

# *Directed by Desire*

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF

## *June Jordan*

EDITED BY

JAN HELLER LEVI

AND SARA MILES



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## *No Train of Thought*

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A year runs long enough  
from force momentum trips  
the memory

hard dark tracks

rush hatred hearts  
nobody destination  
home away

parallels to scare the starting place  
start  
tracks together  
hard dark real long bloody tracks

pull pointless

killers  
kill people pointless  
killing (people) life  
killing (people) love  
killing (people)

partly (       )

killing

all of us (       )

## *Poem from the Empire State*

Three of us went to the top of the city  
a friend, my son, and I

on that day when winter wrote like snow  
across the moonlike sky  
and stood there breathing a heavy height  
as wide as the streets to see  
so poor and frozen far below  
that nothing would change for you and me  
that swallowing death lay wallowing still  
with the wind at the bloat of piled-up swill.  
And that was the day we conquered the air  
with 100,000 tons of garbage.

*No rhyme can be said  
where reason has fled.*

### *47,000 Windows*

The Lower East Side of New York City offers, in itself, a history of American contradiction, devotion to profit, and the failure of environmental design for human life. People had to pass a law in order that ventilation and minimal, natural light be available to the immigrants who had no money for decent housing. Instead of tearing down the tenements that were unfit for human habitation when they were first erected, the reformers satisfied themselves by legislating phony windows blasted into the bricks. That was a hundred years ago. People still have to live in those Lower East Side hellholes. This is a poem about the law that passed some light and air into that deliberated slum.

1. There were probably more Indians alive  
than Jews and Italians in that whole  
early American place of New York  
when the city began being big:  
a perfect convergency confirmed  
congested with trade  
creating tolerance for trade requires  
abject curiosity or general indifference  
to anything that sells not well enough



to tell somebody else about it. And  
at the beginning of New York  
the world was selling well and so was  
tolerance along with trade that  
provocation to a polyethnic population  
trading every bit of time for money  
made the city made me take  
your eye for mine according to extreme  
prosperity and appetite.

2. In 1830 then the blurring crowd  
that overwhelming beggarly blur of people came  
they pushed into the seaport cornucopia of New York  
small many people forced  
from land from farms from food from family forced  
like seasons dictatorial  
the people fled  
political hostilities and hunger  
people fled  
that soon consuming triumph  
of elimination  
that machinery for triumph  
by a few.

3. Then in 1830 the Astors and the Vanderbilts left.  
They rode by carriage from the uproar  
trouble from arrival by the millions  
shoved their ships that wandered  
with the sea to make their glad delivery  
of travelers penniless and hellbent toward  
the welcoming coast of always America.

Those other ones  
they came  
not trading things  
*but lives.*

4. Unskilled millions crammed old mansions  
broke apart large rooms and took a corner  
held a place a spot a bed a chair a box  
a looking glass  
and kept that space (except for death)  
a safety now for fugitives  
from infamy and famine  
working hard to live.
5. In place of land that street the outhouse  
tenement testimonies  
to a horrifying speculation that would quarter  
and condemn  
debase and shadow and efface  
the privacies of human being.
6. Real estate arose as profit spread  
to mutilate the multitudes and kill them  
living just to live.  
What can a man survive?  
They say: The poor persist.
7. O the Chinese and the Irish and the names!  
The names survived.  
Likewise some families.
8. 1867 after the first and only Civil War  
men looked at others  
men again  
not targets.  
Looked at latrines six stories high  
people paralyzed by penury immobilized  
and children docked  
and hopes untied and  
lying loose and less than skeleton  
at the dirty waters  
by the building of a dollarbill  
venality

near to nothing  
at the doorway nothing  
only life and speculation:  
What can a man survive?

9. Men looked at other men again  
not targets  
and in 1869 they passed a law  
about the nightmare rising as they saw  
sick men and women nurse their babies  
although love  
is not enough to eat.
10. The Tenement Act of 1869  
was merciful, well-meant, and fine  
in its enforcement  
tore 47,000 windows out of hellhole  
shelter of no light.

*It must be hard to make a window.*

### *What Happens*

What happens when a dog sits on a tiger  
when the fat man sells a picture of himself  
when a lady shoves a sword inside her  
when an elephant takes tea cups from the shelf

or the giant starts to cry  
and the grizzly loses his grip  
or the acrobat begins to fly  
and gorillas run away with the whip

What happens when a boy sits on a chair  
and watches all the action on the ground and in the air  
or when the children leave the greatest show on earth  
and see the circus?