

An American Medley: An Essay in Prose and Verse

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Preface

My talk tonight focuses on the decade leading up to my birth in Carbondale, Illinois in November, 1933. In light of our current administration's vow to "Make America great again," many have wondered what the benchmark for that greatness might be. Some have concluded that this nation's greatness lies in its constant striving to make things better for generations yet to come by righting the wrongs of the past. As the Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana wrote in *Common Sense*, volume I of *The Life of Reason*, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," meaning we are foolish if we return to a past we poorly understand in order to relive it. The location of the events I discuss is Williamson County, Illinois, and the town of Herrin where I came of age.

I. Williamson County: How It Came To Be

1. Milo Erwin, an early historian, wrote in his 1876 *History of Williamson County* the following.

This was a lovely home for the Red Man, where the dews of Egypt kindled roses and vines for him, and Nature, with her sweet influence, taught him to love and adore the Great Spirit in this fair haven of happiness and repose, too pure and stainless to be sullied by immortality. These prairies ripple and glitter yet; but wherever civilized man has put his foot, it has left its print, and now wild briars, thorns and thistles have grown up to choke out the sweet blossoms which once bloomed over this country.

Place

Like an arrowhead long in the ground,
shaped by nature, tossed up
and broken to our fathers' purposes,
a piece in this American cartography,
Illinois is divided by delineations
circumscribing artificial territories
within which its residents seek
their imperatives. At its tip, south
of much of Kentucky and Virginia,
awash in the ineluctable confluences
of the Wabash, the Ohio, and the Mississippi,
is a land-between-the-rivers,
an irony called Little Egypt.

[no stanza break]

Herein lies a surveyor's delight,
a rectangular plot of ground,
a county of contrasting geometry
with the river-shaped political conveniences
it borders, a symmetrical location
for the human events which gave it
the name of Bloody Williamson.

The place was pleasant enough
long before being settled.
Even now it seems benign,
its slender streams and domesticated
lakes embracing vestiges
of the prairie for which the Shawnee
and the Kaskaskia fought purposelessly
as if bear, deer, and buffalo
would return to the victor, not knowing
this land would acquire a permanent
blackness from the hunter's fires
and then from soft coal,
a crop worth all the others –
walnut, berry, persimmon,
fox, turkey, goose, [no stanza break]

tobacco, cotton, corn –
 and inexhaustible, too, in its dimensions,
 replacing the great blue stem
 under which it had lain forever
 with its sulfurous soot and its slag.

2. Again, I quote from Milo Erwin who describes the pioneers in the area:

They were poor, but of unmixed blood. There were no half-breeds, neither Indians nor other obnoxious races.

People

No more wanting to kill
 one another than to die in the wilderness,
 there were no heroes among them,
 though plenty boasted of heroism.
 Not that they were cowardly.
 They'd never lived easy, never
 got ahead from a war or a job.
 They tried to explain to their women
 why they left the hills
 of Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky
 to hunt this strange prairie,
 to till the virgin ground,
 to protect only those they knew

[no stanza break]

and their own good name.
 They had their vendettas and killed
 an errant Indian or two
 while their faith forced them to lament
 that they were ever born.

3. In his “Unauthorized Biography,” of John L. Lewis, 1949, Saul Alinsky wrote this:
Coal is the prime mover of our life. In these black chunks of the earth’s history is the energy that pours power into our gigantic industrial empire. Beyond the conjuring of any imagination is the awesome vastness of man’s industrial procession.

Coal

Then coal
 and trains and industry appeared
 miraculously – more attractive and subtle,
 a preacher said, than the apple.
 A nine-foot vein lay
 under thirty square miles of the prairie
 where a village had been founded by a Baptist
 called Herring, or Herrin to the tongue.
 In the nineties they came from Italy
 (building their Roman Church
 on one side of town, [no stanza break]

the Baptists on the other)
Wales, Ireland, the Baltic,
and Russia –wherever generations
of backs were accustomed to bending
and minds were accustomed to knowing
that life was to be traded for coal.
Then came the Blacks from the South.

