THE LIFE OF BEN
AND OTHER POEMS

THESIS

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By

Alan Michael Berecka, B.A.
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The Life of Ben and Other Poems consists of two sections. The first, The Life of Ben, is a series of seventeen poems about the life of a first-generation American and his family's immigration. The second section, Other Poems, includes twenty-one poems on a variety of themes.
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She pulled the baggage free. There were no porters for poor D.P.s who rode on milk trains. She waited.

The Polack had told him, "Five years you waited, what's ten minutes more?" He sold the Polack's milk, then looked for her.

Five years did not last as long as those five frozen seconds; he stood still as she stood at the platform's other end. A child of six hid at her hip. They were strangers to him. The child had grown tall. The wife had grown plain and hard. Her eyes had died. They wore a shroud of indifference. Finally, he moved towards her.

He felt obliged.
For months he talked.
The daughter brightened at his
voice, secretly relieved to know
that men still knew how to speak
her mother's tongue. The wife
spoke only to remind him.
"Money and life are going to be easy,
you said. I was not to worry but wait.
Easy for you. I waited five years,
worried for four that the news you
promised would not come. I waited.
I listened to people laugh. I moved
with Mary home. Each day 'Mr. Bigshot'
my father would call you. Said, 'I told
you he was no good--an idiot without a
village, but you married him and look.'
My mother said little; she hid from my
shame. Then, finally, money and news came:
You live in America--illegal--sneaking
in from Canada like a gypsy-thief. But
don't worry you say, the Polack I milk
for has no wife. He will sponsor you
as his housekeeper. So now I'm to be
a Polack's maid--a Polack's--do you think
I have no pride."

The Polack said, "She's tired from
the trip; give her time."

She remained at her distance.
But once she had been his bride.
The village had celebrated for two
days and three nights. She had spoken
vows in front of God and the priest.
One night, not only lonely for Lithuania,
she began to bed with him;

she felt obliged.
In America, in the cool of a Central New York's spring, as the last snow hid in deep shadows, three years after the reunion, (as Europe manned to insure its first modern ruins) with the help of a Polish lady, a neighbor-midwife from a farm three miles away, in a dim corner of the second story of the two-storied farmhouse, she gave birth to their only son.

It went well. He was strong. She worried though. They lived too far from the church. The priest, a missionary, who spoke Polish, pidgin English and Latin, of course, came on First Fridays, but only four times a year. He had come last week, the week before, and now she and her baby must wait. Every night, kneeling beneath the crucifix that hung above her bed, she prayed, "Dear Jesus, don't let him die; I could not think to bear the burden of knowing my son suffers in hell." She went a little mad. The child's cries meant more than I am wet, I am hungry. She feared he was dying, suddenly ill and near his eternal torment. She decided to wait until it was safe to name the child. If he died, she did not want to know him.

The men celebrated long and hard on Wasnufka and homemade Virytus and talked of names. He told the Polack, "You know, I name my son for you, Woytek." The Polack flattered answered, "What kind of God-damned name is Woytek for an American boy? An American boy needs an American name, something good." Together they remembered Americans and American names. "Benjamin, yes, that is a good American, wise but with common sense, rich but down-to-earth." Who cared that he was not Catholic. On the first day they agreed that Benjamin would be the name of their newest hand, even if she did not listen and would not agree.

Mary, who had learned English at school and Polish from her father's friend, whispered translations of the priest's words to her mother, that is until the Latin came. After the service, the priest, in his buggy, went on his way, a cured ham and a bottle of blue clover wine went with him. He said he would try to come more often. For two days the proud Godfather opened his house. A few friends came including their feed salesman, their best American friend, Benjamin Cohen.
Our existence begins at conception.  
Our life retold begins with our first memory. Ben's life begins when he is four. His chubby frame is dressed in stiff bibbed overalls. His feet are bare except for his heels that are shoed by his thickly rolled cuffs. It is a cool spring day. He is playing on his front porch. The cows bellow as they parade through the barnyard. His father herds them with a cane. Ben knows it is milking time. He knows he is not to go to the barn alone. He tries to resume play. Time is anchored by his will. It begins to drag. He sneaks off to the barn. He peeks around the giant barn door which has been left open. His father sits on a stool twenty Holsteins away. A fountain of milk falls from the farmer's hands. A tin pail sings. Ben, filled with pride at his father's skill, moves closer. Halfway to his father's side he bumps into a high-strung bovine's right hind leg. The cow kicks. She catches Ben low in the gut. He doubles-over and rolls backwards like a drunken acrobat impersonating a defective bowling ball. He skids across the barn and lands in a manure-filled gutter. Unable to breathe, unable to cry, Ben sits sprawled and stunned in the filth and his horror. His father races to him. His father jerks him to his feet. His father slaps Ben across the face, and screams, "How dare you upset a cow at milking time! Get to your mother! I have work that needs to be done!" As Ben reaches the living-quarters, his numbness has turned to pain. His ribs ache. His head has fogged-over. He is learning that the world spins faster than our liking. He longs for his soft bed. His mother meets him at the front door. She carries a large wooden spoon. She screams through the fog, "Is this the way you take care of your new clothes! What's the matter for you?" She takes Ben into the middle of the barnyard. Her daughter brings a basin.

