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The Ghetto and Other Poems

Lola Ridge

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Produced by Catherine Daly

賤 The Ghetto
賤 Lola Ridge

TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

賤 Will you feast with me, American People?
賤 But what have I that shall seem good to you!

賤 On my board are bitter apples
賤 And honey served on thorns,
賤 And in my flagons fluid iron,
賤 Hot from the crucibles.

How should such fare entice you!

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THE GHETTO

I

 賤 Cool, inaccessible air
 賤 Is floating in velvety blackness shot with steel-blue lights,
 賤 But no breath stirs the heat
 賤 Leaning its ponderous bulk upon the Ghetto
 賤 And most on Hester street...

 賤 The heat...
 賤 Nosing in the body's overflow,
 賤 Like a beast pressing its great steaming belly close,
 賤 Covering all avenues of air...

 賤 The heat in Hester street,
 賤 Heaped like a dray
 賤 With the garbage of the world.

 賤 Bodies dangle from the fire escapes
 賤 Or sprawl over the stoops...
 賤 Upturned faces glimmer pallidly –
 賤 Herring-yellow faces, spotted as with a mold,
 賤 And moist faces of girls
 賤 Like dank white lilies,
 賤 And infants' faces with open parched mouths that suck at the air
 賤賤賤 s at empty teats.

 賤 Young women pass in groups,
 賤 Converging to the forums and meeting halls,
 賤 Surging indomitable, slow
 賤 Through the gross underbrush of heat.
 賤 Their heads are uncovered to the stars,
 賤 And they call to the young men and to one another
 賤 With a free camaraderie.

牋 Only their eyes are ancient and alone...

牋 The street crawls undulant,
牋 Like a river addled
牋 With its hot tide of flesh
牋 That ever thickens.
牋 Heavy surges of flesh
牋 Break over the pavements,
牋 Clavering like a surf –
牋 Flesh of this abiding
牋 Brood of those ancient mothers who saw the dawn break over
Egypt...
牋 And turned their cakes upon the dry hot stones
牋 And went on
牋 Till the gold of the Egyptians fell down off their arms...
牋 Fasting and athirst...
牋 And yet on...

牋 Did they vision – with those eyes darkly clear,
牋 That looked the sun in the face and were not blinded –
牋 Across the centuries
牋 The march of their enduring flesh?
牋 Did they hear –
牋 Under the molten silence
牋 Of the desert like a stopped wheel –
牋 (And the scorpions tick-ticking on the sand...)
牋 The infinite procession of those feet?

II

牋 I room at Sodos' – in the little green room that was Bennie's –
牋 With Sadie
牋 And her old father and her mother,
牋 Who is not so old and wears her own hair.

牋 Old Sodos no longer makes saddles.
牋 He has forgotten how.

賤 He has forgotten most things – even Bennie who stays away
賤賤賤 and sends wine on holidays –
賤 And he does not like Sadie's mother
賤 Who hides God's candles,
賤 Nor Sadie
賤 Whose young pagan breath puts out the light –
賤 That should burn always,
賤 Like Aaron's before the Lord.

賤 Time spins like a crazy dial in his brain,
賤 And night by night
賤 I see the love-gesture of his arm
賤 In its green-greasy coat-sleeve
賤 Circling the Book,
賤 And the candles gleaming starkly
賤 On the blotched-paper whiteness of his face,
賤 Like a miswritten psalm...
賤 Night by night
賤 I hear his lifted praise,
賤 Like a broken whinnying
賤 Before the Lord's shut gate.

賤 Sadie dresses in black.
賤 She has black-wet hair full of cold lights
賤 And a fine-drawn face, too white.
賤 All day the power machines
賤 Drone in her ears...
賤 All day the fine dust flies
賤 Till throats are parched and itch
賤 And the heat – like a kept corpse –
賤 Fouls to the last corner.

賤 Then – when needles move more slowly on the cloth
賤 And sweaty fingers slacken
賤 And hair falls in damp wisps over the eyes –
賤 Sped by some power within,
賤 Sadie quivers like a rod...

賤 A thin black piston flying,
賤 One with her machine.

賤 She – who stabs the piece-work with her bitter eye
賤 And bids the girls: "Slow down –
賤 You'll have him cutting us again!"
賤 She – fiery static atom,
賤 Held in place by the fierce pressure all about –
賤 Speeds up the driven wheels
賤 And biting steel – that twice
賤 Has nipped her to the bone.

賤 Nights, she reads
賤 Those books that have most unset thought,
賤 New-poured and malleable,
賤 To which her thought
賤 Leaps fusing at white heat,
賤 Or spits her fire out in some dim manger of a hall,
賤 Or at a protest meeting on the Square,
賤 Her lit eyes kindling the mob...
賤 Or dances madly at a festival.
賤 Each dawn finds her a little whiter,
賤 Though up and keyed to the long day,
賤 Alert, yet weary... like a bird
賤 That all night long has beat about a light.

