

CITY OF NIOBE

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CITY OF NIOBE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Headings	Page
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
THE POEMS . . . . .	5
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	35

## INTRODUCTION

The poetry in this thesis is a selection from two years' work. I have included not only what I considered to be the best of my poems but also pieces representative of the evolution that took place during this time period. Significant changes have occurred in all facets of my poetry, and my writing has taken a very different direction from when I first began this collection, especially in terms of form, subject matter, and imagery.

Probably the most significant change in my work has been the choice to work in a more formal tradition than I had been. Previously I had written entirely in free verse; "Andrei Rublev" is the only example of truly free verse left in this collection. Next closest are pieces like a "A Child Grows," which is strongly accentual though stanzas incorporate varying line lengths, or "The River," which is unrhymed accentual verse very close to iambic pentameter. A further stage toward more formal structure is represented by "Bird and Beast," which is fairly strict iambic pentameter and relies heavily on assonance, consonance, and slant rhyme. In other poems I have used established forms: "New Orleans: Black Men" is a madrigal in slant-rhymed terza rima; "Limehouse Blues" is a sestina; "Remodeling Florida," "Industrial Penance," and "New Orleans: Tamale Peddler" are in rhymed couplets; and I have used the sonnet form in "Becoming Thirty" (my first completed effort in this tradition), "City of Niobe," and "Sonnet for My Dad." Most of my work tends toward iambic pentameter, but I have used iambic

trimeter in the villanelle "Stalking," iambic tetrameter in "Nightclub," and six-stress accentual verse in "Houseplants." I have also used syllabic verse, both in created forms like the stanza of "Woman" and Japanese forms, as in "Four Tankas for a Spring Ice Storm." In general I do not find syllabics as interesting to work with as accentual-syllabic verse, though, and I find traditional forms, especially those involving repetition like the villanelle or sestina, most challenging.

Another significant change in my poetry in the past two years is in subject matter; previously almost all I had written was rather stridently egopoetic, more in the therapeutic mode than the communicative. For example, one of the poems in this collection, "A Child Grows," is a recently revised version of an older poem taken directly from childhood fantasy and experience. The older poem was an exercise in personal hieroglyphics; in the present version I have removed such references and tried to maintain only that which I felt was useful for connotational values integral to the poem as a unified whole. The "I" of the former poem has become "the child" of this version; in other poems I have similarly refrained from personal references I felt would weaken structural unity and evocative power. In poems in which I do use "I" it is generally the dramatic "I" as in "Andrei Rublev," where I wanted an individualized complement to the first narrative segments of the poem. In a poem like "Sonnet for My Dad" in which an autobiographical "I" is used, my procedure in crafting was the same as for a poem using the purely dramatic first person, and the emphasis is on character, ideas, and a dramatized situation. Generally the poetry in this collection is not autobiographical but deals either with ideas (especially about women's roles, as in "Woman" and "My Viking Funeral")

or places (as in the New Orleans poems).

Along with this change in focus of subject matter, the type of imagery I use has developed away from autobiographical hieroglyphics. Most of the images I use in the poems in this collection are readily understandable; for example, I use a great deal of plant and animal imagery, as in "Bird and Beast" and "The Rapists." Any other images can be found easily in a library--for instance, "City of Niobe" depends on a Greek myth. I feel that the most significant new direction my imagery has taken is exemplified in "Sonnet for My Dad," in the use of film references. I believe that film and television are basic forces shaping the modern psyche and ought to be tapped more than they are in contemporary poetry. References to classic films, especially, are readily apprehensible to the majority of people, not only their first-run audiences but generations of television viewers; film is the new mythology. In future work I hope to continue developing this resource as well as others capable of generating complex (and preconceived) responses.

