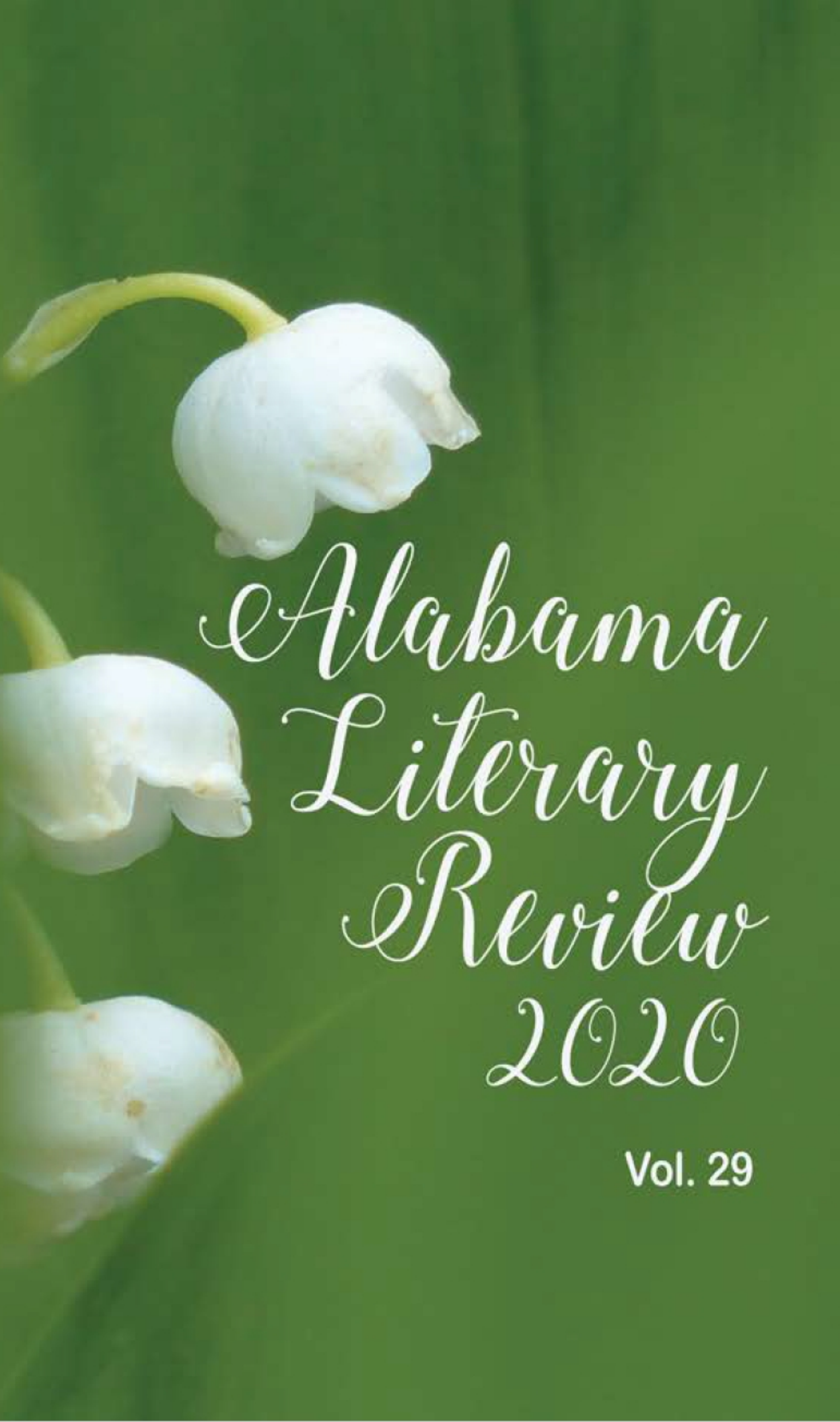
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Jane Blanchard

Inimitability

remembering Stanley Plumly
(1939-2019)

We shared a week in Sicily, my husband there,
your wife as well, our Bread Loaf workshop intimate
enough, with six participants, one auditor,
and you around a table, where you growled a bit
while commenting on what a poem did or did
not do. At times you took a marker to the white-
board, showed us what a line or more should do instead,
as if another's style and yours were much alike.
When meeting privately, you first observed my work
had merit, then directed my attention to
a poem of mine perhaps excessively overt,
a second oddly reticent, a third untrue.
It took a widely read yet nonconforming mind
to recognize the full potential of design.

To Carolyn

on whose birthday I was born

I learned of your last illness, then your death,
through lawyers. How I hope you had no fears
of leaving. How I pray your final breath
was not a rant against someone with years,
months, days remaining — namely Jane. Our lives
were bound by common parents who misused
us willfully. One daughter yet survives —
mere me, the younger one, who long refused
to bow to power — for better, not for worse,
I hope and pray again—however hard
is left the effort to escape the curse
of any generation. So, on guard
as always, never mind the customary,
I offer this as your obituary.

Catharine Savage Brosman

Romaine

It's labeled "artisan" — a current word
seducing buyers prone to snobbery,
whence higher price. (Still, have we ever heard
of workshop turnips, studio broccoli?)

But this time it makes sense. Each head, "petite,"
is tender, outer leaves curled back a bit
and flounced, the rest, like tiny rowboats, neat,
concentric, nested, to great benefit;

for, wrapped around themselves, by nature's art,
they are untouched by anything — pristine,
protecting, as a lover might his heart,
their subtle prism, half-earthy, half-marine.

With care I peel away three leaves, no, four,
arrange them cunningly — an amulet —
slice cucumber, tomatoes ("heirloom"), pour
a "cold-pressed" oil- and red-wine vinaigrette.

Voilà! I yield to vegetable guile,
in short — and marketers. It's justified;
they nourish us with taste, in leafy style.
A mineral world and I must have our pride.

Arm-in-Arm

Arms linked and shoulders touching, feet together,
faces lit by the delights of laughter, talk,
close harmony — what homages to love and friendship.
Once, Pat and I walked arm-in-arm,
along an aisle, new husband, wife, to happiness.
We strolled in Paris one sweet summer, too —
the very picture of romance. And near
his lifetime's end, we walked in London, shivering

(as it was January), both slightly lame (the shoe
that pinched me, Pat's bad knees), but celebrating
older love, the sort that won't give up.
My parents, also — I must not forget: the three of us
along canals in Amsterdam, and later
on a Paris boulevard. We stopped at an appealing
bistrot where Vivaldi's *Seasons* gave a voice
to time as passing, always — my mother wondering

at the customs: large dogs, quiet, orderly; two lovers
kissing, each with glass in hand, on a bench
below the mirrors — the quintessential image of *amour*,
reflected for us. Other threads of recollection:
friends from Catalonia — she British, born in Ceylon,
and he, a native Catalan, a novelist.
We met in London at a conference, walked arm-
in-arm through Gordon Square; then they invited me

to visit for a week their country house outside Olot.
Elsewhere, happy scenes of holding hands,
the way my grandson, not full grown, gave his to me,
half-guiding, half-supporting me discreetly
past the semi-darkness of the entryway and down
the steps in Diocletian's Palace, hollowed and too high.
What comes to mind most dearly are Pat's hands,
when he was old — strong, sensitive, with wrists still

powerful from slamming tennis shots — and that day
when on a tourist train he held my own
so tenderly that others in the coach inquired how long

we'd been married. Two answers, there. Another
moment: Michelangelo, the Sistine Chapel.

Now I imagine copper clouds at sunset, Pat appearing
as they part, reaching downward to me, arm
extended — smiling, signaling, his fingers touching mine.

Normandy, 7 August 1944

They parked their Panzers in a poplar grove,
expecting orders. *Hitlerjungend*, not
supported well, worn down. Montgomery drove
his forces toward them hard, as always. Caught,

then overrun, the SS tried retreat,
but met Canadians, whose countrymen
had perished by a field of summer wheat
as prisoners of Germans at Ardenne.

And each remembered. War is destiny;
to even out the score, the ancient curse —
however crazed and cruel revenge may be —
appears as sacrifice, awaiting worse.

It will not end. The Teutons at La Cambe,
who lie beneath their crosses of basalt,
compose a desperate ideogram,
aligned as for an ultimate assault.

Rick Campbell

Balm

I would make you a promise
that the world will turn
toward good, but you're no fool
to the way worlds turn, and you
know my powers and promises
        often fall short.

There's a small grove of wax myrtle
and cedar. Its shade is honey
when the sun is high and hot.
Bees gather there to rest.
If you burn, I'll try to soothe you
with aloe and oils. I will bring you
grapes, peaches and teacakes.
What's this all about, you ask.
I don't know. I don't know.

On Dying too Soon After Finally Finding Love

for James Wright

When does too soon become long enough?
When your love lights the trees of your East River park,
shouldn't you get another lifetime more?
Certainly, we might wonder, "how much love
is a lot more love than not much love at all?"
That's not a rhetorical question.
It's cold this morning. As I walk the dog,
my fingers feel brittle. The trash truck beeps
two shell roads over. As he squats, I watch
a white squirrel chase a gray from pine
to pine. The gray scrambles up the trunk
then reverses, like a runner in the open field,
or a soldier dodging enemy fire, and leaps
across to the tree he just left. The white
remains still, content, I guess, to claim
his tree. About love. About age.
About death. What do squirrels know?

Rick Campbell

Love Is Not a Victory March

It's come to this. Freezing
night. A quarter moon in the sky,
one star, bright as a spaceship
hovering in the south, somewhere
over the water. It was too cold to sing.
We walked, particulates — dust, pollen —
floated in my headlamp's bright beam.
Florescent bugs glowed like jewels in the grass.

Love, how far away it is: a village
at the edge of a lake, satellite image,
dark and round with what could be trees
ringing the shore from heart
to heart as the crow flies. Who
can fly with crows, love?

Poem for John Prine

I don't think I ever prayed
without being forced to. Ten
Hail Marys, three Our Fathers,

an Act of Contrition. I confessed
some made up sins, embellished
my venial faults to seem

a worthy sinner. Then I quit.
God wasn't doing me any favors.
South Florida was so far from the Celestial

Palace that even my sad mother
couldn't hear the angels sing. The God
who made me, floated above smoke

stacks, his fingers stained with soot.
But today, sun rising over the Gulf,
Dear Lord

Rick Campbell

The Old Places

for Philip Levine

Here, in the modern invention
of South Florida, I am trying
to remember a place that never was.
The ever and never changing malls,
gated communities with names
that conjure the idyllic out of palmetto
and scrub. I point to a road heading
west to more real estate and say
that's mine. I flagged its only curve
and measured half-mile sections
to the horizon. On the rich
island's forbidden green
streets I take two quiet steps
on paver blocks I laid and tamped
with my German foreman and redneck crew.
All over this county there's roads I drove
trucks down, condo stairs I carried sofas
and washing machines up. Out
on Haverhill when it was the western edge
of all that had been bought and sold, I
pounded on an ex-girlfriend's door
at 3 a.m. and then slept off a mushroom
trip in the back seat of her unlocked
VW. I used to call the Singer Island
shoreline, where every high tide
washed away the evidence
that I was ever here, home.

On Not Going to Vietnam

Two young men are crawling in a ditch that runs along the dirt road in a campground, but now they are quite still. It's a shallow ditch, lit, barely, by moonlight. It's wet from the night dew. One young man holds a package of bacon, the other a half gallon of milk. They are wearing dark clothes and are hard to see in the dim light.

They are staring at a skunk a few feet away in the same ditch, and the skunk isn't moving either. In the dark only the skunk's eyes and the white of its body are visible. The young men in the ditch can smell both the potential of the skunk and its everyday skunkness; it smells tangy, but also warm and fresh, like mulch, like wet grass. In fact, the young men in the ditch smell a lot like the skunk — wet grass and sweat and everything is comingled in a less than glorious frozen moment in the natural world. Both parties are rigid, eyeing each other. The night is almost silent. There is a distant slap of the lake's small waves on the shore. Frogs, too far away to sound like every night frogs, croak. Farther away, fainter still, the low rumble of occasional tires rolls in from Route 6. The young men hear each mosquito, each gnat buzzing around their heads. The skunk hears all of this and more.

The young men are breathing with the little gasps and explosions of people trying to be quiet. The skunk is nervous too and hisses a little like a cat cornered, but breathes slowly, more rhythmically than the young men.

Nearby grass rustles, a mouse or small snake makes its exit. Everything crystallizes here like an unsnapped photograph — a little moonlight, a few stars in the cloudy sky, two young men on their wet bellies, a thoughtful skunk.

Finally, the skunk turns away, climbs out of the ditch and finds its own campsite to forage. The young men begin to breathe and then to crawl. A few seconds later they rise and run with their spoils.

It's the summer of 1971 and cow corn is green in the fields, taller than I am. I'm living in a cabin, actually more a shack, an amalgamation of structures joined into one small dwelling, near the shores of Lake Pymatuning in Northwestern Pennsylvania. I don't really know it, but I'm waiting for my lottery number to come up.

The shack is just west of Linesville, Pennsylvania, a little farm town that became a working class resort when someone flooded the Pymatuning Reservoir over farms and roads within a couple of miles of town. The town's most famous and lucrative attraction is the

Spillway where ducks walk on the backs of thirty-pound carp as both scramble for day-old bread that people throw to them. It's a town that benefits as much from the dollars of campers and fishermen, as the corn and cows, silos and barns that populate the countryside.

The lake is muddy green, cold as it laps against the bleached white driftwood that rings its shoreline. During the day I walk to the state park on the lakeshore where the free showers offer not only a chance to get clean, but also something to do. Entertainment is hard to come by here. The roads are tar-covered and heat shimmers off them as I walk; sometimes my sneakers squish and leave imprints in the bubbles.

I've been hungry a lot of this summer — out of money in early July and living mostly on rice and food that my father left on his earlier summer visits. I've made a few acquaintances in my two months here. I am the long-haired curiosity and some of the town boys stop at my camp to drink beer, or to just be in a place where there are no parents, no adults. I play whiffleball with one of them. If I strike him out, he has to bring me food the next time he comes around. He always bites on the big sweeping curve, flails at the knuckle ball or misses the diving fork ball. He looks bad. About once a week I get some eggs or bread that he swipes from his mother's pantry. It doesn't take much to get by.

Sometimes my friend from down near Pittsburgh joins me. He's younger than I am and not worried about the draft. I don't think I'm worried about it either, but I don't often tell myself the whole truth. We are only a little bit hungry, and we like the adventure of seeing where and when our next food will come from. We haven't had to beg yet and, until it happened, catching us by surprise, we'd never stolen any food either.

I have a girlfriend, of sorts, who lives down the road. She's a townie stuck on a street of working class summer cabins and trailers. Her mother hates me (of course) and forbids her to see me, so we sneak around a lot. One day I met her in town at the high school gym where she was working for the summer. A bunch of guys were playing basketball and the coach baited Ray, his best player, into playing me one on one — a battle with the long-haired stranger. We had a good game, matched each other shot for shot, drive for drive, and Ray won by one basket. It couldn't have gone better; I tried as hard as I could to win, but luckily or because Ray was really better, I lost. I won a measure of respect from him. When he walked off all he said was good game. But that, as players know, means a lot in these circumstances.

Hippies, which I looked like, but really wasn't, were not well accepted in the Pymatuning region, or anywhere else in the rural heartland. A common habit for the local boys was to cruise the picnic grounds and look for camper girls, the daughters of vacationers up

from McKeesport, Ambridge, or some other milltown. There were no shopping center parking lots to cruise, no malls to hang out in. The local route began at the Linesville Dairy Queen, shot straight out the road to the campground and sometimes, if kids were adventurous, cut west to Route 6 and circled back to the Dairy Queen. I'm not sure that the cruising locals (nor I) ever connected Route 6 (The Grand Army of the Republic Highway) to the far flung places it went; maybe we knew about Cleveland, but that it would have taken us across the Continental Divide, through the high desert of Nevada, and dumped us off in Long Beach was beyond our ken.

If there were no camper girls hanging around for the boys to leer at, and usually there were none, because this was a little fishing campground in Northern Pennsylvania, not the Jersey shore, the boys would look for other entertainment — either racing, or, after we arrived, hassling hippies. Usually nothing more drastic happened than someone shouting *get a haircut, faggot; get a job, or you a man or a woman?* But sometimes things escalated. Once, as I was sitting on my rock in front of bathroom at the end of the road, two guys I'd never seen before began to give me a hard time, trying to pick a fight. When I didn't bite, one pulled a choker chain out of his pocket and said that since I looked like a dog maybe he should put a collar on me. Just when things were going to get serious, Ray drove by and said, "let him go, he's ok," and the others left. Respect.

2.

I was there among the red barns and white houses where Mennonite farms melded easily into the secular world. My reasons, though unclear to me, were common to many young men my age in 1971: a desire to be somewhere other than home and the faint notion that the war and its draft were issues that I could not ignore no matter how oblivious I was to the news and events of the time. I didn't think of the draft as a central part of my reality. Though a few kids I knew had enlisted to avoid being drafted into the Army, none of my friends had been drafted yet.
But to be unconcerned is not to be unconscious. I was acting on some mixture of fear and revulsion, some undeclared sense that everything I hated might come to claim me and maybe claim my life too. Probably my ignoring the war was an act of denial. Though I had talked about hating the war with my "peers," I assume that I might have gone if my number was called. I was young, naive, and easily pushed around; to do what was expect-

ed was the easiest road to travel. I don't think I had the guts to travel the road of overt resistance.

I had no thoughts, no plan, no strongly held beliefs. All I can be sure that I wanted was to avoid people like my father, like most of the fathers I knew. That alone should have made me a draft evader if I had had the courage to do something that difficult. I never seriously considered that I would be sent to Vietnam. I never thought I could die, in Vietnam or anywhere else. Yet somewhere inside, the situation must have been real to me. I was living a few miles from the Canadian border, and I was waiting for the lottery.

My circumstances were meager, but so were my experiences and my expectations. August was coming. I would turn 19 with no job; I was on a summer break from junior college, but I didn't like college. It had no purpose. There was nothing I wanted to be, only things I didn't want to do and people I didn't want to be like. It's true that I still had a student deferment, but that was some sort of some abstract thing. I had a draft card, but I don't think I had a deferment card. Maybe there was no such thing as a deferment card. What did I know? I cared so little about so much that I didn't care about my deferment either. Things happened and seeing what would happen next was enough. This slack version of carpe diem was pretty sustaining then.

Maybe that's why we were crawling through the ditch. It wasn't really hunger that sent us into the campground that night, just a sense of curiosity stretched too thin. A couple of the town boys were out to see us, and they'd had a few beers. My friend and I didn't want to eat as much as we wanted to talk about food, about the food we hadn't eaten for days and weren't likely to see unless we went home to our parents' refrigerators. We fantasized about cookies and cakes, about sausage and spaghetti. I went on too long about bacon, my favorite food. Soon we'd driven ourselves into a frenzy of sweet or savory desire, and someone suggested going into the campground and raiding the campers' coolers.

Just before we began our sortie, the townies chickened out and left. Scotty and I went through with it because there seemed no good reason not to. I got my bacon. I don't remember what else we liberated. We ate everything. Then we started to feel guilty because we knew that campers, people more or less like us, were not the proper targets for our raids.

3.

The morning that the draft numbers came out, August 6th, I walked down the tar road through the late morning's rising heat to Linesville to find a newspaper, and in Isalys at the end of the long formica counter in a pile left from breakfast was my number — 358. *358.* Suddenly I believed in the war. I believed in not going and felt the lucky rush of having been missed by a speeding car after you step off the curb without looking. In a moment fueled by three simple numbers, I was suddenly aware of what the war meant to me: I wouldn't get drafted unless we were fighting on Mars. I bought a celebratory ice cream cone and walked across the street to browse the windows of Morrison's Surplus. Even in this moment of joy, or at least relief, Linesville offered little else in the way of celebration.

I'm not into numerology, not then, not now, but 3+5+8 = 16, and August 16th is my birthday. There are good numbers and bad. If you play APPA baseball, where your fortune is decided by rolling dice, the best numbers — 11, 22, 33, 44, 55 and 66 — bring homeruns and extra base hits. 3 is auspicious and maybe even Holy. 5's pretty good. 7 and 11 are lucky in craps. Willie Stargell wore number 6, Clemente, 21; Mazeroski wore number 9. But in the draft lottery did any of this matter? Probably not, and if it did I certainly don't know why. But, a lucky number came up for me and I've no reason to discount anything that might have caused it.

I spent a few more uneventful weeks there in the shack by the lake, and during those weeks I realized a few things about my life. I discovered that Ray and a lot of the town and farm boys didn't get number 358. Many of them, too many for sheer chance it seems, had numbers below 100. I also learned that since I was 358, I didn't know what to do next. I grew tired of the cabin and had to go somewhere else.

4.

Ray might be dead now; I don't know. I think he drew number two. He probably wasn't thinking about going to Canada or becoming a CO; he probably didn't want to go to war, but he probably thought there was nothing he could do about it. Most of us really have little control over our lives, and working class kids have less control than those with better lives and better connections. I doubt that anyone ever told him that you don't have to go get killed; you don't have to walk out in front of a

truck. As I grew more knowledgeable and distrustful of our government's ways, I came to suspect that the lottery was rigged so that poor boys not in the habit of making critical decisions were the ones who got the low numbers. As Steve Earle sang, "they draft white trash first round here anyway." Did the lottery have a list of birth dates cross referenced with stats on income, education, geography, so that low numbers came up in Linesville, PA, the Dakotas, West Texas, most of the Deep South? In 1971, I knew only two draft-age black men; I'm sure that my geography of who gets drafted would have been changed by race, but race was not yet a factor in my thoughts on Vietnam or my life at large.

For sure, lots of kids were getting drafted and getting killed. In 1972, the good chance of getting killed numbers were 1-125. A boy born on December 4, 1952 would have been number 1. January 25th was number 2. December 15th — number 3. Those two-digit tickets-to-a-body-bag numbers had to be someone's; but I did not have to worry about it. As a wise song says, "*It's not hard to get along with somebody else's troubles.*"

Being 358 meant that I didn't have to go back to the junior college classes I'd been taking. I was bored. I didn't know why I was taking them, so I let the fall term begin before I headed back to Florida. Being 358 meant that the vague plans I'd been considering of running off to Canada, or just drifting anonymously across the country, weren't necessary anymore. I'd have to actually think about what I wanted to do. I wandered home after Labor Day.

By the time I grew conscious of the war it was obvious that it was a bloody, dangerous, stupid mess. I might have been ignorant about why we were fighting and apathetic about opposing the war, but I was not about to enlist. For me to have gone to Vietnam, via enlistment or the draft, would have been an act of monumental emotional confusion. Maybe I wasn't the most informed guy around, but *you don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows, do you?* After Kent State even I was aware of the opposition to the war. Even I knew that kids had died for no good reason and that they were still dying. I could have gone to war and joined the troops doing pot, acid and heroin; I could have fragged arrogant officers, could have mutinied and said I wasn't going to fight, could have gotten caught in a civil war between black troops and white racists. Yes, there was a world of opportunities that I missed. But as I've said, I didn't know enough then. So, I just didn't go; I had no concrete,

articulated reason for *not going*. There are degrees of not going. To be a CO and not go, to be an anti-war activist and not go, to be a draft evader and not go, these were noble stands. The more selfish position was to believe that someone had to fight the Commies, but not me. The most common position held by my generation was probably to hang on to your college deferment, do some good dope and hope to get laid. But even that kind of *not going* was better than going.

Bill Clinton didn't go either, and he and I weren't alone in missing the war. Very few American men, less than 10% of those eligible to serve, went to Vietnam. Most Americans simply didn't go and didn't become COs, antiwar activists or draft evaders. Most didn't do much of anything except stay in college or get lucky. I won the lottery.

