



RUTH FORBES SHERRY

Collected Poems

GENE, DESERT, MACHINE, AND THE MEASURE OF TIME

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

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Ruth Forbes Sherry

A Critical Reading Edition

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Extremes and Moderations: Early Southern California Poetry

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ARCHIVAL IMAGES

Book history, public recognition, and the surviving record

IMPERISHABLE GENE

RUTH FORBES SHERRY

OUTPOSTS PUBLICATIONS LONDON

and

HENNYPENNY PRESS CALIF. U.S.A.

Chapbook—Periodical No.6

1958

Title page of Imperishable Gene (1958), jointly issued by Outposts Publications and Hennypenny Press.

PUBLICATION SET OF RUTH FORBES SHERRY POEMS

Poet Mrs. Ruth Forbes Sherry, whose home is on La Calera Street, San Juan Capistrano, will see publication of her new work soon, according to an announcement this week by Hennypenny Press. Outpost Publication and Hennypenny Press are jointly publishing her most recent works, "Imperishable Gene", a double volume selection of poetry containing a new work, "Valences" and Mojave Motifs", sequel to "Hourglass in the Mojave" published earlier. "Chart for Voyage" is also included in Mrs. Sherry's published works.

Born in Chicago, she attended the University there and the Sorbonne in Paris. She and her husband Ralph Sherry, also a writer, moved to San Juan Capistrano last year.

Mrs. Sherry's many awards include Princess Anne prize and first prize of the Poetry Society of America. She has also won state prizes from California, Florida, Georgia, Virginia and Texas.

Besides Zonta International of Laguna Beach, of which she is a new member. Mrs. Sherry is a member of El Camino Real Woman's Club, San Juan Capistrano Woman's Club, South Coast Kappa Alpha Theta Sorority, California Writers Club, Poetry Society of America, and the Pen and Brush, New York. Her poems have appeared in more than 150 publications.

A 1958 Coastline Dispatch profile announcing Imperishable Gene and summarizing Sherry's education, awards, affiliations, and San Juan Capistrano residence.

Browning Poetry Winners Revealed

Ruth Forbes Sherry Wins First Prize

Winner of the 1950 Browning Poetry Award in the adult division this year is Ruth Forbes Sherry, a Daggett, Calif., woman, according to the judges who will make their announcement at a writers week dinner at the Commons this evening. The awards to be made are:

ADULT DIVISION

The Redlands Daily Facts announces Sherry as winner of the 1950 Browning Poetry Award.

Former SJC Resident Dies

Ruth Forbes Sherry, internationally known poet and former resident of San Juan Capistrano, died Tuesday, November 10, in Laguna Beach. She was 86.

Mrs. Sherry and her husband lived for a number of years on La Calera Street in San Juan Capistrano.^N She moved to Laguna to make her home following his death.

She was a past president of the Laguna Branch of the National League of American Pen Women. Despite gradually failing health she had remained active in Pen Women and in her efforts toward world peace until a few weeks before her death. She passed away quietly in her sleep in her apartment in Continental Manor. A son, Forbes Sherry of Torrance, Calif., survives her.

Sherry's 1970 Coastline Dispatch obituary records her Pen Women leadership, peace work, Laguna Beach residence, and surviving son.

INTRODUCTION

A desert modernist between the gene and the geophysical year

Ruth Forbes Sherry wrote from the Mojave, the Pacific coast, and the charged middle years of the twentieth century, bringing evolutionary science, war, drought, machinery, and the stubborn continuities of human feeling into the same field of vision. Her poems appeared across several decades in books and little magazines, yet most of that work has long been difficult to reach. This edition resets the complete surviving text of *Imperishable Gene*, restores ten poems from periodical witnesses, and prints two further poems preserved by an online index while marking what remains unlocated.

Stage I | Chicago, Stanford, and formation, 1883–1934

Ruth Forbes Sherry was born in Chicago on November 14, 1883. Stanford University records place her in the class of 1908, although a 1958 newspaper profile instead credited study at the University of Chicago and the Sorbonne; those latter claims have not yet been independently verified. In an oral-history interview recorded late in life she also recalled Vassar. She married Ralph H. Sherry, a Stanford alumnus and metallurgist whose technical book *Steel Treating Practice* appeared in 1929, and they had one son, Forbes Sherry. Her later recollections connected her with the woman-suffrage movement and with meetings involving Carrie Chapman Catt and Susan B. Anthony, but those memories still await corroboration in contemporary records. By 1930 the Sherrys were living in Los Angeles, where civic records soon described her occupation simply as writer.

Stage II | Periodicals, the desert, and the first books, 1935–1949

Sherry's surviving publication trail opens decisively with "The Porpoise" in *Prairie Schooner* in 1935 and "Hegira: Epic of the Dust Bowl" in 1938. The latter joins environmental catastrophe to the forced migration of farm families, anticipating the social and geological imagination that became central to her writing. In Los Angeles she organized public "Conversations in Contemporary Poetry" in 1937. *Hourglass in the Mojave* followed in 1941 in an edition of five hundred copies from Wagon & Star Press, designed by Sherry, handset by Dion O'Donnol, and illustrated with Wallace Cook's blocks. The book established the Mojave not as scenic backdrop but as a scale against which history, erosion, and human desire could be measured. *Lament and Prophecy* appeared in 1942, and *Chart for Voyage* about 1943; complete copies of neither have yet been recovered for this edition.

