On the Eve of Jubilee: Fifty Years of "Rhyming" Louisiana,

Coda to a *Collected Poems* (2025)

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[adapted from the final chapter of *The Unsurrendered Ground: On Becoming a Poet in Louisiana*]

by

David Middleton

My life as a Louisiana poet began the day my parents brought me home from the North Louisiana Hospital in Shreveport shortly after my birth on May 6, 1949. Placing me in my crib, my mother stood some children's books in a semicircle around my head while above me had been placed a wheeling mobile of the sun, the moon, and the stars. Thus, from my very first moments at home, books—with their words and images, emblems of heavenly bodies appearing in radiant sway for my regard, and the very things themselves—like the sunlight flooding my picture-book's captioned image of the sun and heating the mobile's wired orange ball—made up that *given world* it is the poet's fate to try to understand and ever to praise.

The story of my subsequent life as a poet who writes about his home state has been recorded in a work long in progress: *The Unsurrendered Ground: On Becoming a Poet in Louisiana*, a work which I hope to publish one day in the not-

too-distant future as a book. My remarks today are taken and adapted from the unpublished final chapter of that book, a chapter entitled "Going Home: The End of the Story--and the Journey--in Sight."

So now, beginning near the end, at age 75, as my life's twilight slowly but steadily deepens into dusk, I think more and more of how that life has been lived in both a linear and a circular manner–the line and the circle being symbols of time and eternity–and with a mysterious connecting spiral sometimes in between. In that regard, I often think of T.S. Eliot's lines in his musically entitled *Four Quartets*:

In my beginning is my end.
("East Coker")

[and]

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.
("Little Gidding")

And so, in that spirit . . . I remember sending early poems, at age 17 in 1966, to the famous Agrarian writer Andrew Lytle, a contributor to *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) and at that time editor of *The Sewanee Review*, America's oldest continuously

published literary quarterly; I remember Mr. Lytle's encouraging handwritten rejection note on *Sewanee*-blue stationery; I also remember meeting him nineteen years later, in April of 1985, at the first Fletcher Lecture at my university, Nicholls State; I remember his calling me "son" (for me, a kind of laying on of hands) when Fran and I visited him later at The Log Cabin in Monteagle, Tennessee; I remember his jacket comment (he wrote few such for books of verse, he said) for my first book of poems *The Burning Fields* (1991); and I remember as well his sending and inscribing to me a copy of his last book, *Kirsten*, "To David Middleton, a friend whose light shines best in darkness. Andrew Lytle, Monteagle, 1992)"–another line and circle somehow becoming one--and also making a kind of musical variation and "deep rhyme."

And I remember Bollingen-Prize-winning North Carolina poet Fred Chappell's great poem, "Humility," and its influence on my book of Jean-François Millet ekphrastic poems on LSU Press just as "Humility," as Fred later told me, had been influenced by Millet's great painting *The Gleaners*--another line and circle spiraling into one–and sounding a deep though silent "rhyme." Chappell found Millet's 19th-century French rural peasant life in the North Carolina country life he knew just as I found Millet's rural laborers in the North Louisiana life I knew growing up. Again, T.S. Eliot's beginnings and ending, like musical motifs, going both ways--lines and circles spiraling out and back toward home.

And I recall returning to my maternal grandparents' home--The Village of Saline in Bienville Parish--in October of 2014 to read my poem "The Old Bank in Saline" in that very bank building, now a small public library, where much of the poem--about my grandfather as bank president--is set. And I remember speaking then and there to Ariel Anderson, a young teacher at Saline High School who grew up in my grandparents' house–sold to her family in 1962 not long after my grandmother died--Ariel, who, as a a girl, climbed the same pecan tree as I did as a boy and wrote of in "The Family Tree," the final poem in *The Burning Fields*.

