

Poetry South

2014





Poetry South

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Poetry South

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Sterling D. Plumpp

Fields of Dreams

When
it rain
bows it pour horrors

I journey days
I pull from bushels of
nights I shape with brass
knuckles I over
come to tell my hours

where grave
yards are chromatic
idioms of history spoken
in dialects of wet handkerchiefs and *no*
body knows shades of
my sorrows

I review them
in my steps toward
the worlds I dream
when I journey long

I got so many worlds
I should can them
There are many high
ways between what Poppa and
Momma do not say

I am trying to scribble
a map on my eye
balls with the sand
that blow across decades
and collect in my face

My song
got a signature of
distance on it
Groan is a nephew
of a face
I know

I live
on this road where

Each night. A missionary's
failure. Some
where a "heathen"
(like me) pats
his foot to *Ogun*

and follows *Shango's*
fingers in chants
of rays clapping
the *boogaloo*.

Each night. They rise
from the world in
side the half-priced
lies they wear for eye
glasses.

Blues
The angel
bee making house
calls to pollinate
aches and pains

the path in
to cell and cells of
self definitions and self
word crafts man
ships on waves of
brutal episodes

I
been looking
for troubles and

I
hope troubles
been looking
for me

This world ain't a house
or big statue or
a tree or long deep
rivers or some
thing you can spend

Each time a step of mine
comes down I gotta re-draw
the boundaries of my universe

Blues
the speech
tree I grab apples off
on troubles-run a
way days

The good
times of slavery
days or good
good loving days
or lynching days
things time throw out

Bitter tea I
drink to clean
my guts and get rid of spirit
belly aches

Woke up
this morning crying
I could
not see
there was no light
in my day

Woke up
this morning crying
I could

not see
there was no light
in my day

Things so bad
it take the blues
to drive them no good
blues away

Sterling D. Plumpp

Mississippi

Place where Mattie
washes scraps of dis
missals until
enough cloth.

Is garmented to patch
work a mojo hand
me down room in an eye
on a sparrow.

And bible belted
narratives keep
moral's britches
from knowledge of knees.

This wide open land
scape of tales
I harvest in memory.
Land of my birth and
births of my longings.
Birth of the boy
hooded in silences.
I spin hallelujahs identities

from and run and keep
swinging roadside
work days poppa
prayed sunrises in despair

In deaconly
holds on the word he keeps
stored in lips he intones
what I tell when I speak.

August 8, 2014

Sterling D. Plumpp

I Come Mississippi

I
tell mirages
on vacations
from tar and
feathers what places
to sit in
at counters where Martin's feet

teach more blues
than Son House

and
I got a house
full of water
Lord
I don't need no
land or land
lords

Always

My poems wanna fuck
at 3 o'clock in the morning
say they need some privacy

why in the hell
don't I

Take
my dirty eaves

dropping self some
where else and move
on down the line

Move
on down the line

Blues
the threshold of naming
and re-naming as down
pavements for leaps

across gulfs of stone

The
architect of new worlds

in
side my voices
and voice be
low it in
side Poppa's
bass

on this road
beneath the roads
I journey and
journey beneath roads

They bloom under
neath grief
where my foot
prints drown memory

and I pick up
a piece of my shadow
set it out
twelve places some
body shoots and

the concrete moans
Every day.
Every day.
I have the blues.

Cries alphabets.
Cries deeds.
I get from the good
time I all
ready know.

For I got some *goober*
dust I sprinkle
on *The Hawk's* tail.
Which grow icicles
as feathers.

Blues
is the mortgage
for survival.
A down pay
ment on dark roads.

Where I invent
root for roads
beneath the road
I travel

I am afraid
to tell you a
bout this but

I am all
ways drunk spinning a
round millenniums bellowing some
body's bad
news shouting to distant
parts of universe
in my baby's heart
crying seas that drink
ships as pills
to cure belly
aches moaning thunder
from under
neath eye
lids of clouds

I am an echo
scout chasing *The Enterprize* a
cross galaxies of troubles

I am
the voice of a broken
record that escaped

apocalyptic lynchings
of wandering
comets hanging a
round my door envying turn
tables I ride
in orbits until
CD Voyagers come
to carry me
on with
out *Kirk*

or *Spock*

What
is to
morrow but to
day in
side bones of dreams

There is
no bitterness
I can
not sing a

way in
to my dreams

I build you a penthouse
on every street
but you evict me
on boulevards of pain

I done everything
in the dictionary to please you
you still go out
get yourself another man

Sterling D. Plumpp

I Come Mississippi: Two

I

I come Mississippi
sit by the cross

modes of song and
dance where The Law
is a tenant
farmer in my moods

Poppa tell me
at thirteen that I
gotta leave

Say he hear that
them tall poles
they digging holes for
gonna bring the RE
(Rural Electricity
to the country)

say I gotta go
work for the REFS
(Rural Electricity
For the Soul) because
the light of the world
is how you see
from the soul
the blues he says
cleans its windows

He tell me I gotta
put up poles and
lines for the song
say it don't matter
how I do it

and I hit the road

All
you got is your work
your world down road somewhere
your manhood you fight for
your God you pray to

your will to go on
and your word

your word
your word

Poppa
take me to the doctor
I say

And he carry me
by the Burnt Out Inn
and some one-eyed and
peg-legged fella give me
a mojo
hand and a holography

He
snagga-toothed and smile
a river out through
the gap and sound

like I hear a million cotton
sacks dragging over leaves
sound

like I hear prayers
coming from revival lips in
side the sacks

Cotton troubles
Cotton troubles

keep us in debt

I done live seventy five years
ain't got out of them yet

Cotton blues
Cotton blues

cost me everything
they my traveling dues

Poppa
done lived his life
and mine too

Poppa
done lived his life
and mine too

Every
morning when the sun rises
I declare its blues

I
I come Mississippi
make no difference
how long my journey
short or long

Sterling D. Plumpp

And I Hear Music

In memory of Amiri

Here I plant lineage:
crevices from slave castle
agonies laundered in Amens.

There are furrows beneath
accents of your pain. Always
births of metamorphoses
a journey
somewhere twisted
in history's impulses.
Where your tongue remembers
sweetness on pomegranate
paths. Footsteps
are texts your manifold
rhythms decode as chefs.

Music begins in eyes
of your spirit. Patch
defining your face
is a witness.

For it is music I hear
logged in words.

Transcribed by metaphors
unique in BeBop riffed
dialogue.