They were scabs until the union
in aught six and their willingness
to work until they suffocated
like canaries earned them the right
to die with the others but not
to live with the others in Herrin,
a Jim Crow town to its roots

The war to end all wars
passed momentarily, its message
confirmed only by the dead
and by the politicians and the righteous who found it
to be a lovely reason to prosecute
the American Dream with vigor.
And in the mine fields casualties

made all war lovely
to the mind of the white-eyed
miner emboweled in the earth,
far from Flanders, far
from the centers of legislation,
far from the dream kept alive
by distant dreamers whose dreams
were clouded by the blackness that issued
from the prairie. The dream in the pits
was of being alive at the end
of the shift, of a night without coughing
black sputum into a porcelain pot,
and of a nickel's worth of beer;
and was of union that would allow a man
to stand up at work,
keep a canary alive,
the lamp lit, and blackness
six feet in front of his face.

In their square, bare houses
the dreams of the women were on Jesus,
a good life for their children,
a better life after death,

[stanza break]

and saving their men to be buried
by the preacher, for god's sakes.
But they hadn't reckoned on Tom Mix
serials, driven a Ford
or done the Charleston,
and never would. When told
the way to happiness would be
the elimination of nickel beer
and of all evil spirits,
they thanked god,
not giving a thought to Jesus,
who made his own brew.
Waiting, just waiting, was the preacher
and his clan who saw this victory
as a victory over the Italian, his foreign pope,
and waiting, too, were the men
who knew they could be somebody
by finding the miners a drink.
The prairie abounded in misbegotten
Jesuses and tin star cowboys
who refused to distinguish blood from wine.

II. Massacre, June 22, 1922

In his book *Bloody Williamson*, Paul Angle, uses this quote from President Harding's address to Congress, August 8, "[*The Herrin Massacre*] is a shocking crime...butchery wrought in madness....

A few of you knew Paul Angle, who was a member of our Club from 1946 until his death in 1975. In February of 1950, he delivered a talk titled "The Herrin Massacre." That talk became a part of his book *Bloody Williamson: A Chapter in American Lawlessness*, which I read when it first appeared in 1952. At the time I was a sophomore in college and had never heard about the Herrin Massacre that happened within a few hundred yards from where I grew up. Angle cemented that horrific event and its aftermath in my mind, and it has been one focus of my writing ever since. Angle says that the Herrin Massacre is but one of many violent acts endemic within our nation, from the Whiskey Rebellion of the 1790s, to a century of lynchings, to the Cicero race riot of 1951, to many other such events that occur almost every day. In this talk, I incorporate references from Angle.

1. A Mine Guard Testifies

The first of summer. Solstice, I'd heard.

It was just light, but the heat kept
even the crows quiet. Nothin' stirred.

We were all alive, but no one slept.

Someone found some coffee. Like gall [no stanza break]

it was. Some fellows had snuck away
in the dark. Only a few of us waited until day.
Then we surrendered. And that was all.

If they'd wanted to kill me, they'd done it.
I asked for water; they slit my throat.
I thought I was dead. I was wrong,
I guess. My four pals died. The song,

"Nearer, my God, to Thee," kept runnin'
through my head, but it made no sense.
Then I got kicked and called a son-of-a-bitch.
That night I woke up at the hospital hummin'

that song. There'd been five of us tied by the neck.
Hell, I was as tired as they was. Sick
with the bullet holes in me and the runnin' and the crawlin'
to where they'd buried their own, and knowin'

others'ud been killed back on the road.
Fifteen more, I learned. We'd started out
with the promise we'd have free passage. In about
a mile or so the line was slowed.

“Kill the scabs and get rid of the breed!”

someone shouted. Our peg legged super was shot,

and we were given but a little lead

before bullets from behind and the barbed wire in front

did for us. Four men were gobbets of flesh

when they got to a woods. One was hung.

The others’ throats were cut. Christ!

If we’d only known in Chicago what we’d begun.

Some of us had worked a strike before.

