

A naked woman my age is a total  
nightmare.  
A woman my age naked is a  
nightmare.  
It doesn't matter. One doesn't care.  
One doesn't say it out loud because  
it's rare  
For anyone to be willing to say it,  
Because it's the equivalent of buying  
billboard space to display it,  
  
Display how horrible life after  
death is,  
How horrible to draw your last  
breath is,  
When you go on living.

It is typical of Seidel to lead off with a statement of such brutality, as though daring the reader to close the book in righteous anger. In this way the righteous are weeded out, and only readers curious or sympathetic enough to go on are allowed to see what leads Seidel to write this way: not misogyny or "ageism," but a desperation so profound that it can speak only in a tone of cruel flippancy. It may be horrible to

draw your last breath and go on living, but the poem concludes by showing us that not all old women and men feel that they are trapped in a living death. On the contrary:

I hate the old couples on their  
walkers giving  
Off odors of love, and in City Diner  
eating a ray  
Of hope, and then paying and  
trembling back out on Broadway,

Drumming and dancing, chanting  
something nearly unbearable,  
Spreading their wings in order to be  
more beautiful and more terrible.

Love, Seidel seems to be saying, is stronger than death: the old couples who cling to one another in the face of physical decay remain "beautiful" in their fidelity and defiance. If they are also "terrible" to the poet, it can only be because they represent a kind of consolation that is unavailable to him. He hates them because their happiness exposes his misery as a self-inflicted punishment.

Sartre may have said that hell is other

people, but poets have long known that, in fact, hell is being trapped in the self. "Which way I fly is Hell, myself am Hell," says Milton's Satan, and Gerard Manley Hopkins concurs: "The lost are like this, and their scourge to be/As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse." But few poets have written more horribly and convincingly than Seidel about the torment of self-hood. Reading *Poems 1959-2009*, one is struck by how often Seidel returns to images of people cut off, abandoned, imprisoned. In "Dune Road, Southampton," from his 1998 book *Going Fast*, he writes about the famous case of Sunny von Bülow, who was allegedly poisoned into a coma by her husband:

The neurologist on call introduces  
herself to the murderer and  
concurs.  
Locked-in syndrome, just about the  
worst.  
Alive, with staring eyes.  
The mind is unaffected.

And with the patient looking on  
expressionlessly,

## Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

**Charles Miller seeks** an identification, and the exact words, of the German historian referred to by the late Harvard Law School professor Paul Freund in a 1950 essay: "No one would have been more entitled [than Justice Brandeis], or less inclined, to echo the words of the German historian, 'I have spent sleepless nights that others might rest.'"

**Josh Gibson hopes** someone can identify a short story about a Nazi (not, he thinks, Dietrich von Choltitz, the military governor of Paris after D-Day) who refuses an order to demolish a cathedral and/or its windows. The text describes the man looking through binoculars or a rifle scope as he has his second thoughts.

**John Ehrenreich thinks** Churchill once said, "Love and war change everything"—meaning certain events such as falling in love, or starting a war, change things irre-

versibly, creating a discontinuity with the past. He would like a verified citation.

**"When the Camp says: 'Dig graves now,'...I'll know and be with you"** (March-April 2004). Kathleen O'Higgins identified Peter Viereck's poem "To Be Sung," published in *Time and Continuities: Last and First Poems* (1995).

**"in Harvard balance"** (July-August). Responding to Robert Hoffman's reply, Ernest Bergel (with 20 years' more medical experience) reports hearing "dying in balance" (no "Harvard") in the mid 1950s in the early days of the study of serum electrolyte balance. Doctors focused on sodium, potassium, chloride, and bicarbonate, not realizing the importance of magnesium: "Thus, as they 'corrected' patients' acid/base balance, they often intensified their hypomagnesemia, which led to death." Bergel and Irving Rudman, M.D.,

both cite an earlier recording, *The Exanguination Blues* (attributed to a student or house officer at North Carolina Memorial Hospital) that included a song ending, "He died in balance." Bergel suggests "Harvard" might have been added later because of the research of Harvard biochemist A. Baird Hastings, who lectured widely on acid/base balance: "It seems at least plausible that after such a lecture, someone attached the adjective as shorthand to refer to the subject."

**"selling the Stradivarius"** (September-October). Sean Condon recognized "The Shanahan Strad," by Paul Jones, published by *Collier's* in 1948 and reprinted in *Best Short Shorts*, edited by Eric Berger (1967).

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