賤 The Gentile lover, that she charms and shrews,
賤 Is one more pebble in the pack
賤 For Sadie's mother,
賤 Who greets him with her narrowed eyes
賤 That hold some welcome back.
賤 "What's to be done?" she'll say,
賤 "When Sadie wants she takes...
賤 Better than Bennie with his Christian woman...
賤 A man is not so like,
賤 If they should fight,

賤 To call her Jew..."

賤 Yet when she lies in bed

賤 And the soft babble of their talk comes to her

賤 And the silences...

賤 I know she never sleeps

賤 Till the keen draught blowing up the empty hall

賤 Edges through her transom

賤 And she hears his foot on the first stairs.

賤 Sarah and Anna live on the floor above.

賤 Sarah is swarthy and ill-dressed.

賤 Life for her has no ritual.

賤 She would break an ideal like an egg for the winged thing at the core.

賤 Her mind is hard and brilliant and cutting like an acetylene torch.

賤 If any impurities drift there, they must be burnt up as in a clear flame.

賤 It is droll that she should work in a pants factory.

賤 – Yet where else... tousled and collar awry at her olive throat.

賤 Besides her hands are unkempt.

賤 With English... and everything... there is so little time.

賤 She reads without bias –

賤 Doubting clamorously –

賤 Psychology, plays, science, philosophies –

賤 Those giant flowers that have bloomed and withered, scattering their seed...

賤 – And out of this young forcing soil what growth may come –

賤 賤 賤 爛 hat amazing blossomings.

賤 Anna is different.

賤 One is always aware of Anna, and the young men turn their heads

賤 賤 賤 爐 o look at her.

賤 She has the appeal of a folk-song

賤 And her cheap clothes are always in rhythm.

賤 When the strike was on she gave half her pay.
賤 She would give anything—save the praise that is hers
賤 And the love of her lyric body.

賤 But Sarah's desire covets nothing apart.
賤 She would share all things...
賤 Even her lover.

III

賤 The sturdy Ghetto children
賤 March by the parade,
賤 Waving their toy flags,
賤 Prancing to the bugles—
賤 Lusty, unafraid...
賤 Shaking little fire sticks
賤 At the night—
賤 The old blinking night—
賤 Swerving out of the way,
賤 Wrapped in her darkness like a shawl.

賤 But a small girl
賤 Cowers apart.
賤 Her braided head,
賤 Shiny as a black-bird's
賤 In the gleam of the torch-light,
賤 Is poised as for flight.
賤 Her eyes have the glow
賤 Of darkened lights.

賤 She stammers in Yiddish,
賤 But I do not understand,
賤 And there flits across her face
賤 A shadow
賤 As of a drawn blind.
賤 I give her an orange,
賤 Large and golden,

賤 And she looks at it blankly.
賤 I take her little cold hand and try to draw her to me,
賤 But she is stiff...
賤 Like a doll...

賤 Suddenly she darts through the crowd
賤 Like a little white panic
賤 Blown along the night –
賤 Away from the terror of oncoming feet...
賤 And drums rattling like curses in red roaring mouths...
賤 And torches spluttering silver fire
賤 And lights that nose out hiding-places...
賤 To the night –
賤 Squatting like a hunchback
賤 Under the curved stoop –
賤 The old mammy-night
賤 That has outlived beauty and knows the ways of fear –
賤 The night – wide-opening crooked and comforting arms,
賤 Hiding her as in a voluminous skirt.

賤 The sturdy Ghetto children
賤 March by the parade,
賤 Waving their toy flags,
賤 Prancing to the bugles,
賤 Lusty, unafraid.
賤 But I see a white frock
賤 And eyes like hooded lights
賤 Out of the shadow of pogroms
賤 Watching... watching...

IV

賤 Calicoes and furs,
賤 Pocket-books and scarfs,
賤 Razor strops and knives
賤 (Patterns in check...)

賤 Olive hands and russet head,
賤 Pickles red and coppery,
賤 Green pickles, brown pickles,
賤 (Patterns in tapestry...)

賤 Coral beads, blue beads,
賤 Beads of pearl and amber,
賤 Gewgaws, beauty pins –
賤 Bijoutry for chits –
賤 Darting rays of violet,
賤 Amethyst and jade...
賤 All the colors out to play,
賤 Jumbled iridescently...
賤 (Patterns in stained glass
賤 Shivered into bits!)

賤 Nooses of gay ribbon
賤 Tugging at one's sleeve,
賤 Dainty little garters
賤 Hanging out their sign...
賤 Here a pout of frilly things –
賤 There a sonsy feather...
賤 (White beards, black beards
賤 Like knots in the weave...)

賤 And ah, the little babies –
賤 Shiny black-eyed babies –
賤 (Half a million pink toes
賤 Wriggling altogether.)
賤 Baskets full of babies
賤 Like grapes on a vine.

