

CAPTION SLIDE: “Atmospheric Marginalia”

CAPTION SLIDE: “Part One”

Like waves that climb a strand,
across a sky,
along a wire ...

sometimes breaking through,
with the energy of ghosts,
delivering stories that have almost been lost,
desperate now to be told.

Once, so far, they’ve come to me clearly
... these ghosts ...
comforted me ...
when I wasn’t expecting it.

He wrote theirs was
“a story of dreams and magic.”

An “interlude” that “was beautiful ... but fragile.”

I guess you could say they both were misfits,
lived on an outskirts few of us know.

He described their last meetings
as if they were time travel,
but I don’t know if that was right.

It isn’t surprising ...
all his life he was preoccupied with time:
marking it, preserving the reminders
of its passage, mourning its loss.

On November 23, 1950,
a month after he turned 21, he wrote:

“The past is so wonderful ...

I feel sometimes I must write it all
down it's too beautiful to die."

And ... maybe it doesn't ... die.

Maybe our continuing bonds with the past are
not strictly internalized in the form of memories,

maybe they are external,
exist both within, and beyond, memory,

maybe that's not dysfunctional at all.

They had a few thoughts about
that ... and so do I.

CAPTION SLIDE: "First Orchid"

Earlier that year, still 20,
writing of May 5, 1950,
the dance at Western Kentucky State College,
at which he gave her her first orchid:

"Ray McKinley was playing the last no-break at the
Talisman Ball, and Camille and I were cheek to cheek.

"She seemed to want it that way.

"She hummed -- sometimes singing lightly --
and I danced better than I had all evening,
or ever, I guess.

"I had never seen Camille so elated.
On the way to the gym, she led me,
almost running, along the edge of the
football field, holding hands, our arms
arching track hurdles at times.

"Laughing. She was on a cloud."

Then ... their intermission ... a long intermission,
to a nearby diner with another couple.

“When I’m a grandpa of 70,
I’ll read this again and remember.

“Down through Kentucky Gardens,
Camille wanted to run off and leave Phyllis and Dave.
She’s as light and gay as a little girl.
I’m like a stiff old man.

“Moon ... perfect.
Air ... perfect.
Light breeze ruffled Camille’s hair,
as she ran down the slope,
toward the willows and the little bridge,
leading me stumbling along by my left hand.
I picture it now,
like playing high among little white clouds.
It’s all too far out of this world to be real.”

Afterward, they joined Phyllis and Dave
by a dry swimming pool behind the gym,
where they watched the moon and chatted lightly
until it was time for each to go home.

“Life,” he wrote later that year,
“can, or could, be beautiful.”

CAPTION SLIDE: “Apart”

They wrote letters that summer,
spent time together that fall and the following spring,
all the while working together on the campus newspaper:
friends, close friends, but nothing more.

Then, they drifted apart,
everyday life drowning out the wonder,

the magic, that evening had brought them.

He went to graduate school in Iowa.
She finished her last year at Western.

In 1952, he wrote to her that he loved her.

She said she believed him,
but didn't know what to do,
didn't know how to love.

In 1954, he told her again.

She thanked him, told him she could think
of no one who had helped her more than he had,
that his letters remained etched in her mind
... always would.

But told him too that probably,
she would marry soon,
give up on any other dreams.

She wished him success,
in journalism and in life,
said she believed that down
to the last "-30-"s they each wrote,
she would remember him, effortlessly.

She got married later that year.

He ... tried to move on.
But ... never really did.

CAPTION SLIDE: "1958"

On a stifling summer day, in 1958, she returned.

"I was at work that Monday,
planning newscast assignments

as TV news coordinator at WHAS Louisville,
when Charles phoned to say that Camille,
and her one-year-old child,
would be stopping off for a couple
of nights with him and Elizabeth.

“Camille had suggested they invite me out
Wednesday or Thursday night.

“I chose Wednesday, July 30th.

“The call was unexpected, but understandable.

“Camille had told me at least once that
I just might be the best friend she ever had.
We had become soul mates of sorts.
There had been no bounds as we talked for
hours of literature, music, love, infinity
... whatever topic we felt like.

“She said I was able to understand things
about her that no one else did.
Like what she meant when she said she wanted
to be free as the wind that swayed the
tall trees we sat beneath on a college hill.

