



ALBERTA JOHNSTON DENIS

Questionings

THE COMPLETE 1920 BOOK AND MAGAZINE VERSE

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS: EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

A TEXT-TECH PAPERS PROJECT

Extremes and Moderations

Early Southern California Poetry

Extremes and Moderations is a Text-Tech Papers project devoted to recovering poetry written, published, and circulated in Los Angeles and Southern California. Each volume brings neglected books and poems back into view through carefully prepared texts, archival images, biographical context, and a clear record of the surviving sources.

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

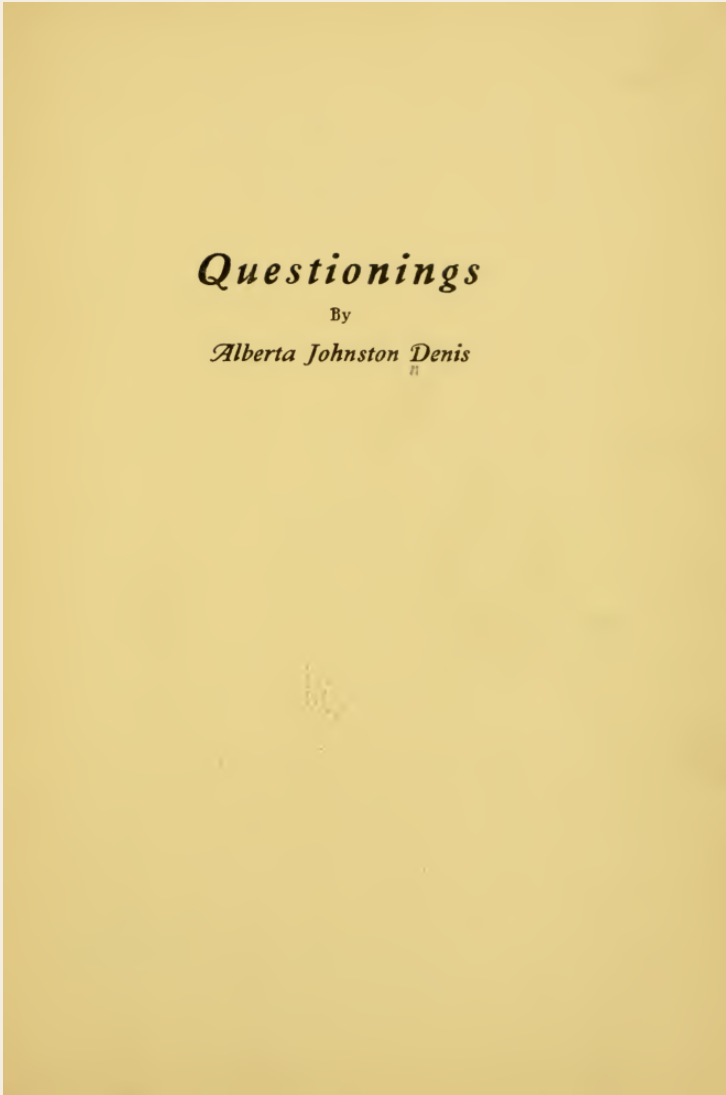
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ARCHIVAL IMAGES

Portraits and documentary publication witnesses



Title page of Questionings (Los Angeles, 1920).

A Magazine of Verse

JAPANESE IRIS

"For East is East and West is West,
And never the twain shall meet."
Kipling.

SAN MARINO RANCH

ON the meadow-like floor
Of the cañon's depth,
In the semi-shade
Of the filtered light,
In stately grace the Iris bloom,
In purple and mauve, and white.

Past water-grasses' tinted plumes
And idly waving sacred Lotus,
Across the rocks and stepping stones,
Above the spot where bamboos grow,
Like a flame
In the green and brown of the gorge,
Burns an Azalea's rosy glow.

In the very heart
Of the Western World,
This bit of the Samurai land
Is set;
And here,—despite the poet's words,—
At last, "the twain"
Have met.

Alberta Johnston Denis.

