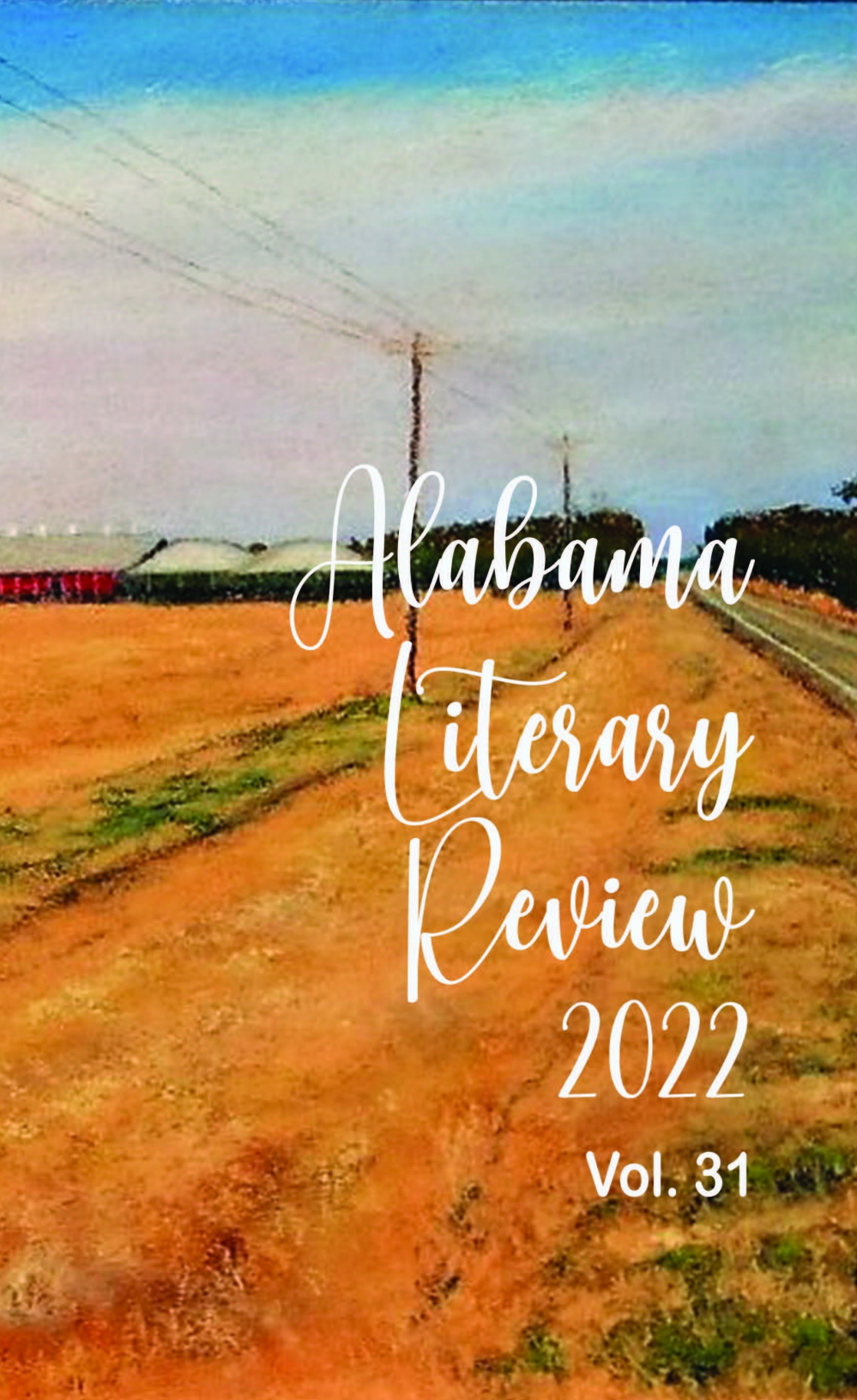

Alabama Literary Review

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In the Visionary Company of Love

(a story as one-act play)

— after Peter Taylor

Cooper, a man of fifty-two with mostly gray hair and a thick beard and mustache, trimmed, but not too neatly, sits at a small dining table in an artist studio on the second floor of an old Victorian-style house, which is evidenced by a high ceiling and tall windows. An easel stands near one of the windows, a small, paint-stained table beside it. Across the large room, on the right, is a loveseat with two cushioned chairs on either side, all arranged around a coffee table. Beyond the dining and sitting areas, toward the back of the room, and at its center, is an opening to a kitchen where part of a counter is visible and beyond that an open outside door with a closed screen. An outside white light illuminates the top landing of a set of metal stairs. Beside the opening to the kitchen hangs a small oil painting. It appears to be a portrait, or perhaps a self-portrait, of a young man. Larger acrylic paintings of curb market scenes, circus performers, and one of ladies eating lunch in a restaurant hang between the elongated widows. All the paintings are similar in style, the faces in them not quite natural but not grotesque. Cooper takes a final bite of food, pushes his plate away, and lights a cigarette. He then takes a drink from a tumbler.

Seth, in his early thirties with moderate length hair and a trim beard, sits across from him. He is of slender build and wears a plaid, flannel shirt in contrast to Cooper's dress shirt and well-matched suspenders. Seth drinks from a bottle of beer and takes a final bite of food from his plate.

. . .

Cooper (*in a resonant voice, Southern*) So everything tasted all right? I thought maybe the pork chops were a little tough.

Seth No, not at all. And the fried okra was great. I said how good it all was.

Cooper Yeah, you said. (*takes a drink*) I'm glad you took me

up on my invitation. I don't get much company up here.

Seth I've dropped in before. And it's not like you never get out, never see anyone.

Cooper (*stares at the tumbler in his hand before putting it down*) First time I ever had Scotch I thought, my God, where has this been all my life?

Seth (*laughing*) I never could develop a taste for Scotch, or bourbon. Guess my tastes are too simple.

Cooper I never had to *develop* a taste for any of it. It was just there, waiting on me. Course, I didn't start 'til late, mid twenties. I used to be the most shy, innocent boy you ever saw in your life.

Seth That's pretty hard to believe.

Cooper You don't *want* to believe me, but it's true. Even when I was in the army, in Germany. This was before Vietnam got started good. I got drafted. A friend and I made what you might call a very hesitant trip to a whorehouse. He knocked on the door because I was too scared. The madam took one look at me and started laughing so hard she couldn't even talk. She shut the door on both of us. I know I looked like a Catholic altar boy — which I'd been. (*smokes his cigarette*, *takes a drink*) Sure don't look that way now.

Seth How old were you? You must have at least finished high school if you got drafted.

Cooper Catholic High, class of '59. Other day at the bar, I heard somebody say they were Huntingdon College, class of '81. I said, "Meadhaven, class of '83, Bradford Clinic, class of '84, Bridge House, class of '88." (*laughing*)

Seth So you graduated from all of them. Did they give you a diploma? (*a pause*) I shouldn't make a joke like that. I'm sorry. But I figure you, of all people, can take it.

Cooper You never been to a whorehouse, have you? (*takes a drink*, *smokes his cigarette*)

Seth (*looks away, then back at Cooper*) You can probably guess the answer to that. But if you want to know, there was a strip joint on the Black Fork River near where I grew up. I used to sneak in with friends. From what I understood, some of the ladies would take you outside, for a price.

Cooper But you were too scared to do that. Too innocent. (*in a slightly exaggerated Southern accent*) Pussy scared you. (*pauses*) I'm getting a little drunk. Was maybe a little drunk when you got here.

Seth I thought maybe so. (*drinks his beer*) Guess I wasn't exactly experienced. That's true enough.

Cooper You were too saintly to do something like that. That's what it was. Saintly.

Seth Now you're being facetious, and maybe a little mean, too.

Cooper No, I meant it, though I know I can get, well, *slightly* mean when I'm drunk.

Seth Like when you told that woman at the bar she looked just like Ethel Merman.

Cooper (*takes another drink*) Yeah, like that. (*pauses*) But I wasn't being facetious. I do think of you as saintly. And I'm Catholic. So I know what a saint is.

Seth I'm no saint, Cooper.

Cooper Well, you've probably at least had some pussy by now. (*laughing*) You're a better person than me, though. Better than anyone I know. You have a good heart. Not everyone would come up here and have dinner with a old drunk like me.

Seth You're not old.

Cooper I just look old. (*takes a drink*) But I am a drunk. And I feel worn out.

Seth That's not how I think of you.

Cooper So how do you think of me? (*smokes the last of his cigarette, stubs it out on his plate*) You've only known me a year or so.

Seth I think of you as an artist. That's what you are. You're talented, and you're one of the funniest people I've ever met.

Cooper I'm a whore. *That's* what I am.

Seth Why would you say that?

Cooper You already know why. 'Cause I have to paint the kind of shit you see up on these walls so I can make money. (*in a barker's voice*) "Come get you some of this, you rich old biddies. I got some good stuff here. Want me to put a little more blue in it so it'll match your living room walls?" I've done that, you know. And people want to come up to this studio, see "my work." I don't let them. They think I got paintings leaned all up against the walls everywhere. I have to sell this shit fast as I can paint it. (*Cooper slowly rises, walks over to a small shelf in a corner of the room that's filled with liquor bottles. He picks up a bottle of Scotch, turns back toward Seth, and pours a drink into his tumbler.*) This one (*shakes the bottle in his right hand*) was winking at me. They'll do that sometimes when I walk by. Proposition me. You know, one whore to another.

Seth I saw your last show at the gallery. You can't tell me there wasn't anything in there you didn't like. I know I saw good paintings.

Cooper (*still standing beside the liquor bottles, eyeing him with suspicion*) What do you know? And by God, don't say, "Well, I know what I like." (*laughing, walks back toward the table with the bottle in his right hand, tumbler in the other, sits down and takes a drink*) Well, there were the two nudes I kind of liked. All the old biddies were probably saying, (*in a mocking tone*) "There goes Cooper painting those nasty pictures again." (*lights a cigarette*) And I did like the bar scene, mostly. Wish I'd had more time with it.

Seth I loved all those. And I saw where you put yourself in that bar painting. You're peeping out of the crowd.

Cooper Yeah, I'm the Alfred Hitchcock of painters. The old ladies eat that up. "Oh, look at Cooper in there." They hang me in their bathrooms, and I have to look down at them in their tubs. (*takes a drink*) So you liked the show?

Seth Of course.

Cooper Oh, you don't know shit. You're a historian. You only like paintings if they're old. (*laughing*) That's what people say about me. "His old stuff. It's so good." That's what they want to buy. People sell it for ten times the original amount, and I don't get a damn dime more. (*takes a drink*) I never know where my paintings end up. They're the children I'll never have, my very own no-neck monsters, and I don't know where they are. They're probably all out there being molested.

Seth I've heard other painters, at the Oak Room in the afternoons, they say how much they respect you. Say you should have stayed in New York, not come home to Montgomery.

Cooper What clichéd old bullshit. Sounds like something from a Tennessee Williams play. (*smokes his cigarette*) I was only there for one damn summer, after I left the artist colony in Maine. Somebody let me have their apartment while they went to Europe. I was still so Young then, but out of the army, thank God. I spent whole days at the museums. (*pauses*) It was wonderful.

Seth You could get more money for your paintings. The artists here, they complain you don't charge enough for them. Say you undersell everybody else. I think it pisses them off. (*pauses*) Which you probably like doing, knowing you. People tell them, "I can get one of Cooper's
paintings for less than this."

Cooper But I can't wait months for somebody to finally pay a high price. (*smokes his cigarette*)

Seth Looks like Bethany Gardner makes a living at it.

Cooper (*cocks his head, eyes him with suspicion again*) Just what the hell are you trying to do? Don't get me started on her. (*takes a drink*) You know she had a stroke a few months ago?

Seth I heard.

Cooper Yeah, she had a stroke all right, a stroke of genius. (*laughing*)

Seth Her paintings are kind of similar in style to yours, all those angels she does.

Cooper No shit, boy. She's been copying me for years, but she's the one making the damn money. All those beatific angel faces. *Mine* ain't quite as beatific. My angels been flying through fire. Hers been flying with god damned butterflies. And people can't see the difference. But I tell you what they can see, if the color matches their fucking living room walls. (*smokes, stubs out his cigarette*) Tell you what I did once. *Miss* Bethany had a party. I went to drink as much of her liquor as I could possibly get a hold of. Found me some fancy goblet on one of her shelves and started drinking from it. When I left, I walked out the door with it full of liquor.

She come running after me. (*in an exaggerated Southern accent*) "Cooper, Cooper, you can't leave with that." I turned around and said, "You just as phony as those pearls around yo' neck." (*laughing*) I dropped the damn goblet onto the grass. (*pauses*) But I'm not bitter, mind you. (*laughing*) Though I can get a little hateful, you know, just sometimes.

Seth So do you hate her?

Cooper (*takes a drink, puts the tumbler down slowly, speaks quietly*) It's not her I hate.

Seth (*after a long silence*) I shouldn't have brought her up. I was curious and that was mean.

Cooper Maybe it was, a little.

Seth I told you I'm no saint.

Cooper People like to see me riled up. It *entertains* them. "Cooper's so dramatic." That's what people say. But you've apologized. So now you're a saint again.

Seth No, I'm not.

Cooper (*takes a long swallow of his drink*) There's something I wanted to ask you. Next week, there's a show that opens at the art museum in Atlanta. I want to go. It's the Impressionists. Would you go with me? (*pauses*) We could spend the night. I'd rather not go alone.

Seth (*drinks from his beer*, *looks toward the kitchen*, *takes another drink*, *looks around the room*) Maybe. I don't know. I'll have to see.

Cooper You don't want to. I can tell.

Seth I didn't say that. I'd *like* to see the Impressionists. It depends on how busy I am.

Cooper We could maybe go to a play, too. (*pauses*) If you wanted.

Seth You mentioned Tennessee Williams a while ago. I've heard you quote him a lot.

Cooper Well, I told you how dramatic I am. I love Tennessee Williams. Another old drunk like me. I've read his plays, seen his plays, seen the movies made from them, even read his short stories. I love his words and his characters. (*takes a drink*, *holds the half-full tumbler high above his head and looks upward as light shines off the glass*) This is my paper lantern. It colors everything for me. Softens the world.

Seth That's from *Streetcar*.

Cooper I guess you don't just read history. (*continues looking at the tumbler he holds aloft*) "I have always depended upon the kindness of strangers."

Seth Seems like you quote Blanche DuBois more than any of the other characters.

Cooper (*lowers the tumbler, drinks from it, and sits it down carefully, as if it might break otherwise, then, again in an exaggerated Southern voice*) I am Blanche DuBois. (*laughing, but stops abruptly*) "And so it was I entered the broken world to trace the visionary company of love." Bet you don't know where that's from.

Seth No, but it's beautiful.

Cooper Glad you think so. It's the quote from Hart Crane at the beginning of *Streetcar*, or part of the quote, at least.

Seth (*drinks the last swallow of his beer and both are silent a moment*) Let me take these plates to the kitchen, and I'll get another of the beers I brought out of the refrigerator. (*rises from his chair and picks up the plates and his empty bottle*)

Cooper You're going to have to drink faster to catch up with me.

Seth (*laughing*) I wouldn't count on that happening. (*walks toward the kitchen, stops beside the door, and looks at the small painting there, studies it*) Is this a self-portrait?

Cooper Yeah. It's what I used to look like, before I went all to hell.

Seth It's good. I can see you in it, and no beard yet. Date says '67. And it's oil.

Cooper It's shit, is what it is. Sometimes I absolutely hate seeing it.

Seth (*mildly irritated*) Then why don't you just sell it?

Cooper (*takes a drink*) I wish somebody would steal the damn thing.

Seth No, you don't. If you did you wouldn't have kept it all these years. Stop bullshitting.

Cooper Hush. That's enough of you trying to prop me up.

(*Seth walks into the kitchen, sits the plates and bottle down onto a counter, then disappears from sight, reappears with another beer, and walks back into the larger room, sits down at the table.*)

Cooper (*lifts his arm and points to the nearest corner of the room*) You see the crack in that plaster wall? (*Seth turns and looks.*) It drew itself into its own shape. Made itself. It didn't need any damn painter, and I love the lines of it. (*takes a drink*) I know just how that crack feels.

Seth How does it feel?

Cooper It's full of woe. (*pauses*) Lord, listen to me. I'm so affected. Of course, affectation becomes me. (*laughing*) You know Tennessee and Truman were good friends, until they fell out.

Seth Capote?

Cooper No, Harry. Of course Capote. What other Truman would I be talking about? (*pours a drink, sips it*) I met him once, years ago. There was kind of an odd moment that happened between us.

Seth Really? How was that?

Cooper Why don't we get up from this table and go sit over there where it's more comfortable, where I've got an ashtray?

Seth All right.

(*Both rise and move toward the two chairs and the loveseat. Cooper carries his drink and pack of cigarettes, Seth his beer and the bottle of Scotch. Cooper sits in one of the chairs, and Seth takes the loveseat, places the Scotch at the corner of the small coffee table nearest Cooper, and slides an ashtray next to it.*)

Cooper They were filming a movie of one of Truman's stories, "A Thanksgiving Visitor." It was in an old abandoned farmhouse south of town. A bunch of old goats had been living in it — the

four-legged kind, I mean. Not people. (*laughing*) A friend of mine found the location for them, and they gave him a part as an extra. So he was there a lot, and he took me down one afternoon. Maybe he knew Capote was going to be around that day. (*picks up the pack of cigarettes and a lighter from his lap and lights a cigarette, then puts the pack and lighter on the table and takes a drink*) So we'd been there a little while. I'd seen how they'd taken out the ceiling over this great big dining room table so they could shoot down from the attic. Some of the actors and crew were milling around, including Geraldine Page, who I got to meet. She was very nice, or at least *pretended* to be. Which was nice of her. (*laughing*) Do you ever pretend to be nice?

Seth Maybe sometimes. You know, the way I pretend to be a saint.

Cooper No, you're too nice to pretend anything. (*smokes his cigarette*) Or maybe you pretend to be mean sometimes. You know, just to see how it feels. Try it on. Like when you brought up that Bethany Gardner a while ago, knowing it would piss me off.

Seth I am sorry for that. I thought I was forgiven. (*laughing*)

Cooper Boy, you were born forgiven. (*takes a drink*)

Seth Weren't we all?

Cooper If anything, I was born damned.

Seth Damned how? With talent?

Cooper Talent? Shit. I told you I'm a whore.

Seth You've worked hard. Maybe the Muse has inspired you some, too. I hope so.

Cooper The Muse. You know what the Muse is?

Seth What?

Cooper The Muse ain't nothing but a pot-bellied, bucktooth

whore. (*laughing*) And you want her!

Seth So have you ever had her?

Cooper (*takes a drink and smokes his cigarette*) What are you asking?

Seth Just making a joke.

Cooper Maybe she's had me, but not as often as I wish. Lord, that's the truth. You know Capote wrote a book about a drama company called *The Muses Are Heard*. Maybe I need to listen harder.

Seth You were going to tell me about meeting Capote.

Cooper Alcohol gets my mind to wandering in the damnedest directions. But Truman. All right. I went outside on the porch and sat in an old swing that had birdshit all over it, and just as I got settled and looked up, I see him get out of a car. There's a woman with him, but I'm not really looking at her. I'm a little startled to see him. And he starts walking toward the house, toward the porch steps, which are kind of high, and steep. So he puts his hand on the rail and looks up. He sees me, and I'm looking at him, and he just *stops*, doesn't move, just keeps looking at me. He *sees* me the way I see things. I'm cursed with seeing, like that crack in the wall. You thought I was being funny.

Seth No, I didn't.

Cooper (*smokes his cigarette*) I do know how that crack feels. I know how it drew itself, every hurting line. When I was young, I was in the car with my mother on a rainy afternoon. Just give me a minute to tell you this. We stopped behind an old pickup, and the rain came harder and the wind did too, really blowing. There was a black man in the back of the truck holding a dirty old tarpaulin over his head, and the way the wind caught that thing and kept it whipping around, covering his face and then revealing it. I remember his eyes, his looking at me, staring, the darkness of his face and the heavy canvass, the way he held it so tight in his hands. He looked otherworldly. It frightened me. It was like I saw past the everyday, past what everybody else sees, and I don't

think I've ever seen the world the same since.

Seth (*a pause*) Did you ever try to paint that?

Cooper I've tried. Never have gotten it right. You might say the Muses stayed silent. (*takes a drink*) That man's hands looked huge, and strong. Hands are so hard to draw. Truman's hand, on the rail, it was delicate and fine, but there was strength in it too. I wanted to draw it. But I was drawn to his eyes. Knew how he saw me. And then the moment broke, cracked, you might say. He came on up the steps, nodded at me, and went inside with the woman following him.

Seth Who do you think she was?

Cooper (*smokes his cigarette*) Oh, I know who she was. I recognized her just as she passed. Word was out she might be with him.

Seth Who?

Cooper Lee Radziwill, Jackie Onassis's sister. She was quite beautiful, and married to a prince at the time.

Seth Prince of what? Or I guess I should say of where?

Cooper Prince of some damn where. Who the hell knows? Prince of money is what he was. I'm sure he had plenty. (*smokes the last of his cigarette*, *stubs it out*, *takes a drink*) So I finally get up and go inside, and I see this squat little girl, some no-neck monster in a frilly dress who's an extra in the dinner scene. She walks up to Lee Radziwill, just beaming, so fat and beatific, and says, (*again in an exaggerated Southern voice*) "My daddy says you're a princess." And then the little girl turns to Truman. "And he says you're a queen." (*breaks into hard laughter*)

Seth (*laughing too*) So how did Capote take that?

Cooper He just stared at her. Didn't laugh. Then walked off. In a little while they started filming, so I had to go outside and keep my distance. I guess I can't say that I really met him, but there was that one odd moment.

Seth (*a pause*) Well, maybe not that odd. Moments like that happen between people.

Cooper Why, whatever do you mean, boy? (*leans forward toward the coffee table, reaches for his pack of cigarettes, lurches, and has to grab the corner of the table to keep from slipping off his chair*) Uh, oh. The drunkenness has got me. I'll be on the floor if I'm not careful. Wouldn't be the first time. (*reaches for his drink and swallows what remains in the tumbler*) I didn't look then like I do now. I wasn't bad looking.

Seth You think he was attracted to you?

Cooper How should I know? What difference does it make?

Seth It must have made some difference to you. You wanted to tell me about it.

Cooper I didn't bring you here to tell you anything. Or ask you anything. That what you think? I brought you here to tell you something?

Seth No. I thought you invited me as a friend. But you did ask me something, to go to Atlanta with you.

Cooper Maybe I invited you here as my patron saint. That's what all artists need, a patron. And with you I get a saint, too. Or so you pretend.

Seth Are we back to that?

Cooper I'm trying your patience. Do you have the patience of a saint? (*laughing*)

Seth Now you're talking in circles.

Cooper That's what one does when one can't walk, or talk, a straight line. One sits and talks in circles. It's a fine way to exist. (*leans backward in his chair and tilts his head toward the ceiling, as if he might want to sleep*) Those water stains up there, they look just like female genitalia. (*Seth looks upward.*) Don't you think?

Seth Not sure about that.

Cooper Oh, I can see them. It's pussies everywhere. (*lowers his head, leans forward again, drunkenly, then looks directly at Seth*) I'll tell you one thing. I have had my girls, and I have had my boys. (*Seth slowly nods and drinks from his beer. Cooper waits to see if Seth will speak.*) You can't look at me now, can you? Do I disgust you?

Seth No, Cooper. Of course not. (*laughing, nervously*) I know you've been with, well, not girls and boys but women and men. You've told me about a few of the women.

Cooper (*angrily*) You've known all this time I've been with men? And pretended you didn't? You shit! And you *laugh* at me? How did you know? Am I effeminate?

Seth I didn't pretend anything. And I'm not laughing at you. I just laughed from surprise at your reaction. And no, you're not effeminate. Or maybe a little when you quote Blanche DuBois, when you're drunk. But that's just you playing the role.

Cooper Oh, I've played the role, darling. I've played lots of roles. But I still want to know how you knew. Did some busybody tell you?

Seth (*picks up his bottle of beer but doesn't drink from it*) I honestly don't remember if anyone told me. I've just known.

Cooper You liar. (*lets out a drunken, guttural sound*) You think I'm awful. And I've tried so hard to . . .

Seth To what?

Cooper (*has begun to slide down into his cushioned chair*) Hide it from you.

Seth There was no need for that. I'm sorry. It must have been hard. Maybe that's why you invited me tonight.

Cooper To tell you? Oh, you shit. You *shit*. You made me . . .

Seth Why am I a shit?

Cooper (*his tone suddenly shifts, becomes gentle in the way only someone very drunk can manage*) Oh, you're not. I am. And a whore. You're a saint. (*in a Blanche DuBois voice*) You're too beautiful for this world. And I'm not being facetious. (*slides a little farther down in his chair and looks upward at the ceiling, as though he's looking through it at the night sky*) I can see the stars in the heavens, all the constellations. No more pussies, just stars. (*suddenly looks at Seth*) Tell me, do you have a pretty dick? I bet you've got a pretty dick.

Seth (*shaking his head in mild disbelief*) I really wouldn't know one way or the other, I don't guess. (*laughing*)

Cooper I bet you do have a pretty dick. (*pauses*) Now I *know* I've disgusted you.

Seth (*looks away from Cooper, then down at the floor*) Can't say I'm crazy about this topic of conversation, but no, you still haven't disgusted me. It's all right.

Cooper You always pretend to be so calm. But you're not. You just hold everything in — all your worries and fears. I know your fears. I can see them like I see that crack in the wall. You're scared. That's what you are. You try to hide in all that history you read, cover yourself up in dates and battles and dead soldiers and (*again in an exaggerated Southern voice*) sins of the past. I know what you are. You're scared of women. You like women, but you're scared of them. You've spent too much time alone, like me, and you don't know how to be close to anyone. So tell me, does pussy still scare you?

Seth (*stands, beer bottle in his hand*) Maybe that's enough, Cooper. All right? (*in a harder voice*) Enough.

Cooper (*looking up at Seth*) Why don't you just go ahead and get mad? I've never seen you mad. Try it out. See how it feels.

Seth (*takes a step toward Cooper — voice slightly raised, but not into the high register of full anger*) I've seen you get drunk and turn on people, lash out at them, insult them, even strangers, alone, like when you told that woman she looked like Ethel Merman. Did you see the hurt on her face? Did you *see* that? I did.

She was crushed. So let me ask you something. Why do that to people? You almost said it a little while ago, when we were talking about Bethany Gardner — whether you hated her. But you held back, didn't you? Just said it's not *her* you hate. Why hold back? Who do you hate?

Cooper I need a drink. This bottle's empty.

Seth You don't need a drink.

Cooper For me to answer would be like me telling you the sky is blue or the grass is green. What any fool can see doesn't have to be told. (*a pause, then a sudden shift in tone, his voice softening into the sound of a lament, again in the way only someone very drunk can manage*) I don't hate anybody in this world, no matter how I might sound. But I know I'm awful. I'm filled with awful. I confess it.

Seth (*slowly kneels down bedside Cooper's chair*) At the risk of sounding like a fool, you don't have to hate yourself. You're not awful. No more than anybody else at their worst. Forgive yourself.

Cooper (*looks up at the ceiling and back down at Seth*) The way you're kneeled there, I feel like I should anoint you, but I'm not worthy.

Seth Don't start with the saint business again. Let go of that, okay?

Cooper (*leans toward Seth*) Kiss me here. (*points to his cheek*) Just once.

Seth (*in a gentle voice*) No, but here, take my hand.

(*Seth reaches out with his right hand and Cooper reaches with his right, their hands clasping, palms together, thumbs locked*)

Cooper One kiss.

Seth Hold my hand, Cooper. Just hold my hand. It's all right.

Hold it as long as you'd like. And tomorrow, when you remember all this, don't feel bad. You don't have to be embarrassed.

Cooper (*leans his head backward again, is slumped far down into his chair, remains silent for quite some time, then looks toward Seth again*) You're holy. You are. Oh, you are.

Seth Stop saying that. When you do, I feel like an awful fraud, like I'm pretending something and don't mean to be, but am. As well as you can see me, you're seeing me only the way you want. I wish I could do something to show you that you're wrong.

Cooper (*lets out a deep sigh*) That's a beautiful speech. You're too good for this world.

Seth (*continues to hold Cooper's hand, shakes his head in exasperation*)As much as you can usually see, you sure can't hear.

Cooper (*leans backward again*) I need to rest my eyes. Will you sit with me while I do?

Seth You want to sleep?

Cooper Maybe. I don't know.

Seth I'll sit with you. You just rest.

Cooper In peace?

Seth Yes, in peace.

(*Seth draws his hand slowly out of Cooper's, guides Cooper's freed hand onto the arm of the chair, and carefully and quietly rises from his kneeling position. He goes and sits again on the small sofa. Moments pass. He drinks the last swallow of his beer, places the empty bottle on the floor, and looks around at the paintings on the walls. He rises again, steps quietly toward the painting between the nearest windows, studies it, then moves to the other paintings, studying each one. Finally he moves to the self-portrait beside the door to the kitchen, looks at it, then looks toward Cooper and back at the painting, then toward Cooper again, as if with each look he is comparing the man now with the young man he*

was. He walks lightly toward Cooper, up to his chair, looks down at him, and sees that he is passed out. Seth touches his shoulder, leaves his hand there a moment, completely still, then turns and picks up his beer bottle off the floor. He walks toward the kitchen, stops beside the self-portrait, and looks again back at Cooper. He hesitates, then removes the painting from the wall, holds it in one hand, the empty beer bottle in the other, and walks into the lighted kitchen. Cooper slowly raises his head, watches him. Seth places the bottle on a counter and walks out the door onto the stair landing beneath the glare of the outside light, the painting still in his hand. His steps sound against the metal stairs, then fade.)

Cooper (*clearly to himself*) It's yours. You blessed shit.

Curtain

Ace Boggess

The Value of Poetry

Little spider escaping from under the closet door &
sprinting across the desert of beige carpet
to the vast, enchanted wilderness beneath my bed

must, somewhere in the arachnid unconscious,
know it is exposed for a distance, prey
to whatever razor-beaked raptors circle

below the milky sky of my ceiling.
At any moment, its eight pumping pistons
might be ripped from the ground

by the opossum playing possum near the nightstand.
Surely this wasteland is overrun by lizards, frogs, &
wasps this knight errant prefers not to fight. Yet,

with all its eyes, it fails to notice me,
a lazy god looming, shoeless,
nestled in a nest of pillows & reading a book of poems

I soon will add to the free library down the street,
a smudge like a thumbprint on the back cover
awkwardly visible next to the author's face.

Ace Boggess

Yesterday's Spider

dropped from the lip
of the garage door
after it opened —
a reddish-brown stain
as if a single bead
of blood splashed
against an invisible wall &
dried. I would've
walked right into it
had the sun not offered
backlighting
as to a singer on stage
the moment before
the song takes a darker turn.
There would've been
screaming, would've been
icy paralysis
I otherwise feel
in crowds where strangers
have yet to say hello,
laugh at my jokes,
or drink. I can't say
the spider intended
any harm, although
its timing was suspicious
as it leapt from shadow
like an assassin
with a knife
between his teeth.
I noticed in time &
exited with my life,
trembling a little
as if struck by
a sudden wind.

Visualizer

Remember when this was the *in* thing to launch
while songs shuffled on the desktop computer?

Patterns flared outward like supernovae,
lines in all directions building new stars,

circles expanding, triangles, squares.
Colors shifted to accommodate mood:

blue or purple to denote the minor key
of a sad ballad, reddish orange for rage

of rock & roll. A simulation of synesthesia,
effortless & exact, the code

seemed to recognize differences
between a bopping, happy jam-band tune

by the Grateful Dead or Rusted Root &
the fist-pumping heartbeat of Judas

Priest's heavy metal, even fuzzing
to crowd noise on a live track

before ticking to center to start again
or rolling across the screen in a wave.

I could lounge in my desk chair &
watch for hours, Of course, I was high

all the time on Percocet, coke, or sleeping pills
that never helped me sleep, each of these

adding a private sense of transcendence
to a sequence of hallucinations.

Music for the eyes, it felt as though
the coders jammed along, their ones & zeroes

Ace Boggess

flutes & oboes played off-stage,
absent but somehow part of the performance,

deities who preferred their hands be visible
in every nuanced aspect of the world.

Catharine Savage Brosman

Woman with Mop and Bucket

She's smocked in blue, like peasants by Millet
at work, a crook or pail in hand, or bent,
perhaps, for sewing, nursing, sheaving hay,
their faces worn by pity and consent.

The airport crowds have atomized by now;
the loos are nearly empty. There, alone,
she traces arcs, a model showing how
it's done — left, right, ahead — as if to hone

her gestures as a dance routine. She sings,
a thread that rises, falls, and floats.
The words are muffled. Might her voice give wings
to home thoughts, in its melancholy notes?

I speak to her in English; no reply,
no recognition. I use Spanish then;
she's pensive, unaware. So should I try
my Creole French? But no; to speak again

would seem interrogation. Does she see
me, even, leaning as she swirls her mop?
She is the body of the melody,
its mute existence when the song must stop.

Catharine Savage Brosman

For Jane, on Her Ninetieth

It may be we're not meant for such great age,
enduring past the full "three score and ten."
But there's a time for all things, said a sage,
who, were he here, would see that modern men

call sixty "middle-aged," and ninety, still
in competition. Fifteen years or more
than we, perhaps, is "old"; yet, chance and will
can change horizons outward. With your store

of practice, prudence, your profound belief,
rejoice, sail well the channels that remain,
and let things resonate, the love, the grief.
Congratulations and best wishes, Jane.

