



# **Bill Hedrington**

*a memoir*

**Michael J Smith**

Bill would not have approved of this memoir. But that was thirty years ago; he was twenty-three when he died. Young men think they're immortal, whether they admit it or not, and striking a pose is the most important thing there is — far more important than survival. Bill's stance — not a bad one, of course — was elusiveness, self-containment, unknowability. The Fortress of Solitude: every boy's fantasy. Bill had a much more imposing and better appointed Fortress than the rest of us boys. We all admired him hugely for it, and I still feel a superstitious reluctance to trespass, though the owner is long gone and past caring.

We have his poems. The Bill I knew, thirty years ago, would have said that should be enough. I'm not sure he really meant it; even the misanthropic dragon Fafner sings a little message for posterity with his last diminished fifth. Bill himself kept an immense mass of papers — rough drafts, notes to himself, musings, comments on the people and events around him, even a journal. Some of this material — indeed, its very existence — suggests that he, like Fafner, may have had posterity in mind.

This doesn't do away entirely with my slightly uneasy conscience; but I have the benefit of thirty years' practice ignoring my scruples. Remembering our dead is something we do, not for them, but for ourselves. We don't like to let go, and why the hell should we?

And furthermore, I'm still a bit angry — a sure antidote for scruples. No, Bill, the poems aren't enough. For one thing, there aren't enough of them. And there aren't enough of them because you went and got yourself killed on the road, and I remember how you drove. To this loss, I am less reconciled with every passing year — another year of your friendship and your work that I won't have. So this is my revenge, if you like, and you can take your medicine meekly wherever you are. You are gone, and your friends now must make what we can of what little we have of you.

But I hope you don't mind *too* much.

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I knew Bill only in college. This was in the late sixties, a wild and wonderful time, in spite of all its folly and absurdity. Our campus was a very small one; though very up-to-date in its views, very countercultural, very peace-and-love, very turned-on. It was in this turbulent but lively setting that I came to know Bill Hedrington. He was a year ahead of me, so he was already a biggish man on campus. My initial impressions were favorable but not overwhelming; it was only

later, when I got to know him better, that Bill's exceptional qualities became evident.

He was tall and lean. In repose his expression was slightly melancholy though not gloomy. He tended to duck his head a bit, to the point that the phrase "hang-dog expression" occasionally came to mind, and he habitually looked at the world from under lowered brows. His gait was usually something between a slouch and a lope. His smile and laugh were low-key, even shy, though he was not hard to amuse. In general, his manner was contained and understated.

Whether one ought to call him handsome I don't know, but women often found him attractive. His hairline had retreated a good deal, although he was barely out of his teens; perhaps to compensate, he had grown the world's most ridiculous pair of sideburns. Combined with his somewhat abstracted expression, this gave him the air of a youthful, earnest Civil War lieutenant from a Midwestern regiment who has had a Rip Van Winkle experience and awakened, inexplicably clad in cutoff jeans and a T-shirt, at Woodstock. He tended to be laconic, but when he did talk, he would really say something, instead of just dropping some pregnant but noncommittal gnomism, as too many of us tirelessly did.

In spite of his tonsorial errors and attempts to be unobtrusive, he had the knack, or the gift, of exerting a certain magnetism without overt action; even when he was silent and still, you didn't overlook his presence in a room. Of course we were all young and easily imposed upon, and of course Bill had affected some fairly obvious Heathcliffian and Byronic mannerisms. But Bill's charm, for lack of a better word, went deeper than that. One had the strong and, I still think, accurate sense that there was a great deal going on beneath the surface.

Not my first memory of Bill, but one of the strongest: he reacted badly to being startled. An instance: it's the college snack bar. Bill is standing at the counter, waiting for some frightful grilled thing to be disgorged. I walk up behind him and speak, or tap his shoulder, or something, and he hasn't realized anyone is there. He whirls around in a flash, fist cocked back, apparently ready to throw a punch. He doesn't, fortunately — or do I mean, he doesn't, of course? Because I wondered then, and have often wondered since, was this for real? Or was it part of the pose? It certainly wasn't "cool" in any obvious sense.

Bill talked very little about his past and his family, so until it came time to write this memoir, I had very little sense of who he was before I met him. But it was definitely part of his persona that he came among us from a grittier, tougher

world than the bland white-collar suburbia that bred most of us. And that was certainly true enough.

Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, where Bill was born and did most of his growing up, got its start as a lumber town in the nineteenth century. Lumbering and the associated industries do not make for a delicate literary milieu. After the lumber was all cut, other industries moved in. These too provided solid blue-collar jobs but didn't move the town very far from its working-class roots. Only in the last couple of decades has the ballyhooed postindustrial information economy had much of an impact on Chippewa Falls, and the town's original character is even now far from obliterated. It is a handsome town; the sawmills and the later industries attracted solid, hardworking people and paid solid wages; the people built solid, honest buildings and laid out wide, generous streets.

But its attractions were lost on me the first time I saw it, along with a carload of other friends of Bill's, at his funeral. No doubt it was partly the occasion, and partly the season, that made it seem so grim. Flat, bare, November-gray and wet. Even in 1971 the primeval harshness of these glacier-scoured plains wasn't yet entirely obscured by creeping suburbia, and it must have been harsher still when Bill first saw that even unblinking northern light, later in the year but very early in Henry Luce's "American century", on December 3, 1947, the son of Johanna Hedrington and an unknown father.

Johanna, it seems, was quite a girl. There was at least one other child, a daughter, also born without benefit of resident father. Johanna died in 1964, when Bill was in high school, and Bill wept for her. His feelings on that occasion must have been complex enough, because although he knew Johanna and she remained in the picture, she didn't raise him. That job was undertaken, as soon as the infant Bill got out of the hospital, by his uncle, Earl Hedrington, and Earl's wife, Clara. Clara already had two children, Darlene and Frank Newton, by her first marriage, and these two became for all practical purposes Bill's brother and sister, as Earl and Clara became his mother and father.

He came to Earl and Clara's household a far from unwelcome guest. Earl and Clara couldn't have children of their own, and they were devoted to Bill, as were Darlene and Frank. Clara's "whole world centered on Bill," says Bill's cousin Mary Maluski. And Mary remembers her mother saying that "Billy was Clara's whole life."

The household wasn't rich; Earl was employed for a while as a carpenter, but that seems to have been insufficiently dependable, so he took a job as a garbage collector. Frank and Darlene recall that the job carried some social stigma, but it

paid the bills. The kids never went without anything they needed, and Clara “had her washing machines — always Maytags,” Frank says. Cousin Mary says, “I enjoyed my time there — you had to toe the line but [Clara] was generous and giving.” She also acknowledges that “if you didn’t know her, you might have found her unpleasant,” and indeed it seems clear that Bill’s childhood wasn’t altogether idyllic. The Earl and Clara family portrait has its darker shades.

For one thing, Earl and Clara drank. A boyhood friend of Bill’s recalls that “their social life consisted mostly of going out every night and getting hammered.” Darlene and Frank concur. Earl and Clara didn’t drink at home, but just about every night they headed off after dinner to a convenient tavern and spent the rest of the evening there. During much of this time, Earl even had a second job tending bar in one of these establishments, the Indian Head; presumably this sideline made the drinking easier and less costly than it might otherwise have been.

Bill’s younger cousin Peter wasn’t aware of Earl and Clara’s drinking, although he says that it doesn’t surprise him: “All those people drank a lot back then.” He does recall that the household didn’t seem happy. “I didn’t like going there. It wasn’t a fun place. It seemed dark, closed in.”

The Indian Head, where Earl and Clara spent their evenings, still stands. I was bold enough to drop in during a recent visit to Chippewa Falls. I felt a little conspicuous; the other patrons were decidedly a neighborhood crowd, and the attractive but tough-looking young cookie who served me my one draft beer didn’t expend any effort pushing a second. But everybody was perfectly civil and the overall tone entirely benign.

Things might have been a bit different at a later hour, or in an earlier decade; at any rate, when Earl and Clara came home at the end of an Indian Head evening, they were combative — both with each other and with the kids. Frank, who was thirteen years older than Bill and already something of a Wisconsin Wild Child, would be awakened and roundly excoriated for his scrapes. Bill, who never got into scrapes and was apparently a model child, nevertheless was lectured on how grateful he should be for Earl and Clara’s care.

They weren’t altogether wrong about this, though most people would agree that they shouldn’t have mentioned it. Yes, they drank, and yes, they were quarrelsome, but that’s not all there was to them.

