

COMEBACK, LITTLE SHEBAAN ODE TO THE MUSE OF AMERICAN POETRYJanuary 11, 1999Aaron Levine

On July 22, 1997, the New York Times published an article which headlined: "Constitution, Under Sail, Evokes a Century Past" – and told the story of the re-launching of the USS Constitution, "Old Ironsides", as a ship under free sail for the first time since 1881. No longer a museum, it cruised off the shores of Marblehead, Mass., to celebrate the 200th birthday of the Constitution. The oldest commissioned warship still afloat, a ship never defeated in 42 battles, it was President George Washington who ordered the ship built for the fledgling American Navy, and that ship won her first victory over the Barbary pirates in Tripoli. What a proud day that was in Marblehead and everywhere else where there were patriots!

But that was not the first time the Constitution won out over great odds – a story repeated many times during the Sunday mornings my father brought us kids to view the great treasures of historic Boston – Old Ironsides, Bunker Hill, Concord and Lexington. On September 24, 1830, the Boston Advertiser announced the news that the Secretary of the Navy had recommended the disposal of the Frigate Constitution, a wreck lying in Boston harbor. An impromptu outcry ensued shortly after the protesting verses of Oliver Wendell Holmes brought patriotic fervor to a boiling point – and to salvation – with these lines:

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
 Long has it waved on high,
 And many an eye has danced to see
 That banner in the sky:
 Beneath it rung the battle shout,
 And burst the cannon's roar;
 The meteor of the ocean air
 Shall sweep the clouds no more.

Oh, better that her shattered hulk
 Should sink beneath the wave;
 Her thunders shook the mighty deep,
 And there should be her grave;
 Nail to the mast her holy flag,
 Set every threadbare sail,
 And give her to the god of storms,
 The lightning and the gale!

Of a piece with this noble exhortation was Emerson's Concord Hymn, sung at the completion of the Battle Monument on July 4, 1837:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
 Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
 Here once the embattled farmer stood
 And fired the shot heard round the world.

Spirit, that made those heroes dare
 To die, and leave their children free,
 Bid time and nature gently spare
 The shaft we raise to them and thee.

Ah, that was poetry! That was music and fervor and country and love for our traditions. Poetry the way it should be — to take its place with the paeans to glory, the call to arms, the nobler impulses and thoughts of man from the time of Homer on. It was the kind of inspiring and familiar verse that many of us treasure from our early years. And where is our poetry of today? Has the muse deserted us? Is she hiding, awaiting a new day and different times? Or is it that we don't recognize her in her different guises and answering to different needs? Let's roam a bit and look for our little Sheba.

But of course American poetry was not just concerned with heroism and country though those were important themes. Even more prominent were the tried and true virtues of hearth and home, connubial love, faithfulness, the lessons of nature, the innocence of childhood, freedom and liberty. Here is Ann Bradstreet, writing in the 17th century: "To my Dear and Loving Husband — If ever two were one, then surely we, / If ever man were lov'd by wife, then thee, / If

ever wife was happy in a man, / Compare with me to women if you can."

William Cullen Bryant, still a teenager, gave us that accepting and faithful rendering of fate in Thanatopsis - "So live, that when thy summons comes to join / The innumerable caravan, which moves / To that mysterious realm, where each shall take / His chamber in the silent halls of death, / Thou go not, like the quarry slave at night, / Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed / By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave, / Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch / About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."

Long narrative poems were also beloved by the public during the 19th century and often sold successfully in many editions. Longfellow's Evangeline, in 74 pages of exquisite verse in classical hexameter, told the tale of brutal expulsion from Acadie, the separation for almost a lifetime of two star-crossed lovers, of their wandering over the vast prairies and waters of America, of their final meeting in the city of Brotherly Love only to die in each other's arms. A tale to break the hearts and renew the ties that bind for thousands of Americans of all ages and for many years. Those sonorous rhythms are still with us: "This is the forest primeval, The murmuring pines and the hemlocks, / Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight, / Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic, / Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms. / Loud from its rocky caverns, the deep-voiced neighboring ocean / Speaks, and in accents disconsolate answers the wail of the forest."