And most of all, I remember that deep vision-like dream I had in 1976 of my late maternal grandmother, Mary Emma Williams Sudduth, who came to me like an angel in a time of great stress and walked me–in a circle--around the old house and yard with the reassuring words "It'll be all right"–"the voice of providence"–as I wrote in "The Vision," a poem composed in 1985 and placed as the first poem in *The Burning Fields* and thus "rhyming" with the last poem in that book, "The Family Tree." (Another line and circle spiraling into one.)

I also call to mind the cemetery of Magnolia Baptist Church in Saline where my maternal grandparents and uncle, and now my parents, are buried and where a plot is waiting for me. My wish is that on my gravestone should be chiseled the words my

daughter, Anna, proudly spoke at age 9 to a group of grownups: "My daddy is a poem-maker!" That, and the combined biblical inscriptions from my grandparents' nearby graves–"The Lord is my shepherd" and "Thy will be done"--will be all the epitaph my stone will need. That these two separate biblical inscriptions, in English, make a perfect iambic pentameter line seems appropriate, even providential, for a poet's gravestone. And, together, they are now the final line of my early mature poem "The Shepherd." Another deepest kind of "rhyme" of music and silence, eternity and time.

Furthermore, though remaining, in technique, a formalist poet, I have, over the last thirty years, come to think of "poetics," in a broader sense, as deeply connected to a way of looking at the universe and humankind's place therein. I see more clearly now than I did as a younger poet the importance of *storytelling* in poetry, in human life, and in the history of the cosmos itself: The Story of the Bible (The Garden of Eden, The Fall of Man, Redemption--or The Return to Eden or The Journey Onward to The New Jerusalem), not only in a spiritual and intellectual sense but also as a way to explain The Story of the Cosmos from The Beginning to The End. In terms of literary modes, this story means a journey from pastoral through epic and tragedy, then back to pastoral, but a pastoral now changed by the pain, suffering, and heroic acts and experiences of those two intermediate modes. The title of my *Collected Poems--Time Will Tell*–points toward all these things.

This view of poetics, poetry, and storytelling implies the existence of a Creator--not just as some logically necessary, impersonal Aristotelian First Cause but as The Maker (an old name for the poet). Genesis Chapter 1 and verses in Psalms 19 and 147 come to mind in this regard. In the Book of Genesis, in God's own mind, the *word* "light" somehow came before and helped to give existence to the *thing* called "light"--"And God *said*, 'Let there be light'; and there *was* light" (Genesis 1:3)--and in the psalms the Psalmist says of the heavenly bodies, "There is neither speech nor language: but their voices are heard among them" (Ps. 19:3) and, of God the Creator, "He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names" (Ps. 147:4). We may think, too, of this stunningly mysterious cosmos that photographs taken first by the Hubble and now by the Webb telescope have revealed. Creation is the first poem. And Scripture, to my mind, is the second. And from those two Ur-Poems all other poems descend. As I once wrote in a poem of my own, all things are "Literal symbols speaking for themselves."

And, in addition to these recollections, I am grateful, both as husband and as poet, to have had so many good years now in retirement with my wife, Fran. We enjoy simply going through the cycle of the seasons both of nature and the church and the cycle of the months, weeks, and days. We watch the birds as they alight, then fly away, both residents and migrants–cardinals and blue jays, mockingbirds and sparrows, woodpeckers and crows—as well as the wildflowers and other plants as they

bloom in their seasons in our yard and neighborhood–oxalis, buttercups, asters, wild strawberry, Dutch clover. (A recent poem of mine--"Staying Put"--"puts" these ideas into verse.)

Fran and I try to live by the values stated so well by Mitchell Kalpagian in his comments on Howard and Katherine Pyle's *The Wonder Clock* (1887), a book of stories for children interspersed with poems by Katherine on the commonplace events of life at home, hour by hour, during any 24-hour cycle of night and day.

As Kalpagian says, "*The Wonder Clock* involves this cyclical, recurring experience of the old, familiar things day in and day out, from the preparation of breakfast to the tucking of children in bed–a repetition of daily activities that never results in boredom, jadedness, or world-weariness. These old things that intoxicate and nourish are the permanent, lasting sources of joy and wonder that inhere in work and play which honor nature's laws and God's design. . . . There is the poetry of the home in *The Wonder Clock* that elevates humble work and domestic life, transforming the honest toil and simple, innocent pleasures of the home into glimpses of heavenly peace and reminders of Eden."

