

Will Durham

View from the Tenth Decade: An Interview with Gerald Stern

durham:

In your 2017 memoir *Death Watch: A View from the Tenth Decade*, five of the chapters contain the name “Shoshana” in their titles, and each of these chapters ends with that famous Old Testament name. Can you discuss your thinking behind these linked chapters?

stern:

The whole presence of the Shoshana chapters is probably to create a counterforce to the obsessions with death. Or perhaps it's love versus death. Though it's not really love—it's spying. It's some form of love, anyhow. Historically, it's seen as lust. At the time, I was looking at the Wallace Stevens poem about Shoshana and the elders. Stevens creates his own concept of what Susanna is, what the elders are.

Let me read a little from the chapter called “Shoshana and the Elders,” to give people a sense of what we're talking about. At this point in the book, I'm talking about graveyards and death and such, and then I start thinking about the legend of Susanna and the elders:

Some contemporary painters reconsider the myth directly (Benton) and some (Picasso), indirectly. It is a well-known story but the source—the Book of Daniel—is not so well known. There it is seen not as an erotic tale but as a question of justice and the need to cross-examine witnesses, who, as in this case, may be false witnesses. I am puzzled by how such a myth

made its way into a book about death. Maybe love, or love-making, is an interruption or an opposite, as Freud suggests. But why *this* form of love? Maybe it came from a reading of Stevens's poem "Peter Quince at the Clavier." It is certainly significant that it was—at least in name—the elders who lusted for Susanna. [...]

Wallace Stevens has an odd take on the elders. What they experience—in the poem—is a kind of music, since, as he says, "Music is feeling, then, not sound; / And thus it is that what I feel, / Here in this room, desiring you, // Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk, / Is music. It is like the strain / Waked in the elders by Susanna"—so that "the red-eyed" elders watching Susanna "felt / The basses of their beings throb / In witching chords [...]" It is "melody" that went on belittling them: "Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings / Of those white elders." It is a gorgeous poem, and its gorgeosity has carried it since 1915. But what Stevens says is astounding. And, at bottom, it is she—in Stevens's poem—who entices the elders, and no one is innocent.

I address myself in the book to a number of "Susanna and elder" concepts and experiences, and I start off in this chapter recollecting a meeting in Greece with an Englishwoman who was on a ferry going from Athens to Crete. We talked and stayed up all night and decided to travel together. But there was really not a sexual context. She wasn't attracted to me, and I wasn't much—at least in the beginning—attracted to her, and I didn't lust for her. Although, she had been to this city in Crete before, and on the first day we went swimming in the bay and we went nude. She was a very beautiful woman, except one of her arms was withered, as a result of an accident she had as a younger woman horseback riding. Anyhow, the story goes on about what our experiences were, and why she was there, and I'll just talk about that for a second, though I go into detail in the chapter.

She really had come back to this little town in Crete to

meet a younger guy—younger than she—whom she had met or seen a couple times before when she visited there. And she went off one day to meet this guy, and she came back early in tears. I have no idea what happened—he was brutal or indifferent, or something like that—and she came to my bed and wanted to sleep with me, or at least not so much sleep *with* me but *sleep* with me. And we became lovers. And that was one “Shoshana and the elders” experience. She left on a bus a week later, and I helped put her bags on the bus, and she was weeping and crying, wanting to stay, but she had to go back to work in London.

durham:

And the memoir explores similar experiences in other chapters...

stern:

Yes. Let me talk about two of them. I had a *pied-à-terre* in New York City on Vandam Street, which is south of Houston a couple blocks, and there’s Seventh Avenue. I was on a subway at one in the morning, and you know that’s bad because they’re always working on subways, and there were about fifteen people, maybe twelve people, and they bypassed Houston, which was my stop. They stopped at Canal, and I had to walk over to the other side and take a work-horse subway up to Houston. It took about an hour, and then this woman got off, and I got off. She started to walk, and I was walking behind her, and I could smell the terror. This was about two o’clock in the morning in an empty part of New York south of Houston on the way to SoHo.

