POETPOURRI

Poems by
David A. Buchsbaum
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None of these poems has appeared in print.¹ They have appeared in public only in that they have been on my web page since around April or May of 2004. I believe that their existence on that site has passed unnoticed for most of this time.

¹I have just discovered that four of these poems – Septembers Happen, Bush-Whacked, The Buchwald Art and Kaleidoscope have actually been published in “Pedestal Magazine,” the November, ’04, issue.
For Betty

The poem in my life that I could never
write, and for all my reading
will never fathom
(and without whom the very notion of writing
poetry would never have occurred to me).
# Table of Contents

- Lovesong—7
- How Still—9
- Cicadas—10
- Algebra and Fire—11
- Poem—13
- Septembers Happen—14
- Teaching...Learning—15
- Kaddishel—16
- Hell's Kitchen Schooldays—18
- Achoo, Atchoo—21
- To Bucket a Torrent—22
- Baba—23
- Che Bella Pronuncia—25
- ...Season of the Harvest—27
- Manifest Entropy—28
- Like—29
- Ode to Spring—30
- Telling the Grandchildren—31
- Must There Be a Difference?—32
- The Earnest of Being Important—33
- Morphine Maunderings—34
- To Life—Exponentially Exquisite—36
- Mudpies—37
- Sightings—38
- Tuscan Snapshots (3)—39
- Surf—41
- Shower—42
Topic of Cancer—43
Metaphysical—45
In Whose Image?—46
Bush-Whacked—47
Money Isn’t Time—48
Cogito...—49
The Buchwald Art—50
Repetitive Tasks—51
The Binding—52
Svolgimento—53
You’re Welcome—55
Dreams Make No Noise—57
Plumbing—58
...The Gate of His Enemies—59
Kaleidoscope—61
Devolution—62
Buzz—63
Erose—64
Eating, Crow?—65
Lovewriting—66
POETPOURRI
Lovesong

What the man say
    he say he feel good
    he say he in love
    with his girl from the 'hood?
He love her full up
    he can’t speak it out—
    he shy he want to—
    hey, can’t spout.
It fift’-two year
    they’s livin together
    sun rain snow
    all kinda weather
all kinda places
    month here, year there
    some buildin up
    some strong wear and tear.
He like when she smile
    the laugh from the throat
    that got ’im first—
    smote th’old goat—
way th’eyes light with fun
    or dark up with worry
    don’t want no eyedrops now
    make ’em all blurry.
She fun to be with
    make sights come alive
    don’t matter how heavy
    she make ’em all jive.
And when she get into
    some dang-fangled mood
    he figger: gotta take
    some bad with the good.
She sometime be wise
    give out good advice
    make him soup for a cold
    for the runs make him rice
her voice fold him in
    her touch make him melt
    he figure the cards
    pretty good he was dealt.
So, yeah, the man love
    his girl from the 'hood
    from school kid to coed
    through ripe womanhood
if he talk 'bout it much
    he feel like a sap
    so he jes put it all inta
    this kinda bum rap.
How Still

How still can a still astilbe be?
Depends upon the wind.
On slender stalk
it’s wont to point;
it doesn’t even bend.
Crystal petals
dusky rose throughout
it watches as we gaze.
A waft of breeze
is all it takes
to give a little wave.
Cicadas

We don’t hear them now but we know they’re there
on this cool August day with the wind asough
the air a soft awareness on the skin
the fingers, though unlabored, too coarse
to feel even that slight caress.

We know they’re there:
allow but a pulse of moisture in the air
a stillness in the breeze
a weight in the surround
and the rasp begins—
that broken bicycle bell of continuous sound
that cicadas make when they call each other
to their sexing rounds.
Algebra and Fire

A mixture of algebra and fire
is how Borges described poetry, I’m told.
I have to wonder what he meant.
Fire as metaphor isn’t so rare—
in fact, it’s almost trite.
So ‘algebra’ must be
the spice in that combine.
But why algebra?
He didn’t say mathematics and fire
or geometry and fire.
‘Mathematics’, perhaps, is too generic
and ‘geometry’, what?
too visual—too real—
for the magical fabrics that he wove?
But algebra for him, I suppose,
was clean, precise, abstract
unpredictable yet inevitable—
square root of minus 1?!
Imagine that! Fantastic!
But for Borges, algebra alone wasn’t poetry. 
Perhaps he felt, like Tagore 
that it needed some handle—  
something to buffer  
its keen, cutting edge. 

Which to me, an algebraist 
seems strange.  
Algebra permits—requires—  
devil-may-care flights of fancy.  
The interplay of structures—  
some ‘seen’, most only imagined—  
has its own meter and form. 
To work with another, to offer an idea 
mold it together, can be a dance of joy—  
to joy—a ballet.  
No other fire need be in play.
Poem

I think that I shall never see
a poem; woe o woe is me!
A poem writ, that is, by me
that I can leave to posterity.

For six months or so, maybe more
I found events upon which to draw
for lovely vignettes by the score.
Alas, alas, no more, no more.

I’m plumb dried out, finished, through;
nothing moves me to write. To view
mundanity as though ’twere new
to feel a feeling and know it’s true.

Is this what they call writers’ block?
This hover between hard place and rock?
Will it ever stop... might I again unlock
that cellar of sense; that sacred stock?
Septembers Happen

I don’t believe in the Fall:
that all of man’s years on Earth are blighted.
Nor that I’m the center of it all
entitled to unflagging bliss and sunlight.
Maybe that’s why I’m not repelled
if things turn out well:
I don’t expect them to happen by right
but I don’t feel guilty that they...might.

And maybe that’s why
when in September planes fell
blue sky, hell all around.
I was amazed, disbelieving
numbed, then believing
angry, sad—
and then again mad
I didn’t keep staring at the TV
I didn’t keep asking how this could be;
it was—part of the shit that happens.

