

A Wry, Humorous Poet Writes of Floosies, Alcoholism, and Redemption...

# Will Nixon's Pocket Full of Wry

by Djelloul Marbrook

## Love In the City of Grudges. Poems

by Will Nixon

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All poetry and fiction is biographical. Its universality comes from the writer's painful walk up and down the world in others' shoes, however ill-fitting and improbable. The rare man takes a stroll in high heels, the rare woman dons a man's prickly skin.

Will Nixon's second collection of poems, *Love in the City of Grudges*—the first is *My Late Mother As a Ruffed Grouse*—is a short history of our ordinarily harrowing lives. Not Nixon's but ours, because he understands that biography is interesting to us only when we are able to inhabit it, and the invitation to inhabit it is the poet's work.

The poems recount a brief, searing span in the poet's life in Hoboken, New Jersey, as the city tries to redeem itself from its status as Manhattan's dump. Their beauty is that they reflect the poet's own effort to redeem himself from his mother's drunken indictments, and this is why he relates so intimately with Hoboken's yearning. City and poet are hard at work on a project of redemption. What the city gives him the poet returns. *Love In the City of Grudges* is a story of symbiosis.

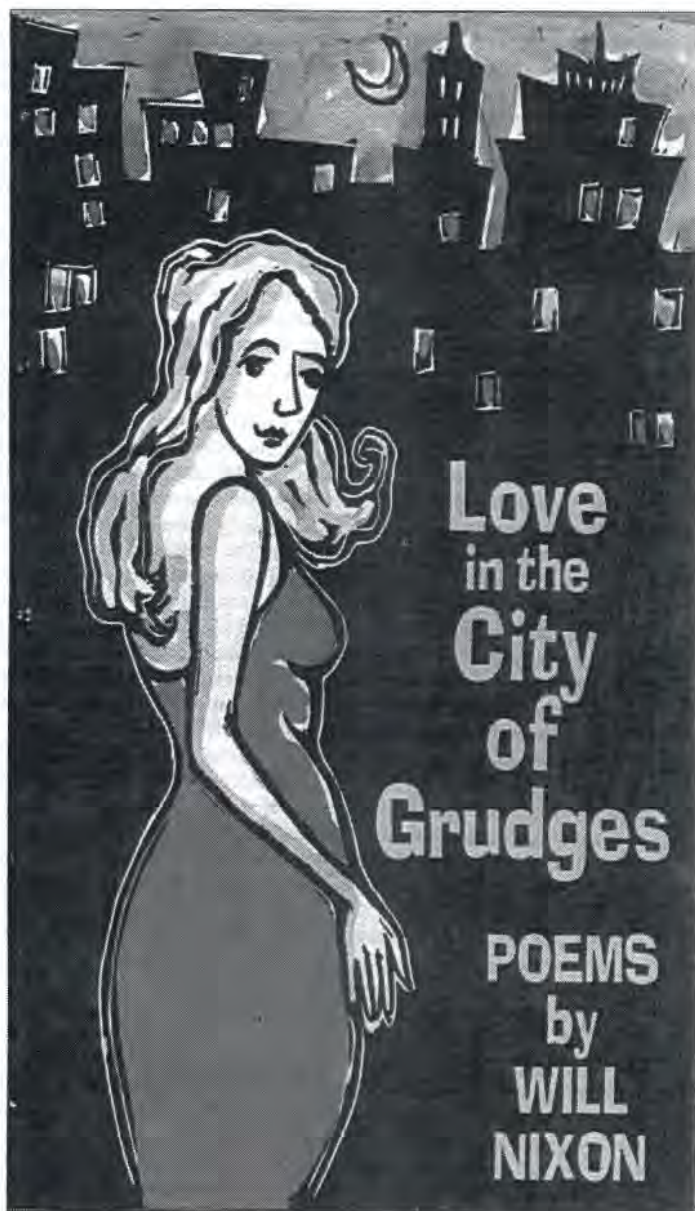
The poet's innate humor, often expressed in a kind of upper-class argot, rather than masking his serious intent to say something telling about our interactions, creates a kind of seesaw on which we see each other from different angles. And we see the world juxtaposing itself around us, up and down, dizzying us, giving us no time to laugh too long or too loud and no time to wait for our smile to be returned.

In the marvelous "Love, Falling In," which occurs early in the collection, Nixon seems to have remembered everything that was ever said to him, announcing without making much of it that he is a dangerous man. All good poets are more dangerous than the Special Forces, because their specialty is not to shut us down but to open us up to the sheer menace and immensity of existence. Here are the last seven lines of this signature poem:

*The gap in your front teeth meant something sensual  
in Chaucer that I tried to recall from sophomore English.  
Your shyness was inviting. You asked if I knew  
The Merck Manual of Medical Information  
spread like a library dictionary on its own lectern  
by the stereo turntable. I didn't, but wondered  
what it said under "Love, falling in."*

Sometimes a poem is an incident in a poet's life, sometimes the poet writes about incidents. I suppose both statements are true, but Nixon's memory for incidents is Proustian, and like Proust he seems to remember the color of every fabric, the grain of every wood. It would be a bit eerie if it weren't reassuring, reassuring because it instills an authenticity that more experimental poets sometimes lack.

