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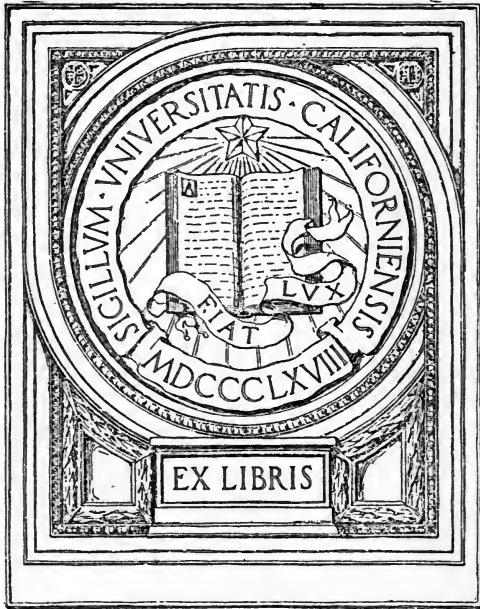
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ARCHWAYS
OF LIFE

by

Mercedes de Acosta

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**ARCHWAYS
OF LIFE**

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by

Mercedes de Acosta

Author of "Moods," etc.



NEW YORK

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1921

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To
A. P.

460491

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ARCHWAYS OF LIFE

*I am a part of all that I have met.
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.*

“ULYSSES.”

FADED PETALS

COME! Let us be friends.
Throw off the cloak of passion
(You wear it far too much)
And though your slightest touch
Has ceased to make me tremble,
There is no reason why —
We still cannot
Climb our hill together,
And, at twilight's end,
Call each other "friend."
The rose tree fades but has its spring and
autumn,
And so with love.
But with a rose —
We gather its faded petals
And in a box of precious metals
We store its fragrance.
Why not with love?
And which is more beautiful —
Who can say?
A rose in bloom or the fragrance of its petals
In decay!

SOILED HANDS

AFTER everyone had left,
It was always so wonderful sitting in the dark
theatre with you.

There was a mystery about it,
As though the echo of many plays
Still lingered in the folds of the curtain,
While phantom figures crouched low in the
chairs,

Beating suppressed applause with vapor hands.
Do you remember how we always sat silently?
I would shut my eyes to feel your closeness
nearer.

Then slowly and like a ritual
I would take your hand,
And you would laugh a little and say,
“My hands are awfully sticky” — or
“I can’t seem to keep my hands clean in this
theatre,”

As if that mattered . . . as if that mat-
tered. . . .

REFLECTION

I, WITH my back to the window,
Can see bending and swinging trees,
A gay blue patch of the sky
With the corner of a cloud looking in
And you, with your face buried in a rose.
Thus, I have my whole world,
In just this little mirror
Which I hold in the hollow of my hand.

LUMBERMEN

I WATCH the lumbermen
Winding up the mountain
Between the autumn branches.
I see

Leaves gold, red, flame and green,
With flashes of faded blue between
Of their overalls.
Straining and pulling
Horses brown and soiled white
Stagger up the mountain side
Before them
Dragging huge and heavy timber.
Down in the valley
I can hear the echo
Of the men's muffled curses,
And the quick snap
Of long thin whips.

SONNET

I COULD not wish all pain and grief and fears
Should leave my life and let my heart go free;
For then true love could never stay with me,—
That deepest love that had its birth in tears.
Smiles come in eyes, while often joy appears
When lovers meet — but deeper than the sea,
With strength that could a thousand chains
 tear free,
Is love that from gray tragic sorrow rears.

So, love, but one rare bliss I would aspire:
If you would let me share your grief on earth,
Bear all your loss and take your pain entire —
Guide your dark way. Let others share your
 mirth,
I know your gay laughter is not for me —
But lean on me in grief, when tears flow free.

UNPOSSESSED

NEVER shall I be all subdued,
Nor the real secret of me understood;
Passionately and violently my body may be
 possessed,
But my spirit
Always a virgin,
Will wander on forever
Unpossessed!

