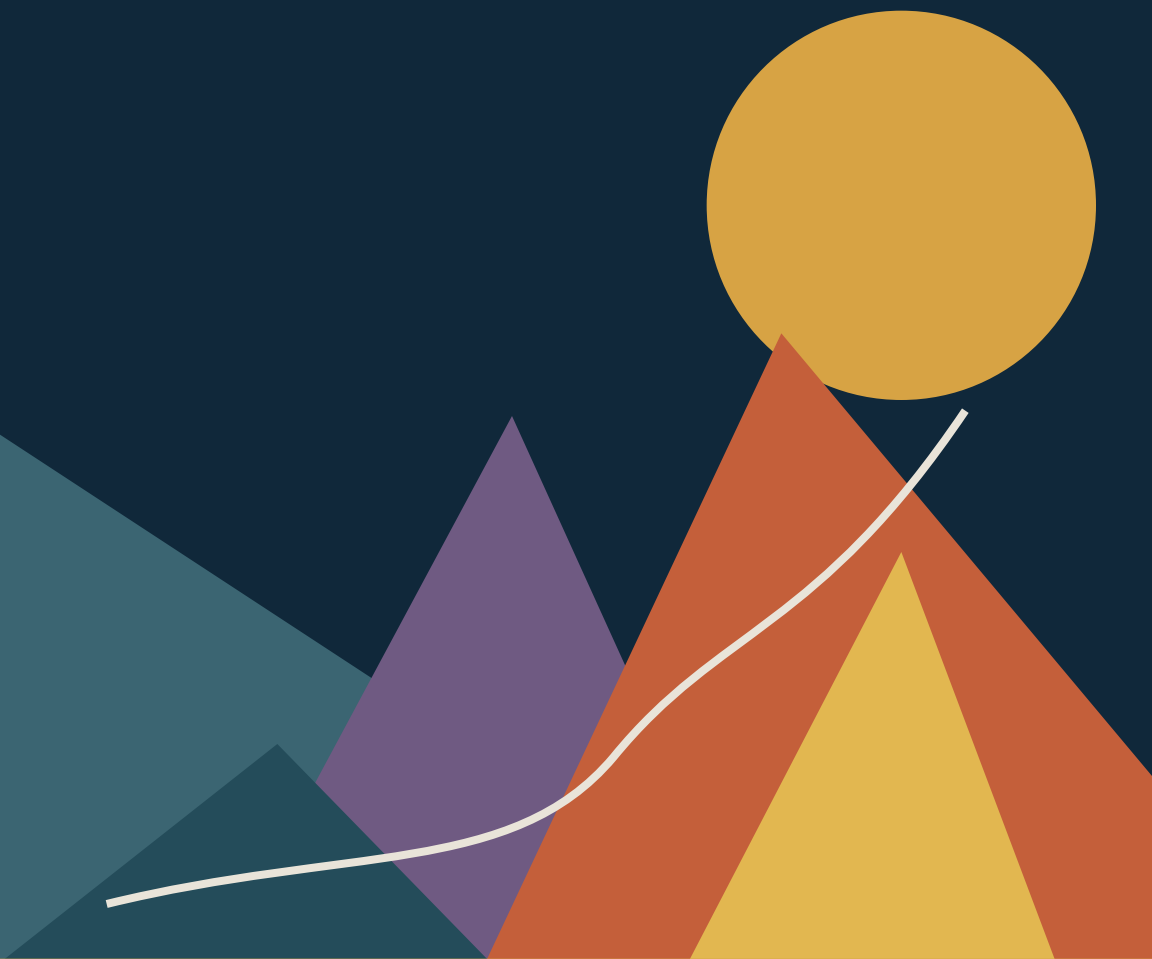




HARD LIGHT

Best Poems
from the Deferred Poets

SIXTEEN POEMS WITH SHORT APPRECIATIONS

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS:
EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

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EDITORIAL NOTE

A severe selection, not a survey

The Deferred poets folder contains many books worth preserving for biography, local history, book design, eccentricity, or the social worlds they record. This anthology asks a narrower question: which individual poems remain convincing when read apart from those contexts? The sixteen poems here were selected for pressure of language, clarity of image, rhythmic control, emotional intelligence, or an unusually exact encounter with place.

