

On the Selection

Selected Poems is divided into nine sections, which reflect the chronology of the nine published books. I have rearranged some of the material to represent the original contour of the earlier work. In the 1970s, my writing was often prompted by an occasion, a chance encounter while on foot or driving—or by a significant event, such as the death of a beloved figure, as in “William Blackburn, Riding Westward.” Sometimes the encounter was simply with a thought in relation to a landscape, as in “Bordering Manuscript,” written (pretty much as it is printed here) while in my car near the Law School of Duke University, after a walk across campus. I was also at work on a long poem using certain obsessively recurring memories of growing up in a small town in eastern North Carolina, in relation to tensions induced by the Vietnam war. This poem, “The War with My Father,” engaged spiritual fatherhood, male identity models, and images of warfare, but never fully developed a language for mediating between the past and that present.

My feelings respecting male leadership in our culture, the divisions between spirituality and violence, projected themselves backward, into recollections of World War II versus the Christian quietism I had known, growing up in a Methodist household, son of a minister’s daughter, with a pious grandfather and one maternal uncle a minister. I considered including the whole of “The War with My Father” as an appendix. But I wanted this volume to be based on published poems. Many memory-passages from the long poem *had* been published, as the last section of *Statues of the Grass* (University of Georgia Press, 1975). Some also appeared in later books. The occasion-prompted poems of the early 1970s made up most of *Statues of the Grass*, and are now represented in section I of *Selected Poems*. Section II puts back together, in their original sequence, all of the passages taken from “The War with My Father,” which were published as individual poems.

Section III is selected from *Following Gravity* (University Press of Virginia, 1980). Donald Justice, judge of the 1979 Associated Writing Programs contest I had won, persuaded me to delete a group of poems I had written in England, while on a Guggenheim Fellowship. The manuscript of those poems remained in my imagination, and I present it here, as section IV. It is completed by a few poems written later and published in *Foreseeing the Journey* (LSU Press, 1983).

It would have been simpler to have selected each section from a single published book. But I have taken this opportunity to clarify issues—for myself, and hopefully for my readers—that were implicit in my first publications. In the first book, there was a certain vision, and a simple, direct way of putting it

into words, which were the only language for the thing I then had to say. The poems were about identity in relation to place and involved a sense of familiarity and distance. They concerned an initiation into a culture, and a spiritual intuition of a selfhood, that seemed to stand *prior* to this eastern Carolina village and its passionate, collective-minded people, with their history-encoded attitudes toward ownership and race. The sequence I have reassembled as section II struggles especially with the strangeness of this encounter. This first self feels almost as if fallen from the sky, into this humid landscape and lineage. The meaning of his inheritance is partly that it is gratuitous, inexplicable. These folk may be rough-handed, harsh, inarticulately loving, but they are *his*. This is to be his home and his family. These seasons of tobacco farming, war work, gardening, the lengths of these Methodist sermons, are to create his sense of time. He seems to remember a larger, clearer, timeless perspective, just at the moment when he feels himself fully enveloped in this other, blood-related knowledge. Rereading “The War with My Father,” I see that I then lacked a language for my contemporary anger over Vietnam, as it echoed against an earlier wonderment, and a sense of reluctance and acceptance. I could encode the conflicts I felt only in depicting the remembered moments. Still, the sequence of those self-encircled times moves into the present, as in “Keeper of the Dragon’s Teeth.”

Looking back over the nine books, I felt that they embodied an aspiration toward a more inclusive language. How could the lyrical, accepting voice of the first self expand and adapt, in response to the many alien experiences that time includes? As a poet, I have needed to be both innocent and experienced, and to find modulations of style connecting these conditions. If my linguistic journey is *about* time, as well as *into* time, perhaps I have been able to graph that ineffable subject experientially, without directly intending, through poems recording the landscapes of these many years. This thought guided my selection. Perhaps these poems, if rightly arranged, I hoped, might trace a trajectory of form and voice that developed along with the more complicated knowledges of career, marriage, fatherhood, friendships and enmities, of failing and succeeding, in the passage through what Blake called Experience.

Section V is taken from *Ode to the Chinaberry Tree and Other Poems* (LSU Press, 1986)—a book that adapts traditional English forms, such as ode and pastoral elegy, to the experience and language of eastern North Carolina. Section VI contains most of *River Writing: An Eno Journal* (Princeton University Press, 1988). This book, written during my last year as director of the Institute of

the Arts at Duke University, began as a journal recording daily runs next to the Eno River, starting from behind my house, and eventually included a hiking excursion to the Grand Tetons. Appearing in the Princeton Series of Contemporary Poets (chosen by John Hollander), *River Writing* escaped the notice of my southern readers. I present it here essentially complete, continuing the dialectic between short poems and sequences, and between the near and the far, the present and the past. Written from the start as a single poem, it required no lifting out of shorter units from a longer context. The only selection to be made was from among the different days of the year recorded: mostly by drafts I would write in my head, while next to the river, running.

Section VII comes from *Lessons in Soaring* (LSU Press, 1989) and continues the exploration of landscapes in the present, with poems based on my experience as a student sailplane pilot, as well as on the time in Manhattan, with a semester-long arts program. Section VIII comes from *A History of the River* (LSU Press, 1993)—a book responding to the deaths of my wife's father and of my mother, and to the incapacity of my father, which obliged me to manage the family tobacco farm in Wilson County in his name, for six years. This meant an emotional homecoming, through an economic and cultural perspective, to the region that had first shaped me. Section IX comes from *Daytime and Starlight* (LSU Press, 1997), with the two final poems representing *Quartet for Three Voices* (LSU Press, 2002).

The obsessive issues are in some sense looked back on from afar: from a reminiscent, ruined farmhouse in northern Durham County; from a botanical recreation of a coastal pocosin in Chapel Hill, N.C.; from the perspective of astronomy; from a bridge across the Mississippi, in Minnesota; from a residence in the American Academy in Rome; from a sailboat off the North Carolina coast; from St. Peter's Square, glimpsing the pope; from an interstate highway near Washington, D.C.; from William Wordsworth's favorite perspective, above Lake Grasmere. The near landscape and the far seem part of a single topography: the slice of space-time I have known, viscerally, intellectually, running or hiking or canoeing or driving or sailing or sailplaning, over the years. The places in time marked out by the sections of this book appear closer together than I ever imagined they would, setting out. It is a partly continuous terrain, though with underground dynamics still to explore. Perhaps this book can be read as a single narrative, a story I have written with my life, across these years.

I continue the journey, and will continue these verbal records: these reports

by the way, these poems that are shaped by the way, and that shape the way. Though I may think somewhat differently now, and look not nearly the same in photos, I still share a continuity of feeling with that original self. Sometimes, still, I experience his first-encountered community across the years as a kind of auditory vision. It may arise on seeing the houses of a small town or country crossroads, gathered near a cemetery hill slope, beside a lake or a river. Words then come into my inward hearing with the earlier emphasis, aligning me and that first self with our people, white and black, from places in the Midwest, or the Carolinas, or small-town New England. I feel us now riding the same planet, in human and astral time, around our local star. That first self and I will trace these arcs and orbits for a while longer, with wonder and thankfulness, part of a larger family, at home on a wider earth.