

## Four Poems · *Gerald Stern*

### FIRST DAY OF SPRING

I have been such a follower,  
first Porphyry, then Alexander,  
I have gone so long without shaving,  
that now I have nothing  
except this moustache and this forked stick.  
Behold one T-shirt  
I have travelled with from one wrinkled continent to the other;  
behold one leg  
that lifted me up over 40,000 thresholds.  
My heart—such as it was—  
always surprised me,  
and my curved back,  
it never gave out on the stairway,  
it never paused once in spite of  
the lifeless ankle  
and the unlubricated lung.

There was a red carpet once  
in the north of France  
that wandered like a river  
from the staircase to the first turn  
and lapped against the plastered walls.  
I stood outside a door  
listening to two cries,  
one guttural and despairing,  
one frantic and birdlike.  
I shifted my trunk to my left shoulder  
and began another climb,  
three steps to the landing,  
sixteen or eighteen steps to the next river.  
As far as I can remember,  
even with the closing of the door

and the admiration of my own face  
in the unsilvered mirror,  
stuck as it was wrongly  
between two loose pillars  
on a mahogany wardrobe,  
I listened to their cries  
half with shame, half with desire,  
and half with terror and half with unabashed regret.

That was the beginning of grief,  
the start of a second life,  
although it wasn't that  
the love cries themselves did this,  
it wasn't the moaning—  
or the creaking floor  
or the exploding pipes—  
it was, for the first time in *my* life,  
I was abandoned.  
I had to grab some rail  
or vestigial fixture  
sticking out of the wall  
and do a shaky dance  
under the heavy trunk.  
I was suspended.

I guess I lay on the bed  
staring at the ceiling  
and the painted wire going into the light bulb,  
or I guess I lay there remembering—  
although I know I cut short the first years  
and I know I concentrated on the early tribes,  
crying out with rage and disappointment  
in their slide from shelf to shelf;  
though what I should have done,  
and what I was able to do later,  
was smile at what they *did* do  
in the 200,000 years,

the first half aeon.  
It took me one decade  
till I could lie peacefully,  
and two or more—  
I think it was three or more—  
to forgive myself,  
or just to ignore myself,  
for singing at the wrong time,  
for interrupting the way I do,  
for moaning, for talking out loud,  
for being a dwarf.

In the great and lasting argument  
that overwhelmed the Mediterranean  
for more than a thousand years  
I took the losing side.  
I would do that in Spain  
in the time of the two Solomons  
and I would do that in America  
in the time of the two Stevensons.  
I wanted to mourn for kings,  
I wanted a bonnie prince,  
and I wanted to feel the stinging  
salt on my face too—  
the silent ship, the sym-  
pathetic sailors, the letters  
wrapped in leather, a bottle  
waiting to be opened,  
a ribbon around the neck.  
I solved problem after problem  
in 1985  
in the *campo dei fiore*  
not only at the fish stand  
but in the freezing movie house  
where we sat in leather coats  
and rocked in our chairs  
watching the Blues Brothers

in English and Italian.  
This is where Bruno died,  
this is where my foot dragged  
on the way to the river,  
this is where Brutus—may  
the Lord keep him insane—  
swam before eating.  
My favorite church  
both then and now  
was Il Gesu  
where the Jews were herded together on Holy Thursday  
to listen to a sermon  
on the joys of conversion,  
only a few blocks away  
from the Vesuvio Palace, my  
own crowded bakery.

It was astounding  
to walk up that red carpet  
in the fifth decade,  
and it was astounding  
to rock by the river  
in the middle of the eighth.  
Something was in my mind  
both then and then  
and something later brought it back again.  
Sometimes you wait for forty years, it was  
a little less for me  
when I first thought of Alexander and Porphyry.  
I have forgotten now, but I remember  
it was a sweet elation, I was happy  
and I was half-suspended.

I am sitting  
in Arizona, the moon is full, so check  
the twenty-first of March, 1989.  
I am reading Horace tonight, who never  
wrote by porchlight, maybe a dish of oil

outside Brindisi. Ah, the stricken soul,  
he sat till midnight waiting for a girl  
who never came. I love his *sense*, he knew  
where the ludicrous lay, he hated  
quackery. I wonder  
if maybe in the palace he had seen  
a bromeliad once and touched the drooping flower—  
the rubbery claws; I wonder if he talked  
to a passing fox about the frogs that lived  
in those leaves, if he had exchanged some wisdom, how  
it only eats air, how it clings to palm trees; I wonder  
if March twenty-first was when the plum tree bloomed  
in Tivoli, if he had also seen  
hundreds of butterflies in those branches, if he  
lay down and wept—in spite of his careful mind—  
if that is the third suspension, the third abandonment.

### THREE HEARTS

A chicken with three hearts, that is a vanished  
breed, a day of glory in the corn,  
romance against a fence. It was the sunset  
just above New Egypt that made me wince,  
it was the hay blown up from Lakewood. God  
of chance, how much I loved you in those days,  
how free I felt and what a joy it was  
sitting there with my book, my two knees braced  
against the dashboard. How empty it was then,  
and how my mind went back. How many hearts  
did the chickadee have? How much whistling and singing  
was in those fields? How far did I have to go  
to disappear in those grasses, to pick those trillium?