The result is deliberately uneven in representation. A strong poet may appear four times; most writers do not appear at all. Historical importance alone did not qualify a poem, and local color without verbal force was not enough. The sequence moves chronologically from Helen Hunt Jackson's formal compression through desert and California landscape writing to Madeleine Ruthven's hard-edged modernism.

Mary Austin's 'A Song in Depression' requires a special qualification. It appears in *The American Rhythm* under the heading 'Amerindian Songs Reexpressed from the Originals' and is identified there as Washoe-Paiute. It is included as Austin's 1930 reexpression, not as a claim that she authored the underlying traditional song.

Texts have been reset from the local scans. Original spelling, stanza divisions, and meaningful indentation are retained; obvious OCR damage and accidental spacing have been corrected. The short notes are appreciations rather than verdicts. They name the particular thing each poem does well.

HELEN HUNT JACKSON

Danger

With what a childish and short-sighted sense
Fear seeks for safety; reckons up the days
Of danger and escape, the hours and ways
Of death; it breathless flies the pestilence;
It walls itself in towers of defence;
By land, by sea, against the storm it lays
Down barriers; then, comforted, it says:
"This spot, this hour is safe." Oh, vain pretence!
Man born of man knows nothing when he goes;
The winds blow where they list, and will disclose
To no man which brings safety, which brings risk.
The mighty are brought low by many a thing
Too small to name. Beneath the daisy's disk
Lies hid the pebble for the fatal sling.

WHY IT WORKS

A tightly argued sonnet about the fantasy of safety. Its movement narrows from abstract fear to the daisy's disk, then snaps shut on the pebble: smallness becomes fate.

Source: *Sonnets and Lyrics* (Roberts Brothers, 1892) p. 9.

HELEN HUNT JACKSON

A Woman's Battle

Dear foe, I know thou'lt win the fight.
 I know thou hast the stronger bark,
 And thou art sailing in the light,
 While I am creeping in the dark.
 Thou dost not dream that I am crying,
 As I come up with colors flying.

I clear away my wounded, slain,
 With strength like frenzy, strong and swift;
 I do not feel the tug and strain,
 Though dead are heavy, hard to lift.
 If I looked in their faces dying,
 I could not keep my colors flying.

Dear foe, it will be short,—our fight,—
 Though lazily thou train'st thy guns;
 Fate steers us,—me to deeper night,
 And thee to brighter seas and suns;
 But thou'lt not dream that I am dying,
 As I sail by with colors flying!

WHY IT WORKS

The naval metaphor never loosens. The refrain 'colors flying' moves from public bravery to private concealment, and the steady music makes the suppressed grief more moving.

Source: *Sonnets and Lyrics* (Roberts Brothers, 1892), p. 15.

HELEN HUNT JACKSON

Burnt Offering

The fire leaped up, swift, hot, and red;
Swift, hot, and red, waiting a prey;
The woman came with swift, light tread,
And silently knelt down to lay
Armfuls of leaves upon the fire,
As men lay fagots on a pyre.

Armfuls of leaves which had been bright
Like painter's tints six months before,
All faded now, a ghastly sight,
Dusty and colorless, she bore,
And knelt and piled them on the fire,
As men lay fagots on the pyre.

Watching the crackle and the blaze,
Idly I smiled and idly said:
"Good-by, dead leaves, go dead leaves' ways.
Next year there will be more as red."
The woman turned, and from the fire
Looked up as from a funeral-pyre.

I saw my idle words had been
Far crueler than I could know,
And made an old wound bleed again.
"These are not leaves," she whispered low,
"That I am burning in the fire,
But days,—it is a funeral pyre."

