

32 Short Pieces on Alan Stephens

Poet and Professor (1925-2009)

by John Ridland

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DEDICATION

To whom else but Alan Stephens, Jr.
for his dedication to advancing
his father's name and work?

1. An Encounter of the First Kind

I'd never heard of Alan Stephens when I turned a page in an annual anthology of verse published in English in periodicals and faced this poem:

The Baby Cockatrice

I'd heard of the vast reptiles, maybe seen
Some musty drawings of them, years ago.
The rumor that such creatures have once been
Will make a child fear, idly, *They are, now.*

Preoccupied and happy, I had fished
Well through a June day on Commotion Creek
And had my limit; now the water rushed
In shadow, mostly. Almost at the lake

I climbed the bank, tired, quiet. There he was.
He happened; total; there. He barely lay
A finger long—bone mouth and ruff and claws,
The plated body, and, shock on shock, the eye.

And once I turned, all I had been stood there
Whole, in a gaze where no more could occur.

Alan Stephens

It stopped me in my tracks. The poem is both typical and atypical of Stephens' continuing work. It's typical in that he kept on being a fisherman for "some sixty years" (as the last poem in his final book, *Away from the Road*, says), and frequently wrote about hiking into the back country, though usually he didn't fish in creeks with symbolic names such as "Commotion" but real ones you could find on the map, like the Matilija, a small river near Ojai to which two of his books pay tribute *Water Among the Stones: Along the Matilija* and *Goodbye Matilija*. Nor did he continue to stumble on mythical creatures that had the power of killing by their glance, or, even as babies, of making one find all he had been, standing there "Whole, in a gaze where no more could occur."

The book the poem was included in was *Best Poems of 1957: Borestone Mountain Poetry Awards 1958*, whose cover printed the names of the then famous poets whose work had been chosen. Among them were W. H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, John Ciardi, E. E. Cummings, C. Day Lewis, W. S. Merwin, Howard Nemerov, Theodore Roethke, Eudora Welty, and William Carlos Williams. Heady company, crowding off the cover some lesser-known figures, like Paul Engle of the Iowa Writing School, Norman MacCaig and Edwin Muir, two of Scotland's premier poets, and such soon-to-be-noted newcomers as A. R. Ammons, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, May Swenson, and James Wright. Missing from the cover, Alan Stephens faced alphabetically across the page spread another new Western poet not on it, with whom he would sometimes be confused, William Stafford. It was an early appearance to be proud of, and Stephens' cockatrice turned up second in the batting order of his first book, *The Sum*.

2. *The Sum*

I remember buying Stephens' first book soon after reading the *Best Poems of 1957* and before moving to Santa Barbara in 1961 to begin teaching in the University of California. *The Sum* was published in 1958 in Alan Swallow's hard-covered, hard-headed New Poetry Series: "first collections of poems by the ablest new poets" — most of them able in the style of Yvor Winters, with whom Alan Stephens had become well acquainted while holding a post-doctoral Stegner Fellowship at Stanford. Having served in the Air Corps during the War, and completed a doctoral dissertation on Edwin Arlington Robinson at the University of Missouri, he went to "Arthur" Winters more mature and independent than most of the others, many of whom disappeared as poets in the way disciples can. Stephens was less likely to be stamped with the Winters branding iron, though a better image for these poets than a herd of cattle, or even a gang of cowboys, would be as Knights of a Roundish Table with King Arthur at one end and J. V. Cunningham as Lancelot at the other. Of one of a later generation of Wintersians, whose rhythms were exceptionally stiff, Stephens punned wickedly that his meters displayed "a trace of Arthritis." His own mentor at Denver, Alan Swallow, who published most of Winters' strictly metered, powerful poems and outrageous, unbending criticism, wrote much the same of Stephens' early poetry: "stilted in its own way, with rather precise prose background, warped a bit in the needs of versification.... Indeed, it may be said that Alan had a 'poor ear,' in that the metres were sometimes missed... never appeared 'natural.'"

Nevertheless, *The Sum* was not out of place in Swallow's Series, although it became atypical of its author's style. Its final poem, "Epilogue: the Heresies" typifies the austere, restrained, "stilted" versification and the uncompromising intellectual demand for conceptual contents of the School of Winters, from whose company Stephens would soon part:

Now go, small book. Go quietly, and stand
In clipped abstractions at the first outcry
For tropes to fondle. If they should demand
Your reasons, use an image for reply.

They crave the maker's mime and myth. You be
The gross materialist. And rational.
(Stop the interpretations technically.
Be edgy, tight, and unequivocal.) ...

3. "The Simplicity of the Poem"

On my job interview visit to the UCSB campus in 1961 I noticed a small poster for a lecture by Alan Stephens under the title above. When I asked Stephens, later on, if I could read it, he brushed it away like a blue-tailed fly. Public showing-off was not to be his sideline, and in fact he published very few, but succinct and excellent critical articles or reviews.

I did not meet him on that first visit, but had lunch with three of the higher powers in the Department, all dead now: Hugh Kenner, then at work on his "chef d'oeuvre," as he said, *The Pound Era*; Edgar Bowers, whose *The Form of Loss* preceded *The Sum* by six volumes on the Swallow New Poetry list; and Bill Frost, a jack-of-all-trades with a mastery in the Restoration and 18th Century. This period was nominally my own field, though I see it now as a camouflage behind which I could be free to write poems as I chose and, in my dissertation, talk in far too much detail about dramatic poetic style. Three more disparate critical and personal viewpoints could not have been represented at the time — a warning of the fractured structure of the department — and not one of them would have ever proposed a lecture under Stephens' title. For Kenner, the complexity of a polyglot,

fragmented page of ideograms in any Ezra Pound *Canto* was meat and drink which he consumed insatiably. Bill Frost would make a whole meal out of a page of Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*, seizing every opportunity for footnote commentaries and comparisons to the wording of previous translations and the meaning of the original Latin. And to Bowers, perhaps Winters' most loyal and acclaimed disciple, "Simplicity" would be beside the point. Bowers and Stephens would soon be barely on speaking terms, but I remember the first exchange I overheard between them, in a party at Marvin Mudrick's house, which went like this:

Wintersite 1 (probably Bowers): Fulke Greville? (*Barely interrogative in tone.*)

Wintersite 2 (in that case, Stephens): Fulke Greville. (*Affirmatively, as if seconding a nomination.*)

I knew that King Arthur had dubbed Lord Brooke as one of the greatest poets in the Plain Style tradition of English poetry, fully aware though he was that the vast majority of English professors would scoff at the assertion (and in return he would scoff at them). "The Tradition" was the password at any meeting of Wintersians. Here I felt I had overheard the secret password to their inner circle: "Fulke Greville."

Another poet to whom Winters assigned a place at the Round Table was Barnabe Googe, not a common Renaissance syllabus hero, and Alan Stephens' one book of scholarly endeavor was an edition of Googe's poems, a small book published by Swallow that made a solid enough addition to the available corpus of That Tradition. His dissertation on E. A. Robinson remained nothing but that. He did not mine it for scholarly articles, nor recycle it into a first book as evidence for promotion to tenure, which became the customary practice for English professors. It was a meal ticket, which proved he knew how to gather and weigh evidence responsibly — "professionally" — not helter-skelter as autodidactic and iconoclastic poet-critics were prone to do. Its residue perhaps survived in the impulse to satirize misdirected scholarly enterprises in stinging epigrams; here is an early example, from a time when Blake was being discovered as a great, prophetic, epic poet, rather than the writer of some brilliant lyrics:

A Curse on William Blake

You that, demanding total liberty
Of human words, proceeded so to twist 'em —
May you lie face up for eternity
Stunned by the clank of symbols in a system.

4. Syllabics

And then something happened. Perhaps through being surrounded by such ardent anti-Wintersites as Hugh Kenner, or Marvin Mudrick, who became Stephens' office-mate and published a scalding critique of the poetry of Winters, Bowers, and J. V. Cunningham, and certainly encouraged by reading William Carlos Williams, whose *Pictures from Brueghel* Stephens was given the plum of reviewing in the February 1963 *Poetry* (of which Kenner was an Advisory Editor). Stephens' short, succinct piece was titled, revealingly, "Dr. Williams and the Tradition," and sought to break down the fence between Williams's free verse and the strict iambics of The Tradition according to Winters, letting them mingle as they did in Stephens' career, like cattle of different breeds.

What happened first was that Stephens' own poems moved away from the somewhat clumsy movement of his early iambics in the direction of Williams's free verse by way of a formal technique which Winters had in fact endorsed in the poems of Elizabeth Daryush, daughter of the British Poet Laureate Robert Bridges, who had developed it, and a few others. Very simply, "syllabics" had a positive and a negative rule: the number of syllables per line (1) followed a determined count, while it (2) avoided falling into any regular accentual-syllabic pattern, iambic or trochaic or any other. Obviously the first rule makes room for stanzas with lines of differing lengths, repeated in the same order, as had been done in traditional English meters by poets such as George Herbert and Thomas Hardy (among Stephens' favorites), and this branch of the form became the trademark of Marianne Moore and Dylan Thomas (neither of whom was Stephens' cup of tea).

His first published poem in syllabics, found in *The Sum*, appears to have been "The Vanishing Act" subtitled "(syllabics for T. G.)", who must be Thom Gunn, a more faithful Winters disciple who also headed for the open territory of syllabics. The poem speaks, in lines of seven syllables, of a poet who, not wishing

... to raise his
voice when he spoke of such mat-
ters as the collapse of the

Something Empire, or of things
the folk suffer from, ... sim-
ply set in words such meanings
as were there, and then, when he

finished the final verse, van-
ished in the blank below it...

The poem is very funny in the way it plays with form and meaning, but no less than the Epilogue to *The Sum*, it insists on setting *meanings* in words, and this opens a door (or loads a gun?) for the whole shooting match of Stephens' later work. As he writes in a short Note to his third volume, *Tree Meditation and Others* (not, he would insist, "*and Other Poems*," as the usual such collection title would run):

The poems are descriptive meditations rather than meditative
descriptions — I mean that they are first and last about subjects,
not objects, despite what may be appearances to the contrary.

Stephens' second book lumbered under an awkwardly abstract title, *Between Matter and Principle*, mixing sections in traditional meters with experiments in the new syllabics. One group, "The Liquor Festival," adapted songs in Ruth Underhill's studies and translations of "Papago" (properly

now called Tohono O'odham) ceremonies, and as it happened, I saw him approaching the outset of that subject the first time I ever identified him in person. I was standing filling out a library card by pencil while the man beside me printed and signed his name *Alan Stephens* on a card for Underhill's *Singing for Power*. So that was Alan Stephens! It was several years before I dared call him "Al," which seemed too easy-going for such a grim-faced, rapidly moving man. His wife Fran told me she was introduced to him by the only one of his friends who used to call him "Al." To the rest he was "Alan." "Play it again, Al," seemed an unlikely request to be uttered in his presence, and yet — and yet I remember a party up Boulder Canyon, in Colorado, at Wendell and Harriett Harris's hospitable house, where Al joined an impromptu band led by Wendell's banjo in a flood of old familiar songs. They were moved by the spirit of the Papago Liquor Festival, to whose dancers the Elder spoke:

Let none grow unruly —
I have made this liquor

that you may drink and, all
in measure, the songs come:...

and among whom a Youth sings his drunken song:

To the ground of little
Gray Mountain holding, I

become drunk: beautiful,
soon, the unfolding song...

I saw, I swear, Al Stephens doing this, with a couple of Colorado beers in him, on the bass instrument, a galvanized steel laundry tub turned upside down, a hole drilled in its center from which a rope emerged, and was tied to a broom handle which he moved back and forth to change the pitch, and *thrummed*, entirely swept up in the rhythms of the occasion: a party at Wendell and Harriett Harris's house up Boulder Creek. I envied Al for this release from the power of the rationality he exercised at other times — i.e., most of the time, although he wrote poems possessed by powers darker than any he allowed into his published books, as this excerpt demonstrates:

Demonology

Exposition

1. Yes, it's distressing, the demon appears in you as quietly as, say, a large pimple appears overnight on a teenager's nose.
2. In dreams he sometimes resembles a man, sometimes the demons in old pictures — greenish, a baked-looking skin. He changes rapidly.
3. In your contest with him, you may think at times to ignore him, having observed that he thrives on attention: the thought that you have succeeded in this, though, is a signal to him to come rushing back with a furiousness that will astound you: you discover he is more serious than you yourself have ever been. ...

5. *Genesis West*

Genesis West (“a garden to grow the world again”) was a short-lived magazine edited by Gordon Lish before he went on to wider fields at *Esquire* and elsewhere. Its Associate Editor, Barney Childs, was a composer at Arizona State University, where Stephens taught for a couple of years before and after Stanford and before Santa Barbara, and who must have been the link that drew him into the second issue (Winter 1962), which made a “*Genesis West* Presentation” of twelve pages of Stephens’ poems with a laudatory yet not effusive three-page preface by Alan Swallow. Six of the poems were in traditional meter and rhyme, and six were in syllabics, including, most interestingly to me, four poems grouped as “Sevens” (seven seven-syllable-line stanzas). “Numbers” was a term for “Meter” or “Measure” in Pope’s time, and here Stephens was numbering syllables in this new way. Instead of thickly abstract stanzas like this one in “The Adventurer: A Note:”

Earth alters. The rare,
At its time and place
Settling deeper, with reserve
Watches drawing near
Another strange face.

we find scenes as clear as this opening stanza of “Bearings: at a Sierra Resort:”

My wife and I stand watching
our three small sons veer and skid
in dust scattered with mica,
points of light zigzag with them
down the fragrant trough of air
the road makes in the trees—road
and roadside store are quiet.

