

UNHEARD MELODIES

AND OTHER POEMS

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BUCHSBAUM PRESS • NEWTON, MA
2007

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my knowledge, none of these poems has appeared anywhere but in the hands (or emails) of my dedicatees, and my sisters, Gertrude Ostrove and Betty Weinstein. To all of them, I owe a debt for their patience and quite undeserved encouragement.

For My Whole Family

My wife, Betty, my daughters Helen, Susan, Marion,
their husbands David, Karl, Jeffrey,
and all my grandchildren,
Jessica, Max, Gabriel, Eva, Katie, Raphaela, Sophia and Kyla.

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UNHEARD MELODIES
AND OTHER POEMS

ONE

Unheard Melodies

*Heard melodies are sweet,
but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore . . .*
Keats, Ode On A Grecian Urn

After hearing an inspiring bit of music
I'll often try to hum it, reproduce
the sounds, the rhythms, dynamics.
Unfortunately, I lack the right juice.

But then, I stop whistling, or humming
or otherwise making discordant sounds
and soon the themes are thrumming
and music, at least in my mind, abounds.

This is not, though, what Keats meant
when he said unheard melodies are sweeter.
I think that closer to his intent
was something broader, much deeper.

In fact, this little excerpt from *Grecian Urn*
has inspired me to define my own passion – mathematics –
as the Art of Unheard Melodies – a fanciful turn
of mind justified by experience, not dramatics.

For instance, work and area are the “heard” special cases of the abstract “unheard” definite integral and slope and velocity take their concrete places inspiring the derivative – a concept far from audible.

The mathematician listens to the strophes – the needs observed in specific situations – but then composes the unheard melodies to transcend the particular, with mathematical imagination.

Invention vs Discovery

*Is math real, something to be discovered,
or invented by the mathematician?*

is a question pondered by many a philosopher
and has a long academic tradition.

If truth be told, the daily math practitioner,
while agreeing this issue may be of curious interest,
doesn't find it acts as an important conditioner
of the problems he chooses. Which may cause distress
to those who give first place to problems metaphysical,
but not to the artist ruled more by his aesthetic
than the philosophical. In fact I find it risible
that so much importance is placed on this dialectic
when "reality" is something yet to be defined –
and "to discover" requires there be something real to find.

Some may think I've let the sonnet form
curtail discussion of the crux of the debate
and that I should with more particulars inform
the reader of how philosophy and art relate

in the doing of the “art of unheard melodies” –
the name I give to the art I practice –
at least in choosing the tempi and keys
and the rest of the craftsman’s apparatus.

Those in the “discovery school” may be turned on by analysis
a field classically allied to field physics and geometry.
Some, like myself, may take a more algebraic focus
and study rings and group actions and symmetry.

But when push comes to shove and we get down to brass
tacks,
it’s the beauty of the form, regardless of the facts.

The Icon Barrier

In Rome my friends come, we talk
about this, that, math.
We take a coffee, propose attacks
on a long-time problem, not intractable
but stubborn.

A rich vein; have to make a new cut.

The first steps move, we see the lode
extract a small rich sample. Yes!
Now that glow begins...

But it's time to leave Rome; go to Berkeley,
celebrate the sixtieth birthday
of a former mentee.

He, director of a mathematics institute,
is stepping down after ten years.

And I, his mentor, am made to feel
an icon in this universe of algebra.
Algebra commutative and combinatorial
geometric and homological
to most of which I've added my bit.
Cited in almost every talk
I can bask – I do bask.

Alone in my room I dig some more
to extract that nugget of ore
uncovered in Rome.
But it's stuck, has a mind of its own.
I try to tweak that stubborn
damned, just-one-more-shovelful-to-go prod
that seemed so promising, so about-to-become
and yet, and yet. . .

I almost hit a wall – I'm an icon after all –
I can stop if I want. Why suffer
more pain and frustration, face failure
when I've arrived, can do no wrong –
can do no more. . . ?

