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(formerly Kansas Quarterly)

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Contributors

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Pray

by Anton DiSclafani

Laura Stanley received the news via text message. BREEZEWAY BAPTIST WOULD LIKE TO INFORM YOU—

And then a link, which Laura, holding John on her hip, had tapped with her thumb. We're sorry to inform you that your child, John Furlow Stanley, has not been granted admittance into Breezeway Baptist's Ones Class. Please call our director, Stacey Heath, with questions. A cold panic spread over her, starting at her scalp; the panic no less terrifying given how familiar it had become as of late. She who had never been an anxious person anxious all the time, now. If Carter, her husband, was late coming home from the hospital; if she turned a corner in their vast, white house and thought she saw a shadow; if a car honked behind her. To quell the panic she prayed. She texted Amanda, her best friend. She called her mom. Before John's birth, she had been known among family and friends for being a calm, even-keeled person. A tether, Carter had once called her. Anchor, she'd countered. She was no longer that person. Before, she had thought everything would pass, because it always did. She had trusted in the Lord. Her church had been a sanctuary. Was still, until this very moment. John let out a gurgle, and Laura touched her lips to his smooth forehead. She had, somehow, forgotten to pray.

She'd been young, which the various doctors they were sent to after John's birth kept saying, over and over again until it turned into a terrible sort of mantra. So young! So young! That the mantra was true—Laura had just turned 26 when John was born—made her feel more like a failure, though that was not what the doctors had intended, and Laura knew that. She knew they were simply, if insensitively, expressing surprise. Her eggs were young; they were supposed to be perfect. But they had allowed what the doctors called a *de novo* mutation, a term Laura had been blessedly unaware of before her own child's entrance into the world. Welcome to the cold, hard world Amanda had texted her, in jest, just after John, whom they'd named after her father, was born. Furlow was a Stanley family name. Smiley face emojis followed, then hearts. It was before Laura had known anything was wrong. She had laughed, peered down at her sleeping baby, swaddled in a silky blue blanket. But now—well, now Laura's world was both cold and hard. Not John's. She took some comfort in that, more or less depending on the day. The less intelligent he turned out to be, the better, for him at least, because he would not know what it was he was missing. She'd been reading so much—so many forums on which she lurked but never contributed, so many articles, so many pictures—and it was clear there was a spectrum of intelligence. A spectrum of other health issues, too, though John seemed mainly healthy, at least so far. A healthy heart, at least. At least.

The propensity for obesity, for early-onset dementia—she tried not to think of those. The despair she'd felt when her obstetrician, a kind, older man named, funnily, Dr. Mann, entered the room, accompanied by a taller, younger man, whom she'd never seen before, with a thatch of honey-colored blond hair— "I'd like Dr. Nichols, our pediatrician on call, to take a look at our boy, here," he said, and held out his arms for the baby. She had given birth only hours before. Carter was gone, getting her sushi and champagne. The despair. The despair. She still could not finish the thought. The despair was vast but unformed. Of what was she so despairing? She could not say. Not exactly. Her life upended, her son not, after all, perfect. The disappointment threatened to swallow her whole in those early weeks. But there was something else, too, something she could not name. Something was wrong in the world—something rotten in the state of Denmark, a line she remembered from the one compulsory English class she'd taken in college— but she did not know what. When Dr. Mann held out his arms she shook her head, pressed John to her chest. A little whimper emerged from her mouth.

They'd gone ahead with most of it. The baby photographer who came to their home and pretended nothing was wrong, though John's features—the almond-shaped eyes, the flat face, the tiny ears—were impossible to ignore (how had she ignored them, for those few hours in the hospital?). The visits from Carter's family, who lived nearby, who were known in the sense that old, wealthy families in small, Southern towns were known. Her family, from Southaven. Their church family, who supplied an endless rotation of meals. Word had gotten out quickly, but Laura was grateful for that. It seemed like a mercy, not to have to explain John to everyone. But the Sip'n'See, for which John had been supposed to wear the smocked blue romper Carter and his brothers had worn, for their own Sip'n'See's, which Laura's mother-in-law, Nancy, had saved in acid-free tissue paper for all these years (John was the first male grandchild)—Laura had her limits. She'd prayed one night for hours, longer than she'd ever prayed before. Crumpled in the rocking chair in John's room, John himself absent, in the bassinet by her side of the bed. She prayed and cried and at first it was about the Sip'n'See, and how she did not want to play host to the dozens of women who would come to her house and circle her baby and pity her. And then the prayer turned to something else, something darker. She prayed about her own shame, about how it had colonized her heart, her mind. What kind of mother was she, to be ashamed of her own child— The next day she'd told Carter she was cancelling the Sip'n'See. It's not a compulsory event, she'd said, trying to make light of the matter. And Carter had tilted his head in his wry way. It is here, he'd said. And that much was true. She was from the South, but Southaven was close enough to Memphis, and anyway, her family had not had money, not like the Stanleys, who owned real estate and restaurants and car washes and other vague enterprises. Where Laura lived now had its own rules, its own way of doing things, ways which Carter understood and she was learning. Bows the size of Christmas tree toppers on girls' heads. Smocked shirts with Peter Pan collars for boys. Everyone a ma'am or a sir. The men so nice they seemed effeminate, Carter no exception to this rule. Everyone aligned with the Tigers or the Tide, though they lived in between those two towns. Everyone a member of a church family, but that was the one way Laura felt at home here,

in this small town in Alabama, a state she'd never managed to visit though she'd grown up barely two hours from the northwest corner of it—Laura had always been a member of a church family. She'd grown up attending the First Baptist church. Since adolescence, she'd begun her mornings reading devotionals, journaling. It was her therapy, she felt. Her way of feeling at home in the world. Of finding peace. She'd gotten her way about the Sip'n'See. Her mother-in-law had, surprisingly, not been astonished, the absence of which had slammed into Laura like a tidal wave. She understood why Laura would not want to show John to the world.

She texted Amanda, first. John didn't get in. Calling now. Laura would have preferred to email—she didn't like confrontation—but she knew a phone call was best in this situation. Faster, at least. She felt a buzz against her ear, then another. Amanda, responding. The buzz was a comfort. "Hello," a woman said, "Stacey Heath." She had a leisurely voice, which Laura instantly disliked. She was one of those Southern women for whom her mother had a phrase—butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. "Hi, this is Laura Stanley. John Stanley's mother—" Stacey cut her off, midsentence. Her voice, when she spoke, was completely different. "Oh, yes," she said. It was not a good sign. John's denial of admission had not been a mistake, even though she and Carter and the entire Stanley family were members of Breezeway. Carter had attended preschool there, along with his two brothers and one sister. They were a legacy family, not like the families that started coming on Sundays when they found out they were pregnant, since attending Breezeway gave you preference for admission to its preschool. Its preschool that met twice a week, for half a day, and was staffed by women like Laura, except older, women whose own children were grown. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Stanley, I truly am, but your son—" "John," Laura supplied. "Yes, John. Well, we just don't have the resources to serve him." Laura's chest grew tight. Her breathing quickened. She had no hands left—the left cradled John, the right held her hot phone to her sweaty ear—and so she leaned on the counter with her elbow. "I . . ." she said. She was at a loss for words. Stacey Heath didn't sound sorry, did she? She sounded . . . she sounded firm. She sounded as if John had been the subject of much discussion at Breezeway Baptist, and that the conclusion they—she and the other teachers, Laura assumed—had reached was final and absolute. A buzz brought her back to reality. Amanda, returning her text. Another buzz, another text. "But he doesn't need any resources," Laura said, finding her voice. "He's like all the other babies." That wasn't really true, even at this early stage, but Laura did not want to explain to Stacey Heath that John's current deficits were mild. He likely wouldn't be walking or talking by the time he entered the Ones Classroom, but what did that matter? "Our preschool isn't equipped to serve special needs children." Laura's eyes glazed with tears. "He's not!" she cried, though he was. But not in any way that should matter to a preschool class. "You wrote on the form that your son has Down Syndrome?" The fake uncertainty in her voice made Laura want to hurl the phone across the room. But that would hurt only herself. "Yes," Laura said, surprised by the iciness in her voice.

"Well . . ." She let the word trail off. "But this is for socialization, right? It's for letting kids be around other kids?" "Among other things. Other skills." "Calculus? Are you teaching calculus?" A sigh. A deep, disappointed sigh. "Mrs. Stanley, this is not a decision we take lightly. You are very much a valued member of our church family, but we want to make the right decision for everyone." Laura's cheeks burned. She knew who the Stanleys were, and it hadn't helped. Laura searched her memory, but she couldn't place Stacy Heath. She sounded older than Laura, but still young. She sounded thin and hard and mean. "It's illegal," Laura whispered. The thought had just occurred to her. A flare of hope. They couldn't do this. They thought they could, but they could not. "It's not, unfortunately," and Laura wanted to laugh at the unfortunately. "As a religious institution, we're free to make our own judgement about what we can and cannot handle. We're guided by God, not the state." Laura curled over, as if she'd been punched in the gut. John squirmed, and when she looked at him she was met by a wide, toothless grin. He was so happy, her baby. So delighted by, of all things, her. Laura thought of her mother-in-law, of how this conversation would surely get back to her in some way or another. She was a mild, sweet woman with whom Laura found conversation difficult. She loved John. She would accept the preschool's decision. She would not find these two feelings contradictory. "Mrs. Stanley, I hope you'll agree this is the best decision for all of us." She was still looking at John, at his clear blue eyes, which he'd inherited from Carter. At the swoop of light brown hair that fell across his forehead, that she could not bring herself to cut. She looked at her baby and thought, He is who he is. He's himself. "But where is he supposed to go?" she asked.

Whaaa????? Amanda's text read. Must be a mistake. Breezeway could not reject world's cutest baby! Not a mistake, Laura typed back. Will explain later.

???

Then, an hour later, when Laura did not reply: Are you okay?

Laura was not okay, but her not okayness was larger than a preschool rejection. Her not okayness related to lying awake at night and wondering if John's future brother or sister, as yet just an idea, a plan—would be kind, would be willing to shoulder the burden of John after Laura and Carter's deaths. If John did not die first, which was a possibility, given the host of health problems that accompanied his diagnosis. Then she wondered, as she did tonight, John's rejection accepted without complaint by Carter—they don't know what they're talking about, but who cares?—if they should have three children, as they had talked about before John was born. Four. The better the chance that one of them would take care of John; or, that they could share him. He could live two months in one house, two in another, etc. Carter stirred. An unfairness to her future children, to shoulder them with this responsibility before they had even been conceived, but there was no other option. John couldn't live in an institution—the thought of her child, being cared for by strangers, undid something inside her. They hadn't found out the sex. There are so few surprises in life, Carter had said. Laura had

secretly wanted a girl, and now she was so, so grateful John was a boy. He was less likely to be abused that way. Sexually and otherwise. There were so many stories of caretakers raping women. They found her, when she was online paying a bill or scrolling through Facebook. And he would never live by himself. Carter stirred, and Laura bit the inside of her cheek, which had become a habit since John's birth. The ridge of skin, puckered, and raw, familiar between her teeth. She hadn't yet texted Amanda back. She'd been disappointed by Carter's reaction, even though she'd expected it. His main purpose in life, now, to soothe her. It wasn't really about the preschool, of course, but then again, it was. The carpeted rooms, lined with perfectly organized, brightly colored toys; the walls decorated with foam cutouts of shapes and letters and numbers. We are all God's children here, the sign above the entrance read. There were other preschools in the area, but Breezeway was where everyone Laura knew went. Where John would not go. She probed the line of damaged cheek with her tongue and prayed, her praying too private to put into words, even too herself. She read the Scriptures, did devotionals—What acts of selflessness have you completed today, with an open and forgiving heart?—or had, before John was born. But Laura's praying did not involve language, as such. It was more a feeling. A connection. A connection John's birth had interrupted. Right now, for instance, in the room that she had so carefully decorated with the help of a designer from Birmingham—pleated curtains from antique French fabric; a velvet chaise lounge; a gigantic sterling silver frame that held a picture of her in her wedding dress, beaming at Carter, who stood beyond the camera—the room felt like a strange country, not the place she had loved, been loved. The man beside her—also unfamiliar. She put a hand on Carter's cool back and tried to summon the feeling of peace. But she could only think of Amanda, Amanda who'd had her second child a month after John had been born, a little girl named Genevieve. John and Genevieve were supposed to enter the Ones class together.

