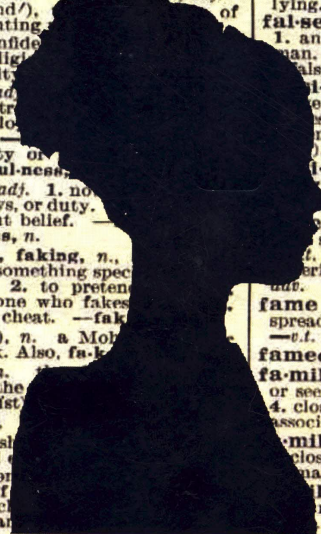

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

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CONTENTS

Daniel Tobin

from *From Nothing*

Georges Lamaitre (1894-1966) was a Belgian mathematician, theoretical physicist, and Jesuit priest whose insights during the 1930s and 1940s provided solutions to physical problems stemming from Einstein's general theory of relativity and quantum mechanics that Einstein himself did not foresee. Though a lesser-known figure in cosmology, he was the first to develop a theory of an expanding universe through the explosion of a "primeval atom," what has become known popularly as "the big bang."

To figure from nothing holiness in perihelion—
though one must not proclaim it, but let the matter
spin along its poles into the bright entanglements

like two particles of light flung to opposite zones,
and still the one moves with and how the other moves --
love's choreography in the elegance of the dance.

Though maybe it's more like matter and antimatter,
the one canceling the other in a blinding negation,
number and noumen locked in their separate estates.

You would not collapse them to a point's white heat,
but kept them before you, your physics and your faith,
the divergent roads with their singular horizon

where the radius of space converges into zero,
where what was, is, will be waxes without boundary
into seed and sand grain, a Cepheid luster of eyes:

news of the minor signature keyed from everywhere,
the primal radiation, omnipresent, the prodigal
wave arriving from its Now that has no yesterday,

the proof of your calculus, the tour of the expanse—
"The evolution of the universe might be compared
to a display of fireworks that has just ended,

some few red wisps, ashes and smoke. So we stand
on a well-cooled cinder to see the slow fading of suns;
we try to recall the vanished brilliance of the origin of
worlds."

*

A little sand, a little soda, a little lime once used
to embalm the dead, and out of black hole and kiln
the molten bubble gathers like honey on a dipper

for the blower to stretch breath into glass, the pipe
a silent horn shaping the form with its emptiness
to be marvered and mandrelled, jacked and lathed.

In your father's factory the vessels anneal, neat rows
of flagons, jars, mould blown, ribbed and decorated—
every glinted edge and pattern the fire will destroy

so the life foreseen becomes a retrospect foreknown,
the char-black rolling country of the Pays noir
from which your people came: the smelting works

and coal pits, gas, slag-heap, pick-axe and sump.
He rose from all that, and rose again to make good
for the losses, for his laborers, as though justice

were the standard candle he followed in the dark,
or the hidden vein in a seam of earth that opens
on a vault where monstrance lifts from the monstrous.

In the photographer's studio your mother nestles you
on folded cloth, an heir of miners and weavers,
the scene a tapestry of hills and fields and settling sky.

You could be a girl in your frilled gown, or Rilke,
your eyes as bright and lenient, your right hand
gesturing outward, the left already figuring sums.

*

In the Cathedral Saint-Michel, the chancel window
pours down its lucid spectrum across the altar.
The priest in green chasuble for Ordinary Time

bows before the tabernacle, paten, chalice, *Agnus Dei*.
Uniformly you sit among the pews and schoolboys.
Latin and incense commingle beneath the nave.

The altar servers in their chiaroscuro— white surplice,
black soutane—move in consort to cross and ciborium.
Is it now that you sense the certainty of your calling?

Or had it haunted you nights with your schoolbooks
even back in Charleroi, in the halls of Sacre Coeur:
calculation and consecration, geometry and God?

"There is nothing I think in all of physical reality
more abstruse than the doctrine of the Trinity,"
you would write years later, your primeval quantum

inflating to millennia, into weeks and days –
if only every life, like quires in a Book of Hours,
could unfold from vellum, unique and indelible.

In the glittering fan the priest lifts host and chalice,
bread and wine to body and blood, as though a switch
flickered at the bottom of things, its sizzling foam,

with a word accidence into essence alchemized.
While outside immaculate gardens begin to bloom
in riots of light, pallets of flesh, stained glass blazoning.

*

Georges Lemaitre

"A red flare broadcasts its annunciation over the Salient,
Ypres in the half-light of morning, an unnatural silence
broken by the screech of shrapnel shell and howitzer,

machine guns spattering the parapets of No Man's Land.
Horrible enough the slaughter, hand to hand, house to house,
in Lombartzyde—bayonet, rifle shot, the blood in my nails.

We've opened the sea sluices to hold back their onslaught --
Louvain burned, this one strip left of free Belgium.
Now these crater fields, the men mown down in swathes.

Why is it, O my Precious Christ, we do this to each other,
crouching in trench, transverse, the barbed and deadlocked
lines,
who might have joined like harvesters among hedge and
fold?

A hiss, and from enemy dug-outs the strange cloud curls
in waves, grayish, yellow to green, darkest at the bottom.
And I know we're in a biblical plague, the men fumbling

for bits of flannel, cotton pads, the gassed in spasm, clawing
at their throats, their eyes, vomiting, crawling off to die,
the way the forsaken do in Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death,*

its black plumes of smoke and burning cities, its scythes
and armies, skeletal, their coffin lid shields, the slit throats,
wagonloads of skulls, that dog nibbling a dead child's face.

On the ravaged plain, a cauldron of torture and carnage
like ours with its mangles, stench, stumps and splintered
trees,
the Cross still rises skyward, Death hammering the plinth."

April Lindner

Seen From Space

Here's a photograph, patched from a series,
of earth cast all at once in deepest night,
the surface like an orange skin peeled flat
so we can read its violet continents,
its cobalt oceans blackening at their depths,

vast swaths of lavender at either pole,
its features as familiar as our own,
made up in unaccustomed shades. The point—
there's an agenda here—is many points
of incandescent light like glue-drenched glitter

on a preschool art project. Some spangles
stand distinct as sequins—there's Sao Paolo,
and here gleams Perth —but most melt into pools
of quicksilver. See how the U.S.A
and all of Europe glow in golden fishnet.

South America glistens at its coasts
and Africa goes bare but for her toe rings.
Japan and India, lit like Roman candles
outshine China's cloak of sketchy threads.
From this far off, our handiwork's a pretty

filigree to ornament the planet.
Why think of skies gone wine red with our backwash,
of how we've bored in deep for coal to burn,
of awesome cavities we've left behind?
Like cancer, we don't mean to harm our host.

Our nature bids us multiply and spread.
Embellishing the canvas we've been given,
we turn the earth into a neon sign
to advertise our presence to the cosmos.
We burn to know our place in so much darkness.

Robert B. Shaw

Back Home

In an essay depicting the farm of his childhood, Seamus Heaney begins by invoking the Greek word *omphalos*, "meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the center of the world." With a poet's sensitivity to sound, he glides from this into a description of the pump from which his parents and their neighbors drew water. "The horses came home to it in those first lengthening evenings of spring, and in a single draught emptied one bucket and then another as the man pumped and pumped, the plunger slugging up and down, *omphalos, omphalos, omphalos*."

Reading this, I feel a stir of recognition, for I, too, have heard this utterance as water issued from the earth. But the pump I remember stood in a farmyard an ocean and a third of a continent away from Heaney's County Derry, and my memories are of midsummer, not spring, in a baking, unremitting heat unknown to the north of Ireland.

I am looking at a photograph of the place, a farm house with a shallow-pitched hip roof, white and severely plain, which may have begun as a symmetrical block but at some point acquired an el in back. It was built by my great-grandfather in the early 1890s. Even before the el, the house was on the large side, since there were ten children in the family. (The thought is incredible to me, though even more remarkable is the fact that every one of the children, male and female, attended college.) Two of those children were my two grandfathers, which made my parents first cousins. My immediate family's tie to the place was perhaps doubly strong because of this; to make the two-day trip from Long Island to Ohio was to blend a vacation with a pilgrimage. There was a distinct sense of the place as a *source*, especial-

ly for my grandfathers. As children we knew that the farm was still for them the center of the world, and though we didn't fully share the feeling (how could we?), we were respectful and perhaps envious of it. My father's father had lived for more than forty years in Brooklyn, but when he prepared to make the trip to Ohio he always said, in an Ohio accent that Brooklyn never dented, that he was "going out home."

I visited the place only a handful of times, and never as an adult; and it is strange that I remember it as well as I do. It was in the country outside Yellow Springs, home of Antioch College, which in the Sixties became a mecca for the counter-culture—most incongruously, given the surroundings. Like those around it, our family farm had nothing avant-garde to display. The land was flat and sectioned into a gigantic checkerboard of crops, and when we visited in midsummer it was so hot that we really could hear the corn growing: an occasional yeasty popping sound.

After our highway marathon (the Pennsylvania Turnpike seemed endless, and there was more after that) we were relieved to drive up to the dusty turn-around, a big open space separating the house from the barns and other outbuildings. There was a raised fuel tank (I suppose for the tractor) that I once climbed up on and had a lot of trouble getting down from. There were two corncribs with corrugated metal roofs, and when my brother and I were big enough to climb up and jump from one structure to its neighbor, the noise we made alighting was satisfyingly thunderous. Best of all, there was a pump with a tin cup hung on it by a loop of fence wire. While the house had modern plumbing, the pump still worked, and I persuaded myself that the water from it tasted more interesting than the water from the faucets indoors. I now think that I was tasting the cup; but then, the water seemed to have a deeper, darker quality, a taste of coming from a long way down, as it assuredly did.

Inside, or if they had heard our motor, on the hospitable porch, our relatives greeted us. My great-grandfather had died in 1944, and at the times I visited the house, mostly in the Fifties, four of his children lived there. There had been, and would be, some coming and going of others over the years, for his will gave any of his children the right to live in the house whenever and for as long as they wished. This grand patriarchal gesture was held in awe by my parents, but it probably created headaches for the Ohio Shaws. I suspect that when Uncle Emerson, well on in years and wheelchair-bound, moved back in together with his younger wife, there must have been strain on the household. But even before that there would have been plenty of tests of tolerance in so large a family.

The regular and longstanding residents, the four that I knew, were my two great uncles, Ray and Jack, and my two great aunts, Nettie and Ruth. Uncle Ray's marriage had broken up years before, and the other three had never married. They made an odd but serviceable family unit. They even exhibited a curious complementarity in appearance: all of them were spare in build, but Ray and Ruth were tall and fair while Jack and Nettie were small and dark.

Uncle Jack was the one who ran the farm, which was winding down in its operations by this time. He had rented out some of his fields to other farmers and managed what remained without hired help. At the busiest times relatives would come from their own farms down the road to lend a hand. I don't recall many animals; the barns held equipment rather than livestock. But there was one enormous cornfield near the house, and a sizable kitchen garden. Uncle Jack was compact, wiry, deeply tanned: a brown man with a green thumb. He would show us the new vegetables he was trying, holding out a beefsteak tomato big enough to conceal his hand, cutting plugs out of it with his pocket knife for us to taste. He let my brother and me "drive" the tractor while we sat on his lap, and it was exciting to jiggle the little lever to

up the speed—probably from ten to all of fifteen miles per hour. The Shaws tended to be either extremely taciturn or extremely talkative. He was one of the quiet ones, always in overalls, outdoors all day with his chores, happy to have us follow him around.

Uncle Ray, several years older than Jack and his sisters, was quite different. From what I learned later on, his early adulthood was something of a shambles. He had hopes of a career as an actor, had married a woman with the same ambition, and was traveling in a touring company when his wife "ran off," as people always said, with another cast member, leaving him with a small son to raise. After that his life had a makeshift quality. He would have liked to be a teacher, but although he would slip into a pedagogic mode when a topic appealed to him, he never got certified to teach. He went around as a door-to-door salesman—of school supplies, at the time we children first got to know him. His bedroom was filled with samples: pencil cases, pencil sharpeners, even pencils, and much else in the same vein. I think that making his rounds had become more of a pastime, a way to find people to talk to, than a serious way to make ends meet. Others in the family murmured that he had a way of being out of sight if there was heavy work to be done. He was, as improvident people sometimes are, preternaturally cheerful, and this must have been irritating to his siblings, who were all steady workers. He was brilliant at pitching horseshoes; he would have had more time than the others did to practice. He drifted in and out of the scene, smiling benignly, sometimes offering startling opinions. When one of his grandnephews interviewed him for a family history project, he somehow got onto the subject of evolution. He didn't believe, he said, that human beings had descended from animals like apes. "Well," said the interviewer, "what have we descended from, then?" "Eagles," said Uncle Ray firmly. Just at that moment the clock in the room hooted "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" We had this on tape.

The aunts, both childless, loved children. Aunt Nettie was for the most part in charge of the house; she was diminutive, dark, and possessed of the tranquil patience that made her a fine first-grade teacher. Like her brother Jack, she was quiet, organized, and unhurried as she went about the household chores. Her opinions were a little less surprising than Uncle Ray's, but no less decided. When she drove east with her sister to visit us in the mid-Sixties, she asked me if we had watched Martin Luther King deliver his "I have a dream" speech. When I said we had, she offered her review of it: "He was *inspired*," she said, and she used the word biblically. This kind of thinking made her and her sister a bit suspect in their chapter of the DAR, which they had joined for social reasons. While on that visit she drove us to the New York World's Fair in her heavy sedan, always going a few miles below the speed limit, infuriating the drivers breathing down our necks on the Long Island Expressway. She was unruffled. There was never any doubt in her mind that we would arrive in time to see Michelangelo's Pietà and sample the new sensation, Belgian waffles.

Her sister Ruth was extraverted to the point of boisterousness. Her zaniness, her mimicry, her giggle would infect people, and crowds around her grew louder. She was double-jointed, and liked to show children how she could bend her wrist and fingers back to touch the top of her forearm. Until she retired she lived at the Masonic nursing home in Columbus where she worked as a practical nurse, coming back to the farm when she could on weekends. I had a hard time imagining her measuring out doses in the dispensary, because she had a gangly, all-elbows way of going about things that often resulted in spilled ice tea and shattered glass. She had trained as a nurse in Philadelphia in the Thirties and lived with my mother's family during that time. (Nothing got thrown out in our family, and her outmoded nurse's cape, silky and funereally purple, became my Dracula outfit for Halloween decades later.) She used to take

my mother, then a schoolgirl, on outings that involved odd bits of daring. Once at the zoo, my mother saw her pet the paw that a sleeping lion had poked between the bars; the beast woke up with a terrific roar. Another time, in a park, she patted a mounted policeman's horse, which swiveled its neck back and clamped its teeth on her shoulder, as if it was arresting her. In one more animal encounter, a tethered goat she tried to feed wrapped its cord several times around her legs and proceeded to butt her until she was rescued. Incidents like these she took in high good humor—or at least she and her companions did in recalling them later on. With her great height, her long pale neck, and her sometimes unruly mass of white curls, she reminded one of some arcane, llama-like creature, but it was hard to get her to be still long enough for the impression to hold. Whenever one of our visits to the farm drew to a close, she would hide a twenty-dollar bill in the pocket of my mother's raincoat, knowing that it wouldn't be accepted without protest.

All four of these engaging people seemed as decisively connected to the house as the paint on its walls. It was impossible to imagine them living anywhere but there; and as things turned out, they never had to.

A lot of my memories of visits are composite, for apart from the day trips we made to places like Ohio Caverns (I recall Uncle Jack feeling the rock above our heads and warning the guide leading us among the stalactites that he had a wet ceiling) the life at the farm was much the same from day to day. There were outdoor suppers on an enormous table that my grandfather during one of his stays had banged together, using a section of barn door and some lengths of iron pipe that served as legs. There was plenty of corn on the cob, their own Silver Queen. Local relatives came over in the evening and with their children my brother and I played shadow tag in front of the porch. The floodlight set in the eaves made our shadows so monstrously long that it was not a game of much skill. The grownups, too, liked games, and

would often be playing dominoes or crazy eights as they talked. The television, when they got one, went into the large family room that had been added to the house. I could not draw a floor plan of the house, but that room has always stayed in my mind. Its specially designed flooring—a dramatic green S against a white background of vinyl-like tiles—made it definitively a family room. So did my great-grandfather's pocket watch, which was displayed hanging on a little stand face forward, like a midget clock beneath its glass dome. Aunt Ruth kept the watch wound when she remembered to. I know now that the people who lived in that house had their share of anxieties, but for a child the pervading feeling was of utter stability in a setting of kindness and modest comfort. It was as though time itself was under control for once. The ticking of the watch was inaudible.

Some of my recollections are less generic. Two of them continue to preoccupy and puzzle me whenever I think about the farm. In the first, my brother and I, awake in the middle of the night, were making our way back to bed from the bathroom when we noticed a door ajar with some light lurking behind it. It was Uncle Ray's room. We peeped in and saw him in night clothes but not in bed, sitting next to a work table or desk in the lamplight. The localized light in the surrounding darkness made the room mysterious. Uncle Ray wasn't apparently reading or doing much of anything. He seemed happy to see us, and we joined him for a long, inconsequent conversation, inspecting his salesman's samples and the other oddly miscellaneous things on his desk. It surprised us that he didn't immediately send us to bed as we would expect a grownup to do. He was content to talk, in a hushed, unhurried way, for as long as we were able to listen. We eventually began to yawn and took ourselves off. Although at the time we were charmed by his welcome, I mined a good deal of sadness out of this unmomentous experience when I thought about it as an adult. How often did he keep that sort of vigil, without the accidental company two

children were able to give him that one time?

The other adventure I keep recalling was mine alone, and it must come from the first visit that I can remember, when I was no more than four or five years old. I had gone exploring in the slant-roofed shed tacked on to the kitchen at the back of the house. It was dim and full of clutter—furniture that needed fixing and the like. On top of a box I saw a cat of a common, gray tabby kind, utterly motionless, its four legs stiffly extended. It was the most realistic stuffed-animal toy I had ever seen. Its fur was just as invitingly soft as our cat's was back on Long Island. I decided to ask if I could have it to take to bed at night. I picked it up and walked into the kitchen with it. The aunts, in the middle of making a piecrust or something, looked at me and froze. What I was holding was a dead cat. This is where I feel some bafflement: how did it happen to be there, in that catchall storage space? There was a platoon of barn cats who were fed scraps outside every day, and I have to assume that this was one that had checked out without warning. Uncle Jack probably parked it there, out of the sun, until he had a chance to bury it. None of this was explained to me. But I got the basic message, that it was not a toy I was holding. "Holy Moses!" whooped Aunt Ruth, as she always did when things got dramatic. I was relieved of the cat and hustled to the sink, where my hands were mercilessly washed. I remember thinking afterwards with a kind of awe: I have put my hands on something that is dead. Over the years my memory heightened the grotesquerie, picturing the cat as standing on its four stiff legs; it must have been lying down. Of course, I would have seen dead animals before, but this was the first one that registered. What I had done made me feel strangely singled out and important.

Great-grandfather's watch ticked on under the glass bell. I grew up, and as life got more complicated I saw the Ohio relatives much less frequently. I missed the sojourn of Uncle Emerson, and I missed the aunts' attempt to make some pin

money by raising chinchillas (as they soon discovered, the profits weren't enough to compensate for the animals' fetid odors). I got married, and said to my wife each summer, "We really should drive out so you can see the farm." Something always diverted us. On a bitterly cold night in January of 1976, the farmhouse, probably because of un-updated wiring, caught fire and burned to the ground. Uncle Ray had died a few months before, but his brother and two sisters perished in the fire.

My wife and I were visiting my parents when the news came to us the next evening. My mother took the phone call and after she got over being stunned told us what had happened. I remember standing later in upstairs hall, looking out the window into the night. In my parents' old house some of the panes were of antique glass with wavery ripples and flaws. I was looking through one of these, and the world outside appeared to be not only dark but warped out of its customary formation.

Almost nothing was salvaged from the house. One item that I heard described by someone who viewed the burnt-out scene has stayed with me as though I had seen it myself: Uncle Jack's World War I army helmet, cradled between charred timbers.

