

Poems by Bill Berkowitz

& 3000 Miles to the East

Louis Ginsberg, an old man on shaky legs, reads his poem “At My Father’s Grave,” while his son Allen sits cross-legged on the stage staring up at his father. Louis reads. His voice cracks. He is crying.

& 3000 miles to the East,
waiting in a Greenwich Village liquor store
for a nighttime mugger or the boss
with a not so gratuitous New York Daily News,
my father, an old man on arthritic legs,
sells dreams and forget-me-nots in brown paper bags.

Downtown on the lower East Side
the Jewish temple is burning.
Who is left to explain this to his father?

Louis says that America was once a melting pot
and is now a pressure cooker.
The steam always churning into dirty cement,
tying knots into the bodies of newly arrived immigrants
who worked fourteen hours a day in garment factories,
watched their young women whoring for survival,
and went blind bending over buttons and buttonholes.
Perhaps they were farmers in Hungary.

“At My Father’s Grave” is a recurrent thread in our lives.
Hours and minutes, events and situations
Go by before the eye notices,
Before the heart allows entrance.
And then, we mourn the dead.

& 3000 miles to the East the liquor business booms.

Bottle after bottle slides from shelf to customer,
replaced by another bottle for another customer.
There's more anesthesia handed out here
than in St. Luke's Hospital just up the street.

In his Waverly Lounge he controlled a portion of his reality;
When the Trolley Song was played on the piano,
he was there to provide the clang, clang, clanging in real time.

& from behind the bar a rendition
of "keep your head down fritzie boy"
provided relief from the pressure cooker.
& later, much later, he revealed that
"it was good to make some people happy,
even if only for a short time."

Louis Ginsberg finishes reading.
Allen steps up to the podium.

Ezra Pound, San Gregorio Beach & An Acid Trip To Remember

This may sound like a most obvious oxymoron, but you can only drop acid for the first time once in your life. It may seem like the first time on your second, third or fourth trip, but the first time is always going to be the first time. The first time I dropped acid was on a Sunday afternoon at San Gregorio Beach, a nudist beach south of San Francisco. It was the summer of 1966. I haven't been back to San Gregorio Beach since that trip so I don't know what it's like these days. In August 1966, beach goers were a colorful mélange of bohemians, hippies, Hells Angels, dopers, and anyone else who enjoyed spending an afternoon naked.

After coming off the road from a month-long car trip from New York City to California, I was staying with a couple of new friends in the Haight district of San Francisco. After a Saturday night hearing John Coltrane at a North Beach Jazz Club, we packed some food and wine, sun tan lotion, and a tab of LSD for each of us, and headed for the beach on a brilliantly sunny summer's day in a long-ass convertible. I

brought one more item along: A copy of "The Cantos" by Ezra Pound.

Given what I heard might happen when you dropped acid, i.e. great insights and unrealized mind-expansion, I figured I'd finally be able to unlock the mysteries of Pound's poetry. I realized soon after taking LSD that it wasn't like smoking marijuana, sniffing Carbona Cleaning Fluid, or even drinking a bottle of Romilar cough syrup. I tumbled off into outer space without a life jacket. Pound's "Cantos" made as little sense to me then as they had when I was stone cold sober; they did nothing to help me survive what quickly became an out-of-body, out-of-control, almost-out-of-my-mind acid trip. What saved me that day was thinking about Willie Mays, the baseball-playing hero of my youth. Willie brought me back down to our beach blanket on the sand. He was my lifeline and saved my ass that summer day.

Outside the Synagogue (for Arlene Shmaeff)

I saw her standing outside the synagogue.

She was wearing a black coat down to her ankles,
a black scarf, and a hat with a veil covering her face.

But I knew who she was.

I stood next to her and draped my arm around her shoulders.

"Are you coming in," I asked.

"I can't," she said. "I don't have the time."

"But what could be more timely," I replied. "Isn't time of the essence.

Surely there's no time like the present."

"You don't understand. I am now timeless. No free time, no overtime, no being somewhere on time, no New York Times or Times Square."

"But we need you inside," I whispered.

"Believe me, in time there will be good times and I will be with you many times in the time to come."