

until napoleon built these big avenues  
through all the old neighborhoods."  
i say, "napoleon didn't get to london.  
he missed the boat from ostend  
when he ran into a delay at waterloo."  
but now, from the look on his face,  
i realize he is genuinely confused.  
i try to be kind:

"it was paris.  
the grand boulevards.  
cut through the quartiers.  
the baron haussman.  
and it wasn't the same napoleon."

"let's see," he says, "london is in ..."  
and he pauses.

"england. paris is in france.  
they're only about an hour apart by plane,  
but there's a channel in between.  
their histories are intertwined,  
but in recent centuries they've had separate governments  
and spoken different languages."

he's grateful to have these matters clarified.  
i go on to say a few words about dickens.

that evening i read in the papers  
that on an international test  
japanese students did even worse than americans  
in geography.

#### THERE MAY BE SCOTTISH BLOOD ON MY FATHER'S SIDE

when i ask my former wife  
how our son's contact lenses  
are working out, she says,

"well, they really weren't a good idea  
and then, the very day we were supposed  
to have them double-checked by the eye-doctor,  
he lost one of them."

"did you get your money back?"

"for one of them."

"were they insured?"

"not yet."

so i hang up as amicably as possible  
and, on the way to the car,  
i grind my teeth at the mother for having  
urged me to give the son the money  
for the contact lenses,  
and the son for not knowing  
the value of money.  
don't they teach kids about cash-flow problems  
in eighth grade?

then i find a street-sweeper ticket  
on my windshield -- twelve dollars bail.  
i must have been so drunk that i parked there,  
right beneath the no-parking sign,  
even though i vaguely remember  
the thought making its way through the circuits,  
like a camel turned loose in the kif closet,  
that thursday was sweeper day.

so i forgive  
(temporarily at least)  
my former wife  
and i permanently forgive my son.

and if someone will pay me twelve dollars  
for this poem, you will be helping me  
to square accounts with my conscience.  
but if you can, brother, at least spare a dime for it,  
maybe the i.r.s. will let me write off  
the remaining \$11.90  
as expenses incurred  
in the pursuit of my profession.

#### IT TAKES, IT TAKES A BUSY MAN

he hadn't made a dent  
in his list for weeks.  
one of the items was "call z."  
then one day z's wife called to say  
that z had died.

he was ashamed to catch himself  
indulging in a feeling of accomplishment  
as he crossed "call z" off his list.