My wife and I went back to Cambridge, where we were living at the time; I was finishing up a term appointment at Harvard. I went through the next weeks in an automatic fashion as my feelings veered between numbness and angry regret. I tried to tell one of the Episcopal monks I had become friendly with about the fire. He drew me out with sympathetic questions, and once he had gathered that the victims were relatives I had been with only briefly and sporadically over the years, he said in a gentle, musing way, "Well, relatives like that become almost legendary." I did not feel like following this up, and probably to his relief as well as mine, I evaded any discussion of theodicy. The word legendary made me impatient. The implication was that my

dead relatives were figures in a personal mythology, and could thus be thought of with some measure of detachment. What he had said was kindly meant, but it was off-target. It was true that the days I spent in the presence of those people would not total much more than a month, and years passed in which we did not see each other. If destiny had been kinder than it commonly is, I would have known them better. But I knew them enough to savor their reality, and to feel shock at their sudden absence from the world. No, they were not legendary, not remote, but all too humanly close to me. They still are.

It is good to have the photograph of the house, though its unadorned clapboard face discloses nothing: like all but a very few photos, this one is ultimately inert. It cannot tell all that much more than a picture of the building's ending—as a black patch on a field of snow—would be able to. The better way for me to see my great-grandfather's house and the progeny it sheltered for most of a century is to close my eyes and think back. Then the building stirs with life, and often with laughter, and the aunts and uncles are as vividly there as any of the vital images that inhabit my mind. In a recovered summer, I taste the water from the tin cup, dependably cold even when the pump, standing like a sentry in the unforgiving sun, was almost too hot to touch. And I feel with my fingers the plush of the dead cat's fur, not yet knowing enough to recoil from the rigidity swathed in its softness.

Loren Graham

Country Boy

Why did I cringe at the unvarnished shock
in the voice of the first boy to look down from the bus
at my family's falling-down wreck of a farm
off the dirt road behind his nice subdivision?

He stared at me, unbelieving: "You *LIVE* there?"
How had I missed it before then, the heft
such speech could bear?
And how did I answer
in the hearing of his friends and still feel surprise

the following morning when all of them were waiting
with their new club of words? *Cracker boy. Cornbread*.
Tax stealer. And how, of all catcalls, did the mildest
and truest enrage me the most: *country boy*?

Country boy: their leader chanted it, dropping
his tongue to the floor of his mouth to mock
my accent and make it obscene, *cuntra boa*,
cuntra boa, until I learned that words could make *me*

obscene, till I calculated daily whether I had the strength,
if I caught him off guard, to slam his face
into the metal bar on the back of the bus seat,
to pay him for those weights, those words that were my fall.

Octobers

Dad would lug the big coal stove in
off the porch where it had rusted all summer and fit
the pipe to the hole in the chimney—covered
until now with a pie pan—and bring in the coal box;
and with the front room smaller, I could see ahead
how that one warm room would draw us all to it,

always somebody stabbing at the fire with the long
crowbar we used for a poker, someone
working the grate back and forth, adding to the din
getting rid of the clinkers or tumbling fresh coal
into the flames, banging down the iron lid, always
everyone talking in that one warm place

with the TV going and nobody watching it,
somebody singing with a guitar, one of the aunts
telling a big story to the others leaning in
(*and I want you to know* . . . she'd say and *I'll be jiggered if he didn't* . . .), while Grandma cracked
pecans with a tack hammer and the cousins argued—

whose hound, whose car—my younger sister
riding her trike in slow circles across the linoleum,
uncles laughing at her, smoking pipes or rolling
their own, opening the stove with one
smooth motion to toss a spent match or butt
so quick its warm breath was all I noticed.

Letters

He kept it under the divan where it couldn't
get stepped on, chalk and eraser
on top of it: little blackboard

framed in pale pine, slate
on which I fashioned my first crude
letters, his huge hand closing

over mine to help me form them,
to learn the order of things—"A" first,
the upstroke, the downstroke, the cross again

and again until I could generate
a rough lopsided capital on my own
and on through "Z," through zero

through nine—months passing as we framed
daily the strange awkward marks
whose insistent, eccentric gravity

I could feel but not account for, impossible
fascination of what chalk created,
eraser destroyed, both

by erosion, both in the single
clasp of that double hand
in that little clutch of moments left to him

before a final stroke closed in and left me
without him, with only these odd characters,
these letters, this way.

Zakia R. Khwaja

Nastaliq

Cat-lazy afternoons, my lead-smudged
fingers trace nastaliq script—a fusion of curling,
arcing Persian and geometric Kufic Arabic.

Straight-backed *alef*, big-bellied *chey*, the qāf
vocalized deep in the uvula—harsh, unlike the softer
kāf; I give a turban to tey, a bindiya to zwād,

thinking of calligraphy in a Sādeqain, Faiz ghazals
sung by Noor Jehan, rhyming riddles and my grandfather
reading Urdu poetry, quizzing me on poets' names.

Absorbed in eternal lines of nastaliq, in trance
like mystic Sufis, I decipher God and Love and
Self until the sweaty, blunted pencil slips.

Robert B. Shaw

Dinosaur Tracks

Beside the river where they used to wade
mornings or evenings in their hotter world,
relaxed as only those can be whose link
is soldered nicely high up on the food chain,
they've left a mincing trail or three-toed prints
in mud that time medusa'd into slabs
of sandstone brown as mud. The steps advance,
even less hurried now than when they first
pressed muck along their marshy avenue,
then vanish where the stratum is disrupted.

Each one about a man's handspan in size
and looking avian enough to plant
visions of carnivorous prototypes
of ostriches and emus (and in fact,
we're now informed such foragers wore feathers),
these tracks lead nowhere, and we're left to posit
the river of rivers in Connecticut
broadened and lush with swampy margins but
pursuing its primeval, silty creep
down reaches dense with hot fog and tree ferns,
as alien to us as any predator
traipsing along its banks. Again the world
is warming, sliding back toward a climate
like the one enjoyed by the old slashers,
and we, after scanning their once-soggy
plod into extinction, quicken our pace,
knowing what is forewarned and knowing too
we may at last leave less of an impression.

“Pity the Monsters!”

--Robert Lowell

Yes, at this late date, I pity them,
fang-flashers stuck with the dead-end job
of devouring bodies and/or souls
of victims hapless, foolhardy, or
corrupt, and always more on the way.
Think of Egypt’s Eater of the Dead,
Ammit, equipped with crocodile head,
leopard torso, hippo hindquarters,
slumped and sulking beneath the balance
weighing the heart of each new would-be
tenant against the feather of truth.
Intent on nothing but the hoped-for
guilt overload that would fill her gorge,
she had to stay awake slavering
while Thoth droned out the court proceedings
and Anubis yawned, holding the scales.
Think of the sphinx (the Grecian version),
part woman, part eagle, part lion,
roosting by the main road into Thebes,
a chimerical, bored tolltaker
programmed to plague each passerby
with her musty riddle, molting wings
unauthorized to flutter her off
her post even for calls of nature.
Think of chivalry-pestered dragons
who probably wanted nothing more
than a few well-spaced human gobbets
and peace and quiet while they caressed
their coin collections, snug in their caves.
Think of the centuries of bad press,
followed by years of no one taking
them seriously—to the point that

they became moth-eaten jabberwocks
scarcely able to alarm children.
It was their misfortune that we learned
as soon as we did not to fear them;
and after all, why should we ever
have done so, having earlier learned
to do unto others all the things
that made them infamous—things that now
we think may remain tolerable
if kept for the most part out of sight
while we dragoon the world purged of myth
into our own brittle regimen.

Stephen Cushman

The Red List

Endangerment's foreplay en route to extinction
often but not always. Ask the bald eagle,
ridiculous nickname for that elegant hood
rhymed with its tail, a matched set distinctive
against distant spruce, white as the transit
of pre-dawn Jupiter's super-heated drop
soldering sky plates to cement a meridian;
ask the white hoods about last-minute comebacks,
all but erased by really fine pesticide
but now off the red list and suddenly nemesis
to the gull population, herring or black-backed,
whose chicks make good snacks during long days of fishing.
Eagles increase, local gulls dwindle, till one day, who knows,
seeing an eagle skim low overhead, no bigger deal
than seeing a crow, so what, who cares, the national bird,
as in permit me to flip you the.
Move forward as the way opens.
But will the way open? Will the endangerments
prove passing fronts, slow-moving, stalled-seeming
for months, even years, but in the end ushering in
survival's high pressure? Or is this the one
there's no coming back from? And what kind of danger?
The one of tonight they'll drag me away,
my remains in a pile of anonymous others,
or that of believing I have no connection
with someone who's, what, fill in the blank,
male to my female, old to my young, light to my dark?
Connection, praise connection, I'm always connected,
says Hannah, 13, and there's more life online
than for those who are off, who don't have a life

or really exist. Tell it, little sister, whatever one thinks
of eagles and Jupiter and a parallel universe
where nothing plugs in, the urge to exist
engines most urges from the gull and the eagle
all the way up to you who discriminate
between mere existence and really existing,
no exception made even for the urge,
when existence gets sickening, to endanger oneself.

Ooh, lighten up and give us a break
from these blocks of long lines, we don't have all day
and no one's entitled to jumbo attention
even from throwbacks who still can sustain it
instead of yacking on the phone while navigating traffic
or texting on the crapper or, Hannah, does this happen,
poring over some small screen while taking it from behind?
You're too young to know, one assumes, and, boy,
your parents hope so, but that would be a question
arising from your assertion: Do the connected do it now
like sailors in rough weather, one hand for you,
one for your ship, that glowing device? Could be nice
in some ways, the distraction, perhaps, slowing things down
so no one lapses prematurely and two can synchronize,
thanks to messages back and forth,
RUT ILBL8 UT2L SRY B2W THNX

Dirty Martini

For this lip-reader
olive juice is hard to tell
from an *I love you*.

One's distraction's another's aphrodisiac,
so who can say that connection here can't enhance
connection there or that texting jimmy
while banging johnny won't turn all on

and move the earth
as the earth moved Tuesday,
day before yesterday, 5.9 on Richter's scale,
Charles Francis, born in Ohio, Hello,
I'm a seismologist, what about you,
are you a seismologist too, as if getting paid
to track our temblors weren't cool enough,
you also get to say I'm a seismologist,
never felt the earth move? here lemme help,
don't speak English? no problema, sismo,
Erdbeben, maanjäristys, tremblement de terre,
whatever you call it it jostles us all
thirty miles from epicenter, teenage kid
with three life sentences, middle-age lady
with daily radiation on top of her chemo,
premature baby urgently delivered
to intensive attention, and connects us all
for thirty seconds, even someone standing
alone in the woods while the woods roar and rumble
the sign sufficient, the message received.

The national bird,
Washington's white monument,
has closed for a crack.

Wonder what the eagle's doing
to ready for the hurricane, prophesied for Sunday
and bearing a name that might make one ask
if people paid to christen storms, yet another job to envy,
have anhydrous senses of humor or nasty knacks for irony
or plain don't know Irene means peace; it's sure peaceful now,
blue morning in the buff, not the fig leaf of a cloud,
not a single stitch of wind, for the forty she's left dead,
the bozo on the Outer Banks who thought it boss to surf,
the guy who fried while wading to save a small girl stranded
by waters hiding two live wires, the many hapless felled by trees

crashing in windows, dropping on rooftops, swatting cars
like blood-puffed mosquitoes. What are you supposed to do?
Act like a bozo, something may happen; act like a hero,
something may happen. But sitting quiet in your room,
minding your own beeswax, when suddenly, pow, you're history
gives Pascal the lie. Death, Leading Causes of:
accidents rank third for men, for women sixth, but rule out
anything having to do with booze or with some kind of machine,
narrow it to nature, in her high assassin mode, e.g., falling tree,
falling coconut, lightning strike, landslide, avalanche,
tornado, flash flood, earthquake, tidal wave, meteor debris,
and the number must be pretty small, especially for those,
neither bozos nor heroes, who keep to little rooms
meekly hoping to miss misfortune. And yet it happens;
shut-in, agoraphobe, convict under house-arrest,
the deeply depressed who sleep all day with sad heads covered
share endangerment, too. Wonder what the eagle's doing.

The white fog covers
island contours like the sheets
drawn over faces.

Move forward as the way opens. And if it can't open
beside the sea or in the woods, perhaps it opens,
in project or penthouse, trailer park or track development,
with a story instead. Today another aftershock, 3.4;
yesterday the queen of Sheba came to test Solomon
with spices by the camel-load, gold and flashy stones,
but he answered her questions, showed her his stuff,
lots more opulent than hers, knocked the wind right out of her
before he sent her home again with all she could desire.
Odd transaction. What's her game? Show him up? Put him
down?
Is this how monarchs pass the time? A shrewd investor,
maybe she figured on a good return in a bearish market:
Bring King Solomon X in gifts, your retinue groaning,

and you go home with ten times X. Or maybe she was angling
to make herself his newest wife, number seven hundred and
one,
not exactly top of the heap but possibly a notch or two above
any one of his three hundred concubines. Or maybe she really
needed his help with questions she couldn't answer, like Why,
if you're smitten with foreign women, haven't you come to
me?
Am I so ugly? Look at this; take a peek at those. Here we go
into apostasy, hand in hand, just say the word and we can build
a very high place for my abomination. If so, did he say no,
and she chose to attribute a failed seduction to something
she called wisdom? Solomon's sharp, no doubt about it,
that prayer for discernment ranks near the top,
as does his judgment between the two harlots, and don't forget
he built the temple. But all the excess, whether in women
or conspicuous consumption, while slobbering after other gods
when one was taking such good care of him,
doesn't feel much like wisdom. Good story, though.
And thinking it over surely beats heck out of sitting around
making big idols out of one's problems. If you ever have
trouble
distinguishing the queen of Sheba from Bathsheba, Solomon's
mom
and his dad's first big transgression, just remember David saw
BATHsheba in her BATH. Careful: This trick won't work
in Hebrew, Greek, or Latin.

Things not lost today:
any weight, a tooth, my nerve.
Praise the plus column.

But does the eagle, its branch-nest humming atop a dead
spruce
with chirpy eaglets hankering for fish, herring or mackerel
so fresh it was swimming just minutes ago, until the big
swoop,

too fast to be fell, snagged it from the full-moon flood tide,
ever give an eagle thought to whether or not to leave them
alone?
Come on; confess. If you're an eagle, you rank pretty high
on the shoreline food chain and don't worry much about
ending up
as somebody's lunch. And who could manage to raid that
nest,
weighing in at a metric ton, when adults usually guard it?
But one of the parents could up and die and then the survivor
would be in a bind, having to exit to bring home the
mackerel
while junior's defenseless. Helpless. Endangered.

Yellow-haired boy arms to the sky in yellow fall light
chasing to catch yellow leaves flying.

I remember saying
you will remember this.

Now I remember this.

So many mysteries, no wonder detective fiction
has been detectable ever since Daniel, in defense of Susanna,
cross-examined witnesses, or Oedipus, insistent,
sent for the shepherd, or Scheherazade's *Three Apples* story.
Who can't admire Auguste Dupin, Sherlock Holmes,
Hercule Poirot?
Or the great Chief Inspector, who cracked many cases
while fathering analysis? But Freud had his blind spots,
among them a mystery beyond solution, so of course he
belittled
religion as illusion; our largest spirits have never believed
in the God he didn't believe in either. What a low bar:
diss the divine into trivial silliness and then call it silly.
Talk about illusion: ideas of God are childish

so God is childish and doesn't exist? What logic primer
did he find that in? Grow up. You've finally figured out
God's not Santa Claus, a school principal hot to suspend
you,
or your personal short-order cook? Good for you.
Congratulations.
How does it feel to graduate from kindergarten?
Hope you do as well in first grade. Easy, Cush.
Unemployment's high and there aren't any jobs for more
Jeremiahs.

In my trilogy
of sky and shore, wind and sea,
this is volume three.

So many mysteries, no wonder some like detective fiction;
solutions comfort, especially when mystery comes
with a copious side order of brain-dicing pain. But others?
Others may find investigation too exhausting
and opt themselves out of intractable inquiry:
When did this happen? Who did this to you? What do you
remember?
Maybe it's better to kill the day in bed, skip the medication,
say you've been robbed of a certain kind of life,
one that sadness doesn't disfigure and force underground
out of the light of others' attentions, out of the headlines,
the prizes, the raises, the perks of looking good or doing
well.
Or maybe detection, even successful, doesn't diminish
the deficit of hopelessness, so why bother trying?
Maybe, could it be, hopelessness is ecstasy?

Red leaf in the road.
This place will shake my dust off.
Crickets effervesce.
Ecstasy. There's a subject that's lots more fun

than spending a morning in General District Court
with shoplifters, trespassers, fishers without licenses,
inmates in jumpsuits who hobble to the bench in shackles
where the clean-cut judge, who doesn't sound judgmental,
denies them bond for risk of flight. Ecstasy. Much better
but in its way as complicated, variegated, unless you settle
for euphoria, bliss, exalted delight as adequate synonyms
and let it go at that, eager for the next installment, please.
But if the Greek means displacement from senses,
how can you settle for synonyms like those? So many ways
to end up displaced. The young man angry
at how his folks flubbed, ruined his life
from infancy on, isn't there ecstasy in the way he can't focus
on the simplest task or verbal exchange? Or how about sadness
his mother now feels, the majesty of her motherhood
suddenly spilled, unmoppable mess on linoleum floor?
Or ecstasy of fear as when someone says you jerk you scared
me
shitlessly witless, or of boredom so bored one truly is bored
out of one's mind and into its boondocks. Ecstatic hatred,
ecstatic jealousy, ecstatic disgust, ecstatic confusion,
ecstatic embarrassment, ecstatic bereavement,
ecstatic compassion, ecstatic detachment, ecstatic obsession,
ecstatic stress in the ravishment of overwork. So much more
to ecstasy than pleasure, the back rub, hot bath, warm bed,
the fond folderol between your legs or someone else's.
When you get down to it, ultimate ecstasy,
super-deluxe, five-star vacation from the sensory grind,
wouldn't it be in the Grand Last Resort? Or if that's too glib,
wouldn't it be in whatever-they-call-it? Near-death experience?
(Well look at that: it's even got an acronym, NDE,
but surely the army could have done better, something more
like NEARTHEX, Sergeant, take those men and flank that
NEARTHEX,
Yes sir, Lieutenant, except it sounds too much like narthex,
although come to think of it, the resemblance resonates;

when in doubt, Greek gives good word, parathanatosesthesia
or perithanatosesthia, on the model of perimenopause,
pericarditis, peridontist, but not Perry Mason or Como,
and could yield the acronym PETE, suddenly changing
For Pete's Sake, or also possible, PETHE, which hip insiders
like us, who else, could pronounce pithy when we apply
for grants to study the pithiest pithies; where's my pill?)
But what do we do in the meanest of meantimes?
Here's the thing: there's no displacement from one's own
senses
except through one's senses. If you're simply not interested,
skip this strophe and pick it up below; if you can't control
seizures, fits, or spells, you don't have a choice
and displacement will come, willy-nilly, sally-tally,
holly-folly, so good luck to you; if you're receptive
and in the market for a nice starter ecstasy, choose a sense
and then overload it, or bring it to the brink
of such overloading. Eyesight failing? Touch unavailable,
other than your own? Smell a little dull,
thanks to allergies or sinus infection?
Worried that taste will lead to gluttony and put on pounds?
Here's the good news. Words: organic, fat-free, low-calorie
and whether you're deaf or pretending to be,
they're all dressed to shimmy that auditory ecstasy.