UNREALITY

FROM out the window pane I see your face,
Its outline a little vague
In the dimness of the shadow.
But the whiteness of your skin
Is like a clean ship's sail,
Standing out in the darkness of a night.
And your eyes,—I see them like two golden
 bowls,
With the rays of a thousand moonbeams sweep-
 ing over them.
As I pass out into the blackness,
I wonder if I have ever really known you —
Or, if you exist at all —
And are not but a twisted, fevered, silver crea-
 tion of my brain,
And the unreality of you comes over me,
Like a mist upon a lonely sea.

MAGIC

WE, who yesterday were spring, and wine, and
flame, to each other,
Today are only two human beings,
Commonplace, and tired;
You vaguely jealous, and I slightly bored. . . .
But tomorrow —
Or the next day —
The Magic may come back again,
And with it Spring, and Wine, and Flame.

It is for this that I live.

PLATITUDES

TONIGHT for a second
I almost thought I could love you.
The mystery of the night
And stillness of the wind
Seemed to speak of love
And draw us closer.
There was something sublime
About our silence,
With only the sound of dripping water
As it splashed and fingered the bow of our boat.
I seemed to see you differently,
And for a brief instant
My love wanted to creep down
And kneel at your feet.
Just then you turned and said:
“Isn’t the moon wonderful tonight!” and
“It all seems like a stage setting,”
Then I knew I never could love you!

A DREAM

I REMEMBER when the moon cast down a flood
Of gold across my floor and you came through
And held my hand and brought me hope like
 silver dew.

I remember when your touch stirred my blood
And taught me in a flash to dream of you,
And recklessly I poured your face into my
 heart

And lodged you there — and you were a part
Of me, before I knew.

Then we became comrades, we two,
Even before this dream so strange and new
Fastened itself upon my wakeful life,
And from out the chaos and maddening strife
I called to you. . . .

And now you do not answer.

TO VOULETTI

THERE is not a leaf grown,
Not a breeze that's blown,
Not a sweet fragrant tree
That is not you, to me.

In the sunlight I feel your smile,
In the moonlight the whole long while,
I feel the pressure of your hand,
And feeling this I understand.

I understand all sacred things,
The depths of Life, the secret wings
That carry beyond the dreary way,
Turning dark to light, and night to day.

All things fine, and straight, and true,
I know better because of you.
While your sweetness is like a warm fresh
 shower,
And your face and soul like a sun-kissed flower.

OCTOBER 28TH

TODAY is your birthday.
Many people will come to you with offerings,
While I,
Who seemingly know you so slightly,
Yet who truly know you so well,
Must stand aside with empty hands.
If love could make this day perfect,
My love would weave for you
A web enmeshed with all your desires.
On your pathway
I would fling stars for pebbles
And tear down the moon
So that you might wear
The radiance of its silver
In your hair.
But instead —
I stand outside like a wall
And quite powerless
I send no gift at all.

LIFE'S MIRAGE

I HAVE seen happiness. I have seen a slim
figure steal
Across my path, and gathering flowers, laugh-
ingly kneel
And strew them on my way. . . .
Then, but for one brief day,
I have seen them bloom beneath my feet, and
fade away.

I have heard happiness. I have heard its
voice, blown through the trees,
Calling and whispering in soft minor keys;
I have heard the voice of heart's desire, the
voice of Hope,
Chanting melodiously and luring me up the
slope
Of Life.

I have held happiness. Like a grain of sand,
Golden and beautiful, and gathered in my hand,
There, one second — then gone again:
Elusive, transient: all in vain
To try and hold it.

WIND

IF I should die,
I would be buried air-tight beneath the ground.
While you —
Your gold hair blowing in the breeze —
Would still feel the caress of the wind,
And on your face would steal
A smile.

If I should die,
My body would be buried air-tight beneath the
ground,
But my spirit will wander in the wind
That touches and circles about your face.
Perhaps you will know this —
And recognizing my touch
For this reason, you will smile. . . .

The smile I know and love.

