

Late life happiness. 2010

Greenberg, Barbara L.

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Late Life Happiness



Poetry by Barbara L. Greenberg

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

Late Life Happiness

Poetry by
Barbara L. Greenberg



PARALLEL PRESS 2010

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I

The Applicant

My time, how was it spent? Giving and taking courses.
Pouring and siphoning milk, wine, plasma
into and out of the metaphysical waters,
upsetting many a trout and many a catfish
along the way, for I was non-canonical
and never truly *of* the teaching profession
and never *one* with any student body:
never at ease in my chair, never at the right level,
always a poor fit, always a foreigner
pining for my homeland, my village, my dialect
rich in words for which there are no English equivalents
though heaven knows I've tried to convey those meanings,
whacking my old gray mare and calling her *Dummkopf*. . .

“Peace,” says the dean of the Methuselah Institute. “Welcome.”

No It Is Not Too Late

No it is not too late to visit my house on the coast
where rays from the lighthouse enter every five seconds
and boulders resembling the body parts of mastodons
riddle the shoreline. Nor are we two too old
to walk the length of the breakwater. Let there be
guano underfoot, gulls swooping close, and a mean wind
for us to stiffen against as we press to the end
in triumph after all, our canes raised high.

That night, let the vectors converge. The moon in its prime
will burst forth like a diva with the surf applauding.
You'll fall asleep to a rhapsody of foghorns,
then wake to chatter in the trees, then
call to me the way my grandchildren used to
to ask me what time it is, and to tell me your dreams.

Rondeau

“Bring me the baby,” says a very old woman
in a wheelchair. Oh, to feel human
again, to be smiled back at! She,
like any old being in the sea,
aches for the instant of reunion

between her worn soul and the young one.
Smiling is what they have in common,
the has-been and the yet-to-be:
bring me the baby!

Provide, provide . . . Grant communion
to what remains of the very old woman
and then, to what remains of me
(alone, and long past seventy)
before these walls come down. “Come in!
Bring *me* the baby.”

The Hour of

Professor Vera Schreiber would have you describe it
not as a sudden hour like daybreak or nightfall
and not as a hand on the clock, but as a whole round hour
conceived as a bowl or a chalice you pour yourself into.
Here you discover yourself as a told story.
Here your ghost is expressed like vapor rising
from broth, or light through crystal. But don't
get Vera Schreiber wrong—she wants you to write it

in words so free of guise, they equal nakedness.
Think of your hour of birth and hours since then
when you were brought to light and not seen. Loved
and not seen. Scrutinized and not seen. Pitied, envied,
damned, praised, pleased—and not seen, not seen.
One hour remains, says Vera Schreiber. *Write.*

Metamorphosis

Such havoc there was in your house
when the sparrow flew in
and the cats set to: somebody's arms
flailing, somebody's larynx ululating. You
were reaching out to interrupt a cat
when the sparrow dove into your arm
beak first, and pierced you through the denim
like, in truth, a hypodermic needle,
the tiny wound introducing
a great quietness. How
solemnly then, and oh so slowly you
sidled into the out-of-doors, the sparrow
at peace on your sleeve in a semblance of nest.
Did the air move? Only a little. Hardly enough
to ruffle a bough on the red-leafed Japanese maple
that you were about to become—or would have become
if this were a myth, or a believer's dream.

Three Wishes

My first wish is for an easy death;
my second, for a timely death;

my third, for the power to
heal others, the power to

keep others' souls close
to me as I begin to close

the book of my life.
For it is a fact of life

that old flesh repels the young
and discomforts the not-so-young

whereas I with my fingers of
foxglove, my long fingers of

aloe and mandrake, would be
welcome still. My tears would be

salve for the wounded, my breath
an infusion of sea air for the short-of-breath

and my eyes would beam at your psyche like
green lasers to undo your pain. Then what would I like

in return? Only to be let in before I am let go.
Only, before I am let go, to be let in.

