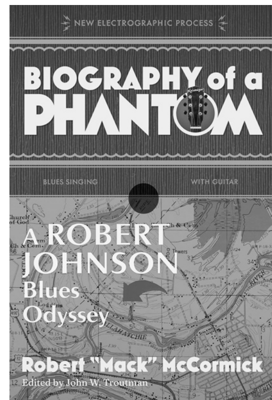
Reviews

***Biography of a Phantom: A Robert Johnson Blues Odyssey*. By Robert "Mack" McCormick, edited by John W. Troutman. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2023. Pp. xxx + 232, editor's preface, introduction, afterword, notes, acknowledgments, index, photographs, maps, illustrations, $30, hardback)**

I have literally been waiting to read this book for two decades. Other blues fans and researchers have anticipated its publication for twice that time. McCormick completed a number of versions of the manuscript in the 1970s, but several factors delayed the book's publication. They include copyright disputes, controversy over content, tension over ownership of intellectual property, questions about fieldwork ethics, and McCormick's own challenges with mental illness. Consequently, the manuscript of *Biography of a Phantom* was put on a shelf until 2015, with interest in publication an option only after McCormick's death. We are fortunate that when his estate was settled, arrangements made it possible to publish the book and also release his massive amount of fieldwork materials to the Smithsonian Institution. Editors and curators with the Smithsonian have made the book's publication possible, and they have also released digitized recordings of McCormick's intensive and valuable field recordings. The results are a treat both for those who have long awaited the book and those newly acquainted with the author's work. The book's contents as well as the recordings are also an important contribution to scholarship.



Robert Johnson was a phantom to McCormick when he began his fieldwork in the late 1960s. He was largely unknown following his death in 1938 near Greenwood, Mississippi. The 1961 release of *King of the Delta Blues Singers* by Columbia Records was the catalyst that eventually literally put Johnson on the charts. A colorful, but highly romanticized, album cover sparked blues revivalists to pick the record from the bins, British blues rockers covered Johnson's tunes, and Frank Driggs's highly speculative and even more highly romanticized liner notes cast Johnson as a legendary even Faustian figure within blues history. Driggs cast him as a mysterious figure, embodying quintessential elements of the archetypal bluesman. The legend of Johnson's diabolical pact has been totally debunked, yet the Crossroads remains vibrant in blues imagery, even commemorated in sculpture in Clarksdale. Barry Lee Pearson and Bill McCulloch's 2003 *Robert Johnson Lost and Found* is the definitive critique of the Faustian association with Johnson. The writers reveal how the imagery is related to major misunderstandings of blues as well as major presence of stereotypical imagery within blues. They end their critique by challenging researchers to find the real Robert Johnson and not simply perpetuate the mythol-

ogized imagery. McCormick's contributions help researchers to discover what we can know about his life history. By his book's end, McCormick gives us a portrait of a musician who readers recognize far more as a real man rather than a phantom.

McCormick's contribution is an excellent addition to other more recent biographies. Some of his research is excluded in *Biography of a Phantom* due to copyright disputes and challenges over who owned the rights to the research materials. We do have major omissions from McCormick's original manuscripts, and the book's editor, John Troutman, explains how readers can discover the content of what had to be excised. Despite some major editorial cuts, the resulting manuscript provides readers with an excellent book. McCormick brings readers into his own efforts to discover biographical information on Johnson, and he writes vivid accounts of his adventures in finding relatives and friends of the musician in the decades after Johnson's death. McCormick discovered that many individuals knew Johnson well and that they could offer vivid memories of their interactions with the bluesman. The phantom imagery dissipates in McCormick's book, and we gain a much better sense of who Johnson really was as a musician and as an individual.

Biography of a Phantom requires that readers engage the book's back story. John Troutman's preface sets the stage for McCormick's twelve chapters. McCormick follows a thread that leads him from Hazelhurst to Robinsonville, Mississippi, with stop-overs at points in between. The trope of the Odyssey works well with McCormick emerging as a late twentieth-century Telemachus in search of Odysseus. Throughout the narrative, McCormick demonstrates his skill as fieldworker, researcher, and writer. He begins with his efforts to learn about Johnson in his hometown, but it's clear that the bluesman spent little time in Hazelhurst. McCormick then takes readers to numerous towns and cities mentioned in the lyrics of blues songs and identified with Johnson, a process that results in only scant information. Through diligence coupled with serendipity, McCormick finds his way to Robinsonville. His careful research blends, and fortuitous, even quirky, leads bring him right into the neighborhood that served as Johnson's home base. There he meets a full cast of characters who provide him with a wealth of memories and stories. The fieldworker's journey and his descriptions add to the narrative. Readers also gain an excellent presentation of Johnson's life history. The book is well worth the wait and is a major contribution to blues history.

