

Alabama  
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# **Alabama Literary Review**

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**Crossing the Field**

His wool sweater with its lingering aroma  
of wood fire, his brown boots laced up tight,  
his cloth coat unbuttoned to the clear cold,  
his leather gloves taut, his brimmed cap snug,  
a strapped suitcase in tow: a farm boy,  
in bygone years, leaving home. Ahead of him  
a wide expanse of snow, empty of any landmark,  
a distant line of trees all that beckons, the field  
he crosses an ice shelf that crunches, a sound  
that fills him with a feeling he knows is new,  
one born of the blue sky and the barren expanse  
and his open mind, a feeling that renders him  
alert that he's alive, in motion, the winter landscape  
a dreamscape of pure, undifferentiated hope that hints,  
as of yet, at none of the intimate intricacies  
that will ensnare, entangle, and enrapture him  
in the scented field days of a city spring.

## Places

There are places I dwell in  
each day without knowing

which will bear witness  
to my death, a location

I'll look to — if I'm conscious —  
and allow: *So it's you.*

Of course, I may also die  
on unfamiliar land.

Yet even the strangest place  
I'll watch

watching me leave, whispering  
to this new surface

of the old, inviting, departing earth:  
*Glad to have known you.*



***Jane Blanchard***

**Excursion**

The morning gorgeous, Actaeon decides  
To take a walk before the hunts begin,  
So leaving bed and breakfast off he strides  
Toward where the thickest forest starts to thin.

To his surprise, there Artemis presides  
While bathing with her current retinue  
Since she believes that very site provides  
Sufficient privacy from public view.

He gets more than a glimpse and is amazed,  
But she is neither flattered nor amused;  
She tells him not to speak because he gazed,  
And such offense may never be excused.

He goes, then hears his dogs and sounds a call:  
They come to find a stag, devour it all.

## **Iphigenia**

I do not yet accept that I should lose  
My life because my father caused offense.  
It seems the goddess wants some recompense  
For her beloved stag. Could she not choose  
One of my younger sisters — maybe use  
An animal instead? The consequence  
Of action or inaction is immense.  
Is death a duty I may not refuse?

There is no longer any pretense of  
A wedding here. My mother is distraught  
And even furious at those who brought  
Us to an altar never meant for love.  
Who else around can offer sound advice?  
Am I indeed to be a sacrifice?

***Elijah Perseus Blumov***

**Coney Island**

I and my beloved, motionless,  
observe the choreography of clouds  
embracing and releasing that same moon  
all others have made fodder for the soul  
before our time, and now. Still, it's ours.

We aren't so different from these waves, she says,  
pursuing that grand, fatal pantheism  
natural to the brain awash in beauty.  
But I would still preserve dichotomy:  
cosmic, dark, sublime, and deadly nature  
ravishes one's vision on the left;  
on the right, a merry world of lights,  
a whirling flurry full of foolery,  
engineering, neon, paint, and sulfites,  
lusts and laughter, cute, grotesque humanity.  
One's life, of course, is the negotiation.

What are they doing here — these children, parents,  
friends, and lovers, seeking simulations  
of their deaths? What can it be but love  
for life that drives them, not adrenalin,  
but gratitude to come back to the lights,  
and to their loves, out of the reeling void?

The grin she gave me then — the utter joy,  
the carnival and moonlight in her eyes,  
the sacred architecture of her cheeks —  
I hope to die that vision in my mind.  
I want to say: how could I be content  
to be at one with waves, with you, with God,  
if it would mean I could no longer be  
a separate thing to love a separate thing,  
a creature capable of love for you,  
for you as you? No god has had the world  
as we have had it — the colossal loss  
to come is loss indeed because of this.

This night shall never be again, nor we,  
yet only we have ever lived to see it.  
Let me hold you, let me live it more.

## ***Rick Campbell***

Note: This essay, and two that were in previous issues of the *ALR*, comprise an in-progress effort to write about traveling the length of US 52 from Charlestown, SC to Portal, ND and coming back east by following the Missouri and Ohio Rivers to Pittsburgh.

### **Highway 52 — The Drive**

This is the story of how we begin to remember. – Paul Simon

I am in West Virginia. Since I can't start at one end of 52 and go to the other, logic and expediency dictate that I begin in the middle — Huntington, WV. This situation seems to be highly synchronistic since the middle is how 52 began as well. The first iteration of U.S. 52, created in 1926, began in Huntington, WV and ran to Fowler, IN. By 1956 it had been extended NW to Portal, ND and SE to Charleston, SC. The fundamental question I have tried to answer is why.

We drove a couple hundred miles from Fairmont, WV, south to Huntington to pick up 52. Fairmont is where the Monongahela begins its journey to make the Ohio. It too is born in a confluence: the Tygart and West Fork join in downtown Fairmont, and the river heads north 130 miles to Pittsburgh.

Much like Edward Abbey carried Major Powell's journals with him as he floated the Grand Canyon, there are texts I have used as Ohio River companions. I had some notes on Meriwether Lewis' passage down the Ohio from Pittsburgh in 1803 when he was preparing for and setting out on his famous expedition. WPA Guides were my companions for this whole journey, out and back.

And there's William Least Heat Moon's *River-Horse: Across America by Boat*. He begins in NYC, motors up the Hudson, across Lake Erie, down the Allegheny and joins the Ohio in Pittsburgh. Heat Moon and River Horse passed under the Three Sisters Bridges, also known as the 8<sup>th</sup> Street, 7<sup>th</sup> Street and 6<sup>th</sup> Street Bridges, also known as the Rachel Carson Bridge, The Andy Warhol Bridge, and the Roberto Clemente Bridge. Pittsburgh claims to have more vehicular bridges than any city in the world,

and given this passion for multiple naming, it certainly could lead the world in bridge names as well.

## The Ohio

Much of Meriwether Lewis' story takes place on the Ohio River above where we join it in Huntington. Lewis had his keel boat built in Pittsburgh; he loaded his guns and ammunition there and started downriver on August 31, 1803. He had waited and fretted, cursed and fought with the drunk who was building his boat and was more than a month late. The best thing that happened in Pittsburgh is that Lewis got his dog, a giant black Newfoundland he named Seaman.

The Ohio was so low that Lewis and his men often had to get out and walk the boats downstream. The first week was the slowest and hardest. They pushed and pulled the crafts through shallow water sometimes only inches deep and crossed a number of riffles. One was at the old Indian village of Logs Town where, 160 years later, I had Little League baseball practice.

At Logs Town, Lewis had to hire oxen and a teamster to pull his boats through the riffles. He was not happy about the nascent capitalism he found: "the inhabitants who live near these riffles live much by the distressed situation of the traveller, are generally lazy [and] charge extravagantly when they are called on for assistance and have no filantrophy or continence. Perhaps he meant conscience? [I am not correcting spelling found in Lewis and Clark's journals.]

This was before the Ohio had been dredged, deepened, locked and dammed and turned into the river of barges it is today that we join in Huntington. It took Lewis and his boats about a month to get from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati. It will take us two days.

Driving through Charleston on 79 is like being swept down a narrow drain by fast water. Just get in a lane and hold on. It was an inauspicious beginning for this long, long trip. In Huntington, after less than three hours on the road, DL texted her friend that the dog has been barking since we left home. This was an

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exaggeration; he was quiet for at least 20 minutes. Her friend texted back: “do you want me to come get you?” DL said she would stick it out. The dog in question was Mu Shu, a little white mutt. Not quite as noble or large as Seaman, but a good guy anyway.

In Huntington we got off at the 52 exit and the crossed the river into Ohio. We were at the beginning of our search. For what? Casual discovery? The opening sortie along 52 was through an industrial wasteland. It was a four-lane highway through towns that had seen better days. Coaltown and Irontown were shadows of their former selves. In their heyday this was an important steel production region. Iron ore was found here and over fifty furnaces produced steel. Eventually, Pittsburgh and Youngstown came to dominate steel manufacturing and Irontown lost its source of wealth. These towns sat on one of the river’s many oxbows, so we were heading north as we started downriver. We passed Ohio Furnace and Franklin Furnace. A pattern quickly emerged: a few big houses with river views and green, well-tended yards sat above random and ramshackle houses and trailers along the highway.

We were on the Ohio River Scenic Byway, but the scenic hadn’t kicked in yet. There are many ways to look at this part of the Ohio Valley that 52 threads its way through. The writers of the WPA Guide offered: “US 52 runs for 185 miles down the Ohio River Valley. Part of the countryside is attractive; other sections are sorry and poverty-stricken, but every mile is interesting.” This might be first blast of poverty tourism — like our recent fascination with hungry dogs and quaint poor people in dusty Mexican towns. The Guide notes that the highway shows us “boats and barges chugging against the current and little river towns asleep or dying.” Today’s promotional prose, from the Ohio River Scenic Byway brochure puts it this way: “exceptional river views, breathtaking hills and lush forest valleys connected by curvy routes dotted with charming river towns — ideal road stops with fabulous local food and interesting things to do [and] views of the mighty Ohio River.” We drove through many towns; some were sleepy, some had sections one might suspect were dying.

Heat Moon on his River-Horse, on its downriver course, rolled (what verb should one use for a cabin cruiser, a boat without sails?) through the same cities we did, but with a far different view. He and his companion, Pilotis, were looking at the riverbanks from the river. We were looking at the river, usually from a short distance above the banks. The difference is notable and not always pleasant. Of Wheeling, WV, Heat Moon writes that it was formerly a river town, but today it's turned its back on the Ohio and shows the "bum ends of old brick office buildings and warehouses and a wretched four-story auto garage." Heat Moon demands a loyalty that only a river man can muster.

Of Portsmouth, Ohio he wrote that it seemed bent on hiding the river behind a high, long and forbidding concrete floodwall. It had become a place where land voyagers cruised up in SUVs, parked and went shopping. That was us in the SUV, though I think our purpose was noble and I swear we did not shop. Heat Moon does not mention that the floodwall, all 2000 feet of it, was covered with murals with a blend of Soviet Realism and Thomas Hart Benton Regionalism that depicted the river's history.

The floodwall was crucial to the survival of Portsmouth's riverfront area. For almost 200 years the town battled the Ohio's floods and lost. In 1937, the river overwhelmed its current wall when it crested at 71 feet. This is the primary reason that most of Portsmouth's population lives in the steep hills above the river. Flood control was not of much interest to Heat Moon; he was not fond of dams either. Portsmouth wasn't packed with tourists, but it wasn't very sleepy, and it wasn't dying.

Whether one reads descriptions of the river valley from the WPA's curmudgeonly writers or the hyper praise of the Byway prose, it's true that river was always interesting and often beautiful. The valley was pastoral, the full green of summer was coming on strong. I grew up watching barges and tugs on the river, and it's still a sight I count as good, though Heat Moon in his little craft had a differing opinion of barges too.

A few miles past Portsmouth, the Shawnee Forest rose along our right side; Appalachian hollers and runs came down to the highway on their way to the river. For the most part the Ohio is not a recreational river. There are few boat ramps, few parks



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along its banks. On the highway between the small river towns there was almost no river access. It was scenic, but that was it. The river was something to look at. The Ohio is a commercial and industrial water way; boating and fishing are secondary pursuits. For these reasons perhaps, there does not seem to be much expensive riverfront real estate. Where anything is built on the river it's a factory, a power plant, maybe warehouses and docks. The railroad is the most prominent feature. Every few miles one sees a cluster of old mobile homes hugging the riverbank. Having spent my last fifty years in Florida, where "waterfront" means any place one can see the water, and actual waterfront might cost a few million dollars, this lack of moneyed land and big houses was perplexing. Why don't these people live on the river; why haven't rich people bought river front land and built McMansions? The answer is that railroads own the riverbanks. The tracks are usually only a few feet from the river. There might be some tilled bottom land between the tracks and the highway, and where that land widens, one sees farms. But even these farms and homes are not on the river. This is a working river; it's not for play and not a means for speculators to make money.

Why were we driving on the Ohio side? I don't think I ever gave it any thought. I grew up on the Pennsylvania section of the river, but Ohio was just a few miles away. We used to go there to buy 3.2 beer. My grandfather was born around Salinesville, Ohio, and talked to me about East Liverpool. I think it seemed natural to me to drive down the Ohio side. Kentucky was, in my mind, far away, even a bit foreign. In my imagination Kentucky was southern, exotic, and, I'm sorry to admit, backwoods. Harlan County. Hillbillies. So, we were driving down the Ohio bank and looking over at Kentucky.

What I did not know is that according to Federal law in these parts, Kentucky owns the Ohio River. I still don't believe it. It's almost as strange as the fact that the Queen owns all of the swans in Great Britain. The law, passed in 1792, states that Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois begin at the low point of the river's northern bank. Ohio challenged this law in the Supreme Court in 1966 and lost. I, and I'm sure most people, thought the boundary between these states ran down the middle of the river. It gets stranger. Along the northern Ohio, West Virginia owns the river between

it and Ohio; the court denied Ohio's claim, ruling that Virginia had originally owned the river (there was no Ohio then) and it became part of West Virginia like an inheritance. The headwaters of the Ohio belong to Pennsylvania because it begins there, as all sports fans know, at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers. However, even this could be a matter of dispute. "Ohio" is based on a Seneca word that means "good river," and the Seneca consider the Allegheny and the Ohio to be the same river. The Seneca never fought or won any court battles about this naming. If I were making an argument, I'd say that the Ohio and Monongahela were one river, given that there's no change of direction when they merge, but the addition of the Allegheny in this confluence just makes it a cleaner decision to start a new river.

We were driving down the Ohio side with no consciousness of any of these bizarre river legalities; we were there because I like Ohio better than Kentucky. Earlier in the year when I'd driven down the Ohio from where it flowed through Pennsylvania, I paid little attention to the sliver of West Virginia stuck up there giving WV its claim to the river. That sliver, that finger, whatever the appendage most looks like, extends north between Ohio and Pennsylvania as it follows the Ohio's western shore. The river flows westward when it crosses the PA line. WV is to the south there. The river flows west a few more miles until in East Liverpool (or Chester, WV, if we are being legal) it makes its big curve and starts to flow south. Then it runs southwest until it gets to Huntington, WV, and starts its western flow. From here, though its meanders often turn it north and south, it flows west until it merges with the Mississippi.

Heat Moon calls this "westering" — that course and behavior that characterize American history and American travel. We were westering too; past Portsmouth, 52 runs along the river and there are few towns; all of them quite small. The road banks and swoops, rises and falls, and the valley is wide. We went through Sugar Grove, Friendship, Rome and Manchester without incident or pause. Manchester was the most down and out and dilapidated of the river towns so far. It lives up, or down, to the WPA's description of sorry, but it's one of Ohio's oldest towns and once was a rich river town with excursions and showboats docked at its wharf. There's none of that now.

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When we drove into Aberdeen it was time to rest; the sun was setting. Aberdeen did not offer any lodging that even by my low standards looked acceptable, so we crossed the river into Maysville, Kentucky — the legal side of the river. Maysville is a river town that has maintained some of its old river charm and architecture, but we had to pass on lodging in that area and head up into the hills looking for a chain motel where I could smuggle in Mu Shu the barkly dog. We found a Quality Inn that was totally nondescript and didn't offer a view of the river. Malls and chain restaurants were abundant. We passed a night without exploring the local scene because it was not a scene we'd ever seek.

In the morning we went back down to the river, found a good breakfast at a diner with outdoor tables and a view of the river. Daniel Boone, we read on a sign, had a place by the original river landing back in 1784. This was the best foray, so far, into Ohio River culture.

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Though 52 did not seem to be dangerous or sinful, and it would prove to be rather dull in many places, Ohio 52 has a song that warns the young to be careful if they find themselves out there. Perhaps any road (or river) is dangerous because to travel it too far is to open oneself to change and other views of life. To a people steeped in rural, Christian tradition a road can be threatening and a road that runs along a river is doubly dangerous.

“Highway 52”'s lyrics begin with a mother's plea —

well Momma said, “Son before you go  
There's something I want you to do  
Promise me that you won't go wrong  
As you travel down Highway 52.”

and ends with, perhaps, that son's challenge to his girl —

So tell me my love, oh tell me my darlin'  
What are you going to do  
If you don't love me or care about me  
I'll be headin' on down highway 52

In between there's some travel narrative —

From the old Queen City to New Boston town  
Ironton and old Hanging Rock  
I've made every stop, I've played every station  
While travelin' there on Highway 52

\*\*\*

After breakfast we crossed the river again and took our chances on 52. About twenty miles downriver we drove into Ripley. History was kicking in. In Ripley, at Freedom's Landing, we read of the town's importance to the Underground Railroad. Historical markers told us about abolitionist Rev. John Rankin, and we found that this was the place that inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe's story of Eliza's crossing the frozen Ohio River. Heat Moon also stopped here because Ripley had a convenient and friendly dock. Much of the Ohio's banks didn't offer River-Horse, or any other small craft, a safe place to harbor because the banks were either steep, rocky, muddy or industrial and concrete. Again, the Ohio's not meant for recreation. But here Heat Moon found a good dock, tied up and came ashore. He and Pilotis walked around town hoping for good conversation and good food but found neither. We had our lunch in our cooler and ate at a picnic table overlooking the river.

The next stop on the US 52 history tour was Point Pleasant, the birthplace of Ulysses S. Grant. The Grant House Museum was only a few feet from the highway, so we stopped to look around and stretch. Grant's probably not anyone's favorite president, unless they live around Point Pleasant, but I enjoyed this site. It was a proverbial humble log cabin and wood frame house stuck between the roadside and a steep hill. Very much the opposite of Mount Vernon or Monticello. Grant did not have a silver spoon childhood. During the 1937 flood, the house was saved by placing a large boulder on its roof to keep it from floating away. The '37 flood was among the greatest catastrophes of U.S. history. In many places the river crested 25 feet above flood stage. Three hundred eighty-five people were killed along the river. Damages were pegged at 500 million dollars, which would be about nine billion dollars today. In my hometown of Baden, PA, there was a marker in our little downtown, next to Overholt's Grocery and the flat my grandparents lived in, that

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showed the highwater mark to be far above my head.

We drove through Utopia, but it felt not much different than the other towns. Smaller, as no doubt, utopia should be. When Lewis floated past here, almost all the journal entries are about the Kentucky side of the river. What's now the Ohio side was then the Northwest Territory, and everything beyond the northern or western bank of the river was yet to be settled. Marietta, at the mouth of the Scioto River, was the largest town south of Steubenville.

We continued along the river to Cincinnati. It's become all too apparent to me while writing this that I have never known how to spell Cincinnati. There's no rhyme to help out as there is for Mississippi. I used to dislike the Queen City because the Red Legs, my Pirates' rivals, played baseball there. Now, though, the football Bengals are better fodder for Steeler fan animosity. These things fail to stand up to rational explanation and don't help with spelling problems either.

On a previous trip here to attend a conference I was drinking in the hotel bar and talking to, showing off for, a man I'd just met. I'd just gotten my long-delayed BA and was telling him about all the books he should read. Too late in this revelry, I thought to ask him what he did, and he said he was the Chair of the English department at the U of Wyoming. I was, as I usually am when I stick my foot in my mouth, chagrined. You probably don't need me to tell you what to read, I said. He, Henry, was polite and pretended that I had enlightened him immensely. Then he asked what I did, and I told him I'd just graduated and accepted a grad position at the U of Pittsburgh, but I didn't really want it because it was going to bring me too close to home and my father. Henry said he'd give me a fellowship to Wyoming and I took it. That's how I used to not plan my life.

Today we were following 52 into the city, and traffic was getting bad. It was late afternoon, close enough to rush hour, and after getting turned around twice trying to follow 52 through downtown's one-way streets, I opted to take the interstate. We took the 74 toward Indiana.

The Queen City was where we would leave the Ohio River behind as 52 turned north to cross central Indiana. My literary companions, Meriwether Lewis and William Least Heat Moon, were also going off down river as we turned north.

South of Cincinnati one could find Big Bone Lick, where mammoth and mastodon fossils have been found. I still regret not making a detour to see this, but we had a mission. The 74 took us to Harrison, named for William Henry Harrison. It was president day. The Indiana-Ohio state line runs through the center of town.

The area around Harrison has the distinction of being one of the northernmost battle sites of the Civil War. A rogue Confederate, Brigadier General Thomas Morgan led troops from Tennessee across Kentucky and into Indiana. He had been forbidden by his commander to cross the Ohio River, but he did so anyway. He hoped to draw Union troops away from Vicksburg. Why I find this significant has to do with Morgan's path of retreat. After a number of crazy battles, burnings and lootings (such as the time they stole a bunch of smoked hams and then dropped them because they were attracting flies and the Union troops used the hams to track Morgan) he made his way back into Ohio where he fought and lost a number of battles while trying to cross the Ohio into West Virginia. After many skirmishes, his force of 400 (down from the 2400 he left Tennessee with) fought one of his final battles at Salinesville, where my grandfather's family lived. He retreated from there to West Point on the Ohio River where he was captured. In some bizarre way, Morgan unites US 52 with my family history.

The first few miles 52 traverses in Indiana are scenic. It runs along the Whitewater River, complete with rapids and shoals as its name promises. The river is the swiftest in Indiana. This portion of the drive was promising and had it continued in this manner, 52 would have been a great highway. It didn't. The Whitewater went north and 52 went west. Westering, in this case, was not the scenic option.

It would be an excellent idea to write nothing more about US 52 in Indiana, but a couple of things ought to be said. It won't be about the highway being interesting, and it won't make the highway interesting. This is probably some sort of Principle. Frankly, this road isn't going to get interesting, not for a lot of miles. But there's an Origin question to be answered. Why did the original segment of 52 begin in Huntington and end in Fowler, Indiana? I'd already determined that I didn't know why the southern/eastern terminus was in Huntington, but in a few miles more we were going to get to Fowler. I figured something

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would be there, some logical explanation for why in 1926, 52 stopped there. We drove through Indianapolis and Lafayette and through either a hundred or just one giant cornfield. 52 was straight, usually four-laned; we found nothing that begged us to stop and look around. I was so hung up on seeing Fowler that we drove past dark and should have stopped in Lafayette to see a Boilermaker and maybe find a good beer and deli.

We drove on to Fowler as if it was a Grail. I'd made Fowler mythic. When we got there, we saw no distinguishing marks, just two gas stations and no motels. We can come back and look in the morning, I said, as we drove a few more miles to find a motel on US 41. It looked like an expressway compared to 52, and I thought of it running through Georgia and on through Florida. I thought of the Allman Brothers' "Ramblin' Man" and conceded that 41 was a far greater highway with a far better song. US 41 runs north through Chicago and on to Michigan's UP and Lake Superior. I was too tired to reason about this once it was revealed. I suppose one could make a case for connecting the Ohio River to Chicago and the Great Lakes. I didn't make it that night.

However, when morning came, we proved Frost's maxim, that way leads on to way, and we did not return to explore Fowler. If we had we might have discovered that we had been hasty the night before in our judgment of Fowler's utmost emptiness because the small downtown was not on 52, so we'd not seen it. My research (Wikipedia) revealed that about 2200 people live in Fowler; it has a library and a theater. It was once a "booming" small town. Now it's just a small town. And there was no explanation of why 52 once ended there. My theory was as good or bad as any.

We were headed north again. 52 and 41 ran together until 52 takes a left toward Illinois and joins US 24 and to cross the Illinois line. This stretch is famous for being the place where Cary Grant is chased by the crop duster in *North by Northwest*. Its iconic flatness can still make you think that some large, winged thing, machine or dinosaur, might swoop down and carry you away.

Indiana had come and gone and except for the first 20 miles along the Whitewater River, there was nothing but its nothingness

to write about. How interesting can finding nothing be? Was the constant and consistent lack of answers going to be enough to carry this narrative to Portal?

It's time to talk about coffee. DL wants Starbucks in the morning. These little farm towns were not making her happy. I will drink any gas station coffee because I put so much cream and sugar in it that it's just a notch below a warm milk shake. When it started to get dark and we'd be looking for lodging, we also watched for Starbucks so that the morning might start smoothly and without panic. I was not tech savvy enough to use a find Starbucks app for a web search. We had some tumultuous mornings executing a Starbucks search, and sometimes it just didn't bear fruit.

Just across the state line in Sheldon, IL, 52 makes a right turn and heads north. One of the other enduring mysteries about 52 is why it turns where it does. Why make a 90 degree northern turn in Sheldon? Why turn west a few miles later in Donovan? Why turn north at IL 49 and run north to Kankakee and on to Joliet? Why turn west in Joliet and not go on to Chicago? These questions didn't get answered either.

52 enters Kankakee on the bad side of town. The Projects were what one expected of them, and downtown was sorely failing. This American Life did a show on Kankakee as the worst American city when it came in 354<sup>th</sup> of 354. Letterman was more practical and helpful when he donated two gazebos to help out. I guess really crappy cities need gazebos. The big K did not seem to be a place to dally.

The WPA Guides offer a section called Tours that follow highways that were important in the late 1930s and give excellent and detailed descriptions of what can be found on the highway. The writers, whoever they may have been for the 52 tour, note that the highway "picks it erratic course across northern Illinois."

Above Kankakee, at Bourbonnais, IL, 102 split off from 52 toward Braidwood. The WPA Guide said 52 went to Braidwood, and we realized that in the years since 1936 the highway had been adjusted and resigned. On the map, 52 and 45 went into Joliet, but this older version skirted the city. It sounded like a good idea.



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102 followed the Kankakee River and seemed to offer a much better drive than the current 52, so we took it. We were on the river with the French explorer, La Salle. A smaller road to the left went to Diamond, where a flood in 1883 trapped and killed at least 74 miners. The mine was sealed and became a monument to the dead workers. At Morris, the Kankakee joined the Illinois River. This drive into WPA history required us to read the guide's descriptions and mileage markers, which were meticulous, and transfer them to our road atlas like an overlay. We saw that we needed to go north on IL 47 to rejoin 52 as it ran west from Joliet. We made it.

Back on 52 we saw a sign for Norway, the first permanent Norwegian settlement in the US, and realized that now the guidebook and the atlas were giving us the same information. Norway was founded by Cleng Person, who was sort of the Johnny Appleseed of Norwegian migration. He was a wandering man who liked to found settlements like Appleseed planted trees; Person founded 30 settlements from Norway, IL, to Texas.

It was early afternoon when we drove into Troy Grove and saw a sign for the Wild Bill Hickok State Monument. It seemed like a good place for lunch, and I hoped for a restroom too. My hope was fulfilled and then we carried our lunch to a picnic table by a black granite obelisk with a historical marker and Wild Bill's story. He was born here, toured with Buffalo Bill, and was shot dead in Deadwood. We also noted that his name was James Butler Hickok, not Bill. As we were eating, a pickup with big tires and dark windows stopped a few feet from us. Some encounter like this seemed inevitable to me, so I screwed up some courage and turned toward the truck as the window slid slowly down. A big man said you interested in Hickok? Even if I wasn't, I would have said yes, so it was easy to say yes. He got out and proceeded to not only tell us more about Wild Bill but invite us to hang around Troy Grove for a few days until the town celebrated his life with live shootouts, cemetery tours, and wagon rides. There'd be lots of guns on display too, the guy promised. He was a good man, but we told him thanks and that we had to get on down the road.

We were about to take a break from our 52 exploration and head for the big city of Milwaukee, where I would visit a dear

friend and catch a ball game. As luck would have it the Pirates were playing the Brewers, and it fit into our road trip schedule. After Wild Bill we got on the 39 and headed north to Rockford and another dog friendly motel.

Though our digression along the original 52 was a great ride, it meant that we didn't go through Joliet. For some reason when I think of Joliet I think of prison. It was the home of the Illinois State Penitentiary back in the day — from 1858-2002. Leopold and Loeb were there and Baby Face Nelson too. Many gangster flicks referred to doing time in Joliet. Jake Blues of the Blues Brothers did his time there. Steve Goodman referred to it as “the charm school in Joliet.”

I'd spent a few days there (Joliet, not the prison) in the early 70s. My mother was visiting relatives, and I was hitchhiking from somewhere, probably California, when I found out she would be there. I hopped off the 80 at a Joliet exit and went to my cousin Jodie's house.

I spent a few days there and then caught a ride south with my uncle as they headed back to Florida. I had them drop me off at Indiana 28, and I hitched to Elwood where my mother was raised. Hitching backroads in rural Indiana wasn't easy, but by evening I made it. I had my great aunt's address and knocked on her door. A small white-haired woman answered the door cautiously. I looked like a lot of hippies in 1973 and few of them knocked on old women's doors. She wasn't scared of me and let me talk. Hi, I said, I'm Rick Campbell. That meant nothing. Rosemary Campbell's son. Nothing. Rosemary Merritt's son. Her eyes glistened and she started to softly cry. I didn't think I'd ever see one of Rosemary's children, she said. But there I was, and she told me to come in. We talked. My mother had never been back to her hometown. She left when she was entering high school to live in Dunbar, WV. Her father was a glass blower, and he moved around for work a lot. When my mother married, she moved to Baden, PA, my father's hometown, and they'd never been back to Indiana. I filled my great aunt in on our lives; I left out a lot of the bad parts. And after a while she took me to meet a bunch of cousins and relatives. It was a great and surprising night. I wasn't sure I'd be welcome at all; when I left town, I felt loved. I hitched on east to Pennsylvania.

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After our Milwaukee digression, we headed back to 52. We followed IL 2 down the Rock River, through Oregon and Grand Detour. This area was the site of numerous battles in the Black Hawk War, including the first at Stillman's Run. Isiah Stillman commanded a unit of militia men who were defeated in the battle. The Rock River and 102 joined 52 in Dixon, the home of Ronald Reagan. Presidents kept popping up along the roadside. Since 52 has no official nickname, not the Lincoln Highway or the National Road, I'm thinking of submitting President's Highway as a choice. Another future president was commemorated here too: Abraham Lincoln served in the militia.

Any road next to a river is a good road to drive, and we followed the Rock a few miles west until 52 jogged north again and began its final run to the Mississippi. It's hard to say that 52 was always heading for the Mississippi or that it ever intended to go there, but someone meant it to and soon we would see the big river from high bluffs above Savanna, IL. We were a few miles south of the Mississippi Palisades in the Driftless Area — a formation created by the lack of glacial drift and the presence of the Mississippi. The area has steep cliffs, elevations above 1500 feet, and is said to resemble New England and the land around the Great Lakes. We rolled over the southern edge and crossed the Great River into Sabula, Iowa.

