

Thomas Gardner's  
**POVERTY CREEK JOURNAL**  
(Tupelo Press, 2014)

***READER'S COMPANION***

*Contents*

<b>(1) <i>Poverty Creek Journal</i> and Process</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>(2) On Reading</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>(3) Lyric Thinking</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>(4) As If</b>	<b>22</b>
<b><i>Biographical Note and Links</i></b>	<b>29</b>

## (1) *Poverty Creek Journal* and Process

**14 / APRIL 11, 2012**

*Big wind all night. "You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going," Jesus said to Nicodemus. That high, unanswerable wailing. The word in Greek is pneuma—spirit or wind. Whichever it is, it has left me tender and raw. The trail this morning is littered with pine tips, the torn smell of evergreen everywhere. The same steady roar, but now I'm under it, the trail sliding down along the creek, the wind camping out on the ridges. On runs like this, we'd put our heads together to talk, a hand on an elbow sometimes when one stride would set the other flailing. Now I'm alone. Wordless. The strangest sense of having been set apart, to mourn or notice, I'm not sure which. The wind above us, moving across space.*

**30 / AUGUST 1, 2012**

*The voices of two women across the pond, invisible in the fog. I can't make out their words but their rhythms stay with me. Miles later, deep in the woods, perhaps on another trail, I hear them again, and this time I catch a word or two, as if I'd been turning something over and now can make it out. But only for a moment. The fog rolls back and takes it all away. Susan Howe writes about the "physical immediacy of the spiritual improvisations" recorded in Dickinson's manuscripts, the inner rhythm visible in the tallies of wrist and hand. I've seen those manuscripts, under glass. What I'd give to be able to run my fingers down their darts and stops. To make my own way. Jonathan Edwards would sometimes break open his day and ride to what one biographer calls "some lonely grove" where he'd get down and walk. When he mounted up again, his clothes would be covered with slips of paper where he'd pinned his passing thoughts. A private bible. As if it were possible to catch spirit in flight, to take in its passing and bear it home.*

I've drawn these two lyric meditations from my book-length sequence entitled *Poverty Creek Journal* (Tupelo Press, 2014). There are 52 sections, as in weeks of the year, but also as in the number of sections in Whitman's "Song of Myself," a poem I dearly love. Letting poems and other bits of writing I dearly love work themselves into the on-going conversation I had

with myself and the landscape and the weather over the course of my morning runs in 2012 was one of the goals of this experiment. Most of my runs were along the Poverty Creek trail in the Jefferson National Forest, just outside our house in Blacksburg, and the trail's sequence of a pond, a series of descents, and a stream crossing becomes the constant against which the shifting surfaces of weather and memory and grief write and un-write themselves.

Almost forty years ago, when I was a student at Bucknell University, running cross country and track for Art Gulden and cobbling together an English major after flaming out as a chemical engineer, I ran into Jack Wheatcroft near the library. He stopped me and congratulated me for doing well in the Penn Relays marathon the precious week. He'd seen the results in the paper—the *New York Times*, I want to say, but perhaps the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I was floored, first, that he knew my name outside of class; and second, that he read the sports pages. An English professor! I had worked quite hard at walling off the various parts of my life from each other, and here was someone I deeply admired casually bringing them together. (A few years ago, when I reminded Jack of this conversation, he told me that, having grown up Philadelphia, he knew all about the Penn Relays and of course followed the results.) I've remembered that moment and have taken it as permission, in my teaching and my running, to move back and forth between body and spirit, body and mind, using one to metaphorically unfold and speak back to the other, and vice versa. This sequence tries to capture some of that back-and-forth, improvising on the notes I took each morning after running—weather, distance, the condition of the trail, but also what passed through my mind, the inner landscapes that appeared and disappeared as the trail bent and dipped and turned back on itself. My brother John died unexpectedly of a heart attack at the end of February that year, and his presence and absence—he was also a runner—became another, unexpected constant as the year unfolded. One can perhaps see him most clearly in the poems' repeated interrogations of the terms *you* and *us* and *he* and *I*.

I'm aware of some of my models: Charles Wright's long poem "A Journal of the Year of the Ox," Robert Hass's prose poems in *Human Wishes*, the extended metaphors in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and the spiritual improvisations in Thoreau's *Walden* she was drawing from, Guy Davenport's *A Balthus Notebook*, Anne Carson's "Every Exit is an Entrance (A Praise of Sleep)," and Kenny Moore's articles in *Sports Illustrated*, which tease out the connections between a runner's way of moving across a landscape and his or her inner make-up. I'm sure there were others. Most of these models are prose, and what I discovered, in working with this material, was that I was able to unfold the particular rhythm of the mind listening to the body most convincingly (to my ear anyway) by first establishing a prose rhythm, a set of prose expectations. Prose somehow allowed me to wait, in the writing as in the running, for what might come along. It allowed what came along to rest lightly within the paragraph's frame, as originally within my mind and moving body, and only slowly, slowly declare itself, drawing other details into its gravitational field and then, just on the edge of being fully understood—this is another prose rhythm as it is, of course, another running rhythm—abruptly, even arbitrarily, come to a halt.