(more; no stanza break)
He is told to strip naked. His mother rudely washes him in cold water and insults. She beats the wet child with her spoon. Then she sends her "stupid" to his room. He goes all night without food. He is relieved to be alone. Ben curls with a pillow on his soft bed. He feels his body begin to mend. He doesn't sleep. He plots revenge.
BEN'S FIRST GOOD MEMORY

When Ben was five he asked his father why most calves disappeared from the farm. His father explained to Ben the relationship between milk and veal.
When Ben turned twelve, his parents were sure that he had learned enough. He could speak good English, read, write, add, subtract and even multiply. He could sign his own name. To know more was dangerous. The old country was full of educated dumbbells—who books had taught to doubt God and be communists. Their son had grown fast. It was time for him to learn the land, to learn the animals, to learn to milk, to learn to work. Their son would be a farmer. By the time Ben turned fifteen, he had mastered the pitchfork and the scythe. His muscles and callouses had grown thick.
MARY GETS MARRIED

Her mother reminded Mary of her age and marital status with every other breath. Mary knew that when she turned twenty she would be doomed—fated to care for her parents until they passed on in her advanced years. She would die alone and unmourned for. She also knew that there would be no mixed marriage and Lithuanian Catholics were not easy to find in the middle of cities not alone in the middle of nowhere. Then, one day a letter from the old country came. Mary read it to her mother, and there was new hope. One cool spring day a suitor came to visit, a son of a family her mother had known in the old country, who now at twenty-eight and a tailor by trade had travelled a hundred miles by milk train to be formally introduced. He was short, balding and not very strong, but his deep set, nearly hidden steel blue eyes burned with the brightness of his wit. He spent two hours with the seated family, talking of life in America and his kin folk, who had remained in Lithuania. As he left he promised to write. The letters came at first twice a month. Mary was hesitant to answer. Was it true what Ben said, "Any man under five feet tall was just a big midget"; would her children all be dwarfs? Her father wasn't sure, but her mother had known his people to be very big or a bit on the small side. Woytek asked her if her own five-two made her a giantess. At nineteen she knew she could not afford to wait. So she wrote often. For six months the letters were full of small talk. Her father complained of spending money to know of the weather in Amsterdam, New York. But then the tone changed. Jonas began to write of his plans. At twenty-eight he feared he may have waited too long to court. He would understand if she refused, but he wanted to ask her, and her father (of course), for her hand in holy wedlock. It took him a year to ask. Mary answered with a virgin confidence, "About your proposal, I don't know, but if you should ask in person, I might consider it."

(more; no stanza break)
did not know why, but they noticed that Mary spoke less and bristled more at references to her age and questions about Jonas, who seemed to have lost interest almost over night. Finally, after a month and a half of silence, a letter came. If permitted, he would like to spend Christmas on the farm. They were married in the spring. Three months before Woytek died.
BEN GETS HIS FIRST REAL JOB

Loading the last full milk can Woytek felt something give below his belt. He thought it was a muscle. It was his abdominal wall. Three days later Woytek died, killed by his own blood turned bad. Ben and his parents grieved for their friend and their fate. Woytek had no will. His nephew, a mill worker in Pittsburgh inherited it all. The man had a wife, four sons and no need for hired help. Ben's family moved to Utica, where work in textile mills was still easy to find, although hell to do. Ben's sister and husband followed. They all settled in a two-family house three blocks from the mill. Ben found work in a slaughterhouse. He stood on a box near a gate holding a sixteen-pound sledge. He broke the skulls of chubby calves as they pranced through a chute. The K.O.ed calves' hind legs were tied by a two-man crew, who then hung the calves on butchers' hooks. Next, the calves' throats were slit. With blood spurting from them and with their long tongues hanging down the carcasses were pushed around a corner to be stripped and carved. Ben earned a dollar a day and seemed to really enjoy his work.
It wasn't only his mother's command or his just fear of the one true God or his professed need for the grace offered to him by the sacraments that kept Ben going to church on Sundays. It was the women. Each week as the family trekked the two-mile pilgrimage to mass, Ben would ask God and himself, "Where else can a guy who clubs calves to death for a living meet a good woman?" Each Sunday the priest was on the altar speaking in Lithuanian, praying in Latin and the women sat across the aisle being eyed. Ben became a collector: he stored his glances of uncovered knees, camisoles through sheer shirts and the covered causes of bulging buttons as he took their nickels twice a mass for the greater good of God and all his church.
When he first saw Fay, Ben liked her looks. It was her thick hips and legs. Ben thought behind his eyes grown loud, "My God, there's good breeding stock." Fay left the front porch, uneasy at best, to fetch her mother. "Hey, Ma some guy's here selling tickets or something for the church." Mrs. Sabonis left her garden, guarded by her eldest daughter, she walked briskly to the front of the house, annoyed that the church could ask her to give it any more money. She greeted the young man and noticed that he was growing glib with each glance at her daughter's summer blouse. Ben offered tickets for the Sacred Heart Society's raffle (twenty-five dollars to the winner guaranteed) to be held next Saturday night during the church's semi-annual polka dinner-dance. Mrs. Sabonis's anger and embarrassment over Ben's bold bumblings changed to intrigue when she remembered that Ben didn't sport a wedding ring. She asked Ben to stay for lemonade.