On Footprints

How long a view does one have to take
to make “footprints” make sense?
If one goes all the way to the end of the world
(let’s call it “eternity”)
even Adam has left no imprint.
The Buddhist process extols transience
the lesson of Ecclesiastes is almost the same:
Transience, transience, all is transience.
The former injects hope with reincarnation an option;
the latter just sums it all up: that’s the way it goes.
But let’s take the shorter view; say a thousand years;
do we want our footprints to last that long?
A walk on the beach, the footprints deep and clear
erased in the moment it takes wave to lap shore.
Clearly too short.
What would the sands look like
if the prints just stayed – and stayed.
Indecipherable, as though there were none at all.
Is “footprint” the right metaphor?
Sands of time notwithstanding, shouldn’t “imprint”
be the word we’re looking for?
As long as there’s homo sapiens, Adam’s left his.
Even we, with our children, our writings, our sayings
if it comes to that
can’t just be scrapped. Nor can the work of Aeschylus,
Homer, Plato and Aristotle. . .
No, a thousand years is a bit short for imprints.
So, somewhere between a millennium and eternity. . .

Ferblundjit

I talk to the birds. They sing-talk
and greet me when I return,
say, from a long walk.

It's several phrases,
with maybe a little question
posed in between.

I thank them for welcoming me home;
it feels good to be back,
though I enjoyed the walk too.

I tell Betty

I'm replying to their comments –
I can understand what they're saying.
Something like Konrad Lorenz.

And of course, no one
could check up on him
to see if he got their meanings right.
She says well, maybe I could follow his trail
and see for myself.

I say I don't follow trails,
which is why I may so often
get *ferblundjit*.¹

¹“Ferblundjit” is Yiddish for “totally lost.”

Waiting for Death

For every looking forward, there's a looking beyond.

I'm looking forward to my retirement.
I say that to myself, and to everyone who asks
I say: "I think of my retirement
as a full-time research fellowship –
self-endowed, of course." Heh, heh.

I looked forward to graduation from grade school –
and starting high school;
graduation, starting college;
then graduate school and marriage, job and family. . .

On and on with promotions and raises, awards
(some won, some wanted), grandchildren.
With every looking forward, a looking beyond.
And now retirement – I'm really looking forward to it.

I've always deemed myself a thoughtful person,
a man truly of sense and sensibility.
A man of inner quests, unswayed by externals.
Then the flash: And after retirement. . . ?
My first answer: death.

.....

The answer for a man of sensibility, of inner quests?

Well, that *is* a looking beyond.

If I thought of heaven as a Great Beyond,
that could do it.

But I don't,
and death all by itself is pretty much
the end of experience.

Some people, like Maurice Schwartz,
made the advent of death the great experience –
and even got a book out of it.

(I didn't read it; I shouldn't critique it;
but I don't think that's my sort of thing.)

Should my new definition of 'beyond'
be a sort of transcendence?

Betty is doing that, in a way,
or at least trying to.

All the things that came to mind above
were very much in the here and now;
not at all uplifting or transcendent.

Is there really some spiritual essence
worth uncovering at this late date?

Would such a quest get me up in the morning
feeling I had to get a fast start – ?

That it's a quest I don't doubt.
But will it get me up?
Or can I learn NOT to have a quest, a goal?
Can I get up each day and just enjoy it?
Just do what I feel like doing
and not think of where it's going?

Realize that living through time,
without accountability for its expenditure is fun?
Is in itself fulfilling?
Always a great time-waster,
I've justified my idleness
by its rehabilitating effect on the psyche,
if not the soma:
a clear mind will produce.

But if all time is now fun,
then idleness is just a hole in a hole;
no justification for it at all.
Unless
it's that it just is. That's it:
it's not transcendentalism I'm in need of;
it's existentialism.

So that's my great beyond: I'm going to be
an existentialist and/or
die in the attempt.

Unresolved Resolutions

Isaac, son of Sarah, and Ishmael, son of Hagar,
both, sons of Abraham,
together buried Abraham.
Together.

Ishmael came from afar to join his brother
to put their father to rest.

Adoniah, son of David and Chagit
made a feast when David was dying.
He invited a host of allies and friends
as he proclaimed he would be king.
Not invited was his brother, Solomon,
son of Batsheba.

In the traditional pairing of Torah with Haftorah
the deaths of Abraham and David are twinned.
They say Abraham had a noble wholeness
David a fullness of will and conceit;
both lived to ripe old ages.

I was born after the death of my grandfather, David
at the part in the Torah reading, when Abraham is born.
My given Hebrew names are thus David and Abraham.
In my seventieth year, when called upon,
I described myself, mathematically,
as a man of unresolved resolutions.