In my 1962-63 diary (which I was filling more self-consciously than usual since it was “A Journal of My XXXth Year”) I noted:

Saw Alan [*sic*] between classes, while I was drinking a cup of orange drink, and told him how much I enjoyed his poems in *Genesis West*, especially the “Sevens” syllabics. He seemed grateful and pleased, he said he “had a lot of fun writing ’em.” “It’s quite a change, isn’t it?” Yes, it is. “Have you enjoyed making the change?” Yes (nodding), I have. He is working on a batch of new ones.

They did not seem as staunchly “intellectual” as the Winters School would have liked, although the symmetry of the sevens may have consoled some ruffled feelings about form, and the depth of thought was sounded more lightly than strongly stressed accentual-syllabics might have encouraged. As the decades passed, he often deployed rhyme and meter in widely varied stanzaic formations — George Herbert, who invented a new combination of line lengths and rhyme scheme for almost every poem he wrote, was one of Stephens’ true exemplars — but often with an ease that made you stop and count in order to check the pattern.

In a reading in the early 1960’s in the lounge of one of the campus dorms (Santa Rosa, I believe; they were all named for the Santa Barbara Channel Islands), his audience reclining in big stuffed 1950’s easy chairs, Stephens read only a couple of poems in traditional forms. Most were in syllabics, which he likened to driving a sports car on mountains roads, making quick turns at

unexpected points. He then dropped an ambiguous hint about other forms he might try, even formless ones, and Leighton Steele, who wrote a dissertation on Wallace Stevens under his supervision, jumped on it, “Do you mean you might try free verse?” If so, that would have been headline news, but Stephens dodged it like a rock in the road. But yes, he did go on to write free verse — and more syllabics, and finally, more accentual-syllabic rhyming poems, all together. He was a maverick not to be branded by any single *ranchero*.

6. The Turn-Around

The three sons mentioned in “Bearings” I first saw rough-housing (as my father called it when I would run and dive onto him in bed on a Sunday morning) on the sloping lawn by the South Hall parking lot turn-around (long since paved over for pedestrian walkways). They wrestled more *ferociously* than I had ever seen boys do. In the *White River Poems*, Stephens remarks of one of the Utes, called “Jack,”

... Such a man
And the world are brothers wrestling.
He does not forget which of the two of them
Is the elder and will win.

Across that two-row lot from what is now Girvetz Hall (Professor Harry Girvetz was then the most active politician inside and outside the Academic Senate) was one of the wooden buildings left over from the Marine Air Base which the campus had supplanted — a sprawling mess hall or non-commissioned officers club, by the look of it to my Army-base eyes. Since then it has been variously used, repartitioned and repainted, now serving as the Women’s Center (over which the spirits of old Corporals and Sergeants must hover, grinding their teeth), but for a while it held the campus Bookstore, which then even sold a few non-textbooks and literary magazines. When the 1964 issue of *Spectrum* appeared on its rack, I picked up a copy excitedly; Al (by then no longer “Alan”) as a Faculty Advisor had told me it would be printing a poem of mine, which would be my first appearance in the magazine, which had then considerable national prestige. I wasn’t listed in the Contents, and my poem wasn’t in the text. I bought a copy and took it to Al in his office. He flipped through it quickly but carefully.

“That little shit, L—,” he hissed, getting up and going after him. I don’t know that I ever heard him swear like that again. The poem came out in the next issue under the politically incorrect title, “In the Indian Room,” which was the label by the door in the Natural History Museum; in later printings it became “In the Chumash Room.” Interestingly enough, for political and perhaps ethical reasons, the objects it describes have been removed from the Museum. I am certain that the tightness of my stanza form was influenced by the “formalism” of the Tradition that Edgar Bowers and Al Stephens exemplified:

In the Chumash Room

(Formerly the "Indian Room" of the Santa Barbara Natural History Museum. The grave has not been exhibited for many years.)

A lowered ploughshare, new-honed, cut deeper and
Gave this grave birth:
Eased out, into a bright, box-like glass stand
In the dim museum, skeleton and earth.

Whose was it? "A famous person's." A man's,
Splayed on a large
Sperm whale's shoulder blade, a thick smooth bone fan
Studded with star-like shells embedded in tar.

A necklace of perforated star-like shells
Drips down the pressed
Ribs, the backbone, along the pelvic shelves,
A thin rich chain. Baskets and implements, blessed

For the journey, ornaments necessary
And expected,
Are correctly placed; random, unwary,
Some lesser neighbors' loose skulls, disconnected,

Have rolled. Illuminated, brightly lit in
A public tomb: This indeed is to lie unforgotten
With a vengeance, vivid only in the dumb

Memories of children, whose thoughts like feather
Mops dust over
The cramped and child-size image of this father,
Whose long laugh mocks the ground their quick legs cover.

7. “The Poetry of Yvor Winters”

As I have noted, Stephens wrote only a handful of literary critical articles, although he published abstracts of dozens of others for Alan Swallow’s journal, *Twentieth Century Literature*. A piece under the title above, analyzing his one-year mentor’s own poetry, was published there as well. It is respectful but dares to discriminate among good and less good work, though judging nothing like as harshly as his office-mate Marvin Mudrick had done in the *Lugano Review*, dynamiting the work of Winters, J. V. Cunningham, and Edgar Bowers. Instead of accepting or ignoring the reservations, Winters proved to be as touchy as Viola in disguise in *Twelfth Night* — “very comptible, even to the least sinister usage,” and he himself retorted, *ad hominem*, in the journal’s next issue to the effect that if Mr. Stephens had paid attention when he audited Winters’ class, he would not have blundered as he does here. Mr. Stephens did not reply in print, and Winters’ response to his analysis effectively excommunicated him from the Wintersian School of poets and critics, including Edgar Bowers, who outranked him in his own Department, and with whom he rarely exchanged two words ever again — not even the first and last names of Fulke Greville — that I saw or heard.

All the same, after Winters had died, his generous widow Janet Lewis made more than one visit to UCSB, and she was received warmly by Al and Fran Stephens, whom she had befriended during his post-doc year at Stanford, as well as by Edgar Bowers (who — or a friend of whose: his son Alan and I have different recollections, which someone else may be able to settle) ironically bought a property to rent out next to the Stephens house on Cañon Drive.

8. *White River Poems*

On his own he was freed, I think, to explore a range of poetic forms and subjects well beyond his old inclinations. In 1967-68 he spent a year as a Visiting Professor at his alma mater, Denver University. This was a momentous year in the social and political history of the United States: the Vietnam War shifting into high gear and the protests increasing apace, resulting in the decision of Lyndon Johnson not to run for President again, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, all forced our attention to the public arena, and poets followed the news, writing and holding “Readings Against the War.”

Alan Stephens did not join those readings, even though he was no “hawk.” Instead, he began writing his epic on the Meeker massacre of 1879 in Ute Territory, Colorado, where his grandmother had gone to work as a nurse. Its ambition as a book-length presentation of an atrocity of the Old West is matched only by David Mason’s verse novel, *Ludlow*, on the 1914 slaughter of striking coal miner families in Ludlow, Colorado. Where Mason, an avowed New Formalist, sticks to his iambic last throughout, broken into unrhymed eight-line pseudo-stanzas (“pseudo” because they are not held together by end rhyme and run on from one to the next so frequently that the poem might as well be set as unbroken blank verse), Stephens adopts a dozen or more line lengths, meters, and stanzas for his book, whose title in its *Denver Quarterly* first appearance in Fall 1971 elaborated the “subject” with tongue firmly in cheek:

WHITE RIVER POEMS

being a collection of dialogues, tales,
observations, arguments among several
persons, lyrics, remarks, exchanges of
insults, description, harangues, and
reveries, on the subject
of the White River
Massacre
Sept. 29
1879

even more so than on the book's title page, which the Swallow Press published in 1976:

White River Poems

conversations, pronouncements, testimony
recollections and meditations
on the subject of
the White River
Massacre
Sept. 29
1879

One of the more glaring omissions of Twentieth Century American poetic critics is their failure to pay attention to *White River Poems*. Only a couple of discussions have been published; one is a useful five-page introductory summary by Bruce McIver in UCSB's *Spectrum* (Spring 1977), which concludes:

The genius of *White River Poems* lies in the poet's powers of observation, in both his sense for details and his fidelity to actuality. The poems convey the sense that Stephens has been transcribing, in a verse so natural that it seems like prose, the details of what he has seen in going to Meeker, in going among the documents, and in his own mind's eye. The effect of this fidelity to events as he perceives them is not so much a true picture of the actual as a truthful way of perceiving it. As Meeker himself says, truth is "not something we should try/ to say, it makes speech possible,' not something we see,' being the radiance we see by ..." In a remarkably vivid re-creation of an actual event, lit with the radiance he sees by, Alan Stephens has made for us an absorbing record of human suffering.

Another, by Janet Lewis, occupies one page of *The Threepenny Review* (Spring 1987, "A Neglected Book"), and these are all I have seen.

However, instead of reprimanding the misperceptions of those who should not have neglected it, here are the last couple of pages from the book, to suggest what they have missed:

*

I sit writing letters
in the lobby of the broken-down
Meeker Hotel. The talk
of a bent old woman
and two old men,
desultory when I came in,
stopped some time back.
The buzz of a light fixture,
a sniff, a cough,
another cough. The TV set
stands gray and still.
More coughs. Silence.

Mounted heads of bear, deer,
elk, moose, occupy every
available space on the walls
above me, antlers decorate
the pillars and lintels,
against one pillar is an arm-chair
made entirely of antlers,
looking like some
instrument of torture. Below
the heads are mounted
photographs of still more game,
copies of early newspapers,
photographs of early-day
Meeker scenes streams,
plateaus, mountains,
valleys the whole
White River country
crowded into this one
stale room. Near the entrance
photographs of the Meekers,
of Ouray and Chipeta,
Colorow, Johnson, Jack;
on the wall opposite, hung
above the dead TV
a painting of the massacre
by a local hand. Meeker
lies front and center, outstretched
in the dirt. His naked
torso looks painfully white.
Later the talk starts up
led by the desk-lady
chiefly of flying saucers
(she is a firm believer).
Talk lapses when a derelict
woman they know comes in
and tries, as they watch in silence,
to make a phone call,
fails to make her connection,

and then, not having so much as glanced
at any of us, re-enters
the snowy dark. They talk
of her marriages and divorces,
her several religious conversions
(which the desk-lady deploras),
her wanderings. Then one of the old men
declares, 'And she was once
a real good looker.' The other
after a long pause
looks out the window and says,
'I believe it's lettin' up . . .' And the first,
'Damn but she was a looker.'

*

When I finish my last letter
they have all long since retired.
I have the place to myself.
I step outside a moment.
The snow has stopped, the town
lies in the same stillness
as the low hills around it.
The cafe is closed and dark,
the streets are empty,
the buildings look small,
contracted hard
in the clear cold, under
the open starry sky.
I stay a moment longer,
feeling the cold
bite in, and watch the stars,
a great scattering,
variously flash and dim
over the country.

No meter, no end-rhyme—just the facts. The style suggests that Hemingway was one of Stephens' exemplary writers, and a long "Conversation on Hemingway" published in *Spectrum* in 1993 explains why, against the currents of current opinion, springing from the over-publicized experiences of his life away from what he labored, counting words per day, to produce at his stand-up writing desk. In a way, Stephens may be thought of as a Hemingway lucky enough not to have sought or received publicity.

9. Politics and Race Relations

A decade before the publication of *White River Poems*, in 1966, a photo appeared in the then-liberal (now neo-conservative) Santa Barbara *News-Press* showing a young African-American man in white shirt and thin tie, Richard Noakes, a research technologist at Sansum Clinic, pouring coffee for his "neighbors and friends," Alan and Fran Stephens in his "family's modern apartment in Isla Vista." ("Neighbors" was stretching it, since the Stephens family's modern, tiny, house was ten miles away in San Roque, and "friends" may have been a stretch also, though not by Facebook standards.) The tableau must have been arranged by Marjorie Frost, the most active white member of the local NAACP chapter, a genuine neighbor who lived just around the corner from the Stephenses. The

point of their posing was to underline the caption's assertion: "Pleased with present accommodations, the [Noakes] couple reported running into a wall of racial discrimination when house hunting after moving here from the East." In 1969, five years after the Civil Rights Act had passed, another black couple from the East were still running into a wall of racial discrimination when house-hunting in Santa Barbara, and had to be accompanied by a white faculty member to an advertised property, to break through it. The Stephenses' friendliness as a gesture illustrating the desirability of integration had not fixed the problem.

White River Poems begins in a living room in Boulder, Colorado, glamorized with Pueblo and Navaho artifacts, in the Fall of 1967, as talk shifts from "the ghetto riots" to "travel plans" for the upcoming Spring break. In the 1971 *Denver Quarterly* printing of the first dozen pages, the ghetto riots were "Negro riots" — so much had changed from then until the book's publication in 1976 — and this opening chord sets the key in which the story will be played out. That is to say, the plot is largely concerned with "who began it between the two races," the question Frost raises in "The Vanishing Red." "Indian atrocities" are committed by the Utes in Stephens' poems, but what is being done to them by the white settlers is presented even-handedly, loading neither side with prime responsibility — unlike Mason's story in *Ludlow* of bad-guy bosses vs. good-guy workers. One of Stephens' more innovative accomplishments is to have dug out of the archival records direct evidence of the different types of character and personality among the Utes — and some contradictions: one of their main leaders, Jack, was himself not a Ute at all!