John Greenleaf Whittier's Snowbound sold enough copies to make him a rich man, not to mention a revered one whose 80th birthday was a national event. Snowbound, published in 1866, came at a time when the country was experiencing nostalgia for its innocent beginnings. The world of the poet's youth and family and memorable characters is lovingly and precisely observed. Each faces the problem of time and survival; only love can never lose. Then comes the peace of night and the reconciled dream of summer in the midst

of winter, and, with the dawn, the present appears with its obligations, joys and promises. The answer to the relation between the dreams of the past and the obligations of the future lies in the sense of the continuity of human experience, a sense of personal renewal, the connection with the American inheritance and, finally, of God's will. Thus, Whittier: "Clasp, Angel of the backward look / And folded wings of ashen gray / And voice of echoes far away. / The brazen covers of thy book; / The weird palimpsest old and vast. / Wherein thou hid'st the spectral past; / Where, closely mingling, pale and glow / The characters of joy and woe; / The monographs of outlived years, / Or smile-illumined or dim with tears, / Green hills of life that slope to death, / And haunts of home. . . The dreamer leaves his dreams midway / For larger hopes and graver fears. . . The traveler owns the grateful sense / Of sweetness near, he knows not whence, / And pausing, takes with forehead bare / The benediction of the air."

Much of American poetry in the 19th century was a celebration of our history and traditions and our respect for American ideas – Manifest Destiny, freedom and independence, a transcendental calling, the individual's self-reliance, the virtues of family. Like the epics of Homer, our poetry also portrayed an idea of civilization. And like Homer, our poets used forms of meter and rhyme which reflected well-accepted usages, which conformed to the needs and sounds of the English language.

Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass, published in 1854, introduced a new world of poetry and expression, and was heralded by Emerson who saw his image of American democracy and individualism realized in Walt's free-flowing verse. Free verse had been used before; in the Bible, by Milton, Blake, even Dryden, and others. But here was new American language and was to serve as a model not only for Walt's contemporaries but also for his followers up to today. William Carlos Williams, Allan Ginsberg, Ezra Pound, Jorie Graham, and most of our poets of today learned from Walt. And not only his style and rhythms but his subject matter – all kinds of people and experiences; an unabashed cataloguing of activities and things and ideas. Ezra Pound wrote: "I

make a pact with you. Walt Whitman. . .It was you that broke the new wood. Now is a time for carving. We have one sap and one root – let there be commerce between us." A note for the future lies in Walt's lines: "One's self I sing, a single, separate person, Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse."

Emily Dickinson's influence began later, in the 20th century, since she was not published to any extent until well after her death. But the Belle of Amherst, as she called herself playfully and wistfully in a latter sent to a school chum, sent a unique message in her struggle to find her true identity. Trying to maintain her faith which was no longer a strict Puritanism, she created a world of imagination and metaphor within which she could face the world – or avoid it – without complete despair and with wit and an abiding trust. Her secret thoughts, her American speech, her hymnal verse all speak to our latter-day poets and as both an individual and a woman she left an indelible metaphor of imagination, humor and courage for our modern times.

For the most part, today's poetry stems from Walt and Emily. Here is Walt as himself – "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume. You shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. / I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass." And again – "Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road, / Healthy, free. The world before me, / The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose." We are a long way from Longfellow's "Lives of great men all remind us we can make our lives sublime." And then there is Emily's "Hope is the thing with feathers / That perches in the soul, / And sings the tune without the words / And never stops at all."

And so a new brave and modern world opens up with its confidence and uncertainties.

The transition from the Fireside morality of the 19th century through Walt and Emily is shot through with the ups and downs of American culture. Edwin Arlington Robinson struck a note in American minds with Miniver Cheevy, "child of scorn, Grew lean while he

assailed the seasons. He wept that he was ever born, And he had reasons." T.S. Eliot said it even more powerfully in Prufrock: "I grow old. . .I grow old. . .I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled / Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? / I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk along the beach. / I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each, / I do not think that they will sing to me. . .We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown." Later TSE found his salvation from despair in faith and his own traditions.

