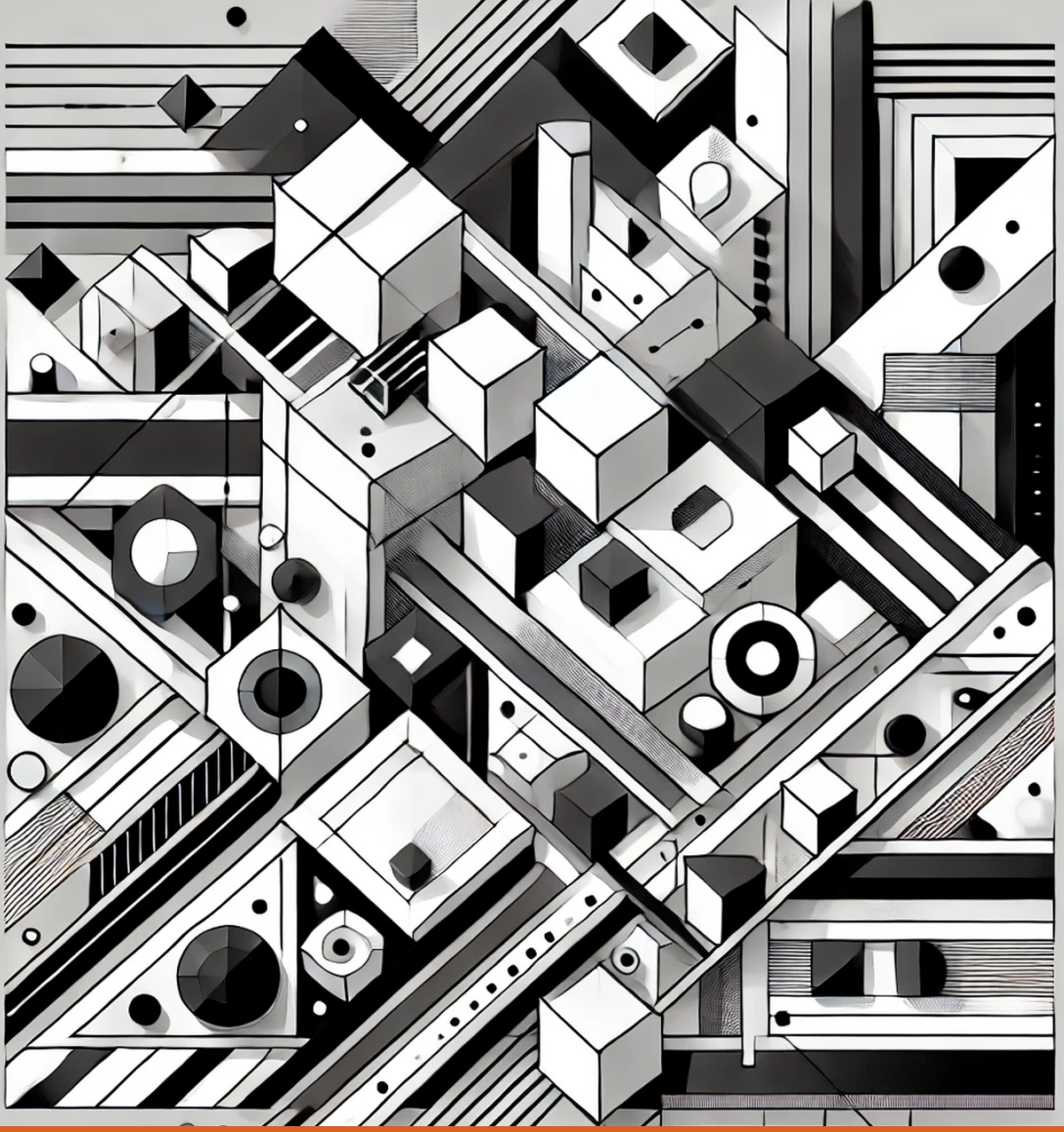




JAKE ZEITLIN

Collected Poems

TWO BOOKS, CALIFORNIA POEMS, AND ARCHIVAL RECORD

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS:
EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

A TEXT-TECH PAPERS PROJECT

Extremes and Moderations

Early Southern California Poetry

Extremes and Moderations is a Text-Tech Papers project devoted to recovering poetry written, published, and circulated in Los Angeles and Southern California. Each volume brings neglected books and poems back into view through carefully prepared texts, archival images, biographical context, and a clear record of the surviving sources.