Further "ghetto riots" broke out after Martin Luther King was assassinated in May 1968, when Stephens' year of teaching at Denver University was nearly done. Denver was hard hit, and the separatist rhetoric of the Black Panthers was intimidating a great many staunch liberals and integrationists, most of whom tried to stay out of their way. Not Stephens. He arranged to join a meeting with some of their leaders, hoping to talk things over, sensibly and reasonably. And he was of course rebuffed: these were not reasonable debaters any more than Tea Party-goers in the second decade of the Twenty-First Century. But he tried.

In 1961 I had been hesitant about teaching at Santa Barbara, knowing that the English Department's Chairman Hugh Kenner was a buddy of the Editor of the *National Review*, and published frequently there, including a note I had seen suggesting that Yuri Gagarin's first flight in space could have been faked. Indeed, at my job interview luncheon, Kenner mentioned that his summer plans included "going sailing with Bill." Afterwards I said to my wife, "You know which Bill he meant, don't you?"

"Bill Frost?" she asked, not naively, for our colleague's brother had a big yacht and Bill joined him coasting it up from Maine to Newfoundland on occasion.

"No. Bill Buckley."

I think she was more startled than I to wonder, What if all the department leaned so far to the right? But in fact they didn't: when the poet James McAuley, who had founded, with help from CIA money, *Quadrant*, the Australian counterpart of Buckley's *National Review*, came through town and joked at a party about "knee-jerk Liberals," Edgar Bowers offered a blank face in rebuttal. McAuley was surprised to discover that so conservative a metrist and formalist would not nod approval of the standard conservative put-down phrase. He must not have known that Winters himself had displayed his lifetime NAACP membership certificate on his office wall at Stanford, discomfiting one right-leaning graduate student who told me so. And when Bowers died, he left his valuable house on Miramar Beach to the Nature Conservancy.

My point is this: for Alan Stephens, unlike most academic intellectuals at Berkeley and elsewhere, the politics of the day was not a “knee-jerk” topic of conversation, nor does contemporary politics appear often in his poetry. When it does, though, the viewpoint is bound to be distinctive, individual and personal. For example, from the sequence of 72 sonnets, *Running at Hendry's*:

65. Politics: Reading the Papers

On the first page, review of Brecht by Spender.
Asks the tough question last: how come he
Clammed up about Stalin? Because, you see,
Brecht could “play games with evil,” with no tender
Conscience, for the sake of future good. (I render
The prose down to its shred of meat.) Page three,
It's Solzhenitsyn getting by memory
His prose and verse, in the gulag. Old non-bender.
And in the *News*, Bukovsky (Vladimir,
I mean): “I don't like certain ideas because
They bring terrible results.” *His* prose is clear.
“The most dangerous thing is when you start
To limit your conscience” *for the noble cause*. . . .
Cold dusk, and time to run . . . where's the tide-chart?

Bertolt Brecht and Stephen Spender, willing to “play games with evil,” contrast starkly with the “non-bending” Aleksander Solzhenitsyn and the less-known dissident Vladimir Bukovsky, who “was one of the first to expose the use of psychiatric imprisonment against political prisoners in the Soviet Union,” in the words of the useful Wikipedia. The elucidation implied in “Vladimir, I mean” also brings into the contrast another Bukowski, Charles, whose political views were insignificant, and whose popularity as a California poet was irksome to many real poets in California: I never heard Stephens mention his name either favorably, as he did Kenneth Rexroth's, or unfavorably.

In later life — let's say around the time his hair and beard turned white (and it was gray for a very short interval) — Al Stephens mellowed in some definable ways. For one, he became a dog-fancier, having been scared off them by an early traumatic bite on the face — and what's more, a fancier of little dogs. Yappy little dogs, to his visitors' regret. Another sign was the beard, which he grew at two distinct periods of his life, with a gap between. Hugh Kenner said to me during the first, “Al Stephens is the only man who looks more like himself with a beard than without it.” And Al wore his well-trimmed white beard to the end.

10. Sir John Denham *Redivivus*?

When I was attempting to be a true scholar of the Restoration and Eighteenth-Century (now part of, I believe, “The Long 18th Century,” as if it were a golf course hole), I read some of John Aubrey’s *Brief Lives*, and when I first saw Alan Stephens (at that UCSB Library check-out stand), his appearance reminded me of some details of Aubrey’s sketch of Sir John Denham (1615-1669). Denham wrote at least one strikingly original poem, “Cooper’s Hill,” which Samuel Johnson described as “a species of composition that may be denominated *local poetry*, of which the fundamental subject is some particular landscape, to be poetically described, with the addition of such embellishments as may be supplied by historical retrospect, or incidental meditation.” Not a bad general description of Alan Stephens’ work. And in Aubrey’s character sketch, John Denham

... was of the tallest, [Stephens was an inch or more over six feet] but a little incurvetting at his shoulders, not very robust. His hair was but thin and flaxen ... His gate was slow, and was rather a Stalking (he had long legges.) His Eie was a kind of light goose-gray, not big; but it had a strange Piercingness, not as to shining and glory, but (like a Momus [“the personification of fault-finding and criticism” *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*]) when he conversed with you he look’t into your very thoughts...

... He was satyricall when he had a mind to it. [You bet he was!]

Al’s eyes were just as piercing (I wasn’t sure of the color but his son Alan tells me they were “the darkest brown”) and looked into your very thoughts (like the Baby Cockatrice’s). However, walking with Stephens in his 30’s you would, even with longer legs, be hard put to keep up with his gait: he stalked fast. Driving, too, in his earlier years, he went hell for leather (“pedal to the metal” was a pop rhyme not yet coined that would have applied). It was sad, therefore, to accompany him in his late years, walking with painfully slow and cautious steps, or inching along in his car, stop-and-go, on the open country road to Ojai, on which earlier, driving at a much faster pace, he composed one of his smoothest down-shifting poems, after the death of another of his heroes, whose sharply focused intelligence was very much like his own:

The Morning of Glenn Gould’s Funeral

Hearing him now on the car stereo—
 That’s as he wished it when alive—
 I look for browsing deer, and slow
 For the tight down-curves as I drive
 Through deep oak shadows
 Over the back way to Ojai.
The October day burns quiet bright and dry
 In the brown meadows.

The thing he’s playing’s a rocky-riffled clear
 Mountain stream of a piece by Bach:
 The bright quick-moving length of it’s here
 Along with sun and oak and rock
 O brief survival
 Glittering in the light and air,
And in the dark unbreakable silence there
 The new arrival.

When he was ordered by his doctor to surrender his driver's license, he was furious. (His son Alan disagrees, believing that "he quietly gave up driving, after scaring himself a couple of times.") And yet, behind this appreciation of one use of the internal combustion engine lay a fierce boyhood hatred of tractors for displacing the horses he had begun his farm life by leading, and loving. There was a loss he could never forget or forgive, as poems in *The Heat Lightning* illustrate.

In early middle age, when his three sons were still in school, Stephens owned a white pick-up truck camper. In this he would drive into the back country, or up the coast, park, and sit in the shell with its back door open wide for the view and air, and read and write. Writing had to be a moveable feast for a full-time, deeply dedicated teacher, and he did much of it in a moveable study.

11. Reading

He began having trouble with his eyes five years or more before his death, and this agitated him even more than losing his driver's license.

"Reading is what I *do!*" he cried, reacting with fury as he must have as a boy when a gasoline-powered tractor replaced the family's plough horses. After that, his wife Fran drove him everywhere. However, the harder it was for him to read, the more he wanted to do it, and the less he needed to go out. He built a sort of fortress around his reading chair in the living room, with bookcases of assorted sizes and finishes, and packed with books of all descriptions. One shelf was nearly filled with volumes from the Everyman's Library Pocket Poets Series, one of them Robert Mezey's *Poets of the American West*, which includes three Stephens poems.

In his long intellectual prime, he was an intensely *active* reader, crafting summaries and queries into margins and then onto those Post-Its, which he used so much they seemed to have been invented for him. Gradually, however, his ability to make sense of written language diminished, but he still didn't give up on books. Camped out most of the day in his reclining reading chair, palisaded by bookshelves even up behind his head, he would pull out a book and invite a visiting friend to hold it, turn the pages, feel it, smell it—though not giving them time to read it, either to themselves or to him. It was still an object of great affection, which he handled like the retired fisherman (himself again, in the third person) in "Names of Trout Flies." He would *not* take up fishing again, since that would be

... like taking up
years later one of those books
which, as he read it, became
the signal event of that time
in his life. And such a book, once read,
had then become (while his mind
went on to other books and other
concerns) an occupant, vivid and
quiet in him. If one day years later
he took down the book and read
into it a little way, he'd find it was

still alive there in him. There were only
a few such books. The physical
book, the one that got dusty,
he would dust, and put back on its shelf.

12. Writing and Writers

When he retired from teaching it was with the intention of having more time for writing poems. That was his plan, as I understood he would have it. Writing had always (except for sabbaticals) been squeezed into gaps of time between the reading and preparation and teaching of classes. One of our younger colleagues, a flamboyant sort who would announce on being introduced, “I’m a poet,” as Stephens would never say out loud for fear of jinxing himself, or appearing vain, once left a note on his campus door:

*Office hour canceled—
Writing a poem*

If Stephens noticed that he would have smiled tolerantly—not scoffed—at the pretension. He respected the art, and tolerated those who tried to make it, whatever their character blemishes. One poet well-known at the time, Kenneth Rexroth, never Stephens’ friend in either the old barroom buddy, or the new faceless Facebook sense of the word, had quickly made himself *persona non grata* to the English Department, which was paying him generously for very little present work—more to have him as a name to drop. Despite his own work ethic, Stephens despised the writer who he felt was acted against less than the professors who acted against him, “treating him badly.” Nevertheless, in a page-long sketch he recorded (but never published) a character of a man, unnamed but utterly recognizable, warts and running sores and all, called “In the Habitat of the Magpie” — which mattered to him enough to stand for a while as the working title of a book manuscript that resolved into *In Plain Air*:

This man of letters who gets along
without a character, this snarler
or bootlicker as the occasion demands,
this dirty joke teller, this name dropper
with the carny air, this purveyor
of third-rate literary gossip, with
the direct, deeply sincere gaze
and determined mouth of the veteran
con man, bloated, blear-eyed:
cruising the straight campus
tottering but there, there
every day! with the wonderful
battered dignity of the durably
disreputable, this moral garbage scow
expertly piloted on the warm
tidal currents of self-pity, this
sentimentalist with the ready supply
of clear, rattler-venom malice,
this past master at blending the arrogance
and the cringing of the panhandler

(enough warts and sores, you'd think, to sink him several levels down in Dante's *Inferno*, and in Stephens' esteem? Read on, dear reader!)

has composed some splendid poems (yes)
and is more intelligent, has more ideas,
thinks better, writes more elegantly
and copiously in prose and knows more (yes)
than all but one or two of all those
that loathe him and don't dare
challenge him face to face.

Visiting writers were dropping like a platoon of parachutists onto the Denver University campus in 1967-68 when Stephens was there as a Visiting Professor. By his own account, he ducked and hid from them all day as from an invasion of enemy troops, staying out of their way until their readings, which he could not escape attending, but at which he could hope they would not recognize him. Almost always, I think, it was painful for him to listen to other poets reading their work: either they would read good poems badly (over-theatrically) or, more often, they would read bad poems badly — or too “effectively,” wallpapering over their faults. As a result, when he himself gave one of his very rare readings — unlike most of those visiting storm-troopers he was never a traveling salesman on the Poetry Circuit, nor an entrepreneur in what had been dubbed, by Louis Simpson, “Po Biz” — he was likely to be barely audible. His voice was not strong in the first place, and sometimes, given a microphone to amplify it, he perversely refused to test its placement, leaving all but the first row or two of his audience to wonder what he was saying. In this, it occurs to me, he was like Glenn Gould, who gave up concertizing in favor of studio recording — except that Stephens didn't record, either — except, of course, in writing. What he really gave up was “the audible reading of poetry” (the title of one of Yvor Winters' most direct and convincing essays, though advising a style of half-chanting that Stephens would never dream of) in favor of poems intended for silent, or private reading. In public he would read them swiftly, almost silently, almost “privately.”

As his son Alan remarks at the end of his Note to the *Collected Poems* he has lovingly and meticulously edited: “He may be found in his poems.” Or, as Ben Jonson, another Stephens hero, wrote in an epigraph to *his Collected Poems* (the first such volume to be published by an English poet):

Pray thee, take care, that tak'st my book in hand,
To read it well: that is, to understand.

13. Not Writing but Drawing

The plan to write more when he retired fell through. In one of the saddest poems I have ever read, he registered what happened:

A Last Time

He still has poems to write
but that region of his mind
which got busy and mobilized
the words, will not budge now.

It's like an old saddle horse
that has stopped on his own.
The rider puts a heel
to the flank. The horse stands there,

then turns his head back around,
rolling an eye at his rider
as if to say, You ought to know
that if I could I'd go on.