I don’t believe in turning the other cheek
or that once dimmed, we need stay benighted.
No. But like Londoners during their blitz
who didn’t shriek, beat their breasts;
we must pick up, move on,
see how this wrong may be righted.
Like the folk in Hiroshima  Nagasaki
we hurt, we can’t fathom the mind
that can bring such woe.
But as we should know, it happens.
Teaching . . . Learning

“Dear Mrs. Brown, Thank you for teaching me the things I never learned.”—letter from eight-year-old to his ESL teacher.

One tense Mrs. Brown didn’t teach is the pluperfect: “. . . the things I had never learned.”
Even if that’s not all her teaching failed to reach she clearly did her pupil a good turn.

Something slightly different happened not long ago one evening as I sat in the theater.
A former student looked back at me from the front row, then jumped from seat to seat to get nearer.

He wanted to thank me for all I’d done for him in that long-ago Freshman calculus class.
Despite all his hangups I’d tried to eliminate he just couldn’t manage to pass.

He said from my voice he could tell my passion how the material gripped me through and through. Yet he knew he could never respond in that fashion; for him it just wasn’t the right brew.

So he was not only grateful for the effort put in but even more, for the insight acquired: he had to find ‘the something’ that really grabbed him—that would spark and keep him on fire.

Is it clear he didn’t learn the things I taught? Well, not the stuff I’d written on the blackboard. But I’m glad the essentials were what he caught—and that he happened, in the theater, to look backward.
‘Kaddishel’

*L’cha dodi* they were reciting
as I entered from the rear of the *shul*—
and so began my period
of official mourning
for the death of my father.
And I was furious.
My mother had handed me his letter
asking me to say *kaddish* for him—
as is the custom and the rule—
I was his ‘*kaddishel*’ after all.
He’d known me well enough to know
I could tell him no, but not so
to my mother.
After the seven days of *shiva*
every morning and evening
I went to *shul* to say the mourner’s *kaddish*.
I did it and fumed; I laid *tefilin*
and fumed. I recited
the prayers from the *siddur*
and fumed.
And while I fumed, I read the Hebrew
read the poetry of the Psalms
recovered the flow of the idiom
remembered my father:
remembered playing catch where they built
the George Washington Bridge;
my delight when he phoned Macy’s
and ordered the scooter I said I’d like;
his delight when I could recite by heart
the whole first section of *Vayerah*—
Genesis, Chapter 18—and his ecstasy
when I could read the whole portion
of *Noach* at my bar mitzvah...
I fumed a little less.
Months passed. I was called to the Torah, I made the blessing and *mi shebayrach*. I still resented, but also talked to the men—some very learned. I relearned the chant for the Song of Songs; learned of the role of women in the days of the Jerusalem Talmud. While not feeling communion I began to feel community. The tradition and lore that coursed through me in my youth, when I sat with my father in *shul* on Saturdays and Holy Days was juice again—sufficient juice, finally to quench the fuming fire. I cannot guess what deeper wisdom guided him to ask that my mother give me his last message. Within the course of less than a year I saw that his quivering hand was a message—not a demand as I (and perhaps my mother) had seen it. Our father-son differences, our yang-sparring through the span of years, could not be bridged by confrontation; only immersion in our common milk: the hours spent together, auras shared might bring union: his note was a call to my yin from the yin in him with his wife my mother as conduit.
Hell’s Kitchen Schooldays

Forced out, with all the other boys, from my local school
I was placed in a new one on the edge of Hell’s Kitchen,
a zone known for its tough kids, gangs and capo rule;
peopled mostly with first- and second-generation Sicilians.

Fifth and sixth grades were peaceful: no classroom changes,
no social-class mixing; coping with teachers was the game.
In seventh, ‘departmental’ mode brought fear, a sense of danger:
meetings on stairs and in hallways—the threat of being maimed.

To survive some of us developed tactics: say little (if at all),
be invisible. But one day Mr. F., our teacher in History,
said he’d give a spanking new sleek black handball
to the student who’d unravel the challenging mystery:
what saint was it the Franciscan monks were named after?
Strategy demanded I not even try to answer; every boy
wanted that prize and it would be a personal disaster
if I won it and had to face the wrath for stealing their toy.

Besides, who in blazes were the Franciscans, and was there
really a Saint Francis at some time or other? Logic clearly
demanded a yes, and the silence which stifled the air
encouraged me to volunteer a guess—or would I pay too dearly?

I raised my hand ever so slowly… Come on, give it a try,
from Mr. F. Saint Francis? I venture, RIGHT YOU ARE,
with acclaim, and the ball comes hurtling towards my eyes.
I catch it, look over at Larry Leone, the Hell’s Kitchen czar.

He’s looking at me, this seventeen-year-old, his eyebrows raised
his head anod, and strangely doesn’t seem too aggressive.
In fact his gaze isn’t a glower, it’s a little surprised, appraising,
but not hostile, not sinister; not the least bit oppressive.

After class Larry approaches, says, Kid, that’s nice,
a Jewish kid like you knowing all about Saint Francis.
He suggests that we talk some time. I say sure, sure, twice,
go to my next class and hide the ball from envious glances.
Next term, the teachers decide I should be a ‘stair monitor’ so that for most of the day I’m to patrol the staircases and send AWOL miscreants, (some of them six years my senior), back to their classrooms. (To me, this arrangement has traces of lunacy; I see now it was a solution to my antsiness: it was hard for me to sit still in a class that proceeded at a snail’s pace.) At my first encounter with Larry on a landing, I ignored the laws I was to enforce, and the talk he’d wanted to have took place.

Here was his advice: *Kid, ya should study, don’t get inta fights, try to make it all the way through college. It’s too late for me; I’m just marking time around here ’til I can claim my rights—quit school. Fa you, doors are open, ya can go through ’em, see. Yer bright—yeah, Jewish—but ya even knew about St. Francis.* I’d never dreamt that going for that prize would win for me the very opposite of what I’d dreaded: instead of an antagonist I’d won, at least with Larry, an ally, entente, comity.