But not until this week, when I saw juxtaposed
the deaths of David and Abraham,
saw the contrasts between them so vividly etched:
sons Ishmael and Isaac, long rivals, eventual nemeses
drawn together in filial devotion;
sons Adoniah and Solomon, though living together,
riven because of paternal legacy,
did I finally understand how like
my mathematically described conflicted self,
is the pairing of my names.

Where Numbers Lie

They say that numbers don't lie
but where they lie makes a difference.

I'm thinking analog watch, numbers 1 through 12
lying around the dial.

And when I look at a number, say 5 itself,
do I think "five?" Heck no, strong denial.

Maybe only twice a day (at 5 AM and 5 PM)
the numeral doesn't belie its form.

But otherwise, in fact, most of the time
it's read as twenty-five past, as is the norm.

This kind of thing is really routine,
just think of simple arithmetic.

11 plus 2 may be thought of as thirteen
but it's equal to one on things that tick.

And sociologists and politicians know
that the same numbers, when used in their hands,
can unequivocally predict outcomes wet as snow
or temperatures so high, they give rise to sand.

If your faith is too shaken, think of the number 10
as it lies, one among twelve, on the face of the clock.

Whether ten of, or the hour itself,
it's immutable, solid as a rock.

TWO

Reflections: A Year After September 11

This is *Shabat Shuvah*
we're in the midst of our repentance
in the mists of our reflection.

Mists? Yes. Even if
one does arrive to the very core,
the shrouds that must be parted
glaze the eye working through these clouds;
faze the most diligent unveiler.

But reflect I must.
Not because I'd choose to dwell
on the meaning of 9/11 if left alone.
And not because *shuvah* means
I must return to plumb
the most hellish event of the year –
of human history
the pundits continue to drone.

No. It's just because
I don't *want* to ponder
and dwell forever on that horror,
and so feel such anger toward
these harpings on those happenings
that I end up. . . pondering.

Irony? Well, if thats all it is,
I suppose it's not so bad.
Maybe we can make it through
another year.

Venting

I write letters to the New York Times
incessantly.

Maybe “incessantly” is a bit strong
but there are days when I’ve written two or three.
For me, it’s a way of venting.

It started years ago. Mornings
I’d come downstairs to breakfast
look at the Times, read a few lines
then start to talk to Betty.

This talk, though, was the kind
that came from the back of the throat
that part that produces the tones and whines
of rage or contempt, or both.

And Betty would say *I don’t
want to hear that. It’s bad enough
to have to read it, but why must you
repeat it?*

And I’d stop and fume
and after breakfast and the dishes
go upstairs to my computer
and write a letter to the editor
of the New York Times.

It’s not as though all’s been in vain;
a number of these epistles
have made it through the strainer
of editorial bells and whistles
and appeared in the next morning’s paper.

Of course they first check on provenance
and make a few editorial emendations.
They ask if I approve of these minimal corrections
to which I reply I have no objections.

The problem is that the letters they select
are not the ones I'd have preferred they'd chosen.
So while to their improvements I can't object
I wish they'd choose the ones that express
my more deeply felt emotions.

And so, today, when they'd chosen one
from among the three I sent them yesterday
and asked the usual questions
including *Do you approve the changes?*
I said yes, but that I'd rather they'd taken
one of the other two that covered more
significant, controversial situations.

I don't know how that will play out,
whether they'll ditch mine and print another's letter
but I figured, might as well let them know how I felt
because I'd really written so many that are better.

Remembrance

*Where has all humanity gone?
Deep in self-absorption everyone*

Do men make the times, or times the man?
The usual question you ask when you can't stand
the man elected, or understand how your compatriots
could have been such idiots
as to have chosen him.

In this instance, the Supreme Court,
nine-eleven, conspired to give us the man;
the man was savvy enough to grab the time
and get himself elected – some say “reelected”.

He now has a “mandate” he says
and on his inaugural day, gave
an “inspirational” address.

Be uplifted say the sober media.
*Don't confuse the office with
the office holder.* I'm old enough
to have heard Adolf Hitler uplift the crowds
with words of noble promise.
I learned early to hear the words
and identify the tongue that utters them.

But I worry. On the radio today
I heard a journalist report
that when American youth were asked
what they thought
of Prince Harry's armband swastika,
most didn't even remember
what the holocaust had been about;
at least those who even remembered
hearing of it.

