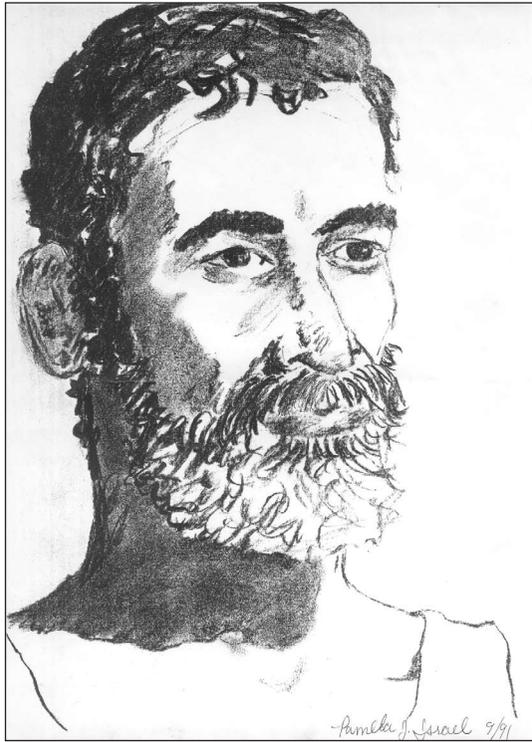




Stroking the Sparrow's Tail
and other poems

ARTHUR JOSEPH KUSHNER



Stroking the Sparrow's Tail

Stroking
the
Sparrow's
Tail

and other poems

Arthur Joseph Kushner

Stroking the Sparrow's Tail and other poems

©2004 Estate of Arthur Joseph Kushner

www.arthurjoseph.org

10 Norrie Court, Germantown NY 12526

front cover image from "Grasping the Sparrow's Tail"

Sr. Assi Ben-Porat, www.arttaichi.com

used by permission of the artist

*This book is dedicated to all the people who shared their homes
with Arthur, who put him up and put up with him.
Although he earned his keep doing odd jobs (from roof repair to
scanning for harmful electromagnetic spectra), you gave him foothold.
Without you, we never would have known him.*

*This book would not have happened without the generous support of Myron
“Bucky” Buchman. A friend since college, Bucky cherished Arthur’s gifts,
talents, and deep kindness toward all living creatures, and helped fund this
work in tribute.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The editors would like to acknowledge the two journals in which some of these poems previously appeared:

Rondout Review 1990:

Poetry at the Rosendale Creative Space Co-operative
("A Bird Flew In," "Cicadas," "Elephant, You Pass")

and *The Hudson Valley Literary Supplement*
("Cicadas").

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Publisher's Introduction

Rabbi's Introduction

Editor's Preface

Stroking the Sparrow's Tail	1
Shinar in the Hand of the Sea	2
In the Belly of the Snake	3
Medicine Channeling for Davida	4
Sub Urban Ecology	5
Marc Chagall's Poems	6
In Noon Time	7
Prophets Awake	8
Sweat Lodge Preparation	9
The Doctrine of Metaphors	10
Light Met	11
Heal the Family	12
Mudweave Reflections, 1995	16
Laughing Woman's Drum	20
Day Three of the Attack; Before the Rain	22
Rosanna Chavez	23
Her Secret, Unveiled	24
Pinwheels	25
Cicadas	26
Elephant, You Pass	28
A Bird Flew In	31

*There is a fragrance around people who are able to go inside.
It's like roses. Arthur had that fragrance.*

- Jay

Publisher's Introduction

I met Arthur Joseph Kushner 15 years ago at the Rosendale Creative Space Cooperative, an experimental, membership-supported community events and activities center. We founded the Space Co-op to spur nascent local artists to produce for an easy public venue, and to share interests through workshops and presentations. In addition to our poetic offerings and helping hands, Arthur served as mentor/provocateur, always prodding our group to define intentions and align actions and attitudes with those intentions.

Embodying that task, Arthur was a perpetual font of “mission statements” like this one: “The Creative-Space Cooperative, in recognition of the verbal arts as media for the growth of the individual into more fully informed, expressed and experienced humanity, supports ongoing programs of open and invitational poetry; toward which we welcome and encourage each person to engage the means and dynamics of the poetic media to touch, awaken and communicate their human aspirations and experiences.”

Arthur carried a lot with him. His physical holdings included a “bat utility belt” of waist-hung vise-grips, knives and other tools, and his rucksack of curled file folders full of scribbled sheets and the occasional recorder or found object. His muscular, agile body was designed for whatever objects wanted carrying, martially trained to move with spiral grace and precision.

The other vast innumerable things Arthur carried were stored in his head, downloadable at steering committee meetings and poetry readings. We found his poetic philosophy funny, spiritual and intense, laden with precise ideas about how a group of people with a shared intention might make something with integrity and staying power. These ideas, which he derived from first-hand experiences, extensive research and a creative imagination, were a blessing for our inexperienced, eager band, but a mixed one.

