

# Annie Elizabeth Cheney

## Selected Poems



# Annie Elizabeth Cheney

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Cheney was born Anna Elizabeth Skinner in Worcester, Massachusetts. She married William Atwell Cheney in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1871 and moved to California in 1875, eventually settling in Los Angeles in 1882. William Cheney an active State Senator representing Plumas, Butte and Lassen counties and judge in the Superior Court of California. William Cheney was interested in speculative philosophy — these interest resonate throughout his wife’s poetry — and published a book titled *Can We Be Sure of Mortality?* The inscription on Annie Cheney’s tombstone in Angelus Rosedale Cemetery reads: “There Are No Dead. A Poet, A Philosopher, and a Great Soul.”

*Dreams of Helas*. New York: Lloyd Publishing Company, 1917.

# from Dreams of Hellas

ATHOS—OLYMPUS

“O Zeus almighty! Thou who canst entwine  
A chain of lightning round the form divine  
    Of proud Olympus,  
Snatch young Athos to thy powerful arms,  
Protect him from a woman’s charms!  
Be still, thou Tempter!  
He who soars on reason’s wings  
To vast unending space of mind  
Must rise alone,  
Untrammelled by seducing arms,  
Unfettered by the tangling charms  
Of woman’s locks,  
Unloved by children, who but carry on  
The curse of woe.”

For Athos spake in plaintive tone  
Grim words which seemed to sigh and moan  
Along the quivering, shivering leaves  
That rustled ’mid the stately trees  
Across the valley and the lea  
Of classic Hellas to the sea.

“Beneath the brooding wings of love  
Hate lies concealed;  
Black shadow sharply cuts across  
    The noonday sun;  
The ebb-tide follows close upon  
    The leaping sea;  
From womb of Hope  
    Despair is born;  
Indifference dances near  
    Supreme desire;  
But pure tranquility is found  
    On that lone height

Where all of nature blends.

“I seek the goal of mind  
Where love and hate,  
Indifference, passion’s flame, and hope  
Are seen from far,  
And through the lucent air of soul  
Are merged within the One.”

He ceased, and sadly gazed around.  
Was it a voice or did he dream?  
Some siren from a distant wood,  
A Naiad from a whispering stream,  
A soft vibration in the air,  
Pathetic like a woman’s prayer,  
Had startled him.

“Adonis, loved of Aphrodite!” —  
Aye, ’twas such a cry  
As one would raise about to die.  
It flew along electric air in very frenzy of despair.  
Then prone he lay beneath the moon,  
The pitiless, white moon!

Ah! he was young, if one can be,  
Who lives and lives eternally,  
And he was fair, if men are so,  
With eyes as bright  
As orbs of night.

“Once more, fair Athens, then will I depart,  
I’ll tear from my revolting breast, my heart!”

He struggled to his feet and went  
Desirous, vacillating, spent,  
Amid the pile of Hellas’ palaces.  
Helios arose and over Athens gleamed,  
Ah! what cares he for wisdom’s lore or maid’s virginity?

Upon the evil and the good  
Impartially he sheds his beams,  
On palace roofs and rushing streams,  
Save where the wood conceals their purity.  
He listens not to human prayer,  
Nor loveth he the young and fair,  
But dandles with the locks of age voluptuously.  
On haunts of guilt he blandly smiles,  
And boldly he himself beguiles  
    In dens of infamy.

    Beneath his glaring, scorching rays,  
    More searching than a woman's gaze,  
    Walked Athos wearily,  
    Till, strolling near a palace door,  
    He turned, as if to stay were sin,  
    But halted once again, ah more!  
    He went within.

O passion—man!  
Immortal, but his soul, alas!  
Is bound by chains of sense.  
Desire intoxicates his blood  
And leaps along his nerves  
To rule his yielding heart,  
And strike his reason blind.  
In vain does his aspiring mind  
Attempt, as would a captured bird,  
To rise to those supernal heights  
Where dwell the conquering gods.

    Again, again he dreams of love,  
    Of music and sweet summer nights,  
    Of Aphrodite and her doves.

But as cold breezes from the North  
Bring doom to tender flowers,  
So down from ice-peaks of his mind

The frost of logic fell,  
And quenched the fire of his desire.  
He broke the honeyed, subtle film  
That held him like a vicious snare,  
And spake aloud harsh virile words  
That sprang from soul itself.

