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This thesis consists of twenty-six poems. The poems vary in formality and subject but are essentially about defining human conditions within the frame of language. Most of the poems tell a story. The story they tell may be the poem or, perhaps, the speaker of the poem. With the exception of two sonnets and a sestina, the poems in this volume are free verse.

SHEELAH ANN CLARKSON

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the College of Arts and
Sciences of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
May 1967

Approved by


Director

LADY WITH UNICORN

by

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APPROVAL SHEET

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SESTINA

I shall sing the beauty
 of these great rugged hills
 these mountain villages,
 painted from the silver goblets
 of evening - but I shall sing,
 in my hearing throat, the song
 of a note to the end of a thread.

THRENODY

Anyone can sing the beauty
of these glass wrought hills
these murrhine valleys,
poured from the silver goblet
of spring. But I shall sing,
in my rasping throat, the song
of a moth to the end of a thread.

JUST A THOUGHT

What I wanted to say
last night when we were
driving through the dark
where white horses sleeping
could not know that we were
passing beneath the autumn
ghosts of hackberry trees and
unwinding 320 horses for the
purpose of adventure, but what
I wanted to say was
I think it positively grand
that the two of us--you and I--
are forever and eternally damned.

REVELRY

Heady with wine we made for Maxy's
and Willsonia kept saying how it had rained
so hard-as-hell all day we'd better take
Thickety Creek Bridge, which was higher
ground but a longer way while Nate
played "There Ain't No Flys On Jesus"
on the Jew's Harp till we got to Maxy's
which had closed. We all piled out and
sat on the grass. Somebody kept saying
how war is inhuman and Frank sang Arias
in Italian till his throat got hoarse and
then everyone wanted to talk about poets
and I got sick on some Azaleas and went to sleep.
When I woke up Willsonia was following the center line
back to Nashville.
All the way home I kept thinking of bay leaves.

THE VIOLIN

Only Italy has loved you well.
Your great lovers have been recorded
as sure as flying fingers upon your neck
have driven away tones of sadness.
Stradivari, Amati, and Guarneri,
magic names of love for you.
Some say your age has died and
place you, unthinkingly, away in gold
lined cases, covering you with silk cloth.
But I have seen you fondled by the old music
masters, tucked under the elbow of a worn coat,
slowly coming through the rainy streets to a music
hall. For some you have been no more than a place
for the world to rest its chin.
Yet those bright men from any age
lean their faces upon your body,
lower their eyes at your name.

ELEGY

(To the memory of Edwin S. Godsey
who died Jan. 1966, by ice)

The crowds come with their loud lips and
staring eyes and in a room I am silent.
Not one given to prophetic musings I am
perplexed to feel a strange spirit in this room
moving around the vacant chairs, desk, walls.
Moving against me it does not speak but murmurs
soft as rain and rubs its small fingers against my face.
I know that his eyes are deeper than all roses
and only the earth knows his name.

II

We met later,
I much older than you
and feeling my years.
You said, "It's our loss,
a tragedy." And I agreed.
I said, "It was inevitable."
You disagreed.
How could I explain that the death
card had turned its face upward
upon the dull table?
You frowned, you said,
only, simply,

"Why?"
 and I could not answer.
 Father, I wish that I might.
 That I might rend the veil
 and pulling it back find
 what visions are given
 to great men. That I might
 enumerate upon the icy fingers
 (now long dead) the ways the
 world works to purge itself.
 "A bit of the sacrificial lamb,"
 I might have said. But,
 being frightened of your
 wondrous heart, I talked of venerable
 green and privet hedges.
 You nodded.
 What must you think?
 You who are willing to give
 so much of yourself to me
 who am willing to record so little?
 Would you have me sing for Lycidus while you weep?

III

What I would like to have said to you
 that day we talked, was the love I have
 for the death of angels and hackberry trees.

One prays only for those one loves to die utterly.
Dying they make make us possibilities, and more.
I have said my beads,
made a noise in the morning,
and lain down at night to wrestle.
I will give up a score of ghosts
before my time and yet never be able
to give them up so cleanly.
Closing my eyes I see two faces
and yours is one.
I would really
like you to stay.
I, like you, stay.

IV

Now the spirit has lifted itself
and moving its great white form
it goes screaming through the house.
I have closed the windows,
turned the lock in the door,
and putting my foot heavy upon
the stairs I know that I must carry
always within me the ghost
of the whole humanity.
When there is only fading light
I will darken the rooms

with my great shadows.
 When there are no more sounds
 I will listen to him in the earth.