I could say a few words about these two entries. Number 14 is in the present tense, as are many but not all of the entries. It tries to capture the feel of running under a big wind in April. Perhaps somewhere behind it is Roethke's poem "Big Wind." Here are my notes from April 11:

*Pine tips, twigs, old cones—big wind last 24 hours left the trail carpeted. 33 degrees and windy still this morning.*

*In class today—Rae Armantrout, in an interval of attention, attending to language, its crossings, tensions, connections. Running, similarly, is a way of attending to the body. To consciousness, to the sense of being wholly and fully alive. Step after step. Tweak after tweak.*

As I began improvising on this, remembering that day, I first remembered the night before, the high, wailing, night-long wind. It was perhaps the evidence of that invisible wind captured the next morning in the pine tips, twigs, and old cones of my journal entry that gave me Jesus, in John 3:8, saying to the puzzled Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit," but it may have been simply the sound. In any case, something unknowable, up high, out of reach, wailing. Something that had torn me up even as it had the green along the trail. Turning to the run itself, "attending" to how my body felt, as the note about Rae Armantrout might have directed me, I found myself thinking spatially: the wind above me, the trail along the creek below; everything that mattered unknowably roaring above me, my small figure tracing the trail below. How my brother, or whoever that *you* is, came into the poem, I can't say: bending his head near me to speak over the roar, steadying me at the elbow. This happened as I wrote. Perhaps it was born of the wind, born of feeling again raw and empty and alone. It was a gift, and when it left me, it left me alone and with a calling—to notice or to mourn, or both. Or perhaps not alone at all. I still remember the shock of that last line, writing *us*, attending to it, *us*, the two of us, alone under that unanswerable wind.

Number 30 is another study in wordlessness. My entry for that August day reads:

*Heavy fog, voices through the mist from across the pond. Steady dripping of the trees. Bishop's fog. See it swirling in currents. Conversations through the fog, continued from yesterday's run.*

Like most of the pieces in the sequence, this one begins with the simple physical details of my notebook entry, writing them out and letting them sit and gather. As I remembered my way back, I remembered hearing those

voices not once but twice, their conversation seemingly continued but on a different trail. That actually happened, but I was reminded of it by the notebook entry above, in which I suggested to myself that their continuing conversation was a way to think about my own continuing conversation, out there, day after day, an idea I would actually develop in another entry entirely. In any case, the fog, as it does in Bishop's "Cape Breton," wiped everything away.

There's a pause here, and what came to me was Susan Howe's brilliant discussion of the "physical immediacy of the spiritual improvisations" Dickinson records in her poems. Howe's *The Birth-mark* and *My Emily Dickinson* are books I often teach. I'm not exactly sure why Dickinson came in here. Part of it, surely, was the memory of those still unreadable voices coming back out of the fog, but probably more important was the comparison I had just made, in improvising off of my original notes, of those returning voices to the mind turning something over and over in an attempt to make its essence out. This, of course, was Dickinson's genius, as Susan Howe had let me see, that an inner rhythm—the spirit's continual, improvisatory turning over and over of bits and pieces of the world—could be made visible through the movements of the body, recorded there, for all to see, in her manuscripts. But Dickinson's genius is far beyond my own, as the tiny sigh of "What I would give to be able to run my fingers down their darts and stops" perhaps records. The Edwards story, which I love, comes out of George Marsden's biography. It came to me as a bit of comic relief, fluttering slips of paper pinned at all angles across one's shirt and jacket being perhaps closer to my writing in these passages than Dickinson's exquisite inner tracings. Acting as if it were possible to do such a thing, to make something out, while acknowledging the inevitable failure, and privacy, of the act. But doing it, nonetheless, in whatever lonely grove we find ourselves returning to.

## (2) On Reading

Wallace Stevens, in "Of Modern Poetry," defines a poem as "the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice." This seems to me to be true of any work organized lyrically: poems, certain sorts of essays, certain sorts of fiction. We see in such work a mind moving—noting and considering, listening to what it has just said, leaping forward or turning back. Rather than reporting on what will suffice, speaking from a position of arrival, this kind of writing dramatizes the act of getting there. What we do when we read such work, as Kenneth Burke illustrates in his important essay "Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats," is reenact that movement. We perform the poem, connecting image to image or turn to turn, making of its various parts a coherent inner action: "For a poem is an act, the symbolic act of the poet who made it—an act of such a nature that, in surviving as a structure or an affect, it enables us a readers to reenact it."

A poem, we might say, gives us instructions for reenacting its inner movements. Burke mentions affect (mental states, moods, or emotions) and structure. As we pause and move forward, circle and repeat—tracing, for example, the way a mental state gradually clarifies itself and then, taking note of what it sees, shifts away, in reaction—we "do" the poem in our own minds and bodies, gradually coming to understand, for ourselves, how its parts fit together as a coherent action. And it's not only mental states or emotions that are structured in this way. The simplest of elements—words, sounds, rhythms, all of the marks of a voice stuttering and finding itself under pressure—are all readable as acts of thinking, traces of a mind finding its way. As Stevens puts it in the same poem, the poet, in the particular way he or she handles language, is a performer on a stage, "A metaphysician in the dark, twanging / An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives / Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses." The poet thinks by messing around

with words, twanging the wiry string of language—I think of the mountain music on the sidewalks and in the store fronts of Floyd, Virginia, on Friday nights, near where I live—and in doing so sketches out the subtlest of inner dramas. The trick, in reading, is learning how to pay attention and take it in.

I think I've always known how to do this, in a rough sort of way, but it was poem by Elizabeth Bishop, "Poem," that gave me a way to articulate the process. I talk about this poem in my fourth entry, January 25th. I'm not surprised this poem came to me while I was running; it's on my mind a lot. Bishop, as I say there, describes herself staring at a painting, gradually identifying it as her native Nova Scotia, and then suddenly realizing that she recognizes, from her own childhood, the actual scene represented there. "Heavens," she writes, "I recognize the place, I know it!" At that, she turns away from the painting for a moment and visualizes the scene for herself, allowing its elements to light up and come alive and gradually assemble into a whole: "It's behind—I can almost remember the farmer's name. / His barn backed on that meadow." With that, the scene alive in her head, she turns back to the painting, ready to take it in—the barn, for example: "There it is, / titanium white, one dab."