Even though I did not go to Vietnam (and in 1971, walking through Linesville, PA, I might have been very much out of touch with the political reality and threats of the day) I later found that I had friends whose lives were damaged or terminated by Vietnam. My neighbor Larry was a few years older than I when he was shot by his own men on Christmas Eve walking perimeter guard duty. I'm not sure when I came to know this, but I did find Larry's name on the Vietnam Memorial many years after 1971. At the Memorial, as I rubbed his name, I was sure that try as he might, he couldn't quietly walk guard duty. Larry was clumsy. He was a fat kid who dropped at least sixty pounds so that the Army would take him and then served less than 50 days in Nam before he was shot. His Service Record says he died from a "Misadventure." It's sickening to think of those words and what they mean in this circumstance, but I have often been sickened by the evasive, whitewashed language like "friendly fire" that the military regularly uses to describe the tragedies of war.

Tommy, a good friend, the best baseball player I knew, was also a few years older than I; he enlisted in the Navy so that he would not get drafted. He came home with bad hearing, a penchant for weed, and a lethargic, broken spirit that kept him either in his parent's house or holed up in his apartment. I only saw him twice after Nam. Another guy, I met him much later, in the late 70s, joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War when he was in Nam and then accidentally had his faced plastered on the cover of Life Magazine. He came home a bit crazy, but not as fucked up as many others. My neighbor of the last twenty years served on a river patrol boat like the one in Apocalypse Now, and for much

of his early years back in county he was pretty crazy too. We all have war stories. Not going did not necessarily insulate one from the fallout of the Vietnam War, but it's pretty safe to say that for all but the most gung-ho, not going was certainly better than going.

5.

There are many conspiracy theorists who claim that the lottery was rigged. Maybe losing any game of chance that is likely to result in getting you killed is enough to get people thinking the game's rigged against them. Remember Tessie's cries in Jackson's short story "The Lottery." But there were some weird circumstances that caused a lot of doubts about the lottery's fairness. It was supposed to work like this: a birthday lot was drawn, say August 16th; then a draft number was assigned to it. In the lottery held on December 1, 1969, dates were written on slips of paper and placed in blue plastic capsules; then the capsules were drawn from a large glass container. Congressman Alexander Pirnie of New York drew the first capsule, September 14, and this date was assigned the number one. Then youth delegates who had been chosen from places all over the country were given the dubious honor of drawing the remaining capsules; each date drawn was given the next number in line. Think again of "The Lottery" when the administrators of the town's lottery made sure that all of the children had stones to throw at the sacrificial victim. Having kids draw numbers was morally suspect, but the story gets worse. It was later discovered that the date capsules were kept in shoeboxes; each month had its own box, and then the capsules were dumped into the glass container in chronological order. October, November, and December were dropped in last. The capsules were not mixed very well so those capsules remained near the top and too many dates, to be statistically fair, from the last months of the year were drawn first and given low numbers. The random draft wasn't really random, but this mistake was more a product of inept and sloppy thought than cheating or targeting any certain groups of young men. However, everything matters when we are gambling with lives.

I can't get over the idea that the Nixon administration thought it was a good idea to have young people participate in the lottery by drawing the lots. Nixon, as did many others in America, knew that the young targets of the draft distrusted the process. He cooked up this scheme to use even younger kids to

draw the lots hoping that it would "answer questions and dispel illusions about the conscription process which are now held by many of our younger citizens." This scam, The Youth Advisory Committee Program, was meant to create the illusion that America's youth supported the government's war policy. Through these no doubt hand-picked "good" kids, Nixon hoped to create "a channel for communication and for influence" and "provide a way in which young people can help to shape government policies in which they have a very special stake." This was clearly another joker the Nixon administration's pack of cards.

After Rep. Pirnie drew number one, young Paul Murray, of Rhode Island, drew lot number two. These kids, who were chosen or volunteered to be on the Youth Council, were either Angels of Death or Angels of Mercy, depending on the numbers they drew. Did they understand this as they came to D.C. and then walked up to the glass jug to draw a capsule? Their participation even further complicates the metaphysics of why some men got low numbers and went to Nam and some got high numbers and were spared. Here are the permutations of why Tommy gets a low number:
Chance
God's will
Deceit and corruption
Karma

If chance governed the lottery, as the Selective Service and government wanted us to believe, then it did not matter who drew the lots. If it was God's will, then if there was a God, it probably didn't matter who drew the lot for whom, and there was probably nothing anyone could have done to change the outcome of the drawing. If the lottery was rigged, then again it didn't matter who drew the lot because winners and losers had already been chosen according to factors of privilege, power, politics, and social control. But if Karma also factored into this equation, good old American Karma without the additional complication of reincarnation, just the idea that we get what we deserve, then what one got, in the way of a low or high numbered lot, might have been affected by who drew the lot. If "bad Karma" low numbers came about because of the previous negative Karmic actions of the young man who got the low number, then in our limited understanding, it would seem that this young man got what he deserved. But what if the Youth Advisor kid had the bad karma?

What if he (or she) wasn't as pure as Nixon wished? Could this youth pass bad Karma on to the young man being drafted who had to live (or die) with the terrible lot he was assigned?

What strikes me as most resonant about the Youth Advisors drawing lots for others is how it implicates them in the fates of those about to be selected or set free. They become saviors or executioners. They're made to function like those Just Say No kids of the Reagan 80s snitching on their weed smoking parents. Humans have a long tradition on turning on each other for many reasons: McCarthy and his suspected commies. Judas and Jesus. Snitches and scapegoats.

In the 1971 draft, my draft, a lot more thought and care went into making the process more statistically random, but when the capsules were placed in drums and rotated, much like Lotto and Powerball drawings on TV today, one of the drums broke and rotated for half of the time it was supposed to spin around. Sloppy, but no one claims this sloppiness resulted in an unfair draft. In the 71 draft, July 9th was number one, but since the war was winding down, not as many young men were sent to Vietnam in 1972. Whatever glitches and problems there were in the 1971 lottery, they did not affect as many lives as in the years before. In 1972, only 49,514 boys were inducted, as compared to 382,000 in 1966.

6.

As I wrote the first drafts of this essay I was a lot older than the 18 year old kid in the ditch. I was living in the country, listening to the rain, to woodpeckers, the deep rushing beat of cardinals at the bird feeders and the more distant sounds of the neighbors' peacocks, chickens, cows and a solitary and seemingly sad mule. Looking back at the kid crawling through the ditch, though I didn't really hurt anyone by stealing that food, I've always been a little ashamed of the deed. It's not that I believe theft is always wrong; sometimes, under certain conditions, it can be quite necessary. But I don't believe in stealing bacon from a camper's cooler. I imagine a family getting up in the morning, opening their cooler, having maybe dreamed of bacon and eggs, but their bacon is gone. They are shocked, can't believe it. Maybe the old man accuses his wife of forgetting it. I did not mean to cause that conflict, to throw a wrench in otherwise decent family outing. I wasn't really that hungry.

Coda

In a sort of seven-degrees-of-separation event, I met a writer at a conference and over beers we were talking about our lives. He taught in northwest PA, not far from Linesville. I told him about my going to Linesville often years ago, about this essay, and about the encounter with Ray. Then I sent him what I thought was a finished draft of this essay. It turned out that his wife went to high school in Linesville, and when she read the essay she figured out that Ray was probably the Ray she knew. Her Ray was alive and well and still living in the Linesville area.

As a writer, I was a bit disturbed by this turn of events. I was happy that my Ray (and hers) was alive, but what about the facts, the truth, in this essay? I began asking my friend questions, and he would run them by his wife and if she needed help answering them she would ask her sisters.

Did Ray play basketball? *Yes. He was his team's star.*
Was he sort of short for a basketball player? *Yes.*
Did Ray look Hispanic? *Yes, but he was Filipino.*

Ok, I thought. The bigger question — now that Ray appears to be alive and back in the world:

Did he go to Vietnam? *No.*

No? Now I'm wondering where I got this story about Ray? Did I make it up? Did we ever talk about Vietnam and draft numbers? I don't know for sure anymore. I do believe that a nonfiction essay ought to be as true as the author can write it. Memory is suspect, yes, and all things can't be researched and proven. But I don't like the feeling that I've made up such an important situation about Ray. I am certain that I played a game of basketball in the Linesville gym that summer, and the same guy I played drove by and told the choker chain guys that I was "ok."

I need to know what Ray's lottery number was. I was pretty specific about that important claim; maybe I weaseled when I wrote "I think Ray *told* me he was number two." Now, when so much of what I wrote and thought was accurate has been thrown to the winds of doubt, I'm forced to consider this. I don't remember any conversation with Ray. Even during the game I doubt that we said more than an occasional "nice shot." We

only "knew" each other for maybe thirty minutes — a game to 21. After the game we did not suddenly become good buddies who were going to chew the fat about our chances of going to Nam. That sounds crazy now. I'm sure I went back to where my "girlfriend" sat during the game and soon we left the gym. I'm pretty sure about this too: the game probably took place in the weeks before the lottery was held. When we played, there were probably no numbers but the score for us to be concerned with. *Probably* is a convenient word to a memoir writer. Now I ask if I found out what Ray's draft number was, how and when did it happen?

After the August morning when I found out my number, I hung around Linesville for a couple, maybe three more weeks. I saw my girlfriend a lot; we said tearful goodbyes I suppose, and I must have promised to come back sometime. I'm sure that I would have told her of my lucky draft number. Maybe she told me that Ray was not so lucky. Maybe. Maybe I did speak to Ray again after the lottery. Maybe.

I asked my friend to help me get in touch with Ray and so I have his address. If I can find out when his birthday is, I can look up his draft number. I don't think he will remember me, or the game we played. I don't suppose he's ever thought of me again, and I figure he will be surprised (and I hope not angered) that I took his life and used it in this essay without knowing all, or many, facts about him. If I do get in touch with him, if we do talk somehow, I don't know if I will record what I find out. Maybe this is the end. If there's a second Coda, then it's not. But really, how important is it that Ray did not go to Vietnam even if I thought he did? Lots of young boys went. What if he did not have a low number? Lots of young boys did. This essay is about me — me and the lottery and the Vietnam War. It's about my not going to Vietnam, about my being spared having to suffer through the worst historical event that happened to people, men and women, boys and girls, of my generation. I believed what I wrote here, years ago, to be true, and if I had not met a poet in a St. Augustine bar, I would still think that I had written a true account of what I thought happened to me — and to Ray. So I'm thinking that maybe Ray's number, his going or not going to Vietnam, doesn't really matter in this essay. His not going to Nam matters a great deal to him; it might be the major reason he's still alive, so I'm happy that I had that part of the story wrong. I'm not even sure how much my life matters to this essay. What if the essay, the important part, is more about Vietnam and what it

meant to America, to people like me, and what if the value, the measure of this essay is more how well written it is (if it is) and how well I've used these words to string together sentences to make some beauty, maybe some truth? If that's the measure of this essay, of any essay, then how much does it matter if what I've written is true?

Answer: it matters to me. It matters a lot. I believe in the Covenant — not the one between God and his Chosen People (not Americans) but between the nonfiction writer and the audience. I want to tell the truth as well as I can and create beauty too. I want to. I do. It's absolutely true that I stole that bacon and stared at that skunk. Honest. Believe me.

Coda II

Ray never answered my letter. What now?

Catherine Chandler

Wandering Thoughts

It's summer here, although my weather app
is set to Allentown, where it is noon
(not two) and snowing. Soon the overlap-
ping fullness of the waxing mirror-moon
will, from divergent latitudes, play out,
inspiring Yeatsian fever dreams of loss,
of apples, berries, moths, and silver trout,
beneath Polaris and the Southern Cross.

Then there's the one I love, who seems just fine —
Retired, single, buoyant as can be.
From what I've chanced to see of him online,
It's clear he's long since gotten over me.

Rather than the other way around,
It was I who needed to be found.

I R L

En Comala comprendí
Que al lugar donde has sido feliz
*No debieras tratar de volver.**

— *Joaquín Sabina* (from "Peces de ciudad")

Street View shows it's more or less the same.
Despite what I've been told,
the neighborhood appears quite tame —
the launderette
and deli as they were when I was twelve years old.

The question: to recall or to forget?
Ambivalent, I zoom
in closer, feeling vague regret,
till I can see
the double-block's high window to my favorite room.

But the narcissus and the climbing tree,
the asphalt ghetto-brick,
the front porch swing, the filigree
are gone.
I exit Google Maps with a reluctant *click*.

Reality's a foreign lexicon
now that I'm living here,
where caracaras hunt at dawn
and rheas roam
the fertile pampas of this austral hemisphere.

Yet there it was. My bliss. A fledgling poem
penned in the attic of
a Pennsylvania coal town home
whose saving grace
lay under common rafters ringing loud with love

that cannot be observed in cyberspace.

*Translation:

In Comala I realized
That you mustn't try to return
To the place where you've been happy.

Note: IRL, in Internet culture-speak, is an acronym for *In Real Life*, as opposed to online.

Terese Coe

Ballade for Long-Gone Ladies

Adapted from the French of François Villon

Tell me where, on what seas,
is beautiful Flora, the Roman?
Where Archipiades,
where is Thais, her cousin?
And the maven of brook and pond,
where is Echo, whose cheer
speaks to us from beyond?
And where are the snows long gone?

Wise Heloise is where?
For whose love Abelard,
her hermit monk in prayer,
wrote letters under guard.
Tell me, where is the queen
who sent Buridan to his dawn
drowning-sack in the Seine?
And where are the snows long gone?

Blanche, the lily queen,
whose voice was allure and bliss;
long-foot Bertha and keen
Alice, and Beatrice?
And Joan, the Maid of Lorraine —
my sovereign Virgin, where?
Burned for France at Rouen.
But where are the snows long gone?

This week do not sing the refrain,
do not ask again in song —
only one chorus remains:
where are the snows long gone?

The Labyrinth

Translated from the Spanish of Jorge Luis Borges

Even Zeus could not untangle the stone
webs that encircle me. I have forgotten
the men I was before, and dog the hated
path of monotonous walls that is my fate.
Vertical galleries that curve in hidden
circles to the end of years. Towers
cracked in the usury of the days.
I have deciphered signs I fear in the faded
dust. The air has borne a howl
through the concave evenings,
or the echo of desolate howling.
I know that in the shade there is the Other,
the one whose fate it is to drain the long
solitudes that weave and then unweave
this nether world,
and to long for my blood and to gorge
on my death. We each seek out the other.
If only this were the final day of waiting.

Remorse for Any Death

Translated from the Spanish of Jorge Luis Borges

Free in the end of both remembrance and hope,
boundless, having transcended, almost the future,
the dead is not a dead man: he is death.
Like the God of the mystics, for whom
we must abandon every theory,
the dead man, outsider everywhere,
is naught but the loss and voidness of the world.
We rob him of everything, we leave him
not one color, not one syllable: here
is the courtyard his eyes no longer share,
there the pavement where once he waited for hope.
Precisely what we are thinking, he may be thinking;
like thieves we have stolen away
the bounty of every night and every day.

Terese Coe

The Sea

Translated from the Spanish of Jorge Luis Borges

Long before dream (or terror) had woven
mythologies and cosmogonies, long
before time was coined in days, the sea,
the always sea, was and already had been.

Who is the sea? Who is that violent and
primordial being that gnaws at the columns
of the earth and is one and any number of seas
and chasm and sunlight, cutthroat and wind?

Whoever observes it sees it for the first time,
always. With the astonishment left behind
by the elemental, the dazzling evenings, the moon,

the cascading sparks of a bonfire. Who
is the sea, and who am I? On the day
that follows my final torment, I will know.

Galatea's Daughter

The hell his words could wreak

The way is an enigma
with precipices where
she sees the choice of life or death
observed through fog and air

where pain and blame resemble
a caravanserai
across the lands and oceans,
and every day a lie.

Deriding her and grinning
he turns her into clay
with *Either you will bend or break,*
or you will lose the way.

A month, and with his fettling knife,
a deadly undertow
drags her hollowness into him —
and she is free to go.

Terese Coe

High Falls

In the photo their eyes were closed, as if
the pleasure were more than they could bear

The left brain crosses over
and sees into the right,
where intuition's clever
and dominates the night.

Tomorrow and tomorrow
reverses like a sling
and promises an elbow,
the vestige of a wing.

It seems there was a sorrow.
It seems there was a slight.
The trouble is tomorrow
can blind you with its light.

A Hemisphere Away

for Katy, Susan, Terris, Keith, Richard,
James, and friends met in Kathmandu

From Swat to Santa Cruz
the seekers hit the road
with half-truths we could live
and others we'd explode.

From Santa Cruz to Swat
and halfway back to Rome
we seldom felt a knot
from the quondam thing called home.

We gained from what we gave,
we lost what we disused —
and slowly we *Let it go*
from Swat to Santa Cruz.

Some flogged woodblock prints
or clothing, silver, and jewels,
knelt with dedications,
taught English in country schools.

To souk and peak and dive,
trekking and camping rough,
we had to adapt to survive.
But going home was tough.

Andrew Frisardi

Early Riser

The dark is petaled, fleshy like a lily,
And dew is magnifying a dot of day,

When fingers pivot on an icy grip
To swing a door out from a rockface room,

As motes of thought too inchoate to say
Drift slantwise slowly on a draft of dreams,

While moulting light wheels back from far away
To flutter down like feathers at the arms,

And the creaking man-frame settles in its nook
To find a chair and board and an open book.

In a Renaissance Bishop's Garden

With swelling cupolas and cornucopias,
The hillside garden is a theme park for us
Still: an architectural thesaurus
Of body's dream of on-the-spot utopias.

Its fountains are a learned priest's creations,
As link by link they gurgle liquid chains
That coil into pools to sluice through veins
Of statues wet with spouts' ejaculations.

The sound of water: how describe it? Purl
And tinkle, lave and lap, lip-sync a song
Of shade in summer, when the light is long
And oyster-mind secretes a body-pearl.

The naiads in the water speak in tongues,
Baffling to anti-Babel gospel fire.
Their hefty haunches strain to push them higher
While tritons shimmy down the angel-rungs.

A stone boy laughs in plashes from a grotto
As if he's overheard a sober motto.

Andrew Frisardi

The Distance

Castiglione in Teverina, Spring 2020

Covid left us cold in the wake of winter.
Then the numbers, northward, vertiginally
Mounted. Storefronts shut. And the hours unrippled,
Pooled in our closing.

Teverina's trees were a pause in music,
Empty staves of branches that dripped piano
Interludes of silence. The Tiber Valley
Harmonized distance.

Painted rainbow *Ce la faremo* banners
Grinned in windows children had decorated.
Neighbors sang together in twilight choirs
Balconies lofted.

Held to household angles, we walked in circles.
Army trucks up north on the television
Solemnly disgorged the remains in churches
Morgues were disguised as.

Casalpusterlengo, Codogno, Lodi,
Lombardia, Bergamo, Terranova,
Castiglione d'Adda, Milano, Brescia:
Names that were falling.

August at the church of the Snowy Mary
We will feign a flurry amid the swelter,
Soapsuds blown out from a machine above us,
Laundering *afa*.

Sailing clouds will dock in the blue of morning:
Back at last in Italy, bliss of exiles,
Shelley said, so many are right at home in
Breaching the distance.

NOTE:
Ce la faremo = "We'll get through this," "We can do it," etc.
afa = hot, muggy air

Midge Goldberg

Arroyo

It's a dry year this year. In the arroyo
the sheep jostle their way down steep banks, low
— lower down than last year, thinks Ramirez —
to find water. He notices the mark
of last year's flood high up the sides. They trot
faster as they get closer — he hears the bell

of the sure-footed ram in front, the bell-
wether of the flock who owns the arroyo —
at least among the sheep, who clump and trot
behind. Arriving, the ram lets out a bellow —
a bleat being the sound of panic, a mark
of fear, and he fears nothing. At least Ramirez

thinks the ram fears nothing. Not like Ramirez,
who each day fears the clanging of the bell,
the gravelly rumble, snort, and roar that mark
a flood's rapid approach in the arroyo.
But no rain's coming and the water's low.
He should get a dog, he thinks, who'd trot

easily down the slope and make them trot
to safety with him. Evenings, as Ramirez
strolls through town relaxing, his dog would follow.
He likes the city — people, the church's bell
pealing, grand buildings. Not like the arroyo —
remote and dull, the opposite of landmark,

the place is an aside, a snide remark
in this translation of a life, a trot
instead of the real story: *The arroyo*
is burying the man who is Ramirez.
He likes this gloomy metaphor, the bell
tolling for him, he thinks, deep and low.

He stops outside the 7-11, low
on cigarettes. The dog would circle, mark
his territory, waiting for the bell
above the door that says it's time to trot
alongside this remarkable Ramirez,
lead the way back to the dry arroyo

that could flood at any moment, and trot
below high-water marks to guard Ramirez
from sheep, from bells, from flood and the arroyo.

Bernadette, On Playing Dolly on Broadway

So, sometimes I can't hit the highest notes.
That campy bit, pretending that I'm tired?
Yeah, sometimes I just need to catch my breath.
You'd never recognize this "Broadway star"
at ten a.m., hobbling around the room,
needing an hour to stand up, hit the john —
72 ain't 50, that's for sure.
Just think about your mother — who am I kidding,
your grandma doing shows six nights a week,
and twice on weekends. So yes, a dramatic pause…
can mean I'm pooped.
At noon, I take my limo
(though it's fun to think about the subway —
I'd wear a polyester jogging suit
and scarf and look like any other nonna)
and head down to the theater to get ready.
It takes a while to make me look this good.
But then it's time.
I ride on stage — that bit
with a horse — and then the audience notices me.
I have to stand there casually while they clap,
a minute, more — my hand raised in a wave.
Sometimes just for fun I'll wink at them,
so they know that I know they know it's me,
we're in on this — this thing, this show — together.
I guess that's one thing age can let me do,
own everything: the stage, the seats, the story,
the fourth wall too.
And what about the ghosts?
Carol, Ethel, Barbra, they're all here,
we all hear them, the audience and I.
Everyone out there brings their ghosts as well,
whoever played the record for them first.
The house I play to has a fifth wall, time,
and all the seats are taken every night —
I've found that ghosts can be the toughest critics.

So I'll just break the wall because I can
and play for laughs to get them on my side,
ignoring my creaks and quavers. The cast is young;

Midge Goldberg

I need these folks for company — we prop
each other up, whisper forgotten lines.
While everyone's together in this room,
we clap and laugh and cry and mug and sing —
we know we'll be alone when the curtain falls.

Florida, But Inland

I practiced pinball in the two-room clubhouse
at Hidden Lake the summer I was twelve.
We'd just moved to this complex east of town —
no lake, just asphalt and a laundry room.

I played alone until I met her — Shelley,
long hair, white-blond, which she wore loose, on purpose
(I didn't learn "tow-headed" until later).

She had a bike. Not a "bicycle," like mine —
a Schwinn, picked by my New York City parents,
who took me to a store where I was measured
for proper fit from saddle down to pedal —
but a "bike," from KMart, with a banana seat.

Shelley was bossy, also younger, but
she knew where we could ride to get a Slurpee,
the Seven-Eleven down Palm Avenue.
She told me about the Girls' Club as we passed,
which I thought was some kind of orphanage,
but with a pool, which made the girls seem lucky.
I wondered if she'd steal a candy bar
while we were there, or make me take a BlowPop;
instead she bought some gum — grape Bubbalicious,
something I was not allowed to have,
or so I thought. I bought some anyway.

On our way home, when I was turning into
the complex, left hand straight out, signaling,
I bumped a car's back fender with my tire.
I don't remember seeing her again
that summer—my own decision, I suppose,
to stay inside our air conditioned unit.
I'd never thought a girl might steal before.

Playing Along in Temple

> *A basket of multi-colored egg shakers*
> *sits next to the prayer books at the*
> *entrance with the sign, "Please take*
> *one and play along as we sing."*

The man who taps his egg to keep the beat,
not on the up beat, nothing syncopated,
just one after another, tap, tap, tap.

What is faith? That is faith.

The man who trips while walking to the bimah,
and doesn't see it as a metaphor.

What is faith? That is faith.

The man who sits and smiles as he sings,
his finger following along the text
though clearly he already knows the words.

What is faith? That is faith

or I'm imagining it all —
the faith, the fall, music, the man, the egg.

