

Dear reader –

Apologies in advance for the occasionally difficult work ahead. even more so for any lamebrained ideas which don't seem to be worthwhile or even interesting. . .all these poems have some meaning to me and I've tried to do my part by putting them in a context that makes them accessible to you as well. However, you will probably have to do some work on your own to really appreciate them. Of course, that's what makes reading (and writing) something special. Thanks for the effort.

In the 1960s Leonia, NJ was a bedroom community for Columbia University faculty and their families. I attended high school in Leonia after my mother insisted on it, which required us to move. There were two memorable teachers there who opened up a literary path for students like me. Mr. L and Ms. A were worlds apart in their approach to English, teaching and life. Mr. L was older, settled, trained in the classics and would brook no silliness in class. Ms. A was young, beautiful, interested in the moment and encouraged some zaniness as a way of advancing creativity in class. From Mr. L came an exposure to old English, to Shakespeare, Donne and Byron. From Ms. A came an exposure and an immersion in contemporary poets. Roethke, Stevens, Langston Hughes. I admired Stevens because he had a successful career in insurance while writing his poetry, like some science fiction reality shifter, he kept a foot in each world and reported that “things as they are are changed upon the blue guitar”.

Ms. A thought my writing was interesting. Even though that would have been enough to keep me writing for a long time, she also used to read some poems in class that were written by a living young poet with whom she was acquainted. These were the best classes for me. The words of that poet opened up a new world of meaning and insight which had previously been unavailable. He is African-American, and at that time, he lived in New York City. Ms. A introduced me to him. NHP wrote poems in a style he later called trans-real, which is to say, he made the intellectual experience of Stevens reality shifting, into a visceral experience as if the words whirled up off the page, surrounded you and created a shimmering new reality. The poem became real and the “real” world seemed distant and abstract. Although our lives diverged, I have never forgotten my meetings with NHP, and his words, the “oughty slim bricks” with which he created such wonderful three-dimensional word paintings, continue to awe and inspire me.

In high school, with the excitement of discovery and under the twin influences of Ms. A and NHP, I wrote a lot. Several of those poems have survived the travails of the intervening years. Here’s one I wrote after watching a July 4 fireworks display on a very cloudy night, with smoke and noise bouncing off the clouds, during the bloodiest part of the Vietnam war.

dry

darkening sky

colors

d

i

v

e

in

waving

ripping

pools

I spent some time in Ohio. Went to college there, fell in love, hitched a ride with the devil, hugged some trees. There are lots of magical places in Ohio and lots of interesting people. I'll always remember riding my scooter at dusk, past a field glowing with fireflies, and stopping to watch the otherworldly light display. Once while I was working in a box factory, a friend invited me to participate in an Ohio ritual - a mushroom hunt. From that experience, I learned that mushrooms taste great just picked and fried in a little butter, and friends and enemies can look a lot alike at first sight.

While I was living in the town of Wooster, I had an apartment just down the hall from George who was a retired welder. He liked to drink and tell stories, especially the one about getting drunk on the fourth of July in 1949 and waking up in his convertible in the middle of a field with the top all in tatters and the whole car filled with golfball-sized hail from a freak storm. George's eyesight had been sacrificed to his career as a welder. He kept his color tv adjusted so that everything looked sort of green – he said he “liked it that way” if anybody asked. He also snored in his sleep. Loud enough to hear down the hall and with an almost musical syncopation. I've tried to immortalize George's snoring in the next poem.

scene

in a green

submarine

color tv hue

escapades of unknown forces

farcical factors

welded

ovals

temper

salty flash

dimpled chirrups

bump

jump

Falling in love in College is a pretty standard event. I fell in love several times, but only made one serious connection. We shared many things, including living quarters in the apartment down the hall from George in Wooster.

We had many pleasant experiences by ourselves and with friends, including one night, a tea party on the roof of a friend's apartment. In downtown Wooster, on any given night you could watch the parade of cars go by as teenagers and older folks too, cruised along in their various shiny vehicles. We seemed to inhabit our own world then, and the rooftop vantage point placed us, appropriately, between heaven and earth.

Here is a poem to mark the occasion, called rooftop tea.

the shape

full

streetlight

memory

of the moon

on you

drifting

over

hills

and fields

of flowers