

A Poet's Autobiography

by Frederick Smock

*It could be for beauty—
I mean what Keats was panting after,
for which I love and honor him
—Jane Kenyon*

I

Do I begin with the present?

This morning, my wife rises near dawn to bake a quiche for her women's literature class. I lie dozing in our bed, half-listening to the clinkings and stirrings of her work in the kitchen. The dog lies curled up on the foot of the bed. Outside the east window, the early morning clouds are lit pink from underneath by the rising sun. The day has almost begun. *Pink sky in the morning / sailor's warning*, goes the old rhyme. Olga-Maria comes back to bed when the quiche is in the oven. "It's going to snow today," she says. We lie together again, for as much time as we have until the day must really begin.

While she bathes—a sometimes lengthy affair, with as many as two or three separate immersions in the tub, a large old-fashioned claw-footed thing—I retrieve the *New York Times* from the front stoop and spread it open on the big table. I have a view into the front room of the fireplace, the roses on the mantel, the doors to the balcony and the trees beyond. The big table is where we eat, and work, and read the newspapers, and work the crossword puzzle, and take care of the household business. The big table was the first piece of furniture I bought for the apartment, from a neighbor who was having a yard sale. The table had belonged to his ex-wife, he said, and he added that he was "right glad to be shed of it."

Outside our balcony doors, the flat palm-size leaves of the Bartlett pear trees have turned a deep gold. Last summer, the local utility company hacked away at these trees where their branches entangled the electrical lines. From the street side, the trees look sorely mutilated; however, from inside our apartment, what's left of the trees still curves gracefully up past our doors. The other trees on our street have already shed their leaves. Our balcony alone remains shaded. These leaves will last through December. The most stubborn leaves will not drop until the spring, when they are pushed out by new buds.

The roses on the mantel lean flirtatiously out of their vase. Before leaving for

her class, Olga-Maria brings them fresh water. The morning comes together around the pure sound of water splashing into a vase. The roses lean into the early sunlight. We admire their readiness for the day. We study their long wanton necks, heavily weighted by those gloriously crowned heads. Roses: those old war-horses of love. These are blown roses now, several days old, beginning to drop those drowsy heads, their petals curling outward and ever so slightly browning. We bought yellow roses this week, yellow roses rimmed with pink, like a milk-maid's cheek in a Vermeer painting. Flowers are good habit to get into, we have decided. We remark on them daily. They deserve a portion of the household budget for the good cheer they bring. In Copenhagen, where I taught for a couple of summers, flowers are everywhere, decorating window-boxes, corner stalls, sun-browned bosoms. There are flower stalls on nearly every street-corner. In Copenhagen it is positively impolite to show up at someone's door without flowers.

Roses, as they grow old, grow open, as if they want to take in more and more of the world. More light! More rain! Like Keats, roses live—and die—for beauty.

My wife and I live in an old part of town, in a six-room apartment with Tudoresque woodwork, cream-colored walls, and high ceilings. The art on our walls consists mostly of paintings by former students of ours. The place has seventeen doors, and twenty-eight windows. Remarkably, the windows are all angled or positioned such that we need no curtains. Our neighbors on either side are obscured. This suits us fine. We are rather private people. We are happiest being alone together. When we do go out, we tend to go wrapped in the mantle of our togetherness, drawn up rather tight. Soon after we moved into our apartment, a well-meaning colleague who lives down the street started inviting us to barbecues, cocktail parties, and the like, until, finally, we had to tell her, we do not go out much. We protect our time. It is hard not to hurt people's feelings, sometimes. Enough of our energy goes to our students. Being writers, my wife and I, we guard our time. In Baudelaire's "Les Hibous" ("The Owls"), he wrote:

*Their attitude instructs the wise
That in this world they must eschew
All vain movement and ado*

It is for a similar reason, I think, that athletes move so slowly when they are off the field—the conservation of a much-needed energy.

On days such as this one, when I do not teach, there is a transparency to the hours. The leaves on the pear trees glow with a clear and vegetal light. The mailman's arrival looms as a major event (writers still live by and through the mail). I read, scribble, putter about. I can get lost for long minutes in the study of wind moving through the leaves, or the clouds idling in their patch of sky. I can get lost in the quiet of sitting with stacks of books, newspapers, and journals. There is a pleasure even in the making of such stacks, in the anticipation of reading, just as there is a pleasure in sitting down to a blank notebook in the anticipation of writing. I do not subscribe to the Anguish of Writing theory. Hunger is anguish. Disease and poverty and violence are anguish. Writing is not anguish, it is a pleasure—a craft of leisure, even if that shall be an impoverished leisure.

