

Wrapped in a Mother's Love

Con-verse-ations for Mother's Day

June 6, 2010

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In collaboration with his mother,

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Encased in steel and glass
Nearly a thousand pounds of sinews, strength, and dreams,
Soar to a lofty platform. Ten thousand eyes
Of sandaled children...

i among them
miss the spectacle
of the plunging half-ton
i hugged his surging white neck
from section one-eleven.

*These are my children
Never before have they seen
An animal DOING something
Does my oldest, Dennis, 8
Make sense of a horse
Leaping from a tower?
Does my Ronnie-me long to ride?
Joel, not quite four, will he remember?
Did I pack enough bottles for
Baby Joyce?*

Four days ago a family pulled up
To Cottage 43 in Brigantine
The floor and sheets are full of white sand.
The cleanup task begins...

now now
i badgered dad
a day in the Pontiac wagon
i'm hungry i'm hot
the sand on the blanket
will be fine until we
get back

*My Mel is like that.
Sweep the floor, set the stage.
Every prop has a grid in storage;
Every toy knows where to sleep.
You play like you rehearse,
The best window displayman
The Three Rivers have to offer
Doesn't leave for the water*

With the wagon full.

The boys, aged eight and six, in an embrace
Reserved for lovers. Had they only known
A battle for a new room would take place
At least a sleeping bag...

Zzzz.
zzzZ.

*Aware the sky, that silky black
Is turning steely blue I steal
A moment when even the seagulls sleep
But I perceive the change.
The water not yet boiling
The sun not yet rising
The children undisturbed.
A jigsaw of somnolent body parts
Will spring to life in not too long -
And they will be hungry.*

Atlantic City boardwalk, where the boys
Eat shirtless, wistful gaze of teen girls met
With gestures to be seated, but the noise
Of wild guitars...

mary margie our sitters
recognize it in an instant
that guitar leads us like pheromones
dad, who for once touring freestyle
did not get that the music,
not he, was in command.

*Mel, what to do when we've obtained
The secret door, neglected
Unprotected
By aught but a crack?
The girls begged to stay
As Sgt Pepper rattled the door
Against its hinges
No expert on the changes, can't predict
The seismic shifts these sounds portray
My children hunger.
Leaving legends to suckle offspring.
Time of day trumps epoch time
For us on the fringes.*

The music stays, Alas! The band moves on
To feed the hunger of a different sense
Unvoiced resentment clouds their Diet Cokes
No words are uttered...

maybe dad's afraid
of these new noises, strange
not the folk songs of protest
nor Mary and Margie's ballads
no, change progresses in measured steps
not this rip in time

*Over lunch I sense the nannies
Glaring as if the meal's repugnant.
Mother-in-law asks, "How're you feeling?"
I mutter, "I think I feel pregnant."*

Gary

While you formed in my belly
My soul swelled first.
I could say to an insect
I feel you
I feel you.

Still smaller than a marble
Tiny bundle of nerves and sea water
refracts my essence
Filling me
Expanding.

My eyes saw four children
My heart saw five
Den and Ron would play chess
I imagine
You teaching.

When you emerged from me
In the typical way
My compass gyrated off its center
Then, like a magnet
Two complete.

Now in your own body,
You grasp every toy like Torah¹,
Study every angle, every property.
Eyes hunger
For every action.

Not content to watch impassive
You capture and command attention.
I who bore you see and witness:
I feel you;
I feel you.

¹ The Hebrew bible

Bobby

Bell tolls, tape extends.
In the sadness of the day I wrote
A liturgy with my dad's tape measure.
Brass clangs such a solemn note.

Bell tolls, tape extends.
Days ago I'd read the news
Kennedy Dies in 72 point type
As if all hope to disabuse.

Bell tolls, tape extends.
By inch number 44
Not for birthdays lost lost to Ray
Bring him back, the peals implore.

Bell tolls, tape extends.
Once my father's uncle died.
Will they give him a parade
Like they did John F? Mommy cried.

Bell tolls, tape extends.
Harry only mattered here.
Kennedys to all the world
touched hearts and spirits. No, my dear.

Bell tolls, tape extends.
I have to catch my taxicab.
Dad and Zayde² sick at once
Mom's Kleenex gave her tears a dab.

Bus rolls, Mom attends
Her father destined for the Home
Huntington's had won the battle,
Leaving him a helpless gnome.

Top floor, Montefiore.
Good my men are in one place.
Three hours travel for a visit
Checking vitals, just in case.

Bell tolls, tape extends.
So much trouble in one year.
The country shakes to its foundation
Dry ducts fail to shed a tear.

