



A Southern Line & Other Poems

By Thomas James Martin

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Dedication

For my Mother, Ina Claire James Martin, who first realized I was a poet.

I also dedicate this book to my wife and life partner, Joyce Elaine Watson, without whom this volume of selected poetry would not have been possible.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Suite101 Senior Managing Editor, Barbara Nicholson Bell, for editing this volume. Her encouragement catalyzed me to action to select and finally to evaluate some of poems that I have written during my life.

Thanks also to my fellow contributing editors at Suite101 who have supported my writing through the years. Thanks to all of you for stopping by my site and taking time to leave a message of constructive criticism or appreciated encouragement.

Preface

I must confess that until the last few years I had been a poet who mostly collected fragments, writing the odd line here that suddenly appeared in my consciousness or a turn of phrase there that seemed to sum up some thoughts or feelings. I have always had a chronic problem with finishing poems—mostly because what I tried to add to make a complete poem so often clashed with the quality of the gift that the Muse had given me outright—undeserving mortal that I am.

Thus, the hardest part of writing poetry for me has been the cultivation of what I call "thinking poetically," the ability to turn into actual poetry the gift the "Muse" offers outright, the insights and words that she sometimes gives the poet from her unfathomable consciousness. I have struggled with this most of my life.

Then, suddenly, a few years ago, after I started writing essays and stories more regularly, I found myself starting to write poetry again after a decade or more of silence. I discovered that I was actually mining my life experience and producing those multi-faceted crystals of insight, inspiration and intention that I humbly call poetry. I also started revising and even finishing poems that I wrote decades ago so great has been the alchemical change in my literary consciousness.

I am not quite sure what brought about this change of consciousness, but I am grateful to whatever Providence exists for some continuing closure for

these poems, some of which were started in
childhood.

I sincerely hope you find reading these poems as
worthwhile an experience as I had in writing them.

Thomas James Martin
August 13, 2003
Beaverton, Oregon

A Southern Line

*Seeds in a dry pod tick, tick, tick,
While Homer and Whitman roared in the pines.
~Edgar Lee Masters*

1

“Give me Liberty or give me death!”
“I’ll take death” They said in the '30s,
Leaving the old Liberty Depot
Liberty, North Carolina,
On the Southern Line,
Heading toward all the cigarette cities:
Greensboro, Winston Salem, Raleigh, Durham.

2

I wrote poetry all the time in high school
Showing it to Kimrey, each morning,
Waiting in Home Room for Mrs. Johnson
Waiting for approval.

Prolific but not free
Caesar or Alexander's great somewhere,
Marigolds spinning in the sun,
Threads of love unknown,
A renowned sensitivity.

No bitter or biting thing,
Nothing about being or becoming,
Or the glories of the simple life,
Nothing of Tobacco Road people,
lurching and alone
On Highway 421 South
Or black balloons rising to the moon;

Feelings caught in my heart
like a fish bone in the throat

Writing poetry like preaching sermons,
mouth stuffed with Sunday handkerchiefs

Anaesthetized and alone,
Highway 421 South,
Liberty.

3

Half a hot dog cheap;
Hopalong's in town,
Curtis Theatre
Liberty,

Coke and chips free;
Red kerchiefs and big black hats,
Hoppy talks with some white kids
On stage
smiling and clean;

I sit in back
With Darrell who is also shy
And who would someday become a plumber
But now switch hits like Mantle,
And me, I'm more like Berra,
Pear-shaped and bat right-handed
No field, no hit,
Can run a little,
good for a quick out
who could call out the statistical glories
of Ruth and Gehrig
just like that.

Screaming and laughing with the Nice Cowboy
Not knowing
That we hoped for Hoppy's quick obsolescence
with bad men or good women,
No more robbers and rustlers,

A quick break in the action
So we could grow up and get out of town.

4

Curtis Theater again,
Liberty NC,

Out of the sewing plants and tobacco fields
Apparitions in the balcony

The heads of black children
Rising like black balloons
At the edge of darkness,
So Silent
Silent and waiting.

