

On the Dayton Floodwall, May 4, 2010

by Robert K. Wallace

Hard to believe it was only a year ago that I walked this wall with my wife
 Hours after hearing Wendell Berry give the Commencement address
 In which he spoke of the destruction caused by the very forces
 To which our universities are subservient, financial forces
 Whose amoral pressures have deformed the banking,
 Mortgage, automotive, and energy industries, culminating
 In the collapse of the BP Gulf oil rig only last week,
 Spewing raw crude into a broken economy in need
 Of a larger fix than one busted pipe.

This night the same sunset light we saw last year
 Is flooding the turn in the wall above the sheltering trees
 Under which we'd seen the father stop the baseball game
 To choke his son for some unseen offense,
 Breaking the idyllic beauty of the scene
 With heartbreaking violence. What makes
 This May light so lovely, the shore
 On which it plays so God-forsaken?

Tonight the muddy Ohio runs far too hard
 For river traffic, recent rains pushing high waters
 In a swollen fabric of roiling ease
 Oblivious of the shoreline development denuded
 Of trees by developers eager to destroy
 A millennium of growth to make their mark,
 No visible sign of progress for two years now —
 Ever since they uprooted every tree in two days,
 A lone rabbit suddenly exposed, nowhere to go.

Tonight, retracing the wall, the sun now behind the hill,
 I descend into the city park a former mayor
 Had saved from developers, its riverside walk now dry,
 The river receding safely below the flag-pole stand.
 "That's the nation and that's the state,"
 The man says of two of the flags to the child;
 "I don't know the other one." So I say,
 "That's Bellevue, the town we're in. I told the city
 Last year how tattered all three flags were,
 But they're worse now than then."

"You can get a flag that's flown over the White House,"
 He tells me. "You just ask your Congressman.
 Our church did." The church was Catholic,
 Across the river in the Clifton area of Cincinnati,

One the Diocese had planned to close, but
“Both my parents went there, and all four grandparents too,
And now my grandson is going too, because
We all got together and raised enough money to save
The parish,” the six-year-old boy all the while
Kicking a soccer ball through the gaps in the bike rack,
And then back at the low brick wall cupping the flags,
Not once overshooting into the fast-moving river,
Where all would be lost for who knows how far,
Floating to become another tar-ball in the Gulf.