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PROFILES

THE GARDENER

For most of a century, Stanley Kunitz has cultivated generations of poems-and poets.

by Dana Goodyear

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In 1946, just after being discharged from the Army, where he underwent infantry training four times and then refused a commission when it was offered, the poet Stanley Kunitz got a letter from Bennington College inviting him to come and teach. He was baffled—he had no teaching experience—until he learned the origin of the proposition: his friend and fellow-poet Theodore Roethke had had one of his periodic manic



episodes, and, holed up in his faculty cottage, had said he would emerge peaceably only if Kunitz was hired to replace him.



Kunitz's affiliation with Bennington was brief. As he tells it, several weeks before the graduation ceremonies of 1949 a student, Miriam Marx (Groucho's daughter), came to him in hysterics. She told him that she was going to be expelled because of a curfew violation. Kunitz was sympathetic. She was young and vulnerable, and he felt that expulsion would be disastrous for her. He organized a meeting of the student body to protest the school's decision. That night, the president of the college barged into Kunitz's house and testily warned him to stop the protest. Kunitz was repotting a plant at the time and threw it in the president's face. Then he packed up his car.

Kunitz still has a green thumb, and spends the better part of every summer day in his garden in Provincetown, at the tip of Cape Cod. He is ninety-eight, with a fringe of white hair, orbed hazel eyes, and a sketched-in mustache. In Provincetown, he often wears khaki pants, a khaki overshirt, and a blue denim fisherman's cap. He is about five-five, with an appearance of physical delicacy and an attitude of indomitability. He is prone to jumping up mid-conversation to say he's just going to check on the boiler or get a hammer to fix a protruding nail. He shakes his fist in the air as a greeting, and croons "Hel-lo-o-o." (Goodbyes are punctuated with both arms tossed in the air.) A sly hilarity lies behind a precise, courtly manner; he laughs often, and is known for his Martinis and his withering remarks. Dorothy Antczak, a woman in her early forties who used to work in the garden and go shopping with him, recalls being with him at the A. & P. a few years ago. When Kunitz, who still stocks his larder as if it were 1930, came to the register with an overwhelming amount of food, the cashier said in a patronizing voice, "How are you ever going to eat all those groceries by yourself?" Kunitz turned to Dorothy and said, "Well, we do have the six kids, right, honey?" The

cashier looked shocked. “He never is rude,” Antczak said, “but he always has a comeback.”

Kunitz’s house is a two-story gray shingled turn-of-the-century—“twentieth century!”—bungalow that is rumored to have once served as a brothel for sailors who arrived in the nearby harbor. When he bought the house, in 1962, the front yard was a sand dune—there is still sand in the basement—but now it is a fertile perennial garden, built on a steep incline between the house and the front gate. With three brick terraces, the garden is like a jewelry box that unfolds vertically when you open it, and it is filled with a tangle of colors and shapes: spiky lavender, melon-orange daylilies, hostas, fizzy pink spirea, hydrangea, lady’s-mantle, meadow rue. At last count, there were sixty-nine species, including three twenty-foot-tall conical Alberta spruces and a wind-flattened, anthropomorphic juniper tree.

One afternoon in mid-July, Kunitz walked through the garden, deadheading with long, nimble fingers, and told me about its origins. “The problem was first to build these”—he gestured toward the terraces—“and really to transform the pure sand into soil.” To do this, he carted seaweed from the beach and combined it with peat moss and compost. Enriching the soil took several years, but the composition of the garden has taken forty, and is ongoing. In this way, it resembles many of Kunitz’s poems—worried over, many-layered, slow to evolve. In a seventy-five-year writing career, Kunitz, who has won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award, and has been poet laureate twice, has published ten volumes of his own poems. (He has translated several Russian poets, most notably Anna Akhmatova.) At ninety-five, he published his “Collected Poems,” outpacing Thomas Hardy, who boasted about having a new manuscript at eighty-seven.

