

Brownstone Eclogues

Brownstone Eclogues

AND OTHER POEMS

by Conrad Aiken

DUELL, SLOAN AND PEARCE

New York

Brownstone Eclogues

ALSO BY CONRAD AIKEN

POETRY

- Time in the Rock* (1936)
Landscape West of Eden (1934)
Preludes for Memnon (1931)
The Coming Forth by Day of Osiris Jones (1931)
John Deth and Other Poems (1930)
Selected Poems (1929)
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Some of these poems have appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *Poetry*, *Vice Versa*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *The Harvard Advocate*, to which herewith a grateful acknowledgment.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY THE VAIL-BALLOU PRESS, INC., BINGHAMTON, N. Y.

For Mary

*"Needs must I rejoice beyond the
age, though the world have horror of
my joy."*

—JEAN DE RUYSBROECK.

CONTENTS

Brownstone Eclogues

<i>Sursum Corda</i>	3
<i>Saint Ambrose: Early Morning</i>	5
<i>Doctors' Row</i>	7
<i>The Nameless Ones</i>	9
<i>North Infinity Street</i>	11
<i>The Junk-cart</i>	12
<i>Who Shapes a Balustrade?</i>	14
<i>The Sounding</i>	16
<i>Clearing and Colder</i>	17
<i>Two Visions</i>	19
<i>Hatteras Calling</i>	20
<i>The Habeas Corpus Blues</i>	22
<i>Anaesthesia</i>	24
<i>Whisper Under Asphalt</i>	26
<i>Old Goody Two-Shoes</i>	27

<i>The Lovers</i>	29
<i>How to Accompany the Moon Without Walking</i>	30
<i>South End</i>	32
<i>Music</i>	33
<i>The Lady in Pink Pyjamas</i>	34
<i>Weather on Rooftrees</i>	36
<i>Clock and Compass</i>	37
<i>Three Star Final</i>	38
<i>All the Radios</i>	39
<i>The Street That Took a Wrong Turning</i>	41
<i>The Census-Takers</i>	42
<i>Solitaire</i>	43
<i>Ballade d'Hiver: after Steinlen</i>	44
<i>The Five-fifteen Farewell</i>	46
<i>Shaemus</i>	47
<i>All Death, All Love</i>	49
<i>Nuit Blanche: North End</i>	50
<i>The Visionaries</i>	52
<i>Blind Date</i>	54
<i>The Birdcage</i>	56
<i>Dear Uncle Stranger</i>	58

<i>Stone Too Can Pray</i>	59
<i>Spring Festival: The Taxis</i>	60

Blues for Ruby Matrix

<i>Blues for Ruby Matrix</i>	65
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Other Poems

<i>The Temptation</i>	81
<i>The Poet in Granada</i>	85
<i>The Four Appearances</i>	96

Brownstone Eclogues

Sursum Corda

Speak to us only with the killer's tongue,
the animal madness of the fierce and young:
and from that agony we'll learn to break
our human hearts, but for thy suffering's sake.

Then will the mind, exploring passion, learn
through all this burning world how thou dost burn:
in every particle, and hour, thy death,
in every painful leaf the creative breath.

And thy stone's hardness, we will learn this too,
with our wet flesh, our flesh as soft as dew;
through this small looking-glass to guess at length
the savage knowledges beyond our strength.

Wherever death's red hand unhusks a heart,
or tiger ice rips the meek hills apart,
there we lie down alone, and lonely spend
the spirit's silence to the spirit's end.

Lost from thy rock-face to thy last abyss,
we faint in darkness for an age; yet this
ends in an hour; and in the sun with thee

we wear the rainbow and the rain, and see:
we break the numbers and the names, and see:
we are thyself, thy heart of light, and see.

Saint Ambrose: Early Morning

Daybreak, on slatting shutter and windowpane—
rise, and touch foot to floor.

Over your head the tin roof hums with rain,
Saint Ambrose tower peals four.

Now the slowed heart that all night long has beat
through yours and the body's slumber
seems, in the listening silence, to repeat
"without number, without number—"

yes, without number the things that come to end,
the idle promise broken;
in every tenement, in every room, a betrayed friend,
the deadly sentence spoken.

Down the dark street the faithless footfalls ring
where selfish to selfish moves,
as, to her treacherous end, turns one more spring,
and treason with cheat involves.

On your own hand how many deaths still bleed,
which the hand alone forgets!
Here, there, and everywhere, the unanswered need,
dead loves like unpaid debts.

Here the fly buzzes, and the fingernail
scrapes on the faded sheet:
there, through the sparkling window, the east grows pale;
and slowly upward beat

innumerable and anonymous as birds
on the dull void of air,
alas, the whole city's unhappy, unspoken words,
one vast and ragged prayer.

Stone to stone reaches, brick to brick is joined;
the votive candle shines
upward a little on arches grieved and groined
and shabbily twinkling shrines.

Stone to stone reaches, brick is joined to brick:
and along the sweating aisle,
look, at each Station of the Cross, the sick
kneel down; in a little while

who doubts but they will find an end to illness—
summer, and the long lost ships?
Or even a little love; or, out of stillness,
a blinding apocalypse!

But no. In darkness, behind the shaken church,
ribbed like the hurricane,
roars past the apse, while walls and windows lurch,
the first suburban train.

Doctors' Row

Snow falls on the cars in Doctors' Row and hoods the headlights;
snow piles on the brownstone steps, the basement deadlights;
fills up the letters and names and brass degrees
on the bright brass plates, and the bright brass holes for keys.

Snow hides, as if on purpose, the rows of bells
which open the doors to separate cells and hells:
to the waiting-rooms, where the famous prepare for headlines,
and humbler citizens for their humbler deadlines.

And in and out, and out and in, they go,
the lamentable devotees of Doctors' Row;
silent and circumspect—indeed, liturgical;
their cries and prayers prescribed, their penance surgical.

No one complains—no one presumes to shriek—
the walls are very thick, and the voices weak.
Or the cries are whisked away in noiseless cabs,
while nurse, in the alley, empties a pail of swabs.

Miserable street!—through which your sweetheart hurries,
lowers her chin, as the snow-cloud stings and flurries;
thinks of the flower-stall, by the church, where you
wait like a clock, for two, for half-past two;