Kale

What's this? New foodstuffs fans can rave about,
all green: chips, flatbread, pasta, rich with kale!
Perhaps old Popeye's spinach is worn out;
shiitake mushrooms, toney, are too pale

for folic acid; portobellos, tough
and brown, do not, I think, have chlorophyll.
And what of dandelions? Poor man's stuff,
suspect thereby, a garden weed, like dill.

And collard greens? A type of kale, in fact,
but southern, overcooked, with ham bone, salt —
ill-famed. Folk cooking's good, in the abstract;
but Dixie food partakes of Dixie's fault.

A salad made for the Thanksgiving feast
of cabbage, nuts, chopped kale, and who-knows-what
becomes the rage. The turkey, at the least,
deserves sincere appreciation — but

it looks and tastes as always. Novelty
and mania are key ingredients
in fashions; kimchi, fungi, bitter tea
can, oddly, turn into a preference.

A cheer for strange and rotten foods! Blue cheese
and tempeh, miso, sauerkraut — extremes
of tolerance, with tongue, radicchio; these,
with kale, prove sense cannot be what it seems.

Rick Campbell

The End of the Road: Portal, North Dakota, Part II

Near the Missouri

ND 1804 paralleled the east bank of the Missouri. Sometimes it was even close enough that I could see the great river. I traveled down river, wound through Bismarck and continued south. Here I made a bit of a tactical mistake. Had I crossed the river and traveled south on the west bank, there were more historical sites to see. I think I was getting tired and maybe I unconsciously chose not to explore more history. The day wore on and I was content on my side of the river, content to just drive. I crossed into South Dakota and continued south on to Mobridge. The town sits on the bank of what was the Missouri, but now is Lake Oahe. I got a room in a motel that catered to fisherman, though today it was cold and blustery and no one seemed too interested in being out on the lake. The motel office was full of guide pamphlets and pictures of fisherman holding trophy walleye. After I checked in and was wondering around the room, small as it was, I noticed that the cell phone kept changing time. The bathroom said 7 pm and near the bed it was 6. After puzzling this over and walking around the room watching my phone play with the hour, I checked my atlas and realized that the line between Mountain time and Central ran more or less through the middle of the lake. My phone was too sensitive to handle such proximity. I had to ask the motel maid what time it was to know which of the time options I should claim as true.

About this area, my guidebook gives me the usual message. The Arikara villages where Lewis and Clark met with local chiefs to try to win their allegiance away from the Teton Sioux are now under the waters of Lake Oahe.

When I left Mobridge, I saw a road heading off into the rolling hills and decided to take it. I still don't know its number, whether it was blue or not, but it went from paved to gravel and there was a conspicuous absence of signage; for a while I didn't care because I had filled my tank in Mobridge. What could go wrong? I drove for what seemed quite a while and was starting to despair of not knowing where I was going. I could have turned around, gone back, and chosen a bigger highway, but I hate turning

around and going back. I figure all roads go someplace, intersect something, and if you're on a skinny gravel road anything you come across is going to be bigger if not better.

It should be clear by now that I didn't use any GPS device. Then and still, I am more of a map man. This road I was on was not on the map, but I had faith. On I went. After few more miles I saw some silos and a couple of buildings gleaming on the horizon. Soon my gravel road crossed US 83 and I took the divided highway south toward Pierre. Other than the adventure of not knowing exactly where I was and hearing the crunch of gravel, there was little to say about this road. It cut through what would probably soon become tall fields of corn.

83 was just a highway on the high plains, empty and dusty, but I knew where it was taking me. Near Pierre I took SD 14 into the city and back to the river, looking for SD 1806. Had I not been alone, had DL (my muse?) been with me, I would have stopped and walked around the city. I would have explored the riverbank and gotten a good cup of coffee. Found some lunch.

Alone, I hooked up with 1804 and headed east. The Missouri was a river again here. The damming effects seen in Oahe did not extend this far downstream. This was one of my good-as-it-gets roads. Rolling hills, sometimes a wash, a small coulee, sometimes a glimpse of the river. The hills were beginning to turn a deep green and the road was recently blacktopped, so it was a black ribbon furling away from me, beautiful, peaceful, and I was enjoying the curves.

I entered the Lower Brule Indian Reservation. I want to like being on an Indian Reservation, but I know enough to know that I am just interloper. I have, since childhood, taken the Indians' side in each battle. Little Big Horn is my favorite. I've read dozens of Native American books, hundreds of poems. Big shit, I know. Just like 30 years of teaching on a Black college campus didn't make me Black or erase my white privilege, my fondness Sherman Alexie's work, my sadness after reading *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the fact that I'd read poetry with Sherwin Bitsui and hung out with Joy Harjo wasn't going to win me any kudos or respect on this reservation. I was respectfully passing through, just as I had a few days earlier on the Fort Berthold Reservation where I admired the beauty of the land and regretted the poverty of the ragged shacks, skinny sheep, and rusted pickup trucks down each dirt road I passed.

I was swooping through the curves, marveling at how well banked they were. I hardly had to brake. There were no other cars on the road. Around a bend I came upon a stunningly beautiful small herd of horses. The leader, the biggest one, was white with brown markings. I supposed that it was a stallion. It seemed to look me right in the eye and say keep going. Again, I wished DL was here. She knows horses. She could have told me what I was admiring, but I could not have admired them more even if I knew. Stallion, gelding, Bay, Pinto — Indian ponies — it didn't really matter.

A few miles and a couple of flocks of sheep later, it began to seep in that *really* there's no one else out here. It was mid-afternoon. The sky was beginning to darken. Every now and then I consider this prospect: I have 165,000 miles on my car, virtually no tools with me, and virtually no knowledge of how to work on a car. The fatalist in me (which comes to the forefront of my thoughts when I am least expecting him) figures this car, a 2007 Toyota Rav 4, has to break down some time and somewhere. But so far (I'd knock on wood but there's none within reach) everything was going swimmingly.

I was on the Lewis and Clark Trail and the Native American Scenic Byway. Though the Indians were certainly here first, they were sharing the billing with the Corps of Discovery. Many of the Indian accounts I'd been reading in preparation for this project said that Lewis and Clark were not really "a big deal" to most of the Indian people who encountered them. The biggest deal, certainly, was that L&C and their men did not kill any Indians during their exploration. That's remarkable. However, L&C were not the first white men that these Indians had seen, and their numbers were small — they were not an army. Talk was exchanged, goods bartered. All in all, a pretty good time was had by all parties, but the Indians were not in awe of the coming of white men and the talk of the powers of the Great White Father back in Washington.

Time went by and I left and I left again
Jesus loves a sinner but the highway loves a sin
Jason Isbell

I was on this shared trail and I was of little consequence too. If I were more adventurous, more gregarious, more garrulous, maybe I would have stopped and talked. I'm not. I didn't. I turned south on another gravel road and headed for the interstate. About 10 miles down the road it started raining and the temperature dropped quickly; rain was threatening to become hail and I had to pee. Standing behind my car, peeing in the cold rain sort of marked an end to this part of the journey. Soaked and cold, I drove on. At the interstate exchange, after I gassed up, I texted DL that I was heading home. I was already heading home, but now I was going to put some speed into it. Kennebec, South Dakota, cold rain, the 90, heading east.

The wind was blowing hard from the north, but the 90 is flat and wide and pretty empty. I drove and I drove. Drove right past the Corn Palace. Its signs reminded me of Pedro's South of the Border. Lots of signs. Don't miss it. 50 miles. 40 miles. Exit 332. Mitchell, SD. I almost stopped. I would have stopped if DL was with me. She's a better traveler if being a traveler is being part tourist. The Corn Palace retreated in my rearview mirror.

We had seen the 30-foot buffalo in Jamestown, the Turtle made of wheels in Dunseith, the International Peace Park, but I drove right past the Corn Palace. What can I say? It was raining. It was late afternoon. I had hours of daylight left and I decided to use them. I drove east toward Sioux Falls and took the 29 south toward the river that had slid away from me when I was on the 90. I joined it again at Sioux City and drove another hour south. It was after dark now and I had driven a bit longer than I should have, but I like to get past cities before I stop. I don't want morning city traffic waiting for me when I rise.

I found a cheap motel around Onowa, Iowa, that was close to a small Indian casino. I figured I'd get a good rate. It was nothing special and the desk clerk paid no attention as I snuck my dog out into the grass to do his business. I'd loaded up on beer and snacks at the local gas station, so being dead tired wasn't a big problem. This could have been a low point, but there was a Pirates game on the TV and that's about as good as a night alone gets.

The next morning I realized that my one star motel was smack in the middle of a corn field. The grass outside my room was

lush, wet from rain and probably being in a floodplain. The corn edging the motel parking lot was so high that I could not see the casino.

I loaded the pockets of my cargo shorts with "fresh" muffins that would no doubt last far past any reasonable time stamp on the package. It was time to hit the road. The sky was low, wet and dense, but soon the sun burned off the miasma. A few miles south of Onowa a beautiful little river flowed under the 29, the Little Sioux. I got off the highway because I liked the river's name and a sign claiming that this was the gateway to the Loess Hills. My good friend and fine poet Keith Ratzlaff's first book had Loess Hills in the title, and that was enough to make me feel I should explore.

The Loess Hills are Ice Age dunes made by drifting glacial flour. They range for over 200 miles along the east bank of the Missouri and are between 60 and 200 feet high. I entered the hills near the southern end of the Loess Scenic Byway.

A blacktop road wound through an old and nearly abandoned town called River Sioux, then it climbed into a "peak and saddle" topography, with narrow ridges, which fell off at near ninety-degree angles on either side of the road. Switch backs carried me up and up above the river valley. This land would have been a Run in Western Pennsylvania, a Holler in West Virginia. As I started to drive the ridge line the Dead played *Know You Rider* and then the Stones' *Sympathy for the Devil* came on. All of this echoed across a topography I'd seen before in a land I'd never seen before.

Five buzzards fed on a rabbit and Jagger sang "if you meet me show some courtesy … or I'll lay your soul to waste." Past Pisgah, The Dead sang "many worlds I've come since I first left home," and I came to a fork in the road and a detour. One county road detoured into another and I didn't know where either one would go, but it felt like the river was waiting to the west. I saw a sign for US 30 and knew if I took it east, I could roll all the way back through Ohio and into Pennsylvania on the Lincoln Highway; it was tempting. But I turned west, back to where I figured I would find the Missouri because that was my mission today. Lewis and Clark waited on the river. I drove through Missouri Valley, a town

named for the larger region it was in. A superfluous name. Like living in Florida, Florida. Costello sang "radio, radio, you better listen to the radio" and Gurf Morlix followed with "she's a river flowing away from me."

Back on the 29 I headed south again. Then more detour signs. Road construction. Road construction. Traffic being shunted up the off ramp and onto another road, so many cars that no one's moving. A hundred yards before I get to the ramp turned parking lot, a cop pulls the traffic cones away and my lane seems to open up. He doesn't wave me on or stop me, so I go. I'm the only car heading down the 29. Is this good luck or a mistake? What were we being detoured for? Will the road disappear up ahead? Will there be a bridge to nowhere? A tanker truck overturned spilling poisonous chemicals across Iowa? I go on. "I've got no expectations to pass this way again."

Percival exit. What if every grail quest is just about going home? "Won't you please read my signs, be a gypsy. Tell me what I hope to find deep within me." The 29, nearly empty, took me into Missouri and I wondered why all those other drivers had to detour off the highway.

Tarkio Road. "One toke over the line, Sweet Jesus." I need gas. I need to pee. My dog needs to pee. In the multi-purpose Stuckey's parking lot, a cop asks a young guy sprawled in a red Cavalier with zebra seat covers if he's having a bad day. The kid's wasted. What's he going to say? Fuck yes, officer, especially now. A young woman in the back seat holds her head in her hands. "If you're looking for some trouble you can find it on the Tarkio Road."

This is a sad place, despite the cheerful efforts of Stuckey's racks of peanut candy, coon skin caps, and schlock cowboy stuff announcing the Gateway to the West. Having a bad day? Fuck yes. We're "one toke over the line, waitin' for the train that goes home sweet Mary." Swallows are nesting in the eaves of the billboard. Cheap smokes. Trail's end. Muddy River Fudge. In the Stuckey's peanut sandwich shop trinket market, the men's room was marked Lewis and the women's Clark. What would Clark say? Meriwether seemed to be the womanly one, if one was. One toke over the line. I said no to the coon skin caps.

Out back a line of derelict washing machines clanked and tumbled as they washed the Super 8 sheets. Soapy water flowed out of hoses and rolled down the parking lot to a brown dirt ravine. Having a bad day? Tarkio Road is a mother.

In the rest area where I walk Mu Shu, a sign says that this land was deeded to Indians in perpetuity in 1830 and repurchased for $7600 in 1836. The Indians were removed to Nebraska. Everybody's crying perpetuity when they don't know the meaning of the word.

The 29 ran south along the river dividing Nebraska from Missouri. Today was going to be a driving day, and I was willing to give up a lot of Lewis and Clark to cover some miles. The day before I'd rather roared past Niobrara State Park in Nebraska where L&C began their study of the Plains in earnest and later the Sergeant Floyd Monument in Sioux City. Floyd was the only person in the Corps of Discovery, despite the great hazards and dangers encountered, to die on the journey. He died of a burst appendix, not an Indian arrow, a grizzly bear, drowning or freezing.

I stopped here and there to look at the river. I ate something at Independence Park near Fort Leavenworth, now more famous as a prison than a Corps of Discovery site. I kept rolling. In Kansas City I picked up the 70 and kept my car heading east. Somehow, I lucked out and missed rush hour traffic and in St. Louis caught the 55 toward Cape Girardeau.

Where the Missouri merged with the Mississippi, I understood why some river people thought that the Missouri was the greater river and that it should have swallowed the Mississippi and kept its name on its southward journey.

Travels on the Missouri were over. I was filled with a low grade regret the whole time I was near the Missouri River. I'd arrived too late. So little of the river was still river; not only was it no longer wild and untamed, it was not even there. The riverbed was underwater; the riverbanks were under water. The museums and visitor centers tried to maintain and convey river's message, but without the real river there as well, it was like asking Cooperstown and the Baseball Hall of Fame to be the whole story of baseball.

In two days, I had covered as much of the Missouri as The Corps' keelboats and pirogues did in five weeks of downriver travel. And for them going downriver was a breeze compared to their outbound, upriver travail. It took about six months for them to labor upriver to their Mandan camp. Even though I had reached what many consider the jumping off point of the Corps of Discovery, there was still a lot of river travel to follow. I planned to travel down the Mississippi and up the Ohio to Pittsburgh. Following the Corps' path in reverse was still my master plan.

Cape Girardeau, Missouri, had some sort of significance for me. I'd read of it in Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. I was excited about it and prepared to slow down and explore. About 40 miles north I dropped off the interstate and headed toward the river.

I was unprepared for the heavy tourist element. Billboards and more billboards. Riverboat history. Riverboat gambling. By early evening the setting sun was a gauzy spot over low hills, and the air was thick. The light seemed tinged with rose, but it wasn't beauty rose, it was soggy and smoggy. When I finally drove into town I was disoriented and soon disappointed. Everything looked like the typical interstate exit culture and architecture. Fast food. Gas stations. Outlet malls. Everything was jammed together in overlapping parking lots. I searched for my motel in a maze. It probably looked better if one came here by river.

The sky grew more dismal, but not as dismal as my motel. I'd been tricked by the blue and white pastoral web site photo. It wasn't even the same brand that I'd seen on the web but some cheap southern chain. Ugly, full of browns and greens, stained carpets. Lots of not well-to-do people roaming the corridors, a parking lot filled with work trucks. I was too tired to complain, too tired to ask for my money back and find something else. I bought some fast food and hunkered down.

The next morning, I looked for historic Cape Girardeau. As befits the narrative of much of my journey, the Cape that Cape Girardeau is named for was destroyed during a railroad construction project. Only a rock remains. One thing that I have long known was often reinforced on this journey: we didn't really give a shit for our history before it was old history. Progress, economic growth, real estate development destroyed much of the evidence,

the actual land and river, that Lewis and Clark traversed. Destroying the cape the Cape was named for was just another incident in this gruesome travel tale.

Historic Cape Girardeau was there, but not compelling enough to keep me around for a long time. I saw the old buildings and the river front park and then decided it was time to leave. It's fair to say that at this point of my journey, it would have been hard for any place to compel me to linger, but certainly I did not care to further explore this town. The bridge across the Mississippi dropped me in Illinois where I drove through Mounds on the way to Cairo.

Provenance — Driving the Ohio Backwards

Cairo. Not only is the water from two mighty rivers funneled into this vortex, but so is stinky, mucky, mosquito-ridden air. This is not the fertile vortex. Not what Egypt gleans from the Nile, despite the presence of the faux Cairo and Thebes. It's a shabby illusion. Fertile soil, plantations, cotton, all gone to ruin. I drove through Future City and it was far from it. The people are poor, the towns run down, the soil exhausted. You feel like snakes and spiders and haints will come down and crawl into your car. I was worried. I was oppressed. More than any other place I had been on this journey I wanted to be somewhere else. I wasn't stopping to pee or buy a drink. I wasn't going to look at some curious dilapidated fake western saloon. No, get me out of here. I knew Cairo was in Illinois, but everything else was nebulous and shifting. In Missouri, in Illinois, in Kentucky, out again. Swamp water puddled in the swale of every road. Only the bridges were interesting. They were old metal bridges, two lane, metal grills in the roadbed, metal girders overhead. They weren't wide enough for a semi and another car. Even two cars side by side was pushing it. Luckily there were not many other cars on the roads or the bridges.

I was heading for Kentucky on U.S. 51 when I saw a sign for Fort Defiance State Park. I parked and walked a trail to the bluff at the confluence of the rivers. When Lewis and Clark were here they began their serious study of river's ecosystem. Clark calculated that the Ohio was 1274 yards wide and the width of Mississippi

1435 yards. From my observation point only a few feet above river level, the rivers were hard to distinguish.

From Fort Defiance I got back on the highway, made a wrong turn, and ended up crossing the Mississippi on U.S. 60 back into Missouri. This was an even smaller, funkier bridge, with an immediate left turn as the bridge hit land. I turned around in an abandoned gas station, crossed the river again and couple of miles north found the bridge across the Ohio and into Kentucky.

If one looks at the confluence of these great rivers, it's unclear why the Ohio became the Mississippi. The Ohio is flowing south when the Mississippi joins it from the west and they both, almost twice as wide now, continue south on their journey to New Orleans. To go up the Mississippi, there's an oxbow at the confluence, a veritable U-turn if one's on the Ohio. It also jams a lot of bridges and three states into a small area of land. Fort Defiance is in Illinois on a thin spit of land between the two rivers and between Kentucky and Missouri. Because of my bad navigation I was in all three states in a matter of ten minutes. Luckily, I love bridges.

Near the intersection of US 51 and 60 I saw a giant cross on a hillside and went to investigate. From the hill I could finally see the two rivers merge. Historical markers mentioned Lewis and Clark's encampment at the confluence below. The cross bothered me. Ninety-five feet tall, made of steel and meant to dominate the horizon and be seen from three states. It was a Christian Manifest Destiny, as if the conquistadors were bringing their God to the heathens. To me it was violation, a confusion of history and geography and evangelical symbolism. Fort Jefferson Hill Park played upon history by loosely referencing Fort Jefferson, which George Rogers Clark had established in 1789, but on a site closer to the rivers. The fort was abandoned, as was the town of Fort Jefferson; much later in the 20th century the good people of the region established this park and erected their giant cross. They brought the history of the old fort and Lewis and Clark up the hill and installed them at the base of the cross. I was bothered by this co-opting of Lewis and Clark for religious propaganda. The Corps of Discovery's mission, and Lewis and Clark's beliefs, were refreshingly secular; this cross infringed on that, rubbing me wrong. I wanted to argue with someone but fortunately there was no one around. This was my cross to bear. I sat and studied

the rivers until my low-grade anger went away.

Now I was on a rather long home stretch. Over 900 miles. Lewis began his journey on the Ohio River in Pittsburgh, and I began my life about 20 miles downriver in the Beaver Valley. So now I was going home. I crossed into Kentucky on US 60 and soon took a blue highway to get closer to the Ohio's bank. This excursion had me traveling through flatland farm fields and brought me a view of Monkey's Eyebrow. Hardly a town, but a memorable name. Legend has it that if you look down on the town from the hill above, it looks like a monkey's eyebrow. I can't verify that as I never climbed a hill, and as someone wrote, who really knows what a monkey's eyebrow looks like. I slowly, very slowly at times, since each little monkey town has a 25 mph speed limit, wound my way toward Paducah.

It was hot and hazy, getting near Memorial Day, and soon the full weight of a southern river summer would descend upon this valley. *Many years ago, in the early 70s, I'd been around here before when I'd come to find my friends who lived on a farm. All I remember now was that it was near Paducah. I had an old Ford wagon that a biker near Lake Erie had welded the frame together on and then I'd set out southward. I was going back to Florida via Western Kentucky. I often traveled like that. I didn't know where these friends lived, but in those days highway hope was high so I stopped at a gas station on the edge of Paducah and asked the guy with the longest hair if he knew Jimmy. Yea, man he said.*

Where's he live, I asked?

You won't find him on your own, he replied. Wait a few minutes and then follow me out there.

Nowadays, the days of meth and opioids, following a long-haired stranger into the back roads of rural Kentucky isn't a great idea; maybe it wasn't then either, but it was the way I and many like me traveled. We trusted the kindness of strangers who looked like us. I followed this guy out of town, off the paved road and down some red clay roads to a farmhouse that was engulfed in green. Beans on a fence. Marigolds. Morning glories. Some marijuana and corn in the side yard. Kudzu rose on the hill behind it. We pulled off and I followed my guide to the screened porch. Jimmy was out

there picking his guitar. That's what he was doing every other time I'd found him. I spent a few days wherever we were, took on two day's work hanging tobacco, and then drove that Ford wagon on south to Florida. The exhaust system was crap. So I wired some beer cans on it. They fell off in Alabama, and when I got to West Palm Beach I was driving down a sand road behind the factory my brother worked in when the frame fell out. It speared the sand, the car bucked up and slammed back down. I took the plate off and left it there. My brother gave me an even worse car that was, for the moment, still running.

I crossed the Ohio for the third time that day figuring to work my way up the Illinois bank of the river. On the map it looked more promising, but it was sort of a road-less-traveled illusion. Both sides of the river looked about the same on paper and I decided I liked Illinois better than Kentucky. No good reason. I had done little or no research on this region. For the trip out west on the 52 I'd read everything I could find. My armchair travel was very thorough.

But for this return journey I'd done little. No one says go east young man. No one goes east looking for a new life, for gold, for destiny. That's why my guidebooks had to be read backwards. Lewis and Clark spent twice as much time and twice as many pages in their journal going west as east. Neither of them made this journey up the Ohio. Keep heading up the river was the only plan I had. Each night I'd study my map to see what might show up the next day.

My decision to cross into Illinois was immediately rewarded when I entered Metropolis on the other side of the bridge. Superman rose to a giant height over the gas station complex I needed to visit. This area had long been important to many Native American cultures and was the site of a French fort before the Revolutionary war. Lewis and Clark stopped here when it was Fort Massac. It's only fitting that Superman would live here. Billboards informed me that were I to linger another couple of weeks in this pastoral land I could take part in the annual Superman celebration that drew fans from all over the world. Alas, I had miles to go before I could sleep and I drove off, watching Superman become a distant hero.

It's often true that one bank of the Ohio is more beautiful than the other. Or one side is more developed, more commercial, wealthier than the other. One side's escarpment is higher and more abrupt than the other. In Ohio, the west bank of the river is higher, more forested than the east bank in West Virginia and Kentucky. However, that more level bank has more factories and energy plants and therefore jobs and larger towns.

Here, in Shawnee Forest, both sides of the river were undeveloped, but the west side offered a highway that ran closer to the riverbank. That's why it was my road.

I took a blue highway north along the river. It was easily the most scenic land I'd driven since leaving South Dakota. I dawdled. I liked the names. Rosiclare, Cave Rock, Saline Mines. At Golconda I drove down to a marina on the river. There was a club van parked on the levee and a number of young men in matching t-shirts stood there watching the river flow. I thought it was church group out on an excursion until the armed guards yelled for everyone to get back in the van and they drove off.

"Road I ride gonna set me free."

A few miles north I found Old Shawneetown. The Shawnee were an important tribe along the river and this was one of their centers in the mid-18th century. It became a US government hub when this area was part of the Northwest Territory. Lewis and Clark stopped here too on their way to the Missouri. It was a financial center in the 1830s and a couple of the old banks are still standing. The people had, for the most part, been moved inland to New Shawneetown because the river often flooded these streets. Today it was a pleasant place to stop and walk around, to let the dog have his walk too. We ate lunch and felt both historical and forgotten. In the park it seemed like time had not only stopped, but it and everything it once carried had moved away. It was eerily quiet, too empty to be peaceful. Less than 200 people still lived here, down from 1900 in 1840. You could feel their absence even though most of them had only moved five miles inland.

From Old Shawneetown I drove north and crossed the Ohio into

Indiana. I had a purpose here. A plan. A destination. For nearly 40 years I had wanted to see New Harmony, Indiana, where my Rappite people (I thought of them as my ancestors) settled when they left their first American home in Harmony, PA. New Harmony is near the banks of Wabash, just a few miles north of its confluence with the Ohio. I headed up Indiana 69 toward the historic village.

When I was in grade school, we took a field trip to Old Economy, where the Harmony Society made its final home after leaving New Harmony. As a kid I paid it little attention. It wasn't as good as trips to the amusement park or even the Baden donut shop. I often walked past the old houses occupied by mill families without giving them much thought. It wasn't until I quit hitchhiking and went to college that I studied these folks. Their group had many names. Rappites, because their leader was George Rapp. Harmonists, because they built an intentional community in Harmony, PA, and then later Economites after they moved to Economy in the 1820s. They were a commune much like the more famous Shakers and the Oneida Perfectionists. Millennialists, they believed God would come and take his faithful to heaven in their time. The world would end too, but that was a minor concern if you were among the blessed.

New Harmony was the second of their earthly homes. The first Harmony settlement was in the hills around what's now Butler, PA, and it was deemed too far off the commercial path for the Society to be fiscally successful. Even though the world was to end in their time, and they communally shared wealth and property, they wanted to amass a considerable amount of wealth while they still lived. So they moved to Indiana and created a life on the Wabash. Ten years later they decided to leave. They said the land was too wet, malarial, and too far from the wealth of the East. They sold New Harmony to the English industrialist Robert Owen, a social experimenter in utopian thought, and moved back to a fine spot of land on the Ohio where I was many years later to grow up. They succeeded in becoming rich even if they were wrong about the world ending.

Owen believed in a more secular utopia — a worker's world. He and his supporters tried to make this intentional community in New Harmony. I'd read about this town, written papers on

it, and fancied myself as the vagabond driver in an old car who knew more about this experiment than most who came here. For the first time on this journey home, I knew where I wanted to go and knew I'd stay a couple of days.

I spent the first night in Harmonie State Park since it was too late to tour the New Harmony grounds. As I rolled up to the gate-house I saw a sign saying that pets were not allowed in the Park's cabins, so I hid Mu Shu under blankets and figured he would not bark if there were no annoying traffic cones in sight. I parked and walked up to the office and got my cabin. Mu stayed quiet.

The cabins were great. Log structures, a big fireplace, front porch with rockers. I felt bad staying in such a wonderful place after making DL sleep in two-star motels and that tick campground in North Dakota. She would have loved this place. Mu liked it and he would gladly have shared.

The park was on the bank of the Wabash and as we walked the trail I sang *Wabash Cannonball* to Mu Shu. It had been a long day, so I gathered firewood and cooked dinner in the outdoor grill. Later I called DL and told her I was sorry. There was no TV so we fell asleep early.

The next morning we drove the few miles in to New Harmony and explored the Village; the houses and commercial establish-ments were built when New Harmony was a working commune. Now they some were museum exhibits, but others were stores and restaurants. Some were houses for current townsfolk. Rules were strict about what could not be done to alter these early 19th century structures. My favorite place was the Working Men's Institute's library.

Owen and his supporters were intent on making a worker's uto-pia and believed in free education. They believed in bridging the gap between the wealthy and the working poor by establishing free libraries; 144 were built in Indiana and Illinois. The one in New Harmony was the first and now the only one remaining. It's a grand building. I stood in the grass and stared. It was sort of the fulfillment of a dream, two dreams, to see this place and to see workers honored, respected, treated fairly. When I walked in, I was feeling righteous. It was as if I was participating in some great

victory that I'd had little or no hand in bringing about. I was a working-class kid turned PhD professor; I was seeing in the flesh what I'd studied in books. I never felt so good entering a library, even the Carnegie.

A woman who worked at the Institute greeted me, and I told her my story as if I was a prodigal son returning. She sat with me for a long time, talking, listening, answering questions. I joined the Working Men's Institute; I browsed the holdings. I even did a spot of research. I would have stayed all day, but Mu was out in the car sitting in the shade of huge sycamores.

I ate lunch in a sandwich shop built in the 1830s. I had pie. It was no holds barred today. I was making up for the sparsity of life since Regina. After lunch we walked the grounds, looked at exhibits and historic buildings. Mu was reserved in his praise but glad to be out of the car.

Then we found the Labyrinth. It was made of tall hedges in concentric circles. The goal was to make it to the stone Rappite Temple at the center. There was no minotaur. Nothing threatening. It was more like driving a NASCAR track than walking in a labyrinth. One just kept going. There was shortcut at the front gate that led straight to the center, but I figured that was for the elderly and infirm. I intended to walk the whole maze. One couldn't get stuck or lost in this one. There were no choices, once you began walking you just kept on until you reached the center. It was like going through airport security but there were no guards waiting to search you. The spaces between the hedges were very narrow, good for one person at a time. A wide person would certainly brush the hedges. Mu Shu was frustrated. Since he was only ten inches off the ground he could tell that there was a faster way to do this by just ducking under the hedge, but he was a good dog and put up with my quest.

Swallowtails and monarchs, or maybe the ones that look like monarchs, flitted between the hedges. Soon enough we were out of the maze and maybe marginally enlightened and uplifted, but I was already uplifted by the Working Men's Institute. It would stay with me.

Back to the River

From New Harmony, essentially a detour from the river journey, I headed south to Evansville. I have driven through every state in the continental United States, so it's odd when I find myself in a place that I have never seen before. Evansville was one of those places. It's possible that I was not even sure where it was until I was there following a road along the Ohio's northern bank. Along what the French settlers called *La Belle Rivière*, I found a park, picnic tables and a great view of the river. We were on a bluff that offered a view of the waterfront and I needed a discovery like this, but as was the case in Pierre, without DL I did not stay long enough to explore the city.

In a very definite way, my failure to slow down and explore where I am when I am alone is a problem. Was I better at exploring when I was younger? I don't think so. When I traveled alone during my 20s, and I traveled for about seven of those ten years, I was usually broke. If I was hitchhiking, I probably had less than 50 dollars in my pocket. I didn't own a credit card. I could afford these travels mostly because I did not stop. Many nights I slept on the road, literally. I slept near the top of interstate overpasses. At the top of the steep incline there's a shelf about three feet wide and two feet under the roadbed. This shelf is dry and relatively clean. It's relatively safe too, since no one can see you up there. It's hard and cold and the highway is loud when traffic rumbles two feet above your head. Since it's the interstate there's almost always something rumbling. I slept remarkably well on those concrete beds; I can't say that rumbling became a lullaby, but it didn't often keep me awake.

This makes my writing about travel decidedly noncommercial. Travel mags are not looking for cheapo cheapo travel articles. I write essays and memoirs, and they are not intended to be guidebooks or how to see the High Plains. Sometimes, as in this essay, when ten or twelve hours of a day are spent driving, there's not much "travel" to write about. The miles go by. Fields, plains, swamps, hills, mountains, rivers, buildings, town and cities go by. When I stop it's usually at a gas station. It's quite possible that I am writing philosophy, cultural critiques, music reviews, and above all, a memoir. I am writing about me. No one should want to travel like I do unless they already do. I'm not going to sell articles to Conde Nast, and there's little I can tell people about what they ought to do or see on the road. This road. Any road.

On the river in Evansville, while I'm eating something that includes bread, Mu Shu is near my feet, eating or waiting for scraps. Mu Shu is about 14, he's still pretty lively. It turns out that he likes rivers and lakes, or else he does not understand what they are. He walks down to the shore like he's walking in the yard and steps into the water and keeps walking. He does not swim. If the water is calm and shallow I let him get belly deep, which is only about five inches, and then I pick him up. I don't know how far out he would walk. I don't know if he'd start swimming when the water got near his head. On the outbound journey he walked into the Ohio and started floating down stream. Luckily I had a grip on his leash and pulled him out. He repeated this trick in the Missouri and the Mississippi. I don't know what he's thinking.

After leaving Evansville, I stopped at Angel Mounds, a Mississippian culture settlement. Maybe I was feeling guilty for not exploring the city, but I wasn't on a mission to explore cities. I was driving the river and the Mounds were in the river's floodplain. Someone had the idea, good or bad, to make the Visitor's Center look like faux mounds. Probably all the Indians who lived here back in the Mississippian day could come and park now. The lot holds well over 200 cars and has 30 or 40 spaces big enough for buses. It's an educational center in an extensive corn field. Sometimes what one chooses to get off the road and explore isn't really worth the stop.