Others were just off the gutters of Madison.

We didn’t figure the strikers would be sore

enough to kill us. We learned our lesson.

Well we shot at folks to keep ‘em frightened.

Then we killed a couple intruders. That was that.

Our shovel that had been used to cut Panama

was ripped apart like a helpless animal.

We surrendered to a mob of some say a thousand.

The rest you know. What you don’t know is this: **[no stanza break]**

I don't wonder the miners wanted to kill us.

We were dupes of the owner. The miners took a stand.

2. Justification

John L. Lewis wrote this to the Herrin chapter of the UMW on June 19, 1922:

Representatives of our organization are justified in treating this crowd as an outlaw organization and viewing its members in the same light as they do any other common strike breakers.

And Theodore Cronyn, a reporter for the *New York Herald*, wrote on June 19, 1922, following the Massacre: *When Lewis officially told them that those fellows out at Lester's mine were to be treated like any other strikebreakers...it was about the same as saying, 'Hike out there to the mine and clean 'em out.' I don't believe that John Lewis gave the matter enough thought, or maybe he didn't know how bad conditions were down here.*

And in a radio interview in Herrin conducted by then SIU graduate students Curt Billig and Steve James (now the Oak Park movie documentarian), a miner said: *You let one scab move in, it's just like a cancer.... You have to nip it in the bud, you might say. People that condemn the coal miners, why they probably got scab blood in them themselves.... They couldn't get away with it today, in any of these towns down here.*

3. A Miner's Account

They waved that goddam cook's apron

to surrender and walked out, simple as that.

[no stanza break]

Nobody'd thought about what to do with 'em
,but we sure as hell didn't want to just pat

their bottoms and send 'em back to Chicago.

They'd broken our strike, threatened our livelihood,
and then killed a couple 'uv us. How could
we've been expected to let our blood flow

and not do like we did? Some say
we were protectin' our American way of life.
Hell. That's the Ku Kluxers' way.

We were Americans and Italians who'd mined

in the pits and who knew that the union would get
us wages and conditions if we'd only stick together.
We had to make an example. We figured
there'd be more to come if we didn't settle it.

Maybe it was the blasted heat. Maybe the guns
we'd taken from the hardware stores in the name
of the union. Maybe we'd just gotten tired of those sons-
a-bitches scarin' berry pickers. It's all the same.

There were five hundred of us, two dozen of them.

A miner tried to reason: “They’re out

now. Let’s let it go at that.”

Then their peg-legged super pulled up lame.

Someone yelled, “You bastard, I’m goin’ to use you as bait,”

and shot him twice in the chest. We were worked

to a pitch. “Here’s where you run the gauntlet,”

an ol’ boy cried. “Let’s see you get

to Chicago, you damned gutter bums.” They were cursed,

then run into the woods over barbed wire.

It was like huntin’ deer. Then they began to tire.

One kept flailin’ after bein’ shot where he lay.

“Some of ‘em are hell to kill, ain’t they?”

a miner grinned, then blew off half a face.

Six got to the schoolyard and began to crawl

on the hot tar and gravel. We gave ‘em god’s grace.

We took ‘em to the cemetery down the road

and thought we’d killed ‘em all by cuttin’ their throats.

One guy lived. Don’t ask me how.

[no stanza break]

I saw a woman big as a sow

standin' on his body helpin' him bleed.

He asked for water. A little kid peed

in his face and kicked him senseless. The crowd
grew tired. It was almost noon, not a cloud

in the sky. The coroner came for the bodies.

He had nineteen by the time he was done.

Next day they put them in a room in town

where they could be seen. In the heat, the flies

and the stench frenzied the women who brought
their kids to see the dead. One put

a stick in a mouth, another took off a sheet.

In a day or two, the dead were not so neat.

We buried our own and the whole town mourned.

We dumped the scabs in a pauper's plot,

but marked just one for a Russian who'd fought
with us in the war, though he was foreign born.

"Goddamn them!" our union boss fussed.

[no stanza break]

“They ought to have known better than to come down here.