Arthur had a sometimes confusing, long-winded knack for talking way past the cognitive or attentive capacity of his listeners, which (given his eclectic passions and crusades against everything from alternating current to neurochemical domination by cats) made it easy for the earth-bound and lazy-minded to dismiss him as a nut case. At the same time, an appreciative cult of those with the “right stuff” to understand Arthur grew in equal measure.

Though occasionally stuck in expressive high gear, Arthur had a big-hearted patience and surprising flexibility to connect with listeners, and hand them a long but stout conceptual rope with which to pull themselves toward his vision. (It helped if they had the arms for it and were not afraid to say, “Arthur, enough!” when their strength gave out.) As a teacher myself, I learned to swing on his conceptual ropes, and we worked together on the educational philosophy he called “Ropework.” “Rope” is a homophone for the acronym RHPE, which stands for “Representations of Human Participation in Environments.”

The pedagogy of Ropework begins with the conviction that only situated, culturally evolved knowledge—the conveyed real experiences of people in places over time—should be taught (in contrast to jigsaw gibberish compiled by Texas textbook committees to advance social, political and economic agendas.) This conviction was Arthur’s core project: it unified his poetry, sweat lodges, Torah commentaries, tai chi interpretations, and all the other personal and collective engagements he developed, supported and sustained.

Arthur sought social structures that brought people together to pursue perfection, to practice “rightness” physically (martial arts), socially (poetry as a form of communal intimacy) and spiritually (sweat lodges, Reconstructionist Judaism). Arthur demonstrated “rightness” for others in everything he did, whether modeling for an art class, holding a tool, building a house, or reflecting on the Cosmos. He sought the commitment of others to work with him on visionary projects that would embody something real, evolving and ecologically sustainable.

People were drawn to Arthur for his talents, visions and powers, and also for the depth of his being. He was dedicated to developing spiritual awareness, in efforts that spanned acid megadoses from Tim O’Leary in Millbrook, Hindu mantras from the young guru Maharj-ji, rituals of the sweat lodge and vision quest from medicine man Charlie Thom, integrative martial arts from masters of tai chi chuan and aikido, Torah commentary for the New Paltz Jewish Congregation Ahavath Achim and a lifelong commitment to “live off the grid” with nature. Mice, snakes and foxes lived with him in his hermit huts.

But Arthur also lived with inner demons, and his practices were anchors against the calls of distorted voices in his head. He could often be heard arguing loudly and angrily with these voices as he rode his bicycle to and from town in all weather. These sirens tortured him with paranoid mythologies, distorted magnifications of the interpersonal dynamics he had grown up with, and the surrounding destruction he witnessed being wrought upon the land by American consumer culture.

Arthur strove to unseat his personal demons through intense interpersonal relationships. However, his urgency to convey complicated (though beautiful) thought structures sometimes drowned out feedback that his listener was unable to receive such high-voltage transmissions. And so, inevitably, his demons tore at the social fabrics he was ever weaving, and broke the equilibrium he established through martial arts and meditations. It was painful, sometimes, to be Arthur’s friend, to watch him initiate, pursue and ultimately undo the engagements he so craved.

And so Arthur was neither an “outsider” (for he was always inside and outside, building, making connections, enlightening, entertaining, serving) nor an “insider” (for walls and ceilings would obscure his forest and the sky, and could not contain him). But Arthur found a stable place in later years, a heart-centered place, and the demons were quieted. He found peace in a middle position between the hermit’s isolation and team membership, where he wandered among contexts as a caretaker,

but not a member, of families; an incidental teacher without a school of pupils.

From that middle place, Arthur was ever ready to help anyone who crossed or shared his path, and these poems are an irrefutable record of his compassion for human suffering, his delight in the power of ideas to associate, connect and align worlds, and his powerful arms that reached toward the highest truths attained by cultures past and present.

Arthur, you left no reference to any blood kin, and it fell to me to manage the personal effects of your wandering life, and sort through the truckload of dusty writings and recordings you left behind. From these, I have created an online ideography and, with the financial help of your old friend Bucky, published this book and CD set of poems. May these words and the sound of your voice be a gateway continuing to inspire those who knew you in life, and many others who will come after.

Bram Moreinis

An Introduction for Arthur's Book

Arthur was a wild Jew. As a rabbi, I mainly meet Jews at one or another level of domestication, just like most folks. Arthur, however, was a wild Jew. He ate his Scripture raw, and drank his Tradition unfiltered.