Amanda had come to the hospital to meet John. All of it felt like a fraud, now. The giant floral arrangement, topped with pearlescent blue balloons, which their night nurse, a Black woman with a Caribbean accent, had exclaimed over, right before exclaiming over John. The ivory baby gown, meant for a different child. His name. She wanted it all back. "Hey," Amanda said, just inside the door. It was their third full day in the hospital. John was staying longer, for tests, and Dr. Nichols had told her she could stay, too, which she knew was supposed to be a kindness, but nothing felt kind, right now. Laura tried to smile. John lay beside her in the clear bassinet. He had cried for so long and so hard after his circumcision earlier that day that the day nurse, a white woman with dry lips and thinning hair, had come into the room. So far the night nurses were all Black; the day nurses white. "Oh," she'd said. "You have to pick him up, sweetie." And then, the same thing they all said, every nurse and doctor and relative who had entered the room: "He's perfect." If he had been perfect, they would have been discharged a day ago she thought. But did not say. Amanda wore yoga pants and a turtleneck, her pregnant belly asserting itself before Amanda had even fully entered the room. She was a small woman, unlike Laura, whom everyone had complimented on carrying her pregnancy so well. It was a virtue, Laura understood, to look less pregnant than one actually was. She should not have

been surprised, but she was. "Honey," Amanda said, and came to Laura, not John. Put her small, warm hand on Laura's forehead. She hadn't even glanced at John for the longest second. Laura moaned. She felt like a monster. A swollen, bleeding monster with thoughts so terrible she knew she could never tell another soul about them. She had been a nice, good person because everything in the world had gone her way. That's all it was. It wasn't her. It was circumstance. Amanda leaned over the hospital bed and pressed her forehead to Laura's. Laura tried to say something. "I . . . it's . . ." but Amanda shushed her. Laura felt Amanda's warmth. Pushing out her grotesque imaginings. If John had been born a century ago, for instance, or in another country— And then Amanda was beside John, so quickly Laura thought she felt a rush of air as Amanda moved from one side of the bed to the other. She stood over John's clear bassinet for a long moment, murmuring. Laura did not think she could stand it, if the word perfect left Amanda's mouth. She watched her friend, who watched her child, who until a few days ago had lived inside her, whose subterranean presence Laura found she missed, now. The weight of him, pressing, ever downward, against her hips. The movement, which was constant and soothing. How foolish, to be comforted by the very infant you carried in your womb. And yet she had been. "He is who he is," Amanda said, finally, tears in her eyes, her voice thick with emotion. She smoothed one of John's inky eyebrows with her finger, then placed her palm on his tiny chest. She looked up at Laura. "And you're his mother."

She'd fallen in love with John in the weeks that followed his birth, after the shock of him gradually departed. Sometimes, when she prayed, she tried to picture it that way: The shock lifting from her in plumes of smoke. The way he opened and closed his fists while he slept. The sheen of fur that covered his shoulders. Epaulettes, Carter had said. The way he rooted around for her breast. The sighs he made when he slept. She was delighted by all of it, but more than that, relieved. He was like any other child in these ways. She tried to prepare herself for all the things he would not do. He would crawl, and walk, and talk, just later than everyone else. Then it became less clear. He would kick a ball, but he would never play soccer on a team. He would attend school, but he would not complete the same homework as the other children in his grade. He would have friends, maybe, but as they grew older they would tolerate John, not come to him for advice. Would he fall in love? He would have those impulses, she knew. She understood adolescence to be a particularly thorny time with special needs children. Laura did not know how John would express those impulses. How he would date, or spend his free time, which he would have more and more of as he grew older. There were so many things she did not know, so few she did. She tried to prepare herself for the daily difficulties as well. The double-takes people did, then tried to hide, when she took him to a new place. The way she'd watched some stupid sitcom and had been brought to tears by the word "retarded." The jealousy that had nearly knocked her from her feet when she'd seen Amanda, Amanda who already had a perfect child at home, nursing Genevieve in her hospital bed only a month after John's birth. If there had

been any note of apology in Amanda's eyes when she looked up Laura would have turned and fled. But there was not. She was accosted and then she steeled herself for future hurt. She learned to gaze steadily at people in restaurants or stores when they approached; she'd found this made them less likely to do a double-take, if they knew they were being watched. She repeated the word "retarded" to herself, over and over again in her head, to take away the sting of it. She told herself it was a meaningless word, though she cringed to remember that she herself had gone through a phrase of saying it, in middle school, before her mother told her it was bathroom word, a category that covered all manner of inappropriate language. And Genevieve—well, she learned to love the child, who was so blonde she looked creaturely. She found it was more difficult to be jealous of those whom you loved. But the shock of a church preschool denying admission to her child on grounds that were utterly ridiculous—this was a surprise for which she was not prepared. A surprise that seemed to foretell the rest of Laura's life. So she was prepared now, for Amanda's rejection. She would send Genevieve to Breezeway. Why wouldn't she? She should. Her child shouldn't suffer because her best friend's child did. It was a simple equation. You did what was best for yours. It was Laura against the world.

In the days following the text from Breezeway Baptist, while she ignored Amanda's text messages, she found she missed her friend. But she missed so much, now. She was still comforted by the routine of church, but gone was the feeling of solace that had always blanketed her when she'd entered its vast atrium, slid into a smooth, blonde wood pew. Let the light of the stained-glass windows, recently installed, bathe her in gem tones. That would be gone now, too, for she would never return to Breezeway Baptist, even though Carter had told her several times that the preschool had nothing to do with the church. She didn't care. "Honey," Carter had said, coming up behind her at the kitchen counter, where she was stirring milk into John's oatmeal to cool it down—"We'll go somewhere else." Laura stiffened, then released the tension. It wasn't Carter's fault. She did the things she always did, but without the pleasure of anticipation of talking or seeing or texting with Amanda. Honey, her last message read. What's going on? Carter and Amanda the only two people in Laura's life who called her that, and she knew they meant different things by it, but she also knew that they both loved her. She missed Amanda, but the longing she felt for her best friend was tolerable. She missed so much and yet so much was newly tolerable, her thermostat for what she could and could not endure having been reset with John's birth. She was on the floor with John, playing with him. Giving him one toy, taking it away, teasing him, giving it back. John laughed. Clapped his fat hands together. Sometimes Laura disappeared. Before John, but more frequently since his birth. Amanda must assume she was doing that. Going just beneath the surface of her life for a little while.

She'd met Amanda at her spin class. Amanda, tiny and extremely pregnant with her first child, leading the class, shouting into her headset, asking them to imagine they were scaling a mountain. Asking them to give themselves over to the feeling of pain. "Everybody's gotta mountain," she'd

shouted. Then laughed. "Everybody wants a glass of wine and a piece of chocolate at the end of the day, amirite?" It didn't even make sense, not really, but Laura liked Amanda's latent cynicism, the way she cut her platitudes with further clichés. They were fast friends. They both stayed home with children, or planned to, in Laura's case, as soon as she had one. They lived in the same, brand-new, treeless subdivision. They attended the same church. Amanda's husband was a malpractice attorney for the hospital; it seemed too perfect that Carter was a general surgeon. Laura had the sense that she was more religious than Amanda, but that was fine. Laura was private in that way. In all ways, but especially that one. "I don't know why God would do this," she'd said in that hospital room, Amanda holding John, now, as Laura herself could not bring herself to do. She held him, yes, but not like Amanda did. Not with that kind of love. Her voice was jagged. It sounded unfamiliar even, or especially, to herself. "Honey," Amanda said. "It's not God. It's just what happened. Random. God had nothing to do with it." And for the first time in her life, Laura was comforted by the idea of God's absence.

The doorbell rang. John startled, sought out Laura's gaze, relaxed when he found it. Grinned. She put him on her hip and went to the door, making sure to stay hidden on the off-chance it was someone other than the Fedex guy dropping off a package. She recognized the white patch of Genevieve's scalp. Then the reddish sheen of Amanda's thick hair, which never seemed to be depleted by postpartum hair loss. Laura opened the door a crack. She was so nervous she might as well have been being chased by a pack of wild dogs. Her breathing that quick, her heartbeat that rapid. "Honey," Amanda said. Her face was worried, worried. "Let me in."

Book of the Dead

by Virginia Archer

1985. My mother's fake tits nearly killed me on the way in. I came out blue as a fish and breathless. Not enough room for the milk I would need and all that plastic beauty in one body. When the doctors decided I'd make it, my father smoked his wooden tobacco pipe and played Chopin on the piano. Bad sign when a newborn doesn't cry.

1991. We'll fry some fish when I get back, my father said. He and the dog loaded the boat to check the trot lines behind the cypress. He left the just opened can of Budweiser on the white stone table where I sat making clover crowns. When he was out of eyesight, I grabbed the icy, silver can and had my first taste. "Original sin" they call it. Astonished, I walked over to the water's edge and poured my fizzy, gold questions out into the bayou. Hide and seek under water oaks. Crickets, cattails and bottle rockets. Moonlit barbeques amid the cicada and mosquito repellent. His foul moods. The silence we kept. Poured it all out. A banishing. Did you do this? he asked, holding the empty can. Swear to God, and say you didn't do it. I looked squarely back at him, swore to God and, for reasons I didn't understand, told my first lie.

1995. With my best friend in tow, I climbed the magnolia tree around the corner to spy on the boy making a sugar baby for class. I wore a black corduroy jumper with large girlish pockets and a small bouquet of jasmine tucked behind my ear. We watched through the window as the boy's tan hands cut the nylon stockings that his mother had gotten from the drugstore. One day, he'd be valedictorian. He filled the peach-colored mesh with white Domino sugar like the teacher said. Cup after cup, he made our baby. I wished I could knock on the door and help him sew on navy blue buttons as eyes, but his mama was narcoleptic, and it embarrassed him to have company. I hoped he knew I was in his tree and that I hid my mother too. I hoped that my watching helped him make our baby right. I'd never been kissed. Would he want to kiss me now that we had a baby together? It's only a sugar baby, said my friend. Are we old enough to have real babies?

2003. By junior year, I knew that I needed out of that town with only one stoplight. Still, I was nice to the over-caffeinated band guys that never knew what to say and the journalism kids that had too much ambition. I skipped class to go to the library and liked the teachers but refused to follow the rules. In town, my father never smiled and my mother, who was on disability, was always stoned. She'd stand up in church during prayer requests and say things to get money. People thought she was sad and sweet, so they gave. I remember the day I left. Behind me: the miles and miles of cow pastures and rows of sweet potato prone to rootworm, the noxious chemical plant that made paint emulsifier and the washed-up marines who rushed virgins to third base. The Baptist church lock-ins, the rich kids who snuck out at night and smoked on the ninth hole and who stole

for fun, the stray trailer park kittens, the meth heads that got tried as adults at

seventeen and the Friday night tailgates at the Quickstop. The children's home where run-aways played table tennis and memorized the New Testament, the glowing, green fields where boys crashed into each other for glory and sex. My father's no-smiling face, my mother half-awake at the wheel. All behind me. And that one stoplight slowly fading in the distance, a menacing eye winking in the rearview mirror.