So to reduce her anxiety, I said, “Excuse me, young lady,” for she was maybe in her twenties, early twenties, and I was maybe in my forties. I said, “My name is Gerald Stern, I’m a writer, and I happen to be here not to pursue or to abuse you—I’m on my way to my house. I live on the next block.” And she turned around and said, “Gerald Stern? I just came

from the Aegean School of Fine Arts Greece, in Pharos, and was told to look you up!” And so she came with me to my apartment on the fifth floor. And she stayed overnight. We didn’t make love, but she stayed overnight on my spare bed. In the morning—there was a bathtub, an orange painted bathtub in the kitchen—and she took a bath. She used a sponge that she got in Greece, and she was bathing in this bathtub, and so this was my Susanna. And I saw her later, three or four times—she lived on 115th and Broadway. And we did become intimate, but it was not a serious thing.

That experience of “Susanna and the elders” was fascinating because of her saying “Gerald Stern?! I was told to look you up!” The guy who ran the school, the Aegean School of Fine Arts, had been a student of mine at an art school in Philadelphia, which is a part of Temple University, when I was thirty-one or thirty-two years old.

The other one that comes to mind is very interesting. I was teaching at a community college in New Jersey, maybe ten years after this, and I went with a woman I was having an affair with to New York. My apartment wasn’t available for some reason. I think my son was occupying it—I don’t remember. So we were looking for a place, and I remembered a hotel I used to stay in—the Hotel Earle. I stayed there in the fifties and sixties, and it’s a strange hotel. It has been replaced by another hotel called the Washington Square Hotel, which is a *boutique* hotel, with very tiny rooms that are all fixed up, and a lot of Europeans come over and stay there. But it used to be a poor man’s hotel, and it was seven dollars a night...

durham:

Wow.

stern:

...for which you got two rooms—a bedroom and a living room. So I thought, “Oh, that would be interesting.” I assumed it would be more than seven dollars at that point, but

maybe seventy dollars, or fifteen dollars, I didn't know. Of course, I was on a roll, so I didn't care. [Laughs.]

We went into the hotel, and there was a guy there who was both the one who signed you in, and also the one who drove the elevator, and he also took your bags. He had a kind of shirt on, a half uniform, a pair of pants, and his chest hairs were sticking out, and he showed us these two rooms. He was puzzled why we were there, and I was puzzled why he was puzzled. We saw no other guests, and I realized later it was a welfare hotel. He showed us a pair of rooms. We went in, and it looked welcoming, even though there was a lot of dust and flecks of dirt on the windowsill and such. We went into the bedroom, and there was a pipe leaking water onto the bed. A little bit. And she started to cry. I'll just read a little bit of that:

She had burst into tears, whether it was from the chest hairs or the wet bed, an excess of emotion, which struck me at the time as somewhat inappropriate for a thirty-eight or thirty-nine-year-old woman, the mother of four. It ruined our idyll at the Earle, nor did I even want to see another apartment, for who knows what fresh horror we would encounter. [...] What we did was venture out into the early dark, and I called a friend of mine who had an apartment nearby, which she let us use, since she was away somewhere. So—after we found the key—we ended up having an idyll anyway, even if it was in a bunk bed (I remember), in a very small, heavily overheated room. Which I remember not because of the great passion there but because I associate that venture always with the welfare hotel and the three-headed gatekeeper, something out of Greek mythology, a Cerberus who ran an old-fashioned elevator, carried your bags, and registered you in the big book of guests, a separate function to go with each of the three heads.

So each Shoshana takes a different turn with different women, and I was in every case the elder. But I wasn't spying.

I was attracted to the idea of Susanna and the elders. Each was a different experience. There's another one where I had been a graduate student at Columbia in my early twenties, and I got an M.A.—I returned years later for my Ph.D.; I went to Europe in the meantime—I was taking out a young woman from Barnard. And I ran into her, this young woman, and her mother in Paris, three or four months later. And I was attracted to the mother, who had to be in her forties, mid-forties maybe, and very beautiful. But I didn't act on it, and I describe that, too. In a way, I was Susanna, and she was the elder. So that was a Susanna and the elders story that forms a counterforce.

durham:

In the chapter that bears her name, you talk about Emma Goldman and the idea of “anarchic love.” You say she is “the spine of this book,” and that the book is built on this idea. Can you talk a little bit about “anarchic love” and how it works in *Death Watch*?

stern:

Well, when I say Emma Goldman is the spine of the book, I mean that her spirit is the spirit of the book. She was greatly respected, she was called by the conservative press “Red Emma,” and I even have a poem in my new book called “Red Emma.” I am maybe obsessed by her a little. She was born in Germany and spoke German first, and she spoke to huge crowds—I mean crowds of sometimes four, five thousand people. In Union Square. Sometimes in other places in New York. And she traveled around to other cities—like Minneapolis and Chicago—and she was in Chicago for a great event, where May Day was organized.

