

# Poems by Menke Katz

## MY FATHER HEERSHE DOVID

### USED TO SAY

#### *On Old and Young*

Fools are old at birth, old is the laughter  
of the young bore and the voice of the toad.  
Old is the gossip of the cricket, the  
tattle of the telltale, the piping crow.  
Old is Mammon who sees the stars diving  
into busy rivers to mint rare coins.

Young are the kisses of the Song of Songs.  
Young was my grandfather's last rising dream,  
as he took death out of his lucky bag,  
listened to the labored wind, bread scented,  
operating the sails of his old mill,  
grinding the ripe grain into sated flour;  
blessing with the townfolk the new moon.  
Young is the oldest gold of every dawn.

## STILL CLEAR NIGHT

Stars sleep  
on needles  
of ice, hushed brooks  
are fettered with frost.  
Chimney swifts, smoke-blinded,  
join the winter moths, flutter  
over burnt pentateuchs, seeking  
Spring at the last sparks which refuse to  
die, scintillate the ashes like rare gems.  
Two brave pages (ancient sunsets yellow each  
letter) find their way back through the remains of the  
synagogue, cover as with the hands of cherubs the  
anguished commandment: 'thou shall not kill.' Moses leaves  
the scorched  
tablets, rises wherever the mourned dust is thirsty for tears.

## AGAINST LOCK OR RHYME

Poems,  
sit in rhymes  
like men, birds, beasts  
in cages. I saw  
Samson with fist in the  
teeth of a lion, forced to  
his knees under the load of rhymes.

Poet,  
brother, let  
your word roll un-  
rhymed as thunder, let  
it flash like free lightning  
through the fog: over a parched  
field, the eager harbinger of  
rain. The poem in rhyme bends like a  
captured enemy under an arched yoke.

A chased deer in panic of the forest does  
not race in rhyme, a grieved stone does not mourn in rhyme.  
The rhyme, patted, rounded by the file of crystal verse,  
cuts into the flesh of a word like a wound. If like thirst,  
stream, sun, storm is eternal the poem, lock not the storm in  
the cell of a rhyme. Give the word the fresh scent of ripe corn,  
swaying in wind of a hopeful field, tasty as rare  
bread of my hungry childhood. Let the word ride on,  
speak face to face with your neighbor of a far  
century. Wars do not kill in rhyme. A  
plummeting airplane like a wounded  
eagle does not fall in rhyme. A  
hurricane does not uproot  
trees in rhyme. A stormy  
sea is a rhymeless  
call for a day  
without lock  
or rhyme.

(from: Menke Katz, *A Chair for Elijah*, The Smith: New York 1985, p. 57)

## A Chased Mouse

The woe and panic of a chased mouse is murder.  
Her shadow in the moonlit fissure resembles my grief:  
dainty-limbed, a graceful dream, dressed in sensitive fur,  
and I am shabby to the core and I am clumsy as a rock.

(from: Menke Katz, *Land of Manna*, Windfall Press: Chicago 1965, p. 75)

## Isaiah on Freedom

Isaiah is always there  
where builders build a new jail.  
He says: Alas, my grim sons,  
the sword is still not a plow.  
If one image of God will  
be somewhere chained in a cell  
the chain will shackle us all,  
in heaven and on earth.  
Angels will know the weight of  
the chain, winds will not be free  
to curse even their own fate.  
The sky will be an endless  
prison roof if one captive  
will still remain in a cell,  
at the end of time, nearby.

(from: Menke Katz, Rockrose, The Smith: New York 1970, p. 88)

## Five Minutes Late

(unrhymed villanelle)

You are a minute late for our appointment.  
I await you in a cafeteria,  
in expectation of a great miracle.

In two minutes the thronged cafeteria  
seems empty as after a calamity.  
(Crowds flow around me as a quenchless river.)

