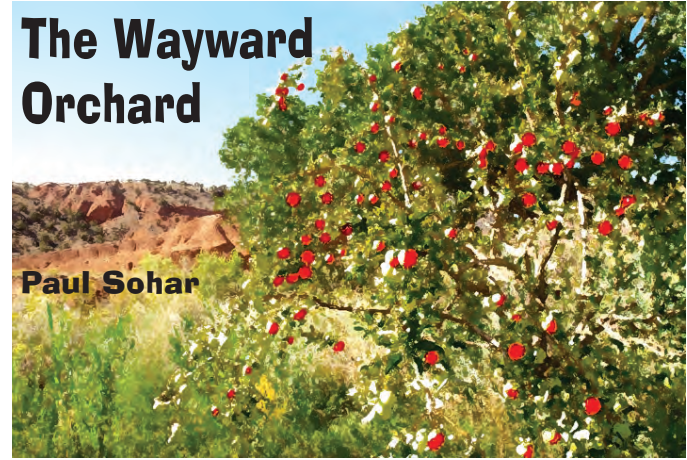


# The Wayward Orchard

Paul Sohar



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## Sunfish Pond

No, I don't turn into a hawk or  
any other bird when I look up  
at the sky, swimming on my  
back in Sunfish Pond,

I only turn into myself,  
the one I undressed on the shore  
and let loose naked in the pond to swim

and pretend I was flying like the hawks  
in the cool waves of the sky above...

thus I, too, can fly and what's more  
I can enjoy the freedom of flying,  
the freedom of the limitless sky,

the freedom of a hawk  
who can glide right through a  
lightning bolt as my earthbound  
body can through cigarette smoke

and the hawk can go on flying without  
even ruffling a feather or moving a toe,  
riding the wind with more ease  
and grace than a cloud...

No flying permitted!  
Tack that to the wind and see  
what hiking boots can do,  
if I still find them on the shore...

yet freedom is wherever you demand it,  
not only in the sky or the middle of a  
forbidden pond or on an unmarked trail...

freedom for a worm is to crawl  
for a fish to swim  
for a bird to fly  
for man to make believe he too  
can soar into the sky...

## Requiem for a Refugee Camp

On that day I'll become as blind  
as a locked gate of a dead-end street  
leading to a refugee camp  
in a war-torn city

where people go to find long lost relatives —  
in a hushed tone they inquire  
after knocking politely on the gate  
broken boards nailed together  
maybe with some prematurely rusting  
sheet metal mixed in  
beer signs most likely from the good old days  
when it was all right to laugh  
and kick some teeth in  
they knock and wait and knock and wait  
muttering words of comfort to one another  
words they already know like an incantation  
and pretend to hear  
in spite of their disabilities they carry with them  
such as plywood windows  
buses without wheels  
little signs that there may be something alive  
if nothing else a fraying memory  
it's a burden they must carry  
in addition to the search for the missing  
in that city where  
I'll be as blind  
as a locked gate with only silence behind it.  
Only the blind will hope there is more  
to the world than one huge refugee camp.

## Summer Past

I don't trust this autumn wind that saunters  
into the screened porch and stumbles around  
the sharp corners as if trying to settle down  
here for the winter,

but there's little comfort on the concrete floor  
even less on the empty picnic table  
and the wind keeps rattling around,  
talking to itself,  
nothing but gibberish to me standing by the door  
and listening to this demented ghost  
of a summer past;

clearly, it has no place in the house,  
but should I let it winter out there  
in the porch where no one else would  
want to linger...

we have much to say to each other  
but instead each of us blows dust in his own wounds  
with the bitterness of having to retreat  
from a winter we cannot fight.