And this is the generation
who will be electing
our leaders for years to come.

Oy, Es Tit Mir Vay

Oh, it hurts, *es tit mir vay*
I'm left with nothing else to say
the Bush got in, drove Kerry away
oy vay oy vay oy vay oy vay.

I hope Kerry got the Jewish vote
if not that would really get my goat
the bile would stick and burn my throat
if we Jews'd added to the Bushies' tote.

Oh, with Kerry we could again be sane
I could begin to sing that old refrain
the one – how does it go again?
Oh, yes: *Bei mir bist du shayn.*

Instead, I'm forced again to say
Oy vay oy vay es tit mir vay.

The Lid Off Life

*“...somebody had taken the
lid off life and let him
look at the works.”
– The Maltese Falcon*

Flitcraft was walking by a construction site
when a beam fell and missed him by inches.
Tho not hit by the beam, he was smitten by the thought
that life – or rather death – is unpredictable, random
and he walked out of his own life – wife, family, job –
into a random future.

How many Flitcrafts there were on eleven September:
some who were still walking their children to school
some busy fabricating their excuses for arriving late
others just ‘stepped out for a minute’ or ‘had a date.’

The one butterfly fluttered its wings
and caused not a tidal wave, just a conundrum.
But these latter day Flitcrafts
new witnesses to the lid come off life,
had they fluttered – despaired, panicked, bolted –
could have – perhaps all together – made a wave.
Were they too utterly spent to create their own
or bent on digging out of a deeper chaos?

When Bush Comes to Shove

George Bush maintains we've got him all wrong
on his accusations of Iran we're manifestly unclear.
Though his charges ring in our ears like the old Iraq song
he claims that war with Iran isn't even near.

We take hope from the fact that our forces are over-stretched
our economy's almost bankrupt, our alliances frayed.
When all's said and done, our military position is wretched;
there's no way the war card can possibly be played.

Bush might send in more troops to carry out a "surge"
he may figure on a few more hundreds dead until his term
expires.

But on a full-scale war with Iran he'd hardly splurge:
the effects of that would plague him well after he retires.

Unless, counting on the Second Coming – and getting ever
pricklier
he figures it takes just a tweak to go from "unclear" to
"nuclear."

Telephone Poles

Telephone poles have proliferated on Comm. Ave.

Dispersed among the trees as I used to run
was the occasional naked wood upright
strung with its catenary of singing wire
carrying messages from here and beyond.
The natural bark and leaves of the native trees
made an arcade under which we runners
nodded to one another sharing our pain,
our labored breath forcing reduced volume
as we hailed each other, while our eyes
flashed our ardent savor of limpid air
full breaths of which filled our lungs and being
with the oneness of flora, fauna and each other.

Now, Betty and I walk along that same avenue
the trees still there. But coming toward us
or swishing by in running trunks and shoes
are the new telephone poles, strung with ear buds
communicating with hidden phones or iPods
oblivious of the trees they now outnumber.
With wooden steps, empty eyes, they move, trailing wires;
a new mobile copse of enclosed, self-absorbed
rootless trunks more like the telephone poles neatly spaced
than the friendly halloosers they've displaced.

THREE

Meditating

*Close up his eyes and draw the
curtain close; And let us all to
meditation – King Henry VI.
Part II. Act iii. Scene 3*

When you meditate you're supposed to clear your mind
of all your active thoughts. Presumably King Henry was
moved
by a strong need for comfort and healing of that kind
when he bade the company leave dead Beaufort alone,
unloved.

Years ago I took up Transcendental Meditation –
I did it mainly to relieve pain from a herniated disc.
I found that within minutes my mind could be in free flota-
tion –
contrast between cerebral buzz and vacuum almost sheer
bliss.

Now I've returned to meditation for other reasons –
retired, I have the time for it; I can take on some new
quests.

But I can't seem to find the free-float of former seasons –
active thoughts seem to intrude despite my most focused
press.

This most natural question comes immediately to the fore:
is it inability to focus that inhibits the vacuum's embrace?
Can it be I can't control my mental processes anymore?
Or is it that these days there's so little activity taking
place?

Soul of Breath

Nishmat n'sheema – soul of breath –
oozes over and around neck, shoulders
over arms, into chest, down to groin
all under cover of the skin.

Or is it *n'sheemat n'shamah* – breath of soul –
that exudes from the deepest lobe of lung
lifts chest, makes red, yellow, black
screens between eyes and lids?

