

Ann Stanford

Selected Poems



Ann Stanford

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Stanford graduated from Stanford University in 1938 Phi Beta Kappa, and University of California, Los Angeles, with an M.A. in journalism in 1958, an M.A. in English in 1961, and a Ph.D. in English and American literature in 1962. While at Stanford, she was part of the circle of Yvor Winters who included her in *Twelve Poets of the Pacific* (New Directions, 1937). She married Roland Arthur White, an architect, in 1942, and they had three daughters and one son. Her earlier books, which still reflected the formalist tendencies of Winters, were published by Alan Swallow, long a supporter of Southern California poetry; later volumes appeared with Viking Press. Herder and Herder published *The Bhagavad Gita: A New Verse Translation* in 1970. She edited *The Women Poets in English* (1972), a groundbreaking collection covering centuries. From 1962 to 1987, she taught at California State University, Northridge; among her students were the poets David Trinidad, and Maxine Scates who co-edited *Holding Our Own: The Selected Poems of Ann Stanford*, published by Copper Canyon Press in 2001.

Twelve Poets of the Pacific (Ed. by Yvor Winters). New York: New Directions, 1937.

In Narrow Bound. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1943.

The White Bird. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1949.

The Weathercock. New York: The Viking Press, 1966.

The Descent. New York: The Viking Press, 1970.

Climbing Up to Light. The Magpie Press, 1973.

In Mediterranean Air. New York: The Viking Press, 1977.

Dreaming the Garden. Los Angeles: Cahuenga Press, 2000.

Holding Our Own: The Selected Poems of Ann Stanford. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2001.

The Weathercock

Wind shakes me
I am weak and spent
With every argument.
I doubt and hang
A breath disturbs me.
Sinewless and vain
The harsh and soft are one to me
Zephyr or gale, I turn my face to it.

North wind and south have whispered
And I go with each.
The dulcet evidence of bloom and spring
Or the cold reason of on-circling storm
Both have convinced me, and I yearn with them
Yearn as the smoke drift or the lifted leaves.

Yet I proportion my stance to the breeze.
Wind shall not take me
Though he shriek and bite
Frighten all other birds to leeward shade
Blow down the pigeons from the cooing lofts
Sail the hawk back downwind and send
Laborious eagles panting to their rocks.

I have set my claw
Deep in the roof's pinnacle,
There to hold
While solid objects knock about Each
broadside thing -
Stiff in this hub to turn and, keen,
Broach to the wind a practiced waywarding.

Though the barn totters
And hay flies
And the wood is pierced by pebbles;
Till the ties of the timbers skew

With the beams ajar
And the shingles scatter
And the great roof falls

I crow though none may hear.
In the vast spinning world, I still point true.
I fly here.

Union Station

There was a feather in her hat.
Smiling and waving as the great wheels turned,
Calling Good-by, Grandmother, we caught last sight of her.
But in the gray cavern of the terminal
She is a part of every parting.
These things accumulate-
The cheerful cries
For untold years of summer-passing aunts;
College vacations; father walking slow.

They travel trains unseen and mythical
Each followed by his ghostly fellow-riders.
Sudden as tears they come around the ramp
Running the gauntlet of the waiting room.
For this they bought
Their long tickets, locked their doors on dust,
Jogged out of every-morning to this moment
This precise place, this point of meeting
Solemn and arched as a cathedral,
Here where we waited, planning the ambushade.

The plane makes travel nothing, and the steamer
Beckons a party or a sun-pithed palace.
But here it is we learn the weight of travel.
It is time spent observing distances
Seen through blurred glass, felt in the jolting road,
Conforming to earth's curving hills and passes,
Waiting, strange faces, crowds, and memories hanging
Like posters on the walls beneath the windows.

Above the Earth

The mystical experience is love
Without an earthly object-one's slant of light
Or vivid emptiness; so I in this
Transported past proportion find my being.

And saints that capture heaven's flow
Rise on that stream beyond their narrow cells
Swung above earth, a silent choir
Being themselves a shrived and tenantless world

A god's breath. Who can hold
Such high hosanna through the sounding days?
But fall again to voice and restlessness
When the earth's shadow interrupts their flight,

And from such levitation dropping home
Cry out the luster of that glimpsed garden.

Pandora

Never, never again the house new or youth precise
Or the fresh loaves of hay in the field.
And the tree bark shimmers black and white
Only after rain.

The day rose clear-faced and quick
Breathing lemon and sage, undoubtedly crystal,
Fog was for coolness, not to get lost in, and the wicked
Rode to ominous music.

