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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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THE LIFE OF BEN



## THE MAKINGS OF BEN

## The Conception

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.

## THE NAMING OF BEN

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.



## BEN'S FIRST MEMORY

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 shod 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.

## BEN GRADUATES EARLY

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)

The family 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.

## WHY BEN BELIEVED

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.



## BEN MEETS FAY

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'S DAY TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

"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 HELPS WIN WWII

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.

## ONCE TOO OFTEN

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.

## BEN RETIRES

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 DIES A QUIET DEATH

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.

## MISGIVINGS OVER BEN

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 birth-  
day 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.

OTHER POEMS

## 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.

## THE ASSIMILATION OF VITAS PERCONIS

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  
bumming 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.

## 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  
 Warmed and helped  
 Heal my ailing  
 Chest and head.

## 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.

## 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.

## BOWIE KUHN FURTHERS THE AGING PROCESS

Gladly 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 chewed 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.

## COMPOSITION

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.

## WHOLE FICTION

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.



## VOLLARD FAILS CALIBAN

"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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 CONFESSIONS OF A VOYEUR CAUGHT

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.

## SATIRE

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 tin-foiled  
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.

## THE WOULD-BE POET

He kept his desk drawers  
full of beautiful pencils--  
odd shades of green, red,  
yellow and blue--graphite  
wrapped in wood and rain-  
bow. 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.



## A SECOND COMING

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 SECOND MIRACLE: THE LUNATIC'S PROMISE

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."