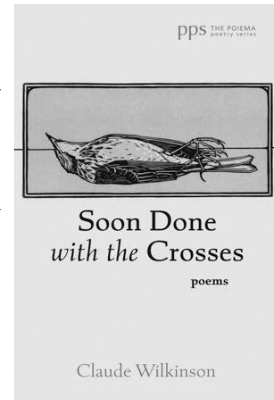
It also was highly edited. There are major sections that McCormick wrote about Johnson's parents and his own family life. Readers will find sections that make large leaps in biography that display obvious omissions. This information was in numerous versions of McCormick's original manuscripts, but they do not appear in this volume. Reasons for the editorial deletions are thoroughly discussed in Troutman's Afterword. Some of the problems are connected to the need to avoid republication of material that is already in print. Other lapses of biographic detail stem from major copyright disputes. They reveal ethical problems that resulted in major court cases. The commoditization of photographic imagery, interview material, and other resources became especially rich when Columbia Records released a box set of complete recordings in 1990. McCormick had made earlier claims to the rights of the material, but Columbia was successful in the legal battle. When the compilation sold over a million copies, the claims for intellectual ownership obviously became even more pronounced. The award to the Johnson estate took a decade to be settled, with compensation awarded to

Johnson's son, Claud Johnson. Tensions remained among relatives of Robert Johnson, and intellectual property rights resulted in other publications that played a role in preventing McCormick from publishing his book. Troutman critiques McCormick's actions within this dispute. He holds him and other researchers accountable for their actions. At the same time, we also see a sympathetic discussion of the struggles that McCormick faced with his failing health and mental illness. After McCormick died, his estate placed the fieldwork, manuscripts, and collectanea into the holdings of the Smithsonian's archives. Troutman's careful and conscientious editorial and curatorial efforts are also an important part of McCormick's story, and we are fortunate to have this important legacy made available for the future.

--Gregory Hansen

Soon Done with the Crosses. By Claude Wilkinson. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2023. Pp. 92. $10.00, paper)

"If there is a seal on southerners that identifies them as peculiar to all other people, it's quite likely our spiritualness," Claude Wilkinson remarks in *Southern Writers on Writing* (ed. Susan Cushman, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018, p. 125). Citing passages from his first poetry collection, *Reading the Earth* (1998), he suggests the seal was upon him from the start, especially in his perception of nature. "Without the poems' prevalent inclination toward belief, all they might reveal is a patient way of looking" (p. 126), he explains. In fact, Wilkinson is a scrupulous observer of the natural world; and the woodcut of a dead bird on the cover of *Soon Done with the Crosses*, his fifth collection, anticipates the lifeless feathers, bill, crown, "tarsi" or leg bones, and "blind / but still bright eye" (p. 6) in his "Cock Robin, in Memoriam"—a much darker elegy than its nursery-rhyme counterpart, "Who Killed Cock Robin?"



Worse than the bleak February scene in Wilkinson's poem is the spiritual winter of his first-person speaker, who "had waited, and waited, / and waited on God" (p. 6) for three days before spotting the bird beneath his window. Here, Wilkinson evokes the Bible account of Jesus's followers arriving at the empty tomb three days after his death on the cross; but the closing image of a "chalky outline / of transfiguration" (p. 6) unexpectedly relates the bird with its nimbus of snow to the glorified Christ. The book cover, too, juxtaposes death with a hope that is repeated in the gospel music of the epigraph: "We soon shall be done with the crosses / We soon shall be done with the troubles of the world" (p. v).