In the kitchen Fay was enraged. "How could you ask that fool to stay!" "That fool is a trustee of the church, didn't you see his pin?" "So big deal he's a trustee, that means he can speak Lithuanian and say yes." "So now you're questioning the priest and me your own mother? You know Fay you're twenty-two, the other children are nearly grown, for God's sake don't you think it's time to think about men?" "Men? You would call that idiot a man? Doesn't he work in the slaughterhouse?" "First of all what's wrong with the slaughterhouse? It's a job and an honest one.

(more; no stanza break)
Second of all, I know his mother and she tells me that he has gone to school. He's a welder now." "Thanks, that makes all the difference."

After one glass of lemonade, Mrs. Sabonis bought two raffle tickets. By the end of the second, Fay had a date for Saturday night.
"Fay, are you sure." She wasn't—she couldn't tell if her father was asking or pleading with her not to. Her sisters, whom Fay had half-raised, stood by her in their pastel gowns—her mother was right, they were women now. Besides, Ben was not all bad. He was honest, good-hearted, even if he wanted to be liked a bit too much, but mostly, even better than his job, Fay felt his body had a certain charm. She had noticed it on their first date, felt it under his jacket as she held on to him, felt the power of his thick legs as they forced her to move with him in ways which had little to do with the rhythm of the hired polka band that played at the far end of the church hall. She knew too that Ben would not change. He had no big plans—a house, a son, a beer or two with supper. He enjoyed Friday nights with the boys and something about Fay that she enjoyed seeing in his eyes. No, she wasn't sure, not after two years of dinners and dates, but maybe her mother was right, maybe love would come. So with her father holding tightly to her elbow she marched behind her sisters, past the relative-filled pews and married Ben.

Within six years Fay's sisters all got married, her brothers went off to war, her mother quit her mill job, and Fay gave birth to Ben's only child, a son.
Ben was balding and in his mid-thirties, when the day of infamy forced his sweat shop into the munitions business. Even if Ben had been younger, his feet that were flatter than rolled vertini dough would have kept him state-side. But Ben was a hero of sorts, in his own mind. In thirty-five years at the shop, he never missed a quota. The other men said that he was mad to work that hard for a few extra bucks, and during the war Ben even worked harder, welding the bottoms onto artillery shells. When he would hear reports of downed zeroes or Fokkers or a sunken enemy ship, he would claim that it was done with one of his. Fay's brothers both went to Europe, one was even wounded at the Battle of the Bulge. The closer they got to the front the more she would bristle at Ben's mindless braggings, but as always she kept her anger hidden (she prided herself at knowing her place), except at work with the other girls who G.E. had taught to solder. Her mom took care of the kid, the grandchild helped her forget about her own sons. The boy enjoyed his time away from being told not to. Ben worried about having a wife that worked, and he knew his mother-in-law would let his son grow soft, but Ben always enjoyed having an extra buck.
THE PROPHET BEN

Once, just before I turned ten, the clan gathered at Uncle Ben and Aunt Fay's to celebrate the great event. We sat in their den silenced by a picture tube and the voices of the Eagle's men. We were reverent, welcoming history, our haughty but deserving guest into the middle classed room.

We were all there except for Uncle Ben, who sat on his front patio stairs--angry, afraid and working on a drunk. He knew the truth. His sweat shop pal, a spot-welder by trade, had figured it out, and he had then told Ben:

The Question was one of cosmic balance. The moon was like a powder blue bowling ball (the kind thin-armed women use) that hung in the sky like a powder blue bowling ball balanced--cosmically balanced--on the slippery tip of a circus seal's nose. To this Ben had easily agreed and so he would with all the rest of his pal's spot-welded physics. Next Ben was asked to suppose what would happen if for some dumb reason an eagle would happen to land on a powder blue bowling ball that happened to be balanced on the slippery tip of a circus seal's nose. It would take an idiot not to know. On this they both agreed: The powder blue bowling ball would fall from its slippery perch, crash and damage whatever lay beneath its bulk. And so he sat watching the overcast sky waiting for the Eagle to knock the moon from its (more; no stanza break)
slippery perch, waiting to be
destroyed because he saw
what all the know-it-all's couldn't.

