Jahan Ramazani, in *Poetry of Mourning*, argues that we have great need of elegies. “[We] need them because people die around us every day,” and we are powerless to do anything about this as “neither science nor technology can fix death, reverse loss, or cure bereavement” (ix). However, Ramazani may underestimate what we are capable of doing with technology, for we make use a certain kind of technology—our narratives—to make us feel less susceptible to death. Indeed, we may ask even more of them—and for an opposite purpose. Particularly in his mother-son poems, Stanley Kunitz for instance uses poetry to consolidate himself to his life’s gains, making it for him foremost an instrument of acquisition, and perhaps never truly of defense or repair. Even true for his many elegies, that is, his poems are much more about the better claiming of still-available riches than they are about recovering from what’s been lost to him.

Especially when he was young, Kunitz feared his hold on life was not secure. In an interview with Leslie Kelen in *American Poetry Review*, Kunitz says that as a young man he hoped to find a “language that saves,” which would help him from feeling vulnerable to “[t]he destruction of the self, the loss of identity, becoming nameless” (52). He feared losing his own autonomous identity, which had been hard-won, for life had shown him that it is very difficult to move beyond one’s roots. He refers to the terminating poem of *Intellectual Things*—a book he originally planned to title, *Against Destruction* (52)—and, after quoting select parts of it, says, “The young man whose voice I hear in that poem is telling me of his discontent and his determination to change his circumstances and himself. He knows that he must test his resolve in the crucible of experience. At the same time he realizes that he cannot escape from his sources: in his end is his beginning” (52). The beginning from which Kunitz emerged was a household ruled by an especially “dominant” (51), dominating mother—someone who had “lost [the] [. . .] capacity [to demonstrate affection] [. . .] through all the tragic circumstances of her life” (54). And if we attend both to what object-relations theory has to say about the lifelong effects of having had parents who were denied affection, and to his poems (note, not just to his “mother-son” poems), we have basis for concluding that many of them restage early experiences where attempts to detach himself from his mother lead to his becoming familiar with, and being strongly owed by, the threat of annihilation.
Unlike conventional Freudian psychoanalysis, which holds that the boy fears his father will castrate him unless he desists in his claim upon the mother, its branch, object-relations, understands children as first coming to know the threat of bodily mutilation, of parental sadism, through experiences with their mothers, the primary object one relates with that. And unlike Freudian theory, where growth, emergence from the maternal fold, is something the child, though he does not desire it, finds easy to manage, as it is a path the father encourages for it being a detour away from his own claims, object-relations theory is more likely to posit that growth, separation from the mother, is often very difficult for the child to achieve. For as Lloyd DeMause explains,

[I]mmature mothers and fathers [that is, mothers and fathers who themselves were not reacted to warmly, affectionately by their own parents] expect their child to give them the love they missed when they were children, and therefore experience the child’s independence as rejection. Mothers in particular have had extremely traumatic developmental histories throughout history; one cannot severely neglect and abuse little girls and expect them to magically turn into good mothers when they grow up. […] The moment the infant needs something or turns away from her to explore the world, it triggers her own memories of maternal rejection. When the infant cries, the immature mother hears her mother, her father, her siblings, and her spouse screaming at her. She then “accuses the infant of being unaffectionate, unrewarding and selfish . . . as not interested in me” [Brazelton and Cramer 11]. All growth and individuation by the child is therefore experienced as rejection. “When the mother cannot tolerate the child’s being a separate person with her own personality and needs, and demands instead that the child mirror her, separation becomes heavily tinged with basic terror for the child” [255]. (151)

Kunitz rarely overtly wrote about his relationship with his mother until later on in life (his early family poems were father-son poems), until after she died. It would seem appropriate to consider them elegies, then, but the difficulty in doing so is that it is difficult to understand them as registering any mourning. Nor should they have, for Kunitz says that the death of his mother and sisters was empowering: “The disappearance of my family liberated me. It gave me a sense that I was the only
survivor and if the experiences of my life [. . .] were to be told, it was within my power to do so” (qtd. in Keillor). And many of his mother-son poems portray their relationship so that her disappearance would be cause for jubilation, for they consistently show her as someone whose own tragic life experiences made her incapable of tolerating his own desire for independence and attendance.

