

PENGUIN AUDIOBOOKS

WILLIAM BLAKE

SELECTED POEMS



America, A Prophecy



AMERICA: A PROPHECY

William Blake

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Preludium

The shadowy Daughter of Urthona stood before red Orc,
When fourteen suns had faintly journey'd o'er his dark abode:
His food she brought in iron baskets, his drink in cups of iron.
Crown'd with a helmet and dark hair the nameless Female stood;
A quiver with its burning stores, a bow like that of night,
When pestilence is shot from heaven — no other arms she need!
Invulnerable tho' naked, save where clouds roll round her loins
Their awful folds in the dark air: silent she stood as night;
For never from her iron tongue could voice or sound arise,
But dumb till that dread day when Orc assay'd his fierce embrace.

`Dark Virgin,' said the hairy Youth, `thy father stern, abhorr'd,
Rivets my tenfold chains, while still on high my spirit soars;
Sometimes an eagle screaming in the sky, sometimes a lion
Stalking upon the mountains, and sometimes a whale, I lash
The raging fathomless abyss; anon a serpent folding
Around the pillars of Urthona, and round thy dark limbs
On the Canadian wilds I fold; feeble my spirit folds;

For chain'd beneath I rend these caverns: when thou bringest food
I howl my joy, and my red eyes seek to behold thy face —
In vain! these clouds roll to and fro, and hide thee from my sight.

Silent as despairing love, and strong as jealousy,
The hairy shoulders rend the links; free are the wrists of fire;
Round the terrific loins he seiz'd the panting, struggling womb;
It joy'd: she put aside her clouds and smilèd her first-born smile,
As when a black cloud shows its lightnings to the silent deep.

Soon as she saw the Terrible Boy, then burst the virgin cry:—

'I know thee, I have found thee, and I will not let thee go:
Thou art the image of God who dwells in darkness of Africa,
And thou art fall'n to give me life in regions of dark death.

On my American plains I feel the struggling afflictions
Endur'd by roots that writhe their arms into the nether deep.
I see a Serpent in Canada who courts me to his love,
In Mexico an Eagle, and a Lion in Peru;
I see a Whale in the South Sea, drinking my soul away.
O what limb-rending pains I feel! thy fire and my frost
Mingle in howling pains, in furrows by thy lightnings rent.
This is Eternal Death, and this the torment long foretold!

A Prophecy

The Guardian Prince of Albion burns in his nightly tent:
Sullen fires across the Atlantic glow to America's shore,
Piercing the souls of warlike men who rise in silent night.
Washington, Franklin, Paine, and Warren, Gates, Hancock, and
Green
Meet on the coast glowing with blood from Albion's fiery Prince.

Washington spoke: 'Friends of America! look over the Atlantic sea;
A bended bow is lifted in Heaven, and a heavy iron chain
Descends, link by link, from Albion's cliffs across the sea, to bind
Brothers and sons of America; till our faces pale and yellow,
Heads depress'd, voices weak, eyes downcast, hands work-bruis'd,
Feet bleeding on the sultry sands, and the furrows of the whip
Descend to generations, that in future times forget.'

The strong voice ceas'd; for a terrible blast swept over the heaving
sea:

The eastern cloud rent: on his cliffs stood Albion's wrathful Prince,
A dragon form, clashing his scales: at midnight he arose,
And flam'd red meteors round the land of Albion beneath;
His voice, his locks, his awful shoulders, and his glowing eyes
Appear to the Americans upon the cloudy night.

Solemn heave the Atlantic waves between the gloomy nations,
Swelling, belching from its deeps red clouds and raging fires.
Albion is sick! America faints! Enrag'd the Zenith grew.
As human blood shooting its veins all round the orb'd heaven,
Red rose the clouds from the Atlantic in vast wheels of blood,
And in the red clouds rose a Wonder o'er the Atlantic sea —
Intense! naked! a Human fire, fierce glowing, as the wedge
Of iron heated in the furnace; his terrible limbs were fire,
With myriads of cloudy terrors, banners dark, and towers
Surrounded: heat but not light went thro' the murky atmosphere.

