

# Slowly Along The Riverbeds

by

Philip Wedge

For my family

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Group Portrait

Generations  
Car Keys  
Natural  
Fredericksburg, Virginia  
Deaf and Blind  
Public Recital  
Her Pregnancy  
Young Tiresias  
Home on Leave

### Years Abroad

Rue Ste. Catherine  
Bordeaux Sunday  
On a February Morning  
A Last Judgment  
In a Park near the Marmotan  
In Retrospect  
Thomas Hardy, O.M.  
Wagtail  
Lunch Break  
Night Scenes  
Christmas, 1979  
Head Banger  
Rue du Soleil

### Homecoming

Catechism  
Prayer  
Van Gogh's "Crows over a Cornfield"  
The Sandpits  
Dragonfly Drunk  
Memory Poem  
Lone Star

# I. GROUP PORTRAIT

## Generations

I think of a Sunday morning  
spread out on your great double-bed;  
Mother cooking scrambled eggs  
to jazz downstairs,  
sisters still asleep? I don't remember.  
We split comics and the sports-news  
before giving in to bacon smells,  
and a hospital-man in New York  
phones to say your father's dead.  
You sit on the edge of the bed,  
underwear aflap;  
your voice frogs in mid-speech.



## Car Keys

We shared the same childhood, almost the same,  
yet events you learned well I soon forgot:  
the night you hid the keys from father, when  
he was drunk and mother screaming him not  
to go . . . that night he broke his foot on some  
fresh-turned gravel; no one could believe the  
story . . . but somehow I forgot all that,  
except the gravel. Who could? You held it  
in your mind vividly and let it spill  
out just as then, fifteen years further on.  
I drink like Dad; you scream like Mom.  
Which one of us holds best our childhood?

So often I could shut those hard times out  
from the picketfenced backyard where we'd play  
with the dog while you stood in the kitchen  
watching our parents fighting over keys:  
keys to Dad's illness, keys to Mom's sadness.  
My key was tomorrow: tomorrow we'll  
grow up and leave; tomorrow be alright;  
tomorrow Dad won't need long walks at night.

## Natural

(For Bert)

Thin-legged thin,  
she stood before the family,  
chipmunk-checked,  
in a blue, hand-me-down dress,  
a four-year-old adoptable child  
with dying-rabbit twitch of the face  
and short-cropped hair  
blacker than her polished shoes,  
a white-stockinged mulatto.  
And the white woman said, "We'll have her;  
we'll love her."

Someone slammed the door on her finger  
when they got in the car  
to take her home.  
And at sixteen she still stood before the mirror,  
powdering over  
what at nineteen she reached back for,  
in that black, unlearnt past  
of a natural father.

## Fredericksburg, Virginia

It was the third time did it.  
Our sergeant bucked us up,  
shouting, "One more charge,  
boys, then we'll have 'em!"  
(Of course he didn't believe  
it anymore than we did.)  
My brother, Uriah, and I  
kissed once again for luck  
and crossed ourselves, winking  
at the blood on our blue coats,  
as the cannons blasted us  
from up on Marye's Heights.

We'd just passed the halfway tree,  
me and Uriah, side  
by side; we'd gone too far  
to be scared anymore. We  
were gonna make the stone wall.

I never could see how  
that voice could've been so clear.  
"Merritt, don't go there!"  
it said, right behind me.  
It was a big, deep voice,  
like your older brother  
would use when you're small  
and doin' somethin' wrong:  
"Merritt, don't go there!"  
And I had to look, but  
no one was there. The middle  
of the damn battlefield,  
and it must've been clear  
for twenty, fifty yards  
at least, just clouds of smoke  
from our lines by the ditch, and clumps  
of grass hiding in the mud;

"Merritt, don't go there!"  
And then it whistled right  
past my ear, this one,  
here, I've been deaf in

that one ever since.  
When I turned back toward  
their lines, there was Uriah's  
body a few steps ahead;  
if you could count steps  
out there, more like leaps, I guess.  
And his blood was everywhere;  
he was chest-up in the mud.  
I never found the head.