In the chapter, I talk about her life, her spirit, and how nobody knows or cares about her much anymore. May Day, which is May 1st, was created in the United States, in Chicago. But we don't celebrate May Day. Sweden does,

Germany does, France does, China does, Australia does, Canada does, and so on. We have Labor Day—the stupidest fucking holiday, where in the old days you brought in your white shoes and your stupid little sailboat. Also, you went back to school if you were a student, if you were in college or whatever. And there’s really no mention, or there’s only a slight mention, about the politics and the economics underlying May Day and its American substitute—the euphemistic holiday, Labor Day—where labor leaders give a perfunctory talk, and people interrupt their last day of swimming to listen to two of the words.

Emma Goldman is the one who sent her lover, Alexander Berkman, from New York to Pittsburgh with a pistol to kill Frick, who was the head of U. S. Steel and the partner of Carnegie. He went to Frick’s office at about 7:30 at night. Frick was at his desk working. Berkman shot him and took out a knife and stabbed him in the leg. But Frick didn’t die. He was bleeding but he stayed at his desk till 8:00, and then he went to the hospital where they removed the bullets and so on. Berkman spent ten years in jail. The crime was attempted murder. The maximum penalty according to Pennsylvania law was six years, but he spent over fourteen years in jail. He was destroyed spiritually. He spent half of the time in solitary, in a hole.

Eventually, he got out and came back. During World War I, a conscription law was passed, and Emma and Berkman made speeches against it. It was the first such law since the Civil War. And they both went to jail under the law passed by Wilson—the prick, whom I hated all my life. It’s now come out, finally, what his character was really like—what Princeton was like, where a lot of Southerners would come to school with their “servants.” And after the students graduated, the servants would stay at Princeton, so Princeton always had a large African-American population of ex-slaves, and there is still a large African-American section there in Princeton. He was the president of Princeton, Wilson, the governor of New Jersey, and finally President of the United States.

Anyway, Emma and Alexander were both sent to jail,

and Emma taught herself English while she was in jail. Then she made her speeches in English, rendered her speeches in English. She was just an incredible woman. They exiled them, both of them. They sent Berkman back to Russia, and she went with him. They were both Jews, which didn't help, and they were critical of the Soviet system. Wherever they traveled, the fellow travelers, so-called, didn't welcome them because they were critical of Lenin and Stalin, particularly—and Trotsky, too. Anyhow, that's Emma, and I talk about her in various ways. As I said, she spoke about the war to crowds of thousands in Union Square. Now Union Square has nice expensive restaurants, although there is a little statue of Gandhi in one part of Union Square. I used to meet people at the statue of Gandhi. He's naked with a kind of big diaper on and a walking stick and glasses. And I was looking at the statue one day, years ago, I guess it's still there, and a policeman, a stupid New York cop, was there and said, "How come he ain't got no clothes on?" What a fucking idiot.

durham:

Hearing how Goldman spoke to these huge numbers of people very passionately, it makes me think about the Haymarket Riots.

stern:

So the Haymarket Riots was where May Day was organized. I don't remember the numbers, but there were X number of people hanged, including some people who weren't even there, as being the spirit of destruction. Somebody threw a bomb. Anarchists were the communists of the day, and this bomb exploded and killed some cops, and they went wild and shot dozens of people. It may have been an inside job. Although Edgar Hoover wasn't there, there was no FBI yet, but the spirit of Edgar Hoover was born there in Haymarket Square.