For much of the development in my work I owe a debt to other poets. My decision to abandon the egopoetic mode, for instance, reflects my admiration for contemporary poets like Donald Justice, Richard Hugo, and Richard Wilbur, and my decision to work in traditional forms has been greatly inspired by the poetry of William Butler Yeats and E. E. Cummings. My use of the sonnet form, in particular, derives from the way Cummings used the form, deliberately abolishing traditional expectations for syntax, structure, and content. My use of tetrameter in poems such as "Nightclub," rather than in humorous verse as often expected, is in part inspired by Yeats' use of the meter in pieces

like "Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad?" My use of extended metaphors in some poems, for example "Hiving Your Swarm," reflects my interest in the metaphysical poets, especially John Donne and George Herbert. Even the "free verse" poem "Andrei Rublev" reflects the formalist tradition of T. S. Eliot in structure, imagery, and language. Other poems have more direct precedents: for example, the "fool cool" of "Nightclub" is a deliberate echo of Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool," and "A Child's Garden Snake" owes its subject matter to D. H. Lawrence's "Snake" and Emily Dickenson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," to which it is also indebted for its language. In general I find that I am influenced in many ways by the poetry I read, though I hope that the work in this collection reveals an original voice developing.

Indeed, I feel that each of the major changes in focus of my work, in imagery, subject matter, and form, presents a major turning point in my writing and an area for future development. This collection captures that turning point; all these poems represent necessary experimentation. Continued experimentation in the verse forms I have used here and in other forms I have not worked in yet should help develop my writing skills; continued development of varied subject matter and imagery techniques should help assure that I have something meaningful to communicate with those skills.



THE POEMS

A Child Grows

an old maid waits in the house alone  
with her wedding linen, her candles, and trousseau  
a child sits on the peaked roof, peering  
at an old black man struggling to cross on red

broken glass surrounds me  
red baptismal candles shatter  
and cleanse my mouth  
walls soar, like a father

pigeons shed outside their rooms  
quills stick in the carpet  
and prick their feet till  
they fear to open doors  
birds will scream hermaphroditic

I want to creep through the willow tree  
past the climbing bush and crawling vine  
over the jasmine and dandelion  
into the reeds and cool breeze

her mother lies abed  
in a roomful of Turkish snakes  
surrounded by boxes  
files of insurance and contracts  
cobwebs mutate dust from sunlight

help me through these thistles  
 pull me through these brambles  
 scrape me from the womb  
 from my mother's room

all is so male of the house  
 roofing and walling its women  
 three in the patriarchal home  
 now a womb for decay, and lost whispers

leaves slap my face  
 chorus of laughing mouths howls  
 blind them all, I want through these reeds  
 to the ivy, ivy, life-green ivy

sing to me, bearers of the light  
 touch me, gatherers of the dew  
 hold me, chanters of the vine  
  
 mold me into the oak I cling to  
 make me still and ant-crossed  
 a path for caterpillars  
 a rectory for wolves

yellow-jackets, bumble-bees, dragon-flies  
 lift me on your wings and bear me away  
 far from the molding walls and crumbled fence  
 far from the old red bricks to the world beyond  
 to bright, buzzing, dangerous freedom from bonds

Andrei Rublev

## 1. Icons

gold

red

emaciated faces

Mother Mary

dark eyes, pale breasts

nourishing Death

as he kicks his baby feet

one son born

sons of Israel slaughtered for two thousand years

beyond that--the disdained forest, Roman knife, Tatar horde

heads bent to lions: a sin of faith or pride?

St. Sebastian, arrows

Catherine, stones

Jerome

we worship suicide

in half-prayers

## 2. Cathedrals

for them, for the builders, no life but death  
sweating away their seventy years  
at hope's empty monument

toiling at strangling pulleys  
the very stones they hauled would crush them  
under gargoyles carved to mock themselves

from these vaults of air  
bled banners torn to the east  
in name of a savage book  
and a salvation bought with gold

they painted the duke's cathedral  
he would gouge out their eyes  
before they adorned his brother's church

## 3. I

kneel, the priest

opens the confessional door

damned from the pulpit

I am bled, snake-bitten, flogged

night, my windows leering, gothic guards

I cry prayers

fervent as the pledge chanted school mornings

for country, king, and King

what god is this

that wreaks peace only from pain?

Nun, you are wearing death around your neck

and Death in your arctic habit

Lead me not with those nails that are in your eyes.

Sister and I

Always, my sister and I scraping.

