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YOU MUST RUIN YOUR LIFE:
AN INTERVIEW WITH GERALD STERN

Gerald Stern's street in Lambertville is lined with cherry blossom trees, petals the size of fingerprints blown across the pavement under a gray sky. Lambertville is an historical landmark, a neighborhood of Victorian homes on the edge of the Delaware River. Jerry invites me into his "study," his small two story house; according to him the whole house is a study, a place to write, read, stare, talk with visitors, think, eat, nap. During our discussion, he sits under a photo of the poet Stanley Kunitz holding Jerry's face in his hands. "You know what Stanley was saying to me at that moment? He was saying, 'Jerry, you are the wilderness in American poetry.'" We began our conversation by discussing what it was like when he was just starting out as a poet. One of his new poems, "Stern Country", pokes fun at new poets sending their work unsolicited to older poets.

Eve Grubin: As a young man you must have sent your manuscripts to people.

Gerald Stern: I almost never did that. I did send a long poem when I was about twenty-three years old to W.H. Auden who was living in New York at the time. And he asked me to come in and see him and I assumed he was responding to the poem. That was the only occasion I took the liberty of approaching an older writer. I have a poem about it, "In Memory of W.H. Auden." In the poem I describe the horror of that visit. I knocked on his door, I was with my two friends Jack Gilbert and Richard Hazley, they were envious and furious but they pretended to be supportive. We were all very young.

EG: They were envious of...

GS: The fact that I was going to be meeting the great poet. And that the great poet wanted to see my work. I knocked on his door in the village, he was living at the time on Cornelia Street. And he came down in slippers and a chalky suit jacket and his face all carved with lines, and he invited me up. And there was a roomful of people and they were talking about cheese and theatre and this and that...

EG: They were talking about cheese?

GS: They were aficionados of culture. And I didn't know anything. I was fresh out of Pittsburgh. I grew up in ignorance. I knew Velveeta cheese, Pimiento; Swiss cheese was pretty radical.

EG: What about cheddar?

GS: Oh, cheddar, too radical, forget it. So it was getting dark and I finally asked, "Mr. Auden, are you going to say anything about my poem?" And he said, "Oh, I do like the last ten lines."

EG: How long was the poem?

GS: About 2,000 lines. [Laughs]. So I left shortly after that and I was angry with him for years but then I forgave him later in the poem. I realized, this is kind of absurd. Why should he respond to my poem? That was the wrong person to ask, he wasn't my connection; I liked his poetry and I still do but I should have been approaching Kunitz or possibly Roethke. I was totally uneducated about how "to do it" in the poetry world. I was straight out of Pittsburgh!

EG: Where are your parents from?

GS: My mother was born in Bialystock, a city in Poland where the Polish movement of solidarity got started. Although the Jews in northern Poland identified with the Lithuanians and they called themselves Litvaks, not Polish Jews. She was born in 1900 and was brought to America when she was five years old. My father was eight years old when he came to America and he came from the Ukraine, a little village, a shtetle, about fifty miles from Kiev. His father owned some land. Well, Jews weren't allowed to own land, but he owned it in name; the land

was actually owned by a German... My mother's father was a kind of rabbi. He taught chader¹ and he performed shchitah² on Fridays. And he was a scholar; he wrote articles on Russian literature in Yiddish. And I just found his diary. He never learned English.

EG: Why did your family come here?

GS: There was a great pogrom in 1905 because of an abortive revolution in Russia and of course the Jews were blamed for that.

EG: That always happens, doesn't it, Jews getting blamed for things?

GS: They haven't been blamed yet for SARS. But they are definitely responsible for SARS, for the war in Iraq, and for the bad economic state we are in, and for the rain we are having today. Hundreds of thousands of Jews, like my parents, came here the first part of the century. As you know, the Czars were very hard on the Jews and laid a great weight on them and Jews wanted to get the hell out. My parents were a part of that wave. And they came to Pittsburgh. Why, I don't know.