## **Deaf and Blind**

(For Jack and Ruth Clemo)

He spreads his palm; her fingers spell the words  
as readers recite poems he cannot hear.  
His lips move to the print upon a page  
remembered before sightlessness arrived,  
or spelled out braille points from more recent years.  
She knows he knows the poems that are read  
and taps beginnings, the lines that move her.  
He grips his leg as if in sudden fear  
that we are watching them communicate,  
but his mind goes on reciting when she  
stops; the words and meanings are for him, one.

## Public Recital

Tighter than teeth-hugging braces,  
her knees grip the cello sides,  
as hair hangs down concealing face,  
a long formal dress  
in folds around the wood.  
One wrong sound  
and fingers work more firmly,  
her will pressed into each precise note.

Delicacy listens, not seen,  
a parent left standing at the door.

Comes the applause,  
with head-nod of the judging master,  
and tears articulate the shyness,  
return to haunt  
her image of the bold artist.



## Her Pregnancy

When the mistake began to show  
her parents understood,  
but had sent her to her sister's,  
that seeming to them to be more proper.  
She chose not to keep the baby  
because she couldn't keep the father;  
yet through those months of waiting  
in her two rooms  
at the back of the house,  
she learned to knit  
baby's first set of clothes.  
Now she hides the loss in her obesity.  
Late into the night  
she lies motionless  
in the half-filled promise of a warm bed,  
thinking sometimes of her growing son,  
who must have learned long ago to tie his shoes.

## Young Tiresias

With slow stagger, unstealthily,  
he crosses the dance floor,  
a drunken bargeman poling in the reeds.  
Reaching the inner circle of shadowed figures,  
he drops down to his knees  
and lifts her dress lightly,  
putting his mouth to her crotch  
as if she were the sacrificial sheep.  
He knows no secrets, youth,  
no visionary figure, he,  
to aid the banished sailor;  
future lies for him  
somewhere in a bed not far away.

His act does not embarrass her,  
their ritual,  
but acting it so publicly.  
Stepping back,  
she helps him up  
to move again slowly,  
more steadily, and stagger less.  
His cherub face turned up to suck a breast,  
but still withheld by gentle hand,  
led away to bed, perhaps to sleep,  
sleep and peace.

## Home on Leave

(For Jim Carothers)

He sleeps in the upstairs screen-porch  
that looks out onto the dog's fenced-in  
backyard. His sister married, his parents  
at work all day, he sits in the silence  
of an empty house, or batters it with quiz  
shows, celebrity talk shows, I Love  
Lucy, everything but the news.

When he was twelve with nothing to do at home,  
he would throw a tennis ball hard against  
the back of the house, practicing flies, each thud  
leaving a gray moon-to-half-moon  
smudge on the white clapboard. Letting  
the uneven surface of the wall determine  
the bounce, he would fling the ball harder,  
faster, working up a hot-hour's sweat.

Sometimes he dreams he's playing ball  
again, snatching with his glove in one easy motion,  
throwing at the house as if to knock it down,  
but the ball he throws blows out the windows;  
through thick black smoke he sees his parents  
dragging his sister, running away from him,  
their heads on backwards, screaming at him  
(in sweat, he cannot wash the napalm from his hair).



## II. YEARS ABROAD

### Rue Ste. Catherine

Three living statues stand nightly outside the *Unipris* store: faces painted in blushing forms, exposed thighs that could support an army. One night the red head had called him a flower child because he was carrying a radio and wearing a jean jacket. They rarely spoke to him directly except for the youngest one. Whenever she thought he'd been thrown out by his girl, she'd stare at his crotch and ask if he wanted something: "*Tu veux quelque chose?*" "Not tonight," he'd say. It was a joke they had, sort of. When he'd return with steaming *crepes* in one hand, their circle would close, giving him their backs, and if they spoke at all it would be "flower child," spat upon the ground like spent tobacco.

## Bordeaux Sunday

The wing-whistle of pigeons  
cuts the silence before dawn  
as he watches her sleep.  
She huddles in a fisted curl,  
a child seeking warmth in the calm.  
There are no rumblings of  
early morning trucks on *cours Victor Hugo*,  
only the ancient clock-tower,  
remnant of Richard I's reign,  
striking eight bells to the quarter,  
never tolling which hour is passing,  
which hour gone.