Mid-afternoon, the snows come. Olga-Maria returns from class, her dark-green SAAB gliding to a stop on the wet street below. She carries up a stack of papers to grade: student essays on some of her own current enthusiasms—Adrienne Rich, Sonia Sanchez, June Jordan, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Joy Harjo The sky has grown heavy

and gray. We could smell the snow coming. We each felt it in our bones. Then the first few flurries materialized. Soon, large wet flakes were filling the sky. I turn on the radio and we happen to catch Handel's "Water Music," a music that is slow and mannered, like the snow falling outside our windows. Snow falls in minuets. We open a bottle of wine, an Australian shiraz that feels good on the back of our throats. It will snow for a couple of hours, and then, just before dusk, the sun will burst back through, under the clouds, its light streaking in through the west-facing windows.

Later in the day, I am sitting at the big table, writing. I am wanting a prose that is less predictable than prose. Or, if it is poetry, I am preparing for the lucky accident—waiting for the world to hand me a line, an image The Oregon poet William Stafford wrote that he used to wake at dawn and sit by a window, waiting. Eventually, the world always gave him *something*, he said. He wrote a poem every day. Not every one of his poems was a keeper, but, hey—a poem a day. The small breathy noises made by pencil-on-paper are most companionable (it is a sound I have known since earliest childhood) even if the writing itself amounts to nothing much. Noises from the street below reach me, but dimly, through the snow and the scrim of leaves remaining on the trees. There is the heady scent of roses and, now, a little Satie on the radio—the tinklings of *Gymnopedia*, or is it *Trois Caprices*?

My wife is also an actor and singer. She put herself through graduate school singing opera, and (slumming) singing in an Italian-themed roadhouse restaurant. Around our apartment, she sings arias from Mozart's operas, *Così fan tutte* and *Figaro*, songs by de Lisle, Faure's "*Au bord de l'eau*": *To sit together on the bank of the stream that passes by* Sometimes I will think that she has put on the radio, or a recording, but no, it will be her, singing, as she dusts photographs, or takes a bath, or puts on her make-up, while I prepare our dinner, or tend to the fire. Our apartment has one of those old shallow coal-burning fireplaces, banked to pitch the heat out into the room, although, on a truly cold day, much of that heat slips out through the old warped loose-jointed window-glass.

Suddenly the sun has set. Out any window spreads a vivid dark-streaked sky, pink-rimmed, like the roses on our mantel. *Pink sky in the night / sailor's delight*, goes the old rhyme. It has been a day of poetry. A good day, then. We sit before the fire, for much the same reason, I imagine, that we sit before the ocean—to be mystified. By which I think I mean that we are returned to an existence prior to living memory.

II

Or, do I begin with the past?

It took a long time to arrive at the lovely day that is described above. A poet's life can be such an iffy thing, and not always prepared for in the classroom. There is nothing certain about that life. Nobody talks about poetry as a professional calling, not in America, anyway. To apprentice one's self to the craft in any meaningful way calls for a good deal of challenge and sacrifice, not all of it financial. I recall my father remarking, "My son the poet," a phrase he soaked in sarcasm. (My father should have been more sympathetic—he was a watercolorist at heart, but his own father forced him to go to medical school.) And, I recall my first wife saying, when I complained one day about the poet's lot, "Well, why don't you just write a best-seller?"

To write, one must live aesthetically. Or, because one does not live aesthetically, one must write. In either case, poetry brings beauty and symmetry to a world in dire need of both.

The signature event of my childhood was a rather sorry cliché—my father went

out for cigarettes and did not return until years later. How I watched the road that led up to our house! How I hoped for his white Lincoln Continental to suddenly appear from behind the trees. (The writer in me, even at that young age, must have recoiled at the hackneyed nature of my father's defection.) And so it was that my mother spent her days complaining loudly about "Smock men," and staring out the kitchen window at the woodland fields, a Virginia Slims menthol cigarette ever-burning between her fingers, a cup of coffee (cream and sugar) at her elbow. My little brother and sister and I quickly learned to shift our imaginative worlds away from the house, and toward the woods, and the horses, and the open fields.