Charles Hughes

After Easter

April 2020

An infant died in March in Illinois,
Who'd tested positive for the disease
Here and now blindly raging.
Scheherazade, the oboe solo, sings
Lifting me free of my anxieties.
(We have an infant grandson.)
Music Appreciation, Monday nights,
Seven to ten, spring term. An earthy breeze
Finds barely open windows
And mingles with strains of *Scheherazade*
I'm hearing at eighteen, which makes time freeze
As if I were outside it.
"All shall be well." Words given to Julian
I read and read and read, looking for peace
Hidden within their promise.
The Resurrection is dissolving time —
So I would say. Visions and melodies
Burn through time's fabric, vanish.
A baby died! Still, sparks of beauty come —
From God, I'd say. I'd say, no less than these,
The horror feels immortal.

Charles Hughes

Two Butterflies for Chris

In memory of my sister Christina Ann Hughes,
a person with Down's syndrome (1969-2020)

Two sudden butterflies,
A yellow one, a white,
Their watercolor wings
Flailing the breeze — they rise
And fall in bell-shaped swings,
Then vanish into bright,
July, late-morning glare,
On their way silently,
Going to God knows where
But lingering with me —
Shy glories still intense,
In flight, bobbing and weaving
Across my memory,
Always arriving, leaving,
Indelible innocence.

Greg Huteson

Enter into Life

A cup of water for the one in hell.
Go with the cup to quench his thirst.
It's better for you to enter Life
salted with fire and sacrificed with salt.

Go with the cup in your two hands.
And if a hand offends you, cut it off.
Salted with fire and sacrificed with salt,
you'll enter maimed into Life, your reward.

If your hand offends you, cut it off.
Likewise, cut off your crooked foot
and enter Life crippled, your reward.
It's better than being cast into hell.

Cut off your foot if it offends you.
It's better to be cast into the sea
with impediments than into hell,
where the fire will never be quenched.

It's better to be cast into the sea
than to offend one of the little ones
who believe the fire will not be quenched
and the worms and maggots will not die.

Pluck out your eye if it offends you.
A cup of water for the one in hell
is the gift of a one-eyed man.
It's better, by far, to enter into Life.

Salted, partial and scorched,
but hobbling through freshets of joy.

Greg Huteson

The Store Room

1

It's dusk or seems so.
A lone white bulb is newly on,
revealing oddments and budget furniture.
Underneath, a white card table leans.
One end is draped with white
cleaning cloths. There's dust
on the spare, shadowed floor.

2

From right to left: a gray cabinet,
squat shelves, a pine desk,
a cork board. Pinned lightly on the cork,
there's a verse of Saint Paul's about heaven
and "Life is like a bowl of chocolates."
A tad more left is a dark-framed window.
Outside, a washer, a mop, an expanse of sky.

3

Near the desk, on a soiled dun cloth,
are a kettle and a clay pitcher
with a few droplets on its rim.
There's a flimsy ironing board
near a bagged black-and-red fan.
And a chunky dehumidifier mid-floor.
Streaks on one wall from a leaky AC.

A few steps in, the space is mainly shelves
and planks and cavities. Some for musty,
dusty thinkers' books, moldering facts,
analyses. And some for handier items.
Among them a spade, a tape measure,
a package from overseas. A canister
for tea, now empty. No last specks of green.

4

There's a desk lamp with a wood base
and a black shade. This is the lesser light.
For the ceiling bulb, there's a ladder.
The stashed umbrellas are dark, white,
and plaid, while silver pots and crockpots
are unboxed and dull in a dozen crannies,
set widely among the miscellany.

5

There's even a slot for octopuses.
Plastic hangers, turquoise, red,
and black, with twenty-four arms among them.
A notch below them is a toolbox, its pale
latch dangling. Lower still, an insulated bag
for carbonated drinks, saltwater
fish, and other watery, wavery things.

On the far wall
is a cream-colored wardrobe
for ruined spreads and ruined quilts
in whites and sickly yellows. Even
the mothballs are dry, brittle, bland.
Even the roaches are scraps, mere straw.
The mirror's a half-flattened moon.

6

Not quite imaged by the mirror
is a scaffolding of "like new" suitcases, brown
and black with consort blues, but dusty.
A compact khaki sleeping bag on top.
There's a cairn of lumpy pillows,
precariously aslant. And a spare door rests
in the corner, draped with a bright red cloth.

7

This store room, this sacristy,
is a tangle of devices
and sundry linens and lumber
and, yes, old plastic bags. Bags
within bags on the white tile
floor. The maranti door's half shut.
There's rest in these pistachio walls.

Becky Kennedy

The Swans

In the season of returning
to the clarity of winter,
in the morning, which will always
be the first morning without you,
a bar of white December sun
floats on the water slick with cold.
Feathered stillness, the cradles of
the wintering swans, pedaling
now, planing the water, and the
heavy climb. Daylight disappears
beneath the face of compacted
water; the shallow wingbeats lift
past the empty trees and sail the
wide, apparent sky, always the
first sky, which is the blue part of
water, which is where flying goes.

Jean L. Kreiling

Watching from the Passenger Seat at Night

It was a film noir sequence with a cast
of one: my mother stared ahead and gripped
the wheel, her profile grazed by lights we passed,
then veiled in shadow as they quickly slipped
behind us. Underneath a streetlamp's beam
for just a moment, half her chin and cheek
would glow, then darken, hinting at some scheme
or romance. Or she'd turn her head to seek
direction, and a billboard's floodlit glare
would flash half-threateningly across her eyes,
her once-maternal gaze assigned an air
of mystery. I'd barely recognize
what light and dark would draw and then erase:
a chiaroscuro, movie-worthy face.

Ovillejo: Vivace

after Louise Farrenc's Piano Quintet, op. 30, movement III

A rippling riff, a knot unwound,
the sound
of gravity swiftly undone,
of fun
that art aligns but no one tames
and games
that no one loses — custom names
this all vivace — lively, yes,
but also full of sly finesse:
the sound of fun and games.

Jean L. Kreiling

Staircase Stories

> *In the late nineteenth century, the sisters of Loretto Chapel in Santa Fe, New Mexico, maintained that St. Joseph himself had built the spiral staircase up to the choir loft. It "was innovative for the time . . . The staircase has two 360 degree turns and no visible means of support." "Staircase," https://www.lorettochapel.com/info/staircase*

I.

We look up to its art and mystery —
this staircase summoned by nine days of prayer,
steps leading to a place where piety
was sung, where chanting sanctified the air.
The nuns believed that their novenas brought
the nameless carpenter to them. More deft
than most, he toiled for weeks and never sought
remuneration. When the stranger left —
his staircase swirling skyward as if meant
to dance toward God — the sisters found no bill
and no trace of the man whom God had sent.
They called him saint, and through his selfless skill
we tourists learn that anonymity
may bless and heighten generosity.

II.

The staircase isn't really — as some claim —
a miracle, for any architect
can explicate the physics. But its fame
persists: the spiral rises to connect
with something past the highest step. Beyond
the ordinary work of carpentry
climbed faith, and though some say that we've been conned,
that there's been no defeat of gravity,
such doubters miss the shifting shape of things:
how painfully reality can twist
a soul, until its safest wanderings
wind artfully, in order to resist
despair, dodge sin, elude the base and mean —
a path miraculously serpentine.

III.

For years the staircase had no rail; it wound
from floor to choir loft — more than twenty feet —
with stark, uncluttered grace, its coil not bound
by any nod to caution. But its neat
geometry of midair curves unnerved
the nuns, some of whom anxiously ascended
on hands and knees. Though their faith never swerved,
the test was steep. And so the steps that wended
so sleekly toward salvation were enclosed
by balusters supporting arcs of wood
for striving hands to grip: a frame imposed
upon an arabesque, protecting good
intentions, making safe a holy space —
an emblem of the Savior's own embrace.

IV.

But God need not be found here. Reverence
can rise from heathen hearts; one need not pray
to grant profound respect to elegance,
devotion, and hard work. In Santa Fe,
art calls to us from churches, galleries,
and sidewalk stalls — in clay and silver, bare
adobe and bright fabrics, novelties
and relics, treasures commonplace and rare.
And when a sculpture or a handmade pot
or bracelet pleases us, it may well gain
in value if the seller shares the plot
behind its making. Sacred or profane,
the story of the staircase, bowl, or bangle
weaves life and art into a splendid tangle.

Dooms of Love

"my father moved through dooms of love . . ." — e. e. cummings

I'd found him downstairs in his workshop, wielding
a balky wrench; some tough nut wasn't yielding
to his strong arm. And suddenly he hurled
the wrench — about the last thing in the world
I thought he'd do. He'd always been so calm,
his six-foot frame a fortress of aplomb,
his shoulders broad and patient. When he turned
and saw me, what I saw was grief; it burned
in his blue eyes. Something beyond repair
had creased his brow and made his graying hair
look grayer; he himself appeared half-broken.
And then, so quietly he'd barely spoken,
my father muttered, "Kids'll break your heart."
No tool would fix this problem, no spare part.
He looked back toward the wrench, but let it lie,
then grinned at me. I wish I'd asked him why
he'd said those words, but I was just thirteen,
and rattled, and whatever they might mean,
he let that lie as well. He followed me
upstairs to lunch, and cheerfully
gave ear as four kids vied for his attention,
his laughter, his applause, his intervention
in crises. We knew he was on our side,
but now my sense of that was amplified.
I'd figured out that since our every win
and loss was his, what we took on the chin
bruised his jaw, too — and maybe his words meant
that he was doomed to suffer for us. Bent
by love, he still stood tall, his shoulders sagging
so rarely that his strength appeared unflagging —
but in his workshop, I think he'd confessed
how much it cost to carry what distressed
his kids. I don't know who had creased his brow
that day, and I don't know exactly how;
I don't know why he shared with me the ache
I heard in that confession — "Kids'll break
your heart." But once he did, I found more room
in my own heart. There is no finer doom.

Mary Cassatt's Mother and Child (1890)

i.m. John Heller

The painter never bore a child, but knew
just how it felt to hold this girl, and how
our eyes would hold her, how each painted cue
would light up her pale arms and sleep-flushed brow.
The mother's dress recedes into a blur;
blue smudges on the shelf were probably
fine china, but we don't care what they were.
All our attention is — can only be —
directed at the little girl. Cassatt
knew which details would matter, which would not:
she knew the texture of a toddler's skin
and how a small hand strokes a mother's chin.
She never would know motherhood, but knew
this moment, and ensured that we would, too.

(Online image at http://wichitaartmuseum.org/acm/detail.php?action=v&id=1286372571596751)

Aishani Majmudar

Lily

Lily of the valley,
Lily of the moon,
Lily of the plains,
Lily of my mood.

Amit Majmudar

Gift Books

for Aishani

A Queen bee is not born, but fed
Her crowning diet in her bed.
All bees, at birth, inherit toil.
The royal jelly makes the royal
And raises to the honeyed throne
A girl who might have been a drone.

And so I serve my Queen-to-be
The royal jelly, poetry,
And all the pollen of the field
That fragrant, ancient books can yield,
A hive where she will rule by feeding
On inksweet dynasties of reading.

Fragment from a Lost *Prometheus* of Sophocles

I slammed through double doors and double doors
and double doors and danced that bee swarm fire
down marble steps. What's with this fennel stalk
they're on about? Whoever carried fire
in that? The beggar's bowl of this cupped hand
was what I used to rush it down to earth.
It started out a spark no bigger than
a firefly. I blew and blew to keep it breathing.
It crackled up the flesh fuse of my arm.
Olympus, self-absorbed as ever, never
saw me burn alive. Thief in the night?
Agreed. But I put on a light show for them.

This eagle-beak evisceration's nothing.
I soaked in that burn-unit marsh while nursing
the fire that had put me there. This eagle
isn't the first bird to partake of me.
Hummingbirds sipped my blisters smaller.

Easy enough to get a human being's
attention. *Shiny shiny*! *Come and see!*
Tinfoil could have done the trick, or else
a pocket mirror tilted in the sun.
Shiny: the pink sheen of my half-healed burns.

I slit an ox at the neck and flank. They pressed
their faces to the wound and gnawed the way
they'd seen the mountain lions do. I told them:
No, cut a piece off, hold it over this first. *Then* chew.
I taught them candlemaking, too, and with it
the art of patience. Dip a stick in this stuff,
I said, and it's a torch. Can you say *torch*?
Grey wolves are terrified of these things. Here.

They thought the wick an orange orchid. More
than once I had to stop them tucking it
behind their ears. Perhaps I read a love
of beauty into simple vanity.
But Aphrodite loves a mirror, too.
A string you dip a couple hundred times
in a pot of wax. *This is how you get wise.*

The candle, tilted to another unlit wick:
And this is how you pass the wisdom on.
First metaphors. First inkling that a thing —
a body — isn't what it is at all.

To give them a use for that intimate light,
I taught them letters. These little marks, I said,
are yours now. Recombine them how you like.
Alpha, mu, iota, tau. Write your own name,
or a god's. Don't like it? Cross it out.
The letters have no right to stop you writing.

All this Olympian fuss over fire. That's just
the light they see. The word I smuggled out —
this *if* — was far more dangerous to Zeus
and all his ilk. If I had never filched
the fire, only taught them how to use
the gift of *if*, that single verbal spark
would burn them all to ashes. After *if*,
they could imagine things another way.
Their dream lives flickered on, eyelids aflutter
like curtains hiding two thrown-open windows,
jailbroken vision swimming with the current
down the river of the optic nerve. *If*
there were no gods, and *if* there were no fear,
no suffering, no hunger, *then* there would be

us and only us. Prometheus
foresees the justice. Burn, burn. Zeus is dust.
He chained me to this crag. Ah, feel that: Waves
explode, explode, explode. Rebellion weather!
Fake rain I never sang for patters down.
You want to know the name of Demogorgon's
mother, don't you? The one mare you can't mount?
Too late, you lech. The demos is the gorge.
My people, my pupils, will spear you with a spit
and cook and chew and swallow you the way
I taught them, first slash to your neck,
the second down your flank. I see this, I
forsee this. Hell, I hear your melted fat
spatter the cookfire like the spray of these
white waves that salt the meat of me immortal.

Insomnia

1.

Not thought. Heat lightning in the skull.
My mind, in neutral, revs
a mile from the cliff. A would-
be suicide, it lives

and lives. The living, enviably deadened,
plump in their sparrow fluff
on power lines with the power cut
have shut their chirping off.

They lie there at their nightly wakes,
resting in peace, the brain-
stem's stash of nightcap morphine
eased into a vein.

I used to swat at fireflies.
I chased them on the lawn.
They glowed one glow the whole time dying,
damaged into dawn.

2.

My eyes open with the sound of gates
slammed shut. I'm up, undead.
I pace the hall, my road of exile,
with clockwork-steady tread.

I pause a spell beside my wife
and marvel through a window,
divided from that kingdom I've
no hope of passing into.

I fall asleep but never stay
asleep, the cure-all slapped
away, that one sip all I get.
My time is strictly capped,
the magic sound until the stroke
of startled midnight, when
my coach and four regresses to
a four-post bed again.

I waft from room to room and watch
my children floating on
their backs, as peaceful as a wake,
downriver to the dawn.

The mind is its own arsonist
and dances in the night
around the fire it has set
by sitting down to write.

Amit Majmudar

December, Ohio

December, Ohio, and winter still
conspires in our burying —
this snow-white dark we name for air,
this gouge we call the harrowing.

Oxycontin breathes us, breeds us
heirs of old despair.
It circes churches into barns
in sterile disrepair.

One pill, two pill, three pill, four,
countless Ohioans count
the flicks of the Bic to cook a spoonful
down to a manic ounce.

The railroad crossing's overgrown.
The bars are never down.
A mile up these tracks, an engine
smokes into the ground.

Snow in the mouth, a smoking censer,
savors of mankind
as white pills crushed to powder make
a Christmas in the mind.

Our future is a skating rink,
a pale and pill-shaped oval
where long lost daughters lock their mittens
and orbit through the snowfall.

World's Worst Best Man

Bowtie, and wedding band, and cummerbund on me?
Nooses, my friend, in search of a Judas tree.

Will a true love knot, then, hoist me kicking off the ground?
Trust my rusty saw to cut you down.

Does rigor mortis give a married man that stoic look?
Even Marcus Aurelius bit the hook.

And when the wedding cake gets wheeled in on a gurney?
The biggest piece will go to your attorney.

Busking

When work runs late, and I race the bastard dusk
beneath the earth, I hear a guitar sometimes
calling me to the Green Line. It's an offset
cosmos over there, a tandem cohort
of commuters cursing the PowerPoint
that stole the evening. Since no one awaits me,
and since a long enough commute becomes
a home, I theseus that six-string out
into another life. The same twelve stops,
but all renamed: The world I know, transfigured.
The real weirdness on that Green Line platform
is how no one can hear this woman busking,
guitar case laid there like an opened ribcage.
Only the coins she's tossed in it are in it —
seed money, failing her in time of famine.
I try to meet her eyes, but she is gazing
beyond the Green Line, beyond the horizon.
In this religion that I once came up with
(I write them, then revise them back to nothing,
like poems) buskers were the best of omens,
a sacred class of holy beggars, there
to hurry transcendence like a grain of sugar
deep into our anthill, feeding all,
even the fools who push their earbuds snug.
What's paper money but a prayer flag?
I drop some in her case, her collection plate
to build the cloud cathedral of her body.
The Green Line shows up, drinks the people in,
and then it's only me and her a while
on this familiar unfamiliar platform,
acoustics perfect, like a monastery's,
the Green Line illuminated with the blues.

Gary Metheny

Fish Knife

Fishing was my father's meditation —
silently drifting in his small boat,
his mantra gently lapping
against its sides all morning.

In the afternoon, he would scale, gut,
and clean his catch with a pearl-handled
bowie knife, his fish knife he called it,
although it was a tool with many uses.

When he died, we included with his
obituary a photograph I took of him
holding up a prize largemouth bass,
knowing he would have approved.

Instead of having the fish mounted,
he had my mother pan fry it
that night for dinner to enjoy
with coleslaw, potato salad,
and buttered sweet corn on the cob.

I have the fish knife now, and although
my mantra is different from his,
I feel his energy run through it
when I put it to some good use,
and I sense his presence every time
I cast my line across still waters.

Gary Metheny

Shattered

When our 12-year-old nephew
accidentally shattered
the banker's lamp-green bell shade
of our vintage brass floor lamp
with one s

wing
of my Mickey Mantle baseball bat
and stood in silence,
stunned and mortified,
hanging his head, while his eyes
searched the floor for something
to say, I picked up the pieces
of broken glass and forgave him,
while assuring him
that everything was okay.

But since then,
the lamp has quietly stood in the attic,
its bare head bowed at the end
of its long, arching neck,
the empty socket of its only eye
staring blindly at the floor,
trying in vain to shed some light
on what it had done.

Richard Meyer

Black Hole

Darkness Visible, Finally: Astronomers Capture First Ever Image of a Black Hole (The New York Times, 10 April 2019)

Past swirling galaxies, through time and space
we searched, then finally glimpsed the great abyss —
a cyclopean eye that lacks a face,
and now it's looking looking back at us.

We squint and pry beyond the light year haze
to plumb the bottom of its mystery,
but it returns an ever darker gaze
beneath which blackness we can never see.

Surrounded by a flaming oval ring,
extinction's portal, vast and pitiless,
the gaping chasm swallows everything,
collapsing all to utter nothingness.

That dreadful eye, a black unblinking hole,
stares back, devoid of mind and heart and soul.

Richard Meyer

Conflagration

The gargoyles grin, engulfed in smoke and flame,
and turn their backs on ravaged Notre-Dame.
Not God's unbending will or Mary's grace
can spare the burning of this Gothic place.

A crowd looks on. Some murmur, gasp, or shout.
A few kneel down and pray the rosary.
The spire flares, then topples like a tree.
Rose windows shimmer, glow from inside out.
The roof collapses, crashes to the nave.
Slim buttresses hold up a limestone grave.
For TV news a prime catastrophe:
this medieval monument ablaze.

The fire halts. What can be saved they'll save
and build again on top of what survives.
We turn away, resume our little lives
upon the scaffold of these numbered days
where things are burning down in other ways.

David Middleton

Oxalis

South Louisiana

Midwinter here gives way to early spring
With February just begun,
The last freeze all but done,
And pink oxalis close to blossoming.

It likes the morning sun, then partial shade
Warm afternoons, each leaflet-stem
Wilting till light grows dim,
Unwrinkling when the petals fold and fade.

Great swathes spread wild on open pineland floors;
Clumps mound in lines by garden walls
Or where a pathway falls
Between the garden-gate- and threshold-doors.

In meadows, yards, it seeds the windy grass,
Long stalks soon flowering everywhere,
Thriving in earth and air —
Invasive beauty! — come to stay, then pass. . .

For hardy as it is, at times a pest
Attacks it: powdery mildew rots;
Smut, rust, and fungus-spots,
Leaf miners, spidery mites plague, infest.

And if the plant escapes insects, disease,
Late summer still will wither, bleach
Dark leaves as petals reach
Their end in autumn frost or winter freeze.

All this we know, as flowers cannot do,
And so we praise them while they stay,
Hoping till our last day
That seeing things in time will see us through.

David Middleton

Song

In brush when snowflakes cling
The winter wren will sing,
The burden of its song
How long, how long?

Come earliest in spring,
To dead oaks martins bring
The burden of their song,
How long, how long?

Mockingbirds in summer trees
Sing lifted melodies,
The burden of all song
How long, how long?

In fall, no more is heard . . .
Wren, martin, mockingbird
Unburdened of my song
How long, how long, how long?

My Father's Shop

— 'Has my lord dallied with poetry among the roses?'
Queen Guinevere

— The king's poet ached with belated verse;
he took part against himself

of Taliesin, whose name means 'radiant brow'

Charles Williams, *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944)

So many years . . . yet still I find you there
Pushing the pedal of your potter's wheel,
Shaping wet clay for the kiln's burning air —
Old elements that you could see and feel.

And from a lump well-turned arose a bowl
Or column, balanced, set, by thumb and palm,
Then bisque-fired, glazed, glaze-fired, and so made whole
By paint and flames that harden into calm.

You built that shop yourself — from slab to roof —
Detached from the house, your own place apart
Where you could dream, engaged, and yet aloof
As who and what you were emerged in art.

From boyhood through my teens at times I came
To watch you work till hand and eye would bind
Imagination, intellect — the same,
And you would sing the song of heart and mind.

Then in good time, I too sang, in my room,
Like Arthur's bard, of white knights, black despair
In adolescent poems of gloom and doom
And courtly love for blushing maidens fair.

And one such knight a well-born maiden wed
But in that bed where ice would glaze desire
Her passion took the form of formless dread,

His hands unskilled at bringing clay to fire.

And by my own rhyme broken I soon sought
A place where goodness, truth, and beauty met
In hands through which the whole man thought and wrought
And you, my father, shaping, singing yet.

You spoke, though hesitant, to your grown son
In that repressive Baptist atmosphere
About the art of love, and what is done,
The secrets of a craft at last made clear.

The craft was learned too late. The maiden fled,
Her cutting words a blessing and a curse,
The knight who bled forever on their bed
Nursing a wound whose healing made it worse.

Yet in that knight and bed a shaper lay
Who rose to work his verse through bisque and glaze,
Each deep-cut word steel-penned in tablet-clay,
His mind a kiln, his ways a potter's ways.

And like a potter when the wheel has turned
And kiln-doors open to a cooling shelf
With column, bowl, cracked or intact, he learned
That verse well-turned may turn against itself.

*

Father, your shop was torn down years ago —
And you long dead, and I not long to stay —
Yet both near Taliesin, brows aglow,
God's potters singing from and of the clay.

Peasant Girl Day-Dreaming

after the painting by Jean-François Millet (1814-1875)
1848, oil on panel

i

The distaff on her lap, the spindle dangling
Between her knees from a limp left arm,
The fingers all but ready to let go,
She cools bare feet on earth still undisturbed.

