

THE PRESIDENT NEXT DOOR
poems, songs, and journalism

Philip Martin

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A different poem titled “Matty Alou” appeared in *The Giant Bee Journal* in 1993. “The Pry Bar” appears in *Scars: An Anthology* (Et Alia Press, 2015). A prose version of “Bad Brain” appeared in Volume 1 of the *Arkansas Literary Forum*, an online literary journal, in 1999. A draft of “September Morning, 2001” appeared in Volume 6: 2004, of the *Arkansas Literary Forum*. “Ray Chapman, Killed by Pitch August 16, 1920,” a finalist for the 2013 James Hearst Poetry Prize, appeared in the Spring 2013 issue of *North American Review*. A draft of “September Morning, 2001” appeared in Volume 6: 2004, of the *Arkansas Literary Forum*.

The songs “Brother Bob,” “Cassius Clay,” “Closest Friend” and “Gastonia” appear on the 2013 album *Gastonia* (Strangepup Records). The songs “Bill Clinton,” “Euclid Avenue,” “Stand My Ground,” “Thomas Chatterton” and “Urban Shocker” appear on the 2014 album *Euclid Avenue* (Strangepup Records).

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have worked in newspapers—as a reporter, editor, columnist and critic—my entire adult life.

I have also written—and sometimes performed—songs since I was 12 or 13 years old. I read somewhere that Lou Reed, that student of Delmore Schwartz, had, before he became famous, published some of his song lyrics as poetry in little magazines. That delighted me, and gave me ideas.

I tried to write poetry when I was young, but gave it up when I found it too hard to approach my models. I only began trying to write more than doggerel about a decade ago, when I was encouraged by two great writers—two great men. Donald Harrington told me I should suspend my modesty when I set out to write, that I should shout over all those voices I thought sweeter and stronger than my own. He thought it was worth me trying, and without his confidence I doubt I would have.

Miller Williams worked with me on specific poems, talked to me about theory, about lying my way to the truth and the sacredness of necessary honesty. He also published my books of essays, and became more like family than mentor to me.

I wish those men were alive to hold this volume in their hands.

It is a collection of song lyrics and poems, more than a few of which were inspired by my work for newspapers. I should hope there is truth in all of them, though I don't know if they would withstand a thorough fact-checking.

I also have some people I must thank, chief among them the generous poet Johnny Wink, who read—and often improved—these poems. Johnny gave me copious feedback and led me to slaughter a few pernicious darlings. I also want to express my appreciation to several editors who shaped me as journalist and writer—Griffin Smith, Michael Lacey, Stan Tiner, Stephen Buel, Jack Schnedler and Suzy Smith.

And Erin Wood, my editor at Et Alia Press, was a kind, observant and patient partner in the process of producing this book.

Finally, I wish to tell my wife, closest friend, most critical reader and first-last-best editor Karen Martin that I love her and our life together. She's the best.

**TALIESIN DESTROYED BY FIRE:
EDWIN CHENEY SPEAKS TO FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT IN A
CLUB CAR, TRAVELING TO CLAIM THE BODIES**

What is it, Frank, but
a numb muscle in my chest?
I want to make it into
a pain,
aciculate and memorable.
Yet it is simply
and undeniably
a dull organ,
my heart.

You tell me, Frank,
my wife is dead.
My children too.
It has devastated you.
I see.

I do not blame you
for loving her or her
for loving you or you
for hiring or allowing to be hired
that madman cook
from the islands.

None of that could be helped.
Pascal says,
“Love has reasons that reason cannot know.”
Right?

I was privileged to be your client.
You are a genius
and I understand
that those whom the gods so favor
should not be bound
by the petty circumscription of man's society
or shamed by the tuneless grief
of an electrical engineer.

EUCLID AVENUE

(a ballad in A minor)

On the train from Chicago to Wisconsin,
Edwin Cheney said to Frank Lloyd Wright:
Maestro, my heart is a numb muscle,
a dull pump bumping blackly in the night.
They tell me death is but an illusion,
and we are made of naught but bone and spit.
I know this world's a lousy contract,
I haven't got the wherewithal to quit.
So I'll accompany you to Taliesin
to poke through the cooled ruins of my life.
There I'll collect the corpses of my children
and leave you with the body of my wife.

"To live outside the law, you must be honest."
I have heard these words attributed to you.
You lit out on your spiritual Hegira
and abandoned me to Euclid Avenue.