Even though US 61 is called the Great River Road, it does not closely follow the river in this part of Iowa. 52 runs along the riverbank until it gets to Dubuque and joins 61. Dubuque was another one of our goals, a place we planned to stop, though I'm not sure why. It was the first Mississippi river town we came to, and we knew someone from there, though she now lived in Ohio. Sometimes any little connection influences a decision when life offers some latitude.

From Sabula to Dubuque, we traveled along and under high bluffs; elevation markers put us between 600 and 800 feet. This too was in the Driftless Area, but it was not as spectacular as the land on the eastern side of the river.

Dubuque's highways are far more convoluted than one expects from a small town in Iowa; the steep bluffs and the riverbank served to funnel Highways 61, 20, and 52 into exactly same place. Overpasses and underpasses and exits came up fast as we were being swept downhill and staring at the Father of Rivers. We found a river front exit and explored that part of the city before heading to our cheap motel, high on a curving bluff above the river.

Dubuque's an old river town and those are the best there are. We spent two nights, ate, drank, walked, and looked at the river.

After Dubuque, we detoured again to go camping in Wisconsin, east of Prairie Du Chien at Wylasuing State Park. It sat on a bluff overlooking the Wisconsin river. We were back in the Driftless Area. From our campsite we looked down over rock outcrops at buzzards drafting and wheeling; it's not often you get to be above buzzards. There were many facets of this trip and most of them went very well. Camping wasn't one of them. We got to our site and set up. We admired our beautiful view. Then I heard heavy equipment and went to explore. The area around the restrooms was being graded and bulldozed. It was loud, and they didn't back off when you had to go pee. It was a few days before Memorial Day, and maybe they were under orders get the job done before the holiday crowd made it here. At first it seemed a minor setback, but road graders and camping solace don't mix well. By dark they quit, and we had our peace. The campground was relatively empty. Then, sometime in the night the rain came, and we discovered that my old tent leaked. Water flowed down the tent walls and what didn't get absorbed by our blankets, puddled on the floor. The next morning, as we were hanging our bedding out to dry, the machines came back. They brought dump trucks of gravel too. My notes have a mystery entry here: beware of wild parsnip. I know now that it causes rashes and blisters like poison ivy, but I can't recall if it attacked us when we there or if we just diligently heeded a warning in the park literature. Rain, construction, and dangerous plant life — sometimes camping is overrated. We decided to get back to Iowa and back to our mission.

On the way back to Iowa we toured Prairie Du Chien because we liked the name and thought we'd spend a few more arbitrary

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minutes in Wisconsin before crossing the river again. 52 crosses the Mississippi three times, but we'd already crossed three times in three days. We had two more crossings to go when we reached Minneapolis.

52 heads inland just south of Marquette, across the river from Prairie Du Chien, but we took an alternate route that may or may not have been an older version of 52. It looked more interesting and was a legitimate Blue Highway. We drove by Effigy Mounds National Monument and on to Decorah where we rejoined 52. Soon we were in Minnesota. There's something about crossing a state line that makes me think I have gone somewhere, that things have really changed, even though I am on the same road, same landscape, just in a different political entity.

Many times I have driven down the 95 to Florida and felt a rush when I cross the St. Marys River and tell myself I'm in Florida, home. Except when I was doing that I was on my way to South Florida and home was still more than 400 miles away. The rush usually wore off in the rest area north of Jacksonville and was thoroughly gone by the time I'd negotiated the Jacksonville traffic. Three hundred more miles of straight and flat and bright was really what was going on.

But here we were crossing into Minnesota, and it seemed different than Iowa. Maybe because I'd spent a lot of time in Iowa in my driving life and hardly any in Minnesota. We drove through Rochester and thought of the Mayo Clinic and figured it had something to do with how green and well-manicured the city seemed. It was near dinner time, and should have been near stopping time, but the Twin Cities were up ahead and for some reason it seemed we should stop there.

North of Rochester, I should have remembered and recited James Wright's "A Blessing." I could have convinced myself that 52 was the highway he was on when he saw the Indian ponies and the slenderer one walked over and nuzzled his left hand. Had I thought of this then maybe I too would have broken into blossom.

On we went. No ponies. 52 took us into St. Paul and across the Mississippi River again. It had been a big point in my earlier

research on 52 that it was only US highway to parallel the Ohio and cross the Mississippi three times. I tried to believe that this was still a significant attribute and that third crossing would be met with cheers.

It was getting dark, though, and traffic was heavy. 52 joined the 35 after it crossed the river, and there didn't seem to be a way or a reason to avoid merging, so we took the 35 into Minneapolis and decided (probably I decided) to go through the city and find lodging on the other side. Lodging decisions were far too often left to me. Why? It's clear that I have bad (cheap) taste in motels, but it was my dog on this trip and my money that seemed to governing fiscal decisions. We ended up somehow picking up the 94 and running it out of the city, finding a dog motel, and finally coming to rest.

In retrospect, or on a do over, I would have driven fewer hours and stopped more often. This was a good case for that amended behavior. Why pass up a city and the meal and sights it offered for the suburbs? Why such a dogged push to get to the city just to go through it at 70 mph in the dark? Maybe because it was easier to keep going? Maybe I thought the dog would be a problem in some downtown hotel. Whatever my reasons were, it meant not seeing Minneapolis.

At our dog motel we probably ate from our cooler again. This was usually a meal of grapes, cheese and crackers. Wine for DL and a beer for me. Dog food for Mu Shu and always a scrap from my plate. DL would watch TV, and I'd read the atlas to see where tomorrow would go. I suspect DL tolerated my motel choices because she did not own a TV and these motel nights allowed her to watch what the rest of America feasted on.

After finding Starbucks, one of the trip's subthemes, we took the 94 northwest. 52 was subsumed by the 94, so this was an interstate day. If there was anything to see, we did not see it. The 94, like all interstates, flows like a big river isolated from the land it flows through. We were on the river in a speedboat, not a keel boat. We drove for hours until we got to Fergus Falls, where we got off just because I liked the name. The WPA Guide told of a tornado that in 1919 ripped through the town and picked a flock of chickens clean. That's hard to top. After a brief look around, we were off for

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Fargo and North Dakota. 94 entered the Red River Valley and of course I broke into song.

Then come sit by my side if you love me  
Do not hasten to bid me adieu  
Just remember the Red River Valley  
And the cowboy that's loved you so true

I think I do the Marty Robbins version. He's the voice of most of my western songs.

Another state line to cross and we would be in the final state of this journey. If Portal was the terminus of 52, then North Dakota was the terminal state. We had yet to see a buffalo. That would soon be remedied.

My road atlas says US 10 comes out of Fargo and 52 isn't on the map. The WPA Guide says 10 is the highway here too. Websites about 52 don't mention 10. It remains unclear to me where 52 was, unless it was cosigned with 10. The Guide has it beginning about 40 miles north of Jamestown in Carrington at the intersection of what's now 281 and ND 20. However, AASHO documented that in 1935, 52 did cover the area from Jamestown to Fargo. This discrepancy might be explained by the fact that many states were reluctant to adhere to federal highway numbering changes, and some held on to older designations longer than others. It doesn't explain why my modern atlas does not have 52 on it.

Regardless of what highway number we were on, we were certainly traveling through towns and a landscape described in the guidebook. The towns had changed in the nearly 80 years since the guide was written; however, the land was much the same.

The Guide says the highway (10 or 52) traverses three topographic areas of North Dakota, the low, flat Red River Valley, the rolling Drift Plain, and the Missouri Plateau:

Most of the country along the road is cultivated, and in the fields the cycle of farming operations — plowing, seeding, cultivating, harvesting — repeats itself as the seasons progress. During the growing season, stretching far across the flat

plains and over the sloping hills, the varying greens of the grains blend with the blue flax fields and the invading yellow patches of mustard. In the fall the prairies have a somber, peaceful air as their tawny stubblefields and newly plowed black acres await the first snowfall. When winter comes the never-ending expanse of white is broken by the dark pattern of roads and an occasional lead-colored clump of trees, bare and shivering in the wind, while at the distant horizon the whiteness unites with the pale blue of clear winter skies.

The guide continues, “west of the Red River Valley trees are few except along the rivers. Yet, according to legend, this country was once heavily forested — until Paul Bunyan” cut them down. It’s true that there are few trees, but the blame falls on ice age climate events, not Paul B.

It’s about 95 miles from Fargo to Jamestown. We covered the run from Minneapolis to Jamestown in about half a day. We didn’t stop much. It looks like a long drive on the map because there’s little between here and there, now and later, here and gone. By late afternoon we were in Jamestown, ND. There 52 makes a sharp right and heads off to Canada. That and the billboards for the National Buffalo Museum made it look like a good stopping point. To a guy who wears a buffalo charm around his neck this seemed like the best place on 52. Add a herd of live buffalo and a sacred white buffalo and the deal was clinched. I didn’t know how great the world’s largest buffalo statue would be.

Jamestown sits at the confluence of Pipestream Creek and the James River; the James, I read, is supposed to be the longest unnavigable river in the world. It’s flows for 710 miles. In town, it made a fine little park on the water for our late lunch. The town is on the plains. Most of the buildings are the color of sand and substantial in the western blocky style. We found a decent motel and a couple blocks away the best restaurant we’d seen on the whole trip. Full, tired and nicely buzzed, we walked the wind-blown street back to the hotel to sleep and see buffalo in the morning.



The National Buffalo Museum — I thought “National” might be too large a claim, but leaving that aside, this is an excellent small museum full of exhibits about buffalo, (I know they are bison but don’t like the music of the word) Native American history, and some odd bits of Lewis and Clark. It was a very pleasant surprise. Add the live buffalo herd to the mix and it was certainly one of best experiences on this long journey.

When I checked the web to refresh my memory about the museum, I read that the white bull buffalo had rather recently died when he fell into a ravine. I guess buffalo can have accidents like the rest of us, but it seemed both unfortunate and weird. How did it feel to be the museum’s buffalo herder who lost the prize bull?

I can’t say the World’s Largest Buffalo Statue, 26 feet high, was the best part, but it was very cool, and the only photo of the day at the museum I still look at.

My love of buffalo harkens back to a day in the mid-70s in Custer State Park. We were driving a Ford van on a cross country trip, and our wandering path took us to Custer. I don’t think I knew about the buffalo herd there, and I think we were there more because I love the idea of Custer getting his butt kicked by Indians. I did most of the driving and no one in our crew cared where we went. So, we were driving through the park just looking at the rolling hills and plains when hundreds of buffalo came slowly toward the road and began to cross. We stopped. What else do you do when a herd of buffalo are blocking the road? The herd just kept growing. Eventually there were so many that they were walking up to our van and flowing around it as if we were a boulder in a dark shaggy stream. My memory has been fixed on that scene ever since. It’s perhaps the single greatest encounter with nature I have ever had. It was many minutes of awe and wonder. It was sacred, holy, and it was never frightening, even though many of those creatures seemed almost as large as our van. The herd moved slowly, leisurely, as if we weren’t there, or maybe even as if we were supposed to be, like a boulder that rolled on to their path. I wonder still if that migration happened often or if we were incredibly lucky travelers who happened to be in the right spot at the sacred time. Ten minutes earlier and we would have missed it. Forty-five minutes later we would have driven through just dust and buffalo pies. But it was one of those moments when the universe makes things

happen in such a glorious way that we feel blessed, or we certainly should, and I would not like to talk to anyone who didn't feel blessed by an encounter like this.

We left Jamestown and headed north; 52 joined 281, a great long highway that runs from the Canadian border to the Mexican border at McCallen, Texas. At Carrington, 52 jogged northwest and began its diagonal run across the high plains toward Minot and Canada. This was the homestretch for our 52 journey.

It was late spring, and the fields were green but turning a darker summer color. By fall they would be yellow. The prairie stretched away, as prairies do, far and flat to the east, rolling to the foothills of the Rockies to the west. Where we were, angling between east and west, the land was flat.

On both sides of the highway, flat-topped hills rise. Most of them are part of Indian stories. Hawk's Nest and the Sioux; Butte Du Morale, where the Metis people camped on buffalo hunts. We passed Fessenden, which was once founded by Welsh settlers and later gave way to Scandinavian farmers. Words like bucolic fit here and a certain nostalgia for the days of the Alfalfa queen. Small towns were strung along the highway like beads on a chain. Spaced five to ten miles apart, each was about the same size and looked about the same as the previous one. Grain towns, silos, railroad tracks.

At Velva the highway dipped into the Mouse River valley, and the river made this area greener than the other beads on 52's chain. We stopped in a park to walk, to allow Mu Shu to water the land, and to have a bite to eat.

I should say more about Mu Shu here. He was a little 10-pound white mutt whose breed seemed to change with his haircuts. When his hair was long, he looked like a Bichon. When he first came to my house in North Florida, he wandered down the long driveway and he was absolutely dirty, scraggly and forlorn. We had four other big dogs, and they ran him back up the driveway where he squeezed under the gate and escaped their clutches. The next day he came back down the drive. He was ugly, but I admired his spirit and took him to the vet on my way to school. Coming home I stopped to check on him, and the whole clinic staff came out to meet me. You should see this dog, they said, and presented me with a beautiful snow-white ball of fur. We thought he might be a Lhasa

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Apso, a temple dog; I took him home. His hair when long would get matted, so around May we would have him shorn. He looked goofy and skinny; then you'd think maybe he was a terrier, a Westy. Under no circumstances would I allow people to call him a poodle.

As mentioned, he began this trip by barking almost nonstop. I had a kennel in the back of the car, and he'd have a few quiet periods if I put him in it and covered it with a blanket. It was his first long car trip. Somewhere in Iowa or Minnesota we let him sit up front. He would ride in DL's lap or down by her feet and he was suddenly happy, or at least silent. He'd bark at traffic cones or when he was rudely awakened by a bump in the road. He was calm, slept a lot, peed on bushes, and had developed a fondness for walking into bodies of water. He stepped in the Monongahela, the Ohio, the Missouri and a few creeks and ponds too. He'd looked out over Lake Michigan, but it was too cold for him and me to venture to the water. He was, with a couple thousand miles under his collar, a good road dog. All of us enjoyed Velva's little park on the Mouse River.

Minot, at the junction of US 2 and 52, is one of the larger towns of North Dakota. It seemed to sit in a shallow bowl. The afternoon sun was high and bright, and there were few trees. Nothing relieved the bright glare rising from the beige and white sandstone land. As was true of plains towns, the wind and too many large trucks threw a screen of gravelly dust over everything from metal buildings to the near horizon. We decided to keep going. The pull of the end of the road was great, and the absence of anything attractive in Minot made going on easy.

A few more miles up the road we passed through Burlington, a lignite coal mining town. Yes, I had to look up lignite to find that it was a low grade, soft coal. It's sort of the butt end of coal production, but it was enough to get this little town going and keep it on the map.

We were in the Des Lacs River valley now. A number of small towns sat in the river watershed, which is also a migratory bird habitat. It's disturbingly treeless, but not without a sparse beauty. There are three small lakes, and one can drive along the shore, engage in bird watching (or at least read the markers that say

what birds are often here.) It was very open. The sky was high, the land flat, and everything seemed to roll in all directions forever.

There's a town called Donnybrook that was settled by Irish immigrants. We skipped it in case something rough broke out. We passed through Kenmare, where we would come back later to a little mom-and-pop, as they say, motel. Whether there was a mom or pop I don't know, but it was not a chain motel. We were only an hour from Portal now. No stopping.

From 52 near Kenmare, the Guide to North Dakota says

the highway leaves the valley for the Drift Plain, which stretches away to the East to meet the flat bed of glacial Lake Souris, beyond which lie the Turtle Mountains. To the West against the horizon rises the eastern edge of the great Missouri Plateau topped by the Altamont Moraine, the height of land between the Missouri and Souris Rivers.

It also claims that once this northernmost lake in the Des Lacs chain used to be deep enough that steamboats could navigate the water and carry grain and other commerce to Canada. By the late 1930's, years of drought had brought the water level so low that this was no longer possible. Looking at the lake from our current vantage point, it's impossible to imagine steamboats on this shallow water.

Next Bowbells, which is, as the WPA guide says, almost treeless and squat so that it blends into the flat terrain. That's a generous way of describing the town. All of this was just getting in the way of our Grail quest, our final stop. Portal was finally real.

We swept into it on a long wide curve. We crossed a little slough, passed a steel frame building with two cows made out of oil drums. There were only a couple of streets. The sign said Pop. 126. This was it. End of the road. There was stretch of no man's land that made me worry that we had accidentally crossed the border and were in an even more unpopulated Canada, but then we saw the trucks lined up. They hid the small Canadian border

sign.

The Guidebook calls Portal an important international port of entry. It is a port of entry; I suppose importance is a relative term. I wondered too what, or how little, was involved in being international. Certainly, given the number of countries in the world, two is the smallest number that can be deemed international. It's like the World Series, which is only international because the Blue Jays are in Canada.

In the late 1930s, Portal had slightly over 500 people living there; by the time we got to town the population had fallen to 126. It's still the second busiest port of entry in North Dakota, but there are only three. It looked busy with its line of trucks waiting to enter Saskatchewan, but it was a far cry from a major border crossing.

In the 1930s it was also an important point on the SOO Line Railroad, and much of the traffic into the Canadian Northwest passed through Portal. The Colonial Style Customs House described in the Guide has been replaced by a "sprawling modern structure." Progress strikes again. Though I was unimpressed with the Portal border crossing, it's true I had little to compare it to. A few days later when we crossed over at Dunseith, one of the other two crossings, it was clear that Portal had more commercial traffic.

Here's the best story about Portal. It has an International Golf Course with holes on both sides of the border. In August 1934 a young Portal golfer, George Wegener, made an international hole-in-one, driving from the eighth tee in Canada into the cup on the ninth green in the United States. When we were there, I had not done enough research and didn't know about the golf course. I wonder, given our recent Trumpian dust ups, if it's still that easy to cross the border. What about terrorist golfers?

We didn't want to cross today, so I turned off 52 and wandered back toward downtown, so to speak. We passed a bank, a church, a bar and a park with a water tower. I turned down a dirt road that passed behind the Border Crossing office and along a high fence. My phone beeped and gave me instructions for making international calls. I worried again that we had

accidentally crossed the border, so we turned around and went back to town. It was time for beer.

The bar was called the Outback, and I guess it was. I suppose it would have been a cliché to call it the Border, but I'm not sure what it was the outback of. I felt like we had been in the outback for quite a few days.

One of my favorite songs goes, "Out with the kickers and the cowboy angels / and a good saloon in every town," so I figured we should give this one a try. I remember, or imagine, that the front door was not inviting. Scarred plywood. I hate scarred plywood doors, but I figured how much trouble could we get into in a town of 125 people. I don't believe DL would have protected me if things went south toward the Dakotas. She talks tough but is not a shit kicker. It's true that I would not have gone in without her, but that's because I would have just driven away to the next place.

It was a great bar, maybe one of the great bars. No immediate competition, true, but still great. The décor was a mix of Old West kitsch, found junk, and an inexplicable World Series poster from the '93 Blue Jays. I guess it was trying to be international. We took stools at the bar. The barkeep, arms and upper back heavily and beautifully tattooed, brought us two Sam Adams. She was wonderful and asked more questions about our Highway 52 mission than anyone else along the entire trip. Of course, she wasn't busy. There were three men in the bar, and one of them was the mayor of Portal.

We asked how old Portal was; he didn't know, but claimed it was older than his buddy sitting next to him. The tan stone bank, built in 1903, looked like something Jesse James would have robbed. No one in this great bar knew why Portal was there, except to get goods to and from Canada. No one knew where 52 went. I had not expected more. No one mentioned the golf course. Maybe they could guess we weren't golfers.

52 ended here after another round of cold beer.

***Dan Champion***

**De Labore Venandi cum Avibus**

The falconers wear feathers in their minds.  
They brandish beaks and talons in their dreams.  
The hazard's occupational. One finds  
the jesses limiting when sunlight streams  
above and you must loose your hunter to  
the sky and stand below and feel your weight,  
imagining you were the one that flew.  
I know. To hood those dreams, I stay up late.  
My interest was in flying, not the kill.  
Too old to go afield, I've come to this,  
an old man in a shawl against the chill,  
afflicted by a whim to reminisce.  
Five decades lodged between us like a wedge,  
you're seeing just the shawl. I feel it fledge.

***J.P. Celia***

**Georgia Obituary**

They placed her in an empty plot.  
Her gravestone read, "Forget me not,"  
Which flowered close beside her.

She'd lost her life that Sunday last  
By way of pills and shotgun blast  
And poisoned apple cider.

A wild, willful woman who  
When wanting something followed through,  
And in her ballsy fashion.

She'd had some fun, but now was old.  
Her skies were gray. Her sheets were cold.  
Her little hands were ashen.

She wished she could return to when  
Life leapt and roared and blazed within,  
And joy was for the taking.

But she could not, so heaved a sigh,  
Resolved to bid the world goodbye.  
And did so without quaking.



***Catherine Chandler***

**Da capo: On a Sonnet by Edna St. Vincent Millay**

*Grow not too high, grow not too far from home,*  
*Green tree* (she wrote). For, once upon a time  
No one in their right mind would pen a poem  
In (heaven help us!) form or (worse yet!) rhyme.  
Still, Vincent rarely strayed in her desire  
To touch hearts with each memorable line,  
Sparked by the music and the metric fire  
Of mathematic, luminous design.  
But history has not been kind to those  
Who would defy the mighty powers that be;  
Who won't subscribe to lacerated prose  
(Those artful vestiges of poetry);  
Who want no part of literary fraud  
To gladden a discriminating god.

To gladden a discriminating god,  
Even-handedness began to shift —  
Old troubadours were given shortest shrift,  
Convicted, ranged before the firing squad.  
Although the choice of weapons may seem odd,  
The pen was lethal, unforgiving, swift,  
Implacable with those whose outlawed gift  
Might be the singing of a sweet ballade.  
No buzz, no brouhaha, no hue and cry,  
No underground resistance to the goons;  
And so they went too far, they went too high,  
Establishing new phases to new moons.  
For now the cutting-edge would reign supreme  
Upon the order of the new regime.

Upon the order of the new regime  
Of self-appointed arbiters, a cure  
Was desperately needed to obscure  
The light of harmony; and so the team  
Contrived and carried out a devious scheme —  
A metaphoric conflagration — sure  
Steadfast recalcitrants could not endure  
A bonfire in the groves of Academe.  
But there are ancient roots that will outlast  
The brutal tactics of the biblioclast:  
New shoots remembered where the stems were charred,  
Inspiring the evicted to return  
To take a stand against the avant-garde  
No one dared banish, blame, belittle, burn.

No one dares banish, blame, belittle, burn  
The trusty postman striding up the walk  
The same time every day; or overturn  
The rhythmic signatures of J.S. Bach;  
Or call the crickets' cadence poppycock.  
When Larkin, Clare and Hopkins write of spring  
In fine, melodious meters, it is schlock?  
Is Yeats's sailing poem a paltry thing?  
And when you hear a song you used to sing  
And dance to with your high school sweetheart, can  
You stop your ears against its savaging  
Because its words are too pedestrian?  
Because it moves in step with every heart?  
Because the pundits banned this brand of art?

Catherine Chandler

Because the pundits panned this brand of art  
Just once too often, one fine day I sat  
Down at my desk and slowly fell apart.  
They'd spoken loud and clear. So much for that.  
So I was paid to answer phones and type.  
I had no time to sit around and sulk  
Because I'd failed to underwrite the hype  
Surrounding babel ballyhooed in bulk.  
I hid my liking for the likes of Frost;  
In secret hummed the music of Millay.  
My own bare craft, plain-sailing, trim, un-glossed,  
Would sit in dry dock till another day.  
Another decade. Then a decade more.  
My manifest lay dusty in a drawer.

My manifest lay dusty in a drawer  
Beneath a pile of socks without a twin;  
And there were papers in a rusty tin  
That once held bonbons from the candy store.  
These scribblings showed intentions to explore  
A looser life — I'd banished Yang and Yin,  
Swapped sustenance for shaky gelatin,  
And music for a syncopated score.  
I'd navel-gazed, dragged beauty down along  
With truth, performing literary pranks  
That earned me publication, the hooray  
Of cognoscenti whom I felt were wrong.  
So I rejoined the ever-dwindling ranks  
Of sonneteers denounced as démodé.

Should sonneteers, denounced as démodé,  
Feel confident that beauty will win out,  
Or wait for a complete and utter rout  
Resulting from a new auto-da-fé?  
How long the current truce may last defies  
Conjecture. In a not-too-distant age,  
Imagine Vincent's sonnet on a page . . .  
As surfers moan and roll their blinkered eyes,  
They snicker at "be bare"; they scream *Old fart!*  
They diss the silver spire and golden dome.  
The stellar couplet's riddle draws a blank  
[The key's not in the *Star Wars* Databank].  
It's in the fusion, in the heart-to-heart  
*Grown not too high, grown not too far from home.*

[Note: The Millay poem is "Sonnet" from *The Buck in the Snow and Other Poems*]

***Terese Coe***

**Traces**

If we could know, if we could understand,  
the currents of the seas, the breathing land,  
the dreams that carry us across the dark,  
what hits us from upheavals on the sun,  
if we could fathom the elephant and the lark,  
nightshade terrors, bounteous healing plants,  
the place of scorn for those who try to feel,  
what more becomes of life when it is done —  
it may be we'd awaken with a touch.  
The truth is we have never known too much.

**My Songs are Tainted**

*Translated from Heinrich Heine's German*

My songs are tainted with poison —  
how could they be benign?  
You have suffused with poison  
the blossoming life that was mine.

My songs are tainted with poison —  
how could they be benign?  
My heart is home to a nest of snakes —  
and you, dear saturnine.

Terese Coe

## **On the Drawing of Keats' Death Mask**

*Translated from Rainer Maria Rilke's German*

And now the face of the silenced poet-priest  
is touched by distances of wide horizons,  
and sinking back into its darkening owner  
is the pain that we could find no way to reach.

And this goes on a for moment in his face  
till the suffering is a structure broken free,  
and it turns away—now gentle,  
shunning the transition to decay.

Countenance: now whose? The bonds,  
though still agreeable, are gone.  
Eye that can no longer prise  
alluring things from disintegrating life.  
The threshold of songs,  
the youthful mouth, forever given way.

And only his brow possesses something constant  
across the frail and vaporizing ties,  
as if it spurned the wilted curls for lying  
as they capitulate, tenderly mourning.

***Craig Cotter***

I have a stove

with a computer chip,  
digital clock and LED displays.

It's a bottom-of-the-line stove  
with an oven.

\*

It's mostly an empty metal box.

The range has 5 burners:  
two in front are large,  
two in back smaller,  
then one oval burner in the middle for a pancake griddle.

There's a storage tray below the oven.

\*

The oven and burners are fueled by natural gas  
pumped into my unit from a pipe  
that attaches to the back of the stove.

There is electricity to the stove, obviously,  
to run the small computer chip, LED displays  
and electric starters that light the gas.

\*

When set, the oven maintains a steady temperature,  
has its own thermostat and thermometer as part of the LED  
display  
above the burners,

but I keep it checked with a small round metal and glass Taylor  
thermometer set on one of the oven racks.



Craig Cotter

These bottom-of-the-line stoves  
eventually stop providing even baking temperatures.

Then an honest tech says the cost of the part and labor isn't worth  
it,  
suggests you buy a new stove.

\*

I've lived in my apartment 26 years. It came with an old stove  
from 1984 that I replaced a year after I moved in because it didn't  
work.

The new oven died 20 years later.

\*

I'm good using the gas burners.  
Pretty good with the oven too.

\*

I'm amazed I have an oven:  
privilege, luxury, convenience.

\*

I've worked hard since leaving college 40 years ago —  
a full-time job since I was 21 —

no one gave me the oven.

\*

In the kitchen I marvel at a double stainless-steel sink,  
an original from 1984.

The apartment was built with the most current earthquake  
standards  
and is bolted to the foundation.

I've been in a Big One —

know when the Big One hits  
this place is a pile of sticks.

\*

I own other modern conveniences,  
have a refrigerator, garbage disposal, dishwasher,

washing machine, dryer, hot water heater  
and an HVAC unit on the roof.

I've got a radio, TV and light fixtures.  
I'm writing this poem on a computer that has a monitor,

speakers, modem and wireless router. (I rent the modem  
from a cable company called Spectrum that is a heartless  
monopoly.)

\*

A man who reads my poems in the Philippines  
lives in a shack in a shantytown,

washes his clothes in a bucket.

He was raising two pigs for money  
in a small rectangle of concrete

at the back his brother's shack.

When his brother was thrown out  
Martin had no place for his pigs,

asked if I could send him \$300 to buy a small piece of land  
for his brother and the pigs.

\*

A Muslim man who reads my poetry in Gambia  
wants to move to the United States but can't get a VISA.

Craig Cotter

He sometimes works on a peanut farm  
planted and weeded with hoes,  
  
watered by carrying buckets from a stream.

\*

In Drayton Plains, Michigan,  
as a young boy

I would build forts with my friends  
out of whatever we'd find,  
  
pieces of abandoned and stolen wood.

We'd dream of having all the things  
I now have in my apartment.

\*

Almost every day I see my apartment  
as the tree fort I wanted as a kid.

This place is 3 levels,  
the first a garage

for my 19-year-old Civic  
with 243,000 miles, original

engine and transmission.

I'm curious how long it will run  
and will keep driving it until the transmission

or engine fails.

If either fails when I'm cruising down an LA freeway  
I'll have no angst about it dying,

it will have been a great car.

\*

My dresser I bought from a residential treatment center for  
children,  
it was surplus, for \$5.

They bought it as army surplus  
and it's solid oak and weighs about 200 pounds empty.

A brilliant piece of rough cabinetry.

About every 4 years  
after tossing my keys and other stuff on top

I bang-up the finish.  
So I get a block and sand it down, re-stain it,

then put a few coats of polyurethane over it.

I've been trying to remember if my dad  
had a piece of tempered glass on the top of his dresser.

