

PASSING THROUGH

Nobody in the widow's household
 ever celebrated anniversaries.
 In the secrecy of my room
 I would not admit I cared
 that my friends were given parties.
 Before I left town for school
 my birthday went up in smoke
 in a fire at City Hall that gutted
 the Department of Vital Statistics.
 If it weren't for a census report
 of a five-year-old White Male
 sharing my mother's address
 at the Green Street tenement in
 Worcester
 I'd have no documentary proof
 that I exist. You are the first,
 my dear, to bully me
 into these festive occasions.

Sometimes, you say, I wear
 an abstracted look that drives you
 up the wall, as though it signified
 distress or disaffection.
 Don't take it so to heart.
 Maybe I enjoy not-being as much
 as being who I am. Maybe
 it's time for me to practice
 growing old. The way I look
 at it, I'm passing through a phase:
 gradually I'm changing to a word.
 Whatever you choose to claim
 of me is always yours;
 nothing is truly mine
 except my name. I only
 borrowed this dust.

Stanley Kunitz
 — on my seventy-ninth birthday

Stanley Kunitz was born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1905 and graduated from Harvard College, *summa cum laude*. In his long and distinguished career as a poet, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, the National Book Award, and the Bollingen Prize. He served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, the forerunner of the post of Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress — commonly referred to as the poet laureate of the United States. He died in 2006.

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