Wilkinson's sixty free-verse poems speak of multiple worldly crosses, including war, prostitution, the autism of a friend's child, a saint's martyrdom, a grandmother's dementia, and a mother's "soft hymns" that could be "gorgeous with afterlife," even though they "always sounded like tears" (p. 26). Readers are apt to identify the poet as the narrator who shares his thoughts throughout the collection, but one poem is unmistakably autobiographical. In "Posed beside the Lyceum Marker Commemorating James

Meredith's Enrollment at Ole Miss in 1962," the award-winning Wilkinson—honored as "a visiting scholar" (p. 33)—is "goaded to pleasantness for P.R. photos" on the same campus Meredith integrated four decades earlier in the face of much crueler goading. Long after his own enrollment there in the late 1970s, Wilkinson remembers "the tall, stunning / white girl who always glanced / whenever we passed each other" (p. 33); but he remembers also how futile it was "then" to dream of "waking on misty mornings / to share ripe figs and tea," even in countries "like France or Greece."

The scene changes dramatically in the next poem, "London Rain," where the narrator is far from Mississippi, "having croissants and blood sausage / with a woman from Australia" (p. 34) and discussing their individual travel plans instead of the previous night's riot "over yet another black man / murdered by police." The breakfasting couple is glad to be away from the "incessant summer heat" of their home countries, and the English rain parallels the dreams of misty mornings at tea with a beautiful young white woman in the preceding poem. But there is no escape from crosses, as the city's heat of racial violence and the speaker's solitary journey to Stonehenge imply.

Soon Done with the Crosses is not formally divided into sections; yet, as the successive poems at Ole Miss and in London hint, the new book is not a random array. Printed on facing pages, "Listening to Nina Simone Sing 'To Be Young, Gifted and Black'" and "Posed beside the Lyceum Marker" are more explicitly paired, exposing the terrible disparity between Black achievement and relentless racism in a similar four-stanza, thirty-line format. Several pages later, Wilkinson elaborates on motifs of music, suffering, and race with a trio of blues-related poems, ranging from the mock-epic mode of "Listening to 'Voodoo Child' While Imagining Sisyphus Instructing Jimi Hendrix for His Eternal Labor" to the exuberant wordplay of "Bluesman" and the poignancy of "Blueswoman," in which a "now frail figure / in sequined costume" sings "to lowdown men / who love to roam" (p. 46).

From sea horses to a Tennessee Walking Horse, animals are central figures in at least half of the poems; like "Cock Robin, in Memoriam," several works express a spiritual dimension through allusions to myth, art, music, natural history, and literature. "The Parable of the Snail" starts with the narrator's humorous outburst on the challenge of applying nature's lessons: "My! You're a sticky wicket / of examples of how I ought to be—" (p. 2). In contrast to the "humble" snail's silent and "nearly indiscernible pilgrimage" (p. 2), are the intrusions of creatures who caw, peck, and buzz later in the book in a three-parable sequence with comic religious references. Italics emphasize nature's urgency to convey its wisdom as the narrator struggles to interpret a croak of "Eureka!" (p. 63) in "The Parable of the Crow," a repeated "Knock, knock, knock!" (p. 64) in "The Parable of the Woodpecker," and a song defending "the screech of our decibels" (p. 66) in "The Parable of the Cicada."

"Birds That Alight on Faith" introduces the book's most extended series: seven poems positioned about ten pages apart, each title beginning with the same two words. The narrator prays for a "thimbleful / of aerial surety" (p. 1) to help him follow a bird's example and "grasp those things / which never collapse / under the heft of this life." Despite each bird's fragility, these poems frequently serve as a counterweight for the volume's "heft" of pain. In "Birds That Sing in Winter," chilly sparrows are sustained by thoughts of spring and the "trusted promise" (p. 74) that they could not "fall without notice / even in such wincing gloom"; and "Birds That

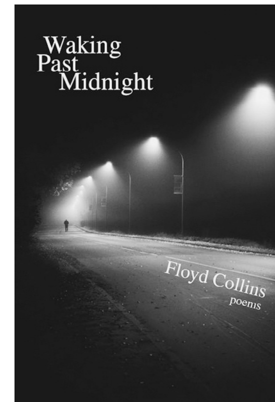
Abide No Matter" concludes the sequence by thanking heaven for the meadowlark's trust in providence. Nevertheless, in the six poems that follow, the griefs of animals, earth, and humans seem so endless that spiritual darkness is the inevitable subject of "Vigil," the collection's final poem. Wilkinson turns to Edward Hopper's most famous painting as an analogue for "our being wake [sic] and about" (p. 89) in psychic distress at a late and lonely hour: "It's 'soon / I will be done with the crosses' // since we are Hopper's Nighthawks here, / snared in our own all-night café . . . ."