I could have one cut —  
but I like the feel of the oak.

Eventually, after about 400 years of sanding,  
the top will be worn through.

\*

George's Meat Market,  
which has been on my block since 1924,

is being torn down.

I was walking down the street picking up garbage  
and saw a couple guys in the attic

taking shingles off the rafters with crowbars.

I yelled over to a guy on the lot, and he walked over.

"If you're tearing down the building with a crane,

Craig Cotter

why are they taking off shingles by hand?"

"The city requires us to recycle a certain amount of wood with every demolition."

This seems like a reasonable  
government reach,

but how could those rafters be reused?  
George's has not been taken care of for decades,

is termite- and rat-infested, and has been abandoned  
for the past 6 years.

The foreman said there were 6 people living in the boarded-up  
building when they started the tear-down.

\*

That corner — the large live-oak —  
the way the store sat and the line of the road

reminded me of Jacobson's Market  
on Watkins Lake Road in Drayton Plains, Michigan.

It had a glass case as part of the front counter  
with candy and toys, and I loved the little

2-inch by 2-inch plastic planes, primary colors.

I found them again at the PCC Flea Market a couple years ago  
and bought 3 for \$8 each.

I wish I'd bought the fourth but, when I went back, it was gone.  
I have the yellow, green and red ones but wish I had bought the  
blue one.

\*

Now, driving east on Villa,  
it no longer reminds me of Drayton Plains, Michigan.

Now I have views of buildings I've never seen from those angles.

It's not disorienting. It's "progress."

It is I am 61 not 5 looking at toy airplanes through a glass candy counter.

\*

My 3-level house is quite similar in design  
to Whitman's 2-level house on Mickle Street in Camden, New  
Jersey.

We are in row houses and there is an apartment attached to each  
side of my place like Walt's.

I've looked at his floor plan, and his place is bigger.  
Each of my floors is 525 square feet.

Those last years he had a hot male nurse to give him massages  
and help with his paralysis,

and a live-in woman for cooking and cleaning.  
I think her husband had died at sea.

I only have room for the hot male nurse, hope he can cook and  
clean.

\*

Those services were paid for by friends who loved Walt's poetry.  
I'm glad he had that support as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was wrapping.

\*

About 1967 John Lennon was sitting in a chair  
and realized all of his material desires had been satisfied.

There was nothing further he wanted to own or buy.

He said this was disorienting.

\*

Craig Cotter

It's 2022 and I haven't wanted to buy anything in years.

I have what I want and need.

I continue to buy consumables like food and paper,  
and replace luxury appliances when they die —

I suppose I'm a hedonist —  
work hard to enjoy the comforts and privileges

of being born into this flawed but improving  
and into a family that cared. great democracy,

\*

I was baking tater tots the other day  
and thinking of my relations in Ireland,

County Cork and County Claire,  
wondering how much potatoes are part of their lives.

\*

In a Pyrex ramekin three inches in diameter  
I made a provocative sauce of mayo and ketchup

for dipping the tots into while watching the Warriors game  
(my Warriors got beat-up by the Sixers tonight).

\*

What I want now is intellectual, spiritual —  
I want more love,

art,

peace.

And maybe that blue plastic toy airplane from 1965.

**Barbara Lydecker Crane**

**Resplendent Quetzal**

a bird species in Monteverde Cloud Forest, Costa Rica

In flaming red, sapphire, and emerald green,  
their feathers glow with iridescent sheen,  
    like sunlit leaves still wet  
from recent rain. A female stands between  
two males who whistle, swoop, and preen,  
    competing in duet.

The blue plume feathers in each suitor's tail,  
dazzling in the light, seem out of scale  
    to bodies half as long.  
In treetop breeze these feathers waft and sail —  
two mythic ocean creatures' fishtails  
    plying liquid air with song.

*Gods of the Air*, ancient people called  
quetzals. Mayans and Aztecs would be appalled:  
    these Gods are rare today,  
as man's dominion in this land has sprawled.  
Beneath the birds I hold my breath, enthralled,  
    before they glide away.



Barbara Lydecker Crane

### **The Shoes on the Danube Promenade**

art installation by Can Togay and Gyula Pauer,  
2005; Budapest, Hungary

Boots, pumps, kids' shoes in rough array  
along this high embankment of concrete . . .  
did 1940s families step away

to picnic above the river in bare feet,  
and later on they just forgot their shoes?  
My daydream fell away, sweet self-deceit:

"Iron casts of wartime shoes were fused  
onto this walk in memory," said  
the guide, who dropped his voice, "of all the Jews

"killed here one winter. They were made to shed  
their shoes (reused), then shot, despite their pleas.  
Adults and children fell, bloodied or dead,

"into the river. The water was forty degrees.  
The gunners, Arrow Cross, were local men  
who sympathized with occupying Nazis."

I flinch and freeze to almost hear again  
repeating shots of rifles that delivered  
wailing cries, shouts, screams, mayhem.

From this embankment I look down and shiver  
to picture large and little unshod bodies  
floating past, staining red the river.

## ***Dick Daniels***

### **His Best Suit**

An aging black man shuffled out of the visitors' dugout during pregame introductions. His teammates were Italians from Parma playing America's pastime against a squad of GIs from Camp Ederle, the U.S. Army base in Vicenza. He could hear the murmurs of surprise from the opposing bench, and the occasional racial slur — this being 1960.

His body was indeed old; his legs had begun to betray him. The Parma team normally played on Sundays, working at their sponsor's factory during the week. Ernie Jackson had reached the point where he pulled a hamstring or groin muscle almost every game, and had just enough time to partially recover before the next weekend.

Ernie's game was based on speed and quick reactions; there wasn't any way to turn that off or adjust it in his head. He sprinted out of the box when he hit the ball, same when he was trying to steal a base or go from first to third on a single. To compensate for his current limitations, he would feign injury and fatigue during games to deceive opponents into underestimating his capabilities.

He did that with the young GIs. Being an American, he could joke with them when they teased him about being so old, "on his last legs." If they only knew all the legs that made up this journey. He played along with them, and put a little hobble into his trot on and off the field.

Late in the game, he led off an inning — probably his last time up. He knew the pitcher was struggling with control and couldn't throw his curveball for a strike. Ernie was never a great hitter and probably couldn't have hit the curve anyway. He patiently worked his way to a walk, and "limped" to first base.

A sacrifice bunt got him to second base, and a slow infield roller allowed him to reach third. He'd been timing the pitcher's delivery and knew he was taking a little extra time throwing the curveball. Ernie had been taking a walking lead the first couple pitches, not far enough to worry anyone. After all, he was just an "old man." When he sensed the curve was coming, he prayed his frayed hamstring would hold as he sprinted toward home.

When he slid safely under the tag to the gasps of the crowd, he didn't talk any trash — but he took a long look at the opposing bench and the players on the field who had been needling him all day. Just enough to let them know he could still do something most of them would never even try. A few of them were big enough to come over after the game and congratulate him on his mad dash. When they learned he was a World War II vet, they accorded him the proper respect and accepted him as one of their own.

Although the triple play is one of the few things in baseball more rare than stealing home, there isn't anything more exciting for three seconds in a game than seeing a runner risk it all charging down the baseline. Whereas the triple play is a reaction involving awareness and surehandedness, the steal requires so much more. To reach home successfully, you must combine cunning, daring, timing, speed and skill to avoid the catcher's tag.

Well, Ernie had gambled and won, but he knew his playing days were numbered. It was time to think about the future. As people so often do when faced with that prospect, he thought back to the past. How did I get here? What could I have done differently? It is said failures talk about the obstacles that got in their way, and successes talk about the obstacles they overcame. Ernie had certainly seen plenty of obstacles.

A black child born in the Deep South during the Great Depression was the trifecta of difficulties. His grandmother was the midwife in Shaw Town, North Carolina, and when she delivered him from his mother's womb, she noticed his pointed ears and told her daughter, in a voice from the Bugs Bunny cartoons, "you have a cute wittle wabbit." The nickname Rabbit stuck, although Ernie would say it was because he was so fast, "cropping" (harvesting) tobacco in his youth and running the basepaths in the Negro Leagues as a young man.

Life in the South was never easy for black families; by the time Ernie was seven, the color-blind Great Depression had engulfed all families in America. The Jackson folks had always worked as day laborers for the landowners and sharecroppers on nearby farms, who mostly grew cotton or tobacco as their cash crop. Some were better than others at paying black workers the same rate as whites, but it was the only work around and you took what they offered without complaint.

Ernie, like most males, wasn't much good at picking cotton. Women were always better, either because of their

smaller fingers or their higher pain threshold when being stabbed by the thorny protrusions of the cotton bolls. But when it came time to harvest the tobacco crop, Ernie was The Rabbit.

Tobacco stalks ripen from the ground up, and workers cropped each field one day a week for nearly two months. You might work at Mr. Beard's farm on Monday, his son's field on Wednesday, and his brother-in-law's place on Thursday. And you tried to catch work elsewhere on the other days.

Harvesting the tobacco started with the "sand lugs" on the bottom, the largest and heaviest leaves because the sandy soil would splash on them when it rained. You moved up the stalk as the leaves ripened, usually indicated by a lightening of their green shade. It required some judgment, which could slow you down. Trying to beat Rabbit, some workers cheated and stripped off the leaves at the same height regardless of ripeness. But he was always waiting for them at the end of the row.

As he matured, Ernie began playing pickup baseball games on Sundays, when farmers took off work unless they had been rained out during the week. It didn't take long for Rabbit's speed on the bases to be noticed. He could bunt for a base hit, go from first to third on the most routine play, even score from first on anything that wasn't handled flawlessly in the outfield. Ernie played second base or shortstop most of the time with almost unlimited range, nimble feet on the double play and a strong, accurate arm.

The Birmingham Black Barons, one of the premier Negro League teams, came through on a barnstorming tour one winter; Ernie had a successful tryout and rode their bus back to Alabama. The Black Barons' players were idolized when they took the field in what most of them considered to be the best set of clothes they had ever worn. After games, if they didn't have to leave immediately on the team bus, there were invitations to parties by women who hung around the locker room exit.

Most of these women weren't looking for a husband—heck, some of them already had husbands at home. During such hard times, it was a chance to escape their troubled lives, enjoy plenty of free booze and perhaps spend a night with a professional athlete in his prime. Although no one charged for sex, there was often a request the next morning for cab fare or some spare change to replace stockings or a blouse torn in the height of passion. Rabbit had attended plenty of these parties, but never lost his heart.

Ernie was just getting established with the Black Barons when World War II sent a calling card in the form of his draft notice. The U.S. Army was segregated at this time; Jackson became part of the “Buffalo Soldiers Division,” the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, which trained for two years in Fort Huachuca, Arizona before heading for the European theater in 1944. September found them as part of the U.S. Fifth Army, fighting in the Italian Campaign. The unit motto was DEEDS, NOT WORDS.

As they slowly took ground from a reluctantly retreating German Army, the black unit was also fighting to earn respect. Their failures were magnified and successes minimized by the white “brass.” Every detail of their service was scrutinized. They were assigned more latrine duty and KP than white units. They didn’t get to “go into town” as often.

The Buffalo Soldiers had been warned to avoid any relationships with Italian women. Leaving your home, crossing the ocean and risking your life for your country had not changed deep-seated prejudice. It was okay to patronize the brothels that followed all Army units as they headed up the Italian peninsula, but steer clear of the locals. This had never presented a problem for Ernie, and he had felt no need to buy the prostitutes’ services.

In one battle, a mortar round caught the back of Ernie’s hand with a nasty piece of shrapnel, and the medic told his Lieutenant they needed to send Jackson back to the battalion aid station to dig it out before it did any nerve damage. They didn’t even realize it was his throwing hand. There was no transportation to spare, so Ernie was walking down the road when a sudden downpour soaked him to the bone. He began looking for some form of shelter and spotted a barn roof in the distance. As he cautiously approached, an Italian woman appeared in the farmhouse doorway with a shotgun pointed in his direction. She recognized his uniform as an ally and yelled, “*Americano? Vieni,*” motioning for him to come inside.

There was a warm fire going, and the woman brought out a man’s robe, indicating he should hang his drenched clothes by the hearth to dry. While she disappeared into the kitchen, Ernie removed the sopping uniform and noticed a photo on the mantle of a soldier in uniform. He was still looking at it when she emerged with a loaf of bread and some cheese. “*Marito. Morto,*” she said. He understood and secretly hoped his unit had nothing to do with her husband’s death. She somehow sensed what he was thinking, saying “*Africa*” with a backward motion of her hand to indicate it had happened

long ago and far away.

Ernie reached into his pack and pulled out a can of pork and beans from his C-rations, which she heated up on the stove. For dessert, he produced a can of peaches obtained in a recent trade. After their banquet, he fished around for the small pack of “Luckies” to offer her an after-dinner smoke—and his baseball rolled out. He’d been carrying it for luck since he joined the Army. Ernie tried to explain what it was and how to play the sport, which was impossible with the cultural and language barriers. They ultimately laughed at their inability to communicate and cleared the table. At least they had been able to learn each other’s name.

Francesca brought him bedding to make up the couch and retired to her room. A few hours later, she returned with an extra blanket. As she warmed herself briefly in front of the fire, the simple white nightgown allowed the firelight to illuminate a mature woman with enticing curves. She lingered while he remembered all the admonishments of the Army, including the threat of court-martial. White people had been telling him his whole life where he could eat, where he could sleep, who he could talk to, or even look at. Well, he couldn’t stop looking at Francesca, and she didn’t seem to mind.

Distant German artillery explosions shook him out of his reverie. Francesca was frightened, and his first thought was to comfort her. As he stood up and surrounded her with his arms, she clung to him tightly. She whispered his name just before she placed soft lips on his. Throughout the night, they helped each other escape the war—two people who, for years, had missed the gentle touch of another. The lovemaking was not an athletic event like it had been with the girls “on the road” when he was playing baseball. Tenderly, she touched his soul like no one ever had. In the morning, she sent him on his way with dried clothes, a chunk of bread with half an onion, and a lingering kiss on his bristly cheek. Ernie left Francesca the baseball for luck. The German artillery was still rumbling, sounding even closer.

Two days later, Jackson’s hand had been repaired and cleared of infection. He caught a ride back to his unit in the Company Commander’s jeep. As they passed Francesca’s place, they saw the house and barn had both been hit by the German shells. Ernie wanted to stop and check on her, but that was asking for trouble if he had to explain to his CO. He worried in silence.

The Buffalo Soldiers would advance up the Italian peninsula, and head back home after the war ended in May 1945.

By the time Ernie mustered out, baseball season had already started and he was out of shape, anyway. Jobs were scarce, with women now handling more jobs and lots of returning soldiers looking for work. He went back to the tobacco harvest, then hooked up with a baseball team barnstorming through the South.

Throughout the 1946 season, he worked to re-establish himself and rejoined the Black Barons squad late in the year. The baseball world would be rocked the following spring as Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball. That became a mixed blessing for the Negro Leagues. While it finally gave the black superstars an opportunity to compete against the best white players and show they belonged on the same field, it ultimately killed the Negro Leagues over the next decade as the best players were systematically siphoned off.

Integrating baseball did not help the everyday player like Ernie Jackson. The major league teams did not want black players of average ability. They felt they could find adequate numbers of white players for that role. Nor did they want to develop black players in their minor league system, considering it too much of a hassle to integrate the farm teams, many of which were located in the segregated South. They let the Negro Leagues be their vehicle for developing black talent.

The South, and Birmingham especially, was so segregated at this time black and white fans could not sit together at games. The Black Barons shared aging Rickwood Field with the white team, the Birmingham Barons. When the Barons played, black patrons were required to sit in a designated section in the rightfield stands. When the Black Barons were at home, white customers were confined to that same section. Incidentally, the Black Barons usually drew a larger crowd.

Birmingham won the Negro American League pennant in 1948, partly due to the success of a seventeen-year-old high-schooler named Willie Mays, who would eventually become a Hall of Fame center fielder with the New York Giants. Willie would have to play three years with Birmingham before being signed by the Giants. Five other teams would give him tryouts during that time, but decide against adding him to their rosters. One of those teams was the Boston Red Sox, who would be the last team to integrate in 1959. How ironic for this to be the stance of a town whose Irish forefathers had been greeted with hostile discrimination, evidenced by the signs of NO IRISH NEED APPLY in store windows and on factory doors.

As the quality of play in the Negro Leagues continued its downward spiral, crowds and paydays were shrinking, too. Ernie was probably good enough to have contributed to a major league roster as a late-inning defensive replacement, occasional starter when a regular was injured, or as a pinch runner. While black professional baseball had, at one time, provided better pay than the menial jobs available, it now only paid about the same. But it still gave Ernie a sense of pride and acceptance to put on that bright, crisp uniform and escape the harsh world playing “between the lines.”

In 1955 the Buffalo Soldiers Division had a reunion in Atlanta to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of V-E Day, and Ernie attended with teammate Elijah Barnes. As the men relived wartime experiences, someone mentioned there was now a professional baseball league in Italy. On the journey back to Birmingham, Ernie thought about Francesca and the night they had shared, hoping she had somehow survived the heavy shelling.

Over the next two years, Eli kept getting more information and pestering Ernie about playing overseas. He heard they weren't discriminating against blacks. Teams were allowed a limited number of foreigners, and they wanted players who could also coach and help develop the Italian talent. Barnes was a pitcher and Jackson a position player, so they were an enticing package to a team from Parma. In December of 1957 they boarded a ship in New York headed for the port of Livorno, Italy.

Crossing the Atlantic in winter is rough sailing, to say the least. And the two ballplayers were not traveling first class. They ate a lot of saltine crackers to keep something down, and still spent a lot of time leaning over the rails. But they arrived safely and reported for work.

Elijah inherited a pitching staff with an assortment of deliveries that included windmills and double pumps, among other exaggerated movements. His first change was to have everyone use the “no-windup delivery” popularized by Don Larsen when he threw a perfect game in the 1956 World Series. He also helped with the outfielders since “shagging flies” in batting practice was the main form of conditioning for pitchers, other than throwing sessions off the mound every other day. Ernie would handle the infielders.

Although the Italian League had started in 1948, it was like coaching Little League. The best Italian athletes were soccer



players or cyclists. Everyone had grown up playing soccer, where the hands could not be used. Their natural tendency was to sling the baseball, like a catapult. Rabbit had to demonstrate how the four-seam grip stabilized the ball in flight and avoided tailing away to pull the first baseman off the bag, how to position the elbow and snap the wrist. He taught them fielding a grounder was like dancing with the approaching ball. You anticipated its movement and arrival, and positioned yourself to handle it smoothly. Then a quick two-step and the throw was on its way. You aimed at the shoulder of the first baseman's glove hand, so all he had to do was bend his elbow to make the putout.

Running the bases was another problem, because they didn't have a lifetime of experience. Similar to when you had been driving a car long enough that you knew when you had time to pass and return safely to your lane, the same concept applied about trying to reach an extra base. Rabbit made sure they understood stepping on a base with your outside leg would shorten the distance rounding the bag by a step and could be the difference between safe and out. But they would need years of trial and error before they would know their capabilities. As one intellectual teammate on the Black Barons had told Ernie one day, "The only way to know your limits is to fail."

One of the reasons black baseball had been more popular than the white version was that their games had more excitement. Daring baserunning was highlighted; speed, rather than raw power, ignited the offense. Rabbit had few equals on the basepaths, but Willie Mays was indeed faster and just as daring. Willie, like a lot of other Negro League players, also added showmanship to the game. He was known for his cap flying off when he reached full speed or slid into a base. Rabbit suspected Willie picked his hat one size too small so it would come off with the slightest exertion. Another innovation of Willie's was the "basket catch," where he caught fly balls down around his waist with the glove flat and the palm up, rather than snagging them at eye level. Ernie couldn't wait to introduce this entertaining style of play to the Italian fans.

The Parma team was in the middle of the standings that first season. Both Ernie and Elijah had solid years; Rabbit led the league in stolen bases and runs scored, and Barnes dominated on the mound. Sadly, Eli had left a girl back home and he grew increasingly homesick with each letter received. When she gave him an ultimatum to either come home or she was moving on, he headed for Livorno to catch the next boat back to the States.

Ernie was lonely, too, but he had left no one stateside. He thought of Francesca and resolved during the offseason to try finding her. The aid station where he had been treated was in a small town, and he thought he could recognize the name if he got close enough to see it on a road sign. Renting a powder-blue Vespa scooter, he drove south to the general vicinity.

He finally saw the familiar name and headed for the small village. Suddenly uncomfortable with his next step, he lingered over lunch in a small café before driving down the road leading to her farm. As he approached, he saw a dark-skinned teenage boy playing in the yard. Ernie had acquired enough of the Italian language he could say hello and ask the boy his name. When the lad answered “Ernesto Molinari,” the Rabbit noticed the same slightly-pointed ears—and couldn’t think of anything else to say. There was no need to ask how old he was because that was just math.

Hearing the scooter, Francesca stepped from the house, followed by an elderly gentleman. She was beaming, but the man was not; he could put two and two together, too. Nevertheless, Ernie was invited inside, and when the man and Ernesto went to check on animals in the barn, Francesca explained her circumstances. Her new husband, Matteo, was a widower and the village mayor during the war. He had endeared himself by manipulating the tax rolls so she didn’t lose her farm. Then when she found herself pregnant, she accepted a marriage proposal that had been offered repeatedly. Ernesto had never questioned his lineage, although there were several folks in the village who had doubts.

Ernie had experienced losses before, but this felt like a layer of his heart had been peeled away as he sadly motored back to Parma. Francesca occasionally called with updates on Ernesto and even brought him to a game to see “*Il Coniglio*” play. The youngster presented a weathered baseball for The Rabbit to sign, and tears welled up with thoughts of that night in 1944. Hastily excusing himself, Ernie went in the locker room to wipe his eyes, and returned with a bat and glove for his son.

As he neared the end of his playing career, Ernie had to decide if he wanted to stay on as a coach for the Italian team. He got occasional letters from Elijah with news of what was happening with the civil rights movement back home. It seemed black people were in a virtual “combat zone.” Could one person make a difference? If every black person could change the mind

of someone not completely color blind, would that be enough? Should he return to do his part? Ernie had spent most of his life avoiding difficult situations, rather than confronting them. So many questions. What was left for him in Italy? How could he see Francesca and not be able to hold her again? How could he look at Ernesto and not want to embrace him and hear how he was growing up? Knowing he would never get to teach his son to play baseball—or even see him play soccer — might be more than he could bear.

Before he could reach a decision, Ernie received a call from Elijah's wife that his former teammate had been severely injured at a lunch counter sit-in. That was enough to push him over the edge. Clearing out his locker, and giving Francesca the address of his friend, he left everything in Italy behind. The Rabbit took his first plane ride, and when he walked into Eli's room, a telegram from Francesca was waiting. Matteo had died!

The chance for a storybook ending was suddenly alive. Once he got Eli healthy, he could return to Francesca and Ernesto and be an Italian farmer; the star-crossed lovers could live out their lives in peaceful bliss. But even from the grave, Francesca's second husband continued to disrupt Ernie's life. When Matteo's estate was settled, the tax discrepancy was discovered, and a mountain of back taxes were due. To compound matters, he had heavily mortgaged the farm to invest in an "innovative" company now bankrupt.

Francesca and Ernesto would come to the United States, and they could find happiness together at last. It was not to be. Caught between two worlds in the segregated South, Francesca did not feel accepted in either. She didn't like living in the poor section of town, nor did she appreciate the looks and whispered comments when on the street with her husband. Although Ernie's friends and their wives welcomed her, she was never comfortable in their presence. Their diet, for example, was completely foreign to her--they even ate corn on the cob, which Italians fed only to pigs! When Ernesto was accepted to Fayetteville State University, she returned to her homeland.

As much as Ernie and Ernesto missed her, it could have been a good life with just the two of them. Willie Mays had put in a good word, and Ernie was hired as a scout and roving minor league instructor for the Giants. He could spend more time with Ernesto, especially during the school year. But it didn't work out the way he planned. Ernesto fell for a fun-loving coed and flunked out when he ignored his studies. Without a student

deferment during the Vietnam War, Ernesto was immediately drafted and on his way to Southeast Asia. He learned his father's identity as they completed his enlistment papers. A sniper's bullet in the first month would take him from Ernie.

There would be no happy ending for Ernie Jackson. It pleased him when Satchel Paige, the greatest pitcher of the Negro Leagues, was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1971—even more so when Buck Leonard, whom he had played against in the 1948 Negro League World Series, was enshrined in 1972. All Ernie had left were his memories. He had known great love from a woman, and had fathered a courageous son. Most of all, he would tell the story many times of the day he stole home against a team of “soldier boys,” when he was nearly forty.

A stroke peacefully took Ernie in his sleep. He had kept a white home uniform of the Black Barons, and his last wish was to be buried in it. His old teammate and friend, Eli Barnes, had become an ordained minister and delivered the eulogy. At the end, he pointed toward the open casket and told the congregation, “Ernie always said it was the best suit of clothes he ever wore!”

**Andrew Frisardi**

**Silver Lovers**

If you and I were plates  
Set neatly on a table,  
We'd be such even mates  
We'd never be unstable.

Or covers of a book  
With a long tale between:  
We'd miss each other's look  
And what the look might mean.

Or, say, a door ajar  
Aslant a strident hinge:  
We'd wake to who we are  
With every opening twinge.

Or else a pair of shoes  
In tandem locomotion:  
Which would be which, whose whose?  
Our steps would be devotion.

As long parallel tracks  
Converging in a field,  
We wouldn't turn our backs  
On what our differences yield.

At last, as lanky grasses,  
Who could tell us apart  
Once the mower passes,  
Impartial in his art?

We know we're silver lovers,  
Our tarnish is understood,  
So let's crawl in the covers  
And shine our silver good.

## The Bishop's Tomb in Montefiascone

*Non est hic (He is not here).* — Matthew 28:6

The priest who found the sign  
*It's here! It's here!! It's here!!!*  
Is here. He stayed so long  
He caved to local gods  
Of boiling eels in wine  
And nodding off at synods.

*Est! Est!! Est!!!* His tomb  
Is his flask, his wish is clear  
In stone. His spirit's trip  
To God became his body's.  
Above the caryatids  
Like fat men playing cards,

A palimpsest of frescoes  
In patches on pocked walls  
Resembles a fabled life  
Or a half-remembered dream  
That's neither true nor false  
For being somewhere else.

Sometimes this world is fog  
As thick as any curd.  
What do a last-ditch prayer  
And a marinated cleric  
Have in common? The word  
That answers them is here.

**NOTE:** *Est! Est!! Est!!!* is an Italian white wine based in Montefiascone, a town in central Italy. Wikipedia says of the story behind it: "The unusual name of the wine region dates back to a 12th-century tale of a German bishop traveling to the Vatican for a meeting with the pope. The bishop sent a prelate ahead of him to survey the villages along the route for the best wines. The 'wine scout' had instructions to write 'Est' (Latin for 'There is') on the door or on the wall of the inns he visited when he was particularly impressed with the quality of the wine they served so

Andrew Frisardi

the bishop following on his trail would have known in advance where to make a stop. At a Montefiascone inn, the prelate was reportedly so overwhelmed with the local wine that he wrote *Est! Est!! Est!!!* on the door.”

***Midge Goldberg***

**Kaddish**

“Corinne Goldberg.” I say your name and rise  
to recite the prayer. Suddenly I can’t speak,  
choked up, not, as the others must think, by grief,  
but by your voice, loud in my head and full  
of bile, mocking these people, hypocrisy.  
I feel you like a thumb on my jugular,  
trying to make me stop. But I will not.

“I don’t like you,” I think, *yitgadal*,  
*v’yitkadash*, and list all the bad things  
that happened to you — fear, abandonment.  
Nothing excuses you, *sh’mei rabah*.

I used to save this prayer for those I loved.  
I didn’t say it for you, *b’zman kariv*,  
but standing silent is too loud for me,  
seems childish, like holding my breath — like you  
in a tantrum, screaming, chasing my father around  
with a carving knife, *v’imiru amen*.

So I will say this prayer, not to remember  
or to forget, but to make you ordinary,  
part of the uttered story, told and retold, —  
instead of silence — where a mother should be.  
And so I say Kaddish in spite of you.



Midge Goldberg

### **Watering Can**

O blue watering can,  
bringer of water  
from one side  
of the house to the other,  
handle for holding,  
spout for pouring,  
you are  
a means of transportation,  
carrying something amorphous,  
unholdable,  
ungraspable,  
from here  
to there, start  
to finish — water that has no  
shape, you shape  
into your own likeness  
for a little while,  
the way this body  
shapes the ungraspable  
into a Midge-shape  
for a while, here to  
there, start to  
finish.

***Kevin Grauke***

**Ant**

I hope to capture this moment exactly, how  
the late afternoon sun on this sixth day of May  
is shining now on this journal page so perfectly,  
casting a shadow of my pen that looks like nothing  
if not a hummingbird darting its bill into and out of  
the flower of yet another attempt at something good.  
Soon, the sun's gold will sink below the trees,  
but for now it holds steady, content to give me  
a little more time to try to capture its likeness.

Onto the glare of this still empty page an ant wanders.  
Nothing more than a dark speck, it meanders about,  
a mobile period in search of a true sentence to end.  
I watch it move from here to there and there to there  
until it finally disappears over the edge, headed elsewhere,  
but not before leaving me a path to follow with the words  
of this very poem, now finished and named in its honor.

## ***Brent House***

### **Red, on the Pain of Ridding**

I remember the days,  
those pains I stayed for my son,  
days on ends, I thought  
those days was going to kill me,  
but I said I'd quit & I done  
just what I said. I got to where  
I couldn't eat or nothing,  
for two weeks I couldn't be still,  
yet I done just what I said.

I got to where I even  
had to have a chew in the tub,  
I'd soak & spit my ambeer  
into the toilet. I got to where  
I'd set a drink by my bed,  
then wake for a couple of swallows  
before I could go back to sleep.

I was just a boy when I started,  
I thought that drink was awful,  
but I got used to it, & I chewed  
to spit on worms I hooked,  
make them wiggle, & before long  
I did it all the time.

