

# SWERVE

*poems by*  
**Bruce Cohen**



Black  
Lawrence  
Press

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In Memory: Judith “Judy” Cohen (1928–2000)  
& Norman “Sonny” Cohen (1921–1974)

# Curb Appeal

I am steaming the hideous wallpaper off, arranging,  
In my mind, the furniture, turning the thermostat down.

Outside a rusty cow & childless school bus  
Are lifted 50 yards in the swirl of this tornado

Making the sun appear inside out.  
Just yesterday we collected bugs, spiders,

For a class project, placing them in glass jars  
Death-fragrant with nail polish remover.

Any useful item left out on the curb is  
Miraculously gone before the trash man comes.

Days off throw everyone's schedule off.  
Doesn't it seem like Saturday?

There hasn't been a new letter added to the alphabet  
For a good while. It's sad we live in such

Unimaginative times. I couldn't find my car  
Keys but then discovered them in the ice box.

Our new neighbor brings over a bag of tomatoes  
From her garden. I've lost track of what I've read

Or haven't read. How many layers till I get to the  
Original wall? What is the appropriate cut-off

For an evening phone call before the ring  
Automatically signifies an emergency?

Or sorry, I had no idea what time it was...  
The seller purposely left his bathrobe so he could

Come back one last time after The Closing for one  
Last look. A hard lesson: *this is not my life anymore.*

## Subtext Suburbia

The phone is kind of ringing. I picture  
Cute housewives naked except for frilly aprons.  
Hoodlums are placing cherry bombs and M-80's in mailboxes.  
So and so is borrowing sugar from so and so who's borrowing sugar from...  
Sugar is endless and contagious and so amazing for baking.  
I find it quite difficult to cook bacon to the perfectly underdone point—  
The kids complain the bacon's too fucking crispy.  
It's true. Most people have very strong bacon preference-phobias.  
Some are even over the top judgmental about nitrates and fat.  
I wish I smoked Cuban cigars too, in my chaise lounge.  
I could smuggle boxes, hand rolled from Havana,  
On my business trips from the sugar plantation.  
I wish I was the illegitimate grandson of Pablo Neruda.  
No, Caesar Vallejo. I wish I had written a book  
Called The Unbearable Sweetness of Being.  
A reward has not been posted for my safe return.  
I can't decide whether to bag or mulch my autumn leaves.  
You can't burn them anymore; they are taking away our choices.  
The wind has evolved into a major conglomerate  
With chains stores, franchises popping up all other the country;  
It's even invaded Cuba where they make the wind out  
Of a sugar substitute instead of sugarcane. There are moments,  
Of course, I'd like to pull some moron out of his car  
And beat him to the proverbial pulp. There are kids  
Playing hopscotch in the insane traffic don't they know!  
I no longer have qualms about wishing someone an early death—  
I have an equal appreciation for cartoon characters  
Being on par with Shakespeare guys: Hamlet versus Elmer Fudd.  
Who's provided me a more complete and insightful sense of who I am?  
To be or not to be recited with Elmer's saliva laden lisp.

Bald is the new hair. There is a small crack in my driveway  
That I am concerned will grow and spread,  
Contracting and expanding the entire universe  
Over the next few years. I hate knowing that.

# Cleaning the Basement Early Autumn

The bees, stoned on fermented apples, stagger home to their hives at dusk—  
Naturally their wives are pissed.

Because I have teen-age sons, carloads of girls cruise by my house  
But I need a dictionary to talk with them, neologisms galore.

I like the dentists' offices where the magazines are current.  
And Jeopardy. Orange sunshine, blotter, hydrochloric—

For two hundred, what are types of acid?  
Now that one son is out of my house I experience nostalgic

Flashbacks. Shrinks say there are no contradictions—  
Conflicting behaviors co-exist within us; we are not

Defined by either our best or worst moments,  
But by the accumulation. Wishy-washy hogwash.

The never worn ice skates dangle on a hook by their own laces.  
The fans, unplugged & hibernating— feel free to stick fingers

Between the blades. Wasn't that trumpet, now fully paid for,  
Slightly off-tune, in the rainy parade last year, or was it the year before?

Can't you hear the nervous squirrels nesting in the walls?  
Retired Halloween masks with fake plastic blood

Try to strangle an antique Norwegian Santa with an orange  
Extension cord. Holidays can't keep their hands to themselves.

People say in horror it's not even Thanksgiving & already  
The malls are plastered with X-Mas decorations or don't

The holidays just creep up on you? I'm trying to reconnect with  
Old friends; some have had the same number for decades & no machine.