Mates found or unfound,
birds shut their mouths and leave us
fall in songless woods.

yellow-haired boy *electroconvulsive therapy*

arms to the sky *severe depression*

in yellow fall light *when psychotic*

chasing to catch *refusing to eat*

yellow leaves flying *thinking of committing*

yellow leaves flying

Tough time lately
IDing a tree, its leaves turning red, first on the ridge
again this September, but even with a specimen branch
and field guide to common timber, one's small knowledge
of opposite simple leaves, edges smooth instead of toothed
and leafy veins concurred with edges, amounts to little
when it comes to pronouncing with confident conviction
the mystery tree a species of dogwood, which it might well
be.
It's so much easier to say what it's not: buttonbush,
buffaloberry, the golden branch that must break off
for permission to visit, a visa for Hades.
Authorized Personnel Only. Hardhats Required. Passport,
please.
I don't have a passport, but here's a branch I broke from a
tree
I think might be a species of dogwood, although it differs
from the flowering ones that mostly go purple.
Are you kidding? You can't come down here with that.
Back up to the surface for you. No Admittance. Access
Denied.
I know, I'm sorry, I thought it was just descent from the
ridge,
maybe thirteen hundred back down to six,
which is where I live if you call this living,
but I must have gone wrong, taken a bad turn,
since here I am, now flying stand-by, on Air Katabasis.
Well, as long as you're down here, let's see who's around.
No thanks. Little as I like what's up up there,

I can't handle it down here. Not so fast, pal;
somebody's recognized you; we got rules against rudeness.
Who is it? Over there. Tall, a little stooped,
orangish tonsure below a dapper hat. No, it can't be.
That you, Archie? *I'm at fifty Octobery*. Younger than I am
when we met. *How you getting along up there?*
Tough time lately. *Still writing?* Still writing.
Then what's the trouble? Hard to say. *Ease up; ejamb*
more; let it all mosey. It's not that. *What then?*
A yellow-haired boy. *Oh that.* Yes that. *I do*
the ones I love no good. Yes that: *there are those whom to*
lose
soaks direction out of the tree boughs. That too.
You still got the letters I wrote? Got em right here:
if treated obsessively it becomes obsessively important,
whereas, in fact, a good many things are important,
including the love between poets. Fight free
to the true spirit–. Twenty-one when I opened that.
I treasure the knowledge of you. His age now. *I treasure*
the knowledge of you. Last thing you wrote me
twenty-one later. *Look me up when you're down here*
for good; sign the guest book.
I treasure the knowledge of you

A favorite cow,
calf-bereft, loudly out-lows
a bellowing bull.

Move forward move forward, but it's hard to know
where forward is down here, now a shore, a rocky stretch,
this bitch of a beach where urchins and barnacles
can slice the shoeless and ocean's so cold
heads hurt, privates burn, but no swimming like it
for a saline facial, a salty rubdown that sloughs dead cells
and when you get out in a fresh west wind it makes your
skin feel

as if you'd taken communion on the outside: thus spake
the shivering imp, yellow-haired elf, blue eyes and goose
bumps,
laughing tongue of laughing fire. Not every day
includes eagle-sighting or should, if it's special
and meant to stay so; not every place, no matter how real
the health it restores, the spirit it resuscitates,
or how thin the membrane between its trees and
sacred emanations
is more than real estate in someone's eyes. One owner dies,
one survives, wants to sell, and just like that
it's gone, though still on the tax map and under surveillance
by satellites taking the very long view, gone, gone,
and if you're kin, even if distant, to airborne Antaeus
and needed your feet firmly on that ground or your face
in that water or your eyes on that eagle, then my poor friend,
you're one step closer, one giant's stride closer,
to being gone too. The Greeks got it wrong:
Mnemosyne's queen of the overstuffed underworld
where places go to be with people.

Been flipped the finger?
Only a prosodist can
give you the dactyl.

Can't move forward? At least change the scene,
eight straight days of some kind of rain, so heavy muggy
pages curl, covers warp, slime molds and fungi
erupt in the woods now studded with puffballs, inkhorns,
fatal Amanitas, one little bite of a Panther Amanita,
four-inch Death Cap, Destroying Angel, you don't feel a
thing
for ten full hours, maybe more, but then it's too late
for puking to help or any kind of drug, but the great thing is
your change of scene, you nailed it cold, the underworld
express

without all the hassle, delays, cancellations, long lines
at security, no room for your carry-on, the seat in front of
you
smack in your face across the Atlantic or worse the Pacific,
while back upstairs in the light and air
the surface you rippled when you ate the wrong mushroom,
was it by accident, smoothes over fast and very best of all
it doesn't cost a thing. What a great deal but a tad extreme
for some mobilizers, who'd rather zip off to Europe instead,
London, Madrid, Paris, or Prague, whoopee, la-di-da,
welcome to Europe where thirty-eight percent suffer from
illness,
we're talking mental, insomnia, anxiety, dementia,
depression,
so welcome to Europe, sit back, relax, enjoy the quick trip
out of the pan into third-degree burn
over ninety-percent of your transient body.

No problem so huge
it doesn't shrivel puny
from a moon's-eye view.

Everything triggers sadness.
That's what he said, eyes filling up, while stroking a dog's
ear.
He's right. Of course. Who can argue if anything can
trigger anything, and it's only a matter of how light you set
the trigger resistance. If you're motion sick or morning sick
or sickly hungover, a big bowl of chowder can make you
upchuck;
horny, enthralled, obsessed, or infatuated, even the breeze
can be deeply engorging. So it makes perfect sense
that the sadder you get the sadder it looks, the sadder it looks
the sadder you get. The next question is is sadness the rule,
joy the exception, the most trigger-happy a gated community
of neurobiologies wired for mania, while the trigger-woeful

inherit the landfill. Or does joy have a chance
to get half the pie? Desolation Consolation Desolation
Consolation, how much of one offsets the other?
Can one arrive where it all triggers joy
without drugs or booze or mental disorder?
Black clouds backlit with hip orange edges: last night's sun
set,
which after a day of even more rain was looking mighty foxy.

Recession's no fun
for gums and economies.
Rough on hairlines, too.

If it all triggered joy, you could just think
of the names of newborns, the three most popular,
Jacob, Ethan, Michael, virile trochees strutting smartly
to the Hebrew Bible, but girls mix it up more, number one,
Isabella, also Hebrew, a form of Elizabeth but more Español,
then off to Greece with wise Sophia, as Emma rounds it out,
whole, universal, with Old High German. Especially for guys
the Bible hangs on, the top twenty-five still bringing in
Noah, Daniel, Joshua, Andrew, David, Matthew, Elijah,
James, Joseph, Gabriel, Benjamin, and Samuel, whereas the
girls,
except for Ava, akin to Eve, Hannah, Leah, and a couple of
others
such as Nevaeh, heaven's own palindrome, go for the hetero
-dox or -geneous. Must be something to it, but what?
Maybe boys' parents, even agnostics, cling to nostalgia
for something like Logos and hope that their angels,
named for an angel, an apostle, a prophet, won't break the law
unspeakably badly and might end up righteous. If that's not
a laugh
to generate joy and perk up an underworld, try the old system:
open the book at random and point. I hereby name thee
Shaphan, Jeremiah twenty-six, and now quite possibly

unisex like Jayden or Brandon or Rory. Hurray for the
epicene;
joy's hard in jails, especially gender ones.

Jupiter rising
over sadness set to set
still shines when joys rise.

In rutty routine randomness refreshes, here the name
Shaphan,
there the coarse bulldozer roaring next door. Who doesn't
love
a blue October day, top-shelf weather with leaves turning too;
who doesn't hate the mechanized grinding, continuous
drilling
by some sadistic dentist, or is there a nervous system
so calm and evolved, a brain so remapped by meditative
practice,
it hears the grating growl as purling susurration? Wait.
It stopped. Now don't you feel like a jerk for complaining?
Now don't you wish you'd left lamentation
up to the soul-crushed who really have earned it?
Boo-hoo, so you're banished from the land of the eagle,
boo-hoo, so he's sick inside his handsome head,
boo-hoo, you can't travel and leave him alone,
boo-hoo, you can't sleep, boo-hoo, your shoulder aches,
boo-hoo, there's no raise, boo-hoo, you're always older,
boo-hoo, so your work has suddenly come to nothing.
Time's up. Quiet's over. It started again. Back to the dozing
of overbearing bull, or should it be dosing, as in a big dose,
a really big dose, of endless-link treads tearing up air waves,
getting in gear to gouge out the day, the china shop of silence
or small sounds and whispers, crickets winding down, wasps,
breezed leaves, a white-throated sparrow on his way south.
Instead get the earplugs. And where is that book,
since my last train of thought done jumped off the track.

No, not the Bible. Already downed a good shot this morning,
Jeremiah, Paul, especially that Matthew, do not be anxious
how you are to speak or what you are to say
whenever trial comes and you're delivered up, wish all my
lectio
could be as divina, now that eyesight's even more precious,
wish all our tax collectors could sing the same song
or that the same song were soundtrack instead
of bulldozer muzak shattering Sheol. Here's the book,
thick and black, so play the game, open at random,
Thou art now in the vale of misery, in poverty, in agony,
in temptation; rest, eternity, happiness, immortality,
shall be thy reward, as Chrysostom pleads, if thou trust in
God,
and keep thine innocency. Though 'tis ill with thee now,
'twill not be always so; a good hour may come upon a
sudden;
expect a little. Yeehah, now we're talking, keep on trusting,
keep up that innocency, expect a little, and most of all
don't continue reading, *Yea, but this expectation*
is it which tortures me in the mean time; future hope
makes present hunger; whilst the grass grows,
the horse starves.

That mackerel sky.
How big would they have to be,
eagles to eat it.

But then, starving horse, along comes a day, one single day
when, lo and behold, medication works, or is it good
weather?
Or maybe it's prayer, go ahead and smirk, whatever the
cause,
he's got a little zip, the smile shines again, there is the sound
of his chuckle and singing. Expect a little? Receive a lot,
glory be, alleluia, don't you dare think ahead

or look up this drug, what it's meant for, what the side
effects
of antipsychotics they designate atypical.

Before dawn, ladies,
Jupiter was ogling
passing Pleiades.

Superlative blue of optimal October, how can one born to
you,
with yellow light for breast milk and red leaves for toys,
question joy's inoculation or say such a thing
as the universe hates me? Today is a birthday.
Tell the black tupelo, maroon in the field,
to glow when he passes. Make the clear sun
apply to his cheek an ache-easing compress.
Swaddle him up in southwest wind
that tousles trees and floats the hawk
while smelling of ginger. Today is a birthday.
Let him gaze at zebras in gazebos;
let him liberate leopards in jeopardy.
Help him be born; help this day bear him
and him bear this day.

is silence escape from noise or noise from silence
contemplation escape from action or action from
contemplation
built environment from rubescent maple or rubescent maple
from downtown buildings crammed with self-promotion?

That's a blot on your escutcheon.

Rhomboid in the male, triangular in the female,
escutcheon meaning shield-like pattern of pubic haircoat
is medical lingo and doesn't appear in the dictionary
usually used here or in any of the household back-ups, so it
helps

to have a doctor friend, although the doctor also says
escutcheon meaning shield-like pattern of pubic haircoat
doesn't appear on many crotches these days either,
at least among the young or not so young who maybe figure
a little shaving's cheaper than a tummy tuck
and could be more effective in getting business back.

That's a blot, your escutcheon.

Is faith escape from skepticism or skepticism from faith?

If you put it on display,
anticipate assessment.

so that the people could not distinguish
the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of people's
weeping

Of those whom thou gavest me I lost not one
in all those years on that cold water not one
I took in a boat I never lost one not one

but this morning he wasn't in bed or anywhere
did I lose him would I find him at midday on the mountain
where he'd gone up to end it under Jupiter?

three times this week dreams of the house
someone else is calling home

the only thing better than sunset at sea is sunrise at sea;
there's no night sky like night sky at sea

the deeper the faith, the deeper the skepticism;
the converse may not be true
poo-poo to honolulu

What if the universe really did hate us does hate us
What if they got it wrong and bumper stickers should read
God hates you What if the constant onslaught of omens
signs oracles revelations theophanies amounts to an over
flowing
inbox of heavenly hate mail and the eagle in the spruce
really means you miserable abortion of a soul I hope they
diagnose you tomorrow with inoperable pancreatic cancer
or Jupiter rising at downtime setting at uptime really means
may a beam pulled out of your house impale you on a
dunghill
or the rubescent maple in the full throes of its blood-flush
mean let dogs dine on your precious interior the one you
tended
petted caressed primped and plumed the one you gazed upon
doted upon drooled over and trumpeted abroad without
ceasing once
in or on your memoir Christmas letter resumé web page pod
cast
blog a word so ugly so onomatopoeia for vomiting it makes
perfect sense where is she she's in the bathroom blogging
up her insights I'm so sorry I blogged all over your lap
oh no someone else announcing the substantial impact she's
had
on American poetry these last thirty years I think
I'm going to blog What if this is really the way it is
What if he's right the universe does hate him and the
medication
that could produce confusion fainting spells irregular heart
beat
frequent need to urinate stiffness spasms trembling
constipation
sexual impairment sleeping impairment weight gain is
nothing
but sugar-coating on the hate a rose-colored contact lens
for each blue eye so he sees the leaves as they let go

into the whirling wind sees and says let go let go
it will be all right the wind will lift me sail me up
and over this troubled time these troublesome times up and over
up and over until it's all over?

"I've fallen below the level of presentableness."

Give us a sign. But who needs a sign with signs and headlines
in such abundance, as in an airport: THE WORD *FOREIGN*
IS LOSING ITS MEANING. Really? What's the latest salary
of the genius who generated that tour de force,
expense account, retirement package, favorite hotel
in downtown Hong Kong? Does he or she stroll
with black designer roller-bag and matching laptop case
through this treeless, breezeless oasis on the way to a drink,
bourbon in business class, look up, and think
I wrote that one all by myself. Well, not quite myself;
I had a team on that campaign but remember the meeting,
time zones away, when the rhythm just came, who knows from where,
Is Losing Its Meaning Is Losing Its Meaning, *and when I shouted*
out loud to the board, we knew we had a winner
for the xenophobe market. Poor *foreign*. You're out of a job
if everything's domesticated, housebroken, tamed.
Nothing left alien, uncanny, exotic?
And all you meant was *out of doors.*

Praise the inventor
of headlights opalescing
dirty-blond fox fur.

Even if one's a steerage class peon, courting blood clots
in a small middle seat on an overnight long-haul
back from the underworld, it's still good to read
the financial page of a decorous newspaper, if only to escape
aggressive alliteration in the hectoring headlines
of your typical tabloid, especially its sports pages,
but also because, even for investors only in invisibles,
financial headlines pay spiritual dividends. Consider:
FINDING YIELD IN A LOW-RATE WORLD. Okay, okay,
an auditory audit aimed at eliminating erotics for the ear
might object to terminal consonance in *yield* and *world*,
but quibbles aside, isn't this all that Emerson's saying,
for just one example, and isn't this really the basic goal
of the spiritual portfolio, no matter how diversified
among thriving theisms, mono-, poly-, pan-, and a-?
Or how about this one: WHY VOLATILITY MAY BE
HERE TO STAY.
No need to bother reading the article; enough to know
tranquility gone AWOL in transactions with the world
isn't afflicting you alone, enough to grasp if peace and quiet
are high on your list, you'd better learn to grow your own
when they can't be imported. Five dismal days
of unbroken darkness, and then, with November,
he suddenly looked up. Today's a Thursday, Thursday the
third,
the sky mostly sunny, highs in the 60s, lots of trees leaved.
But the last two months, his Thursdays go bad.

Aquila Jovis,
the eagle of Jupiter,
was golden, not bald.

It was and is not and is to come. How could he know,
John in the cups of Patmos apocalypse, that the beat of the
beast
with seven heads and ten horns and a woman on its scarlet
back

is the beat of the beast in a head so distressed?
Yesterday it was, unshakable shadow hooding his face
as if before hanging, but is not today because, who knows,
the angle of the sunset cuts more sharply or he dreams a
dream
that leaves a good taste or some small short in neurotrans
mission
suddenly connects and power's restored, the juice resumes
flowing
until it comes again, the reliable beast, repetitive bastard.
Have mercy, Master; my child's possessed, severely
possessed
by a most severe demon. Nothing's changed. Two thousand
years
and still the parents of offspring afflicted beseech and
believe
in very little else. And can one blame a young man for
hunting
escape from unbearables when the first day for
muzzle-loaders
finds, yes it's true, his old father straying up toward the deer,
just before dusk, chancing an accident?

The light bleeds away.
November's the hemorrhage.
Three minutes each day.

Last stripe of afterglow in clear, cloudless sky
goes to ROY on the spectrum, while to the naked eye
for the first time tonight a new face in town
offsets austerity, the recent cutbacks handed down
and more light laid off: Venus returned from celestial
sabbatical
spent behind the sun, its curtain drawn on her boudoir
these last eight months, but now she's back starring, however
dim

compared to Jupiter, his maximum magnitude her eastern
opposite
(somebody check: was he this big in 4 B.C.?), but bright
enough
to outlast winter, exhaust its cold lechery, and rise refreshed
up through midspring. Bright enough. Bright enough.
As is the moon, three days from full, a screech owl trilling,
the white-throated sparrow's password at dusk, deer in the
road,
three tails visible. This is enough. Or could be enough.
But not for him, along for the walk.

New tongues build your brain:
bird slang, colloquial breeze,
the phrasings of rain.

Most days one wakes parallel to the floor, overnight
long-hauls
afflictive exceptions, but whether one's supine, all laid out
like Tutankhamun's gold sarcophagus or one of those
knights
in dim Norman churches, hands chest-folded (my preferred
mode),
or prone to sleep prone or hugging soft pillow, fetally balled,
the first roaring Rubicon yawns to be crossed: how does one
get
from parallel to perpendicular? What's the carrot, goad, or
spur
to drop that last dream, shed the cocoon of cozy bedclothes,
and somehow levitate ninety tough degrees to, let's say,
a grimly dismal Melvillian morning, November rain ripping
down
the last of the oak leaves, nothing ahead but the usual gruel?
And this from an optimist, an eager believer in eager
believing,
a poster-boy morning person who doesn't drink coffee

or tee off with tea and doesn't wake starving without any
food
or to bars across windows and automatic weapons fire.
What's someone luckless expected to do, lonely, despairing,
constant heart-ache that's not metaphoric but chronic
anxiety,
its snug anaconda squeezing him tighter with each
exhalation?
Sleep's his relief. Waking him's cruel, so isn't it better
to sit there a while, stroke the short hair, kiss the sad head?

I lift up my eyes
for some help to the foothills
the Spanish call skirts.

Thank goodness we're small and soon leave the earth
to much grander motions. Why care? Why try? Why
bother
with a sabbath day you have to work hard to keep half-holy?
As long as we're resting, then let us start resting
from Commandment Number Four, even though Mosheh,
drawn from the water (think no one's left for you to admire?
refresh yourself on Shiphrah and Puah), claimed it ranks
higher
than later commandments that keep lawyers billing. It's
simple really:
no sabbath, no rest of any deep kind; no rest, no distance
from the funhouse of feelings addiction to busyness
can make you think real; no distance from feelings, no
chance
for your ashes to start to reheat, your juices regenerate,
your punctured lungs fill with fresh second wind
only true apathy gives mouth to mouth. We're talking
true apathy, as Stoics conceived it there in their portico,
not the kind now that endangers surprise and most curiosity,
but the bona fide kind that fires the drama jack king or
queen,

for magnification of minor emotion. Sure, feel sad
and then feel free to share that sadness with someone who
cares
or wants to appear to, but then take a shot at letting it drop
and don't say you're dying unless it's high time to shop for
a coffin.
If it is, speak the word, and we're off to the undertaker,
but if not, try transmuting sadness to askesis, lead into light,
rather than ass-kissing into high status they may not have
earned
your ambient blues. Given a chance, sadness makes ascetic,
draining the appetites of erstwhile pleasures. Movies
magazines
booze and most food can suddenly seem cumbersome, ditto
the news
or keeping up with the latest buzz, the one going viral,
as if a virus were a plus. Pare things down. Bask in basics,
cool water, dark bread, weather, the sky; if it's available,
long-standing friendship simplified by trial into true trust.
Sex is trickier and not often thought of respecting ascetics,
appearing at first to have nothing to do
with self-control, strict discipline, or renunciative regimen,
but maybe it does, or maybe it can, since nothing's more
austere
than absolute nakedness and how can one deny oneself
any more fully than when one surrenders one's self to
another?

Yes, ithyphallic
once upon a bygone time.
Now, iffy-phallic.

"I'm sorry to be a parasite."