Stage III | Daggett, awards, and *Imperishable Gene*, 1950–1959

The 1950 census found Sherry at Yermo in the Mojave, and contemporary notices also locate her in nearby Daggett. That year she won the Browning Poetry Award. Her desert residence sharpened a vocabulary of rock, sand, fossil time, spectrum, and mutation, while her periodical work ranged from the compact "Narrow Interlude" to poems in *The Archer* and *Variegation*. In 1957 she and Ralph moved to San Juan Capistrano. *Imperishable Gene*, jointly issued in 1958 by Outposts Publications in London and Hennypenny Press in California, brought together the sequence *Valences* and *Mojave Motifs*. Its scientific lexicon—genes, valences, equations, geophysics, and the Univac computer—does not cancel lyric feeling; it repeatedly tests whether knowledge can account for grief, love, violence, or historical memory.

Stage IV | *Trace*, peace work, and the late years, 1960–1970

Sherry remained active in little-magazine culture into her eighties. *Trace* printed her poem and essay “Angry Young Men” in 1960, followed by “Journey into Self,” “Parodies of Spring,” and “Identity.” A four-page collection titled *Partisan* appeared from Goosetree Press in 1964, and another edition of her Mojave poems was reported in 1966–67, though neither text has been located. She was a leader in the Laguna Beach branch of the National League of American Pen Women and continued working for world peace even as her health failed. After Ralph’s death she lived in Laguna Beach. She died in her sleep at Continental Manor on November 10, 1970, four days before her eighty-seventh birthday. Her recorded oral history, scattered correspondence, rare books, and periodical appearances now form a dispersed archive whose recovery is still in progress.

EDITORIAL NOTE

Text, chronology, variants, and the limits of the surviving corpus

The edition is chronological by first known publication. Each poem begins on a new page; long poems continue at the established measure rather than being reduced. Book and journal titles are italicized. Stanza breaks, section numerals, speaker labels, and clearly intentional line indents follow the scans; page-imposed hanging indents are not reproduced.

The text of *Imperishable Gene* was checked against the complete 1958 scan. Decorative drop capitals are silently regularized, obvious OCR noise is excluded, quotation spacing is normalized, and rhetorical dashes are rendered as closed-up em dashes. The book's contents page gives "Voyage Towards Morning," while the poem itself reads "Voyage Toward Morning"; the body title is followed.

Where a later version makes only local changes, one reading is printed with a variant note. Thus "Measure of Time" (1952) is recorded under the revised "Stuff of Time" (1958). "Nuance" and "Song Against Night" survive in complete text through Poetry Explorer, but their first print venues remain unidentified and are marked accordingly. Fragments and title-only records are not promoted into poems.

PERIODICAL POEMS, 1935–1954

Poems recovered from Prairie Schooner and The Archer

The Porpoise

It is not mine to know what chemistry
Of submarine fire begets this lustrous curve
Of sensate power; this fantasy
Of whorl and swerve.

What terse equation could describe an arc
So beautiful, deliberate and slow,
That joins the air to sovereign dark
In sinuous flow.

In strict obsidian crescent beats
The ocean's heart, a rhythmic systole,
And, plunged in fathomed foam, completes
Diastole.

First published in *Prairie Schooner*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Summer 1935), p. 213.

Hegira

Epic of the Dust Bowl

I

Now the panther shadows creeping low
Beleaguer the brazen gate of day. No longer
The earth, compassionate and strong, to sheath the slow
Upsurging sword of thirst, gives mother-heal
To ancient trust. One urge pervasive lingers
In the taut purpose of the mind. The glazed mouth
Stammers through the pangs of dust and strains
To green mirage where only drouth remains.

II

The savage wind-drums pound the feverish land.
Outscream the crazy sob of furrows, prodded
To powdered hurricane.

A little band

Of harried ones crouch in the gray room, goaded
By hail of sand and flail of dust. And one,
Deep-bronzed as the metallic sun, shoulders
The tottering wall as he were Atlas standing
Beneath a world of towering boulders.

III

The Man:

“O Lord of the Bread, we see the pasture sicken;
The lean year’s toil, the travail of the young
Betrayed, and vintage of our labor taken.
Feel of our thews and sinews! We are strong!
We’ve delved and hewn and sown and ploughed for you.
Red hunger stalks our blood and old lusts waken.
And now our courage wanes and ravel thin.
Oh, give us rain! Oh, send the healing rain!”

IV

He stands erect. His iron muscles knot,

His prairie eyes gold-shot with slender hope.
“Time gone my father heard the bison thunder
This range, the passenger pigeon arrow the slope,
The myriad buffalo stampede under
The leaping coils of dawn. Saw panther stalk
The wooded marge-fringes; the snow-whelped wolf
Track with frothed fang the timorous antelope.”

V

The Woman:

“And where our fathers ploughed the plain
An amber sea
Leapt up to shout reply
To their strict ecstasy.

Hewn of rain,
Quarried of the loam,
The golden rivers rushed
In weirs of foam.

No more the jewel wheat
Scepters the plain.
Now, disinherited,
We weave the web of pain.

O proud high hearts
That here unleashed the seed
And raised a strange and golden city—
Hear our need!”