Even before that troubled time, our mother, inexplicably enough, had begun the rather pathetic practice of threatening to turn me over to the local orphanage whenever I misbehaved. At some small infraction (for I was quite an obedient child), I would be made to pack a bag, and to settle myself in the backward-facing seat of her Chevrolet station-wagon, and off we drove. With what care did I choose from among my belongings—books and t-shirts, chiefly, if I recall correctly. Then, we pulled away, and I watched as our house grew smaller and smaller, then disappeared from view. Eventually we pulled up in front of the tall iron gates of the orphanage. Boys Haven, it was called. We sat there—the gates were always closed, thank goodness—and my mother made me repent of my sins until, satisfied, she turned the car around and drove away home again. From where I sat, looking backward now, of course, the tall gates of the orphanage grew smaller and smaller, then disappeared from view. I remember thinking, at the time, that the orphanage would have been a kind of solution.

The thought of an orphan's absolute freedom is thrilling to me, even now, as a grown-up, with both of my parents dead. However, were I an orphan, I might not know the family history that grounds me, and which continues, herewith, in brief:

My family is Dutch, given to drink and dark rumination. We are not quite so melancholic as the Danes (Hamlet's brood), but they are our first cousins. It is that flat land, and those long winters. And that flat land. At any moment, we know, the sea can reclaim us, humble low-landers that we are. Our lives are writ on water. And the sky is so large and bleak . . . My kinfolk hail from Utrecht, an ancient university town just outside Amsterdam. The link in our tribe, Hendryk and Gertrude Shmolck, sailed over in the 1650s and settled in the Dutch community of New Utrecht, Long Island. (Their name became crunched and anglicized. Their own doing? The doing of others? I do not know.) Interestingly enough, when Hendryk and Gertrude departed for the new world, they seem to have left behind the family coat-of-arms, which dated from the 12th century. Some artist found it, in a German castle near the Rhine, re-painted it and sent it after them. Since that time, the children of each generation have been given a copy of the coat to do whatever with.

Hendryk and Gertrude's descendants drifted down-river over the next couple hundred years, and a few of them stepped off at the Ohio River portage near Louisville and put down a few tenuous roots. Thus the clan persevered, if it did not exactly prosper. Oh, there have been doctors and judges in the family, but there have also been drunkards and swindlers. (On balance, one half of the men could have seen to the other half, in some fashion.) The men seem to have fared generally less well than the women, certainly in terms of longevity. I grew up in a house of women—it was a kind of pediatric harem—the men were all gone or dead by then. Gone to find their fortune, or their reward. And, truly, I did not notice their absence until later on.

"Men come and go," an aunt once remarked, "women are the place." She made that remark in the kitchen, no less, and I can remember how it hung in the air, like a sharp aroma. Even now I can call that specific aroma to mind: cinnamon, burnt.

Childhood trauma may contribute to adult depression, but it does not necessarily contribute to artistic expression. Extending the argument, would Coleridge still have become a poet if not for his club foot? (A question originally posed by Guy Davenport.) Certainly, many a person with a club foot has not become a poet. And, many a young man with tuberculosis has not written “Ode to Autumn.” Trauma may be a source for art, but it is not a substitute for talent. That distinction took me a while to sort out. The lyric poet, as well as the confessional poet, might be just an egoist. Having an eloquent complaint against the universe does not make one an artist. While the neophyte sometimes confuses argument for art, the mature artist has grown out of that youthful confusion and understands that art answers only to art. After a certain age, you cannot blame your parents anymore.

III

More clearly than some girlfriends do I remember the various rooms in which I learned to write. My study during graduate school was a columned, high-ceilinged dining room in an apartment that I really could not afford. (The building had a name—The Alexander—not just a number, and anything with a name is going to cost more.) The opulence of the place, however, was more than made up for by its lack of a stove or refrigerator. I took my daily meal at a Greek restaurant down the street. They ran me a tab; they ran many people a tab, and eventually, through their overly generous Aegean hospitality, they went out of business.

Some of my fellow students in graduate school lived nearby one another, in several of the large apartment buildings in Old Louisville just north of the university. We spent many an evening sitting on somebody’s broken-down Salvation Army couch, drinking jug wine and talking jazz and poetry. We were a generation behind the hippies, and while we knew and liked Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin and the Rolling Stones, we also imagined ourselves somewhat more *uptown* than that. The music that was most often playing behind our conversation was Grover Washington, Harry Nillson, Weather Report, and Django Reinhart. Some of the poets on that broken-down couch? Aleda Shirley, Bonnie Cherry, Alex Stiber, Jane Olmsted, Michael Snyder. We could have had no idea of how quickly the years would pass, once we got jobs, married, and had children to raise. Of our wider circle, now, Desmond is dead, of a heart attack. Jack is dead, of a car crash. Lynda is dead, of a car crash. Aleda has two types of cancer, but she is braving it out in her own inimitable way, wearing gorgeous clothes and still smoking cigarettes, fuck you very much.