They did it anyways, and look at what they got.”

I suppose so. But we promised them we’d be fair.

III. Interlude: Otice and C Talk It Over

In his early history, Milo Erwin wrote, “...*I met some old men who told me that in an early day, when they neither had gospel nor meetings, that the people were peaceable, friendly and happy; and as soon as preachers came into the country they got up ‘isms,’ ‘sects,’ and ‘systems,’ which ended in jars and feuds among the people, and that they have never seen any peace since.*”

Following is my imagined conversation between my maternal grandfather, Otice Maynard, mentioned in Angle’s book, but spelled Otis, like the elevator company, and “C,” all that I’ve ever had of a middle name.

C: I’ve waited long to hear you out.

Maybe all grandkids should become at least a score
of years older than their dead grandfathers
before they start asking them the hard questions.

By what logic am I your grandson, anyway?

You were dead seven years before my birth.

I know but my mother’s dream of you, a dream
in which you were what she wanted you to be.

Otice: You think that I am a figment of my daughter’s imagination?

She spoke the truth. Her faith demanded no less.

C: Of course. She was a Southern Baptist and a court reporter.
 The church and Brown's Business College made her
 a believer in truth and an accurate recorder of facts.
 But both were hard to find in the sanctuary or the courtroom.
 Look at the Scopes trial for evidence you need of that.
 She created you to satisfy her need to love you.
 Afterwards she began to believe in her creation.
 You, above all, should know that such a love
 distorts the truth. Witness love of country.

Otice: Your cynicism is abominable to me. It is obvious that you
 have no desire to understand my side of things.
 Nevertheless, to truth, facts, and love
 I add my faith, my belief in the Word of God,
 and my loyalty to union and to the American way of life.

C: So you raise the flags of faith, belief, and loyalty
 so soon? At least you make clear that they are your flags
 and no one else's.

Otice: Again, that is not just. Everyone
 I loved thought as I did.

C: Ah, love, again!

Otice: You know, I suppose, I could not read or write
until my wife, God bless her, taught me how.

C: Yes. That girl of fifteen you married at twenty-two
had become the family's matriarch by the time I knew her.
She never spoke of you. After she died
my mother, old enough to be her sister,
invented you for me out of a few well-chosen facts.

Otice: The record's clear. I went to the mines at twelve
and died of lung disease at forty-four.
Before that there is little else I recall but the journey
from Tennessee to Kentucky and eventually to the State of Illinois,
a journey it seemed everyone I knew in the mines
had taken to Williamson County. I began as a trapper
in '95 at the age of twelve, before the union,
and survived the ten-hour dark days lit by kerosene
that were marked only by the opening and closing of a door
so that the mule could pass and the air remain free of gas.
When I became a loader, I married your grandmother.
I knew she would be a Christian mother to my children, [no break]

and I knew she could give me the education I never had.

We had five children, your mother the first,
followed by four good boys. I promised myself
they'd never have to work the mines. I became
a mine inspector and took on extra jobs.

I was a union man, a church man, a family man,
a county superintendent. And then I died.

C: That pretty well sums up the safer side of your life.
It would make an obituary in the church bulletin.
the facts upon which a daughter can build a dream.
But what of the facts recorded in the courthouse:
murder, conspiracy to commit murder, assault
with intent to kill – ten cases in '22;
murder, conspiracy to commit murder, and assault
with intent to kill – fifteen counts in '24?

Otice: Unfair again. All of those charges were dropped.
The prosecutor knew he couldn't prove them true.
There wasn't a man who lived in the County
who wasn't brought to court for something he didn't do.

C: I've read the records. None of the 500 miners **[no stanza break]**

Who surrounded the strike breakers at Herrin in '22
 were near the scene when the nineteen scabs were killed.
 From then on "not guilty" was followed by "nol-prosse."
 The verdicts: "Death by a person or persons unknown."
 There were a hundred such deaths in the next four years.
 The "person or persons unknown" was a serial killer.

Otice: No one else was killed because of the strike.