Nishmat n'sheema – n'sheemat n'shamah
seeps and fills, restores, recreates
as one sits and meditates.

...Is One

SHEMA – A – A – A – A – A –

YISROEL – L – L – L – L – L –

the sounds held as long as the lungs can lift them
as we sit safely in shul and recite the Shemah
the four fringes of our shawls gathered in one hand

ADONAI – AI – AI – AI – AI – AI –

ELOHENU – U – U – U – U – U –

and I think of the Jews in the cities of Europe
rounded up like panicked sheep
crying out these words

ADONAI – AI – AI – AI – AI – AI –

ECHAD – D – D – D – D – D.

Is one. An affirmation not plea not sheep
we go we die but we don't disappear
we are all one

Regel, Raglayim, Regalim

The man asked to learn Torah on “regel achat” – one leg and he was told, “Love thy neighbor as thyself” or “Do unto others as you would have done to you” – some such reference to a pillar holding up the world.

The man asked to learn Torah on “raglayim” – two legs and he was told “They have two legs, and do not walk” a teaching in the Psalms of David following the line “Two eyes they have and see not; ears, and hear not.”

The man asked to learn Torah on “shalosh regalim” – three legs and he was told “Observe Pesach, Shavuot and Succot.” “What?” he asks, not knowing “shalosh regalim” are the pilgrimage festivals basic to Jewish tradition.

The man thinks, then says, “I guess my best shot is to stick to learning Torah on regel achat.”

Voice of Jacob, Hands of Esau

*“The voice is the voice of Jacob
and the hands the hands of Esau.”
Genesis, XXVII:22*

I'd always thought of Isaac the way I think of Indiana:
something you have to get through to go from A to B.
Indiana takes you from Ohio to Illinois
Isaac moves you from Abraham to Jacob.

Everything in between is flat.

Not fair of course. Can't speak for Indiana
but Isaac got trussed up and laid on an altar
missed being gutted by a hair, married Rebecca
and had two quarrelsome twins.

I hear that Indiana has nice rolling hills.

Original Sin

What's with this Original Sin?
The Christians demonizing it
the Jews skirting its rim –
if not apologizing for it.

It's the most inspiring story
you find in the Bible.
And there it is, in all its glory,
right after the preludial Eden eyeful.

That tree of knowledge just going to waste:
the one at which they'd been told just to *Look*.
If Eve and Adam hadn't been told not to taste,
would they have been as effectively hooked ?

But *Don't taste* – that has an appeal
that's almost meant to ensnare.
So our forebears slip on that apple peel
and we're taught the lesson: always dare!

And the trade-off? This expulsion from Eden
where every day's the same – like California?
That's supposed to fill us with revulsion?
Sorry, I have to warn ya:

I'll plant my own trees
sow my own seeds.
Resolve my own strife
choose my own wife.

Original? Yes!
Sin? Not on your life!

Hey, you readers of the Book.
There's good stuff there;
the seven-day week
the Jubilee year.

The challenge to look at the other side
try something untried.
And all of this at a trifling cost:
it's just, after all, Paradise lost.

FOUR

My Father's Son

The September before I turned six, my father decided
my sister and I must start Hebrew school.
For some misguided reason
(probably because she was a girl),
it hadn't been necessary to enroll her
when she'd turned six, nor make her party
to an interview with the Rabbi (principal of the school).

I can just barely remember
my feelings at the time: a bit proud of
going off with my father to start school
(he hadn't been around
for my kindergarten enrollment one year earlier);
a bit nervous about what this rabbi
was going to ask me.
Yes, I was Orthodox (because my father was)
but was low-key about strict observance.

I did keep strictly kosher, though,
said some prayers before going to bed
(Now I lay me down to sleep...),
didn't keep a hat on my head but didn't
turn on or off the lights on *Shabas*;
didn't pray every day, but went to synagogue
almost every Saturday.
It was a little iffy,
but I felt secure enough.

We entered the synagogue, it was a Sunday morning,
found the office off to the side,
and there was The Rabbi.
He motioned to us to wait

while he finished up some work on his desk,
giving me a chance to get a close look at him.

And he was scary!

Tallish and heavysset, he had a black goatee
punctuating a face with deep-set eyes, swarthy skin,
straight grim mouth, deep lines running
from the sides of his nose to the ends of his lips.

