To the Reader:

I selected these poems from the manuscript of “Preowned Odysseys and Rented Rooms,” my poetry collection-in-the-making.¹ It records a pilgrimage where mortality and mobility characterize the wayfarer’s condition. He makes a journey that ultimately leads nowhere, and he travels second class in used conveyances to reach his destination. But, as he saunters along, the pilgrim himself changes, not his destination. He finds the end of the road in each step of the way and becomes the one he is.

“Connecting Flights,” the first poem in this selection, can stand as a sign of my ambitions. It describes a business trip back home, where I had a chance to visit my elderly father. But it also demonstrates how a work of art can turn the world inside out and make you feel as though you share a heartfelt way of seeing with another person.

My highest hope for my poems is the achievement of that sort of response. May readers hear my words and say to themselves, in moments of recognition, “I know how he feels and what he means.” Perhaps such readers may even come to think, “Now I know better what I feel and what I mean.”

Don’t we all need such provocation and reassurance? I certainly do.

¹. Runner-up for the 2019 Marble Faun Award from The Pirate’s Alley Faulkner Society.
Connecting Flights

Twisted neon tubes illuminate
arcades that span Midway’s moving walkways.
I’m flying home to see my father

and join a group of teachers to discuss
biblical poetry. At the Best Western
I share a room with Sharif, a Tucson native

whose Sufi wit provokes a second look
at God’s almighty bipolarity
before we theorize about divine

machinery and traffic management
of transcendental flight for passengers
like us between stops halfway home.

No chariot of fire here gives us a lift.
My father soon will fall like fruit too ripe
with time, oblivious, the way his mother

ended up unhappily. She took her leave
in loneliness apart from family
and friends. Etched in bright green neon tubes,

like those at Midway terminal, a cactus
signifies the Saguaro Drug Store’s open.
I often pass it, heading east on Grant.

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In front of me the Catalinas call
to mind a water color that my father
painted one rainy day that made him keep

indoors. For a second the world looks inside
out and freshly rinsed—as though the mountains
stay with us, however far away we go.
Alternative Fact

On the addition of Essie Mae Washington-Williams to the list of Strom Thurmond’s children on the pedestal of his monument on the South Carolina Statehouse grounds

Let’s not kid ourselves.
My powerful rhyme will not outlive Devouring Time

or local bronze and gilded monuments and, mostly, does not rhyme. But after

more than five score years of breathing air on earth, Strom Thurmond’s metal likeness is moving right along:

striding into the future on the Statehouse lawn.

Yet heirs caught up with him above ground and atop a granite plinth, where all

can read an afterword. Crudely carved in stone, but no mistake, the record speaks of Essie Mae, inviting us to ask and learn of her three score

3. Quorum February, 2017 (online, Columbia).
and ten, well spent as teacher, 
parent, citizen.
Many ghosts still cry,

“Remember me.” But now 
her proper name’s restored, 
this second draft allows

us here to hear of Strom 
and Essie Mae, though words 
are only breath, just air.
Vertigo

_to my daughter at the Museum of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco_

Behold the empty space that typically
holds Carlotta’s likeness—or a copy
of it—out on loan or in the shop

for restoration now while you are seated
on that wooden bench. Dressed like someone
dressed like someone else, Kim Novak tricked

Jimmy Stewart into thinking he’d killed
someone before he killed someone else.
Earlier he’d seen her on that bench

looking at what’s now missing—or a copy
of it—where you are seated looking now
at the empty space that typically

holds Carlotta’s likeness—or a copy
of it. Nothing’s there and never was.
Together we’re present at its absence

for a moment shared. Some vanishing point
puts all this in perspective. Keep that point
in mind, enjoy the view. And I will too.

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Experts in rewiring hearts
disturb my sleep. Perfect strangers’
cool reserve engenders dreams

of Lazarus healed without a tear
of joy or sorrow. Yet Osler earned
my dad’s esteem because he deemed

equanimitity a virtue: Doctors
must practice patience with patients.
To ease my son about my heart

and myself about my son, we watch
a Youtube on pacemakers during halftime
in the Celtics’ game. Merely being

here with him quickens my sluggish pulse.
When our team hustles to catch up
and stretch their streak in overtime,

it sings Kyrie’s praise for mercy
coming down like rain on freshly
mown grass in the Boston Garden.