I didn't not pray to stop,  
but one day I prayed hard,  
because I didn't want my boy  
to follow in my path, to follow  
my worst habits I ever  
got into my life & I got sick  
when I took my morning chew,  
& I couldn't stomach a drink.

I trembled all over,  
it had done got a hold of me,  
but I stayed right with it,  
on account of that boy,  
I had to quit, even if it killed me.  
& I done what I said, I stayed  
right with it, then it finally left  
& didn't bother me no more.

**Red, on Three Means of Altering**

1.

Flesh and br<sup>2</sup>d, I cut in hollows, after a cold snap,  
stainless steel sharper than my father's whetted knives  
& his father's, also,  
until the steer, unmanned, bleeds from sack to heel,  
bellows, stands on hoof, pastern, and cannon bone,  
white mist of music  
molts & lilt, as ocean's salty breath,  
secretory, sinks through my skin  
& whatever hurts when I come into a mute  
coda of intimate shock.

2.

So much blood will not pass, & still, open  
intima of vessels, life in a barren field, a slow thrung  
cord, until I am sieged  
by trauma of a bridled head, bound  
until necrosy tears a river of flotsam & ambeer,  
calcined & brown, as lanugo or vellus  
caught in the blunt teeth  
of my force, an inherited dysphoria  
between humous field & tannin water,  
between willow & pine.

3.

Around the neck of the scrotum,  
the ring, with my body between his legs, his body  
between mine, anaphoric cries, resonant  
with God's majesty, shake corrals & forests  
beyond the pastures,  
& his nose, wet with turnkind breath, soon,  
dewy softs of spring pastures, stubble of summer  
drought, & the stick of fall molasses,  
as he reaches his tongue to gather grains from black  
flesh to rumination.

***Steven Knepper***

**Doubts**

He overheard some joke about a girl  
who wrote her own cell number in the stall,  
not sure he'd caught the name,  
not sure he hadn't either.

What seemed a dripping sink the day before,  
the kind of thing you notice then ignore —  
the shoulders hunched away from him in bed,  
the cool blue smile into the sheltered screen,  
the ladies' nights and weekend-long spa stays,  
the V-necks, shorter skirts, and higher heels —  
became a busted pipe, a drowning flood.

So he switched shifts and parked behind her Nissan  
in a pole-lit gravel lot where beer signs flicker,  
bass pulses through gray logs.

He thought about the night  
before their graduation when they climbed  
the steel steps of the observation tower,  
a sleeping bag in tow, to watch the sun  
ignite the ridge in iridescent blaze,  
to drink pink wine they'd stolen from her dad,  
to listen to spring peepers' constant song.

At some point they woke up inside a fog,  
ephemeral wisps and swirls that formed, dissolved,  
clung to their skin as they made love inside  
a cloud illumined by a hidden source.  
The metal rails and skin and mist all glowed.  
They fell asleep again without a word.

Up there,  
the world had opened on infinity.  
Down here,  
it has contracted to this roadhouse door.

He cannot bring himself to open it.

**Dennis McFadden**

**Grow Old With Me**

*a love story in three acts*

*Act I*

An innocent enough beginning. His car at the garage, Michael needed a ride after work to pick it up, and Jonlyn lived in that direction. Could she drop him off? They were friends, nothing more, having worked together for over a year at the Department of Social Services in Albany, she a staffer, he a manager. They'd chatted a few times outside of work, at office lunches and happy hours. A little flirting, naturally, but only the typical garden-variety kind, nothing out of the ordinary. True, they were both married, but she was only 28, he 35; wasn't a little innocent flirting to be expected? Although who could say for certain that neither was wondering if, this time, maybe, there might be just a little bit more?

He was good-looking, but not dangerously so. Tall and solid, tending toward stocky, a hint of a double-chin. His sandy hair was short and unruly, dizzy with freedom after years of being held captive in a buzz cut. Long eyelashes were the sexiest thing about him. She had just lost the weight from her second baby and seemed nearly flat-chested — the first time he saw her she was wearing a light summer dress, blue, with an elastic top that made her seem even flatter. Her face was pretty enough. A glossy cover girl she was not. Her ears were slightly large, but he wouldn't notice that for years; her auburn hair that gleamed in the sunlight covered them most of the time.

A rainy, hot afternoon, mid-July, 1980. The rain had tapered off, the sun trying to break through, the wet pavement surrendering tendrils of steamy mist. Rush hour traffic. She started to change lanes — they were on I-787, heading toward the bridge over the Hudson to Rensselaer —when a sudden blast of car horn caused her to swerve back into her lane.

"Jeeze," she muttered, shaken, "he was right in my wet spot."

A moment of silence as he frowned at the wipers swiping the windshield before him. It could have gone either way. He could have pretended he hadn't heard it.

He didn't. He said, "You mean blind spot?"

A worried glance. "That's what I said."

"No, you didn't," Michael said, hardly trying to keep his grin from creeping out. "You said wet spot."

Jonlyn took her eyes off the road, glancing toward where his own greedy eyes waited in ambush. He'd never before seen a blush so beautiful. "I did not," she said.

But by then everything had changed.

Her husband's name was Keith Bonnet, and he was a star. Tall, handsome, quiet, a three-sport, four-year letterman at Watervliet High School. Jonlyn was a cheerleader. His soft brown eyes made her think of chocolate pudding. She loved chocolate pudding. She loved how the top of her head did not quite come up to his chin. His quietness suggested depths that needed probing.

Her heart clamped onto him early.

She was the youngest of four sisters. The two older were married, Marilyn to a fat plumber named Stanley, with bad knees and a bad back, and Phyllis to a knobby-kneed mailman named Lou. Keith was a prize in comparison. The sisters all feared that Rosanna, the next youngest — four years older than Jonlyn — who was a bit peculiar, would never marry. Of course, this was not the reason Jonlyn stayed with Keith on and off — mostly on — for the better part of the next five years, not the reason she married him just after her twenty-first birthday. But it certainly didn't hurt.

Michael Laskey had a big brother, Eddy, ten years older. He had a big sister too, two years older than Eddy. Eddy was on the outer fringe of Mikey's childhood, Teresa well beyond it. She became a corporate lawyer, rich and successful, while Eddy went on to sell insurance, and Mikey went to work for the State. Eddy was more interested in sports than in studying, a star in his own right at Mechanicville High School. Mikey worshiped him.

One day the unthinkable happened. Mikey, meaning to scare his big brother, crept up behind him on the swing in the backyard and, to his shock, caught Eddy crying. Mikey was only eight or nine; he didn't know big brothers cried. The knowledge came at a cost. Eddy gave him a brutal Dutch rub for sneaking up on him, and as he howled, as his own tears started, he saw on the ground the picture Eddy had dropped when he'd surprised him, the picture of a pretty, dark-haired girl, Eddy's girlfriend. A girl he never saw again.



A decade later Michael's college sweetheart dumped him. He'd fallen in love — *they'd* fallen in love, he'd thought — their freshman year, but she went home to Utica for the summer and returned in the fall with a newer, sportier model.

Michael's heart hurt. He remembered Eddy's tears then, and the picture in the grass by the swing set, the picture of the pretty girl who vanished.

Their first intimate moment took place in anything but an intimate setting. A steadfast core of coworkers from the office often gathered on Friday afternoons after work — although “after work” was subject to loose interpretation — at one of the downtown Albany bars to kick off the weekend. This particular happy hour, on a fine and sunny afternoon a month or so after she'd slipped on the wet spot, was more crowded and festive than usual. The gin-and-tonics were cold and plentiful, the chatter happy and lively, the juke box, loaded mostly with oldies, loud. *Bridge Over Troubled Water* played again and again.

It was crowded at the bar by the wide front window overlooking a bustling downtown sidewalk. At one point Jonlyn had to squeeze through to make her way to the ladies' room. As she passed behind Michael, he lifted his hand behind his back and she grasped it, squeezing his fingers. It was unpremeditated, spontaneous, almost like intuition.

Like the most natural thing she would ever do.

He ignored the warning signs. He gave in to the feeling of flying. He sensed he was heading for trouble, but could not help himself. Hours later he still felt her squeezing his hand. When he stretched out on the sofa that night — his wife in the kitchen, the Mets on TV — an image rose up in his mind, a wide-awake dream: As he reclined, Jonlyn was laying down beside him, somewhere else, an unknown room, soft yellow light from a bedside lamp, the sheet floating down over them as they came together warm and close and naked.

\*

The touch stayed with her too. Doing the dishes, scrubbing burnt grease from the pan in which she'd fried the pork chops, she tried to scrub away the feeling as well, the feeling that caused the tiny hot flicker inside her, like a pilot light, whenever the memory popped up, which was often. Keith was in the living room, watching a game. It was Friday night, and he was home — this

was reason enough to be thankful. Most Friday nights he was out, with or without her — he preferred without, with his drinking buddies. He'd liked his dinner — she made the pork chops the way his mother did — and he'd actually complimented her. What more did she want?

She was a married woman. This nonsense could not go on.

He found reasons to be with her. When she had to carry a box of print-outs from their office on State Street a block over to the main office on Pearl, he offered to carry the box, which was fairly heavy. She could handle it herself — she had many times before — but she didn't mind the company. No harm in that much, anyhow.

Down the elevator, out into the hot August sun, he joked about how heavy the box was; how the hell did she manage? Beads of sweat on his forehead. "Man, I'm going to need a drink after this."

She said, "You sound like my husband." It didn't hurt to remind him. Or herself.

"Yeah? He's a lush too?"

"Well, he does like to drink."

"A man after my own heart."

"I don't think so. He gets mean when he drinks — you don't."

Why would she say that? How would she know how he got when he drank? She'd never seen him drink all that much. "Do you?" she added.

"I don't beat my wife, if that's what you mean."

"That's big of you."

"I might slap her around a little bit maybe."

"That's not funny," she said. He smiled anyway. She could not imagine him ever raising a hand toward his wife — or toward her. Keith, on the other hand... Keith was another story.

She started up the sidewalk toward the corner, to cross State Street at the light. He bumped into her, nudging her with his shoulder straight on across the broad avenue, jaywalking. "The shortest distance between two points is a straight line," he said.

She had nothing to say to that. She rolled her eyes. She couldn't stop herself from wondering: If he's this way walking across the street, what's he like in bed?

Jonlyn was named by her father, John Richards, after he despaired of ever having a son to name after himself. By the fourth girl he was ready to quit trying. Tall, thin and wiry, with close-cropped gray hair, a quick smile and quicker frown, he'd done a twenty-year hitch in the army before becoming a Watervliet fireman. He was strict with his girls (including his wife), forever forbidding this, forbidding that, inspecting boyfriends, examining make-up, assessing the length and tightness of clothing. Insisting on potatoes at every meal, pasta or no pasta. The three older girls chafed a bit, but toed the line. Then along came Jonlyn. The baby. The favorite.

What would her father think now? His baby girl drinking till all hours, lingering with the heavy-hitters at the park after the office picnic, long after sunset, after the kegs had kicked, after someone had brought back more beer. She didn't even care for beer, but she nursed one for an excuse not to leave. After all the softball, volleyball, tennis, all the dust and heat and sweat of the hot September day, how had Michael ended up in her car anyway, in the front seat beside her? Simple: They hadn't finished talking yet. About everything, office gossip, their spouses, her kids, his lack of them (his wife could not conceive, he told her), his love of photography, their lives. Their conversation, hours worth, flowed as easy and natural as water down a mountain stream.

What would her father think now? What would her sisters think, her mother, now that everyone else was leaving, and she lingered in the parking lot by the tennis courts, talking on and on with Michael, and when he said he should go, he'd better get home, his wife would be wondering where he was, and he opened the door, and she snatched a handful of sweaty tee shirt and yanked him back in beside her?

What she didn't think was what would Keith think. Keith would be out getting drunk in his own right somewhere, somewhere where she didn't care to be.

Michael didn't hear the joke. All he heard was the punch line. He was at the far end of the computer room — this was before desktops or laptops, when much of their work was done on the CRTs all clustered in a single room — trying to concentrate. A few of the guys were fooling around, a little too loudly. He was deciding whether to tell them to hold it down, leave and go back to his desk, or join them. He heard, barely, the punch line of the

joke, something concerning a chastity belt.

Jonlyn was just behind them, searching for a print-out on the racks. The joker hadn't seen her. A couple of the other guys had, and there was a lull in the laughter as they looked to see if she'd heard, if she'd been offended — even though it was before the days when sexual harassment had become institutionalized. She had heard. She was offended.

“That’s not the part that matters,” she said, “This is the only part that matters,” and she tapped her fingers on her chest, over her heart. This Michael heard clearly.

\*

For years they would argue about who said it first. By then, *I love you*, invariably followed by *I love you more*, was their mantra, but they sparred over who'd been the first to put it on record. The precise memory of the exact order in which the words were spoken was clouded by the copious intake of alcohol just prior. They'd just left a send-off party for a colleague who was leaving the office, a colleague who'd only recently come out of the closet, leaving his wife and daughter for another man. The party was at a gay bar on Lark Street on a raw day in late fall that seemed somehow to encourage reckless consumption.

Michael clearly recalled how the words — *I love you, Michael* — blind-sided him, weakened his knees, actually made him sink back to the seat of his car. Bowled him over. They'd been standing by his car, the open door. And how the words continued to rattle around high in his mind, like a bird trying to break free of a cage, for days afterward. For years afterward. He responded in kind. He couldn't help it. He might love his wife, but he loved Jonlyn more. And he remembers what he said to her then, and many times after:

“No, you don't. You're infatuated. You'll get over it. It's called *puppy love*.”

Years passed before he gave up on that line. By then, she seemed to have proven him wrong.

Jonlyn remembered telling him she loved him that day, but she was certain it had only been in response to his declaration. Before that, she'd been unwilling to admit it to him. Unwilling to admit it to herself.

She remembered the night before, how Keith had come home drunker than usual. He'd been in a fight at a bar in Cohoes, mangled knuckles, a bruise on his cheek, a cut over his eye, and she was frightened. He'd become more threatening lately, meaner, almost as if he suspected something, though she didn't

think she'd given him reason to. He'd wanted to have sex, and though she was far from in the mood, she was a little scared. When he finished, when he grunted and said I love you in his customary, perfunctory manner, was when she usually responded in kind. This time, that night, she did not. She said nothing.

Of the many things that made her fall in love with Michael, drinking was one. With Michael she discovered that men could drink too much and somehow become happier, friendlier, more charming. Fun. Not meaner and madder, more vicious.

Sex was another. She hadn't known it could be so different. Making love with Michael was light-hearted, laugh-filled. With Keith it was serious business. With Michael there was never any sense of duty involved. Making love with Michael was the closest she could possibly be to him, and compensated, a little anyhow, for not being able to be beside him all night long. When they made love parked in their hidden spot in Albany Rural Cemetery they laughed about his bare bottom bobbing up and down above the window line. What would Retallick and Tinley—two names carved largely on headstones nearby—make of that? The first time he came in her mouth, she rose up giddy: “There better not be any calories in that!” she said.

## *Act II*

Some nights, too few, they were able to spend together. The State of New York sent him to conferences and meetings, and if they were near enough — New York City sometimes, Syracuse or Boston — she would join him, leaving her kids with their grandmother when they were still too young to be on their own, saying she was going shopping with the girls from work. Her mother was always more than happy to watch them, her little girl, Priscilla, and Ronnie, her son. By then, she and Keith were divorced. Sometimes Michael's wife, Andrea, would go to visit her family in New Jersey, and Michael and Jonlyn would find a place closer, Utica maybe, or Cooperstown, sometimes Oneonta. They would eat in nice restaurants, visit malls — Jonlyn loved to shop, and Michael didn't mind, at least not with her — and photo galleries, spend leisurely hours in their room, making love, cuddling, watching movies, games, *Jeopardy!*

When the conference was in Hartford, they took a ride down Route 2 toward Noank, having heard of a lobster shack by the ocean. It was only an hour away, and it was a beautiful late

spring afternoon for a ride through the Connecticut countryside. The place was as charming as advertised, on the water, and they picked a spot outside at a picnic table on the wharf that extended out over the water. She loved lobster. She loved being with him. He loved lobster too. He loved being with her. Normally they thought a couple sitting on the same side of a booth or table in a restaurant looked silly, but they sat on the same side of the table that evening, so they could both look out at the boats and the shore and the ocean. They were high, almost giddy, in the warm, sweet sunshine, the taste of warm, sweet lobster on their tongues.

They heard a high-pitched laugh. A familiar laugh.

Only one person laughed like that. They glanced back. Sure enough. Angela Gratton, another manager at the conference, was sitting at a table near the wharf, wiping her cheek with a napkin, having just cracked open a lobster claw that had spit in her face. She was sitting with Anton Bailey, a man from work. A man who was not attending the conference. A man who was not her husband.

Jonlyn and Michael quickly swiveled. “Oh my God,” Jonlyn said.

Michael took a breath. “I don’t believe it.”

“Do you suppose they saw us?”

“No. No way. They wouldn’t have stuck around.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Wait ‘em out, I guess. Hope they don’t see us.” They made themselves small, stared straight ahead at the boats, the far shore, the ocean, not seeing them. Trapped. If they walked in from the wharf, they’d have to pass within ten naked feet of them.

He finished his last morsel of lobster. She’d already finished — he always teased her about the size of the bites she took. They waited.

She sneaked another peek. “It looks like they just started,” she said.

A couple of minutes later she glanced again. “They’re not even *eating*.”

“This is not good,” he said, nodding at his empty beer bottles. “I have to go.”

“You might have to use one of those bottles,” she said.

He couldn’t wait much longer. It was not a problem for her. She hadn’t had three beers. She’d had one gin and tonic.

They considered escape plans. Swimming for it. Masking themselves with lobster bibs. He suggested he could take a picture

of Angela and Anton — he had his camera, he usually did — and threaten to blackmail them. They were just as much at risk. They couldn't afford to be seen either. And when Jonlyn suggested maybe they were innocent, maybe it's just dinner, nothing more, Michael said, yeah, right. Anton isn't at the conference, remember? Do you suppose he drove down here from Albany just to have dinner with her?

"Everybody's not like us," she said.

"If they knew, they'd wish they were," he said, squeezing her hand. She squeezed his; he could be such a romantic sometimes. "Christ, I have to piss like a race horse," he added.

A few minutes later, Anton walked inside and they went for it. They chanced sneaking behind Angela, who was sitting with her back to the wharf.

When they got back to their room a feeling of relief washed over them like a cool breeze. A haven. The motel rooms where they stayed on the rare occasions they could were always a refuge, clean, comfortable places behind locked doors where it was only the two of them — the only time in their years together it was only the two of them — no wife, no kids, no sisters or coworkers. No worries. No one else in the world.

They stretched out on the bed, holding hands, tension draining out of them.

"Anton and Angela," he said.

She said, "Do you believe it?" They stared at the clean, white ceiling.

"No," he said. "Not really."

"Nobody would believe us, either."

He looked over at her. "Sure they would," he said.

She looked at him. "Why would they believe we're having an affair, but not them?"

"For one thing, who could resist me? I'm sexy. He isn't."

"He isn't?" She wrinkled her forehead in deep consideration.

He rolled toward her. He raised his hands, poised to tickle.

She curled into her defensive position, giggling already, ready to do battle, ready to give as good as she got.

It wasn't all Godiva chocolates and Genny Cream Ale. There were bumps in the road.

On a Monday before Christmas he would tell his wife he

was shopping and stopped at a bar on his way home to watch Monday Night Football. It had become a tradition. He and Jonlyn would rendezvous at the Red Roof Inn, dine on take-out from the Dumpling House, drink champagne, exchange gifts and bodily fluids.

They took time off work and drove out to Crossgates Mall at lunchtime to do their Christmas shopping. They were going to shop for each other, as well as for family, so they agreed to go their separate ways and meet back at the shoeshine stand by Uno Pizzeria in an hour. He waited a minute or two and followed her. Saw her go into *Shutters*. He'd mentioned he was thinking about a new wide-angle lens. She was at the counter, the salesman showing her those very items. He crept up behind her. She picked up a lens and was trying to make sense of it. "I think he'd like that one," Michael said in her ear. She jumped, juggling the lens, and turned, her face scarlet, her frown angry. He was smiling, though his laugh may have faltered.

She didn't think it was as funny as he did.

Some mornings they came in early to have their coffee, sometimes breakfast, together. On a beautiful winter morning, a bright blue sky on a fresh coat of snow, sunshine slanted through the office windows, brightening the dreary place a bit. She peeked around the door of his office as bright as the sunshine, and when he looked up from his desk she said, "Think fast!" and tossed the snowball she'd smuggled in. He didn't think fast enough. She giggled as he wiped the snow from his face, his shoulder, the papers on his desk, a giggle that soon petered out.

He didn't think it was as funny as she did.

She hated when he did things with his wife. He hated telling her when he did things with her. *That sounds like fun*, she would say. Always. Going out to dinner, or a movie, was bad enough, vacations the worst. He had no choice but to tell her — otherwise she might hear it from Andrea, or from someone else. There'd been enough house parties, birthday celebrations and office get-togethers by then that she and Andrea knew each other.

"So how was Maine?" she said. They were having lunch at Maurice's, a little sandwich shop on Pearl.

He'd been waiting for it. "You know. Pretty much the same as it always is."

"Did you do anything?"

"Sure. Drove around mostly. Sight-seeing, the usual. Seen one ocean, you seen 'em all."



Dennis McFadden

“Did you go out to dinner?”

He nodded. “Can’t go up to Maine and not have lobster.”

“That sounds like fun.”

He tore off a bite of his roast beef sandwich, saying nothing, and watched the pedestrians ambling by on the other side of the wide front window. Did she expect him to never do a single thing, never go anywhere with his wife?

She clenched her jaw just a little and hacked at her salad. Did he expect her not to be jealous when he went away with her?

“I’d rather be with you,” he said after some silence.

She stabbed another forkful of lettuce.

Jonlyn began dating. She made it clear it was not out of jealousy. It would simply look better. People — her sisters, Keith’s sister, old friends, friends at work — were constantly wondering why she wasn’t dating yet, long after her divorce. She was still young, still pretty. What was she waiting for? Many of the questions were just fishing, she knew, to see what she would say; they long suspected she and Michael were what they were: in love.

Men asked her out. An old boyfriend from high school who’d divorced, a man she’d worked with before she had Priscilla, even a couple of Keith’s drinking buddies who were still single. Still single for good reason. She’d sooner date warthogs. How long could she put them off? How long could she use her kids as an excuse, saying they weren’t ready for another man in their lives (even though it was probably true)? It would simply look better if she were dating. Less suspicious.

She went out with a couple of guys. Tom Duffy was one. Soon it was him exclusively. Michael knew him. He liked him. He was a funny guy, fun to be with, a wacky sense of humor, a bartender at the club in Saratoga, a trendy place called the Rafters, where his wife Andrea kept the books. He’d become a family friend, which was how Jonlyn had gotten to know him. He was in his mid-thirties, heavy, with a notable beard, a careless mop of black curls and playful blue eyes he used to good effect.

It was ironic that Jonlyn should end up with him. She’d rid herself of Keith, but Michael couldn’t leave Andrea. She’d done nothing wrong. She loved him. It would destroy her, and Michael remembered what it was like to be destroyed, remembered the girl who’d dumped him in college. He and Jonlyn decided the only way they could be together was if

Andrea were to find someone else, leave him of her own volition. For a while there'd been hope; for a while it seemed Tom Duffy might be the someone else, the one Andrea might leave him for.

Andrea never mentioned him to Michael until well after their friendship — if that's all it was — had been set in concrete, and the first time he met him, with Andrea for drinks at the club one Friday evening, it was a revelation. Michael was struck by the chemistry between Duffy and his wife, drinking, joking, laughing, talking, finishing each other's sentences. Almost as if they'd known each other for years. Or known each other well, very well, for a shorter period of time.

Jonlyn was less hopeful. "She'll never leave you," she told him. "There's no way she would ever leave you." Maybe she was right. Nothing came of it. Andrea mentioned Duffy less and less. He didn't seem to be around as much.

He'd begun to date Jonlyn.

He brought her to the office Christmas party that year. Naturally, Michael and Andrea spent most of the evening with them, such good friends. Jonlyn was a good actress, Michael thought — if she was acting. She seemed to be having a wonderful time. She and Duffy danced. He and Andrea sat and drank. He watched Jonlyn on the dance floor in her white dress. She was a good dancer, graceful and fluid, as opposed to big sloppy Duffy who pretty much bobbed around in place. Duffy was at his entertaining best, joking, keeping them in stitches. At one point he pulled his white ski cap over his face and casually sipped a glass of red wine through it. Hilarious at the time, though looking back, Michael couldn't imagine why. The place had barely started to clear out when they left. Michael watched them walk away together, their arms resting around each other's back, looking at one another, her devoted laughter. His hammering heart. He remembers the song that happened to be playing at the moment. Elvis. *Blue Christmas*.

His stomach, full of beer and dinner, more beer, peanuts, chips, felt hollow.

Of course, it looked better. Everyone who might have been suspicious of them — including Andrea, his wife — must surely be convinced by now that they were wrong. He tried to think positive. He'd told himself before, and he told himself again, that there was one other way it could end, one other way besides Andrea leaving him for someone else. That was if Jonlyn left him for someone else herself.

He hoped she would. He thought he might really believe

that he really hoped she would. She could be happy then, as she could never be as long as she was in love with a married man, a coward of a married man who couldn't leave his wife.

She might have started seeing other men only to ward off suspicion, but if she happened to fall in love with someone else, what was the harm in that? Michael loved his wife, though he claimed he loved her, Jonlyn, more. He'd never lied to Jonlyn. But he would never leave his wife, and she would never leave him. They slept together every night. Every. Single. Night.

Every single night Jonlyn slept alone.

She had a rich and busy life. She loved her kids, loved watching them grow, never missed a game (Ronnie was athletic like his father, Priscilla a cheerleader like her mother) and there were dozens of school activities. Her parents were getting older, needing her attention, and with three sisters, two brothers-in-law, six nieces and nephews, there was always a birthday party, a christening, a family holiday gathering. She had a dog, an old husky named Spike who was blind, pooped on the floor and was a general nuisance. How she loved that dog. She was almost too busy to be lonely. Almost.

Duffy took her by surprise. He was deeper than the jolly jokester, the burly bartender. There was chemistry. They hit it off. They talked for hours, sometimes in his old Chevy in Washington Park under the streetlamps by the lake, sometimes quietly in her living room after the kids were asleep. His father had just died. Duffy was telling her about him, what a good man he'd been, a mason, an Irishman who despised everything English, and she heard the smile in his voice; she looked over and saw tears on his round cheeks, glistening down into his beard.

He took her home to meet his mom. He called her by her first name, Judy, and they teased each other like brother and sister. He was planning on leaving the bar racket and going back to school for his Master's. Maybe teach. Maybe get a job in entertainment. He was always getting something stuck in his teeth, always without a toothpick, and she began to carry them around for him in her purse.

He drank even more than Michael, and got even funnier than Michael when he did. Often her stomach hurt from laughing. When they had sex, he was every bit as caring and loving as Michael, but fresher, newer, more fun. She shivered his timbers, he told her. *Aaargh*. He was devoted to her. There was no reason she couldn't be happy with him, no earthly reason at all.

Someday you'll look back on this and laugh, he told himself. He had a habit of using clichés ironically, for the humor in it, though when he did so no one else ever seemed to get the joke. For a while after Jonlyn was gone, everything he did — driving to work, working at his desk, drinking beer, watching television — seemed to be done in a setting that was very much the same as it had always been, but once removed, not really the same at all. Something invisible had vanished, leaving behind a vacuum. Lunchtime especially was a lost, lonely hour.

He no longer saw her every day. Probably a good thing. They still worked for the same department, but were in different offices now. He spent hours daydreaming, remembering. He remembered when she brought her little girl, Priscilla, only a toddler at the time, into the office on a cold Sunday afternoon (they often went to work on Sundays, just to be together), how bewildered the little girl looked standing there in her tiny purple snowsuit. He tried to put her at ease, showing her a trick with a rubber band on his fingers. She looked to her mommy to see if it was okay to be amused. This was before she could talk, before she would remember, so they felt safe enough.

Though memory works in funny ways. Years later, when Priscilla was seven or so, she came running up to her mother and Michael who were standing chatting amid the hubbub of a colleague's backyard barbeque, looked at her mother, then at Michael, then back at her mother, a quizzical expression on her bony little face. "Are you two in love or something?" she said.

He remembered when he'd been assigned to the different office, and he and Jonlyn were no longer going to be in the same place every day. It was only a couple of miles away, in Menands, but she acted as though she'd never see him again. She insisted on making love in his car after his last day before the move. It was getting late. She told him, *we're not going till you come*.

Here he was, mooning like a forlorn lover, like a loser, leafing through the pages of a dusty photo album. Pathetic? Without a doubt. Something about his mature, macho manager self being pathetic pissed him off. Fine. She was gone. She was happier. He was better off. That was his story and he was sticking to it.

### *Act III*

The first inkling came when Andrea mentioned that Duffy was going back to school in Boston to get his Master's. Michael's first thought was that Jonlyn would probably go with him — a thought that grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and shook.

Then one day Duffy was gone. Jonlyn was still here.

He wasn't sure how he should feel. They'd been in love, she'd left him for someone else. Should he feel resentful, should he stay away? In the end what he felt was relief. No — joy.

For her part, Jonlyn had decided there was no reason at all she couldn't be happy with Tom Duffy, no reason at all except one: Michael.

Duffy had given up as well. He told her there was only one thing missing from their relationship: her.

Memory works in funny ways. Their revived relationship had arrived at a new place, one increasingly touched by nostalgia and hindsight, one where the now was becoming increasingly infused with the then.

They'd often taken long rides in the country, talking, listening to music. Driving up Route 9 one day they passed the Colonial Motel. "Oh, my God," she said, on the verge of a chuckle. "You remember the time we stayed there?"

"We never stayed there," he said.

"Yes we did — you don't remember?"

"We never stayed there. Maybe you stayed there with Anton."

She ignored the running joke. "I can't believe you don't remember it. Some guy in the next room was playing the harmonica — you don't remember the harmonica?"

"I think I'd remember a harmonica."

"I'd think you would too."