This is how reading takes shape. We pass our eyes across a piece of writing and something causes us to slow down and take notice. Maybe it's a beautiful line or a striking image. In time, working out what is being said and thinking through how one image leads to another, we understand what we are staring at—Nova Scotia. But then comes the crucial moment at the heart of any great reading—the moment in which we recognize, within ourselves, the mental and emotional action being described. "I recognize the place," we say, "I know it," and proceed to scroll through the twists and turns of our own inner landscape, working our way through it again and then returning to the poem with that landscape alive in our heads, ready to see and respond. We have eyes to see. Details in the poem matter not because they are "symbols" or "motifs" someone has laboriously taught us to tally but because they are elements of a process we know something about, luminous now and alive.



Not elements of a code but turns of thought—"titanium white, one dab." We use those details to deepen our reading, one detail calling to another, the larger pattern filling itself in, the eye being instructed what to look for.

Let me give a few examples of those inner dramas, built out of such moments of recognition, that I carry around, as alive to me as my own memories. The first is Emily Dickinson's "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," a poem in which the speaker, using the metaphor of a funeral, looks back on a mental collapse. The funeral allows her to break the collapse down into steps and re-enact it. We are called to do that along with her. First, we think of mourners walking up to the coffin and back, many mourners—a way of visualizing almost making sense, handling some problem over and over. Then we imagine the service beginning, its droning elements so relentlessly bearing down that the listener's mind goes numb—almost making sense giving way to an exhausted blankness, the mind no longer able to process. But then that reverses itself; numbness is washed away and sound returns, yet now the overwhelmed senses are utterly unable to defend themselves and simply absorb the onslaught. This is the most terrifying moment of the poem. Dickinson gets at it by imagining, after the ceremony, walking out with the coffin and hearing some cosmic bell tolling, that mental collapse so far along that it seems as if "all the Heavens were a Bell, / And Being, but an Ear, / And I, and Silence, some strange Race / Wrecked, solitary, here—." The word that stands out is *here*. If we have imagined this along with her, have recognized trying and failing to make sense within ourselves, we are perhaps ready to notice that in this past-tense poem she has suddenly called attention to herself *here*, writing and remembering the moment when she and her own inner silence had been washed up and abandoned on the shore of some strangeness she hadn't known existed before. *Here* is the stage she speaks from. It is the white dab that is suddenly full of meaning for us, if we have found this moment within ourselves. It means that here, within speech and within language, we

are always aware that it could all be lost again; that, as she concludes the metaphor and the poem, the “Plank in Reason” could give way again and we, like the coffin, could drop “down, and down,” hitting worlds “at every plunge,” and bringing to an end the project called “Knowing.” How charged and tentative, how deeply alive, thought and speaking become here, and how brave.

Another powerful inner drama about straining and failing to make sense of the world is Robert Frost's “The Wood-Pile.” Like Dickinson's poem, it also looks back on the event, although this time it walks us through the drama by means of a simple narrative. Frost's speaker begins by describing how he had paused at the edge of a frozen swamp, understanding the instability of that unmarked, in-between space, but being drawn nonetheless to what he might discover within it. He goes in, of course, and immediately the speaker gives us a way of imagining his precarious position: the hard snow holds him, except when it doesn't and one foot pushes through. If we can imagine that, in our bodies, then we also understand why his eyes would fasten on the “view . . . all in lines / Straight up and down of tall slim trees” and why the failure of that attempt to locate himself, the trees being all alike, would leave him with the sense that he was lost, unmoored, “far from home.” A second attempt to steady himself follows, just as quickly undercut. A bird appears, keeping some distance in front of him, and the speaker asserts that the bird was “foolish as to think what *he* [the bird] thought”—that is that the speaker was “after him for a feather,” the bird being, in this telling of the tale, like one who “takes / Everything said as personal to himself.” The speaker, of course, has invented this position of superiority in order to lift himself above the blankness he is passing through, but he also quietly acknowledges, looking back, the absurdity of his claim: he, in his mind reading, being the one taking everything as having to do with himself.

Finally, the wood pile that the poem had been heading toward looms into sight and the bird is abandoned. If we have entered into the poem's drama of seeking stability and then acknowledging its being erased, then we are prepared for this more extended version of the same process. First, the wood pile greets him as a solid thing, a welcome sight in this blank space—a cord of wood, deliberately and carefully built. But then, as he looks closer, the cord seems to dissolve, right before his eyes. There's no other cord of wood. (He apparently looks around, seeking some sort of confirmation) There are no runner tracks in the snow—no one has been here recently. In fact no one has been here this year, or for several, no, many years. The pile, as he looks more and more carefully at it, ages and all but gives way. So much for human acts of order and location. With all of that in mind, then, the poet's last gesture becomes the dab of white that leaps out at us as having a charged sort of meaning, if we have found within ourselves this grasping for and loss of order. If not, it reads only as the kind of country moral Frost was so famous for. But it's surely much more. Lost in the frozen swamp's blankness, the poet makes one last attempt to find his footing, imagining a woodcutter who must have been so devoted to the process of creation that he could leave behind this artifact for the new day's fresh task. (We realize that at some level the poet is talking here about writing.) But then he adds, and it's no comfort at all, our ears tell us, taking in the dark, slowing tone, that this wood pile is, in a sense, doing what it's been designed to do: warm the frozen swamp as best it could / *With the slow smokeless burning of decay.*" If we've followed this drama internally, we get it: nothing lasts, it all gives way. Voice is all we have to work our way through our swamps, and that's something, but how little weight its constructs can truly bear.