And he moved – seriously I thought at the time –
pompously, I realized years later.

He finally turned to my father and me,
shook my father's hand
and reached out to take mine.

With my father standing beside me
I extended mine and shook.

It felt to me as though I were shaking hands
with a crook – some ogre.

Only because I was my father's son
did I have the assurance
that this I would survive.

At first the rabbi asked my father
some questions about me:
my age, my year at school, my place in the family.

Ah, the youngest, the only son, I see.

Then he turned to me.

The eyes stippled my face as he asked me staccato:
did I eat trafe hotdogs, did I listen to the radio on Shabas,
did I go to the movies on Saturday afternoons?

With no prompting from my father

I could answer surely and satisfactorily
these myriad queries.

I could also see my father was not displeased with my
replies –

he was clearly coming off quite well
in this not so subtle test of his paternal tutelage.

The rabbi, also seeming pleased with my responses,
then asked: *And do you have tsitsis?*

A blow!

I knew my mother and two oldest sisters had them –
or something that sounded like them;

my youngest sister didn't;

that was because she was too young.

I looked at my father – he was turning red –

I looked at the rabbi – not a clue from either.

Not knowing how else to parry

this seeming challenge to my malehood,

I answered: *If my father has, then I do too.*

Little did I realize that this parry

was the cruelest thrust

to my father's orthodox image.

I looked at him and saw he was a burning red;

I looked at the rabbi, who stood there placidly

though his swarthy face had taken on

a slight tinge of rose.

Well, said he, *you'll learn about all of that here.*

And the interview was closed.

It took a while

(the whole walk back to our apartment)

for my father to recover,

and I was loath to break our silence.

Once in our house, he explained to me

that tsitsis were a fringed undergarment

worn by observant Jewish males;
they were not what I had apparently taken them to be –
a part of the anatomy.

I asked him why, then, he didn't wear any,
and he said that starting the next day he would.
And so would I.

He left me and went to tell my mother
how the 'interview' had gone;
I quickly went off to do something more to my taste.
A little later, when my mother spoke to me,
she said she was glad the interview'd gone well;
she said no more, but there was a sparkle in her eyes
and a smile curving her mouth
while she spoke.

Smoking

*When Israel, of the Lord belov'd,
Out of the land of bondage came,
Her fathers' God before her mov'd,
An awful guide in smoke and flame.*

– Ivanhoe. Chap. xxxix

*And a woman is only a woman,
but a good cigar is a smoke.*

– Kipling, The Betrothed

My father was an upright man:
believed in God; respected his good wife;
sired three daughters
and then me, his only son.
His God walked before him, true,
but it was my *father* who smoked cigars
and guided *me*.

After dinner, still at table,
he'd remove from his humidor
a long brown cigar, sit back, regard it
snip off the end, roll it in his mouth
to moisten – soften,
light a match and ignite the other end,
the flame undulating as he puffed
– drew in breath, rather –
with clear delight.

I would watch the ritual:
the post-prandial sigh,
the standing wooden humidor
(a piece of furniture in the dining room
just for him!),
the fondling the kindling,
the inhale, exhale,
the smoke and flame.

By God, that was for me
(and rightly: I was the only male child
in the family).

And I watched and I studied
my father my guide.

And I waited my turn – which came one night
when I was a little more than three.

With my parents at a movie,
my grandmother, my sisters and me in the house,
I struck.

Literally, in a sense.

I snuck into the dining room,
opened the iconic humidor, removed a cigar,
(didn't snip it – had no snipper),
struck a match, inhaled and sighed.

Inhaled again... felt woozy,
crept to my bed, and was very, very ill.

So ill, my sisters called my folks
home from the cinema.

By the time they appeared at my bedside,
I had flushed the cigar away.
But a good cigar leaves its own aroma –
a doctor wasn't needed for what ailed me:
there was no risk of polio or coma
or other maladies imagined by my sisters
when they'd seen me green, pallid
trembling, sweating and gelid.
Little was said that night,
nor any time since.
But to this day
when I think of cigars
– I wince.

Snakes

*Bassano: Every offence is not a hate at first.
Shylock: What! wouldst thou have a serpent
sting thee twice? – Merchant of Venice,
Act iv Sc 1*

I should have known:
my mother's loathing for snakes
was deeply embedded.