Clara, as we noted, had been married before, to Percy Newton, Darlene and Frank’s father. He took off one day — “went out hunting and just didn’t come back,” says Frank, “and took all the change out of the Carnation Milk can before

he left.” There was “another woman in the picture,” Darlene thinks, and Frank agrees that their father had “an eye for the ladies.” Clara loaded her children into a little red wagon and pulled them down the road to her parents’ house. The image is iconic: Clara was no weakling, she made do with what was at hand, and she put her shoulder to the wheel when she had to. People often had to, in the hard-bitten world of Chippewa Falls in the forties and fifties.

Clara seems to have been, if not a stronger character, then perhaps a more definite and decisive one than Earl. She was “headstrong,” says cousin Mary. “She knew what she wanted and found ways to get it. She had a huge collection of salt and pepper shakers — she’d let you play with them, but she’d pick out the ones you could use.”

But Earl was by no means an inconsiderable figure. Bill’s cousin Peter actually has clearer memories of Earl than of Clara; he describes Earl as “not a very loose person; very controlled, not expressive, aware of himself.” Earl had a lengthy war. It appears that he was already enlisted in the 32D Division of the Wisconsin National Guard (the “Red Arrow”) when it was called to active duty in 1940, and he spent the rest of the war in uniform. The division compiled a very substantial combat record in the Papua, New Guinea, southern Philippines, and Luzon campaigns. Earl attained the rank of Tec 5<sup>1</sup>, according to his gravestone, and also picked up malaria somewhere along the way. Another cousin, Dave, recalls that Earl was not much given to discussing his experiences in the war. “I think he might have told one story once,” Dave says. Earl was still in uniform when he and Clara met. He was three years older than she was; both were in their thirties and had seen a fair amount of life, but their passion for each other seems to have been as fresh and strong as anything youth could offer. Cousin Mary remembers that they were “very close, very dependent on each other. Not on the surface. But it was like they were the only two people in the world.” Did they argue? “Oh, yes, they did, but they didn’t stay mad. Whenever I was there, they were always together.”

There is a wonderful snapshot of them, taken at a county fair. Both are looking directly into the camera. Their expressions are unselfconscious and unstudied, though very far from childish. Earl is a striking-looking man; his face is almost gaunt, his eyes deep-sunk and, one feels, probably rather haunted in repose; a self-questioner and man of many second thoughts, though certainly no weakling. But in this image he is smiling, and his evident happiness is the more striking for

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<sup>1</sup> Technician fifth grade, equivalent to corporal.

being overlaid on his visible substratum of melancholy. Clara's face is immensely attractive: full and healthy looking, vigorous and in no way delicate, yet intensely feminine; her troubles have taken away none of her youthful bloom. Her expression is less complex than Earl's but perhaps harder to characterize. She too is obviously happy — more than happy. One wants to use words like “triumphant” and “victorious,” but these suggest a smugness that she doesn't have. She looks like a person who has found something very specific and important that she's spent a lot of effort searching for, and Earl is it, unlikely a candidate as he may appear, with his Epimethean pensiveness. Her clear-sighted gaze is full of strong intelligence. Proverbs notwithstanding, this is no blind love, and the force of her character comes across so strongly that we take a second look at Earl and half-consciously defer to her judgment.



Clara knows what she is about, and we cannot doubt that whatever she thinks she's found in Earl, it must certainly be there. Both of them have had their trials and lost their naiveté; yet they still have within them abundant springs of hope and vitality and look the future levelly in the eye. They were married on December 14, 1946.

Compare this image with another freezing Gorgon glance from that same future, taken a quarter-century later. It's their anniversary: December 1971. Bill's twenty-fourth birthday would have been a week or two before, but he has been dead a little over a month. Cousin Dave recalls that Clara was “just devastated” after Bill died. Cousin Mary says that “they all lived for each other — when [Bill] was gone they didn't want to be around anymore.”

Characteristically, Clara's devastation is not evident in this picture. She and Earl are both wearing jackets, and Earl has a billed cap on; they're sitting at a formica-topped table, in chairs with plastic upholstery. It's the old familiar Indian Head tavern, where Earl had tended bar, and Clara kept him company for so many evenings. On the table in front of them, there's a lavish cake, surmounted

by an escutcheon bearing the number 25. Wildly overexposed by the camera's flash, the cake appears radioactive. Is it made of Kryptonite? Is it responsible for what has happened to the handsome young couple from the county fair? Earl's gauntness is now nearly skeletal, and Clara's face is lined and puffy. They have turned away from the future's gaze and toward each other. Earl's eyes are downcast, his posture rather bent. Clara looks steadily into his face; one arm is flung around his shoulder, and her other hand is clasped in his. She is still smiling, but at him now, not at us. Her expression is no longer triumphant, but it is full of strong, steadfast, time-defying tenderness. She seems to be protecting him, comforting him, perhaps cajoling him; at the same time she clings to him out of some great yearning of her own. He appears almost lost in his own thoughts, a man bowed down by years and burdensome reflections; yet his hand grips hers tightly. He does not merely allow her embrace, he meets it, in his own constrained and involuted way. The youthful heat of the earlier picture is long gone, but something stubborn and unquenchable still burns between these two.

Within a year, Clara too was dead; she lasted out one more hard Wisconsin winter after losing Bill and died amid the rich, brief bloom of a northern July. Earl soldiered on without her for another two years. We are somehow surprised to hear this, but there was always more to Earl than met the eye.

Indeed, he has a further surprise for us: after Clara's death he found himself a girlfriend. In the first phase of Earl's bereavement, his stepdaughter Darlene had been helping him out with his checkbook and other small necessities, though she didn't have any great affection for him: "I did it for Mom's sake," she says. But once the girlfriend came on the scene, Darlene seems to have concluded that Earl was well able to take care of himself.

The girlfriend forms an interesting pendant to the story of Earl and Clara. Earl's ability to find company and solace with another woman doesn't detract from the importance of his connection with Clara, but perhaps her departure created a little space for him to spread his wings for one last flight — she seems to have been a rather formidable personality. Earl may have felt a bit constrained when Clara was around; but at the same time, it certainly seems that she must have filled some deep need of his nature.

What might Bill have taken from these two? No doubt he learned caution. His contained, muted manner in later life probably owes much to Earl's example; self-protectiveness would have been vital in their household, subject as it was to boozy Sturm und Drang. He learned what it was to be loved, clearly, and learned what a complex and contradictory blessing this can be. And he saw, as well, something of

the strength and something of the travail that lies in the dialectic of men and women. An experience of love, then, and a capacity for it, and at the same time, a lively sense of its perils — these, perhaps, were some of Earl's and Clara's gifts.

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There were other gift givers around Bill's cradle. Prominent among them were Frank and Darlene Newton, his foster siblings, allies, and protectors. They were thirteen and eleven, respectively, when he came on the scene. People nowadays might worry that they would resent the new arrival. In fact the result was quite the contrary.

Darlene says simply that "Bill was my baby," and there is, again, a picture to illustrate the point. Darlene appears quite a competent young woman. Her air of maturity makes her look more grownup than she could have been in fact. She is wearing a very fetching hat at a jaunty angle. Baby Bill is so wrapped up in blankets and swaddles and a sort of Teletubbies cap as to be a rather awkward burden, but Darlene has the situation under control. She is looking at him, and he is staring with infantine suspicion at the camera. A close look at her face reveals a complex expression; it seems happy but thoughtful. She is looking not just at Bill but also, one feels, past him. In a few years she will be holding her own babies and experiencing the joys and sorrows of motherhood in her own right. Is her veiled look the sign of a foreshadowing? In any case we can see that she has a gift for motherhood, and we think she will probably make a fine job of it; and knowing what we do about Clara in her motherly capacity, we are glad to see that she has this girl for a subaltern.



And then there's Frank. Frank was a handful as a child and grew up into a wild man. Rebellious, disobedient, contumacious, and constantly in trouble, Frank was

the sort of boy that journalists and politicians nowadays consider a deep and puzzling social problem.

Chippewa Falls in the late forties and fifties, though, had its ways of dealing with boys and young men like Frank. He saw the inside of the local jail more than once — indeed, he got his name in the paper on one occasion as the “first customer” of the brand-new county lockup. But these were the days before American politics became the theater of punishment, with its elaborate apparatus of felon manufacture. Police and judges in Chippewa Falls had a lot of discretion, and at least in Frank’s case they seem to have had a fair endowment of common sense to go with it. They didn’t, apparently, classify him as some sort of alien being, requiring permanent quarantine like a deadly virus. Rather, one gets the impression that they had him sized up as a guy who would one day straighten himself out.