5. Published in *fall/lines: A Literary Convergence*, Volume VI, 2019.
Koheleth’s words first caught my ear in ninth-grade English. You pictured how dawn’s chirping birds disturb light-sleeping seniors and ignited my imagination. *Now* always turns to *then*, but still your gloss remains a present moment, “Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth.” Planes roar above my sublet quarters near the terminal. An old bird up early, I con your recent versions of Koheleth’s verses: such news, so clearly heard, renews its claim. Despite the noise of silver birds, the life of words has kept us friends

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since freshman year. When clicked,
a pixilated paper
clip brings you these lines
online, my breaking news.
An Abnormal Psychlist’s Secret History

Consider what a repetition it would be to go spinning along the Gulf Coast in a rental car by Keesler! No kidding, this is a good idea all around.

WALKER PERCY TO ROBERT COLES, March 1981

Perhaps the poor in spirit have it best. Such poverty’s no special feat, though its discovery takes eternity to own. Or so it seems when little time and so much being feel like youth itself, the very you-ness of yours truly years ago. I owned a bike and rode around the Garden District, Irish Channel, Faubourg Marigny, French Quarter, back Uptown, further afield, and felt I was in luck.

My twelve-gear Schwinn inspires praise for taking me all over New Orleans, rejoicing in the flatness of its easy-going low-lying cityscape. The jet black frame and racing tires carried me back from where I found myself, marooned and castaway, to a fresh start after I’d hit rock bottom far below the poverty of spirit cutoff line.

That bike deserves such praise precisely now because my patience, my last nerve,

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must meet tough challenges of will and cool reserve from handymen on just two wheels—the bikes and the unlicensed scooters DUIs reduce recovering addicts and alcoholics to dependence on. They don’t show up on time or don’t stay long despite their ardent promises and evident good will.

In what we used to call The World Today, I now confess—because confession is an irresistible way to muck about in all my yesterdays—I’m one of them. My impoverished spirit sank below the line. Sometimes I turned in papers late. I was discovered sleeping on the job. I drank too much. (Of course, I drank too much. Why do you think I’m speaking of recovery here and now?) Tardiness becomes the place you live year-round, and giant effort only and good luck or, if you will, the grace of God will set you free from such belatedness, once force of habit makes it second-nature.

“I had to take my girlfriend to the ER because she just fell off the porch” won’t do as explanation or excuse. When I last saw her there she looked stolid as ancient stoics once were famed to be, but she was drunk or stoned, though seated (aptly for a stoic)
on the porch. Her fall was easier to predict
than to prevent. Her bright new car was scarred
with “whiskey rash,” the bumps and dents and bruises
parking—parallel, head in or out,
or on some barren plain, miles from any trees
or traffic jams—can cause poetic sailors
in their drunken boats or handymen
whose revels start earlier each day.
“I need some lunch, but I’ll be back real soon.”
While you were gone, your ladder leaned
against our house for weeks—a permanent
attachment in all kinds of weather.

Once I awakened to my need for help
for drinking out of my control
and asked for what I needed, such help came,
in person or in prayer—whatever prayer
may mean besides the daily payment
of attention and deliberate care,
mindfulness of others and oneself.

“They’ll feed you to the alligators
way down there,” a Boston wit had cracked
in warning. Those echoing words returned
as comedy instead of lonely melodrama
when I looked out at my classroom
filled with Izod-shirted southern girls
and boys and saw his prophecy fulfilled.  

(stanza break)
When I was cycling back and forth to school in New Orleans at thirty-five, I’d sobered up for what the psalmist calls, depending on the company you keep, a single day or a thousand years. Since repetition is the secret of this secret history, the key is how time turns upon itself and stops the spinning world somewhere new yet unapproachable because you are already there, depending on the company you keep, a single day or a thousand years—one revolution of the sun.
Thanksgiving, 1966

for Robert Coles

Demonstrating what my gut already knew by heart, anti-war protests made headlines during McNamara’s mid-November visit.

Most students leave early to beat the traffic so you invite the rest to your nearby office, aptly underground. When you learn I’m from Tucson you show me a shoebox full of lemons and thank-yous on Big Chief tablet paper with Crayola drawings from school kids there. Holding those gifts to you from when and where I’d left somewhat in a hurry, my hands shake. I’m wondering less—and much less vaguely—What is coming next?

After a day of touch football and turkey, when the phone rings, I don’t know how to say, “Thank you for the call.” You heard my anger, your candor and the laughs we shared. I won’t forget your gesture of concern. Kindness is the right word for your reaching out.

