

A LAMENT FOR NEW ORLEANS*

Clyde Fant

How like a widow sits the city once so beautiful!
She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks,
 because there is none to comfort her.
She stretched forth her hands, but none came to her;
 they heard how she was groaning, but none came unto her.
In her streets the flood bereaves;
 in the sodden houses it is like death.
The leaders and elders of the city have fled,
 but the poor are trapped within her levees.
Her friends have dealt treacherously with her;
 those who promised to help are worse than her enemies.
When she cried aloud, none came;
 smooth words promised much,
 but they were empty rhetoric,
 wells without water, phantom bread.
Shame! Shame upon us all.
Who would have believed it!
She who sang even when she mourned,
The people who danced even in their want—
 now they are dying.
Their colorful robes are stained with mud;
 they are gray, all gray, the pallor of the dead.
Weep, weep for the great city!
Orators of platitudes, politicians of promises,
 it is you who betrayed her!

* After Prof. Fant composed "A Lament for New Orleans" with the following superscript, it was posted on the Internet by a friend on 14 September 2005: "*I am from Louisiana. In the last days, grief and outrage have held a contest inside me. So I'm writing this. Because I have to.* Clyde Fant, Th.D."

You took from her her safety;
 you neglected her when she reached out to you.
 You channeled her rivers and harnessed her waters,
 but for yourselves! for the profits of your friends!
 You caused her marshes to dry
 and her wilderness to recede;
 You brought the might of the waves
 and the winds to her very doors.
 The poor, those who dwelt in the lowest places,
 who lived in miserable shanties of wood,
 termite-ridden and forlorn,
 where none but the hopeless would dwell:
 You have murdered them,
 and their corpses drift in the brackish floods,
 but their cries have gone up to God!
 Woe to you, Republicans!
 For you pumped wealth from their lands
 and sent their sons to die in your wars,
 but they are as nothing to you.
 "Who is my neighbor?"
 You do not yet know the answer to this ancient question.
 Your only neighbors are your friends in the country clubs,
 or the "good old boys" in the redneck bars.
 Your grandfathers set the slaves free, and
 you return them to a worse bondage of perpetual poverty!
 Your fathers segregated them, but you ghettoize them;
 you redirect them to take away the few voices they have.
 But God will cause the ruined city to cry on their behalf!
 Shame! Shame for your hypocritical use of my name
 to lure the unwary.
 Woe to you also, Democrats!
 You were the fathers of slavery, first sons of the South!
 You damned the poor to generations of ignorance and want.
 Your fathers segregated them,
 and you promised to bring them into your family.
 But where were you when they needed you?
 For you lack the courage of your convictions!
 You curry the favor of the enemies of your own people!
 You have become impotent by your timidity.
 You endorsed the wars. You approved
 the miserable crumbs for education and employment.
 You courted the indifferent, smug suburbs:
 may you live among them eternally,

 bored forever by their white sameness!
 Shame! Shame for your graft in the statehouses,
 your selfishness that has turned your people from you in disgust.
 Woe to you Christians who take pride in the name Conservative,
 who call all generous spirits and inclusive hearts liberals,
 who see wars as strength and peace as weakness!
 The Prince of Peace rebuke you!
 Woe to you also, Liberal Christians!
 You scorn the common
 and cause the simple to feel inferior in your midst.
 Your hearts are ever open,
 but your pocketbooks are always closed!
 He who lived among the poor rebuke you!
 Woe to you, television preachers and mega-church pastors!
 False prophets!
 You deceive the people with your bleats of piety
 while you endorse wars and favor your rich benefactors.
 Your prophecies of end times have come true
 in your own generation!
 Look upon the city! Look upon hell on earth!
 See what your leaders have wrought,
 the shame of the earth!
 All mock us and call us fools,
 we who send armies across oceans
 but cannot cross the Mississippi to help our own!
 Shame, shame upon you!
 I hate, I despise your solemn assemblies,
 the self-hypnotic repetitions of your pagan
 praise-hymns are a scandal in my ears.
 Come before me no more lifting up unholy hands.
 Do not use my name to grow your personal kingdoms,
 or to bless your political ambitions.
 What do think I desire? Barrels of oil from Iraq?
 Herds of sacred cows from Texas?
 Go now and learn what this means:
 I desire mercy and not sacrifice,
 Loving kindness, not benign neglect.
 Weep, weep for my city,
 For my people,
 For my children.
 For they are dead.