Executive Chef

Because of my great size
you aren't aware of me.
Next time you think you see
a cloud in the shape
of a chef's hat,
think again. Then, re-see
canyons as cauldrons,
hot springs as broth,
sand storms as seasonings.
As for the priest and the rabbi,
the bishop and the imam,
the shaman and the preacher,
the monk and the martyr
and the guru and the minister and all
such holy mushrooms I have come
to collect, you must try
without a shred of piety
to re-see them
as morsels in the minestrone
that I myself
will be serving the gods
at the unification banquet
to be announced soon.

II

After Supper

After supper between
the Depression and the War

summer evenings
when it was not raining

if we had been well-
behaved, and if our

father was home, and if
there was juice in the buggy

and coins in the kitty
we would be taken out for

ice cream under
a giant sky so

wide open that in a
single gulp

it could swallow the seven seas
and all the world's children.

*Chocolate, vanilla,
pistachio, strawberry . . .*

There would be moths, too.
There would be constellations.

Back Then

Coins from the nineteenth century were still circulating when I was a young girl. Some were older even than my old grandparents.

From my mother's jar of Indianhead pennies
I took an 1861 and brought it to school.
"This penny belonged to Abraham Lincoln," I said.

My mother's mother, when she was not cooking,
was endlessly knitting from nineteenth-century yarns
socks and mufflers fit for Siberian winters

and my father's father, the horse-and-wagon
fruit-and-vegetable man, would bring us the makings
of thick, nourishing soups too good for the Czar.

My turn-of-the-century parents looked to the future.
"The future is on your lap," my father would say,
meaning he'd put it there to be hatched like an egg

and I should be grateful. Oh gratitude! Oh duty!
Oh lady-like behavior! Oh God Almighty Who
punished girls who didn't believe in Him. Even so

I was forgiven for taking and then losing the old penny
that in fact I gave to a boy whose name I've forgotten
in exchange for something or other I didn't want.

Going at It

I grew up believing I lacked courage ever to go at anything the way my mother went at *boiled live lobster* at The Surf, or *lobster Cantonese* at Lotus Palace. She'd pick each shell as smooth as a teacup. The morsels she couldn't free with a fork, she'd suck loose. I'd be handed a skinny mini-claw she said was the sweetest and it would be hollow, but she would insist otherwise. That's how I yielded jurisdiction over all my senses to the high court of my mother, taste bud by synapse. Half a life later, when I crossed her border to join the natural world, I went at it in a not-quite-natural way, but hugely, figuratively, climbing her spine, swimming the length of her faces.

Close to the End

*“And they cried and they cried
and they lay down and died.”
From “Babes in the Wood”*

Close to the end she cautioned me not to cry
as if I might, as if one had such choices,
as if she were the stoic sister and I the cry-baby
scared of our own two shadows and of shadows generally
at ages six and three again, hands intertwining,
reciting “Babes in the Wood” in Grandma’s parlor
then lying down to die, our uncles applauding;
or forty and thirty-seven again, looking to all
the world like twins again, climbing the high tower
where, in a strong wind coming off the ocean
each told the other the story of her life
until *she* with her arms flung out and laughing violently
turned on me, transposing me and our mother.

“How come you never taught me to fly?” she said.

The Knife Accuses the Wound

The knife accuses the wound: *See how I bleed*,
to which the wound replies: *We bleed as one*.
That's how it was between us, between her and me

when one of us was the cloth and one the needle,
one the teeth, the other one the tongue.
Knife to wound: *See how I bleed*.

Bough to cradle: *You tore me from the tree*.
Cradle to broken bough: *You let me down*.
That's how it was between us, between her and me

like hound to hare, or shark to squid,
or parent to child, or sperm to ovum,
the knife accusing the wound: *See how I bleed*

and the needle the cloth, the tongue the teeth
and cradle and bough one another in lieu of the wind.
That's how it was between us, between her and me

from girlhood on, the little games we played,
tossing the hot coal back and forth:
See how I bleed! See how I bleed!
Nothing could come between us, between her and me.

