Bound: A Few Threads

By

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Abstract

What follows is a paean to memory, loss, wonder, worth, and belonging. When I first started my studies with the School of Letters in ’18, my vision for this thesis manuscript was a work that would focus entirely on my thirteen years of experience working on the Ohio and other rivers. During that time, I was fortunate to experience some of the last vestiges of a quickly vanishing river culture. I myself was a steamboatman, but through my time on the river I got to know shantyboaters, commercial fishermen, and wooden boat builders, WW II veterans, and a whole other cast of characters. The dearest among them was Joe Rafferty. I lived on his wooden hulled shantyboat for a month, and my essay on that experience was what I hoped to bind the rest of “the river book,” as I was calling it at the time.

However, as I progressed with material, I found it difficult to pair these other sketches of river life to the shantyboat essay. It just felt too different in character and tone color, and perhaps that was because it was an experience beyond observation and was truly transformative. Paired with this was my three decades of following and being a practitioner of traditional music. Over the years, my musical journey has taken me from an outsider, to being in the middle of a healthy traditional scene, and back to the fringes where fellow like-minded musicians are not in great supply. Why then be part of a tradition where most of your colleagues are a generation older than you, leading to the inevitable loss of your immediate community? This question and others, such as what does art look and sound like to the modestly abled, led to the greater introspection of this

work, which is bound to the idea that all of us are given the opportunity to be in community with that which is greater than us.

Those questions, in addition to my deep friendship with Joe and the onset of dementia in his life, framed the essays that followed. I felt that this was no longer "the river book," but in reality, a questioning of other ways of living in this world – a "different economy," as Wendell Berry writes. So, while I am part of the essays, my intent was not to write a memoire. At best, it is a series of observations from an insider's view, with the hope of bringing the larger question of what can I take from these observations to readers that have no experience with any of the subject matter. It is a work with gravity, but I hope it is also a work of affirmation.

Structure wise, I have taken inspiration from the great Japanese poet Basho's "Narrow Road to the Interior" as well as traditional fiddle music. Most fiddle tunes consist of two sections, the A part and the B part. There are some Kentucky fiddle tunes that have three parts, labeled A, B, and C. While most fiddle tunes are played ABABABAB, these three-part Kentucky tunes keep returning to the B – ABCBABCBABCBABC. The B part is the hinge. My hope in this manuscript is that poetry is the hinge and, although the work begins and ends with poetry, it is not the same rigid architecture of the B in the fiddle tune context. But nonetheless, it is my hope that the poetry will link, in a more lyric voice, the essays.

Thank you for taking the time to read this work.

This work is dedicated to the memory of my father, Bill T. Ray, the first and greatest natural storyteller I have ever known and to Jerry B. Cain, himself an extraordinary teller of tales, who always saw the potential in my attempts. I hope both are honored by these scribblings.

1

A Summer's Night on the Ohio Above Louisville

"I want you to have it," he said, as the time worn

faded brown cordura covered case was opened and

the rich summer's air seeped with the Ohio's slow current

bathed the fiddle within. It was Joe's, it was Joe's

genius loci – the giver of his tunes that gave themselves

to the unbridled joy of playing for the sheer hell of it, knowing that

the music, like rain, fell on the grateful as well as the un

-dulating tunes of his that winded their way across the river as he smiled

on the fiddles and the tunes and the lives of the dead

and the debts we owe as we bow the tears.

Honoring the ones who knew nothing other than the

shaking of the hive to make us dance.

The lift of the bow courts the light stepped lovers

as they float through the years as the old timers smile.

2

And I knew then, on those muggy summer nights

in between the mayfly hatches that bathed his yellowed

shantyboat like a plague-*lite*, just enough to drive our music

in and off the river open porch, where we dined on

a feast of shared tunes and tales, that this was all

fleeting – this marriage of tunes twined together

like the loose bonds of this fierce friendship bound

in love for the river and the songs it sang to us as we sang back giving thanks

for the times on the boat, with the river running past

our lives, our thoughts on those gone before.

And the upbow takes us there, where the tunes flows freely

through the falling of the feet on the river's edge.

The looks that we exchange, bind us to the buzzing

of the hum in the tune, so we play it once again.

We don't get to keep the ones we love, keeping instead

all that is kept in a tune whose lifts and lurches

preach idiosyncrasity and unbridled individuality. Instead

of simply saying the things which are neither simple

nor said, we open the cases again, and in armless chairs sitting,

set right once again the world, which turns on the tip of the bow

in the worn yellowed shantyboat where two friends play giving thanks

Current

Where it began

In my tattered old river chart book, Mile 603, Ohio River is easy enough to find. Years of running that stretch of river has led to the dog-eared page opening to that singular location which encompasses two states and the wide ditch of river that separates them. It is somewhat misleading in the singular as there are a multitude of locations that can exist within the narrow confines of its name. The Allegheny River and the Monongahela River converge at Pittsburgh to form the Ohio (Mile 1), which runs 981 miles downhill until it finally spills into the broad, brown Mississippi at Cairo, Illinois (Mile 981). From the top of the flood proof cement observation deck at Ft. Defiance Park in Cairo, you can see the blue green of the Ohio encroaching on the mud-addled Mississippi. Usually there is a clear demarcation line in the river, then blurring a bit further downstream, until finally the two become one. Joe's shantyboat was tied up on the river's edge below the tree fringed Riverside Drive in Jeffersonville, Indiana, right across the river from Louisville, Kentucky at Mile 603.

The shantyboat was painted a muted combination of yellow and cream, with green/grey trim on the windows and along the roof's edge. It was about thirty-six feet in length with a porch on either end and the cabin slung between them was about twenty feet in length, punctuated by two windows on each side. It was mostly like a shoebox in appearance and the overall effect was more akin to an old outbuilding rather than a boat. Whether it stood out or stuck out was entirely as a matter of opinion and taste. Unlike its more modern brothers and sisters, the old

shantyboat's lines were far more boxy than graceful; more trailer park than yacht club. Under the eaves of the river side porch, Joe perpetually left the back-porch hatch open to let the river air circulate among the oaken timbers in the eighty-year-old hull. Thus, the aspect of the boat from the river side was like that of a gap-toothed pensioner; which did little to increase the old boat's credibility with the few people who noticed.

This was not a vessel in which you would take your family out for a cruise on a bright summer's day. There were no means of propulsion. The boat no longer *went* anywhere, it just *sat*, nestled into the dappled shade of the river's edge in a little community of eccentrics, success stories, and other ragamuffins inexplicably drawn to the river. A relic from the no longer remembered *before* which offered a more elemental perspective of what the river could give. Wood. Water. Current.

The sky was overcast and the wind off the river was cool but not biting the first time I meet Joe at the boat. Joe is a man of slight build, with piercing blue eyes that take in everything. He later told me that he is always on the lookout for the "little miracles of the day," and his eyes reflect back wonder and appreciation. I have come over to meet him after finishing my day on the working river. Joe looks like a man who has navigated a river life of high water and drift, of peace and the mirror finish of the Ohio at sunrise, of the smells and the sights and the wonder. He warmly shakes my hand and welcomes me aboard.

It hit me as soon as I went through the single Dutch door. The smell was like that of a camper van that had hastily been put to bed for winter after an impulsive road trip to the woods; a last-ditch effort to deny winter's encroachment. That scent permeated the interior of the cabin, and the off-white of the ceiling stumbled into the grey natural light, as if *worn out and wet* could

be the name of a color. It was a cool-ish down on the river. Although Louisville could look forward to warmer days ahead, I was thankful that I was wearing a work jacket over my paint stained sweatshirt and frayed flannel long-sleeve.

In my mind's anticipation of how this first meeting would play out, I was sure that I would walk into a cabin which spoke of the early days of the story. I expected to find one or two cane-back chairs, unsteady with age but still better made than anything to be found these days. I imagined a rocking chair or two facing inward, their backs to the river, toward where the old wood stove once dried and warmed the occupants after they adjusted the lines or fended off drift during a winter's rise - "Payin' their rent," as the old-timers used to say. The floor would be wide plank tongue-and-groove, most likely southern pine, worn with eight decades of use, smooth and cool to bare feet in the river's summer. But in the winter, to keep the chill of the hull permeating through the floor, there would be a worn oval rug; stretched out on the floor like an old hound.

What I actually walked on, upon entering the cabin on that late winter's day, was simple, musty interior/exterior carpet. It had yet to make up its mind to whether it was grey or green, and I had seen its brothers and sisters covering the floors of the three season rooms that everyone in our part of Louisville had added on in the late 1970's. I was sure that there was a wooden floor beneath the carpet, but since it spread to every corner of the cabin like kudzu, I had no way of telling for sure.

In fact, there was no old, quaint furniture to be found anywhere on board; all vestiges of *the before* had been swept away. The effect was more like what I would expect to find in someone's doublewide and not on the last floating wooden-hulled shantyboat on the Ohio. And yet, there *it* was: the river flowing just outside the window-flanked door; as it always had been

and always would be. Even as the chill of the cabin burrowed its way into my clothing, morehan anything I wanted to take two of the mottled plastic deck chairs, sit out on the back porch, and breathe in the cool river air. Joe regarded me as if reading my mind, pulled two of them from the stack and carried them through the door to the porch; where we sat in silence, our hands thrust deep into the pockets of our coats.

A Postcard from the Working River

It felt like Spring was long overdue and the morning was cold and grey. I had been at the fleet since six, and by the time we took our break at ten, I'd had enough of hauling cable and steamboat ratchets around the yard in the splotchy, oil-soaked late February snow.

Mister and I left the dampness behind and slipped though the double doors and into the relative warmth of the *William Clark*'s galley. The screen door slamming behind us filled my head with thoughts of the warmer days ahead, and the scent of the spices in the cupboard slipped through the painted oak door and filled the galley. Mister went right to the coffee maker and poured himself a cup of the strong, hot equalizer, his glasses steaming up as the newly released heat bathed his bearded face. I passed, as I had never taken to coffee, although I didn't mind the bitterness of chicory on occasion. I was just pleased to be out of the cold for a short while and hear Mister hold forth on whatever topic came to his mind.

"Well, sir", he said, "this company simply couldn't go another day without Mister to keep nursing it along."

"Yessir..." I replied, knowing it was the safest response this early in any conversation with Mister.

His perpetual use of referring to himself in the third person had disarmed me when I first started working with him, but now I simply recognized it as the precursor of some prophesy

revealed by him to anyone who would listen. I shifted from leaning against the Formica counter and pulled out one of the old worn out chrome and plastic chairs from the matching table and rested my cold bones on its torn seat.

"Yes sir, they couldn't do without Mister; I'm a deckhand, I'm a pilot, I'm an engineer," he continued. His body grew more erect the more he got into the laudatory lists of his duties, and he sat down across from me to make sure that we would have eye contact, just so I wouldn't miss the importance of what was coming.

"I'm the welder, I'm the electrician, I'm the plumber, I'm the dead horse burier..."

"Wait," I interrupted, "What do you mean you're the "dead horse burier?"

Mister was always only too happy to educate me, his young disciple, on the, in his opinion, inept shit-for brains who ran the towing operation. In the holy warmth of the beat-up towboat's galley, surrounded by the love that is embodied in the sweet incense of black coffee and diesel oil, he transfigured himself into Jesus of Morgantown and John the Baptist/Dead Horse Burier combined and started to preach. For the next fifteen minutes, Mister held me on the edge of my seat, telling a story that was so convincing it could only be true, while at the same time shocked me into disbelief at the management's inability to use good judgment in the most obvious circumstances. I laughed so hard I was almost doubled over. When I finally would step back out into the cold of the day, my ribs still hurting from the laughter, my face would sting from the residue of those tears of hilarity for a good half hour.

The rest of the day-- while we were respooling wire, pumping water out of empty barges, or any of the other mindless drudgery that you're given to do when your boat is broken down and

they're still obligated to give you your hours-- was punctuated by the occasional "Yes, sir" from Mister; which both served as a reinforcement of his position and as a reminder of the story to me, lest I forget the importance of its lesson.

I have since had days, weeks, and years to reflect back on that story and in Mister's telling of it, and I smile every time I tell it myself; a minor prophet, ordained by self-proclaimed minister whose healing powers were most evident in his use of a welding torch. In my memory of his telling, I can still picture his piercing green eyes grow sharper and more animated behind the brown framed bi-focals; glasses that would look too large on any man who didn't already have a bushy, unkempt beard.

As he tells the story, the cast of characters come on stage in turn, each set against the other in the pursuit of the family fortune. They are all brothers and sisters; the products of this river towing dynasty, and each must play their role in order to get their share of the haul. This extends to one of the poor sisters, whose lot it is to run the family farm that has no other purpose within a river towing company than to provide her with her fair share. Her inability to keep her animals alive culminates in the end of the story, where Mister delivers the immortal line.

"Well, God-dammit, Steve couldn't you have walked that horse out to the field before putting it down?" He almost allows himself the smallest of chuckles before he resumes his Parable of the Dead Horse.

"It took three of us six hours, block and tackle, and a front-end loader to get that dead horse out of its stall and out into the field where we could finally bury the son of a bitch!"

He concludes, no passing of the plate, no alter call. Just good, pure, you-sons-of-snakes preaching. He throws back the remaining coffee in the chipped mug, puts on his cap, pulls it low, and pushes back the chair. I stretch out my arms, yawn, zip up my coveralls, and follow him out the door where some almost-too-far-gone barges are waiting for us to pump them out.

The Portrait of Two Paths

I remember him well, the first time I saw him. It must be in the summer of 2000. He stands under the shade of that oak, walnut, or whatever deciduous tree that shields the banjo players, fiddlers, and other old time musicianeers from the late afternoon heat. I remember that it was uncomfortably hot that afternoon. The photos I still have somewhere tell me that there are about eight of us under the shade of that tree, sending our music up into the overstory. Joe shows up in a couple of the photos, diminutive next to the other musicians with the cotton cap covering his bald head. He is playing the old Welsh fiddle that smells of coal dust.

He remembered me, he told me some five years later, from seeing our string band play under the shade trees at the annual Art in the Park Festival in Sellersburg, Indiana, a stone's through up I-65 from Louisville. Thus, we both knew *of* each other, but it was only when we met on his shantyboat on that overcast late winter's day in 2002 that we put all the pieces together, realized what we already knew, and truly got to know each other. This we both remember.

In the early 2000's, we played together; on his shantyboat and anywhere else where the music of the Ohio River was remembered. Sometimes we would play for historical societies, sometimes for neighborhood parties in the historic Rose Hill neighborhood in Jeffersonville, Indiana. The beauty of our music making lay in the fact that we were both good listeners. We almost always knew where the other was headed. All of that changed when I packed my fiddle

and moved away to St. Louis in 2007. Much of the change seemed to be on my end: the move, the change in careers, the divorce, the pain, the healing, the remarrying, the move to the woods. His life remained as stable and reliable as the Ohio often is. His firm friendship, even remotely, sustained me though that chapter. While we still hold firm to our weekly conversations, usually revolving around the river, I noticed about four years ago the conversations began to loop.

It has been a slow road, and he has not declined as rapidly as my wife's late father who was reduced to his most elemental self after moving into a memory care facility, carrying around a baby doll, wandering into other rooms naked, passing away within three months of his admittance. My wife keeps taped between the AC vents on the dashboard of her Forester a photo of him taken shortly after he arrived. In it, he wears a Grateful Dead t-shirt that she is pretty sure that someone there walked off with after he passed. In the forced smile in the photo it's easy to trick yourself into believing that he is not as far gone as he is.

Even in the midst of his decline, Joe and his wife Rebecca do the best they can to hold on to each other, facing the inevitability of aging. For years they have slept in separate rooms and every morning he wakes up and presses his pants as if he is still living in the *before*. I have never seen him in wrinkled pants. His room is neat and orderly, a combination of "everything in its place" and everything in every place. A couple of guitar cases lean against his worn dresser on the wall where the river facing window sits, and there are fiddles throughout. Under the bed, nesting in the closet, he is often surprised when he finds another one once played but now forgotten.