If so, their judgment was vindicated. Frank caused a lot of trouble and took a good many lumps; even his twenty months in Korea didn’t settle him down, and he came home as wild as he left. But a point finally arrived in his life — it was, in fact, May 1, 1964 — when he decided to change his ways. He stopped drinking and hasn’t had a drop since. He moved with his wife, Donna, to Milwaukee and found a good steady job in a machine shop, which he kept for the next thirty years and more. This turn in Frank’s life came at a crucial time for Bill, as we shall see.

Frank and Donna raised their children in Milwaukee and are now retired to the back of beyond in northern Minnesota. The wild man came in from the metaphorical woods, served his time as the solidest of solid citizens, and has now gone back to the literal woods. But his wildness is still evident. One has the sense, in his company, that this is a guy whom one would do well to treat with respect.

Frank now regrets that, as he says, “I wasn’t much of a brother to Bill.” But I think he does himself less than justice. In talking with Frank and Darlene and Donna and Ed Knudtson, Darlene’s husband, it becomes very clear that Bill was an unusual child: thoughtful beyond his years, solitary, and given to untypical pursuits. Such children are not always well tolerated by their coevals. Naturally I wondered whether Bill was teased or persecuted by other kids. Cousin Peter’s unconcerned, even absentminded, answer was, “Oh, I wouldn’t let nobody shit on him.” It’s hard to convey the matter-of-fact, un-self-regarding tone of this remark. There was nothing remotely resembling bluster or braggadocio in it. It was impossible to doubt that it simply represented an offhand, by-the-way statement of the literal truth.

Once more, the camera comes to our aid. People with teenage sons will appreciate this image at its full value. In front of a tumbledown shed or barn stands Frank, about fourteen, wearing a high-school football uniform. His face is a



bit puffy, eyes half shut, and his left hand is on his head, in an eloquent gesture: Is he actually hung over, at this tender age? Surely not; but knowing the kind of boy he was, we can't quite dismiss the thought. On his right shoulder, Baby Bill is perched, nonchalantly held in place by Frank's right arm. Bill's expression is that of an infant rajah astride one of his favorite elephants. Frank looks tough and maybe a bit pugnacious, but he doesn't seem to mind the slightly out-of-character baby on his shoulder. On the contrary, he looks as if he carries a baby around on his shoulder most of the time — as if the baby lives there — as if he has a baby on his shoulder by way of variation on the proverbial chip. If he seemed slightly more

conscious of the baby, one might imagine him saying, "Wanna make something of it?" But it seems more in keeping with his body language to write in Frank's dialogue balloon, "Baby? What baby? Oh, this baby! Hey, meet my brother Bill!"

Now that we have the supporting cast on stage, let's do that — meet Bill. I mean, as much as we can.

One thing everybody agrees on: he was "smart." Frank and Donna, and Darlene and Ed, and Bill's neighbor and boyhood friend, Jim Crandell, all cite this as the most striking thing about him. Jim says he would have expected Bill to grow up to be a scientist or an engineer. Cousin Mary would have expected a "nuclear physicist." He took an interest in mechanical things and, later, in electronics, and became adept in both areas. His cousin Peter remembers a science fair project in which Bill cultivated a tray full of four-leaf clovers; Peter thinks this may have received a prize, since Earl and Clara were "proud of it" and displayed the crop prominently in their living room. Bill always got good grades in school

and was never a discipline problem, though cousin Dave recalls some “mischievous rumbles” down by the river, including occasional raids on a nearby watermelon patch.

Insofar as Earl and Clara were capable of undiluted pampering, they pampered Bill; Frank and Darlene blandly say they “spoiled” him, though he apparently didn’t take undue advantage. One spoiled-child trait he did acquire: he was a picky eater. Couldn’t stand onions, and if he were served something with onions in it, he would patiently pick all the onions out, no matter how finely chopped. He seldom had occasion to do so, since as Darlene says, “they cooked what Bill liked.” But the slightly compulsive capacity for taking pains, revealed in the onion picking, never deserted him. His habit of worrying at a poem in later life, covering sheet after sheet of multiply-folded paper with minor variations in a tiny, cramped scrawl, seems a kind of onion picking by other means, and in a different sphere.

Jim Crandell’s first memory of Bill: he’s under the outside stairs leading up to the Hedrington apartment (Jim’s family lives on the first floor). Bill is patiently constructing an elaborate system of roads and buildings through which to run his toy cars. Jim joins him, and this becomes a favorite game. Jim recalls that the building was the fun part; actually running the cars through the finished infrastructure was something of an anticlimax. (Bill and Jim seem to have discovered an important truth here, which also applies on a larger social scale.)

The two boys also played board games; Jim recalls one involving financial manipulation — not Monopoly; something more complicated than that, God help us — and another involving military strategy. And they watched a lot of TV, which does not seem to have rotted the brain of either child. Perhaps TV was less perfected in those innocent days.

Bill didn’t have a lot of friends, as a child or as a teenager, and Jim can’t recall that he ever dated. (He made up handsomely for the latter omission in college.) He was, from the first, an inward sort of child who kept his feelings, and, one imagines, many of his thoughts to himself.

Jim was an athlete and is now a successful and respected sportscaster in California. Bill didn’t go out for school teams, but in unofficial sports after school, Jim says Bill was “right there.” Was he any good? Oh, yes, says Jim, with the judicious, precise approbation of professional expertise. “He was pretty lean and pretty strong.” Jim doesn’t recall any teasing about Earl’s occupation on the garbage truck. “Nobody had any money in that neighborhood, so who could talk?” he says. Possibly Darlene and Frank, being older, were more sensitive on this topic. Bill went to Catholic schools and Jim to public ones, and by the time they

were in high school, they weren't seeing much of each other. There was no breach, Jim says, they just had different circles.

Bill once observed, apropos of his cradle Catholicism, that "you can put it in neutral, but you can't stop the engine turning over." How true it really was for him is difficult to say. He had an eye for the transcendent, but was this because of, or in spite of, his early experience of religion? Certainly his researches in this area mostly expressed themselves in a very different idiom. But some of his musings on the Big Questions suggest that these questions first lodged themselves in his brain as posed by the astute old Roman firm. One of his own journal entries, from his college years, notes, "It's strange how deeply early religious training affects one."

The engine of Catholicism in Bill's household was Clara. Though she didn't go to Mass herself (because of her second marriage, perhaps?), she saw to it — or tried to see to it — that her kids did. Needless to say, Frank found ways to play hooky and sometimes persuaded Darlene to do so too. Bill was too young to join much in these delinquencies.

We have, again, a picture: Bill's First Communion, in 1957. Bill, ten or so, is neatly dressed, though not Fauntleroyed, as happens with First Communion in less stern milieux. He's standing in a backyard, holding a candle and a missal. Clara stands behind him; she's bending over and embracing him, in an oddly stiff and restrained way. Does she feel that her little man has crossed a threshold and can no longer be subjected to a fully maternal hug? Or has this just become her style? Her expression seems severe, but a magnifying glass suggests that this appearance is largely due to a remarkably unbecoming pair of eyeglasses, in that diagonal teardrop shape popular in the fifties, with its sharply pointed, reptilian or bird-winged outer corners. Magnifying further, until the grain of the print begins to swarm like a plague of locusts over all the imaged features, do we see, behind these frightening space-alien goggles, a gleam of the old warmth we know from earlier days? Or do we just want to see it?

The little man's expression is a study too. He stands rather stiffly, holding his book and candle in a reasonable approximation of the *de rigueur* hieratic pose. But his head is now bent, in that beetling way that became his habit later on, and he looks out at the camera from beneath distinctly lowered brows. His mouth, too, is set in a complex, ambiguous curve with which his friends became familiar in our college years: a crinkled, almost sinusoidal line. Not a grin, not a grimace, not a smile or a frown. Expressive, certainly, but of what? My reading of this look, in those later days, registered irony and a touch of self-mockery: a blend of rueful

amusement and embarrassment. Apparently Bill started working on this stance rather early on.

In all these old pictures, Bill is elusive. To be sure, he seems happy. Would one see anything unusual in this boy if one didn't know how he turned out — or rather, began to turn out? There is a hint of remoteness in some of the images. Though he usually looks very directly at the camera — an echo, here, of Earl and Clara's straightforward gaze — and though he is usually smiling, there is something about the eyes that suggests travel in realms far from Chippewa Falls.