This is her special place to think and dream,
A settled talus boulder for her seat,
A wall of rocks moldering though it holds
The steady weight of elbow, hand, and chin.

Twin trees behind her long have taken root,
Their branches interweaving as they rise
Above green seedlings that can only grow
Stunted between the canopy and ground.

The woman is a shepherdess, her flock
Grazing somewhere nearby yet out of sight.
Her gaze is toward the one she would become.
The woolen threads she spins tell what she is.

Beyond the rocks, against a slate blue sky
A sun, pale as the clouds, is almost gone
Leaving behind a face still lost in light,
Not solar, but the dream-like light of dreams.

And there she stays, both other and the same,
Suspended in a soft and fluid glow,
Floating past resignation and regret
Toward husband, children, Paris, riches, fame

Then back, a warp and woof of fancy, fact,
No willowy figure with a low-cut blouse
Tight-corseted but a sturdy girl whose dress
Is loosely fitted, flowing like a robe.
ii

David Middleton

Her world is not Watteau's nor yet Millet's
Where gleaners gather up the fatal grain
But one in which her yearning still belongs
With distaff, spindle, sheepdog, staff, and sheep.

Her pensive sadness holds her, holds Millet,
Far from the clash of citizen and king,
The masses, troops, and bloody barricades,
That Paris he had fled for Barbizon.

And there, in fear, ill health, and poverty —
Rheumatic pain migrating joint to joint —
He came home to a place he'd never left,
Painting a light whose source is not the sun

But cheeks that bloom as the smooth brushstrokes dry
On panel made of heartwood by a man
Who like the girl through dreams could wander free
Or flower in the ruins of Arcady.

Lines in Advent

Through ordinary time we come again
To Advent and the waiting on a sign,
Kneeling in pews, then trying to prepare,
A burdened heart, the body of our sin
Brought low by our own choices, by design,
Our wonder in an attitude of prayer.

Night's watch fires burn far up above us there,
Appointed, named, and numbered sending beams
Down through the eons to a chancel wall
Whose colored glass, now cold in autumn air,
The pieces held in place by leaden seams,
Depicts a Christ beyond the cross and gall.

One hand has bread, the other wine for all
Who pray the prayer He taught us — heart and mind
Together and our will "Thy will be done" —
Redeemed at last from Adam and his fall,
The Way the only way for humankind,
The very blood and body of the Son.

And yet . . . before Communion has begun
The Words of Institution give me pause,
The mystery of *is* — like "Let there be"
And Christ the Vine, the Shepherd — coming undone
Inside a mind restless with place and cause,
The snake's disastrous as a part of me.

Outside, the stars keep burning, as they must,
Illumining the stained-glass grape and grain,
Shapes of the elements we take on trust
Though I trust too in lines of grace and pain
In which alone I feel at one with Him,
My cross to bear, my Star of Bethlehem.

First of the Final Things

How often do we try to turn away
From facing it: the plain, blank, simple fact
That none of us forgets — our own one death —
Even in sleep or some heroic act
That takes the breath away.

What lies beyond this world we cannot know
Though we may think, hope, yearn, surmise, and dream
This side as to the other side of death —
If such is even there — *where be and seem*
Might be both *like and so.*

And what could follow — Judgment, Heaven, Hell?
Waters of uncreation, pool and tide?
An endless nothingness past life and death?
Pischon in Lethe flowing deep and wide
Forever from the Well?

The stone no angel's hand has rolled away,
Fire-shadows on the wall of Plato's cave —
Things flickering and fixed, all stayed by death —
The screening images we make and crave
Have yet to show The Way.

Leslie Monsour

The Sloth

The mugginess had soaked us to our skin.
The man who brought the rental car was rude
And spoke a lazy Spanish with a grin.
We set out in a dilatory mood.

Our talk was idle: "I don't care . . ." "Perhaps . . ."
"Could you turn up the air conditioning?"
We swayed and bumped along, comparing maps
And routes, or drowsily envisioning

The might-have-beens of old or failed affairs,
Occasionally nodding off in twisting,
Ascending, and descending scenic lairs
With sudden rivers frothing through the misting

Volcanic chasms, glimpsed through missing planks
Of rusted, narrow, questionable bridges.
We passed the wild impatiens on the banks
Of moss along the road, the crimson ridges,

Tobacco-ruled, till something up ahead
Made us slam on the brakes. We met a sloth,
Unfairly named, midway, in arduous tread,
Its shabby shape, a hunk of burlap cloth

That groped the yellow line, the halfway point
Of where it had to go. Its chances poor,
It labored forward like a battered saint
Expecting pain, determined to ignore

The perils and the treachery of asphalt
And humans, heir to an instinctive code,
As several drivers coasted to a halt,
Intrigued by the enigma in the road.

Leslie Monsour

Doors swinging open, iPhone shutters snapping,
The eager paparazzi of the cloud
Forest emerged to marvel, almost clapping
At every inch of progress, sharing aloud

Their knowledge and surprise, advancing near
And commenting: “The two-toed ones attack.”
“Moths feed on algae growing in its fur.”
“It carries ecosystems on its back.”

The sloth, with solemn resolution, gained
The other side — the grasses and the grove
Of palms and rubber trees — while we remained
Pinned to the spot, watching the branches move.

White Christmas

I drove my father to the Desert Palms
Medical Plaza where we took a seat
In the air-conditioned waiting room, after
His name was added to the sign-in sheet.

Epiphany had passed, and still the fake
Tree blinked above the dummy Christmas gifts,
While palm trees decked the parking lot outside
Through windows stencil-sprayed with snowy drifts.

Some plastic evergreens were gathering dust
And fading on the sill. An orchestra
Over the intercom played standard tunes
Of peace on earth and fa la la la la.

While others in the room swiped at their phones,
We chose a magazine and leafed through news.
Something about a famed comedian's death
Prompted my dad to start in on the Jews.

I'd heard it all before, but even so,
Could not believe my ears. "Jews can't be trusted,"
He said. "They're always favoring their own."
"You're right, they're just like us," I hissed, disgusted,

Hoping no one had heard, then flipped the page to
Vacations in Japan, and, as I feared,
He muttered something else about the Japs.
How fitting when an Asian nurse appeared

In fiercely spotless polyester white
To lead my father back to Dr. Stein,
While *Walking in a winter wonderland*
Accompanied the cooling system's whine.

I studied the Potemkin Christmas scene
And almost laughed, because it was so sad:
The polyvinyl greens, the sprayed-on snow,
The empty gifts, good will towards men, my dad.

James B. Nicola

Other People

We are the Other People
and are here
where we have been
and yet shall be
Passed by in our small rooms and scattered graves for centuries.

We teach and are forgotten.
We sit with niece and nephew for their parents' dates;
sit at their nuptials too behind front rows.
We're the ones who need most to get drunk and we abstain,
to drive the others home.
We bring desserts and salads, never main courses, of fruit and
egg, a fortifying joke.
We are pall bearers too,
as alternate choices.

We've made fortunes in the New World, venturing forth
with herds of wagging men and wagoned women
suffering camps and boarding houses and dryasdust careers
at home or abroad as tutor, governess, librarian,
peddler, priest.
We tell a truth with humor, tempt with heart,
or torment with another way to see,
another way to be. At times we are
the Wicked City's ornery avatar;
at other times, the honest anodyne.

Journals we keep as well, and poems at times
are found upon our whispered deaths, to be
unearthed again perchance by one of note
who'll set one of the things into an aria,
the unmelodious rebirthed as lyric.
A solo hour, so sung, at last congeals
some decade or safe century beyond
into a brief, conspicuous community.

But most of the time we eat, sleep, work, breathe, stay
or amble, dissolving without issue:
More like the universe over-sped than blades of grass,
which sow another season.

I come from a long line of Other People
Though didn't know how I was to become one of them:
The mantle should not be inherited.
Now as my former friends and loves pass by with
carriages and lives
And as I call and find they've moved to larger digs,
or cannot come
For diapers, soccer, graduations — such good
friends we once were, too —
I fall into the Other People
Who dote on those we've known and lost
And you whom we shall never get to know.

Forgiving

You know what Hindus say: that we return
to make up for this life's ills and abuses;
the Western model, that we either burn,
or wait to move. So if the State of Grace is
the Kingdom of God toward which we strive,
it's coming, but seems never to arrive.

But other realms are worth the founding: To
Forgive, for one. Yourself as well as others.
Then, not need to, because the person you
become sees neighbors as sisters and brothers —
and, when the realm's frontiers swell to the seas,
not only neighbors but your enemies.

For that family comprises givers, takers,
bullies, victims, heroes who are hitters,
good-deed-doers who are really fakers,
the shat upon (forgive me) and the shitters;
those who are miserable — for no real reason,
their earthly circumstances being blessed
with riches —, neither moved by nor impressed,
if they even note, the changing of a season.

You've known —? Well I have been all the above,
forgave myself, then you, then learned to love
in such a way I don't need to forgive
so much now. It's as hard to understand
as to explain — like living in a land
remote from everything that I once was,
that coexists in the same continuum
of time and space, accessible because
you can leave the world of Was and Will — for Am,
the Kingdom that comes even while we live.

Athar C. Pavis

Dear Millennial

"The purpose of living," you ask, and "what's the point?"
It all seems useless to you looking forward
in instant algorithms, but it's after,
once you've weighed anchor, only from afar,
you see, the way the beveled cliffs of Dover
tower to their full height when you set sail.

I'm not a model, I have to admit.
I've turned down so many chances of living,
my house is cluttered with measuring cups a husband
gave me for Christmas, half of its windows
walled over in stone — what the French do
to lower their taxes. It's uncomfortable,

the questions you're asking, when the furniture
fills up the spaces that were once my own.
I'm not a role model, and I can tell you
things it wouldn't be good for you to hear,
the multiple selves I left disappointed
for you to bloom, how the sore heart pauses

because the mind it seeks is multitasking
each time I phone. It's true, I can't offer much,
the homilies successful people bring,
tweaking "commencements" to a grand rebirth —
their easy optimism is not my thing;
I know the beast that gnaws from underneath

remembering life before it has been lived,
time counted now against a drip-drop clock
no one can see.
                Nevertheless, I think
how the light filters through the balsam fir,
gliding to morning as the fog lifts off,
gilding horizons, blanching the grass —
nothing of what you loved once has been lost.

Athar C. Pavis

Only the gladness of an open heart,
wonder, the surprises that keep me alive,
blossom, that sweeter impulse to impart
something within to these ungentle shores —

a life, my dear millennial, that's yours.

Portrait of Peter

You were a loner, socially inept,
always saying the wrong thing to a woman —
something about a man's duty to protect
nobody wanted to hear. You told them

about your first million, desperate to attract
even a passing interest, and the time
you backed a makeshift upstart, your wild bet
to make PCs better than IBM.

You were a high-risk taker, so you said
to anyone who listened, but no one
at the Commonwealth Club, the place I'd found
for you to meet bright women — or someone —

gave you the time of day. I had you try
dancing lessons, hard workouts in the gym,
products to whiten teeth, and taught you how
Pride and Prejudice shows that what things seem

are not what they are. Years of non-fiction
had made you literate but too literal —
history you read — for truth — but missed the one
staring you in the face no one would tell —

how all these high opinions put them off.
But I liked the way, when I took your arm
it stiffened with authority, as if
entrusted with some sacred task you came

just in the nick of time to show the way.
You were a sucker for this kind of thing,
and women used it, you became the prey
of needy damsels needing everything —

a new apartment, TVs from Best Buy,
SelectQuote shares, even the family farm,
before I took your camera, so that I,
deleting pics, might keep it safe from them.
You must have given S. a half a million

and yet I could not bear to intervene —
you were in love, you thought, and this illusion
was quite enough — for you had never been.

Later they used to wait around the block
not to be seen by the Assisted Living —
women, though not an educated lot,
smelled opportunity. And so your giving

had to be stopped, but still you couldn't do it.
You took a Xanax first, then told me straight
these women came for money and you knew it —
but, after all, what else could one expect?

Who were you not to remedy an ill —
their motives were irrelevant, in fact,
and swallowing yet another Xanax pill
you added, disappointment of the heart

is what you'd lived with your entire life.
Depression's just the modern word for heartbreak,
in its rebuff, you said, the world was right —
something in you was flawed, misfit, a lack.

But I remember how on Alcatraz
you'd planned before its time a wandering moor,
the house you built all windowed to the skies
leaning to seaward its suburban shore.

Your dreams like mine once blowing to full sail
across vast oceans, beating on the wave,
the heave of time, the unforgiving swell —
and then I think the dreams we cannot save

define us best. So I remember you,
not in the anecdotal of a life
but in ambitions only the heart knew,
remembering yours to find them in myself.

Steven Peterson

Matisse After the Liberation

I didn't want to tell. He was my father
And I his only daughter, Marguerite.
Just after my escape I wrote him letters
Describing tortures I received as "hard
Interrogation," sparing him the truth.
France was being liberated. Why say more?

It took three months that fall for me to heal,
If one can ever heal. I never cried.
My father taught me to endure. I did.
That final winter of the war I travelled
South to his house and studio near Nice.
I owed him that — to show him I survived.

He wasn't well. He painted in a wheelchair.
Each afternoon we talked into the dusk;
I finally told him all the Nazis did.
At first he didn't speak. As usual,
He spoke in paint — his colors now looked bruised
And soon he stopped his painting altogether.

He turned to paper cutouts he had fashioned
When I was young. His colors lived again.
He turned, surprisingly, to that new chapel
Designed with his own Stations of the Cross
Where people worshipped as he never could.
I may be wrong. His art was his own way.

John Poch

The Shield of Aeneas

— No words can tell its power.

So Virgil's fatal anthem
glorifies the soldier
who holds (but cannot fathom)
the art before his shoulder.

He bows to Vulcan's violence
as he must. After the gore
always the peace, a silence
where boredom longs for war.

Or this reprieve where the God
of the forge can foretell Vandals
and Goths on the bronze façade
with his blowtorch and anvils,

the bloody Roman glory
for the illiterate.
The picture tells the story
of men. Consider it.

Begin with, blank as a clock,
the face. We start at twelve,
the mountain peak, a tock
is ticked and midnight felled

where God's own eagle plucks
the liver from the thief
of fire. The blood's the crux.
It falls like a red leaf.

But note this hero can-
not die. While others do
the dying for him, pan
across the carnage. Cue

the anti-heroes, emphatic
as Cain or Herod, obscene
as Rambo, cinematic,
produced by Harvey Weinstein.

When Abel's slain by fate,
we blame the blessèd given:
Adam's stupid fruit
of knowing . . . and then the women.

By three fifteen the Middle
East falls. Tears fall where laughter
rose. Barrel bombs riddle
Damascus: no answer after.

No nucleus in chaos,
the refugees now scatter,
the coyotes betray us,
and kings say what's the matter.

The wounded flee by boat
to Italy, Greece, or Ireland,
America where the redcoat
still believes the tyrant.

My father there in brambles
lost like Dante, warning
me through bad examples,
is he praying or just mourning?

The art upon the shield
is, we now realize,
our simple fears revealed
on gold we fantasize.

That doesn't mean it's fake.
Imagination can make
a world to undertake
the city, the faults, the quake.

So make an icon of
this aegis, upon its gleam
imagine scoring, the love
of a college football team.

Flip the remote control,
two lovers in the corner
abiding rock-n-roll,
the slow-dance to Foreigner.

If only all were enshrouded
within some monstrous Chevy
Bel Air interior, clouded,
the silver lining heavy.

But those affairs are merely
memories. Or Maud Gonne —
they never happened. Cavalierly,
you drank and skipped the prom.

So what can shock your rivals,
what picture would you show them
to terrify? Your idols,
a line from an ancient poem?

A military parade,
our modern golden calf.
This camouflage charade
as subtle as a giraffe.

War is a chameleon.
Don't call it homicide.
When death is by the million,
the truth is classified.

How could you not believe,
old friend, Iscariot?
The silver up your sleeve.
Some trust in the chariot.

At the hub of the wheel of the shield
an emptiness, the sea,
expanse of fear, until
the Statue of Liberty,

her verdigris and charm,
a certain slant of torch,
to the West her Eastern arm
invites all to the porch

of freedom. Done with the sea,
unlost, at least you hope.
Move inland, south, free,
where slavery's telescope

spies strangest fruit in the trees,
Atlanta's architecture
burned, half a million dead
to give the shield some texture

upon the lower edges.
The look of a beehive
smoking. Below, the pledge is:
We were not born to survive,

only to live: engraved
in English that no one behold
or grasp or know but the grave
and the god of the underworld.

These are the images
upon the shield, some gold,
some silver finishes,
some vague because foretold.

Why for the soldier a scene
in the first place? Why not
a shield as young and plain
as Helenor, whose plot

seems never finished, his end
we never see. Not so
with Lycus, his close friend:
three similes to show

his brutal death at the hands
of Turnus. He's a hare,
a swan, a lamb from the pens,
his mother bleating a prayer.

Some die anonymous,
some end up on a shield.
Some rage, some merely fuss,
some buried in a field.

All for the good. The art
is for Aeneas's pride.
Not to protect his heart,
but for the viewers outside:

this battlefield evil
who swings the pendulum
though it swings us, woeful
one way, or adrenaline.

Adopt the odd perspective
from just behind the shield,
and smell the blood, subjective,
the corpses in the field.

Embrace misfortune, twist
and know defensive power,
the hidden straps hold wrist
and arm, can't tell the hour,

for no such thing as time
exists for warriors
caught up, thrown down in their prime
in battle, glorious

in moments of the fight
where the shield makes shadow holy
and darkness is the light
or death. An old story:

love duty, not love, and pleasure
of slaughter well done. The dust
will be dusted and ashes treasure
the fire to come. They must.

Lift up your arms, Aeneas,
and worship Fate, your Lord.
Ruined, inspired by Venus,
move forward, draw your sword.

Zara Raab

Humboldt Co. Winter

California in the 1960s

To begin, the usual rain-soak,
turning the ground mud-thick
in the north-county bottom lands.
So a winter rain falls for a week.
Week follows week, till mountains
warm with rain begin to melt
and shed into the river gorges
filled with broken debris of bridges,
the bric-a-brac of railroad trellis.
Who doesn't know this element?
Streets and houses awash in silt.
Cracked pumps way before this
smearing spongy ground in grease
around the Esso, soon washed out.

Traveling from school in early June,
I pass the towns, house on house,
the builders' ore, pried loose,
wrenched and rusting liver-brown,
lumber strewn across the ruin
below a lonely crying mew
circling down the inlet.
I stay back, do not get out.
Narrow escape, drowning, rescue:
Beware of nature, warned a prophet.
A moonless night falls like velvet,
as if Earth did not know these cares,
mere human, mere "flood of tears."

Phoebes

Of our *fee-bree fee-bree* and the whispering winds,
you know zilch! Articulate fact
your realm, the exclusive reserve of truth
and lie, spoken there only. So you
philosophize. Falsity, Truth. . .

Words! Words! What matter, when we are?
You're born, you begin to walk, spend nights away.
One day you leave your habitat for good.
All this swaddling — the womb, the cradle, the cookhouse,
the sleeping dormer, *the coddling*. After that,
memory only repeats, repeats.

You utter strings and strings of syllables —
discuss, repeat, and speculate, discuss. . .
We know the peregrine and fox, a song
by us, fee-bree, would just call them over.
We go about our business, they, theirs.
They seize. *Fee-bree*, *fee-bree* the sole debate.

Alice, Wakefield Asylum, West Riding, 1853

If the asylum at Wakefield's a town,
you don't notice: the others come and go,
like Mr. Preston, once a Gomersal
shopkeeper, who assists the vicarage —
an honest man and well-liked — if
"completely, magnificently mad"
(he thinks that he's an old-world prophet).
He learns to play the violincello,
composes tunes and sets hymns to music.
Fiercely he guards his inner spark of god,
yet speaks kindly to all and labors hard,
while you, a lady, wake the others up
each night with cries that hang over the ward,
the mystery of madness incarnate.

The poor, driven from their old ways of life,
will take to drink, go mad. What drives Alice?
All here are poor but you, a well-bred girl,
so say the Reverend's copious notes:
Alice, a scholar's daughter, governess.
(English nobles have learned their French from you.)
Why are *you here*? The record's a blank page.
None speak for you, no one elaborates.
Without a doubt, though, some deep wound was dealt,
some hurt, or unrequited love, else why
this distress, this sealed refuge, this walled yard?
All day you wait and watch for clouds to drop
a pair of wings you'll don for flying off,
into the gentian skies of Riding? . . . Love!

The world's in need of love! — This lunatic
fallen to drink, or that worker who thinks
he's Christ, or the prophet called Elijah.
Did you, Alice, ever so much as touch
the tin drawer's deep-scarred face, a man
with many bairns, still young, who call for him?

Did you say kindly words to Mrs. Wrath
as you passed her in the ward's hall? Poor girl,
brought here straight from York Castle jail.

Mother to half-dozen little ones,
she held her seventh babe and strangled him
using the cord of her thin dressing gown.
Had you befriended her, she might have lived
though childless now, like you, beyond the year.

No friend comes to speak to you or Nurse.
None, through 20 years abiding here.
Yet inmates spoken well of — see how
the Reverend's written — all thrive,
whenever wife or sister come to call.
You're young, you'll live another twenty years.
Alice, if you must be crazy, do choose
delusions more amenable to those
who live next door. You might become divine,
blessed and simple — like Gomersal's Preston.
You must know you can't shout and punch your way,
insisting you're due the favors of rank.
Alice, knowing firsthand the wire that scours
the mind, I'd speak for you, oh, if I could —

Pony

Both my brother's wives were women our mother
    could not abide,
and because he was her first born, and smart,
    because she had yet to see
the full consequence of her tongue, she told him so
    in no uncertain terms:
he deserved better than he got — an older, experienced woman,
dressed in moo-moos like a brightly colored tank,
    a smoke on her lip.

    That didn't last long! The second wife,
if possible, was worse, as she went, my mother was sure of it,
with other men from the bar where she worked.

    No doubt our mother's rancor — her whole personality —
owed something to genetics, but I can't help thinking
the big black dog that bit her on the face when she was a kid
    had something to do with it.

Mother's grandfather, "Old Sam," had said to her father,
    "You stay here," while his siblings —
mother's uncles and aunts — went off, out of the valley.
    The valley had been good for the old man,
    but then Old Sam had come across the Plains
on a lively, roan-colored pony in the last century.
    At least he'd seen a bit of the country.

So Mother's father did as he was told —
    it was easier to stay than go, maybe —
Mother's father stayed, and raised a family,
    and so when the dog bit Mother on the face,
her father had to high-tail it over the hill, and from there,
    ride a dust-filled road to reach the Sherman place
where the doctor, a man who had once been a doctor,
    came back with him and staunched what he could of blood,
and lay her in the back seat of a borrowed car,
    driving a hundred miles to the nearest clinic.
There she stayed for months — she was terribly anemic —
    living at the house of a nurse in town.
In town!

Maybe this is what sealed the tight bond between her two sisters,
pushing her out, so when she finally did go back to the valley
the sisters cut her off, my mother, a girl who'd had a bit of luck.

Maybe my mother did feel special; maybe she bragged
of things she'd seen in the nurse's house, on the streets,
sidewalks, parks of the county seat.

Maybe it was this taste of town life,
or maybe it was the young men from the city
who came later to stay in the cabins her mother —
enterprising and careful always, with money —
had built by the river,
summer rentals, mostly for young couples, a few with children.

My mother talked once about her crush for one of the young
men,
But nothing came of it.
What did come was our father, brash, insistent,
handsome. She'd need that brashness to leave home,
crossing the coastal range for a new life — in town.

In town now! She was a town girl!

But she didn't fit in there, either. Not really.

So the bite of a big black dog, the chance to spend time in town,
the break with her sisters — all that, mixing with her DNA,
meant my mother not knowing better couldn't abide the girls
my brother, her first born, chose for wives.

My brother lost the second wife, too, and she came to thrive
in that town, re-marry, own a bar, a house.
He got on well with his dogs, though — big black labs he kept
in his tiny back yard.

