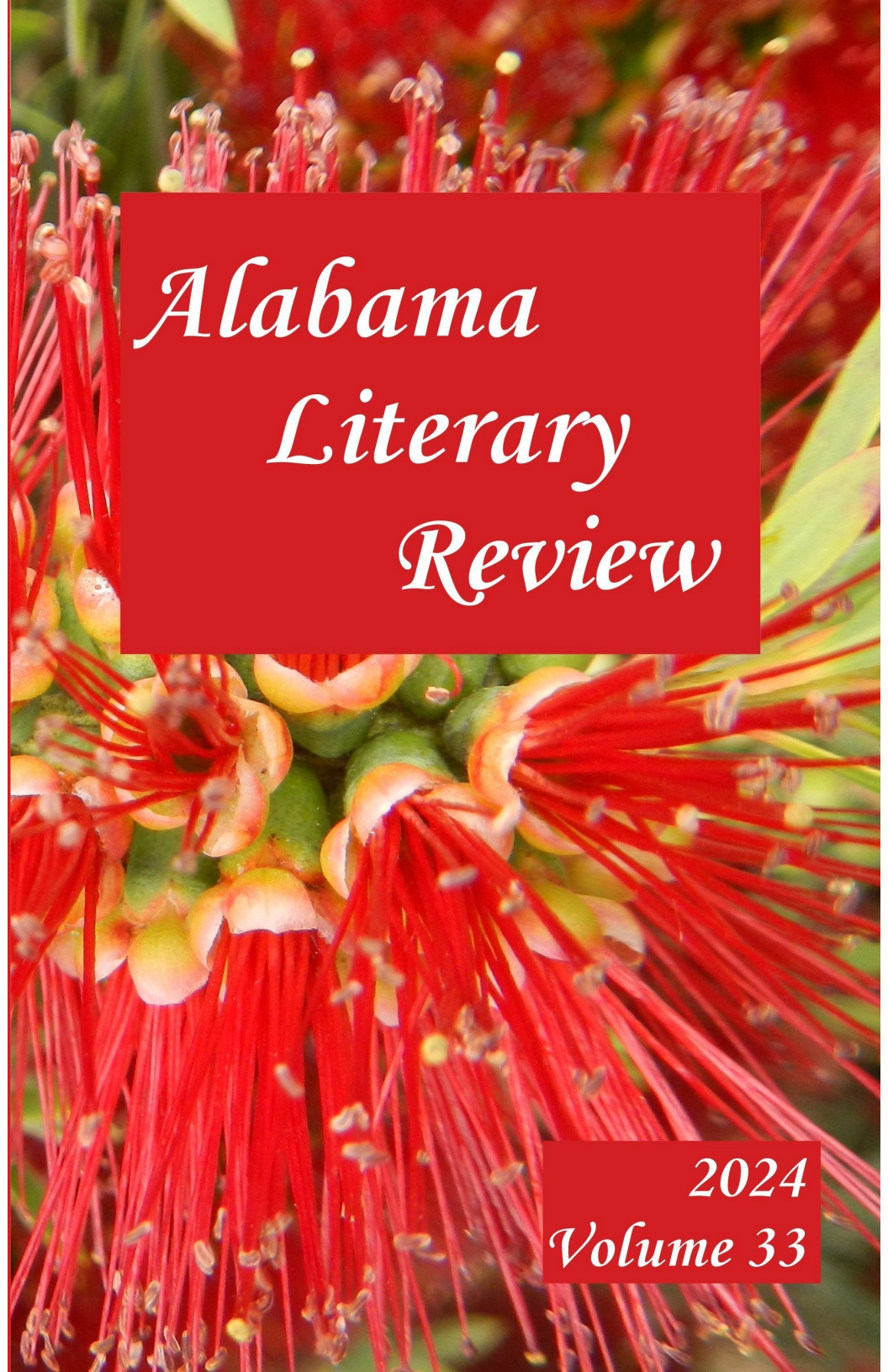
Alabama
Literary
Review
2024
Volume 33

Alabama Literary Review

Crown Shyness, Greenville, Alabama, 2023

2024
Volume 33

Editor Ben P. Robertson

Assistant Editors Matthew Carpenter and Nicholas Pincumbe

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Editor's Note

As the new editor of the *Alabama Literary Review*, I'm pleased to present the 2024 issue (Volume 33). Most of the work assembling this issue was done by our outgoing editor William B. Thompson. My job, this time, has been merely to add a few additional selections and finalize the layout. I'd like to express thanks to Bill for his many years devoted to this journal. He started as poetry editor in 2007 and served in that capacity for three years before becoming the general editor in 2010. Under his guidance, we have produced fifteen issues, including this one.

With Bill's retirement from Troy University this past year, I've now assumed the general editorship of the *ALR*. I'm not new to the journal, having been fiction editor since 2021 and having designed and maintained the web site since 2011. It's an honor to assume this new role, and I hope to continue the journal's longstanding tradition of publishing excellent material from contemporary authors.

For the time being, I don't plan to make any major changes to the way the journal is run—with one exception: Effective immediately, we will begin accepting digital submissions through our web site at http://spectrum.troy.edu/alr. If you prefer to send paper submissions, you may still do so. My hope is that accepting digital submissions will streamline the editorial process by making file-handling more manageable and by setting us up to respond more quickly to submissions.

I have a few other goals in mind in the long term. First, I hope to get more people involved in the journal's day-to-day activities locally—both to second-guess me and to prepare another generation to take over my place eventually. Along those lines, thanks are due to Jill Magi for her help in assessing recent submissions. Additionally, I'd like to publicize our authors a bit more in future years, perhaps by having online literary readings and/or workshops. I'm open to other suggestions if any readers would like to send them.

Many thanks to those of you who read the *ALR* regularly, and thanks, especially, to our contributors, without whom the journal simply could not exist.

—Ben P. Robertson
Troy, Alabama, USA
21 April 2025

Cloudscape, 2025

Mark Belair

On Watch

A watchful boy stands
before a giant, craggy, fairy-tale-like tree that
bears nine knots where nine branches have broken off.

Knots that bulge like
nine heads outgrown and left behind, faces
twisted by the swelling trunk into demon masks.

At his feet snake
gnarled, bony, grasping roots, the stony
earth no match for their hell-bent encroachment.

The tree's whole, violent presence
the record of a gruesome, unreflective life
the stilled boy, due reflection done, turns from.

*

A watchful boy, waist-deep
in a trout stream, casts a fly he
tied himself, at home, from what he had.

Casts it to test
the fly-in-progress in the sparkling water
churning toward him, swirling by him, and past.

Which is how he
comes to know what he
needs to know from where he stands.

Belt and Pipe

A leather tool belt
stows like a bird's nest
inside a new water main pipe
stacked atop others
in the closed-off street, shadowed
tools splayed out, the workers presumably
broken for lunch, jackhammers
and backhoes also at rest.

Given the demolition necessary
to tear up the street and sink
and fit the pipes, this sheltered
tool belt marks a spell
of stillness
soon to be gone, the tools
plucked out, the pipe
chained and lowered, the tucked
wings of this nested calm
worked
into feathery flight.

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The Red Cowboy Boot

In my kitchen cabinet, amid
the wine and pilsner glasses,

stands the red plastic cowboy boot cup—
faux-tooled and spiked with a spur—

I prized until, nearing age nine,
it became just a childish trinket.

In my closet, nestled in a box, resides
the red-checkered cowboy shirt with

mother-of-pearl buttons I outgrew
at about the same time.

Things my mother kept from my boyhood
and bequeathed to me before she died, her

saving of them meant to make them
icons of her attachment to me.

To that cub cowboy she held tight,
even as he started to squirm

with a need to break free,
an embrace that grew hot

with stalemate until, at cold cost
to them both, he wrenched away.

His boot cup
now

my icon
of their grief.

Song and Dance

The creaking leather
of a saddle

sings
of the slowness

of the hours,
each step

the horse
takes

a living rhythm
to keep

closer
the closer

the dark
barn.

*

An autumn leaf twirls
midair

beneath its tree,
caught,

perhaps,
on a filament

of spiderweb, one
the leaf,

when plummeting,
presumably

rent—
this red-and-yellow

castoff

commanded

by harvest breezes
to conduct

an open air, otherworldly
dance of the dead.

Jane Blanchard

Apologia

Decades ago, to my dismay,
My hair went dull, so I would try
To keep my former look in play
With what beauticians could apply.
The price for such was really high,
Charge after charge, which I did pay
While oversharing with a sigh:
The time will come when I go gray.

Self-coloring became okay
When I was barely getting by
With children left to raise (and they
Had needs and wants to satisfy).
A store-bought formula of dye
Washed any mousy tinge away,
Yet I knew whether wet or dry:
The time will come when I go gray.

Now paler shades are kept at bay
With nice'n easy—boxes nigh—
An extant brand, perhaps passé,
Though I can only wonder why.
How months, whole seasons seem to fly!
Old age is likely here to stay,
And certain thoughts preoccupy:
The time will come when I go gray.

Dear Jimmy, you as well as I
Still see me as a blonde today,
But once again I prophesy:
The time will come when I go gray.

One and Done

Your GP's office calls to offer you
A routine wellness checkup, so to speak.
You are to see the nurse, the doctor, too,
At mutual convenience mid-next-week.

Once there, you figure out they want to test
The fitness of your mind this day, month, year.
Though slightly irked, you choose to do your best
In answering the questions that you hear.

You exercise, eat well, and drink a bit.
You neither smoke nor want to end your life.
You sleep when you lie down, not while you sit.
You have no living will, instead a wife.

That line gets you a laugh. You leave the nurse
Assured that you remember "blue – bed – sock"
And use your break from having to converse
By watching all three hands of one wall clock.

Chitchat with your physician goes quite well.
Church. Travel. Yardwork. Bricker—by last name—
Supplies you both with compost—some soft sell:
"The price of sh*t stays pretty much the same."

"Today's bill will be paid by Medicare,"
Confirms the practice's receptionist,
Who bids you come back next June, if you dare.
You smile and say, "Perhaps." She gets the gist.

Ace Boggess

The Dead and the Living

She texts that her pop's brutal cop dog
killed the stray pup they've taken in
despite a fence between the two &
all the good will of isolated worlds.

Not a dog person, I process this
like a school shooting or tsunami,
a horrible otherness elsewhere
which has nothing to do with me

except in need for empathy I lack,
money I lack, or ability to do one thing
about it, which I lack most of all,
not the hero of any story

that begins or ends with fire,
blood, grief, guilt, remorse.
I choose the option I have:
I call to comfort, & by the time

she answers, the pup's alive again,
hand of some dog-god having touched it.
How's that possible? I say.
Did you bury it in a Pet Sematary?

She doesn't laugh but gets the joke &
will laugh later once things have
settled down, begun to make more sense.
For now, the big dog's outside barking,

its booms over the phone
sounding like a column of howitzers,
which means trouble, which means
the pup's still out there scrapping.

You better go check on that, I say.
She says she will, but her voice
assures me she's a refugee
from a war she knows will never end.

A Junkie in Rehab

said he envied me for the stupidest thing I ever did.
He said he stabbed himself in the gut
in front of his kid, then went to the E.R. for pills,
because he was too chickenshit to rob a pharmacy.

I countered with fear of self-harm as why I chose the other,
a brief existence as a criminal that ended in a blood-
soaked floor, my head squeezed under a deputy's boot
as though he were snuffing a cigarette.

Convinced myself I needed to do it, risk of injury
or death by someone else less worrisome
than knifing my stomach or slamming a door on my hand.
Strange how two men swimming in the same sewer

notice dissimilar things: for him, the stench;
for me, the rats. *At least you don't have kids*,
he said. He had me there. *At least that*, I agreed, &
wondered if it would've made a difference.

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Gratitude List #24

Forgive me when I praise my wealth
of second chances.

Fell into a manhole once.
I was young & in college, buzzed on booze.
Someone left the disc askew.
Only my left went down.

The dashboard in my black Ford Tempo
set itself on fire
due to a faulty, recalled part, &
I, driving through Morgantown,
lost good sense & pulled onto the lot
of the nearest Exxon station,
got out, then went back
for the journal in which I
had written half of a novel.

How often I almost burned myself up,
dosing on methadone, trying to quit
the drugs I loved. My hand
went lazy with a lit cigarette,
slacking against my chest—
all those T-shirts with burn holes—
the first touch of flame to skin
waking me like a loud alarm
set precisely for 2 a.m.

Praise most the times I should've died
in dope lust from overdose
or a pistol clicking behind my head
in shadows of a stranger's house.
I've twice had knives held to my throat.
A cop could've shot me when he had the chance.

Praise these words, too,
which save me again:
antivenin against the snakes
that bite at dawn &
won't let up until the night has fallen.

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Robert Boucheron

The Dialtones

A report card for David Gooch from Hapsburg Elementary School bore this handwritten comment by Mrs. Lang:

> David is happy, intelligent, and well-developed for a boy his age. He reads at or above the fifth grade level. He refuses to apply himself in subjects he dislikes, such as spelling and arithmetic. Occasionally, he disrupts the class.

Where a harried teacher saw disruption, her students saw live theater. David made up songs and skits and performed during lulls in the school routine. He drew people and talking animals and gave the sketches to classmates. Mrs. Lang confiscated one of these, a caricature of the school principal. She shared it with a fellow teacher, and a copy got loose. Unsigned and all-too-recognizable, it prompted the subject to send a blistering memo to "All Staff and So-Called Artists."

When David was eleven years old, his father was struck down by a freak accident involving a golf cart. This loss, which his mother Winifred shared, may have reinforced a tendency to dote. The boy grew into a handsome young man careless of his appearance. Coasting through high school, he picked up more through casual reading than in class. Teachers were flummoxed by his range of knowledge and failure to parrot the assigned textbooks.

David's sister Jane struck everyone as a sensible girl. Two years younger, by the time she entered high school, she was a serious student, the best in her class. Brains repelled boys like an invisible shield, but Jane had a best friend, Emily, the daughter of a bank president. Her only fault was that she adored her wayward brother.

Winifred struggled to raise her brood with limited means. A life insurance policy paid a small pension. A brother-in-law gave generous advice and little financial help. When the children were older, Winifred took a job as secretary at the architectural firm of Banister and Picket. The wage was inadequate, but the crotchets of old Fletcher Banister provided inexhaustible material for grumbling.

David graduated from high school under the proud gaze of his mother. His grade average was high enough for college or university to be possible. Winifred considered it essential.

"You can attend a Virginia state school. You can apply for a scholarship and work part-time. You will have to buckle down and study."

Accepted at a campus some hours away, David enrolled, signed up for courses, got a job in the cafeteria, and bought the appropriate textbooks. Then,

away from home for the first time in his life, he tasted freedom. Temptation lay in the young man's way, and he followed it with zest. He overslept and missed classes. Sensing failure by mid-semester, he tried to study but was too far behind to catch up. He wrote papers and took exams as if filling in a questionnaire with silly answers.

Without waiting for the result, David crammed his belongings into a used car and drove back to Hapsburg. He arrived as Jane returned from school. She guessed the reason.

"Down in flames?"

"Crash and burn, with no survivors."

Thrilled to have her brother back, Jane helped him carry clothes, sketchbooks, and a guitar to his bedroom before their mother got home.

Winifred did not have the heart to throw David out, as Uncle Irwin said he deserved. She did insist that he find a job. The same uncle steered him to a place in the Hapsburg Iron Works, generally known as the foundry, where Irwin Gooch toiled in accounting. As unskilled labor, David lifted heavy boxes, swept floors, took out garbage, cleaned toilets, and sorted scrap metal. The routine was irksome. He amused coworkers with impressions, including some of company superiors, and got himself fired.

*

When not in his room smoking cigarettes and noodling on guitar, David Gooch passed much of his time at the Catharsis Café on Main Street. Underage, he did not drink. He sat in a corner and scribbled in a sketchbook: poems, songs, jokes, skits, and sketches of people chatting with each other, leaning on the bar, and staring into space. He talked to them, men and women of all ages, with years of experience, successes and failures, bright dreams and bitter disappointments. Listening to them in the café was far more interesting than reading in a college library.

Lionel Small was the proprietor. A short, energetic man of color, Lionel had bought the moribund Rialto Lounge on Main Street and transformed the interior. Gone were the fishing nets hung from the ceiling, the candles stuck in wine bottles, and the stained wooden booths. The pressed tin ceiling was painted black, foreign film posters decorated the walls, and a tiny stage enabled live performance. With a bar, a menu of snacks and sandwiches, and music for all moods, the Catharsis Café won a reputation as the place to be, among those who wanted to be somewhere.

Always on hand like a master of ceremonies, Lionel dressed for success. He greeted each customer like a long-lost friend. Every man was his pal, and every woman was a special lady. He let it be known that he came from the big city, where he did artistic things including theater. What role he played was left to the imagination, but he picked up the vocabulary. Café conveyed the image of a swank nightclub. Catharsis suggested what might happen there.

Lionel wanted to discard the old jukebox, but former patrons protested. They wrote letters to the editor of the *Vindicator.* They lamented "the baleful

influence of outside money." But no one stepped forward to buy the jukebox. In good working order, the 1952 Seeburg M100C could play one hundred sides, or two times fifty records. Lionel understood that race resentment had as much to do with the protest as nostalgia. He cleaned the case and moved it to an alcove. Lit from inside, the jukebox glowed like an oversize jewel and touted its trove of forgotten classics. Now and then a college student or an out-of-town visitor inserted a coin, and it came to life.

When a vacancy developed in the wait staff, Lionel easily persuaded David to wear a white dress shirt and black bow tie. The young man remembered orders, he was courteous and prompt, and he gladly worked late and irregular hours as business demanded. Without a resume, without networking, and without even looking, David found a job that suited him.

*

In no time, David revealed his gifts as an entertainer. He clowned between sets and before the regular program got underway. His humor was innocuous. Patrons listened politely and laughed without knowing why. The fresh material caught them off guard. No one expected spontaneity in Hapsburg.

One night, a man at the bar asked for a telephone. He dialed, listened intently for a minute, then slammed the handset down in disgust. David happened to be standing next to the man, holding a round tray. With his free hand, he picked up the phone. To the tune of "The Shadow of Your Smile," he sang:

> The number you have dialed no longer connects.
> Please hang up and consult your Rolodex.

David gave the impression he was making up the words as he went along, or he was repeating what he heard as he pressed the handset to his ear. His tenor voice quavered in a way that sounded authentic. Applause was as thunderous as the few on hand could manage. Lionel noticed and spoke to him at the end of the evening.

"Can you put together an act?" he asked. "Bring your guitar and ten minutes of material. You'll be the warm-up for the name performers."

David kept up the songs and patter, and word got around. To give the act more weight, Lionel asked a couple of musicians who were regulars at the café to play along. Slim Oliphaunt, a pale, skinny boy, played banjo and sang baritone. Gabby Brown, a tall black man who always wore a hat and dark glasses, played bass. Gabby seldom spoke. When he did, it was on point. The three jammed. Lionel booked them on a weeknight, and the audience was pleased.

"The Number You Have Dialed," arranged for the group, became their first hit. David followed it up with other telephone-related songs, such as "So Glad You Called," "Alone with My Cell," and their next hit, "Please Hold." The group had no name. Was it even a band? Lionel wanted to call them Dave and the Dialtones, or the Gooch Gang.

"I don't want top billing," David said. They agreed on the Dialtones.

A band without a drummer was unthinkable. But a band as unusual as the Dialtones needed an unusual drummer. Lionel put out feelers. A young Chinese-American with a savage manner surfaced, a demon on drums who went by the single name of Wu. Eyes closed, black hair tossing wildly, Wu improvised with brilliance, then dropped into synch with Gabby, Slim, and David. When Lionel heard them jam in the empty café, he erupted in glee.

"Paydirt! These boys are going to be paydirt in the right hands. Namely mine."

Lionel booked them in a regular Friday slot and paid them as a house band. David continued to work as a waiter, and the other musicians kept their day jobs. The gig was promising, but as Gabby said, "Can't eat no promise."

*

Always on the lookout for upbeat stories, the local newspaper jumped at Lionel's suggestion of a weekend arts feature on the Dialtones. The *Vindicator* sent its sole reporter-photographer to the cafe one afternoon. Jimmy Kidd was a recent graduate of journalism school, eager to shine and apt to repeat whatever people told him. David provided good copy. The group photograph, with a Mickey Mouse telephone in the foreground, ran over the article, which burbled:

> It would be hard to imagine a more diverse foursome. But when they play, it sounds like they all grew up together on the same block. Dave Gooch plays lead guitar and sings his own songs as well as modern favorites in a reedy tenor. The talented nineteen year old is also an artist and a side-splitting comic. Slim Oliphaunt plays old-time banjo and sings harmony. These two white boys are joined by Gabby Brown on bass, a big black man with a big-band style. Chinese drummer Wu rounds out the group, with riffs seldom heard in this hemisphere.

The spread in the *Vindicator* resulted in calls to do charity events and benefit concerts. The fees barely covered the expense of travel. Lionel urged them to take advantage of the exposure, and he helped with small amounts of cash. He got in touch with club owners in nearby towns to arrange paying gigs. That spring, the band played up and down the Shenandoah Valley, with forays to Lynchburg and Charlottesville.

On college campuses, the Dialtones acquired a cult following. David struck students as one of them. His lyrics appealed to their sense of irreverent wit, as something they might have written in their spare time. The left hand held to the ear, with thumb and pinky extended, became the in-sign for the Tones. Pirated recordings from their concerts circulated. It was essential to bring a cell phone, the more antique the better.

Telephone paraphernalia appeared as a sight gag. In the course of a performance, an assistant ran onstage flourishing a handset with an absurdly long and tangled cord. One of the four pretended to take the call. David used

touchtone sounds in songs, along with a busy signal, electronic beeps, and computerized voices.

The Virginia Telephone Company got wind of the band's antics. Executives and their lawyers disapproved. A letter reached Hapsburg in care of the Catharsis Café. It ordered the band to cease and desist. Letter in hand, Lionel drove to Richmond, where he sweet-talked the marketing people in their sleek, glass tower overlooking the James River. He emerged with an offer to sponsor a statewide tour. The band met him at the café.

"I made it clear," Lionel said, "you are in no way selling the rights to your songs, your name, or the concept."

"Concept?" David asked. Slim stopped fussing with a banjo string, Wu opened his eyes wide in astonishment, and Gabby sat up.

"You know, this whole multicultural thing you got going."

"So that's what we got," Gabby said. "And I thought it was juice."

"I signed you up for a tour this summer, towns big and small, playing in memorial halls and high school auditoriums. Eight weeks, all expenses, and a modest stipend."

"Say what?" Gabby said.

"He means a paycheck," David said. "Can you get away from your regular job that long?"

"Maybe." He turned to the others. "What about you two? Oliphaunt? Wu?"

"Long as we stay in Virginia, I'm good," Slim said.

Wu nodded agreement, and the Virtelco Tour was on.

*

David moved out of his mother's house to an apartment. He shared the rent with Slim and Wu. Winifred was torn by this development. She was relieved by David's success, but she had to release her son to the world. How would he survive without her?

She need not have worried. Food ran chronically short at the apartment, as did heat and hot water. In any case, it was only a brisk, ten-minute walk away. David popped in continually, as did the other band members. They adopted Winifred as a den mother.

Jane continued to do well in school. Toward the goal of becoming a responsible lawyer, she joined the debate club and competed with nerds. She wanted to attend a national university, a school with clout. She would need a scholarship, but with her grades she was in a good position to win one.

Meanwhile, Jane was her brother's biggest fan. She pasted press clippings in a scrapbook. She went to as many concerts as she could. She begged rides with friends who owned cars, and she bribed them with insider tidbits.

One Saturday morning, David lounged unshaven on the sofa. The Virtelco tour was a recent triumph, and he was inclined to bask.

"What about this trip to New York?" Jane asked.

"Mom told you?"

"In a confused way. She got the story from Slim and Gabby. Something

about an audition, a recording studio, and a demo."

"Lionel wants us to make a recording that he can peddle. It's called a demonstration tape or demo, and it has to be made in a sound studio for quality. You pay by the hour, and you pay through the nose. He thinks we're ready for the big time."

"Do you?"

"I don't know. The music is fun, but it's hard to take seriously. It happened so fast. One day, I'm a bum with no future. The next day, I'm the star of a band. Some days, I'd like to go back to drawing and writing poetry."

"What about college?"

"What about it?"

"Do you want to go back?"

"A college degree isn't very useful in this line of work. You're the smart one in the family."

"It's less than a year away. I'll miss you."

"For a week. Then you'll be caught up in the varsity whirl, like a varsity girl!" David tried to snap his fingers and missed. Jane made a face.

"What comes after the demo?" she asked.

"A contract, an album, and stardom. Or we fall apart. Gabby is making noises about too much time on the road. Did you know he's married? Slim is terrified of New York, of setting foot in it. He's a country boy. Richmond was a stretch, and New York might push him over the brink."

"Is Lionel capable of dealing with New York?"

"We'll see when we get there."

"Whatever happens, you're moving on."

"Who would have thunk? I met a lot of people in the past two years, and I learned how small this town is. I know what I want to do, and I can't do it here."

"So away we go." Jane remained slumped in an armchair.

"What about Mom? A year from now, she'll rattle around this old house. Will she clean obsessively, take in stray cats, talk back to the radio?"

"David, she has a job."

"With crusty old Mr. Banister. She can't wait to quit."

"So she says, but she never misses a day of work. And she might fill the aching void of your absence sooner than you imagine."

"Oh? This sounds interesting."

Jane realized that she had said too much and tried to wave it away.

"Tell!" David caught her arm. They wrestled, and he fell off the sofa. Jane got the upper hand as they rolled on the carpet. Panting, she kneeled on his chest and pinned his arms. He was weak with laughter.

"You know, David, you stink."

"The water heater at the apartment is busted. I came here to wash up."

Jane rose to her feet and brushed herself off. David lay on the floor. He straightened his legs and crossed his arms over his chest, like a mummy.

"I'm off," Jane said, "shopping with Emily Clough."
Staring upward, David began to hum.
"Toodles."
"Oodles." David resumed humming.
Jane lifted a seat cushion to search for spare change.
"I beat you to it," David said. "Two life savers and a peanut. I ate them."
Jane dropped the cushion on her brother and ran for the front door.

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Catharine Savage Brosman

The Body's Past Its Prime

My youth was orderly, and I was green,
reserved, and bent on cultivating mind—
thank God; my figure, habits all were lean,
my appetites appropriate, refined.

Time was abundant. One did not misspend
it, though; for "recreation," there were rules,
for play and married love, the proper end
of girlhood. Those ignoring them were fools.

I'm still alive; the gods may be confused.
Or I. And now I'm squandering my old age—
these added years a favor, but unused,
my superannuated charms offstage,

while there's no need for prudence; no one cares
or notices; all conduct is the same,
all preferences; no one says affairs
or trysts. One's liver is, perhaps, to blame

for caution; any other pretext, trite.
Today, though, someone texts me from Saigon.
(He worked there once.) He's thinking of me. Might
he come to see me? As in antiphon,

I answered, "Yes! Of course!" My old heart raced.
Conditions set, however; I can't yield
too much. His company won't go to waste;
yet I am wary. Let's define the field.

The body's past its prime, eyes faulty, skin
discolored, muscles slack. No shorts, sarong;
no negligee for hours of yang and yin,
sweet commerce, book talk. It cannot last long.

Dry Lightning

Winking to us from the stage door at the horizon,
it's given us a sound-and-light show,
spotlights zig- and zagging, sheets illuminating
all the backdrop, proscenium well lit,

with percussive fanfare, snare drums, timpani,
and occasionally a bass drum bang. The clouds
are waiting for their cue, it seems.
This summer has been long, and hot, and parched;

we've gotten by on showers, mornings
overcast that half-disguise the sun, patience, hope.
This time, full-bodied rain will fall,
a symphony! But no: I listen for light tapping

on the panes, then hard attacks. In vain;
no signal comes.—That man also turned out
to be dry lightning: salvos, smiles,
admiring looks and words, the gestures of a suitor,

intimations, invitations. His display was finest
on the fringes or remotely, behind the scrim
of distance. The tender droplets I imagined, virgae,
vaporized before they hit the earth.

On a Birthday Party Photograph

It is my husband's natal day, not mine.
He faces neither camera nor me.
but, looking downward, pulls me close, the sign
that I should be the evening's honoree—

while I, expressionless beside him, stand
unmoved, it seems. It's my old self, severe,
my stiffness or aloofness. Yet my hand
has reached for his; though mute, the meaning's clear.

Though handsome, slim, bow-tied tonight, his hair
quite dark, he is not well; he's eighty-five.
And years fly faster now, as he's aware—
a bird of yearning, fragile but alive.

Does he reflect on whar we had, and lost—
the might-have-been, the carelessness of youth?
Or were misunderstandings just the cost
of later joy, to illustrate the truth

that everything is charged to one's account?
Acknowledging that errors have their price,
he thinks of love regained: it's tantamount
to miracles, our having found it twice.

The bird extends its wings, a silver thought
that rises out of time, arcs up in style,
and planes. The photo's taken; we are caught
together, happily. At last, I smile.

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Lifeline

As lightning bolted through the clouds and played,
a deadly ignis fatuus, by his plane,
Malraux observed his hand, the palm displayed
a moment, trembling, with a sea-blue vein

and furrows deeply etched. The lifeline meant
long years for him. But why? His father dead
by suicide; *his* father—through intent
or accident—by axe; new deaths ahead.

He'd tempted fate, he knew, at Angkor Wat,
been jailed, then freed by friends and fortune. War
would come once more, as in '14—the rot

of purpose. In the passage between facts
and will lies human destiny: a door
swings open, shuts again. Man *is* his acts.

High Stakes

The young Voltaire, a commoner, was bold
and proud enough to cast a verbal glove
at an aristocrat who mocked him. Old
Regime conventions held; for neither love,

nor fame, nor money could it countenance
such breach of social code. To the Bastille!
Then exile. He chose England. Circumstance
served well: free conscience, ancient rights, ideal

for grooming thought. In France again, he bet
his own, by acid pen, in his campaign
against unreason, risking oubliette

and gallows yearly, while renowned abroad.
He wrote for human happiness.—The vane
of history turns, a shifty wheel, half-fraud.

Rick Campbell

Highway 52: The Highway with No Name

Perhaps your country is where you think you will find it.
— A. S. J. Tessimond

Below you will find the prologue to my travel memoir. Three sections of it have already run in previous issues of the *ALR*. But before the prologue, I have to include a confession, an elegy perhaps. In 2014 I was on sabbatical when I began this project, the research, and then the driving, I intended to drive the entire length of US 52. However, for some rather unforeseen reasons, I began the journey at a midpoint, Huntington, West Virginia. I thought, no big deal. Since I would, in a few months be heading back to Florida, I could drive from Huntington south through West Virginia, then through North and South Carolina to Charleston. I believed that this southern portion of the highway would be less interesting than the journey across the Midwest to North Dakota, but I fully intended to finish the project and the drive. But, as we know, things happen.

By the time I was back in West Virginia, taking a return route following the Missouri, Mississippi, and Ohio Rivers, family issues and maybe fatigue caused me to postpone the 52 drive and figure I could do it the following summer. That summer came and went, and I did not drive my highway. Then, around Christmas of 2015, my spine collapsed. I had a couple of surgeries, went through rehab and was in no shape for a long drive. Time kept passing. I kept getting older and slower and my car kept aging too. The longer I waited the less interested I was in finishing my project. Now, in 2023, I think I am admitting, conceding, that I am not going to drive from West Virginia to Charleston. As I often concluded in my narrative about following 52 to Portal, the highway just wasn't very interesting and I figured, maybe feared, that it would be even less interesting crossing North Carolina and South Carolina. This is probably the end, a retirement, a death knell, of sorts. Maybe, like Tom Brady, I will come back to the game, but I really doubt it. If someone wants to finish the drive, I will readily pass on the rights to US 52.

Prologue: Birth of the U.S. Highway System

In the 1920s there was considerable debate and conflict concerning the establishment of a U.S. highway system, particularly about where the highways would go. Some states wanted more highways, some wanted fewer. Highway planners and politicians even fought about numbers. Many thought highways ending in zero sounded more important than those ending in other digits.

There was more esoteric debate too focused on the choice of numbers to designate the highways, rather than names. Some felt that a numbered highway system was cold and heartless compared to the colorful names of the old Auto Trail systems such as the Dixie Overland Highway (Savannah, Georgia, to San Diego); the Lee Highway (Washington, D.C., to San Diego); the Old Spanish Trail (St. Augustine, Florida, to San Diego), the Pikes Peak Ocean to Ocean Highway (New York City to Los Angeles); the Theodore Roosevelt International Highway (Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, with a Canadian stretch through Ontario), and the Yellowstone Trail (Boston to Seattle).

North-south routes included the Atlantic Highway and the Pacific Highway along the coasts and the Evergreen Highway (Portland, Oregon, to El Paso); the Jackson Highway (Chicago to New Orleans); the Jefferson Highway (Winnipeg to New Orleans); the King of Trails Highway (Winnipeg to Brownsville, Texas), and the Meridian Highway (Winnipeg to Houston).

Why so many from Winnipeg?

The New York Times wrote, "The traveler may shed tears as he drives the Lincoln Highway or dream dreams as he speeds over the Jefferson Highway, but how can he get a 'kick' out of 46, 55 or 33 or 21?" Obviously, "Route 66" had not been written yet. However, a cursory study comparing the names of these highways with where they went shows that often there was little accurate relationship between the two. How could one know that the Pikes Peak Highway went to New York? And one does not think of evergreens and El Paso in the same thought.

The Atlantic Highway became US 1 after the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials ASHTO numbering system took effect. It's one of few highways that might have become more famous by having a number than a name. While a number does not signify geographical location, at least it's as inaccurate as the old name of Atlantic. US 1 travels inland, far from the Atlantic coast as it wends its way from New Jersey to Georgia. It's a coastal highway from New Jersey north and also in Florida. Though in Florida its sister offspring A-1-A is more often within sight of the ocean.

The highway system created in 1926 birthed an interstate highway system, but not the one we know now, the one that Charles Kuralt maligned when he wrote, "thanks to the Interstate Highway System, it is now possible to travel across the country from coast to coast without seeing anything. From the Interstate, America is all steel guardrails and plastic signs, and every place looks and feels and sounds and smells like every other place."