GOD'S HAND

LET me wander back over the mountains,
And facing the sea
Live under the open sky —
Too long have I been encumbered
With the deceit of man
And his spoken lie.
I wish to die,
Away from petty thoughts
And treacherous ways,
And end my days
Alone.

I shall sing no sad lament
That no hand guides me;
But rather shall the vision I once have been
Through solitude, make me again the thing I
might have been.
The self I lost because I trusted, loved and
hoped,
And blinded my eyes with the dust of faith and
groped
My way to truth.

There is no truth in man —
Only shall I find it
In grasping God's Hand
That leads my way to hill and tree,
And stamps His Truth upon the sea.
In nature shall I find my life,
Through nature lose the poisoned knife,
That tried to slay me.
In solitude I shall breathe life's breath,
And breathing life I shall welcome death.

WORDS

WORDS — words —
Why are you forever fencing?
And if you must fence
Cannot you use something else
Besides words!
Do you remember the last night?
We talked so madly —
Words again
And then more words.
It all seemed a tangled net of words.
You were trying to convince me of something
(God knows what)
And I was trying to answer intelligently
And keep my end up.
But somehow and suddenly
Our words meant so little;
Then you leaned forward
And your knee touched mine
And after that my thoughts blurred
And our words meant nothing.

BLINDNESS

PERHAPS you are not much —
And maybe you are heartless
As they say you are —
And yet,
I shall always try to believe
That you are all the things
That I would have you,
So, that in the end,
I shall not have to know
My love and dreams of you
Have been all in vain
And wasted.

SPRING AND YOU

TODAY there is a smell of Spring in the air—
That sad restless note that makes one stretch
 forth longing hands
Into the heart of Life.
I who used to hate Spring,
Can never hate it again,
Because it has brought me you.
Now, Love and April, and the gold of your
 hair,
Are all mingled together
Like the blending of an exotic dream plant
With the fragrant perfume of a strange, frail
 flower.

WALT WHITMAN

I WOULD dare say that you are a superman.
Would fling the words out to the world
And dare him who dares to question it.
I would satiate myself with the art of you;
Would fling aside the talent of the many,
For the gift of the few
Whom you have touched.
In your hands you hold a torch of light,
A message in your being,
While in your eyes —
Far seeing vision clear and bright.
There is power in your poise,
And magic
In your rhythm, advance and wait.
Drinking in your greatness,
I, myself, am great.

SURRENDER

I WILL offer all my love
Recklessly, without rest,
And give myself completely
Upon my darling's breast —
Our pulses shall beat as one pulse,
And in that sacred breath
I shall feel the touch of Life
Yet know the truth of Death!

WE THREE

THERE is something that from between us has
slipped away and left me chill,
Something that by its loss has made the world
less warm
And made me feel as though the sun rising o'er
the purple dew-touched hill,
Finds its rays cold as it touches the face of
dawn.

Although we kiss and meet the same each day,
You speak my name and I yours and we clasp
hands,
Yet from somewhere, I do not know which
way,
Stealing between us a lurking figure stands.

A figure clad in gray. . . .
To me a dream, a phantom come to steal
My starlight quite away.
To you a gay figure, not strange but real.

And all the while it lurks and turns,
And from every cell and corner of my brain
I feel its presence and the burns
Even of your kisses cannot make me sane.

Why should this figure strange and sinister
Keep on coming? Why should she in the night
Breathe words of comfort and administer
Balm to my soul, pointing the way to light?

While when we meet in the day a dread silence
 lingers,
A silence chill which with no kindness blends
A word of cheer, or kind touch for my trem-
 bling fingers;
No look to prove that we are even friends.

Sometimes when you call my name I hear a
 tone
Of her voice within yours, and you say
Things which she will say at night and when
 alone,
Or what she's said before just that way.
They say we dream in sleep, but I must dream
 by day,
Because on waking she is a dream child, nor
 seems less fair,
Though more cruel than when I left her in my
 sleep sitting there.

