Poseidon's bakery; A collection of poems

Niles Edward Choper

The University of Montana

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POSEIDON'S BAKERY

A COLLECTION OF POEMS

By

Niles Choper


Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1972

Approved by:

[Signatures]

[Positions]

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oracle

every movement,
every turn of the tongue,
the slightest pursing of lips,
we are joined
and language floods my spine.

my face is buried,
weaving incantations in the dark:
every breath anticipates violence.
These shaking bones want wings.
The Ogre
for Bill Burriss

When my neighbor walks the tundra
pain curdles in his pockets.
His is a white country,
squirrels guard his path.

This deep-bearded carpenter
sires a well mannered line of chests and caskets.
His buzz saw whines ecstatically
from the barn, sends birds flapping.

This winter, we bring fruitcakes.
His eyes drop tiny sparks
when he eats.
The Banker

slush, wreaths, flashing lights.
They ask about Christmas Clubs
mortgages and credit.
No one comes to say hello,
to talk of fishing or the children
An orgy of words and small change,
faces like sinking minnows,
I wish them health.
They trickle through paper streets
and disappear. The vault moans,
growing louder towards afternoon.
Beyond its steel door, I wish a room
chest high with green paper
where I might go of a lunch hour,
jack off the pain, the precision
of their lonely faces.
Riding Close

if our clothes vanish
and the train keeps lurching
I would be on you in a flash.
We would pass thirty-fourth street
and wouldn't care till after yankee stadium
had disappeared.

what dull magician, then, keeps us both
holding the handles
quietly riding these subways?
Good Morning

or waking up in your own room

beside a woman who looks just great

only she's someone's wife

and you can't remember her name

but there you are and it's raining outside.

She's not awake yet and looking around

you see empty glasses,
bottles you left open and Hey!

there's cigarettes on the floor.

She turns in her sleep,

but you can't reach a cigarette

and you feel oh, almost sick this morning.

When she wakes the first thing she will say

is something about roaches.
The Love of Chaos

Chaos opened her lips to me
and I pushed my tongue deep into her mouth,
into a sea of flashing lights and false friends,
lovers who forgot me and strolled past with broomsticks.
I drifted through empty shops,
all night bars where women yell
tearing out hair by the handful.
Only the beer accused me--
no one ever knew me like that:
the dizziness, the failings,
shrill jap radios, wedding cakes iced with vomit.
Chaos spread her legs for me.
Screaming in her mouth,
I tasted her terrible love.
Incantation

O rise
from the bed where you dream
slowly, like smoke in the night
feathers, wings,
rise on the wind
rise, drift over mountains and lakes
over forests
(grasses and sage scurry beneath you)
ride the wind through the night
through clouds and blue air
to the city

streets and subways,
bars, movie houses,
find me
through offices and couches,
cops and countermen
search with feathers and amulets
through the dead flesh

find me
and give me blue feathers
singing loud
wrap me in your yellow blankets
and draw the blue smoke from my mouth
find me with your song
find me
lift the blankets from my shoulders
and drop them in the ocean
singing loud in the city
singing
wrapping me in feathers
and rising, a yellow wind
above the clouds
Poem For The Muse

I said "In sewers and steampipes,"
but you said "No!"
so we went off to the Botanical Gardens
and the museums.
You bought postcards of Rubens and Titian
then we went back to your place,
spent the evening drinking pink ladies.
When you left to take a leak,
I listened to the delicate water,
from where I sat. I listened
to the trickle as it fell
and was spirited away.
This poem is for my muse,
waters moving.
America Comes to Life on the Stage

The stranger didn't applaud.
He sat alone, drumming his fingers.
You paraded and the scenery moved.
He sat alone, drumming crossover patterns on the seat
while you changed
from Statue of Liberty to the girl from West Kansas.
He watched your eyes go black.
You, tearing into your pockets,
covering the audience with pennies and sawdust,
throwing keys, sunglasses, rings.
When the houselights came up,
your clothes were torn.
You shivered in the sound of their hands.
They left you, went home
to type notices. "Awesome," they said, "Ritualistic.
America comes to life on the stage
and suffers a nervous breakdown."
Meanwhile you were alone with the stranger,
the one you fell on, last act, and grabbed by the throat
just before everything went dead
and you forgot who you were, America,
before things had gotten this bad.
They turned on the porchlight
when they heard the noise and found it starving.
Idiot innocence dripped from the small eyes,
but none could fondle the little bastard.
With blind arms they lent it love:
vitamins and sunshine,
hearty liquids were urged.
They bathed it, bought fresh air, delicate robes
and sat down to late night t.v.

While they slept, he took off in the Lincoln
totaled it before he'd reached Bayonne.
A Street in New Brunswick, N.J.

If I hadn't seen better streets
I knew there were better poems somewhere.
Anywhere but Joyce Kilmer Avenue.

"Who's Joyce Kilmer?" I asked
my sister and she just back from teaching
Early Childhood Ed in Iowa.

"The poet," she said, safe, knowing
she had never seen the poem more lovely.