My wife and I refer to the room where my fiddles live as "The Long-Legged Room." It is a play on Wendell Berry's essay "The Long-Legged House," in which he writes about his camp

house on the banks of the Kentucky River. Ours hangs out in the air above the wet weather creek bed on stilt like legs, giving us the effect of living in a tree house. My seven fiddles hang in a rack made from one hundred and fifty-year-old piece of oak that was once part of a dining room table back in the gilded age. Below the rack is an old chaplain's pump organ, it's "Estey Organ Co., Battleboro, Vermont" plaque still shines in the natural tree dappled light that floods the room from three sides. The third fiddle from the left is the old coal dust fiddle, which Joe gave me when I suspect that he was first aware of his cognitive potholes which were starting to show. That was a year or so before I noticed the loops in conversation.

Perhaps it is his sense of routine that keeps the reality of his condition shaded. I know his patterns well, although my visits are more infrequent. But in my mind's eye, I know how his day typically unfolds. With freshly pressed pants, he descends the steep stairs from the second story, turns left and then right and finds himself in his tiny kitchen. He lavishes much care in the cutting up of nuts and apples, and a simple act that seems to brings him joy. The nuts and apples are not for him. He has always had a St. Francis of Assisi quality about him, and so the nuts, apples, and birdseed are for the birds and squirrels who wait expectantly. He's told me numerous times that he's not sure he's really helping them out, but it blesses him. I remember him moving a groundhog from its den, which was undermining the foundation of his shed, down the road to the Falls, hoping it would find a new home that suited everybody. Within weeks the groundhog was back under the shed. They played this game at least six more times, whether it was the same groundhog or not, I don't remember. He never said. Knowing and remembering; the simple distillation of our friendship these days. I know his life well by the reduction of his world.

In my modest house in the woods I have the freedom to go anywhere I want and yet most of the time I don't want to go anywhere. I wonder if that will ever change. When I first found the house, perched in the deciduous shade of the hillside, with wildflowers above and a Paw Paw fringed wet weather creek below, I knew that I was Home. I knew that the only way I ever wanted to leave was when my still warm body reluctantly let go of what was never truly mine to begin with. I have my books, I have the woods, I have the freedom to leave, but I'm not inclined to.

The boundaries of Joe's world are marked by the Falls of the Ohio, about a mile downriver from his house, the Big Four Railroad Bridge two blocks upstream, and the coffee shop, which has changed names more times than I can remember, four blocks away. Joe's need for his morning coffee remains undiminished. It's difficult to believe that Joe is still driving anywhere, but his wife Rebecca trusts that he can make it to the coffee shop and back. Never without his Irish cotton driver's hat, he shuffles down off the generous front porch and settles into the familiarity of his 1998 Corolla, which simply refuses to accept things as they are and continues on its daily meandering to the coffee shop. I know that Bob Croll will be there, partly because it is one point Joe remains cognizant about, and partly because Bob's goings and comings from Florida have been a source of fascination for Joe since before the memory loss. Other than that, I know almost nothing about Bob.

It is not every day that I take the coal dust fiddle down off its rack and play some of the old tunes we used to play. Without Joe, it feels like I am only playing by half. And so often I don't play at all, feeling the loss of what we had. The coal dust fiddle lives peaceably along with six other fiddles of various vintage and pedigree. What an embarrassment of choices I have, at

any time I can pull any of them down, play and remember, and yet I often don't, choosing something else hardly worth remembering.

Joe plays every day. It is one aspect of his life which is only reduced in scope, but not in spirit. His mandolin lives beside his recliner in the comfort of their cluttered living room. The house seems far too big for their limitations and with each visit I notice them slipping farther behind. Tucked in the corner behind the recliner is the banjo I gave to him shortly after his gift of the coal dust fiddle to me. He hasn't picked it up since the loops began. There is usually a fiddle laying out on the settee in the front room. "The mandolin is just so handy," he tells me two or three times a week in the same conversation. When I visit, I hear him play without accompaniment. It is ragged music, highly syncopated, the warts and slurs bubble to the surface as he plays notes that only he hears in the crossed wires of his memory. Hard to follow and hard to believe that when we eventually play twin fiddles his harmony is sublime. He almost always starts off with "Rubber Dolly," a novelty song turned fiddle tune that seems to have made itself at home in his memory. But when I suggest a waltz or other slow piece, his playing of the harmony eclipses the loss of his ability to recall the melody. "Midnight on the Water," Tennessee Waltz," and "Kentucky Waltz" are rich and warm with the shared harmonies and fragments of the *before*. It is a gift when we get to play together. He rarely picks up the fiddle anymore, but the mandolin and the loop that keeps him reaching for it bring him peace.

The peace of my sleep is often interrupted by 75 pounds of Plot Hound thumping her 17-inch-long tail against the dresser next to my side of the bed. Half asleep, barely remembering my dreams, we take our morning constitutional down the road past the tumble of rocks that frame the den of the grey fox and her kits. Concerning the route, the walk itself seldom varies. We close

the front door behind us, startle the doe that is snacking on the wildflowers that my wife had such hope for, go down the road, up the hill and finally down to the dam. Of course, there is much to take in. It is a feast for the senses on most days. Both the hound and I have our sacred patches where we choose to pause and be present. I thirst for the first view of our cove as we get to the bottom of the first hill, where often the wind is playfully dancing in the overhanging branches of the trees at the cove's edge. If there is too much activity at the dam, then on our way back home we will linger on the dock in the cove, inhaling the peace of the place beyond the reach of powerboats. For the hound, her sacred patch is contained by the entire walk. She wants to experience everything, meet everyone and take it all in. She lives in hope eternal for what discoveries she might make – even when it's just us, the woods, and the lake.

Before settling in for the night, Joe usually walks two blocks upriver and climbs the stairs to the deck of the Big Four Railroad Bridge, now a pedestrian walkway spanning the Ohio. Joe knows his way across and back again and it has become a sanctuary of sorts for him. On any given night, it is part therapy and part carnival, particularly in the warmer months as the throng of tourists, cyclists, street musicians, and un-homed all meet and mingle on the bridge deck. I worry about that night when he can't find his way back, whether or not someone takes advantage of him, when he loses the ability to tell a stranger where he has come from and where he needs to get back to. So far it is a tightrope that he has managed to balance. The same anonymity of him in that crowd that keeps me up at night also gives him the freedom of observing without interaction. By looking at him you would never know.

I know when it is time to end out weekly phone conversations. For years we would talk while I was on my way to work in the morning. Not long after the loops began, it became clear

that he was best in the evenings. Our calls since have undergone a distillation of their own, rarely more than ten minutes, rarely varying from the same pattern. While I can call him from anywhere, I know that he will either be on his front porch talking to me, or in the living room where the TV's volume bullies all other conversation into the corner. "Well, things are looking pretty good around here." he says, for the third or fourth time. I know it is time and I say my goodbyes. After I hang up, it is the silence of the absence that lingers in the air.

20

From the *before*

A phone call this evening

to Joe Rafferty, informing him

of the passing of Raymond Hicks;

a fellow member of the brotherhood

drawn to the banks and the currents

and the mud and the smells and the sights.

We were all bound by a desire

to leave as much of the world

up on the bank above. And so

we retreated to the river's edge, it

didn't matter much where because

the river always gave what it could.

Raymond's river was the Kentucky,

where he'd been born on a shanty-

boat somewhere up near the river's

mouth. His grandfather, Irish born,

taught Raymond the art of boat building

using only hand spans and finger widths

to create wooden boats well suited

for the commercial fishermen who

could still make a meagre living from

living off of what the river could spare.

Even though the floating fish market

up above Lock Four at Frankfort

was nothing more than a shadow

of a memory by the time

I knew him, Raymond's boats

were prized by those whose living

still depended on them for a

livelihood of apartness.

The Ohio was the shared river

of Joe and I, our stretch a third

of the way down – 603 miles

from the mouth at Pittsburgh

where the Allegheny and Monongahela

flow into each other to form

the river that the Iroquois knew

as “Oyo,”

Great River

and the French simply called

“La Belle Riviere.”

So, Joe and I were hardly the first

to long for what the river could

spare for two more pilgrims seeking

a way of life apart from the noise

and coal dust from a city that once

never stood. From where the river

silently slipped by.

Our confluence began in Frankfort

at the Kentucky Folk Life Festival,

where we three represented the “folkways”

of the river. More truthfully, we were lit

by a sun long setting, shining

on meagre lives whose livelihood would

not be replaced after the last light

teased the shadows’ trailing edge.

But there we were in the golden

light - shantyboaters, commercial

fishermen, boat builders- all

people of the past still living

on the fringe, as best we could.

Raymond's death was hardly

expected, in truth his life path

had lent itself to few expectations

given or sought out. The river gave

us his life in ours, because it could.

"We never did make

our visit." Joes says first,

regretting the not the impossible

but rather the improbable

prospect of visiting a man

with no phone for to give

advance warning.

Trying to find him, years before,

I put in at the mouth

of the Kentucky at Carrolton,

rowing against the current

to the no longer

lockable Lock 1 – hoping to see

on the left descending bank,

Raymond's place on the river.

I knew it was there, and while I

found heaven in that indescribable

place between water and sky,

rowing my own skiff (not one

hewn from Raymond's hands)

I found only

driftwood

and

mud

and I wondered

if he might not be like

the water vole, living tucked

in tight on the river's edge,

the water flowing past his kitchen

window as he figured out how

many board feet he needed

to build the next boat over his first

cup of coffee. To firm up our friendship

I once gave him a photograph

of the old steam towboat "Omar";

a chapter of his that had drifted

into my story. He had served

on her as a deckhand, back in

the day when the scent of coal

dust was carried by water and wind

covering the entire river valley in

shade and soot. He beamed

as he gazed at the black and white

view into the world of his

younger self. He, in turn, gave

me a pair of bronze antique oarlocks,

a wonderfully antiquated gift

from a wonderfully antiquated

man. I guessed them to be older

than his seventy something years.

They carried just a hint of heft

about them and the warmth of

the worn bronze cradled the oars

which lived in the balance

between the hands and the oar blades,

which reached out toward either

shore like the heron’s wings

as it glided long and low just

a kiss above the river mist, hoping

that the river had something

to give.

Sound

30

Bread of Angels

"We…suffer ourselves…to be transported to elysian regions" ~ Samuel Johnson

"A life without music is a life in error" – Anne Sophie Mutter

The Dogwoods are in bloom in Louisville, it's March of 2001, and the Chieftains are waiting for me. The leader of the band, Paddy Maloney, has just called me one stage and I step out in front of a sell-out crowd at the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts and take my seat. Later on, I am told that I just about wore a hole in my brown corduroy slacks as I repeatedly wiped the sweat from my hand. I take stock of mya luck as I sit next to one of the Chieftains' two legendary fiddlers, Martin Fay. It was a friend overhearing a phone conversation with the Chieftains' publicist looking for a button accordion player in Louisville that got me the job. I have gotten the gig not due to any instrumental prowess on my part, but rather because I am the only player of the Irish "box" in town. The Chieftains often invite local musicians to share the stage with them. As such, I also have the pleasure of sharing the stage with the local group of young Irish Step dancers, who will hit the stage like fifty Clydesdales dropped out of a helicopter.

Overall, the pressure of playing with such a group of tight and talented musicians made for an almost traumatic experience. I survived the performance, but just. And yet it remains the summit of my performing career, my avocation occasionally flirted with vocation. While I still

have residual pangs of anxiety when the memories of that night surface, I know that I was among gods, and the memory of *being* in the middle of that sound is still burned into my soul.

But it wasn't the act of sharing the stage that made it divine. The performance was merely the echo of that higher than us; translated and transformed, and yet given. The writer of Psalm 78 understood the audience that night:

"He rained down manna upon them to eat

And gave them grain from heaven.

So mortals ate the bread of angels;

He provided for them food enough"

Those pilgrims in their plush seats were seeking that which could not be found in their own lives, another culture made incarnate on the stage. One could almost smell the peat fire warming the cob house on the windblown west coast of Ireland.

In the Kansas City of my youth, I was eighteen when I first started listening seriously to both classical violin and traditional fiddle music. While I could only appreciate the music on a superficial level, I was aware that the story and music of the instrument was far deeper and complex than I could fathom. I understood that its music moved people in a deep and personal way. I yearned to be affected. I needed to be affected. After the suicide of a friend and the acceptance that my academic apathy had all but ruined my prospects for future stability, I had re-examined my faith and my life. I knew that if I truly believed in God then I knew I needed to be

true to that belief. I knew that if I didn't start living as if it mattered, then the quality of my days would be their own reflection.

So, music came in. It didn't knock, it stormed through the door. Suddenly, with my ears open, I was eaten up with it. It started with the study of the highland bagpipes, and quickly moved on to the piano accordion, and then the mandolin. I found a mountain dulcimer in a dingy pawnshop on the seedy side of town and spent all my spare money on recordings. One of the cassettes worn to the nub in the tape deck of my '85 Chevy Celebrity was *An Irish Evening – The Chieftains live at the Belfast Opera House.*

Kansas City was blessed in those days to have several fine independent record stores. It is a city which has fostered a thriving arts scene for decades. The legendary tenor Luciano Pavarotti gave his American debut there in 1973 at the college I would eventually attend. In my college years, I attended dozens of concerts featuring some of the greatest string players in the world. My friends and I would dress to the nines, take our complimentary box seats and pretend that we deserved it all. One of the greatest nights of my life found four of us in the dark opulence of one of Kansas City's old art deco theaters, enraptured by one of the greatest string quintets of all time. Isaac Stern, Yo-Yo Ma, Jaime Laredo, Sharon Robinson, and Cho-Liang Lin had come together for a six city run of performances. We were close enough to the stage to notice that while the rest of his colleagues wore formal tuxedo shirts, strikingly white, under their jackets, the violin god Isaac Stern performed in what appeared to be a short sleeve button up that could have just as easily come from Sears. Being in such close proximity to these artists and the music was the well from which we drew. And yet, this wasn't simply fan worship, we knew that these musicians had devoted their lives to this art. To be in the midst of it was our world for the taking,

we felt immortal – that it was high art that pulsed through our veins. The record stores were my lifeline to that world when there were no concerts to attend. I drank deep. Driving back and forth from downtown to my college dorm I absorbed *An Irish Evening*, driven with curiosity and wonder of what it must be like to be in the middle of that sound.

I am now 24 years past the performance with The Chieftains in Louisville. I was fortunate to play with them before age and health thinned them out. Three of those I played with that night are now passed, including Martin Fay, the sober looking fiddle god that I sat next to during the performance. On the day of the concert, I arrived for the sound check in late afternoon. I had only scored the gig three weeks before. I had been playing traditional music for over ten years at that point, but I was in no way qualified to play with groups who carried themselves with the weight of their name. But sometimes scarcity, not talent, gets you a seat at the feast.

I found them all to be professional, friendly, and welcoming. Kevin Coneff, their bodran player and singer, called my name when I walked out on stage to meet them at the sound check. There were smiles all around as each one greeted me in turn as I weaved through them to take my chair next to fiddler Martin Fay. They all knew me, it would have seemed, as if for years and me showing up at the sound check was just another joyful reunion in our long friendship. For the two weeks leading up to the concert, the cassette tape of the tunes I was to play with them finally showed up, I had spent about six hours a night learning the tunes on the black Marantz tape recorder set to half speed. We were lucky that the Ohio was in flood for that time of preparation, which meant that as I had night watch duties on the boat I worked on, I had ample time just to sit and learn with my button accordion’s case lying haphazardly open among the tables and chairs

usually taken by tourists when the boat was running in the summer. For two weeks, I watched the dark Ohio roll and boil past the hull at our landing, pausing occasionally to go out and push driftwood past the bow and then going back into the cabin and resuming my practice. I may not have had the experience and talent to play with the Chieftains, but I needed to play at a level that suggested I did once I took the stage with them. Three pieces – a set of Kerry polkas, a slow song in Gaelic, and a fast set of reels. Over and again. Play. Stop the tape player. Rewind. Repeat. Try it without the recording as accompaniment. Over and again.