VI

Suddenly the house shuttled and leaned upon the cables
Of the storm. There was a sound of corded steel
That rends. The skein of terror in the room unraveled,
And the children furled and circled in the mother arm.
“The house can bear no more!” He groaned to feel
His burden slip and strode the span and marvelled
That his hope had held so long. “Come! Come!”
They fled, looked back and saw the roof-tree reel.

VII

They stood knee-deep in shuddering soil that fell
From the cloud on the gale like rain. And still there fell
No rain to dew their strangled breath, to rinse
The livid wheat.

 The shed that roofed the bins
(All empty now) loomed black beyond the home.
And thence they fled, enveloped in gray doom.
All night they lay, half drowned in tides of dust.
The soil-surf boomed on beaches of the gust.

VIII

And the man watched. He built a barricade
Of straw about his wife and babes who slept
Fitfully, their torn breath convulsive; and he trod
A path by the dry well out to the barn and stripped
The clotted dust from the pane to glean the light.
And while he packed with sparse necessities of flight
He girt his will.

 “This is earth’s utter wound,”
He thought. “The meadows bleed, the fields are stunned.”

IX

“O River-throated, O Forest-tongued,
O Bread-god, hear my cries.
I am America. In me the implicit
Strains of centuries.

Ye are the dream, the promise;
I, the plan. In me
The bright pattern; the kinetic mood
Stems from my agony.

The cloud is an organ, and a god
Plucks anger from the strings.
I leave the meadow hanging sheer
Under shadow of fell wings.

Still I am the work, the plough, the plan,
By my own greeds foresworn.
Earth's runes I had forgot, and now
I reap the untasseled corn."

First published in *Prairie Schooner*, vol. 12, no. 3 (Fall 1938), pp. 216–219.

Mark the Time

Now is the lusty time they told
who from the birth of the universe
measured the patient curve of history
with ordered stars for calipers.

In air gigantic with change, the unbowed
old behold their dream unwind;
and decades crowd the vision of boys
stampeding the dry arroyos of the mind.

But how shall the gibbering lip recount
the fury of jungle where python plunders
the doe; and horrid crocodile
submerges, plowing the bright wing under?

How shall the mind compass the ruin
of delicate gazelle, stricken as it fled;
of wild thing smoked from the African grasses;
harlots filching the medals of the dead?

You of this lusty time, dynamic,
that sit at the controls of power;
compel the river; anatomize the silence;
shout a music for the mighty hour.

Constringe the blood in weirs of steel,
the plastic body in sluices of metal.
Bend the torso to the flume, fashioning
candescent rose and livid petal.

Persuade the eye to excellent star,
the will to nice geometry
that yields no error. Mark the time
with pointed pencil, carefully.

For the heart knows only the perfect equation;
the plotted curve's pure eloquence.
And the heart's integrity is beautiful
beyond the hour's malevolence.

First published in *Prairie Schooner*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 1942), p. 19.

Narrow Interlude

Let the heart mutiny; let the hooded mind
Break the bright chrysalis that stays its going;
But not this narrow interlude be dimmed
By fear of knowing.

First published in *Prairie Schooner*, vol. 24, no. 3 (Fall 1950), p. 254.

To a Certain Veteran

Now blind for home you turn your face
to your own valley, your fury spent,
your weapons broken,
weighing honor in your hand.

Once in battle pain you dared to dream
of throat so starkly beautiful;
of dazzling demand for love, flesh-hunger fed,
and giddy rose of joy.

Be patient now. Compose a history for the heart,
serious and lyric; prove how the brow
is proud to wear your lesser hour.
Discover how cold the climate of the soul.

First published in *The Archer* (Spring 1954), p. 7.

Arbor Vitae

We seek the living root
deep under time.
For the year has unplumbed seasons;
it slumbers in the winter snow
till breath of April blow upon it.
Then with a rush of power, aware
of its own stature, it sheds the pall
of sleep, takes on desire and dignity,
and in the autumn fruits.

First published in *The Archer* (Fall–Winter 1954), p. 4.

IMPERISHABLE GENE

The complete 1958 collection

Valences

Twenty poems of inheritance, war, science, ocean, and memory.

Native

I am my country, I my race,
the sum of all that came before.
My forebears find abiding place
within my core.

In me the fruit of ancient seed—
the inextinguishable sperm.
The ruby sap of lineal need
defies the worm.

All loves conjoin and in ordained
rebellions, race-deep in the will,
converge in me. My blade is stained
with many a kill,

telling a configurative tale
of battle in cold crypts of mind;
while oceans toss a bellied sail
with shroud entwined.

While mountains cast a lidless eye
on nubile innocence beguiled;
on craven hearts unfit to die;
on sorrow big with child.

Now from this wrist the confluent stream
of centuries is freely poured;
and hero sons, born to the dream
belt on the sword.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 5.

Pacifica

*Matrix of life,
O, beautiful Pacific,
once paced with ships of war,
now clocked to rhythms of peace.*

Where the wild spindrift veils the light
that silvers hollow curl of swell,
there homes the albatross in power
of elemental grace.

To rims of nebulous isles the pinions
brood in passionate embrace.
Their shadow undulates on shells
housed in opulent shallows.

