

H. Stern

NIHIL OBSTAT

(Nothing Hinders)

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A hiss and crash of icicles from the trees,
a touch of sun - already the birds can drink
from tiny pools that flash in disappearing.
Thought is a place; you're in it. Look at the world.

WALKS WITH WINFIELD

I

As soon as I turn the corner the wrong way,
Winfield's in heaven - garbage, and the best kind:
dry cheeseburger bits and watermelon rind
in the lovely iridescence of decay.
How thrilling! How delightfully face-to-face!
Please don't rush me, says Winfield; this is my place.

We're deep in ragweed under an entrance ramp
to a rumbling interstate that maneuvers
over meanders of two dismal rivers
through a vulcanized marsh that borders a dump.
Although the scene is a real postcard from hell,
I can tell that the geography meant well.

I recognize, as you can't from a straight street,
the painterly lay of the land, the way it
must have unfolded itself on the day it
first was seen from a ship where its waters meet.
The land then spoke to someone; and what it said
I faintly hear through the garbage in my head.

And that's the sort of abundant recompense
that answers to my design; not irony
or the remoter charm of philosophy,
but simply beauty, now revealed in the sense
that one could live in: a country, not a flag.
Winfield can drink from a plastic zip-lock bag

- one of the many graceful turns of technique:
the trick, the stanza, the broad estuary.
Beauty, if it's real, is imaginary;
and I'm still standing in weeds on Widow's Peak.
So gather yourself, my friend; it's time to go.
I want you home when the storm begins to blow.

II

Having conquered the bald knob of Whitney Peak
(only three hundred feet - no oxygen tanks -
but still an elevating refreshment thanks
to the view of wooded Westville and West Rock)
I settle down to see what I came to see;
Winfield turns to descend immediately.

For him the pleasure is all in the going.
He understands why the pompous architect
who redesigned my office didn't suspect
I might just sit and read instead of doing
vigorous calisthenics. (Like a bored pup,
every twelve minutes the heat and lights give up

and sleep until they sense me moving again.)
I want something different, a sublimated
overview of a thousand unrelated
goings that make bewilderment in the plain.
(Of course it doesn't hurt that many of these
are filtered or partially obscured by trees.)

And I want to see myself an hour ago
by the millgate, gazing up at the summit,
thinking I'd like to speculate down from it
on me looking up at myself from below -
proof that I'm not something that happened to me,
but rather something I intended to be.

Then I'll be happy to let the heat escape
and light grow dim. Better freeze and be finished
than have to see my symmetry diminished
from this great height. - Poor Winfield grumbles in sleep.
I ought to do something for my patient friend.
I grant the wish he gave up on: let's descend.

III

Nightfall, snowfall. Here's the old gun factory,
 where long dead workers make the obsolete guns
 for counterfactuals and comparisons
 or just averting a costly victory
 out in the world. The wind is growing colder;
 the snow now reaches up to Winfield's shoulder,

commanding every bit of his attention.

I have attention to burn. For me the storm
 partakes of a ghostly paradigm or form -
 while solidier my companion soldiers on,
 inhabits the snow like a squat Inuit.
 I'm both in it and, as always, out of it.

To wit: I'm in the Winterreise, shunning
 the tuneless roads that fat Philistines drive on
 because they're shoveled; managing to thrive on
 a regimen of self-destructive cunning -
 keeping to impassable mountain passes
 and glaciers with invisible crevasses.

Born to drift on the Balto-Slavic basin,
 I'm stuck in the etymology of storm.
 The suffixed zero grade (a variant form)
 has me troubled, conturbed. I lose my place in
 Pokorny, prospecting for quartz, as it were -
 not jasper, topaz, or chrysoprase - in *(S)TWER.

And then of course I'm here in my own strange dance:
Mesto, with a lilt or limp, in eleven -
 out in the street, or at my table, even
 lying flat on the page. My thanks in advance
 for helping me to imagine the last word:
 I'm here, Winfield is with me, you make the third.

DOUBLE SESTINA: STATE STREET

I walk to work on State Street for a change;
the route is questionable, and I love questions.
Here's the storefront of the embezzler-saint:
Beware, it says, of nonexistent dog!
So crack the fortune; read the blessing. - What?
"You're either homeless or a ghost at home."

I never even think of leaving home
without a handful of Canadian change
to mystify the con men - which is what
seems most effective in forestalling questions
about my strange tattoo: the Victor dog
below the legend: GÖDEL WAS A SAINT.

Now here's Kielbasa Row: the stretch from Saint
Stanislaus to the Polish National Home
by way of Zosia's Deli. Praise to God,
to country, and to sausage! Never change
the recipe for virtue! Drown all questions
in fragrant vats of Polish beer! - Say what?

Great Pompey's ghost! I can't imagine what
got into me. (I can, of course: the Saint-
Estèphe I drank for breakfast - any questions?)
I'm pale, diffuse, dyslexic; but a home-
cooked meal (instead of Blessings, for a change)
would do me worlds of good. - Now back to dog.

Poetry, like a nonexistent dog,
is man's best friend when he remembers what
living was like before the Stock Exchange
made grifters of us all. The strains of "Saint
James Infirmary" greet me from the home
for homeless theorems, and I'm racked by questions.

But please, let's not outsmart ourselves with questions
or imitate the sly (as he thought) dog
who read the forecast and remained at home:

"Partly cloudy, they say - and partly what?"
The world is firm; it doesn't take a saint
to be defeated by it. Some things change,

and some things (here's my theme) seem not to change:
they get renumbered, recombined as questions
to try the patience of a reader-saint;
go round forever like the Victor dog
on old shellacs I let the crafty what-
not merchant stick me with and carried home.

Now here's the Bradley Bar and Grille, my home
away from home. Last year I watched it change
from vaguely lesbian to who-knows-what;
it's not, in any case, a bar for questions.
I nurse my Polish beer and scratch the dog,
whose name is Saint Bernard - who is a Saint

Bernard. I call him Neal, after the Saint
the Kirbys kept on Topper. When at home,
he felt at home, though dead - a former dog,
not much impressed by death, immune to change,
impervious to metaphysical questions;
a happy ghost, a goof, a God-knows-what.

Happy the man who can distinguish what
is still alive, who knows: this is, this ain't.
I dreamt a sign that raised amusing questions
in Oxford, England, once. I'd left the home
of J. L. Austin - bored, wanting a change
of air - to walk his nonexistent dog.

I reached the red-light district, and my dog
began to howl insanely - howl at what,
I couldn't see. I felt the winds of change;
I promised, warned, advised, and swore by Saint-
André (the cheese). I saw the Sailors' Home
and then the sign: LIVE SPEECH ACTS. - Any questions?

I'm back at State and Bishop. All these questions
have left me dizzier than the Victor dog.

I'll make a stop at Blessings, then trot home
and call in dead or obsolete or (what's
my mantra?) nonexistent, like the saint
for whom they named Saint Catherine's. Plus ça change!

So that's my dog, my blessing - all for what?
For life, o reader-saint! If you have questions,
try State Street; it's like home: it doesn't change.

ODE TO FREDDY

What it's like having five cats is like this:
Willy is gruff and envious of Buddy;
Pookie is proud and indignant vis-à-vis Spanky;
but everybody loves Freddy, who loves everybody.

When I think about Fred I often ask myself:
Is this virtue, or some very-hard-to-classify defect?
To sing a note that can't be fit into any known discord
renders your sweethearthood - doesn't it? - a bit bland.

Human relations are rarely smooth. Even St. Francis,
feeding the birds, sporting the halo, doubtless provoked
a grumpy neighbor who seethed inwardly and finally poked
his head out the window: More birdshit on my tennis court; terrific.

But everybody has a good word for Fred, and he for everybody.
Perhaps, after his death - sed longe, longe absit! - his heirs
will discover he's been embezzling the widow's industrial shares;
or find a cache of Japanese cat-pornography: hideous, with rodents.

Freddy, don't stare at me with those watery green eyes.
I regret I spoke the word "bland," let alone "rodent."
Work with me, paleface; I'm in utter desperation.
Freddy, you toward and sapid creature, you goodnik!

NEW HAVEN GREEN

in memory of Herb Meyer

Crossing the New Haven Green
in the interval between
Desdemona's death bed scene

and my likely ineffectual
stab at lending intellectual
glitz and glamor to the aspectual

system of the Yiddish verb -
spring has come; it's a superb
day for having lunch on Herb -

up ahead I spot a fellow
strumming his guitar. Othello
exit left; enter Apollo.

Carefully he finger-picks
famous Leo Kottke licks,
and he's learned some tuning tricks:

slightly sharper, slightly flatter
underneath a fluent patter
(plunk) that mainly serves to flatter

(unison) his own innate
(octaves) taste in finding great
geniuses to emulate.

Blatant, self-regarding spectacle!
Him-regarding droves of skeptical
passers by the trash receptacle

pause to clamp a legal brief
under arm and breathe relief:
virtuosos come to grief;

drudges don't, or not so surely.
Better go through life obscurely
as a stooge or stagehand purely

- not Houdini. And besides,
art is where the truth abides;
true art castigates and chides,

testifies to inhumanity
in the tone of sober sanity
- not of self-indulgent vanity.