Only the dew bothered to
find Ben that night as
he listened for the heavens
set to humming by tons of
powder blue Ebonite
thundering down the celestial boards
hooking toward the one-three
pocket of the Mohawk Valley.
A passing semi at sixty-five or
a B-52 flying too low would
evoke Ben's rage, panic and
his well rehearsed prayers.

Inside we had too much to hear,
too much to watch and too much
to learn. There were no purple
moonmen hiding behind crater rims,
no cheese, just ankle deep dust
stirred for the first time
by two ghost-like, faintly
human forms doing their
lunar hop, while they browsed for
the right lunar rocks. As I watched
the ever-changing patterns
of black and white dots,
my eyes slowly dried, as
did my childlike fervor.
Two hours after I fell asleep,
I was carried past my once vigilant
uncle to the back seat of my father's car.

The next day found
an orange sun balanced
on the rim of
a dew-dampened valley
and Ben still sleeping
on the cool cement
patio stairs. He
said little for days.
Half disappointed,
half relieved
he went on living—
sweating for five-forty
an hour, dying by
the piece, uneasy in
knowing that Armstrong's
step meant the beginning
of the end for his
blue-collared world.
At a family picnic, in front of the potato salad across the table from my Uncle Ben, I sat when a bird passing on high some post-digested gruel used its bird’s-eye view and bombed a reflecting glare—Ben’s bald head.

Bull’s-eye.

It landed, and splattered and like ice cream double-dipped in July down a sugar cone’s side it slid, channeled toward a reddening ear by Ben’s stranded attempt to cover over his age.

I laughed, choked, gagged, doubled over, pounded my cousin who pounded me, thought I’d get sick and finally cried. So did Ben but he was first. He went inside. The potato salad remained, unfinished.

The next day, Ben threw out his wife’s birdfeeder, filled her birdbath with dirt and forget-me-nots, and the traitor St. Francis was banished from the front yard to the vegetable garden, right next to the compost heap. Ben claimed the Italian saint would help his tomato plants grow. Ben also pledged to always wear a hat when outdoors. The sun could make bald men dumb, he claimed. Why else did the unhooded Francis spend all that time talking to the wolves and ungrateful birds.
Three-quarters to the quota
Ben's heart gave out. He
made it to the hospital and
then to workman's comp. His
parents had died young. Science
kept Ben around for years, but
at the age of sixty, on the day
Ben retired, on that day they shook
his hand and gave him his Timex,
Ben died a sort of death. He
never knew his sweat shop tasks
were meant to be boring. Welding
strong joints for thirty-six years
had brought him joy. Now they told
him to relax (would they tell Sisyphus
to forget his rock?). He tried to
but jigsaw puzzles and beer brought
him little solace. They told him
to get a hobby. He read the paper,
the obituaries and the box scores—
his fifth grade reading level offered
him little entertainment. He memorized
the T.V. Guide, but movies bored him,
comedies made fun of him. He was too
cheap to buy cable, so the sports he
enjoyed so much were shown only on the
weekends. He listened to the talk shows
on his new five-band radio. The ones
who called in struck him as dumb, and
the smooth-voiced hosts struck him as wise-
assed. They bought him seeds but
he was a welder not a farmer. The
garden became Fay's. They bought him a
table saw, but he cut his hand putting the
damned blade in and never touched it again.
His boredom and intolerance grew. Ben
became bitter. Then his brain
began to go. He would watch buffaloes graze
for hours, he'd see giraffes, and other
circus animals frolic in his front yard.
Ben became too much to care for, and
his strength made him dangerous. When
he went to the home it broke Fay's heart.
She visited each day. It was her place.
Her son helped as much as he should, but
all that was left was for Ben to drool away his golden years.
Ben called us "Buddy," the nephews he taught by his mistaken example. Us buddies learned to go easy on the booze and that work was an eight-hour-hell, where the pay was never worth the sweat.

When death came for the Big Buddy, did it come like the buffaloes that lived in the water on his brain? Did it come hard, steaming from its nostrils, spoiling the cool antiseptic air, charging red-eyed past and through and over the pygmy hand-dug pits that Ben once thought would do the trick? Or did that phantom bicycle salesman up on the third floor finally break down and bring Ben the part that he had always asked him for? Did Ben then just pedal off on a spot-welded bike to the old, old country, his arms full of the best palms a trustee could pilfer, handing them out to saints and dancing girls, while helping out some departed priests along their holiest of ways? Or did death just happen there as he slept, empty of action and meaning?

