

Classic Poetry Series

Conrad Potter Aiken
- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Conrad Potter Aiken(5 August 1889 – 17 August 1973)

Conrad Potter Aiken was an American novelist and poet, whose work includes poetry, short stories, novels, a play and an autobiography.

Early Years

Aiken was the son of wealthy, socially prominent New Englanders who had moved to Savannah, Georgia, where his father became a highly respected physician and surgeon. But then something happened for which, as Aiken later said, no one could ever find a reason. Without warning or apparent cause, his father became increasingly irascible, unpredictable, and violent. Then, early in the morning of February 27, 1901, he murdered his wife and shot himself. According to his own writings, Aiken (who was eleven years old) heard the gunshots and discovered the bodies. He was raised by his aunt in Massachusetts. Aiken was educated at private schools and at Middlesex School in Concord, Massachusetts, then at Harvard University where he edited the Advocate with T.S. Eliot who became a lifelong friend and associate.

Aiken's earliest poetry was written partly under the influence of a beloved teacher, the philosopher George Santayana This relation shaped Aiken as a poet who was deeply musical in his approach and, at the same time, philosophical in seeking answers to his own problems and the problems of the modern world.

Adult Years

Aiken was deeply influenced by symbolism, especially in his earlier works. In 1930 he received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his Selected Poems. Many of his writings had psychological themes. He wrote the widely anthologized short story Silent Snow, Secret Snow (1934). His collections of verse include Earth Triumphant (1911), The Charnel Rose (1918) and And In the Hanging Gardens (1933). His poem Music I Heard has been set to music by a number of composers, including Leonard Bernstein and Henry Cowell.

Aiken wrote or edited more than 51 books, the first of which was published in 1914, two years after his graduation from Harvard. His work includes novels, short stories (The Collected Short Stories appeared in 1961), criticism,

autobiography, and, most important of all, poetry. He was awarded the National Medal for Literature, the Gold Medal for Poetry from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the Pulitzer Prize, the Bollingen Prize, and the National Book Award. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, taught briefly at Harvard, and served as Consultant in Poetry for the Library of Congress from 1950 to 1952. He was also largely responsible for establishing [Emily Dickinson's](http://www.poemhunter.com/emily-dickinson/) reputation as a major American poet.

After 1960, when his work was rediscovered by readers and critics, a new view of Aiken emerged—one that emphasized his psychological problems, along with his continuing study of Sigmund Freud, Carl G. Jung, and other depth psychologists. Two of his five novels deal with depth psychology.

Conrad Aiken's interest in Freud was reciprocated by the great psychoanalyst, who was equally interested in how Aiken used Freudian concepts in his fiction. Freud went so far as to call Aiken's *Great Circle* one of his favorite novels. At one point Freud expressed interest in meeting Aiken face-to-face to discuss psychoanalysis. Aiken agreed and set off to Europe, but by chance on the boat over met Erich Fromm, a Freud disciple, who convinced Aiken that it would be a bad idea for the writer to have sessions with Freud. Because of this, the two never met.

Personal Life

Conrad and his family with Jessie McDonald lived in England, where his third child was born, from 1921 to the beginning of World War II. During his time in England, he served in loco parentis as well as mentor to the budding English author Malcolm Lowry. In 1923 he acted as a witness at the marriage of his friend the poet W. H. Davies. In 1950, he became Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, more commonly known as Poet Laureate of the United States.

Aiken returned to Savannah for the last 11 years of his life. Aiken's tomb, located in Bonaventure Cemetery on the banks of the Wilmington River, was made famous by its mention in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, the bestselling book by John Berendt. According to local legend, Aiken wished to have his tombstone fashioned in the shape of a bench as an invitation to visitors to stop and enjoy a martini at his grave. Its inscriptions read "Give my love to the world," and "Cosmos Mariner—Destination Unknown."

He was married three times: first to Jessie McDonald (1912–1929); second to

Clarissa Lorenz (1930) (author of a biography, *Lorelei Two*); and third to Mary Hoover (1937). He was the father, by Jessie McDonald, of the English writers Jane Aiken Hodge and Joan Aiken. Aiken had three younger siblings, Kempton, Robert and Elizabeth. They were adopted by Frederick Winslow Taylor and his wife Louise, a distant relative, and took Taylor's last name. Kempton was known as K. P. A. Taylor (Kempton Potter Aiken Taylor) and Robert was known as Robert P. A. Taylor (Robert Potter Aiken Taylor). Kempton helped establish the Aiken Taylor Award for Modern American Poetry.

The best source for information on Aiken's life is his autobiographical novel *Ushant* (1952), one of his major works. In this book he speaks candidly about his various affairs and marriages, his attempted suicide and fear of insanity, and his friendships with T.S. Eliot (who appears in the book as *The Tsetse*), [Ezra Pound](http://www.poemhunter.com/ezra-pound/) (Rabbi Ben Ezra), and other accomplished men.

Awards and Recognition

Named Poetry Consultant of the Library of Congress from 1950–1952, Conrad Aiken has earned numerous prestigious national writing awards, including a National Book Award, the Bollingen Prize in Poetry, the National Institute of Arts and Letters Gold Medal and the National Medal for Literature. Honored by his native state in 1973 with the title of Poet Laureate, Aiken will always be remembered in his native state as the first Georgia-born author to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1930, for his *Selected Poems*.

Aiken was the first winner of the Poetry Society of America (PSA) Shelley Memorial Award in 1929.

In 2009, The Library of America selected Aiken's 1931 story "Mr. Arcularis" for inclusion in its two-century retrospective of American Fantastic Tales.

A Letter From Li Po

Fanfare of northwest wind, a bluejay wind
announces autumn, and the equinox
rolls back blue bays to a far afternoon.
Somewhere beyond the Gorge Li Po is gone,
looking for friendship or an old love's sleeve
or writing letters to his children, lost,
and to his children's children, and to us.
What was his light? of lamp or moon or sun?
Say that it changed, for better or for worse,
sifted by leaves, sifted by snow; on mulberry silk
a slant of witch-light; on the pure text
a slant of genius; emptying mind and heart
for winecups and more winecups and more words.
What was his time? Say that it was a change,
but constant as a changing thing may be,
from chicory's moon-dark blue down the taut scale
to chicory's tenderest pink, in a pink field
such as imagination dreams of thought.
But of the heart beneath the winecup moon
the tears that fell beneath the winecup moon
for children lost, lost lovers, and lost friends,
what can we say but that it never ends?
Even for us it never ends, only begins.
Yet to spell down the poem on her page,
margining her phrases, parsing forth
the sevenfold prism of meaning, up the scale
from chicory pink to blue, is to assume
Li Po himself: as he before assumed
the poets and the sages who were his.
Like him, we too have eaten of the word:
with him are somewhere lost beyond the Gorge:
and write, in rain, a letter to lost children,
a letter long as time and brief as love.

II

And yet not love, not only love. Not caritas
or only that. Nor the pink chicory love,
deep as it may be, even to moon-dark blue,

in which the dragon of his meaning flew
for friends or children lost, or even
for the beloved horse, for Li Po's horse:
not these, in the self's circle so embraced:
too near, too dear, for pure assessment: no,
a letter crammed and creviced, crannied full,
storied and stored as the ripe honeycomb
with other faith than this. As of sole pride
and holy loneliness, the intrinsic face
worn by the always changing shape between
end and beginning, birth and death.
How moves that line of daring on the map?
Where was it yesterday, or where this morning
when thunder struck at seven, and in the bay
the meteor made its dive, and shed its wings,
and with them one more Icarus? Where struck
that lightning-stroke which in your sleep you saw
wrinkling across the eyelid? Somewhere else?
But somewhere else is always here and now.
Each moment crawls that lightning on your eyelid:
each moment you must die. It was a tree
that this time died for you: it was a rock
and with it all its local web of love:
a chimney, spilling down historic bricks:
perhaps a skyful of Ben Franklin's kites.
And with them, us. For we must hear and bear
the news from everywhere: the hourly news,
infinitesimal or vast, from everywhere.

III

Sole pride and loneliness: it is the state
the kingdom rather of all things: we hear
news of the heart in weather of the Bear,
slide down the rungs of Cassiopeia's Chair,
still on the nursery floor, the Milky Way;
and, if we question one, must question all.
What is this 'man'? How far from him is 'me'?
Who, in this conch-shell, locked the sound of sea?
We are the tree, yet sit beneath the tree,
among the leaves we are the hidden bird,
we are the singer and are what is heard.

What is this 'world'? Not Li Po's Gorge alone,
and yet, this too might be. 'The wind was high
north of the White King City, by the fields
of whistling barley under cuckoo sky,'
where, as the silkworm drew her silk, Li Po
spun out his thoughts of us. 'Endless as silk'
(he said) 'these poems for lost loves, and us,'
and, 'for the peachtree, blooming in the ditch.'
Here is the divine loneliness in which
we greet, only to doubt, a voice, a word,
the smoke of a sweetfern after frost, a face
touched, and loved, but still unknown, and then
a body, still mysterious in embrace.
Taste lost as touch is lost, only to leave
dust on the doorsill or an ink-stained sleeve:
and yet, for the inadmissible, to grieve.
Of leaf and love, at last, only to doubt:
from world within or world without, kept out.

IV

Caucus of robins on an alien shore
as of the Ho-Ho birds at Jewel Gate
southward bound and who knows where and never late
or lost in a roar at sea. Rovers of chaos
each one the 'Rover of Chao,' whose slight bones
shall put to shame the swords. We fly with these,
have always flown, and they
stay with us here, stand still and stay,
while, exiled in the Land of Pa, Li Po
still at the Wine Spring stoops to drink the moon.
And northward now, for fall gives way to spring,
from Sandy Hook and Kitty Hawk they wing,
and he remembers, with the pipes and flutes,
drunk with joy, bewildered by the chance
that brought a friend, and friendship, how, in vain,
he strove to speak, 'and in long sentences,' his pain.
Exiled are we. Were exiles born. The 'far away,'
language of desert, language of ocean, language of sky,
as of the unfathomable worlds that lie
between the apple and the eye,
these are the only words we learn to say.

Each morning we devour the unknown. Each day
we find, and take, and spill, or spend, or lose,
a sunflower splendor of which none knows the source.
This cornucopia of air! This very heaven
of simple day! We do not know, can never know,
the alphabet to find us entrance there.
So, in the street, we stand and stare,
to greet a friend, and shake his hand,
yet know him beyond knowledge, like ourselves;
ocean unknowable by unknowable sand.

V

The locust tree spills sequins of pale gold
in spiral nebulae, borne on the Invisible
earthward and deathward, but in change to find
the cycles to new birth, new life. Li Po
allowed his autumn thoughts like these to flow,
and, from the Gorge, sends word of Chouang's dream.
Did Chouang dream he was a butterfly?
Or did the butterfly dream Chouang? If so,
why then all things can change, and change again,
the sea to brook, the brook to sea, and we
from man to butterfly; and back to man.
This 'I,' this moving 'I,' this focal 'I,'
which changes, when it dreams the butterfly,
into the thing it dreams of; liquid eye
in which the thing takes shape, but from within
as well as from without: this liquid 'I':
how many guises, and disguises, this
nimblest of actors takes, how many names
puts on and off, the costumes worn but once,
the player queen, the lover, or the dunce,
hero or poet, father or friend,
suiting the eloquence to the moment's end;
childlike, or bestial; the language of the kiss
sensual or simple; and the gestures, too,
as slight as that with which an empire falls,
or a great love's abjured; these feignings, sleights,
savants, or saints, or fly-by-nights,
the novice in her cell, or wearing tights
on the high wire above a hell of lights:

what's true in these, or false? which is the 'I'
of 'I's'? Is it the master of the cadence, who
transforms all things to a hoop of flame, where through
tigers of meaning leap? And are these true,
the language never old and never new,
such as the world wears on its wedding day,
the something borrowed with something chicory blue?
In every part we play, we play ourselves;
even the secret doubt to which we come
beneath the changing shapes of self and thing,
yes, even this, at last, if we should call
and dare to name it, we would find
the only voice that answers is our own.
We are once more defrauded by the mind.

Defrauded? No. It is the alchemy by which we grow.
It is the self becoming word, the word
becoming world. And with each part we play
we add to cosmic Sum and cosmic sum.
Who knows but one day we shall find,
hidden in the prism at the rainbow's foot,
the square root of the eccentric absolute,
and the concentric absolute to come.

VI

The thousand eyes, the Argus 'I's' of love,
of these it was, in verse, that Li Po wove
the magic cloak for his last going forth,
into the Gorge for his adventure north.
What is not seen or said? The cloak of words
loves all, says all, sends back the word
whether from Green Spring, and the yellow bird
'that sings unceasing on the banks of Kiang,'
or 'from the Green Moss Path, that winds and winds,
nine turns for every hundred steps it winds,
up the Sword Parapet on the road to Shuh.'
'Dead pinetrees hang head-foremost from the cliff.
The cataract roars downward. Boulders fall
Splitting the echoes from the mountain wall.
No voice, save when the nameless birds complain,
in stunted trees, female echoing male;

or, in the moonlight, the lost cuckoo's cry,
piercing the traveller's heart. Wayfarer from afar,
why are you here? what brings you here? why here?'

VII

Why here. Nor can we say why here. The peachtree bough
scrapes on the wall at midnight, the west wind
sculpts the wall of fog that slides
seaward, over the Gulf Stream.

The rat

comes through the wainscot, brings to his larder
the twinned acorn and chestnut burr. Our sleep
lights for a moment into dream, the eyes
turn under eyelids for a scene, a scene,
o and the music, too, of landscape lost.
And yet, not lost. For here savannahs wave
cressets of pampas, and the kingfisher
binds all that gold with blue.

Why here? why here?

Why does the dream keep only this, just this C?
Yes, as the poem or the music do?

The timelessness of time takes form in rhyme:
the lotus and the locust tree rehearse
a four-form song, the quatrain of the year:
not in the clock's chime only do we hear
the passing of the Now into the past,
the passing into future of the Now:
but in the alteration of the bough
time becomes visible, becomes audible,
becomes the poem and the music too:
time becomes still, time becomes time, in rhyme.
Thus, in the Court of Aloes, Lady Yang
called the musicians from the Pear Tree Garden,
called for Li Po, in order that the spring,
tree-peony spring, might so be made immortal.
Li Po, brought drunk to court, took up his brush,
but washed his face among the lilies first,
then wrote the song of Lady Flying Swallow:
which Hsuan Sung, the emperor, forthwith played,
moving quick fingers on a flute of jade.

Who will forget that afternoon? Still, still,
the singer holds his phrase, the rising moon
remains unrisen. Even the fountain's falling blade
hangs in the air unbroken, and says: Wait!

VIII

Text into text, text out of text. Pretext
for scholars or for scholiasts. The living word
springs from the dying, as leaves in spring
spring from dead leaves, our birth from death.
And all is text, is holy text. Sheepfold Hill
becomes its name for us, anti yet is still
unnamed, unnamable, a book of trees
before it was a book for men or sheep,
before it was a book for words. Words, words,
for it is scarlet now, and brown, and red,
and yellow where the birches have not shed,
where, in another week, the rocks will show.
And in this marriage of text and thing how can we know
where most the meaning lies? We climb the hill
through bullbriar thicket and the wild rose, climb
past poverty-grass and the sweet-scented bay
scaring the pheasant from his wall, but can we say
that it is only these, through these, we climb,
or through the words, the cadence, and the rhyme?
Chang Hsu, calligrapher of great renown,
needed to put but his three cupfuls down
to tip his brush with lightning. On the scroll,
wreaths of cloud rolled left and right, the sky
opened upon Forever. Which is which?
The poem? Or the peachtree in the ditch?
Or is all one? Yes, all is text, the immortal text,
Sheepfold Hill the poem, the poem Sheepfold Hill,
and we, Li Po, the man who sings, sings as he climbs,
transposing rhymes to rocks and rocks to rhymes.
The man who sings. What is this man who sings?
And finds this dedicated use for breath
for phrase and periphrase of praise between
the twin indignities of birth and death?
Li Yung, the master of the epitaph,
forgetting about meaning, who himself

had added 'meaning' to the book of >things,'
lies who knows where, himself sans epitaph,
his text, too, lost, forever lost ...

And yet, no,

text lost and poet lost, these only flow
into that other text that knows no year.
The peachtree in the poem is still here.
The song is in the peachtree and the ear.

IX

The winds of doctrine blow both ways at once.
The wetted finger feels the wind each way,
presaging plums from north, and snow from south.
The dust-wind whistles from the eastern sea
to dry the nectarine and parch the mouth.
The west wind from the desert wreathes the rain
too late to fill our wells, but soon enough,
the four-day rain that bears the leaves away.
Song with the wind will change, but is still song
and pierces to the rightness in the wrong
or makes the wrong a rightness, a delight.
Where are the eager guests that yesterday
thronged at the gate? Like leaves, they could not stay,
the winds of doctrine blew their minds away,
and we shall have no loving-cup tonight.
No loving-cup: for not ourselves are here
to entertain us in that outer year,
where, so they say, we see the Greater Earth.
The winds of doctrine blow our minds away,
and we are absent till another birth.

X

Beyond the Sugar Loaf, in the far wood,
under the four-day rain, gunshot is heard
and with the falling leaf the falling bird
flutters her crimson at the huntsman's foot.
Life looks down at death, death looks up at life,
the eyes exchange the secret under rain,
rain all the way from heaven: and all three
know and are known, share and are shared, a silent

moment of union and communion.
Have we come
this way before, and at some other time?
Is it the Wind Wheel Circle we have come?
We know the eye of death, and in it too
the eye of god, that closes as in sleep,
giving its light, giving its life, away:
clouding itself as consciousness from pain,
clouding itself, and then, the shutter shut.
And will this eye of god awake again?
Or is this what he loses, loses once,
but always loses, and forever lost?
It is the always and unredeemable cost
of his invention, his fatigue. The eye
closes, and no other takes its place.
It is the end of god, each time, each time.

Yet, though the leaves must fall, the galaxies
rattle, detach, and fall, each to his own
perplexed and individual death, Lady Yang
gone with the inkberry's vermilion stalk,
the peony face behind a fan of frost,
the blue-moon eyebrow behind a fan of rain,
beyond recall by any alchemist
or incantation from the Book of Change:
unresumable, as, on Sheepfold Hill,
the fir cone of a thousand years ago:
still, in the loving, and the saying so,
as when we name the hill, and, with the name,
bestow an essence, and a meaning, too:
do we endow them with our lives?
They move
into another orbit: into a time
not theirs: and we become the bell to speak
this time: as we become new eyes
with which they see, the voice
in which they find duration, short or long,
the chthonic and hermetic song.
Beyond Sheepfold Hill,
gunshot again, the bird flies forth to meet
predestined death, to look with conscious sight
into the eye of light

the light unflinching that understands and loves.
And Sheepfold Hill accepts them, and is still.

XI

The landscape and the language are the same.
And we ourselves are language and are land,
together grew with Sheepfold Hill, rock, and hand,
and mind, all taking substance in a thought
wrought out of mystery: birdflight and air
predestined from the first to be a pair:
as, in the atom, the living rhyme
invented her divisions, which in time,
and in the terms of time, would make and break
the text, the texture, and then all remake.
This powerful mind that can by thinking take
the order of the world and all remake,
will it, for joy in breaking, break instead
its own deep thought that thought itself be dead?
Already in our coil of rock and hand,
hidden in the cloud of mind, burning, fading,
under the waters, in the eyes of sand,
was that which in its time would understand.
Already in the Kingdom of the Dead
the scrolls were waiting for the names and dates
and what would there irrevocably be said.
The brush was in the hand, the poem was in the love,
the praise was in the word. The 'Book of Lives'
listed the name, Li Po, as an Immortal;
and it was time to travel. Not, this year,
north to the Damask City, or the Gorge,
but, by the phoenix borne, swift as the wind,
to the Jade Palace Portal. There
look through the clouded to the clear
and there watch evil like a brush-stroke disappear
in the last perfect rhyme
of the begin-all-end-all poem, time.

XII

Northwest by north. The grasshopper weathervane
bares to the moon his golden breastplate, swings

in his predicted circle, gilded legs and wings
bright with frost, predicting frost. The tide
scales with moon-silver, floods the marsh, fulfils
Payne Creek and Quivett Creek, rises to lift
the fishing-boats against a jetty wall;
and past them floods the plankton and the weed
and limp sea-lettuce for the horseshoe crab
who sleeps till daybreak in his nest of reed.
The hour is open as the mind is open.
Closed as the mind is closed. Opens as the hand opens
to receive the ghostly snowflakes of the moon, closes
to feel the sunbeams of the bloodstream warm
our human inheritance of touch. The air tonight
brings back, to the all-remembering world, its ghosts,
borne from the Great Year on the Wind Wheel Circle.
On that invisible wave we lift, we too,
and drag at secret moorings,
stirred by the ancient currents that gave us birth.
And they are here, Li Po and all the others,
our fathers and our mothers: the dead leaf's footstep
touches the grass: those who were lost at sea
and those the innocents the too-soon dead:

all mankind

and all it ever knew is here in-gathered,
held in our hands, and in the wind
breathed by the pines on Sheepfold Hill.
How still the Quaker Graveyard, the Meeting House
how still, where Cousin Abiel, on a night like this,
now long since dead, but then how young,
how young, scuffling among the dead leaves after frost
looked up and saw the Wine Star, listened and heard
borne from all quarters the Wind Wheel Circle word:
the father within him, the mother within him, the self
coming to self through love of each for each.
In this small mute democracy of stones
is it Abiel or Li Po who lies
and lends us against death our speech?
They are the same, and it is both who teach.
The poets and the prophecies are ours:
and these are with us as we turn, in turn,
the leaves of love that fill the Book of Change.

All Lovely Things

All lovely things will have an ending,
All lovely things will fade and die,
And youth, that's now so bravely spending,
Will beg a penny by and by.

Fine ladies soon are all forgotten,
And goldenrod is dust when dead,
The sweetest flesh and flowers are rotten
And cobwebs tent the brightest head.

Come back, true love! Sweet youth, return!--
But time goes on, and will, unheeding,
Though hands will reach, and eyes will yearn,
And the wild days set true hearts bleeding.

Come back, true love! Sweet youth, remain!--
But goldenrod and daisies wither,
And over them blows autumn rain,
They pass, they pass, and know not whither.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Annihilation

While the blue noon above us arches,
And the poplar sheds disconsolate leaves,
Tell me again why love bewitches,
And what love gives.

It is the trembling finger that traces
The eyebrow's curve, the curve of the cheek?
The mouth that quivers, when the hand caresses,
But cannot speak?

No, not these, not in these is hidden
The secret, more than in other things:
Not only the touch of a hand can gladden
Till the blood sings.

It is the leaf that falls between us,
The bells that murmur, the shadows that move,
The autumnal sunlight that fades upon us:
These things are love.

It is the 'No, let us sit here longer,'
The 'Wait till tomorrow,' the 'Once I knew —'
These trifles, said as I touch your finger,
And the clock strikes two.

The world is intricate, and we are nothing.
It is the complex world of grass,
A twig on the path, a look of loathing,
Feelings that pass —

These are the secret! And I could hate you,
When, as I lean for another kiss,
I see in your eyes that I do not meet you,
And that love is this.

Rock meeting rock can know love better
Than eyes that stare or lips that touch.
All that we know in love is bitter,
And it is not much.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Asphalt

Light your cigarette, then, in this shadow,
And talk to her, your arm engaged with hers.
Heavily over your heads the eaten maple
In the dead air of August strains and stirs.

Her stone-white face, in the lamp-light, turns toward you;
Darkly, with time-dark eyes, she questions you
Whether this universe is what she thinks it—
Simple and passionate and profound and true—

Or whether, as with a sound of dim disaster,
A plaintive music brought to a huddled fall,
Some ancient treachery slides through the heart of things—
The last star falling, seen from the utmost wall...

And you—what sinister, far, reserves of laughter,
What understandings, remote, perplexed, remain
Ungessed forever by her who is your victim—
Victim, of whom you too are victim again?

...Come! let us dance once more on the ancient asphalt:
Seeing, beneath its strange and recent shape,
The eternal horror of rock, from which, for ever,
We toss our tortured hands, to no escape.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Beloved, Let Us Once More Praise The Rain

Beloved, let us once more praise the rain.
Let us discover some new alphabet,
For this, the often praised; and be ourselves,
The rain, the chickweed, and the burdock leaf,
The green-white privet flower, the spotted stone,
And all that welcomes the rain; the sparrow too,—
Who watches with a hard eye from seclusion,
Beneath the elm-tree bough, till rain is done.
There is an oriole who, upside down,
Hangs at his nest, and flicks an orange wing,—
Under a tree as dead and still as lead;
There is a single leaf, in all this heaven
Of leaves, which rain has loosened from its twig:
The stem breaks, and it falls, but it is caught
Upon a sister leaf, and thus she hangs;
There is an acorn cup, beside a mushroom
Which catches three drops from the stooping cloud.
The timid bee goes back to the hive; the fly
Under the broad leaf of the hollyhock
Perpend stupid with cold; the raindark snail
Surveys the wet world from a watery stone...
And still the syllables of water whisper:
The wheel of cloud whirs slowly: while we wait
In the dark room; and in your heart I find
One silver raindrop,—on a hawthorn leaf,—
Orion in a cobweb, and the World.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Bread And Music

Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread;
Now that I am without you, all is desolate;
All that was once so beautiful is dead.

Your hands once touched this table and this silver,
And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.
These things do not remember you, beloved,
And yet your touch upon them will not pass.

For it was in my heart you moved among them,
And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes;
And in my heart they will remember always,—
They knew you once, O beautiful and wise.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Chance Meetings

In the mazes of loitering people, the watchful and furtive,
The shadows of tree-trunks and shadows of leaves,
In the drowse of the sunlight, among the low voices,
I suddenly face you,

Your dark eyes return for a space from her who is with you,
They shine into mine with a sunlit desire,
They say an 'I love you, what star do you live on?'
They smile and then darken,

And silent, I answer 'You too-I have known you,-I love you!-'
And the shadows of tree-trunks and shadows of leaves
Interlace with low voices and footsteps and sunlight
To divide us forever

Conrad Potter Aiken

Chiaroscuro: Rose

He

Fill your bowl with roses: the bowl, too, have of crystal.
Sit at the western window. Take the sun
Between your hands like a ball of flaming crystal,
Poise it to let it fall, but hold it still,
And meditate on the beauty of your existence;
The beauty of this, that you exist at all.

She

The sun goes down, -- but without lamentation.
I close my eyes, and the stream of my sensation
In this, at least, grows clear to me:
Beauty is a word that has no meaning.
Beauty is naught to me.

He

The last blurred raindrops fall from the half-clear sky,
Eddying lightly, rose-tinged, in the windless wake of the sun.
The swallow ascending against cold waves of cloud
Seems winging upward over huge bleak stairs of stone.
The raindrop finds its way to the heart of the leaf-bud.
But no word finds its way to the heart of you.

She

This also is clear in the stream of my sensation:
That I am content, for the moment, Let me be.
How light the new grass looks with the rain-dust on it!
But heart is a word that has no meaning,
Heart means nothing to me.

He

To the end of the world I pass and back again
In flights of the mind; yet always find you here,
Remote, pale, unattached . . . O Circe-too-clear-eyed,

Watching amused your fawning tiger-thoughts,
Your wolves, your grotesque apes -- relent, relent!
Be less wary for once: it is the evening.

She

But if I close my eyes what howlings greet me!
Do not persuade. Be tranquil. Here is flesh
With all its demons. Take it, sate yourself.
But leave my thoughts to me.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Counterpoint: Two Rooms

He, in the room above, grown old and tired;
She, in the room below, his floor her ceiling,
Pursue their separate dreams. He turns his light,
And throws himself on the bed, face down, in laughter.
She, by the window, smiles at a starlight night.

His watch—the same he has heard these cycles of ages—
Wearily chimes at seconds beneath his pillow.
The clock upon her mantelpiece strikes nine.
The night wears on. She hears dull steps above her.
The world whirs on. New stars come up to shine.

His youth—far off—he sees it brightly walking
In a golden cloud wings flashing about it....
Darkness
Walls it around with dripping enormous walls.
Old age, far off—or death—what do they matter?
Down the smooth purple night a streaked star falls.

She hears slow steps in the street; they chime like music,
They climb to her heart, they break and flower in beauty,
Along her veins they glisten and ring and burn.
He hears his own slow steps tread down to silence.
Far off they pass. He knows they will never return.

Far off, on a smooth dark road, he hears them faintly.
The road, like a sombre river, quietly flowing,
Moves among murmurous walls. A deeper breath
Swells them to sound: he hears his steps more clearly.
And death seems nearer to him; or he to death.

What's death?—she smiles. The cool stone hurts her elbow,
The last few raindrops gather and fall from elm-boughs,
She sees them glisten and break. The arc-lamp sings,
The new leaves dip in the warm wet air and fragrance,
A sparrow whirs to the eaves and shakes its wings.

What's death—what's death ? The spring returns like music ;
The trees are like dark lovers who dream in starlight;

The soft grey clouds go over the stars like dreams.
The cool stone wounds her arms to pain, to pleasure.
Under the lamp a circle of wet street gleams.
And death seems far away—a thing of roses,
A golden portal where golden music closes,
Death seems far away;
And spring returns, the countless singing of lovers,
And spring returns to stay....

He, in the room above, grown old and tired,
Flings himself on the bed, face down, in laughter,
And clenches his hands, and remembers, and desires to die.
And she, by the window, smiles at a night of starlight....
The soft grey clouds go slowly across the sky.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Dancing Adairs

Behold me, in my chiffon, gauze, and tinsel,
Flitting out of the shadow into the spotlight,
And into the shadow again, without a whisper!-
Firefly's my name, I am evanescent.

Firefly's your name. You are evanescent.
But I follow you as remorselessly as darkness,
And shut you in and enclose you, at last, and always,
Till you are lost,-as a voice is lost in silence.

Till I am lost, as a voice is lost in silence. . .
Are you the one who would close so cool about me?
My fire sheds into and through you and beyond you:
How can your fingers hold me? I am elusive.

How can my fingers hold you? You are elusive?
Yes, you are flame, but I surround and love you,
Always extend beyond you, cool, eternal,
To take you into my heart's great void of silence.

You shut me into your heart's great void of silence. . .
O sweet and soothing end for a life of whirling!
Now I am still, whose life was mazed with motion.
Now I sink into you, for love of sleep.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Dead Cleopatra

Dead Cleopatra lies in a crystal casket,
Wrapped and spiced by the cunningest of hands.
Around her neck they have put a golden necklace
Her tatbebs, it is said, are worn with sands.

Dead Cleopatra was once revered in Egypt—
Warm-eyed she was, this princess of the south.
Now she is very old and dry and faded,
With black bitumen they have sealed up her mouth.

Grave-robbers pulled the gold rings from her fingers,
Despite the holy symbols across her breast;
They scared the bats that quietly whirled above her.
Poor lady! she would have been long since at rest

If she had not been wrapped and spiced so shrewdly,
Preserved, obscene, to mock black flights of years.
What would her lover have said, had he foreseen it?
Had he been moved to ecstasy, or tears?

O sweet clean earth from whom the green blade cometh!—
When we are dead, my best-beloved and I,
Close well above us that we may rest forever,
Sending up grass and blossoms to the sky.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Discordants

I. (Bread and Music)

Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread;
Now that I am without you, all is desolate;
All that was once so beautiful is dead.

Your hands once touched this table and this silver,
And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.
These things do not remember you, beloved,
And yet your touch upon them will not pass.

For it was in my heart you moved among them,
And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes;
And in my heart they will remember always,--
They knew you once, O beautiful and wise.

II

My heart has become as hard as a city street,
The horses trample upon it, it sings like iron,
All day long and all night long they beat,
They ring like the hooves of time.

My heart has become as drab as a city park,
The grass is worn with the feet of shameless lovers,
A match is struck, there is kissing in the dark,
The moon comes, pale with sleep.

My heart is torn with the sound of raucous voices,
They shout from the slums, from the streets, from the crowded places,
And tunes from the hurdy-gurdy that coldly rejoices
Shoot arrows into my heart.

III

Dead Cleopatra lies in a crystal casket,
Wrapped and spiced by the cunningest of hands.

Around her neck they have put a golden necklace,
Her tatbebs, it is said, are worn with sands.

Dead Cleopatra was once revered in Egypt,
Warm-eyed she was, this princess of the South.
Now she is old and dry and faded,
With black bitumen they have sealed up her mouth.

O sweet clean earth, from whom the green blade cometh!
When we are dead, my best beloved and I,
Close well above us, that we may rest forever,
Sending up grass and blossoms to the sky.

IV

In the noisy street,
Where the sifted sunlight yellows the pallid faces,
Sudden I close my eyes, and on my eyelids
Feel from the far-off sea a cool faint spray,--

A breath on my cheek,
From the tumbling breakers and foam, the hard sand shattered,
Gulls in the high wind whistling, flashing waters,
Smoke from the flashing waters blown on rocks;

--And I know once more,
O dearly beloved! that all these seas are between us,
Tumult and madness, desolate save for the sea-gulls,
You on the farther shore, and I in this street.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Duval's Birds

The parrot, screeching, flew out into the darkness,
Circled three times above the upturned faces
With a great whir of brilliant outspread wings,
And then returned to stagger on her finger.
She bowed and smiled, eliciting applause. . .
The property man hated her dirty birds.
But it had taken years—yes, years—to train them,
To shoulder flags, strike bells by tweaking strings,
Or climb sedately little flights of stairs.
When they were stubborn, she tapped them with a wand,
And her eyes glittered a little under the eyebrows.
The red one flapped and flapped on a swinging wire;
The little white ones winked round yellow eyes.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Evening Song Of Senlin

from Senlin: A Biography

It is moonlight. Alone in the silence
I ascend my stairs once more,
While waves, remote in a pale blue starlight,
Crash on a white sand shore.
It is moonlight. The garden is silent.
I stand in my room alone.
Across my wall, from the far-off moon,
A rain of fire is thrown . . .
There are houses hanging above the stars,
And stars hung under a sea:
And a wind from the long blue vault of time
Waves my curtain for me . . .
I wait in the dark once more,
Swung between space and space:
Before my mirror I lift my hands
And face my remembered face.
Is it I who stand in a question here,
Asking to know my name? . . .
It is I, yet I know not whither I go,
Nor why, nor whence I came.
It is I, who awoke at dawn
And arose and descended the stair,
Conceiving a god in the eye of the sun,—
In a woman's hands and hair.
It is I whose flesh is gray with the stones
I builded into a wall:
With a mournful melody in my brain
Of a tune I cannot recall . . .
There are roses to kiss: and mouths to kiss;
And the sharp-pained shadow of death.
I remember a rain-drop on my cheek,—
A wind like a fragrant breath . . .
And the star I laugh on tilts through heaven;
And the heavens are dark and steep . . .
I will forget these things once more
In the silence of sleep.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Exile

These hills are sandy. Trees are dwarfed here. Crows
Caw dismally in skies of an arid brilliance,
Complain in dusty pine-trees. Yellow daybreak
Lights on the long brown slopes a frost-like dew,
Dew as heavy as rain; the rabbit tracks
Show sharply in it, as they might in snow.
But it's soon gone in the sun — what good does it do?
The houses, on the slope, or among brown trees,
Are grey and shrivelled. And the men who live here
Are small and withered, spider-like, with large eyes.

Bring water with you if you come to live here —
Cold tinkling cisterns, or else wells so deep
That one looks down to Ganges or Himalayas.
Yes, and bring mountains with you, white, moon-bearing,
Mountains of ice. You will have need of these
Profundities and peaks of wet and cold.

Bring also, in a cage of wire or osier,
Birds of a golden colour, who will sing
Of leaves that do not wither, watery fruits
That heavily hang on long melodious boughs
In the blue-silver forests of deep valleys.

I have now been here — how many years? Years unnumbered.
My hands grow clawlike. My eyes are large and starved.
I brought no bird with me, I have no cistern
Where I might find the moon, or river, or snow.
Some day, for lack of these, I'll spin a web
Between two dusty pine-tree tops, and hang there
Face downward, like a spider, blown as lightly
As ghost of leaf. Crows will caw about me.
Morning and evening I shall drink the dew.

Conrad Potter Aiken

From: Preludes For Memnon

LXII

I read the primrose and the sea
and remember nothing
I read Arcturus and the snow
and remember nothing
I read the green and white book of spring
and remember nothing
I read the hatred in a man's eye
Lord, I remember nothing.

Scorn spat at me and spoke
I remember it not
The river was frozen round the ship
I remember it not
I found a secret message in a blade of grass
and it is forgotten
I called my lovers by their sweet names
they are all forgotten.

Where are my lovers now?
buried in me.
The blades of grass, the ships, the scorners?
here in me
The haters in the spring, snow and Arcturus?
here in me
The primrose and the sea?
here in me.

I know what humans know
no less no more
I know how the summer breaks
on Neptune's shore
I know how winter freezes
the Milky Way
My heart's home is in Limbo
and there I stay.

Praise Limbo, heart, and praise

forgetfulness
We know what the tiger knows
no more no less
We know what the primrose thinks
and think it too
We walk when the snail walks
across the dew.

I was a rash man in my time
but now I am still
I spoke with god's voice once
now I am still
Evil made my right hand strong
which now is still
Wisdom gave me pride once,
but it is still.

Lie down poor heart at last
and have your rest
Remember to forget
and have your rest
Think of yourself as once you were
at your best
And then lie down alone
and have your rest.

These things are as time weaves them
on his loom
Forgot, forgetting, we survive not
mortal bloom
Let us give thanks, to space,
for a little room
Space is our face and time our death
two poles of doom

Come dance around the compass
pointing north
Before, face downward, frozen,
we go forth.

LXIII

Thus systole addressed diastole,—
The heart contracting, with its grief of burden,
To the lax heart, with grief of burden gone.

Thus star to dead leaf speaks; thus cliff to sea;
And thus the spider, on a summer's day,
To the bright thistledown, trapped in the web.

No language leaps this chasm like a lightning:
Here is no message of assuagement, blown
From Ecuador to Greenland; here is only

A trumpet blast, that calls dead men to arms;
The granite's pity for the cloud; the whisper
Of time to space.

Conrad Potter Aiken

From: Time In The Rock

XXIV

If one voice, not another, must speak first,
out of the silence, the stillness, the preceding—
speaking clearly, speaking slowly, measuring calmly
the heavy syllables of doubt, or of despair—
speaking passionately, speaking bitterly, hunger or hope
ordering the words, that are like sounds of flame—:
if one speaks first, before that other or the third,
out of the silence bringing the dark message,
the grave and great acceptance of the rock,
the huge world, held in the huge hand of faith:

and if it says, I hold the world like this;
here in the light, amid these crumbling walls;
here in the half-light, the deceptive moment,
here in the darkness like a candle lifted—:
take it, relieve me of it, bear it away;
have it, now and forever, for your own;
this that was mine, this that my voice made mine,
this that my word has shaped for you—

if this voice speaks before us, speaks before
ourselves can speak, challenging thus the dark;
waking the sleeping watcher from his sleep,
altering the dreamer's dream while still he dreams;
so that on waking—ah, what despair he knows!
to learn that while he slept the world was made—
made by that voice, and himself made no less,
and now inalterably curved forever—

yes, if to wake, to cease to dream, be this,
to face a self made ready while we slept,
shaped in the world's shape by the single voice—
if thus we wake too late and find ourselves
already weeping, already upon the road
that climbs past shame and pain to crucifixion—
seeing at once, with eyes, just opened, the world,

vast, bright, and cruciform, on which so soon
ascending we must die—
and to look backward,
but know no turning back; to go forward,
even as we turn our faces to the past;
still gazing downward from the hill we climb,
searching the dark for that strange dream we had,
which the voice altered and broke—
ah, can it comfort us,
us helpless, us thus shaped by a word,
sleepwalking shadows in the voice-shaped world,
ah, can it comfort us that we ourselves
will bear the word with us, we too, we too
to speak, again, again, again, again,—
ourselves the voice for those not yet awakened,—
altering the dreams of those who dream, and shaping,
while still they sleep, their inescapable pain—?

LX

The chairback will cast a shadow on the white wall,
you can observe its shape, the square of paper
will receive and record the impulse of the pencil
and keep it too till time rubs it out
the seed will arrange as suits it the shape of the earth
to right or left thrusting, and the old clock
goes fast or slow as it rusts or is oiled.
These things or others for your consideration
these changes or others, these records
or others less permanent. Come if you will
to the sea's edge, the beach of hard sand,
notice how the wave designs itself in quick bubbles
the wave's ghost etched in bubbles and then gone,
froth of a suggestion, and then gone.
Notice too the path of the wind in a field of wheat,
the motion indicated. Notice in a mirror
how the lips smile, so little, and for so little while.
Notice how little, and how seldom, you notice
the movement of the eyes in your own face, reflection
of a moment's reflection. What were you thinking
to deliver to the glass this instant of change, what margin
belonged only to the expectation of echo
and was calculated perhaps to that end, what was left

essential or immortal?

Your hand too,
gloved perhaps, encased, but none the less
already bone, already a skeleton,
sharp as a fingerpost that points to time—
what record does it leave, and where, what paper
does it inscribe with an immortal message?
where, and with what permanence, does it say 'I'?
Perhaps giving itself to the lover's hand
or in a farewell, or in a blow,
or in a theft, which will pay interest.
Perhaps in your own pocket, jingling coins,
or against a woman's breast. Perhaps holding
the pencil dictated by another's thought.

These things do not perplex, these things are simple,—
but what of the heart that wishes to survive change
and cannot, its love lost in confusions and dismay—?
what of the thought dispersed in its own algebras,
hypothesis proved fallacy? what of the will
which finds its aim unworthy? Are these, too, simple?

LXVII

Walk man on the stage of your own imagining
peel an orange or dust your shoe, take from your pocket
the soiled handkerchief and blow your nose
as if it were indeed necessary to be natural
and speak too if an idea should recommend itself
speak to the large bright imaginary audience
that flattering multiplication of yourself
so handsomely deployed and so expectant
tell them between flings of orange peel
or such other necessary details of your rôle
precisely what they are, or what you are
since—lamentably—they are so much the same thing.
Decrepit inheritor of the initial star!
do you yourself sometimes imagine
or even perhaps say to that peculiar audience
something of this? as that yourself and they
comprise one statement? supercilious
the actor may be, often is, to those who hear him

but to be supercilious to one's self
even in one's dramatic moments!—marvellous
decay of what in God's first declaration
might have been good.

Conrad Potter Aiken

God's Acre

In Memory Of. In Fondest Recollection Of.
In Loving Memory Of. In Fond
Remembrance. Died in October. Died at Sea.
Who died at sea? The name of the seaport
Escapes her, gone, blown with the eastwind, over
The tombs and yews, into the apple orchard,
Over the road, where gleams a wagon-top,
And gone. The eastwind gallops up from sea
Bringing salt and gulls. The marsh smell, too,
Strong in September; mud and reeds, the reeds
Rattling like bones.

She shifts the grass-clipper
From right to left hand, clips and clips the grass.
The broken column, carefully broken, on which
The blackbird hen is laughing—in fondest memory.
Burden! Who was this Burden, to be remembered?
Or Potter? The Potter rejected by the Pot.
'Here lies Josephus Burden, who departed
This life the fourth of August, nineteen hundred.
"And He Said Come." ' Josephus Burden, forty,
Gross, ribald, with strong hands on which grew hair,
And red ears kinked with hair, and northblue eyes,
Held in one hand a hammer, in the other
A nail. He drove the nail . . . This was enough?
Or—also—did he love?

She changes back
The clipper. The blades are dull. The grass is wet
And gums the blades. In Loving Recollection.
Four chains, heavy, hang round the vault. What chance
For skeletons? The dead men rise at night,
Rattle the links. 'Too heavy! can't be budged . . .
Try once again—together—NOW! . . . no use.'
They sit in moonless shadow, gently talking.
'Old Jones it must have been, who made those chains.
I'd like to see him lift them now!' . . . The owl

That hunts in Wickham Wood comes over, mewing.
'An owl,' says one. 'Most likely,' says another.
They turn grey heads.

The seawind brings a breaking
Bell sound among the yews and tombstones, ringing
The twisted whorls of bronze on sunlit stones.
Sacred . . . memory . . . affectionate . . . O God
What travesty is this—the blackbird soils
The broken column; the worm at work in the skull
Feasts on medulla; and the lewd thrush cracks
A snailshell on the vault. He died on shipboard—
Sea-burial, then, were better?

On her knees
She clips and clips, kneeling against the sod,
Holding the world between her two knees, pondering
Downward, as if her thought, like men or apples,
Fell ripely into earth. Seablue, her eyes
Turn to the sea. Sea-gulls are scavengers,
Cruel of face, but lovely. By the dykes
The reeds rattle, leaping in eastwind, rattling
Like bones. In Fond Remembrance Of. O God,
That life is what it is, and does not change.
You there in earth, and I above you kneeling.
You dead, and I alive.

She prods a plantain
Of too ambitious root. That largest yew-tree,
Clutching the hill—

She rises from stiff knees,
Stiffly, and treads the pebble path, that leads
Downward, to sea and town. The marsh smell comes
Healthy and salt, and fills her nostrils. Reeds
Dance in the eastwind, rattling; warblers dart
Flashing, from swaying reed to reed, and sing.

Goya

Goya drew a pig on a wall.
The five-year-old hairdresser's son
Saw, graved on a silver tray,
The lion; and sunsets were begun.

Goya smelt the bull-fight blood.
The pupil of the Carmelite
Gave his hands to a goldsmith, learned
To gild an aureole aright.

Goya saw the Puzzel's eyes:
Sang in the street (with a guitar)
And climbed the balcony; but Keats
(Under the halyards) wrote 'Bright star.'

Goya saw the Great Slut pick
The chirping human puppets up,
And laugh, with pendulous mountain lip,
And drown them in a coffee cup;

Or squeeze their little juices out
In arid hands, insensitive,
To make them gibber . . . Goya went
Among the catacombs to live.

He saw gross Ronyons of the air,
Harelipped and goitered, raped in flight
By hairless pimps, umbrella-winged:
Tumult above Madrid at night.

He heard the seconds in his clock
Crack like seeds, divulge, and pour
Abysmal filth of Nothingness

Between the pendulum and the floor:

Torrents of dead veins, rotted cells,
Tonsils decayed, and fingernails:
Dead hair, dead fur, dead claws, dead skin:
Nostrils and lids; and cauls and veils;

And eyes that still, in death, remained
(Unlidded and unlashd) aware
Of the foul core, and, fouler yet,
The region worm that ravins there.