The box had been left, but I never suddenly opened the lid.
The day hung so full, time being happy and short,
No reason to fret over a dusty chest in a corner,
And I had given my word.

But nothing is changeless. While it was there in the house
Something crept out, buzzing and small.
I heard it at night, an insect whine in the air
Unseen in the light.

And the mornings were sad sometimes
And rising slow, and the day crumpled and worn
Like a picture handled too much,
And I indifferent.

Came haze outlasting the dawn
Between me and the fields, the horizon too close;
And bright days were full of objects
Not noticed before.

Love broke to a trinity, there were too many paths;
None seemed to be true, and in the oat fields the horsemen
Wore various guises, and which could I trust
On their spotted geldings?

I have heard of such things, but not for myself,

And the silver sifts from the box
On my hair and my tears, and the owner is gone, and I
shall never be rid of it.

The Protéstant

I never hold a thought
But what the opposite
Comes straightway into mind

Or cannot look at day
Except I see the night
Descending or ascend.

The place is, where we're bent
And ringing noon is high
Judged by an earthward slant.

Whatever I know I know
Only as April trees
Sucking the sap to green

Or as the simple seas
Answer a winter sound
Unstable, unseen—

No sooner say I know
Than all my fibers turn
To prove it is not so.

To think God firm in heaven
Is to intenser learn
How shaken is that bough,

His good evades us still;
The solemn evidence
Proves death, dark, and evil.

As a lover or thrush
Embarrasses the hand—
Twice savory in the bush—

I pray and lie; I see
Spirit desired, denied
That when I come, I flee.

The Skyrocket

How sheer the arc I took, vagrant in speed,
Self-circling star, and breathed upon my flight,
Higher and slow and then again to height
Past summer bonfires, over the house the trees

Gathering suspense in the attempt to thrust
Beyond all earth! Then, sudden gasp and stop.
Elate, I puffed in fire and golden drops
Till the one brightness spread to nebulous.

And I, a single fleck, fall into dark
While strewn about, my sister selves, a shower
Of small and dimming lights, sift lower and lower
And pale and flake and disappear in calm.

The Sleeping Princess

I don't remember when I fell asleep,
Half up the stair, or dropped from a summer hill,
Or yawning into bedtime. But the dream
So counterfeited me, I could not tell

I was asleep. For in that sleep the sun
Shone on my eyes, I rose and breathed the day,
Widened the doors, ran to the summer lawn,
And spent the seasons prodigal as snow.

Still I was careful. There the sleeper lay.
I took such journeys as were possible.
My diary was complete, and it could show
Much was accomplished, and the days turned full.

And yet it was not real. I find the book
Dusty, unwritten in. For someone called
And touched my cheek. The spendthrift years were done.
Was it a kiss? I woke. And I was old.

Hidden Things

1

Upon the wall, drawn by a child's hand,
The horses twitch their tails or clash their hooves
In formal duel in an unreal land.
And they are sealed in stillness, though all moves

About them. No one sees them paw the air
For they are painted over, and no stain
Shows where they fly. Yet certainly they are there.
They are secret as the packet sealed with chain

To the courier's wrist, and even more, for none
Shall read what codes this flying herd might bring.
And so they stretch in their impenetrable zone.

2

Beneath engulfments of ocean, ground, and green

Between the lid of the box and the enclosed
Or the layers of paint or leaf, under sheared surfaces,
The hidden things broaden and are disposed
As rounded bodies in immeasurable space.

As gold beaten to foil may yet endure
Another stroke, and thin and thin again
So does each changing layer yield but more
The wheels and chambers of the finest plane.

No violence attains these inward stores.
Nor the slow fall of stealth, or shifts of day
Complete their rendezvous, although we shower
Echo with roar and labor. Suddenly

We are within the sound that we have made,

Within the box, and mystery surrounds
With vacancies of sun, enclosing shade
Of articulate blue. It is no simple ground

On which we walk, but treasuries of roots
And stones and hollow chambers, and the slow
Descent of parting things. How lonely broods
The orchard, raising the green whispering show

Of summer through the roofs of cottages,
Through lawns and asphalt, in incorrigible tiers,
Remembered seasons, and beyond, in that place,
The waving grass of time's old furniture.

3

What lies beneath the terrace of flesh, the pale
Secluding forehead, in that weir of past
Illusions or hoped events? I cannot tell:
As one walks in darkness past a house

Suffused with radiance, and the curtains pulled
And curious, waits, discovers there a sum
Of uncovered light and finds within revealed
A shadow passing from the empty room.

