**BEINISH GOTTESKIND**

**Serge Liberman**

It is Maximilien Schneiderman, the photographer of our transit camp in Ziegenhain who, when we meet again long decades after we - Mother, Father and I - and he have left it to go our separate ways, fleshes out my earliest and meagre recollections of our fellow inmate Beinish Gotteskind. For the rest recounted here, I have pieced it together from the snippets told to me at different times by Father and Mother, and from my own short-lived - very, very short-lived - crossing of paths with Gotteskind himself.

Photographs taken by Maxi in Ziegenhain show Beinish to have been at the time to have been a dark lean curly-headed youth of nineteen always dressed in the same fully buttoned-up black suit, and, even when caught off guard, being unrelievedly intense, and perhaps timid or shy, and keeping very much to himself, seldom without a notebook and pencil in hand.

The Ziegenhain communal dining-hall is a long dreary room strewn with sawdust, surrounded by deeply cracked, mildewed and grease-stained walls, lined on two sides by small grime-smudged windows allowing for little light. The tables consist of crude wooden boards straddling several trestles, their edges so chipped that more than once do I, in common with others, catch splinters in my pullover, while long low benches offer the only seating to be had.

The camp's inmates eat in shifts. Having our tin plates or bowls sloshed and mounded with whatever passes as the meal of the day, we sit wherever we will, there being no protocol about the seating.

So it happens on one occasion that while Father, Mother and I sit at one particular table, Beinish Gotteskind seats himself there too - although on his own and at some remove - followed by the big, gregarious and incorrigible commentator on all things, Itzik Glicklich, there being none who can possibly be more different from Beinish than he. For Glicklich - as Maxi Schneiderman has photographed him - is indeed a big man and has the large head, high brow and directness of gaze that I come, long after in my university years, to associate with strong and lucid intelligence, with firm independence of opinion and self-certainty. He is something of a humorist too when it suits him, a poser of riddles and composer of parables, and something of a bit-part actor.

Glicklich seats himself on the bench opposite Beinish, but also just next to me.

"Shall we all of us eat together of the manna offered us this day? he says. "If in Moses' Sinai, the children of Israel survived on similarly meagre fare, shall not our own hardened generation do likewise?"

Before anyone can answer - even if such questions truly beg none - he turns and leans his large solid bulk towards me.

"I was born with the name Itzik Glicklich," he says. "And you, little hero, tell me, what is yours?"

I swallow whatever it is I am eating.

"Raphael," I say, in a murmur just above a whisper.

"Raph...a...el," he repeats, stressing each syllable separately. "What a splendid name your parents..." - he nods in turn towards Father, towards Mother - "have given you. Do you know what Raph...a...el means?"

I shake my head.

"It means 'God heals'. Even if..." - he looks again at Father and at Mother who, bemused, are looking on - "even if on this earth only men can heal - first themselves and then others. And how old are you, Raphael?"

"Eight-and-a-half," I reply, a mite louder than before.

He draws me to himself with a large arm draped across my shoulders.

"Not just eight, but eight-and-a-half *noch* !" he says. "What a clever boy you are."

He looks up to address Father and Mother as one.

"You really should make of him a doctor!" he says.

"What he will be, he will be," replies Father across the table with a smiling light-hearted upturning of a hand. "A doctor, a tailor, a kvass-maker... So long as also a *mensch* ."

To which Mother on my left adds, "And is healthy."

"Amen!" responds Itzik Glicklich. "While a little bit of luck... at the right time, that can do wonders too."

They engage briefly in conversation - about Father's work at the garage, Mother's in dressmaking, and Glicklich's own in the camp's requisitioning stores - until his attention is diverted to Beinish Gotteskind who has just laid open his notebook and is writing in it.

"Say, friend Gotteskind!" he calls across the table. "Have we just dropped pearls so precious that they're worth preserving?"

Beinish Gotteskind, so timid before Itzik Glicklich as to be almost tongue-tied, ventures an answer of sorts.

"I... I just had an idea," he mutters, avoiding the bigger man's direct gaze.

"And you write down all your ideas?"