In certain company, this could prove difficult. Most folks are not acquainted with many wildmen, and the initial experience can be off-putting. At times I had to rein him in a bit. But in other, usually smaller groups, with others who knew him for years and understood his ways (or lack of ways), he could be let go. Still, his greatest soaring, with regard to the interpretation of ancient texts and the renewal of old traditions, occurred when we two were alone. We were teachers for one another: I, somewhat on this side of the wild/tame line, he well on the other.

In the really old days, there were many more wild Jews. It was the wild Jews who wrote the Bible, after all—tame folk couldn't have begun such a thing! Some of the rabbis of the Talmud were quite wild: the great Akiva, Shimon bar Yochai, ben Hyrkannis... There were the wild Jewish mystics of medieval Spain and Galilee. And do not forget that Christianity was begun by one of the wildest Jews of all.

Arthur was capable of taking a musty, dusty old ritual or a black-and-white text and imbuing it with rainbow colors and psychedelic scents that made so much sense that one's mind hurt. Fortunately for us at the Jewish Congregation of New Paltz, New York, Arthur was a regular at our Saturday Morning Torah Study Group. For 18 years he helped us uplift holy scripture, showing us in many cases just why it was holy. There are many teachings that are now a continuing part of this community that owe their existence to Arthur, or to that strange Gestalt-mind that sometimes grows around us, Arthur the catalyst, wherein it was no longer possible to figure out who was saying what. Those moments were precious, and resulted in understandings greater than any one mind is capable of.

Many years ago, Arthur was the *shammos* of our synagogue, a caretaker/sacristan, and even in later years when he was not, he remained intimately concerned with not only the spiritual health of our congregation, but also its physical health. The last time I saw him, two days before he died, he had nailed up two *mezzuzot*, prayer cases, upon the doorposts of classrooms in our new community center. The day after that, his last full day of life, he took down the *sukkah* (harvest hut) that we had built a week earlier (Arthur as crew boss) in honor of the Autumn Festival. He neatly stacked the wood in a congregant's garage, and pedaled away into the sunset. Rabbi Akiva said, "Live each day as if it were your last." Arthur did just that.

Rabbi Bill Strongin

Editor's Preface

This book is a selection of sparks from the myriad fires kindled and kept burning by Arthur Joseph Kushner over the course of his 56 years on the planet. Culled from notepads, loose typed pages, and hand-scrawled scraps of paper, these poems were abruptly released from the custody of their channeler when he left them, and us, on October 2, 2002. Through Bram Moreinis, they found their way to me, and through me, to you.

Some of these poems have made the journey intact; others have been “cleaned up” for publication (spelling corrected, occasional discrepancies between subject-verb agreement set straight, etc.), and a very few have had missing or illegible words intuitively reinstated or replaced by yours truly. The chief criterion for their selection was simply how well, in my estimation, they worked as words on a page.

That said, I hasten to add that anyone who ever witnessed Arthur in performance is well aware that any formulation of poetry that begins and ends with “words on a page” is far too reductive to encompass his work. He was a great Algonquin-Ashkenazi-Zen-beatnik storyteller, and his reverberant voicings and tai chi movements were inseparable from his words. Moreover, Arthur’s poetry didn’t end when he stepped off the stage. It flowed when he welded steel, planted veggies, herded goats, officiated at weddings, and especially when he conversed, pursuing those long, discursive, probing and painterly confabulations that were a form of song for him. Happily, the two CDs snuggled into the special edition of this book provide a fleshier echo of his poetic practice, one that restores his breath to the bones of the text.

The poems chosen to open and close this book are meant to lend it a proscenium effect. They illustrate two of Arthur’s grandest and noblest themes: the power of compassion, and the epiphany that all lives, all times and all places are inextricably intertwined. Grand, too, is Arthur’s articulation of the understanding that there is nothing ordinary about ordinary life when one’s heart and mind are fully engaged with it. Fully engaged he was, and his poems become “more wild with light” with every reading.

Stroking the Sparrow's Tail

The sparrow tried to fly into light
Through the terrifying mystery of glass
Framed in steel
Set high in the cinder block walls
Cathy sympathetically called out
“Help him!”
To all us roughneck welders and machinists
Standing around on coffee break
“Help him!”
In response there was a lot of arm waving
And shouting “hey hey”
Which was sincerely supposed to help
It did at least make him fly down
Across the hall in front of me
Where quite unexpectedly
Out of my amateur tai-chi belly
Stroking the sparrow's tail
An ancient image and form
Emerged
Joined his motion and lightly embraced him
He did not resist
But surrendered to the spontaneous compassion
As if he knew
It belonged to no one

Shinar in the Hand of the Sea

At Ur, Noah's camp by the sea,
Waves kiss Shem's feet.

Out in ships he fills his nets
From the filled waters.

As a shepherd boy he danced with the maidens
Who dance in the waves that wash the feet of Ur.