Kunitz stood looking up at the terraces from the crushed-clamshell path that forms a kind of margin at the garden’s base, as Genine Lentine, his literary assistant, took notes in a speckled

journal. For the past couple of years, Kunitz has been collecting and recording his thoughts about the garden for a book; he and Genine, a woman in her early forties with an air of calm conscientiousness, have been working steadily and plan to have an outline done by fall. She is also trying to capture the mythic set pieces he has told again and again in his life: how he tamed a family of owls and walked out of the woods with them on his outspread arms; how, at twelve, he climbed a quarry wall and dangled there all night, unable to go up or down; how, in the South of France in the nineteen-thirties, he waved day after day at an old man in a steamer chair, and discovered that it was his hero, D. H. Lawrence, shortly before Lawrence's death.

“The prevailing concept of the garden is that each tier constitutes a stanza,” Kunitz said. “There's a difference in the color values in each tier. But there's always a cross-reference—a color always finds an answer or response in the next tier. And then, of course, there is the seasonal evolution. The garden is in bloom until the killing frost. The tiers advance—the late garden is on the upper tiers. It keeps renewing itself. There still is some bloom in the end, as, for example, in the asters.”

Kunitz and his wife, Elise Asher—a painter who has published two collections of poems, “The Meandering Absolute,” in 1955, and “Night Train,” in 2000, when she was eighty-seven—come to Provincetown from New York every year on or around June 21st, their wedding anniversary. (They were married in 1957, the third time for both of them.) This year, the trip was in jeopardy. In March, Kunitz, after giving a talk at New York University on the poetry of the Holocaust—one of a dozen readings or lectures he had given over the previous year—became exhausted and went into the hospital. For two weeks, he barely ate, and when it seemed that he wouldn't recover he was brought home to his apartment, on Twelfth Street. Dozens of friends from all over the country came to say goodbye. His editor at W. W. Norton, Carol Houck Smith, was among the visitors: “I went down on a Monday, a beautiful sunlit day, and the flowers downstairs were coming out and he was surrounded

by orchids. There was a hospital bed, and Stanley was lying on it as if he were on a sarcophagus, very calm. Galway Kinnell”—a poet and a professor at N.Y.U.—“was sitting on the bed, reciting Yeats. So we all stood there, quiet. Galway—with the sunlight, it was beatific—leaned over and kissed him and told him he loved him. And then I went over and held his hands, and sat on the bed there for a while, and I told him I loved him, too. I went away thinking that that was probably the last time, and I wanted to memorize everything. The azaleas coming out downstairs and the camellias, and there were beautiful tulips. It was like a painting. When I found out that he was still with us, and I went down on the Wednesday, Stanley was sitting up in his bathrobe and his jammies, with his newspaper and his glasses in his lap.”

A few days later, Smith went back, and found Kunitz working through some poems with a former student. Soon he was getting letters from friends to congratulate him on “the most successful death since Jesus!” He doesn’t remember anything about that time, but apparently was alert and lucid. At one point, he told Genine, “All I want to do is write poems, and think about the garden, and be in the garden.” Now that he is there, he told me, his plan is not only to write a garden book but “to write a hundred poems!” He looked at me sharply, with a small smile. “Don’t be surprised.”

Two years before Auden, twelve years before Lowell, Stanley Kunitz was born, in Worcester, Massachusetts. The timing of his birth was “awkward,” as he put it in his most famous poem, “The Portrait”: several weeks earlier, his father had killed himself by drinking carbolic acid in a public park, leaving his mother, Yetta Jasspon Kunitz, with two daughters, six and three, and Stanley imminent. Yetta, a strong-willed immigrant from Lithuania, never mentioned what had happened. As

“The Portrait” tells it:

She locked his name
in her deepest cabinet
and would not let him out,
though I could hear him thumping.
When I came down from the attic
with the pastel portrait in my hand
of a long-lipped stranger
with a brave moustache
and deep brown level eyes,
she ripped it into shreds
without a single word
and slapped me hard.
In my sixty-fourth year
I can feel my cheek
still burning.