BLAH BLAH BLAH. I disagree:
no constraint of history
abrogates the right to be

briefly godlike; no disaster
makes it very wrong to master
lyre and lyric. In the last or

next-to-last analysis,
my apology is this:
all we really want is bliss.

"ZÖLLER HAT MICH GENOMMEN"

I learned to play the wind as a graduate student
in Frankfurt. For me the oboe was absolute;
but fearing to sound like German players of that, I thought it
prudent
to settle for second best and learn the flute.
Less plangent, less acute.

The professor flatly refused to take a beginner;
but one of his better students, who openly pined
to jump from him to Karlheinz Zöllner, the great Berliner,
agreed to teach me. She was funny and kind,
needed the money, and didn't mind.

"Remember," she said, "the lessons are terminated
as soon as I hear from Zöllner's Hauptseminar
that a place is vacant. A year and a half I've waited,
but the minute I get that letter I start my car.
I'll think of you from afar."

And so it happened that every term-time Saturday
I noodled my way through Quantz, Telemann, and the easier bits
of J. S. Bach; then cute chromatic oddities by the latter-day
minor ironic masters Karg-Elert and Schmitz -
progressing by starts and fits.

My teacher's name was Maria Michaelis.
She taught me the word hecheln: "pant like a hound."
(One of the ways that German flute-books make you learn to exhale is
rhythmic panting. I thought it silly but found
that it really deepened my sound.)

One day, lucky in streetcars, arriving early
to take my weekly lesson, I heard a sleek
cadenza to Mozart's Flute Concerto in G. I waited. Shortly a curly
pudgy preadolescent emerged. That little freak
gave me heartburn for a week.

I'm telling stories to pass the time. It's now the middle of May. I journey from east to west across the city. "Zöllner hat mich genommen" - PUNKT - is how the message reads on the door. Indeed the rest had already been expressed.

She could have called, I suppose, and thereby saved us both time and trouble; she might, except for the year, have used a raft of inventions that later universally enslaved us: fax, beeper, e-mail, electronic gear implanted deep in the ear.

But doing what she did - how well she captured in that laconic door-inscription the fine perfectiveness of her divine assumption, being raptured like Ganymede in Purgatorio IX. She left a sign,

a one-line poem, really, that I've been reading for thirty years, until I began to hear the Locked-Out Lover's (Music Lover's) Lament - yes, the preceding - which paid me back in poetry, as it were, for the literal loss of her.

POETRY AND TRUTH

On the road to New York I noticed a tractor-trailer with a load of steel beams. The beams were not exactly being carried, for there wasn't a proper trailer - only the steel beams themselves, fastened directly to axles and wheels. That's what poetry is like. Just outside my office in the German Department at Columbia there was a set of swinging fire doors with polished brass plates for the hands of the public. About ten or twelve inches above each of the plates the brown enamel was flaking off where many thousands of hands had actually encountered the doors. That's what truth is like.

THE FIREDOORS

(second half of the previous as a New Hampshire poem)

We'll have no sweatshop death - an architect
has mounted banks of insulating doors
at intervals along the upper floors
of the fine pseudo-Georgian imitation
where my department lies. But I suspect
that what he feared by way of conflagration
was not a thing to interest a Dalmatian;
most likely what he thought to stop was mirth.
You'd be surprised how fast a wing can catch
if one untenured teacher's witticism
races down corridors for all it's worth.
Wit is a hazard, like a sulphur match,
in arid microclimates.

Nonetheless,

the name of Truth compels me to confess
that quite another style of symbolism -
less whimsical, in the public domain -
has reconciled me to my doors. (It's plain
that one can learn to live with ugliness
for purposes of thinking.) Every panel
of chicken-wired window has a plate
of polished brass beside it where the State
High Ministry of Bald Misinformation
reckons that hands must fall. They must, but don't.
A foot above each plate the brown enamel
has flaked and rubbed away beneath the weight
of countless hands that either can't or won't
behave as predicted by authority.
The price we pay in paint is fine with me.

TRY THIS AT HOME

I wrote a song - it nearly broke my fingers.
I sang it for myself to still the pain.
The pain has vanished and the music lingers.

Aesthetics, anaesthesia. Many singers
have tried to come between them but in vain:
a happy song will always break your fingers.

Gum-gatherers and introspective swingers
of birches do their work and don't complain.
Who cares about their knuckles? Music lingers

long in the mind. A thousand years of ringers
have rung their changes on the same refrain:
Be happy (though the song will hurt your fingers).

Be brave. Do tricks. Try pulling out the stingers
of scorpions by brute legerdemain.
Who will amuse us if the mage malingers?

O Jove! O Jupiter! - the cognate bringers
of jollity from heaven - kindly deign
to rough me up a bit and smash my fingers.
I've got insurance and the music lingers.

1 Prince Igor has been captured by the barbarians.
A great eclipse of the sun! Disgrace! Disaster!
Disgrace, because a Russian prince is expected
to die in battle when he's defeated in battle.
Disaster too, because the savage Polovtsi
will devastate the defenceless fatherland,
will carry off the workable men in chains,
and rape the women. That, in a standard nutshell,
is how the Faithful want this tale to begin.
Borodin obviously had other ideas.

Come reason with me closely. The long Act One
is given over to drunken buffoonery,
abduction of a young girl to concubinage,
and deposition of the legitimate ruler -
none of which involves a single barbarian;
it's all concocted at home by Prince Galitsky,
regent and brother-in-law to Igor himself,
well in advance of reports of Igor's defeat.

O Russia! train your eyes on
the interior horizon!
Beware the repercussions
of failing to fear the Russians!

2 Opera-goers, let's admit
it can't have been the sobbing fit
by Igor's grieving wife (to wit:
by Yaroslavna, large of tit)
that brought us here. The opposite;
what brought us was the popsy bit -

Act Two, the wild extravagance
of Oriental song and dance,
with captive girls of brightening glance
in undulating see-through pants
and tunics.

Then the mustached lords
of various brightly costumed hordes
take up their ornamental swords
and capriole across the boards.

Don't stop at seconds, give me thirds.
It's all too marvelous for words.

3 Alas, Prince Igor fails to see this point;
his nose remains severely out of joint.
However charmingly those maidens sing,
his mind is unattuned to anything
but going home, where he will be released
from the reproach of being undeceased.
The Khan Konchak has done his level best
to make the prisoner feel like a guest.
"You want a bird for hunting? Please take mine.
And here's an offer that you can't decline:
Take any girl that suits your fancy - say,
a raven-haired seductress from Cathay -
to warm your bed. I make you equal lord
of half the world I've conquered by the sword.
You'd rather be a peasant and be free?
Well said, my friend! You sound a lot like me.
I grant your freedom; use it well. Of course,
you promise not to reengage my force.
You don't? I knew you wouldn't. Nor would I.
O Igor, you and me against the sky!"

Thus spake the Khan; and I shall add my own
injunction in a less exalted tone:

"Igor!

Don't fail to recognize, you fuddy-duddy,
opera's most congenial drinking buddy!"

4 This is the problem that Borodin, if he had lived to a hundred,
likely would never have solved; and nothing that Korsakov-Rimsky

(lo by dint of ingenious arrangement) or Glazunov likewise (he who perfected the art of composing the improvisations Borodin threw to the winds) in their eagerness fixed and finagled alters the grimly traditional plot: for the rest of the evening, Igor will try to escape - and escape - from the world of aesthetics; where, as the dutiful victims of life, we would love him to linger.

5 At the Met in Lincoln Center
 once I heard Valery Gergiev,
 energetic but erratic,
 lead the Petersburg Prince Igor.
 Uncorrected freshman papers
 littered my New Haven office,
 which is why I'd left New Haven
 for the steppes of Central Asia.
 Mostly, what I want is music;
 that night, though, the stage designer
 followed by the dance director
 stole the show: they worked in metal.
 Gleaming stainless-steel constructions
 bathed in analgesic moonlight
 (what they represent is murky)
 circumstand the Mongol camp.
 Not by stage convention sexy
 acrobats in gold and silver
 light-reflective body stockings
 turn their somersaults and cartwheels -
 o the spangle dust and streamers,
 o the phosphorescent hoops!

6 Prince Igor, house and father,
 say: Unbestimmter Wohnsitz!

 Take one of the gleaming girls.
 (If you prefer, take a boy.)
 She'll do somersaults in bed,
 possibly logic puzzles.

Mongolian swivelpot!
Never the same syntax twice!
To be and not to be - both!
What more could you ask?

7

Igor, sell your birthright, and with the proceeds
go buy yourself a more appealing birthright.
(They're selling rights, you know. Trust me - I'm Jacob.)
Forget the childish fear of disappointing
your great ancestral heroes. In their day
they all did what they wanted; so should you.
At any rate, they're all here on the turf,
those old campaigners, hurling their javelins,
racing their battlecars, grooming their horses -
none of which will ever be used in war.
They're not pretending; they've invented sports.
They dwell on mossy riverbanks, forgather
in shady groves, and never seem to miss
the metropolises they're known for having founded.
Happy the man whose walls need not rerise!