Beinish Gotteskind nods faintly.

"And...," he adds; he is so hard to hear, "and sometimes what I see, what... what I hear...."

"A chronicler of our times, ha?" says Glicklich. "A writer maybe?"

Glicklich looks about him as if he were announcing a fact rather than asking a question.

Beinish, with head bent in shyness, is a roll of wire tightly coiled. His brow, so narrow, so thinly-fleshed, is puckered above small deeply-recessed flickering black eyes. He probes diffidently with his fork at the food on his plate.

"I... I write what I have seen in the war," he answers, "and... and what I learn from others, and... and to pass it on and... and what to make of it all..."

Itzik Glicklich sits back, he sits upright, more imposing still in his fully drawn-up massiveness.

"What to make of it all?" he echoes Beinish Gotteskind. "To make sense of what has been? And find meaning in it? Is that what you are saying?"

Beinish brings a finger to his lips. He is so bowed that his face is almost hidden, the most visible part of his head being its tangle of dark curly black hair. He then nods again, still more concerted his evasion of Glicklich's gaze.

"Yes," he murmurs.

At this, Glicklich pushes aside his plate, and places his two large and powerful hands upon the table.

"Well, then," he says, talking to us all and pausing variously over Father, Mother, myself and Beinish across from him. "My father, may his memory be forever blessed, he was a bookseller. He was a lover of writers, he cherished poets, and he would say that, while the world had a place for historians, philosophers, clergies and professors of this and that, it needed writers and poets more, far more, infinitely more. For, no other, he would say, could so burrow into the human mind, and heart and soul, into those innermost recesses where not only a man's profoundest and most vicious darknesses are to be found but also his finest, holiest and most luminous possibilities. So much did he worship writers that he saw in them, all in one, witness to every age, memorial, interpreter, conscience, waygiver, prophet and comforter."

Glicklich now leans directly towards Beinish with his forearms solidly advanced across the table.

"So, as a writer, and as such all these things my father spoke of, there are three questions I should like you to answer. But first..."

He raises a finger.

"But first, a story. A man stands naked alongside a grave filled with the corpses of others already shot there. There, on the edge, he waits, first for the command to fire and then for the coil to tear into him. But instead of tearing into him, the coil only grazes his shoulder. All the same, he lets himself fall on to the mound of the warm, sticky, bloodied bodies of those others. There he lies unmoving while more bodies keep falling around and on top of him, remaining until night when, unseen, he works through the weight of the now-stiffened and cold cadavers upon him and crawls as best he can over the carnage towards the other bank.

Glicklich fixes more squarely upon Beinish Gotteskind who now ventures to return the gaze, nervously, timid, retreating.

"So, here are the questions. If we are to talk of meaning, one, what is one to make of the annihilation of a people? Two, what may I make of my surviving? And three, why did all those others shot before and after me *not* survive?"

So confronted by Glicklich's massive presence and the pressing force of his questions, Beinish, so slight, so shrinking and reclusive, covers his face, he begins to rock, lets out a whine, and, with sobbing mounting ever louder, cries out, "I don't know! I don't know! I too have suffered enough! What do you want of me? What do you want?" With that, he rises in a frenzy from his seat, seizes up his pad and pencil and, almost unseeingly, striking now one's shoulder, another's elbow, yet another's back, he flees from the dining-hall, his flight attended by a metallic clatter of his plate and cutlery upon the floor.

For a while, no-one at the table is disposed to talk.

Father and Mother continue for several moments more to look at the doorway through which Beinish has fled. Itzik Glicklich, with a reflective pursing of his lips and a rubbing of his cheeks, looks about the hall where the other inmates sit eating or bring their meals to the tables or leave, the place filled with a chatter, clatter and a shuffling of feet, save for the briefest pause occasioned by Beinish's pained distressed departure.

Turning back to face Father and Mother beside me, he splays out his fingers in the void, bringing them down just as quickly upon the table.