“I was eight years old, and I had gone poking around the remnants,” Kunitz told me during one of our conversations in his study on Twelfth Street this spring. “I may have had a design, as I think back on it. I think I was searching for something—I was searching for my father. And there in the trunk I found his clothes that had been left behind, and in that trunk I found the first image I had ever had of him.”

What he came to know about his father was only that his name was Solomon Kunitz, that he was a Freemason, that he was a talented public speaker, and that the dressmaking company he and Yetta owned, the apparently flourishing Parisian Wrapper Company, was nearly bankrupt. Kunitz’s mother, a shrewd businesswoman, was able to open a drygoods store on the ruins of the Wrapper Company, and the store eventually became another garment factory. When he was eight, as he recalls it, his mother married Mark Dine, a well-educated man who had been a wine merchant in Europe. Kunitz adored his stepfather, whom he always called Mr. Dine. “We had a great attachment,” Kunitz said.

“He had a real sense of what I needed desperately.” Yetta and Mark Dine began to build a house on Woodford Street, on Providence Hill, the first affluent Jewish neighborhood in Worcester, and, though the construction was intermittent, because of the First World War, Stanley spent time there, planting a victory garden and exploring the woods. Toward the end of 1918, the three-story stucco house with Moorish details was finished. Stanley was visiting a stepbrother, one of Dine’s sons from a previous marriage, when the news came that Mr. Dine had suffered a heart attack while hanging curtains, and had died.

And so the lost father became the overriding theme of Kunitz’s work. (“The fathers merged,” he said. “When I think of ‘father,’ it’s a double image.”) Kunitz, who knew he wanted to be a poet from the time he was a young child, has a motto: Poetry is the conversion of life into legend. In 1930, when he was twenty-five and had recently graduated summa cum laude from Harvard—he was told he couldn’t stay on to teach, because the Anglo-Saxon students would resent his Jewish heritage—he published his first book, “Intellectual Things.” He was devoted to Blake and to the Metaphysical poets, just made fashionable again by T. S. Eliot, and his poems, full of Christian images and obliquity, can seem almost hindered by erudition. The strictly metered lines have an ingrown, flummoxing quality, most conspicuous in the love poems:

So intricately is this world resolved
Of substance arched on thrust of circumstance,
The earth’s organic meaning so involved
That none may break the pattern of his dance;
Lest, deviating, he confound the line
Of reason with the destiny of race,
And, altering the perilous design,
Bring ruin like a rain on time and space.

Although some critics of the time found Kunitz’s verse esoteric, the collection was saluted by

the great William Rose Benét in *The Saturday Review*: “There is a ‘new’ poet. His first book, ‘Intellectual Things,’ is an event. . . . Here is a man immediately asserting his own fresh utterance, modern and yet very old, intricate and metaphysical and yet undeniably full of the sagacity of the true seer, the poet born.” That same year, Kunitz, who was living in New York, married a poet named Helen Pearce. They moved out of the city, to a hundred-acre farm near Mansfield Center, Connecticut, where Kunitz plowed the fields with a pair of white oxen and sold herbs to markets in Hartford.

Nearly fifteen years passed before he published his second collection, “Passport to the War.” The book was mostly well reviewed, but it disappeared fast. The outstanding poem of the collection, “Father and Son,” picks up the lost-father motif. Kunitz describes pursuing his father through the twilight fields of suburban Worcester, imagining how to make up for all the lost time, how to “bridge the chasm in a casual tone,” when, suddenly, “At the water’s edge, where the smothering ferns lifted / Their arms, ‘Father!’ I cried, ‘Return! You know / The way. I’ll wipe the mudstains from your clothes; / No trace, I promise, will remain. Instruct / Your son, whirling between two wars, / In the Gemara of your gentleness.’ ” This was before Ginsberg’s “Kaddish” and Plath’s “Daddy,” when direct address of a parent was still a surprising poetic strategy.

