Carl Rakosi, age 3, with brother Lester, in Baja, Hungary

CARL RAKOSI

GEORGE OPPEN, THE LAST DAYS

In a mortuary the only serious subject is mortality. And that may be true of poetry too, only we are diverted by earthly matters, or like Oppen get Alzheimer's Disease on the subject. Oppen himself has not dealt with the anguish of death, for he wrote only from experience. I have tried to find my way to it from a line of his, "in events / the myriad lights / have entered us," but from that it follows that in death a particular set of events conclude and their particular lights simply leave, and I weep that it is not that neat or easy.

There was never any mystery about Oppen's character or his working principles. Already far into Alzheimer's he said to his sister, June: "I don't know if you have anything to say but let's take out all the adjectives and we'll find out." The curious pertinacity of character!

The morning his wife Mary and I drove him to Oakland to enter him into the Home for Jewish Parents, he was very quiet. I explained that I was going along just to keep them company and he said, "That's nice," and that's all he said. Mary and I tried to use up the time by talking but he was out of it, and when I looked over for a moment to see what was going on, his body was rigid, his eyes fixed outwards into space, terrified. When we reached the Home, he went along without a word as Mary and I carried in the baggage. There in the vestibule we had to wait while his room was being prepared.

We were now in the milieu of very aged women in the final stages of illness and infirmity, the average age being eighty-six. They were walking slowly, with great difficulty, this way and that, mostly to their rooms. We couldn't think of anything to say that would sound right or have any interest for him at such a time, so Mary and I just stood and looked on. The atmosphere was not threatening but the *physical* sight confronted him with that fate from which there is no escape and closed in on him. For the first time he was alone with it and he fell into the starkest inward state, where no one could

accompany him. But his body remained where it was: he stood very tall and straight, towering over the little white-haired ladies, as if he were asserting his eternal distinction from them. His eyes, however, were distraught and lost, for this was an ending he had not counted on or prepared for or was willing to go quietly into.

It was at that moment that something unexpected happened. Limping slowly towards him from the dining-room and talking came three very frail women. They looked slightly better dressed and put together, had a bit more class and self-assurance, but only by comparison to the others, who had long ago given up trying to look attractive. The smaller one had a kindly face with gentle features and the finest white hair. Anywhere else I don't think he would have noticed her, but here as they approached him and she looked up and their eyes met, at once his face lit up, like someone surprised at encountering a kindred spirit in such a dismal place, and walking over to her, he greeted her and with just the suggestion of a gallant gesture, he bent over as if to help her. She acknowledged this with a soft smile and walked on.

"By God," I thought, "he's found a friend. He's going to make it!" But it was not so.

He was no longer able to read or write, but I didn't know that. At his 75th birthday celebration he had been afraid that someone would ask him for his autograph and he would start to write his name and forget how to finish it. He spoke a little less and was more quiet . . . but he had always been a quiet, observant man . . . and when he did speak, there were droll glints as before. The perceptions, however, were no longer related to anything one said. His civility remained unimpaired, and his body seemed to be in good shape, he went on walks with Mary and exercised at a gym and did pull-ups and exercises on his cross-bar at home and could stand on his head.

But there were cracks. On a radiant summer day, he and Mary and Leah and I had driven out to Fort Funston for a picnic with some young poets. When we got to the picnic area, everybody started doing something, setting the table, laying out the food, or just chattering and feeling good. Mary had warned the young men that George was not up to answering questions, and they refrained. He stood off by himself, some distance from the others, his face clouded over. They approached him only briefly to say something pleasant, then retreated, and he replied politely in a word or two.

When the table was set, Mary noticed that she had left something behind in the car and told George she was going back to get it. He nodded and just watched her. It was a long walk back, down a hill, then along a flat stretch and around a bend, and when she started the descent, he walked over to the edge and stood there, his bearing erect like a captain on the high bridge of his ship, but tense, locked in. His eyes followed every step she took, going down and along the meadow, her figure getting smaller and smaller, then the bend, and when she passed out of sight, his eyes were lost to everything else. I have seen a dog tied to a post look in just such a way and not move a muscle, peering into the exact space in the store where his mistress disappeared. It was not until Mary came into view again that he relaxed. He watched her for a few minutes, then walked back to where he had been standing before.

"Ah George," I sighed. I had not remembered him being *that* dependent on Mary before.

Since he could no longer read or write, he had become fidgety and had to get out of the house and walk, but he couldn't remember his address and would get lost, so Mary always had to go with him. One day, however, he stole the car keys and slipped out without her knowledge. He had been a meticulous driver but had not driven for two years because of his condition. She waited anxiously. Finally the phone rang. It was the police. He had been in an accident, the car demolished. The police had found him sitting bolt upright in his seat, unaware that the blood was gushing out of the back of his head. As he told Mary afterwards, he had had an irresistible impulse to drive on the open road and he sped wildly down the freeway, speeding weightless on an unfamiliar ecstasy. Suddenly it ended (he was on the Bay Bridge). In front of him was a blank: he didn't know where he was. He slammed the brakes on and the car behind smashed into him. I have to put this into words for George because all he could say to Mary was that he had never felt so great. He couldn't understand it.

I am with George again at The Home For Jewish Parents and he is standing in the vestibule waiting for his room to be readied. Off at the other end a circle of chairs has been set and voices are heard as aged ladies and one lone Adam amble out of the dining room on their way to the chairs. It will take them several minutes to plod the distance of about twenty feet, each step measured and hesitant. It is folk-singing time. The folk singer, a smiling young woman with a guitar, greets them by

name as they approach and settle in their chairs. She sings Latino and Israeli songs with a hearty beat, then stops and tries to teach them the words, calling on them with her eyes, her head beckoning, her body beckoning, to sing along, she will carry them on her undaunted spirit. And one voice does respond, faintly, and a couple of heads nod to the beat, but Adam's eyes are closed and a few others have one eye open and the other, as in a cartoon, X-ed out.