I grew up as an American. I grew up as a type of Jew, I was born in 1925, the movement was towards getting away from the shtetl and towards various types of assimilation. We still didn't know about Shoa.³ I did actually have some religious feeling as a child. I used to pray at night when I was about ten years old. I had my own personal ritual. I would pray for about fifteen minutes, for everyone I knew, for their safety, for my pet canary, for my stuffed squirrel and my friends. My connection with Judaism, I don't totally understand it. I did grow up in a time just besieged with Jew hatred.

EG: How did that manifest itself, the Jew-hatred?

GS: In various ways. Physical abuse, verbal abuse; at a more subtle level, at an adult level, not being able to get equal treatment at universities, jobs. In Russia and Poland the professions were denied to Jews except in extraordinary

cases. It was more subtle in America. The first wave of anti-semitism here, which I call WASP anti-semitism, as opposed to Polish anti-semitism, started in 1910 when the business and professional community were, as they saw it, threatened by the Jewish immigrant. Jews were moving quickly into the businesses and the professions. By the 20s this is all reflected in the literature. Hemingway, Cummings, Pound, Eliot. There is hatred of the Jews in all of their literature, a fear of the Jews. And Jews are treated despicably. When I was going to school in the 30s I was beaten up and told I killed Christ. I had my glasses smashed. I have an essay on this in my book of upcoming essays.

EG: Did you ever feel that you didn't want to be Jewish?

GS: I never had that feeling. I became more and more Jewish.

EG: Let's talk about your new poems.

GS: You're always the most excited about your new poems. Your poems overtake you. You don't overtake them. That's a truism, although there are people who sit down deliberately to write a book of love poems about left-handed goddesses or what have you. I guess that's OK. I have no problems with left-breasted, I mean left-handed goddesses. Do you think goddesses are left- or right-breasted?

EG: I think they are left-breasted.

GS: They are all left-breasted. In my poems now I am reflecting as a poet on both external and on internal things. I am reflecting what is going on out there, a culture that produces governments and economies. We have one now that is contemptible, I am embarrassed to be an American, and I am embarrassed to be a Democrat. Verbal exchange is not going on anywhere. No one questioned the war, not just the war, but what is coming out of the war. The war is an expression of a spiritual deadness in our culture. These new poems come from that feeling so they express irritation and anger, and they come from me, who I am at this time of life, how I have

been received as a poet, how I perceive my life. These poems come out as kind of ferocious. I am half-delighted and half-amazed at them. They are an attempt to say the truth. If anybody is the guardian spirit of these poems it would be the prophet Amos or the Greek gentleman Diogenes who was looking for an honest man and walked around with a light.

EG: Remind me of who Amos was.

GS: Amos was one of the earlier prophets. He spoke curtly and briefly and didn't beat around the bush when he wanted to tell the ruling powers what was wrong with them. We have no prophets in America. Our only chance for prophecy rests partly with our artists and partly with our intellectual critics. Most of our critics are bowed down in some bureaucratic game of linguistics.

EG: In your new poems, which you describe as angry, do you think it's your id that's speaking?

GS: My id is always speaking.

EG: Is that what your poems are, your id speaking?

GS: Well, I didn't say that. In fact, I don't like the division of life into ego, id, superego or whatever it is. I think it's a crazily artificial way of looking at things. I don't oppose the brain to the heart. I think the heart is in your head, and the brain is in your belly. I love rationalism and I love intelligence and I think it is and should be deeply emotional. And I reject the German notion of separation of emotion from intellect.

EG: That's a German notion?

GS: I think it's Germanic.

EG: That reminds me of your poem with the line "I am sick of the spirit of Lindbergh over everything." I think you are referring to Lindbergh who was a Nazi sympathizer, who was a rational and an intellectual thinker. The line is from, "Behaving Like a Jew."⁴ In the poem, the speaker finds an opossum dead on the road and wants to bury it; the poem is about paying

attention to his suffering. And the poem's title is pointed.

GS: I had trouble with some rabbis over that poem, some rabbis who were literary critics. In the poem the opossum himself is a kind of Jew, with a beard. They didn't like that depiction of him; they thought it was improper. And it may be presumptuous to say that what the narrator did is the way a Jew behaves, to take an animal away from oncoming traffic, but that was the impulse of the moment... The poem is about death, I remember writing it, I was in a hospital in a waiting room and my wife at the time, Pat, was getting treatment for a minor injury, a growth on her wrist, and I was waiting a long time, and I had assumed something serious was going on with her. And that sense of dread was in the air, all of those greasy magazines full of heart disease and cancer. And I was reading an article by Charles Lindbergh, I think it was in *Readers Digest*...