In an eighteen-line sentence spread across six short stanzas, Wilkinson explicates "our" likeness to the only three customers in Hopper's stark diner: the blue-suited businessmen who "obviously don't know each other / or care to for that matter" and the woman who is "so pale and loveless she looks almost dead" (p. 89). Earlier in *Soon Done with the Crosses*, Wilkinson imagines how cicadas feel during their seventeen years of "cyclic jailing" (p. 65), and in this closing poem he keeps vigil with all who feel trapped in our own solitary snares.

–Joan Wylie Hall

Waking Past Midnight: Selected Poems. By Floyd Collins. (Nacogdoches, Texas: Stephen F. Austin University Press, 2023. Pp. 120, $20.00, paperback)

When I first started reading Floyd Collins's magisterial book of selected poems, *Waking Past Midnight*, my newsfeed was ablaze with tidings that Louise Gluck, America's most recent Nobel laureate in literature, had died. Eighty years is a goodly span, especially for one who remained prolific her entire life, and there will soon be an update to her most recent collected, which spanned forty years. In *Waking Past Midnight*, Floyd Collins offers a half-century worth of poems, the plums from three collections and two chapbooks that came out years apart on small presses. Now Stephen F. Austin State University Press has made available this selected volume, as well as a book of Collins's critical essays, *The Living Artifact*.



Floyd Collins is a native of Mississippi who grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, where he played high school sports and began writing poems in his late teens. After graduating from Memphis State, he received his MFA and PhD from the University of Arkansas. His first two full- length collections, *Forecast* and *What Harvest*, a book focused on the battle of the Alamo and the men and women caught in this maelstrom, were each separated by almost a decade, partly because Collins is a deliberate writer, but also, I suspect, because Collins has been one of the most prolific poetry critics of recent decades. Then it was more than a decade before *My Back Pages: The Teresa Poems* appeared from Stephen F. Austin State University Press. For fans of his work or those eager to discover a voice that has been in our midst for a long time without getting a lot of attention, *Waking Past Midnight* is a welcome entry among the welter of poetry books released on a weekly if not daily basis. Collins is no mere voice of the moment, but a craftsman who has honed

his skills to build poems meant for the long haul.

Collins began publishing in his late teens and early twenties. This was in the early seventies, when many poets wrote in a hieratic, lyrical mode that Collins mastered early. Collins read deeply among the Spanish and Spanish-language poets who were only then, thanks to ambitious translators, coming to wide attention in America. But Collins, unlike some poets of the time, is always aware of landscape, and the imagery of West Tennessee, of rivers and even the Delta, and this imagery imbues his early poems with a gravity many of the poets of that time lack.

Collins's early work is impressive enough that the reader wishes that he had avoided the stabs at surrealism that were also an earmark of the early 70s. Collins's forte is precise, at times meticulous, observation of the physical world, which often pulls the poem into metaphor , allowing something like revelation. So it's disappointing to see the first poem in the book, an ode to the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti, sporting ornamentation like this: "night after night / I wear a necklace bestowed by nightmare, / beads of blue phosphor and salt."

These lines seem the anthemic flourish a young writer might commit, and these early poems are very much the poems of a young man, albeit a preternaturally gifted one. Still, the reference Collins makes to Alberti's "elegy for a man buried with his watch running" sticks, even forty years after first reading this poem.

A central aspect of Collins's poetry has always been the physicality of the world he makes. Collins does not just see the physical world as a series of objective correlatives, images to spark our deepest thoughts, but for the things they are. The poem "Forecast," a twelve-line gem begins, "November is the tombstone / At a wheat field's edge." In a few words, Collins captures exactly the elegiac feeling of late fall, the look of fields broken and picked over after harvest, before the plowing under. The tombstone also reminds us that in the days of family farms, many people, sometimes whole families, were buried on their land, often in the fields that succeeding generations would work. Such plots can still be found scattered through fields in more rural areas. "Forecast" is Collins at his early best. Masterful as many of these early poems are—especially, "Piano Player," "A Last Word," "The Tree House," "Turning the Corner for Home"—one welcomes the widened scope that comes with entering the poems from *What Harvest*, based, as I said earlier, on the battle of the Alamo and the history surrounding that battle.