Bishop's "Brazil, January 1, 1502" gives us another example of a mind moving, this time in the present tense. It begins with the speaker's acknowledgment that she, and we, share the Portuguese explorers' response to the landscape's

fierce abundance. At first Bishop's description seems designed simply to convey the experience of trying to take in an overwhelming blur, "every square inch" filling in with leaves and flowers in wildly complicated color combinations, but then we realize that she is speaking metaphorically: Brazil "greet[s] our eyes" as if its bright profusion of colors and shapes were a piece of embroidery, "fresh as if just finished / and taken off the frame." The poem's second stanza develops this metaphor, lifting it into full visibility. Reading the landscape as a tapestry, what she sees is sky as background, palms with birds in a kind of middle ground, and five lizards near some rocks in the foreground. Reading it even more explicitly, she sees the tapestry as an illustration of "Sin" having invaded a green paradise—the male lizards are staring at a female lizard with a tail "red as a red-hot wire" and the rocks are licked with the hell-green flames of moss. The poem turns with its third stanza, when the speaker, listening to herself, realizes what she had just done. Just as explorers had come to this new world and found it "not unfamiliar," corresponding in fact to an "old dream of wealth and luxury" they had brought with them, so she had made sense of this overwhelming landscape by turning it into an illustration of a familiar story. "Just so," she writes, those two words the white dab that only becomes readable to us when we have made the tapestry along with her. The poem gives way here, much like Frost's speaker watching his wood pile dissolve or Dickinson's speaker her plank in reason break. But with this difference: speaking in the present tense, Bishop's speaker doesn't just report on the loss of language or structure or an ability to order, she steps into that loss. Like those explorers, she has discovered within herself a drive to rip and tear and catch what should be ours—a not unfamiliar story we all carry, deep down—but unlike them, she has acknowledged this drive, and in acknowledging it, temporarily set it aside, discovering in its place a world powerfully present, most powerfully present as it "retreats always retreats" from her failed attempts to master it.

One last example of what we do as readers when we reenact the mind's movements traced in a poem—Robert Hass's "Meditation at Lagunitas," another struggle with the charged fragility of language. Hass begins in the present tense, speaking from a *here* about a discussion with a friend the previous night, sorting it out. "All the new thinking is about loss," he writes. "In this it resembles all the old thinking." The new thinking is the post-structuralist idea that because word and language do not directly correspond, "a word is elegy to what it signifies." Not so different from Plato, he now suggests, and his idea that "that black birch" out Hass's window this morning is, in its particularity, "some tragic falling off" from a world of forms or ideas. The tone seems unsettled and we're not surprised to see the poet return to that earlier conversation, bringing it all back again. There was a "thin wire of grief" in the voice of my friend, he says, "a tone / almost querulous." He can't get that out of his head—that almost disappointed tone, a way of talking in which, sadly, "everything dissolves." But it wasn't just his friend. Talking about that idea, he "remembered," last night, making love to a woman and the way his "violent wonder at her presence" drove him far beyond her particular body and its small shoulders to the thought of pleasure boats on a childhood river, "a first world / of undivided light" so powerful that what he wanted "hardly had to do with her." She disappeared, and he did as well. As his friend spoke last night, he acknowledges, he had found his own way to that world-dissolving thought.

But then comes a turn, a simple change in tense that we probably don't notice unless we have allowed ourselves to play out within ourselves that previous all-consuming longing. "But I remember so much," he counters, now, staring at the birch the next morning in its specific particularity: what she dreamed, how her hands moved. And tone—he remembers the tone of their voices: "Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings, / saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.*" As if against his friend's querulous tone he might juxtapose another, tender one—each tone responding to the same facts about words and bodies and the desire, but tenderness treasuring what

will soon dissolve, an idea with which Frost with his soon-to-be-dissolved figure of the wood cutter, Bishop with her “retreating, always retreating” landscape, and Dickinson with her “wrecked, solitary, here” would have been equally at home. One of the deepest joys in reading is hearing these conversations going on under the surface, one poem giving us access to another, forming that landscape we turn to within when, in reading, we “recognize the place” and our real work begins.

### (3) Lyric Thinking

We can think of the lyric as language under pressure—language driven by compulsion, or sudden insight, or the nagging awareness of something just outside the mind's reach. As Robert von Hallberg puts it in *Lyric Powers*, the lyric moves “*toward* something unpossessed—maybe lost like Eurydice, or never fully attained, like Beatrice.” Lyric thinking, in both poetry and prose, is thinking not constrained by notions of progress or position taking. It is urgent, compressed, not yet fully unfolded. Von Hallberg again: “Prosaic thought may spell out relations between statements, but poetic thought is different: it leaves meaning implicit, loaded not unpacked. Poets condense; critics explicate. . . . [Poets] present, with musical language and figure, a sense of what will not be brought into propositional prose.” Under pressure, the lyric leaps and slides and proposes new connections. Lyric thinking is musical thinking, and as von Hallberg suggests, “music leads away,” the reader being invited to follow along in its tracks.