2006. We married in the spring of 2011 because his grandmother wanted to throw a real wedding with cake and dancing, but I'd already married him in my way back in July of '06. We'd met in the stairwell of a beige condominium in a gentrifying neighborhood. I was reading Mrs. Dalloway and living out of a car after my father lost his job and then his money and then our house. I was all freedom and words, no roots. He was training for baseball season and knew how to play the piano. His apartment smelled like clean laundry and cold air. He did sit ups with perfect form while I watched. He was orderly and embodied. All structure and discipline. He liked that I was strangely innocent and always said the right thing. I googled "Love at first sight."

2012. The tiny white pills that took my father. It was a long way down. Lost his eyeglasses and was put in solitary. He forgot my name. Forgot the tiny white pills and his pain too. The soup kitchen ladies looked after him in the June heat. Served him mercy spoon by spoon. The autopsy report read "heart attack," but anyone could tell you what did him in was all that mercy at once. Grew his heart too fast and too big for any one man to handle.

2013. See you later, Mom. Not if Jesus comes back first, my mother said, cheerful as a daisy at rapture.

2014. I'll break it off with her and move us to Paris. Say the word. Prideful, no words came. I'd googled "How to be the perfect wife," but that was all over now. Bury your heart in New Orleans. Like an old Western, but broken, no one pulled their gun at sundown. No duel to satisfy justice. We kept warm on the edge of the lake by having impeccable oysters with beer and making funny noises. We laughed at the strangeness of life, at the art of kissing, and at how despite it all we'd known real love. A wire. Go to Paris anyway, he said.

2016. That December, flamboyant Nativity scenes electrified front yards. Believers with candles flocked from all over to the house on the corner with a towering, kitsch statue of the Holy Mother said to have bled tears. Our very own suburban stigmata. It was nearly Christmas when he called to say they were pregnant. He didn't know if she'd keep it. But she did. They did. It was supposed to be your baby, he said but shouldn't have. He played me a song about the sun on his guitar, and we said goodbye one last time. I didn't let him hear me cry, but I should have. He put up the biggest tree in town that Christmas. I fed my friends hot chocolate and told ghost stories by the fire. But neither one of us forgot how we had biscuits with butter and instant coffee after sex or how we decided time travel was possible but not nothingness.

2018\.

“Gone to Glory” they call it in the South when someone dies. It was a long drive through rolling cow pasture, speed traps and falling-down barns to see my dying mother, whose third and most devoted husband refused to leave her side or to change his “Life is too short not to be Irish” t-shirt. I made white beans and cornbread, which burned, and prayed to apocryphal faces of Mary while my three aunts took shifts reading aloud from Psalms. We ignored someone’s “She’s a Brick House” ringtone for the better part of the night and draped sleepy, overweight dachshunds across my mother’s failing body like luxurious furs. She told me what she knew for sure. That God is everything good. That, to her, Heaven was a baby doll house with a porch and two dogs. And a vegetable garden in case you still need to eat in Heaven, which was endearing because that had been her life. When she finally passed, we gathered under some pine trees and planted daffodil bulbs to remember her by. As I drove past the last stop light on the way out of town, through the football fields and the hypnotic whirl of snowy white cotton rows, I realized her triumph: despite it all, Mama died right.

Three Poems

by Tyrone Jaeger

Perhaps the Dam Will Hold

I'm drying out like a late Raymond Carver
story but these Arkansas rains . . .
Leaks trickle in the kitchen and living room.
Drips pop in pails and tupperware. Water above,
water below. My APRN assures me the pain
and blood only internal hemorrhoids. Breached pipes.
Ruptures abound. I survey the storm
from a window and behold the sill,
carved in child scrawl it is okay.
I might rage. The child denies—and later
tosses my way a wadded paper confession
I did it. :(:(x2 please do not be madx2
I might cry but instead close my eyes and whisper
it is okay. it is okay. it is okay.

Another Wet Winter, Arkansas

Dock submerged in flood brown
I paddle up the lake's narrowing roots
two creeks, Beaverfork and Pickles Gap.
The gathering of fog disperses,
ascends, a sect awaiting worshipers
and three corn-fed bucks climb the slope
and stop, peer down at the water drifter, me.
Winter-wiped trees and greenbrier lay bare
the wooded shoreline. I marvel at the awful
flotsam—basketball, bicycle helmet, lures
and bobbers, styrofoam cups and bits—tossed
from boats and cars, washed off lawns, draining
down the ditch—and one prostrate, dead forever
goose, head immersed as if in shame or prayer.

Lost in the Forest of Unaware

You at fourteen, a sapling with spooked brown eyes,
careful through the hallways, where the bathroom toughs
wait at the stair top, lookout bored with no teacher on
the way to bust smokers. You are fresh meat to be grabbed
and taunted. They smell your fear through the pine-scented
deodorant your mother said you should start wearing,
but she is nowhere and does not exist in this thicket
of bodies and threats. Inside that bathroom they suck
on cigarettes and you imagine murder on their minds.
I promise that someday you'll see that they were just
fucking with you. Still, you have teary sleepless nights
and want mothering, but your parents watch St. Elsewhere
and where exactly are your words? Years later, you will
be the boy who walks in the bathroom to smoke a pinner
and will see your tweaker cousin has, miraculously unaided,
tied to the stall frame a nerdy classmate upside-down
by his shoelaces. Let 'em down, you'll say.
Your tweaker cousin will laugh and fire his lighter.
The boy falls, head-smacked on the tile. He mutters
thanks as he exits the door, and you'll stand at the window
uncertain why you entered in the first place.

Forty Days of This

by Jeffrey Utzinger

She washes her face, dabs it dry with a towel as I watch over her shoulder, attempting to shave, both of us watching the image of how each appears to themselves, the opposite of how we appear to the world, and though she's beautiful there in the mirror, she applies a light base, rubs blush on the cheek bone, the thick black mascara to lashes, a subtle eye shadow that makes me realize I wasn't aware she wore any at all, and though I'm transfixed by her face, I stop to rinse the razor as she steps out of the way, and I miss what I love the most, the pursed lips ready to receive the red waxy lipstick, catching only the tissue floating to the waste basket—a kiss suspended and falling, and then gone. I look up to see that she's smiling over my shoulder, our images reversed, and I turn to kiss, reversing the image again, and as she puts her hands to my face to rub the smooth skin, I touch my lips to the tip of her mask. We're unusually close, sharing this space in the mirror; we've been together long enough that we're more likely to seek our own time in the morning, but we're out of our element, staying at her brother and his wife's apartment in New Orleans. We arrived in the city to rows of young, Black girls bearing down, kicking spandex legs high, adorned in silver sequins, ruffled skirts and bright bows, their leader twirling a baton. We joined the parade in medias res. Stepped into the street on the heels of the glitter girl's last swagger and dance. Trombones and cymbal crash of the marching band swelled, the final note of "Iko, Iko," talkin' bout Hey now (hey now) blended into an unfamiliar tune, with a hint of a Latin beat. I stood in the middle of a blacktop street so narrow cars would have to drive half in the ditch to pass, beneath a canopy of oak tree branches. A tractor with goal posts mounted to the front, painted yellow and blue, rolled lazily by, not at all a threat to the twirling, cheering squad, but enough to keep the parents and sponsors and a few exhausted girls with their pom poms hanging at their sides who were lagging behind, moving at a reasonable pace. I've moved at a reasonable pace through the preceding nights and days. It's been two, maybe three; I've lost track of time. Late nights. Early mornings. Heavy sleep with no dreams. We did our own dance on Friday in Austin, kicking drawers shut, holding paperwork at bay, and spinning out the door early to drive like mad for the Mardi Gras. Christa grew up in Baton Rouge, and this celebration along the Mississippi, fit for such a wild, muddy river, is nothing new for her. I've never been however, and at first, I didn't want to come. I'm loath to spend a weekend away from the country where we live in a small town, on an acre of land, surrounded by trees near the Colorado River. During the week we drive two hours round trip each day to work in the city, so the thought of driving for hours to relax, smacked of madness, along with the sleeping in guest beds, eating what others choose, spending all waking hours talking with people. Travel brings out the beast who usually sleeps, and he's prone to lash out. It gets ugly. I'd also expected scorching heat, projectile vomit, crushing crowds and overwhelming fatigue, but my first glimpse of a parade was two

blocks from a university which we passed after parking along a residential street lined with hundred year old mansions that looked brand new with immaculate lawns and gladiolas in bloom. I hadn't expected to get close enough to the floats to reach out and touch the rider's hands, and in many ways, my first glimpse reminded me of a small town parade. And soon after we arrived, Christa spotted her brother and squeezed my hand, laughed, and pulled me from the path of the yellow and blue tractor, forward to the curb into the shade among spectators yelling and waving their arms. My sister-in-law strung beads over our heads, and her husband handed me a beer. Her family was lounging in a grassy median beneath trees, waving for us to join them like we all lived in the neighborhood and had just walked from our house. I had expected chaos, but found it natural to blend into the crowd, to fall into easy conversation with strangers while men in ludicrous rubber masks or with scarves across their mouths hurled throws, plastic cups, and doubloons. I hung back that first afternoon, believing the trinkets were for children, but each time a float passed, the adults rushed forward, waving their arms, so I inched forward and caught my first strand, lightweight and green. It circled around two fingers and I felt a lightness, an understanding, almost a relief. My brother-in-law handed me another beer as I slipped the beads around Christa's neck. A plastic cup hit me in the back of the head, and I felt better than I'd felt in some time. I didn't know, the first afternoon, how addictive all of this would become, didn't know I'd want the span of time to stretch on for forty days or more, but began to understand when six or seven floats had passed and suddenly, the first parade was over, and I felt the child-like disappointment. We'd arrived too late for this one, but it was only the first of many parades we'd join. And though nobody spoke of plans or emerged from the crowd as a leader, we began to move as one; at first I thought towards the parade's mid-point, so we could revisit the marching bands' tunes or heckle the float-riders with "hey mister," but it was more like movement on a raft in a river, being carried towards an uncertain destination, lulled by the sounds and the sway. A movement I slipped into with ease at that moment, and have followed for the duration of our stay. We came to rest on the steps of an enormous white stucco apartment with a narrow stairwell, lined with a cold iron rail that spiraled to the top. It smelled of mildew but the people ascending and descending, drinks in hand and laughing, made the atmosphere crackle, the hallway sparkle and shine. I don't remember who lived there, or even if the one I'm remembering was the first we visited that day—our sister-in-law has friends and family spread all over the city. The houses and apartments we have visited are all tiny, but we've gladly squeezed inside. A double bed with several lounging people usually sits near the door. Mimosas and fried turkey are crammed on narrow kitchen counters. Love seats pushed next to tables on which sit plates of ham, potato salad, crab dip, and tortilla chips threatening to push small TVs over the edge. A narrow hallway usually leads to other rooms full of more people, more alcohol, more food. An ever-present line for the bathroom whose end is never sure circles the room, but I can fall into conversation with someone at some point, and eventually be granted a turn. At one stop a man told me there was beer in the bathtub, so I waited in line, used the facilities, and grabbed a beer. When I emerged the guy said you'd better get two. And I did. Dionysus has moved through the day into darkness, handing me bottle after beer after bourbon, making me think I can drink like a young man again. And I have.