All That Remains

All that remains to be done now is the pruning
which comforts me and is a source of pleasure.
I like the act of fracturing twigs and branches
with or without blossoms, with or without bird nests.
When a strangulating vine can't be uprooted
I like uncoiling it and scissoring it off
and watching it expire: *Die, worm, die!*
I like forcing the lopper to bite the deadwood,
incising pockets of air in blueberry bushes,
redesigning wind-wracked junipers. They serve
as mourners in the field, bending and keening
for mother's sake, and father's sake, and sister's...

Sister is in the ground. Her rooms are empty.
Clouds that overlaid her life drift in and out.

III

The Widow of Few Tears

1.

*How is she doing? Has she
begun to weep?* Not yet, but she is
walking back and forth in

coastal waters
which are composed
entirely of tears.

2.

When she is offered body parts—
arm, hand, shoulder, lap,
breast, heart—

the quiet widow, the amputee,
rises to embrace
her would-be donors.

3.

The widow of few tears
releases one
into the steaming pot.

“Taste this soup,”
she would have been saying to him.
“Does it need more salt?”

Plans Aborted

Deep in her crystal ball their unspent future is dissolving fast. The cruise to Tahiti or was it Panama has seeped into the music or was it the art appreciation lecture series they'd signed for, and the religions seminar, and lessons in duplicate bridge and ballroom dancing. Even those dear images of him and her in striped aprons ladling beef stew into bowls at a traditional soup kitchen in the raw heart of their city are but a blur now.

But also, the widow confesses, there was a Plan B beginning with the letting-go of any remaining secrets. After that, the enacting of fantasies: getting high, sinking low, spray-painting words on walls, going naked in public—then, having forgiven themselves and the gods, acquiring parachutes. Strapping them on as one. Bailing out together.

The Widow Composes an Email

Dear one, I double-click and there you stand,
reanimated. Beloved husband dead
a whole half year, you are so suddenly close
I sense your breath on my face and your hand on my hand
and then your quiet eyes reopening with
sweet regard for me—or so I envision them.

Husband deceased, husband redux, I find myself
blind-sided by your avatar. The loss of you
has made me slack and stupid, stupid and slack.
Seeing you still on screen and slowly morphing
from an octogenarian into a Ken doll
at play with a Barbie doll resembling me

some sixty years ago, I hesitate
between Save and Exit, but I press Delete.

All Cats

“All cats are gray at night,” she whispers
into the graying night, or is it
Zeitgeist her kitty-cat, her pet for life
who’s whispering that?

She looks him in the eye: “Zeitgeist,
are you a singular cat of many lives
or a series of interchangeable cats?”
“Yes,” he hisses and leaps from his basket

onto her lap, then up to encircle her neck
like a fur collar. Does he intend
to adorn her or some other act?
Joined, they visit the mirror. She reflects

as a granny wearing a soft gray pet.
He reflects as an elegant cat
wearing his own gray mannequin
for the time being.

Madam Regrets

Madam regrets that madam is unavailable,
is under the weather, alas, in body/soul.
When madam is wailing/flailing at the Wailing Wall

or wishing/fishing at the wishing well
or babbling like a baby at the tower of Babel,
then madam regrets that madam is unavailable

and summons me, her aide, her working double,
to fill her shoes and hold her place at table.
“Good morning,” I say. “Madam is at the wall

and what are you doing today? Reviewing your will?
As madam has often said, we must all die, all.”
Madam regrets that madam is unavailable,

having evolved, she tells me, to a clod, a pebble,
a passing thought, a flicker, a twitch, a bubble,
an echo echoing at the Wailing Wall,

a last laugh at the wishing well
and, at the tower of Babel, a final syllable.
Madam regrets. Unavailable.
Wall.



Barbara L. Greenberg is the author of *The Spoils of August* (1974), *The Never-not Sonnets* (1989), *What Nell Knows* (1997), and *Fire Drills: Stories* (1982). She has taught creative writing in the Boston area and was an originating faculty member of the MFA writing programs at Goddard and Warren Wilson colleges. More recently she has been affiliated with the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts.

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