Yasmine Beverly Rana

Dance the Orange

Characters: Sara (*Early-Mid-Forties*)
Kevin (*Late-Thirties*)

Setting: *The Studio Museum of Harlem, New York City*

Time: *Late afternoon*

Stanley Whitney's painting Dance the Orange is magnified upstage. A bench is placed downstage. Museum visitors Sara and Kevin consider this vibrant work of art.

KEVIN: You missed the crowd.

SARA: Good. I prefer it this way.

KEVIN: I do too. Are you a fan?

SARA: I'm becoming one.

KEVIN: You didn't know of Stanley Whitney's work before?

SARA: Not the way I should have.

KEVIN: What's changed?

SARA: (*Gestures to painting*) This.

KEVIN: It's quite a painting. There are other paintings in the show.

SARA: I know. They're wonderful and vibrant, but this . . . I don't know. I read about it a few weeks ago and had to see it.

KEVIN: Is this your first time here?

SARA: Only my second.

KEVIN: The show's closing today.

SARA: Do you work for the Studio Museum of Harlem?

KEVIN: (*Laughs*) No.

SARA: Are you a painter?

KEVIN: No.

SARA: A patron, then.

KEVIN: A neighborhood patron, yes.

SARA: It's a great neighborhood.

KEVIN: That's why I live here.

SARA: I had wanted to come earlier, but . . .

KEVIN: You were too busy.

SARA: I hate that excuse. I hear it from friends and colleagues when I ask them if they've read that book that got a glorious review or seen that exhibit written up in *The New Yorker*.

KEVIN: Maybe they are too busy.

SARA: Posting Facebook comments or Tweets or Instagram pics? They have time for that, but not for *this?*

KEVIN: You're not a fan of social media?

SARA: I'd rather have this.

KEVIN: You could have both. Sort of. Kind of. Oh, maybe not. People waste their time.

SARA: I was waiting to come here with someone.

KEVIN: But he or she was too busy.

SARA: No; he just didn't want to come with me.

KEVIN: Hm. Sounds like a waste of time.

SARA: I can't say that. I should say that. Maybe I don't care anymore, so I frankly don't know what he is.

KEVIN: He couldn't *Dance the Orange*.

SARA: That's what it was!

KEVIN: I know.

SARA: How do you know?

KEVIN: Because there are two kinds of people: those who can do the dance and those who can't. He can't. I'm sorry. I shouldn't assume. I don't know you; I don't know him.

SARA: You know enough.

KEVIN: I was too personal. I apologize.

SARA: No. You're exactly right. He wouldn't take the risk.

KEVIN: And you would?

SARA: Yes, I would. I did. I still would. What exactly is the risk?

KEVIN: Paint what you want. Large and bright, with absolute abandon, with complete disregard to what anyone else is doing, as long as it's you.

SARA: He couldn't do that.

KEVIN: Then he couldn't *Dance the Orange*.

SARA: How do **you** do the dance?

KEVIN: Not like this. Not like Stanley Whitney or Rilke.

SARA: I bought the *Sonnets to Orpheus* after reading about this exhibit. I was on the subway, turning the pages until I found the words. I wanted to share those words with someone else, with him, which I did. Then I wanted to share this painting, this moment, with him.

KEVIN: Which you didn't.

SARA: But I did with a stranger.

KEVIN: (*Checks phone*) You still have another half-hour until closing. Maybe he'll show up.

SARA: I don't think he will. Did you come here with someone?

KEVIN: No.

SARA: Why not?

KEVIN: I'm selfish for wanting this painting for myself.

SARA: I've intruded.

KEVIN: I don't mind. Actually, I did want to share this, but I couldn't. What did your non-dancer say when he read the poem?

SARA: Firstly, he didn't read it; I read it to him. Secondly, he's not really "mine" at all.

KEVIN: Now I see.

SARA: What do you see?

KEVIN: The one who wouldn't take the risk and do the dance. You picked the wrong person.

SARA: No, he picked the wrong person. I'm not like that.

KEVIN: Like what?

SARA: Someone who's hidden. A secret, to be kept in the dark. Without an identity. I wasn't the girlfriend or even a friend. I don't know what I was. "The thing on the side?" No one?

KEVIN: Then don't be.

SARA: Who did you want to share this with?

KEVIN: My students.

SARA: What do you teach?

KEVIN: High school English. Public school.

SARA: That's altruistic.

KEVIN: It's futile.

SARA: It isn't.

KEVIN: I wanted to take my students to this exhibit. And do you know what my principal told me, or rather asked me, "Why?" That's what he said. "Why? Our test scores are low. So, what good will it do? "No one's going to be a painter, a real artist," so what good will it do? Why waste everyone's time taking them to a museum when you should be packing your class of thirty-eight students into a computer lab with five working computers so you could practice for an unfair test written by people living in another world who don't know your kids or their lives at all! When their parents are working three jobs, how else do they get to see art? See this? But I'm not an art teacher, and even if I were, it wouldn't matter because my school doesn't offer art classes anymore, because we need to spend our days clicking A, B or C. No art. No poetry. None of it. So again, what good would it do?

SARA: It's everything.

KEVIN: To us.

SARA: What will you do?

KEVIN: Leave.

SARA: You can't.

KEVIN: Why not?

SARA: Your students need you.

KEVIN: I don't know if I have anything left to give.

SARA: There's always something left to give.

KEVIN: At whose loss?

SARA: Why does anyone have to lose?

KEVIN: Wouldn't it be ideal if no one lost? If no one "underperformed"? If no one failed? Look at yourself.

SARA: What have I lost?

KEVIN: Something. Someone. You're waiting for someone, a life that will never be yours. That's a loss.

SARA: I'm not waiting for him.

KEVIN: You are.

SARA: Not anymore.

KEVIN: Do you believe that?

SARA: You're angry.

KEVIN: I am.

SARA: You hate what you do.

KEVIN: I really don't.

SARA: You wish you had . . . more.

KEVIN: It was never about the "more," the more respect, the more money. It should have been; it would have been easier for me if it had been. But I thought I could do something, something tangible, something not just for the present, but for the future. I can't even teach what I want to teach, what I think I need to teach. Not if it's not on the test. "What good would it do?"

SARA: Don't quit.

KEVIN: Maybe I'll go back to school, get further in debt. Study technology.

SARA: No. you won't.

KEVIN: You don't know.

SARA: I don't, but I think I know people like us.

KEVIN: Who are people like us?

SARA (*Gestures to Dance the Orange*): That!

KEVIN: Nothing. Ten years into this futility. Ten years of Mondays telling my students about my weekend visits to the paintings they can't see.

SARA: They can through you.

KEVIN: Second-hand knowledge.

SARA: What I know about the world is second-hand. He used to tell me about it: his travels to places I had wanted to work.

KEVIN: And you haven't?

SARA: No.

KEVIN: But you sound like someone who has.

SARA: Do I? That's second-hand knowledge for you.

KEVIN: Is that what you wanted from him? Adventure stories? Sound bites?

SARA: It sounds as if I did.

KEVIN: Go and tell your own.

SARA: As a social worker from a cubicle in a non-profit office in midtown?

KEVIN: Then from somewhere else.

SARA: Where?

KEVIN: Anywhere you've been curious to see. Curious to be.

SARA: It hasn't been for nothing.

KEVIN (*Stands before the painting*): Stanley Whitney had this. And what will I have to show?

Sara removes a copy of Ranier Maria Rilke's **Sonnets to Orpheus** *from her bag and proceeds to read aloud.*

SARA: Dance the orange. Who can forget it,
the way it fights, drowning itself,
against its sweetness. You've possessed it.
Its deliciousness has entered you.

Dance the orange. Fling the warmer
landscape out from you, so the ripe fruit may glow
in its native breezes! Aglow yourselves, peel

perfume from perfume! Create a kinship
with the pure, reluctant rind,
with the juice that fills the happy fruit!

Kevin turns to Sara who closes the book.

End of Play

Rainer Maria Rilke translated by Susan McLean

The Gazelle

Gazella dorcas

Enchanted one, how can the accord of two
selected words achieve the rhyme that now
comes and goes in you as if on cue?
Both lyre and leaves are rising from your brow,

and everything of yours already flows
in simile through love songs, whose words lie
as light on one's lids as petals of a rose,
when one no longer reading shuts his eyes

to see you there, carried away, as though
each limb were loaded with leaping, and delays
from firing just so long as the neck upholds

the head to listen, as when one who bathes
in the forest pauses, suddenly stopped cold,
the lake reflected in her sharp-turned face.

The Solitary

No: a tower shall rise within my heart
and at its upper edge I'll be installed —
where nothing else exists, once more the hurt
and the unsayable, once more the world.

Another thing alone in the immense,
becoming dark and then illuminated,
another final, yearning countenance
banished into the never-to-be-sated,

another most remote and stony face,
responsive to its inner gravity,
while vastnesses that kill it silently
compel it on to ever greater bliss.

Roman Fountain

Borghese

Two basins, one that rises from the other
out of an ancient marble cistern's round,
and water gently bending from the upper
to water that below it, waiting, stands,

which mutely meets its gentle whispering,
and, as it were, in cupped hands, secretly
shows it the sky behind the greenery
and darkness, like an unfamiliar thing;

it spreads out calmly in its lovely bowl,
not feeling homesick, circle upon circle,
just sometimes dreamily, trickle by trickle,

settling down the mossy hangings to
the final mirror, making its basin smile
gently from below as it slips through.

The Balcony

Naples

Arranged as by a portraitist up there
from the constriction of the balcony,
and tightly bound as if in a bouquet
of aging oval countenances, clear
at evening, they look more ideal, more
moving, as if like that eternally.

These sisters, who are propped on one another,
who seem as though from far away they yearn
for one another without hope, and lean
their lonelinesses, one upon the other;

and then the solemn silence of the brother,
who's self-contained and full of destiny,
yet for an unobtrusive moment, he
reveals an unseen likeness to the mother;

and in between, drawn out and moribund,
not for a long time kin to anyone,
unreachable, the mask of an old crone,
held up, as if in falling, by one hand;

meanwhile, a second hand, more withered yet,
as if it were continuing to slide,
hangs down before the woman's dress, beside

the countenance of the young child,
who is the last of them, attempted, faded,
crossed out again by bars of the balustrade,
as if still undefined, as if still not.

Portrait of My Father in His Youth

Dream in the eyes. The brow as if in touch
with something far away. Enormous youth,
unsmiling captivation in the mouth;
before the full-dress ornamental trim
of the slim aristocratic uniform,
the saber's basket hilt and both hands, which
wait, calmly, not impelled by urgency.
And now almost unseen, as if they'd be
the first to fade, the distance in their grip.
And all the rest self-camouflaged and shrouded,
effaced as if we didn't understand,
and from within its own depths, deeply clouded —.

You swiftly vanishing daguerreotype
in my more slowly disappearing hands.

Ben P. Robertson

Late-Night Standoff

He had me cornered. I cowered in the bathtub, droplets of water left over from my shower a couple of hours earlier soaking into the shoulder of my t-shirt as I leaned uneasily against the cheap plastic tub insert near the showerhead. The clear plastic curtain hung limply to the left — a flimsy shield — and I held the white plastic laundry hamper to the right to protect my bare legs and other, more tender, parts. He had caught me in my underwear, and I felt all the more vulnerable as a result.

I tried not to return the gaze of those angry blue eyes that glared at me with hugely dilated pupils. *I have to keep an eye on him*, I thought, *in case he springs for me. But if I meet his gaze too much, he may see that as a threat*. As I stood there pondering what percentage of eye contact might work best to keep him calm and protect my tender flesh from violence, it occurred to me all too clearly that I had no way to escape. He was between me and the only door in the bathroom.

I considered various alternatives to get out of my predicament, but all of them involved considerable risk if he felt threatened enough. I could try to slide past him to the left, ever so slowly, but I'd have to move closer to him. I could jump out of the tub and make a run for it. After all, I needed to make it only six feet — maybe seven — but any sudden move most assuredly would send him into another panicked frenzy that could leave me bloody. I could even upend the laundry hamper and try to clap it down over him long enough to make it to the door, but if my first attempt didn't work, I'd be in deeper trouble. I considered using my still-damp bath towel for the same purpose, but he might not even let me reach the hook where it dangled. Besides, his claws and teeth could go through the towel.

He had me at his mercy, and as I stood there feeling helpless, I wondered how long this standoff might last. He could keep me here for hours — all night, even. No one else was in the house, so I couldn't call for help, and my cell phone was about fifteen feet away in the bedroom. I couldn't even reach out to anyone electronically. It was around this point that the irrational part of my mind decided to be heard. *You're going to die here*, it said.

He'll slash you until you bleed to death or he'll keep you here until you starve. You might even lose an eye! I could see my own clear, gelatinous cornea parting to let the claws pass through effortlessly. I imagined news headlines about the professor who was killed in his own bathroom. Or starved to death trying to outwait a predator. Maybe Brian would find the body when he arrived for the weekend. Do the cats have enough food to last until then so that they won't be tempted to eat my remains? No, I'd have to extricate myself somehow. I had gotten myself into this situation alone and had to get myself out of it.

To my embarrassment, it was my own fault that I found myself in this standoff. Lying in bed a few minutes earlier, I had heard a clattering noise in the bathroom. Without even looking, I knew he was the culprit, and I was delighted that he had come out of his hiding place. He had been hiding in the laundry room behind the water heater all day. I'd been worried about him and had checked on him many times throughout the day. Each time, my glance was met with a hard, unblinking stare even though I was careful to make quiet noises when I approached so he wouldn't be startled and even though I spoke to him in what I hoped was a soothing, nonthreatening tone. Of course, he didn't understand my language, and my own large size — compared to him — must have been terrifying looming from the sky.

I sprang from the bed, careful to make as little noise as possible, and took two paces to the bathroom door to see the gray fur of his rump poking out from behind the cabinet. I'd been right; he was loose in the house again, and the clattering noise was his attempt to open the locked cat door that led into the back yard. How did he know the cat door was an exit? He'd probably never seen one anywhere else. Maybe he could see a glimmer of moonlight through the clear plastic flap, or maybe he detected some of the familiar myriad odors of my back yard. Regardless, he knew that freedom lay in that direction.

Excellent, I thought. *I've got him now!* I had decided finally to set him free, but as long as he was hiding behind the water heater, I couldn't get him out the door. He'd been in the house for a week and a half, but I had kept him confined to the other bathroom for all but the last two days. The network camera I had placed on the edge of the bathtub let me keep an eye on him without having to open the door and scare him. When the lights were off, the infrared lights on the camera revealed two intense, shining eyes staring into the dark from the depths of the plastic

carrier that held my guest. He must have slept at some point during those few days — he had to have — but I never saw him close his eyes. This guy was serious, and he had no intention of being caught unawares.

To be honest, I was lucky that he had chosen to go into the carrier of his own accord. I had used a trap to catch him, baiting it on successive nights with treats that I thought would tantalize his sense of smell. This guy was so wily, though, that he virtually ignored the best I had to offer. He fell into my trap only after hunger goaded him into it on the fifth night. I've caught other such creatures, but it usually takes only one attempt. This guy, on the other hand, actually had entered the trap repeatedly. I had watched him go in long enough to get a big bite of my carefully curated bait before backing out to chew (a little) and swallow his prize with impunity. *How dare he?* I thought. I was almost offended that he had the nerve and dexterity to carry out such a heist. My trap was being robbed!

Finally, I walked away from my secret vantage point, expecting to see an empty trap with no bait in the morning, but the next day, there he was. At some point, he had made a mistake, a miscalculation. He had stepped on the pressure plate and tripped the spring. He was mine!

My first step was to call the vet's office. Could they do surgery on short notice? Would they be able to neuter this angry creature today? I couldn't have him breeding in my neighborhood. Already, there were too many of his kind prowling around the streets, sometimes climbing the fence into my back yard to steal my cats' food or to pick a fight with them. My smallest cat, Lily, had charged at him on several occasions, prompting him to flee each time, but he kept returning to the sweet temptation of the cat food. I had even caught him napping in one of the chairs on the porch and on the warm electric pad I kept outside for the cats during cold nights. This guy wasn't just visiting.

Why didn't you just kill him? you ask. I didn't have a gun, and I wasn't willing to use poison. Besides, he was a living creature and had as much right to life as anyone else. He hadn't actually hurt anyone or anything, and my two larger outdoor cats, Ernie and Charlie, basically ignored him. He wasn't violent; otherwise, he would have received very different treatment. As it was, I had no desire to hurt him any more that I do the "little brown people," as I call the deer in the woods near my house, or the bright yellow-, red-, and black-ringed king snake that tried to get

in my back door one evening as he tried to escape from Lily, who glared at him with a look in her eyes that suggested she had just seen something supremely obscene and offensive. However, I had no qualms about curbing my prisoner's reproductive abilities.

The vet's office was open, and yes, they could do the surgery immediately. I thrust the prisoner, still in the trap, into the trunk of my car and took him for a ride. A surprisingly short time later, the vet's assistant called to tell me to come pick up my guest. Hereafter, he would not be creating any little clones of himself.

When I brought him home, I decided to keep him for a few days. A period of inactivity would work in his favor as he recovered from the involuntary surgery, and I had hopes that I might be able to make friends with him. After all, he had been hanging around my house every night for almost five months. *If he's not leaving and isn't violent, I might as well try to befriend him*, I thought, so I set the still-occupied trap on the floor, released the latch, and closed the bathroom door.

My guest stayed there for nine days. I left a camera in the room so I could check on him. I put my cat carrier in the room with a nice bed inside, and to my surprise, he went into it immediately — probably because it was dark inside and felt safer. I could then remove the trap, which he probably associated with the panic he must have felt when he had tripped its mechanism. I gave him food and water, and I cleaned the mess when he used the bathtub as a toilet. The smell was awful, but I was delighted when he stopped resisting his urges to relieve himself. I even gave him a litter box to use, although he had no idea what it was. When I cleaned his messes in the bathtub, I put the excrement in the litter box, hoping that he would understand that it was meant for that very purpose. To his credit, after nearly a week in the room, this wily creature finally understood the function of the litter box, and from then onward, he used it instead of the tub.

I checked on him several times a day, talked soothingly to him, and allowed my friendlier cats into the room so he could see that there were other small animals who didn't find me too objectionable. They were very little help. They would come into the room, stare at the guest for a few seconds, eat some of his food, and walk away, bored. I sometimes sat on the floor in the room, ignoring the guest so that he could see that I wasn't a threat. I even left the door open a few times and lay on the carpet in the hallway, still mostly ignoring him while my ever-curious cats came to see what I was doing.

After seeing that he had used the litter box several times, I decided to let my guest explore other rooms in the house. He came out of the bathroom only when it was quiet — mostly at night since he essentially was nocturnal anyway. He hid behind a bookcase one day for several hours until I partially unloaded the shelves and moved the furniture away from the wall to extricate him. And today, he had spent the entire time behind the water heater.

When I heard the clatter in the bathroom near my bed, I was happy that he had come out of his hiding place, and I was doubly happy because that bathroom had a cat door set into the wall about eight inches from the floor. It led into the back yard. *That's* how I would release him back into the wild. I promptly closed the bathroom door so he couldn't come back out and get into any other inaccessible nook where I couldn't pry him loose.

Then I realized I had another problem. The cat door was locked. It stayed locked all the time. As much as I would like to give my cats the ability to come and go as they please, I have no desire unknowingly to admit wild animals like the very guest I was hoping to free this evening. I also had no desire for the outdoor cats to bring their favorite "toys" — snakes, shrews, lizards, spiders — into the house, alive or dead. For more than ten years — since I've lived in the house, in fact — the cat door has remained unused for these reasons. Instead, I have served my cats as valet, opening the human doors for them countless times each day. They merely ask to come in or go out, and I hop to the door to carry out their wishes. Meanwhile, the plastic flap on the door that was actually designed for cats to use independently remains securely, and ironically, fastened, and it can be unlocked only from inside the house.

To unlock the cat door, I'd have to go inside the bathroom — inside the confined space — with my scared, untamed guest. For eleven days, he had rebuffed my attempts to make friends, and the one time I had come within inches of his nose while offering a tasty snack, he had tried to strike me. At least he had stopped growling at me after the first couple of days, and with this fact in mind, I stupidly opened the door and walked into the bathroom wearing nothing but at t-shirt and underwear. Even more stupidly, I closed the door behind me.

His reaction was instantaneous. He bounced — like a ping-pong ball, like a ball in a pinball machine — from one part of the room to the other. He bounced from the floor to the shelves to

the walls to the ceiling and back to the shelves in quick succession, knocking the two pictures from the wall, overturning toiletries, and littering the floor with clean sheets and other loose objects that had been stored neatly.

I quickly grabbed the clothes hamper and used it as a shield, holding it between him and me when he came close enough to do any damage. He finally came to rest on the top shelf of a small shelving unit to my right, after I froze just inside the door, now holding the clothes hamper firmly to protect the lower half of my body.

At this point, a smart person probably would have backed out of the room. In my own defense, I did consider it, but the confusion had left me in a position in which I would have to move *toward* my guest about a foot before being able to get through the door frame. He was only three feet from me anyway, so I decided that instead of trying to flee and risking another outburst from him, I would slide to my left toward the cat door and get into the bathtub. I hoped this might calm him since I would be moving away from him rather than toward him to get out the door. I could not have been more wrong.

Once again, his reaction was instantaneous. By the time I froze in the bathtub with the laundry hamper still held before my lower half as a shield, he had knocked over several other items and crouched on the counter growling at me, prepared to strike. However, I'd had the presence of mind to bend down and unlock the cat door as I moved the agonizing six feet across the room, trying to minimize my movements and any noise while he continued to panic.

I'd done it. The cat door was unlocked. The plastic flap moved freely. He could exit on his own. All I had to do was get out of the room.

It was only now that I fully realized how stupid I had been to enter such a confined space with him. He had me cornered. He didn't think of himself as a guest the way I did; he was a prisoner, and he was in a fight for his life. He was on the counter, roughly between me and the door, and he had no intention of letting me move. He countered each movement I made with a menacing growl, and those intense blue eyes never wavered.

As I stood there pondering how I'd probably lived a long-enough life, I realized that getting out of this situation was entirely in my hands. My guest wouldn't let me move toward him to escape, and he certainly wasn't going to move toward me to get to the cat door. It was a stalemate.

Gingerly, not meeting his glare too much, I leaned over far enough to reach into my clothes-hamper shield and pull out my dirty jeans. At the very least, I would have that much protection for my lower half. I balanced my shield on the bathtub's edge and carefully wriggled into the pants, sopping up some of the leftover water droplets in the bottom of the tub with the legs. Then I just stood there. It seemed that there was plenty of time for me to contemplate my situation, and admittedly, I was perplexed as to what to do next. This could last a while.

Moments later, I noticed that the bathroom door wasn't closed all the way. Either I hadn't gotten it to latch, or in his ping-pong movements my guest had hit the handle and opened it. Either way, I could see a narrow opening that gave me hope. If I had to make a mad rush for the door, its being unlatched would speed my progress by a few milliseconds, possibly saving precious millimeters of my vulnerable flesh from my guest's assault. Or my guest might notice that the door was open and flee in that direction. However, neither one of us made a move. In a sense, we were both cornered.

We waited only a short time, punctuated by the occasional growl, before I heard a familiar scratching sound. Bennie — the largest cat in my herd, the cat who never goes outside — was at the door, and he wanted to know what was happening.

It's important to understand that Bennie hates doors. Well, Bennie hates *closed* doors. A closed door is an affront to his feline sense of dignity and independence. If I close the door to the bedroom, for example, he yowls plaintively as if he has lost his best friend. For once, I was very happy that Bennie hates closed doors because as I watched from my bathtub confinement, he pulled the door open a few inches and stuck his small, pink-and-black nose into the room. The nose was followed promptly by the rest of his large, furry, white self as he came to investigate what had caused such a commotion in his domain.