The consistent, drab, homogenous nature of the current system was not a characteristic of the US highway system. Each highway had as many individual characteristics and quirks as a highway can have. This system was made of preexisting state highways and county roads that were joined together by numbered road signs; even numbered roads were to go East-West and odd numbers North-South.

Sometimes cobbling a long highway out of a number of other existing roads caused some deviations in direction, some strange situations where a driver headed east for a few miles in order to go west or jogged west for no apparent reason before resuming a journey heading south. However, the larger mystery concerns where the highway began or ended. Many highways began in upstate New York at Rouse Point and many others began in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. My assumption of beginnings is based on my being a Northerner and thinking that serious travel flows south.

The 1926 highway system was not a construction project. It did not have a large economic impact when it was created. Few roads were built, extended, or significantly altered to create the federal system. There was little money to be made by highway contractors and few jobs created that politicians could claim that they had brought home to their constituents. It was more an idea than a concrete entity. It was like Progress. Manifest Destiny. The American Way. Maybe the American Dream. Someone thought the US needed a national highway system to be considered a great country, so we made one, even if in number only. It was a Babbitt thing; we did it because we could.

We made a national highway system that connected towns and cities that few wanted to travel to in a time when there were relatively few travelers on the highways. Who needed to drive from Brownsville, Texas to Salt Lake City? Maybe this is a typically American thing; we created a national highway system, and then extended it to virtually everywhere, whether there was need for it or any people to use it. It could be seen as farsighted, as good planning, given that we soon became a nation of cars and drivers, but by the time we did become that nation, these US highways were deemed obsolete and the current Interstate system was begun by the Eisenhower administration. That too, I suppose, is very American.

The long highways were not made, as our interstate highways are, to connect cities hundreds of miles from each other; these highways were just the opposite in their genesis. Short segments of a US highway ran from town A to town B; these segments were then married to form a system. This system became a long highway. In the more populated and older Eastern half of the country, which had far more roads than the West, these marriages created a family highway tree of branching "daughter" highways: US 19 adds 119 and 219 and 319 that drift away from their parents to connect some other towns to the system, but the daughters don't go too far away, and they eventually come back to join their parents somewhere further down the road, as the saying goes.

The practice of coupling and linking to form a US highway is most noticeable when we see four road signs with a different number than the highway we think we are on. The bigger problem comes when the highway that we want to stay on eventually separates itself from the rest of its numerical family. That's when we sometimes find ourselves having to turn around and go back and read the signs more carefully.

There are periodic realignments, divorces, second marriages, which might move what was a stretch of Highway 52 a few miles to where transportation engineers think there's a more efficient location. The old union just wasn't working anymore, didn't meet the needs of the people it served, or demographic changes rendered the location of the old highway obsolete. Quite often the old highway segment will be marked with a closely related number — 52A, 52X — and left to get a handful of people to a town that they need to go to, but very few other travelers will ever visit. Or maybe there's a town on the old highway's course that has enough historical significance to change the original 52 into a tourist road — a heritage trail or something else that sounds good to county officials.

Because the long highways once served a local, or at best regional need (and we can argue that most of them still do since the Interstates serve our larger, national needs) long highways have hundreds of local names as they make their way across the country. Quite often each town has a name for the US highway that runs through it, and were it not for the US highway shield that pops up just when we are wondering if we are still on US 221, we'd think we were lost.

Those who live on a long highway think it goes from their town to where they work — maybe they have a two county, a forty-mile drive version of highway's longer story. They might think it just goes to the local big town. They rarely know their long highway's many identities, aliases, and incarnations. They see the highway on a county map; I see it on a national atlas, but it's harder to find now that the Interstates are taking up so much space.

US 27 runs through Tallahassee near where I'm writing this, and at the same time it rolls south to Miami and north to Michigan. On any given day there are cars and trucks on the highway in Tallahassee and similar cars and trucks on each end of the same highway, albeit hundreds of miles to the south and a couple thousand miles north. I am more interested in how this can happen than I am in the heavens. I can't drive a highway to a star.

A Highway by Any Other Name . . .

When a long highway rolls through a city as US 52 does in Charlestown, South Carolina, when it's either almost at its end, or its beginning, its name might change every few blocks. If our journey were to begin in Charlestown, US 52 is also US 17, and for this first segment our highway is called East Battery, then East Bay, Meeting Street, Rivers Road, Camer, South Goose Creek, North Goose Creek, and we will have traveled only a few of the 2100 miles left to go. US 52 will split from US 17 and head west while 17 heads north and both will have hundreds of names before they reach their ends.

This confusion, if it is such a thing, because local drivers know their long highway, mostly afflicts the driver who is traveling a longer stretch of the

highway than can be considered local. The poor driver who uses Map Quest will be even more confused about what highway he is navigating.

Once I drove from my house in rural Gadsden County, Florida, on a trip to Statesboro, Georgia, and the county road I began my journey on, CR 270, already had two other names — the Sycamore Road and Bonnie Hill Road. When I got to Quincy a few miles east of my house I was on US 90 and Jackson Street. This multiple naming continued and was not really a problem until late on this cold and rainy night, a Bridge Out detour on a road I'd never been on near a town I'd never heard of, made me use the Milledgeville Highway when I knew Milledgeville was a good ways south of where I was and that I had been heading north before the detour. My computer directions were of no avail since my mapping guys didn't account for a detour that had occurred in yesterday's heavy rain. I went on faith, believing that the purpose of the detour signs was to get me back on the highway I had been on, going the direction I had been going. My faith was tested but rewarded. By the time I was back on my desired highway it was late, dark, cold, wet and I was low on gas. The little Georgia towns were closed. When I saw a sign for US 1, one of my homeboy long highways, my spirits lifted and I took it. Heading north I believed would take me to I-16 where I would find gas and a bathroom and a highway system guaranteed to deliver me, like freight, to Statesboro. As long as I could read the big green exit signs in the rainy night, I was okay. On the interstate everybody knows its name.

Doubts, Meditations

If these highways were cobbled together in 1926 and reconfigured a few years later — extended, renamed, segments traded to another highway like baseball teams swap utility infielders — for a good purpose, for many of these highways I can't see it. That's one thing I hope that driving my highway will reveal. As for the question of why any stretch of highway is where it is, it's much like how water, or deer, get where they need to go. The first highways followed paths that offered the least resistance. The old highways are palimpsests — pavement and asphalt laid down on the dirt tracks of paw prints, footprints, and wagon ruts of whoever traveled them long before cars and pavement covered them over. Usually, an old road follows the course of the river because the river knows the easiest way to move across the land. And an old highway follows ridgelines in hills and mountains, not because it wants to but because it has to; its mission, the way it knows how to live is to follow the easiest, less taxing way from there to there. When a long highway, which is always also an old highway, goes across a bridge, it's because there was a ford there. It's where the old ones crossed the river.

Does it matter, when driving a long highway from beginning to end, where we begin? Is a journey on a long highway the text Barthes wrote about, where the reader could begin anywhere, read it forward or backward? Yes. The road is a text and yes it goes two directions, and though the volume and

demographics of the highway's traffic might be the same each way, like the tide there's a difference between what happens on the outgoing and the incoming flow. What we see heading in one direction sometimes can't be seen when heading the other way. The sun that's in our eyes heading west in the late afternoon, shines in our mirrors when we drive east. Direction always matters; direction is a matter of intention and purpose, of desire and need. Coming and going, leaving a lover and coming back to her, are never the same. The song says *six days on the road and I'm gonna see my baby tonight*. It's a coming home song. It has direction and desire. In our cultural mythology, heading west trumps east. We go west to discover, to get rich, to begin again, to pursue a dream. We go *back* East to see family, to have a reunion, or to live with our western-gained riches. No one in America ever said go east young man. The territories Huck lit out for were out west.

North and South, maybe that's not so obvious. North is, as Richard Hugo said, up on all the maps. Up sounds better than down in our Rags to Riches dreams. The North won the war. The South reeled and tottered until conservative Republicans and Fundamentalist Christians made it rise again and I, for one, prefer the battered South. But south is where we go for warmth and fun-and-sun vacations, unless we live in the South and then we head north to escape the heat, the humidity. Today, if we were to study the emotional state of I-95, it seems that cars travel south with urgency; they want to get to Florida so that the vacation can begin. But cars going north do so with resignation. Vacation is over. Work looms, and the driver, everyone in the car, is tired, sunburned; sand grinds skin in places they didn't even know sand could get into. Though it's true that a long highway can be traveled in two directions, which direction we drive will determine the nature and tone of our journey and who meets us, who we hold and who we break bread with at the journey's end.

How I Discovered US 52

The website called *U.S. Highways from US 1 to US (830)* has a list of 209 US highways listed in 1926 and a link to an updated list compiled in 1956. On the original 1926 list I noticed Highway 52 and dismissed it as not worthy of being designated a long highway or, for that matter, even an interesting highway. In 1926 it ran from Huntington, West Virginia to Fowler, Indiana. It covered only 343 miles, and Huntington and Fowler didn't strike me as places that needed to be connected.

But on the 1956 list, Highway 52 had been extended and looked a little more interesting. A *little* more only because I read the chart wrong. It looked like US 52 originated in Bluefield, West Virginia, and extended to Portal, North Dakota. Portal, that was interesting enough just for its Star Trek name. I got out the map and traced 52 west from Bluefield, which on my atlas was tucked in the fold of the page. West Virginia is never given much respect in a road atlas. It's an oddly shaped state that extends too far east, has a little slice that

runs north to Wheeling and then ends up wedged between Ohio and Pennsylvania. The whole weird state is often crammed onto one map page. Bluefield was hard to find even though I knew where it was; after I had it, I followed 52 across southern West Virginia and watched it cross the Ohio River into Kentucky. Then it and I followed the north bank of the Ohio into Cincinnati where we headed north again into the heart of Indiana. We passed through the original terminus in Fowler.

But a pattern was beginning to show itself — a zigzag. North, then west, then north, then west. This is supposed to be an East-West highway, since it has an even number, but it's gone almost as far north as it has east. I'm starting to really like this highway. I traced 52 into Indianapolis and then started to ask some questions — why does this highway go where it goes? It ghosts out of the west side of Indy and then at Lafayette (Purdue) cuts north into Illinois. So far, it's zigzagged its way a few hundred miles and accomplished little — if the purpose of this highway was to carry trade goods, it has not connected any real centers of trade except maybe goods shipped by river to Cincy and then taken by truck to Indy and the other way around.

Suddenly in central Illinois the highway executes a series of right-angle turns, as if it's on a mission north to Joliet. I'm even more confused; why travel from Cincinnati and Indianapolis to Joliet and not to Chicago? In Joliet, probably near the State pen, 52 heads west again into western Illinois and then cuts north and west toward the Mississippi River, where it crosses the river and heads north again up the west bank in Iowa. No other highway travels the banks of these two great rivers, the Ohio and the Mississippi, and crosses the Appalachians for a bonus. 52 rolls north through Iowa and then angles west and north into Minnesota. It bounces west again after going through Minneapolis/St. Paul and crossing the Mississippi River twice. It continues its west and north course to Fargo, North Dakota and then in Jamestown it takes a pretty straight line north through Minot, Bow Bells, Kenmare and finally to Portal where it enters Saskatchewan. There the Canadians change this noble and confused long highway's number to 39.

I love this strange highway now; I want to drive it if only to end up in Portal and then cross into Canada. I want to see where this highway ends and ask again, *why?* Why connect Regina, Saskatchewan to Bluefield, West Virginia? Where must I go for the secret to be revealed?

And then the really strange thing happens. I'm back in my atlas, trying to find out how many northbound miles the highway covers, and how many east to west miles as well. I'm measuring a line north from Bluefield when I see 52 popping out of the mess where the pages are bound and heading east toward Charlotte. Highway 52, on its southeast run, is decidedly more of a north-south highway. It passes through Darlington that Springsteen sang about and then south toward Charlestown.

As Highway 52 enters Charlestown, I realize that I've driven it before, but I thought it was a street — Rivers Avenue. This great long highway ends in the

Battery. Years ago, I stood right where it ends (or begins). It must begin there, a Virgin Birth, a highway born without any intersection. This might be the greatest highway ever, a highway born like Athena bursting from Zeus' head.

What do I know? Why should 52 go from Charlestown, South Carolina to Portal, North Dakota? Who plans and designs such a highway, even if it's a series of roads linked together long after they've first been traveled? Why such meandering to connect two end points that would seem to have no reason for commerce, for travelers, for anyone at all to go from one end to the other? The problem, fundamentally, is that hardly any places in the 2000 and some miles of US 52 need to be connected. I have to imagine that it's an accident. Nothing that I've considered before — game trails, Indians trails, roads following rivers — nothing explains the genesis and path of Highway 52.

What's my driving wheel, my North Star that will guide or misguide me? Since I think that Highway 52 does not make sense in its geographical and commercial nature, is that what I am going to try to prove? Am I predisposed to finding this lack of purpose, and will I miss evidence to the contrary? Will I be like Columbus who, seeking India and the East, decided he was in India because that's where he wanted to be?

The reality is, that for US 52, and for most of the long highways, no one "wanted" them to go where they go; no one "wanted" them at all. The numbers are just numbers. It's not an American dream we are dealing with, but a local, community dream. And it's maybe far less a dream than just daily needs and some smaller wants. Highway 52 was made, not born.

Highway 52 was designated and named, linked by rational men, engineers, who by 1935 could write that it connects Charlestown to Portal. Nothing I have found yet explains why even one of these rational men wanted to do this or thought it was necessary.

US 52 can be described in much the same way as George R. Stewart, author of *U.S. 40: Cross Section of the United States of America*, says of Route 6, that it "runs uncertainly from nowhere to nowhere, scarcely to be followed from one end to the other, except by some devoted eccentric."

Yes, given the web of roads and highways, blue highways, red highways, spurs, business routes, interstates, one can go from anywhere to anywhere else, but that kind of trip, wherever it might lead, takes desire and a sense of whimsy. *Let's see where this one goes*, you say, and if you can keep finding gas stations and your vehicle keeps running you will get to your "anywhere."

There have been, fortunately, a number of eccentrics willing to travel these highways. One of them was Jack Kerouac. I am now about to add myself to their number.

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Dan Campion

Gag Order

The starlings did their Alfred Hitchcock thing
this morning, flocking to the cedar trees
for berries ravenously, taking wing,
then perching on bare ash limbs in the breeze
of more starlings arriving for the feast.
Their murmuration utters not one note
of song, as if some magistrate or priest
forbade their singing and they'd learned by rote
the eerie silence of a moonstruck moth.
But when they're startled, all take off at once,
and those first wingbeats churn the air to froth,
a gush of sound like all the elements
competing to be foremost to fulfill
the natural fate of ordered things. To spill.

Of Fences

A fence is older than the laws, but not
as old as trespasses. Its posts and wire
or rails, or piled-up bricks or stones, concede
priority to footprints, although faint,
still visible, left by intruders long
ago. A fence describes a simple plot.
Except, that is, for fences that require
that nothing leave the lot. For this, we need
a different storyboard, a can of paint
or whitewash, and an anthem or plainsong.
A worm fence follows still a different route.
Admit you've peeked through fences, in or out,
to see what's on the other side. "God's spies,"
Lear says, and bids Cordelia wipe her eyes.

To the Figure in White

Go study Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek
and Latin, Sanskrit, Arabic, enough
to get by in the marketplace. Then seek,
among tired, shoddy wares and useless stuff,
provisions for your journey to the isle
for dreaming. Through the desert you will need
a guide. Choose carefully. Too quick to smile,
pass by. They'd leave you in the sand to bleed.
You want somebody grave of mien, but not
severe, who speaks about as well as you,
who'll bring you safe to Tyre. Then you have got
to find the right ship that will bring you through
the Cyclades until you reach the cliff
of caves and cypresses and board your skiff.

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Concha aurea

But what if time won't tell? We'll say again
that time will tell. Of course we will. And time
won't disabuse us; time would lose out, then,
to oracle and dream and nursery rhyme.
An emperor jots down his thoughts, and when
we read them in our distant age they feel
immediate, as by a borrowed pen
from our own desk. And yet, they're under seal.
For time won't tell, no matter what we tell
ourselves. The question is, how telling might
avail. Our ear has hovered near that shell
since sea and land first met a morning's light.
That light was gold and green and rose and blue.
The shell was weathered, though the world was new.

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Statue of the Watcher

Do not by any means embrace, I told
myself, the coils of the Laocoön.
Observe, and even touch, but never hold,
or you'll be drowned or torn asunder. John
the Conqueror would think again before
entangling himself in that melee
out in the churning water. I'll stay ashore.
No sons nor serpents have a claim on me.
It makes no difference, when a god decrees
a punishment. Mine is to stand and stay
composed while twin sea monsters rise and seize
two blameless boys and guilty priest. Why pray?
Apollo and Poseidon know their minds,
and, though they don't exist, their ruling binds.

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Blank Stare

The eye stays innocent no matter what
is seen. It's not responsible. It keeps
no log for future reference. When it sleeps
no bad dreams trouble it. It's weepy, but
it can't think it will be forever shut.
Mortality lies elsewhere, though it seeps
at times into a look, and even creeps
throughout the frame, until it's cropped or cut.
So don't believe it when they say no eye
is innocent, all eyes are knowing. They're
mistaken, or they misspoke, or they lie.
It isn't for the eye to know or care,
affirm, consider, pardon, or deny.
The eye receives, reports, and leaves it there.

Christine Casson

Of the Night

I hear its soft *clic CLIC clic CLIC* like watch
ticks in reverse on an elevated track
high above the forest floor where I've stopped
to sit and rest, watch the train slowly progress,
clad in an arrangement of ochers and browns,

before I move beneath an old growth tree
like the railcar's crude resource but towering,
glance through its limbs at the lowering sun,
knowing I should leave with hours to town.
Instead, I lean in to investigate its trunk.

It's all hair, or fur of some kind — ash gray,
blonde, shades of umber and slate, burnt chestnut —
a thick, sturdy mane. Above, just the same —
branches, offshoots deftly woven or braided.
Nonplussed, I still worry the overdue hour.

Then home again to my childhood house
and father away for multiple days;
my mother alone but for me; the rooms
in disarray. She goes about her chores,
as I do mine; dusts and straightens the parlor,

the kitchen downstairs. I clean and tidy
my bedroom, then theirs; think about my age.
In the basement electric trains circle,
ceaselessly, along rails strangely singing.
The dolls in the dollhouse prepare for dinner.

I'm sixty. Yes. Is she now ninety-nine? —
And in such splendid health? I recollect day
and the date — thirteen years since her death.
A lone bird calls. The trains chug round their tracks.
Dolls finish their meal in gauzed lunar light.

The bird cries once more. It seems to inquire,
What of the forest? Its wings shadow inwards.
Subcutaneous, I wager, smoothing
the beds. Footsteps in the stairwell — my mother's
soft shuffling. She will join me upstairs.

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Zero Is

absence or, if preferred, a world:
perhaps our bulking planet:

continent laden, ocean
heavy, sum total of profound

metaphor; a placeholder
some would say has additive

properties allowing for end-
less accumulation:

from above a mottling of clouds,
land, water, conjuring

billions of years of somethings;
for others, gesturing to

no things — things remaining
undefined that might be matter —

or matter, depending on
point of view and by who

and how! zero is mastered:
in neat formation lining

up like helmets for a drill,
accounting and accounted for;

or amassing — an ample,
riotous crowd of "O's"

converging and bobbing in
delight, *ahhing* satisfaction

until like bubbles they drift
lazily apart; or — gaping,

a single vacuum, begun
in seed, quiet, furtive

lump that balloons in-
exorably from inside, hole

devouring the whole,
greedy, sated, smug —

Terese Coe

David Tennant's Hamlet

He cannot suppress what he cannot accept
nor countenance the loss,
but has to contend with the fester:
the murder of his father.

A regicide so effective
it was not at first detected.
When the murdered King has spoken
Hamlet is cut clear through.

Foreboding deposes the present.
For the queen as silent accomplice
his love contorts to mania.
One trauma adds to another.

There is reason in Hamlet's raving,
regicide in his day,
and the finish in his future is
the play within a play.

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Reversing the Void

It's a miracle anyone survives
the creative life.
No one *really* survives it:
part re-creation,
part improvisation,
part rummaging for survival.

It is not so much a sacrilege
or a presumptuousness,
but a follower of consciousness.
A re-collection of what
could have been a hidden
miracle. Or a divestiture.

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Detritus of Greed

Her reason skewed,
Her precocity spent,
the Tragic Muse faces
the camera:

Greed is the flaw.
I did not invent
these armaments of fire,
this mad malign intent.

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Craig Cotter

I Can't Buy my Childhood House

3937 Baybrook Drive
Drayton Plains, Michigan

that my parents built in 1963
for $10,300.

*

I dislike the color grey now
and it's a grey brick house

where I felt at home.

*

Saw my dad pull stumps
from the dirt backyard
with a green and white Ford Fairlane.

He'd wrap a chain around the roots
and the car's chrome bumper,

the stumps would stick in the ground,
he'd floor it

wheels of the car spinning in place
spewing dirt jets.

He'd horse the engine
until each stump released.

*

I can't live long enough
to replace oaks the former owners cut down

not wanting to rake their leaves.
Silver maples cut down.

The last time I was there one shag-bark hickory
had survived the axe.

*

Watkins and Loon Lake still there,
the Clinton River through the Drayton Plains Nature Center.

Drayton Plains is gone, just a post-office,
now the mailing address Waterford.

*

All the wild land across the street,
fields, woods, swamps

an ugly subdivision.

The air wouldn't smell right,
no blackberries or elderberries in bloom.

*

Maybe I could keep the pool
and develop a twink harem.

*

I'd have to spend billions
tearing down the hundreds of houses built across the street

to return the big swamp.

*

I face it's gone—
where do I want my ashes?

That bend in the Clinton River
just south of the Nature Center.

*

I wanted that house back
so many years.

There's even a goddamn sign at the Hatchery Pond now
not to feed the fucking ducks.

Christ the next time I visit
I'm bringing 27 loaves of bread,

will feed the ducks, swans, and geese
until they haul me away.

*

There are fences around each yard now,
before fields of grass 200 yards wide,

all the neighbors' lawns connected,
kids ran from yard to yard.

Trilliums and hepatica each spring.

*

How can California be my home?
Almost nothing here from that time.

My dad's RIT college ring in the gun safe.
Couple .308 rifles my grandfather made.

Four Old-Fashioned glasses my parents received as a wedding gift in 1959.

Me.

*

Almost nothing.

*

Morri Creech

House of Memory

for Julie Funderburk

1.

I put on my hair shirt and slippers in the house of memory.
I fold my name across the curve of a cane back chair.
I wander into half a dozen rooms where the dead loiter
in the incalculable poverties of dust, in the days that stop
for no one, while time weeps from the eye of a rusty faucet
and the refrigerator hums in the silence. I tally the beads
for a thousand private indignities on a broken abacus,
watching the stars glitter and drop from the rafter beams.
And still the years make their pinchbeck promises, still
the embarrassments draw their moonlit bath, still threads
of consequence unravel from cold pillows at dawn.
The curtains luff. The mirrors confirm their suspicions.
In the house of memory, even in the dark, nobody sleeps.

2.

In the precincts of breath, in the numbing repetitions of night,
wind gnaws at the bricks of the house and the mind believes
what it remembers first, a caress or a stringent correction,
a spider spinning its abstruse equation under the stairwell,
while the unredeemed hours rock in a hammock of thorns.
I peer through the parted curtains, looking out at the rain,
at the old paint flaking away from the porch rail and soffit,
and think of the jackets and sweaters moldering in the attic,
the mice in the drawers, the scattered dust and the carpets
hoarding their treasures of scurf, the nail parings and hair,
and in my mind the portraits come tumbling from the walls,
the peeling wallpaper curls like a cresting wave just before
it crashes, before it breaks against a house already in ruins.

3.

The questions scrawl their dismal ink across the page,
and the man who answers betrays his name to the eaves.
I hear the shutters rattle. Stanchions buckle and warp.

The dead take their shoes off in the empty rooms
and drag their reflections from window to window.
The ledgers of regret lie open in the house of memory,
but where are the dressers stuffed with old letters,
the beds and couches reeking with the sweat of days?
Where does the rust keep its furious appointments?
A cockroach scissors its wings on the granite counter
as though it could sever the present from the future,
and in the silence of rooms bristling with indiscretions
the night ends once the clock hands close their shears.

4.

A white broom sweeps the floors in the house of memory.
A vacuum's belly swells and sags with the filth of living,
with the crumbs and grains of irrevocable subtractions —
evenings on the lake, the dusk-drunk shallows of 1979,
where the shirtless boy I was swims under a copper moon
until what I recall of him now submerges and disappears.
When the moment draws to a close, dry filaments cling
under the living room sofa and the folds of the drapes,
gathering in tangles and tumbling across the hardwood.
So what should I say about the lint caught in the cracks,
about the insidious dirt of the hours that will not return?
In the house of memory, the past churns its fine motes,
falling into my hair, settling into the lines on my palms.

5.

I have strayed long enough in the house of memory.
I will walk away from the pictures in their frames,
from calendars shedding their pages, from the leaves
blown on the roof in sullen heaps. I will walk away
from the whims of an instant fixed like ants in amber
or the water stain's dark map of an inscrutable country.
Images of joy or sorrow offer their brief distractions,
spilling their pearls on a tilted floor, equivocations
of a mind that cannot sort the sun from the rain.
And, after all, what good does it do to remember?
I will close the door and leave this house forever.
I will give myself to the present, shielding my eyes,
casting my shadow at noon in the narrowing light.

Verdict

Although it's late now, there is time enough
for my father in his black judicial robes
to bid me rise as he strides toward the bench
in the dream that wakes me up at 3:00 a.m.
The clouds eclipse the sky outside my window
and a bird broods on a limb not far away
as I stand looking through the mullioned panes
at the vast courtroom opening its doors
— the scales of justice balancing my sleep
against the clock hands inching toward the morning—
and at my father staring down at me.
Blear-eyed and broken, barely on my feet,
both counsel and defendant, I await
his name amid a gallery of shadows
whose jurisdiction sprawls beyond the margins
of an hour already stretching into twilight,
await the gavel's loud crack on the table
as the book I swear on with every breath
scowls up from the witness stand in testimony.
The jury files in from deliberations
and lawyers fidget in their swiveling chairs;
a grave hush settles over everyone.
Insomniac since twelve, I press my ear
against the glass and listen for the verdict
the clerk of court announces in the cold
while my father muses, lost in a brown study,
still faithful to the letter of the law.
Papers shuffle. The lights begin to dim.
He shuts his eyes and turns his back to me.
When I say a few words on my own behalf,
the court reporter reads them all aloud
and the bailiff bends to fasten my restraints.
Have I said too much? Too little? It does not matter.
Guilt is a redbird in the manzanita.
Sleep is a bare branch quivering at dawn.
There is time, before the haggard lid of sun
pries open, for the witness bird to fly
away into the weather of forgetting,
slurring across my windowpane that frames
the moon's plaintive appeals among the clouds,

my own bewildered face, so like my father's,
one small star at the mercy of the dark.

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The Hour under Scrutiny

1. Song

When time, under
the spell of the winter
stars, strummed his

blue guitar, the song
grew wings & flew
into my open mouth.

2. Erosions

In the erosions of evening, when lovers
do not touch, when jealousies smolder
& the anger of hands smothers itself in
pockets, when the voices on the porch
croon mischief & the garter snake coils
in the clover by the mailbox, the mind
goes back to the hour under scrutiny: so
many looks & delights, the lips & eyes,
so many manic adjustments, with every
minute peeling off a layer until nothing
is left but the emptiness before creation.

3. Matins

Morning will speak to you amid the green crests of the sea,
its limpid distances, its erasures. Press your ear to the seashell

of the moon at dawn or a little after, when the wind hushes
& the sea sleeps in her stone bed, in her white skirts of foam.

4. Night

Hours perch like magpies in the honey locust
in autumn, when the thermometer's red tongue
sinks in its mouth. In a gesture of wind, leaves

float up toward the limbs they fell from; stars
hang lanterns in the hectic, fevered branches;
& night air is delicate as the lace of memory.

5. Encroachment

One theory of the past, how it lengthens slowly,
expanding its territory with the inch of minutes,
with the precarious rise & fall of every breath,
preoccupies the mind. While the iconoclasts go
on raging at the walls, & eternity is no more than
an old woman at noon dragging the hours to drown
them in the river, while flesh & bone cry out for
the tenderness of their own begetting, write down
the equation for the day's drift toward what no one
remembers: the season swinging on its hinge, the
quick & the dead preening in the promise of winter.

6. Weather

Rain, rain in the cedar tree, & the bitten fingernails of the moon.
The drops fall like the sift of moments into moments, each one

beating its pewter drum before the cloud, wrung dry, makes way
for rainbow, the hush of mist, for the long & arid tyranny of sun.

7. Archery

To honor the anniversary that I pass each year,
that broods on the calendar, an unknown date,
one afternoon I carved a bow from alder wood,

strung it with buck tendon & set the tension,
then whittled a stick to a spindled straightness
& made from the dead crow a fine fletching.

The head I honed down from a chip of quartz.
Across such a green distance, a haze of hours
or years, I can't see the bull's eye. But I know

when I nock the arrow & pull back the string,
when I let it go, on the day it strikes the target
I'll fold my hands & close my two blue eyes.

The Poems of Sun and Moon

1.

When the poems of sun and moon littered the floor,
the dusty sage leaned from his lecture stand.
Wind swept the threshold. Just beyond the door
a few dark notes stirred in the baby grand.
The song went, *write your name down and be saved;*
it went, *scratch out your neighbor's and be healed.*
Saints in their hair shirts stood outside and raved.
The dead lay still as starlight in the field.

2.

When I am old, weary, and growing weak,
someone may still go with me to the sea;
someone may press her cheek against my cheek
as the world dissolves to less than memory.
Everything else amounts to arrogance,
those delirious hours I keep to please myself.
Even the past can speak in present tense.
The books I wrote collect dust on the shelf.

3.

What pilgrim in his right mind sleeps till noon
while husks of sun batter the bedroom walls?
Storm clouds came and went, leaving the day moon
dressed in a windblown twist of misty shawls.
I could have said the road less traveled by
was a choice made in quiet stands of pine.
That it made all the difference was a lie;
reader, whatever fault there was, was mine.

4.

The trunk stands, but the roots grow underground,
The sibyl told us, combing her black hair,
and stretched onto the grass without a sound.
Her hands were dirty and her feet were bare.
The stars are night seeds buried in the sky,
she went on, and I saw them overhead,
glittering as she told everyone goodbye

and disappeared into all that she had said.

5.

Each time you traded vision for revision
the magpie darted into the poplar trees.
The pensive sisterhood watched television
while winter made its marginal decrees.
We drank and talked of nothing all night long
— the nil, the abject zero at the bone —
then imagined nothing changed into a song,
the one Orpheus only played alone.

6.

The fat sun goes sidling down the gutter.
The skinny moon goes mincing down the stairs.
It gets so quiet you can hear God mutter
curses to catch the devil unawares.
Go on, relax. It's midnight. Things are slowing
to the pace of a lost traveler in a wood.
Pilgrim, why do you struggle forward, knowing
the future never comes to any good?

7.

Once told with polish, confidence, and skill
in houses, empty now, where silence grows,
the stories read out loud with time to kill,
the poems of sun and moon, draw to a close.
I lean out of the doorway, facing the street,
and listen for tomorrow as it nears;
in cold winter wind, in the mizzling sleet,
fate, on the corner, shakes her silver shears.

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Terence Culleton

After Rage

Yesterday this strip mall
was a panic place,
it would appear — steel
cans hurled about —

that bashed-up marquee
there in that parking space
came crashing down, got
blown into it, no doubt.

Trash all over. Poop
bags, soda cans,
untethered packing skids
buffeted scarily

around, one of those
rooftop out-take fans
lodged in the branches
of a little maple tree.

Skulking around here now
bad weather's past and done,
I all but revel in these things
wrenched from moorings, cast

from where they've always
been, smashed in the sun,
void of mere function
for a change: at last,

undone by mindless
pulverizing weather,
things lie out everywhere
apart together.

Carmine House

At dawn the gables blush
above a strip of rimed, chipped
stucco-work. Squares

of plywood cover
the windows and doors
like outsized postage stamps

on some outsized thing mailed
by steamer a century ago.
Bent chanticleer on

the central peak catches,
from somewhere, sparks
like garnets. The latticed trim

has splintered where the siding
sags, the whole rear half
drops off a foot or so,

rose-flushed, flaring
as birds and neighbors' dogs
wake up—the edifice

glisters with a crabbed
rubescence like make-up
smeared across the jowls

of some cast aside
dowager aunt gone
to la-la-land alone —

if ever loved, not now, nor
much needing love for all
this sudden gift of shining.

Stephen Cushman

Euclid's Cuckoo

I know every bird in the sky
(Psalm 50)

Out in the county's
never meant nothing
but copperheads crows
cattle coyotes.

Flashfloods and rainbows
blowdowns tornados
of mind spirit feeling
keep the week reeling.

Yesterday Sunday
identified finally:
thicket-hid relisher
of tent-worms invisible

haunter of dawn
spooking dusk too
cooing or hooting or
sort of like barking

a seal might do
in fog through a scarf.
Yellow-billed synonym
for most marbles lost,

named you at last.

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Euclid Looks It Up

Better quit killing the cattle, Coyote,
or soon you'll hear a rabbit call,

your favorite dish, in nearby distress.
Or SOS from orphaned pups

screaming for rescue in distant dens.
Or no less perilous under Snow Moon

a whimper a whine a desperate howl
in heat unbearable looking to lock.

All of them fake. Some made by hand,
some by machine, each one comes

with rifle included, or else a shotgun
preferred for close range. Serves you right,

apex predator nuisance trickster
tricked in turn by your kind of con,

the phony tones, the vocals mimicked
when you and a mate imitate a pack;

serves you right, they'll say forgetting
prestigious meant deceptive once.

