

DAVID LEIGHTTY

By the Colorado

An ancient flow through the deep heart.
Each step made here in desert sun
Could be a life's experience.
Up endless switchbacks on cliff rock
Then crumbling slopes, then back to cliff—
We pass time's epochs stowed in earth.
The metamorphic riverbed
Yields to these sedimentary strates
We lug up hour by plodding hour,
Craving, each step, with such a thirst
It seems like this must take forever.

Loons on Lac La Croix

Half moon-a-shimmer on La Croix,
now, first calm four bad days in—
a loon's cry. Silent, we enter the tent,
bed down. The call rings out again
to silence back. We know. But then:
an answer—farther, from across;
and again, waxing, and back again,
again; filling, delirious
with union, all the night—and us.

Cumulonimbus

The lawn's span: wide and regular;
well-kept, with house, garden, and pond;
tomatoes staked in careful rows
and tubers thriving under soil.
Small fish flashed dimly in the pool.
The household cat roamed free, a pet
indulged. Inside were private nooks.
Over all, an azure deep held calm.

Once in deep summer, heat nagged disturbance—
thunderheads, dark on the periphery,
mounted in apprehensive quiet,
at length, until the palpable
electric air could hold no more.

Revelation flashed to a swelling voice!
Limbs heaved in histrionic mime! The storm
held sway a time, then settled to steady
outpouring. It left, the place a wreck:
power dead, vine stakes down
and awry, the garden littered, and everything
drenched; the whole yard
sprouting like crazy.

The Classics

— *for Doctor Hubert M. Martin*

The centuries' accumulated store
Of reverent study bides in these dense books;
Dense with millennia. In lifting these
The hand lifts time itself. Who were those men?
No telling. Legend vested them obscures;
The gist of long tradition shifts their mien.
So too their works. A reading bends beneath
Words massive with the increment of years.

A Public Narrative

— from reports in the *Louisville Courier Journal*

He stopped his useless pickup, center strip,
And clambered out—a small child on his hip,
The twelve-gauge in his free hand waved to stop
A random car. Forty yards off, a cop
Followed with crosshairs fixed in steadied fear,
Poised for the instant one shot would stand clear.

The boy had fired twice: vaguely toward his ex,
Shrieking he'd never leave his daughter; next
Past crouching officers. His blasts (sprayed wild)
Touched not a soul, but terrified the child.
When he veered past their blocking cars they shot
His tires and chased him, wobbling, to this spot.

The marksman watched now, holding steady aim.
The boy stopped one car, thrust his shotgun claim;
The woman driver braced then answered *No*
—The boy paused—*And you let that baby go.*
The twelve-gauge wavered toward clear atmosphere.
One rifle shot transfigured every year
That cop had served and never fired his gun.
The boy lurched, dropped the baby, sprawled and spun.
The woman scrambled out, stepped where they lay,
Took the dazed child, and kicked the gun away.

This time, the child came home; the boy survived—
An end better than most ends we've contrived.
Men, women, children, guns—ever it goes;
Ancient roles cast in timeless juxtapose,
Shaming the trace of human sanity
With outrage, an abiding lunacy
Wrenching our daily calm with disbelief,
A marksman's steady hand trembling in grief.

Off the Record

— *young attorney at a multi-party deposition*

Witness, that small wraith of the air.

Deponents sworn to solemn truth
Authenticated *what* and *whom*.
But questions, answers dimmed; his stare
meandered the appointed room.

Then he divined a finer proof—
Perched an arm's length outside the glaze
Thirty floors up, a sparrow hawk:
Bright copper mantle; robin size
But with the fierce square raptor face;
Alert through bold, dark facial marks.

Call it out? Not in that sober forum,
Good judgment swayed by sheer decorum.

The Courthouse Starlings

“The poisoning approach became moot last month when an endangered peregrine falcon was seen picking a starling out of the air.”

— Louisville *Courier-Journal*

Flocks darken in our loathing; *immigrants*.
They overwhelm shy first inhabitants
With squalid numbers, breeding vast extent
In garrulous hordes across the continent.

Each autumn night a huddled, mass descent
Defiles the local seat of government.

Oration and debate. Decreed at last—
Death; bread crumbs laced with lethal aftermath.