This poem appears midway through that final book, *Away from the Road*, and it is followed by some magnificent long poems, but it foretold what did come true. Stephens stopped writing altogether.

For a while he returned to a childhood passion for drawing. His grandfather had taught him to paint when he was a boy back on the farm in Colorado, and some of his Literature students, excellent prose writers, had turned to painting after graduation. The Santa Barbara Landscape School, in which Stephens' UCSB colleague Hank Pitcher was a leading light, gave them license to paint what they saw around here, shunning myth and symbol, surrealism and minimalism, and whatever up-to-date styles would sell in New York galleries (where some of them, including Pitcher, have nevertheless sold). Stephens worked with a very fine pencil, and on a tiny scale: six inches wide by two inches high, I would guess to be the dimensions of one landscape drawing, and three-by-four, at most, for one of his little dog Molly.

But before long, as I said, his eyes began to give out, too. Nobody said "from overuse," but besides all the reading he did, his poems offer close-up after close-up of native grasses, trees, birds, and earth, and when he had not been out drawing the landscapes of the back country in words, he often photographed them. Back home he covered the walls of his living area with small prints, both his own photos and reproductions of famous works of art, as Van Gogh writes of doing, in his *Letters* (of which Stephens had two editions). He had *used* his vision to the maximum. A book could be written on the centrality of the visual to Stephens's work. And, sadly, his son Alan suggests his father's failing eyesight may have been due to a series of small strokes, as the family learned "when cataract surgery failed to correct his vision in one eye."

It's my opinion that he ran his finely engineered body, mind, and feelings like the nippy red convertible sports car he loved driving in the 1960's — see *White River Poems* for the trip he made in it from Denver to Meeker, Colorado — and rather than moderate the speed at which he ran them, it *was* hell for leather all the way until they more or less wore out. Insomnia should be added as a factor in this process of wearing down. No-one was a more diligent teacher of literature, but in addition, while he was writing his intense, sharply focused poems, he was fishing and hiking in the back country, he was playing poker once a month with a group of other academics, he was keeping track of the L. A. Dodgers (who only occasionally gave him the satisfaction of winning the League and, very rarely, the World Series), he liked watching old movies in black and white, he and his wife walked the dog every evening, he drove through the Southwest every few years, he once, and once only, spent three weeks in England, keeping off the motorways and out of the big cities, sending back postcards crammed with his tiny handwriting, and being delighted beyond measure when, coming down the steps of Salisbury Cathedral, he was greeted by a native of the country, who doffed his cap and greeted him, "Morning, Guv'nor." Thomas Hardy was one of his favorite writers, and one highlight of the trip was seeing the Harvest Home offerings piled over the altar of the church near Hardy's house. It's interesting to note where he placed Hardy in a *Hendry's* sonnet defending his convictions against others of the era:

69. What the Wind Hissed

A chill gray day and a wind began to blow:
Where will you get with that plain water style?
Running's a joke that long since has gone stale,
Seascapes were old a century ago.
 I like plain words, I always have been slow.
And the names you drop. Milton of course is vile,
And Hemingway! pathetic macho male . . .
And that brute, Robert Frost. I like them, though.
Why Santayana? Surely you want Saussure.
And Rilke's missing. Really I much prefer
Hardy. He's fading fast. Herbert? OK. . . .
And Homer? Fine. My dirty words? Passé.
Here, try a Barthes. Somehow it lacks allure,
 Such is my hesychastic** mood today.

14. Of Dogs and Men

As I've noted, when they finally got a dog, the Stephens family adopted a small, scruffy, black-haired mongrel they named Bill — after William Carlos Williams, I believe. Bill was one of the ugliest dogs my wife and I had ever seen. Also he barked a lot, which may have been a good precaution in their rather lonely neighborhood, but which annoyed the hell out of us when we came to visit, and he seemed totally undisciplined in every other way.

In the dust jacket photo of *Between Matter and Principle*, you can see a young-looking Alan Stephens holding a tall mug of coffee, which he continued to rely on, and smoking a

**appeasing* (OED)

pipe, which he did only long enough for his son Alan to emulate while still in high school, but for the last forty years of his life Al smoked nothing. Once, in the Sixties or Seventies, he was asked by some of his hipper students if he had ever tried pot, which he had known as the drug of choice among Mexican farm-workers in his youth.

“As soon as it’s legal I’ll try it,” was the answer, typical of Stephens’ cautious adventurousness. He was a law-abiding citizen. During the tumultuous protests of the decade from the mid-Sixties to the mid-Seventies, he stayed out of the street demonstrations which many of the younger professors boldly joined, some getting jailed for their pains, and boasting loudly about it later in the department office.

White River Poems, beginning, as I quoted above, during the “ghetto riots,” offers his independent treatment of the numerous interlocking social and political “issues” raised in that period. Unusually among poets, Stephens rose above partisanship by setting those intractable problems back in history, with the story of the Nathan Meeker Massacre of 1879 in the Ute Territory standing in for all the current turmoil in American cities. This epic, as it deserves to be called, was published in 1976, the Bicentennial Year, when efforts were being made to draw the country together after the riots and assassinations had torn it apart. Not that many people read *White River Poems*, or took it that way, but those who did found some comfort, I would testify, from the power of high art to moderate the fierceness of political and rhetorical chaos.

15. Slim

His slender frame was an embodiment of the old Western nickname “Slim,” but I never heard anyone call him that. He seldom wore short-sleeved shirts which would have exposed how skinny his arms were. But that was deceptive. His handshake was firm, his biceps and triceps well-toned. He had inherited his slenderness genes, which he passed on to two of his three sons, but as a boy he worked hard enough on the farm to build himself up as much as his physique had been capable of. He was as strong as he needed to be, and that was very strong, which made him able to drive himself so mercilessly.

He used to get into fights in boyhood, and he was a boxing fan who would invite like-minded friends and former students over to watch the fights on TV. It’s hard to imagine him as a boxer, tall and thin, with a long, vulnerable mid-section, yet he could have danced around on those strong slim legs and with a good reach would have landed some stiff jabs. And his intelligence and agility would have been at work as well, developing a strategy. I think I wouldn’t bet, or box, against him.

This carried over into the intellectual sphere as well. He drove himself to read and “understand” as widely as he could. He taught himself Ancient Greek so that he could read Homer in the original, and did so. His son Alan remembers a family celebration the day that he finished the last page of *The Iliad*.

In “First Deposition” he remarks on “the look of Greek on the page” as one of the varied things he would testify in favor of. The list is extraordinary for the range and variety of objects, activities, and feelings that get into it. These are not the puny truisms of a

conventional mind. They embrace so much of the world it is hard to imagine any missing aspect. In a manuscript of 1976 the poem is titled “*Stele*,” a Greek word for an inscribed memorial tablet. The literal meaning of “First Deposition,” with its legal dimension, seems to be not only “I testify to the truth of these statements,” but its emotional overtones: “These are things I love.” I quote the poem as one of his touchstones:

First Deposition

A trout stream in the high Rockies,
my wife’s laughter, a little brass whale
from Taiwan, the sight from my study window
of the two blue hills above the trees,
all kinds of cats, the high desert
of northern Nevada, all particulars
concerning the life and writings of Pope,
the time of sundown and just after,
the grammar of any language, a flawless
sea urchin shell found on Hendry’s beach
and kept around and looked at
almost daily for ten years now,
all the birds, the look of Greek on the page,
cottonwood trees in summer, glistening
above the ditches in the dry country
of the west, the words of English songs
of the period 1580 to 1620,
the smell of lumber, of the iron
in a hoe as you file it, of a horse;
bolts of fine woolen goods;
the Indian head nickel; rain,
snow, sunshine, wind, darkness,
the game of poker, discovering used bookstores
in large cities, the clear recollection
of the house and farmyard of early childhood,
driving through streets to meet someone
at the airport, at an hour, late or early,
when you are not usually out; bare trees,
the rhythms of iambic trimeter;
granite boulders; coffee; the coming
of the early darkness of December.

16. The Ball Turret Gunner

One of the few famous poems to survive from World War II is Randall Jarrell’s “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” and this nightmare station “set in the belly of a B-17 or B-24” (as Jarrell described it) is the one Al Stephens was trained by the Army Air Corps to fill. He wrote no poems about it. In fact, he only began writing poems, according to Alan Swallow in *Genesis West*, during the last year he was studying at the University of Denver, where he took his B.A. and M.A. degrees, and where he helped Swallow with the physical production of his Press’s books. He was never sent overseas, in part thanks to

spending many months in the Infirmary with appendicitis and a double hernia operation. Later, in Santa Barbara, he underwent a more serious operation for a genetically malformed kidney. A long middle section of “A Puff of Smoke” provides a major meditation on the “mind-body problem” which a later hospital experience, perhaps for pneumonia, raises, and which may be one of his most important statements of principle:

— Conscious again; shaking cold,
Interstellar cold sunk in
To the middle of the bones.
No doubt from the shock. A new
Numbness down there, and fresh pain,
And a meek feebleness, and
Morphine, all teach the spirit
How it sits reliantly,
Precariously, astride
Its old mule, the body, now
Tottering along strange roads.

I am still musing upon
The horrors that shape themselves
In the gray country of drained
Vitality, foul places
And presences that we two
Innocents visited, with
A sighting one night (eyes closed)
Of death’s door, going past it
In the hospital basement:
Bare concrete, tall, wide, unmarked,
Set flush in the concrete wall.

*

The stunned spirit monitors
The shocked and wounded body
And itself; and puzzles how
The mind includes the body
The body includes the mind
Equally.

I remember
Using the body the way
One drove a car when a kid:
To see what it could take, from
A curiosity quite
Disinterested, from anger

At a world so impassive
And clearly uninterested
In the spiritual (no
We would not have used that word)
Authority of energies
Our own yet not our own; and
From exuberance When young
We are I think but distantly
Attached to our bodies, being

Ill-informed still on any
Necessity we live by.

Years pass and we sink into
The body. Now warily there
I find I take a kindly
Interest in the more or less
Faithful old mount (that is
When fairly healthy), wryly
Admiring its survival
Of pain, sickness, and danger,
With recollections of work,
Food, sleep, love, talk; of places
Where for moments all was well.

And one day we are body,
And nothing more. Though spirit
Is instructed by the body
Not the other way around,
It's in the spirit only
That instruction can take place
—Of what grand elaborate sorts—
While a definition of
The body might be: What knows,
Really knows its lessons, so
Is a fully accredited

Member of the cosmos. While
The spirit, born ignorant
Of its own rules, and the world's,
At the end has, at best, earned
Only a provisional,
Temporary membership,
Still more ignorant than not
(Which must befit it, must be
Of its nature)—and at worst
Will be all but blackballed (yet
Never quite, even at worst?)

17. Post-Its, NPR, Liquid Gel Pens, etc.

A Moment for Encomium

By John Ridland

I break open a three-pack
of those EnerGel Metal Tip Pens
you were the first to brandish —
as you were first to discover
the minute miracle of Post-Its

(which your tiny handwriting fit),
and, well before that, sleepless
at midnight, you picked up NPR,
its intelligence and range, its interest.
Nothing like it before,
except Pacifica's KPFA
flooding the Bay Area with jazz,
floating a coracle of classical,
and a bargeload of Opinions —
mostly blown from the Left.

You carved your own opinions
from the hardest wood you could find —
hefty thinkers like Eric Hoffer,
the Longshoreman Philosopher;
the Ancient Greeks; the Greeks' interpreters,
Martha Nussbaum, Santayana;
Hardy and Hemingway,
Frost, Stevens, Dr. Williams:
you read as wildly as a prairie-fire...
like the dry-earth farm boy you'd grown up,
let loose in a forest of numberless
trees, of all qualities —
hardwood for carving,
firewood for heat and light,
and some of them punk: soft, squishy,
giving, like dough in a bowl.

Your judgment never sashayed
down the fashion aisles,
though you knew the names
and all the shapes of Literature,
as a Professor should.
(You'd set this piece aside
under the heading, "Encomia.")
We all were grateful that Death
let you sleep your last week out,
unsuffering, unconscious, resting up
for the hard journey. At the end, Tim,
your youngest, on morning watch
with your eldest, Alan — Dan,
your middle son, on an errand —
leaned forward, whispering,
"Is he still breathing?"
and you weren't.

October 12, 2009.

My poem asserts another fact, that Stephens was an adventurer not only in poetic technique but in practical matters of the physical world. As I've said, when Post-Its were new, not so long ago, Al was constantly writing short quotes from his wide reading on them and leaving them in

colleagues' mailboxes. The story of Spencer Silver's accidental development of a glue that didn't stay stuck, and Art Fry's realization that it could be put to the use we are all now familiar with (in Fry's case, as a place marker for his hymnal that wouldn't flutter free) is the sort of serendipitous unintended result Stephens loved, not unlike the way his *White River Poems* grew from a news story in a Sunday supplement to the *Denver Post*. (If he had not been spending that year teaching at D.U., might the epic not have been written?) Another such discovery was that Robert Frost was not the kindly old white-haired philosopher he had made himself out to be but the toughest-minded Modern poet of them all — a view that others have come to latterly.

Away from the Road, as a title, finally gets his territory located correctly. It wasn't the now hackneyed "road less traveled by," but away from any roads at all, following footpaths only, and sometimes not even those, as in "Reflecting Pool:"

The sound of a waterfall down below
had made him turn off the trail; now
he was working his way down,
crouching to get under low
branches, shoving aside or
snapping off the smaller stuff,
his boots skidding, his cap
snatched off once, his pack
twice lodging against a limb,
stopping him dead with a jolt,
making him bend even lower
to go on. He was sliding sidewise
when the falls and its big pool
came into sight. He was here
for the first time.

