

## LOUIS GALLO



© 2009 *Segue* online literary journal  
ISSN 1939-263X

All rights reserved. This publication may be freely distributed only in its entirety and without modification, and only for private use. It may not be sold for profit. Excerpts may only be reproduced and distributed with permission from the copyright owners, except for classroom use or in the case of brief quotations used for book reviews and interviews. The creative works published in *Segue* do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of its staff or of Miami University.

Issue 8 Fall 2009

Editor: Eric Melbye  
Managing Editor: Michelle Lawrence

*Segue* is published once a year in August. We accept submissions of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between January 1 and April 30 (closed May through December), and writing about writing year-round via email. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

Segue  
[www.mid.muohio.edu/segue](http://www.mid.muohio.edu/segue)

Miami University Middletown  
[www.mid.muohio.edu](http://www.mid.muohio.edu)

# CONTENTS

---

Old Man's Cane	4
After the Poetry Reading	6
Cyrus McCormick	8
Tom	10
Author Notes	11

## Old Man's Cane

Before my back went out  
 I'd jog the track at the rec center  
 with all the kids after school,  
 hoping their almost holy and excess energy  
 would anoint me some—  
 and it did.  
 Then I lay paralyzed for a week  
 and it took nearly three months  
 to even think of walking much less jogging.  
 At one point, in the delirium that is pain,  
 I think I wound up crawling.  
 Now that I have returned to the track,  
 but only to walk, or more like waddle,  
 to strengthen my fragile chakras,  
 I avoid the youngsters altogether  
 and arrive at codger time  
 when the maimed and ruined  
 come for their own reasons,  
 some equipped with oxygen machines,  
 others wearing full body plastic braces...  
 bad lungs, crumbling knees and hips,  
 twisted necks, arthritis, the manifold degradations.  
 Yesterday I notice an ancient, wizened man  
 hobbling along with a lacquered wooden cane,  
 an ornate green serpent coiled around  
 its shaft.  
 We happened to leave at the same time  
 and, gathering our coats from the rack,  
 I couldn't resist, "Wow, what a nice cane."  
 He looked into my eyes, at first bewildered  
 as if trying to decipher each word;  
 then the smile, blossoming like a sunrise,  
 his entire frail body proud.  
 "Yep, took a lot of hard work," he said  
 softly, his voice a feather.  
 And I: "You *made* that? It's beautiful."  
 "Yep," he said, "took forever,  
 especially the damn snake."  
 "Great job," I said, heading for the stairwell.

I took each step slowly, with care.  
I can make no more false moves.  
Such knowledge is also a serpent.

## After the Poetry Reading

Fidgeting in my cushioned chair, I think of Whitman  
 at the astronomy lecture. But when the poet offhands  
 that cancer of the throat has changed his voice,  
 my ears bristle, and the horror of it forces me  
 to listen intently for each rasp of catarrh, rattle, gasp—  
 and suddenly I crave an even greater relief.  
 Most of us hang in for the final *thank yous*,  
*it was a pleasure, splendid, hope all goes well*  
 (though no one mentions cancer);  
 some pick at refreshments—ossified cauliflower,  
 mushy grapes, acidic punch, old burned java.  
 I slip out of a back door, into the hallway,  
 and rush for the exit into a breezy, delightful night.  
 My car is parked behind the next building  
 and I stroll a walkway between orange lights,  
 resist the urge to pull out a cigarette.  
 I cross the street, veer left and note  
 that one of the side doors to the building  
 is propped open. A group of students  
 are inside playing instruments, a guitar, drums,  
 flute, keyboard, saxophone. They sound intense  
 but muted, a kind of mellow jazz maybe,  
 and it's nice to hear, though at the moment  
 I'd prefer silence. Then I notice her.  
 A young girl, another student probably,  
 in leggings and leotard, her hair long and flowing,  
 dancing under the full moon, alone, miming  
 the music. Or does she follow her own inner music?  
 I'm so delighted and startled by the sight  
 I freeze and just gaze at her.  
 She pays no attention to me whatever,  
 doesn't have to, doesn't want to, may not even  
 notice me, staring. She seems enraptured,  
 joyous, her body a liquid congealing in shadows,  
 leaping, twirling, bowing over, contorting  
 in easy grace. She deliciously flows

and becomes the moment, is the moment,  
nothing else pertinent. Silent as she moves,  
blessed with youth, health...  
what else can you call it but joy?  
And prayer, she was prayer, for us all.