But then, respite in predatory guise:
A savage, noble breed, edged on demise.
And we're reminded—the connectedness
Of things surpasses knowing. We acquiesce—
The aliens we sowed here, and despise,
Spared that the natives we have plagued survive.

First Night

*Mary Anderson Center for the Arts,
Mt. St. Francis, Indiana*

The wind-ruff has died, and the glare;
the lake is a still, dark glass
at dusk. A nighthawk passes,
silent, prowling the air
for the lace-winged multitude
rising from the grass.
An owl calls—distant, subdued,
heard only for the stillness.
Through my reflection I see
the lake's dark sanctity.
Then it is wholly night;
I spot, far up the hill,
my room's small, welcome light.

Named for a saint who spoke
with beasts, these civil grounds
are a careful sanctum, devised
for the white-tail and ruby-throat,
for sung and spoken sounds—
for whatever may arise
in safely husbanded bounds.

So husbandry of art
will thrive. Here, sleep and wake—
small wildness civilizes;
become the still pane of the lake;
be clear and deep and dark.
Let loose what will not stir
by day, the forager
of what in quiet rises.

Constitutionals

Strict Constructionalist

This man of letters holds, deep-delved in books—
His purpose firm, his quest the law that's *there*;
Bound by the page's height and breadth, he looks
And finds it plain, direct, precise—and bare.

Situationalist

Confidence lies in his certitude.
Vaulting from page to clause construed.

Interpretations

Meanings arise here like the green of trees—
Staying, then scattered with the Sibyl's leaves.
Still bearing this rank season's tangling yield,
The trunk stands rooted in a tangled field.

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In the Office of an Attorney Specializing in Accident Cases

Ranked on his shelf are lawbooks—poised, replete.
Below, there blares the racket of the street.

For My Stepson

— *Kenton Wooden*

Many times what I took for love has turned
My most well-wrought intent, the choosing blind.

Love with your mother was no purpose, earned—
It came, like the year's seasons, in good time.

If I've encountered loss, so I have gifts
No one could reckon for—like your good heart:

As if I made way through a wilderness,
Worn out, bewildered in a mid-day dark;
Came unexpectedly to open glade
And found a sapling, shimmering with young leaves,
Bright in a stippled mix of light and shade:
Strong, straight, and supple in the forest breeze—

I, who did nothing that you came to be,
Blessed beyond reason in your life with me.

Shaolin

— *at the Jeffersontown Karate Club*

On Shao Shih Mountain, in its bamboo glades,
Air sweet with cinnamon and cedar trees,
Murmured instruction measured by the fall
Of water, cadenced, to still pools,
And the recurrent clack of wooden staves,
The mind focused on an empty room...

Through epochs—shifting dynasties—
The temple stayed, as history jostled past.

But discontent at length seeped in:
The kingdom rankling at the Manchu rule,
Intrigue made hidden entrance to the calm.

Intrigue and politics. The secret forms
Disclosed to hopeless insurrectionists,
The Empire judged and acted, ponderous—
Its army crushed the empty-handed monks
Fouling the pools and gardens with the corpse
Of innocent and rebel, fired the ancient
Halls, and left the initiates broken, dead,
Or—some few—fleeing death in hiding.

The forms survived, as human wisdom may—
Suppressed, covert, eking in secret rites
Passage to an unknown century.

Times turned again: new students seek the forms
In places unforeseen those eras past.
Here in the basement of an urban church
A white-robed adolescent rises and bows.

On the Nolin

— for Beverly Derrington Moore

Casting to deep, clear green,
the flow a steady press,
he works down river. Upstream—
some catches, some regrets.

Miles distant, and more hours,
near the source of tiny rills,
a storm—now history—scoured
red clay from knobby hills.
A swollen freshet, roiled
with aftermath, here spills
into this undisturbed
clear-running current, soiled.

Two waters, calm and turbid,
flow abreast, unmerged.
Two shades of consequence.
What husbandries preserve
one watershed in clear
descent? What negligence
or outrage bared the earth
dark water carries here?

Thus they come, till at last
one eddying flow imbues
the other, where he casts.
Beyond—dark tinging light—
the moot enwoven hues
pass downstream, out of sight.

Far Travels

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