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

The Text-Tech Papers | Los Angeles, 2026

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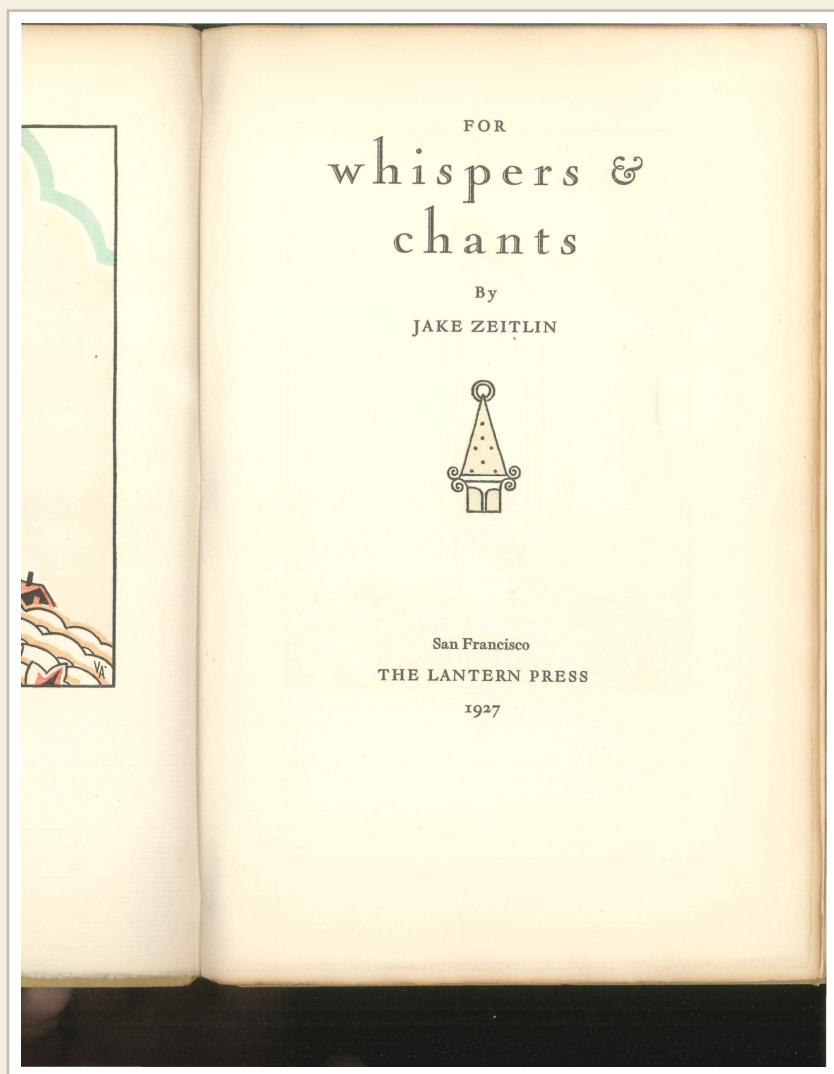
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Title page of For Whispers and Chants (1927).

MORE
WHISPERS & CHANTS

by Jake Zeitlin



1952

THE AMPERSAND PRESS

Pasadena, California

Title page of More Whispers and Chants (1952).