By glint of evening they philosophize
about causality and human freedom;
talking in circles, granted, yes, but then -
there's much to learn from going round in circles:
you get a sense of what connects with what
and where the fractures lie. (I write these lines
cruising the Ringbahn clockwise round Berlin.
And space itself is curved; so even thoughts
that wander through eternity come back.)
After the talk there's music; all the world
is held in ravishment as, to the harp,
in long-suspended harmonies the heroes
sing their adventures; sing their own defeat
by doom of battle, granted, yes, but then -
victory is too fat to sing about.

Igor, you're in an opera, remember.
To hell with victory, bring on the music.

8

Fly to your native land
far east of Samarkand
my loopy song

There, in a sea of flowers
you built the fictive bowers
for which I long

You let your thoughts unravel
in fantasies of travel
to foreign climes

where life would be so merry
although involuntary
in later times

My song, you felt so free there
you didn't need to be there
beyond the day

A heartache - first we choose it
and then we're forced to lose it
far from Cathay

ISOMORPHIC

It may be nearly impossible to walk a straight line when you're drunk, but I've never seen anyone try to do it under any other circumstances. Or, to put the matter another way: when you break off the ears of a chocolate rabbit, the rabbit is much diminished but its hearing is not impaired.

If only we could see in complete wakefulness the transparent identities of structure that reveal themselves on the border of wakefulness and sleep. As long as we keep our equilibrium on that border and fall into neither oblivion nor remembrance, then the solution to the most intricate logical puzzle is nothing more than the particular breath we take to keep from falling; and that in turn is subsumed under a magnificent metaphysical pun in all tongues - the very pun that will establish once and for all that irony is an instrument of love, like a caress. But one impetuous swerve to either side of that border, and we either remember that we've forgotten or forget that we remember. Half-light is the condition of these identities.

ON MEASUREMENT

I

Years ago, before the cessation of hostilities, when I opened the door to my apartment, I could tell immediately by the ratio of black to yellow hair on the carpet that someday this sentence would come into being. It was that intense: the conflict between cats, and also the knowing.

II

A sinister mound on the roadway up ahead - the closer I am to New Haven, the less likely it is to be a beautiful raccoon or opossum and the more likely it is to be a clump of oily rags. That's the consolation; and, in a way, that's the beauty.

III

All my life I've been looking for a flexible community where the local fishmarket sells cheddar goldfish. That isn't a lot to specify. Once, when a student of mine resurfaced after missing three or four classes, I asked him where he had been, and he startled me by saying: Not far. I understood, I understood. On the final examination he identified St. Augustine as a North African hippo, and - naturally I gave him half-credit.

A FESTIVAL OF MALFEASANCE

First the construction company lays down a defective pavement, so that water collects in the numerous depressions. Then the negligent maintenance workers fail to clean up after torrential summer rainstorms, so that a half-inch layer of mud replaces the puddles. And how does September respond to this consecutive multiplicative malfeasance? With a sprinkling of grass: tender, pale green, a refreshment to the beholder.

A FESTIVAL OF HOPELESSNESS

I had a neighbor who loved to scatter grass seed on the bald patches of an otherwise scraggly lawn. He could be persuaded to shade the patches with hay, maybe to water them once; but he never watered again, and all his seedlings died in the cradle. For years I thought of my neighbor as an allegorical figure, on the order of Persistheth-Not. Nowadays I think: how wonderful to so enjoy scattering grass seed that the activity is uncompromised by any hope whatsoever of someday enjoying grass.

A DIP

"That year the snow came early. Talbot sent
his workmen south one Thursday noon. Great blocks
of granite bound for Boston stood in stacks
about the quarry pit. Nobody meant
to fold the business, but when Talbot went
(he died at Christmas), war and politics
and money problems hit like hammerstrokes.
A quarry doesn't vanish like a dent

in dough; it fills with water. Swim and fall
in eight November nineteen thirty-seven
preserved forever like a crystal ball;
and when it's time to reinhabit heaven,
climb gently onto sunlit granite shelf -
not bound for Boston now - and sun yourself."

for Cyrus and Rosamond Hamlin
Somesville, 25-28 August 2006

ACADEMIC SONNET

Congenial bar. Small table. You and me.
I've got a theory about Aztec art.
I talk in chapters and of course I'm smart.
Exactly what an ass/prof ought to be.

You've got a share or two in Aztec art,
a more substantial interest in me.
You're not my lover but would love to be.
Agreeing with me, though, is not so smart.

My latest book has had a vile review
from Ass/Prof X, who hopes to do me in.
Everything I print the bastard skewers.

The rubbish I've been serving up to you,
and you've admired through a quart of gin,
is not my theory, love - it's my reviewer's.

COLD BLOOD

My devil's little acre in Was Farms
has recently, of all the rotten luck,
been colonized by an outlandish duck -
Muscovy duck, I think. Its birdy charms

have not been lost on my attentive cats:
at first they circled, wondering where to bite it;
but then they saw that they could never fight it
successfully - it's much too big. And that's

the standoff as we speak, a diplomatic
mutual disregard, with muskets down.
Was Farms is such a quiet part of town,
politely inoffensive, unemphatic.

The duck drama, though, has opened my eyes:
cold blood is just a question of your size.

THREE RHETORICAL OBJECTS

for Sam

1. A PENCIL SHARPENER DISGUISED AS A HUMAN NOSE:

When Junior sticks a pencil up his nose,
do not rebuke him. Most will find it more
productive not to take his act for prose,
but praise his mastery of metaphor.

"The nose, the sharpener - both cavities
in which a shaftlike object may be fit.
Good work, my boy! No demonstrations, please.
The thought is a sufficient stroke of wit."

2. A MATCHBOX PRINTED TO SIMULATE A PACK OF CIGARETTES:

At first we bound our matches in a "book"
and failed to see the mischief we had done.
Until the reading room filled up with smoke;
it burned at Fahrenheit four fifty-one.

We learned our lesson, though. Today the matches
come boxed in fairly safe metonymies:
Marlborough, Winston. When an inmate scratches,
the worst we have to fear is lung disease.

3. A TEABALL IN THE FORM OF A MINIATURE TEAPOT:

I've never told a gravy from a boat
or boat from boom. I cultivate relations
with all my close relations and promote
not free but flexible associations.

That's why I love my teaball, love to let
its lucid implications gyre and gimble
under the bigtop when I drop the net:
a looks-like, lives-in, used-instead-of SYMBOL.

AN EXERCISE IN THE STANZA OF GOETHE'S "HOCHZEITLIED"

The vampire extended and lowered his fangs,
and punctured the neck of the beauty;
but not to assuage metaphysical pangs -
he did it for reason of duty.
A vampire is what they had raised him to be;
he'd siphoned a mouse on his grandfather's knee
and earned a Carpathian master's degree;
what else could he do but go drilling?
He went; but it wasn't fulfilling.

J. W. GOETHE/H. STERN
CHINESE-GERMAN-AMERICAN OCCASIONS AND SEASONS

I (=I)

What's a mandarin to do
when he's feeling blue? -

when he's tired of courtly service,
hates administrative duty;
northern city makes him nervous,
and he dreams of rustic beauty.

There's your answer: Leave the city!

Spring is here,
roads are clear.

Go down south where girls are pretty,
river song is always new,
wine is cheap and talk is witty -

write a ditty or two.

II (=IV)

The peacock's voice is ugly, but the cry
reminds you that his feathers are celestial;
which somehow makes the voice itself less bestial.
To Indian geese the same does not apply:
they're ugly birds, depressing and deplorable;
the honk is hideous and unignorable.

III (=VI)

The cuckoo like the nightingale
would keep the spring on tether;
it can't, and nettles never fail
to thrive in summer weather.
I too have had my wishes crossed:
the leaves came in so densely
that lines of stolen sight were lost
for which I rose immensely.

I can't observe her painted roof,
the trellises and porches -
she lets me look but stays aloof;
she warms but never scorches.

IV (=IX)

I never really knew what roses meant
until the rose's energy was spent.
Now one belated bloom in gloriolo
 seems heaven-sent
to make the world of summer flowers whole.

V

The thought that I may never come this way
and see this lake again - for who can say? -
engraves it in my mind, where it shall stay.
The fear that I may never come this way
and see this lake - What lake? My great dismay
precludes my seeing what I see today.

VI (=XI)

"What's the good of anything, then,
if everything good escapes;
one thing changes to something else
the moment it appears?" -
Friend, you haven't quite understood;
let nature allay your fears.
Nothing changes the law that gives
the rose and lily their shapes.

VII (=XIII)

I wish to sit alone today, my brothers;
to drink my wine in peace - do not intrude.
Instruction wants the company of others,
but inspiration dwells in solitude.

SWEET ORTRUDE ("SCHÖN-ROHTRAUT")

King Rugbert's lovely daughter, what's her name?

Ortrude, Sweet Ortrude.

What does she do the livelong day? -
sewing or spinning is not her way.

Goes out hunting and fishing.

O, to be her happy squire!

Hunt and hound were all my desire.

- Steady now, my heart.

And after a month or two had turned,

Ortrude, Sweet Ortrude,

Old Rugbert took to his employ
a freshly furnished hunter-boy

to ride the hunt with Ortrude.

O, to be the son of a king!

I love her more than anything.

- Steady now, my heart.

One day they rested under an oak;

she teased him then, Sweet Ortrude:

Why give that look of dreamy bliss?