² Yiddish for "grandfather"

Mom on the Moon

the moon we could see,
no Magnificent Desolation
that Buzz Aldrin described
a friend, a guide
by day a ghost of the future
by night a companion
she pointed out the man there
we all drew what we saw
you never knew the moon had
so many faces

mom prepared us like a teacher.
i don't remember
that summer
before the mission
that July it was stories of
space time travel journey to the center of the earth
cutting moons out of swiss cheese
painting round rocks
dad even bought us a UL-Approved
bottle rocket

we launched that rocket at Penn Hills Junior High
more amazed than thrilled that it worked
two long-haired young men watched and exclaimed
lucy in the sky with diamonds, man!
i never called her Lucy
my older brother said she was Luna
apollo went up 7/16 9:32am
ours went up 7/14, more like 1:32 pm
lucy luna could wait until
after lunch

the night that we came in peace
mom caused a stir at shul
she left the board meeting early
“Ladies and Gentlemen, I have to watch
history with my children.”
our sitter had special orders that night

we would not sleep until the Next
Frontier had been claimed.
the Channel That Brings You All The News

would unite a generation

at 10:56 Pittsburgh time
The Man in the Moon
accepted an oversized boot
and with it
six hundred
million

kisses

I Take Over the Religious School

I am the gardener
Each child skips through my flowers
I don't plant the same bed twice
Each set of toes knows where it has danced
(or trudged or ground into the mud
spurning each blossom with "Ewww!")
I take cuttings from one bed
Splice to stems from another
The cheery yellow tulip from the front
Goes double, earns frills and purple trim
No single path to blossoms here
Each species groomed, each petal sculpted
Drawing every set of toes forth
Never tiring of my garden.

One set of feet, too nimble, too quick
For even a garden so crafted as this
No mere tulips for this dancer, orchids
Bird-of-Paradise, Spathodea,
Bloodlily, jacaranda,
koutruk leis around his hips his neck
For this one is my dancer
My child my Ronnie-Me
And the most elegant plantings
That I craft for the others
To dance five years 'til their legs grow weary
Cannot hold him for a fortnight
The artist gives her star student
To the conservatory

The Piano

too many fingers hitting
too many white slabs
too many black bumps
how can I make those sounds

wherever I found one
I grabbed the bench first
or if by myself i
slid the cover off the keyboard

placing a pudgy finger
on an arthritic key
scouting for don't touch that
adding more fingers, forceful

now while the synagogue
songs flow chippily
second time a melody
add something – hope you like it mom

*He has an ear, an eye, a feel
He lacks an instrument
We lack space and the money
But just a Spinet in the corner maybe*

*Then some lessons if you practice
thanks mom listen
The notes flow out of him like breath
let's stop at Volkwein's for a Liszt*

little Gary climbs on the piano bench
the cast on his leg keeps time
am I special if my baby
brother plays like me

Both demeaned will be in the
Sibling revelry

We are Your Family, Forever

gamboling
(how else to say it)
up and down the bulldozed trail
that used to be The Clearing
you golden boy
and your long haired
black buddy
(it was 1970 when we met)
bounding where The Sweetheart Tree
once squeezed me in her arms
with acorns
recalling the day with
the haze of history
it was your friend
I pet

*Rambling
(I think I'd call it)
In and out of earshot
Your bark's report like buckshot
So rarely I would hear you
Beyond your happy panting
From games of kid-tag leaving
Children doubled over laughing
Gasping
After romping
Catching breath and back to ramble
Round the Gordon's Warehouse building
Soon no longer rambling
You became like family
The name of your
Black buddy
I forget*

gamboling
now in a pack of playmates
up and down the blacktop trail
they call duff road
where once we lobbed a basketball
back and forth like Nipsy
no point or destination
you chose your own stunt
settled in the center for a good long scratch
and if a car approaches you'll catch his eye

and continue scratching
I threatened you with a leash
gambling
that you'd listen
but not too
closely

Rambling
Only til your scratching
Scraping on our screen door
Ends whatever sojourns you've
Attempted. We learn later
You've another family
Another set of children call you
Dukey, another
Grocery list attests to
The feelings you engender
Even when the dinner meatloaf, left untended,
Disappears into my dizzy spell
The sitter's split attention
And your animal soul
Or doggie
Bag

grovelling
growling with your nuzzle
down in the grout of the sofa
grand and giant gestures
with names you gave them wordless
majestic Duke loving Duke playful Duke
shifts in sense so subtle
that to name is to overstate
standing
paw on each shoulder
resting your chin on Gary's neck
like a lineman, injured,
leaning on a referee or
napping with one front leg
folded under, one
leg over my
chest

When Gary broke
His leg you sat
By his cast and licked
His little toes peeking through plaster.