Ur, camp of Noah who planted grapes and sang.
"My house of reeds was lifted to the lintels of the sky,
While the waters ate the world from under."

By Ur in the hand of the sea Shem's nets fill the land
With children of the drunken sailor, married to the sea
By songs squeezed from grapes.

Noah sang in his camp in the hand of the sea:
"The foot of Ur is washed by maidens eaten by the sea."

In the Belly of the Snake

In the belly of the snake a drum song
The bull elk appears
Snake lifts head looks in wonder
A great lifting of the earth is the elk
It is a great thing to be lifted
The earth shall be lifted
Lifted into great elk forms
To dance with hooves on the drumskin of the earth
And leap up with horns toward the powers of the day
I will call upon great powers with the song of an elk
I will rise as a snake with the song of a snake
I will rise into dancing upon the earth
Into drumming upon the night
Into lifting up horns toward the quiet of dawn
The bull elk snorts and leaps
Earth power is lifted
Eye of snake looks up
It is a good day



Medicine Channeling for Davida

Feathers of night
Settle in her nest
On egg clutched to her breast

Hhwooo

From the root of mountains
Coal red in my belly this stone
Since time has been mountain born

Hiii

Very small I fly
Through rainbows of dew
And onto leaves wet jewels

Yah ha ala

A tree from the ridgetop
Falls burning to the sea
Waves green lap the flames

Chee abh



Suburban Ecology

The roadside stream
carries strange fruit and flowers
past treadbare tire banks
to oil drum islands
These chocolate milk containers
and styrofoam hot cups
bear no seed
A few years later
the stream has to move back
to make way
for “U Do It” car wash
and Drake’s Cakes delivery depot
But because water needs
a place to flow
a new bed is bulldozed out
and a few fresh tires rolled in
Now a quick fish in that clean stream
says, “OK by me”
and slips slick as a melonseed
up cross to the other bank
keeping just ahead of eye speed
Rodney, Sid and Jake wade in
more or less fearlessly
seeking crawfish
for sport, character development,
and to show at school.
Inside a high-rimmed truck hub cap
an exotic exhibit
is soon assembled,
pacing laps, waving wicked green claws
snapping and flapping their tail fans.
A goldfish or two will be long gone
before teacher catches on.

Marc Chagall's Poems

On the occasion of a reading on November 11, 2001, in remembrance of Kristallnacht and the shattered glass and souls who went through flame on September 11. Hosted by the Holocaust literature program at the State University at New Paltz; written in response to hearing Marc Chagall's personal secretary lecture and read from Chagall's journals during the Resnick Lecture Series at New Paltz.

Marc Chagall's poems are better than his paintings.
Even his paintings are better poems than they are paintings;
more pictographic/poetic to look at—
his own face half cow; martyrs of his village nailed to steeples.
When he visited Yad Vashem and wrote,
“I have been to the new temple,”
he ended my search for the red heifer's ashes.
Now I'll let the ashes in the basement
settle on the altar, show the fingerprints,
swirl into the breath of the sanctuary.

In Noon Time

In noon time the hunter of animals
Shall become a hunter of spirits
The catching spear an electron microscope a poet's pen
And yet the prize shall be carried home
And shared among the tribe
As in the dawn time

In noon time the mother who comforted children at her breast
Is called to bring nations to rest with words of peace
Who spoke to the healing herb shall prescribe a balm
A remedy for legions long suffering
Who wove plaits of fine basket work
Shall etch the tingling pathways of thought through stone
And yet shall lift love's heart with a smile
And cheer the return of the spirit hunter
As in the days of dawn.

Prophets Awake

I propose, for poets, an entirely reasonable immortality
I propose to be there in centuries to come
And in millennia to come as well
As progeny of these my genes
Well schooled in these my songs

These songs shall provide inducement
To the persons of ages hence
And I shall provide the properly preserved sample
And the well-conceived document

I the undersigned being of sound soul
Yet ephemeral flesh
Do herein specify
Those persons and conditions of agreement
To whom I bequeath my genetic copyrights
Custody of the corkscrew templates
And other inheritances held in trust

And though acres of fine print shall follow
In sum I shall commend my copyrighted remains
To the care of persons in ages hence
Moved and qualified to say over them:

*Rise up and be a clone
And sing the songs of former times
For which we have not now the voice
And of all that is about you now
Risen out of the former times
To fulfill those songs of former times
Sing again*

Sweat Lodge Preparation

He's standing in the shallow pool
At the bottom of the spring's jogging course
Down off the mountain
Jay is moving rocks
With his wiry patient total engagement
That goes on hour after hour
Pools ledges steps appear
As if the mountain happened here
To make what mountain springs do
Here and there make
He does it the mountain's way
And he does it his way
And the boundary between
Is lapping like water
And ledging like stone
Jay the master gardener
Works for mountains and springs
When no one else is asking
Tallish with leather and rope-wrapped bones
I never saw him take hold of anything
He didn't move
Or talk above the rippling waters
When leaning near an ear to whisper
Would do more
To pull me or most of us
Stomping around and shouting important stuff
Into the voice of the mountains and Jay
Making a place to step onto the mountain
Into the stream

The Doctrine of Metaphors

Everything is a lot like everything else
but while being a lot like everything else
it's also a lot more like itself
than anything else is.

