



# A SUNDAY IN PURGATORY

Henry Morgenthau III



## Author's Note

Writing poetry for me is a celebration of the evening of a long life, a coda, a strikingly new expression of my inner being that surprises me as much as those who know me. Now as death kindly waits for me, I am enlivened with thoughts I can't take with me.

In my delayed vocation I have found solace and inspiration in the example of Stanley Kunitz, who continued to write and to tend his garden until the year before he died at one hundred. In one of his best poems, he wrote, "I can scarcely wait 'til tomorrow when a new life begins for me, as it does each day."

But the poet who inspired me the most, as I began to write poems, was Robert Lowell. Kunitz had written that Lowell's *Life Studies* was perhaps the most influential book for modern poetry since Eliot's, *The Wasteland*.

Earlier in my career as a public television producer and writer in Boston, I met with Lowell a number of times, both in his New York apartment and in Castine, Maine,

with him and his wife Elizabeth Hardwick, to discuss the possibility of making a documentary film, using excerpts of *Life Studies*.

My visit was a rare opportunity to observe the intensely disciplined routine of a poet at work. Each morning Lowell isolated himself to work in a fisherman's shack. What the poet, Mary Oliver, calls "a patch of profound unbroken solitude." Then after a short break for a tuna fish sandwich lunch, back to work until late afternoon Martinis. Ultimately Lowell decided he would be willing to have us record him reading his poems, but not to allow a documentary film.

In a letter dated July 29, 1964, following my Castine visit, he wrote:

"What is needed, I think, is for me to appear as a poet, mind and imagination, rather than as a story . . . I think I would begin to wander if I were real or merely an eye floating outside its body and existence."

Lowell's confessional poems continue to serve as a guiding light to illuminate my own poetry. In these precious days I dress my private demons in these scribblings to come out from behind the shadows that have darkened my long and privileged life, sometimes choking, sometimes joking, in a purgatory where I wait to pass through the open gates.

Henry MorgenThau

## THE HALF OPEN DOOR

While listening to the moaning  
of a ghostly choir of lost lovers,  
I try to tell you the truth,  
half hoping you don't hear me,  
as I desperately try to expel  
something stuck in my soul  
I can't bear to live with,  
but don't want to die with.

With a furtive sideways glance  
I peer through a half open door, to behold  
a body gnarled like an old cherry tree.  
Exposed shaft at half-mast,  
he stands between an iconic David,  
beautiful in his awkward adolescent grace,  
and a redolent overripe Schiele harlot.

As though in a pas de deux,  
he moves as I move.  
Is he my partner or my mirror image?  
When the mirror shatters, the truth will out,  
with half truth seen through a door half open.

## BURNT TOAST

Afraid to love, I make love  
to the beloved of another,  
never daring to come out,

I live under anonymous cover.  
In a dark room I spy on life  
through a shattered window.

To intimates, to those who would love me,  
there are secrets I cannot bear to share  
that I confess to strangers, happily.

I look for diamonds buried in the sand.  
I find instead, a rusted knife. A slap  
in the face greets my extended hand.

My fingers blistered by a vengeful stove,  
I scrape bitter crumbs from burnt toast,  
to taste the kiss I miss the most.

## A SUNDAY IN PURGATORY

A voluntary inmate immured  
in a last resort for seniors,  
there are constant reminders,  
the reaper is lurking around that corner.  
I am at home, very much at home,  
here at Ingleside at Rock Creek.  
Distant three miles from my caring daughter.

At Ingleside, a faith-based community  
for vintage Presbyterians, I am an old Jew.  
But that's another story.  
I'm not complaining with so much I want to do,  
doing it at my pace, slowly.  
Anticipation of death is like looking for a new job.

Then suddenly on a Sunday,  
talking recklessly while eating brunch,  
a gristly piece of meat lodges in my throat.  
I struggle for breath, too annoyed to be scared.  
Someone pounds my back to no avail.  
Out of nowhere, an alert pint-sized waiter  
performs the Heimlich maneuver.  
I don't believe it will work.  
It does! Uncorked, I am freed.

Looking up I see the concerned visage and  
reversed collar of a retired Navy chaplain,  
pinch hitting as God's messenger for the day.  
Had he come to perform the last rites,  
to ease my passage from this world to the hereafter?  
Don't jump to dark conclusions.  
In World War II on active duty,  
he learned the Heimlich as well as the *himmlisch*.  
Knowing it is best administered  
to a standing victim,  
he rushed to intervene.  
On this day I am twice blessed  
with the kindness of strangers.

photograph by Pantea A. Tofangchi



Having reached his centennial year, Henry Morgenthau III has recently found a delayed vocation: writing poetry. Formerly a producer and writer for WBGH in Boston, a major contributor to PBS, he received many awards for his pioneering documentaries and talk shows. He produced the series, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Prospect of Mankind*, which she hosted during the last three years of her life. His memoir, *Mostly Morgenthau*, won the annual Jewish Book Council prize for autobiography/memoir. He has recently published poetry in *Nimrod* and an essay, “The White House Revisited,” in *District Lines*, published by *Politics and Prose*. Morgenthau now resides in Washington, D.C.

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HENRY MORGENTHAU III, age 99

“Morgenthau’s poems are crisp, elegant forays into memory both personal and cultural, as he engages, with an ironic, Lowellian eye, a rich cultural history of growing up in affluent Manhattan during the 1920s and 30s. His surgical examinations of self and his unflinching stare into mortality define the unique and honest voice of this remarkable first book of poems.”

PETER BALAKIAN, Author of *Ozone Journal*, 2016 Pulitzer Prize for poetry

“A late bloomer, Henry Morgenthau’s talent shows that old age is a wonderful time for self-expression.”

JANE MAYER, Staff Writer, *The New Yorker*

“It was a delight to read these poems, heartfelt, wry and sparely eloquent. Some made me laugh out loud; others broadened my literary horizons and sense of what poetry take on: do you mean it’s really possible to write about *that* feeling? *That* memory? *That* experience? It is, and Henry Morgenthau III does it beautifully.”

ADAM HOCHSCHILD, Journalist, Author, Co-Founder of *Mother Jones*



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