When Emma got sick and was dying, she was living in

Canada. She married a guy who was Canadian, a Welshman, and she tried to return to the States, and the American government wouldn't let her. Still, when she died, they allowed her to be buried with the other anarchists from the Haymarket Rebellion. It's a marvelous story in American history. But students in junior high school, I'm sure they don't study it, or if they do, it's only a couple words and they don't know what it means.

durham:

In the memoir, you say that, as far back as the 1960s, "the voyage of death was never far from my mind. The humor of it, and the terror." So it seems like *Death Watch* has been in your writing for most of your life. You also mention an underground study that was all mud-packed and dark—almost like a self-burial ground.

stern:

That underground writing place. I was teaching in Philadelphia, my very first college teaching job. I think I got it when I was twenty-nine, after living as kind of a bum. I was living off the G. I. Bill and temporary jobs, and money I earned at those jobs, and I spent a couple of years in Europe. I got married; we spent three years living in Europe, and we came back and decided to try out what it's like to live in America. So we tried to charge something, a lamp, I think—we didn't own any furniture—and they wouldn't let me charge anything because I had no history of credit, you know? And I learned that all Americans live by credit. Credit scores, and this and that.

We were renting a house, on a street called Lime Kiln Pike in Philadelphia, and it was an old house with a couple of old apple trees and a barn—I'm sure it's torn down now and ten houses are there in this huge backyard—and I used to buy cars for fifteen bucks, the junk price, and work on them, fix them up so I had something to drive around, you know. The house we lived in was small, too small for two little kids, and

there was a trap door in the kitchen that went down two stories into a sub-basement. You opened the door, and the walls were packed with hard mud. And I brought a red wire with a lamp attached to the end of it, and in that little space was an ancient chopping block. I brought down a chair and that was my study space. It was soundproof, and I worked there all alone for hours and hours, in addition to the other things I was doing in my life. And so it was a kind of a grave, and there I was, you know, being buried—by self decision—deep in the earth. Some of the memoir describes what happens to you in great detail when you die.

durham:

Extreme detail.

stern:

Exactly. And so I'm trying to make up my mind where I'll be buried, and what system I'll use. Whether I'll be put in a casket—I mean a *coffin*—which is called a casket, that's one of the euphemisms for a coffin, or whether I'll be cremated. And will I be in a graveyard—I hate the idea of burning yourself—or having someone burn you and put the ashes in a box or a little container and you put it on the mantle, or you dump it in the sea or in your backyard, or in some beautiful place. It's just ridiculous, I think. I've decided that I'm not going to give myself to the beetles and the ants, but that I'm going to put the ashes in a bag or box of some kind and be buried in a graveyard, which I've chosen already. It's called Mt. Hope, in Lambertville—the city I love and still have a house in. Anyhow, it's kind of an interesting book. I guess it has a unity of sorts. I've been so recently involved that I haven't had opportunity to look at it as a whole. And that'll come to me, one day soon. And I'm so busy writing poems and writing that and I've got forty or fifty new poems after *Galaxy Love*. I gave you—didn't I?—that collection of new poems? We can get to those.

durham:

Of course. I just want to ask one more question about the memoir before we get to the poems. One of my first entrances into your work was a poem called “When I Have Reached the Point of Suffocation,” and it ends with the lines “to learn how to leave the place / of oppression; / and how to make your own regeneration / out of nothing.” This seems to be a huge theme throughout *Death Watch*—this idea of remaking yourself over and over again, and also in your body of work. How has that regeneration made its way into your new books, where you’re clearly trying to come to terms with the end of life?

stern:

That’s a good question. I mean, I’m still alive and I’m writing now at an amazing pace, twice as much, at least, as I’ve ever written in the past. After *Galaxy Love*, as I say, I already have a group of forty-five or fifty new poems. They don’t have a home yet. I can’t go to my editor, who hasn’t published the last book yet, and say, “I got a book!” you know? Because there’s a common agreement, at least among poets, that you don’t change publishers. Fiction writers seem to have more freedom. They follow the buck. They can publish one month with Doubleday, and the next month with Norton, or what have you. A lot of European writers, I have noticed—like Ritsos, the Greek writer—used to publish a book almost every year, and that’s me, but that’s not the custom here.

Anyhow, the issue of regeneration. It’s finding a way to live in your skin and a way to prepare for what’s next. I think it has to do with the future. It’s a way of accepting something as coming. I was just talking to my friend Ellen Doré Watson about her father, who died last year at 96. He sounds like a wonderful guy whom she loved at the end, but as a young woman had problems with, you know. He didn’t seem to have a sense of the future, so he had pains here and there. I asked her yesterday in the car, “What did your father die from?” and

she said, “He just gave up—he actually died from no will to live.”