But traditional forms continue today as written by some of our most skillful poets, such as Richard Wilbur, James Merrill, John Hollander and many others: meter and rhyme, several kinds of sonnets, tercets and triolets, couplets and quatrains, sestinas and pantoums. Forms became in time the available and appropriate means of expression and provided value and relevance to poetry. Form brought order to a chaotic world and, as one poet put it, kept us from being idiots or at least from being stupider than the law allows.

A popular traditional form, with which we are all familiar, is the limerick, the first appearance of which came in 1820 in a book of fairy tales called Sixteen Wonderful Old Women. Edward Lear created many limericks and gave it some of its most popular models. The rhyme scheme was usually AABBA, is always short, often nonsensical, sometimes ribald, and always surprising. Thus, an American example:

There was an old dame of Nantucket
 Who kept all her cash in a bucket.
 But her daughter, named Nan,
 Ran away with a man.
 And the bucket?
 Nan - tuck - it!

A very contemporary example of this usage - in the tradition of The Old Lady From Wheeling and The Young Fellow Named Dave - and numerous others unworthy of mention or quotation in this august assembly, is the one used by Christopher Plummer in his recent wonderful

tour-de-force in Barrymore on Broadway. Here Plummer plays Barrymore to the hilt, with all his charm, his despair, his talent and his alcoholism. He describes how he eats bananas to disguise his whiskey breath and then launches into this – a bowdlerized version of the original:

There was this old drunk in a dive,
Whose breath one could hardly survive.
So he ate a banana
And read George Santayana.
And expelled Chanel No. Five!

Here is a short series of poems which reflect the changes from the Romantic period that we have inherited from English sources to the present. These changes include the losses in faith and the need for new guidelines in our contemporary world, as well as the great changes in language that have occurred in our culture.

First is from Wordsworth's Ode, Intimations of Immortality – "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: / The soul that rises within us, our life's star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting, / And cometh from afar. / Not in entire forgetfulness, / And not in utter nakedness, / But trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home; / Heaven lies about us in our infancy! . . . / Though nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower, / We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind, / . . . In the faith that looks through death, / In years that bring the philosophic mind."

We move to Frost's existential view. Provide, Provide – "No memory of having starved / Atones for later disregard / Or keeps the end from being hard. / Better to go down dignified / With boughten friendship at your side / Than none at all. / Provide, Provide."

Though he goes back to the pre-World War II period, but has remained influential, is William Carlos Williams. His conversational tone and his stress on the facts as we can know and interpret them, there being no ideas except in things. The Red Wheelbarrow –

"So much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow / glazed
with rain / water / beside the white / chickens." And,
"This is just to say I have eaten / the plums / that
were in / the icebox / and which / you were probably /
saving / for breakfast / forgive me / they were
delicious / so sweet / and so cold."

And here in the present is Gary Snyder, one of the
Beats, a student of Buddhism, lover of nature and the
world of reality, in For The Children - "The rising
hills, the slopes / Of statistics / Lie before us, /
The steep climb of everything, going up / up, as we all
/ go down. / In the next century / or the one beyond
that, / they say, / are valleys, pastures, / we can
meet there in peace / If we make it. / To climb these
coming crests / One word to you, to you and your
children: / Stay together, learn the flowers, / go
light." Thus environmental protection and the saving
of our world have become the true glory for many.

Among the many poets of America there is an
indubitable force in Carl Sandburg's mid-western
exuberance, as in Chicago - "Hog-Butcher for the world,
/ Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Freight Handler /
Stormy, husky, brawling, / City of the Big Shoulders."
Again, a new kind of poetry in the Whitman line, the
voice of the open prairie, the new industries, and a
new America.