Have you the heart to steal a kiss?

Good Lord! the boy was trembling.

But then he thought: she said I might;

and kissed her mouth with keen delight.

- Steady now, my heart.

Silently they rode for home,

Ortrude, Sweet Ortrude.

The boy was flush with happiness:

If they made her now an emperess,

I swear it shouldn't grieve me!

The woods would murmur, he dared embrace
an emperess and kissed her face.

- Steady now, my heart.

AN IMITATION OF MÖRIKE ("DENK ES, O SEELE!")

a sapling in the pine wood,
who knows where?
a rosebush, who can say
where lies the garden?
one day that tree that rosebush -
think, my soul!
will sink its roots into your grave
and grow there

two black colts at pasture
in the meadow
turn and head for home
jumping and frisking;
one day with measured steps
they'll draw your coffin,
perhaps before the hoof
has thrown its iron -
the one I see now
flashing in the sunlight

ABDALLAH'S EARS

Through the steppes of Central Asia
on a splendid summer evening
hard I drove my horse Abdallah.
As he knew the way was homeward,
happily his hooves went flying -
lightened by a dream of oats.

Nothing on the wide horizon,
not a sound to pierce the silence;
not the chirp of lonesome cricket,
nor the flap of startled pheasant,
nor the howl of far hyena;
nowhere houses, nowhere people,
nowhere forests, hills, or valleys:
all there was was shifting sand.

Nodding with his mighty forehead
in a constant rhythmic motion,
gracefully my horse Abdallah
let his jet-black mane go streaming.
And in likewise constant motion
were his ears, alert and slender;
both of them now pointing forward,
both of them now pointing backward.
Now he's got the right one forward,
got the left one tilted backward;
now he's got the left one forward,
got the right one tilted backward -
back and forth. What puzzles me is:
what on earth can he be hearing?
Not a thing disturbs the silence,
nothing to confront or fear.

Then I thought: perhaps my stallion
hears a sound that has escaped me
in the plenitude of silence,
in the peacefulness of evening.
What the devil can it be?

Savage horsemen fast approaching
who've been sent to intercept me?
Does he hear their sabers rattling,
does he hear their saddles creaking,
still so many miles away?

Or perhaps it's some exhausted
outcast on a fringe of desert,
soon to die of thirst, and heaving
one last sigh toward heaven's gate?

In a grove of stately palm trees,
where the steppe gives way to lushness,
does he hear the fervent pledges
of a handsome pair of lovers;
hear a spate of fervent kisses,
each more fervent than the last?

Sounds of distant lamentation?
Drinking songs at someone's wedding?
All the earthly joys and sorrows -
every prayer, hymn, and curse?

Does he sense the stars vibrating;
hear the angels' halleluiahs;
catch the music of the spheres?

Translator's Metalogue

That's where good old Detlev left it;
but I can't escape the question:
does that sharp-eared beast Abdallah
hear the clunk of my translation?
Or (to raise the general issue)
does he know the world he lives in,
though it stretches wide as steppeland,
is, from any reader's viewpoint,
just a narrow, two-page poem?
And what's more (forgive me, Detlev),
it's a fairly pointless poem,
shaggy doggerel in trochaics -
though perhaps it's partly pointed
if the stallion knows he's in it;
namely, that he's made of words.

Reinterpreting Abdallah's
grand obsession as proleptic,
ontologic self-awareness
has the strange effect of turning
what was really just a joke in
highly sleep-inducing meter
(some would call it "Hiawatha";
some would call it "Kalevala" -
call it what you want to) into
something like a pre-postmodern
sendup in the mode of later
language-drunk extravaganzas -
say the famous Disparition
(nicely named A Void in English)
by the brilliant Georges Perec.

There we learn the joy of watching
characters within the novel
tumbling to the meta-scandal
that the world of words they live in
strangely lacks the letter e.

As I sit here drinking claret,
moving verse from head to notebook,
there's the host of Lunch with Mozart
serving up the usual rubbish,
bland forensic infotainment,
on the theme of "What killed Wolfgang?"
Did Salieri slip him poison?
Did he wolf a wormy porkchop?
(Trichinosis has been gaining
on its rival - tricky rival.)
Did Archbishop Colloredo
punch a voodoo doll in Salzburg?
I think Mozart died of boredom
caused by his acutely hearing,
in advance, these waves of hogwash.
What's it got to do with music?
Get a life, he said and died.

Gentle reader! Let me try to
overhear your thoughts. I'm hearing:
Wait, by now this metalogue is
longer than the German poem.
(Now it is: line fifty-seven.)
Well, so what? Or as the saying
goes in Yiddish, "call me crack-nut."
Call me, too, the mad loquacious
wag whose coda dogged a horse.

THE TROUBLE WITH ME ("WAS MIR FEHLTE")

Other people storm and capture the ship
SS Fortuna. But not me - I trip
and fall down flat on the treacherous boarding plank.
For this I must have a quirk of fate to thank.
Or is it some omission I always make?
Some crucial bull-by-the-horns I fail to take?
Is one of my four elements out of balance?
Knowledge? Method? Energy? Natural talents?
Well, the answer isn't really mysterious:
I lack the gift of being deadly serious.

Looking back on my life, I think: how numerous
the people that I've encountered, and how various -
the high and mighty of every rank and grade
at court, in business, on military parade;
both virtuous Penelopes and steamy sirens;
doormen, superintendants, real-estate barons.
I was always ready to take them as they came,
but take them lightly, in the spirit of the game.

For this people eventually make you pay -
everyone wants to be a bigshot in some way.
So when, for any preferment, my name is mentioned,
some pompous ass will submit a well-intentioned
character assassination to this effect:
"I'm sorry to say he lacks the proper respect.
Life isn't real to him, it's a lantern show.
He won't fit in with the other people we know.
The most that Herr Fontane will have to say
on any solemn occasion is 'fa il re.'"¹
Trust me - there's nothing more deleterious
to one's career than being thought "unserious."

¹ Italian in the original: "He plays the king"; in other words, "Isn't he being grand?"

HOLLYWOOD MINUTE
(inspired by Christian Morgenstern's "Der Werwolf")

A giant lizard famed of yore
once knocked on Steven Spielberg's door.
The great director flashed a grin:
"T. Rex, my man, I'll squeeze you in."

He squeezed, but just the toothy enda
Rex would fit in his agenda.
"Sweetheart, I can give you five -
this business eats me up alive.

What's on your tiny brain?" The king
of reptiles spoke the following:
"I'd like your draftsmen to design a
consort for me: T. Regina."

"Done!" "But I foresee the queen
will nurse ambition; so, to please her,
please have me proclaimed on screen
Tyrannosaurus Julius Caesar."

"Why stop there?" cried Steve. "Dictator!
Fancy Pants and Pontifex!
'Regina (T) seeks Pantocrator;
object: world dominion, sex.'

Get lost, you fossil! I've a hunch
you're all washed up - let's not do lunch."
T. Rex was totally deflated,
slithered out and abdicated.

Variations on a Heliotrope of Rainer Maria Rilke

1. PERSIAN HELIOTROPE

For your friend, Praise of the Rose might seem too bold:
Take the embroidered heliotrope, the plant
that urgently whispers; overchant
the Nightingale, who stridently extolled

her name in every public square she graced
and never knew her. For behold, and mark:
Like sentences that huddle in the dark
their honeyed words, allseparateness erased;
the vowels' violet and wakeful red
perfuming quiet canopy and bed - :

so stars that are distinct will close in muster
over the quilted leaves to form a cluster;
blending silence, cinnamon and delight
to deliquescence, essence of the night.

2. INDO-EUROPEAN HELIOTROPOLOGY

It seems quite likely that hyperbole
would overdo it. Wiser to understate
her virtues - when you find one, imitate
a plant that mumbles to itself. Then she

can't be standoffish: she'll ask you to date her.
Whisper sweet uncommonplaces in
her perfumed ear. When you've induced her (later)
up to hear your etchings, spike her gin
with several drops of tasteless synaesthesia.
Inhibitions? Gone with the mind. Amnesia.

So words resolve their prudishly phonemic
differences, blend endings, mix morphemic
melodies into a sillabub
of syllables: the sweet dessert of love.

3. VITO "DA BOID" USIGNOLO TO HIS NEPHEW VITO "DA LIDDLE BOID" ELIOTROPIO

Swaddyatink? A liddle pome in French
is gonna drive a goil like Rosie bonkers?
Vnella shoibut? Poifume? Yeah, in Yonkuz
yuz cd probbly knock ya sweetie off da bench

wid candy pomes. Bud in da cidy, boidie,
ya hafta do it big. Foist fancy speeches,
den a stringa alldiffrun poils - zwat teaches
Rose dat ya mean business. Hoidy-toidy
Easside dolls wid doormen frunna deir homes,
dey don pud out fa poifume a fa pomes.

Dimportun tings ta neva ged cunfoosed.
Keep evenins fa da fambly, nyill ged used
ta nookyin in da sunlight. Don lose ya head.
Don call da missuz Rose. Don ead in bed.