The fact is, he seems to have been rather elusive even to those around him: right from the first, marked for an unusual destiny. Not that he was an oddball or a deviant or an outcast. Quite the opposite. His family and friends still speak of him with deep affection mixed with some degree of puzzlement. He was, it seems, not at all unavailable in spite of his solitary quality. His virtual nieces and nephews, the children of Darlene and Ed and Donna and Frank, remember him fondly as a perfectly satisfactory young uncle. They enjoyed teasing him and he took it good-naturedly. And his cousins Peter and Dave remember that he was kind to them, though he was a teenager and they were much younger. "He had an elaborate model train setup," Peter recalls, "and he let us play with it. Told us not to run the trains too fast, but then he went off and left us to it." Cousin Mary recalls him as "friendly" and "good-natured" and says that "people liked him a lot. He was always tinkering or reading a book — never bored — always had something to do. He was quiet; he'd keep to himself and just listen, or read a book." Was he sad? Mopey? "No. He just seemed like someone who was always seeking to learn more — looking for his place in life."

He wasn't self-serious. His college friends were well acquainted with his capacity for taking a pratfall and then neatly fielding the joke. This capacity showed up early. With enduring delight, Donna tells a story about seeing adolescent Bill bump his head on a low garage doorway. He looked up and saw her watching, and commented, "The garage is sinking or I'm growing. Either way, it's scary."

Certainly the air of happiness that Bill mostly wears in his childhood pictures is not the whole story. Darlene says he had his darker moods, and he still had them, in spades, when I knew him. She goes so far as to say he was "depressed" a lot of the time; but if so, it seems to have been a more energetic variety of depression than most. He developed his habit of pacing early on and went for long runs in the evening. Frank thinks that by the time Bill was in high school, he was writing poems in his head while pounding along. Ah, those innocent days!

Running is a more single-minded business now. But “just doing it” was never Bill’s style.

Still, whatever angel wrestling he was up to behind what he later called his “high Shakespearean brow — and getting higher every day”, little evidence of it ever showed externally. Melville — a favorite of Bill’s — remarks somewhere, if I recall correctly, that the whale, like all things that are mighty, wears a false front to the common world. One hesitates to improve on Melville; but is “false” really quite right? Unrevealing, yes. And the smooth, blank cliff of the whale’s apparent forehead is not a bad analogy for Bill’s completely assembled, self-concealing, self-presentation, with his real thinking- and feeling-works lying far behind the surface. But false? I think not. The more I learn lately of his early life, the more I think that even less of him was pose than perhaps we realized at the time.

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By the time Bill was in high school, he seems to have found life at home increasingly hard. Frank and Darlene don’t recall any particular casus belli, but Clara’s bossiness and the beer-fueled histrionics after an Indian Head evening seem to have become more and more difficult to take as Bill grew toward adulthood. Finally, in the summer before his last year of high school, he moved out. At first he stayed with Darlene and her husband Ed in Chippewa Falls. But Clara put the kibosh on that arrangement in short order. Darlene says that Clara felt that it would reflect badly on her and Earl if Bill were living in a different household in the same town. It is a measure of Clara’s force of character that everybody seems to have accepted her ultimatum. Bill moved right out of town, to stay with Frank and his wife Donna in Milwaukee, a couple of hundred miles away. This was a turning point for Bill in several ways; it almost seems that Earl and Clara did him as big a favor by driving him out as they had done, seventeen years before, by taking him in.

He seems to have recorded this moment in a quick draft of a poem, on one of the midden of paper scraps he covered with his sharply slanted, compressed handwriting.

I have fought you long, my mother, my father  
In this comfortable room  
With this brown carpet as a battlefield  
And this damn couch my last retreat in tears.  
Yet I will run, for neither a son  
Who would be man nor a daughter who  
Would be woman  
Can loose these bloody wars.  
But now the great conflict  
The last battle  
Will end in our hate  
And I will run  
Until I am safe with the distance.  
Someday I will come  
And speak to you again  
When I can forgive  
Your well-wishing chains.

Bill worked and reworked his poems. Many of the ones in this book grew from such kernels, often extending as far back in his life. But he never revisited this one.

Providentially, Frank had just made his own sharp turn from wild man to solid citizen. He and Donna were able to offer Bill a stable, affectionate home during this critical year. Bill enrolled in Pius XI High School, a large and deservedly well regarded Catholic institution. Nobody seems to know, now, how the tuition got paid; but somehow or other, Bill had gotten in every way into a much bigger pond than Chippewa Falls, and his good fortune stayed with him. At Pius XI, he found teachers who recognized and nourished his gifts.

I haven't been able to find any of Bill's high-school teachers, though Father Robert Cartney, the alumni director at Pius XI, did his helpful best to hunt them down. Thanks to Bill's pack-rat habits, though, we have a documentary record. It consists of some dozens of typed sheets, each bearing a poem or other writing exercise of Bill's, with comments by one or more of his teachers. Bill dated these sheets — sometimes, rather drolly, with eminently Catholic constructions like

“ante May 15, 1965” — so we can even put them in order. The writing itself, to my eye and ear, gives little indication of what Bill would later achieve, but apparently he was lucky enough to find teachers with better ears, or eyes, than mine. Two different hands account for most of the comments.

The most striking of these is a bold, blocky, almost certainly feminine but by no means pretty, semicursive script with some very original ways of forming certain letters. It seems to belong to someone whose initials are SMH. Frank and Donna Newton had the impression that Bill’s main patron and cheerleader at Pius XI was a nun; is this, then, “Sister M. H.”? Let’s hope so; the idea of Bill, who was something of a Don Juan when I knew him, embarked on a voyage of literary discovery with an obviously strong-minded and determined sister, imaginative but unsentimental, professionally chaste but probably unshockable — it’s just too good to give up. It’s the stuff of which movies are made.

Did Sister M.H. know what she was launching into the world? I bet she did. Let’s hope Bill stayed in touch with her and sent her some of his later work. Judging from her comments, she would certainly have been pleased by it. Would the contrast between Bill’s life and explorations and those of the convent chapel have bothered her? Not necessarily: people seek the cloister for all kinds of reasons, but SMH doesn’t come across as the type who would do so from a fear of life.

Whatever the incongruity of their personal lives, it certainly seems that SMH either was very persuasive or had literary tastes that fell into a preordained harmony with Bill’s own emerging outlook. One of her early comments on a Hedrington vers-libre exercise — a very libre one indeed — is this: “OK but simply broken prose.” Did this make an impression on Bill? Or did it reinforce an attitude he was already forming on his own? One way or the other, he was certainly no friend to “broken prose” later on; the study of meter — not necessarily regular meter, but emphatically meter all the same — wasn’t far short of an obsession with him and formed the subject of a good many late-night conversations. A paper on the subject he wrote for one of his courses shows both an analytic capacity and a degree of sensibility that one doesn’t often encounter in undergraduates — or postgraduates, or, for that matter, professors.

In the same vein, SMH comments on another piece — at uncharacteristic length, and, let’s candidly admit, with an uncharacteristic slight touch of pomposity — “I think you ought to begin working with the discipline of regular pattern. Young contemporary poets of stature are trying to mesh new imagery with traditional patterns.” Here again, either SMH persuaded him or this

resonated with an inclination already present. Bill wasn't exactly a suggestible person, but he did in fact undertake to do something not too far from what she proposed, as a glance through the work in this book will show.

One very tart observation runs: "OK if you like this sort of Beat in the Ginsberg style. I don't." The poem in question certainly isn't a very prepossessing example of the mode, and if Bill had had any inclinations in this direction, we all owe SMH a vote of thanks for steering him elsewhere.

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Bill graduated with honors from Pius XI and moved on to New College, in Sarasota, Florida. This milieu may require a bit of introduction in its own right.

Our college was founded in the early sixties, a time of optimism and aspiration. A fair amount of optimism would have been required; Sarasota, in those days, was a place out of Chekhov by Conrad. In this unlikely landscape of mangroves and mosquitoes a small community of émigrés from the northern snows kept the flame of Culture burning. These high-minded exiles produced plays, painted, carved and modeled, fiddled and sang, and potted and knotted to a fare-thee-well; their houses were dripping with macramé, and you couldn't take a step without bumping into some piece of chunky homemade ceramic.

Now, every Athens needs a grove of Academe, where venerable sages can stroll in sweet communion with admiring youth. And so our college was born. The slightly generic but perfectly accurate name of New College was a placeholder until some Maecenas should come along and give us enough money to take his name. Traditional approaches to education were ditched wholesale, but very high standards were nevertheless intended to be hewn to.

