An abstract painting with a textured, layered appearance. The top half is dominated by a large, bright yellow area that transitions into darker, more muted tones of green and brown. The bottom half features a dark green foreground with a winding, reddish-brown path or stream. The overall effect is one of depth and naturalistic color palette.

*An Early Picking*

*Selected Poems 1976-1988*

*Barry Louis Polisar*

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## *Author's Notes*

The poems in this collection were written decades ago and almost all are in syllabic form, where the number of syllables in each line is the same in every corresponding verse. I had not planned to publish any of these, but from time to time, I'd pull them out to read and would end up editing and revising them.

The cover art for this collection of poems is a watercolor study by my grandmother, likely painted in the late 1940s.

The poem about my father began as an answer to Marvin Bell's poem "The Manipulator," where he writes about how his father fled the pogroms of Russia, hiding in wagons and eating hot dogs on his way to America.

The poem placing W. H. Auden at the O.K. Corral references his poem written after the German army invaded Poland in 1939. Auden, who had a penchant for wearing carpet slippers and drinking scotch and soda, originally ended the poem with the line, "We must love one another or die," but later went back and revised it.

I had read W. D. Snodgrass's poem "April Inventory" in college. Over the years, I would often recite favorite lines from the poem, but reading it again after many decades, I realized I had been misquot-

ing it all this time. I liked the line I had remembered incorrectly and had made my own, so I've included it here.

I took a creative writing class my last semester of college with the poet and writer, David R. Slavitt. I had already been writing songs and poems, and really wanted an A in the class, but was told I didn't sweat enough and had only earned a "shaky B." In "The Poetry Class," I borrowed lines that other students had written and when I read my poem out loud in class, David Slavitt gave a hearty laugh, and announced I now had a "solid B." In that class, I was introduced to the poems of A. D. Hope; Hope and David Slavitt have been my favorite poets ever since. The title of this collection references one of Hope's last books, *A Late Picking*.

Finally, in the summer of 1978, while traveling through Europe by train with the young woman I had begun seeing a few months earlier, we had our first fight. The next day, we heard the sound of artillery in the distance and were told that the army was practicing war games. The Vietnam War had recently ended after years of peace talks that began with arguments about what shape the peace talk tables should be and those two things came together in a poem. It ended up being the first of four poems I returned to every few years when we celebrated milestones together.

*Barry Louis Polisar, 2023*

## *An Early Picking*

## *Jerusalem Fig Tree*

*Fall 1976*

My grandfather planted this tree just before he died.  
It grew behind the house, shaded by the broad-leaf  
American maple which kept it from ever bearing fruit.

My grandmother often complained about the maple,  
saying its roots were destroying the foundation  
of the back porch. After she died, we cut the maple tree down.

That year, my mother and I ate the solitary  
fig that grew. Splitting it in two, we tasted the  
sweetness of that first fruit, knowing this had been saved for us both.

## *Jerusalem Fig Tree II*

*May 22, 1977*

My grandfather knew how  
to take a cutting and  
root it, so it would grow.  
Knowing it would take years

to mature, he planted  
this tree for the future.  
It blossoms long after  
the apple; its stalks stay

bare 'til late spring. Thinking  
it dead, the handyman  
cut it down, piling all  
the limbs outside to burn.

Its roots exposed, I found  
what remained that day and  
gathering up the shoots,  
I carefully placed them

into the ground again  
without ceremony.  
I kept the neighbor's dogs  
away from the fresh dirt,

and like my grandfather  
years before, I watered  
the stalks that now grow by  
my window, bearing fruit.



## *My Father (after Bell)*

*Winter 1976*

Separated for almost two decades, our  
New York City reunion was  
made under the watchful eyes of St. Matthew  
in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

We did not touch, save a handshake at the end.  
He looked like the pictures my mom  
had kept for me; grayer now, but fit and trim.  
He had no stories like those of the old Jews—

learning to survive where he was not wanted,  
hiding in a wagon from the  
Czar's drunken soldiers, riding a horse bareback  
into Poland. He rarely left New York now.

The next time, we drove together to Brooklyn.  
Walking around the boarded-up  
rides at Coney Island, he ate a hot dog  
outside Nathan's Famous. I had a shrimp roll.