Your lines shuffle
inch by inch from one
age to improvised
evolutions.

And I hear music.
And /A geography
truth calypsos on wind

for those pulling weight
of this world.

How long?

How long must I travel
before I decipher eternity
of this willingness
in lyrics you hang
on night tranes going
north of any north
in this land?

Always I arrive
muddy with make-a-way
somehows
etched blues in my veins.

This road, this music
I journey
is my surname.

OP/ED peace of folded
hands in my ancestors
belief in their Savior's care

Leads me on.

March 10, 2014

Sterling D. Plumpp

Singer

I emerge from upside down
home blues hung on vines
of insurrections.
From night tranes gone dizzy

witnessing a good
bird's spiritual engineering
to decode liquid flows
of bloodlined

cries echoing
muddy waters

a home in the delta
where slide guitars
come to carry home
amens of

affirmation and stubborn
insistence on survival. And
make-a-way some hows/up
lifting destiny from lynch
rows of debts
and hard work from shares
I never receive.

August 8, 2014

Sterling D. Plumpp

Between Silences

for Sam Greenlee

He'd hold his vodka
between silences and stares,
"integration messed everything
up." Then the glass empty,

He'd honor silence a spell
turn pages of his memory,
"when white kids and their parents
walked out at Englewood

teachers kept teaching" Man,
He'd imply we had community
nobody speaks. We claim
symbols by movement. Lift

one finger: everything gone
hand grabs a dream, folds
outcomes in sequences, steps
over brigades of nights. He'd

raise a fist, wink
at laughter intended to dissipate
shadow in definite minutes.
Fill another glass and ponder.

August 1, 2014

Sterling D. Plumpp

Always an Excerpt

for Billy Branch

I

1.
I cannot be hindered from my journey.

I know moments, interred violets
erupting from pained streets
of desire or narrow corridors
where dreams assemble.

2.
The poet has no schedule
for ferries or barges or liners.
Always the journey, the road I revive
is my song.

3.
I have kinship with oracles.
Pain is twin of mine. Here a rein
drop of a steady hand is music's
origin and innovation when I hear
tonight at high noon melodies.
Tomorrow is always the question
for genius.

4.
An island I summon
wandering in fragmented week
ends in blues singers'
confined generations of cries
I inherit.

I exist to collate pleas
In my lines.
For my poetry is an empty tier
drop of silence

I rent in this odyssey
of beliefs when I monitor
Bird's riffed indigo
secrets of vision
ascending ornate lasered genius
negotiated over mundane speech.

Like infinity music has no
limit.

5.
I view honors for blues
singers margined off
only to realize they are tombstones
for humanity belatedly installed.
They exist and Mississippi cannot give
its exiled prophets
revered places because it cannot
admit complicity
in banishments.

For the voice in blues is a monument.

II

1.
The road is part of my soul; part
the bouquets of existence of
inhalations and exhalations I breed
over distance and silence.
Somewhere and somewhere I own
mileage and depths of perceptions.
The poem I chase.

2.
Mississippi, space for incarceration:
singers exiled to roads and distance
affirm narratives tragic and
contemporary; sing dungeons
away with boldness of head
nods and war songs in feet, announcing self.
Muddy waters dammed
until somewhere invites moans

to its meandering canals
where small talk queued inside
choruses journeying somewhere
to urban vitality offers myriad codes
of dialects; naming trials and
stunted dreams for sale at flea
markets.

3.
Legends rise from idioms
out of tragic hour
glasses counting
decades for fun. They
loot to get arias
where muddy molds country
proverbs from hard times.

He is nobody there;
nobody here but ears
who harken him poet. For
the city beckons Europe; has
its back to great epics of this land.
Embraces vernacular wardrobes
Latin or German or Celtic. Chicago
has no inn for muddy psalms
in overalls. Has no space
for brown eyed memoirs
calypsoed at its door.

4.
My journey is always
an excerpt out of a
windy tragedy
I endure.

November 14, 2014

John Zheng

Home/Bass: An Interview with Sterling D. Plumpp

Sterling Dominic Plumpp, born on January 30, 1940 in Clinton, Mississippi, is an international blues poet and essayist living in Chicago, to which he hitchhiked in 1962. He has authored sixteen books including *Half Black, Half Blacker, Black Rituals, Blues: The Story Always Untold, Blues Narratives, Clinton, Hornman, Ornate with Smoke, Velvet BeBop Kente Cloth*, and most recently *Home/Bass*, which fuse blues and jazz rhythms with poetic insight to speak of Black lives home and abroad. Plumpp distinguishes himself with a peculiar voice, style, and rhythm. His poetry was included in *The Best American Poetry 1996*. He was Chicago's Poet Laureate and received the Carl Sandburg poetry award. He is also the editor of two anthologies, *Somehow We Survive* and *Steel Pudding*. Plumpp is Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago where he taught in the African American Studies and the English Department. In 2009, *Valley Voices* ran a special issue on Plumpp's poetics, his artistic and intellectual development, and his distinctive bluesjazz voice. In 2013, the NEH Summer Institute devoted a two-day session to the discussion and exploration of Plumpp's poetry and aesthetics at Mississippi Valley State University. He is the finest blues poet of this century. During his visit to MVSU in July 2013, we had long chats, and I approached him for an interview with a focus on his poetry collection, *Home/Bass*, published by Third World Press in the same year. This interview was conducted by mail right before *Home/Bass* won the 2014 American Book Award. —JZ

John Zheng: Professor Plumpp, can you tell us a bit more about yourself before we begin our interview on your latest poetry book *Home/Bass*?

Sterling Plumpp: Let me begin by noting, I was first published in 1968. The event stemmed from a poem I wrote after marching to Cicero, Illinois in 1966. A Black youth had been beaten to death in Cicero and Bob Lucas, head of the Chicago chapter of CORE, led a march to protest it. This was the period when Black Power became prominent and shortly thereafter the Black Arts Movement emerged. Here in this cultural and historical malaise, I began my writing and publishing career. The Black experience has always been my work.

Therefore my vision as a writer has undergone metamorphoses: Black life, Black experience, Black aesthetic, and finally to the rural Southern experience of the Black peasant. I seemed to have found my voice in moist Mississippi mud as a grandson of a tenant farmer. Though I became a member of the OBAC Writers Workshop and was published in *Negro Digest/Black World* and by Third World Press, my soul, nevertheless, longed the comfort of the rural Black Southern experience. That's where blues enters my imagination because nothing I ever came into contact with mirrored the experiences on the mourners' bench that touched and molded me in my efforts to write creatively.

Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal are the two Black Arts Movement poets, I admired and cherished. They seem to have forged personal voices out of their experience and they were both experts and inclusive with respect to Black culture, especially Black music. *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* and *Dead Lecturer*, though not technically Black Arts Movement texts, were to me unofficial Black aesthetic canons. Baraka's *Black Magic: Collected Poetry* is wonderful. Neal's *Hoodoo Hollerin' BeBop Ghosts* is a magnificent display of cultural craft and vision. In many ways my poetry as a southern inhabitant of this planet is a voice searching tracks of Jones/Baraka and Neal. Nikki Giovanni's *Truth is on the Way* recording is also brilliant in its display of music, power and unique voice.

The two writers I had the most conversational exchanges with prior to the appearance of *Home/Bass'* creation were Leon Forrest and Keorapetse Kgositsile. Forrest—whose *Divine Days*, is arguably the finest novel by a Chicago writer—cautioned me not to be “afraid to get in the ring with champions.” He warned that Ellison had observed that perhaps the reason some writers insisted on being “Black writers” was perhaps because they feared the textual champions of world literature. He cautioned me, always, not to be afraid to explore the angularity of the Black experience. Observing that “the bookshelf is not an equal opportunity player.”

Kgositsile, Poet Laureate of South Africa, read many of the poems in *Places and Bloodstains* to me in his native SeTswana and sometimes in Zulu. There is an aspect of language you can only hear. You need only ears to know, judge, and select it as primary. There is something in Willie Kent I hear that propels me to craft a persona in my poems. It is a personal hearing I seek.

Blues is that authentic something culturally one discerns in the great blues performers and a lot of it has to do with cadence, speech delivered in a personal, unique way. That is what I am

grabbing at with slashes or line breaks and construction of a blues singer's persona or a horn's for that matter. It is something so real, so tangible, yet so elusive.

JZ: Thank you for sharing your Black life and experience which has been important to your writing. Third World Press published your poetry book, *Home/Bass*, in 2013. Can you give a little history about writing this book?

SP: *Home/Bass* grew out of my preoccupation with Blues and with Blues singers. I was always fascinated by the power, authority, Blues singers and ministers had with relationship to the word. I was also wedded to the poignancy of the speech of the rural vernacular of tenant farmers. I had been twenty-nine years in various blues clubs in Chicago in 1988 when I met him. There was something unrehearsed in his dialogue and manner. I was also in the shadows, so to speak, of *Blues: the Story Always Untold* published in 1989. Willie's voice and performance demeanor placed him squarely in deep blues. I immediately became attracted to him and his music and followed him from 1989 until his death in 2006.

Kent performed from an expansive songbook and almost never repeated a song on a nightly engagement. His utterance fell on ears with the potency of prayer or a sermon. It wasn't long before I recognized the journey we both had taken from cotton fields in Mississippi to Chicago. Kent's music and performance—as it were—became an aesthetic wardrobe that forced me to hear the possibility of poetry in a slightly different light. Listening to him was almost like eaves dropping on a secret conversation he was having with destiny or God. I began taking notes on what his music evoked as memory and experience. In this manner I stumbled upon lines that I tried to nuance with “line breaks” this was *Home/Bass*'s beginnings.

JZ: *Home/Bass* is dedicated to Willie Kent, the blues musician playing bass. Can you talk about your friendship with him?

SP: I was undoubtedly Kent's most loyal fan and admirer. I followed him during his Wednesday and Thursday night gigs at Blue Chicago: 636 and 736 N. Clark respectively. I would talk with him before shows. I also was present at his Friday and Saturday night gigs at both Blues Chicago clubs. I was at his Monday night and weekend gigs at B.L.U.E.S. and his weekend

gigs at Rosa's, Legends, Brady's, the Checkerboard and Boss Man's. I was always dabbling and wrote three songs which Willie recorded "911," Delmark; "Address in the Street," Delmark and "Lonely, Lonely Streets," Blue Chicago. I handed Willie's songs and sometimes later he'd say, "I got something for you" and it would be a song recorded on CD.

The French film, *We are the Blues*, recorded me reading a draft of *Home/Bass* and Kent and Eddie C. Campbell, playing in the background. In the final months of Kent's life, I along with a female blues singer friend of Kent contributed financially to his support. Kent once said he didn't know I was writing about him. I told him he needed to know he was singing the best blues in Chicago or in the world for that matter.

JZ: When did you first meet Willie Kent in Chicago?

SP: I first met Kent in 1988 while he was playing a gig at Brady's on the Southside of Chicago. I think he had one LP, "I am What You Need." His power and brilliance was memorable.

JZ: In what way has Kent's voice helped you "invent a blues singer persona narrating" *Home/Bass*?

SP: More than anything else Kent's musical forte anchored my imagination around concepts such as tone, rhythm, a wry, subtle insinuation and irony, ritual, and heritage. Kent re-enacted African American memory and heritage. He reaches deep into the tool kit of the Black church's myriad expressions to celebrate and atone. I can honestly say his exhibiting blues through his performances left me no choice but to attempt to construct a persona where the blues performer's voice was on par with the poet's or prophet's. It was only when I struggled to erect a persona for Kent that I felt I was realizing something indelible in my culture.

JZ: So, can we say the voice of *Home/Bass* is a combination of yours and Kent's?

SP: Yes, we can at once say that the voice of *Home/Bass* is a combination of mine and Kent's and the blues greats: Robert Johnson, John Lee Hooker, Howlin Wolf, Muddy Waters, Elmo James, and Junior Wells whose recordings are canons of American music.

JZ: In the poem “From the Delta,” you present Willie Kent in a voice of the first person character:

Max
Well/Street.
Where/I
Got/my name:
HOME/BASS,

West/Side Story.
Got
part/of me
in it. I/come
here/from Delta.

Boston
Blackie/I know.
Children
killing/children.
I/know.
Children
Killed/by children.
I/know.
Children
in trouble/my children.
And/I
know. (*Home/Bass* 11)

Do you try to revive his voice by using the blues skills such as refrain?

SP: Yes I do. But do this by not creating within a traditional blues form. I try to avoid cliché by not permitting too much repetition or rhyme.

JZ: What was Kent’s voice like as a blues singer?