So far, a gentle comedy of cultural ambition. Now for the shadows in the picture: these aficionados of the Higher Things were conducting their noble experiment in the midst of a howling wilderness of crackerism. Florida was very much a southern state in those days before American society had reached its present advanced degree of homogenization. Civic and political Sarasota — the Sarasota of the courthouse and the police station — were as un-Athenian as a town could be; even to say that they were Boeotian doesn't quite do justice to the slow, slitty-eyed, simmering resentfulness and suspicion that lay over the land like a fog of poison gas as soon as you got half a mile from the beach. Thracian? Sarmatian? Pontine? I wonder whether the classical world had anything to offer resembling a small southern town in those last years of the Jim Crow regime.

Oh, well, Town and Gown are never quite happy with each other. But worse, or better, was to come when the deluge of cultural upheaval that we call the Sixties swept into this already charged setting. Some of the earnest and high-minded joined the armies of psychedelia; others clung to the banner of Standards and, with horror, watched themselves morph into conservatives. Imagine a well-meaning, sensitive individual who contracts lycanthropy: he sees the hair sprouting on his palms, feels the fangs pushing between his lips, and realizes, with a sinking heart, that within minutes he will be baying at the moon.

Perhaps the defining moment came when a group of undergraduates took off for an “independent study project” that consisted of living for three weeks in tents and lean-tos on a then-desert island in the Gulf. The undertaking was duly blessed by one of the more with-it faculty, who acted as adviser, and it was also duly damned by a prominent loup-garou as a “bare-ass pot party.” The independent studiers did in fact spend a lot of time in the condition alluded to, though their adviser probably missed this part of the fun. They came to be known as the “new barbarians,” and whether or not they themselves coined the phrase, they adopted it as a badge of honor.

New barbarians and newly minted reactionaries were united in one thing: fear of the Yahoos at the gate. No matter how ululant and bushy-tailed the werewolves of the academic Vendée might be, there is still a great gulf fixed between egghead and redneck — the more so since some of the defenders of Standards confined their scrupulosity to the intellectual realm and lived personal lives that would embarrass a rutting mink. And of course the weed-smokers and acid-droppers lived in a permanent state of high paranoia about imminent “busts,” raids, and other potential brandishments of the peckerwood nightstick. At night the dark, rustling swamps and bayous beyond the campus lights seemed terribly sinister, like a coarsely colorized print of *Cape Fear*.

Some people had a very bad time in these treacherous and uncharted waters, but others had a very good time. I think Bill was one of the latter. He had an internal compass that kept him from being swept away; but the general turmoil and up-for-grabness of everything in the culture created openings for him that might not otherwise have been available. He had no allegiance to conventional mores or attitudes, and so he got along fine with the denizens of psychedelia — after some initial reluctance; one friend tells of Bill insisting that they leave an apartment where they had planned to stay, on one of the road trips that Bill loved so much, when he found that other people there were smoking a controlled substance. This inhibition was later overcome, but his seriousness — we might

even say conscientiousness — remained. He had some work he wanted to do, and some questions he wanted to answer, and slogans and song lyrics didn't satisfy him. In his travels through psychedelia, Milton and Donne and Melville and the old boy who gave us Beowulf stayed with him. Even the alpha werewolves of the Standards pack thought well of Bill, because he too took the *auctores* seriously.

His capacity to get what he needed from both sides is clear from the subject matter of his work and also, I think, from its style. *Pace* SMH and her remark about “young poets of stature,” Bill found a voice that was very much his own, and somewhat at variance with the prevailing taste. A note in Bill's file from the then highly regarded Robert Bly pretty much sums it up: “The Voices is pretty bad — it's murdered by all the archaic and ‘poetic’ diction — ‘O they call’ etc, ‘untracked by supplants’ — stop writing like Frankenstein's 18th century night-walker!”

But right or wrong, Bill's sense of connection with the long English lyric tradition was something he consciously clung to, and throughout his writing career he was unabashedly willing to talk about whatever old poet he happened to be learning from at the time.

Bill's attitude toward the tradition, though far from slavish, was a little unusual. Americans in general are cursed by the belief, explicit or not, that history ended not long ago and everything will be different now. Bill certainly, and not wrongly, had the sense of recent and ongoing cataclysm; his notes are full of references to the death of God, the loss of myth, and the disgroundedness of values. But at the same time he felt that he was part of an ongoing story.

A poem draft, date uncertain:

Five hundred years will stare this English down —  
When New York is “an ancient town”  
Yeats will be footnoted like Shakespeare,  
Shakespeare as contorted as Chaucer,  
And Chaucer — “one of those early English writers.”  
The sky's cold eye intimidates all tongues  
All songs will be translated before sung,  
And what's the singing if in foreign words?

More with-it writers reproached him for being “rhetorical.” Bill had some thoughts of his own about rhetoric which would have seemed quite up-to-date in critical circles a few years later. In one of his random jottings, he writes: “The first thing to remember is that tropes and figures are no more rhetoric than hood

ornaments are automobiles. Rhetoric has a rather bad name in the 20th century, so much so that whenever we use the term in a context of praise, we must insist that there is a good kind of rhetoric. Yet what we dismiss as mere rhetoric is only what every good rhetorician would likewise dismiss, since it is... failed rhetoric, bad rhetoric. To see the powerful uses to which rhetoric can be put, we need only look at Shakespeare, who without rhetoric would be like a body without protein.”

Elsewhere, he notes, “One should use other writers as the Shake did — to remold their half-completed attempts. One should take boldly of the past, tones especially.”

Bill liked poetry that had a clear prosodic structure and a clear rhetorical structure; this taste may well have been connected with his analytical side, the side that might have made him a scientist or an engineer. He also liked poems to have an argument, to be about something. In a letter written shortly after he graduated from college, he says of Dylan Thomas, “It’s so exhausting, so much noise and no real toughness of thought to give it rigor. It seems mostly like a source book of great images for other people to draw on, resonant but directionless.”

My own memories of Bill, on the literary side of things, are rather fragmentary, apart from the poems themselves. We didn’t argue much; our attitudes and tastes were fairly similar. I do recall once a hammer-and-tongs discussion about Milton, who was not high on Bill’s list at the time. I at least got him to admit that “In adamant chains and penal fire” was a pretty good line. Bill knew Old English poetry only in modern versions, and I remember going over a big chunk of something — *The Battle of Maldon*, maybe? — word by word and explaining the syntax. He always wanted to know what poetry in other languages sounded like, and I did my thick-tongued best to oblige. The principles of Old English prosody were particularly interesting to him, and a couple of the poems in this book represent explorations in this area.

On one occasion we both went up the road to St. Petersburg for a “poetry festival” at the university there. I hitched a ride on Bill’s motorcycle and have never been so terrified in my life. There was an extremely high bridge spanning the entrance to Tampa Bay, paved with open metal mesh to save weight, and Bill went hurtling over it leadfoot, as was his wont. That mesh offers no traction at all, and the crosswinds up there were wicked; on the way back, I insisted on the longer sea-level route, and Bill accommodated this wuss-out with benign good humor.

At the festival itself we had a high old time with the various schools of poetry represented. I well recall one extremely embarrassing effort by a young woman who started with the conceit of “grave = vulva” and ran with it into regions of rather overelaborate anatomical euphuism; the grass around the edge of the grave was like pubic hair, and so on — you don’t want to hear the rest, believe me. Bill’s face during the reading of this poem — which seemed to go on for about an hour — was a study. Normally he had a pretty good deadpan, but it failed him on this occasion. Once we escaped from the room, he dashed off a parody of the poem, which had us howling in our cups that evening to a degree that was probably rather wearisome for everybody within earshot.

It’s these recollections of palship, for lack of a better word, that come more vividly to mind than any literary exchanges. Bill was a first-class pal. His excellent ear extended to this realm; he really never got it wrong. There was the right amount of competitiveness and acerbity; he never erred on the side of chumminess or overfamiliarity. But at the same time, all his pals, I’m sure, had the unspoken sense that they and Bill were fighting the same corner.

One pal recalls: “On at least one occasion, his friendship had a very direct and momentous impact on me. It was one of those partying evenings and for some reason neither of us had anything better to do than circulate from booze-up to booze-up in convoy. During the course of this evening, Bill’s radar picked up the fact that a fellow student, [Carol], was, as Bill put it, ‘hunting,’ and he said that he thought she had an eye for me. A little later on, he proposed that a few of us — including [Carol] and me — scale the fence to the college pool and go for a cooling dip. The suggestion was acclaimed, the dip duly taken, and [Carol] and I ended up an item, as the gossip columns say. Our relationship lasted past college for a couple of years, and then we parted. But our time together was pivotal for me; and I have Bill to thank for it.”