“At dinner, and afterward,
the four of us recalled old times
and caught up on what had happened
since we were last together.

“It was enjoyable.
Everyone seemed happy.
Camille and I shook hands
as we said good night.

“But ... the next day,
delayed reactions began.
I kept seeing her in my mind.

Same pretty, dark-haired girl who had
danced close to me long ago.

“As then, she would say little things
most people wouldn’t think of.

“And she still had a way of looking into my
eyes as if I were somebody special.

“I called Charles,
wondered if I could stop by again after work.
He said yes.

“The second night was different.
Camille seemed delighted that I had taken
the initiative to invite myself, and our hosts seemed
glad to have the four of us together again too.

“Camille liked the music, mostly jazz, I brought.
She sat across the room and listened,
more relaxed than the night before.

“We seemed ... to forget time.

“We went to the basement,
where Elizabeth played piano and the four of us
sang together from a songbook of standards.
Camille and I stayed close to each other,
sometimes touching.

“The wee hours moved on,
as we talked and sang and laughed.
Camille and I looked into
each other’s eyes without inhibition.
We were all a bit spellbound.

“At sunrise, we went outside.
As Camille and I said goodbye,
it wasn’t cheerful like the previous night.

She was holding back tears.
It seemed minutes before she let go of my hands,
and we each, once again, headed home alone.”

CAPTION SLIDE: “Easter 1961”

He knew all the reasons it was probably futile:
she had a husband, a young child.
But, as he wrote many years later,
“rationalize as I might, she stayed on my mind.”

Even ... when he slept.
He wrote about that in the spring of 1961:

“And there were the dreams,
inescapable even if one wanted to escape them.
Camille, recurring so many nights in ways
so wildly different yet always alike.

“Her wondering face on a girl fleeing me
out of love, out of classrooms, down hallways,
over the grass of Ogden campus,
where we never walked,
or at Mr. Joe Jackson’s spring,
where she never was and I only as a child:
near the bottom of a steep hill,
holding on to a long sapling
me pulling, pulling,
trying to help her up with me;
then ... just me ... searching behind trees,
in bushes, up to his house and through the gate,
where people were laughing,
thinking me crazy.

“Camille, fleeting soul of lost dreams
that now come back as dreams of dreams.”

He wrote to her at Easter, that time of miracles.
She called him the day she got the letter.

Yes, she loved him too.
But she didn't know what to do about it.

Slowly, they planned a visit.
So they would *know*.
It almost ended in disaster.

CAPTION SLIDE: "Baltimore Night"

Like the rest, he memorialized it, this time
in the early morning hours of July 23, 1961,
with a scribbled parenthetical:
written "while drinking self to sleep
after flight from Baltimore":

"A car pulled up. She shuddered.
The blue Opel she knew the sound of without
seeing, home at 10:30 when he had been
scheduled to work until midnight.

"I felt myself in a strange area of senses beyond senses.
Camille pushed me inside, guided me to the basement, told
me to go out its rear door once he was inside upstairs.

"The steps were easy enough,
but then I hit something,
loud as a clap of thunder.
I slowed down,
moved cautiously and cat-like,
over and around object after object until I reached the door.
I peered out, and there he was,
walking along the back of the house calling, 'Camille?'

"I braced myself, but he went up the back steps and
indoors, still calling, a bit sternly now: 'Camille! Camille!'

"She, I assumed, was falling back on her instincts too.
Getting rid of cigarette butts of two different brands,

in two different ashtrays;
hiding my coat,
my small plastic briefcase.

“I stepped out into the doorway shadows;
maybe I could wait to make sure she was okay,
maybe she could sneak the coat,
with my return airline ticket,
to me, out the back door?”

“A dog barked, nearby and getting closer.
Casually but quietly,
I strolled across the yard and made my way
along the foreign sidewalk as if I were a neighbor.
I glanced back once,
hoping for a clue that everything was alright.”

So ... he found his way to the airport ...
worried ... distracted,
but got a new ticket,
and thought about her all the way home:

“From the plane window I watched the stars,
the Big Dipper, the North Star.
I recalled, like a beautiful dream,
Camille and me tonight.
We sat in the cool tree-framed moonlight for what
seemed at the same time a moment and an eternity,
a point in time that encompassed all
the ages that have been and will be.

