

# Notes from the Inner City

Ursula K. Le Guin

2006

Daughter of itinerants,  
ungrateful refusers of benefits and charity,  
in terror of the all-embracing arms  
I turned from the tabernacles of turkey  
and progeny of toothpaste, I ran and hid  
from the love that damns and pardons,  
I dodged the draft from the golden doors  
and let the wild west wind carry me  
with torn newspapers, cigarette butts, condoms,  
up against the chainlink fence at the world's ends  
in a red November evening.

There were some others there. They had lit fires.  
I found some trash and lit a fire too.

You keep away from the hyped-up kids  
and the old guys fighting Troy and Nam  
and the preachers even here  
creating dogma out of antimatter.  
You don't listen to the rant.  
You listen for whispers,  
sometimes a song.

One song ends  
arise and unbuild it again  
One begins  
From far, from eve and morning  
An old song says

O genus infelix humanum  
and the children sing  
come away  
come out and play  
the moon doth shine as bright as day  
You find your family where you least expect it  
but you have to let them go.  
A lot of them are dead before you met them.  
Or not born. You know them. Your eyes meet for a moment in the flickering light  
by the trashcan fire. Hey, brother.  
Hey, little auntie.  
Hello, baby.  
After a while you get around to marking  
a lean-to on somebody else's shack  
with pieces of plywood, plastic, cardboard  
and the pieces hold each other up  
as the keystone holds the ancient arch  
if you do it right. Scraps of aluminum,  
bright junk, bottlecaps, decorate  
our shelters, particular  
and elaborate as butterflies or snowflakes  
or human eyes. We inhabit them  
a while, each alone.  
Then we move on,  
because we fear our longing.  
Because we wanted home so much  
and looked for it so long, we found  
no house of stone or wood or word to hold it.  
So all around the city they call sacred  
we live in the exurbs of certainty,  
the shantytowns of righteousness.  
They fear our little separate fires  
scattered like stars in the indifferent night,  
and shut their ears when voices cry  
all down the silent streets  
between the shuttered windows,  
the steel-grilled banks, the locked cathedrals,  
children, children, come away  
– Ursula K. LeGuin 2006



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