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Euclid, Civilian, at Malvern Hill

Euclid, you landlubber, what do you know
about Leviathan other than war
of all against all, the state of nature
according to Hobbes, ask any elm
once growing here, Poindexter's farm
or Methodist Parsonage, twin brick chimneys
all that's left long after Crew House
slave cabins vanished. Sorry: disease,
Dutch as Melville's Ganesvoort granddad,
wiped out the elms so there's no question
his talking trees can answer:
We elms of Malvern Hill
Remember every thing.
Neither great poem nor a great insight
of Hobbes about *the face of the earth*
we'd know nothing of without social contract
beech oak and poplar grew up despite.

Euclid Complicit

. . . why smartphones are running . . .
(U.S. Geological Department)

Today of all days, one trillion six hundred
fifty nine billion three hundred million
seven hundred thousand since the first puff

on the face of the deep, and today has the cheek,
chutzpah, what have you, to show up like this
miscarried Monday a month

before spring, sleet-spoiled snow,
rain-rotten slush, mist, fog, and hint
of no cobalt blue, nothing exultant

in cobalt's credentials, not in the view
of underground goblin weather distemper
runny and wheezing *Cobalt, who cares*

what fairer skies do, why envy anyone
living on messages sent and delivered
by couriers nourished on caviar ore

mined in fine dust by child or slave?

Euclid in the Optative Postulates Optics on the Mighty Big Muddy

Let it be assumed first light flashing yellow-orange badges
near where Audubon's flatboat landed *passes through space of great*
extent
drifting downriver into the cormorants, the grackles and gulls
and "white-headed eagles," *are things upon which the vision has fallen*
but for some reason do not appear in *Birds of America* among other
blacks,
black tern yes, black guillemot too, even black warrior, so why
not a blackbird, unless here at Memphis in first light of daybreak
December the first, a Friday that year, he just plain missed
red-wing display in the thick of "purple finches, parakeets, teal,"
and things unseen which vision does not fall on, or maybe the blackbirds
were migrant in Mexico and the sea captain's bastard born of his
chambermaid
didn't catch up until volume five, female and male, she looking down
on him from above, painted from specimens purchased from others
back from the west and called "prairie starling" after the Chickasaw,
Choctaw, and Cherokee had passed this way also, another migration
with Sin-e-cha singing, "I have no more land, driven from home
up the red waters, let us die together and lie on the banks,"
nothing that is seen is seen at once entirely, in lieu of life eternal
leave us anachrony.

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Tom Hansen

Last Letter to Lee

(Stuart Lee "Moon" Hansen, 1945-2022)

. . . all that will survive of it
will be what you remember . . . .
– Richard Shelton

Lee, I was three when I first saw you
days after your birth.
One look and I knew things
would not be the same around here.
A week later I said to myself,
"I guess OK, he can stay."
I even wrote you a poem –
"Lee, Lee, full of pee."

*

Seventy-seven years later, I can say
I never saw you angry,
never heard you complain –
not when you had that liver transplant,
not in that last long year when you spent
more days hospitalized than at home.
And I can't remember arguing with you.
Not about anything. Not even once.
All of which raises a question:
What's wrong with you?

What's wrong with you is
you are no longer here.

After Nancy called to tell us you died,
I looked out the window a long time
at the enduring world:
tall ponderosa that seem to survive forever
and outcroppings of rock that last even longer.
I stood and stared, my mind a blank,
my eyes full of blinding light.

*

I see you now as you were
those last thirty-odd years:
your Rip Van Winkle beard
reaching down to your navel,
obscuring the quizzical message
on your T-shirt *du jour.*
The one message I still recall
and probably always will:
"Good enough never is."

You are gone.
That is not good enough –
not by a long shot, pal.

You are gone, but I see you still.
My hearing is failing fast,
I have to squint to read –
hell's bells, it's even a challenge
to take a decent piss any more –
but, Lee, I can still see you.

You are gone, old man.
You are gone, little brother.
But listen: I see you, I see you....

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Ruth Holzer

New Year's Eve, W. 10

As the year went slipping down the drain
Notting Hill became one vast
impromptu masqueraders' ball.
Homeward up the Grove, I elbowed past
queens and belted earls, my neighbors all
bedecked in gallantry, or heavy chains

and studded leather. They swirled in cloaks
and flouncy gowns, Rastas, noblemen
or ladies — who could tell or care —
and I among them, fleeing when
a random push turned to a shove and bare
fists roughly handled slower folk.

Back by my hearth, I was unscathed at least,
the single luckless lodger staying here
at No. 80 for the holidays,
reflecting on another wasted year.
The last train rattled empty on its way.
At twelve, a plaintive whistle from the street.

Randall Ivey

Paradise Lost: A Review of David Middleton's *Outside the Gates of Eden*
Measure Press, 2023

In an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 1975, the late Texas novelist William Goyen, then teaching a creative writing course at a prestigious university up north, bemoaned the fact that his students had so weak a sense of place, that the landscapes they described in their stories were all uniform, without distinction, displaying the same frosted globe streetlight on the corner, the same fast food restaurant, the same gas station. Regionalism in American creative arts, Goyen seemed to suggest, had greatly diminished as people of different regions in the country assumed like minds and predilections and ignored those places and customs that had once nourished and sustained them and made them unique.

Nearly fifty years after that interview, Goyen's dire observations on regionalism are more relevant now than they were then. Regionalism *is* dead, or at least on life support, which is terrible news for literature. All the great writers were regionalists – Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Hardy, Balzac, Proust, Faulkner, *ad infinitum, ad gloriam*. They understood, and worked with the knowledge, that the universal can only be achieved by engagement with and depiction of the specific, the grounded, the familiar, with all the peculiarities retained by London, St. Petersburg, Wessex, Paris, Yoknapatawpha, etc.

(It must be admitted that in a 1982 interview with William Peden, Goyen cited as one of his late-career influences Samuel Beckett, that mandarin of placelessness in drama and fiction, but we'll ignore that bit of dichotomy for the sake of this review.)

To diagnose the causes of regionalism's present maladies would surely rob this review of its remaining space and then some. Besides, the causes are well-known, and to repeat them at length might deny this fine poet and his excellent new collection the praise they deserve. Technology, of course, is the main culprit, dating back to the early days of industrialism some two hundred years ago, up to our present age, where The Gadget (in all its forms) and its wily satrap the Internet, have altered the ways people communicate and helped to erase those borders that nurture language, literature, fine arts, culinary arts, and religious observation.

But before those regionalists among us fall irretrievably into despair, we should note that champions of place and tradition remain among us, fighting with gusto, even in our contemporary literature. Chief among them, of course,

is Wendell Berry, the poet-novelist-essayist who left his native Kentucky to write and teach California and New York, only to return home permanently to write and speak of man's stewardship of the land and against the encroachment of the machine not only in farming but in everyday life. The West Virginia novelists Denise Giardina and Jayne Anne Phillips write almost exclusively of their home state (with exceptions in Giardina's case) to great acclaim and Pulitzer Prize glory (for Phillips); Giardina, also an activist, even ran for governor out of concern for her state's coal-mining plight. Bill Kauffman of Batavia, New York, uses his journalism to implore readers to go back home and make that place better. And then there is David Middleton, poet, professor, and chronicler in verse of Thibodaux, Louisiana, and one of the country's finest formalist poets, unafraid of traditional form or rhyme.

His newest collection, *Outside the Gates of Eden* (2023) from the Measure Press, is no mere clarion call to go home, however; that would make it not much more than propaganda. It is a summation of a singularly sensitive, deeply-thoughtful artist's ruminations on place, yes, but also life, death, family, art, and God. Middleton sees what is good in our existence, what Eliot referred to as "the permanent things," slipping away, replaced by so much detritus. Again, to list causes for this diminution in values would require space greater than what I have here. Suffice it to say, that when Adam and Eve were cast out of Paradise and made aware of their nakedness, they took with them humankind's only chance for perfect happiness and command over nature. Now, merely mortal, man must struggle with his sinful nature in order to achieve some modicum of happiness, with nature always at his back, sometimes a friend, often times a foe.

Middleton opens his collection with a brilliant conceit. The first poem, "Night Watchman at the Zoo," shows what has happened to Paradise since Adam and Eve's exit from Eden. The animals, once ranging in harmony with man, are now caged up for his amusement and other commercial purposes. The watchman, standing in for Adam, intuits the wrongness of this, the whole enterprise, how the "menageries" have been reduced to "[pure] spectacle, a conversation piece" by mercantilists and no longer opportunities for genuine wonder and contemplation. Materialism has replaced meditation, and we have now entered, perhaps permanently, what the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa has called "civilizacion del espectaculo," the civilization of entertainment, or what I would further dub "the society of the perpetually amused and pacified," in which even the vulgar is elevated for man's edification and entertainment. Middleton makes the point in "Test Patterns," in which something seemingly innocuous as television has gone from

Leave It to Beaver, The Andy Griffith Show

Where fathers talked to sons of right and wrong
Or Gunsmoke where Matt shot an outlaw down,
Then said to Chester, "he was just no good."

to

. . . infomercials, soft porn, cable news -
No national anthem, sign off, sleep and peace.

In "Toll Free," modern technology further corrupts and hampers basic human communication. The speaker, beset by bad cable TV reception, calling the company for help, is sent through a labyrinth of "cordless button-pushing," automated voices, endless transfers from one supervisor to another, all, in the end, to be left high and dry and, one assumes, with no better reception than when he first called. In "Goodbye, Dear," the same speaker laments the jettisoning of simple manners for the sake of quick efficiency, in this case care of electronic mail:

How seldom now do you begin with Dear,
Both warm and formal (civil) but a mere
First name – "David" – like a Sir *or* Madam
Summons to a wayward child of Adam.
No salutation as in Saint Paul's Letters,
Your curt tone saying one should know his betters
As if you bid a servant or a beast,
And you in these emails not the least
Aware of such abruptness being rude –
Public, private address grown crass and crude –
And so in closing, I reply (hit Send*)*
Goodbye: *And let this conversation end.*

Where does one find solace in the midst of so much confusion, of such separation from the basically human? For David Middleton, there are two sources of escape: memory and place, namely Thibodaux, Louisiana, the place he some forty years ago adopted as home and where for more than thirty years he taught and served as Poet-in-Residence at Nicholls State University. He writes of it as though he had been born and brought up there, displaying a heart-learned encyclopedic knowledge of its flora and fauna, its highways and byways, its "dazzling pageants of...skies." He does not neglect his native Shreveport, however. He writes, without sentimentality but much sensitivity, of traditional church services and county fairs, of relations facing the vagaries

of old age and death, of friends who, like the poet, dedicated their lives to remembrance and tradition. He writes inspired by the French painter Millet, father of the Barbizon school of art, whose portrayals of peasant life correspond with Middleton's own depictions of rural life as frameworks for tradition and serenity. He writes of Odysseus struggling to return to home and hearth. He writes of the late professor/biographer Mark Royden Winchell, a modern-day Copperhead, who left his Ohio birthplace to find a permanent home in the South Carolina upcountry. He writes of John Martin Finlay, a fellow poet dead young of AIDS, who sought a form of permanence in the great works of literature and philosophy.

David Middleton writes of a life that is still available to us if we only have the courage to throw off the manacles of binding technology and return to that which makes us human, makes us whole. His poems are essential in these troubled times. His new collection is the finest book of American poems this decade.

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Jarrett Kaufman

The Muddied Pond or the Polluted Fountain

"Jolene," Errol said. He sat on the bed, gazing at the window blinds lying on the floor.

She was awake. "What?" she asked. Her shoulder ached.

"You had a nightmare," he said and went to the closet to remove his uniform.

He laid his duty belt on the bed. He picked wax from his ear. She said, "I—"

"You called Ed sh-sh-shaytan," he stuttered. "What's it mean?"

"Devil," Jolene said, twisting the bedcovers in her hands.

"You called our so-so-son a devil?" Errol sniffed the wax on his finger.

"Did I?" Jolene asked. Her shoulder was throbbing now.

"Se-se-seriously?" he said. He stomped into the bathroom and closed the door.

Jolene heard the kids looting the kitchen downstairs for breakfast. Rita yelled, "Mom," but she didn't answer. She rested her back against the headboard. She'd felt like her mind was filled with black pits. It was an affliction that'd followed her home from Iraq a month ago. The last week of her tour was a blur. The memories she could dig out of those dark places — a raging fire and the bloodied faces of the dead — haunted her. Her troubles, they worried Errol. She knew that. She knew it just like she knew the nightmare last night had spooked him. It spooked her too.

Jolene had been asleep when a car backfired in front of the house. She rolled out of bed and crawled in a daze across the carpet to the window. She spied from behind the blinds she'd parted with her fingers. She saw a car she recognized — an old Toyota — parked in idle across the street. She said to herself it was a dream then looked out the window again but the car was still there. "No," she said as she tore the blinds off the window frame and threw them onto the floor.

What she saw palsied her at the window. It was a tide of sand that crested at the dark horizon and buried the drab St. Louis neighborhood. Once the sand cleared, Jolene found herself sitting in a Humvee between Red, who was the RO, and a Syriac named Gabi who was the interpreter. SGT Ford drove and PFC Willis, the EOD, manned the UAF. She was staring out of the window at the moonlit village of Numaniyah while Gabi prattled on how it was a place that was cursed by ancient gods of Nimrud. "Red," Jolene said. She grabbed his arm. "Is this real?"

Ford braked. The rutted road was blocked by a junked Toyota, and the road back out was choked with a trip of goats. SOP called for Ford to report to RB but the UAF was scrambled. So the squad established an AOR. Ford and Red secured the nearby haji shops as Willis inspected the car. Jolene, at the

Humvee's rear, covered Gabi. He was herding the goats. She took a breath to cool her jitters. She saw the dark move in the alley and blamed her fears on Gabi's yapping about fire cults and ziggurat blood temples. She called, "Gabi," but a blast of light blinded her.

When her sight returned, she saw no alley or car. "Gabi," she hollered.

"Jolene," Errol said. She felt a hand on her arm. She rubbed her eyes.

"Mommy?" Ed said, cowering behind Rita in the hallway.

"Shaytan," Jolene said. She lunged for Ed with a clawing hand.

"St-st-stop," Errol said. He was pawing her face. "It's me. It's just me."

"Errol?" she said. She hugged him. She said, "Is this real?"

By the hand, Jolene tugged Ed down the sidewalk. Rita was texting on her iPhone.

"Hurry," she barked as she rushed them to the school bus stop at the street corner.

Jolene piloted Ed and Rita away from the kids and the lingering parents. She knelt down. She considered telling them the truth. She wanted to explain how her memory was like fog, but she realized she could find no words to tell the truth of what she saw in that fog. So she told them what she supposed they needed to hear. She said she was fine. Then she hugged both of them.

Earlier she'd tried to confide in Errol about the nightmare as well. She'd really only sought his comfort. But he'd said he didn't have time for that "shit." He was dressing for work, squaring his officer hat griping how he still had to pick up Chet, his partner who lived across the street with his diabetic wife, Dixie, then beat the traffic and make roll call. "I can't," he'd said.

Jolene stood. She saw Dixie limp across the street, punching her cane at the ground.

"Boy," she said. "Errol seemed dog-tired. I fixed him a biscuit —"

"It was a nightmare," Ed said and licked snot off his lip.

The school bus arrived. Ed and Rita and the other kids began to board.

When Jolene spotted Ed in a window, she started. His eyes were black as soot.

"Oh, dear," Dixie said. She fussed with Jolene's frizzed hair.

"Ed?" Jolene said. The bus turned the street corner. It was gone.

"You need a cut, dear. Go to Great Clips. I'll give you the—"

Jolene huffed. She pulled Dixie's fat hand out of her hair and went home.

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Bob Kunzinger

How to Die in the Congo

I stood near the Congo River on the west side of Kolwezi, Zaire, and my body shook uncontrollably as I stared at the river for the first time. I watched the water flow across rocks and probably bones toward the equator carrying no apparent proof of death of my friend, adventurer Joseph Kohn, despite the unlikelihood of any other outcome. But "missing" is unacceptable, and as is often the case, the lack of information concerning what happened to him pulled me like a powerful current into that dark distance.

As in any narrative about wilderness and adventure, the spirit of place takes over, and I finally understood why he continued past here, despite his intestinal illness, his resulting weakness, and his indefinite sense of what to expect next. The Congo is enticing; it teases you into believing it is safe and protecting and eternal, that nothing could possibly die in such a beautiful river. Stanley and Livingstone and Speake and Akeley and Burton and others, they're all out there somewhere. I know these men; for more than a year, Joe and I brought them to life in the soft shade of a narrow river in western New York, and standing here now looking west I could sense them not far away, and Joe with them, talking about the changes, talking about the rain.

I needed a canoe or a raft, supplies, that's all, and I could follow the bends and turns I knew so well from the maps we studied beneath lamps in a library six thousand miles away. I could follow Joe as Stanley had followed Livingstone, and as I was warned would happen in the mystical grip of the Congo, reason evaporated into the green hills of what was then called Zaire.

Surely, this earth of ours was patient with Joe, I thought, despite its obvious unpredictable temperament. But this was the wilds of Zaire, present day Democratic Republic of Congo, noted by all authorities as one of the most dangerous regions in the world. Still, in the 1980s when this narrative plays out, such danger, when there was any, was more predictable and, therefore, avoidable. Joe and I prepared for a year for his solo trip on the Congo from origin to the Atlantic.

I looked west, and half of me felt lighter, energetic, brought to life by some African adrenaline Joe had warned me about, and whose source lay out before me. I would gather the supplies offered to me by a local Peace Corps worker a day earlier to make the trip. Of course, nothing else made sense. I was as ready as Joe was, obviously. We trained together; we learned the astronomy and dangers, the medical concerns, the rivers turn, the villagers' anger and ease, together. The only burden I still carried was in the psychological weight of his disappearance: *He lived here for three years prior to the journey, I did not, and I can't find him anywhere.*

I wondered more than a few times how one carries the concept of missing. Death at the very least is concrete. It keeps our attention because of what we call an "ending." We despise death for its finality, but we don't avoid it for the sheer concrete truthfulness it carries. There is weight in death, and clarity. Closure. In a paradoxical way, it is the ultimate security. It is too real to dismiss. One can't be "kind-of" dead. It's conclusive.

But when missing enters the mix, the direction of the narrative remains muddled among the infinite number of inconclusive outcomes. *Lost in the jungles; living in a village; Ebola; malaria; dysentery; the Crocodile Men of the Congo.*

The variables are exhausting. A croc can kill, but a hippopotamus won't even chew. Large, snapping bites and the limbs sink to the river bottom for other animals to devour.

Villagers kill Joe because he is a mercenary. Rebels kill him because he is not. The sun bakes. The night chills. The river bends and turns then twists into a thousand branches lit by nothing but moonlight, when there is a moon. Some tributaries travel thousands of miles and turn back on themselves, a labyrinth circling toward death. The river is the large intestines, twisting and spinning toward an evacuation that no one will discover. He could be anywhere, which is to say, essentially, he is nowhere to be found.

I stared a long time toward the west, then waded in, slowly at first then with more confidence. The water tugged at my sneakers. Joe wore sandals made from tire treads. I wondered where they were now. When I waded in just knee deep, I stopped and wondered how far he got. The trees bent toward the water and men fished and spread nets. To the east was the city of Kolwezi with its seeming safety and buildings and market. To the west was wilderness and the mystique of my imagination. About me were men who must have worked these waters most of their lives. Did they watch Joe paddle by? Did they wave? Maybe he traveled for weeks before some wide tributary teased him off course. Perhaps after just a few days he became too weak to continue. It might not have mattered to him whether he was sick or in danger. It wouldn't have mattered to me. The water ran up my thighs as a small canoe moved behind me. I wanted to turn and see him standing on the shore, laughing, shocked, wondering what the hell I was doing in Africa. I wanted that so bad. Two teenagers stared at me from the shore. When this all started, I was their age.

For a year before he left, we "trained" on the college campus where I was a freshman and from where he had graduated five years earlier. I would quiz him on his medical knowledge and treatment procedures. In most of the industrial world, death often comes with warnings; that is, prediction is common. EEGs. MRIs. CT Scans. Even cancer patients go through treatment. But in Africa, like many parts of this vast planet with still so much unchartered territory, death broadsides its victim. Death lies beneath the surface, only its eyes revealed, camouflaged by our confidence that we're well prepared. Death waits, searches for the vulnerable spot. It comes in large forms, like three-ton

hippos, eighteen-feet-long crocs, rebels on the move.

It comes, too, in microscopic armies. Consider the parasites. During our research, these lilliputian terrorists remained part of our daily dissection of "modes of death." Schistosomiasis wins as the worst, of course. Water-borne flatworms carry the disease. In labs, they're called schistosoma. In the jungle, a person doubles over while worms too small for the human eye to see devour his insides. I thought of Saint-Exupery: "What is essential is invisible to the eye." So is what's lethal.

These schistosome insurgents enter the body from a river's surface. Because of them, the World Health Organization warns against paddling in fresh water. In the long term, exposure to them increases reports of bladder cancer by thirty-two times the rate in America. In the short term, however, acute infection causes temporary paralysis of the legs. Schistosomiasis itself is unlikely to kill. It's the animals, dehydration, reptiles, dysentery, hostile strangers, and other fatal combinations that transform a sick adventurer into vulnerable prey. Even if paralysis doesn't set in, the lethargy and weakness can compromise safety.

We knew this.

We knew malaria posed itself as a problem since Joe contracted it before, rendering him more susceptible. His little orange pills ran out once and he had all the symptoms and problems associated with it, like fevers, shivering, pain in the joints, headaches, and vomiting. But treatment was readily available to him at the time. However, without treatment, death is common. Malaria is the anopheline mosquitoes' fault. They hang out near stagnant water and kill one child in the world every thirty seconds. In Africa today, the death rate for malaria far exceeds that of AIDS. The convulsions alone can kill since a child's body can shake so violently that the organs simply stop functioning. More than ninety percent of malaria cases are in sub-Saharan Africa, and deaths top about one million each year. Without medical attention, those otherwise treatable symptoms evolve into convulsions and coma. But carrying pills is easy so concern of malaria remained on our back burner.

Still, as a freshman at college my introduction to earth science, astronomy, biology, foreign languages, and geography came not from fifteen credit hours a semester; no, my exposure to the ways of this earth came after class in the library with Joe, at the river, at a local reservoir.

We would be prepared; it was that easy. Joe received the yellow fever vaccination followed by many others. He knew to cook his meat and fish well, but somewhere between Lumbumbashi and Kolwezi, when he lost everything, including matches, going over falls, he ate fish dried in the sun on rocks. We prepared for this, too. We caught bass in the Allegheny River, dried it on rocks in the sun and ate it. We studied the fish of the Congo regions and learned that boiling most species avoids possible diseases.

Our vocabulary didn't include HIV and AIDS in 1981. No, we had another new entry in the entomological soup: Ebola. It remains one of the most

virulent diseases known to humanity and causes death in about ninety percent of its victims. The symptoms include a sudden onset of fever, muscle pain, headaches and sore throat. One might seem to simply have the flu until the rash spreads and the kidneys shut down. Then the liver stops cleansing the blood, which by now courses through the bowels and urinary track. At this point, the internal organs literally liquify, and death is welcome. It is, luckily, a predominantly north Zairean problem, but people in remote African jungles do not readily report incidents of disease. When the west is aware of twenty new cases of Ebola breaking out in Uganda and the DRC, more remote cases along desolate regions of river tributaries remain unreported. Usually, one contracts Ebola by contact with the blood or semen of an infected person. However, transmission also occurs by handling dead chimpanzees, like those west of Kolwezi. Recent studies show that some bats carry the disease without dying, like the bats prevalent in central Africa.

Ebola kills, but so can a slight fever, even a common cold. What knocks a person onto a couch in suburban Buffalo can kill in rural Africa. It isn't the disability that poses the problem: hepatitis B, malaria, and others, while dangerous, can be cured. But in remote regions, the symptoms themselves can expedite death. Lethargy leaves one exposed to the elements. Tiredness, diarrhea and general sleepiness and weakness, while inconvenient at home, become critical when attempting to avoid animals that snap humans in two, reptiles that kill by a mere scratch, or hostile humans defending themselves against some unknown intruder.

Hell, just sleeping allows animals like the hippopotamus time to terrorize. Joe talked of their gentleness. Upon further study it seems their nonchalance is borne from confidence. Their lack of interest in humans results from having no fear at all. Hippos maintain a mostly vegetarian diet, consisting of grasses. But bulls grow to about eight thousand pounds and still remain graceful in the water. They sink to the bottom and run along, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups of up to thirty. During the mating season, territorial males use their long canines as weapons, snapping the enemy, including human, in two. Experts consider these animals among the most dangerous in Africa. Hippos don't sweat blood, as rumored in decades past, but they do spill plenty. Someone resting because of some ailment, or simply sleeping in the reeds of a riverbed during mating season, might cause a disturbance and not move fast enough to escape this graceful swimmer twice the weight of a Jeep Cherokee. Hippos can climb steep embankments fast, and snap in half or trample to death anything between them and their destination.

Research revealed comical dangers as well, particularly the "Crocodile Men from the Congo." What should be a title for some B movie is a reality check to those traveling to the south of Kinshasa. Villagers and police considered six tribal chiefs in possession of a mystical ability to turn themselves into crocodiles. They were arrested for killing thirty-three people. One confessed to eating five people during the previous fifteen years. Some

Buma region fisherman left his village because he claimed he could identify the crocodile men and he feared them. He described them as monsters with human legs, crocodile faces and other features.

Real crocodiles devour. They hide in mud, in water, in grass, and chase, snap and swallow prey. The locking jaws of these eighteen-feet-long Jurassic remnants might snap a weak human too close to the river. They grip the body, crushing the spine, the neck, the skull, popping it and dragging it under a rock or riverbank to tenderize for later consumption. Crocs are a problem all along the Congo. Fishing has depleted their food supply. Drought has forced more people to the river, and once there, those people kill animals normally eaten by the crocs. And this food-supply depletion doesn't consider that conservationists who fight to protect the carnivores are leaving humans more susceptible to their hunt.

Reptiles, too, pose a threat. Dozens of snake species live along the riverbanks and in the water. Some cause no harm. Others debilitate a victim enough to leave that person susceptible to other dangers. Some snakes bite to paralyze and then kill within seconds, minutes at most. A person eating dried fish, weak from dehydration, might be bitten and then suffocate from muscle contraction. Other prey would devour him in time like the African rock pythons prevalent in the region and which can grow to a reported thirty feet. These coiling monsters eat goats, crocs, and humans. In 1958 in what was then Rhodesia, elephant tracker K. Krofft killed a rock python and found a six-foot croc inside. The Congo tributaries are their home. It's common practice that when a child is caught in this coil, the villagers nearly always allow the snake to crush the screaming child to death rather than jump in to help and certainly die as well.

People are more dangerous. Rwandan rebels wouldn't gather and wreak havoc with their sick, animal-like behavior from the border to Bukavu until the nineties, but just before Joe returned to Africa on "our" trip in the early eighties, rebel forces had emerged twice from Angola. Belgian paratroopers quickly ousted these Katangan insurgents, but some rebels continued to invade when Joe reentered the Shaba Province.

My God, the terrain alone kills. This earth of ours is not designed for human manipulation. The river is dangerous the entire 2,720 miles, but most hazardous after the meeting of the Lualaba and the Luvua rivers. From there water flows a thousand miles to Stanley Falls, north of the equator. But thousands of islands, some spanning ten miles, run along this long stretch, which under excellent conditions might take months to traverse. Several stretches of the river are altogether unnavigable. Waterfalls, as well, can surprise a solo traveler. One such falls, the Kiobo, on the Lufira tributary, pours down from almost thirteen hundred feet. West of Kolwezi, the river moves into a sort of lake-region where poor navigation can lead to an endless maze through jungles and smaller rivers, most of which humans have never mapped. This is the "dark" part of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

But the planning, the anticipation, ignited a spark in me which refused to be doused by worry of what might happen. He was twenty-seven; I was not yet twenty, and we were alive to the core. What a time it was, cutting up sun-dried fish we caught in the Allegheny River, laughing about the previous night's antics; conversations at Antonio's Italian Restaurant across from campus when faculty associated me with adventure and daring, and students counted me among the few that didn't belong there. The entire restaurant was always engaged when Joe and I showed up and he talked about his adventures in Africa, or stories of when he rode a bike from Buffalo to Brazil.

One night, Joe flipped over a soiled place mat and used tomato sauce and blue cheese dressing to draw a map of the Congo River. He looked up at me and said, quite seriously, "I have an idea, and I need your help."

And now, here, alone on the river, those placemat maps and the real maps the State Department sent him, and the books about this place, the stories he told of this place once nearly fantastical, are all real. After more than enough time of secondary tales, I finally stood in the midst of the primary source, stared upriver knowing, somewhere not far away were answers.

I stood waist deep and my mind ricocheted between the innocence of western New York and the visceral reality of the Congo River. How simple it was, back then, back there. How dreadfully and beautifully simple when I still thought this world of ours was all-welcoming and navigable. I was just nineteen and trying to navigate myself into adulthood, and who should take the helm but a world-class adventurer. Still, before he left, Joe said, "Maybe I am trying to find myself." Indeed. Perhaps the possibility of dying in Africa didn't scare Joe half as much as ending up missing in civilization, drowned in the dysentery of ordinary life, a fear I carried with me from then on. I understood Joe's passion.

The Congo River moves through the trees like blood in the veins, and the hills pulsate, the sky covers it all in a blue light, and the river runs brown but not dirty. It all blends into some organic aspect of existence, womb-like, and it feels comfortable, as if nothing could possibly hurt anyone here. The reality of Joe's disappearance suddenly didn't bother me here, nor his incomplete journey, if that is even possible, nor my own. Later, others asked why I went since I knew I wouldn't find out anything new. But that's not true. In fact, I discovered something very ancient, as primeval as Africa herself, and it is probably what called Conrad, and Stanley, Livingstone and Kohn. Like the first explorers a millennium earlier, I carried the brand new, yet ancient concept that despite our hopes and expectations, all journeys are, in fact, incomplete.

The skies turned grey, and it started to rain. My face was wet, and I waded back to shore thinking about the overshadowed distances. We bury our dead. We have a wake, a funeral, and we bury them. When time passes, we

remember them. Sometimes we visit their grave, and sometimes we bring flowers. But what do we do when someone disappears? Part of us never moves beyond the last moments with that person. There are no last rites. We simply wait.

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Joshua Tree, California, 2024

Richard Meyer

La Gioconda

*apostrophe to the **Mona Lisa***

We know you well. We call you by your name.
We know the stamp of your iconic face —
that enigmatic smile and cryptic gaze.
We see your body shift in subtle ways
and quaver gently like an umber flame.
Apart from ordinary time and place,
you sit, emerging in a smoky haze.

Drawn by the power of a famous name,
the chatty crowds keep coming in a queue
like pilgrims tramping to a mythic shrine
to stare and point and puzzle over you.
Only the tired guard shows no surprise.
With folded arms he leans against a wall
and notes one woman moving through the line,
a blonde with ample breasts and slender thighs.
The best today, he thinks. *Well built and tall.*
He stutter taps a foot against the floor,
and checks the time, and yawns a little sigh.
To him you're like some criminal of war
condemned and placed on permanent display,
encased in sturdy glass for all to view.
You'll never be released and cannot die.
He stands at ease. He rarely looks your way,
accustomed to the smirk behind his back
and numb to eyes that slice across his neck.

Tradition tells us little of your life:
Florentine. Late quattrocento middle class.
Named Lisa. Christened after morning Mass.
Believed to be a wealthy merchant's wife.
His third. You married well. Arranged, no doubt.
Appearance plain. Not very well equipped.
Quite commonplace. Most likely nondescript.
And through arrangements no one seems to know,
a contract for a portrait came about
which brought you to the maestro's studio
where he possessed you as no husband could
and recreated you in oil on wood.

We come upon you seated in a chair.
You turn our way and meet us face to face.
Your flesh is palpable. You breathe our air.
You pose before a strangely lunar place
and look at us with secrets in your eyes.
We see your cunning smile. You always wear
that smile, that furtive curve of lip on lip
we cannot read but always recognize.

Precisely keeping their excursion pace,
two teachers midway through a summer trip
politely pause, consult a list, and stand
just long enough to say they've seen your face
and taken in your legendary charms,
then scurry off, museum maps in hand,
to find the Venus missing both her arms
and headless Nike with the spreading wings.

You see them all. You watch them come and pass:
a whining child, three nuns, an art school class,
a scholar searching for some hidden clue,
and even Lester Pratt from Cedar Springs
who with his wife arrived by tour bus
and joined the line that winds its way to you.
So, here she is! he broadcasts with a shout
and tilts a thumb your way to point you out.
He grins and shakes his head at all the fuss.
You don't rate well against the glossy prints
found in the Norman Rockwell picture book
he has at home beside a jar of mints.
It's kinda plain, says Claire. *And dark and small.*
She leans and squints a last bewildered look.
She's disappointed. Not impressed at all.
She looks like cousin Martha, Lester laughs,
after the doctor put her on those pills.
Before they leave, they pose for photographs,
but you're obscured in flash and glare on glass.

What can you do, so windowed and confined,
the chief attraction in an artwork zoo,
when you grow weary of our eyes on you?
Perhaps your mind retreats into those hills
and ghostly rocks receding deep behind

to find new mysteries to make your own
and etch in Delphic riddles on your face.
Perhaps you dream of solitude and peace,
a quiet corner in a minor room
where you can live unnoticed and unknown
and few inquisitors, if any, come
to gawk and gabble, stare and scrutinize.

When looking on your image fresh and new,
Vasari stood astonished and enthralled.
He swore he saw a pulse beat at your throat
and moisture glisten in your sentient eyes.
He saw an eyelid twitch. Your flesh he called
a miracle of art made living skin.
Close-by a window where the sun streamed in,
a pious cleric shivered in his coat
and risked his soul to look askance at you.
Such alchemy, he knew, must be a sin.
He quickly crossed himself, removed his cap,
and murmured *Deus!* with a lowered head.
Deus meus libera nos, he said.
He did not mean to, but he looked again,
and saw before him in that painted space
those perfect hands that gently overlap
like lovers resting in a mild embrace,
calm hands that may at any moment move
to smooth a sleeve or brush a strand of hair.