“Side by side, hand in hand.
Under the linden trees as in a trance.
Our talk of love.
Our apartness from time and space.
Her saying she was glad I came.
Her touch.
Her suddenly kissing my hand.

“What ... would become of this?
As I gazed across the wing of the Electra,
I knew only that this ...
was complete happiness.”

“A moment and an eternity,” he wrote.
“A point in time that encompassed all the
ages that have been and will be.”

Years later, he wrote more about his interest in eternity,
bonds that continue beyond the bounds
of our everyday human conception of time,
our tendency to frame all experience as linear:

“Time has fascinated me since early childhood.
As a toddler filled with wonder, I’d stand with
my father as we looked up at a starry sky.
Space went on, star after star, never ending.
Time, too: eternity never ending.

“In the beginning, God created it all, I was told.
But, what about before the beginning, I wondered?
And what’s on the other side of never-ending?
Must there be limits?
Why can’t they be broken through?”

He also wrote, in 1961, about his and Camille’s
“apartness from time and space.”
As if he could sense, even as he lived it,
how strange and different their
experience of this world was.

He would write more about that too,
for the best, and worst,
of their shared bond was still to come.

CAPTION SLIDE: “Poconos”

September 1961, the week after Labor Day:

“It had been a long drive, the turnpike blistering in late summer heat, the winding little road up along the river tedious though coolly shaded. Now, dusk was falling on the last few miles and a penetrating haze already cushioned the Poconos.

“The weather forecast from my radio was for fair and mild for that part of Pennsylvania. Not so along the Texas coast, where preparations were being made for Hurricane Carla. The cold war dominated the rest of the news: Kennedy. Krushchev. Castro.

“It was a good time for me to take a vacation from radio and tv news editing and broadcasting. Camille’s doctor had suggested she take a break from her everyday life too, find a quiet ‘resting place’ for a few days. She did, and invited me to join her.

“We stayed in separate motels, to avoid suspicion. Mine was Myer Motel, cottage #6. With the season officially ended, most of the other cottages were empty.

“Apple trees ran along a dusty road that led down to the nearby Delaware River.

“The things Camille and I did are now hazy in memory. Much is like a dream that fades with time. But I recall that, from the start, Camille was as in a trance.

“Mornings were mostly for driving around. We sought out scenic places: a high cliff, a falls, a popular gardens attraction where ducks swam on a pond. Antique shops.

“She said she’d like to own one someday.

She asked if I would like to do that with her.
I said yes.

“Afternoons, more likely the cottage:
hand in hand beside the river, or picking
dusty, striped apples fresh from the trees;
or side by side in wooden chairs on the front porch,
talking of life, our childhoods, the people we’d known.
Seldom were our hands not touching.

“She said I’d brought her ... home.

“Inside, later, we had vodka, tonic,
and ginger ale with ice.

“Our days, and nights, quickly went by.

“The last night was tumultuous for Camille.
She was practically catatonic and almost didn’t stay.
When I mentioned Baltimore, or anything
else involving reality, she froze.

“She settled down only when I turned to things
romantic, returned us to our dream world.

“On Sunday, the 10th, I checked out of cottage #6.
We had breakfast at a little diner, just down the road.
She was on the verge of tears.
I tried to keep things light, but we both knew better.

“She asked me to let her out at a
little white church near the edge of town.
There were trees, as everywhere in Milford.
She got out, held my hand through the
driver’s window, and said ‘We’ll meet again.’

“I turned back as I drove away,
saw her standing in the September sun,
still smiling, now lightly waving goodbye.

It was good, at the end, to see her smile.”

CAPTION SLIDE: “Fall”

They wrote letters, as they had after his July visit,
talked on the phone, sometimes for hours.

She told him she’d known a “completeness” with
him that she’d believed for three years was possible.

He wrote, in a letter home that mentioned a vacation,
but not a lover, “I’ve never had a better time.”

She wrote, “When you walked and talked with me,
so beautifully did you touch me, that I was in wild
grief and agony when you left me that Sunday.”

He pleaded with her to come to him,
wrote of the future they could have together.

But ... it wouldn’t happen ... it couldn’t happen.