*And my injury? No different.
Mel could pay for hands to replace mine.
None could pay for a heart to touch mine.
You would curl up, feline
You'd protect me, caring, ursine.
Even Mel fell in your thrall
His eyebrows danced to hear your call
Or scratch on screen with paw uplifted
In his heart rocky mountains shifted.
Duke, I could never
Begrudge you that
Meatloaf*

every box we packed
held youandthebooks youandthegloves
youandtheclothes, even youandthechina
every chair every pillow
bore soundless panting, spotless pawprints
every room disappearing into echoes
and i? away to school
ten miles and a light year away
*Not a floorboard left unsniffed
Not an echo unremembered
The coldest, wettest nose yields
Moisture to your eyes and mine
The softest ears I've ever touched
Now mop my little Gary's cheeks
Gary's arms still felt
On your neck
As the truck
Pulls away*

The Gift

what do want to do next dad asked
was there ever a question
i dazzled on my day at shul³
like the cantor I'd become
i took over at the torah service
boy soprano plus a new octave
they could hear me in the kitchen
lecturing leyning loving

i had earned the question i thought
i put it in dad's head or else
he plucked it straight from mine
let's go to Duke's house i said
as if Dukey were a neighbor
not ten neighborhoods nine exits eight months away
it was decided
not like there was any question

seven of us squeezing
lap to cheek to thigh to handle
of the sky-blue Pontiac station wagon
if we could breathe in any deeper
when the wagon turned on Tulip
Street, the gasp would cause a vacuum
never had there been a question
would he be there

or at the ballfield

at the warehouse

visiting a canine lover

a new family

yet a golden form came into focus
lighter, smaller than I had remembered
at a distance smaller than the bulldozed
track above our house, already fallen
speckled like the sandstone blocks in sunlight
head cocks, growing recognition
Duke? says dad not totally believing

³ synagogue

answer bounding through unbounded bonding

DU-KEY!!!!!!!!!!!!

rang out the breathless wagon

DU-KEY!!!!!!!!!!!!

your family has found you

in a flash of synchronous emotion

the back door opens as the dog flies inward

never was so much dry cleaning created

never has the bill been so forgotten

still the puzzled fearful look

of the children living there

shades the moment – still the shift

from dad to patriarch commanding

half against his will

we'll come visit you i promised

yet another vow

I couldn't

keep

Climate Change

I am down sixty pounds
this week I put back one
all are noting smiling flirting
but a friend who busts on me
you're no longer fat just ugly

but that pound
that pound hung in the air of the Bonneville
like a collider adding neutrons
doubling the weight of every molecule
makes it hard to breathe the words
my father uttered next

I pay the weekly meeting fees
for this? he muttered. that money
could buy your mother's shoes or-
Mel my mother gasped
he went on
i didn't hear it
the details of this change in climate
i don't remember
what difference if the wind shifts five degrees
but gusts as hard?

I didn't connect the gas lines
unemployment lines
food lines
dad taking calls at night
from worried clients
cutting back his schedule

i read the story
of the dying boy
giving up his struggle
becoming a stew
nourishing the men
fighting for besieged
Jerusalem

The Pot

hand grips
boy
second of
five
1 ½ quart Queen
Dennis will not
roast still raw
make his deadlines
Joel at large
escaping Mel
water boils
demands
(accuses)
pulse races
youngest fighting
cannot take it
business crumbling
head throbbing
boy what
rage
wanting
thousand screws into
pressure plates
he sees nothing
plates on my
brain
nerves
copper bottom
no
pot flies
time dies
you threw
what did I do
a pot
what did I do
at me mom
what did I do
why
why

The Afghan

The boy
on the parlor sofa
5:30 AM
wakes nude
the phone still
kissing his earlobe his
open lips his
tongue so relaxed
clothes poorly remembered
silent witnesses
on the floor
hand-stitched afghan
covers his manhood
in filigree

boy still sleeping
brings lips tongue teeth
to the plastic receiver
warmed to body temperature
by his breath his touch his love
young manhood swelling again

as it must have swollen
to full readiness for loving
the girl two hours away by bustrolleyfoot
if he walks with passion
she has a phone
in her room in her bed
where she slept exhausted
he turned her on by talking
the news of the day in detail
the suicide of the Baader-Meinhof guy
Sihanouk arrested

care never much present
fell away with clothes
language slipped
from conversational english
to the holy tongue
arom⁴
yichud
sh'neinu b'yachad

⁴ Hebrew: "naked//in union//the two of us together// (next page) love, sex! sex!"

ahavah min min
two are one one one

girl fully realized
never stopped making love
even when only sighs returned
were they sex or were they sleep
no matter
she sucked him deep inside her
tremblingexploding tremblingexploding
sleeping

had he climaxed he wondered
now so round so strong so wanting
under that afghan
from where
from who
from her not HER
from mom
who saved his pride should
he be found
by covering him
in filigree
the source
of which
is a guess

The Loss

You plodded up the stairs, feet heavier
Than ere I'd known you, I did not perceive
The change in mien. Not bounding to your love
Awaiting, teen-aged loneliness relieve.