And we come now to Robert Frost, who speaks to our
modern mind with its ambivalences and with its need to
confront our doubts and our need for faith and the
ability to cope. Rabbi Victor Reichert, in his paper
delivered to the Literary Club on November 11, 1957,
pointed out the Star Imagery in Frost's poetry, the
symbol used to communicate the ideals of living on the
side of constancy and the search for absolutes. We
should live with a certain height of aim; we need the
calm of courage, the poise of self-possession, the
worth of incorruptibility. In the stars is the light
of reason and common sense and a call for endurance and
commitment. With Promethean spirit he responded to the
rebel Job and demanded to know the reason why! He was
the man who took the road less traveled by. Frost
wrote mostly in meter and rhyme since he believed these
forms were needed to put order over chaos. The tone

was simple and direct though not without its inner meanings, and always in the American tradition. Basically, he demanded and got: simple language and metaphor to surprise one from innocence into experience, from delight to wisdom; a courageous affirmation of life; the aim of life should be for high performance in what we do in the world. He broke loose from rigid creeds and frozen religious dogma. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." And in Swinging Birches – a sustained allegiance to life – "Earth's the right place for love." Thus his testament of faith and man's inner strength to deal with life's mystery of suffering, and he had his deep personal tragedies. Incorruptibility, loyalty, devotion are his themes in Two Tramps in Mud Time – "come in – but no, I was out for stars; / I would not come in. / I meant not, even if asked, / And I hadn't been."

This was not Wordsworth's "trailing clouds of glory" but modern American man facing his world with courage.

Mary Oliver, poet, critic, and teacher, sheds light on the development of our contemporary poetry from earlier models. Earlier poetry was formal, different from the ordinary world. Change brought simplicity and intimacy, neither pretentious nor formal. A knowable person is behind the poem; the spirit of the times is participatory. Personal and community life, self-revelatory, is key. There is a much greater feminist and ethnic involvement. The best seem to come from the particular, the regional, the personal and become parables that say something about our lives. Keats' negative capability – the capacity of the poet to fill himself with the understanding of, or the empathy with, the subject of the poem – is alive and well, as we shall see. And in our times the diction of the poem goes to the heart of the matter, and transfers from the page to the reader an absolutely essential quality of real feeling. The poet needs the actual known event or experience to elucidate the inner invisible experience. Thus the natural world is so often the source. Imagery can often take us out of our own existence. It can make the subject of the poem as intimate as honey – or ashes – in the mouth. Poems are

not words after all, but fires for the cold, and ropes to let down to the lost.

But every poem contains within itself an essential difference from ordinary language, no matter how similar to conversational language it may seem at first to be. Call it compression, originality, or imagination. Free verse arose out of a desire to be free of meter, measure, and rhyme, and yet not really free since there is some sort of design, spontaneous and impulsive as it might be. It is also language that is composed, considered, appropriate, effective — perhaps a product of our times, a desire to alter and change; perhaps the increasing idea of a democratic and classless society in America. And changes in content — suitability of subject faded into the background; and emerging voices wrote about anything and everything. The poem is no longer a lecture but speech, the music of conversation.

Not everyone is as happy about the condition of contemporary American poetry as Mary Oliver and some of her colleagues. Not that this "loyal opposition" dislikes poetry, but rather than there is too much of it, and too much of that is unthinking and untalented. The Economist for the week of December 20th 1997, for example, carried an article entitled "Poetic Injustice," which bemoaned the fact that poetry was once important, that it was once ubiquitous and, even more, central to the cultivated life. Verse was humorous, populist, narrative, satirical or polemical; it was lyrical, personal, or learnedly esoteric. Great occasions were marked by poems whose phrases sometimes entered the language. But that was a long time ago. Now contemporary poetry is more akin to collecting butterflies, or painting by numbers, or gazing at stars. In America poetry has fallen off the map and has become more than culturally marginalized. Often obscure or self-referential, it neither scans nor rhymes nor tells us a story; it is impossible to memorize, is humorless, and can be more like a puzzle than a poem. When was the last time you bought a book of contemporary poetry? Can you remember even one poem by a living poet? But the puzzle is that more and more of it is being produced. Hundreds of new small presses

and hundreds of new magazines appear every month and the volume is really intimidating.