His reflections follow, focusing sharply, and often close-up, on the sort of experience that coming frequently to this one place has enabled him to attend to, with what Barry Spacks once called "meticulous attention, i.e., love," or Henry James, "the habit of a sort of heroic attention."

18. Subjects Matter

Our 2011 Poet Laureate, W. S. Merwin, has been quoted as saying: "Prose is about something, but poetry is about what can't be said." It was against such smug self-satisfaction ("I am a poet. I say what can't be said by lesser 'people' — by prose writers, like you, dear reader.") that Stephens set himself both before and after he took the road the Winters team had not traveled by. I have already cited his short note to *Tree Meditation and Others* (1970), but it is worth restating:

The poems are descriptive meditations rather than meditative descriptions — I mean they are first and last about subjects, not objects, despite what may be appearance to the contrary.

This is not to say Stephens's subjects are like "theme topics" in a Freshman writing class, written in the prose Merwin disdains for being "about" something. The title poem of the book just mentioned turns on a visionary dream focused on a huge old cottonwood tree on the farm where he grew up. The poem is turned, as on a lathe, on the seven-syllable, non-accentual line which Stephens was comparing to iambic pentameter blank verse in the Renaissance for its fresh, all-around versatility (organized in this poem into unrhymed eleven-line stanzas — seven and eleven both being traditional lucky numbers):

I approach and a cavern
slopes upward into the huge
interior of the tree.
At the threshold I look up
and see on the crest in light
(a regular, clear nimbus)
a great deer standing quietly;
in the cave's natural dark
the deer's wholly visible.
It looks at me; its eye shines.

I have no inclination
to approach any closer;
according to the dream's plan
I've had a look at my life
which is all I was to do
that was the feeling at first;
then the sense of the dream changed
the deer was merely life
itself, being presented
in repose for a moment,
so that I could look at it.

It's hard to exaggerate how radical a statement this concentration on "subjects" was at the time. Subjects *matter*? Searching for this or that Stephens poem, or line, I'll find myself asking "Where is that poem about (whatever it is)?" remembering it by its subject, the poem being a meditation on that subject. It takes time to attend to and describe the salient features of the subject, and features of an "object" may get described along the way with careful attention paid to them as well. It's as if a photograph of the setting sun were framed by silhouettes of oak branches. The setting sun would be the subject on which to meditate (and a really violent sunset offers much material for meditation), but in composing the *picture*, the oak branches force themselves into it, even though they are not the subject of this photo/ poem (they might very well be of another, like "Tree Meditation"). Only as the range of Stephens' *subjects* is examined more fully will the depth and breadth of his work be acknowledged.

Such an examination might compare Merwin's longish "Fox Sleep," with Stephens's "The Fox." "Fox Sleep" would be ashamed of being called anything as plain as a narrative poem, because a narrative, a story with a plot, would require a subject that could be summarized, and even a narrator. Nor would it stand still to be tagged with a metrical label; *form* and *narrative* are tarred with the same brush — or they star on the same stage, as for many Junes at the annual West Chester University Conference on Form and Narrative in Poetry. Merwin's title refers first to a sleeping fox carved in the stone of a hand mill and later to the body of a vixen "just dead with no sign of how it had come to happen" which the speaker carries home to bury in his garden — another fox put to sleep. Very sympathetic to the wild animal, the Laureate is a vegan or vegetarian.

Stephens' "The Fox," by contrast, is brimming with narrative details, that is, with subjects for meditation out of real life, almost certainly the poet's own life which he is recollecting. It begins:

Fall came and he took a leave
(certain he could not sit through
another graduate class — not
yet), wrote a bit, taught one class —
he liked to teach, they needed
the money he put with what
she earned at her office job.

He'd fish the small stream that ran
below the cliffs at the edge
of town. They ate what he caught;
ate the blackberries, soft-ripe
large ones, that grew at streamside.
They made some blackberry wine,
once, from a small bucketful.

And sometimes he went hunting.
He found a good single-shot
.22 in a cluttered
second-hand store outside town.
It was old but well cared-for
smelt of gun-oil, and the bore
was bright, clear of corrosion.

Already the Laureate would be unhappy: this man buys and carries a gun, willingly, and judges its condition and quality as he might a poem's. He is going to hunt animals and eat them, never having had his living provided for him, except for a stint in the Army Air Corps, which barely counts as food and lodging. Merwin, as he himself has put it, for some time was "moving around Europe, tutoring the children of wealthy families," before withdrawing in his latter years to an old pineapple plantation in Hawaii and replanting it with native flora (a noble ecological project, which Stephens would have approved, I am sure —although he found Merwin's poems tiresome: dull). Stephens eked out a living for his growing family through graduate school scholarships and the GI Bill of Rights (Merwin "to this day feels claustrophobic on a university campus"), while his wife worked in an office, and, as the poem just quoted states, he augmented their diet with wild berries, fish that he caught, and squirrels he shot with the .22, which they ate with relish, although:

Like chicken, they said.
But no — an alien tang

which cooking, seasoning,
could never quite rid it of...

This meager livelihood cuts a small, sheepish figure beside the famous poet's aristocratic or bohemian "life-style," but it has, to my mind, an American integrity, it is "in the American grain," like the life of one of the writers he most admired, the hard-working GP, Dr. William Carlos Williams of Paterson, New Jersey. One feels the squirrel and trout lives that Stephens took must have been taken with respect, out of necessity. By contrast, the main plot action in his fox poem presents another mode of pursuit: there turns out to be a fox hunt in progress, such as those wealthy families of Europe may have indulged in despite their children's American tutor's presumed disapproval. (Alan, the younger, suggests that "fox hunts in Missouri in 1954 were not likely the pursuit of the wealthy." Still, even poor folks then and there would have left the eating of any chicken-killing foxes they caught to the dogs.)

Stephens is resting on a stream bank, carrying his rifle but having shot no squirrels, when

He heard a dry, light rustling
far up past the bend upstream.
For all its slightness, the sound
came to him clearly, the air
having been still for so long.
He looked upstream and waited.
What appeared around the bend

was a gray fox. It was tired,
and came on, down the center
of the streambed, at a slow
steady trot with its head low,
its tail level with its back.
It held its eyes straight ahead
as it drew near where he sat.

They were eyes dulled by fatigue.
Mud had soaked its legs, belly,
and flanks, and matted the long,
fine fur of the underside
of its plume. The fox went by
sparing itself the effort
of a glance aside at him,

and rounded the bend downstream.
He listened till the dwindling
rustle of leaves had died out,
and then he kept on listening
in the new stillness around
for some minutes. Well, he thought,
he has built up a good lead.

He pictured the fox moving
through the coming dusk and dark
downstream toward settled country.
He could not convincingly
see where the fox then might go.
He was getting up to leave
when he first heard the foxhounds.

The far-off, varied baying,
oddly melodious, came
drifting in through the stillness.
Yes, they're a long way upstream.
And this creekbed that the fox
chose for its course, is a choice
course for a pack of foxhounds.

He did not stay on to watch
the pack go by. He gathered
his gun and rucksack and left,
glad he had brought a flashlight.
He knew this breed was tireless.
They'd stream past, wild-eyed, long ears
flapping, tails up and waving

There's no question where the poet's sympathies lie, which of the animals he can feel for, just as there are no doubts that eventually the fox will be caught and killed — though not for any essential, life-preserving meal. And he could even have shot it himself, though such a thought never crosses the poem's mind. There may be good reasons for hunting and killing some foxes — when the old song's "fox went out on a chilly night," after all, he slung "the gray goose over his back," and brought home somebody else's food to his family, who "never had such a supper in their lives,/And the little ones chewed on the bones-O..." Stephens's fox is bedraggled, tired out from the chase, and he will be cruelly killed by the hounds (who sound less than heroic in Stephens' telling), and with that death, one fewer truly wild creature will be left in the woods.

Nor will the poet's surrogate remain there. And neither will we be over-reaching for meanings if we sense an affinity between the exhausted fox and the poet-scholar who had taken a leave from his studies "(certain he could not sit through/ another graduate class—not yet)." He will, though. By the end of the poem:

He had done all you did for
the degree. They were leaving
that place, for one with no woods
but plenty of cactus; then
on to a place with ocean,
and mountains. They settled there,
knew the mountain trails, the streams,

knew shores after winter storms
left them stony, driftwood-strewn;
knew the salt-marshes, russet
in winter, where shore-birds came
from the far north. Certain days
they've had there stay in his mind,
none more detailed, none clearer,

than the day he saw the fox.

Detail and clarity, then, are two of the principles in Stephens' treatment of the matter of this world: "Between Matter and Principle" does make good sense as a title for his second book. And clarity of purpose seems to be a standard by which we can judge any or all of his poems, without underestimating their complexity of meaning.

19. His Modesty

Stephens inserted a small loose sheet (before Post-Its) into the copy of *Tree Meditation and Others* he gave my wife and me, on which he had written:

“One opens a friend’s book with dread, every trick of style has its associations, we wonder perpetually... how a man we have buckled to our heart can have so little sense.”

W. B. Yeats on a book by AE.

Such a gesture is self-deprecating to an extreme — the self-trumpeting Norman Mailer title *Advertisements for Myself* could not be farther from anything Stephens could write — yet I do not doubt he nursed the blue flame of Ambition, all but invisible, shielding it from the winds of Fame. His fellow Stanford Stegner Fellow, Thom Gunn, in *The Yale Review* as early as 1964 had predicted that “a tradition enormously fruitful” could follow from Stephens’ example. They had known each other in the Winters workshop, and both wrote themselves away from the “Arthritis” of some of the more dutiful shop workers, as I have mentioned, but always felt free to rhyme to meter if they wanted.

This predicted tradition may still come to pass, as the students who went through Stephens’ far less rigid classes ripen to maturity and find themselves onstage in a publishing world where Poetry with a capital “P” is being given at least more lip service than it had been in 1964, a decade about to plunge into turbulent political rhetoric, the bane of poetry, which Stephens did not plunge into — unlike Robert Frost, who couldn’t resist tossing his two cents into the political ring.

The academic ring was another matter, and Stephens took to that as a boxer might, publishing some searing epigrams on the incursions of sociological and “cultural” theory into the reading of Literature, for example:

So-and-So Reassesses Yeats

The mystery’s not that like the poet you are made of dust & spittle,
It is that after all these years you’d look so hard and see so little.

And again:

Professor Bath’s Talk on Shakespeare’s Sonnets

Forgot his notes? Over-confident? While we waited
He employed charm, and when that dissipated
He stalled, digressed, tried more charm, made
One little point, digressed, once more delayed —
We writhing under the infrequent drip
Of meaning from a lifetime’s scholarship.

20. Nature and People

In one encyclopedia of modern American poets, Stephens is belittled as a “nature poet,” which is no truer of him than it was of Frost, who said he “did not write Nature Poems: there’s always people in ’em.” As against the view of “Nature” as limited to “Pretty Scenery,” Stephens no less than Frost would side with Epicurus and Lucretius, who “By Nature meant the Whole Goddam Machinery” (Frost, “Lucretius Versus the Lake Poets”). Thus “Tree Meditation” spends many lines describing a Western Cottonwood (neither a California live oak nor a Mediterranean olive, nor the Midwestern pond-edge dwellers with snaky surface roots misleadingly pictured in the cover photo of the Swallow Press first edition — perhaps because it was no longer published out of Denver, where Alan Swallow, by then deceased, had lived and worked). The poem is acutely perceptive in its depiction of the tree, but the subject is human. It closes after a caravan of cars passes on its way to a cemetery, telling us that someone who knew a lot of people has died, probably an old-timer like the poet, who remembered how things used to be around there. Stephens wrote this poem after a visit to the old family farm in Greeley. Atypically, he had accepted a one-week residency at the Ruth Stephens (no relation) Poetry Center in Tucson, which conveniently had a Cottonwood tree growing in its yard. The poem appeared first in the *Denver Quarterly* and next in a limited edition illustrated by Donald Lent from the Bowdoin College Press, a book called *The Heat Lightning*, observing what was left of the old farm and lamenting the changes suburbanization had brought. His viewpoint was not *Nostalgia* (home-sickness), rather a *Nost-hygienia*, a healthiness produced by thinking, feeling, and writing so clearly about what had been lost and what remained, not merely lamenting. In that way it illustrates the emphasis on “the health of the poem,” i.e., the health a poem can offer and represent for writer and reader, which his epigraph to *Between Matter and Principle* had set forth:

Be with me, powers
of the tongue I love,

sources of clarity in
the turns of life:

that the slow action of the
understanding and the motions

of the rapid feelings
breathe in a unison—
health howsoever brief.

The last line balances, for me, with the title of the lost lecture, “The Simplicity of the Poem,” in suggesting an entirely different *poetics* from that prevailing at the time. Freud had decreed that all writers were neurotic (or worse), that there was no health in them (as the Book of Common Prayer had already instructed all Anglicans, not just those who were poets), and Plato had urged the Platonists to kick the Poets out of the Republic. Stephens’ invocation turns that entire line of thought on its head, seconding Frost’s famous assertion that a poem is “a momentary stay against confusion.” I remember Stephens in a poetry reading in Denver (January 24, 1968) describing the poems approved by the New Critical approach in vogue in English classrooms of his college days as stretching before the reader like “flowery meadows with hidden personnel mines.” These he contrasted to poems of the Native American Southwest, which were “quiet in a penetrating way... a low sound that carries far. Very clear in its imagery, very limited in feeling” — the direction his own poems were to take.