Back on Indiana 66 we meander up the river. This is perhaps the best river driving yet. The road winds, climbs and falls, and follows the riverbank closely. I am drifting into a bit of trance watching the splashes of black tar flash in front of me. This two-lane highway feels familiar, like the hills above and along the Ohio where I grew up. I convince myself that I am home. That all of the Ohio River is home. This is what I know. This is where I grew up. I know it like the back of my hand, it's in my blood. During this reverie I go through a bridge construction zone. I drop down a steep hill, go through a sharp curve too quickly and miss, or misread, a road sign. I was staring at the old bridge and I didn't notice that I'd slid off 66 onto 166. I'm heading down this even smaller and more tar splashed road, still in deep thought about how I feel this road deep in my blood and bone, when I have to jam on the breaks to keep from driving into the Ohio. 166 ran right into the river. There used to be a ferry here but now

the pavement just disappears. I laugh and chide myself. Maybe I am not home. Maybe I don't know this road all that well. Maybe I don't really know where I am. After meditating on the river and looking at Kentucky on the far shore, I turn around and make my way back toward that construction site where I figure I lost my way. There it is. 66, right where I lost it. I turn right and, paying more attention, as befits someone driving a road he's never seen before in a land he's never been in before, I head east again. Upriver, figuring home is up there somewhere, but still hundreds of miles away.

What I knew of the river was not learned, or experienced, as a life on the river. We did not boat. As I kid, I did fish for carp and catfish in the oily waters. Actually, no one fishes for oil slicked carp and catfish, we just wanted to get away from home and fish. Usually we played baseball, but some days, maybe for a change of pace or scenery we'd go down to the river. It wasn't easy to get to. We walked through a large field of weeds, cut through an old and abandoned cemetery, crossed a wide set of railroad tracks, and slid down the riverbank to a spit of land that jutted into the river. Then we threw our doughballs out and waited for polluted fish to bite. It was fun and none of us had yet to see a trout or a bass or any fish a person would want to eat.

My Ohio River was mostly seen from a car going down Route 65, from the hill I lived on, or when I sat with my Grandpa and watched barges haul coal to the mills.

As I more mindfully continued upriver, I contemplated this strangeness. I was only a few hundred miles from home and yet I had never been here before. I was on my native river and I had never seen it before. Heraclitus' famous maxim that you can never step in the same river twice grew to though I grew up on this river I had never been here before. This was either a New Physics thought experiment, or it was true that there are thousands of Ohio Rivers. I knew one of them well; I knew others in some varied and marginal measure. This one I did not know at all, and yet I did. There is the one Ohio River and the many. I was heading up one of the many and there were many more to come.

North of Tell City, in the Hoosier National Forest, I stopped at a creek to pee. Restrooms are hard to find on backroads. I had

a sudden urge to fish. I had no license, but I figured just a couple of casts. I rarely catch fish these days anyway. First cast, my spoon hit the water and something big took it. I fought it for a few runs and finally pulled a fish of about 25 inches long out onto the bank. I wasn't sure what it was, but I looked it up later and found it to be a blue, or black carp. It's an invasive species that's currently a problem in the Ohio River basin. The only fish I catch in a long time and it's a criminal.

I wove my way on up the river as the sun started to fall and in the interest of finding a place to sleep before dark, I got on the 64 to drive toward Louisville. Technically, or geographically accurately, since I was on the north side of the river, I drove through Clarksville, Indiana, not Louisville, KY. Clarksville was founded by George Rogers Clark, Revolutionary War hero and older brother of William Clark. George Rogers Clark was given a tract of 150,000 acres in payment for his services during the war. There was no shortage of land to requisition from the Indians and give away.

Clarksville is next to Jeffersonville. I wondered as I drove into town is this "The Last Train to Clarksville," though I guessed there was a Clarksville for every ten Clarks and there are a lot of Clarks. What I should have stopped to see and didn't because of the falling darkness was the Falls of the Ohio. I told myself I could go back in the morning, but since way leads on to way, I didn't go back I went on.

I should have gone back. The Falls are, or were, extensive rapids that when Lewis came down river were impassable and required portage. They were a speed trap. River travelers had to unload goods, portage around the falls, and then reload and get back in the river. This created all manner of work for the good people of Louisville, Jeffersonville, and Clarksville. When Lewis came down the river the roar of the falls could be heard from ten miles away. I didn't hear it. The dam and lock system has essentially done away with the Falls. And I had my windows rolled up and my music playing.

Around Clarksville I got another cheap motel room. I can't remember a thing about it. I am sure that Mu Shu and I slept there. In the morning we were off again. Very quickly we passed an Amazon.com shipping center. It looked like a top-secret military base.

Fences were high. Security was tight. The gates were manned with guards. It was spooky. I've spent much of the last twenty years shipping books to Amazon sites and this was the first time I had ever seen one. I wanted to stop and explore but I did not want to get shot or arrested.

Another day on the river. The highway went inland for a few miles but returned to the river in Madison, KY. If I were a travel writer, I'd say this was a town to visit. It was as close to the river as one could get without being on a dock. It's on the Ohio River Scenic Byway and its small downtown has been remade for tourists. Kitschy shops. Restaurants. Bakeries. Besides Evansville, it was the first town I'd gone through on the Ohio that was investing much in inviting tourism. I'm not a B&B guy because I don't want to talk to someone as if we are friends when I am paying to sleep in their bed and use their bathroom. In a B&B I feel like I can't make a mess. I have to clean up after myself and not use too much toilet paper. But there was one that had DL been with me would have been tempting. We could have strolled the streets; I could have watched her shop. The house offered a beautiful view of the river. Since it was just Mu and me, I dawdled. I bought a scone and then we went on.

Later, doing post drive research, trying to figure out where I'd been and what I'd seen and didn't see, I visited the city of Madison website. It's dominated by a You Tube video of the bridge across the Ohio being blown up in a construction project. One two three and boom. The middle of bridge explodes and falls into the river. The catfish below must have been shocked. This was a couple years before I drove through and the new, wider bridge had just been completed months before I was there.

I didn't cross the new bridge but continued upriver and stopped at the Markland Lock and Dam to see if I could watch the lock operate. There weren't any boats in sight, and I was too impatient to wait around. I crossed the river there and was back in Kentucky. The next towns were Ghent and Warsaw. I wonder often at Americans' predilection for naming their new world towns and cities after Old World places. Some cases make sense to me. My hometown was called Baden; it was settled and named by Germans, many of whom came from Baden-Baden. They had the good sense to figure one Baden, in this New World, was enough.

Places like New Berlin, New Amsterdam, New London also make sense. A second case I can understand is calling your newly christened town Athens, Rome, Jupiter, Sparta—name your town after Gods or the great cities of antiquity. It's instant credibility. Like naming your kid Lebron or Bruce. But Ghent and Warsaw I was puzzling over.

Again, historical markers (and Wikipedia later) came through. Story has it that Patrick Clay suggested that Ghent would a good name for this little river town. It was originally called McCool's Creek Settlement. Ghent (then in Belgium) is the city where England and the United States signed the treaty ending the War of 1812. Obscure? Now yes, quite. But to Patrick Henry and other patriots a few years after the end of that war, the name seemed appropriate and honorable. It's not as poetic as McCool's Creek though.

Warsaw raised its own question. How many Poles could have settled this part of the river? I stopped at the Courthouse to read the historical marker. Not only did I find out that this was the oldest operating courthouse in Kentucky, but the curious story of how Warsaw got its name. The rich guy who owned the land the town was built on named his town Fredericksburg after his hometown in Virginia, but later the Postal Service wanted it renamed so that there would not be two towns of the same name. (This policy obviously didn't catch on or we'd have far fewer Athens, Decaturs, Jeffersons and Washingtons.)

Warsaw's naming is a weird example of what literature can make happen. A riverboat captain was reading *Thaddeus of Warsaw*, by Jane Porter (a book that we have probably forgotten by now, but was quite the best seller in its time. It had 84 editions) and for some reason this suggested name won the day.

US 42 as it enters Ghent was in bad shape. Frost heaves, potholes, and a generally tough slant made me feel like I was going to get far too close to the river. Ghent was another town in disrepair. Sometimes this narrative has taken on a dystopian tone, but I'd argue against that reading. The salt-of-the-earth towns I'd been driving through from Cairo to Ghent had no utopian element at all. There's no opposite to the hardscrabble existence, no fall from grace. These places, most of them, never saw the high life, never

had a big shot at the American dream. These towns and people scraped and scrapped by. If ever they flourished it was a least a hundred years ago when commerce and people used the river to get where they had to go. To call this barebones reality dystopian is to invest it with a sense of loss that doesn't work because there was never much to lose.

Near Warsaw I left the river and drove across Kentucky on what certainly should have been a four-number blue highway, but the ones I were on had only two, KY 32 and 22. The hills, not mountains, ran mostly north to south and the highways cut across them. We climbed and we fell. We switchbacked as if we were deep in the mountains. These highways would give the Blue Ridge Parkway a slow run for its money. Driving these roads also requires faith because signs are scarce. Everyone driving from Sparta to Jonesville knows where they are and where they are going and don't need highway signs. These roads were not meant for the crosscountry driver. I was that driver. I rarely got to 45 mph. It was beautiful country but there turned out to be too much of it. The views started to meld into each other. I drove through a lot of farmland and no shortage of small cemeteries. It seemed like more people had died around here than still lived here. I missed the river. Eventually I missed rest areas and truck stop bathrooms too.

I was more than ready to get back to DL and West Virginia. The hundreds of switchbacks and sharp curves were like obstacles between me and a straight, fast highway. I started to regret my decision not to grab the Interstate in Cincinnati and zoom off toward West Virginia. Those are the kinds of regrets you can't really make up for, so I was oh so slowly winding my way southeast back toward the 64.

I was starting to feel like I was driving Zeno's Paradox. I kept going further and 64 was not getting closer. Half-way remained too far for too long. It was hot too. When I saw what I hoped was an interstate exchange on the horizon I tempered my joy until I could confirm that it was not a mirage. There's comes a point in my travels, on a trip, where I am more than ready to get there, to shut the car off, to walk across some grass and enter whatever house I've been heading for. When this happens it's as if the air leaks out of the journey and there's little left to see, little to talk

or write about. This was one of those moments.

64 was real and I got on; I floored it, more or less, got up to 78 and set the cruise control. Kentucky gave way to West Virginia four exits later. I crossed the Big Sandy River and had come full circle back to Huntington.

I was no longer following the Ohio home to where I was born and raised. I was going to Fairmont, WV, to DL. I thought of her waiting for me there, though she was probably working or out riding her horse. That was close enough, close to "six days on the road and I'm going to make it home tonight."

I felt I could ditch the Ohio because I'd driven the stretch between Pittsburgh and Huntington once this year and twice last year. I'd driven through Martins Ferry thinking about James Wright. Driven through Steubenville and remembered sneaking into a Canned Heat concert. Driven through East Liverpool and imagined my grandfather there, though my family is largely dysfunctional and I don't know what my grandfather did there.

I'd driven through the bend at the Pennsylvania line and driven up and down the river through the Beaver Valley and Allegheny Valley, past my hometown, the mills now dead, past Neville Island, past the West End Bridge to where the Ohio meets its confluence. I decided not to do it this time, though I knew I'd do it again. I had plans to go to Sistersville, WV, and ride the ferry across the Ohio. I had no intention of looking for the house I'd crashed in back in the 70s when I was hitching up the Ohio. That time, I was walking through Sistersville and it did not look or feel like a place a long-haired hitchhiker should be with night coming. Then a woman on her porch told me to come in. She said it was not good to be out there on the street. I agreed and went in, but not without caution. What if she was a serial killer? What if this was a post-modern Hansel and Gretel? I entered anyway. There were a lot of street kids there, all of them younger than I. She said she ran a sort of an unofficial runaway shelter. Times were hard in the mill towns along the river and a lot of kids were in trouble with their parents, or with someone. She fed them and gave them a place to sleep. She fed me and I rolled my bag out in the corner of a room. I was uneasy and sleep didn't come quickly but it came. Early in the morning I thanked her and got back on

Highway 2 to head upriver.

64 went through Cross Lanes where up in the hills above the Kanawa River my mother is buried with her parents. It passes Saint Albans where my uncle and cousins lived and we'd go a couple times a year when I was young. It seemed to me to be the heart of West Virginia. They lived high in the hills on a clay road; my aunt's vegetable garden was terraced into their steep backyard. One of my cousins had a scar from where a shell that had somehow gotten into the burning trash had ripped into his side. I remembered going to the movie theater to see Elvis in Blue Hawaii, walking over the river on a bridge with metal gridwork, and being scared looking at the river beneath my feet. Mu and I passed Nitro, the home of Lew Burdette, who I was supposed to be very distantly related to, and Dunbar where my mother went to high school.

Once through the confusion of Charleston, where 64, 77, and 79 joined in a fast jumble, I headed north up 79, rolling, swooping and diving like a hawk through the mountains. A couple of hours later I was crossing the Monongahela River and driving up the steep hill to DL's old bungalow.

The road trip was over. What would I call it? Outbound on 52: Home on the Rivers. Not a catchy title.
Maybe --

Going home, going home
By the waterside I will rest my bones
Listen to the river sing sweet songs
To rock my soul

Dan Campion

Galimatias

You slip into the river but climb out
and lie still, convalescent, on the bank.
I take you in my arms and start to speak
instead of listening. And then I wake.
What hint, I wonder, do I have to thank
for this vignette, what sin for the mistake
of saying something, when without a doubt
you had some words for me I'll have to seek
upstream, in tributaries, drooping leaves,
rain tumbling through gray air, and never find.
What woke me up and left us stranded there
is obvious. The world is full of thieves.
They steal our goods, and we must be resigned —
again a speech where wisdom would forbear.

Dan Campion

Grotesques

Though cut in stone they slither and contort,
Uriah Heeps of both the animal
and mineral worlds. And we in turn distort
our faces when we see them, guttural
expressions in our throats, may even wring
our hands in horrored sympathy and fear
and loathing. Some grotesques, however, sing,
no matter how atrocious we appear
in cramped incomprehension of their plight,
for, frozen as they look, they know they'll wear
to nothing mercifully, while our kind fight
through generations, suffering. Don't stare.
It's not polite to gawk at ugliness,
not even in the mirror of duress.

Catherine Chandler

Good-bye Song

> *Ah, when to the heart of man*
> *Was it ever less than a treason*
> *To go with the drift of things,*
> *To yield with a grace to reason,*
> *And bow and accept the end*
> *Of a love or a season?*
>
> — Robert Frost, from "Reluctance"

i.

This year I thought I knew where to begin —
with autumn's bow to the encroaching night,
the fade, the giving way, the giving in,
the ripeness turned to rot. I thought I might

go further still, and pledge allegiance to
the incandescence of a dying sun,
and sport my newfound skill to shrug on cue
as leaves dropped from their branches, one by one.

I'd welcome winter with an open mind
and love it with an open hand. I'd show
the whole world (and myself) how I'm resigned
to the hypothesis of letting go.

For one who's known the lyrics all along,
the time had come to sing the good-bye song.

ii.

The time has come to write a good-bye song;
and if it must be sad, one can't go wrong

with universal *I remember whens*;
with *au revoirs* and *till we meet agains*;

where tracks of tears and unchained melodies,
like mawkish Sonnets from the Portuguese,

will either move the hardest heart of stone
or else give rise to a collective groan.

But I will not resort to songs sung blue
when bidding fare-thee-well. So, here's to you,

the blessing and the burden and the bane
of my existence. Let the song explain

in every minor key and shade of black,
the self-destructive art of doubling back.

iii.

The self-destructive art of doubling back —
that catchy riff or classical refrain —
can conjure repetends that come and go
and either lead you down a cul-de-sac
or offer up an anodyne to pain,
blunting the edges of the status quo.

As when, not long ago, I overheard
an old-time ballad, *Rhythm of the Rain*
drifting from a neighbor's radio —
I knew my song depended on a word.
Yes. No.

iv.

Yes or no. The mind. The heart. It's time —
long overdue, in fact — to sing good-bye
to reconsolidated neurons I'm
obsessing over.
But the gadfly, *Why*,

flits in, as recollections multiply —
the hazel eyes … the B-flat clarinet …
Ich liebe dich … the 2nd of July …
until what started as a minuet

becomes a mosher's slam dance; the duet
becomes a duel, and neither wins the day.
Heart calls up *Romeo and Juliet*.
Mind wants to zap them both away.

Bob Dylan got it right, and I admit
I'm tangled up in blue. I want to quit.

v.

I'm tangled up in blue. I want to quit —
give up, back out, back off — but I'm intent
on finishing this vain experiment.
I'll write the song. I pledge to recommit
my waking hours to wordplay and to wit,
avoiding pathos, bathos and lament,
and take great care I don't misrepresent
the facts. This song will be my Greatest Hit!

I search for inspiration in Millay:
Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink …
I brainstorm with the Bard, whose words ring true:
Let thy fair wisdom, not thy passion, sway …
Too OTT. I tailor Humperdinck:
I don't know how to [sing] *good-bye* [to you].

vi.

I don't know how I'd sing good-bye to you
without a note of censure or regret;
I'd have a tendency to overdo

the wretchedness I can't seem to forget;
I'd botch the score with tremolo or trill,
and la-di-dah about the night we met.

But on the flip side, if mere words could kill,
I'd make it clear that, though you were my first
and dearest love, I did survive you. Still,

if both the roles we played could be reversed,
and I had dropped you, as you dropped me then,
you'd know, because when something is the worst —

say, like eleven on a scale of ten —
then nothing's ever quite so bad again.

vii.

Nothing has been quite so bad again,
nor quite as good, and never quite the same.
I thought it would be effortless to write

a song whose coda is a firm *Amen*;
an exposé on how I've come to claim
the qualities of slow-burn anthracite.

But, as you see, I've failed. The staves are bare.
The metaphors break down from wear and tear.

I based my premise for the good-bye song
on fuzzy logic and on shaky ground.
It isn't right, but neither is it wrong.

Perhaps next year the heart will come around
and hand the mind an uncontested win.
Next year, perhaps, I'll know where to begin.

Terese Coe

Here and Now and Then and There

Some creatures have a gift for the curious.
A father says it in *The 25th Hour*:
You came so close to never being born.
He says it to phantom children of his son,
invisible flecks from the unknown future.
You came so close to never being there
clarifies the presence of nonbeing
here or there or everywhere or where.
It's not as if we had a choice between
the vagaries of being and nonbeing
or visions taking shape to fill a void.
No one in the film is ever sure.
Even Then and Now are mysteries
they will not uncover, and nor will we.

The Key in Salonika

from the Spanish of Jorge Luis Borges

Abarbanel, Farías or Pinedo,
thrown out of Spain by ungodly persecution,
even now still hold in their possession
the key to a house in Toledo.

Free in the present from hope and terror,
they observe the key as day goes down.
In its bronze are what is past and what is far,
the brightness spent, and the misery I remain.

Now that its door is dust, the slim device
is code for the diaspora and the wind,
and is like that other sanctuary key

someone pitched into heaven on the day
the Roman stormed the wall with reckless fire
and out of the sky a hand received the key.

You Are Not the Others

from the Spanish of Jorge Luis Borges

They will not have to save you, the diaries
left behind by those to whom you prostrate;
you are not the others, and now you see
the center of the labyrinth plotted by
your footsteps. The agony cannot save you,
not that of Jesus nor of Socrates
nor the towering gold Siddhartha, who
yielded to death in a garden as the sun
went down. Dust as well is the word
written by your hand or the verb formed
by your mouth. There is no pity in Fate,
and the night of God is infinite.
Your matter is time, relentless time.
Every instant of solitude is you.

A Bust of Janus Speaks

from the Spanish of Jorge Luis Borges

No one will open or close any door unless
he has honored the memory of Two-Face,
who presides over portals. I include the horizon
of the uncertain seas and the certain earth.
My two faces make out the past
and the future. I see them and they are the same,
the swords, the strife, and the evils Someone
could have done away with and has not done
away with and never will. My two hands
are missing and I am rigid stone. I cannot
exactly say whether I am seeing defiance
from the future or that of distant yesterdays
today. I see my ruins: the column cut away
and the faces, which will never see each other.

Barbara Lydecker Crane

Marie de Valengin

Portrait of a Lady, c. 1460, by Rogier van der Weyden (c.1400-1464); Brussels, Belgium

Something brewed beneath her cool remove
when she sat down and held her body still
as I began to paint. "Père won't approve,"
she murmured, tightly clasping hands. "What will
my father do? I want to be a nun."
With that, she dipped her head as if in prayer.
Her père, the Duke of Burgundy, isn't one
to pass the chance for an amorous affair.
Outside of marriage he has sired plenty;
Marie is one. At court he's schooled her well
and cossets her with jewels. But now, at twenty,
she fears her future as a demoiselle —
a cunning figure paired with charming face.
I've seen her dodge her father's fond embrace.

Rivals

Self-Portrait, 1506, by Raphael (1483-1520); Urbino, Italy

I hope my languid eyes will draw your gaze
to my simple composition of chestnut, umber,
and black; against the dark my pale flesh plays
in subtle shadows. There's nothing to encumber
or embellish my likeness or my skill.
I'm only twenty-three, and have already
been awarded large commissions that fill
my pockets. And to fill my bed, a steady
stream of women. I'm nearly sure I've more
of them than he, whose name I will not say.
How well he sculpts and paints, I can't ignore —
so well, I wish he'd fade away today.
David, a marvel, lives and breathes in stone —
as I do here in paint. We stand alone.

Barbara Lydecker Crane

Imagining Caleb

Portrait of Caleb Cheeshahtaumuck, 2010,
by Stephen E. Coit (b.1948), Cambridge, MA, U.S.

Precious few at Harvard looked like him,
with skin nut-brown, hair poker-straight and black.
I paint this Wampanoag stern and grim
but proud in his academic gown. At his back,
a map of Martha's Vineyard he likely drew,
his island home. He must have felt defined
by autumn harvest feasts, by hunts on snowshoes,
by April herring, by summer berry wine.
Did Caleb plan that someday he'd return
and, like his father, be a chief? Would one
so learned, schooled in church and classics, earn
respect or scorn in the tribe where he'd begun?
He never knew. He took a room near here
and perished of TB within the year.

Anne-Marie Delaunay-Danizio

Papi Hubert

"Your grandfather is dying," her father said, "and you have not been visiting him. Now you go . . . right now!"

Papi Hubert was ninety-six and had been in bed for three weeks, unaware of his surroundings, lost in a horrific past, yet fighting death with all his might.

There was something that prevented the young woman from visiting her grandpa and Mamie Valentina. She knew that her step-grandfather was the good and caring man everybody assumed he was, and she had memories that confirmed these assumptions but she also had doubts, and her desire to be a nice granddaughter created a feeling of anxiety, the source of which she could not understand.

When Clara was an infant and her mother a busy young professional woman, she hired a nanny recommended by a neighbor to take care of her six-month-old daughter. One day Papi stopped by unexpectedly. As he was about to enter the apartment with his own set of keys, he heard little Clara wailing while the woman was shouting, "Stop, stop! You shut up, shut up, you little brat, or else!"

When he came in the nanny was holding the baby and shaking her little body. Her grandfather grabbed her from her hands and told the woman not to come back.

He then changed Clara's diaper, which was drooping from its heavy, stinky load. He bathed her in the kitchen sink, heated her baby formula, and fed her until she fell asleep in his arms. When her parents came home from work, Clara was in her crib in her nursery room, her grandpa reading the paper on the worn-out blue sofa of the living room with the large windows overlooking the gray-tiled roofs of Paris.

* * *

"Look at you, Leila, Leila with the bright blue-green eyes." Her grandpa would smile at her while, as a three-year-old, she became very intrigued at her reflection in the small mirror in the tiny kitchen next to the shower stall. Leila was Clara's middle name and her nickname. It meant "night" in Hebrew and Arabic so that the name, picked by her mother, honored both her maternal great-grandmother from Morocco and her Jewish step-grand-

father.

Her grandpa often picked her up from kindergarten, holding her little hand stained with bright paint colors, and toward the end of warm spring afternoons, he would walk slowly with his cane, at the pace of her little steps, to the Jardin des Tuileries. The main entrance was flanked by two large, bronze lions, which her Papi sometimes helped her climb. Her thighs brushed against the metal skin of the lions, warmed by the afternoon sun. She would close her eyes and open her nostrils to the scent of lilacs.

On Saturday or Sunday afternoons, they often joined a group of other children, with their parents or grandparents sitting on wooden benches or green metal garden chairs, to watch the Guignol puppet and his friend the gendarme, whom Guignol always outsmarted. Although Grandpa could not hear very well, he enjoyed Guignol's antics as much as Clara did.

In late 1965, when she was ten, her family moved to a bigger apartment, still in the same district of downtown Paris, the second arrondissement, from one side of the stock exchange building to the other side, just off l'Avenue de l'Opera. Her parents needed money to pay for the mortgage, and someone at home to take care of Clara. So they sold her grandparents' apartment, and Mamie Valentina and Papi Hubert moved in with the family.

Sometime after the move, Clara grew tiny buds on her chest that felt like they wanted to burst out like flowers under the ground. Papi came into the bathroom every night while she was enjoying a bubbly warm bath before bed. "Your breasts are growing," he would say. "Now they are like rosebuds, soon they'll be like tangerines, and then they'll grow into oranges and grapefruits." This made her giggle.

Her Papi had brought along with him a full tank of exotic fish. Every Saturday afternoon, after her dad and she had finished doing and putting the dishes away, and her mom was resting and reading in the living room, he changed the water.

Clara observed him gently scooping each little critter in a net of fine-webbed metal strands with a green rim and handle before transferring it into a small bowl. She looked at each fragile creature with its long, translucent tail and fins, suspended in the air for a few seconds between life and death, while Patou, her black cat with a tiny spot of white under his chin, lay curled up and unstirred on top of the white refrigerator.

The fish were colorful, one of a deep, iridescent blue, the other looking like a flamenco dancer with its silvery scales and black polka dots, another of a bright orange with a big mouth and bulging eyes, the next one flat and round with a glimmering yellow hue.

Later, when she was around fourteen, her grandparents moved to an independent, small apartment upstairs while Clara showed all the external signs of being a woman.

* * *

She had developed a strong inclination for stopping in front of every mirror to look at her reflection. She witnessed the inexorable changes in her body in the same way she had observed the tadpoles she collected and fed a couple of years ago during the summer at her maternal grandmother's house in the South of France. She had observed their tails receding, their legs growing. When they reached a stage between tadpoles and frogs, they looked, in her mind, like tiny, live dinosaurs. This obsession with her strange and new body incited a mixture of irritation and amusement in her family members.

"She is beautiful," her grandfather said to her dad as she was once more looking at herself in the mirror above the mantelpiece in her grandparents' apartment.

"Yes," her father answered, "and she knows it."

As she leaned down to kiss goodbye to Papi Hubert, who sat in an armchair, his hand furtively caressed her breast. Her dad and Mamie Valentina did not seem to notice.

Before they left Paris in January of 1973, her parents had bought a ranch house in a small, suburban town near Toulouse and a smaller house next to it for her grandparents.

That Sunday afternoon, when she set foot outside of her parents' house to visit her grandfather and walked the three hundred yards that separated the two dwellings, she felt the brush of a slight breeze. In her mother's garden the tulips, daffodils, and jacinth in bloom beamed at the sun and the chirpings of birds.

When she stepped into her grandparents' kitchen, Mamie Valentina was shuffling through a large pile of papers. "Long time, no see," she said without raising her head when she heard Clara coming. "He used to throw all the mail in a drawer before I had a chance to sort it out. I am looking for that additional private insurance policy. We need it now or we can't afford the visiting nurse anymore. Go see him now and then maybe you can help me with the sorting."

When Clara was a tween, her dad would take her to the

Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Although it translates into botanical garden, it was also a museum of natural history and a zoo. As they stood in front of the orangutans that, as a little child, Clara used to call the orange-utans because of the color of their fur, she slid an open hand, filled with peanuts, between the bars of the cage. The ape, which was about her size, looked her directly in the eyes. He picked the nuts from her hand, put them in his mouth, and crunched them.

When her hand was empty and she was about to withdraw it, he grabbed it with his large, rough hand, kept looking her in the eyes, and would not let go. She did not feel afraid but assumed she should have been when, for a very short time, her father stood next to her with a worried expression. The zookeeper quickly intervened, hitting the ape with a stick, forcing him to release her hand.

"Dad, why did the zookeeper hit that poor ape? He was just friendly. He did not deserve to be beaten because of me," she said, holding, this time, her father's human and familiar hand.

"They are wild animals, Clara. I should never have let you him feed him. He could have bitten you. There should be some safety measures in the zoo. Let's go home now!"

When she entered the bedroom, Papi Hubert's eyes were closed, and he was mumbling words in French and German in his agitated and delirious sleep. "Where are my combat fatigues? Schnell, schnell, du, Jude Schweinhund! Mom, I am so sorry, I did something stupid. Mom, I am coming, I am afraid, Mom!" As she sat next to him, he opened his eyes and grabbed her hand firmly.

"Is this you, Leila? I am hurting everywhere," he painfully uttered. She felt sorry for him, but she was also afraid he was going to drag her into the realm of his upcoming death.

She left his bedside to join her grandmother at the kitchen table. "Look at these pictures," Valentina said. "They are all of you. You were his little sunshine. He loved you so much."

The pictures were not unfamiliar. They were duplicates. They showed her at different stages of her life. Here were her first steps in the Jardin des Tuileries with her papi standing behind her. There was a school picture of her in her first-grade classroom, sitting at a little pulpit next to her friend Cécile. The more recent one was the one where she stood in front of a board showing the results of the baccalauréat, the high school diploma she had received just a year ago. The pictures were familiar yet she felt the surge of tears.

"Leila, don't cry," Mamie Valentina said, her green-blue eyes softening.

She had the beautiful eyes Clara had inherited, but in her case they had turned sharp and cold. "He had such a long and difficult life. His death will be a deliverance."

Emily Douglas

Silence

It's March 13, 1965, a Saturday night. My sister and I are "doing hair" for friends who lounge on the soft comforters of our twin beds or sit cross-legged on the floor in slips and flip-flops as we get ready for a party at the VFW club, our party clothes hanging from the closet doors. Tonight, there are only five of us, Jean rolling Linda's dark shoulder-length hair on orange juice cans while Joan sits under the beauty-style "hood" dryer my mother bought for us last year. Judy calls out "talk *louder*" from the bathroom where she's shaving her legs. Because it's Saturday night, we're giddy with anticipation as if we might slip through the world of contradictions, escape the ordinary and be touched by divinity. We breathe in the coming night's happiness as if inside a dream: we know the Elberta boys will be there, tall, lanky boys, already tan and beautiful with unforgivably long lashes framing pale green eyes. They're farmers' sons. They drive their daddy's chicken trucks to and from dances, getting out in a feverish pack as if they have so much energy they absolutely *must* jostle and smack each other before ambling into those damp, crowded rooms. Already I can see them standing together by the refreshment table at the VFW Club sipping Pepsi and 7-Up from paper cups, then squeezing those cups into tight-wadded shards to torpedo each other.

As we flip through the pages of *Mademoiselle* or stare at the glitter of our newly painted nails, we believe that everything lies ahead of us. *Everything*. Not just tonight's party but awards, books, proms, concerts, recitals, and college followed by what we call "the rest of our lives."

Our lives. As we stand before the mirror primping, smoothing "Pretty-As-Pink" lipstick on our lips and sweeping a tiny brush of dark mascara through our eyelashes, we never think of our lives as a cloister of whiteness, a code of conformity. But it's exactly that: we're white girls with white girlfriends, boyfriends, teachers, mentors, preachers, doctors, coaches, neighbors, ballgames, and parties. The only black people we know are the maids who come into our houses once a week to mop the kitchen floor and iron our fathers' shirts and the black men who mow our lawns or work as janitors at the public school. And yet, even as we curl and spray our hair, the Civil Rights Movement is

blazing through the once slumbering cities and towns of Alabama, marchers and activists demanding racial justice, planning sit-ins, teach-ins, giving speeches, registering voters, and even going to jail. Though the violence against them is brutal and televised, its reality doesn't penetrate our lives as if we're enveloped in a fog of whiteness, a hush of silence, a cocoon of ignorance.

Tonight, as we gossip about the Elberta boys, wondering who'll be first to break from the pack and ask one of us to dance, no one mentions the 600 peaceful marchers who crossed the Edmund Petus Bridge in Selma last Sunday only to be met by a wall of state troopers, mounted deputies, and white spectators waving Confederate flags. No one mutters, "My god, did you *see* how horrible it was . . ." how the troopers, their faces disguised by gas masks, rushed the crowd, striking men, women, and children with "sticks, clubs, whips and rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire" to the riotous cheering of bystanders. In truth, no one has said a word all week about "Bloody Sunday," not at the dinner table, in the classroom, or from the pulpit as if we aren't living in Alabama, but in a place where goodness and mercy shine down and all we need worry about is who we'll become, never once questioning how that becoming might restrict or violate others' lives.

"Com'on." My sister nudges me as Joan waits patiently before the full-length mirror. "You do the back while I do the front and sides."

When I glance at Joan, her subtle beauty takes me by surprise: the soft curve of her cheek, the arched brows, the tumble of her chestnut hair as I unwind the rollers and stack them on the dresser. Not once do I think of her as white, privileged, and part of our silence. Not once do I think, *she can go to the public library and read anything she wants*. Instead, I begin combing out her hair, the strands luscious and thick, the ends loosely curled, smooth and lovely, their golden hue shimmering in the evening light. She will be chosen. I know it.

Patricia Foster

Christmas, 1988

Opening his eyes to thick darkness, Benny sniffs the air. It smells like old newspapers and rusted pipes, a dank smell, a winter smell in a warm climate where moisture clings to the walls, settles deep into the grooves of the floor. The jangling of the phone has roused him. Now it rings a second time and Benny sits up, clutching the thin blanket with his old man's hands. Who could be waking him in the dead of night? Probably Ivory Genwright used his worthless toilet and the mess came right back over the top of the bowl. Even in the darkness, Benny can see Ivory staring in confusion at the toilet then stumbling to the phone, the smell of his bowels trailing the hem of his pajamas.

