

EXPANSION

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"Out here it is my father lies, my son,"
the older said in passing through the teeming
knee-high sage that slowed their need to run:
Relating private history must seem
a pressing thing to sons.

September air
had cooled the day — birds and a bluer sky
had gathered — as they let themselves draw near
the near-forgotten plot where still must lie
the graying father's father, left alone
some unremembered years. The slab they found
looked blank at first, a nameless broken stone
in parts they reconstructed on the ground.
An oblique sun in time revealed the veins
of some stone-cutter's art. A textured sigh
had hardened family grief, had chiseled lines
that shortly spelled the facts of how men die.

In time the father found the words to show
the son how things had been, what sons must know.

"He was not always old, for I have heard
him talk of other times. He used to sit
on summer evenings facing slanting suns
that laced the fence-row sassafras. The times
of silence spoke the loudest, when his eyes,
his pale blue eyes, continued what he thought
he ought not say about that other day
when Elma rode into his bachelor life
and found the prospects on the Forked Deer
superior to Reelfoot. Then, she said,
he never lifted her across the sill,
but pointed, rather, with the open door
to where she would conceive the seven men
who are my living brothers now.

"They came
down old Ridge Road, he said, around the mill,
for showing her the house where he would die
and she, past caring, rock away the days
until she followed, warming near the fire
that he built first some fifty years before.
He told us, too, he took to Texas once
at twenty, just to scout the West, and stayed
for eighteen months in making up his mind
to settle back in that West Tennessee
he never justly left.

"Sometimes he told
about the horse of his the railroad killed
down at the trestle crossing; how he sued
the Central on a lawyer's bad advice
and lost in costs.

"He took another tone
to pass along his father's older tale
about the family trek from Carolina
west, over the mountains, down the trail
that later would supply the Southern troops
to die at Shiloh, up the Tennessee
to Linden; how they caught the western pike
that carried them in time to bottom ground
which put an end to family wanderings.
The long-row piece we raised our cotton on
was part of what they found.

"He spoke sometimes
of God Almighty, whose millennium
was close at hand.

"His short-lived warning illness
was relieved by death before we delved
in family dissolution. He had latched
the stock-pens shut a day or so before
and hung the harnesses on proper nails
his collared team had worn, as though to write
a quiet final order that would draw
a termination. Drug-store calendars
were what he stored upstairs in the strapped trunk
he opened once a year.

"At first we laid
him out much finer than he lived, to show
the friends who called, and then we laid him here.

"I know now he was a feeling man," he told,
"too wise to weigh my childish summer dreams
as more than seasonal, as more than thin
appraisals of some gentle fall. Extremes
of youth in which a natural son must deal
were all rejected projects of his own,
were necessary hopes, as sure to heal
as tunnels down to nowhere are foregone,
or pinned-down butterflies, and leaves, and rocks
from states, in time, are properly ignored;
as sure as hope is vain that granite blocks
will hold the past on which sons' lives are shored."

The son still standing heard his father's words
over the breezes and the calls of birds.

In time they left the marker's mound of grass
to find the way they came, that former trail
to carry them away, to let them pass
into a weekly world that would impale
their retrospective thoughts. The younger man
walked close behind in file until the row
of headstones stopped.

A quarter-century span
might pass before some son of his could know
the private tale, would understand the words
that fathers say above the sounds of birds.