Kalpagian's words are now one of the epigraphs in my Collected Poems.

And whatever, if anything, may follow the last tick of *The Wonder Clock* and then death, I am not eager to go into a New Jerusalem in which there is neither day nor

night nor sun nor moon nor stars. (A new of mine poem on this subject is “After Reading Revelation 21:23.”)

My bywords remain Wonder and Ponder, not Faith or Hope (nor their opposites Disbelief and Despair)-although, as best I may, I do practice the Love called Charity as a self-evident good. I often recall Geoffrey Hill’s great poem “September Song” in which Hill first meditates on the horrors of the concentration camps, then thinks of the “harmless fires” of leaves swept up into piles and burned on an ordinary autumn day in England in a time of peace. Of such days, he says, in contrast to the terrible suffering of those who died in the camps in gas chambers and whose bodies were burned in the ovens, “This is plenty. This is more than enough.”

And I remain committed to The Pastoral Vision. For me, the long journey had been from Eden through the Fall into History and going both onward and back not to a city, The New Jerusalem, but to Eden, or Paradise, regained but in a fullness of being unknown to Adam and Eve.

I once put some of these thoughts about our journey through life in a poem addressed by a father to a daughter: (And, again, I keep in mind the title of my forthcoming Collected: *Time Will Tell*):

A Child's History of Reading

Before you learned to read you'd lay your head

Against my heart, then snuggle up to look

With sleepy eyes at bedtime's storybook

Whose pictures figured forth the words I said.

For years you lingered there among your kind

In Pan's Neverland, Pooh's Hundred Acre Wood,

Edenic places, simple, true, and good

Like Mother Goose's England of the mind.

Then you became a woman and you crossed

Bleak regions far beyond those happy dells--

Lyonesse, Lear's heath, Dante's and Eliot's hells--

Badlands sacred to the chosen and the lost.

Yet one day soon, with your own child to hold,

In those old love-worn storybooks you'll see

That once upon a time will ever be

Till time's unending story has been told.

Eliot again!

What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

("Little Gidding")

And I remember when, as a newborn child who could not read but who could soon look at picture books--one word and one image per page--as he was read to by his mother and father, I first saw that mobile of the sun and moon and stars that my parents hung over my crib–heavenly bodies so near and yet so far away and certainly out of reach of my baby hands–although, when I did reach, I could almost touch them. . . .

And as they turned when a breeze came through the window, I saw them moving through silent music in their spheres and going through their courses–the prime and final progress of the stars and all their kind. They were the first light I saw--and the only light by which I would ever after see.

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Louisiana Studies Conference
Northwestern State University
Natchitoches, Louisiana
September 14, 2024

JD: Please ADD what follows here at the END for DM's Nicholls Website posting:

Published Poems Quoted or Cited Above

For the text of Fred Chappell's poem "Humility," search the web for

Difference by Fred Davis Chappell - Famous poems.

The Old Bank in Saline

for what shall it profit a man,
if he should gain the whole world,
and lose his own soul?

The locked front door holds firm though broken panes
Above the worn brass knob go unrepaired.
Late afternoons the tellers' rusted trays
Take in the gold the sun deposits there
Descending through a haze of yellow dust
That settles far beyond all human care.
Beside a filing cabinet's empty drawers
A calendar for 1959
Cut from a southern almanac declares
A January holiday for Lee,
The weather and the moons, best planting times,
Aquarius and Christ's Epiphany.
And through the wavy blocks of jagged glass,
Peering with thick-lensed eyes made dim with age
I'm swept by love's great elegiac sway
Back forty years when I would toddle down
Past open doors and tellers to your lap,
Grandfather Sudduth, president and mayor
Of this small bank and sandy pine hill town.