Peter Sacks suggests that many elegies, through the “sacrifice or mimed death of the personification of nature,” function to “reverse [man’s] [. . .] passive relation to the mother or matrix” (21). “My Mother’s Pears,” if it is an elegy to his mother, would have to be considered an unorthodox one then, for it is one in which the Mother and her matrix exert their dominance over Kunitz. It is one of many of Kunitz’ mother-son poems which begin with him enjoying some object, some activity, outside his mother’s influence. This poem begins with a gift being presented to him by “strangers” (The Collected Poems 13). And what a gift! He writes that a “nest” (7) of “[p]lump, green-gold Worcestor’s pride” (1) pears were “deposit[ed] at my [i.e., his] door” (6; emphasis added). He prefers to believe the gifts were for him, that he was the intended recipient, not just of their pears but of the warm intent, the “kindness” (14), that moved the strangers to give them to him, but his mother intrudes to correct him in this.

Kunitz introduces her so that she seems either a natural complement to or a rival of the strangers. The tercet—“Those stranger are my friends / whose kindness blesses the house / my mother built at the edge of town” (13-15)—in effect has the house (and Kunitz, since the blessings occurred at “my [i.e., his] door”) sandwiched between the two influences. They “bless,” the mother “builds”: these influences could work in tandem, except the poem makes the comparison simply to show how different they are from one another. “Build” is singular, no nonsense. It might suggest pride, but not play. The blessing strangers built an abode too—they put together the “crinkled nest” of pears—but the work involved seems pleasant. The pears were “hand-picked and polished and packed” (5). We sense craftsmanship and communal effort; and with the alliteration, with similar but pleasantly variant (“tic, tac, toe”) words, we sense play. Even “transport[ing]” them might have been pleasant, for they were “transported through autumn skies” (2), at “harvest time” (12). Moreover, since the work was pleasant, and since, though “[a] smaller than usual crop / [.] [they] [. . .] still had enough to share with [him]” (11-12)—that is, since they didn’t deprive themselves in order to provision Kunitz, their gifts do not invite guilt or obligation. How different from his mother’s gifts, then, for they lead to
household disrepair and personal destitution. We are told that she “marr[ied] again” (19), “for her children’s sake” (18), and that this would lead to a home where “windows would grow dark / and the velvet drapes [would] come down” (20-21). Since the poem has already associated the essence of an object with the state of mind involved in crafting and delivering it—proud pears are provided kindly—the foreclosed house is a metaphor for her own withdrawnness. The mother, then, is quickly established, not just as someone who would oppose their influence, but as the one dearly in need of their benefaction. Her “dark” home should have welcomed in the gift of “polished” “pears,” with their “bright lea[ves]” (9). The “velvet drapes [which] [came] [. . .] down” require the same sort of attendance as the pears received, which were carefully “picked and polished and packed.” And yet there was her son, pretending they were his rightful property—that they had come to “[his] door.”

He is made to seem an interloper. His interception is made to seem a transgression worthy of punishment, and one is handed out. He is set to work—hard work. He finds himself “knee-deep in dirt / with a shovel in his hand” (24-25). The gift-giving strangers have been banished from the poem. Further punishment?—quite possibly. For in the following tercet—and as if he is not now to be receiving visitors—the mother is overtly shown sending away those who “appear on the scene” (28) without their being there at her bequest. Of course, the “visitors are his “sisters” (28), not “strangers,” but the alliterative resemblance between the two sorts of visitors is marked, and so too the poem’s portrayal of them—especially in comparison to how the poem portrays the mother. The strangers were kind, the sisters, fun: “they skip out of our sight / in their matching middy blouses” (32-33). We note the alliterative play here too, and it reminds us of how the pears were prepared. The mother, however, is a no-nonsense commander: though her “glasses [may] glint” (24), there is no play in the manner in which she is described. “Mother has wrapped a kerchief round her head” (26), and this commander “waves them [i.e., his sisters] back into the house” (30). She waves them away so that they can “fetch [. . .] pails of water” (31); but since we learn of the real cause for their dismissal only at the beginning of the next verse unit, the poem’s eleventh tercet—that is, given the severe indentation of each of this poem’s tercet’s terminating lines, a ways off—we are left to conclude that their unexpected entrance amounted to a considerable offense.

The poem ends with alliteration, but not with alliterative play. There is nothing fun about the lines, “‘Make room / for the roots!’ my mother cries, / ‘Dig the hole deeper’” (37-39), when we know Kunitz is already “knee-deep in dirt.” She is
directing him to plant a tree on her property—a pear tree. No further need for strangers’ pears: henceforth he will be eating his mother’s pears. He is participating in his being further constrained within the “orbit created by his mother’s gravitational power” (Orr 9): he is here, digging his own grave. And it is significant that the poem terminates with him associated more with roots than with pears—pears, after all, are expected to fall from pear trees—for since this tree is associated with the mother, the poem ends with him being linked to the tree’s sustenance, not its extensions. The poem finishes with him being likened to her, with him mirroring her. The terminating tercet, which begins with “It is taller than I” (37), is followed by these two commands of his mother’s, where as well the same consonants are used to begin and end each of them.