"Meaning!" he huffs. "Meaning! You, too, you have your own stories to tell. You, too, have lost family and have lost much else. And must have thought about these questions. So, if you know, tell me: grass, it has a meaning? Or a star? An acorn? A toenail? Or a mouse even? Or a dog? Or, in the grander scale of things, does a human being have any more? When I lay in that heap of human offal, none ever closer, do you know what I saw?"

He looks separately at Father and Mother and at me.

"I should spare such young ears from this," he says, "I truly should. But truth is mocked if it cannot be told. When I lay in that offal, that was all I saw: offal! Nothing less, nothing more! So..."

Just then, camp photographer Maxi Schneiderman joins our table, affably smiling at everyone as is his way as he sets down his own plate and cutlery with one hand and his inseparable *Leica* with the other.

"Everyone is so sombre here," he says, looking down the table. "What happened? I have never seen our Beinish in such a state."

Itzik Glicklich, more sober, perhaps contrite, examines his fingernails.

"My father," he answers Maxi, "he was a bookseller who said that writers and poets delve most deeply of all into the human mind, and the heart and the soul. And that, he would say, was because their own souls, they ran so deeply that they were also the most brittle of all. I'm afraid I was too hard on our Beinish. He's a young man looking for meaning for what we've been through and maybe, in a world where ever since Cain killed his brother Abel not a day has been without evil, maybe even of life itself."

Glicklich places a hand upon his chest.

"From my heart," he says, "I pray that he may in time find one."

He now taps a temple.

"But my head, it tells me that he will not have a happy end."

\* \* \*

As has long been my custom, I take coffee and strudel on Sunday mornings at the *Scheherazade* . I have a favourite spot at the rear which the other regulars recognise as mine; hence, when I arrive there at ten or so, it is usually vacant.

There, after a week's medical work, I derive much pleasure from sitting - simply sitting - and reading a journal or a book.

One particular Sunday, Maxi Schneiderman enters. Since becoming widowed several months before, he has himself been increasingly frequenting the place. On seeing me, he approaches with the agility that he has he has never lost and, pointing at whatever I might be reading, asks, "Will I be interrupting you if I join you a while?"

Maxi Schneiderman who, in Ziegenhain, was a rather lean narrow-shouldered man of middle height and extraordinarily adept at weaving through the most narrow of gaps between people to take his voluminous photographs, has since filled out substantially. He is now more solid, broader and fuller, although he seems somewhat shorter than I recollect him to have been - or even as he appears in certain photographs taken of him at that time. His face is commensurately more rounded; it has acquired a heavier ruggedness scored by an accretion of creases; his hair is as dark and wavy as it ever was, touched by only the sparest heretic strands of grey; while he has since added a neat moustache above lips that, at least until recent bereavement, would smile as easily as a twinkle would appear in his eyes.

Having been happily married but childless, he remains, despite his numerous friends, very much alone. And, as many as are their invitations to their families' engagements, weddings and *Bar Mitzvahs* , where he continues, more as a hobby now, to ply what has since Ziegenhain been his passionate photographic vocation, he is sadder, his smiles are more tentative, the twinkles fainter.

Sitting opposite me, he orders a cappuccino and, until it is brought, we engage in simple inconsequential small talk.

However, while sugaring his cup, he points to the book I happen to be reading that day.

"Seeing that beside you," he says, "reminds me of another young man I used to know. And your parents certainly. It was in Ziegenhain and his name was Beinish, Beinish Gotteskind. You probably don't remember him, you were only a *boychikl* then and still in short pants."

He stirs his cappuccino. Milky froth flows over and trickles down the sides of the cup.

"He lives in Melbourne too, you know?" he adds.

"*That* I didn't know," I admit, "but I do remember or have learnt some things from my parents about him. And especially a time when he sat with us at one table and with another my father mentioned, a certain Glicklich."

"Ah, yes, Itzik Glicklich. I have a photograph of him too. Big man. Strong features. Strong voice. Talked a lot, and had miraculously survived a mass shooting. And once gave poor Beinish a truly hard time."

"Poor Beinish?"