EG: Remind me, who was Charles Lindbergh? The first person to fly around the world?

GS: The first person to fly across the Atlantic solo. Well, he flew with a cat.

EG: Why a cat?

GS: There were no dogs available. He flew from New York to Paris. Lindbergh, Lindy. The ticker tape parade that took place when he returned was probably the biggest parade they ever had until World War II was over. It was this great victory of conquering water, like conquering space, conquering distance. He was a major hero for most of his life. The other side of the coin was that Lindbergh was a supporter of the German government, the Nazi movement. He was a noted anti-semitic. Anti-semitism in the 20s, 30s and 40s was incredibly powerful. Lindy was a complex package. He represented the concept of individualism, certain American ideals, going out alone, isolation from the city, a love of tradition even though he was innovative in air travel, a kind of anomaly, similar to

Henry Ford who was a friend of his, another Nazi sympathizer. Lindbergh's article was about death; there was a certain embracing of death, an acceptance of death. What struck me was that it was the very opposite of the Jewish view of death.

EG: In the Jewish view, death is an outrage.

GS: Yes, it is a terrible thing. It is a sadness. It's a great loss, it's the end of life. And the Jewish toast is to life.

EG: L'Chaim.

GS: L'Chaim. But in Lindbergh's case it was a kind of pan-Germanic acceptance of death. You can hear the spirit of Wagner there. It's all of a piece. I was giving a reading at the time in Philadelphia. I wrote that poem in the mid-70s. I was reading with Muriel Rukeyser, who was very well known at the time, and I was the younger poet, the warm up act, if you will. We were reading at the Walnut Street Theatre. Some very aggressive guy in the audience was attacking me because of the language of the poem. He kept saying that he didn't know what I was saying about Lindbergh. There was a tone of malevolence in his voice. I said in a low voice to Muriel: "I don't want to be mean." And she said, "Be mean, be mean." So I told the guy, "No Jew in his right mind would go across the Atlantic Ocean by himself." But then I amended it and said, "An Israeli would." That got a good laugh and put him in his place.

EG: A lot of your poems emphasize an empathy with the victim, with the sufferer, combined with humor and playfulness.

GS: I just wrote a poem two days ago called "Tenderness." It's a poem about what you just said to a certain degree. The poet Linda Gregg, a dear friend, is suffering from breast cancer, going through her fourth round of chemo now. She talked to me about some things that happened at the clinic. She doesn't have health insurance so she is getting treatment at a clinic. This could provoke different attitudes in people: bitterness anger, frustration, exhaustion, but it provoked in her a kind of

strange generosity, a concern for the other people who are undergoing treatment. They are all in a room together, those being treated for radiation and chemotherapy and those waiting for it. She always talks to me about the other people there. And of course, outside my kitchen window where we just were, there is a Redbud tree—I don't know if you noticed it—and it was in full bloom about three days ago. It was unbearably beautiful with bees in full sunshine; there were hundreds of bees in the tree. The poem is for Linda and begins with the image of the Redbud tree.

Now, I am going to get some Pepsi-Cola. Let's sing a song. "Pepsi-Cola hits the spot, twelve full ounces, that's a lot, nickel trickle..." It's a commercial from the 40s. Twelve full ounces was supposed to be a lot. Now they have twenty ounce bottles. [Goes to kitchen to bring us something to drink.]...

EG: There is so much rage in your new poems, there is a different tone in them than in your earlier poems.

GS: The earlier poems, when I talked about dead animals, those poems are gentle, pitying, loving. Here I am seeking justice. Earlier, the rage was there but it was more hidden. Now, I am saying, "Enough play acting, there is not a lot of time, so let's say what we have to say." Consider the last line of my new poem "Luck" and think of Rilke's most famous line. What is his most famous line?

EG: "You must change your life"?

