

Notes from the Inner City

Ursula K. Le Guin

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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