The fall days grew shorter,
and they came down from their clouds,
woke from their dream to a feverish nightmare.

The reality of everyday life, the drowning mundanities,
the intransigent barriers: a husband who refused to
agree to divorce, a child Camille believed would never
forgive her, never understand if Camille left them.

In 1954, he had described Camille’s writing
as “beautiful and tender,” and it was.
But now began a season of frenzied, churning letters,
back and forth,
mirroring the dissonance that buried their dream world.

Her writing now was beautiful ... but haunted.
Tender ... but devastating.

And ... she had her own take on the transitory,
yet eternal, nature of their bond:

“You are loving a dream ... and I wanted
you to love the dream ... always.”

And ... a riddle, or maybe, a premonition,
sent to him just before her breakdown:

“We’ll meet again:
In any cabin number 6
Where two chairs hold us
Knee to knee
In memory.”

There were hospitalizations, and he was
forbidden any contact with her.

Phipps Clinic.
Johns Hopkins Hospital.

They didn’t know she continued to listen
to his radio newscasts, clear-channel 840,
waves across a sky, along a wire,
a private Louisville to Baltimore line.

She smuggled letters into the mail,
Christmas Eve and New Years,
then, told him the contact had to stop.

She’d been told she’d lose her child forever
if they found out she’d tried again.

And ... it did stop.

Eventually, he gave up.

But he never stopped thinking about her,

never “got over” her.

CAPTION SLIDE: “Part Two”

In early 1981, as his 15-year marriage crumbled, his mind returned to Camille, again and again.

She had told him once that when her child was grown, she would come to him, if he still wanted her, and they would spend their later years together living peacefully in a place she called “Stone’s Hope.”

In 1982, he went to the 30-year reunion of her graduating class at Western.

She wasn’t there.

In the summer of 1986, reeling from the pain of the death of his mother, he decided he had to *try* to make contact, in case she was waiting, but unsure if he still cared.

Using an address he found in an old alumni directory, he sent her a press clipping about his career, an innocuous little note jotted in its corner: “Hope things are going well for you, Camille.”

He later wrote, “The long distance phone call came as quickly as the one that followed my Easter letter in 1961.”

But this time, it was her husband.

He said, “I thought you should know that Camille is dead.”

She had been for five years.

In early May of 1981, her husband had tried to call home from a business meeting out of state.

No one answered.

Her health had been failing for years,
a heart condition that progressively weakened her.
She rarely left the house in her final months.

“He was courteous to me. I expressed belated
sympathy and told him I appreciated his calling.

“The news jolted me. More than I would have
expected after all those years.”

She had said to him at Western, in April of 1951,
“I’ll write a book about you in 50 years!”

But ... she’d lived only 30 years more.

On another starry night at Western,
on a bench near Van Meter Hall,
she’d told him that she wanted him
to write about her.

Now ... he did.

It began as an effort to preserve her letters,
many of which were written in pencil,
fading with time.

He added his own reflections about the events,
pondered the meaning of it all.

He remembered she once said they both were misfits.
“Independent dreamers seeking more than
the realities of the world would grant.”

But the memories alone weren’t enough.

How could they be?

He'd written her, on July 24, 1961,
just after their Baltimore night,
"Sometimes I feel that if you touched a hot stove,
I, hundreds of miles away, would feel pain too."

The bonds they'd shared when alive
were the strongest he'd ever known.
Was there a way to continue them now,
beyond the conventional sense of just "remembering"?

CAPTION SLIDE: "Back to Milford"

"A moment *and* an eternity. A point in time that
encompassed all the ages that have been and will be."

In 2003, he wrote: "Growing up, I liked to imagine
what life had been like long ago on the land of
the farm we moved to when I was in first grade.

"Once, for a high school English assignment,
I wrote about the people buried in a
long-abandoned family graveyard there,
set off from the farm by a rusted iron fence.

"Five or six graves, names and dates chiseled
into stone markers, ending in the 1800s.

"I stood staring, trying to go back.

"It seemed at times I was actually getting to know them:
what each person was like, what they did day to day.

"A strange, unexpected sensation,
Looking in on life in another century.

"My mind unfettered by what we call the
impossible, I truly felt carried back in time.