## *New Year's Eve*

*1976*

The wounds unhealed, my pain rubbed bare.  
My heart cut open, ached and bled.

I wrote her poems of my despair.  
“Stop sending me that crap,” she said.

## ***Taking Stock***

*April 1977*

Nothing lasts long enough.  
Soles wear thin where they tread,  
The heart hardens like old  
split leather and gives out.

I knew the stitching would  
tear, stretched beyond repair  
and fraying at the edge.  
The collar was threadbare.

It is in this time that  
we examine what went  
wrong. We are skillful but  
our clothes are all rumpled.

Fashions change. We adapt.  
Knowing we are bankrupt  
and broke, we both close our  
ledgers. Acknowledging

the end, we note all the  
market conditions that  
led to failure and loss.  
Emerging intact, we

look for a new wardrobe.  
Announcing “the season  
of loss is now over.”  
we take stock and go on.

## ***W.H. at the O.K.***

*November 1977*

The old scripts were so simple. Those were the days of easy answers.  
He walks in, the spurs on his carpet slippers jangling.  
Sauntering up to the bar for a scotch and soda  
and armed with the script from some B-western, he says to the bartender,  
“We must love one another or die.”

Times change, the stories are more nuanced, the characters more complex.  
He knows what that cough could mean, so he re-thinks the line.  
Still, he loads up on scotch, but now asks for the bottle.  
The plot has thickened; he surveys the room and says to the bartender,  
“We must love one another and die.”

## ***December Inventory (after Snodgrass)***

*1977*

At the college where I teach,  
each year the girls grow younger  
and further out of reach.

## *The Poetry Class*

*December 1977*

Where “volcanoes thunder, flash, spit, and spew”  
we keep returning—we, the stubborn few  
whose numbers thin as we plod on through nights  
that drag. One wants a son and so, she writes

of “muted greyness that pervades her sleep”  
while “wallowing in dreams she cannot keep.”  
The critic shakes his head and sighs; wincing,  
slashing the lines that are not convincing.

The muse is fickle; we must not cheat her  
as we fiddle with our faulty meter.  
“The point is dumb,” he says again to me,  
“Sweat more. Right now you’ve got a shaky B.”

I must admit, I’ll say it plain: we stink.  
Like our flagging, sagging spirits, I think  
“we will all grow impotent”—or just sick,  
leaving it to others to turn that trick.

The work is hard when you just don’t have it;  
to write like a Hope or Pope or Slavitt.  
We write of “love’s strained and sad relations.”  
In the end, we’ll “douche all emanations.”

## *Civil War Newspaper Story*

1978

A headline in the paper—  
recalling a quick skirmish—brief  
and more likely forgotten except for those  
soldiers seeking some relief:

“Southern Troops on Their Way Home  
Raid Blair Mansion.” Why that address?  
Says here: “To steal wine.” A historian’s joke?  
Or just pure rebelliousness?

Hard to think some General  
could have devised plans for this first;  
a way to reduce enemy spirits while  
letting the troops quench their thirst?

Should have been an easy mark  
if not for that small army; those  
Union troops were ready and loaded with shot.  
Just guarding the booze? Who knows

if thirsty soldiers met up  
later—beaten—but not wasted;  
no bottle to help the dry and homesick get  
past the defeats they’d tasted.

## *War Games*

*Europe, Summer 1978*

Like diplomats who won't  
admit internal weaknesses,  
we meet at polite halfway points to  
discuss the shape of  
peace talk tables.

When talks fail, we act like  
generals, weighing the risks. We  
calculate strategy and pull back.  
Unmoved by weeping,  
no one concedes.

But no young recruits, we  
survive this skirmish and emerge  
a bit wiser. We lower our sights,  
simply glad to have  
made it through this.

## *Marriage*

*October 31, 1981*

Like diplomats who have  
pledged their word, we agree to forge  
no other alliance. Knowing when  
to embrace peace, we  
adjust to terms.

Cease-fires are shaky.  
Troops are accustomed to battle.  
Peace is marked by compromise and  
interrupted by  
small arms fire.

Your settlements encroach.  
We break the truce, but are willing  
to negotiate. We have given  
our word and now we  
hope not to bomb.