GS: Yes. "Luck" ends, "You must ruin your life." You must give it up. Our choice is to give it up to get something else. That is the only way to move forward. Throw yourself in the filthy river and take the chance of drowning or getting some dread disease (e.e. cummings used to say that, a dread "dizez"). So tell that to the little MFA students who are scratching each other's backs and who are getting published in little magazines, writing little reviews about each other and promoting each other and writing ass kissing letters to minor critics and doing what the critics tell them to do. They don't

want to ruin their lives. They want to get tenure and get high salaries, and these days you can get high salaries.

EG: I heard a rabbi say recently, "You must give up what you wanted to get what you wanted."

GS: That is kind of Buddhistic.

EG: He is really saying that many of the things we hang on to are not what will point us in the direction we want to go in.

GS: The things you hang on to cloak what you really want.

EG: Yes, once you give up what you want maybe you can get what you really want.

GS: If you are lucky. Of course, let's not forget that a lot of people don't get what they want. We should not forget that. Bless them. Take our field, poetry. A lot of people go into it and end up not being recognized poets, whatever that means. Is it a legitimate life anyhow? You can be an accountant; you don't have to be a recognized accountant. You can be an upholsterer and not be a recognized upholsterer, and be sad the day you don't get a prize or are not in an anthology. "Oh, I am not in the upholsterer anthology! All of the nails I have had in my mouth, the nails I have spit, did they consider that? Oh, so sad. Curse the day on which I was born!" And we are not all lucky to be Lear, to go through his hell. You must be run over by your own Mack truck.

It's a strange "dizez." First, we fool around with words. We live in this clean lovely innocent world, and if we are lucky, if we publish a few poems or make some connections where we learn some more things or we get jobs or write articles, then we start getting the germ of wanting to be chosen. It's probably inherent in the art form. I am not altogether sure of this. I wonder if the anonymous writers who wrote the early Egyptian lyrics were trying for immortality.

EG: What about the person who wrote "Western wind, when will thou blow." Did he want to be chosen by Helen Vendler?

GS: First of all, he wasn't chosen by Helen Vendler nor was Helen Vendler chosen by him or, as Shakespeare said, "What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba, That he should weep for her?" It's quite possible that that person did want the recognition. Think of the anonymous artists that painted on the cave walls. It's kind of a let down, a "dizez," a painful thing to be constantly looking for the award. I did not win the Pulitzer prize this year. Someone else did. I was eligible for it. Well, am I bitter because of that? A little. Do I think I should have won? Of course. Do I mean that? Yes. Am I right? Yes! Does it matter? Who the fuck is Pulitzer? Who is on the committee? And what is the politics of the committee and how did it choose what it did and what committee does it go to after that? And after all these things, there still remains this given called the Pulitzer Prize that I didn't get this year. I was nominated two or three times. And it's OK. I have had a lucky life as far as getting accolades and such. But it is not lucky anymore to publish a book of poems—you have to win a prize.

There is the scene in Hamlet when Laertes jumps into Ophelia's grave and she had committed suicide and Catholics don't bury suicides in a Catholic grave. Laertes cried, "What ceremony else!" That is what the poets say: "What ceremony else?" What about this prize or that prize? I am saying it's a "dizez." Maybe it started with the Romantics. Shakespeare didn't bother to collect his own work. Certainly from the Romantic poets on, it's not earlier. To recreate your person. Your personality—the cult of Jerry, the cult of Eve—has been the main business of artists. We want to say finally, don't we, because it is always said in this discussion: the joy is in the act of creating, writing the beautiful poem. Of course, that is the final joy. But there remains the bitterness. And my guess is that it's Romantic, post-Romantic.

EG: What do you think about Emily Dickinson in relation to this issue?

GS: She did publish a few poems! And she carefully saved all of her work. It's a very strange business. Most people who sit beside us calmly on trains or stand beside us in drugstores don't understand the agony (and the ecstasy!) of being a writer and the ridiculousness of it. I am a little ashamed of it. I am a little ashamed of my own feelings about it. Keats certainly knew he would...

EG: ...be among the English poets.

GS: I say, I will be among the Mongolian poets! You must ruin your life! Drink Diet Coke, it contains chemicals!