I've long been interested in lyric prose—prose that moves and thinks as poetry does, while insistently keeping one foot in the ordinary world, its language, as Robert Hass puts it, both “casual and intense,” lasting as long as “poppies on the table in a clear glass vase, stained near the bottom to the color of sunrise” (“Spring Rain”). Let me offer three examples, prose I've found especially useful in thinking about what can be seen in the ordinary when it is put under lyric pressure.

My first example is Robert Hass's “Museum,” one of an important group of prose pieces in his book *Human Wishes* (1989). Hass begins the piece with a scene—a couple and a baby, the adults eating, smoking, and reading the paper in a museum restaurant “on the morning of the Käthe Kollwitz exhibit.” The poem's observer takes in the rhythm of the scene, a rhythm completely ordinary and all but unconscious, the couple unaware

they are being watched. The woman sits, the man fills a tray. He holds the baby, she drinks coffee and scans the front page, then they trade responsibilities and begin again, their give and take a slow, wordless dance. "They've hardly exchanged a look," the poet notes. "Meanwhile, I have fallen in love with this equitable arrangement, and with the baby who cooperates by sleeping." Our eyes turn here from the couple to the poet, the recording consciousness who calls attention to his response to the scene. And as we pause to ask what he loves about this delicate, nearly-unconscious arrangement, the poem makes a sudden, I want to say "lyric," turn: "All around them are faces Käthe Kollwitz carved in wood of people with no talent or capacity for suffering who are suffering the numbest kinds of pain: hunger, helpless terror." It's an extraordinary moment, suddenly displaying the couple's confident, wordless movements against a larger context of which they seem unaware, a context which undercuts or renders precarious each element of their exchange—eating, drawing into themselves, teasing out the textures of a Sunday morning.

This shift is what von Hallberg is speaking of when he says the lyric thinks by loading not unpacking. We need to pause here for another moment and realize that the poet's eyes are on himself, his response to what he sees still forming and still out of reach. He's not criticizing the couple, or not directly. They are, of course, unconscious of what's around them, ignoring it in their focus on their own small needs. But that's too easy a reading and closes too quickly the space between the initial description and troubling context. If we focus instead on the speaker, we realize that he's thinking about the faces' numbed terror as the precarious context in which this equitable arrangement is performed. He sees what the couple doesn't, that there is another side to the ordinary—that this scene could easily be otherwise, that any arrangement might fail, that in time they all will. And in seeing this, he sees what he has fallen in love with—the actions of the everyday, its fragile charged rhythms, here for a moment and then gone. For now, he says, *his* eyes open to everything around them, "everything seems



possible." Love, bodies, beauty itself—all of that infinitely threatened and of infinite worth. It's a lyric thought: he can barely get it into words. It leaps beyond him as he raises his head and takes in the carved faces. Its music draws him out into an equally charged world.

You can see a similar sort of musical thought in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*. The novel moves forward by means of a series of lyric improvisations as its narrator Ruth looks back on her childhood and the period of time in which she gradually removed herself from the world of social expectation. Early in the book, Ruth imagines a scene, years before she was born, in which her grandmother, after the sudden death of her grandfather, re-entered everyday life. Like the Hass poem, the scene celebrates the ordinary. Ruth begins with an image: "One day my grandmother must have carried out a basket of sheets to hang in the spring sunlight, wearing her widow's black, performing the rituals of the ordinary as an act of faith." Faith in what, we wonder. In life itself, perhaps—that it goes on. Like Hass, Ruth attends to the image, studying it, waiting to see what it will draw up into consciousness: say there was still snow, she writes; say my grandmother stooped to lift a wet sheet and when she picked it up it began to move, "as if a spirit were dancing in its cerements." "That wind! She would say," Ruth surprising herself here and welcoming into her meditation the notion of a burial cloth stirring with life, enlivened by the spirit.

That wind carries Ruth to a second scene: the smell, sweet and rank, of melting snow reminding her grandmother (as Ruth recreates the memory) of the wind "sour with stale snow and death and pine pitch" as she and her husband climbed high each spring in search of certain rare flowers, her husband stirred by a "serious, mystical excitement" at this yearly coming together of life and death. In the grip of such a passion, he seemed to the grandmother, "a soul all unaccompanied," alone before the immensities of life. Her grandmother, Ruth imagines, would have loved that about her husband, his ties to the everyday vanishing as its deeper rhythms stirred all about him.

These are lyric moves, image calling up image, some inner wind stitching them together, as is Ruth's return to the initial image of her grandmother hanging sheets, now with the words to say what her faith was based on: "So the wind that billowed her sheets announced to her the resurrection of the ordinary." Soon skunk cabbage would come up, and her girls would wash and starch cotton dresses, Ruth's grandmother thinks. "And every evening would bring its familiar strangeness, and crickets would sing the whole night long, under her windows and in every part of the black wilderness that stretched away from Fingerbone on every side." She would feel, that is, the strangeness of the ordinary, its inner immensities swelling before her and reducing her to an entranced, unnoticed observer, wrapped up in "that sharp loneliness she had felt every long evening since she was a child. It was the kind of loneliness that made clocks seem slow and loud and made voices sound like voices across water."