Kunitz finds himself rooted in the earth at the end of “My Mother’s Pears,” and his freedom to move as he pleases is also lost to him by the end of another mother-son poem, “The Testing Tree.” In this poem he is actually shown enjoying two things in particular—his mobility (freedom) and his precious “perfect stones” (7). His enjoyment of the former is the subject of the poem’s first section. As in “My Mother’s Pears,” alliteration is used to convey the pleasure and play of action:

then sprinted lickety-
split on my magic Keds
from a crouching start,
scarcely touching the ground
with my flying skin
as I poured it on (10-15)

The capital “k” “Keds” stand out in these lines—an object enables, helps generate his speedy flight. He slows to a “walk” (55), but not owing to the difficulties a different object—a “bend,” which would end his fun by “loop[ing] [him] [. . .] home” (25)—presents him with, but because he is preparing to participate in a great game which requires he stay calm and in control. So he “walked, deliberate / on to the clearing / with the stones in [his] [. . .] pocket” (55-57). And there we are told:

In the haze of afternoon,
While the air flowed saffron,
I played me game for keeps—
for love, for poetry,
and for eternal life—
after the trials of summer. (73-78)

Pairs pale in comparison; it is indeed difficult to imagine a greater bounty. And so it is no surprise that to assist him in winning it, he asks for help—that he asks his father to “bless [his] [...] good right arm” (72). We don’t know if his father obliged, but we do know that, just like after he received kindness from strangers in “My Mother’s Pears,” once again his mother intrudes.

He has been avoiding home. He has sought out and found environments where there was “no one no where to deny” his play (19-20). And so, in apparent response, his mother, his “home,” come to him—and do far worse than just tame him. The previous three sections attended to his will and prowess, the fourth attends to and features his mother’s:

In my recurring dream
my mother stands
   in her bridal gown
under the burning lilac
with Bernard Shaw and Bertie
Russell kissing her hands (79-84)

This sentence is made to seem a response to the one which terminated the third section, which also began with “In my.” The details in these two particular tercets respond to the details in the previous section—his mother’s will loops back around his own: she checks, opposes her son. While he “stood in the shadow” (61) [. . .] “of the inexhaustible oak” (63), she “stands” “under the burning lilac” He desires love, poetry, and eternal life, and she makes claim to all three. He desires poetry; she is associated with the burning lilac—fiery desire and flowered poesy are hers already. He seeks eternal life; she, with her “owl’s face” (86), who “makes barking noises” (87), already seems a grotesque of ancient myth and Jung. He wanted love; she has Shaw and Russell kissing her hands, kissing from out of her hands. That is, though she stands in her “bridal gown,” two men other than her husband attend to her. And owing to her son already having claim her husband’s attention, we are left to wonder if his [Kunitz’] action is responsible for her being attended to by these wrong men.
That is, in this mother-son poem as well, we are lead to associate the narrative turn of what had hitherto been a poem about play and enjoyment, not just with his mother’s appearance, but with his own ostensibly blameworthy behavior: there may be reason for guilt, reason for him to sabotage his errant run. We note that we are no longer drawn to attend to legs—the action has moved on to arms and hands. “Good right arm” becomes “kissing her hands” becomes “[h] her minatory finger points” (88). While the shift from walking to running conveyed his increasing vitality, appropriately, the microscoping arm images foretells its constriction. Her command may well have tamed Shaw and Russell into making a supplicant’s gesture; and faced with the power implicit in this threatening gesture, he no longer wills his way through the landscape but rather at her bequest. He passes under a “cardboard doorway” (89); the great oak, we note, is replaced by what has been built from the wreckage of trees. He is directed to a well, to a hole—a hole, which, as it is filling up with dirt, seems grave-like. He obliges his sudden feeling that it is “necessary to go / through dark and deeper dark” (166-67), but unlike before when he had “kept his appointment” (60), he is not now rewarded for doing so. Instead, he finds himself far away from his testing-tree, and without his stones. He hasn’t lost them; they were taken away—or at least that is what his cry, “Give me back my stones!” (111), suggests is what he thinks occurred. There is protest in this line, and, according to Sacks, one of the elegy’s traditional conventions is to voice protest (though usually through “the form of a question” [22]) as it helps the mourner transform “grief” and/or “rage” into something purposeful. But according to Sacks the protest normally arises from having lost one’s first and primary object of desire—one’s close association with one’s mother—not from just having lost the consolation prize, the object we were to transfer our love to and were supposed to get to keep.