This section begins with the book's first extended narrative, "James Bowie: Bexar, 1836." Any writer, when confronting history or any field of specialized knowledge, is figuring out how much the writer needs to tell the reader. For the poet, this is especially problematic. A poem needs to deliver its necessary background and get on with the business of the poem without the reader being aware of the manipulation. In this 64 line poem, Collins moves deftly between Bowie's final circumstances, dying of tuberculosis, his namesake knife bound to his hand with rosary beads, and Bowie's past of gambling, bad business deals, his marriage to the daughter of a Mexican politician.

Collins adeptly weaves Bowie's illness into the tale of making the knife that still carries his name. "Bowie's chest labors like a ribbed bellows / And again the coals shift and glow white hot / In the forge of James Black, Arkansas cutler / and smith." Collins nimbly handles the narrative's woven strands in graceful iambic pentameter that gives him room to maneuver through the tale of Bowie's life. The knife that made him famous gives him "a handle / The ivory hafted steel a slick purchase." Yet Bowie's purchase, his

hold on the riches of the world, does not hold, leading to the final illness Collins writes about. The poem ends on a note of foreboding as Bowie waits on his bed for death that will arrive either from illness or the attack of Mexican soldiers.

I have spoken before of the physicality of Collins' poems. There are in his lingering observations, even his recitation of period diction, a respect for the well-made things of this world. "Kentucky Long Rifles" is one of the book's highlights, an elegant description of the long rifle, then a recent innovation in the world of firearms. The poem pans over the rifle, delighting the reader with language even as it instructs: "In the buttstock of polished maple / A hinged cavity hid the greasy, square-cut / Linen patches that wrapped each leaden ball." This sort of lingering observation is not usual in this time when most written communication takes place in phrases and illustrations. Collins takes his time and trusts the reader to follow. After a dozen lines of dense description, "Kentucky Long Rifles" unwinds into narrative of the renowned Davy Crockett "squeezing off round after round," a display of shooting that "Showed his Excellency each morning / How Texas cut the pigeon's wing."

Many poets have based extended sequences or whole books on historical events. But these narratives are rarely as grounded in the three dimensional sphere of the senses as Collins's poems are, and they suffer as a result. The reader comes to trust the small observations about the long rifle's manufacture—"a poised / Sniper could spill the eye of a gold braided / Zapadore at two hundred paces"—and those small three dimensional images construct a world we trust and are willing to follow the poet through. Collins not only did an immense amount of research for these poems, the language has been crafted like one of Bowie's fresh-minted knives. Those not schooled in the Alamo's history (from what I can tell, it is not much studied in schools these days) might not know some of the more obscure names and facts here. But be assured that if you don't know who Norris Wright or Carlos Espalier are, that Collins does. *What Harvest* was a great step forward for Collins' work as the move into narrative torqued his already well-wrought language to greater heights.

The last third of *Waking Past Midnight* is taken up by poems for Collins' most recent book *My Back Pages: The Teresa Poems*, a volume focusing on Collins's adolescence and first love in Memphis, Tennessee, as well as a portrait of the changing south in 1970. Again here, we find Collins using narrative and highly charged language, but the mood here is more meditative, at times even somber, as it relates two teenagers' fleeting romance and later the death of one lover far too young and the aging of the other although these poems never descend into self-pity or melancholy. As an homage to bygone love, Collins is walking the same path as Dante in *La Vita Nuova* or the painter Andrew Wyeth in his long-hidden series of Helga paintings.

"Still in our teens," begins "Expiation," a poem dedicated to Teresa Shuler, "we walk the back paths / Of Overton Park, looking for a place," an opening which recounts the permanent dilemma of teens too young or poor for cars and no recourse to places away from adult eyes. The poem's pivot to an image of falling leaves foretells the end of the romance. The speaker has tried to be rid of such memories, but as the poem ruefully notes, "It remains that brief season that transpired in another age." The remainder of the collection takes us through that season as well as following some unexpected detours.

"The Ghostly Heart" is one of several poems that Collins bases on music and especially Memphis musicians. Furry Lewis plays slide with a

"pocketknife of dimpled bone" for a group of boys who bring him a pint of whiskey. W.C. Handy, Robert Johnson, and Elvis Presley put in appearances as well, but Teresa Shuler is never far: "I wanted to make your name / A byword for all things of beauty and grace."