At summer camp, I was awarded
a pair of garter snakes –
born to a fecund pair, one of which
I had helped to take –
and brought them home.

Home: an eighth-floor flat
on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Greetings done, left finally alone,
I rummaged up a roomy shoebox,
brought up grass and mosses
from the nearby park,
filled a soapdish with water,
installed the snakelets in their shelter.

Intuiting my mother's snake phobia,
I decided not to share – at least not air –
the experience then and there;
I'd wait to see how things developed.
But even most cursory house care
will unearth a snakepit;
cursory was not my mother's habit.

...

The shriek told me she'd found it;
the tremolo foretold she'd soon find me.
Get it out of the house – immediately!
A command not to be contested,
let alone defiantly refused.
But why “it,” not “them”
I had to muse.

I looked – and then I knew:
there was just one little snake in the box.
I had no time to worry or stew:
it had to go right to the park.
But now the dread: would there be
a second serpent sting
(albeit by a second serpent)?
Two days I searched and found – nothing!
My mother never happened on the other.
I did. I found it torpidly essing
down our long dark corridor.
I picked it up quickly, easily,
and made another silent trip to the park.

On Cheese

*Poets have been mysteriously
silent on the subject of cheese.
– G.K. Chesterton*

I bet not everyone agrees
that a subject of poetic neglect is cheese.

There must be someone who's descanted a solfeggio
exulting in the aroma of a ripe Taleggio.
And can it be true no one's penned a paean to extol a
pear sandwiching a full, runny, green Gorgonzola?
Or loudly declaimed and invited crowds to toast a
melty, gooey, sharp Fontina, Val d'Aosta?

No, I may not be a poet, but I have to take exception
to this blanket statement of G.K. Chesterton.

Thoughts on Driving Through Connecticut

Why did the gee in “burg” transmogrify
and become a wye?

I’m thinking Waterbury, Danbury.

These should, from the outset, have been named
the solid, if stolid, cities: Waterburg, Danburg.
They could have held their heads high – without shame –
like the German cities, Rottenburg and Limburg.

Or if they didn’t like “burg” as an ending
they could have done a straight translation
to get Watercastle, Dancastle, thereby lending
a little panache to their station.

But instead they made it Waterbury, Danbury,
creating an image of unenviable gloom.

Like changing “A man’s home is his castle”
to “A man’s home is his tomb.”

FIVE

Farfalla

I came across these lines
from Lao-Tze's *The Way*:
*What the caterpillar calls the end of the world
the rest of the world calls butterfly.*

Actually, I came across those lines
in an Italian book I was reading
and it really went like this:

*Quella che il bruco chiama fine del mondo
il resto del mondo chiama farfalla.*

Farfalla, the end of the world to a worm
and my thoughts immediately flit to *ferfallen*
(or *verfallen* in German, but Yiddish comes
more naturally to me). Just how far
is a farfalla from ferfallen?

Ferfallen – as in a disaster struck
or something doomed or lost or forfeited –
the unhappy end of an episode, if not the world.
The kind of adjective my grandma used
with the palms up and out
and pouting a shrug – *what can you do?*

Equinox

Farewell to winters obnoxious
welcome to the vernal equinoxes
to the emergence of robins and little foxes
to the baseball teams: White and Red Soxes.

I don't really hate winters; the snows and the ice
the skies glinty blue, the trees covered with glaze.
But slush over months can cease to be nice
so a few months, then fine – that will suffice.

I do like robins, can't say the same for kits
and baseball's okay, just doesn't give me fits.
But the sun will rise ever earlier, bit by bit
and the fever of spring – by that I'm always smit.

A Dip in the Dunes

*We'll go up to where the dunes dip,
she says after we've been walking for a while,
so you won't give me a hard time
when I want to turn around.*

We take note of that distant dip
and continue our slog through the sand
along the shore at low tide.

*Far out at the join of the sky and the sea
stands a wall, a dark wall.*

*A tidal wave arrested in forward rush?
A new continent arisen overnight between our shore
and Spain beyond the horizon's touch?*

We walk, feel free, sun scorching
just those parts of us neglected
when we slopped on sun tan lotion.
We watch for seals, avoid glancing at
that black horizon.