21. Green Land

Stephens was regarding the ecosystem as “green” before the term came into general use as a short cut for “ecologically sound.” In boyhood, whenever he had time off from his chores, he used to “walk the almost seven miles to the nearest fishing—a weedy little lake at the edge of town.” (Interview with Robyn Bell.) One of the poems in his last book is titled “Names of Trout Flies,” almost an addendum to “First Deposition,” whose opening line was “A trout stream in the high Rockies.” (Section 15 above.) He was a keen birdwatcher: of shorebirds and pelicans while running at Hendry’s Beach, of suburban “DBBs” (Dull Brown Birds) and brighter ones simply by looking out his window to the backyard feeder, and of rarer species in the Santa Ynez mountains on solitary hikes or with his wife’s Audubon Society bird group. His Life List, counting only those that get named in his poems, is varied and substantial, and particularized in detail. There are several Herons, whom he took as his totem when he was toying with the idea that he was already an old man (at fifty), in a number of poems whose titles contained the Greek word *Geron* (root of *Gerontology*):

Geron the Heron

A fragment

There, leaning alone,
A thin crooked dark shape inside the blaze
Of the low sun and the blaze-back of the sea:
Now the breeze freshens, lifting his scant crest. He
Is finishing this one more of certain days
He has made his own.

The bird he seems most to admire in a poem is one of the most solitary:

The Ross’s Gull

Whenever the Arctic winter nears
and the white sun just clears
the earth’s rim and the tundra colors go
under the new snow
and the terns and plovers make their flight
away from a solid night
and ptarmigan, fox, owl, hare
turning white, disappear
on the white space under the black sky
and the gulls, too, fly
by coast and open waters down
to where there’s green and brown,
the Slaty-backed, the Glaucous, the pale
gray Iceland gull —
then the little Ross’s gull makes a strange
migration from his summer range
in north Siberia — heading northeast;
most lovely and known least
of gulls; his plumage a delicate rose. . . .
northeast then north he goes

beyond Point Hope, and Icy Cape, and past
Point Barrow till at last
he disappears, with his graceful, wavering flight
into the polar night
and his cry *a-wo a-wo a-wo*
kiam! drifting back slow.
There he will fly and sleep and eat
for some nine months in the complete
darkness — God’s own darkness, surely —
over the Arctic sea,
feeding among the open water cracks
in the shifting polar packs
(so the authorities suppose,
nobody knows)
in his fresh rose feathers no one can see
up there, not even he.

The Ross’s Gull lives in a world such as Frost pretends to long for in “An Empty Threat:”

I stay,
But it isn’t as if
There wasn’t always Hudson’s Bay
And the fur trade,
A small skiff
And a paddle blade.

These are the free imaginings of a person bound by duty and responsibilities, like the woman in Frost’s “The Silken Tent,” to a life inhabited, and inhibited, by other responsible citizens to whom she is tied, fathers and mothers, teachers and students, children and relatives, and so forth. Of course these duties weigh on him (or her) irksomely at times. Stephens’ escape was to break away, carrying his fly rod and a selection of dry flies, and fish a stream, that is, hike up it from its outlet, casting a fly into every likely pool and although, in younger years, he may have kept all he caught that were legal size for eating, later, when “catch and release” had become (pun coming) the catch phrase, he did that. The beauty of either version of the sport was that you could fish the same stream many times in a single season and get a different result each time — just as you could run Hendry’s Beach at sundown many times, and each day see it as a different sonnet.

Devotion to a single place was expressed through what you did there, not only with your hands and feet but with your mind: in Stephens’ case with both Hendry’s Beach and the Matilija Creek, he could observe and write at the height of his powers. He could express the beauty and majesty of the place — a quiet majesty compared to, say, John Muir’s Yosemite Valley or Ansel Adams’ spectacular black-and-white images of it, or John Wesley Powell’s spectacular Technicolor Grand Canyon. But those tremendous sights are many hours’ drive away and not for living in, while Hendry’s and the Matilija are only an hour or less from your house, if you live, as Stephens did, in San Roque Canyon.

And if that’s where you lived, you also had a small, suburban creek curving around the back of your property, quiet and shallow, dry most of the year, but powerful and noisy during winter storms, plenty of rocks getting tumbled and rounded. (Al had one of those small machines that tumble and polish pretty stones.) Bordering the creek was a swath of periwinkle rising gently from the streambed, up a wide sloping lawn to the small roofed brick patio and large persimmon tree which ripened hundreds of luscious fruit every year, which Al picked and Fran packed into boxes to

distribute among their friends who lusted for persimmons — not everyone does — making sure that none went to waste: theirs was the Generation of the Depression and wartime austerity. The raccoons also took part in the harvest, often breaking off a branch along the way, but the tree kept producing fruit, and a slip from it could be grafted onto unproductive root stock in another garden, and in a few years Al and Fran had lost a market outlet there. Despite its low elevation above the creek, not even the heaviest El Niño rainstorm raised the floodwaters as far as their back door.

22. Home Town Poets

In National Poetry Month of 2011, the lead-off public event in Santa Barbara was a reading by three living local poets of three dead ones who had lived there: Gabriela Mistral (first Latin-American winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1945, whose house was across Anapamu Street from the High School, where she taught Spanish); Kenneth Rexroth (who needed no introduction, though he often gave them, especially as M.C. to his Poetry class at UCSB that was known among students as “Rexroth’s Night Club,” where all you had to do for an “A” was perform a poem or song you’d written); and Alan Stephens (who hated to be introduced, or to introduce, always wanting to get on with the *teaching* or the reading, so that he could get on with his writing). Stephens is the only one to have lived in Santa Barbara long enough to count as a near-native. Rexroth was, as Stephens snapped him in that unpublished portrait already quoted, a “name dropper/ with a carny air.” The names he dropped were usually not local heroes but international celebrities, and the most frequent character attribute of these Names would be that So-and-So was “of course, a notorious pederast”—the “*or*” drawled out *fortissimo*.

But Rexroth also deserves the credit Stephens gives him in the same poem that pegs him as a name dropper: he wrote some “splendid poems.” Though none, I believe, were about Santa Barbara, he did have a California place to which he was loyal, and that was local for him, the Kings Canyon National Park in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. There he would camp for the summers, saving money on San Francisco rentals, I presume, learning the fauna and flora, hiking, making love to one wife or woman or the next, and writing poems as touching as his elegy for Andrée Rexroth — no less touching *as a poem* when we learn from the Library of America biographical notes that he had separated from her five years before her death:

Andrée Rexroth

Died October, 1940

Now once more grey mottled buckeye branches
Explode their emerald stars
And alders smolder in a rosy smoke
Of innumerable buds.
I know that spring again is splendid
As ever, the hidden thrush
As sweetly tongued, the sun as vital—
But these are the forest trails we walked together,
These paths, ten years together.
We thought the years would last forever,
They are all gone now, the days
We thought would not come for us are here:
Bright trout poised in the current—
The raccoon’s track at the water’s edge—
A bittern booming in the distance—
Your ashes scattered on this mountain—
Moving seaward on this stream.

The truly local poet can't help filling in the density of local detail, as Rexroth does here, and as Stephens does in his landscape sketch of a scene near the Santa Barbara Mission, which every tourist has to see (and every local resident has to take their visitors to see it), but Stephens, as usual, looks a little beyond the obvious to an intersection literally right around the corner:

At Los Olivos and Alameda Padre Serra

Below St. Mary's retreat
In its greenery, on its hill,
Are some unowned olive trees
Backed by a stone wall
In a crook of the busy street.
You can visit them when you please.

Though trucks gear down and brake,
Growling and hissing, and cars
Whoosh by the place all day,
The light's clear there, the gray
Grove whitens, when it stirs,
As if for its own sake,

The ground is packed and bare
And stained bright purple and black
From the unpicked bitter fruit
That spurt from underfoot.
Walking, I do not lack
For quiet in that air.

The street-names in the title are not Rexrothian "name dropping" but locate us on the map of the real, half-Hispanic city of Santa Barbara, natural and man-made. The olives were introduced by the Spaniards who first seized the Chumash lands and tried to turn the hunters and gatherers into farm workers, as Meeker did the Utes in *White River Poems*. Some four, or is it six? thousand Chumash are buried in a plot smaller than this olive grove, piled in on top of one another between the outer wall of the Mission grounds and the building itself. The poem, after the three-stanza prelude, plunges deep and far into a meditation on Sophia, or wisdom, relating the olives all the way back to the Greeks and Athene, but listening to and observing the behavior of the natural world while reflecting upon its meaning. It is one of Stephens' virtuoso performances, and an excerpt was deservedly picked by Steven Gilbar as one of a handful of poems for his anthology of *Santa Barbara Tales* (John Daniels, 1994).

23. Running with Sonnets

I've already quoted from an achievement in many ways the equal of *White River Poems*, Stephens' *Running at Hendry's*, a sequence of seventy-two sonnets in the more demanding Italian rhyme scheme (albeit rhyming slantwise often enough) and in what Frost would call "loose iambic" pentameter: in other words, both "traditional" and "modern" in form. And, as Stephens told it in the published prefatory Note, in subjects as well. In 1978, having finished some fifty, he wrote me that he felt uneasy at doing such an uncommon thing: "a sonnet sequence in this day & age! I begin to feel the need of an outside opinion." He explained to me how he took up running:

I started running last fall [1977]. Fran & I took walks, going farther & farther, & faster & faster. One day I broke into a run. Soon after, Fran took to swimming each noon at the Y for her exercise, and I kept running. (Fran had decided running wasn't her sport, I guess.)

It was his sport, as no other could be. It's hard to imagine Al Stephens swinging a bat or a tennis racket or golf club. Or shooting a basketball, or throwing a pass. The image is almost ludicrous. Like the boy in Frost's "Birches" who lived "too far from town to learn baseball," Stephens, I think, lacked the "instinctive" physical and psychological "moves" required in most competitive sports, which were inculcated by the urban and suburban American culture in the decades he was growing up. But this is too speculative. Most boys who had to work as hard as he did on a farm in the Depression would not have had leisure for sports and games anyway — nor strength at the end of the day, unless their inherited physiques had provided them with so much superfluous energy that it had to be released in play if not in work (which is how he described to me his long-time office-mate, Edward Loomis, football player, infantry combat soldier, and motorcycle rider).

Besides the absence of time and opportunity, however, Al's *seriousness* — not solemnity — forbids the image. All the same, he did like listening to Dodger games on a little transistor radio, possibly appreciating Vin Scully's running commentary as the closest approximation to poetic language you could hear on the radio, especially a night with insomnia.

One time he *did* attempt a more directly athletic activity, with the direst results. Fran had bought an indoor rowing machine, and Al jumped onto it (maybe just once), rowing so hard and inexpertly that he tore a ligament in his back, and for years, not just months, was in sharp pain sitting in any sort of chair, especially a comfy one. He carried a cushion for his lumbar region, and always requested a straight-backed chair. Physical therapy? I doubt it. As with massage, the thought of anyone else touching him would be anathema. Fran told my wife, back when I used to be pretty slim myself, "Al and John have their nervous systems on the *outside* of their skins."

24. His Anger

Marvin Mudrick, a critic noted for the ferocity of both his condemnations and his commendations, once confided to me, “I live in dread of doing anything that earns the disapproval of Al Stephens,” and in fact, he would read the draft of each of his quarterly “pieces” (as he called his critical essays for the *Hudson Review*) out loud in Al’s office two doors away from mine. Mudrick’s voice was strong, but all I could hear were the “sounds of sense” not his actual words, with occasional soft interpolations from Al.

As a younger man, Alan Stephens seemed always about to scowl. I think this may have been because he was discovering that most of the people teaching in a university were not as smart as he thought they should be. As for the students: the best he cherished, the middling he tolerated and hoped to help, the worst he despised (“that little shit L—”). He did not adapt his teaching standards to the limitations of his students. He was always looking for excellence to appreciate. When he studied Ancient Greek he would have found just the right word for it: *arête*, rendered by Liddell and Scott as “excellence, goodness, virtue, merit, manliness.” His purpose in reading and teaching was to discover and do justice to every occasion of *arête* that he could find. And “manliness” did not make him disrespect his brightest young women students—Caroline Allen, Robyn Bell, Kia Penso, and others.

The same quest for excellence held for his writing, and his experiences in the world. It was the *arête* of the Matilija canyon and creek, the excellence of its solitude teeming with desert fauna and flora, including trout and rattlesnakes, that received his fierce attention, line by line. At Hendry’s Beach, I would say, the temperature of the excellence was more moderate—cooled by the ocean, which was itself another majestic matter. He made the disclaimer in his prefatory Note to the sonnets that Hendry’s was “a not especially beautiful or otherwise remarkable beach” (though it was and is immensely popular among Santa Barbara residents, and *plein air* landscape painters), but it opened instead a vista of *goodness*, variable in quality though not more varied in *subjects*, natural and human, for the awareness of a subject comes from within. A poet will say, or have it said to him by a well-meaning friend, “There’s a poem in that incident,” or a photographer coming around a bend in the trail, or a street corner in a slum, will realize, “There’s a picture in that scene.” Was the poem or the picture always there? Maybe not. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” not in the inert object beheld. Nobody else had written that many sonnets about that beach. No-one else had made an epic poem of the Meeker Massacre.