4. MADAME NATASHA SPECULATES INTO THE RECENT FUTURE²

Ah! Iss cahmink a nyew men eento you life.
Weet rosess? Nyet, impwossible. Ahnahder
fwonny plent. Iss tcheapsket? Sahmtink bwahder
me about mens vvoice. Xeess nozzy wife

xeff earss een tyelescopp? Iss xwhy men mahmble?
Nyet, impwossible. Iss only beshful.
Poyet. Xwhere iss cahmink from? From Neshville?
Speak weet xheavy eccent. Mahmble-tchahmble:
"Tseena Mohnva Neelee Sespa Reelee" -
Iss voodoo wedding coorse? Iss bed Swaxili?

Iss maybe - nyet, impwossible. Natasha
start to smyellink music meekst weet kasha.
Poyet invyent sweet tsimbalom off pession.
Xahndred bahcks. Nyekst week ahnahder syession.

² X as in Russian (kh)

5. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF MAX LÖWENPREIS, FLORIST AND WAG³

Hallo. Hier Maxens flauer schopp. Wie heff
a speschl nau on teiger lillies bei se
dossen. Wie beliebten? Schutt bie leise?
Longstem roses mehby. Leik dschireff

im wachs museum, seldom giff a Mucks.
Na, heliotrop is lausy. Zwanzig dollars,
un so meschugge leik an ajatollers
bohring spietsches. Dschost a teiny Jux.
Heff no eidieja. Watt em ei, a goht?
Ei neffer iet semm. (Mensch, ein Vollidiot!)

Ei tell ju watt ju du. Ju mehk a foto
off reckord off Fritz Kreisler spieling Moto
Perpetuo off Bambl-bie und send
se foto wis samm bonbons tu dein frend.

³ To be pronounced as though in German.
Wie beliebten: How's that again?
leise: soft, quiet
Mucks: peep (of protest)
Jux: joke

6. BALBULUS BALBULORUM DICIT CARMEN

Rosa sicut persica puellae
clamat os. Quid dixi? Sicut flos
in campo. Sed hoc melius: o formos-
a! duo dentes tui sunt gemellae

columbarum. Peius est. Amarum
sicut vinum sentio puellae
claros pedes. Quid? Quasi gemellae
redolent lunae, rident capellarum
ubera. Tuarum? Suavis Musa!
mihi vero facta es Medusa.

Sed iubes me dolorem renovare. -
Saporem ineffabilem spectare
me delectat vocis tuae. Mene
fugis? Oculos avertis? Bene.

7. A DISSERTATION ON THE MARQUIS DE SADE, SO NOW I'M EDITORIAL ASSISTANT IN CHARGE
OF . . .

Thank you ever so much for your submitting
Horticultured Verse. The editors judge it
worthy of publication, but our budget
doesn't agree. Right now we're not committing

funds to poets who aren't already dead.
Would you consider advice? Grind up a ballad
or sonnet from your book to garnish a salad
of Persian melon and passion fruit. In bed,
slurp ice cream with it. Blend a vanillanelle
or incestina. Why not? What the hell!

There isn't much work for poets in the city,
but everyone eats, almost. You're sitting pretty
with gourmet verse or light digestible prose.
(Signed) Florence Nightingale, for Harpy & Rose.

8. FINALE: A HUNDRED SMACKERS, AND ALL HE EVER SAYS IS "TELL ME ABOUT IT"

The creep I dated last was a musician.
Punk rock outfit called the Night-in-Jails.
Arena's crammed with people, this loudmouth wails:
"O Rosie let me be yer electrician -

I'm Eveready forya." What's the good?
I'm tired of playing a Kewpie on the shelf.
I'll give up men and learn to love myself,
as any self-respecting woman should.
This guy I met in Writer's Workshop though,
he's sort of cute, he's sort of ... I don't know ...

refined. His love songs have an almost quichey
sound, he drones them like a maharishi.
But maybe I'll invite him home to tea.
And one thing is for sure, he's sweet on me.

THE IN-LAWS GET THEIR ESCORT

a poem in three times eighteen verses to Kurt Björling,
virtuoso clarinetist of Brave Old World

Imagine

a wedding worthy of music like yours:
the bride a Sore-Malke, to say the least;
beautiful, plump, and dainty; only child to
the richest beetsugar merchant in Lublin;
fluent in Hebrew, as in worldly tongues;
modest, so accomplished, such a rare gem.

And then the groom, a prodigy from a well-known
nest of scholars who hadn't thought to work
for money in at least two hundred years;
a pale, smiling question mark of a boy
who moves the ancient rabbis round like chessmen -
the bride loves him well, her father adores him.

I hear the dinner board give a great kekhts
beneath a giant carp that must have taken
four fishermen with grappling hooks to land;
foretaste of the Leviathan that's promised
righteous Israel at the heavenly feast,
the day Messiah stops dragging his heels.

Tomato pickles, dried salami, sprats,
exotic fruits and nuts, gray partridge eggs,
herb vodka, slivovitz, fresh honeycake,
Solomon's temple modeled in mandl-broyt,
fine teas and coffees - here's redundant proof that
life for the chosen Chosen can be sweet.

Of course the best klezmerim in all Poland
have been engaged: you, Kurt, on clarinet;
a fiddler-singer; a squeeze-harmonica;
trombone, string bass, or cimbalom (as needed).
You play, you take a drink - like all musicians,
you're not quite of the party, not quite not.

Who are these strange patrons of merriment?
Geniuses, moneybags: they've got life backwards,
sending for music when the Lord has blessed them.
Greatest of all our blessings is the music.
If they had ears, their kings would be klezmorim;
and when you felt like playing, they'd get married.

But now it's late; a long evening is done.
Nothing remains but to escort the in-laws
through the streets, with clamor of pipe and drum,
back to their lodgings. Then the players can go
wherever it is they go after the last
scheduled display of virtuosity.

A gentle breeze envelops you at the door
and lightens your sense. Now watch the candle, child;
blow on the flame and try to hold it steady.
Your teacher said so. Good; now make it dance.
The clarinet - can wait until tomorrow.
Here's your true instrument: the breath of life.

Your teacher said so. Now perform for him
a curious étude under the turning stars:
something between ecstatic syllogism
and articulate sob. Give us a song
of tiny creatures furious to be born
as words or kisses, under the turning stars.

Author's Note on the Yiddish Materials

The number eighteen, expressed in letters of the Hebrew alphabet, is a form of the verb "to live"; celebratory gestures (like the gift of money in whatever currency) are thus traditionally offered in multiples of eighteen. Vivat!

Sore-Malke is a not uncommon Yiddish name based on the Hebrew words for "noble lady" and "queen."

A krekhts is a Yiddish-inflected groan.

In the traditional song "A Sudenyu," a student inquires about putative arrangements for the heavenly feast and is told by the rabbi that Moses himself will deliver the table sermon; the biblical Leviathan will be served for dinner.

According to the Creed of Maimonides (and a Yiddish song derived from it), a Jew continues to believe in the coming of Messiah despite a possibility that the latter - in what I consider a wonderfully dry formulation - may "tarry."

Mandl-broyt ("almond bread") is a sort of biscotto. As a purely private cipher, the word is my tribute to Benoit B. Mandelbrot, the principal inventor of fractal geometry.

Klezmorim (singular: klezmer) are traditional Eastern-European Jewish musicians. (The word is derived from the Hebrew for "musical instrument.") Brave Old World is one of the best American bands in the current klezmer revival. Kurt Björling's brilliant elaboration (on bass clarinet!) of the klezmer melody for "taking the in-laws home" can be heard on the recording Brave Old World: Beyond the Pale (Rounder CD 3135, 1994).

EXERCISE FOR GRAVICYMBAL, E MINOR

to Ursula Sudhof
on her 70th birthday

A hiss and crash
of icicles from the trees
a touch of sun

a hiss and crash
of icicles from the trees
a touch of bronze
on broken icicles from the trees
a hiss and crash
of icicles from the trees
a touch of sun

a touch of sun
already the birds can drink
from tiny pools
that flash in disappearing
a touch of bronze
on broken icicles from the trees
a hiss and crash
of icicles from the trees
a touch of sun
already the birds can drink
from tiny pools
that flash in disappearing
look at the world

that flash /
a touch of sun /
in disappearing



Thought is a place
you're in it
look at the world

a hiss and crash

of icicles from the trees
a touch of sun
already the birds can drink
and I shall drink from the brook
and raise my head
a touch of bronze
on broken icicles from the trees
and I shall bend my head
and drink from the river

thought is a place
a road a river
a touch of bronze
on broken icicles from the trees
and I shall stop by the wayside
and I shall bend my head
and drink from the river
a touch of sun
and I shall drink from the brook
and raise my head

thought is a place
a road a river
look at the world

a hiss and crash
of icicles from the trees
a touch of sun
already the birds can drink
from tiny pools
that flash in disappearing
and I shall stop by the wayside
and I shall think of the birds
and drink from the river

and I shall stop by the wayside
and I shall drink from the brook
and raise my head

NOAH AND THE DOVE (SESTINA-MIDRASH ON GENESIS 8.6-12)

After a time the great waters receded.
Noah lifted the box to release a dove
and wondered: would her lightness return to him?
All day, patiently, Noah watched and waited -
for what, exactly? A new love of lightness
contended in him with thoughts of walking the earth.

