

Charles Reznikoff, *Rhythms* (1918)

Rhythms, Reznikoff's first book, was published by the author in Brooklyn, New York, in 1918. It contained twenty-three unnumbered poems. When he reprinted the group in *Poems* (1920), Reznikoff rearranged the order, dropped five poems, and revised thirteen others. He again revised and rearranged the group for the 1927 book, *Five Groups of Verse*, restoring one of the omitted poems. This third version is the one reproduced here. For details of the re-orderings and revisions and for the omitted poems see the Appendix.

1

The stars are hidden,
the lights are out;
the tall black houses
are ranked about.

I beat my fists
on the stout doors,
no answering steps
come down the floors.

I have walked until
I am faint and numb;
from one dark street
to another I come.

The comforting
winds are still.

This is a chaos
trough which I stumble,
till I reach the void
and down I tumble.

The stars will then
be out forever;
the fists unclenched,
the feet walk never,

and all I say
blown by the wind
away.

2

The dead are walking silently.

I sank them six feet underground,
the dead are walking and no sound.

I raised on each a brown hill,
the dead are walking slow and still.

3

So one day, tired of the sky and host of stars,
I'll thrust the tinsel by.

4

I step into the fishy pool
as if into a cool
vault.
I, too, become
cold-blooded, dumb.

5

The dead man lies in the street.
They spread a sack over his bleeding head.
It drizzles. Gutter and walks are black.

His wife now at her window,
the supper done, the table set,
waits for his coming out of the wet.

6

They dug her grave so deep
no voice can creep to her.

She can feel no stir
of joy when her girl sings,

and quietly she lies
when her girl cries.

7

On Brooklyn Bridge I saw a man drop dead.
It meant no more than if he were a sparrow.

Above us rose Manhattan;
below, the river spread to meet sea and sky.

I met in a merchant's place
Diana:
lithe body and flowerlike face.

Through the woods I had looked for her
and beside the waves.

8

The shopgirls leave their work
quietly.

Machines are still, tables and chairs
darken.

The silent rounds of mice and roaches begin.

9

Hair and faces glossy with sweat in August
at night through narrow streets glaring with lights
people as if in funeral processions;
on stoops weeds in stagnant pools,
at windows waiting for a wind that never comes.
Only, a lidless eye, the sun again.

No one else in the street but a wind blowing,
store-lamps dimmed behind frosted panes,
stars, like the sun broken and scattered in bits.

10

I walked through the lonely marsh
among the white birches.

Above the birches rose
three crows,
croaking, croaking.

The trumpets blare war
and the streets are filled with the echoes.

11

Wringing, wringing his pierced hands,
he walks in a wood where once a flood
washed the ground into loose white sand;
and the trees stand each a twisted cross,
smooth and white with loss of leaves and bark,
together like warped yards and masts
of a fleet at anchor centuries.
No blasts come to the hollow of these dead;
long since the water has gone from the stony bed.
No fields and streets for him, his pathway runs
among these skeletons, through these white sands,
wringing, wringing his pierced hands.

The troopers are riding, are riding by,
the troopers are riding to kill and die
that a clean flag may cleanly fly.

They touch the dust in their homes no more,
they are clean of the dirt of shop and store,
and they ride out clean to war.

12

How shall we mourn you who are killed and wasted,
sure that you would not die with your work unended,
as if the iron scythe in the grass stops for a flower?

13

Her kindness is like the sun
toward dusk shining through a tree.

Her understanding is like the sun,
shining through mist on a width of sea.

14

The fingers of your thoughts
are moulding your face
ceaselessly.

The wavelets of your thoughts
are washing your face
beautiful.

When you sang moving your body proudly
before me wondering who you were
suddenly I remembered, Messalina.

The sea's white teeth
nibble the cliff;
the cliff is a man,
unafraid.

She eats his strength
little by little,
his might will be lost
in her depths.

15

My work done, I lean on the window-sill,
watching the dripping trees.
The rain is over, the wet pavement shines.
From the bare twigs
rows of drops like shining buds are hanging.