Waving at friends,
Semi-darkness,
Saturday Matinee

Nobody waves to the balcony.

We sit screaming and throwing popcorn,
Waiting for the Old Rebel to speak,
He's a TV star from Greensboro
don't you know;

It's 1956,
Nobody's heard of Woolworth's
And the sit-ins;

Balcony corner,
Curtis Theater,
Liberty, North Carolina
Swannanoa, etc.

(Put a little moonlight here
so we can see their faces.)

5

In the seventh grade my coordination comes
I swing a bat that Spring
and connect,
I get to play;

Guys don't steal my turns at bat
I laugh. I fight
and cut up with friends
(and decide that I love Diana);
Finally getting a "C" on Conduct
after a short life of perfect
deportment,

Teachers worry about me,
conference with my Mother,

Hurrah!

Black Lotus

Drifting Koi dreamy and golden
Slowly waving

Among the lotus roots
Under the mirror shine
Of almost too much
Brightness

Breathing in slow summer time
Mallards and marigolds
Spilled like toys in the sun.

Swaying in the darkness
In trances,

Centered in gold and light,
Black lotus.

Letting Go Again

Letting go again,
I head North into the Big Time
bepearled and alone;

Thankful that no-thing delights
and only half in love with night
I have learned to still
this streaming mind,
I feel love rise in my tears
Gentle fireflies rising into night.

In forgiveness born,
scared to move,
Father, I am breathing without breath,
Holding, hushed down and silent to please,
inner light pale neon and flat,

How was I ever so restless and still?

Even now he teases,
unknowing the terrible fear,
his fierce, ignorant wrath
forced into my heart.

Heading North into Big Time
gray with words and ways,
Jumped into day;

one soil, one path.

Freedom and Remembrance

Freedom, freedom, prison of the Free.

~Lawrence Durrell

“Just remember
We love you,” he says,
This the first time, I remember,

Remembering
That lightning strike of joy,
My heart so struck
I could never speak it to him.

Never speaking that heart strike even as he
died,
Forgiven his failings of attention,
Tacit understandings of regret;
A hard, Depression childhood,
Toiling on Tobacco Road,
Stuttering man-child
Steeped in cruelty
and ridicule.

I remember;
Thank you, Father;
Remembering to free you,
Before you die.

Slowing for the Blue-Carred Mailman

Slowing for the Blue-Carred Mailman
Thrown against the buzzing day
Stretched hot and shimmering,
In the fields of Morning Glory
and Queen Anne's Lace;

Strangely alone, paused
near Snow Camp, North Carolina
Star Route 1;

Watching a tortoise* pass,
My life lasts another moment

Blue and hazy
A long way off,
A small shed's roof,
Probably tin,
Shines silver and gray.

I wonder
At the slow marvel of charts passing,
Mysterious and unforeseen,
Maps depicting the circle squared
Or the completion of Fibonacci
Or at least some simple freedom,
So slowly it crawls
Across the Southern road.

*In Asian lore, the tortoise's shell is the Map of Heaven.

Prayer to the Thunder God

For my Grandfather

Thunder in the morning
I complain

Summer's even

Hoeing in the rain
I soon quit the field

Under a barn roof
I gulp ice water
From a Mason Jar
And minding the lightning's power
(Grandma always said to stay away from
Dogs and cats;
They draw the lightning down, she said)
I edge away a little from Fuzzy and Blackie,
Curled up on some dusty sacks.

I'd just as soon not hoe tobacco
Or pluck those great horned green worms either,
But I am an ancient relative of the land
Soaked in the blood of my forbears,
My Grandfather Martin
Runs through me
Into the deer and hawk,
Into the lands he loved so fiercely,
He never knew his own
Sullen, lonely children;

Still, the land's own
Freedom,
The spring at the one tree

From which we drank
Sweat pouring off us
In the grasshopper blur of
Midsummer.

The lightning dances in my eyes
The thunder rattles in my ears,

O' Tunkasila Wakantanka
Ho naho tuwa mis tate el kin. . .
O Great Spirit,
I stand in your heart

Speaking with thunder,
Strong with lightning,
How do I live apart?