But still—it's a lot like everything else.
And it's not so much like anything else in particular
as it is like everything else put together
But of course put together a little bit differently
than it is in anything else
or as in some cases a lot differently.

Light Met

We were sitting on the floor facing each other
in a tunnel with gnarled rubbery walls that kept
changing into shapes I wasn't sure I wanted to look at too closely
so I looked at her

But my mouth kept changing shape and gurgling
I didn't know where to grab it if I wanted to speak
Considering it as a feat of navigation I said
I'm going to try to stay with you and she said
There are people who've been waiting for years
in the back wards of hospitals
just for someone to come and say that

I look at her glow which is becoming outrageous
The familiar surface anatomy is becoming a pattern
of shifting flashing lights
She appears covered in ornate jewelry

The patterns move faster we are rising
into worlds of more agile energy
In four seconds the dynasty
of goddesses elaborate intricate brilliance

The effect is accumulative
Each the mother and source of all becoming before
More wild with light

Heal the Family

I. The Sicilians

My Grandfather,
the smallest of 9 or 10 rough loud trampling sibs
teasing to well beyond today's criteria of sexual abuse,
dreamed as a child of old men's snoring peace and dignity
and apple-sweetened tobacco in overstuffed parlor thrones
where no one teased or poked from behind
to enjoy a squeal for laughs.

He dreamed of the dignity of man as a serious concern,
wrapped in overstuffed, almost mounted, and fumigated sanctity.

And he made it.
He ruled a well-wived roost
and scattered the children with his rumble,
and won the perpetual anger
of his naturally wild and teasing daughter-child, my mother.
Blowing Italian martial rage was his only available defense
against her all too intelligent and instinctually impeccable
demonstrations of woman juice
If ever someone in the house had his cazones strapped on,
If someone had arrived at age 4 as a sturdy little earth giant
instead of a whining pin cushion,
The last cushion in the patriarchal pecking orders of little chicken-hood
The last or maybe one or two past the worn last
Of a tumbling brood of town-cooped farm-stock.

He would have been ready but
he wasn't ready—he blew it.
He lived to 80 and he never
a day in his life
was ready for Mom.

Grandma—a beauty bright but stunned quiet
by something I have no right to know—
was not ready for mom.

II. The Jews

My father wasn't either.
His own mother was wildly energetic
and overblown, voluminous,
a frolicking partyer.
She wrapped herself around her beloved Mayo,
a muscular man-child devoted to her whims,
for radishes on snowy nights, or ice cream.
(It made him blush.)

She would have been an "actress"
but when she was 3 or 5
her father found out her aspiration
and blew up with the shame and shock
of his traditional concept of heresy.

But he only diverted her dramatic verve
from the mild boundaries of the Yiddish stage
to lifelong deathbed tragedies of Hypochondria
pursued with unflagging vitality for 90 years.

It would take big warm balls
with heavy duty shock absorbers
to keep up with her,
which I suppose Grandpa Mayo had.
A house painter and plasterer,
a Jewish Tarzan,
veteran of an arm-flailing fall
through 5 flights of backyard clotheslines
to a landing he walked away from,
limping on a crutch to the huppah
to marry Grandma Bessy,
who praised his memory
after he left his, at his age 54 (mine 8).

At his funeral, my mother asked me
If I knew what it meant that he was dead.
I knew, I said, "We won't be seeing him anymore."

Zaidie Mayo, with brood-baked love for me,
the only one who seemed to see something in me
that I could possibly want in me
(something normal and already present
not something I theoretically should be
but probably wasn't),
carried on his broad back
the last work-worn father-blessing in the family
left to him.
My father carried a reflection
and a reflex of it,
but he wasn't sure he had it.



Top, Sicilian Grandfather; bottom, Zaidie and Bessy Mayo

Mudweave Reflections, 1995

This is an untitled excerpt from a tape recording by Arthur J. Kushner (ca. 1996) of collected pieces relevant to the "Mud Weave" performance of spring 1995. It was transcribed and read by J. Luckner at the memorial gathering held on November 1, 2002, in Hasbrouck Park, New Paltz, New York.