I know, Frank, that you are a great artist,
due all the things your genius can command
So I will stand beside you on the platform
and before I leave, I'll smile and shake your hand
For laws and rules are made for dull men,
not for the brave and spiritually austere.
I know I was privileged just to be your client;
I've paid your fee, now I'll disappear.
For laws and rules are made for dull men,
not for the brave and spiritually austere.
One can't expect the angels to attend to
the tuneless grief of some bald engineer.

HERMANN KAFKA AT THE GRAVESIDE OF HIS SON

I am the respectable villain;
conventional and much concerned
with the illusion of security
my place and family provide me.

You are the dead, ingracious hero
wild and reproachful even as the dirt
(I've paid for) rattles on your coffin,
and immortality swallows you.

I was the schocet's son; I was poor.
I had no time for pimps or poetry
yet I allowed you your leisure and
I was not so coarse not to take pride
in the glories that accrued to you.
You thought me too dull to recognize
the steepled ruins of Palestine or
the pain inflicted by breath and bowel.

I look on this Dora, this banshee,
who calls her suffering evidence
of a love too great for men like me
to parse. On me your fineness wasted,
like a silk robe on an Iroquois.

I stand here in black wool and take it;
Pocket jangling coins, waiting for night
to overtake all philosophy
and deliver us to nothingness.
This is my prayer; common and low,
unmumbled, unscreamed, but felt
pith deep in my bourgeois belly:
I'll never mourn for you, my son.
I know that you're the lucky one.

FOR A RABBIT

Terrier sisters caught the scent;
flushed the rabbit from the deck.
In calm horror I watched as he went
across the yard and doubled back—
crazy scuttled and hell-bent—
our girls pursuing, tan and black.
The chase—their feral sacrament.

He would, I thought (hoped) get away
as wild critters often will.
But on this green dappled day
Paris and Dublin scored a kill.

Who, in plastic, wrapped him up
and dropped him in the garbage can?
Who spoke kind words to bereft pets,
who searched his face for their command?

Who gives the animals their names
and manufactures hate and fear?
The fellow who sits at this desk
and scratches at a proffered ear.

I love them beyond reasoning
though I'll never understand
the mind that murderously compels
the little dogs beneath my hands.

THE WITNESSES

Before the snap, I felt the air, I swear,
go sour, and the hair rise on my neck.
Atoms, or molecules, whatever,
rowing into line. I checked the clock
on the microwave. The time is branded
on my brain—at three thirty three pee em
the transformer blew. I went outside.

The sky was wide, empty, and bluer than
the rime-locked heart of an ancient iceberg.

“Is your power out too?” my neighbor asked.
“It is,” I said, “second time this week.
With no weather either; seem strange to you?”
We stood together for a moment, then
we heard the wail and whoop; the sirens sing
and tasted blood and copper in our mouths —
Remembering the scaffolding.

For two weeks or maybe three, we’d seen
them working on the house at Martin Street
and H. They had but got it in the dry
a day or two before; we were impressed
with their industry. They worked together
with uncommon grace and we gathered from
their calm clear faces a joy in making
a thing that would perhaps outlive us all.

We walked toward the construction site
with dread pooling viscous in our bowels.
“Mexicans,” she whispered from her porch.
“Their ladder hit the power line. Boom.
Two dead, the other fled in a panic.
I saw the bodies smoking in the street.
They hit a power line. I called the cops.”
Just then the van from Channel Four pulled up.

In my life there have been enough bodies,
inert and waxen, their souls scooped out
for me to think there's some electricity
that hums through us a while. And is us.
Or at least is more us than bones and meat
and prayers mumbled in shock and disbelief
over scorched corpses in our quiet street.

If that is so we'll be released one day
though to what mystery I cannot say
and if it's not, then what we build must stand
as circumstantial evidence of man.

FOR MAYA ANGELOU

We were the people, they the whitefolk.
Their world verged on ours without touching.
I looked on them as wraiths parading,
unclutchable and unreal spirits
gliding pretty with their eerie ways.

Born without grandeur, I was misused
and the devastating clarity
of my voice so thrilled and frightened
I was struck dumb in Arkansas
in communion with the ancient ghosts

who walked through books.

