a chapbook of poems, *Getting It On Up To The Brag* (1975), and he edited and wrote the principal text for the recent Aperture Monograph, *Ralph Eugene Meatyard*. After years of odd-jobbing and teaching on the west coast and in New England, he returned to the University of Kentucky in 1973, where he teaches writing.

Michael S. Harper

GRANDFATHER

In 1915 my grandfather's
neighbors surrounded his house
near the dayline he ran
on the Hudson
in Catskill, NY
and thought they'd burn
his family out
in a movie they'd just seen
and be rid of his kind:
the death of a lone black
family is *the Birth*
of a Nation,
or so they thought.
His 5′4″ waiter gait
quenched the white jacket smile
he'd brought back from watered
polish of my father
on the turning seats,
and he asked his neighbors
up on his thatched porch
for the first blossom of fire
that would burn him down.

They went away, his nation,
spittooning their torched necks
in the shadows of the riverboat
they'd seen, posse decomposing;
and I see him on Sutter
with white bag from your
restaurant, challenged by his first
grandson to a foot-race
he will win in white clothes.

I see him as he buys galoshes
for his railed yard near Mineo's
metal shop, where roses jump
as the el circles his house
towards Brooklyn, where his rain fell;
and I see cigar smoke in his eyes,
chocolate Madison Square Garden chews
he breaks on his set teeth,
stitched up after cancer,
the great white nation immovable
as his weight wilts
and he is on a porch
that won't hold my arms,
or the legs of the race run
forwards, or the film
played backwards on his grandson's eyes.

COMMENTARY ON *GRANDFATHER*

Family background

Much of the early information alluded to in the later (and final) version of *Grandfather* came directly to me through my father, who was born and raised in the town of Catskill, New York; 1915 was his birth year, he the second of five children who survived, and his recollections in

part were consummated in the writing. My grandfather worked on the boats that ran from New York up the Hudson River; he worked as a cook and waiter, and moved to Catskill to work in a concession during the high season. After an accident in which he lost an eye from an exploding bottle, he was offered a settlement in cash or the running of the dayline concession in Catskill; he settled on that concession as a means to buy his own business. The family had a tradition of independence; my father's grandfather walked from the South to New York at the end of the Civil War, and bought the house on "Sutter," and much of the storytelling, over many years, included salient episodes on race relations, American history and politics, the economics of the Hudson River, the entrepreneurial limits for black men in the '20s and '30s, railroads, under and above ground, those itinerant progressions from slavery to freedom, games and family mores, folklore and music. My grandfather was an amateur musician and made his own instruments; it was said he could play anything with strings, and though untrained, used his talents during the depression to feed his family. He lost his business in the early '30s and went to work again on the boats up the Hudson River. He was my first clear image of an heroic stance against adversity; I was often sent to my grandparents to do errands for them on weekends, a pretense whereby I could sustain a continued connection with the lineage of my father. It was through my grandfather that I came to realize the stature and importance of my own father, and the poem is more for my father than for any other family member, because he preserved the images of my forebears so clearly in mind, though he did not dwell on them: he was their embodiment and their legacy.

The writing of the poem

I have always been a poet who had a pattern for a poem at conception, a means of balancing form and content in formal rather than traditional lines; the original pattern was the ballad form, because it is economical and dramatic and does not require too much right-sounding rhyme; so I left the poem for some years. I began to ponder the balance between *art* and *life,* what elements of both were necessary to tell a story, a story that I knew well, and which exacted the price of simplicity and straightforwardness in the telling? I had seen D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in a college film survey course, and I was angered at the showing, at the false

ight given to elements of the Civil War and its aftermath that I had
›wn from childhood; I was appalled at the instructor's failure to focus
the moral elements that were obfuscated by the film's technical ad-
ıces, as discussed in a linear survey history-of-film approach, and at the
orance of my fellow students about the real nature of the Civil War
l Reconstruction. I returned to another showing of the film, some years
er, to test my recollections. I wrote the poem in one sitting, about five or
drafts, over a whole day, and changed only a word or two thereafter.

Michael S. Harper was born in 1938 in Brooklyn, New York, where he
ended public schools; his family moved to Los Angeles in 1951. He
›te plays and short fiction for creative writing classes, worked as
vspaper distributor, lifeguard, postal clerk, counselor, and in 1961 spent
ear at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop. After teaching in
·tland, Oregon, Hayward, California, and Urbana, Illinois, he now
ches and directs the writing program at Brown University. He lives
h his wife and three children in Massachusetts. Publications include:
ar John, Dear Coltrane (1970), *History Is Your Own Heartbeat* (1971),
tory as Apple Tree (1972), *Song: I Want a Witness* (1972),
bridement (1973), and *Nightmare Begins Responsibility* (1975).

Phil Hey

OLD MEN WORKING CONCRETE

won't be rushed; will take
their own sweet time.
Now and then, will stop
for snuff (reaching in
the pocket where the circle
of can has worn a circle
in the cloth); and then
get back to work, mix mud
and fill and walk that barrow
back and back and back.
Soon enough the slab end
takes shape. The one man
on his knees with a float
checks it with his eye
stopping time and again
to run his striker saw-wise
and level across the top.
Soon enough it gets long;
smooth with broad swings
of trowel it gets long.
Finally they stop the mixer.

One trowels out the last space,
one works the edger.
Done, they stand back.
They look one more time.
It's good. Yes sir, it's good.
They talk. They dip snuff.
They are happy.