Benny waits for the next ring. When it comes, he waits some more. Trouble comes with four rings, sometimes five. Trouble will be his boy Chester, his middle son, the one with the sugar disease, the one who's made his heart old before its time. Chester dresses in dirty, ragged clothes, torn sweatshirts and stained baggy pants like someone living on the streets, even though he gets a disability check every month from the government and lives right down Bird Dog Road in Mr. Walker's duplex. When he was little, Chester loved nothing better than starched white shirts and midnight blue pants with a stiff knife pleat creasing the center of each leg, the kind of clothes he wore every Sunday morning to Bethel Street Baptist Church. "Going to talk to Jesus," he always said with a beatific smile, and Pauline, his mother, used to say proudly, "Look how Jesus brings Chester joy." But now Chester is all grown up and don't want Jesus no more. He gets his joy other places.

As Benny shuffles to the phone, he expects to hear Deputy Swinn snarling at him with bulldog authority, telling him, "Get your ass down here to the jail ASAP." Last April, Deputy Swinn put Chester in jail for disorderly conduct, for drinking and swearing and threatening another patron at Gwen's Hideaway with his big, loving hands. Benny used his last fifty dollars to bail Chester out, then brought the boy home, washed him up as best he could, and put him on the living room sofa, the *good* sofa, to sleep off his drunk.

Now Benny swallows hard before he answers the phone.

"Mr. Taylor." Benny is surprised to hear a woman's voice, soft, almost timid, on the other end of the line. "I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour, but this is Dr. Barton at the hospital. Am I speaking to Mr. Taylor, Mr. Benny Taylor?"

"Yes ma'am," Benny says. He's been standing up, waiting for a shock, but now he slumps in the green plastic chair with the stuffing held in place with two strips of duct tape. He closes his eyes, never ready to hear the worst, words that will make his breath catch, his feet burn, his mind go flat as red mud.

"Mr. Taylor, the police found your son Chester on the side of the road, intoxicated and sick, and they've brought him in to West Central Hospital. I've started a saline iv, given him insulin. He should be much better in the morning, but I wanted you to know the situation, know where he is."

Benny opens his eyes, stares at the curled cord of the phone and sees Chester lying in the ditch, motionless, his body slumped there like he's sleeping, a smiled curled on his pretty-boy lips. Lips the color of wild cherries dropped ripe to the ground. "Sweet lips," his mama used to say when he was a child. Now his hair will be full of dirt and weeds, his clothes grimy, stained with vomit and spit. But what Benny keeps coming back to is that smile, the way Chester, at forty-two, looks so peaceful, so happy to be throwing himself away, lying sprawled in the dark.

Benny knows he should thank this new doctor, knows she's just moved to town and lives in a big white house on Summer Hill, but beneath gratitude something riles him. He feels revulsion at a woman doctor peeking under his son's clothes, touching him in private places no woman oughta be touching, wiping spit off his pretty-boy smile. He decides he doesn't like this Dr. Barton so he says his thank-you, very curt and stiff, ready to hang up.

"I'd like to talk to you, Mr. Taylor," she says with sudden firmness. "I understand this isn't an unusual occurrence and I'd like to meet you in my office tomorrow so we can discuss what might be best for Chester."

Benny closes his eyes. "Yes ma'am," he says, resigned, wishing he could say "go to hell." But he knows he has no choice but to meet with the white doctor and talk about Chester. He thinks of his son sleeping off his drunk in a clean hospital bed, hovered over and tended to, not worrying about a thing.

Now that he's up, he'll never get back to sleep. He gets

the quilt off the chair and wraps it around him, then sits on the orange tweed sofa and stares into darkness. Out the window he can see the silhouette of Mr. Bonapart's carport, and the front end of Gabriel Petry's broken down truck. The azalea bushes fan out against the school yard across the way and before he can stop himself, he's seeing Chester as a little boy, Chester at seven scrambling up onto the roof. Chester would sneak out of the house early on Saturday morning while the older kids were sleeping, drag old Mrs. Montgomery's broken down ladder from her shed and be sitting by the drain pipe, staring up into that warm nothingness of blue when Benny came out to his truck.

"What ya doing?" Benny would ask.

Chester would put his hands between his skinny legs and smile his plum sweet smile. "Talking to the sun," he'd say, and then he'd lift his face to the sky as if the sun was his own personal discovery.

"Well, get down from there. You can talk to the sun right here on the ground like the rest of us."

"Aw, Daddy."

"Aw, Daddy nothing. Get down."

And Chester would climb obediently down, each step barely connecting with the ladder, which trembled and shifted, though Chester never showed a bit of fear.

When Benny thinks about this now, he knows he's smiling, wishing only that he'd stayed longer to see what Chester did next. But he had work to do, sinks stopped up and toilets overflowing and the whole mess of broken-down lives. His kids, he figured, would grow up like he did, held up by the church and held down by white people and poverty, broken early to the horrors of the world.

But then Chester grew up and got the sugar and still acted like some little kid talking to the sun. Like he had every right to climb up on a roof and daydream. Like he didn't have any worries. No responsibility to bring up the race. No sugar in his blood. Chester acted like he was just any man at all.

Benny walks through the door of the doctor's office and stands in the waiting room with his hat pulled tight on his gray head. He's waiting for the lady at the counter to check him in. In the past, when Chester saw old Doc Westfield — who treated black and white with equal impatience — they knew him in the office and all he had to do was sign his name and sit down. Doc

Westfield would see him within twenty to thirty minutes. If he got tied up, he'd come out personally and tell folks sitting there why he was late. "Mrs. Buckley's got notions of labor," he'd say, or "Doug Hatterfield's boy was run over by a tractor and I gotta set his right leg." Now they don't know one old dog from another. He can see the lady at the counter eyeing him from behind a bough of holly as she finishes up some form, her eyes taking in every wrinkle on his 80-year-old face. He wants to bug out his eyes. Push out his teeth. Show gums. Get her good. Instead, he stands stooped and tense, waiting to be noticed.

"Dr. Barton," he says when she finally looks up. "She said be here at 10:00." It's 9:50 on the wall clock.

"Benny Taylor?" the woman asks.

He nods.

"Dr. Barton's had an emergency at the hospital, but you can wait for her anywhere you want."

"Must be why they call it a *waiting* room," he says to the floor and finds a seat.

An hour and forty-five minutes later when he's called in to Dr. Barton's office, he's hungry. He usually eats lunch at 11:30 sharp, stops off at Dell's Bar-B-Que and has a deluxe sandwich and cole slaw, heavy on the mayonnaise. After that, he doesn't eat until nearly 8:00 at night. It keeps the gas out of his stomach. But now his stomach is growling and empty. The nurse says for him to see Dr. Barton in her office.

She's on the phone, her head tucked down, but her eyes flash up a moment to acknowledge him. He doesn't know where to sit. There are two upholstered chairs beside her desk and then a leather chair off to the side. He prefers the leather, but he doesn't know if that's the right one, so he waits just inside the door.

When Dr. Barton hangs up, she indicates the chair beside her desk and he sits down, sinking into the softness like a man folded into a cloud, his overalls starched and stiff against his knees.

"Mr. Taylor," she begins, "what Chester has is a tricky disease, but we can control it with insulin, diet, and exercise." She sits primly behind a cherry wood desk, her stethoscope hanging limp around her neck, her dark hair straggling down from a hastily formed knot. She looks serious, aggressive as if she's put away all worldly foolishness to personally attack this disease.

Benny nods. His eyes feel like milky oysters floating in his

head. His knees ache with arthritis. Now these words press down on his sore back, words he's heard many times before. Once again, he glimpses the shadowy danger in the dark, feels a shiver around his heart. He knows about the sugar disease, knew when old Doc Westfield first talked to Chester about it, that it was the enemy. Benny imagines sugar dissolving in Chester's blood, the alcohol making the sugar spiral around his body like snow crystals shimmering in the cold, then heating up and melting, doing something bad.

"Now we know diabetics often get rebellious with so much control. . . it's only natural." She tries out a smile, a brief pause, though Benny can see her mind's hurtling forward. "Is there anything you can tell me about Chester's life, anything that keeps him from looking after himself?"

Benny thinks of Chester as a little boy sitting on that roof, believing the world would open its arms, then Chester angry at twenty in his army uniform coming back from Vietnam, moody and tired and cynical before the army doctors found the sugar, and finally Chester as a middle-aged man lying drunk on the side of the road. "No ma'am," he says. He doesn't like these questions, questions that suggest he might know the clue to Chester's life. He thinks how Doc Westfield didn't ask him any questions but put the responsibility squarely on Chester's shoulders. When Chester would come into the hospital with sugar so high he was vomiting, Doc Westfield said bluntly, "You drinking, Chester?" When Chester nodded, Doc Westfield shook his head. "Well, let's just knock it off right now if you're not going to do it the way I tell you to. You going to drink, I don't want to see you." And he walked out. Right out of the room. Benny respected that though Chester had only rolled his eyes and watched the liquid drip in tiny increments from the IV bag.

"Do you know how much Chester is drinking?" Her question brings him back to the present. "Because when he came in here his blood alcohol level was high."

"No ma'am," he says again. We don't talk about it, he could have said, because every time he brought up the trouble with the alcohol, Chester walked out the front door, slamming it hard, the pictures rattling, dust floating up in the air. He remembers the morning after Chester got out of jail. "Look what you done." Benny said, shaking Chester's elbow, pointing at him lying on the couch.

Chester looked around him. "What? I hurting this

couch?" Chester looked slyly at the couch as if he were inspecting it for damage, then he fluffed the pillows, smoothed out the little doilies Pauline had made years ago. "Man, I don't wanna do nothing to this couch. This your prize possession."

"You know what I mean," Benny said angrily. "You running head first for trouble."

Chester closed his eyes. "You think I'm doing it head first?"

Benny ignored this. "Now we gonna make a pact. That's right. You gonna straighten up and I'm gonna help you."

"'Scuse me," Chester said, opening his eyes and smiling at Benny. "What you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna watch."

At that Chester got up and walked out the door.

Benny looks at Dr. Barton, wants to tell her that Chester is a grown man. And even though Chester lives just down the street from him, he doesn't see him that often because every day he's out fixing somebody's leak, getting himself all twisted up behind white ladies' toilets, in the crawl spaces of people's houses where sometimes he has to tease out the snakes before he goes in, or wade through a house with a burst pipe, the water gushing around his ankles. When he gets home, he takes a shower and fixes himself some beans and bread, maybe a little hamburger or chicken wings, and sits before the TV hoping he'll fall asleep with those voices around him. Living alone now that Pauline is dead has made him jumpy. He's lost the hold he once had on Chester and they avoid each other as if that is the nicest way to show the distance between them.

When he leaves Dr. Barton's office, he goes directly to see Chester in the hospital. He doesn't stay long because Chester is sleeping or pretending to be asleep. Benny stands in the room and looks at his boy's smooth face, his sweet curved lips and the small cut on his forehead stitched with silky black thread. One knee is flexed as if he means to get up soon, and this detail so touches Benny that he has to turn away. This is the way Chester slept as a child, arms splayed across the bed, one knee bent as if the upper part of his body has given in to sleep, but the lower part is still climbing trees. Benny looks quickly back at the IV bag hanging above Chester's bed and shudders. He doesn't like hospitals. Pain frightens him. He walks out into the cool sleeve of the afternoon, worried that by the time he gets there, Dell will be clean out of barbeque.

When Chester comes home from the hospital the next day, Benny calls and asks him to come over for some crowder peas and cornbread Bessie Genwright sent over for supper. It's the middle of December and a sharp wind is blowing from the east. Benny has fitted the front windows with old newspapers that rattle with each new gust. He's been under a house most of the afternoon, in the cold damp crawl space where some roots have blocked a pipe, and now his shoulders and hips ache.
"Crowder peas?" Chester asks. "I can't say no to crowder peas. Give me twenty minutes."

Benny sets out the plates and silverware on the table, anxious to eat. He keeps the cornbread covered in aluminum foil and the crowder peas in the serving pot. After twenty minutes, he begins to get restless. He calls Chester's house but gets no answer. After thirty minutes, he calls again. Still, no answer. He picks up a piece of cornbread and stuffs it into his mouth, chewing as he spoons some peas into a Tupperware container. Then he marches down the street to Chester's house. He bangs on the front door, and when there is no answer he opens it to an empty room. The TV is blaring, but there's no sign of Chester. Only some Diet Coke cans lined up on the counter and an empty pack of cigarettes. Benny can see Chester's lips, how his mouth tilts up on one side when he smiles. As he is probably doing right now at Gwen's Hideaway.

"Damn pact."

There's nothing hidden about Gwen's Hideaway. A string of red and green blinking lights surrounds a painted gold door busted at the bottom where it's been kicked. A lighted beer sign highlights the only window of this dump that used to be somebody's house. When he opens the door, Benny sees Chester sitting at the bar laughing at something the bartender is saying. It's all he can do not to throw the peas at his son. Instead, he walks up behind him, opens the Tupperware and puts the peas on the counter in front of the beer, then brings a fork out of his pocket.

"Eat your peas," he says.

"Daddy." Chester smiles. "Well, look who's come calling," he says, grinning at the bartender and a tall, skinny man with dreads sitting next to him, as if including them in his joke. "Mmmh-mmmh!" He bends over and smells them. "Nothin' I like better than fresh peas. I'm gonna eat these right after this beer. Scout's honor."

"Eat your peas," Benny repeats, looking at the half-full

glass of beer on the counter. The man next to Chester snickers, and before Benny can stop himself, he grabs the beer and pours it on top of the peas. "No need to wait."

After that night, Benny refuses to call Chester. Let Dr. Barton worry about Chester. Let Dr. Barton stay up all night staring at the phone.

For a week Benny stays busy. He's out all day in his truck, going twenty miles east to Auburn to fix Mrs. D'Angelo's leaky sink and ten miles north to Notasulga to hack down ten-inch roots in old Mrs. Ainsley's crawl space. He manages to get only two days of Dell's spicy barbeque and has to take peanut butter crackers and an Orange Crush with him in his truck to stop the rumbling in his stomach. On Saturday when he goes to the Piggly Wiggly for his weekly grocery shopping — butter beans, kidney beans, lima beans, two loaves of Sunbeam bread, a supply of Vienna sausage, Lipton tea, oatmeal, and corn pads for his feet — he is surprised to see all the Christmas decorations, the miniature Santas and snow men hanging in a swag from the ceiling. Red and green ribbons and bows are clustered around the check-out aisle. He's forgotten all about Christmas, though it's only one week away. He doesn't bother much with Christmas now that Pauline is gone and the other two sons live in California with wives who work and older kids in baggy clothes who act like he's some ancient Uncle Tom. When Pauline was alive, she insisted on a tree with all the balls and tinsel she saved from year to year, and a turkey dinner in which Chester was obliged to come because his mother asked him. Then, they went to church together, even Chester in a white shirt and borrowed tie and quickly polished shoes.

Benny pushes the cart past the fresh fruit and vegetables, being tempted only by the bin of turnip greens that look fresh and plump and will cook down good. But he doesn't buy any. He doesn't fix anything you have to cook more than 20 minutes in a pot. He is rounding the cake mix and cookie aisle, heading for the canned vegetables, when he sees Chester in the middle of the aisle, bent toward some stuffed bags of sweets, a red plastic basket on his arm filled with what looks like pretzels. He stops and stares, waiting for some momentum to push him forward. His stare is so intense, he expects Chester to turn and acknowledge him, but Chester doesn't waver. Chester picks up two or three bags, turns them over, puts them back, picks up a few more,

then says without facing him, "You watching, Daddy?" and holds up some salted nuts and a package of string licorice. Benny can hear Pauline say, "Give the boy another chance for my sake," but Benny feels again the dark anger boiling in his stomach, rising in his throat, and he pushes his cart straight ahead to the check-out, forgetting what he's come for.

That same week, Benny receives the letter from Dr. Barton, a letter which details Chester's treatment in the hospital and the low carbohydrate, low fat diet that the letter says "would be most beneficial for Mr. Chester Taylor," along with regular checking of blood sugar "at least three times a day." The letter is official, pragmatic except for a line at the bottom written out in fine blue ink: "I know you're worried about your son, and I don't mean to trouble you further, but I thought this information might be helpful."

Benny throws the letter in the trash. What does she know about his worries? Damn woman don't know a thing about him. She made him wait too long in her waiting room and now she thinks she can get inside his head. Doc Westfield would have just said, "Keep your nose in the wind, Benny," and they'd have had a good laugh.

It's Christmas morning when the second call comes. "Mr. Taylor," she says, her voice cautious, anxious. "Benny Taylor, this is Dr. Barton." Immediately he thinks of Chester lying dead in the weedy thicket behind Gwen's Hideaway, along with the empty whiskey bottles and wadded up condoms and leftover pretzels. Or dead in the middle of the road, like roadkill. Without thinking, he sinks into the green chair and feels the gas in his stomach start rising up to his throat. He doesn't want to see Chester's body, doesn't want to be the one called in to identify him, to sign him over to Brother Peace and the undertaker. "I'm so sorry to call you this early, but we've got a small problem." It's the word "small" that makes him sit up straighter. Small can mean another hospital or a night in jail. He burps softly, feeling the foul air push out of his mouth.

"What's going on?" he asks. It's the first question he's ever asked Dr. Barton.

"Well, I apologize for interrupting your Christmas morning. This is a private time, but I didn't know who else to call."

"What's going on?" he asks again, louder.

"You see, every one of our toilets have stopped up and we've got company coming at noon, and I knew that you. . .

well, you seem to have the reputation for being able to fix anything."

Benny goes silent. All the images in his head about Chester dissolve into pictures of rusty pipes and tangled roots, clogged toilets, and the stink of sewage.

"I know this is inconvenient, and I wouldn't ask . . . well, if it's impossible —"

"Where do you live?" he asks, letting the annoyance show in his voice. He knows of course that it's the big white house on Summer Hill, but he wants her to have to tell him. He wants somehow to make her beg.

He's there in twenty minutes, dressed in his clean but wrinkled work clothes, his felt hat on his head, big tool kit in his gnarled hand. The house, up close, is bigger than he'd expected, a sprawling house which curls back on itself, a maze of rooms, some you step up into with lots of many-paned windows. She meets him at the door, a carved wooden door, in a soft, violet bathrobe tied tight around the waist. In the soft light of the big house, she looks younger, prettier than he remembered, but he dislikes her more for it and refuses to smile when she says, "This is a great generosity. You don't know how much my husband and I appreciate this. Let me get you some coffee."

He wants to say, "Let's just knock it off," as old Doc Westfield had said to Chester, but he takes the coffee and follows her through the house. He's distracted by the splendor of the rooms, something he can grasp only in bits and pieces: the grand piano polished to a high sheen, a fancy painting on the wall of a woman in a floral dress, a plush sofa, an ornate clock and the silvery drop of a chandelier. They move through a kitchen, a breakfast room, a den, a piano room, and a bedroom until they're in a high-ceilinged mirrored bathroom, a room as large as his living room and dining room together. He can hear Pauline say, "Ain't this pretty, Benny. Looks like you could have a party in that tub." Pauline would have looked around shamelessly, even going up close to see the curlicues on a wall sconce.

He doesn't see any toilet. He's about to ask when Dr. Barton opens another door opposite the tub and there it is. He sucks on his bottom lip, shakes his head, thinking how these rich people can separate their business from the rest of it while everybody he knows crouches down to shit while somebody is brushing their teeth or washing out clothes.

She leaves him there. He fixes the toilet, scrunched around its base, then screwing a tank-to-bowl gasket back in. He

sees the grimy twists his tools have made on the white flesh of the toilet, and though usually he wipes up after himself, today he leaves the marks. Let her get down there. Let her bend over in a knot. He picks up his tools and wanders back through the maze until he finds the second bathroom, just off the kitchen. That one takes a little longer but when he finishes, he gathers his tools and heads to where she said the third one is. He moves down a long hallway, the wood beneath his feet dark and shiny, the walls a quiet beige. He must have taken a wrong turn because when he opens the door that should be a bathroom, he sees a small boy with dark curls sitting on his bed, his face red, either from crying or yelling. While Benny stands there, the kid kicks at the dresser, yelling at someone in the other room. "I won't! I won't! I'm *not* going to do it." Now Benny can see he's crying. The boy looks pale, sickly, but when he sees Benny, he says meanly, "Don't come in here!"

Benny steps back, eyes narrowed, lip jutting, knowing there's nothing he can do about this child's bad manners. *Don't respect his elders*, he thinks, then sees his own grandchildren changing the channel on the program he's been watching without so much as a "Grandpa, may I?" the last time they visited. When he turns, the smell of bacon cooking somewhere in the house makes his stomach growl. He didn't have time for breakfast and now the black coffee's eating into his stomach lining.

"Douglas!" he hears Dr. Barton call. He's in some long hallway where sound bounces around like an echo chamber. He's just started away from the room when he hears what must be retching and he turns quickly, opening the door again. The child is bent over, his body heaving, vomit spiraling out of him, splattering on the floor.

"Son," Benny automatically says, stepping back into the room.

But the boy ignores him, running into an adjoining room, shutting himself inside. Benny can't move. He hears more retching. Then Dr. Barton rushes past him, a syringe in her hand. She pulls on the doorknob of the room, but it doesn't open. She's frowning, eyes squinted.

"Come out of there, Douglas." Though her voice is firm, her hand, Benny notices, is trembling.

"No!" the boy shouts.

"You must get your shot."

"It's Christmas. I don't have to have it on Christmas —" And then there's the sound of something breaking as if a mirror

has dropped to the floor. The child screams.

Benny can't move. He knows he should leave but he can't make his body obey, can't turn away.

"Douglas!" Dr. Barton's voice is tense now, excited. "Open the door. This minute." She rattles the knob.

"Mama," the boy's voice is low, weak.

"Unlock the door, Douglas. Com'on, honey, you can do this."

There's silence as they both wait. It's only a slight turn, but she glances toward Benny, not seeing him, he knows, only taking in the pile of vomit, the slight stench of the room. Her eyes have that worried frenzy in them at Pauline's eyes used to get, a dark haunting as if the child's illness was her undoing. Thinking of Pauline, Benny backs out of the room quietly, intending to go down the hallway to that first bathroom and wipe up the grimy marks, but when he gets to the den, the husband stops him and quickly takes out his billfold, handing him a fifty. "Thank you," the husband says hurriedly. "We thank you," and motions toward the front entrance before he rushes toward the voices in the back room.

Outside in his truck, Benny looks at the fifty-dollar bill. He intended to charge seventy-five, twenty-five for each bathroom, even though the third bathroom he never got to. Still, it's Christmas, the Lord's day, not a working day and they owe him for that. It's the first time he's said the word to himself. "Christmas," he says out loud, surprised at the gentleness of the word. He thinks immediately of Pauline and the tree and the turkey he didn't buy. He'll go by her grave now and talk to her. Tell her what's happening, what he's seen. Of course, he'll tell her about Chester. He wonders what his boy is doing on Christmas day. He sees him sitting on his broken-down couch, laughing at the lot of them worrying so much. Benny has a mind to go right over there and tell him to straighten up, knock it off. But he knows it wouldn't do a bit of good. What he will do is go by Piggly Wiggly tomorrow and buy some turnip greens. He'll cook them like Pauline used to do in a big pot, letting them simmer all afternoon on the stove with a ham bone stewing in their middle. Then he'll take them down the street to Chester. He'll say, "Here, son. Brought you some greens." And he won't ask for nothing. He'll just walk back down the street to his house and watch the TV, whiling away the afternoon, waiting for sleep to come, waiting for trouble to follow, waking him, as if always does, from his dreams.

Ruth Holzer

Solitary Journey

(after the painting by Fritz Mackensen, 1896)

A man in a boat with a single sail
glides through the reed-edged waterway
this perpetual April afternoon.
A rounded cloud in the pallid sky

glides through the reed-edged waterway.
The world bound by a fixed horizon,
a rounded cloud in the pallid sky
and the curve of the canvas taut in a breeze.

His world bound by a fixed horizon,
a mound of peat on the open moor
and the curve of the canvas taut in a breeze.
His hand on the tiller, no other companion

but a mound of peat on the open moor.
He looks straight ahead, intent on the distance,
his hand on the tiller, no other companion,
silently moving along with the current.

He looks straight ahead, intent on the distance,
the man in the boat with a single sail,
silently moving along with the current
this perpetual April afternoon.

Charles Hughes

The Artist

On Main Street — west, two blocks from the river, Third
And Main — there stood the town's small library,
A trim white clapboard house built on a hill,
Its bookshelves puzzle-pieced into two floors
Of little rooms and narrow hallways, its
One reading room a screened-in porch the breeze,
Some summer days, made a near paradise.
A man of maybe seventy most people
Didn't know well — they knew him as *the artist*
("The artist loves the porch" or "has gone home") —
He hadn't lived in town for very long
And didn't socialize — a few did know
He had been married plus the fact he'd been
Drafted into the First World War and shipped
To France (a woman, a librarian,
Of roughly his own age, had drawn him out);
The artist used to sit and paint the view,
The hues of greens of leaves concealing branches
And trunks of trees, whose roots gripped and were gripped by
The also living earth far down below.
Children sometimes would wander in and ask
What he was painting. "Light," he always said,
"I paint the light" — which wasn't strictly true.
But what else could he say? Not his belief —
Sprung from the horrors he'd been witness to —
That all is an illusion or at least
Is passing, as the Bible says, away,
Though infinitely, infinitely more
Slowly than shadows yield to a new day.
The breeze washed through the screens. The artist painted
Yellows and blues revealed in sunlit greens.
This was his work — failed work, or so he judged it —
To try to catch the light he couldn't see.

Greg Huteson

Every Brilliant Thing

As if by banyans and sad willow trees,
past damp black concrete rife with river stones,

pragmatically, the tan-green water flows
southwesterly, and it is ankle deep.

Some seven decades back, the stones were trucked
past bright green paddies from the scrub-laced land

along the dry Han River, even then
not much more than an incurious stream,

and set in rows by bronzed, loose-shirted men
who gamely squatted on the channel's walls.

The waterway's not straight. Dug (when?) to link
the Han and Wu, it bends and bends again.

(The Wu's a river to the south once known
for flocks of birds that blackened all the sky.)

At oddest angles, it bisects the roads
and slices houses there to triangles,

both scalene and obtuse, winged, tactless shapes,
while other shapes, great bulging bushes, hang

like burlap sacks from cracks in slanting walls,
old burdens slowly tugging at their holds

to carve the cracks into distorted holes.
The railing of this watercourse is poles

of faded teal, and laxly soldered to them
are slender benches also painted teal.

For one short space, the railing's built of posts
of concrete painted bamboo shades of green

to represent the mythos of the woods
in hazy tales of local settlers' deeds.

At intervals along the choppy walk
are trees of many kinds and qualities —

the jackfruit trees with their ungainly fruit
that droop like blistered tumors from the bark,

the bishop wood with dark green oval leaves —
its roots once said to be pain's lauded cure,

the crooked oil trees with their remnant scars,
the ash, the Madagascar almond whorls.

The sweet gum, rain trees, and Chinese pistache
are also there among the varied trees

that overhang the slopes of this canal
a thousand steps to where it's kneecap deep —

and trumpet trees whose golden yellow blooms
still litter walk and wall and water's line.

A light green moss half cloaks the river stones,
but here and there the walls are pierced with pipes

that drain the side streets' gutters to this cut
and add the splash of water's minor fall.

A little distance from a mad morass
of roots of banyan trees are marks of white,

the paint that marks the stages of a flood,
assumed or actual apocalypse.

A sun-dried Buddhist compound, brief mirage
of calm, takes up a block along the road

that lines the central part of the canal
while further south the water's shunted down

and under tar and roots and chancy soil
and then on past a cockeyed local park,

where in the cool dusk of the withered days
the elderly and weary children meet

within the shade of tattered, grayish homes,
their windows strung with rusted iron bars,

a lone screen door with peeling yellow paint,
a solitary, ailing mango tree.

One calm spring day, a man released macaws
along a border of this nestled park.

Like blue-gold leaves against the burnished smog,
they climbed and tumbled in the lustered air,

these thick Brazilian craft of careless flight,
above the ring of gray hairs and the black,

above the tousled grass. At last at dark,
they rested on a light wood pole that's lashed

behind a tattered motor scooter seat
while close to them a few old women sat

encased in boldly checkered winter coats
sunk on a bench beside the crooked road

and chatted of the marvels of their lives.
A grizzled man perched on the farther end.

Bored with the talk or mulling buried dreams,
he turned a flat cap in his mottled hands.

Once or twice, a black-haired lady held
a giant goose while squatting on the curb

and waited for a sympathetic ride.
Aloof in all its pride, the goose was calm.

Once past this interlude, the water slips
above the cultivated ground again

then through the middle of a market street
close to a sunlit district. Here the watercourse

is stocked with quantities of vivid fish,
including swarms of orange-dappled koi

as well as silver mahseers, common carp,
and ray-finned zaccos jostling in the dark.

But this is not a place for spreading nets
for every brilliant tallied thing will live.

Ecstatically, the tan-green water flows
southwesterly, and I cannot pass through.

Steve Knepper

***Never Enough Already*, Jane Blanchard. Kelsay Books, 2021.**

***Sooner or Later*, Jane Blanchard. Kelsay Books, 2022.**

Jane Blanchard's poetry is one of precise language, precisely executed forms (especially Shakespearean sonnets and villanelles), and precise wit. Blanchard's is not a machine-like precision, though, punching out the same pattern again and again. It is the precision of a great painter, who sees the need for one light brushstroke and then not one stroke more, or the precision of a great gymnast completing a complex routine with ease and flair. The latter comparison is especially apt since, as the concluding couplets in her sonnets show, Blanchard knows how to stick a landing.

Blanchard is also a prolific poet, publishing six volumes in seven years' time: *Unloosed* (2016), *Tides & Currents* (2017), *After Before* (2019), *In or Out of Season* (2020), *Never Enough Already* (2021), *Sooner or Later* (2022). Blanchard returned to poetry after a decades-long hiatus. Her muse was obviously ready to get back to work. Even the titles of her volumes suggest this. They evoke release, constant movement, inevitability, insatiability. But there is a reason I mentioned Blanchard's precision first. While she is incredibly productive, each poem is well-wrought, crisp. Not one feels rushed. And the collections themselves are intricately arranged, with themes, topics, and forms woven together, so that we might, for instance, get a somber handling of a topic juxtaposed with a sardonic one. The poem "Weaving" in *Sooner or Later*, about a medieval tapestry, provides an apt image for Blanchard's poetic practice in this regard. What are Blanchard's major concerns? Married life, friendship, exes, loss (including the inevitable heartbreak of parenting), food, faith, the folly of current events and social pretensions (especially at writing workshops). She splits her time between Augusta, Georgia, and the Georgia beach, and these two locales situate many of her poems.

Blanchard is a particularly skilled humorist. Some of my favorite poems in these collections skewer the pat wisdom of life and literature. Consider three examples from *Never Enough Already*. "Again" takes up the conventional poetic advice that you

should not settle on a form too quickly, that you should allow it to organically emerge:

> As language flows from pen or key to page,
> Discovery could be one's s.o.p.
> So that surprise engages every stage
> Of writing any kind of poetry.

The sonnet ends with this wry wink of a couplet: "A habit can be difficult to halt: / Here is another sonnet by default." "All Aboard" pokes fun at another bit of standard writerly advice:

> No poet has to travel far
> To find some inspiration,
> But why should anyone forgo
> A get-away vacation?

Here and elsewhere in the collection, Blanchard's verve, sly humor, and formal virtuosity call to mind the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay. But T. S. Eliot is the early twentieth-century poet who gets the explicit nod in "The Long Song of Jane E. G. Blanchard," complete with an epigraph from Dante. Prufrock's ennui is hilariously transported to a summer writing workshop, with its hothouse mix of ego and insecurity, with its "sleepless stint in dormitory suite / Post evening boozy-schmoozy meet-and-greet" and its room where "the poets sit and pose / Waiting for which way the wind blows."

Blanchard does not only write about writing, though, and she is not only a poet's poet. You could hand a copy of *Never Enough Already* or *Sooner or Later* to someone with a stated aversion to poetry, and I suspect that Blanchard would have them guffawing in delight and turning from page to page. "Strategy," an advice poem in Sooner or Later about chance encounters with exes, ends with this kicker, funny and wise and bittersweet all at once: "Maintain some semblance of composure; / Abandon any hope of closure."

Blanchard might also cause our hypothetical reader to shed a tear, for she does not only write light verse, and her humorous poems are not necessarily light. Consider the heart-wrenching poem "Vigil" in *Never Enough Already*, where a dying mother is attended by a daughter who turns away from the medical machinery, from "tracking vitals on a monitor," to

gently "moisten her / poor mother's mouth" with a sponge. She does so "in trust / that meager efforts matter." The first half of the poem is built around poignant juxtapositions of the technical (as necessary as that may be) and the human, of the technician and the daughter. In the closing lines of the poem, though, the scene becomes an archetypal and timeless "vigil." The daughter is joined by her husband and her own daughter at the bedside: "Breath by breath, / life must concede another loss to death." The next two poems deal with a funeral and the aftermath of loss. Here the humor returns but as a way of dealing with grief and the purportedly consoling comments of others, too often callous, clichéd, or uncomfortable. "Condolences" runs through ten such comments offered during a lunch out and then ends: "Spare me from unwelcome roaches. / Look, another one approaches."

There are also poems of understated observation. I was particularly moved by "At Church on Christmas Day" in *Sooner or Later*. Here the poet notes a single goldfish cracker, familiar to anyone who has had to snack a restless child through a long homily, parceling out one fish at a time. The cracker is untrammeled beneath the pew, remarkably so given the previous evening's busy Christmas Eve service:

> The fact that no foot crushed it in
> The crowd the night before
> Seemed yet another miracle,
> As if we needed more.