Tonight we leave for our final parade with the moon so high and full following over our shoulders through the black silhouette of tree branches and street signs as we walk through neighborhoods that rose up beautiful and white. Christa's hand is as warm in mine as I imagine the hot burning stars to be resting in the folds of the sky so clear and midnight blue. The bourbon and water that has replaced my blood reminds me I'm so much in love, makes me fall back on the sentimental phrase, makes me skip and talk too loud. We cross railroad tracks and our group reconvenes to merge in the crowds lining the streets to catch a glimpse of another parade. We catch the parade in preparation, still and churning as though it's been dammed. The source of the stream that will wind its way through the Big Easy, carrying lights and masked men on ornate floats made of flowers, plastic and papier-mâché. Herculean forms, smiling gypsies, mermaids. The men aboard talk, swill beer from silver cans, pulling handfuls of beads—purple, yellow, and green—from boxes and bags they discard in the street, a casual preparation for a full night of work. We move, our pool of relatives and friends through this sea of people; we've arrived too late, lingered too long over cocktails and light conversation, the kind that moves through a day so relaxed you haven't noticed the time, the kind possible only when strangers are mingled with family, and nothing of import needs to be sorted. Too late to really carve out the perfect spot on the curb. A family friend who's a lawyer and collector of cowboy boots, a man who always wears slacks and a sports jacket, pulls cigars from his coat and begins passing them around. I draw the flame in as the smoke fills my mouth. My wife wanders off with her sister-in-laws' parents, back to view the static floats. I watch as they admire, then grow closer, waving to the men in masks. Christa pulls the band from her hair, shakes her long blond ponytail loose, and waves to the men on the top tier. A swirl of large white beads move heavenward and swing down around her outstretched arm. Her movements and laughter, rare revelations of her coy nature, the flirtation with strangers, moves me to the year we met and I began falling asleep at nights with her image in my head. I look back down the alley of the static parade, swarms of people milling in conversation, clinging to keep warm, and the colored lights that have begun to flicker on floats, on street posts, and from glow-in-the-dark charms children are swinging on strings. The first float begins to move. An enormous cheer erupts. I find Christa and we move back to the group. The crowds are like tides swelling, our hands shooting upwards like flecks of foam, lashing out at nothing really—plastic beads, Frisbees, and trinkets. It makes sense to reach out the first afternoon, when the first float passes by and you stand there naked waiting to be adorned; you want the beads to show you belong here, you're a part of this swell, but midway through if it's too hot, and you've had too much beer, and bodies are pressing too close, enough to drown you, it doesn't make sense to roll your arms like a drowning man—it's not lifesavers we're grasping; it's more weight. And midway through your stay, your second or third parade, if beads hang like mill stone around your neck which has turned bright pink from where sweat bled a cheap set into your skin, and hundreds, already procured, lie in a tangled seaweed glut on the back seat, strung around the rear view, draped across the chair and under the bed, or a boxful sits in someone's apartment, removed to ease the burden, and forgotten in a peaceful stupor walking home, then it seems ludicrous to cry out for more. But when the float passes by, and there's a lull, the void seems insufferable. The crowd recedes to catch its breath, the road and curbs like the beach

at low tide littered with beads that miraculously sifted through hands and touched down. Nearly no one stoops to pick up these treasures. There's something magical about snatching it mid-air. It's a tradition that comes from Spain, but its actions seem so American. The thrill of the wide receiver. The hunger for more of the same. This annual apocalyptic celebration—one more sin before the beginning of Lent— somehow seems out of order to me. Forty days of abstinence, and self-denial should be followed by forty days of this. This masquerade seems more of a chance, for an evening, to forget your failures and fears. It's a chance to move through an evening without anyone questioning whether the visage you wear is real, or if you're only holding a mask. It's an evening of levity, weightless illusion, surrounded by beauty with no time constraints. It's a chance for the things, real or imagined, that separate a family to evaporate in brisk coastal air. And if it's just an excuse to eat and drink more, work less for a few days, then well, that seems okay too. Religious ritual and pagan rites aside, it's easy to get lost in a parade. And this one is winding down. The wind feels a bit more brisk, our steps slowed and speech sparse. As the crowd disperses, a discussion ensues about where we should eat, and though I'm suddenly overcome with hunger, I think I'd rather curl up next to Christa and sleep. We cross the street to where a line of men in orange jumpsuits with white, plastic bags slung over their shoulders have emerged from the shadows. A man with a whistle barks a command and the line of convicts move in methodical unison down the sidewalk, picking up trash. Every detail perfectly planned. A siren blares, and as we step out of the street, a paddy wagon big as a city bus bears down, red and blue flashing lights on top, and bright neon lights inside, lighting the faces of those who stepped out of line, faces more weary than afraid at the prospect of a night in jail. My brother-in-law yells go deep, and I trot back into the street, my feet feeling for the curb, my eyes over my shoulder. He rears back, lets the plush football fly. I lose it in a streetlight, catching instead a glimpse of a beautiful woman who's become haloed in the street cleaner's spray. A boy intercepts the pass and runs off. I stand and watch, amazed at the stranger she's become. At the beauty of water and refracted false light. Bells from a fool's cap jingle, and for a moment I pretend we are saved.

Southward Bound on a Mississippi Steamer, 1863 excerpted from Lottie Deno: A Novel (2024)

by Frank Thurmond

I finally booked passage for myself and Mary on a shiny new paddle wheel, triple-deck stern-wheeler christened the New Orleans (after Robert Fulton's first commercial steamboat fifty years earlier). I traveled to Pittsburgh with Mary, where the New Orleans was docked on schedule. From there, the paddle steamer would head south down the Ohio River until reaching the Mississippi at Cairo, Illinois, and thence downriver through Memphis and Natchez and finally to New Orleans after an almost three-month voyage of over eighteen hundred miles. One cold but sunny morning in early spring 1863, I found myself starting up the boarding gangplank with Mary. We must have been some sight too: a petite nineteen-year-old girl with flaming red sunlit locks climbing the platform with an ebony giant of a woman by my side. Lugging our own respective baggage, too!

* * *

I knew our route would take us past Warsaw, Kentucky, and that we would probably stop there, so I would have to be careful to stay hidden to avoid being spotted. This was made easier on account of the women passengers being separated from the men for the most part and confined to second-class "deck passage"—along with immigrants and servants. I had other plans, however: I had spotted an elderly gentleman whom I recognized from the poker club in Detroit and—in hopes of an invite to a private saloon in the upper deck—formed a plan to ingratiate myself to him at the first opportunity. Women were, of course, generally kept as far as possible from bars, following the outrageous notion that ladies and liquor should never mix company. Despite such chauvinistic policies, my little scheme worked brilliantly, and for the remainder of the trip, I worked the poker table to both the delight—and the increasing dismay—of the gentlemen passengers as the lone lady gambler in their midst. Not all were gentlemen, mind you: There were ruffians aplenty aboard our ship, too, some of them professional gamblers who made their livings preying on affluent yet naïve passengers. It was the professional riverboat gambler you had to watch out for, though. They were as mean and crude and as dirty at cards as they come, and all they ever did was cheat. I tried my best to avoid these, as their wary eyes could easily spot the most subtle sleights of hand that Daddy had taught me. (Fortunately, thanks also to Daddy, I knew most of their tricks too.) I set my sights instead on the many young and chivalrous gentlemen on board. I learned to use my wiles to charm them into a round of poker, only to fleece those innocent pigeons for all they had. In this

way, we made our progress slowly

south, with me raking in cash at the tables while Mary waited patiently below decks for me to return and take her along for my afternoon perambulations above decks and—when docked—at the various landings along the way. (I would never stroll alone without Mary, especially having observed more than one sinister-eyed ruffian follow my movements with a certain lusty malice, but one look in turn from Mary’s evil eye could intimidate the devil himself.) Despite our ship being Union-controlled, Mary was forced to stay on the lower decks unless escorted by me. But between us, she knew that—in my mind—she was now free as a bird and that it was just a question of biding our time until I no longer had to play the ruse of being a Southern slave heiress. Yet, with the palpable tension on board among fellow passengers from both North and South, we knew we had best play our expected roles for now. A few days past a brief stop in Cincinnati, I saw the familiar old landing at Warsaw. We stayed discreetly below decks in our cabin till, at the piercing whine of a loud whistle, we felt the jolt of the giant paddle wheel launch our ship again with a sudden roar of steam power. I had watched anxiously through a porthole window to see if anyone I recognized boarded there. Nobody did, but what I did see were troops of soldiers in dark blue patrolling along the dock. Clearly, Warsaw was now under Federal occupation, and I shuddered to think what might be happening back home on the plantation. I could only pray for them and hope to have news from Ellie Mae upon arrival in New Orleans. As I learned later, this was also the reason for our safe passage downriver. By that time, Union forces generally patrolled the rivers, with garri- sons at the various ports and gunboats controlling river traffic to protect goods being transported North. And so our vessel trudged its steady ten miles per hour pace downstream, a relatively uneventful journey once we got past the roaring rapids at the treacherous Falls of the Ohio just past Louisville. There—at the same place where Lewis and Clark had once met up in 1803 to plan that famous little expedition of their own—the Ohio River drops twenty-six feet in the course of a mile over a rise of limestone bedrock. At one point, our hardy captain feared the water might be too low to proceed. But once he and his crew had navigated us safely through, we continued apace until finally meeting the mighty Mississippi where the Ohio converges with it just south of Cairo, Illinois. At that point, the brown, sediment-laden water of the Ohio flows into the greenish water of the Mississippi River. Also green were the distant riverbanks, where luscious pine forests bounded us on both sides. Looking out at this beautiful scenery, I hummed an old folk ballad I had heard once in the Appalachians.

* * *

Now darlin,’ my darlin’ Don’t tell me no lie, Tell me, where did you stay last night?
In the pines, in the pines Where the sun never shines, I shivered when the cold wind blowed.

* * *

There, where the landscape suddenly opened up gloriously on both sides of the vast river, I first felt an invigorating sense of genuine freedom. I loved to stand in the open air of the foredeck in the shadow of the pilot house, Mary by my side, and inhale the perfume of flowers lining the rails—pungent gardenia and sweet azalea blossoms. A frantic whirl of tiny hummingbird wings made a pleasant change from the accu- tomed whine of mosquitoes and gnats. Nights were especially magical, the way the dark roiling water behind our ship’s paddle glinted moon- light in its foam. In the darkness across the river, the glow-worms big as lanterns illumined the