In three minutes elves chewed off my fingernails.  
I dread you may never come, could be you met  
Icarus on the way and flew to the sun.  
Four minutes are the hands and feet of a ghoul  
who invades you as a treasure grave, thus and  
so what is left of you if not a raped nymph?  
Evening towers climb from mirage to mirage.  
With each turn of the revolving door New York  
returns to its unborn stage, to virgin wilds.  
In five minutes I have a date with longing.  
You never lived or died my love, still you roll  
me under every wheel of my queened city,  
still I am stoned by the mobbed streets of New York.

(from: Menke Katz, Land of Manna, Windfall Press: Chicago 1965, p. 15)

## On God's Children

Harry,  
the knife is  
here not even  
to cut the throat of  
a flea. I learned on Pig  
Street that baby pigs are the  
favorite pets of angels that  
knives are here to break bread with all God's  
children, such as the white little goat who  
promised almonds and raisins in songs of my  
mother when she lulled me to sleep, in the wooden  
cradle, in the wistful village of Michaleshik.

Harry,  
the knife is  
here only to  
strip nude the fruits from  
the trees of Eden. (I  
heard a weary wanderer  
saying in the shade of a tree:  
all trees are from Eden.) Mine is the  
fire (not the flesh) of the bull — the champion  
lover. Let us drink no toast to life with the  
hunter, Satan's sportsman, with hands of death. O let  
us not pollute with blood the wine of heaven and earth.

(from: Menke Katz & Harry Smith, *Two Friends*, State of Culture & Horizon Press: New York & London 1981, p. 36)

## On Travel

Travel is for weak-  
chinned braggarts (champagne is for  
sterile snobs) but at  
a cup of coffee a chat  
is still the farthest, grand tour.

(from: Menke Katz, *Land of Manna*, Windfall Press: Chicago 1965, p. 71)

## On Hunting

I heard the legends  
of Michaleshik at a  
brook in New England.  
I saw the deer take your moods  
in a dash to the unknown.

O leave for the armed  
coward the skill to  
vie with a trapped deer;  
the fun to pierce the heavens  
with the cry of a shot bird.  
In the plundered nest  
only ghosts hatch their cursed eggs.  
Calm has a vile tongue.  
Even stumps are wounds in the  
twilight woods. Even stones bleed.

The cat bird — a pest  
mews odes to a craven ghoul.  
The wind strews baned seeds.  
O hear a dead bird with a  
broken beak peck someone's skull!

(from: Menke Katz, Land of Manna, Windfall Press: Chicago 1965, p. 40)

## On Race

Two races were left  
from time immemorial:  
the race of mammon,  
and the race of lone poets —  
the blessed scum of the earth.

(from: Menke Katz, Land of Manna, Windfall Press: Chicago 1965, p. 68)

## On the Sins of God

God of mercy, are you not merciless to turn into dust  
your own image to place as guards the Cherubim and the  
flaming sword, to keep Eden locked, to create hell in  
heaven after hell on earth for the only sin  
of tasting one of your all-wise apples (fit  
for a miser, hoarder of apples)? King  
of the universe, would it not be  
just to lead yourself through all the  
torments of Gehenna to  
atone for your wrongs since  
Adam, until man  
of true mercy  
will forgive  
your sins?

(from: Menke Katz, *A Chair for Elijah*, The Smith: New York 1985, p. 93)

## Praise to the White Lie

The eighth wonder of the world is the white lie  
we tell day in, day out to save our lives,  
to redeem us from the terror of tedium.  
Out of compassion God formed the white lie,  
the daydream to change into wings our throttling ties,  
to give us ease to live, mirage to marvel.

My last prayer will be to the white lie,  
the angel of mercy flitting wingbroken  
at my deathbed to charm out of my coffin  
a rowboat cruising hell-deep the seas of dusk,  
(with death as with a killing, wanton-eyed love)  
where Manhattan drowns in its own mirrors.

(from: Menke Katz, *Land of Manna*, Windfall Press: Chicago 1965, p. 77)

## To a Truthmonger

The cruelest of all  
beasts is your naked truth. You  
transform me into  
a mule, a wolf-spider, a  
yak, zebu, a snake-idol.