"He really was, poor Beinish," replies Maxi, with a wan and distant pensive smile. "An earnest fellow, but a bit naive. Wanted to be a poet, a writer, but was too much on his own, lived too much in his head to truly be a writer. And though everywhere he went he carried a much-worn notebook, he never showed anybody what he wrote. There were some in the camp who worried over him, but he would never let them get too near. He was an orphan, that we knew. He'd seen his family carried off. And how he survived... all we knew was that he'd been something of a field and forest child, never staying two nights in the same place. He talked to nearly no-one in that time and, in his wanderings, he was more gypsy than the gypsies."

Maxi sips his cappuccino and shakes his head.

"Itzik Glicklich, fine as he was, hurt badly inside. But, so did we all; so did we all, even if in different ways. So when poor Beinish talked of finding some meaning for everything they'd been through, Glicklich should really have been gentler and not so brushed him off."

I bite into another piece of strudel.

"And Beinish Gotteskind now lives in Melbourne,?" I say.

Maxi Schneiderman returns his cup to its saucer and wipes the corners of his lips with finger and thumb.

"I can't remember who told me," he says. "but he lives not far from here. In Balaclava, I'm told."

"Must be near me," I say. "I'm in Hotham Street."

"I guess he must be," he answers, then after a very brief pause, he goes on.

"From Ziegenhain, it seems he went on to Paris and then to an aunt in Sydney who brought him out. Living together didn't work out. They couldn't get on. He lasted six months there, after which time, she showed him the door.

"He seems not have stayed in any one place for more than several months at a time and was, I hear, a celebrity of sorts, appearing at Kings Cross every Saturday night to recite his poetry on the street.

"He came to Melbourne two years ago or so, where he's again been moving about from place to place, from boarding house to boarding house, and from job to job, while I hear that the footpath outside the pawnbroker's down the street has become his local Kings Cross. It's a minor landmark for some of the locals. They like to call it Benny's Zone. As for his actual work - already twenty-three, twenty-four when he came to Australia, he never developed a trade. So he's worked as a storeman, driver, door-to-door newspaper deliverer, hospital cleaner, orderly, factory hand. Luckily, he left his last job just before it was exposed. It was some paltry charity concern, for which he packed and mailed out brochures and twenty-cent pens for ten dollar contributions. But the charity was more a front for a blackmail, drug-peddling and extortion racket. Beinish's boss was caught out and exposed. Beinish, who had known nothing about it was an ideal monkey up front: sees nothing, hears nothing, therefore can spill nothing. He's now with a scrap metal yard. I guess he'll be retiring soon; he's not in such good health - never has been - I'm told; and must in any case be getting on to sixty-four, sixty-five. He never married. But I hear that..."

Maxi downs the rest of his cappuccino. Some of its froth clings to his moustache.

"But I hear that," he says, wiping away the froth with the back of a hand, "that he still keeps writing poetry, and I must, I really must one Saturday make an effort to hear him."

\* \* \*

What brings all this to mind is a succession of events that comes to take place inordinately soon after - within three weeks in fact, and either as, purely and simply, a coincidence, common enough in the daily run of things (and the more rational way to look at it) or as some idiosyncratically orchestrated sequence that may lean one well towards a superstitious contemplation of fate.

For, one mid-week evening, I receive a call from a woman who asks to speak to the doctor. One of her tenants is unwell. She has tried his usual doctor; but he's at a meeting and won't be home till late. She has found my name in the telephone directory's Yellow Pages as being fairly near.

"He's coughing a lot and shivering like he was wrapped in ice," she says, "He's caught himself the death of a chill."

Unwell is unwell.

"We'll just have to finish our chess game later," I say to Julian, and "Do keep the home fires burning," to Laurella. There is no gain in disturbing Nechama and Damien studying in their rooms.

Nor is there any gain from creating artificial suspense.

