

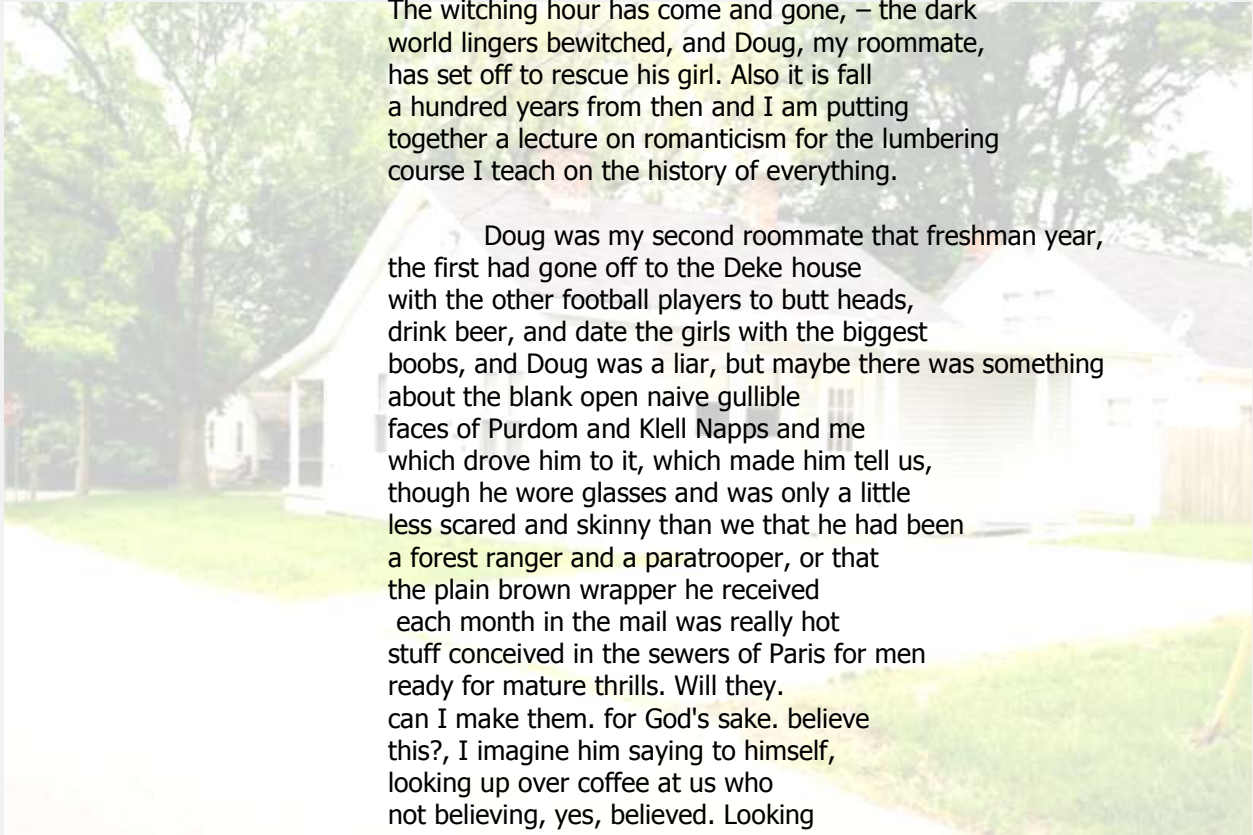
My Lecture on Romanticism

*And a spirit in my feet,
Hath led me - who knows how?
To thy chamber window, Sweet!*