## On a February Morning

Dirt brown wisps of her once black hair  
floated down when she shivered,  
polluted snowflakes.  
The flames had singed her eyebrows  
when the camping *gaz* canister exploded.

We must have been a funny-looking pair  
holding each other on the sidewalk,  
watching the firemen carry out our things,  
smoke still rising from half-eaten clothing.  
Maybe it was my bare feet,  
but I always remember the cold.

If she hadn't gone for eggs that morning,  
and worn that black, fire-resistant sweater,  
I would have been standing there alone,  
our hands untouched.



## A Last Judgment

Their high priests stare stone-fingered  
in endless waiting slumber,  
but the fingers only point a way,  
not the blank eyes.

Weathered worm-tracks creasing the faces,  
even the patron's tomb has not survived  
the crumbling master.

Suspended in the last fall  
by the unforgiving hand,  
the nameless wait also  
in tympanum relief,  
white-candle hopes  
that didn't keep the mould,  
the brown stone and the bodies blackened.



## **In a Park near the Marmotan**

We sat on a shaded bench,  
watching the children  
released from their strollers to wander  
the sun-splashed green of an early spring afternoon.  
We held hands but never said a word  
as the children made their first attempts at friendship,  
offering a ball to a possible playmate  
who let it drop  
in amazement.

We smiled with the cautious mother  
whose black-haired stumbling boy  
bounced up  
from a fall  
without even a cry.

That we could be so flexible.

Sleek quarter horses cutting the weak from the herd,  
we were the snatching child,  
who grabbed the toys,  
leading the slightly timid away,  
teasing,  
lending the stolen toy back  
before whipping it away again to be hoarded.  
And gape-mouthed, they followed,  
believing in friendship.

## In Retrospect

Once, during our year of separations together,  
you went out to dinner with another man  
who wanted to be more than just a friend,  
and out on a walk, trying to forget where  
you were, or what you might be up to  
(not to mention what he might be up to),  
I found myself in a street with no  
access out, in front of a restaurant  
queue and the two of you approaching.  
At first I tried to hide beside the wall;  
then, like scared game hemmed in by  
beaters in a wood, I bolted up the street.

As a boy of five I would cycle  
into town, proud to be on an errand  
alone, but end up in a wrong place,  
determined not to let others know I was lost.  
I was sure their looks were on my neck  
if I suddenly changed course illogically,  
the logic of the lost. At times I feel  
it still, embarrassment of turning back,  
but not to you, not to you.



**Thomas Hardy, O.M.**

“The cats found it at the rectory,”  
they say, grimly smiling;  
“he was a mean old man.”  
Dorchester natives claim it’s not  
his heart at all,  
out at Stinsford;  
some other beast lurks in Emma’s grave  
to gnaw his conscience to brittle wires of rust.

The loudest channel firing  
couldn’t wake her now,  
nor steel teeth cut a heart  
lost so many years ago,  
at Lyonesse.

## Wagtail

A pied wagtail moved haltingly  
across the terrace between tables  
and bread crumbs and you thought his toes  
were missing on one foot. He uncurled

them as if in answer to you and  
I wanted to tell you how his careful walk  
was your ballet step through life measured,  
balanced steps between two partners I  
wanted to

## Lunch Break

It happens that my plane will fly this way,  
passing over where we lie now . . . at 12:  
45, or maybe :46. I'll  
be thinking of you then, at *least*. Let's stay  
a while longer here - - Lunch break isn't  
finished yet, surely.

She smiles, watching  
the cows grazing in the ravine below.  
Tomorrow, once you've gone, perhaps I'll swim  
in the brook as we said we'd do sometime  
but never managed. And if the rumble  
of your plane passes over me here as  
you say it will and the water's not too  
noisy and inviting, maybe then I'll  
believe our lunches in the grass were worth  
the thunder in the clouds, the emptiness  
we felt round 12:45 or :46.



## Night Scenes

1

Out of the dark below our window  
the cold metal sound  
of train cars coupling rises.  
We've gotten used to it.  
She sleeps softly on my arm  
and doesn't think about it much;  
just the right touch  
and you could break her back.

Her father didn't mean it,  
I suppose,  
when he kicked out at her.