Abnormal skull: *fenestra rotunda* and temporal bones
distinctly pronounced, cochlea coil unusually large,

temporal gyri impressions, inferior and fusiform,
suggesting marked development of opposing cerebral zones.
Was he born with this brain, or did practicing music
alter its architecture? Say yes to the former
and Prelude and Fugue in E-Flat Major might as well be
Jupiter
for all the chance you'll ever get there, but yes to the latter
and suddenly it matters how hard you practice pale sky scales
on December's first day or listen to gasps and the comelier
grunts
these lines keep whispering into your ear as they go on trying
to work closely with you to find the right rhythm
one hopes might result in phonemic satisfaction, mutual
esteem,
inclination toward future encounters. Ready readers' radars
with signals enough, discrete and discreet, and soon
sensitivity
gets cranked so high it takes fewer words to enter the
kingdom.
See that closed door? Someone's behind it stoking the notes
for your delectation and what's more there's no need
to huff and puff and blow the house down or sing to the door
paraclausithyrons of your own composition, no call to
wheedle
or bully it open because the composer's not what you want
so bad you can't swallow; it's the thing that's composed.
Can't trance to Bach's skull, even in a powdered wig.

Rangers on their rounds
carry tampons in their packs,
slip them into wounds.

Sustain a gross insult to one's self-importance
and slip into sulking, prodigious, sublime, getting passed over
for raises, promotion, the Hot Stuff Award so stoking
resentment

that one soon warps bitter, bitchy, and hurtful when suddenly
there she blows, the Goldilocks planet, six hundred light
years
off through gray sky, where given a watery greenhouse effect
life may be happening--this rainy instant--and under a sun
a quarter less luminous (same way it seems down here some
days),
its years sliding by with seventy-five fewer evenings and
nights
(give them November, January too, and maybe throw in,
at no extra cost, July's second half). Discoveries like these
put the cosmic beats-me of nescioquiddity into ascendancy,
and one doesn't need didactic reminders of how not to be
conformed to this earth. Conformed to this earth?
What can that mean, when superlative earthliness
is scoping out space, hunting for planets? What about there,
somewhere on Goldilocks: is somebody saying be not
conformed
to Goldilocks also, and does sentience there likewise
distinguish
between Goldilocks versions of earthly and earthy?
Be not conformed to the earthy? What else is worth it,
if Professor Ornithologist has figured it out and sexual
choice
in birds has to do not with genetics but with a strong
preference
for what's merely beautiful? It makes perfect sense:
the eagle's an aesthete and mating is art, since art is a form
of communication co-evolving with its evaluation.
(here's where the footnote should go if there were one),
though skepticism jumps to say, Then art doesn't differ in
any big way
from marketing or politics. Oh stuff a sock in it
and take a few seconds to ponder instead how Professor
explains
the angry upheaval we had only yesterday: if mating is art,

your face was displaying its luminous plumage
of tears in low lamplight.

Prosopagnosia,
worse than color, snow, or night,
blindness to faces.

Old and Middle Kingdom well-to-do Egyptians
sailed for the underworld in coffins lined with spells,
Here I am sailing, crossing the sky, but not afraid
because of good deeds, and litigants in Ethiopia
used to sue in poetic form, plaintiff or defendant winning
based on how the form impressed. Even an Inuit has better
charms
up in the Arctic, warm in her igloo, humming as she mends a
parka
one to stop bleeding, one to catch fish, one to make some
thing
too heavy light. But where in the atlas can you find this:
Whenever you sing, / Whenever it's dawn, / The path of
death /
Will never be gone. It's not in any coffin yet, and no one's
won a lawsuit with it, and now that the sun's already set
in Greenland, Nord, two months ago, you're not going to see
it
again for two more, no matter the charm you happen to
choose
or how hard you say it. No, that one's by a little boy,
five years old, composed by a river. They scanned his brain
this past Tuesday, the right side fine, so good at music,
Whenever you sing Whenever you sing Whenever you sing,
the waves of the left all scrambled and choppy. No wonder
he can't function sometimes, make a list, remember to call;
no wonder when December darkens, as it did Tuesday
for two rainy inches, he won't wake or speak at all

Whenever it's dawn *Will never be gone*

It's not complaining
when starling wings start grumbling;
it's murmuration.

Solstice minus nine but just minus three till sunset ticks up
that first minute later and comeback's begun, spring's on the way
through ice storms and snow drifts with summer on its tail.
I am the frostbite and the heat prostration. In my wind chill
is my sun stroke. Half a million minutes in a calendar year,
even the worst, and that's their leading lady, at this latitude,
four fifty-five, December sixteenth, the tourniquet's applied,
we won't bleed to death, this year at least, from equinox-slashed
blue wrists of sky, bow down, bow down in total adoration,
high beta waves completely released in trances of theta
gamboling with gamma, so check your agnosis back at the door.
For Ahab had a little vial . . . whose fleece was white as snow.
No, no, don't horse around. Ahab had a little vial
of soundings in his pocket, for *nostos* to Nantucket,
which must have gone down in the North Pacific with him,
now mixed profoundly with its benighted bottom. Ahab had
a little vial smaller than a junk-shop flacon
half-filled with sand from that extinguished beach
only the eagle keeps eyes on now. The sand looks like pepper
coarse-ground from corns of granite by eons of ocean,
the master spice, and yet does it help, a keepsake like this?
Or is all the flavor now past enhancing, the taste of each day
best left to blandness so palates forget, don't go off riled?
Light may seep back, but some day that sand will get thrown away

by whoever cleans out this cluttered little room. Let it be
him.
He.
Won't be long now, compared to time needed
for grinding up sand. The Hunter has started
making an evening of ending this autumn
above the black ridge line.

Enrique Barrero Rodríguez

Hoy quisiera, por fin, sobre el desbrozo
de sueños de mi vida defraudada
con cántaro de barro hacer parada
a la sombra tranquila de este pozo.

Fuente de vida, manantial de gozo
en mi humano cansancio tu mirada
y ya siempre adelante, en la jornada,
trocada la tristeza en alborozo…

Ay cristal de tus ojos, agua pura
para tanta ansiedad como se escribe
con sílabas de sed sobre mi frente,

incesante cascada de hermosura,
lago de claridad, radiante aljibe
donde beber la vida eternamente.

Today I wanted, finally, beyond the removal
of the dreams of my life gone amiss,
to pour with a pitcher of clay my disapproval
on the tranquil shade of this abyss.

Fountain of life, spring of delight,
cast on my human lethargy your gaze
and always already before, oh that I might
on my journey trade the sadness for praise…

Pure water, O the crystal of your eyes,
slakes all that worry writes
with syllables of thirst upon my face.

Relentless overflow astonishing,
my lake of clarity, resplendent spring
where I shall drink from life always.

--translation by John Poch

John Poch

Ransom Canyon

in memoriam Robert Bruno

I. Lake Ransom Canyon

Two rows of Western Soapberries line the road
to a stop sign before you drop into the canyon.
What leaches from elsewhere, the bright green lawns,
from the maze of predictable brick homes built within
and on the canyon who only adores erosion?
What from the cotton fields, the gins, the sorghum,
prairie dog dross, the power company,
from the feed lot bovine-crush slogging through
their excrement up and off the rim? It turns this water
green-brown-gray as a dying fish, as crumpled money,
a steady cloudiness like the sore eyes
of the very old. After a rain, stand above
the long spillway and watch the smooth sheet suds
at the bottom of the concrete fall and funnel
below a barbed wire fence a cowboy repairs
into the North Fork of the Double Mountain Fork
of the Brazos River.

II. The Chapel

The Curve-billed Thrasher at the chapel perches
among orange berries, wary of cats
and bold coyotes. Hold still and you can hear
the water trickling down the arroyo to the pond
above the other artificial ponds

and ultimately, lake complete with geese.
Here, Comanches traded their white captured
to the Comancheros who, in turn, would turn
their profit. Now, the realtors flip the houses.

III. The Party Island

The flagpole bangs its flagless rope
in the wind. The derelict, rusting swingset
and the empty swimming pool dismal
between two yellowing cottonwoods
say goodbye to summer. On the long dock
lies one Zebco rod and reel, abandoned.
The island clubhouse, full of metal folding chairs
arranged to face the western end, is ugly enough,
aluminum, a roof, and big on echoes.

IV. The Robert Bruno House

More music, really, than sculpture.
—Robert Bruno

Like the dark head of a dead goddess
rising from the orange crumbling rocks
and caliche at the edge of the north cliff, the house hovers as
if to judge
the dam and her lake. Instead she sings stained glass sonatas
in her head.
Rusting steel sheets by the hundreds held by welds of
decades of bending
and a little horsing around are skin and skull of a patient
labor, a library
in the dark core whose several lamps we must imagine. If
you are to wind

on staircases in the wind ushering up from the canyon floor
to this edge,
turning on that steady stair like a vulture to her evening
perch at the rim,
you want this steel to hold like old poetry, the window
to cast its eye over and into
the old spring-fed ravine it misses.

Theron Montgomery

Driving Truman Capote: A Memoir

On a calm, cool April afternoon in 1975, I received an unexpected call from my father on the residence First Floor pay phone in New Men's Dorm at Birmingham-Southern College. My father's voice came over the line, loud and enthused. "Hi," he said, enjoying his surprise. He asked me how I was doing, how school was. "Now, are you listening?" he said. "I've got some news."

Truman Capote, the famous writer of *In Cold Blood*, would be in our hometown of Jacksonville, Alabama, the next day to speak and read and visit on the Jacksonville State University campus, where my father was Vice-President for Academic Affairs. It was a sudden arrangement Capote's agent had negotiated a few days before with the school, primarily at my father's insistence, to follow the author's reading performance at the Von Braun Center, the newly dedicated arts center, in Huntsville. Jacksonville State University had agreed to Capote's price and terms. He and a traveling companion would be driven from Huntsville to the campus by the SGA President early the next morning and they would be given rooms and breakfast at the university's International House. Afterwards, Capote would hold a luncheon reception with faculty at the library, and in the afternoon, he would give a reading performance at the coliseum.

My father and I loved literature, especially southern literature, and my father knew I had aspirations of becoming a writer, too. "You must come and hear him," he said over the phone, matter-of-fact and encouraging. I caught the edge of authority in his voice and the sense of pride in him that he

often portrayed as a school administrator when something exceptional or new was happening on his watch. Jacksonville State University had just trumped every school in the state, getting a famous writer and a celebrity, and one from Alabama, to boot.

My parents and I knew Capote's work. Over the years, we had read *Other Voices, Other Rooms, The Grass Harp* and *In Cold Blood*, and we had seen the special TV movies based off of his stories, such as "A Christmas Memory" and "Among the Paths to Eden." We had seen re-runs of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. And, as many people at that time, we had watched the small man with his large hats and quiet histrionics on *The Dick Cavett Show*.

My father's voice could not contain his eagerness. "Having Truman Capote on campus will be an event," he said. "I'll see that you get to meet him and I'll tell him you want to write."

"Truman Capote?" I echoed over the phone. "Really?"

I felt myself grin and go suddenly shy. I paused and then said all right, I'd be there. "Thanks, Dad."

"Coliseum at two-thirty. And come around the back," Dad said. "Admission is free. Tell someone who you are and they'll show you where your mother and your sister and I will be. We'll see you afterwards at home, okay?"

He paused. "President Stone is going to let us hold dinner for Truman Capote at our house. Oh, and--" Dad added before we hung up, "don't forget to take notes." He said it with a knowing laugh.

I laughed at the insinuation, too, remembering some statement attributed to Truman Capote that he took notes virtually every day, and with a ninety-something percent total recall.

That night, instead of going to the fraternity house, I sat at my dorm room wall desk and rewrote a short story I was

working on, “The Boy and the Horse,” which had been inspired by the John Steinbeck story, “Flight,” and the quote of the mother when she told Pepe, “A boy becomes a man when a man is needed.” My story was about a boy alone with his horse during a jumping workout in a ring while his parents were absent. After some detailed development, a jumping accident, some emotional travail, and the encouragement of a maternal vet who arrived on the scene (and who could not act because the parents were not there), the boy did what had to be done: “He slowly placed the point of the gun’s blue steel barrel on the middle blaze on the horse’s forehead, between the large, calm brown eyes, clamped his own eyes shut and squeezed the trigger.” The next, last, and closing paragraph read: “The blast seemed to be far, far away.”

I stayed up into the night, revising lines so they read better, changing infinitives, struggling over accurate description, and before going to bed, I retyped the entire story on my small, blue, portable Smith-Corona. I was a graduating senior English major, taking the school’s only course in creative writing with a visiting, white-haired and aging gentleman professor from Vanderbilt, whose specialty was Dryden. In his classes, he gave us eloquent lectures about writing from behind a desk while he chain-smoked cigarettes in a suit and then guided the class in reading and critiquing each other’s short story efforts, discussing such concepts as the recognition of “pastoral elegy” or the short story’s “mimetic implications”. Once a week, there was a one-on-one conference with the professor in his office where he would tell each student whether his or her work was too didactic (“preachy”) or whether the work was realistic (believable) enough, being sure to mark off points for punctuation and fragments. He would then cite passages or give examples from writers who were dead or had written at least fifty years ago, and each of us would be sent off to revise again. “The real writer,” the

professor would say with a wink and a slanted, tobacco-stained grin, "always comes back."

The next morning, after classes and lunch in the cafeteria, I went back to my dorm room, packed my typewriter in its case, placed my short story into a folder and packed a change of clothes and a toilet kit. I remembered to put on a brown knit suit with a wide belt and a wide, brown tie with something like silver fox hunting patterns on it, brown socks and a pair of brown and white oxfords to please my mother. Before carrying everything to my cranberry red Camaro in a parking space behind the dorm, I placed a call from the hall phone to my new girlfriend, Darla.

"Oh, yeah? Truman Capote?" she said over the phone from New Women's dorm. "Oh, hey. *Far Out!*" she declared.

I was taken aback by her sudden excitement and the volume in her voice. "Wild," Darla went on. "Truman Capote. Another Alabama writer. I *loved* that rain scene with the cat in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

"So, you're going, huh?" Darla said. "Come around the back of New Women's' and I'll see you off.

I carried my suitcase, typewriter and folder outside and into the black interior of my Camaro, loading everything into the back seat. I got in behind the wheel and drove around the campus circle to an open parking place along the curb behind New Women's dorm. Darla was already there; smiling and waiting for me on the landing above the concrete steps to the glassed West Door: her long, frosted blonde bangs hanging down her shoulders and in something like a midi, blue paisley, drop dress, with a cream string belt and heavy-heeled, medium blue shoes. She gave me a small, girlish wave and did a little hop; her clean, white smile and clear, baby blue eyes the largest things on her face. I grinned up at her, got out of the car and ran up the steps.

"Hey," she whispered, suddenly shy, as I came up. She

held her closed smile on me.

"Hey," I said.

"So…you're going, huh?"

"Yeah. Sorry I can't take you with me."

"Oh…that's okay," she sighed. "We're not there yet," she hinted at the level of our relationship.

I nodded in surprise at her directness.

"Hope you have fun," she drawled. She watched me with a shy grin. "Maybe you can learn how to write, too."

I shrugged and tried a small laugh, feeling the blood rise to my face, suddenly embarrassed. It was as if Darla had clued into my inner thoughts. She smiled and nodded, like she knew something.

The drive from Birmingham was a little over an hour on I-20 to Oxford, north on Highway 21 through Anniston, past Fort McClellan and into Jacksonville. I drove with the driver's window down; my large, brown, knotted tie loosened, smoking an occasional Winston Red, and the car radio blaring rock on FM WERC. I listened to songs by Elton John, Sly and the Family Stone and Joni Mitchell. I was twenty-two years old with sideburns and thick hair that dropped over my ears to my collar, and which I constantly swept out of my eyes. The sun was bright. The air was mild. The sky was blue. Wild white dogwoods were blooming in the flush spring greening of the Appalachian foothills. I listened to songs and thought random thoughts. I thought about Darla and then of my ATO fraternity brothers who would be lounging around the fraternity house TV about now, watching "Andy Griffith" re-runs or driving together to The Tide and Tiger Bar and Grill on Graymont Avenue, across from Legion Field, for beer.

In something like a slow surprise, I would now and then realize where I was going and why, hearing my father's ebullient voice, seeing his smile and expectant face; seeing

Truman Capote in his large, white hat with a dark band on *The Dick Cavett Show*, a quiet, wheedling voice from the tiny man seated in a raised chair, with a fair and plump face, tinted glasses and a prominent nose. I thought about writing. I recalled the black and white TV dramas based on Truman Capote's stories, "A Christmas Memory" and "Among the Paths to Eden," and then I thought of Truman Capote as the small, lonely neighborhood boy, "Dill," in Harper Lee's book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I thought of the character in the movie, too.

Take notes, I heard my father say, as if there was a significant point to all of this—Take notes--like Truman Capote always claimed to take prolific notes, with a prolific memory. I thought about writing. Was that how one became a writer? We're not there yet, Darla had said.

In Jacksonville, I drove around the small, circular square with the Confederate statue of my hometown, listening to Bread on WERC as I went past the filling stations, the stores, the bank, the drug store where the old men of my childhood used to sit on the front steps and tell tales, and onto the main Pelham Road, past the post office, the Dairy Queen, where I hung out as a teenager; past the high school and the Jacksonville State University campus. At the university's International House, I turned West onto Highway 421, driving past dormitories and the funeral home and then to the coliseum, its large, surrounding, black asphalt parking lot crammed with parked vehicles, their chrome and windshields shining in the sunlight.

I parked behind the coliseum, before a cracked curb and the high, green-slatted cyclone fence of the tennis courts. I got out of my car, straightened my tie, straightened my coat and joined a slow progression of people going through the parking lot, up the concrete steps and into the coliseum, through its tinted glass and steel doors and onto the long

concrete and ceramic-tiled balustrade that served as an upper deck with offices to one side and as an upper side deck overlooking the hard rubber basketball court on the other.

Inside was dim, cool and crowded with people. On the deck side, I stopped at the railing, looking down on talking, milling students, local citizens and faculty gathering in sections of folding chairs in rows below—maybe four or five hundred people in all—standing in small groups or as couples on the court floor. Most of the upper court bleacher seats were empty. People stood beside or sat in the lower or floor seats under the ceiling lights, and some were already seated around a raised, wooden platform at mid- court. On the raised platform was a steel microphone on a low stand to the right side of a plush, blue study chair, facing the rows of seats. Beside the chair was a small, glass-topped table with a wrought iron center leg in the form of a musical Treble Cleft. On the glass table top was a clear glass of water and a closed, dark, hardcover book.

I recognized some familiar faces but I did not locate my parents or my sister. The lights began to go off and on. Everyone who was standing began to sit down and I decided to stay where I was, looking on with my hands on the railing as the lights dimmed down and off and the people talking below grew quiet. In a few moments, a spotlight beamed on from the upper court seats above me to my right, piercing the dark with a direct, strong white light onto the blue study chair on the center platform. Without any introduction, Truman Capote, the small man from *The Dick Cavett Show*, came into the light, bareheaded, without a tie, in a white dress shirt, unbuttoned at the collar, and in gray slacks and small, dark dress shoes. He made a slight bow before the chair in the fierce beam of the light, to rising applause from the dark and sporadic flickers of flashbulbs: a small, short, plump man with thinning hair, almost bald; a fair and bland face with clear-framed, gray-tinted glasses, and a long, low,

prominent nose. He turned and plopped himself down into the study chair. In the fierce stream of light, he looked pale and tired; a small, doll-like man slumped into what seemed like an oversized seat. In the fierce light, his hair was white and thin, his small face was pallid and his glasses glinted in a lambent glow. He turned the level microphone toward his mouth and reached for the dark book on the side table, looking to it and opening it as if pretending this was to be a quiet, ponderous moment. He paused and looked up from his book.

"Hello. I'm Truman Capote," he said into the microphone in a soft whine. A loud round of applause rose from the darkness. He went back to the book, pausing between the pages.

"Since I'm back in Ala*bama*," Mr. Capote stressed, in an emphasized slow and high drawl while he turned the pages, "I thought I'd give you an Ala*bama* story." He paused. "I spent my early childhood in Monroeville," he informed everyone. "And that's where this story takes place."

He turned, picked up the shiny glass of water from the side table, took a swallow, set the glass back on the table and studied a page in the book for a long moment before he began to read into the microphone in a quiet and steady voice and with a slow tone, like a soft and sullen child. As I listened to him read and settled into the pacing of the story in a "we" point of view, I recognized "A Christmas Memory," the story of a seven-year old boy child and the sixty-something year old woman "friend" who was also a child; the story of their being together, partners, their making of fruitcakes in November, pushing an old, ratty baby buggy through fields for pecans, bootleg whiskey and a Christmas tree; the last Christmas day when the boy is loved and flying kites with his older "friend" before he is sent off to military school, never to return "home" again.