What warm welcome I felt from the band quickly faded when I took my seat next to Martin. Perhaps it is helpful to remember that my perception of these people was in what I heard, which was augmented by what I *saw*. Martin Fay always looked the most dour of the lot, a grim smile in the press photos. He seemed like a man who didn't suffer bunglers and in that moment that I joined them for the sound check, I felt like the chieftain of bunglers.

The sound checks started stage left to right and by and by each of the instruments in various combinations was brought to life. Flute, then tin whistle, then Paddy Maloney's ethereal Uilleann piping, then on to the fiddles. Right before the sound check came to me, Paddy, Martin, and the Chieftains other fiddler, Sean Keane, played a tune that I would give most anything to recall. There. The pipes joined with the fiddles while the harp and bodran are just a ripple's distance away. That moment. Even sitting to the side, I felt that I was right in the middle of that sound. I have never experienced anything like it in all of my years of playing. There was a richness of tone, a warmth in the music that was transcendent. It was the culmination of the gifts they had been given. In my memory, that is the moment that I choose to recall. Not the nerves, or

the pressure, or the feeling of unsupported isolation as I watched the first half of the concert from the wings.

After my bit was done, I retreated back to the wings, having no real idea how it sounded. But, for some time later, I felt bad for the audience members, because all they got was a Chieftains concert. I, on the other hand, feasted with gods and was left with memories that blessed and burned. A crossroads of the divine and fortunate that was most real before the concert, during the sound check when it was just the music and nothing else.

Martin, in person, was the warmest of the Irish gods I met that night. After the concert, when my first wife and I were leaving through the grey cinderblock of the backstage hallway, on our way back to the car and our ordinary lives, we met Martin. Fiddle case in one hand and cigarette package in the other, he thanked me for playing with them and said I should have sat in with them all night. I'm sure he had given the same line for hundreds of other guest musicians that had played with them throughout the years. But, he had called my bluff early on, being the one who sat next to me and thus most privy to my nerves, my musical warts, my sweaty hands rubbing the plowed fields of my brown corduroys, my not being one of the Chieftains. I jokingly answered back with something along the lines of the refunds that would have needed to be given if I had stayed on stage with them. Martin's countenance changed from light to intense. He looked through me, his eyes intensely meeting mine.

"Don't' be hard on yourself," he said "You didn't just come out of a cave you know. Thank you for playing with us."

His directness was disarming and that one brief interaction was what carried me for years as I struggled with my legitimacy of that gig. That was his gift to me. He retired from the band the year after I played with them and passed away in 2012.

In my memory, I think of him often and am carried back to the sound check and the mournful voice of his fiddle. In it was the lament of the immigrant, of sorrow reaching back to the times of famine. Even in his playing of spirited reels and jigs, the sorrow was ever present beneath the joy. How one instrument could evoke such strong memories and emotions is something that I have spent the past thirty years seeking. Long before my three decades of playing, this instrument known as either the *violin* or the *fiddle* has embodied the best of the human artistic soul and has survived the worst of humanity.

I was twenty-one the first time I held a violin. For close to two years prior, every Tuesday night would find me in the basement den of S. L. Berry. My crush on his daughter had been superseded by my discovery that he was fiddler and could sing old Johnny Cash songs convincingly. A painfully shy man, he was nevertheless the emcee for a band who played every Friday night on the town square in Smithville, north of Kansas City. The first time I saw them play one simmering summer night I must have been the only one under the age of sixty in the audience. I was startled when he called me out from the stage and offered me the use of any of their spare instruments if I wanted to come up and "give the folks a tune." I never wanted to play music so bad in my life.

While I couldn't play anything offered that night, within a week I had found a mandolin in a pawn shop. The following Friday night found me on stage in the back of the band, trying not

to stand out but still savoring the sensation of being *in* the music. S.L. and I started getting together the following Tuesday.

In the two years leading up to him handing his violin to me, we spent those evenings in a married mixture of music. He shared his songs from his rural childhood and they met the Irish and Scottish tunes that I knew. His solid guitar and fiddle offered stability to my jagged accordion and mandolin playing. The gap in our relative skill levels didn't matter, we were *in* the music and that was everything.

The strings on the mandolin are tuned the same as the violin and so, in theory, it should be relatively easy to move from one to the other. When S. L. offered his fiddle for me to try that night, I started down a path of which I hope to never reach the end. There is so much to take in.

First, there is the physical beauty of the instrument itself. It is an enticing combination of curves and arches, graceful lines slipping into contours. It is a feast for the eye as one follows the form from top to bottom. The grain on the wood itself is often highly figured, standing out and bringing attention to itself like an older woman whose confidence in her beauty refuses to fade. And finally, the varnish, whose shades can color the violin from a honeyed blond to an almost coal dust black. All of these facets come together in a harmony of wood; beguiling and entrancing. Years later, in Oxford, I saw over twenty instruments by the great makers of Cremona, Italy. In the world of stringed instruments these makers' names are sacred, full of the myth and mystery that the violin evokes: Antonio Stradivari, Nicolo Amati, and Giuseppe Guarneri "del Gesu (of Jesus)". I was almost moved to tears by the three-dimensional beauty of these Cremonese violins, violas, and cellos. Their bodies seemed more sculpted than carved; truly one of the great art forms of the late Renaissance.

Within a year of my first attempt to play S.L.'s fiddle, I was accepted into William Jewell College's music program. While I may have had the passion, I did not possess the years of dedication my colleagues had. It mattered not to me that I was underqualified, however, because I now found myself in like-minded company. I was surrounded by students and professors who had immersed themselves in this elysian world of art. Every morsel offered to me was ravenously consumed. Not the least of which was my opportunity to have a violin lent to me for the purpose of study.

Before I go on, I offer up some considerations and some context. As the years have gone by I have played with or heard many other musicians in vignettes. Some have been as ordinary as exchanging tunes on a porch and some as sublime as being in the middle of a symphony orchestra. I have wrestled with what it is that drives musicians to be *within* the music. That is to say; where is the point in the journey that causes some to be dissatisfied with listening only? Is their only recourse to take up an instrument or are they resigned to the "someday…", or "if I only had the time…"? For me, I could not resist the siren song, so I cannot offer an objective point of view.

The other consideration asks what is it about the violin that seems to inspire such passion in its players and admirers? I am not the first passionate amateur to have fallen in love with it, and I am in good company: Henri Rousseau, Louis Farrakhan, Charlie Chaplin, and Albert Einstein, among many others. Beyond the lyrical tone, which takes years of practice to achieve, does the inherent physical contact play a part? Unlike many other instruments where there may only be two or three points of contact, the violin demands a complexity of touch, balance, and pressure.

Playing the violin demands commitment from many parts of the body and, like a dancer of the tango, it is the bold sensuality and confidence that the artist must bring to the dance every time they lift the instrument to play. The most overt example of this in the string world is the cello. There is film footage of the late Jaqueline Du Pre in 1968 performing Edward Elgar's Cello Concerto. The cello is not merely held between her legs, but it leans back in her chest as leans forward into it, her head a breath away from the fingerboard and scroll. She can't seem to get close enough and her passionate playing, leaning in and then away, staring at her hand as she coaxes the tone and then looking away as she soaks in the sound she had released seems so intimate that watching her at one with the cello almost makes one blush. And yet, as sensual as it is, it is beyond mere eroticism. It is the divine connection that we all seek in one form or another.

As children, many of us sought out the act of being hugged and were free in our giving of them. We needed that physical contact because it gave us assurance that we were recipients of love. Perhaps it is the difference between receiving an embrace and simply hearing "I love you." My wife loves to lay her head on my chest and listen to my heart, it is the pulse that reminds her that I am there and that it is hers. The violin is like a living thing because it has evolved with that connection between player and instrument since its earliest days. I once saw the inspired violinist, Anne Sophie Mutter, perform in a strapless gown, with nothing between her and the violin; her Stradivarius kissing her bare shoulder. It was an open display of sensuality that was disarming yet passionate, intimate yet shared.

The voice of the violin is the result of a chain reaction that culminates in high art. While it may seem less poetic to explore the source of that voice from a mechanical point of view, it shines light on a crucial point. It shows that the desire for that connection between player and

instrument was evident from the beginning. The violin's voice is rooted in the very life blood of the trees that it comes from. It begins when the cake of rosin, about the size of a small lump of coal, is rubbed on the horse hair fibers on the bow. Made from the sap of pine and other coniferous trees, the flakes of rosin that impregnate themselves in the horsehair provide *grip.* Without that grip, when the bow hair skates across the string, there is not enough friction to get the string to vibrate – and vibration begets art.

When the drawing of the bow causes the string to vibrate, those vibrations are transferred to the bridge, a single standing piece of maple whose resemblance to the Bridge of Sighs in Venice foreshadows the fate for hearers of beginning players. While the tall, narrow bridge does support the strings as well as lend to the perception of fragility, its purpose lies in the transfer of those vibrations from the strings to the top of the violin. Also known as the *table,* the top is generally made from pine or spruce. These coniferous trees grow fast and as a result their cells and tree rings tend to be spread out more than their slower growing cousins such as oak, walnut and, for our interest, maple. In almost every violin, the table tends to be made of a softwood (so called, because the more open cell structure reduces its density) and the *bottom plate,* or the back, is almost always maple. That hardwood species provides a stiff sounding board for the vibrations to resonate off of.

In fact, the greatest of all violin makers, Antonio Stradivari would tap the pieces of wood before he ever started, listening for what tone or pitch the wood naturally sounded. He would pair pieces that were roughly a semitone apart. This is the equivalent of sounding a white key and then the black key above it on a piano keyboard. It is a dissonance that creates harmony once the instrument is completed, a tension resolved.

Once the vibrations are transferred to the table via the bridge, they then make their way to the back via a thin pine dowel wedged vertically between the table and the back. Without the *soundpost* connecting the table and back, the vibrations die away, but, once joined, those two star-crossed wooden lovers, from different backgrounds and hometowns, create a sound so lyrical, so pure, that it once caused Albert Einstein exclaim "Now I know there is a God in heaven."

To put it less poetically, at its most simple the violin is basically a vibrating box of air. And yet in the 16th century, this vibrating box of air was already evolving into an instrument that, by the early 18th century, had achieved a pinnacle of acoustic mastery. To keep the instrument's voice equal in volume and projection from the lowest strings to the highest, a long narrow piece of pine was glued to the underside of the table on the bass side of the instrument. Known as a *bass bar*, it served to deaden the vibrations on that side of the violin to keep it from overpowering the treble strings.

At this point, the violin differs little from its more stoic predecessors. While the ability of the violin to speak is dependent on the transfer of vibrations, the singing voice, its *dolce voce*, is a result of graduating the wood. Otherwise, with both table and back maintaining a uniform thickness, the resulting sound is dull, lacking in depth or tone color. Parts of the table are thinned out and thus compliment the sections of the back which have also been thinned. A little bit here, a little bit there. The undersides of these pieces resemble, like Frederick Law Olmstead's vision of what a city park should look like, an undulating landscape. These graduations foretell of the strength of the marriage of table and back singing in harmony. It is the difference between speaking in monotone and using all the subtleties of your voice to seduce, enchant, and soothe.

Perhaps one reason why many fall under the spell of violin collecting is the individuality of each instrument's voice. Even those made from the same wood and the same maker are distinct, although related. Modern luthiers today use audio strobe technology, ultra violet lights, and other technological aids to try and replicate art created by craftsmen in the late Renaissance who had nothing to go on save the violin they had just finished. It is remarkable that their work may rarely be equaled, but never surpassed.

The pinnacle of the violin maker's art is like a temple to visual beauty, sensory pleasure, and lyric voice. This is why collectors pay in the millions for these instruments. This is also why they lend them to artists who could not afford them otherwise. The sole appreciation of the violin's form isn't enough to bring it to life. The other two aspects are only awakened when the instrument is lifted to the shoulder and the bow drawn.

Even my loaned student instrument had elements of the divine. It was probably made in a West German shop sometimes during the Cold War. In that shop environment, no instrument was completed by a single craftsman, but rather the work was parsed out as different workers bore responsibility for a single part, which were then assembled. Even these "factory fiddles" or "shop fiddles" were modeled after the great Cremonese instruments. In my first year, I took great pride in the fact that I played without a shoulder rest, a device that supports the violin's back to raise it up enough that one doesn't have to crook their neck to hold it in place on their shoulder. My pride was based on the association that true traditional fiddlers did not use the rest. My resistance to it was one more way for me to place myself in the long, storied history of the instrument and its players.

Fortunately for me, my violin teacher understood that I had taken up the instrument much too late in life. I would never accomplish much as a strictly classical player. She was a smart, fiercely funny woman who saw the folly of yet another young romantic college student falling under the spell of the violin. She fed me what morsels she could. She brought me articles from the string playing world and put me on a steady diet of Baroque music, her logic being that traditional fiddle music borrowed from that genre.

I checked out every book on the history of the violin that I could find. I read about famous players. I was a regular at the Salvation Army Bookstore downtown where I would pick up dog-eared scores of string trios, quartets, and symphonies. They were all far too difficult for my meagre talents, but by possessing them there was always the hope of someday crossing the threshold where they would share their secrets with me. I, then, would be privy to noble and high music, given as part of my inheritance for simply being a member of the human race. As a solo player, even after thirty years of playing, have I rarely been so blessed. But as both a player and a listener, I have walked the halls, sat at the banquet table and laughed with the divine that gave us such gifts. That terrifying night with the Chieftains being one such occasion.

My career as a burgeoning violin student took a turn the following year when my first instructor moved to Chicago and was replaced by a younger, aspiring professional violinist. While I didn't remain long in her studio, I am still taken back to the memory of her debut performance with the Liberty Symphony Orchestra, of which I was solidly anchoring the bottom end of the third violin section. Her performance of Ralph Vaughn Williams' "The Lark Ascending" was sublime; it was the divine made manifest in a Kansas City suburb. And I was there to bear witness to it.

In the thirty-two years since that performance, my love affair with the violin has never abated. What I could never achieve as an artist I achieved by being just good enough and in the right company. To be in the middle of an orchestra as Dvorak's New World Symphony pours out all around you in pure luminescence. To hear the national pride tinged with sorrow in Smetna's paean to his homeland and the Moldeau River running through it to the sea. To share a plastic bottle of "Old Forester" bourbon with Billy Don Stamper and other old fiddlers in a house party in central Kentucky as Billy Don plays you a haunting tune he composed. To have been part of all these things is to have been blessed enough to bear witness to the divine.

It is the summer of 2022 and it lies in its case with the half-light streaming through the window, accenting its contours like the Flint Hills in the late afternoon. I had bought the case from Gary Cornett years ago, when my knowledge of traditional fiddle music and regional styles had brought me to the attention of the university I worked at. It is far fancier than anything I truly needed. It exudes pure style and class; burled wood veneer inlaid in plush green/grey velvet with a black leather exterior. It makes me think of the kind of case an owner of a vintage Jaguar E Model might possess. My reasoning in its purchase was that a nice case with an 18th century violin would carry me past any negative cultural connotations as simply being a "fiddler." I needed the music faculty to take me seriously. One of the bespoke extras that came with it was the hand sewn blanket to rest between the violin and the interior of the lid. In a rich pallet of blues, greens, salmon, and silver, the baroque pattern is striking with its black and gold braiding. The blanket suggests that whatever lies beneath it is a work of art. I still own the violin from 1797 that originally slept in that case, although its age proved more alluring than its tone. Over the years I have owned a baker's dozen or so fiddles, some better than others. They all have

spoken to me, in one way or another. Some of them have taken me to the divine. The violin in the case, made by Paul Freidel in 1912 is one of them.