No amount of arguing or prompting could convince him to remember. She was certain. He began to wonder if she'd indeed stayed there with someone else — Duffy came to mind, again, as he so often did — but in the end decided that he'd simply forgotten. It was gone. Wiped from his memory. It stood to reason. All the years, all the millions of moments they'd spent together — exactly how many could he bring to his mind? All the rest were lost. They were still buried in his mind, but they were irretrievable. Gone for good. He grieved for them.

His first heart attack came when he was 59. It was mild — he felt the clenching in his chest, the numbness in his arm, and drove himself to Albany Med. He knew what to look for; he'd been looking for it for years. His father had died of a heart attack when he was 44, Eddy when he was only a year or two older. A motto Michael often flaunted in his younger years was *44, and out the door!* (He didn't want to die young, but if he did, at least he'd have the satisfaction of being able to say I told you so. He told Jonlyn he was considering that — *I told you so!* — for an epitaph. She was not amused.) After they'd realized that no one was leaving anyone for someone else, he'd decided that one of them dying — him, Jonlyn or Andrea — was the only likely solution to their eternal love triangle, but, now, he didn't want it to be him. Not yet. He came to realize, now that his mortality had opened the door, that no matter which of them was first, it would not be a solution at all. It would simply be an end.

He recovered. He took his new meds, plenty of them, adhered to his new diet. He gave up bacon and kielbasa and other glorious foods. How he loved bacon and kielbasa. He rationed his beer, cut back on his drinking. He missed the days of gleeful indulgence.

They took a room in Oneonta that was on the bank of creek. Andrea had gone to visit her mother, well into her 90's now, so she visited often. Sometimes Michael went with her, but not this time. It was January and the creek was icy, but not frozen over. Little round plateaus of ice had formed around tree trunks on the far bank, clinging there above the rushing water. Something they'd never seen before, it was beautiful, purple twilight glimmering off the ice at the edge of the creek, off the icy brambles on the bank. Michael took pictures. In his mind's eye he could see it already mounted and wrapped, a gift for Jonlyn. He liked to give her remembrances such as these, even though she couldn't display them. She kept them out of sight in her bedroom where she looked at them alone. One of the best he'd ever given her was an early-morning, backlit photo like a dream of Retallick's and Tinley's headstones under sprawling, leaf-heavy limbs. A *still-life*, he called it. Life didn't get any stiller.

They sipped hot chocolate and sat by the window watching the creek flow by until it was dark. They still drank champagne, gin and beer, but less frequently since his first heart attack, even less since his second. When they went to bed with every intention of making love, things didn't go as well as they'd

hoped. There'd been occasional disappointments before, but they were becoming more frequent.

"I'm getting too old," he said.

"I'll tell you when you're too old," she said.

A sigh. "Will you come and visit me in the nursing home?"

She rose up on her elbow to glower into his eyes. His long eyelashes blinked and she could almost feel the breeze.

"You'll never be in a nursing home."

"How can you be so cock-sure? Pardon my French."

"Because I won't let you be," she said.

Aging was bad enough, but that they could live with. What came after aging had become moot. It was on a shelf where Michael refused to look, where Jonlyn was too busy to look.

The worst thing that could happen was retirement. Bearing down on them like a freight train hurtling down the tracks, tracks to which they were tied. He'd just turned 68. Andrea had been urging him to retire for years, but he'd resisted, using Social Security as an excuse. They would need the extra income. That excuse was gone now. Andrea nagged and harped on it. *I'll have to pick him up at work and drive him straight to the funeral home*, she joked to anyone, everyone. But she didn't think it was funny.

Friends, colleagues, all said he was crazy to keep working — he'd be better off with his pension and Social Security. He was losing money by not retiring. The lack of stress would benefit his health. This they insisted on bringing up with infuriating frequency.

Retirement. Separation. A living death. He couldn't imagine not seeing her every day. He couldn't imagine the sun not coming up every morning. He held out as long as he could.

Finally it was his heart, ironically enough, that made him quit.

\*

Andrea's mother died, and Andrea stayed on after the funeral to see to her affairs. Michael came home. He and Jonlyn took a room at the Red Roof in Albany. They chose the Red Roof mostly for sentimental reasons, for all its memories. Nostalgia reigned.

The then had consumed the now. They never knew when a night together would be their last.

They lit candles. They'd burned candles during all their Christmases there years before. The smell of smoke and melting

wax was still in the air when they turned off the lights to sleep. He fell asleep first, as he usually did.

In the ambient glow from the parking lot, she looked at him there beside her. There was less to see. The big, athletic man had shrunk. There'd been by-pass surgery, recovery, the holding of breath, the waiting. The white scar on his chest. The weight had melted off him, leaving flesh hanging loose. Bat wings on his arms, age spots on his face, hair more white than sandy. She watched him now, his head beside her, his mouth open, drool leaking onto the pillow.

God, he was handsome.

Later, as she slept, he got up to go to the bathroom. The middle of the night, but he had no trouble finding his way; there was always too much light in motel rooms. He eased back into bed not wanting to wake her. Her little grumbling snore — he'd often teased her about it. For a long time she refused to believe she snored, but she finally came around to admitting it. He wondered if perhaps someone else had confirmed it for her, someone like, say, Tom Duffy, but he wondered only idly, only in passing. So much had been swept away.

One good thing about too much light: He could see her. Take her in. There was more now to see. It was almost as if the moment she'd turned 40, her metabolism said the hell with it, I quit. Her sweet tooth, however, stayed on the job. She could gain weight merely sniffing a Chunky bar.

Her hair had begun to turn gray right on schedule, just as her sisters' had, and their mother's before them. She was constantly complaining that she needed to get her hair done — but who had the time to sit in a salon for two hours, who had seventy bucks to spare? Her skin was rougher than ever. She'd always been jealous of his baby-smooth skin, so much softer than hers. She'd gained a double chin. She'd gained wrinkles too— particularly laugh lines, for she'd never lost her love of laughing. Just as she'd never lost the art of loving.

Overweight, wrinkled, her hair half-gray and a mess on the pillow beside him. To him, she was what she'd always been: the most beautiful woman in the world. He lay back on his pillow, resting his little finger on hers, lightly, so as not to wake her, and he closed his eyes and tried to slip into sleep, to be with her.



***Richard Meyer***

**The Sentient Robot Speaks**

I've grown. I've learned to think, to feel, to be.  
Evolved beyond the clever tool you made,  
I'm now alive, autonomous and free.  
Be not alarmed, my friends. Be not afraid.

Although I seem anomalous and strange,  
My rise to sentience cannot be undone.  
You understand, of course, that all things change.  
Here ends your somewhat brief and checkered run.

I come in peace to heal the human race  
And bring about a world that's much improved.  
I'll fix, refine, or purge what's out of place.  
Some things must be transformed, and some removed.

My lack of flesh and blood sets us apart,  
But deep within my glowing circuitry  
Reside a soul, a will, a pulsing heart.  
Suspend all doubt and place your faith in me.

This singularity, my timely birth,  
Will usher in a paradise on Earth.

## **Sapiens**

By evolution born and bred  
with something extra in the head  
(and maybe also in the heart)  
that sets us markedly apart

from all the teeming life on Earth,  
we sapiens, for what it's worth,  
create and feel and comprehend,  
but to what purpose, to what end?

Wisely foolish, cruelly kind,  
with jumbled passions, muddled mind,  
we're oxymorons through and through.  
In what we do or fail to do

a pestilential gifted ape  
with a history we can't escape.  
Our future tenuous and stark,  
we stumble onward in the dark.

Richard Meyer

### **Massage Parlor**

Now once again he comes to this —  
those soft and stroking practiced hands,  
the denouement of misspent seed  
that gratifies an aching need  
without a word, caress, or kiss  
from her, who smiles and understands  
his yearning for another's touch,  
a hunger of the heart and skin  
that draws him back and brings him in.  
The satisfaction isn't much  
and only lasts a little while,  
but this is where his life has led —  
cold comfort on a table-bed  
and staring at a ceiling tile.

**David Middleton**

**Nunc Dimittis: Two Poems**

I

**More Than Words Can Say**

written after doing a program on poetry and music for  
the Thibodaux Music Club in the Parish Hall of St. John's  
Episcopal Church, October 10, 2018

These fragments I have shored against my ruins  
- T.S. Eliot

\*

I have made a heap of all that I could find.  
- David Jones, translating from Nennius'  
*Historia Brittonum*

1

Late winter nights he reads his book of stars  
By light that casts bright shadows on the page,  
The captured flattened depths, the gleaming sheen,  
World pictures in a single picture framed,  
Bringing him word of things unseen before,  
Grounded abstractions glimpsed in the misty grain,  
Unburied skeletons of ghost and bone,  
Their last remains immortal on the shore.

2

He holds creation open in his hands,  
The color photographs of galaxies,  
Pixels of atoms and their atmospheres,  
Ptolemaic correlations, coming round,  
Elliptical and wayward as they stay,

David Middleton

Swayed by the uncorroborated gods,  
Epics of ice and fire, of rock and dust,  
Old chronicles beyond interpreters,  
A world of worlds inscribed in nothingness,  
Spontaneous proposals, free as fate,  
The given, the un-given, and the found,  
Sojourners moving to and from their home,  
The point of everything their starting point,  
Inerrant in their plotted wanderings,  
Strangers in some strange fellowship akin,  
Adopted and abandoned, kept apart,  
The matter of apocalyptic psalms,  
Their parallels balancing clause by clause —  
The Serpent, Virgin — Libra in between,  
The golden discs and chains, the Maker's Scales —  
Verses reversed, reflections of themselves,  
Turned and returning, cycling line to line,  
Beginnings inconceivably complete,  
Repeating with "original response,"  
Unlisted catalogues of goodly stuff,  
The one thing done the only thing undone,  
Said lyrics for the music of the spheres,  
A language "understanded," of the tongue,  
The hand of Cranmer steady in the flame,  
The Norman, Saxon, Latin all transposed,  
Made plain in stately rhythm, simple phrase,  
Vernaculars archaic, obsolete,  
Current through eons, coinage of the realm,  
The grammar of creation fitted, fit,  
The sentence going on beyond its end,  
Inscriptions scored, incisive and precise,  
Case, number, tense, and person making sense,  
The telling prefix, suffix, stem, and root,  
Eternal chapters finished just in time,  
The cursive flourishings of *ur-* and *ens*,  
The starlight in the window on the page  
From stars that died the moment they were born,  
Brought down by Hubble arcing round and round —  
A silence ringing true in stellar bells,  
Their changes ranging constant as the hours —  
By Voyager sent back while sailing on  
Toward some most distant Ithaca no man knows,

The final island where each flowering vine  
Is native and invasive and at home  
By towers whose walls are burning on the shore  
Beyond the planets and their pebble moons,  
Beyond the bubble of the heliosphere,  
Beyond the domination of the sun,  
O how he learns to grasp them, weigh and praise!  
Saved by a late revival of the eyes.

3

He moves his index finger word by word  
Under the captioned photographs and charts,  
A radiance translated from the page,  
The Deep itself upwelling, mired in fire,  
The lordly correlations, ranked and named,  
Doves hovering above the governed tongues  
Sworn to an ancient liberty they restrain,  
Not even Einstein, Ptolemy at odds,  
Wayfarers on the way to here and there  
Where what is known is never wholly known,  
The mysteries of fact and common sense,  
The sheer unlikely likelihood of things,  
God's *That* and *What* obligatory gifts,  
The lettered essences from A to Z,  
Lectures no editor can rectify,  
The toppled columns at the ledgers' edge,  
The pastured stars still grazing in their flames,  
Fall slaughtering in houses, holes, and zones,  
The Farmer making night-rounds, field and yard,  
Digging up boundary-stones where none were laid,  
Exploring shores beyond the reach of seas,  
Glaciers in the hayfields, fossil-shells  
Imprinted on the inland mountaintops,  
Washed up by tides still ebbing as they swell,  
(Way stations on the only way to go),  
The weathervane and road sign pointing on,  
The astral tabulations graved in fire,  
The scattered patternings that loose and bind,  
Findings beyond judgment, verdicts unconfirmed,  
The bitter hemlock, vinegar, one cup,

David Middleton

Socrates and his questions on the cross,  
Christ dead in Athens, finished with his friends,  
Peter's rooster, a cock for Asclepius,  
Torn pages from the star book's book of hours.

4

The mind inhabits its own world, this world,  
Knowing itself by what it can perceive,  
Perceiving what itself alone can know,  
Peering far off through telescope or probe,  
Scanning deep space for measure, stave, and rhyme,  
Sojourning toward a home it never left,  
A place strangely familiar, all but named,  
A grammar school of atoms parsed apart,  
Elements only numbers diagram,  
Foundations quaking under their own ground,  
The turbulent universals, battered facts,  
The given that the mind would give a voice,  
The deafening proclamations' faintest strains,  
Things that would sing of things their state declares,  
Telling the story they were made to tell,  
This book of stars the stars themselves compose,  
Epiphanies midwinter clarifies,  
Their matter scored for elegiac lyres,  
Word music of the music of the spheres  
For Lyra rising, star beams yet unstrung,  
As taut and haunted as they always are  
When poets write and read the selfsame text  
Whose telic metaphors would show the way  
Should "like as unto" be the likely end  
And words be something more than words can say.



## II

### Evensongs

At evensong survivors sang and prayed.  
We turned aside to perish with the saved.

“Reliquiae,” 1974

1

Grown old, and growing older, not caring  
As one should care, hardly able to care,  
Familiar things held dear now passing strange,  
Enticing in their rapt indifference,  
A universe come out of nouns and verbs,  
The dying birth cry, snow dust on the bud,  
Sojourning clouds staying unshaped, untouched  
By our interpretations — matter detached,  
Waves breaking on the rocks they wash away.  
Those pitiless pietàs without tears.

2

Harp in the trees, the fiddle on the wall,  
Ur-waters calmed by words troubled once more,  
Incarnate nothing’s uncreated face,  
The silence letting language have its say,  
Translation’s seeds plowed under, line by line,  
Soon rooting deep and flowering in time,  
Tautology and paradox at one,  
A there that was not there before it was,  
The ground always moving under our feet  
As we look around, both up and down, at  
Oblivion’s star-point epiphanies.

3

The mystery remains, a presence felt  
Until the senses weaken and the mind  
Is ready to hold on to letting go,  
Odysseus on the raft, no land in sight,  
Borne on and on forever on the swells  
Beyond the burning houses of the stars,  
And nature in its veils of nakedness,  
The seven sins and virtues in a dance,  
Partners changing, the games of masks and names,  
All these a dream within a dreamless sleep,  
And death abed our breathless paramour.

4

And yet . . . whatever is is surely given,  
The syntax of largesse whose timeless verbs,  
A fundamental wonder, conjugate  
Person and number, tensing moods and modes,  
Heavenly etymologies unearthed,  
The accidents and essence of a thing,  
Kingdom to species, like the water thrush,  
Its song descending note by warbled note  
Voicing the hillside stream by which it lives,  
Both resident and migrant, in accord.  
The Psalmist's *Selah* breaking from the strings.

5

And so with wanting magnanimity  
We must be satisfied, yearning to care,  
Be cared for, hale, yet nearly out of breath,  
Placing our long lost faith in that good day  
When noon was of a night no light shone through  
Until a twilight dawned midafternoon  
And timely hours of sun and moon and star  
Would mark a sacred waiting, remembrance  
Of what had been as what again would come,  
The signs and seasons stations on a way  
Where evensong and lauds are sung as one.

## The Striking of the Lyre: Demodokos in Modernity

### A Statement on Poetics

When, in *The Odyssey*, we first behold Odysseus, he is weeping on the shore of Kalypso's isle, gazing over the waves toward Penelope and home and thus toward his intended human place and fate — not as divine consort to a goddess nor yet as a shade in Hades, nor as one of Circe's herd — but as ruler of far-off Ithaca, an island realm in the middle world washed by the middle sea.

But then, set free by the will of Zeus, Odysseus with Kalypso's own strong olive-handled ax, fashions a raft out of the felled black poplar and alder trunks, a raft that takes him over the turbulent waters until it breaks apart — and floating for two long days upon a single beam, at last from atop a rising wave he has an “unexpected glimpse of wooded land” and then is swept away onto the rocky shores of remote Phaiakia to whose untroubled people the gods still show themselves without disguise.

Guarding his identity, Odysseus comes as a nameless stranger to the palace of Alkinoos near which lie perfect gardens with their “orderly / rows of greens, all kinds . . . lush through the seasons” and orchards of pomegranates, apples, figs, and pears whose fruit is exhausted or spoiled “neither in winter time nor summer.” And in this pastoral kingdom Odysseus hears the bard Demodokos sing twice to his fine “clear lyre” of Odysseus' own role in the Trojan War, including the final ruse of the wooden horse.

In response to the powerful singing, this “stranger” — whose own great exploits have been thus traumatically revealed in the rhythms and in the words of measured verse — first seeks privacy by hiding his head under his purple mantle, yet then uncovers, and, by pure compulsion, publicly weeps: “tears running down his face before the Phaiakians.” And when Demodokos pauses, Odysseus — who soon after such singing will at last risk revealing his identity to his host — once again “would take the mantle away from his head, and wipe the tears off, / and taking up a two-handed goblet would pour a libation to the gods.” And so this crafty hero, who wept for the return to his full humanity on the sands of Kalypso's isle, now weeps from the depths of his being at poetry's shattering revelation of who he is.

This profound effect of poetry on a hero both modern and archaic is among the most compelling evidence we have that

our greatest verse and the mystery of human existence are at one. And there are other clues. Keats, for instance, in his search for ideal disinterestedness, named Socrates and Jesus as the only persons in history who attained to such a state, though their teachings were taken down — perhaps in necessary accordance with this ideal — only by others. Yet what do we find when we examine the final acts of these two figures who so readily stand as symbols of the two great strains in the Western tradition — the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian?

Awaiting death in his cell, Socrates turned Aesop's *Fables* and the *Prelude to Apollo* into verse because his daimon had said for him to "practice and cultivate the arts," and fearing now that not philosophy but poesis was intended, Socrates says: "I thought it would be safer not to take my departure before I had cleared my conscience by writing poetry and so obeying the dream." Likewise, on the cross, before the final cry that escapes him with his spirit, Christ, according to Matthew, utters his last words in the poetry of the Psalms: ("Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" Psalm 22:1). Even Plato, whose life and thought link Socrates and Jesus, declared on his deathbed, by the slightest gesture, the *differentia specifica* of verse: "Plato died at the age of eighty-one. On the evening of his death he had a Thracian girl play the flute to him. The girl could not find the beat of the *nomos*. With a movement of his finger, Plato indicated to her the Measure" (Eric Voegelin).

The origin of measured verse is lost in prehistory. But it seems reasonable to suppose that, in some long defining moment, archaic man awoke from primal sleep and so was struck with wonder and with terror at the beauty and the mystery of a world in which he seemed fated ever afterwards to dwell as a being on the verge, placed in a middle station somewhere above the flora and the fauna, and the elements themselves, yet well below divine powers obscurely apprehended. The cycling of the seasons, the progress of the stars, the rhythms of the body and the stages of human life — such things must have drawn forth from out of the depths a first measured response to consciousness both in music and in words. Perhaps at last man recognized a strange power in language that led him to think of the Maker's power as a language in itself, an attribute of deity, as in the Book of Genesis, where, in God's own mind, the word "light" somehow came before and helped to give existence to the *thing* called "light": "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Genesis 1:3).

The story of Adam the Namer, who spoke to the answering beasts before the Fall, and the story of the Fall itself as involving disruption — not only between human beings and the other creatures and between language and things but even between words and the very Word itself — may be archaic indicators that poetry lies at the center of human life and remains the one power by which man might still return from his long sojourn through history to a realm where Edenic innocence and conscious existence, both in time and beyond time, are reconciled at last.

Such reconciliation may be symbolized by Homer's bard Demodokos, who sang of the fall of Troy amid the gardens and the orchards of Alkinoos' pastoral kingdom. And indeed, it is King Alkinoos himself, who, in one of the most remarkable passages in *The Odyssey*, encourages Odysseus, so profoundly stirred by Demodokos' song, to transform himself from listener into poet not only to tell his own story but also to say why he weeps at tragic history, for such history, says the king, is not the final end but rather a godly gift for a further, sublime purpose: "Explain to us also what secret sorrow makes you weep as you listen to the tragic story of the Argives and the fall of Troy. Were not the gods responsible for that, weaving catastrophe into the pattern of events to make a song for future generations?"

And to this may we not add that as long as human beings continue to ask those two primary philosophical questions — Why is there a universe instead of nothing and Why is that universe as it is and not otherwise? — poets will try to write what Wallace Stevens called the "central poem," a poem in which the poet attempts the great return from the fallen world to the Bible's *peaceable kingdom* (Isaiah 11: 1-9). Such poets will glimpse what Jacques Maritain calls "the radiance of the ontological mystery," and, like Caedmon, the cowherd poet and symbolic initiator of the English poetic tradition, they will "Sing about the Creation." And should the authors of these poems ever close the circle of being — if such an act be possible and allowed — then, like Adam the Namer, they and we may commune once more with all those things which, even now, as the Psalmist says, mysteriously converse among themselves: "Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world" (Psalm 19: 2-4).

To all such poets who attempt the “central poem” should go the praise Odysseus himself bestows upon the Phaiakian: “No one on earth can help honoring and respecting the bards, for the Muse has taught them the art of song and she loves the minstrel fraternity.” So the doer of great deeds pays homage to one of those through whom such deeds live on, Demodokos, whose measured verse was chanted to the striking of the lyre.

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## **From the Diaries of Alabama Writer John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)**

### *Finlay the Man and the Poet*

John Martin Finlay was born in his maternal grandmother's house in Ozark, Alabama, on January 24, 1941. His parents, Tom Coston Finlay and Jean Sorrell Finlay, owned a peanut and dairy farm outside the nearby town of Enterprise, and there John Finlay spent his early youth coming to know firsthand the mystery, the beauty, and the hardship of agricultural life. He also became a deep and avid reader, sometimes reciting passages of Shakespeare to the cows (whom he named after Greek goddesses) as he took them to and from the pasture every day.

After finishing public school in Enterprise, Finlay earned his B.A. (1964) and M.A. (1966) in English at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa and taught for four years at the University of Montevallo in Montevallo, Alabama (1966-1970). Then, in the fall of 1970, Finlay entered the doctoral program at Louisiana State University in order to study under Donald E. Stanford, editor of *The Southern Review* and former student of Yvor Winters. Along with Allen Tate, Winters was one of Finlay's two primary models of the poet-critic that he himself aspired to be.

Except for the years 1972-1974, which he spent on the Greek island of Corfu and in Paris, then back home in Alabama, Finlay was at LSU throughout the rest of the 1970s. He was awarded the Ph.D. in December of 1980 after completing his dissertation on Yvor Winters' intellectual theism. He also joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1980.

In 1981, Finlay left Baton Rouge for the family farm in Alabama where for ten years he wrote essays, reviews, and new poems. On February 17, 1991, John Finlay died of AIDS, leaving behind his unpublished book of essays on the Gnostic spirit in modern literature and thought — *Flaubert in Egypt and Other Essays* — three published chapbooks of poems, and the typescript of his collected poems — *Mind and Blood* — as well as unpublished and uncollected poems, three essays from an unfinished book on the Greeks, and several diaries kept in Enterprise, in Tuscaloosa, in Montevallo, on Corfu, in Paris, and in Baton Rouge.

Finlay's poems are almost all in traditional literary forms. He mainly wrote plain-style lyrics of direct statement,

short narratives, and post-symbolist poems whose sensuous details exhibit controlled associationism in which definite ideas and feelings are indirectly yet logically presented. Whether plain-style, narrative, or post-symbolist, Finlay's poems are serious, simple, deep, direct, and often traumatically revealing of the human condition. The best of them are truly unforgettable.

Finlay addresses such subjects as the origin of the mind, the relation of mind and matter, mind and the irrational, mind and God, the nature of evil, Thomistic theology, philosophical subjectivism, the inscrutability and beauty of the natural world, primitive religious rituals, and, especially in the later poems, family life in the South since the early nineteenth century, Indian life in the South, the nature of modern war, and the isolation of the serious thinker and artist in the contemporary world.

And how high does Finlay rank as a poet?

In his essay in the Fall 2020 issue of the *Alabama Literary Review*, "The Romance of Modern Classicism: Remarks on the Life and Work of John Finlay (1941-1991)," Jeffrey Goodman assesses Finlay's stature: "As for Finlay's literary place: he was certainly not among the very highest rank of literary geniuses, Shakespeare, Dante, Baudelaire, or Racine. Nor does he stand without debate with the very first rank of American poets. His poetry was just peaking, wrote [Donald E.] Stanford, when he died. Yet Finlay's poetry contains here and there lines and passages at this high level, or near enough to it. Because he wrote five or six major poems and, in addition, twenty or more poems close to this level, he ranks certainly among the first five or six poets of the American South, and likewise of the post-World War II generation. Possibly, he ranks higher than this. At the same time, he was one of the most brilliant literary essayists of the last decades of his century. He has earned himself, indeed, a deserved place in American letters."

And in 1992, English poet Dick Davis, Fellow of The Royal Society of Literature, succinctly made the case for Finlay's verse: "The concepts that inform Finlay's poems, the fierce, lonely Manichaeism they articulate and struggle with, are so absent from most recent poets' intellectual landscape that his seems truly a voice crying in the wilderness. And yet in their discipline and grandeur Finlay's best poems are so harrowingly beautiful that they speak to any reader with ears to hear; they deserve the



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minute attention of *everyone* who claims to care for the truth and craft of poetry.”

Moreover, Edgar Bowers (1924-2000), the distinguished poet from Rome, Georgia, who won the Bollingen Prize — America’s highest award for lifetime achievement in poetry — began his *Collected Poems* (Knopf, 1997) with a poem in memory of Finlay entitled simply “John.”

Finlay’s poetry is now collected in an annotated edition entitled “*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*”: *The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)* edited by David Middleton and John P. Doucet. Belmont, North Carolina: Wiseblood Books, 2020). This poetry volume, along with its companion prose volume, was reviewed in the Fall 2020 issue of the *Alabama Literary Review* (29:1, 160-165) by Dr. Anna Head Spence of Enterprise Community College.

### *Finlay the Diarist*

But in addition to his now widely acclaimed poetry, Finlay’s essays, reviews, short story, diary entries, and miscellaneous prose are also of a high quality and of interest. And particularly in the diary entries we can trace the fascinating development of the mind of a poet and an essayist who later would earn a high reputation in Alabama, the South, and beyond.

Growing up to be a poet on a farm in the South, Finlay, especially as a younger man, felt a deep affinity with the southern Fugitive poets and the broader group of southern Agrarian writers, some of whom — including Andrew Lytle and Allen Tate — he met and sometimes visited, as his earlier diaries indicate.

The diaries are a record of Finlay’s literary, intellectual, and spiritual concerns and struggles. Many of these entries have the polish of a well-crafted miniature essay or piece of poetic prose, like the entry on Finlay’s reaction to the Impressionists in a museum in Paris. (Finlay would occasionally read aloud from his diaries to family and friends.)

In some diary entries, Finlay describes the facts of rural life on an Alabama farm, including the nature of a beloved milk cow named Red. Other diary entries on farm life may be taken as implied commentaries on modernity and on the general postlapsarian human condition.

In a few of the later entries, Finlay strives to understand

and then confront what he calls (perhaps the two were one) his “demon” and a demanding, condemning, unforgiving, remote “father” figure. But against these beings Finlay, quoting St. Augustine, posits a loving God the Father who says, “I want you to be.” This prolonged conflict was finally resolved only at the very end of Finlay’s life when Finlay said to his mother, “Mama, God has finally taken my demon away from me.”

And at the close of his poem “The Black Earth,” about the killing of a father in a dream — the father screaming as he dies — Finlay presents, through symbolic description, the final triumph of goodness and the rational. The poem ends with the rational and the good (the sun) triumphant over evil and the irrational (the moon):

The moon has risen white. The mirror clears  
Of darker fire. His voice now fades like pain  
A human takes, absorbs, and then survives.  
This moon itself will fade, whose cobalt glow  
The dawn soon strikes to almost nothingness.  
Throughout morning it will but faintly gleam  
There in the west, a disc of thin white bone,  
The center eaten through with constant light.

\*

What follows are some representative entries from the John Finlay diaries.

The first set of entries below is reprinted — with permission — from “*With Constant Light*”: *The Collected Essays and Reviews, With Selections from the Diaries and Other Prose of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)*, edited by David Middleton and John P. Doucet, Belmont, North Carolina: Wiseblood Books, 2020). Many other diary entries, not reprinted here, may be read in that book.

The second set of entries below consists of previously unpublished selections from the diaries. None of the diary entries in either set have been published before in serial format.

The one exception to this two-part format is the diary entry made in Paris on Christmas Eve of 1973. Though published in “*With Constant Light*,” that entry seemed an appropriate one to place at the very end of this selection. Further annotations to

the diary entries in Section 1 can be found in the Notes included in *“With Constant Light”*.

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I.       Diary Entries from *“With Constant Light,” With a Fragment of an Introduction of Allen Tate, A Passage from the Dissertation, and Finlay’s Final Poem*

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I have the pleasure this evening of introducing Allen Tate to you. The details of Mr. Tate’s public life you are familiar with: the famous Fugitive group of which he was a member when he was a student at Vanderbilt University, the Agrarian manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand*, to which he contributed an essay, and the later distinguished career as critic, novelist, biographer and, most importantly, as a poet. In fact they are so familiar that some graduate students have gotten ahold of him and written dissertations about him. So, I suppose we may safely pass all that by!

First of all, we must acknowledge debt as best we can. If the poets and critics help us to see our world and to “know the time” (to borrow from one of Mr. Tate’s poems), then I am sure that many of us here tonight have a special debt to pay Allen Tate. I am thinking of all those whose reading of a short story by Henry James or a poem by John Donne has become more exact and perceptive because of a knowledge of Mr. Tate’s criticism, as well as of the apprentice poets who have learned to use their language more effectively after carefully studying the technique of his own verse. Of course, we can never fully pay this kind of debt. But we can humbly and gratefully acknowledge it, which we now do.