"Home is where my friend is," Capote read even slower

towards the end, his voice sad, “and there I never go.”

At the end of the story, when the child, now older and on a military school campus, learns of his older friend’s death, but instead of looking down, is searching the sky, Capote’s voice broke and he wiped each of his eyes under his glasses on an index finger before he managed to finish.

“As if I expected to see, rather like hearts,” he read on with a deep sigh, “a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven.”

He went silent in the bright stream of light upon him in the study chair. The audience in the dark gave him a pause and then loud and steady applause. Capote nodded, closed the book, dropped it onto the side table and wiped both eyes under his tinted glasses with the fingers of either hand. He dropped his hands, pushed the glasses back up on his nose and nodded his thanks. The ceiling lights came on and the spotlight went off. As the applause died, the little man slumped in the study chair laid his hands on the armrests, crossed his short legs at their ankles and he gazed off and around at the audience.

“Well,” he whined at the audience through the microphone, “does anyone have a *question*?”

A pause. Capote waited with a thin, closed and bemused smile. A female student stood up, in a pink and white dress, raised her hand and asked a question I couldn’t hear.

“Oh, no, dearie,” Capote said, after a moment. His face relaxed as he considered her question. “Truth is a relative thing,” he announced in his still quiet voice. “In order to tell a story, we have to first know that the story will be believed--or there wouldn’t be one, would there?” He paused, looked to the girl. “I mean, who knows what real truth is?” he added in a plaintive whine. “The only truth we have is in the word.”

The girl nodded her thanks and sat down. Several people rose then throughout the audience with a show of hands.

Capote pointed to a male student in a dark blazer a few rows away from him.

"Mr. Capote… sir," the young man said, loud and eager, "I was wondering, how much revision do you do?"

Capote looked at the ceiling and tugged an ear lobe with one hand. "Oh, I used to revise," he said slowly in a soft whine. "I don't revise anymore," he stated.

There was brief, polite silence, then applause from the audience.

"You see," Capote went on. He looked down at the young man and then upwards again, tugging his ear. "If one writes long and hard enough… and if one *plans* in his head, well…you can eventually learn to avoid a lot of revision."

He paused. There was more scattered applause. Capote searched the audience and pointed to a middle-aged woman with thick glasses, in a long, flowing brown dress, who was standing roughly in the middle of the seats with her hand raised.

"Mr. Capote," the lady said, her voice ingratiating and shrill as she lowered her hand, smiling. "Do please tell us how Nelle is doing," she said. She waited, smiling expectantly. She was referring to Harper Lee, another Alabama writer, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and a longtime friend of Capote's.

"I do not," Capote dead-panned in his soft voice, "care to talk about my friends in public."

He dismissed the woman with a turn of his head and pointed to a student standing below him near the platform in flared jeans and a yellow shirt. The woman remained standing for a few moments and holding something left of her smile before she sat down.

"Mr. Capote," said the male student Capote had pointed to, "I was wondering…what advice you have for anyone wishing to become a writer?"

"Yes, well," Capote drawled and nodded. "You need to

read," he said. "Read any and everything and pay attention to those writers you like." He paused, dropping and crossing his hands in his lap. "Then you need to decide whether you really want to write," he insisted. "After all, writers have to work alone and they have to work hard. I decided long ago," he elaborated, looking away to the audience and expanding with his slow, soft voice, "that college wasn't for me. I wanted to be a writer and I knew where I wanted to go." He paused. "So, I began as a young man to read and study words and write … for hours every day.

"That's not to say you can't or that you shouldn't go to college," he added. "It's just that the big decision comes down to what you want to do," he whined, "and then, well, do it. Right?"

Capote paused, looking away with his tinted lenses. The audience applauded. The young man applauded, too, and sat down.

"Mr. Capote?" another male student called, standing far back in the seats in a red plaid shirt and dark slacks, after getting the author's nod. "I was just wondering. With all that you've read and written," he asked, "who would you say is the greatest writer today?"

"The greatest *living* writer?" Capote drawled. "Oh, my," he paused. "There are so many," his voice trailed. He adjusted his glasses with one hand. "I couldn't say. "William Styron?" he offered. "Malamud? Or, maybe Norman Mailer…" his voice trailed off. He paused. "Well, who do you think?" he turned the question on the student.

"You?" the student said. The audience applauded.

Capote took a long moment, adjusted his glasses with both hands on the frames and let his hands drop.

"That's acceptable," he said quietly.

He sat rock still while the audience applauded.

I watched from the railing, sweeping my hair out of my

eyes and shifting my weight from one foot to the other, fighting the fatigue of standing, while the questioning went on: raised hands to be acknowledged from eager or solemn, and mostly young faces--though an occasional academic with a serious face, a serious question. Each slow, thoughtful answer from Truman Capote, in a calm nonchalance and a soft, whiny voice while he sat with his legs crossed and his short arms and hands resting on the armrests, brought applause. Truman Capote could do no wrong, the small, virtually bald, man-doll with tinted lenses and thinning hair, in an over-sized and plush study chair, enjoyed himself as he fielded questions at his time and will, each one with random and interpolated pauses. The questions were various, some banal.

Someone asked what his favorite color was. Truman Capote paused and grinned with a pencil thin leer. "Does that *matter*?" he whined. "Story gray, sometimes sky blue," he said. A professor asked about discipline and how many words he wrote a day. That brought a long pause, a doff of a hand. "Some days, only one word," Capote finally stated. Then someone asked what the hardest thing about being a writer was. Capote pondered. "I'm not sure," he said, after a moment, tugging on an ear. "Being alone, I imagine…and finding that exact and right word," he said slowly. That brought hesitant, scattered applause.

After about half an hour of such questioning, Truman Capote slid off the front of the chair, stood up and with a slight bow, waved everyone off. "Thank you, thank you," the little man in tinted lenses said in his high, quiet voice, without the microphone beside him, "but I think I'm due somewhere else." He peered up toward the ceiling. His lenses glinted. He gave a small, concave smile.

The audience rose and applauded. He bowed two or three times, turned and went slowly down the steps of the platform, as a few flashbulbs flickered in the audience. A

man in a dark suit appeared to be waiting for him. The audience began to break up, murmuring, and filing out, while others rushed to the front of the
platform to try to meet the famous author. I followed Capote from my perch on the deck railing and watched two dozen or so students and faculty swarm around the little man. He patiently stopped and answered their questions and autographed books or scraps of paper as they were offered to him.

I searched the rest of the crowd and found my parents then, waving to me behind the platform; my father, his dark, thinning hair and big-toothed grin, in a steel gray suit and wide, silver tie with some kind of white pattern on it; my mother smiling in a white, russet-lined suit dress and a gold balled necklace, her short dark hair in a wave perm, her lips ginger-colored; my fourteen year-old sister, a thin, young teen; not waving but close-smiling, in a green and white T-shirt dress, her lighter brown hair in something like a wedge haircut. My parents stopped waving but kept smiling at me. *Home*, my father mouthed, pointing away from the platform. *See you home*. I nodded that I understood. I smiled and waved and turned away.

"Where you going, boy?" someone uttered behind me at the exit doors. I turned and it was Gus Edwards, my father's best friend, my sister's godfather, and the Dean of Men at Jacksonville State University. Short, square-shouldered, in a black-tailored suit, white shirt and black tie, with rapid, squinting dark eyes behind thick, black framed glasses, Gus was a perpetual Citadel graduate with his ever close-cropped, black crew cut. He could be gruff and laconic, but beneath the façade, he was, in truth, amusing and kind.

"Funny fella," Gus said, bemused, with a slight and knowing grin, a rapid blinking of his eyes.

"Yeah," I grinned back. "How are you?"

He nodded. "Humph," Gus said, holding a slight and

mischievous grin. "If he's from here," Gus observed, "I don't know that many families that would take him in."

I laughed. "He's very popular," I said. "He's on TV."

"Um-hmm, popular," Gus echoed. "Our greatest writer?" Gus did his rapid eye squints. "I'd take Pat Conroy, myself."

"He might be the best one from Alabama," I said. "Though I don't think he's any better than William March."

"Um-hmm," Gus said with a nod. He averted his eyes, and then peered over his glasses at me with a wry smile. "And who," he asked, "remembers William March?"

On the street before my parents' pink bricked, colonial style, I was surprised to discover our family's yellow Oldsmobile 88 and our maid's brown Buick Electra with its black vinyl top, parked off the shoulder of the drive, as though to allow visitors entrance. I parked my Camaro at the curb, walked up the drive, past the vehicles to the back door and rang the doorbell. My mother came to the door, smiling in her ginger lipstick, her dark perm, in the same suit dress from the coliseum.

"Oh, Tem-bo," she greeted me. "Tem-bo, you made it!"

She hugged me and led the way inside. "We're so glad you came," she whispered, giving me a knowing wink. Your father is so excited," she smiled

She led the way through the foyer, the hallway and into the cherry paneled family room, where the author himself, Truman Capote, was seated at the far end of the white couch, near the dead, brick fireplace, on the opposite end from my sister, Kam; the same small man with the same tinted lenses, dressed as he had been in the coliseum but with a light gray suit coat on now and cradling a large, white Panama hat with a black band in his lap. His apparent companion sat in the immediate brown club chair, diagonally across from the small wooden coffee table from him, facing my sister. My

father was seated in the further orange club chair across from the coffee table, facing Truman Capote.

"Mr. Capote," my mother declared, leading the way into the family room. She stopped and raised her hand, palm up and toward me, as though I was the presentation. "This is our son," she announced, smiling.

Feeling a rising blush on my cheeks and my sister's lingering grin, I stopped and nodded to Mr. Capote and the other man.

"Hello," I said.

"There he is," Dad declared. He rose from his chair with a broad smile, his dark gray suit coat unbuttoned. Truman Capote and his companion rose after him. Everyone nodded toward me. I tried to force a smile. My sister remained seated, her steeled look and grin on me.

"Tem," my father said, with a slow, dignified emphasis, "this is Truman Capote…and," he turned to the other man, "this is his good friend, and a good writer in his own right, Mr. Jack Dunphy."

My father nodded to Jack Dunphy. Jack Dunphy nodded to my father with a quick, curt smile. He was a trim man in a dark suit. He had a small face with a pointed nose and his blue eyes were bloodshot. His hair was short and white, his temples a sheen of gray. Mr. Capote stood, polite, quiet, dangling his panama hat by the fingers of one hand. One had to look down at him. The gray tinted glasses seemed to cover most of his face. He was about five feet, two inches; short and plump in his small suit, fair skinned, balding and with thin, wispy hair.

I shook Mr. Capote's hand and Mr. Dunphy's hand. I shook my father's hand, went and hugged my sister as she rose from the couch, still grinning at me, and sat back down.

Pearl, our maid, came out from the kitchen, her mahogany face and black eyes behind black-topped and wire-rimmed cat eye lenses; her heavy frame in soft, leather

shoes, a white dress and beige apron; her salt and pepper hair pulled back into a bun. She hugged me quick, hard and shy before the others and I smelled the steam from cooking on her skin.

"Pearl," I said and grinned.

Pearl smiled her white and gold teeth, nodded to me, everyone, turned back into the kitchen. I turned to our guests.

"I enjoyed your reading, sir," I said to Mr. Capote.

"Thank you," he said in a soft voice.

"And how are you, sir?" I said to Mr. Dunphy.

He nodded.

"Please, please. Let's sit down," my father said. "We shall all eat soon."

Mr. Capote sat down in his corner of the couch, holding the hat in his lap. Mr. Dunphy and my father sat down in the same Family Room club chairs. My father motioned for me to sit between Truman Capote and my sister; which I did, remembering to unbutton my coat and to sweep the hair out of my eyes.

What I did not know until much later was that my father was putting up a pleasant and persistent conversation in an attempt to soothe tensions that had been building all day between him and our distinguished guests. Truman Capote and Jack Dunphy had arrived that morning from Huntsville hung over, apparently having not considered that they were now in the Deep Dry South, at a public university, and that not all of their needs would be accommodated. I would learn later from various witnesses that both men were sullen and lethargic throughout the morning and the faculty luncheon, though Capote did make a greater effort to be polite. At the faculty luncheon, Jack Dunphy unknowingly pulled on his suit coat inside out, and his head fell onto his salad plate of cottage cheese. Capote had stifled a giggle and looked

away, while Dunphy tried to dab his face with a napkin and the audience looked on speechless.

From mid morning of that day, Capote and Dunphy began prodding people for vodka, beginning with the SGA President who was their student escort, the cafeteria waiters at the faculty luncheon, the English department chair, resorting to even the cleaning crew, and finally, my father, who was the university administrator in charge of the event. What began as friendly, colluding inquiries with winks, grew to plaintive whines and then outright demands by the afternoon. To each request for a drink, my father had answered, "No."

As I seated myself on the couch between my sister and Mr. Capote, Mr. Capote remained quiet, holding the panama hat in his lap, while my mother went into the kitchen, apparently to assist Pearl with dinner, and then she came back into the family room, walking into the middle of everyone, between the couch and chairs and beside the coffee table, in her soft, polite and servile manner; a smile on her ginger lips.

"Gentlemen," she said in her southern drawl, "You've had a long day." She clasped her hands together at her waist and looked to our guests. "Wouldn't you like a drink before dinner?" She paused and smiled.

My father stared at her and his eyes widened in alarm. But my mother ignored him and continued to smile. She had already spoken. The men were guests in our house and there was nothing Dad could do.

Mr. Capote and Mr. Dunphy looked up at her in disbelief and they nodded like chagrined children.

"We have bourbon," my mother suggested, her voice bright and friendly. "We also have…vodka," she added and held her smile. My father, sister and I all stared at her. I wondered how she had located a bottle of anything in Jacksonville. But that was another thing I didn't know.

"Oh, er…vodka," Mr. Dunphy managed in a weak voice and he blinked his bloodshot eyes.
"Vodka…*please*," Mr. Capote said in a slow, soft whine. He cleared his throat.

My mother kept smiling and she turned to my father. "And what would you like, dear?" Her tone remained bright.

My father looked at her, swallowed, and slowly shook his head no. She turned to me with the same smile. I quickly shook my head no.

"No thank you," I said, in disbelief.

My sister said nothing, shy and staring at my mother with wide and surprised eyes while she nodded, smiled at all of us, turned and went into the kitchen.

"Well…er, well…and another distinctive tale of ours," my father finally broke the silence, apparently returning to a sociable discussion before I had entered the room, " is we have only Virginia bridal wreath growing all over Jacksonville. It seems during the Civil War," dad warmed up to his topic with an engaging smile, "when our local hero, the Gallant Pelham, was killed in action in Virginia, the women up there placed cuttings of bridal wreath on his casket before it was sent back here by train and wagon for burial."

My father paused as Capote and Dunphy nodded and dutifully looked on. "At his funeral in the old Baptist church off the town square, as legend has it," Dad continued, "four grieving, young ladies showed up dressed in black, each one clasping a Bible in her hand signed from him, and each one claiming to be engaged to him as well—that's another story," my father interjected with a laugh "—anyway," he went on, "as reliable, local sources have it, the women of Jacksonville took the cuttings of bridal wreath off the casket before he was laid to rest in our town cemetery…and to this day, descendants of that particular bridal wreath bloom every

spring, all over town, in the hills, our yards, gardens, everywhere.

"So, you don't say?" Mr. Dunphy said. He nodded with a small smile and blinked at my father with his bloodshot eyes. "Tell me," he asked, "what is bridal wreath?" He gave my father a blank look.

"Oh, *Jack*," Truman Capote muttered, giving him an incredulous look. "You know what *bridal* wreath is."

Mr. Dunphy looked at him and shook his head no.

"Small, stick-like stem," my father offered. "Clustered with small, white flowers." He looked to my sister and then to me. For a brief moment, I thought he was going to tell us to go out and find some, but dad let it drop. Mr. Capote and Mr. Dunphy gave him tired smiles.

Mr. Capote turned to me. "Your father says you like to write?" he said, quiet and kind.

"Oh. Yes, sir," I said. I nodded. My sister watched us in silence.

"Oh, *pleeeze*," he rolled his eyes with a quick look upward. "Call me Truman," he said softly. "We are in your house."

"Yes, sir. Er, Truman, sir."

He laughed at that, a soft, slow laugh; his face amused behind the tinted lenses.

"What do you write?" he asked.

My father and Mr. Dunphy began to talk about something. My mother came in from the kitchen, smiling, and carrying two large glass tumblers on a silver tray, each glass filled to the brim with clear liquid and ice cubes. My father stopped talking to Mr. Dunphy. He watched as mother served our guests.

"There you are, Mr. Capote," mother almost sang, her voice ever bright and cheerful. Her ginger lips.

"Oh…*thank* you, dear," Truman whispered with gratitude. He set his hat down on the coffee table and made a

long, dry swallow as he took the drink from the tray, holding it with care. He took a slow, deep sip, closed his eyes and sighed with relief. Mr. Dunphy nodded his thanks as mother turned with the tray to him. He took his glass and took a long, careful swallow. Mother paused with the tray, smiled, turned and left for the kitchen.

"You were saying?" Truman turned to me while my father and Mr. Dunphy resumed talking. "Oh, yes. You want to be a writer?" He took another slow sip of his drink. "Well," he said, "you only *write* as well as you *read*," he stated. "What do you read?"

"The English," I said, sweeping my hair out of my face. My sister said nothing, only watched us.

"The *English*?" Truman looked at me in disbelief. He looked away with a playful, subtle sneer, looked back at me. Why the *English*?" he repined. "I don't know *that* many English writers."

"They've had more great writers," I said.

Truman scoffed, his eyes rolled behind his tinted lenses. He took a fast sip of his drink, clutching the glass tumbler in both of his hands.

"Oh, but…that's not *fair*," he answered in his high, soft voice. They've had more time," he stressed. "Who do you know living now that's so great?" he wanted to know. "I mean," he frowned, "name one."

"Er …Waugh? Golding?" I searched.

"Waugh's all right. Nothing to crow about, really. Golding can be good." Truman nodded, took a deep sip of his drink and stared me in through his lenses.

"The best writers today are American, young man," he said, his voice quiet and sure. "That's where the writing is today, where the great energy is." He paused, pushed his glasses back up his nose with one free finger. "And who do you think is the best American writer?" he wanted to know.

"Faulkner," I stated.

"*Faulkner*?" Truman sputtered as he took a swallow of his drink. He sneered, looked away and up at the ceiling. "Oh, but he's dead," Truman whined, bringing his eyes down on me.

"He was an original," I said, with sophomoric defensiveness. "A genius."

"Oh…."Truman pouted, doffing a hand at me from his glass. "Genius is *cheap*," he stressed with a high pitch. "Besides, he was before television," Truman said. "How a book sells is what gets it noticed. You can't have impact if people don't *notice* it," he insisted.

I looked at him and nodded, but I didn't get it.

Truman smiled a small, smug smile. He looked at me, paused before a sip of his drink and looked to Jack. Jack turned from my father, nodded and laughed. My father and I smiled to be polite. My silent sister said nothing and looked on, either listening or pretending to.

Truman took a sip of his drink and turned back to me with a sigh and a look of patient tolerance. He started to speak, thought
better of it, finished his drink in a gulp and set the glass down on a coaster on the coffee table.

"So, what do you like, my boy? Why do you write?" Truman Capote waited.

"I don't know," I said. I swept my hair out of my eyes. I saw his cheeks were turning red.

Truman smiled and nodded. "That may be a good reason," he said in his soft voice. "But it's not the best one," he added, placing his hands on his knees and sliding them to his lap. He made a slow, closed smile and glanced toward the kitchen.

"Me?" he said. "I wanted to say something great. I wanted be rich and famous." He smiled and chuckled.

"I think Faulkner said he had ghosts chasing him."

Truman frowned. "Will you get off *Faulkner*?" he

whined. He grimaced. "God, Faulkner," he said. He ran a finger up and down his cheek. "The only people who could read him were academics."

Truman let his hand drop and studied me with a closed smile. "All right, Faulkner was great in his *time*," he conceded. He became thoughtful, rubbing his ear between a thumb and forefinger. "But this is a new *time*," Truman Capote said, serious. "The news is becoming our literature. People relate more to what they see than what they live in now."

I looked at him and nodded, but I didn't get it.

