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This thesis is a collection of poems I have written, polished, or finished during the 1970-71 academic year. Some of the poems are poems of loss, and some are love poems. Many of the love poems, however, are not love poems in the traditional sense, but poems whose tone and intention cause me to categorize them as such. There are also several dream poems which have as their focus a world other than this world, but a world which has, nevertheless, a very real similarity to reality.

The division in the text of the thesis separates those poems written, or finished, more recently from those completed earlier. Section II contains the more recently completed poems.

Some of these poems have appeared in The Greensboro Review, The Dragonfly, Atlantic, and New Campus Writing, 1966.

POEMS

by

Jessie Rosenberg Schell

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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in Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Fine Arts

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Approved by

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We seem very small.

Defiant, we lie in tall grass,

Watching the darkness edged between the trees,

Saying eight things:

Like a cold penny, your hand is mine is not.

You squira up slower, calling us names,

And, behind, we attack a snail.

Indeed, we die,

Shivering like a star beneath your candle's light,

Flashing yellow and serene

From the tree trunk's root.

"That's three," you whisper,

Blowing in the air the numeral.

The moon, above the limes branch of the trees,

Is a turtle star.

I hold your moist hand tight,

Am staring at the stars,

Forgive us for the snails,

For your aggression yesterday,

And pray that day will come

Before they know,

And snail upon snail,

Come softly for revenge.

SEVEN

We seem very small.
Defiant, we lie in tall grass,
Watching the darkness wedged between the trees,
Saying night things.
Like a cold penny, your hand in mine is wet.
You squirm up closer, calling my name,
And, united, we attack a snail.
Salted, he dies,
Dissolving like a star beneath your candle's light,
Flowing yellow and serene
from the tree trunk's root.

"That's three," you murmur,
Drawing in the air the numeral.
The moon, above the first branch of the tree,
Is a turtle stare.
I hold your moist hand tight,
And staring at the stare,
Forgive us for the snails,
For your apprentice wizardry,
And pray that day will come
Before they know,
And snail upon snail,
Come softly for revenge.

THE NUNS, AT FOUR

Each afternoon at four
The quick nuns walk the park,
Counting their hands like thoughts
And smiling their white way
Past the lowered heads,
Their habits trembling leaves
Like wind.

In the park,
They circle white or black,
Tapping their way down paths
As if the spiral walk
Had some redemptive end.

Only irreverent statues
Meet their stares,
Raising their iron swords,
Their stony hats,
To the rich, dark sin
Of the sun.

DELTA SUMMER

My grandmother
likes to tell about
when she was young and thin and
the levee broke
and the flood came over
the leaning town
like a dirty wave,
carrying horses and shoes and rings
and a few Negro men
who happened to be there
fishing their supper
when the waters sighed
and rose up.

She likes to tell about how
she tucked up her long white
skirts and climbed barefoot
to the roof alone, to watch
like a bird, the river
suck through trees and
how she heard the cattle
and chickens choke.

My grandmother
lies in her bed

like a bloated queen,
painting her pointed nails,
her hair the color of rust,
and tells me this,
her watery eyes
as soft as fish:
how the mud was black
on the gate posts for weeks,
and how ten children
drowned that day
in the middle of the
oak-lined residential street.
Their graves, she says, are
quaint black stones
that lie beneath the concrete wall
that keeps the waters neat
today.

SUMMER SONG

All summer
we sat on the lake wall,
feeling the sun reach through
to touch the bone,
careless, easy as
water drinking the earth's
rim away, quiet
as the summer boats,
flat on a postcard.
We counted the waves like time,
touched round stones,
named the color of things.
Sails as soft as angels' wings
motioned the empty gulls
that weighted down the air.

Now summer noons
crouch in the shadows
of November trees,
moving their faded light,
saying love, then, love
was as vacant and as bright
as the eye of the careless gull.

NEW YEARS EVE

Things end the same--
lovers, aunts, brothers
when last seen or spoken to,
all, all turn bitterness and pain,
like keys to the closed doors
of the heart.
We end the same,
in one silence or another,
but always in silence.
Death even, or someone's sleep
when you lie waking--
simply the clockhand,
making its curious sound in the emptied room.
Betrayal, in whatever face,
is the shadow we share,
our common, certain bond.