O' Tunkasila Wakantanka
Ho naho tuwa mis tate el kin. . .
O Great Spirit,
I stand in your heart

To be, to be,
Thunderous,
Freefalling and free,

O My Grandfather,
O Great Spirit.

Gone Fishing

Gone Fishing, Gone All Day

Morning's up early,
Shaking early stars
Out of her sunlit hair,
Gently brushing my hand away,
Then sighing and drawing me
Down into the silvery dew;

I never fish.

Catching the crickets, digging the worms,
I never fish.

Baiting hooks, untangling lines,
I never fish

Tying the flies, putting on hats,
I never fish

Swatting mosquitoes, running from flies,
I never fish

Rowing the boat, chucking the shirt,
I never fish

Sunning myself, lazing away,
I never fish

Holding the pole, never checking the float?
I never fish

Evening coming so suddenly—

Curling herself into a golden ball,
And bouncing up over the sky
(Put some word that means incomprehensible love,
beauty and delight here),
Scattering purple clouds and roses in the wind
And solitary stars;

I never fish.

Making the Dawn

Cape Hatteras

Joe the Moustache

wiping the suds
& plays a black trombone while She (
Joe has taken a player piano and nickelodeon from
his lapels;)
hurling now a nylon and
suddenly slipped out of it all,

Joe thows her a blue and giraffe skin,

She blows a kiss

And lifting a thigh

Smiles and

Is

Gone.

(Joe into a head
blows himself away.)

Looking for Monsters

Alltsaigh, Loch Ness - the Scotch Highlands

I made a pact with you near water's edge:
Before the campers came, I would remove
The drawings on the hostel's kitchen walls
In which you are a few sad and patient tires
Half in some blued-out lake with dragon face
So patently fading to public white;

You said you would never come back up
To startle us again or find disgrace...
So you said going black under blue;

I knew you would be back
Sailing these spindrift waters
Diving the bone-deep depths and taunting us
Across the waves with your rippling spines,
And flair for bumbling melodrama.

Therefore, I have kept my watch
And evenings, a blue sword in darkness,
I look downward and slip off into the night.

Some Stick Candy for Gramps

(Circa 1968)

Some stick candy for grandpa's birthday
We always got

Since he neither liked, wanted nor appreciated
Any of the common
Sensational, store-bought stuff like electric razors
And portable radios

And other electronically grown-up things we liked
So we
Always
Got some stick candy for dear old Granpa
On
His
Birthday
And it was source of amusement for us all
(His
Relatives
I mean)
That all he ever wanted was just a box of
peppermint
And now and then
we
got
Horehound
Or some other such strung-out fancy like
butterscotch
That
we
Thought
he'd
Like)

Cause here we'd got a new TV or something
electronically slicker
For our
Verbal
Familiar
Grandma, a parvenu patron of the telephone
And
Nouveau Electro-
Mancer
Of the Heart Flounders on the Obvious Form.
And
We
Got
Gramps just a little old box of peppermint sticks
(And
To be
Fair,
A pair of black socks at Christmas
We
Also
Got)
But Grandpa always loved
What
We
Got—
Just
Ah-
Grinning and twiddling the infinite stick o' mind
In
His
Gray
Old whiskery, old slobbery gray lips
And
Pleasantly
Looking
Like an American Eternal over the fireplace

In
The
Sub-
Nowhere
Of a thousand sub-developments in the heart of the
land
Where
His got
Got away from apples trees and rose hips
and
wee
little
tendrils
of
r
a
i
n
.

Continuing Job Search Implodes

When I was skinned
I made a little list--

Call it (Something Here):

It started out,
"I am getting older,
what should I do?"

Like go on the road,
Actually join the Legion or
Take vows for the ashram of Guru SatChitAnanda.

.
Buy acre of land and travel trailer
Raise garden, keep White Leghorns
(like Dad),

Foment Graduate School riots,
Teach,
Commit suicide with tea
Commit horoscopes for money
Or go home or
Sell health foods and
Grind my own peanut butter
Drive a Big Rig
Ten days on the road
Eating fries and dogs
Or
Take a job with the state
As employment counselor
Give out food stamps.