EG: I have always been moved by that Keats line from one of his letters, "I think I will be among the English poets after my death." His letters and poems embody humility and integrity, and at the same time, that statement is so manly, so confident.

GS: He had a practical intelligence. His was one of the sanest lives. A love for friends. Think about his sanity. Compared to even Coleridge and Wordsworth—two poets I like a lot, Coleridge I love—compared to them, he was totally sane.

EG: Except with his fiancé he wasn't.

GS: Well, you can have a little madness! I have a new poem called "Loving the Mirrors" that is about fucking. Have you ever written about fucking? Do you disguise it?

EG: Yes, I think so.

GS: Why?

EG: You can't see it or feel it if you don't disguise it.

GS: That is an interesting comment because you are saying that only through metaphor can you see it.

EG: Right.

GS: In my experience, women describe the sexual act with more cunning than men do.

EG: Yes, they do.

GS: They are more aware of the humor of it, the complexity

of it, how it is connected to the larger dimension.

EG: Men have so many myths surrounding it.

GS: Like it's a celebration of their manliness. Do women ever think of making love as a celebration of being feminine? There was a group of women in the 70s who thought so. My poem about fucking takes place in the 70s.

EG: The poem is not very graphic.

GS: It's actually not about fucking. It's about a state of mind at a certain period of time. Do you claim that for women it's about love? Then what is it for men?

EG: Ultimately it's love for men too but they have an easier time separating love from it, and this makes men sad. It's the most intimate way that two souls can come into contact with each other.

GS: More intimate than a mother and child, a mother giving milk to a child?

EG: It's the most intimate way that two adult souls can come together.

GS: Is it a perversion to enjoy sex when love is not attached?

EG: Yes.

GS: But many people do that.

EG: Most people do that.

GS: So then life is sad. I didn't know life was sad until this moment!...

EG: What are you angry about in the new poems? Where is the anger coming from?

GS: All my life I have been crazily sensitive to the issue of deceit. I sit there with my beloved Anne Marie at night sometimes watching television, and she is exhausted from a hard day of raising children, reading student papers, writing poems, paying bills, cooking meals. I am there and although I had a hard day too, not as hard as her's, and I am there rag-

ing about the TV... I am excessively sensitive to all forms of lying. I can't stand advertisements. When I came back to America after a long absence of not seeing television and I saw for the first time two adults talking about soap or a car and pretending they were personally and dramatically involved in this, it was unbearable to me. Some people can stand the sun and others can't, they get skin cancer. I get skin cancer when I see advertisements. I can't stand lies, and I can't stand it when people say, "That's the way it goes" or "That's how you pay for programs" or "Politicians are politicians." Fuck 'em. Tell the truth!

EG: Let's connect poetry to this issue of lying. Language can be used to lie. How does language tell the truth? How do words do that?

GS: It's a very complicated art. Propaganda is too. It's an agony to explain to young people that they are being abused and lied to and diddled. Should we be angry with them because they are victims or prisoners of the culture? Or should we be angry with the ones who victimize them? Poetry is a gift that hopefully will transcend all this. Words in poems can enlarge an understanding; it's how they appear in a context, how they are used efficiently.

EG: We have this English language that we were born into. You also have Yiddish and some Hebrew. But you write in English, a relatively new language in your family history. How can this language get to the core truths?

GS: I believe it takes a lifetime of giving yourself to the language, gradually accommodating to the truth; the refinement of the poem is the search for the truth. When I was 39 years old or 40 or so and my poems were not working, I had a sense of feeling that I was in a false place, not just aesthetically but morally and I felt I was lying; I hadn't found my voice, is what I might have said. And suddenly at that age, the famous age of 40, suddenly I found a new voice, a new poem. I may have found it through language, just through language,

or I may have found it by growing as a human being and suffering as a human being suffers and writing poems which I and others found not adequate. My process of arriving at the correct poem, at the expressive poem, at the beautiful poem was a moral issue; it wasn't just a technical or aesthetic issue; it is always a moral issue. And getting it right and exact is a moral issue; telling the truth is a moral issue.

EG: Do you think Pound and Eliot thought that?