The Teresa poems require narrative, and it can be difficult to maintain the standards of language that Collins set for himself in "Forecast" or "Kentucky Long Rifle." The first two lines of "The Machinery of Night" stumble a bit in setting the scene, but the poem recovers nicely as it progresses through a description of the poet's father setting type for the Memphis newspaper, the trade he took up after being unable to complete his dental studies. "While only a youth," the poem begins, "I visited the composing / Room of the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*." The prosiness of these lines does not prepare us for the description of his father's "beautiful square hands" loading "slugs of hot lead" into the linotype machine.

"Load every rift with ore," was John Keats's advice to poets, and it seems to be advice Collins has taken to heart. Over and over reading these poems, readers will be brought up short by the transformative powers of Collins' imagery and his metaphor making. In "Narcissus to the Muse," a description of his elaborate preparations for high school—"It was for you, Teresa, that I put on the pleated / Oxford cloth shirt with the button down collar"— is compared with his dressing for the day now—"I shrugged on my wool cardigan"—before launching into a memory of high school sports and the inevitable passage from those years. "Farewell," a poem placed early in the sequence, tells us that Teresa "died in the days before the autumn equinox / Twenty-five years after our short liason." The speaker, unaware of his former love's demise, describes himself as "slumbering," but says of Teresa, "She, too, sleeps on a little past the dream."

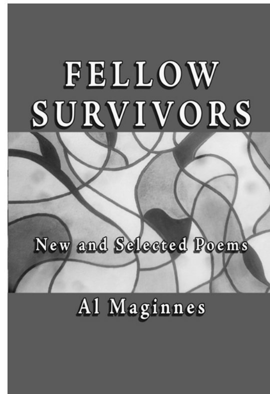
Floyd Collins is an artisan of language. We may have no one who chisels and sculpts language as precisely as he does. In this generous, yet carefully curated, selected poems, Collins provides example after example of what language is capable of. Young poets would do well to look here for guidance. Widespread attention has eluded Collins, perhaps because his books of poems come infrequently, and his career did not lead him into the favor-trading world of writing programs. *Waking Past Midnight* may or may not change that, but this is a book built of poems that will endure and long after the time of this writing, people will discover and marvel over the poems of Floyd Collins.

--Al Maginnes

Fellow Survivors: New and Selected Poems. By Al Maginnes. (Hickory, North Carolina: Redhawk Publications, 2023. Pp. 269, $16.00, paperback)

Born in Massachusetts and raised in the southeastern United States, Al Maginnes earned his BA from East Carolina University and his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Arkansas. A prolific practitioner of the language arts, he has published thirteen collections of poetry. Individual poems have appeared in prestigious literary journals, including *The Antioch Review*, *Arkansas Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The New England Review*, *Poetry*, and *Tar River Poetry*. He is a recipient of the John Ciardi Award from the University of Arkansas Press and a grant from

the North Carolina Arts Council. Maginnes is also an aficionado of popular music, which is evident in his poem for Delta bluesman Robert Johnson titled "Love in Vain," perhaps the most poignant entry in the selections from *Sleeping Through the Graveyard Shift*. The two hundred and sixty-two pages of the volume presently under review, *Fellow Survivors: New and Selected Poems*, clearly indicate that Maginnes has achieved T. S. Eliot's first criteria for literary excellence: "abundance." When my appraisal of Maginnes's latest book is concluded I hope it will be apparent that the poet has also attained "variety" and "complete competence."



Perhaps the finest and most evocative of Maginnes's earlier poems, "For a Glass of Red Wine" conjures the gustatory and olfactory qualities of a vintage that could be a *premier cru* such as Chateau Lafite or a more earthy blend like Black Cloud. The opening lines put us in mind of a bottle broached by a corkscrew:

> I want to reach over and move you
> so your smoky odor of crushed grape
> cannot drift around me, but
> I cannot stop watching the smear
> of candlelight reflected on your ruby belly,
> bright as the hour glass marking
> the black widow I killed in my toolshed
> this summer. (p. 78)

The speaker seems to shiver with anticipation so pure it borders on greed. Note the orotund *o* and *r* sounds in the adjective-noun combination "smoky odor," as he rolls them on his tongue like plump grapes picked from vineyard rows still wet with dew. He seems entranced by "the smear / of candlelight reflected on your ruby belly" (p.78). Like a French Impressionist he depicts with subtle brush strokes the "ruby belly" resembling an "hour glass" that culminates in the spectral image "black widow I killed in my toolshed."