Ruth pauses here—another lyric move—and thinks about loneliness, its power to unveil. She imagines her grandmother staring at her daughters after the death of their father, their faces as "soft and serious and inward and still when she looked at them . . . as they had been when they were small children," so unconscious of her presence that they offered her their faces "not as they always were, or as other people's were," but as faces in the grip of a radiant and revealing "inwardness." "What was it like," Ruth asks, taking on her grandmother's charged awareness and imagining her, on a summer evening, out in the garden, the world an "ordinary green and full of comfortable rustlings." She imagines the ordinary stirred suddenly by a "swift, watery wind" that lifted the hair on her neck and filled the trees with movement, the same wind Ruth has been directed by throughout this meditation, "the earth and sky and the garden, not as they always are," with the grandmother, as Ruth imagines her, quiet and aloof before garden and children, careful to "not startle the strangeness away."

This, I take it, is what it means to think lyrically. As Ruth has allowed the wind to lead her from billowing sheets to lonely mountain passes to the

wind over the garden and the strangeness hidden in the faces of those we love, she has been led out, by music or spirit or some still-forming inner intuition, into a world both deeply familiar and deeply new. Thinking by connecting, by following, by taking another's loneliness in and inhabiting it for herself, Ruth has made a way through the world "unaccompanied" but trusting to an inner music, following it out.

My third example of such musical thinking is Anne Carson's lyric essay "Every Exit is an Entrance (A Praise of Sleep)." Carson too is interested in the lyric's approach to the ordinary. Her essay is a "reading" of a number of literary accounts of sleep; in that sense, it presents itself as a familiar academic exercise. But what's interesting about the essay is how it moves, how it almost runs away with her. That is to say, it moves lyrically, as if she were driven by something just out of her reach. The essay brings together a number of examples. First, Carson describes what she calls her earliest memory: a dream, when she was three or four, of waking and coming downstairs and discovering her family's living room not as it always was but different, "deeply and glowingly strange." It was "as if [the room] had gone mad," she writes. She described this to herself as having "caught the living room sleeping," an experience she found "supremely consoling," indicating as it did that there was "something *incognito* at the heart of our sleeping house." She had entered the room "from the sleep side," its ordinary features strange and revealing, much like Hass's equitable arrangements, seen in the light of the Kollwitz faces, or Robinson's trees and garden, touched by the wind and not as they always were—sensing in it something unpossessed.

Carson then moves to a number of literary examples of approaching the ordinary through its sleep side. The central figure of Elizabeth Bishop's "Man-Moth," for example, seems to Carson to move like sleep itself, pursuing an exit out of this world but failing, quite, to find one. He gains, however, some insight into the world, insight the poem labels "his only possession": a tear. Carson calls this insight the "tear of sleep." We might call it the lyric's secret, "something *incognito* at the heart of [the world]." It's what we read

for: "Slyly he palms it, and if you're not paying attention / he'll swallow it. However, if you watch, he'll hand it over, / cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink." Sleep, this suggests, might offer access to such a secret. If we were good sleepers, it might make us whole. Carson draws parallels to both the ancient Greek temple of Asklepios, "where sick people slept the night in order to dream their own cures," and psychoanalysis, in which the analyst tries to make it possible for "a bit of something *incognito* [to] cross over from night to day and change the life of the sleeper."

Of course, an entrance into the world's sleep side isn't always so comforting. Carson turns to Virginia Woolf and the moment in *To the Lighthouse* in which, as she strikingly phrases it, the novel "falls asleep." This is, of course, Part II of the novel, "Time Passes," in which a single night turns into years, and sleep erases all evidence of human consciousness. We enter the sleep side of the novel, much as Carson entered into the sleep side of her living room, but in this case, we are swept up, absorbed, made captive by forces outside of our control. This "is the emptiness of things before we make use of them," Carson writes. "There is no exchange between night and its captives, . . . no drinking the tear of sleep." It is a deeply unsettling moment, but one that Carson finds Woolf drawn to over and over again. It is another picture of lyric thought, one in which we are carried away from the world, un-housed or dispossessed. In some respects, we find it attractive, as did Woolf: "If I could catch the feeling I would: the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one is driven by loneliness and silence from the habitable world." But we also realize, as she did, that one could get lost there, could be changed so deeply as to become unrecognizable to the world, a ghost slipping by on the street.

Carson counters these fears with Homer and his deft negotiations with the sleep side of things, orchestrating in the *Odyssey* "a master sleep plan that pulls all the major characters into a nocturnal rhythm lying just under the surface of the awake narrative," where characters can speak and think and come together differently. But Homer's ease with that world seems

out of Carson's reach. Ours as well. She concludes the essay by returning to a moment in Woolf in which a sleeper awakes to ghosts leaning over her bed, laying claim to "*their* treasure buried in *her* heart," a suggestion that the lyric's secret, unpossessable yet almost in our grasp, might finally estrange us even from ourselves, if only as we speak it. Think of Socrates, Carson writes, returning from the sleep side and so possessed by the discovery of "something *incognito* in his very being" that he has become "a person ungraspable in ordinary sentences," silenced and un-housed by the "singing of the real world" passing through him. What I want to say, then, is that lyric is brought to life by this risk—that in embracing the feeling of being possessed and dispossessed, it hopes to catch a glimpse, unaccompanied, of our ordinary world, a world deeply familiar but also deeply strange. Why else would we read?

#### (4) As If

My friend Edward is a political theorist. We get together a week or two before the start of classes in the fall to talk about our summers, exchange manuscripts, and pass on news about what we've been puzzling over. Edward is one of the best readers I know. He has seen ambitions in my work I wouldn't dare acknowledge to anyone but him. He's writing a book now on political atrocity, and when we got together recently to talk about the manuscript of *Poverty Creek Journal*, he had only one question, apparently prompted by that work: how aware was I of what I was doing with my repeated use of the phrase "as if" in these pieces? That's how I remember it, anyway—the manuscript pages on his desk all marked up and circled, something stirring in his eyes. I think I understand why he asked. The phrase gives voice to something deep in us—the drive to take up and commit to something *as if* it were true, *as if* it could bear the weight we need to put on it. There's a "terrible beauty" in such thinking, Yeats says, and Edward was wondering how aware I was of the charged territory my words had entered.