It is true. As his landlady said, even swaddled beneath a puffed-up and jumbled eiderdown in a room, host, surely, to every Antarctic draught, Beinish Gotteskind is unwell indeed. To the extent that I do recollect something of him from Ziegenhain, he has drifted far, far from the mind's-eye picture I carry of him. For, where before, he was lean, sunken-eyed and underfed, and ever strait-jacketed within a tight buttoned-up black suit, there is about him instead a wholesale dilapidation. His red fevered eyes and nose apart, all there is to see of him above his covers is a wild straggly riot of grey hair and beard within which lips, chin and ears are wholly lost. His bed consists of the thinnest of mattresses on deeply sagging springs; a threadbare dressing-gown, corduroy jacket and a scarf hang on a doornail; in a cupboard are a few odds and ends of clothing; on a chair lie a chequered shirt fraying along the collar, a sweater and shiny-seated pants; while in front of his window, in which everything inside the room is reflected under a dreary unhooded light, stands a writing table with an antiquated typewriter at the centre of a slipshod hodge-podge of folders, dog-eared notebooks, a dictionary, scraps of paper, pencils, pens, rubbers, a stapler, a calculator, pills, a linctus and other assorted bottles. Suffice it to say that the floor, too, which has already long ago earned a sound scrubbing is not without its own heaps of higgledy-piggledy disorder. The window has probably not been opened for ventilation for a year or more.

As for his illness, as his landlady tells it on leading me along the hallway of the boarding-house that smells of a mixture of bacon, floor wax and soap suds, Beinish Gotteskind - "Mr Benny", as she calls him - "Mr Benny he went out as he always does on Saturdy night. It was raining cats and dogs and he got drenched right through. I told him plainly he shouldn't go, but there was no stopping him. All he said was, 'After what I've been through, you think rain can hurt me?' So what do you think happened - now he's got himself the chill of his life."

At his door, she leaves me.

"Just call out Maisie if you need me," she says.

Rain *has* hurt the one-time field and forest child. He has pneumonia which, given his surroundings, press for hospital transfer.

Once so stuttering and mouse-like, where did he get that almost hostile vehemence that now laces his answer?

"Hospital?" he huffs, his eyes burning with more than fever alone. "For this?"

He is re-buttoning his pyjama top.

"Oh no!" he stresses the point, giving on to a brief burst of coughing, similar bouts of which pepper our talk for the rest of my visit. "If Job got over his afflictions without hospitals, no less will I! Barriers may keep being laid down, but they won't stop me. I'll just go on scaling them!"

"Barriers?" I echo.

"Barriers! Laid down before me as if by Satan himself over and over over the years - rashes, colitis, cataracts, swollen glands, kidney stones, migraines - to thwart me from what I must do?"

"Which is?" I ask, reaching for the Penicillin in my medical case, having no option but to treat him at home.

"Which is..." - he is caught by another coughing spasm, after which he continues - "which is to bring God down into the world."

I concentrate on the injection in my hand and, not commenting immediately, ask him to bare a buttock.

He rolls over, I administer the shot, he rolls back, and draws up his eiderdown again to his chin.

It is only then that I take up his last remark.

"Through your poetry?" I venture.

Out of the vast nest of hair almost covering his whole pillow, his eyes, in their swift helter-skelter flitting over me, resemble the flight of sparrows. He is clearly taken by surprise.

"You know my work?" he says.

"I know *of*f your work," I reply. "That you write poetry, that is. That you have done so since..."

I pause, devising the best way to broach the fact.

"I was still a young boy then," I say, " but we... you and I, that is, and my parents, we were in Ziegenhain at the same time. And I know you were already writing then."

"When you came in, you said your name is Bloom?"

"Raphael Bloom," I say.

With his head sunken into his pillow, he shuts his eyes.

His shoulders rock - as shoulders do when one is either crying or laughing - and then lightly sways his head from side to side.

"How strange, strange, strangely things turn out," he says, seeing - who knows what? - behind his eyelids. "Raphael Bloom. I wrote it down around that time. Raph...a...el. God heals. And here you are, a doctor. Like that... that... What a pig he was then, that Itzik Glicklich. I have never forgotten. And yet..."

Beinish reopens his eyes, turns his face towards me.

There is more of irony in them than of tears.

He is also about to cough, but manages to suppress it.

"He really did land a challenge on me, he did," he now goes on. "I wrote it all down at the time. The meaning behind the annihilation; the meaning behind some surviving; the meaning in so many others *not* surviving."

