

Poetry Series

**Charles Wax**  
**- poems -**

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# Charles Wax()

# A Capacity For Limitless Serenity

Matilda Halbert pushed into Meng's  
at exactly five in the afternoon  
with her red shopping cart  
empty except for cardboard  
covering the bottom making it perfectly flat.  
Not tall to begin with her bent back  
created a wee woman in her early seventies  
without a spot of gray in her auburn hair.  
Each day like clockwork  
white rice floated into the cart.  
At times, wonton soup, that mostly in winter.  
We spoke  
mostly about the weather  
and especially about wind  
which she didn't like because gusts jostled her  
making breathing difficult  
If married, no ring,  
perhaps the husband long dead  
and if she bore children, no word of them.  
Our brief conversations stayed put at the counter  
as Matilda never dined in Meng's  
but through the timbre of her voice  
I understood utter contentment.  
The red cart the white rice  
protecting her  
and wonton soup  
a bit of bliss  
on winter  
nights.

Charles Wax

# A Discourse On Heartache

Joe Rosenfeld trudged into the Teacher's Center  
plopped on the couch, then whispered, "Terrible nightmare."  
Silence. Staring. Then:  
"My dear Uncle Irving wailing as his wife  
stuffed into the grave. Never recovered."  
"This the guy with the funny eye, " I said.  
"The left one, stood to the side, like a soldier,  
never moving  
and from this slight imperfection  
unbearably low self-esteem.  
At the age of twelve only dark sunglasses  
never took 'em off  
but after he met Emma  
they was gone for good. A miracle!  
Such a sweet girl, a tragedy, really,  
her death."  
Eyes drifting now  
the scene replayed, most certainly,  
then: "Not a month later fired from his job  
ripped papers into long strips all day-  
Important documents!  
So my dear wife Addie invited him  
for dinner eleven times, to comfort him  
finally he accepted. Why I don't know  
perhaps the pot roast-Emma's specialty!  
Uncle Irving sat slumped at the table sobbing  
'Eat, ' I said, 'a man needs strength  
at a sad time like this.'  
As soon as I said those words  
I realized my error. Too late.  
He was already pouring  
the big bowl of gravy on his head."  
Silence. I waited, finally:  
"All down his cheeks  
like tears."

Charles Wax

# A Paper Coat To Protect Against The Cold

"Some folks ain't never gonna make it, "  
said Willie Benney, "don't ask me why  
but that's the truth  
so if they can't live in this world  
they dream of another world  
and maybe that  
other world's gonna be better for 'em.  
I been trying to get to that  
improved place for fifty-five years  
through vodka. Now, well,  
I figure I just gotta live in this one."  
"How old are you? " I asked.  
"Sixty."  
"Sixty? " I blurted out,  
"but just before you said  
you were drinking for fifty-five years."  
Benny smiled saying,  
"Started when I was five,  
couldn't help it since my ma was a drunk  
and I wanted to be close to her  
so I did like her—  
guzzle vodka.  
Course she couldn't afford  
no fancy booze but any stuff will do  
if your heart's tortured."  
"Is your mother dead? " I whispered.  
"What the hell you think? "  
"I really don't know."  
"A drunk don't live long."  
"You're still around."  
"God loves me."

Charles Wax

# A Sad History Of Misfortune

I strode to the Pier in Coney Island  
on Christmas day. Eleven degrees  
and with a gale off the vast Atlantic  
the temperature zipped  
to well below zero. No place  
to match this, my private scrap of Nirvana  
but in the distance I spotted a soul  
and when I approached  
who should it be but Harry Henwood.  
"Hey, " I said.  
He turned and at once  
began to speak:  
"God don't love me  
and not only me  
my whole family is cursed.  
My mother choked on a chicken bone  
and died when I was seven  
and my dad is doing  
life for killing his brother  
with an ax. No wonder  
my sister is nuts  
and gonna die an Old Maid.  
I gave Ralph Dillon  
the go ahead to poke Marie  
but don't you know she fell asleep  
and Ralph filled with passion.  
I told him the shrink's medication  
made her groggy, but I don't know  
if he's ever coming back."  
As the tears fell  
from Harry Henwood's eyes  
they froze in a flash  
on his mournful face.  
Silence. My body in bliss. Warm inside.  
Suddenly: "What are you doing here? "  
"Getting ready to give God back  
this load of flesh.  
Enough is enough."  
"Not on Christmas day, you're not

with a snowstorm coming in.  
I'm only human, Henwood,  
to watch you croak...  
couldn't enjoy nothing then.  
A ten enough to make you smile? "  
Eyes shifting now  
between me and the swirling sea  
then a tilt toward Heaven,  
fist suddenly shooting into the sky  
finally: the smile.

Charles Wax

# A Tale Of Love

Hubert at 38  
and weighing 427 pounds  
an only child  
father dead long ago  
had lived  
all his life with his mother  
also obese  
so when she passed away  
in October  
the man was crushed  
but when he returned  
to Spinoza high school  
after a week of mourning  
he told me  
of a dream about Monique from Martinique,  
how she fell in love with him.  
"Maybe if I lose weight  
the dream will come true, " he said.  
So Hubert struggled up the stairs each day  
cut way down on calories  
and slowly began to lose weight.  
Everyone at Spinoza was amazed.  
In May Hubert announced  
he was going to spend  
the summer in Martinique  
where he was certain he would find Monique.  
The last week in June  
Hubert walked on air  
as he had lost 110 pounds  
and looked positively thin,  
relatively speaking. I told him  
to call me, or write.  
"You'll get postcard a week, " he said.  
On July 8th, July 16th, August 7th,  
and August 20th  
I received lovely picture postcards  
from Hubert. Monique  
had not yet found him  
but the warm blue waters were comforting



and the people friendly.  
Three days later a call. They found  
my name and address  
on a letter in Hubert's room.  
Drowned in his bathtub.  
"How? " I asked.  
"Drowned, " the heavily accented voice replied.  
That night I dreamt of Monique  
by the azure abyss  
of the Caribbean sea,  
in radiance,  
shimmering under stars,  
her bottom round and pure,  
brown hair floating on a tropic breeze  
when suddenly the back shifted  
and she turned.  
"Oh, don't touch yourself there, "  
I whispered as she stroked her thighs.  
"Have mercy.  
I'm Hubert's friend."  
She spoke in French.  
I couldn't understand a word  
but such sweet tones,  
like delicate chimes,  
like crystals caressing  
and the surf rumbled,  
and the warm wind  
rushed through dense leaves  
creating an hypnotic incantation.  
"It is good  
to love  
and be loved in return, " I said  
but really wanting  
to ask about Hubert.  
"Fat people suffer the most, "  
she said in perfect English,  
this Monique from Martinique,  
"and they suffer until they die."  
Then silence,  
moonlight in her tears.