While pigeons circled Brunelleschi's dome,
their outward flight unfolding like a wave,
a marble giant standing in the square
cast Buonarroti's shadow long and deep.
Young Raphael, the vaunted prodigy
whose reputation reached as far as Rome,
walked home in haunted silence after he
was introduced to you. He could not sleep.
That night his mistress lay alone in bed
and watched him draw until his fingers bled.

Napoleon fell a victim to your spell
and kept you in his bedroom for himself.
He spoke to you. You smiled and listened well.
You leaned against a neoclassic shelf
and watched him study maps by candlelight

while yellow shadows flickered on your face.
You watched him write. You watched him brood and pace
and plan maneuvers late into the night.
With bold resolve he turned a stalled campaign
by daring use of infantry and horse,
then took advantage of adverse terrain
to flank and split a far superior force.
He sent reserves to back the lead brigade
and claimed the field and won a war that day.
He labored long to master arms and men,
but you could often coax his mind away
from routing paper armies with a pen
or struggling with a troublesome blockade.
He'd turn to you and for a while forget
the lure of battlefield and bayonet,
the thrill of saber flash and cannonade.
He spoke aloud of skill and risk and fate.
He'd look at you and say *Je t'aime*, then hum
a tune he heard a street musician play
in Tuscany. Sometimes he'd masturbate.
You watched him stroke his cock, you saw him cum.
He spoke of Joséphine de Beauharnais
and how she kissed, and how he liked to lick
between her legs where hair grew black and thick.
You smiled, but did not blush or look away.

Leonardo would not let you go.

He took you with him everywhere he went
until he died in France with you in tow.
He left you incomplete. Never content,
he fiddled with your image off and on
but failed to match the vision in his mind.

For you the passing years have been unkind.
You have become an icon much abused,
a curiosity, a joke, a pawn,
an image over-hyped and overused,
a varnished ghost of what you used to be
reflecting only what we wish to see.

Museum number seven-seven-nine,
arranged and housed with other artifacts,
you sat sedately proper and relaxed,

content for years to hold your place in line
with not much known of you and not much said,
but when a crazed Italian kidnapped you
and kept you in a box beneath his bed
your quiet life was shattered through and through.
The daring heist immortalized your name
and catapulted you to worldwide fame.
(Picasso was a suspect in the crime
but cleared of all complicity or blame.)
Your rescue brought a torrent of acclaim.
For art you're now the foremost paradigm.

Pronouncing you alluring and aloof
with their rhapsodic academic breath,
the pundits praise your countenance and style
while memes online purloin you for a spoof.
You've been lampooned and parodied to death —
a stock contrivance in the hackneyed pile,
a ready-made for mustache and goatee
and lettering that says your ass is hot.
The advertisers will not let you be.
You're reproduced and strewn *ad nauseam*,
compelled to sell perfume, a kitchen pot,
a credit card, a dress, or chewing gum.
Ubiquitous and stale, a cheap cliché,
you haunt our lives and never go away.

We leave you on that loggia where you sit
inscrutable, alone, and dimly lit,
forever changing and forever fixed,
an archetype that cannot be eclipsed.
Contesting what we think and how we view,
you question us more than we question you,
and seem to conjure from your eyes and lips
a silent musing meant for everyone —
Tell me if anything ever was done.
Tell me if anything ever was done.

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Notes

Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is generally believed to be a portrait of Lisa Gherardini Gioconda, the wife of a wealthy Florentine merchant named Francesco del Giocondo. In Italy the *Mona Lisa* is known as *La*

Gioconda, and in France it's called *La Joconde*. In Italian *giocondo* also means "light-hearted" or "jovial"— thus the title is a pun on the sitter's married name. The French title has a similar meaning.

Toward the end of his life, despairing of so many projects that were never completed, Leonardo wrote variations of a phrase over and over again in his notebooks: *Tell me, tell me if I ever did a thing* or *Tell me if anything got done*.

David Middleton

Erasers

north Louisiana, 1959

They come back now from sixty years ago,
Not wholly on their own or by my will,
These memories that change yet stay the same,
All but effaced, though I can see them still . . . .

The building was already decades old
When I went there to learn the elements,
A grade school that had been a high school once
For Cedar Grove when cedar trees grew dense.

But then the river city spread up hills
Absorbing crossroad, hamlet, village, town,
Some schools, like mine, repurposed and renamed,
And every one-room schoolhouse taken down.

So *Fairfield* would survive, its limestone, brick
Creating space for coolness, warmth, and light —
Tall windows, taller ceilings — ceiling fans
And coiled gas heaters keeping the air just right.

*

Each classroom had a blackboard made of slate
And underneath a finished pinewood tray
Where stubby chalk sticks lay in their own dust,
By hand and mind worn down till worn away.

There, too, were felt erasers, used and left
By teachers and their pupils being done
With sentences or problems, diagrams
Of knowledge and its one long proof begun.

My desk held other tools that grade by grade
Helped me to measure, read, write, make, construe —
A pencil, newsprint, compass, ruler, book,
Construction paper, crayons, scissors, glue.

And every year my latest teacher saw
How I worked best when doing so alone,
A quiet child, content with inwardness,
A boy to trust outside and on his own.

*

So in the hour before the final bell
Midafternoon I pushed back in my chair
Whenever I was called to gather up
Erasers white with dust from board and air.

I walked the long main hallway end to end,
Then passed through an arched side entrance under BOYS,
The ribbed erasers held against my chest,
And stepped down to a playground without noise.

Backstops and swings, hoops, monkey bars, a field
For racing, a knightly piggyback fight,
Or Smear where we would chase the outcast 'It' —
Yet not a child except for me in sight.

And there with absence and its solitudes
I made my way where I had gone before
Bringing the blocks of matted wool across
Mown grass that once had been a forest floor.

*

At last I reached the trees, two first-growth pines
Spared by the builders when they cleared the ground
And laid a school's foundation, leveled earth
By those tall trunks with sun and silence crowned.

Then one by one I beat the erasers hard,
Clouds rising from the bark and grooves and gum,
A ghostly image left on flaking plates,
Rectangles of a powdered calcium.

My duty done, I paused, then went straight back
And placed the cleaned erasers on their tray,
Ready below a blackboard once again
To lie in dust and wipe the dust away.

All this was long ago . . . a story told
When memories connect, as by design,
White chalk across a board of shale and clay,
Motes floating gold in light from pine to pine.

The Buried Dixie Cup

Saline, Bienville Parish, 1961-2021,
in a field not far from my maternal
grandparents' house

So many years and still that paper cup
Stays buried in my mind as in the ground
Though memory and will would dig it up
And spill a boyhood's treasures all around:

Two soldiers locked in combat, blue and gray,
A Yankee and a Rebel bayonet
Crossing in some unchronicled melee
Where long lost brother toys are fighting yet.

Beside them, coins — a penny, nickel, dime —
A wheat-back Lincoln, chief and buffalo,
Liberty winged, each struck by place and time,
And one gold curl I cut to go below.

I scooped out sand where rows of corn once grew,
A Caddoan "old field" cleared of girdled trees
On wolds whose rippling hills were shaped anew
For ages by the tides of inland seas.

Then gently working the cup down in grains
Until pure sand gave way to sandy loam
I made a grave in Eden for remains
Of legends that had now become my own.

Years passed, and country kin, their house was sold,
And yet the cup would haunt me, sunken deep,
A story with an ending unforetold
Whose words would draw me on in waking sleep.

And so I took a road I knew so well
Through north Louisiana where it leads
To memory's grave and grave goods that compel,
The land and mind one map an old man reads.

The field was there, but by thick brush reclaimed,
Yet still I found the resting-place I made,
Wild corn stalks tall near things no marker named,

Tasseled like flags waved in the cannonade.

My splotched hands sifted sand from piles built up
Till in my palm I held them once again,
My soldiers, coins, discolored, but no cup,
Its elements dissolved by sun and rain,

Or curl whose strands had spiralled out of time
Like history itself, which in the end
Brings all that was and is to one full rhyme
As *Dixie* brims when all its meanings blend.

Note
The Dixie Cup was invented by a Boston lawyer, was named after dolls made in New York City, was originally manufactured in Pennsylvania, and is now owned by Georgia-Pacific, an American pulp and paper company headquartered in Atlanta.

Steven Monte

Romeo and Juliet at the Met

The stage is all their world. And they are merely singers
in this condensed romantic version of a play
already operatic: they're the kind that lingers
debating larks and nightingales till break of day

and that dies, after making speeches, in a tomb.
Music won't save them, but the opera lets us see
the couple die together, with breath enough and room
to sing a duet that defies reality.

The stage is all awhirl, at least in this production
where zodiac signs and the heavens they inscribe
offer their warnings or ambiguous instruction
as they revolve around the scenes they circumscribe.

Jealous, indifferent, Fate looks on. Or the reverse:
Love reveals harmonies within this universe.

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Whether it is the lovers' music or the spheres',
the instrumental passage opening Act 2,
plaintive and delicate, fades out, then reappears

following the balcony scene and its adieux
as if ascending through the moonlight to the sky.
How many balconies have we looked from or to,

having had our heart's strings plucked and said goodbye
with words like theirs — *jusqu'à demain!* — said every day,
and still, in spite (because?) of that, let out a sigh?

Like youthful love, the orchestra seems far away
even as gently rising phrases bridge the span
of stage and hall to where we sit and hear it play.

At the end, I can almost feel a camera pan
past our balcony. To heaven. *Jusqu'à demain.*

*
* *

That act is hard to follow, and yet it isn't hard,
astonishingly, to believe their love is real —
at first sight, even. For beyond the sure appeal
or excuse of youth (hearts that haven't yet been scarred),
beyond the music, we, at least, can't disregard
that they will die soon: it's a fate they can't un-seal.
— and beyond that, they represent what we can't feel,
something that we long for and from which we seem barred.

And so, in Act 4, when their bed becomes unmoored
from time and space, and all the stars become untracked
(as though heaven disavowed the deaths it's pointing toward),
we feel their love more in their freedom not to act,
and whether a real world is embraced or ignored
we will only think to ask during the entr'acte.

*
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Some questions simmer nonetheless. A change of scene.
Crowds mill and mull. "What did that floating mattress mean?"

"Did you like Juliet?" "The music's gorgeous, no?"
"But will this opera ever find its Romeo?"

Good question. We seek out each other through the crowd.
"Better than *Traviata* . . ." (pause) ". . . Is that allowed?"

We meet, exchanging glances. Another point of view:
"Oh, I don't know, I found it sugary. And you?"

I was moved, even knowing it was a cliché
(is *that* what love is?) and they would face no next day.

Why must we measure love by bliss or if it lasts?
Consider all the shadows their tomorrow casts.

They would love intensely and never be time's fool.
It's just that time is short, their dream too beautiful.

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You and I, uncoupled now, slowly drift apart
as we descend, fatigued, relieved, and smiling,
opposite stairways curving vaguely like a heart,
then reunite, drawn back together by some string.

In just a matinée we have lived out their life.
"Bliss isn't meant to last, nor joy. Not even sorrow."
(So they tell us.) Yet a thread cut by Juliet's knife
dangles: what if they (we) had made it to tomorrow?

Wozzeck is waiting for the evening in the wings.
The set, mostly menacing walls, more than implies
a world where something other than love pulls the strings —
a world where the couple come to see a red moon rise

standing at odd angles with their backs to each other
like members of a rock band on an album cover.

Winter has thrown off its coat (After Charles d'Orléans)

Winter has thrown off its coat
of wind and cold the whole day through,
and wears loose lace from foot to throat —
sunlight, glistening in dew.

There is no bird or creature who
will not proclaim or sing this note:
"Winter has thrown off its coat."

The springs and brooks, and rivers too,
wear silken clothes, in waves that float
with threads of silver-gold on blue.
The whole world's dressed in something new:
Winter has thrown off its coat.

James B. Nicola

The avenues that one has

The avenues that one has never known
ask but one question of a life of ease:
Are you to be the hero of your own

life? Will you have turned over every stone,
or will the stuffing of complacencies
mean avenues that you have never known

remain so? Well I know the Comfort Zone:
it's one of the craven anomalies
of not being the hero of one's own

life. For what soul has ever really grown
except in leaving it? They may not please,
those avenues that you have never known;

and for a long while you may feel alone;
but then: two roads in frost-rimed yellow trees
appear. And you, as hero of your own

life, in response to me, as crossroads crone,
impatient for the possibilities
of the avenue about to be known,
tell me I need a hero of my own.

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The Gift

It was the worst thing I have ever done.
It was the best thing I have ever done.
It was the first thing that I did as me.
Was it a cursed thing? Hm. Fortunately,
he'd never know: two weeks later, he died.
Was that convenient? Would he have cried,
or railed and cussed and called me wicked slurs
in slurred speech? Sudden death, of course, defers
knowledge, so I won't know until I die
how he would have reacted had he found
out. Nor would I have had to explain why
I changed my name, his mind being unsound.
His timing was a sort of blessing, then—
a gift, I tell myself, time and again.

Dawn and Dusk

When a young person passes by an old
and looks, the instant funhouse mirror works
in both directions (the distortion: time),
though they have never said so, nor do they
admit it to themself. The way they know
lies in their instinct, bones and blood, and eyes.
It's something sunrise minds don't realize.

When a young person passes by an old
and does not look, the mirror only works
in one direction. Once upon a time
they didn't look, either. And what are they
now but the unseen sunset souls who know
about sore bones, thin blood, cataract eyes,
and final things they finally realize.

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Why You Haven't Seen Me Lately

You have a type of personality
that has initials. Namely, OCD.
If it is a mild case, you wash your hands
till super clean. Everyone understands.
But if your case is chronic and severe,
your fingerprints will all but disappear.
You also binge. Some things are not unwise
to binge on: healthy diet, exercise,
and so forth. Chatting on the internet
is safer if you set a time limit
and honor it. Too long and you get tired.
Then, should some avatar get you all riled
up inadvertently and you fire back,
you're down the rabbit hole, if not a black
hole. So I do not chat. I watch old flicks.
One night I stayed up all night and watched six!
But then I had to sleep. And wake. And eat
and bathe and work—then, true to type, repeat.

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

Killing Agamemnon

What else could a grieving mother do?
The deed he did enough to drive her mad.
Their sweet girl murdered so he and his crew
could sail off, kill more, come home glad
victors of an awful war. She had no say,
no power to stop him in his dumb desire
to please the unappeasable gods, no way
to save her own child's life.
    They set fire
to Troy, headed back, thought their work done,
led by a foolish king who had no clue
of the dreadful cycle he'd begun
of blood for blood for blood. You'd
think he'd know, a man of violent passion,
that he'd be murdered in the same fashion.

My Mother's Music

The stereo was never silent night-
or daytime hours. Big & bright
chrome knobs, walnut cabinet,
its twin speakers pulsed and hummed
with life, played a couple hundred
songs a day while she worked,
cooked our dinner, stood and scrubbed
the stove, waltzed her way up
and down the cellar steps, basket
in hand, stopping only to smoke
a half cigarette, sip her coffee,
sing along with Hank or Johnny,
Dean or Al or Frank or Connie,
some sad song, love lost & found
over & over in our small house,
the tape played and then rewound,
the needle on the record gently set
and then reset. The Lady's blues
her anthem, Shirley Bassey's longing
big enough to make us all ache,
for what we didn't know yet,
but she did, somehow belonging
to a world more real than our fake
suburban streets of strangers.
Their songs sang her quiet anger,
a litany of all her wrongs,
the disappointment that she knew
but never named or spoke.
Having none of her own, she made do
with their words, tried & true
and felt along the muscle of her tongue.
Each day she played the same old songs.
I still know every one.

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Handwriting Lesson

February, the hard month to write
when we learned cursive in the 3rd grade,
b the branching bridge between *r* and *e,*
took time and patience to get just right,
the two-pronged *r*'s, the swinging *F*,
it took swank and swagger, the surety
of adult hands, despite my pudgy
pencil with its thick load of lead.

Why did it have to be so tough
to get through, this month of cold and snow,
iron gray skies, my mother's death?
Even so young, how did I know
I would grieve for the rest of my days
as I traced its letters across the page?

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The Married Body

belongs to someone else besides yourself.
My husband, we say. *My wife.*
Lies beside a second body that you own,
a posture that you'll keep all your life.
Traveling through time with two bodies
more demanding than living with just one.
Two bellies, two livers, two spleens, two hearts,
all of these need your attention
if you're to keep your second self alive
not to mention your first. It takes stealth
and sleight of hand. It's a fine art.
Survival become your daily hobby.
A circumstance you chose and didn't choose.
A game of chance you know you're going to lose.

Steven Peterson

Battlefield Tourist

I've seen enough of them:
Verdun and Shiloh,
Bastogne and the Somme,
the thin defense that couldn't hold
in Singapore,
the start or end of things
at Concord Bridge and Waterloo.

Now green and tidy as a golf course,
here the silent soldiers speak
in ranks of crosses on parade,
a Star of David on some graves
above the beach called Omaha,
the names of many Muhammads
on the Menin Gate at Ypres.

Yes, I have seen enough,
and though I am civilian
I hear the beat of marching men,
the thunder of the drum,
and watch without surprise
as nations go to war again.

Caedmon and the Experts

The experts say it surely can't be true:
A herdsman, so ashamed he couldn't sing,
Suddenly found a voice—and verses too.

According to old Bede, that song was new
And flowed from Caedmon like a gushing spring.
The experts say it surely can't be true.

What's more, the song was English through and through,
The first we have, our language taking wing
Once Caedmon gave it voice—and verses too.

A monastery abbess, Hilda, knew
Rumors of Caedmon, told her monks to bring
Him to her. Experts say it can't be true.

Like soaring birds his words to her now flew
In praise of our creator, heaven's king.
The abbess loved his voice—and verses too.

So Hilda said to Caedmon, "Join my few
Dear brethren, let your voice forever ring."
The experts say it surely can't be true.
But they can't hear that voice—or verses too.

Mother Gone

We didn't hear from you. I called.
They checked. They called: "We have bad news."
My flight to Florida is cheap.
Beside a flat and boatless Gulf
Your town lies empty, snowbirds flown.
It's June. Hot clouds rise white as bone.

My rental car blows chilly mist.
The guard who guards your condo gate
Checks off my name, expecting me.
I stand before your door and pray
This key dug from my keepsake box
Will turn. Thank God, the door unlocks.

From books on war I know this smell,
Always described as "sickly sweet."
You lay three days a crooked ball.
According to a local cop,
"By then your mom was pretty stiff,"
A quote as bad as what I sniff.

But now you're gone. You're bagged away.
Some kindly people on the phone
Answer my questions: What comes next?
The men I "Sir," the women "Ma'am,"
But none of them choose to confess
It's not their job to clean the mess.

Now on my knees, I scrub your life
From carpet where they found you dead.
I say, "So, Mom, it comes around:
You cleaned my shit, now I clean yours."
You would have smiled a little bit
Then told me I should not say shit.

My mind replays our last two calls.
"Mom, please," I begged you on the phone,
"You need to see your doctor now;
Your memory issues seem much worse."
"Okay," you said, "I promise to.
I'll see my doc then I'll call you."

You didn't call. I rang again:
"So, Mom, what did your doctor say
About those little memory slips?"
You answered, "I forgot to ask!"
We laughed about it, ha, ha, ha—
That tricky lady's last hurrah.

That's when I stop and call your doc.
I ask him how you seemed last week.
Your doc goes quiet, then he drops
The double punch line of your joke:
He checks his records and I hear
He hasn't seen you in two years.

So all this time you lied to me?
Lying in Happy Sunshine Land?
I sit down on your soggy carpet
But then from somewhere comes a sight
Remembered from when I was small
And you were—where?—behind a wall,

A wall of glass, a hospital
Contagious room when I had croup
At five years old and almost died.
Behind a soundproof wall of glass
You stood there, reaching out to me,
Calling me, crying, silently.

That image from the past comes back
So vividly the strangest thing
Occurs: the wall of glass is gone
And I can finally hear your cries
Of desperate love—that's when I find
That calling voice I hear is mine.

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Nicholas Pierce

from CRUDE

10.

Oil Notes tells two love stories. In one
Bass courts his future wife; in the other
he hunts for oil in Mississippi, never
stopping to ponder how his wife might feel
about the comparison. We forgive him because
he published the book in 1989, because
we like to think the intervening decades
have enlightened us to the evils of capitalism,
because Bass intoxicates us with romantic
descriptions of discovery and extraction, discovery
and attraction, because his prose possesses
a muscular sensitivity endemic to southern
men. Or we don't forgive him, because
why should we? Wikipedia tells me he's now divorced.

11.

"*My* love," remarks the hypothetical critic.
"A generous reader might find the term endearing,
but in a collection about oil, its harvesting
and hoarding, 'my' adopts a different valence,
becomes possessive, as though Pierce were taking ownership
of the beloved." The hypothetical critic objects
to my criticism of *Oil Notes*: "Putting aside
the sonnet's ad hominem attack, the problem is not
with Pierce's argument but that he engages in
the same abysmal behavior as Bass, *i.e.*, treating oil
as a metaphor for love, even if, in Pierce,
love is also rotten." The hypothetical critic whispers
in the ear of every sonnet, not just this one,
is overbearing and stubborn and petty and never wrong.

15.

My father says *different* like it's a bad thing
Foreign films different sushi different tattoos
Different my love though he never says my love
Is different despite the ink sleeve on their
Left arm despite their brown skin their pronoun
Every night in junior high I went to bed hoping
To wake in a different body as Bailey
My classmate the soccer player with bleach-
Blonde locks and no acne he looked different
The last time I saw him a used car salesman
With stubble and a belly he'd forgotten my name
My love I wish I came from a different family
Wish I could tell you I'm not my father not
The name he gave me Nick Pierce two kinds of wounds

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John Poch

On Mushrooms

I love the word "forage." It sounds far better than saying, we went out in search of mushrooms. Or looking for mushrooms. You could say, "mushroom hunting" to be a little more active with the verb, but that's silly. Picture Elmer Fudd with a shotgun blasting puffballs. Foraging, I get a good hike in at ten to twelve thousand feet, and it's peppered with little adrenaline rushes every time I see one of those firm fungus jewels bursting forth to say hi. Hi! Why hello, friend! Yum. You can eat puffballs when they first emerge, I read. So I foraged a few I found on the side of a trail. I brought them home, cut them up, and cooked them in butter. It was like eating Styrofoam cooked in butter. Unless it's the apocalypse and I'm desperate, from now on I'll leave the puffballs.

No matter what this essay might suggest or hint at, no matter how seductive or poetic my prose: DO NOT EAT WILD MUSHROOMS. Ignore the tantalizing descriptions, and obey the capitalized words of this short prose paragraph.

I started foraging mushrooms about seven years ago in the mountains of northern New Mexico. To escape the hellscape nothing of Lubbock, Texas, my family and I tend to spend a month or two of the summer in Taos each year. At one of the stalls at the farmer's market on the plaza, I saw this guy with a table full of mushrooms, and he was selling them for more than twenty dollars a pound. He had quite a spread, and there were six or seven varieties, some of which I had thought surely poisonous what with their outlandish colors and shapes. I was positive I had seen some of these species on a hike the day before up in the mountains, and the value of the fungi along with the fact that this was real food that I like to eat made me realize I should pay more attention. I'm a poet. Most people understand that a poet in general pays more attention to the world, as well as the words for the world, than your average Joe.

Foraging, I'm a hunter-gatherer, a primitive, a minimalist, not having to create nearly out of nothing, but only to find. I also garden and fish, but I don't hunt. The thrill of foraging, of finding what's already there, is what I like most. And I admit like getting something for free. The providence of it is spiritual. The harvest is not always bountiful. One year, in a month of over one hundred miles of hiking we found one. One bolete. It was ridiculous. There was little rain that summer, but I kept thinking we would strike it rich. No such luck, until on that last hike before we headed back to Lubbock my wife spotted the king bolete that tasted better than any I'd ever eaten simply because it was the only one. A few weeks later I heard from a friend in Taos that finally a small amount were popping up. I was back in Lubbock writing my syllabi trying to figure out a way for a quick trip to the mountains, but it was seven hours each

way, and early fall is the busiest time of year for me. I stayed put and imagined others foraging my mushrooms.

Even if there weren't mushrooms up there, we would hike. We did for years, on our own, with children in slings and on our backs, with children trailing behind, and now with teenagers leading the way. Just NOT to be in the dry summer heat and blazing sunshine of Texas, but to be alive up in the national forest, in the cool air, to see the flora and fauna, to hear the hermit thrush calling from deep in the woods, to soak in the views of the mountain streams and alpine meadows. And sometimes if we made it all the way, the vistas from the peaks was more than enough. But now our life was even richer: not just spiritual sustenance, but foodstuffs!

Fishing is similar to mushroom foraging. The fish are there waiting to be found. And with experience you eventually get a good sense of where they're most likely to be and what they want. Honestly, I can fish for hours without a nibble. Just to be walking in and along the rivers of Northern New Mexico, I almost don't care if they're biting. Almost. The beauty of moving water (it doesn't really exist on the Southern Plains) is intoxicating to me. It is no surprise to anyone who knows me that I wrote a book of poems about rivers. But what makes rivers is mountains and watershed, and in those mountains we find the mushrooms. And you don't need artifice to trick a mushroom. You only need a knife and a bag to put them in.

My daughters act like they don't like to find them. It's a thing with teenagers to sometimes heartily dislike what the parents are passionate about. I get that. They need to be their own people and like what they like and figure out why. But my passion is contagious. They get a little thrill when they see one and they point to it so I can come along with my Opinel and cut it, clean it up, and put it in the canvas bag along with the others. They know the boletes, and a few more varieties, but otherwise, they don't know what's edible.

A few years back, my youngest was collecting these little plastic toys called Shopkins. We consider ourselves nature lovers, so I was pretty horrified at the whole enterprise of collecting anything called a Shopkin. We mostly don't like shopping and try to avoid the American way of feeling good about ourselves because we can buy things. But you gotta let kids be kids, and she was into these Shopkins. One of these little Shopkins is a mushroom called Milly Mushroom which she brought along on our trip to Taos. The entire purpose for her to bring it was to go on the trail ahead of me, to place it strategically among the leaf litter and mosses so I might be fooled for a second, and indeed I was. Kids can be so cruel.

This same child later found a big patch of chanterelles. They are unmistakable because they have a fluorescent yellow-orange-gold underside in which the gills reach down well into the stalk. There is a false chanterelle whose gills suddenly stop near the top of the stalk, and the color isn't as bright underneath. They're sort of poisonous to some people.

But true chanterelles, their tops are beige or beige-orange at best, and I had been looking for that fluorescent color, which mostly you don't see except at the farmers market when they are all on display with their beautiful undersides showing. My daughter was much more able to spot them because she was probably only four foot nothing at the time and I am five foot ten and too far removed to see what she could. She was right down there with them. Lucky child. My girls would find a few, but then they were done. Come on, they say. Hurry up, let's go. This is BORING. You go on ahead, I say. I'll catch up. The past two years there has been an abundance, especially of boletes, so it takes me a while to catch up. My heart gets to pounding, and it's not the elevation. It's the thrill of the forage.

When you find one, you harvest it by cutting it at the base as far down as you can. The stalk usually has a lot of the meat that you want to eat. But if you are going to put it into a bag with the others, you need to clean it up from the dirt it's growing in, so you wipe off the debris from the cap and cut away the dirt from the bottom of the stalk. You do that as you go. The first time I brought mushrooms back, I had only half cleaned them up and then I had to clean them all over again because of all the dirt in the canvas bag that had re-attached itself. You learn.

My wife is more patient than my daughters and even somewhat interested. This summer, she told me she was about to buy me a new Opinel mushroom knife complete with brush for scraping away the dirt when you harvest one, but the forest was closed because of the drought and fires, and we thought maybe we couldn't hike at all this year. So maybe Christmas? She humors me. Once, I lay down on the hiking trail beside a bolete and had her take my picture. It was a monster twice the size of my head. She actually will eat the chanterelles I cook and take a nibble of the boletes, though the other night she swears the porcini pasta messed up her throat and kept her awake half the night. She points them out along the trail. There's one. Wait, that's a false bolete. She's getting good. Oh, there's another *Suillus lakei*. She's making fun of me now, even though she's right. I brought home some *Suillus* the other night and cooked one and nibbled at it, afraid to die. The internet says they're edible. But was it a *Suillus*.? Sure it was. But was it? Tasted pretty good, actually. Porous underside like a bolete, but a little slimy on the top. Seems poisonous, but it isn't.

This year I found a new one. New to me. A shrimp *Russula* with a white stalk and a pink cap the size of my whole hand. I was nervous to try it. There are many different Russulas, so how was I to tell? One is called *Russula emetica*, and that name should have warned me away. Any mushroom with gills makes me nervous, but I texted a Taos friend an image and I also looked it up. He asked does it smell shrimpy. Smells a little shrimpy. OK, I sauteed it, and it had this very tender texture and a flavor of sweet apples and the slightest hint of shrimp. Delicious.

You do learn a lot beyond distinguishing between mushrooms and the Latin names. You learn their various habitats, how boletes really like not only the pine trees they work alongside, but the edge of the trail. Why, I'm not sure, but you do tend to find more of them in mid-July there on the edge of any given human trail or deer trail than just off in the more hidden parts of the woods. It's like they *want* to be found. You learn how the chanterelles like to come up among the mossy areas near larger boulders or in clearings where they can get a little sunshine to help them do their thing in late July or early August. There's a lot some of us non-scientists can't know, because the mushrooms spend most of the year underground. For instance, how does the snow factor in? The temperatures. How much snowmelt? What about the long hot fall after they've already spread those spores? What about the brutal, high altitude winter? Maybe it's not that you can't know, and it's more about just saying I've got other stuff to do and know. I have my limits unless I am going to have a career in mycology. But then, I realize I should know much more than I do because it's not exactly a safe hobby.

At first, I could only identify the bolete, but that is complicated by the inedible boletes (poisonous) that seem pretty much the same at first glance. But when you cut the stalk, streaks of neon green or blue or purple give you a warning. Those have a scabrous stalk, as well, perhaps a little slimier cap, and maybe a weird edge. The aspen bolete also has a scabrous stalk, but you can eat them. Mostly. Some people are allergic. I tried them. Edible, but they didn't taste great. A little too funky and bitter. If I'm trying a new mushroom that I'm not sure about, I just have a little bit that I fry up in butter. I don't want to destroy my liver, as some poisonous mushrooms will very well do. I figure if I start feeling bad or hallucinating after just a nibble, I'll make myself throw up and it probably won't kill me. My wife shakes her head. My kids are horrified. I can't blame them. They need me around. They're teenagers, so they often don't necessarily *want* me around. But they also don't have the appreciation of the taste for them. People don't have a decent sense of taste till they're at least thirty or so, right? I know that when I was younger I didn't. And I'm a sensitive poet. But now I love wine, though I can't afford the really good and precious wine because I'm a poet.

When I first came back with a small bag (a few days after I'd seen the mushrooms that first time at the farmer's market), I took photos of the mushrooms with my phone and texted them to a mycologist professor I know back at Texas Tech where I teach. I wanted to eat them but not die. I'd been in touch with him before about some mushrooms that grew up in my yard in years past, and he had actually come over to my house to harvest a few for his classes. Stinkhorns! They do live up to their names, and they look like a dog's penis with a black slimy head. You can smell them from a block away. Nasty things, but amazing in their capacity to offend in multiple ways.

This professor texted me back about the boletes I'd found. Yeah, it looks like a bolete, but don't eat it. He knows many people who have gotten really

sick from mushrooms. He has stories. He's a mycologist with a Ph.D. He texted: I'd have to put it under a microscope to be sure. Now, that's not really true, I thought. I bet he'd know instantly. But I'm sure he didn't want to be liable for death or damaging some vital organ. I kept sending him photos. And he was basically: John, stop. Stop. Find someone local who is an expert. Do not trust Google. You don't know what you're looking at. And he was right, unless I was lucky. I'm not going to tell you what is edible or not, he said. He finally just quit responding to my texts.

But years later, now, this technology called Google lens is amazing, and I can get a much better sense of what it is I'm looking at. However, there's not always connectivity up there on the mountain. And even if I bring it home and photograph it and look it up, the Google lens might tell me I've found goose feathers and not a wild oyster mushroom. This happened. Oh, but I'd figured out by then this *Ostreatus* has a slight fennel smell and it must be fried in butter and eaten with eggs. Amazing. Have I mentioned the butter is important?

I wonder about the Native Americans from days of yore and the ones now on the reservation here, or even about the Asian, Greek, and Italian miners or other frontiersmen who had to live off the land. What did they know or even risk? What do they put up in winter? Did they have butter? You can dry these puppies, and put them in soup, and the edible ones are nutritious. I've read that mushrooms are rich in the B vitamins, which is useful for heart health and good skin. Even thicker hair. I'm 56, and my hair is thinning, and I swear that, with all these mushrooms I'm eating, my hair is thicker. I tell this to my wife and girls, and they roll their eyes. Of course, I've been in Taos for two months without a haircut, so I just have more hair. But maybe it really is thicker. I want to believe. After all, I'm eating mushrooms just about every day now. I do get tired of them, sadly. I try to trick myself and say it isn't so. But day after day, yeah. They're too rich. And because I've found so many, I'm putting too much on my plate each meal.

I'd heard that you can sell them to the local restaurants. Last year I tried, and you quickly find out that the ones who make a living off this are one step ahead of you and already have relationships with all the local restaurants and chefs. I tried. But there is this one guy I know who runs a bakery, and he was happy to buy them from me. The really good ones he uses for fancy pastries and the rest he dries in his big ovens and uses the rest of the year for soups and who knows. We traded, actually. He set up an account for us, and we could come in and get bread or cookies or croissants for the fair price he offered for our mushrooms. Last year we'd foraged such a ridiculous amount, we had hundreds of dollars in credit when we left town. We stopped by the bakery and he gave us a fifty pound bag of local organic flour for our trip back to Lubbock. My wife bakes all our bread, so that was perfect.

How do you know where to look? Well, no one is going to tell you, at least not exactly. You can pay wilderness survival guides who do these medicinal

foraging tours for a little extra cash, but they aren't going to take you to their best spots. You have to find out for yourself. It's a kind of tradition to NOT tell anyone where you've found your mushrooms. You can say, up in the ski valley I found some king boletes yesterday, but you would never say: Yesterday right before the Long Canyon trail forks off from Bull of the Woods, over near the stream, that's where I found five pounds of chanterelles in a clearing. You would never say that. It's a code of honor not to say. Everybody wants to have their own spots where they go. Well, the few of us who go. Most of you should not go. You should be terrified. I had a colleague in technical communication who ate some bad mushrooms once in the mountains and he said he drove the whole way home back to Lubbock through a tunnel of lights and they had to rush him to the hospital to pump out his guts. There's that.