"And have you arrived at any?" I ask.

Somewhere within the dense grey undergrowth that constitutes his beard, I fancy I can make out a suggestion of a smile. He withdraws a hand from beneath his cover to lay it on my forearm as I stand beside the bed.

"You'll just have to come to Acland Street on Saturday evening to find out. Eight o'clock. Outside the pawnbroker's. There are usually a few regulars there and others that they attract."

I contemplate the invitation.

"I may well take you up on that," I say, "at least for a short time. We do have tickets for the movies, I know, but after nine, I believe. . . Even so," I add then, "my better advice is..."

My better advice is that he be checked daily by his regular doctor until then, but, even so, that he remain home Saturday coming.

"Remain home?" he counters. "When I have important work to do? Oh no! No Satan, or whatever its name is, is going to keep me from that."

Another more sustained burst of coughing follows me as I leave his room.

But come Saturday evening, and Beinish is indeed at his post again preparing for his session; with myself there, too, at Benny's Zone, partly to see whether he has recovered and partly, even though I have little time, to satisfy a whetted curiosity.

The evening is cold, chilly in fact, with the air teething through to the bone. A drizzle is falling, the street lights are muted in wet yellowish haze, while a closely huddled cluster of folk, some twelve to fifteen men and women, alone, in pairs and in threesomes, with a couple of youngsters in their midst stand chatting outside Acland Street's pawnshop, wrapping themselves around by their arms and stamping their feet. From the general tone of familiarity around, some of them are clearly regulars. Beinish, for his part, is this time sanely dressed. He is wearing a duffle-coat with a plastic rain-coat over that, a cloth cap with ear-muffs offering scant cover his mass of hair, and a scarf about his neck. He has just set up a card-table and is spreading over it a number of books. His movements are swift, purposeful, intense.

Weaving between the gathering, I approach him.

"Hello, Beinish," I say. "You're well back on your feet, I see. I thought I'd take up your offer and come by."

Thickly padded in his layerings, he is broad, he is solid, every bit a bear.

"I told you that not even Satan would keep me away."

He then indicates the books on the table with an open palm.

"They're mine if you're interested, though you'll note the play on my name."

There is no mistaking that they are his indeed. Whose else's could they be with such titles as *The Poems of Benedict Godschild* , *Benedict Godschild: Selected Poems* , *A Sampler of the Poetic Works of Benedict Godschild* , each a thin crudely produced volume manually typed, photocopied on cheap yellowing paper, and stapled with brown wrapping paper as covers?

Turning my back against a whorl of wind that whips in from the sea, I pick up one of them, open it at random and read a couple of stanzas. I then flip through its pages. On each is a uniform layout, four-line verses giving variable concession to rhyme.

I hold on to it but do not read on, for Beinish Gotteskind, stepping on to a low chair before the gathering, is ready to begin.

Whereupon, after a brief clearing cough, he does begin.

For one who has always in my mind's-eye been so isolated, so wary, so withdrawn from others, he is now unexpectedly unabashedly forthright.

"Ladies and gentlemen, friends," he says in a voice that, to my ears, has not yet fully lost the heaviness of his illness, "For those of you who do not yet know me, my name is Benedict Godschild. I am a poet. A misunderstood poet. An unfashionable, even old-fashioned kind of poet. Which is why regular publishers will not take my work. I am misunderstood, one, and unfashionable, two, because I am a poet who asks questions and a poet with an answer. As I have written in the opening poem in my very first book here, in a piece that I have called, simply, *Why?*  "

With a pyramid formation of his fingers, he rocks his hand.

"Why are we born, and why do we suffer? Why do we hold on even when living gets tougher?

Why are we here and whose plan do we follow? Why the pain and why the sorrow?

If it's meaning you're after, listen with care and withhold your laughter,

For, as one who through hell has been, there is more than any can imagine that I have

seen."

What follows makes Beinish wince, even as others are moved to giggle and snicker as, to one side, an overly jovial trio of inebriates repeat the last line as a Gilbert and Sullivan-like parody, mock-singing, "For, as one who through hell has been, there is more than any can imagine that he has seen."

