

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,

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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

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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 Dormon'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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.”

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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.