INTRODUCTION

November 4, 1902, Racine, Wisconsin – August 30, 1987, West Hollywood, California

Jake Zeitlin changed the literary map of Los Angeles by treating a bookshop as a meeting place, a print shop as an artistic laboratory, and bookselling as a form of cultural matchmaking. Born Jacob Israel Zeitlin in Racine, Wisconsin, in 1902 and raised in Fort Worth, he worked there as a bookseller, reviewer, and poet before moving to Los Angeles in 1925. After employment at Holmes Book Company and the book departments of the May Company and Bullock's, he opened his own shop in 1927. Lloyd Wright designed the first shop and a larger 1929 successor; writers, artists, printers, collectors, and political thinkers gathered there.

Poetry came first in print. Carl Sandburg's foreword to *For Whispers and Chants* (1927) introduced a young writer drawn to Texas landscapes, erotic modernism, nocturnal fantasy, trains, masks, and compact ironies. The book was printed at the Grabhorn Press and linked Zeitlin to the fine-printing culture he would help establish in Southern California. With Lawrence Clark Powell, Carey McWilliams, Phil Townsend Hanna, and Ward Ritchie, he operated Primavera Press from 1929 to 1933; he also helped found the Rounce & Coffin Club and participated in the short-lived magazine *Opinion*.

Zeitlin's second collection, *More Whispers and Chants* (1952), is consciously retrospective. Its foreword says that most of the poems had been written about twenty years earlier and were being printed as an intimate communication to family and friends. The poems are more plainly autobiographical: dedications to Josephine, Judith, and Sarah Bixby Smith stand beside poems for Robinson Jeffers and sharply observed California landscapes. The East Texas farm woman from the first book returns in a lightly revised text, making the two books a dialogue between youth and recollection.

The larger Zeitlin achievement continued outside poetry. His shops exhibited the work of Edward Weston, Paul Landacre, Käthe Kollwitz, and

other modern artists; his rare-book expertise helped build major collections in the history of science; and the red barn on La Cienega that he ran with his wife, Josephine Ver Brugge, became an international destination. He defended Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* in California obscenity litigation, received an honorary Doctor of Letters from Occidental College in 1981, and donated extensive archives to UCLA. He died in West Hollywood in 1987. These poems restore the lyric beginning of a career remembered chiefly for making other people's books, pictures, archives, and conversations possible.

ORIGINAL FOREWORDS AND PUBLICATION NOTES

Carl Sandburg's 1927 foreword and Jake Zeitlin's 1952 account of the later book

Carl Sandburg's Foreword

From For Whispers and Chants (1927)

Now we have the boy, the young man, Jake Zeitlin, stepping forth as a poet. Dreams and impressions come to him and they take word-shapes, and he must put down the words. He has the value, the merit, and quality, that accompany the inevitable. He will go on writing; he is worth reading in the commencement of his work. Some of his lines, as the years pass, and he looks at them, scans his early children, he may wish to change, to revise. A few others he will treasure as too good to change. Thus life goes with all artists.

Carl Sandburg

Original Publication Note

From For Whispers and Chants (1927)

Of the following poems, "Three Ironies" has appeared in *The Southwest Review* for April 1925, "Train Portrait of an East Texas Farm Woman" is accepted for publication in the same magazine, and "Gypsy Nights" has appeared in the *San Francisco Review* for September 1925 and is included, in part, in L. A. G. Strong's *Best Poems of 1926*.

Jake Zeitlin's Foreword

From More Whispers and Chants (1952)

Almost all of these poems were written twenty years ago when I had more of the urge to sing. As I read them now they still have for me the power to

evoke sentiments and memories that are good to remember. I am printing them so that those for whom I have affection, my wife, my children, and the men and women with whom I have shared some moments of human sensitiveness, may have a communication of the things that are not easily or often spoken. I send them out as a friend sends a letter to another.

