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## Poems

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## *Farfalla*

Once, speaking of her brother, uncle Joe,  
my mother mixed an idiom, and put  
the foot before the hand in hand-and-foot,  
and laughed, but went on talking, even so,  
about our uncle's quick-step, one-man show,  
a singing waiter on a pleasure boat  
who sang the menus out with a golden throat,  
and danced his three-foot platters on heel and toe.

I knew the story, as I also knew  
the one my uncle told about her too:  
far from their sunny southern Italy  
a first snow flake waltzed down the winter sky,  
and spellbound, a small girl let out a cry,  
and then sang, in Italian, "Butterfly."

## ***Dante Closes His Book***

*for George Steiner*

*Now my speech falls short of the test:  
for all my talk, I am less than a babe  
with tongue still dripping from his mother's breast.  
"Paradiso," last canto, 1.106-108*

His tongue, how could it speak for his mind's eye,  
caught as he was in that angelic daze  
that praises but to breathe, and breathes to praise?  
He had approached where languages all die,  
and then retreated, sparrow, from that sky  
where emblems take on wings, emitting rays,  
clouds volley—as in medieval plays—  
gigantic cannonades, and rainbows fly.

His speech, less than an infant's tongue still wet,  
as he wrote down, from suckling, turned a pun  
on tongue and language, naturally done—  
not holy, and not easy to forget.  
His last lines trembled, like wind-shaken boughs,  
before the silence that is the wind's house.

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## Chooch

It was the family that he came from—  
they made him man at ten, and fool at twenty—  
who marked him with the nick-name like a bruise.  
They got him working papers at fourteen;  
up till that time, they'd set him shining shoes  
right after school. Born fit, till Kingdom Come,  
he labored without thank you, blows a-plenty  
for speaking up, and free cuffs in between.

They called him Chooch. In an old dialect  
the word means donkey, beast of burden, lout.  
He'd been our classroom slavey, always there  
to pick up after teacher at the bell.  
His virtue was forever his defect:  
Alacrity. He never figured out  
that some chores keep, that discipline pell-mell  
from fear and doubt, can send you straight to hell.  
He found that out in 1944  
at Normandy, when, on the famous shore,  
he took a bomb, and was shipped home, a ball  
of plaster, because he ran and ran  
when all the sergeant said was, "Keep down man."