The wing reflection dwells on pillar
of citadel long lost in ocean's
everglade; on ruined tower once
carilloned with bells.

Measures atoll where brown feet spelt
on coral sand a ritual
to hail the ship to jewelled shore.
Red lips murmur love.

Now morning wears a mask of lilies,
sails are furled, anchors cast,
and all Pacifica adores
the orphic bird.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 6.

Imperishable Gene

Now is the still clear after storm
when evening lays her grave command on hill;
and under pools are images of sleep
where slow fish delve reflection.

Let us go now into the twilight,
the river a gem at the throat;
roam the length of landfall,
in search of dear desire.

Serene in low and fluent curve
the swallows throng the waterfall;
salmon leap in emerald,
and under water surge the stars.

Oh, listen with your heart on mine
obeying the blood's compulsion.
And after nuptial interim
discover beauty beyond reason.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 7.

Voyage Toward Morning

Let us go now into the year
bearing our wounds,
wearing lilies of wonder.

Let us leave the mounds of the dead
garlanded by love.
Leave them for grasses to praise.

They are nourished by sweetness of bone;
arbutus hushes their pain;
anemones lend them pride.

Now let us bury wrath,
eat bread and salt,
speak truth.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 7.

A Poem for the Geophysical Year

For who shall decode his time;
Who, casting a beam spaceward,
casting a beam to the sea floor,
shall read the year?

Give him rockets to assault Mars,
sky-cavalry to hurl megathons.
Give him the spectrum to cipher planets,
the atom to uncover firstness,
to read beginnings.

Quantum he shall plot, and leap of proton.
He shall understand values, valences.
Let him feed data to Univac—
data of the soul's equation.

He knows courage and violence
but not their measure.
Love he courts but cannot consummate.
He cries: Here the engine; here the proverb;
here the lovely figure of our dream.

The sun throbs in his hand.
Stars are not stranger to him,
and gossip wind awakens longing.
But he cannot read the year
nor decode the century.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 8.

Forsooth, Goode Worm

Who challenges
life's brittle plan
and garners wassail
where he can,
not heeding what
the cost may be,
nor reckoning
his equity,
will find, when he
achieves the span,
he is but dust
rigged out as man.

Who chews the pip
of bitter gall,
nor heeds the apple's
silken fall,
who looks into
the serpent's eyes,
and exorcises
paradise,
will gnaw the crust
of mouldering bread,
whereon his dusty
heart is fed.

The tidbit sweet
or bitter flavor—
forsooth, Goode Worm,
which will you savor?

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 9.

Promises

O, fastidious mind, gorging on absolutes,
Remember:

How green Cambodian jungle
crept up the silent stair
of templed Angkor Wat,
sealing all flesh
in web of arrogant spider;
binding the ritual lamb
with lianas of mangrove.

Remember Atlantis, engulfed
by heedless waters that leveled
the mullioned tower of the princess;
greening with slime the lanes
where her chariot lurched;
rotting the hero-halls—
porches for octopi.

Remember Pompeii, her people
flicked by Vesuvius' fang,
caught like innocent children
playing at statues;
Her promises spitted like moths
on the half-buried wall—
her lovers welded in death.

Remember Nineveh, sin-lost
in sifting, drifting sand,
the coins on her harlot ankles
bruised by bright dust;
her rubbled altars
asylum for cursing rook
and jaguar.

O, fastidious mind:
Time is a bracelet for the wrist;
a footfall in Argolis;
a lullaby in a Mongol inn;
quicksilver quail in a coppice;
Lacrimae Christi quaffed in a cloister.
Time is mountain's promise
and sea's contract.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 10.

Ruined Cathedral

Soldier, lie quietly there where the nave is fallen;
The Virgin is toppled—her gold crown lies at your feet;
The crucifix crazily blesses the ravaged cloister;
Holy water runnels the ruined street.

Gargoyles grin evilly there on the shadowed cornice,
Where Sebastien, in agony, bares his wounds to the moon.
The watchful stars are loud with hallelujahs,
But earth's long penitence is never done.

Remember how phantom girls gaze from vacuous windows,
Their satin throats no proof against decay.
Their hollow voices echo malediction.
In the Avenue's bawdy formula they pray.

This unclean hour has left a lethal vintage
For your cup. Soldier, could you not find the Grail?
Percivale and Galahad tasted the glowing liquor,
But they were pure—and you are frail.

Now weary of time and of men you sleep, and dreaming
Of valley where paradise bird and panther play,
Your naked vision pierces old oblivions.
The stone that sealed a tomb is rolled away.

Lie quietly there in the rubble, Soldier, lest waking
You hear the anguished cry of the nations above
The psalm of night. Only earth's long arrogant sorrow
Can ever discover—omnipotence of love.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 11.

Motif for Fugue: Fingal's Cave

Where the bent wind intones on towers
of fluted stone, behold the sea's dark
dignities assaulted; still diminished
by the rock's tenure.

For here the sealed profundity
of time's annihilating mood
hollows the cliff with petalled wave
bequeathing coral reliquaries.

Mark how the lingual utterance
subdues the suave cave's rumorously
intent and answers to the bell's
distillate tone along the floor.

A Titan's heel half-hung with weedy
signature of earth's profound
resounds along the amorous wall,
charges the tidal flux with music.