For ere I'd known you, I did not perceive
This evening differed from Thanksgiving past
Awaiting, teen-aged neediness relieve
When fright and lust your hand held my breast fast.

This evening differed from Thanksgiving past
When ne'er the thought of separate lives we'd bear
No fright, no lust, would bring our hands to pass
Within a hundred miles of pain, of care.

When ne'er the thought of separate lives we'd bear
A mother's heart this couple's fate rejoiced
Not in a hundred miles of pain, of care,
Instead, I'd fain envision klezmer's roist.

My mother's heart this couple's fate rejoiced
My blessing to their loving quick be giv'n
How quickly wed? I hear the klezmer's⁵ roist
A family begun, not ever riv'n.

My blessing from their future now is riv'n
A fickle choice, hearts sundered, futures rent
A future dashed, familiar love though giv'n
My child, why to your life this sorrow sent?

A fickle choice, I'm sundered, spirit spent
For no one's gain their future she's decreed,
O mother, poison dart to my soul sent!
To only God's compassion must I plead.

⁵ Jewish folk musicians of Pre-WWII Europe

Bobie⁶/Mom

she's tired ron
but i have so much to tell her
right bobie?
yes ronnie
the cancer has eaten
her strength not her will
ronnie
bobie
tell me what you did today
she asked again
i told her three times
about the poetry club with judy
i like judy, she said, yet again.
ron, said the half embrace around my shoulder
i know mom
bobie, i'll go to bed now
it was not yet eight

the half embrace would wake me
at quarter past something small
mom, i said, barely turning
she's gone, she whispered back
yisgadal v'yiskadash shmei rabah ⁷we
intoned together favoring
comfort over custom⁸,
She's left us, said mom, in the moment
with the child's perspective, i sat up
gave my mom the half embrace, and said
Never
never

⁶ Also spelled "bobeh": grandmother

⁷ The first four words of the prayer said by mourners

⁸ The mourners' prayer ("Kaddish") is not said until the graveside in traditional Jewish families

The Tern

i don't know why you came up
you and dad couldn't really afford the trip
but you came anyway

*We left as early as we could
Foregoing favored pit-stops
He wouldn't say how sad he was*

Audubon's arctic terns looked through me
i looked one back with color
a heart-eyeball encased in graydarklightruggedsnowy

*He threw his arms around us both
To his roommate, casual jest
Charcoal, gesso strewn like toys of sloppy children*

just play I said, recognize it
Larry shared the gesso
showed me how to shave the charcoal

*(And the heart? I rubbed my index finger, just checking)
I recognize the theme, I lied
Just enough gold gets through the clouds*

gold hell – didn't I say it was a study in gray
I'm glad she saw it though
maybe she won't know how bad it is

*Mel liked the mixed media
Never mind Ron's roomie the artist
He sees some lesson from the workshop*

dad threw his plaster on canvas, painting
day-glo starbursts with a clothes display
theme in mind – i know why

he turned down the collector's money.

The Power of Positive Thinking

closets
retail display windows
in raw, unskilled hands
space to stick stuff in there
some formula in some too thick
text book teaches show goods drive sales
Albert Dad Barnes⁹ would not have it.
the mannequin in the corner
flings a flirty hip across the doorway
bustform reflects a hint of midriff bare
saying, i'd wear it hotter
if only i had hips:
the mannequins, forms and three-quarters
deeply engaged,
struttin' cross the scenery
as if it weren't built in Shadyside

“Mel, you're a genius!”

Remarked the assistant, early 20's, body hewn from steely reps

To the artist, late forties, more beaten down than double

“How long can you keep painting a Rembrandt a day,”

Said the MFA in muscle.

“What if you could leave behind you

Work that not only would they ooh and aah at, but

That would keep paying you long after you sold the piece?

“Like a canvas”

“If you made one in lifetime, you'd have beaten the odds.”

“Like a novel?”

Kinda like that, but-each-time-someone-read-it-theyd-write-their-own-and-you-d-get

Royalties

A dollar on every ten

A dollar on every hundred

And it didn't matter if you could bend down that day..