TO A POET

I have often felt beneath the morning sky
 and have often felt the gold and honeyed
 the golden words you write, the eyes that look
 a kind of white beyond from the mind,
 and you are not like leaves when they die
 a something like of gifts from the sky
 to each strong image dancing in your eyes,
 and have crystal tears without a price.

One day I see you walking in an orchard
 look, your soft feet tracing black eyes,
 reaching the new lines of your age,
 at night, but by the light of the moon
 when the sun has set--the sun and I,
 a young face above the unwritten page.

TO A POET

I have often lain beneath the warming sky
and read within the gold and bound book
the ashen words you wrote, the eyes that took
a cloud of white dogwood from the mind,
and within the pale leaves cause them bind
a sometimes idea of gifts from the sky
to rock-strong images dancing in your eyes,
and hard crystal tears someone cried.

This day I see you walking in an unbound
book, your soft feet tracing black eyes,
graphing the new ideas of your age.
At night, and by the arms of the round
moon, we see you running--the moon and I,
a young faun across the unwritten page.

THE VIOLIN MAKER

You, working in wood with chisel and knife,
know the feel of soft maple growing in your hands.
Fingers that carve flagrant bouts are worn on the
ends from ceaseless rubbing. You smell, as your shop,
of lacquers and varnish. Your nails are not clean.
Ole Bull and Paganini have long ago put you
beneath them. And while young men in orchestras
sing praises only to Cremona's masters, aspiring
to one day finger the prize, you put all worlds
beneath their hands.

IN SPRING A YOUNG MAN FANCIES TURNS

It came from nowhere, poised,
tilted, bent, and slept in me.
Concordant zithers made strains,
unbelievable joy, and melted guise.
How is it that suffering comes so easy?
That we can one day wake, find it spring,
and want to change, let it be?

Perhaps it is not, as they say, time
but is space where we are confined.
We live through endless summers here
(I hear Rio is nice this time of year).
It isn't time I'd like to change
but space we live in I'd like to rearrange.

REFRACTION

I hold you close up before me.
Hearing the wind blow gently through your eyes.
Gently whistling through the hollow orbs.
How is it that you are so transparent?
Perhaps the world has fallen on you.
Flattening off the edges.
Hurling pieces from your front and back.
Forward and backward in time.
Leaving only you and the transparency of the
moment that is only now and yet always was as
you always were, and I.
Holding you close up before me
your eyes are a mirror.

CLAUDE FINKLESTEIN, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. (SOB)

SPEAKS TO HIS BETROTHED

Come under the arbor, my love,
where hyacinths are rooted in
an ardent mixture of lime and potash.
Do not fear the blackness of my cloak,
one grows old by degrees and it is
cool in my garden under the arbor.
I will not speak of your beauty,
for being honor bound to speak
the truth, I must confess that
an orthodontist could have promised
more to your face than Helena has
been able to think of yet.
But, come with me under the arbor
and I will love you and kiss
your forehead--not your lips--
for in your forehead, my love, is your brain.

REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM

If you had died before I met you
I would have known you still
reaching beyond voids of unfathomable
space I would have marked you venerate
in the night air, a mythical salamander
singing from the solstice and I
would have listened.

If I had not seen your eyes
I would have already known how
the dark towers crumble year after
year, unrolling into millenniums of
decay, shaping unshaped pools of ruin
(like your eyes) a broken urn filled
with rancid wine.

If you had not spoken I would have heard
through aeons the shriek of wings in
the air heavy with death.

If I had not listened I would have
understood how it is that only through
you I desire death. Only your words falling
down on my eyes, lips, breasts, desire
me to be wholly dead.

If I had not carried the loyal disease of you

in my blood for eternity I might not have
 thought of what it would be like if
 wings were white and
 Angels wore them.

TWILIGHT SONG

In the gloom I see
 the lights of the city
 below me twinkling in
 stippled streams on my window.
 I watch the flickering red, green,
 redemptive in the night air while
 I am alone here, listening and waiting—
 waiting for you to come with your large eyes
 and with your soft lips whisper me to sleep.
 The rain stops. It is late and the tower
 bells are silent their beautiful sounds,
 in the deserted streets I wait you under
 the still waiting sky of the city stars
 in hushed sleep and in my purposed
 to find that once you like a hundred years
 and never see a hawk.