I feel for Beinish, but however pained he may be, he pushes on.

Or, perhaps more correctly, he is driven on. His voice rises a jot.

"Gentlemen!" he addresses them, two of the men rakish lean, the third far shorter and portlier between them. "I beg of you, just as the poem itself begs of you, do not laugh. I beg of you to listen instead. And, through listening, to *hear* . And, through hearing, to *understand* , to understand that poetry may, even in its simplest form, reach deeper into the core of things than the treatises and tomes of the most erudite scholars."

"Yea! Let us listen, let us hear, let us understand!" calls out a reed of a man in shapeless gaberdine coat, with a raggle-taggle flimsy beard and a tail of plaited hair.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," continues Beinish with a near-oratorical raising of both hands now, undistracted this time, "why do I ask the why of things? What have I seen that lead me to ask that why?"

He takes a red vinyl-covered notebook from his duffle-coat and, flipping it open at a pre-marked page, says, "I will read you a poem that may make clear to you, why. I call it, 'May you never know such things yourselves'."

Giving yet another clearing cough, he again sets ail.

"May you never know such things yourselves,

Men lashing others with whips and rifles,

Or know the boot that with one kick becomes a weapon

Or a hand that patting kittens just as keenly breaks infants' necks."

Beinish proceeds in this vein through two more verses detailing other acts of violence which his one-time note-taking must well have accrued into a lucrative source; and then goes on:

"Behind partitions we hid, and in lofts, in bunkers and in cellars

Even of sewers were we not squeamish.

Choice between living in another's shit or dying in blood that was our own,

Rarely was there choice so easy - none easier - to make."

Beside me, a youngish girl, twenty, twenty-one, in black coat and beret, rises on her toes and whispers into her boy-friend's ear - which, whisper though it is, is yet loud enough to be more widely heard, even above the wind along the street and the rain pattering ever more steadily on the overhead eaves.

"That's poetry?" she says.

The boy-friend shrugs a shoulder.

"You know the saying, don't you, about one man's meat being another man's poison," he answers.

"No wonder he can't get the stuff published," she says.

With the rain falling in mounting degree, a passing car hisses and swishes more sibilantly on asphalt while a tram clattering towards its terminus at the end of the street sprays splashing rainwater from the tracks.

Whether Beinish himself hears the pair's exchange or not, I can't say. But, undiverted, and with an ardour progressively intensifying he proceeds along rails he has clearly laid down for himself.

"The evils that are done, they are done in the name of this God and that,

In obeisance to icons religious and canons philosophical,

In servility to credos economic and dogmas socio-political,

Blind that every new ism and every new ology is an evil in a different hat."

The rain falls still more heavily about, the wind in its circuits is whistling in the doorways of the surrounding shops, while the street-lights swing more wildly above. First, one pair of listeners, then the young couple, huddled tightly against the elements, move away. I, too, have but mere minutes left before returning home to collect Laurella for the movies.

Beinish Gotteskind - Benedict Godschild, master of Benny's Zone - leans further forward, the better to be heard and goes on, compelled, too, to raise his voice which acquires a harsher raspiness.

"The world us godless, we say, but it is evil that keeps it so, evil itself keeping God away,

Neither directing nor playing any earthly part, God watches, he waits,

In His aloneness, yearning towards a cleansed, purified humankind to descend,

And infinitely more so than have singular holy martyred souls to him ascend.

"So why are we born, and why do we suffer? Why the pain and why the sorrow?"

He pauses, surveys his dwindling audience and holds up his two index fingers to keep holding their attention.

"I come now," he says, "to the last verse that I composed just this week, a verse that came to me as if in a vision at the height of a fever bringing with it what is for me the truest beginning of an answer. I beg of you, I beg of you that you listen and that you hear me. So..."

"So why are we born, and why do we suffer? Why the pain and why the sorrow?"