Stench flowed out of the second's tick.
And Goya swam with it through Space,
Sweating the fetor from his limbs,
And stared upon the unfeatured face

That did not see, and sheltered naught,
But was, and is. The second gone,
Goya returned, and drew the face;
And scrawled beneath it, 'This I have known' . . .

And drew four slatterns, in an attic,
Heavy, with heads on arms, asleep:
And underscribed it, 'Let them slumber,
Who, if they woke, could only weep' . . .

Conrad Potter Aiken

Hatteras Calling

Southeast, and storm, and every weather vane
shivers and moans upon its dripping pin,
ragged on chimneys the cloud whips, the rain
howls at the flues and windows to get in,
the golden rooster claps his golden wings
and from the Baptist Chapel shrieks no more,
the golden arrow in the southeast sings
and hears on the roof the Atlantic Ocean roar.
Waves among wires, sea scudding over poles,
down every alley the magnificence of rain,
dead gutters live once more, the deep manholes
hollow in triumph a passage to the main.
Umbrellas, and in the Gardens one old man
hurries away along a dancing path,
listens to music on a watering-can,
observes among the tulips the sudden wrath,
pale willows thrashing to the needled lake,
and dinghies filled with water; while the sky
smashes the lilacs, swoops to shake and break,
till shattered branches shriek and railings cry.
Speak, Hatteras, your language of the sea:
scour with kelp and spindrift the stale street:
that man in terror may learn once more to be
child of that hour when rock and ocean meet.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Haunted Chambers

The lamp-lit page is turned, the dream forgotten;
The music changes tone, you wake, remember
Deep worlds you lived before, deep worlds hereafter
Of leaf on falling leaf, music on music,
Rain and sorrow and wind and dust and laughter.

Helen was late, and Miriam came too soon;
Joseph was dead, his wife and children starving;
Elaine was married and soon to have a child.
You dreamed last night of fiddler crabs with fiddles.
They played a buzzing melody, and you smiled.

Tomorrow—what ? And what of yesterday ?
Through soundless labyrinths of dream you pass,
Through many doors to the one door of all.
Soon as it's opened we shall hear a music:
Or see a skeleton fall.

We walk with you. Where is it that you lead us ?
We climbed the muffled stairs beneath high lanterns.
We descend again. We grope through darkened cells.
You say: 'This darkness, here, 'will slowly kill me—
It creeps and weighs upon me is full of bells.

'This is the thing remembered I would forget:
No matter where I go, how soft I tread,
This windy gesture menaces me with death.
'Fatigue!' it says—and points its finger at me;
Touches my throat and stops my breath.

'My fans, my jewels, the portrait of my husband,
The torn certificate for my daughter's grave—
These are but mortal seconds in immortal time.
They brush me, fade away—like drops of water.
They signify no crime.

'Let us retrace our steps: I have deceived you!
Nothing is here I could not frankly tell you—
No hint of guilt, or faithlessness, or threat.

Dreams—they are madness; staring eyes—illusion.
Let us return, hear music, and forget.'

Conrad Potter Aiken

Herman Melville

'My towers at last!'—
What meant the word
from what acknowledged circuit sprung
and in the heart and on the tongue
at sight of few familiar birds
when seaward his last sail unfurled
to leeward from the wheel once more
bloomed the pale crags of haunted shore
that once-more-visited notch of world:
and straight he knew as known before
the Logos in Leviathan's roar
he deepest sounding with his lead
who all had fathomed all had said.

Much-loving hero—towers indeed
were those that overhung your log
with entries of typhoon and fog
and thunderstone for Adam's breed:
man's warm Sargasso Sea of faith
dislimned in light by luck or fate
you for mankind set sail by hate
and weathered it, and with it death.
And now at world's end coasting late
in dolphined calms beyond the gate
which Hercules flung down, you come
to the grim rocks that nod you home.
Depth below depth this love of man:
among unnumbered and unknown
to mark and make his cryptic own
one landfall of all time began:
of all life's hurts to treasure one
and hug it to the wounded breast,
in this to dedicate the rest,
all injuries received or done.
Your towers again but towers now blest
your haven in a shoreless west
o mariner of the human soul
who in the landmark notched the Pole

and in the Item loved the Whole.

Conrad Potter Aiken

How Is It That I Am Now So Softly Awakened

How is it that I am now so softly awakened,
My leaves shaken down with music?—
Darling, I love you.
It is not your mouth, for I have known mouths before,—
Though your mouth is more alive than roses,
Roses singing softly
To green leaves after rain.
It is not your eyes, for I have dived often in eyes,—
Though your eyes, even in the yellow glare of footlights,
Are windows into eternal dusk.
Nor is it the live white flashing of your feet,
Nor your gay hands, catching at motes in the spotlight;
Nor the abrupt thick music of your laughter,
When, against the hideous backdrop,
With all its crudities brilliantly lighted,
Suddenly you catch sight of your alarming shadow,
Whirling and contracting.
How is it, then, that I am so keenly aware,
So sensitive to the surges of the wind, or the light,
Heaving silently under blue seas of air?—
Darling, I love you, I am immersed in you.
It is not the unraveled night-time of your hair,—
Though I grow drunk when you press it upon my face:
And though when you gloss its length with a golden brush
I am strings that tremble under a bow.
It was that night I saw you dancing,
The whirl and impalpable float of your garment,
Your throat lifted, your face aglow
(Like waterlilies in moonlight were your knees).
It was that night I heard you singing
In the green-room after your dance was over,
Faint and uneven through the thickness of walls.
(How shall I come to you through the dullness of walls,
Thrusting aside the hands of bitter opinion?)
It was that afternoon, early in June,
When, tired with a sleepless night, and my act performed,
Feeling as stale as streets,
We met under dropping boughs, and you smiled to me:
And we sat by a watery surface of clouds and sky.

I hear only the susurrations of intimate leaves;
The stealthy gliding of branches upon slow air.
I see only the point of your chin in sunlight;
And the sinister blue of sunlight on your hair.
The sunlight settles downward upon us in silence.
Now we thrust up through grass blades and encounter,
Pushing white hands amid the green.
Your face flowers whitely among cold leaves.
Soil clings to you, bark falls from you,
You rouse and stretch upward, exhaling earth, inhaling sky,
I touch you, and we drift off together like moons.
Earth dips from under.
We are alone in an immensity of sunlight,
Specks in an infinite golden radiance,
Whirled and tossed upon silent cataracts and torrents.
Give me your hand darling! We float downward.

Conrad Potter Aiken

How To Accompany The Moon Without Walking

Harsh, harsh, the maram grass on the salt dune,
seen by the cricket's eye against the harbor moon,
anchor-frost and seaward, the lighthouse moon—

the bellbuoy-beating moon, the tiderip bronze
ringing above deep channels and old bones,
the hawsehole moon, where blood and money runs—

foremast and mainmast moon, up harbor still,
island and smokestack moon, and the wind-spill
falling from the sail-throat for the moon to fill—

up harbor, the old wharf moon, the capstan moon,
and round it the capstan bars, the heeling tune,
India Wharf, we'll bring you to Rio soon—

the shipyard moon, the grain-elevator moon,
derrick and gantry, and the turbine croon
sweet under seafoam as a bird in June—

red-warehouse moon, yacht-basin moon, where spars
tangle and telegraph with stays and stars—
hi ho, the queen of accordions and guitars—

ship-chandler moon, sea-boots and Wharf Street shine,
the ropewalk moon that spins in turpentine,
sail-loft invaded with a pour of silver twine—

and high! up spinning! skyscraper tipped on purple!
skyscraper moon, and high! for the stare of people—
skysign and belltower moon, moon for the steeple—

bells breaking bronze, gold, down, the scattered tinkle,
silver-bell moon, cornice and rooftop twinkle,
Christmas and graveyard moon, the tinsel sprinkle—

and dead, the stockyard moon, where blood drips down,
dead longhorn and mute snout; the barrelhouse moon,
moonmusic doubling, rigadon, jigadon—

so down, and down, who will be darkened soon,
red and green lights, the pallid airport moon—
ah! on the flying field, the captive balloon!

and cold; for the rim of night, the earth's black arc,
swings up, blots out the stars, to the last spark;
while, underworld, the moon drowns dead and dark.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Illicit

Of what she said to me that night—no matter.
The strange thing came next day.
My brain was full of music—something she played me;
I couldn't remember it all, but phrases of it
Wreathed and wreathed among faint memories,
Seeking for something, trying to tell me something,
Urging to restlessness, verging on grief.
I tried to play the tune, from memory—
But memory failed: the chords and discords climbed
And found no resolution, only hung there,
And left me morbid. Where, then, had I heard it? ...
What secret dusty chamber was it hinting?
'Dust,' it said, 'dust and dust and sunlight
A cold clear April evening snow-bedraggled
Rain-worn snow dappling the hideous grass
And someone walking alone; and someone saying
That all must end, for the time had come to go'
These were the phrases; but behind, beneath them,
A greater shadow moved, and in this shadow
I stood and guessed Was it the blue-eyed lady?
The one who always danced in golden slippers?—
And had I danced, with her, upon this music?
Or was it further back—the unplumbed twilight
Of childhood? No—much recenter than that.

You know, without my telling you, how sometimes
A word or name eludes you, and you seek it
Through running ghosts of shadow—leaping at it,
Lying in wait for it to spring upon it,
Spreading faint snares for it of sense or sound ;
Until of a sudden, as if in a phantom forest,
You hear it, see it flash among the branches,
And, scarcely knowing how, suddenly have it.
Well, it was so I followed down this music,
Glimpsing a face in darkness, hearing a cry,
Remembering days forgotten, moods exhausted.
Corners in sunlight, puddles reflecting stars;
Until, of a sudden, and least of all expected,
The thing resolved itself: and I remembered

An April afternoon, eight years ago—
Or was it nine?—no matter, call it nine—
A room in which the last of sunlight faded;
A vase of violets, fragrance in white curtains;
And she, who played this same thing later, playing.

She played this tune. And in the middle of it
Abruptly broke it off, letting her hands
Fall in her lap. She sat there so a moment,
With shoulders drooped, then lifted up a rose,
One great white rose, wide open, like a lotus,
And pressed it to her cheek, and closed her eyes.
'You know—we've got to end this—Miriam loves you....
If she should ever know, or even guess it,
What would she do? Listen!—I'm not absurd....
I'm sure of it. If you had eyes for women,
To understand them, which you've never had,
You'd know it too' So went this colloquy,
Half humorous, with undertones of pathos,
Half grave, half flippant while her ringers, softly,
Felt for this tune, played it and let it fall,
Now note by singing note, now chord by chord,
Repeating phrases with a kind of pleasure.
Was it symbolic of the woman's weakness
That she could neither break it—nor conclude?
It paused and wandered paused again; while she,
Perplexed and tired, half told me I must go,
Half asked me if I thought I ought to go....

Well, April passed, with many other evenings,
Evenings like this, with later suns and warmer,
With violets always there, and fragrant curtains....
And she was right. And Miriam found it out....
And after that, when eight deep years had passed—
Or nine—we met once more, by accident.
But was it just by accident, I wonder,
She played this tune? Or what, then, was intended?

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow

I

The girl in the room beneath
Before going to bed
Strums on a mandolin
The three simple tunes she knows.
How inadequate they are to tell how her heart feels!
When she has finished them several times
She thrums the strings aimlessly with her finger-nails
And smiles, and thinks happily of many things.

II

I stood for a long while before the shop window
Looking at the blue butterflies embroidered on tawny silk.
The building was a tower before me,
Time was loud behind me,
Sun went over the housetops and dusty trees;
And there they were, glistening, brilliant, motionless,
Stitched in a golden sky
By yellow patient fingers long since turned to dust.

III

The first bell is silver,
And breathing darkness I think only of the long scythe of time.
The second bell is crimson,
And I think of a holiday night, with rockets
Furrowing the sky with red, and a soft shatter of stars.
The third bell is saffron and slow,
And I behold a long sunset over the sea
With wall on wall of castled cloud and glittering balustrades.
The fourth bell is color of bronze,
I walk by a frozen lake in the dun light of dusk:
Muffled crackings run in the ice,
Trees creak, birds fly.
The fifth bell is cold clear azure,
Delicately tinged with green:
One golden star hangs melting in it,

And towards this, sleepily, I go.
The sixth bell is as if a pebble
Had been dropped into a deep sea far above me . . .
Rings of sound ebb slowly into the silence.

IV

On the day when my uncle and I drove to the cemetery,
Rain rattled on the roof of the carriage;
And talking constrainedly of this and that
We refrained from looking at the child's coffin on the seat before us.
When we reached the cemetery
We found that the thin snow on the grass
Was already transparent with rain;
And boards had been laid upon it
That we might walk without wetting our feet.

V

When I was a boy, and saw bright rows of icicles
In many lengths along a wall
I was disappointed to find
That I could not play music upon them:
I ran my hand lightly across them
And they fell, tinkling.
I tell you this, young man, so that your expectations of life
Will not be too great.

VI

It is now two hours since I left you,
And the perfume of your hands is still on my hands.
And though since then
I have looked at the stars, walked in the cold blue streets,
And heard the dead leaves blowing over the ground
Under the trees,
I still remember the sound of your laughter.
How will it be, lady, when there is none left to remember you
Even as long as this?
Will the dust braid your hair?

VII

The day opens with the brown light of snowfall
And past the window snowflakes fall and fall.
I sit in my chair all day and work and work
Measuring words against each other.
I open the piano and play a tune
But find it does not say what I feel,
I grow tired of measuring words against each other,
I grow tired of these four walls,
And I think of you, who write me that you have just had a daughter
And named her after your first sweetheart,
And you, who break your heart, far away,
In the confusion and savagery of a long war,
And you who, worn by the bitterness of winter,
Will soon go south.
The snowflakes fall almost straight in the brown light
Past my window,
And a sparrow finds refuge on my window-ledge.
This alone comes to me out of the world outside
As I measure word with word.

VIII

Many things perplex me and leave me troubled,
Many things are locked away in the white book of stars
Never to be opened by me.
The starr'd leaves are silently turned,
And the mooned leaves;
And as they are turned, fall the shadows of life and death.
Perplexed and troubled,
I light a small light in a small room,
The lighted walls come closer to me,
The familiar pictures are clear.
I sit in my favourite chair and turn in my mind
The tiny pages of my own life, whereon so little is written,
And hear at the eastern window the pressure of a long wind, coming
From I know not where.

How many times have I sat here,
How many times will I sit here again,
Thinking these same things over and over in solitude
As a child says over and over

The first word he has learned to say.

IX

This girl gave her heart to me,
And this, and this.
This one looked at me as if she loved me,
And silently walked away.
This one I saw once and loved, and never saw her again.

Shall I count them for you upon my fingers?
Or like a priest solemnly sliding beads?
Or pretend they are roses, pale pink, yellow, and white,
And arrange them for you in a wide bowl
To be set in sunlight?
See how nicely it sounds as I count them for you --
'This girl gave her heart to me
And this, and this, . . . !
And nevertheless, my heart breaks when I think of them,
When I think their names,
And how, like leaves, they have changed and blown
And will lie, at last, forgotten,
Under the snow.

X

It is night time, and cold, and snow is falling,
And no wind grieves the walls.
In the small world of light around the arc-lamp
A swarm of snowflakes falls and falls.
The street grows silent. The last stranger passes.
The sound of his feet, in the snow, is indistinct.

What forgotten sadness is it, on a night like this,
Takes possession of my heart?
Why do I think of a camellia tree in a southern garden,
With pink blossoms among dark leaves,
Standing, surprised, in the snow?
Why do I think of spring?

The snowflakes, helplessly veering,,
Fall silently past my window;

They come from darkness and enter darkness.
What is it in my heart is surprised and bewildered
Like that camellia tree,
Beautiful still in its glittering anguish?
And spring so far away!

XI

As I walked through the lamplit gardens,
On the thin white crust of snow,
So intensely was I thinking of my misfortune,
So clearly were my eyes fixed
On the face of this grief which has come to me,
That I did not notice the beautiful pale colouring
Of lamplight on the snow;
Nor the interlaced long blue shadows of trees;

And yet these things were there,
And the white lamps, and the orange lamps, and the lamps of lilac were there,
As I have seen them so often before;
As they will be so often again
Long after my grief is forgotten.

And still, though I know this, and say this, it cannot console me.

XII

How many times have we been interrupted
Just as I was about to make up a story for you!
One time it was because we suddenly saw a firefly
Lighting his green lantern among the boughs of a fir-tree.
Marvellous! Marvellous! He is making for himself
A little tent of light in the darkness!
And one time it was because we saw a lilac lightning flash
Run wrinkling into the blue top of the mountain, --
We heard boulders of thunder rolling down upon us
And the plat-plat of drops on the window,
And we ran to watch the rain
Charging in wavering clouds across the long grass of the field!
Or at other times it was because we saw a star
Slipping easily out of the sky and falling, far off,
Among pine-dark hills;

Or because we found a crimson eft
Darting in the cold grass!

These things interrupted us and left us wondering;
And the stories, whatever they might have been,
Were never told.

A fairy, binding a daisy down and laughing?
A golden-haired princess caught in a cobweb?
A love-story of long ago?
Some day, just as we are beginning again,
Just as we blow the first sweet note,
Death itself will interrupt us.

XIII

My heart is an old house, and in that forlorn old house,
In the very centre, dark and forgotten,
Is a locked room where an enchanted princess
Lies sleeping.

But sometimes, in that dark house,
As if almost from the stars, far away,
Sounds whisper in that secret room --
Faint voices, music, a dying trill of laughter?
And suddenly, from her long sleep,
The beautiful princess awakes and dances.

Who is she? I do not know.
Why does she dance? Do not ask me! --
Yet to-day, when I saw you,
When I saw your eyes troubled with the trouble of happiness,
And your mouth trembling into a smile,
And your fingers pull shyly forward, --
Softly, in that room,
The little princess arose
And danced;
And as she danced the old house gravely trembled
With its vague and delicious secret.

XIV

Like an old tree uprooted by the wind
And flung down cruelly

With roots bared to the sun and stars
And limp leaves brought to earth --
Torn from its house --
So do I seem to myself
When you have left me.

XV

The music of the morning is red and warm;
Snow lies against the walls;
And on the sloping roof in the yellow sunlight
Pigeons huddle against the wind.
The music of evening is attenuated and thin --
The moon seen through a wave by a mermaid;
The crying of a violin.
Far down there, far down where the river turns to the west,
The delicate lights begin to twinkle
On the dusky arches of the bridge:
In the green sky a long cloud,
A smouldering wave of smoky crimson,
Breaks in the freezing wind: and above it, unabashed,
Remote, untouched, fierly palpitant,
Sings the first star.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 01

The girl in the room beneath
Before going to bed
Strums on a mandolin
The three simple tunes she knows.
How inadequate they are to tell how her heart feels!
When she has finished them several times
She thrums the strings aimlessly with her finger-nails
And smiles, and thinks happily of many things.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 02

I stood for a long while before the shop window
Looking at the blue butterflies embroidered on tawny silk.
The building was a tower before me,
Time was loud behind me,
Sun went over the housetops and dusty trees;
And there they were, glistening, brilliant, motionless,
Stitched in a golden sky
By yellow patient fingers long since turned to dust.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 03

The first bell is silver,
And breathing darkness I think only of the long scythe of time.
The second bell is crimson,
And I think of a holiday night, with rockets
Furrowing the sky with red, and a soft shatter of stars.
The third bell is saffron and slow,
And I behold a long sunset over the sea
With wall on wall of castled cloud and glittering balustrades.
The fourth bell is color of bronze,
I walk by a frozen lake in the dun light of dusk:
Muffled crackings run in the ice,
Trees creak, birds fly.
The fifth bell is cold clear azure,
Delicately tinged with green:
One golden star hangs melting in it,
And towards this, sleepily, I go.
The sixth bell is as if a pebble
Had been dropped into a deep sea far above me . . .
Rings of sound ebb slowly into the silence.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 04

On the day when my uncle and I drove to the cemetery,
Rain rattled on the roof of the carriage;
And talkng constrainedly of this and that
We refrained from looking at the child's coffin on the seat before us.
When we reached the cemetery
We found that the thin snow on the grass
Was already transparent with rain;
And boards had been laid upon it
That we might walk without wetting our feet.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 05

When I was a boy, and saw bright rows of icicles
In many lengths along a wall
I was disappointed to find
That I could not play music upon them:
I ran my hand lightly across them
And they fell, tinkling.
I tell you this, young man, so that your expectations of life
Will not be too great.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 05

When I was a boy, and saw bright rows of icicles
In many lengths along a wall
I was disappointed to find
That I could not play music upon them:
I ran my hand lightly across them
And they fell, tinkling.
I tell you this, young man, so that your expectations of life
Will not be too great.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 06

It is now two hours since I left you,
And the perfume of your hands is still on my hands.
And though since then
I have looked at the stars, walked in the cold blue streets,
And heard the dead leaves blowing over the ground
Under the trees,
I still remember the sound of your laughter.
How will it be, lady, when there is none left to remember you
Even as long as this?
Will the dust braid your hair?

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 06

It is now two hours since I left you,
And the perfume of your hands is still on my hands.
And though since then
I have looked at the stars, walked in the cold blue streets,
And heard the dead leaves blowing over the ground
Under the trees,
I still remember the sound of your laughter.
How will it be, lady, when there is none left to remember you
Even as long as this?
Will the dust braid your hair?

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 07

The day opens with the brown light of snowfall
And past the window snowflakes fall and fall.
I sit in my chair all day and work and work
Measuring words against each other.
I open the piano and play a tune
But find it does not say what I feel,
I grow tired of measuring words against each other,
I grow tired of these four walls,
And I think of you, who write me that you have just had a daughter
And named her after your first sweetheart,
And you, who break your heart, far away,
In the confusion and savagery of a long war,
And you who, worn by the bitterness of winter,
Will soon go south.
The snowflakes fall almost straight in the brown light
Past my window,
And a sparrow finds refuge on my window-ledge.
This alone comes to me out of the world outside
As I measure word with word.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 08

Many things perplex me and leave me troubled,
Many things are locked away in the white book of stars
Never to be opened by me.
The starr'd leaves are silently turned,
And the mooned leaves;
And as they are turned, fall the shadows of life and death.
Perplexed and troubled,
I light a small light in a small room,
The lighted walls come closer to me,
The familiar pictures are clear.
I sit in my favourite chair and turn in my mind
The tiny pages of my own life, whereon so little is written,
And hear at the eastern window the pressure of a long wind, coming
From I know not where.
How many times have I sat here,
How many times will I sit here again,
Thinking these same things over and over in solitude
As a child says over and over
The first word he has learned to say.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 09

This girl gave her heart to me,
And this, and this.
This one looked at me as if she loved me,
And silently walked away.
This one I saw once and loved, and never saw her again.
Shall I count them for you upon my fingers?
Or like a priest solemnly sliding beads?
Or pretend they are roses, pale pink, yellow, and white,
And arrange them for you in a wide bowl
To be set in sunlight?
See how nicely it sounds as I count them for you —
'This girl gave her heart to me
And this, and this, . . . !
And nevertheless, my heart breaks when I think of them,
When I think their names,
And how, like leaves, they have changed and blown
And will lie, at last, forgotten,
Under the snow.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 10

It is night time, and cold, and snow is falling,
And no wind grieves the walls.
In the small world of light around the arc-lamp
A swarm of snowflakes falls and falls.
The street grows silent. The last stranger passes.
The sound of his feet, in the snow, is indistinct.
What forgotten sadness is it, on a night like this,
Takes possession of my heart?
Why do I think of a camellia tree in a southern garden,
With pink blossoms among dark leaves,
Standing, surprised, in the snow?
Why do I think of spring?
The snowflakes, helplessly veering,,
Fall silently past my window;
They come from darkness and enter darkness.
What is it in my heart is surprised and bewildered
Like that camellia tree,
Beautiful still in its glittering anguish?
And spring so far away!

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 11

As I walked through the lamplit gardens,
On the thin white crust of snow,
So intensely was I thinking of my misfortune,
So clearly were my eyes fixed
On the face of this grief which has come to me,
That I did not notice the beautiful pale colouring
Of lamplight on the snow;
Nor the interlaced long blue shadows of trees;
And yet these things were there,
And the white lamps, and the orange lamps, and the lamps of lilac were there,
As I have seen them so often before;
As they will be so often again
Long after my grief is forgotten.
And still, though I know this, and say this, it cannot console me.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 12

How many times have we been interrupted
Just as I was about to make up a story for you!
One time it was because we suddenly saw a firefly
Lighting his green lantern among the boughs of a fir-tree.
Marvellous! Marvellous! He is making for himself
A little tent of light in the darkness!
And one time it was because we saw a lilac lightning flash
Run wrinkling into the blue top of the mountain, —
We heard boulders of thunder rolling down upon us
And the plat-plat of drops on the window,
And we ran to watch the rain
Charging in wavering clouds across the long grass of the field!
Or at other times it was because we saw a star
Slipping easily out of the sky and falling, far off,
Among pine-dark hills;
Or because we found a crimson eft
Darting in the cold grass!
These things interrupted us and left us wondering;
And the stories, whatever they might have been,
Were never told.
A fairy, binding a daisy down and laughing?
A golden-haired princess caught in a cobweb?
A love-story of long ago?
Some day, just as we are beginning again,
Just as we blow the first sweet note,
Death itself will interrupt us.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 13

My heart is an old house, and in that forlorn old house,
In the very centre, dark and forgotten,
Is a locked room where an enchanted princess
Lies sleeping.
But sometimes, in that dark house,
As if almost from the stars, far away,
Sounds whisper in that secret room —
Faint voices, music, a dying trill of laughter?
And suddenly, from her long sleep,
The beautiful princess awakes and dances.
Who is she? I do not know.
Why does she dance? Do not ask me! —
Yet to-day, when I saw you,
When I saw your eyes troubled with the trouble of happiness,
And your mouth trembling into a smile,
And your fingers pull shyly forward, —
Softly, in that room,
The little princess arose
And danced;
And as she danced the old house gravely trembled
With its vague and delicious secret.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 14

Like an old tree uprooted by the wind
And flung down cruelly
With roots bared to the sun and stars
And limp leaves brought to earth —
Torn from its house —
So do I seem to myself
When you have left me.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Improvisations: Light And Snow: 15

The music of the morning is red and warm;
Snow lies against the walls;
And on the sloping roof in the yellow sunlight
Pigeons huddle against the wind.
The music of evening is attenuated and thin —
The moon seen through a wave by a mermaid;
The crying of a violin.
Far down there, far down where the river turns to the west,
The delicate lights begin to twinkle
On the dusky arches of the bridge:
In the green sky a long cloud,
A smouldering wave of smoky crimson,
Breaks in the freezing wind: and above it, unabashed,
Remote, untouched, fierly palpitant,
Sings the first star.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Knock On The Door

Knock on the door, and you shall have an answer!
Open the heavy walls to set me free,
And blow a horn to call me into the sunlight,
And startled then what a strange thing you shall see!
Nuns, murderers, and drunkards, saints and sinners,
Lover and dancing girl and sage and clown
Will laugh upon you, and you will find me nowhere...
I am a room, a house, a street, a town.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Laughter

You, whom these eyes, no longer mine,
Shall see in the mirror's flash and shine,
Meagre of face and pale of cheek,
Pale mouth, and lines that sadness speak:
All the grey shipwreck of this me
Who look upon you and laugh for glee,
Mocking at you, poor feeble thing,
You word that's uttered, you tune that's played,
You body shrunken, you soul decayed,
You heart that whispers but cannot sing:
You, when you walk abroad in sun,
Blinking at last for the too much light,
Scorning the young life that can run,
Scorning the fierce life that can fight,
And drooling wisdom day by day,
Presuming, you, to point the way:
Here are my eyes upon you, now,
Colder than stars to sear your brow,
Here is my hand upon your hand,
A stronger grip than yours can stand,
Here are my words, so cruelly true,-
If you be false, they are stones for you ...
And because you are feeble, a crawling thing,
Walking by walls to hold and cling,
With terror of darkness on your breath,
And terror lest you be dead, with death:
Catching perhaps at straws of faith,
Drunk with religion in hope to drown
These maddening truths that will not down,
Clutching philosophy's vapid wraith:
Here is my perfect scorn for you,
The scorn from youth to old age due,
Merciless laughter, sharp as knife,
The egotistical laugh of life.
I hold my sides!- let truth be said,
'Twere better if things like you were dead.
For I have strength to face this earth,
I am risen warm and strong from birth,
I am song, I am love, I am bitter hate,

The laughter of speed that will not wait.
Nature is hard, but hard am I,
The hard will live, the soft must die:
And I who am nature know this truth,-
The soul of nature's soul is youth.
If you deny me, turn to shame,
Or pity me,- forego my name;
For youth is right, and age is wrong-
You but a prayer, while I am song!

The weak hates strong: you will hate me,
And war upon me, with cunning wiles,-
Pity me, with indulgent smiles,
And shrug your shoulders paternally.
'Mad youth!' you'll murmur- 'how mad it is!
He must indulge his ecstasies!
Youth is a madness, it will pass,
The fever of blood, the mad blind eyes-
His stars will burn him, he'll grow wise,
The years bring calm to lad and lass.
And what we thought so fine in youth
Was at the most but half of truth,-
For truth is not of youth or age,
But some of life's whole pilgrimage,-
The young men's visions, the old men's dreams,
The passion of days, the thought of years;
Age's cautions, and youth's extremes;
Laughter is life no more than tears.
Youth sings, 'the height of life is youth,
All after that is retrograde,
The music falters, the flowers fade,
And falsehood masquerades as truth.'
Youth sings, 'Age hath no right to speak,
Nature abhors him, he is weak,
But youth is right, for youth is strong,
Youth is the young earth's bridal-song!'
I was a young man once, myself,
Youth, I can sympathize with you;
I speak impartially from my shelf-
Truth lies half way between the two.
Youth scorns old age,- well, youth is right,
That is youth's nature; age scorns youth,

Age too is just; each sees the light
As nature grants, and each sees truth...
For truth is not of youth or age,
But sum of life's whole pilgrimage,
A wonder of many wonders wrought,
Blended of passion and of thought;
And so, young man, we'll compromise-
Each of us, in our way, is wise!

Thus you will speak, O cunning one,
Warming your cold hands in the sun;
Squinting your eyes in too bright light,
Shielding your face's sickly white.
However weak, life fends for self,-
Thus you, old ghost! you shuffling trimmer!
You speak impartially from your shelf?-
You clutch at rays, for the light grows dimmer.
This much I'll not begrudge you, then-
Go, justify yourself to men,
With powers of darkness come to terms
Lest you turn sick with dread of worms.
But, for the hard work of my brain,
Hands off! your yellow hands would stain.
Our best work, youth's! one finger mars;
If you must loathe it, or disclaim,
I beg you, then, forego my name,-
Else, die, mid laughter from the stars!

And yet, what's life? Come, here's my hand.
For at the last, I see it well,
Age were not age unless it fell,
And crawls- because it cannot stand.
I pity you,- I laugh at you,-
Yet to your years I see you true,
Truer than if, with rigid thought,
Your age to ghost of youth you wrought.
Poor soul! go, make your peace with death,
And warm your heart with a shibboleth!
Yes, you will hate, despise my work,-
How else?- But here's my laughing dirk,
Here I have snared you, all complete,
Your pitiful pale hands, struggling feet;

If you breathe poison on my art
Here is my poniard, here your heart!...
Because you are aged, senile, lamed,
For this, man, you shall not be blamed,
Though youth must smirk old age to see,
And merriment bubbles up in me;
But if with hand that smears and mars
You touch our best work, yours and mine,-
Then comes my laughter from earth and stars,
Youthful and cruel, wild, divine!

Conrad Potter Aiken

Melody In A Restaurant

The cigarette smoke loops and slides above us,
Dipping and swirling as the waiter passes.
You strike a match and stare upon the flame.
The tiny firelight leaps in your eyes a moment
And dies away as silently as it came.

This melody, you say, has certain voices—
They rise like nereids from a river, singing,
Lift white faces, and dive to darkness again.
Wherever you go you bear this river with you:
A leaf falls, and it flows, and you have pain.

So says the tune to you—but what to me ?
What to the waiter, as he pours your coffee?
The violinist who suavely draws his bow ?
That man, who folds his paper, overhears it.
A thousand dreams revolve and fall and flow.

Someone there is who sees a virgin stepping
Down marble stairs to a deep tomb of roses:
At the last moment she lifts remembering eyes.
Green leaves blow down; the place is checked with shadows;
A long-drawn murmur of rain goes down the skies.
And oaks are stripped and bare, and smoke with lightning;
And clouds are blown and torn upon high forests;
And the great sea shakes its walls.
And then falls silence And through long silence falls
This melody once more:
Down endless stairs she goes, as once before.

So says the tune to him—but what to me?
What are the worlds I see?
What shapes fantastic, terrible dreams?
I go my secret way, down secret alleys.
My errand is not so simple as it seems.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Miracles

Twilight is spacious, near things in it seem far,
And distant things seem near.
Now in the green west hangs a yellow star.
And now across old waters you may hear
The profound gloom of bells among still trees,
Like a rolling of huge boulders beneath seas.

Silent as though in evening contemplation
Weaves the bat under the gathering stars.
Silent as dew, we seek new incarnation,
Meditate new avatars.
In a clear dusk like this
Mary climbed up the hill to seek her son,
To lower him down from the cross, and kiss
The mauve wounds, every one.

Men with wings
In the dusk walked softly after her.
She did not see them, but may have felt
The winnowed air around her stir;
She did not see them, but may have known
Why her son's body was light as a little stone.
She may have guessed that other hands were there
Moving the watchful air.

Now, unless persuaded by searching music
Which suddenly opens the portals of the mind,
We guess no angels,
And are contented to be blind.
Let us blow silver horns in the twilight,
And lift our hearts to the yellow star in the green,
To find perhaps, if, while the dew is rising,
Clear things may not be seen.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Morning Song Of Senlin

It is morning, Senlin says, and in the morning
When the light drips through the shutters like the dew,
I arise, I face the sunrise,
And do the things my fathers learned to do.
Stars in the purple dusk above the rooftops
Pale in a saffron mist and seem to die,
And I myself on a swiftly tilting planet
Stand before a glass and tie my tie.
Vine leaves tap my window,
Dew-drops sing to the garden stones,
The robin chips in the chinaberry tree
Repeating three clear tones.
It is morning. I stand by the mirror
And tie my tie once more.
While waves far off in a pale rose twilight
Crash on a white sand shore.
I stand by a mirror and comb my hair:
How small and white my face!—
The green earth tilts through a sphere of air
And bathes in a flame of space.
There are houses hanging above the stars
And stars hung under a sea. . .
And a sun far off in a shell of silence
Dapples my walls for me. . .
It is morning, Senlin says, and in the morning
Should I not pause in the light to remember God?
Upright and firm I stand on a star unstable,
He is immense and lonely as a cloud.
I will dedicate this moment before my mirror
To him alone, and for him I will comb my hair.
Accept these humble offerings, cloud of silence!
I will think of you as I descend the stair.
Vine leaves tap my window,
The snail-track shines on the stones,
Dew-drops flash from the chinaberry tree
Repeating two clear tones.
It is morning, I awake from a bed of silence,
Shining I rise from the starless waters of sleep.
The walls are about me still as in the evening,

I am the same, and the same name still I keep.
The earth revolves with me, yet makes no motion,
The stars pale silently in a coral sky.
In a whistling void I stand before my mirror,
Unconcerned, I tie my tie.
There are horses neighing on far-off hills
Tossing their long white manes,
And mountains flash in the rose-white dusk,
Their shoulders black with rains. . .
It is morning. I stand by the mirror
And surprise my soul once more;
The blue air rushes above my ceiling,
There are suns beneath my floor. . .
. . . It is morning, Senlin says, I ascend from darkness
And depart on the winds of space for I know not where,
My watch is wound, a key is in my pocket,
And the sky is darkened as I descend the stair.
There are shadows across the windows, clouds in heaven,
And a god among the stars; and I will go
Thinking of him as I might think of daybreak
And humming a tune I know. . .
Vine-leaves tap at the window,
Dew-drops sing to the garden stones,
The robin chirps in the chinaberry tree
Repeating three clear tones.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Multitudes Turn In Darkness

The half-shut doors through which we heard that music
Are softly closed. Horns mutter down to silence,
The stars wheel out, the night grows deep.
Darkness settles upon us; a Vague refrain
Drowsily teases at the drowsy brain.
In numberless rooms we stretch ourselves and sleep.

Where have we been ? What savage chaos of music
Whirls in our dreams? We suddenly rise in darkness,
Open our eyes, cry out, and sleep once more.
We dream we are numberless sea-waves, languidly foaming
A warm white moonlit shore;

Or clouds blown windily over a sky at midnight,
Or chords of music scattered in hurrying darkness,
Or a singing sound of rain
We open our eyes and stare at the coiling darkness,
And enter our dreams again.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Music I Heard

Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread;
Now that I am without you, all is desolate;
All that was once so beautiful is dead.

Your hands once touched this table and this silver,
And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.
These things do not remember you, beloved,
And yet your touch upon them will not pass.

For it was in my heart that you moved among them,
And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes;
And in my heart they will remember always,
—They knew you once, O beautiful and wise.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Nightmare

'Draw three cards, and I will tell your future . . .
Draw three cards, and lay them down,
Rest your palms upon them, stare at the crystal,
And think of time . . . My father was a clown,
My mother was a gypsy out of Egypt;
And she was gotten with child in a strange way;
And I was born in a cold eclipse of the moon,
With the future in my eyes as clear as day.'

I sit before the gold-embroidered curtain
And think her face is like a wrinkled desert.
The crystal burns in lamplight beneath my eyes.
A dragon slowly coils on the scaly curtain.
Upon a scarlet cloth a white skull lies.

'Your hand is on the hand that holds three lilies.
You will live long, love many times.
I see a dark girl here who once betrayed you.
I see a shadow of secret crimes.

'There was a man who came intent to kill you,
And hid behind a door and waited for you;
There was a woman who smiled at you and lied.
There was a golden girl who loved you, begged you,
Crawled after you, and died.

'There is a ghost of murder in your blood-
Coming or past, I know not which.
And here is danger-a woman with sea-green eyes,
And white-skinned as a witch . . .'

The words hiss into me, like raindrops falling
On sleepy fire . . . She smiles a meaning smile.
Suspicion eats my brain; I ask a question;
Something is creeping at me, something vile;

And suddenly on the wall behind her head
I see a monstrous shadow strike and spread,
The lamp puffs out, a great blow crashes down.

I plunge through the curtain, run through dark to the street,
And hear swift steps retreat . . .

The shades are drawn, the door is locked behind me.
Behind the door I hear a hammer sounding.
I walk in a cloud of wonder; I am glad.
I mingle among the crowds; my heart is pounding;
You do not guess the adventure I have had! . . .

Yet you, too, all have had your dark adventures,
Your sudden adventures, or strange, or sweet . . .
My peril goes out from me, is blown among you.
We loiter, dreaming together, along the street.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Nocturne Of Remembered Spring

I.

Moonlight silvers the tops of trees,
Moonlight whitens the lilac shadowed wall
And through the evening fall,
Clearly, as if through enchanted seas,
Footsteps passing, an infinite distance away,
In another world and another day.
Moonlight turns the purple lilacs blue,
Moonlight leaves the fountain hoar and old,
And the boughs of elms grow green and cold,
Our footsteps echo on gleaming stones,
The leaves are stirred to a jargon of muted tones.
This is the night we have kept, you say:
This is the moonlit night that will never die.
Through the grey streets our memories retain
Let us go back again.

II.

Mist goes up from the river to dim the stars,
The river is black and cold; so let us dance
To flare of horns, and clang of cymbals and drums;
And strew the glimmering floor with roses,
And remember, while the rich music yawns and closes,
With a luxury of pain, how silence comes.
Yes, we loved each other, long ago;
We moved like wind to a music's ebb and flow.
At a phrase from violins you closed your eyes,
And smiled, and let me lead you how young we were!
Your hair, upon that music, seemed to stir.
Let us return there, let us return, you and I;
Through changeless streets our memories retain
Let us go back again.

III.

Mist goes up from the rain steeped earth, and clings
Ghostly with lamplight among drenched maple trees.

We walk in silence and see how the lamplight flings
Fans of shadow upon it the music's mournful pleas
Die out behind us, the door is closed at last,
A net of silver silence is softly cast
Over our thought slowly we walk,
Quietly with delicious pause, we talk,
Of foolish trivial things; of life and death,
Time, and forgetfulness, and dust and truth;
Lilacs and youth.
You laugh, I hear the after taken breath,
You darken your eyes and turn away your head
At something I have said
Some intuition that flew too deep,
And struck a plangent chord.
Tonight, tonight you will remember it as you fall asleep,
Your dream will suddenly blossom with sharp delight,
Goodnight! You say.
The leaves of the lilac dip and sway;
The purple spikes of bloom
Nod their sweetness upon us, lift again,
Your white face turns, I am caught with pain
And silence descends, and dripping of dew from eaves,
And jeweled points of leaves.

IV.

I walk in a pleasure of sorrow along the street
And try to remember you; slow drops patter;
Water upon the lilacs has made them sweet;
I brush them with my sleeve, the cool drops scatter;
And suddenly I laugh and stand and listen
As if another had laughed a gust
Rustles the leaves, the wet spikes glisten;
And it seems as though it were you who had shaken the bough,
And spilled the fragrance I pursue your face again,
It grows more vague and lovely, it eludes me now.
I remember that you are gone, and drown in pain.
Something there was I said to you I recall,
Something just as the music seemed to fall
That made you laugh, and burns me still with pleasure.
What were those words the words like dripping fire?
I remember them now, and in sweet leisure

Rehearse the scene, more exquisite than before,
And you more beautiful, and I more wise.
Lilacs and spring, and night, and your clear eyes,
And you, in white, by the darkness of a door:
These things, like voices weaving to richest music,
Flow and fall in the cool night of my mind,
I pursue your ghost among green leaves that are ghostly,
I pursue you, but cannot find.
And suddenly, with a pang that is sweetest of all,
I become aware that I cannot remember you;
The ghost I knew
Has silently plunged in shadows, shadows that stream and fall.

V.

Let us go in and dance once more
On the dream's glimmering floor,
Beneath the balcony festooned with roses.
Let us go in and dance once more.
The door behind us closes
Against an evening purple with stars and mist.
Let us go in and keep our tryst
With music and white roses, and spin around
In swirls of sound.
Do you foresee me, married and grown old?
And you, who smile about you at this room,
Is it foretold
That you must step from tumult into gloom,
Forget me, love another?
No, you are Cleopatra, fiercely young,
Laughing upon the topmost stair of night;
Roses upon the desert must be flung;
Above us, light by light,
Weaves the delirious darkness, petal fall,
And music breaks in waves on the pillared wall;
And you are Cleopatra, and do not care.
And so, in memory, you will always be
Young and foolish, a thing of dream and mist;
And so, perhaps when all is disillusioned,
And eternal spring returns once more,
Bringing a ghost of lovelier springs remembered,
You will remember me.

VI.

Yet when we meet we seem in silence to say,
Pretending serene forgetfulness of our youth,
"Do you remember but then why should you remember!
Do you remember a certain day,
Or evening rather, spring evening long ago,
We talked of death, and love, and time, and truth,
And said such wise things, things that amused us so
How foolish we were, who thought ourselves so wise!"
And then we laugh, with shadows in our eyes.

Conrad Potter Aiken

North Infinity Street

The alarm clocks tick in a thousand furnished rooms,
tick and are wound for a thousand separate dooms;
all down both sides of North Infinity Street
you hear that contrapuntal pawnshop beat.

Hall bedrooms, attic rooms, where the gas-ring sings,
rooms in the basement where the loud doorbell rings;
carpeted or bare, by the rail at the head of the stair,
the curtains drawn, a mirror, a bed, and a chair,

in midnight darkness, when the last footfall creaks,
in northeast rain, when the broken window leaks,
at dawn, to the sound of dishes, the kitchen steam,
at dusk, when the muted radio croons a dream,

there, amid combs and the waiting shoes and socks,
and the bathrobes hung in closets, tick the clocks:
on the chest of drawers, on the table beside the bed,
facing the pillow, facing the recumbent head:

yes, from here to forever, from here to never,
one long sidereal curve of ticking fever,
all down both sides of North Infinity Street
you hear that contrapuntal pawnshop beat.

Conrad Potter Aiken

One

One, where the pale sea foamed at the yellow sand,
With wave upon slowly shattering wave,
Turned to the city of towers as evening fell;
And slowly walked by the darkening road toward it;
And saw how the towers darkened against the sky;
And across the distance heard the toll of a bell.

Along the darkening road he hurried alone,
With his eyes cast down,
And thought how the streets were hoarse with a tide of people,
With clamor of voices, and numberless faces . . .
And it seemed to him, of a sudden, that he would drown
Here in the quiet of evening air, These empty and voiceless places . . .
And he hurried towards the city, to enter there.

Along the darkening road, between tall trees
That made a sinister whisper, loudly he walked.
Behind him, sea-gulls dipped over long grey seas.
Before him, numberless lovers smiled and talked.
And death was observed with sudden cries,
And birth with laughter and pain.
And the trees grew taller and blacker against the skies
And night came down again.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Our Secret Selves

The snow floats down upon us, mingled with rain . . .
It eddies around pale lilac lamps, and falls
Down golden-windowed walls.
We were all born of flesh, in a flare of pain,
We do not remember the red roots whence we rose,
But we know that we rose and walked, that after a while
We shall lie down again.

The snow floats down upon us, we turn, we turn,
Through gorges filled with light we sound and flow . . .
One is struck down and hurt, we crowd about him,
We bear him away, gaze after his listless body;
But whether he lives or dies we do not know.

One of us sings in the street, and we listen to him;
The words ring over us like vague bells of sorrow.
He sings of a house he lived in long ago.
It is strange; this house of dust was the house I lived in;
The house you lived in, the house that all of us know.
And coiling slowly about him, and laughing at him,
And throwing him pennies, we bear away
A mournful echo of other times and places,
And follow a dream . . . a dream that will not stay.

Down long broad flights of lamplit stairs we flow;
Noisy, in scattered waves, crowding and shouting;
In broken slow cascades.
The gardens extend before us . . . We spread out swiftly;
Trees are above us, and darkness. The canyon fades . . .

And we recall, with a gleaming stab of sadness,
Vaguely and incoherently, some dream
Of a world we came from, a world of sun-blue hills . . .
A black wood whispers around us, green eyes gleam;
Someone cries in the forest, and someone kills.

We flow to the east, to the white-lined shivering sea;
We reach to the west, where the whirling sun went down;
We close our eyes to music in bright cafes.