The wall next to the stairs that led down to Gary Cornett's Louisville basement was covered with photos of the musicians whose instruments he has repaired or restored. For years, in his basement temple of violin repair and study, he took me under his wing and taught me the regional repertory of Lewis County, Kentucky. I had been playing for about twelve years by now and had moved beyond the stage of not knowing what I didn't know. It was Gary who offered his gift of time and talent. He also sold me, at a fraction of what it was worth, my first decent violin. It was made by Eduard Reichert in 1896 and its highly figured back was so scratched it looked as if it had been dragged behind a truck. He sold it to me, I think partly to prevent me from asking him to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear out of every mediocre fiddle I would bring him. It was shortly after asking me whether I thought I would ever own anything but "piece of shit fiddles" that he brought out the Reichert and made sure it found a home with me. His violin was the aforementioned Freidel, who was in his middle years when he made this violin during the War to end all Wars. With hardly a blemish on it, it was a joy to behold and like heaven to hear. That fiddle sings back to me in the field recordings I made of those lessons all those years ago.

Gary finally reached an age and a chapter where his life no longer included playing. The Freidel he sold to his best friend John Harrod, who kept it because of *what it was* by nature of *whose it was*. Many of us fiddlers, classical or otherwise, tend to be purposeful in our disbursements. It is an act of hoping some of that "bread of angels" still lingers, wrapped around the sound post or tucked under the bass bar. For John, it was important that it remain "in the

family" and so he made a generous trade with me so that I find might find nourishment. In the almost five hundred years since the golden age of violin making, technological advances have ensured that we know how the violin sings in the same way that we understand the DNA patterns that determine when we pick up a violin if we will be a god or a pilgrim. But while we may have knowledge, our understanding of music and its hold on us is on more shaky ground. To understand that is to accept that it cannot be understood, it just is. The mana that is given. Whether we deserve it or not is immaterial, the point is whether or not we recognize it. These days recognition may come more easily, but it is never any less sacred. I get up, go to the case, and take out the rosin.

"It's the best you've ever heard"

By the fall of 2022, Kentucky fiddler John Harrod started referring to them as the "Ohio Fiddle Mafia." He had been watching their comings and goings for a decade. The "Ohio Fiddle Mafia" is composed of five fiddlers, with others who drift in and out. In this game of fiddle acquisition the same 80 or so fiddles are constantly traded between them from one side of the Ohio River to the other. This fiddle trading enterprise runs from central to Southern Ohio, down into northeast Kentucky, next door into West Virginia and back again. It's a dance of sorts. In theory, a single fiddle might pass through the hands of any one member 3 or 4 times in as many years. I may be only an occasional member, but I am well familiar with the ways of the dance.

Tony Ellis, widely regarded as one of the best fiddle set-up men in the Ohio Valley and one of the most respected artists of the banjo, usually has 30-40 fiddles living in his fiddle shop. While not a commercial venture per se, it ensures that a goodly amount of fiddles drift in and out and eventually find the right owner. He has a keen sense of tone and is an expert on many of the second and third-tier fiddle makers whose work occasionally graces the top end of his inventory. It's hardly what you'd expect in Circleville, Ohio where the Scioto River meanders to the south.

Bobby Taylor is a living legend in the traditional arts of West Virginia. A protégé of the renowned West (by God!) Virginia fiddler Clark Kessinger, he has dedicated his life to the passing on of fiddle traditions and other folkways of the Kanawha River Valley. Bobby *knows* people, those folks who work in the hallowed halls of the highest levels of cultural preservation such as the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress. He has seen and played violins by

Stradivari, Amati, and Guarneri. Rumor has it that he has owned some absolute gems of fiddles. He is always on the hunt.

Johnny Staats, one of most sought-after mandolin players in the upper Ohio Valley is always on the move. Even though he calls Parkersburg home, he plays extensively on both sides of the river and drives a UPS truck for a living. He takes his mandolin on his truck and is not above taking a long lunch to pick tunes with someone on his route. As a hired gun musician, he often will play fiddle in addition to mandolin, meeting the band's needs. Johnny is not one to collect fiddles per se, but he has rarely met a fiddle he didn't like or have hopes of owning.

Stevie Parsons is a fiddle repairman down in Portsmouth where the Scioto River empties into the Ohio. From the early 1800's until World War II, Portsmouth was a major river town, a confluence of culture and commerce. Roger Cooper, another occasional member, told me that in the early twentieth century sheet music arrived by steamboat in Portsmouth once a week. There, a piano player sigh-read the music in the town's gazebo and the local fiddlers would gather round to learn the tunes by ear. Even though Portsmouth was the hometown of the great African American jazz violinist Stuff Smith, none of the fiddle-centric culture remains. Which is unfortunate for Stevie. His fiddle playing customers are farther afield. Nonetheless, Stevie is a self-taught artist of repair and restoration, and he has made a living in the most hardscrabble of ways. Many of the fiddles which are now traded between the five, were brought into the fold from Stevie's trading and God-given gift to bring fiddles back from the dead. One never knows what he will turn up.

Charlie Wilcoxen may be the unlikely kingpin (or at least lynchpin) of the whole operation. He is not a performer, nor has he made a living by either playing the fiddle or dealing

in them. He is a true *amateur* who simply loves the fiddle. His father played old time fiddler and taught him some tunes. As a kid, he took classical violin lessons, just enough to give him a grounding. When I first met him, he had already amassed a collection of forty or so fiddles. Most of them were of the mail order variety from the turn of the last century, made by the thousands in factories throughout Germany and France. But he has cultivated an eye for form, an ear for tone, and the unbiased view that all fiddles have something to offer. Over the years, he has traded up in quality and now has close to ninety good fiddles hanging in racks in the basement of his modest ranch house on the quiet upriver side of Marietta, Ohio. Charlie is the only one who has made it to Cremona, Italy, where the art of violin making remains unsurpassed.

Love of the fiddle is the one thread that connects them all. Every new fiddle that drifts in is "the best fiddle you every heard in your life, buddy," often followed by "So and So's having a dying duck fit to see that fiddle!" For every one fiddle that comes, there are at least three suitors from the group. The others watch from a distance, curious but not committed. There are always more of the best fiddles you ever heard coming through. Sometimes it's cash that drives the commerce, but more often than not it is the art of the trade that moves these fiddles from one side of the Ohio and back again. Trading three fiddles for one. Making an even swap. Occasionally letting go of a prized fiddle for the promise of the newly found – knowing full well that the likelihood is good that a trade down the road will get the prized fiddle back in your pocession, never to leave you again. Until you hear of this fiddle that Stevie just found and buddy, it will just stand up and sing, it's that good.

One memorable weekend, about eight years ago, I visited Tony and Charlie and played more fiddles than I thought I ever would. Tony's fiddle shop is attached to the garage connected

by breezeway to the green shuttered house his wife Louis grew up in. The worn, canal town of Circleville lies just to the south. The house, garage, and fiddle shop look like they have always been there, both aged and in the present simultaneously. The fiddle shop itself is relatively small, made smaller in feeling by the three fiddle racks, two running along the back of the shop and one rounding the corner. In addition, there are fiddle cases under the table on which two or so boxes of cd rest. Banjos in cases nap between the table and the front wall. Two "been through the wars" chaplain's pump organs have somehow found room around the table. Concert posters bear testament to his storied career. The fiddle racks also serve as a ledge of sorts, the tops are lined with framed photos of his friends, his mentors, his times gone past – lest we forget. On this particular visit, every slot in the racks was taken up and there was another dozen or so fiddle in cases, all waiting to be played. I arrived on a Friday night and had not been there for more than half an hour when Tony invited me out to the shop. We knew we were visiting Charlie the next morning. There were plenty of fiddles to be played before I headed back to Missouri on Sunday.

It is remarkable how each fiddle sings in its own unique voice. Once, Tony had thirteen fiddles made by the same Cleveland maker, Benedict Dvorak. Even though a number of them were all made from the same slab of maple, they all had their own unique sound colors. I had bought one of the last ones that he had made, it had never really been played and I wanted to experience the joy of "playing in" a fiddle, where the molecules in the wood will shift with the vibrations and will settle into the frequencies of the fiddle in tune. One of the reasons old violins are desirable is that the wood has shaped itself in response to decades of sonic vibration. It the instrument has been kept in tune, the result is a rich tone, a tone that Tony and the others would

refer to as an “Old World” tone. There are many other factors that determine how good a fiddle will sound, but two centuries of vibrating in harmony can make even a lesser fiddle sing deeper.

So, on that Friday evening, I think we started with the fiddles in the cases. He had some absolute gems on this visit. The vast majority of fiddles he usually has are German first, French second, and then other European and American instruments. Most hover around a mid-1800s date, although having fiddles from the 1700’s is not uncommon. That evening, I must have played about twenty or so fiddles. That night their voices still echoed as I slept. The next morning Tony made a farmhouse breakfast of country ham, homemade biscuits, and sausage gravy while I played one of the fiddles he had brought in from the fiddle shop. Breaking the fast is always a celebrated office of the day at Tony’s, but today we needed the calories. There were many more fiddles to play before I would sleep that night.

Before setting out to Charlie’s, another two dozen fiddles are taken down from their racks, carefully considered, and come to life as the bow is drawn across the strings. So much can be learned from that first bow stroke over the open strings. Immediately you know if the fiddle has a great low end, which is to say it will really sing in the lower pitched strings, a great high end, or it is even-toned top to bottom. I have a fairly large repertory of tunes, in a pinch I could call up close to two hundred. Whenever I pull one of the fiddles off the rack, I try to pick a tune that will complement that fiddle’s character. It is a great joy to pull out the strength of that particular luthier’s work. I worked hard, massaging the best out of each fiddle.

By the time we left for Charlie’s in the late morning, some forty-four fiddles had been under my bow. Circleville is at the crossroads of open, flat, farm country to the west and the Pickaway Hills to the east. To get to Marietta and Charlie’s fiddle haven is a journey into

southeast Ohio where, soon after leaving Circleville in the rear-view mirror, you are soon embraced by the rolling hills which still echo the prehistory long before any settlers arrived. Even if you don't know your history, it feels *old*. It is two and a half hours or five hundred years to get to Charlie's, depending on whether or not you are paying attention.

Charlie lives in a red brick ranch built in the '70s, and we parked in the narrow drive, had hellos and handshakes and wasted no time heading down to the basement, where the bevy of Charlie's fiddles live. It is an unfinished basement. The furnace and water heater perform their service in one corner, the washer and dryer almost adjacent. There are boxes of the past too dear to part with scattered around. Chairs that need repair and chairs that are fine to sit on. A treadmill off to one side. It could be a basement found anywhere in Woody Guthrie's "This land was made for you and me," except…

There are four long racks, made on the same model as Tony's. The fiddles, dozens of them, hang like bats in the half light of the basement. In a sense, it is a bit like looking at a Monet, only it is a canvas of fiddles. But as you move in closer and your eyes and mind adjust from the comprehension of a ton of fiddles hanging on racks, individual aspects come into focus, the brush strokes on this canvas of fiddles. Scrolls come into focus, alike and unlike their neighbor, the f holes, the thickness of the bodies, the way the light (what there is of it) is reflecting off of the finish, the curve of the upper and lower bouts fading into the shadows.

Charlie beamed as he took each one down and handed it to me, giving me what he knew of its provenance and the story of how it came to him. On this weekend, most of what he had were "mail order" fiddles, instruments that could have been ordered though the Sears or

Montgomery Ward catalogs anywhere from the 1880s up through the 1930s, ones churned out by German and French factories.

In the coming years Charlie would continue to trade "up" and by the time John started referring to them all as the Ohio Fiddle Mafia, most of Charlie's menagerie had higher pedigrees and more varied back stories, such as the Japanese fiddle that Charlie got from Tony. It arrived with a knock at Tony's door from a lady who didn't play but had a fiddle case in hand. She told him that her parents were Jews and that this fiddle was with them as they endured the horrors of the holocaust. She didn't volunteer any more information, but it was important to her that it found a home. She gave it to him and left him with the fiddle and the few fragments of its story. The stories are important. They are the bridge between the fiddle and the ghosts. That Saturday afternoon I played another eighty-eight fiddles. I sought the best in each, mindful of their stories that might only exist amidst the dust and cobwebs.

You often will hear any of the members remark about one another "Old So and So's got the sickness bad," to which the other will reply "Yeah, and no one's looking for the cure!" To an outsider it seems to be, as Tony often says, "just a bunch of Hillbillies swapping fiddles," and yet the musical and historical literacy that each member possesses is formidable.

We are hardly the first to be enchanted by this instrument. Each visit I make with Tony starts with the walk through the covered breezeway to the fiddle shop where, from right to left, I take each fiddle down off the rack. I listen to Tony's appraisal of its qualities and then draw the bow across the strings. We're both listening to its voice, pulling out the echoes of its past in its tone. "What could this fiddle tell us?" is a common refrain from each member as they bow the strings, always eager for fiddles yet unheard, always lamenting the loss of voice in a fiddle

traded away. The dark, woody sound of the German made Russian 18th century fiddle. The richness of the low G string on the unmarked fiddle (probably German) that favored the fiddle music of Scotland. The singing E string on the Jérôme Thibouville-Lamy French fiddle that absolutely *sang* on Roger Cooper's tunes from northeast Kentucky. It's what drives the bartering from one side of the river to the other.

"Fiddleosophy"

In Memory of Darley Horatius Fulks – 1895-1990

I will open my mouth in a parable,

I will declare the mysteries of ancient times. ~ Psalm 78: vs 2

It must have been in 2004 or 2005, the first time I attended Bruce's party, held in the old neighborhood of North Frankfort, nestled under the ridge which descends hurriedly to the Kentucky River. I remember that by then I had my 1896 fiddle made by Eduard Reichart, and that John Harrod had recently acquired a Reichart as well – his made in 1911 and stained with the dark red finish that mine had. Though his fiddle was 15 years younger than mine, their backs were carved from the same slab of figured Maple. In the din of the party, we found a corner where we could play and revel in the similarity of their voices.

It was a St. Patrick's Day party, of sorts. Bruce was a retired attorney from Frankfort who loved to throw a lively party where the focus was on old-time music. It had been going for years, and it had gained the reputation that if you wanted to hear some of the best and "authentic" fiddlers and banjo players in Kentucky, you made sure you were there. It was a melting pot of fiddlers, banjo players, academics, students, old hippies, burgoo, young hippies, corn beef, and bourbon.

The house wasn't large and was typical of the working-class homes built sometimes in the late twenties or early thirties, when the flood of '37 likely put water up to the eves. A hollowed-out tree of some indeterminate species greeted you as you parked on the street and wandered up past all the other houses with similar back stories.

Just like the dances that were held in that part of Kentucky two hundred years before, the furniture was moved out of the living room. Folding chairs were brought in and placed in a circle for the "musicianeers," as the old timers would have called us. The living room was sacred because the music was sacred, and the music was sacred because the stories and lives intertwined with it were sacred. The fiddle tunes, at times both joyous and lonesome, were not the soundtrack to the party, they were a testament. A testament to lost times and fiddlers long past.

The tunes offered up largely depended on who was in the circle at any given time. The party was often like a lumbering entity, with some people hopping on and others headed out. Oftentimes it was Billy Don Stamper and Earl Thomas Jr. who anchored the folding chair fringed circle of tradition. They came up from Estill County, a few counties to the south, and played their repertory unique to central Kentucky. Billy Don was a small man, balding and bearded. His playing, like his manner, was often honest and earnest. He had written some fiddle tunes as well, and upon hearing them you would think that they had been around forever, as I thought he had.