2

I caught her with my camera  
coming from the kitchen  
in her buttercup sweater and jeans.  
The moonlight fell across her back.

3

The doctor's number still waits  
in my desk,  
in case she got stuck while making love.  
(He would come and wrench  
her spine until she could walk again  
in orthopedic clogs.)

4

I don't hear that clomping sound tonight,  
echoing through the hall as she comes to me.

5

The train cars bang incessantly.

## Christmas, 1979

(Otter Valley)

On days like this he walks the old railway lines,  
looking for trains that never come,  
the smudged faces of little boys  
and their mums,  
peering through glass  
at a world of engineering wonder,  
a limitless sea-scaped horizon.

Nothing but the gravel beddings and iron bridges  
spanned the years.  
The boys lie at the Marne, Verdun.

A geologist, he can stand  
on the red sandstone fault,  
a cliff high above the broken-up weir,  
watching the water run down  
the green, concrete slabs.  
He knows every layer of flint hidden  
in the hills across the valley,  
but cannot comprehend the empty line below.

## Head Banger

Encased in black leather and the metal studs,  
he shakes his head in whipping fashion,  
flailing his own back,  
beating out the music thump.  
Ghosting the guitarist's solo riffs,  
his long hair draped over the instrument,  
he wails his imagined licks.  
But in the beer-washed corridor,  
straining to find that whumping beat again,  
he hovers between the plaster wall  
his head is most familiar with  
and the deeper, softer other walls  
that please him when they give.

## Rue du Soleil

Out of the dark, narrow street his five-note whistle floated toward shuttered windows. A misty rain dimmed what light there was and raised the stink of the street. He whistled again and after a minute a window opened above him. When she leand out over the railing the light from inside framed her: all smiles in a green robe. She dropped the keys toward the street, ordering him not to catch them, but he cupped his hands and drew the keys in like some brittle baseball. She watched him open the entrance door and then slammed her shutters. Misty darkness returned, a filter for the red glare from the window two buildings down.

## HI. Homecoming

### Catechism

*What did I tell them about Kansas?*

I told them all the lies:

that under every haystack, a farmer's daughter hides,

that Oz was really a place

just north of Wichita,

a small hill outside Newton, full of grace,

that the yellow brick road was a metaphor

for the breadbasket of the world,

symbolized in a field of wheat.

Of the waving wheat of football,

even, I told them.

I told them that the world's largest prairie dog

had outlasted gunslinging Dodge City in fame,

due to an overshadowing event caused

by the prairie dog's convenient juxtaposition

with a major, interstate connection,

and that the true Garden of Eden

could still be found at Lucas.

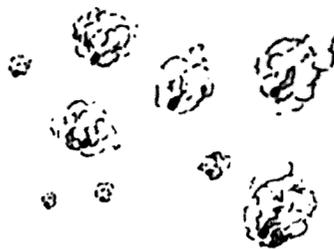
I told them all this,

yet still they wouldn't believe.



## Prayer

Teach me how to tell them  
of our flat country that is not so flat,  
of the infinite wind-hollows  
and corrugated patterns touched by hand;  
how a rainbow of colors  
is hidden in their one word, brown:  
living in the wheat and corn stubble,  
each species of grass  
and the dust in the air;  
how the prairie wind  
murmurs in the heart;  
how the cottonwood strides  
slowly along the riverbeds,  
releasing paratroop offspring  
who will deftly land  
on the heads  
of those who wait;  
how the older cottonwood stands  
still shelter bald eagles,  
here and there, in a remote past;  
how the coyote multiplies in the face of white man;  
how the Indian must become that coyote.  
Teach me all this,  
but especially teach me  
to bury what you have taught,  
and what, maybe, I have learned,  
that the prairie sod may thicken in memory  
and blossom and grow.



## Van Gogh's "Crows over a Cornfield"

(Nelson Art Gallery, 1963)

Not the polished, medieval armor,  
gape-mouthed, emptying in the entrance foyer,  
nor the moon rising in chinese tapestry  
over wooden bridge by high mountain,  
but the skeleton crows held in mid-flap  
above the cowering wheatfield;  
the scraped-on yellow whistling from the canvas  
just as at home it would in a world already  
over-familiar to my eyes till seen suspended  
thus, as if it awaited my stopped-breath  
seven-year-old wonder to bring  
it back to life . . . crows cries-crossing  
still, wheat ready for harvest and barely  
time enough to get it in to dry.