SP: Kent easily possessed the poignancy of an Elmo James. He was not so much a minister delivering a sermon but a member of the flock who done been possessed by the truth that he must give his testimony about. Kent, like Big Daddy Kinsey, evinces a blues experience, even before he utters a sound, possessing a share-cropper’s shoulders and hands of a laborer, he convinces you he

has the right to talk about the trials and tribulations he done under gone.

JZ: And how did his voice and bass form a unique music that touched you?

SP: Since Kent is a bassist, he controls tempo and texture of his music. He possesses a concept of music and his playing imposes that on songs as well as the ensemble he engages with. There is a rhythmic articulation between bass and drum that creates a unique melodies space for Kent to swing.

JZ: Willie Kent’s song, “Born in the Delta,” tells his birthplace:

I was born in the Delta,
a hundred miles south
of the Tennessee line

I was born in the Delta,
a hundred miles south
of the Tennessee line

I was chopping and picking cotton
’way before the age of nine

Kent was born in Inverness, Mississippi. Were many Chicago blues musicians Mississippi Delta émigré?

SP: Many Chicago blues musicians were from the Delta or “the country” as Buddy Guy might say. They were born and grew up in rural communities where their families were engaged in agricultural endeavors centered around cotton. Muddy Water, John Lee Hooker, Elmo James, John Primer, Otis Rush, Rice Miller, Howlin Wolf, Carey Bell and Buddy Guy are names of those whose birth place is rural agricultural communities of the South.

JZ: When the Delta-style blues went to Chicago, it must have to adjust itself to the city life. In what way did Willie Kent’s voice can be both of the Delta and Chicago’s West Side?

SP: Since Kent’s passion and sincerely felt delivery of lyrics that he makes personal possession is a force of his ability, it positions

him to utter lyrics a cappella or unadorned country style. It also allows his brilliant melody delivery to co-exist well with the rhythmic dialogue of bass and drum and guitar.

JZ: What's the typical characteristic of the urban blues?

SP: To me, Chicago urban blues is noted for its beat, something understated and intimate between symmetry of the bass and drums.

JZ: *Home/Bass* also encompasses the voices of other musicians; am I right? Who are the other blues musicians you feel to have a strong connection with?

SP: The other musicians are many, though I will single out the voice of Otis Rush and the guitar work of Buddy Guy. Rush's performances sets the bar for their poignancy and Guy's guitar seems always in want of another galaxy to explore after mapping this one's possibility. Willie Dixon's voice seems to close floodgates of pain just prior to drowning audience and Lurie Bell's originality and skill at playing and singing is epic. I find Sons of Blues (SOB) and Billy Branch in the pocket, blue, and eager to synthesize the new and the old. Junior Wells' brilliance continues to inspire my imagination. Carl Weathersby, in finding his voice, redeems black music diversity and expands possibility for those who know soul and R&B.

JZ: Did they also impact your writing? In what way?

SP: These other brilliant blues artists constantly remind me that excellence in blues is diverse and that the music itself is in capable hands awaiting meticulous scholarship and appreciation. I see the wide and widening landscape of blues and try to convey the geographic journey that it has recorded. That forces me to try to be imaginative and open to new possibilities of expression as I struggle to "put my mouth to paper."

JZ: I feel that your poetry is a spoken-word type that's strong for performance with music. Can you talk about any significant performance of your poetry? How did the audiences respond to your poetry?

SP: When I recently read in Chicago with Matthew Skoller on harmonica in the back ground, the audience spoke well of the collaboration. Also, when they filmed “We are the Blues” with Willie Kent on Bass and Eddie C. Campbell on guitar, the commentary regarding the poetry was outstanding. This was also the opinion of those who saw the film on European television. Blues music energizes the poems of *Home/Bass* and brings another dimension to them.

JZ: I also feel that the line break or the word break with slashes in your poetry highlights the line or the word for special attention to the new meaning. Can you use a poem to illustrate this intention?

SP: “On Credit” where the slashes connotes a unique cadence rather than a pause and where the length of line connotes a speech style.

All

ways/I paint
my songs
in my eyes
where they pose.
Life
sized and testifying
ice and fire.
I take
my time and
a little of yours.

Photograph/my
cries. From behind
my eyes.
Shoot
them in color
because
black and
white.

Might.

wanna
fight.

I
can take
a table spoon/full of week
ends.
Make
it
last six whole
months.
Be
cause I wrestled a river
from between some devils
teeth.
When I
was five. Swallowed
it
down with muddy
waters.

I
cry
showers every
time I hear my heart
break. (*Home/Bass* 46-47)

JZ: Section One of *Home/Bass* focuses on Maxwell Street which functions as a mecca for people of different races, as presented in “Gathering Place”:

This
is the palimpsest/of
traveled roads. Here.
Dreams/open
their arms/wide.
This
Is where shadows/hold
national assemblies.
.....
This
is the place/where
you get/your naturalized
papers/of
feelings

Hope
is the/ruling
party here. In this/city
state of/make-a-way-some
how citizens.

Max
Well/Street gathers
voices. While A
merica/is a land
where/strangers meander. (*Home/Bass* 21-22)

These poetic lines must present your impression of the street. What is the most significant experience of yours in this gathering place?

SP: The most important experience of mine in this “gathering place is witnessing vendors from many nationalities making a way for their families. A Jewish woman once took me down Halsted between Thirteenth and Fourteenth Streets showing Jewish symbols and relating to me how and when Jewish vendors came there. There were also Middle Eastern vendors and money of the vendors and customers were Hispanics where several generations of a family present—child, parent, grandparent. Most important to me was hearing Jimmie Lee Robinson related how he grew up in the Maxwell Street community and how Jesse Owens had been at his elementary school to inspire black youth. I also have fond memories of talking to Maxwell Street Jimmy and Willie James.

JZ: Did Maxwell Street also function as a base for Kent’s bass music and energize his voice?

SP: Yes, the fact that Maxwell Street was a place where blues musicians could perform and showcase their talents made Maxwell Street a special place for *Home/Bass*. I was told that sometimes Jewish merchants would leave coal outside during winter. This is a perfect place for his bass and for Kent to invite his voice to intone affirmation. Yes, Maxwell Street is a base for Kent to use his Bass and energize his voice.

JZ: Jimmie Lee Robinson, a Chicago-born blues musician, called the Maxwell Street Market “a holy place.” Are there any bluesy memories of the market that stand out in your mind?

SP: I fondly recall the Walker meandering from place to place with an identity given by those who know the place. I enjoyed Willie James with his family as the band. Maxwell Street Jimmy had a name from out of his association with place. The mixture of folks on Maxwell Street was wonderful. I was there between 1980 until the day it was shut down.