And even now I seem to find you there
In plain white shirt, black coat, and straight black tie
Leaning over a ledger's columned page,
Your fountain pen dipped deep in purple ink
To reconcile and balance, rectify.
And when you read the numbers and the names
By signatures on mortgages and loans
You did not think of profits maximized
Through sharpness or severity but those
With whom you sat each Sunday as you prayed
Taking to heart the Baptist pastor's fire
His bony finger tapping at the texts
About the widow's mite and Caesar's things,
Joseph enrolled, the tithe, a Wise Man's gold,
The temple's moneylenders, talents hid,
Or Judas' palm where silver burns the soul.

Thus humbled by God's justice and His love
And led by mercy's prudence you would try
To help indebted neighbors keep their homes,
Building up true community and trust
With honesty from that part mythic time
When handshakes were as good as papers signed.
The girls your loans would send to Normal School,
Come back to teach the farm boys thirty years,
Those boys' own fathers you would let hang on
When mortgage payments fell months in arrears,
Widows whose pension funds were placed so well
They'd all have gladly wed you if they could...
Such private happiness and public good
Defined a world you bettered on the way
Toward modest earnings hard and fairly gained.
And so, unchanged, your probity and word
Sustained you through not only those grave days
When FDR himself would have to write
To shut a bank untouched by panic-runs
But through Ike's richer '50s when you died
Leaving nine thousand dollars and a name
To those the name alone had satisfied.

And now as dying sunlight turns to gold
Those rooms that only memory can restore
To one who knows as you had known before
From what great depths the heart can overflow,
I walk back down to my blue Regal parked
Beside the modern bank that's since replaced
Those old gray walls condemned to slow decay
And see through windows silvered in the dusk
Two young bank officers still working late,
Granddaughters of a man whose land you saved,
Now helping as they once were helped themselves.

And on a wall there hangs a photograph,
A gift I sent in 1994
To celebrate the founding of the bank,
Your image caught some forty years before
In honor of the first half century.
You stand erect in sober, formal pose,
Grandmother Mary Emma at your desk
Beside cut roses floating in their bowls,
Your firm hand on her shoulder gently pressed,
A patriarchal gesture, dated now,
Yet here the source of her contentedness.
Behind you two large pictures fill a shelf,
Grown children missed: Joe Lynn, a country boy
Scarred by fifty missions over the Rhine
Whose bombing left a time bomb in the heart
Exploding in his sleep at forty-five;
And by him in a golden oval frame
Anna Marie, my mother, who lives on
According to her girlhood's social code,
Expecting courtesy, good manners, taste,
Eyes saying all a lady has to say.

Long may such faces gaze from that new bank
As spirits witnessing to other days
And may the old bank building not be razed
For parking space or draw the tourists down
Who might have seen Saline in Newman's *Blaze*.
And may those yellowed ledgers in their dust

Remind us like the Bible that you kept
Beside the books to call you to account
How soon you'd have consigned to bankrupt hells
All loan sharks and those '80s S&Ls
By virtues made the coin of your just realm,
Their worth the legal tender of your ways.

The Vision

--for my maternal grandmother. d. 1962, Saline, Louisiana

It had been far too long since you had said
“Remember me,” the southern covenant,
When in a troubled sleep I stood again
Before the lonely house in which you died
Some twenty years ago, your weak heart broken
By the relentless heat of sixty green Julys.
Beyond fine sands blowing their ghostly roads
Through North Louisiana’s pinewood hills,
I saw the pale boards brighten in the sun,
The white and pink oxalis lining the walk
Where bold moss-roses welcomed back the day
And long melancholy summer afternoons
Woke up the four-o’clocks to watch them fade
Into the primrose evening. There, where you lay
With pills and pistol ready by the bed
Listening to sweet gums whisper in the fields
And bobwhites call aloud their human name,
One night, as you had prayed, you died in sleep,
And took your place among the Sudduth graves
Made fragrant by your dignity and grace.
Now you had come: no dream within a dream
But luminous and true, radiant as a source,
Shelling your purple peas, rocking on the porch,
Letting the perfect knowledge of your face
Release me in the calmest depths of love.
You dressed in cotton lavender, of course,