## The Sandpits

A red-red setter blunders forward  
through brush to the water's edge,  
my setter, but no more a part of me now  
than me a part of the city we have left.

A cold, Sunday morning  
and hunting season's come to boot,  
but my hands are deep within  
their rust-coated pockets  
and my untrained red, rust-red setter  
raises an instinctive paw,  
barks an alert to all hunter-waiting prey.

(Somewhere, my father will raise a gun-salute today  
at blue-winged teal, or slow-poke mallard,  
for he has switched religions now,  
and shotguns *are* better than booze.)

This is no wild, country place, here,  
just an ear-shot from the interstate;  
but it does have its solitude.  
The dredging crane leans in still silence,  
poised to stir again the clouds of sand below,  
but there's no use for sand-dredging now.

The setter splashes her way clumsily on;  
she's no longer my red, dust-rust, red setter,  
but a sleek coot-hunter - - a head-bobbing red otter.  
Thinking of quicksand patches too late,  
I try to call her back,  
but she is the thought given expression now,  
and she voices her own will.  
Grown tired of the useless chase  
(for no one said coots can't swim),  
she pants a dripping trail to my bank-perch,  
shaking,  
rolling like a horse in the dirt, the leaves.  
Her search, my search, has come to nothing,  
dust, dust, dust-red setter.

## Dragonfly Drunk

The bright blue sheen is gone;  
part of one of his wings is missing:  
the time he was nearly plucked for some  
young boy's dried insect collection:  
he pinned to slowly waste in dust  
and yellowed Scotch tape, for that boy's  
young son's rediscovery of him in  
the cigar boxes almost discarded with the move  
to Ames. The nymphal buzz of youth gone too,  
the ponds of waiting food. Lie back  
and remember the time (in college) he plucked  
the giant rhubarb for an umbrella and led  
his first astonished English girl home  
to bed and hover in aerobatic love.



## Memory Poem

At the first sign of a hard frost  
he picked each firm, green tomato  
from the thriving plants still ranged  
in the garden. Wrapping each one  
carefully in tissue paper saved  
for the occasion, or newspapers  
left from last week, he carried  
them in bundles down into the cellar  
to wait. He brings a few up  
to ripen each week in kitchen-warmth,  
reddening slowly, softening slightly.

## Lone Star

The drive home is a routine, same turns,  
same movement out of an expanding  
city, across the river, past fields where  
now the harvesters are still, the plows readying  
ground, the red-tailed hawks sitting on poles  
they will hunt from until just before spring.

The road we take has many turns, including  
the next-to-last, where once when you were sleeping  
your mother, who was caught napping too, clipped  
a pole and brought the car to rest against  
an old culvert of an abandoned road,  
the kind of event a five-month-old would  
rather sleep through than wake to dream about.

Why you know the corner, why this place registers  
in your mind, we don't know, but there it is:  
soybean fields plowed dark brown again, grass  
trailing up to hills where horses, cows and new-built  
neighbor houses wait, a place we come to  
in the dark, ready to turn at a country corner  
only different from the others by its out-of-place  
streetlamp shining over a road-crew's sandpile.

Even in the dark, you know this spot, not yet  
two and a half, travelling on a night  
much like the one two years ago, same season  
as well. We pass the forgotten curve, head  
towards the street-light before gliding to our  
tiny town, and your dreamy voice drifts up  
to us from the car-seat in back: "Almost Home!"  
reminding us to stay awake, to watch you grow  
out of this dark, toward the promise of some other light.



## Biographical Note

Philip Wedge grew up in Lawrence, Kansas and received a B. A. in English and French and an M. A. in Creative Writing from the University of Kansas. He also studied at the University of Bordeaux, France as an undergraduate. Phil is A.B.D. in English from the University of Exeter, England, where he held the Eden Philpotts Memorial Scholarship while doing dissertation work on Thomas Hardy and Architecture.

Presently an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Kansas, he is also Poetry Editor of *Cottonwood Magazine and Press*.