

1996

# Wailing

Gerald Stern

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Stern, Gerald. "Wailing." *The Iowa Review* 26.2 (1996): 186-187. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4654>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## WAILING

Walking from west to east past the living  
dead man on the corner of Grove and Fourth  
north side of the bank I closed my eyes  
so I wouldn't have to see his stumps and the red  
mouth without a tongue and make the water  
rush through my ears so I wouldn't have to hear him.

And sitting on the bench across the street  
I exchanged ideas with the woman next to me  
on a question in ethics, Kant and Schlegel; I made  
a reference to early Herodotus, she stuck by  
Bentham, pleasure and pain, though she was loyal  
also to Hobbes, he of the loathsome universe.

While the sun, though who would notice it, was covered  
in what the older Plato would call slime  
and the one tree that didn't have metal growing  
through it shook with life—I'd say it was leaves  
but birds rushed by and one was Bentham and one  
was Hobbes himself, one of the true slime-chasers.

And sitting across from me although the lice  
drove him crazy was the master of nuance  
lifting a wing and eating, he of the blinking  
eyes we waited for standing alone  
and walking along the slats of his bench, the prince  
of bleeding mouths, I'm sure, and duke of welts,

not to mention organs erupting and faces  
some black and some red but all with huge creases and I,  
with a scholar like that, I kept him in bread, I gave him  
one Guggenheim after another, I even  
gave him a Hobbes, a half a bagel, with seeds  
from the opium tree and did my drumming, hands

on the cement armrests, now beginning to clap,  
and a tongue of my own inside my mouth, still thinking,  
still talking, I will learn to forgive, still lucky  
to have a tongue and sit in New York and bleed  
only a little, from one or two cuts, and lucky  
to walk the way I do and have my own secret

and shoulder my bag as I get up and walk  
to another part of the city past, I'm sure,  
shoes and wine and futons, thinking up  
a plan for not eating, a place for my papers, a room  
to read in, a chair to live in my next two years  
and keep my tongue intact, poor suffering mouth

at the corner of Fourth and Grove, and lie down hard  
when I have to and sit where I want and wait for my own  
restaurant to open and drink my coffee at last  
in a certain park, at another bench, this one  
with curved iron sides in stamped black: fruit and flowers  
and yellow lacquered slats, a bench for wailing,

with a name on it in English and even dates  
for someone to study and only three short lines  
to memorize, the plate attached with bolts  
from front to back, the metal treated, a rat  
for witness, a sparrow to eat the pizza, a *Times*  
to sit on, a daughter for whistling, a mother for staring,

and someone to loosen the bolts and someone to stand  
in front of me with a flute and throw his hat  
on a little Turkish rug and someone to sit  
beside me and wail, "Coffee from 1940,"  
"pie from 1936," the only  
song I know, half Mississippi, half Poland.