JZ: How was your state of mind in writing from Kent’s perspective different from writing other poetry books of yours?

SP: I was more cognizant that literary texts were one way to articulation and working with one’s hands was another. I became more appreciative of those who craft a vision, a language, a poetic meaning out of their experience in song and performance.

JZ: The last two stanzas of “Rituals” in section 3 of *Home/Bass* give a vivid description of the two blues musicians:

I/saw
lightning/strike Buddy
Guy/and he squeezed/its
neck/till a D-natural:
Lord/have mercy/on me.
Wrung/its head
off. He/put the
rest/on his guitar/for
strings. Played/warm hail
down/on Theresa’s floor.
But/Junior Wells/done
cut the/lightning/fore Buddy
stringed it.

Magic
Slim/is funny.
He
collects/vipers.
Uses/fangs
for picks. Fits/the spinal
columns/on his guitar.

As strings. I/saw him
mad/with a rattler/a
round/his little finger. As/a
slide. That's/why he called
The Hiss Doctor. (*Home/Bass* 100)

The descriptions given in Kent's voice take us inside the blues performance. Did Kent often share with you his comments on other blues musicians? And how did you dramatize his voice

SP: Kent talked about Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Elmo James and Howlin' Wolf. The foremost thing in my mind as I attempt to dramatize Kent's voice is the myriad ways hyperbole is utilized in blues. There is also humor and a sense of someone masterful narrating something simple.

JZ: Other than influences from Chicago blues musicians, who else have been your literary influences?

SP: My major literary influences have been James Baldwin and Richard Wright. Baldwin because of insistence on writing from one's personal experiences, of squeezing not water but wine from it. And Wright because I knew the landscape of his upbringing and had to somehow learn to wring meaning from meaningless suffering I had known. Ellison taught me to view the epic achievements of those inventing and performing blues, jazz and gospel. In his way, Charlie Parker forced me to always allow for another more unique way of expressing what I aspired to express.

JZ: Thank you for your time, Professor Plumpp. Is there anything else you'd like to add about *Home/Bass* or Willie Kent?

SP: *Home/Bass* is an important excerpt from a larger work, "Mfua's Song," about matrilineal ancestors, basically in the narratives of females. I am indelibly connected to the moans and dreams of ancestors who do not know how to quit. Kent is a friend and a metaphor for artists who pry open silence and intone songs from delinquent tongues of generations.

Ted Haddin

Daring-Do

A fly was walking on the ceiling
served by a slow-moving fan.
It flew between the blades to stand
on the opposite side upside down.
It wasn't right in the first place,
but was preparing for another flight.
It liked to fly between the blades,
the way kids jump between ropes.
It sailed at the fan but was thrown off
far enough to buzz around and land
again, having done what's in no human
scope. I won't attempt to interpret
this tale. It only tells itself in some
circles that can be seen. It's not fair
to compare how Ms. Earhart flew away
to nothing but sky and water between.

Theodore Haddin, a professor emeritus from The University of Alabama in Birmingham, is the author of two poetry books, *The River and the Road* and *By a Doorway, In the Garden*. He has published articles and reviews on American literature.

Ted Haddin

Mrs. Connell Takes a Spin

Bearing the message of her secret cancer,
from behind the house at the top of the hill
she comes out on her driveway,
grim at the wheel of an off-white
Nissan, pauses with creaking brakes
as if for a swan-dive, then dips
to the street for a stop, gazes left-right,
then pushes the pedal to the floor,
wildly, hectically, does a sixty-in-ten
all the way down as if in flames
to the street below (we just see her
tail), straight through on her way
to a destination she knows,
where she'll have no hands
on the wheel, no accelerator,
and no brakes that ever squeal.

Ted Haddin

On A Child's Waking at Night

He would come sometimes at two a.m.,
his little boy's feet sticking out
from his pajamas and just nudge me,
father asleep, and his blue eyes
would peer into mine in the night's
faint light from down the hallway.
"I'm cold," he would say, "I'm lonesome,"
till I rose with him and we found
ourselves in the kitchen's warm light.
We got out the bottle and the cooking pot,
warm milk and talk, man to man,
made the hour slide by, and we would
stride back to his bed with the warmth
we shared to tuck him in till dawn.
Once we thought he was lost
when he hid from us at a park.
Just as the evening sky grew dark,
he came out then, knowing
he could find his way.

Ted Haddin

Old Plantation, Selma

Hanging in the old plantation
down the road, at Selma, the holding
quarters of slaves, now a restaurant,
iron gates open to a dark pit even today
here a slave was whipped there one bludgeoned
before Belsen, before Auschwitz, and floor
here of the old plantation house
now a cellar heap where blood ran like sweat
the keepers here no less than they
who far in a year in a war daily
put out the lives of thousands
was gas or the river worse
the drowned bodies disemboweled
urging in the silt no one
would ever know about

Ted Haddin

I Was Up in My Room

I was up in my room almost asleep
when the broadcast came and bombs
were hitting the *Arizona* too late
for Americans to wake up
and then the President coming over
and making the Congress declare war
and me running downstairs to tell those
still asleep mother and father still
hung over from Saturday night
that was a war then scary as hell
and now NPR reports the Taliban
are more organized than we thought
and they intend to kill Americans
wherever they can and not to reveal
any secrets not tell the truth lie
every time asked write letters nobody
can trace back to jihad
and why not while they're at it
poison American farmlands
here says the announcer at NPR
like the Japanese who wanted to do it
in 1945 send balloons across the Pacific
filled with poisoned turkey feathers
microorganisms parasites to let drift
down and scatter across fields
float even as now when American farmers
say in Iowa and Kansas for a start
look up now fearing turkey feathers

Ted Haddin

Putting in the Flag

My sister sent a flag
it was the American, flat
and thin made in Taiwan
with a little cloth hook
on it for hanging from something
the day is Memorial and the President
is over in Normandy saying stern things
over 9,000 dead he hopes we'll remember
from far away here at home
while the bridge over the Arkansas
lies cracked and fallen and souls lost
by a barge that hit a stanchion in a storm
so what if Saddam thinks of one we don't know
this day may mark his end we think
from points of safety here still safe
my sister sent a flag I haven't put up yet
I've folded it on the dresser waiting
for a moment to hold it up and show it
maybe somewhere in my flowerbed
where things are still coming up
from long before winter as if to crowd the day
and make sure of remembering if we will

Renee Emerson

On the Divine Use of Music

Mother's advice was a grasping hand
you don't remember; you were young,

thirsting to run without music. I taught you
the back and forth that failed us in the end,

to shape words that kept the next step
from falling. To burn away a need

with more than a wail, coming jagged.
Now you are older, living in another city.