But in a modern style, your spirit's mild
Contempt for time, so quietly expressed.
We did not go inside the darkened rooms
Whose figures moved through half-remembered scenes,
But with your softly wrinkled arm about me
We slowly circled round the house and yard
Seeing each thing as what it truly was,
The old pecan cocooned in dry June skies,
Crepe myrtle great with bees and dragonflies,
Measureless wells, so lucid in their noons!
No fantasy's compensatory lie
Or image drawn at random from the flow,
You were the angel summoned up in pain
That innocence might walk upon the earth's
Envisioned ground, by memory sustained.
At last our circle closed, but as you stopped
And I awoke to consciousness and tears,
You said, "It'll be all right," words whose truth
Is all we crave, the voice of providence.
You sat back down beside your peas and flowers,
Smiling, talking, laughing, singing aloud
But to yourself alone, there, where you wait
And think of me until I too can go
Into the only world the heart would ever know.

THE FAMILY TREE

for my "country grandmother," d. 1962

It always brought the fall to you off guard,
This old pecan, its brown husks clustered hard,
While on the lawn's high grass leaves crisp and bent
Touched nuts and newborn moths with bitter scent.
More quickly then, as if you'd been delayed,
You'd gather cabbage in the evening shade
And dig up late potatoes with your spade
In a garden that you planted near the end

From pride and need. Just there is where I sinned,
Though still a city boy who could not read
The seasons' book of hours and took no heed,
For once in bright July, in my Sunday suit
I climbed the pecan and plucked unready fruit
Smushing the pulp inside each pliant hull,
Eating rubbery nuts until so sick and full
I ran to you as you read your Bible verses
On the long front porch, your innocent curses
Holding me as you turned to where time weaves
Births and deaths and weddings in the leaves.
Then, distracting me from a stomach so torn
You traced the family tree till I was born
Once more. "Don't pick too soon" was all you said
As distant winds blew faintly overhead,
Yet only now, so far from summer calm,
The hard brown hulls held tight in my hard palm,
Can I suspect how soon you saw the end
To which all family trees and world-trees tend
In an old pecan, which, when the fall winds cry,
Shreds its dead cocoons against the sky.

THE SHEPHERD

a Christmas play, 1951, Saline, Louisiana

Outside the country church's open door
Closed on the growing cold of Christmas Eve
I waited—the other shepherds gone before—
Till summoned by an angel-child to leave
Those early stars peeking sheepishly from night
I swung my golden crozier over them
And entered into a world of warmth and light
Walking the pinewood aisle to Bethlehem.
First grandson of the town's first family,
I heard "the city of David" as I came
To stand beside the manger, and to me

The psalms and gospels mingled in my name.
Behind us in the dark I just could see
The painted Jordan sliding on its tide
Into the waters of the baptistry
Where a thirsty lamb had curled away and died.
The pageant quickly ended though we prayed
Before the baby Jesus' doll-like face—
Candy-canes, mint tea, and lemonade
Luring even Mary from her place.
Then running out to play among the dead
I saw our family plot through ghostly breaths,
The long low wall enclosing at its head
An infant son—there were no other deaths.
Yet like a shepherd boy whose single sheep
Is lost as prey, I sat on that low wall
As on a sheepfold fighting off a sleep
In which I still could hear the slain lamb's call.
"David! David!" the stiff grass made me shake
As my grandfather nudging me with his cane
Slung me over his shoulder half-awake
And took me limply home to bed again.
That was long ago. And now alone above
The Sudduth graves so silent in the grass
Where once a boyish shepherd, out of love,
Tried not to fall asleep and let death pass,
I tear green blades from epitaphs grown old
Wearing out the night whose Herdsman searches on
Till each lost star is gathered in the fold:
"The Lord is my shepherd." "Thy will be done."

END
8-25-24

See also:
"The Spiritual Terrain of David Middleton"
By James Mathew Wilson
https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2024/04/12/the-spiritual-terrain-of-david-middleton/

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