Take the poem "Oscar Night." Poet and wife are coming to dinner to a shabby flat in New York's East Village. The poet reveals something loutish about himself: *My wife wants me to appreciate her astrology friends. / "they're very smart," she'd said on the stairs. / "About something very stupid," I'd replied...*



Cover art for *Love in the City of Grudges. Poems* by Will Nixon, linoleum cut by Carol Zaloom (Foothills Publishing, 2010).

Ah well, a marriage could have gone a thousand years without that exchange. But, clinically, Nixon thinks it important that he's no Homer, no Yeats—he's a deeply flawed survivor of bad times who wishes to make it amply clear to us that his poetry cannot exonerate him from his role in making those times bad. You can trust such a poet, even when you know that others would tell the same story differently. This poem also shows us Nixon's gift for finale. The two final lines are:

*The way she smiles you'd never know  
we haven't touched since her father died.*

One would have thought confessional poetry had run its course with Lowell, Sexton, Berryman, Plath, et al—and perhaps the poet could be accused of a spate of indecency here—but my own take is that sometimes the hem of a situation, of a life, must be lifted for the sake of art, rather like the unavoidable eroticism of watching almost any ballet, even one authorized for children. Some things should be said even if they offend the sayer, and these last lines throw light back on the exchange in the stairwell.

(And that, by the way, is perhaps the strongest defense one can make for the current insistence of publishers on thematic and sequential books of poetry, that there is a backward throw of light in each subsequent poem. I think it is of little concern to the market-minded publishers but worth noting anyway.)

"Moving Into My Cabin" is a Walden-esque memorandum to someone left behind, and perhaps a former self as well. It achieves its memo style by omitting the first person and going directly to past-tense verbs: hung, loaded, gathered, picked, shook, swept, listened, stepped, decorated, noticed, brewed, studied. There is a sense the writer feels honor-bound to account for this experience, the guilt of someone who has ventured somewhere at the cost of human loss.

The poem has the punctiliousness of someone who needs to talk to himself to stay sane, the focus of someone consciously taking one step after another in order not to be swamped by the enormity of something that has occurred. It's a kind of hand-over-hand rope crossing of a torrent, and the past tense gives it an ominous drumbeat that makes the reader wonder if this man will survive this dislocation from Hoboken to the epicenter of the Catskills. We know he does survive it because we now have this book, and this reminds us of how much we have all paid to arrive where we are from somewhere else.

Nixon has not had the immigrant experience. He has not had to see America as a person who is kept out of certain places by color or religion might see it, but he goes this experience one better, because he often sounds like an extraterrestrial who hears and sees a foreignness in what we often perceive as quintessential Americana. I think this may be an inheritance from a mother who undermined his footedness in the world.

If I'm right, then for all the pain in his relationship with her, which is amply revealed in his poetry, we're obliged to celebrate her gift to him, which is that she compelled him to examine everything and his place in it.

"The Lumberjack's Beard" exemplifies this. The poem is remarkable for the poet's distance from self. He is listening to a foreign language, his own, and observing foreign customs, his own. And he has been doing this for a long time, witness these lines:

*But what did my father know, a bank economist  
forever rushing out the door with shaving cream moles  
missed on his chin, late for his train, the 7:48?  
I did not intend to grow up to be a commuter slave.*

We probably owe this poetry to his father's preoccupations and his mother's judgments. And it wouldn't incur in us much of a debt if it weren't for how well it honed Nixon's powers of observation. The poem is about nothing having rescued the poet from himself, an experience about as universal as experience gets. The youth culture of the 60s, the greed culture of the 90s, the war and security culture of today, nothing ultimately saves us from the mirror, from our dreams, from the decisions we hardly noticed ourselves making.

So, while Nixon may come across as an extraterrestrial, we see in him our own foreignness and how our customs and institutions are crafted to give us surcease from our own foreignness. That is perhaps why some of us inveigh against immigrants—we want so badly to be in that we conspire to keep others out.

*I need to believe what my mother said,  
"Write what you want. I won't read a word."*

That show-stopper appears at the end of "Procrastination." There is the writer's own demon: The beast in the basement that must not be fed. Mom belongs, but son is a foreigner. And if mom does not read a word, then son does not exist. The phenomenon is in microcosm the very illness occurring in the nation: we belong, you don't. Churches say it, ethnic groups say it, political cults say it, commentators say it, politicians say it. We are at work alienating one another, and to the extent that poetry sheds light on what we do it makes out footfalls upon the earth more legitimate.