My guest was not scared of my cats, and Bennie was no exception. I did worry that Bennie wouldn't be a match for the wild creature that held me at bay if a fight started, but I was more hopeful that Bennie's presence might actually calm him. Ignoring the intruder, Bennie came to see what I was doing in the tub, which he likes (when it's dry) almost as much as he hates closed doors. He even stood to place his front paws on the closed toilet lid so that I could reach from my plastic prison to scratch the top of his head a few times in greeting.

My chance of escape would get no better than it was at that moment. Bennie had distracted the guest, who was now watch-

ing the interaction between the cat and me. Taking advantage of the situation, I carefully slipped out of the bathtub, still holding my shield protectively, and made it slowly to the door. My guest was not happy and threw a few more growls and hostile glares in my direction, but Bennie had managed to diffuse the situation enough to let me escape. He followed me out the door, which I closed, leaving our guest alone in the bathroom.

Moments later, I opened the door just enough to place my network camera on the shelf to watch the guest. He growled at me again but stayed mostly still, only slinking into the cool embrace of the white porcelain sink as I pulled my arm out of the crack and closed the door. I watched him through the feed on my tablet computer until he finally gathered enough courage to come down from the cabinet and try the cat door once more. As he slipped into the night, leaving me with a wrecked bathroom to clean, I thought, *He'll be back.*

Robert B. Shaw

Muscle Man

The child wasn't scared of skeletons.
They looked easy to kick apart; they had
nothing to see or smell with; they could only
go on grinning with their silly teeth.
But on a nearby page of his big children's
gateway book designed for future doctors,
there was a character that proved disturbing
enough to give him nightmares now and then.
"Muscle Man" he called it, sensibly:
a vivid anatomical illustration
of a man with skin removed to show
all of his muscles as they clung to one
of those unscary skeletons and made it
a form to flinch at.

For intent observers,
there comes a point at which monstrosity,
without giving up strangeness, grows familiar.
Poring over the image periodically,
the boy could not have said when, in his mind,
the thing got dignified by pronoun slippage —
quite soon, though, "he" had muscled "it" aside.
And this made Muscle Man, if anything,
even more creepy. Everything about him
repelled: the muscles' bulgings and striations,
their swathing of the shape like some organic
mummy wraps, or (was it?) rubber bands,
gathered in sheaves, stretched taut from head to toe.
The color was a kind of grayish-pink
(the boy would think disgustedly of earthworms).
Unlike a skeleton's, this hairless head
had two eyes looking out of it. At *him*.
No one could look more naked (after all,
somewhere, out of the picture, thankfully,
all three layers of skin had been shucked off).
Some smaller pictures in the margins showed him
using himself — swinging a sledge hammer,
plying a shovel, bending a bow. He looked

like someone sent from an unfriendly planet,
engaged in staging gruesome parodies.
Who'd want to meet him? The boy felt relief
each time he closed the book on him; and each
time he opened it he felt a sense
of clamminess when coming near that page.
His visits to the image petered out
once he moved on to books with denser text
and pictures that were plainly not totemic.

For reasons well beyond his fixed aversion,
he became something different from a doctor
when he grew up. As just another patient,
over the years he put out of his mind
the flayed, intimidating bogy-figure
until he tore first one, and then his other
rotator cuff, and couldn't lift his arms
above his shoulders without stifling
a yell that just as well could be a curse.
Talk about the return of the repressed . . .
Muscle Man wasn't any more appealing
to him in retrospect, but he could see
that any muscles that might give him grief
were no one's but his own, so long neglected,
paying back insults now beneath his skin.

Devices

In '40s movies that our parents watched
this was a standard scene: an empty room,
which someone had just left or not yet entered,
and on the table a black telephone
ringing away with no one to pick up.
A plot device to send lives off the rails:
She will not learn that he is still alive.
He will not know that she's forgiven him.
She will assume he's gone for good to Burma.
He will believe her parents have succeeded
in poisoning her mind against his pleadings.
The phone stops ringing. News does not get through.
They and all others doomed by such bad timing
head for the wars or marry the wrong people,
and end up suffering for most of the film.

That black phone with its black snake of a cord
(one thinks of Henry Ford's first Model Ts:
"Any color they want as long as it's black")
updated earlier calamitous
miscarriages of tidings: lagging couriers
leaving Romeo and Juliet
to blunder through sequential suicides;
as well as countless intercepted letters
destroyed through malice or possessiveness,
adding an easy poignancy to novels
(novels, of course, from when we still wrote letters).

But now these tragedies of happenstance
are lost to us. Shrunk and minus its cord
the phone goes with us now, snug in a pocket,
vibrating as though with its own pulse.
There is no way for us to miss connection,
no way to evade it if we wished.
The good and bad news find us where we are;
the old excuse of being uninformed,
however tempting, can't now be believed.
Breakups happen, but the couples trade
remote reproaches while they walk through airports,
make their own mess without the folderol
of interfering relatives conspiring.

We got so tired of being out of the loop
we've made the loop our daily route to plod.
Can it be phones feel free without their cords?
How free do we feel, tied to our devices
which are different, but not different enough
from what the Prayer Book, soberly probing, calls
the devices and desires of our hearts?

Around the Block

Why must I always be the first to show
my face at any meeting, party, dinner?
Tired of being everyone's precursor,
I park a good way down the street from where
this evening's hosts are no doubt occupied
with pulling plates and bottles out of cupboards,
or mounding salted nuts in little bowls,
or any of the chores they'd rather not
be tied up in just when I ring the doorbell.
It's a big enough block to stroll around
in order to arrive on time, not early.
As I pace around one corner, then a second,
the slowly gentrifying neighborhood
reminds me of the one my first few years
were spent in, although that one, unlike this,
was headed down, not up, and none too slowly.
There are the same Victorian mansard houses,
some better kept than others, and the same
postage-stamp yards with sparse platoons of grass
and stoic trees, new leaves dusty already.
No one is out: they must be at their tables.

Now that I've turned the corner I must look
over my shoulder to see the sunset deepen,
pink tensing to an operatic orange,
courtesy, perhaps, of some pollution.
Even with that gigantic flare behind me,
my body throws no shadow I can see . . .
This is one of those times I feel that time
is growing porous, this place now providing
a serviceable replica of my
pre-kindergarten mise-en-scène . . . where am I?
A sound comes from a house I'm just approaching —
a stubborn window grudging its way up —
and there, framed in that upstairs corner lookout,
an older woman peers impassively,
gaze fixed not on me but on the sunset.
My grandmother used to sit like that each evening,
giving the sinking sun appreciation
for a few quiet moments, staying sometimes

until the twilight overtook the sky.
Just as I tell myself I shouldn't stare,
the woman introduces a false note
by lifting to her lips a cigarette.
Grandma never, ever smoked, of course.
(She made me promise: if I ever smoked,
I wouldn't smoke in bed. I gave my word.)

Eyes turned to the sidewalk, I pick up
my pace as sentences in counterpoint
scratch out a pointless rut of inner protest:
This isn't all that *much like Philadelphia.*
The trees there stood taller, and the street
had to be wider (room for the trolley rails).
It would be warmer there this time of year.
And the air had its own damp rusty smell . . .

I thought I'd come too early, but it feels
as though I've come too late. I check my watch.
Another corner: one more after that
and I should be where I should be on time.
And sunset maybe will have burnt itself out.

Hilary Sideris

Liberty Wash

She hauls the bags onto a scale,
speaks Yoruba on her cell.

Our English interrupts, tells her
to write, *No fabric softener.*

Yesterday we set the clocks
in our too-small apartment back.

It's dark in five-pm Flatbush.
Our English says we're in a rush

to swipe our cards, take an Uber.
Between washers & dryers

her children fall down, laugh.
We drop our whites & colors off.

Forza Roma

Your team lost,
so you give me shit
about my accent,

think out loud —
a stream of *stronzos*
fills the afternoon.

I've never known
the kind of love
for my home squad

that brings you
grief & makes
you practice faith.

You can't bear even
to name the town
that won — *Che te*

interessa? I don't
ask again. I bet
it's a bella citta'

dove si mangia
bene, better maybe
than in Rome.

J.D. Smith

Laying Siege

The city would fall
in a day of hard fighting,
The thickest walls breached,
the gates rammed to splinters.
The troops could be rendered
dog-pickings and pike-fruit,
The rest soon dispatched
or made concubine, slave
Driven far from their gods,
farther still from each other,
Their language extinguished
like slight, unfed flames,
Their goods seized or pissed on,
the garden-plots salted,
Their banners made tinder
or wiped in latrines,
Their remnant herds slaughtered
and turned on great spits.

Every stone could be taken
from column and mortar,
Left for the sappers
to lengthen our roads.
In a fortnight the palace
could be shorn from the landscape
That travelers and traders
making way to live cities
Might wonder why flat land
by a river lies vacant.

If this kind of victory
in itself is sufficient,
Its completeness — perfection —
can bridle its power.
There's no making of legends
without some kind of witness

To tell and retell
    our great deeds and small doings,
Make their fame multiply
    like flocks on lush land.
Since mothers must frighten
    bad children with monsters,
And monsters must bear names,
    let that name be ours

As we spent a whole season
    in setting up war camp
Supplied from the capital
    and most of the provinces,
Let more seasons draw close
    the routine camp followers,
Tent taverns and brothels,
    stage players and bards,
All policed by our soldiers
    and bound by our laws,
A town overshadowing
    the town to be taken,
Its envoys turned back
    by blizzard-thick volleys,
While we turned lumber
    to storehouses, engines,
Throwers of great bolts
    with tips sharp or flaming,
Catapults primed to lift
    great stones, every missile —
a bloated horse carcass,
    a pot of tar bubbling —
In volleys or single,
    but mostly by lot,
Confounding the watches
    of morning and night.
Just as random go sorties
    by scouts and outriders
Who at times reach the walls
    to unnerve their defenders
And like them, will fall — be let fall —
    but their bodies recovered
To hallow our fighting
    with vengeance, with names.

In a week, in a year
comes the foregone conclusion.
Though the capital lacks
neither trophies nor captives —
The crowds have shown boredom
at the latest parades —
In the far outlands
that trade with mixed coinage
Our spoils will show forth
as a lantern of power
And cast its long shadow
on the next town to take,
Magnified by our prisoners'
shouting and wailing
As long as their being
justifies their short rations.

Nomads and raiders
may come for our riches
But they'll be roughly met
and tossed on far middens
Like rags spent and shredded
to burnish our prowess.
Our legions fast swollen
by the dread of far peoples,
We might seize whole kingdoms
by reaching their outposts
And raising fresh flags,
showing the coinage
To be rendered in tribute
and whose face defines it,
Leaving a regiment
to hold our fresh conquests.
We might then imagine
somehow greater triumphs.
If rescuers approach
they must rise up to meet us.
Where will they draw water?
How long dare they wait?

J.D. Smith

Romesco

I am eating romesco sauce, simply
"romesco" to those in the know
like foodies and hipsters (they overlap)
and peoples of the Iberian Peninsula,
who account for 1.2 percent of my genome,
according to the spit-in-the tube test,
and none of our family lore.

I hadn't even heard of romesco,
to be familiar, until the age of forty
because, as fellow native Thom Jones
said in "The Pugilist at Rest,"
"I had grown up in Aurora, Illinois,
and had never heard of such things,"
but I would learn of romesco
from the woman I would marry
(aka Ms. Wonderful)
who, though no more Iberian than me,
had learned to make her own.

In this way and others I married up
as men seldom do and now
find myself eating romesco
on crusty bread, a perhaps-redundant choice
because her recipe calls for breadcrumbs
and I start to wonder why
I'm wondering about this
instead of how to repair the world
(Tikkun Olam, friends)
or at least reduce neighborhood litter.

While I taste charred and sweet red peppers,
almonds, oil, the aforementioned breadcrumbs
and think of how those parts make up
a larger whole, like marriage,
boreal forests dry and beetle-ravaged, burn.
Borders tremble under the weight of untold crossings.
(And whither, by the way, my country?)
Knowing this, I also know
anything short of a renunciation

like that of Saint Francis —
who started out as a rich kid
with a whole lot to renounce —
will fail to move the needle
or, to mix metaphors, nudge the structures
that, to mix again, lock in so much devastation.
Such a turn would alarm my creditors
and my wife (aka Ms. Wonderful)
who signed up for nothing of the sort,
and this bourgeois sacrifice would still
do nothing to bring back my parents
so I am still here, with romesco,
crusty bread, my wife (aka Ms. Wonderful)
and wine I once couldn't have imagined.

In spite of knowing what I can't un-know
of what prevails beyond our slight walls
I am called by the Golden Mean, the Middle Path,
the wisdom of the ages by any other any name,
to relish this abundance so long as it does not
discomfit the pets or increase others' suffering,
to savor oil and acid, taking on my tongue
like a sacrament the roughness of ground nuts and crumbs
while Greenland melts and republics self-immolate.

What the hell?

J.D. Smith

Funeral

Dad's ashes now join Mom's inside the double urn,
On either side our flowers and those from friends
Reminded of their fast-approaching turn.
We may not see them once the service ends.

A sermon's made to hold his four-score years.
A song is sung about a country road.
A eulogy is tried but stopped by tears.
A flag unfolded, folded, is bestowed.

The last on which our lives were shaped now cracked
Beyond repair, we're left to wonder how
To navigate a world of orphan fact,
Pretending we can be the grown-ups now.

Outside, a truck downshifts into a curve.
The world goes on. It has a lot of nerve.

Newspapers

I started with, if not Neil Armstrong, then
The naked, napalmed girl and Watergate
And helicopter flights to follow when
Old centers failed, and I would graduate
To features, columns, in-depth analysis,
Reviews and editorials — a range
Ensuring there was little that I'd miss
In touring realms that I would surely change.

I stop at headlines now, as others steer
The ship of state — into a reef, I dread —
But for this current and indefinite spell
A mortgage must be paid, and deadlines near.
I set the pages down and leave the dead
To bury their dead, if not us as well.

The Thing In Itself

1. Let us consider the thing in itself.
2. Not the thing as we are accustomed to seeing it through filters of habit.
3. Not as symbol for some other thing — thing in a sense of the word that also includes an idea, an ideal, or a reality potentially found in some dimension or dimensions not perceptible by our senses and the tools we use to extend them, dimensions such as those posited in string theory and other theologies. And definitely a thing in the more common and tangible sense suggested in the grammatical trinity of the noun as "person, place or thing" consisting of molecules and possessing mass and volume.
4. Nor let us consider the thing only as a collection of other things, whether in their own time and place or as precursors to or components of some other thing, which likewise can be considered in another time or place, at its own level of aggregation, with a lens of higher or lower resolution, ad infinitum.
5. Each lens could as well be a considered a separate thing.
6. Least of all should the thing be considered in a primarily instrumental light, as a means to getting or making some other thing. Questioning that approach, of course, is hardly original. The task has been undertaken by thinkers such as Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant or John Ralston Saul who are more often cited than read, whether by real or self-styled intellectuals. Instrumental rationality nonetheless deserves further examination — "interrogation" as *au courant* academics might say — because it is both ascendant and ubiquitous, a mental artifact deployed unthinkingly, more an atmosphere or habitat than a consciously chosen world view. We are again reminded of Keynes' assertion "Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist." Asked to describe this atmosphere of default assumptions, most of us would have the same difficulty as we would in describing the air, as a polyglot dolphin or unprecedentedly sentient fish might have in describing water.
7. Let us consider then, as best we can, the thing in itself.
8. What thing, then?
9. Anything will do. A wealth of choices — i.e., everything — is available.

10. In Chinese "the ten thousand things" refers to the inventory of all that is, the catalog or inventory of the things of this world.
11. This errs on the low side. Cities, armies and flocks can easily number ten thousand members, and then one considers counting their more numerous tack and gear. (As The Fixx reminded us in 1983, one thing leads to another.)
12. Yet ten thousand (10,000, 10^4) seems more than adequate to convey the idea of plenitude, a multitude, a great deal, a lot, unless we are considering a quantity of more or less identical things, like dollars or bushels of grain. Our hunter-gatherer brains cannot necessarily encompass such a quantity, or more, of different things. Saying 10,237, or twenty thousand, is unlikely to imply a greater sense of abundance; the higher number cited cannot further impress a saturated mind.
13. Likewise, while at least fifty times as many species of beetle have been described, to say "the five hundred thousand things" lacks poetry and risks pedantry.
14. In college, drunk on a high opinion of my own wit and capacity for transgression, and on one or another type of rotgut, I solemnly posited that any quantity greater than ten thousand should be called "a shitload." (Not to be confused with a "buttload," which has mistakenly been attributed with scatological connotations. It derives from an antiquated unit of measurement applied to casks. A butt —derived from a medieval French and Italian meaning "boot"— is 108 Imperial gallons, about 130 U.S. gallons, or two hogsheads.) This was in the days before I had to support myself, whereupon I learned the hard way that ten thousand plus one dollars doth not a shitload make.
15. That the world at large failed to adopt my locution now seems fortunate. One probably does not want to hear about a monk being distracted from his meditation by the shitload of things.
16. Ten thousand times ten thousand is the stuff that dreams and federal budgets are made of, and perhaps but a rounding error in the macro and micro scales of cosmology and molecular physics, depending on the thing considered.
17. That most anything can offer itself for consideration represents a silver lining in the cloud of unknowing and in the low-lying fogs of forgetting or being tongue-tied. To refer to a quantity unknown by its proper name to someone, if not

necessarily the speaker, is to partake in the innocence — and the confusion — of a prehistoric ancestor, or a toddler.

18. From the primordial ooze of "thing" arise — *inter alia* — animal, mineral, vegetable, earth, wind, fire, water, artifact, concept.
19. Yet vagueness can serve to remind us of the limits of knowledge. *The Thing from Another World* (1951) takes as it subject a hulking anthropomorphic creature whose tissue traces turn out to be, under microscopic examination, plant matter. Taxonomies failing, one must call it all one knows with certainty, a thing. How a large and cellulosic life form manages to move, let alone survive in the Arctic waste surrounding an exploratory station, is never explained. Nor is the source of that entity's urge to kill. Sometimes disbelief must not only be suspended, but also battered like a piñata.
20. In another drama of northern latitudes, Hamlet explains the appearance of his father's ghost by telling Horatio, "There are more things on heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy."
21. Changing poles and premises, John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), a loose adaptation of the earlier film, casts an even wider net of ambiguity. The eponymous entity goes unseen and, like a virus, displays no vitality outside of the host it possesses and transforms. When one of its victims is decapitated by desperate crew members, the head sprouts arachnid legs and continues to menace the survivors; as in the original, the limits of invertebrate load-bearing must be ignored.
22. This is not the only thing the staff of the Antarctic research station have to worry about; the breakdown of trust and burgeoning paranoia among the isolated crew pose as much of a threat as the thing itself, and likewise work through their hosts. Considering when the film was made, it can be viewed as an allegory of what Europeans often call the Second Cold War.
23. In another film whose name I cannot recall, a crew of gangsters — not necessarily one of the more articulate professions — refer to their upcoming contract killing as "a whole thing." (The term for a fractional or superabundant thing goes unspecified.)
24. What the phrase lacks in denotative clarity, though, is more than made up for in connotative richness.
25. Entire languages — to take a ubiquitous category of thing — emphasize one or another quality. English possesses a vast

lexicon containing a large number of precise and nuanced terms, more than a few from other languages. Spanish, on the other hand, has at first glance a smaller lexicon but a great many words with multiple meanings according to context and adjacent phrasing. The verb pasar ("to pass") and its variations across parts of speech easily fill several columns of a dictionary in small type.)

26. Likewise, criminal argot—the only kind of argot that seems to come up for discussion—suffices for its users. No differently than doctors, economists and literary theorists, criminals use language to hide meaning from outsiders while efficiently sharing it among themselves. That knowledge "puffeth up" like any other, though, and its possession can be mistaken for the arbiter of all other things. No matter how much ink is spilled and how many words are spoken in the name of inclusiveness, the need to include oneself and exclude others seems deeply rooted in the human condition.
27. The invisible velvet rope can be set anywhere. In a particularly colorful (read "divey") burrito place in my hometown of Aurora, Illinois, a late-night diner of uncertain sobriety and no visible means of support was once heard to tell another patron "You don't speak Spanish — you are *nothing*" (of which more below).
28. We look for fences until we can find one that places us on the "right" side. Hence, much as dogs sniff each others' hindquarters, in a less necessary and more obnoxious ritual small talk in certain East Coast social settings almost invariably includes the question "Where did you go to school?"
29. The thing that makes one something rather than nothing often represents some vague desideratum or inchoate notion, as it was for the judge who said he knew pornography when saw it.
30. Who gets to determine or claim ownership of an essential if elusive quality can be a matter of contention, particularly in defense against appropriation. To wit, the locution "It's a Black thing," occasionally expanded to "It's a Black thing — you wouldn't understand."
31. For an outsider, interpreting this expression in the world at large can pose difficulties. During the 1990s I was one of a very small number of Whites who attended a speech by Louis Farrakhan at Northern Illinois University. There I saw a young African-American woman, presumably a student, wearing sweatpants with a backside bearing the slogan "It's a Black

Thing." Should this wardrobe selection be interpreted as:

a. an expression of ethnic identity and cultural pride;
b. a knowing wink of double entendre;
c. an unambiguous attempt to promote in-group assortative mating;
d. self-objectification mirroring the larger hierarchies of race, class and gender, where ultimately the oppressed comes to think in the terms of the oppressor and courts attention on the basis of that valuation;
e. all of the above; or
f. a lack of alternatives until laundry day?

32. To say "It's a White thing" is generally unnecessary, and as a joke it falls flat. As the dominant culture is White, cultural phenomena are assumed to be White unless otherwise indicated; linguistically, Whiteness is the "unmarked" condition. Thus John Singer Sargent is not known as a White painter, nor John Updike as a White author. Most film directors are not known as chroniclers of the White experience. One is hard-pressed to name a director analogous to Spike Lee, but as a chronicler of the White experience.
33. If every identifiable or self-identified group has its own thing and/or things, then one can reasonably paraphrase Christ's words as "By their things ye shall know them."
34. The following tangent calls for a disclaimer. As noted of Italian-Americans in a preamble to some cuts of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, the vast majority of the Italian-American community are law-abiding, hard-working citizens who contribute to society and should not be conflated with the generally larcenous and sometimes murderous subset of that community that is about to be depicted. The same was done for Cuban-Americans in Brian de Palma's 1983 version of *Scarface*.
35. Vast majorities, though, do not necessarily make for good movies. Larceny and murder have far greater cinematic potential than punching a clock and paying taxes.
36. But back to the digression. In an episode of *The Sopranos*, soldier and aspiring made man Christopher Moltisanti invokes the need to defend the dignity of "Our Thing."
37. In the days when Italian-Americans were more likely to be bilingual, the Kefauver Hearings were conducted by senators whose names generally did not end with a pronounced vowel. They asked questions along the lines of "Are you now or have you ever been a member of La Cosa Nostra," ("our thing" or "the thing of ours") intoning the capital letters, em-

phasizing the consonants and flattening the vowels in a way that identified the speaker as an outsider who did not know enough to use the phrase offhandedly.

38. It would never be *his* thing.
39. The pronunciation must have occasioned snickers in the strangely unwelcoming "social clubs" of New York and other cities. Crime was organized — the Apalachin, New York meeting of 1954 did not arise ex nihilo—but its perpetrators did not seek the intellectual property rights involved in Nike-style trademarking and brand extension. We have yet to see La Cosa Nostra LLC, or Mafia Solutions.
40. Would it have been pedantic, or an illustration of fascination with the other that is the warp to xenophobia's weft, for one of those senators to have referred to "La Cosa Sua" ("your thing" or "that thing of yours") when addressing a witness. Perhaps fortunately for the dignity of the Senate and its things, air quotes had yet to be invented.
41. Like less articulate men of action, learners of another language hold fast to the new word for "thing," which covers a multitude of gaps in vocabulary.
42. This comes as no surprise. To learn a language is to exist in a primal condition of limited knowledge. "Thing" may then amount to the extent of speech, and an achievement under the circumstances. The language learner or traveler in a land whose language he does not speak may come as close as possible — for a contemporary person — to the pre-Socratic condition. A simulacrum of that innocence and confusion is experienced by someone speaking a non-native language who knows the word for "thing" and also the words for listing its characteristics — but not yet the precise term that takes not nearly as long to say.
43. Wonder, aphasia, or a general absence of verbal facility do not explain every appearance of the word. Sometimes vagueness hides action like a ninja's smoke bomb or the cloud of ink shot by a fleeing squid.
44. The thing referenced can be a transgression of greater or lesser severity. In 1972 Billy Paul crooned "me and Mrs. Jones, we've got a thing going on." The persona of the speaker is not Mr. Jones, given the subsequent line, "we both know that it's wrong." To call this thing by its proper name, adultery, raises the specter of consequences — divorce, or lasting scars on a marriage that does survive, along with emotional and economic instability that can reverberate for generations.