Jake Zeitlin · January 1952

FOR WHISPERS AND CHANTS

San Francisco: Lantern Press, 1927

Gypsy Nights

(Prelude)

Tonight we shall go wandering
Across the rhythmic, flowing hills
Where supple saplings weave and bend.
Beneath the gnarled and twisted trees
We shall descend
Into a magic-haunted space
Where wild, goat-footed Pan pipes sensuously.

I

Every night of last week was a Gypsy:

Two were old tired hags, dressed in black;
Three had saved a crescent ear-ring;
One was a cool child;
And the last
Was a young, lithe woman.

If she bewitched me
It was because I followed her
Through twisted tree-branches,
And if I am mad—
Madness is what I sought.

II

An old hag
Rustling her many skirts,
The night leans over;
And the moon is an old gold coin,
Swinging at her throat.

If she had not lost her voice,
Shrieking with cold
In winter,
She would call me to the lake

To read my palm:

Then I would follow her
And kneel
And listen.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

Train Portrait of an East Texas Farm Woman

There is a question in her deadened eyes

At each new person and a new surprise
Be-sets her with each movement of the train.
Bald prairie land is new to her long life

As well as endless miles of track that send
Her mind a multitude of ways at once.
Her old rough hands betray the drudgery

Of farm-house tasks that come with poverty:

Her time from bed to bed is over-filled
With toil: baking, churning, washing, sewing.
The halt and dragging in her walk is proof
Of long, long windy fields and labor done
Alongside of her man beneath the sun,
And too, there is a hint of children borne
In damp cold houses and of death at dawn.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

For a Reminder

They are burning the fallen leaves again.

At twilight the old men and old women

Rake them into springy heaps and kindle them
For a reminder that Autumn waits

Around the corner of next week.

A new smoke smell

And a new smoke drift along the wind.

They are burning the fallen leaves again at twilight.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

Sad Secrets

A mother tells of a daughter lying in bed all day and calling her hard names.

A daughter tells of a fierce father tearing

her dresses up and throwing her suit-case out the door.

A husband tells of a love gone out like a

snuffed candle and a wife who mocks

his weakness.

A woman tells of a lover trampling her

flower garden and throwing drunken curses

over his shoulder.

A man tells of a faith broken like a green branch and a friendship gone bitter.

Hard names, torn dresses, snuffed candles,

trampled flowers, broken branches...

Sad secrets whispered.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

Prairie Flower

I'm glad I never saw you in a city.
There will always be
a bending tree,

a graveled road,
a sleek backed hill,
behind you.

When we meet in a dawn
I shall say,
“You are sweet
As wild bee’s honey.”
I shall call you
a prairie flower
and a mustang.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

For the Lady Never

You—

Sapling-slim

And shadow-naked—

Bent leaf caressed

And sun gilt flanks

Before a jasmine laden wind.

Sweeping

To kiss the valley

Of your coral centered breasts,

I felt your breath,

Made sweeter by a song

Hummed underneath

Your shell pink lips.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

Mood

The dusk is laden poignantly
With a pipe's sound and a child's cry.

The fowl are restless in their roost tree,
Mist and smoke mingle in a slate sky.

The candles brighten gradually,
Tired people wait for the old to die.

The dusk is laden poignantly
With a pipe's sound and a child's cry.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

To a Woman

Evoking thoughts of a quiet wet dusk
When the rain, like a slender dancer,
Touched the ground and sprang and whirled
In the wind; your low words sadden me,

Your foot-falls bring me melancholy.

I remember a slight tree
That bent itself and beat be-draggled leaves

Against the curtained window.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

Prelude to a Song

I dreamed I saw the mountains dance,
They changed to women in a bacchanale.
Then as their rounded sides flashed past
Bright flowered veils of green dropped down
And they stood silver-naked there
Before the moon.
A melody of star-marked harmony
Throbbled in my head
And every wind made flute sounds,
All the rivers sang.
My blood beat loud within my ears
To keep them time
And all my being begged to dance with them.
But that same magic
That had changed the earth to flesh
Had also changed my flesh to stone
And my song-hungry lips
That would have joined the symphony
Of stars and winds and lilting rivers
Were stricken mute.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

Fragment of an Elemental Symphony

Into a ghostly pause
There bursts
The thin shrill crash of cricket cymbals.