The miners' cause was just. The owners came
 from outside to take away their livelihood.
 Then like vultures the gangsters eyed their prey.
 In their helplessness the miners had need of protection
 from those who would sully their lives with liquor and turn
 what happened into unholy profit for themselves.

C: So you don't deny your part in any of this?

I didn't think you would. I finally learned
 that you were there that first day of summer in the woods
 where one of the scabs was found hanging from a tree.
 You told the owner of that woods, "Do not say anything
 to these men, for I have talked to them,
 and they have told me to stand aside."

Until now, these are the only words of yours **[no stanza break]**

I've known you to say. Alone they are not incriminating.

But those woods are your Gethsemane. Not guilty. Nol. prosse.

Otice: That I lived nearby made it natural for me to be there.

In any case, those who were killed were our killers,
the dupes of powerful forces that would deprive us
of our livelihood and take away our union.

C: So you found your voice and your place in the community.
And then it became necessary for you to save the miners
from themselves or for the life you would have them lead.
You and fifteen thousand other citizens
looking for the means to eliminate sin from the County
with the same efficiency by which you had eliminated the scabs,
embraced the Ku Klux Klan, and a cheap version
of Elliot Ness to make it operable.

Otice: S. Glenn Young perished in a just cause.

C: I've seen a picture of the man with the Belgian hound,
the tommy gun, and the pearl handled revolvers
who no doubt recited the Klan chant with you:

... -- *men, high minded men,* [no stanza break]

With powers as far above dumb brutes endued

In forest, brake or den,

As beasts excel cold rocks and brambles rude;

Men who their duties know,

But know their rights, and knowing dare maintain.

These constitute a state.

I've been told that you, like Young, carried two revolvers,
and left them at the church door only because
you were able to conceal your derringer in your cap.
What did you fear?

Otice: We feared nothing.

But we had to show we were prepared to fight for the right
and destroy those who would destroy us.

C: The Italians who fought with you against the scabs?

Otice: They followed a foreign priest and ignored the law.

Their drunkenness was against the will of God and man.

C: Yes. Man. I have heard the cheer of the Klan: **[stamza break]**

Have we not sinews as strong as they?

Have we not hearts that ne'er give way?

Have we not God on our side today?

Hurrah!

So you and Young and the Southern Methodists and Baptists
and all the good people of the prairie decided to place
the law behind a white sheet and a tin badge.

Otice: We did what we could to enforce the law of the land.

C: And when Glenn Young died and the Klan with him,
you died as well, almost a year to the day.

Otice: He died a martyr's death. I died the death
of a miner. Neither of us was guilty when we died.

C: I found a photograph of Young before the pulpit
of the Baptist Church, laid out for all to see.
To the upper right was the Baptismal where at nine
I was forced under tepid water that was to change
my life. I suppose it has. For I resent not knowing
that Young had lain in that church and been visited
by thousands of mourners, many in white sheets.

He's beneath the largest monument in the city cemetery,
just a few steps from where you and all our family lie.

The yearly whitewash on the stone does not hide
the bullet chips that began to appear within days
of his funeral. I didn't even know the grocer
who took my ration stamps during World War II
was the Cyclops who carried Young to his grave.

Otice: So you simply wanted to know your heritage, did you?

And by not knowing you've made these false judgments.

C: There is more than your early death and my mother's dream
that separates us. I don't judge you or Young
or those conspirators in massacre. It's the Cyclops
I fear, the one who lurked behind the counter
hoping that in my ignorance I could be tricked
into being what he wanted me to be.