night. Yet nothing compared to looking up at the night sky, where on clear nights, the stars appeared like a billion pinpricks in some cosmic blanket through which the light of Heaven beamed and drew enchanted constellations. On such nights, the sultry, humid summer air was often pierced with music when the joyful banter of banjos and mandolins on deck would sometimes compete for our attention with the more sonorous melodies of the saloon piano. But it was not always such clear sailing: Sometimes, a summer storm would announce itself with a sudden clap of thunder, followed by the swift patter of rain on the water below from which steam would rise up as if the river were on fire. But when lightning began to strike, and the clouds emptied their giant buckets upon us in torrential rain, Mary and I hightailed it below deck rather than putting too much stock in Ben Franklin's lightning rods adorning the ship! When we reached Memphis, our captain had a new concern. This part of the Mississippi was notoriously dangerous for steamboats such as ours, ever since the New Madrid earthquake of 1811 had devastated the region and raised the many perilous snags along the banks. These sunken trees, with their twisted branches and roots, could lurk unseen just beneath the water and impale passing ships with deadly consequences. (Just such a fate had indeed befallen our own ship's namesake; a hidden snag had sunk the very first New Orleans steamship in 1814.) However, the savvy captain carefully navigated through the marked shallows whilst still managing to dock at the Memphis port. The Federals had occupied this highly strategic river gateway—once among the South's largest cotton (and slave) markets—since defeating the Confederates in the naval battle of '62, so Mary and I were able safely to disembark for a much-desired respite on dry land. While there, I did manage to join a small group of Union soldiers I spotted playing poker outside near the ship. One of them clearly took a shine to me, too—until, that is, I had shone him up at cards and emptied his wallet. The parting look he shot at me might have warned me to watch out for him downriver, especially after overhearing that the men were part of a cavalry regiment heading south to New Orleans themselves. But I still had much to learn about sore losers (especially when they were insecure men losing to women!). In the meantime, our next visit to shore was very nearly tragic. The river seemed to grow ever wider as we journeyed southward, often past large islands midstream. At the point where we reached the confluence of the Mississippi and Arkansas rivers, there was a landing situated right on the Arkansas Delta. The riverport town there was called Napoleon, and it was there that we stopped again. I read long afterward how that same town would soon suffer a disastrous fate. After the occupying Union troops dug a channel through the narrow land separating the Mississippi and Arkansas upriver to aid their gunboats, the town of Napoleon would eventually be entirely submerged by river floodwaters. Mark Twain later wrote about it in one of my favorite books, his *Life on the Mississippi*, where he described the ghostly image of floating over the town he once knew and loved: Yes, it was an astonishing thing to see the Mississippi rolling between unpeopled shores and straight over the spot where I used to see a good big self-complacent town twenty years ago . . . a town no more—swallowed up, vanished, gone to feed the fishes; nothing left but a fragment of a shanty and a crumbling brick chimney! Yet for us that day, Napoleon was still a thriving, bustling community, and it was also where Mary and I both had a near-fatal fright. The Captain informed us that our stay would be brief—just long enough to load some much-needed supplies and fuel for the boilers—

but that passengers could have the afternoon to stroll about the town. I was walking along the bank rather briskly, my colorful parasol in hand, until I was ahead of Mary a piece despite her long stride. Suddenly, I heard her shout from behind in her deep voice, almost a scream even. She yelled, "Stop, Miss Carlotta! Watch your step!" I looked down to see a large water moccasin snake on the bank right in front of me. I screamed, but before I knew what hit me, I was flung to the ground with one sweep of Mary's strong arm. I looked up just in time to see a long shape with numerous dark bands attached to Mary's hand. It was the largest such pit viper I had ever seen. It was sunning itself on the bank when I nearly stepped on it, but Mary saw it first, and—after pushing me aside—threw herself upon the serpent right before it struck. The snake now dangled from her hand as she tried to free herself from the grasp of its sharp fangs. The cat-like pupils seemed to glare at her hatefully, and I knew she would now consider herself forever cursed and under the "snake-eye" spell. The snake finally let go after she pinned its writhing body to the ground with her foot. She then quickly grasped a sharp-edged rock near at hand and smashed the diamond-shaped head before tossing the now limp, scaly body far out into the river. Despite the pain in her hand, the first thing Mary did was rush over to my side. At that moment, I felt a new sense of deep devotion toward Mary as a loyal friend. And I knew she had probably just saved my life at the risk of her own. "You all right, Miss Carlotta?" "I'm fine, thank you Mary. But look at your hand, you must see the ship's doctor at once!"

* * *

For the next few days, Mary lay in her bed below deck suffering from a high fever and hallucinations. Fortunately for her, the on-board doctor was something of an expert in treating snake bites—particularly those of the river variety, having seen his share as a ship's doctor—and he had responded to my urgent pleas by attending to her promptly. He said, "She'll have to lose her little finger to keep the venom from spreading. But if she recovers from the fever, she might still live." "Might? I don't like the sound of that! How long before we know, doctor?" "She will likely be bedridden till we reach New Orleans. But, with luck, she will make a full recovery." "With luck?"

* * *

I remained, for the most part, with Mary in our quarters for some time afterward, tending to her wound and praying for her recovery—though I did venture up to the deck occasionally to observe the sights. As we drifted further south, the years of recent warfare were all the more evident. There were many burnt and empty fields along both sides of the river, where the cotton and other crops had been abandoned to rot. There were recent battlefields, such as Vicksburg, where the muddy trenches appeared still stained with blood, lined with hundreds upon hundreds of temporary graves with small wooden crosses. And sometimes, I could see empty plantation houses in the distance. Some were still quite beautiful, but others had been burned to the ground, with occasional chimneys and Greek revival pedestals and columns standing like ancient ruins from some distant land. These images brought back my worries about the situation in Kentucky. At such times, I would grasp the rails tightly and say a silent prayer for my mother and sister, anxious for news from home. At Natchez, many beautiful estates along the river had survived. There, the Confederates surrendered early in the war without a fight soon after the fall of New Orleans, and many of the old mansions were now occupied by Union troops. (General Grant himself occupied the fa-

mous Rosalie Mansion as his headquarters in ## 1863.) Soon after passing through Natchez, Mary seemed to make a miraculous recovery and was soon on her feet again, joining me on deck to view the changing landscape. If her bandaged hand troubled her, she stoically ignored it. The only pain she showed was from within, as I could see in her eyes when we passed numerous refugee camps where thousands of freed slaves struggled to survive in destitute living conditions. President Lincoln had first issued the Emancipation Proclamation in '62, and it had taken effect on the first of January 1863. Federal troops were now busy closing down slave markets and liberating captives from the horrors of human slavery at each city they captured; yet while the war still raged, they were largely still confined to these sordid camps. Many of the freedmen eagerly joined in the fighting against their former masters and were organized into separate regiments of their own. Whenever I looked at Mary now, I felt an ever-deepening sense of guilt for having been raised in a so-called "civilized" society that could condone such monstrous barbarity. As we journeyed on down into Louisiana, we also saw occasional bands of Indians—men, women, and children—watching us from the river banks, their eyes filled with a depth of sadness such as I had never seen. At night, we could sometimes see their campfires glowing red through the woods. The still evening air was often punctuated with a solemn drumbeat, and the melancholy cadence of their sacred chants drifted across the moonlit water. They, too, were displaced, mostly remnants of Choctaw and Cherokee tribes forcibly removed during the shameful Trail of Tears travesty, perpetrated by President Andrew Jackson and continued as hostile policy toward our native peoples by Van Buren and subsequent presidents. It was only later (after I finally reached the Texas frontier in the midst of the Texas-Indian wars) that I fully understood the true nature of their struggle to keep their ancestral lands and way of life.

* * *

Baton Rouge was our last major stop before the long sternwheeler journey finally approached its conclusion at New Orleans. The landscape changed drastically as we ventured deeper south into the swampy regions of Louisiana. One misty morning, as Mary and I stood on the stern of the Texas deck enjoying a cool breeze infused with the sweet scent of wild honeysuckle and wisteria blooming along the bank, a large dark shape surfaced in the water just below us. As I peered over the railing for a closer look, I jumped back, startled to see staring back at me a pair of sinister-looking yellow eyes. Just then, a young man with eyes even darker than my own stepped up beside me and said in a thick Cajun drawl: "Don't let them gators get y'all!" He pointed toward the bank, where we could see through the clearing fog several more enormous alligators lying in the sand. "My heavens!" I smiled at the fellow and lightly touched his arm. "I don't recall ever seeing such critters back home in Kentucky." He said, "You ain't in Kentucky no more, lady." Then he winked at me before sauntering off toward the gambling parlor, and Mary glanced at me with a knowing smile. I had just gained a gullible new customer for my card table.

* * *

That's where the "sore loser" I mentioned earlier comes in, when I learned the hard way about the perils of playing too many of Daddy's old tricks at once for the sake of winning at all costs. Our steamboat finally docked at the landing in New Orleans, and we had just stepped off the boarding ramp with our luggage when I heard a voice behind me, this time an angry shout.

“Hey, lady! Hold it right there, you cheatin’ little whore!” I turned around to see the Union soldier from Memphis who had frightened me with his appearance. He was pointing at me while speaking angrily to a group of soldiers. I tried to remain calm while looking around for a means of escape. There was none. We were quickly surrounded by soldiers, and they were all now staring at me with looks of hostile intent.

* * *

Several things now happened at once. First, the piercing whine of our steamer’s whistle sounded above the deck from where we had just descended. I attempted to step backward onto the plank and head back up in hopes of finding safety aboard ship. But the way was shut off by a wooden gate now that all passengers had disembarked. I looked frantically around for possible help but saw naught but distant stevedores busily unloading cargo. At that moment, the soldier lunged forward with the most frightening look I had ever seen. “I finally figured out how you done it!” he shouted as he strode toward me. “You was dealin’ dirty from the bottom of your deck. That’s how you stole all my money. And now I aim to whip you good for it!” He reached out to grab me, but at that moment, Mary leapt into his way and stood firm, towering before him like some Amazonian warrior. Mary shouted, “No you ain’t, mistah!” She grabbed the young man with her good hand and dragged him with her powerful arm onto the dock. Before he even knew what had hit him, Mary threw him out into the muddy waters of the river, just as she had done with that snake up in Arkansas. I looked back with dread at the other soldiers surrounding us, fearing their angry retribution. But to my great relief, they were all laughing hilariously. One of them shouted, “Let’s get a drink!” At that, they all quickly departed in a rush to the taverns of New Orleans. I sighed with a deep breath and turned back to Mary. She was still keeping an intent watch on the soldier as he floundered in the river before finally stumbling back on land sopping-wet in his blue uniform. He took one look at us and hastened off in the opposite direction. We never saw him again. sts

Editor’s note: Lottie Deno: A Novel of the Civil War & the American Southwest is now available from Parkhurst Brothers Publishers (2024).

Four Poems

by Claude Wilkinson

Nightfall

When as much
as a gibbous moon
slants shadows
of sweet gum
and poplar limbs
across the tool shed
out back in ways
reminiscent of
Burton Callicott paintings,

between dusk and dawn,
while I'm watching
for raccoon action,

especially for that
rare albino who
showed up foraging
two nights in a row,

the other blessing
is listening spellbound
among a host of peepers
and perpetual nighthawks
thrashing against
the velvet hours.

Our Pear Tree

If Eden's tree of life wasn't destroyed
by that mighty Flood
ages ago, there are perhaps somewhere

shifts of cherubim hovering
around its limbs in a lushly secret forest,
checking their blazing sword

now and again so that the odd,
lost and errant moth
or adventurous aborigine mightn't bite off

another curse and be
changed into wanton gods. But not
bequeathed from on high with sentries

of angels, our pear tree, on the other hand,
was mostly used as food
for my father's few head of half-Holsteins

and for my mother's bounty
of preserves, although it may be as close as I've
come to understanding the everlasting,

as it just kept offering full branches
of cadmium-green spheres
worthy of Cézanne, even after it was getting on,

had caught fire once, and its
trunk had been gutted by at least two lightning
strikes, even after the death of our faith

in its will to bloom one more season,
though flourishing spread over
its roots and wildly about the rest of the yard

in a patchwork of periwinkles
and showy jonquils. When we moved some years
later, the tree had dwindled to what

seemed like a shell of bark, yet we were told by
the new tenants there that, summer
after summer, it was still bearing beautiful fruit.

Providence

Being the son of even
a jackleg preacher,

Ricky Anderson

should've known better,

yet in our boyhood lull
of late August heat

not long before
sumacs would redden,

coming upon a
passel of hogs sprawled

under their shed,
he was possessed

to strip the leaves
from a willow switch

and plow into them
for fun. Though

in their squealing escape,
two or three bumped

the rusty panel where
a globe of yellow jackets

was quietly nesting
but quickly rose in

formation to throw
their whole golden veil

over Ricky's head and face,
and every other bit

of uncovered flesh
they found till he

must've looked similar
to Christ his Lord

after being scourged
and crowned with thorns.