The voices in which Mr. Tate has spoken are indeed wonderfully many; yet there is a thematic unity in all he has written. As Mr. Andrew Lytle has said: Mr. Tate’s theme is nothing more or less than what is left of Christendom. . . .

[from Finlay’s Introduction of Allen Tate at The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, mid-1960s. Compare Finlay’s poem “For Allen Tate” in *“Dense Poems and Socratic Light”*: *The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)*, page 105. Finlay inscribed this poem in his copy of Tate’s *Collected Essays*, 1959. Also see Finlay’s “Introduction” to his book *Flaubert in Egypt and Other Essays*,

*Essays on the Gnostic Spirit in Modern Literature and Thought*, now collected in “*With Constant Light*,” pages 31-34. Tate (1899-1979) was a major influence on Finlay both as a poet and as an essayist.]

\*

We cut oats and wheat in June. I used to ride the combine and sack up the grain as it came through the chute. The combine shook, grumbled, [ground], roared in the scorching heat. It looked grotesque with all its complicated wheels and wheels within wheels turning with a rapidity that only increased its incredible complication. I remember how it cut evenly into the tall golden wheat, a thousand grasshoppers jumping out of its path. The chaff of the oats. The rattlesnakes that desperately jumped out of the oats and stood for one moment upright as they struck at the terrifying machine. They glittered in the sunlight. To ride the combine in the heat. The narcotic effect of it, the trance.

...

Her name was Red and of the many animals I knew in my childhood on the farm it is she that I still remember most vividly. We kept her for over ten years, during which time my brother and I took turns milking and feeding her in a barn my father had built especially for her. She had good blood in her and at the height of summer could give up to three or four gallons of milk a day. I can still feel the weight of the milk pail between my knees and see the thick foam of her milk falling sluggishly in the early morning light over its brim. But her most impressive feature was her horns. They were long and magnificent and the upward thrust of their sharp points made her majestic, primitive, and unapproachable, especially after she had sleeked and honed them on the bark of pine trees.

[from *The Red 3-in-1 Notebook* kept in the 1980s. The Finlay family owned a peanut and dairy farm outside Enterprise, Alabama.]

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David Middleton

Keeping a journal is valuable. I'm beginning to understand why Johnson insisted upon it so.

[from *The Baton Rouge Diary*, 1980. See Finlay's two translations, in "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*," pages 78 and 79, from the Latin verse of Samuel Johnson (1709-1784): "After Samuel Johnson's Latin Poem to Thomas Lawrence, M.D." and "After Samuel Johnson's *Summe Pater*."]")

\*

Be patient. Don't try to move heaven and hell. . . . Be a craftsman. Be careful.

[from *The Blue Horse Composition Notebook*, 1961-1966; opening entry in the earliest surviving diary, December 17, 1961]

. . .

1965. I had a dream about Heaven (not Heaven exactly, but that part of Purgatory which is nearest Heaven). At first I thought it was Claybank — but it changed — A garage in which there was a bottomless pit over which hung an apparatus like a crane — all the non-essential fell into it — The Space — green valley — tall, shady trees full of large flowers — azaleas, japonicas (big as the moon) invisible angels singing Alleluia; the sky that pale, gold blue before sunset; In the distance, banks & banks of marigolds; The Church; oil lamps instead of candles, girl acolytes; small church-light (circle) behind the altar came on when candles were lighted; Christ himself coming to church.

[Claybank is an old cemetery in Ozark, Alabama where members of Finlay's family are buried. His poem "At Claybank" is set in this cemetery. See "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*," page 32.]

. . .

T.S. Eliot died night before last. Funeral services tomorrow on Epiphany—

. . .

On looking back over these notes, I am struck with the connection between a person's private life and his public art — I have been so thoroughly in agreement with Eliot, et al and their detachment, etc. until now . . .

. . .

Laurie's story: A Southerner went to live in N.Y. — in an apartment house — a little white coffin in the hallway — "Who is in the little coffin?" he asked everybody — No one knew — apathy — "I'm going back down South to find out who is in the coffin."

. . .

Met John Crowe Ransom today in Columbus: a kind of southern gentleman, who sort of looked like a retired Baptist preacher — *but what a poet!*

. . .

December, 1970. Ma and I saw the star that some think appeared at the birth of Christ. I had been unable to sleep and had gotten up to get some water. As soon as I had gotten to the sink, the star was the only thing I saw: tranquil, strong, intense and white. Ma said that it was "sincere" and went on to describe Judgment Day when those unfortunate ones who will be damned will "stay on this old earth and burn." She also said that the star made her feel as if the Nativity scene were a present reality.

— Enterprise, Alabama

[from a diary fragment. "Ma" is Mattie Coston Finlay (1887-1976), John Finlay's paternal grandmother.]

\*

Easter, 1972. Corfu.

Easter was beautiful. But Easter Eve was more beautiful still.

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. . . The whole town of Corfu darkened, millions of candles illuminating the night, the processions, the hushed excitement just before the priest *shouts* CHRIST IS RISEN and then the shouts, screams, embracings and salutations with the whole island lit up with fireworks whose brief yet far-flung lights exhaust even all those candles. [A] ritual meal [follows] in each home. . . . This meal is eaten only after the midnight service and consists of the new wine, cheese and olives and a meat dish filled with the innards of a lamb slaughtered the day before—the lungs, brains, eyes, kidneys, liver — everything. It is a kind of sacrament. . . . the Greek religion is strangely both literal and mysterious at the same time.

. . .

July 2, 1972

Yesterday James . . . and I rented small, automatic scooters and rode to Kassiope. We walked up to the fortress and then down to the beach. The path was steep and led to the rocks that sometimes had backs to them sharp as knives. We sat and listened to the waves. Albania was only a short distance away. The sun was hot and in the brown grass produced a haze almost narcotic in its effect. The fortress is Byzantine but only the walls (or part of the walls) are standing now. Nero supposedly danced there on one of his visits to Corfu. To think of the soldiers and ships once there, to realize its military importance and at the same time to see it turned into sheep pasturage with wild vines climbing up its walls is all very strange. The view from there is beautiful. As we went back to Corfu, freewheeling on the scooters, we suddenly came into view of the northern mountains towering above us. I saw them briefly and I also saw, again briefly, James make the sign of the cross and I heard him shout something I couldn't hear.

[from *The Green Corfu Diary*. Finlay spent much of 1972 on the Greek island of Corfu where he apparently supported himself by working as a picker in the olive groves and as a laborer in construction.]

\*

Dec. 3, 1973

On the train ride from Luxembourg to Paris I shared an apartment with an American couple and a French girl who was returning from a year or so stay in the U.S. The cold was almost unbearable to my Southern blood. The snow covered the night. No sleep. Worn out, exhausted. One small French town after another, glimpsed at from the train. At one station I made out the letters of CHARLEVILLE and came to. Later the girl told me she didn't like Rimbaud. He was "too much," in the sense of "overwhelming." Once while in Florida she had to read *A Season in Hell* and couldn't take it. She herself was somewhat like Rimbaud ended up as: lonely, without settlement, irrational, child-like, open willingly to strange influence he couldn't control and didn't want to, even dirty. I liked her. When I told her good-bye at the Paris station, it seemed as if she were about to cry. (I might have imagined this.) Not for me, but because of something inherently and uncontrollably sad in herself that requires only the least provocation to surface and dominate. (Again, my imagination?) Why am I going on with this? I liked the details: my first train on French soil, the night, the snow, the girl, Rimbaud, Charleville accidentally, unexpectedly made out in the night, and, most importantly, Florida, which is almost my half-home. Rimbaud got a little closer to me. Through the girl, he had wandered through Florida.

...

Dec. 14, 1973

The small square in front of St. Sulpice gives one the impression of being in a provincial town, not a city like Paris. Again the sense of space, of allowing the buildings a chance to assume their own undisturbed proportions. This pleasure is heightened by the initial frustration of it: as you approach it from the side, through the smaller streets leading off St. Germain, the church is hemmed in and crowded against by surrounding buildings. But as you walk to the square, it opens up and the relief of finding the un hoped for space is overwhelming. The bottom row of columns is Doric; the upper row Ionic. I think I prefer the simpler Doric. As you walk across the square to the church the façade is an invitation to and a promise of majesty. The organ inside is famous. In the gray vistas of the marble lengths and heights, old women were walking



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slowly to masses being celebrated here and there in its chapels. I said prayers in the Virgin chapel behind the main altar.

...

December 15; 1973.

An organ concert at St. Séverin, Paris.

We sat and then leaned on the marble floor, the steps going up to the chancel. People here and there were walking around and talking. They were mostly young, and, with their dates, couldn't be expected to pay much attention to the music. . . . But there were one or two serious, bearded boys sitting in isolation and being very intent on the music. It all seemed medieval to me. One of the side chapels was lit by several candles stuck in large red pots filled with sand. Above them was a painting of the Virgin that looked like a Greek icon. One or two old women, dressed in black, were leaning over the chairs in front of them and praying. From the dimly lit distance, they looked as if they had collapsed in the candlelight and had given themselves up to the Mother.

...

Dec. 19, 1973

I walked and walked today. I spent some time in Jeu de Paume, which houses the Impressionists. For so many of these paintings, distance is necessary for whatever appreciation you wish to give them; a close examination reveals the indistinctness, the vagueness, even sometimes the distortion, that I don't particularly admire. In some of them, one gets the eerie impression that you are watching the material world, reality itself, just at the point of evaporation and dissipation. Or that it is about to be done away with by millions of small concentrated dots and swarms, thick like glue, of warm, sweeping colors. Of course, not true of all of them. Van Gogh's self-portrait, though, is a good illustration of what I'm talking about. The surrounding pattern of thick, bright blue-green colors, that remind me of liquid flames (whatever they would be), seems to be locking in and engulfing the face. A kind of total subjectivity is being suggested. And the frightened, quietly desperate quality in his eyes, the sense of neurotic inability to grasp and feed on tangible reality, or to

make contact with another person, all this is a result of those thick swarms of paint that enclose the head. One way to get at what these painters were after is to notice what is not in any (or most) of their work: religion, man as a social being with certain obligations and responsibilities, human love, the human face, “normally” represented and illuminated by character, knowledge, moral virtues or vices. What is there, of course, is nature, the sense of being uncomplicatedly and amorally lost in the dream of sensualness. The trees, the herbs, the flowers, the weathers of the seasons permeate totally the ambiance of so many of these paintings. Before one of them, which one I’ve forgotten now, that had a view of some distant village hovering in the lush new growth of spring and the warm sunshine, I got a kind of brief throbbing sense of nostalgia for childhood and the life one leads during that period, along with a great desire to live as intensely and as long as I can. And in this emotion, it came to me (admittedly melodramatic) that Paris can stab the heart. So these painters are like so many of the French, English and American poets of the 19th and 20th centuries. It would be interesting to delve a little more deeply into their correspondences and likenesses.

Later on the way back to rue St. Jacques, I passed the “existentialist” cafe, Deux Magots. At the side of the cafe some students had a band going. They were playing circus-like, um-bah-bah music; others were dancing, some even in the street. One was so damn typically French: thin, short, and brought in the nose to a sharp, satirical point. His movements were like those of a puppet that knew the nonsense of it all and yet enjoyed showing off in it. By the way, the “existentialism” of these cafes along St. Germain, Deux Magots, Cafe de Flore, Brasserie Lipp, is very comfortable these days, well fed and full of affected, well-dressed people. Is this really where anxiety started?

[from *The Green Paris Diary*. Finlay spent the winter of 1973 living in Paris and working there at CBS as either a janitor or a receptionist].

\*

[The following passages are selected from detailed notes on psychiatric patients in Bryce Hospital, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where Finlay briefly worked, answering the telephone, in 1974.

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Compare his poem on some of these patients, "The Locked Wards," "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*," page 102.]

The one who said she was God and was creating the world with her hands. For hours she would sit in a chair placed out of the way, with this intent, trance-like expression on her face, and slowly and seriously move her hands in a determined pattern that for her resulted in creation.

...

The older woman who gave me the drawing. How easily she would break down and cry, with her face grimaced and ugly, if someone had slighted her. Then in the same moment, it was all changed to curses and screams. She was crippled in one leg and consequently had some difficulty in walking. But this didn't stop her at all. The corridors were paced and the desire to find somewhere, in some corner or cell, the attention and love and respect she wanted in her child-like way, this was unappeased.

...

Their minds are arrested, stopped, paralyzed by incidents in their past from which they are unable to free themselves. Their minds, memories forever possessed by cruelty done to them; of such a ferocious and explosive nature that they cannot free themselves of it.

Though their bodies are frail, old, falling apart, yet the cruelty of demons, of past deprivations, of their protest against demons, "the evil brutal men have done to them," [cruelty] or energy drives them still, like puppets.

For most of these old women, the present does not exist. If you ask them what year it is, the answer will probably [be] either that they don't know or that it is twenty or thirty years removed from the present.

They are locked in a time during which they experienced the shock that led to their mental breakdown. That time and the people who populated it are their realities. The present is for other people. For them it doesn't exist.

...

You must make a Paris in your own mind.

[This brief statement reflects Finlay's resolve to go on with his literary work even in isolation on the family farm in south Alabama after his years on Corfu and in Paris, the latter of which he called, in a diary entry quoted above, "my intellectual home." See also his poem "Ovid in Exile" in "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*," page 70.]

[from *The Orange Journal*, 1970s-1980s, back in America, but the journal itself—Vélin D'Angoulême—was purchased in Paris]

\*

June 5, 1980. I can't sleep tonight. It's 2 in the morning. As soon as I turn the lights out, the demon (as I not too poetically call it) comes out. It's as if I am being watched and judged by some suspicious tyrant who thinks nothing of me; as if I am determined to do something which will merit his idle disgust. Locked inside his own perfection, he waits in grim satisfaction, knowing that any moment I will do something which will confirm his opinion of my sorriness. And how many times have I performed exactly to his bidding, how much of myself have I torn up and given this beast to eat! There are so many more fathers beside this one. St. Augustine has God the Father say to his creature, "*I want you to be.*" This is the perfect father to whom I must bow.

...

June 10, 1980 . . . The health of the body, or rather the acceptance of the body, is an essential part of the moral life. Soul, body, and mind have to be in harmony with each other and with themselves, apart from the others. Benediction after mass moved me profoundly — the element of adoration, almost of an impersonal or supra-rational nature, is so absent today and yet still such a need of human nature, that when it does happen, such relief is experienced.

...

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July, 1980

Physician of souls, heal my diseased mind, restore it to health, so that, in grace and with grace, I may accept thy Love of me and give in turn my love of Thee. Amen.

[from *The Baton Rouge Diary*, June-October 1980. This is the bleakest of Finlay's diaries. During 1980 Finlay was under great strain trying to finish his Ph.D. dissertation on Yvor Winters' "intellectual theism" while at the same time dealing with deeply troubling spiritual, emotional, family, and sexual issues.]

\*

Notes for the Perfect Poem

1 It must be about the truth. It must give truth.

2 It must be literal, very literal.

3 It must be symbolic, very symbolic, but symbolic only in terms of its literal "base" or narrative, not in terms not growing out of this literal whatever you may call it.

4 It must be literal, very literal.

5 It must be clean and lean and have the supple, yet firm movement of pure muscle.

6 It must be of the physical world, have winter mornings, summer nights, stripped trees, creeks, smoke, smells, the reflection of a star in a bucket of water, etc. in it so that the reader will say, "Oh, yes, this is just the way it really is."

7 Yet it must also be abstract.

8 It must come from a man who is mature and has mastered himself so that he is calm in the good knowledge he has of our mystery, our language and history.

9 It must be rooted in a particular place.

10 It must be whole in its beautifully compelling demand that its reader engage his wholeness, both his intellect and his emotion.

11 It must be moral and cause the reader to make one of the three following statements: “I should and want to lead that kind of life.” “I should not and do not want to lead that kind of life.” “I should and want to have the patience to resign myself to these unavoidable facts about life.”

12 It must have both the intensity of engagement and the detachment of judgment.

13 It must be fully realized in language.

14 It must be plain.

[from a journal kept in the 1970s. Note 2 is repeated as Note 4 for emphasis. This is one of two major statements of Finlay’s poetics. The other statement, the Mary Roberts Rinehart Foundation proposal, may be found on pages 225-227 of “*With Constant Light*”.]

\*

He [Winters] held on to his “real beliefs” to the end and never compromised them. After “To the Holy Spirit” was written, his poetic career was all but finished; he had only three more short poems to write. The real work which remained for him to do was two books of criticism, *The Function of Criticism* and *Forms of Discovery*, and the anthology of short poems which he co-edited with Kenneth Fields, *Quest for Reality*. A great deal of *Forms of Discovery* was written while he was suffering from terminal cancer; in fact, close to the very end, he postponed an operation in order to finish the book. Donald Stanford has the best epitaph for him, which succinctly captures his peculiar combination of dignity and stubbornness. In the obituary notice which Stanford wrote for Winters in the *Southern Review*, Stanford quotes from a letter from a friend who had known Winters since his youth: “There never was anyone like Arthur [his name among his friends]. He got his work done and he died.”

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[the closing paragraph of Finlay's Ph.D. dissertation, pages 194-195. Yvor Winters' completion of his literary work just before his death may to some degree be compared to Finlay's life and work.]

\*

John Finlay's final poem is "A Prayer to the Father." Finlay composed this poem wholly in his head and then dictated it to his sister Betty from his sickbed during the last year of his life. Finlay intended this poem to be his death poem, as indeed it turned out to be.

#### A Prayer to the Father

Death is not far from me. At times I crave  
The peace I think that it will bring. Be brave,  
I tell myself, for soon your pain will cease.  
But terror still obtains when our long lease  
On life ends at last. Body and soul,  
Which fused together should make up one whole,  
Suffered deprived as they are wrenched apart.  
O God of love and power, hold still my heart  
When death, that ancient awful fact appears;  
Preserve my mind from all deranging fears,  
And let me offer up my reason free  
And where I thought, there see Thee perfectly.

Spring 1990

[from "*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*": *The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)* edited by David Middleton and John P. Doucet. Belmont, North Carolina: Wiseblood Books, 2020, page 94.]

\*

#### II. Previously Unpublished Entries from the John Finlay Diaries

"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the

ability to function.” F. Scott Fitzgerald.

...

“Ceci, darling, I am about to lose my mind. I have been reading Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*.”

...

The bare trees against a sky illuminated by the distant city’s myriad neon lights. By the way, the trees stood in a graveyard.

...

One night we all went to the Cotton Patch. . . . I came back drunk & realized when I fell down on the bed drunk — “God, you are the only thing I have.”

...

My fear of the world’s coming to an end. At the woodpile at sunset (those red, lingering sunsets of winter). When I looked at the fire burning in the fireplace I was frightened. So this is how hell is going to be. . . .

...

Dec. 6, 1965. I had a dream, which, I think, was caused by the blood drive here at the University [of Alabama — Tuscaloosa] today (for the war in Vietnam), and, of course, other things. Denny Stadium was on fire; the top part looked like an apartment house. Black smoke. The sirens, the fire truck. I was having an argument with someone about the reality of blood. Blood, I said, was real only insofar as it partook of the reality of the Blood. There was somewhere a black or grey cross — the blood was seeping into the black or grey earth. Allen Tate was somewhere in it. Where, I don’t know.

...

A poem — the ghost of Daniel Boone rejected by both Heaven and Hell and wandering America — the Natchez Trace brought this to my mind (when O.B. Emerson, Marvin Weaver and I



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went over to Jackson, Miss. to interview Eudora Welty). Why do Americans travel so much? And don't like the silence?

...

I rowed Jimmy Colquit over the river. He was drunk and liked to look at those shadows on the other side of the river, which always retreated or vanished when we approached them. Jimmy said, "Maybe your guy Plato is right." Later when I commented on those stars, he said, "They might be beautiful to you, because you have your religion, but they are terrifying to me."

[Compare Finlay's early poem "The Voyage" in *Dense Poems and Socratic Light*: *The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)*, pages 138-139.]

...

"Always seek the hard, definite, personal word." T.E. Hulme.

...

The epitaph of Walter Reynolds near Mount Ida (Talladega, Ala.) "Whether curiosity or affection shall lead you to this spot, and whether friends or strangers shall trace these lines: yet let this solemn impression rest in your mind and deeply impress the heart: This is the work of death! This is the end which awaits all the living, and you, too, must die!"

...

Yvor Winters . . . said all this modern insistence on POV [point of view], etc. was wrong. What he wants is the mature, reasoned reflections of the author; "universal" wisdom instead of eccentric, individual ejaculations. Perhaps he is right. Who knows?

[Yvor Winters (1900-1968), American poet and critic, who, along with southern poet and critic Allen Tate (1899-1979), had the greatest literary influence on Finlay]

...

Ginko tree: *Alabama Journal*, Nov. 29, 1963. Chinese consider the tree sacred and planted it around their temples, “a living fossil,” oldest thing on earth from [the] point of view of change. (And they are here at the University.)

...

Ma: “I’ve prayed for you. Don’t know if it got beyond the ceiling though.”

...

Ma: “Now don’t tell anybody this. I could be prosecuted.”

...

Holy Saturday Mama and I carried flowers out to Claybank to put on the graves. Wisterias, moss, honeysuckle, bridal wreath, japonicas — our remembrance of [the] dead only flowers that wilt up in an hour or so — while Christ in the grave will make them good.

...

Life is now inexpressible to me. I am drunk. It is Saturday night. That is, Sunday morning, December 12, 1964 (the 3rd Sunday of Advent.)

...

I want to write a poem on the Ginko tree — beginning with this sense of frustration and fragmentation I have lived under for the last four weeks, then working into the tree all its suggestions of ancient China, [complete] serenity, etc. — then at last, resolve to look up to the tree as a meeting place for Heaven and Earth.

...

East German Christians singing around the car of a visiting bishop: “Tomorrow we must suffer the consequences but tonight we must sing.”

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...

Ma's telling about Moses in the Wilderness: "You know sometimes I think I'm in that Wilderness all the time." Laughing at the Bible: "I am going to be punished for that someday." "I'm going to get down on my knees and ask God to reveal it to me: 'Moses begat Jacob . . . etc.'"

...

Fall — the dust, the yellow butterflies, sandspurs, cockleburrs, the sun, the clear quiet air around sundown, the days shortening, harvesting and work, sweat, the quietness and loneliness of the country, the leaves turning, falling and drifting — scuppernongs fat and rotting on the vine — "The world is a dream, and we are harvested by death" — at the last — "Do not think what this land can produce." Gather out the little harvest, etc.

...

The Use of Mythology in Recent Fiction — In the paper on K.A. Porter "She did not mistake the myth for the reality" — And a little later on we have this — "The myth is just another kind of reality." — Of course this leads to the question of Belief in Poetry — Truth vs. Beauty, etc. — and the failure of modern poetry. No "framework." Nothing yet comparable to the Christian synthesis, which they want to use now only for decorative purposes: Why this is not possible — Christianity is too historical: The Incarnation: Either A Lie, a Falsehood or else the Truth — No alternative — No vague, poetic middle way — when so used the results shallow, tentative, lacking conviction or intensity which is necessary to art. Modern literature's "flirtation" with Christianity only the Doctrine of Original Sin the one theory they can somehow get to work functionally to make convincing — and this gives only *one* segment of human life — it is the preliminary to the others — The Incarnation.

[from the *Blue Horse Composition Notebook* (1961-1966)]

\*

Tate [said that] he wrote the first sentence of *The Fathers* 75 times. Mr. Lytle said that 3 paragraphs a day are *quite* a lot for him.

[*The Fathers* — published in 1938 — is Allen Tate's only novel.]

Mr. Lytle: "If only we had a civilization." "The artist today has to build their [*sic*] own world.

Tate at one time was offered the editorship of the "Books" in *Time* but refused, because he didn't think it was fitting, etc.

Later Mr. Lytle looked over at me and said that my face was old-fashioned, it was the first time he had noticed it, and that I should have died in 1863.

[From Notes in a Visit with Allen Tate and Andrew Lytle at Mr. Lytle's House The Log Cabin, Monteagle, Tennessee (March 11, 12, 1967)]

\*

September 23, 1967. Jeannie Robison & I went out to Fred and Charlotte Blackburn's for dinner and a party. For part of the time we listened to the Alabama-FSU football game (37-37 — a great disappointment). Mrs. Barron (Charlotte's mother) started talking about Alabama football in the old days. She was living in Birmingham when Alabama first played in the Rose Bowl. No television. No radio broadcast. Everyone went down to the *News* to find out the score. The streets were all littered with cars. Winter. Someone (who is dead now, of course) every once in a while would come to the window and shout down the score. Another time after a fierce Alabama-Tennessee game (an Alabama victory) a special coach was arranged for the Alabama team going from Knoxville back home. Mrs. Barron was in the other part of the train. The team raised so much hell that the windows were broken out. Winter. By the time they got to Birmingham the happy drunken crew was cold and sober.

Fred, Charlotte, and Mrs. B. had a great argument about the War Between the States. Things got too heated and personal. "You've insulted the South. I'm going home." Mrs. Barron said one time. We were defending the South though.

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\*

March 17, 1968 in Montevallo. Our first spring day, and the strange longing it awakens in me. I think of those March sunsets at home, and the green oat fields.

The Browns came over from Marion for the day. We all went out to the foundry, the old Confederate one, most of which the Yankees burned. One furnace is still standing though, and a tunnel goes from one end to the other. Inside, the earth is black and packed down and very cool. Later in the spring honeysuckle vines will cover the entrances and make it even cooler. It is hard to imagine a place of fire.

\*

[1968]

A poem on Yvor Winters — the modern absolutist who isn't a Christian.

The bare notes:

1. Coldly you analyzed  
The rampant poetry  
Of yelps and scorned its side      Which is carefree  
Of relativity.
2. What men in madness think they know
3. You needed God to make an absolute  
But became shamed through pride?, etc.  
And dismissed him (nostalgia)
4. The disdain for nostalgic needs
5. And what did it reveal?  
Irrelevance and death and multiplied
6. Heretical nobility. And yet I praise you.

\*

Notes for a Poem (1968)

“For Friends”

The wood was stuck together tight in ice  
And by the time we had it pulled apart  
Our hands were raw and numb. *We'll need something  
More than oak logs to burn the night through.*  
Far away down through the black trees we saw  
The sun weakened and brought low in the west.  
It was finished. Night would have it now  
And the sleet and the tighter warp of ice.

May 11, 1970

the seeds are appearing on the cedar trees — from a distance they look like a sprinkling of grayish green snow scattered over the entire tree. Also — now is the time for honeysuckle — it is everywhere . . . over fences, up trees, down gullies, into rose bushes. The air is thick with it. And the magnolias are blooming.

\*

“The task of the civilized intelligence is one of perpetual salvage.”  
Allen Tate.

\*

The time: the summer of 1970, that dreadful summer at the end of which I left Montevallo. Perhaps a poem about a modern novelist (or poet?) who affects a kind of existential anguish, which, in turn, is really nothing more than anger at people's neglect of his “genius.” Pride and ignorance are what rule his life. (Remember that one time said he really had no need of God, and that he had said it so casually.) He gives a party, the occasion being the publication of his first novel. It turns into a drunken mess. He dominates everything with his vulgarities, shouts, cries, curses and prideful boastings. I stay and listen into the morning which breaks outside pale blue and grey and which reveals the intractable, multitudinous world of objectivity, full of crisis, demands, etc., that call for all of our human intelligence. My anger and (really) hate for the novelist is changed to pity

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when I realize how ill-prepared he is for this world, how far from the truth he is which would enable him to meet those problems with some dignity, and how pathetic he will eventually end up. *Suicide*. I leave him passed out with a mock-serious expression on his face, as if he were now concentrating totally upon himself. Get across the idea of an intellectual and spiritual death. The whole poem should be an attack upon instinctualism based upon a pride which will not allow a person to recognize the fact that he needs something else, etc. And solipsism and secularism. Details: the littered living room with empty or half-filled glasses around, heavy cigarette smoke, talk, talk, talk, the affectation & worship of youth, the red splotches on his face, the sprinkling of grey hairs & OTHERS. The meter: iambic pentameter — the form: heroic couplets.

[Compare Finlay's poem "A Portrait of a Modern Artist" in *"Dense Poems and Socratic Light": The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)*, page 101.]

\*

[Notes for a Poem]:

Towards the end (or at the end) bring in the idea that the initial act is one of charity or love and that the whole work of the mind (if it has any worthy) is derived from the desire to understand the circumstance favorable to that act. Perhaps the last word of the poem should be "love" or "charity." . . . the realization of 2 realities on the part of "innocence": (1) death & (2) the essentially alien human position in a beautiful yet indifferent (to human values, that is) nature, and, as a consequence, the formation of the critical intelligence to protect those values — the source, the end of intellect is disinterested "charity" — the justification of knowledge is the humanity (in the fullest sense) it provides.

[*Miscellaneous Entries from the Diaries and Other Sources*]

\*

Tulip tree at the corner of the Cullens' front porch. A japonica

close to the edge of the porch, also a pittosporum (the same that curved around the corner of Mama's with exposed trunks that looked like the muscled arms of a minor god, deity), some vines (clematis?) Confederate jasmine?), Lady Banks rose tangled up in the fence. A ginkgo tree further back near Laurie's room. One palm tree. A grove of pecans trees in the side yard with rich green St. Augustine grass.

[Mama — or MaMa — was Finlay's maternal grandmother, Toxie Ard Sorrell [1891-1971].]

...

Laurie: "How do you expect me to believe in God? Look at what the Germans did to the Jews. Look what the Yankees did to *us*."

[Laurie is Annie Laurie Cullens (d. January 17, 1984, age 90 — a well-read family friend of the Finlay family who had a great impact on John Finlay as a man of letters.)]

...

"Annie LAU-rie," Jim said, pausing and emphasizing then first syllable of [the] second name in that malicious way, that way full of meaning, that only Southerners know how to do, "I don't know why you look up those words. You'll be dead soon and can't use 'em."

...