In “The Testing-Tree,” a poem published in a collection of the same name in 1971, Kunitz tells how, as a child, he took refuge in the woods around the house on Woodford Street. After racing the three miles home from school, he would stand in front of a huge oak with a pocketful of lucky stones, preparing to take his chances with the ultimate: “*Father wherever you are / I have only three throws / bless my good right arm. / In the haze of afternoon, / while the air flowed saffron, / I played my game for keeps— / for love, for poetry, / and for eternal life.*”

Greg and Carol Stockmal live in the house on Woodford Street today. “It’s still *his* house,” Greg

said in a distinct Massachusetts accent when I spoke to him on the phone. “We’re just taking care of it for a while.” The Stockmals, both natives of Worcester in their fifties, moved in twenty-four years ago. They met Kunitz in 1985, when the city had a poetry festival to mark his eightieth birthday. “We came home one day from shopping and there was a crowd of people standing in front of the house,” Greg said. “I looked into the crowd and saw Stanley. We invited him in. He said that he hadn’t been in the house in sixty-five years, and that the inside looked exactly the same as when he lived there. He said that there used to be a pear tree in the back yard that had the most delicious pears you ever tasted. I said, ‘You wanna know something? It’s still there, and they are the most delicious pears.’ He looked at me and said, ‘I planted that tree.’ Every fall after that, I started sending him a box.” Kunitz has a late poem about this called “My Mother’s Pears,” in the volume “Passing Through,” which was published when he was ninety, and which won a National Book Award.

Greg and Carol work night shifts at their respective jobs, and they consider the maintenance and restoration of the house their full-time occupation. They have filled it with furniture original to the period when Kunitz lived there—throne chairs, majolica, Oriental rugs. They spend their spare time scouring flea markets and antique stores for things like old-fashioned plumbing fixtures.

A few years ago, the Stockmals were at an estate sale in Newport, and came across a 1912 Wasserman baby-grand piano. Carol had been wanting to get one for the front room, because of a moment in “Three Floors,” a poem of Kunitz’s from the sixties:

Mother was a crack of light
and a gray eye peeping;
I made believe by breathing hard
that I was sleeping.
Sister’s doughboy on last leave
had robbed me of her hand;
downstairs at intervals she played

The Stockmals bought the piano and were wondering where to put it, when Kunitz happened to call. He told them exactly where his family's baby grand had been, and they placed theirs accordingly. "It's almost like—I hate to use the term—a psychic connection," Greg said. "I've got quite an interest in gardening, and a lot of the plants that I have here Stanley has in his garden in Provincetown—gingers and Korean orchids and things like that." The Stockmals sometimes give tours of their house; in 1997, a bronze plaque commemorating Kunitz was added to the front of the house, and they have often come home to find groups of students sitting on their front steps. Greg hopes to turn the house into a museum someday.

In the winter of 1935, Theodore Roethke—husky, blond, in a raccoon coat—visited Stanley Kunitz in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Kunitz had moved there after losing the farm in Connecticut to a tornado. Roethke had a habit of cultivating mentors, and had already apprenticed himself to Louise Bogan and Rolfe Humphries. Roethke read "Intellectual Things" and wanted to get to know Kunitz, too. A letter of Roethke's indicates that they had met the previous March ("I had dinner with Stanley Kunitz," he wrote to Humphries. "He has plenty of stuff, I think. I liked him"), and then came the providential encounter: "He just appeared at my door with a copy of my first book in his hand and started reciting a handful of poems by heart," Kunitz told me. "We became great friends, naturally! In fact, he was my first real poet friend. It was great good luck that Ted and I met, because we needed each other badly. He needed me, I think, to confirm his sense of himself as a poet, and I needed him because I was lonely." Kunitz's marriage to Helen Pearce, always fragile, had recently come to an end.

The friendship had a pedagogical aspect, and Kunitz, though only three years older than Roethke,

was the undisputed master. (It wasn't long, however, before Roethke surpassed him in recognition and reputation.) They exchanged poems regularly, and Kunitz often gave advice: "About your poem, 'The Cure'—there *is* something wrong with it: it's not that the images don't fuse, but that the poem and the poet have gone off in different directions," he wrote. "A shift in perspective is always fatal in a lyric." He went on, "A couple of slight criticisms: one naturally reads the first three lines in the first person singular, and consequently misreads the fourth line; isn't it redundant and tautological to 'bleed' oneself of 'blood'?"