Spectered with storm, the cormorant's
cry knells a gusty monotone
weaving in contrapuntal skein
the rhetoric of life and death.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 12.

Sub Specie Aeternitatis

There is love; there is hate.
There is good; there is evil.
Also there is a reason why
children, lovers and some poets—
unless tricked by treason in the wimpled grass,
pricked by caviar,
or slicked by the devil—
will range themselves
on the side of the angels.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 12.

Discovery

Sea Saga, I

For here is immensity. The sea.
Here is peace.
The twelve winds are folded in their caves.
The music you hear is the hunter's chant of Saggitarius at the kill.
It is as if the world lay yet unborn in the pelvic dark.
The imperious bell; the rude siren, are lost.
Lost is the din of the magnet jangled with scrap;
the champing of the Monighan slaving rock;
the bullet-song of the clipper—
All are lost.
The bugles and the moaning in the caverns of the mind are lost.
For here is the great peace.
And you that beat your foreheads, rise and go down the night
wearing this level knowledge like a miner's lamp
bound to the brow.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 13.

Theme for Discourse

Sea Saga, II

Alone in many dawns
we shall remember this beauty.
A low star burnishes the wave.
Dusky torches brood on the prone water.
It is the law that strong life mate with the sea.
Let us therefore take counsel
with the strict image of our dream.
And yet no rapier is fleshed in the heart.
Let us take counsel
for our little sophistries are lost
and we have need of rock to whet the heart on.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 13.

Only Time and the Sea

Sea Saga, III

“Out of the terrible years”, we said
and came down from the mountain bringing our sorrow.
Here on the splayed crag
a sombre surge drums the largo of time:
and umber light is broken on the walls
of drowned cities.

We said: “—— and here the bitterseed of men’s faith
blooms in coldest grapes of foam.
His little shining hopes lie like a rubble of stars
that dim and pale, flicker and are lost.”

(There are things only time and the sea may know)

We said: “—— and the flagons of his hate crimson the cliff.”
The waters are passionately at peace measuring time’s arc.
We turned to the mountain strangely comforted.
“—— out of the terrible years——“, we said.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 14.

Charm against Time

Sea Saga, IV

For time is a bitter transiency.
Let us therefore gild our throats with amulets-against time.
We have journeyed long in the melancholy continent.
We have lived in the depth of the nation;
known the angry wound; orgy of death.

Now let us follow in the sun,
skim the wave with the sharp delight of troikas on snow.
Let us cross the reef beyond the weave of storm.
The world is a blue monad, furled in time.
Death is forgotten in the idiom of life.
The wing lifts down fiords of light,
and no surf booms on the beaches of the mind.

Madrepore, purple asterids sift in the cobalt;
gorgonias, aurelias move in a cycle of sleep;
orbs of swart octopi pierce the moonstone shadow—
orgy of life.

Far out beyond the reef booms the tragic diapason.
Let us therefore gild our throats with amulets-against time.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 14.

Sea Isle

Sea Saga, V

It is time, O Presence, that you give of your strength to men.
For your sibyl speech is of dark splendor
and the words in your caves are old words
for salt and hunger-and love.

It is as if veiled women go down to the sea
to mourn their unburied dead.
They bear sea-aster and their tears are of rain.

Your crown is speared with lightning
and a girdle of sea-change swaths your hips.
Leopard sea crouches at your feet.
It is time, O Presence, that you spread your oracles
to men-that crave salt and liberty.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 15.

Eden Made Plain

That we followed
the old road back,
pushed spider from lock.

Our voices halloed
on hollow room,
on leprous stair. The rain
seeped through a broken pane
and blush-rose mallow bloomed
and sprig of henbane
on mouldering sill.

We clung together then.
Found home within.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 16.

Of Swans Passing

Silent and slow with arched neck, enigmatic
Self-questing, motionless in the motion of time, she floats,
Ecstatic.

She imagines her image, her reflection evanescent in the polished ebony,
Languid and immersed in recollection.

Liquescent silver bathes her going.
The sheer drops, symbols of oneness, cling in her plumage,
Proving the contours of her quiescent wing.

Drowned in time, monumental on the charmed air, immemorial,
She moves in an opalescent groove, remembering
Her passage through the roots of mangrove.
She makes her pilgrimage as one appointed of love.

Slowly she moves, surrendering, reminiscent, her being
Coeval with the first breath, still touched with fire;
Her dying hoarded in song.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 16.

Fallen Mallard

Poor ghostly bird, fallen from reticence
of altitudes. I lift your body
from unworthy earth; the frenzied dynamo,
the life you wore, consumed by its own spark.

Arrowing from the North, full-patterned, did the flock
tremble and break when death and heaven met?

Tensioned by an inner law,
what Ariadne ribbon spooled your course
in labyrinths of upper air? Were you one, last night,
in the moon's horn, with that caravel of fowl
whose feathered prow, parting the mist,
fathered my flight-wish? Through silences
too profound to guess, you plummeted to death
in lonely eloquence. What thesis and antithesis
caused you to mate with time, resolving full-circle
to source,—probing the heart's malaise?

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 17.

The Petrels

Against these weathered shales the waters moan
An elegiac dirge, while, undeterred
By imminent danger, dusky petrels herd
Their young along the wave-worn face of stone.