“Even today, driving along I-65 as it cuts through what used to be that farm, I see that family graveyard across the way and feel a closeness to those people.

“Some might say I believe in ghosts.”

In September of 1996, the week after Labor Day, 35 years since his first visit, he went back to Milford, and the penetrating haze of the Pocono Mountains.

He wanted everything to be as much like 1961 as possible.

He traded in his car, which was aging anyway, for a newer one, white with black trim, beige cloth interior, not unlike the 1956 Pontiac Star Chief he'd driven in 1961.

He packed clothes of similar fabric and color, similar shoes, aftershave, toothpaste, even a similar windup alarm clock.

And yes, the Myer Motel was still in business, run now by the grandson of the late Mr. Myer.

And yes, he was able to again rent cabin #6.

“I was amazed at how unchanged it looked. On the porch, two chairs with a table between them, as when Camille and I were there.

“Inside, renovation had made the room fresher and cleaner looking, but unchanged in motif or mood.”

But ... there were changes:
Camille's apple trees all gone,
the trail to the river rough with disuse.

“I walked along the shore where Camille and I had walked and talked hand in hand.

“I sat on a fallen tree trunk, the flow
of the water the only sound,
let my mind take me back.
As it had been with Camille.
So ... easy.”

Then ... Milford again.
The changed and the unchanged:
the diner, where they'd eaten breakfasts,
the little white church where he'd let her off,
where she'd smiled, and waved,
after she'd promised they'd meet again.

At dusk, he ventured back out,
lost himself in songs from 1961.

And then, it happened:

“The music started me sensing,
really sensing, something I hadn't expected.

“It seemed for all the world that Camille
was there in the passenger seat beside me.

“No effort, no premeditation by me.
It was just happening:
she was listening to the music too,
smiling from time to time.

“That's the way it had been in the Star Chief
as we listened to the AM Delco radio.

“Now, this strange, unexpected sensation of her presence
came to me as I drove ...
up into a hilly, wooded residential area,
past the almost-dark villa, now run down,
where she'd once stayed.

“Then, even as the music continued,
Camille was gone.

“As if left behind at her former hotel,
now her fellow ghost.”

Back at cabin #6, he set up drinks,
similar as possible to the ones they’d had:
vodka, tonic, ginger ale.

His glass full, her glass empty.

“For a photo,” he wrote,
“and for bringing back the past.

“The news added still another parallel to 1961,
when Hurricane Carla moved up the Gulf Coast.
Now, Fran was moving toward the mid-Atlantic.

“The afternoon’s weather in Milford had been
cloudy and muggy, with a brief light sprinkle.
At dusk, haze lay on the green hills and mountains.
It all felt ... like a fairyland.
I fell asleep contentedly.

“About 4 a.m. I awoke, at least partially,
turned over as in 1961,
and it was as if Camille were there.

“Not in a dream, but for real.

“We made love.
Easily, lovingly, passionately.

“More freely than long ago, when we were
tense and scared about the whole affair.

“It was as if she had come back to go
beyond that, to know each other fully.

“It may have been the most intense and satisfying sexual experience of my life.

“How did it happen?

I don’t know.

I can’t put it into words.

“A transcending experience.

“Like back in college,
sitting on a bench at Western,
letting ourselves go as far as we could go.

“Camille hated limits on the mind and spirit, as did I.

“I’m writing this for myself,
not in hopes of making a believer of anyone.

“But these things really happened in Milford.

“They left me with a new appreciation
of the body and mind we are born with
but seldom realize the full potential of.

“And no, it wasn’t a dream.

“When I awoke that morning in cabin #6,
the bed looked as if slept in by two lovers.

“In a sense, beyond usual senses, it was.”

She didn’t return on that trip to Milford.
But he didn’t mind ... because now ... he *knew*.

“Like magic,” he wrote.

“And still I feel the wisps of that spell.”

CAPTION SLIDE: “Last Orchid”

As fall turned to winter,
and winter thawed to spring,
he planned a trip to visit her grave.
It was north of Baltimore,
in the quiet countryside,
a dozen miles from the Pennsylvania line.

He chose July, as in 1961,
wanted to bring,
to her grave,
a last orchid.

But, life's everyday mundanities
conspired against him.

So he tried again in 1998.
And this time ... it worked.