All us buddies know is that on a night quiet for the Sacred Heart Home for the Aged, our Uncle Ben's life ended.
Ben is done. The other Bens are safe. The Ben who claimed to be ill each day of his life. The Ben who had each ailment worse than anyone else, even menstrual cramps worse than his wife. The Ben who dropped his birthday cake and thought that it meant that he'd be dead soon, the Ben we improvised "It's curtains for you, Ben, it's curtains for you..." for, the Ben who cried in his fear, those Bens remain unwritten. The Ben who would predict each pitch of the game of the week, the Ben who'd describe each play gone bad as stupid, the Ben who kept his lawn with great care, the Ben who protected his windows, porch and trees from any sort of batted, thrown, or punted ball like a despot gone mad, all those Bens remain safe, carried by those who knew him. Fay's grief also will stay unwritten and more real because it is so. All that could be resurrected by my words are his bones, and they are bare ones.
FOR HOWARD NEMEROV

In the Lyceum on a stage
In front of the blank screen
Where hundreds had watched the
Stooges in three-D and
Pythons search for the meaning of life,
He stood, rounded by age with less
Teeth than a blind, old, hip-locked
Dog an uncle of mine once kindly shot.
Three dozen sat amused, ill at ease.
He read, defining us all as
"Rejects, retreads and fucking 4-f's,"
Asking riddles, offering prizes.
I knew one answer because
Midgets are hard to forget, but
Rejects must bear their truths in silence.
He, disappointed, shook his head,
Explained his eulogy for E.T.'s hidden soul,
and I learned that he was right.
Even meter readers can add things up,
but only the poet can give
Wisdom a voice.
Farts are no longer respected, the stuff of low comedy. It wasn't always so. When the Litvoks came to the American mills in droves, farting was serious stuff—an art. A man was known in his neighborhood by his word, in the street by his handshake, and in the tavern by his fart.

When I was young, the old-timers talked for hours about the greats—the hall of famers of flatulence, the Babe Ruth of whom was Vitas Perconis. The bombino seldom looked one in the eye and had a handshake that a milkmaid could crush, but the man could fart like a fog horn mated to a machine gun. And smell—his performances never failed to bring a tear. When he'd belly up his small frame, loaded with Kielbasa and cabbage, up to the bar, the crowd would grow silent. He never disappointed. Like the young Ruth toeing the rubber, Perconis would swing his right leg skyward, effort etched on his face, then deliver. The crowd would go crazy and scream "Gerai." Vitas would refuel on beer, given to him by his fans, and the tavern's free pickled eggs. Careers end though. Even Ruth lost his swat, but the Babe knew it was coming. Perconis lost it all at once. The end came as he strained for a third encore. He stepped into his delivery, but it wasn't there. Something else was. He doubled over in his shame. His name, amongst other things, had been soiled beyond repair. He sprinted home and beat his wife. Her cooking had brought his ruin. He knew he was right until the police came. Weeks later the married couple reunited. Vitas stayed at home nights. The tavern got a radio. The men played pinochle, ate peanuts and learned about baseball—an American game.
PROSE BALLAD

Legend says Methane
built up a flush at a time,
grew into some invisible blob,
kin to the one that ate Philadelphia,
others say that it wasn't a blob at all, but some reincarnation of some old country being--a dragon, that lingered beneath the streets waiting for a chance to belch its stomach-full of fire.

The oldtimers who can still remember say it was that other natural gas that isn't made but found by the lucky and the rich. Gas that is and the cold. The kind of cold that can freeze-dry a runny nose, the cold that can make snow squeak. But there was no snow that year, just a dusting and a fine sheet of ice. A sheet makes a poor blanket, and so the cold got deep, working its way down--core-bound--down past the frost line, busting water pipes and a minor gas main downtown between St. John and Genesee. The escaping gas, like some P.O.W. in a stalag break, kept underground and out of sight as it made its way back to the well it had been taken from, to hide again in the land of the lucky and the rich. It tunneled to the sewers and moved easily beneath the streets, the Salvation Army's chapped-lipped bands, two dozen St. Nicks, the determined shoppers and the hope-filled shopped for. The gas escaped beneath the whole downtown pre-mall scene, which was never complete without at least one from-out-of-town hobo, who worked the streets bummimg nickles and smokes.

(more; stanza break)
Twelve years before, promised a quick promotion, he had settled for a traffic detail. He had thought that he would have made detective by now. He'd been promoted to the busy corner where he chanted: "Com' on get a move on, will ya, hey, where ya think yer goin', ya want directions, find a beat cop, can't ya see I'm busy here?" He seldom stopped for breath and would sprinkle in his favorite seasonal refrain, "Yeah, Merry Christmas to you too Lady." As he mouthed his memorized routine, he kept his feet on the driest, warmest part of the street. Standing on manhole covers was an age old trick of the traffic cop's trade.