WHY IT WORKS

A domestic scene turns elegiac through repetition. Leaves, fire, and pyre begin as comparison and end as emotional fact; the speaker's mistake becomes the poem's ethical turn.

Source: *Sonnets and Lyrics* (Roberts Brothers, 1892), pp. 18-19.

HELEN HUNT JACKSON

October

The month of carnival of all the year,
When Nature lets the wild earth go its way,
And spend whole seasons on a single day.
The spring-time holds her white and purple dear;
October, lavish, flaunts them far and near;
The summer charily her reds doth lay
Like jewels on her costliest array;
October, scornful, burns them on a bier.
The winter hoards his pearls of frost in sign
Of kingdom: whiter pearls than winter knew,
Or Empress wore, in Egypt's ancient line,
October, feasting 'neath her dome of blue,
Drinks at a single draught, slow filtered through
Sunshiny air, as in a tingling wine!

WHY IT WORKS

Its extravagance is disciplined by sonnet form. Jackson stacks seasonal color into a single feast, then converts sky and sunlight into dome and wine.

Source: Sonnets and Lyrics (Roberts Brothers, 1892), p. 32.

HAMLIN GARLAND

On the Mississippi

Through wild and tangled forests
The broad, unhasting river flows—
Spotted with rain-drops, gray with night;
Upon its curving breast there goes
A lonely steamboat's larboard light,
A blood-red star against the shadowy oaks;
Noiseless as a ghost, through greenish gleam
Of fire-flies, before the boat's wild scream—
A heron flaps away
Like silence taking flight.

WHY IT WORKS

Ten lines make one continuous cinematic movement: river, steamboat light, fireflies, heron. The final simile is exceptional because it makes silence visible by making it fly.

Source: Prairie Songs (Stone and Kimball, 1893), as reproduced in the local Poets.org file.

MADGE MORRIS

To the Colorado Desert

Thou brown, bare-breasted, voiceless mystery,
 Hot sphinx of nature, cactus-crowned, what hast thou done?
 Unclothed and mute as when the groans of chaos turned
 Thy naked burning bosom to the sun.
 The mountain silences have speech, the rivers sing.
 Thou answerest never unto anything.
 Pink-throated lizards pant in thy slim shade;
 The horned toad runs rustling in the heat;
 The shadowy gray coyote, born afraid,
 Steals to some brackish spring and laps, and prowls
 Away; and howls, and howls and howls and howls,
 Until the solitude is shaken with an added loneliness.
 Thy sharp mescal shoots up a giant stalk,
 Its century of yearning, to the sunburnt skies,
 And drips rare honey from the lips
 Of yellow waxen flowers, and dies.
 Some lengthwise sun-dried shapes with feet and hands
 And thirsty mouths pressed on the sweltering sands,
 Mark here and there a gruesome graveless spot
 Where some one drank thy scorching hotness, and is not.
 God must have made thee in His anger, and forgot.

WHY IT WORKS

The apostrophe stays physical: cactus, lizard, brackish water, mescal, thirst. The repeated 'howls' and long breath-lines make solitude a pressure on the body.

Source: The Lure of the Desert Land and Other Poems (Harr Wagner, 1917), p. 3.

MADGE MORRIS

The Wheat of San Joaquin

A thousand rustling yellow miles of wheat,
Gold-ripened in the sun, in one
Vast fenceless field. The hot June pours its flood
Of flaming splendor down, and burns
The field into such yellowness that it
Is gold of Nature's alchemy; and all
The mighty length and breadth of valley glows
With ripeness.

Then a rolling of machinery,
And tramp of horse and scream of steam
And swishing sighs of falling grain,
And sweaty brows of men; and then
The Samson of the valleys lieth shorn.

WHY IT WORKS

A compact California machine-age pastoral. The field begins as a yellow color plane; harvest enters as noise and violence, and the Samson image makes abundance and loss simultaneous.

Source: *The Lure of the Desert Land and Other Poems* (Harr Wagner, 1917), p. 103.

