



Remembrance
and
Other
Poems

a collection of poems
by Gary Beck

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Biography & Acknowledgments

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger and a salvage diver. His poetry has been published in dozens of literary journals. His chapbook, *The Conquest of Somalia*, will be published by Cervena Barva Press. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway and toured colleges and outdoor performance venues. He currently lives in New York City, where he's busy writing fiction and his short stories have recently appeared in numerous literary magazines.

Poems from this chapbook have appeared in *Alura*, *Archer*, *Caravan*, *Green's*, *The New Renaissance*, *Orpheus*, *Poem*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Poetry Today*, *Portland Review*, *Touchstone*, *Visions*, *Wellsprings*, *The Dande Review*, *The TMP Irregular*, *The Poetry Superhighway*, *Poetic Matrix Press*, *Living Poets Magazine*, *Contemporary Voices*, *Starfish Poetry*, and the *Delinquent*.



To Nancy

who has shared the torment of art and life

Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère!

Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées
Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer;
Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées,
Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher.

— Charles Baudelaire

The Poet is like the monarch of the clouds,
Familiar of storms, of stars, and of all high things;
Exiled on earth amidst its hooting crowds,
He cannot walk, borne down by his giant wings.

— Richard Wilbur, translator

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introduction

My poetry comes from the internal depository of my self, my spirit. For me, the creation of poetry takes place prior to conceptualization. It emerges from the composite material of my life: values, judgments, failures, sins, aberrations, aspirations, the stuff that art is made of. In my choice of substance over style, I have progressively alienated the custodians of literature, who bar the doors of recognition like resentful eunuchs, denying admittance to disruptive passions.

I write what I write because it springs out of my experiences in this complicated life. Calculation or gain has never directed what I do. The doing is everything.

G. B.

Abandoned

Abandoned in the desert
I dream rescues,
while the smiting sand
strips the shimmering flesh
from my rejected bones.
Where is the guide?
Wagon master of the soul's journey
fording rivers,
repelling ambushes,
then leaving me behind,
a companion to the voyage
who turned the wheel
harder than anyone,
but questioned the road.

Hazards of the Road

A butterfly lay on the side of the road
still fluttering as we drove by.
One who sped before us downed the butterfly.
One before that got the rabbit,
then the dog, the deer, the skunk,
before that the Indians, mountains,
then gave the land a final shot
ripping up everything,
so we could rush 65 MPH,
zapping anything that moves
on the pitiless highway
to a motel of dreams.

Rest Stop

Tortured honking
on the nomad-horded highways
visioning the great land
the pilgrims land
billboards and motels.
The moon bows to flashing neon signs
chanting a message in the night,
giving oracles in the night:
our soap,
beer,
cigarettes,
car,
will cancel your casual crimes.

Idolatry

Arise from refuge bed,
throw off the covers of darkness,
join the totalitarian morning
and sing your surrender.
Pledge not to question your leaders
as long as you are fed.
Righteously tend your church
while your neighbor is the sacrifice.
Consign your children to corruption
on the playing fields of schoolyards.
Never wonder why few resist deceptions,
reject false prophets,
deny available temptations.
Cars, clothes, culture, delusions,
subsistence crusts for millions.
We defuse the artist's rage with money,
sate the politician's virtue with privilege,
for these rewards maintain our innocence.
We destroy those who will not worship
the golden calf.

Remembrance

In the winter of an old man's dreams
as icicle tears
shatter on the floor,
I sit shivering and bare,
hiding from my nurse's care,
because she has black hair
upon her chin.

Behind the doorway
of an antiseptic room
a scrofulous intern waits
to seal me in an antique tomb.

I will let him,
but I'll carry pen and paper
and write what I remember.
And when it's done
the door that's set within a marble wall
will crack and bare a mound of paper,
covered with a trembling scrawl.

What!
You think this is an old fool's vision?

Perhaps you're right.
Perhaps I should start now....

Sometimes I remember
the warming sun
in a distant, Mediterranean November,
and a ragged urchin peeing
on the beaches of Palermo,
his tiny tool held gently
in his mother's guiding fingers.

Now I can remember
naked bellies, brown and pulsing
glistening in the dawn
on white, erotic beaches,
until my presence cast a shadow
on a sea of lovers' sweat,
and they fled the dampened contours
where their bodies stained the sand.

Yes, I can remember....
November was the time of year
to lie upon a sun-scorched beach
and lick the salt-hot stiffness
of a lover's thighs.

But I have also walked
the palm-lined avenues of evening
in a tiny, Caribbean land
followed by a blind guitarist
whose strumming fingers
summoned girls with hot-eyed glances
who did undulating dances
on the sidewalks of the open air cafes.
I coupled with a dancer
wilder than an Andalusian mare in springtime.
She clawed me in her heat
and writhed upon a pastel sheet.
Later we drank rum and coke,
but mine was drugged
and I awakened on a public beach,
alone...and broke....

The rage that flared within my heart
drained my strength to run away
festered on my will to live another day,
cast me pitiful and empty
on a hostile, driftwood shore
where I feasted on raw oysters
with a toothless, grinning whore.

