

Gail White

Communion of Saints

The things that living brains forget,
the dead keep neatly filed.
My grandmother remembered yet
the death of Oscar Wilde,

the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk,
and from the time before
her own, her mother's fervid talk
about the Civil War.

Now I remember for her sake
the small years as they pass,
the years that like a hatchling snake
run underneath the grass,

that sometimes crawl and sometimes climb
as to their goals they tend
until the quick-eared cat of time
pounces, and there an end.

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Ambition and Early Love

I was a teenage bottom feeder,
in all my studies very slack,
when Jean, our high school's head cheerleader,
eloped with Kay, our quarterback.

This was a secret from their parents
and school, but not from us, their friends,
who marveled at their perseverance
and all that lawful sex portends.

Kay took a scholarship to college.
Jean bore a daughter (also Kay).
I, in pursuit of hipper knowledge,
loafed for a while in Uruguay.

Kay'd be a banker, while delicious
Jean would grace the social list.
And I, belatedly ambitious,
would be a famous novelist.

I raged at agents like a tempest
of talent, but they all cried "No."
Today Kay sells used cars in Memphis,
and Jean divorced him long ago.

Wild Turkeys

I'm losing short-term memory (by short-term
I mean 5 minutes, as in "Where's that book
I just laid down?" "Behind you." "So it is!"
"Where are my glasses?" "On your head" and so on...)
Memory like a witch, mounting the air,
taking the last five minutes up the chimney.
Not like my father yet, who at the end
forgot his wife of 60 years, my mother
who predeceased him, although we could still
show him old photographs of their courting days
and he would say reflexively "There's Jeannie."

Now I should consciously begin to save
the memories I want. The brain, of course
selects the most humiliating ones
to garner in an Easy Access File,
especially the ones from middle school.
I'd like to forget everything before
about age 30: start with my first trip
abroad, first look at Belgium, England, France.
The time that we sang "Dixie" in Red Square
just days before the Soviet Union fell.
The peacock that jumped down and spread its tail
in a rajah's garden. But if I could choose
a memory for my deathbed, I believe
I'd choose the day we drove the Natchez Trace
and three wild turkeys walked across the road.
"What's THAT?" we said — because wild turkeys don't
look anything the way you think they'd look —
and then we laughed, and ever afterward
Wild Turkey was our drink. I half believe
that if I keep that memory intact,
when I raise up for my last look at things,
I'll see wild turkeys spread their silly wings.