If I could brush away this vision and start
 once again,
If I could see sunlight and feel less sad,

If I could only steady the confusion of my brain,
Somewhere, somehow I might again be glad.
And by a laugh or carefree jest,
I might once more call your love from out the
 past
And hold you closely to my side — lest,
Again between us the figure stand and fast
Would bind my hands and from me turn your
 face away,
Making once more my day a night and my
 night a day.

Ah, love, if we could turn Spring into last
 Spring again,
Or if I could toss my heart away and make it
 new;
If I could drink deeply of some draught to ease
 the pain,
Or become more callous, less kind and far, far
 less true. . . .
Less true to ideals, to love and you.

Perhaps I will, then my brain will cease to
 ache,
And this sad frenzied chaos I will not prolong;
Then for yours, or mine or hers or each one's
 sake,
I will wave farewell to you, singing Love's Swan
 Song.

Singing Love's Swan Song, so that this may
truly be,
That never again will false love take hold
of me;
I may be mad, but which is the maddest of
we three,
Is it you? Or I? Or is it she?

IN THE WINGS

BACK in the wings

I remember how I used to stand by your side
until you went on.

I remember the darkness and the slow beat of
the music —

And the mad desire in me to hold you always
near me.

I remember the weird reflection of the colored
spot as it circled round,

And you gazing intensely at the dancers,

While I watched only the curve of your neck
and the way your hair grew.

You seemed to be always thinking of the
dancers,

Or, as you said yourself so often,

“Of nothing at all.”

But I, while standing with my shoulder touch-
ing yours,

Or holding your hand —

Would dream great, wonderful dreams that car-
ried far beyond the horizon!

INFATUATION

It is not that I shall ever forget
The charm of your face, this I do not fear,
Or the rhythmic sway of your form, nor yet
The melody of the voice I loved to hear.
These things I shall remember.
I shall remember, too, the beauty of your eyes
And the stirring curves of your crimson mouth,
Like lightning storms and wind-swept flaming
 skies
Set on fire by the hot sun of the South.
I can recall all the words you promised and
 said,
Your seductive caressing ways and the false
 kisses you gave to me;
Remembering these I cannot help harboring
 the dread
That some day I will return, remembering no
 longer your cruelty.

ALL I ASK

NOT caresses, nor the touch of your hand, nor
the sweet savor
Of your love, I ask; nor the flavor
Of your lips against mine day by day;
(These joys I could not hope to stay).
They will pass and naught remain,
Except sweet memories, or perhaps the pain
Of their departure.
I could not hope that you would give these
things forever,
Nor that our lives in one long dream could pass
together;
But when love's tide has ebbed and after you
quite forget,
May there come to you no sad remorse or deep
regret
For the things that you have given.

SYMBOL

You are a symbol to me
Of all the better things I might have been,
Of all the best things I still might be,
Of all the wonderful things that are not
But exist somewhere in the God Mind
As yet unborn and unfulfilled —
These things you are to me.
Then you are Truth and Silence —
Both the Divine Force and the Great Strength,
And being all these things
You cannot help — being Love!

MISUNDERSTANDING

You have so completely misunderstood me —
Vainly I have tried to reach you
But always you have turned away.
And yet,
Like a blue flame
Burning hot and fiercely
My faith has ever burned for you.
Through the darkness
Of my loneliness
I have prayed for even small gleams
From the candle of your thoughts —
I would not pray for love;
But all the while
I would gladly have worn my soul out
To bring you joy.
And more than that. . . .
Had you asked —
For you I would have made a plaything
Of my dreams.

But what does it all matter —
Why should I care
That you do not love me,

Or that you turn away and despise me?
Since through you I have found inspiration
(All unworthy that you are)
And quite unknowingly you have shown me
The pathway to a star!

ENDING

LIFE! I am broken, tired,
I have drunk too deep and wandered far —
And coveted a star.
I have been a rebel
And fought against your laws. I was bent
On wielding you . . . but you had me in your
firmament
And I never knew.
Now I know —
I know I cannot beat you,
And he who wants to meet you
Must go *your* way
Or Perish.