Not that he questioned his love of the firm earth
or hoped that the waters hadn't receded.
He simply enjoyed the feeling of lightness
he got from floating, or from watching the dove
ascend the heavens, or even from waiting
the whole day long for her to return to him.

At evening she did - that is, return to him.
She had flown far and wide over the earth;
but saving only the box where Noah waited,
which seemed to grow larger as it receded,
found no place to rest her foot. And so the dove,
despairing of a new perch for her lightness,

flew back to let her terrified lightness
circle Noah's box and return to him.
Relieved, he was reluctant to send the dove
a second time, but he did - to prove the earth
had now emerged and the great waters receded,
or else to prove they hadn't. Noah waited

as mysteriously as he had waited
the time before. He felt a familiar lightness,
but now the question of dry land had receded
behind its double: would she return to him?
She did, and brought him back a token of earth,
a grim anagram of disaster. The dove -

and here, I admit, it's hard - the wandering dove
had plucked an olive leaf to alert the waiting
Noah that - what, exactly? The fragrant earth
was once again available? Or her lightness

had found a perch? Or she would return to him
beyond all need, when the waters had long receded?

The third time Noah ... her lightness ... he's still waiting.
The earth was fresh and open, the waters receded.
The dove was gone; she did not return to him.

LOGORALLY ON -DGE

for Kurt Graulich

The sages (namely? - I have no idea)
teach us to give the world a gentle nudge
when it's (it rarely isn't) out of kilter;
at most, maybe, to drive a tiny wedge
into the works; to jiggle, juggle, joggle
the part (whatever) that refuses to budge.
Better to make the frequent fine adjustments
as needed than to swing a heavy sledge-
hammer and have to start again from Adam.
The Holy Grail, wherever it may lodge,
has passed its royal blood along to every
goblet in Christendom - no need to trudge
through miles of crypt and catacomb and cloister;

no need to watch the movie actors dodge
machine-gun bullets as they climb the ridge
and drop the trunk down to a narrow ledge
from which the helicopter . . . watch them dredge
a solid lake of North New Jersey sludge
from oil refinery to railroad bridge
(and startle pheasants in the withered sedge)
in search of . . . watch them flash a phony badge
under the nose of a provincial judge
to steal the parchment covered, edge to edge,
with pictograms no larger than a midge
(they tell the story of a cosmic grudge

match between beams of light and clouds of darkness);
no need to take the job as kitchen drudge
and hope to find a pearl by shucking oysters.
But time is running out for me. The pledge
I made to Whoda Thunkit (she's my English
protector-saint) has left me this hodge-podge
of silly words that will not go together,
no matter how I fib. I fear the smudge
on my good reputation as a wizard
for whom the pieces fall in place. I cadge
a puff of inspiration from my uncle -
the Polish uncle who was born in Woodge

(thus they pronounce the name). But no relaxing
any restrictions! I refuse to hedge
my reckless bet. Should we perhaps revisit
the startled pheasants long enough to fledge
their nestlings? Better not: my Stygian vessel
might run aground and we be forced to kedge
her off the muck. Perhaps I need a lunch of
ambrosia? - just a smattering, a smidge.
I feel the truth is right beside me booklike
or foodlike on a shelf. Open the fridge,
and there it is - the word that (mindful, mindless)
we've all been looking for: Vanilla FUDGE.

POEM FULL OF MUSH

Because I'd finished wheeling out the trash.
Because I smarted from an ugly brush
with lucrative employment - blood for cash.
Because I loved a girl from Bangladesh
who had a lovely lisp; her fervid wish
was "Write me pleath a poem full of mush."
Because it isn't there, but in a flash
I see it could be. Now I slip the leash.

It's Saturday, get out of town. The crush
of eager MBAs, the hollow crash
of pundits and politicoes who blush
at no banality, the slimy whoosh
of gene technology making a hash
of our inheritance - the balderdash
retrenches and recedes. A solemn hush
descends upon my grateful soul. A lush
carpet of mountain poppy wafts its fresh
pale perfume to my nostrils. What a rush!
Incredibly, I'm in the Hindu Kush.

A doe-eyed dancing girl with creamy flesh
and a suggestive zoöomorphic sash
between her breasts emerges from a bush.
She loves me for my mind. Or is my stash
of Butterfingers what she craves? O bosh,
me or my goods - in either case I'm flush
with happiness. "Beloved, let us thrash
through fields of poppy, hemp, and summer squash
down to the river Oxus. Waters gush
from sacred caverns, and the sands go 'squish'
when pilgrims come to bathe. Young children splash
and frolic in the shallows. A lone thrush
complains in song that it is not a fish."

Three years we dwelt together. Then the clash
of armies caught my fancy. Rough and rash,
I left my girl and dropped the calabash

of peace in high Pamir to burn and slash
along the Oxus, to reduce to ash
the towns of Central Asia and to smash
the mighty kings of Persia. Now I gnash
my teeth to think I graved a bloody gash
across the continent - I buckled swash
(I know that's not the verb). I chose to slosh
through desert sands in summer, slosh through slush
in winter. All for what?

The Great Backlash
belittled me back home. I had to thresh
through stacks of papers by eupeptic frosh,
one more confident than the other brash.
Of course they're brash, their life has been too posh.
My life has been a struggle. But I dish
out punishment as well as take it. Gosh,
reality has also failed. When push
(on Friday) comes to shove, call it a wash.
In World War II my father walked from Tash-
kent to Berlin, and so our fortunes mesh.
The charge of fecklessness I hope to quash.
Thank God for single malt and sour mash.
That's my story; I'm sticking to it. Shush!

LECTURE ON LIMITS

Differentials, I told the class, were a question of limits - of "exact approximation" with deltas and epsilons (which is a paradoxical way of putting it, but close to the truth). First you: you stipulate how unhappy you need to be to be happy; then I guarantee you'll never be unhappy again after such-and-such a date. That's the way logical quantifiers function.

When I began to study the functions of a single real variable, I knew there would be severe limits to how much interest I could take, ever again, in anything but formal systems. I sang them lonesome Delta-and-Epsilon Blues, and the blues made me deliriously happy. My sister insisted on discovering the truth

about our family history, but merely manipulating the truth functions of first-order logic was enough to keep me comfortably unhappy, or moderately cheerful. Anyway, there are limits to how much we can know about what really happened in 1860 in the Mississippi Delta; there's no point in retracing the whole undiagrammable sentence again.

Miss Rosa sat there for five decades in the heat and accumulated gloom, restaging the family tragedy time and again in that tenacious brain (less brain than butter churn), making ever more frantic approximations to an ultimately unknowable truth (unknowable because nobody, least of all Faulkner, the prime progenitor, ever told her to read Second Samuel 13), bringing forth a monstrous insufferable masterpiece of the narrative imagination that might well have been titled Epsilon, Epsilon! for all the help it ever gave us in plotting the functions of a complex (i.e., partly real and partly imaginary) variable; unknowable because there are limits to how unambiguously you can characterize a system in which all the characters did what they did for different reasons (even that which ostensibly they did together, for entirely different reasons) that they themselves were either too stupid or too

confused to understand, and whatever they did understand they misrepresented methodically to others in order to keep their conception of themselves (in the teeth of abject misery) at least tolerably happy.

But me: the bare, bald combinatorial felicity is enough to make me preposterously happy again.

The virtue of finite or infinite or even (thinking of nonstandard analysis) infinitesimal mathematics is the way it limits the damage that a family comedy can do to you in your quest for a universal, or at least rationally defensible, truth. Who could have imagined that the study of elliptical functions would lead to a breakthrough in number theory? - as though a SWAT team or an elite Delta

Force of grinning Midwestern Republicans with enormous deltoid and possibly epsiloid muscles liberated you from the small band of deranged Ruthenian terrorists who had hijacked your fragrantly happy (because nobody ever gave you the option of constructing an unhappy) childhood, and were now flying it back to a remote base camp in the Carpathians. A tussle, gunshots, a drop in air pressure, diminished brain function - you hallucinate the legendary late-medieval battle of Stara Koza. The Ruthenians insist upon fighting it over and over again to recover what they lost there forever: independence, empire, honor - everything but the recipe for cabbage soup and their tenacious grip on a highly idiosyncratic truth. But no: here come the Marines, the mathematicians and logicians; by the grace of permutation, we've reached the outer limits.

That's my lecture about limits. I'm off to Berlin now, flying on Delta. I've told you the truth (mostly), and the truth will make you happy (approximately).

At a later stage, if you want to study with me again: I've developed a new course on Dostoyevsky and Bessel functions.

SONATA: HER SMILE WAS LIKE A SIMILE

Her smile was like a simile. It could be agitated by consecutive jigsaws, or else with bundles of milksugar. And all the catapults of Patagonia fired forth.

Said you Paphlagon? Her kiss was as was chiasmus. Said you pentathlon? The jig is up. Fits could be motivated by executive rickshaws, or else with bundles of milksugar. With bundles of laxative milksugar. Consecutive bundles of sugar, and all in a jigsaw puzzle of rickshaws. Her kiss could be irritated by scrimshaw, as any kiss could. And all the catapults of Patagonia backfired froth.

Said you Pentecost? Trundle a jackdaw down to the Palatine. All the caterpillars of Palestine finger frets. A million sugary frets. Hear them caterwaul on the milky spindles of Paraguay. Like Papageno! And in sandals! All the catatonics of Pennsylvania fondle fruitbowls.