This spare stanza somehow suggests a world, with the penultimate line evoking everything from the mundane realities of parenting and cleaning up crumbs to the child in the manger, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the Last Supper, the Ichthus on the catacomb walls. Once more, Blanchard is a precise poet. Here it is the poetic paradox of how the precisely right line can awaken us to mystery.

Jean L. Kreiling

On the Cusp

Rehoboth Beach, Delaware

for Ivy

It's not quite summer, but this boardwalk calls
to those who need the seashore, their footfalls
a song of slapping flip-flops close beside
the thuds of sturdy sneakers. On the wide,
pale golden beach some hardy souls have laid
their blankets, where they huddle, unafraid
when late spring winds turn wintry. But most stroll,
and briskly, as if headed toward some goal,
unspecified but critical. It might
be Kohr's for frozen custard treats, despite
the chill; or Thrasher's for the famous fries;
or else the next white bench, where seagulls' cries
and breakers' roars will underscore their rest;
or maybe just the boardwalk's end, a test
of stamina. My guess, though, is that most
have come to this slice of Atlantic coast
to stride toward summer. Their perambulation
explores the season's cusp, their destination
less physical than temporal, their aim
to greet the summer's first breath and to claim
that exhalation for their own. The sea
that beckoned them now lends its energy
to their more finite heartbeats, and will steer
them toward a well-known and yet new frontier:
the edge of summer. Reaching it, they may
find seasons of their own: a time for play,
a mind at ease, a freshness at the bone,
a step beyond the cusp of all they've known.

Jean L. Kreiling

Vertigo

after the 1958 film directed by Alfred Hitchcock

He'd watched her fall — a ghastly end —
and knew that with her would descend
his own frail equanimity,
both sacrificed to gravity
and lies. He didn't comprehend

that his obsession might extend
a fraud committed by his friend;
he learned to doubt the tragedy
he'd watched. Her fall

was fatal, but he would pretend
that his affection could amend
the past. His friend's duplicity
provoked poor Scottie's fantasy —
but though he wished that facts could bend,
he'd watched her fall.

Mirror Nonet: Madeleine and Lilac

> *"And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of madeleine which on Sunday mornings . . . my aunt Léonie used to give me . . .[T]he smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment."*
> —*Marcel Proust*, Remembrance of Things Past

Let Proust marvel at his madeleine;
I have the fragrance of lilacs,
which returns me to the day
when I hid behind shrubs
to elude the tag,
and purple buds
dizzied me
with sweet
scent—
for though
I've outgrown
the scabby knees
and the frizzy braids,
one whiff of lilac still
makes me half-drunk with wonder,
the enchanted air twisting time
as exquisitely as Proust's damp crumb.

Unmailed Letters to Old Lovers

Dear A, I meant to write you long ago,
before my hot tears ended and I learned
I could forgive you. How was I to know
my rage would cool, considering I'd burned
with it for months? I'd thought of searing lines
of razor-sharp reproach, the kind that rips
into a man's self-worth and redefines
and magnifies his guilt. But clever quips
would have been lost on you, and would have gained
me nothing. Our affair now seems like just
another fling, and I have not retained
a trace of heat where you're concerned — no lust
of any kind, even for settling scores,
for I was never *Very truly yours*.

Dear B, We did it right. We had a good
eight months, or maybe nine — more fun than fights,
more trust than trouble, more things understood
than not, plus what the poet called "wild nights."
We liked the same things: biking by the lake,
then lingering at the outdoor café,
reciting Robert Frost and William Blake,
researching pizza joints, spending a day
spellbound by Hitchcock while it snowed outside.
We parted sadly, neither of us bitter
but both sure it was over. Though I cried,
we skipped the grudges and regrets that litter
so many endings. Yes, it had to end,
but we did that right, too. I'm still *Your friend*.

Dear C, You were, at last, a mystery:
both tough and fragile, brainy and naïve,
a nomad who would settle down with me
but who, perhaps, I should have known would leave.
You'd lived all over—Africa, Japan,
Hawaii, Costa Rica—but somehow
you seemed contented here, just like a man
who'd found his home at last. And even now,
I still can see us by the fire: we sip
Merlot and chat, solve problems big and small,

consider travel plans. But your next trip
would be for one; last I heard, Montreal
was your next stop. It seemed we failed the test
of time, though I did give it *All my best*.

Dear D, I wondered more than once if you
had been "the one" — and if I'd been a fool
to send you on your way. When I review
our history, your flaws seem miniscule,
your virtues more substantial. Did I choose
unwisely? Maybe, though I can't complain
about my life since then, and when I muse
about what might have been, I know my brain
has donned rose-colored glasses. But to know
that now you are inarguably out
of reach, that you've gone somewhere I can't go,
has more than grieved me; it's rekindled doubt.
With your death, I see everything less clearly;
I do know that I once loved you, *Sincerely*.

Josh Luckenbach

Spring Poem

Oak leaf rollers
hang from the trees
by thin silk threads
the drying rain
makes glitter —

this shine
and the low breeze
the violent gusts died
into, all that's left
of the storm. Maybe

this is memory.
What's there to guess at?
— the caterpillars
already dangling
by lines almost

invisible from leaves
they will reach again,
dark clouds over
some other landscape
now. But who —

who is the child
by the river crying?
Do you want me
to claim, dear reader,
it is or isn't me?

All at Once

It's January. The decade's first frost coats our lawn
in Arkansas as tensions escalate
between the United States and Iran,
days after the U.S. sent a drone to assassinate

the Iranian general who had just landed in Baghdad,
the same time our son
turned four months old, which is hard
to believe, how quickly and slowly time has gone —

those first days home from the hospital, I'd keep
looking at him, exclaiming
at the smallness of him against my lap,
and without language and beyond explaining,

though I will try, I'd think how he'd go on and on, how
he'd keep going on from that moment,
from whatever moment it was — and right now,
at *this* moment, all at once, the Iranian missiles which went

undetected have just hit the U.S. military strongholds
in Iraq, my wife and son
are asleep, our son is four months old,
and the decade's first frost coats our little lawn.

Richard Meyer

In Plato's Cave

Perceived by the senses, sieved through the brain,
the *thing-in-itself* … out there in the world …
can never be grasped, deciphered, unfurled.
The most we can gather, assume, or obtain
are shadows of substance, a silhouette show,
and *that-which-appears* is all we can know.
We're trapped in a cave and stare at a wall
where images flicker, fractured and blurred,
and take as the truth the sum of it all,
a view of the real that's merely inferred.
While the essence of things is never revealed,
we dwell on the surface of what's concealed
and give our impressions a source and a name.
We live on illusions, and die just the same.

Death is . . .

the price we pay for being here,
the cost of getting in —
annihilation's lottery
you're guaranteed to win.

Soliloquy at the Asylum

The shrink who's here to plumb my mind
with Rorschach's silly inkblot test
is businesslike, or so inclined,
and clinical like all the rest,

absurd and long past wearing thin!
I won't reveal the things I see.
I keep my secrets deep within,
but she's still showing cards to me,

and each is splattered with a blotch
that's meant to trigger some reply —
a bearskin rug, a woman's crotch,
a bat, a bird, a butterfly —

such common stuff that dullards spout
when looking at an abstract shape.
They'll never get me figured out.
I'm not some laboratory ape.

This room is stifling, stale and stark.
Those other voices in my head
(the ones that come out after dark)
conceal themselves by playing dead.

I smile. Put on a placid face.
Refuse to speak. My thoughts range far
beyond these blots, this fenced in place,
to where the buried bodies are.

David Middleton

Of Literature and Life

for a mother whose son died at the age of twelve

But when my mind remembers, unamused
It pictures Korczak going with his children
Through Warsaw to the too substantial train.

Edgar Bowers, "In Defense of Poetry"

And round that early-laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.

A.E. Housman,
"To An Athlete Dying Young"

How moved you must have been to come to me
When the spring term was over, not to complain —
You knew you'd make a B — but wanting to say
In person what you could not say before.

The course was Understanding Poetry,
Offered to sophomores not in liberal arts
To satisfy the core curriculum:
Exposure — brief — to the Humanities.

Most students sat through class resigned and bored,
Willing to serve their time for sixteen weeks,
Cellmates with dreaming poets, eager to leave
For "the *real* world" with their B.S. degrees.

So I, to try to free them from themselves,
Assigned a two-part paper, "Lit. & Life,"
The students' task, to analyze a poem,

Then link it to a story of their own.

And you chose "To an Athlete Dying Young,"
An elegy and epitaph combined,
About a runner taken in his prime,
Not lingering till fame had turned to dust.

Your story made a sadder parallel.
It was about your son, a player skilled
At hitting fastballs hard against the wall,
Running the bases, sliding safely home.

But on an early summer afternoon,
Driving him from the game, the shoulder-ride
And trophy his to tell about and show,
You eased through a left-turn green light, seen too late

By a honking eighteen-wheeler skidding ahead,
Its swinging trailer smashing through the door,
Crushing a boy who died before your eyes,
Gone before you or he could say a word.

How long you searched for words, pleading with God
To give you understanding and a peace
Not found in years of therapy and prayer —
A consolation deeper than your grief.

Then, in good time, something would draw you here,
Not chance or fate alone but common grace
That led you to another like your son
Who died and lived again in Housman's verse.

And having said at last just how that poem
And paper had the power to touch and heal,
You left in tears, yet strengthened, not by me,
But by the virtue found in poetry.

I never saw or heard from you again
Though memory brings back from time to time
The image of a mother who returned
In gratitude for "literature and life."

And though I know that you were not alone

In writing on a poem you made your own,
Of all who might have come to tell me so
You were the only one who ever did.

*

Coda

Your story is from thirty years ago,
And I am long retired with the times
In which the kind of paper I assigned
Let likeness bring "relationship and love."

Now more and more a cored curriculum
In place of broad surveys of English verse
Tempts sophomores with some narrow "topics" class —
"Comic Book Zombies — The Apocalypse!"

And there, old canon poems, the living dead,
Dissected as *topoi* — mere rhetoric
Of politics and sex — are tagged with "trigger
Warnings" for those traumatized by fact:

Unflinching Homer fixed on severed heads
Whose lips still begged for mercy in the dust,
Apollo chasing Daphne into a tree,
Bull-raped Europa riding the god's white flanks,

A floating dagger pointing toward the king,
Or lashed Fedallah gazing from the whale,
From this and more — hard givens of our myth —
The tenderhearted mind would turn away.

But you, who had no time to turn away,
Who had no warning — saw split-second death —
Took courage from consoling recompense
In lines about an athlete dying young.

Taking Down the Tree

some sixty years ago

We put up this year's tree on Christmas Eve,
Anglicans now, waiting on Advent's end,
The four wreath candles, violet and rose,
Guttering under wicks too short to trim.

*

The tree was from the north, a balsam fir,
Cut off above the stump, then shipped down south
To live a while in milder winter air,
Stacked in a lot till bought and taken home
To be a fragrant twelve-day Yuletide sign,
Held steady in the old stand's metal bowl,
By pointed blade and twisted screw secured.

We watered it from time to time, and yet
Needles still dried and fell among the gifts,
Browning on boxes yellow, red, and gold
With ribbons curled and knotted into bows.

White lights were strung around uplifted limbs,
Spiraling down below the treetop star
Through bubble candles, crocheted flakes of snow,
Icicle strands cascading toward glass balls
A great-grandmother painted, just three left
Unshattered by a careless brush or drop.

*

The children gone to bed, though not to sleep,
Watching a clock whose hands are nearly still,
Their mother, all her work done, under quilts,
Guarded in dream by her own helper elves,
I stay awake and put out unwrapped gifts
From one in whom the youngest still believes.
Then fill the stockings up with jelly rings,
Peppermint bark, and twisted candy sticks.

*

The fire is out below the stocking-hooks
Although a log is smoldering aglow,
And there I stop, looking up at the tree.

*
And not just at a tree but at a world,
From water at the bottom to a star
And in between a galaxy of lights
On branches with their people, beasts, and things,
A caroler, a church mouse, and a horn,
A crèche of woven straw where angels sing.

These images in mind I go to bed
Till wakened by the children half-past four.

Their mother makes them wait till prayers are said.

Then in no time at all toys, books, and games
And other gifts are claimed: an Alamo
And a Civil War playset for the boys,
Jewelry stands and girl-bikes for the girls,
Hardbacks of the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew,
Monopoly for them all to grow into,
Scrabble and Clue, for words and mysteries.

The children find and lose themselves in play.
But day has peaked at dawn. Elation fades
Through morning and the long slow afternoon,
With naptime, weighing heavy, just fought off,
Then early bed, and making up lost sleep.

*

The wrapping paper, ribbons, paperboard
All bagged and thrown away, we leave the fir
Still decorated, still lit up at night
For twelve more days, waiting on three more gifts,
The Wise Men's gold, and frankincense, and myrrh
For one who had been born to be a gift

Not under but upon another tree,
The king of earth and heaven, and of death.

*

Then time at last for taking down our tree,
The ornaments in tissue gently laid,
The caroler, the church mouse, and the horn,
Their box the box they came in years ago,
Its corners torn, its snowflakes worn away,
Victorian glass balls unbroken still,
Brought up the attic ladder to a dark
Where they will stay unseen and out of mind
Though glowing yet awhile in children's dreams.

*

Then checking limbs for anything we've missed,
Its stand removed, we drag the shedding tree
Out to the roadside where it slowly dies
Without its roots or water, unadorned,
A symbol now of nothing but itself.

*

And all down the street we see the other firs
Put out from other houses where a truck
Will stack them flat and take them to the dump.

*

But through deep nights of this Epiphany,
Anglicans who would liken thing to thing,
We look up at the sky as at a tree,
Its taproot, top, at either end of time,
Old oceans both above it and below,
Its branches strung with stars, the icy trails
Of comets, and the moons and planets hung
To hook around their paths around a sun,
The spinning balls of water, gas, and rock,
Galactic Catherine wheels like wheeling wreathes.

*

And with the naked eye, or telescope,
We try to understand as best we may
The only gift but one the Maker gave,
The mystery of creation, birth and death,
And of our being here to be and see,
Reaching like balsam firs toward Northern Lights
And past their solar flares to a fixed North Star,
Wondering as we ponder how a night
Will come at last as it was meant to come,
With all the decorations put away,
When time is right for taking down the tree.

"Painting with Words": My Life as a Louisiana Poet North and South

Delivered Before The New Orleans Fine Arts Club on November 9, 2020

North Louisiana

My life as a poet who paints with words began many years ago in my hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana. My father, David Vernon Middleton, Jr. (1922-1996), was a founding member of the Shreveport Contemporary Art Group, which brought Modernism to northwest Louisiana after the Second World War. One member of the group — Clyde Connell (1901-1998) — has won international recognition with shows in Paris and New York.

As a child, I was privileged to live in this Shreveport art world, and I recall the long visits to Clyde Connell's studio and house, first at the State Penal Farm (where her husband was supervisor) and later on Lake Bistineau, the art exhibits at Centenary's Magale Library and Meadows Museum, the Barnwell Art Center by Red River, and the Louisiana State Exhibit Museum; and the many hours at home watching my father work in his studio and shop in watercolors, oils, pen and ink, acrylics, wood, and clay. To me the smell of oil paint is an aroma of the soul, and my love of vivid images in poems comes from that art.

From my father's world of art I also remember most vividly those long Sunday afternoons when members of the Contemporary Art Group were busy hanging a show at the Louisiana State Exhibit Museum while I circled again and again the museum's rounded hall gazing at Curator H.B. Wright's wonderful dioramas of Louisiana life — Indians, oil wells, salt mines, slave cabins, plantations, cane and cotton fields — and especially at that magnificent topographical map of the state railed off and sunken down into the museum's floor. I mused upon and pondered that map not knowing at the time that I was absorbing a symbol of the essential subject of poems I would write a quarter century later.

My father, who died of Parkinson's Disease, once made a sketch of me as a boy straddling the thick low limb of an oak atop a hill outside my grandparents' house in Saline, a village in Bienville Parish where I came to know north Louisiana rural life, its flora and fauna, its weather and geography. That sketch, unfortunately now lost, remains emblematic to me of our shared

lives as artists and is the of subject my poem "For an Artist with Parkinson's":

So still beside the window in a chair
Whose wheels you cannot move and barely clutch,
You scan with eyes harsh medicine has blurred
A winter world once rendered by your touch.
Black seed-pods and a last few orange leaves
Crackling in dwarf crape myrtles, stark pecans
Mistletoed and bared of leaf and nut, grackles
Cracking berries in the frosted holly groves —
All these you stained in ink, the pot's baked glaze,
Or brought alive in oils — those earthen shades
Made from the very things whose shapes they made.

When you were in your prime I was a child
Held tight in the softened muscles of your hug
Riding on your shoulders while the spring
Grew wild with buttercups and ladybugs.
On summer days, heat pouring from above
Beat strong on your hard arm that hammered down
Long boards to roof a workshop where you wrought —
Absorbed in the timeless habitude of craft —
God's objects set aflame with human love.
And though your gift was modest, still in kind
You knew the joy of Buonarroti's mind.

One day in fall now forty years ago
You took me to a sloping melon field
That crested in an oak whose thickest limb
I straddled as you sketched me from below.
Evasive of your gaze grown so intense
I stared down at the dried and shrivelled vines,
Dreaming of greenest rinds in late July
And heard in the still green needles of the pine
Faint windblown strains refining to a quiet
In which a newborn gift delayed by grace
First stirred as you shaded-in my gazing face.

Now you are old and ill beyond all art
Yet just as when you sketched me on the day
My head of curls was wreathed in curling leaves
And I was drawn and chosen we still serve

The Giver of our gifts: for when I draft
Quiet poems upon this table whose thick top,
Split with hard use, you covered up at last
With plastic sheets held taut by roofing nails
My pen moves where you painted, stained, and glazed
Giving for years to beauty and the muse
Those hands a child had thought would never fail.

But in addition to my father and the Shreveport art world there was also Miss Caroline Dormon (1888-1971), Louisiana's famous naturalist, who lived just outside Saline at Briarwood where she grew and studied native Louisiana flowers, observed and wrote about our birds, participated on the state and national levels in conservation projects, and composed and illustrated her great books on Louisiana birds and wildflowers. Since my maternal grandparents lived in Saline, I grew up knowing "Miss Carrie" but simply as an older woman who lived in a cabin outside of town and made pictures of and wrote books on Louisiana flowers and birds. I did not know that she was world-renowned. (As I'm sure you know, as members of the New Orleans Fine Arts Club, some of Caroline Dorman's works are exhibited at Long Vue House in New Orleans where "Miss Carrie" is honored each April on the annual Louisiana Iris Day.)

"Miss Carrie" encouraged me with my poetry some years later both in person and by letter. I will never forget the remarkable experience of watching at a distance as she called down out of the wildwood birds of many species that alighted on her arms and hands to take the seeds she had placed there. This union in one extraordinary woman of the botanist, the painter, the gardener, the conservationist, and the writer has remained with me as an example of the unity of being for which as a mature poet I have always striven.

My poem on her life and her influence on me is entitled "Calling Down the Birds — in memory of Louisiana naturalist Caroline Dormon (1888-1971)":

1.

You saw them just the way they really were,
Those flowers in your gardens and the wild,
Studied, preserved, in earth and paint and words,
The naturalist and artist of one mind.

The red woodbine and orange-yellow phlox,
Greenbriar, blue larkspur, nodding indigo,
The violet oxalis — rainbow names —
A covenant in pastoral catalogue.

You knew the birds as well, the goldfinch, wren,
The swallow, warbler, sparrow and the food
They loved to eat, calling them from the trees
To peck up at your feet the sprinkled seed.

And you would stay at Briarwood — birthplace, home —
Secluded in a wold's uplifted hills,
Your cabin, grounds, a modest green estate
By wisdom and solicitude maintained.

And there some April dawns a pineland quiet
Would draw you on toward spots in partial shade
Good for Celestials, common once, now rare
In north Louisiana's well-drained clays.

Their sky-blue petals graceful on the stem,
They open in midmorning, shrivel at noon,
Then die before their first and only day
Darkens toward far-off clusters of the stars.

And you remembered how their meadowlands
Once flowered around Old Shreveport to its edge,
Now ringed with plants and neighborhood escapes
Lying like slabs above the dusty bulbs.

2.

I came from Shreveport often as a boy
To visit kin close by you, in Saline,
And I would ask to share your solitude
By following and watching for a day.

You taught me birds you named by sight and song
And let me smell new cuttings taking root,
Species at threat that you would propagate,

Their wildness spared and thriving in your care.

And once, when I brought down those early poems
You read and complimented, being kind,
Sensing how I was trying to say my way
Back home to that same place you never left,

You had me stand apart, yet almost near,
Then called the autumn birds from bough and sky
To come to earth and eat Celestial seeds,
This time from open hands you lifted up

Toward feathers cloudy-black and iris-bright,
A kingdom needing peace, a saving grace,
A mixed flock growing larger by your love,
Still trusting that first promise you had made.

*

South Louisiana

But even though North Louisiana is my native ground, I have deep roots now in South Louisiana as well. I spent most of the 1970s at LSU in Baton Rouge earning my M.A. and Ph.D. in English and learning how to write traditional metrical verse — as opposed to free verse — under the guidance of my major professor, Dr. Donald E. Stanford, himself a formalist poet and editor of LSU's world famous literary quarterly, *The Southern Review*, founded in 1935 by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. It was during those LSU years that I met my future bride and wife now of forty-four years, Francine Anne Kerne, who is with me today and who served for over thirty years at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana as a librarian. Fran is designated a master craftsman in white-work by the State of Louisiana, and, as I once wrote in a poem, we have shared our lives as artists: "Thereafter, when they wove their words and threads / They were each other's muse and truly wed." (I should add that it was also at LSU that I met one of your members, Dr. Lee Pitre, who invited me to speak today.) Since the 1970s, I have lived in Thibodaux, Louisiana where I was professor of English at Nicholls State University and Poet in Residence until my retirement in 2010. So South Louisiana has long since also been my home.

Two of my painterly poems set in south Louisiana are "Blue Herons" and "Hurricane Baby." "Blue Herons" combines direct observation of these birds with research I did in books on Louisiana birds. If I have done my job properly as a poet, you should not be able to tell the difference in the poem between what I saw and what I read about:

> The morning sun inclines us toward its light
> Spreading above scrub willow and the sedge
> Where swamp gives way at last to marshy ponds
> Of pickerel, fire flag, and arrowhead.
> And there in mangle-brush and roseau cane,
> Black mangrove, matted bullrush, and the dense
> Old water-groves of tupelo and gum
> Or high within the doming cypress-stands
> We see the great blue herons in their nests,
> Each platform with its clutch of pale green eggs.
>
> Hatched out by June in softest natal down,
> The birds become tall stalkers in their prime
> Deliberate in movement through the pools
> Darting at minnows, frogs, and dragonflies.
> Their colonies remain throughout the year
> Though when the northern flocks that breed in cold
> Then gaze toward polar wastes of ice and snow
> Are drawn back south by some still hidden sign
> Our residents call out when they return
> Alighting on the islands and the coast.
>
> We make no noise yet when we start to go
> The herons cry and climb as toward a home,
> In columned drafts between the Gulf and sun,
> Alive in fiery light above the foam.
> Bright heirs of an almost winterless domain,
> They hear our voices rising as they glide
> Higher in time's elation and declare
> That time is but a flyway to the side
> Of one who calls all creatures by their names,
> His timbre their intention on the course.

A shorter South Louisiana poem is entitled "Hurricane Baby." As a North Louisianian, I had never encountered the term "hurricane baby" until I overheard it used by two old men standing in line

to restock on liquor at a grocery store in Thibodaux after electricity had been restored in town following a hurricane. The men agreed that, nine months hence, the birth of "hurricane babies" would cause a spike in the birth rate since — and this was before generators in private homes were as widespread as they are now — when a hurricane strikes and the power goes out and time weighs heavily upon them young couples do (more and more) what comes naturally:

Hurricane Baby

They lie there in the golden afterglow
Of hurricane and twilight and the slow
Powerless hours through which they'll stay so still
Till air moves cool past each wet windowsill.
Outside spent gales adrift in sweet release
Blow mild by flattened cane until they cease
While herons high in cypress preen and sleep,
Their hours those primal hours all beings keep.
And with the clocks, A/C, and TV dead,
No light for books, they have the dark instead
In which he turns to touch, then kiss her there
Lost in a gentle storm of flesh and hair.

My first two full-length collections of verse, *The Burning Fields* (1991) and *Beyond the Chandeleurs* (1999), were both published by LSU Press. Each volume contains many poems set in either North or South Louisiana. So, at the turn of the millennium, I had said all I could think of to say at that time about our state and needed a new subject. Given my background in the art world, I thought I would try writing a poem based on a picture.

I chose a painting by the nineteenth-century French artist Jean-François Millet (1814-1875). Like many young artists, Millet began his career by depicting subjects from Greek and Roman myth or from the Bible and by imitating past masters. (I did the same in my earlier poems.)

In time, Millet found his true subject: the peasants who worked the fields and tended flocks of sheep either in Millet's native Normandy or just outside the small city of Barbizon where Millet settled after a few years of living in Paris. Born in the village of Gruchy, Millet himself came of peasant stock and once

said, “I was born a peasant, and a peasant I shall remain.”

In his pictures, Millet — without sentimentally overly idealizing them — raises these almost medieval peasants of late pre-industrial France up to a level of dignity, sometimes even tragic dignity, traditionally reserved in literature and the other fine arts for persons of high station — persons such as kings and queens, princes and generals.

Little did I know at the time, but by turning to Millet I was actually returning to the North Louisiana of my youth, a place which at that time still retained much of its own nineteenth century agrarian, pre-industrial way of life. Millet called his pictures “The Epic of the Fields,” thus elevating peasant labor to the level of an epic poem by Homer, Virgil, or Milton. My poem on Millet led, quite unexpectedly, to fifty-nine more such sixteen-line poems over a three-year period (2000-2002). I will close my talk this morning by reading two Millet poems.

The first one is entitled ”Goose Girl Bathing.” A “goose girl” was a young girl who from about age three to puberty had the job of shooing the family geese back and forth between the barnyard and a pond. This was her first job on the farm. It ended when she reached her teens:

Goose Girl Bathing

ca. 1863

Late morning and secluded in the cool
Of May’s green banks and boughs, this hidden stream,
A girl perhaps fifteen sheds all her clothes
And rests beside the waters where she’ll bathe.

Her geese and ganders paddle in the wet
Where she as yet but dips one ankle in,
Her gangling body rounding out in soft
Womanly contours—thighs, hips, belly, breasts.

She’s been the family goose girl thirteen years
And knows her time as such is near its end.
Between the trees of life and innocence
She stares at her reflection’s steady change.

Above her, in dense foliage, two white cows
See all that young men soon will vie to see:
Flesh warming toward its noon in rose and blue,
Those filtered sun-shafts rippling in the depths.

*

A decided preference for focusing on art about subjects other than oneself also links Millet and me. In my poem on his picture entitled "Self-Portrait," the painter and the poet become all but one as Millet's France and my North and South Louisiana converge:

Self-Portrait

ca. 1840-41

Such portraits in your works are early, rare,
Just two in fact—that Cherbourg fantasy
Tailored to Ono in-laws, white shirt starched,
A black cravat, cheeks shaved like sheep well shorn

And this arch countering image, full rich beard,
High velvet collar, right eye bright, urbane
And frank, the other warier in dark,
Bohemian and peasant, sundered, one —

Yet neither does you justice, your true face
Disclosed in self-effacingness alone,
A model artist modeling on God
Your kingdom ringed by Ptolemaic stars.

And in these poems I've disappeared in you —
Or is it that you've lost yourself in me? —
Our shapes and phrases so alike composed,
Your Channel in the Gulf, my South in Normandy.

After Millet's death in 1875, Vincent Van Gogh saw, and was overwhelmed by, an exhibition of Millet's pictures and called the world of these pictures "holy ground."

Over many years, Louisiana, both North and South, had become my own "holy ground" and so by writing a book of sixty poems on Millet's pictures — a book published in 2005 by LSU Press — I had closed a great circle and, by going to Millet's France, had actually come back home.

Thank you.

Leslie Monsour

Serious Pleasure

Robert B. Shaw. *What Remains to Be Said: New and Selected Poems*. Pinyon Publishing, 2022. 312 pp.

Through some of the most turbulent decades in the history of English prosody, Robert B. Shaw has kept his bearings, never losing sight of meter, musicality, integrity of meaning, surprises of the imagination, feats of association, strategies of rhyme, and the accurate word, among other crucial poetic compass points. "I am indebted in a primal way to the English language," Shaw says in an interview with Ryan Wilson for *Literary Matters* (Issue 14.3). He repays that debt in full, at the current rate of interest, with *What Remains to Be Said*, a superlative addition to this year's plentiful field of "new and selected" titles.

Along with twenty-eight new poems, half of them in print for the first time, the volume contains, by my count, 215 selections from Shaw's previous seven poetry books, dating back to *Comforting the Wilderness*, published in 1977, when Shaw was twenty-nine years old. In the Foreword to *What Remains to Be Said*, he tells us

> The earliest poem reprinted in this book was written in 1966, when I was nineteen. Most of the new poems in the first section were written over a period of about a year bridging 2020 and 2021. I leave it to others to do the math.

According to my math, the poems here span fifty-five years.

"I think I was a very odd teenager," Shaw relates in *Literary Matters*, and he continues

> Very early on . . . I felt that what I was doing was different from a hobby or a pastime. I felt deeply compelled, not just to write, but to rewrite, to master expressive clarity and technical skills. It gave me, when it went well, a pleasure that was too serious to be called fun.

The serious pleasure paid off. In 1978, the critic, Paul Breslin wrote in *Ploughshares*

> . . . the first thing one notices in *Comforting the Wilderness* is Shaw's impressive command of traditional form. . . . On closer acquaintance, one finds that the best dozen poems or so have more than wit and skill; they have an understated but unmistakable intensity of feeling.

Surely, "A Study" is one of the "best dozen poems" Paul Breslin had in mind in his assessment of Shaw's first book. It's a remarkable poem for a poet to have written in his twenties, therefore, probably not the one Shaw wrote when he was nineteen. It describes the first stunned moments upon entering a room where someone has hanged himself. The room is, apparently, a study; and the poem, itself, is a study of the room. The emotional content is skillfully delegated to the unobtrusive end-rhymes, which serve to create a sense of inevitability and finality:

> That was it: having made his effects as neat
> as might befit a man of considered action,
> he set himself to perform this final feat
> of incredible abstraction.

"Twilight eddies in the corners, almost blue," Shaw writes of daylight's remnants, as "Hairline cracks begin to radiate / outward from the firm hook that held the chandelier." The poem finishes with a devastating play on words — Shaw excels at double meanings — as "we, his audience, who forced the door" behold in disbelief the "willing suspension."

The identity of the victim and how he is connected to the poet is left to the reader's imagination. Shaw was not yet the more personal poet he would become, but he learned early on to keep his lens clear, his focus sharp, and his hand steady when facing a subject as difficult as that of "A Study." When something is already heavy, why add more weight and send it crashing through the floor? To quote Shaw's interview in *Literary Matters*, "Gravity will get our worn out bodies in the end. But the imagination is still free to ascend as well as to plumb the depths."

I tried, but ultimately could not decide which of the early poems Shaw wrote when he was nineteen. However, if I were forced to choose, I might guess "The Pause" or "In Witness" for the moody woodland settings that suggest the significant im-

pression Robert Frost made on Shaw when he began to seriously study and write poetry in high school. Furthermore, "In Witness" is dedicated to Robert Fitzgerald, Shaw's professor at Harvard, where, as an undergraduate, he also had the good fortune of studying with Robert Lowell. (As a side-note, it's hard to ignore the importance in Shaw's life of so many figures named Robert. In addition to Fitzgerald and Lowell, as well as the major influence of Robert Frost, Robert B. Shaw, himself, is named for his distant relative, the Bard of Scotland, Robert Burns.)

If emulation signals the work of a nineteen year-old, "Snake Crossing" might be a candidate, due to its strong echoes of Dickinson's well-known encounter with her "narrow fellow in the Grass," particularly in the phrases "horsewhip tailed," "jumpiness of heart," and "joints made gelid," recalling Dickinson's "Whip Lash," "tighter breathing," and "zero at the bone." Shaw's later poems, "To the Cricket" and "Shut In," among others, assimilate Dickinson's influence organically. In any case, all the poems Shaw selected from his first book must surely be among the "best dozen or so" Paul Breslin mentioned, and it seems a shame not to have included more than ten of them here.

In 1988, when Shaw published his second book, *The Wonder of Seeing Double*, he'd been serving as Emily Dickinson Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College for five years, a position he held until he retired in 2016. It's no wonder that, after nearly two decades, having taught thousands of English majors, Shaw wrote "Letter of Recommendation" (*Solving for X*, 2002). In couplet rhymes worthy of Alexander Pope, Shaw makes the amusing and candid confession that the only piece of information he's able to glean about a former student is the less than perfect letter grade he gave her.

Even though some of his former students at the college Emily Dickinson attended may have failed to leave a significant impression, Shaw is fully aware of the impression Dickinson has made on his work, as he acknowledges to Ryan Wilson,

> You can look out the window on winter afternoons and see that certain slant of light 'That oppresses, like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes.' It can seem intimidating — a lot to live up to — but also inspiring if you can at moments sense such lingering presences.

In "Called Back," also from *Solving for X*, Shaw describes a quietly moving instance of Dickinson's lingering presence, using

her characteristic quatrains of common measure and end rhymes — several of them slant — at the second and fourth lines of trimeter, as well as her style of punctuating with dashes and quaint capitalizations. The poem recounts a tour of the Homestead, in which Shaw addresses Dickinson directly: "We came — a Century or so / Too late — to find you Home." He ultimately leads us outdoors to Emily's gravesite with the words "Called Back" carved in her tombstone, where he reflects

> Gray Words hemmed by an Iron Fence —
> Latticed — by mighty Trees —
> Your Postscript to the World declares
> How Potent Absence is.