Thus, the speaker savors the allure of this sweet intoxicant but also realizes its fatal potential. Moreover, he admits to thirsting for more mundane brews in the ensuing lines: "And I loved your earthy cousin, beer, / who bears the brassy accent of wheatfields" (p. 78). Here Maginnes's protagonist forsakes the delicate palate of the wine connoisseur for the "brassy accents" (p. 78) of one who lives by the rough braille of his senses. Beer brewed from barley is not pearled and awakens in the reader's mind the neon-lit windows of roadhouses where frosted mugs come to a head in foam and the occasional brawl: "'You could have been killed,' I'd hear / for the next seventeen years, after / the car wrecks, bar fights, [and] nights in jail" (p. 79). Oddly enough, the poem that began as a paean in the vein of Emily Dickinson's "I taste a liquor never brewed" culminates in a sobering dirge for the aftermath of youthful excess: "tiny cyclone / in the clear barrel of a syringe, swirl now / of my wine-colored blood in tubes taken / to be tested or measured, to tell me / how far this new disease has marched" (p. 79). But "For a Glass of Red Wine" is no temperance sermon nor is it Maginnes's intention to point a moral or adorn a tale. His closure seems one of wistful remembrance:

> but one scent of your dry breath
> can make me thirst again
> for the cup after cup I emptied,
> searching, I thought, for the pearls
> some kings used to hide in wine
> for favorites of the court to find,
> round and drowning
> and, briefly, the color of blood" (p. 80)

The fifth and sixth lines quoted above capture the full-flavored cadences of Yeats's "Sailing to

Byzantium."

Maginnes embraces a Whitmanesque urge toward cataloguing and prefers expansive narratives that embrace the phenomenal world and enable him to name the numinous particulars that abide in the rich marrow of day-to-day living. In "Before Electricity," the poet's metrical register lilts trippingly throughout the opening lines: "Evenings then were music, saw-grass rasp / of fiddle, thumb and horn-tipped fingers // frailing a reedy banjo, or spinning forth / of words unspooled like thread to repair // the simple fabric lives were clothed by" (p. 75). The sibilant *s*-sounds in "saw-grass rasp" connote the amber rosin block and bristling bow, an aural device countered by the bass note inherent in the locution "thumb." Even more arresting is the expression "horn-tipped fingers" that plays into the phrase "frailing a reedy banjo." Stylistically, Maginnes resorts to Old English kennings revived by the Irish Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, which in the latter's case was intended to evoke the turf-fire snugness of the Gaeltacht in Northern Ireland. Maginnes likewise strives to convey the creatural existence of his protagonists living in a time before incandescent bulbs lit Trans-Appalachian homesteads along the Blue Ridge Mountains: "but more than one might have yearned / for the forgiveness smeary oil-light granted, / a glow built as much from shadow as illumination" (p. 75). Perhaps he envisions a woman weary from hours spent at a butter-churn or cider-press shrugging off her dress of printed flour sack fabric and letting her "stiff hair fall" (p. 75). The last thing her husband sees when she slips beneath the patchwork quilt of their iron feather-bed is: "the mute instrument in the corner" (p. 75). Doubtless his hands slide along the curve of her spine as easily as they did the pearl inlay of the banjo's fingerboard.

"Electricity: A Requiem," occurs much later in Maginnes's oeuvre and amounts to series of apocalyptic scenarios not intended for the more delicate sensibilities typically drawn to poetry. But its opening segments appear benign compared to what follows: "Wanderers learned how / to carry fire with them, / not sensing yet that its warmth, its gift of vision would lure us / into building hearths / to cast our bodies beside" (p. 204). The Promethean tone promises an ameliorating warmth, the solace of heat and light, if not ceremony, to ancestral tribes who seek a familiar dwelling. But with a local habitation and a name come the inevitable pitfalls of what passes for civilization. Maginnes relates how Mississippi and Louisiana "elected / to buy electric chairs that could be taken around the state rather than house / the soon-to-be-dead in Parchman / or Angola" (p. 204). Notice how the poet generates a macabre homophone through his juxtaposition of "elected" and "electric chair." The poet offers us *sotto voce* a scathing cultural critique as the good people of the community gape like bumpkins at a carnival: "Crowds would come to watch the chair unloaded. The / executioner would hire an electrician / to wire up the chair." (p. 205). However, Maginnes initially denies us the specter of the convicted soul crowned with electrodes and banged out of his leather straps once the switch is thrown: "In some towns there were concerts and picnics. / Church bells would toll / as the hour approached" (p. 205). Meeting-house belfries reverberate for miles around as bronze bells tongue twelve and the state-sanctioned homicides are carried out. Doubtless, the corpses will be dumped in a potter's field. Maginnes's indictment of these casual slaughters is fraught with irony as afternoon sublimes into evening: "men and women turned from / the mid-day execution / to walk home for quiet copulations in shade-cooled houses" (p. 208).