Life! I am weary, spent,
The sun you gave me was only lent
And now at the end of my day
It has faded and gone away.
I am lonely and grown cold;
Youth is on my brow, yet I am old,
And darkness falls around me.

Life! I am finished, ended,
But before my way from you I've wended,
I only ask one thing. I, who used to ask so
much!

(The music has stopped and I feel no touch),
Life! I falter because the way is far too steep
And so in pity just send me . . . Sleep!

POETRY

LIKE a beautiful, frail, seductive woman
Who flings herself across her lover's couch
And wets his lips with desire —
So you, too,
Fling and stretch your long, lean, white-
limbed body,
Across the couch of Life
And with your lips alluring,
You chant your rhythmic, undulating, euphoni-
ous, melodious song,
Into the heart of me.
Vainly I try to tear myself
From the bondage of your voice,
And cast you off —
But from far away,
And deep down in the long un-lived-in and bar-
ren valleys of my soul,
I feel the breath of you.
You are like pastures green,
When one has lived forever with face pressed
to the sand;
You are like cool, moist rocks with moss between;

You are like shadows of thin cypress trees
Across a moonlit stream —
Like rippling, twisting, sprays of foam
Across the dark unfathomable sea.
These things you seem to me.
In you, Oh, Poetry,
Lies the power to lift me up,
And mad with frenzied exaltation
To bear my spirit beyond the need of any
mortal want.
In you the power
To beat upon my heart strings,
And quivering, with your music,
To toss for me weird, flaming words across my
brain,
And hear your rhythm in my soul beat back
again.
In you the power to dash me down —
For in my desire to create a child of yours;
And after infinite toil and labor pain,
To find it deformed, weak, and not worthy of
your name.

ATLANTIC CITY

VULGAR houses
And large grotesque hotels,
Thousands of swarming people,
Overfed, disgusting, and fat,
Or pale and sickly;
Creeping along the boardwalk
Or being pushed by sweating niggers
In pigmy houses built on wheels.
Shops filled with gaudy finery —
Cheap laces, false jewelry, and pink
 and blue sea salt candy. . . .
And then more shops,
And million dollar piers
Stretching their sordid hands out toward the
 horizon,
And reaching down into the depths and sacred
 blueness of the ocean,
Which, in the face of all such man-built
 hideousness,
Remains forever, mysterious,
Sublime and beautiful!

YOUR FACE

How glorious is the coming back to your face
After I have seen so many others
All missing something,
And failing me completely.
Faces filled with lust and hatred,
With joy, hope and despair;
Some dripping with greed and others fresh with
love —
But in your face,
I find the consummation or possibility of all
these things,
Both good and evil —
Like a well
With no man capable of measuring its depth.
Mysterious, pathetic, sensitive, strong and
weak;
But always exquisite
With a beauty that creates in my heart an
aching thing
That penetrates and fires my soul forever.
How glorious is the coming back to your face
After I have seen so many others.

ILLUSION

LAST year
Within this door
We stood and dreamed
Great dreams.
I remember the light
In your face,
And the odor of my lilies,
Suffocating and strange.
This year —
You have gone
And I have ceased to dream.
But my lilies are flowering once more,
And their odor,
In the dusk's wane,
Creates you,
And our dreams,
All over again.

FESTA DEL REDENTORE IN VENICE

DEEP blue water,
Like a dark sapphire;
A thousand swinging lanterns
Reflected in its depths,
And hung from gondolas
Whose blackness makes them forever
True comrades of the night.
Fireworks with spark and light;
Dripping from the skies,
Like thirsty stars
Bending to cool their lips
On Venetian waters.
Near by and far
The echo of a carefree laugh,
The plaintive voices of violins,
And clear songs of living men;
While deep in the shadows
Of beauty and old palaces,
Crouch the ghosts of tears and crime,
And men long centuries dead.