# A Tale Of True Love

Mabel Catherine Rose allowed herself  
to be wheeled into Meng's once a week  
for her beloved pork chops with corn and applesauce.  
She could well afford to eat that feast every day  
since her late husband's life insurance policy  
provided money enough to live a comfortable life  
but her metabolism was slow, and had been so all her life.  
Indeed her battle against obesity never-ending  
now made more difficult by being confined to a wheelchair  
after breaking her hip two years ago  
the bones never healing properly.  
Harold McSorley wheeled her in  
also a widower McSorley was now her companion  
and even in his mid-seventies the chap dressed in a jaunty manner  
today sporting a lavender shirt and peach colored pants  
glasses fire engine red  
and fancy Michael Jordan sneakers.  
McSorley and Catherine Rose had been a couple  
for ten months, defeating the demon loneliness.  
'Read any good books, Bernstein? '  
'One about Mrs. Seton, founder of the American Sisters of Charity.'  
'You read books about Saints? McSorley watches the Three Stooges.'  
He said, 'Whatever I like you got no use for.'  
'Did I ever stop you from watching the Three Stooges? ' she said,  
'even though Moe looks like a monkey.'  
'He makes me laugh.'  
'A baboon with half a brain.'  
'You don't want me to watch them no more, I won't.'  
'I never said you shouldn't watch them. Did I say that, Bernstein? '  
'Not that I heard.'  
'I only said Moe looks like a monkey with half a brain,  
and the other one, baldly,  
squeaks like a mouse.  
Fine! You want to watch, so watch.'  
Catherine Rose turned to me saying,  
'So, Bernstein, what did you come away with  
from reading the book? '  
'That's a difficult question.'  
'If you want easy talk to McSorley. From me you get tough questions.'

'Mrs. Seton felt the Heart of Jesus was her refuge  
and in such a state of being  
no aspect of existence could be painful or burdensome.'  
'A Saint!  
Mortals have problems!  
But not for long:  
McSorley, the Pork Chops! '

Charles Wax

# A True Child Of The Buddha In Brooklyn

Mary McCall  
one of my students  
raped  
in an abandoned building  
her face  
then set aflame  
alive  
but forever disfigured  
no rest  
from the nightmare  
and when I lay down  
couldn't catch my breath  
a fierce rumble of  
torment—  
Oh, the dear girl  
pain  
I couldn't imagine.  
'I wish I never knew.'  
Then whimpered for a moment  
but didn't cry  
mumbling, 'I ought to cry.'  
Then I tried to cry,  
but could not.  
'No soul left  
in this tattered body, ' I moaned  
and left the bed,  
turned on the light  
sat in the green chair  
slowly following my breath  
gradually rhythm soothed me  
and soon began to muse  
on the great matters  
this entire experiment  
of humanity  
wouldn't last more than a million years  
if that long  
a blip in the grand sweep  
of time  
measured in billions

and billions of years.  
I inhaled deeply  
and felt tingling in my arms and legs  
beginning to taste Buddha's great truth—  
Not a thing exists  
just the endless transformation of atoms  
and a bit of joy entered me.  
'No matter what happens  
I'm lucky to have come across  
his wisdom.'  
Without warning  
tears  
Mary's suffering  
finally  
real.

Charles Wax

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Charles Wax



# A Wholly Unprecedented Wound

I said to Barry Waldbaum in the Teacher's Center,  
"One of my students asked me, 'What's a hermaphrodite? '"  
"That some kinda mollusk, Bernstein? " he said,  
"cause I think I seen that creature on NATURE."  
"Got both male and female sex organs."  
"I was born with four toes."  
"I never knew. Which foot? "  
"Left. A missing little thing like that  
and my father was against me from the start.  
First time I went to the beach  
a crowd of people hovered around me.  
Well, when my father seen that  
he right away started charging a nickel  
for a look and for a dame  
you could play 'This little Piggy  
went to market'  
with them four toes.  
This one guy wanted to rent me  
for his daughter's birthday party.  
'Five dollars, ' my father says.  
'All the cake the kid can eat, ' he shot back.  
'That's for him—what about me? '  
says the old man.  
From then on I never took off my socks  
always wore 'em, both  
cause if I only had the left sock  
people would think  
there was something funny.  
Two socks never drew no attention,  
even in the shower when I was in high school  
I told the guys I didn't wanna catch no fungus.  
They believed me.  
Julius Szollosy and Arnold Tranen did the same,  
thought it was a good idea."  
"Your wife? " I asked.  
"How you mean, Bernstein? "  
"When you're...intimate, socks on or off? "  
"On. After so many years  
she got use to it

the socks  
not  
the toes."

Charles Wax

# Above All Things Desirable

A little man in his late seventies  
trudged along  
in front of the Hebrew Home For the Aged in Coney Island  
grey skull, faded skin,  
huge rounded hump on his back  
forcing him to totter on in a stooped position.  
"The Messiah is coming, " he said,  
"Are you waiting also?  
I know it's a long time we're waiting.  
But He will come. Otherwise,  
what is the meaning of our Earthly existence? "  
In order to look at me he tilted his head  
causing his lips and cheeks to tremble.  
"There must be a purpose to life  
other than death. No?  
What do you say? Walk with me. Walk for the Messiah.  
If I only stand my strange shape pains me."  
Just then Angie strolled over  
and said, " Irving Frankel, you're looking good."  
Then appeared a great rush of words:  
"We want too much. No?  
Perhaps not to want happiness,  
not to think of it, then He comes?  
Perhaps my suffering—the Messiah's gift?  
Never do I rest. Later? After the end? Then? "  
"Irving Frankel, " said Angie, her voice so sweet, so gentle,  
his name like a benediction.  
No words now, silence  
staring at Angie. "You're a handsome lad, " she said  
kissing him softly on the cheek.  
Still silence, his face serene,  
waiting  
Angie kissing him again  
this time  
a smile.