SWEET TIME: WORKING A POEM

I hadn't written in a long time, and despaired of ever writing again. But the concern at the moment was not writing. My friend Bill needed help with his garage floor. He'd had a heart attack, so his friends helped out: George, Al, and me (the only one under sixty). All retired but me; all working with their hands all life long, but me. We did it, we finished more than Bill hoped we would. He was proud of the floor, deeply moved by friends happy to do so much for him. So was I.

So the poem was not begun, in a sense: it was there complete in the experience, needing not so much invention as transcription. Or so it felt, and still does. There are few things more beautiful than old men working. They don't have to; it becomes a point of honor to show the mastery of years working with hands. Supernal patience wins out, the joy of being with the thing worked, of seeing yourself reflected in the work. And of knowing that the work will outlast you, if you do well; and being happy about that too.

The poem did not write itself. It demanded a kind of faithfulness to the experience, a sense of working in language somehow like the sense of working with concrete. Only enough to make it firm and level; unspectacular: strong, without decoration. From first word to completion, perhaps twenty lines of description were eliminated; the poem ended up less colorful and less narrative than when it began (which was by a rapid dumping onto the page of all associative materials, images, names, etc., roughly in the order in which they had been noticed).

But how is the sense of the poem the sense of the experience? I knew (want to say, anyone would know) that

won't be rushed; will take
their own sweet time.

has to be the first two lines. Young men sweat and curse under work; old men retired savor it. Something perhaps to keep, lovingly, from thinking how much is past and how little left; but in any case, savor. Time is sweet when you feel the purpose in your hands again. As time should be sweet and purposeful in the movings of this poem. There is no specific prosody behind this poem; it seeks the motions inherent in the experience. There is a coherence in the way sounds occur in my writing, a subdued but constant repetition and near-repetition; but no more planned or preordained than the phrases of a good jazzman, I hope. Thus I do not directly believe that "the sound must seem an echo to the sense." There is a sense of rhythm larger than any body of sounds one could use mimetically (and thus nothing of "slap and scrape of trowel" or "rough wash of mixer"). In its place, a kind of cadencing, that is, ways to keep the words flowing, or to modulate or stop their flow—ways the sounds, phrases, lines, grammar show the ear how to hear, the mouth how to speak. In a poem it should be immediately obvious to a sympathetic oral reader. At the end, for example, everything conspires to end. Anticlimax in ideas. Short sentences of flat sounds. Full pauses.

But never these aside from some sort of immediate concern with the things said, as if it were the most ordinary prose. I like poems that at once (1) offer an experience which is the words, and (2) indicate an experience of value independent of any poem whatever. But poems are not consequences of judgment. One experience calls another experience into being, and the latter is a poem. Richard Palmer (*Hermeneutics*, Northwestern University Press, 1969) says that truth is "the dynamic emergence of being into the light of manifestness." All language, all craft, goes to make the experience manifest; not only the experience of working concrete, or of old men, but of seeing, of finding all this to be fascinating. I would be a Whitmanlike observer, knowing that observing itself is real experience.

And who to read it? Anyone, I hope; but mostly, a reader no respecter of cultural fashion. I seek to be neither old nor new in style or subject, but to work finally from my own sense of style and experience. I don't know that other poets are either interested or impressed. Readers who like poems such as this one seem to be a little more willingly innocent than

most poets or scholars. A reader would have to at least be open to the possibility that old men working concrete are beautiful, that unspectacular style can be most appropriate and good. And that many poems now written are a kind of vitiated, obscure mush in both senses of language and experience; and that I will not let mine be, regardless. I am honored that David Evans and E. V. Griffith (two fine editors) like some of my poems such as this one. I would love to hear from someone who couldn't stand the poem.

Or from someone who wanted to know what it "means." I would rather write a good clear poem than a bad one that could be analyzed all day. (Agreed: there are great poems that could be analyzed all day. But analysis never improved any poem.) In short, I can hardly bring myself to believe that a paraphrase is either needed or valuable, that it would be significantly more clear or understandable than the original. If one is needed, consult a book on how to finish concrete.

Do not consult a book on how to finish poems, however. I have tried very hard to study both technique and poetics so that I could put all away, and write each time as if I had never written before. I see this poem as similar in theme and technique to several others (Midwest life and language; sorry, both coasts, if I haven't entertained you); perhaps slightly better than some. How should I know that? But judgments like these are always retrospective, somehow not lived.

Still. All poetics is a Procrustes bed. If a poem is good, it is more than anything like it, more than anything said about it: almost too much of experience to be as mere as words. And yet, miraculously, it is.

See also: comments with poems in *New Voices in American Poetry*, and "Letter to Any Young Poet," *Oakwood*, I; English Department, South Dakota State University, Brookings 57006.

Phil Hey was born in 1942 and has been growing up ever since in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa. He was enlightened at Monmouth College, and the universities of Iowa and Wisconsin. He has worked as a pinsetter, fry cook, and tuba player; he now writes and teaches writing at Briar Cliff College, Sioux City, Iowa. Published *In Plain Sight* (1974); received Edwin H. Gardner Award, 1968.

Donald Justice

FIRST DEATH

June 12, 1933

I saw my grandmother grow weak.
When she died, I kissed her cheek.

I remember the new taste—
Powder mixed with a drying paste.

Down the hallway, on its table,
Lay the family's great Bible.

In the dark, by lamplight stirred,
The Void grew pregnant with the Word.

In black ink they wrote it down.
The other ink was turning brown.

From the woods there came a cry—
A hoot owl asking who, not why.

The men sat silent on the porch,
Each lighted pipe a friendly torch