There are some fine poets writing today, but most people can be forgiven for not finding them. Surprisingly, in the last few years, poetry seems to be making a comeback — due to public readings. Not only in universities and schools, but also in libraries, bookshops, cafes and bars.

Poetry "slams" have become popular with audiences, sometimes 100 or more, giving each a "score" after each reading. (A new movie, "SLAM," is acclaimed as a fable which elevates "rhythmically charged, fervently incantatory street poetry into a redemptive sport, opening prison cell doors and the human mind.") The ultimate "slam" is the Heavyweight Championship contest staged every June in Taos, New Mexico. The champ, Professor Quincy Troupe of the University of California, San Diego, sees no inherent contradiction between showmanship and seriousness. Is public reading the final debasement of poetry as a pretentious cabaret, or is it the beginning of a genuine revival? The responses rage on between two camps. One critic says that the spread of creative writing classes is partly responsible and represents the democratization of the arts. Maybe so, since some 11,000 American students choose to work for degrees in creative writing and about half of those "do poetry". Although a new group of "Formalists" have returned to formal traditions in protest against looser usages, the trends continues with "magnetic" poetry (little boxes of word magnets for the doors of refrigerators), cowboy poetry (200 festivals a year — horses go in free), business poetry, construction poetry and that ain't all.

And then there are the numerous poetry societies in almost every State, National Poetry Month in April, the Geraldine R. Dodge Annual Poetry Festival in Waterloo, New Jersey (popularized by Bill Moyers in his television show, and his book The Language of Life), the Poetry Center of the 92nd Street "Y" in New York City, the National Library of Poetry contests offering \$48,000 in prizes, not to mention our own local societies, such as the Greater Cincinnati Writers League, and the annual poetry reading held at the

Institute for Learning in Retirement, and the regular readings at the Elliston Room, both at the University of Cincinnati. I could go on and on but let me give an example of the ridiculous before we go on to the sublime:

In June 1997, the New York Times ran an article about a prize for poetry by the National Library of Poetry located in Owings Mills, MD. The winner of the \$2500 prize, including a book contract, was one Sophie Downes, whose poem reads as follows:

Bwah bwah bwah bwah bwah bwah
 mmm mmm mmm mmm mmmmm
 Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
 uhh bu bu bu bu bwah bwah bwah bwah
 ma ma ma ooooooooooh eeeeeeeeeee heh heh heh heh!

Sophie has just turned 17 - months, that is.

Thus poetry lives at any age.

Although the author of the Economist article bewails the fact that too many poets have lost the ability or the desire to reach readers outside their coterie, beyond the "little province of the self," he also makes an important point that - the beauty of a surprising image; moments of revelation or contemplation; the pleasure of a well-turned or oft remembered phrase: these are the satisfactions that poetry above all other acts can offer. Without these, something valuable will have been lost - valuable beyond words.

Perhaps at this point, when we are about to take a good look at some contemporary poetry, we should ask the all-important questions - what is poetry? What is it supposed to do? How does one recognize it? Longfellow said that the purpose of poetry was to delight and instruct, and he certainly did just that, and put it into many forms of sonorous and pleasant verse. Wallace Stevens, whose verse was entirely different in technique, was looking for something essential to living - "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right." Like religion without the ritual? Wislawa Szymborska, the

winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1996, writes in Some People Like Poetry: "Some people - / that means not everyone. / Not even most of them, only a few. / Not counting school, where you have to, / and poets themselves, / you might end up with something like two per thousand. / Like - / but then, you can like chicken noodle soup, / or compliments, or the color blue, / your old scarf, / your own way, / petting the dog. / Poetry - / but what is poetry anyway? / More than one rickety answer / has tumbled since that question first was raised, / But I just keep on knowing, and I cling to that / like a redemptive handrail." Muriel Rukeysey, in The Life of Poetry, writes: "I cannot say what poetry is. I know that our sufferings and our concentrated joy, our states of plunging far and dark and turning to come back in the world. . . all area here, in a music like the music of our time, like the hero and like the anonymous forgotten, and there is an exchange here in which our lives are met and created." Thus, the search for meaning, for insight, for epiphany goes on.