If I’m one, you’re one too—the human kind, although it’s human to act otherwise and shun connecting. Despite tragic losses,
in Memphis and LA, you took your search out West. When the desert smells like rain, “ripples of hope” suffuse the air. Your kindness changed the weather of my days.
Last Night I Felt like Katharine Hepburn

in memory of Stanley Cavell (1926-2018)

The printer wouldn’t let me print my latest about mortality and you and me in whatever English sounds the best. I was in that mood when Hamlet just won’t do, whatever meds you’re on, with all that talk of letting be, the readiness is all, and special Providence in a sparrow’s fall. And Hepburn came to mind to see me through. I felt like her when people hated Hepburn. Box office poison she was known as then. Phillip Barry wrote that play about her as an insufferable snob, one of the Lords on Philadelphia’s Main Line. They built the local library in town, where she found herself in Jimmy Stewart’s stories—all he had to show for many years of little pay and lots of work. She griped about “that corkscrew English” in magazines like Spy, then paying Stewart (aka “Mike” Macaulay Connor from South Bend) just enough so he could still get by. “South Bend,” she echoes, mockingly, “It sounds like dancing.” But soon she’s praising his short stories, “Connor, they’re almost poetry,” as he explains one’s title by its source, a Spanish peasant proverb: With the rich and mighty always a little patience. Give me a break! Have you read any poetry?

Talk about corkscrew English, look no further!
But then, I love the way she later says,
“I’m much beholden,” when Connor tells her,
“There are rules.” A little gallantry
shines through, as Hepburn learns he’d taken no
advantage when they both were drunk, though soon
she wonders, “Why? Was I so unattractive?”
They don’t make them like that anymore,
I’d like to say, because they don’t, and not
because I’d be the last to know. Yet still,
I’m glad to hear that corkscrew English rattling
inside me when there’s nothing I can do
about the way things are, as opposed
to the way things are supposed to be.
Writing on a Wall

I am neither Athenian nor Greek, but rather a citizen of the world.
—SOCRATES, at the University of Lisbon Metro station

Words on tiles lining the Metro stop remind me of playing Scrabble. Once Beth’s competitive edge caught me off guard. She was playing to win a game I’d won before, taking for granted nothing was at stake. In the myth of my life, my father surprised me like that one afternoon at golf among the desert Protestants in Tucson, which, for want of a better word, I call home. How fiercely he wanted to win! But practicing medicine left no time for golf. Grandfather taught me to play and turned chagrin at being cut from the baseball team to balm: calm dialogues and easy-going efforts at improving my game on the practice range. My handicap slowly decreased until now, though I stopped playing long ago,

9. *fall/lines IV*, 2017 (Columbia), 75.
my brothers remember me as
far better than I ever was, with no
handicap at all. Gratefully, I agree
as if I believe things improve unseen
in this vale of whatever it is we make
of ourselves until we play on links
elsewhere as naturalized citizens
of that world Sócrates still calls home.

In blue letters lining white-tiled walls
at University City he proclaims
his part in cities of words all may share.
The Athenians, you’ll recall, disagreed.
5-Star Rental

for my landlady, Felicidade

Creio que uma folha de erva não vale menos que a jornada das estrelas.
—WALT WHITMAN, Canto de Mim Mesmo (trans. José Agostinho Baptista), xxxi, 1

Midway through your bilingual “Song of Myself,” I find a shopping list with pão at its head and read on until the Portuguese rendering of “I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars” translates me west-by-southwest overseas to the High Road to Taos and Española’s low-riders, north of Santa Fe where tourists succumb to night skies though locals take what’s given for granted.

In Lisbon, my day’s work done, I return to rented rooms lined with books in Portuguese and pass by mosaics of Camões swimming for Goa and of Pessoa—four of him, at least, all dreams with souls all their own—Moorish geometries and blue and white azulejos, wall after wall bearing tales, Latinate words and names opening up, vowel after vowel, even at the Metro stop: Roman arena becomes A-re-e-i-ro.

In my inner ear the train’d soprano sustains those sounds, rewording the world of Leaves in another’s mother tongue.

Easter, 2016

Anthropologists of resurrection must include your hat among their golden boughs. What were the odds the maître d’ that day would do his job at the Imperial Café and hand your hat along to the concierge of the Imperial Hotel—that round black flat-topped flannel cap of sorts you wear so jauntily? Right away, when you first felt the loss, the duties of such jobs became our hope.

I’m no Aeneas saddled with a frail old man and clinging son who soon will be without a mom. I served no more than figuratively in Vietnam: meeting my first wife during the Tet Offensive and leaving her during the Fall of Saigon. I went to see if that would be the case with the concierge and maître d’ at the Imperial in Prague. Would they do their jobs?

I came back, hat in hand, and your smile briefly turned me into Spencer Tracy in Adam’s Rib. His Eve receives this present from her Adam:

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“Just the best hat in the world, for the best head”
—or some such line I don’t yet have down pat.
Whether or not I earned it, who’d deny me that?