Your life comes at you hard—unbidden
and rampant. And you look up and see
a raw sun or a cold moon climbing
and know the turning, sliding Earth
will one day fall away, delivering

us to the peace of nothingness

or to the bliss in everything.

And so this caged bird dared to sing.

GODFATHER

(a blues for Miller Williams)

Vito Corleone was in the hospital
on the first night of 2015.
While my phone was buzzing in the other room,
I focused my attention on the screen.

I watched until they blew up Apollonia
then I took a break and I saw the missed call.
My hands were shaking as I punched the number out
then the world cracked open bitter and banal.

There are times you want to burn down hospitals
and there are times you want to curse at nuns.
These days these times come at briefer intervals:
I hate the gods of cancer, rape, and guns.

Michael Corleone had been exiled to Sicily
when the news came down from Fayetteville.
I sat down at the table and I tried to write
But I ended up taking a sleeping pill.

There are times you want to wreck the universe,
rip out the cosmic ganglia and dreck.
Rage, rage against the doctors and philosophers,
and wear the viscera around your neck.

Godfather, you were such a gentle soul
calm and temperate, courtly as a squire.
I know there'll come a time when I regain control
I know there'll come a time when I expire.

But I've got no pretty words to make it seem all right
I've no breath to waste on sweet clichés.
I know they'll never be another New Year's night
When I don't fondly think upon your ways.

THE IDIOT HUSBAND TRIES TO TALK HIS WAY OUT OF IT

Miller Williams told me John Ciardi told him
sometimes you have to lie your way to the truth.

That's good to know.
And even better
to remember,
at times like these,
sweetheart.

BLUES FOR DAEDALUS

(a country shuffle in G)

Minos held you as a prize
for your ingenuity.
But noble minds will not be tamed;
you longed to be free.
The king had covered all the ports,
he put out an APB.
Someone'd collect a large reward
if he caught you trying to flee.

You looked up into the skies
and devised your crazy scheme.
The more it rolled around your brain,
the more plausible it seemed.
So you photographed the birds
and microscoped a feather.
You worked late nights, built prototypes,
kept one eye on the weather.

You tricked yourself into believing
and found somehow you could.
You never knew how far you flew
but you knew it felt damn good.
You told your kid Icarus,
you had it figured out.
“Crashin’ ain’t inevitable
if you clear your mind of doubt.
We can ride on battered air,
it’s tricky—but achievable.”
Then you showed the boy the wings.
He said, “That’s cool, Da. Unbelievable.”

You sensed he might be overeager,
but you hoped Ick’d be all right.
You regretted there was no time
for a final shakedown flight.
You warned him not to fly too high
not to get above his raisin’
but sons are born to disappoint.
Still, at first it was amazin’.
He did a little loop de loop,
he was poetry in motion,

he climbed into a power stall
—and fell into the ocean.

Heartwrecked you were, but you pushed on
across the blazing sea
to the unblemished beaches
of the isle of Sicily.
And there you built a temple,
walls trued up good and straight,
an Apollonian structure
born of mourning and regret.
You hung your wings there on the wall,
as an offering to the gods,
who'd carried you across the sea
against enormous odds.

But you would never fly again.
You couldn't—not with a heart of lead.
You took some comfort in your work
but some nights you'd lie in bed
and stare through the ceiling
to the silver-peppered sky
from which your son was torn
and try to reason why
he was such a stubborn boy.
You'd wonder if he felt inside
a final jolt of panic or of joy—
and could you call it suicide?

For Ick was Dionysian,
like Rimbaud and Mojo Jim,
like P.B. Shelley and V. Woolf—
was there something wrong with him?
Some imbalance in the brain?
Too much chaos in the heart?
No, it was just an accident.
The kid was brilliant—just not smart.
He had to push the envelope,
he simply had to improvise.
He wasn't strong on fundamentals,
he was gifted, but unwise.

You have always been a careful man.
“Boring” is the term you've heard.

You measured twice for every cut,
and vetted every word
you put down on paper
for somebody else to see.
Maybe you've felt envy for the ones
to whom things come so easily?

Some flash across the firmament
like comets in the sky.
Others worry the least increment;
they draft and test and try
and fail and fail and fail again.
Maybe you lacked the style of Icarus,
but you showed him how to fly.

Maybe it's only wishfulness,
to imagine artists who
don't crack up as a pretty corpse
but work when there is work to do
and attend to dull and picky things
(such as the wax that fixes wings).