In those last miles between us, I reacquaint
with the whole. I have missed the shifts in air,

city in the distance, hard angles and grid, elms
spaced in increments—a series of lift and release.

Empty, indelicate, I worked like everyone did
there, all of us wrapped around a hunger for breath.

The starlings lent me their own voices. Fragments
were what we knew as a child—only glimpse of a storm,
only that endless beating against the earth.

Renee Emerson is the author of *Keeping Me Still* (Winter Goose Publishing 2014). She earned her MFA in poetry from Boston University, where she was awarded the Academy of American Poets Prize in 2009. Her poetry has been published in *Indiana Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *storySouth*, *32 Poems*, and elsewhere.

Renee Emerson

Sunday's Palms Are Wednesday's Ashes

A half-year after burying your daughter,
you ask me what is the normal
amount of grief? As if loss can be measured out
in half or full portions, fine and sifted like flour
I use to bake my daughter's birthday cake.

We know nothing of portion—what size is fair,
the silver knife runs through severing this day
from that. What is it O'Connor says?
Everything that rises must converge—I don't know
if we do all rise, except in the last days,
and even then only some of us.

In Georgia, the hills rise like reoccurring dreams,
converge in an uneven horizon.
The pink balloons released at the funeral lifted
their single vowels toward heaven, partnering
in ways I would never orchestrate.

Renee Emerson

The Family Table

In those back-alley Memphis rib
and BBQ joints, father broke
the bone, sucked the marrow,
on date nights courting mother.
I did not marry that kind of man.
My husband and I live on the slope
of Mount Alto, our fence bowing
like someone forgiven, separating
the land that does and does not
belong to us. We walk into the bristle
of new-growth pines, the cross-hatch
of needle and twig, gumball and pinecone.
Our broken loaves multiply. Wisps of pollen
rise with each step we take: vapors,
vespers. Our young daughter bridges
our hands as she does each meal, before
we take a moment to say grace.

John J. Han

On the Old Dirt Road

Where my village once stood, reeds sway
in the Yellow Sea wind. A rice paddy has replaced
the tomboy's house. I shunned her, my bully.

In wrestling matches, set up by villagers,
she sat on me as a tiger pins down a bunny.
Her legs straddling my chest

felt soft, but her punches stung like peppers.
She pounded my nose; it bled, and I cried.
My dad shook his head.

In high school, she changed. Her body bloomed
into a lotus. She shunned me, blushing,
lowering her gaze.

On this autumn day, I am back on the dirt road
where we had matches—mismatches—
five decades ago.

She is gone, so are the villagers who cheered me on.
Her face blurs, except her peachy cheeks
that turned into ripe persimmons

when she felt my gaze. A red dragonfly
touches my nose, leaving me
suspended in time.

John J. Han is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Missouri Baptist University, where he also serves as editor of *Cantos: A Literary and Arts Journal* and chair of the Humanities Division. He has published his poems in numerous periodicals and anthologies worldwide, including *Kansas English*, *The Laurel Review*, and *Wilderness*.

Mack Hassler

Lessons in Northern Fishing

for Don and Nancy and Mark

I need some help to cast this line.
The lure must arc almost to shore.
With pole down and rapid reel,
Avoid, also, the weeds and catch
A spinning motion graceful as the prey
Itself. Then raise the curving tip,
Perceive the slightest strike, and praise
My mentors in this northern game
They teach so well.

I'm old myself,
A clumsy Thoreau aspirant,
No angler nor test enough on the line
As one would like, yet recognize the tug
When we've been caught.

Our friends believe
In fishing, though retired, and build
Their rugged homes themselves
With huge and sturdy sense of place.
My wife and I come lucky guests,
Always alien in a tough land,
And grateful for the welcome.

Don,
Our favorite predator, told Mark
And me as we jostled up the rough
Rocky road from Glitter Lake
Where we had twenty footlong pike
That, if not eaten by their fellows,
Those fish will grow sleek like us
To bite on future lines we cast
Inscribe graceful images for life
Attain some weight that we may keep.

Mack Hassler retired in June of this year and now has time for fishing at his camp in Northern Michigan. He is working on two more sections for his long essay on James Gunn, the science fiction writer.

Mack Hassler

At the Science Fiction Writer's Funeral

Tantae molis erat
("...very many small things are heavy....")
—Vergil

"... they beheld God, and they ate and drank."
Exodus, 24:11

We never know the roles that may be cast,
And many languages can help us cope.
His older brother Aaron spoke. The rope
That moored the boat had frayed at last
To launch us free to navigate the past.
One could not believe the range and scope
Of rhetoric, cacophony of hope,
As colleagues conjured unity by contrast.

Still in ancient rituals we men
Of modern times confront the common fate.
We gather in seventies to meet the Lord
At mountain heights where, never bored,
We also eat and drink and stay up late
To greet a future that has always been.

Elaine Terranova

Keeper

It was difficult to make out precisely what was in the heap
for the dust lay on it so thick that the hands of anyone who touched it
at once looked like gloves—*Dead Souls*, Gogol

Crows clear their throats
in preparation: another day
of rummaging.

It's raining and buds rain,
wisteria or whatever it is
in back of me

while soaked men
heft like Sisyphus
huge cans of stuff into
a gaping garbage truck.

Some time, could it be possible?
nothing will be left
that is still me.

But a keeper keeps,
and here inside,
despite the grime and flies,
my vista is an Alp of magazines,

slivered soap and pencil stubs,
scraps that flutter
orchid-like in wind,
the odd, unopened delivery box.

To rub each surface
for its genie, Clean,
just slows the groping dust.

I could, of course, pick up,
pick up at least and leave

the mess behind.
Sporca. Pig! you'd say.

Whatever enters here, you'd say,
sinks into the quicksand
of oblivion: doorknobs,
the sole of a shoe,
piles of regenerating bills.

But an object waits,
that is its nature.
I wouldn't want to grieve
for one lost thing.

I stand as in a painting,
Rückenfigure,
back-turned figure,
arms raised helplessly,
orchestrating ruin.

Mimosa

Pink aureoles peaking through
a fringe of leaves.
The scent, the bright
excitement
arouses the hummingbird.