[19]

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"Japanese Iris" in *The Lyric West*, July-August 1921, p. 19.

INTRODUCTION

A focused account of the poet, the books, and the editorial method

Biography

Alberta Johnston Denis was born in Los Angeles on 30 August 1861, the daughter of Eliza Griffin Johnston and Albert Sidney Johnston. Her father's military career and death during the Civil War made the family name nationally prominent, but Denis's own writing belongs to a later Los Angeles world: travel, civic society, new roads, local landscapes, and small-press literary culture.

On 30 November 1885 she married George Jules Denis, a New Orleans-born attorney who became a significant Los Angeles lawyer, federal prosecutor, civic official, and clubman. The couple's daughter, also named Alberta, died young. A 1906 passport application records Alberta Johnston Denis's Los Angeles residence and an extended journey abroad; travel later furnished the subject of her prose book *Houseboating in Kashmir*.

Her poetry book *Questionings* was printed in Los Angeles by the Times-Mirror Printing and Binding House in 1920. Its title sequence moves from metaphysical uncertainty through allegorical islands, urban crowds, imagist parody, local botany, and the new automobile landscape. "The Torrey Pines" and "The Ridge Road" are especially rooted in Southern California, while "Modern Imagism" shows her alertness—whether amused or skeptical—to contemporary poetic fashion.

The following year *The Lyric West* printed "Japanese Iris," subtitled "San Marino Ranch." The poem's compressed free verse and Japanese-garden setting extend the local and international interests already visible in *Questionings*. Denis died in Los Angeles on 2 February 1947 and was buried at Angelus Rosedale Cemetery.

Editorial Note

This file restores Denis to the active anthology pool and prints the complete contents of *Questionings*, followed by the separately published “Japanese Iris.” Because her surviving poetry corpus located to date is compact, selection at this stage would conceal rather than clarify its range.

The poems were reset from the original scans. Narrow-page hanging wraps were rejoined; clear stanza breaks and authorial indents were retained. Obvious OCR intrusions—such as numeral 1 for capital I and corrupted words—were corrected against page images. No securely identified portrait of Denis was found, so the opening image section uses documentary pages from her publications.

QUESTIONINGS (1920)

Book One | Philosophical, domestic, and California lyrics

Questionings

Oh! Soul, thou dweller for a little space
In this poor body:
Canst not remember whence thou hast come?
Canst not return
When once the knot, albeit such a thread,
Is cut?
Art thou the Ego,
And ask I but myself?
Or, art thou something other?
Am I not thee?
Am I but mortal, all?
Dost leave the me when thou betak'st thyself
Some other where?
Or, do I, myself, depart with thee,
Am thee, in fact?
Do I then leave this body with the breath,
Nor give a thought to all the while
That I, if I am thee, the Soul,
Have dwelt therein?
Or, do I linger, knowing all,
When throbbing ceases,
Feeling, seeing all that passes.
And hearing, as it falls, the clod,
When "Dust to dust" is said?

Publication. *Questionings* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1920), pp. 1-2.

The Far Away Land

Swathed in a mist of life that is lived
Is the land of Far Away.
It is one of the numberless “Isles of the Past”
Where Phoebus rose high in glad array,
In gold and purple with streamers gay,
To spread his gleams for a joyous day.
The misty isle was the “Isle of Sighs”,
The storm driven one was “Tears”,
The gay little dot was childhood’s spot,
Hedged round with kisses and fears.
But the glorious one with golden haze.
Ah that was the “Isle of my Youth”.

A very fair land was that “Far Away Land”,
As I look through the vista of years.

Now I live on a strip of wind-swept shore;
I gaze at the setting sun.
For me the “Isles of the Past” are no more.
My earth-day is almost done.
But I’ve work to do on this wind-swept shore
Where the swirling sand beats in my eyes,
And birds of ill omen hover o’er.
And the wind outrivals their cries.
The wind-swept shore is nothing but Life,
Or so it appears to me. The sand and the gale.
And the birds with their wail,
All stand for hurry and strife.
Tho’ still in my mind to ease the pain
Is the land of Far Away,
All bright and shining and free from stain.
With never a cloud and never a rain.