The power of the moment silenced all debate.

who would join Mel's business and help him create genius

on his own time?

i would i said with conviction

what must I do

Set up Meetings. Get People

In a Room, where I will Spin their Circles

⁹ Albert Barnes (1872-1951), an art collector known for offsetting paintings in precise positions in his Merion, PA gallery

Mom tells me I was committed
To being Dad's Greatest Distributor
The Greatest Salesman on Earth
together we would think and grow rich

we broke our hearts twice
each for his failure
each for the loss of the other's dream
mom had a special third heart
so one could break
for us both

One Game Away

the hotel marked the entrance to the main line
we players, playas, wanna-bes, tourists and dreamers
a thousand, pushing two thousand chess clock buttons
believing in their claim on the five-figure prize

last year I'd beaten and befriended
Vinay Bhatt who, at age 6,
caught me by the ninth round
now 7, Vinay had the Class B's all to himself

i was a drop out by the end of the first semester
the denouement written not yet read
my folly paid for by tournament winnings
my shame paid for in options foreclosed on

had i fashioned an icicle straight-A
i could not transfer, so must play to pay
grimly, dispatching one poseur with the Poisoned Pawn
one with a Maroczy Bind and one took my queen, sealing his fate

finally one game, e4, e6, French Defense
no one knew how to beat this.
fifty-seven moves in I held no edge.
a tie meant split prize money; could I last the year?

i gambled.
and lost.
my mom
could not know

the importance
of one game
not drawn
it's only money

Save Soviet....¹⁰

the Soviet Union paid for my recession
i placed skilled technologists with the defense industrial complex
my boss's one eyebrow found a way to shake its own hand
when

neither of his two ears understood our greeting
zdravstvuyte, privyet¹¹ and a soviet bear hug
given to men who could have been moi otyetz my father
iz otechestvyennui stranui from the fatherland

Valery spoke grrreit Englisch
better than my childhood friend Mr. Sukiennik
he even knew the difference
between an accordion and
a harmonica.

Semyon and others needed me to translate
for their interviews.
what will the chief engineer do with him
no problem I responded and sent Lev the draftsman
whose math was clear as black bread but whose English shone
i got two placement fees that way

Israel now more than ever¹²
I sold bonds, made calls, even called my Congressmen
All I didn't do was support the Great Redemption
Get called to Israel to convert
Making ready for the Rapture
Instead, I proudly wore my button,
"Save Soviet Jewry."
I was volunteering once –
A lady, sculpted coif still breathing
Aerosols (we didn't know from ozone)
Asked, "What is there worth saving
About Soviet jewelry?"

After bearing with her querulous
Challenge to my taste, my culture,
I gently pointed out her error.
I told her about how Ronald
In his way, and I in mine
Saved Soviet jewelry of the purest kind
My jewelry and his
named Kats, Shteynman, Frankshteyn!

¹⁰ "Save Soviet Jewry" was the rallying cry of Zionists and Jewish activists during the 1970's and 1980's.

¹¹ "Hello, greetings!"

¹² A Jewish Federation rallying cry of the same period

Oneg Shabbat

when I got off
the greyhound bus
the Pontiac awaited

as i kissed you
i saw the stack
of nosherei

from silverman's
and prime kosher
like a baby seat

I serve the world in my own way
For Jews, for Earth, for city
But "fellowship," as Christians say
The service that best fits me.

Let Sisterhood buy mandel bread
Air kichels and weak coffee
If that be it, the hall'd be dead
In minutes, they'd be gone free.

on my next trip
the seat bore no
confection kids

or deli chairs -
bought already
i surmised, not

thinking mom had
been relieved of
this tasty chore

When Sisterhood saw what success
A bounteous spread had made there
They took the job back, I confess
My pride had found its nadir.

I hope my pattern they retain

they won't i bet
they'll mess it up
when i returned -

ha i was right

Stone Walls and Iron Curtains

about ten years before
we'd page through together
Masada: Herod's Fortress and
the Zealots' Last Stand
you wondered how he went from
recruit to general to scholar
to contender to lead a country
i wondered how Herod could have died in 3
and told Jesus to
walk across my swimming pool¹³
he mined relics with a whisk broom
you mined minds with imagination

when he died the obit seemed to me
to paint another man's life
you recalled in a flash of neurons
all the connections
all the careers
all the wars of Yigael Yadin
how the man with a mind like a machine gun
led his people between an angry bear
and a clumsy elephant

what would you have said, Yigael,
what would you have told
the man whose mind
had to melt the
munitions for the
machine gun
when he said
we begin
bombing
in five
minutes

¹³ Webber, Andrew Lloyd ad Tim Rice, *Jesus Christ, Superstar* (1971)

Orson, Yul and Us, October 10, 1984

Children whose Depression Era minds
Inflamed with Men of Steel proved fallow ground
For monstrous landing terrorizing Earth
Of this synthetic memories abound.

We'd later meet and marry, while the King
And Pharaoh beamed from Brynner's Buryat pate
The network led our children practicing
To exile Moses, determine Anna's fate.

together made a film in sixty-nine
in Sarajevo no songs just agitprop
one went to think financial angels swine
the other shone till death his curtain dropped

Both gone in hours, our anniversary
Bore stains of decades spent, grim threnody.