# Cyrus McCormick

Our twelve-year-old trembles before us,  
 her parents and now inquisitors, stiff on the sofa,  
 to practice delivery of an oral report  
 on Cyrus McCormick for Social Studies.  
 She has labored all week on the note cards,  
 research, the writing itself, memorizing.  
 She has wept, cursed God, gone limp  
 with frustration. Right now she looks meek  
 and nervous, and she gulps as her mother  
 sets the timer. Two minutes, the Procrustean Bed  
 for this particular, severe, dour teacher:  
 “No more, no less...so pace yourselves.”  
 She wants to laugh but her lips quiver.  
 I convey a casual seriousness so she won't think  
 the world will explode if she messes up.  
 Her eyes dart back and forth, focus on me  
 for a moment, then my wife, then at some safe point  
 in the room with no eyes. “Did you know,”  
 she begins, “that one person could change the world?  
 Well, Cyrus McCormick changed the world  
 when he invented the Mechanical Reaper.  
 He took up his father's original machine  
 and improved upon it. In 1851 Cyrus McCormick  
 introduced his Reaper to Europe—wait...”  
 She forgets something and is embarrassed.  
 I noticed subtle gasps as she spoke and that she  
 swallowed hard every third or so word.  
 Suddenly I want that other Reaper to re-strike  
 Cyrus McCormick dead, a second time,  
 for the misery he was causing my child  
 and all those before and after.  
*What's the point of this assignment?*  
 “Did you know,” she begins again, “that one person  
 could change the world? Well, Cyrus McCormick  
 changed the world when he invented the Mechanical Reaper.  
 He took up his father's original machine  
 and improved upon it. It could cut grain  
 when pulled by horses in a field. The grain  
 was then bundled and stored in barns...”

We listen to her repeat the story about six times  
before everything goes smoothly enough, within  
the two-minute scaffolding, and she can at last  
breathe easy and run off to horse around  
with her little sister. All the hours, the nights...  
And yet I know, given the nature of mind,  
that my daughter will remember him  
until the end of her days, and every so often  
he will spring forth, and the details, though blurred,  
will sift again like grain in a silo  
and reconstitute as a field of wheat,  
each stalk a single fact, a date, an event.  
*What is the point of this assignment?*  
When have we ever reaped as we sow?

# Tom

I knew this guy in Missouri,  
 a scrawny, ghostly man with fierce eyes,  
 who lived in a room at the Ben Bolt Hotel.  
 We admired him because he was a published writer  
 and had been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.  
 He wouldn't have anything to do  
 with English Department types at the university.  
 You'd find him sitting in the hotel bar,  
 staring at air, nursing his whiskey and soda.  
 He was a drunk all right, but we read  
 his poetry, and it was pretty damned good.  
 A few books came out from minor presses,  
 poems and stories in all the little mags.  
 I finally moved away from that state  
 into the blurred future.  
 Entire decades burned at the stake.  
 Didn't think too much about Tom  
 until one day I heard he had died at 54  
 of cancer, heart attacks, strokes, everything,  
 he had died of everything.  
 By this point no one remembered his name,  
 the publications had ceased years before  
 and, needless to say, no one read his stuff,  
 what he lived for, his passion, along with the booze.  
 He *was* damned good too. Better than  
 lots of the contemporaries they jam into  
 The Norton Anthology. Can we meekly  
 assume that he had no luck and wipe our hands?  
 Must we howl out the windows, It's Not Fair?  
 Can we bear the staggering implications?  
 One afternoon, on a lark, I typed his name into Google  
 and found nothing at all, no mention of the man,  
 his stories, poems and that almost Pulitzered novel.  
 Finally, some fifty or so entries down,  
 his last name, a university site, his university.  
 They named a writing prize after him.