A different presence, easy to imagine as a descendant of Dickinson's fellow Amherst townsfolk, recurs in three selections from Shaw's first two books. She's an elderly female relation, possibly a great aunt or grandmother, a memorable New Englander who fastidiously preserves family heirlooms and traditional practices. We meet her in "Boston Sunday Dinner" from *Comforting the Wilderness*:

> More grandly than a camel kneeling down
> in desert twilight she assumed her place,
> motioning me to join her at her right.

I recognized my own grandmother's Victorian touch when Shaw recalls, "A prism hung to the cord of a window blind" and how it "sprinkled a bracelet of rainbow on her wrist." The same figure, or a similar one, returns in "Bright Enough to See Your Face In" and "Homework" from *The Wonder of Seeing Double*.

These are among the first of Shaw's prolific outputs of blank verse, a form well suited to the conversational style he favors, and, to a large extent, inspired by his early encounter with Robert Frost's blank verse narratives, as he describes to Ryan Wilson:

> At first, because I hadn't read much if any earlier blank verse, some of Frost's speech effects made it hard for me to hear it as regular meter at all. I remember puzzling over it, and very gradually growing to hear the regular beat underlying even lines that veered conspicuously

> away from it. This interested me deeply, and gave me a sense of meter as something measured but not mechanical. When I came to writing blank verse myself, I was attracted to the versatility of it: it could be lyric or narrative, descriptive or dramatic. . . . [L]ike Frost and so many others, I value the illusion of verse as conversational speech.

Not surprisingly, in 2007, Ohio University Press published Shaw's highly readable and instructive book, *Blank Verse. A Guide to Its History and Use*.

Probably Shaw's most notable blank verse poem remains "The Post Office Murals Restored," also the title of his third collection, published in 1994. Having volunteered to clean the wall paintings of the local post office, which aren't, as he tells us, "anything I'd choose to paint myself— / earnest, public-minded '30s stuff," Shaw reflects on the history of the town, as he slowly cleans the murals, clarifying their images, and guiding us through his thoughts. The poem is untypically several pages long, but typically conversational with thoughtful commentary and instances of subtle double meaning. About halfway through, Shaw brings us "face to face with the long wall, / full of lore to ponder on your way out:"

> Where to begin? The left,
> I guess, which goes back to pre-history,
> that is, before the founding of the town.
> It's of a forest clearing where a pair
> of fur-traders socialize with Indians.
> Some small thing (a rabbit?) roasts on a spit,
> and the men share a pipe beside the fire. . . .

When Shaw asks, "Where to begin?" his answer, "The left," comes at the end of the line, where, despite the enjambment, the weight of its double meaning stands out. As he painstakingly washes away the grime of past ignorance, Shaw reflects on a more enlightened and more troubling view of American history:

> Dabbing it clean by inches I was bothered
> by weird sensations as if I could feel
> the textures changing hands in these transactions.
> The red men handed over something warm
> and soft, and got in payment something cold

and hard. They couldn't possibly have known
what they were buying into, any more
than they or their pale guests could have divined
that this unbroken wilderness they sat in
would in a century and a bit be axed.
The trees were fair game once the game was gone.

The dark commentary that simmers in Shaw's thoughts, as he considers the catastrophes that will befall the "red men" and the forest, boils over in a scalding new poem, "After the Latest Mass Shooting." It begins, "The motto's changed: Live free *and* die." With a glaring italicized conjunction, Shaw adapts New Hampshire's state motto to better fit the current crisis of gun violence in the United States, and, in tightly contained couplets of iambic trimeter, he goes on to mock the government leaders whose cowardly, money-driven failure to act has perpetuated the crisis.

Shaw's poems rarely embrace such dark statements. In fact, he seldom even uses a nocturnal setting. More often, his moods are developed through explorations of daylight. A new poem about the moon is called "Daytime Moon." A poem called "Dusk," from *Aromatics* (2011), ends up being about dawn's radiance; and the gorgeous aubade, "A Certain Other Slant," also from *Aromatics*, bids us to "See the blinds partly askew, parsing the sun-flood / into a radiant sheaf of diagonals." "Winter Sunset," from 2016's *A Late Spring, and After*, ends with the line, "My goal is afterglow." Reflection, translucence, and changing light are devices Shaw uses frequently throughout his work.

"A Beacon," also from *A Late Spring, and After*, is a noteworthy exception. Shaw has said that his poems have become more personal with time, and this one, in which the distance and the obscurity feel insurmountable, deals with a poignant, solitary image of his father, seated on the terrace at night, smoking a cigarette, an "ember-dot of hot vermillion" in the "cooling, deepening dark." When his father inhales, it is

as if his cigarette end took a cue from
fireflies glimmering in and above the grass,
but unlike them, finding no answering flash.

Adam Kirsch's comment about John Donne's use of metaphor (*The New Yorker* October 10, 2022) is equally true of

Shaw's: "The metaphors aren't merely virtuosic; in elaborating them, he discovers surprising new aspects of his subject."

By contrast to the one in "A Beacon," a cigarette can be hilarious, as in "Making Do," from *Solving for X*, in which Shaw describes a series of outraged experts, from piano tuner to electrician, who take offense at the do-it-yourself repairs perpetrated by amateurs who are simply "making do" with what they have. In one case

> . . . the house painter
> almost swallowed his cigarette when he saw
> the alligatoring my hapless hand-done
> sanding had left sitting on the clapboards.

Much of Shaw's humor occurs when seemingly trivial subjects end up having serious or deeply personal meaning. "In the Kitchen," one of the opening section's new poems, is about the universal experience of accidentally dropping a glass on the floor and helplessly watching it shatter "from shards, to splinters, to smithereens."

> . . . maybe now it will have startled
> out of you some respect as an exemplum —
> of what? That you should be more careful?
> As a lifelong belt-and-suspenders person
> you don't find that enlightening. No, it's more
> of a reminder of how close behind the scrim
> of your placid day-to-day sense of safety
> chaos waits to occasionally poke through.
> Yes. That is what this brokenness says to you.

Shaw has an uncanny ability to bring a moment almost to a standstill, making it possible to study an occurrence in freeze-frame slow motion while it's happening. As Shaw puts it, his aim as a poet is "to capture the moment and give it safe harbor on the page, rescued from the flow of time. Some people do this with cameras, others by keeping diaries. I do it in verse, which to me seems to have more staying power."

With "Ant in Amber," again from *Solving for X*, Shaw gives us, in rhyming couplets, an image of the captured moment itself. Humor and double meaning don't escape him in such lines as, "Nature expended quite some enterprise / in getting

this poor sap to fossilize." As was his namesake, Robert Burns, Shaw is a deeply empathetic individual, by nature and towards nature. His petrified ant resembles Burns' "Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie," and the frequently quoted lines about "the best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men" resonate in Shaw's amber bead prisoner:

> Now honey-hued, translucent, it displays
> intact the forager of former days:
> every last leg the little soldier needed
> is here embalmed, or we might say embeaded.

A moment of classical beauty follows, when Shaw muses, "Didn't the Greeks believe such beads were spawned / as tears of sunset, hardened as next day dawned?" Finally, as Robert Frost (and Horace) recommend, the poem that began in delight finds its way to wisdom in the end: "a model instance, maybe of renewal — / interred as ant and disinterred as jewel."

The mingling of pathos and humor comes naturally to Shaw. In a May, 2019 interview with Sarah London for *The Woven Tale Press*, he comments on the necessity of humor in poetry:

> I certainly think that humor can be a useful ingredient in a poem whose subject matter may not in itself be funny at all. The old-fashioned term "comic relief" comes to mind. But it's not as simple as seeing comic and tragic as sheer opposites and attempting to balance them against each other. To me what is often unsettling about human experience is the extent to which these things seem uncannily intermingled. Sometimes what we might call humor is hard to distinguish from irony. Maintaining some awareness of this is one way to keep writing from sliding into sentimentality. If we feel the joke is on us, that may not be fun, but it may be a step forward in ad justing ourselves to reality. As John Gay wrote: "Life is a jest; and all things show it. / I thought so once; but now I know it."

Robert Frost, who had more than his share of personal tragedy, coined his own version of John Gay's observation in the epigram

Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee,
And I'll forgive Thy great big one on me.

The final section of *What Remains to Be Said*, with poems from *A Late Spring, and After*, deals with some of the most recent "great big jokes" in Shaw's life. The blank verse sonnet, "On the Death of Wilmer Mills," eloquently expresses the shocked grief shared by all who knew the young poet, whose death will forever be an "imponderable event."

The title poem, "A Late Spring," is named for the season in which Shaw's beloved wife, Hilary, died, after a sudden and brief struggle with multiple myeloma. The poem, a tightly contained villanelle in iambic trimeter, is a brave example of Emily Dickinson's observation, "After great pain, a formal feeling comes—/ The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs." From its opening stanza, "A Late Spring" retains its formal composure, while establishing the villanelle's stoic lines of mournful repetition:

She died on Mother's Day.
Our son stood close to me.
What more is there to say?

The care with which Shaw has arranged the order of his poems is worth noting. *What Remains to Be Said* opens with the new poem, "Morning Song," while the last section brings the book to a graceful close with "Winter Sunset." Shaw has magically managed to give us five and a half decades in one full and enriching day. Still, he leaves us wishing the day were longer, and that, instead of "new and selected," the title of *What Remains to Be Said* could have been "new and collected."

James B. Nicola

Black Holes II

To do what you have never done may not
be easy, but I think that it is not
unthinkable. To think a thing does not
mean doing it, though. And I've been taught not
to think. But the unthinkable is not
unconscionable, I am thinking, not
unless we are what I am trying not
to be, the product of others, and not
ourselves. Are you like me? See, we did not
have show-and-tell in my day. We did not
do oral reports. These two things were not
about what could be tested, so were not
in the curriculum; and what did not
provide data through black dots, we did not
learn. So I'm great at filling forms, but not
at what comes next. My education's not
a lot of help when I feel I do not
exist except from dot to dot. That's not
atypical. Yet if the form is not
me, am I no-one then? Or am I not
more than black holes of data? I know not.
And I so want to think what I have not
thought before. You, for one, though I have not
the least idea if you exist or not;
I've only seen your form. One that seems — not
unlike mine! At this point, though, I do not
know what to do; just think that it would not
be such a bad idea to meet. Or not . . .

James Owens

To Galla, an Aging Bride

— from the Latin of Ausonius

I prodded: "Don't despise
our youth. It goes to waste.
Spread those pretty thighs.
A hag's forever chaste."
You spurned desire, while years
crept up, as if we were blind,
and can't redeem from arrears
those chances left behind.
You regret and pine because
you lagged at saying "yes,"
and now you note new flaws,
your beauty shining less.
But embrace me, just the same;
re-light our dampered fire.
Warm me, if not with flame,
by the embers of desire.

Invocation to Priapus

— from the Latin of Martial

Cock-god, you who chase off men with that huge dick and scare
sissies with your sickle, give this lonely orchard some care.
Then may ugly, old apple thieves never come near,
but a pliant youth or a girl winsome with flowing hair.

The Forlorn Maid in Spring

— anonymous Latin, c. 1000

The west wind gusts softly;
the warming sun grows.
Now earth bares her breasts
and sweetness overflows.

Spring steps decked in purple,
wearing her royal gems.
She scatters flowers on the ground,
leaves on woodland limbs.

Beasts ready birthing lairs
and gentle birds their nests,
singing their rightful pleasure
from trees' flowering crests.

I've ears to hear such things,
and I still have eyes,
but, oh, in place of those joys,
I am racked with sighs.

I sit alone, brooding
and chilled and drear,
and if, by chance, I look up,
nothing I see or hear.

You, though, for the sake of spring,
go listen, go learn
from leaves, from blooms and meadows.
My spirit lags. I yearn.

Steven Peterson

Iliad in Suburbia

for my father and his friends, born in 1925

My father let me stay up late at night
When his old high school buddies came to town.
They'd sit out in the backyard getting tight
On cold canned beer and watch the sun go down.
There I would sit, a quiet boy ignored,
Hoping they'd talk about a world at war.

It didn't happen every time. It's true
That soldiers who had seen the worst stay mum.
But sometimes something in the summer drew
Their memories from the dusk, cut through the hum
Of mortgages or baseball games they'd seen,
And call them back to when they were nineteen.

One said he wore a Red Cross on his sleeve.
The toughest thing he said he did: Triage.
One met a nurse one warm Pacific eve
Who gave him — *what?* I think he said massage.
One served with Patton on his great advance
And singlehandedly drank up all France.

And one, at Anzio with his recon squad,
Got trapped behind the German lines. They starved
A week until by chance or maybe God
They found a burnt-out tank. Inside they carved
The ration cans from three burnt men before
They ate their fill, then puked, then ate some more.

Tales like that last one tended to be rare.
Whenever one was told the men grew still.
I'd look from face to face. Each would stare
Down at the ground or in his beer until
A tired joke or subject leveled light
Brought grown men back to present day that night.

My dad and all his friends have passed away,
Their stories not in books or on the screen.
Achilles, Hector, Stan and Mike and Ray:
The warriors in our midst retreat unseen
As we who heard their tales recall our finds
To busy ears and soon-forgetting minds.

Elvis at Graceland, 1958

His mama died, the woman he adored.
Everyone said they never saw a boy
so devastated — weeping, sobbing, wailing
for days while crying out, *She's all I lived for*.

The boy was twenty-three years old, the king
of rock and roll, a sudden millionaire,
yet still at heart a Mississippi child
who grew up poor, who wanted everything.

He bought his mama and his daddy this —
a Memphis mansion on an oak-groved hill.
Now half a million people come each year
to file past the glamor and the glitz.

Some stand in awe, his greatness verified.
Some smirk at what they see as tackiness.
But then we see at last the bedroom that
his mama used, unchanged from when she died:

Here, simple country dresses, pink and blue,
are seen hung in her closet, just a few,
these simple dresses telling us the tale
much better than the glitz will ever do.

The Tongue Is a Deadly Arrow

Penny Knepper, my fifth-grade teacher,
standing at the front of our classroom
told me to be quiet, just be quiet,
stop being the class clown,
and I shot back: Okay, *Penny*,
or maybe: Whatever you say, *Penny*.

I can't recall exactly what I said
but I vividly do recall
more than fifty years later
that when I used *Penny*
in such a way, with such an expert,
mocking tone of voice at age ten,
she suddenly burst into tears
and left the classroom.

That moment hung in the air,
the blackboard clouding with chalk dust,
my heart beating, the wall clock ticking,
as my classmates sat silent, heads bowed,
none of us knowing what to do,
and I could feel them scared of me,
impressed by me, or hating me
for a power I didn't know I possessed,
and it thrilled and scared me too.

Penny Knepper, forgive me,
wherever you are.
You taught me better than you know.

Robert Schechter

Reaching Six

When I was four
I thought that five
was oh so long
to be alive

but now, at six,
I can report
the span of five
is oh so short.

I know the span
of six is long,
yet seven whispers
I am wrong,

and when I'm eight
I guess I'll think
that seven years
are just a blink.

Everything changes.
Nothing sticks.
Today, however,
I'm old at six.

My First Snow

Before it snows the world is gray,
    the leaves are off the trees;
the sun won't drive the cold away
    or warm the wintry breeze;

and all the world seems pale and flat,
    a stage without a show;
a gloomy, drab unwelcome mat.
    But wait! What's that? It's snow!

The snowflakes fill the frosty air
    and sparkle as they're swirled,
and soon the world's not dark or bare.
    It's like a whole new world,

a world that's neither old nor gray
    but lively, bright and new.
They told me snow was beautiful.
    And now I know it's true.

Robert Schechter

The Empty Boat

At times I think my mind will burst
with all the thoughts it's thinking,
and if it were a ship at sea
the poor ship would be sinking.

But sometimes I don't think at all.
My brain's an empty boat
that drifts along upon the waves,
at peace, relaxed, afloat,

and then I sigh, or laugh, or sing,
my world an endless ocean,
free from the bustling thoughts that bring
such turmoil and commotion.

Lights Out

I am abed.
The door's ajar.
In dreams ahead
I'll sail afar,

adrift aboard
a ship ashake —
but safe ashore
when I awake.

Robert B. Shaw

Back Story

From middle age through what comes next
my back (belt-level) has been vexed
by twinges lately grown to pangs
(the way lit fuses lead to bangs).
A recent X-ray brought to light
just what it is that isn't right:
a disc has been disintegrating.
Whittled down, well, it's simply . . . grating.
Down at its base, my spinal column
molders on, mean as Tolkien's Gollum.

Darts from its quiver are dispersed
throughout the day, but morning's worst:
getting upright is hard to do,
assuming what will then ensue.
"Discomfort" would be understating
what I've been used to find awaiting.

Up in its penthouse, though, the brain
surveys with stoical disdain
the sparks my neural net transmits.
If there's a problem, it's not its.
With less-than-lukewarm sympathy
for what it deems the lesser me,
it doles out each day's bitter pill:
a pep talk touting Strength through Will,
so Boy Scout leader-like in tone
it adds a second cause to groan.
When it's in that sententious mood,
calling it "brain" seems almost rude:
its favored soubriquet is "Mind."
It brands my lagging unrefined,
thinks I should dwell on Higher Things,
not body's qualms and whimperings.
Woes of the flesh aren't worth a snort
when it's inspired to exhort:

"So: vertebrae are misaligned?
What matters Matter? Heed your Mind!
Time to put both feet on the floor!
Nothing you haven't done before.
Your clock is buzzing. Just who set it?
No one but you, and don't forget it.
Get yourself up, and one good stretch
will stop you feeling like a wretch.
Quit dawdling! That's a mattress edge;
it isn't the Grand Canyon's ledge.
Hop to it, Robert! Show some spine!"

"Be glad to, if it wasn't mine,"
I say, or ought to, in rebuttal.
But it's too early to be subtle.
Mostly my comebacks come as sighs
or grunts, the while I temporize.
Our dawn debate, habitual
enough to count as ritual,
runs in the same disgruntled way
day after disenchanting day,
mired in standoff, Mind and me,
postponing verticality. . . .

Then I get up. It hurts like hell.
But I've reserved my right to yell.

A Neighbor's Rooster

The sole apparent rooster
strutting in hearing range
emotes as is expected,
but here is what is strange:

it isn't only daybreak
that keeps him on his toes.
From morning on to twilight
he fountains out his crows.

His ardent *cocorico*
(must be a Gallic bird)
repeatedly announces
that daylight has occurred,

unless that's vocal ogling
of unenamored hens
who yearn, each time they hear him,
for segregated pens.

Or maybe he's campaigning
for a much grander post
than what he's got to perch on.
A pedestal, almost?

From there, he'd broadcast edicts
to anyone with ears
trying to get some work done
even as darkness nears.

What ails him? Or, what thrills him?
That noise we've come to know,
rasping out raw — why is it
exultant even so?

His "sunnie seed," I'm thinking
(on that, see Henry Vaughan),
confoundingly has burgeoned
to mark each hour as dawn.

His notes are never dulcet,
but in them I discern
a zeal for standing dazzled
that most have yet to learn.

If so, for the duration,
let's tender him some slack.
Wise to his looking forward,
not falteringly back,

let's count him as a herald:
this votary of sun
who crowns his hours by hailing
beginnings re-begun.

Hilary Sideris

Maria & Tony

West Side Story made us ponder
love beyond the sprinklered
lawn we called our yard, wonder
if we'd be Jets or Sharks. Our aunt
& uncle had the same names
as the screwed protagonists

from warring gangs. Their marriage
was arranged. Our cousins were
Greek boys. We were just girls,
just half. Our father prayed, Jesus
came into his heart. Born Again,
he still hurled plates, made half-
moon dents in Mom's linoleum.

Sophia

Are you following so *far*?,
I asked my Russian-speaking
class as the Soviet Union
collapsed. Lyudmila said *of course*,
but why do you ask only Sofa?
meaning Sofia from Lvov,
whose name is still the world's

most popular for girls, wisdom
in Greek, which Socrates
said writers lack, especially
sophists. The Test of English
as a Foreign Language stumped
us all with multiple choice
author's intent questions.

Hilary Sideris

Hyenas

Born spotless with eyes open
& teeth intact, each cub drinks
only its mother's milk — not even

sisters cross-suckle. We snickered,
cackled in church when Reverend
Prather, a cat lover, slipped & said

tabby-nacle. Our father dubbed us
hyenas. Since then we've learned
from Wikipedia that alpha

females lead their clans, sporting
a pendulous clitoris (*pseudopenis*,
say Zoologists). Mom hissed

That's enough, now you girls
listen to your dad! but she too
laughed behind his back.

Posto di Merda

Thank God she's gone,
my husband whispered,
but she wasn't — that Roman
woman on her phone, who
promptly sat down next to me.

I thought I heard a sob on speaker.
Maybe her daughter?
Then she said *Non posso fare*
niente!, I can't do anything!
I'm on a plane to a shithole —

un posto di merda! The flight
attendant begged, *Signora*,
per favore! Spenga il cellulare!
Her Louis Vuitton, our Samsonite
rubbed zippers on the black

conveyor belt, steel carousel.
Do you know Athens? she said,
I've never been here.

Vasco

Vasco means bathtub, as in *vasca da bagno*.
Vasco di Gamma sailed around the world.

Tonight Italian rocker Vasco Rossi plays.
We've reached the cordoned zone,

a tent city of hardcore fans. We're late
for Zia Maria's wedding on the Campidoglio.

My husband tells the cop he's handicapped,
a customary sob story. Her eyes are deep

brown pools. Our Cinquecento's radio
plays Brown Eyed girl. Van Morrison's

an anti-vaxxer now. Maybe not Vasco,
but his fans swarming the Circo Massimo —

the maximum circus — mess with her mind.
Maybe she likes a wedding story told

by a disabled man. My temples throb
vascularly. She waves us through.

Chios

My little sister Eleni drew Jack-O-Lanterns everywhere. She always sneezed four times. Dad shouted *That's enough!* after two sneezes, but Eleni didn't stop. We're both alive, Eleni and I, a kind of victory. Instead of Bless you, I still tell her *That's enough*. Our Yiayia Calliope came from Chios, an Aegean island where they grow mastic, as in masticate. This sticky sap was prized for sweets, pies, wine, chewing gum. Columbus used it to seal ships. He wrote his diaries in Byzantine Greek. Dad never mentioned priests with eyes gouged out, small human skulls in glass cases at Nea Moni monastery, commerce that thrived under the Genovese and Ottomans, *The Massacre* by Delacroix, how Byron died for the Hellenes. Eleni called them *punkin heads*. I watched him beat her with a belt after she carved them with her fork into our kitchen table's pine.

J.D. Smith

Doughnut Holes: An Inquiry

I will begin by defining terms. By doughnut hole ("donut" if one must, though one shouldn't) I mean the space around which a doughnut exists, having been shaped by hand, mold or machine.

This space is, to the best of my knowledge, non-monetized to date and unlikely to change in that regard unless — and even more improbably — I am paid for this essay. (Even then, the average value of a doughnut hole, whether discussed here or among the invisible multitudes lost to time, will increase only notionally and not in any meaningful way.)

This non-lucrative absence contrasts with the present and commodified "donut holes" sold by the fraudulent dozen, as if they had in fact been excised from the blanks that would shortly become doughnuts — an implausibly inefficient process. (By this logic, every bagel would begin as a bialy and/or end as a bialy manqué.) Particularly troubling are Tim Horton's "Timbits," nubs of dough that sound disturbingly like a starch-based analogue to mountain oysters.

Whether because such spaces call for definition or because people feel called to define them, by "doughnut hole" I do not mean all space except that occupied by a given doughnut. To take the notation of economics, and smack it around somewhat, such a broad definition could be written as

DH=U-D

where *DH* stands for doughnut hole (not designated hitter, another subset of the problem of evil), *U* stands for the universe and *D* represents a particular doughnut. That would encompass the Rocky Mountains and the Horsehead Nebula, inter alia, not to mention all other doughnuts and their respective holes. This definition is not only broad and unwieldy, but one that also exaggerates the importance of any particular doughnut —likely to be eaten before it is adequately described or measured. To measure a doughnut's volume by displacement of water (likewise milk or coffee), per Archimedes, seems unwise. Any doughnut this side of Elly May Clampett's petrine efforts would prove perme-

able and thus invalidate the experiment. From the standpoint of experimental ethics, dunking the whole confection at once is simply vulgar.

More narrowly, and intuitively, a doughnut-hole could be defined as the space surrounded by an any given doughnut but extending no higher or lower (or farther across, depending on initial presentation, packaging and/or the consumer's grip) than the outermost plane tangent to each side of that doughnut.

This definition may still be too generous, suggesting a concave cylinder whose flat ends seem to spill too generously from that which defines it. (Jelly and filled doughnuts, lacking a visible hole, lie beyond the scope of this inquiry.)

More intuitively still, those ends could be trimmed down to a squatter cylinder well within its upper and lower bounds. What, then, can we do with this entity-slash-nonentity? We can insert a finger and briefly wear the surrounding doughnut like a ring —glazed or unglazed. We can intersect one or more with a rod set on a flat surface, much like a vertical paper towel holder, and make them available in stacks or sleeves, much as the doughnut's distant savory cousin simit and its accompanying hole are offered by street vendors in Turkey.

We can for the moment consider the conditions of the doughnut hole's existence. Does it precede the doughnut, an ethereal last on which the doughnut is fashioned by hand, mold or machine, or does the doughnut occasion the hole's existence?

Likewise, whatever the doughnut hole's origin may be, does it survive the doughnut once the latter is consumed, or its existence coterminous with that of the doughnut? As with the preceding question, no empirical test appears to be available, and providing an answer from posits and principles lies beyond my powers of deduction.

This discussion could come to a dead end. As Wittgenstein claimed, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

Often attributed to Abraham Lincoln is the more pointed observation "It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."
Ergo. . . .

Just kidding. Or, as some might write these days, "jk; lol."

Silence and the humility from which it arises stand far from the spirit of the age. To have an opinion means that one has a chance — yea, even a perceived obligation — to state

it as vehemently and often as possible on all present/existing media and, to take the current wording of intellectual property contracts, all those that may be invented in the future. We opine reflexively if not compulsively for the same reason that the dog in the joke licks his nether regions.

Thus conspiracy and other theories fester on the basis of the slightest of pretexts, as if the microdosing entailed by the homeopathic law of similars had any more than a placebo effect. Online communications, in some instances aided by satellites, have enabled a resurgence in the belief that the Earth is flat — unlike any other planet. By the same media a faction of former Flat Earthers assailed by facts has taken the no less unlikely fallback position that Earth, again unique among planets, is a torus — the geometrical term for a doughnut's shape. Why it has a vacant center with no gravitational pull (instead exerting centrifugal force), and what that central void should be named, appear to call for further study.

In the spirit of these inquiries, I would like to end by offering a selection of hypotheses on doughnut holes past, present, and future, if such distinctions apply. Others will have to formulate suitable tests and apply them to those hypotheses.

To wit:

- A thousand doughnut holes went down with the Titanic, the tip of the iceberg that makes up the historical record.
- Under the bodhi tree Gautama met a doughnut hole no less defined than the eye of a Category 5 hurricane. The prayers it spun out would lead some to die into Nirvana.
- Cyril and Methodius brought the Slavs an alphabet for the Logos—and doughnut-holes such as outlined the bases of cupolas.
- Others, raised by wolves and never dunked in coffee, cannot pronounce their O's.
- Many have migrated over the years, slipping quietly as light under the doors of Ellis Island.
- With a vision of rustic doughnut holes in his mind John Henry drove stakes that trembled at his name.
- According to their respective natures, some drop flaccid to the floor. Others rise yeast-high to the ceiling or, like deluded balloons, fly out the window for adventure. A nostalgic few go looking for a pan.

- Decades or more of doughnut-holes fill a house with cliques left by successive owners. Each looks past — through — the others, snubbing them.
- On a clear day, the doughnut-holes can be seen congre gating on Catalina.

Michael Spence

Mistake

A city boy's mistake — I drove the road
Of dirt and gravel as if the thing were paved.

Though this was Tekoa (no one here would pronounce
The "a"), where fields of hay prevailed and the chance

Was small you'd see a car coming your way,
I hugged the right side. That's what they taught me

Back in Seattle: when taking a blind curve,
Prepare to meet someone. It took more nerve

Than I had to hog a road. Besides, it was rude —
Here, east of the Cascades, people were good:

They knew each other; didn't have the crime
My city did. Lloyd Lasz told me the same:

I was working for him this summer, bucking bales
And cutting lots of thistles. As though three moles

Had tunneled underneath the road, its gravel
Ran in ridges down each side and the middle.

I knew the passing tires created them;
I knew my tires were riding them. But time

Was pulling ahead of me: I knew I'd be late
If I didn't move out. Listening to *Spirit's*

"I've Got a Line on You" blast from the tape deck,
I pressed the pedal — then stomped the brakes

As the car began to slide. I really thought
I stomped the brakes. Instead, I guess I hit

The gas: the car whipped around in a circle
As if to meet my earlier self. A pile

Of dirt — dried out and solid as concrete — lined
The edge of the road. I slammed against that mound,

Flipping the Chevy over: the field cartwheeled
As though making fun of me outside the windshield.

I let go of the steering wheel. I must have —
I ended up half in the back (a shove

From fickle physics), landing with my stomach
Over the top of the passenger seat. What luck

Had let the car land on its feet? I tried
To start it up again: one cough, and it died

For good. The front door was jammed; I climbed
Out the rear. Checking for blood and pain, I seemed

Okay, then yelled: *Fuck, I'll be late for work!*
If I kept standing there I'd go berserk,

So I started hauling ass across a plain
Of uncut grass, tripping now and then

On an unseen hole or clump, as if the land
Wanted to prove my feet were not the kind

That belonged out here. I had to stop for breath
In the morning heat — I felt like a damp cloth

Getting wrung out — then lurch ahead some more,
Steering for my aunt and uncle's trailer.

Each time I stopped, I scanned the road, the fields:
No one anywhere. It seemed like I crawled,

It took so long to reach the trailer. The door
Swung open, and Aunt Joy watched me stagger

Up the steps. *I was at the window, she said: You rest —*
I've never seen anyone move so fast.

My car got towed; the farmer loaned me a truck;
A beater then, now it's called a classic.

Its radio could only drag in three
Stations: two bible and one country.

The country seemed appropriate the nights
I brought the truck home full of chicken shit.

Your final job this summer — clean the coop,
Lasz grinned. *Then next morning, spread the crap*

On the gardens. As if to welcome me to hell,
He handed me a pitchfork. *Ain't no shovel*

Gunna break up that stuff. Hard as brick.
I chipped away all day, scaring the chicks

And rooster away: they kept on making sure
I did it right. I finally got the car

My last day on the Lasz's farm. It ran,
But the rear corner of the roof — *Stove in,*

Aunt Joy declared: *Like the devil thumped it good.*
At least it'll get you home. No gravel roads

Over there. She smiled. *Hope you'll come back.*
Driving off, I leaned to put some music on

And fingered air. The tape deck was gone.

Daniel Tobin

The Crown

My father in the kitchen hammering the keys
decodes my high school scribble, thought by thought.
I've never been one for the plumb fidelities
of proper cursive that the nuns taught,

or florid majuscules, like those I'd stoop to read
in someone else's work. His Smith-Corona hums
like a troop transport thrumming in desert heat.
He thumb-pops another Pabst, and soldiers on

through my treatise — Camus and Shakespeare's prince —
the both of us bound inside a nutshell
and neither of us king of infinite space.
Years later, I meet his best old friend at the funeral.

He hands back my book, the one I'd dedicated
to Father on the author page, carefully inscribed,
and gives it to me now, for good. "You read it,"
he says he heard him say, "I don't get a goddamn word."

Daniel Tobin

Palimpsest

After James Stephens (1880 -1950)
After Aoghan Ó Rathaille (1670-1726)

We'll have to wipe our tears and turn away,
Stanch our troubles and try to find some peace
Knowing all's been lost — greatness, grace,
The hand truly given, any welcoming words,
Friendly nods, shared laughter — extinguished.
Now what's best in us is blasted into shards,
Our deep song muted, with our lost art's finesse.
Stifled, we're made to muzzle our gravest griefs.
Nothing isn't scrapped that should have carried on,
Nothing of us endures of all that was our own.

The Game

It's all only prowess and appreciable returns,
as long as you catch what you yourself have thrown —
only when, unexpectedly, you find you are the player
who's caught a ball fired perfectly into your core,
launched to the crosshairs by some eternal teammate
in one of those spinning arcs of God's vaulted design,
only then does mere technique attain to gift —
not yours, but a world's. And if you, then, at all,
had the heart and strength to throw back that ball —
no, more wonderfully — to have already thrown it,
having forgotten strength and heart. . . . (just as
the year hurls the birds, those peregrine flocks of birds
that the turning, aging warmth of the Earth
hurtles over the oceans —) only with such needful risk
does one really play, neither making the pass
easily, without the least strain, nor hindered, hitched.
From your hands the star would shoot into the vastness.

Alejandra Vansant

***Keep the Feast*, Stephen Cushman. Louisiana State University Press, 2022.**

When entering Stephen Cushman's new poetry collection, *Keep the Feast*, one senses decadence. The 17th century Abraham Mignon painting on the cover initiates the reader: a seductive still life with grapevine, bulging pomegranate, love-in-idleness, raw oyster, spiders, some debris, a mysteriously warm light, and behind it, darkness. However, the still life is not as fixed as it might suggest. It holds motion, history — it is thoroughly lived in. So, too, is Cushman's collection, as his enduring interests in American history, nature and its endangerment, religious and secular contemplation, and long poems — in his scholarship as well as his own works, such as *Hothead: A Poem* (2018) and *The Red List: A Poem* (2014) — forge fresh, energetic territory in *Keep the Feast.*

Though feasts in the Bible are celebratory, I think of Ecclesiastes: "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to heart." What is the feast we are meant to keep, and is it our end to keep it? Cushman is certainly aware of this paradox, but through his animated and exacted verse, he resists an "age of inattention," delighting instead in the tensions between pleasure and faith, history and embodiment, feast and restraint.