O you are all truth,  
bladed as a slaughtering  
knife over my throat,  
and there is no ram in sight  
to offer his life for me.

I am the prince of  
liars. On my travels through  
back ages, I reached  
beyond God, dueled Adam,  
fled from Eden with nude Eve.

At dawn, Eve was half  
woman, half fish, made of a  
fake rib when she heard:  
Trick or treat, the picklock of  
the truth of all truths is here.

O savage-hearted  
truth, you see me as a kind  
monster whose gift is  
a tin apple for a starved  
tear-kissed bride in famine land.

In truth a blind god  
with eyes like potato warts;  
who digs lies like gems;  
would love my head, guillotined,  
set on a headless dragon?

My last lie will be  
in mirror-writing on my  
gravestone at a stray  
sun: rising, falling nowhere,  
reaching everywhere.

(from: Menke Katz, A Chair for Elijah, The Smith: New York 1985, p. 59)

## A Hundred Years Hence

O a hundred years hence, my son,  
seven year old, fool-proof prankster,  
we shall all be merrily dead.  
We will be in every wonder,  
in miracles spun by spiders —  
a tale of a hundred years hence.  
Each echo will ever echo:  
we are immortal, no wind is  
born to vanish, no stone is dead.  
A stone dropped in a stream will bring  
round and round all the suns we saw  
go down a hundred years ago.  
We will join the unborn children,  
untouched as snowflakes in a dream,  
we shall all be blissfully dead.  
The wind will be our next of kin.  
(I hear falling leaves talk of birth.)  
Just a hundred years hence, my son,  
ho, death will be merrily dead.

(from: Menke Katz, *Land of Manna*, Windfall Press: Chicago 1965, p. 53)

## On Messiah

Messiah is in no hurry to come for he fears to give  
even to himself infinity. He would rather be  
the donkey on which he is destined to ride at the  
end of days and let the donkey be Messiah  
braying as through a ram's horn, calling all the  
dead to dawn, all equals: man, bird, frog, God.  
The doomed will be the first to rise, to  
live their days which were once whipped, caged, choked.  
The garden of Eden will  
be on the once cursed earth,  
where there were jails, hang  
men, presidents,  
gallows, wars,  
heroes.

(from: Menke Katz, *A Chair for Elijah*, The Smith: New York 1985, p. 93)

## Grand Toast

As I reach King David's age, it is good to die  
next to the first and the last love of all true  
poets: solitude, in a lonely room  
where I may not hear the last song of  
a dying swan but the squeaking  
serenade of a trapped mouse,  
in a backyard of old  
New York or in a  
dream-gutter like  
the gloried  
drunk Poe.

Or may I die here in our old forest house,  
when the redwinged blackbirds start to migrate.  
My last thoughts littered with unwritten  
poems, lulled into hell (No,  
not the dull splendor  
of Eden) by the  
legends flowing  
through the near  
by creek.

Curse me not God to die in a hospital bed.  
No darkness frightens like the light of snow white  
hospital sheets like neat and trim shrouds, fit  
for dying men who lie as on a  
mercy display, under the wings  
of the angel of death, led  
to heaven by snobbish  
hands of rubbersouled  
doctors, as dusk  
bleeds beyond  
Adam.

And guard me God against the merciful eyes of  
nurses who may see my penis, not as the  
god of love who can thrill with fire from  
the first to the last Eve on earth but  
as a torn tail which can not raise  
itself to frighten even

a horsefly away, un  
like Socrates, may  
I drink alone  
a grand toast  
to death.

(from: Menke Katz, A Chair for Elijah, The Smith: New York 1985, p. 102)

## On Resurrection

We shall  
all be born  
again, among  
the unborn: a dream  
without the dreamer. Like  
God each one will be neither  
end nor beginning, neither night  
nor day. Timeless as the world before  
Genesis, before time. Spaceless, we shall  
be everywhere and nowhere: nonexistent  
existence in worm and angel, in dust and sky.

(from: Menke Katz, A Chair for Elijah, The Smith: New York 1985, p. 67)