## *First Anniversary*

*October 1982*

The first year of peace is  
marked by a small party of state.  
Foreign affairs were never as good  
as these relations;  
hopes are rising.

Borders are now open  
and casualty reports are rare;  
just an occasional outburst when  
one of us triggers  
an old land mine.

This truce is here to stay.  
There is little to adjust to.  
We grow fatter and let our guards down,  
but wonder what will  
this peace produce?

## *Pregnant*

*July 23, 1986*

What has become of this  
alliance? We have become fat  
and now carry ourselves like elder  
statesmen—and women!  
It's a new age.

We've flattened our warheads  
and turned our swords into plowshares,  
but signed no non-proliferation  
treaty as bare arms  
and legs entwined.

We checked our shot, and then  
put our tools to far better use;  
plowing and turning through furrowed fields  
and valleys 'til we  
found fertile ground.

## *Shall We Gather at the River*

*John Wayne before the Academy, 1979*

He is back from the hospital.  
Another challenger who thought he was better  
has failed, but more will come after him.  
His voice weak, for years the lines on his face have  
just grown deeper. He is an easy mark.

The lung removed, he clears his throat  
between sentences. To see him in a suit, you'd  
think he was a retired rancher. The  
jackets never seem to fit; his tie chokes our  
confidence. He's gray under that Stetson.

Having put away the gun that  
once assured us, his hand moves slowly for a glass  
of water. There is no one waiting in  
the doorway to back him up this time around.  
Standing alone, unarmed, he knows what's next.

## *A Bumper Crop*

*Birth Announcement, March 1987*

Two heads are better than one and so,  
knowing a good thing when we saw one,  
we decided we should have another.  
What's a Pisces who swims alone?  
Our babies cry in unison  
since our daughter joined her brother.

Tea is better with two. Noah knew  
that and grabbed a pair of everything.  
He knew a miracle when he saw one  
and so do we. It's not just buds  
in the gardens and trees this spring;  
it's also our daughter and son.



# *Soup*

*Passover 1988*

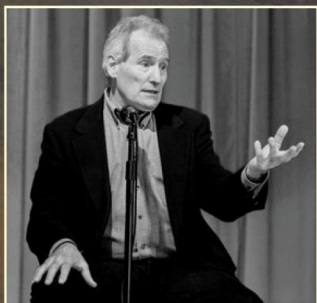
Life, they say, is sometimes tough,  
replete with cheats and painful stuff,  
coughs and colds, or a hacking croup,  
but don't forget, there is always soup.

It warms our chills, comforts pains,  
soothing aches and ills. Man complains  
through the ages, but sages knew  
the value of broth and hearty stew.

There are things that should amaze  
us, even on the darkest days.  
For gardens grow, flower and yield  
bounty for our pots in plot and field.

So make soup and we'll take stock,  
praising every tureen and crock.  
And like the miracle each spring,  
know there's something sacred in this thing.

In *An Early Picking*, Barry Louis Polisar's candid and contemplative poems reflect the landscape of late twentieth-century American life. Gathered around the kitchen table, we listen as the storyteller unfurls tales of his early adulthood, poems of a young man finding his way against the backdrop of family, college, love, heritage, and the end of the Vietnam War. "The old scripts were so simple," the poet says. "Those were the days of easy answers." This slim collection is a soup of the best kind, bringing out the poems that have been waiting patiently at the back of Polisar's pantry for their chance to be savored. There's a beautiful balance of flavors here—between moments of humor and sincerity, between the sweetness of whimsy and the salt of solemnity. There's also a cheeky humor and playful tone underlying even the more somber subjects of peace talks, heartache, and loss. As this pot of poems simmers on the stove, "we grow fatter and let our guards down." This harvest is a full one.



**BARRY LOUIS POLISAR** is an author, songwriter, poet, and storyteller. He performs his songs on two different Grammy Award-winning albums and sings his song "All I Want Is You" in the opening credits of the Academy Award-winning movie *Juno*.

His work has been translated into other languages and his songs have been recorded and performed by singers and musicians internationally. He has written songs for *Sesame Street* and *The Weekly Reader* and starred in a television show for children that won two Emmy awards. His work has been featured on National Public Radio and written about in *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *Newsweek*, and *People Magazine*.

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