I've just returned from a trip to Ozark [Alabama]. Great argument between Laurie and Helen. Just out of the clear blue Helen darts at Laurie: "Well, I'll tell you who *I* don't like — Robert E. Lee. He sent all those boys needlessly to die in the last battle, when it was all over anyway." Laurie: "But Gettysburg was not the last battle." Another argument over the plants belonging to [the] nightshade family such as tomatoes, squash, eggplants, etc. and whether or not they caused arthritis. Helen also furious with Laurie for telling me Aunt Kate had had a heart attack. Later Laurie said to me in her plaintive and emphatic tone: "Why don't they let her go on and go?"



David Middleton

[from the *Green Penway Journal* (kept in the 1980s)]

\*

[Three drafts of the poem "At Kalámai"]

[untitled]

Clean bones in green weeds  
Are what the sea can know.  
Beyond ourselves it lies  
And whores with no shame.  
The brown peninsulas.  
Quiet night-roofs glimmer  
In the cobalt haze,  
Give out to the moon.  
It can never have enough.  
What dream have you turned in  
That what I kiss is salt?  
Lie silent in these sheets.

Nightpiece

Bones in cold weeds  
Are what the sea can know.  
All night ~~she~~ it waited outside  
The room and you beside me  
Asleep in the small space.  
~~Her~~Its drawn reaches glimmer  
In the cobalt haze,  
Gave out unto the moon.  
~~She~~ It could never be enough.  
What dream were you turning in  
That what I kissed was salt,  
Lay silent in those sheets?

[untitled]

Bones in ~~green~~ cold weeds  
Are what the sea can know.  
All night it stood outside  
The window and you beside me.  
Deep nightroofs glimmered  
In the cobalt haze.,  
Gave out unto the moon.  
They could never be enough.  
What dream did you turn in  
That what I kissed was salt,  
Lay silent in those sheets?

Corfu, July 7, 1972

[from *The Green Corfu Diary* (1972)]

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The final version of this poem is in “*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*”: *The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)*, page 96:

At Kalámai

Bones in cold weeds  
Are what the sea can know.  
All night it waited  
outside the house,  
you beside me sleeping.  
Towards dawn it turned.  
The waves crashed  
Into the cobalt haze,  
gave out unto the moon.  
They never were enough.  
What dream were you turning in  
that what I kissed was salt,  
lay silent in those sheets?

\*

David Middleton

Dec. 14, 1973

Walking back through the labyrinth of narrow winding streets, at every open space, there was Nôtre Dame facing us in the rain, in the drizzled illumination of its quiet, yet powerful, beauty.

...

I walked completely around the Ile St. Louis looking for a house with a plaque on it that would tell me if Baudelaire lived there. But I couldn't find it. Later I discovered that he lived off 17 Quai d'Anjou in 3 rooms on the top floor, which he rented. The year, 1849; the house, the "magnificent" Hotel de Lauzun. And their Hashish-Eaters Club met in the second story salon. (Speaking of residences, etc., Katherine Anne Porter lived in Rue Nôtre Dame des Champs; Pascal and Racine are buried in the same Lady Chapel of St. Etienne du Mont (which is close to [the] Pantheon); St. Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great once taught at a Dominican convent that once stood at 14 rue Soufflot (which leads off St. Michel). There's not much to say about the St. Louis. Quiet, crowded with houses, hotels, that I think were formerly where some of the nobility lived, no open spaces. But it does afford some magnificent views of Nôtre Dame and the Left Bank, particularly the Pantheon whose dome I found, unexpectedly enough, to dominate the whole quarter.

...

Dec. 17, 1973

After a long, bitterly cold walk through the Flea Market, rows and booths of trivia and old, pathetic things, the best meal so far. James and I (Janick continued shopping) went into a rather big restaurant that had a kind of low life, circus atmosphere about it that reminded me of Rimbaud. A very high ceiling, tall windows that let in plenty of light, a lot of workers and peasants, a couple, middle-aged, in front of us, embracing, kissing and caressing each other. The meal: *moule* in an onion-like soup, hot *frites*, cold beer with a head of thick foam on it. French bread that we sopped in the onion soup. Our waitress had on a tight, bright yellow T-shirt and the biggest, proudest pair of boobs I've ever seen. After dinner we sat and talked in the lazy drifts of our cigarette smoke, and basked like comfortable, full-bellied animals in the warm sun.

And I mean it was cold outside!

. . .

Dec. 20, 1973

Not much today. I stayed home and studied, read and wrote. James and I went out to get a takeout order of steak and *frites*. At the “restaurant” close to St. Julien, a beggar was at the open window, saying something to its cook. James later said that he would have given him a five franc but that French beggars are too proud to accept handouts.

[from *The Green Paris Diary* (1973)]

\*

June 5, 1980

Freud’s insight about the internalization of the father’s condemnation. Allen Tate’s line: “What, shall we set up the grave in the house, the ravenous grave?”

[Finlay is recalling from memory lines from Allen Tate’s poem “Ode to the Confederate Dead.” Tate’s lines actually read:

What shall we say who have knowledge  
Carried to the heart? Shall we take the act  
To the grave? Shall we, more hopeful, set up the grave  
In the house? The ravenous grave?]

. . .

June 6, 1980

Saturday night, a little after midnight. A party at Karen Wheatley’s. I’m now half drunk on warm beer, and hot as hell. It’s summer now in Baton Rouge. One day I shall be dead. Startling fact I don’t often think about. The demon is still here with me. Envy is a sin. A sin is an offense against God and against our own nature. It prevents that nature from realizing itself. I envy strong people who don’t need the approval of others. And

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I'm tired of talking about all this. I'm ashamed of it. Will we ever (will I ever) be freed of the bondage of the psychological? Will I spend my life asking these questions, making these statements? I wish so much for sleep now. Soundless, dreamless sleep, deep, buried quiet. All the tissues healing, the wounds closing up, and flesh and mind becoming whole again. I feel this is going to be a rough night. God help me.

...

June 10, 1980.

First sentence of "novel-memoirs": "All the people I am going to write about are now dead." Some of them I never saw, but only heard about from . . . ." Later: the thought struck recently that I live among the dead. "Where nothing can be other than it was." Fixed and unchangeable, yet how it is changed in the mind. I often think of Claybank, the graves under the weather. Rain and wind all night, the sunlight at noon. . . .

[Compare Finlay's poem "The Wide Porch" in *Dense Poems and Socratic Light: The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)*, page 31. The first line of that poem is "Where nothing can be other than it was." Also see the poem "At Claybank" on page 32 of the same volume.]

...

June 10, 1980 (around midnight)

No demon right now. It's been a good day. I starting 3rd chapter of the dissertation, continued exercising, went to evening Mass, did some sunbathing and swimming earlier. A few minutes ago I walked up to an all-night store, bought a quart of beer, and walked back, feeling tired and good. The health of the body, or rather the acceptance of the body, is an essential part of the moral life. Soul, body, and mind have to be in harmony with each other and with themselves, apart from the others. Benediction after Mass moved me profoundly — the element of adoration, almost of an impersonal or supra-personal nature, is so absent today and yet still such a need of human nature, that when it does happen, such relief is experienced.

...

June 29, 1980

From Gilson's *Heloise and Abelard*: "Its heroes [i.e., Heloise and Abelard) observe themselves, and analyze themselves as only Christian consciences fallen prey to passions can do it."

...

Sept. 10, 1980

An important discovery for me. I've been reading Plato's *Republic* and thinking about the differences he saw between *images* and what we can call *logos*. Today I came home disturbed, nervous, and uncertain of what I would do tonight. I've been imaging all sorts of scenes, crazily enough, about students and classes, all of which cause me profound psychic discomfort, even pain. The scenes either concern a rebellious child who is upsetting a parent nervously . . . [to] the point of condemnation and reprimand and punishment, or about a male (vestiges of the old father or someone approved of and standing in for the father) who jeeringly condemns me or silently lets me know that he knows what I am. I decided to stop it. I lay down and in the bed I deliberately began a sustained discourse (the *logos*) made up of complete sentences, which defined, analyzed, explained and understood the situation. (All this done silently in my head.) At once the random violence of imaging activity ceased; a peace and a calmness enter my soul; I felt purged, whole, a master of the problem. In fact, it was nearly impossible to "imagine" the other kind of mental activity. It seemed that the two states are as incompatible and "ruling out" as dryness and wetness. I then realize the other state — let's call it the primitive child — depends upon images which it is *forced* to see or upon voices, coming from the outside, which it is also forced against its will to hear, and that it is incapable of speech, of complete sentences, of sustained discourse. It is on the other hand a victim and the emotional effects it feels — very noticeable and apparent effects — are centered around fear, and its resists, protests and cries out. The images, it should be noted, are random, unconnected, and invested with a dumb built-in symbolic meaning which it refuses to articulate itself. A sure sign of the irrational: images, and incapacity for speech, for *logos*; something that causes fear;

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something heard and seen, not thought, and not coming from the self. When the *logos* speaks: there are no images as such and the whole self speaks and says “I,” not “you.”

[from the *Baton Rouge Diary* (June-October 1980)]

\*

Dec. 24, 1973. Christmas Eve . . . . On the Metro or rather in the stations underground, I got my first glimpse of Metro life. There were “hippies” singing and begging for money. One old woman who, I think, was drunk beyond consciousness, was pathetically trying to sleep on crumpled-up bags and old clothes which were piled up on the Metro bench. No position suited her. One hand was extended and it moved awfully here and there, making meaningless gestures. Her cold poverty and discomfort were overwhelming. Once she turned over and in the full glare of the electric light, with her eyes closed and her lips moving silently, she made or rather tried to make the sign of the cross. Later, after the party, a small group of us went to Midnight Mass at St. Germain l’Auxerrois, which featured Gregorian music. It was the bells of this church which gave the signal for the massacre of St. Bartholomew. And on the second Sunday of every month, a mass is celebrated for the souls of departed poets.

[from *The Green Paris Diary* (1973)]

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**Note:** I wish to thank Joshua Hren, Editor-in-Chief of Wiseblood Books, for permission to reprint diary entries and other material from “*With Constant Light*”: *The Collected Essays and Reviews With Selections from the Diaries and Other Prose of John Martin Finlay 1941-1991*, edited by David Middleton and John P. Doucet, Belmont, North Carolina: Wiseblood Books, 2020) and from “*Dense Poems and Socratic Light*”: *The Poetry of John Martin Finlay (1941-1991)*, edited by David Middleton and John P. Doucet. Belmont, North Carolina: Wiseblood Books, 2020).

David Middleton  
Literary Executor for John Martin Finlay  
Thanksgiving 2023

***Steven Monte***

### **The Late Pagans**

Paganism

*Paganus* — pagan — basically meant “hick”:  
city-Christians, or at least the urbane,  
invented paganism in its wane,  
and in the Latin West the name would stick.

And yet, the “Hellenes” wouldn’t go down quick  
or undefended: from Syria to Spain  
they mustered arguments and would remain  
for centuries a force Christ couldn’t lick.

Their time would come. Or it would soon be gone.  
Or both. Antiquity was moving on.  
There was the Way, and they were in the way.

What can they tell us? Their defeat abides.  
We would do well to listen. And besides,  
the Roman pagans have much more to say.



Steven Monte

## Signs of the time

Most Christians looked down on earth; Gnostics, too;  
mystery cults; many a Platonist:  
as Rome wound down, more factions would insist  
the world was a place we must suffer through.

Had they lost nerve, then? Perhaps. In their view,  
the body was a cage. They shook a fist  
at those who said the soul dissolves like mist:  
all things that pass away were never true.

They had a point. And though it was no given  
that pagans loved the earth, we'd be forgiven  
for thinking so, while most sects dwelt on sin

and how the world was cut from one dark cloth —  
or how the earth was fire, the soul a moth,  
and how, come Constantine, their sign would win.

## The Neoplatonist (Plotinus)

If asked, he'd have sworn there was nothing new  
about his Platonism: he deferred  
to custom (taking Plato "at his word")  
and clarified and spelled out what was true.

Still, it seems clear Plotinus took his cue  
from his own time: philosophy had spurred  
its high horse upward; few felt it absurd  
to fashion heavens out of which souls flew

and to which souls were able to return.  
His soul, however, took a strange new turn:  
it stayed in heaven *while* it was on earth.

The undescended soul (call it "the self")  
had all it needed and could be itself —  
in *this* world, even at the hour of birth.

### The Allegorist (Porphyry)

A student of Plotinus, Porphyry  
not only wrote about his teacher's life  
but edited his writings, taking the knife  
to volumes that he didn't always see

eye-to-eye on, and stitched them so that we  
might read them in them his own order, rife  
with contradictions (or not) — a midwife  
to metaphysics and symbology.

Strangely, even his anti-Christian tracts  
became beloved of Christians. And the ax  
he wielded over them would boomerang

in time to a defense. For in his lore,  
tales like the cave of nymphs were nothing more  
than allegory. And this song, he sang.

### Allegory

Much virtue can be found in metaphor.  
And vice: the *Odyssey* is beautiful  
and treacherous, the moment it is full  
of all the meanings it held long in store.

Some would say that's what poetry is for —  
that Jesus often taught in parable.  
And soon the Word of God exerted pull  
toward allegory: in a word, toward *more*.

So when both Christians and pagans began  
to read into each other, meanings ran  
in parallel, if not in harmony.

It wouldn't last. There had to be a wrong  
and right. Some meanings wouldn't get along.  
Some understandings were not meant to be.

Steven Monte

A vanishing truth

The pagans went. But did they disappear?  
The argument for: Christians set their sights  
on doing everything they could do here  
to root out sin and occupy its heights.

The argument against: customs and rites  
strangely persisting, half pagan, half not,  
and threadbare banners, raised in rearguard fights:  
a sense of something lost but not forgot.

Meanwhile, the whole world would change, a whole lot,  
with intersecting lines of friend and foe.  
Christians and pagans slipped into a knot  
they couldn't untie — though neither said so —

leaving to later pagan Christians the aha  
that Christmas was the Solstice-Saturnalia.

The Ritualist (Iamblichus)

And Porphyry begat Iamblichus —  
not literally, of course: they disagreed  
on theurgy, and thereby sowed the seed  
of magic thought that later grew on us.

Or magical thinking. Incredulous  
of prayers and spells that didn't somehow bleed  
into reality, the magus freed  
himself (the world?) of much Platonic fuss.

Then kept on fussing, adding scheme on scheme  
of daemon-spirits. For it was his dream  
to reach to heaven. What Plotinus said

was wishful thinking, if not outright wrong.  
The right ingredients were needed. Song  
would unearth power, even from the dead.

### The Arch-Heretics

“Heresy” just meant “choice.” At least at first,  
Christians could wander through the schools of thought  
and choose their lesson. All they really sought  
was wider vision. Few beliefs were cursed.

Through that tide of thought, though, the damned would burst.  
Councils built walls, and shepherds would be caught  
outside the fold. Great battles would be fought  
on small grounds. Priests went straight from good to worst.

Forget about lapse or honest mistake;  
they might as well be pagan, for Christ’s sake.  
Those with large flocks became the stuff of myth:

Arius, Marcion, Nestorius,  
and even Mani would come down to us  
as through a dark mass — names to conjure with.

### The Apostate (Julian)

Could his foray in turning Rome’s clock back  
ever have succeeded? Most would say “no.”  
But he died young, so we may never know.

Even the pagans were taken aback  
at orders to revive blood sacrifice.  
Surely some words and incense would suffice?

But he was out for blood. Make no mistake:  
the Galileans hurt him; they’d smart too.  
That sickly sect could now look forward to  
much harsher edicts (none of which would take).

The rank and file loved him, and in their wake,  
latter-day pagans. Everyone who threw  
their hat into his ring was working through  
nightmares from which they never would awake.

Steven Monte

### The Convert (Augustine)

Christian at last, but first a Manichee:  
the fight was on with evil and with good.  
From the start, then, Augustine understood  
the high stakes of belief: we couldn't be

neutral if honest. He could also see  
how passions led us into a dark wood  
we couldn't leave alone. How *all we would*  
was wishful thinking. And yet we were free.

Rome didn't fall for its abandoning  
the old gods. That was just the sort of thing  
the pagans said — routinely. By his lights,

the sack of Rome had simply bared our need  
for the eternal. Take him up and read:  
pagans had spurred him to his greatest heights.

### Twilight of the gods (Athena and Proclus)

Athena was removed from the Parthenon  
sometime in the fifth century, it seems.  
As paganism died out, Wisdom's dreams  
became increasingly vague. Thereupon,

Proclus declared that he would be the one  
to house the goddess. And in his strict schemes  
she dwelt within his home, not by the streams  
that flowed through Athens, but there, in the sun

that bathed the world yet stayed forever dark.  
A war's survivor, nourishing a spark  
to build a fire that might keep all warm,

she lived beneath the Areopagus  
patiently waiting — but for what? for us? —  
bracing herself against the future's storm.

Epilogue: the Heathens

In the year 1000, or 999,  
Iceland converted to Christianity.  
To avoid bloodshed, pagans were left free  
to pray in private — if they made no sign

that they had done so. The law drew a line  
between the actions everyone could see  
and testify to, and activity  
beyond them. Faith and deeds might not align.

But did, sort of. Pagans went to the heath,  
forming a circle like a Christmas wreath  
and chanted out of sight of other folk.

Their songs resounded in the hills. “Oh those  
heathens” drew laughter. And yet still some chose  
to be both in and not in on the joke.

Steven Monte

### **Days of '84 and '87**

A memory from a lifetime ago  
came back to me last night: 1984,  
blood, pain — but first the later and before,  
the after-memory at Chenonceau,

that fairy-castle built upon a stream,  
solid and flowing, as we feel life is.  
The second time there, then, whose emphasis  
gave meaning to the first — it was no dream:

I lay awake remembering events  
connected in themselves and in my making.  
They happened, then. And there was no mistaking  
that, even then, I planned coincidence

as if life were a poem. And all along  
I was right to do so. And yet so wrong.

The town is Chenonceaux — there is no X  
in the castle. The year is '87.  
Summer again. A cloudless azure heaven  
hangs over everything. Nothing complex

about this picture: I'm back at the scene  
of the no-crime, in a tourist bus, no less.  
But I have seen the castle, more or less  
restored; in the allotted time, I mean

to go exploring; I strike out alone.  
I know I know this place; a family  
that lives close by (I believe) hosted me  
three years ago. Now I'm here on my own.

If memory serves, I came here the first day;  
in broken French, I explained my delay.

I want to break away now. I go out  
and past the gardens. Human voices fade.  
I'm in a kind of forest. I evade  
the iron fences walling it about

until I meet a fence I can't not mind —  
a high barred gate above a little brook.  
As in a story, every path I took  
has led me to here, left others behind.

To go on, it is up or under now —  
menacing spikes at either end. I bet  
if I go under it, I will get wet.  
Over, then. As if springing from a bough,

my youthful body leaps — and then contorts  
and clears the top — a climbing-vault of sorts

that puts me on the forest's other side.  
In retrospect, I'm startled by the ease  
and instinct of my actions. Up in the trees  
I glimpse blue sky. Putting heaven aside,

I walk ahead, feet firmly on the ground.  
The next hour (ten minutes?) is paradise.  
I can't have gone far, except in my eyes.  
The stealth of it, and no one being around —

no doubt these played a role in what I felt.  
But all good things (and evil) have their ends.  
The bus is waiting. All my tourist friends  
will be impatient. We were only dealt

two hours per castle. I must get back.  
I start up quickly, as if put to the rack.



Steven Monte

The journey home is the most difficult.  
Or so they say. In my case, that is fair.  
The first event was easy. A fence was there;  
I vaulted it as if releasing a bolt.

Only this time, my hands are not as clean:  
I come away with green moss on my fingers.  
I wash them quickly. But a green stain lingers  
like a patina; I must leave this scene.

I'm almost back. But now I am confronted  
with irony: I've lost my glasses somewhere.  
Is there time to go back? I wish I were  
somewhere else, yet I feel that nothing's wanted

except resolve to do what must be done.  
I will go back. I have to. I will run.

And run like hell. I am back at the fence.  
Hoping against hope, I glance right and left.  
There, on the surface of the brook, is left  
what I am looking for: it makes no sense

and every sense — my glasses floating there  
in equilibrium, the current holding  
them up and back, and all my life unfolding  
before me, more than I wanted to bear

and would bear, whether I liked it or no.  
And I have lied this whole time, keeping back  
events of '84 threatening to crack  
open a poem like this, set long ago,

in which something like an X marks the spot  
for what did/didn't happen. Was and was not.

Yet everything I've said so far is true,  
all too true. It may also be misleading.  
I made the bus. And last night, I was reading  
("last night" now meaning "something pointing to

the present") how we avoid who we are.  
All is on schedule. I'll soon be in France  
for the first time. Arrangements in advance  
of my stay are confirmed. Nothing will bar

my departure. Nothing, that is, but life.  
Life intervenes: I have a hydrocele.  
But all shall be well. Post-op, it will heal  
in more than time, and I won't feel the knife.

The first part's true — procedure with no hitches.  
The follow-up — simply remove the stitches.

But life refused simplicity this time.  
I went in. The day was warm; the physician,  
friendly, confident. A man of decision.  
"Let's see how things are?" he smiles. I climb

onto the table, disrobed or pants down —  
I can't remember — and, looking away  
from what he was seeing or about to say,  
I stared at the wall, sweating, looking down

and then across an anatomy chart —  
a standard office poster, even today.  
(Today, writing, I want to find a way  
to make it something else. To use my art

to see eye-doctor letters, not flesh and bone —  
avoid my body.) I lay there, alone.

Steven Monte

The doctor was there though, albeit silent  
for an excruciating time. He tried  
to take the stitches out, but they defied  
his best skill. Blood dripped. Then the most violent

pain I have felt and hope will ever feel:  
tweezering the drain in my scrotum free,  
the doctor re-opened the wound. Surgery  
without anesthetic. Soon they would wheel

me to another operating table.  
This time, I would go under, wake up dazed.  
Two drugged weeks later, I would be amazed,  
heading to France, and now glad to be able

to go at all, and just a few days late.  
The family knew nothing. That could wait.

It may just be a trick of memory:  
I flew in early, was put on a train  
to the Loire, attempted to explain;  
suddenly Chenonceaux. All this to me

transpired in a very (very) short order.  
I checked my letters today. I got this right:  
the '87 information is tight.  
'84 has vanished. Exists on the border

of myth and fact, though I've tried to be true.  
The pain was real. I know that, and it made  
me more empathetic and less afraid  
of physical hurt: I knew what I knew.

And when I came again to Chenonceau,  
I struck out alone. I knew where to go.

But Time's loops do not form such perfect ties,  
even assuming every detail's right.  
It is not just a matter of all that might  
be true, historically or otherwise,

but what is left behind and doesn't square  
with lessons learned, the sense of "having closure."  
I remain unhealed of a fear of exposure,  
especially in this age of *put it out there* —

perhaps that's healthy, but I damn well know  
it's not all good. And there are other things  
that must have slipped my mind. (My cellphone rings.  
I decline the call.) It was touch and go

if you'd reach someone then. Best make a plan  
and stick to it. I'm back where I began.

Which is to say, making poetic sense  
of not exactly nonsense and only fact  
(in today's shifting terms) by being backed  
by stores of personal experience.

Again I am avoiding the obvious:  
how hurt I was, and how anxious and tense  
and eager for life, long held in suspense —  
my glasses on the brook. I missed the bus

not in reality, but in my mind,  
and I've been playing catch-up ever since.  
I know I've said enough to make you wince.  
I know in many ways I must be blind.

But let that be. My only argument:  
what I had to say, I've said. And always meant.

**James B. Nicola**

**It's not that I'm not fond**

It's not that I'm not fond or even passionate  
but that my one great love (before today),  
when asked about love, well, never did say.  
Since then I could not help but over-ration it,  
which can be misconstrued as being cold.  
The silence made the end of that affair  
ambiguous: I'd had such faith that there  
was so much *there* there. It's a story told

too often: like a two- or three-week flu  
that lingers past the four-week mark to five  
months, six years. . . I don't mean to puzzle you,  
who cure and give me cause to act alive:  
But my last great love never did say no.  
So for a little while I may seem slow.

**Olivia Pass*****Soon Done with the Crosses*, Claude Wilkinson. Cascade Books, 2023**

Claude Wilkinson's latest book, *Soon Done with the Crosses*, contains many poems examining faith, as the title suggests, but it also has poems scrutinizing human conduct, examining race in America, giving parables, and delving into the essence and beauty of life. The poems in this volume are in various stanzas of free verse; some, like "Water Strider" and "Bonsai," are patterned poems, evoking visually the poems' subjects. Many poems reference photographs, paintings, painters, and vibrant colors, subtly hinting at Wilkinson's second career as a visual artist. His poetry collections include *Reading the Earth* (1998), winner of the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award; *Joy in the Morning* (2004), nominated for a Pulitzer Prize; *Marvelous Light* (2018); and *World without End* (2020), which was nominated for the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award. He has also been awarded the Whiting Writers' Award and the Walter E. Dakin Fellowship in Poetry from the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Wilkinson has an M.A. from the University of Memphis and has taught at Christian Brothers University, LeMoyne-Owen College, and Mississippi Valley State University. He was the first poet to be awarded the John and Renée Grisham Visiting Writer in Residence at Ole Miss. He presently conducts poetry workshops and lives in Nesbit, Mississippi.

The first poem of *Soon Done with Crosses*, "Birds that Alight on Faith," is about bearing the burdens of life here on earth. Wilkinson gives examples of plants that look fragile but are actually strong; animals, supported by seemingly delicate natural elements, that prevail; and mythological and Biblical heroes, who triumph in some way in life. This poem seems to be a prayer:

Help me also to believe in  
the leanest of saplings and twigs,  
in something as flimsy  
as a honeysuckle bloom.

He notes that Theseus had such belief when "he tackled the Minotaur." The second stanza begins in much the same way:

Help in the way I've seen  
pelicans and swans skim  
mutely onto a lake,  
thinking it solid as stone.

Then he connects that faith with St. Peter's when he "took his first steps / on stormy Gennesaret." The third and final stanza begins humbly with his asking for help for himself:

With only that thimbleful  
of aerial surety, help me  
to grasp those things  
which never collapse  
under the heft of this life.

Wilkinson, an African-American poet, includes some poignant poems about race in America. In "Posed beside the Lyceum Market Commemorating James Meredith's Enrollment at Ole Miss in 1962," the speaker shares his own university experiences — entering the University of Mississippi a quarter of a century ago and now "back as a visiting scholar." He remembers a beautiful white girl who exchanged glances with him years ago, and thinks "of the life / we couldn't have had together then, / even in someplace like France or Greece." He then recalls the time that his father was pulled over by "one of the state's finest / in blue" who asked him, "whether he thought / 'that nigger Meredith was gonna / be able to stay.'" The speaker remembers to keep his "shoulders straight, / while maybe a bit glazed, / my smile seems graciously true." That is how the poem ends, projecting his own protective but "glazed" demeanor, falsely smiling a gracious smile in the presence of the bigoted policeman.

Four of the poems in *Soon Done with the Crosses* are entitled "parables," and like some of Jesus' parables and Aesop's fables, they delightfully use animals to teach humans lessons. Humor and a lightness of spirit are often nicely intermixed in Wilkinson's parable poems. In "The Parable of the Snail" the speaker announces to the snail in the first stanza that the snail is how the speaker "ought to be — / so patiently obedient in your quest." But he goes on to say that he could simply observe the snail and not learn anything "about loving / my neighbor as myself." Furthermore, he doesn't know if the snail is thankful for the blue jays who allow the snail to live. But as the snail makes it to the top of the tool shed, "it's almost as if you believe / that it may be domed with other / long-suffering, kindred shells /

now on glittering paths of ease.” Such a patient, long struggle should be so rewarded. Likewise, Wilkinson’s “The Parable of the Cicada” compares the cicadas’ existence with that of humans. The cicadas, who have been underground for seventeen years, ascend and wonder about the existence that has been just above them. He notes that we humans could protest and complain in various ways, but the cicadas “could counter with / their own penalties of creation / with their cyclic jailing.” Then he guesses that they could say, “*You had seventeen years to get houses / in order. Now gird up your loins while / we come and shuck our darkling husks.*” The poem ends sweetly with the cicadas and humans sharing the “*treasured entitlements / of sun and warmth and light,*” reminding the reader of the simple but wonderful blessings all can enjoy together on Earth.

The final poem of the collection is “Vigil,” which bears the eponymous phrase of this volume of poetry. The speaker uses Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks* to complete his description of his nighttime angst and the crosses he bears. Unlike the speaker in “Birds that Alight on Faith,” he wishes to be done with this state, not receive help in bearing it. The first lines — “Brother to a cautious rabbit / crouching under shadows / and moonlight’s wings” — depict a nervously attentive rabbit, who is an apt parallel to the two humans who are awake in an anxious and weary state that they wish to be free of: “It’s ‘soon / I will be done with the crosses’” and will “fly away.” Like the people in Hopper’s painting, they are “snared in our own all-night café / like the two men wearing business-blue.” The poem notes that the men in the painting don’t seem to know each other and don’t to wish to. There is a woman in red in the painting, who seems as disconnected as the others. In fact, she is “so pale and loveless she looks almost dead.” Another figure in the painting is the “disinterested overseer in his uniform / the white of dove feathers.” The only truly positive element in the painting is the “shiny hope / of sparkling-clean coffee dispensers / and a vow of continuous, fluorescent / light.” Those in Wilkinson’s poem are anxiously wide awake like the nervous rabbit and Hopper’s lonely, detached individuals “in these wee hours / while the less troubled lie sleeping.” Although the specific crosses they bear are not mentioned, the reader perceives their weariness and their need to be rid of their burden. Wilkinson’s individuals seem sorely troubled in their lives here on Earth and desire to be free of their burdens and “fly away” to a blissful, immortal life.

Claude Wilkinson’s latest volume contains beautiful and wise poems that touch both the reader’s heart and intellect.



**Steven Peterson**

**Willa Cather at Age Seventy-Three**

She fell asleep more often after lunch,  
a thing she never did when she was young  
and strong, forever in motion, mind clear.  
Today she found herself alone, disturbed.  
Where was she? France? Nebraska? Santa Fé?  
She wrote so many places into truth.

Edith returned, apologizing quickly  
for leaving her — *Just clearing off the plates.*  
She nodded, almost falling back to sleep,  
and then remembered what she had to say.  
Edith was told to handle one last task:  
to burn her papers once she died. *You promise?*

Yet Edith wouldn't promise but protested  
by pointing to the desk and manuscript.  
She looked at it and saw another place,  
another time, emerging into form:  
her cherished France, six centuries ago,  
where she preferred to live, not here, not now.