45. Such vagueness covers a multitude of other sins as well. A thorough study of wiretap transcripts and films that base their dialogue on them could reveal a high incidence of characters doing or taking care of an unstated but quite possibly indictable thing — an umbrella term conducive to amnesia under oath. It seems reasonable to assume that, much of the time, the thing discussed is a whole one.
46. Where art leads, commerce follows. Budweiser's "urban" (i.e., African-American) *Wassup!* campaign was eventually extended to the Euro-American (White) community with a working-class ethnic relay of "How ya doin'?" A later variant included a line of plausible deniability in which each caller asked the next down the chain of command, "Did you take care of that thing?" At the spot's end, the low man hangs up the telephone — a land line, of course. Having forgotten to take care of whatever that thing may be, he expresses his dismay one letter short of Homer Simpson's signature exclamation with a sudden "Oh!"
47. Shortly after Douglas Coupland's "McJob" entered the language I was more innocently and less lucratively than gangsters cobbling together a life of part-time jobs with no benefits. At the end of one part-time and on the way to work on a freelance assignment, itself a kind of one-off McJob, I excused myself by saying, like the rough character I wasn't, "I've got to take care of a thing for a guy."
48. That "thing" was writing catalog copy.
49. I wasn't necessarily wrong, just grossly hyperbolic. Taking care of a thing is the basic unit of any job, and any career. You take care of a thing for a guy (in the wider sense that includes women). Then you take care of another thing for another guy (or the same guy), and a series of other things after that, for one or another guy or guys. Rinse, lather, repeat. Then you retire to do your own thing, which may or may not require taking care of.
50. I would prescribe no particular way of classifying things, but I would submit that taxonomy reveals character, or at least perspective. In the song "Kiss Me Deadly" Lita Ford sings "it ain't no big thing" of the following:
    a. Not getting laid
    b. Getting in a fight
    c. Being late for work
    d. Encountering bad traffic

e. Having to borrow ten dollars
f. Having nothing to eat
g. Lacking a television

Items b and f would, in fact, appear to be big things to much of the population. Then again, Ms. Ford — or her musical persona, at any rate — may be made of sterner stuff than most of us.

51. Even big things might not be all that big.
52. African-American usage again comes to mind. The flavors of a language or a culture at large, like those of a ripening cheese, travel from the margins to the center, hence increasing non-Black use of the expression "ain't nothing but a thing." The phrase is fraught with connotation; in particular, it implies a degree of dualism, suggesting there exists something outside of the realm of tangible and easily replaced.
53. In regard to tangibility, one does not say, for example, "Ain't nothing but a Theory of Relativity." In regard to replaceability, one does not state "Ain't nothing but a First Folio Shakespeare."
54. This dualism can arguably be traced to several possible sources. Two are the Calvinism that underlies much of the Black church, and the Pentecostalist fervor that infuses other parts. Both make promises beyond the things of this world. There is also the struggle to transcend the catastrophe of slavery and be seen as human rather than a "thing" for sale.
55. A variant of that expression is "Ain't no thing but a chicken wing." The logic of the saying is overdetermined. No other part of the bird rhymes with "thing." Compared to a breast, thigh, or drumstick, moreover, it is small and notably not all that meaty — less of a thing than other pieces, and little better than nothing.
56. Much has been made of that next-to-nothing. Whether because tastes changed first, or the dark arts of marketing stimulated demand, Buffalo wings have spread across North America. More than a second-best choice of animal protein, they offer, as George Will once said of potato chips, a platform for elevating fat and salt to one's mouth as efficiently as possible. The traditional accompaniment of celery sticks at first seems like the tribute that vice pays to virtue, but facts get in the way: those sticks provide a second platform for the salt and fat of blue cheese.

57. Like the improvised potage in the folk story and children's book *Stone Soup*, a virtue — or a high profit margin — is made of necessity. If the trickster Coyote of Native lore were to go into foodservice, he might well be selling chicken wings. Perhaps he has while, like the Devil, convincing us that he does not even exist.
58. Such hierarchies, straight or tangled lengths of the Great Chain of Being, did not prevent Williams Carlos Williams from declaring "No ideas but in things."
59. For better or for worse, Williams wanted to write his poems in "plain American that dogs and cats could understand."
60. Things are not necessarily guaranteed to bear ideas, however. A careful consideration of the facts at hand in a barnyard suggests that not much of anything depends on a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens. If that were the case, it would be stored in a shed where it wouldn't rust.
61. If not all constellations are seen or named the same by all cultures, it is still notable that the same groups of stars are relied upon across a hemisphere. We likewise assemble meaning from the placement of things. Without these connections, approaches however tentative to meaning, ideas effectively cease to exist.
62. Drawing connections between things requires contemplation, and Americans have felt generally ill at ease with contemplatives. Sitting around and looking into space can seem like a waste of time when there are crops to raise and bottom lines to bulk up. The European experience that many Americans' ancestors fled had proven that an aristocracy trained in dead languages, ballroom dancing and inbreeding had clearly made a hash of the world. Robed persons given to fasts and chanting, for their part, weren't likely to pull the body politic's carriage out of a muddy rut. Learning and intentions hold no interest without a tangible outcome, and what is tangible are things in the least abstract sense, particular assemblies of molecules, things.
63. Hence pragmatism, derived from the Greek pragma (meaning thing), the inspiration or implicit grounding of lyrics such as David Bowie's in "Modern Love": I don't want to go out. I want to stay in. Get things done." Those things are left unspecified, presumably for being mundane and possibly numerous rather than criminal or shameful.
64. In this cultural context it is thus hardly surprising that a small chain of gymnasiums in and around Washington, DC is named Results. This sort of labeling does not work as well

for liberal arts colleges or churches, though some of the latter have positioned themselves in the spiritual marketplace through the Prosperity Gospel (always more photogenic than its Social counterpart). Such labeling can be undertaken with good intentions, but it also provides a way for members of the flock to meet those who would gladly shear them, believing primarily in the things of this world.

65. At that point religion becomes a business like any other and may therefore find itself more at home in America than it would otherwise. Nothing is more American than getting things done, whether building bridges and bombs or setting up an Internet, all of which entail business. "The business of America is business," said Calvin Coolidge in a break from silence, and in some quarters the discussion has since then been considered closed. "Taking care of business in a flash" was Elvis Presley's personal motto, with an acronym and lightning-bolt signet ring to prove it. The Bachman-Turner Overdrive single "Taking Care of Business" took an ironic view of the topic but eventually provided the soundtrack for an office supply store commercial, enabling the very business it had once shirked. As Thomas Frank's title goes, *Commodify Your Dissent*.
66. To which Martha Stewart might say "It's a good thing."
67. Doing business can be, without pretensions of other goals, especially comfortable for some of those unencumbered by dualism, for whom everything is a thing and nothing more, and to whom, as to the more reflective pagans of antiquity, such as Lucretius, man is but dreams and dust (sometimes minus the dreams), mind an epiphenomenon of matter, and gods (or God) an epiphenomenon of mind. Such amoralists turn out to be rather thin on the ground. Instead, most atheists, monists and secular humanists — or those who simply call themselves skeptical or empirically oriented — are encumbered instead by a conscience and one or another concept of ethics. They are hard-working and law-abiding members of their communities.
68. In short, most of the godless (un-godded?) would not subscribe to Dostoyevsky's hypothesis that without God all things are possible. Instead, they — like most people — want to do "the right thing." Means by which they determine that may include extensions of evolutionary biology, sociobiology or multiple-play scenarios from game theory in which cooperating with others makes for enlightened self-interest down the line.

69. Yet if some kill cheerfully in the name of religion, as Pascal noted — or in the name of a surrogate religions such as Communism and of fascism — others do their violence in the name of the void itself, where a given congeries of atoms in the form of a person can take its pleasure and enjoys its position vis-à-vis other congeries of atoms — persons, other life forms, and the inanimate world—before returning to its constituent parts.
70. Nihilism is arguably self-limiting, since it does not aim to sustain cultural continuity or even life itself. How many of us are, or know, fourth-generation nihilists? For that matter, how many nihilists do we encounter in daily life? Sociopaths don't necessarily count, since espousal of nihilism on their part may serve as a rationale for pre-existing impulses rather than the articulation of a well-considered position. I wonder how many of us, then, think of nihilists primarily as the black-clad poseurs and pseudo-kidnappers in *The Big Lebowski*, one of whom now and then intones "We believe in nothing," the subtext being *Wanna make somethin' of it?*
71. Some do. If we are just poor things, sentient for but a little while as far as we know, more than a few would call for compassion as the only viable response, given that all are in the same leaky boat of mortality, and there's no bailing out. Some Buddhists take this approach, and Charles Bukowski famously lamented how others should but don't: "We're all going to die, all of us, what a circus! That alone should make us love each other but it doesn't. We are terrorized and flattened by trivialities, we are eaten up by nothing."
72. A penumbra of this approach is found in the writings of the Desert Fathers, at least one of whom recommended against throwing or slamming objects. His ostensible reason was that such behavior only served to perpetuate angry habits and impede spiritual development. At the same time, such actions can be read as a crime against matter itself, which even if non-sentient, is the work a Creator and to be respected as such. Absent dualism or belief in a creator, willfully damaging things suggests a lack of self-respect, or collegiality toward a fellow thing.
73. In contrast lies the dominionist approach, a radical de-divinization of the natural world, supported by a superficial and exquisitely convenient reading of selected passages of one of the Creation accounts in Genesis, whereby Adam and Eve were put over "every living thing." Non-living things

did not even rate a mention. That this commission may have been forfeited in the Fall and the sentence to eat one's bread in the sweat of one's brow is not considered. The dominionist model proved largely academic until recently in light of small populations and relatively low-impact technology. Such an approach, like others, can also provide a superstructure for practical decisions such as whether to kill an animal or pray to it (though some cultures do both).

74. High populations and technology of ever-greater speed and intensity of impact, though, have illustrated the dangers of objectifying everything as instrumental, a means to an end. Who determines those ends, and whether one person's telos can be conveniently used by another to pursue his own ends, are left aside. One goal can be coopted in the name of another, per cause-based marketing and the appropriation of words such as "sustainability."
75. A thing, defined differently, can represent the end result of a process of construction, a meaning itself, rather than the raw materials from which meaning is inferred — or made. The size of that thing may be large or small, but it must exist in an analogue to pass-fail grading. Otherwise, "it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing (doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa doo-waa)."
76. Defining "that swing" lies beyond the scope of this essay.
77. Meaning or not meaning, passing or failing, depends on the value attached to positive evidence. The philanderer caught out in his detours and trespasses may offer the last-ditch explanation of "It didn't mean anything." At other times that philanderer might take the same line of discussion as a man wrongly suspected and state, with a greater or lesser degree of veracity, "Nothing happened," accompanied by a quite nearly Clintonian parsing of the words "nothing" (or "no thing") and "happen." Depending on the situation and time frame, perhaps several things "occurred" instead, if they did not transpire or take place.
78. "More than this, there is nothing," Brian Ferry sang in 1982 on Roxy Music's final album, *Avalon*. We can speculate on whether "this" means the end of a romantic fancy or a statement of lighthearted (if benign) nihilism. Both bring to mind the ephemeral nature of popular music success — and popular music lyrics, which succeed or fail primarily according to how well they are sung rather than their own literary merits. In one of Heart's smaller hits Ann and Nancy Wilson sweetly

sang, "It was nothing at all," which stays with me more than any number of other things.

79. Yet nothing, if not its vaguer sibling nothingness, an abstraction of that which does not exist, represents a thing in itself, a bas relief of some other thing, or things in general — anti-matter to the matter of the perceptible. Elevating a courtly parlor game beyond its roots and bringing it into the canon, John Wilmot, Third Earl of Rochester, made use of his poem "Upon Nothing" to satirically populate the parallel universe and conceptual dilemma of the Void with what could not be found in the unduly narrow realm of things that exist: "French truth, Dutch prowess, British policy, / Hibernian learning, Scotch civility." Footnotes on historical particulars are hardly needed to explain the lines, marred only by the spirit of stereotyping and generalization — itself a flaw seen only through some of the West's fairly recently developed lenses of cultural relativism. What might a contemporary wag — say P.J. O'Rourke in verse — do with this premise?
80. What kind of thing, then, is this nothing? A mirror image, as of written words — the reverse of what it faces? A shadow? Whatever is found in the interstices between things? By this measure atoms, consisting mostly of space, are mostly nothing, and the hydrogen atom of two particles is next to nothing. Aside from atomic weight, though, is a substance of greater density per unit of volume more of a thing, or is moreness measured in other attributes? Only in space or use of natural resources might the collected haiku of Basho be considered less of a thing than the latest semi-annual novel by Danielle Steel. Contribution to the human cultural heritage may call for a different metric. It does not require false modesty to state that this essay, a thing of some heft at about five thousand words, will be a smaller thing than the 271 words of the Gettysburg Address, or all but a couple of Shakespeare's sonnets (some of which show that even the Bard of Avon had off days.)
81. Yet Shakespeare and Lincoln are no longer with us. Our contingent existences have been shaped by them, but much goes on without them. They have left us something — some *thing* — to do in the face of changes in (check all that apply): social relations, means of production, evolution of consciousness, globalization, environmental precarity.

82. What lies before us is not what lay before them, lost now to posterity like Cervantes' hand at the battle of Lepanto. As less benign words and deeds offer their reminders that history is not over yet, though some might be working to hasten it. There is again the unique and passing instant, made up of all those that preceded it, known and unknown, a new thing altogether like a kaleidoscope's image with each turn, the open-ended suggestion of the Song of Miriam, or a Tibetan sand painting, tangential to many other things, if not the continuation of one great thing.
83. In any event, comparison breaks down, and abstracting stylized facts from quiddities and granularity — to take a recent season's bit of management jargon — retreats from experience and by neglect does it violence.
84. If sometimes we think we've seen it all, the moment turns to us and says, like Peter Falk's Columbo, "Just one more thing . . ."

Anna Head Spence

"Dense Poems & Socratic Light": The Poetry of John Martin Finlay and "With Constant Light": The Collected Essays & Reviews with Selections from the Diaries & Other Prose of John Martin Finlay

John Martin Finlay (1941-1991), Southern poet and essayist and a native of the Wiregrass Region of Alabama, remains unknown to many Americans, Southerners, and even Alabamians, despite his extensive body of work. "*Dense Poems & Socratic Light*" and "*With Constant Light*," edited by David Middleton and John P. Doucet and published by Wiseblood Books (2020), seek to elevate Finlay's contribution to the literary mind of the twentieth-century South. Together, these volumes offer a complex understanding of Finlay's works, highlighting the tensions expressed in both his poetry and his critical essays. However, this compilation also includes a variety of additional literary, scholarly, and personal writings as well as contextual material that illuminates his lifelong intellectual and literary influences. As the reader delves into these comprehensive editions, Finlay's position as a notable Southern poet-critic emerges amidst the broad scope of works presented.

Finlay's verse, originally collected in a volume titled *Mind and Blood* (1992), serves as the basis for the current volume of poetry. A number of Finlay's poems, though not all, address traditional Southern literary themes, including nature, home, family, death, rural life, and regional history; additionally, his poetry reveals the divisions he perceived in many facets of life. For Finlay, even the most seemingly innocuous transition, such as the natural geographical differences between South Alabama and North Florida, could provide a source of tension, as is exhibited in "The Road to the Gulf," which contrasts the "green deep river's bank" and "pastures still unmowed" of South Alabama with the landscape of the Florida Panhandle:

> The closer to the Gulf we came the more
> The flattened earth recalled itself as shore.

Another poem that illustrates Finlay's bifurcated view of nature is "A Few Things for Themselves," which points to the distinction between "blooms of lilies" and "darker swamp weeds along the shore" in its portrayal of a location that was most likely a North Florida fish camp. Moreover, this poem emphasizes the divide between nature and man as the speaker recalls the "white underbellies" of the fish lying in "spilled oil, blood, and bay-water." Although two components of the dark mixture, fish blood and bay-water, are natural, the spilled oil is introduced to the natural world by man. These divisions, both within nature and between nature and man, similarly appear in another of Finlay's poems, "Audubon at Oakley." In the poem, Finlay renders an image of combat between mockingbirds and a snake that is attempting to invade a nest; however, he also depicts the speaker of the poem, naturalist and painter John James Audubon, as a predatory force:

> Others I shot, pinned them to a board
> To draw the fresh-killed life.

Finally, directly addressing the issue of man versus nature is Finlay's poem "Salt from the Winter Sea." Here, Finlay recounts a story passed down to him by his great-grandmother about annual salt-gathering expeditions made by local men to the Gulf of Mexico. Despite the fact that these men traversed to the gulf yearly, Finlay is clear that they were nonetheless inlanders facing a daunting task:

> They worked the surf like primitives afraid
> Of gulfs, who never sought the sea herself,
> Who lived inland and knew the solid earth.

Thus, in each of these poems about the natural world, Finlay carefully explores an underlying disunity, a concept that informs his other themes as well.

In his treatment of home and family, Finlay focuses on both external and internal sources of tension. For example, his poem "The Wide Porch" (which refers, in a concrete sense, to the home of his maternal grandmother) also draws attention to the divide between what Finlay biographer Jeffrey Goodman refers to as the "provincial values" of his childhood and the values of the wider world (e.g., university life, the broader South, and Europe): "I then moved outward to become myself."

Another poem connected to the South of his childhood is "The Black Earth"; here, Finlay evokes his youth in Alabama:

> Like prehistoric time the past floods up —
> Fields rising in moonlight from solid oak,
> Swamps where lidlessly the snake slid down
> Gutted banks, pine-quiet, into the light.

However, this poem also speaks to the strain between a son and his father, "A wasted man who strained his cruel life." Finlay was acutely aware of the distance between himself and his own father and worried about the poem's "psychological disclosure"; nevertheless, the difficulties remained unresolved:

> But still, a naked thing, I heard his voice
> At once both curse and cry, condemning me.

Hence, this poem, along with "The Wide Porch," illustrates the tensions that Finlay associated with home and family life in the rural South.

Along with the aforementioned Southern themes, Finlay's poetry also examines the intersection of death, rural life, and Southern history. Death, while universal, broadly figures in many Southern works, from the Southern Gothic to the dead mule, identified by Jerry Leath Mills as a darkly humorous marker of Southerness in twentieth-century Southern literature. Of specific interest to Finlay was the dualism to be found in the nature of death, and he deals with this subject in a number of his poems, including "The Dead and The Season" and "The Blood of Shiloh." As elucidated in David Middleton's preface to *Mind and Blood* (1992), Finlay "spent his early youth coming to know firsthand the mystery, the beauty, and the hardship of agricultural life," an influence exhibited in "The Dead and The Season." In this poem, Finlay treats both death and new life as part of an agricultural existence: by juxtaposing his uncle's death, which resulted from a collision between his tractor and another vehicle, with the birth of a calf, he poignantly depicts the cycle of rural life. Further, in "The Blood of Shiloh," Finlay portrays both literal and figurative death as he reflects on Southern history; the speaker describes her father and brother, who respond to the Civil War quite differently, and the inner struggle of her father, who continually relives the horrors of the war, ultimately succumbing to his own

mental state; her mother, who chooses survival over self during the war ("For life she killed the woman in her soul"); and herself, the "doting daughter" who wishes for her father's death so that he can escape his pain. A slightly different version of this poem appears in *The American Tragedies* (1987), a six-poem sequence which, as Middleton explains, explores conflict in "American history, particularly Southern history" and might have indicated "a new phase and direction in Finlay's poetry"; regrettably, Finlay's death prevented this development.

In addition to his role as a Southern poet, Finlay also produced a complete collection of critical essays titled *Flaubert in Egypt and Other Essays*. Here, Finlay aligns himself with fellow Southerner Allen Tate, which he acknowledges in his preface. Published in 1994 as *Hermetic Light: Essays on the Gnostic Spirit in Modern Literature and Thought* and included in the present volume under its original title, this compendium seeks to provide evidence of a spiritual divide in the minds and works of Gustave Flaubert, Cardinal John Henry Newman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Paul Valéry, Yvor Winters, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Franz Kafka. Following the example of Tate's lecture "Mere Literature and the Lost Traveller" (1979), Finlay's essays are concerned with "the Gnostic spirit of modern literature": in the introduction, he articulates his view that these writers were unified by "the idea of an ontological alienation of God from both the natural and human world." While the works contained in *Flaubert in Egypt and Other Essays* may be appreciated separately, the reader is able to grasp Finlay's treatise on the Gnostic spirit in modernism more fully by following the pieces as a continuous narrative. As suggested by the title of the collection, "Flaubert in Egypt" is the cornerstone essay, and each subsequent essay examines a split between "the divine and the natural" in modernist thought.

It is worth mentioning that the editors connect *Flaubert in Egypt and Other Essays* to Finlay's predominant influences and to his own development as a scholar, writer, and critic. Apart from Allen Tate, Yvor Winters was the most influential literary figure in Finlay's life, and Finlay undertook graduate studies at Louisiana State University (LSU) for the explicit purpose of studying under poet-critic Donald E. Stanford, a former student of Winters. Of further interest is Finlay's communication with both Stanford and American and Southern literary scholar Lewis P. Simpson during his process of writing the Flaubert essays. Stanford and Simpson

had revived *The Southern Review* five years prior to Finlay's entering the doctoral program, and, according to Middleton, Finlay found both in Stanford and *The Southern Review* "an almost ideal combination of Wintersian poetics and the Southern literary tradition." Early in his writing process (October 1981), Finlay corresponded with Stanford, declaring his intention to write "a book on the gods of modernity"; in the same month, he sent a copy of the first essay to Simpson. Later, after completing the final essay (1987), Finlay lamented to Simpson that he felt as if he had been "on some journey to hell" and expressed his desire to turn his attention to other writers; however, in the essay, "The Dark Rooms of John Finlay" (1991), Simpson states that this sentiment referred not only to the struggle of finishing the last essay, but to "the whole job of writing he had imposed on himself."

Besides Finlay's completed essay collection and numerous poems, these volumes contain a variety of other critical, literary, scholarly, and personal materials. Before his death, he had begun a second book of essays that investigate the duality of the spirit in the writings of ancient Greek philosophers rather than those of the modernists. Other works included in these volumes offer insight into Finlay's literary interests, including several book reviews and an essay on English poet Elizabeth Daryush. Returning to Finlay's markedly Southern works, one surprise in his miscellaneous writings is his only known short story, "The Up-There," which explores both the nature of grief and the consequences of a Southern woman's determination to "play God" after the death of her son. One wonders why Finlay didn't write more fiction. Several other writings broaden the reader's perspective on Finlay's concerns as a scholar and poet, and in particular, as a Southern scholar and poet: the preface to an interview with Eudora Welty, his letter of application for a Rinehart grant to write a long poem on the "Southern phase" of John James Audubon's career, preparatory questions for an interview with Georgia native and Bollingen Prize winner Edgar Bowers that was arranged but ultimately did not take place, comments on a dust jacket for David Middleton's volume of poetry, *The Burning Fields* (1991), and the surviving portion of Finlay's introductory remarks for Allen Tate at the University of Alabama in the mid-1960s. However, within this collection of assorted writings, it is perhaps his letters and diary entries that readers will find most enlightening. These musings, which range in location from Corfu to Paris to the Deep South, capture some of Finlay's most poignant descriptions and innermost thoughts. Specifically, his delineations of rural Southern

life are notable for their rich sensory detail, from his depiction of the "grotesque" combine that "shook, grumbled, [ground], roared" while rattlesnakes "desperately jumped out of the oats… as they struck at the terrifying machine," to his account of milking the family cow, "Red," and his remembrance of "the weight of the milk pail between [his] knees," with the "thick foam of her milk falling sluggishly in the early morning light over its brim." Taken together, while these varied writings may not constitute complete works as his collections do, they provide the reader with both context for his complete works and a clearer picture of his versatility as writer.