Bill as matchmaker is a little uncharacteristic, but not necessarily surprising. All the dimensions of the man-woman nexus were immensely interesting to him, and he was very much a participant as well as an observer. Bill liked women a good deal, and lots of women liked him — another trait much envied by his circle of male friends. This is a slightly difficult subject to talk about. The women’s movement was just getting well under way when Bill died, and his attitudes, and ours, were not exemplary by contemporary standards.

I don’t mean to say that he was in any sense a misogynist. In those days one frequently heard men express some rather hateful attitudes toward women, sometimes in a jocular disguise and sometimes without bothering with any

disguise. Bill never took this tone. Of course we all talked about women all the time, and Bill wasn't behindhand. But as I look back on it, what I remember was that his note was nearly always a note of admiration for something, if only the curve of somebody's lip or the texture of her skin. This is not to say that he was incapable of joking on the subject.

One member of Bill's circle recalls an occasion, highly characteristic of the time and the place, when a dining-room discussion turned to possible etymologies for the word "poontang." The relish of this conversation may have been heightened by the fact that a faculty member, not universally beloved, had brought his wife to sample the glutinous college food that evening, and the couple were seated at an adjoining table. Bill, after listening for some time with his slightly owlish, bemused expression, piped up with the "archaic" form "Pwan Twan," meaning "place of great rest." This bit of fictive scholarship was delivered in the tone of donnish solemnity that Housman might have used to propose an emendation of Aeschylus. It was this line that finally sent the slumming faculty pair home — without their dessert, one hopes, remembering the level of New College cuisine.

In a rather odd way, though, Bill was chivalrous. Chivalry, of course, is as disreputable as misogyny; but candor obliges me to record the fact. Bill did not talk about his "conquests," much less brag about them. He could have talked about them a good deal, because they were many.

Like most men in those days, he tended to divide the world of women into two groups: the ones you worshipped and the ones from whom you sought... comfort, shall we say. His choice of worship objects was no more infallible than anybody else's. In spite of his own mastery of the Enigmatic Mode, Bill was as big a sucker as the next guy for the remote, cool, inaccessible Artemis type, and he occasionally found himself languishing on the banks of some still water that really didn't run very deep at all.

But in spite of their less exalted position in the Hedrington hierarchy, the comforters are (to my taste) perhaps the more interesting group. Accomplished, successful, capable women now, with children (and, sometimes, husbands, when a tolerable one can be found); women with well-paid jobs and published books; women respected and sometimes feared by their colleagues and underlings; women who are not, in short, wearing a "kick me" sign: this is how the graduates of Bill's College of Comforters have tended to turn out.

In talking about Bill now, the former transient girlfriends still speak of him, usually, with kindness and affection, and some degree of puzzlement. They too, in

spite of their intimacy with Bill, found it difficult to read him and sometimes still wonder just what the relationship was about. It seems that he made no hypocritical claims of devotion, but neither was he cold or unkind. If he was using them, in what would now be considered a somewhat deplorable way, he didn't rub their noses in the fact.

"We developed an odd relationship," writes one alumna, "not in frequent contact, but spending time together in unplanned ways. I felt myself to be a supportive friend, and then of course we were also occasional lovers. Bill had a reserve about relationships, and for all I know the times we shared a bed may have been only meeting a physical need, not an emotional one. That was not a question I asked."

Another says, "He was interesting and didn't condescend to me (which was terribly important to me then... it was my own babe period). It was also natural, given the mores of the place, that we would become lovers.

"Sadly, I cannot remember any of the details.... And this is extremely odd and terribly distressing. I have not one brightly lit scene of us as lovers.... The two clear memories I do have are of his wandering silhouette on the nighttime campus and a motorcycle ride we took, near the end of our relationship.

"I do know what attracted me, and it was not simply that I was lonely and he was available. I think that what we all want from love is to know and be deeply known. And Bill was very, very good at this, or at least played it very well. It was part of his poet persona, you see. The sensitive writer, the close observer of nature and human nature. This was a killer attraction when combined with the forceful motorcycle delinquent, the devil-take-our-cares thrill seeker. He listened to me as if I were the most fascinating person he had ever encountered. He noticed small details. He paid attention. This is quite irresistible to most women, and was to me.

"I think now that I was fooled by him, and that is why I have no explicit memories. I think that he was seeing me as a writer first and a lover second.... he didn't do much revealing of his own, except through the writing."

The same correspondent records an instance of Bill's style of chivalry. A contretemps with another boyfriend had left her isolated from her circle of friends, who apparently took the boyfriend's side. During this period in Coventry, she writes: "I went to [a] party alone, talked to some other, peripheral folks, wandered awkwardly, felt like crying and running away. Just then, Bill strode into the room like the dark knight he fancied himself. My hero! My rescuer! Nobody knew that we were lovers.... At that moment the spotlight was on Hedrington. He came over, all casual and cool cowboy dude, took my hand, leaned down and

asked if I wanted to split. Did I? You bet! I will always be grateful to him for just that one perfect, gallant and empathic gesture.”

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Writer first, lover second just about gets the range. Bill wasn't unsympathetic — quite the contrary. But the notes he wrote to himself about the life going on around him suggest that his restless intelligence, his desire to figure out things and people, was greatly in the ascendant.

These notes are not cold, but they are uncomfortably clear-sighted. He is often puzzled or bemused but never seems to be much confused by identification, projection, wishful thinking, or envy — by his own needs, in short. Though the notes are often about what he is thinking, they are very seldom about him. He shows little or no trace of the adolescent's love affair with the mirror. He is as elusive in his diary as he is in his poems; but as with the poems, the world around him is keenly observed and deeply pondered. He enters into the lives of others with imaginative sympathy but quite without sentimentality. One of his casually scribbled aphorisms, apropos of nothing obvious, sets the tone: “Remember, mercy must be tempered with justice.”

An early example of Bill the high-school social observer: “I'm just writing this tonight cuz these people are so funny. There is one whose mother committed suicide and one who is fixated on his sister, one who knows his father hates him — then there is the one who is what is known as a ‘closet-case’, a homosexual who won't admit it to himself. There are the lonely girls and the involuted boys, the boy who is on an endless round of meaningless sex, the boy who has a life expectancy of 10 years max if he smokes, which he does, the boy who was drunk for 3 months straight last year, the boy who has twisted a certain girl and the girl who can't let go of him and writes endless poems about him.” “Funny,” he says. But he doesn't really seem to be laughing: just taking it all in.

Another unrelenting observation: “[Ann] has white narrow pinched face with tight lips and light laughter — straight hair ending in mid neck, but after love she is pink & smooth & relaxed & happy & full.” The same girl appears often: “After months [Ann] is so afraid of me that she fears to talk — long periods of silence precede her speeches — she is astonished that anybody could want her so much.” The same entry continues, “[Ben] has been hurt terribly by girls, I think. Frankie by the Old Drunk — to twist someone like that is hell.”

More from the Milwaukee year: “When we are together I think of all the people doing the same in a thousand Milwaukee parlors and of the (cordage of

my fathers) ancestors who have lived and died to let us be one; I am grafted on to you.” The phrase “cordage of my fathers” refers to early drafts of the poem that became “for my father.”

His gimlet eye does extend to himself on occasion: “I have heard it said that poets put salt on their wounds so that they can feel their experiences more sharply. I think not. I think it is lye.”

Or again (this, once more, from high school): “Standing on the street with [Charlie, Dave, and Ann] — oscillating between them uncertain of who to stand by. Talking to exec on stairs feeling superior to what he said but humbled in my work clothes.” As with many of his notes, the point here seems to be: how interesting that one can feel this way. Any adolescent might have recorded such feelings, but few would have done so in quite such an analytical tone.

Occasional Hamlet-like “my tables!” memoranda-to-self occur: “You really have to defend yourself against your own conscience or superego for it will attack you with religion, morality, custom, anything — other people use it also to control you so be on the lookout.”

One page of tedious class notes has later been pressed into service for a wild series of disconnected scribbles; fueled, one suspects, by the fumes of *Cannabis sativa*. A dry little comment, penned in a corner of this farrago, observes, “This use of this paper has made the class notes immortal.” So this is Bill, high as the proverbial kite, anticipating me, reading him observing himself... Well, enough of *that*.