Yet begging, cursing, I cried for more.

I have looked upon the leering skulls of lepers
steaming in the heat of distant jungles.
I've been chilled in pristine polar regions,
the vast expanse so calm and still
that I could almost hear tomorrows.
I have seen the sinful face of my soul,
mirrored in the rainpools of the morning,
while I waited for a taxi in Times Square.

Yet yearning, pleading, I ached for more.

Yes, I have seen Pietas groveling
in the gutters of the evening.
I have seen them swollen bellied
from the winds of morning.
I have seen them bear an infant prince
and cast him down a sewer.

Deep within the steam pits of the city
far beneath the altar of forgiveness
nibbled on by choirs of hungry rats,
a tiny babe

floats to the pollution of the ocean
into a hermit's cave with great commotion
where he's welcomed as a savior
and placed upon a seaweed throne.
Somewhere in the bedroom of the night,
buried in the guilty bed of night,
an infant's voice is screaming:
"Wake me, or I strangle."

No one answers in the night.

The visions of youth are dimming.
Heroes are almost forgotten.
My sullen legs won't carry me
to legendary cities of decay.
The brutal struggles, raw and clashing,
are fading, flickering neon gleams
that barely light a final plea for life
as I raise a supplicating hand.
My fears are greater than my dreams.

I could say more
but television travelers would not understand.

So suck contentment like a sponge,
hesitate before the final plunge,
hide behind our drab diversions
and pray, pray the universe is stable.

Yet hidden by the creepers
of the voracious human jungle,
the python twines around his prey,
ingests us all,
then dozes for another day.

Betrayers

Old men dream wars
fondling remembered weapons
as they watch the skies for omens,
then sleep invasions.
They are America's betrayers
the men of World War II,
who went in millions,
bearing the burden of democracy
to distant, underprivileged shores.
They came home with grosser appetites
hungry for their share of pleasures
and their nation's endless treasures.
They became the makers of power
the abusers of tomorrow
the slayers of the sandmen.

Two Visions

I. Apathy

Who suffers
in the world
suffers for me,
but I forget
and watch TV

II. Elemental

The wind is like the sea.
When it doesn't destroy man,
it doesn't take it personally.

Serena

Serena, withered
sits among swollen grape vines
bursting purple spurts of potency
dreaming of a back seat
in another life
when a migrant hand
plucked the ripeness of her breast
a ravenous traveler
lusting a land of opulence.
Serena turned into a pair of shears
rusting in an orchard.

Once in the Bronx

Once I had a girl friend who lived in the Bronx.
I got lost whenever I visited her.
I vaguely remember her neighborhood,
a resplendent boulevard built to welcome
Napoleon IV, Marshal Foch, General De Gaulle.
But it received instead my urgent lust,
leading me astray in the seven hills,
not of rambling Rome
and the conspiratorial Tiber,
but of less noted waterway, the Bronx River,
already submitting to sludge and squalor.
I never found memorable landmarks.
The Bronx looked like so many other places
in Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island too.
But the people were calm and untroubled.
It was a little while after one of the wars....
Big II? No, Korea! So I exaggerated.
So it wasn't a war.
We've coined new phrases to describe not-a-war,
at least since World War II.
Thus public approval continues
for legitimate bombardments.

Afterwards, our puppeteers again mishandled
the strings that make the public dance
to a more appealing prosperity.
So we don't call it war, no more, no more...
We don't call it war, no...more....
Police action. Protective intervention.
Preventive strike. Preemptive attack.
Far east, mid-east, near east....
So many ways to say we'll bomb you.
I could go on, but you get my drift,
or you might as well depart,
'cause you won't appreciate the rest.

I never noticed while I searched for my girl friend,
how many old people lived in the Bronx.
For the youngsters came home from World War II,
married their girls, packed their bags,
kissed Ma and Pa goodby
and went to college on the G.I. bill,
followed by a class jump to lower middle,
paid for by good old Uncle Sacrifice,
to reward their loyal service
with the first installment of the American dream.
So they got their degrees
and moved to Westchester and Long Island,
to new houses, lawns, two car garages

filled with the latest consumer goods.
The Bronx was not for them.
While they were packing and moving out,
marooning Mom and Pop in oversize apartments,
no longer rattled by arguments and growing pains,
distant political agitators
in San Juan and San Turce,
were stirring credulous Puerto Ricans
with dazzling tales of streets of gold
waiting for them in New York City.
And where did they settle?
(Can't you guess?) The Bronx.

So out with the old,
in with the unprepared for city life,
unassisted by family, government, union-
the Hispanic migration.
Instead of welcoming the newcomers to our shores
with jobs, education, assistance in urban living,
once again we betrayed our immigrants,
but this time better than ever before.
Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, Italians, Jews-
however low they seemed to America's owners-
were more acceptable than Black, Hispanic,
or Oriental,
despite the pledge of life, liberty and the pursuit
of...
After all, the less we look like our masters....

Once I had a girl friend who lived in....
I no longer remember her name.