In Roethke, Kunitz found someone with a similar set of psychological and poetic concerns—the lost father (just before Roethke's fifteenth birthday, his father had died, of cancer) and the botanical world (Roethke's family operated greenhouses). They also shared a sense of isolation: Roethke called himself "the oldest younger poet in the U.S.A.," and Kunitz felt the same. Eliot, Pound, Williams, and Stevens had had a paralyzing effect on the generation that came afterward. "It was difficult to be a poet if you were born at the beginning of the twentieth century," Kunitz said. "The great breakthrough had come around the early twenties, with a whole school. The Modernists sort of stormed their way into the republic of letters."

In 1939, Kunitz married a red-haired actress named Eleanor Evans. They led a quiet life in Bucks County; Kunitz had a job with a Bronx-based library publisher editing biographical dictionaries, such as "American Authors, 1600-1800" and "Twentieth-Century Authors." Just before his thirty-eighth birthday, he was drafted. Eleanor, left behind, found work naming Liberty ships and christening them with giant bottles of champagne. After the war, they moved to Bennington, and then, on Kunitz's dismissal, to a teachers' college in upstate New York, where, in 1950, they had a daughter, Gretchen, who is Kunitz's only child. Kunitz and Evans separated in 1952, and the following year he went to Europe on a fellowship. Gretchen, now a doctor in Berkeley (she and her mother moved

there in 1956), struggled for a long time with her father's abandonment—a theme in his own life that, of course, she got to read about in his poetry. In the past ten years, though, they have become especially close, and, she told me, she has come to understand what happened to her parents' marriage. "It wasn't necessarily something rational or calculated, and he has a lot of regrets about it," she said. "But he *had* to leave, he had to leave domesticity and go to fulfill himself as a writer. It was the drive to write, and to not be taking the commuter train every day to work at a job he didn't like, and feeling all those responsibilities to be supporting the family."

Kunitz eventually moved to New York, where he met Elise Asher, a Village bohemian whose friends included the Abstract Expressionist painters Philip Guston, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko. They married and moved in together on Twelfth Street, a block from where they live now. The painters gave Kunitz the community he'd missed during his rural exile: "They all were living down in the Village, and, on their way to the Cedar Tavern—where they met quite regularly—when they passed our house they would throw pebbles or sand against our windows, like a greeting." Kunitz was a great cook—until last year, he prepared all his and Elise's meals—and loved to entertain. "Practically every other week, we threw a party for the gang, and a lot of dancing went on, and singing," he said. The Kunitzes' current Twelfth Street apartment, where they moved in the seventies, is full of artifacts of the time: a thick pink-and-red Guston oil painting inscribed with verses from Kunitz's "Vita Nuova"; a Robert Motherwell collage entitled "Provincetown: Stanley's View"; one of Kline's first paintings to use color, which Kunitz received when he admired it on the floor of Kline's studio. Elise matches the décor: she likes to wear a red Indian gown with paisleys stitched in white thread, red socks, Birkenstocks, lipstick, and little plastic barrettes.

Poets in the nineteen-fifties—faithful to, and inspired by, their popular image—were a mad,

drunk, disaffected, competitive, theatrical bunch. Dylan Thomas invented the glamorously incoherent reading, setting the tone for a generation. In an essay, Kunitz described Roethke's last reading, which he introduced, in 1960: "He had a high fever, and backstage he was jittery, sweating copiously as he guzzled champagne. . . . On stage, for the first portion of his program he clowned and hammed incorrigibly, weaving, gyrating, dancing, shrugging his shoulders, muttering to himself intermittently, and now and then making curiously flipper-like or foetal gestures with his hands." Roethke died in a swimming pool in 1963. Like Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz, and, later, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, he fortified the cliché of the unhinged genius.