How helpful this would be became apparent not much later. Sal Patalano, who’d coveted that ball, passed me on the stairs, whacked me in the face. Larry, returning—as though fated—from below, saw the mark on my cheek; catching Sal unawares he let go two blows to his chin and solar plexus. With authority he ordered Sal to let me patrol without interference or menace. To me he said I should have no more trouble, but if need be I could find him on such and such a landing—his private terrace.

When Stelio Rufo, a kid more my age, height and size was loitering one day on the stairs I had to patrol, I felt brave enough to ask—even feigned some surprise—*Watcha doing here? I can’t just let you stroll.*

*I’m not feeling too good—I’m feeling like shit,* he said.

*Why not go to the nurse, get a note to go home? I proposed. I can’t do that, it’s not my turn to use the bed.* Thus, a view of life I’d never have conceived, starkly exposed.
In the way of academic achievement school wasn’t exemplary; at home and at Hebrew school I got my formal ‘education’. Larry, Stelio and the others whom I met daily on the stairway were my public school teachers, their lives texts of information not written in books, not dreamt of by boys like me, swathed in middle class ease. And their lessons are etched in my core more deep than the plus and times tables we all learn as babes. No, deeper, much deeper—much much more.
Achoo, Atchoo

Awoke this morning sounding out ‘ch’ and ‘tch’—wondered what made the difference.
Nudged Betty and asked if she could figure it;
she shrugged, not even attempting an inference.

Aha! I thought, after consonants there’s no ‘t’
but after a vowel always:
like ‘filch’, ‘hunch’ ‘lurch’ for the former, you see
and ‘hitch’, ‘latch’ ‘hutch’ for the latter case.

And then I thought, that’s rich,
not much of a theorem there.
We could have lichen grow in the kitchen—
such is my despair.

Does ‘niche’ serve too as another hitch?
Here there’s something I can salvage:
it’s French, after all, and you wouldn’t say ‘kitch’
if ‘quiche’ were what you were after.

So far my theory seems to be error-free
for consonant-following cee aitches.
But I’ll have to consult a backwards dictionary
before I merit congratulations.

My original question is something a linguist
could no doubt unequivocally reply to.
In the meantime, short of painful tongue twist
I’ll pronounce them the same—or try to.
To Bucket a Torrent

The creek’s in Tannersville:
Tannersville, New York.
Greene County—Rip Van Winkle country.

I grew up with it
not all year ’round
summers really.

It started I was three or four
would play there all day long:
the ‘big rock’, paving stones, minnows.

It flowed—babbled, bubbled
sparkled, gurgled, tingled—
always flowed.

I wanted to dam it
make a deep pool
swim in it, of it, be it.

It was strong—
what I built it broke
it was too big for me to handle.

Went away for many years
had that creek in my veins
dam the creek in my brain.

At fifteen waded in again
knew it wasn’t just the creek
had to mold some wild force

Had to bucket a torrent
swallow it float in it
make part of it me.
Baba

Baba—we didn’t call her Gramma or Grammy
or Nana or Mima—
Did you tell Baba...
Did Baba show you her...
Baba moved from the Yiddish East Side
to live with my folks right after they married.
Joe, Momma has to live with us if we get married,
or she’ll be all alone.
Don’t worry, Katie, of course.

My sisters and I, we all spoke Yiddish—
had to—that’s what Baba spoke.
Whoever came to the house
either spoke Yiddish, or had to get
a simultaneous translation.

My girlfriend (now my wife), Baba and I
would sit and have a conversation,
I murmuring the translation to Betty
and shouting the reply in Yiddish to Baba
loud enough so she could hear.

She did the cooking for the family,
the only person who really knew the recipes:
a pinch of . . . , two almost full spoons . . . ,
leave it in the oven until it turns . . . .

She woke early Friday mornings to make
the gefilte fish, braid the chalah, bake it,
grate the horseradish root, make the beetsauce
and let me ‘help’ once I got big enough—five.
We had a special—I thought almost cocoon-like—relationship. She’d talk about her shtetl life: the milking, the farming, the goats—the pogroms. She’d ask, Duvidl, zug mir noch a muhl what is it about mathematics you love so much?
I’d use my hands to talk about spaces, algebraic structures. . . .
Wide-eyed, she’d nod and oooh, and aaah.

When she died, we sat shivva,
my folks, my sisters and I.
We swapped memories: She always made me feel terrific,
one of my sisters said. What about you?

Not only terrific, but special, I offered,
thinking of the unique sealed-off times
that Baba and I had shared. Her favorite.
Me too, said my sister, I was her favorite too.
CHE BELLA PRONUNCIA

Morning
Have to get the train schedule: Torino to Bologna.
I get it online, but Jacopo says:
Call this terrific number—
all the information you need in a second—
and he dials it.
A robotic voice asks: Stazione di partenza?
Torino, I say.
And still robotically: ‘Stazione di arrivo?
Bologna, my reply. Recapitulation:
Treni da Bressanone a Bologna.

No!, I say. Speak clearly and distinctly, says she.
NO, I say as distinctly as I can in Italian.
So we start again: Stazione di partenza...
and she gets it straight—
yes—I’m starting from Torino.
I say, Si.
This elicits again: Speak clearly and distinctly,
so SI, I say, like a bell.
But again the cold voice: Speak clearly and distinctly.
I try, but nothing, it seems, makes a dent.
I hang up.

Afternoon
I must check my flight schedule: Bologna to Catania.
With No and Si still ringing in my ears
I phone a travel agency; can they tell me
my time of arrival?.
A human voice replies, slumber-soaked:
*I’ll pass you on.*
A—live!—woman gets on and asks my flight number.
I gather my tongue and breath and e-n-u-n-c-i-a-t-e
*SEI NOVANTASEI.*

A pause, I hear an intake of breath,
I wait in fear.
Then the lady, in fine full voice with a sound
and a richness I’ll always remember, sings out:
*MA! CHE BELLA PRONUNCIA!*
...Season Of The Harvest

For the unlearned, old age is winter; for the learned it is the season of the harvest.—Hasidic Saying
As long as our dreams outweigh our memories, America will be forever young—W.J. Clinton,
State of the Union, 2000

Last year I said to Paolo, When I was younger, . . . and went on to give a summary of something or other I’d done. A few hours later, his voice filled with exaggerated wonder he said, Son, by ‘younger’ are you saying that you’re still young?