But could I go within where dark and gold
Lean close together, hear the voices' tremor,
Still I would be outside each separate world
Illumined by its own conservator.

Alas, poor Psyche, did you think the fire,
The quick uncovering of the lamp would prove
By adding sight, the death of your desire?
You only changed unknown, for loss of, love.

4

Last night, happy and clear, I saw the dead.

We walked together over a wide lawn,
The living not more real than those dear shades,
And leaving to wake, I said farewell again.

Day world of birdsong, when I woke in light
And resonant morning, could any thought distress
This clear existence, paced by breath and bright
Air in which I move. For surfaces

Are hard, and depth the clean repeating of
The seen. The scene cut through and every leaf the same,
A chord of agate, into which we move,
The immortal hardening of a mortal plane.

Yet in this plain, by every light we sense
We lose as much, slipped back into that bend
Of suffering's waste, unreclected sunsLose,
and behold only the figured mind,

The dreamed, annihilable soul, psyche
Beyond the surface of the face, and there
Secretly rest. Where absolute abides
Abide all secret things, in an unbroken care.

By the Woods, Reading

Something is creeping out between the words
The page dawdles its tune
While something slips up behind the wellpoint of the eye

Out there. And the highway roars past the pine trees
The firs that should never have grown there
In the first place. The trucks pass like waves
The old house shakes on their wheels.

But there is something drifting out of the sun
Not the weed puffs that glisten
Or the gnats, wing-caught by the sun.

It has been falling for weeks now.
The slow ash piles round my ankles
Rising from nothing but green—
Or I am sinking in a pond of dandelions.

It is winding between the trees
Tying them together. I am surrounded.
I walk into the dark eye.

The Beating

The first blow caught me sideways, my jaw
Shifted. The second beat my skull against my
Brain. I raised my arm against the third.
Downward my wrist fell crooked. But the sliding

Flood of sense across the ribs caught in
My lungs. I fell for a long time,
One knee bending. The fourth blow balanced me.
I doubled at the kick against my belly.

The fifth was light. I hardly felt the
Sting. And down, breaking against my side, my
Thighs, my head. My eyes burst closed, my
Mouth the thick blood curds moved through. There

Were no more lights. I was flying. The
Wind, the place I lay, the silence.
My call came to a groan. Hands touched
My wrist. Disappeared. Something fell over me.

Now this white room .tortures my eye.
The bed too soft to hold my breath,
Slung in plaster, caged in wood.
Shapes surround me.

No blow! No blow!
They only ask the thing I turn
Inside the black ball of my mind,
The one white thought.

The Speed of Planes

They have been falling from the sky
Ever since they went there
And the two wings, upper and lower,
Were stretched, catching the wind
Straining upward, a kite
To the sun. The wings have changed us.

Noisy and hurrying we forget
To listen, we forget the wind
That once said winter is coming,
We forget the walking on the earth,
We forget the midnight message
And the slow drifting of small things.

Till in the offering of fire
We have poured our children.
We heard them laughing together
While the planes hurled overhead.
We heard all turn to silence
In the building of the flame.

The Organization of Space

1

Vacancy goes with me as does a sea,
Perfect, round, in all directions sending
All the not-where, where that one not bending,

Or the wide disk of grain, shadeless of trees,
Empty, and the arch empty, of seeing,
Above, below, unconscious of that being,

And the great desert parched of all—
No rock, no shadow-without green or air—
Only salt and dry, that center being not there.

2

Add to the dull disk of sea, colors of coral,
A speck of land within brief shafts of water
Then we have distance and before and after.

Set in the midst of grain a single tree
And like a magnet pulling into place,
It draws a path across the unlined space.

And in the desert the uprising stone
Cuts into space and makes the skies convene.
Landmarks arise, and in the shade a green.

3

I praise a local vista, clipped or rough.
It makes its variants with sun and frost—
Hill, row, and field-till vacantness is lost.

And from such centering, the wires that join
The farm and town, the seen and unseen line
Can mark out waves' and gravity's design.

Arched like a row of tents with canvas seams,
The sky is propped by pole and: spire to show
They hold the circles fixed through which I go.

4

And yet a vacancy, an almost none,
An arching of the mind into a sky
Under which empty fields and barrens lie,

A round of almost gone, a black and sere,
Returns across the vivid local tiers
And turns them to a round, unshaded sea.

Spirit or being, corn-god or harvester,
That sets us deep within the year's concern,
Hold the circumference in which we turn.

