

## Stanley Kunitz POETRY

### The Portrait

My mother never forgave my father  
for killing himself,  
especially at such an awkward time  
and in a public park,  
that spring  
when I was waiting to be born.  
She locked his name  
in her deepest cabinet  
and would not let him out,  
though I could hear him thumping.  
When I came down from the attic  
with the pastel portrait in my hand  
of a long-lipped stranger  
with a brave moustache  
and deep brown level eyes,  
she ripped it into shreds  
without a single word  
and slapped me hard.  
In my sixty-fourth year  
I can feel my cheek  
still burning.

### The Quarrel

The word I spoke in anger  
Weighs less than a parsley seed,  
But a road runs through it  
That leads to my grave,  
That bought-and-paid-for lot  
On a salt-sprayed hill in Truro  
Where the scrub pines  
Overlook the bay.  
Half-way I'm dead enough,  
Strayed from my own nature  
And my fierce hold on life.  
If I could cry, I'd cry,  
But I'm too old to be  
Anybody's child.  
Liebchen,  
With whom should I quarrel  
Except in the hiss of love,  
That harsh, irregular flame?

## The Layers

I have walked through many lives,  
some of them my own,  
and I am not who I was,  
though some principle of being  
abides, from which I struggle  
not to stray.

When I look behind,  
as I am compelled to look  
before I can gather strength  
to proceed on my journey,  
I see the milestones dwindling  
toward the horizon  
and the slow fires trailing  
from the abandoned camp-sites,  
over which scavenger angels  
wheel on heavy wings.

Oh, I have made myself a tribe  
out of my true affections,  
and my tribe is scattered!  
How shall the heart be reconciled  
to its feast of losses?

In a rising wind  
the manic dust of my friends,  
those who fell along the way,  
bitterly stings my face.

Yet I turn, I turn,  
exulting somewhat,  
with my will intact to go  
wherever I need to go,  
and every stone on the road  
precious to me.

In my darkest night,  
when the moon was covered  
and I roamed through wreckage,  
a nimbus-clouded voice  
directed me:

“Live in the layers,  
not on the litter.”

Though I lack the art  
to decipher it,  
no doubt the next chapter  
in my book of transformations  
is already written.

I am not done with my changes.

## Touch Me

Summer is late, my heart.  
Words plucked out of the air  
some forty years ago  
when I was wild with love

and torn almost in two  
scatter like leaves this night  
of whistling wind and rain.  
It is my heart that's late,  
it is my song that's flown.  
Outdoors all afternoon  
under a gunmetal sky  
staking my garden down,  
I kneeled to the crickets trilling  
underfoot as if about  
to burst from their crusty shells;  
and like a child again  
marveled to hear so clear  
and brave a music pour  
from such a small machine.  
What makes the engine go?  
Desire, desire, desire.  
The longing for the dance  
stirs in the buried life.  
One season only,  
and it's done.

So let the battered old willow  
thrash against the windowpanes  
and the house timbers creak.  
Darling, do you remember  
the man you married? Touch me,  
remind me who I am.

## HALLEY'S COMET

*Miss Murphy in first grade  
wrote its name in chalk  
across the board and told us  
it was roaring down the stormtracks  
of the Milky Way at frightful speed  
and if it wandered off its course  
and smashed into the earth  
there'd be no school tomorrow.*

*A red-bearded preacher from the hills  
with a wild look in his eyes  
stood in the public square  
at the playground's edge  
proclaiming he was sent by God  
to save every one of us,  
even the little children.*

*"Repent, ye sinners!" he shouted,  
waving his hand-lettered sign.*

*At supper I felt sad to think  
that it was probably  
the last meal I'd share  
with my mother and my sisters;  
but I felt excited too  
and scarcely touched my plate.*

*So mother scolded me  
and sent me early to my room.*

*The whole family's asleep  
except for me. They never heard me steal  
into the stairwell hall and climb  
the ladder to the fresh night air.*

*Look for me, Father, on the roof  
of the red brick building  
at the foot of Green Street—  
that's where we live, you know, on the top floor.*

*I'm the boy in the white flannel gown  
sprawled on this coarse gravel bed*

*searching the starry sky,  
waiting for the world to end.*

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## **The Abduction**

Some things I do not profess  
to understand, perhaps  
not wanting to, including  
whatever it was they did  
with you or you with them  
that timeless summer day  
when you stumbled out of the wood,  
distracted, with your white blouse torn  
and a bloodstain on your skirt.  
"Do you believe?" you asked.  
Between us, through the years,  
we pieced enough together  
to make the story real:  
how you encountered on the path  
a pack of sleek, grey hounds,  
trailed by a dumbshow retinue  
in leather shrouds; and how  
you were led, through leafy ways,  
into the presence of a royal stag,  
flaming in his chestnut coat,  
who kneeled on a swale of moss  
before you; and how you were borne  
aloft in triumph through the green,  
stretched on his rack of budding horn,  
till suddenly you found yourself alone  
in a trampled clearing.

That was a long time ago,  
almost another age, but even now,  
when I hold you in my arms,  
I wonder where you are.  
Sometimes I wake to hear  
the engines of the night thrumming  
outside the east bay window  
on the lawn spreading to the rose garden.  
You lie beside me in elegant repose,  
a hint of transport hovering on your lips,  
indifferent to the harsh green flares

that swivel through the room,  
searchlights controlled by unseen hands.  
Out there is a childhood country,  
bleached faces peering in  
with coals for eyes.  
Our lives are spinning out  
from world to world;  
the shapes of things  
are shifting in the wind.  
What do we know  
beyond the rapture and the dread?