Other than Finlay's letters and diary entries, valuable biographical information is also available in the editors' extensive annotations, which provide additional contextual material, including pertinent information on the numerous poets and writers to whom Finlay alludes as well as a wealth of relevant geographical, historical, and cultural information. Perhaps what is most interesting for those readers who are acquainted with Wiregrass Alabama and the Florida Panhandle, his home and his "half-home," is the description of his native South provided in the notes, including particular landmarks, which allows the local reader to tie Finlay's experiences more concretely to familiar places and times. As recorded in a journal entry from 1966, Finlay once remarked to Robert Penn Warren regarding the works of Allen Tate, "I sometimes think that in order to understand Tate's work, you have to know something about his personal life." According to Finlay's diary entry, Warren responded, "I think you are right, Mr. Finlay." Through the inclusion of Finlay's letters and diary entries and the meticulously researched annotations, the reader develops an awareness of the life surrounding Finlay's work. These critical editions present a comprehensive view of Finlay's contribution to Southern literature. They accentuate the tensions found in his poems and essays and amplify his voice, which, on many occasions, is distinctly Southern. These volumes are also a window into the life that shaped his work, including his rural life in South Alabama and the stimulating intellectual environment he found at LSU. Ultimately, the considerable scope of these volumes, in combination with their focus on Finlay's role as a Southern poet-critic of merit, will allow the value of his work to become known to a new generation of readers and provide a fuller understanding of his works to those readers who have met him before.

Jack Stewart

Kudzu

Out in the country, the kudzu
Has swallowed the hills and all it can
Of the horizon. Even the sky
Does not look safe.
I pass the thickened 'T's of power lines
And houses that are little more
Than mounds of dark green leaves,
As if Henry Moore had taken up topiary.
The leaves are good in salad.
The vines could restrain a madman.
As a boy, I once watched a 5-bedroom house
Lifted and moved back 100 feet
Because the cliff was being eaten by wind.
Here, the red clay
Is heavy and warm,
Absorbing water to bring forth
The smothering vine that can only
Be killed with gasoline,
The darkest vine that holds dear
Whatever it touches
And will protect it so fiercely
Against intruders
Even the wind and sun are weaklings,
The very cosmos and time
No match.

A Driving Rain

The wind driving the rain sideways, and the ducks
Have sunk so far into their shoulders, they look like feathered turtles.
The orchid tree outside our porch is having a seizure.
Even the pond is trying to get away,
The ripples racing along the bank
And not looking back —

Like the cold rain driving Adam
And Eve out of Paradise,
The wet wind that soaked them cold
To the bone and denied any cover,
And their knowledge that when it stopped
All they had tended would straighten
And the green deepen and shine.

They would outrun the rain
Into the desert,
To the earth baked hard, a sterile earth
He would have to break into the barest life
To survive.
They would remember
The sun in the cedars,
The poplars aflame,
The cherry trees thick with blossoms,
The lions' manes burning along the underbrush.

Gradually the wind slows, and the rain
Bends to the softness of a willow.
Another hour and the ducks
Are coasting the bank.
Everything breathes deeply
In the returning warmth.
The prayer in the bones has ended.
The pond is as calm as black marble,
The grass silver with light.

Farm Weather

Red-eyed, the chickens peck stupidly
Around their small dirt pen.
In the coop, they have hidden some of the eggs.
He bought two turkeys and named them Christmas
And Thanksgiving, but when the weather
Turned cold didn't have the heart
To bring the axe down. Now they sit
Like brown candle flames on the fence posts.

You see things differently in gray weather.
It outlines color like a shawl.
Things reveal themselves by contrast,
The way his dog's bark and silence
Explain each other. I whisk my hands together
To get rid of the dust from the seed I tossed.
The sky is heavy enough to snow.

The chickens go into the coop
With blood hanging from their necks.
The turkeys stay on the fence, even when
They begin to disappear in the browning light.
We stay outside, too, even until
We can feel the darkness falling. Even until
It begins to feel like our own.

Peter Vertacnik

Collars

1.

He hates his collar: always creased and blue;
He wants a job where he can wear a tie.
Though still unsure of what else he could do,
He hates his collar: always creased and blue,
Torn, stained by grease, by sweat. "That's it, I'm through,"
He mutters frequently each day — a lie
He hates. His collar always creased and blue,
He wants a job where he can wear a tie.

2.

He has a job where he must wear a tie;
He wishes his white collar weren't so tight.
Though moneywise he's more than getting by,
He has a job where he must wear a tie,
Compelling all employees to comply
With policies he rarely feels are right.
He has a job where he must wear a tie;
He wishes his white collar weren't so tight.

Peter Vertacnik

Teacher's Lament

No longer can I keep this under wraps:
I see no faces, just the tops of heads.
They while away the time with swipes and taps,

Necks bent toward glowing desk-tops, palms, and laps.
Perhaps some haven't slept or missed their meds.
No longer can I keep this under wraps:

I've lost my students to the latest apps.
We waste our days in class at loggerheads.
They while away the time with swipes and taps;

I chide and lecture till my lungs collapse.
Like winter flu, the disaffection spreads.
No longer can I keep this under wraps,

But still must watch the useless hours elapse.
Often, I wish they'd stay home in their beds.
They while away the time with swipes and taps,

Until I reprimand them in ALL CAPS,
Though not enough to rip their trance to threads.
No longer can I keep this under wraps:
They while away the time with swipes and taps.

My Mama's Schmaltz

It seemed she only laughed
Or looked remotely happy
When recollecting tales
I found extremely sappy.

If I came home from school
And saw her sipping tea,
I knew the next few hours
Would not belong to me.

She'd gab about past trips,
Trite trinkets she collected,
Her face a tear-puffed smile;
Yet I felt unaffected.

She'd gush about the time,
One anniversary,
My dad bought all the mums
From Gaertner's nursery.

Most stories would begin
With "Once, when I was pretty . . ."
But I, a selfish child,
Was not disposed to pity.

Those tedious afternoons
I'd fidget at the table,
And she would share her life —
Part memory, part fable.

Lisa Vihos

Two New Poetry Collections by Mark Belair: *Taking our Time* and *Running Late* (Kelsay Books, 2019)

Mark Belair's books arrived in my mailbox in the middle of the pandemic, at a moment when I needed to be reminded that Time with a capital T is a human-made construct that can either rule me or set me free. Time is the agreed-upon backdrop we use to get through our days in relation to ourselves and others. When that backdrop is disrupted, it is helpful to turn to poetry. As Belair's poems affirm, we run late all too often. But if we flip that script, we will see we are simply taking our time. The poet skillfully dissects these divergent views of Time into its corollary parts, and in so doing, shows us the many blessings of being alive in the world.

The poems in both books are grouped into eleven sections of four to eight poems each. I must assume that the poet purposely did not create twelve sections, which would have been easy enough to do, but would also have been too neat and tidy in relation to our measuring time in twelves. Each section has an evocative heading, for example: "Taking Our Time As We Try to Connect" or "Taking Our Time As We Leave the Stage." In the other book, we find "Running Late Yet Leaving No One Behind" and "Running Late Yet in a Spell." His grouping of the poems into themes does suggest an order to the chaos. The poet provides us with some balm, a measuring of the mess of life.

Belair dwells in memory. He conjures frequent narratives from childhood, sensory moments that are never forgotten. In "Donuts," he remembers flailing around in the backseat of the family car with his sister on Sunday mornings after church, on the way to get a sweet treat:

> But that first bite of donut —
> coming after our giddy, tilted ride —
> was the sacrament
> that purged,
> for another blessed week,
> the waxed-wood taste of church.

Sometimes, an observation in the present will unlock a memory, as in the poem "Spring Chill," when turning a corner from shade into sun on a spring day awakens a bodily awareness:

. . . childhood-small
and summer-warm,

a memory
radiating out

from marrow
to muscles. . . .

Many of the poems touch upon some moment in childhood that becomes the seed for something that the poet still carries with him. Belair clearly has nailed this approach and takes it further in poems that recount the memories of other people in his life, such as his mother and father. Expanding the circle of memory, some poems are memories that he imagines someone else might hold some day, as in the poem "Yellow Boots." Here, he is drawn to the sight of a little boy in yellow boots who is out walking with his mother in the rain. As the "sweetly laughing" boy and his mother vanish down the street, the poet sees

into the boy's far future;
into stringent days
sweetened

by his earliest —
if now departing —
rain-slicked memories.

Belair teases apart the past, present, and future. He unwinds them and then weaves them back together, at times crossing over from one consciousness to another. He points out that memory eventually gets muddled, as in the poem "Compass," in which his father gives him a driving a tour of his boyhood haunts, making use of an old compass pulled from the glove compartment, allowing for

an Alzheimered version
of its glory days, a town
that my dad
would never forsake
no matter how forsaken
for as a fatherless boy
he could count on
the magnetic north. . . .

For me, the magnetic north of these two collections is summed up in the line "all time is One" from the poem "Pocket Watch." Belair's poems continuously reveal the many mundane things that hold us all together. His words reveal not only how we measure Time, but how Time measures us. If you think about it, that is exactly what someone who is both a professional drummer and a poet would be very well-suited to do. Belair is a master of taking the one small detail, the could-have-been-missed observation, the thing half-seen, and turning it into something that goes far beyond itself. He gives us the world, startling and fresh; placing it both inside and outside of Time. He reminds us to see that who and what we are is actually time-*less*, existing, as he writes, "in a living line of felt continuity."

Will Wells

Carved Corbel of a Monk Reading

Mounted upside down against a hammer beam,
an oak exemplar of your age's faith,
serene in a perilous perch, you pondered
the book propped on your knees, stuck on one page
for 500 years. That contemplation
stayed unwavering when iconoclasts
beheaded holy statues in the chapels
below, and later, when misdirected bombs
stove in the nave. Stars became your votives
till a dealer in antiques, back from the war,
raised a scaffold to pluck you like scorched fruit
before the walls gave way. Still keeping vows
to lodge apart, you gathered dust, displayed
out of reach for decades on a ceiling joist,
the yellowed price tag discreetly tucked
beneath your robed backside. At the auction
of his shop, I made high bid and brought you home.
Now, right-side up and pillowed on a chair,
although suspended in detachment still,
you browse among the books I cherish most,
gazing through grainy oak to what's sacred.

The Chosen One

Our football team was called the mighty Redskins –
brawny rednecks earmarked for assembly lines.
The name conjured Tecumseh, Shawnee chief
turned hometown hero long after defeat.
Troops torched his village, clearing space for ours,
war crimes that our history book ignored.
The teacher, when I mentioned it, just frowned.
Past sundown on fall Fridays, I put on
a shameless outfit to cover up my guilt.

A doctor's son, too bookish for the mauling,
I roamed the sidelines in war-paint, leggings
and full headdress, exhorting the heavens
for victory, as team mascot, Sammy Spirit.
Coach Marshall quipped, *That boy's one of the Tribe,*
part Jew I mean, no doubt the Sammy part.
I channeled offense with war dance and a whoop,
urged staunch defense with a tomahawk chop
and twirled the sidelocks of my long black wig
like a bored yeshiva boy. No one got that joke.

Hold that line, the crowd would chant, *Hold that line*
as if earth could belong to anyone.
A great spirit whispered whose side they were on.
Go Cossacks, go, I mouthed without my megaphone,
Drive out those Jews and burn their shtetls too.
Though the crowd couldn't hear me, it roared support!
If our team trailed late, I'd rake my fingers
through cleat-gouged turf, exposing bits of ash.
Tecumseh knew the Shawnee sacred flame,
if snuffed, would chimney up in smoke. His next
of kin, I sat shiva as time ran out.

The Latest News from Nowhere

> "This is the picture of the old house by the Thames to which the people of this story went. Hereafter follows the book itself which is called ***The Latest News from Nowhere or An Epoch of Rest.***"
>
> (William Morris)

At Kelmscott Manor, kitchen gardens bloom.
Along its leafy lane, centuries seem
to lapse, as cows line up at milking time
to follow stacked stone walls into a barn
in use before Shakespeare. Any concern
should be dispelled by this embroidered dream.
Yet small ducks bicker where the Thames cuts close.
And rumbling bomber flights from Fairford Base

mark final descents by the gabled rise
where Morris plotted earthly paradise.
There, by the towpath on the Thames' near bank —
its antonym — crumbling concrete, squat and dense,
a World War Two pillbox, aimed like a tank,
waiting to mount a desperate defense.

Robert West

Then

or, A Florentine Taking Fluoxetine

He used to think about her all the time
and almost wished he thought about her still.
She'd made it so much fun to find a rhyme,
he used to think about her all the time.
But when she died, light song turned heavy chime,
dark music muted only by a pill.
He used to think about her all the time
and almost wished he thought about her still.

A Shadow

Since college taught him Burke's sublime
and how to read "When I Have Fears,"

he's elegized himself in rhyme
and outlived Keats by fifty years.

Exhaustion

He wakes to one more day he ought to seize —
and would, had life not drunk him to the lees.

James Matthew Wilson

First Day of School after Christmas

The frosted grass winks light
    And crunches underfoot,
As day reclaims from night
    The shade of leaf and root
And lends it to our sight.

We cross the backyard's plain,
    You and I off together,
As we did in fall rain
    And in the warmer weather,
And as we shall again.

I steam the air with words
    That fathers tell their daughters,
Taking the part of birds
  Who've fled to lapping waters
Or lands of grazing herds.

But you say little back,
    Will sometimes smile, if just;
The grind beneath our track
    Of winter's crystal crust
Attends the speech we lack.

A father dreads that space,
    Wherein comes awkward silence,
Where what was set in place
    Seems jostled by some violence
And strips the dawn of grace.

And yet, we still walk through
    This chill that blankets all.
For, what else could we do,
    But hear late blue jays call
And watch the day renew?

Inhabitants

I know. You've spent this whole day wandering
    Through clumps of trees and seen the sunlight shine
Until that gushy heart is all a-swing
    At God's deft needlework, so soft and fine.

Yea, like some vicar mounting to his nest,
    You sigh and stutter sweet and gentle words
That all is love, but we are loved the best
    (A bit more even than those charming birds!).

But man's hands spoil everything they touch;
    And someone following after you will spoil
The scene with shifty eyes and thieving clutch
    And make you weep we're sprung from common soil.

Then you will preach a different sort of text,
  Just like the naturalist who turned explorer:
Each painted face he saw left him perplexed,
    And made him feel his brotherhood with horror.

When

When noisome crowds turn out to flood the beach,
And with their flesh despoil all in reach;
When some boy burns his hand and squeals with pain
Only to touch it to the stove again;
When, waiting for a carousel at the park,
You see pale, tattooed bodies purpled dark;
When this drunk stranger brags with all his force
About his past adulteries and divorce;
Will you look on it all, just as you should,
And, in that sordid wreckage find the good?

When you turn over leaves upon the vine,
Where lantern flies cling, gorging each veined line;
When great winds shake the trees and cut the power,
Leaving you in the darkness of the hour;
When, in the nursing home, your mother dies
Cut off from muttered prayers and useless cries;
When every argument begets a roar,
And every careless thought erupts in war;
Will you maintain what once was understood,
That, even now, the world as such is good?

And when they hunt him through the soaking heat,
To leave him crumpled on a bloody street;
And when, behind calm eyes, he seems to gloat,
And press his weight down on another's throat;
And when you see them standing calmly there,
Indifferent as his last word dies in air;
And when the glass is cracked, the streets aflame,
With no words spoken but that burning name;
Will you stand as the Lord of All once stood,
And somehow say that things are very good?

The Children of Hamelin

Within the mountain that became their home,
  The children lifted up their cries in pleasure,
Their laughter bouncing, golden, free to roam
  From wall to wall, as they enjoyed each treasure;
  More was prepared for them than taste could measure,
    From candy floss to rocking horses, all
    Piled high about the glittering, echoing hall.

They dueled with wooden swords and painted shields;
  They dined on berries, cream, and golden cake,
While lounged on blankets they called battlefields,
  Unsure if they were dreaming or awake,
  But knowing every wish was theirs to take,
    And that the song descending with its trance
    Possessed their tired limbs and made them dance.

So great the harmony and clamorous din
  That filled up every moment of their day
And made the weeks, then seasons, seem to spin,
  They could not hear those noises far away,
  As their abandoned parents knelt to pray
    Then later, raised chapped fists up with a cry
    At the uncomprehending, empty sky.

The stony streets of Hamelin sank in quiet,
  The alleys emptied even of their rats,
Where once plump clerks and merchants had run riot
  With sales of wine and wares, fine gowns and hats
  To please the daughters of aristocrats.
    Now only starving felines stretched in places
    That once were filled with flushed and cunning faces.

The fountain's waters were shut off for good;
  The old men disappeared behind stone walls;
While women, bent and sad, did what they could
  By stationing the square and park with dolls
  Whose arms forever spread to catch thrown balls,
    Forever reached for some long-vanished treat,
    Ears straining for the vanished sound of feet.

Joyce Wilson

Field Trip

I drove to the dilapidated farm
Where unpaved roads had lost themselves in mud.
The creek was there, like rivers in my dreams,
That twisted in the eddies of its flood.

I brought my parents' books of naturalists
With tattered covers, many pages curled,
Their guide to link descriptions to the field
Where we observed the corresponding world.

A tiny bluish-purple slip appeared.
I plucked it by the stem, and put it down
To look at it, by bending close to view
Serrations of the leaf and petal crown.

I scanned the index of my fragile guide,
Where drawings ran and pages rose and fell.
As I compared the profile to the thing,
Imagined waves soon took me in their swell.

I sank through spaces in between the leaves
Where past and present lessons intertwine,
While images and imitations swirl,
And mirrors of existences combine

And saw how much this wispy petal shape
Resembled tongues, or wavelets in a brook,
Or tufts of hair, or shavings from a plank.
"It's called Bluecurls," I said, and closed the book,

Remembering my parents and this flame
Of baby blue that through them I had learned
To see and sound, identify and name,
Forgotten till today when I returned.

The lessons that they fostered festered in
My memory, as good as dispossessed,
Until the source ignited once again:
A tiny flower with a purple crest.

CONTRIBUTORS

Jane Blanchard lives and writes in Georgia. Her work has appeared in venues as varied as *Aethlon*, *Anesthesiology*, *Anglican Theological Review*, and *Arion*. Her third collection, *After Before*, has been released by Kelsay Books.

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Rick Campbell is a poet and essayist living on Alligator Point, Florida. His most recent collection of poems is *Provenance* (Blue Horse Press.) He has published six other poetry books as well as poems and essays in journals including *The Georgia Review*, *Fourth River*, *Kestrel*, and *New Madrid*. He's won a Pushcart Prize and an NEA Fellowship in Poetry. He teaches in the Sierra Nevada College MFA Program.

Catherine Chandler, poet, translator, and editor, is an unapologetic *formalista* whose work has been widely published in journals and anthologies in North America, Europe and Australia. She is the author of *Lines of Flight* (Able Muse Press), shortlisted for the Poets' Prize, and *The Frangible Hour* (University of Evansville Press), winner of the Richard Wilbur Award. Her complete bio, reviews, and audio recordings are online at *The Wonderful Boat* (cathychandler.blogspot.com).

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Midge Goldberg received the the Richard Wilbur Poetry Award for her collection *Snowman's Code*, as well as the Howard Nemerov Sonnet Award. Her poems and translations have appeared in *Light*, *First Things*, *Oxford University Press's 100 Poems: The Romantics*, *Appalachia*, and on Garrison Keillor's *A Writer's Almanac*. Her other books include *Flume Ride* and the children's book *My Best Ever Grandpa*. She lives in Chester, N.H. with her family, two cats, and an ever-changing number of chickens.

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Aishani Majmudar is 6 years old. She enjoys reading about animals, plants, and fungi, including purple drop mushrooms, quinine trees, and slug moth caterpillars.

Amit Majmudar is a novelist, poet, translator, essayist, and diagnostic nuclear radiologist. Majmudar's latest poetry collection is *What He Did in Solitary* (Knopf, 2020). Recent books include *Godsong: A Verse Translation of the Bhagavad-Gita, with Commentary* (Knopf, 2018), the mythological novel *Sitayana* (Penguin Random House India, 2019), and the historical novel, *Soar* (Penguin Random House, 2020). His novel *Partitions* (Holt/Metropolitan, 2011) was shortlisted for the HWA/Goldsboro Crown Prize for Historical Fiction and was named Best Debut Fiction of 2011 by Kirkus Reviews, and his second novel, *The Abundance* (Holt/Metropolitan, 2013), was selected for the Choose to Read Ohio Program. His poetry has appeared in *The Best of the Best American Poetry 25th Anniversary Edition*, numerous *Best American Poetry* anthologies, as well as the *Norton Introduction to Literature*, *The New Yorker*, and *Poetry*; his prose has appeared in *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2017*, *The Best American Essays 2018*, and the *New York Times*. His first poetry collection, *0',0'*, was shortlisted for the Norma Farber Poetry Award from the Poetry Society of America, and his second collection, *Heaven and Earth*, won the Donald Justice Award. He also edited an anthology of political poetry, *Resistance, Rebellion, Life: 50 Poems Now* (Knopf, 2017). Winner of the Anne Halley Prize and the Pushcart Prize, he served as Ohio's first Poet Laureate. He practices diagnostic and nuclear radiology full-time in Westerville, Ohio, where he lives with his wife, twin sons, and daughter.

Susan McLean has published translations of Latin, French, and German poetry in *Arion*, *Transference*, *Literary Imagination*, *Subtropics*, and elsewhere. Her book of translations of the Latin poet Martial, *Selected Epigrams* (U. of Wisconsin P, 2014), was a finalist for the PEN Center USA Translation Award. Her own books of poetry include *The Best Disguise* and *The Whetstone Misses the Knife*. She is professor emerita of English at Southwest Minnesota State University and lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

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David Middleton is Professor Emeritus of English and Poet in Residence Emeritus at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana. Middleton's books of verse include *The Burning Fields* (LSU Press, 1991), *As Far as Light Remains* (The Cummington Press [Harry Duncan], 1993), *Beyond the Chandeleurs* (LSU Press, 1999), *The Habitual Peacefulness of Gruchy: Poems After Pictures by Jean-François Millet* (LSU Press, 2005), and *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill* (LSU Press, 2013). Middleton's new collection of verse, *Outside the Gates of Eden*, will appear in 2021 from Measure Press.

Born in and currently residing in Los Angeles, California, **Leslie Monsour** grew up in Mexico City, Chicago, and Panama. Her books include *The Alarming Beauty of the Sky* and *The House Sitter*, winner of the Finishing Line Press Open Chapbook Competition. Her *Colosseum Critical Introduction to Rhina P. Espaillat* is due in early 2021 from Franciscan University Press.

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Athar C. Pavis grew up in New York City, attended Mount Holyoke College and studied literature in France. She lives both in Maine and in France where she has worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and teaches at the Sorbonne. Her poems have been published in the UK, Canada, and in U.S. magazines, in *Measure*, *The Able Muse*, *The Comstock Review*, *Slant*, *Oberon*, and *Chariton Review*, among others. She is currently working on a collection of poetry to be entitled *Pulled Pork*.

Steven Peterson is a poet and playwright. His recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Alabama Literary Review*, *America Magazine*, *The Christian Century*, *Dappled Things*, and *First Things*. Until the pandemic closed the theatre world in 2020, several of his plays were produced in theaters around the country. Before turning to poetry and playwriting, he had a 25-year career for an international consulting firm, posted in France, Singapore, and the USA. He lives with his family in Chicago and northern Wisconsin.

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