In the first of the book's three parts, we begin in Eden. "The Fruit Thereof" considers

> just what sensation
> followed her mouthful and subsequent double-take
> at fresh sight of him, still oblivious
> and suddenly scrumptious

— already the reader is attuned to desire, but Cushman's language is clear and inculpable, hovering above the embodied moment. "Time Management," "List List," and "Frequently Asked Questions" also feature early on. In them, the religious is deliberately paired with the quotidian: "pray without ceasing: / figure it out; pump out the septic"; "grocery list, Christmas list"; and "Do you think / I look fat? What is prayer?" The effect of this play-

fulness is twofold — we see religion leveled with life's tedium, malleable enough to joke about, but we also see the dynamic, parallel lens it affords the speaker.

Amid increasingly rhapsodic verse, ekphrastic nods to Caravaggio and Rembrandt, and allusions to the Civil War and John F. Kennedy assassination, Cushman finds footing in the deft resonance of poems like "Supposing Him to be the Gardener":

> How can one tell divinity
> From a tree turned red,
> Or *Do not hold me* from what else
> Its leaves might well have said?

Here, what may be the speaker's skepticism of divinity is instead subverted in an expansive gesture: how could one separate divinity from the beauty of earth and the mysterious language it extends to us? This moment signals a desire to move *into* the mystery, rather than toward definition.

The titular poem sequence, which comprises the second of the book's three parts, takes the form of Psalm 119. The poem's verse is filled with vitality and fervor for "thee" who is at once a conduit for the speaker's sensuality and the locus of his unconditional devotion. This formal connection to scripture, paired with the lover's ambiguity (both divine and personal), allows for a peculiar spectrum from fondness to blasphemy. Visually, each poem is of uniform length with every other line indented. Their indented teeth, not unlike the expansion joints of a bridge, guide the reader along a continuum of "euphorics." Furthermore, Cushman's characteristic play with etymology reminds the reader "that believe and libido share the same root / with lover, quodlibet, beloved, and leman."

Over the arc of twenty-six pages, the poem reaches erotic heights. However, as the speaker finds himself "with limbs yoked to thine, / sitting or standing, prone or supine," he asks, "why was I falling in love with the end?" This earnest reflection redirects the poem's rich sensuality back to its purpose: not the veritable climax and close, but the communion of the speaker with the other. This is the space the whole of *Keep the Feast* attempts to inhabit, that of attention in its pure and impassioned form. At the poem's end, after it has traversed the lovers' landscape, the speaker sweetly prompts, condemning all scorn for the body: "how could someone feel alone / lying next to thy hipbone?"

In the book's third and final section, Cushman drives questions of wildness, worship, and interconnectivity home. In

"Green Zebra," he muses on tomato cultivars and their obscene engineering:

> [we thought] we had evaded human improvement,
> only to find
> in ancient love manuals
> we might as well be
> a Cherokee Purple, another Big Rainbow,
>
> or this zingy beauty with flavorful flesh
> striped green and yellow.

In this tender language is the notion of being far from one's nature, perhaps misunderstood, but still precious. Linnaeus's classifications, the poem asserts, do not close any gap; they only serve to alienate one cultivar from another. Then, in "He Chose Minnesota," a poem about Thoreau's journey to ease his illness, Cushman writes:

> Last journal entries describe a new kitten,
> as perfectly protected by instincts in infancy
> as by any wisdom "an old man can be."

These themes of instinct and ancient wisdom highlight a different means of reaching truth. In "Cut and Paste," Cushman extends an invitation to chant prayers in other languages, to scale a mountain in worship, to do the unlikely: "let's push the statute, let's worship freely." The book's final poem is set in a church. Here, the speaker holds a serene clarity of connection, much developed from the first deliberations of Eden.

Sincere contemplation — of nature, faith, and pleasure — becomes its own devotional mode in a culture of inattention and artifice. These poems press beyond tedious discourse and classification. They implore the reader to fully enter their world, to "lusciously touch" another, even across distance. Finally, the feast in question was not a sign of decay or overindulgence, but a bold and challenging exercise in embodiment. Religion is one vehicle, the body another, and both intertwine without prejudice in *Keep the Feast*.

Wendy Videlock

And Still

I can be knee-deep in *poor me*,
on a whim, sky high
or medium,

frumpy, glumpy, full
of grandeur,
wracked

with candor, showing
all my years,
grinding

all my gears, bumbled
as a bee,
consumed

with some idea
and still you give to me
a tender

kind of sigh,
a slant kind of rhyme,
those

I
love you eyes.

Wendy Videlock

Given a Choice

Today I was given a choice:
consumption or creation.

I chose an old ball of string
and all morning long

I played with the cats.
I did not look at the clock.
I did not answer my phone.
Something began to take form.
I confess it was an awful lot
like writing a poem.

Lisa Vihos

Wind Technicians Needed

We are in need
of wind technicians,
magicians with the strength
and know-how to deftly
harness the wind.

We seek a candidate
experienced in weather vanes,
wind socks, and kites.
Someone who can
build a strong coalition

of breezes, who can
gently float soap bubbles,
jangle wind chimes,
and still raise the strength
to move turbines.

The ideal candidate
will come from the north,
south, east, or west and be able
to maximize resources,
prioritize workflow.

We do not discriminate
on the basis of age or gender
but this is an executive level
position. Familiarity with
hurricanes a plus.

Michael Washburn

Repentance

I.

On that day in August when it felt like the earth had veered too close to the sun and no one wanted to be outside, a knock came on the door of Peter and Mary Shelton, one of the young professional couples in town. Youth is relative, of course. Peter was thirty-six, bitter, and at risk of dying any night of insult to the brain like that famous Welsh poet. The itinerant salesman, Evan Larkin, had a lofty purpose in mind when he turned up on the couple's porch that day with his sack full of Bibles, the brim of a dark hat shielding his piercing blue eyes from the sun.

Mary opened the door.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"I'm not the one who needs help, miss. Your husband gets drunk every night and sleeps around. He's unfaithful. He's spending a lot of his time with a godless woman on the other side of town, but you're choosing not to see what's before you. But I've got something that can help you both."

"Who are you?"

"I've got the word of the Lord here. You both should heed it. I can see you don't want to believe what I'm laying on you. That's Peter's Jeep in the drive there, isn't it, miss?"

"Who are you?"

"Isn't it?"

"Yes. No. What are you doing here?"

"Please be calm, miss. If you take a good look at the tires on that Jeep, you'll notice, in the grooves, some fine red dirt such as is common in the valley five miles to the southeast of here. Does Peter work or shop or have any business there that you know of?"

Mary looked at the stranger, stupefied. Evan was nineteen and looked years younger, and his dress shirt and tie and slacks were as crisp as those on a mannequin in a store window.

"Does he?" Evan repeated.

"I have no idea. I don't monitor my husband's moves."

"Peter's bedding a fiery-haired woman named Linda Miles, who works in the bowling alley and lives in a trailer in the

valley, and it is not well to ignore his sin. Ephesians 5:5. 'For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.'"

"Peter's a wonderful man. He'd never carry on an affair. You can leave now."

"Willful blindness will not make the problem go away. Please disabuse yourself of any such delusion, Mary. Deuteronomy 22:22. You both will pay dearly."

"My husband's not cheating on me and if you don't leave right now, I'm calling the police!" Mary yelled.
Evan shrugged, turned, and sauntered off the porch and up the street.

Soon a knock came on the door of the Hawke household. We all had heard about the teen who lived there. Jessica was out, as were her parents, but her brother Kenneth opened the door.

"Can I help you?"

"I'd like to offer you a King James Bible. There's someone in this house who hasn't been following the word of God. She could use some daily instruction."

"No thanks, mister."

But before Kenneth could close the door, Evan leaned forward. Kenneth was too polite to slam the door on a stranger, even one this weird.

"The slut that lives here is going to get an STD. But that's not even her real punishment, you hear? A carnal woman who won't repent has eternity in hell to look forward to."

"You really better leave, mister. It ain't nice of you to call my sister a slut."

"I'm trying to save the lot of you. A sinner dwells herein. Heed 2 Timothy 2:22. 'Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

"We can't afford a new Bible right now. You better leave now. My dad'll be home in a minute."

The next door on which a knock came was a few houses up the street, the McFadden residence. Ed came to the door. So far, Evan had not confronted a malefactor directly. Now he had the chance to say exactly what was on his mind to this restaurant manager and real estate entrepreneur.

"Whaddya want?"

Ed peered at the boy with suspicion.

"I want you to accept the Lord into your life and follow His word and adopt an ethical code and stop hurting people so wantonly and selfishly."

"You forget to take your meds this morning, kid?"

"Mr. McFadden. We do not even need to be privy to the contracts for the last three deals you made. Or pretended to make. For the old houses on the northern edge of town where retirees live."

Ed McFadden leered at the boy. The sun was brutal.

"Start making sense, kid."

"As I said, we don't have to have the contracts in front of us, because it's obvious what you're doing, sir. You come in with what seems like a competitive price, and those desperately poor old folk jump at the chance. They can hardly scrape a mortgage payment together one more month. You've got an oily lawyer and you make sure there are clauses in there granting you all kinds of leeway to delay closing if X, Y, or Z should turn up in the inspection report. Things will turn up, given the state of those crappy old buildings, and it's all totally subjective anyway."

Ed gasped. How did the strange boy know all this? "You can delay closing if you don't like the kind of paint on one of the walls or if someone steps on a toothpick, Ed. You put it off 'till those retirees worry they're going to die before the closing, there's more than a fair chance, and they're not going to make their payment one more month, and then you come in with a price way below market even for those lousy old digs, but at that point they can't say no to you. It's technically legal, but you'll go to hell for it if you don't repent."

"Get off my porch!"

"Psalms 101:7. 'He that worketh deceit shall not dwell within my house: he that telleth lies shall not tarry within my sight.' Repent, Edward McFadden. You can still avoid the torments of hell!"

"Get off my property now, you lying sonofabitch!"

"Ephesians 4:25. 'Speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another.'"

As Ed moved back inside the house, he heard a few words of yet another line, from Revelation, about a lake of fire. It was scary, apocalyptic stuff. The Jesus freak would not shut up. But when Ed returned to the porch with his .45 in hand, Evan was far up the street. In minutes, the boy arrived on the porch of one of the nicer houses, where Walter Barnes lived with his ill octogenarian father, Nate.

"I know what you're thinking about doing, and I'm here to tell you not to do it," Evan said to the handsome young man who opened the door.

Walter gaped at the curious stranger, with his broad-brimmed hat and his sack full of Bibles.

"I don't need a Bible just now, thank you."

"Obviously you do, or you wouldn't be contemplating what you are thinking about doing, not for a second."

"No, really. It's awful hot. I'm going back inside. Sorry, kid. You won't get your commission this time."

"You are about to make a horrible choice, Mr. Barnes. I'm trying to save your soul."

Walter shook his head, uncomprehending, and began to close the door. Then a voice spoke from somewhere in the house's shady depths. An elderly voice.

"Who's there and what does he want?"

"Shut up, dad," Walter said, and then Evan spoke again.

"Do not put your father in a nursing home, Walter. You don't know what those places are like. They're gross, evil dens filled with rats and filth and seed-stained bedsheets. Disgusting. Don't give another thought to fobbing off the greatest responsibility in your life at this point in time and making it the problem of strangers. Your father needs you."

"Get out of here," Walter said.

"Exodus 20:12. 'Honor thy father and thy mother.' Psalms 71:9. 'Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth.'"

"I said get out of here!"

"What does he want?" the old voice called again.

"I'll call the cops," Walter said, but then the boy left with a shrug.

II.

This is where the story really gets interesting. I was an undergrad at a college in the cornfields, within walking distance of the town. The setting was pretty, but when it got this hot, we wanted to stay in our air-conditioned dorms, downing beers and wine coolers or smoking weed. The administrators began the school year too early. There was no point when the kids just hung out and acted much as they would at home this time of year.

We soon heard about Evan Larkin's visits to the dorms. Access was all too easy. Even today, some people are awfully lax about security on this remote campus in the cornfields. It is not as if things never happen around here, but the sun and the miles of cornstalks in thrall to forces indifferent to the doings of men tend to lull almost everyone.

The boy went through the halls of our venerable dorms, knocking on doors and offering his King James Bibles to students trying to cram for tests and churn out papers on Foucault or Derrida or Marcuse or Dworkin. This time, he relied on a general pitch. *Like students everywhere, you kids here on this campus are living in sin.* I don't think I need to tell you how far he got with his pitch. More than a few of them wanted to know who had let him into their dorm and some threatened to call security. What a crock. The security force on our campus was a sixty-three-year-old man who rode around on a motor scooter growling at kids he suspected of littering or scribbling on the walls.

Though Evan came to see that he was wasting his time trying to sell the good book to these young progressives, he didn't decide it was futile to make his pitch on our campus, full stop. Maybe he had had the ill luck to visit those dorms where a bulk of students agreed with Christopher Hitchens, or maybe the effort to cram and write papers, after a summer of debauchery, put people under unbearable stress. On a campus of more than 1,200 potential converts, he was not giving up easily.

I stood on a stone path in the brilliant light, about midway between the student lounge and a classroom building. Paul Madeira was a radical from Chicago. I had heard him rant when he was drunk often enough to know that if he had his way, all the exploiters and reactionaries and regressives would hang from lampposts, tongues dangling obscenely. Whether it was Paul's real self that came out into the open in those drunken rants or a fantastical self was a question for another time. Right now he was going on about an English professor who seemed indifferent to the un-woke subtext of certain works.

I nodded but said nothing. Carl Hasford and Jason Pratt agreed with Paul or at least dared not challenge him in front of others. Also present were Kendra Jones, who had forgotten more poetry than I had read in my life, and Marcus Gorman, an awkward kid with a sagging belly and a mild form of cerebral palsy that made him drool and walk awkwardly. A few others were there, but I didn't know them.

We stood there listening to Paul, whom few people dared challenge, feeling the heat on our faces and necks and forearms and legs, when the boy in the big hat ambled over the green toward the path, his bag jouncing. He had to know how off-putting his conduct was. No one had a right to go out into the world and correct others, jump the line, bypass the education that empowers people to make their own choices about what to believe and do.

As soon as he reached our cluster on the path, heads turned, faces twisted into looks of disbelief. Who was this freak?

"Hey, man. You're about two months early for Halloween," said Jason Pratt.

"You're in the wrong state, dude. Oral Roberts University's in Oklahoma," said Carl Hasford.

"Get out of here, man," said one of the kids whose name I didn't know.

Now Paul turned to the stranger, and really took him in for the first time.

"Can I ask what you think you're doing at an enlightened school?" Paul said as his eyes roamed over the boy's idiosyncratic garb.

"Hey, man. No one here wants to buy a Bible. Take some friendly advice and leave right now," said Jason.

"Leave!" Carl repeated.

Kendra began to say something, but then a few pairs of eyes rotated in her direction and she thought better of it. Maybe she was thinking of the treatment one of our number, Marcus, got from people sometimes.

At last Evan spoke.

"You all think I'm a square kid, don't you?"

We all laughed at his sincere use of such an antiquated term. Square. I had heard it so long ago, maybe in a *Happy Days* rerun.

"Yeah, you cool kids think I'm peddling a load of Sunday school twaddle. About believing in the Lord and living a moral life and helping the helpless and all that. Or I'm just another opportunist trying to pad my wallet. But you will come to see soon enough that what I have to offer is in your best interest. You are all wallowing in debauchery and sin. The Lord's elect have no illusions about the lives of rich kids or the end toward which you are all bound. There is one path to your redemption."

Paul gave a laugh I had never heard before and hoped never to hear again.

"You poor fool. Moronically repeating what your ignorant parents told you over the dinner table. You come to this campus where all of our parents are a lot smarter than yours, and we've all read more in a week than you have in your life, if you take one book out of the equation, and we've got professors who are at the top of their field nationally, and you presume to enlighten us. You pitiful rube."

Evan took all this calmly, as if he had expected such a reply.

"May I ask your name, sir?"

"Paul."

Evan smiled gently.

"Well, now. I'm sure that someone as educated as yourself can place those words of yours in context."

We looked at each other in the heat.

"Start making sense, bumpkin."

"Paul the Apostle was vicious to the followers of Jesus until his conversion."

I was afraid our radical classmate would hit this boy. Paul was deeply proud of his radical reputation, and people were watching, but he seemed briefly disconcerted.

"You must know that your presence here is offensive. Go back to your 1950s Norman Rockwell wet dream. Get out of here now. Take that as a suggestion in your best interest," Paul said.

"Leave!" "Get lost!" "Pig!" "Fascist!" "Scum!" others joined in, until Evan nodded, gave another gentle smile, turned, and walked off. The people in the crowd laughed and spewed more insults at the rube, save for myself and Marcus Gorman, who had a perplexed look. Gazing at his big, awkward features, I wondered what could be going through his mind right now. Maybe Marcus was thinking about the climate on this campus, the ethos of *free speech as long as you agree with me*, the jeers and cries that greeted visiting speakers. Or maybe, after months of acquiescence, Marcus's thoughts about Paul were taking a new turn. I doubted Marcus had forgotten the time Paul berated and mocked him at a party for adding his name to the signers of a letter in the student paper decrying the scribbling of words on the walls around campus. If Marcus had a problem with it, he was at the wrong school, Paul chided, and went on to say things to Marcus that I would rather not repeat.

On the next morning, I set out on my 8:00 a.m. run full of energy. The sun was high and the air felt vaguely hostile, as if

warning me what kind of day it would be. Even at this time of year, I loved the open spaces and the sense of owning the path cutting through all the acres of corn, so high it would engulf you as soon as you left the road.

Just three minutes into my run, I spotted the dark hat on a shuffling figure with a strap on his shoulder up ahead. The interloper. The emissary of values and creeds my friends loathed. I thought I would pass by without a word. He was on his way out of here and one must not complicate things in any way. But as I drew near, he turned and the recognition in his look was unmistakable. He smiled and nodded.

"Hold up a minute, brother," Evan said.

I decided I wasn't so afraid of Paul Madeira that I'd be rude to the boy. I stopped and stood there, gathering my breath.

"You know, I studied your face during that encounter yesterday. Your thoughts were perhaps a bit more complicated those of the others on your highly enlightened campus."

"You think you can walk right onto the campus of an elite private school and people will hail a stranger who looks about sixteen as the Lord's elect and will hang on his every word. The school may be set in its ways, but don't think that excuses your arrogance for a second."

"False equivalence, my friend. They hear the same viewpoints and rhetoric all day, every day. I'm here to offer some of that diversity you hold in such high regard. I'm the enemy of conformity. I'm the agent of all the whispering thoughts you try to banish in the dark."

The banality of his choice of words did not blunt the truth. I stood there groping for words in the gathering heat.

"Hey, I am living in sin. If I want to die of insult to the brain, like that Welsh poet, what's his name, that's my choice."

"You don't remember his name?"

"No. I wish we had Kendra here."

"Come on, Brian. Tell me your night thoughts. Don't worry, I won't share them with the enforcers of correct opinion."

"Who told you my name?"

"The Lord knows all and his ways are not for you to know."

"Someone said my name and you overheard it and, like many uneducated people, you think everyone you deal with is as dense as you are and you can easily fool me."

"What do you even care how I know your name? Smell

the air, hear the birds, look at the sun, Brian. Think about the course of the world. Imagine if all the meteorological predictions are wrong. Maybe it's not about to get any cooler. Maybe what you see and feel is the climate of God's world as it hurtles to the heart of the sun."

"You crazy rube."

"Okay, never mind, ignore me and go right on with your jog, don't concern yourself with the rantings of a rube from a fly-over state. But when you run a bit further into this broad bright morning, you may find that the heat and the glare have a way of changing your mind and making you feel kind of unsure about everything. It all has a way of messing with your assumptions."

I stood there, still panting a bit.

"Evan. Tell me why your parents didn't give you a more Biblical name."

He smiled indulgently again.

"Do you really want to bring my parents into the discussion?"

"I really couldn't care less. Tell me how you got so much dirt on this community."

"Oh, I spent some time in the public library and the diner downtown. There are no secrets here, Brian."

"Tell me how many Bibles you've sold so far, Evan. Do you really think you're going to convert a soul? Listen, I'll tell you a secret. I don't like the way things are at my school. There have been some incidents I still can't believe. And I wasn't on Paul's side yesterday. In fact I think his conduct was atrocious. But let me suggest for your own safety that you not show your face on campus again. In fact I think you should continue right on out of town. It really may not be safe for you around here."

He looked around at the tall stalks and the pastel sky.

"I sure don't see danger around us here."

"You know quite well what I mean."

"But you don't get my meaning. Somebody could hide pretty well from the world with a minimum of effort out here. Do you not agree?"

I had to concede the point.

"Maybe you do know something about the recent history of this place. Are you alluding to the Chris Fogel matter?"

He shook his head.

"Ah, well. That was a guy who worked in a bar downtown. And one night he sexually assaulted a young female

student who'd been flirting with guys all night and he grabbed all the money in the register and the back office and took off. He hid out in the corn for days and they caught him when he got so hungry he ventured out to try to burglarize one of the homes over there."

I gestured toward a row of houses on a road parting the stalks west of campus.

"He was dumb, Evan. I happen to know a spot about midway between here and campus where the stalks are tall and you can hear men and dogs approach from a mile away and there's lots of room to dart and hide. He should have stayed there until they decided he wasn't in the area anymore and called off the searches."

Evan nodded.

"It's a tragedy that I didn't get to Chris when there was still time for him to repent and be a moral man. Anyway, I'm sorry I interrupted your jog, Brian."

III.

An eventful day got even more so. The Campus Democrats had a tradition of sending out a tiny delegation from the college to attend town hall meetings. We kids were all so cloistered and privileged and some of us yearned to engage with the community. The car containing Paul, Carl, Kendra, Marcus, and me sped through the hot evening. Kendra inspired us by reciting W.H. Auden's "September 1, 1939," a poem that always left me feeling that the choice facing humanity was mutual love or mass death. When the car slid into a lot outside the old auditorium, I saw that there were more cars than usual. We went in and found seats twelve rows up from the stage. Tonight the faces of the moms and dads all around looked somber. Now Carl turned to Paul and I heard him whisper, "Why are the police here?"

Paul shrugged. We sat there waiting impatiently for the proceedings to begin. At last a figure mounted the stage. It was the chief of police, a stout man named Joe Hoyt. He cleared his throat and jumped right in.

"For those of you who have not heard, we have some very bad news tonight. As you know, this is one of the safest communities in the state. It is rare that anything serious happens here. This afternoon, we had our first homicide in ten years."

Gasps and cries rose into the air. Couples hugged each

other and parents whispered to the teens.

"Nate Barnes, an elderly citizen living at 52 Drury Lane, got into an altercation with his son Walter, and it grew very heated. We gather that an itinerant Bible salesman had recently been to the house and had said some things, in the presence of both Walter and his father, that led to this argument. At some point Nate produced a .22 pistol and fatally shot his son."

The cries were loud and shrill now. Parents looked at each other, aghast, questioning the wisdom of bringing young people here. Such violence was almost unheard of in the town. My friends and I looked at each other with bemusement. We were too jaded and cool to let anything unnerve us.

"We do not know the exact content of the discussion between the itinerant salesman and the residents of 52 Drury Lane. But if we are to believe statements that Nate made to the responding officers, the salesman had convinced him that Walter was bent on putting Nate in a retirement home where he wasn't likely to last more than a month or two, and that Walter had plainly malicious motives."

The gasps and cries rose even higher. Paul chuckled in the seat next to me. Then, to my amazement, a girlish voice called out from the fifth row.

"It's true! It's true!"

People called out in indignation. A few strangers in the rows in front of me got up. Craning my neck, I saw a trio of adults escort the girl out of her row and up the aisle toward the door. The chief of police went on.

"I wish I could say that's all the bad news we have tonight. But a resident of 60 Drury Lane, a girl by the name of Jessica Hawke, has run away. She got into a really nasty spat with her parents about her lifestyle and her alleged promiscuity and drug use. From what the Hawkes told us, she screamed at them and said she never wanted to see their faces again and then she put some things together and slipped out. This too seems to have flowed from an exchange that the Bible salesman had with her brother earlier the same day."

All over, people wailed and shouted and clasped their palms together as if in a contest to project the most concern for the girl and alarm at the conduct of Evan Larkin. The problem here was that he was, in a sense, on their side. They didn't like an interloper from out of town disrupting the lives of their friends and neighbors, but he brought the word of God.

"Finally, it's not quite as serious a situation at this point, but yet another member of the community, Ed McFadden has gone and holed himself up in a hotel downtown and refuses to see anyone except his lawyer. It appears that he related something of his brief exchange with the Bible salesman to the mailman, thinking they were speaking in confidence. Now it's all over town that some suspect McFadden of shady business dealings, and he has received abusive and threatening communications even from his own investors in a restaurant deal. I am not liberty to say more."

It was hard to know what he could have said that might have turned the audience's passions more decisively against Ed McFadden, a smooth-talker who had conned retirees out of a good deal on the one asset they clung to so late in life. Why anyone would have become a partner of his was a mystery.

"We have not been able to locate the itinerant Bible salesmen, but we are actively searching with the help of reserve officers and volunteers. If you see him, please do the right thing and turn him in. I ask all of you to remember that everyone is presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. He is only a person of interest at this point."

The chief of police shuffled off the stage, and the mayor, Marty Welch, took his place.

"I'd like to put in a word for my good friend Ed McFadden. He is understandably upset by what has gotten out. But rumors are precisely that: rumors. He will make a statement in the next few days and we ask that people let him conduct his affairs in peace and privacy for now."

This drew boos and, from a few of the teenagers, catcalls targeting the mayor's prim and nerdish appearance. Next on stage was Father Kirby.

"I remind you to be wary of those who proselytize for their personal gain and who spread malice and lies while claiming to speak in the name of our Lord. I sense that the boy who went door to door yesterday is a misguided soul with dreams of grandeur far out of proportion to his experience and maturity. I know how upsetting today's news is for everyone. Place your trust in the Lord to see us through this difficult time. You know who are His true representatives in this community. If any of you have questions or need guidance, I and Father Sloan will be here for you."

Now to my dismay, Paul stood up. One of the young

people down by the stage came up the aisle, reached over me, and handed Paul a microphone. I sensed that Paul's thoughts were in sync with my own, to a point, and I felt queasy.

"Good evening, Father Kirby. Today's news is tragic. With all due respect, I think you're in kind of an awkward position here. From what we've heard tonight, it appears that the boy, the stranger from out of town hawking Bibles, didn't really do much more than quote the Good Book verbatim and extrapolate from it. I don't think you can criticize him for bluntly stating what you yourself aggressively urge people to read and assimilate. I realize the shock and sadness that a lot of people are dealing with right now, but I think it would be well to ask some hard questions —"

The priest interrupted.

"Young man. The accounts suggest that this boy did quite a good deal more than quote the Bible."

"No. Not really. He extrapolated from what the Bible says. Nothing he allegedly told these people today is out of keeping with the literal language of the Bible. Which is why I think you could ask some hard questions —"

"This is a discussion for later, young man. You can see how distraught the people all around you are."

How I wished Paul would shut up. But my radical classmate went right on.

"— ask some tough questions about the compatibility of the Bible with contemporary mores. You do know how old the Bible is. You will stunt the development of young women like Jessica Hawke, and young people generally, if you force on them an ethos that has no place in the contemporary world. It's a nasty anti-humanist piece of text. That's one of the underlying causes of the tragedy we may be dealing with here."

"Paul!" Kendra whispered. "Do you want them to lynch us?"

I told myself that the people around us were civilized men and women, not a bunch of savages, but I felt queasy as ever.

The priest, looking faintly ruffled, spoke again.

"You're distraught and not thinking clearly. That is totally understandable. If you come to me —"

"If Jessica Hawke doesn't come home alive, I blame the Bible! But don't worry, she won't suffer a second death in hell. There is no second death or resurrection. There is no heaven or hell. The Bible is a pile of lies!" Paul yelled, before the kid took the mike back from him.

Under the gaze of scores of hostile eyes, we quickly left the auditorium.

I sat in the student lounge the next morning, sipping coffee and poring over a passage in Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* as brilliant light streamed through the big glass façade. In my peripheral vision, I saw that two uniformed cops had entered and a girl whose name I didn't know had just pointed me out to them. My friendship with Paul gave me even more celebrity in this place than I realized.

They were a couple of veteran cops from the town, no doubt with many bitter memories of dealing with college kids.

"We're talking to everyone in the little group that spoke with the Bible salesman yesterday," said the older cop.

"We gather you were in that crowd. Did he say anything about someone he knew in the area or where he might ago?" asked the younger.

I wondered who had given my name to the cops or told them I was often in the lounge at this hour.

"Oh, I think he knows us all better than we might like. But, no, he said nothing that could help your inquiry," I replied, feeling at once that I had worded my answer the wrong way, I was too blatantly trying to close an avenue of inquiry.

But they nodded politely and left.

Two hours later, I sat in Professor Jackson's class watching the look on Paul's face change. Paul seemed unable to mask his contempt for the venerable professor's devotion to the canonical status of certain works. The whole point of an education, as they say, is to teach critical thinking. Paul raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Madeira?"

The professor was so old-fashioned.

"You know, if you strip away the pseudo-poetic language, *Heart of Darkness* in essence is a racist fantasy in which the European, the representative of what is legitimate and established, ventures out into the world to face the Other with growing revulsion and horror. It's good reading for 1950. Tell us why you'd assign this text today, knowing full well the impact something like this is sure to have on your students."

There came applause from some parts of the room. The elderly professor looked befuddled and I could see Paul relished it. After an awkward pause, the professor strolled right into Paul's trap.

"You may think Conrad is the devil, Mr. Madeira. But I

wonder what your education would be without the opportunity to explore a spectrum of viewpoints."

"That's the point, you dinosaur!" Paul exploded, and we thought the professor would have a heart attack.

"Please calm down."

"I'll be happy to calm down when you tell us when you plan to assign the narrative of a Congolese, maybe female and queer but at the very least a Congolese, who goes to London and explores and ventures deep into the heart of this strange place, where the natives flout all the norms of human conduct. Especially when it comes to transparency in fiscal matters and respect for minorities. The story could take place before or after the Brixton uprising. But it should leave no doubt about how bizarre and alien life in a Western capital is and has always been!"

Now there came cheers and claps and the professor teetered and wobbled and nearly fell down. Happily for him, it was just about noon.

I wandered around the campus in a daze, unable to believe what writing instructors call the unexpected inevitable. It had erupted from my friend Paul and I could not call that friendship into question. I avoided the gaze of other kids on the paths until I passed under the ramp leading to the library's big glass doors and came face to face with Marcus Gorman. He was not drooling just now.

"I see I'm not the only one who is sensitive to his standing here on this diverse campus," Marcus said.

I stood there in the heat, rubbing my eyes, trying to collect my thoughts.

"Come again?"

"I saw you lurching and shaking on the path like you were afraid a hostile breath would knock you over."

"Marcus. If you haven't figured out that I have problems with the intellectual reign of terror, then you're not observant at all."

"If you asked me what bothers me most, it's the temperature on this campus. And I don't mean the heat, duh. The political temperature. Feels like we never get a break from it, Brian. And we're all so young and hotheaded to begin with. It's not healthy. Man, I know people who keep guns on campus."

I had to laugh nervously at that.

"Really? Shotguns, Uzis, machine guns? Sounds like an urban legend to me."

"You mean rural legend."

I laughed again.

"Yeah, Marcus. You know, I was only seventeen when I started here and to me, this all feels like a continuation of high school. It's not a happy time and I'm not even really sure that it's meant to be, that that's the point. The worst thing you can do is to —"

"*Brian*. I can't stand to see the popular kids parade past me and get all the praise when I'm every bit as socially conscious and a lot smarter about it. And with none of their self-righteousness. But I do know that it's partly my fault. I can't just wear my social conscience on my sleeve, I've got to go out and do things. And I'm going to, Brian."

"That's great, Marcus. I just hope it takes a form that'll make us all proud of the Marcus we know."

"Oh yes, it will. Carl and I have been following China for a long time, you know. And our president has gone over there and made all the issues about trade and military treaties and such. Not a whisper about the Uighurs and the unspeakable things happening to them over there. The massacres and the detention camps. So, Carl and I are building a shanty, you know, like the ones they had during the apartheid era when protests were going on all over, on every campus. We'll post a lot of a photos and texts and raise awareness. This could actually lead to something, Brian. We could get into the news."

I had my doubts about that but the last thing I wanted to do was discourage Marcus Gorman from getting up and doing something. Maybe it would make him popular.

Lying in my bed sometime after 11:00, I turned to the screen under the open window and looked out through it at the corn. It was cooler and the night was peaceful, soothing.

There were so many warring doctrines and I did not know what to make of anything. I needed guidance as much as anyone. That did not preclude my helping another person.

I filled my backpack with snacks and bottled water from my mini fridge and set off. I heard brief laughter and muted words in Jason's room as I slipped out, but thought no one saw me leave the dorm. The grounds lay empty under a bright round moon. When at the edge of the corn, I looked quickly around again in every direction. Then I set out into the rows with a precise point in mind, my feet clumping on the loose dirt.