Oh, I almost forgot to tell you....

While Puerto Ricans were pouring off the planes,
Blacks were torrenting off the buses,
stiff and creaky from the long ride
from Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi too.
Driven out, not by Goth, Hun, Zulu, Mongol horde,
but farm machinery, by Deere, by Deere,
that rendered unnecessary until World War III,
or Interplanetary War I,
agriculture's favorite utilities,
the bent human back, the grasping human hand.

And so they came to the Bronx, the Bronx,
as others before them had come, had come,
for jobs, homes, schools, a better life.
Does this sound unreasonable to you?

But in the mid-nineteen fifties
It was unacceptable to most.
For in with the new, out with the old,
who galloped, drove, flew, trucked, punted, fled,
until the once comfortable neighborhoods,
abandoned by experienced city dwellers,
left groups of rural newcomers adrift
on harsh, unfamiliar streets of decay.
Despite all the universities in the Bronx,
and law courts, and legislators,
constitutional guarantees lapsed:
inalienable rights were alienated.

I've almost forgotten the pleasures long ago,
shared with my girl friend in the Bronx.

I didn't go back for twenty years.
What a change, citizens.
I had lived in Germany,
walked the ruins of World War II,
saw defeated ghosts of the Vaterland,
heard the laments of destruction,
met a madman, crooning for the lost "Fuerher",
rushing crazed through Stuttgart streets,
chanting: "The bombs are fallen, Berlin is dead.
The bombs are fallen, Berlin is dead."
What does this have to do with the Bronx?
Imagine that I made no gentle rediscovery,
but found a biblical revelation.
Abandoned, burned, collapsed buildings,
spreading rubble, refuse, riots,
on unresisting residents,
atoning their sins in urban purgatory.

Yet across the river,
on Sutton Place terraces,
comfortable observers counted the fires,
entertained by companions and cocktails,
while tenuous holds on life went up in flames....

But how the feasting in Sodom went on....Went on....
And the pleasures of Gomorrah were many....
Separated from us by the palace guard,
the prosperous wallowed in indulgences,
refusing to receive suppliants,
a perilous subway ride removed.
Thy song, chanted for all of us:
consume, consume....Waste, waste....
Burn, baby, burn....

Her house was buried under rubble,
while the fires still smoldered
and extravagance burdened the people.

But who had declared war on the Bronx?
Did I miss the notice in the New York Times
that intelligently explained the invasion,
or authorized high altitude bombing?
Dresden, Hamburg, Nagasaki, ravaged cities,
welcome to the Bronx and don't say no thonx.
My visit no voyage of atonement,
nor pilgrimage of reclamation,
but arrested by these bleeding streets,
I was possessed by the wilderness of cities
and compelled to serve the needy.

I saw visions that tortured my spirit;
murderous madhouses of anguish,
provided by the state, the state,
no different than bedlams of Dark Ages.
Our prisons jammed, crammed full-
criminals, sinners, sufferers, babies-
hidden from sight behind forbidding walls.
After my immersion in American Institutions,
I recognized the style of government consent.

The children of the parents we would not help
were finally receiving some attention,
concealed from us by padlocked doors.
While outside those bitter caverns
where frightened children howl,
the non-war on crime, drugs, poverty
and all the other social divertissimos
that keep the media at peak employment,
constantly declare truce, amnesty, armistice,
whenever it's time to go home to the suburbs.

Our schools are losing the spirit to struggle,
our leaders always have eloquent answers,
our churches are falling silent,
while multi-national corporations peddle our heritage.
Are we mortally wounded?

I think my girl friend was crushed
beneath the wreckage of her house of dreams,
in a once pleasant neighborhood,
now submerged,
somewhere in the Bronx.

Brief Moments by the East River

Sailboats underway with engines,
sails flop loosely, famished for wind.
Gulls soar, probing the murky waters,
nearby traffic roars and snarls.
Joggers sweat, huff and puff.
Industry throbs, clanks, thumps.
A yellow butterfly flutters,
sucking off undernourished weeds,
tries to cross the highway,
doesn't make it.
The helicopter spotting traffic
doesn't notice.

I Still Remember

In the bright time
uncare weighed
friends and games
most free.
Snubbing hours,
growth,
the next day.
A sudden glimmer,
the teasing word,
the shy, sly hope,
then victim of poses,
the first taste of girlchild.

Underground Regrets

I have spent my nights in calculations
planning a Roman ruin.
For nothing else is,
seems, attained.

Dreamy as a hydrocephalic
formless imaginings
passing in the subway inconsistency
rocking,
pause....rocking.

O indescribable conductor
opening the doors of your tired blue face,
my last quarter of consolation,
a girl's crossed legs,
hairless....whispering....

Hart Crane

You are discarded by many
as liberty is,
replaced by matinee compliance
that squats atop the American dream,
heaps of jobs, services, goods,
dampening the fires of judgement.
And when you slipped over the side,
out of the hazards of the swim,
succumbing to injustice
and fear of tomorrow
for you could not be among us,
and one, or many cast you out,
first to be alone, then gone,
a myth to few.