Conventional elegies, that is, are supposed to be “places” which enable a “substitutive turn” (5) away from the mother.

The narrative does not establish beyond doubt that his mother took the stones, but since she is the only threatening and commanding figure in the poem, she seems not just the likely but the only possible culprit. She is unmistakably the one responsible for eliminating the ostensible consolation prize in another mother-son poem, “The Portrait,” however. Like the visiting strangers, like the testing tree and the precious stones, it is again something not readily associated with the maternal environment. But while in “My Mother’s Pears” the object was brought to his door, but while in “The Testing Tree” he sought and found the object away from his door,
in this poem he has the effrontery to bring the object—the portrait of his father—straight to her! In protest. Just after describing how his mother had “locked his [i.e., his father’s] name / in her deepest cabinet / and would not let him out, / though I could hear him thumping” (7-10), we learn that he “came down from the attic / with the pastel portrait in [his] [. . .] hand” (11-12). She would not let him out, but Kunitz, by delineating many of the portrait’s details—never an innocent activity in his mother-son poems, for it always means his greater involvement with an object—sets him free. He would free the person she had enslaved, and by so doing demonstrate his intention and capacity to be free from her control. And in response, she demonstrates her power over him. As in many of his mother-son poems, the contest between the pair is staged through the use of their hands, and as is the case in other poems [even, debatably, in “The Magic Curtain], the contest is won by the more dominant power—by the mother, who rips up the object he covets, and then “slap[s] [him] [. . .] [so] hard” (18) he never forgets the blow. Though I am assuming he intends to document his own life experiences in these poems, I am reluctant to accept that Kunitz manages to convey them without significant distortion. For these poems do not, in my judgment, portray the sort of struggle that would inspire recurring fears of annihilation. Indeed, there is in each of these poems nearly as strong a sense of his ability to make claim to his “name”—i.e., his own independent identity apart from his mother—as there is his difficulty in doing so. He describes his relationship with his mother as “a battle of wills,” that “there were two strong wills in that household, hers and mine” (Busa 68), and even though the mother is portrayed as the victor, as possessing the superior authority, she is not the only one in these poems possessed of strong will. In “My Mother’s Pears,” the mother feels the need to make two commands to feel sure of her hold on him. With his hand on his shovel, with his declaration, “I summon up all my strength” (34), we sense his early manhood: she has him, but is already losing her hold on him. He is worthy of being contended with, unlike his sisters, who are girls, who are children, and who are appropriately readily waved away. In “The Testing Tree,” though he loses “the prize of mastery” (16), we don’t doubt he felt himself near to be “the world’s fastest human” (21)—that he knew from his movement from boyhood to adolescence what it was to feel an exhilarating sudden aquisition of previously unknown power. We might suspect, too, given our sense of him in the poem as efficacious, that in real life he probably hit the tree more often than not (in his interview with Christopher Busa, he says that he “almost never missed” [78]).
And as I have suggested, in “The Portrait,” the slap across his face acknowledges his willful desire to contend with her, as well as their mutual awareness that gestures alone were no longer sufficient to keep him in line.

Perhaps he experienced his mother as these poems suggest he did, that is, as a castrating Father. Perhaps he first experienced her intention to thwart his will at the age he portrays it as having occurred in his poems, in his late childhood—way past when Freudians argue the castration complex occurs, but not at any event in infancy. But Kunitz never got over feeling vulnerable to annihilation, and since traumas that can be recalled in significant verisimilitude don’t “demand” constant re-engagement, for “they [haven’t been] [. . .] split off [and therefore] need not be repeated” (DeMause 203), we have reason to wonder if Kunitz is in denial concerning the greater truth regarding his struggles with his mother. He indeed says “there was a good deal of denial that was associated with my childhood” (Kelen 54). And arguably, since he admits he is “doser to women and animals than [he is] [. . .] to any other category of living creature[,] [that he] [. . .] was brought up in a household of women, and that “[t]here wasn’t a male presence around and it seem to run through a whole life pattern,” yet it is only in his “later poems [that] powerful, combative women suddenly appear” (54), he may be very reticent to portray, or may actually be incapable of portraying, just how vulnerable he felt when his mother’s will first pressed down on his own.