When panhandling at Christmas, dress for the early fall. The law was working. Mr. Hey-buddy-I'm-a-vet-who's-down-on-his-luck-could-you-spare... was doing well, but his gloveless hands were nearly frozen. The cigarette helped warm them. As he enjoyed his newly bummed wealth, he hid in the Thom McCann's portico. He needed to return to the street, a fresh hoard of goodly Samaritan shoppers were heading his way. He resumed his needy guise and ditched the half-spent smoke into a curb-side sewer drain.

"Good God, it sounds like a God damned underground train," was the cop's last earth-bound thought.

He never understood what happened, but at the altitude of ten feet his mind began to clear. It began to theorize. He thought of Enoch and the Assumption, and his first assumption looked better at twenty feet and climbing. Why had he been so blessed? He tried to remember his good deeds, but all he could recall was the punchline of an old, half-forgotten joke: It ain't the fall that kills ya. He thought of Mary. The church supper. Mary as a bride. The motel room. Her hair's scent that gave him courage. They were both virgins and embarrassed. It didn't take long before they were sore with experience. "Good God, hey have ya forgotten?" Forty-five feet up, his theory had begun to lose its steam. It ain't the fall that kills ya. "My God, is this it? Shit, I got tickets for the P.B.A.'s ball." Things at home had gotten rough, but Mary and him had looked forward to being dolled up and out together--drinking, dancing and forgetting. The kids (more: no stanza break)
were going to stay at the in-laws, the old lady was good for something. "Damn it, if they'd only had bumped him upstairs; what the hell did I do wrong?" The ground was getting closer. He closed his eyes. "It ain't the fall that kills ya. Hail Mary... Mary, who'll break the news, who'll write this up, this down?"
No breath, no thoughts. "Did it matter? It ain't the fall... Mary."

The oldtimers who can still remember say that he came down a half a block away, square on the hood of a '53 Chevy. Some say, "It sounds crazy, but they said he died with this strange smile on his face." Must have been one hell of a ride.

No one knows though. Legend says that there ain't been another city manhole cover stepped on here in a hundred years.
FOR MY MOTHER IN TRIBUTE

I
While shooting hoops
Practicing for teams
I wouldn't make,
I pivoted faked
Shot
Followed through,
And wished
She would die.
"Follow your shot,"
Instinct's coaching
Urged my frozen legs.
Still, I watched
The ball fall
Free from the net
Bounce, bounce
And roll away.

III
Next, bed-bound
Head shaven
Shriveled she lies.
Her pain
Her drugs
I don't understand,
Only her half-formed words:
"Jesus take me."
Gaudy jewelry:
Rosaries, medals,
Brown scapulas
Adorn but
Do not comfort
Her foreign shape.
Nor do I,
I only hide
My father's
Razor blades.

II
For one moment
Again I am young
And ill.
Drowsy from the fever
My beaded head
Rests in my
Mother's lap.
I remember when
The medicine came.
My head, raised,
Pressed gently
Against her small,
Firm breast,
That pulsed
Warméd and helped
Heal my ailing
Chest and head.

IV
The basketball, now
Flat, covered by dust
Lies hidden on
Some garage shelf.
She, healed,
But scarred
More than most
Finds some comfort
In knowing life
Is the only sense
Found in pain.
This day
She sits quietly.
My nephew rests
Nesting by her side.
Her paled hair and face,
The child's easy blond pose
Confuse my senses, and
For one moment
I stare at
My mother's apparition
Nursing my childlike ghost.
A WINTER WEDDING

The Texas winter brings brown,
dead trees, bored leaves
sterile rain and mud.
It grows and tails
anything dead that moves,
and when it can it swallows.

It followed the guests
in their grey and reds.
It followed the groom
in his panic. It
followed the priest, quietly.
Mud can be reverent. It
followed the bride. It
inched up and stained
her white gown. It climbed
her father and ruined his shine.
It carried its reminder:
"Dust thou art,
until you add water."

Women cried,
especially the mothers.
No one noticed the mud
or tried not to,
but when they got home
or to their rented rooms,
the mud climbed up
onto their hands, and hid
beneath their fingernails.

That night a losing battle was fought. The marriage was final.

The mud oozed onto the walks,
sat on steps and stairs,
hid in closets and on us all,
waiting for its next feast,
its next chance to swallow.
GOOD FRIDAY

Wooden creations of the creator
Bleed dried oil based paints and stains
From chiseled wounds, broken and contorted limbs.
Frozen forms of the humbled deity
Hang out of time and out of place
On bedroom walls above sagging double beds,
Above widows on wooden floors and ancient knees,
Who thumb their beads--fingering memories.

Suffering is eternal. Hope remains
three days away.
NINETY YEARS ENDED SILENTLY

Ninety years ended silently
In one ignored instance.
It could be no surprise.
The corpse will stay the night
Above a linoleum floor
Supported by a mechanical steel frame.
It will lie hidden by curtains
And the hospital's antiseptic air.