Charles Wax

# All Travelers On The Way To Infinity

As we trudged  
to Coney Island Hospital  
to visit  
Jim Pitt  
who'd tried to slit his throat  
with the tiny attachment  
on a nail clipper  
Vinnie Early said, "The depression musta  
hit him  
after all he ain't a dinosaur. Them critters  
never did such a thing  
lasted 160 million years  
and we humans been here for a million,  
something like that,  
but the strings  
in our brains is knotted  
and the nerves  
go haywire.  
A design flaw..."  
John Couch said, "The Almighty  
don't make mistakes.  
When I was in the joint  
they was dying like flies. Hanging with  
the belt  
the favored method  
but the Almighty never sanctioned  
such behavior  
that was Satan's handiwork.  
Do not be confused:  
The Almighty is the Almighty  
and Satan is Satan."  
"All I'm saying, " said Vinnie Early,  
"dinosaurs never committed suicide,  
and that's a plus on their record."

Charles Wax

# Almost An Illustrious Author

"Bernstein, I envy you, "  
said Moses Aaron Ginsberg  
having gone from  
a hundred eighty pounds  
to three forty  
in less than a year  
because he abandoned  
the glittering land  
of crystal meth  
fearing impotence  
stroke  
dementia  
incarceration.  
But I couldn't figure out  
why anyone should wanna be me  
so said, "Why? "  
"The novel."  
"Not finished  
not published, " I informed him.  
Moses Aaron Ginsberg shoved a Three Musketeers  
candy bar whole  
into his mouth  
sucked for a second  
then swallowed  
since chewing without teeth  
presented a problem  
"You're the Creator  
I'm a zero, " he said.  
"Well..."  
"What'd you think of my story  
A Disabled Father? "  
I stared at him  
wanting to boost his spirits  
so said, "A fine piece of work! "  
"You actually  
read it, " he blurted out.  
In truth  
I couldn't decipher  
a single word

worst handwriting on the planet  
minuscule bits of shaking  
from years I'm sure  
of ingesting every  
exotic drug  
known to man  
yet Moses Aaron Ginsberg  
refused the computer  
saying machines frightened him  
as did  
most everything else  
the world threw at him.

Charles Wax

# An Illustrious And Sublime Author

When I landed in my third  
period class  
Trisha stood near my desk  
I thought to myself, "She's blessed—  
gonna be an honored author one day."  
"Bernstein, I want to write  
this story, but I don't know if anybody would believe it."  
After she told me her idea  
I muttered, "When you're  
on Oprah  
mention my name."  
When I walked into the Teacher's Center  
food of every kind and description  
graced the long table  
in the center of the room.  
Henry F said, "Bernstein,  
Edwardo Jesus Torres  
catered the whole thing  
in honor of Edwin, his twin brother  
died exactly six months ago."  
At the end of the period  
Edwardo played  
Handel's Hallelujah Chorus  
for a few minutes  
then spoke,  
"All of this to honor  
my beloved brother,  
Edwin Jesus Torres  
with God now."  
The music commenced  
once more.  
I closed my eyes  
lowered my head  
and when I looked up Edwardo's tears  
flowed  
overwhelmed  
I too wept  
then raced out  
went to the bathroom

threw cold water on my face  
and left  
only to bump into Trisha  
who asked if I was OK.  
"Got something in my eye."  
Without hesitation she said,  
"The first time  
you ever lied to me."  
Feeling utterly worthless  
tears  
once more  
and the dear girl  
whispered,  
"Never again, please"  
"How'd you know? "  
"Heart to heart is where I live."

Charles Wax



# At A Conference Entitled

Best Practices in the Classroom

Principal Harry Zundel was instructed by  
Superintendent Bertha Happ  
to place an aquarium in each classroom  
to uplift the spirits of the children  
thus creating serenity,  
then, perchance  
learning.

One day Irving Tennenbaum,  
a failed Rabbinical student...  
well, the endless study of Torah  
had induced sadness, madness, melancholia, etc.,  
said, "Lillie Rush swallowed another goldfish...  
Tillie."

"Not Tillie, " I said, "the one with the brilliant colors."  
"The same.

I thought after she devoured Samson  
that was the last of her obsession.

I thought to expel her,  
but where?

She's troubled,  
I won't say she's not,  
but, still, she's searching  
for a way to reside in Holiness...  
we all are, Bernstein.

To come to exist in that state  
is our deepest purpose.  
because The Almighty has imbued us all  
with that desire."

"Tillie was my favorite, " I sighed.  
"Like a little spinning rainbow."

Charles Wax

# At Spinoza Hs Mice Ruled The Night

thousands  
secretly alive  
in walls and closets and bookrooms  
but even in daylight  
a bold one would race across my shoes  
seeking some mysterious delight  
at the other end of the room  
fear of humans  
bred out of them.  
Ziggy the newly installed head custodian  
insisted on glue traps  
indicating without subetly no cure existed  
for the deadly Hunta virus  
which floated freely into human lungs  
from the dust of dry rodent feces.  
At five o'clock in the afternoon  
he placed eleven traps in my office  
because he wanted me safe  
saying I looked just like his older brother  
who leaped from a roof in Warsaw  
unable to find the perfect word  
to conclude a poem  
he'd worked on for six years.  
As he plopped down the simple  
mechanisms of death  
he declared, "I am Ziggy the Terminator.  
I will kill them all."  
All this said in  
an Arnold Schwarzenegger Austrian voice  
even though Ziggy came from Poland  
and in the morning  
eleven mice became stuck  
though not dead  
their bodies  
twisted and misshapen in odd ways  
searching this unimaginable torment  
for a way home  
but eventually all  
became glued to eternity

then a phone call to Sonny the sweeper  
who scooped the scraps  
into an immense trash bag.  
And this went on  
the same routine  
four days straight  
until too much death  
wore out even Ziggy's lust for conquest.  
And once more  
mice ruled the night  
but now  
also daylight  
the ferocious slaughter of life  
coming to naught.

Charles Wax

# Being At One Time Defeated

I descended into the pit with Caligula  
while my hero the Dalai Lama  
serenely watched men  
sawn in half  
their soft flesh  
bubbling blood into the air.  
And I understood nothing.  
Lonely  
and longing for  
his words:  
Goodness inherent  
in every heart  
he said that again and again  
like stars  
like wind  
a million hours of meditation  
so he knew  
his breath impregnable  
as chunks of diamond  
yet I could not shift  
from the immense crater of  
Caligula's perversity—  
slaughter from a jiggling  
tongue  
devouring my beloved  
teacher.