EVENING SONG

In the pane I see
the lights of the city
below me flashing in
rippled rivers on my window.
I watch the flickering red, greens,
seductive in the night air while
I am alone here, listening and waiting--
waiting for you to come with your large eyes
and with your mute lips whisper me to sleep.
The rain stops. It is late and the tower
bells cry alone their mournful sounds.
In the deserted streets I meet you under
the still morning sky as the city stirs
in bestial sleep and we are perplexed
to find that some can live a hundred years
and never see a dawn.

A SAD TALE

The very uncommon wealth of a young woman of Cambridge
lead a certain Duluth boy to pursue the ivories at Harvard
and bringing down the hall was made quite contrite
and artistic and
played for Miss Cambridge's lawn parties to delight
the Cabots until
a lute player from Kansas City hit an unusual high C
and the people of
Cambridge threw the cod stinking into the street--stinking
all the way to Minnesota.
Jesus, he even drank lemon with his tea.

AT WIDOW'S WALK--CAPE COD, MASS.

I wore white brocade while the seas
still sang across the rock-filled shores.
Running bareheaded to the spray I shouted
your name above the waves with pebbles in my mouth.

Here there are no seas of glory.
No shellfish lying crush-taceated on the green slime.
There are just the imprints of soft feet
on warm beaches
and the stone walls that keep the sea out.

Once in South Georgia I drove all night in the rain.
The broken line came at me and the tires humped
click-click over the asphalt road.
The radio was blaring a song from Nashville,
The pavement slipped by,
The white line still kept coming.

Here corpses are singing in the deeps.
They are singing your name
and I am thinking of you.

SONG OF SAPPHO'S LOVER

By a sea cave I found her
not as I had expected,
with fish eyes and bleeding mouth,
but rather lying serenely on the rocks
her twisted red hair filled with salt spray
and catching sea things.

The textbooks would describe her act as
inevitable.

A loss of contact with reality they would say,
and yet her small white arms resting
quietly in the sand showed no signs
of a last struggle. Her whole body
gave the appearance of complete resignation and
now lying silent in the rocks and sand
she spoke from every pore, and I,
not being able to hear turned
once again to the shore.

Soon the rescue squads and curious
public opinion will race wildly
over the sand,
by the sea,
across the rocks,
stooping over me they will wonder at you
singing to the waves,

THE FIGHTING MAN

The stately house of Branden
looked over the clouds of peach blossoms
rising from the red mud of Memphis and
held within the Roman columns
a slender lady and a tall young fighting man.

The girl stood in the Western gate
tears rained from her eyes--
tears for Colonel Talbot riding off to war.

In Mississippi a young officer slept too freely,
contracted syphilis and died. While
over painted cups in Memphis, the lady
told of how Colonel Talbot lead the charge
at Vicksburg, and defended, with her ivory arms,
the dignity of his name.

Two men met in Virginia and
at Branden the moonlight crept across
the polished floor to stare at the
dead young fighting man lying in state.

By late fall the peach trees lay on their sides
with naked roots pointed to the sky.

DECEMBER FROST

The air was light as we came from the lake
that December day, our skates thrown over our shoulders.
The blades striking together were the only sounds
in the frozen air.

But from an icy limbed maple a bird's voice drifted
over the quiet
snow to leave a song unknown to us in the stillness.

Now twenty long winters snows are piled upon my head
and the only sound I long to hear more than your voice
is a bird's song across a December frost.

ON FIRE

I do not understand
the smell of a fire
that claims the quick
responsiveness of the child,
or the heat that presses
the chest out until the lungs burst
spilling their invisible contents
on the charred floor.

I cannot understand
the flames that dance macabre
and crack their long bony hands
fulgurating in the dark sky while
your hollow eyes cry out their grief
to Mnemosyne and turn again to the cave.

SOMETIMES WHEN I'M LONELY--

I THINK I MIGHT FORGET.

With arms bleeding flowers
stolen hurriedly from the busy park,
I came to reconcile my wrath
and place them on your still white coffin.

FOR LYDIA

Far more beautiful was she than any antique flower
 vased by ivory hands in cold indifference.

But one was who caressed her petals in moonstruck hours
 and longed to take her from the green bough in pure
 severance.

But he tarried so long in books and letters
 that his lingering spirit would have made a tortoise weep
 for she became a woman growing old and far better
 men than he helped close her eyes in sleep.

Now the dark figures come crying above her head
 vehemently saying how all had loved her kind heart
 and yet none but he would think how heavy wreaths press on
 the dead
 and how soft a flower of ivory feels upon the dark.

PASSUS

Days weigh heavy on me.

Time marches up and down the pages
of the book I read.

