

Hunger

I

It was 1913 and there was no money.
She was born a runt who vomited everything,
So much poverty, such thin milk,
The doctor said to let her go in the dark
And have another child when there was money for food
But her mother persisted, insisted,
For months feeding and feeding
The skin on bones until she lived and grew,

And still remembers hunger, even now
Shaking her soft white hair,
She remembers hunger and vomiting,
Remembers seeing her mother approach with the bottle,
Her desperate need to suck and be filled,
The grip of despair, the furious pulse of will.

II

She remembers also the dresses her mother sewed her,
Woolen, tucked, pleated, exceptional,
In dead European styles that made her ashamed
When she went to school, which insulted her mother,

But anyway, her mother never loved her
After that hard beginning. Fix your hair,
My grandma was still scolding in the wheelchair
Whenever my poor mother visited

The Workman's Circle Home for the Aged.
Fix your hair, she would say, grimacing,
And reach to fix it, and my mom got rashes,
My mom got asthma before each visit.

III

They fired my father, they thought he was a Commie,
And it was still the Depression when I was born.
She remembers how she tied my arms and legs to the highchair
So that I wouldn't flail and she could get the spoon in

Though she and my father were hungry.
She told that one to my school counselor,
Boasting, and the counselor told me
To distance myself from my mother,
That she was crazy.

I wanted to be the best mother in the world,
She says in a voice like hoarded string.
That was what I wanted, but I failed,
Here I freeze as always, and swallow my spit.
I failed, but I did my best.

As a girl she was a wild one, a *vilde chaya*,
She says into the little microphone
I hold for her as the cassette whirs on.
She beat up a boy on her block who cheated at cards,
She refused to be tidy, she ran away from home.

We stand to go to the dining room, where because
The meal is free she will stuff herself as if
She were still that infant, she'll eat her own ice cream
And mine, she'll tell her neighbor that I
Am her sun and moon and stars,
And before I leave she will hug me
As if we were lovers—
She will lock me in her arms.

IV

And I too had my dreams of improvement and perfection.
Another crazy Jewish mother—
I too hungered to give abundant life to my children.

Elegy for Allen

That was a break
In the fiber of things
Sorrowful
When Ginsberg died
Because I still have students
Wanting to be Beats
And even some
Wanting to be Buddhists
Why not, but when
That brilliant Jew poet took
The train for the next world
American nirvana
Temporarily went with him.
Not that he ever attained
The tranquility
Supposedly sought,
He was so nervous
And somehow ailing,
The neurotic utopian
Prophetic fairy side
Of the guy never
Surrendered really
To those Asian things
And too much ginseng
Makes a man feeble-like.
Yes, B— says
You would be there
At a party and he'd say
Excuse me I have to follow
That young man, you'd think
Fine but why are you obliged
To announce it, why not
Just do it.

The greatest Jewish poet
After Celan and Amichai,
I cry, grieving, and
B— says better not try
To sell him as a rabbi
Though what else is he
For heaven's sake
Beads and bells
And dreams of peace
And all.

West Fourth Street

—for Jerry Stern

The sycamores are leafing out
On West Fourth Street and I am weirdly old
Yet their pale iridescence pleases me

As I emerge from the subway into traffic
And trash and patchouli gusts—now that I can read
Between the lines of my tangled life

Pleasure frequently visits me—I have less
Interfering with my gaze now
What I see I see clearly

And with less grievance and anger than before
And less desire: not that I have conquered these passions
They have worn themselves out

And if I smile admiring four Brazilian men
Playing handball on a sunny concrete court
Shouting in Portuguese

Goatskin protecting their hands from the sting of the flying ball
Their backs like sinewy roots, gold flashing on their necks
If I watch them samba with their shadows

Torqued like my father fifty years ago
When sons of immigrant Jews
Played fierce handball in Manhattan playgrounds

—If I think these men are the essence of the city
It is because of their beauty
Since I have learned to be a fool for beauty.

At the Revelation Restaurant

Ecclesiastes sits across the table
And whenever I start to whine
He starts to laugh

Sometimes so heartily and suddenly
That he spills his soup—
Buddha (the waiter) looks sympathetic

Then I read the fine print
On his enlightenment special
Reject birth get off the wheel

But Mama Gaia flounces from the kitchen
Exclaiming, *Must we despise our bodies*
Just because the philosophers and pharmaceuticals,

The priests and politicians, the advertising industry
And the movie industry tell us to?
So I whisper, Mama, I like my body

Washing and touching itself in the bath
Was the beginning, so sweet, then dancing
And kissing—too late to stop now—

Since I know my eyeballs and clitoris
Will turn to muck or dust as the Preacher
Reminds me, and the process of dying

In all probability will be extremely painful
Mama, tonight I intend to order
The soup, the salad, the entrée, the dessert.

Grandchild

Elohai, neshama . . .

I take her to the park, I swing her in the little swing
Help her on the slide, lotion her face and arms against the sun
She runs around in her little blue jeans

The sun is getting higher, as it does every morning
The game now is for me to chase her
The air is dusty and warm

My God the soul you gave me is pure
When another child comes into the playground
She points excitedly and shouts: baby!