Dry weed stalks,

Strummed by weaving fingers of the wind,
Respond,

While babblings of leaves increase

And slowly merge themselves
Into the broadening movement.

A steady monotone

Of water flowing

Upon the rough uneven bottom
Comes just above

The fugue of many slender streams
Entwined

And breaking with a crash
At one high fall.

A pause ie

Tenderly

The thin stringed part
Of fluttering wings
Unfolds

And just a moment
Shows itself.

Insistently
The old tones grow

And swallow it into the one progression.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

Three Ironies

I

I have watched
Sinuous snakes glide
Through the grass
Or hide
And swing head and tongue
Upward
After whirring grasshoppers.

But yesterday I walked
Where the sun
Threw a flood of dazzling bombs
Upon an autumn day.
There, amid the broken yellow grass,
A dull green grasshopper
Sat solemnly eating
Of a golden-plated serpent.

II

From the darkness
A white pigeon falls
Through the drizzle
To the cold wet pavement.

We huddle together
Under the arc-light.

Spring of a black gutter cat,
Flutter of white feathers
Beat down to the ground
By the rain.

But I do not interfere.

III

In October
Brown monarchs came—
Brown-winged,
Clothed in white-spotted velvet.
They fluttered in clouds along each low path,
Filled the creek beds,
And clung to the haw trees—
Clung till they outnumbered the leaves;
Refoliating empty branches.

In the background
A brilliant cardinal—
Black-moustached—
Fluttered and chirped
And fattened.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

To a Maker of Masks

With slow malignant gestures
Of your soft and ruthless hands
You have corroded clay

Until the stern and changeless
Masks of truth

Have crept out of chaotic mass
And fixed themselves
Unyieldingly.

You have found
Just that wind-shifting instant
When the stubborn and adamant earth
Reveals the ultimate of sorrow.

How zealously

You have pared all the dross of moods away
Until the chaste and sinister

Last residue

Has shown the naked passion

In its final blinding shape.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

Consummation

Moist drifted leaves and mould and earth

Were in our hair

And dust

That had sifted from the cave-top

For a thousand years.

A blinding darkness

And a madness

Had possessed us:

And we lay,

Still tensed and trembling,

Breathing a strange strong perfume;

Clutching that moment from eternity,

To make of it,

Within ourselves,

A thing as sacred and unchanging

As the stars and gods.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

Death of the Moon

Last night, the moon,
Sauntering cat-footed
Across a bas-relief sky,
Fell into a bog of clouds.

Slowly the quagmire closed
And left a twisted scar.

Near morning a white corpse rose.
But the moon was dead.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

The Return

A mist I had made of you
And a vision,
Abstract and built
On many dreams
Of what you should become.
Because you were not,
Could not be,
This vision
I sought to quarrel
That I might not see you
And again,
Perhaps,
Rebuild my old illusion.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

Incomplete

Seeing them

As hard enameled images,
Removed

And impossible of inner contact,
I have thrown my arms

Across men's shoulders

Kissed women's lips,

Embraced their bodies—

Not them.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

Sequel

I have resumed my gazing
At the stars;

I have renewed my listening
To the wind;

I have returned my love
To the frigid moon.

So strange it seems
To have forgotten them.

Publication. *For Whispers and Chants* (Lantern Press, 1927).

MORE WHISPERS AND CHANTS

Pasadena: Ampersand Press, 1952

The Past Is a Name

Sense recalling experience

Bringing sensation back

To consciousness

Might be the past

Lived over.

Might be, but never is.