In addition to these random jottings, he also kept a more systematic journal, though as with most such undertakings, the entries become less frequent over time. Its first page, from October 1967, his second year at New College, reads, in part: “I am concerned with [Beth] — she is exceptional and the other pillowheads fade beside her — She said I was ugly — I don’t think she could take the truth about [Ed] & me & older students & 1st year students & her. Perhaps, like art, life needs some indirection.... Anyhow, I made a mistake and must now pay for it alone.... I am very tired.... perhaps I’ll chase a pillowhead just to give me what ease a person like that can.... I’d like to give something to [Ed & Beth] but I don’t know what — my absence perhaps.”

Most of the book, though, concerns itself more with what he was thinking than with his social life. A later entry from the same year reflects on his own intellectual evolution: “It is strange that I was drawn to poetry — 2 years ago I was so analytical — my interpretations of experience were demythologized except

for conventional myths.... Science can point to things & make ideal models (which of course are a kind of myth too) but it cannot give the slightest value.”

The social sciences take a few lumps too: “A history book is like a stone thrown into the darkness of a huge echo chamber in order to silence a barking dog.”

His own aspirations are recorded unblushingly: “So many people make radical declarations & take radical stands when young, only to back down later — one thing I want is to so identify with my role.... that I can never escape at some future date into the kind of life Mr. [F] chose. I want to become a truth teller.”

Occasionally there are expressions that suggest an almost hallucinatory vividness of perception, even when chemical assistance doesn’t appear to be involved. There are several references to the “Isness of the napkin holder in the snack bar,” though this epiphany is not discussed in detail. Bill alludes, in the same context, to “the radical contingency of [Professor J.]’s arm,” and there are enigmatic references to “Unspeakable Thoughts” — those are Bill’s capitals — which come to him on occasion. And once he says, with a rather startling matter-of-factness, “Am going into the Fear today — have been close to it for a week to 10 days.”

A lengthy entry records some reading in thermodynamics and information theory, topics which became and remained quite important to Bill. The connection between information and entropy was one that he found richly suggestive. He seems to have found a link between these ideas and his quest for a new basis for values and what he called “Myth,” the old ones having notoriously dropped the ball, as far as Bill and much of our generation were concerned.

“It’s been fun breaking the rules,” he writes, “Yes, very much fun, but what now? Perhaps without the rules there’s no game.... Today we have, as usual, our particular combination of reason & unreason. We use the vestige of the enlightenment to attack codes of morality as insupportable by any scientific data — then proceeded to act totally emotionally about the effects of the disintegration.... Perhaps I’ve been reasonable too long and now it’s time to be unreasonable. If people don’t artificially limit their experience by systems or contracts with reality, everything can and does happen.... How much chaos can we take — the Word really creates.”

For a literary guy, he seldom makes specifically literary comments; he’s more inclined to relate his reading to his big questions of Value and Myth. But every so often an obiter dictum whizzes past: “Poetically speaking, *Murder in the Cathedral* is on about the same level as *Gammer Gurton’s Needle*.” The comparison is unfair to the *Gammer*, but not bad.

The late sixties were not all fun and games, of course. There was a war on, and we were all keenly aware of it; it makes an appearance in some of the poems in this book. Like most of us, Bill was determined not to participate. He wasn't a particularly political guy — I don't ever remember having a political conversation with him — but he shared the general, somewhat diffuse, attitude of resistance to authority in general and skepticism about patriotic slogans that prevailed in our milieu.

His family was completely behind him. Frank Newton, who served in Korea, was characteristically definite: "I figured if you really didn't believe in it you shouldn't go — I know some of these Vietnam veterans would rip my head off for saying that. I figured he'd taken steps to stay out of it. Didn't bother me none."

It's not clear exactly how he did manage to "stay out of it." He did get a notice to report for his physical. And in his paper trove are copies of two letters, written to his draft board, by dean of students Arthur MacArthur Miller<sup>2</sup> and campus chaplain Horace Cooper. These make interesting, evocative reading nowadays.

Arthur Miller's letter has a very suspicious flavor of near parody. Was this intentional, or was he just laying it on a little thick? "The written report of Williams' most recent diagnostic session confirms my long-standing suspicion of this student's erratic behavior.... His use of dangerous and unprescribed drugs, including those much stronger than cannabis, has aggravated his problems. This college cannot tolerate such abuse of drugs."

Oh, Mac, I think, as I read this, aren't we a bit close to the wind now? Isn't your nose growing? He continues, in the same fulminant vein: "William has certain pronounced and peculiar qualities of mind which have carried him through a loosely structured college program.... Speaking myself as an Army officer (Cpt. USAR) and a current military instructor... I cannot imagine William as a present credit to the service.... As [his] pattern of drug abuse is likely to continue after leaving college, I frankly cannot hope that his mental health is likely to improve."

Horace Cooper's letter strikes a less Blimpish note, but equally accentuates the negative: "I have known [Bill] for almost three years and have a considerable degree of personal intimacy with him. Last year... he took [psychological tests] which indicated serious emotional and psychic dysfunctions.... [His] 'highest' scores were those which revealed Anxiety-Tension-Stress and Inadequacy in feelings and behavior. He also scored significantly in the Compulsive-Obsessive-

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<sup>2</sup> As we always called him. His actual legal middle name was just McA. Spelled like that. Period and all.

Rigid Behavior group and in Motivation-Goals. Mr. Hedrington and I had a discussion of these matters, in which he disclosed that his difficulties were of long standing and he felt he had not made much progress in resolving them.... In view of the above, I cannot believe he will function adequately in the military environment, with which I have had much experience [as a chaplain in the air force].”

Bill’s draft board was the Sarasota one, rather than one back home in Wisconsin. Knowing the type of people who ran Sarasota in those days, and the antagonism that many of them felt towards the “hippies” of New College, it seems mildly surprising that letters like these should have done the trick. On the other hand, the Sarasota draft board had other pools of young men to draw from; perhaps they just decided that it wasn’t worth pursuing somebody who had the motivation and the support to put up a struggle. In any case, Bill was spared the choice between Vietnam and Canada.

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Bill and I graduated from New College at the same time, the spring of 1970. He went to take up a one-year creative writing fellowship at Stanford, and I to the dungeons of graduate school in Chicago.

By this time the entries in his journal have become very infrequent. He does write, at one point, “Dr Johnson — GREAT!” which hugely pleases me to read, because I was always talking up the great Cham to Bill at college, and he wasn’t (yet) buying. He records a dream in which class takes place “underground, in a dungeon, wet, dark.” He was reading “Rabelais, Winters, Blackmur, Auden crit, Stevens crit, 17th century lyric, 16th century lyric, Bradley, *Age of Shakespeare*, *Moby Dick*, *Timon of Athens*, poems of Hardy, Tate poems, Ransom crit, much Winters crit, Chaucer, *Rage For Order* (forgettable), Auerbach *Mimesis* (very good), *Axel’s Castle* (good!), *Winter’s Tale* (1st time), Montaigne essays, article on circuit breakers.” The circuit breakers are highly characteristic.

A lengthy letter to our New College teacher Robert Knox gives more detail: “For a while now I’ve felt that my reading of Yeats had reached a certain impasse, unlike any I’d felt before, not that I’d exhausted him, but that after 4 years of him being my regular standby reading, I was ready for something else. So I turned to Frost. Unbelievable! There’s so much going on that I didn’t ever see there before....

“Frost has more a complexity of tone, whereas Yeats had one of symbolism, so I’ve been jumping up and down at the change. What a sly old rascal that New

England Delphic village seer was! ... Part of it is that humor, that non-committal wavering between maybes. A big part tho is the dramatic aspect. How much more you can infer in a situation!

“I’ve been reading some books on rhetoric. I found this fine solid standby book of about 1900 called *The Working Principles of Rhetoric*. So far I’ve avoided any of those god-damned modern semanticaler-than-thou studies but I’ll take a dip to see how the water is....

“This Frost thing has really increased my ability to see how one can play with language to make it suggestive. It’s like a constant subtle indirection to find direction out.... Frost has that same feeling for me that Yeats has, that all the poems add to the whole, that there’s value in each for all....

“Been reading plays — Chekhov is so much better than the rest it’s incredible.... he knew how to infold all the edges to make it seamless. I read *Absalom, Absalom!* — it’s good but it’s too rhetorical Dr. Knox, some of those passages of misamal murk embarrassed me exceeding much.”

Here too, the straight-faced, burlesque-Malory note of “exceeding much” is decidedly Bill’s idiom.