And no-one else had seen Truth as a White Dog:

The White Dog Truth

I make out the white bulk in the dark
the dog approaches at a quick pace
and goes by showing no interest in me,
and such is the quiet of the street
I hear the clicking of his toenails
on the blacktop, quick, business-like,
even half a block away, the sound
growing fainter very gradually
and already, while I keep an eye
on the wire-thin half rim of light
the moon shows in a sky jagged
with trees along the bottom
already this encounter, the white bulk passing

in the dark, the diminishing click
of the toenails along the stretch
of silence back there, cannot be forced
not to have been, the lords of creation
themselves will have to submit to
its having been, if they should find it
some day blocking the way of a desire.

The poem belongs in a section on his anger because its “lords of the universe” are also the lords of the literary world, the arbiters of Reputation, from whom flow grants and prizes — which Stephens never received, except for the Stegner Fellowship at Stanford — “a little handful of men who manage the present fortunes of poetry in England” (as he phrased it in a review). Stephens played poker once a week with a group of mostly fellow faculty members, probably having learned to play in the Army. Over the four years that the group stuck together, I have it on the authority of one of them (Bruce McIver, whose understanding account of *White River Poems* I quoted above) that Al probably found it a small, steady source of income. He was not a heavy better, and he knew how to bluff—which he did seldom enough that it usually succeeded. “And there were never any wild cards,” Bruce told me. The looseness which that variant of the game introduced would have made the choices less intelligent, more chancy, making it harder to play at your highest standard — the level at which Al always wanted to work. I saw the depth of this conviction once when he and Fran were visiting us in our cabin at Huntington Lake in the Sierra Nevada, along the north shore from the scene of “Bearings: at a Sierra Resort,” the first poem in “Sevens.”

Our children were just old enough to play *at* poker a little, and we let them play fast and loose, staying within the general rules but betting foolish amounts, winning or losing huge piles of M & M’s, and declaring not just one card wild but two or three. Al stuck with this travesty for an hour, but he clearly didn’t enjoy it for one minute, and folded his hand almost every time. Since he was used to focusing his powerful intelligence on the particulars of every game, analyzing the style of every player, he usually, as McIver said, came out ahead. In this scramble of wilder cards topping wild cards topping real cards, there was no sport for him — too much was open to chance.

Although he spoiled the fun our children were used to having, I think they didn’t notice. But the lesson was not lost on me: I felt a little abashed to have let them fool around with such a serious matter as poker.

25. *Saeva Indignatio*

Ubi saeva indignatio ulterius cor lacerare nequit: “Where savage indignation can lacerate his heart no more” is the epitaph inscribed on Jonathan Swift's grave in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. In “To My Matilija,” Stephens seems to be asking that his ashes be not buried but scattered in that Creek and Canyon, though it's clear from the poem that he's thinking not only of his physical remnants but of a spiritual legacy, the deep involvement of his spirit with the spirit of that place. (In fact they were deposited in the Matilija and at Hendry's Beach by his sons and his friend John Wilson.) And it seems that this canyon is a place where savage indignation can no longer lacerate his heart:

Where the canyon walls
Close in, and the air cools,
And the little green trout flick and hover
In the clear green pools
Between the falls:
Where that sturdy solitary, the slate-gray dipper, year round, sings
Till the steep stone rings
Is where I'll go, still unforgiving
Of others' and my own poor past
(How keep my mind clear and not curse
Doings that make life worse?)
And be, Matilija, your lover
When I am dead, and at long last
Won't have to make a living.

An example of how savagely he could be lacerated is an almost trivial incident I remember hearing about, whether from him or Fran I can't recall. He had been anticipating the arrival in the UCSB Library of the latest book by a philosopher he admired (perhaps Karl Popper), and when he received it, he brought it straight home and sat down to consume it like a fine fat trout. But long before finishing the thing, he found it full of bones which stuck in his throat. He was so disappointed, and so angry, that he made a special trip back out to campus that same evening to get the repulsive thing off his hands before he drove back out there again the next morning.

On the other end of the spectrum, when he liked a book enough, he could, as he did with Jorge Luis Borges's Harvard Lectures on Poetry, buy half-a-dozen paperbacks of it to lend or give away to friends who deserved to know them. When Al Stephens had picked out an author — a poet, a philosopher, more occasionally a novelist — whose thoughts and writing he could admire unstintingly, he “buckled him to his heart with hoops of steel.” These were the writers he loved to teach. Among them were: the Ancient Greeks, the Elizabethan sonnet writers (including Shakespeare), Milton, Ben Jonson, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, Alexander Pope, Thomas Hardy, and among the Moderns, Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats (with reservations), Edwin Arlington Robinson (subject of his doctoral dissertation), Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams (“Dr. Williams,” at least while he was still alive), Ezra Pound (with many reservations), and Ernest Hemingway. Among living American poets he thought the two best were Richard Wilbur and David Ferry. He published very few critical pieces on these writers, a major exception being the verse dialogue about Hemingway with “a friend” that appeared in *Spectrum* in 1983.

The fierceness of his admiration for these masters fueled a savage satirical impulse, like Swift's or Pope's, which he released more often on literary critics, professors, and theoreticians than on poets—most often critics, eligible for a modern *Dunciad*. (See two examples in section 19 above.) The passion could be unforgiving when he sensed malice, or disdain of the writer whom the critic was analyzing; he tackled them head-on. If he'd been a football player he'd have suffered, and caused, a hospital wardful of concussions. For another example:

Geron Among the Lit Reviews

Though by our century's failing light
Our poets can't find much to write,
They're safe enough, with our new breed
Of critics that can't learn to read.

In the long run, however, I believe this savage hatred of the academy was “self-lacerating and debilitating,” as one of his sons wrote me. He retired early, at sixty-three, because he couldn't stand the stress of it any more and hoped to spend more time writing, and yet his inability to “write” suggests that the formidable amount of work he completed while teaching as a professor (over 500 manuscript pages in the *Collected Poems*) had been in some way stimulated by the antagonism he felt toward the contrary directions the discipline of English was taking.

It's a paradox, that regular occupation in an uncongenial intellectual environment, however distasteful, may have helped to provide some of the instrumental causes of his writing. Was he left like an oyster trying to make pearls without the grains of irritation?

26. His Tenderness

No-one in the English Department who had been the target of that savage indignation would credit the tenderness my wife and I saw him extend to his wife Fran after a major, highly specialized operation which had saved her life.

The affliction was galloping inside her skull: an acoustic neuroma, a tumor attached to a nerve in her left ear, not malignant but capable as it grew of expanding, crowding and eventually crushing the brain, thereby killing its unwitting hostess. It was discovered only when Fran, seeing her doctor about some minor ailment quickly disposed of, mentioned as she stood up to leave that she'd been noticing a sound like a refrigerator motor which continued after the refrigerator had shut off. He sat her back down and diagnosed immediately what it was. A tricky, specialized operation could remove it completely, although the nerve had to be cut, leaving the affected ear totally deaf. However, the tumor would neither metastasize nor grow back. (And it didn't.)

The operation was so specialized that one whole floor of the House Institute for ear surgery in Los Angeles was devoted to patients with that particular affliction. The cure rate was extremely high, the side-effect (the deafness) predictable, and the House hospital was only a hundred miles away.

"I'll book you in," the local doctor said. "You should go right away." So the next Monday they drove down, took a cheap motel room in the dismal neighborhood around the hospital, and Fran was admitted, given a single room, and very soon gurneyed away to the O.R.

The operation was performed with the hospital's renowned efficiency, the tumor completely removed, Fran deaf in the left ear, and stuck in her hospital bed, alert and out of pain, for a week of recovery. Al spent his whole days and evenings with her, and his nights in the motel. He, or perhaps Fran, phoned up to Santa Barbara for company, and my wife and I were free to drive down for a day, so we went.

Between the Stephens' arrival and ours another patient had checked in — a royal personage with his extended retinue: literally "Royal" because he was a "Gypsy King" (more properly, "Roma"), and with a "retinue" because he brought with him his entire tribe, a dozen dark-skinned, black-haired men in white suits and colorful ties, and several dozen, nearly a hundred, women and children, who filled all the chairs and sofas in the several waiting rooms, spilling onto the floor, the females clothed in loose flowing dresses and gowns in a rainbow array of colors. All were speaking a Roma dialect which of course we could not understand at all, and never once did any of them notice us with so much as a nod. Filling half of the hospital's large parking lot were their "wagons" — in late 20th Century America that meant a fleet of big, new RV's.

We wondered if the huge turnout was meant in part to remind the surgeons to pay the closest attention to their work, but the unexpectedness of such an encampment was a source of great amusement for Al, and soon after her operation, for Fran as well.

And the tenderness I mentioned? To see the formidable, fierce and fearsome Alan Stephens standing by the head of his wife's hospital bed, tentatively stroking her hair on the side away from the bandages with the backs of his fingers, speaking softly, smiling, taking her hand, his elation at her having come through the ordeal and being on the way back to her usual infectious buoyancy, to being the center of his, and their boys', and their dog Molly's family again, and for him to be unembarrassed to reveal these feelings in our presence: it was a joy to see all this, and report back on it to other close friends in Santa Barbara. For Fran the company of the Romas was a final source of satisfaction, like the ending of a children's story — "and she lived with the Gypsies happily ever after" — or of a prayer — "forever and ever. Amen."

In *Away from the Road*, he sketched like a Japanese ink-brush artist this tribute to that accustomed "buoyancy:"

High Summer

She moved so fast
Sometimes — in the house
and out and back in
in one rush — but unruffled
just from her usual
abounding energy
that one time
the dog sat up
and began barking
from sheer excitement.

In a folder hidden behind some books on a shelf, after the shelves had been cleared by the book dealers, his son Alan discovered the most intimate of all his tributes to his wife of sixty years (and since both his parents have since died, I have his permission to print it here, with a tentative title added for convenience):

Sketch

. . . she wakes, and with the same
quick start and buoyancy
heads without hesitation
along her usual ways — those
trim routines she's fashioned
through ordinary days —
yet in an instant, game
for the unscheduled jaunt,
spur-of-the-moment spree.

So far as I can see
she's lived her life out free,
somehow, of the bad passions
(but knows well — forgivingly,
I've learned, the ones in me);
free of the wants that claw
and gnaw at others so
for this and that; has no
taint of that vanity,
ambition for her sons.

She's no worrier. Is brave,
those close to her can attest,
as her youngest son knows best,
whose life she dived to save
in the Rogue — a fast river
well-named from those it drowned.

She's quick to understand
the good that comes to hand
in the course of things, for what
it's worth. Her gaiety
at any flash of wit
confirms its quality.

Just last night I saw
yet again her fresh delight
at seeing the moon rise

August 22, 1996

27. Un Bourgeois Gentilhomme?

Once, when a colleague of ours gave a talk on Donne, Al jumped into the discussion with fierce determination, not only to tear the lecturer's argument apart but to fight off some other colleagues present, all of whom had succumbed, even more than the lecturer, to the academic pressures that were lowering the profession from its central concern with understanding the high monuments of our culture to a relativistic, sociopolitical, anti-elitist, Marxist *pot pourri* of popular culture and literary writers formerly considered minor — or not considered at all, in the case of various ethnic authors (which is another tragedy altogether, to which *White River Poems* speaks obliquely and powerfully).

The battle grew so heated that I left early. Later, Al told me with a strange glee in his eyes how much he had enjoyed it. "They even called me a 'bourgeois'! A *bourgeois* — hah!" He laughed immoderately at the thought of this farm boy from Colorado via U. S. Army Air Corps, GI Bill of Rights, University of Colorado, Denver University, University of Missouri, and Arizona State University, being travestied as a *bourgeois gentilhomme* when he was demonstrating his prowess as a literary pugilist. As I said before, boxing was his favorite sport, and as a school boy in Colorado, he had gotten into more than his share of fist-fights.

28. Other Tongues

Poetry in the English language alone didn't give him enough grist for his mill. His rapacious intellect was always alert as a rattlesnake coiled to strike. The Greeks had come to his aid early, and the Latin poets — he translated some epigrams of Martial, identifying, I think, with the earlier poet's provincial origins:

Martial of Bilibis

Nothing in Rome escaped his glance, he understood
This touchy sort of verse,
And mixed the poor ones with the good:
Your even book, he said, is worse.

Old and fed up this son of Bilibis went home,
A harsh hill town with a cold
River below, that shipped to Rome
A lot of iron, a little gold.

He made use of the French (a poem "After Baudelaire" figures two or three times in his early bibliography), and the Spanish ("Autumn Island" after Jorge Guillén, as well as the enthusiasm for Borges), and the Chinese and Japanese. Probably he had first read Rexroth's companion volumes of 100 Poems from each language in the Fifties or Sixties, but another book he recommended and lent to friends was the Penguin edition of Du Fu translated by Arthur Cooper, whose long Introduction explained the metrical structure of the original poems better than any other essay in English. (We remember from his "First Deposition" his love for "the grammar of any language.") Later he admired greatly the poems of Gensei of Grass Mountain, whom he commemorated in a poem published in *Away from the Road*:

Homage to Gensei

Last night I lay awake
From some sound in the night
And pictured I could take
(Knowing that I could not)
The firm and quiet way
Of the gentle monk Gensei,
Who watched from his Grass Hill
(Three hundred years away)
Beneath a favorite tree,
Or from his leaky hut,
Travels of crow, cloud, sail;
With some food and wine
Welcomed the always rare
Visit from old friends; wrote
His poems, though unwell
Much of the time; read; gave
Lessons, again while sick,
Kept clear of pedantry
(And all he wrote of it
Rings true of it today),

With his goose-foot walking stick
To keep him company
Took walks, kept his mind free
And agile as the air,
Transcending tragedy,
Under his bent old pine
With writing brush in hand
Quiet at close of day
Saw out the evening sun
Across the shadowy land.