In the Lenten Season

Risen, the masquerade of flesh
Compounds this floating spring, the plane
Of trees, bloom, terrace, where we pass
The garrulous afternoon. The noun

Is what is feared:· to name the sly
Commotion of the blood which runs
Unplanned as leaves to their own ways.
The day ends in a double vision

Of the self immaculate, and its brood
Of interior dwellers-kernel and shell:
The token ritual, grown hard,
And the sweet corruptible.

Night of Souls

I saw each soul as light, each single body
With his life's breath kindled and set like flame
Before his nostrils. All creatures visible—
Small beings moving in the midnight grasses,

Light in the thoroughfares underfoot
The mole's house hung with the mole's breath
As with candles., and the busy air
Clouded with light.

It is no longer midnight, for the sea
Rustles translucent waters, windows letting out
The glow of all its denizens, colored as through
Cathedral glass, the night sky dark
Save where a lost gull drops like a meteor
Into the phosphorous waves.

The linnets chirp as in daylight. The owl dazzles himself.
Silent and still, wondering by the glare of his mother
The new colt shines.
Light betrays the young deer in the thicket

On this night of the lighting of spirits
All quiet, all visible
Till the lantern of man comes up over the hill,
Shades out those other beams like a bare sun rising.

Glimmerglass

This lake is the center of the story.
All that happens the lake makes possible.
This lake has deeps for graves and shoals for building.

On a shoal in the lake there is a fortress
A house that resembles a ship, round which the tides
Drift in predictable fashion, like a cradle rocking.

All is at hand, lake trout rise to the hook
Deer come down to drink, easy for taking,
Ducks and geese by the bagful. Berries grow on the shore.

What a monotony of noble days and nights!
The cliffs softened by trees, the water birds calling
The lake glimmering as sun and stars take turns above it.

Outside the ring-the house, the lake, the shore
The unbroken forest. There the enemy waits
Circling and stalking the house in the center.

Round within round to the very eye
That watches from the knothole, the heart that hides
In the house in the lake in the circle of the forest.

Libraries

Always being burned by vandals
of whatever name
next to the temple
papyri
browned, curled, the paint flaked off
the secrets of the gods
a black smoke only.

Or breaking through the ill-kept door—
the scriptorium littered with fallen flowers
the acanthus scattered among vowels
the blossoms not of this world, the enameled petals
gilt stems falling underfoot, saints
and the pointed hills crowding the margins,
the prayers divided, the visions gobbled in blood
the girt-robed guards dead or leaving.

And the pyres at the street corner
added to page by page
smoldering among the righteous.

The secrets coded, the hillside with its kings
stares down at us, the undecipherable,
the tablet that means victory. Whose? When?
The clay messages wash down to pebble
the scroll torn, packing for urns
 fair face *engrained*
is all it tells us.

Water, fire, enemy bombardment
the careless sky, the slow damp of nightfall
the gathering and division
Khufu, Thebes, Alexandria
Rome, Monte Cassino.

Leather reeks an invitation.

I sit by the wall
of a deep well
while the slow fire of hours
darkens the pages.

The Graeae

We were always old, always turning away
from ripeness, without ever knowing springtime,
our hair hung in wrinkled strands
and no one ever looked at us.

We were born on a coast covered with grey clouds
all day. We have been here forever.
Grey sedge, grey rocks stretched up from dirty sand
a beach littered with weed and cast up timbers.

Nothing ever prospered here, the bushes covered with spines
a few water birds lost and quickly leaving
or adding a flat carcass to the draggled strand.
We had few hopes and nothing came of any.

Bit by bit we lost what little we had—
our teeth, our eyes, the rhythm of walking.
From the beginning the flat shore closed us in.
Three cold grey stones we sit here doing nothing.

Perseus

Because my mother mated with a god
I am by birthright a hero.
This brings responsibility. I have had to excel at games—
running, wrestling, throwing the spear and the discus,
and to undertake long journeys at a moment's notice.

My mother, being alone, brought me up as best she could
and I have always deferred to her wishes.
I have had to keep her unwanted lover at bay
and, as he was king, conciliate him too.
That is how I encountered my first adventure.

Bring back the head of Medusa, he told me
as if it were easy. Being young, I agreed.
I didn't even know where to find her, but I had help
from my brothers and sisters, the eternal gods.

They equipped me with wings, a shield, a sickle, and a cap of darkness
and pointed west. I flew up, high over the island
and saw how small it was. I flew on over the sea
until toward sunset I found the three old women.

They sat there, hardly moving, toothless and blind—
at least only one tooth and one eye among them,
which they passed round. I felt sorry for them
but I took the eye and the tooth anyway
and they pointed out Medusa.