Charles Wax

# Besieged

In the morning  
at Spinoza high school  
Tom Banta ate chalk  
champing merrily  
wouldn't stop  
until EMS  
came  
and carted him away  
to the G Building  
of Kings County Hospital  
as UFT Chapter Leader  
I hadda defend the guy  
cause this wasn't the first  
time he did crazy things  
one day  
brought six African bullfrogs  
to school  
and set 'em loose in class  
laughed like it was  
the joke of the century.  
Herbert Tartt the Principal  
wanted him out  
argued with me  
for an hour  
"Next time, Bernstein,  
you're sitting in his class  
the rest of the term."  
At Kings County Tom lay in bed  
strapped down  
at least  
not in a straight jacket  
like before.  
"Bernstein,  
you old flubbergaster  
save me again? "  
I stared at the man  
hair flying every which way  
teeth a dark brown  
from endless cigarettes

left ear today seeming  
lower than the right  
suddenly a tiny physician  
came in  
from India possibly  
Sri Lanka  
"How do you feel? " he asked  
in a clipped British accent.  
Tom stared blankly at the doctor  
who promptly punctured his skin  
with a rather long needle  
then took my arm  
escorting me into the hall  
"A friend? " he asked.  
"Work with him but  
he's been here before  
can you help the man? "  
"Sir, I am presently responsible  
for eighteen immense  
and difficult Wards  
possessing 182 patients."  
I took that to mean  
Tom Banta would now sleep  
and when he woke  
still be  
profoundly unhappy.

Charles Wax

# Betty's Bliss

Betty breathed vitality  
Spinoza High School  
could teach her nothing  
about life  
small, skinny  
wore her hair in a pony tail  
a smile forever flashing  
across her face  
in perpetual conflict  
with authority  
danced in class  
smoked in the john  
wandered hallways  
until kicked out.  
I saw Betty a year later  
in the subway.  
"How are you? " I asked.  
"Fine, " she said smiling  
at ease in her own being,  
"just came back from a hearing in school."  
"Still the same trouble, uh? "  
"Yeah."  
The train rumbled  
into the station.  
Betty did what she wanted  
and for awhile  
the going might be rough  
but in the end  
she'd do well—  
never abandoning joy  
which alone  
creates destiny  
not merely grim acceptance.

Charles Wax

# Breath In The Tunnel Of Bone

bitter pain  
no one can say  
I am not alive

Charles Wax



# Christmas Day

When I ambled into Meng's  
the place was packed even though  
this was Christmas day.  
Well, not every soul in Brooklyn  
had a place to celebrate the holiday,  
thus Meng's flourished as refuge.  
"Bernstein, here, " said Joe Lutz.  
"Greetings, " I cheerfully proclaimed  
but Joe's drunken breath told another tale  
as he sobbed, "My old man  
killed himself on Christmas day  
and after that things was never the same  
mother went nuts  
loved my father so  
and after that I never got a present.  
She tried to raise us kids but couldn't.  
Then one boyfriend after the other  
in the house and doing things with her.  
The worst was a stranger on Christmas day  
and my mother always made sure  
to have a body on Christmas day.  
Never a real tree, year after year  
a tiny plastic thing maybe a foot high  
without lights."  
Just then Treasure showed up  
sat smiled said,  
"Merry Christmas."  
Joe silent staring  
perhaps a tear couldn't tell head down.  
"That OK to say to a Jewish man, " she asked me.  
"Sure."  
"And it's gonna snow know you love snow."  
"Yes."  
Treasure silent, staring at Joe  
now at me asking, "What's with Lutz? "  
"Father killed himself on Christmas day."  
"So."  
"Never been the same."  
"So."

"You know, couldn't handle it, the pain."  
"Then he'll suffer, " Treasure said calmly  
as Lutz blinked, then gulped, blinked again  
still silent, waiting, wanting  
time to shift, somehow turn or bend or break  
but Treasure's implacable eyes  
would not let that happen  
so again: "Merry Christmas."

Charles Wax

# Don'T Get Many Fan Letters

well, most people don't read my stuff  
cause not published  
except in little magazines  
with an average circulation  
of under a hundred  
but one day got a letter  
from a guy in prison  
saying:  
Greeting  
from the mortuary  
found your writing in Monozine #3  
somber  
yet cleverly amusing  
your bio indicates publication in 50 zines  
if you have any please send  
zines pass the time  
gonna be here  
for another eleven years.  
I laminated his letter  
hung it on my wall  
then Xeroxed my 3,487 page novel  
WARRIORS OF THE UNSURPASSABLE  
COMPASSION  
and sent it off by UPS.  
Six months later received a note:  
You're the greatest  
Send more  
The longer the better.

Charles Wax

# Drowning In A River Of Liquid Assets

## Part 1

Mulliken called.  
As usual he wanted to read  
a section from his  
Treatise on the Profundities, vol. I: Evil.  
He had been working  
on this single volume  
eleven years  
projecting  
thirty volumes necessary  
to complete his work  
His father  
passed away when Mulliken was 16  
leaving him a small fortune  
millions  
he didn't know the exact amount  
and he didn't need to know the exact amount  
all that he required were funds necessary  
to cover his living expenses.  
I met him at City College  
where he wanted to be  
a writer of fiction at the time  
but he could never seem to finish  
a tale  
because he couldn't handle misfortune  
even in a story of his own creation.  
His father had been a salesman,  
cornering the entire Caribbean  
and Latin American market  
for Sony products in the early sixties.  
Sadly for Mulliken the private jet  
carrying his father, mother, and brother  
went down somewhere  
off the coast of Venezuela. His mother  
had been in and out mental institutions  
for most of her life,  
as had been his brother  
so at this point his father had

lost all faith in Western medicine  
and was taking his wife  
to a village somewhere in the Amazon  
where a local Indian was reputed  
to have magical powers.  
Thus as sole heir  
he inherited everything. The money  
had been both a blessing  
and a curse. A blessing  
because it allowed him  
to work uninterruptedly on his Treatise,  
and a curse for the very same reason.