IV. The Reign of Purity: 1923-1926

In his 1905 *Historical Souvenir of Williamson County*, J. F. Wilcox wrote,
*Nearly all of America's great men, like the giant oaks and the fruitful vines and trees,
 were first planted in the fruitful soil of the country they love and honor. Pigmies and
 criminals are bred in the cities, giants on the farm....*

The life of one of those giants was detailed in a 1925 anonymous book, *Life and Exploits
 of S. Glenn Young: World-Famous Law Enforcement Officer*:

*[This fight of past and present in Williamson County is not a klan and anti-klan fight. It
 is not a religious fight, although the Protestant churches are leading and supporting it
 and other denominations are not aiding.... What few foreigners or men of foreign-born
 parentage are implicated are outnumbered by those who should have an undying loyalty
 for our country and its institutions, by birth and education.*

*There are thousands of potential Klansmen in America, and it is safe to predict...
 that a great host of these potentials will become actuals....*

1

After massacre the lucky world
 beats its scapegoat bleating
 into the wilderness, denounces
 killing with a happy heart,
 and trembles like a hovering kestrel
 for the slightest signal of remorse. **[no stanza break]**

Deep in the pits the miners
 speak of Ludlow* and the Chamber,
 Out of the bodies of scabs,
 blood brotherhood,
 a sacrifice made to union.
 Herrin knows no guilt.

Quiet the days, quiet
 but for mine whistles, on Sunday
 quiet but for preachers who plot
 to bring God back, Glotfelty,
 the Methodist, the Baptist Lee,
 like generals shaming their troops.

2

The Ku Klux Klan circles them
 like a craven beast,
 waits until the time is right,

* Ludlow, Colorado was the site on April 20, 1914 of a massacre by fire and bullets of striking miners' wives and children in an encampment at the Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, protected by the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. This incident, believed by some to be as close to class conflict as any event in American history, caused Ludlow to be invoked in subsequent strikes as sufficient cause to initiate violence against scabs and, particularly, a company's hired guards.

probably helped convince the local jury of the innocence of any one person in the deaths of the strikebreakers. Ludlow and the Chamber were mentioned in WSIU radio interviews sixty years later as reasons Herrin residents made collective alibis or the defendants.

strikes with a silvered palm
 for Jesus, multiplies its sheets,
 and begins to select its prey.

The Kleagle, the Cyclops, and the Dragon
 ride round the prairie on the trolley.
 Citizens raid their beds
 and attend the grand Klantauqua.
 They know whom to fight if they could,
 but languish for want of a leader.

3

As if sent by the forces of good,
 S. (for Seth, son of God)
 Glenn Young, a son of Kansas,
 by a rancher and a marshall sired,
 by a prohibitionist suckled,
 presents his credentials for hire –

Belgian police dog, brace
 of revolvers slung left and right,
 boots, breeches, tommy gun,
 tin badge, Carrie Nation's passion
 for sobriety and morality, a passionate [no stanza break]

hatred for the weakness in men,

cattle herder, student, gun-
 for-hire, nemesis of deserters,
 bootleggers, criminals, and Reds –
 a lone ranger worth the contract
 and a Lincoln to tour in the style
 of the gangsters he would pursue.

Young is fearless, and fearless
 too the Klan practicing
 the Great Experiment in roadhouses
 and Italian homes, teaching
 crook and papist American
 justice here in the heartland.

4

It is the cleansing of Bloody Williamson,
 the peace sought by Glotfelty, Lee,
 and the Cyclops. Quiet again
 are the days, quiet the streets
 until death is summoned once more
 with a shot to the head of a Klansman.

Sheets give way to tin badges.
 The law becomes the law of the Klan.
 For three glorious days the County
 has its own judge and jury.
 Quiet the streets. Quieter
 still the Cyclops' laughter.

5

Is absolutism victorious?
 Does the Cyclops' hood hide a smile?
 The Lincoln swerves from a blast.
 Young's wife lies blinded.
 Too soon the pleasure, too early
 the quench of death's candle.

Two years after the Massacre
 rid the County of scabs,
 the Klan and the cops shoot it out
 in fine Keystone fashion.
 Three bodies lie here, two there,
 plus a father pushing a pram.

6

January 13, 1925.
 Summer hate freezes over, **[no stanza break]**

the streets of Herrin quiet.
Improbable time for death
as it enters the European Hotel
where Young and his Klan await.