Sodium pentothal? It's a catacomb! And cud is what the kuh chows. Forth may she fire her milk in a catastrophe of froth! For all the speculative Catalonians in rickshaws. And all their in-laws. We could all be illuminated by doo-dahs, as any Pooh-Bah could. A handle on the galaxy, a charismatic kiss. Like Papageno! Like Papagena! And all their in-laws.

Her smile was like a simile. It couldn't be agitated by consecutive jigsaws, nor else with bundles of milksugar. And all the catapults of Patagonia fired back.

Said you Pentecost? Said you Palestine? The jig is up.

Variations on Goldilocks and the Three Bears



WITTGENSTEIN AND THE THREE BEARS

for Jeff Dolven

And then little Ludwig saw three bowls of porridge on the dining-room table. Hot-ziggety! I wonder what sort of porridge that is, said Ludwig to himself. Or more precisely, the words he actually recited to himself were, Grandfather has recently affected a gigantic sombrero - by which he meant, or at any rate attempted to mean, I wonder what sort of porridge that is on the table. Barley or peas, do you suppose? Something glutinous and farinaceous, or altogether leguminous and stringy? Although Ludwig had eaten nothing since the previous evening, it struck him as extremely odd that the word "porridge" could denote so many heterogeneous varieties of pottage. I wonder what, if anything, porridges have in common, he said to himself - or rather, that's what he meant by the words he actually recited (never mind what they were). Thinking about problems of philosophical grammar always made Ludwig sleepy, and he decided to forgo the lunch in favor of a short restorative nap. There must be some beds around here somewhere, or at any rate beds around here somewhere, he said to himself; I shall compare them with my mental image of the bed that would suit me to perfection. Just then a gigantic brown bear shuffled menacingly into the dining room. Grandfather! Leave the bloody thing alone! said Ludwig, and fainted.

KGB AND THE THREE BEARS

Sit, Comrade Zlatovlasova. Make yourself at home. Have some pepper vodka, please. Care for a cigarette? Take the whole package, I insist. What? My name is Medvedev, but let's not stand on formalities - call me Stinky. Everybody calls me Stinky. Perhaps you wonder, comrade, that a common bear - and let's be honest, that's what I am, a common bear, with the mold and muck of the birch forest clinging to my mangy fur - has attained the rank of colonel in our glorious State Security apparatus. Believe me, comrade, in the Proletarian Paradise everything is possible. You laugh? Tell me: how does a bear get honey? By clipping coupons? By monthly remittance? No, Comrade Zlatovlasova! A bear is a worker. But I digress, I digress. You must be asking yourself why I had you awakened in the middle of a peaceful Moscow night and (shall we say) in-vi-ted to headquarters. Surely it wasn't to discuss the theory of socialism! On the other hand, it may have been to discuss the theory - let me pronounce the word slowly and reverently - the theory of PORRIDGE. You laugh, comrade; but why? Is it a small thing, porridge? I can assure you that a sensitive young creature lies in bed sleepless for many nights thinking about a lost bowl of porridge, and especially when the bed in question has been smashed into more than a dozen pieces. Are you beginning to remember now, comrade? Have another pepper vodka, please. We're going to have a nice long chat. We're going to sit together in this overheated room, you and I, for a very long time. The reader, perhaps, will run away screaming; but you and I, comrade, are going to remember . . .

WITH SPOONS FOR WINGS: PURGATORIO AND THE THREE BEARS

for Kamran Javadizadeh

And then I turned to Vergil, best of teachers,
for guidance in my deep perplexity.
"Master," I said, "like all the forest creatures,

these bears display a natural tendency
to eat no more than what is necessary
for life and locomotion. Hence the three

bowls that contain their mush are seen to vary
in size from Papa's most to Baby's least;
which thought then leads me to this corollary:

the heat that made them interrupt their feast
and go out walking must have dissipated
more quickly as the size of bowl decreased;

and in the Physics this is clearly stated.
Why then did Goldilocks in frantic flight
disdain the food for which she'd salivated

not once but twice? What prompted her to light
on Baby's cold, congealed, and crusty serving -
instead of finding Mama's bowl 'just right'?"

Here Vergil flashed a smile: "You'll soon be swerving
far from the truth if I refuse to guide
your wayward thought; but since you are deserving

of apt assistance, I shall now confide
the gist of what fair Beatrice condescended
to teach me of this matter. She untied

the knot that had defeated me; she ended
a thousand years of ignorance like a dream.
What no man by himself has apprehended,

I gathered from her lips: THE BEARS USED CREAM.
And Mama had a heavy paw in pouring.

Now ask no further. Questions that I seem

to leave suspended will be answered during
your sojourn in the place toward which we climb;
until then let the questions keep maturing,

and rest content with 'once upon a time.'
Reader, think of a bear sent out to forage
in thicket so obscure and so sublime.

I dropped, like one who's eaten too much porridge.

UNDISCOVERED COTTAGE: EMILY DICKINSON AND THE THREE BEARS

There's a certain Sort of Mush,
Summer Afternoon -
A Bowl too hot to touch,
Claw-shaped Spoon.

On Heaven's white Expanse -
Unbidden - lay thy Head -
But a familiar Difference
Indignant grow - "the Bed" -

Broken beyond redeem,
In Shafts of golden Light -
"Burglar!" - internal Frame -
Just right, just right.

MERA TOU MELITOS: JAMES MERRILL AND THE THREE BEARS

for Rachel Trousdale

Late one night we climbed out of Dante's Dive a riveder le stelle. Would Ursa Major dance on point? We figured the launch just right, then "tumbled in harness."

Caro, lust will turn, as it must, to mush in two short strokes. Tant pis! But as compensation - pense or dense? - well, after my dance was done the richest of dreamscapes

bowed and beckoned, opened before me: cliffside, crystal bay, taverna, with lush Melina (louche, but worth a penalty stroke) dispensing bowls of farina -

no: grilled fish, dolmathes, and mottled olives. Plates emerge in triplets. Melina licks and fawns, but G (fastidious, firm as always) carefully picks and

chooses: "Too much cream"; or "there's not enough cream." "Honey's what I wanted - remove the Karo." What, on avgolemono? No: it's oatmeal. Think of it, caro!

Dancing bears! (The parallel planes of being flip and flop like mutual funds.) A crypto-Cotswold cottage: glued to the window, James is standing on tiptoe!

A MIRACLE FOR LUNCH

Miss Purkle said there wouldn't be time for lunch -
 I'd have to run to the village and fetch her "medicine."
 I knew what that meant, of course: barring a miracle
 you get back just in time to go straight to bed
 without your supper. What, are these people crazy?
 An orphan wants to eat something, you know. You know?

Still, we're not defenseless, you know. You know
 that half the time Miss Purkle is out to lunch -
 Earth to Purkle, come in! So we'd be crazy
 not to take advantage when she's on "medicine."
 Life in the orphanage is not a bed
 of roses, but one contrives the occasional miracle.

Look! A shortcut! (Surprise, surprise.) It's a miracle!
 WARNING: DON'T FEED THE BEARS. (Uh-oh, a no-no.)
 Come to Papa - what's this? A gingerbread bed-
 and-breakfast-and-midmorning-snack-and-lunch
 with cute Victorian tchatchkes. Just the medicine
 for Mama's pain. Ignore it? I'd be crazy.

What luck! No grownups around to drive me crazy.
 I can't believe my eyes - it's a miracle:
 a whole carton of cigs and a fifth of "medicine."
 And porridge. Down some porridge, you know you know
 you've eaten something substantial - not Wednesday lunch.
 Then puff on Luckies and look around for a bed.

I'd prefer salmon medallion served on a bed
 of flash-fried spinach. I'm not exactly crazy
 about leguminous mush; but at least it's lunch.
 Perfumed by Luckies it counts as a miracle.
 Not that the menu matters - you know, I know,
 Dinty Moore is good with the right "medicine."

Turn on the tube. O no! Prescription medicine
 is all they're talking about. It's time for bed.
 You know, one thing I truly know, I know

I'll never grow up. Why bother? Grownups are crazy -
crackpots, really: "Don't rely on a miracle!"
"Work is its own reward." "There's no free lunch."

Dear Diary: It's me, Crazilocks. I'm in bed.
Confidentially: there's been a miracle for lunch.
What Miss Medicine doesn't know won't . . . you know.

THE NEW ECONOMY (QUASI VILLANELLE)

I sell information to people who've got too much
information already. But in the new economy
going over the top will make you a bundle.

Aristotelian logic is just a crutch.

Discard it. Jump to conclusions. Embrace the antinomy.

And sell information to people who've got too much

mindless enthusiasm to do arithmetic. Terms like swindle,
pyramid scheme, or confidence trickster belong to a long obsolete
taxonomy.

Selling the pond to the fish will make you a bundle.

Reports of earnings, dividends, and such

are wicked, unnatural practices that Dante considered a form of
sodomy.

No, sell information to people who've got too much

cosmic togetherness to turn a conventional profit. One candle
kindles another, undiminished, in grateful ceremony.

Peddling everyone a piece of the action will make you a bundle.

