

# Hildegarde Flanner

## Selected Poems



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June Hildegarde Flanner Monhoff was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, to Frank Flanner, Indiana's first licensed embalmer and noted philanthropist, and Mary Ellen Hockett. The Flanner House, a social service center for the African American community, is still in existence today. Her older sister was Janet Flanner, Paris correspondent for the *New Yorker* from 1925 until her retirement in 1975. Hildegarde Flanner attended Sweet Briar College in Virginia before moving to California in 1919 to attend the University of California, Berkeley, where she studied poetry with Witter Bynner. Her poem "Young Girl" won the Emily Chamberlain Cook Prize in 1920; a volume, *Young Girl and Other Poems*, appeared the same year. After the Berkeley fire of 1923, due to which she and her mother lost all of their possessions, she moved to Southern California. She married architect Frederick Monhoff in 1926 (Monhoff, also a noted artist, provided woodcuts for several of Flanner's books). Flanner was one of the most recognized Southern California poets in the 30s and 40s, with poems appearing in *The Nation*, *The New Republic* and *Poetry* (Chicago). She was named the New Directions Poet of the Month in 1942. Flanner and Monhoff spent their later years on their property in Calistoga, Napa Valley, California, though maintained close ties with the Los Angeles literary community.

*Young Girl*. San Francisco: H. S. Crocker Company, Incorporated, 1920.

*This Morning*. New York: Frank Shay, 1921.

*A Tree in Bloom*. Santa Barbara: J. Daniel, 1924.

*Valley Quail*. Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Pres, 1929.

*Time's Profile*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929.

*If There Is Time*. Norfolk: Norfolk, 1942.

*In Native light*. Calistoga, 1970.

*Hearkening Eye*. Boise: Ahsahta Press, 1979.

*Poems Collected and Selected*. Santa Barbara: J. Daniel, 1988.

# Companion

When the sun is shining,  
I go within the privacy of mist  
Along a road  
Where time is clasped in laurel boughs  
And leaf-life minutes  
Drop unhindered to the ground.

When the moon slinks above me  
Like a white cat,  
And the cricket stars chirp angrily  
Far behind her,  
    I am as much alone  
As though I were God.

There may be others besides myself  
Who live upon the earth,  
But I have not found them.  
My only companion  
Is a little, wren-like pain  
That gossips of death.

# To Choose

We think that sin is but desire astray,  
A crowned or lesser Psyche who would task  
The face of darkness with too mad a ray  
And lose the beauty laid beneath the mask.  
It will forever be a mighty thing  
To draw the hand back when the rose is red.  
It was not new that Psyche, wavering,  
Should wish to look at Love upon his bed.  
But life is all a history of choice—  
How Guenevere was queen, but cared not why;  
How Mary knelt and listened to a Voice;  
How all of us are gods, yet wait to die.  
Ah, Psyche, dim your little lamp and sleep . . .  
The night has many secrets that will keep!

# Portrait of a Strange Woman

Far after her without a leaf of sound,  
Her dress falls like a hush upon the ground.

She wavers like a cherry-spray  
And strangely hesitates away,

And she is gone again . . . who goes  
Where I know not, and no one knows.

Where has she fled upon her unseen feet  
With steps invisible and indiscreet?

Where does she pause to rest, and where  
Shake out the pennant of her hair?

Where slightly lift her gown,  
And oddly dance and let it down?

Who faints before her as she sings,  
Carolling terrible, fair things?

Against whose heart does her long throat  
Sob out toward morning a remote

Dim laugh? Upon whose soul does she at last  
Coldly break her body's fast,

And then come quietly home, with her  
Face insanely lovelier?

We never follow her nor look  
To see the pathway that she took.

When she comes floating on the grass  
I turn away and let her pass . . .

I would go wholly wild were I to see  
Calypso in her eyes look down at me.

# Dumb

Silence braided her fingers in my hair  
And put her ankles dose to mine in bed.  
She hushed a silver sparrow in his song  
And laid against my throat her fragile head.

“I conquered today,” she said, “as yesterday,  
And now we two shall rest as one tonight.  
A girl with silence in her arms,  
(Lie quietly!) is a lovely sight.”