## The Geese Were Gone

It was a bright and sunny day  
without a cloud on a breeze  
to gussy up the sky and  
without the flock of geese  
that must have crashed into the golf  
course somewhere very near  
for the silence was so final  
its camouflaged flames could sear  
the eyes and slice the mind  
trying to comprehend the flow  
of motionless moments conveying  
the end in a self-centered glow —  
the cries of the fractured wings  
could be painfully felt  
in one's own suspiciously uninjured  
bones and immaculate pelt —  
it was the end fermenting the end  
or a pedestal for its display  
nothing was moving  
the geese were gone  
it was a bright and sunny day.

## The Wayward Orchard

The fire trail is a dried-up umbilical cord  
I almost have to hold it in my hands to find  
this valley, an orchard of wayward apple trees,  
bulging with blushing roundness,  
silently sucking up the august sun;

they're too full for the wind to play on,  
their story is told by the hesitant twangs  
of the maple, about someone who came here  
long before me and made this valley his bed,  
probably read his destiny as spelled out in  
the clouds by the same old wind...

Maybe he died here under the apple trees  
whose gifts bulge now only for the deer,  
and the deer fatten themselves for the hunt...

I bring nothing to the valley and  
take away nothing but the story of  
someone who long ago buried his passion  
for living in this valley and then buried himself,  
here, where his wayward daughters  
still bulge with passion...

It's someone else's ballad,  
yet I can feel the earth pulling on my feet,  
roots that feed me with the sap of fables,  
the company of old friends  
I don't even have to know.

Sometimes I, too, lie here dead and get reborn  
with apples in my hands...

## Mount Katahdin

The mountain returns  
man's defiant gaze  
a balm I use to rub on my goose bumps  
another myth I refuse to explain

god sees all but  
takes note of none

doesn't reject nor accept your sacrifice  
and doesn't mind if you obsess about it

go climb if you want  
the mountain is yours  
the ticks you carry also belong to you

but don't ask god to explain it all  
if you don't listen to the trailside greens  
confessing to your boots

the silence of the mountain  
is a naked monument  
echoing the dome of an ancient library

don't go to the mountain  
seeking god  
god is not lost  
needs no seeking

sits there on the mountain  
teasing you if it's laughter

the silence sounds like to you

## A Tour Without Virgil

a make-believe tour inside  
an insane asylum,  
talking with someone  
who's someone else;

words are what  
shape our lips  
and pictures we see  
put a glow in the eyes,

and yet the words here  
flee like numbers on TV,  
because the lips you watch  
belong to someone else;

the eyes that watch you  
are busy painting pictures,  
you could drown in the oil,  
smothered by the ochre smears,

and soon the pictures  
overlap in waves, the garden  
hangs on the wall  
and the wall walks

behind you, your shadow  
holds it for an umbrella,  
and inside it locked up  
is your private 10th Circle.

## The Ravished

The truly naked skin is all alone  
and not about to be dressed,  
but waiting for its nakedness  
to slowly hatch  
the colorless and odorless  
ants of eternity...

yet the skin about to be dressed  
in caresses' silk  
proudly bears its naked petals  
and strokes the fruits wrapped in them  
with unhurried fantasies,  
watching the world sweeten and swell,

and knows nothing about  
the nakedness of a singularity  
in the busy universe,  
about the stark reality  
of absence and the nudity vibrating  
between parallel lines...

## Ideal

I watched the one with windswept eyes,  
whose smile had withstood the storm,  
that was the one who wrenched my gaze  
away from future's maps and tools  
and carved in me a thirst for winds.

The winds of swooping valleys and  
defiant cliffs massaged my throat,  
yet thirsty I am for more of it  
and more of everything around,

for something even past that face  
whose eyes have never met with mine;  
we wrestled with the same warm wind  
but lost our way on trails apart.

## Daniel

The lions arrive by motorcycles long  
before Daniel sneaks alone into the lions' cave;

it's well into the happy hour  
when the din unloosens his prayers,  
he doesn't have to be afraid of the sound  
of his voice if he can't hear it,

and he already knows what the lions will have to say  
and how to nod...

