

BLACK BREAD



POEMS, AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

BY

BLU GREENBERG

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THERE BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD . . .

David

My beautiful athlete
And fearless adventurer
Born in the sixties
Now a foot taller than I
With one year of growth
Still in him
Shiny face sun-windswept
Languid lean torso
And sturdy long legs
Stretched out on the couch
With Billy Joel blaring
His bittersweet gold

I lower the volume
(Though not all the way
To avoid a teen protest)
And flop into a chair
Tuck my feet under
For a cozy moment
Of 'quality time'.
So how was skiing?
(For a routine opener)

So Steven and I . . .
Down the steepest slope . . .
I'm getting so good . . .
Warm fire in the lodge . . .
Spent all my money . . .
It was so great . . .

Except for this big man
With a thick neck
Standing at the bottom
Pointing us left or right
It felt so eerie
For a second I felt
Real scared.

THE CHAZZAN FROM TARNOPOLE

Henry's voice
Crackled at the edges
No longer did it satisfy, serve,
Lift, uplift,
Carry the congregation.

Still
He stood throughout the *tefillah*
In the corner of his pew
In the glass and cedar
Angled ceiling
Sunlit, red-carpeted
Design-award-winning
Shul in northern New Jersey
“Another Bergen”
He laughed
With his brother.

“Why stand, Henry?”
His elegant, Chanel-suited wife pleaded
(In another life
She would have
Called him Chaimke
But her, now,
In this Lincoln Continental
Glass and cedar crowd
Henry must do.)

“No longer the chazzan”
She railed
“Varicose veins . . .”

“Embarrasses the rabbi . . .”
 (“Embarrasses me,” she means)
 “So stubborn, my Henry”
 She told “the girls”
 With a transparent laugh.

“When I sit I’ll die”
 He had confided long ago
 In a darkened room
 In an intimate moment.

As his friends raced
 Speedily toward death
 While standing in aching stillness
 At five-hour roll call
 Chaimke transformed himself
 Into the chazzan of Tarnopol
 Descendant of a long line
 Of illustrious sweet singers of Israel
 “*Ehrliche chazzunim*”
 He lovingly called them.

While the men of Tarnopol
 Stepped outside for a shmooze
 And a breath of air
 And the women of Tarnopol
 Rushed home
 To feed the young
 Fasting till noon
 Chaimke stood without respite
 On aching legs
 From morning till night
 From *shacharis* and *musaf*

To *minchah* and *neilah*
With a stomach that rumbled
And lips that parched
Growing stronger each moment
Feeling life restored
As he pleaded with God
This stubborn
Messenger of the congregation.

“When I sit, I’ll die.”
Long ago
In that darkened room
She understood.

THE BEETLE

Winter of '73:
A clearness in the air
Born of cold
Icy glistening cold
A clear
So clear
So pure
Clouded only
By the immediate mist
Spun of a labored exhale.
I should have worn my black suede boots
He should have left me the car.

The bus is long in coming
I'll be late for class
At seven past nine
The students will bolt
With glee
Having done their part.

A horn sounds
It must be Elijah
“Hey. Mrs. G.
Wanna ride?”
Kevin
Sophomore or junior . . . I forget
Blue eyes, freckles
Easy, winning smile
That will drive some
Katherine or Peggy wild.
Kevin, C + on the midterm
Kevin, nice guy.

“Thanks, Kevin
Now we’ll *both* be on time”
Not that funny
But student and teacher laugh
Enjoying a moment’s camaraderie
That crosses lines and
Makes me feel younger.

“New car?”
“Yup, a week old
Nineteenth birthday . . .”
(So the Irish, too
Are upwardly mobile)
“Thirty-two m.p.g.
In city traffic
Handles great
Almost parks itself.
Neat little job.”

We laugh again

But I must
Twist the knife
My Christian friend
Softly, very softly
“Too bad it’s German-made
I could never buy one.”

A long silence
Irritation?
Exasperation?
“Jeez, Mrs. G.
How long you gonna remember?”

In my heart
I answer
Until I die, Kevin
Until you die, Kevin
Until the whole world dies.

Too bad!
In the bext cold rain
Kevin will probably
Pass me by
That lachrymose Jewish teacher.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY RIDDLE

Who is older than her mother
Older than her grandmothers?

Answer:

Lydia.
Auburn hair
With gray-brown roots
Wide green eyes
Framed by soft crow's-feet
Fine skin
With a wrinkle or two
As befits a matron
Of fifty-seven.

Lydia
Remembers her mother
Fair, creamy complexion
Air-brushed by the years
Wearing a big white hat on Shavuot
The fur boa
A young girl nestled against
On winter outings
Beautiful mama
Young enough
In the mind's eye
To be her daughter.

Lydia
Remembers the grandmothers
Nagymama Sosha and Bubbe Clara
Two elegant Hungarian ladies

Gabor style
Wearing white gloves and red veils
Lunching in cafes
Taking her to the park
With her big brother of ten
(Ah, where is he now?)

The grandmothers made jam for Pesach
Stuffed cabbage for papa
They painted their nails
And Lydia's, too
She played
In the lace-curtained parlor
Napped in their high beds
Rummaged musical jewelry boxes
Fingered the mirrored tray
Crowded with lotions and creams
Not a line in their faces
Skins fine, luminescent
Two elegant Hungarian grandmas
Who died without a wrinkle.

They all said a hurried good-bye
On a cloudless Budapest day, 1944
Lydia, in her Shavuot dress
Taken by nagymama's stout cook
Her brother, sent off to a farmer
Never heard from again.

“*Emlékezz*, “ said beautiful mama
After the last “Be a good girl”
And final hugs
“*Emlékezz*”

Remember
"Te egy zsidó vágy
Drága lányom."^{*}
But tell no one.

Who is older than her own mother?
Older than the world?

A twentieth-century riddle.

* You are a Jew, my dear daughter.