

A Poet's Voice

Thomas R. Verny

Thomas R. Verny is author of five books including the international best seller *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* and 44 scientific papers. He also edited two books: *Pre and Perinatal Psychology: An Introduction and Gifts of Our Fathers*, a collection of short stories and poetry. Thomas' poetry has appeared in many magazines in Canada and the USA. This year his poem "The Arcanum of My Misdeeds" will appear in *Persepolis Magazine* and "When My Soul Prepares to Depart" in *Letters and Pictures from the Old Suitcase*, Pinking Shears Publications.

Author's Statement My poetry is not concerned, as so much poetry seems to be today, with falling leaves or the beauty of deserted beaches. Like I say in one of my shortest poems: "Cherry Blossom Poets": I wonder on what planet/those poets live // who write about cherry blossoms/in fulgent bloom // and the thousand colors/of the winter moon // while the earth is burning." I write about things that matter to me: relationships, exploring the emotional spectrum from love to hate, rage against God (if there is a God), bigotry and the sadness and joy that comes with growing older. I believe poetry should be accessible and exciting, it should make you think, laugh or cry, it should awake your senses and connect you to the rest of humanity.

Filial Gravity

An aseptic hospital room
with the usual furnishings:
a night table, a chair, a bed,
I had seen it often enough
but this time not a stranger
but my father,
unconscious,
his breath ragged, leaden, uneven
as if scaling a sheer cliff.
Perhaps he is.

For three days
he has been like this,
ever since my mother
called me on Saturday
because she could not rouse him.

The doctors say
he had a stroke
and will probably
not recover.

Once full of vitality and vigor
now emaciated from the cancer
he had held at bay for five years
his long prostrate body
lies motionless
under the white sheets.

His eyes are closed,
his face reveals nothing
of the struggle
beneath.

I sit next to him
holding his hand
hoping, searching
for a sign, a glimmer
of returning cognition.
But *nada, nichevo* —
except an occasional fearsome sound
more animal than human
erupting from deep within his throat,
Mount Vesuvius spewing ash and rocks.

Memories and feelings
from our interlaced past
swirl by
like floats at a Santa Claus parade.

On our way to Canada
we arrive in Genoa
on a train cramped to the rafters
with people, children, chickens, boxes.
We push, we shove, we tumble out of the train —
but without our luggage
which we could not extricate.

Panic.
The train could pull out any second.
All our earthly possessions
in those three pieces of luggage.
My father starts to scream:
"*Gendarme, policia, carabinieri!*"
Miraculously, out of nowhere,
a soldier, an angel of mercy,
with a two-pointed plumed hat, appears
and orders the people on the train
to hoist our bags through the window.

I feel relieved. But more than relieved
I feel ashamed,
ashamed of my father's unseemly behavior.
All I want is to disappear
and never be seen
in his presence again.

What a pompous little prig
I was.

Now I wonder —
is uncompromising judgmental self-certainty
a common disease of childhood,
or was I the only one so afflicted?

In the Vienna of 1948
in the streets, on trams or buses,
I feel vulnerable, tense,
or at night in restaurants
constantly on guard
against a taunt or insult
some good upstanding Austrian citizen
might lob my way
for my being a DP and a Jew
a double offense to his sensibilities.

With no knowledge of German,
my parents anxious about our future,
is it surprising
their son would do terribly at school?

My father, a brilliant student
who stood at the top
of his Law School class every year,
excoriated me mercilessly
for my lack of academic success,
and unceasing, he made me feel lazy and stupid,
until one day when I once again
shaking as if I had chills and fever,
I delivered into his hands,
another dismal report card.

Instead of, as in the past,
growing all crimson in the face
and yelling till the doors rattled
my father quietly said:
“Do the best you can.”

For me it is like Ali Baba
from *One Thousand and One Nights*
saying “Open Sesame.”
I hear a click, like a key turning in a lock,
and on the spot,
my mind starts to clear,
my marks begin to improve.
Four years later I am in Medical School.

In Bratislava, the summer after the war,
I am watching my father play chess
with Mishka, his brother-in-law.
I learn quickly to play well
and become so proficient

I beat my father regularly.
Once in a while,
very carefully I throw a game
so he does not become discouraged
and stops playing.

In Toronto, it is Monday night
and I am visiting my parents.
After a dinner of fried chicken with *pommes frites*,
prepared by my mother,
my father and I play chess,
discuss current events, politics,
history, religion — all of which he possesses
an encyclopedic knowledge.

A sudden stirring in the bed.
My father opens his eyes,
looks at me, smiles,
and squeezes my hand.

“You are here, thank you,”
he whispers hoarsely.

His eyes close, his grip loosens.
He is gone —

and I am left alone
alone in the big white room,
in the big dark world.