## Part 2

While researching  
Hitler's death camps  
Mulliken fell into a profound depression  
which took the form of insomnia.  
He couldn't sleep  
thus more and more sleeping pills  
were required each night  
to eke out a nap.  
Needless to say  
all his friends drifted away  
because they couldn't bear  
to listen to him anymore.  
I alone remained.  
"What's the second volume? " I asked him.  
"Depression, " he said.  
"The third? " I asked.  
"Joy, " he said.  
I immediately urged him  
to put the final period on his 1,800 page manuscript  
delineating all aspects of Evil  
and launch into the third volume  
putting off Depression until a later  
time. Mulliken hinted  
he would consider the advice,  
then said, "Evil is the absence of Joy."  
I told him he was making progress.  
The next week

he informed me pages 1,234 through 1,789  
needed serious revision  
and he would have to hold off  
beginning  
the Treatise on Joy.

Charles Wax

# First Sermon Of Autumn

Every so often  
I felt the need  
to spice up my class  
with a sermon  
"I do not fail you, " I began.  
Immediately Oscar Bice  
called out,  
"My good Sir,  
I believe you and you alone  
gimme a 50."  
Undeterred I continued,  
"You fail yourself  
ponder this: in fifty years  
what?  
time flies  
gray hair arrives  
and soon after  
the coffin  
luckily  
just before being shoveled into  
that everlasting box of doom  
comes the question:  
what is the meaning of Life?  
If you can't answer  
forget it  
You're bound for Hell  
on a one way ticket  
and that's a fearsome trip  
no way out  
once the flames  
crisp up your flesh  
but you don't burn up  
everlasting torment  
TORMENT  
therefore I say unto you  
READ A BOOK  
soothe  
your troubled souls."  
"You sound like my grandma, "

Oscar Bice noted.  
"What a woman! "

Charles Wax



# Floating To Fame

As I ate tofu ravioli  
at my sister's place  
the phone rang. Her daughter  
Annie leaped to answer it  
and a moment later  
said, "It's Navin. A shark attacked him."  
"What? " said my sister  
grabbing the receiver.  
Five minutes later  
she told me the story:  
Her son Navin had been  
zooming along on his jet ski  
when he lost control  
and flipped off  
sadly the machine sped away  
as he bobbed in the water  
the current being too strong  
for him to swim after it.  
so he floated helplessly  
screaming for help  
but after ten minutes  
he grew tired of howling  
simply quivering and twitching.  
Then the hammerhead  
sharks appeared. Of course Navin  
stared at the sky  
because he didn't want  
to see how close they were.  
This lasted a good hour,  
so Navin said,  
but the paper reported  
the next day  
he floated  
for a mere twenty minutes  
before a boat came  
and hauled him out:  
Thus he was dubbed the Shark Man  
because even surrounded by  
at least four,

the Captain of the boat said,  
not a single one attacked.  
The next day  
my sister called saying,  
Navin made a grand last night."  
"Oh."

Dave Eickwort  
the owner of the Banana Peel  
read the article  
called Navin,  
and offered him a job  
as a male stripper  
so on stage he walks  
wearing a shark skin suit  
then gradually he disrobed.  
He was in instant success  
with women stuffing  
hundred dollar bills  
in his jock strap."

"Fantastic  
Navin's gonna be famous  
and he found his true calling."  
"But is there a future  
in stripping? " asked my sister  
always worrying  
even when  
good fortune  
appeared  
this time  
via  
four  
not too hungry  
hammerhead sharks.

Charles Wax

# Fragments Concerning Ontological Commotion

"Tell me about your mother, Jim."

"I called her up 8 o'clock last night, " Doctor Bernstein.

"I didn't speak to her

for about a month.

As soon as she got on the phone

she said

she's watching

this great Errol Flynn movie on channel 11

and can't talk.

Then she hung up."

Charles Wax

# Gloomy Scenes Foreshadowing Commotions

In 1968 I landed a job in Berriman JHS  
thus keeping me out of Viet Nam  
but if I faltered and got fired  
I'd be there swatting flies and fleeing bullets.  
My control wasn't fabulous,  
yet it existed, somewhat, at moments.  
Melvin Smeld was another story.  
He'd been relieved of his regular English program  
when Ruth Kaufman returned from her bout with pneumonia  
but as luck would have it  
he landed a regular Science program  
when Joseph Botts got pushed down a flight of stairs  
and broke his left arm and right leg.  
"How goes it? " I asked.  
"It's rough, Bernstein, the kids don't listen.."  
"Did you call up any mothers? "  
"It doesn't do any good.  
I call up at night and the next day  
they're back to their old tricks again"  
"Don't give up, " I said sternly,  
"or you're off to Viet Nam."  
Smeld stared at me, lips twitching  
barely able to get the words out,  
"Did you hear what happened? "  
"No."  
"They killed all the fish. Gilmore.  
Oh, you gotta watch him  
put ink in the tank, water turned blue  
then he strangled a goldfish  
in the back of the room.  
Assistant Principal Stein came in  
and gave him hell, but it won't help  
next day he'll be doing the same thing."  
"Sit him up front."  
Smeld stared at me quite hopeless  
finally managing to mumble,  
"Principal Foy says he's fed up with me."  
And don't you know  
the next day a kid heaved a chair

out the window onto Foy's sky blue Cadillac  
smashing Smeld to smithereens.

Charles Wax

# In Hopes Of A Happier Life

Ever since Andrew Stern's wife  
left him for guy living  
next door  
he couldn't shake the blues  
well, eleven years of marriage  
down the drain  
so one day Henry F  
trying to be helpful said,  
"When my pet goldfish  
Mr. Ben Brilliant  
passed away I was thrown  
into such agony  
as few men have ever known  
cause the joy his swimming around  
gave me can't be put into words  
at least not my words  
so I'll just say watching  
Mr. Ben Brilliant gave me delight—  
joy, joy's the word  
and such a golden orange he was  
to dazzle the eye  
for two days he floated  
on the surface of the water  
finally my dear wife said,  
'Enough. He's garbage.'  
I was taken aback  
by her cruelty.  
I said, 'Mr. Ben Brilliant is getting  
a proper burial.'  
so at once I went to  
the Yellow pages  
and looked up Pet Cemeteries  
closest one being in Huntington, Long Island  
I dialed  
then heard the toilet flush  
such a sound the human mind  
cannot imagine  
so to make a long story short  
I sunk into a catatonic coma

for three days  
and three nights  
then  
the great Rebbe Nachman of Breslov  
told me what to do in a dream  
and I did it  
straight-away racing  
to the pet store  
and bought a Mr. Ben Brilliant Jr."  
"The point, " moaned Andrew Stern,  
my wife ain't a goldfish."  
"Uh, well,  
yeah  
I was getting to that  
quoting the Rebbe now:  
'It is a great achievement to be happy! '"