This brought me up sharp. I’d said più giovane simply as reference to the mid-distant past. But to Paolo, the “più” was a dead-cert giveaway: he’d just have said giovane—or qualch’ anno fa—in setting the time frame of my aperçu.

His sardonic “Figlio” when addressing me later was his sign that, at 70, we were both no longer chicks. Clearly he’d accepted that as the truth of his current state and that I hadn’t was, well, maybe un pocatino thick?

Truth is (when I thought of it) I really had meant più giovane; my self-image (scusa Paolo) isn’t yet that of an old man. I did plant for a decent crop were I to go out now to harvest it but—I’d rather put that off a bit if I can.

For while sowing for the future’s crunch, I scattered some seeds of a more exuberant sort: an exotic place left unvisited; a few unexplored hunches from which could blossom errant urges, mind-tingling thoughts. . . which in turn would spin a skein of new dreams. So if I’m lucky, from what I planted—and should reap when I’m old—will come a rich autumn harvest, with dreams enough to outweigh memories; keep me young while I weather the cold.
Manifest Entropy

Manifest symptoms of systems running down?
Everywhere.
No numbers anymore at the deli to determine “nexts”.
No more choral chirping of the birds at dawn.
No more chirruping of cicadas toward dusk to drum up sex.
Ah, this breakdown, this breakdown I do mourn.

But could it by any chance be
that what I see
is just the running down of me?
Like

To hold as 'twere the
mirror up to nature—
Hamlet.Actiii Sc2

My granddaughter, fourteen years old,
talks like her peers: You know, like,
I found this fuzzy mold
in my yogurt, like.

I thought to myself, and suggested to her,
it might make for a nicer sound
if she substituted the term 'as 'twere'
for 'like', when her friends are around.

She looked at me as though, like, I was nuts;
didn't even bother to shrug
and told me—no ifs ands or buts—
to like shove it under a rug.
Ode to Spring

I felt like singing to spring
singing of spring
Can you understand what I mean?
The sky was blue bliss
the air warm but crisp
the trees that special spring green.
I thought it so déclassé
to exclaim in this exuberant way
that spring is here, is here.
I never thought I’d be
resorting to poetry
to say something so patently clear.
We all see the trees in bud
each flower still under its hood;
the scents, the colors so rife.
But now I know why
I have to give singing a try:
spring soars, it swells— it’s life.
Telling the Grandchildren

When the time came
that I was old enough to doubt
my father told me:

\emph{first learn all there is to know;}
\emph{that way you’ll know}
\emph{what you’re incredulous about.}

What do I tell the grandchildren
now when they say:

\emph{I don’t want to be bar mitzvah;}
\emph{Why can’t I go to school}
\emph{on Rosh Hashanah?}

Tell them to learn?
They have no time for it.
Talk about tradition?
That lives out there with words
like ‘courage’, ‘nobility’, ‘sacrifice’.
Remind them of the holocaust?
No pride in that—only ash.

\emph{Because from Zion}
\emph{will go forth the word}
we recite upon removing
Torah from ark.
Always \emph{will} go forth
not past tense
tense as the past has been.

Our tradition looks forward
with a sense always of destiny.
Even from ash we recover
Art, Science, Humanity.
Must There Be a Difference?

*Teaching is not a lost art, but the regard for it is a lost tradition*
—Jacques Barzun

After teaching math for around thirty years
I was struck with the disturbing thought
that while I was pouring out truths to their ears
many students just didn’t learn what I taught.

This made me wonder about the distinction
between ‘to learn’ and ‘to teach’:
we can preach ’til the world’s extinction
yet the students remain out of reach.

I searched through the languages I knew:
the Romance group, the Teutonic and such.
Then I consulted a linguist or two
but they couldn’t help very much.

I did find out though that in Greek
διδάσκω is to teach (as in didactic).
While μαθαινω (mathematics, so to speak)
means to learn—now that makes me ecstatic!

The Hebrews (from their language) are more optimistic:
it’s the same root from which the two verbs are made
although it seems far from realistic:
‘to learn’ is *lilmode*; ‘to teach’ *l’lmaid*.

(Maybe that’s why it was the Hebrews God took
when He decided to broadcast His name:
their language was a natural for a People of the Book;
to teach and to learn were the same!)

But to get back to earth let’s look at the facts:
after years of pondering this rift,
I decided there’s nothing to do but relax.
Getting students to learn what you teach is a gift
that some people have—different roots notwithstanding—and some of us don’t—what a shame!
We still have to try to grow understanding;
*that’s* the name of the game.
The Earnest of Being Important

This past week I’d been in Bologna as part of a bash in honor of Paolo, my longtime friend, who’s retiring (going first ‘fuori ruolo’).

They had thanked me, me, graciously, and acknowledged the part I too had played in furthering careers, research...

I liked it a lot—much more than I like to admit.

Last night, in Rome, I was sitting in Walter’s that restaurant Betty and I enjoyed so much last March, that month of almost unreal ordinariness in the heart of this soul-enveloping city.

A booming voice entered, preceding a couple—a man and his friend (as he introduced her to the Italian pair who were already there waiting forever for their arrival).

*Found the place just fine, excellent directions,* he boomed and beamed, stilling other voices in the space. *Of course,* my Italian was more than adequate.

He was a professor, architecture, he made sure we heard; didn’t say where, but patently American.

Whether about weather (*just a tad nippy*) or design (*interesting bit of structure, that,* bending toward his host in that solicitous way a parent listens to a child)

his comments were deep as his voice, assured as his posture, his posture that of total self-importance.

I felt—this surprised me—I wanted him to know in that same space was someone else who had also done something worthwhile, good.

But never would—or could—swagger, strut and boom when walking into any room.