The King of England looking westward trembles at the vision.

Albion's Angel stood beside the Stone of Night, and saw
The Terror like a comet, or more like the planet red,
That once enclos'd the terrible wandering comets in its sphere.
Then, Mars, thou wast our centre, and the planets three flew round
Thy crimson disk; so, ere the Sun was rent from thy red sphere,

The Spectre glow'd, his horrid length staining the temple long
With beams of blood; and thus a voice came forth, and shook the
temple:—

‘The morning comes, the night decays, the watchmen leave their
stations;

The grave is burst, the spices shed, the linen wrappèd up;
The bones of death, the cov’ring clay, the sinews shrunk and dry’d
Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing, awakening,
Spring like redeemèd captives, when their bonds and bars are burst
Let the slave grinding at the mill run out into the field,
Let him look up into the heavens and laugh in the bright air;
Let the enchainèd soul, shut up in darkness and in sighing,
Whose face has never seen a smile in thirty weary years,
Rise and look out; his chains are loose, his dungeon doors are open;
And let his wife and children return from the oppressor’s scourge.
They look behind at every step, and believe it is a dream,
Singing: "The Sun has left his blackness, and has found a fresher
morning,
And the fair Moon rejoices in the clear and cloudless night;
For Empire is no more, and now the Lion and Wolf shall cease." ’

In thunders ends the voice. Then Albion’s Angel wrathful burnt
Beside the Stone of Night; and, like the Eternal Lion’s howl
In famine and war, reply’d: ‘Art thou not Orc, who serpent-form’d
Stands at the gate of Enitharmon to devour her children?
Blasphemous Demon, Antichrist, hater of Dignities,
Lover of wild rebellion, and transgressor of God’s Law,
Why dost thou come to Angel’s eyes in this terrific form?’

The Terror answer’d: ‘I am Orc, wreath’d round the accursèd tree:
The times are ended; shadows pass, the morning ’gins to break;
The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands,

What night he led the starry hosts thro' the wide wilderness,
That stony Law I stamp to dust; and scatter Religion abroad
To the four winds as a torn book, and none shall gather the leaves;
But they shall rot on desert sands, and consume in bottomless
deeps,
To make the deserts blossom, and the deeps shrink to their
fountains,
And to renew the fiery joy, and burst the stony roof;
That pale religious lechery, seeking Virginity,
May find it in a harlot, and in coarse-clad honesty
The undefil'd, tho' ravish'd in her cradle night and morn;
For everything that lives is holy, life delights in life;
Because the soul of sweet delight can never be defil'd.
Fires enwrap the earthly globe, yet Man is not consum'd;
Amidst the lustful fires he walks; his feet become like brass,
His knees and thighs like silver, and his breast and head like gold.

'Sound! sound! my loud war-trumpets, and alarm my Thirteen Angels!
Loud howls the Eternal Wolf! the Eternal Lion lashes his tail!
America is dark'ned; and my punishing Demons, terrified,
Crouch howling before their caverns deep, like skins dry'd in the
wind.

They cannot smite the wheat, nor quench the fatness of the earth;
They cannot smite with sorrows, nor subdue the plough and spade;
They cannot wall the city, nor moat round the castle of princes;
They cannot bring the stubbèd oak to overgrow the hills;
For terrible men stand on the shores, and in their robes I see
Children take shelter from the lightnings: there stands Washington,
And Paine, and Warren, with their foreheads rear'd toward the East

But clouds obscure my agèd sight. A vision from afar!
Sound! sound! my loud war-trumpets, and alarm my Thirteen Angels!
Ah, vision from afar! Ah, rebel form that rent the ancient

Heavens! Eternal Viper self-renew'd, rolling in clouds,
I see thee in thick clouds and darkness on America's shore,
Writhing in pangs of abhorrèd birth; red flames the crest rebellious
And eyes of death; the harlot womb, oft openèd in vain,
Heaves in enormous circles: now the times are return'd upon thee,
Devourer of thy parent, now thy unutterable torment renews.
Sound! sound! my loud war-trumpets, and alarm my Thirteen Angels!
Ah, terrible birth! a young one bursting! Where is the weeping mouth,
And where the mother's milk? Instead, those ever-hissing jaws
And parchèd lips drop with fresh gore: now roll thou in the clouds;
Thy mother lays her length outstretch'd upon the shore beneath.
Sound! sound! my loud war-trumpets, and alarm my Thirteen Angels!
Loud howls the Eternal Wolf! the Eternal Lion lashes his tail!"