One mill-gnarled
Once arthritic hand
Holds decades of bluish red beads
That are knotted, woven around its digits.
An often kissed crucifix
Dangles beyond the bed's side
Dancing in concentric rings
In a night light's shadow.
It was given life by her
Last living motion.

Soon she'll be blessed, boxed,
Buried and forgotten
But for her hope:
Our only prayer,
That time can be cured by faith.
Glady the nickel was spent
For five fact-backed images
Of Topps' modern heroes.
I peered down at the unopened pack.
My heart raced
Like a runner on a squeeze play.
"Oh please God
Don't let there be any doubles,
Or if you could
Oh gosh God if you could swing it
Maybe even a Mantle or a Mays."
The opening game
Jitters were felt on the feel
Of small grubby fingers which found the gap,
Split the seam and uncovered
The bubble gum scented dreams that
Lay stacked in a bat-calloused grip.
Then, inventory taken, the new roster set,
The gum stale as always broke in half and
Was wadded and chawed while I walked home.
I managed a smile for new names acquired,
New deals to be dealt, and my next nickel spent.

Today, retired from the game, I find it strange
That still cardboard images abound. But for me
Summer's seasoned games have ended and even
Mantle and Mays have lost their sugared scent.
CLEANED ICE

He always stopped the show. He was wide and big boned. He had a bald, bristled, many chinned head. He always chewed on the same cigar's end. He wore rubber shoes over his work boots. He never grinned. He had a bulbous nose. He was getting old. If he farted I knew it would smell like beer and pickled eggs. He always stood as he worked. He only moved one hand. He drove the Zamboni. I think I hated him.

From my second level seat, I waited for him to misjudge a corner, spin, bang the boards and knock the end screens out of place. When he did I'd clap and hoot and scream, "Hey, Jerkface, them's the brakes!" He'd never look up, but an old usher always would. I'd slink low in my chair, and pray that Dad would get back with my coke and his beer.

Once the Eastern Hockey League could draw large raucous crowds, when the major league clubs were too few, and the minors were for all the less than greats and those no longer great. Oh, they were good but not good enough to escape, so they laced their skates for drunken construction workers, zitted teenagers on the prowl, bored women on soon-to-be-forgotten dates and us--sons of all the above.

They were Armstrong, Anderson, Bannerman, Hook, Babando, Kane, Kelly, Babiuk, Speck and Smith--star members of the Clinton Comets and small town lore. I remember their goals, their saves, their fights, their blood that stained the Auditorium's ice, until the Zamboni would erase their efforts with its slow and steady swipes.
Like some high priest of language
I guard the silence as they scrawl.
Left to right, line by line, their
persons fall to paper, fused and
spliced and not fully developed, and
I like some high priest of language
will read their written confessions of
ignorance, pass judgment, assign the
proper penance and pray that it will make
them whole. So like some high priest of
language, as I sit listening to their ink
and lead being dragged across paper
I hear the promise of the beauty
of A's, the creativity of B's. I
hear a thousand voices singing praise
to all our greatness. I hear the love
of language. And I have been spoken to by
saints, but they have been so few that I
have come to regard my belief as fallen,
my god as dying, and as I sit like
some high priest of language, I protect
the silence, too much a coward to abandon the hope
that judgment can be replaced by knowledge.
From Babel's tower
Rebuilt in ink,
Myth and image, the
Forged bird sings
Its siren song.

The reader's lured from below.
He follows and begins to know
What he can't understand. Then
The page turns. The song wanes.
There comes an airless night where
Black and white begin to mate to
Blue guitars strummed silently,
Dolphins swim deep. The new cold
Startles the snowman into melting.

In a park walk a young husband and wife.
Thirteen blackbirds on the green graze
Dumbly as cattle. They all look the same.
The couple talks of numbers. It is their
married right. He likes three. She says
That she's too old and prefers two. They
Talk of names. They will welcome the night.
"Monsieur Vollard,"
The burning primitive
Frenchman, beached
In a white sun's bleached heat
Writes in boldly stroked ink,
"Send more paint."
He pleads for
Tubes of white,
Carmine lake, emerald green and
Ochres of red, yellow and de Ru.
He explains:
"I must work.
My vision will simply devour paint,
But not the terre verte
You blindly sent."
Vollard soon answers with
Color-filled crates.
Gauguin creates.

"Monsieur Vollard,"
A native savage writes,
"Send more words.
What can I do
With these copular verbs,
This bare framed language
Of my obedience and my curse.
I am a sterile, loveless thing
Of darkness--
Only once embraced.
But with the language of sleep--
Expressions of island-given dreams--
My art would drown all books.
The wedding party leaves soon, and
My words must follow."
Vollard answers
With a word-filled book.
Caliban reads,
But the gap remains
Unabridged.
A LOVE SONG

His being bagged in his
Scholastic business suit,
The celloman at center stage
Sat fondling his fond love's throat
While probing and plucking its breast and bowels.
Like a mad Frenchman's swan
The cello sang perhaps its last.
In its violent serenity--the song--
I bathed and began to
Understand:
The cello, man
And our nakedness.
A 20th CENTURY POET SAYS "I LOVE YOU"?