Before he left, he called a florist there,
arranged a corsage of a large purple orchid
against a white and pale-blue background:
close as possible to the 1950 Talisman Ball.

But when he arrived,
the florist was devastated:
the orchid had been crushed in transit.
She apologized,
offered to create a new corsage
from smaller orchids and, if he didn't mind,
a few white roses she had in the back.

The result, he wrote, was beautiful:

“Not the same as in 1950, but I felt
that Camille would have liked it as well.

“Near sundown, I laid the corsage on her grave, placed
it where I thought it would be just under her shoulder.

“I returned the next morning, removed the pins and plastic tape, left only the flowers themselves:

“to break down into soil ... to blend with the earth that once was Camille.

“I kept one orchid for myself ... to remember.

“Back home, I woke at 4 a.m. and thought of the flowers left on her grave.

“They were probably still there, wilting after the day’s hot weather.

“Then, shades of 1996 in Milford, I seemed to sense Camille’s presence again.

“Beside my bed, just for a moment, an older Camille I’d never seen, smiling slightly, as if pleased.

“Her eyes saying ... thank you for remembering.

“Then she was gone.
The experience came neither from a dream nor from being fully awake.

“As that night in cabin #6, a strange level of consciousness.

“And there was something about the florist adding white roses that I’d liked, without knowing why.

“A month later, poring over my notes and mementos, I discovered why:

“a long-forgotten request from Camille, found in her first letter after our Baltimore night:

“ ‘As long as he sustains a love for me,
he will send one white rose at Christmastime.
No name.’

“Now, in 1998, I recalled that roses
always had a special appeal to her,
that in the Christmas Eve letter
she’d smuggled out of Phipps Clinic,
she’d written of how we’d ‘loved the Christmas
roses that bloomed for us in September.’

“How fitting that the flowers I left on her grave
37 years later included not only a last orchid
but belated white roses.

“As in 1996, I wondered what it all meant:

“Maybe, in a sense, she really did smile,
shed a tear.
I felt a fulfillment ... maybe she did too
... coming to me now ...
in this universe we understand so little.”

CAPTION SLIDE: “Return to Western”

“ ‘When I’m a Grandpa of 70, I’ll read this again
and remember,’ I wrote Saturday, May 6, 1950.

“Now, Saturday, May 6, 2000, this grandpa
of 70 notes that yesterday I did indeed
read that bit of writing and remember.”

And, he did more than read and remember.
He invited her to visit again.

Was it the same?
Could it be?

There was no travel to Milford, cabin #6,
no orchids and white roses on her grave.

But he wrote that he felt parallels throughout that day,
“similarities across 50 years.”

And he wrote about the traits of hers
... he’d never forgotten:

“Her love of life.
Her spirited spontaneity and delight with things beautiful.
Her capacity for the extrasensory.
Her desire for self-expression.”

That night, he watched an old film,
then went out on the deck overlooking his backyard,
trying to summon her to join him.

“Without effort, my mind took me back 50 years.
Camille and I were skipping along hand in hand,
across the football field, heading for the big event.

“Then, later, she was laughing and
leading me through Kentucky Gardens.

“My memory now was in such high gear and my senses
so attuned that it was almost as if we were together again.
Back on that same night of the year 1950.

“But no. It was only my backyard in 2000.”

He tried again ... an hour later.

“Pleasantly cool now, as it was at our
long intermission from the Talisman Ball.

“Stars shone in a fair sky, a whitish cast
on the tops of my tall oak and maple trees.
Leaning back against the deck railing,

I let my consciousness go free,
giving full rein to the unconscious.
Again, 50 years began to vanish,
but more so this time.

“This was no longer usual memory.

“Suddenly, strangely, I felt myself
actually beside the Western pool.
And there -- actually beside me again -- was Camille.

“Looking into my eyes, smiling.

“Not just memory, or a wish,
or some kind of self-hypnosis.

“For all the world, for me at least,
she was there.

“How real her presence!
And her knowing smile, as if to say how
nice to see me again in the year 2000.

“Just for a moment, fleetingly.
Then ... gone.

“A speck in the universe, I stood under the stars,
alone on my deck looking across time to Camille.”

He died in 2005.

I don't know if they connected again before that.

