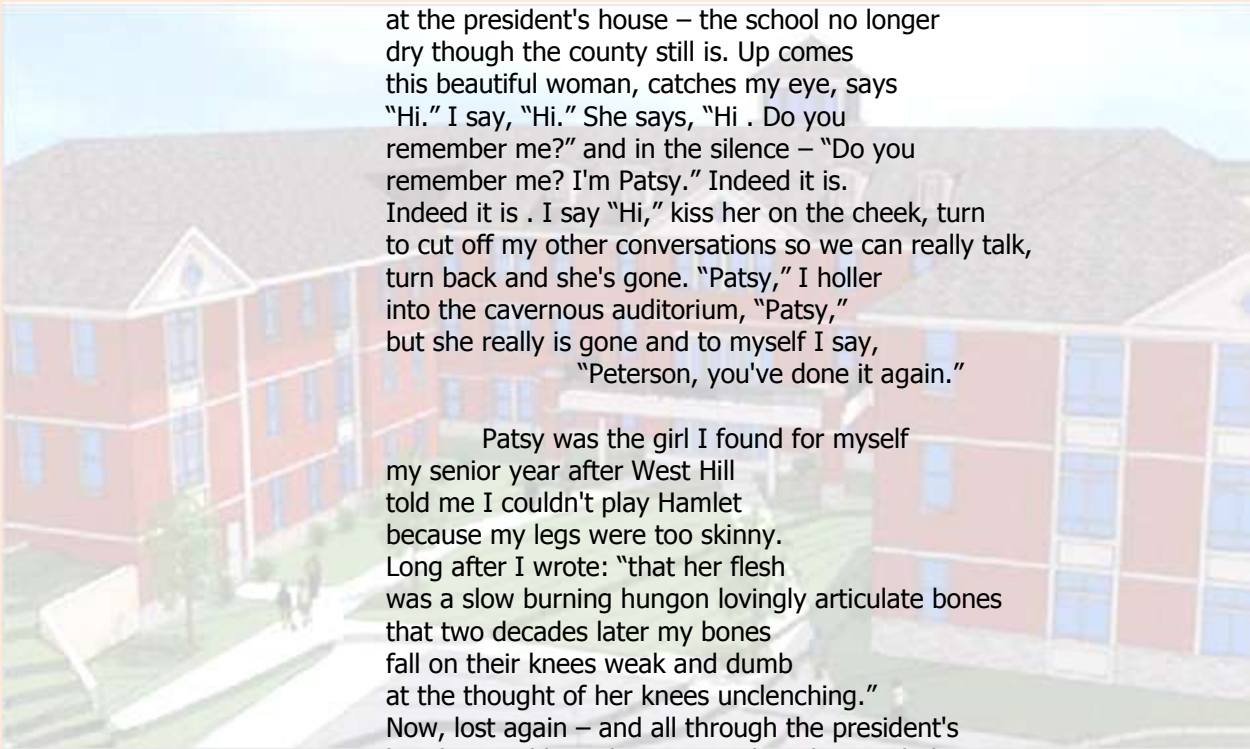


Homecoming

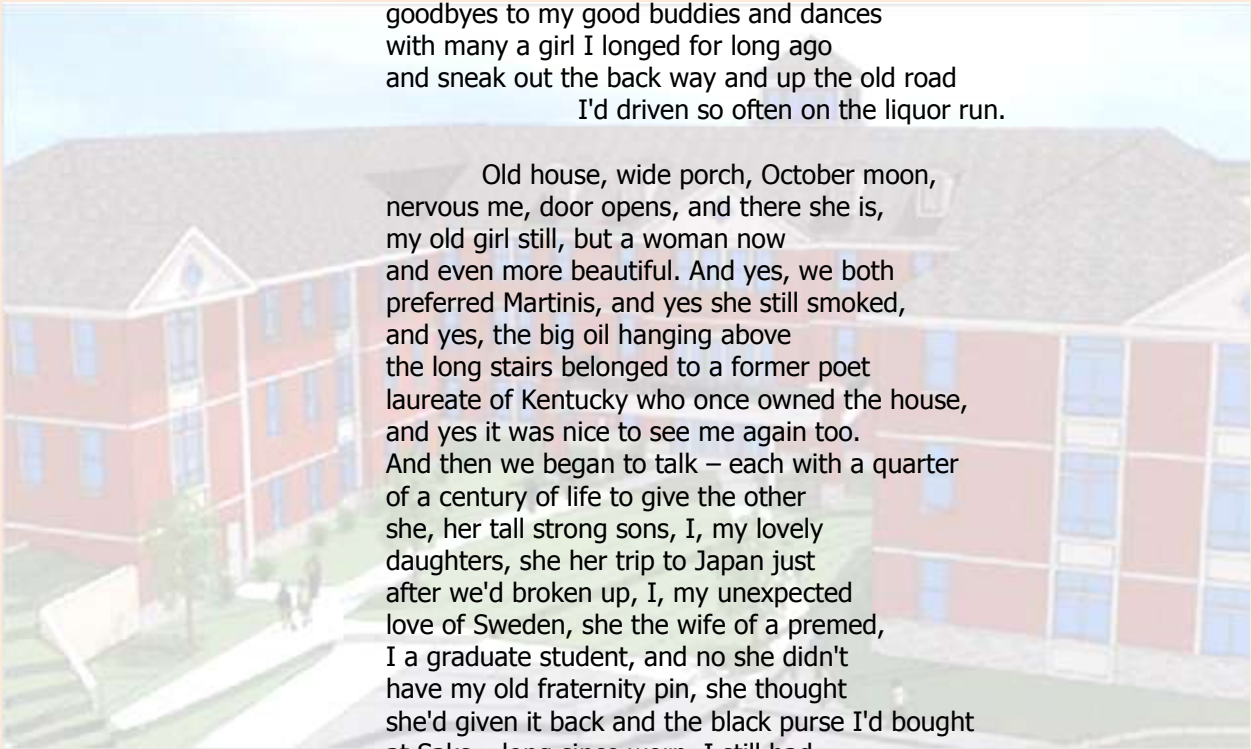
It's fall, night time, my old college,
a required assembly a couple of days
before my 25th reunion, 700 students, a few old
friends and teachers, – *Peterson Pontificates*
on Love trumpeted the college paper
and, smiling to myself, I give them some
of the great lovely chestnuts – Catullus,
Waller, Marvell, some of my own stuff,
Corso's "Marriage," a nasty Thurber story.
Much applause – friends coming up on stage,
old teachers – we're off for a drink
at the president's house – the school no longer
dry though the county still is. Up comes
this beautiful woman, catches my eye, says
"Hi." I say, "Hi." She says, "Hi . Do you
remember me?" and in the silence – "Do you
remember me? I'm Patsy." Indeed it is.
Indeed it is . I say "Hi," kiss her on the cheek, turn
to cut off my other conversations so we can really talk,
turn back and she's gone. "Patsy," I holler
into the cavernous auditorium, "Patsy,"
but she really is gone and to myself I say,
"Peterson, you've done it again."