*Love In the City of Grudges* could be love in a nation of grudges, and it could be a plea for just a little room in which to survive each other's prejudices.

More than in *My Late Mother As a Ruffed Grouse*, the strategy of *Love In the City of Grudges* is novelistic, but the recurrent tactic is to seed the landscape from a pocket full of wry. This is a poetics as memoir. You might imagine a handler debriefing a manic, somewhat zany operative. Consider, for example, this account in "What Is It About Christmas?" of the poet's affair with a Jewish musician and her first Christmas tree:

*The first time we made love under its balsam scent,  
I tossed her black bra on the treetop for a star.  
"Leave it," she dared. "Your family will love it."  
Maybe I should have explained our traditions.*

Or maybe not; not would be so much more fun. I can't believe Jesus would have objected to the bra atop the tree, but I can think of a number of Christians I have known who would object to Jesus. The poem captures our common knowledge that Christmas finds and nourishes our well-concealed nuttiness. By the time you reach this poem you may well be thinking of how Voltaire's smile, captured by Jean-Antoine Houdon, haunts everything we know about Voltaire, indeed everything we know about ourselves. This is often the effect of Will Nixon's poetry.

The long poem "The Buckskin Bikini," exuberantly erotic, has a palpable effect on an audience that I myself witnessed. There is a reluctance to allow the poet to continue, not because the end is a stunner but because it's so casually, innocently provocative:

*In salty winds her bikini straps flap, her blonde hair  
catches on her lips. A red tear from her wax cup  
dribbles down to her breasts. "Thank you," she says.  
"But I'm only made out of light."*

If a Sufi master said it we'd gather a cult around it, we'd contemplate it like a zhikr, we'd canonize it. But this Hoboken water nymph is saying it, and it seems so familiar to us that we can't imagine how we missed it when one girlfriend or another said it. It's like encountering a goddess and mistaking her for the girl next door.

In "The Leak" the verse diarist goes on a roach hunt in Hoboken, and then he visits his super's piranha. His girlfriend has left, finding roaches humping on her toothbrush:

*She threw the toothbrush at me, "Stick it up your ass."  
Another thing I hated: her reliance on clichés.*

In my perversity I would have liked to know what happens to this girl. But the poet has other people to talk about. One of the felicities of his work is that people other than himself come to life in the work and sometimes you even like them more than their observant interlocutor. You have to like a poet who gives them this room to state their case.

## BOOKS

It seems somehow anachronistic that in a period of inchoate and contradictory public anger our poetry should give voice to a kind of innocuous romanticism pervading even some of the most intellectually rigorous journals. Nixon's poetry does not of its good humor shun the gritty and disturbing. It is not romantic, not by a long shot. It speaks, for example, to the threat of losing everything that is dear in life to a floozy in a red dress or a Hoboken tenement rent strike ignited by green mold.

And yet, while he is an acute and acerbic observer in the best journalistic tradition—he is in fact a freelance journalist—he sometimes swings the gate wide open to a kind of lyrical surrealism, which I have a hunch has been waiting in the wings of this verse memoir all along, as he does in the poem “The Nude Model With a Mortuary Tag on Her Wrist:”

*All we know: You left before the party  
spilled into the house, nor in the morning  
did the posse sweeping fields drop you  
with a marksman's shot. Are you still walking,  
luring farm boys down from their silos  
to consummate in hay? Are you releasing doves  
from their rib cages, leading you home to the sea?*

It's not hard, reading this, to think of a Fellini film or a Dali painting. “Mother Reanimated” is the last poem in this sturdy collection. Its last two

lines—*To feel dirt under her nails/is all she wanted from heaven*—reminds us that Nixon's poems are haunted by his mother and, to a lesser extent, his receding father. The poems raise the question of whether society requires of a mother that she love a child more than anything else in her life, more than art or idealism or lovers or career. I think our facile answer is yes and that much of our hypocrisy flows from this, but there are other answers that remain to be explored in the limbo between ideological camps.

What redeems Nixon's lyrical contemplations of his mother is not their complaint but their understanding, their sorrow and their respect for the decisions she made, however damaging they may have been. Only the child can grant the parent such respect; coming from anybody else it's a mere argument.

These poems suggest what can be achieved by verse narrative, by an unblinking and not particularly sentimental eye. Narrative need not be epic. Here are sequential vignettes that by the close of the book tell the story of a young man who took his damaged life apart and put it together again in such a way that he was moved to song.



Djelloul Marbrook's first book of poems, *Far From Algiers* (Kent State University Press, 2008), won the 2007 Stan and Tom Wick Prize. His second book of poems, *Brushstrokes and Glances*, will be published by Deerbrook Editions next winter.

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Complimentary

# The Country and Abroad