Did we make love?
Did we build it
With the maggot-headed nails
Of the crazed poet's
Crucifiction sketch?
Or were you the crucified--
Impaled, pinned
Down in your passion?
Was your song--
Labored groans and breath--
To which I danced,
The lover or the love?
But who could tell the difference?
The babe who brought the beer
Was blonde. Her faded jeans clung
To well defined thighs that rippled
Beneath their denim wrap as
She moved from booth to art deco booth.
My eyes, half drunken, followed
Her dying pink sweat shirt's flow--
Hanging loosely from her solid neck,
Easing over her power-laden shoulders
Straining to caress the sway of her
High, firmly-held breast, cascading
Down over a hidden waist falling
In a pool of pink on her ample hips
Where the flow ended but never came to rest.
She flashed a gaptoothed grin when
Her wide early-spring-green eyes
 Caught mine roving without license.
Was it the beer, my lust, or
Her kindly look that made me
Blush? Flustered, I drank up,
Tipped big and staggered out.
A SHORT LOVE SONNET

He
Said,
"The
Bed."
Her
Eyes,
Sur-
prised,
Flashed
Feminine
Wrath.
Passion
Refused
He boozed.
My modern muse
packed up and left.
She's gone to some dying
industrial town in Ohio.
All she left was a
few tired metaphors and
a note that read:

Dear Bozo-brains,
You could've produced
a great body, you could've
been collected, but now
you're just another contented
bum--a pretender. How can you
have grown so soft? This
is the eighties and you
still believe in God and
stiffs rising from the tomb,
and you're too damn dumb to see
that it's all just sexual.
You think wonder bread can walk,
talk and bleed wine from a cross.
Hell, you even love the bitch you
married. You don't whore around
and the both of you even want
brats. How do you expect me to
survive. I need misery and
the loss of hope
not all this moralistic crap.
You used to show promise,
so if you ever get
castrated, write.

Until then, read
your Donne, forbid your mourning
and rot in your happy, boring life.
FREE WILL

The child fathers the man. Could it have been Different? Could it have been different If his mother had loved the light, had Hated the sun less--hiding behind her tinfoiled Windows, thick with dust, and the thick green shades that She never rolled up? Could it have been different If she had protected him less, had let him Out of sight, out of doors to play in unstale air, To play with boys, brown and strong, who owned Tonka toys, who knew how to throw a ball, to catch With one sure hand and to live without fear In the sun and the dirt? If his father Could have felt at ease with a bookish son-- Untouchable behind a mother's wall in a mother's Room that used to be the father's own, if He had only known she was ill, if he had Known diseases of the mind can be cured with Honor kept intact, would his son be Different now? Would it be different if She had died, driven by her madness? Would This empty being, filled by prescriptions only, Would this would-be-human who knows only His past which he recites by rote to strangers Who pass--the ones who are too kind and those who Are too slow, who will always listen and sometimes Care--would this parasite who has fed his self-pity On my goodwill and the friendship of others have Become a different man? Could he have loved? Would he have lived?

I have my doubts. Excuses are easily found.
He kept his desk drawers full of beautiful pencils—odd shades of green, red, yellow and blue—graphite wrapped in wood and rainbow. He kept them from his childhood, unsharpened with sharp-edged erasers. They were stacked with great care, bound by rubber bands. He took great pride in his collection.

He told me he wished he could become a poet.
Deep in a darkly-lit alley
A long-haired lunatic, robed in white,
Sees the garbage and two drunks
Heaped—high, over which he screams,
"Repent!"
Before it's too late,
One drunk rolls to vomit.
The other stands to urinate.

A smiling lunatic retreats.
Expulsed spirits flow,
Searching for the next undeserving soul:
Prey for the next miracle.
The playground King of the jungle gym
Lost his elevated grip, slipped
Grounding himself head-first
The playmates giggled
Until death's thought
Entered and left
Them frozen by fear.
So, still they stood at the fall's paved sight.

A long-haired lunatic,
Grizzled robed in white,
Walked by saw the need
And stopped.
The panicked crowd parted,
He knelt by the fallen's side
Chanting a magical incantation
Learned in an emergency room.
"Give him room,"
One young tongue crowed.
Again the aged lunatic
Arms raised
Mouthed his modern spell:
"I.C.U.-I.C.U."

In a matter of minutes
The King came to.
"All-right hand it to him,"
The children cheered.
Except the one
Who lunged,
"Hallelujah, Hallelujah."
Leaving, the lunatic
Warned the King and
All others,
"Remember this. Remember well."

And the one remembered for all others
And, perhaps not so well,
These holy words:
"I'll see you. I'll see you."