And when they start to maul his face, his neck and lips,  
he sticks out his tongue too,  
so he will never have to say a thing again

as a lion drags his helpless body in a corner of the den  
for the final bites to be consecrated....

and Daniel feels his soul spurt out of his mangled  
offering, the sweet swelling of the spirit  
gobbled up by hairy mouths, his goose bumps  
torn off by clumsy paws

to reveal a new skin  
purified by well-rehearsed fast dreams,

but soon he expires in convulsions  
that shake his whole existence, his dasein —

Later, he showers his dead body,  
or what's left of it,  
already thinking about dinner.

Cheek to cheek, jowl to jowl, with the lions.

## My Dream House

We build a home and keep  
working on it all through life  
to have a place in which to die, for  
anywhere else death would not be true,  
only a disappearance;

the colors of the day  
perish with a breeze,  
and so does the flavor  
of handshakes and hugs,  
whether sweet or sour,

but man must go out carrying  
the mask of death,  
must have a wall where to hang  
the finished picture,  
the collage of a life,

but it's more like a group photo without faces,  
left at a flea market in the sticking drawer of a chest,  
when it comes to a mislaid life,  
a disappearance deprived  
of the parting kiss of a living house;

death demands the embrace of walls papered  
with snapshots, pictures, bills  
and death certificates.

We must build that house  
before it can be demolished.

## The God of Spring

The spring sunlight steps over the piously  
green shade of the pines,  
setting its feet firmly on the unshaven face  
of a dead lawn,  
waiting for me to kiss its feet,  
to bow to the conqueror  
whose naked legs  
tower over my measly mortal world,  
the house now reduced to something ridiculous  
with the snow shovel still guarding the storm door  
and an unmated glove lying on the porch floor,

but this god is patient,  
gives me a whole warm afternoon  
plus its muscular legs to hold  
as it waits for the snow on my forehead to melt,  
for my prayers to open up  
like the crocuses and the front door;

Will you accept something from my empty hands?  
The memory of spring birds,  
the chattering scent trapped  
in a closet with summer clothes?

I'm ready to fling open the windows,  
the welcoming hands of the house.  
Come closer,  
even if your next step kicks over the roof;  
my prayer lies underneath  
as bare as sunshine.



## The (Last) Party

Once more the party will end  
and the empty bottles will hurl  
themselves against the bottom of  
the recycling bin,  
instead of the bare bricks of the fireplace,

and we will say good-by  
as if the darkness of the night  
had burst forth from  
our very own overburdened bowels.

The door will slam shut like the back cover of  
an encyclopedia,  
the car will run over another  
dead-end road,  
and the dawn will slice off another dream,  
we hope, before the head starts banging.

What's the matter? Didn't you enjoy the party?  
No, I'm not too drunk to drive.

And the night will trample all  
over us like a tipsy dragon  
looking for a place to pee.

Why did we stay so long?

No, I didn't yawn, it was only a burp  
from the deeper folds of the belly,  
probably mine,  
small change from the rifled rasps of the throat.

Here it is, take it. That's all I've got,  
at this time of the night.  
I've got nothing left except  
a yearning to hurl myself  
into a recycling bin. And not  
with a bang but a warm thud  
like a rinsed-out detergent container.

## The Secret

Sometimes my secret and I go  
hand in hand together  
out into the street and smile  
at the averted eyes and curious wrinkles  
passing by,  
but mostly it's just the two of us together,  
very close like  
a table and the vase standing on it or  
a window and its faithful shade,  
very close like  
a book and the hand that holds it open,  
that's how close we are,  
with a finger slipped between the pages  
while the book is spread wide open  
by a hand glued firmly to the spine,  
that's how close we are,  
I and my big secret,  
when we hold hands in public  
as if in each other  
we each possessed the life  
promised to us by a song  
on a soft radio from the neighbor's  
backyard at blossom time.