And so I rest with silence in my arms,  
Her hair across my breath when I would weep.  
I cannot even force my tongue to pray  
That she will leave me in my sleep.

# Daphne

They told her she had hair the colour  
Of a nightingale.  
They told her that her eyes were candles  
Lit beneath a veil.

They praised her feet like narrow doves  
Mated on the floor,  
Saying there were never feet  
Like her feet before.

They praised her shining voice that rang  
Like stars dropped in a glass.  
“Sing to thy little yellow shell!”  
And so the night would pass.

But when they came too near to her  
And touched her with the hand,  
She drew her hair across her eyes.  
She could not understand.

And when they said a thing to her  
That she had never heard,  
Her heart plunged into silence there  
Like a hunted bird.

She caught her violet mantle dose,  
The Tyrian upon the white;  
She quivered like a little twig;  
She stepped into the night.

They called her name within the dark,  
They searched beneath the sun,  
But there was not a broken flower  
To show where she had run.

Everything was very still,

Far too still, they said.  
So they turned and went away,  
Unaccompanied.

Nothing moved where they had sought,  
Nothing sang or wept.  
Beneath a tree that had no name,  
Silence turned and slept.

# Sky Meeting

Alone on the mountain ridge I waited, waited.  
Immensity plunged to the sky and fainted  
In its inverted ocean of gentian-burning,  
Collapsed in cobalt whirls and circled  
Into the high suspended lakes of air.  
Below my feet the wilderness let down  
From spire to spire; fell, hurled, swept, swooned  
And with the pendant waters loosened from the snow

Finished falling.

Finished? no not until the vast descent  
Jarred up and tripped upon  
The lower hills with hyacinth backs  
And over these sprawled flying, flung face  
Down. This is the desert.

Below my feet, with balm sealed, honey-locked,  
The trees are rooted in velocity.  
Slow from the breast of rock they take their life  
And inch by inch put green into the sky.  
Sloping below them pillars of blue snow  
Fall as the sun moves on.

I am waiting alone in the steeple of world.  
Where have you wandered on the spacious snow,  
Where bent to peer into infinity  
And there slipped in,  
Where stood to lean on the amber body of a pine?  
Here no bird speaks, no little prophet dares  
To prick the round air with a song.  
Here in the icy wilderness I am alone,  
Alone in the centre of the looping wind,  
Throwing his rings about me, closer coiling,  
Until I can almost see the wind that binds,  
Seeing the fir tree spin between his crystal sides,  
Until I fear I too will spin  
Wound in a spring of winding and unwinding wind

And shoot in stars of bitter snow  
    Into the quiet Mojave.  
But suddenly through the maze of storm  
You run and come to find me,  
Stumbling to rest with a cry at my feet.

And we go down to the canyon, down from the wind,  
Down from inhuman pinnacles and towers of space,  
Back to the shallow bells in the brook's heart,  
    Back to earth,  
Counting the sumless snow which is  
    Love's number.

# Serenade

Evening passed us on a balmy foot

Slowly.

After dusk the jerking moth and the tidal dark.

Earth upon her shoulder takes the night,

The stars have opened and their light comes down,

While at the roadside walks the glittering cat.

Sleep, beloved.

Life's meaning runs away like falling water.

There goes the answer and is lost at sea.

Tell me, beloved.

Though day was broken, now the night is ours,

In sleep,

Healed breast to breast of distance and desire—

O undivided and anointing night

Whose universal couch is spread for two.

# White Magnolia Blossom

The rolling, staggering bee, the honey-fronted,  
Shoves his gypsy face into the pollen,  
Thrusts and wallows with delight unblunted  
While over him the yellow snow has fallen  
And under him the stamens deeply **st)aken**\*\*\*  
Tremble. Tumult, O bee—in her cool tower  
Sleeps perfection that no fire can waken,  
Slumbers, alaska-white, who said a .flower,  
Who said a more than flower, who can discern  
What lantern-like and secret single  
Word is bright enough for her but will not burn,  
What sound is pure enough to hold and mingle  
With this unseizable, impending doom-  
To fall unfathomably into beauty's bloom?