Young dead. Two Klansmen
dead. Ora Thomas, deputy,
dead. Herrin mourns aloud
and forgives itself in silence.
The Cyclops stands by the casket.
Glottfelty and Lee preside.

The citizens of Herrin are proud
of the procession for Young.
A sarcophagus protects him
from all but gangsters' bullets,
that whitewash and plaster can't hide.
And Thomas, God-fearing Baptist,
blemished by Klan-hating deeds,
has a Presbyterian minister to thank
for a burial all but ignored.
The Klan reveres its martyr.
God returns to Herrin.

7

Quiet the streets. All
 quiet but for the blowing of whistles
 and singing of choirs as an evangelist
 tells Herrin how happy God is
 to be back. The gavel bangs.
 The courts forgive once more.

The world makes much of the deceit
 that the people are in control.
 Power is the lesson of the martyr.
 The Cyclops observes an election.
 It is the spring of '26.
 A nun is denied her vote.

On the lawn of the Baptist Church
 in the doorway of the Masonic Temple,
 three Klansmen and three gangsters,
 their socks, once white, their hats
 now filled with blood.
 Cyclops and law close their eye.

8

The Klan has worked its magic, **[no stanza break]**

the Klan has worked its spell.
The lucky world forgives
massacre and murder,
welcomes the folks of the prairie
to their charming life.

Mine whistles pierce the air,
signal the miners to work.
The second shift emerges,
stops for an illegal beer.
Blood brotherhood.
The Cyclops minds his store.

VI. Looking for Work: 1934

And then came the Great Depression. I was born on November 28, 1933, in Carbondale, Illinois where my father managed a grocery store . It was the height of the Depression and only one week before the country came to its senses and ratified the 21st Amendment that repealed the 18th Amendment of January 17, 1920, thus ending the chaotic years of Prohibition, and, in retrospect, giving me one of my best birthday presents. Close to my birth, my father lost his job, and my mother, brother, and I moved over to Herrin to live with her mother. My father went on the road, looking for work. In a year he returned to Herrin and became a successful tavern owner and beer distributor, thanks to the end of Prohibition.

This conclusion to my medley includes phrases of his from letters I found wrapped in a silk ribbon after he and my mother had died. We write the following together.

I

My father lives in the rooms of friends
who board in the rooms of houses
whose owner widows live off the rent.

Penciled on hotel stationery
from St. Louis and Elkhart,
his letters contain desiccate thoughts
the paper, now wrapped in silk ribbon
has come to resemble.

[no stanza break]

His life is a sum of quotidian transactions:
 a promoter's check, not cashable,
 a twenty-cent bus ride to no interview,
 twenty-five cents for Mae West in "Belle of the Nineties,"
 settling "that business" down in Cairo,
 finagling the gas dun from Carbondale,

 the immensity of a three-cent stamp,
 until the day he splurges on a thirteen-cent
 special delivery letter:

*-- I bet fifty cents on a horse
 and won seven dollars and fifteen cents.
 Here's five dollars you can use. --*

His words are the chaff of hope:
*-- I have nothing to write about.
 I'm awful blue and lonesome.
 This is short. If you were here I'd make up for it.
 I suppose the baby'll start walking before I see him again.
 I hope I have some good news to tell you soon.*

Stayed in the room all day, because of the rain. **[no stanza break]**

I haven't written because I've been half sick. .

I will probably go to work next week, about Wednesday

Been to all those places on 3rd and 4th. No luck.

My father's face is everywhere,
his head beneath a cloth cap,
a cigarette dangling from his mouth,

a mirage within his vacant eyes,
he stares as if Dorothea Lange
had taken a photograph and with it his soul
and named it "Ditched, Stalled, Stranded."

He waits until morning for others to go off,
then exits the room to follow leads,
to get a breath of air, to win
once more on a no-name horse,
to lick the lead of his stubby pencil,

to mark the sheet, to send X's home.

The vagary of the lonesome dad.

My father looks all business.

.....

Ineluctably the medley continues, but for now, we must all head for home and think of our responsibility for helping shape a welcoming future for generations yet to come.