“To scale the heights of mind  
From passion must I flee.  
To stand upon the dizzy crest  
Mine eyes must upward gaze.  
Truth shivers on the mountain peak,  
She is my hope, 'tis she I seek.”

Adonis, shivering, bowed his golden head;  
Fair Aphrodite with her doves had fled;  
The tearful clouds all rushed in quick alarm  
To wrap the sky which lay within the arm  
Of willing earth.

The sun retired to depths of dark,  
Nor upward soared the rapturous lark;  
In discord music moaned and sighed,  
While fascination drooped and died.

The night was dark;  
The moon in fright had hid herself,  
And startled stars had fled.  
Black clouds, in sullen groups,  
Had crowded in the gloom,  
Until their sap of life, the oozing rain,  
Fell spattering to the ground.  
The winds in mad battalions shrieked,  
And giant oaks fought grimly with the blast.  
Fantastic music, struck from Orphic lyre,  
Rang past the quivering pines  
Which swayed in pantomimic dance  
To Delphic rhapsody.  
Now fiercer raged the battle 'mid the clouds  
That shocked the earth with thunderbolts

And hurled hot balls of fire,  
While cutting with sharp. knives of sleet  
The vanquished and the dead.

Great Athos sat apart;  
His flashing eyes gleamed like the double stars,  
And when the thunder ceased  
Its tragic moan, he spake:  
"Ah, how: my youth has flown!  
Now Truth and I are here alone.  
Nay, wait! Yet much I have not found;  
So vast is she that when I touch the hem  
Of her . white robe, her face is lost above,  
And when I fly on wings of thought  
To spaces 'twixt the stars,  
And gaze into her eyes,  
Her form hath vanished from my view.

"Shall I go back to earth and worms," he  
"Give up my quest and dally with the dead,  
Dig up a grave, embrace an old desire,  
Play with decay and burn with evil fire?  
No, no, forever no!  
Though heaven's bolts were hurled at me,  
Though lightnings blinded me,  
Though gods should weep  
And demons curse!  
Put me upon the rack  
And twist my tortured limbs,  
Pile faggots high  
And scorch me in their flames,  
Hang me upon a cross  
And jeer and spit at me!  
No, no, forever no!

"I stand on that lone height  
Where silent stars and I  
Hold converse sad.

The clouds are far beneath,  
Like breath of mist.  
No friend have I save the white moon;  
Love could not climb so far;  
He shivered and turned back  
Unto the plains below.  
Hate comes not here,  
Nor proud Ambition;  
There are none,  
For star-eyed Hope,  
And cold Despair have flown.  
No bird of song  
E'er soars to realms which I have won,  
In spaces silent, desolate,  
I dwell and brood alone.

“I slew Earth's joy as up I came,  
Fair children's eyes  
Grew dim beneath my glance,  
Sweet flowers were crushed,  
And beauty fled dismayed.  
Now bleeding, torn,  
With thorn-pierced hands,  
Indifferent eyes,  
Upon this crag where love comes not,  
Erect and poised,  
I stand alone.”

#### WINTER—OLYMPUS

How the dark clouds glower and threaten,  
Climbing up and gliding down the mountain peaks!  
The tyrant Death, in heartless glee,  
Holds festivals in palaces of ice on winter nights,  
And ghosts of maids, whose roses  
He has blasted with a kiss,  
Strong youth, stabbed ruthlessly in jealous rage,  
Sweet children stolen with the flowers,  
All gather there.

When 'twixt the somber curtains hung aloft  
The moon peeps out and shivers with the cold,  
Aeolus plays upon a harp of many strings,  
And one loud discord rolls through depths of space  
In waves of misery.

Ice! Ice!

Sharp, cutting swords of ice!

Long, jagged knives of ice!

That cleave straight to the marrow-bone

Like ground and burnished steel,

Or tear and hack like metal red with rust.

Ice needles, tine and sharp

And stinging like an insect's barb,

Stiletos, piercing tender veins

For drops of scarlet blood,

Cold forms of women, men and children,

Stiff and stark, all, all of ice.