We diverge from clamorous streets to streets that are silent.
We loaf where the wind-spilled fountain plays.

And, growing tired, we turn aside at last,
Remember our secret selves, seek out our towers,
Lay weary hands on the banisters, and climb;
Climbing, each, to his little four-square dream
Of love or lust or beauty or death or crime.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Over The Darkened City

Over the darkened city, the city of towers,
The city of a thousand gates,
Over the gleaming terraced roofs, the huddled towers,
Over a somnolent whisper of loves and hates,
The slow wind flows, drearily streams and falls,
With a mournful sound down rain-dark walls.
On one side purples the lustrous dusk of the sea,
And dreams in white at the city's feet;
On one side sleep the plains, with heaped-up hills.
Oaks and beeches whisper in rings about it.
Above the trees are towers where dread bells beat.

The fisherman draws his streaming net from the sea
And sails toward the far-off city, that seems
Like one vague tower.
The dark bow plunges to foam on blue-black waves,
And shrill rain seethes like a ghostly music about him
In a quiet shower.

Rain with a shrill sings on the lapsing waves;
Rain thrills over the roofs again;
Like a shadow of shifting silver it crosses the city;
The lamps in the streets are streamed with rain;
And sparrows complain beneath deep eaves,
And among whirled leaves
The sea-gulls, blowing from tower to lower tower,
From wall to remoter wall,
Skim with the driven rain to the rising sea-sound
And close grey wings and fall . . .

. . . Hearing great rain above me, I now remember
A girl who stood by the door and shut her eyes:
Her pale cheeks glistened with rain, she stood and shivered.
Into a forest of silver she vanished slowly . . .
Voices about me rise . . .

Voices clear and silvery, voices of raindrops,-
'We struck with silver claws, we struck her down.
We are the ghosts of the singing furies . . . '

A chorus of elfin voices blowing about me
Weaves to a babel of sound. Each cries a secret.
I run among them, reach out vain hands, and drown.

'I am the one who stood beside you and smiled,
Thinking your face so strangely young . . . '
'I am the one who loved you but did not dare.'
'I am the one you followed through crowded streets,
The one who escaped you, the one with red-gleamed hair.'

'I am the one you saw to-day, who fell
Senseless before you, hearing a certain bell:
A bell that broke great memories in my brain.'
'I am the one who passed unnoticed before you,
Invisible, in a cloud of secret pain.'

'I am the one who suddenly cried, beholding
The face of a certain man on the dazzling screen.
They wrote me that he was dead. It was long ago.
I walked in the streets for a long while, hearing nothing,
And returned to see it again. And it was so.'

Weave, weave, weave, you streaks of rain!
I am dissolved and woven again . . .
Thousands of faces rise and vanish before me.
Thousands of voices weave in the rain.

'I am the one who rode beside you, blinking
At a dazzle of golden lights.
Tempests of music swept me: I was thinking
Of the gorgeous promise of certain nights:
Of the woman who suddenly smiled at me this day,
Smiled in a certain delicious sidelong way,
And turned, as she reached the door,
To smile once more . . .
Her hands are whiter than snow on midnight water.
Her throat is golden and full of golden laughter,
Her eyes are strange as the stealth of the moon
On a night in June . . .
She runs among whistling leaves; I hurry after;
She dances in dreams over white-waved water;
Her body is white and fragrant and cool,

Magnolia petals that float on a white-starred pool . . .
I have dreamed of her, dreaming for many nights
Of a broken music and golden lights,
Of broken webs of silver, heavily falling
Between my hands and their white desire:
And dark-leaved boughs, edged with a golden radiance,
Dipping to screen a fire . . .
I dream that I walk with her beneath high trees,
But as I lean to kiss her face,
She is blown aloft on wind, I catch at leaves,
And run in a moonless place;
And I hear a crashing of terrible rocks flung down,
And shattering trees and cracking walls,
And a net of intense white flame roars over the town,
And someone cries; and darkness falls . . .
But now she has leaned and smiled at me,
My veins are afire with music,
Her eyes have kissed me, my body is turned to light;
I shall dream to her secret heart tonight . . . '

He rises and moves away, he says no word,
He folds his evening paper and turns away;
I rush through the dark with rows of lamplit faces;
Fire bells peal, and some of us turn to listen,
And some sit motionless in their accustomed places.

Cold rain lashes the car-roof, scurries in gusts,
Streams down the windows in waves and ripples of lustre;
The lamps in the streets are distorted and strange.
Someone takes his watch from his pocket and yawns.
One peers out in the night for the place to change.

Rain . . . rain . . . rain . . . we are buried in rain,
It will rain forever, the swift wheels hiss through water,
Pale sheets of water gleam in the windy street.
The pealing of bells is lost in a drive of rain-drops.
Remote and hurried the great bells beat.

'I am the one whom life so shrewdly betrayed,
Misfortune dogs me, it always hunted me down.
And to-day the woman I love lies dead.
I gave her roses, a ring with opals;

These hands have touched her head.

'I bound her to me in all soft ways,
I bound her to me in a net of days,
Yet now she has gone in silence and said no word.
How can we face these dazzling things, I ask you?
There is no use: we cry: and are not heard.

'They cover a body with roses . . . I shall not see it . . .
Must one return to the lifeless walls of a city
Whose soul is charred by fire? . . . '
His eyes are closed, his lips press tightly together.
Wheels hiss beneath us. He yields us our desire.

'No, do not stare so-he is weak with grief,
He cannot face you, he turns his eyes aside;
He is confused with pain.
I suffered this. I know. It was long ago . . .
He closes his eyes and drowns in death again.'

The wind hurls blows at the rain-starred glistening windows,
The wind shrills down from the half-seen walls.
We flow on the mournful wind in a dream of dying;
And at last a silence falls.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Prelude

As evening falls,
And the yellow lights leap one by one
Along high walls
And along black streets that glisten as if with rain,
The muted city seems
Like one in a restless sleep who lies and dreams
Of vague desires, vague memories, and half-forgotten pain
Along dark veins like lights the quick dreams run,
Flash, are extinguished, flash again,
To mingle and glow at last in the enormous brain
And die away
As evening falls,
A dream dissolves these insubstantial walls,
A myriad secretly gliding lights lie bare.
The lover rises, the harlot combs her hair,
The dead man's face grows blue in the dizzy lamplight,
The watchman climbs the stair
The bank-defaulter leers at a chaos of figures
And runs among them and is beaten down ;
The sick man coughs, and hears the chisels ringing;
The tired clown
Sees the enormous crowd—a million faces
Motionless in their places,
Ready to laugh, and seize, and crush, and tear
The dancer smooths her hair,
Laces her golden slippers and runs through the door
To dance once more,
Hearing swift music like an enchantment rise,
Feeling the praise of a thousand eyes.

As darkness falls,
The walls grow luminous and warm, the walls
Tremble and glow with the lives within them moving,
Moving like music, secret and rich and warm.
How shall we live tonight, where shall we turn?
To what new light or darkness yearn ?
A thousand winding stairs lead down before us;
And one by one in myriads we descend
By lamp-lit flowered walls, long balustrades,

Through half-lit halls which reach no end.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Red Is The Color Of Blood

Red is the color of blood, and I will seek it:
I have sought it in the grass.
It is the color of steep sun seen through eyelids.

It is hidden under the suave flesh of women-
Flows there, quietly flows.
It mounts from the heart to the temples, the singing mouth-
As cold sap climbs to the rose.
I am confused in webs and knots of scarlet
Spun from the darkness;
Or shuttled from the mouths of thirsty spiders.

Madness for red! I devour the leaves of autumn.
I tire of the green of the world.
I am myself a mouth for blood...

Here, in the golden haze of the late slant sun,
Let us walk, with the light in our eyes,
To a single bench from the outset predetermined.
Look: there are seagulls in these city skies,
Kindled against the blue.
But I do not think of the seagulls, I think of you.

Your eyes, with the late sun in them,
Are like blue pools dazzled with yellow petals.
This pale green suits them well.

Here is your finger, with an emerald on it:
The one I gave you. I say these things politely-
But what I think beneath them, who can tell?

For I think of you, crumpled against a whiteness;
Flayed and torn, with a dulled face.
I think of you, writing, a thing of scarlet,
And myself, rising red from that embrace.

November sun is sunlight poured through honey:
Old things, in such a light, grow subtle and fine.
Bare oaks are like still fire.

Talk to me: now we drink the evening's wine.
Look, how our shadows creep along the grave!-
And this way, how the gravel begins to shine!

This is the time of day for recollections,
For sentimental regrets, oblique allusions,
Rose-leaves, shrivelled in a musty jar.
Scatter them to the wind! There are tempests coming.
It is dark, with a windy star.

If human mouths were really roses, my dear,-
(Why must we link things so?-)
I would tear yours petal by petal with slow murder.
I would pluck the stamens, the pistils,
The gold and the green,-
Spreading the subtle sweetness that was your breath
On a cold wave of death....

Now let us walk back, slowly, as we came.
We will light the room with candles; they may shine
Like rows of yellow eyes.
Your hair is like spun fire, by candle-flame.
You smile at me-say nothing. You are wise.

For I think of you, flung down brutal darkness;
Crushed and red, with pale face.
I think of you, with your hair disordered and dripping.
And myself, rising red from that embrace.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Rose And Murray

After the movie, when the lights come up,
He takes her powdered hand behind the wings;
She, all in yellow, like a buttercup,
Lifts her white face, yearns up to him, and clings;
And with a silent, gliding step they move
Over the footlights, in familiar glare,
Panther-like in the Tango whirl of love,
He fawning close on her with idiot stare.
Swiftly they cross the stage. O lyric ease!
The drunken music follows the sure feet,
The swaying elbows, intergliding knees,
Moving with slow precision on the beat.
She was a waitress in a restaurant,
He picked her up and taught her how to dance.
She feels his arms, lifts an appealing glance,
But knows he spent last evening with Zudora;
And knows that certain changes are before her.

The brilliant spotlight circles them around,
Flashing the spangles on her weighted dress.
He mimics wooing her, without a sound,
Flatters her with a smoothly smiled caress.
He fears that she will someday queer his act;
Feeling his anger. He will quit her soon.
He nods for faster music. He will contract
Another partner, under another moon.
Meanwhile, 'smooth stuff.' He lets his dry eyes flit
Over the yellow faces there below;
Maybe he'll cut down on his drinks a bit,
Not to annoy her, and spoil the show. . .
Zudora, waiting for her turn to come,
Watches them from the wings and fatly leers
At the girl's younger face, so white and dumb,
And the fixed, anguished eyes, ready for tears.

She lies beside him, with a false wedding-ring,
In a cheap room, with moonlight on the floor;
The moonlit curtains remind her much of spring,
Of a spring evening on the Coney shore.

And while he sleeps, knowing she ought to hate,
She still clings to the lover that she knew,-
The one that, with a pencil on a plate,
Drew a heart and wrote, 'I'd die for you.'

Conrad Potter Aiken

Sea Holly

Begotten by the meeting of rock with rock,
The mating of rock and rock, rocks gnashing together;
Created so, and yet forgetful, walks
The seaward path, puts up her left hand, shades
Blue eyes, the eyes of rock, to see better
In slanting light the ancient sheep (which kneels
Biting the grass) the while her other hand,
Hooking the wicker handle, turns the basket
Of eggs. The sea is high to-day. The eggs
Are cheaper. The sea is blown from the southwest,
Confused, taking up sand and mud in waves,
The waves break, sluggish, in brown foam, the wind
Disperses (on the sheep and hawthorn) spray,—
And on her cheeks, the cheeks engendered of rock,
And eyes, the colour of rock. The left hand
Falls from the eyes, and undecided slides
Over the left breast on which muslin lightly
Rests, touching the nipple, and then down
The hollow side, virgin as rock, and bitterly
Caresses the blue hip.

It was for this,
This obtuse taking of the seaward path,
This stupid hearing of larks, this hooking
Of wicker, this absent observation of sheep
Kneeling in harsh sea-grass, the cool hand shading
The spray-stung eyes—it was for this the rock
Smote itself. The sea is higher to-day,
And eggs are cheaper. The eyes of rock take in
The seaward path that winds toward the sea,
The thistle-prodder, old woman under a bonnet,
Forking the thistles, her back against the sea,
Pausing, with hard hands on the handle, peering
With rock eyes from her bonnet.

It was for this,
This rock-lipped facing of brown waves, half sand

And half water, this tentative hand that slides
Over the breast of rock, and into the hollow
Soft side of muslin rock, and then fiercely
Almost as rock against the hip of rock—
It was for this in midnight the rocks met,
And dithered together, cracking and smoking.

It was for this
Barren beauty, barrenness of rock that aches
On the seaward path, seeing the fruitful sea,
Hearing the lark of rock that sings, smelling
The rock-flower of hawthorn, sweetness of rock—
It was for this, stone pain in the stony heart,
The rock loved and laboured; and all is lost.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Senlin: His Cloudy Destiny

1

Senlin sat before us and we heard him.
He smoked his pipe before us and we saw him.
Was he small, with reddish hair,
Did he light his pipe with a meditative stare
And a twinkling flame reflected in blue eyes?
'I am alone': said Senlin; 'in a forest of leaves
The single leaf that creeps and falls.
The single blade of grass in a desert of grass
That none foresaw and none recalls.
The single shell that a green wave shatters
In tiny specks of whiteness on brown sands . . .
How shall you understand me with your hearts,
Who cannot reach me with your hands? . . .'

The city dissolves about us, and its walls
Are the sands beside a sea.
We plunge in a chaos of dunes, white waves before us
Crash on kelp tumultuously,
Gulls wheel over foam, the clouds blow tattered,
The sun is swallowed . . . Has Senlin become a shore?
Is Senlin a grain of sand beneath our footsteps,
A speck of shell upon which waves will roar? . . .
Senlin! we cry . . . Senlin! again . . . no answer,
Only the crash of sea on a shell-white shore.

Yet, we would say, this is no shore at all,
But a small bright room with lamplight on the wall;
And the familiar chair
Where Senlin sat, with lamplight on his hair.

2

Senlin, alone before us, played a music.
Was it himself he played? . . . We sat and listened,
Perplexed and pleased and tired.
'Listen!' he said, 'and you will learn a secret--
Though it is not the secret you desired.

I have not found a meaning that will praise you!
Out of the heart of silence comes this music,
Quietly speaks and dies.
Look! there is one white star above black houses!
And a tiny man who climbs toward the skies!
Where does he walk to? What does he leave behind him?
What was his foolish name?
What did he stop to say, before he left you
As simply as he came?
"Death?" did it sound like, "love and god, and laughter,
Sunlight, and work, and pain . . .?"
No--it appears to me that these were symbols
Of simple truths he found no way to explain.
He spoke, but found you could not understand him--
You were alone, and he was alone.

"He sought to touch you, and found he could not reach you,--
He sought to understand you, and could not hear you.
And so this music, which I play before you,--
Does it mean only what it seems to mean?
Or is it a dance of foolish waves in sunlight
Above a desperate depth of things unseen?
Listen! Do you not hear the singing voices
Out of the darkness of this sea?
But no: you cannot hear them; for if you heard them
You would have heard and captured me.
Yet I am here, talking of laughter.
Laughter and love and work and god;
As I shall talk of these same things hereafter
In wave and sod.
Walk on a hill and call me: "Senlin! . . . Senlin! . . ."
Will I not answer you as clearly as now?
Listen to rain, and you will hear me speaking.
Look for my heart in the breaking of a bough . . .'

3

Senlin stood before us in the sunlight,
And laughed, and walked away.
Did no one see him leaving the doors of the city,
Looking behind him, as if he wished to stay?
Has no one, in the forests of the evening,

Heard the sad horn of Senlin slowly blown?
For somewhere, in the worlds-in-worlds about us,
He changes still, unfriended and alone.
Is he the star on which we walk at daybreak,
The light that blinds our eyes?
'Senlin!' we cry. 'Senlin!' again . . . no answer:
Only the soulless brilliance of blue skies.

Yet we would say, this was no man at all,
But a dream we dreamed, and vividly recall;
And we are mad to walk in wind and rain
Hoping to find, somewhere, that dream again.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Senlin: His Dark Origins

1

Senlin sits before us, and we see him.
He smokes his pipe before us, and we hear him.
Is he small, with reddish hair,
Does he light his pipe with meditative stare,
And a pointed flame reflected in both eyes?
Is he sad and happy and foolish and wise?
Did no one see him enter the doors of the city,
Looking above him at the roofs and trees and skies?
'I stepped from a cloud', he says, 'as evening fell;
I walked on the sound of a bell;
I ran with winged heels along a gust;
Or is it true that I laughed and sprang from dust? . . .
Has no one, in a great autumnal forest,
When the wind bares the trees,
Heard the sad horn of Senlin slowly blown?
Has no one, on a mountain in the spring,
Heard Senlin sing?
Perhaps I came alone on a snow-white horse,--
Riding alone from the deep-starred night.
Perhaps I came on a ship whose sails were music,--
Sailing from moon or sun on a river of light.'

He lights his pipe with a pointed flame.
'Yet, there were many autumns before I came,
And many springs. And more will come, long after
There is no horn for me, or song, or laughter.

The city dissolves about us, and its walls
Become an ancient forest. There is no sound
Except where an old twig tires and falls;
Or a lizard among the dead leaves crawls;
Or a flutter is heard in darkness along the ground.

Has Senlin become a forest? Do we walk in Senlin?
Is Senlin the wood we walk in, --ourselves,--the world?
Senlin! we cry . . . Senlin! again . . . No answer,
Only soft broken echoes backward whirled . . .

Yet we would say: this is no wood at all,
But a small white room with a lamp upon the wall;
And Senlin, before us, pale, with reddish hair,
Lights his pipe with a meditative stare.

2

Senlin, walking beside us, swings his arms
And turns his head to look at walls and trees.
The wind comes whistling from shrill stars of winter,
The lights are jewels, black roots freeze.
'Did I, then, stretch from the bitter earth like these,
Reaching upward with slow and rigid pain
To seek, in another air, myself again?'

(Immense and solitary in a desert of rocks
Behold a bewildered oak
With white clouds screaming through its leafy brain.)
'Or was I the single ant, or tinier thing,
That crept from the rocks of buried time
And dedicated its holy life to climb
From atom to beetling atom, jagged grain to grain,
Patiently out of the darkness we call sleep
Into a hollow gigantic world of light
Thinking the sky to be its destined shell,
Hoping to fit it well!--'

The city dissolves about us, and its walls
Are mountains of rock cruelly carved by wind.
Sand streams down their wasting sides, sand
Mounts upward slowly about them: foot and hand
We crawl and bleed among them! Is this Senlin?

In the desert of Senlin must we live and die?
We hear the decay of rocks, the crash of boulders,
Snarling of sand on sand. 'Senlin!' we cry.
'Senlin!' again . . . Our shadows revolve in silence
Under the soulless brilliance of blue sky.

Yet we would say: there are no rocks at all,
Nor desert of sand . . . here by a city wall

White lights jewell the evening, black roots freeze,
And Senlin turns his head to look at trees.

3

It is evening, Senlin says, and in the evening,
By a silent shore, by a far distant sea,
White unicorns come gravely down to the water.
In the lilac dusk they come, they are white and stately,
Stars hang over the purple waveless sea;
A sea on which no sail was ever lifted,
Where a human voice was never heard.
The shadows of vague hills are dark on the water,
The silent stars seem silently to sing.
And gravely come white unicorns down to the water,
One by one they come and drink their fill;
And daisies burn like stars on the darkened hill.

It is evening Senlin says, and in the evening
The leaves on the trees, abandoned by the light,
Look to the earth, and whisper, and are still.
The bat with horned wings, tumbling through the darkness,
Breaks the web, and the spider falls to the ground.
The starry dewdrop gathers upon the oakleaf,
Clings to the edge, and falls without a sound.
Do maidens spread their white palms to the starlight
And walk three steps to the east and clearly sing?
Do dewdrops fall like a shower of stars from willows?
Has the small moon a ghostly ring? . . .
White skeletons dance on the moonlit grass,
Singing maidens are buried in deep graves,
The stars hang over a sea like polished glass . . .
And solemnly one by one in the darkness there
Neighing far off on the haunted air
White unicorns come gravely down to the water.

No silver bells are heard. The westering moon
Lights the pale floors of caverns by the sea.
Wet weed hangs on the rock. In shimmering pools
Left on the rocks by the receding sea
Starfish slowly turn their white and brown
Or writhe on the naked rocks and drown.

Do sea-girls haunt these caves--do we hear faint singing?
Do we hear from under the sea a faint bell ringing?
Was that a white hand lifted among the bubbles
And fallen softly back?
No, these shores and caverns are all silent,
Dead in the moonlight; only, far above,
On the smooth contours of these headlands,
White amid the eternal black,
One by one in the moonlight there
Neighing far off on the haunted air
The unicorns come down to the sea.

4

Senlin, walking before us in the sunlight,
Bending his small legs in a peculiar way,
Goes to his work with thoughts of the universe.
His hands are in his pockets, he smokes his pipe,
He is happily conscious of roofs and skies;
And, without turning his head, he turns his eyes
To regard white horses drawing a small white hearse.
The sky is brilliant between the roofs,
The windows flash in the yellow sun,
On the hard pavement ring the hoofs,
The light wheels softly run.
Bright particles of sunlight fall,
Quiver and flash, gyrate and burn,
Honey-like heat flows down the wall,
The white spokes dazzle and turn.

Senlin, walking before us in the sunlight,
Regards the hearse with an introspective eye.
'Is it my childhood there,' he asks,
'Sealed in a hearse and hurrying by?'
He taps his trowel against a stone;
The trowel sings with a silver tone.

'Nevertheless I know this well.
Bury it deep and toll a bell,
Bury it under land or sea,
You cannot bury it save in me.'

It is as if his soul had become a city,
With noisily peopled streets, and through these streets
Senlin himself comes driving a small white hearse . . .
'Senlin!' we cry. He does not turn his head.
But is that Senlin?--Or is this city Senlin,--
Quietly watching the burial of the dead?
Dumbly observing the cortège of its dead?
Yet we would say that all this is but madness:
Around a distant corner trots the hearse.
And Senlin walks before us in the sunlight
Happily conscious of his universe.

5

In the hot noon, in an old and savage garden,
The peach-tree grows. Its cruel and ugly roots
Rend and rifle the silent earth for moisture.
Above, in the blue, hang warm and golden fruits.
Look, how the cancerous roots crack mould and stone!
Earth, if she had a voice, would wail her pain.
Is she the victim, or is the tree the victim?
Delicate blossoms opened in the rain,
Black bees flew among them in the sunlight,
And sacked them ruthlessly; and no a bird
Hangs, sharp-eyed, in the leaves, and pecks the fruit;
And the peach-tree dreams, and does not say a word.
. . . Senlin, tapping his trowel against a stone,
Observes this tree he planted: it is his own.

'You will think it strange,' says Senlin, 'but this tree
Utters profound things in this garden;
And in its silence speaks to me.
I have sensations, when I stand beneath it,
As if its leaves looked at me, and could see;
And those thin leaves, even in windless air,
Seem to be whispering me a choral music,
Insubstantial but debonair.

"Regard," they seem to say,
"Our idiot root, which going its brutal way
Has cracked your garden wall!
Ugly, is it not?"

A desecration of this place . . .
And yet, without it, could we exist at all?"
Thus, rustling with importance, they seem to me
To make their apology;
Yet, while they apologize,
Ask me a wary question with their eyes.
Yes, it is true their origin is low--
Brutish and dull and cruel . . . and it is true
Their roots have cracked the wall. But do we know
The leaves less cruel--the root less beautiful?
Sometimes it seems as if there grew
In the dull garden of my mind
A tree like this, which, singing with delicate leaves,
Yet cracks the wall with cruel roots and blind.
Sometimes, indeed, it appears to me
That I myself am such a tree . . .'

. . . And as we hear from Senlin these strange words
So, slowly, in the sunlight, he becomes this tree:
And among the pleasant leaves hang sharp-eyed birds
While cruel roots dig downward secretly.

6

Rustling among his odds and ends of knowledge
Suddenly, to his wonder, Senlin finds
How Cleopatra and Senebtisi
Were dug by many hands from ancient tombs.
Cloth after scented cloth the sage unwinds:
Delicious to see our futile modern sunlight
Dance like a harlot among these Dogs and Dooms!

First, the huge pyramid, with rock on rock
Bloodily piled to heaven; and under this
A gilded cavern, bat festooned;
And here in rows on rows, with gods about them,
Cloudily lustrous, dim, the sacred coffins,
Silver starred and crimson mooned.

What holy secret shall we now uncover?
Inside the outer coffin is a second;
Inside the second, smaller, lies a third.

This one is carved, and like a human body;
And painted over with fish and bull and bird.
Here are men walking stiffly in procession,
Blowing horns or lifting spears.
Where do they march to? Where do they come from?
Soft whine of horns is in our ears.

Inside, the third, a fourth . . . and this the artist,--
A priest, perhaps--did most to make resemble
The flesh of her who lies within.
The brown eyes widely stare at the bat-hung ceiling.
The hair is black, The mouth is thin.
Princess! Secret of life! We come to praise you!
The torch is lowered, this coffin too we open,
And the dark air is drunk with musk and myrrh.
Here are the thousand white and scented wrappings,
The gilded mask, and jeweled eyes, of her.

And now the body itself, brown, gaunt, and ugly,
And the hollow scull, in which the brains are withered,
Lie bare before us. Princess, is this all?
Something there was we asked that is not answered.
Soft bats, in rows, hang on the lustered wall.

And all we hear is a whisper sound of music,
Of brass horns dustily raised and briefly blown,
And a cry of grief; and men in a stiff procession
Marching away and softly gone.

7

'And am I then a pyramid?' says Senlin,
'In which are caves and coffins, where lies hidden
Some old and mocking hieroglyph of flesh?
Or am I rather the moonlight, spreading subtly
Above those stones and times?
Or the green blade of grass that bravely grows
Between to massive boulders of black basalt
Year after year, and fades and blows?

Senlin, sitting before us in the lamplight,
Laughs, and lights his pipe. The yellow flame

Minutely flares in his eyes, minutely dwindles.
Does a blade of grass have Senlin for a name?
Yet we would say that we have seen him somewhere,
A tiny spear of green beneath the blue,
Playing his destiny in a sun-warmed crevice
With the gigantic fates of frost and dew.

Does a spider come and spin his gossamer ladder
Rung by silver rung,
Chaining it fast to Senlin? Its faint shadow
Flung, waveringly, where his is flung?
Does a raindrop dazzle starlike down his length
Trying his futile strength?
A snowflake startle him? The stars defeat him?
Through aeons of dusk have birds above him sung?
Time is a wind, says Senlin; time, like music,
Blows over us its mournful beauty, passes,
And leaves behind a shadowy reflection,--
A helpless gesture of mist above the grasses.

8

In cold blue lucid dusk before the sunrise,
One yellow star sings over a peak of snow,
And melts and vanishes in a light like roses.
Through slanting mist, black rocks appear and glow.

The clouds flow downward, slowly as grey glaciers,
Or up to a pale rose-azure pass.
Blue streams tinkle down from snow to boulders,
From boulders to white grass.

Icicles on the pine tree melt
And softly flash in the sun:
In long straight lines the star-drops fall
One by one.

Is a voice heard while the shadows still are long,
Borne slowly down on the sparkling air?
Is a thin bell heard from the peak of silence?
Is someone among the high snows there?

Where the blue stream flows coldly among the meadows
And mist still clings to rock and tree
Senlin walks alone; and from that twilight
Looks darkly up, to see

The calm unmoving peak of snow-white silence,
The rocks aflame with ice, the rose-blue sky . . .
Ghost-like, a cloud descends from twinkling ledges,
To nod before the dwindling sun and die.

'Something there is,' says Senlin, 'in that mountain,
Something forgotten now, that once I knew . . .'
We walk before a sun-tipped peak in silence,
Our shadows descend before us, long and blue.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Senlin: His Futile Preoccupations

1

I am a house, says Senlin, locked and darkened,
Sealed from the sun with wall and door and blind.
Summon me loudly, and you'll hear slow footsteps
Ring far and faint in the galleries of my mind.
You'll hear soft steps on an old and dusty stairway;
Peer darkly through some corner of a pane,
You'll see me with a faint light coming slowly,
Pausing above some gallery of the brain . . .

I am a city . . . In the blue light of evening
Wind wanders among my streets and makes them fair;
I am a room of rock . . . a maiden dances
Lifting her hands, tossing her golden hair.
She combs her hair, the room of rock is darkened,
She extends herself in me, and I am sleep.
It is my pride that starlight is above me;
I dream amid waves of air, my walls are deep.

I am a door . . . before me roils the darkness,
Behind me ring clear waves of sound and light.
Stand in the shadowy street outside, and listen--
The crying of violins assails the night . . .
My walls are deep, but the cries of music pierce them;
They shake with the sound of drums . . . yet it is strange
That I should know so little what means this music,
Hearing it always within me change and change.

Knock on the door,--and you shall have an answer.
Open the heavy walls to set me free,
And blow a horn to call me into the sunlight,--
And startled, then, what a strange thing you will see!
Nuns, murderers, and drunkards, saints and sinners,
Lover and dancing girl and sage and clown
Will laugh upon you, and you will find me nowhere.
I am a room, a house, a street, a town.

2

It is morning, Senlin says, and in the morning
When the light drips through the shutters like the dew,
I arise, I face the sunrise,
And do the things my fathers learned to do.
Stars in the purple dusk above the rooftops
Pale in a saffron mist and seem to die,
And I myself on a swiftly tilting planet
Stand before a glass and tie my tie.

Vine leaves tap my window,
Dew-drops sing to the garden stones,
The robin chips in the chinaberry tree
Repeating three clear tones.

It is morning. I stand by the mirror
And tie my tie once more.
While waves far off in a pale rose twilight
Crash on a white sand shore.
I stand by a mirror and comb my hair:
How small and white my face!--
The green earth tilts through a sphere of air
And bathes in a flame of space.
There are houses hanging above the stars
And stars hung under a sea . . .
And a sun far off in a shell of silence
Dapples my walls for me . . .

It is morning, Senlin says, and in the morning
Should I not pause in the light to remember God?
Upright and firm I stand on a star unstable,
He is immense and lonely as a cloud.
I will dedicate this moment before my mirror
To him alone, and for him I will comb my hair.
Accept these humble offerings, cloud of silence!
I will think of you as I descend the stair.

Vine leaves tap my window,
The snail-track shines on the stones,
Dew-drops flash from the chinaberry tree
Repeating two clear tones.

It is morning, I awake from a bed of silence,
Shining I rise from the starless waters of sleep.
The walls are about me still as in the evening,
I am the same, and the same name still I keep.
The earth revolves with me, yet makes no motion,
The stars pale silently in a coral sky.
In a whistling void I stand before my mirror,
Unconcerned, I tie my tie.

There are horses neighing on far-off hills
Tossing their long white manes,
And mountains flash in the rose-white dusk,
Their shoulders black with rains . . .

It is morning. I stand by the mirror
And surprise my soul once more;
The blue air rushes above my ceiling,
There are suns beneath my floor . . .

. . . It is morning, Senlin says, I ascend from darkness
And depart on the winds of space for I know not where,
My watch is wound, a key is in my pocket,
And the sky is darkened as I descend the stair.
There are shadows across the windows, clouds in heaven,
And a god among the stars; and I will go
Thinking of him as I might think of daybreak
And humming a tune I know . . .

Vine-leaves tap at the window,
Dew-drops sing to the garden stones,
The robin chirps in the chinaberry tree
Repeating three clear tones.

3

I walk to my work, says Senlin, along a street
Superbly hung in space.
I lift these mortal stones, and with my trowel
I tap them into place.
But is god, perhaps, a giant who ties his tie
Grimacing before a colossal glass of sky?

These stones are heavy, these stones decay,
These stones are wet with rain,
I build them into a wall today,
Tomorrow they fall again.

Does god arise from a chaos of starless sleep,
Rise from the dark and stretch his arms and yawn;
And drowsily look from the window at his garden;
And rejoice at the dewdrop sparkeling on his lawn?

Does he remember, suddenly, with amazement,
The yesterday he left in sleep,--his name,--
Or the glittering street superbly hung in wind
Along which, in the dusk, he slowly came?

I devise new patterns for laying stones
And build a stronger wall.
One drop of rain astonishes me
And I let my trowel fall.

The flashing of leaves delights my eyes,
Blue air delights my face;
I will dedicate this stone to god
And tap it into its place.

4

That woman--did she try to attract my attention?
Is it true I saw her smile and nod?
She turned her head and smiled . . . was it for me?
It is better to think of work or god.
The clouds pile coldly above the houses
Slow wind revolves the leaves:
It begins to rain, and the first long drops
Are slantingly blown from eaves.

But it is true she tried to attract my attention!
She pressed a rose to her chin and smiled.
Her hand was white by the richness of her hair,
Her eyes were those of a child.
It is true she looked at me as if she liked me.
And turned away, afraid to look too long!

She watched me out of the corners of her eyes;
And, tapping time with fingers, hummed a song.

. . . Nevertheless, I will think of work,
With a trowel in my hands;
Or the vague god who blows like clouds
Above these dripping lands . . .

But . . . is it sure she tried to attract my attention?
She leaned her elbow in a peculiar way
There in the crowded room . . . she touched my hand . . .
She must have known, and yet,--she let it stay.
Music of flesh! Music of root and sod!
Leaf touching leaf in the rain!
Impalpable clouds of red ascend,
Red clouds blow over my brain.

Did she await from me some sign of acceptance?
I smoothed my hair with a faltering hand.
I started a feeble smile, but the smile was frozen:
Perhaps, I thought, I misunderstood.
Is it to be conceived that I could attract her--
This dull and futile flesh attract such fire?
I,--with a trowel's dullness in hand and brain!--
Take on some godlike aspect, rouse desire?
Incredible! . . . delicious! . . . I will wear
A brighter color of tie, arranged with care,
I will delight in god as I comb my hair.

And the conquests of my bolder past return
Like strains of music, some lost tune
Recalled from youth and a happier time.
I take my sweetheart's arm in the dusk once more;
One more we climb

Up the forbidden stairway,
Under the flickering light, along the railing:
I catch her hand in the dark, we laugh once more,
I hear the rustle of silk, and follow swiftly,
And softly at last we close the door.

Yes, it is true that woman tried to attract me:

It is true she came out of time for me,
Came from the swirling and savage forest of earth,
The cruel eternity of the sea.
She parted the leaves of waves and rose from silence
Shining with secrets she did not know.
Music of dust! Music of web and web!
And I, bewildered, let her go.

I light my pipe. The flame is yellow,
Edged underneath with blue.
These thoughts are truer of god, perhaps,
Than thoughts of god are true.

5

It is noontime, Senlin says, and a street piano
Strikes sharply against the sunshine a harsh chord,
And the universe is suddenly agitated,
And pain to my heart goes glittering like a sword.
Do I imagine it? The dust is shaken,
The sunlight quivers, the brittle oak-leaves tremble.
The world, disturbed, conceals its agitation;
And I, too, will dissemble.

Yet it is sorrow has found my heart,
Sorrow for beauty, sorrow for death;
And pain twirls slowly among the trees.

The street-piano revolves its glittering music,
The sharp notes flash and dazzle and turn,
Memory's knives are in this sunlit silence,
They ripple and lazily burn.
The star on which my shadow falls is frightened,--
It does not move; my trowel taps a stone,
The sweet note wavers amid derisive music;
And I, in horror of sunlight, stand alone.

Do not recall my weakness, savage music!
Let the knives rest!
Impersonal, harsh, the music revolves and glitters,
And the notes like poniards pierce my breast.
And I remember the shadows of webs on stones,

And the sound of rain on withered grass,
And a sorrowful face that looked without illusions
At its image in the glass.

Do not recall my childhood, pitiless music!
The green blades flicker and gleam,
The red bee bends the clover, deeply humming;
In the blue sea above me lazily stream
Cloud upon thin-brown cloud, revolving, scattering;
The mulberry tree rakes heaven and drops its fruit;
Amazing sunlight sings in the opened vault
On dust and bones, and I am mute.

It is noon; the bells let fall soft flowers of sound.
They turn on the air, they shrink in the flare of noon.
It is night; and I lie alone, and watch through the window
The terrible ice-white emptiness of the moon.
Small bells, far off, spill jewels of sound like rain,
A long wind hurries them whirled and far,
A cloud creeps over the moon, my bed is darkened,
I hold my breath and watch a star.

Do not disturb my memories, heartless music!
I stand once more by a vine-dark moonlit wall,
The sound of my footsteps dies in a void of moonlight,
And I watch white jasmine fall.
Is it my heart that falls? Does earth itself
Drift, a white petal, down the sky?
One bell-note goes to the stars in the blue-white silence,
Solitary and mournful, a somnolent cry.

6

Death himself in the rain . . . death himself . . .
Death in the savage sunlight . . . skeletal death . . .
I hear the clack of his feet,
Clearly on stones, softly in dust;
He hurries among the trees
Whirling the leaves, tossing his hands from waves.
Listen! the immortal footsteps beat.

Death himself in the grass, death himself,

Gyrating invisibly in the sun,
Scatters the grass-blades, whips the wind,
Tears at boughs with malignant laughter:
On the long echoing air I hear him run.

Death himself in the dusk, gathering lilacs,
Breaking a white-fleshed bough,
Strewing purple on a cobwebbed lawn,
Dancing, dancing,
The long red sun-rays glancing
On flailing arms, skipping with hideous knees
Cavorting grotesque ecstasies:
I do not see him, but I see the lilacs fall,
I hear the scrape of knuckles against the wall,
The leaves are tossed and tremble where he plunges among them,
And I hear the sound of his breath,
Sharp and whistling, the rythm of death.

It is evening: the lights on a long street balance and sway.
In the purple ether they swing and silently sing,
The street is a gossamer swung in space,
And death himself in the wind comes dancing along it,
And the lights, like raindrops, tremble and swing.
Hurry, spider, and spread your glistening web,
For death approaches!
Hurry, rose, and open your heart to the bee,
For death approaches!
Maiden, let down your hair for the hands of your lover,
Comb it with moonlight and wreath it with leaves,
For death approaches!

Death, huge in the star; small in the sand-grain;
Death himself in the rain,
Drawing the rain about him like a garment of jewels:
I hear the sound of his feet
On the stairs of the wind, in the sun,
In the forests of the sea . . .
Listen! the immortal footsteps beat!

7

It is noontime, Senlin says. The sky is brilliant

Above a green and dreaming hill.
I lay my trowel down. The pool is cloudless,
The grass, the wall, the peach-tree, all are still.

It appears to me that I am one with these:
A hill, upon whose back are a wall and trees.
It is noontime: all seems still
Upon this green and flowering hill.

Yet suddenly out of nowhere in the sky,
A cloud comes whirling, and flings
A lazily coiled vortex of shade on the hill.
It crosses the hill, and a bird in the peach-tree sings.
Amazing! Is there a change?
The hill seems somehow strange.
It is noontime. And in the tree
The leaves are delicately disturbed
Where the bird descends invisibly.
It is noontime. And in the pool
The sky is blue and cool.

Yet suddenly out of nowhere,
Something flings itself at the hill,
Tears with claws at the earth,
Lunges and hisses and softly recoils,
Crashing against the green.
The peach-tree braces itself, the pool is frightened,
The grass-blades quiver, the bird is still;
The wall silently struggles against the sunlight;
A terror stiffens the hill.
The trees turn rigidly, to face
Something that circles with slow pace:
The blue pool seems to shrink
From something that slides above its brink.
What struggle is this, ferocious and still--
What war in sunlight on this hill?
What is it creeping to dart
Like a knife-blade at my heart?

It is noontime, Senlin says, and all is tranquil:
The brilliant sky burns over a greenbright earth.
The peach-tree dreams in the sun, the wall is contented.

A bird in the peach-leaves, moving from sun to shadow,
Phrases again his unremembering mirth,
His lazily beautiful, foolish, mechanical mirth.

8

The pale blue gloom of evening comes
Among the phantom forests and walls
With a mournful and rhythmic sound of drums.
My heart is disturbed with a sound of myriad throbbing,
Persuasive and sinister, near and far:
In the blue evening of my heart
I hear the thrum of the evening star.

My work is uncompleted; and yet I hurry,--
Hearing the whispered pulsing of those drums,--
To enter the luminous walls and woods of night.
It is the eternal mistress of the world
Who shakes these drums for my delight.
Listen! the drums of the leaves, the drums of the dust,
The delicious quivering of this air!

I will leave my work unfinished, and I will go
With ringing and certain step through the laughter of chaos
To the one small room in the void I know.
Yesterday it was there,--
Will I find it tonight once more when I climb the stair?
The drums of the street beat swift and soft:
In the blue evening of my heart
I hear the throb of the bridal star.
It weaves deliciously in my brain
A tyrannous melody of her:
Hands in sunlight, threads of rain
Against a weeping face that fades,
Snow on a blackened window-pane;
Fire, in a dusk of hair entangled;
Flesh, more delicate than fruit;
And a voice that searches quivering nerves
For a string to mute.

My life is uncompleted: and yet I hurry
Among the tinkling forests and walls of evening

To a certain fragrant room.
Who is it that dances there, to a beating of drums,
While stars on a grey sea bud and bloom?
She stands at the top of the stair,
With the lamplight on her hair.
I will walk through the snarling of streams of space
And climb the long steps carved from wind
And rise once more towards her face.
Listen! the drums of the drowsy trees
Beating our nuptial ecstasies!

Music spins from the heart of silence
And twirls me softly upon the air:
It takes my hand and whispers to me:
It draws the web of the moonlight down.
There are hands, it says, as cool as snow,
The hands of the Venus of the sea;
There are waves of sound in a mermaid-cave;--
Come--then--come with me!
The flesh of the sea-rose new and cool,
The wavering image of her who comes
At dusk by a blue sea-pool.

Whispers upon the haunted air--
Whisper of foam-white arm and thigh;
And a shower of delicate lights blown down
Fro the laughing sky! . . .
Music spins from a far-off room.
Do you remember,--it seems to say,--
The mouth that smiled, beneath your mouth,
And kissed you . . . yesterday?
It is your own flesh waits for you.
Come! you are incomplete! . . .
The drums of the universe once more
Morosely beat.
It is the harlot of the world
Who clashes the leaves like ghostly drums
And disturbs the solitude of my heart
As evening comes!

I leave my work once more and walk
Along a street that sways in the wind.

I leave these stones, and walk once more
Along infinity's shore.
I climb the golden-laddered stair;
Among the stars in the void I climb:
I ascend the golden-laddered hair
Of the harlot-queen of time:
She laughs from a window in the sky,
Her white arms downward reach to me!
We are the universe that spins
In a dim ethereal sea.

9

It is evening, Senlin says, and in the evening
The throbbing of drums has languidly died away.
Forest and sea are still. We breathe in silence
And strive to say the things flesh cannot say.
The soulless wind falls slowly about the earth
And finds no rest.
The lover stares at the setting star,--the wakeful lover
Who finds no peace on his lover's breast.
The snare of desire that bound us in is broken;
Softly, in sorrow, we draw apart, and see,
Far off, the beauty we thought our flesh had captured,--
The star we longed to be but could not be.
Come back! We will laugh once more at the words we said!
We say them slowly again, but the words are dead.
Come back beloved! . . . The blue void falls between,
We cry to each other: alone; unknown; unseen.

We are the grains of sand that run and rustle
In the dry wind,
We are the grains of sand who thought ourselves
Immortal.
You touch my hand, time bears you away,--
An alien star for whom I have no word.
What are the meaningless things you say?
I answer you, but am not heard.

It is evening, Senlin says;
And a dream in ruin falls.
Once more we turn in pain, bewildered,

Among our finite walls:
The walls we built ourselves with patient hands;
For the god who sealed a question in our flesh.

10

It is moonlight. Alone in the silence
I ascend my stairs once more,
While waves, remote in a pale blue starlight,
Crash on a white sand shore.
It is moonlight. The garden is silent.
I stand in my room alone.
Across my wall, from the far-off moon,
A rain of fire is thrown . . .

There are houses hanging above the stars,
And stars hung under a sea:
And a wind from the long blue vault of time
Waves my curtain for me . . .

I wait in the dark once more,
Swung between space and space:
Before my mirror I lift my hands
And face my remembered face.

Is it I who stand in a question here,
Asking to know my name? . . .
It is I, yet I know not whither I go,
Nor why, nor whence I came.

It is I, who awoke at dawn
And arose and descended the stair,
Conceiving a god in the eye of the sun,--
In a woman's hands and hair.
It is I whose flesh is gray with the stones
I builded into a wall:
With a mournful melody in my brain
Of a tune I cannot recall . . .

There are roses to kiss: and mouths to kiss;
And the sharp-pained shadow of death.
I remember a rain-drop on my cheek,--

A wind like a fragrant breath . . .
And the star I laugh on tilts through heaven;
And the heavens are dark and steep . . .
I will forget these things once more
In the silence of sleep.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Shaemus

We will go no more to Shaemus, at the Nip,
for sly innuendo and an Oporto Flip,
the rough but tender voice, the wide-mouthed grin,
the steady-unsteady hand that poured the gin:

memory, that flew back years to find a name,
found it, and fetched it up, still just the same;
the shaky footsteps, and then the shaky kidding:
you, the big business man, outbid, outbidding,

the mystery man, the man of deep affairs,
highbrow, and playboy, and friend of millionaires:
and you, the lovers, whose love was in your faces—
there you were, back once more—and still the traces!—

Yes, still the traces of that love he loved,
and re-examined, but as if unmoved;
the names fished up from time, or Singapore,
joined and repeated on his bar once more;

as if no let or hindrance were permitted;
as if both time and space could be outwitted;
endurance noted—in a protocol—
and then embalmed, of course, in alcohol.

And now himself, the immortal, lightly gone,
as if stepped out for a quick one—who had none.
And dead, his room inspected by his friends,
to find a will, adjust the odds and ends;

and there, the fifteen suits, the malacca cane,
the hats, and spats: in which he roved again,
far from the furnished room, the sacred bar,

immortal dandy, towards an immortal star.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Stage Direction

It is a shabby backdrop of bright stars:
one of the small interstices of time:
the worn out north star northward, and Orion
to westward spread in ruined light. Eastward,
the other stars disposed, — or indisposed; —
x-ward or y-ward, the sick sun inflamed;
and all his drunken planets growing pale.
We watch them, and our watching is this hour.

It is a stage of ether, without space, —
a space of limbo without time, —
a faceless clock that never strikes;

and it is bloodstream at its priestlike task, —
the indeterminate and determined heart,
that beats, and beats, and does not know it beats.