Truman looked to Jack and smiled. Jack turned from my father and laughed, blinking his bloodshot eyes. My father and I smiled. My sister looked on, still patient, silent.

"Me? I'm just a fly on the wall," Truman raised his voice and grinned at everyone. "I just enter the storm and report on what I see," he said. "And what I remember," he laughed. "That's all it is, really." He turned to me and smiled a closed smile. Jack laughed, too. They were both feeling better after the drinks.

My father asked Jack a question. Truman watched and sighed as they began to talk.

"You have a girlfriend, Timmy?" Truman turned to me and asked. He gave me a calm, level gaze through his tinted glasses. He smiled a thin, closed smile. He slowly pushed up the bridge of his glasses with his thumb.

"Well, er, yes," I said.

My father and Jack continued to talk to one another and my quiet sister continued to look on like a deaf mute. Truman's smile grew wane. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temple with a forefinger.

"What a waste," he whispered, under his breath.

I smiled and nodded. But I didn't get it.

The doorbell rang. My mother came out of the kitchen and smiled for everyone as she went down the hallway to the

door.

"That may be Dr. Stone," my father said. His tone signaled everyone.

Jack smiled and beckoned to Truman with his empty glass. He set the glass down on another coaster on the coffee table and my mother came into the family room, leading in Dr. Stone, the university president. Dr. Stone's presence immediately dominated the room: a big man with a large, eager face; thick, dark eyebrows and dark, penetrating eyes; fleshy cheeks, a long nose, and a shock of thick, white hair. He wore a dark blue suit with a blue tie. My father and I rose. Truman and Jack rose, too. My sister remained sitting, silent, and watching. Dr. Stone nodded with a broad smile for everyone as my mother introduced him. They had already met during the day. He shook hands with Truman and then Jack. He shook hands with dad and then me.

"Good to have you with us in Jacksonville!" he declared for our guests.

He nodded to my sister and me. "Hey, kids! Kam," he nodded. "Tem."

"Dr Stone," we said in unison and smiled. We had known him all of our lives.

Everyone except my sister remained standing while my father brought a study chair from the living room for Dr. Stone.

He placed it to the outside of Jack Dunphy's chair. Dr. Stone smiled, calmly moved the chair to the near end of the coffee table as we men sat down and my mother smiled and turned towards the kitchen. Dr. Stone took his seat with a broad grin on everyone and unbuttoned his suit coat. He leaned forward from the edge of his seat, resting his elbows on his knees, taking everyone in, and paused as though to include everyone in his confidence.

"We had a good talk this morning, gentlemen," he nodded to Jack and Truman, rubbing his large hands together. "I

enjoyed talking to you," he said. "And we had a good read this afternoon."

Jack nodded with his bloodshot eyes. He suddenly looked tired.

"Why, thank you," Truman said, his tone meek and quiet from his corner of the couch. He averted his look from Dr. Stone's steady, scanning gaze, picked up the white Panama hat from the coffee table and clutched it in his lap with both hands.

"Thank you," Truman said. It came like a slow sigh.

"Oh, I thought the reading and the questioning went well," my father offered.

"What we wanted to do--" Dr. Stone stated with slow solemnity, interrupting my father, leaning even more toward everyone, looking to be sure that everyone was looking at him, and rubbing his hands together, as though he was at a fireplace—"we wanted to bring this great mind," he paused, parting his large hands and holding them up as if to beseech us—"*home*," Dr. Stone looked at Truman, relishing the word.

"Bring him back home," he repeated, like a biblical chant.

Truman and Jack sat staring, unmoved. Dr. Stone paused and waited, letting his hands drop, his eyes surveying our guests. My father and my sister and I nodded.

"*You* are Alabama's greatest writer," Dr. Stone said with a slow and profound nod to Truman. "And we are the ones who brought you *home*."

Truman managed a pencil thin smile under his tinted glasses. "Thank you," he whispered. He nodded. Jack Dunphy looked at Truman. He and Truman seemed to have grown quiet and small in Dr. Stone's presence.

There was a moment of silence.

"Well," Truman finally said, clearing his throat from his corner of the couch, in his high, soft voice. "Thank you … for bringing me…*home.*"

My father and Dr. Stone smiled and nodded. Jack Dunphy looked to Dr. Stone, then to Truman. My mother came smiling into the room from the kitchen.

"Dinner is served!" she announced, almost singing. "Mr. Capote?" mother asked, her voice bright, kind, "Would you do us the honor of leading us to table?"

"Oh…oh, yes," Truman said slowly. He nodded. "Thank you, dear."

He rose from the couch and set his Panama hat down on the coffee table. The little man stood as everyone else rose, looking down at him and waiting for him to lead the way.

Three decades will tinge a cluster of loose legal pages from white to Indian yellow, held together on a rusted paperclip and kept in a fake leather, cardboard briefcase, after being stored under various beds, in desks, on bookshelves, in closets; and eventually, winding up forgotten in the attic of the very house in which the notes originated.

I discover those notes that I took for two nights in April of 1975, under a string-corded stack of *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's* and *Atlantic Monthly* magazines, beside a broken Hercules tricycle, a toy Daisy musket and a wooden baby rocker in my parents' dusty, heat-desiccated attic, while searching for a boyhood Blue and Gray Battle Set to show my young sons on a Thanksgiving Day. Bemused at the discovery and remembering, I slowly pull out the collapsed briefcase and unzip it, as one who wonders if time might still be preserved in a tomb. Opening it and lifting the pages out, I am struck at how juvenile and abstract the writing is, compared to my memory of it; how the pages and paperclip have aged; how the sloppy and slanted cursive in blue Scripto fountain ink has faded into thin purple, and how, except for some tedious recollection of dialogue, the language does not revive all of the expected images.

Beneath the clumped, brittle pages of notes that my

father urged me to take long ago, so that I could one day write a story, is my original and typed short story, "The Boy and the Horse," which Truman Capote read and afterwards said to me, "That's very good." The pages are high in cotton fiber. They are still white and the keyed impressions from another era, Smith-Corona typewriter are still clear.

Only, the story is not good. Reading it again, in my now elderly parents' dim and silent attic, a middle-aged man with glasses and thinning hair, kneeling under a lone, dangling light bulb, I see that the writing is naïve and indulgent; the development is long and slow. Too much passive voice. Too many 'ly' modifiers. Twenty-two pages should have been cut down to twelve and one can see the ending, where the boy will shoot the horse, coming from a mile away. The dialogue is overdone and melodramatic.

Kneeling in an attic, decades later, looking at a novice's attempt at writing, I wonder again, why did Truman Capote lie? I recall the sincerity of his tone and face; how he lifted his tinted glasses and tears ran down his cheeks. I see Frederick Barthleme, later, in the early '80s, in graduate workshop: his large face and Roman nose, his balding head and reddish-brown beard. He makes a bitter, exasperated sneer when I tell him about Truman Capote and the story I have submitted for class.

"Truman Capote?" he makes a pained grimace. "Oh, give me a break!"

And I see Jane Anne Phillips, too, in an early 80s workshop, nodding patiently while I tell her the same—her impervious calm face and eyes and her long, honey-blonde hair. Then she tells me flat-out the story is bad. "The fact that one can write sentences … entertain," she says, "especially to bring attention to oneself, doesn't make one a good *teacher*."

And I see my friend, Anthony Grooms, in Atlanta, later in the mid 90s: his close-cropped, kinky hair, full cheeks and

his dark, attentive eyes. He nods and considers the point. He shrugs. "Sentimental people often disguise themselves—like in their writing," he says.

I look over the faded, inked words of the notes, words that cannot recall or evoke all the mind's pictures of the time; but I, unlike the writing, know more now than I did then. "I felt detached," my sister told me years later. "I was young and present but not informed. I didn't understand what the big deal was—until later." And my father and mother have insisted that Mrs. Stone was also there, though my sister and I have no memory of it, and Mrs. Stone is not in my notes. If she was there, I am certain she did not join the immediate group around the coffee table. I now know that everything on the platform at the coliseum, including the lighting and the schedule throughout the day, was at Truman Capote's specific instructions, that Jack Dunphy was more than just a traveling companion; that my mother, in typical Southern fashion, dashed to a neighbor's house for the bottle of vodka, because it was what a guest wanted; and other than Dr. Stone and some late arriving English teachers and local artistic types, I now realize few of the invited people came for dinner in our combined dining and living rooms that evening.

There were more vacant chairs and tables than not as we in the queue followed Truman Capote and Jack Dunphy into the dining room, served ourselves at the white cloth-covered dining table with a "Spring" flower arrangement in a glass vase ("Is that bridal wreath?" Jack Dunphy wanted to know) and seated ourselves around two of the center folding tables covered in white table cloths, except in Truman's Capote's case. He chose to sit apart from us in a living room arm-chair by the bay window.

I see now how set-off and odd Truman Capote was, how alone he was in our small, southern setting. It had to do with

his being peculiar and eccentric: his being an outsider; his small, pug-like physique and high voice, his being a literary figure and a converted New Yorker; but, ultimately, it had to do with the unspoken knowledge that he was homosexual. In the 70s, homosexuality was not something that was assumed or discussed in the open, certainly not in a small and polite southern town. I learned later that Dr. Stone and the school administration were warned beforehand by their public relations staff that the visiting author named Truman Capote was "queer as a three dollar bill". It made people at the school uneasy and nervous, and while Dr. Stone respected my father's wishes that Truman Capote come as a literary figure, he was also a long-time state politician. I now see why the dinner was held at my parents' house, why Dr. Stone left early, few people showed, and no photographs were taken.

But if Truman Capote was aware of any of this, he didn't let on. As everyone else ate seated or standing in my parents' living room with their china plates, silverware and cloth napkins and crystal glasses of iced, sweet tea, he sat apart in the armchair and ate from his lap, strangely meek and quiet, his cheeks red from vodka, responding to comments and questions in a soft and whining voice while Jack looked on him, now and then, with his bloodshot eyes from wherever he was standing in the room.

My father's brave voice continued to include everyone. Dad nodded and smiled. "Truman," he asked, "didn't you say an excerpt of your next book is coming out in Esquire?" "Doctor Stone," my father informed him, "did you know the Dosters of Anniston are related to Truman?" "Jack?" my father turned. "What's been showing on Broadway?"

Not until Dr. Stone and the few late-comers rose and excused themselves, thanking Truman Capote and saying they had to leave, for whatever reasons--each one shaking

the author's hand while Truman remained seated and my father led them out—not until then, did Truman begin to become loud and merry again, grinning and cracking a joke about his "Daddy" now leaving them, calling my mother and Pearl to the kitchen doorway and leading us, Jack, my father, my sister and me, in high praise of the roast beef, the twice-baked potatoes, and what Truman and Jack insisted as being "fresh" Sand Mountain tomatoes.

Later, after Pearl said goodbye and left, the rest of us retired to the family room, where Truman and Jack took the two club chairs across from the coffee table and my mother poured Truman and Jack each another full glass of vodka with a smile. My family and I huddled together on the couch and watched and listened as Truman and Jack began to talk and laugh, their faces growing redder. Dad tried to join the conversation. He asked Truman about Monroeville, his scattered kin and his childhood in Alabama. "Can you tell us…?" he said. "Can you tell us…?"

But Truman Capote wouldn't go there. He talked about writers and actors he knew and his next great, and upcoming book, *Answered Prayers* that he had been working on for years. With Jack's ever-patient, bloodshot looks, short laughs and servile manner pushing Truman on, Truman doffed his glass, took deep breaths, rolled his eyes and exclaimed in his whiny voice as he told stories about Andy Warhol, Diana Ross and Neil Simon, looking up, now and then, with what seemed to be a posed look through his tinted lenses at the ceiling before he would speak again.

My family and I sat smiling, eyes glued on Truman Capote. We laughed after he and Jack did. In the middle of a story about Gloria Vanderbilt losing a shoe at a party, Truman abruptly stopped and said, "Anyone who is someone in New York is going to be in my next book," he boasted. "Whether they know it or not; whether they like it or not." Truman giggled with a pencil-thin grin. Jack laughed and

winked at us for tolerance. My family and I smiled. We didn't know anything about anyone in New York.

Truman abruptly paused in a rambling story about running into Peter Sellers holding a box of Kleenex on Fifth Avenue the other week. "Could we *possibly* catch a plane in Birmingham in the morning?" he asked. "I *need* to get out of here.

"We have to fly down to the Keys to recuperate," Truman said with sly smile, a laugh. Jack looked at us and laughed, too.

"I'm returning to Birmingham in the morning," I offered, sweeping my hair out of my eyes.

"Oh, wonderful," Truman said. "If you don't mind?" he whined. He gave me a thin smile. "If you drive, I'll talk about writing," he told me with a quiet, smug tone and toasted me with his glass.

"Oh, no problem," I said, feeling a rising exhilaration at being the one to drive him to the airport. Truman nodded his thanks, then asked if we could leave early, say by seven in the morning? I said no problem to that, too. I nodded and smiled. Jack nodded and my mother and father smiled. Then my father said it was time for him to take them back to the university's International House and check them in for the night.

"Oh, of course," Truman said.

Truman and Jack placed their empty glasses on the coasters of the coffee table and everyone got up. Truman turned quiet, politely thanked my father and my mother for having him and shook their hands. He shook my sister's hand and he reached up and drummed his fingers along my shoulder. "And thank you for becoming our chauffer," Truman quipped with a thin smile.

He picked up his Panama hat on the coffee table. He put it on his head, took the proffered pen from my mother's hand and autographed her First Edition of *In Cold Blood* before he

and Jack turned to leave. "Thank you again," he said.

"Yes. Yes, thank you," Jack said, standing with him.

"The pleasure was ours," my mother emphasized. She smiled and clutched her closed copy of *In Cold Blood* to her waist.

"Thank you for coming to Jacksonville," my father said.

"Maybe next year?" Truman quipped. He and Jack laughed.

"Goodbye!" Truman sang. "Thank you."

My father smiled and fished the car keys out of his pant pocket and led them down the hall, the foyer, and outside to the family car.

"There he goes," my mother sighed when they were gone. "The greatest writer to ever enter this house."

"Well, gee. Take notes," my thin sister mimicked my father and looked at me. She gave me a quick, squeaky smile and left for her room.

I walked outside to the street in the cool, April night, under the clear stars, after my father had come home and everyone had gone to bed. I got my suitcase, my typewriter and my short story from the back seat of my Camaro and carried them into the kitchen, where I set everything down, turned on the lights, took off my coat and loosened my tie. I made a cup of coffee and rolled up my sleeves, sat down at the kitchen table and began to proof "The Boy and the Horse," with a pencil, retyping select pages on my small, blue, portable Smith-Corona. Now and then, I swept my hair out of my eyes.

When I re-typed the last page and paper-clipped my story together, it was late but I was too excited to sleep. In the kitchen drawers, I found a white legal pad and a Scripto fountain pen and I sat down at the kitchen table again with my father's voice from the telephone echoing in my mind as I began to take notes, intending and thinking in that moment,

that I was recording something factual and real and important, and believing I had total and fresh recall from the immediacy of the day and that I always would. I made an outline of everything I could remember; sure I would own the memory of specific details later: the school, Darla, the drive, Truman Capote's reading at the coliseum, my meeting Truman and Jack and Dr. Stone at my parents' house; the places, the conversations, the faces, the tones—I thought I had it down.

When I was through, gray light lined the silhouettes of the foothills outside the kitchen windows and the kitchen lights were the only lights on in the house. I had seventeen single-spaced,
handwritten notes in long legal pages. I paper-clipped the pages together, got up from the kitchen table and walked around the empty kitchen and dark family room, still seeing sentences and scenes in my mind, still too excited and too full of anticipation to sleep.

But fall asleep I did, if only for some minutes. I awoke, fully clothed on the family room couch, with my father, in his morning face and mussed hair standing over me in his deep red, paisley bathrobe, shaking my shoulder.

"Get up, writer," he said, mock-serious. "You have a mission." He grinned and I grinned back.

My mother, in a white hairnet, white bathrobe, and her makeup stripped off, made me sit down and eat poached eggs and toast in the kitchen, before I showered, shaved and dressed in a clean green shirt and checkered slacks I had brought along, wearing the same belt, socks and shoes. Still in their bathrobes, my sister sleeping, my parents saw me out the back door into a foggy morning with the coo-ing of mourning doves and the clatter of squirrels in the spring green of the trees. I carried my suitcase with my suit and notes in it, my typewriter under the same arm, and clutching my paper-clipped short story in the other. I turned and

waved and grinned at my parents standing in the doorway with my story in my hand, like a boy leaving for something like choir practice, believing he could always come home.

I drove down the main road to the university's International House and parked in the front lot before the magnolia trees and the white, Doric columns of the two storey, bricked building. I got out of my Camaro and went inside through the front double doors and into the empty lobby, not knowing exactly where Mr. Capote and Mr. Dunphy were, but assuming they were in one of the Guest Suites upstairs, to the left of the long, curving stairwell. At the first door, as I mounted the stairs and swept the hair out of my eyes, I recognized voices rising from inside the room, loud and boisterous, now and then squealing with laughter.

"*Gawd*," I heard Truman play-mimick a Southern drawl, "we brought you home to Alabama." Laughter. "Call the sheriff! Call the sheriff!" Truman howled. More laughter.

I heard someone gasp for breath. "Our most famous writer," Jack said.

"*Gawd*," Truman answered.

"Our most famous," Jack insisted.

I knocked on the door. The voices hushed. There was a long pause.

"Who is it?" Truman said.

"Good morning," I said. "It's me, Tem. Are you ready for Birmingham?"

"Oh, yes…Tem! We'll be right with you," Truman said.

The door opened and Truman came out, looking up at me and smiling in his tinted glasses. He was in a shinier gray suit than yesterday's, dark brown oxfords and a yellow tie. He wore the same white Panama hat with the black band.

"Good morning," Truman sang out. "Tem is here." He pulled a black Pullman case on wheels by its handle behind him. Jack followed, in black shoes, a black suit and tie, and

a stuffed brown garment bag. He smiled, too, his blue eyes clear now.

"Good morning," he said, loud and too cheerful.

"Good morning," I said.

They followed me to the stairway. Truman seemed to have trouble pulling his Pullman case. I offered to take it and he nodded. I picked it up by the carrying handle and we went down the stairs and out of the International House to my Camaro in the parking lot. Outside was quiet before the magnolias. There was little traffic on the main road and the morning fog was beginning to lift above the surrounding foothills. I loaded Truman's case and Jack's garment bag into the trunk with my suitcase and typewriter case. I opened the passenger door.

"You get in the back," Truman said to Jack. "I'll sit up with Tem."

I pressed the seat lever, pushed the back of the bucket seat down and pushed the bucket seat forward so Jack could climb in. I stepped back and Jack complied, settled into the small seating space and stretched his legs across the adjoining back seat floorboard as well as he could. I swept the hair out of my eyes, pushed the bucket seat back into its normal position and lifted the back of the seat up for Truman to get in. But Truman hesitated.

"Too far back," Truman said, his voice soft and matter-of-fact. "I'm just a little fella." He looked at me and sighed.

"Oh, sorry," I said. I pressed the passenger seat lever and pushed the seat as far forward as it would go toward the dash. I stepped back and Truman got in. His short legs, small feet and hat had plenty of room.

"Thank you," Truman smiled.

"You're welcome," I said.

I shut the passenger door, went around the back of the car to the driver's side and got in behind the wheel and shut my door. While Jack and Truman fumbled with their seatbelts, I

paused a moment and thought of defending those Truman and Jack had been making fun of in the suite.

But I was too timid. I put on my seatbelt, started the car and drove away from the International House parking lot, going down the main, Pelham Road, to the town square, around the median with the Confederate statue, and then out of Jacksonville, South, onto Highway 21, toward Fort McClellan. Jack was quiet. Truman gazed out of his passenger window in silence. I searched for something say.

"Have you had breakfast?" I asked.

"Oh," Truman drawled, not turning from the window, "we don't do breakfast."

"Tell me," Jack said, in a curious tone from the back. "Why does every damn southern town have a Confederate statue in it? Don't they know the war is over?"

Truman and I laughed. "I'm not sure," I said, eyeing him in the rearview. "Because we are all defiant, I guess."

Truman turned to me with a thin grin under the Panama hat and tinted lenses. "Are you defiant?"

"I don't think so."

"Umph," Jack said. "If you're so defiant down here, then why is the fort named Fort McClellan? Wasn't he Union?"