Even more surprising, I felt envy of a sort a little wish that maybe, just sometime, I could.
Morphine Maunderings

I. One Life

Maan-Eno—in Finnish lore,
powerful goddess of thunder
who rules over easing of pain

They say all life is one
or is it won?
Is one’s won life one’s own then?

One’s own life is won, they say
and one’s won life is one
so has one now won one’s life for one’s own?

Can the pain of having won one’s life
be eased by anyone but Eno?

II. D, My Name Is...

Maybe it was easy for Ishmael,
observer and narrator of the quest
and obsession of another,
to just state his name.

I wish it were the same for me.
But as I lay semi-doped with Dilaudid
and searched for myself in the unfamiliar bed
in my oh so familiar bedroom shared
all these years with my wife, my now nurse
I said Sh’mi Da vid,
Mi chiamo Davide
Ich heiss Do’ vid.

I’m David, me, I, the one who belongs here.
Why the Hebrew first, then Italian
then German/Yiddish before the me
I daily show...

but I faded then to the thought Ishmael
routine whaling voyage,
engulfed in swirling seas another’s
emotions
as much as in oceans
around him.
And yet knew all along
who and what he was
while I twelve-day voyage in hospital
remember four first two
two last.

Or did I think Ishmael because of
Sh'mi Da vid'? Does muttered Hebrew
conjure founder Arab people
as counter to deeply felt identity
with Isaac branch children of Abraham?

Too much wondering for this addled brain
trying to unknot the threads of thought
cooked in a morphine base but flying out
to the images of books and lore
to the realities of these days’ woes abroad.
Better to keep muttering
Sh’mi Da vid,
Mi chiamo Davide
Ich heiss Do’ vid. And
My name is David
To Life—Exponentially Exquisite

To Betty on her 72\textsuperscript{nd} birthday
— from David

You most likely never gave it a thought, or if you did it fled you.
But how many times can your age be wrought as $q^p$ times $p^q$?
As you must have divined, the $p$ and the $q$
are primes—you know what they are—and the exponents mean what they usually do—nothing strange, odd or bizarre.

If you stop for a moment and do cogitate you’ll have to admit it’s a oner—a once-in-a-lifetime numerical state that makes your new age a stunner.

Yet a humbling thing learned last night at dinner had completely escaped my eye: what really makes this age a winner is that it’s four times chai.

Well, however it multiplies out this year just enjoy it—have a good time.
And you have something great ahead—want to hear?—your next birthday, you’ll be a prime!
Mudpies

Writing poems a while now
and still amateur—worse—
corny, trite, sometimes kitsch.
The language stilted,
or flat—and forced.
What I try to say
gets warped, tilted,
divorced from my feelings
if not my thoughts.
So then I’ll write
junk like this:

I wish I could compose
something more significant.
Oh, Lord, just hold your nose
or send some other sign if I can’t.

I detest (sort of)
that kind of thing,
but can’t throw it away.
I like that play with
the word ‘significant’.
But maybe it’s like making
mudpies on a beach:
amid strands of sand
with regal castles
or complex tunnels within reach,
a child may for a moment hover
but then just fill the pail with sand—
and tip it over.
Sightings

Go left of the house to the yard beyond to see the infrequent visitor:
Brewer’s blackbird.
And there a bit to the right of the pond are reports of the dickcissel
the short-eared owl
the yellow-bellied sapsucker.
In South Boston, the Gyrfalcon;
Plum Island delivers
the Northern harrier, the dunlin
razorbill and Northern shrike.
The short-billed auk, the dovekie,
was spied at Race Point
along with the glaucous gull.
And in North Scituate
the red-necked grebe
and Barrow’s goldeneye.
In other spots the snow goose
the bufflehead, bald eagle
and rough-legged hawk.
All these the quick-eyed sights
as soon as the bird alights
and sends the word to brother birders
to share the view of these barely heard of fanciful arts of flight.
Tuscan Snapshots (3)

I Through the window

The farmhouse in Quercegrossa
(nine-minutes’ drive from Siena)
has large picture window
outlooks distant mountain.
Hopscotched toward mountain
terraced fields:
yellow broom almost fully in bloom
dense, fragile lush-red poppies
durum wheat green early May
ecstatic gold beginning of July
grape vines almost bare at planting
in full blousy leaf as we leave
olive trees—olive Anything-but-drab
leaves and gnarly boles.

II Monteriggioni

Mornings on weathered bike
head out over gravel paths
through vineyards
past fields of wheat.
Some days go through woods
to Monteriggioni
northernmost haven against Florentines
for besieged Sienese.
Fluting song—diurnal—of nightingale
(strangely different from familiar, nocturnal).
Town, described in Dante,
fortress on hill,
stands sentinel
to perils now only recounted.
III Val d’Elsa

Other times, make for road
that leads to Castellina-in-Chianti
through Lilliano (good Chianti wine)
skirts the mutable Val d’Elsa;
five kilometers’ uphill pedaling—
on left, open-page fields of wheat, vines
olives defining spine
between verso and recto;
in Castellina remove helmet
mop off sweat
take restoring espresso
descend along strada statale
to farmhouse, spires of Siena
in view, unchanging
but for light and shade and hue.
Surf

We love to, Betty and I, walk along the ocean’s shore mostly in the evening when the sun’s insistence has abated but the wind’s still up, still fresh in our faces or at our backs and the roar of the mass to our left—or right, depending—threatens and, at the same time, brings rest.

We walk, stoop to inspect stones, shells, fish entrails look out to see if we can spot the pods of seals which have recently—just in the last few years—made our particular shore their new nesting grounds.

We walk, sometimes firmly step into the water to feel that sting of cold then the tingle of froth.

Or we edge further away, hear the roar of oncoming energy expect, and sometimes get, the surge as it grasps our calves.

Other moments, the rush of water promises to engulf but by a stroke of geophysical whimsy what we feel is just a water wisp whispering at our heels, and see the traces of the roll absorbed into the sandy shelf.