Walk across Africa

Without shoes,
Establish base lines for jumping beans
Test kangaroos for tie-downs
Photograph mangoes in flight
Or herd silver-plated ants,

Forest Ranger in Chromium Forest,
Study ancient petroglyphs for Shell
Herd sheep on mesas in Utah
Wander High Desert in search of
New alluvial fans,
Search for aliens in Rachel (NV)
Put all on a number in Vegas,

(List ends here);

Call the President,
I've got a job
In Trust, (some state here),

Job Duties:
Replacing Wisdom Teeth
Milking dry rattlers
Finding wild women
Listening for Agave worms,
Raising desert flowers
And sitting quietly with the stars,

"There you go. . ."
"Thanks!"

Two for the Concrete: Ars Poetica

1

When

a

line's

a

ser-

pent

line

like

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h

i

s,

it

should

also

rat

t

le

and

h

i

s

s

2

Ah-h-h, take the rail

D

o

w

n,

One

(1) day—

if you're very careful

about what you

say—

You will watch your words

Closely

Probably, too closely. . .

Slow

ly

Stairs

And

Up-

calling

Back

grave

g

thoughts

n

L

i

i

b

t

m

e

i

r

l

a

C

t

u

r

e

Meanwhile, take advantage of that bitch,

g

r

a

v

i

t

y

Slide down the banister,

have so much fun

that you call it

p o e t r y

Slapstick Seasons

In a Slapstick Season

Fall again and the little cloud-breathed wind girl
Shakes little slapstick cops and robbers
Out of her smokedrift hair

And it's fall again. . . bounce again
The merry little cinnamon guys chasing
Thru a blue, blue tunnel. . .Bang!
Out they come flailing backwards
In choo-choo time to the same old crossing.

And it's fall again, bounce again
The little cloudgirl smiling me geeseward
Flying like a little blue clown.

Stuffing an apple in my mouthful of blueberries,
When her eyes fall like cold, black grapes
And I'm a little quizfacedstraightman
When the O maybe persimmon bush
Honks like it knew my blue tongue
Was going to run pieintheface.

Summer Reportage: Calling Doodlebugs

"Doodlebug* hole!"

"Ok, what's a doodlebug?"

"An insect-thing that sleeps beneath the earth
In the slow shadows of barn roofs.
As children we used to put our lips
Down close to his little circular valley
(But not too close as breath can
blow away the fine dust
he leaves tunneling downward,
And so lose all signs of him in a singular earth)
And call in best, smooth selfsame throat
Doodlebug, doodlebug, doodlebug
In a three-noted warble that tired quickly
Into doolbug,debug,dubug,dbug."

"And then what happened?"

"Often little except a scurry of dust.
Sometimes though he thrusts his little feelers
Through his sunken grave and stalky eyes
Follow staring so gravely at you
From the barest crescent of brown-gray body."

"Let's call one then.
I see their little craters everywhere."

*Larvae of the ant-lion.

Organ pipe sky

Organ pipe sky
Burnished pearl,
An ice-blue wind
Cold as a fugue,
And curving
to geese,

Ascends
To snows.

November Song

Chapel Hill, 1975

*My hands remember your brightness
your face
graces the morning.*

On a common ground,
a serpent curses wintry sun,
the fierce of heart rush to the skies;

*My hands remember your brightness
your face
graces the morning.*

The wind springs up on wax-wing light
Old loves rise
Merciless and unforgiving;

*My hands remember your brightness
your face
graces the morning.*

Ancient tears from the heart's great spaces,
the windy blood in song
on a clay harp sung,

*My hands remember your brightness
Your face
graces the morning.*

One Enchanted April

1

Falling

. . .one enchanted April
falling puddleward
into earth and sky,
in glorious, more-ious mud time,
falling;

Trailing lilac tendrils
and wrapped in violets
In early light by dawn time,
I follow tiny footprints.
Up far into the Spring Time
Where children's voices sing
And laughter in the bowers ring;

Falling

. . .deeper into Faery time,
Bright dream time;

Christened in the pure delight
Puddle-icious and brilliant,
Priested by meadowlight
Falling and falling
. . .puddleward into light.