COLOR SYMPHONY

OPEN wings of sea gulls
And snow peaks are white;
Deep water in ancient slime-lined wells
Is black —
Great cities are gray,
With dark, gloomy smoke rising to kill the
day.
Sunsets are gold
And sometimes red,
While the moon glows silver,
And then instead
Its face seems rose.
But love —
Love is all colors,
Sometimes black and sometimes red,
Seldom white but again gold —
Colors of youth and colors old;
Faded colors.
Lavender, green,
With stretches of orange in between.
Love is often a deep rich blue,
Or crimson for blood
With a dark brown hue.
Love is gray
Like twilight's breath —
Love — all color symbols of life
Yet, in reality, Death!

TO ONE WHO LOVES JEWELS

I GAVE you verses of mine
Telling of my sadness
And praising your beauty,
But you tossed the beautiful white sheets
That bore my poems
Disdainfully away from you.

I gave you my love —
And more than that,
I gave my dreams by night and day,
But you understood neither
And turned your face away.

Then I gave you a jewel,
A dark sapphire like the night
With depths in it like the sea,
And for that sapphire alone
You smiled at me.

FOOTPRINTS

STRETCHING before me the ever-moving but
never-changing sea,
Looking so wild and dark with mad white
blotches of foam across its face —
While I,
A mere grain of sand in the turmoil and winds
of Time,
Stand alert and tense,
Gazing forward and wondering and peering into
the Future. . . .
Across the depths of the sea hundreds of cen-
turies roll past,
And along its shores I follow the worn and
faded footprints
Of men long since dead.

LIFE AND YOUTH

THROUGH the archways of Life I tread,
Nor do I walk with much less dread,
Because I know
That where I go,
Millions have walked before me.

I do not feel less pain because 'tis said,
That saints and martyrs and soldiers have bled
For what they gave.
I am not brave
Because of this.

I weep not less,
Because in distress
Others, perhaps being stronger, have not wept
as much;
For Stoics, and tearless people, and because of
such
Restraint, I hold not back my tears.

I borrow not my courage from the crowd.
My heart is heavy and my head is bowed —
But were I to raise my head high,
And cast my eyes up to the sky,
A star might guide me.

I cannot be what has been,
I cannot see what's been seen.
I shape my course,
And gather force,
From what's to come.

The future is my golden star,
My inspiration — and from afar,
I see the deeds that may be done,
I watch a race that may be run,
And hold my breath in ecstasy.

Away! Black shadows of the past,
Stale traditions that hold us fast.
Because they were,
Must we not stir
From off their worn out path?

I take up the spade of Youth and of Life,
And fling new pebbles on the path, where
 strife
Has worn the old ones out.
I dig and put to rout,
Old fancies and old doubt.

Across the world I hear a clear, new note;
The locks are shattered and the chains are
 smote,
And a moonbeam has fallen across life's
 shoulder.
I raise my sword, and like a pioneer soldier,
I sharpen it on the Shield of Hope.

POOR FOOLS

THE war is over —
Once more they think that they may dance,
And make the old-time gilded show,
And drink behind closed doors
Their forbidden, hoarded wine,
And pin jewels upon their breasts.
Dance on,
Poor fools,
Because you do not know
That marching
Over the face of the world
Another Great Army is sweeping!

LONGING

ALL night long I used to wish that I were dead,
“May I never see another dawn,” I said.
Now I long for dawn the whole night through
Because on waking it brings me — you!

MUSIC

FOREVER, they are telling me
How futile are your words.
And yet —
It seems strange the spell you created when you
spoke to me.
I would never listen much to what you were
saying,
Because I was always hearing just the song in
your voice.
Quite ordinary things you would say,
Such as:
“I am really very tired tonight”— or
“I wonder why the curtain is so late?”
Or sometimes you would talk of simple things
done during the day.
But to me —
To me it was all wonderful
Because your voice
Was mellow and low,
And sounded like the muffled pealing
Of some distant old church bell.

FLOWERS AND STARS

FLOWERS are the stars of earth,
Stars, the flowers of the sky;
But you are both in my heart —
Flowers and stars till I die.

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