If he first experienced intense feelings of maternal resentment—the equivalent of the slap—when he was still an infant, then it could have been the source of lifelong feelings of annihilation, for it would not then have been readily accessible to the conscious mind to deal with, and would be too overwhelming to overtly grapple with in any case. And though perhaps never in his overtly mother-son poems, he may yet have manifested—however innocently—in some of his other poems what it felt like to receive that slap at an age when her disapproval, her anger, would have felt absolutely life-threatening. “Robin Redbreast,” for example, features something small and vulnerable about to be devoured by something vastly larger and more powerful—a god-like entity. It could have been plotted as “The Testing Tree” was. That is, before seeing it decimated we could have been made witness to its glory. Indeed, in other animal poems titled to suggest they tell of the greatness of the animal being attended to, such as “The Wellfleet Whale,” this is how they are plotted. That is, unlike other poems in which a defeat of some kind occurs, we never are provided a sense of the protagonist when he ruled “his element” (23); we encounter
here only the scenario “since Eden went wrong” (6). In “My Mother’s Pears” and in “The Testing Tree,” he gets dirtied, but the subject of this poem—the robin—is introduced to us not just dirtied but defeated: “It was the dingiest bird / you ever saw” (1-2). In “The Testing Tree” he “stood in the shadow” in the “saffron” “air” (72) and asked his father to “bless [his] […] right arm”; in this poem the bird “stand[s] in the rain, / friendless and stiff and cold” (4-5). In “The Testing Tree” he (may have) needed assistance only because his self-assurance had him aim so high; this drained, “lule[less]” (22) bird requires assistance or he will simply suffer then die.

Given how the robin is depicted, the title seems absurd. We are expecting greatness and see no sign of it until we encounter the vital “blue” (32) sky—the sky, that is, that would devour the pathetic little, “color[less]” (2) bird. That is, if the poem was to be about something great the proper subject of this particular poem, we are encouraged to think, should have been the sky. There is no battle of wills in this poem, for the bird is “wit[less]” (31)—the sky shines through its skull with its vital blue radiance. There is a sense that this pathetic bird made claim to something he did not possess sufficient resources to protect: as Kunitz portrayed himself in “My Mother’s Pears,” the robin here is made to seem a guilt-worthy interloper. And this is how a child would feel as he began to make claim to independence in face of his primary caretaker’s resistance. This is what it would feel like to be vulnerable to becoming nameless, to being demolished in a battle of wills. This is what it would feel like if at heart those magic Keds you wore, those boyhood pretensions to greatness, were really more evidence of your ongoing uncertainty than they were your joyful sense of yourself as a budding young adult.

Of course, this poem need not be understood as staging a contest between a parental power and a child. And even if one sees it this way, one could see it as a conflict between father and son. Gregory Orr, for instance—even though he argues that Kunitz’ poetry amounts to a quest for identity, and that “the motive and priority [of this quest] must be sought in the mother-son relationship,” and that “[i]n order to locate the quest for identity at one of its origins, we must comprehend the situation of a boy who is left fundamentally alone with a powerful mother,” and that “the mother is consistently seen [in Kunitz’ poetry] as powerfully destructive of or inhibiting the son’s quest for autonomy” (9)—insists that the sky is a “cosmic force of male violence” (198; emphasis added), that the poem concerns Kunitz and his father. In my judgment, however, the sky’s personality—its “cold[ness],” its “unappeasable[ness]” (33)—should have us more thinking of Kunitz’ mother than
of the father he never knew, for she was the one who “was unable to demonstrate affection” (Kelen 54), she was the one whose coldness to him he admits sourly affected him throughout his life. And if we look at how powerful women are portrayed in his poems, we note that so often they are often devouring and unappeasable. (In “The Daughters of the Horseleech,” for example, we encounter “[t]he daughters of the horseleech crying ‘Give? Give?’ / Implore the young men for the blood of martyrs” [1-2]; in “Careless Love” we hear of how “[t]his nymphomaniac enjoys / Inexhaustibly is boys” [15-16]; and in “Cleopatra” we understand that Cleopatra will soon “ravish [a young man with] [. . .] her beauty” [5].) But since even a critic who understands Kunitz’ mother as the powerfully destructive force in Kunitz’ life, could yet still deem the destructive force in this poem as the Father, Kunitz may have been able to make use of this poem to convey what it felt like to be vulnerable and powerless to maternal predations without thereby necessitating an engagement with something he hadn’t yet the resources to deal with.

If he felt the need to manifest in his poems what it felt like to be vulnerable to annihilation, he might have made use of “In the Dark House” for this purpose as well. In “In the Dark House,” Orpheus awaits a “frenzied mob” (59) of women whose thirst for vengeance would not be satiated “except by [his] blood” (60). It is a terrifying poem—it ends with “trampling on the stairs” (62). The protagonist seems as vulnerable as the robin in “Robin Redbreast” is; but while in “Robin Redbreast” the reason for his forthcoming evisceration is subtly suggested to be his audacious claim of greatness—to possess a brilliant red breast which rivals in striking color the vital blue sky—in this poem it is not so much his physical vulnerability which undermines him as it is his own belief that he deserves punishment. We are asked, “How could he deny that frenzied mob, / not be assuaged except by blood, / when his own heart cried worse?” (59-62). And just as in so many of the overt mother-son poems, associating with forbidden objects invites punishment, here, making daim to Eurydice becomes cause for his eradication by predatory female beasts.