Thus wept the Angel voice, and as he wept the terrible blasts
Of trumpets blew a loud alarm across the Atlantic deep.
No trumpets answer; no reply of clarions or of fifes:
Silent the Colonies remain and refuse the loud alarm.

On those vast shady hills between America and Albion's shore,
Now barr'd out by the Atlantic sea, call'd Atlantean hills,
Because from their bright summits you may pass to the Golden
World,
An ancient palace, archetype of mighty Emperies,
Rears its immortal pinnacles, built in the forest of God
By Ariston, the King of Beauty, for his stolen bride.

Here on their magic seats the Thirteen Angels sat perturb'd,
For clouds from the Atlantic hover o'er the solemn roof.

Fiery the Angels rose, and as they rose deep thunder roll'd
Around their shores, indignant burning with the fires of Orc;
And Boston's Angel cried aloud as they flew thro' the dark night.

He cried: 'Why trembles honesty; and, like a murderer,
Why seeks he refuge from the frowns of his immortal station?
Must the generous tremble, and leave his joy to the idle, to the
pestilence
That mock him? Who commanded this? What God? What Angel?
To keep the gen'rous from experience till the ungenerous
Are unrestrain'd performers of the energies of nature;
Till pity is become a trade, and generosity a science
That men get rich by; and the sandy desert is giv'n to the strong?
What God is he writes laws of peace, and clothes him in a tempest?
What pitying Angel lusts for tears, and fans himself with sighs?
What crawling villain preaches abstinence and wraps himself
In fat of lambs? No more I follow, no more obedience pay!'

So cried he, rending off his robe and throwing down his sceptre
In sight of Albion's Guardian; and all the Thirteen Angels
Rent off their robes to the hungry wind, and threw their golden
sceptres
Down on the land of America; indignant they descended

Headlong from out their heav'nly heights, descending swift as fires
Over the land; naked and flaming are their lineaments seen
In the deep gloom; by Washington and Paine and Warren they stood;
And the flame folded, roaring fierce within the pitchy night,
Before the Demon red, who burnt towards America,
In black smoke, thunders, and loud winds, rejoicing in its terror,
Breaking in smoky wreaths from the wild deep, and gath'ring thick
In flames as of a furnace on the land from North to South,
What time the Thirteen Governors, that England sent, convene
In Bernard's house. The flames cover'd the land; they rouse; they cry;
Shaking their mental chains, they rush in fury to the sea
To quench their anguish; at the feet of Washington down fall'n
They grovel on the sand and writhing lie, while all

The British soldiers thro' the Thirteen States sent up a howl
Of anguish, threw their swords and muskets to the earth, and run
From their encampments and dark castles, seeking where to hide
From the grim flames, and from the visions of Orc, in sight
Of Albion's Angel; who, enrag'd, his secret clouds open'd
From North to South, and burnt outstretch'd on wings of wrath
cov'ring
The eastern sky, spreading his awful wings across the heavens.
Beneath him roll'd his num'rous hosts, all Albion's Angels camp'd
Darken'd the Atlantic mountains; and their trumpets shook the valleys,
Arm'd with diseases of the earth to cast upon the Abyss —
Their numbers forty millions, must'ring in the eastern sky.