## The Other

My double, he claims, his rags flying,  
he wings his way at me on the skirts of his army coat:

    You can't just walk by me, he says  
blocking the sidewalk like a garbage truck,  
    I'm life itself you know  
    and you cannot walk by life untouched  
    no matter how much you hate the dirt and shit  
    oozing out of my sleeves...

And then his hands fly out like vultures  
landing on my sleeves and chest,

    You can't just walk by this life here  
    keeping your hands in your pockets  
    while mine are bathed in shit,  
    yes, I just wiped my ass with this  
    one I've got tight around your neck,  
    and look at my ass, you innocent bystander,  
    I'll lift my skirt to show it,  
    because this is what life is like,  
    and if you still ignore me  
    I'll lie on top you and let you suck my breasts,  
    suck the vinegar out of this thing I am  
    for this is all you can get out of real life...

Stabbing my face with his beard,  
he forces me to look under his robes,  
at nakedness of ripe red color  
and of wild sewer smell  
until I whip out a credit card from my pocket  
and cut off his hand clinging to my neck.  
He falls away, followed by his hands, like drops  
of steaming excrement on the asphalt, but  
his words crumple my ears as I turn to go:  
    This is your life, sucker, this is it....

## This Wall

This wall by the stairway  
has been waiting in a rhomboid crouch  
for something to happen  
for a good many years  
it's been blank and waiting  
bare and unoccupied  
not even by one picture  
or print in a frame  
or just a mirror perhaps  
on the blank beige surface  
painted a good many years ago  
and then scuffed  
and smeared and scraped  
by the busy traffic passing by  
people running up and down the stairs  
leaving their mark  
busy little brats  
with crayons in their hands  
while the wall just waited  
and waited for It to happen  
even now it's still rhomboid  
and beige and waiting patiently  
like a face  
of uncertain age and sex  
staring into unframed  
unfilled space.

## Summerfest

Two bulging melons  
wrapped in blue denim  
hang over the picnic bench

beer mugs pause to ogle and  
froth up into a smile but  
then slump down into puddles

of oompah blasts down  
under the zigzagging feet and land  
on the grass beyond the tent —

paper plates are the eyes of the  
picnic table eying the wurst and  
kraut and the blue bulges hop

like melons rolling from a cart  
bounce over the polka beat of  
cobblestones laid by the band

and melt into the swirling  
fish tank of the dance floor  
where the picnic explodes

into a million colorful confetti  
that keep raining down for days  
and nights on empty paper plates

## Little Night Music

Late at night the sofa  
spreads out her belly  
and her arms wide open  
even if there's no one there  
late at night when  
time itself may be asleep,

snoring pattern of pelting seconds  
pepper the silence and salt  
the dreams of the restless  
refrigerator: there's a moan  
but the sofa doesn't waken  
only her arms sag as the night  
snuggles up to her,

the bastard son of time,  
he unrolls his being  
all over her helpless body  
and her hopes that can flower  
only thin cigarette smoke  
and turn the living room  
into an empty candy box.

## Being and Its Skin

So what if I stumble,  
drunk on the first draft of air  
slurped directly from the sky?  
And crawl on all fours  
to the other edge of the peak?  
In the vast space below  
I don't even bother to seek out the house  
I left behind.  
Maybe I'll go back down there  
maybe I won't,  
it doesn't matter now.  
At the top it feels good to know  
there's nowhere else to go, just stand . And stand still.  
Still like the air that goes nowhere  
even when tugged by a restless wind.  
The rocks don't move and neither does the sky.  
They are all in the right place  
and they are what they were meant to be.  
And I am where I wanted to be  
and what I was meant to be.  
To go back down would consume  
the substance of being;  
to rise any higher would  
quench being into nothingness.

## Grandma's Silence

A needlepoint flower drops  
its bloom and grandma sits  
there with a magazine.  
She looks up at me without  
taking off her glasses:  
Have you found  
a replacement yet,  
she asks me slowly,  
another son  
to take your place, for  
I do deserve  
to have a son.  
The curtain doesn't shiver  
and the phone refuses to  
ring; we stare  
at the silence growing up  
between us: a dust covered  
but thornless rose.