With every passing moment, the weather becomes nastier. In the expanse over Port Phillip Bay, a flash of lightning momentarily lights up a fragment of sky, followed almost instantly by a loud clap of thunder, in turn giving on to a longer low rumble. At the same time, Acland Street is taken over by a squall. Papers are swept along the pavement; the wind chills to the marrow; and what has till now been drizzle, and then rain, gives way to a downpour of hail that soaks trouser-legs, women's dresses, stockings and shoes.

The gathering, the few that are left if it - the trio of parodists, the bearded plaited reed of a man and another couple I have but scantly noticed till - are looking or listening less to Beinish now than seeking flight to drier cover.

Beinish, however, stands his ground. In duffle-coat, raincoat and enormous growth of hair, he is insulated against wind and rain and is even more the bear as he spreads his arms as if to reap the renegades back unto himself, the while trying again,

"So why are we born, and why do we suffer? "Why the pain and why the sorrow?"

At this point, I, too, must leave. I would stay. I would . Out of solidarity; to learn what sense he has finally made, what final meaning he has derived from all he and all of his generation have been through, and also not to leave him, as it were, whistling in the wind. But I must go, I must. Whereupon, placing a ten-dollar note for him under his books for the volume of his poems I am still holding in my hands and, with a wave, saying to him, "I'm sorry, Beinish, but like I said before I wouldn't be able to stay", I turn and, with head bent against the squall, make for my car, at my back following the glum doleful look of abandonment.

I am about to open the door and escape from the inclement surrounds outside, when there reaches me from behind a skid, squeal and screeching of brakes, a summary gullet-in-throat breath-robbing pause, and, in a wrenching consummation, a brutal wall-breaking impact of solid against solid, a crunching concertinaing of metal, and a smashing and jangling of falling glass, followed by a mounting clamour of running feet and jumbled escalating cries of people materialising from who knows where.

I run back too. Towards Benny's Zone, upon which others are converging, the storm, the movies, everything else to the last be damned! As doctor, I push my way through. I fall to my knees. The people press around. I do all that can be done. But, even before I begin, I know that Beinish Gotteskind will never again compose his verses under the dingy light of his boarding-house room, nor again appear Saturday nights to bring them to his hearers, nor will any of them ever learn his answer to the whys that he himself, from Ziegenhain on, has for all those decades sought. For, even as he stands on the threshold of telling it on that pinpoint on earth's map named for him as Benny's Zone, he is delivered in abominably swift and precipitate despatch to a pulped, macerated, bloodied heap caught between a battered crumpled Holden in front and the shattered wall of the pawnshop behind.

In due course, all formalities are done. Ambulance and police come and go. Beinish, under wraps, is taken away. The pavement is swept of its debris, scoured of Beinish's blood. In my turn, I, too, return home, remaining with Laurella sitting by me - that is sufficient, just sitting by me - as, over and over, I read the verse, Beinish's very last, written into his red notebook that I have salvaged from the pavement beside his upturned chair where, in one fell mishap, ended all his questioning.

"So why are we born," - I read - "and why do we suffer? Why the pain and why the sorrow?

This say I! That, out of blackness and a reckoning the cost, purification may follow,

When, scorning dogma and treasuring the other, men will no more cause hurt, nor themselves hurt again never know,

And, with God in their midst, will ever sleep more easy, each night blessed with an abiding safe and sure tomorrow.

Although the hour is late, I call Maxi Schneiderman.

As neither he nor I know of any relatives or friends Beinish may have known, I take it upon myself to call the *Chevra Kadisha* to arrange his burial.

At the funeral, with Maxi and myself among them, a *minyan* of ten men has been called together. A rabbi says *Kaddish* and everyone in turn shovels earth into his grave.

When the others have gone, Maxi and I linger on a while, he thinking his thoughts, I thinking mine.

Then, after a click of his tongue and a sigh, Maxi, absently smoothing his moustache with finger and thumb and lightly swaying, releases a huff.

"So to die," he says, "so to die. Was Glicklich way back not right after all? Meaning, he wanted, poor Beinish!"

"In the end, he found one," I say.

"For himself, yes," Maxi replies, nodding, thoughtfully, with a pouting of a lip. "For himself. That's the most any of us can do. But beyond that, Raphael? Tell me, beyond that?"