Repast

As for both wake
and funeral, you go with
the best of intentions,
determined not to bring up
anything to do with feeding tubes,
or your opinion on chemo
and life-support, or clichés

about it being better
to go quickly—say,
nodding in an easy chair
after a good day on the lake—
than to suffer vampire nurses,
the indignity of bedpans.

You hope, for the moment,
not to blurt any unsurety
of closure through faith,
meaning instead to concentrate
on the recompense of casseroles,
the lavish glazes on cakes,

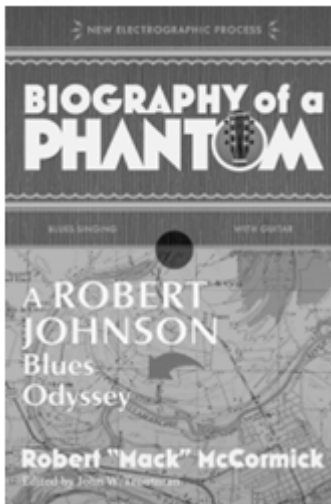
subduing all thoughts
of how there seemed to be
a little too much rouge
on the cheeks, how cloudlike
and eternal the casket's taffeta
looked, when, inevitably,

over an awful pause,
and in the twinkling of an eye,
something like the insipid
"you just never know"
has slipped past your lips.

Reviews

Biography of a Phantom: A Robert Johnson Blues Odyssey. By Robert “Mack” McCormick, edited by John W. Troutman. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2023. Pp. xxx + 232, editor’s preface, introduction, afterword, notes, acknowledgments, index, photographs, maps, illustrations, \$30, hardback)

I have literally been waiting to read this book for two decades. Other blues fans and researchers have anticipated its publication for twice that time. McCormick completed a number of versions of the manuscript in the 1970s, but several factors delayed the book’s publication. They include copyright disputes, controversy over content, tension over ownership of intellectual property, questions about fieldwork ethics, and McCormick’s own challenges with mental illness. Consequently, the manuscript of *Biography of a Phantom* was put on a shelf until 2015, with interest in publication an option only after McCormick’s death. We are fortunate that when his estate was settled, arrangements made it possible to publish the book and also release his massive amount of fieldwork materials to the Smithsonian Institution. Editors and curators with the Smithsonian have made the book’s publication possible, and they have also released digitized recordings of McCormick’s intensive and valuable field recordings. The results are a treat both for those who have long awaited the book and those newly acquainted with the author’s work. The book’s contents as well as the recordings are also an important contribution to scholarship.



Robert Johnson was a phantom to McCormick when he began his fieldwork in the late 1960s. He was largely unknown following his death in 1938 near Greenwood, Mississippi. The 1961 release of *King of the Delta Blues Singers* by Columbia Records was the catalyst that eventually literally put Johnson on the charts. A colorful, but highly romanticized, album cover sparked blues revivalists to pick the record from the bins, British blues rockers covered Johnson’s tunes, and Frank Driggs’s

highly speculative and even more highly romanticized liner notes cast Johnson as a legendary even Faustian figure within blues history. Driggs cast him as a mysterious figure, embodying quintessential elements of the archetypal bluesman. The legend of Johnson's diabolical pact has been totally debunked, yet the Crossroads remains vibrant in blues imagery, even commemorated in sculpture in Clarksdale. Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch's 2003 *Robert Johnson Lost and Found* is the definitive critique of the Faustian association with Johnson. The writers reveal how the imagery is related to major misunderstandings of blues as well as major presence of stereotypical imagery within blues. They end their critique by challenging researchers to find the real Robert Johnson and not simply perpetuate the mythol-

ogized imagery. McCormick's contributions help researchers to discover what we can know about his life history. By his book's end, McCormick gives us a portrait of a musician who readers recognize far more as a real man rather than a phantom. McCormick's contribution is an excellent addition to other more recent biographies. Some of his research is excluded in *Biography of a Phantom* due to copyright disputes and challenges over who owned the rights to the research materials. We do have major omissions from McCormick's original manuscripts, and the book's editor, John Troutman, explains how readers can discover the content of what had to be excised. Despite some major editorial cuts, the resulting manuscript provides readers with an excellent book. McCormick brings readers into his own efforts to discover biographical information on Johnson, and he writes vivid accounts of his adventures in finding relatives and friends of the musician in the decades after Johnson's death. McCormick discovered that many individuals knew Johnson well and that they could offer vivid memories of their interactions with the bluesman. The phantom imagery dissipates in McCormick's book, and we gain a much better sense of who Johnson really was as a musician and as an individual. *Biography of a Phantom* requires that readers engage the book's back story. John Troutman's preface sets the stage for McCormick's twelve chapters. McCormick follows a thread that leads him from Hazelhurst to Robinsonville, Mississippi, with stop-overs at points in between. The trope of the *Odyssey* works well with McCormick emerging as a late twentieth-century Telemachus in search of Odysseus. Throughout the narrative, McCormick demonstrates his skill as fieldworker, researcher, and writer. He begins with his efforts to learn about Johnson in his hometown, but it's clear that the bluesman spent little time in Hazelhurst. McCormick then takes readers to numerous towns and cities mentioned in the lyrics of blues songs and identified with Johnson, a process that results in only scant information. Through diligence coupled with serendipity, McCormick finds his way to Robinsonville. His careful research blends, and fortuitous, even quirky, leads bring him right into the neighborhood that served as Johnson's home base. There he meets a full cast of characters who provide him with a wealth of memories and stories. The fieldworker's journey and his descriptions add to the narrative. Readers also gain an excellent presentation of Johnson's life history. The book is well worth the wait and is a major contribution to blues history. It also was highly edited. There are major sections that McCormick wrote about Johnson's parents and his own family life. Readers will find sections that make large leaps in biography that display obvious omissions. This information was in numerous versions of McCormick's original manuscripts, but they do not appear in this volume. Reasons for the editorial deletions are thoroughly discussed in Troutman's Afterword. Some of the problems are connected to the need to avoid republication of material that is already in print. Other lapses of biographic detail stem from major copyright disputes. They reveal ethical problems that resulted in major court cases. The commoditization of photographic imagery, interview material, and other resources became especially rich when Columbia Records released a box set of complete recordings in 1990. McCormick had made earlier claims to the rights of the material, but Columbia was successful in the legal battle. When the compilation sold over a million copies, the claims for intellectual ownership obviously became even more pronounced. The award to the Johnson estate took a decade to be settled, with compensation awarded to

Johnson's son, Claud Johnson. Tensions remained among relatives of Robert Johnson, and intellectual property rights resulted in other publications that played a role in preventing McCormick from publishing his book. Troutman critiques McCormick's actions within this dispute. He holds him and other researchers accountable for their actions. At the same time, we also see a sympathetic discussion of the struggles that McCormick faced with his failing health and mental illness. After McCormick died, his estate placed the fieldwork, manuscripts, and collectanea into the holdings of the Smithsonian's archives. Troutman's careful and conscientious editorial and curatorial efforts are also an important part of McCormick's story, and we are fortunate to have this important legacy made available for the future.

--Gregory Hansen

Soon Done with the Crosses. By Claude Wilkinson. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2023. Pp. 92. \$10.00, paper)

"If there is a seal on southerners that identifies them as peculiar to all other people, it's quite likely our spiritualness," Claude Wilkinson remarks in *Southern Writers on Writing* (ed. Susan Cushman, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018, p. 125). Citing passages from his first poetry collection, *Reading the Earth* (1998), he suggests the seal was upon him from the start, especially in his perception of nature. "Without the poems' prevalent inclination toward belief, all they might reveal is a patient way of looking" (p. 126), he explains. In fact, Wilkinson is a scrupulous observer of the natural world; and the woodcut of a dead bird on the cover of *Soon Done with the Crosses*, his fifth collection, anticipates the lifeless feathers, bill, crown, "tarsi" or leg bones, and "blind / but still bright eye" (p. 6) in his "Cock Robin, in Memoriam"—a much darker elegy than its nursery-rhyme counterpart, "Who Killed Cock Robin?"



Worse than the bleak February scene in Wilkinson's poem is the spiritual winter of his first-person speaker, who "had waited, and waited, / and waited on God" (p. 6) for three days before spotting the bird beneath his window. Here, Wilkinson evokes the Bible account of Jesus's followers arriving at the empty tomb three days after his death on the cross; but the closing image of a "chalky outline / of transfiguration" (p. 6) unexpectedly relates the bird with its nimbus of snow to

the glorified Christ. The book cover, too, juxtaposes death with a hope that is repeated in the gospel music of the epigraph: "We soon shall be done with the crosses / We soon shall be done with the troubles of the world" (p. v). Wilkinson's sixty free-verse poems speak of multiple worldly crosses, including war, prostitution, the autism of a friend's child, a saint's martyrdom, a grandmother's dementia, and a mother's "soft hymns" that could be "gorgeous with afterlife," even though they "always sounded like tears" (p. 26). Readers are apt to identify the poet as the narrator who shares his thoughts throughout the collection, but one poem is unmistakably autobiographical. In "Posed beside the Lyceum Marker Commemorating James

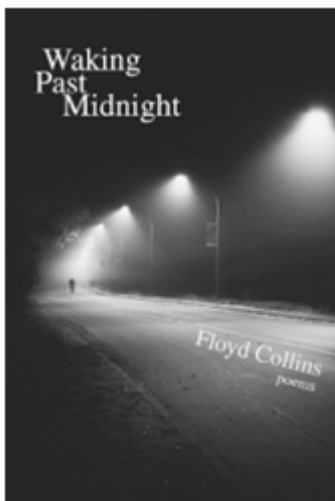
Meredith's Enrollment at Ole Miss in 1962," the award-winning Wilkinson—honored as "a visiting scholar" (p. 33)—is "goaded to pleasantness for P.R. photos" on the same campus Meredith integrated four decades earlier in the face of much crueler goading. Long after his own enrollment there in the late 1970s, Wilkinson remembers "the tall, stunning / white girl who always glanced / whenever we passed each other" (p. 33); but he remembers also how futile it was "then" to dream of "waking on misty mornings / to share ripe figs and tea," even in countries "like France or Greece." The scene changes dramatically in the next poem, "London Rain," where the narrator is far from Mississippi, "having croissants and blood sausage / with a woman from Australia" (p. 34) and discussing their individual travel plans instead of the previous night's riot "over yet another black man / murdered by police." The breakfasting couple is glad to be away from the "incessant summer heat" of their home country, and the English rain parallels the dreams of misty mornings at tea with a beautiful young white woman in the preceding poem. But there is no escape from crosses, as the city's heat of racial violence and the speaker's solitary journey to Stonehenge imply. *Soon Done with the Crosses* is not formally divided into sections; yet, as the successive poems at Ole Miss and in London hint, the new book is not a random array. Printed on facing pages, "Listening to Nina Simone Sing 'To Be Young, Gifted and Black'" and "Posed beside the Lyceum Marker" are more explicitly paired, exposing the terrible disparity between Black achievement and relentless racism in a similar four-stanza, thirty-line format. Several pages later, Wilkinson elaborates on motifs of music, suffering, and race with a trio of blues-related poems, ranging from the mock-epic mode of "Listening to 'Voodoo Child' While Imagining Sisyphus Instructing Jimi Hendrix for His Eternal Labor" to the exuberant wordplay of "Bluesman" and the poignancy of "Blueswoman," in which a "now frail figure / in sequined costume" sings "to low-down men / who love to roam" (p. 46). From sea horses to a Tennessee Walking Horse, animals are central figures in at least half of the poems; like "Cock Robin, in Memoriam," several works express a spiritual dimension through allusions to myth, art, music, natural history, and literature. "The Parable of the Snail" starts with the narrator's humorous outburst on the challenge of applying nature's lessons: "My! You're a sticky wicket / of examples of how I ought to be—" (p. 2). In contrast to the "humble" snail's silent and "nearly indiscernible pilgrimage" (p. 2), are the intrusions of creatures who caw, peck, and buzz later in the book in a three-parable sequence with comic religious references. Italics emphasize nature's urgency to convey its wisdom as the narrator struggles to interpret a croak of "Eureka!" (p. 63) in "The Parable of the Crow," a repeated "Knock, knock, knock!" (p. 64) in "The Parable of the Woodpecker," and a song defending "the screech of our decibels" (p. 66) in "The Parable of the Cicada." "Birds That Alight on Faith" introduces the book's most extended series: seven poems positioned about ten pages apart, each title beginning with the same two words. The narrator prays for a "thimbleful / of aerial surety" (p. 1) to help him follow a bird's example and "grasp those things / which never collapse / under the heft of this life." Despite each bird's fragility, these poems frequently serve as a counterweight for the volume's "heft" of pain. In "Birds That Sing in Winter," chilly sparrows are sustained by thoughts of spring and the "trusted promise" (p. 74) that they could not "fall without notice / even in such wincing gloom"; and "Birds That