Here the dark synapse between nerve and nerve;
the void, between two atoms in the brain;
darkness, without term or form, that sinks
between two thoughts.

Here we have sounded, angel! —
O angel soul, O memory of man! —
And felt the nothing that sustains our wings.
And here have seen the catalogue of things —
All in the maelstrom of the limbo caught,
and whirled concentric to the funnel's end,
sans number, and sans meaning, and sans purpose;
the lack of meaning has a heart-beat, and
the lack of number wears a cloak of stars.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Carver

See, as the carver carves a rose,
A wing, a toad, a serpent's eye,
In cruel granite, to disclose
The soft things that in hardness lie,
So this one, taking up his heart,
Which time and change had made a stone,
Carved out of it with dolorous art,
Laboring yearlong and alone,
The thing there hidden—rose, toad, wing?
A frog's hand on a lily pad?
Bees in a cobweb?—no such thing!
A girl's head was the thing he had,
Small, shapely, richly crowned with hair,
Drowsy, with eyes half closed, as they
Looked through you and beyond you, clear
To something farther than Cathay:
Saw you, yet counted you not worth
The seeing, thinking all the while
How, flower-like, beauty comes to birth;
And thinking this, began to smile.
Medusa! For she could not see
The world she turned to stone and ash.
Only herself she saw, a tree
That flowered beneath a lightning-flash.
Thus dreamed her face—a lovely thing
To worship, weep for, or to break . . .
Better to carve a claw, a wing,
Or, if the heart provide, a snake.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Charnel Rose: A Symphony

She rose in moonlight, and stood, confronting sea,
With her bare arms uplifted,
And lifted her voice in the silence foolishly:
And her face was small, and her voice was small.
'O moon!' she cried, 'I think how you must tire
Forever circling earth, so silently;
Earth, who is dark and makes you no reply.'
She only heard the little waves rush and fall;
And saw the moon go quietly down the sky.

Like a white figurehead in the seafaring wind,
She stood in the moonlight,
And heard her voice cry, ghostly and thinned,
Over the seethe of foam,
Saying, 'O numberless waters, I think it strange
How you can always shadow her face, and change
And yet never weary of her, having no ease.'
But the sea said nothing, no word at all:
Unquietly, as in sleep, she saw it rise and fall;
And the moon spread a net of silver over the foam.

She lifted her hands and let them fall again,
Impatient of the silence. And in despair,
Hopeless of final answer against her pain,
She said, to the stealthy air,
'O air, far traveller, who from the stars are blown,
Float pollen of suns, you are an unseen sea
Lifting and bearing the words, eternally.
O air, do you not weary of your task?'
- She stood in the silence, frightened and alone,
And heard her syllables ask and ask.

And then, as she walked in the moonlight, so alone,
Lost and small in a soulless sea,
Hearing no voice make answer to her own,
From that infinity, -
Suddenly she was aware of a low whisper,
A dreadful heartless sound; and she stood still, -
There in the beach grass, on a sandy hill, -

And heard the stars, making a ghostly whisper;
And the soulless whisper of sun and moon and tree;
And the sea, rising and falling with a blind moan.

And as she faded into the night,
A glimmer of white,
With her arms uplifted and her face bowed down;
Sinking, again, into the sleep of sands,
The sea-sands white and brown;
Or among the sea-grass rustling as one more blade,
Pushing before her face her cinquefoil hands;
Or sliding, stealthy as foam, into the sea,
With a slow seethe and whisper:

Too late to find her, yet not too late to see,
Came he, who sought forever unsatisfied,
And saw her enter and shut the darkness,
Desired and swift,
And caught at the rays of the moon, yet found but darkness,
Caught at the flash of his feet, to fill his hands
With the sleepy pour of sands.

'O moon!' he said: 'was it you I followed?
You, who put silver madness into my eyes? -'
But he only heard, in the dark, a stifled laughter,
And the rattle of dead leaves blowing.
'O wind! -' he said - 'was it you I followed?
Your hand I felt against my face? -'
But he only heard, in the dark, a stifled laughter,
And shadows crept past him. with furtive pace,
Breathing night upon him; and one by one
The ghosts of leaves flew past him, seeking the sun.

And a silent star slipped golden down the darkness,
Down the great wall, leaving no trace in the sky,
And years went with it, and worlds. And he dreamed still
Of a fleeter shadow among the shadows running,
Foam into foam, without a gesture or cry,
Leaving him there, alone, on a lonely hill.

I. Part 2

Evening: in the twilight town
One by one the stars stepped down,
Each to assume his destined place:
And there he saw the destined face.

Her eyes were void, here eyes were deep:
She came like one who moved in sleep:
And when she looked across the night
Beneath, among, those points of light,
Into his heart she shot a pang,
As if a voice within him sang,
Sang and was silent. Down the street,
And lost in darkness, fled the feet;
Ambiguous, the street-lamp's gleam
Mocked at her eyes, and then the dream
From shuttered window, shadowed hall,
Chuckled beyond a lampless wall.

Among the crowding lights he went,
Where faces massed like lillies blent,
And this time plucked and made his own
Above snarled music's undertone:
Breathing the perfume of her hair,
He touched her arm, but suddenly there
As in a dance of shadows fleeing
(His eyes were shut for fear of seeing)
He watched red roses dropt apart
Each to disclose a charnel heart.

Ghostly with powder in the night,
Her hand upon his arm was white:
Her gown was light, and lightly blew,
A gauze of flame it burned him through.
Under the singing lamp she stood,
And smiled in subtly fugitive mood,
From depth to depth of wingless skies
Withdrawing batlike down her eyes:
And in his heart an echo came
Of quick dust quaking under flame.

Pale walls enclosed light shed
A yellow flicker across the bed.

Loud steps rang through the street, and then
The hush of night grew deep again.
Two shadows on the wall made one -
What human walls were here flung down,
The light extinguished as in pain,
The weak light dying in the brain?
Green leaves pushed up through yielding air
Greedy for life she loosed her hair
With conscious and indifferent hands.
. . . High on his cliff, above hard sands,
He saw the moonlit ocean come
In ever-inward rings of foam,
Heard them break to shoot and seethe
Ever inward far beneath:
The ringed horizon rhythmic coming
And in the moonlight silent foaming:
But the dream changed: thick minutes dripped:
Between his fingers a fleet light slipped:
Was gone, was lost:
And on the sand, or in his brain,
He saw red roses fall again:
Rose-wreathed skeletons advanced
And clumsily lifted foot and danced:
And he saw the roses drop apart
Each to disclose a charnel heart.

Whose were these loathed and empty eyes?
Who, falling, in these wingless skies?
This was not she: he rose, withdrew:
One shadow on the wall made two,
The human walls stood up again:
Far in the night, or in his brain,
He heard her whisper, felt her pass,
Shadow of spirit over glass.

I. Part 3

And a silent star slipped golden down the darkness,
Taking his life with it, like a little cloud
Consumed in fire and speed, diffused in darkness:
Tangled and caught together, the days, the years,
His voice, his lifted hands,

Were ravelled and sped; where, by the sea, he bowed
And dreamed of the foam that crept back into the sea,
And the wandering leaves that crept back into the tree.

I. Part 4

Roses, he thought, were kin to her,
Pure text of dust; and learning these
He might more surely win to her,
Speak her own tongue to pledge and please.
What vernal kinship, then, was this
That spoke and perished in a breath?
In leaves, she was near enough to kiss,
And yet, impalpable as death.
Spading dark earth, he tore apart
Exquisite roots: she fled from him.
Her stigma, in the crocus heart,
Probed for delicately, would swim
Lazily faint away on air,
Not to be caught or held: she fled
Before him, wavering, everywhere,
A summer's secret behind he shed.
Music? He found it under earth,
Quick veins of fire: he heard her sing.
Upward it broke, a springing mirth,
A fugitive and amazing thing,
It flashed before his crazy feet,
He danced upon it, it would not stay,
His hands against its brightness beat,
But still it broke in light away.
O bird - he cried - if bird you are,
Keep still those frantic wings a while! . . .
Thus dancing for the evening star,
In hope to capture it by guile.

I. Part 5

The moon rose, and the moon set;
And the stars rushed up and whirled and set;
And again they swarmed, after a shaft of sunlight;
And the dark blue dusk closed above him, like an ocean of regret.

White trident fires were lit on the tops of towers;
Monstrous and black the towers broke the sky.
The ghostly fountain shot and tumbled in showers;
Gaunt leaves turned down above it, thirstily.
The gold fish, and the fish with fins of silver,
Quivered in lamplight, rose with sinister eye,
And darted into the darkness, silently.

The faces that looked at him were his own faces,
They streamed along the streets, they licked like fire,
Flowed with undulant paces,
Reflected in the darkness stared at him,
Contemplative, despairing,
Swept silently aside, becoming dim,
With a vague impotent gesture at the sky,
Uncontrolled and little caring;
And he watched them with an introspective eye.

To shape this world of leaderless ghostly passions -
Or else be mobbed by it - there was the question:
Green leaves above him whispered the slow question,
Black ripples on the pool chuckled of passions.
And between the uneasy shoulders of two trees,
Huge, against impalpable gust of blue,
A golden star slid down to leafy seas,
A star he somehow knew.

Youths tripped after him, laughing, but he fled them:
He heard them mock him, in affected tones.
Their lamia mouths, so smiling, bade him fear them.
His own face leered at him, with timid lust,
Was overwhelmed in night.
He turned aside, and walked in graveyard dust, -
In the dew-dabbled, clinging dust, -
And terror seized him, seeing the stones so white;
And the wet grass, frozen and motionless in the moonlight;
And the green-tongued moonlight, crawling in thick dust.

Was it murky vapor, here, that dulled the stars? -
Or his own guilty breath that clouded heaven? -
Pale hands struck down with spades.
And it was he, with dew upon his face,

Who dug the foul earth in that dripping place,
Turning his back on heaven.
And it was he who found the desired dead;
And kissed the languid head;
While shadows frisked about him in moonlight,
Whirled and capered and leapt,
Caught each other and mimicked lust in the moonlight,
In the dew-wet dust, above the dead who slept.

But this - was it this he rose from and desired?
Black mould of leaves clung wetly about his feet.
He was lost, and alone, and tired,
A mist curled round him coldly, touched his face,
Shadows with eyes were gathering in that place;
And he dreamed of a lamplit street.
But roses fell through the darkness,
They writhed before him out of the mould,
Opened their hearts to pour out darkness,
Darkness of flesh, of lust grown old.
He struggled against them, beat,
Broke them with hands to feel the blood flow warm,
Reeled, when they opened their hearts,
Feeling them with their eyes closed push and swarm,
Thronging about his throat, pressing his mouth,
Beating his temples, choking his breath . . .
Help, you stars! - wet darkness showered upon him.
He was dissolved in a deep cold dream of death.

White fires were lit upon the tops of towers,
The towers shouldered the sky:
The ghostly fountain shot and tumbled in showers,
Gaunt leaves leaned down above it, thirstily.
And he looked with laughter upon the lamplit ripples
Each with its little image of the light,
And thought the minds of men were like black ripples,
Ripples of darkness, darkly huddled in night,
Each of them with its image of lamp or star,
Thinking itself the star.

And it seemed to him, as he looked upon them, laughing,
That he was the star they all in light reflected.
He was the god who had been rejected,

Stoned and trampled upon a filthy street,
Hung up in lamplight for young men to beat,
Cursed and spat upon; and all for saying
There was no life save life of fast and praying.
Or had he been a beggar, with bare feet?
Or a cruel ascetic, trampling roses down? . . .
Roses are death! he cried. He turned in hatred,
And saw red fires burst up above the town;
And a swarm of faces rising, green with hatred.

And silence descended, on dripping trees:
And dew-spats slowly spat from leaves to stones.
He had walked these gardens, he thought, before.
The fountain chuckled;
The leaves rustled, in whispers, along a shore.
And the moon rose, and the moon set;
And the stars rushed up, and swarmed, and set;
And again they swarmed, after a shaft of sunlight;
And the blue dusk closed above him, like an ocean of regret.

II. Part 1

And at times it seemed,
Walking with her of whom he subtly dreamed,
That her young body was ringed with flame,
Hover of fire,
And that she went and came,
Impalpable fiery blossom of desire,
Into his heart and out of his heart again,
With every breath, and every breath was pain.
And if he touched her hand, she drew away,
Becoming something vast; and stretched her hair
Suddenly, like black rain, across the sun.
Till he grew fearful, seeing her there,
To think that he loved such a one,
Who rose against the sky to shut out day.

But at times it seemed,
Walking with her of whom he subtly dreamed,
(Music beneath the sea)
That she was texture of earth no less than he;
Among the leaves her face

Gleamed with familiar grace;
And walking slowly through old gardens,
Among the cool blue cedars,
Spreading her hands in the silent dazzle of sunlight,
Her voice and the air were sweetly married;
Her laughter trembled like music out of the earth;
her body was like the cool blue cedars,
Fragrant in sunlight.
And he quivered, to think that he was the blade, in sunlight,
To flash, and strip these boughs, and spill their fragrance.

Wind hurried the last year's leaves, their shadows hurried,
And clouds blew down the sky.
Where would they be with a year gone by?
Let us be quick: there is time to overcome:
The earth grows old, the moon is already dead,
But you are young, you tremble because you love me,
It is all we have. Let nothing more be said.

What do we care for a star that floats down heaven,
That fiery tear of time?
It spoke to us once, it will not speak again,
It will be no more remembered than last year's rain;
There will be other dusks for us to walk through,
And other stars will float down heaven.
Time is undone: Between our hands it slips,
Goes out between us, the breath upon our lips.

Do not look over your shoulder to see it falling!
Shadows gather and brood, under the trees.
The world grows silent, it listens to hear us walking;
Let the star perish: we wander as we please.
Or is the earth beneath us an old star falling,
Falling through twilight to leafy seas?
The night grows damp: I will take your arm.
Follow the lanterns, lest we come to harm.

IV. Part 6

Twilight: a cold green sky.
Low massed clouds, with dazzling sinister edges,
And a sea gull, falling in high pale sunlight.

Dusk, - the encroachment of poisonous shadows,
The leisurely lighting of lamps;
And a gradual silence of restless trees.

Mist of twilight in my heart:
I who was always catching at fire.
Mould of black leaves under my feet;
I, whose star was desire.

Earth spins in her shadow.
Let us turn and go back
To the first of our loves -
The one who was moonlight and the fall of white roses!

We are struck down, we hear no music.
The moisture of night is in our hands.
Time takes us. We are eternal.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Cornet

When she came out, that white little Russian dancer,
With her bright hair, and her eyes, so young, so young,
He suddenly lost his leader, and all the players,
And only heard an immortal music sung,-

Of dryads flashing in the green woods of April,
On cobwebs trembling over the deep, wet grass:
Fleeing their shadows with laughter, with hands uplifted,
Through the whirled sinister sun he saw them pass,-

Lovely immortals gone, yet existing somewhere,
Still somewhere laughing in woods of immortal green,
Young he had lived among fires, or dreamed of living,
Lovers in youth once seen, or dreamed he had seen. . .

And watched her knees flash up, and her young hands beckon,
And the hair that streamed behind, and the taunting eyes.
He felt this place dissolving in living darkness,
And through the darkness he felt his childhood rise.

Soft, and shining, and sweet, hands filled with petals. . .
And watching her dance, he was grateful to forget
The fiddlers, leaning and drawing their bows together,
And the tired fingers on the stops of his cornet.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Dance Of Life

Gracious and lovable and sweet,
She made his jaded pulses beat,
And made the glare of streets grow dim
And life more soft and hushed for him....
Over her shoulder now she smiled
Trustfully to him, like a child,
The while her fingers gayly moved
Along these white keys dearly loved,
Making them laugh a jocund measure,
Making them show and sing her pleasure....
A smile that dwelt upon his eyes,
To see what mood might therein rise,-
What point of soft light seen afar
Which might dilate to moon or star....
A smile that for a second space
Brooded wistfully on her face,
Opening soft her spirit's door,
Disclosing depths undreamed before:
Passionate depths of half-seen flame,
Young loveliness despising shame,
Desire that trembled to meet desire,
And fire that yearned to fuse with fire....
And lightly then she turned away,
Ironic music rippled gay,-
Subtle sarcastic flippancies
Disguising speechless ecstasies...
'Play something else...' He rose to turn
The pages, while the deep nocturne
Struck slow rich chords of plangent pain,
Beautiful, into heart and brain;
A tortured, anguished, suffering thing
That seemed at once to cry and sing;
Despairing love that strove to find
The face beloved with fingers blind.
He saw her body's slender grace,
This drooping shoulder, shadowed face;
All of her body, hidden so
In saffron satin's flush and flow,-
Its white and simple loveliness,-

Came on his heart like giddiness,
Seductive as this music came;
Until her body seemed like flame,-
Intense white flame, so swiftly moving
That it gave scarcely time for loving;
But rapid as the sun she seemed,
A blinding light that flowed and streamed
And sang and shone through roaring space....
The sun itself! for now her face,
Wherein this music's whole soul dwelt,
Drew him like helpless star, he felt
A fierce compulsion, reckless, mad,
A sweet compulsion, troubled, glad,
His trembling hands went out to her,
Her cool flesh made his senses blur;
While, head thrown backward, sinking dim,
She opened wide her soul to him....
Past his life went whirls of lights,
Chaos of music, days and nights,
Her wild eyes yearned to lure him in
And close him up in dark of sin,
To lure him in and drink him down
And all his soul in love to drown....
Her nakedness he seemed to see.
And breast to breast, and knee to knee,
Tremulous, breathless, swaying, burning,
Body to beautiful body yearning,
In joy and terror, flesh to flesh,
They flamed in passion's fine red mesh,-
Living in one short breath again
The cosmic tide's whole bliss and pain,
Darkness and ether, nebulous fire,
Vast suns whirled forth by vast desire,
Huge moons flung out with monstrous mirth
And stars in glorious hells of birth,
All jubilating, blazing, reeling,
An orgiastic splendor wheeling,
Moon torn from earth and star from sun
In screaming pain, titanic fun,
And stars whirled back to sun again
To be consumed in flaming pain!...
In them at last all life was met:

They were God's self! This earth had set.
Mad fires of life sang through their veins,
Ruinous blisses, joyous pains,
Life the destroyer, life the breaker,
And death, the everlasting maker....

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Dreamer Of Dreams

The sun goes down in a cold pale flare of light.
The trees grow dark: the shadows lean to the east:
And lights wink out through the windows, one by one.
A clamor of frosty sirens mourns at the night.
Pale slate-grey clouds whirl up from the sunken sun.

And the wandering one, the inquisitive dreamer of dreams,
The eternal asker of answers, stands in the street,
And lifts his palms for the first cold ghost of rain.
The purple lights leap down the hill before him.
The gorgeous night has begun again.

'I will ask them all, I will ask them all their dreams,
I will hold my light above them and seek their faces.
I will hear them whisper, invisible in their veins . . .'
The eternal asker of answers becomes as the darkness,
Or as a wind blown over a myriad forest,
Or as the numberless voices of long-drawn rains.

We hear him and take him among us, like a wind of music,
Like the ghost of a music we have somewhere heard;
We crowd through the streets in a dazzle of pallid lamplight,
We pour in a sinister wave, ascend a stair,
With laughter and cry, and word upon murmured word;
We flow, we descend, we turn . . . and the eternal dreamer
Moves among us like light, like evening air . . .

Good-night! Good-night! Good-night! We go our ways,
The rain runs over the pavement before our feet,
The cold rain falls, the rain sings.
We walk, we run, we ride. We turn our faces
To what the eternal evening brings.

Our hands are hot and raw with the stones we have laid,
We have built a tower of stone high into the sky,
We have built a city of towers.

Our hands are light, they are singing with emptiness.
Our souls are light; they have shaken a burden of hours . . .

What did we build it for? Was it all a dream? . . .
Ghostly above us in lamplight the towers gleam . . .
And after a while they will fall to dust and rain;
Or else we will tear them down with impatient hands;
And hew rock out of the earth, and build them again.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Grasshopper

Grasshopper
grasshopper
all day long
we hear your scraping
summer song
like
rusty
fiddles
in
the
grass
as through
the meadow
path
we pass
such funny legs
such funny feet
and how we wonder
what you eat
maybe a single blink of dew
sipped from a clover leaf would do
then high in air
once more you spring
to fall in grass again
and sing.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Complete

I.

The sun goes down in a cold pale flare of light.
The trees grow dark: the shadows lean to the east:
And lights wink out through the windows, one by one.
A clamor of frosty sirens mourns at the night.
Pale slate-grey clouds whirl up from the sunken sun.

And the wandering one, the inquisitive dreamer of dreams,
The eternal asker of answers, stands in the street,
And lifts his palms for the first cold ghost of rain.
The purple lights leap down the hill before him.
The gorgeous night has begun again.

'I will ask them all, I will ask them all their dreams,
I will hold my light above them and seek their faces.
I will hear them whisper, invisible in their veins . . .'
The eternal asker of answers becomes as the darkness,
Or as a wind blown over a myriad forest,
Or as the numberless voices of long-drawn rains.

We hear him and take him among us, like a wind of music,
Like the ghost of a music we have somewhere heard;
We crowd through the streets in a dazzle of pallid lamplight,
We pour in a sinister wave, ascend a stair,
With laughter and cry, and word upon murmured word;
We flow, we descend, we turn . . . and the eternal dreamer
Moves among us like light, like evening air . . .

Good-night! Good-night! Good-night! We go our ways,
The rain runs over the pavement before our feet,
The cold rain falls, the rain sings.
We walk, we run, we ride. We turn our faces
To what the eternal evening brings.

Our hands are hot and raw with the stones we have laid,
We have built a tower of stone high into the sky,
We have built a city of towers.

Our hands are light, they are singing with emptiness.
Our souls are light; they have shaken a burden of hours . . .
What did we build it for? Was it all a dream? . . .
Ghostly above us in lamplight the towers gleam . . .
And after a while they will fall to dust and rain;
Or else we will tear them down with impatient hands;
And hew rock out of the earth, and build them again.

II.

One, from his high bright window in a tower,
Leans out, as evening falls,
And sees the advancing curtain of the shower
Splashing its silver on roofs and walls:
Sees how, swift as a shadow, it crosses the city,
And murmurs beyond far walls to the sea,
Leaving a glimmer of water in the dark canyons,
And silver falling from eave and tree.

One, from his high bright window, looking down,
Peers like a dreamer over the rain-bright town,
And thinks its towers are like a dream.
The western windows flame in the sun's last flare,
Pale roofs begin to gleam.

Looking down from a window high in a wall
He sees us all;
Lifting our pallid faces towards the rain,
Searching the sky, and going our ways again,
Standing in doorways, waiting under the trees . . .
There, in the high bright window he dreams, and sees
What we are blind to,—we who mass and crowd
From wall to wall in the darkening of a cloud.

The gulls drift slowly above the city of towers,
Over the roofs to the darkening sea they fly;
Night falls swiftly on an evening of rain.
The yellow lamps wink one by one again.
The towers reach higher and blacker against the sky.

III.

One, where the pale sea foamed at the yellow sand,
With wave upon slowly shattering wave,
Turned to the city of towers as evening fell;
And slowly walked by the darkening road toward it;
And saw how the towers darkened against the sky;
And across the distance heard the toll of a bell.

Along the darkening road he hurried alone,
With his eyes cast down,
And thought how the streets were hoarse with a tide of people,
With clamor of voices, and numberless faces . . .
And it seemed to him, of a sudden, that he would drown
Here in the quiet of evening air,
These empty and voiceless places . . .
And he hurried towards the city, to enter there.

Along the darkening road, between tall trees
That made a sinister whisper, loudly he walked.
Behind him, sea-gulls dipped over long grey seas.
Before him, numberless lovers smiled and talked.
And death was observed with sudden cries,
And birth with laughter and pain.
And the trees grew taller and blacker against the skies
And night came down again.

IV.

Up high black walls, up sombre terraces,
Clinging like luminous birds to the sides of cliffs,
The yellow lights went climbing towards the sky.
From high black walls, gleaming vaguely with rain,
Each yellow light looked down like a golden eye.

They trembled from coign to coign, and tower to tower,
Along high terraces quicker than dream they flew.
And some of them steadily glowed, and some soon vanished,
And some strange shadows threw.

And behind them all the ghosts of thoughts went moving,

Restlessly moving in each lamplit room,
From chair to mirror, from mirror to fire;
From some, the light was scarcely more than a gloom:
From some, a dazzling desire.

And there was one, beneath black eaves, who thought,
Combing with lifted arms her golden hair,
Of the lover who hurried towards her through the night;
And there was one who dreamed of a sudden death
As she blew out her light.

And there was one who turned from clamoring streets,
And walked in lamplit gardens among black trees,
And looked at the windy sky,
And thought with terror how stones and roots would freeze
And birds in the dead boughs cry . . .

And she hurried back, as snow fell, mixed with rain,
To mingle among the crowds again,
To jostle beneath blue lamps along the street;
And lost herself in the warm bright coiling dream,
With a sound of murmuring voices and shuffling feet.

And one, from his high bright window looking down
On luminous chasms that cleft the basalt town,
Hearing a sea-like murmur rise,
Desired to leave his dream, descend from the tower,
And drown in waves of shouts and laughter and cries.

V.

The snow floats down upon us, mingled with rain . . .
It eddies around pale lilac lamps, and falls
Down golden-windowed walls.
We were all born of flesh, in a flare of pain,
We do not remember the red roots whence we rose,
But we know that we rose and walked, that after a while
We shall lie down again.

The snow floats down upon us, we turn, we turn,
Through gorges filled with light we sound and flow . . .

One is struck down and hurt, we crowd about him,
We bear him away, gaze after his listless body;
But whether he lives or dies we do not know.

One of us sings in the street, and we listen to him;
The words ring over us like vague bells of sorrow.
He sings of a house he lived in long ago.
It is strange; this house of dust was the house I lived in;
The house you lived in, the house that all of us know.
And coiling slowly about him, and laughing at him,
And throwing him pennies, we bear away
A mournful echo of other times and places,
And follow a dream . . . a dream that will not stay.

Down long broad flights of lamplit stairs we flow;
Noisy, in scattered waves, crowding and shouting;
In broken slow cascades.
The gardens extend before us . . . We spread out swiftly;
Trees are above us, and darkness. The canyon fades . . .

And we recall, with a gleaming stab of sadness,
Vaguely and incoherently, some dream
Of a world we came from, a world of sun-blue hills . . .
A black wood whispers around us, green eyes gleam;
Someone cries in the forest, and someone kills.

We flow to the east, to the white-lined shivering sea;
We reach to the west, where the whirling sun went down;
We close our eyes to music in bright cafes.
We diverge from clamorous streets to streets that are silent.
We loaf where the wind-spilled fountain plays.

And, growing tired, we turn aside at last,
Remember our secret selves, seek out our towers,
Lay weary hands on the banisters, and climb;
Climbing, each, to his little four-square dream
Of love or lust or beauty or death or crime.

VI.

Over the darkened city, the city of towers,

The city of a thousand gates,
Over the gleaming terraced roofs, the huddled towers,
Over a somnolent whisper of loves and hates,
The slow wind flows, drearily streams and falls,
With a mournful sound down rain-dark walls.
On one side purples the lustrous dusk of the sea,
And dreams in white at the city's feet;
On one side sleep the plains, with heaped-up hills.
Oaks and beeches whisper in rings about it.
Above the trees are towers where dread bells beat.

The fisherman draws his streaming net from the sea
And sails toward the far-off city, that seems
Like one vague tower.
The dark bow plunges to foam on blue-black waves,
And shrill rain seethes like a ghostly music about him
In a quiet shower.

Rain with a shrill sings on the lapsing waves;
Rain thrills over the roofs again;
Like a shadow of shifting silver it crosses the city;
The lamps in the streets are streamed with rain;
And sparrows complain beneath deep eaves,
And among whirled leaves
The sea-gulls, blowing from tower to lower tower,
From wall to remoter wall,
Skim with the driven rain to the rising sea-sound
And close grey wings and fall . . .

. . . Hearing great rain above me, I now remember
A girl who stood by the door and shut her eyes:
Her pale cheeks glistened with rain, she stood and shivered.
Into a forest of silver she vanished slowly . . .
Voices about me rise . . .

Voices clear and silvery, voices of raindrops,—
'We struck with silver claws, we struck her down.
We are the ghosts of the singing furies . . .'
A chorus of elfin voices blowing about me
Weaves to a babel of sound. Each cries a secret.
I run among them, reach out vain hands, and drown.

'I am the one who stood beside you and smiled,
Thinking your face so strangely young . . . '
'I am the one who loved you but did not dare.'
'I am the one you followed through crowded streets,
The one who escaped you, the one with red-gleamed hair.'

'I am the one you saw to-day, who fell
Senseless before you, hearing a certain bell:
A bell that broke great memories in my brain.'
'I am the one who passed unnoticed before you,
Invisible, in a cloud of secret pain.'

'I am the one who suddenly cried, beholding
The face of a certain man on the dazzling screen.
They wrote me that he was dead. It was long ago.
I walked in the streets for a long while, hearing nothing,
And returned to see it again. And it was so.'

Weave, weave, weave, you streaks of rain!
I am dissolved and woven again . . .
Thousands of faces rise and vanish before me.
Thousands of voices weave in the rain.

'I am the one who rode beside you, blinking
At a dazzle of golden lights.
Tempests of music swept me: I was thinking
Of the gorgeous promise of certain nights:
Of the woman who suddenly smiled at me this day,
Smiled in a certain delicious sidelong way,
And turned, as she reached the door,
To smile once more . . .
Her hands are whiter than snow on midnight water.
Her throat is golden and full of golden laughter,
Her eyes are strange as the stealth of the moon
On a night in June . . .
She runs among whistling leaves; I hurry after;
She dances in dreams over white-waved water;
Her body is white and fragrant and cool,
Magnolia petals that float on a white-starred pool . . .
I have dreamed of her, dreaming for many nights
Of a broken music and golden lights,

Of broken webs of silver, heavily falling
Between my hands and their white desire:
And dark-leaved boughs, edged with a golden radiance,
Dipping to screen a fire . . .
I dream that I walk with her beneath high trees,
But as I lean to kiss her face,
She is blown aloft on wind, I catch at leaves,
And run in a moonless place;
And I hear a crashing of terrible rocks flung down,
And shattering trees and cracking walls,
And a net of intense white flame roars over the town,
And someone cries; and darkness falls . . .
But now she has leaned and smiled at me,
My veins are afire with music,
Her eyes have kissed me, my body is turned to light;
I shall dream to her secret heart tonight . . . '

He rises and moves away, he says no word,
He folds his evening paper and turns away;
I rush through the dark with rows of lamplit faces;
Fire bells peal, and some of us turn to listen,
And some sit motionless in their accustomed places.

Cold rain lashes the car-roof, scurries in gusts,
Streams down the windows in waves and ripples of lustre;
The lamps in the streets are distorted and strange.
Someone takes his watch from his pocket and yawns.
One peers out in the night for the place to change.

Rain . . . rain . . . rain . . . we are buried in rain,
It will rain forever, the swift wheels hiss through water,
Pale sheets of water gleam in the windy street.
The pealing of bells is lost in a drive of rain-drops.
Remote and hurried the great bells beat.

'I am the one whom life so shrewdly betrayed,
Misfortune dogs me, it always hunted me down.
And to-day the woman I love lies dead.
I gave her roses, a ring with opals;
These hands have touched her head.

'I bound her to me in all soft ways,

I bound her to me in a net of days,
Yet now she has gone in silence and said no word.
How can we face these dazzling things, I ask you?
There is no use: we cry: and are not heard.

'They cover a body with roses . . . I shall not see it . . .
Must one return to the lifeless walls of a city
Whose soul is charred by fire? . . .'
His eyes are closed, his lips press tightly together.
Wheels hiss beneath us. He yields us our desire.

'No, do not stare so—he is weak with grief,
He cannot face you, he turns his eyes aside;
He is confused with pain.
I suffered this. I know. It was long ago . . .
He closes his eyes and drowns in death again.'

The wind hurls blows at the rain-starred glistening windows,
The wind shrills down from the half-seen walls.
We flow on the mournful wind in a dream of dying;
And at last a silence falls.

VII.

Midnight; bells toll, and along the cloud-high towers
The golden lights go out . . .
The yellow windows darken, the shades are drawn,
In thousands of rooms we sleep, we await the dawn,
We lie face down, we dream,
We cry aloud with terror, half rise, or seem
To stare at the ceiling or walls . . .
Midnight . . . the last of shattering bell-notes falls.
A rush of silence whirls over the cloud-high towers,
A vortex of soundless hours.

'The bells have just struck twelve: I should be sleeping.
But I cannot delay any longer to write and tell you.
The woman is dead.
She died—you know the way. Just as we planned.
Smiling, with open sunlit eyes.
Smiling upon the outstretched fatal hand . . .'

He folds his letter, steps softly down the stairs.
The doors are closed and silent. A gas-jet flares.
His shadow disturbs a shadow of balustrades.
The door swings shut behind. Night roars above him.
Into the night he fades.

Wind; wind; wind; carving the walls;
Blowing the water that gleams in the street;
Blowing the rain, the sleet.
In the dark alley, an old tree cracks and falls,
Oak-boughs moan in the haunted air;
Lamps blow down with a crash and tinkle of glass . . .
Darkness whistles . . . Wild hours pass . . .

And those whom sleep eludes lie wide-eyed, hearing
Above their heads a goblin night go by;
Children are waked, and cry,
The young girl hears the roar in her sleep, and dreams
That her lover is caught in a burning tower,
She clutches the pillow, she gasps for breath, she screams . . .
And then by degrees her breath grows quiet and slow,
She dreams of an evening, long ago:
Of colored lanterns balancing under trees,
Some of them softly catching afire;
And beneath the lanterns a motionless face she sees,
Golden with lamplight, smiling, serene . . .
The leaves are a pale and glittering green,
The sound of horns blows over the trampled grass,
Shadows of dancers pass . . .
The face smiles closer to hers, she tries to lean
Backward, away, the eyes burn close and strange,
The face is beginning to change,—
It is her lover, she no longer desires to resist,
She is held and kissed.
She closes her eyes, and melts in a seethe of flame . . .
With a smoking ghost of shame . . .

Wind, wind, wind . . . Wind in an enormous brain
Blowing dark thoughts like fallen leaves . . .
The wind shrieks, the wind grieves;
It dashes the leaves on walls, it whirls then again;

And the enormous sleeper vaguely and stupidly dreams
And desires to stir, to resist a ghost of pain.

One, whom the city imprisoned because of his cunning,
Who dreamed for years in a tower,
Seizes this hour
Of tumult and wind. He files through the rusted bar,
Leans his face to the rain, laughs up at the night,
Slides down the knotted sheet, swings over the wall,
To fall to the street with a cat-like fall,
Slinks round a quavering rim of windy light,
And at last is gone,
Leaving his empty cell for the pallor of dawn . . .

The mother whose child was buried to-day
Turns her face to the window; her face is grey;
And all her body is cold with the coldness of rain.
He would have grown as easily as a tree,
He would have spread a pleasure of shade above her,
He would have been his father again . . .
His growth was ended by a freezing invisible shadow.
She lies, and does not move, and is stabbed by the rain.

Wind, wind, wind; we toss and dream;
We dream we are clouds and stars, blown in a stream:
Windows rattle above our beds;
We reach vague-gesturing hands, we lift our heads,
Hear sounds far off,—and dream, with quivering breath,
Our curious separate ways through life and death.

VIII.

The white fog creeps from the cold sea over the city,
Over the pale grey tumbled towers,—
And settles among the roofs, the pale grey walls.
Along damp sinuous streets it crawls,
Curls like a dream among the motionless trees
And seems to freeze.

The fog slips ghostlike into a thousand rooms,
Whirls over sleeping faces,

Spins in an atomy dance round misty street lamps;
And blows in cloudy waves over open spaces . . .

And one from his high window, looking down,
Peers at the cloud-white town,
And thinks its island towers are like a dream . . .
It seems an enormous sleeper, within whose brain
Laborious shadows revolve and break and gleam.

PART II.

I.

The round red sun heaves darkly out of the sea.
The walls and towers are warmed and gleam.
Sounds go drowsily up from streets and wharves.
The city stirs like one that is half in dream.

And the mist flows up by dazzling walls and windows,
Where one by one we wake and rise.
We gaze at the pale grey lustrous sea a moment,
We rub the darkness from our eyes,

And face our thousand devious secret mornings . . .
And do not see how the pale mist, slowly ascending,
Shaped by the sun, shines like a white-robed dreamer
Compassionate over our towers bending.

There, like one who gazes into a crystal,
He broods upon our city with sombre eyes;
He sees our secret fears vaguely unfolding,
Sees cloudy symbols shape to rise.

Each gleaming point of light is like a seed
Dilating swiftly to coiling fires.
Each cloud becomes a rapidly dimming face,
Each hurrying face records its strange desires.

We descend our separate stairs toward the day,

Merge in the somnolent mass that fills the street,
Lift our eyes to the soft blue space of sky,
And walk by the well-known walls with accustomed feet.

II. THE FULFILLED DREAM

More towers must yet be built—more towers destroyed—
Great rocks hoisted in air;
And he must seek his bread in high pale sunlight
With gulls about him, and clouds just over his eyes . . .
And so he did not mention his dream of falling
But drank his coffee in silence, and heard in his ears
That horrible whistle of wind, and felt his breath
Sucked out of him, and saw the tower flash by
And the small tree swell beneath him . . .
He patted his boy on the head, and kissed his wife,
Looked quickly around the room, to remember it,—
And so went out . . . For once, he forgot his pail.

Something had changed—but it was not the street—
The street was just the same—it was himself.
Puddles flashed in the sun. In the pawn-shop door
The same old black cat winked green amber eyes;
The butcher stood by his window tying his apron;
The same men walked beside him, smoking pipes,
Reading the morning paper . . .

He would not yield, he thought, and walk more slowly,
As if he knew for certain he walked to death:
But with his usual pace,—deliberate, firm,
Looking about him calmly, watching the world,
Taking his ease . . . Yet, when he thought again
Of the same dream, now dreamed three separate times,
Always the same, and heard that whistling wind,
And saw the windows flashing upward past him,—
He slowed his pace a little, and thought with horror
How monstrously that small tree thrust to meet him! . . .
He slowed his pace a little and remembered his wife.

Was forty, then, too old for work like this?
Why should it be? He'd never been afraid—

His eye was sure, his hand was steady . . .
But dreams had meanings.
He walked more slowly, and looked along the roofs,
All built by men, and saw the pale blue sky;
And suddenly he was dizzy with looking at it,
It seemed to whirl and swim,
It seemed the color of terror, of speed, of death . . .
He lowered his eyes to the stones, he walked more slowly;
His thoughts were blown and scattered like leaves;
He thought of the pail . . . Why, then, was it forgotten?
Because he would not need it?

Then, just as he was grouping his thoughts again
About that drug-store corner, under an arc-lamp,
Where first he met the girl whom he would marry,—
That blue-eyed innocent girl, in a soft blouse,—
He waved his hand for signal, and up he went
In the dusty chute that hugged the wall;
Above the tree; from girdered floor to floor;
Above the flattening roofs, until the sea
Lay wide and waved before him . . . And then he stepped
Giddily out, from that security,
To the red rib of iron against the sky,
And walked along it, feeling it sing and tremble;
And looking down one instant, saw the tree
Just as he dreamed it was; and looked away,
And up again, feeling his blood go wild.

He gave the signal; the long girder swung
Closer to him, dropped clanging into place,
Almost pushing him off. Pneumatic hammers
Began their madhouse clatter, the white-hot rivets
Were tossed from below and deftly caught in pails;
He signalled again, and wiped his mouth, and thought
A place so high in the air should be more quiet.
The tree, far down below, teased at his eyes,
Teased at the corners of them, until he looked,
And felt his body go suddenly small and light;
Felt his brain float off like a dwindling vapor;
And heard a whistle of wind, and saw a tree
Come plunging up to him, and thought to himself,
'By God—I'm done for now, the dream was right . . .'

III. INTERLUDE

The warm sun dreams in the dust, the warm sun falls
On bright red roofs and walls;
The trees in the park exhale a ghost of rain;
We go from door to door in the streets again,
Talking, laughing, dreaming, turning our faces,
Recalling other times and places . . .
We crowd, not knowing why, around a gate,
We crowd together and wait,
A stretcher is carried out, voices are stilled,
The ambulance drives away.
We watch its roof flash by, hear someone say
'A man fell off the building and was killed—
Fell right into a barrel . . . ' We turn again
Among the frightened eyes of white-faced men,
And go our separate ways, each bearing with him
A thing he tries, but vainly, to forget,—
A sickened crowd, a stretcher red and wet.

A hurdy-gurdy sings in the crowded street,
The golden notes skip over the sunlit stones,
Wings are upon our feet.
The sun seems warmer, the winding street more bright,
Sparrows come whirring down in a cloud of light.
We bear our dreams among us, bear them all,
Like hurdy-gurdy music they rise and fall,
Climb to beauty and die.
The wandering lover dreams of his lover's mouth,
And smiles at the hostile sky.
The broker smokes his pipe, and sees a fortune.
The murderer hears a cry.

IV. NIGHTMARE

'Draw three cards, and I will tell your future . . .
Draw three cards, and lay them down,
Rest your palms upon them, stare at the crystal,
And think of time . . . My father was a clown,

My mother was a gypsy out of Egypt;
And she was gotten with child in a strange way;
And I was born in a cold eclipse of the moon,
With the future in my eyes as clear as day.'

I sit before the gold-embroidered curtain
And think her face is like a wrinkled desert.
The crystal burns in lamplight beneath my eyes.
A dragon slowly coils on the scaly curtain.
Upon a scarlet cloth a white skull lies.

'Your hand is on the hand that holds three lilies.
You will live long, love many times.
I see a dark girl here who once betrayed you.
I see a shadow of secret crimes.

'There was a man who came intent to kill you,
And hid behind a door and waited for you;
There was a woman who smiled at you and lied.
There was a golden girl who loved you, begged you,
Crawled after you, and died.

'There is a ghost of murder in your blood—
Coming or past, I know not which.
And here is danger—a woman with sea-green eyes,
And white-skinned as a witch . . .'

The words hiss into me, like raindrops falling
On sleepy fire . . . She smiles a meaning smile.
Suspicion eats my brain; I ask a question;
Something is creeping at me, something vile;

And suddenly on the wall behind her head
I see a monstrous shadow strike and spread,
The lamp puffs out, a great blow crashes down.
I plunge through the curtain, run through dark to the street,
And hear swift steps retreat . . .

The shades are drawn, the door is locked behind me.
Behind the door I hear a hammer sounding.
I walk in a cloud of wonder; I am glad.
I mingle among the crowds; my heart is pounding;

You do not guess the adventure I have had! . . .

Yet you, too, all have had your dark adventures,
Your sudden adventures, or strange, or sweet . . .
My peril goes out from me, is blown among you.
We loiter, dreaming together, along the street.

V. RETROSPECT

Round white clouds roll slowly above the housetops,
Over the clear red roofs they flow and pass.
A flock of pigeons rises with blue wings flashing,
Rises with whistle of wings, hovers an instant,
And settles slowly again on the tarnished grass.

And one old man looks down from a dusty window
And sees the pigeons circling about the fountain
And desires once more to walk among those trees.
Lovers walk in the noontime by that fountain.
Pigeons dip their beaks to drink from the water.
And soon the pond must freeze.

The light wind blows to his ears a sound of laughter,
Young men shuffle their feet, loaf in the sunlight;
A girl's laugh rings like a silver bell.
But clearer than all these sounds is a sound he hears
More in his secret heart than in his ears,—
A hammer's steady crescendo, like a knell.
He hears the snarl of pineboards under the plane,
The rhythmic saw, and then the hammer again,—
Playing with delicate strokes that sombre scale . . .
And the fountain dwindles, the sunlight seems to pale.

Time is a dream, he thinks, a destroying dream;
It lays great cities in dust, it fills the seas;
It covers the face of beauty, and tumbles walls.
Where was the woman he loved? Where was his youth?
Where was the dream that burned his brain like fire?
Even a dream grows grey at last and falls.

He opened his book once more, beside the window,

And read the printed words upon that page.
The sunlight touched his hand; his eyes moved slowly,
The quiet words enchanted time and age.

'Death is never an ending, death is a change;
Death is beautiful, for death is strange;
Death is one dream out of another flowing;
Death is a chorded music, softly going
By sweet transition from key to richer key.
Death is a meeting place of sea and sea.'

VI. ADELE AND DAVIS

She turned her head on the pillow, and cried once more.
And drawing a shaken breath, and closing her eyes,
To shut out, if she could, this dingy room,
The wigs and costumes scattered around the floor,—
Yellows and greens in the dark,—she walked again
Those nightmare streets which she had walked so often . . .
Here, at a certain corner, under an arc-lamp,
Blown by a bitter wind, she stopped and looked
In through the brilliant windows of a drug-store,
And wondered if she dared to ask for poison:
But it was late, few customers were there,
The eyes of all the clerks would freeze upon her,
And she would wilt, and cry . . . Here, by the river,
She listened to the water slapping the wall,
And felt queer fascination in its blackness:
But it was cold, the little waves looked cruel,
The stars were keen, and a windy dash of spray
Struck her cheek, and withered her veins . . . And so
She dragged herself once more to home, and bed.

Paul hadn't guessed it yet—though twice, already,
She'd fainted—once, the first time, on the stage.
So she must tell him soon—or else—get out . . .
How could she say it? That was the hideous thing.
She'd rather die than say it! . . . and all the trouble,
Months when she couldn't earn a cent, and then,
If he refused to marry her . . . well, what?
She saw him laughing, making a foolish joke,

His grey eyes turning quickly; and the words
Fled from her tongue . . . She saw him sitting silent,
Brooding over his morning coffee, maybe,
And tried again . . . she bit her lips, and trembled,
And looked away, and said . . . 'Say Paul, boy,—listen—
There's something I must tell you . . . ' There she stopped,
Wondering what he'd say . . . What would he say?
'Spring it, kid! Don't look so serious!'
'But what I've got to say—IS—serious!'
Then she could see how, suddenly, he would sober,
His eyes would darken, he'd look so terrifying—
He always did—and what could she do but cry?
Perhaps, then, he would guess—perhaps he wouldn't.
And if he didn't, but asked her 'What's the matter?'—
She knew she'd never tell—just say she was sick . . .
And after that, when would she dare again?
And what would he do—even suppose she told him?

