A naked woman my age is a total nightmare.
A woman my age naked is a nightmare.
It doesn't matter. One doesn't care.
One doesn't say it out loud because it's rare
For anyone to be willing to say it,
Because it's the equivalent of buying billboard space to display it,
Display how horrible life after death is,
How horrible to draw your last breath is,
When you go on living.

It is typical of Seidel to lead off with a statement of such brutality, as though daring the reader to close the book in righteous anger. In this way the righteous are weeded out, and only readers curious or sympathetic enough to go on are allowed to see what leads Seidel to write this way: not misogyny or "ageism," but a desperate anger. In this way the righteous are being the reader to close the book in righteous anger.

Love, Seidel seems to be saying, is stronger than death: the old couples who cling to one another in the face of physical decay remain "beautiful" in their fidelity and defiance. If they are also "terrible" to the poet, it can only be because they represent a kind of consolation that is unavailable to him. He hates them because their happiness exposes his misery as a self-inflicted punishment. Sartre may have said that hell is other people, but poets have long known that, in fact, hell is being trapped in the self.

"Which way I fly is Hell, myself am Hell," says Milton's Satan, and Gerard Manley Hopkins concurs: "The lost are like this, and their scourg to be/As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse." But few poets have written more horribly and convincingly than Seidel about the torment of self-hood. Reading Poems 1959-2009, one is struck by how often Seidel returns to images of people cut off, abandoned, imprisoned. In "Dune Road, Southampton," from his 1998 book Going Fast, he writes about the famous case of Sunny von Bülow, who was allegedly poisoned into a coma by her husband:

The neurologist on call introduces herself to the murderer and concurs.
Locked-in syndrome, just about the worst.
Alive, with staring eyes.
The mind is unaffected.

And with the patient looking on expressionlessly,