Identity does not follow

Identity.

The past has the same

Name for it.

But the thing is not,

Even the wish is not.

Filter and screen of

Time, growth, processes

Of metabolism, the dreaming

Being pondering in the depths,

Translate it into what never was.

The past is a name:

Nothing more.

Flowering is not the
Seed, the trunk, the
Branch, the leaf.
Flowering is forever new.
Sensation recalling
Experience is a flowering
Of the mind,

A blue flag blowing

In the wind of

A new hour, a new sun,—
Burst magically

From the turned earth.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

Josephine

A quiet day
Can be so full of singing moments;
A silent night so full of more

than spoken meanings.
And the cool hands you give me
Can make my heart
A thundering drum.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

To Judith Louon

On her seventh birthday, October 1, 1932

Beyond your slim child figure
Stands a girl
And beyond that stands a woman.

They are all wide eyed,
Looking into the future
Just as I am looking at you.

Always the time ahead

We see in every time,

Always the future a little bitter
With the past.

And I see your eyes growing wider
With wonder, and wiser

With living

And you growing sweeter

Like a ripe berry

With the sun upon you.

Always to wonder,

That is the promise we make to each
other,

Always to keep sweet

Against the past's bitterness.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

A Whispered Song

How women know
The weakness of the men
Who come to them by darkness
Seeking comfort in their arms,
And yet take back their strength from men—
Shall always be a thing
To sing a little whispered song about.
Low steady voices
Coming out of windows
Late at night
When tired, bruised men confide
The little hurts the day has made
And creep into the shelter
Of their women's breasts
Shall be an under-tone
For this soft song.
And the firm proud answers
Hinting of cool fingers
Rustling through the nestled hair
Shall be the song's refrain.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

For Sarah Bixby Smith

Like the words of a song
that are never forgotten
but only lie sleeping

under the tongue.

Your gallant sweetness

and grave smiling calm
wait only the sound

of wind in high branches,
the smell of hot August sage
to surge back upon us.

The flowers on the hills
mind the joy

of their singer.

‘The roads and the ranches
bear the marks of

your faring.

No one speaks your name;
but the silence we keep
when we meet,

speaks it over and over.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

To a Suicide

Now you have kept
the date you made
a long, long time ago.
How eagerly you waited
for this time.
How timidly you ventured out before
then shyly turned away
and ran
from meeting him you sought.
How boldly you have gone
to meet your bridegroom
and violently pushed aside
the hands that held you back.
You had a date to keep,
O Bride of Death.
Your one true lover

(and our last one too)

was waiting there to meet you.
Here's hoping
that he took you
gently
tenderly
and quieted your fright,
composed your thoughts
and soothed the pains
your earthly lovers made.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

A Workingman Once Told Me

I almost died once, he said.
There had been a wreck
and I was lying, crushed
under the weight of the truck.
People were trying to shift
it off of me. But it was
too heavy. All the time
I knew I was going to die.
And do you know what I thought? he asked.
No, I said.
I was very lonely, he said.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

To Robinson Jeffers

Savouring the bitter roots of life,
The treachery of the mind to its slave,
the stark cruel march of nature against itself, you have found sweetness in the
 very bite, the sharp cold after-taste,
the dull opiate pain they leave.

This you have taught us:

we may turn not from the odious drug
nor spit it out
nor even wash it down with some false-flavored draught.
Accept, you say,
Suffering—the only remedy for pain,
Death—the sovereign remedy for life.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

Train Portrait of an East Texas Farm Woman

There is a question in her deadened eyes
At each new person and a new surprise
Besets her with each movement of the train.
Bald prairie land is new to her long life

As well as endless miles of track that send
Her mind a multitude of ways at once.