GS: Yes, well, definitely Pound did. Pound was a moralist. He took his ten-year vow of silence, although it was probably a "dizez," but he did it also as an act of remorse, remorseful about his writing; he felt he was a failure. And I think he was a failure as a poet. I think he is profound but he was a kind of failure in doing what he wanted to do. Eliot was less ambitious, more cautious, more contrived. Of the two, I dislike Eliot. He was sneaky, he didn't put himself on the line, he protected himself, he associated with rich people, he did his job, as he describes in "Four Quartets," of telling people to pull the windows shut during the war. So I'll give him a medal of conduct.

The voyage is one of finding the appropriate language and for me it's a moral issue. For others it is not. I don't know where I get this moral outrage. I remember when I was fifteen years old and trying to communicate with my poor parents over dinner. Maybe it was about war or racism and they were less than honest, evasive, sentimental or said what they read in the newspaper. Enraged, I pulled the table cloth with all the food on a Friday night. The snow-white tablecloth with the gravy and everything spilled, and my father sat there white faced and stunned. Such was my rage. Should I get a medal or should I do penance? I used to argue with my parents over Israel. (Later in life, I was an adult at the time of the War of Independence, I was always sensitive to the issue and alert to it and thought of Israel as another home and I still do. When the six day war was happening, I sat there listening every

second to the radio to hear what was happening to my people.) But when I heard my mother read some newspaper that came to her door or participate in any kind of act that was sentimental or melodramatic, I would react with excessive moralism. She would say something about the Israeli presence in the Arab culture, something like, "Look what we have done for the Arabs. We built hospitals and schools for them." I would see red. The stupidity of this as an argument!

EG: You smelled a lie.

GS: I smelled a rat. I do think that a lot of the anti-Israel and anti-Zionist philosophy on the part of younger Jews expresses a Jewish desire for integrity, ironically. But many of the anti-Zionists talk about Zionism without knowing how it started, why it started, where it started and what the Jews have experienced in history in any one country. Talk about Bukavina, talk about southern Spain. And then examine the desperate effort for Zionism. I have friends who object to the policies of the Israeli government, which is a government, and in opposing it, invoke what can be called nothing else but anti-semitism. These are friends of mine, and they are people who don't know the history. I get deeply sad.

EG: How do you see your poetry reflecting your secularism? And your Jewish-ness?

GS: To the degree that I am a Jewish poet, my poems contain an idea of a journey, a moral journey.

EG: How does God come into this?

GS: He, She, It comes in as an idea or a force.

EG: Do you believe God exists?

GS: No, I don't, but even as I say it I think I may be wrong.

EG: It's a banal question.

GS: It's like saying do you believe your mother exists? What do you mean, does she exist? There she is! Eighty-three percent of Americans believe in "God." What does that mean? Do they

believe in TV? Do they believe in Bush? By the way, I want to go on record saying that Bush is an asshole. I want the title of this interview to be, "Bush is an Asshole."

EG: Your poem, "The Dancing,"⁵ about a memory of dancing wildly as a child with your parents in a crowded living room in Pittsburgh in 1945 turns into a poem about the Holocaust when you refer to "the other dancing in Germany and Poland." You end the poem with a line that moves me each time I read or hear it, "Oh God of mercy, wild God."

GS: I was interviewed once by Bill Moyers, and I read that poem and he turned to me with his Methodist eyes and said, what do you mean "wild God?" He didn't get it. And I said to myself, I might have said it to him: "You know, you have a *goyisha cupf*."⁶ He looked at me with his Christian head and shook his eyes. This was a *goyisha cupf*! That is the only way to explain it. I like Bill, but those wondrous eyes! That question!

EG: What's interesting is that you didn't just write, "Oh wild God." You also included, "Oh God of mercy." How is God merciful in the context of this poem?

GS: I am saying, "Oh God who *was* merciful; Oh God who we *thought* was a God of mercy; Oh you who *are* a God of mercy."

¹ "Jewish school" in Hebrew.

² "The Kosher ritual slaughter of animals" in Hebrew.

³ "The Holocaust" in Hebrew.

⁴ See poem on page 56.

⁵ See poem on page 57.

⁶ "Non-Jewish head" in Yiddish.



Gerald Stern in front of the Redbud tree in his back yard.