LAURENCE EDWARD INNES

Arizona Night

As white as chalk the paths beneath a strange and dream-shot moon
Lead out across an endless world, and vanish all too soon.
Grotesque as satyrs yucca palms stand guard as though they feared
The shadows which their bent arms cast; the night winds strange and weird
Bring odors that the day distilled; the stars superbly bright
Seem studded but an inch apart in fields of hematite.
A desert land? Ah yes, perhaps, yet dreams go hand in hand
With one who goes across the night in this strange silent land.

WHY IT WORKS

Chalk paths, satyr-like yuccas, distilled odors, and a hematite sky make an exact visual world. The landscape feels uncanny rather than merely picturesque.

Source: California and Western Verses (Los Angeles, 1921), p. 11.

LAURENCE EDWARD INNES

The Desert

O shadows that lure! O heat that cries
From the deathly stillness of blinding skies.
O sand that eddies! O sand that blows
From God knows where, to where God knows.
O desert that beckons, brave men who went,
Aye, bravely enough, but broke and spent
Who kissed the cactus and cursed their fate,
As you clutched their throats with red hot hate,
Is the thing that creeps o'er your shimmering breast
A sigh from the bones that will not rest?
Is the lure that breathes in your dreadful breath
The calling of voices that long knew death?

WHY IT WORKS

Twelve lines are driven by cries, eddies, heat, and questions. Tight rhyme makes attraction and mortality feel like the same pressure.

Source: California and Western Verses (Los Angeles, 1921), p. 13.

DOROTHEA HOAGLIN HAYDEN

The Wind

Wild horses were abroad last night,
And down from the hills they came!
They struck the trees with a shuddering shock,
That made them writhe in pain!

The fleck of their nostrils on the grass
Was white as the shining snow;
The small leaves whirled as the steed rushed past—
But knew not where to go.

The mad rush of the thundering hoofs
Stopped only with the shore;
Where, spent with the frenzy of their speed,
They sank—their wild race o'er.

The trees that were shaken, struck deeper root,
And the frost made a cover warm
For the blades of grass in the frozen earth,
No longer afraid of the storm.

The frightened leaves so rudely blown,
Filled many a crevice deep;
To feed the early flowers of spring,
When they wake from their deep, deep sleep.

When those wild horses reached the shore,
As spent, as spent could be!
Their phantom riders in a rage,
Threw their white caps on the sea!

WHY IT WORKS

The conceit of wind as wild horses is sustained through hoofbeats, nostril-fleck, trampled leaves, and white caps. The ending carries the metaphor cleanly from hills to sea.

Source: *Deodars and Other Verse* (Pasadena, 1923), pp. 12-13.

DOROTHEA HOAGLIN HAYDEN

Beyond

As children going on our way to school
We passed a high-walled garden with a gate—
And we really meant to see what there was within those walls;
But we always hurried by for we were late.
Gone, now, are gate and garden, and we can never know
What there was beyond the tight-closed gate.
O, the gates we never open, because they are closed tight!
And the lovely, lovely gardens that we never enter quite!

WHY IT WORKS

A child's missed garden becomes a clean parable of deferred curiosity. The repeated gate and the deliberately simple final exclamation leave more regret than explanation would.

Source: Deodars and Other Verse (Pasadena, 1923), p. 22.

MARY AUSTIN

A Song in Depression

Now all my singing dreams are gone!
None knows where they have fled
Nor by what trails they have left me.

Return, O dreams of my heart,
And sing in the summer twilight,
By the creek and the almond thicket
And the field that is bordered with lupines.

Now is my refuge to seek
In the hollow of friendly shoulders,
Since the singing is stopped in my pulse
And the earth and the sky refuse me.
Now must I hold by the eyes of a friend
When the high white stars are unfriendly.

Over sweet is the refuge for trusting.
Return and sing, O my Dreams,
In the dewy and palpitant pastures,
Till the love of living awakes
And the strength of the hills to uphold me!

