

**Passages from Boyhood to Manhood, and Back:
The Camp Nebagamon Poems of Louis Daniel Brodsky**

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Louis Daniel Brodsky, of St. Louis, has published 55 books of poetry and authored more than 9,000 individual poems. Taken as a whole, Brodsky's poems, like Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, represent nothing short of an attempt to capture on paper as fully as possible the entire life experience of a single individual. Brodsky writes of his childhood and youth in St. Louis; of his career as a clothing manufacturer and salesman; of his marriage and divorce; of the birth and growth of his children; of his life in a small town in America's Heartland; of his sojourns to Faulkner's Mississippi and to vacation spots in Florida; of his midlife love affair; of his ambivalent relationship with his Jewish roots and heritage; of Hitler's Gestapo and the Holocaust; of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the Iraq war. The moods of the poems are as varied as the content: by turns funny and sad, serious and satirical, uplifting and skeptical, lyrical and colloquial, philosophical and farcical.

Brodsky was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1941, where he attended St. Louis Country Day School. After earning a bachelor's degree, magna cum laude, from Yale University in 1963, he went on to complete an M.A. in English from Washington University of St. Louis in 1967 and an M.A. in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University the following year. From 1968 to 1987, writing poetry all the while, he assisted in managing a 350-employee men's clothing factory in Farmington, Missouri,

and started one of the Midwest's first factory-outlet apparel chains, with seven retail stores in three states. From 1980 to 1991, he taught English and creative writing at Mineral Area Community College, in nearby Flat River (now Park Hills). Since 1987, he has lived in St. Louis and devoted himself to composing poems.

In this paper I propose to examine the poems in which Brodsky describes his experiences, as boy and adult, at Camp Nebagamon, a boys' camp in northern Wisconsin. These poems appear in *You Can't Go Back, Exactly* (1988; 1989; revised, expanded edition 2003), and in three suites of unpublished poems. Brodsky first attended Camp Nebagamon as a ten-year-old, served as a counselor for twelve summers, returned years later for occasional reunions of the campers, and then returned still later to visit his son, a second-generation participant and counselor at the camp. Covering over five decades, these poems capture the exuberance of youthful, carefree summers, the bittersweet experiences of life and aging, the strength of abiding friendships, and the sometime troubled but always enduring love of a father and his son. In their entirety the poems reflect the passages one experiences from youth to age, and the resurrections and reclamations that can make art—and sometimes life—so redemptive.

You Can't Go Back, Exactly is divided into five sections, with a single-poem epilogue. Brodsky believes that a book of poems should not be a mere “collection” of random and disparate poems: rather, it should display a discernible and dramatic narrative unity and flow, not unlike the novels he wrote before he became a poet. *You Can't Go Back, Exactly* fits this pattern. The first section, “Camper and Counselor,” comprised of nine poems, recalls the speaker's experiences as a youth at the camp: the gatherings of the campers for meals in the rec hall and songfests around the campfires,

the hikes through the woods and outings on the lake, and the bonding of boys and leaders—all contributing to the “legacy of friendship” (28) that will accompany the boys when they break camp and return to their homes.

The second section, eleven poems aptly titled “Memories and Visits,” describes periodic return trips to the lake and camp and recollections of friends and counselors from earlier years. This section looks backward to expand the boyhood memories of the lake and camp, and forward as the narrator moves through the decade of his thirties into his early forties. Here the nostalgic remembrance of boyhood experiences is juxtaposed with an elegy to the camp founder and the poet’s mentor, Max J. Lorber, “the Bull of the Woods”—a stark reminder of the inexorable passage of time and the universal eventuality of death.

The twelve poems that comprise section three, “A Son at Camp,” present the narrator’s observations and reflections as his son Troika now follows in the footsteps of his father as a Camp Nebagamon participant. Delivering the boy to camp, observing his settling into the camp routine, adjusting to the boy’s absence back home in St. Louis, returning to visit the son during Parents’ Week, accompanying the son on an outing to Duluth—these are the key narrative points of poems that paradoxically celebrate the son’s developing maturity and independence and reluctantly accept the distance and eventual separation that are the inevitable results of the relationship of every parent and child.

This pattern is continued and extended in the eight poems of section four, “Second-Generation Counselor.” Like his father before him, Troika has now become a counselor to the camp boys; and the father fills with pride as he watches the son expertly

teach another generation of young boys the skills and necessities of camp craft. Such recognition, however, represents a bittersweet experience for the narrator: now a decade divorced, his son having lived with his mother for most of that time and only occasionally seeing his father, the narrator sees his son as almost a stranger, and attempts to reconnect and bond have become increasingly awkward and difficult. This estrangement is vividly depicted in “Changes” (79-81), perhaps the saddest poem in the volume, in which pent-up antagonism threatens to erupt during a dinner engagement of father and son.

Section five, “75th Reunion,” contains three poems celebrating the 75th anniversary of the founding of Camp Nebagamon. Attending the reunion, renewing old friendships, sharing memories, the narrator acknowledges the swift passing of the years but pays tribute to the influence and inspiration of the camp in his life and career.