One might argue that it is inappropriate to identify Kunitz with Orpheus in this poem. After all, it begins with an epitaph that quotes Primo Levi—someone who, in that he felt pursued by terrors until “the end,” Kunitz imagined to have suffered Orpheus’ fate. But even if Kunitz saw Orpheus as Levi it does not preclude us from judging that he still largely had his own mother in mind when he wrote it. We imagine the maternal differently, but Peter Sacks believes that the Orpheus and Eurydice myth cannot but be used by the poet to document the effect his own
parents had on his life, of his early experiences and encounters with them. (Saks in fact argues that Milton’s “Lycidas”—the poem that ostensibly determined the subsequent nature of all elegiac conventions—is a poem which is “not only affected by the loss of his mother but also designed for the eyes of his father” [106].) And we note that unlike the traditional pastoral elegy, unlike “Lycidas,” the person elegized is not in the end conjoined to an empowered, eternal, masculine order. That is, the poem lacks the traditional elegy’s “consoling apotheosis” (Zeiger 8). Yet it may have been consoling for Kunitz specifically because it lacks such an apotheosis. That is, if the poem was largely about his own concerns, about what being devoured by female terrors felt like, but managed to make Orpheus seem not the least his proxy but rather instead a part Orpheus-part Levi compound, then it may have helped him feel less susceptible to such a fate himself—for through sacrifice comes (some) appeasement.

Using one’s ability to craft poetry/narratives to stage sacrifices sounds morbid and sick, but in his note to “The Gladiators,” Kunitz shows he knows the connection between sacrifice and obtaining respite. He writes that the actual scandal he narrates in this poem, where another weak subject, the “monk […] [who] is running onto the field, / [who] […] is waving his scrawny arms / to interrupt the games” 20-24), is eradicated by a “mob [who would] tear him to bits” (25), “lead to the proscription of man-to-man combats” (Kunitz, The Collected Poems 270). Kunitz may in fact have delighted in exposing his subjects to annihilation. He admits as much in an interview with Bosa. In reference to “King of the River” he says, “[i]t may be pertinent that I experienced a curious elation while confronting the unpleasant reality of being mortal, the inexorable process of my own decay. Perhaps I had managed to ‘distance’ my fate—the salmon was doing my dying for me” (70).

Though Orr acknowledges that in some poems Kunitz “interpose[es] [others] […] between the destructiveness implicit in the son-powerful mother dilemma” (209)—a way of making the unfortunate interposer seem a sacrificial lamb—he believes Kunitz was hoping to demonstrate his superiority to her. He points to “The Magic Curtain” and argues that here “forgiveness” is shown to “triumph” over his mother’s “never forgiving,” which thereby “affirms his identity as distinct from his mother’s” (11). But if in “The Magic Curtain” he indeed triumphs over her, the victory is squeezed in at the end: it is mostly yet another mother-son poem in which so much of promise ends up being lost to him (in this case his love, Frieda, and all objects associated with her). At least in interviews, Kunitz never acknowledges that
his mother intended him harm. In response to Kelen’s conclusion/query, “I believe it took you half your life to begin to forgive your mother for what she withheld from you when you were growing up,” Kunitz replied that, “She loved me, and encouraged me in every way. But she was unable to demonstrate affection. She had lost that capacity through all the tragic circumstances of her life” (54). Here he sees her as a source of encouragement, not discouragement. Furthermore, we notice that he deflects the blame elsewhere, onto whomever or whatever traumatized her. And so often in interviews and in his poetry, Kunitz establishes his father as the primary source of her distress.