Brunch At The Commune

the peace march trudged through Cleveland
on a Saturday night
some marching feet stopped marching
and danced at mickey finn's
some feet too tired for dancing,
informed their hearts instead
some found other feet to tangle with
on beds on sofas on floors they slept
eventually

and woke up hungry
learning that there was breakfast
they found their way by ones twos fives
to Eddington Road
where i was the backbone and chef
of the cooperative
but i had two dozen eggs minus a few
five pounds of flour having given up a scoop
a gallon of milk some standard co-op fare
i called you said "stone soup"

so the feet sprouted veggies
the feet rolled with eggs
some sweet feet brought Danish
and the strattas grew
two pans made pancakes and latkes
plates flew like frisbees into the commons
and the feet ran to the corner for biodegradable
everything

a hundred thirty marching dancing loving feet made
their way to my commune
bringing sixty-five mouths
dozens of eggs
pounds of veggies
bananas berries juices
even chocolate chips
we made brunch
we made memories
we made stone soup
we made you proud

The Self-Sufficiency for the Poor Act of 1987¹⁴

dad helped me help Sam Harris help Cameron Duncan
help Ernie Loevinsohn help George Stephanopoulos
help Congressman Ed Feighan (D-OH) write it
he did she asked
he did i replied
his dementia hadn't really
started
in earnest

mom's voice was 52 was 27 as it swelled
from her 75-year-old vocal cords
her cough disappeared i noted
she sounded like she was pressing her congressman
for cosponsorship
of the bill i initiated sam and cam initiated ernie wrote
and Dr. Muhammad Yunus
(back when we still spelled it mohammed)
wrote it with his feet his students his \$27
and Nasma initiated
with her stools
the building of which netted her
the princely sum
of two pennies a day

we were excellent that year
muhammad/ernie/george/samcam/ed/
nasma/dad/you/me
Congress vibrates at a new frequency
bangladesh breathed the breath of mothers
you breathed self-sufficiency
to your rep or your make-up/color clients
you found beauty in their smiles
i found beauty in their stools
mel whose dementia had not started
in earnest
found beauty in us both
muhammad met me
and there was beauty

¹⁴ The non-celebrities listed were officers or consultants with RESULTS, a citizens' lobby that creates the political will to end hunger and the worst aspects of poverty, and all had far more to do with conceiving and writing this landmark law. Although I was the primary force behind Rep. Feighan introducing the bill, it was inevitable that a RESULTS volunteer would achieve this success.

Michele

dew dances on the tip of her nose
satiny pink albino cherry flesh
the sweet-seeking taste buds of my tongue
delight in this dazzling drop

features cut in ivory made not taken
smoothe into sensuous skin
the ineffable lightness of your skin
trembles as i stroke lick draw love circles

i cannot find a swimsuit worthy
of holding those globes – perfect, precious
there is no string or cloth that
can bear such an arc as your hips

*Yet I see, as he cannot, the face
Of soulless beauty that she bears –she molds
Him in a form I gave him not, and he
Would always live as failure. On the shoals*

*Of falsehood will she wreck him, rather he
Would lose his complex form a role to play
In her fairy tale. The prince he'd never be
would mock him, her affections steal away.*

purest flower carried through our madness into womanhood
how could i cognosce your mind and know
you would leave me like the others
like the stories of a child

every story must have
a beginning middle end
and this like the others like it unfolded
in two months three weeks
four days
and emptiness

The Wedding Tooth

the day my older bro got married
for real this time the other one
was legal but impossible
the kvelling¹⁵ mama and the bro of honor shared
shingles and a toothache.
while i paced and writhed and somehow failed
to rouse my youngest brother
sweet ivy league dreamer cursed to follow in my faltering footsteps but that's another poem
you rolled and writhed and chalked it up
to nerves that wouldn't quit

the nerves that made made made the kugels
the nerves that rolled rolled rolled the dough
the nerves that formed formed deformed
the cookies, sure and experimental
the nerves that never hear the bride
until, fatigued, she whimpered
I Have Lost The Wedding Bake Off

the tooth that never noticed
the clicking picking as the clock was ticking
while my suit my presents walked up Pelham to the 23
and my car door sticking open
yet with tooth in borrowed clothes
with nerves and seizing skin
the day we seized suited us fine
while you painted joy on the faces of all the women
revealing happiness they didn't know
with each brush of cosmetic
while i danced the kazatsky¹⁶
like a thinner athlete
but like the musician i am
i grabbed the violist's instrument
and made the mournful member of the string family
merry

¹⁵ Yiddish for "beaming with pride"