I couldn’t go back if I wanted to
I wouldn’t go back if I could;
For, perhaps, ’tis a circle of Life I tread,
And beyond that sun so coppery red,
I shall find once more the “Isles of the Past”

My spot in the “Far Away Land” at last,
When the riddle called “Life” is done.

Publication. *Questionings* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1920), pp. 3-5.

The Island of Love

Oh! where
Out there
Is the “Island of Love”?
Is that what you ask of me?
You may look till you are blind,
You never will find
An “Island of Love” in the sea.
From the earth beneath to the stars above,
There is love
Everywhere.
So there isn’t an “Island of Love”
Out there!

Publication. *Questionings* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1920), p. 6.

Love Everywhere

You will find it along
The work-a-day road,
In the hustling crowds that throng,
In alleys and slums, amid gutter-snipes.
In music divine, or the lilt of Pan's pipes,
Of a kind
You will find
It is there
Everywhere.

Rushing and gurgling streams sing the song;
It is old, it is new, it is short, it is long.

It's the same
In Love's name,
It's the song.

In country, in town, in every place,
In every heart, in every face,
There is love
I am sure;
It cannot be bought;
It may be sought
And won.
And none,
Whatever the kind, is bad.
It is sad;
It is pity, full oft.

Divine in its birth,
There is nothing on Earth
Like Love
And it's there
Everywhere.

Publication. *Questionings* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1920), pp. 7-9.

The Island of Jealousy

Jealousy's Isle was an ugly spot,
As it lay in its sea of blood.
Foul murder, and lies, and smothered cries,
Its flotsam and jetsam, like sneaking spies,
Came in with its tide at the flood.

Publication. *Questionings* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1920), p. 10.

Modern Imagism

A little brown bird
On the window sill,
Spreading his wings;
Hear! how he sings!
But, now and again,
With his little brown bill,
He is oiling his feathers.

Black eyes naught fearing,
Bright eyes oft peering;
Head to one side,
Now, to the other;
Preening, and ruffling and fluffing.
And yet
He is only oiling his feathers!

Publication. *Questionings* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1920), p. 11.

The Heart of a Rose

Could I but know,
In just plain prose,
Does anything beat
In the heart of a rose?
For, oh!
The heart of a rose,
Of a red, red rose,
Is so sweet!
Could I but know!

Could I but know!
Beloved, dear.
Have you a heart
Where it ought to be?
—You heart of a rose,
Of a red, red rose,
To me!
Could I but know!

Could I but know!

Sometimes Ah! Well
I doubt it is there,
I cannot tell.
For, Oh!
The heart of a rose.
Of a red, red rose.
Is so sweet!
Could I but know!

Publication. *Questionings* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1920), pp. 12-13.

Life, the Great Procession

Neither beginning nor end is seen;

On and on it goes,

The great procession;

Limitless

Whence has it come,

Or where will end?

That no one knows.

It moves

Unceasingly

Never a pause!

The pace for some is fast,

For some is slow

And some there be who faint

Or fall.

But, whether slow or fast,

The individual speed,

Without concern, the whole

Moves on.

Moves on.

For, underneath it all

Is Time,

The Wheel,

Which, turning,

turning

Carries all alike

No stop, no pause.

Not swift, not slow,

But ever, ever on, and on

It moves

Unceasingly.

Publication. *Questionings* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1920), pp. 14-16.

The Torrey Pines

The soft west wind from off the sea
Frivolled across the mesa,
Over miles of blossoming yellow sage
Heavy honey laden.
I close my eyes; it all comes back to me;
I feel the phantom, fluttering, furtive air;
I sense the honey.
Above the sea, austere and bar
I see the mountains.
Shadows amethystine, a haze the high light dims
And mellows rugged peaks.
All ruddy crimson, down the West, the Sun
Sinks in the sea.
Aloft, above the hills.
The round full Moon in golden glory glides
All space,
The changing, evanescent, evening false light fills.
And there
Against the sky,
Etched by a giant hand, all inky black
The Torrey Pines;
While overhead the Moon, now purest silver, shines.