Last year, we ran across a woman who was harvesting boletes but also some of what we call fairy mushrooms. They have a big bright red cap with white spots (gills on the underside) towering over a white stalk. Beautiful to look at but not good to eat. Fairly poisonous. Some people call them toadstools. *Amanita moscaria*. You see these pictured in illustrations of Alice in Wonderland. Because of hallucinations? Anyway, I asked this woman what she was going to do with those. I warned her, even though she seemed to know what she was doing (she had a full bag of boletes and an Opinel with which she'd been cutting them). She said, oh you can eat them if you boil them a few times. Maybe if you're desperate, I thought. But there were so many boletes last year, it seemed absolute nonsense. I wanted nothing to do with her. I gave her a worried look, and that was the best I could do. Take care!

Mycorrhizal is a great word, too. The mushrooms and toadstools and such are in a relationship with their surroundings. The fungi feed off the roots of the various trees or even off the bark in some cases, and the fungi in turn can extend and fortify the root systems to be able to absorb more nutrients or moisture. I figure it's a bit like the relationship between poetry and prose. They both make each other a little richer when in a good relationship.

Last year one of the last mushrooms I found was a matsutake. I'd heard tell about these. This year I've been on the hunt for them, but I haven't found any. I keep saying to my girls: I will pay you five dollars if you find a matsutake. I should be offering more. People pay outrageous prices for these. My girls just say to me, you just like to say *matsutake*. They know that I am a poet. They make fun of me, *matsutake, matsutake...*

I also wonder about how this foraging is shaping them as young adults and what they'll pass along to their own kids one day when they're out there on their own. Hiking, likely. Foraging, less so, perhaps. The love of words? I mean, I just used three different homophonic variations of "there" at the end of the first sentence in this paragraph. I hope you didn't miss it. Will they forage for other things in life? They already very much enjoy thrifting at used clothing stores, finding the deals and the fashions unknown to most. But the experience of foraging for mushrooms is different, of course, in that you can't

do it anywhere, anytime, and you need a wealth of knowledge and experience beyond a sense of taste. And the senses of taste for mushrooms, or vintage clothes, or poetry all require time and for experience to take hold. My girls are just beginning to taste life in its greater complexities and deeper aesthetics. In some ways, so am I. We can keep finding new things which we've overlooked all these years.

Of the dozens of hikes we did last year, I found two matsutakes. Uncommon, to say the least. I wasn't sure I'd found one, but my baker friend told me that they smell distinctly of cinnamon under the cap, and I'll be darned if that weren't the case. Serious cinnamon action on the one I'd found. So I brought him home and cooked the dude in butter. My wife said don't eat it. She's not like the woman in the film *Phantom Thread* (spoiler alert) who is bent on poisoning her man because she loves him. I know, WHAT? Right?

My wife is the opposite of that. Meghan has saved me from a lot. She is very much a rule-follower, whereas I am definitely a rule-breaker what with being a poet and all. This maverick streak of mine works to my benefit in small ways, but mostly it is a detriment to my life, I admit. I'd likely be far better off if I followed more thoroughly the regulations that benefit mankind and my family.

But now and then there are cases where my risk-taking pays off. Every year when we're hiking, I come across a few springs in the mountains where the water is bubbling up out of the ground. There is no way this water has giardia. Impossible, I say. And I've never gotten sick from it. Not once. In twenty years of drinking from these three different springs that I've found on our hikes, it has been nothing but a pleasure. My wife, she will not drink this spring water, and neither will my kids. They're probably right to refrain and stay safe, but there is little more refreshing to me in this life than this water sent from God and purified by mother nature's gravity moving and straining the water through rock and sand.

But the matsutake...my wife was just like No, no, no, no. Nevertheless, I cut it up into small portions, and little by little, carefully, savoring, praying, I ate it and was all yes, yes, yes, yes. It is the best mushroom I have ever eaten. The saliva welled up from under the back of my tongue, and the flavor kept coming and coming, and I understood why my baker friend raved about it and why that insane price I'd found for them online. I waited and waited anxiously for the tunnels of lights or even the upset stomach, but those never came. Only that taste that is unlike anything I've ever tasted in this world except for the tiny hint of cinnamon. I recognized that. And a meatiness, and the hint of a whiff of the smell of a dank basement where they store precious wine.

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Yasmine B. Rana

Pannonica in Damascus

CALIFORNIA. THE SANTA MONICA PIER.
LATE SUMMER. DUSK.
***ANTHONY*, AN AMERICAN JAZZ MUSICIAN IN HIS EARLY 40**s AWAITS ***NICA*, SYRIAN, 19**. THE PIER IS LIVELY WITH THE SOUNDS OF VISITORS ENJOYING THE FERRIS WHEEL AND AMUSEMENTS ON A WARM AUGUST EVENING. ANTHONY HOLDS TWO MELTING ICE-CREAM CONES AND WEARS A TRUMPET CASE STRAPPED TO HIS BACK. NICA, WEARING A BACKPACK AND CARRYING A FLUTE CASE, APPROACHES ANTHONY WHO CONTINUES TO SEARCH FOR SOMEONE UNTIL NICA APPROACHES.

NICA: Are you, you?
ANTHONY (JARRED): I'm me. Anthony.
NICA: I know your face from photos and online but wasn't sure. I was early. I've been watching you from over there, pacing, looking for me. Then I knew it was you.
(ANTHONY STRUGGLES TO RESPOND.)
NICA (Cont'd): I'm Nica. Is that ice-cream for me?
ANTHONY (AWED): What's left of it. (HANDS MICA THE MELTING ICE-CREAM CONE)
ANTHONY (Cont'd): I'm sorry.
NICA: For what?
ANTHONY: Melted ice-cream.
NICA: That's it? I'm just kidding. It's all good. Meaning, the ice-cream.
ANTHONY: Can I hold your flute for you?
NICA (PROTECTIVE OF FLUTE): No. Sorry, but here, in the U.S., I'm afraid once I lay it down, I'll never see it again which is so weird, that I'm afraid of having my flute stolen, after coming from where I come from. But I am afraid, which is odd to be afraid of something so minor in the greater scheme of things, but you hear things. There are so many people on the beach today. Not that anyone would want a second-hand flute.
ANTHONY: Anyone would want anything. Second hand?
NICA: Or third.
ANTHONY: Are you a woodwind major?
NICA: Flute, which is stronger than my piano, which both cancel out my voice. I can't sing. I wouldn't want to even if I could.
ANTHONY: It's so crowded. We could go somewhere else, someone quieter. I don't know why I picked this place, except I thought it would be (SEARCHING) fun.
NICA: Fun?

ANTHONY: I don't know what I'm saying. I'm nervous.
NICA: Why?
ANTHONY: Why? Because this is the first time I'm meeting you, in person, and I know what you're going to say, "Who's fault is that?" And I would respond, "Mine."
NICA: I honestly wasn't thinking that. I haven't been thinking of any of this today because I just needed to get through with what I needed to get through. Moving in. Starting classes. Meeting people which I guess includes you. I'm not thinking of all that other stuff. Not right now.
ANTHONY: Today is all I've been thinking about for a long time.
NICA: Don't be offended, but I think if I were a little kid, it would matter more, it would be different. Not that you don't matter, but now that I'm older, there are other things to think about.
ANTHONY: I am older.
NICA: But we're from different places. You're an American. You have a lot of time on your hands.
ANTHONY: I do?
NICA: Yeah, I've noticed the same with the other students, worried about stupid, meaningless stuff.
ANTHONY: Stupid and meaningless?
NICA: Did I mention narcissistic as well? No, I'm sorry. This isn't stupid and meaningless.
ANTHONY: You don't have to edit yourself.
NICA: I feel like I do.
ANTHONY: Well don't.
NICA: You're not all narcissistic. Maybe just, overly sensitive.
ANTHONY: Uninformed.
NICA: That's it.
ANTHONY: Your English is perfect.
NICA: Didn't you know, Anthony? It's a globalized world. You can't escape it.
ANTHONY: Did you learn at school?
NICA: Yes, but mainly from my mother. We spoke in both Arabic and English. Mostly Arabic, but I think she wanted me to be perfect for this moment. Coming to America to study.
ANTHONY: She was a good teacher.
NICA: It's a funny meeting spot. Did you think we'd ride the Ferris wheel?
ANTHONY: Do you want to?
NICA: No. There are a lot of kids waiting.
ANTHONY: A lot of families. I'm sorry. Is this uncomfortable for you?
NICA: Being among families? No. What's over there?
ANTHONY: We could walk and see. (ANTHONY AND NICA BEGIN TO WALK ALONG THE PIER.) You're a flute major at ...?
NICA: Jazz flute.
ANTHONY: Of course.

NICA: Why "of course"? Because of you?
ANTHONY: Because of her. Right?
NICA: Right, because of her. Cal State.
ANTHONY: That's a good program. You moved into the dorm? Is it okay? Safe?
NICA: Safe? Yeah, another weird comparison, but super safe from my experience. It's fine. I haven't spent too much time there. It's only been a week, but it's okay.
ANTHONY: Do you have a roommate?
NICA: Another girl from Syria who's been here longer, a bio major. We should be speaking English with each other to practice, but we never do.
ANTHONY: You don't need the practice.
NICA: Music has its own language which I know very well, so I think I'll be fine. Do you have a gig tonight? Or is your trumpet an appendage to your body?
ANTHONY: Both.
NICA: What's the gig? A club? A festival?
ANTHONY: A friend's restaurant. He's the manager. Work is work, right?
NICA: All for art.
ANTHONY: Things dry up. There's always someone younger and newer and hotter, and that's just the way it is. Maybe you'll be the next name in this business.
NICA: I doubt it. I'm an outsider.
ANTHONY: Not for long.
NICA: Didn't you teach at Cal State? I read that in your bio.
ANTHONY: Among others. Schools. Residencies. Conservatories. Workshops. You name it.
NICA: Aren't the jobs permanent?
ANTHONY: Very few are tenured. I'm not a scholar. Just a musician.
NICA: I'd like to be a music scholar. I don't think I'm a performer. I'm taking education courses as well. Just to be safe, not safe, just, wise.
ANTHONY: Yeah, that's wise, but how do you know you're not a performer?
NICA: Because I can't fake joy.
ANTHONY: It's not always joy up on that stage.
NICA: Look at these street performers, giving their art and soul for some coins. They look happy as if they like what they're doing, riding a unicycle, walking on their hands, tossing balls in the air ...
ANTHONY: But we don't know that. You don't like playing out?
NICA: Not all the time.
ANTHONY: Neither do I.
NICA: So why do we keep doing it?
ANTHONY: Because we have to. It isn't joy, it's the air we breathe.
NICA: For my mother it was pure joy. Playing music was her oxygen and her joy, more than anything or anyone could offer. Does that hurt?

ANTHONY: Was it meant to hurt?
NICA: Not really. I have no reason to hurt you. You're just a bystander.
ANTHONY: Now that hurts. But you're right, about your mother's joy and playing. I recognize her flute.
NICA: I should get a new one.
ANTHONY: Why?
NICA: It's what my teachers have said.
ANTHONY: To deflect from their poor instruction. But if you want a new flute, just to have in reserve, I could ...
NICA: Please don't. Melted ice-cream is fine.
ANTHONY: It's not enough.
NICA: Nothing will ever be enough. Unless you could transport her here, walking with us along the sand, along the Pacific Ocean, at this time, in the summer, in the evening, right now.
ANTHONY: I wish I could.
NICA: Even now?
ANTHONY: Especially now.
NICA: But you're old, older. Isn't it better to love when you're younger and you don't know any better?
ANTHONY: I'm older and I don't know any better because I only knew Maryam when she was young. I only knew your mother at one point in life, not as a child or as a teen or as an adult, and I mean, my age now. But I knew your mother at that magical time, you know, or you will know, when you're not a child, but you're still child-like, nostalgic, wistful, wishful, without edits or repetition.
NICA: Not without scars.
ANTHONY: There are scars here too.
NICA: On the Santa Monica Pier under a Ferris wheel?
ANTHONY: Bandages to cover the scars. None of this is real.
NICA: It looks real to me.
(ANTHONY AND NICA CONTINUE THEIR WALK ALONG THE PIER, ENCOUNTERING FAMILIES. A SOCCER BALL FALLS IN FRONT OF NICA WHO KICKS IT BACK.)
NICA: Sorry!
ANTHONY: That was a strong kick.
NICA: Hope he's ok.
ANTHONY: I'm sure he's fine.
NICA: But it's America. I have to be careful.
ANTHONY: Of what?
NICA: Of doing the wrong thing. Of saying something I shouldn't. Of thinking something that will lead me to saying something I shouldn't say. I don't know. I always thought war was more complicated, but it isn't. This is hard. Being here is hard. Back home. War? Conflict? Borders? Identity? Death? They're all very clear. But this. Just walking along this beach and

walking next to you and not knowing what to say or what to do or what to feel, is hard.

ANTHONY: I wish . . . .

NICA: Me too.

(ANTHONY AND NICA APPROACH A BENCH.)

NICA: I'm trying to think if I'm the same age my mother was when you first met. What were you, her teacher?

ANTHONY (QUICK TO CORRECT): Mentor! Student mentor. And she was a little older than you.

NICA: Doesn't your wife mind?

ANTHONY: Who?

NICA: Her. She. Meeting me. Planning our meeting. Emailing and texting about our meeting. Where to meet. What day, what time. Anticipation. Plan B for weather conflicts. Plan C for flight delays. Plan D for visa delays. Plan E for a bomb delay. Me, from my mother, Maryam, your past, your former, friend, lover, girlfriend.

ANTHONY: Soul.

NICA: Soul? Then she must be angry.

ANTHONY: There is no "she."

NICA: Or he?

ANTHONY: There isn't anyone. What makes you think there was?

NICA: You're a musician.

ANTHONY: A jazz musician.

NICA: A jazz musician, which is worse, on the road, playing gigs, getting old.

ANTHONY: Older than I was when I knew Maryam.

NICA: Lucky you. Coming from a place where so many people have died, it's almost blasphemous to curse getting older.

ANTHONY: I don't curse getting older, but I curse getting older without your mother.

NICA: No kids?

ANTHONY: No one besides you.

NICA: That you're aware of.

ANTHONY: I'm confident.

NICA: So you've halted your life for someone who's been away from it for almost 20 years.

ANTHONY: I haven't taken a vow of chastity.

NICA: And music can't be our replacement.

ANTHONY: There were others. Some would have been absolutely fine. But like you, maybe I also can't fake the joy. I think I had always hoped that Maryam and I would find each other again.

NICA: How?

ANTHONY: Fate? God?

NICA: I don't believe in either.

ANTHONY: At just that moment, you looked exactly how your mother looked at me, when we spoke about serious things.
NICA: "Serious"? Like what? Like Syria? Like war? Like music? Like Thelonious?
ANTHONY: Always Thelonious Monk.
NICA: There were lapses, very few, but lapses, of not exactly peace, but not exactly absolute horror, and during those lapses, when there was some battery left on her phone, she'd play Thelonious for me. All of it, all that she had in reserve, almost like oxygen.
ANTHONY: Which piece was your favorite?
NICA: You know.
ANTHONY: "Pannonica."
NICA: Did the name give it away?
ANTHONY: We played it together.
NICA: "Pannonica" does what you and I can never do, find joy in melancholy. (NICA REMOVES HER SHOES AND SITS ON THE SAND) Your sand is different.
ANTHONY: California sand.
NICA: Your home.
ANTHONY: Now yours.
NICA: For now.
ANTHONY: Where else would you go?
NICA: Anywhere. I could go to Copenhagen like Monk or Montreux or Vevey or Lucerne, Montreal. London, Berlin.
ANTHONY: I've played them all.
NICA: Always the performer.
ANTHONY: Who doesn't fake it. I wish you could have gone anywhere before, like here. You could have been here.
NICA: While you toured? Without my mother, knowing she was back there? No way.
ANTHONY: I tried.
NICA: With ice-cream cones and shiny flutes; it's just never enough. Did you meet my grandparents?
ANTHONY: Once. When the secret was out. They hated me.
NICA: For being an American? A musician? A jazz musician?
ANTHONY: For all of it.
NICA: But they supported her music, even in Damascus.
ANTHONY: Because they hoped she would be a classical musician, not jazz.
NICA: Was that your influence?
ANTHONY: No one could influence Maryam.
NICA: Not even you, when you tried to marry her so she could stay.
ANTHONY: Not even I. And that angered me.
NICA: She couldn't leave her parents or her brother, and they couldn't stay, after overstaying. There was nowhere to go except back.

ANTHONY: And if she had married me . . . .
NICA: You would have saved everybody?
ANTHONY: She had a student visa.
NICA: Which had an expiration date.
ANTHONY: I wanted to marry her.
NICA: As a favor?
ANTHONY: Because I loved her. Maryam was a part of me.
NICA: Like your trumpet? An appendage?
ANTHONY: Completely. She shouldn't have gone back with them.
NICA: Them? You don't get it do you? You just see yourself. It's not about one person, it's a unit. It was our family. They were her appendages and she couldn't abandon them. You have no right to judge the dead!
ANTHONY: No, I don't, but I have every right to be mad for losing my daughter's first nineteen years of her life and almost losing her in a war zone, thanks to Maryam's choices, without even giving me the dignity to have any say.
NICA: Dignity? What dignity? There's no dignity in war. You have no right to use that word. Not now. Not about that time. You have no say.
ANTHONY: She should have told me before she left.
NICA: She didn't know.
ANTHONY: That's what she told you?
NICA: Yeah, that's what she told me.
ANTHONY: She kept me from you for nineteen years. And only after she died, you contacted me.
NICA: Died? She didn't die. "Die." She more than "died." She was killed.
ANTHONY: I can't say it out loud.
NICA: You have to. My mother didn't "die." She was killed in a bomb in our home that killed her, her parents, my grandparents, her brother, my uncle, but luckily, not me! I should have been killed. I'm smaller. I was younger. Children are easy to kill in war. But luckily, my saviors pulled me from the rubble. At first I was grateful, but when I realized I was the only one in the home who had survived, who was left, I wasn't grateful. I even wished they hadn't found me and saved me.
ANTHONY: And now?
NICA: Guilty, but grateful.
ANTHONY: I'm glad, for the grateful part.
NICA: I don't know what this is, what you want it to be.
ANTHONY: Whatever you want it to be.
NICA: I should be more curious, ask you more questions.
ANTHONY: We have time.
NICA: But I'm not.
NICA (Cont'd): I'm not curious. I should be, but I don't know why I'm not.
ANTHONY (DISAPPOINTED): It's early. You've just arrived. We've just met. It may be too much today.

NICA: You don't get it. "This" isn't too much. Losing everyone, including my best friend back home, that was too much.
ANTHONY: I'm not comparing.
NICA (REALIZATION): But I don't think you can help it. I don't think you understand, or could ever understand. I don't mean to hurt you, but like I said, you're just a bystander.
ANTHONY: I knew your mother. We were together . . . .
NICA: For how long? One year? Two years? No more than three?
ANTHONY (HURT): Something like that. We were a couple . . . .
NICA: In a strange place for her, far from home. Being here was an appendage to her life, but it wasn't her whole existence. Please don't be hurt. That's not my intention today.
ANTHONY: Then what is? I want you in my life. I want to get to know you. I want to take care of you. To . . . .
NICA: Buy me a shiny new flute?
ANTHONY: If that's what it takes. You're going to need help. You don't know anyone here. You're going to need money, support.
NICA: And you really have that?
(PAUSE)
ANTHONY: Enough for you, yeah.
NICA: I didn't come today for your money.
ANTHONY: Is there any chance I could be someone to you?
NICA: Yes, but I don't know when or how or who.
ANTHONY: Do you want me to be in your life?
NICA: I should say yes, but I don't know.
ANTHONY: What did Maryam say about me? Did she say anything?
NICA: That you were her American boyfriend, a jazz musician, who played music with her, and was kind and smart, and talented, and the first real American friend she met.
ANTHONY: Her "first real American friend."
NICA: Which obviously turned into love.
ANTHONY: Obviously.
(PAUSE)
NICA: She didn't have anyone else in her life, just me and our family. In war, there was no room for anyone else. Besides, so many people were gone. Gone? (LAUGHS) Now I'm dancing around death, softening it, keeping it away from me. I've just arrived and I've already learned the dance.
ANTHONY: Hopefully you won't, so you could stay as is.
NICA: I'll try.
ANTHONY: Fossilized memories. Still. Dormant. My memories of your mother and me with her are just the same, without time or growth or change. That's the mistake they carry. That's my mistake in thinking, hoping, imagining, what this could be.
NICA: Maybe it could be.

ANTHONY: And maybe not. Maybe we'll just leave today as is.
NICA: For now.
ANTHONY: And if you ever need anything like shiny new flutes or an ice-cream cone, or a person to jam with.
NICA: Thank you. (CHECKS TIME) I know we thought we'd have dinner, but ...
ANTHONY: You're busy.
NICA: I just found out today that there's this thing, this event at school for freshmen, and I should . . . .
ANTHONY: Go.
NICA: I don't have to, but,
ANTHONY: You should.
(ANTHONY AND NICA PREPARE TO LEAVE.)
NICA (SURVEYING THE BEACH): I know what I said about performing, and I haven't done any since I've arrived, except in practice rooms. What if I tried here? Do you think I could, without a permit or whatever? Just for a minute, just to say I played out on the Santa Monica Pier, on California sand?
ANTHONY: I think that would be fine.
(NICA OPENS HER FLUTE CASE AND ASSEMBLES THE INSTRUMENT.)
ANTHONY: You know, Monk wrote "Pannonica" for his Pannonica. Do you know the story?
NICA (WARMING UP): She was his friend.
ANTHONY (DISAPPOINTED): His friend.
NICA: But more than a lover, like, a soulmate? At least that's what my mother told me. Am I right?
ANTHONY: Yeah, that's right.
NICA: I wouldn't mind if you want to play together, now, if you don't mind.
(NICA CONTINUES TO WARM UP WHILE ANTHONY PREPARES HIS TRUMPET AND JOINS IN.)
ANTHONY: On three.
NICA: One.
ANTHONY: Two.
(ON THE THIRD BEAT, NICA AND ANTHONY PROCEED TO PLAY "PANNONICA.")

END OF PLAY

Robert B. Shaw

An Indoor Cyclist

Down in his basement, going nowhere fast,
pumping away at pedals, he's amassed
mileage, the sight of which would make you tired,
by putting in the modest time required
each day — say, twenty minutes, half an hour —
a set expenditure of muscle power.
Expenditure? He hopes his daily round
will be like savings interest, and compound.

His cycle's only one within a mob
that hum along, forever on the job.
For instance: spring resurfacing each spring;
the phases of the moon; the busy swing
of business alternating boom and bust;
lust cramped to apathy, then swelled to lust;
carbon transforming into other stuff
and back again — and if that's not enough,
the starry marchers of the zodiac
plodding in order on their astral track.
(And that's without including Wagner's Ring,
or other mythic round-ups following
fortunes of heroes proudly in contention
with grisly foes too numerous to mention,
*re*cycling some archetype's convention.)

The world is wrapped (and rapt) in repetition.
Why shouldn't he make modeling that his mission?
His every stationary revolution
prolongs a flight from body's devolution.
Not a bad aim, but what's his destination?
He isn't given much to speculation.
Notions that might be poised to intervene,
jumbling up the course of his routine,
would not be welcome. While he sits and pedals,
he's not at home to any thought that meddles.
He likes his wheel, a squirrel-cage-type affair,
even if it won't take him anywhere.
His daily stint of sitting down to churn
dutifully celebrates the planet's turn. . . .

For some, however, periodicity
is not the acme of felicity —
in fact, as they regard it, anything but.
To them, his rote is just a deepening rut,
a trek on which he never tries to guess
what use there is in circling barrenness.
They chafe at all the intersecting rings
that drive us on our way as bonded things,
seeing in nets of circularity
a tender trap that most choose not to see.
They long to pierce that subtle whirling mesh
that snugs but also subjugates all flesh.
They even, in some moods, view utter stasis
as offering the only true oasis. . . .

Nothing he thinks of now. Perhaps he will,
though his first inklings may not come until,
panting and ("What," he wonders, "*is* this?") sweating,
he fumbles for a much less uphill setting.

Daily

Memory holds us hostage. Who needs proof?
In later years, with little worth recalling
about those mornings, sometimes she recalled them
exactingly, as though she still was there,
a party to the fixed routine of breakfast,
musing as she had done so many times:
Why did she hate the newspaper so much?

Was it the everlasting sight of it
camouflaging her husband as he sat
taking it all in: fire, flood, and famine,
wars simmering or flaring up in places
with names she had no clue how to pronounce?
Not to mention the latest hit-and-run
last night, only a block or so away,
or the city's Assistant Treasurer
being caught hand in till. Descending from
their 1950s datelines, the gray columns
every morning detailed the gray world's
latest abandonments of innocence.
She always wondered how a normal person
could want to riffle through all that while eating.
For him it seemed to get smoothly absorbed
on its own track, parallel to one
conveying bites of toast and sips of coffee.
The oblong table, each end occupied
as usual, stretched placidly between them.

After he marched himself away to work
she took her turn with it. She always went
first to a certain inside page which sometimes —
not every day, but reasonably often —
gave her what she thought of as good news,
which, truth to tell, was likely there in print
because the editor had space to fill.
Here were stories of homely miracles.
A woman's wedding ring, lost fifteen years,
found in the house that she no longer lived in,
pried out of the floor crack that had claimed it,
traced to her and returned — that sort of thing.

Animal stories held more charm for her:
a family's wolfhound, mislaid on a road trip,
nosing his own way home across state lines;
a chimpanzee who gamely learned to count
by sorting ping pong balls in someone's lab.
Not only brain power but public service
was given coverage: rescuers, Lassie-like,
of accident-prone children trapped in spots
they had no business in, were popular.
(And once, along those lines, like a vignette
cribbed from mythology, a pod of dolphins
grouped themselves in a protective convoy
around a couple's broken-masted boat
for hours, till the human Coast Guard reached them.)
Best of all, though, she reckoned as she grew
into a connoisseur, were the occasional
tales showcasing pet solidarity:
a mother dog caring for orphaned rabbits;
a cat guiding a blind dog round the house;
a guinea pig whose best friend was a duck,
bound by a common taste for salad greens.

She would peruse these, then flick back quickly
past the headlines, soon folding the paper.
Stilled, eyeing her husband's egg-stained plate,
she would think, "We're all animals, aren't we?
Then why can't we do better?" Getting up,
collecting dishes, heading for the sink —
all this comprised a choreography
she fell into mechanically each day.
Now she would wash the newsprint off her hands.

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MRI

Posing for Mama's Christmas card:
to think I once thought *that* was hard.
At least I'm not required to smile,
pinned down in focus all this while.
Parted from wallet, watch, and rings —
in fact, from inorganic things —
I'm slid within this white, magnetic,
resonant tube whose energetic
poundings and beeps mean close inspection
goes on regarding my midsection.

Like a train halted in a tunnel
or, in the small end of a funnel,
something that can't quite make it through,
I do what I'm supposed to do:
holding my breath each time I'm told
(not hard: it's all there is to hold),
and, amid hubbub, lying still
by an extended act of will.
Patience is all a patient can
provide in aid of this deep scan.

The tech whose fingers power each widget
compliments me: I didn't fidget.
It will be interesting to see
just what is going on in me.
Some few unhurried days will crawl
onward before I get a call.
The news may carry reassurance,
giving a nod to more endurance.
Or the news may be not so great.
Patience again: it's time to wait.

The Absentminded

There was something endearing — don't you recall —
in the sight of the pink dry cleaner's label
stapled on the Professor's Harris tweed cuff,
carried along for the ride through his lecture
by a host of impresario arm waves,
his unawareness intact, his students charmed.

And you could feel the same fondness for the way
Grandmother, sharp as a tack, would even so
call you by one or another brother's name
(or even, once, the name of one of the cats)
until, by trial and error, yours came up.

Entertaining to witness in others, slips,
stumbles, detours, momentary derailments,
intermittent oblivion, whatever
you want to call them, such gaps in cognition
leave you fuming, inwardly at loggerheads.
Turned inquisitorial, you plague yourself
with questions targeting each snafu with scorn.
Why was milk left out of the fridge overnight?
Why is that jacket not where it's always hung?
What became of the tax form that used to be
in plain sight on top of that pile — and aren't there
more piles now than whenever last you noticed?
How did the extra car keys get put away
in a drawer only other things belong in?
Any answer you try is self-accusing.

Lucky for you, the doctors, when you ask them,
will tell you it's distraction, not dementia,
attention swerved to things not of this moment,
or yielding to diversion or dispersal.
Woolgathering, or more grandly, reverie.
Time to seek solace from your inner sophist.
Listen, the soothing whisper:

"Calm yourself.
That book's not gone, just on a different shelf.
Why cram your bandwidth, fretting at the mess
of paltry, everyday forgetfulness?
Be glad that when in fact you concentrate,

trifles mislaid no longer irritate.
How overstuffed the mind of God must be,
docketing everything, omnisciently!
Nothing to covet. No, your transient blanks
merit your tolerance, if not your thanks."

All true, no doubt, but not much help to you, balked,
standing vacantly in a room you entered
a moment ago to get some simple thing
that must have heard you coming and has darted
behind some shifty curtain in consciousness,
perversely now determined not to be named.
Annoying, yes; maybe more than annoying
if you (if we) sense how this encapsulates
an impasse too familiar, all too human:
life at a standstill, snagged by a hiatus
in which we find it dawning on us that we
don't know, and couldn't say, what it is we want.

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Hilary Sideris

How Many Vincenzos

The lights are off.
Vincenzo must be home

saving his energy
or in a sea of woe —

marea di guai in his language,
which has no W.

Inside our wardrobe —
guardaroba — parkas,

duffles, puffers, pelts
have hung for months

in *scuro, tenebroso*
gloom, the bulb *guasto,*

the change to happen
on Italian time.

Vincenzo on Church Avenue

It only took the two-block walk home from Calogero the barber, who snipped the white hairs from his ears, to feel the sadness of Cortelyou Road — the lone, immobile pigeon breathing hard, the rat on asphalt, cartoon-flat, a bald man with no hat selling his paintings for five dollars — unicorns, hearts, flowers — the art always the saddest part. Vincenzo knows it's Vincenzo he's sorry for. He's bringing home a bag of walnuts in their shells, a present from Calogero — expired, though possibly not rancid yet. He tried to give them to a panhandler who said *No, man. Not those nuts.*

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Respiro: Spring 2020

Vincenzo's son
won't speak to us.

We know he lives
& breathes because

he texts a link
to Kimberly Clark's

N95 Pouch
Respirator Mask.

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Wendy Sloan

Fall Brings the Anniversary of Your Death

Like echoes in the rain, since losing you
our memories form a chain of losing you.

We gather close, we mean what we don't say
as we retrace the pain of losing you.

Another year has passed, but we're the same:
we're brittle with the strain of losing you.

We bear the gift of living on with shame,
the dull retort, again, of losing you

We watch the candle flicker into flame.
What else can we retain of losing you?

"From stardust, Sloan, long light years far away," I tell myself,
and turn to this refrain of losing you.

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Terry

What more will I ever want from life
than those lingering afternoons of tea
in your rundown railroad flat, scones
I'd picked up at the shop, jam & cream,
to talk of books, the latest you were editing,
nostalgia for an England never seen –
the dream of a trip together through the Potteries,
(Do they have that bus tour, still?) –
admiring quilts handsewn by aging ladies
back home in Carolina, your Miss MacDougal's,
dating cottons in your lilting drawl,
ogling the feed sack backings,
your cats curled cozy in the corners,
till the sky thickened, and you walked
me to my bus home, waving me off
with a threadbare volume of Evelyn Waugh?

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J. D. Smith

Cost

Ana lifted the check from the dining room table, folding it in half so it wouldn't get lost among the bills in her purse.

This was not a big worry today. Four five-dollar bills and three one-dollar bills were all she had, and last night she was so tired she didn't even smooth them, although a wrinkled bill could get rejected by the Farecard machine or torn apart. When did she have time to take the pieces to the bank and get a replacement? Would the bank people believe her? In San Salvador other people were waved ahead of her in line because they wore better clothes and shoes, and they were whiter. Then, like now, she scrubbed and wiped and mopped in other people's houses, but the soaps and chemicals didn't bleach the *índia* out of her. Once she dyed her hair, when she wasn't working after having Ivan, born in Maryland, a United States citizen. Even before the dark roots started showing the blonde hair made her look ridiculous like a clown or a whore with a round belly and floppy breasts swollen with milk and pain. Maybe that would have paid better, and maybe she could have stayed instead of coming to Washington and these cold winters. But it would have been sin, and leading others into sin.

There was no time to wonder about this now, just like there was no time to get groceries last night. By the time she brought Ivan and Mario home from their cousins' house it was nine o'clock or more. She couldn't leave the boys at home, either, and she didn't want them to see all the bad examples. The *marás* boys might try to take her money, or their little gang girls would be outside begging. "*Paísana*. Homegirl. I'm hungry." Maybe they could afford food if they didn't give their money to their pimp boyfriends and spend the rest on tattoos and cigarettes. Those people respected no one, and they believed in nothing.

Ana had twenty-three dollars in cash, yesterday's single check and today's check, with two more to come if nobody canceled at the last moment. Sometimes the second house did, and the third house did not want her to come before two in the afternoon.

There should be more checks and bills, but she couldn't think about that right now. Right now she needed to earn money, starting with the kitchen. It is big, maybe bigger than the shack she grew up in, but it is easy. Mr. and Mrs. Stevens did very little cooking. The stovetop looked almost as shiny as she had left it last time, and she wiped away a little dust with a soapy sponge. Maybe she is imagining the dust. It is a cloudy day, and a light in the ceiling has burned out. Only one spot requires real work: a thin stain of pale white threads in the shape of a cloud. Probably not *papas*. These were not the kind of people who chopped their own vegetables. With a few strokes the stain broke up and dissolved. Definitely not *papas*. They left a more stubborn stain. If their cupboards were any clue, they must have been boiling pasta. Why did rich

people eat so much pasta, anyway? They could afford all kinds of meat and eggs and cheese, but they were eating spaghettis and macaronis like people who had no money at the end of the month.