If it were Felix! If it were only Felix!—
She wouldn't mind so much. But as it was,
Bitterness choked her, she had half a mind
To pay out Felix for never having liked her,
By making people think that it was he . . .
She'd write a letter to someone, before she died,—
Just saying 'Felix did it—and wouldn't marry.'
And then she'd die . . . But that was hard on Paul . . .
Paul would never forgive her—he'd never forgive her!
Sometimes she almost thought Paul really loved her . . .
She saw him look reproachfully at her coffin.

And then she closed her eyes and walked again
Those nightmare streets that she had walked so often:
Under an arc-lamp swinging in the wind
She stood, and stared in through a drug-store window,
Watching a clerk wrap up a little pill-box.
But it was late. No customers were there,—
Pitiless eyes would freeze her secret in her!
And then—what poison would she dare to ask for?
And if they asked her why, what would she say?

VII. TWO LOVERS: OVERTONES

Two lovers, here at the corner, by the steeple,
Two lovers blow together like music blowing:
And the crowd dissolves about them like a sea.
Recurring waves of sound break vaguely about them,
They drift from wall to wall, from tree to tree.
'Well, am I late?' Upward they look and laugh,
They look at the great clock's golden hands,
They laugh and talk, not knowing what they say:
Only, their words like music seem to play;
And seeming to walk, they tread strange sarabands.

'I brought you this . . . ' the soft words float like stars
Down the smooth heaven of her memory.
She stands again by a garden wall,
The peach tree is in bloom, pink blossoms fall,
Water sings from an opened tap, the bees
Glisten and murmur among the trees.
Someone calls from the house. She does not answer.
Backward she leans her head,
And dreamily smiles at the peach-tree leaves, wherethrough
She sees an infinite May sky spread
A vault profoundly blue.
The voice from the house fades far away,
The glistening leaves more vaguely ripple and sway . . .
The tap is closed, the water ceases to hiss . . .
Silence . . . blue sky . . . and then, 'I brought you this . . . '
She turns again, and smiles . . . He does not know
She smiles from long ago . . .

She turns to him and smiles . . . Sunlight above him
Roars like a vast invisible sea,
Gold is beaten before him, shrill bells of silver;
He is released of weight, his body is free,
He lifts his arms to swim,
Dark years like sinister tides coil under him . . .
The lazy sea-waves crumble along the beach
With a whirring sound like wind in bells,
He lies outstretched on the yellow wind-worn sands
Reaching his lazy hands
Among the golden grains and sea-white shells . . .

'One white rose . . . or is it pink, to-day?'
They pause and smile, not caring what they say,
If only they may talk.
The crowd flows past them like dividing waters.
Dreaming they stand, dreaming they walk.

'Pink,—to-day!'—Face turns to dream-bright face,
Green leaves rise round them, sunshine settles upon them,
Water, in drops of silver, falls from the rose.
She smiles at a face that smiles through leaves from the mirror.
She breathes the fragrance; her dark eyes close . . .

Time is dissolved, it blows like a little dust:
Time, like a flurry of rain,
Patters and passes, starring the window-pane.
Once, long ago, one night,
She saw the lightning, with long blue quiver of light,
Ripping the darkness . . . and as she turned in terror
A soft face leaned above her, leaned softly down,
Softly around her a breath of roses was blown,
She sank in waves of quiet, she seemed to float
In a sea of silence . . . and soft steps grew remote . .

'Well, let us walk in the park . . . The sun is warm,
We'll sit on a bench and talk . . .' They turn and glide,
The crowd of faces wavers and breaks and flows.
'Look how the oak-tops turn to gold in the sunlight!
Look how the tower is changed and glows!'

Two lovers move in the crowd like a link of music,
We press upon them, we hold them, and let them pass;
A chord of music strikes us and straight we tremble;
We tremble like wind-blown grass.

What was this dream we had, a dream of music,
Music that rose from the opening earth like magic
And shook its beauty upon us and died away?
The long cold streets extend once more before us.
The red sun drops, the walls grow grey.

VIII. THE BOX WITH SILVER HANDLES

Well,—it was two days after my husband died—
Two days! And the earth still raw above him.
And I was sweeping the carpet in their hall.
In number four—the room with the red wall-paper—
Some chorus girls and men were singing that song
'They'll soon be lighting candles
Round a box with silver handles'—and hearing them sing it
I started to cry. Just then he came along
And stopped on the stairs and turned and looked at me,
And took the cigar from his mouth and sort of smiled
And said, 'Say, what's the matter?' and then came down
Where I was leaning against the wall,
And touched my shoulder, and put his arm around me . . .
And I was so sad, thinking about it,—
Thinking that it was raining, and a cold night,
With Jim so unaccustomed to being dead,—
That I was happy to have him sympathize,
To feel his arm, and leaned against him and cried.
And before I knew it, he got me into a room
Where a table was set, and no one there,
And sat me down on a sofa, and held me close,
And talked to me, telling me not to cry,
That it was all right, he'd look after me,—
But not to cry, my eyes were getting red,
Which didn't make me pretty. And he was so nice,
That when he turned my face between his hands,
And looked at me, with those blue eyes of his,
And smiled, and leaned, and kissed me—
Somehow I couldn't tell him not to do it,
Somehow I didn't mind, I let him kiss me,
And closed my eyes! . . . Well, that was how it started.
For when my heart was eased with crying, and grief
Had passed and left me quiet, somehow it seemed
As if it wasn't honest to change my mind,
To send him away, or say I hadn't meant it—
And, anyway, it seemed so hard to explain!
And so we sat and talked, not talking much,
But meaning as much in silence as in words,
There in that empty room with palms about us,
That private dining-room . . . And as we sat there
I felt my future changing, day by day,

With unknown streets opening left and right,
New streets with farther lights, new taller houses,
Doors swinging into hallways filled with light,
Half-opened luminous windows, with white curtains
Streaming out in the night, and sudden music,—
And thinking of this, and through it half remembering
A quick and horrible death, my husband's eyes,
The broken-plastered walls, my boy asleep,—
It seemed as if my brain would break in two.
My voice began to tremble . . . and when I stood,
And told him I must go, and said good-night—
I couldn't see the end. How would it end?
Would he return to-morrow? Or would he not?
And did I want him to—or would I rather
Look for another job?—He took my shoulders
Between his hands, and looked down into my eyes,
And smiled, and said good-night. If he had kissed me,
That would have—well, I don't know; but he didn't ..
And so I went downstairs, then, half elated,
Hoping to close the door before that party
In number four should sing that song again—
'They'll soon be lighting candles round a box with silver handles'—
And sure enough, I did. I faced the darkness.
And my eyes were filled with tears. And I was happy.

IX. INTERLUDE

The days, the nights, flow one by one above us,
The hours go silently over our lifted faces,
We are like dreamers who walk beneath a sea.
Beneath high walls we flow in the sun together.
We sleep, we wake, we laugh, we pursue, we flee.

We sit at tables and sip our morning coffee,
We read the papers for tales of lust or crime.
The door swings shut behind the latest comer.
We set our watches, regard the time.

What have we done? I close my eyes, remember
The great machine whose sinister brain before me
Smote and smote with a rhythmic beat.

My hands have torn down walls, the stone and plaster.
I dropped great beams to the dusty street.

My eyes are worn with measuring cloths of purple,
And golden cloths, and wavering cloths, and pale.
I dream of a crowd of faces, white with menace.
Hands reach up to tear me. My brain will fail.

Here, where the walls go down beneath our picks,
These walls whose windows gap against the sky,
Atom by atom of flesh and brain and marble
Will build a glittering tower before we die . . .

The young boy whistles, hurrying down the street,
The young girl hums beneath her breath.
One goes out to beauty, and does not know it.
And one goes out to death.

X. SUDDEN DEATH

'Number four—the girl who died on the table—
The girl with golden hair—'
The purpling body lies on the polished marble.
We open the throat, and lay the thyroid bare . . .

One, who held the ether-cone, remembers
Her dark blue frightened eyes.
He heard the sharp breath quiver, and saw her breast
More hurriedly fall and rise.
Her hands made futile gestures, she turned her head
Fighting for breath; her cheeks were flushed to scarlet,—
And, suddenly, she lay dead.

And all the dreams that hurried along her veins
Came to the darkness of a sudden wall.
Confusion ran among them, they whirled and clamored,
They fell, they rose, they struck, they shouted,
Till at last a pallor of silence hushed them all.

What was her name? Where had she walked that morning?
Through what dark forest came her feet?

Along what sunlit walls, what peopled street?

Backward he dreamed along a chain of days,
He saw her go her strange and secret ways,
Waking and sleeping, noon and night.
She sat by a mirror, braiding her golden hair.
She read a story by candlelight.

Her shadow ran before her along the street,
She walked with rhythmic feet,
Turned a corner, descended a stair.
She bought a paper, held it to scan the headlines,
Smiled for a moment at sea-gulls high in sunlight,
And drew deep breaths of air.

Days passed, bright clouds of days. Nights passed. And music
Murmured within the walls of lighted windows.
She lifted her face to the light and danced.
The dancers wreathed and grouped in moving patterns,
Clustered, receded, streamed, advanced.

Her dress was purple, her slippers were golden,
Her eyes were blue; and a purple orchid
Opened its golden heart on her breast . . .
She leaned to the surly languor of lazy music,
Leaned on her partner's arm to rest.
The violins were weaving a weft of silver,
The horns were weaving a lustrous brede of gold,
And time was caught in a glistening pattern,
Time, too elusive to hold . . .

Shadows of leaves fell over her face,—and sunlight:
She turned her face away.
Nearer she moved to a crouching darkness
With every step and day.

Death, who at first had thought of her only an instant,
At a great distance, across the night,
Smiled from a window upon her, and followed her slowly
From purple light to light.

Once, in her dreams, he spoke out clearly, crying,

'I am the murderer, death.
I am the lover who keeps his appointment
At the doors of breath!'

She rose and stared at her own reflection,
Half dreading there to find
The dark-eyed ghost, waiting beside her,
Or reaching from behind
To lay pale hands upon her shoulders . . .
Or was this in her mind? . . .

She combed her hair. The sunlight glimmered
Along the tossing strands.
Was there a stillness in this hair,—
A quiet in these hands?

Death was a dream. It could not change these eyes,
Blow out their light, or turn this mouth to dust.
She combed her hair and sang. She would live forever.
Leaves flew past her window along a gust . . .
And graves were dug in the earth, and coffins passed,
And music ebbed with the ebbing hours.
And dreams went along her veins, and scattering clouds
Threw streaming shadows on walls and towers.

XI.

Snow falls. The sky is grey, and sullenly glares
With purple lights in the canyoned street.
The fiery sign on the dark tower wreathes and flares . . .
The trodden grass in the park is covered with white,
The streets grow silent beneath our feet . . .
The city dreams, it forgets its past to-night.

And one, from his high bright window looking down
Over the enchanted whiteness of the town,
Seeing through whirls of white the vague grey towers,
Desires like this to forget what will not pass,
The littered papers, the dust, the tarnished grass,
Grey death, stale ugliness, and sodden hours.
Deep in his heart old bells are beaten again,

Slurred bells of grief and pain,
Dull echoes of hideous times and poisonous places.
He desires to drown in a cold white peace of snow.
He desires to forget a million faces . . .

In one room breathes a woman who dies of hunger.
The clock ticks slowly and stops. And no one winds it.
In one room fade grey violets in a vase.
Snow flakes faintly hiss and melt on the window.
In one room, minute by minute, the flutist plays
The lamplit page of music, the tireless scales.
His hands are trembling, his short breath fails.

In one room, silently, lover looks upon lover,
And thinks the air is fire.
The drunkard swears and touches the harlot's heartstrings
With the sudden hand of desire.

And one goes late in the streets, and thinks of murder;
And one lies staring, and thinks of death.
And one, who has suffered, clenches her hands despairing,
And holds her breath . . .

Who are all these, who flow in the veins of the city,
Coil and revolve and dream,
Vanish or gleam?
Some mount up to the brain and flower in fire.
Some are destroyed; some die; some slowly stream.

And the new are born who desire to destroy the old;
And fires are kindled and quenched; and dreams are broken,
And walls flung down . . .
And the slow night whirls in snow over towers of dreamers,
And whiteness hushes the town.

PART III

I

As evening falls,
And the yellow lights leap one by one
Along high walls;
And along black streets that glisten as if with rain,
The muted city seems
Like one in a restless sleep, who lies and dreams
Of vague desires, and memories, and half-forgotten pain . . .
Along dark veins, like lights the quick dreams run,
Flash, are extinguished, flash again,
To mingle and glow at last in the enormous brain
And die away . . .

As evening falls,
A dream dissolves these insubstantial walls,—
A myriad secretly gliding lights lie bare . . .
The lovers rise, the harlot combs her hair,
The dead man's face grows blue in the dizzy lamplight,
The watchman climbs the stair . . .
The bank defaulter leers at a chaos of figures,
And runs among them, and is beaten down;
The sick man coughs and hears the chisels ringing;
The tired clown
Sees the enormous crowd, a million faces,
Motionless in their places,
Ready to laugh, and seize, and crush and tear . . .
The dancer smooths her hair,
Laces her golden slippers, and runs through the door
To dance once more,
Hearing swift music like an enchantment rise,
Feeling the praise of a thousand eyes.

As darkness falls
The walls grow luminous and warm, the walls
Tremble and glow with the lives within them moving,
Moving like music, secret and rich and warm.
How shall we live tonight? Where shall we turn?
To what new light or darkness yearn?
A thousand winding stairs lead down before us;
And one by one in myriads we descend
By lamplit flowered walls, long balustrades,
Through half-lit halls which reach no end.

II. THE SCREEN MAIDEN

You read—what is it, then that you are reading?
What music moves so silently in your mind?
Your bright hand turns the page.
I watch you from my window, unsuspected:
You move in an alien land, a silent age . . .

. . . The poet—what was his name—? Tokkei—Tokkei—
The poet walked alone in a cold late rain,
And thought his grief was like the crying of sea-birds;
For his lover was dead, he never would love again.

Rain in the dreams of the mind—rain forever—
Rain in the sky of the heart—rain in the willows—
But then he saw this face, this face like flame,
This quiet lady, this portrait by Hiroshigi;
And took it home with him; and with it came

What unexpected changes, subtle as weather!
The dark room, cold as rain,
Grew faintly fragrant, stirred with a stir of April,
Warmed its corners with light again,

And smoke of incense whirled about this portrait,
And the quiet lady there,
So young, so quietly smiling, with calm hands,
Seemed ready to loose her hair,

And smile, and lean from the picture, or say one word,
The word already clear,
Which seemed to rise like light between her eyelids . . .
He held his breath to hear,

And smiled for shame, and drank a cup of wine,
And held a candle, and searched her face
Through all the little shadows, to see what secret
Might give so warm a grace . . .

Was it the quiet mouth, restrained a little?
The eyes, half-turned aside?
The jade ring on her wrist, still almost swinging? . . .

The secret was denied,

He chose his favorite pen and drew these verses,
And slept; and as he slept
A dream came into his heart, his lover entered,
And chided him, and wept.

And in the morning, waking, he remembered,
And thought the dream was strange.
Why did his darkened lover rise from the garden?
He turned, and felt a change,

As if a someone hidden smiled and watched him . . .
Yet there was only sunlight there.
Until he saw those young eyes, quietly smiling,
And held his breath to stare,

And could have sworn her cheek had turned—a little . . .
Had slightly turned away . . .
Sunlight dozed on the floor . . . He sat and wondered,
Nor left his room that day.

And that day, and for many days thereafter,
He sat alone, and thought
No lady had ever lived so beautiful
As Hiroshigi wrought . . .

Or if she lived, no matter in what country,
By what far river or hill or lonely sea,
He would look in every face until he found her . . .
There was no other as fair as she.

And before her quiet face he burned soft incense,
And brought her every day
Boughs of the peach, or almond, or snow-white cherry,
And somehow, she seemed to say,

That silent lady, young, and quietly smiling,
That she was happy there;
And sometimes, seeing this, he started to tremble,
And desired to touch her hair,

To lay his palm along her hand, touch faintly
With delicate finger-tips
The ghostly smile that seemed to hover and vanish
Upon her lips . . .

Until he knew he loved this quiet lady;
And night by night a dread
Leered at his dreams, for he knew that Hiroshigi
Was many centuries dead,—

And the lady, too, was dead, and all who knew her . .
Dead, and long turned to dust . . .
The thin moon waxed and waned, and left him paler,
The peach leaves flew in a gust,

And he would surely have died; but there one day
A wise man, white with age,
Stared at the portrait, and said, 'This Hiroshigi
Knew more than archimage,—

Cunningly drew the body, and called the spirit,
Till partly it entered there . . .
Sometimes, at death, it entered the portrait wholly . .
Do all I say with care,

And she you love may come to you when you call her . . . '

So then this ghost, Tokkei,
Ran in the sun, bought wine of a hundred merchants,
And alone at the end of day

Entered the darkening room, and faced the portrait,
And saw the quiet eyes
Gleaming and young in the dusk, and held the wine-cup,
And knelt, and did not rise,

And said, aloud, 'Lo-san, will you drink this wine?'
Said it three times aloud.
And at the third the faint blue smoke of incense
Rose to the walls in a cloud,

And the lips moved faintly, and the eyes, and the calm hands stirred;
And suddenly, with a sigh,

The quiet lady came slowly down from the portrait,
And stood, while worlds went by,

And lifted her young white hands and took the wine cup;
And the poet trembled, and said,
'Lo-san, will you stay forever?'—'Yes, I will stay.'—
'But what when I am dead?'

'When you are dead your spirit will find my spirit,
And then we shall die no more.'
Music came down upon them, and spring returning,
They remembered worlds before,

And years went over the earth, and over the sea,
And lovers were born and spoke and died,
But forever in sunlight went these two immortal,
Tokkei and the quiet bride . . .

III. HAUNTED CHAMBERS

The lamplit page is turned, the dream forgotten;
The music changes tone, you wake, remember
Deep worlds you lived before,—deep worlds hereafter
Of leaf on falling leaf, music on music,
Rain and sorrow and wind and dust and laughter.

Helen was late and Miriam came too soon.
Joseph was dead, his wife and children starving.
Elaine was married and soon to have a child.
You dreamed last night of fiddler-crabs with fiddles;
They played a buzzing melody, and you smiled.

To-morrow—what? And what of yesterday?
Through soundless labyrinths of dream you pass,
Through many doors to the one door of all.
Soon as it's opened we shall hear a music:
Or see a skeleton fall . . .

We walk with you. Where is it that you lead us?
We climb the muffled stairs beneath high lanterns.
We descend again. We grope through darkened cells.

You say: this darkness, here, will slowly kill me.
It creeps and weighs upon me . . . Is full of bells.

This is the thing remembered I would forget—
No matter where I go, how soft I tread,
This windy gesture menaces me with death.
Fatigue! it says, and points its finger at me;
Touches my throat and stops my breath.

My fans—my jewels—the portrait of my husband—
The torn certificate for my daughter's grave—
These are but mortal seconds in immortal time.
They brush me, fade away: like drops of water.
They signify no crime.

Let us retrace our steps: I have deceived you:
Nothing is here I could not frankly tell you:
No hint of guilt, or faithlessness, or threat.
Dreams—they are madness. Staring eyes—illusion.
Let us return, hear music, and forget . . .

IV. ILLICIT

Of what she said to me that night—no matter.
The strange thing came next day.
My brain was full of music—something she played me—;
I couldn't remember it all, but phrases of it
Wreathed and wreathed among faint memories,
Seeking for something, trying to tell me something,
Urging to restlessness: verging on grief.
I tried to play the tune, from memory,—
But memory failed: the chords and discords climbed
And found no resolution—only hung there,
And left me morbid . . . Where, then, had I heard it? . . .
What secret dusty chamber was it hinting?
'Dust', it said, 'dust . . . and dust . . . and sunlight . . .
A cold clear April evening . . . snow, bedraggled,
Rain-worn snow, dappling the hideous grass . . .
And someone walking alone; and someone saying
That all must end, for the time had come to go . . .'
These were the phrases . . . but behind, beneath them

A greater shadow moved: and in this shadow
I stood and guessed . . . Was it the blue-eyed lady?
The one who always danced in golden slippers—
And had I danced with her,—upon this music?
Or was it further back—the unplumbed twilight
Of childhood?—No—much recenter than that.

You know, without my telling you, how sometimes
A word or name eludes you, and you seek it
Through running ghosts of shadow,—leaping at it,
Lying in wait for it to spring upon it,
Spreading faint snares for it of sense or sound:
Until, of a sudden, as if in a phantom forest,
You hear it, see it flash among the branches,
And scarcely knowing how, suddenly have it—
Well, it was so I followed down this music,
Glimpsing a face in darkness, hearing a cry,
Remembering days forgotten, moods exhausted,
Corners in sunlight, puddles reflecting stars—;
Until, of a sudden, and least of all suspected,
The thing resolved itself: and I remembered
An April afternoon, eight years ago—
Or was it nine?—no matter—call it nine—
A room in which the last of sunlight faded;
A vase of violets, fragrance in white curtains;
And, she who played the same thing later, playing.

She played this tune. And in the middle of it
Abruptly broke it off, letting her hands
Fall in her lap. She sat there so a moment,
With shoulders drooped, then lifted up a rose,
One great white rose, wide opened like a lotos,
And pressed it to her cheek, and closed her eyes.

'You know—we've got to end this—Miriam loves you . . .
If she should ever know, or even guess it,—
What would she do?—Listen!—I'm not absurd . . .
I'm sure of it. If you had eyes, for women—
To understand them—which you've never had—
You'd know it too . . . ' So went this colloquy,
Half humorous, with undertones of pathos,
Half grave, half flippant . . . while her fingers, softly,

Felt for this tune, played it and let it fall,
Now note by singing note, now chord by chord,
Repeating phrases with a kind of pleasure . . .
Was it symbolic of the woman's weakness
That she could neither break it—nor conclude?
It paused . . . and wandered . . . paused again; while she,
Perplexed and tired, half told me I must go,—
Half asked me if I thought I ought to go . . .

Well, April passed with many other evenings,
Evenings like this, with later suns and warmer,
With violets always there, and fragrant curtains . . .
And she was right: and Miriam found it out . . .
And after that, when eight deep years had passed—
Or nine—we met once more,—by accident . . .
But was it just by accident, I wonder,
She played this tune?—Or what, then, was intended? . . .

V. MELODY IN A RESTAURANT

The cigarette-smoke loops and slides above us,
Dipping and swirling as the waiter passes;
You strike a match and stare upon the flame.
The tiny fire leaps in your eyes a moment,
And dwindles away as silently as it came.

This melody, you say, has certain voices—
They rise like nereids from a river, singing,
Lift white faces, and dive to darkness again.
Wherever you go you bear this river with you:
A leaf falls,—and it flows, and you have pain.

So says the tune to you—but what to me?
What to the waiter, as he pours your coffee,
The violinist who suavely draws his bow?
That man, who folds his paper, overhears it.
A thousand dreams revolve and fall and flow.

Some one there is who sees a virgin stepping
Down marble stairs to a deep tomb of roses:
At the last moment she lifts remembering eyes.

Green leaves blow down. The place is checked with shadows.
A long-drawn murmur of rain goes down the skies.
And oaks are stripped and bare, and smoke with lightning:
And clouds are blown and torn upon high forests,
And the great sea shakes its walls.
And then falls silence . . . And through long silence falls
This melody once more:
'Down endless stairs she goes, as once before.'

So says the tune to him—but what to me?
What are the worlds I see?
What shapes fantastic, terrible dreams? . . .
I go my secret way, down secret alleys;
My errand is not so simple as it seems.

VI. PORTRAIT OF ONE DEAD

This is the house. On one side there is darkness,
On one side there is light.
Into the darkness you may lift your lanterns—
O, any number—it will still be night.
And here are echoing stairs to lead you downward
To long sonorous halls.
And here is spring forever at these windows,
With roses on the walls.

This is her room. On one side there is music—
On one side not a sound.
At one step she could move from love to silence,
Feel myriad darkness coiling round.
And here are balconies from which she heard you,
Your steady footsteps on the stair.
And here the glass in which she saw your shadow
As she unbound her hair.

Here is the room—with ghostly walls dissolving—
The twilight room in which she called you 'lover';
And the floorless room in which she called you 'friend.'
So many times, in doubt, she ran between them!—
Through windy corridors of darkening end.

Here she could stand with one dim light above her
And hear far music, like a sea in caverns,
Murmur away at hollowed walls of stone.
And here, in a roofless room where it was raining,
She bore the patient sorrow of rain alone.

Your words were walls which suddenly froze around her.
Your words were windows,—large enough for moonlight,
Too small to let her through.
Your letters—fragrant cloisters faint with music.
The music that assuaged her there was you.

How many times she heard your step ascending
Yet never saw your face!
She heard them turn again, ring slowly fainter,
Till silence swept the place.
Why had you gone? . . . The door, perhaps, mistaken . . .
You would go elsewhere. The deep walls were shaken.

A certain rose-leaf—sent without intention—
Became, with time, a woven web of fire—
She wore it, and was warm.
A certain hurried glance, let fall at parting,
Became, with time, the flashings of a storm.

Yet, there was nothing asked, no hint to tell you
Of secret idols carved in secret chambers
From all you did and said.
Nothing was done, until at last she knew you.
Nothing was known, till, somehow, she was dead.

How did she die?—You say, she died of poison.
Simple and swift. And much to be regretted.
You did not see her pass
So many thousand times from light to darkness,
Pausing so many times before her glass;

You did not see how many times she hurried
To lean from certain windows, vainly hoping,
Passionate still for beauty, remembered spring.
You did not know how long she clung to music,
You did not hear her sing.

Did she, then, make the choice, and step out bravely
From sound to silence—close, herself, those windows?
Or was it true, instead,
That darkness moved,—for once,—and so possessed her? . . .
We'll never know, you say, for she is dead.

VII. PORCELAIN

You see that porcelain ranged there in the window—
Platters and soup-plates done with pale pink rosebuds,
And tiny violets, and wreaths of ivy?
See how the pattern clings to the gleaming edges!
They're works of art—minutely seen and felt,
Each petal done devoutly. Is it failure
To spend your blood like this?

Study them . . . you will see there, in the porcelain,
If you stare hard enough, a sort of swimming
Of lights and shadows, ghosts within a crystal—
My brain unfolding! There you'll see me sitting
Day after day, close to a certain window,
Looking down, sometimes, to see the people . . .

Sometimes my wife comes there to speak to me . . .
Sometimes the grey cat waves his tail around me . . .
Goldfish swim in a bowl, glisten in sunlight,
Dilate to a gorgeous size, blow delicate bubbles,
Drowse among dark green weeds. On rainy days,
You'll see a gas-light shedding light behind me—
An eye-shade round my forehead. There I sit,
Twirling the tiny brushes in my paint-cups,
Painting the pale pink rosebuds, minute violets,
Exquisite wreaths of dark green ivy leaves.
On this leaf, goes a dream I dreamed last night
Of two soft-patterned toads—I thought them stones,
Until they hopped! And then a great black spider,—
Tarantula, perhaps, a hideous thing,—
It crossed the room in one tremendous leap.
Here,—as I coil the stems between two leaves,—
It is as if, dwindling to atomy size,

I cried the secret between two universes . . .
A friend of mine took hasheesh once, and said
Just as he fell asleep he had a dream,—
Though with his eyes wide open,—
And felt, or saw, or knew himself a part
Of marvelous slowly-wreathing intricate patterns,
Plane upon plane, depth upon coiling depth,
Amazing leaves, folding one on another,
Voluted grasses, twists and curves and spirals—
All of it darkly moving . . . as for me,
I need no hasheesh for it—it's too easy!
Soon as I shut my eyes I set out walking
In a monstrous jungle of monstrous pale pink roseleaves,
Violets purple as death, dripping with water,
And ivy-leaves as big as clouds above me.

Here, in a simple pattern of separate violets—
With scalloped edges gilded—here you have me
Thinking of something else. My wife, you know,—
There's something lacking—force, or will, or passion,
I don't know what it is—and so, sometimes,
When I am tired, or haven't slept three nights,
Or it is cloudy, with low threat of rain,
I get uneasy—just like poplar trees
Ruffling their leaves—and I begin to think
Of poor Pauline, so many years ago,
And that delicious night. Where is she now?
I meant to write—but she has moved, by this time,
And then, besides, she might find out I'm married.
Well, there is more—I'm getting old and timid—
The years have gnawed my will. I've lost my nerve!
I never strike out boldly as I used to—
But sit here, painting violets, and remember
That thrilling night. Photographers, she said,
Asked her to pose for them; her eyes and forehead,—
Dark brown eyes, and a smooth and pallid forehead,—
Were thought so beautiful.—And so they were.
Pauline . . . These violets are like words remembered . . .
Darling! she whispered . . . Darling! . . . Darling! . . . Darling!
Well, I suppose such days can come but once.
Lord, how happy we were! . . .

Here, if you only knew it, is a story—
Here, in these leaves. I stopped my work to tell it,
And then, when I had finished, went on thinking:
A man I saw on a train . . . I was still a boy . . .
Who killed himself by diving against a wall.
Here is a recollection of my wife,
When she was still my sweetheart, years ago.
It's funny how things change,—just change, by growing,
Without an effort . . . And here are trivial things,—
A chill, an errand forgotten, a cut while shaving;
A friend of mine who tells me he is married . . .
Or is that last so trivial? Well, no matter!

This is the sort of thing you'll see of me,
If you look hard enough. This, in its way,
Is a kind of fame. My life arranged before you
In scrolls of leaves, rosebuds, violets, ivy,
Clustered or wreathed on plate and cup and platter . . .
Sometimes, I say, I'm just like John the Baptist—
You have my head before you . . . on a platter.

VIII. COFFINS: INTERLUDE

Wind blows. Snow falls. The great clock in its tower
Ticks with reverberant coil and tolls the hour:
At the deep sudden stroke the pigeons fly . . .
The fine snow flutes the cracks between the flagstones.
We close our coats, and hurry, and search the sky.

We are like music, each voice of it pursuing
A golden separate dream, remote, persistent,
Climbing to fire, receding to hoarse despair.
What do you whisper, brother? What do you tell me? . . .
We pass each other, are lost, and do not care.

One mounts up to beauty, serenely singing,
Forgetful of the steps that cry behind him;
One drifts slowly down from a waking dream.
One, foreseeing, lingers forever unmoving . . .
Upward and downward, past him there, we stream.

One has death in his eyes: and walks more slowly.
Death, among jonquils, told him a freezing secret.
A cloud blows over his eyes, he ponders earth.
He sees in the world a forest of sunlit jonquils:
A slow black poison huddles beneath that mirth.

Death, from street to alley, from door to window,
Cries out his news,—of unplumbed worlds approaching,
Of a cloud of darkness soon to destroy the tower.
But why comes death,—he asks,—in a world so perfect?
Or why the minute's grey in the golden hour?

Music, a sudden glissando, sinister, troubled,
A drift of wind-torn petals, before him passes
Down jangled streets, and dies.
The bodies of old and young, of maimed and lovely,
Are slowly borne to earth, with a dirge of cries.

Down cobbled streets they come; down huddled stairways;
Through silent halls; through carven golden doorways;
From freezing rooms as bare as rock.
The curtains are closed across deserted windows.
Earth streams out of the shovel; the pebbles knock.

Mary, whose hands rejoiced to move in sunlight;
Silent Elaine; grave Anne, who sang so clearly;
Fugitive Helen, who loved and walked alone;
Miriam too soon dead, darkly remembered;
Childless Ruth, who sorrowed, but could not atone;

Jean, whose laughter flashed over depths of terror,
And Eloise, who desired to love but dared not;
Doris, who turned alone to the dark and cried,—
They are blown away like windflung chords of music,
They drift away; the sudden music has died.

And one, with death in his eyes, comes walking slowly
And sees the shadow of death in many faces,
And thinks the world is strange.
He desires immortal music and spring forever,
And beauty that knows no change.

IX. CABARET

We sit together and talk, or smoke in silence.
You say (but use no words) 'this night is passing
As other nights when we are dead will pass . . .'
Perhaps I misconstrue you: you mean only,
'How deathly pale my face looks in that glass . . .'

You say: 'We sit and talk, of things important . . .
How many others like ourselves, this instant,
Mark the pendulum swinging against the wall?
How many others, laughing, sip their coffee—
Or stare at mirrors, and do not talk at all? . . .

'This is the moment' (so you would say, in silence)
When suddenly we have had too much of laughter:
And a freezing stillness falls, no word to say.
Our mouths feel foolish . . . For all the days hereafter
What have we saved—what news, what tune, what play?

'We see each other as vain and futile tricksters,—
Posturing like bald apes before a mirror;
No pity dims our eyes . . .
How many others, like ourselves, this instant,
See how the great world wizens, and are wise? . . .'

Well, you are right . . . No doubt, they fall, these seconds . . .
When suddenly all's distempered, vacuous, ugly,
And even those most like angels creep for schemes.
The one you love leans forward, smiles, deceives you,
Opens a door through which you see dark dreams.

But this is momentary . . . or else, enduring,
Leads you with devious eyes through mists and poisons
To horrible chaos, or suicide, or crime . . .
And all these others who at your conjuration
Grow pale, feeling the skeleton touch of time,—

Or, laughing sadly, talk of things important,
Or stare at mirrors, startled to see their faces,
Or drown in the waveless vacuum of their days,—

Suddenly, as from sleep, awake, forgetting
This nauseous dream; take up their accustomed ways,

Exhume the ghost of a joke, renew loud laughter,
Forget the moles above their sweethearts' eyebrows,
Lean to the music, rise,
And dance once more in a rose-festooned illusion
With kindness in their eyes . . .

They say (as we ourselves have said, remember)
'What wizardry this slow waltz works upon us!
And how it brings to mind forgotten things!'
They say 'How strange it is that one such evening
Can wake vague memories of so many springs!'

And so they go . . . In a thousand crowded places,
They sit to smile and talk, or rise to ragtime,
And, for their pleasures, agree or disagree.
With secret symbols they play on secret passions.
With cunning eyes they see

The innocent word that sets remembrance trembling,
The dubious word that sets the scared heart beating . . .
The pendulum on the wall
Shakes down seconds . . . They laugh at time, dissembling;
Or coil for a victim and do not talk at all.

X. LETTER

From time to time, lifting his eyes, he sees
The soft blue starlight through the one small window,
The moon above black trees, and clouds, and Venus,—
And turns to write . . . The clock, behind ticks softly.

It is so long, indeed, since I have written,—
Two years, almost, your last is turning yellow,—
That these first words I write seem cold and strange.
Are you the man I knew, or have you altered?
Altered, of course—just as I too have altered—
And whether towards each other, or more apart,
We cannot say . . . I've just re-read your letter—

Not through forgetfulness, but more for pleasure—

Pondering much on all you say in it
Of mystic consciousness—divine conversion—
The sense of oneness with the infinite,—
Faith in the world, its beauty, and its purpose . . .
Well, you believe one must have faith, in some sort,
If one's to talk through this dark world contented.
But is the world so dark? Or is it rather
Our own brute minds,—in which we hurry, trembling,
Through streets as yet unlighted? This, I think.

You have been always, let me say, "romantic,"—
Eager for color, for beauty, soon discontented
With a world of dust and stones and flesh too ailing:
Even before the question grew to problem
And drove you bickering into metaphysics,
You met on lower planes the same great dragon,
Seeking release, some fleeting satisfaction,
In strange aesthetics . . . You tried, as I remember,
One after one, strange cults, and some, too, morbid,
The cruder first, more violent sensations,
Gorgeously carnal things, conceived and acted
With splendid animal thirst . . . Then, by degrees,—
Savoring all more delicate gradations

In all that hue and tone may play on flesh,
Or thought on brain,—you passed, if I may say so,
From red and scarlet through morbid greens to mauve.
Let us regard ourselves, you used to say,
As instruments of music, whereon our lives
Will play as we desire: and let us yield
These subtle bodies and subtler brains and nerves
To all experience plays . . . And so you went
From subtle tune to subtler, each heard once,
Twice or thrice at the most, tiring of each;
And closing one by one your doors, drew in
Slowly, through darkening labyrinths of feeling,
Towards the central chamber . . . Which now you've reached.

What, then's, the secret of this ultimate chamber—
Or innermost, rather? If I see it clearly

It is the last, and cunningest, resort
Of one who has found this world of dust and flesh,—
This world of lamentations, death, injustice,

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 01: 01: The Sun Goes Down In A Cold Pale Flare Of Light

The sun goes down in a cold pale flare of light.
The trees grow dark: the shadows lean to the east:
And lights wink out through the windows, one by one.
A clamor of frosty sirens mourns at the night.
Pale slate-grey clouds whirl up from the sunken sun.

And the wandering one, the inquisitive dreamer of dreams,
The eternal asker of answers, stands in the street,
And lifts his palms for the first cold ghost of rain.
The purple lights leap down the hill before him.
The gorgeous night has begun again.

'I will ask them all, I will ask them all their dreams,
I will hold my light above them and seek their faces.
I will hear them whisper, invisible in their veins . . .'
The eternal asker of answers becomes as the darkness,
Or as a wind blown over a myriad forest,
Or as the numberless voices of long-drawn rains.

We hear him and take him among us, like a wind of music,
Like the ghost of a music we have somewhere heard;
We crowd through the streets in a dazzle of pallid lamplight,
We pour in a sinister wave, ascend a stair,
With laughter and cry, and word upon murmured word;
We flow, we descend, we turn . . . and the eternal dreamer
Moves among us like light, like evening air . . .

Good-night! Good-night! Good-night! We go our ways,
The rain runs over the pavement before our feet,
The cold rain falls, the rain sings.
We walk, we run, we ride. We turn our faces
To what the eternal evening brings.

Our hands are hot and raw with the stones we have laid,
We have built a tower of stone high into the sky,
We have built a city of towers.

Our hands are light, they are singing with emptiness.
Our souls are light; they have shaken a burden of hours . . .
What did we build it for? Was it all a dream? . . .
Ghostly above us in lamplight the towers gleam . . .
And after a while they will fall to dust and rain;
Or else we will tear them down with impatient hands;
And hew rock out of the earth, and build them again.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 01: 02: One, From His High Bright Window In A Tower

One, from his high bright window in a tower,
Leans out, as evening falls,
And sees the advancing curtain of the shower
Splashing its silver on roofs and walls:
Sees how, swift as a shadow, it crosses the city,
And murmurs beyond far walls to the sea,
Leaving a glimmer of water in the dark canyons,
And silver falling from eave and tree.

One, from his high bright window, looking down,
Peers like a dreamer over the rain-bright town,
And thinks its towers are like a dream.
The western windows flame in the sun's last flare,
Pale roofs begin to gleam.

Looking down from a window high in a wall
He sees us all;
Lifting our pallid faces towards the rain,
Searching the sky, and going our ways again,
Standing in doorways, waiting under the trees . . .
There, in the high bright window he dreams, and sees
What we are blind to,—we who mass and crowd
From wall to wall in the darkening of a cloud.

The gulls drift slowly above the city of towers,
Over the roofs to the darkening sea they fly;
Night falls swiftly on an evening of rain.
The yellow lamps wink one by one again.
The towers reach higher and blacker against the sky.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 01: 03: One, Where The Pale Sea Foamed At The Yellow Sand

One, where the pale sea foamed at the yellow sand,
With wave upon slowly shattering wave,
Turned to the city of towers as evening fell;
And slowly walked by the darkening road toward it;
And saw how the towers darkened against the sky;
And across the distance heard the toll of a bell.

Along the darkening road he hurried alone,
With his eyes cast down,
And thought how the streets were hoarse with a tide of people,
With clamor of voices, and numberless faces . . .
And it seemed to him, of a sudden, that he would drown
Here in the quiet of evening air,
These empty and voiceless places . . .
And he hurried towards the city, to enter there.

Along the darkening road, between tall trees
That made a sinister whisper, loudly he walked.
Behind him, sea-gulls dipped over long grey seas.
Before him, numberless lovers smiled and talked.
And death was observed with sudden cries,
And birth with laughter and pain.
And the trees grew taller and blacker against the skies
And night came down again.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 01: 04: Up High Black Walls, Up Sombre Terraces

Up high black walls, up sombre terraces,
Clinging like luminous birds to the sides of cliffs,
The yellow lights went climbing towards the sky.
From high black walls, gleaming vaguely with rain,
Each yellow light looked down like a golden eye.

They trembled from coign to coign, and tower to tower,
Along high terraces quicker than dream they flew.
And some of them steadily glowed, and some soon vanished,
And some strange shadows threw.

And behind them all the ghosts of thoughts went moving,
Restlessly moving in each lamplit room,
From chair to mirror, from mirror to fire;
From some, the light was scarcely more than a gloom:
From some, a dazzling desire.

And there was one, beneath black eaves, who thought,
Combing with lifted arms her golden hair,
Of the lover who hurried towards her through the night;
And there was one who dreamed of a sudden death
As she blew out her light.

And there was one who turned from clamoring streets,
And walked in lamplit gardens among black trees,
And looked at the windy sky,
And thought with terror how stones and roots would freeze
And birds in the dead boughs cry . . .

And she hurried back, as snow fell, mixed with rain,
To mingle among the crowds again,
To jostle beneath blue lamps along the street;
And lost herself in the warm bright coiling dream,
With a sound of murmuring voices and shuffling feet.

And one, from his high bright window looking down
On luminous chasms that cleft the basalt town,

Hearing a sea-like murmur rise,
Desired to leave his dream, descend from the tower,
And drown in waves of shouts and laughter and cries.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 01: 05: The Snow Floats Down Upon Us, Mingled With Rain

The snow floats down upon us, mingled with rain...
It eddies around pale lilac lamps, and falls
Down golden-windowed walls.
We were all born of flesh, in a flare of pain,
We do not remember the red roots whence we rose,
But we know that we rose and walked, that after a while
We shall lie down again.

The snow floats down upon us, we turn, we turn,
Through gorges filled with light we sound and flow...
One is struck down and hurt, we crowd about him,
We bear him away, gaze after his listless body;
But whether he lives or dies we do not know.

One of us sings in the street, and we listen to him;
The words ring over us like vague bells of sorrow.
He sings of a house he lived in long ago.
It is strange; this house of dust was the house I lived in;
The house you lived in, the house that all of us know.
And coiling slowly about him, and laughing at him,
And throwing him pennies, we bear away
A mournful echo of other times and places,
And follow a dream... a dream that will not stay.

Down long broad flights of lamplit stairs we flow;
Noisy, in scattered waves, crowding and shouting;
In broken slow cascades.
The gardens extend before us... We spread out swiftly;
Trees are above us, and darkness. The canyon fades...

And we recall, with a gleaming stab of sadness,
Vaguely and incoherently, some dream
Of a world we came from, a world of sun-blue hills...
A black wood whispers around us, green eyes gleam;
Someone cries in the forest, and someone kills.

We flow to the east, to the white-lined shivering sea;

We reach to the west, where the whirling sun went down;
We close our eyes to music in bright cafes.
We diverge from clamorous streets to streets that are silent.
We loaf where the wind-spilled fountain plays.

And, growing tired, we turn aside at last,
Remember our secret selves, seek out our towers,
Lay weary hands on the banisters, and climb;
Climbing, each, to his little four-square dream
Of love or lust or beauty or death or crime.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 01: 06: Over The Darkened City, The City Of Towers

Over the darkened city, the city of towers,
The city of a thousand gates,
Over the gleaming terraced roofs, the huddled towers,
Over a somnolent whisper of loves and hates,
The slow wind flows, drearily streams and falls,
With a mournful sound down rain-dark walls.
On one side purples the lustrous dusk of the sea,
And dreams in white at the city's feet;
On one side sleep the plains, with heaped-up hills.
Oaks and beeches whisper in rings about it.
Above the trees are towers where dread bells beat.

The fisherman draws his streaming net from the sea
And sails toward the far-off city, that seems
Like one vague tower.
The dark bow plunges to foam on blue-black waves,
And shrill rain seethes like a ghostly music about him
In a quiet shower.

Rain with a shrill sings on the lapsing waves;
Rain thrills over the roofs again;
Like a shadow of shifting silver it crosses the city;
The lamps in the streets are streamed with rain;
And sparrows complain beneath deep eaves,
And among whirled leaves
The sea-gulls, blowing from tower to lower tower,
From wall to remoter wall,
Skim with the driven rain to the rising sea-sound
And close grey wings and fall . . .

. . . Hearing great rain above me, I now remember
A girl who stood by the door and shut her eyes:
Her pale cheeks glistened with rain, she stood and shivered.
Into a forest of silver she vanished slowly . . .
Voices about me rise . . .

Voices clear and silvery, voices of raindrops,—

'We struck with silver claws, we struck her down.
We are the ghosts of the singing furies . . . '
A chorus of elfin voices blowing about me
Weaves to a babel of sound. Each cries a secret.
I run among them, reach out vain hands, and drown.

'I am the one who stood beside you and smiled,
Thinking your face so strangely young . . . '
'I am the one who loved you but did not dare.'
'I am the one you followed through crowded streets,
The one who escaped you, the one with red-gleamed hair.'

'I am the one you saw to-day, who fell
Senseless before you, hearing a certain bell:
A bell that broke great memories in my brain.'
'I am the one who passed unnoticed before you,
Invisible, in a cloud of secret pain.'

'I am the one who suddenly cried, beholding
The face of a certain man on the dazzling screen.
They wrote me that he was dead. It was long ago.
I walked in the streets for a long while, hearing nothing,
And returned to see it again. And it was so.'

Weave, weave, weave, you streaks of rain!
I am dissolved and woven again . . .
Thousands of faces rise and vanish before me.
Thousands of voices weave in the rain.

'I am the one who rode beside you, blinking
At a dazzle of golden lights.
Tempests of music swept me: I was thinking
Of the gorgeous promise of certain nights:
Of the woman who suddenly smiled at me this day,
Smiled in a certain delicious sidelong way,
And turned, as she reached the door,
To smile once more . . .
Her hands are whiter than snow on midnight water.
Her throat is golden and full of golden laughter,
Her eyes are strange as the stealth of the moon
On a night in June . . .

She runs among whistling leaves; I hurry after;
She dances in dreams over white-waved water;
Her body is white and fragrant and cool,
Magnolia petals that float on a white-starred pool . . .
I have dreamed of her, dreaming for many nights
Of a broken music and golden lights,
Of broken webs of silver, heavily falling
Between my hands and their white desire:
And dark-leaved boughs, edged with a golden radiance,
Dipping to screen a fire . . .
I dream that I walk with her beneath high trees,
But as I lean to kiss her face,
She is blown aloft on wind, I catch at leaves,
And run in a moonless place;
And I hear a crashing of terrible rocks flung down,
And shattering trees and cracking walls,
And a net of intense white flame roars over the town,
And someone cries; and darkness falls . . .
But now she has leaned and smiled at me,
My veins are afire with music,
Her eyes have kissed me, my body is turned to light;
I shall dream to her secret heart tonight . . . '

He rises and moves away, he says no word,
He folds his evening paper and turns away;
I rush through the dark with rows of lamplit faces;
Fire bells peal, and some of us turn to listen,
And some sit motionless in their accustomed places.