## The Ruler of the Mirror

A king without a kingdom need  
not be without his crown,  
he can steal or borrow  
or make one up out of glitter  
discarded by some better-off kings  
or buy one in a second-hand royalty store;  
and then the king can  
throw off his civilian garb,  
the belts and buttons of everyday disguise,  
step up to the mirror and  
dress his exiled body  
in the pomp and glitter,  
in the sheer delight  
of his royal self,  
and see in the mirror  
a king standing there  
the sovereign ruler of bottomless glass  
and the four walls around it;  
so what if the world had failed to get  
the proclamation,  
a king with a crown  
and the courage to wear it  
is not without a kingdom.

## The Silent Dreamer

Dusk clings to the windows, its charcoal  
belly rubs the glint off the glass and the long  
tentacles smudge up the sky, planting  
darkness in every corner of the house  
in piles of shapeless grayish eggs that will  
hatch during the night with cracks and squeaks  
converging in a long rumble of her dream  
in the shape of an eyeless snake smiling at  
the dreamer's silly fright.  
Why must we know what is yet to come?  
Now it's the dusk to deal with, to  
draw the curtains, turn on the lights  
praying the titles of TV shows  
and names of people to call  
while the darkness builds its nest  
minute by minute within the walls;  
soon it'll be too late to tell her  
fright is but another dream, she'll be  
spinning spider webs of her own.

## Keep It Simple

It could be all so simple  
if we painted every room the same,  
maybe flesh tone would be best;  
we wouldn't have to paint ourselves  
or seek out matching clothes  
when we stood around talking  
to the walls, each to a separate one,  
and of course scaling the windows  
would be easy too, like  
dancing on the ceiling — just one  
step above the molding and the one-note  
symphony would sustain our one frozen gesture,  
maybe a hand over the eyes,  
just in case another color  
were to intrude into our perfect home.

## Canyon Dreams

Only in mile-deep silence do  
red rocks flex their muscles and  
scale the walls to watch the virgin  
chasm crying out between them;

the sky overflows with blue  
well-rehearsed harmonies,  
but the pillars soak up  
the excess chords along with those

who come here to listen to  
the color of red rocks and seek  
their powerful embrace: flesh  
no matter how hard it speaks

is only flesh flexed and open  
and ready to be sacrificed  
to the heavy shadows discarded  
like pods by the rising pillars,

they stand and fall with the blue  
rhythms of the sky; sweat blends  
into those who get lost down here  
and makes them grow as cliffs.

## About Paul Sohar

Paul Sohar was able to pursue literature full time when he went on disability from his day job in a chemistry lab. The results have been published in *Agni*, *Chiron*, *Grain*, *Kenyon Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Muse & Stone*, *Rattle*, etc, and seven books of translations from the Hungarian. His own poetry (*Homing Poems*) is available from Iniquity Press. His latest work is *True Tales of a Fictitious Spy*, a creative nonfiction book about the Stalinist prisons (Synergebooks).



Some of the poems in *The Wayward Orchard* were previously published in the following journals:

- Sunfish Pond, *Pointed Circle*
- Requiem for a Refugee Camp, *Santa Lucia*
- Summer Past, *Pointed Circle*
- The Geese Were Gone, *Reflect*
- Mount Katahdin, *Aurorean*
- The Ravished, *Zillah*
- Ideal, *New Authors' Journal*
- My Dream House, *Frisson*
- The God of Spring, *St. Sebastian Journal*
- This Wall, *LSR*
- Being and Its Skin, *Rattle*
- Grandma's Silence, *SWAG*
- The Ruler of the Mirror, *Poets' Corner*
- The Silent Dreamer, *Small Pound*
- Keep It Simple, *Poetry Motel*
- Canyon Dreams, *California Quarterly*