

### 3 Poems by Bill Berkowitz

#### Otto

Otto was a blond haired blue-eyed kid.

None of us kids had blue eyes or blond hair.

Otto could run really fast;

he might have been the fastest runner I knew.

Otto could jump long distances.

maybe three or four concrete squares on the sidewalk.

Otto didn't grow up with us on Gerard Avenue in the Bronx.

I'm not sure where he lived;

I think it was somewhere on the other side of the Concourse

We met Otto when we went to Jordan L Mott Junior High School.

We met a lot of new kids there,

but only Otto started hanging out with us on the block.

I guess he enjoyed playing curb ball and stick ball in the street.

He was great at Johnny on the Pony because he could jump so far.

I don't think he was so good at games with balls.

He was coordinated but more in an Olympian way - although I didn't know it at the time.

He wasn't the first non-jewish kid we knew;

there were many Catholic kids living in older apartment buildings down the street.  
But he was the first who actually became our friend;  
the first to actually get invited into our apartments.  
Maybe to us he was exotic.

When Butchie told me the news I didn't know what to think

Otto, who was a great jumper,  
tried to leap between two six story buildings.  
He plunged to his death.  
I don't know if he was being chased or was on his own.

I sat in my bathroom for a long time thinking about Otto.  
Wondering why he had done it;  
Wondering why he was dead;  
Wondering where he went.

### **Cemetery, April 2013**

I don't go to cemeteries by happenstance.  
In New York, I stood by my mother's grave  
and held my seven year-old daughter's hand tightly.  
I cried when Cousin Billy took me to my father's grave out on the Island;  
I dug a hole and left him a picture  
of the granddaughter named after him that he never met.

Our first time in Paris we went to Monteparnasse cemetery  
where Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvior are buried in the same grave.  
There were minions of Jews buried there.  
I placed stones on Jewish headstones.  
On our next trip to Paris  
we went to Pere la Chaise, the biggest cemetery in town,  
and joined the searchers for Jim Morrison.  
In Northampton, you can see the cemetery  
from my daughter's back deck.

### **What If You Awoke . . .**

What if you awoke to find your grandfather sleeping on a cot in the kitchen;  
What if Benny was still setting up the newspapers at the corner candy store;  
  
What if the only marbles you lost were those that the manhole cover claimed;  
What if you still melted candle wax into bottle caps to give you an edge in Skully;  
What if Bobby Thomson hadn't yet hit the "shot heard round the world";  
What if Harry Truman was still president;  
What if the dumbwaiter was the way the Super still collected our garbage;  
What if Silvercup White Bread was still the bread of choice;  
What if there were still only six channels on your RCA Victor television;  
What if you didn't yet have a television;

What if Martin Bloch's "Make Believe Ball Room" was still your mother's radio station of choice;

What if Elvis was still in Mississippi;

What if your father still lived at home;

What if your mother still took you to the Highbridge branch library;

What if a trip to the Deli on 167<sup>th</sup> street was still special;

What if an hour-and-a-half subway trip to Brooklyn still made you nauseous;

What if you dad still took you to the Polo Grounds to see the Giants;

What if there was still a Polo Grounds;

What if your sister still smiled and laughed;

What if you could still play in the street until your mother called you home for dinner;

What if you still were too young to make a minion;

What if you still went to Hebrew School every day after school;

What if you still leafed through your mother's Vogue and Harper's Bazaar magazines on the coffee table;

What if your aunts, uncles and cousins still came for a Passover Seder;

What if you still got a ukulele for Christmas;

What if you still spit watermelon seeds out your third floor window onto the courtyard below;

What if Mable the black cleaning lady hadn't screamed and yelled about the Jewish women in the building;

What if the Rosenberg's weren't yet executed;

What if diving under your desk to protect yourself against a Russian Atom Bomb made you feel safe;

What if you still could get any fruit at Willie's Fruit Stand that you wanted;

What if you still met your mother with a shopping cart every Friday night for a trip to the A&P;

What if your father still lived at home.