WHY IT WORKS

The spare free verse moves from loss of song to the bodily refuge of 'friendly shoulders,' then back toward landscape. Depression becomes a failure of earth and sky to answer.

Source: The American Rhythm, 'Amerindian Songs Reexpressed from the Originals' (Houghton Mifflin, 1930), p. 96; identified there as from the Washoe-Paiute.

L. SANDRA DEETH

Fragments of Mojave Dreams

A great peace
A spread of sheltering wings
A crooning hush
As if love sings
A whispered lullabye
Night comes unto the desert
The moonbeams
Are silver fragments
Of Mojave dreams.

A weird forest
Reaching tortured hands
Prays for a blessing
For these ghostly lands
A low whispered prayer
Night comes unto the desert
The forest seems
A curious fragment
Of Mojave dreams.

A white light
A blinding veil cast far
Swathing the plains
To where pale mountains are
A magic veil
Day comes unto the desert
A mirage gleams
Fantastic fragments
Of Mojave dreams.

WHY IT WORKS

Three miniature panels—moonlight, Joshua forest, mirage—are linked by a refrain. The cumulative structure turns familiar desert motifs into a sequence of visual states.

Source: *Desert Dwellers* (Wetzel Publishing, Los Angeles, 1930), pp. 125-26.

L. SANDRA DEETH

Death Valley Dunes

Magic dunes in a magic world,
Dunes where a magic dancer whirled
And left small footprints in the sand.

Golden dunes where a golden light
Glowes like an opal until the night
Throws a black scarf over all the land.

Lonely dunes where a lonely soul
Finds kinship in the restless roll
Of constant shifting barren wastes.

Haunting dunes where a haunted heart
Finds in the magic dancer's art
An echo of its tastes.

WHY IT WORKS

The repeated magic, golden, lonely, and haunting turns an observed landscape inward by stages. The black scarf line brings sudden theatrical darkness to the most visual stanza.

Source: Desert Dwellers (Wetzel Publishing, Los Angeles, 1930), p. 162.

MADELEINE RUTHVEN

The Mountain Road

I saw death's wing, as blue as the sky,
His eye as bright as the sun.

I diced with him on a mountain road—
With the luck of a fool I won.

It was win or lose in an instant's flash.
I had no time for fear—
My heart and brain and blood were still,
Knowing the odds were near.

Such moments are timeless, crystalline:
My eye was innocent,
Seeing the earth as a lacquered plate
In a painted firmament.

Then the smooth tires gripped, the worn brakes shrieked,
The sky was the sky once more.
The earth flowed back to amplitude—
It was all as it was before.

The road leaped up, the hills rushed by,
Heart hammered in the breast;
Hot blood flowed back to warm the brain;
The taut nerves slacked to rest.

WHY IT WORKS

A fast ballad becomes a poem of altered perception. "The earth flowed back to amplitude" precisely captures the return from near-death abstraction to ordinary scale.

Source: Poetry, vol. 49, no. 1 (October 1936), p. 18.

MADELEINE RUTHVEN

Chrysler Building

Never again in our time
Shall such pinnacles leap to the sky.
These fabulous towering spires,
These airy mountains of glass,
Are the signature of an age—
A way of life that must pass.

The delicate petals of stone,
The leaves of silvered steel,
The brassy gargoyles that fling
Their snouts to the imminent sky
Are praise of a greatness that lied,
Are wreaths for a world that has died.

WHY IT WORKS

The poem is both praise and elegy. Hard materials become botanical, while the verbs leap and fling keep the building alive; the last two lines condemn an economic fantasy without flattening the monument.

Source: Poetry, vol. 50, no. 2 (May 1937), p. 77.

SOURCES AND METHOD

Local witnesses used for the reset texts

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Ruthven, Madeleine. 'The Mountain Road.' *Poetry* 49, no. 1 (October 1936): 18; and 'Chrysler Building.' *Poetry* 50, no. 2 (May 1937): 77.

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