We scraped up a white snow fort

to play in, and throw snowballs from,

even if we scraped the grim yard bare.

There was so little of snow, of crystal,

in that factory town with its brown sky.

A Child's Garden Snake

At play I saw a garter snake  
with button eyes and quick pink tongue.  
My sister came and laughed with me  
to guard him with our delicacy  
as he slowly panted from hot cement  
toward safety in the cooling lawn.  
A neighbor boy rode up on a bike  
pretending interest in our thrill  
then spoke on spoke rolled down his wheel--  
he crushed that delicate green spine  
and smiled. I ran. I ran, I ran.



Woman

Am I only a man with a womb?

If I tear it out

will I be

otherwise the same?

How is it that I was named this way?

Was I born of a different dust?

Or merely a bone

torn out and

shaped like docile clay?

Is that hurt the debt he rules me for?

Unwomb, unbone, unname, unshape me

I am more, more!

I remain

otherwise the same:

I have paid his false slave debt in pain.

Houseplants

Houseplants ever fade in their artificial doom:  
central air freezes African violets, boils Norfolk pines,  
southern windows burn drusinia but pale the palm,  
insecticide routs aphids yet browns the fern while I,  
like the ivy, overwatered, limping yellow toward decay,  
wait rootbound, confined in my stainless steel kitchen.

My Viking Funeral

Do not corroborate my birth in dust  
by worming me in earth when I must leave.  
(Man, not I, claims his origin was thus.)  
Return me to Sea, who conceived the continents  
and will receive me gently, more gently still  
if I ship flamboyant, joyful, bedecked  
with red of roses, free of soil's brown burden.  
Release my essence, send me in a boat aflame,  
unthorn, unhouse my soul to wisp away  
as reds leap to blue, then sleep in the ash-white sea.

Bird and Beast

Kissing and clawing in swamp valley meetings,  
mountain goat and egret, your teeth as white as my down  
where they sink unnoticed while I soar in the sounds  
of your nimble proclamations toward bird-beast bonds  
and, flapping and gliding, agree to wing you in the sky,  
but at the edge of fleeing I begin feeling the weight  
of all your bone and quilling fur: my pinions break  
and I dive, to lie fluttering in the mires  
of our slim, sad, desires, while your sure-footed prose  
sashays carefully to the brink, and sighs.

Becoming Thirty

I have noticed the thin blue lines that cross my hands,  
the toughening of the skin, and the small scars.  
I notice the lines that circle my neck like bands  
to collar words that rise from thirty-year wars.  
But the wars have been sparse, and ageing meek and new;  
neither the lines nor veins nor small scars frighten--  
only the warning of the years' curfew  
on hopes, romances: friendless thoughts that run  
from thirty years' knowledge of myself and mind.  
I must confront the essence, the definite  
difference of myself: that I am unlike, of a lone kind;  
yet I'll find a private joy when I admit  
I'll never have a daughter, or a son,  
and I will never again be twenty-one.

Honesty

Honesty lizards in and out doors,  
quick tongue flicking off words,  
shoulders hunched in his chameleon coat.  
Convention slides like mud from shiny scales;  
salamander softness frees my reptile fears.

Hiving Your Swarm

Beware of going loose-hearted when near me,  
and of being loose-laughed and too kind:  
you in some honey moods are more  
vulnerable than a bee stomach-full of nectar.  
When your laugh cannot contain your heart  
and it goes out flying on a meadow day  
remember, if your heart goes swarming  
with its rich buzz and its sweet promise,  
a federal statute warns that if I lure you  
to the bare hive I have prepared, waiting,  
if I net you there, you are mine by law  
(only to be annulled should you go swarming  
from my safe yard again to the meadow air  
for a new nectar, and be trapped by a new keeper there).

Limehouse Blues

A small slouched youth watched her admire the fan  
enshrined in tinselled clutter, a web of blue  
whose use she mimed with her dainty hand.

His sorrow fluttered to perceive that money  
barred her from the shop; such Chinese beauty  
was out of reach for them in Limehouse.