He was right, of course. That turn is everywhere in these pieces: "as if the light were alive, preparing to speak," "as if I had borrowed my old body back," "as if time is a surface I can't find my balance on," and so on.

"Somewhat aware," I said, remembering that in many of these pieces I had, in fact, waited for just that moment—the opening impulse beginning to wane and then an unlooked for thought sending the writing skidding forward, *as if* the mark the sudden leap had left in its wake—but I was surprised he had noticed. I didn't say much else, but what I thought was what I often think: "There's a poem I wish I could show you." I never did. It didn't seem like a thing to put in campus mail. I carried the poem with me for weeks, on the chance that our paths might cross, and then the impulse passed.

The poem was Robert Hass's "The Apple Trees at Olema." It's a poem I carry in my head. You might know it. The poem is in the third person. It begins in the present tense, with a couple walking along the California coast. There's a bit of tension in the air: "They are walking in the woods along the coast / and in a grassy meadow, wasting, they come upon / two old neglected apple trees." *Wasting* is the word that charges the atmosphere. It describes the abandoned meadow, of course, and probably comes out of Elizabeth Bishop's similarly unused meadow in "Cape Breton," "which establishes its poverty in a snowfall of daisies." But our ear also associates the term with the couple, despite what the sentence says, leaving us with the impression of something perhaps strained between them. The poem then shifts to the past tense—what I've been describing as a lyric shift, the speaker halting time for a moment, preparing us for the sliding off the rails that is about to occur:

*Moss thickened*

*every bough and the wood of the limbs looked rotten  
but the trees were wild with blossom and a green fire  
of small new leaves flickered even on the deadest branches.*

The narrator looks at the abandoned trees and remembers seeing what he expected to see—moss on the limbs, dead and rotten branches. But then he's surprised, the white blossoms and new green leaves flaring to life and running before him. He turns back to the meadow, "flecked" now by wild flowers, "Blue-eyes, poppies, a scattering of lupine," including a "leopard-spotted / leaf-green flower whose name they didn't know." Here the tension rises again, the couple having differed over the name—"Trout lily," he said; she said, "adder's tongue"—the disagreement becoming even more striking when we realize, with the help of a dictionary, that these are both names for the same flower.

We return to the present tense now, the couple still standing before the apple trees, and their different ways of taking in the world are suddenly put into play:

*She is shaken by the raw, white, backlit flaring  
of the apple blossoms. He is exultant,  
as if something he felt were verified,  
and looks to her to mirror his response.  
If it is afternoon, a thin moon of my own dismay  
fades like a scar in the sky to the east of them.*

She is taken aback by the rawness of the flaring, he sees himself written large—two bodies, two contradictory rhythms of response. We've all been there, as has the poet. He breaks in, almost without meaning to, reminding us that he is the one creating this scene. It is his life we are drawing from, and adding the moon's thin scar only formalizes the "dismay" rising in him as he goes there again. It was inevitable, he says:

*He could be knocking wildly at a closed door  
in a dream. She thinks, meanwhile, that moss  
resembles seaweed drying lightly on a dock.  
Torn flesh, it was the repetitive torn flesh  
of appetite in the cold white blossoms  
that had startled her. Now they seem tender  
and where she was repelled she takes the measure  
of the trees and lets them in. But he no longer  
has the apple trees.*

The man seeking verification of the intensity of his feelings gets nowhere, for she is startled and then repelled by the "torn flesh / of appetite" so nakedly expressed there, and by the time she slowly "takes the measure" of the



blossoms and “lets them in,” he has lost the feeling and collapsed in on himself. The rhythm is sexual, bodily, inevitable. That almost goes without saying. It is, the poet remarks, a basic fact of life: “This is as sad or happy / as the tide, going out or coming in, at sunset.”

All of this brings me to what I wanted to share with Edward. In the face of their failure to connect, the couple notices a finch “flashing dull gold in the light / above the field” and draws together in admiration of it. They “start to walk again.” It’s the simplest of gestures—a deliberate, even artificial joining together, the two of them fully aware of how little weight such a union might bear, and yet joining together anyway:

*A small boy wanders corridors of a hotel that way.  
Behind one door, a maid. Behind another one, a man  
in striped pajamas shaving. He holds the number  
of his room close to the center of his mind  
gravely and delicately, as if it were the key,  
and then he wanders among strangers all he wants.*

Their coming together, Hass writes, is like a boy wandering a hotel and holding his room number in mind, “gravely and delicately, as if it were the key” to his safe return. It isn’t, of course. There is no real guarantee that he’ll make it back to his room, and yet he holds the room number in mind *as if* it were just that. It allows him to reach out and move forward. It stakes a claim, makes a proposal, ventures out. It imagines a way into the world, that imagining held “gravely and delicately” in the face of the knowledge of how quickly it all might come undone. Poetry, I wanted to tell Edward, is built on such venturings out. It glimpses something and reaches out with that glimpse, “as if it were the key,” *as if* signaling that of course it’s not, not fully. But it’s all we have and it frees us to wander. “Gravely and delicately”—that’s what I caught in Edward’s eyes: the way we handle such truths, the way we rest just so much weight on them, and no more.