Since in so many of his mother-son poems his growth is associated with blameworthiness, it is possible that he used his poetry to help persuade himself that someone else was really the blameworthy one. He may have been trying to find an ideal sacrificial victim—that is, someone he could imagine as the true target of his mother’s disapproval, of her anger, for attending to needs other than her own. I’ve argued that “The Portrait” dramatizes Kunitz’s own desire for autonomy, and that the slap manifests her intention to keep him rooted to her, but this poem could readily be interpreted as one where neither the mother nor the son are truly the ones at fault. The blameworthy person is instead surely the one who left her without help, who left him without a father—his father. Admittedly, the poem plays at making her seem an ogre—the first line, especially, suggests that her unwillingness to forgive makes her nearly monstrous—but it quickly attends to all sorts of particulars that make her husband (and his father) seem errant and irresponsible. “[K]illing himself,” we note, makes suicide seem primarily an act of self-attendance, not of self-disregard—it makes it seem selfish. He killed himself away from home, away from her in a “public park” (4). His action is made to seem scandalous; lude, even. And it is worth noting that at least in one interview, when Kunitz discusses his father’s suicide he suggests that it couldn’t just have been his subsequence absence which tormented his mother. He says “there must have been another woman, too, or mother wouldn’t have made the subject taboo” (Rodman 19). The poem therefore makes his father seem the bad boy, and he is the one who suffers the horrifying fate Kunitz (in real life) feared he himself was susceptible to. He becomes nameless; the father is the one who has “his name” [locked] / in her deepest cabinet” (7-8). We soon learn that the name is a synecdoche for the father himself: his father becomes subject to a fate Kunitz himself suffers in most of his mother-son poems, in finding himself trapped, encased in a “deep” (8) space.
But he doesn’t always make use of his father as he did the robin and Orpheus. He isn’t always or even often represented as a hapless victim. For in several poems his father is someone who could not easily be entrapped, is someone who possesses a marked capacity to attract, endure, and resist Kunitz’ mother’s hostile attention. For example, in “The Unquiet Ones,” as Orr argues: “he is able to give equal weight to the mother and to the father” (285). Before they “slip through narrow crevices / [ . . . ] / glide in [his] [. . .] cave of phantoms” (16-18), he has the two of them focused on one another. They are both “dissatisfied,” for “in death as in life / remote from each other, / having no conversation / except in the common ground / of their son’s mind” (9-15). They fuse at the end into one “two-faced god” (21), but throughout our sense of them is of two separate entities, linked because they are “my [i.e., his] parents” (2) and because they cannot disengage from their personal feud. Lines such as “Father and mother lie” (3) and “in death as in life”—that is, lines in the poem that possess two subjects, two nouns, intractably connected to but spaced apart from one another—help establish his mother and father as both forever attached to and forever apart from one another. The poem may have helped Kunitz convince himself that his father played as important a role in his life as his mother did. His father was never there, but if he could convince himself his mother’s mind was always on him it would seem appropriate to allot them equal weight in his poems—it would seem appropriate to assume that when she was angry at him (i.e., Kunitz), she probably more had his father in mind. Though he fashioned many father-son poems in his youth, they probably didn’t serve to make him feel less deserving of and therefore less vulnerable to annihilation. Moreover, they probably betray his own vulnerability and neediness (Kunitz dearly knew as much, for in poems such as “Three Floors” and “Halley’s Comet,” his father appears in the poem after his mother has either checked up on him to make sure he “was sleeping” [“Three Floors” 4] or after she had “scolded” [“Halley’s Comet” 24] him.). “The Portrait” is a masterful contrivance whose creation likely had to wait until he felt capable of fully manifesting his angry mother in his poetry—the likely reason his mother, someone whom he admits was the primary influence on his life, only emerges in his poetry later in his life.

Kunitz found means to use his poems to feel less vulnerable to annihilation other than through the staging of sacrifices. He found a way to “narrate” his own life, his own self, so that he felt entitled and became empowered to better maintain his gains. Exaggerating his physical prowess could backfire, for it would draw attention to his real weakness as well as invite upon him—as we saw in “Robin Redbreast” and
“The Testing Tree”—angry vengeance. His poetry suggests that what actually works to make gains seem less susceptible to loss is for him to conceive of himself as having witnessed and endured more of life’s pains that its gains—to imagine himself, that is, a perpetual mourner.

The robin in “Robin Redbreast” is incapacitated, but we know that moments before being shot down all he knew was glory: arrogant pride and ebullient joy bring about vengeful decimation. But there is no arrogance evident in “I Dreamed That I was Old,” a fantasy involving his elegizing his lost youth. He imagines himself as an old man, as someone who is “in stale declension” (1) and has lost his “cat-nimbleness” (3). He dearly isn’t enjoying the like of ripe fruit and sporting games here. Nor is he indulging in the aroma of “flower[ing] saffron—in fact, it is easy to read “stale stench” into “stale declension” (1). Rather than receiving visitors, he remembers “when company / [w]as mine” (2-3). For Kunitz, those two words—“was mine”—are, however, words of power. He sounds convinced that the gifts aging brings pale in comparison to those stubborn youthfulness provided him with, but he is not to be believed, for, as I have shown, youth and pleasure so often invite disaster and entrapment in his poems while crippling old age actually enables successful evasion, as well as a surer hold on his name.