Bill’s next destination, after Stanford, was Syracuse University, where he had landed a fellowship in the writing program. During the intervening summer, as was his habit, he roamed the country, staying a few days here and a few days there. He spent some time visiting Jane Farrier, as I’ll call her here, a fellow student whose orbit had intersected with Bill’s, intensely but inconclusively, at college. She writes: “My overall impression was that Bill was confident about the future, happy with his new undertaking and pleasantly distracted. As always, his deep dark side was never far from the surface. It seemed more integrated, less likely to overwhelm. That made him more playful, and willing to be more transparent emotionally. He still had an endearing touch of the Eeyore, guessing that he would be hurt in love again.... One of the things I miss most is his capacity for elegant understatement and gesture, especially about emotional subjects.”

Bill stopped by my place in Chicago for a few days late that summer. He had given up his famous motorcycle and acquired a much-used little two-seater English sports car. It was not in great shape. The passenger-side door didn’t open; one had to climb over it to get in. Bill’s style of driving was perhaps somewhat improved from his college days, but not by much.

I was *solus rex* in my stifling Hyde Park apartment that summer; my then girlfriend was away, on some ultracool tropical biology expedition, and I was

moping enviously around, trying to make our Salvation Army furniture look a little more presentable with sandpaper and linseed oil. Bill's visit was a godsend.

He was tactful as always. I was trying to learn to cook and one evening made some appalling mess with oxtail and bargain-basement wine, which poor Bill gamely ate. He showed me the poems he had been working on during his Stanford year. He had been working, as he said in a letter to Robert Knox, on "trying to write something longer, but still good." His New College productions had mostly been in a very compressed, ultralyrical vein, but now he was spreading his wings a bit and exploring a more narrative, discursive style; perhaps his reading of Frost had encouraged this turn. In addition to his good ear, he was a thoughtful, reflective person — no *vox et praeterea nihil* — and I thought he was doing pretty well with it. Some of these poems are in this collection.

I have a vivid image of him handing me a sheaf of manuscript and settling into a chair opposite me: "So now," he said, "I'm going to take the uneasy chair." I didn't believe it for a minute, even then. He wasn't shy about showing his stuff to people, and though he was interested in what they had to say, his internal compass was too strong for criticism to cause him much disquiet. But the compliment was well turned; Bill knew how to make himself agreeable.

He seemed happy. Calmer, more relaxed, less cautious and restrained. Still very much in control of what he said and did, but his repertoire in every sense had expanded. I wish now I could remember more of what we talked about during that time. I do recall that I was sorry to see him go, notwithstanding the old saw about fish and houseguests.

It was the last time I saw him or heard from him. There is one final entry in his journal: "October 29, 1971. 209 Comstock [his apartment in Syracuse]. Chinese, 3 am. [Jane] is in [another state]. Idled all summer to no good end except some good time at Frank's.

"I am in some ways much more settled than I was in Sarasota. I feel very drawn to a sense of commonality with other people. Tho I get unhappy my mind plays few jumping tricks. I have a sense of implicit order, as in a Bach concerto. Tonight my mind is calm, in stasis, trying to figure out what all this is all about. Very attracted to Bible, to true things which can help us to live. Borges and Barth now seem odd to me. I don't know if it's good or not that this is happening. Aristotle's *Poetics* is very good!"

And with those words, Bill signs off from the world of our knowing. Two days later he was dead. The details are unclear; he was driving his little convertible along a Syracuse highway, fast as usual, with another grad student, Genan

Ozgurel, the son of a Turkish diplomat. Somehow he lost control of the car and “sideswiped a telephone pole,” according to a report in a local newspaper. The car flipped over and both Bill and Ozgurel were killed instantly.

The news came to us, in Chicago, on the dark evening of November 1: All Hallows’ Day, when Christendom once saw itself enfolded by the great assembly of those who have gone before; and earlier still, the immemorial solemnity of Samhain, when old Celtic Europe propitiated the even older dead, those vanished builders of henge and barrow, tumulus and menhir. I can’t recall exactly how we heard that Bill had been killed. What I can recall was the robotic numbness with which we reacted. There were, for some reason, several other ex-New College people there; and for some time we went about our business, whatever it was, with a kind of catatonic indifference. Finally somebody figured out that we ought to go to the funeral. And so we did; six or seven of us all jammed into a car, for the long drive north and west to Chippewa Falls.

A strange sight we must have made when we got there. We were all trying to be respectable, but our wardrobe of jackets and ties and little black dresses left much to be desired, after the deluge of the sixties. Our hair was long and shaggy, and beards abounded. We piled out of the car, after driving through the night, in front of St. Charles Church, and somehow or other — I remember none of this — made ourselves known to Bill’s family.

Robert Knox had suggested that one of us should ask to read a poem at the funeral — it was Stephen Spender’s “I think continually of those who were truly great” — and this was, very generously, allowed. I don’t remember the church, I don’t remember the coffin. I remember walking to the chancel steps and reading the poem, and I remember that my throat felt like some mechanism made of brass producing words without my participation. Not that there was anything wrong with the words: “the soul’s history”; “endless and singing.” The brazen mechanism began to show signs of malfunction. It finally broke down on the phrase “grave evening demand for love.” Temporary repairs were effected; but by the end I was reduced to something not much better than barking. “Left the vivid air signed with their honor.” The growl of that final “r” sounded like an electric drill in the echoing church and seemed to hang in the air forever.

The priest spoke, of course. He hadn’t known Bill. This sort of thing can’t be easy. He was very struck by the fact that this improbable carload of odd-looking young folks had driven all that way to be present, and his homily ended up turning on that: Bill must have been quite a guy, if.... We were all deeply embarrassed and thought it was horribly lame and inadequate.

Well, of course it was inadequate. Funeral speeches, I have since discovered, always are. But maybe the good father was onto something. Even in the bare bones of Bill's life story, there's a pattern that comes strongly out: Bill, literally from his cradle, somehow brought to his side a new mother and father, a new brother and sister, and in later years rallied helpers, allies, teachers, sponsors, protectors, comforters, and mourners. Nor has this gift failed him even now, when he has been dust for three decades: here we are, all present and sober, an editor and publisher — and there you are, I hope, his readers. He drew people to him like a lodestone, and they embraced his cause and made it their own. Bill himself, in himself, was a mystery. Rummaging through his papers, talking with his family, and looking at old photos brings him back vividly but does not illuminate the enigma. There is, at last, nothing better to tell you, posterity, who didn't know him, than this: the guy was *irresistible*.

After all his restless roaming, Bill lies at last in Prairie View Cemetery, outside the town where he grew up. As you drive in, a large sign at the cemetery entrance promises “perpetual care.” Perpetuity is a long time, but the promise has been kept — so far, anyway. The grounds are tidy, the grass green and mowed like a Marine's haircut. But the name is less than candid. There's no prairie in sight; the vistas from Bill's corner are a tank farm to the south and a humming highway to the west. Next to Bill are Earl and Clara, whose headstones call them “Mother” and “Father.” Bill's own says “Son.” Bill's stone also bears the inscription “The Lord is my shepherd.” This jars a bit: not what he would have chosen, surely. On the other hand, it is from a poem. Better, as usual, in the original. יְהוָה רֹעִי — Adonai ro'i. Ro'i is grammatically an active participle with a suffixed pronoun, so you could render it as “The Lord is [the one who is] herding me.” This is the sort of thing Bill would have liked to know. Centuries of piety have blurred the startling character of the image. From the sheep's point of view, the shepherd's motives are obscure at best, and certainly not identical with the sheep's conception of his interests. And the shepherd has a dog, whose attentions have no obviously benign character. Bill's puzzlement at just where and why we are being herded did full justice to the inscrutability of our predicament. And he had, it seems, his own Black Dog nipping at his heels. No doubt his fleece was all the thicker as a result, but is this a trade-off that anybody would choose?

Everybody knows how the poem continues. If we can clear away the Sunday school associations, it's not such a bad fit, really. Bill, as we have seen, evoked something in people, and never lacked for helpers, guardians, and good angels.

The green pastures, the still waters, and so on, were all in fact provided — though there were plenty of rugged and rocky passages, too, in Bill's grazing grounds.

He is done now with verdant land and dry. The lush lawns of Prairie View are nothing to him, and the perpetual care he requires is not the kind a groundskeeper can give. He is in your hands, O unknown and unimaginable posterity, in his book; a book far too thin, but undeniably and strongly full, full to overflowing, with the strange richness and rich strangeness of an infinitely remarkable life.

*Michael J Smith, winter 2001-2002*