My study after graduate school was a tiny converted bedroom, in an apartment not far from where my wife and I now live. A small square room, wainscoted in dark wood, with one window that looked out over the fire escape to the wilderness of the yard next door. I put my writing table by the window. The lights of fashionable Bardstown Road—the Strip—flickered beyond the trees. (My bed I put in the front room, the “living” room.) I had a bookcase, a floor-lamp, and an over-stuffed easy chair left behind by a previous tenant. I had a cheap Picasso print, “Bathers,” taped into an old frame on the wall. It all fitted into that little room, a mirror, as it were, of my mind. A poem from that time reads:

*Red brick hour of dusk.
Swallows dart among the chimney-tops.
In the shadow of a metaphor*

*children play a game of kickball.
Over my desk, I rest my forehead
on the cool white plinth of an eave.
You see, what little room I need
is provided.*

I was clerking at a bookstore, walking to and from work, and my little apartment in the Cherokee Triangle. (My beloved Austin-Healy had died.) Some weeks it seemed I signed my paycheck back over to the store for the books I had bought. That was the era of Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, and Ashbery's *Some Trees*, and Galway Kinnell's "The Bear," and remainders of the complete set of Virginia Woolf's *Diaries*. I was poor and happy, reading late into the night after work. My reading was not programmatic, but intuitive, accidental even—a footnote in one book would send me to the next. I read Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, which led me to the poet Cavafy. Kenneth Koch sent me to John Ashbery. Stanley Kunitz kindly sent me to Olga Broumas.

*How like a beacon
is the illuminated window!
Even mine, I suppose,
though I sit alone reading,
expecting no one.*

If I splurged and went out to eat, it was at the Bristol, the first French bistro-style restaurant in town, on the Strip, where I had my own table. Or, to splurge, at L'Artiste, on 3rd Street, with its square water-glasses of complimentary Gauloise cigarets on every table, Edith Piaf and Johnny Halliday records playing in the background. Sometimes at L'Artiste I ordered only coffee, and sat and smoked. A friend (a future pianist and composer) worked as a waiter then, and he did not seem to mind my tiny *billets-doux*, since I knew to tip well, no matter how little money I had.

I remember feeling like a poet. I was not a poet, yet. But I had embarked on the apprenticeship. A lifelong apprenticeship, Wendell Berry calls the writer's job. I was playing the role that I would later come to inhabit. At home, I would make a cup of coffee, or, if it was the evening, pour a glass of wine, and sit down at my writing table with a pack of Balkan Sobranies (another luxury that I could not afford), a box of Bristol matches, my father's glass ashtray, and such totems as I had gathered around myself over the years: a small box of old Roman coins; a skeleton key from my grandmother's house; several memorable wine-corks, their occasions now forgotten; a tiny origami elephant, pink with white tusks, that a girlfriend had made; all kept in a smoothly-planed wooden box. I had legal pads and black felt-tipped pens. I was lucky enough to have a room of my own with a view. I was putting down lines, and in that singular action I did indeed feel joined to the long history of American poets and writers.

There are many ways, I suppose, that a young man—estranged from his parents, and as yet uncertain of his abilities—can feel cut off from the world, and from history, and from himself. But the patient practice of a craft can begin a salvational connection to a wider community.

IV

For fifteen years, I edited a literary journal, *The American Voice*, with my friend Sallie Bingham. She had lived in New York after attending Radcliffe, and she began to

publish the first of her fine novels. Her husband at that time was Whitney Ellsworth, one of the founders of the *New York Review of Books*. So, she knew a great many writers, some of them, like Elizabeth Hardwick, from Kentucky, but most of them from up East. These friends would form a kind of port from which we launched the journal.

It began in the fall of 1978. I had just bailed out of a Ph.D. program at the University of Arizona, in Tucson, and moved back home to Louisville. My decision had more to do with landscape than with academics, although I had also come to understand that scholarship held less interest for me than creative work. Back home, I took a part-time teaching job at the University of Louisville, where, by a happy circumstance, I was assigned to share a carrel with another part-timer, Sallie Bingham. We became fast friends.