# The Owl

The sweet and ghostly laughter of the owl  
Last night shook upward from the light bamboo.  
The garden rose and trembled at the sound,  
Suspended in enchantment and in dew.  
What strange reversal of the blood and soul,  
What dizzy floating upward from the earth,  
When suddenly the darkness broke in two  
Upon the honeyed edge of this soft mirth,  
And in its wake a glint of mockery  
Unbearable to hearts worn out with prayer.  
For man, asleep, still labours over fears  
The dreamless owl abandons to the air.

# Uncreatured

I wish I were ghost-walking in the snow-feathered rain,  
Stepping like a phantom in the mountain height.  
The snow would follow me and fill up my footprints,  
Leaving them not human, and full of soft light.

The yucca of spun ice, the frost like silver pollen,  
And the snow's white blossom falling on the stone  
Snare me with strangeness, drift me with silence,  
And anything I ever did, lies undone.

It is good to be a wraith once, good to be uncreatured,  
Walking in a world that is pale as hellebore.  
But if the sun were suddenly to smite me on the forehead  
I would go down to earth again, real once more.

# Hills

I know hills whose trees confess  
A passion for the wilderness,  
Whose pagan utterance of early spring  
Swells down the canyon paths to bring  
A palinode of winter's heresy,  
Whose silent attitude of revelry  
Invites from day to day all those who pass  
To heathen baptism in waves of grass.

# Young Eucalyptus

Here in this vertical, wan place

Of girl-like trees

There are three sounds.

One, of water shaken softly

Underground.

One, of mystery discreetly moving

Through the grass.

And one

A creature with a hidden throat

No man may ever bear.

# The Rain is Brave

The rain does not fumble.  
    She comes down straight,  
With lustre-precision  
    Concluding fate.  
One leap from the sky,  
    One lunge at the ground,  
One instant only  
    Of fractured sound—  
Identity's ended.  
    It was for this  
The deep, suicidal  
    Dive of bliss,  
The single signature  
    On the grass,  
That says it is I  
    And means alas.

# Words for Unheard Music

Some say that there are flowers  
Along the paths of hell.  
Trillia lamenting  
And bent asphodel.

Shimmering, long lilies,  
White, abandoned things,  
With only white companions  
To their sorrowings.

There is that about them  
When they gleam and sway,  
Maketh even Proserpine  
Turn her head away,

Maketh even death himself  
Go a pace apart,  
Troubled by a frail song  
Lifting in his heart.

And the lilies tremble,  
And the asphodel,  
Like nocturnal moths  
Along the paths of hell.

## Noon on Alameda Street

Sun, when it shines on traffic, has a look  
Of loaded radiance that might explode,  
Yet keeps its kindle like a meaning known  
Only to motors in the city road,

Only to fury lifted of all horns  
Mourning to themselves a thing to come,  
For we have heard delirium in a claxon,  
Seen revelation lit on chromium.

On Alameda Street the earth is turning  
Secret among old sluices and their kind:  
The voice of men among machines at noon  
Comes like a sigh from history to the mind,

For in this noon there is no light like light,  
(Oh, tell us, dark on asphalt, of the sun)  
But brightness spawning upon dirty glass,  
But fever smoking at meridian,

But men and women riding in their graves  
With hands upon a wheel they cannot keep  
Clear in the rapt confusion of the crowd,  
Crowd and the fate of motion and of sleep.

# Slow Boone

Call it our land, our valleys, but not ours  
Got by our fathers' guns and Paiutes slain,  
Until a slower haste of continent  
Wins twice to west across the brimming plain.

O quick compatriots, now is the need  
To reap a secret in the acre sealed  
Untouched by prairie rage or primitive.  
Say truth is deeper than the battlefield.

Say all sure things that frenzy overtakes  
Win to the greenest goal by their own powers.  
Say patience like the burning of a rock  
Turns passion, then will the land be ours.

Then will the native heart be declared for use,  
The horny miles run inward to the mind  
And the blood's visionary length at last  
Be in the poet's actual vein refined.

His then a continent to sensitize,  
His the blue land not plowed by pioneers,  
His the last new coming the plains will know,  
A slow Boone quietly fingering frontiers.

# Of Old Sat Freedom on the Heights?

Not she. Not Freedom.

Never sublime and near the roaring stars.

Never caught pleated in museum stone.