His long-time playing partner, Earl, had the best timing of a banjo player that I ever heard. You could set his banjo like a metronome if you were playing a dance. I always knew him to wear a baseball cap and, although bearded like Billy Don, he would look at you with a crooked smile that would almost make you think he had just lifted your wallet. John Harrod was also there, and in later years I took Joe. We were welcome and to the non-musician party goers

we were revered. Bruce made sure that everyone knew that this annual party was a moment in time, and that the gifts of music and memories were not taken for granted.

So, I took my place in the circle, pleased that I was part of this chapter. I played the tunes of theirs I knew. I learned the ones I didn't. After a few years, walking past that hollow tree through the front door, I settled into the circle knowing that I was part of this testimony. I played Billy Don's tune "Israel Gap" for him after learning it the year before from him. He beamed. We played "Old Aunt Jenny with her night cap on," "Hawk's got a chicken and gone," "Red Lick," and the national anthem of Kentucky fiddle tunes "Martha Campbell." We shared swigs of "Old Forester" bourbon from a plastic bottle. We shared tunes. We knew what a gift of time it was. I don't know that when I started my apprenticeship a few years earlier, that I ever would have felt so much like I was home.

My apprenticeship started somewhat reluctantly; there was never a true beginning, nothing agreed upon, and it never has quite ended although Gary and I have not seen each other in years. One Kentucky evening, after about a year into our friendship, he asked if I wanted to record a particular Lewis County tune that we had just played. I told him that I thought I had it down good enough on the banjo and could live without recording it. "I just thought you might want to record it in case you ever wanted to learn it on the fiddle," he replied. That was as formal as the invitation got, and I immediately recognized that Gary was offering to share with me what had been shared with him. I understood that I was being welcomed into a community.

And yet some chapters end. When I left Kentucky in the summer of '07, I knew my relationship with all of the fiddlers who had shaped me was forever changed. Lamentation and loss made up the landscape of the first several years of my life in St. Louis. Kentucky's rolling

hills and river valleys like a crazy quilt tapestry were replaced by a gridlocked metropolis that was both everywhere and nowhere at once. There was music all around, but it was not mine. There were truly good and lovely people in the St. Louis old-time music community, but I was not theirs. I was no longer part of a living tradition. As time moved forward and the distance took its toll, I slowly lost my repertory of Kentucky tunes.

What is it to be part of a living musical tradition, in which much of the repertory comes from an oral tradition that stretches back generations? Beyond the healthy romanticism that is often the hallmark of a new fiddler, there is the dawning knowledge of belonging to something that can't fully be comprehended. And yet, in the striving towards comprehension, is the realization that you are part of a community. Focus in tighter still, and you can see the links of the chain that each individual member of that community embodies. Finally, you see yourself as one link, connected on one side by those whose tunes, techniques, and character make up your DNA, and on the other by your living contemporaries. The beginning of the chain is lost in the dim light of the past, and likewise you can't see the links that follow you. But there it is, and you are there, bound and forged in the middle of it all.

The culmination is a recognition of the debt and fidelity to those who have poured into us. John Harrod is one of many gifts I've been given in this journey through old-time music. John is thin with active eyes that are always taking everything in. His head is almost always bedecked in a baseball cap – themselves a rotating exhibit of places, causes, and organizations he supports – the venerable repository of Appalachian culture of Appalshop in Whiteberg, The Pine Mountain Settlement School, the Cowan Creek Traditional Music School, and many others. Places that doggedly hang on to and promote living traditions. If Wendell Berry's statement

"What I stand for is what I stand on…" applies to anyone else, it is surely John and his love for Kentucky, its history, its arts, and its people. He has learned and he has taught. He has seen and he has testified.

I have considered my role in this tradition for close to thirty years now, and I find that my internal questions are rarely answered. How is that I, as a product of a Midwestern middle class suburban upbringing, should be a recipient of a rich musical heritage seven rivers and several hundred miles away in the misty rolling hills of the East? What am I to do with what I have been given? Each unanswered question leads me a little further down the path, though. I am unsure that there are any true answers. Perhaps the recognition of a gift is enough. For decades, John has also shared that introspection, and so I wanted to look closer at his life in relationship to this music to see if it could deepen my understanding of what it means to be part of this.

Our friendship has spanned the course of almost three decades, two divorces, the expected as well as unexpected death of fiddlers we knew, the trading of fiddles, hours of shared tunes, and much "fiddlosophy," a term John coined encompassing any deep talk of fiddles, tunes, or the relationship of ourselves within this tradition and community. To an outsider, the concept is hopelessly out of touch with the modern world, the fiddle an anachronism for an earlier, less elevated time. Just two nights ago, I had a classical violinist tell me the relationship between the fiddle and the violin could be summed up in the phrase: "A fiddle is a violin that never went to college." That narrow view flies in contrast to the lives of many of the fiddlers I have known; artists with talents far beyond technical prowess with bow and fiddle, true individualists regardless of background or education.

It is the summer of ’22, and I’ve driven out to the edge of the Cumberland Plateau at Sewanee, Tennessee, where the isolation, the sights of hawks on the wing, and the sweeping views of the valley a thousand feet below ironically provide me with the only cell service my carrier provides. There is a stillness on the plateau’s edge, and the warm smell of manure from the farms below works its way up to me as twilight illuminates the valley. John and I are deep in conversation about his relationship with Darley Fulks, a fiddler who was already old when John met him in 1976. John is now approaching the age Darley was when they met, thus much of our conversation weaves in and out of the relationship between life’s progression and the unexpected gifts that we occasionally receive. “We found each other,” John Harrod told me, speaking of Darley.

Wolfe County, Kentucky is marked by rugged hill country as the Appalachian Mountains stretch their fingers to the west, eventually ending up in the rolling hills of the bluegrass region of the state. John was 30 years old when he and Darley met. Darley was 81 and lived with his wife Mabel just outside of Campton, the county seat. John had just moved to the area from Monterey, up in Owen County in the Kentucky River valley. John had been fiddling for a couple of years at that point and taken up a friendship with Bill Livers, an African American fiddler also from Owen County. Bill was a natural entertainer, and John was part of the “Progress Red Hot String Band” who played around the state with him. In 1976, John accepted the position of Wolfe County’s “Folk Artist in the Schools” and left Monterey behind. But he still performed with Bill and brought him down one hot summer’s evening to play on the courthouse square at Campton. “It was a pretty cold reception,” John told me. “You see, there were no black folks who lived in Wolfe County.”

Despite the common perception among amateur folklorists that the music of Kentucky is mostly derived from the Scots-Irish, the reality is much more complex and, from a nineteenth century mindset, cosmopolitan. After Kentucky opened up for settlement in 1775, migrants of all types poured into the region, trying to make a life. Lexington became an "elevated" community on the frontier. There was an influx of professional teachers, many from Europe, of the violin and other instruments. By the early to mid-1800's, a sizable population of Kentucky was made up of the enslaved. All of these people groups brought, taught, and shared their music. The soundtrack of 19th century Kentucky was burgoo of Scots, French, Irish, African and German - black and white musical traditions intermarrying and propagating. While the mountain regions of eastern Kentucky experienced the least amount of interaction with African Americans, the more agriculturally rich region of central Kentucky, more dependent on enslaved labor, brought more musical exchanges between black and white. After the civil War, the African American imprint on this music would spread to urban communities, such as Louisville, as former slaves sought work. Louisville would become home to a thriving jug band tradition, distinct from its blues-driven musical sister of Memphis in the upbeat peppering of rhythm and melodic snatches indicative of those central Kentucky black fiddle traditions. The old and the new, the rural and the cosmopolitan. Bill Livers was begotten from this musical sophistication.

Dusk was settling in on the worn courthouse steps as this unlikely band of young white hippies and their charismatic black leader played to an audience who regarded them with a mixture of suspicion and dislike. As they finished, one older white man, his old buttoned up shirt stained from years of dragging oil rigs around, matching work pants, and an old beat up ball cap, came out of the crowd and went straight towards Bill. This was the one man in the crowd who

had to show Bill his appreciation for his talents and his understanding of the complex marriage of black and white that made up the fiddle music of central Kentucky. John was taken aback by this bold show of appreciation and respect. This was John's introduction to Darley Fulks.

Still deep in my conversation with John, the evening's light is throwing shades of pink and yellow on the clouds at the plateau's edge as I scramble to keep up my hastily scribbled notes, page after page of my indecipherable shorthand which will have to be testament enough. "He was my god for that time of life." Our conversation, while on the surface exploring the relationship with one fiddler passing on the tradition to a younger player, keeps going back to the spiritual. "He possessed a nobility of soul," John continues, his voice warming as he goes back to those days.

In the old black and white photographs from John's time with Darley, any modern perception of nobility is elusive. Darley and Mabel's house is not much more than a shack, the long front porch littered with galvanized feed buckets and the odd hound or two. The yard is pockmarked with piles of old drilling equipment, echoes of his professional days in the oil industry. The two oxen that hauled the equipment all around that country still live on the property, Darley's love for them so great that they are kept as pets in their retirement years. Despite the physical appearance of the place, *affection* and *attention* speak to Darley's character. The intentionality that John speaks of when he says that Darley welcomed him as his own, the reverence that he held for the players and places he knew, for his single-minded devotion to the fiddle, is evident in the photos. In one, the wash hangs on one the left of the screen door and Darley stands there proudly on the other side, arms crossed, pressed shirt tucked into pressed pants, his belt, straight and centered. He knows who he is, he knows his story.

John and I ponder over what draws us to the older generations. We observe that in many instances, it seems that the tradition skips a generation. The relationship of John to Darley was like that of a grandfather and grandson, and John certainly felt he had found another grandfather in Darley. Is there something in our DNA that makes us more receptive to our grandfathers' generation? Is it perhaps a breaking of the familial chain that causes us to identify more with what we're not? Darley's father did not play, but *his* father did. Darley learned a number of tunes from his grandfather. From a tune collector's perspective, that is relevant because it means Darley, who was born in 1895, was tapping into a repertory of tunes that reached back to the Civil War or earlier. In fact, John thought Darley really did seem to live a 19th century life, which is far more complex than merely looking at the material culture that made up their lives – their absence of "conveniences." Darley and Mabel's shared life involved hardship and hard work, but it also embodied a quiet independence.

For Darley, that quiet confidence was a result of deep thinking, of centering his life around the pursuit of music. For him the fiddle was everything, it was his reason for being. Darley once told John, "A tune is a feeling," and it was not uncommon for him to tear up after playing a tune, so close was the meaningful association of place or person for him. For John, it was enough to be with him, the tape recorder capturing what it could. While the fiddle was the center of it all, John understood Darley's observations were, on a greater scale, parts of a treatise on how to live in this world. As I listen back on those field recordings, the purposefulness of Darley's exhortations cut through the varied background noise of road traffic, Mabel telling about a dessert she concocted, or the chickens, always the chickens. It is as if he is speaking to

me as well. Like John, my instinct is to sit there, mouth agog, knowing that the next pronouncement will be no less considered than the previous.

But that is also the tricky bit, for it is so easy to then frame their relationship, and by extension my understanding, into some master/student narrative that drifts dangerously into the realm of mysticism. While I do believe that there is something strikingly beautiful about the spiritual aspect of it all, I think the relationship was equally a harmonious marriage of kindred souls. There were no spoken vows, but there was a fidelity to each other which rang true with Emerson's understanding of heroic friendship. Darley took John into his life, and John took Darley into his.

How many, I wonder, are graced by the gift of a Darley Fulks in their lives? Is it the gift that seems so rare, or perhaps is our recognition of it? I never knew Darley, although I think I have been graced by extension through his relationship with John, their connected links of chain. While I did not have a Darley, I did have a John, and a Gary Cornett.

That the generations to come might know,

And the children yet unborn;

That they in their turn might tell it to their children.

When I first met Gary, I had lived in Louisville, that wonderfully eclectic city on the banks of *La Belle Riviere,* for six years. I was around 30 years old, the same age as John when he met Darley. Gary was 52. During those years my musical output was mainly in the context of playing fiddle with the Louisville Dulcimer Society, a loose conflagration of highbrow folk tradition that embodied the sweet if not feral side of old time music. The genteel and well-heeled

declared their Derby Day house parties a success if they had secured the talents and tunes of the Dulcimer Society. The repertory of the Society was fairly common fare, chosen to lift the spirits or evoke the romantic images of Kentucky and the noble role that folk music played. Some of the more popular tunes were, as the late John Hartford once said, "played so often they were hardly ever played at all."

My original hope was to play the dulcimer with them, but I soon found out that fiddlers were as valuable as cigarettes in prison to them and thus my role as their fiddler was now decided. But with every common tune I played with them, I knew that there was something more to the fiddle music of Kentucky. I had heard field recordings that hinted of the rare and wild, a story far more complicated than the one I was telling. These recordings had well written erudite field notes which not only gave a sense of narrative and place to the music, but a sense of true worth as well. I poured over these liner notes until they were as dog eared and worn as the tunes themselves. I wanted a deeper view into that world which I presumed had long been extinct. As it happened, it was two lady fiddlers who joined the Society after I had that would be my entre into that world. They spoke of *Lewis County Fiddle Traditions* and they both studied fiddle with a local luthier, Gary Cornett.

A couple more years passed before I met him in person. His workshop was in the crowded basement of his home. All around were fiddles in various stages of restoration and fiddles in pieces. His workbench was both littered and yet organized with the tools of the trade: calipers, knives, sound post setters, and string lifters all vying for the good real estate on his bench. There was always a pot of hide glue simmering; the granulated glue-to-be resting nearby in mason jars. The cigars came in three varieties; pre-smoked, in the action of being smoked, and

post-smoked, and books filled up every other unused space. This shrine of cacophony removed any romantic notions of the luthier in some Cremonese artisan workshop; the sun-drenched Lombardy sky drying the varnish of the violins which hung from the rafters of the opened aired *seccadour*. Yet, Gary's basement was Holy Ground, a *luogo sacro* of blue-collar instrument restoration taken to its highest art. Gary's depth of knowledge was as formidable as his presence. He shared the same fidelity and conviction to the worth of a life dedicated to the fiddle as Darley.

My first visits with Gary involved much talk about violin construction and restoration, the history of the craft, and in-depth conversations on whatever instrument he was working on at the time. He may have been a luthier in Kentucky, but he could have stood shoulder to shoulder with any of his contemporaries in Cremona. The talk would often weave its way in and out the tunes, as the tunes themselves weaved their way in and out of our lives. For the first several months, I was far too shy to play fiddle in front of him, so I played the banjo, offering counterpoint to the rises and dips of the Lewis County tunes he had inherited.

Lewis County is located a good couple of hours east of Louisville in the northeast corner of the state, where the meandering Ohio eases past the high, rolling hillsides which define its character in that lush stretch of river. Gary had studied under one of the last of the Lewis County fiddlers, Roger Cooper. Roger, who was almost two generations younger than the majority of fiddlers in Lewis County, did all he could to ensure that Gary was part of that living tradition, to share all he could. Roger was indebted to those old, dead fiddlers that he had once known, and he did not take it lightly. Roger himself apprenticed under the legendary Buddy Thomas, whose short life both cut to the bone and immortalized him as Kentucky's primary fiddle god.

Gary formally studied under Roger for two years, but their friendship remained strong afterwards, each continuing to learn from the other. Gary had taken apart Buddy's tunes, had worked with Roger extensively, and made the pilgrimages up to Roger's house in Lewis County, where Roger took him around to all the old timers that were left. Gary understood and consequently shared all that he knew with anyone who was willing to listen, to anyone who would pay attention. I paid attention.