Her old rough hands betray the drudgery

Of farm-house tasks that come with poverty:

Her time from bed to bed is over-filled

With toil: Baking, churning, washing, sewing.
The halt and dragging in her walk is proof

Of long, long windy fields and labor done
Alongside of her man beneath the sun,

And too, there is a hint of children borne

In damp cold houses and of death at dawn.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952); reprinted there from *For Whispers and Chants* (1927), with light revisions.

Dirge on the Last Night of the Full Moon

SEE!

On a golden bier they bear the moon;
Mute monarch of the Spring,

Speak in your softest whispers
While they weave a shroud

Of star spray.

Tomorrow night a nautch dance

Of the planets shall parade, before his grave
And great black groves of trees,

Tear drooping, tune a threnody—

Wind thrown and winter voiced.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

Sea Poem

Where the waves make lace against the rocks,
Where the hands of the water have carved an echoing cave,
We shall come up from a sea bath
naked and iridescent in the summer moonlight;
We shall answer the pull of the moon—
Give ourselves to the rhythm of the waves,
To the ebb and rise of the echoes.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

Convict Lake

A Chinese philosopher would
sit on a stone here
and think of what is
immutable.

The pain of such a mountain,
rock climbing over rock,
would make him walk slowly
in the bare elders.

And when the wind brought
snow down
over the slate water
He would close his eyes
and think of running girls
that bent to sting his cheeks
with little kisses.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

Laguna Rocks

Even the images of sun and moon are broken here.
The shattered chariots of the sea lie tossed about,
And where the ribs of earth are bared, the hungry
- winds have picked a clean white skeleton.

We may not shout here out of drunken ecstasy—
Against the thunder of the waves
Our loudest cries are thrown back in our throats.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

Mono Craters

The black lines of hills chant a slow threnody,
The black islands kneel before the seven bare craters.
The gun-steel water lies upon its bier of death.

Ask any question:

They will give you the last word—
The last answer.

When the craters spouted fire,
When the foothills were green against the snow-grey line of mountains,
When the baby lake nursed at the fresh-water breasts of the foothills.
All questions got different answers,

All stories had different endings:

A cloudy morning could mean a sunny. day or a dark one.
. Now time has made all the answers the same answer,
All the endings the same ending
And all the days dark days.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

The Way

Before the storm breaks,
Before the sky comes clattering
Down upon us
And the earth washes.
From under our toes,
Before the wind strips us to our last rag,
Look at me, look hard at me;
Blue lipped and chattering.
(Being lost for a long time
make wilderness home,
home wilderness, makes
the cold calm of despair
a cloak for the senses,
a refuge for the frantic
imagination.
An end comes,
An end must come.
Not when the patience breaks
not when the heart flutters
or the limbs disobey the brain.
But in its own way,
In its own good time
An end does come.
And the earth rends
and the skies split
and the tall towers come toppling,
and the far blue stars
Burn nearer than the cold moon.

Cry laughter at the first
thunder.
Stand to the rain's lash.
Stand close.
Lightning strikes the green trees.
The wind tears the weak bound
asunder.

We shall be the beaten linen,
the fused clay,
the furnaced glass,
the blast fired steel,
the salt cured thongs.
Faith is in the fiber of these
and their being is a god.
The way comes to them,
They do not seek.
They are the found.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

Dwelling

How can we ever name

The place of our dwelling

Or tell others the road

To the home of our throbbing blood?

Flesh and dream are the

Same pathway for us.

And we go there

Faces to the light,

Consumed and cleansed,
Bathed in the fire of birth,
Made whole together and
Forged against all human
Separateness.

Loneliness we knew before

We can not ever know again;

We can never be exiled from our land of dwelling.

The world of day is within

Its days,

The hours of time are within its

Time;

It is a shining cloud

And we shall never go away

From the brightness.

Publication. *More Whispers and Chants* (Ampersand Press, 1952).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Principal books represented in this edition

For Whispers and Chants. San Francisco: Lantern Press, 1927.

More Whispers and Chants. Pasadena: Ampersand Press, 1952.