



**THE CLASSIC POEM OF  
URBAN ALIENATION  
THE DEATH OF GOD  
HYPOCRISY OF FAITH  
MELANCHOLY  
DESPAIR  
LONELINESS  
& INSOMNIA**

**THE  
CITY OF  
DREADFUL  
NIGHT  
JAMES THOMSON**

**ART SHANNON CLEERE  
AFTERWORD ROBERT LASHLEY**

A POEM BY  
**JAMES THOMSON**

**THE  
CITY OF  
DREADFUL  
NIGHT**

ART  
AFTERWORD

**SHANNON CLEERE  
ROBERT LASHLEY**

**ENTRE RÍOS BOOKS  
SEATTLE 2023**



**CITY OF PAIN**

**EVERY EARTHLY THING  
DENIES FATE TO MORTALS  
AND DENIES THE DEAD.**

*Per me si va nella citta dolente.*

— Dante

*Poi di tanto adoprar, di tanti moti  
D'ogni celeste, ogni terrena cosa,  
Girando senza posa,  
Per tornar sempre là donde son mosse;  
Uso alcuno, alcun frutto  
Indovinar non so.*

*Sola nel mondo eterna, a cui si volve  
Ogni creata cosa,  
In te, morte, si posa  
Nostra ignuda natura;  
Lieta no, ma sicura  
Dall'antico dolor...  
Però ch'esser beato  
Nega ai mortali e nega a' morti il fato.*

— Leopardi

# PROEM

Lo, thus, as prostrate, "In the dust I write  
My heart's deep languor and my soul's sad tears."  
Yet why evoke the spectres of black night  
To blot the sunshine of exultant years?  
Why disinter dead faith from mouldering hidden?  
Why break the seals of mute despair unbidden,  
And wail life's discords into careless ears?

Because a cold rage seizes one at whiles  
To show the bitter old and wrinkled truth  
Stripped naked of all vesture that beguiles,  
False dreams, false hopes, false masks and modes of youth;  
Because it gives some sense of power and passion  
In helpless innocence to try to fashion  
Our woe in living words howe'er uncouth.

Surely I write not for the hopeful young,  
Or those who deem their happiness of worth,  
Or such as pasture and grow fat among  
The shows of life and feel nor doubt nor dearth,  
Or pious spirits with a God above them  
To sanctify and glorify and love them,  
Or sages who foresee a heaven on earth.

For none of these I write, and none of these  
    Could read the writing if they deigned to try;  
So may they flourish in their due degrees,  
    On our sweet earth and in their unplaced sky.  
If any cares for the weak words here written,  
It must be some one desolate, Fate-smitten,  
    Whose faith and hopes are dead, and who would die.

Yes, here and there some weary wanderer  
    In that same city of tremendous night,  
Will understand the speech and feel a stir  
    Of fellowship in all-disastrous fight;  
“I suffer mute and lonely, yet another  
Uplifts his voice to let me know a brother  
    Travels the same wild paths though out of sight.”

O sad Fraternity, do I unfold  
    Your dolorous mysteries shrouded from of yore?  
Nay, be assured; no secret can be told  
    To any who divined it not before:  
None uninitiate by many a presage  
Will comprehend the language of the message,  
    Although proclaimed aloud for evermore.

NOW OPEN



# A NOTE ON THIS EDITION

When I started this press seven years ago, I did not understand how poetry publishing happens within or for a community. I knew of many small presses, but I had not published or worked with one, and my mental model of publishing at the scale we do was naive. A *gift economy* is something one hears often as a poetry publisher, so let this be my gift to the city I love most.

In 1994, during my first weeks in Seattle, I volunteered for a needle exchange at Second and Pike, then very much a center of heroin use. Having never lived in a city, it took surprisingly little time to become inured to the endless desperation — injection wounds, hunger, and derangement. I quit after a couple of years when the only phrase I could think of to describe our society’s response was “violence.”

As this book got underway in 2019, our house caught fire. Our insurance company paid for us to stay on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor of a new residential tower, the *West Edge*, built on the parking lot of that exchange site. Across the street, we often ate lunch in what was once the dank, shabby office where needles were stored and social service referrals given out with free coffee. But the alleys and corners around our gleaming tower could have still been 1994 — drugs and shoplifted goods for sale, people nodded out, unstable, everything and everyone grimly waiting for the next score.

Then the Covid pandemic started and what was terrible became worse.

I’ve read how Victorian studies are being cut from English departments and how even the Humanities are disappearing from universities in an endless quest for profit. When I was twenty, I, too, did what I could to avoid Victorian poetry. Within the era’s preferred metrical constraints, I was too young to grasp the often profound doubt and loss found in the poetry of the time, or the beauty of its sonic texture and rhythms. It didn’t register then for me as it

does now that we stand on the edge of the era's ruin. The climate catastrophe born from unlocking carbon to feed the mills — the consolidation of capital to fund expansion — the creation of labor and consumers on a global scale. As uncomfortable as it might be, if we could time-travel to Thomson's time, it would be to a world we would recognize as ours, a city we still inhabit.

Of the many editions of *The City of Dreadful Night* I have read, I most appreciate Agraphia's 2003 edition. It's a beautiful production with an essay by Dr. Philip Tew on Thomson's place in the radical tradition. It's in that tradition of dissent that I hope this volume is read and understood. The Kennedy & Boyd edition of 2008 is an easy way for the reader to explore other poems by Thomson and includes an insightful introduction by Ian Campbell. As a non-academic, I found the biography *Places of the Mind: The Life and Work of James Thomson* by Tom Leonard engaging. It seems strangely Victorian in its many contextual diversions and obsessive depth.

With endless gratitude, I thank Shannon Cleere and Robert Lashley for their contributions to this volume. It's strange to ask artists one has long admired to engage with you in such a poem, but it speaks to the power of Thomson's work that they both instantly grasped the import of his bleak vision and how it still relates to our time and city.

— Knox Gardner  
Publisher

## “THEY LEAVE ALL HOPE BEHIND WHO ENTER THERE...”

*The City of Dreadful Night* was first published as a serial in the *National Reformer* in 1874 and then in book form in 1880. Its author, James Thomson, was known at the time primarily for his essays, literary piece work, and associations with freethinkers and radicals — and never found the larger readership he worked hard to gain. Poverty, insomnia, and alcoholism lead to his early death at forty-seven.

Now regarded as a cult classic and a refutation of Victorian exceptionalism, *The City of Dreadful Night* is a journey through the vast new urban landscape created by industrialization. In social isolation and economic exploitation the soul despairs, while grim Darwinism has replaced God and charlatans hawk an impossible afterlife.

Our edition features illustrations by artist Shannon Cleere on the current housing and mental health crisis in Seattle, as well as an afterword by Tacoma poet Robert Lashley. Nearly 150 years later, the city, both as imagined by Thomson and as lived in our late-capitalism experience, remains the same: starkly isolating and cruelly unjust for the poor and unwell.

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NIGHT

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**CITY OF**  
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\$17.00