"Yes, but the South beat him every time," I said.

Truman laughed.

"I can tell you want to write," Truman said in his high baby voice. He took me in with the tinted lenses and his thin grin. "I can tell from your voice," he said. "You love story, don't you?"

"Oh, yes sir. I love story."

"Sure you do," Truman insisted. He looked ahead at the road. "Why do you think *I* ever wrote anything?

"I don't know, sir."

"You can stop calling me, sir," Truman said. "We think we want everyone to wake up and take notice of us," he con-

tinued. "We think we have something to say. But even that's not it," he said with a sigh, turning and looking out his passenger side window. "It's the voice—always a voice we hear—telling a story," he said.

"I wouldn't know, sir," I said.

"Oh, *sure* you do," Truman whined, turning to me. "Why do you want to *write*?"

"I—well, it moves me," I said, glancing at him and keeping my attention on the road.

"Well," Truman nodded. He looked off toward the road, too, nodding. "Yes," he said. "I suppose that's not bad. It moves you," he echoed.

Jack said nothing. I glanced at him in my rearview. He was stretched out in an arched angle across the two small back seats of the Camaro, his chin propped up on his palm, his elbow on the side armrest; his eyes staring in our direction.

Truman chuckled, rubbed his temple with a finger. "I remember at LaGuardia once," he said out of nowhere, "a man came up to me and for fifteen minutes thanked me for my books
and called me the greatest mover of American literature, so on and so on." Truman paused. "Problem was," he said, smiling at the road, "he thought I was William Stryon."

Truman laughed, then Jack did. I smiled and paid attention to the driving. We came up the rise in the highway to the scrub pines behind the high cyclone fence of Fort McClellan on our left, the Galloway Gate entrance with its bricked and glassed MP station. Across the street was a cinderblock warehouse, the yellow-bricked building with dark windows of Bob's Barbeque and its high yellow letters on a large, sky blue sign in the side parking lot. Beyond that were white frame houses and a filling station before a right turnoff to Cave Road.

I reached under my seat, pulled out my paper-clipped

manuscript and held it up.

"Mr. Capote, sir," I said, not taking my eyes off the road and keeping the other hand on the wheel, "I was wondering if you would look at something for me?"

"Oh," Truman said, his voice slow and soft. I glimpsed a nod from him. He took the manuscript from my hand.

"Of course," Truman said.

I let my freed hand drop to the wheel and kept my eyes glued to the road, expecting at any moment a rebuke or sarcastic derision from either Truman or Jack, as I had heard from the suite. But we rode in silence all the way into Anniston and through the stoplights, past the businesses on either side, and along the old trees and monuments of the center meridian. When I glanced at Truman, he was reading my story slowly, sighing now and then as he turned a page in his lap. I forced my eyes to stay on the road.

We went over the hill, past the car dealerships and the commercial businesses, and into the city of Oxford, past the mall, the high school stadium and the nursing home. As I signaled and turned right onto the turnoff to I-20 West toward Birmingham, there was a sound like a loud gasp. I looked and Truman had dropped my loose manuscript pages in his lap, brought his hands to his face and begun to cry.

"Why are you crying?" Jack said, alarmed from the back.

"The boy pulled the trigger," Truman said. He sniffed, pulled off his tinted glasses. Tears ran down his cheeks. Without the glasses, Truman's eyes looked small and feeble.

"He what?" Jack said.

But Truman didn't answer him. He looked at me.

"That's…that's *very* good," Truman said to me in a whisper.

I nodded, swept my hair out of my eyes and tried to keep my eyes on the interstate as we picked up speed. Truman wiped away tears with his fingers. He sniffed, slowly set his

glasses back on, turned and looked out the passenger side window.

And that's where something of the memoir ends and another story begins. There are no more notes. I either thought there was nothing more to write, or I meant to write more that night back in my dorm room and I didn't, or I wrote more and I lost it. My memory is that Truman Capote, after a few minutes, turned back from the window, gathered up the loose manuscript in his lap, slid the paperclip back on it, turned with it toward the back seat and asked Jack in a quiet whine if he would like to read it.

"*Jack*? You want to *read* it?"

A moment of silence ensued.

"Er, no," Jack deadpanned.

"Oh, that's…that's a terrible thing to say," Truman said. He sighed and turned back into seat and frowned. Truman handed me the manuscript with a shrug and turned to gaze out his passenger window at the passing countryside along the interstate, in what seemed like a self-absorbed silence for much of the remaining forty-five minute drive to Birmingham Airport.

Jack's refusal to read my story didn't affront me in the least. In my sudden, rising and exuberant emotion, I slid the paper-clipped manuscript under my bucket seat, and while Jack closed his eyes and stretched out in the back and Truman held his silent vigil at the window, I managed to drive to Birmingham in something that now seems like a blur of giddy exhilaration, remembering I had to signal before changing lanes, gripping the wheel so hard that my palms hurt, and catching glimpses of a face like mine grinning back at me in the rearview mirror while I managed to watch the road, afraid to look at Truman or Jack, for fear they would say something to take away the incredulous belief that I had arrived as a writer—after all, I had Truman

Capote's judgment, he *liked* it—not knowing then, and for some time to come, what a naïve and ignorant young man I was; and that what was coming was years of rejection slips and manuscripts stacked in dusty, cardboard boxes, and a long time and a long way--decades--before I could realize, after college, after working as a newspaper reporter, and after reading and writing and being crucified for years in graduate school workshops; pounding away at typewriters and eventually computers, to finally reach a place as one who sits down alone at a table with paper and a pen and struggles in the quiet with oneself for hours, days and years.

Every writer must learn to take his or her own journey to what, as John Keats tells us, becomes a routine and form of constant prayer toward an end one never really gets to—and a long time and a long way for me to finally realize, now decades later, that Truman Capote did not lie.

As I remember it now, over thirty years later, he didn't say the *story* was good. The story is poor. The writer is overly indulgent, superfluous and embarrassingly juvenile--there is no question about that. But what Truman said was, "The boy pulled the trigger." "That's *very* good," Truman said.

I think I now know what Truman meant. Every writer wants to be in the place to pull the trigger. That's not to be taken as some Freudian or a sexual pun. What I mean is that all writers try to push the language to where the writer and the reader can recognize what it is to be on the brink of fate: between living and dying, between loving and hating, between belonging and loneliness; between what is known and unknown; between consciousness and nothing. Whether it's a man standing on a railroad bridge with his hands tied behind his back and a noose around his neck, looking down into the swift water below in Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," or the moment Helen's eyes seized upon the knife in her father's hand before he

slammed it into her chest in Joyce Carol Oates' "By the River," or the micro-second Anders is shot in the head by a bank robber for laughing out loud in Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain," or if it's Perry Smith thrusting the shotgun into each of the Clutters' faces before blasting them away in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*--the list and the ways go on and on and on.

At the end of "The Boy and the Horse," after twenty-two pages of trial and tribulation, the boy did what had to be done: "He slowly placed the point of the gun's blue steel barrel on the middle blaze of the horse's forehead, between the large, calm and brown eyes, clamped his own eyes shut and squeezed the trigger." The next and closing paragraph reads: "The blast seemed to be far, far away."

And that was all that was shared between a young, naïve writer and an aging, veteran one when I handed over a short story at a moment in North Alabama, on Highway 21, between Galloway Gate at Fort McClellan and the turnoff to Cave Road.

Baltasar de Alcázar

About Rhymes

translated by Robert Schechter

I'd like to tell my tale of woe,
oh Juana, but my curse is,
what I mean to say, I fear,
my verse sometimes reverses.
For if I try to say what seems
important, half the time
I end up saying something else
because I'm forced to rhyme.
Example: I would like to write
a verse to make it plain
Inez is *good* and *lovely*, but
the rhyme then adds *insane*.
And so I end up calling her
insane because it went
with *plain* to make a rhyme although
that isn't what I meant.
And if I praise the subtle wit
with which she's known to speak,
before I turn around, my rhyme
proclaims her nose a *beak*.
And thus in substance I allege
her nose, that's so sublime,
is hooked, although I have no cause
except the cause of rhyme.
So rhyme is an impediment,
a deadly burden that'll
make me stretch my tale of woe

with lots of pointless prattle.
And you won't understand the cause,
you'll just know something's wrong;
it's rhyme, and rhyme alone, you see,
that makes my tale too long.
And as I write, the facts get lost.
Verse lies, I now confess it.
A proper tale of woe in rhyme
needs lying to express it:
I hope my lies don't go too far;
you may forgive the crime,
since when I lie, as I have said,
the culprit is the rhyme.
I'm lying to you now, you know,
because the rhymes ordain
I tell you more than just the truth
to tell my tale of pain.
Powerless, although I try
to fix it, come what may,
with any luck you'll read my words
and strip the lies away.
Nonetheless, before too long
my verse will lose its wit,
since reading it too carefully
can blunt the edge of it.
And you'll dislike my rotten rhymes
and say you do not need them,
and I would have to twist your arm
to make you sit and read them.
But Juana, if I tell my tale
in prose, I'm far too wordy,
and you're so proper and refined,
my odd words might sound dirty.
You see, the fact that I'm advanced
in years means often I

write prose in ancient words I learned
in days and times gone by.
Words like *eftsoons, whoreson, lief,*
cocklebread, piscarius,
fuxol, cockloft, cockmate, cronge,
peever, vaginarius.
Diffibulate or *galantine,*
quister, drenge, rotarious,
brightsmith, brownsmith, burgonmaster,
currydow, pannarius.
Hostler, mayhap, emerods,
swoopstake, usward, thole,
hawker, maugre, hatcheler,
fletcher, rantipole.
And if I make you read such prose,
I might as well instead
bind the horrid pages up
and bonk you on the head.
Experience advises me,
if you read my immortal
tale of woe in prose you'd smirk,
guffaw, harrumph and chortle.
And so, if I am not deceived,
it would appear the case
that I should give up on my tale
and try to save some face.
These difficulties I describe,
you'll see, if you take stock,
would fill my verse with packs of lies,
my prose with poppycock.
I like to think I'm sensible
and honest, as a rule,
and so I'd hate for folks to say
I lie or I'm a fool.
I have decided, therefore,

that my story must be scrapped.
I would not wish in verse or prose
to prove such charges apt.

Rupert Fike

Western Lit in Poultry Science

--1966

After French we had fifteen minutes to leave
the columned quad, climb Ag Hill and find
PoulSci, its smoked-glass doors our portal
to a fetid planet, its atmosphere
the face-slap you never got used to -
chickens in the basement being chickens.
Our professor offered no jokes, welcomes.
Yes, an angry young man, we thought. Finally.
Perhaps he even read *The Village Voice*.

Easy to now see he was a grad assistant
pissed at this departmental exile.
Why me? he must have thought. Why did *I*
get sent to the barnyard, far from Park Hall
where the tenured read their ancient lectures
in the eternal air of burnt coffee,
where round-bottomed girls leaned to copiers
in the halls whose walls bespoke verse.

He sighed at our orange plastic chairs and
the green blackboard with its smudged equations.
He said it'd be tough to read Homer here,
even though Greece had maybe smelled like this.
And in that first class he used *in medias res*,
he skipped ahead to get our attention,
to Helen's sigh, "Shameless whore that I am."
We liked hearing that word in a classroom.
This was college, where you didn't giggle.
The thick air coated our throats all quarter,

forced us to spit it out after class,
a smell that didn't bother the *PoulSci* majors
in their white t-shirts and unpressed Levis
who would soon be rich from using hormones,
genes, drugs to grow strips, fingers, McNuggets,
vanilla protein the coming world would crave.
We brushed elbows with them in the hallway
on our way to read lines from the old world
with our still grumpy teacher. We invented
back-stories for him – a lost love, a jilt.
But mostly we worried how he'd grade.
There was a war, and we could be drafted.

Honky-Tonk Milk

Run get your father. His dinner's going cold.
I am maybe eight, dispatched to "the joint"
up at the corner, a job I know well,
one of his buzzed buddies, as usual, hoisting
me to a stool, the shiny red seat where
I can see the barman's long stained apron.
A drink for me is proposed, seconded,
milk produced from somewhere, quite suspect,
already warming in its just-washed mug.
The milk sits becalmed, contaminated
by the glass whose life's work is to hold beer,
and there is so much of it, topped off
by the barman who surely has no kids.
The talking goes on. I stare at the milk,
now mine, an unwanted social fate.
His friends keep the strong-breath questions coming --
do I have girlfriends and how many?
Any answer I give is well received.
The pin-ball machine makes modern noises
over in the corner, begging for quarters.
I want to play but too shy to ask.
My mother is waiting. The milk is waiting.
My father is talking to somebody else,
and now my own food is going cold
in the quiet light of home at the table
where I am fed, where I want to be.
I put my lips to the glass for one sip.
It's awful. I manage a Mmmmmm. They cheer.

Robert B. Shaw

The Soul of Wit

Years ago, when there was more room on my shelves, I made a small collection of offbeat poetry anthologies. One of these was a book called *Eight Lines and Under: An Anthology of Short, Short Poems*, edited by William Cole (Macmillan, 1968). Although there is a certain amount of Leonard Cohen to navigate around, the contents of the book are readable for the most part and agreeably wide-ranging in mood and manner. The inclusion of examples by the neglected British poets Andrew Young and Frances Cornford is commendable. I retrieved this volume recently when I began planning this piece, and I found it a help in formulating thoughts about extremely short poems and their extremely equivocal place in literature. When I say extremely short, I mean less than eight lines; I think Cole made things easy for himself by allowing that many. (Making a rough survey, I counted at least ninety-three eight-line poems out of his more than two hundred selections—a generous proportion.) For a writer of rhymed verse, two quatrains, with all their opportunities for symmetry or contrast, do not seem much of a hurdle. And if you can write in eight lines something like Blake's "The Sick Rose" or Yeats's "After Long Silence," more power to you. But what of work within even tighter margins?

The length of any poem is difficult to discuss without reference to its content. One says that a poem is too long (or less often, too short) "for what it is saying." This obvious point did not prevent Edgar Allan Poe from advancing his notorious dictum (in the posthumously published essay "The

Poetic Principle") that "a long poem does not exist." He argued from his assumption that "a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul," and pointing out that such a rarefied state of imaginative response is bound to be transient: "After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags—fails—a revulsion ensues—and then the poem is, in effect , and in fact, no longer such." This is no doubt an accurate enough description of how many readers have felt upon slogging into quite a number of the longer poems of Poe's time and our own. Poets, however, have remained unpersuaded. Poe's proposition did not deter Pound, or Zukofsky, or Olson from venturing beyond the half-hour limit, though it has provided a handy cudgel for critics disfavoring loose baggy monsters in verse.

Although his dismissal of the long poem has been frequently quoted, Poe's comments later in the essay on poetic brevity are much less familiar and, from a logical standpoint, may seem surprising:

> On the other hand, it is clear that a poem may be improperly brief. Undue brevity degenerates into mere epigrammatism. A very short poem, while now and then producing a brilliant or vivid, never produces a profound or enduring effect. There must be the steady pressing down of the stamp upon the wax.

Poe, like other poet-critics, elevated his own practice into theory: certainly anyone who reads "The Bells" all the way through will by the end feel thoroughly stamped. It is notable, too, that almost every one of the poems he cites with approval in his essay is what a present-day reader would find too long for what it is saying.

Given this situation, it is curious that what Poe called the "very short poem" is not in these days more prominent. Our

attention spans, we are told, have shortened; we absorb information through sound bites. But if this is so, why isn't brevity now more seriously pursued by poets than it has been in the past? Is it simply the case that most poets have more to say than any sensible person has patience to listen to? The phenomenon of blogging suggests that technology has finally gratified for numerous people the human urge to sound off at will (and also at length, and unedited). And some recent poetry seems a verse equivalent of this.

Those attracted to the very short poem can find examples without too much trouble, but usually such poems come with a label attached. The epigram, which it seems Poe thought trifling, is one such category; the Imagist lyric is another, as is one of Imagism's sources, the whole range of Asian poetic forms—haiku and others—that feature extreme compression. These various streams of tradition have fostered a host of poems equally various in aim, in manner, and in subject matter. We are so devoted to pigeonholing that often our first response to an unusually brief poem is to group it with others apparently of its type, and often our sense of the categories is unduly rigid, ignoring the degree of flexibility within each of them. Since in all varieties of the form the central aim is simply concentration, or distillation of expression to the verbal economy of a proverb, it should not be surprising to see a number of different approaches applied to so general a purpose.

The epigram is a case in point. We tend to think of epigrams as poison darts, aimed at individual targets, as many of Martial's and of his imitators' were. But in antiquity and in later centuries epigrams have served purposes other than satire: they have offered praise as well as censure, maxims, epitaphs, personal musings, and descriptions, just as longer poems are accustomed to do. The religious epigram was once a popular form. The modern master of the epigram, J. V. Cunningham, entitled one group of such pieces "Trivial,

Vulgar, and Exalted," and was accurate in suggesting the range of tone and topic available to an epigrammatist. (Of this, more later.) As to the more abrasive pieces, the satiric thrust certainly makes some of them memorable, but those that wear best depend on a moral awareness of widely shared human shortcomings rather than on skewering a particular enemy. The point is effective deployment of wit within notably compressed precincts. In this mode meter and rhyme usually serve to emphasize the force of wit's perception. Poems like this sometimes survive their occasions surprisingly well. Consider Alexander Pope's "Epigram. Engraved on the Collar of a Dog which I gave to his Royal Highness":

> I am his Highness' Dog at Kew;
> Pray tell me Sir, whose Dog are you?

We don't need to know in detail about the servility of courtiers surrounding the royal family *circa* 1737 to get the point of this. We observe the same fawning behavior in present-day political appointees, and in middle managers of large corporations.

If epigrams employing traditional prosody draw their energy from wit, the briefer Imagist lyrics draw it from something else—vision, perhaps. The two most famous ones, Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" and Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," suggest clicks of the camera shutter in their brevity, offering a sudden glimpse of the thing described while (and this is more important) suggesting further aspects hovering out of view. Of the rules that Pound constructed for Imagists, the one most frequently disregarded has been number 2: "To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation." Pound adhered to this in his Metro piece and in a few others, but it proved too confining a program, and some later Imagist poems by him and by others sprawled to surprising lengths. Interestingly, the ones we

tend to remember now are the ones in which the verbiage is dutifully and stringently limited, like HD's "The Pool":

> Are you alive?
> I touch you.
> You quiver like a sea-fish.
> I cover you with my net.
> What are you—banded one?

Many Imagist lyrics teeter on the brink of metaphor, brush up against allusion, without quite committing themselves to these strategies. Lurking somewhere in the background of Pound's Metro poem is a parallel between the subway passengers and the souls of the Underworld. Here, HD seems to create a possibility of metaphor with her use of personification. The poem could be what at first it appears to be: a description of a pool, done in the ingenuous voice HD often uses to conjure her version of the idyllic world of Classical pastoral. But again, it could just as well be a view of a human relationship, in which the speaker hesitates before the mystery of the other. How autonomous, how amenable, is the "you" whom the speaker studies? It was common in earlier decades to describe a person one did not understand as "deep waters." Perhaps this poem is saying something like that.

In contrast with the traditional epigram, such poems keep wit under wraps. The unexpected connections between apparently disparate things are not nailed down for the reader by puns, parallel phrasing, rhyme, or other such devices. They are left latent in the imagery; and the reader must put the piece through a fine mesh to bring them to light—if in fact they are there at all. Some Imagist poems (the less interesting ones) are pared-down versions of earlier nature poetry, content to render the scene without giving any sense of penumbra adhering to it.

Image-based poems, like poems of wit, remain viable possibilities for poets seeking to practice extreme compression. Asian forms, such as the Japanese haiku or tanka, or the Korean sijo, were one influence on the original Imagist movement and still offer further formal strategies for the presentation of single or closely related images. By adding to the Imagist program the requirement of a regular syllable-count, such forms tend to add austerity to an already tightly controlled approach to verse. As with the free-verse Imagist lyric, one notices over time a drift away from the brevity initially aimed at, for many Western poets adapting haiku now employ them as stanzas rather than as a stand-alone form. (Richard Wilbur, interestingly, adds rhyme to his stanzaic haiku.) Perhaps in this case the realities of English go against a greater fidelity to the form. English syntax is a good deal less compact than that of many other languages, and seventeen syllables leave little elbow room for our articles and prepositions. The slightly longer tanka or sijo may be more adaptable: certainly it would be nice if they became more familiar. Modern poetry in English took hints from the compression, suggestiveness in descriptive detail, and effective control of tone, often through understatement, in Asian originals. These are still useful resources for poets writing today.

