

South State Street: Chicago

Bodenheim, Maxwell, 1892-1954

I

Rows of blankly box-like buildings
Raise their sodden architecture
Into the poised lyric of the sky.
At their feet, pawn-shops and burlesque theatres
Yawn beneath their livid confetti.
In the pawn-shop windows, violins,
Cut-glass bowls and satchels mildly blink
Upon the mottled turbulence outside,
And sit with that detached assurance
Gripping things inanimate.
Near them, slyly shaded cabarets
Stand in bland and ornate sleep,
And the glassy luridness
Of penny-arcade flays the eyes.
The black crowd clatters like an idiot's wrath.

II

Wander with me down this street
Where the spectral night is caught
Like moon-paint on a colourless lane . . .
On this corner stands a woman
Sleekly, sulkily complacent
Like a tigress nibbling bits of sugar.
At her side, a brawny, white-faced man
Whose fingers waltz upon his checkered suit,
Searches for one face amidst the crowd.
(His smile is like a rambling sword.)
His elbows almost touch a snowy girl
Whose body blooms with cool withdrawal.
From her little nook of peaceful scorn
She casts unseeing eyes upon the crowd.
Near her stands a weary newsboy
With a sullenly elfin face.
The night has leaned too intimately
On the frightened scampering of his soul.
But to this old, staidly patient woman
With her softly wintry eyes,
Night bends down in gentle revelation
Undisturbed by joy or hatred.
At her side two factory girls

In slyly jaunty hats and swaggering coats,
Weave a twinkling summer with their words:
A summer where the night parades
Rakishly, and like a gold Beau Brummel.
With a gnome-like impudence
They thrust their little, pink tongues out
At men who sidle past.
To them, the frantic dinginess of day
Has melted to caressing restlessness
Tingling with the pride of beasts and hips.
At their side two dainty, languid girls
Playing with their suavely tangled dresses,
Touch the black crowd with unsearching eyes.
But the old man on the corner,
Bending over his cane like some tired warrior
Resting on a sword, peers at the crowd
With the smouldering disdain
Of a King whipped out of his domain.
For a moment he smiles uncertainly.
Then wears a look of frail sternness.

Musty, Rabelaisian odours stray
From this naïvely gilded family-entrance
And make the body of a vagrant
Quiver as though unseen roses grazed him.
His face is blackly stubbled emptiness
Swerving to the rotted prayers of eyes.
Yet, sometimes his thin arm leaps out
And hangs a moment in the air,
As though he raised a violin of hate
And lacked the strength to play it.
A woman lurches from the family-entrance.
With tense solicitude she hugs
Her can of beer against her stunted bosom
And mumbles to herself.
The trampled blasphemy upon her face
Holds up, in death, its watery, barren eyes.
Indifferently, she brushes past the vagrant:
Life has peeled away her sense of touch.

III

With groping majesty, the endless crowd
Pounds its searching chant of feet
Down this tawdrily resplendent street.
People stray into a burlesque theatre

Framed with scarlet, blankly rotund girls.
Here a burly cattle-raiser walks
With the grace of wind-swept prairie grass.
Behind him steps a slender clerk
Tendering his sprightly stridency
To the stolid, doll-like girl beside him.
At his side a heavy youth
Dully stands beneath his swaggering mask;
And a smiling man in black and white
Walks, like some Pierrot grown middle-aged.

Mutely twinkling fragments of a romance:
Tiny lights stand over this cabaret.
Men and women jovially emboldened
Stroll beneath the curtained entrance,
And their laughs, like softly brazen cow-bells,
Change the scene to a strange Pastoral.
Hectic shepherdesses drunk with night,
Women mingle their coquettish colours. . . .
Suddenly, a man leaps out
From the doorway's blazing pallor,
Smashing into the drab sidewalk.
His drunken lips and eyelids break apart
Like a clown in sudden suicide.
Then the mottled nakedness
Of the scene comes, like a blow.

Stoically crushed in hovering grey
Night lies coldly on this street.
Momentary sounds crash into night
Like ghostly curses stifled in their birth. . . .
And over all the blankly box-like buildings
Raise their sodden architecture
Into the poised lyric of the sky.