I have lived among these Americans all my life
And so did my parents from their early childhood
In many ways they are a good people
And certainly this is a good land
But they are tearing the land to shreds
And the actual earthy part of their souls is also shredding
They have no way and no place to let it rest
They cannot lay a hand on the ground and say
"This is good"
They cannot point to the home of their hearts and say
"Here I am"

There is something my parents never spoke of directly
Something they were born to
In the forested mountains
Across the river
Beyond the sea
Names they heard whispered when they were children
And had no time since to speak
Of their enthusiastic hopeful but all-consuming journey to new
continents
Of the choppy waves of a world in rapid transition
Into something inevitable
In many ways better
But rough-hewn
Clumsy and as unconsciously destructive
As a calf in a potter's shop

We are breaking all the pots

There are names I saw my mother and father's lips move
As if to whisper
But there was no one from across the ocean and the river there
To hear and nod
So the whisper passed
Like a puff of air
Through the spruce boughs beyond the river and
Never made a sound in this busy new world where I have lived
It's a good time now for the whisper that passed through the spruce
to be voiced again
For the mountains beyond the river to rise in my memory

Ah Ho Ga Ha Ra

I know your name
You who threw the four-handed wheel
That shaped the earth like a potter with spinning hands
And the threads of life like a weaver with spinning hands
Your name is the spinning of the potter's wheel
The whisper of the web loom

Ah Ho Ga Ha Ra

I am beginning to whisper
Hear me whisper
Our web is frayed
Our pots are cracked
The berry wine runs out
Forest folks feel far from home even when they find the forest
Their strands do not find the weave of the wind through the branches

Ah Ho Ga Ha Ra

Is that the sound of your spinning hands?
You are so quietly courteous
You do not press or pluck us
Until we call

Ah Ho Ga Ha Ra

Wet the pots and draw the web on to the loom
Yes—some things have to be dreamed the old way
At least until the new way learns
To dream of four-handed wheels

I will speak as the web reweaves by its own busy fingers
I will cry into the broken pot—it will soften and swirl
I will hear the whispers become spoken

Once ago and across oceans and rivers and passing generations
We lived at the center of a spinning wheel
Shaping within and weaving without
Pressing pots and spinning threads

When the new way shaping here in America finds a way to dream
this wheel
It will not be a different wheel
A horse from beyond the river and a horse here
Are both horses and can pull together
Whoever makes me a pair of boots will have to fit my feet as they are
Or wear out a few more pairs of shoes with these very feet

Ah Ho Ga Ha Ra

Spin the wheel mud weaver!

Press and weave!
I am becoming a little frayed and cracked
Here in America

When you appoint a new wheel spinner to take up your work
Then you may rest on your laurels and spruce and lounge in your web
Now spin and we will hear your web-loom whisper
Your disciples may press wafers of solid state circuits
And weave a net of spidery logic through
But not so well unless they learn from you

AH HO GA HA RA

I am frayed now and ask a turn at the center of the wheel
Before I can dance again on its rim
Some thread of your web is strung by here
Wrap it into a wheel of hands
Pressing within
Drawing without

Laughing Woman's Drum

All over God's green earth
Hardware stores open at 7 or 8 o'clock
While here in Woodstock, New York
I'm sitting—waiting—for coffee at Misty's
Waiting for Alan to meet me at 8 on the village green
But most of all waiting for the hardware store to open at 9
So I can buy some sandpaper
To polish the floors of a house just bought by a family
To make a home for another family
Of five children and the Grandmother
The mother having been killed by a bullet
That was just passing through a Brooklyn Street
An African-American family
I've only met the 12-year-old daughter
A lovely child
She's about 5 foot 11
She could easily be groomed for high-fashion modeling or even
low-fashion modeling
Physically she's more mature than most women ever are
Her pure African genes hasten her maturity
They tell her "Get your children raised up
Before a bullet comes down the street
And takes momma away."
But bullets are new things
And the African genetic truth is old
Like the short Ashanga spear
And the fly
The ages of struggle are not forgotten by the blood nor are they
entirely past
In this land of the broken
But now let a wind blow the fly away
From our village
And the short spear not reach from the bush

Let us make a village
On this killing plain
Where the millet is sweet to her taste
And the husks are pounded from the kernel
As a drum for her song
May the wind blow away the fly
And the short spears remain in the bush
May the singing woman live long seasons as a child
And long as a woman slowly opening
Let the husks of the millet
Open to her song
While singing woman's pounding pole drums playfully
Against the edge of the mortar bole
Let us lace a drum skin
Across the mortar bole
And everyone dances as the millet opens
A long season of dancing
A long season of drumming
As a child, as a woman
Here in the village on the plain
Here on the streets of Brooklyn
A new season opens
The coffee arrives
Alan arrives
The hardware store opens
We go to sand
And polish the floors
A plain of red oak
Nearer to Brooklyn than Africa
But far enough, we ask, from the fly,
The short spear,
And the bullet.