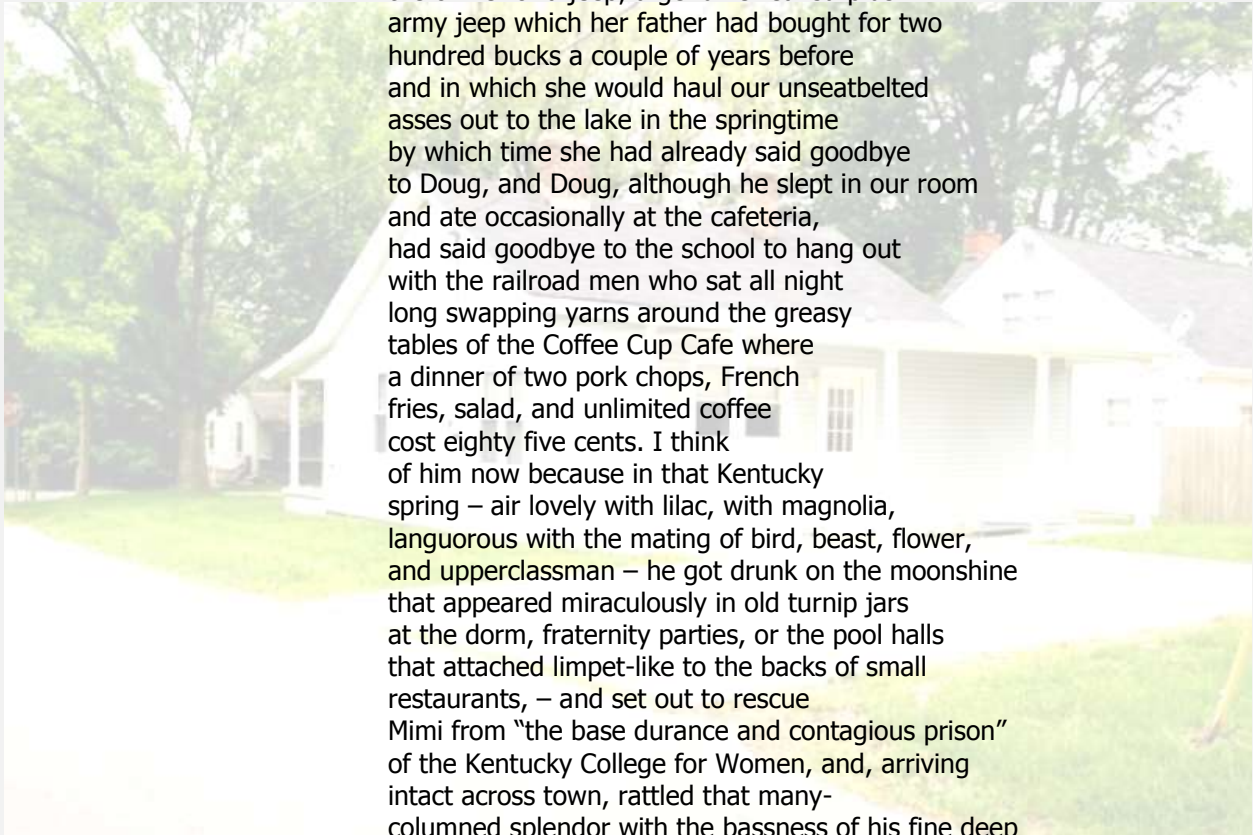
P.B. Shelley

It is spring – a hundred years ago and I am a freshman at a small Kentucky college. Air is heavy and sweet and heavy and sweet is the flesh that hangs about the bones whispering. The witching hour has come and gone, – the dark world lingers bewitched, and Doug, my roommate, has set off to rescue his girl. Also it is fall a hundred years from then and I am putting together a lecture on romanticism for the lumbering course I teach on the history of everything.

Doug was my second roommate that freshman year, the first had gone off to the Deke house with the other football players to butt heads, drink beer, and date the girls with the biggest boobs, and Doug was a liar, but maybe there was something about the blank open naive gullible faces of Purdom and Klell Napps and me which drove him to it, which made him tell us, though he wore glasses and was only a little less scared and skinny than we that he had been a forest ranger and a paratrooper, or that the plain brown wrapper he received each month in the mail was really hot stuff conceived in the sewers of Paris for men ready for mature thrills. Will they. can I make them. for God's sake. believe this?, I imagine him saying to himself, looking up over coffee at us who not believing, yes, believed. Looking for action in the brown envelope he for once did not lock in his desk, I discovered the Charles Atlas course whose dynamic tensions he later admitted performing in the shower those mornings he cut class which gave him, as a matter of fact, much time to practice. He had a guitar and taught me how to play the three or four chords of which I'm still confident, though, as it turned out, the reason his guitar was out all the time was that its case, stuck in the back of our closet, hid his gun collection – two rifles, three pistols, and what looked like about the right amount of ammunition to take along