She was asleep. Maybe she had once been beautiful
but no longer. Her face froze everyone to stone
but with my mirror-shield, cap, and sickle I could deal with her.
When I cut off her head, blood spurted in a fountain.
I had to wash myself in the sea. I had never killed anyone.

I put her head in the bag as I had been told to do
and started home. But I liked flying

and I turned south over Africa.

The desert looked endless-a few palm trees here and there
and towns where there were lakes or rivers.

The worst of it was the bag. Blood kept dripping out of it
and the serpent hair kept writhing.
Several times I almost threw it away.

As I neared Jaffa I saw a girl chained to a rock
the sea dashing over it. Her dark skin gleamed with water.
She wore jewels around her neck and nothing else.
Had she not been beautiful I might have gone on.
It was none of my business what she was doing there.

But then, sliding over the sea a monster appeared
her head twisting around, her body dipping
in and out of the waves. Steam came from her jaws
and scales dangled over her face like seaweed.
Clearly I was destined to do battle.

She was harder to kill than Medusa.
I had to keep flying around her,
invisible, yet in reach of the heavy tail
the spinning jaws. The sea grew bloodier
until at last she sank like a punctured kettle.

I married the maiden, freezing all objections
with the look on Medusa's face
and came home, spellbound the wicked lover,
made the fisherman king. He married my mother
and I became king in Argos.

Now I live idly here, Andromeda beside me
still beautiful, though slow in conversation,
asking myself, was I really a hero?
Or was it the weapons? Could anyone have done it?

After all, what is a kingdom?

The flying, the thrust of battle, the danger,
even the smell of blood, the writhing monsters—
dream or nightmare, then I truly lived.
And was that all? There must be more than this.

The Pursuer

He might come through any door—
the thick oak at the top of the curving stair
the painted panels leading to the study
the knob bed iron from the driveway, with its broken lock,
or the French windows opening on the terrace.
Even, God forbid, from the plain door in the passage
leading down dark stone steps to the cellar.

And I, standing in the massive marble hall,
a piece on a chessboard
moving from the square of pale Perlato
to the dark veins of Turquesa.

Those quarries make the whole house cold
with their ungiving surfaces. And the room so bright
it is like a stage, the audience hidden
in the shifty vines of the terrace
or the shadow above the balcony.

For all I know the walls papered with nymphs and fountains
and flowering trees are peopled with watching eyes
and the Venetian mirrors counterfeit.

I pretend to be looking at the statues,
copies of ancient art—Actaeon, Artemis,
Laocoon wreathed in serpents—
while I search for a faint heelmark,
a spot of water, a speck of lint, a shred of paper.

But I find no clue, and logic cannot help me
nor the strained sensing for the hidden breath
the scent of oleander crushed, the faint electric aura
of the body. I must go at once

lock myself incommunicado in the study
take the broad circling stairway into shadow

or the iron doorway leading to the forest.
I have to choose. I could meet him anywhere.

The Design

In what design am I, here in the garden—
the garden with its diamond paths
that criss-cross behind hedges,
the flowers settled in their chosen plots
divided by size, function, color even,
the flowers adjusted to conditions:
sun, the minerals of the soil, the frequency of rain—
none deviate, weeds are removed,
all rejuvenate, fertilizing one another
with their special insects—not only bees
but flies, wasps,
even wind. I alone. My function
is merely to watch and wait.

How do I fit in? If I move my foot
I trample on hyacinth, perfume of broken stems,
the petals wetting my boot soles, slippery, yellow.
Pollen lies broken open on the dark green of the stems.
Hostile my foot on the ground, pressing in gentle violence
across the grass. Why am I here?
I am curious. But to break
even the flowers in springtime
argues force, overturning, behavior
I should hate to own.

What is the difference between them and me?
We are for beauty, harmony, joy, utopia
here among the hyacinths, the bells' bloody coral,
the yellow cries of the pistils for rape,
for birdwings, the visits of flying hordes.
Nothing lies between us
but lawns and the cold statues
rotting by the old walls.

I have imagined a paradise where no serpent enters
without apples hidden under

the cushions of the parlor, or under
the marble set at tangents in the gallery.
Yet we stand here on both sides of the wall
listening to one another. Our inner states
of love, happiness—it is a strain to bear all this.
Happiness itself is a terror.
I can only conclude with the secret:
if is the wall of thorns; it is the fruit in the parlor;
it is the flight and the chase; it is the disillusion;
it is what we are all afraid of.