Once I changed
into my bathing suit
in the back seat of a car
as a man pointed it out to me.
Mimosa, he said, it means "Beloved."

Elaine Terranova's sixth book of poems, *Dollhouse*, won the Off the Grid Press Award. Her work appears in a number of magazines and anthologies. She has received a Pushcart Prize, a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, a National Endowment in the Arts Fellowship, and the Walt Whitman Award.

Angela Ball

What Happens to Women

Hours of women
tie up herds of tamales and polish
the skyscrapers of the potent.

Their radiant forceful bodies
float beatifically through the poetry
of Khalil Gibran,

wander half-crazed mountains,
find flowers hiding other flowers,
bears stuck to each other with sleep.

At six p.m., an indigo of women
flows south across London Bridge.
Cufflinks sweep past
in knowledgeable black cabs.

Orpheus's lyre, plucking by itself,
plays across seas, destroyers following it,
fish following it, a snafu of tornados,
hailstorms, northern lights.
Eurydice listens, listens not.

Angela Ball is the 2013-15 Moorman Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi, in Hattiesburg, where she lives with two dogs, Scarlet and Miss Bishop, and a cat, Frank O'Hara. Her most recent book is *Night Clerk at the Hotel of Both Worlds*.

Angela Ball

Sorcerers

A country of watery drugs
and amateur magic,
flowers bred to speak Latin.

The garden could tell
what was in our minds:
a large roast, a silken tassel,
a bruised walking stick.

We encountered dead mist and a new,
bitchy concierge, also a fortuneteller,

who said. “Your fame will follow the war
that heals you; you will stain a flag; your children
will destroy a footbridge by means
of harmonic motion.”

We knew who we were when
we jumped up and down on one question.

Our favorite magician turned himself into a wheezy cocktail siphon,
then into a cedar, the tallest of trees, then into a white horse
falling from a bridge.

Angela Ball

Some Regrets That Will Attend You When You
May Have Kicked the Seat of The Patron In Front
of You at the Movie Theater Too Often

A sad milkman drops the milk
and enters a strange basement
to use the restroom. A repentant fox runs past,
looking transparent like a slide of fire.

“A hell of an out,” they say
in these parts, referring to the green caterpillar
with brown spikes found exploring the Chef’s Salad
on two separate occasions, despite
the guardianship of saltines, and referring, too,
to the Galaxy that fell off its wheels
inconveniently.

At the movies
you are disappointed at your failure
to stop kicking the seat
of the person in front of you,
and take your leg outside, where it continues
its protest. The bath mat in your backpack
is a lamentable gift
for your true love, a contrite ghost who has gotten
lost in the dark, a guilty river that
follows the concrete, a dejected sneeze
gone free.

The man who breaks dirty dishes
and buys new ones is as mournful
as were bewailed the happy campers
who threw their smug song up our penitent noses.
But when Brenda Lee’s record falls,
when Brenda Lee’s record falls,
she is Commissar of Sorry.

Judith Ortiz Cofer

El Encanto

I shape the wax
into a hand-size you
and let it melt all night.
I burn pyramids of patchouli
until my eyes water.
Tonight the moon begins to wane,
y ni la mas poderosa magia
will prevail in the darkness
that will follow.
My candle will burn in a vacuum.
Reaching for you
across time and distance,
your image will elude me
like the most cryptic of spells.

魔力

我把蜡塑成
手掌大的你，
讓它徹夜消融。
我焚燒錐形的廣藿香
燒得淚眼漣漣。
今夜月虧，
沒有更強力的魔法
可戰勝即將降臨的
黑暗。
蠟燭將在真空中燒燼。
跨越時空
去追你，
你的身影卻躲躲閃閃
如最神秘的咒符。

Judith Ortiz Cofer is the Regents' and Franklin Professor of English and Creative Writing, Emerita, at the University of Georgia. She is the author of sixteen books including, poetry, essays, stories, and novels. Her work has been included in numerous textbooks and anthologies including: *Best American Essays 1991*, *The Norton Book of Women's Lives*, *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, *The Norton Introduction to Poetry*, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, *The Pushcart Prize*, and the *O. Henry Prize Stories*.

Judith Ortiz Cofer

The Woman Who Was Left at the Altar

She calls her shadow Juan,
looking back often as she walks.
She has grown fat, her breasts huge
as reservoirs. She once opened her blouse
in church to show the silent town
what a plentiful mother she could be.
Since her old mother died, buried in black,
she lives alone.
Out of the lace she made curtains for her room,
doilies out of the veil. They are now
yellow as malaria.
She hangs live chickens from her waist to sell,
walks to the town swinging her skirts of flesh.
She doesn't speak to anyone. Dogs follow
the scent of blood to be shed. In their hungry,
yellow eyes she sees his face. She takes him
to the knife time after time.

被拋棄在聖壇前的女人

她管自己的影子叫胡安，
行走時頻頻回頭看。
她長得肥胖，乳房碩大
如水庫。有一回在教堂
她解開短衫向沉默的小鎮展示
她能做個多子多福的母親。
自她老媽一死，喪葬，
她便獨自過日子。
她把衣飾花邊改成臥室的窗簾，
把面紗改成杯墊。這些
如今都泛黃如患瘧疾。
她把活雞掛在腰圍，
擺動著這些肉裙子去鎮上賣。
她誰也不搭理。狗尾隨著
欲滴的血腥。在它們飢餓
蠟黃的眼珠裡，她睇見他的面孔。她把
一次次拎到殺雞刀前。

Judith Ortiz Cofer

Latin Women Pray

Latin women pray
In incense sweet churches
They pray in Spanish to an Anglo God
With a Jewish heritage.
And this Great White Father
Imperturbable in his marble pedestal
Looks down upon his brown daughters
Votive candles shining like lust
In his all seeing eyes
Unmoved by their persistent prayers.

Yet year after year
before his image they kneel
Margarita Josefina Maria and Isabel
All fervently hoping
That if not omnipotent
At least he be bilingual.

拉丁女人在祈禱

拉丁女人們
在香醞的教堂祈禱
她們操著西班牙語向一位猶太血統的
盎格魯人上帝祈禱。
而這位偉大的白人聖父
端坐大理石基座上
俯視他的棕色女兒們
許願的燭光如慾望閃爍
在他洞察一切
卻漠視她們執著祈禱的眼中。

可年復一年
她們跪在他的像前
瑪格麗特，荷西菲娜，瑪麗雅和伊莎貝爾
一個個懇切希望
他若非全能
至少也該懂雙語。

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Philip C. Kolin

Emmett Till on Whistling

In 1955 my body was interred in history,
a trial more scandalous than the crime
I was to have committed—whistling
It used to be bad luck to do it passing
a cemetery; it also was bad juju for any black man
in Mississippi (synonymous for anywhere)
to ever do it in the presence of white women.
Did they think our breath or lips polluted
their sanctified white air? I got news for them.
Whites inhale the same preferred air
that black exhale until lynching ropes
or bullets block their airways.