Kunitz was more reliable in his habits. He taught in the afternoons, had a cocktail at five, cooked dinner for Elise, and wrote in his study till dawn. By the late fifties, he was ready to publish his third book, a selection, with new poems. He sent the manuscript to seven or eight publishers before the Atlantic Monthly Press accepted it. The new poems were more discursive and narrative, but retained their hard-to-parse, Blakean high-rhetorical style: "Let me proclaim it—human be my lot!— / How from my pit of green horse-bones / I turn, in a wilderness of sweat, / To the moon-breasted sibylline, / And lift this garland, Danger, from her throat / To blaze it in the foundries of the night." Writing in the *Times*, the translator and poet Dudley Fitts said he hoped that the collection would "dispel some of the crasser elements of neglect and win recognition for a vital and deeply pertinent tragic art." A review in *Poetry* likewise held Kunitz's obscurity and his exclusion from anthologies and prizes to be "one of the most depressing literary curiosities of the past three decades." As it happened, "Selected Poems: 1928-1958" won a Pulitzer Prize.

Still, Kunitz was an almost completely unknown poet. In 1968, he was profiled by the *Yale Literary Magazine*, and the undergraduate conducting the interview said he had recently asked Auden, a guest on campus, why Kunitz did not have the following he deserved. Auden replied, "It's

strange, but give him time. A hundred years or so. He's a patient man."

When Kunitz was poet-in-residence at Brandeis, for the 1958-59 academic year, he often invited Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes over for drinks at his Cambridge apartment. Plath refers to the acquaintance ungraciously in a journal entry dated February 13, 1959—a day when, she admits, she had a "lousy green depressing cold": "Stanley Kunitz, his bright white Cambridge apartment with the blood-red burlap curtains and the violent depthless red-accented paintings of his New Greenwich Village wife, who called him: Uh-huh, uh-huh, bye honey. His queer astigmatism, dismissing all poets but himself and the old Roethke and Penn Warren, especially women, whose success must be particularly distasteful to him."

In fact, Kunitz was unusually generous to young poets, and particularly susceptible to poetry by women. (He even recommended Plath's first collection, "The Colossus," for publication.) In the early sixties, he began teaching at Columbia, and one of his first students was Louise Glück. "Kunitz's voice would comment on the weak line, the dull word, the specific opacity," Glück has written in an essay. More important, years after she stopped being his student, during a period when she was writing profusely and uselessly, he invited her over for a Martini. He told her that her new work was awful. He also told her that it didn't matter, because she was a poet.

"He was a true mentor to her, and for many years Louise didn't do anything without Stanley giving her direction," Daniel Halpern, who was also a student of Kunitz's at Columbia and is now Glück's publisher at Ecco Press, says. But the influence went both ways. "Louise is so exact and unyielding. I can see a lot of Stanley in her work and a lot of her in Stanley's. It's very willful and determined and focussed."

Kunitz retired from teaching twenty years ago, but he continues to meet with his "tribe" of

younger poets to discuss their work and whatever else needs discussing. “When can I see you, and what have you written?” he asks when they call. His students treasure his Delphic pronouncements: “Polarize your contradictions!” “End on an image and don’t explain it!” “Never apologize!” He is, famously, a sound giver of romantic advice, seemingly incapable of embarrassment, intensely curious, present, and incorruptible. Lucie Brock-Broido, another of his students and now the director of poetry at Columbia’s School of the Arts, says that “much of my adult life had to do with magical direction from Stanley from afar.” Then, ten years ago, when she applied for the position at Columbia, she was asked to compare herself to her mentor. “I was in front of a very formidable committee—the dean, and the chairs of all the divisions of the School of the Arts, the real heavy hitters. The very last question of the interview was ‘What could you possibly offer here at Columbia that, say, Stanley Kunitz could not?’ I took a moment and I said, ‘More hair.’ ”

