

Olive Percival

Selected Poems



Olive May Graves Percival

July 1, 1868 [Sheffield, Illinois] –

February 18, 1945 [Los Angeles, California]

Percival is best known to historians of Los Angeles as a great collector of Asian artifacts. Her poems, collected in *Leaf-Shadows* and *Rose-Drift*, *Being Little Songs from a Los Angeles Garden*, suggest this Asian influence (the book predates Pound's *Cathay* by about 4 years). Her first job was as a saleswoman at The People's Store; with her modest salary she built a beautiful home and garden in Arroyo Seco, initially without heat or running water. A posthumous volume of hers, *Children's Garden Book*, contains many interesting, largely experimental designs for gardens.

Leaf-Shadows and Rose-Drift. Cambridge: Printed at the Riverside press, 1911.
Yellowing Ivy. Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press, 1946.

The Charm Giver

As I was hurrying up Life's hill,
Once on a May-morn fair,
With all my dreams and in search of Joy,
I met with Goody Care.

She waylaid me with horror-tales
And took my toys from me;
But then at parting she gave a charm,
Called Perfect Sympathy!

Trees After Dark

Close against the old, old mystery
Of the blue night-sky,
Stand black and tall the eucalyptus trees;
They sway like marching spearmen in the breeze;
And aloof, like idlers, live-oaks stand,
Watching them go by!

The New Moon

Above the gum-tree's silhouette,
In sky of pale, pale gold,
Night lifts an Indian silver ring,
Her broken bracelet old!

Lost

For a little mountain-brook, snow-cool,
Through these desert-years I grope;
But all is mirage, mirage, mirage
And deliria of hope!

My Hill

Between the brown and oak-plumed hills
Is the hill of my dreams, desires;
All day a realm of blue, blue mist
And at sunset all opal fires.
Ah! the feet of the heedless its paths have found;
But for me it is ever forbidden ground!

A Country Rose-Hedge

White dust of a rainless summer

And chill of the fog at night

Are hard to endure,

O Roses!

But winter 's a gleesome mummer

And all of these months of blight

His masked smile shall cure,

Poor Roses!

Forst Fires

A summer of white dust-smother! Meads
All silence; the foothills bleaching weeds!
Garden and bee are dead and pools are dry!
Pray! Pray! For devil-fires enflame the sky!

Amaryllis

O the world it withers in the desert-wind;
(And three moons away is the rain!)
The wild-gourd vine swaggers through the roadside-dust.
Too content with its white domain.
In my brown, drear garden, is a sudden pink:
(Not a rose on vine nor on tree!)
'Tis a row of lilies and without one leaf!
O adorable bravery!

A Chopin Nocturne

A dark, cool night and over-sweet
With tuberose breath;
A jeweled javelin in the heart:
Ecstatic death!

Clowns

O the goggled hop-toads are fat, old clowns!
All day, in a fern-bed so cool, do they loll and wait
And rehearse their joke; but at dusk, attired
In spotted, green silk, how alert and importunate!

The Lily-Pool

I have heard of a lake, where great ships sail;
On whose shores twenty cities take their pleasure!
I am hid in a garden, to reflect
One white lily, a lonely woman's treasure!

Moonrise

The splendor of the southern summer-moon, new risen,
Appalls like seraphim, between the trees and hill!
Unworded, old, ancestral joys and fears awaken!
In adoration, all the little birds are still!

The First Rain

O the ground is rose-pink with the wet coral-beads
Lost by our old pepper-tree,
When she joined in the dance of the wind and the rain!
Pardonable gayety!

Winter Twilight

The Marechal Niel roses hang heavy with rain;
Visitor-robins are singing;
And from the dispirited passion-vine old
Yellow-jade lanterns are swinging!

The Remembrancer

Under my window, a green carpet is spread;
No sacred prayer-rug and yet
Precious it is: for on that day in Mid-March
You planted this mignonette!

Prejudice

December asserts my calendar;
My garden declares it's spring;
I'd rather believe the hyacinths
Than any mere printed thing

Reading in the Garden

Along the hard, windswept paths of the garden,
December's brown leaf-birds fly, noisily fly;
Four Persian kittens like dervishes chase them,
Or pause to pretend—who knows what? Who knows why?

A Christmas Dawn

The bright marvel of the morning star has paled;
All the world is swathed in gloom, in dreams;
But one steadfast little Star-of-Bethlehem
In the songless, rain-wet garden gleams!

Duality

Whenever I step from stone to stone,
By the ancient toy-trees from Hokusai's Japan;
Whenever I climb the wishing-bridge,
I remember I live on a paper-fan!
But I've searched by the pool and by the bamboo,
All in vain, for my fan! Now what would you do?

The Scheme Entire

If I had a rose plate and a Ming yellow jar;
A room full of books, a Korin lacquer-box;
If I had a good cook, a new motor-car,
A place out of town, a blue sea with some rocks;
If just trifles like these were mine for a minute,

I would love this old world and want to stay in it!