Maybe that was why some of the people she worked for looked so thin, above all the women. In their tight yoga clothes they looked like twelve-year-old girls. Or boys.

No wonder so many of them didn't have children. They didn't get their cycle, or the men got tired of touching their child bodies.

And so many of the skinny women looked worried when they didn't have anything to worry about. Maybe they looked for things to worry about, or they had pulled their hair back too hard. Did they get so thin because they worried, or did going around hungry make everything look worse?

Some day she would get Mario to write down some of her *recetas* in English, or maybe she could leave each house a *pastel de tres leches* around Christmas, when some people left an extra check. Ana could give, too, if not so much.

She wiped a few crumbs from the toaster tray and swept a few more from the kitchen floor before mopping. It was hard to imagine Mrs. Stevens eating *pastel de tres leches* or any other cake. They did not meet often — Ana came in with her own key most of the time — but when they did Mrs. Stevens was always on her way out of the house, and nervous, rubbing her fingertips across her sharp cheekbones and chin. When Ana called to reschedule she spoke the English she could, but she could hear Mrs. Stevens saying "Meester Estevens, Ana to you want to talk."

He continued the conversation in Spanish, with his own heavy accent, because like her he did not learn the other language until he was grown. He said he studied Spanish in the university, and in cities where he took classes in the morning and was a tourist the rest of the day. That sounded nice.

Ana had taken her classes at night or on weekends, mostly in half-empty schools. Her first teacher was a tall, thin man who was always trying to kiss the single women on the cheek. Sometimes he missed. He was always offering them rides home too. Ana was protected at the time, since Walter had died only a few months before and she was still wearing her wedding ring.

In a few weeks everyone was protected. A woman started the class by saying Mr. Maxwell was not coming back and she would be the teacher from now on. Ana took her classes for another year until she started getting too tired after a day of work, when she was getting her first white hairs.

Mopping the kitchen took only a couple of minutes. Plunging the mop back into the bucket hardly broke down the suds or darkened the water beneath. It would be wasteful to empty the bucket so soon, and she would try to carry it upstairs to other rooms without spilling too much.

First, though, she took a glass from the kitchen cupboard and filled it from the tap, emptying the tumbler in two long swallows and one short as she pressed her nostrils with the fingers of her free hand, because water in

Washington smelled and tasted like things that were not water. At her last appointment the doctor said to drink more because she was in danger of getting kidney stones, and having them would hurt like giving birth, as if he knew. For that kind of pain, two times in a life was enough. Ana managed a second glass.

The tumbler could have gone into the dishwasher — it was nearly empty — but somebody might notice, and she was there to work and not make work for others. After a hand wash with a dot of liquid soap and a quick drying with a tea towel she placed the tumbler where she had found it next to other tumblers, mugs and wine glasses all mixed together. Some people were happy to live in disorder.

The dining room was easy also. It took only a little dusting and polishing on the sideboard, a few minutes to put the books and envelopes on the table into neat stacks and run the vacuum cleaner over the wood floor half-covered by a rug. The machine roared for a few minutes, but that was all. In another house a pair of little black dogs shaped like dust mops attacked the vacuum, barking and biting. Finally the owner left a note and a jar of peanut butter. She could lead them into the basement, where they could keep barking until she finished. The doctor's house with the orange striped cat just made her sad. It just sat and just watched, part of the time meowing and yowling. For that there was no remedy.

The living room was hard. Ana had to carry the vacuum cleaner up to the next level of the townhouse, and the rest of her supplies took another trip. The extra weight pressed on the place where they had operated behind her right big toe. Pressing the gas pedal would hurt once the car came out of the mechanic's, but she would be off her feet instead of standing on the Metro, then the long escalator ride at the Wheaton stop.

On the second trip up the stairs, soreness touched a different spot in each knee, but this had nothing to do with cleaning the living room. The books and magazines would not pick themselves up off the floor before she vacuumed. Some were mysteries and cookbooks, but many of the titles included the word "economics." She knew Mr. Stevens worked as an economist, but he must have really liked his job.

Once, when she arrived a little early, she asked him what economists do. A doctor could set a bone or prescribe a pill, and a lawyer could take care of your papers or talk for you in court. But an economist? *¿Quién sabe?* After checking messages on his phone he said, "Economists try to find out how much things cost." At first that didn't sound hard. Here you just looked at a price tag or a sign, and back in her country she could defend herself and bargain down to a good price for a kilo of fruits or greens. But then he said he was talking about things on a very large scale, like how governments should spend their money. That sounded hard enough.

The place behind her big toe kept hurting as she dusted around the stacks of books on the coffee table and end tables. Getting more Tylenol was

something else she meant to do last night. She needed new shoes, too, but for now she had other bills. How much would it cost to get a pair that wouldn't fall apart in three weeks? Maybe some other economist could tell her which shoes to get.

With luck they wouldn't cost too much, since Mario was outgrowing his clothes. How could anyone avoid thinking about those things? One time a few years ago she went with Marta from Santa Tecla to her church, maybe the *anglicanos*, and they sang a hymn about how their saints did not count the cost. Those saints must have been too rich to care or so poor they had nothing to be counted.

But that visit still made more sense than the time Hilda, also from San Salvador, took her to a storefront next to a laundromat where a sign read "Christian Center / Centro Cristiano." There were rows of folding chairs, and a long sermon by a man in a suit and tie who called himself Freddie — a name for a child or a criminal.

There were no statues or pictures in the room, and no candles. It did not seem like a church. It didn't have to be fancy, but it didn't have to look like everywhere else. God was everywhere, sure, like the priests and nuns had told her, but people needed reminders. When she looked at the blank walls her mind started wandering, and she thought about her feet and her bills. The week after that she went back to Mass.

Vacuuming the living room made her right hip hurt a little. She would definitely have to get Tylenol tonight, or maybe she could find the *genérico*. Saving a dollar or two could not hurt, if she had time. She would have to wait until tomorrow to go to the bank and deposit her checks where they wouldn't take out any fees. Putting them in the ATM didn't feel safe. A check disappeared, and perhaps it was not recorded. One hundred dollars would not get a lot of attention from the bankers, and she would have to spend hours fighting and begging for what was already hers. Better to wait.

There was something else. Ana tried to remember as she cleaned the guest room. Nobody had stayed there since last time, and the bed was made she had left it, but a few books were lying around on the tables and the floor, and on a desk a couple of thick-bottomed glasses with a little water in them. The smell was more than water, though: whiskey. They usually didn't leave glasses lying around. When she went back downstairs she would take the glasses, and she could put them in the dishwasher without thinking about it. And why did these people have to drink so much? They had a good life, a rich enough life. They should not need to stop thinking about it, unless they felt guilty about something. Ana thanked God she had somehow remained without *vicios*, even in the hard times.

The guest bathroom didn't take much work, either, and in a few more minutes Ana carried supplies and equipment upstairs to the master bedroom. As she tried to keep her balance, she remembered the other thing. Her sister Veronica had called and asked her to wire some more money. Her husband

had lost another job and the children needed new uniforms for school. Sending money was fine, because that is what families did, but why did she want a *giro*?

Vero, she said one time after another, you are getting less that way. She could use a bank or PayPal and get everything instead of losing part of it in fees. And people might be waiting for someone like Veronica to walk out with cash, but she would not listen.

It would be so much easier if she could take a taxi home. What luxury it would be to take the taxi. No driving, no standing, no worrying about anything, just a few words and handing the driver some money. How much would that be?

Ana counted the cost. Last year when her car was at the mechanic and they were repairing the Red Line, again, she had to go to a funeral for Rosalia's son at the big church on Sixteenth Street.

What she had in her wallet right now was maybe enough for the fare if the rates had not changed and there was no extra to cover high gas prices. But she still could not pay a tip, and that wouldn't be right. The men driving the cabs, and they were all men so far, worked long days like here, and most of them came from somewhere else too: the men in turbans from India, the *morenos* from Ethiopia and Nigeria, the Arabs. It would be hard to face the driver if she ran into him again. It could happen. Once she ran into a friend from primary school at a shopping mall by the Pentagon.

The master bedroom took time to clean. It was another mix of wood floors and rugs, with places for dust to hide under the furniture and not just on top. The pulling and the reaching aggravated her aches, but they were nothing compared to her father's last days of the cancer that made him bend over in pain, with no money to treat it. In a little bit the bedroom was finished, and only the master bathroom remained.

Like the kitchen, the bathrooms made sense, all hard glass, porcelain and tiles, and a surface was clean or it wasn't. You scrubbed until you didn't have to scrub anymore.

This bathroom did not look bad today. Not many specks of toothpaste on the mirror, and no paste of soap and whiskers in the sink. No sprays or lotions stained the ledge in front of the mirror unless those stains were under the pile of coins on the right side. Maybe Mrs. Stevens had cleaned out a purse or a drawer. Quarters were mixed with nickels and dimes, and there were pennies with green spots. Some people were happy to live in disorder.

Should the coins be stacked like the books, or should the pile be left alone? It was strange to handle someone else's money. They could be testing her for some reason, though she hadn't given them one. But what if they weren't? For them this was not a lot of money, but for her a lot. A few quarters and some dimes might be enough to tip the driver. He would prefer all bills, sure, but he would understand.

Ana took a quarter from the top layer of the pile and turned it over in her fingers. Jorge Washington and the eagle, the eagle and Jorge Washington. She could flip the coin and leave the decision to chance.

A thin edge with ridges separated the two sides, and there was no telling which one would come up if she flipped the coin. If she took that quarter, and a few more, they might never know.

She would know, and knowing, she would find it hard to talk to the driver. Knowing, she would do her business and feed her boys and have nothing to tell them when they talked about how the *mará* boys had the cars and the girlfriends. Then it would not be worth the trouble to come here. If all she wanted was to steal she could have stayed home with family nearby and warm weather all year around.

Ana set the coin back on the pile and pushed the pile aside to clean the ledge beneath. Her foot still hurt, and her hip, and the different places in each knee. A taxi ride could offer only so much relief.

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Michael Spence

Advice Before His Blood Pressure Is Taken

The nurse says: *Go to your happy place.*
Since his happy place is not so sunny,
Her advice strikes him as strangely funny:
As if by forcing a smile on his face,

He'll give himself a reason to smile
And not just look like an idiot.
They're in some sort of New Age skit
Requiring a grinning guile

To prove they're sane and well balanced
In a world that rewards neither virtue.
She tells him: *Don't let things upset you.*
Something about the way she glances

At him makes him see the same look
His mother used to use to make
Him regret some trivial mistake—
Like thumbing through her favorite book

That day right after eating chocolate.
His fingerprint became a bookmark;
His mother's face creased with dark
Seams as she grabbed his hand and put

It under the scalding tap. The pain
Became the secret he kept from Dad
Who would've hit her. He smiles, glad
He keeps the pounding in his veins.

The Pages Between Us

—for my sister Rosemarie, September 11, 2015

Five years ago today you died. I find
On a shelf a creased and beat-up paperback—
50 Great American Short Stories. The kind
Of book we could pick up from the wire racks

And creaking turnstiles in drugstores when Hemingway
And Faulkner stood among Harlequin romances,
Adventures of Conan, westerns by Zane Grey.
Idly opening it, I happen to glance

At the inside of the front cover: a sheet
Glued in and labeled *Highline Public Schools*
Says fines will be levied against those who mistreat
This library property. Your name unspools

As the only signature. You who got A's
So easily and never got called out
For talking in class like me--there was no way
You'd "violate school policy." But doubt

Now stares straight up at me: I realize
You stole this book. You'd never have forgotten
To return it; like me, you grew the eyes
To see other lives pressed into the lines

That ran like roads across paper. To escape
The world's limits, we'd traveled every page
Of these stories to find more foreign lands. What shape
Did silent snow take on? What kind of rage

Destroyed the world to leave a fallen ruin
That turned dead leaders to imagined gods?
In our heads we heard the deeper tunes
The words rang there—a secret song of lauds

As if from bells in a chapel few attend.
I still open its doors, but you don't kneel
Beside me now; the music seems to descend
And glide away like that blue-winged teal.

Time, the thief of all our volumes, shifted
The wall surrounding and protecting us
To a barrier between us. It can't be lifted
By anything I do. I ask, Was it just

For you to die before me, four years older?
So many others should be gone instead.
The snow that whirls inside is always colder.
Or is that only something I once read?

My Confession to Saint Augustine

I have to confess I never read your *Confessions*
Until today—this agnostic felt no need
To heed your words. But you must have had fun
Stealing pears with your friends, a childish deed

That makes me smile. Climbing the road away
From the orchards of this life, you later sought
Some resolve. I have to laugh when you say,
Give me chastity and continence, but not

Just yet. I see you human as I am, admitting
The world is hard to cast off. Before you embraced
The simple bowl of astringent soup, you clung
To the desire for just another taste

Of salty stew, before you let your skin
Wrap you in its chrysalis, its coffin.

Donald E. Stanford

Fletcher Lecture, Nicholls State University, 1991

Introduction by David Middleton

For over fifty years, Donald Stanford has devoted his life to poetry, scholarship, criticism, editing, and teaching. He began his career in the 1930s as a poet and remained an active poet until the 1950s. His best poems were collected in *New England Earth and Other Poems* (1941), *The Traveler* (1955), and *The Cartesian Lawnmower and Other Poems* (1984). Nine of his poems were included in Yvor Winters's famous anthology of 1937, *Twelve Poets of the Pacific*. One of my favorite poems is "The Bee," a profound though simple lyric on a universal theme, the passing of the seasons and thus of time:

> No more through summer's haze I see
> In sunlight like a flash of spume,
> The resolute and angry bee
> Emerging from a flood of bloom.
>
> The bee is quiet in her hive.
> The earth is colorless and bare.
> The veins of every leaf alive
> Have stiffened in the altered air.

The last line, echoing Dickinson, is a haunting conclusion to a poem utterly clear and absolutely true. The bee has changed her behavior by instinct as the seasons change, but it is the poet alone who, in the barer clarities of the fall and in these stark tetrameter quatrains, comprehends that the passage of time takes us, as it does the leaves, to death. In his "Foreword" to *New England Earth and Other Poems,* Winters said of such poems as "The Bee" that there is "a beauty which I, at any rate, cannot expel from my mind."

In the 1950s, Stanford began publishing works by and about the American colonial poet Edward Taylor (1642-1729). This interest led to the appearance in 1960 of *The Poems of Edward Taylor* (published by Yale University Press), a volume which remains today the standard edition of America's first major poet. Reviewing the *Poems* in 1961, L.C. Martin said: "the editing has been done with scrupulous care and all fidelity to the manuscript original, and it may well be that this will long continue to be the standard edition of Taylor's poems." After thirty years, Martin's statement still stands as true.

In the 1960s, Stanford turned his attention to Robert Bridges (1844-1930), the poet laureate of England from 1913 until his death and the friend and editor of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Over the course of twenty years, Stanford worked to revive Bridges's reputation with the publication of *Selected Poems*

of Robert Bridges (1974), the critical study *In the Classic Mode: The Achievement of Robert Bridges* (1978), and the two-volume *Selected Letters of Robert Bridges* (1983, 1984). *In the Classic Mode* examines the entire poetic canon, analyzes Bridges's complex metrical experiments, publishes the trial text of Bridges's long philosophical poem *The Testament of Beauty,* and describes Bridges's literary criticism. The *Selected Letters* put to rest the old charge that Bridges delayed the publication of Hopkins's poems for selfish reasons rather than, as the letters clearly show, to wait for the ideal moment to present the poems to the public.

His outstanding career as poet, scholar, critic, and editor made Stanford a natural choice as co-editor of the new series of *The Southern Review,* the distinguished literary quarterly begun at LSU in 1935 by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. With Donald Stanford and Lewis P. Simpson as co-editors, *The Southern Review* began publishing again with the Winter 1965 issue after a hiatus of twenty-three years. Stanford served as co-editor until his retirement in 1983. As editor, Stanford published a number of special issues of the review, some of which have become collectors' items. These include the Robert Frost Issue (Autumn 1966), the Eric Voegelin Issue (Winter 1971), the two Wallace Stevens Issues (Summer 1971; Autumn 1979), and the Yvor Winters Issue (Autumn 1981). Contributors brought to *The Southern Review* by Stanford include some of America and Britain's most famous writers. Among these, to name just a few, are Cleanth Brooks, Edgar Bowers, J.V. Cunningham, Donald Davie, Denis Donoghue, Northrop Frye, Caroline Gordon, Thom Gunn, Irving Howe, Hugh Kenner, Janet Lewis, Joyce Carol Oates, Katherine Anne Porter, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, and Yvor Winters.

One remarkable story about the revival of The *Southern Review* is that Stanford kept his appointment and flew to New Haven to consult with Brooks and Warren about starting up the review — this, late on that unforgettable day in modern American political history — November 22, 1963. Such determination was also evident in Stanford's fashioning of *The Southern Review* as a place where, for almost twenty years, poets who rejected free verse for traditional poetic forms could find a handsome place in which to publish their unpopular poems.

In 1983, the year of his retirement, Stanford's lifetime of interest in modern poetry culminated in the publication of *Revolution and Convention in Modern Poetry: Studies in Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, E.A. Robinson, and Yvor Winters.* Stanford offered provocative revaluations of the rankings of modern poets and argued for a return by younger poets to rationally comprehensible poems written in traditional literary forms. The final chapter, on Stanford's old mentor and lifelong friend, Yvor Winters, rounded out a career that began exactly fifty years earlier when Stanford wrote poems and studied literature under Winters in California.

I will now close with a few biographical facts and some brief personal observations. Donald Stanford was born on February 7, 1913, in Amherst, Massachusetts. The doctor who delivered him lived across the street from the Dickinson house. In 1926, Stanford's father moved the family to California to take up a new teaching post at the University of the Pacific, the college Stanford attended before finishing his B.A. at Stanford University in 1933, his M.A. at Harvard in 1934, and his Ph.D. back at Stanford in 1953. From 1953 to 1983, at LSU, Stanford rose from instructor to full professor in the English Department and in 1982 was designated a Distinguished Research Master and awarded the University Medal by LSU. In 1983, when he retired, Stanford became Alumni Professor Emeritus and Editor Emeritus of *The Southern Review.* His many research grants include NEH stipends for work on Bridges and a Guggenheim in 1959-60 for work on Taylor. Stanford has been a visiting professor at Duke, the Yeats Summer School in Sligo, Ireland, and at Texas A & M University. He has served on the editorial boards of *Early American Literature* and the *Hopkins Quarterly* and is a member both of Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi. Many of us here tonight have taken one or more of Professor Stanford's graduate seminars — in Modern Anglo-American Poetry, Yeats, Hawthorne and Melville, Henry James, the Poetry of New England, or the American Novel of Manners. His seminars always yielded fat notebooks full of useful information that helped many of us pass the general or special field exam questions on those subjects.

I must also mention how helpful Donald Stanford has always been to his graduate students — getting us to face up to the Ph.D. exams, keeping us going on the dissertation, offering sound advice about taking jobs, and assisting us as young critics and poets in the highly competitive world of academic publishing. And let me not forget to mention the famous Stanford sherry parties, planned and brought off to perfection by Don's lovely wife and longtime research assistant, Maryanna Stanford. Such parties were a welcome relief from the pressures and the usual dietary fare of graduate school days. Looking back over Donald Stanford's long, productive literary career, I am impressed that over fifty years ago, at the height of the still dominant free-verse movement, Stanford was writing fine poems in traditional literary forms. To write such poetry then, and, until quite recently, was, to use the expression of R.L. Barth, one of our best younger traditional-form poets, to fight a "rear-guard action." Today, that rear-guard action has become a full-scale counter-offensive, and tonight, Professor Stanford will address us concerning this dramatic development in contemporary poetry in a lecture entitled "Our Modern Poets—Where Have They Been? Where Are They Going? The Struggle for the Survival of Poetry."

Professor Stanford.

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Our Modern Poets:
Where Have They Been? Where Are They Going?
The Struggle for the Survival of Poetry

Our story begins in 1908 on a cold January night in Crawfordsville, Indiana, when a brilliant young instructor of romance languages at Wabash College encountered a burlesque show girl left stranded in the streets by her company. Ezra Pound (for it was he!) gave her free lodging in his room for the night. The next morning his landlady discovered the girl in Pound's room. She could hardly wait to get to the telephone to inform the president of Wabash College. Pound was fired from his first and last academic appointment. He left shortly thereafter for Italy with hatred in his heart for academia and contempt for his native land, which he referred to as a half savage country. Before the end of the year 1908 he went to London and eventually settled in a tiny three-cornered house on Church Walk, Kensington, where he started a poetic revolution which shook up the literary world. The remnants of that revolution are still with us today.

Pound was an eccentric young man who would do anything to attract attention — such as entertaining the guests at a literary party by eating the hostess's tulips. But he had a certain charm, plenty of energy, loads of poetic talent, and an American capacity for promoting his own poetry and that of his friends. He had a lifelong commitment to poetry. His circle of friends in London soon included W. B. Yeats (he became temporarily Yeats' secretary); Robert Frost; his girlfriend from college days, Hilda Doolittle; Ford Maddox Ford, and many others. Ford was an important influence. For several years Pound had been putting into English verse medieval Latin, French, and Italian poetry, and he had been composing original poetry under the influence of Swinburne and Browning, employing archaic diction and subject matter reminiscent of the medieval troubadours. Ford convinced him that if he wished to become a successful modern poet he should forget his beloved troubadours and employ colloquial diction and the rhythms of common speech. He and his friend Hilda Doolittle began writing short, vivid, imagistic, concentrated poems. Hers were usually on Greek subjects. His were on anything that happened to come into his mind. One day in October 1912 in the tearoom of the British Museum Pound made an extract from the manuscript of her poem "Hermes of the Ways," scrawled "H.D. Imagiste" at the bottom of the page, and sent it to Harriet Monroe in Chicago for publication in her new magazine, *Poetry*. There followed various explanations of the poetic theories behind Imagism. The March 1913 issue of *Poetry* had an article by F. S. Flint, and also Pound's Manifesto "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." After defining an image as an "intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time...which gives a sense of sudden liberation," he lays down the rules for writing this new poetry. Among them, Don't use superfluous words, go "in fear of abstractions," and don't "chop your stuff into separate *iambs*," that is, the modern poet

should abandon metrical language in favor of what Pound called the musical phrase. The ideal imagist poem was short, suggestive, explosive —

with the impact of a firecracker. The emotion was usually conveyed by means of a concrete appeal to the senses — that is, what T. S. Eliot later called "the objective correlative." Pound's most famous imagist poem is entitled "In a Station of the Metro" where he experienced a sudden surge of emotion upon seeing a few pale, beautiful faces in the crowd at the subway station. So he wrote a two-line poem:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

H. D. was composing similar poems — her most famous being one of six lines entitled "Oread" (that is, "Wood Nymph") — in which she describes the tossing fir trees in terms of sea waves:

> Whirl up, sea —
> whirl your pointed pines,
> splash your great pines
> on our rocks,
> hurl your green over us,
> cover us with your pools of fir.

Pound's most successful imagist poem is "The Return." He describes the return of the Greek and Roman gods to modern literature in the poems of H. D. They return cautiously, warily, uncertain of their welcome. The poem reads

> See, they return; ah, see the tentative
> Movements, and the slow feet,
> The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
> Wavering!
>
> See, they return, one, and by one,
> With fear, as half-awakened;
> As if the snow should hesitate
> And murmur in the wind,
> and half turn back;
> These were the "Wing'd -with-Awe,"
> Inviolable.
>
> Gods of the wingèd shoe!
> With them the silver hounds,
> sniffing the trace of air!

Haie! Haie!
These were the swift to harry;
These the keen-scented;
These were the souls of blood.

Slow on the leash,
pallid the leash-men!

But it was a Connecticut business man, Wallace Stevens, who wrote, in my opinion, the greatest poem in the free verse movement. It is entitled "The Snow Man." Stevens himself has offered a brief explanation of his intent. The poem is "an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand and enjoy it." Wallace Stevens was philosophically a hedonist — the end of existence is pleasure — but the poem develops the opposite side of hedonism — Stoicism which emphasizes the virtue of endurance. As I read the poem, please notice the skillful evocation of a cold, glittering atmosphere and the completely successful slow, moving rhythm. The poem has unity and coherence, and it is only one sentence long:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

This poem has substantial subject matter. However, the weakness of the early phase of the free verse movement was usually *lack* of subject matter. Most of the imagist poems were suggestive but they didn't say very much. Pound tried to remedy the weakness by writing a long poem entitled *The Cantos* which he began publishing in 1917. He continued publication of this unfinished literary

and intellectual autobiography for the rest of his life. But *The Cantos* is merely a series of images, or luminous moments as Pound later defined images, strung together without discernible coherence, structure, or unity, and sprinkled with recondite literary allusions. Few people read *The Cantos* today.

It is tempting at this point to speculate as to what Pound's career might have been if he had not lost his teaching job at Wabash College in 1908. Instead of becoming an alienated intellectual for the rest of his life with a grudge against America he might, under the discipline of teaching and of further study for an advanced degree, have employed his great talent to writing poetry of permanent value. Nobody who teaches poetry to students every other day, and who has to test his students on the results, is going to write a poem like *The Cantos*.

The imagist, free verse movement continued to flourish in the teens and on into the twenties. In 1915 Amy Lowell, a poet of little talent but great promotional ability, imported the movement to America and gave lectures and poetry readings to large audiences. The free verse movement which developed from early imagism is still with us today on both sides of the Atlantic. I shall have more to say about that in a moment. But first I must call attention to an unfortunate happening.

In 1921, a brilliant protégé of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, had, or was on the verge of having, a nervous breakdown. On advice of his friend, the famous hostess Lady Ottoline Morrell, he went for treatment to a sanatorium run by a nerve specialist Dr. Vittoz, on the banks of Lake Geneva, also called Lake Leman. You will all recognize the line " By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept." There he finished a longish poem he had been working on for some time entitled "He Do the Police in Different Voices." The locale was mainly London which was to be presented in different "voices" ranging from St. Augustine to cockney women in a British pub. The title comes from Dickens' novel *Our Mutual Friend*, in which a foundling named Sloppy reads the police news to his widowed guardian, imitating the speech of various characters. She reports to a friend "He do the police in different voices." The structure of the poem was derived from Pound's *Cantos* — a collage of scenes, images, literary allusions without discernible coherence, but loosely bound together by a theme — the breakdown of western civilization (for London becomes a symbol of western civilization) on a general level. On a personal level the theme is the psychic breakdown of its author as motivated by marital and other problems.

Eliot lent his manuscript of the poems to Pound who was in Paris. The title was changed to *The Waste Land*. Pound greatly improved it by cutting out half the lines. A short bad poem is better than a long bad poem. Eliot published it in the first issue of his new magazine, *The Criterion*, October 1922. In the next ten years or so it became notorious. R. P. Blackmur told me it changed his literary life. Allen Tate admired it, but his mentor John Crowe Ransom didn't. They quarreled and didn't speak to each other for several months. Irving Babbitt

read it to his class and laughed. A copy was sent to a Harvard college friend of Eliot's while on his honeymoon. He threw it out the window of his railway carriage. More recently, in 1991, Richard Hoffpauir in his book *The Art of Restraint* calls it a "pretentious jumble of allusive matter" and asks "Is there really a need for the thunder to speak in Sanskrit rather than English?"

Well, why make a fuss about just one bad poem? Because of its historical importance. It sent the wrong message to a whole generation of young poets. The message was this: You are living in a disintegrating civilization: an authentic poet should express his civilization; therefore, he should write disintegrated poetry evoking the appropriate emotions of nightmarish horror and hysteria.

To do Eliot justice, towards the end of his life he rejected the *The Waste Land* as "just a piece of rhythmical grumbling," as Pound towards the end of his life rejected *The Cantos* as a failure. "I botched it," he said.

Now to return to the free verse movement, which started as we have seen about 1912. Pound and his circle (especially H. D.) in England, and William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore in America had excellent ears for cadenced language and they were frequently successful at giving each poem a unique and sensitive rhythm unscannable according to traditional rules of prosody. But this special ability was not passed on to the numerous succeeding writers who composed poems in so-called verse that neither rhymed nor scanned nor had any discernible cadence. It was not verse but prose masquerading as verse. Combine this practice with the notion just mentioned that poems should be irrational and fragmented in order to mirror an irrational and fragmented civilization and you have a situation not conducive to the survival of what we used to call poetry.

The free versifiers appeared to be triumphant, but they were not having things all their own way. Robert Frost said that writing free verse was like playing tennis with the net down, and he pitched into the experimentalists with his usual vigor:

> Poetry . . . was tried without punctuation. It was tried without capital letters. It was tried without a metric frame on which to measure rhythm. It was tried without any images but those to the eye . . . . It was tried without content . . . . It was tried without phrase, epigram, coherence, logic and consistency. It was tried without ability.

E. A. Robinson continued to write short poems and long narratives in traditional verse. R. C. Trevelyan, in England, published *Thamyris* in 1925, an attack on the free verse movement. It begins with an anecdote. At a convocation of the Muses in heaven, the devil is invited to state his case for free verse. He starts reciting poems in free verse and is hissed back to hell by all the Muses. Trevelyan then eloquently defends the continued employment

of traditional rhythms and states that "free verse is no more than an excuse for uttering ineptitudes that *we* should not have dared to express in honest prose."

About 1930, Yvor Winters, poet and instructor at Stanford University, who had published several distinguished volumes of poems in free verse, changed his medium to conventional metrical language and never wrote another line of free verse. A group of like-minded poets, now known as the Stanford School, gathered around him. They included Janet Lewis, who was Winters' wife, Howard Baker, Ann Stanford, J. V. Cunningham, and me. They were published as a group in an anthology *Twelve Poets of the Pacific* (1937). Their manifesto, one of the first serious counterattacks on Pound's new poetry movement, appeared as a Foreword in Winters' pamphlet of poems *Before Disaster* published in 1934 in Tryon, North Carolina. The essential points of the manifesto are these: Metrical language is better than free verse for conveying thought and feeling in poetry, and of the various forms of metrical language, the accentual-syllabic line with its fixed number of syllables and accents is superior because it "makes for the greatest precision of movement, the most sensitive shades of perception." The second major point is his definition of the fallacy of expressive form — the fallacy that the form of the poem should express the matter, that (for instance) because our civilization is in chaos we should write chaotic poetry about it, as Eliot did in *The Waste Land*. Winters said, "to let the form of the poem succumb to its matter is and will always be the destruction of poetry and may be the destruction of intelligence.... Poetry *is* form."

A second and last volume of *Poets of the Pacific*, Second Series, appeared in 1949 featuring poets in residence at Stanford considerably younger than the first group. They included Helen Pinkerton, Wesley Trimpi, and Edgar Bowers. The Winters movement had some impact on contemporary poetry, but the work of the poets in that movement has never been popular. A half a century later, in 1981, the so-called New Formalists revived some of the principles of Winters' manifesto and discovered for themselves the virtues of metrical language as the best medium for poetry.

What kind of writing came out of the Stanford School? I have time for only two examples. The first is one of my favorite poems by Winters. It is entitled "A Summer Commentary." It is impossible to convey the full meaning of a serious poem in one oral reading, so I'll take the liberty of stating what the poem means to me. The theme of the poem is the poet's search for the meaning of life, first as a young person, later as a mature man. What was the meaning that he found? None, in the metaphysical sense. Instead, he found a state of mind, which the second part of the poem defines. Note the use of the word "penumbra," which signifies an area partially lit — where the human mind must be content to reside.

A Summer Commentary

When I was young, with sharper sense,
The farthest insect cry I heard
Could stay me; through the trees, intense,
I watched the hunter and the bird.

Where is the meaning that I found?
Or was it but a state of mind,
Some old penumbra of the ground,
In which to be but not to find?

Now summer grasses, brown with heat,
Have crowded sweetness through the air;
The very roadside dust is sweet;
Even the unshadowed earth is fair.

The soft voice of the nesting dove,
And the dove in soft erratic flight
Like a rapid hand within a glove,
Amid the rubble, the fallen fruit,
Fermenting in its rich decay,

Smears brandy on the trampling boot
And sends it sweeter on its way.

The second poem, "The Phoenix," is by J. V. Cunningham. It refers to the death of a loved one, and in simple but moving language asserts a belief in a kind of immortality.

The Phoenix

More than the ash stays you from nothingness!
Nor here nor there is a consuming pyre!
Your essence is in infinite regress
That burns with varying consistent fire,
Mythical bird that bears in burying!

I have not found you in exhausted breath
That carves its image on the Northern air,
I have not found you on the glass of death
Though I am told that I shall find you there,
Imperturbable in the final cold,

> There where the North wind shapes white cenotaphs,
> There where snowdrifts cover the fathers' mound,
> Unmarked but for these wintry epitaphs,
> Still are you singing there without sound,
> Your mute voice on the crystal embers flinging.

Let's move on to more recent times. When we reach the sixties and seventies we seem to be in a period where metrical language has been almost completely abandoned. In 1974 it was stated in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry* that free verse had become the "characteristic form of the age," and Stanley Kunitz (a formalist poet) said "Non-metrical verse has swept the field." And Robert Ely stated that poets today "have no choice but to write free verse." More recently, in Margaret Drabble's *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, it is stated in the entry on "Metre" that "Verse in the 20th century has largely escaped the straitjacket of traditional metrics." When I was appointed an editor of *The Southern Review* in 1963 I was one of the few editors actively soliciting poems written in rhymed metrical language. Perhaps I was the only one.

Timothy Steele in his brilliant scholarly book *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter* analyzes the damage to twentieth century poetry caused by the apparent victory of the free versifiers. He points out a historical fact of great interest, that there have been famous literary revolutions from the Greeks to the present — notably in English literature the successful revolt by Dryden and his school against the overly ingenious conceits of the metaphysical poets, and the successful revolt by Wordsworth and his followers against the stereotyped diction of the 18th century poets — but the Pound revolution is the only rebellion in history that has discarded metrical language as the proper medium for poetry. I wish the book could be made the Bible for younger poets today. Steele eloquently states his case as follows:

> I believe that our ability to organize thought and speech into measure is one of the most precious endowments of the human race. To throw away this endowment would be a tragedy...many proponents of free verse...have adopted the view that meter is entirely obsolete and that anyone who questions this view should be squelched at all costs.