Robert Frost thought very carefully about how we hold ourselves in the *as if*. Think of his great poem “Birches.” After deliberately pushing his language up to and past the point of coherence in describing the way ice storms break down birch trees—the ice on the trees is like cracked and crazed enamel; it is heaped on the ground like “shed crystal shells” and the shattered “inner dome of heaven”; the trees themselves, for years afterwards, take on the posture of “girls on hands and knees” with their hair flung forward “over their heads to dry in the sun”—after pushing his language as far as it would go, Frost spins out a fantasy of a boy taking on a hillside of trees and riding them down in an alternative sort of conquest. What he’s describing, of course, is poetry—or more precisely, how one holds oneself in the *as if*, the moment of venturing out, pushing one’s language, as he has just done, past the point where it holds together and riding that collapse back to earth.

Frost’s speaker, like the boy he describes, enters into such a use of language “when I’m weary of considerations, / And life is too much like a pathless wood,” climbing his tree, or pushing out linguistically, in order “to get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over.” Earth, let’s say, is two lovers with different rhythms attempting to process their feelings; it is the “pathless wood” of our embodied existence. The way the boy climbs the tree lets Frost spell out how one holds oneself in language, pushing out, *as if* something were true, well aware that one has passed the point where language can straight-facedly make any such claim, but enlivened by the risk, embracing that tension and putting it into play. Think of the boy with the room number in his head. Such a way of speaking or imagining rises above the earth of everyday facts and ventures out, past what can be actually said, into freedom:

*He always kept his poise*

*To the top branches, climbing carefully*

*With the same pains you use to fill a cup*

*Up to the brim, and even above the brim.  
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,  
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.*

We say *as if* in order to climb to the top branches of language, so attentive there, climbing with such “poise,” that we find ourselves “above the brim” of what language can do, but doing it nonetheless. “As if the light were itself alive,” we might write, knowing that it’s not, quite, or not in that way, but eager to see what such a venture might open up, eager to go there. Frost’s “poise” is like Hass’s “gravely and delicately.” It’s how we hold ourselves there, attending to language, to the tree, but also to our weight, our moves, the work we are doing, the limits of the world we find ourselves pushing up against. *As if* knows it is a proposition, not a fixed truth. We use it to remind ourselves not to get stuck out there, past the limits of our language. “May no fate willfully misunderstand me / And half grant what I wish and snatch me away / Not to return. Earth’s the right place for love,” Frost whispers. We know what that would be like, of course. We all know those who refuse to acknowledge the *as if* nature of their propositions and never return to the earth. No, says Frost, what poetry wants, what *as if* offers, is a way to climb past language’s limits, “*toward* Heaven,” and then embrace that wild rush as it all gives way and we return to earth, still in language, still holding on to the tree, but changed.

I think often of that space of riding back down, all alert, speculation having finally given way, but not before it had taken us to somewhere new. As it gives way, as we kick our way freely to the ground, we embrace gravity and the facts, the tormenting and bedeviling facts of this earth. But we sail down on them from above, embracing them from somewhere else.

Robert Hass puts it this way, in another poem. Think of that space where language gives way and we ride its collapse back down as an interval of attention, a space in which all of it—bodies, dreams, the truth half-glimpsed—is in play, in a grand, unsorted rush. A kind of a game:

*—the hes and shes of the comedy  
may or may not get together, but if they are to get at all,  
  
then the interval created by if, to which mind and breath attend,  
nervous as the grazing animals the first brushes painted,  
  
has become habitable space, lived in beyond wishing.*

“Beyond wishing” is the moment of free fall. Knowing is no longer an issue there. Alertness is, and attention, what the desire to know brought to life in us, and then, when its reach collapsed, set free. Poetry teaches us how to live there. Lyric thinking does. It offers our limits back as music. *As if* leads us out, or above, but it knows it will bend back down. It makes much of those limits. It is how we hold ourselves in language.

“Earth’s the right place for love,” Frost adds. Earth, where “he says” and “she says,” where our bodies and minds process things in wildly different ways. It’s what we return to, changed, to love. “That would be good both going and coming back,” Frost concludes, learning to love the earth by pushing past it and coming home again. Seeing it in our mind’s eye as if it were another, and then returning to it with all its tensions and issues made new. Living there, as of course we do.

### ***Biographical Note***

Thomas Gardner is a literary critic, poet, and playwright. In addition to *Poverty Creek Journal*, his most recent books are *A Door Ajar: Contemporary Writers and Emily Dickinson* (Oxford University Press, 2006) and *John in the Company of Poets: The Gospel in Literary Imagination* (Baylor University Press, 2011). His play *Eurydice* was performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2006.

Among his honors are fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Virginia Commission for the Arts. In 1996–97 he served as the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair in American Studies at the University of Helsinki in Finland.

Tom Gardner and his wife live in Blacksburg, Virginia, on the edge of the Jefferson National Forest. He is Alumni Distinguished Professor of English at Virginia Tech.

### ***Links***

**The Tupelo Press page for *Poverty Creek Journal*:**

<http://www.tupelopress.org/authors/tgardner>

**Thomas Gardner's academic department website:**

<http://www.english.vt.edu/directory/faculty-staff-profiles/gardner.html>

**Thomas Gardner's publications, as author and editor:**

<http://www.faculty.english.vt.edu/gardner/academic.html>

**An essay by Thomas Gardner on teaching (downloadable PDF):**

[http://www.faculty.english.vt.edu/gardner/minds\\_finding](http://www.faculty.english.vt.edu/gardner/minds_finding)