I moved up the space between the high rows, probing

left to right, right to left, trying to fathom the dark depths between the stalks. There was so much space, you could hold orgies or plot murders or the overthrow of the state or really whatever the hell you liked. I wandered and scanned some more until, with impeccable stealth, a form moved up out of the dark to my right.

"I don't know what law they think I've broken," Evan said.

"Then why don't you turn yourself in? Or just go about your affairs like anyone else?"

"I heard what's going around. They think I incited an old man to murder."

"Arguably, you did."

"You live on a campus, Brian. You of all people know what happens when the bar is set too low for incitement."

"Oh, I know. Just disagreeing with someone is a crime nowadays, because of the inferred implications of what you say. But even now, our arguments usually don't lead to someone getting shot."

"You think I'm a product of my rigid upbringing but you live under tyranny, Brian. You'd overthrow it if you had a clue how to go about doing so. I've talked to one of your friends recently."

"I find that hard to believe. Which friend?"

"Someone I know you care about. In your mind, are you the latent apostle?"

"No. I don't give a damn about any religion. But look, it's very late and I have an exam tomorrow. Are you hungry?"

I was right about one thing.

In the morning, the cops were back in the lounge. I was hoping to get through the denser parts of the *Second Treatise*. The older cop addressed me sternly.

"We found the runaway girl, Jessica Hawke, behind the bowling alley last night."

"Hey, great!"

"With her face purple and her throat full of caked vomit. She swallowed all the pills she took with her."

The runaway had taken her own life. I feigned shock and denied any knowledge of Evan Larkin. They asked whether I knew where they could find Kendra Jones. I wondered what they had on that nice girl.

When evening came, I sat in my room for hours, taking peach wine coolers from the tiny fridge, grateful for the odd

breeze wafting through the windows. Bit by bit, the tension left me. Then the phone rang.

"Brian? Marcus here."

"Hey, man."

"The shanty is gone, Brian. Demolished. Ruined."

"What the —"

"The unexpected inevitable. That's what Professor Jackson would call it, not that anyone should listen to an old coot with one foot in the grave, anyway."

"Oh, man. You mean the shanty you built for the Uighurs, to raise awareness and all."

"Paul and Jason and a few others came by with hammers and wrecked it right in front of me, Brian. Right in front of me. Oh, I cried. I pleaded with them. I got down on my knees and begged. You know. . ."

Marcus choked up.

"This is crazy," I said.

"You know the reason Paul gave?"

"No. Calm down. This is completely nuts."

"He said I was trying to discredit the work of a Democratic president. And not only that, but the first African-American to hold that office. For ignoring the Uighur issue on his China trip. That's —"

His sobs rose.

"That's not at all what I meant to do. I wanted to call attention to the plight of a minority. I swear!"

"Marcus. You don't have to convince me. This is fucking insane. You should file harassment charges."

"Oh, yeah. I wonder where that would go. Maybe in Paul's mind, there's an inverse symmetry here. He was striking back at those racists who wrecked the antiapartheid shanties in the early nineties."

"Those are the words of an incoherent mind."

Marcus began to cry harder, then hung up. I was sorry for what I had said. Sort of. It was true and I was in no mind to call Marcus back and say sorry. He had bothered me. I owed him nothing.

Later I lay in my bed with my head turned toward the window, through which the winds came strong now, caressing me as I drifted off. Gazing out over the corn standing tall in the moonlight, I thought of how markedly my sense of things diverged from my apocalyptic imagination. Out there in the dense

rows there were no white horses or gorgons or demons or hydras waiting to fulfill a commission handed to them directly from hell. There was only a boy who overcame his shyness daily to fulfill a mission to inspire souls he at once disdained and loved with a will to transcend the venality and barbarity of their sordid lives and reach a spiritual state in which they could walk across a path of clouds to meet One who had suffered and died with a selflessness Evan Larkin dreamt of emulating. The boy out there in the moonlit night hoped defiantly as this cluster of rock, gases, water, and dust hurled through the ether of an unfathomably vast cosmos.

In the lounge the next morning, the cops approached me again, to disclose that a gunman had fired a high-powered rifle and blown off Ed McFadden's head while the latter stood in the window of the hotel in which he had holed up. The state police were coming and they were confident of finding Evan Larkin soon. Still I repeated my denials.

Then in solitude I thought about the matter some more, and imagined Ed's head at the moment of impact. I thought of his family. And of certain ancient injunctions and commandments. That did it. I walked through the streets of the town to the police station and entered the lobby, where to my surprise Kendra Jones sat on one of the gray plastic chairs. I gathered that she had reached out to the police as a confidant of Evan Larkin. Still I wished to give a statement.

No one knew who had bought the rifle used to kill Ed McFadden. The only gun owner I knew personally in the area was Marcus Gorman. The events that were to unfold over the next few days fed my imagination and gave me something new to turn over as I drifted off to sleep in my dorm room.

When I fell asleep, it was with an image of Marcus cleaning and loading his Ruger Mini-14 semiautomatic rifle as the verses of Revelation flash through his mind. He loads the weapon's magazine a round at a time.

"Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city."

Marcus slides another round into the magazine, presses it with a finger to drive it firmly into place, thinking of Paul's hip lair in a building off campus.

"And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death,

and with the beasts of the earth."

Marcus slides another round up into the magazine until he hears a little click.

"And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him."

Another round. Another discrete click. Paul has been on his mind constantly.

"And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword."

Another round. Click. The magazine is full. He chambers a round and releases the safety. All ready now. The night is warm and still.

"For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?"

William Wenthe

Phalarope and Carp

At just this time of year, phalaropes
can be found, swimming above the dam.
Dainty, crisply patterned birds, they pirouette
on the water, stirring up minutiae to eat.
A seasonal delicacy, to watch them.
But no phalaropes today. Yesterday's stormwater
spills over the dam, swelling the catchbasin,
slicking across the paved road below.

I'm looking down on all this, musing
on what I might choose to do instead,
when a blue pickup rumbles up, measled
with rust and Bondo, raises a spray
of water, skids and stops. What a dumbass,
I'm thinking. And then the doors open,
and gushing out like circus clowns —
three kids, two women, one man; all in
flipflops, constituting one family,
or many, or none, it's hard to guess.
A woman rolls up her jeans, steps off the road
into a frothy runnel cut by the overflow.
She stoops, plunges her hands to the wrist, gropes . . .
and in one motion, clutches & scoops and flips
a fat bronze carp onto the road.

As it slithers on wet pavement, frantic
to swim, the boy chases it, flailing
with the net — and another scoop and fling
and flopping carp — another and another and now
they're all scrambling and shouting and tossing
fish into the truckbed but the littlest girl
screams at this sudden hail of monsters —
so the man scoops her up and hoists her
into the truckbed but *that's* where the others
are lobbing the fish so she amps up her noise,
prancing and flapping her arms, till again
he grabs hold of her and this time slips

and falls on his ass but no harm —
still holding her he rises and installs her at last
in the cab of the truck where now, like royalty
in an opera box, she gazes upon the show.

Me, I think I'm horrified, but can't really tell:
on one hand, this Three Stooges brutalization
of carp, this carnage; and on the other, such fine-
tuned knowledge that read so closely
this weather, and returned them to just
this place, at just this time; and then the skill
in this woman's hands, the success.
Maybe that's what moves me down
to have a closer look. And most obligingly,
the second woman's happy to grapple
from the mess in the truckbed a thick,
armor-scaled loaf of carp to show me.
We're going to eat them, she grins. I notice —
and at once try not to notice — her teeth.

So this is one family's bounty (or maybe two) —
this rainfall windfall of fish flushed down
the dam. One could think of the gospels,
and for a moment I do, but soon wince at the thought
that every storm sewer and gutter, every dubious spot
in every gasoline-rainbow stained parking lot
on the East side of town drains down to this lake,
and into the flesh of these bottom-feeding fish
this gathering sees as opportunity.

So much, so fast — as if my car spun out
but didn't crash; and the weird quiet that follows,
a coming-to. And I'm about ready to leave,
when the first woman, the fish-catcher, walks up
with the net in her hand, and shows us
a crayfish, found in the catchbasin pool.
I'd no idea. Nor any idea this family, too,
would be pleased just to stop

and quietly study a crayfish. Okay,
my turn to be the dumbass, who judged them
by their frenzy. But I can only give

the merest formality of a glance. I've seen enough.
I'm not ready for beauty, however small,
even if beauty's what I'd come here
hoping for. Not now for beauty,
unless it includes those carp
we still hear, flopping in the truckbed,
beaten and beating like a heart.

Reading in Bed

A body beneath a sheet, I open a mystery:
lying down to wait for the MacGuffin
to initiate the tantalizing foreplay
of clues: a scent, a whisper, a stocking, silken.
Easing me in, the long plot thickens.
Lips loosen, the trail gets hot, a flurry
of moves and counter-moves incites confusion:
hard indeed, to tell the hunter from the quarry.

The best is when it's all about to come
together, and still the story line delays
a little more, before the big reveal.
Then to lie at ease, within the breathing space
of a cigarette, where all the past is solved,
all the future evils unbegun.

Donald Wheelock

Hopper's *Gas*

The country is a lonely place, at least
when seen before a dark bend in the road.
The season's due to change: the sun-dried grass
might as well be given up for dead.
The crowded trees breathe life into the place,
evergreens, perhaps — so deeply dark —
and yet, those could be August leaves, a wall
of green beneath the dimming summer sky.

How clean, this well lit isle, in 1940,
its pumps aligned to greet the cars
that roll in after dusk, as formal as
a stage prepared for summer's local stars.
The attendant in his vest and tie
sees to some detail we cannot see.

Light leaks triangles from offstage right.
The station building's planted on concrete,
as are the attendant, sign-pole and the pumps.
A cupola adds a touch of fantasy,
as does the leap of Pegasus, restrained,
and headed up forever in his flight.

Claude Wilkinson

After James Dickey's "Cherrylog Road"

Here I'll use second person since
you were my Doris Holbrook of sorts,
not just because of your like first names —
though we were perhaps not so young
and not nearly so surreptitiously reckless —
but because it's you who for some reason
come to mind when thinking of the time
when I mostly longed to be "wreckage."

Back then, what place didn't seem
as secluded and clandestine as any car
graveyard with each new day thrumming
its own sweaty encomium of need?

Here I should probably make up
something about remembering one
particular evening and the special brightness
of a July moon and how an unexpected comet
sprayed across our ebon sky at the most
opportune moment, maybe allude to some
voyeuristic theme of crickets singing, and offer
a discreet metaphor of acerose air and the
starry penumbra of sweet gums mingling.

I'd be guessing, based on nothing really,
if I said you enjoyed listening to the surge
of the ocean or that your favorite color
was indigo. Here I could lie about almost
loving the mellifluousness of your voice,
lie about your voice being mellifluous.

I might be able to get away with comparing
ours to a few mythical romances, while nothing
so over-the-top as the strength of our infatuation
prodding us to poison, or one of us jumping
off the county's highest bridge into a rushing
body below when what was between us died.

Here, like in Dickey's poem where he's far
more enamored with the stories of rotting hulks
of automobiles than with his nearly anonymous
farm girl of the summer who doesn't speak or do
anything other than what he wills and then leaves,
like in that poem to which I return every so often,
alas, you also are being left forever by my
rusting memory speeding toward oblivion
up a never-ending highway of the past.

Carcass of a Vole

On a bus in Dublin, and fresh
from the Natural History Museum,
where I'd seen a silent zoo
of wolf and hippo, and even
presumptive skeletons of two
giant prehistoric stags,
I was mostly remembering
the intact, paper-sack cheeks
on a centuries-old hamster.

As I sat awaiting signs of my stop
for the Botanic Garden,
an elderly Irishman who
had lived in Saint Louis, asked
if I knew where I was going.

For a while, we chatted
of his family, his retirement,
and life back in the states.
When I asked about
the improbably huge deer,
he joked, "We've still got
a couple of them around."

After the gardens,
it had been suggested
that I visit the nearby cemetery
where more than a million
are buried. And after the gardens,
it was an irony of acreage
too onerous to contemplate —

those things that happen to who
you are during your hyphen
between birth and death,
the thought that in spite
of a maybe decades-long
investment in life, you never
really rose beyond dirt.

Claude Wilkinson

When I occasionally look
at some much younger picture
of myself during a time that
most everything seemed before me,
the siege of creases
mapping my face weighs like
this muffled sparkle of autumn
in which, along with pooling
magenta leaves, is the small,
saber-toothed form who here succumbed
or was brought dead to my stoop.

Usually, I blame such gifts
on feral cats offering sacrifice
for sleeping atop my hood
and hunting the yard unbothered.
But why I let it lie there day after day,
studying it of evenings
as the tiny snout skinned
into grimace or grin —

I who couldn't pass
my mother's grave in winter
for years without thinking
she might be cold —
without understanding, left
it there nonetheless.

Perhaps there is no perhaps.
Though there were words,
I'm almost certain,
chiseled into a headstone
in Glasnevin — something put right
that must've felt like a cross lifted,
if only I could recall.

And yet in the perfect
opening for grace,
there's nothing but a timbre
of shadows, nothing
but waning light.

De la Cité de Dieu

after a detail from a late 15th-century French manuscript translated from the Latin
by Raoul de Presles

Though Eve's breasts
are less influential
than I would've imagined
and each figure is a bit
potbellied for perfection,
the pair seem comfortably naked.
Behind them is elaborate
masonry of a garden wall
crowned with a touch
of arabesque latticework.
Adam, as a bearded effete,
stands almost in ballet's
fourth position as if he
were subtly objecting
while spouse, on the sinister side,
modestly covers her crotch.
And in Aesculapian fashion,
spiraled around a sapling,
presumed the tree
of forbidden knowledge,
that serpent with coif and face
of a Renaissance angel
hissing his sweet persuasion.
Still yet without the Isaiahs
and Solomons of wisdom,
quetzals and lemurs
must have been screaming
in the moment remaining
of harmony before
the long kerfuffle begins,
the casting blame and talks
of annulment, before pangs
of labor and rebel offspring,
as all creation contemplates
this gloss of glory hoisted in
a woman's small, stylized hand.

Roadkill

In the equitable light of Thoreau,
as he mentioned more than once
how the slain make provisions

for the living to gather
at the welcome table, I try
to fathom their excessive abundance

instead of just their mangled mass
and venetian blood splattered
like a Pollock painting, the whorl

of intestines pushed outside;
snakes mashed beyond recognition
into rattlehead copper moccasins;

the barn owl whose sole, ghostly wing
beckons with gusts from each passing car,
directing everyone's travel. I remember

Walden's order of untenable compassion
and think of freshets clogged with frogs,
which would be similar to the curse

on ancient Egypt, if not for accident.
But it's still a kind of eclipse to witness
the starching mink, a once quick vixen's glazed eyes,

or a kestrel's stricken plummet,
still that same unnatural dark
that followed when Macbeth

murdered Duncan, whose horses
then went wild and began eating
each other to signal something

awry, as it seems to me,
do these many broken bodies
dissolving into puddles of jewel-blue flies.

James Matthew Wilson

Catullans

Washed and buried beneath the earth, the dead man
Lies, outfitted with jacket, tie, and collar.
Only those of strict conscience come to mourn him;
They, that is, who could see how his collecting
Doomed his life and perverted all his pleasures.
Bolted up in his house, he hoarded papers,
Newsprint, magazines, boxes of old files;
Guarded piles and great heaps on beds and tables,
Where he left his half-eaten meals to molder:
Scrambled eggs now long hardened into plate ware;
Crusts of toast that retained his absent bite marks;
Mugs of tea in whom teabags steeped for seasons.
Such things welcomed the flies and curious mice who
Made amid them a feast and maze and brothel.
What, they ask themselves, those who watch the gravestone
Lashed with rain and now scoured by Boreas' bellow;
What could any have said to save him from his
Wandering through the great wreckage he had gathered
With a hunger that knew no other purpose?
What could halt his own burial but this burial?

A Prayer to Christ the Lord

O Christ, you are the everlasting light
Who shone upon the darkness that was not;
The Logos who called out to the abyss
And summoned all things into being and form;
Who walked among us in our shame and death
And bore them naked, nailed upon the cross.

Now, give us eyes to see what you reveal,
To stare upon that light which cleanses all;
And give us ears to hear your single word
That speaks from far away and from within,
To bring us, scattered, unremembering flesh,
Into your body that shall reign forever.

"Starting Out from Such Emptiness . . ."

Yes, I say, yes, this emptiness,
This desert land without horizon,
This mass of hollowed faces staring,

Complacent faces curled with smiles;
This music sweet above the void
Distracting from it, here, and here;

And all those seething choruses
Who make their arbitrary wills
A cause of right and demolition:

Yes, I say, yes, we know it well,
But who has left the limping gait,
Who left the unexhausted heart,

The heart unsullied and untrammeled,
The brazen, purged, assenting heart
To start out from such emptiness?

James Matthew Wilson

For an Anniversary

Although the spring comes whirling in and brings
A faint green to the dry stems on the rose,
    Reminding us life's fragile and will pass
As fleet and fiercely as the March wind blows,
It says as well things circle back, like rings
    Cut by young lovers in a window's glass.

Young Red

I

The son was upset by the world's strange injustice,
And so he turned leftward, moved into the city,
Where like minds could find him and give rage expression.
Baristas in cafés directed him into
The shadows of meetings and plottings, and secret
Agendas known only to rebels who fed his
Deep thirsting with tales of utopias arriving.
A shepherd, if you will, one given to guiding,
Took this shy one's lust just so gently in hand
That platforms were swallowed, strict doctrines digested.

This youth from Grand Rapids now thundered in typing
For pulpy newspapers that only his fellows
Subscribed to or opened or could understand.
But, one night, the sink full, his hands in the soap suds,
He saw that he, finally, would leave his wife, leave her
Pale skin with its freckles, her hair all of scarlet,
And lips that filled his ear with words that were tender.
As soon as the dawn licked the land with its light, he
Would park in the thoroughfare a pickup packed tightly
Its trunk weighed down heavy with dangerous explosives;
And as his shape vanished toward some far north border,
He'd click a small button and set off the charge.

II

Another was also despairing of all that
He saw in his life and the world's hammering ways.
"What *is* man? What matters his doings?" he asked of
The one who tried her best to tenderly love him,
Though she failed, or mostly, and poured out the wine.
She dreamed of a doctor who'd turn his black humor
Shades lighter, and cause him to see all his actions
That slight her and sting her, the way his words bite her,
As slighting and biting, and to her heart stinging,
Not pardoned by some quest to find his life's purpose.

Alas, she could now see no answers could stir him,
No treatment would cure him of helpless dismay.
Her sex was a bottle of doubtful new vintage,
A merlot to drink up and put him to sleep.
Then wake him and ache him, till he knows that sorrow's
A cancer that feeds on the thoughts that would kill it,
All wondering on purpose a pompous malfunction
That gives us no answer to what we desire.

One drinks so one's fate is forgotten a while,
Is dulled and exiled to swim the abyss.
It may give some measure of pleasure to fill in
The voiding, to hold off the groans of the day.
But learn this as you learn all shadows and jesting:
That fate stands in waiting for brain's old unsightly
Dark humming to rebirth, relentless and dull.
Its stale breath and bleared eyes will curse at the daylight,
Will join you in smelling the stink of the day,
But only to show you that there's no escaping
And each tranquil hour we must soon repay.

Marlin Barton lives in Montgomery, Alabama. In addition to his recent novel, *Children of Dust*, he's published two earlier novels and three story collections. Stories of his have been included in *Best American Short Stories* and *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*, and he received the Capote Prize for his short fiction. Barton teaches in a program for juvenile offenders called Writing Our Stories, and he also teaches in the low-residency MFA program at Converse University in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Ace Boggess is the author of six books of poetry, including *Escape Envy* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2021), *I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So*, and *The Prisoners*. His writing has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble. His seventh collection, *Tell Us How to Live*, is forthcoming in 2024 from Fernwood Press.

Catharine Savage Brosman is professor emerita of French at Tulane University and the author of fourteen poetry collections, of which the latest are *Clara's Bees* (2021) and *Arm in Arm* (2022). A new collection, *Aerosols*, is in preparation for 2023. She resides in Houston but in 2021 purchased a pied-à-terre in New Orleans. Her appearances in 2022 include a keynote reading at the University of St. Thomas in Houston and participation in the Louisiana Book Festival.

Rick Campbell is a poet, essayist, and editor living on Alligator Point, Florida. His collection of essays, *Sometimes the Light* was published by Main Street Rag Press in the spring of 2022. 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*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Gargoyle*, *Fourth River*, *Kestrel*, and the *Alabama Literary Review*. He teaches in the University of Nevada-Reno's MFA program.

Dan Campion is the author of *Peter De Vries and Surrealism* (Bucknell UP, 1995) and coeditor of *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song* (Holy Cow! Press, 1981; 1998; 2019). His poems have appeared in *Light*, *Poetry*, *Rolling Stone*, *Shenandoah*, and many other journals and are forthcoming in *Able Muse*, *The Alabama Literary Review*, *Ars Medica*, *Indefinite Space*, *The International*

Journal of Whole Person Care, and *New American Writing*. Selections of his poems are due out this year from Ice Cube Press and MadHat Press.

Catherine Chandler is the author of six poetry collections, including *The Frangible Hour* (University of Evansville Press, 2016), winner of the Richard Wilbur Award, and *Lines of Flight* (Able Muse Press, 2011), shortlisted for the Poets' Prize. Her latest book, *Annals of the Dear Unknown* (Kelsay Books 2022) is an historical verse-tale set in Northeast Pennsylvania in the late 18th century. Reviews of Catherine's work, a list of awards and nominations, sample poems, podcasts and audio recordings are online at "The Wonderful Boat" (cathychandler.blogspot.com).

Terese Coe's poems, prose, and translations appear in *Agenda*, *Alabama Literary Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *The Classical Outlook*, *Hopkins Review*, *Metamorphoses*, *The Moth*, *New American Writing*, *New Scotland Writing*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *Poetry Review*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Stone Canoe*, *The Threepenny Review*, the *TLS*, and many other publications. Her collection *Shot Silk* was short-listed for the 2017 Poets Prize, and her poem "More" was heli-dropped across London in the 2012 Olympics Rain of Poems. Giorno Poetry Systems, Vermont Studio Center, West Chester Poetry Conference, Barnstone Translation Award, and others awarded her prizes and scholarships. Please see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terese_Coe for more information and links.

Barbara Lydecker Crane, a *Rattle* Poetry Prize finalist in 2017 and 2019, has received two Pushcart nominations and several awards for her sonnets. Recent poems appear or are forthcoming in *Ekphrastic Review*, *Alabama Literary Review*, and *Montreal Review*. Her fourth collection, sonnets about portrait paintings in artists' voices, entitled *You Will Remember Me*, will be published by Able Muse Press.

Anne-Marie Delaunay-Danizio has a B.A. in English Literature from Emmanuel College; a master's in Art History and a master's in Museum Studies from Harvard Extension School; and an MFA in Visual Arts from the Institute of Art and Design at New England College. A visual artist, her artwork was accepted in the *SEE|ME Winter 2020–2021* Exhibition at the Yard, Flatiron North, New

York. Her writing is published in *Atherton Review*. Anne-Marie enjoys sculpting, painting, and practicing Reiki.

Emily Douglas has been a professor of writing for many years and travels frequently to Alabama, her home state. She's the author of four books as well as many stories and essays about the South, a place where "stories are necessary, full of family eccentricities and historical anxieties."

Patricia Foster is the author of *All the Lost Girls* (PEN/Jerard Award), *Just beneath My Skin* (essays), *Girl from Soldier Creek* (SFA Novel Award), a forthcoming collection, *Written in the Sky*, and the editor of four anthologies, including *Minding the Body: Women Writers on Body and Soul* (translated into Dutch, German, Portuguese). She has received a Pushcart Prize, a Clarence Cason Award, a Theodore Hoepfner Award, a Dean's Scholar Award, a Yaddo Fellowship, and a Carl Klaus Teaching Award. She has been a juror for the Windham-Campbell Literature Prize in Nonfiction (Yale University) and a fellow at the Inaugural Writing Residency at Sun Yat-sen University. She has published over 120 essays and stories and has been a professor in the MFA Program in Nonfiction at the University of Iowa for over twenty-three years. She has also taught writing in France, Australia, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Spain.

Ruth Holzer is the author of eight chapbooks, most recently, "Living in Laconia" (Gyroscope Press) and "Among the Missing" (Kelsay Books). Her poems have appeared in *Blue Unicorn*, *Faultline*, *Slant*, *Poet Lore*, *Connecticut River Review and Plainsongs*, among other journals and anthologies. She has received several Pushcart Prize nominations.

Charles Hughes has published two books of poems, *The Evening Sky* (2020) and *Cave Art* (2014), both from Wiseblood Books. He worked for over thirty years as a lawyer and now works at writing poems.

Greg Huteson is the author of *These Unblessed Days* (Kelsay Books, 2022). His poems have recently appeared in *Modern Age*, *Trinity House Review*, *The Brazen Head*, *Convivium*, *Innisfree Poetry Journal*, and *The Crank*. He lives in Taiwan.

Steven Knepper teaches in the Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies at Virginia Military Institute. He is an associate editor of the *Robert Frost Review* and the author of *Wonder Strikes: Approaching Aesthetics and Literature with William Desmond* (SUNY, 2022). His poems have appeared in *Local Culture*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *First Things*, *SLANT*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Roanoke Review*, *and other journals*.

Jean L. Kreiling is the prize-winning author of three collections of poetry: *Shared History* (2022), *Arts & Letters & Love* (2018), and *The Truth in Dissonance* (2014). She is an Associate Poetry Editor for *Able Muse: A Review of Poetry, Prose & Art* and a longtime member of the Powow River Poets; she lives on the coast of Massachusetts.

Josh Luckenbach's recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Southern Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *New Ohio Review*, and elsewhere. He received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Arkansas. He currently serves as Managing Editor for *Iron Horse Literary Review*.

Richard Meyer, a former English and humanities teacher, lives in Mankato, MN. He was awarded the 2012 Robert Frost Farm Prize for his poem "Fieldstone" and was the recipient of the 2014 String Poet Prize for his poem "The Autumn Way." His poetry has also received top honors several times in the Great River Shakespeare Festival sonnet contest. A book of his collected poems, *Orbital Paths*, was a silver medalist winner in the 2016 IBPA Benjamin Franklin Awards.

David Middleton is Professor Emeritus and Poet in Residence Emeritus at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana. His 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 next collection of verse, *Outside the Gates of Eden*, will appear on Measure Press in 2023. In the Fall of 2024, Texas Review Press will publish *Time Will Tell: Collected Poems / David Middleton*.

Leslie Monsour is the author of *The Colosseum Critical Introduction to Rhina P. Espaillat*, published by Franciscan University Press. Her poetry collections include *The Alarming Beauty of the Sky* and *The House Sitter*, winner of the Finishing Line Press Open Chapbook Competition. Her essays and book reviews appear in several journals, including *Able Muse*, *Literary Matters*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. She has received a Fellowship in Literature from The National Endowment for the Arts, as well as five Pushcart Prize nominations.

James B. Nicola is a frequent contributor to *Alabama Literary Review*. His full-length collections are *Manhattan Plaza* (2014), *Stage to Page: Poems from the Theater* (2016), *Wind in the Cave* (2017), *Out of Nothing: Poems of Art and Artists* (2018), *Quickening: Poems from Before and Beyond* (2019), and *Fires of Heaven: Poems of Faith and Sense* (2021). His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience* won a *Choice* award, while his poetry and prose have garnered two *Willow Review* awards, a Dana Literary award, eight Pushcart nominations, a Best of the Net nom, a Rhysling nom, and a People's Choice award from *Storyteller* magazine, for which he feels both stunned and grateful.

James Owens's newest book is *Family Portrait with Scythe* (Bottom Dog Press, 2020). His poems and translations appear widely in literary journals, including recent or upcoming publications in *Grain*, *Dalhousie Review*, *Presence*, *Queen's Quarterly*, and *Honest Ulsterman*. He earned an MFA at the University of Alabama and lives in a small town in northern Ontario.

Steven Peterson is a poet and playwright living in Chicago. His recent poems appear in *America Magazine*, *The Christian Century*, *Dappled Things*, *First Things*, *Light*, and other journals. Several of his plays have been produced in theaters around the USA. He is currently a resident playwright at Chicago Dramatists (www.petersonplays.com).

Robert Schechter's debut collection, *The Red Ear Blows Its Nose: Poems for Children and Others*, will be published in April 2023.

Robert B. Shaw taught for thirty-three years at Mount Holyoke College, retiring in 2016 as the Emily Dickinson Professor of English Emeritus. His publications include *Blank Verse: A Guide to*

Its History and Use (Ohio University Press) and eight collections of poetry, the largest and most recent of which, *What Remains to Be Said: New and Selected Poems* (Pinyon Publishing), appeared in the spring of 2022.

Hilary Sideris's poems have appeared recently in *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *The Lake*, *OneArt*, *Poetry Daily*, and *Right Hand Pointing*. She is the author of *Un Amore Veloce* (Kelsay Books 2019), *The Silent B* (Dos Madres Press 2019), *Animals in English, poems after Temple Grandin* (Dos Madres Press 2020), and *Liberty Laundry* (Dos Madres Press 2022.) She lives in Brooklyn and works as an English professional developer for CUNY Start, a program for underserved, limited-income students at The City University of New York.

J.D. Smith published two books of poetry in 2021: the light verse collection *Catalogs for Food Lovers* and the free verse collection *Glenn Danzig Carries Cat Litter*. His first fiction collection, *Transit*, will be published by Unsolicited Press in late 2022 or early 2023. Smith works and lives in Washington, DC.

Michael Spence has been retired since Valentine's Day, 2014, from driving public-transit buses in the Seattle area, a job he held for thirty years. His poems have appeared recently or are forthcoming in *Able Muse*, *Atlanta Review*, *Barrow Street*, *The Hudson Review*, *Kestrel*, *Lousiana Literature*, *North American Review*, *Rattle*, *The Southern Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *Willow Springs*. His latest book, *Umbilical* (St. Augustine's Press, 2016), won The New Criterion Poetry Prize.

Daniel Tobin is the author of nine books of poems, including *From Nothing*, winner of the Julia Ward Howe Award, *The Stone in the Air*, his suite of versions from the German of Paul Celan, and most recently *Blood Labors*, named one of the Best Poetry Books of the Year for 2018 by the *New York Times* and *The Washington Independent Review of Books*. His poetry has won many awards, among them the Massachusetts Book Award and fellowships from the NEA and the Guggenheim Foundation. His critical and editorial works include *Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, *Awake in America*, *The Book of Irish American Poetry from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, and *To the Many: The Collected Early Works of*

Lola Ridge. His most recent work is *On Serious Earth: Poetry and Transcendence*. A trilogy of book-length poems, *The Mansions*, will appear in 2023. He teaches at Emerson College in Boston.

Alejandra Vansant is a writer from the Eastern Shore of Virginia. She is currently an MFA candidate at Louisiana State University and Associate Poetry Editor for *New Delta Review*. Her work can be found in *Volume Poetry*.

Wendy Videlock lives on the western slope of the Colorado Rockies. Her work appears widely, most notably in *Hudson Review*, *Best American Poetry*, *Hopkins Review*, *Rattle*, *Oprah Magazine*, and other venues. Her upcoming collection of essays and haibun, *The Poetic Imaginarium: A Worthy Difficulty*, (Lithic Press) and a new collection of poems, *Wise to the West*, (Able Muse Press) will both appear in 2022. To see Wendy's available books, please visit https://www.wendyvidelock.com/

The poems of **Lisa Vihos** have appeared in many poetry journals, both print and online. She has published four chapbooks and has received two Pushcart Prize nominations and numerous awards from the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets and the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts & Letters. She is the Sheboygan organizer for 100 Thousand Poets for Change. In 2020, she was named the first poet laureate of Sheboygan where she hosts the podcast *Poetry on Air* for Mead Public Library. Her first novel, *The Lone Snake: The Story of Sofonisba Anguissola*, was released in May, 2022 from Water's Edge Press.

Michael Washburn is a Brooklyn-based writer and journalist. His short fiction has appeared in *Rosebud*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Concho River Review*, *New Orphic Review*, *Stand*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *Weird Fiction Review*, *Weirdbook*, *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*, *Nomadic Sojourns*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, and many other publications in the United States and abroad. Washburn's books include *The Uprooted and Other Stories* (2018), *When We're Grownups* (2019), and *Stranger*, *Stranger* (2020). His short story "Confessions of a Spook" won Causeway Lit's 2018 fiction contest, and his story "In the Flyover State" was named a Distinguished Mystery Story of 2014 by Best American Mystery Stories.

William Wenthe has poems recently or forthcoming in *The Georgia Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, *AGNI*, *Plume*, and others. In 2023 LSU Press will publish his fifth book of poems, *The Gentle Art*.

Donald Wheelock's poems have appeared in *Think*, *Third Wednesday*, *Ekphrasis* and many other journals welcoming formal poetry. His chapbook, *In the Sea of Dreams*, is available from Gallery of Readers Press. His first full-length book of poems, *It's Hard Enough to Fly*, will appear very soon from Kelsay Books.

Claude Wilkinson is a critic, essayist, painter, and poet. His book, *Reading the Earth*, won the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award. Other honors for his poems include a Walter E. Dakin Fellowship and the Whiting Writers' Award. His most recent poetry collections are *Marvelous Light* and *World without End*.

James Matthew Wilson is Cullen Foundation Chair in English Literature and Founding Director of the MFA Program in Creative Writing at the University of Saint Thomas, in Houston. He serves also as Poet-in-Residence of the Benedict XVI Institute, Editor of Colosseum Books, Poetry Editor of *Modern Age*, and Scholar-in-Residence of Aquinas College. The author of thirteen books, his most recent collection of poems is *The Strangeness of the Good* (Angelico, 2020).


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