She had just moved back to Kentucky from New York. We were both somewhat disconsolate, I suppose, each in our own way, and some of that was sure to have come through in our first conversations, though we were too circumspect and probably too shy to confess it to one another. We talked about books and authors, and, through them, our own confounded destinies. We were both writing, too, Sallie with more success than me, and we talked about these delights and difficulties as well.

I suppose that I should also say that Sallie was a “media heiress,” as the local press called her. Her parents—grand intellectual liberal Democrats in the Woodrow Wilson tradition (her grandfather was the U.S. Ambassador to the Court of St. James)—owned the city newspapers, and when they sold to the Gannett Corporation, Sallie and her siblings came into a great deal of money. Sallie used some of that money to start a foundation, and to found a literary enterprise, with me as her co-editor.

When Sallie began to talk about making a literary journal together, we first thought of calling it *Other Voices*, to represent the Latin Americans, regionalists, women, and other minority writers we liked—that whole sudden explosion of voices, in the late 1970s and early '80s, that were not yet finding publication within the literary establishment. One evening, our friend Frank MacShane suggested we locate the journal more centrally by calling it *The American Voice*, or something similar. Once remarked, it seemed the obvious choice, and we adopted the name immediately. In a subsequent letter, Frank wrote, “I am glad I had the wit to come up with the name. It establishes you without doubt or qualification, and that seems a good thing.”

The experience of editing a literary quarterly afforded me an education in close critical reading unlike anything I had learned in school. We published many fine authors—Yehuda Amichai, Wendell Berry, Tess Gallagher, Jane Kenyon, Reynolds Price, Jean Valentine—and our standards were very high. I happened not to write very much myself during those years; or, most of what I wrote did not measure up to the standards of my own journal. This might be a particular problem for writer-editors. Because my offices were oftentimes swamped with manuscripts about to be rejected, I thought, how in good conscience can I add to that pile of second-rate writing? That is a good thing to know. It made me get serious, real fast, about my writing. I learned that I did not have to write a lot—just well. A harder task by far.

Another of the enduring benefits of this work was the literary friendships I made. Writers tend to be solitaries, obviously—it is not a group practice. But we can also become starved for good company. Like seeks like. A writer or editor who lives away from the centers of power—New York, Chicago, San Francisco—craves literary talk especially. Misses the rituals of shop-talk. Conferences and other literary gatherings bubble over with the chatter of talk-starved poets and novelists. It can be exhausting. But it cannot be missed. For we will all eventually return to our lairs, where we will pass the coming weeks or months, once again, in productive solitude.

A weekend spent at poet Richard Taylor's farm outside Frankfort had us out hiking the high pastures above the palisades of the Kentucky River, sipping some local whiskey, and watching late-night women's soccer with his daughter, Julia, to whom this little poem (from my second book) is dedicated—

*The wind brings with it
rain shaking down from the leaves,
cat jumping out of tree*

A day spent with the poet and photographer James Baker Hall at his studio in Lexington—on the top floor of an old ice-house—had us drinking a couple of bottles of wine and Jim shooting maybe eight rolls of film. A lunch in Paris at the Café Flore with Steven Barclay, an agent to many of our favorite authors, had us sampling a flite of Sancerres over grapefruit salads, all the while an aging *roué* attempted to seduce a young brunette in a back-corner banquette.

In short, writing is a way of being in the world.

V

The first real poem that I published in a real journal came to me in what I can only describe as a kind of *felt rightness*. (This was in 1988, ten years after I left school.) This poem had its beginnings in a simple, somewhat haiku-like image—

*A woman's upturned face,
framed by my window,
like a face in a photograph*

For several months, I had only these three lines. I felt that they might lead somewhere, so I did not give up on them, but, for what seemed like a long time, that “somewhere” remained obscure. Sometimes, all one can do is wait. (The novelist Naeem Miur has written, perhaps enviously, “The reason poets are able to read so much is because they spend more time waiting than writing.”) Eventually, the rest of the poem presented itself to me, all in one gasp, and David Hamilton at *The Iowa Review* was kind enough to publish it, under the title “Irkutsk Station.” The title signifies an imagined stop on the rail-line to the old Soviet Russian prison gulag—

*A woman's upturned face,
framed by my window,
like a photograph found at auction.*

*Behind her on the platform,
a circle of men turned inward, linked
by a chain, a common thought.*

*The woman
asks nothing of me. She only looks.
Like a face in a photograph.*

*She may have no relation to the men
turned inward, standing behind.*

But I see them there

together on the platform.

The way a photograph sees.