Cold rain lashes the car-roof, scurries in gusts,
Streams down the windows in waves and ripples of lustre;
The lamps in the streets are distorted and strange.
Someone takes his watch from his pocket and yawns.
One peers out in the night for the place to change.

Rain . . . rain . . . rain . . . we are buried in rain,
It will rain forever, the swift wheels hiss through water,
Pale sheets of water gleam in the windy street.
The pealing of bells is lost in a drive of rain-drops.
Remote and hurried the great bells beat.

'I am the one whom life so shrewdly betrayed,

Misfortune dogs me, it always hunted me down.
And to-day the woman I love lies dead.
I gave her roses, a ring with opals;
These hands have touched her head.

'I bound her to me in all soft ways,
I bound her to me in a net of days,
Yet now she has gone in silence and said no word.
How can we face these dazzling things, I ask you?
There is no use: we cry: and are not heard.

'They cover a body with roses . . . I shall not see it . . .
Must one return to the lifeless walls of a city
Whose soul is charred by fire? . . . '
His eyes are closed, his lips press tightly together.
Wheels hiss beneath us. He yields us our desire.

'No, do not stare so—he is weak with grief,
He cannot face you, he turns his eyes aside;
He is confused with pain.
I suffered this. I know. It was long ago . . .
He closes his eyes and drowns in death again.'

The wind hurls blows at the rain-starred glistening windows,
The wind shrills down from the half-seen walls.
We flow on the mournful wind in a dream of dying;
And at last a silence falls.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 01: 07: Midnight; Bells Toll, And Along The Cloud-High Towers

Midnight; bells toll, and along the cloud-high towers
The golden lights go out . . .
The yellow windows darken, the shades are drawn,
In thousands of rooms we sleep, we await the dawn,
We lie face down, we dream,
We cry aloud with terror, half rise, or seem
To stare at the ceiling or walls . . .
Midnight . . . the last of shattering bell-notes falls.
A rush of silence whirls over the cloud-high towers,
A vortex of soundless hours.

'The bells have just struck twelve: I should be sleeping.
But I cannot delay any longer to write and tell you.
The woman is dead.
She died—you know the way. Just as we planned.
Smiling, with open sunlit eyes.
Smiling upon the outstretched fatal hand . . .'

He folds his letter, steps softly down the stairs.
The doors are closed and silent. A gas-jet flares.
His shadow disturbs a shadow of balustrades.
The door swings shut behind. Night roars above him.
Into the night he fades.

Wind; wind; wind; carving the walls;
Blowing the water that gleams in the street;
Blowing the rain, the sleet.
In the dark alley, an old tree cracks and falls,
Oak-boughs moan in the haunted air;
Lamps blow down with a crash and tinkle of glass . . .
Darkness whistles . . . Wild hours pass . . .

And those whom sleep eludes lie wide-eyed, hearing
Above their heads a goblin night go by;
Children are waked, and cry,
The young girl hears the roar in her sleep, and dreams
That her lover is caught in a burning tower,

She clutches the pillow, she gasps for breath, she screams . . .
And then by degrees her breath grows quiet and slow,
She dreams of an evening, long ago:
Of colored lanterns balancing under trees,
Some of them softly catching afire;
And beneath the lanterns a motionless face she sees,
Golden with lamplight, smiling, serene . . .
The leaves are a pale and glittering green,
The sound of horns blows over the trampled grass,
Shadows of dancers pass . . .
The face smiles closer to hers, she tries to lean
Backward, away, the eyes burn close and strange,
The face is beginning to change, —
It is her lover, she no longer desires to resist,
She is held and kissed.
She closes her eyes, and melts in a seethe of flame . . .
With a smoking ghost of shame . . .

Wind, wind, wind . . . Wind in an enormous brain
Blowing dark thoughts like fallen leaves . . .
The wind shrieks, the wind grieves;
It dashes the leaves on walls, it whirls then again;
And the enormous sleeper vaguely and stupidly dreams
And desires to stir, to resist a ghost of pain.

One, whom the city imprisoned because of his cunning,
Who dreamed for years in a tower,
Seizes this hour
Of tumult and wind. He files through the rusted bar,
Leans his face to the rain, laughs up at the night,
Slides down the knotted sheet, swings over the wall,
To fall to the street with a cat-like fall,
Slinks round a quavering rim of windy light,
And at last is gone,
Leaving his empty cell for the pallor of dawn . . .

The mother whose child was buried to-day
Turns her face to the window; her face is grey;
And all her body is cold with the coldness of rain.
He would have grown as easily as a tree,
He would have spread a pleasure of shade above her,
He would have been his father again . . .

His growth was ended by a freezing invisible shadow.
She lies, and does not move, and is stabbed by the rain.

Wind, wind, wind; we toss and dream;
We dream we are clouds and stars, blown in a stream:
Windows rattle above our beds;
We reach vague-gesturing hands, we lift our heads,
Hear sounds far off,—and dream, with quivering breath,
Our curious separate ways through life and death.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 01: 08: The White Fog Creeps From The Cold Sea Over The City

The white fog creeps from the cold sea over the city,
Over the pale grey tumbled towers,—
And settles among the roofs, the pale grey walls.
Along damp sinuous streets it crawls,
Curls like a dream among the motionless trees
And seems to freeze.

The fog slips ghostlike into a thousand rooms,
Whirls over sleeping faces,
Spins in an atomy dance round misty street lamps;
And blows in cloudy waves over open spaces . . .

And one from his high window, looking down,
Peers at the cloud-white town,
And thinks its island towers are like a dream . . .
It seems an enormous sleeper, within whose brain
Laborious shadows revolve and break and gleam.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 02: 01: The Round Red Sun Heaves Darkly Out Of The Sea

The round red sun heaves darkly out of the sea.
The walls and towers are warmed and gleam.
Sounds go drowsily up from streets and wharves.
The city stirs like one that is half in dream.

And the mist flows up by dazzling walls and windows,
Where one by one we wake and rise.
We gaze at the pale grey lustrous sea a moment,
We rub the darkness from our eyes,

And face our thousand devious secret mornings . . .
And do not see how the pale mist, slowly ascending,
Shaped by the sun, shines like a white-robed dreamer
Compassionate over our towers bending.

There, like one who gazes into a crystal,
He broods upon our city with sombre eyes;
He sees our secret fears vaguely unfolding,
Sees cloudy symbols shape to rise.

Each gleaming point of light is like a seed
Dilating swiftly to coiling fires.
Each cloud becomes a rapidly dimming face,
Each hurrying face records its strange desires.

We descend our separate stairs toward the day,
Merge in the somnolent mass that fills the street,
Lift our eyes to the soft blue space of sky,
And walk by the well-known walls with accustomed feet.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 02: 02: The Fulfilled Dream

More towers must yet be built—more towers destroyed—
Great rocks hoisted in air;
And he must seek his bread in high pale sunlight
With gulls about him, and clouds just over his eyes . . .
And so he did not mention his dream of falling
But drank his coffee in silence, and heard in his ears
That horrible whistle of wind, and felt his breath
Sucked out of him, and saw the tower flash by
And the small tree swell beneath him . . .
He patted his boy on the head, and kissed his wife,
Looked quickly around the room, to remember it,—
And so went out . . . For once, he forgot his pail.

Something had changed—but it was not the street—
The street was just the same—it was himself.
Puddles flashed in the sun. In the pawn-shop door
The same old black cat winked green amber eyes;
The butcher stood by his window tying his apron;
The same men walked beside him, smoking pipes,
Reading the morning paper . . .

He would not yield, he thought, and walk more slowly,
As if he knew for certain he walked to death:
But with his usual pace,—deliberate, firm,
Looking about him calmly, watching the world,
Taking his ease . . . Yet, when he thought again
Of the same dream, now dreamed three separate times,
Always the same, and heard that whistling wind,
And saw the windows flashing upward past him,—
He slowed his pace a little, and thought with horror
How monstrously that small tree thrust to meet him! . . .
He slowed his pace a little and remembered his wife.

Was forty, then, too old for work like this?
Why should it be? He'd never been afraid—
His eye was sure, his hand was steady . . .
But dreams had meanings.
He walked more slowly, and looked along the roofs,
All built by men, and saw the pale blue sky;

And suddenly he was dizzy with looking at it,
It seemed to whirl and swim,
It seemed the color of terror, of speed, of death . . .
He lowered his eyes to the stones, he walked more slowly;
His thoughts were blown and scattered like leaves;
He thought of the pail . . . Why, then, was it forgotten?
Because he would not need it?

Then, just as he was grouping his thoughts again
About that drug-store corner, under an arc-lamp,
Where first he met the girl whom he would marry,—
That blue-eyed innocent girl, in a soft blouse,—
He waved his hand for signal, and up he went
In the dusty chute that hugged the wall;
Above the tree; from girdered floor to floor;
Above the flattening roofs, until the sea
Lay wide and waved before him . . . And then he stepped
Giddily out, from that security,
To the red rib of iron against the sky,
And walked along it, feeling it sing and tremble;
And looking down one instant, saw the tree
Just as he dreamed it was; and looked away,
And up again, feeling his blood go wild.

He gave the signal; the long girder swung
Closer to him, dropped clanging into place,
Almost pushing him off. Pneumatic hammers
Began their madhouse clatter, the white-hot rivets
Were tossed from below and deftly caught in pails;
He signalled again, and wiped his mouth, and thought
A place so high in the air should be more quiet.
The tree, far down below, teased at his eyes,
Teased at the corners of them, until he looked,
And felt his body go suddenly small and light;
Felt his brain float off like a dwindling vapor;
And heard a whistle of wind, and saw a tree
Come plunging up to him, and thought to himself,
'By God—I'm done for now, the dream was right . . .'

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 02: 03: Interlude

The warm sun dreams in the dust, the warm sun falls
On bright red roofs and walls;
The trees in the park exhale a ghost of rain;
We go from door to door in the streets again,
Talking, laughing, dreaming, turning our faces,
Recalling other times and places . . .
We crowd, not knowing why, around a gate,
We crowd together and wait,
A stretcher is carried out, voices are stilled,
The ambulance drives away.
We watch its roof flash by, hear someone say
'A man fell off the building and was killed—
Fell right into a barrel . . .' We turn again
Among the frightened eyes of white-faced men,
And go our separate ways, each bearing with him
A thing he tries, but vainly, to forget,—
A sickened crowd, a stretcher red and wet.

A hurdy-gurdy sings in the crowded street,
The golden notes skip over the sunlit stones,
Wings are upon our feet.
The sun seems warmer, the winding street more bright,
Sparrows come whirring down in a cloud of light.
We bear our dreams among us, bear them all,
Like hurdy-gurdy music they rise and fall,
Climb to beauty and die.
The wandering lover dreams of his lover's mouth,
And smiles at the hostile sky.
The broker smokes his pipe, and sees a fortune.
The murderer hears a cry.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 02: 04: Nightmare

'Draw three cards, and I will tell your future . . .
Draw three cards, and lay them down,
Rest your palms upon them, stare at the crystal,
And think of time . . . My father was a clown,
My mother was a gypsy out of Egypt;
And she was gotten with child in a strange way;
And I was born in a cold eclipse of the moon,
With the future in my eyes as clear as day.'

I sit before the gold-embroidered curtain
And think her face is like a wrinkled desert.
The crystal burns in lamplight beneath my eyes.
A dragon slowly coils on the scaly curtain.
Upon a scarlet cloth a white skull lies.

'Your hand is on the hand that holds three lilies.
You will live long, love many times.
I see a dark girl here who once betrayed you.
I see a shadow of secret crimes.

'There was a man who came intent to kill you,
And hid behind a door and waited for you;
There was a woman who smiled at you and lied.
There was a golden girl who loved you, begged you,
Crawled after you, and died.

'There is a ghost of murder in your blood—
Coming or past, I know not which.
And here is danger—a woman with sea-green eyes,
And white-skinned as a witch . . .'

The words hiss into me, like raindrops falling
On sleepy fire . . . She smiles a meaning smile.
Suspicion eats my brain; I ask a question;
Something is creeping at me, something vile;

And suddenly on the wall behind her head
I see a monstrous shadow strike and spread,
The lamp puffs out, a great blow crashes down.

I plunge through the curtain, run through dark to the street,
And hear swift steps retreat . . .

The shades are drawn, the door is locked behind me.
Behind the door I hear a hammer sounding.
I walk in a cloud of wonder; I am glad.
I mingle among the crowds; my heart is pounding;
You do not guess the adventure I have had! . . .

Yet you, too, all have had your dark adventures,
Your sudden adventures, or strange, or sweet . . .
My peril goes out from me, is blown among you.
We loiter, dreaming together, along the street.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 02: 05: Retrospect

Round white clouds roll slowly above the housetops,
Over the clear red roofs they flow and pass.
A flock of pigeons rises with blue wings flashing,
Rises with whistle of wings, hovers an instant,
And settles slowly again on the tarnished grass.

And one old man looks down from a dusty window
And sees the pigeons circling about the fountain
And desires once more to walk among those trees.
Lovers walk in the noontime by that fountain.
Pigeons dip their beaks to drink from the water.
And soon the pond must freeze.

The light wind blows to his ears a sound of laughter,
Young men shuffle their feet, loaf in the sunlight;
A girl's laugh rings like a silver bell.
But clearer than all these sounds is a sound he hears
More in his secret heart than in his ears, —
A hammer's steady crescendo, like a knell.
He hears the snarl of pineboards under the plane,
The rhythmic saw, and then the hammer again, —
Playing with delicate strokes that sombre scale . . .
And the fountain dwindles, the sunlight seems to pale.

Time is a dream, he thinks, a destroying dream;
It lays great cities in dust, it fills the seas;
It covers the face of beauty, and tumbles walls.
Where was the woman he loved? Where was his youth?
Where was the dream that burned his brain like fire?
Even a dream grows grey at last and falls.

He opened his book once more, beside the window,
And read the printed words upon that page.
The sunlight touched his hand; his eyes moved slowly,
The quiet words enchanted time and age.

'Death is never an ending, death is a change;
Death is beautiful, for death is strange;
Death is one dream out of another flowing;

Death is a chorded music, softly going
By sweet transition from key to richer key.
Death is a meeting place of sea and sea.'

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 02: 06: Adele And Davis

She turned her head on the pillow, and cried once more.
And drawing a shaken breath, and closing her eyes,
To shut out, if she could, this dingy room,
The wigs and costumes scattered around the floor,—
Yellows and greens in the dark,—she walked again
Those nightmare streets which she had walked so often . . .
Here, at a certain corner, under an arc-lamp,
Blown by a bitter wind, she stopped and looked
In through the brilliant windows of a drug-store,
And wondered if she dared to ask for poison:
But it was late, few customers were there,
The eyes of all the clerks would freeze upon her,
And she would wilt, and cry . . . Here, by the river,
She listened to the water slapping the wall,
And felt queer fascination in its blackness:
But it was cold, the little waves looked cruel,
The stars were keen, and a windy dash of spray
Struck her cheek, and withered her veins . . . And so
She dragged herself once more to home, and bed.

Paul hadn't guessed it yet—though twice, already,
She'd fainted—once, the first time, on the stage.
So she must tell him soon—or else—get out . . .
How could she say it? That was the hideous thing.
She'd rather die than say it! . . . and all the trouble,
Months when she couldn't earn a cent, and then,
If he refused to marry her . . . well, what?
She saw him laughing, making a foolish joke,
His grey eyes turning quickly; and the words
Fled from her tongue . . . She saw him sitting silent,
Brooding over his morning coffee, maybe,
And tried again . . . she bit her lips, and trembled,
And looked away, and said . . . 'Say Paul, boy,—listen—
There's something I must tell you . . . ' There she stopped,
Wondering what he'd say . . . What would he say?
'Spring it, kid! Don't look so serious!'
'But what I've got to say—IS—serious!'
Then she could see how, suddenly, he would sober,
His eyes would darken, he'd look so terrifying—

He always did—and what could she do but cry?
Perhaps, then, he would guess—perhaps he wouldn't.
And if he didn't, but asked her 'What's the matter?''—
She knew she'd never tell—just say she was sick . . .
And after that, when would she dare again?
And what would he do—even suppose she told him?

If it were Felix! If it were only Felix!—
She wouldn't mind so much. But as it was,
Bitterness choked her, she had half a mind
To pay out Felix for never having liked her,
By making people think that it was he . . .
She'd write a letter to someone, before she died,—
Just saying 'Felix did it—and wouldn't marry.'
And then she'd die . . . But that was hard on Paul . . .
Paul would never forgive her—he'd never forgive her!
Sometimes she almost thought Paul really loved her . . .
She saw him look reproachfully at her coffin.

And then she closed her eyes and walked again
Those nightmare streets that she had walked so often:
Under an arc-lamp swinging in the wind
She stood, and stared in through a drug-store window,
Watching a clerk wrap up a little pill-box.
But it was late. No customers were there,—
Pitiless eyes would freeze her secret in her!
And then—what poison would she dare to ask for?
And if they asked her why, what would she say?

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 02: 07: Two Lovers: Overtones

Two lovers, here at the corner, by the steeple,
Two lovers blow together like music blowing:
And the crowd dissolves about them like a sea.
Recurring waves of sound break vaguely about them,
They drift from wall to wall, from tree to tree.
'Well, am I late?' Upward they look and laugh,
They look at the great clock's golden hands,
They laugh and talk, not knowing what they say:
Only, their words like music seem to play;
And seeming to walk, they tread strange sarabands.

'I brought you this . . . ' the soft words float like stars
Down the smooth heaven of her memory.
She stands again by a garden wall,
The peach tree is in bloom, pink blossoms fall,
Water sings from an opened tap, the bees
Glisten and murmur among the trees.
Someone calls from the house. She does not answer.
Backward she leans her head,
And dreamily smiles at the peach-tree leaves, wherethrough
She sees an infinite May sky spread
A vault profoundly blue.
The voice from the house fades far away,
The glistening leaves more vaguely ripple and sway . .
The tap is closed, the water ceases to hiss . . .
Silence . . . blue sky . . . and then, 'I brought you this . . . '
She turns again, and smiles . . . He does not know
She smiles from long ago . . .

She turns to him and smiles . . . Sunlight above him
Roars like a vast invisible sea,
Gold is beaten before him, shrill bells of silver;
He is released of weight, his body is free,
He lifts his arms to swim,
Dark years like sinister tides coil under him . . .
The lazy sea-waves crumble along the beach
With a whirring sound like wind in bells,

He lies outstretched on the yellow wind-worn sands
Reaching his lazy hands
Among the golden grains and sea-white shells . . .

'One white rose . . . or is it pink, to-day?'
They pause and smile, not caring what they say,
If only they may talk.
The crowd flows past them like dividing waters.
Dreaming they stand, dreaming they walk.

'Pink,—to-day!'—Face turns to dream-bright face,
Green leaves rise round them, sunshine settles upon them,
Water, in drops of silver, falls from the rose.
She smiles at a face that smiles through leaves from the mirror.
She breathes the fragrance; her dark eyes close . . .

Time is dissolved, it blows like a little dust:
Time, like a flurry of rain,
Patters and passes, starring the window-pane.
Once, long ago, one night,
She saw the lightning, with long blue quiver of light,
Ripping the darkness . . . and as she turned in terror
A soft face leaned above her, leaned softly down,
Softly around her a breath of roses was blown,
She sank in waves of quiet, she seemed to float
In a sea of silence . . . and soft steps grew remote . . .

'Well, let us walk in the park . . . The sun is warm,
We'll sit on a bench and talk . . .' They turn and glide,
The crowd of faces wavers and breaks and flows.
'Look how the oak-tops turn to gold in the sunlight!
Look how the tower is changed and glows!'

Two lovers move in the crowd like a link of music,
We press upon them, we hold them, and let them pass;
A chord of music strikes us and straight we tremble;
We tremble like wind-blown grass.

What was this dream we had, a dream of music,
Music that rose from the opening earth like magic
And shook its beauty upon us and died away?
The long cold streets extend once more before us.

The red sun drops, the walls grow grey.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 02: 08: The Box With Silver Handles

Well,—it was two days after my husband died—
Two days! And the earth still raw above him.
And I was sweeping the carpet in their hall.
In number four—the room with the red wall-paper—
Some chorus girls and men were singing that song
'They'll soon be lighting candles
Round a box with silver handles'—and hearing them sing it
I started to cry. Just then he came along
And stopped on the stairs and turned and looked at me,
And took the cigar from his mouth and sort of smiled
And said, 'Say, what's the matter?' and then came down
Where I was leaning against the wall,
And touched my shoulder, and put his arm around me . . .
And I was so sad, thinking about it,—
Thinking that it was raining, and a cold night,
With Jim so unaccustomed to being dead,—
That I was happy to have him sympathize,
To feel his arm, and leaned against him and cried.
And before I knew it, he got me into a room
Where a table was set, and no one there,
And sat me down on a sofa, and held me close,
And talked to me, telling me not to cry,
That it was all right, he'd look after me,—
But not to cry, my eyes were getting red,
Which didn't make me pretty. And he was so nice,
That when he turned my face between his hands,
And looked at me, with those blue eyes of his,
And smiled, and leaned, and kissed me—
Somehow I couldn't tell him not to do it,
Somehow I didn't mind, I let him kiss me,
And closed my eyes! . . . Well, that was how it started.
For when my heart was eased with crying, and grief
Had passed and left me quiet, somehow it seemed
As if it wasn't honest to change my mind,
To send him away, or say I hadn't meant it—
And, anyway, it seemed so hard to explain!
And so we sat and talked, not talking much,

But meaning as much in silence as in words,
There in that empty room with palms about us,
That private dining-room . . . And as we sat there
I felt my future changing, day by day,
With unknown streets opening left and right,
New streets with farther lights, new taller houses,
Doors swinging into hallways filled with light,
Half-opened luminous windows, with white curtains
Streaming out in the night, and sudden music,—
And thinking of this, and through it half remembering
A quick and horrible death, my husband's eyes,
The broken-plastered walls, my boy asleep,—
It seemed as if my brain would break in two.
My voice began to tremble . . . and when I stood,
And told him I must go, and said good-night—
I couldn't see the end. How would it end?
Would he return to-morrow? Or would he not?
And did I want him to—or would I rather
Look for another job?—He took my shoulders
Between his hands, and looked down into my eyes,
And smiled, and said good-night. If he had kissed me,
That would have—well, I don't know; but he didn't . . .
And so I went downstairs, then, half elated,
Hoping to close the door before that party
In number four should sing that song again—
'They'll soon be lighting candles round a box with silver handles'—
And sure enough, I did. I faced the darkness.
And my eyes were filled with tears. And I was happy.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 02: 09: Interlude

The days, the nights, flow one by one above us,
The hours go silently over our lifted faces,
We are like dreamers who walk beneath a sea.
Beneath high walls we flow in the sun together.
We sleep, we wake, we laugh, we pursue, we flee.

We sit at tables and sip our morning coffee,
We read the papers for tales of lust or crime.
The door swings shut behind the latest comer.
We set our watches, regard the time.

What have we done? I close my eyes, remember
The great machine whose sinister brain before me
Smote and smote with a rhythmic beat.
My hands have torn down walls, the stone and plaster.
I dropped great beams to the dusty street.

My eyes are worn with measuring cloths of purple,
And golden cloths, and wavering cloths, and pale.
I dream of a crowd of faces, white with menace.
Hands reach up to tear me. My brain will fail.

Here, where the walls go down beneath our picks,
These walls whose windows gap against the sky,
Atom by atom of flesh and brain and marble
Will build a glittering tower before we die . . .

The young boy whistles, hurrying down the street,
The young girl hums beneath her breath.
One goes out to beauty, and does not know it.
And one goes out to death.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 02: 10: Sudden Death

'Number four—the girl who died on the table—
The girl with golden hair—'
The purpling body lies on the polished marble.
We open the throat, and lay the thyroid bare . . .

One, who held the ether-cone, remembers
Her dark blue frightened eyes.
He heard the sharp breath quiver, and saw her breast
More hurriedly fall and rise.
Her hands made futile gestures, she turned her head
Fighting for breath; her cheeks were flushed to scarlet,—
And, suddenly, she lay dead.

And all the dreams that hurried along her veins
Came to the darkness of a sudden wall.
Confusion ran among them, they whirled and clamored,
They fell, they rose, they struck, they shouted,
Till at last a pallor of silence hushed them all.

What was her name? Where had she walked that morning?
Through what dark forest came her feet?
Along what sunlit walls, what peopled street?

Backward he dreamed along a chain of days,
He saw her go her strange and secret ways,
Waking and sleeping, noon and night.
She sat by a mirror, braiding her golden hair.
She read a story by candlelight.

Her shadow ran before her along the street,
She walked with rhythmic feet,
Turned a corner, descended a stair.
She bought a paper, held it to scan the headlines,
Smiled for a moment at sea-gulls high in sunlight,
And drew deep breaths of air.

Days passed, bright clouds of days. Nights passed. And music
Murmured within the walls of lighted windows.
She lifted her face to the light and danced.

The dancers wreathed and grouped in moving patterns,
Clustered, receded, streamed, advanced.

Her dress was purple, her slippers were golden,
Her eyes were blue; and a purple orchid
Opened its golden heart on her breast . . .
She leaned to the surly languor of lazy music,
Leaned on her partner's arm to rest.
The violins were weaving a weft of silver,
The horns were weaving a lustrous brede of gold,
And time was caught in a glistening pattern,
Time, too elusive to hold . . .

Shadows of leaves fell over her face, & sunlight:
She turned her face away.
Nearer she moved to a crouching darkness
With every step and day.

Death, who at first had thought of her only an instant,
At a great distance, across the night,
Smiled from a window upon her, and followed her slowly
From purple light to light.

Once, in her dreams, he spoke out clearly, crying,
'I am the murderer, death.
I am the lover who keeps his appointment
At the doors of breath!'

She rose and stared at her own reflection,
Half dreading there to find
The dark-eyed ghost, waiting beside her,
Or reaching from behind
To lay pale hands upon her shoulders . . .
Or was this in her mind? . . .

She combed her hair. The sunlight glimmered
Along the tossing strands.
Was there a stillness in this hair, &
A quiet in these hands?

Death was a dream. It could not change these eyes,
Blow out their light, or turn this mouth to dust.

She combed her hair and sang. She would live forever.
Leaves flew past her window along a gust . . .
And graves were dug in the earth, and coffins passed,
And music ebbed with the ebbing hours.
And dreams went along her veins, and scattering clouds
Threw streaming shadows on walls and towers.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 02: 11: Snow Falls. The Sky Is Grey, And Sullenly Glares

Snow falls. The sky is grey, and sullenly glares
With purple lights in the canyoned street.
The fiery sign on the dark tower wreathes and flares...
The trodden grass in the park is covered with white,
The streets grow silent beneath our feet...
The city dreams, it forgets its past to-night.

And one, from his high bright window looking down
Over the enchanted whiteness of the town,
Seeing through whirls of white the vague grey towers,
Desires like this to forget what will not pass,
The littered papers, the dust, the tarnished grass,
Grey death, stale ugliness, and sodden hours.
Deep in his heart old bells are beaten again,
Slurred bells of grief and pain,
Dull echoes of hideous times and poisonous places.
He desires to drown in a cold white peace of snow.
He desires to forget a million faces...

In one room breathes a woman who dies of hunger.
The clock ticks slowly and stops. And no one winds it.
In one room fade grey violets in a vase.
Snow flakes faintly hiss and melt on the window.
In one room, minute by minute, the flutist plays
The lamplit page of music, the tireless scales.
His hands are trembling, his short breath fails.

In one room, silently, lover looks upon lover,
And thinks the air is fire.
The drunkard swears and touches the harlot's heartstrings
With the sudden hand of desire.

And one goes late in the streets, and thinks of murder;
And one lies staring, and thinks of death.
And one, who has suffered, clenches her hands despairing,
And holds her breath...

Who are all these, who flow in the veins of the city,
Coil and revolve and dream,
Vanish or gleam?
Some mount up to the brain and flower in fire.
Some are destroyed; some die; some slowly stream.

And the new are born who desire to destroy the old;
And fires are kindled and quenched; and dreams are broken,
And walls flung down...
And the slow night whirls in snow over towers of dreamers,
And whiteness hushes the town.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 01: As Evening Falls

As evening falls,
And the yellow lights leap one by one
Along high walls;
And along black streets that glisten as if with rain,
The muted city seems
Like one in a restless sleep, who lies and dreams
Of vague desires, and memories, and half-forgotten pain . . .
Along dark veins, like lights the quick dreams run,
Flash, are extinguished, flash again,
To mingle and glow at last in the enormous brain
And die away . . .
As evening falls,
A dream dissolves these insubstantial walls, —
A myriad secretly gliding lights lie bare . . .
The lovers rise, the harlot combs her hair,
The dead man's face grows blue in the dizzy lamplight,
The watchman climbs the stair . . .
The bank defaulter leers at a chaos of figures,
And runs among them, and is beaten down;
The sick man coughs and hears the chisels ringing;
The tired clown
Sees the enormous crowd, a million faces,
Motionless in their places,
Ready to laugh, and seize, and crush and tear . . .
The dancer smooths her hair,
Laces her golden slippers, and runs through the door
To dance once more,
Hearing swift music like an enchantment rise,
Feeling the praise of a thousand eyes.

As darkness falls
The walls grow luminous and warm, the walls
Tremble and glow with the lives within them moving,
Moving like music, secret and rich and warm.
How shall we live tonight? Where shall we turn?
To what new light or darkness yearn?
A thousand winding stairs lead down before us;
And one by one in myriads we descend
By lamplit flowered walls, long balustrades,

Through half-lit halls which reach no end.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 02: The Screen Maiden

You read—what is it, then that you are reading?
What music moves so silently in your mind?
Your bright hand turns the page.
I watch you from my window, unsuspected:
You move in an alien land, a silent age . . .

. . . The poet—what was his name—?
Tokkei—Tokkei—
The poet walked alone in a cold late rain,
And thought his grief was like the crying of sea-birds;
For his lover was dead, he never would love again.

Rain in the dreams of the mind—rain forever—
Rain in the sky of the heart—rain in the willows—
But then he saw this face, this face like flame,
This quiet lady, this portrait by Hiroshigi;
And took it home with him; and with it came

What unexpected changes, subtle as weather!
The dark room, cold as rain,
Grew faintly fragrant, stirred with a stir of April,
Warmed its corners with light again,

And smoke of incense whirled about this portrait,
And the quiet lady there,
So young, so quietly smiling, with calm hands,
Seemed ready to loose her hair,

And smile, and lean from the picture, or say one word,
The word already clear,
Which seemed to rise like light between her eyelids . . .
He held his breath to hear,

And smiled for shame, and drank a cup of wine,
And held a candle, and searched her face
Through all the little shadows, to see what secret
Might give so warm a grace . . .

Was it the quiet mouth, restrained a little?

The eyes, half-turned aside?
The jade ring on her wrist, still almost swinging? . . .
The secret was denied,

He chose his favorite pen and drew these verses,
And slept; and as he slept
A dream came into his heart, his lover entered,
And chided him, and wept.

And in the morning, waking, he remembered,
And thought the dream was strange.
Why did his darkened lover rise from the garden?
He turned, and felt a change,

As if a someone hidden smiled and watched him . . .
Yet there was only sunlight there.
Until he saw those young eyes, quietly smiling,
And held his breath to stare,

And could have sworn her cheek had turned—a little . . .
Had slightly turned away . . .
Sunlight dozed on the floor . . . He sat and wondered,
Nor left his room that day.

And that day, and for many days thereafter,
He sat alone, and thought
No lady had ever lived so beautiful
As Hiroshigi wrought . . .

Or if she lived, no matter in what country,
By what far river or hill or lonely sea,
He would look in every face until he found her . . .
There was no other as fair as she.

And before her quiet face he burned soft incense,
And brought her every day
Boughs of the peach, or almond, or snow-white cherry,
And somehow, she seemed to say,

That silent lady, young, and quietly smiling,
That she was happy there;
And sometimes, seeing this, he started to tremble,

And desired to touch her hair,

To lay his palm along her hand, touch faintly
With delicate finger-tips
The ghostly smile that seemed to hover and vanish
Upon her lips . . .

Until he knew he loved this quiet lady;
And night by night a dread
Leered at his dreams, for he knew that Hiroshigi
Was many centuries dead,—

And the lady, too, was dead, and all who knew her . .
Dead, and long turned to dust . . .
The thin moon waxed and waned, and left him paler,
The peach leaves flew in a gust,

And he would surely have died; but there one day
A wise man, white with age,
Stared at the portrait, and said, 'This Hiroshigi
Knew more than archimage,—

Cunningly drew the body, and called the spirit,
Till partly it entered there . . .
Sometimes, at death, it entered the portrait wholly . .
Do all I say with care,

And she you love may come to you when you call her . . . '
So then this ghost, Tokkei,
Ran in the sun, bought wine of a hundred merchants,
And alone at the end of day

Entered the darkening room, and faced the portrait,
And saw the quiet eyes
Gleaming and young in the dusk, and held the wine-cup,
And knelt, and did not rise,

And said, aloud, 'Lo-san, will you drink this wine?'
Said it three times aloud.
And at the third the faint blue smoke of incense
Rose to the walls in a cloud,

And the lips moved faintly, and the eyes, and the calm hands stirred;
And suddenly, with a sigh,
The quiet lady came slowly down from the portrait,
And stood, while worlds went by,

And lifted her young white hands and took the wine cup;
And the poet trembled, and said,
'Lo-san, will you stay forever?'—'Yes, I will stay.'—
'But what when I am dead?'

'When you are dead your spirit will find my spirit,
And then we shall die no more.'
Music came down upon them, and spring returning,
They remembered worlds before,

And years went over the earth, and over the sea,
And lovers were born and spoke and died,
But forever in sunlight went these two immortal,
Tokkei and the quiet bride . . .

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 03: Haunted Chambers

The lamplit page is turned, the dream forgotten;
The music changes tone, you wake, remember
Deep worlds you lived before, & deep worlds hereafter
Of leaf on falling leaf, music on music,
Rain and sorrow and wind and dust and laughter.

Helen was late and Miriam came too soon.
Joseph was dead, his wife and children starving.
Elaine was married and soon to have a child.
You dreamed last night of fiddler-crabs with fiddles;
They played a buzzing melody, and you smiled.

To-morrow & what? And what of yesterday?
Through soundless labyrinths of dream you pass,
Through many doors to the one door of all.
Soon as it's opened we shall hear a music:
Or see a skeleton fall . . .

We walk with you. Where is it that you lead us?
We climb the muffled stairs beneath high lanterns.
We descend again. We grope through darkened cells.
You say: this darkness, here, will slowly kill me.
It creeps and weighs upon me . . . Is full of bells.

This is the thing remembered I would forget &
No matter where I go, how soft I tread,
This windy gesture menaces me with death.
Fatigue! it says, and points its finger at me;
Touches my throat and stops my breath.

My fans & my jewels & the portrait of my husband &
The torn certificate for my daughter's grave &
These are but mortal seconds in immortal time.
They brush me, fade away: like drops of water.
They signify no crime.

Let us retrace our steps: I have deceived you:
Nothing is here I could not frankly tell you:
No hint of guilt, or faithlessness, or threat.

Dreams—they are madness. Staring eyes—illusion.
Let us return, hear music, and forget . . .

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 04: Illicit

Of what she said to me that night—no matter.
The strange thing came next day.
My brain was full of music—something she played me—;
I couldn't remember it all, but phrases of it
Wreathed and wreathed among faint memories,
Seeking for something, trying to tell me something,
Urging to restlessness: verging on grief.
I tried to play the tune, from memory,—
But memory failed: the chords and discords climbed
And found no resolution—only hung there,
And left me morbid . . . Where, then, had I heard it? . . .
What secret dusty chamber was it hinting?
'Dust', it said, 'dust . . . and dust . . . and sunlight . . .
A cold clear April evening . . . snow, bedraggled,
Rain-worn snow, dappling the hideous grass . . .
And someone walking alone; and someone saying
That all must end, for the time had come to go . . . '
These were the phrases . . . but behind, beneath them
A greater shadow moved: and in this shadow
I stood and guessed . . . Was it the blue-eyed lady?
The one who always danced in golden slippers—
And had I danced with her,—upon this music?
Or was it further back—the unplumbed twilight
Of childhood?—No—much recenter than that.

You know, without my telling you, how sometimes
A word or name eludes you, and you seek it
Through running ghosts of shadow,—leaping at it,
Lying in wait for it to spring upon it,
Spreading faint snares for it of sense or sound:
Until, of a sudden, as if in a phantom forest,
You hear it, see it flash among the branches,
And scarcely knowing how, suddenly have it—
Well, it was so I followed down this music,
Glimpsing a face in darkness, hearing a cry,
Remembering days forgotten, moods exhausted,
Corners in sunlight, puddles reflecting stars—;
Until, of a sudden, and least of all suspected,
The thing resolved itself: and I remembered

An April afternoon, eight years ago—
Or was it nine?—no matter—call it nine—
A room in which the last of sunlight faded;
A vase of violets, fragrance in white curtains;
And, she who played the same thing later, playing.

She played this tune. And in the middle of it
Abruptly broke it off, letting her hands
Fall in her lap. She sat there so a moment,
With shoulders drooped, then lifted up a rose,
One great white rose, wide opened like a lotos,
And pressed it to her cheek, and closed her eyes.

'You know—we've got to end this—Miriam loves you . . .
If she should ever know, or even guess it,—
What would she do?—Listen!—I'm not absurd . . .
I'm sure of it. If you had eyes, for women—
To understand them—which you've never had—
You'd know it too . . . ' So went this colloquy,
Half humorous, with undertones of pathos,
Half grave, half flippant . . . while her fingers, softly,
Felt for this tune, played it and let it fall,
Now note by singing note, now chord by chord,
Repeating phrases with a kind of pleasure . . .
Was it symbolic of the woman's weakness
That she could neither break it—nor conclude?
It paused . . . and wandered . . . paused again; while she,
Perplexed and tired, half told me I must go,—
Half asked me if I thought I ought to go . . .

Well, April passed with many other evenings,
Evenings like this, with later suns and warmer,
With violets always there, and fragrant curtains . . .
And she was right: and Miriam found it out . . .
And after that, when eight deep years had passed—
Or nine—we met once more,—by accident . . .
But was it just by accident, I wonder,
She played this tune?—Or what, then, was intended? . . .

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 05: Melody In A Restaurant

The cigarette-smoke loops and slides above us,
Dipping and swirling as the waiter passes;
You strike a match and stare upon the flame.
The tiny fire leaps in your eyes a moment,
And dwindles away as silently as it came.

This melody, you say, has certain voices—
They rise like nereids from a river, singing,
Lift white faces, and dive to darkness again.
Wherever you go you bear this river with you:
A leaf falls,—and it flows, and you have pain.

So says the tune to you—but what to me?
What to the waiter, as he pours your coffee,
The violinist who suavely draws his bow?
That man, who folds his paper, overhears it.
A thousand dreams revolve and fall and flow.

Some one there is who sees a virgin stepping
Down marble stairs to a deep tomb of roses:
At the last moment she lifts remembering eyes.
Green leaves blow down. The place is checked with shadows.
A long-drawn murmur of rain goes down the skies.
And oaks are stripped and bare, and smoke with lightning:
And clouds are blown and torn upon high forests,
And the great sea shakes its walls.
And then falls silence . . . And through long silence falls
This melody once more:
'Down endless stairs she goes, as once before.'

So says the tune to him—but what to me?
What are the worlds I see?
What shapes fantastic, terrible dreams? . . .
I go my secret way, down secret alleys;
My errand is not so simple as it seems.

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 06: Portrait Of One Dead

This is the house. On one side there is darkness,
On one side there is light.
Into the darkness you may lift your lanterns—
O, any number—it will still be night.
And here are echoing stairs to lead you downward
To long sonorous halls.
And here is spring forever at these windows,
With roses on the walls.

This is her room. On one side there is music—
On one side not a sound.
At one step she could move from love to silence,
Feel myriad darkness coiling round.
And here are balconies from which she heard you,
Your steady footsteps on the stair.
And here the glass in which she saw your shadow
As she unbound her hair.

Here is the room—with ghostly walls dissolving—
The twilight room in which she called you 'lover';
And the floorless room in which she called you 'friend.'
So many times, in doubt, she ran between them!—
Through windy corridors of darkening end.

Here she could stand with one dim light above her
And hear far music, like a sea in caverns,
Murmur away at hollowed walls of stone.
And here, in a roofless room where it was raining,
She bore the patient sorrow of rain alone.

Your words were walls which suddenly froze around her.
Your words were windows,—large enough for moonlight,
Too small to let her through.
Your letters—fragrant cloisters faint with music.
The music that assuaged her there was you.

How many times she heard your step ascending
Yet never saw your face!
She heard them turn again, ring slowly fainter,

Till silence swept the place.
Why had you gone? . . . The door, perhaps, mistaken . . .
You would go elsewhere. The deep walls were shaken.

A certain rose-leaf—sent without intention—
Became, with time, a woven web of fire—
She wore it, and was warm.
A certain hurried glance, let fall at parting,
Became, with time, the flashings of a storm.

Yet, there was nothing asked, no hint to tell you
Of secret idols carved in secret chambers
From all you did and said.
Nothing was done, until at last she knew you.
Nothing was known, till, somehow, she was dead.

How did she die?—You say, she died of poison.
Simple and swift. And much to be regretted.
You did not see her pass
So many thousand times from light to darkness,
Pausing so many times before her glass;

You did not see how many times she hurried
To lean from certain windows, vainly hoping,
Passionate still for beauty, remembered spring.
You did not know how long she clung to music,
You did not hear her sing.

Did she, then, make the choice, and step out bravely
From sound to silence—close, herself, those windows?
Or was it true, instead,
That darkness moved,—for once,—and so possessed her? . . .
We'll never know, you say, for she is dead.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 07: Porcelain

You see that porcelain ranged there in the window—
Platters and soup-plates done with pale pink rosebuds,
And tiny violets, and wreaths of ivy?
See how the pattern clings to the gleaming edges!
They're works of art—minutely seen and felt,
Each petal done devoutly. Is it failure
To spend your blood like this?

Study them . . . you will see there, in the porcelain,
If you stare hard enough, a sort of swimming
Of lights and shadows, ghosts within a crystal—
My brain unfolding! There you'll see me sitting
Day after day, close to a certain window,
Looking down, sometimes, to see the people . . .

Sometimes my wife comes there to speak to me . . .
Sometimes the grey cat waves his tail around me . . .
Goldfish swim in a bowl, glisten in sunlight,
Dilate to a gorgeous size, blow delicate bubbles,
Drowse among dark green weeds. On rainy days,
You'll see a gas-light shedding light behind me—
An eye-shade round my forehead. There I sit,
Twirling the tiny brushes in my paint-cups,
Painting the pale pink rosebuds, minute violets,
Exquisite wreaths of dark green ivy leaves.
On this leaf, goes a dream I dreamed last night
Of two soft-patterned toads—I thought them stones,
Until they hopped! And then a great black spider,—
Tarantula, perhaps, a hideous thing,—
It crossed the room in one tremendous leap.
Here,—as I coil the stems between two leaves,—
It is as if, dwindling to atomy size,
I cried the secret between two universes . . .
A friend of mine took hasheesh once, and said
Just as he fell asleep he had a dream,—
Though with his eyes wide open,—
And felt, or saw, or knew himself a part
Of marvelous slowly-wreathing intricate patterns,
Plane upon plane, depth upon coiling depth,

Amazing leaves, folding one on another,
Voluted grasses, twists and curves and spirals—
All of it darkly moving . . . as for me,
I need no hasheesh for it—it's too easy!
Soon as I shut my eyes I set out walking
In a monstrous jungle of monstrous pale pink roseleaves,
Violets purple as death, dripping with water,
And ivy-leaves as big as clouds above me.

Here, in a simple pattern of separate violets—
With scalloped edges gilded—here you have me
Thinking of something else. My wife, you know,—
There's something lacking—force, or will, or passion,
I don't know what it is—and so, sometimes,
When I am tired, or haven't slept three nights,
Or it is cloudy, with low threat of rain,
I get uneasy—just like poplar trees
Ruffling their leaves—and I begin to think
Of poor Pauline, so many years ago,
And that delicious night. Where is she now?
I meant to write—but she has moved, by this time,
And then, besides, she might find out I'm married.
Well, there is more—I'm getting old and timid—
The years have gnawed my will. I've lost my nerve!
I never strike out boldly as I used to—
But sit here, painting violets, and remember
That thrilling night. Photographers, she said,
Asked her to pose for them; her eyes and forehead,—
Dark brown eyes, and a smooth and pallid forehead,—
Were thought so beautiful.—And so they were.
Pauline . . . These violets are like words remembered . . .
Darling! she whispered . . . Darling! . . . Darling! . . . Darling!
Well, I suppose such days can come but once.
Lord, how happy we were! . . .

Here, if you only knew it, is a story—
Here, in these leaves. I stopped my work to tell it,
And then, when I had finished, went on thinking:
A man I saw on a train . . . I was still a boy . . .
Who killed himself by diving against a wall.
Here is a recollection of my wife,
When she was still my sweetheart, years ago.

It's funny how things change, — just change, by growing,
Without an effort . . . And here are trivial things, —
A chill, an errand forgotten, a cut while shaving;
A friend of mine who tells me he is married . . .
Or is that last so trivial? Well, no matter!

This is the sort of thing you'll see of me,
If you look hard enough. This, in its way,
Is a kind of fame. My life arranged before you
In scrolls of leaves, rosebuds, violets, ivy,
Clustered or wreathed on plate and cup and platter . . .
Sometimes, I say, I'm just like John the Baptist —
You have my head before you . . . on a platter.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 08: Coffins: Interlude

Wind blows. Snow falls. The great clock in its tower
Ticks with reverberant coil and tolls the hour:
At the deep sudden stroke the pigeons fly . . .
The fine snow flutes the cracks between the flagstones.
We close our coats, and hurry, and search the sky.

We are like music, each voice of it pursuing
A golden separate dream, remote, persistent,
Climbing to fire, receding to hoarse despair.
What do you whisper, brother? What do you tell me? . . .
We pass each other, are lost, and do not care.