賤 Mothers waddling in and out,
賤 Making all things right –
賤 Picking up the slipped threads
賤 In Grand street at night –
賤 Grand street like a great bazaar,

賤 Crowded like a float,
賤 Bulging like a crazy quilt
賤 Stretched on a line.

賤 But nearer seen
賤 This litter of the East
賤 Takes on a garbled majesty.

賤 The herded stalls
賤 In dissolute array...
賤 The glitter and the jumbled finery
賤 And strangely juxtaposed
賤 Cans, paper, rags
賤 And colors decomposing,
賤 Faded like old hair,
賤 With flashes of barbaric hues
賤 And eyes of mystery...
賤 Flung
賤 Like an ancient tapestry of motley weave
賤 Upon the open wall of this new land.

賤 Here, a tawny-headed girl...
賤 Lemons in a greenish broth
賤 And a huge earthen bowl
賤 By a bronzed merchant
賤 With a tall black lamb's wool cap upon his head...
賤 He has no glance for her.
賤 His thrifty eyes
賤 Bend — glittering, intent
賤 Their hoarded looks
賤 Upon his merchandise,
賤 As though it were some splendid cloth
賤 Or sumptuous raiment
賤 Stitched in gold and red...

賤 He seldom talks
賤 Save of the goods he spreads —

賤 The meager cotton with its dismal flower –
賤 But with his skinny hands
賤 That hover like two hawks
賤 Above some luscious meat,
賤 He fingers lovingly each calico,
賤 As though it were a gorgeous shawl,
賤 Or costly vesture
賤 Wrought in silken thread,
賤 Or strange bright carpet
賤 Made for sandaled feet...

賤 Here an old grey scholar stands.
賤 His brooding eyes –
賤 That hold long vistas without end
賤 Of caravans and trees and roads,
賤 And cities dwindling in remembrance –
賤 Bend mostly on his tapes and thread.

賤 What if they tweak his beard –
賤 These raw young seed of Israel
賤 Who have no backward vision in their eyes –
賤 And mock him as he sways
賤 Above the sunken arches of his feet –
賤 They find no peg to hang their taunts upon.
賤 His soul is like a rock
賤 That bears a front worn smooth
賤 By the coarse friction of the sea,
賤 And, unperturbed, he keeps his bitter peace.

賤 What if a rigid arm and stuffed blue shape,
賤 Backed by a nickel star
賤 Does prod him on,
賤 Taking his proud patience for humility...
賤 All gutters are as one
賤 To that old race that has been thrust
賤 From off the curbstones of the world...
賤 And he smiles with the pale irony

賤 Of one who holds
賤 The wisdom of the Talmud stored away
賤 In his mind's lavender.

賤 But this young trader,
賤 Born to trade as to a caul,
賤 Peddles the notions of the hour.
賤 The gestures of the craft are his
賤 And all the lore
賤 As when to hold, withdraw, persuade, advance...
賤 And be it gum or flags,
賤 Or clean-all or the newest thing in tags,
賤 Demand goes to him as the bee to flower.
賤 And he – appraising
賤 All who come and go
賤 With his amazing
賤 Slight-of-mind and glance
賤 And nimble thought
賤 And nature balanced like the scales at nought –
賤 Looks Westward where the trade-lights glow,
賤 And sees his vision rise –
賤 A tape-ruled vision,
賤 Circumscribed in stone –
賤 Some fifty stories to the skies.

V

賤 As I sit in my little fifth-floor room –
賤 Bare,
賤 Save for bed and chair,
賤 And coppery stains
賤 Left by seeping rains
賤 On the low ceiling
賤 And green plaster walls,
賤 Where when night falls
賤 Golden lady-bugs
賤 Come out of their holes,

賤 And roaches, sepia-brown, consort...
賤 I hear bells pealing
賤 Out of the gray church at Rutgers street,
賤 Holding its high-flung cross above the Ghetto,
賤 And, one floor down across the court,
賤 The parrot screaming;
賤 Vorw 鋌 ts... Vorw 鋌 ts...

賤 The parrot frowsy-white,
賤 Everlastingly swinging
賤 On its iron bar.

賤 A little old woman,
賤 With a wig of smooth black hair
賤 Gummed about her shrunken brows,
賤 Comes sometimes on the fire escape.
賤 An old stooped mother,
賤 The left shoulder low
賤 With that uneven droopiness that women know
賤 Who have suckled many young...
賤 Yet I have seen no other than the parrot there.

賤 I watch her mornings as she shakes her rugs
賤 Feebly, with futile reach
賤 And fingers without clutch.
賤 Her thews are slack
賤 And curved the ruined back
賤 And flesh empurpled like old meat,
賤 Yet each conspires
賤 To feed those guttering fires
賤 With which her eyes are quick.

賤 On Friday nights
賤 Her candles signal
賤 Infinite fine rays
賤 To other windows,
賤 Coupling other lights,