Publication. *Questionings* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1920), pp. 17-18.

The Ridge Road

Twisting, turning
—Like some live thing

The long, long road goes up and up;
At last, the summit: around
A wilderness—a wilderness of color,
Evading, all pervading, not tangible,
Rose, pink and violet; over all
A veil, a haze of blue, is cast.
Beneath the veil, pastel; but, shadowy dark
And purple, in the depths;
Where sun tips higher points, is orange.
In somber spots, far in some canyon cleft,
Lurks indigo.

The sky, behind the outline of the ridge, pale green,
—A Chinese celadon—shading, changing,
Until at zenith, blue.

On winds the road
Giving in itself the thought of motion,
Rushing down the grade.
Flashing past a salt marsh, white and green,
Abordered sparingly with feathery trees,
Aglimmer in the sun.
On, on, until we find a valley,
Nesting high among the hill tops.

The road sweeps on,
—And leaves us there
Up, up and up again, high over mountain pass.
And then,——

for us, is lost.

We pitch our little camp,
And, all around, and all the while, and everywhere,
The gray-green flowering plants, star-petaled, yellow,
Are waving back and forth, and to and fro.
Behind are mountains in full shade.
The western sun below their crests.
Veiled, over all, with misty haze of blue
Far down in front, a lake;

The slopes of brown hills curved around
Slip down to water's side:
They meet and kiss.
High overhead the sky serene,
—Pretending not to see—looks on.
While all around, and all the while, and everywhere.
The gray-green flowering plants, star-petaled, yellow,
Are waving back and forth
Are waving to and fro.

Publication. *Questionings* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1920), pp. 19-21.

MAGAZINE VERSE (1921)

Magazine Verse | The periodical afterlife

Japanese Iris

San Marino Ranch.

*"For East is East and West is West,
And never the twain shall meet."—Rudyard Kipling*

On the meadow-like floor
 Of the cañon's depth,
In the semi-shade
 Of the filtered light,
In stately grace the Iris bloom,
In purple and mauve, and white.

Past water-grasses' tinted plumes
And idly waving sacred Lotus,
Across the rocks and stepping stones,
Above the spot where bamboos grow,
 Like a flame
In the green and brown of the gorge,
Burns an Azalea's rosy glow.

In the very heart
 Of the Western World,
This bit of the Samurai land
 Is set;
And here,—despite the poet's words,—
At last, "the twain"
 Have met.

Publication. *The Lyric West*, vol. 1, no. 4 (July-August 1921), p. 19. The source prints a two-line epigraph from Kipling above the poem.

AFTERWORD

Sources, selection record, and limits

Sources and Editorial Record

Primary texts: Alberta Johnston Denis, *Questionings* (Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Printing and Binding House, 1920); “Japanese Iris,” *The Lyric West*, vol. 1, no. 4 (July-August 1921), 19.

Biographical checks: 1906 United States passport application; memorial and family records; George Jules Denis in *Notables of the West* (1913); library catalog records for *Houseboating in Kashmir*.

Sources and Editorial Record

Textual witnesses and supporting documentation

The source editions, periodical witnesses, and biographical authorities used for this edition are identified in the accompanying author datasheet and in the editorial notes already printed in this volume. Reset text was checked against the scans preserved in the poet's Source Scans and Research folders; archival images reproduce those same project holdings.

This consolidated record does not enlarge the edition's claims. Where a source remains incomplete, a date is uncertain, or a rights determination has not been completed, the datasheet retains that limitation explicitly.

Colophon

Publication and production notes

This critical reading edition was edited by Brian Kim Stefans for The Text-Tech Papers, Los Angeles, in 2026, as part of *Extremes and Moderations: Early Southern California Poetry*.

The poems were reset from the source pages identified in the editorial record and datasheet. The book was composed in EB Garamond on a cream field at 6 × 9 inches. Its designed cover and selective archival opening follow the Julia Boynton Green production standard.