Over the moon and dizzy with stars,
Still,
rising. . .

2

In tulips live I,

A little tulip man;

Opening

A cup of stars at dawn,

Drawing

down the sun at dusk;

In tulips live I,

A little tulip man;

Immortal as a drunken butterfly,

On nectar and dew befuddled;

In tulips live I,

A little tulip man;

Indelible and senseless

Un-busy as a bee full

Of honey.

Maniacal and magisterial

Elemental and eleemosynary

Lyrical and lascivious

A little tulip man am I.

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Hummingbird Summer

Stolen my heart in a hummingbird summer
Of Spanish courtyards and Olive trees
Bird of Paradise and Calla Lily,
And pure Morning Glories
Grace of palms
And a peaceful sky;

Hummingbirds bloom in every blossom's breath
Flickering of gold dust shook from tiny heads;
Fairy magicians
Glistening the morning light,
A sleight of hazy wings,
A sudden quickening of the heart's delight.

That summer so much too beautiful to bear;
Flying, dancing, humming, being,
Quickening in the cathedral light;
And soaring on some liquor divine,
Divinely mad!
A fool with wings!
The anointed messenger of the gods of play;

For now is the time
Stopped and still in the golden air
I see myself shining everywhere;

**“Pomes:” Ten For a
Dollar
(Occasional Verse)**

Prayers to a Playful God

(Variations on "Now I lay Me Down to Sleep")

Did this childhood prayer scare anyone else? Here is the original:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
Amen.

Here are my Variations:

1

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
In Your arms I safely keep,
Knowing in Love I shall wake,
All my fears you shall take.
Amen*

2

*In Your loving arms I sleep,
In your wisdom my soul to keep,
When you bid my soul awaken,
Refreshed in wonder I am taken.
Amen*

3

*Now as every night I pray,
Thank you for this awesome day,
When I waken in your keeping,
With your love my heart is seeing.
Amen*

4

*In Your heart, please let me sleep
Safe and warm and sweet and deep,
Thank you for my loving mother,
Thank you for my tender father.
Amen*

5

*Thank you, God, for air and water,
Thank you for mother and father,
Thank you for the moon and sun,
Thank you, God, for everyone.
Amen*

In appreciation of the depths of childhood, here are a couple of verses for the sense of fun and quick laughter a child expresses so easily:

6

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
Any nightmares You may keep,*

*If there's monsters 'neath my bed,
Keep'em tied but properly fed.*

7

*I won't die before I wake,
Waiting for ice cream and cake,
Should Mom and Dad look in on me,
Tell them please I've got to pee.*

On Dissing Chagall

"Chagall's decorative, suspends,"
the flip-lipped man says,
"each form in Pretty's rosy fins."

I like Flip-Lip. He's sad
And profoundly alludes spinning top
Stops, and, truly, we've all been had;

In each fish-dancing breast-fest,
A cleverly contrived little man
Must turvy-curve like a breast
Lest we see his string at work,
See him like Flip-Lip—Jerk.

To Hampstead, NW3

(Near the house of John Keats)

Drinking your coffee
And sipping your beer
Alone and palely loitering

Sleeping on the Heath
Near Beauty-Truth's dream,

Going nowhere
But, alas, no where to go,

I go up to the Public Baths at noon
And come down to eye your women.

The Most Arrogant Steed

(From the short story of the same name)

For Nancy Jordan, a childhood playmate who passionately loved horses.

He reared up suddenly on the hill,
The most radiant horse I had ever seen,
Splashing down the stream to drink his fill,
I watched in wonder his coal-black sheen.

O I should ride him into the evening sun,
He would carry me like a flower on his back,
Forever riding, never ceasing his run,
Riding forever in the moon's silver track.

Riding this stallion in his prideful might,
Under the shining moon we climb,
Ascending forever into the starry night,
Rising together, breathless in time.

O I love you so much my arrogant steed,
I love you so much in my own sweet need.