One mounts up to beauty, serenely singing,
Forgetful of the steps that cry behind him;
One drifts slowly down from a waking dream.
One, foreseeing, lingers forever unmoving . . .
Upward and downward, past him there, we stream.

One has death in his eyes: and walks more slowly.
Death, among jonquils, told him a freezing secret.
A cloud blows over his eyes, he ponders earth.
He sees in the world a forest of sunlit jonquils:
A slow black poison huddles beneath that mirth.

Death, from street to alley, from door to window,
Cries out his news, & of unplumbed worlds approaching,
Of a cloud of darkness soon to destroy the tower.
But why comes death, & he asks, & in a world so perfect?
Or why the minute's grey in the golden hour?

Music, a sudden glissando, sinister, troubled,
A drift of wind-torn petals, before him passes
Down jangled streets, and dies.
The bodies of old and young, of maimed and lovely,
Are slowly borne to earth, with a dirge of cries.

Down cobbled streets they come; down huddled stairways;
Through silent halls; through carven golden doorways;
From freezing rooms as bare as rock.

The curtains are closed across deserted windows.
Earth streams out of the shovel; the pebbles knock.

Mary, whose hands rejoiced to move in sunlight;
Silent Elaine; grave Anne, who sang so clearly;
Fugitive Helen, who loved and walked alone;
Miriam too soon dead, darkly remembered;
Childless Ruth, who sorrowed, but could not atone;

Jean, whose laughter flashed over depths of terror,
And Eloise, who desired to love but dared not;
Doris, who turned alone to the dark and cried, —
They are blown away like windflung chords of music,
They drift away; the sudden music has died.

And one, with death in his eyes, comes walking slowly
And sees the shadow of death in many faces,
And thinks the world is strange.
He desires immortal music and spring forever,
And beauty that knows no change.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 09: Cabaret

We sit together and talk, or smoke in silence.
You say (but use no words) 'this night is passing
As other nights when we are dead will pass . . .'
Perhaps I misconstrue you: you mean only,
'How deathly pale my face looks in that glass . . .'

You say: 'We sit and talk, of things important . . .
How many others like ourselves, this instant,
Mark the pendulum swinging against the wall?
How many others, laughing, sip their coffee—
Or stare at mirrors, and do not talk at all? . . .

'This is the moment' (so you would say, in silence)
When suddenly we have had too much of laughter:
And a freezing stillness falls, no word to say.
Our mouths feel foolish . . . For all the days hereafter
What have we saved—what news, what tune, what play?

'We see each other as vain and futile tricksters,—
Posturing like bald apes before a mirror;
No pity dims our eyes . . .
How many others, like ourselves, this instant,
See how the great world wizens, and are wise? . . .'

Well, you are right . . . No doubt, they fall, these seconds . . .
When suddenly all's distempered, vacuous, ugly,
And even those most like angels creep for schemes.
The one you love leans forward, smiles, deceives you,
Opens a door through which you see dark dreams.

But this is momentary . . . or else, enduring,
Leads you with devious eyes through mists and poisons
To horrible chaos, or suicide, or crime . . .
And all these others who at your conjuration
Grow pale, feeling the skeleton touch of time,—

Or, laughing sadly, talk of things important,
Or stare at mirrors, startled to see their faces,
Or drown in the waveless vacuum of their days,—

Suddenly, as from sleep, awake, forgetting
This nauseous dream; take up their accustomed ways,

Exhume the ghost of a joke, renew loud laughter,
Forget the moles above their sweethearts' eyebrows,
Lean to the music, rise,
And dance once more in a rose-festooned illusion
With kindness in their eyes . . .

They say (as we ourselves have said, remember)
'What wizardry this slow waltz works upon us!
And how it brings to mind forgotten things!'
They say 'How strange it is that one such evening
Can wake vague memories of so many springs!'

And so they go . . . In a thousand crowded places,
They sit to smile and talk, or rise to ragtime,
And, for their pleasures, agree or disagree.
With secret symbols they play on secret passions.
With cunning eyes they see

The innocent word that sets remembrance trembling,
The dubious word that sets the scared heart beating . . .
The pendulum on the wall
Shakes down seconds . . . They laugh at time, dissembling;
Or coil for a victim and do not talk at all.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 10: Letter

From time to time, lifting his eyes, he sees
The soft blue starlight through the one small window,
The moon above black trees, and clouds, and Venus,—
And turns to write . . . The clock, behind ticks softly.

It is so long, indeed, since I have written,—
Two years, almost, your last is turning yellow,—
That these first words I write seem cold and strange.
Are you the man I knew, or have you altered?
Altered, of course—just as I too have altered—
And whether towards each other, or more apart,
We cannot say . . . I've just re-read your letter—
Not through forgetfulness, but more for pleasure—

Pondering much on all you say in it
Of mystic consciousness—divine conversion—
The sense of oneness with the infinite,—
Faith in the world, its beauty, and its purpose . . .
Well, you believe one must have faith, in some sort,
If one's to talk through this dark world contented.
But is the world so dark? Or is it rather
Our own brute minds,—in which we hurry, trembling,
Through streets as yet unlighted? This, I think.

You have been always, let me say, "romantic,"—
Eager for color, for beauty, soon discontented
With a world of dust and stones and flesh too ailing:
Even before the question grew to problem
And drove you bickering into metaphysics,
You met on lower planes the same great dragon,
Seeking release, some fleeting satisfaction,
In strange aesthetics . . . You tried, as I remember,
One after one, strange cults, and some, too, morbid,
The cruder first, more violent sensations,
Gorgeously carnal things, conceived and acted
With splendid animal thirst . . . Then, by degrees,—
Savoring all more delicate gradations

In all that hue and tone may play on flesh,

Or thought on brain,—you passed, if I may say so,
From red and scarlet through morbid greens to mauve.
Let us regard ourselves, you used to say,
As instruments of music, whereon our lives
Will play as we desire: and let us yield
These subtle bodies and subtler brains and nerves
To all experience plays . . . And so you went
From subtle tune to subtler, each heard once,
Twice or thrice at the most, tiring of each;
And closing one by one your doors, drew in
Slowly, through darkening labyrinths of feeling,
Towards the central chamber . . . Which now you've reached.

What, then's, the secret of this ultimate chamber—
Or innermost, rather? If I see it clearly
It is the last, and cunningest, resort
Of one who has found this world of dust and flesh,—
This world of lamentations, death, injustice,
Sickness, humiliation, slow defeat,
Bareness, and ugliness, and iteration,—
Too meaningless; or, if it has a meaning,
Too tiresomely insistent on one meaning:

Futility . . . This world, I hear you saying,—
With lifted chin, and arm in outflung gesture,
Coldly imperious,—this transient world,
What has it then to give, if not containing
Deep hints of nobler worlds? We know its beauties,—
Momentary and trivial for the most part,
Perceived through flesh, passing like flesh away,—
And know how much outweighed they are by darkness.
We are like searchers in a house of darkness,
A house of dust; we creep with little lanterns,
Throwing our tremulous arcs of light at random,
Now here, now there, seeing a plane, an angle,
An edge, a curve, a wall, a broken stairway
Leading to who knows what; but never seeing
The whole at once . . . We grope our way a little,
And then grow tired. No matter what we touch,
Dust is the answer—dust: dust everywhere.
If this were all—what were the use, you ask?
But this is not: for why should we be seeking,

Why should we bring this need to seek for beauty,
To lift our minds, if there were only dust?
This is the central chamber you have come to:
Turning your back to the world, until you came
To this deep room, and looked through rose-stained windows,
And saw the hues of the world so sweetly changed.

Well, in a measure, so only do we all.
I am not sure that you can be refuted.
At the very last we all put faith in something,—
You in this ghost that animates your world,
This ethical ghost,—and I, you'll say, in reason,—
Or sensuous beauty,—or in my secret self . . .
Though as for that you put your faith in these,
As much as I do—and then, forsaking reason,—
Ascending, you would say, to intuition,—
You predicate this ghost of yours, as well.
Of course, you might have argued,—and you should have,—
That no such deep appearance of design
Could shape our world without entailing purpose:
For can design exist without a purpose?
Without conceiving mind? . . . We are like children
Who find, upon the sands, beside a sea,
Strange patterns drawn,—circles, arcs, ellipses,
Moulded in sand . . . Who put them there, we wonder?

Did someone draw them here before we came?
Or was it just the sea?—We pore upon them,
But find no answer—only suppositions.
And if these perfect shapes are evidence
Of immanent mind, it is but circumstantial:
We never come upon him at his work,
He never troubles us. He stands aloof—
Well, if he stands at all: is not concerned
With what we are or do. You, if you like,
May think he broods upon us, loves us, hates us,
Conceives some purpose of us. In so doing
You see, without much reason, will in law.
I am content to say, 'this world is ordered,
Happily so for us, by accident:
We go our ways untroubled save by laws
Of natural things.' Who makes the more assumption?

If we were wise—which God knows we are not—
(Notice I call on God!) we'd plumb this riddle
Not in the world we see, but in ourselves.
These brains of ours—these delicate spinal clusters—
Have limits: why not learn them, learn their cravings?
Which of the two minds, yours or mine, is sound?
Yours, which scorned the world that gave it freedom,
Until you managed to see that world as omen,—
Or mine, which likes the world, takes all for granted,
Sorrow as much as joy, and death as life?—
You lean on dreams, and take more credit for it.
I stand alone . . . Well, I take credit, too.
You find your pleasure in being at one with all things—
Fusing in lambent dream, rising and falling
As all things rise and fall . . . I do that too—
With reservations. I find more varied pleasure
In understanding: and so find beauty even
In this strange dream of yours you call the truth.

Well, I have bored you. And it's growing late.
For household news—what have you heard, I wonder?
You must have heard that Paul was dead, by this time—
Of spinal cancer. Nothing could be done—
We found it out too late. His death has changed me,
Deflected much of me that lived as he lived,
Saddened me, slowed me down. Such things will happen,
Life is composed of them; and it seems wisdom
To see them clearly, meditate upon them,
And understand what things flow out of them.
Otherwise, all goes on here much as always.
Why won't you come and see us, in the spring,
And bring old times with you?—If you could see me
Sitting here by the window, watching Venus
Go down behind my neighbor's poplar branches,—
Just where you used to sit,—I'm sure you'd come.
This year, they say, the springtime will be early.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 11: Conversation: Undertones

What shall we talk of? Li Po? Hokusai?
You narrow your long dark eyes to fascinate me;
You smile a little. . . .Outside, the night goes by.
I walk alone in a forest of ghostly trees . . .
Your pale hands rest palm downwards on your knees.

'These lines—converging, they suggest such distance!
The soul is drawn away, beyond horizons.
Lured out to what? One dares not think.
Sometimes, I glimpse these infinite perspectives
In intimate talk (with such as you) and shrink . . .

'One feels so petty!—One feels such—emptiness!—'
You mimic horror, let fall your lifted hand,
And smile at me; with brooding tenderness . . .
Alone on darkened waters I fall and rise;
Slow waves above me break, faint waves of cries.

'And then these colors . . . but who would dare describe them?
This faint rose-coral pink . . this green—pistachio?—
So insubstantial! Like the dim ghostly things
Two lovers find in love's still-twilight chambers . . .
Old peacock-fans, and fragrant silks, and rings . . .

'Rings, let us say, drawn from the hapless fingers
Of some great lady, many centuries nameless,—
Or is that too sepulchral?—dulled with dust;
And necklaces that crumble if you touch them;
And gold brocades that, breathed on, fall to rust.

'No—I am wrong . . . it is not these I sought for—!
Why did they come to mind? You understand me—
You know these strange vagaries of the brain!—'
—I walk alone in a forest of ghostly trees;
Your pale hands rest palm downwards on your knees;
These strange vagaries of yours are all too plain.

'But why perplex ourselves with tedious problems
Of art or . . . such things? . . . while we sit here, living,
With all that's in our secret hearts to say!—
Hearts?—Your pale hand softly strokes the satin.
You play deep music—know well what you play.
You stroke the satin with thrilling of finger-tips,
You smile, with faintly perfumed lips,
You loose your thoughts like birds,
Brushing our dreams with soft and shadowy words . . .
We know your words are foolish, yet sit here bound
In tremulous webs of sound.

'How beautiful is intimate talk like this!—
It is as if we dissolved grey walls between us,
Stepped through the solid portals, become but shadows,
To hear a hidden music . . . Our own vast shadows
Lean to a giant size on the windy walls,
Or dwindle away; we hear our soft footfalls
Echo forever behind us, ghostly clear,
Music sings far off, flows suddenly near,
And dies away like rain . . .
We walk through subterranean caves again,—
Vaguely above us feeling
A shadowy weight of frescos on the ceiling,
Strange half-lit things,
Soundless grotesques with writhing claws and wings . . .
And here a beautiful face looks down upon us;
And someone hurries before, unseen, and sings . . .
Have we seen all, I wonder, in these chambers—
Or is there yet some gorgeous vault, arched low,
Where sleeps an amazing beauty we do not know? . . . '

The question falls: we walk in silence together,
Thinking of that deep vault and of its secret . . .
This lamp, these books, this fire
Are suddenly blown away in a whistling darkness.
Deep walls crash down in the whirlwind of desire.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 12: Witches' Sabbath

Now, when the moon slid under the cloud
And the cold clear dark of starlight fell,
He heard in his blood the well-known bell
Tolling slowly in heaves of sound,
Slowly beating, slowly beating,
Shaking its pulse on the stagnant air:
Sometimes it swung completely round,
Horribly gasping as if for breath;
Falling down with an anguished cry . . .
Now the red bat, he mused, will fly;
Something is marked, this night, for death . . .
And while he mused, along his blood
Flew ghostly voices, remote and thin,
They rose in the cavern of his brain,
Like ghosts they died away again;
And hands upon his heart were laid,
And music upon his flesh was played,
Until, as he was bidden to do,
He walked the wood he so well knew.
Through the cold dew he moved his feet,
And heard far off, as under the earth,
Discordant music in shuddering tones,
Screams of laughter, horrible mirth,
Clapping of hands, and thudding of drums,
And the long-drawn wail of one in pain.
To-night, he thought, I shall die again,
We shall die again in the red-eyed fire
To meet on the edge of the wood beyond
With the placid gaze of fed desire . . .
He walked; and behind the whisper of trees,
In and out, one walked with him:
She parted the branches and peered at him,
Through lowered lids her two eyes burned,
He heard her breath, he saw her hand,
Wherever he turned his way, she turned:
Kept pace with him, now fast, now slow;
Moving her white knees as he moved . . .
This is the one I have always loved;
This is the one whose bat-soul comes

To dance with me, flesh to flesh,
In the starlight dance of horns and drums . . .

The walls and roofs, the scarlet towers,
Sank down behind a rushing sky.
He heard a sweet song just begun
Abruptly shatter in tones and die.
It whirled away. Cold silence fell.
And again came tollings of a bell.

* * * * *

This air is alive with witches: the white witch rides
Swifter than smoke on the starlit wind.
In the clear darkness, while the moon hides,
They come like dreams, like something remembered . .
Let us hurry! beloved; take my hand,
Forget these things that trouble your eyes,
Forget, forget! Our flesh is changed,
Lighter than smoke we wreath and rise . . .

The cold air hisses between us . . . Beloved, beloved,
What was the word you said?
Something about clear music that sang through water . . .
I cannot remember. The storm-drops break on the leaves.
Something was lost in the darkness. Someone is dead.
Someone lies in the garden and grieves.
Look how the branches are tossed in this air,
Flinging their green to the earth!
Black clouds rush to devour the stars in the sky,
The moon stares down like a half-closed eye.
The leaves are scattered, the birds are blown,
Oaks crash down in the darkness,
We run from our windy shadows; we are running alone.

* * * * *

The moon was darkened: across it flew
The swift grey tenebrous shape he knew,
Like a thing of smoke it crossed the sky,
The witch! he said. And he heard a cry,
And another came, and another came,

And one, grown duskily red with blood,
Floated an instant across the moon,
Hung like a dull fantastic flame . . .
The earth has veins: they throb to-night,
The earth swells warm beneath my feet,
The tips of the trees grow red and bright,
The leaves are swollen, I feel them beat,
They press together, they push and sigh,
They listen to hear the great bat cry,
The great red bat with the woman's face . . .
Hurry! he said. And pace for pace
That other, who trod the dark with him,
Crushed the live leaves, reached out white hands
And closed her eyes, the better to see
The priests with claws, the lovers with hooves,
The fire-lit rock, the sarabands.
I am here! she said. The bough he broke—
Was it the snapping bough that spoke?
I am here! she said. The white thigh gleamed
Cold in starlight among dark leaves,
The head thrown backward as he had dreamed,
The shadowy red deep jasper mouth;
And the lifted hands, and the virgin breasts,
Passed beside him, and vanished away.
I am here! she cried. He answered 'Stay!'
And laughter arose, and near and far
Answering laughter rose and died . . .
Who is there? in the dark? he cried.
He stood in terror, and heard a sound
Of terrible hooves on the hollow ground;
They rushed, were still; a silence fell;
And he heard deep tollings of a bell.

* * * * *

Look beloved! Why do you hide your face?
Look, in the centre there, above the fire,
They are bearing the boy who blasphemed love!
They are playing a piercing music upon him
With a bow of living wire! . . .
The virgin harlot sings,
She leans above the beautiful anguished body,

And draws slow music from those strings.
They dance around him, they fling red roses upon him,
They trample him with their naked feet,
His cries are lost in laughter,
Their feet grow dark with his blood, they beat and
beat,
They dance upon him, until he cries no more . . .
Have we not heard that cry before?
Somewhere, somewhere,
Beside a sea, in the green evening,
Beneath green clouds, in a copper sky . . .
Was it you? was it I?
They have quenched the fires, they dance in the darkness,
The satyrs have run among them to seize and tear,
Look! he has caught one by the hair,
She screams and falls, he bears her away with him,
And the night grows full of whistling wings.
Far off, one voice, serene and sweet,
Rises and sings . . .

'By the clear waters where once I died,
In the calm evening bright with stars. . . .'
Where have I heard these words? Was it you who sang them?
It was long ago.
Let us hurry, beloved! the hard hooves trample;
The treetops tremble and glow.

* * * * *

In the clear dark, on silent wings,
The red bat hovers beneath her moon;
She drops through the fragrant night, and clings
Fast in the shadow, with hands like claws,
With soft eyes closed and mouth that feeds,
To the young white flesh that warmly bleeds.
The maidens circle in dance, and raise
From lifting throats, a soft-sung praise;
Their knees and breasts are white and bare,
They have hung pale roses in their hair,
Each of them as she dances by
Peers at the blood with a narrowed eye.
See how the red wing wraps him round,

See how the white youth struggles in vain!
The weak arms writhe in a soundless pain;
He writhes in the soft red veiny wings,
But still she whispers upon him and clings. . . .
This is the secret feast of love,
Look well, look well, before it dies,
See how the red one trembles above,
See how quiet the white one lies!

Wind through the trees. . . .and a voice is heard
Singing far off. The dead leaves fall. . . .
'By the clear waters where once I died,
In the calm evening bright with stars,
One among numberless avatars,
I wedded a mortal, a mortal bride,
And lay on the stones and gave my flesh,
And entered the hunger of him I loved.
How shall I ever escape this mesh
Or be from my lover's body removed?'
Dead leaves stream through the hurrying air
And the maenads dance with flying hair.

* * * * *

The priests with hooves, the lovers with horns,
Rise in the starlight, one by one,
They draw their knives on the spurting throats,
They smear the column with blood of goats,
They dabble the blood on hair and lips
And wait like stones for the moon's eclipse.
They stand like stones and stare at the sky
Where the moon leers down like a half-closed eye. . .
In the green moonlight still they stand
While wind flows over the darkened sand
And brood on the soft forgotten things
That filled their shadowy yesterdays. . . .
Where are the breasts, the scarlet wings?
They gaze at each other with troubled gaze. . . .
And then, as the shadow closes the moon,
Shout, and strike with their hooves the ground,
And rush through the dark, and fill the night
With a slowly dying clamor of sound.

There, where the great walls crowd the stars,
There, by the black wind-riven walls,
In a grove of twisted leafless trees. . . .
Who are these pilgrims, who are these,
These three, the one of whom stands upright,
While one lies weeping and one of them crawls?
The face that he turned was a wounded face,
I heard the dripping of blood on stones. . . .
Hooves had trampled and torn this place,
And the leaves were strewn with blood and bones.
Sometimes, I think, beneath my feet,
The warm earth stretches herself and sighs. . . .
Listen! I heard the slow heart beat. . . .
I will lie on this grass as a lover lies
And reach to the north and reach to the south
And seek in the darkness for her mouth.

* * * * *

Beloved, beloved, where the slow waves of the wind
Shatter pale foam among great trees,
Under the hurrying stars, under the heaving arches,
Like one whirled down under shadowy seas,
I run to find you, I run and cry,
Where are you? Where are you? It is I. It is I.
It is your eyes I seek, it is your windy hair,
Your starlight body that breathes in the darkness there.
Under the darkness I feel you stirring. . . .
Is this you? Is this you?
Bats in this air go whirring. . . .
And this soft mouth that darkly meets my mouth,
Is this the soft mouth I knew?
Darkness, and wind in the tortured trees;
And the patter of dew.

* * * * *

Dance! Dance! Dance! Dance!
Dance till the brain is red with speed!
Dance till you fall! Lift your torches!
Kiss your lovers until they bleed!
Backward I draw your anguished hair

Until your eyes are stretched with pain;
Backward I press you until you cry,
Your lips grow white, I kiss you again,
I will take a torch and set you afire,
I will break your body and fling it away. . . .
Look, you are trembling. . . .Lie still, beloved!
Lock your hands in my hair, and say
Darling! darling! darling! darling!
All night long till the break of day.

Is it your heart I hear beneath me. . . .
Or the far tolling of that tower?
The voices are still that cried around us. . . .
The woods grow still for the sacred hour.
Rise, white lover! the day draws near.
The grey trees lean to the east in fear.
'By the clear waters where once I died'
Beloved, whose voice was this that cried?
'By the clear waters that reach the sun
By the clear waves that starward run. . . .
I found love's body and lost his soul,
And crumbled in flame that should have annealed. . .
How shall I ever again be whole,
By what dark waters shall I be healed?'

Silence. . . .the red leaves, one by one,
Fall. Far off, the maenads run.

Silence. Beneath my naked feet
The veins of the red earth swell and beat.
The dead leaves sigh on the troubled air,
Far off the maenads bind their hair. . . .
Hurry, beloved! the day comes soon.
The fire is drawn from the heart of the moon.

* * * * *

The great bell cracks and falls at last.
The moon whirls out. The sky grows still.
Look, how the white cloud crosses the stars
And suddenly drops behind the hill!
Your eyes are placid, you smile at me,

We sit in the room by candle-light.
We peer in each other's veins and see
No sign of the things we saw this night.
Only, a song is in your ears,
A song you have heard, you think, in dream:
The song which only the demon hears,
In the dark forest where maenads scream . . .

'By the clear waters where once I died . . .
In the calm evening bright with stars . . .'
What do the strange words mean? you say, —
And touch my hand, and turn away.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 03: 13: The Half-Shut Doors Through Which We Heard That Music

The half-shut doors through which we heard that music
Are softly closed. Horns mutter down to silence.
The stars whirl out, the night grows deep.
Darkness settles upon us. A vague refrain
Drowsily teases at the drowsy brain.
In numberless rooms we stretch ourselves and sleep.

Where have we been? What savage chaos of music
Whirls in our dreams?—We suddenly rise in darkness,
Open our eyes, cry out, and sleep once more.
We dream we are numberless sea-waves languidly foaming
A warm white moonlit shore;

Or clouds blown windily over a sky at midnight,
Or chords of music scattered in hurrying darkness,
Or a singing sound of rain . . .
We open our eyes and stare at the coiling darkness,
And enter our dreams again.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 04: 01: Clairvoyant

'This envelope you say has something in it
Which once belonged to your dead son—or something
He knew, was fond of? Something he remembers?—
The soul flies far, and we can only call it
By things like these . . . a photograph, a letter,
Ribbon, or charm, or watch . . . '

. . . Wind flows softly, the long slow even wind,
Over the low roofs white with snow;
Wind blows, bearing cold clouds over the ocean,
One by one they melt and flow,—

Streaming one by one over trees and towers,
Coiling and gleaming in shafts of sun;
Wind flows, bearing clouds; the hurrying shadows
Flow under them one by one . . .

' . . . A spirit darkens before me . . . it is the spirit
Which in the flesh you called your son . . . A spirit
Young and strong and beautiful . . .

He says that he is happy, is much honored;
Forgives and is forgiven . . . rain and wind
Do not perplex him . . . storm and dust forgotten . . .
The glittering wheels in wheels of time are broken
And laid aside . . . '

'Ask him why he did the thing he did!'

'He is unhappy. This thing, he says, transcends you:
Dust cannot hold what shines beyond the dust . . .
What seems calamity is less than a sigh;
What seems disgrace is nothing.'

'Ask him if the one he hurt is there,
And if she loves him still!'

'He tells you she is there, and loves him still,—
Not as she did, but as all spirits love . . .

The House Of Dust: Part 04: 02: Death: And A Derisive Chorus

The door is shut. She leaves the curtained office,
And down the grey-walled stairs comes trembling slowly
Towards the dazzling street.
Her withered hand clings tightly to the railing.
The long stairs rise and fall beneath her feet.

Here in the brilliant sun we jostle, waiting
To tear her secret out . . . We laugh, we hurry,
We go our way, revolving, sinister, slow.
She blinks in the sun, and then steps faintly downward.
We whirl her away, we shout, we spin, we flow.

Where have you been, old lady? We know your secret!—
Voices jangle about her, jeers, and laughter. . . .
She trembles, tries to hurry, averts her eyes.
Tell us the truth, old lady! where have you been?
She turns and turns, her brain grows dark with cries.

Look at the old fool tremble! She's been paying,—
Paying good money, too,—to talk to spirits. . . .
She thinks she's heard a message from one dead!
What did he tell you? Is he well and happy?
Don't lie to us—we all know what he said.

He said the one he murdered once still loves him;
He said the wheels in wheels of time are broken;
And dust and storm forgotten; and all forgiven. . . .
But what you asked he wouldn't tell you, though,—
Ha ha! there's one thing you will never know!
That's what you get for meddling so with heaven!

Where have you been, old lady? Where are you going?
We know, we know! She's been to gab with spirits.
Look at the old fool! getting ready to cry!
What have you got in an envelope, old lady?
A lock of hair? An eyelash from his eye?

How do you know the medium didn't fool you?
Perhaps he had no spirit—perhaps he killed it.
Here she comes! the old fool's lost her son.
What did he have—blue eyes and golden hair?
We know your secret! what's done is done.

Look out, you'll fall—and fall, if you're not careful,
Right into an open grave. . . .but what's the hurry?
You don't think you will find him when you're dead?
Cry! Cry! Look at her mouth all twisted,—
Look at her eyes all red!

We know you—know your name and all about you,
All you remember and think, and all you scheme for.
We tear your secret out, we leave you, go
Laughingly down the street. . . .Die, if you want to!
Die, then, if you're in such a hurry to know!—

. . . .She falls. We lift her head. The wasted body
Weighs nothing in our hands. Does no one know her?
Was no one with her when she fell? . . .
We eddy about her, move away in silence.
We hear slow tollings of a bell.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 04: 03: Palimpsest: A Deceitful Portrait

Well, as you say, we live for small horizons:
We move in crowds, we flow and talk together,
Seeing so many eyes and hands and faces,
So many mouths, and all with secret meanings,—
Yet know so little of them; only seeing
The small bright circle of our consciousness,
Beyond which lies the dark. Some few we know—
Or think we know. . . Once, on a sun-bright morning,
I walked in a certain hallway, trying to find
A certain door: I found one, tried it, opened,
And there in a spacious chamber, brightly lighted,
A hundred men played music, loudly, swiftly,
While one tall woman sent her voice above them
In powerful sweetness. . . Closing then the door
I heard it die behind me, fade to whisper,—
And walked in a quiet hallway as before.
Just such a glimpse, as through that opened door,
Is all we know of those we call our friends. . . .
We hear a sudden music, see a playing
Of ordered thoughts—and all again is silence.
The music, we suppose, (as in ourselves)
Goes on forever there, behind shut doors,—
As it continues after our departure,
So, we divine, it played before we came . . .
What do you know of me, or I of you? . . .
Little enough. . . We set these doors ajar
Only for chosen movements of the music:
This passage, (so I think—yet this is guesswork)
Will please him,—it is in a strain he fancies,—
More brilliant, though, than his; and while he likes it
He will be piqued . . . He looks at me bewildered
And thinks (to judge from self—this too is guesswork)

The music strangely subtle, deep in meaning,
Perplexed with implications; he suspects me
Of hidden riches, unexpected wisdom. . . .
Or else I let him hear a lyric passage,—

Simple and clear; and all the while he listens
I make pretence to think my doors are closed.
This too bewilders him. He eyes me sidelong
Wondering 'Is he such a fool as this?
Or only mocking?'—There I let it end. . . .
Sometimes, of course, and when we least suspect it—
When we pursue our thoughts with too much passion,
Talking with too great zeal—our doors fly open
Without intention; and the hungry watcher
Stares at the feast, carries away our secrets,
And laughs. . . .but this, for many counts, is seldom.
And for the most part we vouchsafe our friends,
Our lovers too, only such few clear notes
As we shall deem them likely to admire:
'Praise me for this' we say, or 'laugh at this,'
Or 'marvel at my candor'. . . .all the while
Withholding what's most precious to ourselves,—
Some sinister depth of lust or fear or hatred,
The sombre note that gives the chord its power;
Or a white loveliness—if such we know—
Too much like fire to speak of without shame.

Well, this being so, and we who know it being
So curious about those well-locked houses,
The minds of those we know,—to enter softly,
And steal from floor to floor up shadowy stairways,
From room to quiet room, from wall to wall,
Breathing deliberately the very air,
Pressing our hands and nerves against warm darkness
To learn what ghosts are there,—
Suppose for once I set my doors wide open
And bid you in. . . .Suppose I try to tell you
The secrets of this house, and how I live here;
Suppose I tell you who I am, in fact. . . .
Deceiving you—as far as I may know it—
Only so much as I deceive myself.

If you are clever you already see me
As one who moves forever in a cloud
Of warm bright vanity: a luminous cloud
Which falls on all things with a quivering magic,
Changing such outlines as a light may change,

Brightening what lies dark to me, concealing
Those things that will not change . . . I walk sustained
In a world of things that flatter me: a sky
Just as I would have had it; trees and grass
Just as I would have shaped and colored them;
Pigeons and clouds and sun and whirling shadows,
And stars that brightening climb through mist at nightfall,—
In some deep way I am aware these praise me:
Where they are beautiful, or hint of beauty,
They point, somehow, to me. . . This water says,—
Shimmering at the sky, or undulating
In broken gleaming parodies of clouds,
Rippled in blue, or sending from cool depths
To meet the falling leaf the leaf's clear image,—
This water says, there is some secret in you
Akin to my clear beauty, silently responsive
To all that circles you. This bare tree says,—
Austere and stark and leafless, split with frost,
Resonant in the wind, with rigid branches
Flung out against the sky,—this tall tree says,
There is some cold austerity in you,
A frozen strength, with long roots gnarled on rocks,
Fertile and deep; you bide your time, are patient,
Serene in silence, bare to outward seeming,
Concealing what reserves of power and beauty!
What teeming Aprils!—chorus of leaves on leaves!
These houses say, such walls in walls as ours,
Such streets of walls, solid and smooth of surface,
Such hills and cities of walls, walls upon walls;
Motionless in the sun, or dark with rain;
Walls pierced with windows, where the light may enter;
Walls windowless where darkness is desired;
Towers and labyrinths and domes and chambers,—
Amazing deep recesses, dark on dark,—
All these are like the walls which shape your spirit:
You move, are warm, within them, laugh within them,
Proud of their depth and strength; or sally from them,
When you are bold, to blow great horns at the world. .
This deep cool room, with shadowed walls and ceiling,
Tranquil and cloistral, fragrant of my mind,
This cool room says,—just such a room have you,
It waits you always at the tops of stairways,

Withdrawn, remote, familiar to your uses,
Where you may cease pretence and be yourself. . . .
And this embroidery, hanging on this wall,
Hung there forever, & these so soundless glidings
Of dragons golden-scaled, sheer birds of azure,
Coilings of leaves in pale vermilion, griffins
Drawing their rainbow wings through involutions
Of mauve chrysanthemums and lotus flowers, &
This goblin wood where someone cries enchantment, &
This says, just such an involuted beauty
Of thought and coiling thought, dream linked with dream,
Image to image gliding, wreathing fires,
Soundlessly cries enchantment in your mind:
You need but sit and close your eyes a moment
To see these deep designs unfold themselves.

And so, all things discern me, name me, praise me &
I walk in a world of silent voices, praising;
And in this world you see me like a wraith
Blown softly here and there, on silent winds.
'Praise me' & I say; and look, not in a glass,
But in your eyes, to see my image there &
Or in your mind; you smile, I am contented;
You look at me, with interest unfeigned,
And listen & I am pleased; or else, alone,
I watch thin bubbles veering brightly upward
From unknown depths, & my silver thoughts ascending;
Saying now this, now that, hinting of all things, &
Dreams, and desires, velleities, regrets,
Faint ghosts of memory, strange recognitions, &
But all with one deep meaning: this is I,
This is the glistening secret holy I,
This silver-winged wonder, insubstantial,
This singing ghost. . . . And hearing, I am warmed.

* * * * *

You see me moving, then, as one who moves
Forever at the centre of his circle:
A circle filled with light. And into it
Come bulging shapes from darkness, loom gigantic,
Or huddle in dark again. . . . A clock ticks clearly,

A gas-jet steadily whirs, light streams across me;
Two church bells, with alternate beat, strike nine;
And through these things my pencil pushes softly
To weave grey webs of lines on this clear page.
Snow falls and melts; the eaves make liquid music;
Black wheel-tracks line the snow-touched street; I turn
And look one instant at the half-dark gardens,
Where skeleton elm-trees reach with frozen gesture
Above unsteady lamps,—with black boughs flung
Against a luminous snow-filled grey-gold sky.
'Beauty!' I cry. . . .My feet move on, and take me
Between dark walls, with orange squares for windows.
Beauty; beheld like someone half-forgotten,
Remembered, with slow pang, as one neglected . . .
Well, I am frustrate; life has beaten me,
The thing I strongly seized has turned to darkness,
And darkness rides my heart. . . .These skeleton elm-trees—
Leaning against that grey-gold snow filled sky—
Beauty! they say, and at the edge of darkness
Extend vain arms in a frozen gesture of protest . . .
A clock ticks softly; a gas-jet steadily whirs:
The pencil meets its shadow upon clear paper,
Voices are raised, a door is slammed. The lovers,
Murmuring in an adjacent room, grow silent,
The eaves make liquid music. . . .Hours have passed,
And nothing changes, and everything is changed.
Exultation is dead, Beauty is harlot,—
And walks the streets. The thing I strongly seized
Has turned to darkness, and darkness rides my heart.

If you could solve this darkness you would have me.
This causeless melancholy that comes with rain,
Or on such days as this when large wet snowflakes
Drop heavily, with rain . . . whence rises this?
Well, so-and-so, this morning when I saw him,
Seemed much preoccupied, and would not smile;
And you, I saw too much; and you, too little;
And the word I chose for you, the golden word,
The word that should have struck so deep in purpose,
And set so many doors of wish wide open,
You let it fall, and would not stoop for it,
And smiled at me, and would not let me guess

. . . 'What are you thinking of?' . . . My first wife's voice
Scattered these ghosts. 'Oh nothing—nothing much—
Just wondering where we'd be two years from now,
And what we might be doing . . . ' And then remorse
Turned sharply in my mind to sudden pity,
And pity to echoed love. And one more evening
Drew to the usual end of sleep and silence.

And, as it is with this, so too with all things.
The pages of our lives are blurred palimpsest:
New lines are wreathed on old lines half-erased,
And those on older still; and so forever.
The old shines through the new, and colors it.
What's new? What's old? All things have double meanings,—
All things return. I write a line with passion
(Or touch a woman's hand, or plumb a doctrine)
Only to find the same thing, done before,—
Only to know the same thing comes to-morrow. . . .
This curious riddled dream I dreamed last night,—
Six years ago I dreamed it just as now;
The same man stooped to me; we rose from darkness,
And broke the accustomed order of our days,
And struck for the morning world, and warmth, and freedom. . . .
What does it mean? Why is this hint repeated?
What darkness does it spring from, seek to end?

You see me, then, pass up and down these stairways,
Now through a beam of light, and now through shadow,—
Pursuing silent ends. No rest there is,—
No more for me than you. I move here always,
From quiet room to room, from wall to wall,
Searching and plotting, weaving a web of days.
This is my house, and now, perhaps, you know me. . .
Yet I confess, for all my best intentions,
Once more I have deceived you. . . .I withhold
The one thing precious, the one dark thing that guides me;
And I have spread two snares for you, of lies.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 04: 04: Counterpoint: Two Rooms

He, in the room above, grown old and tired,
She, in the room below—his floor her ceiling—
Pursue their separate dreams. He turns his light,
And throws himself on the bed, face down, in laughter. . . .
She, by the window, smiles at a starlight night,

His watch—the same he has heard these cycles of ages—
Wearily chimes at seconds beneath his pillow.
The clock, upon her mantelpiece, strikes nine.
The night wears on. She hears dull steps above her.
The world whirs on. . . .New stars come up to shine.

His youth—far off—he sees it brightly walking
In a golden cloud. . . .Wings flashing about it. . . . Darkness
Walls it around with dripping enormous walls.
Old age—far off—her death—what do they matter?
Down the smooth purple night a streaked star falls.

She hears slow steps in the street—they chime like music;
They climb to her heart, they break and flower in beauty,
Along her veins they glisten and ring and burn. . . .
He hears his own slow steps tread down to silence.
Far off they pass. He knows they will never return.

Far off—on a smooth dark road—he hears them faintly.
The road, like a sombre river, quietly flowing,
Moves among murmurous walls. A deeper breath
Swells them to sound: he hears his steps more clearly.
And death seems nearer to him: or he to death.

What's death?—She smiles. The cool stone hurts her elbows.
The last of the rain-drops gather and fall from elm-boughs,
She sees them glisten and break. The arc-lamp sings,
The new leaves dip in the warm wet air and fragrance.
A sparrow whirs to the eaves, and shakes his wings.

What's death—what's death? The spring returns like music,

The trees are like dark lovers who dream in starlight,
The soft grey clouds go over the stars like dreams.
The cool stone wounds her arms to pain, to pleasure.
Under the lamp a circle of wet street gleams. . . .
And death seems far away, a thing of roses,
A golden portal, where golden music closes,
Death seems far away:
And spring returns, the countless singing of lovers,
And spring returns to stay. . . .

He, in the room above, grown old and tired,
Flings himself on the bed, face down, in laughter,
And clenches his hands, and remembers, and desires to die.
And she, by the window, smiles at a night of starlight.
. . . The soft grey clouds go slowly across the sky.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 04: 05: The Bitter Love-Song

No, I shall not say why it is that I love you—
Why do you ask me, save for vanity?
Surely you would not have me, like a mirror,
Say 'yes,—your hair curls darkly back from the temples,
Your mouth has a humorous, tremulous, half-shy sweetness,
Your eyes are April grey. . . .with jonquils in them?'
No, if I tell at all, I shall tell in silence . . .
I'll say—my childhood broke through chords of music
—Or were they chords of sun?—wherein fell shadows,
Or silences; I rose through seas of sunlight;
Or sometimes found a darkness stooped above me
With wings of death, and a face of cold clear beauty. .
I lay in the warm sweet grass on a blue May morning,
My chin in a dandelion, my hands in clover,
And drowsed there like a bee. . . .blue days behind me
Stretched like a chain of deep blue pools of magic,
Enchanted, silent, timeless. . . .days before me
Murmured of blue-sea mornings, noons of gold,
Green evenings streaked with lilac, bee-starred nights.
Confused soft clouds of music fled above me.

Sharp shafts of music dazzled my eyes and pierced me.
I ran and turned and spun and danced in the sunlight,
Shrank, sometimes, from the freezing silence of beauty,
Or crept once more to the warm white cave of sleep.

No, I shall not say 'this is why I praise you—
Because you say such wise things, or such foolish. . .'
You would not have me say what you know better?
Let me instead be silent, only saying—:
My childhood lives in me—or half-lives, rather—
And, if I close my eyes cool chords of music
Flow up to me . . . long chords of wind and sunlight. . . .
Shadows of intricate vines on sunlit walls,
Deep bells beating, with aeons of blue between them,
Grass blades leagues apart with worlds between them,
Walls rushing up to heaven with stars upon them. . .
I lay in my bed and through the tall night window
Saw the green lightning plunging among the clouds,

And heard the harsh rain storm at the panes and roof. . . .
How should I know—how should I now remember—
What half-dreamed great wings curved and sang above me?
What wings like swords? What eyes with the dread night in them?

This I shall say.—I lay by the hot white sand-dunes. .
Small yellow flowers, sapless and squat and spiny,
Stared at the sky. And silently there above us
Day after day, beyond our dreams and knowledge,
Presences swept, and over us streamed their shadows,
Swift and blue, or dark. . . .What did they mean?
What sinister threat of power? What hint of beauty?
Prelude to what gigantic music, or subtle?
Only I know these things leaned over me,
Brooded upon me, paused, went flowing softly,
Glided and passed. I loved, I desired, I hated,
I struggled, I yielded and loved, was warmed to blossom . . .
You, when your eyes have evening sunlight in them,
Set these dunes before me, these salt bright flowers,
These presences. . . .I drowse, they stream above me,
I struggle, I yield and love, I am warmed to dream.

You are the window (if I could tell I'd tell you)
Through which I see a clear far world of sunlight.
You are the silence (if you could hear you'd hear me)
In which I remember a thin still whisper of singing.
It is not you I laugh for, you I touch!
My hands, that touch you, suddenly touch white cobwebs,
Coldly silvered, heavily silvered with dewdrops;
And clover, heavy with rain; and cold green grass. . .

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 04: 06: Cinema

As evening falls,
The walls grow luminous and warm, the walls
Tremble and glow with the lives within them moving,
Moving like music, secret and rich and warm.
How shall we live to-night, where shall we turn?
To what new light or darkness yearn?
A thousand winding stairs lead down before us;
And one by one in myriads we descend
By lamplit flowered walls, long balustrades,
Through half-lit halls which reach no end. . . .

Take my arm, then, you or you or you,
And let us walk abroad on the solid air:
Look how the organist's head, in silhouette,
Leans to the lamplit music's orange square! . . .
The dim-globed lamps illumine rows of faces,
Rows of hands and arms and hungry eyes,
They have hurried down from a myriad secret places,
From windy chambers next to the skies. . . .
The music comes upon us. . . .it shakes the darkness,
It shakes the darkness in our minds. . . .
And brilliant figures suddenly fill the darkness,
Down the white shaft of light they run through darkness,
And in our hearts a dazzling dream unwinds . . .

Take my hand, then, walk with me
By the slow soundless crashings of a sea
Down miles on miles of glistening mirrorlike sand,—
Take my hand
And walk with me once more by crumbling walls;
Up mouldering stairs where grey-stemmed ivy clings,
To hear forgotten bells, as evening falls,
Rippling above us invisibly their slowly widening rings. . . .
Did you once love me? Did you bear a name?
Did you once stand before me without shame? . . .
Take my hand: your face is one I know,
I loved you, long ago:
You are like music, long forgotten, suddenly come to mind;
You are like spring returned through snow.

Once, I know, I walked with you in starlight,
And many nights I slept and dreamed of you;
Come, let us climb once more these stairs of starlight,
This midnight stream of cloud-flung blue! . . .
Music murmurs beneath us like a sea,
And faints to a ghostly whisper . . . Come with me.

Are you still doubtful of me—hesitant still,
Fearful, perhaps, that I may yet remember
What you would gladly, if you could, forget?
You were unfaithful once, you met your lover;
Still in your heart you bear that red-eyed ember;
And I was silent,—you remember my silence yet . . .
You knew, as well as I, I could not kill him,
Nor touch him with hot hands, nor yet with hate.
No, and it was not you I saw with anger.
Instead, I rose and beat at steel-walled fate,
Cried till I lay exhausted, sick, unfriended,
That life, so seeming sure, and love, so certain,
Should loose such tricks, be so abruptly ended,
Ring down so suddenly an unlooked-for curtain.

How could I find it in my heart to hurt you,
You, whom this love could hurt much more than I?
No, you were pitiful, and I gave you pity;
And only hated you when I saw you cry.
We were two dupes; if I could give forgiveness,—
Had I the right,—I should forgive you now . . .
We were two dupes . . . Come, let us walk in starlight,
And feed our griefs: we do not break, but bow.

Take my hand, then, come with me
By the white shadowy crashings of a sea . . .
Look how the long volutes of foam unfold
To spread their mottled shimmer along the sand! . . .
Take my hand,
Do not remember how these depths are cold,
Nor how, when you are dead,
Green leagues of sea will glimmer above your head.
You lean your face upon your hands and cry,
The blown sand whispers about your feet,
Terrible seems it now to die,—

Terrible now, with life so incomplete,
To turn away from the balconies and the music,
The sunlit afternoons,
To hear behind you there a far-off laughter
Lost in a stirring of sand among dry dunes . . .
Die not sadly, you whom life has beaten!
Lift your face up, laughing, die like a queen!
Take cold flowers of foam in your warm white fingers!
Death's but a change of sky from blue to green . . .

As evening falls,
The walls grow luminous and warm, the walls
Tremble and glow . . . the music breathes upon us,
The rayed white shaft plays over our heads like magic,
And to and fro we move and lean and change . . .
You, in a world grown strange,
Laugh at a darkness, clench your hands despairing,
Smash your glass on a floor, no longer caring,
Sink suddenly down and cry . . .
You hear the applause that greets your latest rival,
You are forgotten: your rival—;who knows?—;is I . . .
I laugh in the warm bright light of answering laughter,
I am inspired and young . . . and though I see
You sitting alone there, dark, with shut eyes crying,
I bask in the light, and in your hate of me . . .
Failure . . . well, the time comes soon or later . . .
The night must come . . . and I'll be one who clings,
Desperately, to hold the applause, one instant,—;
To keep some youngster waiting in the wings.