Abide No Matter” concludes the sequence by thanking heaven for the meadowlark’s trust in providence. Nevertheless, in the six poems that follow, the griefs of animals, earth, and humans seem so endless that spiritual darkness is the inevitable subject of “Vigil,” the collection’s final poem. Wilkinson turns to Edward Hopper’s most famous painting as an analogue for “our being wake [sic] and about” (p. 89) in psychic distress at a late and lonely hour: “It’s ‘soon / I will be done with the crosses’ // since we are Hopper’s Nighthawks here, / snared in our own all-night café” In an eighteen-line sentence spread across six short stanzas, Wilkinson explicates “our” likeness to the only three customers in Hopper’s stark diner: the blue-suited businessmen who “obviously don’t know each other / or care to for that matter” and the woman who is “so pale and loveless she looks almost dead” (p. 89). Earlier in *Soon Done with the Crosses*, Wilkinson imagines how cicadas feel during their seventeen years of “cyclic jailing” (p. 65), and in this closing poem he keeps vigil with all who feel trapped in our own solitary snares.

--Joan Wylie Hall

Waking Past Midnight: Selected Poems. By Floyd Collins. (Nacogdoches, Texas: Stephen F. Austin University Press, 2023. Pp. 120, \$20.00, paperback)

When I first started reading Floyd Collins’s magisterial book of selected poems, *Waking Past Midnight*, my newsfeed was ablaze with tidings that Louise Glück, America’s most recent Nobel laureate in literature, had died. Eighty years is a goodly span, especially for one who remained prolific her entire life, and there will soon be an update to her most recent collected, which spanned forty years. In *Waking Past Midnight*, Floyd Collins offers a half-century worth of poems, the plums from three collections and two chapbooks that came out years apart on small presses. Now Stephen F. Austin State University Press has made available this selected volume, as well as a book of Collins’s critical essays, *The Living Artifact*.



Floyd Collins is a native of Mississippi who grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, where he played high school sports and began writing poems in his late teens. After graduating from Memphis State, he received his MFA and PhD from the University of Arkansas. His first two full-length collections, *Forecast* and *What Harvest*, a book focused on the battle of the Alamo and the men and women

caught in this maelstrom, were each separated by almost a decade, partly because Collins is a deliberate writer, but also, I suspect, because Collins has been one of the most prolific poetry critics of recent decades. Then it was more than a decade before *My Back Pages: The Teresa Poems* appeared from Stephen F. Austin State University Press. For fans of his work or those eager to discover a voice that has been in our midst for a long time without getting a lot of attention, *Waking Past Midnight* is a welcome entry among the welter of poetry books released on a weekly if not daily basis. Collins is no mere voice of the moment, but a craftsman who has honed

his skills to build poems meant for the long haul. Collins began publishing in his late teens and early twenties. This was in the early seventies, when many poets wrote in a hieratic, lyrical mode that Collins mastered early. Collins read deeply among the Spanish and Spanish-language poets who were only then, thanks to ambitious translators, coming to wide attention in America. But Collins, unlike some poets of the time, is always aware of landscape, and the imagery of West Tennessee, of rivers and even the Delta, and this imagery imbues his early poems with a gravity many of the poets of that time lack. Collins's early work is impressive enough that the reader wishes that he had avoided the stabs at surrealism that were also an earmark of the early 70s. Collins's forte is precise, at times meticulous, observation of the physical world, which often pulls the poem into metaphor, allowing something like revelation. So it's disappointing to see the first poem in the book, an ode to the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti, sporting ornamentation like this: "night after night / I wear a necklace bestowed by nightmare, / beads of blue phosphor and salt." These lines seem the anthemic flourish a young writer might commit, and these early poems are very much the poems of a young man, albeit a preternaturally gifted one. Still, the reference Collins makes to Alberti's "elegy for a man buried with his watch running" sticks, even forty years after first reading this poem. A central aspect of Collins's poetry has always been the physicality of the world he makes. Collins does not just see the physical world as a series of objective correlatives, images to spark our deepest thoughts, but for the things they are. The poem "Forecast," a twelve-line gem begins, "November is the tombstone / At a wheat field's edge." In a few words, Collins captures exactly the elegiac feeling of late fall, the look of fields broken and picked over after harvest, before the plowing under. The tombstone also reminds us that in the days of family farms, many people, sometimes whole families, were buried on their land, often in the fields that succeeding generations would work. Such plots can still be found scattered through fields in more rural areas. "Forecast" is Collins at his early best. Masterful as many of these early poems are—especially, "Piano Player," "A Last Word," "The Tree House," "Turning the Corner for Home"—one welcomes the widened scope that comes with entering the poems from What Harvest, based, as I said earlier, on the battle of the Alamo and the history surrounding that battle. This section begins with the book's first extended narrative, "James Bowie: Bexar, 1836." Any writer, when confronting history or any field of specialized knowledge, is figuring out how much the writer needs to tell the reader. For the poet, this is especially problematic. A poem needs to deliver its necessary background and get on with the business of the poem without the reader being aware of the manipulation. In this 64 line poem, Collins moves deftly between Bowie's final circumstances, dying of tuberculosis, his namesake knife bound to his hand with rosary beads, and Bowie's past of gambling, bad business deals, his marriage to the daughter of a Mexican politician. Collins adeptly weaves Bowie's illness into the tale of making the knife that still carries his name. "Bowie's chest labors like a ribbed bellows / And again the coals shift and glow white hot / In the forge of James Black, Arkansas cutler / and smith." Collins nimbly handles the narrative's woven strands in graceful iambic pentameter that gives him room to maneuver through the tale of Bowie's life. The knife that made him famous gives him "a handle / The ivory hafted steel a slick purchase." Yet Bowie's purchase, his

hold on the riches of the world, does not hold, leading to the final illness Collins writes about. The poem ends on a note of foreboding as Bowie waits on his bed for death that will arrive either from illness or the attack of Mexican soldiers. I have spoken before of the physicality of Collins' poems. There are in his lingering observations, even his recitation of period diction, a respect for the well-made things of this world. "Kentucky Long Rifles" is one of the book's highlights, an elegant description of the long rifle, then a recent innovation in the world of fire-arms. The poem pans over the rifle, delighting the reader with language even as it instructs: "In the buttstock of polished maple / A hinged cavity hid the greasy, square-cut / Linen patches that wrapped each leaden ball." This sort of lingering observation is not usual in this time when most written communication takes place in phrases and illustrations. Collins takes his time and trusts the reader to follow. After a dozen lines of dense description, "Kentucky Long Rifles" unwinds into narrative of the renowned Davy Crockett "squeezing off round after round," a display of shooting that "Showed his Excellency each morning / How Texas cut the pigeon's wing." Many poets have based extended sequences or whole books on historical events. But these narratives are rarely as grounded in the three-dimensional sphere of the senses as Collins's poems are, and they suffer as a result. The reader comes to trust the small observations about the long rifle's manufacture—"a poised / Sniper could spill the eye of a gold braided / Zapadore at two hundred paces"—and those small three-dimensional images construct a world we trust and are willing to follow the poet through. Collins not only did an immense amount of research for these poems, the language has been crafted like one of Bowie's fresh-minted knives. Those not schooled in the Alamo's history (from what I can tell, it is not much studied in schools these days) might not know some of the more obscure names and facts here. But be assured that if you don't know who Norris Wright or Carlos Espalier are, that Collins does. What *Harvest* was a great step forward for Collins' work as the move into narrative torqued his already well-wrought language to greater heights. The last third of *Waking Past Midnight* is taken up by poems for Collins' most recent book *My Back Pages: The Teresa Poems*, a volume focusing on Collins's adolescence and first love in Memphis, Tennessee, as well as a portrait of the changing south in 1970. Again here, we find Collins using narrative and highly charged language, but the mood here is more meditative, at times even somber, as it relates two teenagers' fleeting romance and later the death of one lover far too young and the aging of the other although these poems never descend into self-pity or melancholy. As an homage to bygone love, Collins is walking the same path as Dante in *La Vita Nuova* or the painter Andrew Wyeth in his long-hidden series of Helga paintings. "Still in our teens," begins "Expiation," a poem dedicated to Teresa Shuler, "we walk the back paths / Of Overton Park, looking for a place," an opening which recounts the permanent dilemma of teens too young or poor for cars and no recourse to places away from adult eyes. The poem's pivot to an image of falling leaves foretells the end of the romance. The speaker has tried to be rid of such memories, but as the poem ruefully notes, "It remains that brief season that transpired in another age." The remainder of the collection takes us through that season as well as following some unexpected detours. "The Ghostly Heart" is one of several poems that Collins bases on music and especially Memphis musicians. Furry Lewis plays slide with a

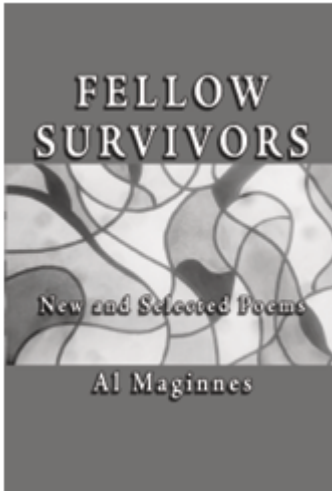
“pocketknife of dimpled bone” for a group of boys who bring him a pint of whiskey. W.C. Handy, Robert Johnson, and Elvis Presley put in appearances as well, but Teresa Shuler is never far: “I wanted to make your name / A byword for all things of beauty and grace.” The Teresa poems require narrative, and it can be difficult to maintain the standards of language that Collins set for himself in “Forecast” or “Kentucky Long Rifle.” The first two lines of “The Machinery of Night” stumble a bit in setting the scene, but the poem recovers nicely as it progresses through a description of the poet’s father setting type for the Memphis newspaper, the trade he took up after being unable to complete his dental studies. “While only a youth,” the poem begins, “I visited the composing / Room of the Memphis Commercial Appeal.” The prosiness of these lines does not prepare us for the description of his father’s “beautiful square hands” loading “slugs of hot lead” into the linotype machine. “Load every rift with ore,” was John Keats’s advice to poets, and it seems to be advice Collins has taken to heart. Over and over reading these poems, readers will be brought up short by the transformative powers of Collins’ imagery and his metaphor making. In “Narcissus to the Muse,” a description of his elaborate preparations for high school—“It was for you, Teresa, that I put on the pleated / Oxford cloth shirt with the button down collar”—is compared with his dressing for the day now—“I shrugged on my wool cardigan”—before launching into a memory of high school sports and the inevitable passage from those years. “Farewell,” a poem placed early in the sequence, tells us that Teresa “died in the days before the autumn equinox / Twenty-five years after our short liason.” The speaker, unaware of his former love’s demise, describes himself as “slumbering,” but says of Teresa, “She, too, sleeps on a little past the dream.” Floyd Collins is an artisan of language. We may have no one who chisels and sculpts language as precisely as he does. In this generous, yet carefully curated, selected poems, Collins provides example after example of what language is capable of. Young poets would do well to look here for guidance. Widespread attention has eluded Collins, perhaps because his books of poems come infrequently, and his career did not lead him into the favor-trading world of writing programs. *Waking Past Midnight* may or may not change that, but this is a book built of poems that will endure and long after the time of this writing, people will discover and marvel over the poems of Floyd Collins.

