
Joy always followed after Pain

Comes the night sounds the hour
The days go by I endure

Hand in hand rest face to face
While underneath
The bridge of our arms there races
So weary a wave of eternal gazes

Comes the night sounds the hour
The days go by I endure

Love vanishes like the water's flow
Love vanishes
How life is slow
And how Hope lives blow by blow

Comes the night sounds the hour
The days go by I endure

Let the hour pass the day the same
Time past returns
Nor love again
Under the Mirabeau flows the Seine

Comes the night sounds the hour
The days go by I endure