What do contemporary poets write about? Mostly about some or all of the following:

(1) Cultural issues (myths, politics, religion, history and including Objectivists, Black Mountain artists, San Francisco Renaissance, The Beats);

(2) Issues of self, social groups, urban and suburban landscapes, visual art, New York School and others;

(3) Issues of language, reading and writing itself;

(4) Issues of performance, voice, genre, dialog, personae.

(Above from The Other Side of the Century, new American poetry 1960-90). And from the Morrow Anthology – poems the editors liked – interesting, dramatic, with character, aware of being alive. Thus poetry is everywhere and everything. People do not change, but poetry tries to penetrate the mysteries around us.

Quality – esthetic judgment, skilled rendering, musicality, metaphorical creativity, originality, meaningfulness – is the key to good poetry. Here are a few examples:

James Tate writes: "Ultimately poetry is / Virtue if it is our lot to choose, err, regret, and / Wonder why in speech that would melt the stars / X marks the spot of / Your latest attempt. Point at a map blindfolded / Zanzibar, Shall we go there, you and I?"

The following poem by poet laureate Robert Hass describes the natural world and makes it a part of his family life and a symbol of his love. "Letter" – "I had wanted to begin / by telling you I saw another tanager below the pond / where I had sat for half an hour / feeding on wild berries / in the little clearing near the pines / that hide the lower field / and then looked up from red berries / to the quick red bird brilliant / in the light. I have seen / more yarrow and swaying / Queen Anne's Lace around the woods / as hawkweed and nightshade / wither and drop seed. A new blue flower / sweet, yellow-stemmed, o very inferior, / has recently sprung up. / But I had the odd / feeling, walking to the house / to write this down, that I had left / the birds and flowers in the field / rooted or feeding, / they are not in my / head, / are not now on this page. / It was very strange to me, but I think / their loss was your absence. I wanted / to be walking up with Leif, the sun / behind me, skipping off the pond, / the windy maple sheltering the house, / and find you there and say / here is a new blue flower (o very inferior) / and busy Leif and Kris with naming / in a world I love. / I have believed so long / in the magic of names and poems. / I hadn't thought of them bodiless / at all. Tall Buttercup. Wild Vetch. / You are the body / of my world, root and flower, the / brightness and surprise of birds. / I miss you, love. Tell Leif / you're the names of things."

Humor and courage underlie Jane Mead's amusing poem about a truck full of chickens who could almost be humans on their way to an uncertain fate. "Passing a truck full of chickens at night on Highway 80" – "What struck me first was their panic, / Some were pulled by the wind from moving / to the ends of the stacked

cages, / some had their heads blown through the bars -
 / and could not get them in again. / Some hung there
 like that - dead - their own feathers blowing, clotting
 / in their faces. Then / I saw the one that made me
 slow some - / I lingered there beside her for five
 miles. / She had pushed her head through the space /
 between the bars - to get a better view. / She had the
 look of a dog in the back / of a pickup, that eager
 look of a dog, who knows she's being taken along. / She
 craned her neck, / She looked around, watched me, then
 / strained to see what happened beyond. / That is the
 chicken I want to be."

Mary Oliver's Wild Geese also brings us close to
 the natural world and makes it a part of one's human
 emotions; "You do not have to be good. / You do not
 have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles
 through the desert, repenting. / You only have to let
 the soft animal of your body love what it loves. / Tell
 me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. /
 Meanwhile the world goes on. / Meanwhile the sun and
 the clear pebbles of the rain / are moving across the
 landscapes, / over the prairies and the deep trees, /
 the mountains and the rivers. / Meanwhile the wild
 geese, high in the clean blue air, / are heading home
 again. / Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, / the
 world offers yourself to your imagination, / calls to
 you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting - / over
 and over announcing your place / in the family of
 things.