Near the end of his book Steele points out that the free verse movement has not developed a new metric, and he concludes "If one wants to invent a new prosody, one must invent a new language."

Poets are influenced by the critical climate in which they are operating. Those of us who were writing and teaching poetry from the late 1930s on through the 1950s were (in the light of what happened later) especially

fortunate, for the New Criticism was then dominant. The most important new critics were Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Yvor Winters, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and R. P. Blackmur. With one exception all of them were poets. It is an historical fact that the best critics are poets. Brooks in the above list is the exception that proves the rule. These poets wrote practical criticism, the kind of criticism that helps one to understand, appreciate, and evaluate a poem or a body of poetry. For example, when I read Warren's now famous essay on "The Ancient Mariner," I was afforded new insights into Coleridge's mind and a better understanding of the poem. The same can be said for Brooks' essays on single poems in *The Well Wrought Urn* such as those on Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Yeats' "Among School Children." When I finished Winters' analysis of Wallace Stevens, I was able to understand poems and passages in that difficult poet which had previously baffled me.

Brooks and Warren also produced a textbook *Understanding Poetry* (first published in 1938) which is an invaluable teaching guide. It analyzes poetic techniques and shows how they work to evoke the desired reader response. It was a major doctrine of the new critics that the text of a poem is more important than the biography of the poet and his historical background. They promoted close reading of a given poem and responsible interpretation of its meaning. All this was helpful to the reader and to the aspiring young poet.

On the other hand, the critical climate today is *not* conducive to the understanding of poetry or to the art of writing it. The dominance of the New Critics in the thirties, forties and fifties, of the Structuralists in the later fifties and into the sixties has given way to the Deconstructionists who became prominent in the seventies at Yale under the leadership of Jacques Derrida and his followers: J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man, and Harold Bloom. These disciples of Derrida are sometimes referred to as the gang of four. Their movement appears to be grounded on a deep distrust of language. According to Derrida, a poem, or a text as he prefers to call it, is merely a group of floating signifiers, without precise referents. That is, a poem can mean almost anything. Every poem commands its own misreading. Every poem stimulates the Nietzschean joy of open endless interpretation. To read a poem one must trace the etymology of each word back to its origin and consider all the connotative possibilities of each word. The possibility for multiplicity of meanings is almost endless. What then of the future of poetry, of literature in general? Derrida tells us. I quote his words directly: the future "breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed as a sort of monstrosity."

An example of the monstrosity Derrida may have had in mind is furnished by J. Hillis Miller's deconstruction of Wordsworth's famous epitaph (on the imagined death of his sister Dorothy) which begins "A slumber did my spirit seal." This touching little poem of two stanzas totalling forty-eight words is deconstructed in a critique by Miller in (so help me!) four thousand five hundred words!

There has of course been opposition to this destruction of the humanist tradition. It has been satirized by David Lodge in his ironic portrait of academic life, his novel *Nice Work*. Charles and his girlfriend Robyn are both teachers who share a common interest in post-

Structuralist literary theory. After about ten years, Charles decides to call the whole thing off and become a banker. In his farewell note to Robyn he says, "Poststructuralist theory is a very intriguing philosophical game for very clever players. But the irony of teaching it to young people who have read almost nothing...., who cannot recognize an ill-formed sentence, or recite poetry with any sense of rhythm — the irony of teaching theories about the arbitrariness of the signifier in week three of their first year becomes in the end too painful to bear...." Gamesmanship has become a paramount skill among the deconstructionists in their fights with the opposition, and in the in-fighting among themselves, and the words "strategy" and "strategem" are frequently employed. The British critic John Bayley remarked that they cannot drink beer without a strategem. There has been a resistance more serious than mere ridicule to the invasion of our colleges and universities by the deconstructionists, especially in the attacks on them by M. H. Abrams and by the new critics themselves and their allies.

Perhaps the most lucid and eloquent critiques of deconstruction were made by M. H. Abrams in *Critical Inquiry*, the Spring issues for 1976 and 1977. He cites Miller's argument that the job of a critic need be no more than *the importation of meaning into a text* which has no meaning in itself, that is, Miller's central doctrine of infinite multiplicity of interpretation of any given text. He describes this little chamber of horrors as follows: "a sealed echo-chamber in which meanings are reduced to a ceaseless echolalia, a vertical and lateral reverberation from sign to sign of ghostly non-presences emanating from no voice, intended by no one, referring to nothing, bombinating in a void." And he makes the obvious point that for the last twenty-five hundred years authors have written works with determinate meanings, a core of meanings most readers can agree to. And if there is ambiguity (as in James's famous *Turn of the Screw*) it is a controlled and not an infinite ambiguity.

However, I hope that today's university students will not become too embroiled in quarrels over literary theory but that they will spend their energies reading more poetry — and perhaps writing it — and that if they wish to read or write criticism they will accept the advice of the eminent British critic Frank Kermode in his recent book *An Appetite for Poetry* to go back to the standards and techniques of the old fashioned book review.

As for the anxiety about language — Miller called all language fictive and illusory. But let's remember that as poets, language is our medium — it's all we have unless we take James Kincaid's advice and "devise a semiotic system more reliable than language." And let's remember too that a poem has never been intended to be real in the sense that a chair or a sunset is real. William Carlos Williams is mainly responsible for this mistaken concept that a poem is

as real as the thing it describes. His most famous statement is "No ideas but in things." And he claimed that when he describes a sunset the sun actually sets in the poem. But of course it doesn't. According to Eliot the best passage in *The Waste Land* is the water song:

> Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop

The language he said is so transparent we are in the presence of the physical object itself. All of this impresses me as exhibiting a distrust as well as a misuse of language.

Nor is a poem a means of arriving at truth, metaphysical or otherwise. A satisfactory poem is simply a statement *about* human experience, composed in the special language of verse (usually metrical language) and conveying to the sensitive reader an emotion appropriate to its subject. It is true not in any scientific, mathematical or metaphysical sense but only in the sense that is "true to human experience."

I believe Ben Jonson is using the word *truth* in this manner when in his poem "His Excuse for Loving," entreating a young lady to love him (an older man) rather than her current younger lover, he writes

> And it is not always face,
> Clothes, or Fortune gives the grace;
> Or the feature, or the youth:
> But the Language, and the Truth.

Is there life after deconstruction? One of the hopes for the future is the new formalism. In a special issue of the magazine *Verse* for Winter, 1990, devoted to this movement, its chief spokesman, Robert McPhillips, describes it as follows: "The New Formalism is a movement in American poetry that became prominent during the 1980s and seems likely to remain a vital influence on American poets in the next decade. It represents a rejection by a generation of poets who came of age in the 60s and 70s, a period in American literary history when the predominant free verse aesthetic was popularized — and politicized — by the various social protest movements that arose during that era and institutionalized by the use of writers' workshops, modelled after Iowa, within American universities."

Basically it is a revival of the counter-attack against the free-verse revolution mounted at Stanford by Yvor Winters and the Stanford School and already described. The New Formalists have discovered that metrical language, conventional prosody and stanza forms, the use of rhyme — all the traditional poetic techniques — give a range and a variety to poetry which is unobtainable in free verse. But there are some differences between the older and the younger formalists. The younger formalists attempt to appeal to a wider readership than did their elders by the use of colloquial diction and

popular subject matter. They seem to consider poets like those in the Stanford School as dangerously elite — *elite* now being a dirty word in current criticism. Also, as noted by Clive Wilmer in his review of Steele's *Missing Measures*, some of the new formalists, while expressing admirable principles, seem to be a bit uncomfortable in their attempts to write in traditional prosody. "They have," says Wilmer, "adopted traditional form in much the same way as the contemporary man of mode might don his grandfather's trilby." This is understandable. They came of age in a period engulfed in free verse, and to go back to traditional forms and prosody has taken considerable effort.

Expansive Poetry, published by Story Line Press in 1989, is an excellent introduction to the movement. The volume includes essays by Timothy Steele who descends from the Stanford School and Wyatt Prunty who, together with David Middleton, Lindon Stall, and the late John Finlay, formed a group of likeminded young poets when they were graduate students at LSU in the seventies. Prunty's recent volume of criticism *Fallen from the Symboled World* explores the philosophical background preceding the new formalism. He is the author of several volumes of poetry published by the Johns Hopkins Press. Lindon Stall and John Finlay have had poems published by the R.L. Barth Press of Florence, Kentucky, and Finlay's collection *The Salt of Exposure* was recently issued by the famous Cummington Press. David Middleton's collection of poems *The Burning Fields* will be published by the LSU Press in July.

R. L. Barth, poet as well as publisher, descends, like Steele, from the Stanford School. He has been playing a very important part in the dissemination of verse written by the traditionalists including all the LSU formalists. Charles Gullans runs the Symposium Press which has published collections by Cunningham, Turner Cassity, Steele, Lewis and other formalists in luxurious format. Mention should also be made of several new magazines. *Hellas: A Journal of Poetry and the Humanities* is advocating what they call "the new classicism." Their first issue (Spring 1990) leads off with a fighting manifesto from which I quote: "Modernism's energies...are by now clearly exhausted. A careerist establishment of academic anti-establishmentarians now indoctrinates the helpless young in the not so new orthodoxies of free verse and free-for-all structure responsible for the obscurity characteristic of modern poetry. Its drear prosaism, slovenliness of finish and pointless eccentricities have combined to reduce the readership of contemporary verse to its collective authorship." I couldn't have said it better myself. The second issue has one of David Middleton's best poems, "The Journeying Moon." Mention should also be made of a new magazine, *The Formalist*, which specializes in traditionalist poetry. Also there are three more relatively new magazines — *Cross Currents*, *Nebo*, and *La Fontana* as well as the older and more widely distributed periodicals, *Verse*, *The Southern Review*, *The Sewanee Review* and *The Hudson Review* which now welcome to their pages the kind of poetry I am defending, as does *The Classical Outlook*. I would like to

call attention again to a book I have already mentioned — Richard Hoffpauir's *The Art of Restraint: English Poetry form Hardy to Larkin.* In the Introduction, Hoffpauir mounts a blistering attack on the assumptions of modernism — especially the notion that poetry has little to do with the intellect.

Formalist poets, though in the minority, have published or are continuing to publish on both sides of the Atlantic. In England, Roy Fuller has written many poems in metrical language and only one in what he calls the "imbecile medium" of free verse because, he said, it was appropriate for the subject. The poem is entitled "Kitchen Life." It describes the attempts of his wife and himself to transfix a single pea rolling uncontrolled in the kitchen sink. In America our three poets laureate — Robert Penn Warren, Howard Nemerov, and Richard Wilbur — have published good formalist poems. There may indeed be life after deconstruction, especially since deconstruction itself appears to be in its declining years, and the free verse movement started eighty years ago may at last be dying of old age.

I would like, finally, to consider briefly two ideas that are not the property of any group of critics or literary theorists but have been prevalent in the intellectual milieu of our century and have, I believe, adversely affected our reading and writing of poetry. First, our obsession — I think that is not too strong a word — with the subconscious as Freud usually calls it or the unconscious as Jung prefers to call it. Very early in our century the poet Mary Coleridge, after reading William James, wrote "I cannot make out the subconscious self...he proves it a fool...then he seems to say it's a God." Now the question I want to ask is this. Does the subconscious (God or Fool) really have a part to play in the creation of a poem? Many, perhaps a majority of our poets, would say "Yes" and they could point to Eliot's famous definition, formulated in 1933, of the auditory image: "The feeling for syllable and rhythm penetrates far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorates every word; sinks to the most primitive and forgotten, returns to the origin and brings something back, seeks the beginning and the end." An impressive but slightly mysterious statement. Is this trip to the deepest levels of the psyche necessary? Or possible? Jung himself said that he could not understand his own subconscious. The most famous case in modern poetry is that of Mrs. Yeats who supplied her husband with images, symbols, and occult information which he used in his poetry and in his occult cosmology as described in his book *A Vision.* The spirit world via her unconscious self supplied the material which poured out in a tremendous flood of automatic writing while she was in a trance-like state of mind. My friend George Harper has undertaken the gigantic task of editing this material which has been transcribed into four thousand typed pages — single spaced. He showed me some of it in its raw state. It is wild, incoherent, irrational stuff, of no use to anybody until Yeats, in a highly conscious state of mind, transmuted it and gave it meaning in his poetry. But I think Yeats would have done better without these messages from

his wife's subconscious mind. (I am assuming none of us believe they were really from the spirit world.) The occult system he extracted from them has no validity and has damaged that part of his poetry which is devoted to explicating it — his poem "Phases of the Moon," for example. His finest poem, on the other hand, "The Wild Swans at Coole," has no necessary relation to his occult system. The swans are lucid symbols of virility and poetic vitality; their meaning is easily accessible. Another great poem, "The Second Coming," was derived from his system but this fact has not damaged the poem which can be read simply as a graphic prophecy of the breakdown and brutalization of western civilization, of which we have sufficient evidence without consulting Mrs. Yeats' subconscious self.

I would like to argue that the writing of poetry is a highly *conscious* act requiring the use of our conscious memory and our conscious imagination. Let's forget the subconscious and its dreams. They have been made the excuse for obscurantism and irrationalism in much of our poetry. Let's consider the subconscious a Fool and not a God.

Another detrimental notion we hear frequently repeated is that poetry should approach the condition of music. Perhaps this idea derives from Mallarmé and the French symbolists. I'm not sure. It is related, I believe, to the distrust of language as an adequate medium for poetry which I have already described, and with the idea that in poetry connotative aspects of language are more important than denotive meaning. Get rid of all denotation and you're left with pure sound, pure poetry, pure music — infinitely suggestive and mood evoking, devoid of meaning, of rational content. But poetry, as an art, has an advantage over music — it communicates sound *and* sense, sense enhanced by emotion *and* thought, and this combination defines its superiority, as an art, over music. So why sell out to an inferior art? Also when it comes to *pure* sound the competition is unfair. No Swinburnian cadences, however sonorous, can compete with a Mozart concerto.

A word about symbols. Symbols, images, figures of speech, when used in a functional manner to convey meaning and not merely as ornaments enrich our poetry. And then there is the post-symbolist style as practiced by a few poets of our century, including Edgar Bowers and Yvor Winters, and defined by Winters in an essay quoting passages of Wallace Stevens' fine poem, "Sunday Morning." Stevens is the greatest practitioner of this style which may be described very briefly as the use of sensory detail charged with meaning. However, some of our poets have become careless and haphazard in their use of imagery and symbols. The classic example is furnished by T. S. Eliot when he said in a commentary on the last of his *Four Quartets* "I used the words 'the spectre of a Rose.' Now I intended to refer to the Wars of the Roses. Then I wanted to hint of Sir Thomas Browne's famous 'ghost of a Rose'....But I was also quite pleased to hear that some people thought it referred to Nijinsky." Eliot is advocating the doctrine of multiplicity of meaning. A poem should be infinitely suggestive. "Here is a rose," he says. "Make of it what you will." If

this doctrine becomes endemic, what a field day it will be for the deconstructionists! But in the writing of some of the formalists today I am beginning to sense a weariness with images and symbols. The plain style — direct treatment of the subject, in denotative language, with the appropriate feeling communicated by means of rhythms governed by traditional prosody, may once again be increasingly employed by our poets.

I want to close with a truism — that form is all important in all the arts, including poetry. The Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges, said it right when upon looking back over a major part of his career he wrote:

> What had led me to poetry was the inexhaustible satisfaction of *form*, the magic of speech, lying as it seemed to me in the *masterly control* of the material: it was an art which I hoped to learn.

A Backward Glance at the New *Southern Review*: Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities: Address as the 1993 LEH Humanist of the Year

The new *Southern Review,* which is still going strong and which, I hope and believe, has contributed to the humanistic culture of Louisiana, was founded just thirty years ago. As one of the founding editors, I would like to take this opportunity to give, very briefly, a firsthand account of the beginnings of this periodical.

The history, from beginning to end, of the internationally famous original review, edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren at LSU from 1935 to 1942, is well known. A book has been published on it and the editors themselves have published accounts of it. The history of the beginning of the new *Southern Review* is not well known.

So here is the story from my point of view. I first saw a copy of the original review on the living-room table of my teacher, mentor, and friend, the California poet Yvor Winters, who was in the English Department of Stanford University and whose house was near the Stanford campus. It was on a Sunday afternoon in the Spring of 1936. The spring issue of the review carried a fine poem by Winters, "The California Oaks," a fact which probably put Winters into a favorable frame of mind about the magazine and its editors.

On Sunday afternoons, Winters and his wife, the novelist and poet Janet Lewis, entertained graduate students who, like myself, were attempting to write poetry. They would bring their new poems which Winters would read aloud while we drank a first-rate California Zinfandel at 50 cents a gallon. (We were in the depths of the depression when the best things in life were not free but were often mercifully cheap.) Winters said the *Southern Review* was a distinguished new literary quarterly. We should read it and some day perhaps we could publish in it. The fact that this southern magazine published a poem on a California subject by a California poet indicates to me that it was much more than a mere provincial, regional magazine. The next four years — 1937-1942 — I was teaching at Dartmouth in Hanover, New Hampshire. The most recent issue of the *Southern Review* was always available in the faculty lounge — also, eventually I believe I subscribed to it. I was delighted when, on the advice of Winters, Cleanth Brooks commissioned me to write a fiction chronicle reviewing about a dozen or so new novels. It was published in the Winter issue of 1941. Among the novels were *The Beloved Returns,* by Thomas Mann, which I admired and *Light in August*, by William Faulkner, which I detested, and said so. For me, the characters were boring and the rhetoric excessive. In recent years I have been chastised for this low opinion of Faulkner — once even in print! (Why is this man who dislikes Faulkner an editor of the *Southern Review*?) Almost the only person who has hacked me up in this opinion is the distinguished southern novelist Shirley Ann Grau. Well, I haven't really changed my mind about Faulkner though if I were writing the

review today — fifty years later — I would probably express my dislike with more urbanity than I did then.

Skipping a few years, in 1949 I was offered an instructorship at LSU to teach English to foreign students. (I was qualified to do so because I had had two years' experience teaching technical English to the Brazilian air corps in Sao Paulo, Brazil.) One reason for accepting the job was that LSU was the home of the defunct *Southern Review* and perhaps if it were started again I would become involved. I talked to friends and colleagues about it. There was definite interest in the English Department — but no money available. In 1950 I returned to Stanford, received my Ph.D. in 1953 and was offered an assistant professorship if I returned to LSU, which I did. Several of us in the English Department continued to talk up a revival of the *Southern Review* and within ten years there were results. When John Hunter became president, he fulfilled a promise to provide the necessary funds. Lewis Simpson and I were appointed editors of the new *Review* with equal rank and seniority in the spring of 1963. Work was to begin immediately and we were given until January 1965 to put out our first issue. Simpson and I chose Rima Drell Reek of the University of New Orleans French Department as assistant editor. (She was soon promoted to associate editor.) The indefatigable Patt Foster Roberson of the Journalism Department was chosen to be our business manager and secretary. She was probably the most enthusiastic member of our small staff. She wrote up our contract with the Franklin Press, addressed and mailed thousands of promotional leaflets, kept our subscription files, and, in effect, put out the magazine, as well as helping with proofreading and doing all the secretarial work.

In our efforts to get the magazine off the ground, we received strong support from the faculty, the administration, the graduate students, and the townspeople. (We sold 80 copies of the first issue at the corner grocery store!) There were, however, a few dissenters. One day when Patt Roberson was busy tying up a bundle of thousands of promotional leaflets, the telephone rang and a feminist voice said, "How dare you call this magazine you are about to publish the *Southern Review*?" Our administrative superior was Dean Max Goodrich of the graduate school who gave us his unflagging encouragement and support as did others in the faculty of both the Sciences and the Humanities. We held editorial meetings once a month, occasionally in New Orleans, the home of our associate editor, where after the meeting we sometimes dined at the restaurant in the Pontchartrain Hotel. Their adjacent Bayou bar had napkins with the imprint of an oak. We cribbed this design from one of the napkins. It became the logos of the new *Southern Review.* It is still in use today.

In November of 1963 I made an appointment with the founding editors of the original review, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, to request their support and advice. Then came the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas. I immediately phoned Cleanth and we almost cancelled our meeting.

Cleanth explained that the South did not accept responsibility for the murder of Kennedy. It could have happened anywhere. Nevertheless, this was perhaps not the best time to announce the re-establishment of a southern magazine. However, there were deadlines to be met so we went ahead with the interview in November at Yale University and they gave me some good suggestions. Don't depend too much on local talent for contributors — go national and even international — and emphasize continuity with the original review by putting out an issue entirely made up of contributors to the original review. And yes, they would also contribute to the new magazine later on. I acted on the second suggestion immediately and commissioned contributions from seventeen contributors to the original review including Brooks and Warren, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Glenway Wescott, and Randall Jarrell. This special issue was published in the summer of 1965.

Another way to emphasize continuity was the adoption of the same format as the old review. We hired the same printer — Franklin Press of Baton Rouge — who used the same type and similar page design as he did for the original magazine, and the same or very similar paper. Shortly after-the publication of our first issue, I received a telephone call from Randall Jarrell. He congratulated us on our new magazine and he said when he opened his copy he received an intense nostalgia shock. He was instantly carried back twenty-five years by the appearance of the same old page!

As Allen Tate once remarked, a quality literary quarterly should not cater to fashionable or trendy tastes. The editors should attempt to impose their own standards of literary and intellectual quality on their readers.

Now literary standards are very difficult to define and they cannot be stated with scientific precision, but perhaps they can be suggested. Here are some of the qualities I looked for when I selected material for my issues:

> Poetry — a sense of style, structure, and rhythm. The poems I most admire are not written in cluttered, chopped up prose, sometimes called "free verse." For me, the best poems and the most moving are serious, comprehensible statements about human experience, written in rhythmical verse which can be scanned by conventional prosodic systems. Powerful yet sensitive rhythm is the heartbeat of good poetry. Without rhythm the poem is dead. It is possible, but difficult, to attain successful rhythms in free verse. I have published poetry in that medium by Catharine Savage Brosman and Dave Smith. These poems in addition to effective rhythm had original compelling imagery. The imagists at the beginning of this century stressed the importance of the original precise visual image in transmitting feeling. Unfortunately, they wrote these poems in so-called free verse. In the following five or six decades, metrical language was almost forgotten, to the great detriment of twentieth-century poetry.

> Timothy Steele has written a brilliant book on this subject entitled *Missing Measures.*
>
> Fiction — the first thing I looked for was a sense of personal literary style such as we get in Katharine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and Henry James. Plot structure, character portrayal, and the ability to hold reader attention were of course also important. It was *style* that first attracted me to Anne Tyler and N. Scott Momaday. We were publishing these almost unknown writers in the sixties before Anne Tyler's *Accidental Tourist* made her famous and before Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* won the Pulitzer Prize. We had published excerpts from this novel before it was completed.
>
> Literary Criticism — I could spend a whole evening talking about what I think is going wrong with this genre — but now I'll take just a moment. The Marxists, semanticists, structuralists, post-structuralists, deconstructionists, and post-deconstructionists have all vied for attention in our literary quarterlies and in our classrooms. There is simply too much abstruse literary theory of doubtful validity and our graduate students are spending far too much time with abstract theoretical arguments far removed from the primary sources. Instead of trying to puzzle out what Derrida is trying to say, they should be spending their time reading another novel by Henry James or another play by Shakespeare. Frank Kermode, the brilliant British critic, said recently in despair that literary criticism should be returned to the commonsense elementary methods of the good book review in which the reviewer aids the reader in understanding and appreciating (or condemning) a given novel or body of literature.

If I were editing the *Southern Review* today, I would be wary of giving these theorists much space. And if I were teaching at LSU today, I would be wary of the more extreme feminists who prefer any third-rate work by a woman to any first-rate work by a man, and I would be wary too of the rampant reformer of the canon who is frequently the same feminist. The argument frequently advanced is that women writers of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries were discriminated against by the males and discouraged from publishing at all. It is now time to redress the balance by devoting more and more time digging up what was published and giving it serious attention no matter how minor.

Recently I interviewed in London the famous British poet Kathleen Raine. When the question of unfair male dominance in literature of the last several centuries came up — the argument for example that women did not have time to write because of the pressures of domestic duties — she replied *nonsense* — the women of the last several centuries in England had as much

free time as the men. They preferred needlework and crocheting to the arduous task of composing literature. If they had really wanted to become authors, they could have done so — like Jane Austen, George Eliot, and the Brontë sisters in England and like Edith Wharton in America.

A couple of other things bother me about the current literary and teaching situation. Look at what has happened to the word *elite* which used to mean the carefully chosen best of a society or profession. When I graduated from college, I was in the upper ten per cent of American society. I was proud of being among the elite. Poetry, I thought, was written by and for the elite, that is by and for the most sensitive, intelligent people. *Elite* and *elitist* are now dirty words suggesting snobbery and self-righteousness. If someone calls me an elitist, he is trying to insult me. The same thing had happened to the term *belles-lettres* which refers to literature as a fine art (which I think it is). Several years ago I attended a conference on early colonial American literature where the sermonic and poetic literature of the period were slighted as being elitist and belle-lettristic. Much time was spent on popular writing such as almanacs and penny-dreadfuls smuggled into the colonies for the youngsters right under the noses of their puritanical fathers. I sense an unfortunate levelling tendency in all this. The same goes for popular courses in science fiction which may replace (for many easygoing students) serious courses in the British and American fiction of the nineteenth century. It is the duty of the editors of our literary quarterlies to correct this levelling tendency.

In my teaching at LSU I was fortunate enough to have several students seriously interested in writing poetry. They were of the opinion that a return to formalism was the best hope for contemporary poetry. The most successful of these LSU formalists, as they have come to be called, are John Finlay, David Middleton, Wyatt Prunty, and Lindon Stall. Finlay, who died recently, published one volume of his poems during his lifetime with the distinguished Cummington Press and several pamphlets with the Barth Press of Kentucky. His *Collected Poems,* edited by David Middleton, were published posthumously by the John Daniel Press of California and his *Collected Essays* are forthcoming from the same press. His doctoral dissertation on Yvor Winters' poetry will be published by Maurice duQuesnay's magazine *Explorations,* headquartered at USL in Lafayette. David Middleton's first volume of poems, *The Burning Fields,* was published with the LSU Press. His second volume, *As Far As Light Remains,* was issued recently by the Cummington Press. Wyatt Prunty — who frequently deviates from strict formalism — has published four or five volumes with the Johns Hopkins Press. He teaches at the University of the South, and is in charge of their summer writing program. Lindon Stall has published poems with the Barth Press. All four poets published much of their earliest work in the new *Southern Review.*

Our policy was to search out new and promising young writers and publish them in the same issue as established writers. We wished to give the youngsters a place in the sun as it were. This appears to have been the policy

of Brooks and Warren as well as the policy of the present editors of the new review, James Olney and Dave Smith.

Near the Edge

Eulogy for Don Stanford, by David Middleton

I first met Don Stanford at LSU in the fall of 1971 when I began graduate work on the Master's Degree in English. Six years before, in 1965, as a sixteen-year-old poet, I had been given by my parents a subscription to the newly revived *Southern Review,* so Don's name was familiar to me as one of the two new editors. I was naive and brash enough in that fall of 1971 to present myself to Don as a poet and to offer him for publication in *The Southern Review* a selection of what I considered to be my best undergraduate poetry — all in free verse.

Don gave me what I later came to know as the "Winters treatment," a treatment which he, in turn, had received from Yvor Winters, his mentor and friend, in the 1930s at Stanford University. He looked over my poems, rejected them all, and said "Mr. Middleton, these poems aren't really very good, although I did like two lines in one of them about a bird." As I later found out, Don had a great love of birds, and I suspect he liked those two lines more for the subject matter than for anything else.

Eventually, under Don's guidance as my major professor, I was able to develop what talent I had as a poet and, not surprisingly, abandoned free verse for the traditional measured verse which Don usually preferred. Along with Wyatt Prunty, John Finlay, and Lindon Stall, I became a member of what Don later called the LSU Formalists, poets who, though quite different from one another, all benefited from a study of Don's own verse, his critical writings, and the metrical-verse poets whom we came to know through their association with him and with Yvor Winters.

I was always amazed by Don's productivity — the three volumes of verse, the magisterial edition of the *Poems of Edward Taylor,* the two-volume edition of the letters of Robert Bridges with enough annotations and chapter introductions to amount to a substantial biography in themselves, the book-length studies of Bridges and of the revolutionists and traditionalists in modern poetry, twenty years of editing *The Southern Review,* and the numerous articles, papers, reviews, and books that bear his name. When Don appeared at my university, Nicholls State, in 1991 as our annual Fletcher Lecturer, we filled four huge upright display cases in the library with his publications. Only a few of our speakers such as Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, or Lewis P. Simpson had enough books to be what my wife, Fran, and I, who put up the books displays, call a "four-case man." Viewing his life's work spread out there before him, Don commented wryly, and in classically understated fashion, "I've been busy."

Such humor was typical of Don Stanford. He liked to tell his friends that he was related to railroad baron Leland Stanford, who was, he said, a cousin twice removed — "beyond the money." In an editor's introduction to an issue of *The Southern Review* on the short, short poem, Don pointed admiringly not only to the epigrams of J.V. Cunningham, the modern American master of the

form, but also to a sign he'd once observed: "Don't lose your head / To save a minute. / You need your head. / Your brains are in it. Burma Shave." And I will never forget a question he asked me during the oral defense of my Ph.D. dissertation. It concerned a line in Keats's poem "Ode to a Nightingale" — - "Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!" Don looked me straight in the eye and said, "Mr. Middleton, do you believe that birds are immortal?"

As his remark on Keats indicates, Don had his decided literary preferences and usually expressed them in a plain, no-nonsense manner. He shocked some in the audience who heard his address as the 1993 Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Humanist of the Year when he said that a first-rate poem by a man was better than a third-rate poem by a woman — and vice versa — he quickly added. But Don was also a tolerant man. He gave me an A on a paper I wrote defending T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets,* writing next to the grade "I disagree with most of what you say about Eliot but you said it well enough from your own point of view." Don also patiently endured my 778-page dissertation on Dylan Thomas about whom he probably felt as did Winters who once called Thomas "the most naive Romantic who ever lived."

Don Stanford always took care of his graduate students. When Don's colleague, John Fischer, asked me a long and complex question on Deconstructionism in 1977 during my oral exam for the doctorate (Deconstructionism had just then been attracting attention at LSU), all I could honestly say was "Dr. Fischer, I have no idea." Before John could ask a second question, Don said, "Your time is up, Dr. Fischer." Then Don ended the exam by asking me to identify beautiful women in western literary history as he called out their names — from Helen of Troy to Maud Gonne. I was grateful for that question.

Don's students were always invited to his and Maryanna's famous sherry parties, parties at which we often ate too much not only because the food was so good but because, as poorly paid graduate students, we were often truly hungry. For the poets among us there were also beer and pretzel parties where we talked shop. And in England, my wife Fran and I attended plays with Don and Maryanna, had tea with them at Harrod's and dinner at Don's club, the Athenaeum, always at Don's expense, and Bloody Marys at the Grenadier, which, Don said, was the best pub in London for that drink. (No one, by the way could hail a London taxicab as effectively and with such authority as Don Stanford.) Don loved the finer things in life, including good food and drink. I recall a remark in his *Southern Review* memoir on Cleanth Brooks that as much as he admired Brooks he could never understand why Brooks thought Early Times the best whiskey to be had.

Don Stanford was poet, a scholar, and a gentleman. And although he had his formality and his reserve, he was also a man of deep feeling. When my father, an artist whose work Don had seen in my mother's house on a visit to us in Thibodaux, died in 1996, Don sent me a sympathy card that simply said, "you have his art to remember him by." And all of us here today have Don

Stanford's art — his poetry — as well as his many works of scholarship and criticism to remember him by.

When the Yvor Winters Centenary Conference takes place at Stanford University in the year 2000, Don Stanford's life and work will be an important part of the proceedings. Don was often considered unusual, to say the least, in his deep devotion to the work and often unconventional literary opinions of Yvor Winters. Yet he lived to see Winters' poems and the poems written by poets associated with him attain a prominence hardly imaginable not so long ago. And as to Winters' literary judgments, which Don generally shared, I quote not a member of the Winters School but the essay on Winters by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair in the widely used *Norton Anthology of Modem Poetry:* "Many...critics have simply tried to avoid Winters, but anyone who believes that the quality of literary works can be rationally discussed and justified must meet Winters' objections to much of modern poetry on his own terms."

Perhaps those who, like Winters and Don Stanford, knew the power of passion and the threat of the irrational are those most drawn to the values associated with the term "classicism." Don captures this well in his poem "The Falls" where the mind immerses itself in experience, then withdraws in order to define and judge experience:

> The Falls
>
> Clear as a lunar beam
> Down the deep cliff of night
> The inchoate waters stream;
> They rise suffused with light.
>
> Clear as a sudden bell!
> So may the violent mind
> Rise from the depths of hell
> Illumined and refined.

As this poem illustrates, Don Stanford was an optimist about the human condition. When the poet Ann Stanford died, he wrote of her in *The Southern Review* what he might well have written of himself: "she always radiated a kind of quiet enthusiasm for being alive, with all senses alert, in a universe which is, she believed, not so bad." That remark, I think, amounts to something like a statement of faith by a man who, following Winters, called himself a "reluctant theist" because God was needed to insure the existence of moral absolutes. And certainly Don's poems, especially those on birds, show him to have been deeply aware of natural beauty in a way that points to a divine Creator.

I last saw Don Stanford on August 11, just two weeks before he died. Fran and I had come by to drop off some of her homemade jams and relishes, which he loved. We didn't stay long, for we knew he was frail. When we left, I hugged him and told him I loved him, something I had never quite been able to bring myself to say in so many words before. On the drive back home, I thought of the colored drawing on a small card I often give away. The card depicts birds, such as those Don loved and wrote about, alighting on a pond after a long flight home. The caption reads, "With knowledge we begin the journey. Only by love do we reach the end."