When people in their nineties die, they die of old age. But when you read the cause, it says “heart disease,” or “cancer,” something specific. But they don’t really die from that. They die from lack of will. And I guess I have a great will to live, and to see what’s going to happen. Not just to me but to my family, to my country, to the world itself, and to the universe. And that’s the regeneration. I say to make it “out of nothing,” and my last book was called *Divine Nothingness*. It takes you back to the question “What is God?” God is nothing. “What is nothing?” You see how it circulates.

durham:

You have this theme in some of your newest poems—such as “The Cost of Love” and “I’ll Say Goodbye”—of adding up, and the math of life in your underground study...

stern:

I am living mostly in New York City now, and we live on the twelfth floor, but on the ground floor (this came with the apartment) I have an office, a beautiful little office with built-in bookcases and a refrigerator and a desk and chairs, the whole bit. So, yes, I’m in another hole.

durham:

You can’t seem to escape.

stern:

I can’t avoid these holes.

durham:

Well, you have all this math throughout these poems. What is it adding up to? What are you going to know once you

reach an answer? Is there an answer at all?

stern:

There's no answer. There are a lot of jokes about that. I'll try to remember one of them. There's the one where you climb a mountain in the Himalayas and you keep asking different people you come across, "What is the meaning of life?" and the person you ask keeps saying things like "Oh, you must ask my teacher, he lives on another mountain," and you spend years asking this question, you search. And you finally find this guy. He's 150 years old and you say, "What is the meaning of life? I've been hunting for it for years," and the guy says, "Life? Life is a fountain." And the searcher goes, "Life is a fountain?" "Oh!" says the teacher. "Is it your position that life *isn't* a fountain?"

There are many versions of that joke—Jewish, Indian, Chinese. I am very much in love with the history of China and the way that poetry was extended and maintained through the Ming Dynasty, and so on. I'm very close to the American poet Li-Young Lee, who's really Indonesian, and not Chinese, though he speaks Chinese. We spent an evening together recently, and I read him some of my poems, one of them from *Galaxy Love*—about eating an egg. It's called "Ancient Chinese Egg."

I was giving a reading maybe ten or fifteen years ago outside of Philadelphia somewhere, and there was a cabinet at the place, and it didn't have a key in it, and I opened it and there was a thousand-year-old egg, which turned out to be only 500 years old. And I took it—I obtained it—and I tossed it from hand to hand, and I knew, if I took a little nibble of it, two bites of that egg which is worth a fortune, it would have been destroyed. And I think I may have done that. But it was actually cooked at the time when Ben Johnson was an active poet. Fantastic thing to think about. That's part of Chinese history.

All poetry finds a social support system, and that's one of the things I love about Chinese poetry. What's going on in America now is the way poets "support themselves," unless

they're independently wealthy, is by teaching at universities or colleges or even high schools. Which is not such a good thing, for they end up being professors looking for tenure, and they forget that they're poets. When Coleridge and Wordsworth were active in the early years of the nineteenth century, Keats and so on, Shelley. Shelley had money. Keats was dying. But the way you supported yourself or got support, or help, was by studying and preparing yourself for divinity, to be a divine, to be a pastor. So you'd have an office in some little town somewhere, and you wrote your poetry. That was a system in England.

In China, it was a weird and wonderful system. It was a huge country, and they had examinations every year or every two years, and these were examinations based on literature. The subject was the discipline of literature—that is, how well you knew the poets of the past. Could you recite poems? Did you know the life of that poet? If you passed the examination, you got a job as a bureaucrat at some distant province and you came back maybe two times in your life to your home. Ezra Pound has a wonderful poem about that. And I have a poem about a Chinese man who retired. He wasted his life in the bureau of weights and measures, whatever he did as a bureaucrat, but at the same time he wrote poems. That was his real function—not to work for whatever amount of money they paid him, you know. So that was the Chinese way, and I was always attracted to that strategy. It was kind of an indirect way of supporting poets, though nobody knew they were doing that. It's fascinating.

durham:

And that's kind of where the idea of the poet as the divine sufferer comes from.

stern:

Yeah, yeah.

durham:

I also want to ask about another new poem, “Up on Blocks.” I’m wondering how, if at all, this poem situates itself in the timeline of *Death Watch*, because you write about this family where the father figure is really struggling to keep everything together.

stern:

Well, I actually worked a long time on that poem, which I don’t usually do. I rewrote it, took out what was a false beginning. It’s based on some events, experiences, that occurred to me in my life. My students—I’ve taught here and there—would say that this poem is based on a true story. Or a dream. Two of the stupidest reasons to write a poem, but this one is based on a true story, in part.