Day Three of the Attack; Before the Rain*

The pyre of the Battery fire department still smolders. Their ashes must not be sodden or mired until they burn white.

This last immolation of Indios rushing like storm winds to rescue their Euro refugees has spread a cloud in the dream sky of Manahatta where Americans and Americanos breathe.

These Caribbean fireboat harbor pirates; these five-alarm fire dancers were here, dancing through fires, when sailing Dutchmen and seafaring Englanders gaped in fear and wonderment.

“Refugees from your soggy dilemmas, will you dance in the fire and embrace our worlds or are you better suited to some sodden besotted refuge you can embrace?”

“Wrap your tails around the fire if you can. We cheer any good try.”

Taino sea pirates seeded these camps from before the count of years. As these fireboat EMS angels danced again and again in the embers of the white road, they were leaders of Manahatta’s Taino youth struggling on their red road. Now all who tread Manahatta breathe their cloud and hail them.

Now the rain.

Rosanna Chavez

(A Peruvian woman of New York City)

I'm sure a photograph would have confirmed my impression
Of her still-life appearance
As brown small wizened odd-featured
An ancient Indian grandma
Faithfully carrying her medicine bundle of noble Inca blood
Worn ragged by the centuries of stumbling stooped exhausted
Through the misery contracted veins of los indios pobres
Thinned by unhinged spaced-out conquistador passion
Blasted by hungry hot angry inner city crowd noise
Finally saved mended shored up
By durable genetic fragments drawn from displaced black bodies
It all showed in the inevitable but unpredictable
Moments of stillness
But I could never fix the photograph in mind
Because a moment later she was moving again
With light postureless smiling steady-eyed
Twelve-year-old grace
And the centuries like a rotten rope way
Behind a faithful pilgrim
Crumbled

Her Secret, unveiled

Unveiled, where she may be
Her secret, blown like a kiss
Into the ear that inclines
As toward a kiss
As there are places
Women go to mix their juices with the Earth
A beaten rung of clay and ash
With eight fires around
Within a grove on a hilltop
When such can be found
At center two stones to stand on with a bowl
Gathering skylights in the waters
Between the stepping stones
A carefully mixed mud hole
Warmed by steaming stones

Pinwheels

Master Kung Fu Tse's famous pinwheel symbol
For the order of the universe

Is called the Tai Chi 

Each Chinese syllable is a pictorial ideogram

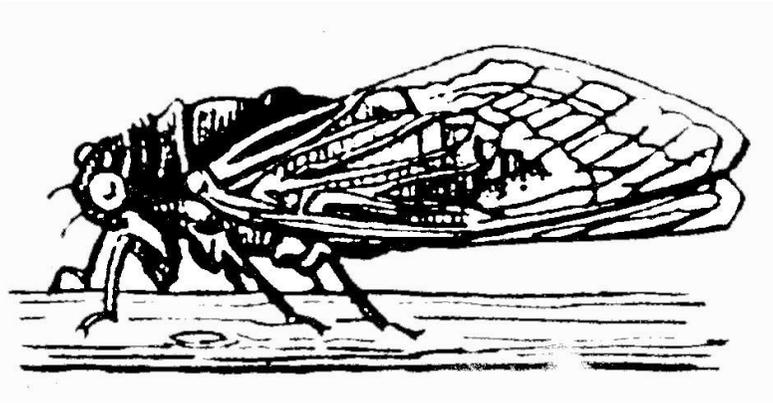
The character Tai  represents and resembles
The fabric of a tent bound to its center pole
And swirling in the winds

The character Chi  a fiery hand
or radiant energy

The whole symbol  may be translated simply as
centrally organized energy.

The poem is called *Pinwheels*.

The Torah, the Tao, the Tai, the tentpole
Runs through all the soul's enthusiasms, the brush work scenery
The computer-enhanced revelations of galactic pinwheels.
Through all the pinwheeling pinwheels of clustered pinwheels
Of galaxies or other bright points
And on all scales going up and out to the last
ripple of the event horizon
Or down and in to the secrecies of the atom
The winds swirl suits of light
tent cloths of bright points
About tent poles of Torah, of Tao, of Tai Chi
While an ungraspable center holds.



Cicadas

Note: The periodic cicadas, or seventeen-year locusts, are the longest-lived insects. They spend almost their entire seventeen-year life span in the pupal stage of development, living underground, feeding on the juices of tree roots. Then, in the seventeenth summer of their lives, that entire generation emerges, almost at once, molts into the winged adult stage, sings, mates, lays eggs, and dies within a few weeks' time.

