Poems from:

To Every Truth
Its Season

By Sam Seifter

ABOUT THE POEMS (in Sam’s own words):

The poem “Code written in a Country Crickyard” is a presumptuous resetting of Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” A churchyard can be transformed to a kirkyard, which in turn incorporates the spirit of Francis Crick of the historic Watson-Crick structure for DNA.

“The Children of Ma’alot” was written in May 1974, shortly after the unconscionable massacre of schoolchildren of Ma’alot and Safaad in Israel.

Nina, for whom the poem “To Nina” was written, was a wonderfully insightful and gracious woman of the pioneering generation in Israel. Nina saw poems I had written about others and asked playfully why I did not write a poem for her. So I did. In this poem, the Shlomo, of course, is the Solomon of the Song of Songs.

Helly and Ilse, about whom the poem “The Austro-Italians” was written, had come to Italy in the 1930s and thereafter lived in Como. Their father had been a well-known Viennese designer-architect; and Helly and Ilse had grown up knowing many of the prominent artistic persons of pre-World War II Austria.

Dr. Seifter’s grandson, Jonathan M. Abrams, illustrated the poems.
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**Code Written in a Country Crickyard**

The curly tails are those of parting DNA,
   The double strand unwinding into complements;
Thus the species upward plod their endless way,
   And live their lives which are a base existence.

Beneath these rugate walls, the membrane’s shade,
   Within the nuclear chromosomal heap,
Each in a narrow cell forever laid,
   The purine forebears of the helix sleep.

Let not cynicism mock man’s useful toil,
   His homely joys, for everything is planned:
So when the doublet shuffles off this mortal coil,
   The code remains within the single strand.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow’r,
   And all that beauty, all that wealth commands,
Arose alike in that stripping hour:
   The paths of glory lead but from the strands.

Perhaps in this cistronic spot, in sweet repose,
   A gene is pregnant with celestial fire:
Phosphor, bases and sugar of ribose,
   Hold everything to which we can aspire.

Thus information lies within the ample chain,
   Rich with coils which time does e’er unroll
(Releving then the full genetic strain),
   Ensures the genial current of the soul.

Though full many a chain may bear the purest gene,
   In dark unconscious turns of helix hid,
Should many a flower be born to blush unseen,
   Don’t lay this failure to the twisted ld.

Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife,
   The sober bases never learned to stray;
Along the cool annealing vale of life
   They kept the matching tenor of their way.

On some fond code the parting chain relies,
   Some pious bonds the leaving strand requires;
E’en from each base the best of nature’s ties,
   Hydrogen atoms send out connecting wires.

**The Epitaph**

*Here lies the code within the DNA,*
   *The nucleotide affairs of man return,*
*Each time transcribed in message RNA:*
   *In this our nature’s copy is eterne.*

Note: Thanks to Thomas Gray and William Shakespeare for use of their lines.
The Children of Ma’alot

Children of Ma’alot,
battered children of our hope,
your ordeal is over
and in the hill beds of Safaad
you rest in gentler cover
than any we could give in life.

Children of Ma’alot,
guide us clearly,
for our grief is too confused;
and there is peril
that our only legacy to you
could be the vengeance we will do.

Children of Ma’alot,
you are also the children of Theresienstadt,
of Maidanek-Lublin, Mi Lai, Belfast,
Mozambique, and a crowded geography
of death in dusty-dry villages,
quick-dug ditches, huddled schoolhouses,
gas and napalm chambers,
rifled huts and cobbled streets;
and, lest we forget,
soul-consuming refuge camps.

Children of Ma’alot,
and all the others,
there was no escape in your time,
although for each many thousand years
of generations of children
had grown and multiplied
to bring you to this point and then to death.

Each child returned
to the stones of Safaad
or the sands of the Sahara
or the smog over the Ganges
is the cruel cut-off
of so many centuries of hope.

And now begins again
the endless wait
for the generation
that can kill the hate.
To Nina

This morning as I ploughed the deep
Of unadorned and silent sleep,
I was wakened by a temple bell,
The glorious voice of Philomel.

Ah, Philomel, a maid of Athens,
Whom now we know as Philomena;
And whose name is love of song,
Nightingale, but really Nina.

All my youth I heard songs of birds
the Spanish swallow, La Golondrina,
The Spanish dove, La Paloma,
And then the Neapolitan Nina.

Yes, the Neapolitan Nina,
Likened to the turtle dove of Shlomo,
Whose voice in Spring is clearly heard
Throughout the land of Palestina.

Pergolesi glorified his Nina
While others sang of Columbina
(Except for pious Palestrina),
But I will only praise this Nina.
The Austro-Italians, Helly and Ilse, in their Citroën, 
Take us for a ride around Lake Como – Easter, 1973 
(a letter of thanks)

Kennst du das Land
where the white Citroën booms
and curves along right and left shores of Como?
And
Connais tu le pays
where the orange blossoms bloom –
but while like orange blossoms should?
And
Knowest thou the fair land
where, on one Palm-less Sunday,
and whatever is the Monday that follows,
Helly and Ilse sprang from our unconscious
(for they must have been with us)
to lead us on like two urging angels
in the upper frieze of a long-ago painting,
to view Paradise?
And then to lead us sadly away,
although there were yet,
as in Walther’s song,
Helly, like Eva, im Paradies,
and Ilse too.
What associations were loosed
as conversation leaped with every turn in the road
and cove of the lake!
And later we exchanged stories
as we drank tea from their Bobba’s Meissen,
and talked with poorly joined connections
of Hans Sachs (remember his house?),
and of Beckmesser who almost stole the Meistersinger Prize
And then we Weilled away the time
as talked of Kurt.
(Wo weilst du?)
You were Dukas’s Sorcerer’s Apprentices
(but we drank politely from the Guilded teacups,
not from the sorcers or saucers,
as might have Alice’s Mad Hatter).
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And, then, in the Plinys’ Como place,
there was a plinitude of good things.
Younger and Older, including a platitude
of traditional Easter Columba
(a dove sculptured in coffee cake,
which, when we dissected away her spread of wings,
was poor Columbina).

And then more conversation.
Take Pittsburgh’s William Steinberg, for instance,
or turn the Stein over and
take Leonard Bernstein, for instance,
whose name is preserved Forever in Amber.
Yes, take Leonard, who conducted Bellini,
because Bellini had conducted himself so poorly!
Casta Diva! and Pasta, too!
(Remember that Pasta was Bellini’s starchy prima diva?)
And in our talk, as we ran over the centuries,
we did not forget Alma Mahler,
and Jackie O.,
and poor Maria, Dame of the Callas!

And we felt like William Tell
As we rowed in mixed metaphor across Lake Como
(really drawn by ferry swans);
but this time, instead of chasing us,
the Austrians were safely in our boat.