She has the hero's eyes, the queenly spine,

Yet never poised her profile on a throne.

She proved herself of old, and still she does,

Sharp in the dirty bargains of despair:

And takes no chariots to great events

But goes on foot, and is not welcome there.

Calm when the cradle of our hope cries loud,

It is crescendo calm, that's history,

Till healing sweeps her sound on every sense,

A whisper, but the kind that drowns the sea.

Yet never conceive her as the warm consoler,

Baring her sterling bosoms for the crowd:

It takes a thinking man to reach her lap,

While all the feeble millions thirst aloud.

# Let Us Believe

Let us believe in the flesh, the hope made flesh,  
For the soul is an exile without rest,  
And the brain is a pack of apes in flight,  
And the heart of the world is breaking in every breast.  
Let us honor the flesh with faith extreme.  
See, on this vicious day, how the brave blood,  
How the frail racial bone, the mysterious marrow  
Would fill with life the rotten sons of God.  
Though death has overrun our desperate walls  
And panic has us in a corner, cold,  
Do hope, do cling: by the great atom, by the cell,  
By the black centuries already old,  
By the bright skull hid in the living face,  
By the five-pointed magic of the hand,  
Flesh, that pale prophet that survives all fates,  
Will, if it matters, make a more human race.

## 12 O'Clock Freight

Away, four miles, I heard the Santa Fe  
Go down the track, and I could see the sight,  
A freighter pulling out with cryptic cars,  
So sealed and sullen in the flowered night.

At home and in my mind I saw her draw  
Her secrets where black fences line the rail,  
And choking orange groves abandoned to  
No rain and flaky pestilence of scale.

And then by palmy drives and boulevards  
Where stucco gleams beside the carob-tree,  
And Spanish patios in vain enclose  
Lone hearts from Iowa and Kankakee.

And past Anita's wealthy meadows where  
Her smouldering pea-cocks doze among her hounds  
With sapphire laces folded in the dark  
That daily trail and twitch about the grounds.

On by the oaks whose forest stoops upon  
The listing hilis where once the drift of deer  
Drew down with winter's waters green,  
A herd of dreams in glassy atmosphere.

Here comes, she comes, here comes the glooming train  
Flying her bloody smoke. People in bed  
Rouse halfway, and made lonely at the sound  
Touch hands and touch their hands to a dear head.

And tell me, night, the names of all the men  
Who ride the freight train, stretched upon the cars,  
Heavy and motherless and rockasleep,  
Their hungry faces pointed at the stars.

What destiny, dark suburb, what asylum

Of rot will they slip off into at last,  
When on the final freighter, oh caboose,  
The ruby jerk and leer of light go past?

Into the valley, long San Gabriel,  
The train crawls bleak and moaning down the track,  
And from the rail the starlight spurts again  
With sudden gush of brightness after black.

# Sunday Afternoon in the Suburbs

As if the sun were shining on the bias  
The light of this day falls and will not fill.  
There is a central emptiness, a cerebral hollow  
Not brimmed by doses biblical.

Increase of virtue in a vacuum:  
Flutter of moth brushed out of the best coat:  
And down the Sabbath slant of time  
Particles of Saturday's dust float.

Cold gravy put away in a blue bowl  
Of willow pattern: a dynasty in grease:  
Double damask shaken free of pie crumbs,  
Three feet of snow and a dean crease.

Pink tots delivered of beatitudes  
Teeter in new leather on the front curb:  
Elders on plush de luxe digesting dinner  
Chew absently the cud of Israel's herb.

# Hawk is a Woman

I saw a hawk devour a screaming bird,  
Devour the little ounce sugared with song.  
First bent and ate the pretty eyes both out,  
One eye and twice, stooping to taste the pang.  
Then her dripping tongue she cleaned, then  
Into the winsome breast she plied her beak,  
Took at a gulp the rosy heart, a pinch  
Of too great innocence, drank the whole lark  
Down, the inmost blood down, licked the lark down  
With vicious dainty pick, oh the damned thief!  
To break! into the beating bird! and tear  
The veins out, out the joy, flesh out of life.  
May hawk be hawked upon, I say,  
May she be spied and nailed upon the ground  
And feel herself divided and devoured  
To ease the gullet of some casual fiend.  
She, she! before her agony lapse quite,  
Before her breast is eaten to her back,  
May she, the very she, may that hawk hear  
The ugly female laughter of a hawk.