And the snow, an endless main of snow!

A sea of pallid faces staring up with glazed eyes

Into the sky,

Great, shivering oaks that strive in vain to die,

Young plants enwrapped in shrouds,

And weary mountains

Crouching 'neath a weight of woe,

And the winds

'Mid snapping branches wrestling,

Moaning 'mong the skeletons of trees

As if Love's heart were breaking.

Near to the mountain top

There stands a pine

That sways and sings

To wail of winter storms.

Though buffeted by savage blasts,

And bent to earth with weight of snow,

Defiant and alone

It flings at Death

A challenge with its long, green arms,

And firmly holds its place  
Upon Olympus' noble crest.

Thou Mountain deified,  
Olympus, battle-scarred!  
Through fire thy head  
Was reared above the clouds.  
Into dim blue thou loomest,  
And misty, distant, lone,  
Thy brow is lost above!  
And Athos, thou  
Upon the icy heights of mind  
To Reason wed, think on,  
While down in dim and verdant vales  
The song of earth is sung.

# To Helen

Ah, do you still remember  
The grove in Attica,  
The grassy mound,  
The rustling leaves, and me?

Oft when your glance is upward cast  
I seem to see those other eyes,  
So like your own  
That once swept longingly  
The waste of blue  
That sank and melted  
In the Aegean sea.

A memory faint and sweet  
Brings back a waking dream,  
When one, tall, beautiful and white,  
A breathing statue by my side,  
Spoke calmly of Olympian gods  
As we to-day of heaven talk.  
O tell me, was it you?

# Adonis

I love thee, Phaon!  
How I love thee  
The ocean tells the moon.  
White the cliffs of Leucas,  
Deep the sea!  
I'd perish in thy beauty,  
But death is shy of me.

The laurel thou didst give me,  
For love hath taught me song,  
And still it sweeps the lyre's strings along  
Through my soft fingers.  
Ah, I love thee!

All my singing I do sing for thee,  
Naught for the ages care,  
Alone for thine eyes' glances,  
Thy sun-fingered hair.  
Naught for the Nine or Lesbos,  
Only for thee.  
White the cliffs of Leucas,  
Deep the sea.

# The Sleep of Brahm

Brahm slept  
Long since the universe of suns  
Had passed away as do our dreams,  
And like a statue frozen Darkness  
Sat upon the throne.  
The never-ending sky  
Had rolled upon itself  
As doth a scroll,  
While gently rose and fell  
The rhythmic pulse of God.

Far, far where thought goes not,  
Into the distance far  
Stole Echo on her naked feet  
Through night and endless space,  
Alive, alone.  
Nay, not alone,  
For near her glowing in the dark  
As fireflies gleam,  
Were living memories  
Quivering on the wing,  
Dim recollections hovering close,  
Enchanted by the passion of her voice,  
For Echo sang of love and bate,  
Of life and death.  
Even the ceaseless drip of tears  
That once had fallen on a stone,  
An army's solemn tread  
Like beat of surf upon the strand,  
The mountains' lava speech,  
The bittern's cry,  
The hiss of fiery tongues  
Where yellow snakes of flame  
Once shot across the breast  
Of new-born sons,  
The groans of Stellar Mothers

Bringing forth their young,  
The crash and clash  
From shock of star on star  
Mad in each other's arms,  
The thunder of the universe  
When skies bombarded skies  
That pregnant burst  
With lightning storms,  
All this is Echo's voice,  
While firefly memories  
Gleamed and paled.

The blood of tragedy  
Dyes red the cheek of youth.  
Alas, and they had not forgot!  
The eyes of many memories stared  
Far down the spaces  
Whence flew patient Time,  
And gazed on ancient dawns  
When iEons bom from iEons  
Painted bright those morning skies;  
And on some fated planet  
Saw the Immortal-mortal,  
Dead—alive,  
A winged man  
Whose ether plumes  
He strove to hide,  
A clod—a God.

Brahm dreamed a dream  
That once in far off days  
He quivered in the aspen's leaves  
And sucked the breast of Earth,  
Then burrowed in the ground  
A crawling thing,  
Till on a summer's mom  
He saw the light,  
And hot for blood

In jungles roved  
A red-tongued beast of prey.