when being dropped behind the lines at Panmunjon which we had begun to realize might happen to us. Anyway, as I assemble my notes on Blake, Wordsworth, and Keats, I think of him because in the middle of winter he found and fell in love with the only girl named Mimi in all of central Kentucky. Her father was a refugee too, but from Vienna, not New Jersey or New York like Doug, my first roommate, and me, and made his living in some exotic unKentucky way – breeder of orchids, or analyst, or tracer of lost persons. She was lovely girl, a little stocky, but the owner of a jeep, a genuine real surplus army jeep which her father had bought for two hundred bucks a couple of years before and in which she would haul our unseatbelted asses out to the lake in the springtime by which time she had already said goodbye to Doug, and Doug, although he slept in our room and ate occasionally at the cafeteria, had said goodbye to the school to hang out with the railroad men who sat all night long swapping yarns around the greasy tables of the Coffee Cup Cafe where a dinner of two pork chops, French fries, salad, and unlimited coffee cost eighty five cents. I think of him now because in that Kentucky spring – air lovely with lilac, with magnolia, languorous with the mating of bird, beast, flower, and upperclassman – he got drunk on the moonshine that appeared miraculously in old turnip jars at the dorm, fraternity parties, or the pool halls that attached limpet-like to the backs of small restaurants, – and set out to rescue Mimi from “the base durance and contagious prison” of the Kentucky College for Women, and, arriving intact across town, rattled that many-columned splendor with the bassness of his fine deep voice calling “Mimi, Mimi, Come down to me and we will fly away on the wings of song,” and I think of him because then he started to sing some fine rich romantic song, maybe – Some Enchanted Evening while the lights came on again all over the dorm – And now, a hundred years later, I am in love with his gesture, with the world and its reason well lost for love, with the “lyric imagination asserting itself over brute fact.” I read in my text from Blake “Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse an unacted desire,” and I remember what Ezio Pinza



advised us all my high school long
"Then fly to her side and make her your own,
or all through your life you may dream all alone,"
and so sang my friend Doug to a dorm
full of girls amused, then envious, then cynical,
at last annoyed as he sang on and on
again and again, annoyed as was my roommate
when it became clearer and clearer that Mimi was not
about to come down and fly with him
anywhere. And now whatever this
means to me gets confusing for Doug
broke off in the middle of his 7th or 8th
chorus, stopped for a moment, heard at last
the growing chorus of Southern catcalls,
turned angry, and hollered "Come on down
out of there, Mimi, or I'm going
to come on up and drag you down."
And in the silence – "Gawdamn it, Mimi, –
come down" and he pulled from his pocket two
of the pistols he had gathered from our room
and began waving them in the air. By this
time, the air was filled with catcalls, Deans
of Women, sirens, and police, and Doug, though drunk,
was not so drunk that he did not sling
his pistols under a bush before anyone
quite got to him and though he spent that night
in the pokey it was for being drunk and disorderly
not for an armed assault on the girl's dorm.

It was not his first night in the hoosegow,
but it was his last as he left by mutual
consent, the school. The night before he went,
we fought. It was the last fight of my fight-
filled youth. He would not – not fight,
so he followed me as I retreated from room
to room. At last we had at each other
in the first floor lounge, knocking over
lamps, rolling over sofas, tripping over
chairs until all of a sudden, it was enough
and we stopped. No one hurt.
No one even bruised much. I never
saw him again, but sometimes, when lecturing
on romanticism, I wake up in the middle
of the night to the sound of my own voice
having at last found itself – and I
have been standing in front of the girl's dorm and I
have at last been singing my heart out.