The ink that spills from my pen writes Time
and is smeared by the warmth of my hand.

In the act of creation is destruction.

Below me the small village stirs.

The priests lie down from Matins in their cool beds
and sleep. Outside the brown figures travel under
the chapel bells--their heads lowered--their thick
lips whispering adorations.

Time is a stalking tiger--
crawling through the high grass toward
the sheep that stands bleating in the meadow.

"Ecce agnus Dei."

I only know that time can no more contain me
than the bronze arms that close in the night
may cause me to capitulate my dreams of hollow eyes.
For ten more chronicles of history would find me
as empty as I am today.

SELF-LAMENT

Ibycus can't hear cranes.

Neither can I hear your words
when I am silenced by thoughts

I hold of you.

Sometimes your young laughter basks
on laureled mountains and I remember
many nights spent in silence under
the warmth of hurdling stars.

I cannot bear to listen to the frail
words you speak. To touch you is
to touch Dryope. I cannot abide you.
I am too full of your wondrous heart.

THE DISORDERING OF JUDITH

When Judith lived among the painted cups, trying
to hold at bay the old vulgarian, it was all
her small hands could do to make him fall
exactly at her hem and keep him sighing
at charms that had all but ceased from dying
in lovely dainty Judith. But words are small
and even old men in love sometimes seemed tall
to Judith whose love was really in the trying.

And now the only leaves that hang are gold
and frozen as the fingers on Judith's wrist.
But do not blame dear Judith's rage to try.
If what they say at tea is true, when old,
lovely Judith understood all of this,
but, dying, pleaded to be told why.

THE FOURTHS IN WINTER

Like lines of snow across the sky
 leaving no space for the departed birds,
 the snow, white and blue (though it
 is now and today that yesterday) looks

A NON-ESOTERIC REVELATION

If, my lady, the intricate patterns
 in the variations of loving have displeased
 you--do not be overly disturbed.
 A monument ago a sister whiter than snow
 closed her thighs and moved
 to a plot six by six by six and
 even she sang songs brighter than your eyes.
 Everything goes down in the end and
 you will go down and
 I will go down and
 it is no great matter.
 Nobody but nobody
 could sing to the worms like you and me.

THE FOOTHILLS IN WINTER

Long lines of geese cross the sky
leaving in maples their deserted nests.
The grass, slick and clean (though it
is more dead today than yesterday) bends
under a covering of light frost.
Even our little horses are moved by
the blaze of color. Your bay has twice
nudged the black and moved against her
side. The hills humping ever upward
fade from scarlet to blue to gold
and back again into the intercourse
of sun and mountains. A bittern streaks
across the sky followed closely by a hawk.
And then the geese come rising, snow clouding,
with a rush of wings and long fading cries.
Now gone beyond the hills.
If there is someone who lives
in the earth until spring,
I love you.
Do you hear?
I love you.
But, there again, if you are watching,
another flight of geese go winging
their voices over silent pains
in empty mountains.

SESTINA

All night the winds have whirled wild through the streets
pushing piles of dead leaves into the shadows
making the tops of trees bend like strange spirits
incanting the muffled murmurs at our windows
of the slowly falling rains that make ourselves
tonight, in our warm antique house, prisoners.

I cannot say that not being prisoners
we would go out at this hour into the streets
slick with rain, to watch an image of ourselves
suddenly large, move from unkind dark shadows
to reflections of dingy cafe windows
that would, one day, have freed our tongues and spirits.

Tonight, determined to sit with our spirits
we have let this great house make us prisoners
and willfully we lock the door and windows
closing out the night, the cold and rainy streets
while your familiar voice drifts through the shadows
so appreciating this time by ourselves.

Maybe if the roar we hear were in ourselves
and not in the alleys, we could be spirits
tonight, and not merely the voice of shadows
long ago grown weary freeing prisoners
of our silent world to descend upon streets

where other faceless eyes stare back from windows.

"Put a record on," you said, and the windows
of your face made this night with ourselves
stretch backward into those impossible streets.
We were more comfortable then when spirits
phantasmagoric made welcome prisoners
of our hours we watched fade, so like shadows.

That endless fading now moves from night's shadows
and slides between us, moans, presses to windows
for out. We have made of the hours prisoners
and the hours have made prisoners of ourselves.
The night holds us in its hands, such small spirits
that we are fearful of even rain in the streets.

Envoy

Prisoners' windows are shadows of ourselves.
Windows make prisoners. Shadows, our spirits,
are windows of prisoners, shadows in streets.