In “Passing Through,” to be aged means that in response to someone he identifies as “the first, / [. . .] to bully [him]” (15-16), he could confidently say that “[w]hatever you choose to daim / of me is always yours; / nothing is truly mine / except my name. I only / borrowed this dust” (29-33). It means that despite “hav[ing] no documentary proof / that [you] [. . .] exist” (14-15), you know for certain you possess a name, and not to be all concerned if another tries to cage, daim, or capture it—there is no protest registered in these lines, for he is unlikely to lose hold of it. That is, the wisdom he thought he’d possess as an old man in “I Dreamed That I Was Old,” he possesses in this poem, and it makes him seem more self-composed but less accessible. Thus: “Sometimes, you say, I wear / an abstracted look that drives you / up the wall, as though it signified / distress or disaffection” (18-20).

Since in Kunitz’ poetry being young means not just being playful but a potential victim, we understand how empowering it must be for him to arrive at a point in his life where he might believe himself “too old to be / anybody’s child” (“The Quarrel” 13-14). Being too old to be anybody’s child also means being old enough to be someone else’s parent. It means to be in a position where one finally might possess
the same power a child grew up believing his parents possessed—the god-like power to create and destroy. If Kunitz imagined the aged, wizened speaker of “The Tutored Child” as himself, he portrays himself so he seems akin to his parents in “The Unquiet Ones,” and even to the god-like sky in “Robin Redbreast.” Just as in “The Unquiet Ones,” his mother and father “slip through narrow crevices” (16) “into” (18) Kunitz’ mind, and just as in “Robin Redbreast,” the “cold flash of the blue / unappeasable sky” (32-33) shone through the hole of the robin’s “tunneled out [. . .] wits” (31), here he (or at least, the speaker) “[c]limbs through the narrow transom of [the child’s] [. . .] will” (15). In that it features an entity—the untutored child—who is “unlucky” (9), who is shown to suffer from the “touch” of others—“Mortals will touch you and your taste be spoiled” (12)—who is “vulnerable” (16), it is a poem reminiscent of “Robin Redbreast.” But here he actually is empowered to do something about wounds (which in this poem he caused), for he has nothing here to fear. No one looms over him in disapproval; instead, he arches over the child, with the final couplet describing his sympathetic attendance to the wounds and pains delineated in the preceding four quatrains. That is, while in “Robin Redbreast” his apostrophe “Poor thing! Poor foolish life!” (19) only briefly draws attention to him before we attend to the much stronger dramatic power—the sky—in “The Untutored Child” his [speaker’s] verse “My poor poor child whose terrors never cease” (69) terminates the poem and helps establish him as the poem’s true “star,” with no reprisals.

His final gesture in “The Tutored Child” is akin to the one he makes in “My Sisters.” Kunitz said that the death of his parents and sisters was empowering, and in this poem (“My Sister”) we see the sort of pleasure the death of loved ones provides him with. Though he consoles his sisters, in that it shows there are still things he can do which can positively affect the deceased the poem performs the consoling function elegies are supposed to perform for the mourner. But it isn’t clear that his actions should be understood as kindly motivated. That is, even though the poem does convey his sisters’ love for Kunitz, as well as his own for them, like so many of his mother-son poems it stages a contest between family members. Just as attending to hand gestures is important to appreciating the full drama staged in many of his mother-son poems, attending to body-positioning is crucial to properly understanding the contest being staged here. At first his sisters—however benignly—loomed over him: “they bend over [him] [. . .] / to comfort [his [. . .] night fears” (13-14). With their death, he imagines himself over them. His action reverses and
mirrors their own: very likely we imagine him bending over them while he tends to them. He does as much with his dead parents in “The Unquiet Ones” as well. Though in that poem he doesn’t console their fears (though, we note, he is not afraid of them: he is quite willing to identify them as “unwelcome guests” [19]), he does imagine them as, in part, confined to “cribs” (4): at least at the beginning of the poem, he infantilizes them, places them so he can imagine himself standing over them, as being appropriately placed to, if he should choose, haunt or terrorize them.

But if in these poems he contests the dead, they yet remain elegiac, for in classical elegies the mourner must actually “wrest his inheritance from the dead” (Sacks 37). Given that he was raised in a household of women, making use of an elegy for some tit for tat also keeps it within the elegiac tradition, for elegies work to “reverse [one’s] [. . .] passive relation to the mother or matrix, perhaps even avenging himself against her and his situation” (Sacks 37).

Works Cited
---. “Cleopatra.” The Collected Poems. 175.