The “Epilogue,” with its single poem, “Key Log,” summarizes the narrator’s deep feelings about Camp Nebagamon by employing the metaphor of the camp tradition of throwing a log onto the campfire in honor of a respected individual or a key event. The book concludes:

Tonight, after my extended silence,
I say a benediction, throw a key log—my pen—
Onto time’s fading council fire,

To bring the light back to life,
And convey my heart’s deed of trust
To my soul’s home, Camp Nebagamon.

The major themes of *You Can’t Go Back, Exactly* place the book firmly in the mainstream of the American (and British) literary tradition. Principal among those

themes is the benevolent power of nature. For Brodsky Camp Nebagamon is the analog of Thoreau's Walden Pond and Annie Dillard's Tinker Creek. Like those more famous locales, Nebagamon is a "sacred place" (34), filled with "Eden's delicacies" (37). Here "the air is decent for dreaming / And the moon has no lascivious thoughts" (34). Here, as "The long day lengthens out / Drips pink inks / Into trees bordering Lake Nebagamon," a boy can stand on the sandy shore at Lumberjack Point, watch "Sailboats buoyed in the sky," and "sing[s *deleted*] hymns to ancient winds" (32). Here a boy as man can return to "savor that old aroma of pine trees" and feel "I'm home," at one with both animate as well as inanimate nature: "A chipmunk scurries across my path. / I laugh to myself. It's not afraid of my shadow; / Its ancestors knew me in another time" (82).

The introduction of religious allusions underscores the special nature of this magical place. "The lake swells / Proudly as a sated priest leaving a godly feast," and its waves moving against the shore look like "a hundred nuns / Floating softly, whitely, as one, / Toward church doors." The campers, naked, immersing themselves in the cold water where "breathing ends and existence begins," are "Baptized in a rite of secular ecstasy" (39). On Sunday, a day of worship, the narrator listens to celestial music:

My ears register vibrations of wind stroking leaves—
 God's violin section in His earthly symphony—
 High in the reaches of birches, poplars, and ashes.
 White and red pines,
 Despite being weighted with robust cones,
 Contribute the sweetest chorus. (68)

A second theme is the age-old one of innocence versus experience: *You Can't Go Back, Exactly* recounts a coming-of-age story, the initiation of the narrator into the paradoxical, tragic, and sometimes confusing realities of life. While the narrative is presented retrospectively from the vantage point of the adult narrator, with continual flashbacks and flash-forwards in time, rearranged chronologically the story recounts the experiences of the narrator from age ten until age sixty-two (23, 97). In between the two poles the narrator returns, as boy and man, summer after summer to the camp, always finding there a temporary escape and retreat from the pressing and sometimes oppressing demands of life: work, social and political problems, marriage, parenting—and later more work, more problems, divorce, and parenting of a different kind. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes, as frequently with life, more and more portentous, at times nearly desperately so. As the narrator notes in the ominously-titled “Trial by Fire and Water,”

I race along the lake's shore,
 Searching for washed-up shards of childhood,
 Then skip deliriously over a liquidless surface,
 On golden steppingstones
 Thrown across the water by the moon,
 And follow its lunatic shimmering home.
 But the path leads ever deeper,
 To the bottom of an empty crater. Still breathing,
 I drown in its undertow. (43)

This threatening undertow reaches full strength in the poems that discuss the narrator's divorce from his wife of twenty years and the consequent separation and

estrangement from his children. A good example is “Going Back,” in which the return to camp is not the nostalgic reminder of happier times but rather a trip accompanied by “demons,” born of

. . . the complex rhetoric of pain and fear
 That ravaged both our children
 After my wife and I divorced, in 1990,
 Left them with an inability, an unwillingness,
 To admit me into their confidences,
 Permit me a share of their investment in youth.

Troika is now in his fourteenth summer at Camp Nebagamon, and the father realizes that “Nebagamon is his domain now, not mine.” And just as he has been displaced at camp, so too has he been removed by the divorce from his son’s company and affection. Thus the father, “nervous,” “wear[ing] uncertainty on [his] sleeve,” fears that the upcoming meeting with the son might become “a knock-down drag-out brawl” (78).

Happily, *You Can’t Go Back, Exactly* does not end on such a despairing note. Later poems in the book hold out at least the possibility of reconciliation between father and son, and a big part of what makes that possible is their shared experiences of Camp Nebagamon. This is the point of “A Common Ground,” in which the narrator, back home in St. Louis, relives his recent visit with Troika at the camp:

Sitting here by myself tonight, I miss my boy
 And wish that I were back at camp,
 Breathing the deep-green scent of Norway pines,

Listening to owls hoot to each other,
 Sleeping soundly under starry fifty-degree skies.