Charles Wax

# Love's Last Shift

As soon as I walked into Meng's  
Billy Symes said, "Bernstein,  
whatta ya think about Viagra? "  
"Why ask me? "  
"You're a pill man."  
"Vitamins, " said Treasure,  
"caused he's scared of death."  
"Two weeks ago, " moaned Symes,  
"My Lord and Master failed me."  
"Lola mentioned it, " said Treasure,  
"but I'd avoid Viagra  
and go for prayer instead."  
"Billy, enough is enough,  
you're 87..."  
"84, Bernstein."  
Lola appeared dripping wet  
having been caught in the rain.  
"How are you, Billy? " she asked tenderly.  
"One time ain't a catastrophe...  
we could go another way, holding..."  
"If you want extra cash  
you got it, no problem  
but I gotta push through the gate  
or I'm finished...as a man."  
He paused, stared at everyone, finally  
bursting out, "I blow my nose  
in hundred dollars bills."  
"He does, " said Lola.  
"Not Bernstein, " laughed Treasure  
winking at me  
which I took as a cue so, "Go to a doctor, Billy,  
and see what he says."  
Thunder now, huge booms  
setting off car alarms  
as the rainstorm plunged from heaven.  
Lola stared out the large plate glass  
window, eyes drifting past the window  
until she said dreamily,  
"When I didn't have a place to stay



before I came to the Clement Hotel  
I used to sleep in Lincoln Square Park  
over by Eastern Parkway  
and the puppies would come to me  
in the night  
and sleep with me.  
and I kept them warm."

Charles Wax

# Nothing Beyond Mercy

For the first time in 14 months  
I went to the movies  
afterwards we went to China New Star  
myself and six friends.  
The oldest at 78, Max, a diabetic  
with three toes already removed said,  
"The book was better, always is."  
Nellie Nilan who had lost 200 pounds  
in the last two years  
and had never married and at  
58 probably never would, said,  
"I couldn't cry  
I wanted to cry but I couldn't cry."  
The film had ended with both lovers  
finally finding love  
in one another's arms.  
"I told you's all, " said Larry, "we shoulda  
seen King Kong."  
"I couldn't fall asleep last night, " Mona moaned,  
"so at 2 AM I watched TV, the Comedy channel  
Lynn something can't remember her last name  
funny and filthy making fun of everybody."  
"That's not funny, " said Vivian  
born without a left ear  
but never combed her hair to cover the absence.  
"Where's the damn waiter, " exclaimed Ed Henwood,  
"in a fancy place like this  
the guy shoulda been here by now."  
Jim Wink simply said, "All in good time."  
"Meaning what? " said Henwood.  
"Meaning: we'll all be dead  
soon enough, what's the hurry."  
"Do me a favor, take your freakin' medicine  
next time you come out in public."  
"You're quiet, Bernstein, why? " asked Ella Le Blanc  
almost bald and completely  
grey at 26, crushing anxiety  
having sopped up the last possible speck of human joy.  
"The God complex again, wanting to grant

Salvation to all beings  
but unable to—  
can't handle it, just wanna be Bernstein,  
eat a little Lo Mein, go home, sleep."  
"Meaning what? " said Henwood.  
"In the movie  
when a farmer plucked that chicken  
still alive and shrieking for mercy  
I could feel every feather  
being yanked out."  
"I didn't see that."  
"As the lovers were kissing  
off to the left."

Charles Wax

# Opening The Door

Timmy, the name he took  
when he came to America,  
spent  
two years  
in the Tiger cages  
of Vietnam  
but seems not to have  
carried that suffering  
into the present.  
He speaks rapidly  
and that combined  
with his accent  
leaves me  
without much comprehension  
only a little  
and with that "little"  
try to carry on a conversation  
I'm the only person  
who really  
listens to him  
so  
he gives me  
Chinese pears  
also lychees  
and kumquats.

Charles Wax

## Some Little Inaccuracies

Mickey was the youngest of six children.  
His mother had died  
bringing him into the world.  
From the unhappy  
details of his life I was positive  
his father and five brothers  
blamed him for her death. When I told  
Mickey of my insight  
he didn't believe me. He maintained  
everything which had been done to him  
occurred because  
"they're just a bunch of rough Irishmen."  
"They made you sleep  
in a closet from age six to nine, " I told him.  
"We had a small apartment, " he maintained.  
"And when your brother,  
Jim,  
knocked out your two front teeth? "  
"I used his favorite Bic pen."  
"Bic pen!  
that costs like a dime.".   
"We wasn't rich."

Charles Wax

# The Chemistry Of Solitude

Miriam curled up  
at the far end of  
Meng's Restaurant  
in Coney Island  
a young girl who took pills  
now gradually her body bent more  
and more until her head  
rested on the Formica table.  
Many times  
I had seen her  
like that for hours  
every so often raising  
her head  
looking around  
if she saw someone she knew  
she'd struggle to rise  
and if she couldn't  
she'd whisper,  
"Got stuff? "  
Nothing else.  
One time  
when Miriam slumped  
on a table  
her mother walked in  
ordered Wonton soup  
sat  
slurped  
then gone  
no love left  
I said to myself  
hoping  
my words were false.

Charles Wax

# The Greatest Mystery

1: 47 at night, still loitering on the Pier  
with the usual crew  
when old Tom Duffy walked by unsteadily  
and as he passed under one of the lights  
his face emerged haggard and white as a sheet.  
"Tom, " I called out. He tottered to us.  
"How's everything? " I asked.  
"Bernstein, my son died, " he said  
bursting into tears crying like a baby.  
"You're still alive, " said Hugh Stryker.  
The remark took everyone  
by surprise. Even Joe Devoe was shocked  
and when he was deep into depression  
it took a lot to shock him.  
"You're still breathing, " continued Stryker.  
"A sad life, " sighed Tom Duffy,  
"a sad life, and then to die  
in his mid-fifties of stomach cancer."  
"Poor kids  
to lose their father, " said Joe Devoe.  
"Never married, " sighed Tom Duffy.  
Devoe stepped to Duffy  
then gently kissed him on the cheek  
lingering, perhaps needing to smell  
the sadness  
forever, but finally pulling away, saying,  
"Over and over in the lives  
that have ended you see  
no miraculous lunge into happiness."  
Duffy went on voice hoarse  
worn ragged from weeping  
"I told him, 'Go out. Meet a woman.'  
I told him a hundred times  
but my wife said,  
'There's time for girls.'  
Now...in the grave."  
"Gone but not forgotten, " said Devoe  
wanting with all his heart  
to shift sorrow

everywhere and for all time  
into joy  
but without God's grace  
so Tom Duffy still wept  
staring at the vast Atlantic  
dawn yet to come, if at all,  
for a father in darkest grief.  
Then another kiss  
Devoe's lips trembling  
longing for purity enough  
to sing that lullaby  
of deliverance  
he had sought all his life.