For the next couple of years, I made my weekly pilgrimages, absorbing as much as I could. John Milton, the lost paradisian who had no time for bunglers, would have found a kindred spirit linking Gary's methodology and Milton's holistic 1644 treatise *On Education.* Like Milton's vision, my education with Gary was not limited to one discipline. Everything was connected. There were well considered lessons on the socio-cultural world of 18th century violin making and trade, often followed in-depth examinations as he performed autopsies on fiddles that should be dead, but weren't. He gave me the histories of specific tunes we were working on, their etymology of players and place, and then the actual tunes themselves. Like John Harrod, I brought my industrial grade black Marantz tape recorder and tried to capture it all. I still listen to those tapes with deep appreciation of the place and time, knowing that it was a gift.

Unlike John's experience with Darley, I was neither the first nor the last student Gary would share his talent with. However, when I was with him, Gary treated me with the respect and seriousness as if I was to be the next heir of the Lewis County tradition. He had sworn, as a personal oath, to take the knowledge he had gleaned from Roger and spread it as he could, so that the tradition would not die. He poured into me and was a close observer of both my bow arm and the little melodic things I would do to make the tunes my own. He always claimed that he

was learning from me as well. The younger version of me, the one with no self-confidence, would brush by that compliment as fast as I could, because I couldn't believe it to be true. Now I get it, and I accept it. The moment you cease to worry about your place in the hierarchy in it all, you are given clarity to see all the little things that others put into their playing. So, for three years he took me into his life, and shared with me his lifetime of devotion. His attention framed his loyalty to a tradition and its practitioners. It was his testimony renewed every week when I descended the stairs down into his basement.

Gary was not only generous with his gift of knowledge, but also with his giving of material things he thought would help me as both a fiddler and a person. He passed on books, violin making tools, granulated hide glue, cigar boxes full of pegs and tail pieces for fiddles, violas, and cellos. When I left Louisville for St. Louis, he gave me his collection of field recordings; over two hundred cassette tapes documenting almost as many fiddlers. They still have a hallowed place in my own *luogo sacro.*

But the gift most dear he gave was the album of photos, memories, and other ephemera from his fiddle-centric life. I knew the care he had put into it and the treasures it held. I had looked through its yellowed pages on numerous occasions, the faded borders which shifted in tint from *lime* to *mustard*, boxing the plastic protective film that preserved the photos, the testament to the *before*. The faux leather is only slightly scuffed and the cloth that it is bound to is like some medieval tapestry. I don't know where Gary had found it, but its purchase was, like no doubt most of his decisions, intentional. Even a year or so after it was given to me, the smell of the cigar smoke still proudly declared its origin story.

One day, at the end of our frequent sessions which included both learning tunes and learning life, he reached over and took it from its perch atop the stereo that lived close to his workbench. There was nothing soft like “I would like to you have this.” He simply handed it to me. His giving of it was, like all of the other gifts he had shared, direct and purposeful. I had looked through it on several occasions before, and when I got home, I opened the cover of leather and tapestry cloth and drank from it like a pilgrim whose thirst knew no end. Between its covers were newspaper articles on fiddlers both alive and dead, some of who I knew back then, links in the chain I was directly connected to.

Throughout the book (one might be tempted to call it a scrapbook, but it is so much more than that, it is a *testament),* below all the photos and other ephemera, written in Gary’s careful hand, are the dates, places, and marginalia that make the scenes jump off the page. While not trying to draw overtly religious comparisons, again I am struck at the similarity between Gary’s assembling go the book and the words of the psalmist:

That the generations to come might know,

And the children yet unborn;

That they in their turn might tell it to their children.

Many of the memories in the book overlap mine. I see dear ones that I love, frozen in time in their much younger years. Smiles that pour out of the photos, the sheer joy of making music and being in community. Jim Webb mugs for the camera, guitar in hand, while John Harrod has already started up a tune, his characteristic up bow already in motion. Just out of frame stands the oracle foretelling of how their lives then and my life later will be interwoven. I

smile, thinking on my old, red JTL fiddle (made by the celebrated French violin firm Jérôme Thibouville-Lamy, hence “J.T.L") that Jim once owned and then sold to John, complaining on how it never stayed in tune. John later trades that workhorse of a fiddle to me for my 1896 Eduard Reichart, and so I gave up one great fiddle with a sniffer full of my history for a really good fiddle already well entrenched into their history.

“Fiddle and drinking; that’s all that he had.”

Many of the pictures go way back before my time, back to the early seventies when the before was the now for Roger and Buddy. Roger looks so young, he must be barely out of his teens and in every photo his smile betrays his confidence that he is living the life he wants and he knows that he is blessed. In most of the photos Buddy, possibly the most talented fiddler the Commonwealth of Kentucky ever produced, exudes none of the fierce pride that Gary does. He is clowning around, with not one, but two pictures of him pulling his ears out and puckering for the camera. Rogers pretends to choke him in another, Buddy’s lips puckered once again. Gary once told me that one of the key things to understanding Buddy is that the two things he loved in life were cartoons and professional wrestling.

I have field recordings of Buddy, made by Roger back in these days of the before, where Buddy is like a catbird, offering up impressions of cartoon characters as well as his neighbors and fellow fiddlers. And yet, despite this playful jackassery, other photos taking in the same technicolor mustards and browns of the house that they share reveal a seriousness and confidence that acknowledges the natural gift of music which was given to him.

The gifts of God are often given to the most unlikely, which perhaps makes them so much dearer. Buddy recognized his gift, and he cultivated it. He took the whistling of his mother and transformed it into bow painted high fiddle art. He was the young buck of the region, admired by some and baffled by others who couldn't comprehend his mastery. Roger told me that Buddy approached tunes with a contest mentality, which meant he was always thinking about the little variations that would flesh out the tune. And yet while he hardly entered fiddle contests, his approach that the tune should be as full as possible. Roger noted that he was "a terrible show off in this most humble way." Today, Buddy's playing is preserved in a single commercial album, 1974's "Kitty Puss." This recording changed the lives of many of the aspiring fiddlers who heard it, including Gary.

In my laundry room, above my washer and dryer, is precariously balanced a crystal-clear photograph of Buddy shortly before he died. Staged as a press photo that would accompany the album, Buddy sits on a log in the woods, a born-again Pan in '70s checkered pants and a fiddle in the crook of his arm. He is the *Genius Loci* of Lewis County fiddling, both part of and apart from the community of musicians in that region. Like so many other treasures I have, it was a gift from Gary. It fell off the shelf a few months ago, escaping its tomb of wood and glass. I could easily throw it in a drawer until I get a new frame, but I have it out so I can see and remember the fiddlers of whom I am begotten from. This branch of my tree runs through the life of Buddy, to Roger, to Gary, and then finally to me. It is important to remember where we come from, it is important to recall our origin story.

It is tempting to talk about Buddy in terms that elevate him higher than he was; a fiddle god who changed the landscape of Kentucky traditional music. While that is true, it is equally

true that Roger speaks on Buddy's life with sadness. "He was really dealt a bad hand to start with." Plagued with health problems throughout his life, Buddy didn't learn to walk until he was five. And yet he could play the fiddle before he could walk. He never held any ambitions to be anything and never thought he would live long. Buddy would bounce back and forth from job to job, but the fiddle was always there.

The music was his meal ticket, he liked the attention. Underneath it all is a pervading sense of darkness, Roger said Buddy was "pretty sad about all the time." It is there, throughout the "Kitty Puss" album, little snippets of bluesy runs that weave into the melodies that rise and fall like the hills of his native Lewis County. The echoes of loneliness are part of what makes his music so compelling.

Throughout his growing up Roger had many opportunities to hear Buddy fiddle. In the pattern of his life, Buddy would play a little here, a little there. In a grocery store, at a skating rink, on the radio. Roger was too timid to ever approach him. But Roger was 18 and working in a factory in Ohio when Buddy came up to visit his brother-in-law, who also worked with Roger. They met for the first time, not anticipating their impact on traditional music. It is easy to wax poetic about their relationship, to cast light on things that never were. Folklorists would be reading deep to cull out the story line of the naturally gifted master who desires to share everything with the devoted and eager young apprentice. But they were both simply living life and having a good time. Roger didn't start to seriously study Buddy's music until after Buddy's untimely death at the age of 39. Like the relationship between John and Darley, the role was more of the apprentice just absorbing as much as he could. Buddy would teach Roger by teaching phrases and Roger would record Buddy and then go off on his own to learn them, which

was how Buddy had taught himself. Occasionally, Buddy would stand behind Roger and guide his bow hand to teach a particular lick, but I am unsure that either one of them would have considered it an apprenticeship.

I wonder if they ever thought about the musical traditions declining. In the 1970's Lewis County, Kentucky had as robust regional tradition as anywhere else in the United States. Buddy lived out his self-fulfilling prophesy, not living long enough, his last page ended on October 4th, 1974, with his passing away after fiddling for a square dance.

As I turn the last page of the scrapbook, I am greeted by a clipping from the Lewis County Herald, Tuesday, April 4th, 1995. There is a picture of Buddy, less than a year before his death, fiddle in hand, posing for the album. It is black and white, a copy of a picture of a picture, with the black dot stipples leaping out of the newsprint. Contrasted with that is the crisp photo of the new marker, with a fiddle carved into the top rough edge of the granite. Gary, always one to recognize the debts we owe to those who have gone before, has written in his meticulous hand; "Buddy had no stone until Roger bought this one."

Gary is now 73 and I am 55, no longer the young man whose tentative playing is captured forever on those old tapes made in Gary's fiddle laden basement. So many of the fiddlers I knew and loved, most all of whom were my grandfather's generation, are passed on now. In 1998, LEO, Louisville's independent newspaper, did a piece on Kentucky's dying fiddle traditions. An interview with Roger provided much of the human voice to the article. It leapt off the page and pierced my soul when I read him lamenting "If I had ever thought that it would be so lonely, I don't know that I would have taken it up." Therein lies the rub of a living tradition; death gets an equal share. John said, of his time back in the 1970's in Wolfe County, "I was spending all of

my time either in the company of fourth graders or folks in their eighties. I highly recommend that practice for anyone." John and Darley remained dear friends until Darley's passing in 1990.

On the edge of the plateau, John and I are wrapping up our conversation. It is still early for the katydids, but the cicadas have begun their choir rehearsal in the overhanging trees. Too dark to write anymore, I absorb as much as I can, calling back down to the earth Emily Dickinson's words "What good things can happen to those who learn to remember." In the end, that is at least partially what this is all about. Memory leading to gratitude. Both of them together leading to understanding, and yet I'm not convinced that understanding is either given or required. Looking back, John says "It shouldn't have been, but it was meant to be, all these things I didn't have anything to do with." We linger on a bit, re-membering the years, the fiddlers, the tunes, the jams, the funerals, the tears, the loss, the love, and the gifts that we were given. The debts we owe and make good on by the alchemy of turning memory back into life. Resurrection may seem to be more appropriate word in the description of a living tradition, but Lazarus wasn't different when he was called from the tomb, he was just no longer dead. Perhaps he just had gratefulness and recognition, an acceptance of nothing he had anything to do with.

And so, it goes on. This music, and the lives it represents, and our playing it, is not resurrection. John playing Darley's tune "Manassas" no more brings Darley back to life than any incantation could. In many ways, it is the tradition that is the living entity and we are merely members doing our part. We learn, grow old, and die, if we are fortunate. Some other takes our place, and if we have taught that person, then our echoes can be heard in their playing. Despite our predilections for romanticizing, we know the fluidity of music and life. John looks back on the wayside markers in his journey and finds that acceptance is more called for than

understanding. He took the gifts of time and intentionality that Darley gave him and devoted his life in a kindred spirit. We may be given one Darley Fulks in our lives and we may be given ten, but it is how we receive and honor the gift that keeps the links unbroken. It's not about understanding; it's about acceptance.

Last year, in the recovery process for an injured finger, I attempted to recall some of the old tunes. As the scar tissue in my left index finger slowly broke down, I could play little snippets. I was being reborn. As the tunes came back, the memories returned with them. Even if it was just in my mind's eye, I was back among them all – the fiddlers both living and dead whose echoes I hear whenever I put bow to string. I no longer play Kentucky tunes with the lamentative spirit on the immigrant longing for home, but with the gratefulness and recognition that I am in the midst of this living tradition. And there is nothing that ever said it would have to be that way.

The links that connect me to those who come after I'm gone fade into the shadows. This I know: I have shared what has been given to me. I have given the testimony of those I knew, their tunes, and spoken to the quality and character of their lives. Not all the stories I keep are pleasant to hear, yet they are part of my inheritance as well. Those lives linked to mine cut short by alcoholism, hear attack, raging cancers, and suicide I don't understand, and I don't need to. But underneath it all flows the truth that we are part of something that is much larger than ourselves. "And the whole story was working itself," John concludes as our fiddlosophy fades to a sigh. As I drive back home through the darkened wooded corridor on this sweet summer's night, I wonder at this "mystery of ancient times" made manifest in the life of one who didn't need to understand, but merely accept.

77

To John Harrod on the subject of Fiddles and Coffin Nails

You wouldn't remember because you weren't

there, John, but that night remains

like the way the type slug for the letter "O"

on my late father's old manual typewriter always

left the raised crater of the letter, an echo

of metal and ink when collided with paper.

Anyway, the me in the memory is younger

than I remember. That night I spent

the better part of two hours, fiddle in

hand, in front of the old mirror

(the frame of which I can't recall, only

what was working within the frame) in your

music room, steeped in the stored sounds,

decades of field recordings, almost all of them

fiddlers, almost all of them as gone as

my longing to belong to them haunts me. Earlier

that afternoon you showed me the playful

syncopation set free when you are

struck dumb in revelation that the play

of the fiddle is as much visual as aural.

I sought to own the subtle circles

of your bow hand and the slightest lift

that you still render so effortlessly.

The top third of my bow balanced

on the A string, knowing that

the rocking is rendered by the hand

holding the dance in the balance of

the bow. The pattern reads funny

—*BGADG*—but that's how it goes,

rocking between the A and D string

in that hypnotic circle—driven

you never want it to end

so you play onandonandon then

reluctantly let it go so

someone else can call a tune

second part of “Shoot that Turkey

Buzzard.” Hardly Kentucky’s

response to Keats’ “Ode to a Grecian

Urn,” but worthy of the work to

render it right. So that night my

mirrored bow hand made little

circles in the air, an up-bow

fulcrum tilting towards home as

I played the hell out of “Shoot

that Turkey Buzzard,” encircled by

the ghosts of all those fiddlers

who loved you. Even then I couldn't

shake that this is a tradition of

diminishing returns, of echoes.

"Quit buying the nails for your own coffin," is

what you would have told me, if you had

been there. The dead once weren't. There

will be time enough to be ghost.

Craeft

Of Eastern White Pine and Aging

This may be the last long road trip my Fiat will ever make. Ludo has served me admirably for years with his six-speed manual *climbs a hill like a Billy goat* superpower. His climbing days are nearing an end, but I am optimistic that he can get me to Brasstown and back again. I have double checked my laundry list of things to take. The email said I didn't need to bring any tools, but I was welcome if that was my desire. So, in the tool bag went my yellow handled combination square from back in the day when I thought that building and restoring pipe organs while also being a part time steamboat pilot would be my life's work. The square didn't fit into the piloting gig, but the river had ebbed into full-time work as an "artisan," and I had proudly labeled each of my tools with a "WHR" – just in case anyone needed to know who they belonged to, who belonged to them. Two other squares made it into the tool bag, both I inherited from my late father who died long before I knew what they could do. It was always too late to ask him, but I held on to them as much for the idea that they were his as the notion that they could be of any use to me.

The first square has a black-ish handle and the measurements on the blade rise to the surface through the patina of five decades. Two straight lines that come together, that's all it is. And yet, without that most elementary perpendicular intersection, very little accurate working of wood can be done. Nowadays, you can expect to pay well over a hundred dollars for a metal square that has been milled accurately within .00001 of a mm, but they were made just as accurately out of wood a couple hundred years ago. But this product of a world where metal is cast cheaply will serve me well to scribe lines across the working face of the timbers. Since the

two-week mentorship program will run over the anniversary of my dad's passing – 28 years ago, it doesn't seem possible- it brings me joy to know that some echo of him is with me as I try to find my way.