A friend of mine who died last year, Karl Stirner, was a sculptor living in Easton, Pennsylvania, two hours west of New York, Route 78. He collected artifacts, paintings, sculptures, and he had, among other things, an apartment building. When houses and buildings were going for nothing in Easton, PA, he bought an enormous factory for about 40,000 bucks. And he lived in it, on one giant floor, and he rented other spaces out. Had elevators, and God knows what. I myself bought three or four buildings in Easton, then fixed them up and sold them. So I was a minor real estate magnate.

Anyhow, Karl would go to Mexico periodically to go underground, into the old caves, and dig up valuable artifacts and take them back illegally to the States. Sell them. He fixed up an old post office truck with a false bottom and a stove, and he and his wife and his three kids went to Mexico where he stole these wonderful statues, little statuettes. He’s an old friend of mine, and I remember they had this one thing about ten or twelve inches tall, and it was a statue of the god of pity, very much like Jesus, from Mexican history. And that was just sitting on his dining room table until he suddenly realized, or

gradually realized, how valuable it was. It was so valuable that you couldn't attach a price to it. It was priceless. And then he hid it, and I knew where he hid it. He made a hole in the wall under the steps, and put the statue in and replastered the wall.

In his apartment, he had literally hundreds of thousands of dollars of Oceanic art, African art, Renaissance art, Early American art, Contemporary art. On the floor, on the walls, in rooms, and the IRS doesn't know anything about this. And God knows, if they ever found out, they would grab all this stuff. For the value. And he died, and I don't know what's going to happen to all his art. He has three kids. But the poem is about when they went to Mexico. Some of it I make up.

durham:

“Age 7” is another poem rooted in a specific memory.

stern:

A lot of them are just out of memory. That one is about being a little kid in Pittsburgh, which is full of hills. Many of the hills would be too precipitous to build houses on. Pittsburgh, an industrial city, produced coal, iron, oil, steel, aluminum, glass, among other things. If it were like some English cities, all flat, then it would have been hideously ugly. What makes it a beautiful city is the hills where you can't build houses. When you fly into Pittsburgh, all you see is the green woods. And no matter who you are in Pittsburgh, no matter what community you came from, there was always a woods near you, always. I lived for a while in a section of Pittsburgh called Beachview. That poem is my memory of some older boys in the woods near our house forcing my sister and me to undress; when we told our mother, she spanked us. I was eight years old.

durham:

You talk about this in *Death Watch*, too.

stern:

Oh, I didn't realize I did that. Well, what you do in writing is you go over your life and sometimes you are telling little stories, sometimes the emotion handles it and you change the story. I'm a narrative writer. But my narrative sometimes is invisible. Sometimes it seems to me that it moves logically, but it's my own crazy, incoherent logic we're talking about, you know.

durham:

So as we're closing up, is there anything else that you wanted to add about any upcoming poems or about *Death Watch*?

stern:

You know, what I'm doing is closing up shop now (I say). I've already gone through my new book of poetry. I've gone through the second pass, and there's one more pass to go through. I'm pretty much done. Then I can put the notes and pages in boxes, which will ultimately go to the University of Pittsburgh, which has my papers. And then I can clear the desk, I say, clear my mind, and do something else. Maybe play the harmonica.

durham:

That sounds wonderful.

stern:

I also do cartoons. Maybe I'll just do some of those. But, God knows, probably another book will force itself on me, or two books, and don't forget I have forty, forty-five new poems which will be the basis of my next book, and maybe the main poems from that haven't occurred yet.

Your questions have been great. Let me congratulate you. It's been an excellent interview. Usually I kind of am terrified

by interviews, not of the content, but of the stupid questions that will come my way, and this was very original in my view, and just terrific. I hope my answers were up to your marvelous questions, Will.

durham:

Exceeded, as always. stern:

Thank you, good luck to you, Will.