We return from these forays into nature that mirror the ebb and flow of our own past dares and daunts refreshed by spray; reassured we’re by now past present danger and ready for . . .

let’s just walk.
Shower

I strip, see my reflection
grimace
walk into the shower
turn it on, let it run
let the warm water
soothe the aches
virtuously acquired
by just-completed exercise.

My wife comes in
her face red and asweat
as much in need as I
of warm water solace
for the same virtuous reason.
She too had seen herself
reflected in our mirror—
and sighed.

*Two tubs in a shower*
flashes through my mind
but then, as though
we’d stepped out
of our sore depleted bodies
hers takes on a sheen
a glow to see
rich silk to touch
and I, not an ache
left in the world
embrace her as though
she were my Francesca
and I her Paolo.
Topic of Cancer

How’d I feel? Got the biopsy news…
only one in eight positive.
All you need to know—
talk at eight tomorrow…
Radical prostatectomy? Radiation?
Cut it out, nerves and all—safer.
But—nerve-sparing?
Don’t believe in it—prosthesis instead…
Found surgeon who spared nerves;
feel better already.

Done. Horrific sensation coming out:
how to point myself so as to survive?
Know what I mean? I don’t
but did.
Cool hand on forehead laid on by friend:
a minister—he had the touch.
Knew which way was up?
Beginning to feel I do too.

Back from hospital, home-bound
catheter-bound.
Every day change bandage, wash bag
use water and vinegar, reprop tube, refresh me,
my sink now partner in antisepsis, helpmeet.
Get through days working on budgets
answering e-mails, sending faxes;
forget damned catheter.
Three weeks now: catheter out.
Me? Incontinent? Wearing diapers?
At least not wetting bed, Kegeling like mad.
Long brisk walks—wet crotch be damned;
do what it takes to make it go away!
Thirtieth day, dry run: literally.
I’m over the hump. Hump...?

When does sex come back?
Will it?
At least when it does, won’t be inhibited
like before surgery: diseased member—
okay, projection of diseased interior—
what right to endanger—endanger?
Nonsense? Maybe, but what I feel
maybe all I feel those times.

Eight nine months, it comes back, sort of.
The desire, no question, and some erection—
penetration—very patient wife, lover.
No sign of rejection—but I do injections.
Viagra’s for the birds—win some, lose some.
Lose spontaneity, gain in satiety...
we’re having fun! Again. Still.

Lots of things covered—not much said
but a roadmap from surgery to conjugal bed.
Left out the dread.
Metaphysical

If I'm to be a poet, what kind shall I be?
Do I have a choice or do I just wait and see
what develops, comes pouring out of me,
when I sit down in front of the keys?

Sometimes, I know, I've been almost frivolous
lifty and light; not at all serious.
But each time I've sat down to try something lyrical
it's tended to come out ponderous, metaphysical.

Sometimes I've tried to be casual—like Frank O'Hara
and I end up pondering wanderings in the Sahara.
Or I've attempted to write gaily—face life with a grin—
and instead end up musing about original sin.

I guess after a life of writing mathematics
to turn out something light takes too much acrobatics.
In Whose Image

Philosophy 101: Was God created in the image of man, or man in the image of God?

With space-time long part of our cultural baggage; quanta, ‘uncertainty’, quarks—don’t even mention—
even the idea of strings doesn’t run us ragged despite its need for more imagined dimensions.

These complexities seem of the same general stature as our constructs of a supernatural being. Complementarity—part of our explanation of nature—no worse than coexistence of good and evil.

But the Big Bang—this result of mathematical necessity—how can it have happened in—what—there was no ‘in’? We can countenance both God and hellish atrocity but expanding space from nothing?—intellectual chagrin!

Can there be any doubt then that God’s image is of man? We can’t fathom reality—better make up a Ruse we can.
Bush-Whacked

We’ve been bushwhacked once—
most likely by the Al Qaeda—
and Bush-whacked in our ‘defense’
with action and voice bellicose, strident.
We’re whipped to a frenzy to take revenge
before thinking how best to do it
how to use intelligently our Intelligence
now sorely depleted—oh how we rue it.
We back our leaders in our anger and our pain
to lash out at—what—audacity
that anyone anywhere could have dared to stain
our self-endowed complacency?

For months without visible end
a newspaper publishes ‘A Nation Challenged’
our talk shows dwell on what everything portends
and spend hours all upset and deranged
about a plane crash that could have been
an act of Terrorism—but wasn’t.
We use a curtain of bombers
and a squall of Tomahawks
to seek out our villain Osama bin Laden
and let the future deal with the havoc
of a land devastated, now a whole world’s burden.

We forget we’re not the first in the world’s tradition
to have felt the cruel slam of terror.
When we’re struck we must form a world coalition
to rectify—no, eradicate—this monstrous error.
No matter our current partners
are those we wouldn’t want to shake hands with;
they now are our comrades-in-arms
that our commanders are chummily making plans with.
And we overlook the fact
that in our overweening pride
we have let our over-preening leaders
take us again for a ride.
Money Isn’t Time

It depends upon what the meaning
of the word is means—
President Bill Clinton

All that fuss about Clinton quibbling
as to what the definition of ‘is’ is
as though the question were trivial, and he
was just wriggling hoping they’d let go.
Though in his case the time-value of ‘is’
is what was under the gavel;
‘is’ can be elusive even to a pro.

When Keats turned his pen to the Grecian Urn
and said “Beauty is truth” as plain as day,
he couldn’t stop there, assume we’d discern
that “truth beauty…” followed in a logical way.
For ‘is’ isn’t always ‘equals’ or ‘the same as’
the way it’s supposed to be in logic or math.

And take James Merrill: writing of his father,
he turned this parent’s slogan, “Time is money,”
into the mordant observation,
when this Mogul had passed his prime,
that even he must curb persistent craving;
that “money isn’t time.”
Cogito...  

_Cogito ergo sum—_

René Descartes

_Nobody can be exactly_

like me. Sometimes even

_I have trouble doing it.—_

Tallulah Bankhead

And I'm not Tallulah—not even close.
Maybe it's not me that I'm not exactly
it's more that what I am must be me
but I don't know what 'me'
is like to be.