Cicadas cicadas cicadas cicadas

emerging
 everywhere in the brush
clinging to leaves
in their tanned leather ditch digger's
 overalls

Oh no, that's not you
 just empty cases
cast-off life masks

Now I see you
 red-eyed, black-hulled
with tiny wrinkled dragon wings
drying—expanding into
 lead and glass lace

And there you are with ready wings
launching yourself into
 the great heights of the basswoods
A metallic rain of sound shimmers
 the sun-hot afternoon air

Cicadas cicadas cicadas cicadas

It was a summer more than half
 my life ago
when I heard the preceding generation
 of your kind
trilling their readiness to complete
 their lives
They were my elders then
and their readiness preceded mine

But now you of the ensuing brood
 are trilling
with a readiness
still far preceding mine

Elephant, You Pass

Elephant, you pass.

The ground sinks.

You see the bush, you see the shadow
in the shadow is a man

You do *not* see him

A man reaching

does not reach as far as your teeth

yet this man will pierce your belly
for this one must take your meat

I wait beside the track

you will pass again

I must slip between your great feet
to open your belly

Your blood will dry brown on
my chest

while I listen from the forest

you will tear the bushes

and drag your intestines

I have taken the fat meat

of your brothers, elephant—

and you have crushed the head bones
of my kinsmen

Tonight we will lick up your fat

and dance

singing your name

Tonight women will weep

and no one will eat

I trust in the loins of my father

I trust in the milk of my mother

I trust in my long-handled killing tooth

Elephant, you pass.





A Bird Flew In

I was sitting at the table in a country kitchen
the windows to my right
let in the summer morning
the door opposite me
was open
leafy twigs of maple hung
just outside
I had a typing paper pad
and an erasable pen
I was working on drawing new valves
for the hydraulic well driver
which had no punch
the way it was set up yesterday
I was just coming up with something
when a small bird
swooped in the door
and flew straight at my face

I pushed my left hand up out
in front of him
and he pulled up
almost brushing my palm
and flew back out the door
swooping out and up
but about five feet outside
He turned and flew straight back at me
so I again held up my palm
and he turned again and went out

On his third pass I was expecting him
so I looked straight at him
and caught his eye
that slowed him up enough
so he landed on the top rung
of the chair back opposite me
which was pushed up close
to the table

He had two paper-thin two-inch
metal disks in his bill
He looked straight at me
which for him was sideways
I held my hand out palm up
He dropped the disks on the table
close enough

They were metal plates
delicately perforated in a
mottled pattern
as if they had been etched by acid
or rusted out
then repolished and anodized
to a glossy black lightly iridescent finish
I picked one up
and the figure-ground relationships
of the perforations started shifting
and I began to recognize
a ring of animal silhouettes
around its outer edge
very lifelike
almost like a photo engraving

There was an African wildebeest
and a long-horned antelope
a greater kudu, I believe
and a mixed group
of other African grazers

The bird was still perched
on the chair back
looking at me sideways
waiting for my answer

it was so quiet between us
that I didn't actually have to speak
but it was as if I said
"Before the sun comes out of the sea it's over Africa"
and inside the word "Africa"

we both saw
the wide plains of Kenya
the Serengeti
with vast herds grazing in the equatorial heat
and it was bright all around us
and I opened my eyes
and there was sun coming through
the clear poly tarp door
of my bent pole lodge
and there was about a foot
of snow in the woods
that morning

End note for “Day Three of the Attack”

Editor’s note: Raymundo Wesley Rodriguez served as Tiano Chaplin, or “Behique,” of the New York City Fire Department Battalion #4, and worked closely with Arthur on Native American representation issues and preservation of tribal lands.

“On September 11, 2001, we watched helplessly as Manahatta exploded, went ablaze, and collapsed. We watched helplessly as an important and close part of our community raced to their deaths to save those who were not so well-trained, those who perhaps had not embraced Manahatta for all it could be embraced for.”

“We sat for two more days, trying to locate our beloved bomberos, the firemen (fire monkeys, as we affectionately call them) who were such a part of our lives. City-dwelling bomberos have a penchant for jungle-gymming around in mountaintop forests while on vacation.”

“As the last of the living bodies was pulled from the ashes, we checked lists, and did not see our brothers’ names among the living or dead.”

“On the evening of Day 3, we decided to do as our ancestors had done, and begin funeral rites for our fallen and missing. The inner council met, and held temescal. When we exited, the clear skies which seemed to be feeding the fires and endless smoke had clouded, and it was raining. Something it hadn’t done for quite a while, but which was badly needed. In the next few days that followed the rain, we located our living and injured, and tended to them. Among the sizzling, smoldering embers, we counted our dead, and sang for them, bringing them into our lives through their transformation as ancestors and heroes.”

“This piece came to Arthur in a vision as we left temescal that third night, and discovered it was raining.”

Raymundo



Stroking the Sparrow's Tail
and other poems