Marie Howe, whose tresses also put her in the category of poetic disciples Elise calls the Big Hair Girls, took Kunitz’s second-to-last workshop at Columbia, in 1983, and still shows him all her poems: “He reads a poem of twelve lines in deep silence for an interminable amount of time, and then he looks up and points to a place and says, ‘There.’ I look at him and I say, ‘Fuck.’ He goes to that place in the poem where the deepest, deepest part of you knows that there’s something a little blurry about it, just a tiny bit tilted or off. It’s something no one else will ever see and you don’t even admit to yourself.” She praised him for having an ecumenical aesthetic. Kunitz told me that he has learned “never to wound” an emerging writer. “The circumstances of my early years made me receptive to any student who came to me and who was exploring not only the self but the society as a whole, the natural world as well as the human world,” he said. “And I’m not implying that the human world is not natural.”

In the forties, Roethke and Kunitz had a game: each would present a line of obscure, often

ancient verse, and challenge the other to identify its author or its vintage. Eventually, they were able to determine a poem's date of composition within ten years. "I think that's a great demonstration of how each poem really bears the stamp of the language as it was spoken in that period," Kunitz said. "Each period has its own rhythm, too, and if you study poems, recite them aloud and so forth, you learn that they bear the stamp of their origins and are inseparable from them."

Kunitz's own poems have grown more lucid with the years. Through the decades, he has steadily shed feet—from a characteristic five-foot, ten-syllable line in the early poems, to four in the middle period, to three in the late work. The poems of "The Testing-Tree," which came out when he was sixty-five, translated his cerebral formality to plain-spoken free verse—the perfect neutral context for the insoluble dream images, portents, and imprecations that continue to surface in his work. A sneaky sense of humor, a feigned innocence entered the poems and stayed: "Reading in Li Po / how 'the peach blossom follows the water' / I keep thinking of you / because you were so much like / Chairman Mao, / naturally with the sex / transposed / and the figure slighter." In a front-page rave in the *Times Book Review*, Lowell wrote that the poetry's "primal themes have come down from the attic."

Because "The Testing-Tree" used emotional material from Kunitz's life—his father's suicide, his daughter's childhood, the game he played "for love, for poetry, and for eternal life"—he came to be associated with the so-called confessionals, a categorization he still resents. "Real poets are not confessional," he told me. "They're interested in writing poems, not confessions of their personal lives. So to be lumped with the confessionals early, as I was by some critics, made me feel ill almost, because it was so antithetical to everything I thought and felt about poetry. My concept was to transform the events of my life into legend. I think that was the concept that kept me alive as a

poet these many years.”

By the time Kunitz was writing the poems in “The Testing-Tree,” both his sisters and his mother had long since died. “In a way, the disappearance of my family liberated me,” Kunitz said. “It gave me a sense that I was the only survivor and if the experiences of my life, whatever it meant, were to be told, it was within my power to do so, and only within my power. And that gave me strength.” The need for candor transformed his style. “At a certain moment, I felt that it was essential for me to free my poems from too much emphasis on the prosody, and to, in a way, liberate my imagination and the forms in which my poems struggled to emerge. I began to feel that the deepest music I could make was outside the limitations of rhyme. I wanted to make harmonies and approximations of likeness without resorting to rhyme. I became very interested in the harmonies of the language when it is spoken and the secret linkages between the vowels and the consonants that are making a music of their own.”

Kunitz’s late poems are open and immediate—“transparent” is the word he uses. “Touch Me,” published in 1995, is set in the garden. It is nearly fall, and a storm is bearing down. Quoting a line from his 1958 poem “As Flowers Are,” Kunitz describes the changes in his voice, now perhaps in its last incarnation:

Summer is late, my heart.
Words plucked out of the air
some forty years ago
when I was wild with love
and torn almost in two
scatter like leaves this night
of whistling wind and rain.
It is my heart that’s late,
it is my song that’s flown.
Outdoors all afternoon
under a gunmetal sky

staking my garden down,
I kneeled to the crickets trilling
underfoot as if about
to burst from their crusty shells;
and like a child again
marveled to hear so clear
and brave a music pour
from such a small machine.
What makes the engine go?
Desire, desire, desire.
The longing for the dance
stirs in the buried life.
One season only,
 and it's done.
So let the battered old willow
thrash against the windowpanes
and the house timbers creak.