 What are you doing, this Monday night, Troika?
 If only I could catch up with your shadow,
 You and I might become friends,
 Not as boys but as father and son, as men,
 Spending our days together at Camp Nebagamon. (93)

As this poem implies, the actual protagonist of *You Can't Go Back, Exactly* is Camp Nebagamon—and the antagonist is time. Between the permanence and the idealism of the one and the uncertainty and vicissitudes of the other, the narrator, even in age still “A novice with canoe paddle, hatchet, and compass, / Trying to figure out how the world works / And how people fit into its inscrutable mosaic” (103), is left, as best he can, as he says in one of the poems, “To seize pieces and tatters of the world / And arrest them in patterns” (34). Such is always the challenge in every individual’s journey from innocence to experience.

Significantly, the journey in these poems is not only a passage through time but also through space. The union of the two realms is explicitly stated in “Passing of Orders”: “Time is a line of musty Pullman cars” traveling through the countryside, “thread[ing] destinations with smoke: Highland Park, Milwaukee, Spooner, Hawthorne” (41), taking the young boy to camp. The heart of the book is Camp Nebagamon, but the campers and the narrator are continually traveling to and from this sacred place. The campers arrive at the beginning of the summer, unpacking their trunks and moving into the cabins, and they reverse the process at season’s end: “We who waved good-bye at

Hawthorne, / Like trees shivering in winter, / Take to our private highways” (29). The narrator travels back and forth from his home in St. Louis to Wisconsin—as a boy by train, as an adult by airplane and automobile. The father and son, both together and individually, occasionally leave the camp for brief trips to Duluth. Thus Camp Nebagamon, like Walden Pond or Tinker Creek or any other idealized setting, exists not in geographical isolation but as part of the larger world. And the narrator (and by implication, others) must negotiate this relationship, finding its meaning not in separation and retreat but in conjunction and engagement. This, I believe, explains why Brodsky has chosen to interweave his narrative with frequent shifts in time and place—now and then, here and there—and to begin and end the volume with poems that dramatize this interweaving.

The quest of the narrator to find order, purpose, and meaning in the course of his journeying invites comparison with the archetypal epic hero of Joseph Campbell’s “monomyth”—in which the hero journeys beyond the familiar world, travels in a strange and exotic place (often under the guidance of a wise mentor or counselor), and returns to his familiar surroundings to bestow benefits of experience and wisdom upon his fellow citizens. In this regard the ordinary, familiar world is St Louis; the quester is the narrator; and the mentors and guides to the hero are Muggs Lorber, the other counselors, and indeed Camp Nebagamon itself. And what does the narrator learn from his experiences that will be a benefit to others?

One answer to that question, I believe, is contained within the title of the book. “You can’t go back,” that is, “You can’t repeat the past,” is a truism that, taken literally, is incontrovertible. However, the title Brodsky gives the book is *You Can’t Go Back*,

Exactly. In other words, it is only in the literal sense (“exactly”) that you can’t go back; in quite another way—that is, imaginatively, poetically, emotionally—you can go back again. This is *exactly* (in this case I use the term both precisely and symbolically) the point of the poem that gives the entire volume its name. In this poem the narrator, twenty-six years after his boyhood camping experiences, is invited back to Camp Nebagamon, but this time “Not as a boy but a writer of verse” (48) to lead an “Explore Creativity” workshop for the campers. In this workshop the poet will encourage the boys to recognize and accept the advantages and even the necessity of conjoining the actual and the imaginary, the real and the ideal. Someday, perhaps, they will realize, as he does, that the best life is one infused with and illuminated by a poetic imagination; and they will know, again as he does, that one of the best foundations for such a life is the time they have spent at Camp Nebagamon. Here they have learned the harmony of man and nature; the value of teamwork and friendship (see “From Many, We Are One,” [27]); a respect for one’s mentors and teachers and for hard work and discipline and the pursuit of excellence; the joy of memory, of remembering and cherishing the people and events of their past; an openness to transcendence; and faith in the infinite possibilities of the future, such as the forgiveness and reconciliation between father and son. With such values, the poet tells the boys, we can continue “to get all mixed up in our dreams,” and still believe

... that if we wished,
 Like Huck Finn and that Sawyer kid,
 We could sneak off the train,
 At the very next station,

Light out for the territory
 Beyond Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota,
 Hiking all the way to the horizon,
 Maybe spend the rest of our days
 Rafting the entire Mississippi,
 Certainly not worry about being hijacked,
 Crashing from 37,000 feet,
 Or arriving five minutes behind schedule.

In the poem “Walt Whitman in the Land of Paul Bunyan” (55) the narrator-poet identifies with Whitman, and certainly there are echoes of Whitman throughout *You Can't Go Back, Exactly*—in terms of content, language, and technique. Brodsky also shares with Whitman the practice of continually revising, rearranging, and republishing previous poems. The version of *You Can't Go Back, Exactly* that I have described is actually the third edition of the work, and since its appearance in 2003 Brodsky has written an additional thirty-two Camp Nebagamon poems. While I do not have time here to discuss those poems, I will note that they all reprise and expand the subjects and themes I have described in this essay, and in one of them, one of the best, the son Troika places a key log on the council fire in honor of his father. I fully expect there will be another edition of *You Can't Go Back, Exactly*, incorporating these later poems. I eagerly await its appearance—as you should too.