## Author Notes

---

*Louis Gallo is a professor of English at Radford University in Virginia. He was born and raised in New Orleans. Only within the last eight months has he ventured into Internet publishing, having published previously in print journals such as Glimmer Train, Texas Review, The Southern Quarterly (forthcoming), Missouri Review, Baltimore Review, American Literary Review, Tampa Review (forthcoming), The Ledge (Pushcart nominee), The Journal (Ohio State), Portland Review, Hiram Poetry Review, Rattle, The MacGuffin, New Orleans Review, The MacGuffin, and many others. His latest Internet publications can be found at the following sites: Paradigm, Raving Dove, Clapboard House, Mused (forthcoming), Bartleby-Snopce, Oregon Literary Review, Poetry Midwest and others. He has an Amazon blog, and a number of his short stories can be found by going to "Louis Gallo Amazon Shorts." He has a MySpace and Facebook page as well. He has a poetry chapbook accepted for publication called The Truth Changes (Finishing Line Press).*

### About the Work

All of my writing is autobiographical, fiction and poetry. I believe in writing about what one knows, and what do I know more about than what happens in my life each day? The danger here is a lapse into the pedestrian. But I also believe in Kierkegaard's notion of "the sublime in the pedestrian," which is, the way I see it, also fairly Taoistic and Buddhistic (though Kierkegaard would turn over in his grave to hear it). This notion informs the work of one of my favorite novelists, the late Walker Percy, who borrowed the idea straight from Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel.

OK, so I intently observe whatever happens at every moment, and all material becomes potentia for writing. Next is where craft and editing emerge. What is given in life must be transformed in writing into something interesting, universal and hopefully engaging and revelatory. This is what I hope I achieve in my work. The poem "Tom," for example, is about a real guy I once knew in Columbia, Missouri, and it's all true except maybe for the writing prize named after him—that is my own invention, though it may have really happened over there. "Cyrus McCormick" stems from an ordeal my daughter had when she was about twelve years old, trying to memorize a class presentation on the subject of Cyrus (yawn). What impressed me most was the agony of her practice, in front of me and my wife, reciting her spiel over and over until she got it right. She actually cried, and suddenly I saw both the teacher and Cyrus as mythic figures of evil, intent to torture my child. Hence, the poem. "Old Man's Cane," another true story; in this one just about everything written actually happened. What I recall most is the pride in the old man's feeble voice when he announced that he had made the cane himself. He stressed how long it took. A small moment, to be sure, but an amazing one, at least to me. "After the Poetry Reading" is yet another true story that happened only about a year or so ago. Our university sponsored a poetry reading by a fairly famous poet and editor, who started things off by telling us about his bout with throat cancer. That word, "cancer," just about reversed reality for me, as he read on, and I felt I must get out of the auditorium (which brought to mind Whitman's escape from the astronomer for entirely different reasons). As fate would have it, on my way back to the car, I happened to see this

beautiful young woman, presumably one of our students, dancing all alone on the lawn, a graceful, classical/jazz ballet number. In the background some other students were playing mellow rock music. The moon beamed down on us all. It was a moment of convergence, and, for me, redemption. The old poet with throat cancer versus the beautiful young dancer—somehow they connected, and she changed everything, life was good again, not replete with paranoia, rage, depression. This connection may not work for others, but I hope it does for some who read the poem.

Now, all that being said, I am also extremely interested in dreams, omens, visions, the mystical. Many of my poems arise directly from dreams, as do many sequences in my short stories. These tend to be surreal and magical realist expeditions, though I regard dream and vision material as equally “real” as “reality,” and maybe more so. I keep dream notebooks, of course, and have studied dreams mostly via Jung, Freud and Eliade (shamanic visions), but I pay attention to the mystics of all religions as well. If you seek omens, just pay attention, be mindful, for they are everywhere, all around you, every single day and night. Our objective-empirical culture has shortchanged us on this what I call “typhonic” reality by opting for logic, rationality and syllogism. But as Freud said, “consciousness is the tip of the iceberg.” And where do logic and rationality reside but in consciousness? The unconscious is far more interesting to me, as is revelation and visionary awareness.