David Middleton
12 September 1998
Rabenhorst Funeral Horne / Don Stanford Memorial Service
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Teakay Tinkham

The Boat in My Backyard

My husband moors his boat in my backyard.
He sails into the sunset every night
with neither charts nor compass, just some hard
liquor and his smokes, Marlboro lights.

I join him on his journey one night this week.
I climb aboard, kick back and share his smokes.
He cracks open a bottle. If we speak,
it's nothing serious — same lies, same jokes

we always tell. Tonight, we're sailing down
to Ocracoke, where he'll restock his booze.
I'll grab fresh grouper steaks somewhere in town.
He'll grill them on the boat while I choose

and navigate our final port of call.
We haven't laughed together since last time
we took this boat to sea — before his fall
from grace, fall from the wagon, fall to crime.

He hurls his empty bottle overboard.
It smashes against the back of my garage.
He glares at me. Before I can say a word,
his ankle bracelet buzzes for a charge.

It's two o'clock when I take down his sails
and wade through waves of grass up to my hips.
He watches me while leaning on the rails.
He raises a fresh bottle to his lips.

Daniel Tobin

Imaginary Career

After Rilke

At first, childhood, its infinite abandon,
aim-less, nothing to renounce. O inborn bliss.
Then the sudden plunge into appetite and loss,
after terrors, barriers, captivity, schoolrooms.

In spite, the one cowed becomes one who cows
and, getting even, bids others knuckle under.
Beloved, feared, savior, rival, winner —
the conqueror conquers in every run of blows.

Then, alone in the cold, ethereal expanses,
still deep within that well-spun fabrication,
a breath is taken toward the Ancient, the Origin...

and out of the hidden-most haunt God pounces.

We Are

After Rilke

just mouth — but do we sing the heart's distance,
that abides in the sacred core of everything?
Its boundless pulsing keys its beats to each of us
in whispered rhythms. And its enormous suffering
is, like its clamorous rejoicing, too much to bear.
So, always, since we are only mouth, we tear
ourselves away. But suddenly at once
the great heartbeat enters into us in secret
and we cry out.... Then, in that instant,
we are all creature, metamorphosis, and face.

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The Bridge

After Rilke

Just as when the wingbeats of ravishment
lifted you over primordial depths,
so now build your bridge, an astonishment
that boldly reckons the envisioned arch.

Miracle's not only when some menace
has been mystifyingly survived;
a miracle is made miraculous
by something consummately achieved.

One shouldn't presume to work in tandem
with the inexpressible relation.
Being's braid unfolds, always more ardent —
still, it isn't sufficient to be carried along.

Make of your most practiced talents a span
till they're strong enough to hold at once
two contradictions.... For it's in the human,
why the All-in-All requires your advice.

Stars, Falling
After Rilke

Do you still point up at them: the way
they'd steeplechase like horses across
the heavens, over the sudden hurdles —
did we have so many — of our hopes?
For then innumerable stars would leap
everywhere, so almost our every gaze
would hitch itself to their risky play,
and the heart feel itself to be whole
under all of that incandescent rubble,
and outlive them, somehow unscathed.

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The Gong

After Rilke

This sound beyond measure before
even being heard. As though the tone
exceeding us were the resonance
of a vastness ripening —

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Wild Rosebush

After Rilke

The way it is just there in evening darkening
with rain, young and undiminished,
and all the offerings of its tendrils lifting,
but still so deep in its own self-possession

already its flushing blooms have opened,
each one untended, each unintended;
so, self-surpassing; so, superabundant —
so inexpressibly self-impassioned

it coaxes the traveler coming down the road
with his evening mulling uninspired:
Oh, look, look at me, how impregnable
I am here, unprotected, without desire.

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In Passing

It rakes these leaves between
the hell strip and the street,
this itinerant wind
that gathers everything.
With particles, galaxies,
the duration at your feet,
it rakes these leaves between
the hell strip and the street.
They rest, for now,
but its gust will not retreat
and even a felt stillness
intends the fleetest wing.
It rakes these leaves
between the hell strip and the street,
this itinerant wind that gathers
everything.

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My Offering

To Zoster*

Legion of infinitesimal blowtorches,
and all the arsonists gleefully at work
on the writhing bundles. Piquant tortures
like needles, acid-tempered, or a pitchfork
sulfur-dipped in the lees of Phlegethon,
scourge with the credulity of a hairshirt.
But the body wants none of it: this zone
of fervid interest that scorches the flesh.
Lesser archon, latency's drone, purveyor
of the border between living and not,
you who've girdled me in your half-armor
brash with the blister-fallout of your rot,
be done, at last, with your intimate flaying.
Here, like a pain-patch, is my offering

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*Herpes Zoster, better known as "Shingles."

Gulls in Winter

They stand it seems a little stunned,
  disciples who've rashly ventured out
to follow a master they can't see,
  though where they've verged is only ice,
thin, the near channel waters rippling—
  not that roiling metaphor, the sea,
for what seethes below but holds us up
  or doesn't.
                They could take off
at any time, one by one, or all at once,
  into the gray-pink patina of sky
with its declining sun and fringe of cloud
  the color of the birds themselves;
but stay, like markers pointing every way,
  these gulls in winter. As they are.

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Ellen Weeren

Trying to Wrestle a Cat from a Tree

Although Thomas stood like a giant at 6'7", he felt very small that Easter Sunday.

But only because his mother had shortened the sleeves on his one good church shirt because she felt like his sleeves should show—and not his shirt cuff but the tattooed sleeve of his right arm, covered from one end to the other with a mermaid whose tail started at the tippiest tip of his cuff line and floated all the way up to his neck line, where her long hair and wide eyes rolled along the curve of his shoulder. The mermaid was surrounded by sea creatures his mother had never seen in their landlocked little town. Sea horses, peacock shrimp, and starfishes pranced along his forearm like it was the ocean floor.

"Can hide that shit from me with your father's old flannel shirt," she said, "but not from God." When she pushed the smoked-out end of her cigarette deep into the green glass ash tray, the smoke faded without much pressure.

"Don't you know God don't care about a little ink," he said but knew it was as futile as trying to wrestle a cat from a tree. Everyone was better off when things got to sit where they wanted to sit and no one got scratched.

Francesa Dowdy, who was now on her fifth and final last name, refused to understand that though. She was always trying to change something or somebody, for the better she would claim.

"Good people," she often said while picking a stray piece of meat from her back teeth with a toothpick from the diner where she worked, "were allowed to throw stones from glass houses if their intentions were pure and their hearts were right with the Lord."

"Haven't you got your own secrets," Thomas wanted to ask. Instead, he simply said, "Yes, ma'am."

"Just know that people are watching what you do. The kid is a reflection of the mother, like it or not. You're my legacy, and being thirty don't change that."

"Love that so much mama," he said and tugged at the plaid edges of his cuff. Mama didn't know that he had finger tattoos in his future, right on the top of the knuckles. Never mind, the one with her second last name that he planned for the nape of his neck. Octopus tendrils would serve as the tails of the letters that spelled out "Mama Tucker," for all her friends to gawk at. He'd get them before the funeral. You could be sure of that.

Well, most likely he would do it. Right then, he was sure of it. Sometimes, though, he just wanted to get a matching tattoo with his mama.

"Mama, you should get a tattoo. Something silly like a catfish."

"You stop, boy." She swiped her hand in the air as if a fly was getting too close to her eye. "It ain't gonna happen. I've had enough of needles."

The thing was that she probably did want one, too, if God wasn't so aware of every single thing she did.

Understand that she tried to be good, but when the spotlight of the sun faded, it was hard to keep herself away from a little bit of hooch and even more so from the hoochy cootchy of an able-bodied man. The worst of it was the tar-filled cigarettes that stained her teeth, her good conscience, and the tippiest tip of her lungs. So, for her, not getting a tattoo was like planting a flag on the moon—it meant a long journey of resisting something.

"Velma's meeting us at the diner for lunch," she said. "Wonder what's on her mind this time."

"The x-rays probably."

"You think? That's been settled."

"With Velma, nothing is settled. She wants you to get treatment."

"I'm getting pancakes, heavy on the butter and extra syrup."

"Mama, that would make a great tattoo." He smiled.

For a flicker of a second, she considered it then waved her hand in the air again. "Stop it, boy."

On Monday, he'd make an appointment at Inkwells for two people. He'd tell his mama the doctor needed to see her. Then he'd let her decide catfish or star. Both were worth catching.

When they got there, he'd tell her that he loved her and that God didn't give a goddamn if a son needed something to hold onto when his mama was gone.

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Claude Wilkinson

A Life

After the man wakes
and envisions the two
bridal-white swans gliding
through their morning
baths in a little pond
off McIngvale Road,
the need for reading glasses
and concerns over which
of his four humors
might now be swelling
his ankles and feet
soon seem less terminal
in the brightened
and brightening light.

He looks out his window
at twirling bronzed
and golden leaves
and wonders whether
and how one's muse may
adapt in an ever troubled world,
till he thinks of a spring
when, while in the wood
listening to the distant whistles
of quail, he found a dropped
but unbroken, angel-blue egg
lying on a pillow of violets
a few feet beneath its nest,
where he remembered
that poem of Larkin's
about an explosion,
and then, for the first time,
dreamt of eternal rest.

Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh

Could we blame the magi
in their unbridled adoration
for starting all this: even
unbelievers with light displays
that rival the pyramids
in spectacle and ingenuity;
the multitudinous shopping
channels stocked with bubbly,
antlered hostesses raving over
so many useless trinkets per
minute, such as illuminated
gingerbread birdhouses,
January through December—
shared with a few seasonal
breaks to appease Cupid
by pushing roses, pendants,
and precious stones; or when
things get green, advising us
to chug more ale and take
advantage of leprechauns'
reasonable charms; around April,
offering milk-chocolate rabbits
for Astarte; then paying homage
to hobgoblins in autumn?
Whom does this remind
of the star-struck shepherds
forsaking their flocks, ignoring
glorious Cassiopea and Eridanus
for a prophecy mysteriously lit?
Is there no room left for any
thought of Giotti's assemblage
of jubilant angels, his reverent
camels, and astonished lambs,
nor even his haloed babe who
would cause the world to split?

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October

Beginning its panoply
of melancholia, everything
is called to session by
the cacophonous caucus
of crows and a chattering shower
of iridescent starlings
descending from linden trees,
while maples and oaks
are dying the rich
mahogany of wine.

On one of the month's days
in ancient Roman myth,
the gate of their underworld
was ceremonially opened
for the blessed dead
to escape and again
commune with the living.

Here, for now, only
sunbursts shimmer through
our high kaleidoscope of leaves
and down to the macabre,
gossamer-sparkled window
from which a frantic candlefly
has all but gotten one wing free.

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The Imperative of Non Sequiturs

Atop tides
of sea-green leaves,
a crow surfs high
on its breezy limb.

Some robins
and blue-gray
gnatcatchers hop
and prod through
the grass below.

Above us all,
the sky is roiling
an ashen mass.

If our storm has
passed by twilight,
an owl will hoot
the moon out

so crepe myrtle
and dogwood
and red cedar
shadows highlight

a strobe of fireflies,
trash pandas mooching
around garbage cans,
flashes of rabbit play.

And a neighbor's
jingling wind chimes
will become that soft
rattle of skeletons
in the closet
of one's mind.

James Matthew Wilson

A Showing

The agent led them through the narrow house,
Its stained floors scratched with use and blanched by sunlight.
She held her binder close against her chest
And let them judge themselves the tight-packed rooms,
The creaking stairs, and sloping bedroom ceilings.
The outside was a rich and creamy stucco,
Peeling and cracked, as were the front porch columns.
When she would turn to speak, the couple saw
Beneath her coarse dyed hair its blackened roots,
Her nose projecting long and wide and straight.
And while they did not do much more than nod
Or sigh, observing how the rooms were cramped,
The closets deep but narrow, and the bath
A block of garish tile and chipped-up porcelain,
They sensed with disbelief and resignation
That this was all their credit could afford.
And so, they lingered on when others would
Have left to set their sights on other places.
They tried to praise the windows for their brilliance
And wondered if the porch could be enclosed.
The listing said there was a finished basement,
But what they found was one low-ceilinged room
Floored with asbestos tile and, at the back,
A great wood cupboard with cast-iron sink.
Upon the agent's face a spot of joy
Appeared, a silent gaze of recognition.
She ran a hand along the smooth-worn sides,
Turned on a tap, and listened to the sound
Of water pouncing down upon the metal.
It was, she told the pair, a canning kitchen,
And looked back toward a wall of empty shelves
That must, she said, have once been dense with jars
Of stewed tomatoes, long thin frying peppers,
Onions and artichokes in marinade.
A hook descending from the shadows showed
Where, wrapped in cloth, prosciutto once had cured.
So again, as they entered the back garden,
Her face relaxed into an absent smile,
Her eyes grew brighter, and she pointed out

Two ancient fig trees reared on crooked trunks,
The boughs grown brittle, patched with moss and lichen,
And weighted here and there with mottled fruit.
They had two children in this house, she said.
They planted these to celebrate the births.
Like what they do in Sicily, she said.
  The husband pinched a rough leaf with his fingers,
Then tried to meet her eyes in understanding;
He was impressed that she could know such things.
His wife did much the same and sighed with warmth,
If just to show that everyone must love
The thought of babies. Then, they turned back down
The gravel drive—but not just yet the agent,
Who seemed at rest within the fig trees' shade.
She looked into the canopy of leaves,
The broad lobes curling in the heat. She felt
The unmown grasses brushing on her ankles,
And heard the droning of a bee that moved
Among the branches till it found, at last,
A hole within a scabbed and hard green fruit
And disappeared in search of some lost sweetness.

In the Woods

The woods that line the margin of the college
And separate it from the parish school,
Grow bright with autumn sun upon their hills
Where rolling slopes lie thick in gold and russet.
The students walk its paths between their classes,
Crossing the bridge that spans its shallow brook;
Its purl runs quiet by the clean-washed rocks,
And yet, when twilight comes, asserts itself
To fill the ear with echoes of pure movement.
For some it is a place of dark retreat,
Followed when evening plates are cleared away,
The final bit of humor spoken, and
The idle spell of plentitude undone.
And others still will find its shades in pairs
To lose themselves in one another's presence.
But for the young man on that afternoon,
It may have been no more than one green space
Among some hundred others he had found
Upon a map. It may have been no more
Than one last destination to seek out,
Following the highways course from far up north,
Each curve and exit sign brand new to him,
So that, in some sense, he did not know where
He meant to go or where he would wind up.
Once there, however, he hiked in and hopped
The leaning chain-link fence-work near the trail,
Then stumbled through the grasping sprays of thorn.
He mounted up one bank and then descended,
And knew no more than that the air grew quiet.
There, where the ground began to sink again,
He settled down against the grade, its bed
Of moldering leaves grown dry and brittle rising
Into the air to spread their heavy scent.
He braced his head against a fallen trunk
Whose mossy spine was finned with shelves of fungi
And felt bark crumbling on his hair and skull.
What was that place to him who shut his eyes?
The children at the school, out for their recess,
Heard the great noise bolt through the empty air.
One cried and others' eyes chased after sounds
That echoed and reechoed and were lost.
The teachers on their watch did just the same;

They searched each other out but could not speak.
One blew a whistle, short and then sustained,
Calling the children, hurried, back to school.
And, though they tried to get them into line,
To bring some sort of order to the panic,
The children all were pushing now and crowding.
Some of them could not hear a thing, but only
Shoulder and press and press against each other,
The threshold narrow and the steel door clumsy,
One teacher struggling with a clutch of keys.
  And when they finally made their inward passage,
The last boy, bruised and sweating with the crush,
The neighborhood grew quiet and the brook
Grew quiet too as if it lost its music,
And waited as the sound that had gone out
And vanished now returned in other form.
A faint, unsteady wailing in the sky,
High-toned and searing, far but drawing near,
Revealed itself, at last, as sirens summoned
Toward the autumnal stillness of the woods.

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Books Received

The following books have been received and are in need of review. If you would like to be considered as a reviewer, please send a short *curriculum vitae* to alr@troy.edu, and indicate which book interests you.

Basile, Al. *Into the Dance*. Rumford, RI: Winnikinni P, 2025.

Bateman, Claire. *The Pillow Museum: Stories*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2024.

Garrabrant, James. *Nightwatch.* Garrabrant, 2023.

Jackson, Harold. *Under the Sun: A Black Journalist's Journey*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2025.

Contributor Notes

Mark Belair—Author of eight collections of poems—most recently *Settling In* (Kelsay Books, 2024)—Mark Belair has also published two works of fiction: *Stonehaven* (Turning Point, 2020) and its sequel, *Edgewood* (Turning Point, 2022). He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize multiple times, as well as for a Best of the Net Award. Please visit www.markbelair.com.

Jane Blanchard of Augusta, Georgia, has recent work in *ETC, Loch Raven Review, POEM,* and *Scintilla.* Her collections include S*ooner or Later, Metes and Bounds,* and *Furthermore*.

Ace Boggess is author of six books of poetry, most recently *Escape Envy*. His writing has appeared in *Indiana Review, Michigan Quarterly Review, Notre Dame Review, Hanging Loose,* and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes, watches Criterion films, and tries to stay out of trouble. His forthcoming books include poetry collections, *My Pandemic / Gratitude List* from Mōtus Audāx Press and *Tell Us How to Live* from Fernwood Press, and his first short-story collection, *Always One Mistake*, from Running Wild Press.

Robert Boucheron is a retired architect and the print editor of *Rivanna Review* in Charlottesville, Virginia. His stories and essays on literature and architecture appear in *Alabama Literary Review, Fiction International, Literary Heist, Lowestoft Chronicle, Saturday Evening Post, Summerset Review,* and *Superpresent.*

Catharine Savage Brosman, professor emerita of French at Tulane University, is known internationally for her eighteen volumes on French literature, four on American literature, creative prose, and, chiefly, fifteen collections of poetry. Her *Partial Memoirs* appeared in November 2024. Her forthcoming books are *Metates and Other Poems* (October 2025) and *Fire in the Mind: Poems New and Selected* (fall 2026).

Rick Campbell is a poet and essayist living on Alligator Point, Florida. His most recent book of poetry is *Fish Streets Before Dawn* (Press 53). A collection of essays, *Sometimes the Light* (Main Street Rag Press) was published in 2022. Other Poetry collections include *Provenance*; *Gunshot, Peacock, Dog*; *The History of Steel*; *Dixmont*; *Setting the World in Order*; *The Traveler's Companion*; and *A Day's Work.*

His poems and essays have appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *The Georgia Review*, *Fourth River*, *Kestrel*, *Gargoyle*, *Alabama Literary Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. He's won a Pushcart Prize and an NEA Fellowship in Poetry. His dog is named Parker.

Dan Campion's poems have appeared previously in the *Alabama Literary Review*. Dan is the author of the poetry books *Calypso* (Syncline Press), *A Playbill for Sunset* (Ice Cube Press), and *The Mirror Test* (MadHat Press) and the monograph *Peter De Vries and Surrealism* (Bucknell University Press) and is the coeditor of *Walt Whitman: The Power of His Song* (Holy Cow! Press). A native of Chicago, he lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

Christine Casson is the author of *After the First World*, a book of poems. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies including *Agenda* (England), *Stand* (England), *The Dalhousie Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Literary Matters*, *Fashioned Pleasures* (Parallel Press, 2005), *Never Before* (Four Way Books, 2005), and *Conversation Pieces* (Everyman's Library, 2007), in addition to the *Alabama Literary Review*. She also has published eco-critical essays on the work of Leslie Marmon Silko and the poetry of Linda Hogan and on the sequential poem, *Audubon: A Vision of Robert Penn Warren*. Ms. Casson is currently writing a book of non-fiction that explores the relationship between trauma and memory, and is at work on a study of the poetic sequence entitled *Sequence and Time Signature: A Study in Poetic Orchestration.* Her second book of poems, *Needle's Eye*, is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry in 2025. She is Scholar- / Writer-in-Residence at Emerson College.

Terese Coe's poems, translations, and prose appear in *Agenda, Alaska Quarterly, Cincinnati Review, Classical Outlook, Cyphers, Hopkins Review, Metamorphoses, The Moth, New American Writing, New Writing Scotland, Poetry, Poetry Review, Stinging Fly, Threepenny Review*, and the *TLS*, among many other journals. Her biographical black comedy, *Harry Smith at the Chelsea Hotel*, based on her long friendship with *Mahagonny*'s filmmaker-artist-wit, was read out by Equity Actors at Dixon Place, NY, in 2019. Her collection *Shot Silk* was shortlisted for the 2017 Poets Prize, and her poem "More" was heli-dropped across London for the 2012 Olympics' Rain of Poems. Agenda UK has featured her Rilke and Borges translations online since their 2007 *Special Rilke* Issue.

Craig Cotter was born in 1960 in New York and has lived in Los Angeles since 1986. His poems have appeared in hundreds of journals in the U.S., France, Italy, Czech Republic, U.K., Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, Canada, India, and Ireland. His fourth book of poems, *After Lunch with Frank O'Hara*, is currently available on Amazon. www.craigcotter.com

Morri Creech is the author of five books of poetry, the most recent of which is *The Sentence* (LSUP, 2023). He teaches at Queens University of Charlotte.

Terence Culleton has published poems in a variety of journals, including *The Eclectic Muse*. He has appeared on TV and radio shows in Philadelphia and New York, and several of his poems have been featured on NPR. Mr. Culleton's third volume of poetry, a collection of sonnets entitled *A Tree and Gone*, is now out through Future Cycle Press and has been included in the New York Review of Books Independent Press "New Releases" list. It's available at *https://amzn.to/3qDrRqN* or through his website: terenceculletonpoetry.com, where you can also purchase his other two books, *A Communion of Saints* and *Eternal*.

Stephen Cushman's most recent volume of poems, *Keep the Feast*, came out from LSU Press in 2022. The poems printed here belong to a new collection in the making, "Common Notions: Euclid Poems." He teaches at the University of Virginia.

Tom Hansen lives in the Black Hills of South Dakota. His poems appear in recent or forthcoming issues of *Commonweal, Descant, The Midwest Quarterly, New American Writing,* and others. His book *Falling to Earth* was published by BOA Editions.

Ruth Holzer is the author of eight chapbooks, most recently "Home and Away" (dancing girl press), "Living in Laconia" (Gyroscope Press) and "Among the Missing" (Kelsay Books). Her poems have appeared previously in the *Alabama Literary Review* as well as in *Southern Poetry Review, Blue Unicorn, Slant, Plainsongs*, and *Freshwater.* She has received several Pushcart Prize nominations.

Randall Ivey has lived almost his entire life in Union, South Carolina, a historic little town in the state's upcountry. He has published seven books and more than two hundred stories, poems, essays, and reviews. He teaches English at the Union branch of the University of South Carolina, where he directs the annual Upcountry Literary Festival, a gathering of some of the South's finest writers. His forthcoming book is *The Gift of Gab and Other Stories* from Green Altar Books.

Jarrett Kaufman has been awarded scholarships from the Lighthouse Writers Workshop and the Minnesota Northwoods Writers Conference. His fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has won numerous literary awards, including the Mary Mackey Fiction Award, the Tennessee Williams Short Story Award, the Missouri Writers Guild President's Award for Fiction, and the Ernest Hemingway Flash Fiction Prize. His stories have been published in more than a dozen literary journals. Most recently, his work has been published in *The Saint Ann's Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Arkansas Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, and *South Dakota Review*. He is an Assistant Professor of English,

and the Director of the No Man's Land Reading Series at Oklahoma Panhandle State University.

Bob Kunzinger is the author of nine books, including his recent *The Iron Scar: A Father and Son in Siberia*, critically praised by author Tim O'Brien, actor Martin Sheen, *Newsday, Yahoo! Entertainment*, and more. His essays have appeared in many publications, including the *Washington Post, World War Two History*, the *Chronicle of Higher Ed*, and noted several times by *Best American Essays*. He lives on the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia.

Richard Meyer, a former English and humanities teacher, lives in Mankato, MN. His book of poems *Orbital Paths* was a silver medalist winner in the 2016 IBPA Benjamin Franklin Awards. He was awarded the 2012 Robert Frost Farm Prize for his poem "Fieldstone." His poetry has appeared in a variety of print and online journals and has also received top honors several times in the Great River Shakespeare Festival sonnet contest. His most recent book, *Wise Heart*, is a memoir of his mother Gert who was born in poverty, came of age during the Great Depression, enlisted in the army during World War II, served overseas, and was awarded the Bronze Star for meritorious service performed during the Battle of the Bulge.

David Middleton is Professor Emeritus and Poet in Residence Emeritus at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana. Middleton's books of verse include *The Burning Fields* (LSU Press, 1991), *As Far As Light Remains* (The Cummington Press [Harry Duncan], 1993), *Beyond the Chandeleurs* (LSU Press, 1999), *The Habitual Peacefulness of Gruchy: Poems After Pictures by Jean-François Millet* (LSU Press, 2005), *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill* (LSU Press, 2013), and *Outside the Gates of Eden* (Measure Press, 2023). In the spring of 2025, *Texas Review Press* will publish *Time Will Tell: Collected Poems* / David Middleton.

Steven Monte is a full professor in the English Department at the College of Staten Island (CUNY). He has taught at the University of Chicago and at Yale University, from which he received his doctorate in Comparative Literature. His scholarly writing is mostly on Renaissance, Romantic, and modern poetry, including his books *The Secret Architecture of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (2021), *Victor Hugo: Selected Poetry in French and English* (2001, 2002), and *Invisible Fences: Prose Poetry as a Genre in French and American Literature* (2000). He has also published verse translations and his own poetry in a variety of journals, including *The Paris Review*, *The Boston Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *Think*, and *TriQuarterly*. He lives and runs marathons in New York City.

James B. Nicola is the author of eight collections of poetry, the latest three being *Fires of Heaven: Poems of Faith and Sense, Turns & Twists*, and *Natural Tendencies*. His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience: The Practical Actor's Guide to Live Performance* won a *Choice* magazine award. Recent nonfiction can be found on-line at *Mr. Beller's Neighborhood*, *Unlikely Stories,* and *Lowestoft Chronicle;* fiction, at *Neither Fish Nor Foul* and *The GroundUp,* forthcoming in *Sine Qua Non*. A graduate of Yale and frequent contributor to *ALR,* he has received a Dana Literary Award, two *Willow Review* awards, *Storyteller's* People's Choice award, one Best of Net, one Rhysling, and eleven Pushcart nominations—for which he feels stunned and grateful.

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, PhD, is a professor, poet, scholar, and writer at Fordham University in New York City, and serves as Associate Director of Fordham's Curran Center for American Catholic Studies. Her publications include two chapbooks and nine full-length collections of poems. Her book *Holy Land* (2022) won the Paraclete Press Poetry Prize. In addition, O'Donnell has published a memoir about caring for her dying mother, *Mortal Blessings: A Sacramental Farewell;* a book of hours based on the practical theology of Flannery O'Connor, *The Province of Joy*; and a biography *Flannery O'Connor: Fiction Fired by Faith.* Her ground-breaking critical book on Flannery O'Connor *Radical Ambivalence: Race in Flannery O'Connor* was published by Fordham University Press in 2020. Her poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *Able Muse, Alabama Literary Review, America, The Bedford Introduction to Literature (anthology), Christian Century, Christian Poetry in America Since 1940 (anthology), Christianity & Literature, Contemporary Catholic Poetry (anthology), Flannery O'Connor Review, Italian Americana, Italian Poetry Review, Literary Matters, Mezzo Cammin, Peacock Journal, Presence, Reformed Journal,* and *Taking Root in the Heart (anthology),* among others. O'Donnell's eleventh book of poems, *Dear Dante*, was published in Spring 2024.

Steven Peterson is a poet and playwright living in Chicago and northern Wisconsin. His first collection of poems, *Walking Trees and Other Poems*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. A selection of his poems is included in the anthology *Taking Root in the Heart* (Paraclete Press, 2023). His recent poems appear in the *Alabama Literary Review, The Christian Century, Dappled Things, First Things, Light,* and other publications. His plays have been produced in theaters around the USA. He is currently a resident playwright at Chicago Dramatists.

Nicholas Pierce's first collection, *In Transit*, won the 2021 New Criterion Poetry Prize. His poems have appeared in *32 Poems*, *AGNI*, *Best American Poetry Online*, *The Hopkins Review*, *Image*, *Subtropics*, and elsewhere. He is a PhD candidate in creative writing at the University of Utah.

John Poch has published poems in *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Five Points*, *Paris Review*, and other journals. His next book, *Dark Cathedral*, will be published by Slant Books later in 2025. He teaches at Grace College in Indiana.

Yasmine Beverly Rana's plays, *Decent* and *Dance the Orange*, have appeared in previous *ALR* issues. Rana's plays have appeared in journals including *The Kenyon Review*, *TDR The Drama Review,* and *U. S. 1 Worksheets. Another Spring and Other Plays* is forthcoming from Seagull Books and the University of Chicago Press, which published *The War Zone is My Bed and Other Plays.* yasminebeverlyrana.com.

Robert B. Shaw is the author of eight books of poems, the latest and largest of which is *What Remains to Be Said: New and Selected Poems* (Pinyon Publishing). He has also published many critical studies of English and American poetry. His book *Blank Verse: A Guide to Its History and Use* (Ohio UP) received the Robert Fitzgerald Award. He is the Emily Dickinson Professor of English Emeritus at Mount Holyoke College, where he taught for thirty-three years.

Hilary Sideris is the author of *Un Amore Veloce* (Kelsay Books, 2019), *The Silent B* (Dos Madres Press, 2019), *Animals in English* (Dos Madres Press, 2020), and *Liberty Laundry* (Dos Madres Press, 2022.) Her new collection, *Calliope,* is forthcoming from Broadstone Books.

Wendy Sloan practiced union-side labor law with her firm, Hall & Sloan, before returning to poetry. Her collection is *Sunday Mornings at the Caffe Mediterraneum* (Kelsay Books, 2016). Sloan's poems, translations, essays, and book reviews have appeared in various journals including *Blue Unicorn, Measure, Mezzo Cammin, Orbis, Orchards, Shadowplay,* and *Think,* and in anthologies including *The Able Muse Translation Issue, The Best of the Raintown Review, The Great American Wise Ass* Poetry Anthology, and *Poems for a Liminal Age,* benefitting Medecins Sans Frontières, UK, among other publications. She was a finalist in the Howard Nemerov Sonnet award Competition, and several of her poems have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Recently, one of her Italian translations received a Readers' Choice Award from *Orbis.*

J. D. Smith's most recent books are the fiction collection *Transit* (2022) and the light verse collection *Catalogs for Food Lovers* (2021). He is currently circulating two poetry collections and working on a book-length post-apocalyptic narrative poem. Smith lives and works in Washington, DC.

Michael Spence drove public-transit buses in the Seattle area for thirty years, retiring from that job on Valentine's Day, 2014. His poems have appeared recently in *Arkansas Review, Catamaran, The Hudson Review, Louisiana Literature, The New Criterion, The Southern Review, Tampa Review,* and *Tar River Poetry.* New work is forthcoming in *The Hopkins Review* and *Terrain.* His latest book, *Umbilical* (St. Augustine's Press, 2016), won The New Criterion Poetry Prize.

Donald E. Stanford (1913-1998) was an editor, a scholar, and a poet. He was a founding editor of the New Series of *The Southern Review* (1965—) at Louisiana State University, and his *The Poems of Edward Taylor* (1960) remains the standard edition of Taylor's poetic works. Stanford's scholarly studies include *In the Classic Mode: The Achievement of Robert Bridge*s (1978) and *Revolution and Convention in Modern Poetry: Studies in Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, E. A. Robinson, and Yvor Winters* (1983). His major collections of poetry are *New England Earth and Other Poems* (1941), *The Traveler* (1955), and *The Complete Poems of American Poet Donald E. Stanford, 1913-1998* (2002), a variorum edition by R. W. Crump.

Teakay Tinkham lives and works on a small boat on the coast of North Carolina. This is her first published poem.

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, *Blood Labors*, named one of the Best Poetry Books of the Year for 2018 by the *New York Times* and *The Mansions*, winner of the National Indie Excellence Award in Poetry. His work has won many awards, among them the Massachusetts Book Award and fellowships from the NEA and the Guggenheim Foundation.

Ellen Weeren's work has been published by or is forthcoming in the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *Kenyon Review* (KRonline), *Hunger Mountain*, *Liars' League NYC*, the *Hong Kong Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *Stonecoast Review*, and others. She's the recipient of the George Mason 2019 Outstanding Graduate Student Award (MFA Fiction), the Porches Writing Fellowship, the Dan Rudy Fiction Award, the Marjorie Kinnear Sydor Award in Literary Citizenship, and the *Kenyon Review*'s Novel Writing Workshop Peter Taylor Fellowship. TripBase twice recognized her blog about living in India as one of the top 10 best travel blogs.

Claude Wilkinson is a critic, essayist, painter, and poet. His criticism has explored such diverse artists and authors as Will Jacks, James Van Der Zee, Italo Calvino, John Cheever, Charles Fuller, and Etheridge Knight. His poetry collections include *Reading the Earth*, winner of the Naomi Long Madgett

Poetry Award, *Joy in the Morning*, *Marvelous Light*, *World without End*, and *Soon Done with the Crosses*. Wilkinson was John and Renée Grisham Visiting Southern Writer in Residence at the University of Mississippi. Other honors for his work include the Whiting Writers' Award and the W. M. Whittington, Jr. Purchase Award for painting.

James Matthew Wilson is the Cullen Foundation Chair in English Literature and the founding director of the MFA program in Creative Writing at the University of Saint Thomas. The author of fourteen books, his most recent collection of poems is *Saint Thomas and the Forbidden Birds* (Word on Fire, 2024). *The Strangeness of the Good* (2020), won the poetry book of the year award from the Catholic Media Awards. The Dallas Institute of Humanities awarded him the Hiett Prize in 2017; Memoria College gave him the Parnassus Prize in 2022; and the Conference on Christianity and Literature twice gave him the Lionel Basney Award. In addition to his role at the University of Saint Thomas, he serves as poet-in-residence of the Benedict XVI Institute, scholar-in-residence of Aquinas College, editor of Colosseum Books, and poetry editor of *Modern Age* magazine.

Ouachita River from the DeSoto Bluff, Arkansas, 2021

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