Here we are. Here we are.

I thought—with this poem—that I had hit upon a kind of system for writing poems, like a system you take to Las Vegas for beating the blackjack table. But, like most such systems, mine crapped out. I made the mistake of subsequently trying to write this same poem over and over again, only using different words. I do not mean this in the way that Richard Hugo said, “most poets write the same poem over and over.” (Nor in the way that Camus said most artists spend their lives working out the same two or three ideas they have held since childhood.) No, I was trying to duplicate the exact method and the success of that one poem, and thus had I closed myself off to risk, to experiment, and to the unknown. I was not really *writing*. My words lay flat and lifeless on the page. It was not until I shut that poem away, in a little drawer in my mind, that I was able to write once again.

I also lost some time in wishing to be a New York poet, or a European poet, or a poet from anywhere, really, that was *not* Kentucky. This place was so familiar, and, because I felt bored with myself, this place felt boring too. It became important for me to make peace with my birthplace. Admittedly, Louisville occupies an anomalous situation in Kentucky. It is *in* the state, but *not of* the state. Half the city behaves as though it’s a suburb of New York, the other half, a suburb of Atlanta. (It seems significant that the Mason-Dixon line runs right along Market Street, through the heart of town.) After a while, the state lines did not matter anymore.

As well, I mistakenly thought that exoticism could add to a poem’s quality. I am still tempted, admittedly, to give my poems titles in French, just for the swank of it. John Ashbery gives many of his poems French titles, but then, he did live for ten years in France. Any such allusion or affectation must be earned. Because I am fairly fluent in Spanish, and have traveled somewhat in Spanish-speaking cultures, I once believed that I could write a poem about *duende* (though not as well as Lorca), and I did, and published it in my first collection, *Gardencourt*. *Duende* is the mystical Spanish concept which can mean anything from witchcraft to blood-worthiness—that combination of style and grace and courage that any good bullfighter must have. But I cannot say that I understand it. A few of the lines in that poem read—

*. . . All the great matadors have it:
El Cordobes, Antonio Ordonez,
Dominguin who kissed his bulls,
called them on the telephone,
flourishes that Hemingway disliked
but what crowd-pleasers!*

Today, I would not write that poem. It feels too much like a form of cultural tourism. Whatever knowledge I might have accumulated in my life, I am not, in fact, Spanish.

Of course, I am not Russian, either. So, how can I possibly account for the poem “Irkutsk Station”? All I can say is that it had—and still has—a *felt rightness* about it, which trumps the boundaries of culture. A decent poem is its own rationale.

VI

Watching the ground. When I was a child, growing up in the country, I spent a lot of time looking down at where my feet were going. Sometimes it was the rows of just-plowed fields, looking for arrowheads. Sometimes it was just meadowlands, the low grass, crickets and violets.

At any step, the earth might yield up something remarkable. It could be an arrowhead, or a clay musket-ball. Or a grinding-stone, or even—wonder of wonders—a stone tomahawk. I have found all of these things, walking the dirt rows of my childhood with my head down. Once, I even found a fish-hook chipped from flint—a thin and elegant creation, surely effective. More likely I would find a trail of ants, or a horned beetle. Or a garter snake. One day it was a black snake. Day-dreaming, watching the sky, I stepped into what I assumed to be a bramble of vines. Without looking down, I shook my leg a few times. When the vines failed to shake free, I finally did look down, and saw a big old black snake wrapped around my lower leg, its large wedge-shaped head at my knee, its forked tongue flicking. I gave it a vigorous kick and the snake went flying, and I sprinted all the way home. The earth is abundant, both in its beauties and in its terrors.

Plain old gravel driveways, paved with machine-crushed limestone, yielded up ancient artifacts—trilobites and crinoids and other animal fossils forged into stone when this part of the world was covered over with Jurassic seas. Fossils are obdurate. They are generous, too. But the earth can also collapse upon itself, can suddenly swallow up cars, cows, horses—sinkholes appeared randomly here and there in my childhood, mysteriously sucking the air out of the sky. One had to watch the ground carefully. The earth giveth, and the earth taketh away.

One must walk carefully on the earth. I am reminded of a fine poem by Natalie Kusz, “Persistent Heat,” which she published in my journal of a few years ago. The poem ended,

*When you walk these fields,
go gently, they say, feeling ahead
with each foot, gauging
what the ground can bear.*

My work as a poet and writer seems an outgrowth of that childhood pursuit—of walking carefully, observantly upon the earth, keeping my head down.