As free of wing, as iron-strong of bone
As they, yet having not high faith to gird
One hour, we dare not emulate the bird
That has dominion over the unknown.

The imperious heart, barbed with the will of youth,
Avid to know and venturous, at length
Must moor his slender shallop from the wind;
Where grim and perpendicular as truth,
A stark arithmetic of quiet strength
Upholds the ravished temples of the mind.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 17.

Broken Ships

After the long watch my son returned to me
and time was on his brow and in his eyes-the sea.

With strange sea-cluster his blown hair was wet,
and on his shoulder a coral epaulet.

He wore the salt sea on his lips;
and his kiss was the kiss of broken ships.

Of agony gnawed clean, he spoke, and manhood shorn
of worth and love and life unborn.

Half of his soul he left out there
with comrades and I did not dare
to question or to probe his hidden wrath.
I threw my body down across his path.

And as he trod my heart the air was shaken
with jubilation of trees and hills untaken.

And children came and women full of years;
and all were bright as lilies dewed with tears.

Striding into the storm where the wide thunders roll
he went, out of my body into the whole.

After the long watch my son returned to me,
and on his brow he wore-eternity.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Valences*, p. 18.

MOJAVE MOTIFS

Sequel to Hourglass in the Mojave

Code of Time

Nothing resists sand
It is more savage than the sea
Its oblivion more complete
By frost and by fire it crystals
That which was life
That which is death
Cypher and code of time
Crypt of milleniums
It is more eloquent than the sea—
Its catharsis of pity and fear
More complete
Life says
 Let the sand take over
Death says
 Let the sand take over.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 19.

Thrall

Here in the Mojave time has unplumbed seasons
And holds in thrall the spark that is life.
O, seek the living root deep under time.

It slumbers in the winter coil
It curls in softest dark
Till breath of April blow upon it.

Then with a rush of power,
Aware of its own stature,
It sheds the pall of sleep,
Takes on desire and dignity,
Thrusts up a ladder of lilies.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 20.

Tangential to Time

Piccolos of heat wind whine in rock pylons;
Keen pain of mystery,
Of unopened knowledge.

Wind spirals the lair of the last wolf:
Fastnesses of wild boar.

Fury wind spirals the lavic columns,
Skirling husks of primordial sea-fauna:
Chisels bones of first camel:
Polishes unfleshed carcass of mammoth:
Scours femur of three-toed horse.

Forms of fire and roses and deathless life
Foal and fade in candescence—
Requiem and prophecy.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 20.

Ceremony

I lie in abandon on the dune
The sun's at play
Shadow moves with morning
The bee is busy with the lily
In the whorled rock
Are noxious shapes of danger

Let me connote the music
Let me master the image
Converse with time

I embrace earth
I answer death
I equate the nature of being—
Dance ritual of the mind.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 21.

Prodigal Hours

Look into the veiled eyes of the hills
Time never came to this place,
For time is measured by strife.
But peace is measured by beauty—
And is timeless.

Four swans, zooming the dry river bed,
Imperial pattern of grace,
Fill the air with presence,
Imprint beauty on the sky.

All day they drift like prodigal hours
Silver feathers downdrifting.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 21.

Poem for this Day

*No longer dust on the mouth
Frantic bell, fever-rush of crowd*

I win to crest of Dinosaur Hill
In the vast theatre of Mojave.
Morning is loud with first light:
Silence loud with first sound.

With geiger counter I poke
Among stone bones, petrified palm
Agate jasper uranium—
I think of men's bodies leached or
Men's hunger fed-thought to sinew the spirit.
Flying electrons click dimension of mystery.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 22.

Elemental

He has set foot on ledges older than speech
Won to heights more ancient than calendared time
His soul is lofty as the mountains
Whitney fugi he knows and holy Popocatpetl
He dreams of piling his cairn on moon-sired Everest

These Mojave ranges are less splendid
But stark and naked and formed of earth-core
Now he merges his flesh with Mojave
The veins of his wrist are garnet
Fluxed in granite

He has grown lofty like his mountains
And jewelled like the earth-core.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 22.

Portent

Ravens weaving above the coral lakes of dawn
Bear night on their sinister wings
So in many dawns in new-minted worlds
In mornings raucous with the hurtling
The pillaging legions of change
Ravens will sweep across the aurora
Bearing doom on their wings—
Their flight being tangential
To time
Focal to death.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 23.

Measure of Mystery

Mercury drowns in afterglow
A nighthawk flashes in dusk
A far bell clings in the mind

(Repeating hills will not be beaten into suppliance
Circling seasons keep their legacy)

Hawk-spiral, bell-call, star—
Is there a word that discovers the soul
And when I have found this word
Shall I no longer grieve.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 24.

Need

No man masters wind or fire or sand or stars
Nor the vaster fields of his own self
But in the savage desert arena
He harnesses the elements to his need
He tethers wind to draw his water
Teaches sand to blossom into bread
Teases fire's old reliquaries for jewels
And for himself he tears from a star—
A soul.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 24.

Integument

Does the hill seek change
Does the stone ask to escape
I will not seek to escape
For stone is the sinew of life-death
Hill the integument of spirit
In the end stone, hill, this body will be one
In the end yucca will be my limbs
Silica my throat
Seasons shall be my song
As long as time.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 25.