*Alternating currents of warm,
then cold, almost refrigerated, air
skim our shoulders, backs and faces.*

*Could it be that stalled tidal mass
causing these thermal anomalies?*

The dip in the dunes comes closer;
Funny, it didn't seem so far when we started.
The receding tide has made one, no two,
of those little sand bars we love to stand on

feeling apart and yet a part of
this sea and shore. There are the plovers pecking
sandpipers seeming to float, a blur
on the moist sand still showing signs
of the water's flecking.

*There, at the line of the shore are heel prints
dug in by invisible giants looking out – to what?
the incoming wave, the newly raised continent? –
the water running in and out of their prints
massaging their feet, the cool air
coming in off the sea. . .*

Achy Elders

I ask my sister: *How's Phil?*
(he's just had a quadruple bypass)
and she says: *He's doing pretty well;*
a little tired, not too much energy,
and not really too bored.

The doctor says he should be good
for another ten years or so –
no firm figures – can't be precise.

My cardiologist said my new valve –
the one put in three years ago –
should hold up fifteen years;
that gets me into my eighties
so I don't have to worry – yet.
But I'm on Lipitor now.

It takes me a moment to relate
the medicine to the disease –
not disease in this case
just a 'condition' – cholesterol.
Compared to all the plumbing reports
this seems pretty mild
but she seems concerned.

I've just returned from a trip abroad
with Betty, to Italy, mostly Rome.
We lived in a converted chapel
a newspaper-pickup-walk
from Piazza Navona.
We'd walk for miles most days
on cobblestones and tar

eat what we wanted
where we wanted –
we gave no thought to pain.

But pain there was, I must admit
and probably a buildup
of cholesterol aplenty.
Still, we walked we talked
held hands made love
much the way we did
when we were in our twenties.

Or so I like to think.
Was it Oscar Wilde who said
the tragedy of old age
is not that we're old – but young?

Three Score Minus Three

*To Betty, as a sort of
valentine – David*

I kissed you on the cheek in second grade –
we'd met in 1A, in school.

Our teacher let out a tirade;
kid though I was, I knew I was no fool.

Our courtship resumed in college – second year;
again we clicked – more ardor in our teens.

Our marriage soon would follow, it was clear.
Degrees and kids and jobs would test our beans.

Through three score minus three we've weathered all;
grown together as one – but still are two.

The layers of love we've woven are a shawl
that enfolds even our grandkids – boy, time flew!

Don't stop; our life's still open, an adventure
we face with zest, not indenture.

Out of Myself

- a) *The greatest pride, or the greatest despondency, is the greatest ignorance of one's self.*
b) *Love is nothing but . . . joy accompanied by the idea of an external cause. – Baruch Spinoza*

Why do I sit here in such despondency?
It's not like me.
Spinoza had something to say you see –
but can I know what he means?

I thought I knew what he meant
way back in the youth of Freshman year
when I even talked off Betty's ear
on our first date – never dreamt
he'd surface here.

*Was that intense talk intellectual
or was it a hunger, sexual,
a way to wrap myself in and around her
wearing the mask of an admired persona?*

This despondency I'm feeling – far from pride –
is it truly the “greatest ignorance” of myself
or due to my self's ignorance,
the gulf between what I am –
and what I'd like to be?

*As we talked – I pressing, she responding –
I could feel myself thrusting, meshing,
the words white noise to our enfolding
our give and take accompaniment to our molding .*

Spinoza said, *The human mind is the idea of the human body.* We can overcome a trough only with a stronger positive crest. It takes mind to do this.

*As I write, and think of how we merged,
I move toward her, out of myself
the despond responding to the surge
of our ongoing love.*

Nostalgia

Betty asking *is it nostalgia we feel
walking like this through the park?*

We walk the paths we used to walk (more quickly, once)
amid the rocks and lawns cutting through the city
with skyscrapers: San Remo, Majestic, Essex House
declaiming their sway over this bucolic thrust
into their lofty brick urban keep.

What emotions do sweep through us as,
with the occasional creak of bone and knee
we glimpse a bird – the kind depending on season –
or tree – in leaf or bare (for the same reason)
and see in déjà view what we know so well
but with new, never-seen-it-before delight,
today's Central Park limned by our senses
of sound, smell and sight?

No, not nostalgia, but layers, tiers
of earlier mixed with later years
as a scuffed, scarred leather briefcase
grown pliant from holding personal troves
expands to enfold with habitual ease and grace
packets of fresh sightings of lawn, lake or dove.