*

Slight rustlings in a tree
And a slow car going by
Returned me to what's mine,
What it had all come to,
What I still had to do
With my own dwindling days.

And in the poem "Untitled" in *Away from the Road* Stephens writes of the widely admired and often translated hermit-poet of Cold Mountain:

Han Shan, old, in three poems
has written my own life for me
and left me with nothing to do.

Stephens always liked a subject that he could ride like a horse for more than one poem, covering a lot of territory, and besides the White River Massacre and Hendry's Beach, another source he found stimulating was an exhibition in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art of 100 woodblock prints of the moon by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi (1839–1892), the last great master of Ukiyo-e and, according to some, one of the form's greatest innovators. Stephens had always enjoyed writing poems about the moon, seen under different aspects. Here is one of the most unusual of the Yoshitoshi Moon poems:

The general is seated
cross-legged beside the lamp
in the closed-off inner room,
on his knee rests the hand
gripping his suicide knife,
the just unsheathed blade
upright. Under his gaze,
on the floor, lies the poem
he has finished. It speaks of his
part in a disastrous defeat.
The tiger's head on the wall,
a great strip of shaggy pelt
looped around its neck and
hanging to the floor, glares off
above and past the seated man.
Where, however, is the moon? Look,
the moon is in his poem.
It is a summer moon.

29. *Three Hundred Tang Poems*

In April 2011, nearly two years after Stephens' death, I noticed at Chaucer's Bookshop an anthology of *Three Hundred Tang Poems* in the Everyman's Library Pocket Poets series, those neat, handsome little books that, as they came out, Stephens had been gathering on one high shelf beside his reading chair. As other branches of his mind were shedding their leaves, the central trunk, where poetry lived, still stayed alive. I don't know if he'd bought this volume, which is copyright 2009, the year of his death, but I thought he would have liked it, so I bought it, and wrote a poem for him out of one of its poems, by Yuan Zhen, translated by Peter Harris:

We used to laugh at how we felt about things after death;
This morning it all came to me again, before my eyes.
Your clothing has been given away I have taken care of that;
But your needlework box is still here I can't bear to open it up.
Remembering how you loved them I am taking care of your servants,
And whenever I dream of you I burn some money for your use.
Everyone has these feelings of remorse, I am really aware of that,
But when a couple has lived through hardship there is so much to grieve for.

My commentary poem is lengthier than the more familiar Chinese lyrics of eight or four lines, which qualifies it as one of the three main types that Harris includes, "Old-style poems, which ... are poems of any length" (and some of his are nine pages long), so I think Al would accept this as a legitimate "Chinese imitation."

Three Hundred Tang Poems

For Alan Stephens (1921-2009)

This little book I bought
in your name, Al, I thought
if you had lived so long you'd
have it set among
the others in that series,
small, modest, serious,
by your chair on the reading shelf:
ideas in words the self
craves, cannot do without,
and having, sets about
you while you sit and read,
or try to, in a need
which never diminishes
although Age finishes
off the capacity —
dulls the rapacity,
calms the young stag's anger,
hangs your armor on a hanger
to gather dust and rust.
We buy books since we must,
however much we read

in them, or don't, we need
(as I remarked above)
to hold them in our love,
just as we hold our women
as tightly on the limen
of Age as when we carried
them over the threshold, married,
and floated in our beds,
submerging, with our heads
poking above the covers,
all the parts of married lovers
engaged in married love.
If now scant remnants of
that gaudy, rich material
are left to quilt, funereal
custom and ceremony
wrap the cerements over your bony
structure, so thin and brittle,
the frame you did so little
to forge harmonious chords
of movements, thoughts and words,
with feelings. Of these *Three
Hundred Tang Dynasty
Poems*, one by Yuan Zhen
tells his dead wife, "When
I dream of you, I choose
some money for your use,
and burn it." So I may
burn what I write today
if, when the day is through,
it sounds too much like you.
If not, I'll let it stand
modestly, not grand-
standing — by your example
letting the words be ample
evidence of a thought
culled from this book I bought.

30. Risk

Writing about Alan Stephens is risky, as about any formidable and distinctive writer. The savvy reader (that adjective is one of his that I normally wouldn't use!) knows there is much more to say about him than he can find ways of saying without slipping into Stephens' own style. Besides which, few of us possess the mental equipment to emulate him without looking foolish, like Hemingway or Faulkner wannabes. Stephens' mind was so powerful, so well-developed, that if his physique had been able to keep up with it, he'd have been an Olympic Decathlon champion. Yet this would have been an impossibility, since the concentrated training and insight required for either talent to blossom to its full would squeeze out the other. In his case, the body suffered. He thought and wrote and taught so *hard* that, despite the healthy back-country hiking and the daily suburban walks with his wife and their dog, his slender frame could not support the toll his mental work taxed it with. The ligament torn by his attack on the rowing machine shows what other sports might have done to him. As a friend I could wish he'd managed his physical equipment with the discipline he applied to his mental activities.

And this is what I've been told by his wife: on his rare visits to a doctor's office, he would not voluntarily divulge what symptoms had forced him there against his will. If the doctor is any good, I presume he reasoned, he'll discover them himself. If he doesn't, then he isn't good enough, and Al wouldn't take his advice anyway. Here is a snippet of evidence from his own hand:

A Sip of the Manzana

A long time since he'd been here,
and now, it was against
doctor's orders ("... and stay
out of the heat...").

It was not a totally reckless disobedience:

The plan: he would use
ten minutes to get here, say twenty to eat
and take in what was here,
then ten more to return,
then drive back to the cool
blue of the coast. He stuck
with the plan.

And the disobedience was not unprecedented. Later in the poem, after a minute, loving examination of the sycamore, cottonwood, and digger pine trees, he looks down at the leaves on the ground, some of which have kept their colors through a year's seasons, and writes:

Once a doctor, treating
some other affliction, had told him
'No alcohol' and thereupon
at the end of the day,
he would take one swallow
of no substitute, but
absolutely the real thing,
straight from the bottle,
in its full — if transient —
restorative powers
(then he let the ritual
lapse).

And once, when I was about to have a very necessary hernia operation, he — who had suffered with one in an Army hospital during World War Two, urged me simply not to let someone cut into my body.

31. Amusements

He cared little for theater because plays were so much less carefully written than poetry — except for Shakespeare (not all the plays, by any means; his favorite was *The Tempest*) and the Ancient Greeks. He loved old movies and knew the names of the stars of the Thirties and Forties better than many “film” critics. (For a long time, perhaps always, he resisted what was then the academically pretentious term “film” in place of the good old-fashioned “movies.”)

I don't know how he felt about TV, except for the boxing: he would gather a small room full of former students and enjoyed watching the Friday Night Fights with them — Anne Kingdon especially. He played poker, but, as I've indicated, so seriously it almost doesn't count as an amusement. He watched some football, and as a Dodger loyalist was frequently disappointed (unlike Tony Hillerman, whose novels of the “Indian Country” of the Southwest he liked, having explored that territory himself, and whose autobiography, *Seldom Disappointed*, he highly recommended). One summer when my family and I were up in the Sierra Nevada, he wrote in a letter, with something like *Schadenfreude*, “The Dodgers have disgraced themselves again” — as if they were puppies that had piddled on the carpet.

He listened to classical music, and when CDs came in, he began collecting a tall stack of them, and gave his vinyl LPs away to his sons. I don't think I ever saw him at a live concert in town or at the university. I suspect he'd have shied away from the noise.

He did have one hobby — “making little things out of bits and pieces of wood,” his son Alan described it. One such project that I saw was a small sloping desk, attached to the wall in a corner of the bedroom that doubled as his study, where he could write standing up, as Hemingway had done.

32. Amusement

The seriousness of Alan Stephens' demeanor and the intensity of his writing might mislead a person into supposing him to have been humorless, but his sense of humor was in fact enormous. He did not issue those booming over-hearty laughs that reverberate, sometimes too long, from some professors, revealing (it seems to me) their yearning for a quieter, more intimate and sincere communication than the competitive academic ladder, with its ranks and steps, advancements and promotions, allowed. Al preceded me up that ladder by several years, and I'm sure his in-house readings of my work helped boost me onto it and up the earlier steps, but he retired early, and thus could not help me climb the more difficult higher steps — attempting which, one year I had the *Schadenfreudean* satisfaction of being belittled as “a light verse poet” by the same rosy-cheeked Professor who had called Al “bourgeois.” He, the Professor, was of the breed my wife describes as “white-carpet, white-Mercedes Marxist.” One of our Fulbright visiting exchange scholars from still-Communist Hungary told us in the mid-1980's that “English Departments in America are the last refuge of Marxism.”

We would laugh about this sort of absurdity with Al and Fran at frequent dinners at their house or Jean Sankey's after her husband Ben had died in 1975 of cancer (and Ben had been one of the few colleagues whose intellect Al respected), or ours, or over afternoon tea at our house (since my wife and I both come from British families, this was for us a normal social gathering). The laughter was constant, and sometimes doubling-over intense. Simply, we all liked to talk of things that made us happy, and when sad or bad things happened, like the death of our son Little John, Al and Fran's consolations were all the more helpful by redirecting us toward happier thoughts, as they always had done when our boy was alive.

However bleak a view of the universe his knowledge and meditation had forced him to accommodate, Alan Stephens was as cheerful a companion as one could wish for, with the result that two years after his death I find myself unwilling to give up that companionship, writing poems to his shade, though he might not approve of the practice. (The relation of *shades* to *selves* to *souls* is a subject explored with great precision in *White River Poems*.) Perhaps this will be a continuing process, whose motive is not emulation but an attempt to pay tribute in an appropriate medium. What I close with here, therefore, are three such attempts. The first is my last view of Al and Fran's house as she was packing up before moving to the Bay Area to be closer to their three sons.

The Emptying House

The book men are sorting your books away into boxes,
your boys divvy up the furniture. They cut cards
for your desk: Tim wins. Fran watches them taking apart
the box that held your lives, keeping her good heart.
Things from your yard will be spread among three yards
by these tall-grown men, who once were three little foxes

who chewed on the bones-O when you were young and poor
and alive — as we can pretend you are now, only
in fantasies of discourse like a ball returned
directly by a backboard. We've unlearned
the afterlife myth: so how can we not be lonely
and empty, and always emptying more and more?

A backboard's neither opponent nor partner of
your game. It's a mirror-wall against which you drive
your hardest shot and immediately prepare
for its bounce straight back at your flat-footed sneakers, where
you swing your racket, to keep the rally alive.
And when you miss? Your score stays stuck at Love.

May 5, 2011

The next is my overview of Alan Stephens, poet, his achievement and his reputation, now
and in the future. (Note that the meter is trimeter, and the rhyme "envelope style.")

False Introductions/True Conclusions

For Alan Stephens (1925-2009)

1.

"What do you do?" "I am
A Poet." Huh? Not once
would you have donned that dunce-
cap. It seemed bogus, sham.

You were yourself. "I'm Al."
And what you thought there, in
that mind all yours, that thin
body, gave you your all.

What you think is what you get —
wytwyg? Computerese
for writing what you please:
epitaph? epithet?

Writing what you pleased
regardless of all others,
having, that way, your druthers,
abetted you, and eased.

You were so much your own
man — writer, reader, teacher —
in one sense, were the preacher
of a faith with a church of one:

its sole practitioner —
from one roll of the dice.
If Fate had rolled them twice? —
perhaps a fictioner.

2.

Off the perimeter
of being Recognized —
Fame was a fate you'd wised
up to, a scimitar

for separating brains
from bodies, base from top,
while spilling not a drop
of blood. The waste remains,

the waste remains and kills,
wrote one of those sharp names
whose rules laid out the games
we played as best our skills

would let us. You deplored
them all. It was no game
to sign your own sharp name
under the words you'd poured

into, say, trimeter.
You knew what that should earn.
You knew you'd get your turn
on that perimeter,

that we would balance the books
on you, Alan (p-h) Stephens.
Future fame breaks and evens
what our Age overlooks.

June 21, 2011.

My final tribute is a sonnet which plays a trick Stephens himself would never have descended to, but which I hope he would condone, for what it says.

Acrostics for a Memorial Tablet

Alan Stephens, Sr., poet and teacher,
Loved hard dry wilderness, keenly admired
Animals, birds, fish, every vivid creature,
Not excepting humankind, if they inspired
Something worthy of his merciless attention
That cut confusion like a laser beam
Etching the retina. He held in tension
Physical matter, metaphysical dream,
High spirits, soft but unequivocal speech —
Each word and sentence painstakingly aligned:
No other could usurp its natural place.
Such passion, and such accuracy, each
So sensuously twined with stubborn grace,
Reader, he was the only one of his kind.

J.M.R.