Did René really have it straight
or is it the rules of language
that make it seem that way?
‘Cogit’ or ‘s...’ wouldn’t pass muster;
the verbs need an ending—
a person first second...

So since it was he, after all,
doing the thinking
it came out 'cogito' and,
to make it all add up
‘s...’ had to end as ‘sum’.

And don’t forget
he still wasn’t totally sure
his body was with him on this trip:
his being wasn’t guaranteed
by his body, just by his mind—
and only a thinking one at that.

If I think I think
is that good enough?
Do I get to be?
And whom do I get to be—me?
The Buchwald Art

We called it ‘Buchwalding’
this art of replying to a question
to which we hadn’t the foggiest notion
of the answer, in the muddiest
most convoluted, illogical way possible.

We called it ‘Buchwalding’ because
Art Buchwald once wrote he’d decided,
when his wife asked him questions to which
he didn’t—couldn’t—know the answer,
he’d give her the nuttiest response
he could think of at the moment and offer it
with aplomb and verve.

The idea is that it’s great fun
provided both parties know the rules.
The White House, I fear,
has come up with a variant—
maybe ‘Bushwa’ is what it should be called.
To the questions, Why war? and
Where are the jobs, the surplus—our freedoms?
We get replies that defy credulity:
WMDs, tax cuts, tax cuts, terrorism.

If we knew they were really just playing
we’d know these replies are not really to be believed
but the public thinks the Bushmen know what they’re saying
—a most cruel way to be deceived.
Repetitive Tasks

And tonight it will be going the other way, my Italian neighbor sighed from his terrace—facing mine—as he scanned the ferry plying the placid Ionian between Siracusa and Messina.

I think of this as I stack the breakfast dishes in the washer just unloaded, still expectant; then remember my long-ago ‘mid-life crisis’ when my days, it seemed, would be invariant.

The ferry’s fated to sail in unroiled sea lanes; the dishes, every day’s supply, have to be washed. Our own daily patterns seem to allow no sea change . . . but does this really mean our inner life is stopped?

I like to think—and so I weathered my old crisis—the pulsing swells and sinks is where change—and life—is.
The Binding

And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?—Gen. 22:7

The Power and the Gory

Puzzled and tormented for years by the story of Isaac’s binding—
we don’t say ‘sacrifice’ since that final act was aborted just in time—
I’ve explored many texts that try to explain the inhumanity—father killing beloved son—that lies within that story.
It seems beyond civilized man’s ability to accept without mitigation or demur.
That scene of Isaac trekking up the mountain with Abraham, the wood for the burning strapped on his back, the conversation between father and son...
how could such a scene be conceived?
Two millennia later, it’s Jesus trekking to Golgotha with the wooden cross on his back;
the rôles of Abraham and God have been folded into one: God the Father.
The ram is lamentably missing, as is the angel who’d called out to halt the gory event.
After this binding, the consummation...
Man had converted this bestial story to praise of the Power and the Glory.
Svolgimento

The days unfold
the way they only can
when you wake to the profumo
of the already pulsing pasticceria
just across the cortile
(the one with the Bramante pillars)
and know that in but moments
you’ll walk to the rear door—
their kitchen portal—
and pick up your three—maybe four—
piping-hot right-out-of-the-oven-glazed
best-in-Rome cornetti;
then sit down with Betty to partake
of the coffee poured from the Bialetti—
that coffee maker with the mustachioed logo—
and absorb—not just eat, or munch—
the buttery, hot, not-too-sweet, flaky
cakes moments ago brought in to the flat—
that converted chapel that lets in little light
but provides you with a home in the core
of that eternally lively, constantly varying
incomparable city—Rome.

In itself that opening of the day
makes more of it unnecessary—
but there’s still a day’s life to follow.
We have, of course, the humdrum chores:
the short walk to Piazza Navona
to pick up the newspaper and—you can’t help it—
walk around the long oval, the fountains,
see the toddlers out of their strollers
the tourists just beginning to stroll in;
then the walk through the *vicolo* by Tre Scalini across Via dell’Anima to Piazza della Pace where stand the fruit-and-vegetable vendors—our favorite, Silvia, already showing us her I-guarantee-you’ll-come-back-again-for-more (and we already have) melons and tomatoes *fior’ di zucchi*, grapes, greens galore; the walk a few paces to the *salsamenteria* to pick up Rosetta rolls, prosciutto, cheese: the luncheon necessities.

Is there time now for a walk along the Tiber before we succumb to our just-selected treats; or instead a stroll through Campo de’ Fiori’s markets of flowers and coffee-sippers, clothing and fish? Or eat first and do a longer *gita* to visit San Clemente, say, with its layered vaults working down from Renaissance church through early Christian arch and curve to altars and pews for bull-slaughtering ritual? But to go on at length is to do an injustice to the process, the unfolding, this *svolgimento*; the process which, itself, is the indelible memento.
You’re Welcome

More often than not when I say, “Thank you”
I just expect a “You’re welcome” in return.
But if there’s any response to my expression of gratitude
it’s mostly “Thank you” that I seem to discern.

This leap in mores from generation to generation
reminds me of an incident that occurred the other day.
We’d (Betty and I) just parked in a downtown parking station
and walked to the elevator to get to that evening’s play.

Two women—I’m tempted to say ‘elderly’—
were nearing the door at the same time as we.
One of them commented on my behavior as ‘gentlemanly’
as I held the door for them to enter before me.

Now, we were all of the same generation
so it surprised me that she was impressed by my deportment.
I fantasized: maybe it was my healthful coloration,
unlined skin, jaunty walk, youthful comportment
(bald though I am, slightly stooped, and white-bearded)
that led her to believe our age gap not so trivial.
But apparently (Betty told me this afterward)
her elevator inspection of me made the idea more convivial
that my behavior should indeed have been of the sort
that parents of children of our generation
were repeatedly, emphatically wont to exhort.