--Al Maginnes

Fellow Survivors: New and Selected Poems. By Al Maginnes. (Hickory, North Carolina: Redhawk Publications, 2023. Pp. 269, \$16.00, paperback)

Born in Massachusetts and raised in the southeastern United States, Al Maginnes earned his BA from East Carolina University and his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Arkansas. A prolific practitioner of the language arts, he has published thirteen collections of poetry. Individual poems have appeared in prestigious literary journals, including *The Antioch Review*, *Arkansas Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The New England Review*, *Poetry*, and *Tar River Poetry*. He is a recipient of the John Ciardi Award from the University of Arkansas Press and a grant from

the North Carolina ## Arts Council. Maginnes is also an aficionado of popular music, which is evident in his poem for Delta bluesman Robert Johnson titled "Love in Vain," perhaps the most poignant entry in the selections from *Sleeping Through the Graveyard Shift*. The two hundred and sixty-two pages of the volume presently under review, *Fellow Survivors: New and Selected Poems*, clearly indicate that Maginnes has achieved T. S. Eliot's first criteria for literary excellence: "abundance." When my appraisal of Maginnes's latest book is concluded I hope it will be apparent that the poet has also attained "variety" and "complete competence."



Perhaps the finest and most evocative of Maginnes's earlier poems, "For a Glass of Red Wine" conjures the gustatory and olfactory qualities of a vintage that could be a premier cru such as Chateau Lafite or a more earthy blend like Black Cloud. The opening lines put us in mind of a bottle broached by a corkscrew: I want to reach over and move you so your smoky odor of crushed grape cannot drift around me, but I cannot stop watching the smear of candlelight reflected on your ruby belly, bright as the hour glass marking the black widow I killed in my toolshed this summer. (p. 78) The speaker seems to shiver with anticipation so pure it borders on greed. Note the orotund o and r sounds in the adjective-noun combination "smoky odor," as he rolls them on his tongue like plump grapes picked from vineyard rows still wet with dew. He seems entranced by "the smear / of candlelight reflected on your ruby belly" (p.78). Like a French Impressionist he depicts with subtle brush strokes the "ruby belly" resembling an "hour glass" that culminates in the spectral image "black widow I killed in my toolshed." Thus, the speaker savors the allure of this sweet intoxicant but also realizes its fatal potential. Moreover, he admits to thirsting for more mundane brews in the ensuing lines: "And I loved your earthy cousin, beer, / who bears the brassy accent of wheatfields" (p. 78). Here Maginnes's protagonist forsakes the delicate palate of the wine connoisseur for the "brassy accents" (p. 78) of one who lives by the rough braille of his senses. Beer brewed from barley is not pearled and awakens in the reader's mind the neon-lit windows of roadhouses where frosted mugs come to a head in foam and the occasional brawl: "'You could have been killed,' I'd hear / for the next seventeen years, after / the car wrecks, bar fights, [and] nights in jail" (p. 79). Oddly enough, the poem that began as a paean in the vein of Emily Dickinson's "I taste a liquor never brewed" culminates in a sobering dirge for the aftermath of youthful excess: "tiny cyclone / in the clear barrel of a syringe, swirl now / of my wine-colored blood in tubes taken / to be tested or measured, to tell me / how far this new disease has

marched" (p. 79). But "For a Glass of Red Wine" is no temperance sermon nor is it Maginnes's intention to point a moral or adorn a tale. His closure seems one of wistful remembrance: but one scent of your dry breath can make me thirst again for the cup after cup I emptied, searching, I thought, for the pearls some kings used to hide in wine for favorites of the court to find, round and drowning and, briefly, the color of blood" (p. 80) The fifth and sixth lines quoted above capture the full-flavored cadences of Yeats's "Sailing to

Byzantium.” Maginnes embraces a Whitmanesque urge toward cataloguing and prefers expansive narratives that embrace the phenomenal world and enable him to name the numinous particulars that abide in the rich marrow of day-to-day living. In “Before Electricity,” the poet’s metrical register lilts trippingly throughout the opening lines: “Evenings then were music, saw-grass rasp / of fiddle, thumb and horn-tipped fingers // frailing a reedy banjo, or spinning forth / of words unspooled like thread to repair // the simple fabric lives were clothed by” (p. 75). The sibilant s-sounds in “saw-grass rasp” connote the amber rosin block and bristling bow, an aural device countered by the bass note inherent in the locution “thumb.” Even more arresting is the expression “horn-tipped fingers” that plays into the phrase “frailing a reedy banjo.” Stylistically, Maginnes resorts to Old English kennings revived by the Irish Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, which in the latter’s case was intended to evoke the turf-fire snugness of the Gaeltacht in Northern Ireland. Maginnes likewise strives to convey the creatural existence of his protagonists living in a time before incandescent bulbs lit Trans-Alpachian homesteads along the Blue Ridge Mountains: “but more than one might have yearned / for the forgiveness smeary oil-light granted, / a glow built as much from shadow as illumination” (p. 75). Perhaps he envisions a woman weary from hours spent at a butter-churn or cider-press shrugging off her dress of printed flour sack fabric and letting her “stiff hair fall” (p. 75). The last thing her husband sees when she slips beneath the patchwork quilt of their iron feather-bed is: “the mute instrument in the corner” (p. 75). Doubtless his hands slide along the curve of her spine as easily as they did the pearl inlay of the banjo’s fingerboard. “Electricity: A Requiem,” occurs much later in Maginnes’s oeuvre and amounts to series of apocalyptic scenarios not intended for the more delicate sensibilities typically drawn to poetry. But its opening segments appear benign compared to what follows: “Wanderers learned how / to carry fire with them, / not sensing yet that its warmth, its gift of vision would lure us / into building hearths / to cast our bodies beside” (p. 204). The Promethean tone promises an ameliorating warmth, the solace of heat and light, if not ceremony, to ancestral tribes who seek a familiar dwelling. But with a local habitation and a name come the inevitable pitfalls of what passes for civilization. Maginnes relates how Mississippi and Louisiana “elected / to buy electric chairs that could be taken around the state rather than house / the soon-to-be-dead in Parchman / or Angola” (p. 204). Notice how the poet generates a macabre homophone through his juxtaposition of “elected” and “electric chair.” The poet offers us sotto voce a scathing cultural critique as the good people of the community gape like bumpkins at a carnival: “Crowds would come to watch the chair unloaded. The / executioner would hire an electrician / to wire up the chair.” (p. 205). However, Maginnes initially denies us the specter of the convicted soul crowned with electrodes and banged out of his leather straps once the switch is thrown: “In some towns there were concerts and picnics. / Church bells would toll / as the hour approached” (p. 205). Meeting-house belfries reverberate for miles around as bronze bells tongue twelve and the state-sanctioned homicides are carried out. Doubtless, the corpses will be dumped in a potter’s field. Maginnes’s indictment of these casual slaughters is fraught with irony as afternoon sublimates into evening: “men and women turned from / the mid-day execution / to walk home for quiet copulations in shade-cooled houses” (p. 208). The new poems in *Fellow Survivors* are rich

and various in their subject matter. Each entry lends deeper insight into Maginnes's personal concerns and ranges from actual events to anecdotal observations. He spent four years living in the shadow of Fayetteville's Mount Sequoia, but managed to assimilate the influence of previous University of Arkansas MFA candidates such as Jack Butler and Frank Stanford, thus emerging with a voice and vision undeniably his own. Maginnes's signature style ranges from expansive narratives to poems characterized by a searing lyric acumen. "Light Has Two Tasks" emerges as a salient case in point: Moonlight only serves for shining the edges of things already dark. Curved fender

of a fresh washed car. Crown of a gravestone. Crescent of a knife two boys use

to open their thumbs and press the wounds together the pale scars insignia of a bond

they cannot explain or express. (p. 27) He captures in the expression "Curved fender / of a fresh washed car," the sponge-buffed contour of a '53 Desoto. Genuine moonlight gleams along the hood ornament. Then the poet shifts to the metonymic "Crown of a gravestone" and appears loath to concede that a monarch lies beneath it. The ritual nick that seals a bond between two youths implies that pain is its own signature, fresh and blinding decades after the fact. The cursory nod to the title poem of Frank Stanford's first volume titled *The Singing Knives* (1971) is unmistakable but Maginnes is no devotee prone to slavish imitation. His youthful protagonists lie beside pulsing embers that shift and glow in the surrounding dark until he dispels the enchantment with one extraordinary line: "Daylight shrinks the world. Birds call" (p. 27). Something inchoate compels these lads to linger beside the heap of sticks kindled by their own hands: "The boys emerge out of night's possibility / into flat light, linger beside // the cooling ashes though they are hungry / and expected in their unpredictable homes" (p. 27). Maginnes's most engaging poems are confessional in nature and deal with themes ranging from social status to alcoholism. In "Blue Collar" he contrasts his father's desire to transcend his class origins and the apparent indifference with which the poet contemplates such nice distinctions. He recalls his parent's natty attire by conjuring the "ice-blue Oxford" worn only on Fridays when his finer apparel is at the cleaners. Ironically, the color motif evokes the demeanor of one who is cool and aloof rather than prone to labor in the grease pits of service stations. Maginnes harbors no disdain for working stiffs who wear "grease-mapped shirts" or whose hands are callused from cracking the lugs on tires driven by those who can afford SUVs. While his father urges mastery of "decimals and fractions," he prefers "radio songs" and the social revolution foretold in the black columns of "underground" newspapers. But he also remembers "the frayed shirts with company logos / and names stitched over the pockets" (p. 148) that both confer identity and produce an ineffable fatigue in the careworn patriarchs of working-class households. Maginnes recalls "friend's fathers as they came home / from the bottling plants or the mill with no good words to say / who opened cans of sweating beer and slowly / unlaced their shoes" (p. 148). Apparently, unrelenting toil produces choler of a different hue than the poet alludes to in his title. In a book-length poem titled *Dry Glass Blues* the poet chronicles the woes of excess in language appropriate to his subject matter. The speaker laments his inability to drink with discretion and concludes that he must either abstain

or indulge. Naturally, the youthful protagonist opts for the latter course, and the consequences provoke both raucous laughter and bitter regret. Perhaps Maginnes's greatest asset as a poet resides in his knack for sustaining a lengthy narrative replete with striking images and metaphors. Certain passages own the table-pounding cadences of a drunken rout while others are deeply introspective. Regarding a friend's 33 rpm disc he remarks: "But when I heard Mississippi John Hurt play / 'My Creole Belle,' I listened to it half-a dozen times / in a row wordlessly joyed by that simple blend / of dry voice and fingerpicked guitar" (p.105). *Al Maginnes's Fellow Survivors: New and Selected Poems* is a veritable tour de force by one of our finest poets.

--Floyd Collins