But I know how he felt about the connections that did happen.
He wrote, “Life is too short and feelings too precious for the
fettering of emotions, the ‘putting it behind you’ and ‘moving
on’ that are often recommended for those who have suffered loss.

“I don't try to put feelings of love or loss behind me.

I let them take their natural course.
And sometimes, along the way, unexpected things happen.”

Time travel, or something different?

As to the first, some would say, “Yes, why not?”

Others would scoff, say he merely loved a dream,
a memory, just as she said she wanted him to do.

And still others would say there is more
than just memory, and no need for time travel:

a dimension most glimpse rarely,
if ever, while living,

a portal of limited or transient access,

a proof that beyond the main stream
of human thought and perception,
on an as-yet unsubstantiated plane,
the ones we thought we’d lost ... survive,
sometimes reach out ... sometimes break through,
“in this universe we understand so little.”

A plane on which the 1950 Talisman Ball,
and the days and nights in cabin #6,
can play out, if desired, in perpetuity:
and new experiences too, a continuing existence,
old lovers again hand in hand,
knee to knee,
a smile, a laugh, a dusty striped apple.

But ... maybe only misfits, like them,
let their minds go that far.

One thing’s for certain:
he refused to accept the death of the past,
the severing of the bonds that linked them together.

He wrote that the past is too beautiful to die,
and he meant it.

Was that “unhealthy?”

Hopeless?

No.

He searched precisely because he did have hope:

to reach the dead while among the living;

to feel her presence, know her presence,
rather than only the ache of her absence;

to say, at least once more while he lived,
as he did in that letter home in 1961,
“I’ve never had a better time.”

And ... one more thing.

The one time, so far, they’ve come to me clearly
... comforted me.

Sunday, August 9, 2020.

A month before Labor Day,
always difficult for me in light of their story.

I crossed the I-24 bridge
over the Ohio and into Kentucky,
and I felt a sense of calmness, peace, right away.

I hadn’t been thinking about him at all,
or even about the fact that I’d be going through Kentucky,
but I immediately felt his presence ... and strongly.

Unseen, unheard, but unmistakably there.

It was a strange feeling,
and not expected,
because I'd never felt his presence,
any deceased person's presence, before.

But it also felt ... natural,
the way he would have wanted it to be.

I started speaking out loud,

telling him it felt good to be back
in the state of his birth,
of his ... days at Western,
of his ... burial.

I told him I'd been wanting to speak
to him and Camille for a long time.

Told him about the pain I still felt, the sadness,

that he and Camille never got
to have the life they planned.

I talked about other parts of their story,
as I understood it from reading their
writings in the years since he died.

The things that I thought I knew.

Then, I felt the presence guiding my thoughts,
and it wasn't just him anymore, it was her too,
the two of them together, gently, serenely.

I found myself saying things I hadn't thought of before:

reasons why it couldn't have worked in 1961,
whether she'd come to him or not,

why it couldn't have worked when her child
was grown, and the shoe was on the other foot.

Why he was the man he was, when I was
a child and didn't understand him at all.

They didn't tell me everything,
I don't think that was their goal,
I think they just wanted me to be comforted,
to know they're watching ... and care.

Almost immediately after passing the 68/80 exit,
where I would have turned had I been going
to visit his grave, or birthplace, or Western,
I could feel their presences quickly fading.

I asked if we were done for the day,
if ... they had to go.

They didn't ... respond.

Later I realized I don't have to be sad for them anymore,
on Labor Day, or any other day:
they're together, and happy, in their Stone's Hope.

But in that moment, as they faded,
I felt a pang of desolation,
almost abandonment.

Then I noticed, to my right,
merging on to the interstate,
a pickup truck pulling a flatbed trailer.

The trailer was mostly empty,
just two shrink-wrapped pallets,
nestled together at the front:
side by side, like a couple, knee to knee:
each pallet was marked,
on the plastic wrap in thick black ink,

with a clear and unambiguous “30.”

Nothing else ... only that.

Some might say it could have meant anything,
nevermind their shared love of journalism,
nevermind her letter of 1954.

As for me, I knew it meant that yes, we were done.

At least ... for now.

CAPTION SLIDE: “-30-”

CAPTION SLIDES FOR CLOSING CREDITS

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