A very up to date poem of blighted romance is
 offered by Anthony Hecht in his satirical version of
 Matthew Arnold's famous Victorian poem, Dover Beach,
 which asks the lovers to be true to one another in a
 world with neither joy nor love nor light. Hecht calls
 his poem Dover Bitch, in which his girl complains "to
 have brought me all the way down from London, and then
 be addressed / As a sort of mournful cosmic last resort
 / Is really tough on a girl. . . And then she said one
 or two unprintable things. / But you mustn't judge her
 by that. I still see her once in a while."

Allan Ginsberg, master of the Beats, brought a
 load of emotions and memories to his generation -
 anger, despair, criticism, contempt, joy,

rebelliousness and sometimes a little fun of some moral standards. From A Supermarket in California — "I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys. I heard you asking questions of each. Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my angel? Ah, dear father, greybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank. . ."

Jane Kenyon's poem, Let Evening Come, written near the end of her shortened life, reflects an acceptance and faith enhanced by her sensitivity and great skill to become almost a prayer of love and reality. "Let the light of late afternoon / shine through chinks in the barn, moving / up the bales as the sun moves down, / Let the cricket take up chafing / as a woman takes up her needles / and her yarn. Let evening come. / Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned / in long grass. Let the stars appear / and the moon disclose her silver horn. / Let the fox go back to its sandy den. / Let the wind dies down. Let the shed / go black inside. Let evening come. / To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop / in the oats, to air in the lung / let evening come. / Let it come, as it will, and don't / be afraid. God does not leave us / comfortless. Let evening come.

These contemporary poems and many others inspired me finally to write my first poem in almost 65 years. In 1934 I won the poetry prize at Brookline High School and received a copy of Housman's The Shropshire Lad, which was so wonderful that I stuck with poetry but couldn't write a thing until now. Old age? Perhaps. But I took the coward's way out by writing a sonnet instead of free verse. Free verse takes too much talent to be really good, and as someone said formal verse keeps us from making idiots of ourselves. So, with apologies to almost everyone, here goes my Ode to the Muse of Mixed Metaphors or Come Back Little Sheba:

When chaos hits the fan, and hope has gone
 With all bases loaded and no one home,
 Even the tough go nowhere and face the dawn
 With an empty stare in the vacant Dome.
 Stout Cortez on the peak in Darien

Would wonder why he was stuck in that State
 Or strayed in a lapse of poetic pen,
 And could just, like you and me, curse his fate.
 But then, as winter's floods give way to sun,
 That muse, long fast asleep in the darkest night,
 Shakes a leg and says, "break the other one,"
 Rise up and give to poetry its right
 To place a form of beauty on dismay.
 Thus love and verse keep misery at bay.

SOUTHERN DISCOMFORT

January 18, 1999

Howard L. Tomb

William Faulkner, Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams write about a dominion dripping with the promise of forbidden fruit. A land foreign to the rest of us. A land of shadows, mystery and malignancy.

Welcome to Linden-population 2,500-the county seat for Marengo County, Alabama, somewhere in the southwestern part of the state. The Tombigbee River is the border between Marengo and Choctaw County to the west. The river starts a little above Eutaw (that's spelled E-U-T-A-W) and meanders slowly to the Gulf, just outside of Mobile.

The Tombigbee is shallow and, since the surrounding terrain is flat, there is water everywhere. The should along most county roads is almost nonexistent, as there is about a 4- or 5-foot drop on each side into swampy darkness. Furtive blue and gray herons patrol the murkiness. One can sense that drowned cypress trees are hiding nests of water moccasins, copperheads and rattlesnakes. The hardwood trees are shrouded with kudzu, so they bend unnaturally, tortured. The grayness is emphasized by Spanish moss draped from live oaks. Just before we came to the city limits of Linden, we saw two well-fed vultures ripping and devouring the carcass of a fawn.