Charles Wax



# The Palace Of Pleasure

China New Star closed, now new owners  
coming in  
switching from Chinese to Thai  
one taste  
and the establishment became  
my favorite twice a week  
every week  
I consumed every item on the menu  
got to know the waiters, waitresses  
also other patrons  
90% were immense  
truly obese  
gobbling Basil chicken, Coconut shrimp  
Steaming red crabs in a fiery sauce  
such happiness on plump faces  
sometimes  
I'd stopped munching  
to stare  
guilty, a voyeur  
but when a woman  
cracked a chair and fell  
I leaped up  
helping the dear soul  
to another throne.

Charles Wax

# The Supreme Command

As soon as I walked  
into the Teacher's Center  
I spotted John Trueman  
weeping.  
"Bernstein, Ida Tennenbaum  
swallowed  
another goldfish—  
Tillie  
the one  
with  
brilliant colors. I thought  
after  
she devoured Samson  
that was the last  
of her obsession.  
Alas, no  
she's troubled  
I won't say  
she's not  
still  
Ida's searching  
for her purpose  
in life  
we all are, Bernstein,  
and we're Blessed  
being teachers  
to pilot  
students  
to such a pure place."  
Trueman paused  
eyes lifted up  
toward Heaven  
"Well,  
we know for sure  
Ida Tennenbaum  
wasn't born  
to be  
a vegetarian."



# The Three Marks Of Existence

Billy Mullins trudged into Meng's  
having just returned  
from four months in a Florida jail,  
possession of marijuana  
without intent to sell.  
"Bernstein, " he said seriously  
"stay out of the State of Florida."  
"I intend to."  
Then he lowered his voice  
to an almost inaudible whisper,  
"Almost became a Sissy Mary  
but took to writing  
and that saved me."  
"You don't say, " said Treasure  
now interested in the conversation.  
A big guy says to me I got cute eyes  
and right away I knew what he wanted  
but a bigger guy says to join  
his poetry club and I won't have no trouble.  
And that's what I did, and I didn't  
have no trouble."  
"Damn, Billy, " said Treasure,  
"I like the way you talk."  
"Big guy's name was Larry Littlejohn,  
Little for short  
and he called his group  
the Fortune Cookie School of Poesy."  
Treasure handed the Thunderbird  
to Larry who swallowed, then smiled  
saying, "All the poems hadda  
give the meaning of life  
everything else was fluff, Little's word,  
and so I scribbled away  
day after day, time going,  
days crossed off, and don't you know  
I got into it, especially Little's  
urging, to go deeper, deeper,  
but soon poetry shifted to Biography about this guy."  
"You liked him? " asked Treasure.

"First man I ever met with the Big Three:  
courage, compassion, panoramic awareness,  
the last one came to me yesterday  
from Bernstein's Tibetan rap."

"Tibet! " exclaimed Treasure  
staring at me, smiling, then again: "Tibet"  
but softer now, almost trancelike  
as she whispered, "Panoramic awareness.  
A thousand eyes, each twirling turning  
seeking searching  
all worlds inner outer  
no escape from vision."

Charles Wax

# The Utmost Fortress

Soon the snow would whirl from highest heaven to earth  
spreading the nectar of happiness  
on the tortured streets, on the tortured hearts.  
"You ain't heard a word I said, " Hubert Tilton moaned.  
"Sorry, " I said, meaning it, yet still caught up  
in the blessed vision.  
"Yesterday after supper  
I munched a whole loaf of Wonder bread  
and drank a six pack of red raspberry soda.  
I needed pleasure.  
If I don't stuff myself day and night  
I can't touch the ground."  
I stared at Tilton.  
"Bernstein, " he continued, "if I don't eat  
I suffer and get low, so low."  
Bill Oats chimed in, "It is back with me now  
the paralysis."  
Suddenly the large plate glass window of Meng's  
framed the first snowflakes.  
"I go to sleep with anxiety and wake up in it.  
I long for ease.  
No hope.  
Close to death."  
Bill Oats paused, stared at the ceiling,  
finally screaming, "I ACCEPT DEATH."  
Then: closed his eyes and whispered,  
"Death is horrible.  
What will happen to me? "  
Eyes open now:  
"I fear each moment  
yet I have resolved not to have such fears  
but Resolve cannot penetrate Dread."  
Outside, no questions, gloom crushed.  
Bill Oats continued, "There's an invisible wall  
between me and humanity  
I'm distant from their dreams  
and have no interest in their voices  
they can't help untangle my wretchedness.  
Only death is undistorted..."

Tilton blurted out, "Doctor Munn said if I didn't lose weight  
I was a dead man but he said the same thing  
when I went past 400 pounds.  
I'm still around."

Almost a headache by now  
the chatter of doom, so eloquent  
but beyond the window  
wonder.