The music changes tone . . . a room is darkened,
Someone is moving . . . the crack of white light widens,
And all is dark again; till suddenly falls
A wandering disk of light on floor and walls,
Winks out, returns again, climbs and descends,
Gleams on a clock, a glass, shrinks back to darkness;
And then at last, in the chaos of that place,
Dazzles like frozen fire on your clear face.
Well, I have found you. We have met at last.
Now you shall not escape me: in your eyes
I see the horrible huddlings of your past,—;
All you remember blackens, utters cries,

Reaches far hands and faint. I hold the light
Close to your cheek, watch the pained pupils shrink, —
Watch the vile ghosts of all you vilely think . . .
Now all the hatreds of my life have met
To hold high carnival . . . we do not speak,
My fingers find the well-loved throat they seek,
And press, and fling you down . . . and then forget.

Who plays for me? What sudden drums keep time
To the ecstatic rhythm of my crime?
What flute shrills out as moonlight strikes the floor? . .
What violin so faintly cries
Seeing how strangely in the moon he lies? . . .
The room grows dark once more,
The crack of white light narrows around the door,
And all is silent, except a slow complaining
Of flutes and violins, like music waning.

Take my hand, then, walk with me
By the slow soundless crashings of a sea . . .
Look, how white these shells are, on this sand!
Take my hand,
And watch the waves run inward from the sky
Line upon foaming line to plunge and die.
The music that bound our lives is lost behind us,
Paltry it seems . . . here in this wind-swung place
Motionless under the sky's vast vault of azure
We stand in a terror of beauty, face to face.
The dry grass creaks in the wind, the blown sand whispers,

The soft sand seethes on the dunes, the clear grains glisten,
Once they were rock . . . a chaos of golden boulders . . .
Now they are blown by the wind . . . we stand and listen
To the sliding of grain upon timeless grain
And feel our lives go past like a whisper of pain.
Have I not seen you, have we not met before
Here on this sun-and-sea-wrecked shore?
You shade your sea-gray eyes with a sunlit hand
And peer at me . . . far sea-gulls, in your eyes,
Flash in the sun, go down . . . I hear slow sand,
And shrink to nothing beneath blue brilliant skies . . .

* * * * *

The music ends. The screen grows dark. We hurry
To go our devious secret ways, forgetting
Those many lives . . . We loved, we laughed, we killed,
We danced in fire, we drowned in a whirl of sea-waves.
The flutes are stilled, and a thousand dreams are stilled.

Whose body have I found beside dark waters,
The cold white body, garlanded with sea-weed?
Staring with wide eyes at the sky?
I bent my head above it, and cried in silence.
Only the things I dreamed of heard my cry.

Once I loved, and she I loved was darkened.
Again I loved, and love itself was darkened.
Vainly we follow the circle of shadowy days.
The screen at last grows dark, the flutes are silent.
The doors of night are closed. We go our ways.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The House Of Dust: Part 04: 07: The Sun Goes Down In A Cold Pale Flare Of Light

The sun goes down in a cold pale flare of light.
The trees grow dark: the shadows lean to the east:
And lights wink out through the windows, one by one.
A clamor of frosty sirens mourns at the night.
Pale slate-grey clouds whirl up from the sunken sun.

And the wandering one, the inquisitive dreamer of dreams,
The eternal asker of answers, stands in the street,
And lifts his palms for the first cold ghost of rain.
The purple lights leap down the hill before him.
The gorgeous night has begun again.

'I will ask them all, I will ask them all their dreams,
I will hold my light above them and seek their faces,
I will hear them whisper, invisible in their veins. . . .'
The eternal asker of answers becomes as the darkness,
Or as a wind blown over a myriad forest,
Or as the numberless voices of long-drawn rains.

We hear him and take him among us like a wind of music,
Like the ghost of a music we have somewhere heard;
We crowd through the streets in a dazzle of pallid lamplight,
We pour in a sinister mass, we ascend a stair,
With laughter and cry, with word upon murmured word,
We flow, we descend, we turn. . . . and the eternal dreamer
Moves on among us like light, like evening air . . .

Good night! good night! good night! we go our ways,
The rain runs over the pavement before our feet,
The cold rain falls, the rain sings.
We walk, we run, we ride. We turn our faces
To what the eternal evening brings.

Our hands are hot and raw with the stones we have laid,
We have built a tower of stone high into the sky.
We have built a city of towers.
Our hands are light, they are singing with emptiness.

Our souls are light. They have shaken a burden of hours. . . .
What did we build it for? Was it all a dream? . . .
Ghostly above us in lamplight the towers gleam . . .
And after a while they will fall to dust and rain;
Or else we will tear them down with impatient hands;
And hew rock out of the earth, and build them again.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Quarrel

Suddenly, after the quarrel, while we waited,
Disheartened, silent, with downcast looks, nor stirred
Eyelid nor finger, hopeless both, yet hoping
Against all hope to unsay the sundering word:

While all the room's stillness deepened, deepened about us
And each of us crept his thought's way to discover
How, with as little sound as the fall of a leaf,
The shadow had fallen, and lover quarreled with lover;

And while, in the quiet, I marveled-alas, alas-
At your deep beauty, your tragic beauty, torn
As the pale flower is torn by the wanton sparrow-
This beauty, pitied and loved, and now forsworn;

It was then, when the instant darkened to its darkest,-
When faith was lost with hope, and the rain conspired
To strike its gray arpeggios against our heartstrings,-
When love no longer dared, and scarcely desired:

It was then that suddenly, in the neighbor's room,
The music started: that brave quartette of strings
Breaking out of the stillness, as out of our stillness,
Like the indomitable heart of life that sings

When all is lost; and startled from our sorrow,
Tranced from our grief by that diviner grief,
We raised remembering eyes, each looked at other,
Blinded with tears of joy; and another leaf

Fell silently as that first; and in the instant
The shadow had gone, our quarrel became absurd;
And we rose, to the angelic voices of the music,
And I touched your hand, and we kissed, without a word.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Room

Through that window—all else being extinct
Except itself and me—I saw the struggle
Of darkness against darkness. Within the room
It turned and turned, dived downward. Then I saw
How order might—if chaos wished—become:
And saw the darkness crush upon itself,
Contracting powerfully; it was as if
It killed itself, slowly: and with much pain.
Pain. The scene was pain, and nothing but pain.
What else, when chaos draws all forces inward
To shape a single leaf? . . .

For the leaf came

Alone and shining in the empty room;
After a while the twig shot downward from it;
And from the twig a bough; and then the trunk,
Massive and coarse; and last the one black root.
The black root cracked the walls. Boughs burst
the window:

The great tree took possession.

Tree of trees!

Remember (when time comes) how chaos died
To shape the shining leaf. Then turn, have courage,
Wrap arms and roots together, be convulsed
With grief, and bring back chaos out of shape.
I will be watching then as I watch now.
I will praise darkness now, but then the leaf.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Things

The house in Broad Street, red brick, with nine rooms
the weedgrown graveyard with its rows of tombs
the jail from which imprisoned faces grinned
at stiff palmettos flashing in the wind

the engine-house, with engines, and a tank
in which young alligators swam and stank,
the bell-tower, of red iron, where the bell
gonged of the fires in a tone from hell

magnolia trees with whitehot torch of bud
the yellow river between banks of mud
the tall striped lighthouse like a barber's pole
snake in the bog and locust in the hole

worn cigarette cards, of white battleships,
or flags, or chorus girls with scarlet lips,
jackstones of copper, peach tree in the yard
splashing ripe peaches on an earth baked hard

children beneath the arc-light in a romp
with Run sheep Run, and rice-birds in the swamp,
the organ-grinder's monkey, dancing bears,
okras in baskets, Psyche on the stairs—

and then the north star nearer, and the snow
silent between the now and long ago
time like a train that roared from place to place
new crowds, new faces, for a single face

no longer then the chinaberry tree
nor the dark mockingbird to sing his glee
nor prawns nor catfish; icicles instead
and Indian-pipes, and cider in the shed

arbutus under pinewoods in the spring
and death remembered as a tropic thing
with picture postcard angels to upraise it
and trumpet vines and hummingbirds to phrase it

then wisdom come, and Shakspeare's voice far off,
to be or not, upon the teacher's cough,
the latent heat of melting ice, the brief
hypotenuse from ecstasy to grief

amo amas, and then the cras amet,
the new-found eyes no slumber could forget,
Vivien, the affliction of the senses,
and conjugation of historic tenses

and Shakspeare nearer come, and louder heard,
and the disparateness of flesh and word,
time growing swifter, and the pendulums
in shorter savage arcs that beat like drums—

hands held, relinquished, faces come and gone,
kissed and forgotten, and become but one,
old shoes worn out, and new ones bought, the gloves
soiled, and so lost in limbo, like the loves—

then Shakspeare in the heart, the instant speech
parting the conscious terrors each from each—
wisdom's dishevelment, the purpose lamed,
and purposeless the footsteps eastward aimed

the bloodstream always slower, while the clock
followed the tired heart with louder knock,
fatigue upon the eye, the tardy springs
inviting to no longer longed-for things—

the birdsong nearer now than Shakspeare's voice,
whispers of comfort—Death is near, rejoice!—
remember now the red house with nine rooms
the graveyard with its trumpetvines and tombs—

play jackstones now and let your jackstones be
the stars that make Orion's galaxy
so to deceive yourself until you move
into that house whose tenants do not love.

The Tower

One, from his high bright window in a tower,
Leans out, as evening falls,
And sees the advancing curtain of the shower
Splashing its silver on roofs and walls:
Sees how, swift as a shadow, it crosses the city,
And murmurs beyond far walls to the sea,
Leaving a glimmer of water in the dark canyons,
And silver falling from eave and tree.

One, from his high bright window, looking down,
Peers like a dreamer over the rain-bright town,
And thinks its towers are like a dream.
The western windows flame in the sun's last flare,
Pale roofs begin to gleam.

Looking down from a window high in a wall
He sees us all;
Lifting our pallid faces towards the rain,
Searching the sky, and going our ways again,
Standing in doorways, waiting under the trees . . .
There, in the high bright window he dreams, and sees
What we are blind to, -we who mass and crowd
From wall to wall in the darkening of a cloud.

The gulls drift slowly above the city of towers,
Over the roofs to the darkening sea they fly;
Night falls swiftly on an evening of rain.
The yellow lamps wink one by one again.
The towers reach higher and blacker against the sky.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Trenches

I

All night long, it has seemed for many years,
We have heard the terrible sound of guns,
All night long we have lain and watched the calm stars.
We cannot sleep, though we are tired,
The sound of guns is in our ears,
We are growing old and grey,
We have forgotten many simple things.
Is this you? Is this I?
Will the word come to charge today?...
All night long, all night long,
We listen and cannot close our eyes,
We see the ring of violet flashes
Endlessly darting against the skies,
We feel the firm earth shake beneath us,
And all the world we have walked upon
Crumbles to nothing, crumbles to chaos,
Crumbles to incoherent dust;
Till it seems we can never walk again,
That it is foolish to have feet, foolish to be men,
Foolish to think, foolish to have such brains,
And useless to remember
The world we came from,
The world we never shall see again ...
All night long we lie this way,
We cannot talk, I look to see what you are thinking,
And you, and you,-
We are all thinking, 'Will it come to-day?'
Get your bayonets ready, then-
See that they are sharp and bright,
See that they have thirsty edges,
Remember that we are savage men,
Motherless men who have no past ...
Nothing of beauty to call to mind,
No tenderness to stay our hands ...
... We are tired, we have thought all this before,
We have seen it all and thought it all,
Our thumbs are calloused with feeling the bayonet's edge,
We have known it all and felt it all

Till we can know no more.

II

All night long we lie
Stupidly watching the smoke puff over the sky,
Stupidly watching the interminable stars
Come out again, peaceful and cold and high,
Swim into the smoke again, or melt in a flare of red ...
All night long, all night long,
Hearing the terrible battle of guns,
We think we shall soon be dead,
We sleep for a second, and wake again,
We dream we are filling pans and baking bread,
Or hoeing the witch-grass out of the wheat,
We dream we are turning lathes,
Or open our shops, in the early morning,
And look for a moment along the quiet street ...
And we do not laugh, though it is strange
In a harrowing second of time
To traverse so many worlds, so many ages,
And come to this chaos again,
This vast symphonic dance of death,
This incoherent dust.

III

We are growing old, we are older than the stars:
You whom I knew a moment ago
Have walked through ages of silence since then,
Memory is forsaking me,
I no longer know
If we are one or two or the blades of grass ...
All night long, lying together,
We think in caverns of dreadful sound,
We grope among falling boulders,
We are overtaken and crushed, we rise once more,
Performing, wearily,
The senseless things we have performed so often before.
Yesterday is coming again,
Yesterday and the day before,
And a million others, all alike, one by one,
Sulphurous clouds and a red sun,
Sulphurous clouds and a yellow moon,
And a cold drizzle of endless rain
Driving across them, wetting the barrels of guns,

Dripping, soaking, pattering, slipping,
Chilling our hands, numbing our feet,
Glistening on our chins.
And then, all over again, after grey ages,
Sulphurous clouds and a red sun,
Sulphurous clouds and a yellow moon ...
I had my childhood once, now I have children,
A boy who is learning to read, a girl who is learning to sew,
And my wife has brown hair and blue eyes ...
Our parapet is blown away,
Blown away by a gust of sound,
Dust is falling upon us, blood is dripping upon us,
We are standing somewhere between earth and stars,
Not knowing if we are alive or dead ...
All night long it is so,
All night long we hear the guns, and do not know
If the word will come to charge to-day.

IV

It will be like that other charge-
We will climb out and run
Yelling like madmen in the sun
Running stiffly on the scorched dust
Hardly hearing our voices
Running after the man who points with his hand
At a certain shattered tree,
Running through sheets of fire like idiots,
Sometimes falling, sometimes rising.
I will not remember, then,
How I walked by a hedge of wild roses,
And shook the dew off, with my sleeve,
I will not remember
The shape of my sweetheart's mouth, but with other things
Ringing like anvils in my brain
I will run, I will die, I will forget.
I will hear nothing, and forget ...
I will remember that we are savage men,
Motherless men who have no past,
Nothing of beauty to call to mind
No tenderness to stay our hands ...

V

We are tired, we have thought all this before,
We have seen it all, and thought it all.

We have tried to forget, we have tried to change,
We have struggled to climb an invisible wall,
But if we should climb it, could we ever return?
We have known it all, and felt it all
Till we can know no more ...
Let us climb out and end it, then,
Lest it become immortal.
Let us climb out and end it, then,
Just for the change ...
This is the same night, still, and you, and I,
Struggling to keep our feet in a chaos of sound.
And the same puff of smoke
Passes, to leave the same stars in the sky.

VI

Out there, in the moonlight,
How still in the grass they lie,
Those who panted beside us, or stumbled before us,
Those who yelled like madmen and ran at the sun,
Flinging their guns before them.
One of them stares all day at the sky
As if he had seen some strange thing there,
One of them tightly holds his gun
As if he dreaded a danger there,
One of them stoops above his friend,
By moon and sun we see him there.
One of them saw white cottage walls
With purple clematis flowers and leaves,
And heard through trees his waterfalls
And whistled under the eaves;
One of them walked on yellow sand
And watched a young girl gathering shells-
Once, a white wave caught her hand ...
One of them heard how certain bells
Chimed in a valley, mellow and slow,
Just as he turned to go ...

VII

All night long, all night long,
We see them and do not remember them,
We hear the terrible sounds of guns,
We see the white rays darting and darting,
We are beaten down and crawl to our feet,
We wipe the dirt from mouths and eyes,

Dust-coloured animals creeping in dust,
Animals stupefied by sound;
We are beaten down, and some of us rise,
And some become a part of the ground,
But what do we care? We never knew them,
Or if we did it was long ago ...
Night will end in a year or so,
We look at each other as if to say,
Across the void of time between us,
'Will the word come to-day?'

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Vampire

She rose among us where we lay.
She wept, we put our work away.
She chilled our laughter, stilled our play;
And spread a silence there.
And darkness shot across the sky,
And once, and twice, we heard her cry;
And saw her lift white hands on high
And toss her troubled hair.

What shape was this who came to us,
With basilisk eyes so ominous,
With mouth so sweet, so poisonous,
And tortured hands so pale?
We saw her wavering to and fro,
Through dark and wind we saw her go;
Yet what her name was did not know;
And felt our spirits fail.

We tried to turn away; but still
Above we heard her sorrow thrill;
And those that slept, they dreamed of ill
And dreadful things:
Of skies grown red with rending flames
And shuddering hills that cracked their frames;
Of twilights foul with wings;

And skeletons dancing to a tune;
And cries of children stifled soon;
And over all a blood-red moon
A dull and nightmare size.
They woke, and sought to go their ways,
Yet everywhere they met her gaze,
Her fixed and burning eyes.

Who are you now, —we cried to her—
Spirit so strange, so sinister?
We felt dead winds above us stir;
And in the darkness heard
A voice fall, singing, cloying sweet,

Heavily dropping, though that heat,
Heavy as honeyed pulses beat,
Slow word by anguished word.

And through the night strange music went
With voice and cry so darkly blent
We could not fathom what they meant;
Save only that they seemed
To thin the blood along our veins,
Foretelling vile, delirious pains,
And clouds divulging blood-red rains
Upon a hill undreamed.

And this we heard: 'Who dies for me,
He shall possess me secretly,
My terrible beauty he shall see,
And slake my body's flame.
But who denies me cursed shall be,
And slain, and buried loathsomely,
And slimed upon with shame.'

And darkness fell. And like a sea
Of stumbling deaths we followed, we
Who dared not stay behind.
There all night long beneath a cloud
We rose and fell, we struck and bowed,
We were the ploughman and the ploughed,
Our eyes were red and blind.

And some, they said, had touched her side,
Before she fled us there;
And some had taken her to bride;
And some lain down for her and died;
Who had not touched her hair,
Ran to and fro and cursed and cried
And sought her everywhere.

'Her eyes have feasted on the dead,
And small and shapely is her head,
And dark and small her mouth,' they said,
'And beautiful to kiss;
Her mouth is sinister and red

As blood in moonlight is.'

Then poets forgot their jeweled words
And cut the sky with glittering swords;
And innocent souls turned carrion birds
To perch upon the dead.
Sweet daisy fields were drenched with death,
The air became a charnel breath,
Pale stones were splashed with red.

Green leaves were dappled bright with blood
And fruit trees murdered in the bud;
And when at length the dawn
Came green as twilight from the east,
And all that heaving horror ceased,
Silent was every bird and beast,
And that dark voice was gone.

No word was there, no song, no bell,
No furious tongue that dream to tell;
Only the dead, who rose and fell
Above the wounded men;
And whisperings and wails of pain
Blown slowly from the wounded grain,
Blown slowly from the smoking plain;
And silence fallen again.

Until at dusk, from God knows where,
Beneath dark birds that filled the air,
Like one who did not hear or care,
Under a blood-red cloud,
An aged ploughman came alone
And drove his share through flesh and bone,
And turned them under to mould and stone;
All night long he ploughed.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Wars And The Unknown Soldier

I

Dry leaves, soldier, dry leaves, dead leaves;
voices of leaves on the wind that bears them to
destruction,
impassioned prayer, impassioned hymn of delight
of the gladly doomed to die. Stridor of beasts,
stridor of men, praises of lust and battle,
numberless as waves, the waves singing
to the wind that bears them down.

Under Osiris,
him of the Egyptian priests, Osymandyas the King,
eastward into Asia we passed, swarmed over Bactria,
three thousand years before Christ.

The history of war
is the history of mankind.
So many dead:
look at them there in the dark, look at them going,
the longest parade of all, the parade of the dead:
between then and now, seven thousand million dead:
dead on the field of battle.

The people which is not ready
to guard its gods, and its household gods, with the
sword,
who knows but it will find itself with nothing
save honour to defend - ?

Consider, soldier
whatever name you go by, doughboy, dogface,
marine or tommy. God's mercenary – consider our lot
in the days of the single combat. You have been seen on the
seashore.

In the offshore wind blown backward, a wavecrest
windwhipped and quivering, borne helpless and
briefly
to fall underfoot of an oncoming seawall, foam-
smothered,

once more to recede, wind-thwarted again; thus
deathward
the battle lines whelmed and divided. The darkling
battalions
locked arms in chaos, the bravest, the heroes,
kept in the forefront' and this line once broken,
our army was done for.

II

In the new city of marble and bright stone,
the city named for a captain; in the capital:
under the solemn echoing dome, in the still tomb,
lies an unknown soldier.*

In the brown city,
old and shabby, by the muddy Thames, in the gaunt
avenue
where Romans blessed with Latin the oyster and the
primrose,
the stone shaft speaks of another. Those who pass
bare their heads in the rain, pausing to listen+

Across grey water, red poppies on cliffs and chalk.
Hidden under the arch, in the city of light,
the city beloved of Abelard rests a third,
nameless as those, but the fluttering flame
substituting for a name.

Three unknown soldiers:
three, let us say, out of many. On the proud arch
names shine like stars, the names of battles and
victories;
but never the name of the man, you, the unknown.
Down there runs the river, under dark walls of rock,
parapets of rock, stone steps that green to the water.

There they fished up in the twilight another unknown,
the one they call
L'Inconnue de la Seine
: drowned
hands,
drowned hair, drowned eyes, masked like marble she

listens

to the drip-drop secret of silence; and the pale eyelids
enclose and disclose what they know, the illusion
found like fire under Lethe. Devotion here sainted
the love here deathless. The strong purpose turns
from the daggered lamplight, from the little light to
the lesser,
from stone to stone stepping, from the nex-to-the-lasy
heartbeat and footstep even to the sacred, to the last.

Love: devotion: sacrifice: death: can we call her
unknown
who has not unknown to herself more? Whose love
lives still
as if death itself were alive and divine?

And you, the soldier
you who are dead: is it not so with you?
Love: devotion: sacrifice: death: can we call you
unknown,
you who knew what you did? The soldier is crystal:
crystal of man: clear heart, clear duty, clear purpose.
No soldier can be unknown. Only he is unknown
who is unknown to himself.

Conrad Potter Aiken

The Window

She looks out in the blue morning
and sees a whole wonderful world
she looks out in the morning
and sees a whole world

she leans out of the window
and this is what she sees
a wet rose singing to the sun
with a chorus of red bees

she leans out of the window
and laughs for the window is high
she is in it like a bird on a perch
and they scoop the blue sky

she and the window scooping
the morning as if it were air
scooping a green wave of leaves
above a stone stair

and an urn hung with leaden garlands
and girls holding hands in a ring
and raindrops on an iron railing
shining like a harp string

an old man draws with his ferrule
in wet sand a map of Spain
the marble soldier on his pedestal
draws a stiff diagram of pain

but the walls around her tremble
with the speed of the earth the floor
curves to the terrestrial center
and behind her the door

opens darkly down to the beginning
far down to the first simple cry
and the animal waking in water
and the opening of the eye

she looks out in the blue morning
and sees a whole wonderful world
she looks out in the morning
and sees a whole world.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Turns And Movies: Dancing Adairs

Behold me, in my chiffon, gauze, and tinsel,
Flitting out of the shadow into the spotlight,
And into the shadow again, without a whisper!--
Firefly's my name, I am evanescent.

Firefly's your name. You are evanescent.
But I follow you as remorselessly as darkness,
And shut you in and enclose you, at last, and always,
Till you are lost,--as a voice is lost in silence.

Till I am lost, as a voice is lost in silence. . .
Are you the one who would close so cool about me?
My fire sheds into and through you and beyond you:
How can your fingers hold me? I am elusive.

How can my fingers hold you? You are elusive?
Yes, you are flame, but I surround and love you,
Always extend beyond you, cool, eternal,
To take you into my heart's great void of silence.

You shut me into your heart's great void of silence. . .
O sweet and soothing end for a life of whirling!
Now I am still, whose life was mazed with motion.
Now I sink into you, for love of sleep.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Turns And Movies: Rose And Murray

After the movie, when the lights come up,
He takes her powdered hand behind the wings;
She, all in yellow, like a buttercup,
Lifts her white face, yearns up to him, and clings;
And with a silent, gliding step they move
Over the footlights, in familiar glare,
Panther-like in the Tango whirl of love,
He fawning close on her with idiot stare.
Swiftly they cross the stage. O lyric ease!
The drunken music follows the sure feet,
The swaying elbows, intergliding knees,
Moving with slow precision on the beat.
She was a waitress in a restaurant,
He picked her up and taught her how to dance.
She feels his arms, lifts an appealing glance,
But knows he spent last evening with Zudora;
And knows that certain changes are before her.

The brilliant spotlight circles them around,
Flashing the spangles on her weighted dress.
He mimics wooing her, without a sound,
Flatters her with a smoothly smiled caress.
He fears that she will someday queer his act;
Feeling his anger. He will quit her soon.
He nods for faster music. He will contract
Another partner, under another moon.
Meanwhile, 'smooth stuff.' He lets his dry eyes flit
Over the yellow faces there below;
Maybe he'll cut down on his drinks a bit,
Not to annoy her, and spoil the show. . .
Zudora, waiting for her turn to come,
Watches them from the wings and fatly leers
At the girl's younger face, so white and dumb,
And the fixed, anguished eyes, ready for tears.

She lies beside him, with a false wedding-ring,
In a cheap room, with moonlight on the floor;
The moonlit curtains remind her much of spring,
Of a spring evening on the Coney shore.

And while he sleeps, knowing she ought to hate,
She still clings to the lover that she knew,--
The one that, with a pencil on a plate,
Drew a heart and wrote, 'I'd die for you.'

Conrad Potter Aiken

Turns And Movies: The Cornet

When she came out, that white little Russian dancer,
With her bright hair, and her eyes, so young, so young,
He suddenly lost his leader, and all the players,
And only heard an immortal music sung,--

Of dryads flashing in the green woods of April,
On cobwebs trembling over the deep, wet grass:
Fleeing their shadows with laughter, with hands uplifted,
Through the whirled sinister sun he saw them pass,--

Lovely immortals gone, yet existing somewhere,
Still somewhere laughing in woods of immortal green,
Young he had lived among fires, or dreamed of living,
Lovers in youth once seen, or dreamed he had seen. . .

And watched her knees flash up, and her young hands beckon,
And the hair that streamed behind, and the taunting eyes.
He felt this place dissolving in living darkness,
And through the darkness he felt his childhood rise.

Soft, and shining, and sweet, hands filled with petals. . .
And watching her dance, he was grateful to forget
The fiddlers, leaning and drawing their bows together,
And the tired fingers on the stops of his cornet.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Turns And Movies: Violet Moore And Bert Moore

He thinks her little feet should pass
Where dandelions star thickly grass;
Her hands should lift in sunlit air
Sea-wind should tangle up her hair.
Green leaves, he says, have never heard
A sweeter ragtime mockingbird,
Nor has the moon-man ever seen,
Or man in the spotlight, leering green,
Such a beguiling, smiling queen.

Her eyes, he says, are stars at dusk,
Her mouth as sweet as red-rose musk;
And when she dances his young heart swells
With flutes and viols and silver bells;
His brain is dizzy, his senses swim,
When she slants her ragtime eyes at him. . .

Moonlight shadows, he bids her see,
Move no more silently than she.
It was this way, he says, she came,
Into his cold heart, bearing flame.
And now that his heart is all on fire
Will she refuse his heart's desire?--
And O! has the Moon Man ever seen
(Or the spotlight devil, leering green)
A sweeter shadow upon a screen?

Conrad Potter Aiken

Turns And Movies: Zudora

Here on the pale beach, in the darkness;
With the full moon just to rise;
They sit alone, and look over the sea,
Or into each other's eyes. . .

She pokes her parasol into the sleepy sand,
Or sifts the lazy whiteness through her hand.

'A lovely night,' he says, 'the moon,
Comes up for you and me.
Just like a blind old spotlight there,
Fizzing across the sea!'

She pays no heed, nor even turns her head:
He slides his arm around her waist instead.

'Why don't we do a sketch together--
Those songs you sing are swell.
Where did you get them, anyway?
They suit you awfully well.'

She will not turn to him--will not resist.
Impassive, she submits to being kissed.

'My husband wrote all four of them.
You know,--my husband drowned.
He was always sickly, soon depressed. . .'
But still she hears the sound

Of a stateroom door shut hard, and footsteps going
Swiftly and steadily, and the dark sea flowing.

She hears the dark sea flowing, and sees his eyes
Hollow with disenchantment, sick surprise,--

And hate of her whom he had loved too well. . .
She lowers her eyes, demurely prods a shell.

'Yes. We might do an act together.

That would be very nice.'
He kisses her passionately, and thinks
She's carnal, but cold as ice.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Twilights, V

Now the great wheel of darkness and low clouds
Whirs and whirls in the heavens with dipping rim;
Against the ice-white wall of light in the west
Skeleton trees bow down in a stream of air.
Leaves, black leaves and smoke, are blown on the wind;
Mount upward past my window; swoop again;
In a sharp silence, loudly, loudly falls
The first cold drop, striking a shriveled leaf . . .
Doom and dusk for the earth! Upward I reach
To draw chill curtains and shut out the dark,
Pausing an instant, with uplifted hand,
To watch, between black ruined portals of cloud,
One star,—the tottering portals fall and crush it.
Here are a thousand books! here is the wisdom
Alembicked out of dust, or out of nothing;
Choose now the weightiest word, most golden page,
Most somberly musicked line; hold up these lanterns,—
These paltry lanterns, wisdoms, philosophies,—
Above your eyes, against this wall of darkness;
And you'll see—what? One hanging strand of cobweb,
A window-sill a half-inch deep in dust . . .
Speak out, old wise-men! Now, if ever, we need you.
Cry loudly, lift shrill voices like magicians
Against this baleful dusk, this wail of rain . . .
But you are nothing! Your pages turn to water
Under my fingers: cold, cold and gleaming,
Arrowy in the darkness, rippling, dripping—
All things are rain . . . Myself, this lighted room,
What are we but a murmurous pool of rain? . . .
The slow arpeggios of it, liquid, sibilant,
Thrill and thrill in the dark. World-deep I lie
Under a sky of rain. Thus lies the sea-shell
Under the rustling twilight of the sea;
No gods remember it, no understanding
Cleaves the long darkness with a sword of light.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Variations: X

Queen Cleopatra, now grown old,
Watched the green grass turning brown ...
The river is shrunk to half its size:
Now I will lay me down.

Queen Cleopatra called her slaves
And peered in the mirror with age-pearled eyes;
My lips are not so red as they were:
Not so the old leaf dies!

Light the torches, and fill the courts
With scarlet music, and bring to me
Vermilion to smear upon my lips,
And opals, that I may be

Once more what Cleopatra was
Before the woman became the queen ...
She laughed, and backward tossed her head;
And horn, and tambourine,

Snarled at the hot and red-starred night,
While gasping dancers, one by one,
Whirled on the stone with yellow feet ...
And when that dance was done

She poured cold poison into a cup
And watched the thick foam wink and seethe:
One black bubble upon her tongue
And she would cease to breathe.

She held the poison before her mouth ...
And saw the dark tomb hewed in stone
Where a thousand nights would drift as one,
And she would sleep alone;

And lightly touched the goblet's rim,
And thought, with a pleased and narrowed eye,
Of this and that, and Antony,
And the laugh that will not die.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Violet Moore And Bert Moore

He thinks her little feet should pass
Where dandelions star thickly grass;
Her hands should lift in sunlit air
Sea-wind should tangle up her hair.
Green leaves, he says, have never heard
A sweeter ragtime mockingbird,
Nor has the moon-man ever seen,
Or man in the spotlight, leering green,
Such a beguiling, smiling queen.

Her eyes, he says, are stars at dusk,
Her mouth as sweet as red-rose musk;
And when she dances his young heart swells
With flutes and viols and silver bells;
His brain is dizzy, his senses swim,
When she slants her ragtime eyes at him. . .

Moonlight shadows, he bids her see,
Move no more silently than she.
It was this way, he says, she came,
Into his cold heart, bearing flame.
And now that his heart is all on fire
Will she refuse his heart's desire?-
And O! has the Moon Man ever seen
(Or the spotlight devil, leering green)
A sweeter shadow upon a screen?

Conrad Potter Aiken

When You Are Not Surprised

When you are not surprised, not surprised,
nor leap in imagination from sunlight into shadow
or from shadow into sunlight
suing the color of fright or delight
to the bewildering circumstance
when you are no longer surprised
by the quiet or fury of daybreak
the stormy uprush of the sun's rage
over the edges of torn trees
torrents of living and dying flung
upward and outward inward and downward to space
or else
peace peace peace peace
the wood-thrush speaking his holy holy
far hidden in the forest of the mind
while slowly
the limbs of light unwind
and the world's surface dreams again of night
as the center dreams of light
when you are not surprised
by breath and breath and breath
the first unconscious morning breath
the tap of the bird's beak on the pane
and do not cry out come again
blest blest that you are come again
o light o sound o voice of bird o light
and memory too o memory blest
and curst with the debts of yesterday
that would not stay, or stay

when you are not surprised
by death and death and death
death of the bee in the daffodil
death of color in the child's cheek
on the young mother's breast
death of sense of touch of sight
death of delight
and the inward death the inward turning night

when the heart hardens itself with hate and indifference
for hated self and beloved not-self
when you are not surprised
by wheel's turn or turn of season
the winged and orbed chariot tilt of time
the halcyon pause, the blue caesura of spring
and solar rhyme
woven into the divinely remembered nest
by the dark-eyed love in the oriole's breast
and the tides of space that ring the heart
while still, while still, the wave of the invisible world
breaks into consciousness in the mind of god
then welcome death and be by death benignly welcomed
and join again in the ceaseless know-nothing
from which you awoke to the first surprise.

Conrad Potter Aiken

White Nocturne

The first soft snowflakes hovering down the night,
From one white cloud that hurries beneath the stars,-
Whispering over the black unfrozen pool,
Silently falling on withered leaves,
Eddying slowly among bare boughs of trees,-
The music you are to me is as ghostly as these,
Softly falling, softly passing,
Wandering slowly on dreamless air ...
The first soft snowflakes slanting down this night
Melt on the lifted palms of your hands,
Or in the fragrant darkness of your hair ...
One of them finds your lip, and you quietly laugh,
A laugh that means to say
'This was the kiss you gave me yesterday,
Or the ghost of it- ah yes, the ghost of it ...
For the ghost of it is all we have to-day ...'
The first slow snowflakes pass
Leaving a sprinkled whiteness on leaves and grass,
The cloud whirls ghostlike against the cold bright stars,
Over the long black boughs that seem to reach
Forlornly after it,
And now it is gone, and suddenly we seem
To walk in silence where before we walked in speech ...
But the silence itself is exquisite,
Like a pause in music, ghostly with overtones,
And, silent, we seem to hear
The echoes of words we spoke and heard last year.
Clearly our footsteps sound on the moistened stones,
Clearly the lamplit hill-street gleams before us,
And silently we climb,
Climbing our tragic destiny together,
From lamp to lamp up the bright street of time.

II

You sit beneath the lamp and talk to me,
With dark hair somehow turned to fire,
Your white hands lie in your lap, or touch your lips,
And your talk, like music, weaving intricately,
Plays upon me. It is a magic of white

Touching and changing all familiar things;
It flows in the windy night,
It quietly opens secret doors, it sings,
It returns upon itself, repeats, denies,
Or takes sweet pleasure in silence. And all the while
You sit beneath the lamp, and smile,
Or turn away your eyes.
We remember, you seem to say,-
Choosing strange words to say it, in another way,-
How slowly and how inevitably we change,
How what was then familiar now grows strange ...
White valleys fall between us,
Your words become a wind, and heavily blow,
We seem to be crying across a chasm of snow,
Trying to hear the half-remembered words,
Trying to guess what we no longer know.
Yes, life changes, we are never the same ...
Your eyes grow dark with a tiny flame,
You say the words, and wait,
And a sudden terror seizes me, for I fear
That you have divined the things that I have forgotten,
Things that still shine before you white and clear.
Yes, it is strange ... You sigh, your talk flows on,
You touch your hair with your hands, and sigh,
And suddenly then it seems to me that this word,
This word so quietly said, was a terrible cry ...
And I am confused, I desire to touch your hand,
But again white chasms open, the night flows chill,
And something freezes within me, and I am still.

III

The snowflakes tick the frosted windowpane,
The night is mad with the senseless dance of flakes,
The coal fire sinks and shakes;
And I wait by the window, and look along the street,
To where in the snow, beneath a lamp,
A man and a woman stand:
He is leaning close to her face, he takes her hand,
He pleads with her, she tries to turn away ...
What is it he leans to say?
What is the savage music he plays upon her?
What chords profound with memories?

He takes her in his arms, and she is his,
She lifts her face in the sombre light,
And together, slowly, they walk away
Whirled about by the mad dance of snow;
Down the white silent street from lamp to lamp they go,
Into the immortal night.
Where have they gone? Where will the white streets lead them?
To what tempestuous or ignoble end?
To what faint peace, or dazzling pain?
The snowflakes whirl and madden my brain,
They whirl in patterns before my eyes ...
And I see them at last in a small and sombre room,
In the yellow lamplight I see them rise;
She smiles, and lifts white hands to touch her hair:
And he waits wearily in the eternal chair.

IV

I would like to touch this snow with the wind of a dream,
With a sudden warmth of music, and turn it all
To petals of roses ... Why is it that I recall
Your two pale hands holding a bowl of roses,
Wide open like lotos flowers, floating in water?
I would like to touch this snow with the wind of a dream;
To hold the world in my hands and let it fall.
We have walked among the hills immortally white,
Golden by noon and blue by night.
I would like to touch this snow with the wind of a dream:
And hear you singing again by a starlight wall ...

V

You talk to me- what is it that you are saying?
April ... April ... the soft sun falls between,
The deep white chasm, the gorge of the frozen river,
Flashes with white and green;
And we are walking there by the blue river,
By the blue river scaled with golden fire,
Our feet move pace for pace through the tall grasses,
And the earth is light with desire.
Youth ... youth ... so sing we for a space ...
And darkness comes over your face,
A great cloud crosses the golden sky,
Wind shakes the leaves, you fall in the grass and cry;

Crying silently, hiding your face with your hands.
Youth ... youth ... so sing we for a space,
And you are crying, I know,
Because this day, this youth, this beauty, must go,
Go down into the dust.
The golden river is dark with a sudden gust,
The green of the willows is ruffled grey,
A great cloud crosses the sky,
Wind shakes the leaves, you fall in the grass and cry.
Youth ... April ... we clamour to them to stay,
And a shadow is on us, for we know that love must die.
And rising, then, we see white peaks in the distance ...
White peaks ... quiet ... peace ... eternity.

VI

Do you remember, you who smiled at me,
Under this lamp, here in this world of snow,
Do you remember, long ago ...
What was I going to tell you? What was my dream to be?
It does not matter; for all we need to say
To strike our hearts to a bitter-chorded music
Is 'do you remember ... on a certain day ...'
And all the years fall down from us like leaves,
And all this sinister world is blown away.
Take my hand and dream of youth once more,
Take my arm, and let us walk
On the wet flagstones gleaming yellow with lamps,
And along the sea-furled shore;
Or up a certain flight of marble stairs,
Resting our hands on the green-veined balustrade,
And into a room where a low-toned waltz is played,
And women rise from gilded chairs.
Ah, this has been a golden day,-
You lean and say,-
A day like music of strange rich involutions,
Swift and profound and huddled and sweet ...
The wind of it blows even into this room,
There is a hint of forests in this rich gloom ...
You smile, your eyes intensely darken at mine,
I feel the music about us heavily beat,
Waver and vanish and shine.
One white rose with a golden heart-

Held in the cup of your hand-
To-day, I muse, all things will find solution,
The universe is simple to understand.
Take my arm, and let us drift
Like leaves when the wind is driven; for the day soon ends.
It is strange how such a day, with such a music,
And one white rose, will make friends more than friends.

VII

White hours like snow, white hours like eternal snow ...
Long white streets jewelled with lights ...
Our steps are muffled and silent, we scarcely know
How swiftly we cross the nights.
I would like to touch this snow with the fire of a dream,
With the mouth of a dream. And turn it all
To petals of roses ... I would like to touch you, too,
And change you into the chord of music I knew.
Can you not change?... Run back again to April?
Laugh out at me from among young lilac leaves?...
Play with your jewels, and sing!
Feeling the earth beneath you float with spring!...
You talk in an even tone, I answer you;
And all about us seems to say
Peace ... peace ... the hills and streets are cold.
You are growing cold.

VIII

Yes, we have changed, slowly and silently changed;
We are the hungry ghosts of the selves we knew;
We sit on each other's tombs and stare at death,
We are not lovely, we scarcely believe it true,-
And only then with a pang that is almost a cry,-
That once, long ago, we were the I and the you
Who shivered in music under an April sky.
White night of snow, and a thousand nights like this;
Snow on our lips like the ghost of a kiss;
And a thousand nights in a hollow second of time
We will return again,
Silently, or with trivial speech, to climb
From lamp to lamp up the white street of pain.
Yet, is it better, you say,
Painfully turning your darkened eyes away,

To lend our souls to a quieter music at last,-
Remembering, when we will,
The sudden and gorgeous clashings of the past?...
Snow falls about us, the hills immortally white
Wait far off in the undisturbing night.

Conrad Potter Aiken

Youth Imperturbable

Let me not shrink at sight of death,
Nor waste in grief an idle breath ...
You whom I loved are one with clay,
The brightness in your eyes is gone,
I shall not meet your face to-day;
Your day is done, while mine goes on ...
Why pity you? You had your fling;
You had your chance to dance and sing,-
To love, to hate, to kiss, to kill,
To laugh and cry and drink your fill:
Now it is ended: so comes end
To every lover, every friend;
The lips turn white, the warm eyes glaze,
The music-box no longer plays,
And so we hide you under earth
And laugh to sun our wonted mirth ...
Let me not shrink at sight of death,
Nor waste in grief an idle breath ...

This buried something- is it you?
Is this decay the man I knew?
You, whose hand was warm in mine,
Whose eyes I saw with music shine,
Who laughed with me and walked with me,
And in your grave way scolded me?-
Well, and so fares it with us all,-
When autumn comes the leaf must fall,
Nor shall I dusk one single day
By mourning for what now is clay.
One of my joys is haply dead,
One song is sung, one word is said,
One laughter dies and leaves behind
Only an echo in my mind ...
Let me not shrink: I will be stern.
For better or worse you had your turn.
Grief for the dead is foolish grief,
A childish thing, a selfish thing,-
One voice cannot for always sing,-
Even for us is pleasure brief;-

Nor can our tears and temper stay
The hand that snatches joy away.
For you, your golden sun has set,
But I have much to laugh at yet.

Let me not shrink at sight of death
Nor waste in grief an idle breath ...
Life is a dance;- O dance it then,
You blind and fatuous hosts of men!
Lift your pale faces to the sun,
And laugh and shout and sing and run;
While he is warm and bright and red
Dance on the bodies of your dead,
Life is the thing,- the song of life,-
The eager plow, the thirsty knife!
Exult, all sorrows past forget,-
Laugh, there is much to laugh at yet,-
Tear down the pallid things you hate,-
Rip open earth's heart for your mate!
This buried something,- is it you?
Is this decay the man I knew?
Here's nought but dirt- here's nought but dust-
It has no gleam of laugh or lust,
Nor does it say a word to me,
Nor reach a warm hand up to me.
Are you become but leaf and grass,
Intricate roots that mat and mass
And thirstily hold and suck the rain?
Here for a half year you have lain,
Quiet as earth is ... are you earth?
Share you with her some secret mirth?

Foolish of me to think you here,
Where you were buried!... Now you are
Diffused through all earth, everywhere,
And look at me from every star.
So will it be with me in time,
Even for me this sun must set;
But I am still in my laughing prime,
O I have much to laugh at yet!

Youth Penetrant

I shall grow calm in a little while,
But now, youth yearns in me to laugh;
Cruel as cinematograph
I show life up to you ... and smile.
I shall be calm in a little space,-
The blood grows quieter with the years;
I shall be tenderer, then, to tears,
And look more kindly on life's face.
Our hearts grow mellow nearing death-
Like apples touched with autumn breath- ;
When the dusk falls and day is done
We look more wistfully on the sun,
Loving his last warmth on our cheek;
We can be kind when we are weak.
I shall be calm in a little while,
but now, youth yearns in me to laugh;
Cruel as cinematograph
I show life up to you ... and smile.
Merciless is this black and white,
A cold inquisitorial light;
Baleful, it makes all life seem base,
Shows you the flesh of every face;
Only the music makes it seem
So brightly glamorous, so like dream ...
Let the musician cease to play,
Here's naught but black and white and grey,
Reality, cold, mechanical,-
The truth- a hideous spectacle!..
Cruel as cinematograph
I show life up to you ... and laugh;
For that is youth's prerogative:
To see life coldly through brave eyes,
To strip life of its lovely lies,
And, careless of the dead, to live.
There is yet time, when I grow old,
When the blood in me is slow and cold,
To look on life with wistful gaze,
To see life through a soft bright haze;-
Singing more sweetly, as they use

Who are half death's, and hourly lose
The light that fades from misting eyes,
so, praise life in most passionate wise;
For in their clouded minds they dream
The whole day, though it was but dun,
Made glorious by the death of sun,-
Death-fires the fires of life they deem.
Through mist they wander, singing sweet;-
Singing of life to make them brave,
They hear death digging each his grave,
They feel his cold net touch their feet ...
Half-lives, they only half-life sing,
The tender light their dim eyes sees;
They reach pale hands to earth and cling,
Grief gives their song intensity ...
I shall be calm in a little while,
But now, youth yearns in me to laugh:
Cruel as cinematograph
I show life up to you ... and smile!

Conrad Potter Aiken

Zudora

Here on the pale beach, in the darkness;
With the full moon just to rise;
They sit alone, and look over the sea,
Or into each other's eyes. . .

She pokes her parasol into the sleepy sand,
Or sifts the lazy whiteness through her hand.

'A lovely night,' he says, 'the moon,
Comes up for you and me.
Just like a blind old spotlight there,
Fizzing across the sea!'

She pays no heed, nor even turns her head:
He slides his arm around her waist instead.

'Why don't we do a sketch together--
Those songs you sing are swell.
Where did you get them, anyway?
They suit you awfully well.'

She will not turn to him--will not resist.
Impassive, she submits to being kissed.

'My husband wrote all four of them.
You know,--my husband drowned.
He was always sickly, soon depressed. . .'
But still she hears the sound

Of a stateroom door shut hard, and footsteps going
Swiftly and steadily, and the dark sea flowing.

She hears the dark sea flowing, and sees his eyes
Hollow with disenchantment, sick surprise,--

And hate of her whom he had loved too well. . .
She lowers her eyes, demurely prods a shell.

'Yes. We might do an act together.

That would be very nice.'
He kisses her passionately, and thinks
She's carnal, but cold as ice.

Conrad Potter Aiken