In its final lines, the poem breaks through the atmosphere of brooding—on life, death, nature, art, sex—and the dramatic lyric, Kunitz's lifelong project, reaches its most unyielding and most vulnerable pitch. "Darling, do you remember / the man you married?" the poet asks. "Touch me, / remind me who I am."

The Stanley Kunitz Common Room at the Fine Arts Work Center, in Provincetown, is part of a former coal bin and holds about two hundred people. Kunitz helped found the Work Center, a long-term artists' residency program, in 1968. "Every artist I know has been at one time or another in search of a community of artists," Kunitz told me. (He also helped found Poets House, a forty-thousand-volume public poetry library on Spring Street, where poets congregate for readings and lectures.) In his view, Provincetown was the ideal setting. "I loved the contours of the land and the immanence of the sea and the great sky, so that was my original impression," he said. "Then it was the people that drew me."

Kunitz was scheduled to deliver a talk in the common room one evening in early August. At five o'clock that afternoon, most of the chairs were already reserved, with pieces of paper taped to their backs or weighted down with giant clamshells. "Holy cow! They're all taken already—I thought, Oh surely I'll be the only one who did this silly thing," a woman in a Volkswagen baseball cap said when she walked in, at five-fifteen. By seven, an employee of the center was lining up white plastic chairs and picnic benches in the back garden, where there were speakers to carry the sound from the stage. The conversation inside was gregarious but intimate, and the charcoal smell of a back-yard barbecue drifted through the room.

At seven-forty-five, the Stockmals came in. They had driven three hours from Worcester for the second time in two weeks. (The previous visit had been to deliver a cutting from one of their fig trees for Kunitz's garden.) Greg, who has a softly spiked mullet, was wearing Army-green cargo shorts, a black shirt, silver hoops in both ears, and heavy-looking metal chains around one wrist. Carol was in an olive-colored flight suit, and wore her long auburn hair down her back. She was carrying a camera. "I can't explain it, knowing him for nearly twenty years, I feel so privileged," Carol said. "He used to scare the hell out of me—it's so intimidating, what do you say to a man like that?" Kunitz arrived with Gretchen and Genine just before eight.

Kunitz took the podium to a standing ovation. He had on a khaki suit jacket, unmatching khaki pants, and a dark-green linen shirt that changed the color of his eyes. He batted down the applause with both his hands, smiling. "Good evening, everybody, thank you," he said. "I want to start with a few comments on the function of the poet in society." He sounded formal and forceful. "If we want to know what it felt like to be alive at any given moment in the long odyssey of the race, it is to poetry we must turn." He described his feelings on being drafted for the Second World War: "On the one hand, I am against war in principle; on the other, I have spent a good part of my life opposing

fascism and bigotry and injustice and anything that degrades or insults the human spirit.” He clenched his right fist on the word “degrades.” His left hand went in and out of his pocket emphatically, perhaps a little nervously. As he began to read “Reflection by a Mailbox,” a war poem from his 1944 collection, he shifted all his weight to his right leg and bent his left knee, like a heron. The stressed syllables seemed to jolt through him, and his eyes jerked upward to the far back corner of the room. His voice, a low growl, attained a sweet, clear sound.

It has been a decade since Kunitz read a new poem. “Touch Me,” which he published at ninety, is his last finished work. “He’s a perfectionist, and also—I’ll say this word—he dithers,” his editor, Carol Houck Smith, said. “He sort of dithers all night. I was always saying, even when we did the ‘Collected,’ ‘Just one new poem, couldn’t we have *one new poem*?’ And he looks mysterious.”

When he was ill, in March, Kunitz told Genine that he was working on a poem. She asked what kind. A poem that says goodbye, he said. How would it go? she asked. “Let it happen the way it wants to go,” he told her. “That’s the way I always feel about my poems.” ♦

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