Charles Wax

# Untitled

Standing on the corner  
of Surf and Stillwell Ave  
Christmas day  
dreaming of Alaska  
62 below zero  
in the mountains  
kill a man for sure  
or lift his spirit  
one simply had to know the realm  
to survive.  
Suddenly I heard,  
"Are you a Doctor  
you look like a mind Doctor."  
Sad crazy tormented Jim  
wandering the streets  
empty of hope  
on the day Christ was born  
funny red wool hat rising to a point  
barely containing his long thick  
uncombed grey hair  
early twenties  
but grief had done its work.  
"Some have said so."  
"Doctor,  
the Voices tell me to kill myself.  
They say, 'Commit suicide, Commit suicide,  
Commit suicide.'"  
"But you're still alive! "  
"Too passive  
to wallop my skull  
to bits."  
I walked towards Meng's  
Jim with me  
ordered Christmas dinner  
for both of us  
meat-loaf, mashed potatoes, coffee  
then spotted Deedee  
worked hard  
but too thin



so never reeled in big cash.  
"You want it, " she asked  
not wasting time  
well, we both knew each other  
and chit-chat would happen later  
in a warm room smelling of bug spray  
in the Terminal Hotel.  
Jim said, "Doctor Sattner tries to help me  
but his name sounds evil,  
don't it?

shoots me up with thorazine,  
no emancipation  
like that word, Doctor?  
reading the dictionary  
for the calm  
told him I need electroshock  
cause I can't take depression  
no more.  
What are you into? "  
"Buddhism."  
"Should I try? "  
"If you have to you will."  
Deedee stepped to us  
and stared at Jim  
with an intense tenderness.  
"I cry  
alone in my bed, " he said.  
"We all been there  
but you can't stay, " she whispered.  
"The Voices.  
I'm paralyzed.  
My only hope is electroshock."  
"Who goin' to care for my son?  
who goin' to feed him?  
put clothes on his back?  
his father?  
Hell no.  
I got to do it.  
You a nice lookin' fella  
a little taste of pussy

lift that depression  
right up off you."  
Jim stared at DeeDee  
for at least ten seconds  
before he sighed,  
"When I jerk off  
my arm burns  
and I hear Heartbreak Hotel."

Charles Wax

# Untitled

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of Surf and Stillwell Ave  
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dreaming of Alaska  
62 below zero  
in the mountains  
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or lift his spirit  
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with an intense tenderness.  
"I cry  
alone in my bed, " he said.  
"We all been there  
but you can't stay, " she whispered.  
"The Voices.  
I'm paralyzed.  
My only hope is electroshock."  
"Who goin' to care for my son?  
who goin' to feed him?  
put clothes on his back?  
his father?  
Hell no.  
I got to do it.  
You a nice lookin' fella  
a little taste of pussy

lift that depression  
right up off you."  
Jim stared at DeeDee  
for at least ten seconds  
before he sighed,  
"When I jerk off  
my arm burns  
and I hear Heartbreak Hotel."

Charles Wax

# Utterly Bewildered By The Tenacity Of Doom

When I didn't hand over the yellow pills  
Tony T said he'd have to  
make The Call to Johnny Ice.  
I calmly informed the dear lad  
Johnny Ice was now 87 years old  
blind in one eye  
and strapped to his wheelchair  
with giant rubber bands.  
He then tried to describe the crippling  
anxiety which had invaded his heart  
taken root, and refused to depart  
this going on now two decades  
a fire, literally, blazing in his guts  
the need to rip off his skin, again, literally.  
I said for me a twelve pound sledge hammer  
pounding my brittle frozen spine  
time and time again the shattering  
and me unable to shift position  
or beg for mercy.  
"Just a few, you cocksucker, " he finally said,  
then added, "A man without empathy is dirt."  
That hurt because a week ago  
the great Arno Gruen visited Spinoza HS  
where I asked him the secret of life, quickly,  
as he left the building, and like Freud's famous  
Love and Work, words, not sentences,  
in his case just one, empathy—  
Understanding of another's feelings, without that  
Fascists would rule the world  
but anxiety...  
creating an absolute loneliness  
where each soul believed his suffering  
the worst  
that ever existed, or could exist  
no greater torment than the torment  
of right now.  
"Cut out the booze  
and I'll give you a few yellow beauties  
one or the other, not both, " I told Tony T

then added, "that concoction's a prescription for death."  
"I swear on my mother's blessed soul  
just pills, only pills."  
Then he stared at me as if I were insane finally moaning,  
"I wanna live, Bernstein, but what I got ain't life."  
Tears now in my eyes  
his suffering so real, so intense  
my own also, pity for us both, so when I heard  
his hoarse voice whisper,  
"Bernstein, just two yellow treats  
will set me right the whole day."  
I delivered two tiny wonders to Tony T  
which he swallowed with a hit  
from a miniature bottle of Grey goose vodka.  
miraculously materializing  
from his tattered left shoe.

Charles Wax

# Waking At 2 Am

dreams too dense  
and murky  
to translate...  
the heart stutters  
in the long night ahead.

Charles Wax



# When Treasure Stepped Into Meng's

The sadness had not yet  
left her  
burying her grandmother  
two days ago.  
Suddenly Benny plopped down,  
hoisted the Thunderbird  
above his open mouth  
tilted his wrist, swallowed  
then smiled, finally holding out  
the bottle to Treasure  
who shook her head, No.  
"Why do people die, Bernstein? " she asked  
"96, " I said softly.  
"Too much love."  
"A blessing."  
"I didn't want her to go  
not yet."  
Outside thunder  
followed by pounding rain.  
Benny gulped again, no smile  
just a sigh, then another.  
"A little longer  
her eyes.  
That too much to want, Bernstein? "  
"About your grandma? " asked Benny.  
Silence. I said, "Yeah."  
"Her name? " he asked  
"Janice, " said Treasure,  
Benny held the bottle high  
said, "To Janice."  
then began the swallow  
until all the booze was gone  
also Benny, head down,  
eyes closed, barely breathing.  
"Looks almost dead, " I said.  
"So pretty  
in the coffin, blue dress,  
shiny black shoes  
told me not to be troubled..."

"She spoke to you? "

"As best she could  
being she was dead."

Charles Wax

# Without A Shield

At the Rochester Institute of Technology  
while a graduate student  
in photography  
I met a woman  
I'll call Ingrid Bergman  
and fell in love with her  
allowing my soul to drift  
in ethereal realms  
When the time came  
to return home to Brooklyn  
we spoke seriously of our future  
She loved me,  
she said,  
but also  
Gustav Gustafson  
and Earl Kip. This information  
hurt but she said  
all I had to do was hang on  
until next summer  
when we'd travel together  
throughout Sweden.  
"What are you going to do  
from now till then? " I asked.  
In the fall and winter  
she'd live with Gustafson  
on his farm in Watertown New York  
in the spring she'd go for a stint with Kip,  
a professor of photography at R.I.T.  
whom I knew to be  
a philandering bum. How could she love him?  
"Any chance you'll change your mind? " I asked.  
She kissed me on the lips whispering,  
"Love is supreme  
but complicated.  
It shatters all worlds."

Charles Wax