The new poems in *Fellow Survivors* are rich

and various in their subject matter. Each entry lends deeper insight into Maginnes's personal concerns and ranges from actual events to anecdotal observations. He spent four years living in the shadow of Fayetteville's Mount Sequoia, but managed to assimilate the influence of previous University of Arkansas MFA candidates such as Jack Butler and Frank Stanford, thus emerging with a voice and vision undeniably his own. Maginnes's signature style ranges from expansive narratives to poems characterized by a searing lyric acumen. "Light Has Two Tasks" emerges as a salient case in point:

> Moonlight only serves for shining the edges
> of things already dark. Curved fender
>
> of a fresh washed car. Crown of a gravestone.
> Crescent of a knife two boys use
>
> to open their thumbs and press the wounds together
> the pale scars insignia of a bond
>
> they cannot explain or express. (p. 27)

He captures in the expression "Curved fender / of a fresh washed car," the sponge-buffed contour of a '53 Desoto. Genuine moonlight gleams along the hood ornament. Then the poet shifts to the metonymic "Crown of a gravestone" and appears loath to concede that a monarch lies beneath it. The ritual nick that seals a bond between two youths implies that pain is its own signature, fresh and blinding decades after the fact. The cursory nod to the title poem of Frank Stanford's first volume titled *The Singing Knives* (1971) is unmistakable but Maginnes is no devotee prone to slavish imitation. His youthful protagonists lie beside pulsing embers that shift and glow in the surrounding dark until he dispels the enchantment with one extraordinary line: "Daylight shrinks the world. Birds call" (p. 27). Something inchoate compels these lads to linger beside the heap of sticks kindled by their own hands: "The boys emerge out of night's possibility / into flat light, linger beside // the cooling ashes though they are hungry / and expected in their unpredictable homes" (p. 27).

Maginnes's most engaging poems are confessional in nature and deal with themes ranging from social status to alcoholism. In "Blue Collar" he contrasts his father's desire to transcend his class origins and the apparent indifference with which the poet contemplates such nice distinctions. He recalls his parent's natty attire by conjuring the "ice-blue Oxford" worn only on Fridays when his finer apparel is at the cleaners. Ironically, the color motif evokes the demeaner of one who is cool and aloof rather than prone to labor in the grease pits of service stations. Maginnes harbors no disdain for working stiffs who wear "grease-mapped shirts" or whose hands are callused from cracking the lugs on tires driven by those who can afford SUVs. While his father urges mastery of "decimals and fractions," he prefers "radio songs" and the social revolution foretold in the black columns of "underground" newspapers. But he also remembers "the frayed shirts with company logos / and names stitched over the pockets" (p. 148) that both confer identity and produce an ineffable fatigue in the care-worn patriarchs of working-class households. Maginnes recalls "friend's fathers as they came home / from the bottling plants or the mill with no good words to say / who opened cans of sweating beer and slowly / unlaced their shoes" (p. 148). Apparently, unremitting toil produces choler of a different hue than the poet alludes to in his title. In a book-length poem titled *Dry Glass Blues* the poet chronicles the woes of excess in language appropriate to his subject matter. The speaker laments his inability to drink with discretion and concludes that he must either abstain

or indulge. Naturally, the youthful protagonist opts for the latter course, and the consequences provoke both raucous laughter and bitter regret. Perhaps Maginnes's greatest asset as a poet resides in his knack for sustaining a lengthy narrative replete with striking images and metaphors. Certain passages own the table-pounding cadences of a drunken rout while others are deeply introspective. Regarding a friend's 33 rpm disc he remarks: "But when I heard Mississippi John Hurt play / 'My Creole Belle,' I listened to it half-a dozen times / in a row wordlessly joyed by that simple blend / of dry voice and fingerpicked guitar" (p.105). Al Maginnes's *Fellow Survivors: New and Selected Poems* is a veritable tour de force by one of our finest poets.

--Floyd Collins