Sterility

Never again would he zoom the zenith
His sabre-jet rests in the hangar
In that season no freshet tore at the boulders
No pomegranate bloomed
For parched days he stumbled over dune
And waste and came upon a wash
Where he built a shack of rubble and dobe
Branded broken he courted savage sterility
A barb to fret his wound

Then Sylvia came from sea-remembering hills
She gentled him, the dew of her beauty
Honeyed his parched heart
His pomegranate bore late fruit.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 25.

Stuff of Time

I dip my hand in sand
Sifting the raw stuff of time
These grains of lava, silica, silt,
Wind-pestled in the metate of the ages
Remember slime of fin, unfeathered wing
Stretch of skull, uncoiling spine
They remember brave free men
Running the hill
But sands remember Cain.
When love is done
Wind will grind silica, lava, silt—
this hand—in the metate of the ages.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 26.

Variant. An earlier version appeared as “Measure of Time” in *Variegation*, no. 28 (Autumn 1952), p. 76. The later text changes the opening “palm” to “hand,” revises punctuation and capitalization, and retains the poem’s stanza structure; the 1958 version is used here.

True Equation

Restive with urge
Suffocated in the canyons of the street
He built the frenzied forms
His genius plotted.
But edifice crashing down
Rebuked his will
At length he came to desert silence
Now richer by his fate
He builds again
Achieves a true equation
Puts by the plumb and trowel—
To brood on edifice of being.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 26.

Opal

Opal matrix uncovered in the ledge:
Look, Universe,
I hold in my heart
The beginnings of light
These darting colors are veils
Of iris air dancing
In moon-valleys of time
You will not discover my riddle
For I was born in the beginning
Beyond the memory of men
From whorls of world-magma
I am light.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 27.

Life

The dune said to the primrose:
How is it you spring new-born
In aureate beauty
From my barren flank?

The primrose answered:
Of all you slay with dragon tongue
Of all that strays into your greedy maw
I make ethereal petals
Waxen-pure as altar candles
Stamens I fashion from an untethered star
Incense from a puff of moon-wind
I am life.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 27.

Violet Ray

There is a violet ray beyond the spectrum
That cast upon this leaden stone
Rain-carved and century-furrowed
Achieves a secret alchemy
Ochre emerald garnet sapphire
Gleam in separate guise—
Core of the sun
And you that see darkly—
As you climb the treacherous trails
Of a tragic world
Cast this beam before you—
See face to face.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 28.

Fulfilment

In his time of youth
Hunger and anger tore at his throat
Terror was his familiar

Now in his vineyard
Waist-deep in flood of harvest
He plucks ruby-heavy cluster
The grape is the claret of his vein
Odor of musky sap his pulse

He flings his knotty arms
To catch the afterglow
Wind of eternity clothes him.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 28.

The Great Music

His ear is tuned to a great music
He can hear sonorities of rock
Within the mountain
He has pushed profoundly into space—
Can hear choirs of silences

Here is fugue—
Blood flesh mortality
(In bond of unharvested hope)
And answering celestial theme
At far edge of being—
The great music.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 29.

Cactus

These scarlet cactus flowers
Have forgotten the oceanic whisper
Perched in wind-danger crannies
Of rasping rhyolite
Where no man roots

They do not think of clock
They thresh the rainless air
With lolling tongues
Merchanting their pollen
On the panderer wind

They cling to stark ranges
Hedged by mutinous spears.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 29.

If Love were Catalyst

To come on a geode of amethyst

Ecstasy of mountain mind

Pounding in earth-artery—

A crystal cry

Explicit in cave-heart—

Holding first knowledge

Knowing primal light—

To come on these in the market place

Bracelets spangling harlot ankles—

Could these things be

If love were catalyst to life?

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 30.

Desire

He had known the whips of desire
But here in the Mojave
His pony sauntering with dangling rein
Among the golden dunes
Mood of wind
Impact of sun's diagonal
Cloud adventures
Tune subtle melody.

Wind swoops from pure altitudes
Light is a benisoned aura
Clouds beckon.

Desires are lost grains
In the flowing millennial sands.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 30.

Winter

January hills fold night on night on night
Purple-dark hills ribbon toward them
Like the veins of an old man, sluggish
Ice-encased, in the winter of his time

Only the dead walk these dunes
Only the dead clutch to their throats
The knife-sharp garment of winter
Look moonward and say

Moon you are beautiful-but inhuman
You belong to us.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 31.

News

I, the reporter who tramps
North east south and west
Ask the stone-ask the dog-star
Who are you?
What equation, what cryptic rune
Is your measure?
And of my brother I ask
Who are you?
Here is my answer
In these sands
Missal of time.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 31.

Seed

Out of these sands a lily
In cool mobility
Encompasses a dream
Look where the bright god sits
Enthroned in orphic silence
He holds a sheaf of golden keys
That keep the chamber where seed is—
Dynamic of life.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 32.

Entity

Only the cry of time crying to time
Breaks on the mind's beaches
Mirage wreaths the dry lake
Like shining waters of denial
Voices of the hidden meaning
Are as flutes afar off.

Perilously the towers of dignity
Are rebuilt.

Life is made whole.

First collected in *Imperishable Gene* (1958), *Mojave Motifs*, p. 32.