Patsy was the girl I found for myself
my senior year after West Hill
told me I couldn't play Hamlet
because my legs were too skinny.
Long after I wrote: "that her flesh
was a slow burning hungon lovingly articulate bones
that two decades later my bones
fall on their knees weak and dumb
at the thought of her knees unclenching."
Now, lost again – and all through the president's
bourbon and branchwater my thoughts swirled
with her – sure – the long lovely nights
with blanket and beer on a ledge looking out
at Lake Harrington but maybe even more
the years after my first loss when fate
would take me through Cincinnati,
over the river, through Covington, and right on by
the curving drive which led to her lovely house
set on its small rise and my heart would
squeeze into itself.

Next day to the alumni office for address
and phone number – she lives in Lexington – not far,
divorced – has a couple of sons – one enrolled
here – I call – no answer – and later – no answer



maybe she's in town for the Homecoming
maybe she's here, maybe she's there.
I look in both places. I call – no answer,
the next morning – 5:30 A.M. – I call
no answer. All through the big game
I pace the stands even on the side of our dreaded
rival not caring who won or lost, but no
Patsy. Game over. Plane out tomorrow. Dance
at the club after cocktails at my classmate's
now a judge and all irredeemable.
Into the judge's pantry for a last call,
by now I know the number – dial – and yes
she answers and yes she says Hi and no, she'd
been out fox hunting when I called so early
and yes she's free for dinner. So I abandon my
goodbyes to my good buddies and dances
with many a girl I longed for long ago
and sneak out the back way and up the old road
I'd driven so often on the liquor run.



Old house, wide porch, October moon,
nervous me, door opens, and there she is,
my old girl still, but a woman now
and even more beautiful. And yes, we both
preferred Martinis, and yes she still smoked,
and yes, the big oil hanging above
the long stairs belonged to a former poet
laureate of Kentucky who once owned the house,
and yes it was nice to see me again too.
And then we began to talk – each with a quarter
of a century of life to give the other
she, her tall strong sons, I, my lovely
daughters, she her trip to Japan just
after we'd broken up, I, my unexpected
love of Sweden, she the wife of a premed,
I a graduate student, and no she didn't
have my old fraternity pin, she thought
she'd given it back and the black purse I'd bought
at Saks – long since worn. I still had
the silver cigarette lighter, though I no longer
carried it, and a book – "The Kentucky Story,"
given to me so I wouldn't forget. She had lost
one of the jade earrings I had blown a week's
salary on but she'd had the other made
into a ring, yes, the one she was wearing,
and the hard times – her divorce,
my separation. By now we're at dinner,
too much bloody meat and too little
anything else, and a New York wine
made out of red ink and sugar, yet all sang
on the tongue, and one of her sons worked there –
yes, he was tall and handsome, and gave me
his hand and half a raised eyebrow – then back

to her place for an after-dinner drink
in front of a warm coal fire burning
vermilion and black in an old metal stove
and talk while the hours fled with the flown years.
What the young offer each other
is the marvelous future, all that can happen,
all that will be. Older, suspicious
of promises, we learn to offer what we have lived.
It is a smaller, harder gift, yet beautiful like fact.

When it was at last time to go, we held
each other long and hard, maybe even harder
than all those nights out at the lake,
as if somehow that would help us with who
we were, as if we could bind the years,
our separate lives and those fine lives
linked with ours and grown out of ours
together – in our arms, then off I went
into the night drunk on nothing I had swallowed.

We wrote for awhile and I thought it was she
that stopped, but, looking through an old notebook,
I found my last letter unstamped, unmailed
and thought, Peterson, you've done it again. But
it's Valentine's Day and I'm preparing to pontificate
on love again and all this comes flooding back,
so, I begin –

"Hi. Do you remember me? I'm Nils."

