

## 24. Selections from *Preowned Odysseys and Rented Rooms*

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To the Reader:

I selected these poems from the manuscript of “Preowned Odysseys and Rented Rooms,” my poetry collection-in-the-making.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

## Connecting Flights<sup>2</sup>

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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2. Winner of the 2019 Forum Prize from the Poetry Society of South Carolina, <https://www.poetrysocietyofsc.org/connecting-flights>. Poetry Society of South Carolina *Yearbook* (Charleston, 2019), 17.

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<sup>3</sup>**

*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

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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<sup>4</sup>**

*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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4. Winner of the 2019 Patricia and Emmett Robinson Prize from the Poetry Society of South Carolina, <https://www.poetrysocietysc.org/vertigo>. Poetry Society of South Carolina *Yearbook* (Charleston, 2019), 26.

**A Late Rally<sup>5</sup>**

*In the first place, in the physician or surgeon  
no quality takes rank with imperturbability.*

WILLIAM OSLER, "Aequanimitas"

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

equanimity 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.

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5. Published in *fall/lines: A Literary Convergence*, Volume VI, 2019.

**Attachment<sup>6</sup>***for Jim*

*...and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird,  
and all the daughters of music shall be brought low.*

Koheleth 12:4

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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6. Winner of the Poetry Society of South Carolina's John Edward Johnson Prize, Winter 2018, <https://www.poetrysocietysc.org/attachment>. Poetry Society of South Carolina *Yearbook* (Charleston, 2019), 19.

since freshman year. When clicked,  
a pixilated paper  
clip brings you these lines  
online, my breaking news.

## An Abnormal Psychlist's Secret History<sup>7</sup>

*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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7. Short-listed for the 2017 Faulkner-Wisdom Gold Medal for Poetry. Published in *fall/lines: A Literary Convergence*, Volume VI, 2019.

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.

(no stanza break)

“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,

I 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<sup>8</sup>

*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?

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8. *Forma de Vida*, no. 15 (January 2019) <https://formadevida.org/lrhufdv15>.

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<sup>9</sup>**

*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,

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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**<sup>10</sup>

*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.

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10. *South Florida Poetry Journal* (August 2018), <https://www.southfloridapoetryjournal.com/soflo-pojo-contributors.html>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7dLMmdo5ZE>.

**Easter, 2016**<sup>11</sup>

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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11. *jogosflorais.com* (Lisbon, 2018), <https://www.jogosflorais.com/unpublishedpoems/2018/11/lawrence-rhu>.

“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?