

Before We Were Born

The sin of the father comes to the son
- Hittite King Mursilius, 14th CBC

1

Too hot to sleep, we lie just out of touch
listening to mockingbirds singing
compulsively outside (American
nightingales, they call them) making
a mockery of our need each night
to let ourselves go into that silence
where we are, or not, who
we think we were while sunlight gave us
strength to keep an eye on the waking world

2

By five it will be light. Voices in the walls
will give way to a creaking of joists and rafters
straining to be free of one another,
membranes expanding at different rates
as daylight heats things up even more

3

Having forgiven myself long ago
for being what and who I am,
but feeling guilty nonetheless, I confess
to being at a loss who else to ask
forgiveness of, or for what:
for being a man? for being at all?
Where does feeling let off and being begin?
Is guilt congenital, inevitable
like the churchgoers say,
in each who falls from uterus to earth,
reversing the father's course but not his curse?

4

Just as the very existence of Jews
who suffered and died in the Holocaust
made clear to me that whatever my faults,
thinking Hitler was once of them was just
so much pseudo-intellectual *chutzpah*;
so the aggressive young guy with an Afro
hitting me up for money and dressing me down
for being white — Telegraph Avenue,
Berkeley, 1967 —

made me see — because he was so real,
so much who he was in his own right
and not my projection in any sense —
that though I might have to pay for them
somehow or other (though certainly not to him),
I wasn't to blame for things my grandfathers did
or didn't do; that, whatever happened
before we were born, isn't our fault.