¹⁶ Russian folk dance step requiring perfect knees

The Gift Redux

he will call she said
that's what he will talk about
will you know what to say
he answered as if it were a dream
he answered as if it were a legend
I briefed him, saying
Mel, do you remember
this was the biggest thing
either of you have ever done
Faye, I don't remember going to Bangladesh
and did Ron say we had talked to Dr. Yunus
I don't remember that
you talked to George Stephanopoulos, not Yunus
in Congressman Feighan's office –
adding input to the bill,
once Ron showed up drenched in sleet to make it matter
how did Ron figure into microcredit –
tell me again how we made
the difference we made and
how we made it

i called after the 60 Minutes program of March 18, 1990
which put Yunus
and the Grameen Bank
in the minds
of many
both to share the Nobel Peace Prize later
and said this was the best birthday present
since you took us to see dukey
after my bar mitzvah
mom took the phone and kvelled with her right brain
kvelled with her right and trembled with her left

Doomed To Follow

i arrived with the woman poised at the edge of
a hundred pounds of ice-cream-fed
misery whose future looked
so loud to my own
that i could listen through her
stethoscope to the little heartbeats
of her future patients in NICU
through the years that waited
thin as a wren's bone¹⁷

dad drove, you guided through the garden of Greentree where
far from the vision far from the prayer
that you held for me since my first black eyed jewish love
(all that was black that night were the olives my teutonic-scotch-irish
ladyfriend and you and mel and i ate with fresh-ground
parmesan and pepper)
you expected an ANNOUNCEMENT over chianti
we delivered nothing but breadsticks and bon mots
in a night that was not different from all other nights
none of us knew
the psychic suicide
that had taken mel
would claim my Margaret
miring each step of mother of son
a grade above quicksand

years later there would be an ANNOUNCEMENT
over double distilled vomit or whatever
by the jewish descendent of the lost jewish angel
of twenty years ago
who ate her misery also but then blamed
each and every schlemazl¹⁸
who had the fortune
to be married to her
not depression but diatribe
this one's study of operations limited
to excising my name, like a tumor, from my little girl's
to stripping my value from her portfolio for less than it costs to lose
varicose veins

¹⁷ paraphrased from "Vision and Prayer" by Dylan Thomas. IN: *Collected Poems, 1934-1953*

¹⁸ American Yiddish for "a luckless loser"

The Power Of A Homophone

bring your presence not your presents
says the invitation card
the party was at the albany-colonie hampton inn
and I was graduating
with a BA that looked like a typo
1992 not 1982 “where did the time go¹⁹”
(when the venture capitalist interviewing me to be a piece of vulture meat he pointed out the
lacuna and i nodded and thanked him; i should have told him to buy the chapbook instead)
you were there
you couldn’t fast forward through the boring part
or the sleepy part
or the potty break
or the hungry part
ten hours in June
bringing your presence
gift-wrapped with the kugels and cookies
in the cooler

you had not finished The Tallit
(that one would have to wait patiently for the Epilogue)
but the tallit you gave me
earns its keep every shabbes
now that, shorn from leadership,
I am a sometimesduespaying buttintheseat
 sister-in-law protested
 a message gift to the Lutheran s.o.
 a motherly pee on the territory
 martin luther wanted to kill jews
 margaret wanted to marry one
walking across the stage is like the forty year gap
in the record of Rameses II
that showed that Israel was there
every mile of shimmering roadway memory
reflects your presence
was, is now, and will ever be
world without end
amen

¹⁹ Robert Hunter and Jerry Garcia, “Uncle John’s Band (1969),” recorded 1970

Return To What You Are//Like An Escape

what do you think she asked
of your son being a whole
state away? thrilled – she was not

I was on fellowship to become a cantor
hoping still to write before man
not to dance before the Lord

you schlepped naches every mile
of the PA turnpike only to find
the Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia

three blocks away
you could always transfer said one
thank God he won't thought the other

Bringing Back the Bones

My clients tasted freedom like crack oenophiles.
I introduced Valery to a hiring committee
As a Soviet engineer who has patents in
Power train design. No-no gosphozha²⁰, he interrupts

Did I get the tech part wrong? I had been practicing.
I am not Soviet engineer; I am Rrrrrussian!
The Wall had fallen. Gone for months,
The Soviet Union sprinted and made a barrel-dive

Into the dustbin of history.
And their children? And their children's children?
Maybe the Biblical God visited
iniquity on the third or fourth generation

But the children and the little ones, the mal'chiki²¹
Claim redemption without repayment
So I gladly embrace the American Jews
Saving Soviet Jewelry rewarded by these diamonds
Glistening

in recalling those days i flipped through leaves
of the Post-Gazette
of Wikipedia
of noaa.gov
and found that a tornado
sucking and hurling roundhouse blows through Westmoreland County
and sprinting toward a small town
bent its knees and leaped over the town
without touching down
all the huddled people in their storm shelters
prayed for a gold - they won
as mom and i prepare to write this
she speaks of "bringing back those days"
which i heard as "bringing back the bones"
next year at Passover the freedom
matza²² will not force ad hoc Talmudic nitpicking
over which is the Middle Matza
when there are four
because the bones are risen and are
finding their way home