In the flames stood and view'd the armies drawn out in the sky,
Washington, Franklin, Paine, and Warren, Allen, Gates, and Lee,
And heard the voice of Albion's Angel give the thunderous command;
His plagues, obedient to his voice, flew forth out of their clouds,
Falling upon America, as a storm to cut them off,
As a blight cuts the tender corn when it begins to appear.
Dark is the heaven above, and cold and hard the earth beneath:
And, as a plague-wind, fill'd with insects, cuts off man and beast,
And, as a sea o'erwhelms a land in the day of an earthquake,
Fury, rage, madness, in a wind swept through America;
And the red flames of Orc, that folded roaring, fierce, around
The angry shores; and the fierce rushing of th' inhabitants together!
The citizens of New York close their books and lock their chests;
The mariners of Boston drop their anchors and unlade;
The scribe of Pennsylvania casts his pen upon the earth;

The builder of Virginia throws his hammer down in fear.

Then had America been lost, o'erwhelm'd by the Atlantic,
And Earth had lost another portion of the Infinite;

But all rush together in the night in wrath and raging fire.
The red fires rag'd! The plagues recoil'd! Then roll'd they back with
fury
On Albion's Angels: then the Pestilence began in streaks of red
Across the limbs of Albion's Guardian; the spotted plague smote
Bristol's,
And the Leprosy London's Spirit, sickening all their bands:
The millions sent up a howl of anguish and threw off their hammer'd
mail,
And cast their swords and spears to earth, and stood, a naked
multitude:
Albion's Guardian writhèd in torment on the eastern sky,
Pale, quiv'ring toward the brain his glimmering eyes, teeth chattering,
Howling and shuddering, his legs quivering, convuls'd each muscle
and sinew:
Sick'ning lay London's Guardian, and the ancient mitred York,
Their heads on snowy hills, their ensigns sick'ning in the sky.

The plagues creep on the burning winds, driven by flames of Orc,
And by the fierce Americans rushing together in the night,
Driven o'er the Guardians of Ireland, and Scotland and Wales.
They, spotted with plagues, forsook the frontiers; and their banners,
sear'd
With fires of hell, deform their ancient Heavens with shame and woe.
Hid in his caves the Bard of Albion felt the enormous plagues,
And a cowl of flesh grew o'er his head, and scales on his back and
ribs;
And, rough with black scales, all his Angels fright their ancient
heavens.

The doors of marriage are open, and the Priests, in rustling scales,
Rush into reptile coverts, hiding from the fires of Orc,
That play around the golden roofs in wreaths of fierce desire,
Leaving the Females naked and glowing with the lusts of youth.

For the Female Spirits of the dead, pining in bonds of religion,
Run from their fetters; reddening, and in long-drawn arches sitting,
They feel the nerves of youth renew, and desires of ancient times
Over their pale limbs, as a vine when the tender grape appears.

Over the hills, the vales, the cities rage the red flames fierce:
The Heavens melted from North to South; and Urizen, who sat
Above all heavens, in thunders wrapp'd, emerg'd his leprous head
From out his holy shrine, his tears in deluge piteous

Falling into the deep sublime; flagg'd with grey-brow'd snows
And thunderous visages, his jealous wings wav'd over the deep;
Weeping in dismal howling woe, he dark descended, howling
Around the smitten bands, clothèd in tears and trembling, shudd'ring,
cold.

His storèd snows he pourèd forth, and his icy magazine,
He open'd on the deep, and on the Atlantic sea, white, shiv'ring;
Leprous his limbs, all over white, and hoary was his visage;
Weeping in dismal howlings before the stern Americans,
Hiding the Demon red with clouds and cold mists from the earth;
Till Angels and weak men twelve years should govern o'er the strong;
And then their end should come, when France receiv'd the Demon's
light.

Stiff shudderings shook the heav'nly thrones! France, Spain, and Italy
In terror view'd the bands of Albion, and the ancient Guardians,
Fainting upon the elements, smitten with their own plagues!
They slow advance to shut the five gates of their law-built Heaven,
Fillèd with blasting fancies and with mildews of despair,
With fierce disease and lust, unable to stem the fires of Orc,
But the five gates were consum'd, and their bolts and hinges melted;
And the fierce flames burnt round the heavens, and round the abodes
of men.