"'I think that I shall never . . .'

was where I stopped her and mused to myself
past factories, parking lots, a dog lifting
a delicate limb above broken pavement

and mused on. A neat pile of aborted boughs,
lines of stunted saplings in a row and
Joyce Kilmer, writhing somewhere in hell
somewhere in the trees.
Light walks across my room,
yellow light from a yellow sky,
mixes with the incense
winding thick and yellow in the light.
I look through the window
where grey clouds move roughly and scrape
against white mountains

I have been waiting too long.
Every foot moving up the stairs
resembles your step.
I rehearse as miser,
counting the pennies, dimes and quarters
we borrowed from school, work,
and the man you live with.

The grey shapes rise
disclosing white clouds,
white sheets, white pillowcase.
No yellow light,
not even the smallest finger
moving across my body
turning the dark hairs of my belly sudden and gold.

Yellow weather balloons vanish through clouds.
My skin pales in the cold
and soft fur folds around me
covers my eyes, arms,
another part of my body
dreaming of your body
your hair
soft yellow light
in a winter sky.
I hold this like a gun
and press it close
against your ear
load it with .38 caliber metaphors.
Like dum-dum bullets
they promise to expand on entry.
I hold this in a hand that sweats
and trembles with power
and mention casually
it has no safety.

Maybe I'll take your hand
and let you touch it
maybe it's only licorice or wood
maybe it's only a picture of a gun
Understand that it has no safety
it dreams beyond the edges of things
it sleeps beyond the limits of my grip.
Testament of Fingernails

Once we were the weapons
the tools you lived by.
Now you cut us off like friends
you have known too long.

We were the key
a man would look to us
before he could gaze your face.
Now you cut us off like distant relations,
old jesters in funny suits.

You put us in a porcelain bowl
send us away to live among turds and eels.

but we'll be back
See, that woman plucks a few hairs from your beard
takes us home, wraps you in words and red smoke
You won't stop her, she's tied your throat to her wrist
Now she grinds your soul
& brews a dark tea of your heart.
The Grave diggers

With spades and shovels
we have come to bury sympathy
in the old quarry
for Nachum is sympathy
& Nachum is dead.
Nachum the great humanitarian
the incurable romantic of Ward 2B
rustler of pillowcases and pale panty hose

In a shabby Ford we conquered this mud,
come to the small town of his birth
with nothing but time on our hands,
the frenzied pulse of time
riding the whole circuit from head to heart to hands -
full of clipt sympathies
we cover with a few clumsy stones
leaving Nachum's bones dreaming of flags and flowers,
small girls and peaches.

The next of kin are too old to drive in this heat
What shall they do without Nachum
now that Nachum is dead?
We tell them it makes no difference.
Go on a long trip, kill someone
Throw all your shoes in the river.
We tell them Nachum was crazy
that he used drugs,
grew rich on self denial and self abuse,
was schizophrenic from age 7.
We tell them we have proof.
Everything he was we have buried
beneath a few broken slabs
we tell them
in this last act of kindness.
I wake

I sit down with breakfast spread before me,
a big wind outside, snow all over, more on the way
and my house wrapped in paper

a blind man, I sit and wait
no cane, pencils or dog
just this music from somewhere,

the next room, only the music is low
when a crunching sound
like chains on the ice gets louder, gets
closer, closing on me
then moves off and I taste the coffee.
Perhaps in the afternoon,

some of my neighbors will know
maybe they saw jaws sink into snow
emerge full of asphalt, dig

a fast grave, a pit,
a burrow in the street.
Perhaps I should go out and meet my neighbors.
Envoy

I conjured a dragon
with 30 heads and 90 voices
it could sing the Messiah
if I wished

I armed him with spikes and barbs
A green poison breath
taught him discretion and simple ways
to impress people

Soon he had a life of his own
800 modern and ancient tongues
lovers and patrons all over the world
nympha, fishermen, millionaires
a countess or two

I was jealous and lured it home
I drew the circle, spoke the words
the air shook and bubbled
with chlorine and smoke
I heard shouts, terrible noises
but it worked
the monster lost color and shape
shrank to raw white protoplasm
How small? Quite small.
It's in your hands now.
star sighting

an old man
comes with gray seeds,
oceans
fills a bottle with old bones
& sends it away
Poem for James Wright

A slender moon walks
gazing down into the midnight lake,
finds the eyes of two small frogs
copulating.
The lake clots with the soft,
snow globes of their love.

Our silences meet, shake hands in the dark,
realizing the uselessness of all fear.
I am filled with a warm speckled sound,
the dance explodes.

All this:
I am old,
fat, drunk,
and cannot swim.
First Winter

No one came to explain
that miracles were no longer free.
The sun was gone
and we were alone.
No one came with food;
we discovered Pain and Cold,
named them.
In a cave, talking all night to the stars
waiting for the wind to shift,
waiting for answers.
The Night Wind

cries,
voices seethe in my skull

Away! Away from the houses!
Away from buildings!
Branches clatter, bend on themselves,
leaves swarm at my feet.
Wind cries, breaks into shadows,
races through passageways,
towing this heavy bundle along the ground,

Moon dances on the broken bridge
flowing down to the island.
Stars stampeding the water,
I leave my bones for dead wood
and rise in smoke.
Abalone Fragment

a curve of shell on the beach
half lost in sand
a shard of torpid silver
changing the coarse colors of morning
to a single, even glow.
curled, languid
dreams of dark ships, gold
and rose colored archipelagoes.
tortoises return with the tide
and broken moon,
dark ocean like a tongue, soft
lapping the earth and air
where they rest,
turning in sleep.