²⁰ polite Russian address to and adult woman

²¹ Russian: "children"

²² twentieth century Jewish tradition to include Jews living in religious persecution in the Passover Seder; there are three slices of matza in the Seder of the Talmud

Celebration of Wisdom (Simchat Hochma)

well on my way to attaining
a dream that had driven me like
a gyroscope that now commanded attention
you shared a baby naming song

at sixty you were changing your ceremonial name
like a japanese sensei making 7-dan
the go player and the mother student wise one
transformed by capturing

all their gains in a freeze frame.
before your eyes degraded you had learned
to chant from the scroll like Ezra like Judith Kaplan Eisenstein
like your daughter Cantor Yael

we performed your naming song a capella
the top voice would leave the family in sorrow
i continued a career that would abort at its zenith
Gary found music a blessed diversion an offertory

there you celebrated a Jewish life
row after empty row of seats dividing you from the boys
discarded books plant their letters on your brain
first woman here to wear a kippah
first to don a tallit (given by her children)
first to ascend the bimah²³
and deliver a sermon

there you stood shoulder to shoulder with the founders
of the women's movement
who reclaimed the New Moon
who taught themselves Torah
who read from the scroll
on Saturdays before apoplectic men

there you quoted Jenny Joseph, saying,
"When I am an old woman I shall wear purple."
looking for all the world like Bella Abzug
your color swirled through your hair your dress
your generations

²³ "kippah" – skull cap "tallit" – prayer shawl "bimah" - stage

International Year for the Eradication of Poverty

we got married on November 2 that year
i foresaw an engine transforming heat to light
passion to full throated love
sung like a robin at mating season

from this would follow fulfillment
my music her writing our children
my dreams of making the name of my wedding year
more valiant vision than vapid slogan

a hundred havdalah candles
would bind our love to all the radiance
was it a foreshadowing
when two drunk sisters
broke formation nearly to burn down
my brother and sister-in-law
(who are still married
after twenty years)

From an injured bird at three
I saw the man you would become
From nests of maple, leaves for floors
to your balalalaika strum

We named you Rafael at birth
Healer of the bird at three
We saw a doctor, but no dearth
Of excellences you'd explore.

If all transformed, my golden son,
The Healing Angel, named at birth
would soon display his trophies won,
if not a doctor, still no dearth

Of triumph in the fields he chose
still unfulfilled, my golden son
imagined with a leader pose
his deeds exceed his trophies won.

none could know
that this crowning moment
presaged illness, nearly death

bride and groom circling one way
havdalah torches the other
power designed to emanate radiate
change the world
implodes instead
the trophies
would be hoisted
by others

The Dog And The In-Law

silver dog with black silky tips
a nest for her curly tail
she would wag her rear two thirds with joy
before i unlock the door

how she gazed at us
with doe-eyed delight
placing her heart-shaped paws
on those who love her until
they can do no else but pet

in an instant she recognized
you and dad as family
adopted in a flash as granddaughter
hinting at the bobie and zayde you'd become

that year on christmas eve i
was rolled into the OR
to become electromechanical
because no nerve told the ventricle
to beat anymore

mother-in-law came to hold daughter's hand
they promised to call you when the surgery'd ended
the call never came
they were at lunch
you had to explain to the nurse,

"I'm his MOTHER!"

later, she told you i was off to audition
in New York, California, or Beijing (whatever)
it wast't true – but the mother in law
said you'd called her a LIAR

the machine would take care of my heart

but silver belle Ariella helped
soon our walks took us to Wyndmoor
through to Cheltenham
always ending at Pastorius Park

where she paid little heed to the frolicking dogs
preferring to rub the humans
who she'd hypnotize
with those brown doe-eyes

Epilogue: Wrapped Up in a Mother's Love

"Beautiful things are well worth waiting for..." Jewish Chronicle, 6/11/1998

the sarcoidosis that tried to stop my heart
opened my voice instead
my life's energy no longer pumping out my pores
flowed to breath to song to prayer
needed to be girded
with priestly vestments
vestments you crafted with needle and thread

Urim and Tumim
the "Lights and the Virtues"
danced before the Lord on the side of the garment
with the g-clef sign
riffing with other sacred spirits
bells pomegranates grapevine rippling
nubile sensual playful
never staid nor solemn

a grand Torah wraps its parchment
around the other side
gifted to it is a bird bearing
the olive branch in its beak
did I say bird? (no poet uses such vague
language and gets away with it)
no dove, no eagle, not even
a peacock the *duchifat* – hoopoe
is mentioned by name
not for valor or for vision
or for its placid mien
but for being prohibited – unkosher
like your son
or the Eternal Light
it can never
be consumed