*****
The above is preamble to another dichotomy
between mindsets of today and those of yesteryear.
That has to do with the etiquette of apology:
what one says and what one then expects to hear.

In days of yore when one used to say
“I’m sorry that...” or “I apologize for...,”
the response might be “Thank you” or “I see,”
and that was considered to have settled the score.

But now, I discover, as in the case of my grandchildren
and with their mothers—my children—tensely looking on
that to an apology proffered for some transgression
I’m supposed to offer one of my own.

How much more complicated it is nowadays:
to a “thank you” one must conjure a reciprocal gratitude;
for an apology or promise to mend one’s ways
one must repent a flaw in one’s own attitude.

Yes, these days one must travel far from home
to hear “Danke/bitte”; “Grazie/prego”; “Merci/je t’en prie”
for that old-fashioned sense of “Thank you/you’re welcome”
that old-fashioned state of live and let be.
Dreams Make No Noise

So, dreams make no noise when they die—
a line in Mark Morris' Going Away Party.
Or was it dreams don’t make noise when they die?
Is there a difference?
What is the image? Is it that dreams
when they die, are so battered
that they’ve no noise left in them to make?
Or is it just that when they die
nobody does hear them—
not even one’s self;
that they die a slow death and just fade out?
But is that the reason one’s self-perception
is always as young, and hale,
even though the reality belies that?
Can it be the dreams die without our really knowing
and over time our memories outweigh our dreams?
But memories die too.
Is that how we keep the balance for so long?
Do dreams outweigh memories only by denial?
That’s an effective process, denial.

My sister, nine years my senior, demurs:
dreams never die she insists
(thus validating that dreams make no noise when they do
—since they don’t).
Should I defer to her wisdom or,
despite her still thinking of me as a kid,
suggest that, perhaps, she doesn’t remember
the ones that did?
Plumbing

You write things down
you touch on this, on that
the cancer you had
and had cut out
the pain—discomfort—
the worry about sex
the coming around
the plumbing rehabbed.

But still afraid to plumb.
I sit and follow the reading
of the binding of Isaac.
How many times is it now?
I usually get lost in reflection
when the ram appears
and the cruel story seems over.
But today I continue to listen
and hear the angel call
for the second time
to recite Abraham’s rewards.
The list seems great:
Thy seed will multiply;
inherit the enemy’s gate... 
I’m reminded of the death
of the mother of my father.
She loved him, he her, dearly.
In her will she left
a ring to his brother
an earring to his sister
a diamond to another.
To him she lovingly left
the outstanding debts
owed her by a daughter,
by another of her sons. . .
He needed no rings,
but my father’s lips pressed tight
his eyes aglaze, face white
when he discovered
what she’d left him.

Was he to storm their gates
control their accounts?
No, he cancelled their amounts. . .
and became their benefactor.
Another kind of debt
impossible to pay;
the resentment he’d feared
now shown—in subtler ways. . .

I look anew
at that ancient inheritance—
‘the gate of his enemies’—
promised to the seed of Abraham
who obeyed God’s decree.
Was this, like Grandmother’s will,
a misguided act of love—
or a hard lesson to a man
who would sacrifice his son?
Kaleidoscope

Robin Hood can be retitled
“Copse and Robbers.”
Think ‘Sheriff’ next,
the ogre of that fairy tale,
and sail to Omar Sharif?
Similarity of sound—and moustache?
A little turn: Hitler, Charlie Chaplin
The Gold Rush—aah—La Fanciulla dell’Ovest
that Puccini piece inspired by American
adventure and avarice.
The avarice that coats our consciences today
so deep-entwined it’s beyond our consciousness
but hey, let’s not get serious here. Keep turning
keep the scattered pieces churning…
now out of the forest. The cops are in the streets
keeping the GOP safe from—it’s hard to say—
terrorists? protesters? Whatever. They keep Bush safe…
that robber baron who lays our country waste.
DEVOLUTION

If I were cap-
Able Abel
To cane to Cain
I’d
have
devolved.
Buzz

*It has to do with sex—with mating* Betty says as we sit in the garden and hear the buzzz the hummm of the crickets—locusts? cicadas?—loud and louder on this warm August afternoon. *I thought this only happened at night.*

And then she goes on: *I’d hate to be out in the country with this the only sound one hears.* I listen now more closely to the sound and note that from the crescendo it descends in volume—not in pitch—almost disappears—is quiet...

then resumes, climbs, peaks—plateaus, rather, and holds that level of buzz then subsides...disappears...

*They don’t stay satisfied for long* grins Betty as they start up again

buz-z-z-z hum-m-m-m-m-m

and I think: this must be like spending the day in a motel room—thin-walled—

with a horny couple—very—

on the other side.

Or maybe that’s not fair.

Maybe we live life too—always at the same pitch different intensity...

but our season is longer.
Erose

Erose, jagged,
notch’ed, zagg’ed—
erose by any other name would
smell... aroma,
scent, perfume—
would smell, just esweet.
Eating, Crow?

Where have all the robins gone.
Gone from graveyards everyone?

It was really so, years ago,
Spring was announced by robins here.
But now, independent of time of year,
the bird you see most is the crow.

You wonder why the robins left us.
But see squashed squirrels in the street,
and spy entrails only crows will eat,
you know it’s road kill that’s bereft us.

Our speeding cars have produced free feed
that only certain birds will go for;
on the food chain carrion’s too low for
robins. It doesn’t suit their breed.

As usual we’ve swapped speed for beauty,
and black for orange, caws for chirps.
Can’t we see we’ve been real twerps?
Or is that beyond our call of duty?
I don’t really hate that she writes of me so lovingly
so lovingly that when I hear the verses read
or murmur them myself
I find my throat constricting
my nose adribbling
and tears filling my eyes.

But I did have to ask her once:
*Do you love me as much in real life
as you do in your poems?*
And what did she do?
Wrote a love poem about that too!
And it’s a good one, I’ve got to admit.
She even ended her book with it.