For poets who might care to explore the power of brevity, the field is open. Magazines that once highlighted shorter poems, such as *The Epigrammatist* and *Sticks*, are no longer published. After Cunningham, Howard Nemerov is the last widely-known poet to have produced diminutive poems in quantity. Aficionados of such writing now have few living models to point to. Kay Ryan might come to mind, but her deft, neatly targeted poems are more often narrow on the page rather than lineally brief in the sense being discussed here. Samuel Menashe is sometimes spoken of in this regard. Although better known in the latter phase of his career than

before, he is hardly a household name. His poems are idiosyncratic, veering in unpredictable ways from both the Classical and the Modernist traditions earlier discussed, reading like diary entries of a spirit strangely marooned in flesh, in time, in New York City. This works for him, but his are not the sort of poems likely to provide templates for imitators.

What purpose might be served by increased attention to Pound's neglected second rule? I do not expect that poets any time soon will be producing collections like Herrick's *Hesperides*, containing hundreds of tiny sparklers. More modestly, I have some hope that a more determined pursuit of brevity could have a salutary ripple effect: the twenty-line poem that could just as well be shorter could be cut back to twelve, and so on. But this is probably a pipe dream, since writers of free verse—the majority of poets—show few signs of attraction to compression. No quick Metro rides for them, just the drone of idling motors no one bothers to switch off.

Fundamentally, then, my intention is not to incite a new (or reanimated) literary movement, but to encourage the writing by more poets of a kind of poem now in short supply. My principal wish is that formalist poets who are willing to see compactness as a virtue will dust off the earlier, more capacious concept of the epigram and discover its potential. Among very short poems, satirical epigrams are the crowd pleasers, and they will no doubt continue to gnash away in their niche. But it would be interesting to see what twenty-first-century epigrammatists might offer us in the way of insight rather than invective.

Here are a few examples of what earlier poets have managed to fold into small, pulsing packages. Queen Elizabeth I, in a poem on the Holy Eucharist, manages to be both theologically astute and astutely diplomatic:

Christ was the word that spake it,
He took the bread and brake it,
And what that word did make it,
That I believe and take it.

In “The Amber Bead,” Robert Herrick, the son of a goldsmith, exhibits a rare trinket:

I saw a Flie within a Beade
Of Amber cleanly buried:
The Urne was little, but the room
More rich then *Cleopatra's* Tombe.

William Blake takes his grievance straight to the top in “To God”:

If you have form’d a Circle to go into,
Go into it yourself & see how you would do.

W. S. Landor sends his appreciation of female beauty into the beyond in “Dirce”:

Stand close around, ye Stygian set,
With Dirce in one boat conveyed!
Or Charon, seeing, may forget
That he is old and she a shade.

Emily Dickinson sends the mind spinning with an enigmatic analogy:

When Bells stop ringing—Church—begins—
The Positive—of Bells—
When Cogs—stop—that’s Circumference—
The Ultimate—of Wheels.

(633, Johnson edition)

And in "Plowmen," Robert Frost takes four lines to summarize the history of agriculture in New England:

A plow, they say, to plow the snow.
They cannot mean to plant it, no—
Unless in bitterness to mock
At having cultivated rock.

One notices that in such pieces wit and imagery reinforce one another, appearing as partners rather than alternatives. And the involvement of the reader is different here than it is with satirical epigrams: instead of watching the poet locate the precise spot to stick in the knife, we watch him doing something more like tying a quick but intricate knot. Practice at writing such poems could offer many beneficial effects to a poet, the primary one being skill in deriving maximum force from every word.

A long essay on brevity is an absurdity I don't wish to commit. But the poems I am commending here take so little room that it seems allowable to append one more in closing. Here is "The Poet's Fate," by Thomas Hood, a poem I have met with nowhere but in William Cole's anthology. Notice the lack of a question mark in line 1—could that be because the question can have no answer other than the one immediately offered? Notice, too, how modern, for a mid-nineteenth-century poet, Hood's use of the word "modern" is:

What is a modern Poet's fate.
To write his thought upon a slate;
The Critic spits on what is done,
Gives it a wipe—and all is gone.

Robert West

Retrospect

Over time
she laughed
a lot

less and
even came
to wish

she'd come
to know
just what

his I
love you
would cost

in time
to laugh
it off.

Top Step

Sit next
to me

and tuck
your hair

behind your
perfect ear,

and I'll
say nothing

I ought
not to say

and you'd
as soon

not hear.

Kenneth Pobo

#9

Homeroom arguments grow fierce—
who's better—the Stones,
the Beatles, Jimi, Janis,
The Doors? I say

Tommy James and the Shondells,
a WLS Silver Dollar Survey
in my shirt pocket, a shield.
Donna Volchak screws up

her face, often tells kids
to do their own thing—but not
if you're gay, not if you have
a crew cut, and not if you play

all of Tommy's singles at least
300 times, going for 500
on "Crimson & Clover"
and "Get Out Now." Tom Wunolik

threatens to "pound" me after school.
I walk home, transistor radio in my ear,
"Ball Of Fire."

Michael Diebert

For Paul Desmond

You sought to sound like a dry martini,
but I hear a deep sepia single-malt scotch,
a sphere of ice,
a short, heavy-bottomed glass,
honeyed smoke curling from a slow-burning cigarette.
You take a long, silent sip,
sit at the bar between sets, riff
not on how Morello smacks his snare,
not on how Brubeck's fingers jitterbug
between tempos, nor how they lift
your solos toward a tart grace.
Instead, wisecracks, cocktail stuff,
throwing your head back with a laugh,
breezy and inscrutable:
Freud, Cadillacs, fear of the Russians.
What are you trying to sound like when you play?
Rain kissing windowbox basil,
pigeons pecking asphalt,
espresso shot, wedge of lemon pie?
You loosen your tie.
Shifty time signatures far from your mind.
You look hard into that heavy-bottomed glass,
that universe of ice.
You swirl that scotch until you're certain it holds
the coldest note ever written.

Gianmarc Manzione

Book Shop Blues

Again this lavender ribbon
between my teeth—
see how I make a bow—

it is Christmas Eve.
My hands are wretched
under this fizzing white light, sleet

turning windowpanes to metronomes,
the days swinging by unnoticed
like pilfered jewels.

You know my fingers throb
like a fat man's heart and
even I wear another woman's face,

but over and over weather
beats the window with the sounds
of my name,

and when the lights in this place are
shut, and I feel the glass door's
breeze on the back of my neck at closing,

my mouth open,
I take the evening's spittle
of ice on my tongue,

and I am a girl,
a grandmother, a bead of rain
stiffening on the frozen bus stop bench.

Jason Shulman

Subjective Driving

The car veers gently toward the shoulder
and I know she is adjusting something
or looking at the dunes and then its over
and we proceed again around the curve,
content we are on the road again.

The car wobbles. Not a lot, but just enough
to make me glance over at that wonderful
woman who is adjusting something or looking
at the dunes: her eyes are like searchlights
that search out beauty. Her hands
on the wheel have a will of their own.

Then we pass a truck. I'm beginning to get
nervous. She veers out toward the opposite
lane for safety's sake. The car wobbles
just a little, a tremor, a tiny temblor,
an editing of the forward motion of
the car. Unlike my driving, which is
mundanely associated with getting
somewhere, her driving is a conversation
with the world around her, a suggestion
in motion. I'm beginning to get philosophical
which is the only defense I know of
that can hope to keep hurtling death at bay.
I'm filled with thoughts about reincarnation.
Her hand reaches for the radio dial I say,
let me do it, or she's cold

and the car's dashboard is her musical
instrument or she is a teacher who has
office hours and a student walks in
and they sit and talk about the weather
and she rises to make them both a cup
of coffee. But I digress. Here we are
wobbling again on the long ride home,
conversing, talking, having cups of coffee.
Her stamina is amazing. Her face quiet
and serene. I try to close my eyes and sleep.

Alice Friman

The Gift

for Dale

Today's sun
shatters through the fanlight.
An exploded prism. All white light

vanishing into its parts—a fallout
of color, a confetti of shards.

I want to box it up, send it
parcel post, for you—shivering
on your porch in your robe and wielding
the driver's pencil—to sign for,

so I'd know

you held in your hands
the lighter-than-light *makings*

of light.
And how taking the box inside

and setting it down
you'd lift the lid eagerly
as a child a present and know

in the swoosh of dazzle
filling the house, in the brilliance

of bits bumping each recess
with rainbow

that the whole is not
always greater than its parts

and that any concept of us
is no bigger than you by yourself
or me.

Phlox

Through the frame
of the poet's kitchen window,
phlox—spring quiver and gush
freshening the morning, a smart
slap or the bursting open
of a pressurized box of gems.
By rights of witness, hers.

She walked outside.

No xerox of yesterday
or last week, but a *tabula rasa*
laid down like Raleigh's cloak
over the cracked sidewalk
saying *Here is Now, your onus,*
your reward: Opals, a melt
of opals run through a sharpener,
a lexicon of shimmy and glow
to drape over the crumbling,
to honor the shoulders
of the destitute, the blear-eyed,
the knocked down, the tested out,
the anonymous. She had the gift.

How sweet her life that
morning—breakfast bread
and berry, the guiltless
anticipation of desk and pen—
before she saw, spread at her feet,
that dictate of flame.

Tending my own patch,
I think of her often, how the heart
must have stirred in its lockup
knowing *flame* not flower
is what phlox means. And how
before she went inside to pull the shades,
she bit her lip to concentrate on
the little career she hugged to her chest
like a report card, as if there were
no such thing as sight.

Stephen Massimilla

Elsewhere

In the meadow of a morning where I went walking,
in the grasses of my walking was the morning.

Striding like a gryphon in orphic air, the cold black filly
swung
her tail, turning toward me with the dawn from the bright
brink

westward through a butter meadow radiant with heat.
Blue-black, striped with shy-lights,

a Stellars jay went winging to a dripping roof to sing,
Go away, go away. Only raspier, *Away*.

***

I was another, apart and moving in a valley of granite;
an instrument in wind, a hollow bone,

asking the breeze that visited all places
where I would find my own.

I leaned on the hardwood door, by the grey
pavement where the heat whisper rose

the way grasses swell in a dream that loving passes
like a dream. I thought that belonging

was no place like being loved, but rather like a place
of loving being: I was thinking that I thought

that I would think tall thoughts in a forest of lodgepole pine.

Far-Sighted Seer

The twitching nerve of his signature blurred
on a late page of fall, through smoke still coiling
from the pipe he dumped, his head drops back
between volumes. Raccooned in shadow-glasses,

his pupils half hide in these dark woods; and she
in the seat across the desk is bedeviled
by moods obscure to him from even the time
he was her age, she incomprehensibly

Beatrice just then, tied to midriff, smirk
on lips, and something like a dimple in wind
glinting at the edge of her cheek, out there

beyond a leaf-shred captured in the storm-glass,
glinting among blue shades of Toussaints that shift
through a riddling of lights on turrets and bridges

behind her, someplace far-gone and never-resolved
and home to the inadmissible imp of a man
who had staked all his vision on nothing but distance.

William Thompson

Recommended Reading

Lines of Flight, by Catherine Chandler.
Able Muse Press. $15.95.

As a literary movement, New Formalism ran its course more than a decade ago, but many of its leading figures—Rhina Espaillat, for example, who wrote the introduction to *Lines of Flight*—still gather online at AbleMuse.com's Eratosphere pages, where they join other writers in critiquing each others' work and exchanging opinions about contemporary poetry, fiction, art, and politics. In 2010, the newly founded Able Muse Press published an anthology of Eratosphere authors and continues to publish a print edition of the *Able Muse Review*, as well as a series of beautifully designed books by individual poets.

As anyone familiar with the Eratosphere would expect, *Lines of Flight*, published earlier this year, showcases a variety of poetic forms deftly handled. Of the 60 poems in this volume, 23 are sonnets, but Chandler also is in firm command of sapphic stanzas, ballad stanzas, the villanelle, the cento, and the haiku, among others. Here, for example, is a very tricky Dominican form recently popularized by Espaillat, the ovillejo:

> Moriah holds my hand in early June.
> Though soon
> the lilies we admire will wither, still,
> she will

be happy for our fugitive vignette.
Forget-
me-nots we'll pick, blue thistle, fern rosette,
hawkweed, trillium, wild columbine:
an afternoon perenially mine,
though soon she will forget.

With its alternating long and short lines, the ovillejo (in English, "little ball of yarn") lends itself to light subjects. The short lines must be combined to make the concluding line, and when done well the effect is usually charming. But Chandler, while exploiting its capacity for song, demonstrates that the ovillejo can also achieve real depth and power. A less serious poet might have been contented with the technical feat of knitting three short lines into a meaningful conclusion. In "For My Granddaughter," however, each isolated iamb carries its own sense of regret ("Though soon") or determination ("she will") or consciousness of time's flight (Forget- / me-nots . . .). Notice, too, how cleverly Chandler uses the word "perennially": each plant she picks is a perennial, but she will also treasure the memory of this day year after year. And, in spite of the poem's assertions, so will Moriah revisit this day each time she reads this beautiful poem in memory of her grandmother.

I've never fully believed that, as is sometimes said, it is harder to write well in free verse than in received forms, but I do know that the latter are much less forgiving of the merely competent. In poem after poem, Chandler shows herself to be the kind of poet whose imagination, to paraphrase Valéry, is stimulated by formal demands. The result in this case is genuine art.

CONTRIBUTORS

Baltasar del Alcázar (1530-1606) was a Spanish poet who often wrote in a jocular, humorous, lively, mocking or satirical tone about the pleasures of food and drink as well as the charms and perceived flaws of women. Most of his work has not been translated into English. The poem translated in this issue, "Sobre los consonantes," has not previously been translated into English as far as the translator is aware.

Stephen Cushman is Robert C. Taylor Professor of English at the University of Virginia. He has published four collections of poetry, *Riffraff* (LSU, 2011), *Heart Island* (David Robert Books, 2006), *Cussing Lesson* (LSU, 2002), and *Blue Pajamas* (LSU, 1998). He is general editor of the fourth edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* forthcoming later in 2012. His poems have appeared in *American Scholar, Poetry, Ploughshares*, the *Virginia Quarterly Review, Five Points, Southwest Review*, *Shenandoah*, the *Yale Review*, and elsewhere.

Michael Diebert teaches writing and literature at Georgia Perimeter College in Atlanta and serves as poetry editor for *The Chattahoochee Review*. Recent poems have appeared in *Southern Poetry Review*, *Hobble Creek Review*, and *Scythe*, and are forthcoming in an anthology of Georgia poets to be published by Texas Review Press.

Rupert Fike's collection, *Lotus Buffet*, was published in 2011 by Brick Road Poetry Press. Two of its poems have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and he has been nominated as Georgia Author of the Year 2011 in poetry. His work has appeared in *Rosebud, The Georgetown Review, Natural Bridge, The Atlanta Review, The Cortland Review*,

story South, The Blue Fifth Review, and others. He has a poem inscribed in a downtown Atlanta plaza, and his non-fiction book, *Voices from The Farm*, accounts of life on a spiritual community in the 1970s, is now available in paperback.

Alice Friman's newest collection is *Vinculum*, LSU Press. Work appears in *Best American Poetry 2009, Georgia Review, Prairie Schooner, Southern Review, Gettysburg Review*, and the 2012 *Pushcart Prize Anthology*. Professor Emerita at the University of Indianapolis, Friman now lives in Milledgeville, Georgia, where she is Poet-in-Residence at Georgia College & State University. Her podcast, *Ask Alice*, can be seen on YouTube.

Loren Graham teaches creative writing at Carroll College in Helena, Montana. His books of poetry include *Mose* (Wesleyan University Press 1995) and *The Ring Scar* (Word Press 2010.) The poems published here are from a new manuscript about a boy growing up in rural poverty; that book, as yet untitled, will be published in 2014 by CavanKerry Press.

Zakia Khwaja obtained an MBA in marketing and finance from Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, Pakistan. She has held positions as microfinance consultant, network coordinator and capacity building specialist for the Pakistan Microfinance Network. She moved to the US in 2005 and earned an MA in English from the University of Rochester. Most of her poetry focuses on cultural topics and social and political issues. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Grey Sparrow, Controlled Burn, Pearl Magazine* and *Ellipsis...Literature and Art*.

April Lindner's second poetry collection, *This Bed Our Bodies Shaped*, is forthcoming from Able Muse Press. Her first collection, *Skin*, received the Walt MacDonald First Book Prize from Texas Tech University Press. Her young adult novel, *Jane*, a modernization of Jane Eyre, was published by Poppy in 2010; *Catherine*, a modernization of *Wuthering Heights*, is due out in 2013. A professor of English at Saint Joseph's University, April lives in Havertown, Pennsylvania.

Gianmarc Manzione lives in Arlington, TX, where he works as the Features Writer for BOWL.com, the official website of the United States Bowling Congress. His first collection of poems, *This Brevity*, was published by Parsifal Press in 2006. Portions of that book appeared in *The Paris Review, The Southern Review, Raritan, Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily* and other journals.

Stephen Massimilla is a poet, critic and painter. His collection *Forty Floors from Yesterday* received the Sonia Raiziss-Giop Bordighera Prize; his sonnet sequence *Later on Aiaia* received the Grolier Poetry Prize; and his volume *Almost a Second Thought* was runner-up for the National Poetry Book Contest judged by X.J. Kennedy. Massimilla's work has appeared in *AGNI, Atlanta Review, Barrow Street, Chelsea, The Colorado Review, Confrontation, Denver Quarterly, Folio, The Greensboro Review, The Grey Sparrow, Gulf Stream, Provincetown Arts, Quarterly West, The Southern Review, Terrian.org, Verse Daily*, and elsewhere. He holds an MFA and a Ph.D. from Columbia University, where he teaches classics and modernist literature.

Theron Montgomery teaches Contemporary Literature and creative writing at Troy University. He is the author of *The Procession*, a collection of short stories, published by UKA Press in 2005.

Kenneth Pobo won the 2011 qarrtsiluni chapbook contest for *Ice And Gaywings*, published in November 2011. He has work coming out in *Poem, Pure Francis, Rose & Thorn*, and *Bohemia*.

John Poch teaches at Texas Tech University. His most recent book of poems, *Dolls*, was published by Orchises Press in 2009.

Enrique Barrero Rodríguez was born in Seville in 1969. He is Professor of Business Law at the University of Seville. He has won many major literary prizes in Spain and published eleven collections of poetry. Yet he has not, until now, had his work translated into English.

Robert B. Shaw's latest books are *Blank Verse: A Guide To Its History And Use* (Ohio University Press) and a poetry collection, *Aromatics* (Pinyon Publishing). He is the Emily Dickinson Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College.

Robert Schechter is a poet and translator whose poems (for children and adults) and translations have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Evansville Review, First Things, Poetry East, Bumbershoot, Snakeskin, Light Quarterly, The Washington Post, The Spectator*, and *Highlights for Children*, among other places.

Jason Shulman is the founder of A Society of Souls, a school which teaches his Buddhist and Kabbalah-based healing work in the United States and Europe. He is a musician with three albums to his credit, the author of multiple books and a long-time poet. He lives in New Jersey and Massachusetts with his driving partner and wife of forty years.

Daniel Tobin is the author of six books of poems, *Where the World is Made, Double Life, The Narrows, Second Things, Belated Heavens* (winner of the Massachusetts Book Award in Poetry) and *The Net* (forthcoming). His many awards include creative writing fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation.

Robert West's poems have appeared in *Alabama Literary Review, Christian Science Monitor, Poetry, Southern Poetry Review,* Ted Kooser's syndicated column *American Life in Poetry*, and other venues. His latest collection is *Convalescent* (Finishing Line Press, 2011). He is an associate professor in the Department of English at Mississippi State University.

Baltasar del Alcázar
Stephen Cushman
Michael Diebert
Rupert Fike
Alice Friman
Loren Graham
Zakia Khwaja
April Lindner
Gianmarc Manzione
Stephen Massimilla
Theron Montgomery
Kenneth Pobo
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