## Hotel Chain

The desk clerk warns: our cell phones erase the key card's  
Magnetic field so keep them separated. Of course.  
So much in life we learn to compartmentalize. I am lying

On the bed fully clothed fast flipping the remote.  
There is nothing I want to watch & my suitcases are not  
Unpacked & the message light is blinking like a lunatic

& someone I don't know is knocking on my door &  
The shower water is steaming up the bathroom.  
Each room pretends it's not identical to the other rooms.

It thinks it can pull the proverbial wool over our eyes because  
We only stay in one room per night & have no reason to visit  
Another's room. The televisions fake being bolted to the armoires.

Actually, they blurt out our secrets in the hallways after  
We're asleep. The in-room coffee labeled decaffeinated  
Gives us amnesia. Non-smoking rooms smell like Lysol

Sprayed into a used ash tray. There are remnants in every  
Mirror of women putting on their faces. Bibles are blank  
& escort services are circled in the yellow pages.

Elevators are pregnant with overheard arguments  
& men blowing into their palms to check if they need  
Breath-mints. Sometimes they rehearse their conversations.

I have dropped my key card a million times before it so  
Sexually enters my lock hung with "Privacy please, come  
Back later". But there is really never a good time to come

Back, is there? During my shower I hear the maid enter  
My room & her canned apology about the intrusion, her eyes  
Averted to the carpet because there's nothing she wants to see.

## The Jerry Lewis Telethon

In those existential black & white days  
It was indulgent luxury when television  
Succumbed to its own insomnia.  
My family adopted the Labor Day Telethon,  
The day off, children with no bed times  
Huddled around the talking box till 3 a.m.  
Surrounded by our personal repartee  
Of salty snacks. Members of the rat pack  
Would radiate on stage, comedians who'd end  
Their shtick with a somber note on the kids,  
& A few tame rock n' roll bands.  
I must confess we never pledged a red cent  
& when solicited my father said he gave  
At work. I must confess when the crippled  
Kids (it was okay to say that then) paraded  
Across stage I made a fat, slow sandwich in  
The kitchen so I'd be spared the drooling,  
Slurred incoherent speech, their contorted  
Bodies supported by utterly exhausted parents,  
Their crutches & wheelchairs just out of reach.  
*Look at us we're walking. Look at us  
We're taking. We who've never walked  
Or talked before.* I was curious about one  
Thing: Jerry never revealed his personal conviction:  
Why he volunteered his heart year after year.  
People asked him always & he was stoically  
Evasive. It was the scoop. It sucked you in.  
I loved the 24-hour evolution of his tuxedo.  
When the telethon was new & hopeful,  
It was neatly pressed, shiny crow-black,

His bow-tie so perfect it must have been tied  
By someone else. By the next bleary morning,  
His face unshaved, bags swelled under his eyes,  
The tie undone of course, you could smell  
His stale Marlborough breath through the TV.  
But Jerry could do anything. Just his face  
Made us laugh. Astair-like dancer, uncanny mimic,  
A singer, according to my father, better than Frank  
Or Dean, he'd duet with whoever graced  
His couch. Jerry was especially moved by  
Unexpected stars & hugged & kissed even men.  
I wanted to be Jerry. The wacky voices, the fake  
Buck teeth. Unabashed generosity. I must confess  
I got chills during the drum roll before the new  
Total was announced. I even prayed a little  
For the cure though I suspected none of the kids  
Were Jewish so I worried my God might  
Not be watching the show. But Jerry was  
Jewish. So was Sammy Davis. I loved how  
We adopted him too, glass eye & all, the way he  
Threw in a Yiddish phrase when he spoke  
& we all smiled his same crooked smile.  
After three hours of sleep I would stumble  
Downstairs & flip on the show. None of the big  
Names were there at 5 a.m. Only Jerry. Only  
Some pudgy Vinnie from Local 526 who pledged  
744 bucks that he personally collected from  
Customers on his bread route, only a scout master  
From troop 13 whose boys collected 121 dollars  
From returning Coke bottles at two cents a pop.  
The early morning acts were crummy. Jerry needed  
Filler. A girl, who would be described in those  
Days as negro, was twirling a baton while doing  
Cartwheels. Jerry was twirling a baton as well.

He could do anything. During her penultimate  
Cartwheel the girl's top slid down.  
She quickly pulled it back up but I saw her breast.  
It was brief I admit but I saw it on TV.  
I had never seen a breast outside of my family  
Before & she ran off stage in quick humiliation  
But Jerry, gentlemen that he was, ignored the indignity,  
Applauded & asked for the new total. All my life  
I wanted to ask contemporaries if they happened  
To be awake at that precise moment, if they had  
Seen what I'd seen, if it really happened.  
You know the business about the tree falling  
& if it makes a sound if no one is around?  
Don't we need a witness to validate our lives?  
Each of us is so expert at deceiving ourselves.