Philip C. Kolin, the University Distinguished Professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, has published over 30 books on Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, Adrienne Kennedy, Suzan-Lori Parks, David Rabe as well as five poetry collections. He is also Editor of the *Southern Quarterly* and Publisher/Editor of *Vineyards: A Journal of Christian Poetry*.

Jack B. Bedell

Hyperlapse

Driving west of Lafayette
I catch the AM feed
from Fred's Lounge in Mamou.

As soon as the static clears,
the house band fires up "'tit Galop."
A sound that's lingered

in me for years pierces the mic.
Like the slide of my mother's house shoes
on kitchen tile or the rising fuss

of a wet baby, the triangle's shuffle
moves me in time, presses the back
of a woman whose name I can't speak

straight into the center of my palm,
and my feet begin
to misremember the floor.

Jack B. Bedell is Professor of English and Coordinator of Creative Writing at Southeastern Louisiana University, where he also serves as editor of *Louisiana Literature* and director of Louisiana Literature Press. His recent books are *Bone-Hollow, True: New & Selected Poems*, *Call and Response*, and *Come Rain, Come Shine*, all with Texas Review Press.

Jack B. Bedell

Marsh

I cannot think of another place
as part of me—

reeds and water to the horizon line,
space and game to live,

fish for stew, turtles for sauce picante,
bullfrogs and moonlight for deep sleep.

A place of practiced rules,
heavy pull, lessons

passed down, preserved
like strawberry jam

put on the shelf for cold mornings
when herons take flight in fog.

Prédire

Just below the tree line
clouds congeal
out of view.

Winds shift course
enough to bend tall grass,
clean smell of water on air.

Cattle lie sloe-eyed
in tight clusters
along the north fence.

The old women see them
go to ground
and know.

Lenard D. Moore

Brandywood, Raleigh

On this mild day of April, a month cool with rain, come singing birds. I sit alone next to the open window, watching the NBA playoffs, head propped up on pillows piled against the shiny brown headboard. The sound of a lawn mower pierces the sun-bright air. Suddenly the TV shuts off. I pick up the remote control to turn it on again. The TV, still black, doesn't respond. Needing to know what's wrong, I spy the phone. The tiny red charge light is faded black. I dash downstairs, open the refrigerator, and encounter darkness inside it. I wonder how long butter, sour cream, and yogurt stacked in the refrigerator will remain fresh. I hear voices outdoors.

neighbors in the street—
a fire truck flashing
through pine pollen

Not Like Yesterday

Intense and glaring, the autumn sun is suspended like a hot air balloon above Fort Worden. No wind cries. I walk alone. The salt smell lingers from the sea.

a door closes
in an empty building—
a crow caws

Lenard D. Moore is Associate Professor of English at the University of Mount Olive. His poetry appeared in several anthologies including *Villanelles* (Knopf); *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (The U of Georgia P); and *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* (Bedford/St. Martin's). His most recent book is *A Temple Looming*.

Angelle Doedhar

Wanderlust

As a child I read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. In leather bound books with gold edgings and black and white images I explored the world of Tom and Huck Finn and heard the name of a river...along which I travelled on a paddle boat.

Later I read *Gone with the Wind*...today as I write, I sing with the Pussycats:

*Mississippi, you'll be on my mind
every time I hear this song
Mississippi roll along
until the end of time*

And I become a ten year old walking along that river...

clouded eyes—
still grandma crochets booties
for the newborn

Angelee Deodhar is an eye surgeon by profession. She is a haiku poet, translator and artist from India. Her haiku/haibun/haiga have been published internationally in various books, journals and on the internet. Her work has been translated into Japanese, Croatian, Romanian, Russian, German, French and several Indian languages.

Richard Cecil

Going Out on Top—Or Not

“The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.”

—Robert Frost, “The Oven Bird”

All writers envy Dante his grand plan
to tour the afterlife and interview
dead enemies and friends and famous souls
abiding in a landscape he invented.
Year after year, living as an exile
in other people’s houses, he escaped
the deadening routines that overtake
too prosperous and untortured poets
like Wordsworth and like T.S. Eliot
whose brilliant *Waste Land* dimmed to *Four Quartets*.
But lucky Dante got expelled from Florence
just in time to not share Wordsworth’s fate—
to get appointed Poet Laureate
(or its medieval Florentine equivalent)
and ride the wave of his young success
until it broke along the shores of death.
In place of *The Inferno* he’d have penned
a sonnet sequence to his favorite mistress
(a fleshy living one, not Beatrice)
and hymns of praise to his beloved Florence.
Instead he ended raging in Ravenna,
inventing a convincing universe
in which to punish enemies and triumph
over every rival on the planet.
And best of all, he died when he was finished—
sent himself to heaven, winked at God
and told Him that he shortly would be back.
Yes! No self-promoting reading tour,
no invitations to dine with the rich,
no desperate thoughts about what to write next.
What luck to exit, exiled, at the top!

Yet Dante would've taken one more year
or ten or twenty and returned to Florence
to write in comfort if he'd been allowed,
though what he wrote would not be called Divine
and maybe even labeled second rate.
It's so much more delicious to create
alive than to be dragged to Paradise
it almost doesn't matter what you make.

Richard Cecil is the author of four collections of poems, the most recent of which is *Twenty First Century Blues*. He teaches in Indiana University's Honors College.

Simon Perchik

*

Windswept, this radio
broken open with its stations
one on top each other

though what you hear
is its dust, bleeding
the way this rag, half doll

half straw, half dirt
scraping till a darkness
oozes from your fingertips

bent over, garbled
—she couldn't tell it's you
from far away, listening for her.

*

As if a rope, half bone
half pulled from your chest
the way this dead branch

tells you everything then closes
though the wood won't burn
—so many things are made from doorways

and she was left inside
with nothing to sit on or a stone
that will fall by itself, broken off

to die alone, whispering goodbye
for two and this dirt not yet
just another hole that weighs too much.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *Almost Rain*, published by River Otter Press (2013).

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