At last he stood erect—  
A Man,  
And climbed upon a cross,  
And died.

And while he dreamed  
A woman's voice  
Rose pure and passionate,  
High, high above  
The echo paeon of the vanished stars,  
And wove upon the soul of Brahm  
The magic spell of human love.

# A Memory

A face like the early morning,  
    With never a semblance of care,  
And Tantalus eyes of beauty  
    Shaded by mischievous hair.

Her lips, they were begging my kisses,  
    Her arms were entrancingly white,  
I thought that I had forgotten;  
    The past is the present to-night.

O Mystery, Orphan of Friendship!  
    Far, far 'long the file of the years  
I seem to be peering through moonbeams  
    That gleam with the dew of my tears.

There's a vanishing wing of a sea bird,  
    A shimmer of silvery spray,  
And pebbles—we found them together—  
    Alas! we threw them away.

Blue eyes! Swift time goes ever  
    Toward the life that is yet to be.  
Blue eyes! Their light shines never  
    On the sheen of the summer sea.

O face like the early morning,  
    A stranger to sorrow and care,  
O Tantalus eyes of beauty  
    Shaded by mischievous hair!

# The Wireless

Young Genius gazes rapt on his ideal,  
    And worships its evasive, subtle charm,  
While doubt unveils before his eyes the real,  
    And strives his muse to humble and alarm.  
But he, enamoured of transcendent strings,  
    That quiver 'cross the singing harps on high,  
Defiant to the winds his message flings,  
    And waits the answer from the pregnant sky.  
What need has he for gross material wire,  
    When vibrant azures to his touch resound?  
Fulfilled at last is his sublime desire;  
    The secret of ethereal air is found.  
And some day I may calmly send afar,  
A wireless message to my lucky star.

# Thy Name?

Before a dank and shadowy secret place  
Within my soul or out, I care not which,  
I sat one time, and peered into its gloom  
Until from cobweb maze and mystery  
There stole a cautious unfamiliar thing,  
A puzzling aspect that I could not name.  
'Twas neither man, nor insect, beast nor bird,  
Impalpable, with shifting eyes,  
Perchance a snake, and opaline and green.  
"Thy name?" said I, "Thy name?"  
It turned upon me its peculiar orbs  
And glanced askance, then pursed its livid lips  
As if to speak.  
"Thy name?" Once more said I, "Thy name?"  
"Pray, dost thou know me not?"  
His voice, a whisper in the dusk,  
"Behind a mortal's back full liberty I crave,  
And hide-and-peek with human imps I play;  
The beast will have me not at all,  
To men and devils am I all in all.  
Suspicion! Aye, Suspicion is my name."  
And slowly back he crawled whence first he came.

# The Light on Namsan

A beacon blazes on each Korean crest,  
Each hill in flame salutes the rest,  
From Namsan fiery signals fly  
Along the waste of sea and sky.

From peak to peak, from height to height,  
Across the gloomy realms of night,  
The full, assuring news to tell  
In Corea's kingdom all is well.

# On the Genkai Sea

(From Kinza Hirai)

The singing wind hums round the straining sail  
While moonlight glitters on the rail  
And flashes from an angry sea  
That tosses up its spray at me.

A monster wave, a slimy whale,  
Spouts filmy froth into the gale,  
Or like a dragon turns and coils  
To clutch the ship within its toils.

The Genkai sea is lost in night,  
And timid souls are faint with fright.  
Above, the yawning, eager wave,  
Is open like a hungry grave.

# The Valley of Groosia

(Rendering from The Demon)

Beneath him came floating a vale,  
Fair Groosia! a picture new-spread  
With a carpet of green,  
A region of columned ruins  
Where murmuring streams ever glide  
Over beds of translucent stones,  
Rose-vines where the nightingales sing  
To women their song  
Unravished by sound of their love,  
The chinar's deep shadows crowned by thick ivy,  
The cavern where hides through the heat of the day  
The graceful gazelle,  
The light and the life, the murmur of leaves,  
The hundred-voiced throng, all alive,  
The breathing of numberless plants,  
The sensual heat o' the noon,  
The ever-full nights with aroma of dews,  
And the bright magic stars,  
Like a Groosian girl's eyes.





























































































































