## Never Ask Why

Doe will die red, she will be killed some night,  
Doe will scream out, weep red, and the ferns bleed  
Deer's blood and the pink bubbles float  
Light on the lovely waters of the pool.  
Bearing no hot horn for defense, the doe must bleed  
(Being gentle meat, being the mountain's fool)  
Her life away, and on her tragic flesh  
Her enemy eat brutal until dawn.  
Thus the wailing doe. Thus the riding lion,  
Fiend on the soft loin of the wailing doe.  
Never ask why, between dark hunger  
And the last bloody sob of terror poured  
On dust, never ask why this thing is so.  
Always the fetid fury of the lion,  
Always the lost, on-lilies-feeding doe.

# Rattlesnake

How soft the serpent lies there in her rings  
And dozes poisonous, without alarm.  
She cuddles in the sand and loves herself  
And, dreaming, sucks her venom without harm.  
I hate her so. Good God, I hate her so.  
Look, how she soothes and pours herself around  
And nudges with her swollen cheek at rocks  
That cannot leap in loathing or in sound.  
She is all flesh and finished in one flesh  
And needs no other things to practise lust.  
Base unity, her sluicing creep is ever  
A cold persistent nuptial with the dust.  
I hate her. Round and round I hate her who  
Opens her mouth into a vipersmile  
And flies her scaly omens at her end,  
Giving to death his dying and his style.

# Fern Song

Had I the use of thought equivalent  
To moist hallucination of a flute  
I could be saying how  
A certain music in my woods has driven  
A certain female fern to tear  
In panic from her good black root  
But no transparency of clear intent  
Assisting me.  
I only guessed at what the singer meant  
That hour I heard his intervals prolong  
Beyond security of common song  
Into a raving sweetness coming closer  
While the lyric animal himself  
Was still remote.  
Since thrush may have a mile of music  
In one inch of throat.

# Deer Season

The old hunter called from his rusted car  
To ask if this year! had seen the great buck.  
And I said No.  
Ten minutes earlier I had seen him.  
Brown and clear.  
Suddenly lift his head and go  
Down from the orchard to Andre's wood  
With his branching crown that made him look  
Such a first-born.  
And the son of a tree.  
By now he was a thicket and a hill away.  
A wrath of hooves and flying joints.  
Bounding on arcs of muscular scorn.  
Crying Ha! to the sons of men  
As the old hunter drove away  
His gun was dozing over his knee  
And he lifted his scarlet cap  
From the white globe of his head  
And bowed. It was not meant for me  
But I bowed also. and there were two of us,  
Bowling and bowling.  
We bowed to venison. we bowed to majesty.  
We bowed to bullet and to target's luck.  
We bowed to silence, we bowed to terror.  
We bowed to the great buck.

# Just Between You and Me

Alice, the widow of my Flanner cousin  
In North Carolina mourns that when her son is gone  
The Flanner name will be extinct.  
Oh, for a fertile Mr. Flanner!  
Well, I've known a passel of Planners,  
Some all right, others quite loony, some dull.  
Why must there always be a male to stir the breed?  
As for the name itself, I never admired it.  
But what about that woman-Flanner, Janet,  
Admirable writer, who for half a century  
With style and elegance of mind sent news  
Of civilization from Paris to New York,  
And whose authority of speech and wit  
Made dinner tables cringe with delight as if  
A comet had drawn up a chair to sit and sup  
A flash or two.  
And what about the other one, Marie,  
Erudite in music and intuitive,  
Who, with her Steinway, was the first to play  
For taken-aback soirees of the middle west  
The mysterious challenge of Debussy  
And even the metaphysics of Scriabine?  
Is there no seed in such girls? Language! Music!  
They are the sons and daughters of the daughters,  
Their generations are their own, they are always  
Ready to be born. Spring from the bed, they do,  
And even as infants, working hard, they do,  
Glisten, they do, to be alive.  
Rejoice, old Alice, language and music.  
Put them in your obituary and light up.









































































































