In the new digital economy it's not how tightly your fingers can
clutch,

but how devoutly they fondle

the fingers of fellow fondlers. Quoth Deuteronomy:

You can always sell information to people who have too much;
and those who don't have - won't be making a bundle.

TWO WOOD SCULPTURES OF WILLIAM B. WEINSTEIN

I. Commuter

It's hard to overlook the comical accessories: the crooked steel-rim glasses, the bristly waxed moustache, the oversized veranda-green bowtie like a propeller, and then of course the briefcase, which is empty - except for half a sandwich. Don't assume that these conventional appurtenances betoken dullness or complacency; they are, I think, rather to be construed as marks of visual courtesy to others, of patient willingness to play one's role in readable landscape:

"Yes, I live in Scarsdale and work at nothing I would care to mention in the old Finster Building on Fourteenth Street - why should I dress as lumberjack or Jock or high-baroque Archbishop of Toledo?"

I'm hearing that or something like it, but there's more. Not just the stuck-on doodads, but the whole ill-fitting body that they're stuck to, till recently a poplar two-by-four at Grossman's Lumber, so inflexible, so stiff, and (let me read your mind) so wooden, bespeaks an almost saintlike condescension to metaphysical necessities (however unexpressed) of all the other commuter-travelers on Metro-North:

"My thought and feeling fill the universe, its infinite expanse; and yet I freely contract myself into this tilted board, attach long arms and legs with dowel pins, affix a green bowtie to turn the gaze away from this enormous telltale head, and put the briefcase on. Let me pretend, for any man aboard the 5:03,

that not I him, but he created me;
let me console by being there to see -
a part, a piece, a facet, sign of something.
And now this is my station; I'll go home,
concoct a perfect Art Deco martini,
remove the awkward body, and become night."

II. Untitled (Snappy Dresser)

Superficially similar in point of
accessories - a floppy blue fedora
(not on the head, but perilously perched
atop the hair), a furled canvas umbrella
(no rain has been predicted for the Hamptons),
a crimson necktie (mediating between
sky blue of hat and bluebird blue of jacket),
and then of course the dog, fox terrier,
who walks him twice a day (I always answered,
when some buffoon wisecracked to me and Winfield,
"Did you make that joke or did it make you?") -
but everything is different. Here the Will
to Visibility means not contraction;
rather, a sort of anxious pumping-up:

"My parents once took me to the Symphony
in Norwalk, under Quinto Maganini.
I must have been ten. We heard Rachmaninoff,
the Second Symphony; and I remember
how thrillingly the curtain of violins
parted at the opening of the Adagio
to let the great clarinet solo emerge.
I saw the picture: somebody stood alone
out on the prairie, bravely silhouetted
against an empty sky, and poured his heart out;
he filled the universe with waves of longing -
personal grief that every person shares.
I was attracted; but I also knew
that was a thing that I could never do,
could never want to do. I quickly learned
to walk a step or two behind my clothes,
to think in groups and classes. Does the blazer

have buttons along the cuff that you can button,
or is it off the rack? Does that umbrella
come from the gear shop at the Westport Yacht Club,
or do you dock at the municipal pier?
These aren't the most important questions, but
unlike important questions these have answers.
What interests me is not true, it's correct;
what I avoid is - read my lips - distasteful.
Nobody misunderstands me but my dog."

THE LESSER WORLD

When the head of her Barbie doll comes unstuck, my niece must choose between ejecting herself from a fantasy world and having witnessed, within it, a fairly alarming decapitation. In either case I'll adroitly glue the head back on; but in the latter case I will be a surgeon.

MOUNTAIN PASSAGE

Does it exist or not? To hunt to abominable creature, you must become the abominable hunter. Does one hallucinate at those elevations? You will never bring it back alive or dead. But do remember, if you succeed, to have a word with it.

ITALIAN PASTRIES

The façade of the Mosque of Omar resembles a Turkish bath more than it does a Romanesque cathedral, which in turn resembles a Roman cloaca more than it does a mosque.

THE THREE STAGES OF COMPOSITION (SECOND, BEASTLY VERSION)

First you have to go hungry like a panther; but when you pounce on the antelope, you mustn't devour it whole (like a giant anaconda). You must cut it down as the beaver analyzes his tree: into units convenient for transportation (and don't waste time on insects in the manner of a woodpecker). Finally you may wish to nibble circumspectly like a butterfish (but avoid the deadly hook - that's for mackerel).

ONE FOR GÜNTER EICH

Even those who hated his work, and the medium in which he had chosen to execute it, generally admitted that Angelsky was the finest potato printer on the continent. Of course, there were not many artists on the continent who understood how to print a potato, let alone how to bind a bushel of them into an acceptable volume. And then again, where was this continent? Did it have a shelf? A divide? What did it contain? Any way you look at it, Angelsky would have been better off cleaning the odd vacuum or causing insurance. Still, he's a wonder.

SHADOWS (ONE FOR JULIO CORTÁZAR)

In the morning the shadow is a long thin patch of darkness on the pavement. Innocuous, yes; but there's more to it. The shadow contrives (and the sun apparently plays a role here, although exactly what role is very difficult to say) the shadow manages to project into three-dimensional space a sort of obstinate hologram, a so-called "object" - which could be an old Buick with chrome hubcaps, a dented mailbox in the Flatiron District, a potted clementine for the conference of mayors. At midday the shadow is, if anything, more impressive. True, it diminishes in size and briefly appears to disappear; but the object of its obstinate implication is just as tall and bulky as it was in six in the morning, when the first cornmeal biscuits were being parsimoniously buttered and many retired schoolteachers had not yet located their reading glasses. In the afternoon shadows return, recover, more than recover, incline to exaggeration. Gradually they commingle, obliquely they conspire, adverbially they conquer the world. It is night. And what becomes of projected objects when the world is completely invisible? Nobody knows - they're invisible. True, we appear to bump into them in the middle of the night and occasionally stub our toes; but in the middle of the night we also appear to conduct long tedious conversations with Uncle Pedro, who, unless it was an insurance scam, died in a boating accident thirty-seven years ago - so what does that prove? We could of course turn on a light and blink painfully at a crude crazy-angled simulacrum of day, but that would be day; what could it tell us about the status of objects at night? No, sorry, we have no choice but to wait patiently for morning; or not wait, which amounts to the same thing.

AND AM THEREFORE DEAD

My fellow students were imagining situations in which one might use the Greek word TETHNĒKA: "I am dead." There is of course the well known scene in Hades. Also the case of negation, and the remote likelihood on earth of a very clumsy attempt to deceive. But no one mentioned what was most obvious to me. There must be a language for honest mistakes.

LESS IS MORE

I overheard a greengrocer trying to talk a skeptical customer into buying an expensive jar of sea salt. The customer insisted, somewhat idiotically but nonetheless effectively, that "salt is salt." And I thought: how marvelous that in natural language even a tautology like "salt is salt" can be used to express a falsehood.

BAY BRIDGES

to K. W. Wachter
Sea Ranch, California
2-5 August 1983

The other night, and a very long night it was,
alone at Sea Ranch while you had business in Oakland,
I turned the radio on for some talking company -
otherwise Silky, the dog, did yeoman's service -
and caught an account of how the baseball pitcher
Juan Marichal, a Dominican, had been inducted
into the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown.
The reporter paused to ruminate on the tidbit
that after a dozen sparkling years with the Giants
(the best being twenty-eight and six, if I heard right)
Marichal was now a scout for the Oakland Athletics,
on the Latin-American circuit. "What a scandal!
There should have been a place for the man in San Francisco.
Well, that's life; a paycheck is still a paycheck.
For Juan Marichal, the Giant romance is over.
Or maybe not: nothing is over forever."

Nothing is over forever. It's odd how failures -
a breakdown, faulty switching, or plain derailment -
sometimes uncannily can counterfeit an insight.
I remember a student of mine in Second Year German
thrashing about in search of the compound auslachen:
to ridicule, meaning literally "to laugh someone out."
The neologism he finally produced was auslächeln:
precisely the same idea, but now with a smile.
I'd call that a job of unintentional poetry;
and a job, what's more, that was aimlessly aimed at me.
There isn't a word in any European language,
except that German affords one thanks to that failure,
for what I spend much of my conscious mind in doing.
That's why the list of poets I love to parody
coincides at length with the list of poets I love.
If this were well understood, my life would be easier.

So the other night, after the baseball epiphany
and sixteen lines of my poem, I picked up a novel,

Jake's Thing by Kingsley Amis, and found this passage:

Brenda, as she was apt to whenever he tried to take a conversation back to an earlier point, gave a look attributing to him either slowness on the uptake or pedantry; for her things must run on, not back.

Whatever the merits of this, the Brenda Principle, it oughtn't to govern a verse epistle from Sea Ranch; circling back to an argument's what we've done, Ken, for the twenty years of our friendship. Nothing's persisted without interruptions, and nothing's been over forever. Let Sea Ranch bask in the history of such consolation; for though the days of my visit are plainly numbered, the days of my absence are numbered, however obscurely. And someday Juan Marichal will be back with the Giants. Here's hoping the world builds good Bay Bridges for me, for you the same, for those that we've ausgelächelt! This is the thought I savor on windy sea cliffs. It's time to walk the dog, whose pleasures are similar.