A London coolie, wraith of Limehouse,  
he ghosted errands, scurrying streets that fan  
to dark corridors still. He'd forgotten beauty:  
bowed in work he knew but the wintry blue  
of limbs unclothed by the wool of money--  
now he recalled summer in her sun-hued hand.

Mindshot, not even imaging his rough hand  
in hers, he mouselike shadowed her through Limehouse.  
Her dynastic sable hair banished money  
to dreams of his homeland, where she might fan  
herself in rikshas on seats brocaded blue  
while crowds would bow, acknowledging beauty.

Another shadow in the streets knew beauty:  
on a gold-topped cane emerged a pudgy hand  
that wore a garish diamond sparkling blue,  
a top-hatted man come slumming in Limehouse  
to bait such girls with gifts--perhaps that fan,  
or any tempting trinket hinting money.



The cornered youth started, shivering that money  
belonged to such as he who stopped the beauty  
and dared to speak. Would he promise the fan?  
Would she succumb if he placed it in her hand?  
She coyly walked; the boy wisped through Limehouse  
blankly to stare at the web of blue.

A rock, a shattered glass, police in blue,  
a hasty gun--there were other thieves for money  
but the boy fell like many who dwell in Limehouse.  
Now the fat procurer shopped with his beauty  
who took the painted paper in her small hand  
but frowning dropped a bullet-torn fan.

His vision clouding blue the youth watched Chinese beauty  
waltz into webs of money; near one jaundiced hand  
lay the hope of a Limehouse night in a ruined fan.

Nightclub

The sequin crowd pose loosely loud  
in tavern windows disallowed  
opacity by shrouds of smiles  
they dancing waft in vampire wiles  
that outdesign the fool cool  
of hustlers' arabesques at pool.  
A Schlitz lamp swallows all, makes prisms  
of Bloody Marys, business isms;  
mirrored in the dull red, blue glow  
rows and rows of bottles echo.

Stalking

She feels a small bird stir  
with mute feathered surprise  
each night he prowls for her

and howls at her demur  
and stalks her for his prize.

She feels a small bird stir  
to shriek that she deter  
the judgment of his eyes  
each night he prowls for her.

Beneath the feline blur  
that cages her dainty guise  
she feels a small bird stir  
and rise a harbinger  
of claws that hypnotize  
each night he prowls for her.

In some deep nest within her  
against his animal thighs  
she feels a small bird stir;  
each night, he prowls for her.

Four Tankas for a Spring Ice-Storm

Ice sculptures in spun  
 hues refracted by the sun  
 that sparkles, then breaks.

Beauty is transient yet  
transience is all beauty.

Glass-blown latticed trees  
 prisms chime out in the breeze  
 that musics, then breaks  
the beauty of transience  
the transience of beauty.

Falling crystals point  
 like fingers to skies disjoint  
 with those who would break  
both beauty's transience and  
transience's free beauty.

Ice-blown crystal trees  
prisms singing in the breeze  
rainbowed in sunlight:  
this wind that chimes, also breaks;  
what god gives, he also takes.

The Rapists

They lassoed hummingbirds and harpooned horses,  
ravished turtles and the moss from the trees;  
they ravaged all the greenery from the human forest  
and when they sat for their evening repast  
found only a robin's egg dried to a small blue stone.

Florida Forest

I always feel a call from these woods  
if I stand alone at their edge, off guard.  
Deep green silence beckons toward  
deep lost silent existence: sisterhoods  
of palmetto, oak tree, and mossy sard.

Remodeling Florida

They're carpeting Florida with cement,  
packaging her in asphalt ribbons meant  
for the gullible, people used to living  
like insects teeming in concrete hives ringed  
by avaricious keepers: contractors  
contriving from Hilton Inn headquarters  
to build cardboard condominiums hucksters  
will sell quickly before the buildings tumble  
into the sea, remodeling with a rumble  
coasts of synthesis for tropics and hotels,  
former refuges for pelicans and gulls  
who steal and beg now from tourist trespassers  
where once were woods peopled only by trappers,  
old Florida crackers who walked on mats of moss  
in Nature's balance; perhaps they're not all lost  
but somewhere still are feasting on cabbage palm stew,  
cursing urban sprawl and hiding from all that's new.