The second square is a framing square. He had two of them when he died and I imagine he had at least another couple that he wore out. I always thought it clunky, its lack of harmony in its lopsided appearance, where the blade was two inches wide but its perpendicular cousin, the "tongue," was only one and a half inches. It wasn't satisfied to have just the measurements marked out in inches and its brood of children: half, quarter, eighth, and sixteenth. No, the framing square boasted an entire other menagerie of numbers and formulas which might as well have been Viking Runes. Other than using it as a straight edge, the framing square has never occupied much of my time. I found it with its sibling in the side door of the hanging carpenter's cabinet he must have built back in the 50's or 60's. For years after his passing in 1996 the cabinet hung in the garage of the house I grew up in, a shrine to all the tools that were rarely used by the time I came of age. Not that I had any interest in them anyway, but our DNA pulls things out of us that we never thought were there, which can be the only reason that I am loading up Ludo to spend two weeks learning to timber frame.

The rest of the tool bag is jammed with tools that I know and love and might even possibly need. They span my entire chapter in woodcraft, from the small brass trimmed six-inch square that was passed on to me by Jan Null, who poured his love for the old ways into me long before I knew I loved this work, to the Kolrosing knife I am packing in the hopes of finishing the decoration for my brother-in-law's retirement party. I've even packed the spoon carving tools – just in case the woods are in a giving mood.

Ludo's *boot* is a pile of duffle bags, tool rolls, and books. I don't know why I've thrown a fiddle on top of the pile, but there it is. The ice storm that hit us in eastern Missouri yesterday has seriously delayed my leaving; I am thankful for the extra time with my wife while we wait for the day to warm the road enough that I can make it through the hills to the open road. We play a couple of rounds of Splendor, she makes us a brunch of sorts and then I slush out to Ludo, turn the ignition and silently smile as his little Italian racing engine comes to life in the cold air. A few tears, a knowing look of assuredness, and I am Brasstown, North Carolina bound – 589 miles or 9 hours, 39 minutes away.

Even without the ice, there is no way I could make it from our home to Brasstown and the John C. Campbell Folk School by the check-in time on the day of our arrival, so I am taking the somewhat meandering route through Jeffersonville, where my dear friends Joe and Rebecca will put me up for the night. Our evening is a confluence of remembrance, of old times and fiddle tunes, and of gratitude, which coaxes me to sleep in the warmth of their love for me.

Choices. I've decided to go out for breakfast with Joe and Rebecca before starting south for North Carolina. I have a window of time, but not a wide one. It narrows with each moment that we struggle to get out the door, this lovely old couple hanging on to each other (because that is what love is, until you have to let go) and their younger friend bound to fidelity of kinship over the constraints of time. Our conversation at the restaurant is sweet, despite the awareness that the slow service has all but eliminated the cushion of time that I had before I came down the stairs from the bedroom, while the house was still quiet, and played a few tunes on the open back banjo I had given Joe years ago.

Soon I am back on the road, working my way south through Lexington and Berea on the way over the mountain to Tennessee at Jellico and then on to the congestion that is Knoxville. Having left the safety and love of Joe and Rebecca, now my nerves push me to second guess my path and even my choice to apply to the program. I've known about the John C. Campbell Folk School for over two decades now, but never thought that I would see it, let alone get paid a stipend to learn timber framing there. But why should I even be part of it, I'm 53. I'm past the point when people "do" different things. I have been inventing or reinventing myself for the better part of 40 years; perhaps that is the sum of anxiety and low self-esteem. The difference is that now I'm not bothered by the notion of being different. It doesn't change the possibility that I will be both the oldest and least experienced among my colleagues. Out of the seven of us, I imagine most will be white men in their late twenties to mid-thirties with more than preliminary experience in the field. My greatest fear is being at the back of the pack, getting left behind as I continue to struggle to understand while they surge forward with confidence.

Back home, leading up to this trip, I dutifully study my two books on the art of timber framing, making sure that I understand how each joint is laid out and executed before I move on to the next concept.

This line of self-questioning is doing very little for me, but at least it keeps me occupied through the snarl of Knoxville traffic. As I get off I 75 and start winding my way into far western North Carolina the fear gives way to curiosity. And possibility. I do deserve to be part of this. Why else would they have accepted me? I have to quit feeding my inferiority complex and accept the reality that I do have some talent, I have had some experience, and if I choose to look

at myself as merely lucky, I'm less likely to realize my full potential here. Eventually, the undulating back roads get me to Murphy. Ten more miles and I am in Brasstown.

The campus of the folk school is as lovely as I had hoped, two hundred seventy acres sitting in a valley with the low, even more worn-out fingers of the Appalachian Mountains rising on either side. One could spend a lifetime unwinding all of the cultural complexities that led to the rise of the Folk School movement in North America, but it is just enough to know that it was born out two truths: that a folk culture was in danger of disappearing in the face of a dying agrarian society, and that there were other models of education that could bring outsiders into this region that would help in the preservation and propagation of these dying arts.

The buildings that make up the campus are almost as worn as the mountain fingered fringe around the folk school. Visions and apparitions of its 1925 founding follow me as I park the car and head up into the Keith House, the first of the buildings to be built and where the weathered pine floors invite my footfalls as they have for thousands of students over the past hundred years. The registration process is fairly straightforward, the usual tax forms, liability waivers, housing assignment, schedule, and map. I head back out to Ludo, where I meet a young man who has just parked his grey Toyota pick-up in the diminutive grove of a parking lot. He looks as if he would have fit in with Quebecois national movement in the seventies – black knit watch cap, weathered blue jeans with high rolled cuffs allowing for plenty of movement of his black leather Doc Martens. When I first meet him, he is wearing a battered mustard colored Carhartt jacket, but for a good portion of the next two weeks, he will be wearing a charcoal-colored woolen cape for warmth over his work wear. "Timber Framer, right?" I ask him. He nods and smiles, his mustache twitching the slightest bit.

It's a bit much to take in, as the reality of the place seeps into my pores. It is a sacred patch, almost sylvan save for the interruption of the occasional speeding car roaring up Brasstown Road on the way to somewhere less sylvan. It is a step into a world where, as Wendell Berry might write, another "economy" is at play. That is to say, our consumer-driven market economy, always telling us we need more, always telling us to buy more – isn't the only game in town. There are many ways to live in this world, and we wake up every morning making the choices of how we want to live and live with others. The Danish educational model that the school is molded around is not competitive. There are no grades, no awards. Rather there is collaboration, dialog, sharing of ideas, with the hands and mind equally engaged. Meals are shared. There are no locks on the doors of our rooms. I leave my fiddle (Joe's old coal dust fiddle) in the room without worry of disappearance. It is a community based on trust and implied goodwill. For the two weeks that I am there, it is a vision of possibility, posing the question of what would it take to foster such a community once we are all back home.

I settle in and walk back from my residence down the gravel road that leads back to the Keith house for welcome and orientation. My curiosity and fear mingle for a quick conversation over drinks in my mind as I finally come to terms that this is no longer my story, but rather how my story is woven with these other souls that I've yet to meet. The room wears the same warm pine as the rest of the building. There is a raised stage on one end where, in a couple of days, two fiddlers and a pianist will grace the place with waltzes and other light tunes while the weekly community carving session goes on below them. Long in the tooth and green as gourds, all in the same space with basswood, carving knives, and community. But all of that is still to come. Tonight, I am still in the *before* of that evening. I haven't met my sudden kin.

He doesn't exactly look homeless, but he certainly looks homespun. His felted wool jacket, the color of five yards of forest floor, isn't the most interesting thing aspect about him. Nor is it the rusty colored back length hair where the occasional dreadlock had taken up residency. It is the tattoos on his face. Ink and Oak. Bridging his nose was a twig that branches out to an oak leaf on either side, below his eyes. He looks close in age to me, with a striking aliveness in his blue eyes. He is also tall, taller than my six feet two frame. He walks with an easiness that suggested he is home wherever he pauses. He is The Green Man walking among us. His name is Joel. He is our assistant instructor for the program.

John, our instructor, is my age if not a bit older. Like Joel, he exudes a humble confidence that I have found in folks who live unconventional lives, working hard not to end up in an office, working with their hands in a part of the country where that is still a viable way of life, where there are people who hunt bears up in the mountains, where everyone carries a pistol, regardless of how peace loving they may be. Thin in frame, the first thing we have in common was a full head of grey hair. I later found out that he is only a few years older than me and had been an aspiring skateboarder as a teenager in Florida, just as I had been twelve hundred miles to the west at the same time. I smile to think that it only makes sense that skaters, when they get old, morph into timber framers. He lives part time in Knoxville, making custom furniture. The remainder, he spends in Brasstown, where he and his coal black dog Murphy take up residence in a somewhat ramshackle timber framed house cobbled together back in the 70's, the stove pipe thrust out of the house horizontally and then a sharp bend to vertical, reaching to the sky above the mountains; a middle finger to the rest of society that insists this kind of life is neither possible

or desirable. He has spent over twenty years in the area, timber framing, demonstrating, and even working full time at the folk school for a while. Everyone, it seems, knows John.

We are all gathered in the room, and it is hard to tell who might exactly be part of our group. This year there are three Traditional Craft Mentorship disciplines running concurrently. In addition to timber framing, there is a group for blacksmithing, as well as natural dying. On top of that, there are approximately another eighty folks who are there for the week-long class offerings of the school, running the gamut from ukulele ensembles to bookbinding to pyrography. I surmise that most of the regular students are the folks of retirement age in the chairs around me. There are some who have been coming to the folk school for decades, addicted to craft, addicted to learning, addicted to the community. It is not an inexpensive addiction. We in the mentorship program, on the other hand, are not paying tuition, nor room and board, nor meals. In fact, we even get a modest stipend for our time. While the unofficial motto of the folk school is "The place you go to learn the things you will never do again" the purpose for our program is to do them: in fact the preservation and perpetuating of these skills, ensuring that they are taken up and taken out into the world, where they may not be commonplace, but they are not extinct.

Before long, we sorted out the regular students from the mentors/mentees and we retired down to the woodworking studio for our introductions and plan making. I quickly came to love each of my fellow timber framers. They are not who I expected them to be, and I am pleasantly surprised at how wrong my assumptions were. Abbey and Bozena traveled here from Minnesota, Gene from southeast Ohio, Jason from Raleigh, Katy from Richmond, and Colleen from Ashville. They are all young, almost painfully young from the lens of my well-worn eyes. Their enthusiasm is just as present as their generous spirit. For the next two weeks, we will work

freshly felled Eastern White Pine together, delighting in the beauty of using well cared-for tools. Abbey and Bozena have some limited experience timber framing, but for the rest of us this is one more fresh perspective of our relationship with the natural world. Our conversations, while working the timbers, while sharing meals, while walking to the old converted dairy barn where we do all the cutting, circle back around again and again to the "why" this relationship is important. The words, writings, and thoughts of Wendell Berry often rise to the surface of our shared time together. Towards the end of the two-week program, Gene Deubler, our dear timber framer from the hills of southeast Ohio, composed this poem:

tell me friends, what holds the earth

if not the unfinished work of home?

The story of the mountain is patience,

the story of the mountain is patience

and yet we too are a living water,

waking root, carving and carved

by the contours of the edge

and the season to every purpose

gather here, pass your laughter, your tears

we'll share this bread too, broken

into a thousandfold prayers

to the soil and the sun

and the grand simplicity of gratitude.

oh friends, oh sudden kin,

may we carry this song

to the hand and the heart

onward behind the plow

Sudden kin. Appalachian eloquence. At the end of every shared meal, we grab a handful of Andes mints from the bowl that nests alongside the other condiments. In the middle of the pine shavings Jason serves us hot tea in Chinese clay cups, a ceremony and sacrament as we pause in our labors. We come to love the gossamer thin wisps of white pine that our timber slicks coax from the tenon cheeks. There is a certain component of the build where power tools are welcomed, but every joint has to be finished by hand. Those were the moments where the labor

of the hand tools dancing with the timbers lifted to the rafters like some collective prayer as we built our own timber framed cathedral.

Years before, back in 2014 or so, my woodworking mentor Jan Null gave me a copy of *Mortise and Tenon*; a new magazine recently published by two thirty-somethings who lived with their families up in mid-coast Maine. The purpose of the magazine was to focus on pre-industrial hand tool woodworking. The magazines were compelling in that they were almost academic journals, but the hands that penned the articles still had dirt underneath their fingernails. From timber framing to the life of one of Thomas Jefferson's enslaved cabinetmakers, from Swedish "Sloyd" culture to high school educators incorporating hand work into their lit classes by building replicas of Henry David Thoreau's Walden writing desk, the underlying chords of curiosity and passion soaked the opaque pages. Joshua Klein and Mike Updegraff, editor and assistant editor respectively, were out to live as much of that world as possible and, like Thoreau, see what it had to teach. Jan and I followed their narrative, curious to see how it would all unfold.

Five years later, under the unfailing enthusiasm and encouragement from Jan, I had converted a shed into a 10'x12' cathedral for writing and just getting some distance from the dust of the world. I had built my first workbench and I was just starting to feel semi-competent, if not continuously apprehensive of trying something new. My world was hardly that of *Mortise and Tenon*, but I was moving along a path. At the same time, up in Maine, Joshua and Mike had decided to build a timber framed blacksmith shop. Their decision how to do it sent ripple effects through my and many others lives.

Charpentiers Sans Frontieres is a loose confederation of timber framers, mostly from Europe, many of them French. This group picks a project every year, either a restoration or cutting and raising a new frame – all with hand tools. In August of 2019, CSF traveled to Maine to work with Joshua and Mike to cut the frame for their blacksmith shop. The timbers were harvested locally and pulled from the forest using horses, volunteer labor had moved the stones for the foundation in place. The members of the CSF arrived, jet lagged but laden with axes of all shapes and descriptions, examined the site, and set to work.

On its surface, a group of men and women descending on a place with the purpose of building a building with only hand tools seems quaint, perhaps a postcard with a long past stamp reminding us of a time that used to be. And to hear Joshua and Mike talk about it, that was at least partially their perspective beforehand. But something changed when the work began.

Wendell Berry writes “It turns on affection,” so therefor there must be some valuation of worth. These framers who travelled from across the Atlantic, plus their American and Canadian counterparts, were not reenactors. They had no desire to demonstrate how things were once done for the sake of demonstration. They understood our relationship with wood, and our dependence on wood for centuries. Their love for wood was made evident by their choice of how they worked with it. They chose axes and saws because they were in conversation with the material, where it told them how to work it, honoring both the worker and the resource simultaneously.

“Another work is possible” was the name of the documentary and accompanying book that documented the Mortise and Tenon/CSF collaboration in Maine. In both one reads the voices of those who lives where craft is the air they breathe – how the love of a well-made axe stands shoulder to shoulder with the love for the material it will hew. There are also the voices of those

who are overcome with awe in the possibility of such a life. For two weeks food was provided by local farms. Bread was made fresh daily. Their labor was fed by the labor of others. What was revelatory to Joshua was quickly the endeavor turned into community, as people settled into the rhythm of the day. In the work, absent from the noise of chainsaws and other power tools, the axes provided a quiet counterpoint to the birdsong. Laughter permeated it all. As unlikely a model for accomplishing something as it was, there it was above a carpet of white pine shavings.