It is not a performance. It is a plea to obliterate old age, and she has reached far out and called on song to help her, for youth and vitality and a smile, however radiant and true, are not enough. When it is over, there are little smiles here and there and faces are not quite so cheerless. Then the ladies slowly stand up and disband, lumbering by as before. When he sees me, Adam stops a moment with a friendly look, as if glad he had found another man to chat with, and I return his smile and am about to say something when I notice that his expression remains the same. He can't speak. He's had a stroke.

When the music started, I had looked over to see what effect it was having on George but he was out of range, shut in the same absorption. The beat and the sense of people and voices swarming nearby were so strong and insistent, however, that he leaned forward, craning his neck to see what was going on. At that moment his face looked as if he might walk over to investigate, but the next thing I knew, he was back in limbo.

While we were waiting, one of the clerical workers joined us, a dark-haired, vivacious young woman. Good-hearted Miriam out of the Bible. Considerately she stood back a little and tried to see without being conspicuous. I learned why. She loved poetry and read a good deal of it, and it was natural for her to be there, watching. She couldn't wait to read the book Mary had left in the office, his *Collected Poems*.

Word now came that the room was ready and the three of us trudged down the long hallway after the nurse, Mary and I, the executioners, carrying the bags. We examined the room. It was clean and light. There were two identical, slightly worn, blonde dressers, two identical plain beds and two identical armchairs, each piece blanched of the old occupants. George stood awkwardly and did not look. Mary busied herself. She unpacked a watercolor by her that he liked and hung it near the door. Then she set a framed snapshot on the mantle to remind

him who he was. It was Mary and George, beaming and in vigorous health.

There was a framed snapshot on the other dresser too. Of the absent room-mate. Where was he? Perhaps being led down the hall by a nurse. Middle-aged in the picture, standing in the sun in shirt sleeves, an ordinary man being photographed. Next to him, also in shirt sleeves, David Ben Gurion, the Prime Minister, equally plain. Apparently taken on a trip to Israel. Someone had left it there as a reminder. No other sign of him in the room.

Since Mary was coming back the next morning, parting was not hard for George that day. In fact, things looked good at first. She came almost every morning and took him out for a drive in the park, and they basked in the Spring flowers, and he was relaxed and agreeable. The head nurse, a large, bluff, good-natured black woman inspiring confidence, came by his room and introduced herself by her first name, and he, always responsive to the natural, liked her at once and introduced himself by his first name.

And the Jewish community newspaper ran a feature story on the Home's first Pulitzer Prize poet-resident. And he liked the food he was getting there and ate more than at home, and danced with one of the volunteers during the music period. And June became his younger sister again, as in childhood, and all the affection he had felt for her then came back, and their visits were tender.

Mary's visits ran a more poignant course. When she had been with him long enough and said she would have to go, he'd walk with her to the front door, as if he were going home, and she would have to explain that she was not well enough to care for him, and he with his customary courtesy would reply, "Of course," slightly apologetic at having forgotten. But he could not hold on to that thread, and the scenes at the door continued and became more difficult.

"Why do I have to be here?" he would expostulate. "We've been together for fifty years."

And "Aren't we husband and wife?"

Finally she stopped the explanations and would beckon to a nurse to take over.

Then his memory got still worse.

Leah, on a visit: "George, do you know who I am?"

George looks hard, tries, then sweetly: "No. You know I have this sickness. I can't remember."

Leah: "I'm Leah Rakosi."

George's face lights up: "Oh, of course, Leah and Carl Rakosi."

Had that light come into his face because he was having a pleasant memory of us or because he had succeeded in connecting her name with mine? It was doubtful at that time whether he recognized anyone but Mary and June.

He continued to eat a lot but looked gaunt and became more and more restless and agitated. He could no longer be trusted in the dining room and had to have his meals brought to him. His absent roommate had come back, a small, harmless old man who was incontinent and slept most of the day. They paid no attention to each other except when there was stench in the room. Then George would burst into rage and shout.

There was nothing to stop him from walking out the front door if he felt restless but in his Alzheimer's mind it seemed to him he was in a menacing situation from which he had to escape and when no one was looking, he slipped into the garden at the back and climbed over a wall to get away, wandering for hours through poor black neighborhoods, lost. The Home simply stepped up his sedation.

About this time he became delusional about the nurse's aides who had to dress and bathe him in the morning, poor black overworked women whom under other circumstances he would have hailed compassionately and probably idealized. They had become sinister in his mind and fierce, meaning to destroy him, and he was terrified, and when they approached him, he threatened them back. They called the head nurse.

"What's the matter, George?" she asked reassuringly. "Don't you trust us?"

No answer

"Don't you trust me?"

"I trust you."

But it had no effect on the delusion.

Finally in his mind they were beating him, and he struck back, and had to be strapped to his chair.

Then came a sudden kidney failure. He was rushed to a hospital and given only a few days to live. But he survived. The question now was, "How much longer?" The Home would not have him back and the referring physician, therefore, transferred him to a small nursing home run by a psychiatrist, a locked facility where he died in a coma on a Saturday evening

July 7, 1984, whether from Alzheimer's Disease or another kidney failure or because no one had noticed that he had not passed water in nine days, or from all three, I don't know, but thus ended George Oppen, who had upheld the integrity of nouns and looked on with dismay at their undoing by adjectives, and such, that are no match for them.

Adieu, gentle friend.