Industrial Penance

The South is on her way up again--  
but why always up with girders that stain  
southern skies with a steel span too Spartan  
for the sylvan stateliness and slow pavanne  
of oaks, magnolias, and plantation land  
that rose once only in a bittersweet blend  
of honor, God, noblesse oblige, and grace  
already scarred by the follies of the white race:  
fraternal blood is baked in her red clay  
and much of what was good has paid in decay.  
Why then, when the South finally may rise  
must it be into girders and smoky metal skies?



New Orleans: Tamale Peddler

Tamales seem out of context with Chartres Street  
yet there he stands, thrust up out of the concrete,  
to challenge grass meridians with his blue light.  
Leather-aproned, dusty, somehow seeming right  
for the wraith city by the romance of his hollow face,  
the vendor claims with furrowed dignity the night's choice place.  
He waits almost urbanely for a passerby he dares  
to accost with eyes like the coals beneath his wares.

New Orleans: Night Vendor

Dusk. A vendor makes a creole lamp  
in Delaiches Street. Cast blue by the coals  
of his blackened brazier, he peddles silent  
chestnuts, hot and papery, with a scant nod.  
He rises like a column of the old market,  
part of the street, cement cracks and crevices  
in his cheek. When night offers, he retreats  
from the coallight, tips his hat to his eyes,  
and stands like an aged doorman awaiting a coach.

New Orleans: Black Men

I saw him on a deep wet Napoleon Avenue night--  
burnished guitar, black skin against a red shirt,  
mouth framed, face photographed by a car's light--  
and though I could not hear him I felt the words  
he seemed to call to the Mississippi's wind.  
I still feel his song and the flash of a headlamp  
in the delta sparkle a too-hot sun can lend  
to black men, shirts fluttering behind them like flags  
as they stride up the meridian, owning the embankment  
in that freeway tangle off Canal Street where they walk,  
banking the river air with their young black talk:  
I wonder where they are going in their bronze skin,  
and if I'll be outdistanced by these black men.

New Orleans: The River

Years ago in the fantasy hours far beyond midnight  
after tramping neon and stone from Bourbon Street  
to Cafe du Monde to prolong with caffeine our evening  
till the air might invite, hum to us past awnings,  
and we, light blind, would melt away into darkness  
over the levee to dissolve into the low tugboat moan  
of the great barge-ridden Mississippi,  
tucking under the wire to slip to her edge  
and touch that breathing in and out of all our lives  
but so seldom seen beyond the walls retrieving us  
from swampland: quicksilver Olympian Queen  
New Orleans is all water, cradled in the river,  
and only the pumps and levee authority  
keep us from Atlantis, except in the thick night  
deep into the near morningtime when we stole away  
to dip our fingers into the real mother of the city  
and, riverside, felt the calm, constant current  
that powers our hearts yet: so still, so still, so still.

City of Niobe

In solstice heat condensation tears  
from building walls. Cement mists meet  
citydwellers drying to stone in the street:  
such dank sorrow preserves them as biers  
preserve the dead. The grey sarcophagi  
of skyscrapers are obelisque memorials  
to children lost in oblique reprisals  
under the arrows of an outraged sky.  
If they rise again it will be to neon,  
resurrecting patterns of the color wheel,  
wheeling at building tops, like a film reel  
that never stops. There is no constellation  
here for those the gods' avengers sever  
from clay mothers who weep, like Niobe, forever.

Sonnet for My Dad

My father is a one-armed used car salesman,  
a Mickey Rooney of the trade-in set  
who does his sly soft shoe collecting debts.  
He never sang a song with Judy Garland  
but wheels and deals publicity, and leers  
boyishly into dressing rooms where he gives  
auditions for his chorus line of wives:  
a production number held over years  
and sold out backstage for a longer run  
by a childish charm I little understand.  
I applaud more knowingly the admiration  
Judy felt for Mickey striking up the band--  
my father strikes up business deals  
and follows things in skirts and on four wheels.

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