LATER PERIODICAL POEMS, 1960–1965

Poems recovered from Trace

Angry Young Men

When I'm a little wave-length happy as a clam
I'll mount a supersonic and loudly shout, "I AM"
But should I meet a meson it might be plenty hot.
Good Heavens, there's a sputnik—"I'M NOT!"

Printed at the head of Sherry's essay in *Trace*, no. 37 (May–June 1960), p. 33; credited there as courtesy of *The American Bard*.

Journey into Self

Back, back to origins,
girdled by gusts of hell,
where mind's in the matrix;

close as a chrysalis
in landscape of waiting,
the heart captive to first cause.

I had known trees and tiger-call of hills;
green tide tearing at the ranges.
I had been guest of stone and fern.

Back to origins, the matrix,
or, by a whisper of mind,
mount the flying force
in proud hyperbola.

First published in *Trace*, no. 43 (Autumn 1961), p. 254.

Parodies of Spring

Who are the lonely ones,
the travailing hearts,
the blind diviners of multiple meaning
whose fingertips probe the girdling dark?

Theirs the perilous images—
frail parodies of spring.
They tear the suns apart
to find their music.

Even the gazelle, his mild nudities
slaked by wet petals,
lopes the leaf-silk aisles
only to be lost in labyrinth.

Even he of the single horn
and silver hoof is lone
till you bangle him with stars
and wimple him with love.

First published in *Trace*, no. 48 (Spring 1963), p. 33.

Identity

The core, an isometric crystal,
hostile to valor, probity and wit,
and faith's fury,
resists my probing chisel.

Something indurate
defies the drive of tool.
All history's jailed within,
and all identity.

What avail to whistle up a Djinn
who no more than I with spoon-fed myth,
can bind the pain of birth
and death?

I'll batten down my will;
gorge on orange
and damson;
velleities of wisdom.

First published in *Trace*, no. 56 (Spring 1965), p. 63.

RECOVERED POEMS

Complete indexed witnesses whose original print venues remain unidentified

Nuance

Strong with the bitter flavor of wild sedge
The west wind whimpers low along the swamp
The redwing gilds with pageantry and pomp
Her citadel of cattails on the edge.
The dank pool shimmers where the lilies drown
A dragon captive in an ivory tower;
And all the languorous world hangs on the hour
When dusk shall close her velvet petals down.
Luminous night now spills the pollen bloom
Of Pleiades among the lily fronds,
Where sleeps the heron cradled in his plume.
And all the ambient world is loosed of bonds.
Cool nudities of shadow brush the shoulder
Of two that wait nor know the moon grows older.

Text preserved by the Poetry Explorer index; original print venue not yet identified.

Song Against Night

Of this, indeed, be sure, even though reason
Rebuke the enamoured mind; even though taut
Asperities rim round with sordid treason
The dear allegiances the heart has bought—
I tell you, once having measured on blue air
The martial counterpoint of moon and tide—
(And you so quiet in the quick earth there)
Song like a savage wing will tear your side.

Stampeding blindly on the crest of night,
Where constellations arrogantly swarm,
Consider how the pigeon charts his flight,
Then weave your slender course above the storm.
Be mindful too, to sift the scarlet dusk
Leaving no music in the withered husk.

And since no litany can quite content
Your famished heart nor any song assuage
Your grief, I tell you this, lest you lament
The transiency of youth, the stab of age;
When tidal gates have loosed their bars of bronze,
The fugitive soul slips out along the quails
Of continents lit by flamingo suns
And softly carpeted by Pleiades.

Here you shall touch the very throat of song.
Aquarius, Aries, Libra, Virgo swinging
Around the Zodiac, and all along
The high meridian, creation singing.
And you but a bell, scattering under foam
A dissonance that warns the sea-bird home.

Text preserved by the Poetry Explorer index; original print venue not yet identified.

RECOVERY REGISTER

Books, poems, and archival witnesses still to be located

Hourglass in the Mojave (1941): complete text not yet located.

Lament and Prophecy (1942): complete text not yet located.

Chart for Voyage (ca. 1943): complete text and contents not yet located.

Partisan (1964): four-page booklet reported to contain five poems; text not yet located.

Mojave (1966–67): reported later edition of the Mojave sequence; text not yet located.

Indexed but not fully recovered: “Canticle for the Doomed,” “Coronal: A Legend of the Annunciation,” “Dover Watch,” “Heart Lies Fallow,” “Waltz,” “Woman to Her World,” and “Christ in Times Square.”

Announced but unlocated: *Mark the Tide* and the play *Seize on Tragic Time*.

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Works by Ruth Forbes Sherry

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“Publication Set of Ruth Forbes Sherry Poems.” *Coastline Dispatch*, February 6, 1958, p. 9.

“Former SJC Resident Dies.” *Coastline Dispatch*, November 18, 1970, p. 7.

Colophon

Compiled from the Ruth Forbes Sherry research dossier, the complete local scan of *Imperishable Gene*, saved periodical witnesses, and institutional records gathered in the poet's research folder, August 2026. Designed in EB Garamond at six by nine inches. Cover artwork is derived from Brian Kim Stefans's unlettered Sherry collage and set in the established Extremes/Green palette and geometry.

HISTORICAL FRONT MATTER

Ruth Forbes Sherry - Collected Poems

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