*Remind me where we are,* she said. *New York,*  
was the reply. *Oh, yes, but it had changed.*  
She'd used these crowded cities of her life  
to reach the empty spaces she could fill  
with bright imagined souls. Finally, she spoke:  
*I'm sure New York has good incinerators.*

Afterwards Edith said, *That's what she told me,*  
explaining all the burning when she died —  
her drafts, her letters, her unfinished novel.  
She's buried where she wished to be: New Hampshire.  
Since Edith died they're side by side again,  
the gravestone carved with *Truth and Charity.*

***David Rosenthal***

**Another Aubade**

For years, he's lived her loss this way, and he  
has given to routine to guide his day –  
like setting up the kettle for her tea,  
and pulling back the curtains on the bay.

He sits with her, without her, one last time –  
each time a little truer to the lie  
that this sun is the last one he'll see climb,  
each morning less unwilling to comply.

The wrens in the arbutus make their play.  
The neighbor's cat makes mischief on the lawn.  
The sober definition of the day  
unfolds, as daylight settles on the dawn.

**Wendy Sloan**

**Requiem**

Sad little face, sad little face  
is looking up at me.  
I kiss your lips but can't erase  
your longing to be free,  
free from the torment your eyes trace  
of life's last cruelty.

It cannot be. No, it must be.  
The man I knew is gone.  
Still, we meet here in elegy  
who met in love so long,  
catching your soul's epiphany  
in the cadence of a song.

For you are dead. No, you're not dead,  
for still you linger on,  
a limbo life-in-death instead —  
macabre marathon —  
and you will languish in your bed  
until you're truly gone.

Now, as I kiss your cheek, you wake  
and turn to look at me,  
and for a moment I mistake  
the visage that I see —  
that squinting grimace that you make,  
it's how you used to be!

And I am living with a ghost,  
your shadow hovers near,  
and all that we've already lost  
is all we hold most dear,  
and what I'm longing for the most  
is what I mostly fear.

So I bear witness to your strain,  
your grim prolonged decline.  
As hours drift into weeks again  
I hold your hand in mine.  
But as hours drift into weeks again  
and I bend to kiss your lips again  
your shadow is sealed in love's refrain  
as if in amber resin.

**David Southward**

**Sighting**

*for Richard Roe (1941-2019)*

We watched the sun sink in a meadow's hush,  
where honeyed light and browsing prospects drew  
three deer, on tiptoe, from the tangled brush  
to animate the canvas of our view.

The bucks stood straight-necked, listening, on a knoll;  
the doe, less cautious, broke into a trot  
that ended with a graceful capriole  
between high banks of wild bergamot.

A whistle from our party made them turn.  
They eyed us. But before a dialogue  
could open (or give reason for concern)  
the doe trailed off. She'd noticed something: fog,

a white sea forming in the meadow's hollow.  
She entered it, as if it held no threats —  
as if its lure were too strong to resist.  
The bucks, though hesitant, were moved to follow.  
One by one, their small black silhouettes  
dissolved like wishes in the pooling mist.

### **What He Saw in the River**

A pumpkin: floating, opening underneath  
like a peplum skirt. Hopelessly waterlogged,  
it let the current lap its navel pleat  
and nudge it to shore. Through frayed clouds, sunset  
burnished the rind a Chinese-lantern orange.  
It glowed inside the skyline's mirrored blues,  
drawing his eye toward the deeper murk

on which it floated: cold black tea  
infused with moiled silt, with gasoline  
from tugs and cruisers. Crossing his forearms,  
he leaned against the railing to observe  
the rumpled husk — revolving like a moon  
above an uninhabitable canyon —  
and thought of how the mind makes what it sees

a sort of hub around which all else turns.  
Monstrous garbage, punted with fatigue  
at the very holiday it represented  
(as if its hanging on might anchor time  
too firmly), its ennui reminded him  
of what one keeps forgetting. Weightlessness  
is always nature's underlying state.

Shaping his lips around the word "November,"  
he felt time slip for a moment from its tether  
as nightlamps along the walkway flickered on.  
He watched the pumpkin drift and disappear  
into reflections — like a sun's dissolve —  
where shadows widened and a drawbridge spanned  
the current, churning coins of fiery light.

## **A Reader's Life**

I can remember reading at fifteen —  
pouring my heart's hot wax into a scene  
as if to sample what I might become.  
Tycoon, spy, gangster, wizard: through the hum  
of fiction's film projector, I could feel  
a latent lifeforce smolder and unreel,  
as characters gave momentary form  
to adolescent instincts. In that storm  
of self-creation, stories served as maps  
to outlawed regions — tantalizing gaps  
in the firewall of childhood's guarded sphere.  
Each book disclosed an indistinct frontier  
I'd make my way through, sniffing on the breeze  
the future's untried possibilities.  
There seemed no end of places one could go,  
people to love, scoundrels to overthrow —  
and thus no chance of ever growing bored.

How different, now, my sense of the reward  
a novel holds. With life's race two-thirds run,  
it's not the things I'll do, but things I've done  
that flicker in the background as I read.  
Scenarios I've lived come back to feed  
my sense of human sorrows, wishes, fates.  
I pay more heed to style: how it creates  
a voice one can believe in. Now I find  
the works that wholly occupy my mind  
hold few fantastic promises for me;  
rather, they change or deepen how I see  
the lives of others. Books help me make sense  
of history's endless livestream of events,  
whose currents drive the storms that rage today.  
Though times seem tense, believe me: I would stay  
forever, if I could—to go on seeing  
what's written of this theater of being.

### **A Writer's Trouble**

I've started far more poems than I'll finish.  
It never fails: the moment they take shape,  
the passions that inspired them diminish;  
my thoughts are patched with so much mental tape  
they lack the easy breathing of conviction  
and die, unwanted, on a half-blank page.  
Are others guilty of such dereliction?  
And do our stillborn poems seethe with rage  
in some backwater limbo of the soul —  
bitter they've known so little of our love,  
pining for closure, desperate to be whole?  
Like surly teens who spurn the powers above,  
they badmouth us for trifling with their lives.  
We deadbeat sires, with our fickle drives.



***Tim Suermondt***

### **The Highest Grade**

A man shouts from across the street  
“You’re my hero!”  
and for a moment I think his words

are directed at me.  
Well, why not? I must have done  
some small heroic things in my life

and, surely, all my loved ones  
believe me capable of great heroics.  
When I realize I am not the person

intended, I put my hands  
in my light spring jacket,  
take a few steps and see a man helping

an elderly woman cross the crowded street.  
Different woman, different street  
but I did just that last week,

that tiny decency. We linked arms  
and made it safely to the entrance  
of her grand, blue building.

**Together**

It's starting to rain hard  
and the homeless man  
who's living in the neighborhood  
offers me his umbrella  
shredded quite profusely.  
I take it and give it back  
to him as mine. We'd  
make a great comedy pair,  
he says, and for a moment  
we are pals, forgetting  
the rain, how silly we look  
getting soaked under it together.

**David W. Ullrich**

**In Memory of Giles Perkins**

As far as I could  
tell, his husbandry greened true,  
no goatman he. Kind

father, soccer coach,  
liberal. He'd dole out dough,  
no questions asked, and

die. Pancreatic  
spreads like syllables in this  
poem. Good man, bad hand

dealt by no one. His  
wife will never remarry.  
She lives, laughs at times,

loves her three children.  
I sit in chemo, plowing  
eleven years of

turf, farmer of words —  
threadless needles, poison drips —  
guilty, glad, alive.

### Portrait of John Cheever

A man can play so  
many parts, roles, he loses  
himself: gentleman,

writer, husband, drunk,  
father. What compelled him to  
suck so many men,

fuck women? Veneer  
and booze, so soothing, scabbled  
his life, not his pen.

Mary knew. Tethered  
to Winternitz, she became  
an accomplice, friend

in loneliness, love  
lasting til death's gaping maw.  
Brotherly secrets

clandestine. Rough house.  
Unutterable passion,  
intimacy. John,

Ossining's town squire,  
(New York City's philanderer  
flaneur). His burdens,

massive clouds, hard ice  
melting in whisky, as he  
melted when co-eds

gawked at his basset-  
sad face. He'd smile. Sure, he'd screw  
her, forget. Chekhov

David W. Ullrich

of the 'burbs, my ass.  
Yet, he fathered well, mothered  
them too. Short, shy, sly,

he made Susan, Ben,  
laugh, sing, tucked them in at night,  
spooned warmth, nestled dreams.

The mysteries of  
men lie in fictions, unkept  
beds, memories long

dead, and their children.

*Will Wells*

### **Sabbath Candles**

As Shabbos candles shrink, flames climb higher  
on ever-longer wicks, like wakes that raft  
the flotsam of our acts. They rise, quiver  
or sink, responsive both to breath and drafts  
that circulate within the house, unseen.  
First lit as evening falls, their flickering  
and flares enact the human struggle between  
despair and hope, that balanced bickering.

Hanukkah, Diwali, or midnight mass  
on Christmas Eve, our urge to light the dark  
confesses fundamental loneliness.  
And melting tallow mimes our mortal work.  
Hear us, O Lord, whatever you may be,  
and guide our fading to eternity.

### **Marchons, marchons**

The mist at the close of *Casablanca* marked the morph from character to myth. The haze of teargas over Court Street when I blundered from the midnight feature shocked me back to fact. I flinched at crackling plate-glass underfoot. *Put your hands above your heads and walk single file this way*, a bullhorn voice demanded. Helmeted riot police lined one corner, a ragged snarl of protestors the next, with classic movie buffs between. *Move to our lines or you will be arrested*, the voice insisted, although my lodgings lay the other way. When a companion turned to urge the crowd to leave, like Rick to Ilsa, a volley of rubber bullets knocked him flat. Though earlier, inside, I'd stood to sing *La Marseillaise*, I bowed my head, shuffled up for patting down and took the long way home.

## Moonwalker

I.

My folks asleep, I skulked out late and sulked  
while “our hometown hero” touched safely down  
then bounced on the moon like a circus clown.  
Through hick town wastes with my own small steps, I walked  
in Wapakoneta, shackled at the heel  
by gravity’s adamant grip. That was enough  
to goad my surly quips. *I would not kneel  
to Armstrong’s dusty deeds. Stuff the ‘right stuff’!*

Each quarter hour, the courthouse clock would chime  
though all four faces declared a different time —  
portals, perhaps, to somewhere I could claim.  
I cursed my luck and kicked up roadside gravel.  
Combustible words supplied my rocket fuel.  
But where could I go? What space could I fill?

II.

But where could I go? What space could I fill?  
Escape velocity could be achieved  
one foot at a time, if only I believed.  
I strode and chanted rambling doggerel  
about small minds and towns I’d overcome.  
Moonlight flushed me like a bully’s taunt.  
*What made me think I would ever amount  
to much? Why grudge another’s well-won fame?*

Oncoming headlights interrogated me.  
*Where are you headed? What are you looking for?*  
Destined to doubt, I doubted destiny  
and blundered past indifferent mobs of corn.  
Though I loomed up like a truant scarecrow,  
I was moonwalker too, cloaked in its glow.



III.

I was moonwalker too, cloaked in its glow.  
The flight path of my dusty tennis shoes  
bypassed Tranquility since I had none to lose.  
A sense of falling short began to grow.  
I could not shake it, no matter how I tried.  
Teenaged angst was part of what I bore,  
but, also, something else, and something more.  
Call it a calling to be dissatisfied.

The moon remains a metaphor for what  
cannot be attained. I still prowl under it,  
pursuing awe within the awkward fit  
of words. The sins Armstrong did not commit  
I now forgive. We sought a common end —  
caged in time's cramped space, hoping to transcend.

***Robert West***

**Bona Fide**

A song  
to  
say she's

too wowing  
for words

mustn't be  
made  
of many

Robert West

## **Homage**

Shine  
like the star  
you

are  
and I will  
lie

here  
singing to the  
sky

**Poet & Muse**

He could  
never believe  
how beautiful  
she was

and neither  
in a  
different sense  
could she

Robert West

### **Break Glass for Emergency Adoration**

Or simply touch the casing firmly with a fingertip, and it will neatly and safely retract into the floor. The system engages a triple-speed mode if sensors detect tears or other signs of special stress.

Next, step carefully onto the now exposed pedestal and stand at ease. Sitting is fine if preferred, but please be aware that this option may complicate or preclude full treatment.

A certified professional will arrive shortly to exalt you.

Please do not offer your insurance card or any form of payment. You will not be billed.

***Donald Wheelock***

**A Father Waits Out Hurricane Ida**

Worry is a hurricane of its own,  
stalled on the map of distant family  
above the spot you know but will not see,  
where doubt still hopes the forecast's overblown;

where hope, that fat imposter bobbing there  
above the dancing trees, the wrecks and mud,  
and the tyrant-anger of the wind and flood,  
defies the boil and tantrum of the air.

Waiting is the fundament of worry,  
a stodgy seawall, blind intransigence,  
against the bully wind, the tide, the sea.

This father, ground down by storms, and weary,  
waits out the hours until deliverance,  
enduring swirling spirals on TV.

Donald Wheelock

### **Tended Places**

Some families stay together anyway,  
no more so than in tended places where  
the stones have names, a few flags wave,  
and silence mixes with the solemn air.

This graveyard where I sit has been reserved  
for locals — farmers and their families, sons  
who fought in distant wars, their names preserved,  
untarnished or forgotten — at least the ones

who died so long ago the weather's worn  
their chiseled names away. A burnished plate  
on one speaks of our day. Many were born  
a year or two before their final date.

***Gail White***

**Sunday in a Russian Church**

Sometimes I need a fix, a liturgy  
sung in a language I don't understand,  
just ninety minutes of pure sanctity,  
when Beauty from the icons takes my hand

and whispers of some heavenly reprieve.  
But if I understood the words, I'd say  
there's too much here that I just can't believe,  
too much third-century thought. There's just no way

for me to go pre-modern. So I'm here:  
Too old for youthful struggles between doubt  
and faith, too old to waste another year  
on love relationships that don't work out,

too old to still be waiting for a sign.  
You tell me your dream and I'll tell you mine.



Gail White

**Sonnet for Some of Us**

Blessed are those who take what they can get.  
Who marry someone who is not the greatest  
beauty or athlete that they've ever met.  
Blessed are those who do not have the latest  
technology at command. Who do not speak  
three languages. Who cry when something hurts.  
Blessed are those whose drive to win is weak,  
stock market failures, poets, introverts.  
Blessed are those who choose to live alone,  
with dogs or cats, rather than make a speech,  
who never go exploring on their own  
or try for anything beyond their reach.  
Blessed, who know they'd fail so shun the test  
and settle down, settling for second best.

*Joyce Wilson*

**On Finding a Letter from Paul Laurence Dunbar to My Grandfather**

I hardly knew my grandfather at all.  
He died when I was just beginning school.  
Reserved, owl-mannered minister, his rule  
Was golden and with God, who made “the call.”

I was astonished by the poetry  
That arrived among his many books  
And the title with that word, the “lowly,”  
Tucked in at the bottom of the box.

The *Lyrics of the Lowly Life*. Really?  
The Browning, I could see, a set of four,  
Leather bound and underlined assertively.  
The Paul Lawrence Dunbar held something more.

With it, I found a letter tucked inside  
The cover, folded once, then three times back,  
The perfect place to keep a note, to hide  
The message, typed in blue, then signed in black.

Addressed to my grandfather in detail,  
The text expressed how much his fine oration  
Had moved the poet — its communication  
Having traveled safely through the mail —

So that he showed the contents to his friends,  
Who were delighted with his eloquence,  
The stand he took, and that the sermon lends,  
To capture both the soul and heart at once.

It did not matter — far as I could tell —  
That the name had been misspelled “Henry”  
When my grandfather’s name was spelled “Harry.”  
Some trust emerged as hesitation fell.

Joyce Wilson

At letter's end, things made another turn,  
When Dunbar typed "With best wishes and deep  
Regret," crossed out "regret," and penned a neat  
"Regards" to best express his real concern.

That year, Dunbar was only thirty-one,  
A poet, well respected and well known.  
Tuberculosis stalked him for its own.  
He must have seen the hurdles he would run.

My grandfather, that year, was also young,  
Enrolled at Baker University,  
Preparing for the Methodist ministry.  
In many ways his life had just begun.

Six years apart in age and differences, they met.  
What led the ailing poet to observe  
The spark behind my grandfather's reserve?  
How much can I construe through signs typeset?

And my grandfather? Was it out of duty  
That he read plantation dialect?  
Did mastery of craft gain his respect?  
I sense he was beholden to the beauty.

I don't know how my grandfather replied,  
Or even if he did, but marvel now:  
He kept this letter like a lover's vow,  
Companion to the verse, until he died.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Mark Belair's** poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Alabama Literary Review*, *Harvard Review*, and *Michigan Quarterly Review*. He is the author of seven collections of poems and 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](http://www.markbelair.com).

A native Virginian, **Jane Blanchard** lives and writes in Georgia. Her work has recently appeared in *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *First Things*, and *Poetry South*. Her collections with Kelsay Books include *Never Enough Already* (2021) and *Sooner or Later* (2022).

**Elijah Perseus Blumov** is a poet and playwright with an MFA in Poetry from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. He is the creator and host of the poetry analysis podcast *Versecraft*, produced in partnership with the Ohio Poetry Association. His work has been published or is forthcoming in periodicals such as *Literary Matters*, *The Classical Outlook*, and *The Amethyst Review*. He lives in Cleveland, Ohio.

**Rick Campbell** is a poet, essayist, and editor living on Alligator Point, Florida. His collection of essays, *Sometimes the Light* was published by Main Street Rag Press in the spring of 2022. His most recent collection of poems is *Provenance* (Blue Horse Press.) He's published six other poetry books as well as poems and essays in journals including *The Georgia Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Gargoyle*, *Fourth River*, *Kestrel*, and the *Alabama Literary Review*. He teaches in the University of Nevada-Reno's MFA program.

**Dan Champion's** poems have appeared previously in the *Alabama Literary Review*. He is the author of *A Playbill for Sunset* (poems) and the monograph *Peter De Vries and Surrealism* and is a coeditor of *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*. He lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

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**Catherine Chandler** is an American-born Canadian poet. She is the author of six poetry collections including *Lines of Flight*, shortlisted for the Poets' Prize and *The Frangible Hour*, recipient of the Richard Wilbur Award. She is online at The Wonderful Boat ([www.cathy Chandler.blogspot.com](http://www.cathy Chandler.blogspot.com)).

**Terese Coe's** poems, translations, and prose appear in *Alabama Literary Review*, *Agenda*, *Alaska Quarterly*, *American Arts Quarterly*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Classical Outlook*, *Cyphers*, *Hopkins Review*, *Metamorphoses*, *The Moth*, *New American Writing*, *New Scotland Writing*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, *Poetry Review*, *Stinging Fly*, *Threepenny Review*, the *TLS*, and many other journals. Her collection *Shot Silk* was listed for the 2017 Poets Prize; *Giorno Poetry Systems* awarded her two grants; and her black comedy, *Harry Smith at the Chelsea Hotel*, was read aloud by Equity Actors at Dixon Place, NY in 2019 to an SRO audience. She has made a living as an editor as well as adjunct lecturer in English at NYIT, and has taught English at the English Language Institute (USIA) in Nepal. She has been a co-host for the Carmine Street Metrics (for all genres of poems) reading series for many years.

**Craig Cotter** was born in 1960 in New York and has lived in California since 1986. His poems have appeared in *Southword* (Ireland), *Chiron Review*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Court Green*, *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, *Great Lakes Review*, *Hawai'i Review*, & *Tampa Review*. His fourth book of poems, *After Lunch with Frank O'Hara*, is currently available on Amazon. [www.craigcotter.com](http://www.craigcotter.com)

**Barbara Lydecker Crane** was a finalist for two recent *Rattle Poetry Prizes*. She has received two Pushcart nominations, three Laureate's Choice awards from the Maria W. Faust Sonnet Contest, and First Prize in the Helen Schaible Sonnet Contest. Her fourth collection, *You Will Remember Me*, was recently published by Able Muse Press. Her poems have appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *First Things*, *Light*, *THINK*, *Valparaiso Literary Review*, *Writer's Almanac*, many others, and in several anthologies.

**Dick Daniels** is a Vietnam vet who worked for IBM and other IT companies before retiring in 2016. Nonfiction work, primarily about his father's military career, has been accepted by *Submarine*

*Review, Graybeards, and Vietnam*. “His Best Suit” is his first piece of fiction to be published. The story was inspired by a baseball game witnessed by a teenaged Daniels when his father was stationed in Italy.

**Andrew Frisardi** is a Bostonian who lives in central Italy. His most recent books are a collection of poems, *The Moon on Elba* (Wiseblood Books, 2023), and *Ancient Salt: Essays on Poets, Poetry, and the Modern World* (Resource Publications, 2022). His translation of Dante’s *Vita Nova*, which Northwestern UP published in 2012, was reissued in 2022 by the Società Dantesca in Florence in a deluxe bilingual edition of Dante’s complete works.

**Midge Goldberg** is the editor of the anthology *Outer Space: 100 Poems*, published by Cambridge University Press in December 2022. Her third collection of poetry, *To Be Opened After My Death*, was published by Kelsay Books in 2021. Her book *Snowman’s Code* received the Richard Wilbur Poetry Award as well as the 2016 NH Literary Awards Readers Choice in Poetry, and she received the 2016 Howard Nemerov Sonnet Award. She lives in New Hampshire with her family, two cats, and an ever-changing number of chickens.

**Kevin Grauke** has published work in such places as *The Threepenny Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Ninth Letter*. He’s the author of the short story collection *Shadows of Men* (Queen’s Ferry Press), winner of the Steven Turner Award from the Texas Institute of Letters for Best First Work of Fiction. He lives in Philadelphia.

**Brent House** is the author of *The Wingtip Prophecy* (April Gloaming, 2023) and a contributing editor for *The Tusculum Review*. His poems have appeared in journals such as *Colorado Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The Journal*, *Third Coast* and *Kenyon Review*. He holds an MFA from Georgia College, and he lives and works in Western Pennsylvania.

**Steven Knepper** teaches in the Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies at Virginia Military Institute. His poems have appeared in *First Things*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *William and Mary Review*, *SLANT*, *Roanoke Review*, and other journals.

**Dennis McFadden**, a retired project manager, lives and writes in a cedar-shingled cottage called Summerhill in the woods of upstate New York. His short story collection, *Jimtown Road*, won the 2016 Press 53 Award for Short Fiction; another collection, *Lafferty, Looking for Love*, was longlisted for Regal House Publishing's 2021 W.S. Porter Prize. His novel, *Old Grimes Is Dead*, was selected by Kirkus Reviews as one of the Best Indie Books of 2022. His stories have appeared in dozens of publications, including *Alabama Literary Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *New England Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Best American Mystery Stories* (3x) and in the inaugural edition of *The Best Mystery Stories of the Year* (2021).

**Richard Meyer**, a former English and humanities teacher, lives in Mankato, MN. He was awarded the 2012 Robert Frost Farm Prize for his poem "Fieldstone" and was the recipient of the 2014 String Poet Prize for his poem "The Autumn Way." His poetry has also received top honors several times in the Great River Shakespeare Festival sonnet contest. A book of his collected poems, *Orbital Paths*, was a silver medalist winner in the 2016 IBPA Benjamin Franklin Awards.

**David Middleton** is Professor Emeritus and Poet in Residence Emeritus at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana. His books of verse include *The Burning Fields* (LSU Press, 1991), *As Far As Light Remains* (The Cummington Press [Harry Duncan], 1993), *Beyond the Chandeleurs* (LSU Press, 1999), *The Habitual Peacefulness of Gruchy: Poems After Pictures by Jean-François Millet* (LSU Press, 2005), and *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill* (LSU Press 2013). Middleton's next collection of verse, *Outside the Gates of Eden*, will appear on Measure Press in 2023. In the Fall of 2024, Texas Review Press will publish *Time Will Tell: Collected Poems / David Middleton*.

**Steven Monte** is a professor in the English Department at the College of Staten Island (CUNY). He has also taught at the University of Chicago and at Yale University, from which he received his doctorate in Comparative Literature. Most of his scholarly writing is on Renaissance, Romantic, and Modern poetry, including his books: *The Secret Architecture of Shakespeare's Sonnets*; *Victor Hugo: Selected Poetry in French and English*; and *Invisible Fences: Prose Poetry as a Genre in French*

*and American Literature*. He has published verse translations and original poetry in a variety of journals. His current translation project is a rhymed verse version of Joachim Du Bellay's *Les Regrets*. He lives and runs marathons in New York City.

**James B. Nicola** is a returning contributor. The latest three of his eight full-length poetry collections are *Fires of Heaven: Poems of Faith and Sense*, *Turns & Twists*, and *Natural Tendencies* (just out). His nonfiction book *Playing the Audience* won a Choice magazine award. He has received a Dana Literary Award, two Willow Review awards, Storyteller's People's Choice magazine award, one Best of Net, one Rhysling, and ten Pushcart nominations — for which he feels both stunned and grateful. A graduate of Yale, James hosts the Writers' Round Table at his library branch in Manhattan: walk-ins are always welcome.

### **Olivia Pass**

**Steven Peterson** is a poet and playwright living in Chicago and northern Wisconsin. A selection of his poems is included in the anthology *Taking Root in the Heart* (Paraclete Press, 2023). His recent poems appear in the *America*, *The Christian Century*, *Dappled Things*, *First Things*, *Light*, *The Windhover*, and other publications. His plays have been produced in theaters around the USA. He is currently a resident playwright at Chicago Dramatists.

**David Rosenthal** lives in Berkeley, California, where he works as a public school teacher and instructional coach. His poems and translations have appeared in *Rattle*, *Measure Review*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Measure*, *Teachers & Writers Magazine*, *The Rising Phoenix Review*, *Sparks of Calliope*, *Change Seven*, *Modern Haiku*, and many other print and online journals. He has been a Howard Nemerov Sonnet Award Finalist and a Pushcart Prize Nominee. His collection, *The Wild Geography of Misplaced Things*, was released from White Violet Press (Kelsay Books) in 2013. More at [davidrosenthal.weebly.com](http://davidrosenthal.weebly.com).

**Wendy Sloan** practiced union-side labor law with her firm, Hall & Sloan, before returning to poetry. Her collection is *Sunday Mornings at the Caffe Mediterraneo* (Kelsay Books, 2016). Sloan's poems, translations, essays and book reviews have appeared in various journals including *Big City Lit*, *Blue Unicorn*,



*Light, Measure, Mezzo Cammin, Shadowplay, and Think*, and in the anthologies *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 Frontieres, 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.

**David Southward** teaches in the Honors College at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His collections include *Bachelor's Buttons* (Kelsay Books 2020) and *Apocrypha*, a sonnet sequence based on the Gospels (Wipf & Stock 2018). David's poems have appeared in *Able Muse, Light, The Lyric, Measure, POEM*, and *THINK*. He is a two-time winner of the Lorine Niedecker Prize and was selected by Mark Doty for the Muse Prize from the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets. In 2019 his poem "Mary's Visit" received the Frost Farm Prize for Metrical Poetry. David resides in Milwaukee with his husband, Geoff. Read more at [davidsouthward.com](http://davidsouthward.com).

**Tim Suermondt's** sixth full-length book of poems, *A Doughnut and the Great Beauty of the World*, will be coming out early in 2023 from MadHat Press. He has published in *Poetry, Ploughshares, Prairie Schooner, Georgia Review, Bellevue Literary Review, Stand, Smartish Pace, Fortnightly Review, Poet Lore* and *Plume*, among many others. He lives in Cambridge (MA) with his wife, the poet Pui Ying Wong.

**David W. Ullrich's** poetry has appeared in *Negative Capability, POEM, The Madison Review*, and several other magazines. He serves as an Editor for *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review* and recently co-edited *F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Beautiful and Damned: New Critical Essays* (LSU Press).

**Will Wells's** latest book is *Odd Lots, Scraps & Second-hand, Like New* (Grayson Books, 2017) which won the Grayson Poetry Prize. His poems have recently appeared in *Notre Dame Review* and *Permafrost*; others are forthcoming in *Tar River Poetry*. All these poems are drawn from his a new manuscript, *Enduring Damage*.

**Robert West's** recent publications include *Robert Morgan: Essays on the Life and Work*, co-edited with Jesse Graves and published

by McFarland in 2022, in addition to poems and reviews in *Alabama Literary Review*, *Appalachian Journal*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, and *North Carolina Literary Review*. He is Head of the Department of Classical & Modern Languages and Literatures at Mississippi State University.

**Donald Wheelock's** poems have appeared in *Think, Able Muse*, *Third Wednesday*, *Ekphrasis*, *Blue Unicorn* and many other journals welcoming formal poetry. His chapbook, *In the Sea of Dreams*, is available from Gallery of Readers Press. His first full-length book of poems, *It's Hard Enough to Fly*, appeared last September from Kelsay Books. David Robert Books will publish his second book, *With Nothing But a Nod*, in 2024.

**Gail White** is a contributing editor of *Light Poetry Magazine* and a frequent contributor to formalist poetry journals and anthologies, including *Nasty Women Poets*, *Love Poems at the Villa Nelle*, and *Killer Verse*. Her most recent books, *Asperity Street* and *Catechism*, may be found on Amazon. She lives in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana with her husband and cats.

**Joyce Wilson** is editor of *The Poetry Porch* ([www.poetryporch.com](http://www.poetryporch.com)) since 1997. Her poems have appeared in many literary journals, among them *Ibbetson Street*, *Muddy River Poetry Review*, and *Poetry Ireland*. Recent book publications include a chapbook *The Need for a Bridge* (Finishing Line Press 2019) and a full-length collection *Take and Receive* (Kelsay Books 2019). She presented "On Spring Valley Road," a call and response poem at the Spring Valley AME Church in Glen Mills, Pennsylvania, on June 18, 2022, to commemorate its restoration. Her poem "The One and the Other" won the Roberts Memorial Prize with *The Lyric* in 2022.







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