For thirteen days they labored, took their meals and tea breaks together, worked in small groups and the logs lovingly worked their way into hand hewn timbers. Is there a difference between labor and work? Without a doubt it was labor, but where did it reach the point where it became work? Why are we so interested in avoiding work, our attentions drawn back to the idea of "labor saving devices" that the industrial revolution birthed into the world? The idea was that with less time devoted to labor, we would have more time for leisure and self-improvement. What we did was fill our time with more expectations, because we could now fit them in, because our labor, while reduced, also accelerated and we convinced ourselves that this was the economy to hitch our cart to, so to speak. So, now we find ourselves a couple hundred years on. We have the embarrassment of riches in the virtual world that is embodied in our phones, who demand our attention like a three-year-old on the verge of a tantrum. Where then is our self-improvement? Then again, who am I to tell someone what their life should be like? All I know is that it was a different life in Maine. It was a different life in Brasstown.

It is all too easy to extoll the virtues of labor and skate the razors edge of romanticism.

In Brasstown the timbers were heavy, even those that were a miniscule 8" by 6" in diameter. They were dripping wet, having only been harvested some six weeks prior. *Pinus*

strobus. Eastern White Pine. The first morning we arrived at the school's Festival Barn, our site for the cutting of the frame, the timbers were waiting for us, neatly stacked in piles according to their sizes. That first morning, they didn't look like a building. They looked like sweat and blood. I cut myself three times before lunch on our first day, just by getting casually nicked by one blade or another as we hauled in the toolboxes loaded with framing chisels, mallets, as well as countless other tools needed to give these timbers a second life.

In April of 2019 the world watched as Notre Dame burned. For many of us who work with wood, it didn't feel like a loss of something historic. It felt like death. Those timbers up in the part of the cathedral known as "The forest" were over 800 years old when the flames set them free. When the trees were harvested in the late twelfth century, they were laid out in orientation to the north for six months, they were then submerged for five years before they were hewn, after which they were submerged for another ten years. It was decades before they ended up at their home in the cathedral. The original workers would never have seen the end results of their labor.

In the months after the fire, French officials examined the ways they might restore this sacred structure that also echoes France's beating heart. The idea of rebuilding with wooden timbers was quickly pushed aside as engineers and contractors advocated for steel and concrete, bringing the old girl up to the times. It was probably due anyway, they thought. No, the country neither had the timbers, the knowledge, or the working skill set to make it work.

In Brasstown we learned quickly. We had to, with only two weeks together and the pervading hope that the frame would be raised on the last day. Within two days we were working in harmony with the pine, our moving of timbers all done by the strength of our backs and the

strength of our community. We waltzed the timbers all around our construction site as they found rest on the saw horses where we worked them, and then back down again as we married them up with their adjacent timbers. Working mostly in groups of two or three on a single timber, starting with the noise and sawdust of the power tools (how we were all aspiring members of *Charpentiers Sans Frontieres* in our minds – give us axes and quiet labor!) and then setinto in to the hand work with the chisels. A mortise is no more than a pocket carved into a piece of wood, the tenon is like a tongue that fits into the mortise. They are held tight by a pin driven through both pieces. This type of joinery has been around for hundreds of years and is just as applicable in furniture making as it is in timber framing. Some of our mortises simply went straight down into timber's face, others had sloped ends to account for angled braces. The noise of the power tools was soon replaced by the dull, warm rhythm of mallets striking the framing chisels, working their way through the White Pine.

Within a year of Notre Dame's fire, carpenters from CSF harvested and cut a full-size truss for the cathedral in a week – in front of the cathedral. Their act quietly proclaimed, "the timbers are available, the tools are sharp, the artisans are ready." Crowds watched on to see the possibility of this resurrection. As the new truss was raised with Notre Dame in the background, the point was made. Fortunately, the chief architects representing the French government saw the possibility. Artisans of all stripes were brought together, including over fifty timber framers, for the worthy work that almost no one conceived could still be possible in the 21st century. Five years later Notre Dame stands once again, intact and alive.

To my mind, the importance in the rebirth of Notre Dame is not about the right decision being made. It is not about the internal and international collaboration of coming together for the

common good, a “once in ten lifetimes opportunity,” as one of the timber framers said. It is not even that craftsmen and women were available, that the skills had not disappeared, and the tools and the timbers were forged and hewn in this endeavor where, in another 800 years, it is highly unlikely that any of them will be remembered by name. The beauty in all of this is that before the fire that brought international attention to heritage and craft, there were, living their own quiet lives, people who made the conscious decision that in the midst of the noise of the 21st century they would choose the *other*. They didn’t need the fire at Notre Dame to light their path or influence the direction of the wind in their lives. They found a way to live both compatible and in opposition to the world around them. It was their kin that showed up in Maine to work with Joshua and Mike. It was their kin that showed up in Brasstown.

It was the beauty of working the white pine with the hand tools that had us showing up early and staying late, often working into the evening after dinner, that was so beguiling. The final tool we used for most of the joinery was the slick, which is in essence a large chisel with a wide, flat blade. While the framing chisels have metal bands around the ends of their handles (to keep the handles from splitting out as a result of the mallet blows), the slick has a knob on its handle end. It is a tool that is to be guided, not struck. Razor sharp, it pares the pine down to the marked line of either the mortise or the tenon. It can take off less than a 32nd of an inch, and one can often see daylight through the shavings. The process of the transformation of tree into working timber is often loud and violent, but the harshness of the power saws, planers, chain mortisers, and circular saws give way to the hand work, with the final work of the slick almost a caress. The sound of the last shaving removed sounds like a kiss.

In Brasstown I am up early, the sunrise lighting up the clouds to the east as I walk past the other houses, past Gene's truck, past the Silver Volvo 240 wagon with the sticker of the smiling Dali Lama proclaiming "Be stoked" and down the rest of the gravel and dirt road that leads down to the school. I make a point of wandering before breaking the fast. Thoreau would have called it "sauntering", though I prefer "wander" because "wonder" is such a close cousin. The sense of wonder is both quiet and profound as I wander past the woodworking studio with its slip stone construction. Its long raised front porch is strewn with shavehorses and chopping stumps. It is where we retreat to after meals, to axe out spoon blanks from the Black Cherry that Joel brought down from his homestead for us to use, to have conversations about what it is like to be young and have both passion and vision, of what it is like not to be young and to be at peace with your path. There is much talk about adopting "old timers," seeking what they have to share with us. There is so much respect in our talks, respect for the people, the materials, the forests, the tools, the ways of living. Towards the end of our time together we find this quote: *"When we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for present delight nor for present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for it and let us think, as we lay stone on stone that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say, as the look upon the labor and wrought substance of them "See! This our father did for us." ~ John Ruskin*

It carries us on its shoulders. We know we are our work is worthy. We keep our chisels sharp.

Bozena has brought her fiddle with her from Minnesota, and the porch is where we raise tunes up into the night air throughout our time together. After dinner one night, we get under the

shelter of the porch right before the deluge of rain hits. Another fiddler and her husband, teaching that week at the folk school, join us, and the mirth and music draws in other wanderers up on the porch, setting themselves on the shavehorses or the stone steps on the threshold of the studio. In the luminescence of the morning in my walks, however, the porch seems to still be sleeping peacefully. The worthy work will come soon enough.

I delight in wandering through the campus in the quiet of the morning, but my real meditation begins when I get to the woods. It is such a joy to be walking among trees that are not native to my Midwest. My morning meanderings take me among the Rhododendron, Mountain Laurel, Hemlock, White Pine, Yellow Pine, and Box Elder. Taking a lesson from Mary Oliver, I wish each of them a good morning and take a moment with each, relishing the gift of being still. Eventually my wending leads me to the dining hall where Abbey and sometimes Gene are already waiting for the bell to be rung, proclaiming to the entire campus that fuel for the day, a collective grace, and company is waiting.

And so, for two weeks, my days were kept to daily offices of gratefulness, honest labor, and community. There were moments in the festival barn where our work was drowned out by the torrent of rain isolating us even further from the real world, drowning out its cares and worries, the rain coming down in sheets that formed the walls that kept us all together, another work being possible. In the end, the rain kept us from our hopes of raising the frame at the end of the two weeks. There was a bitter sweetness to it all; the raising of the frame is both celebration and sacrament, with the final act known as the Whetting. One of the framers, traditionally the youngest, nails a pine bough to the peak of the frame, an expression of gratitude to the forest who gave the timbers to live another, new life.

While the frame wouldn't be raised until three weeks after we left, we all came together to the barn on our last evening. The last bit we got to complete were the principal rafters, each one fourteen feet long and weighing around four hundred pounds. They came together at the roofs peak in a configuration, which called back to their ancient origins, known as either a King's Post or a Queens Post. Our frame was built of both types and as we walked through the early spring darkness to the barn, we beheld the rafters where we had left them in place, nested into the wall plates where they reached upwards towards the ceiling of the barn. It looked like a building. We had done that. Like those early workers of wood back in the shadows of Notre Dame's history, we had to leave to others the gift of seeing it through. Bozena and I took our fiddles from our cases, tuned up, and played to the frame and our comrades "Susan's Gone" an old Kentucky fiddle tune that was in the shared repertory of Bozena and I. The tune's lonesome strains did not beget sorrow, the sincerity of the melody was still echoing in the rafters of the barn as we turned off the lights.

It has been just over a year since my time in Brasstown. I am currently working on building an open-air timber frame for our historic site in the wooded valley past St. Louis. Abbey, Gene, Jason, and maybe Joel will make it out for a few days. We have stayed in touch and every now and then I get letters in the mail from either Gene or Abbey. Before we left, I gave Gene the small brass and rosewood square that Jan Null had given me, along with a photo of Jan and me. On the back of the photo I wrote "You can see in this picture two of the previous owners of this square, it is important to think of the half dozen or so who we will never know but whose hands also set this to worthy work. May it be the same for you as well." I think that I have become the old timer that these young, beautiful and talented people have adopted. We

constantly share what projects we are up to, and I am amazed and inspired by the breadth of their endeavors. We all quietly live our lives of craft.

Ludo surprised me by having one more road trip in him, this time to see my family in Oklahoma, before finally giving up the ghost as he was being donated to Goodwill, burning out his clutch under the inexperienced hand of the young kid who was to drive him up on the back of the truck. But for the last month and a half that he was mine, his interior was flush with the scent of Eastern White Pine. It still permeates my green woolen vest as I go out to sharpen my chisels.

Upon Reflection

There's no easy way to Brasstown.
especially if you are fifty-four and
the young jaspers you will be
working with already have some
God-knows how many years
of timber framing pulsing
through their sinewy sap-filled
bodies.

There's no easy way to Brasstown,
unless you have money and leisure
time to do what you will. To learn
the "things I'll never use once
I get back home." Or you have
no money but youth and time and

if you are willing to swap time

spent on a “reasonable” career path.

Half the time taking classes the other

half earning your bread labor, spreading

mulch midst the hemlock and hickory

on the trails that meander like

a twenty-four-year old’s life plan.

There’s no easy way to Brasstown

unless by God you score one

of seven mentorship slots opened

to however many others there are

that are just like you, working hard

to keep from working hard. Finding work

in the obscure lifeways that sustained us

for centuries but has damn little

practicality for this twenty-first.

“So now you’re a timber framer?’

Well, that’s one way to get to Brasstown.

There’s no easy way to Brasstown

from the rolling hills

of Eastern Missouri so I decide why

don’t I just get to North Carolina

via Indiana where old friends and his

new roommate dementia

always have a warm bed waiting for me

as we try to play the tunes that

once we could play for hours

on end.

There’s no way to recapture

a past which is riddled with loss

of memory, of youth, of options.

And yet we play because it is

what we have always known and

what we have always known is

to follow the path until

it fades into the dark shadows.

There’s no easy way to Brasstown.

Over to Frankfort, Midway, and then

South on 75 at Lexington and slide

down the commonwealth past

Berea,

stopping at the new, shiny

visitors center hoping beyond

hope that I can find some “Haymaker’s Punch”

in the smokey glass bottles to give me

fortitude in the unknown that I am

driving from and to. The old timers knew

it as “Switchel” back in the day before

our practicality rendered it

quaint and curious

and it really

does quench.

I always find it

hard to leave Kentucky, regardless

of which view I leave

in my rear-view mirror.

Crossing into Tennessee at Jelico Mountain

(Free Semi-parking for all!)

I feel the elation of the known views mixed

with a longing for what is less

than three hours away more

or less.

Through the snarled traffic of tourists

willing to go through it all

to get away from it all, I wade

my way past Knoxville and onto the

Promised Land where cell

service is an idea but not

a promise.

For the last bit into Brasstown

is nothing like what I've left or

what I've got left. So, I keep right

on driving into a waiting world

of sharp chisels and Eastern

White Pine.

There's no easy way to Brasstown.

But, oh buddy, when you get there…

Coda

The poetic thing to do would be to craft
a line somewhere along the lines of *I pass*
the Bird's-eye Maple shuttle between
my battered hands where my tape loom
glows with the luminescence of white pine
against the candlelight in my basement workshop,
where I embrace the old ways of
wood, weaving, and wonderment.

But

that's not really true. My battered hands are not
battered per se, but they bear their fair

share of scars. Some are the sum total of mis-

guided decisions and misguided trust in my own

ignorance, but since I really don't know any

better, I take them as they are.

It

(the loom) takes up little space, hardly

as large as a small chest storing

the memories still worth keeping. My loom's

lot in life is to weave small knowing

that "small" also bears its fair share

of bread labor. The narrow bands of woven

"tape" may mean little today, but once

they meant much in a world where work

wasn't

so clearly delineated from the art of living. It's simple

enough, the feather weighted shuttle lightly wrapped by

the *warp* thread working its way (woven you might

say) back and forth between the *weft* threads.

Unlike its industrial cousins of the past, my shuttle

neither rattles or crashes in the cacophony

of the "improved" world. Silent as an owl in flight,

the shuttle passes left to right, right to left, left to right

until

the weaving becomes in itself an act

of meditation, of prayers almost uttered.

Each morning I live in the possible

of the sacrament of silence and reflection

as I lose myself at the loom in the hope

that it will be enough to settle my mind, to slow

my pace enough to

release the person I think I might be until

I

realize that *something*, *anything*, which is

preferable to *nothing,* is happening. The loom tells

me with earnest honesty: *The past is only*

present in what you have already woven, the pattern

revealed in the neat rows that nest nearest the last

woven warp and weft. Put your trust in us,

the shuttle and I. We've seen this all before.

So, I wrestle with this dichotomy of the past, passing

back and forth, left to right, the romantic pining

for a candle lit world of simplicity in the midst

of the world's constant, intrusive siren song:

Why make when you can buy? To which I reply

I'm tired enough of buying what they're selling.

I choose this path of morning mediation, but this weaving

was

once the work of the old, *whose well-worn bodies*

were long past being fit enough for plow or field,

or the young, *who had almost no past*. As they passed

the shuttle back and forth, did they offer un-uttered

prayers midst the musicality of *left to right, right to left,*

left to right until it was time to snuff out the tallow-

filled

wick of the reed rush lamp, casting shadows

which were really more of an idea of light rather

than true illumination? It probably doesn't matter.

All they needed was woven tape. They used it

for everything from adorning their clothing as

fringe to tying up their feed sacks in times

of peace and plenty, where the checked pattern

gave a little finery and artistry to a life otherwise filled

with

hardship and toil. However, while that is not my

world, I am no stranger to the trials that weave

our lives into a shared tapestry far beyond

the limitations of me and my diminutive loom. Which is

to say: we all have our rooms to clear out, our doors

to shut, our bags to pack, and any of the other

platitudes which are not said any more eloquently

than the silent shuttle's passes. I'm (not) interested in a

life

defined by the past. I return to the loom

each morning and note that yes, *the Bird's-eye*

Maple shuttle is bathed in the soft

gentle light where my tape loom glows

with the luminescence of the white pine

against the soft candlelight in my workshop. And

while I want that to be something, I don't want

it to be the everything that defines the time

I

choose to give to the dance of the shuttle, the loom,

and the hands. Left to right, right to left, left

to right as I consider the quality of my work only

after the morning's dance is done. I appreciate

the honesty of the unevenness of it all, this twining

of warp and weft from one who

pined.