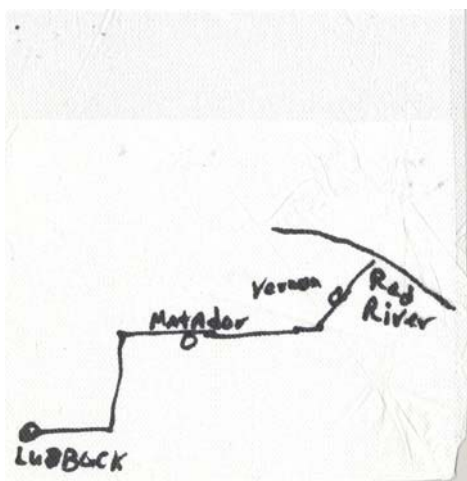


Live White Male

and other poems



Robert Murray Davis

Texture Press
2006

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**LIVE WHITE MALE:
LOVE (AND OTHER) POEMS**

R. M. DAVIS

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Two Voices

After years of reading poetry for courses and exams, all the way through the Ph.D., teaching it as seldom as possible, and writing it not at all, I was driving from Lubbock, Texas, to Oklahoma when a rhythm came into my mind. At the next town, I pulled over and jotted some notes on a napkin and later published my first poem in thirty years.

The poem itself was full of literary allusions, but the voice and tone came from nothing and nowhere I could recognize from my schooling. Later, when I turned back to informal prose after an even longer hiatus and in a quite different style, I realized that both voices came less from academic training than from real voices echoing in my head—my father's and my maternal grandfather's.

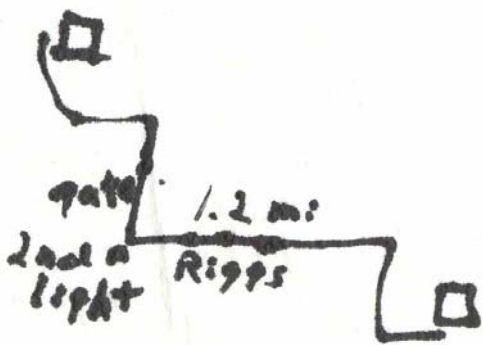
Though the two got on very well indeed, they represented for me a series of oppositions:

Grandpa	Dad
Performing	Doing
Rhetoric	Emotion
Pleasure	Effort
Expansion	Compression
Yes	No
Play	Work
Moving	Sticking
Touching	Holding
Mark Twain	Gary Cooper
King	Duke
Cut	Crush
Lecturing	Silence

The poems that went into *Outside the Lines* surprised a good many people, including me, because of their restraint, and Dad would have been astonished and perhaps not altogether pleased to hear—he never did—that he had influenced their style. He would have been even more astonished to hear that the style was not that far from the academic prose I had been writing for three decades. But there were similarities.

That series of poems and some non-literary experiences freed me to use a very different kind of voice not only in some memoirs that sound like tall tales, though they aren't, exactly, but in a series of prose poems that owe as much to Grandpa as they do to Charlie Parker and what John Updike called, in parody, "spontaneous bop prosody."

So my rhythms are based as much as possible on oral traditions. I'm more interested in the way the lines fall from the tongue than the way they look on the page. "Key to the Highway" is about the country where Dad and I were born; it's in his voice.



THE CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON: AN ELEGY

Sitting alone and virgin in the dark,
I watched fin-crust-ed wet-suit
fail to obscure humanity within.

Pulled from murky depths
to light and bondage,
he struck and struggled.

Sequels gave him pathos.
Swimming beneath the girl,
he mirrored her crawl in backstroke,
mutely signed "Notice me! I am!
In this my element we could unite."

(Words he could not say I heard.)

A bull-prod taught him better.
His own groin smooth and useless,
he shrank from phallic rods
of those with power and knowledge.

Altered to breathe on land and caged,
he broke free to sink,
drowned by familiar darkness.

Lights up
left me in the world I had to walk.

LIVE WHITE MALE

Might as well face it:
Mirror's report is bleak.

Beard betrays gender,
cancels high cheekbones.
Gray brings no glory.

What hair is left is hopeless,
curling too much or little.

The tan is suspect on another scale.

Inside is worse:
cells hooked once to righteousness
cross-wired to form and fun.

No way to emigrate.
Of me I have to sing when no one will.

STUMP

The uncle I was named for lost an arm
before I ever knew him,
tied his own shoes, shifted cross-hand
a four-speed, double-axle truck,
and, without straining, lifted sacks of feed.

I never asked him if the elbow itched
or if his absent-minded body sent
an impulse to the void.

It must have done.

My tissues long have healed.

The heart, though nothing's at the other end,
twitches a message to a wall of scar.

PAPER-TRAINED

A dog put out beside the road
may starve or die of loneliness
without a door to fetch the paper to.
The strong or wary, though not kin
to wolf or coyote,
can dredge a trick from racial memory,
seem beast of prey to law-leashed dogs,
and den alone.

A lover's warned: I'm not domesticated.
But all those years I mastered all the tricks,
filled all that paper up and mowed the lawn
and scurried out to fetch the morning news
and smell the world of those who run the dark.

No plot surrounds me or supports me now.
I get my paper from a little cage.
I would not change it, passing in the night
the houses snug around the dogs and men
and circling round before I sleep alone.

But warmth I do not want I sometimes need
and wonder, can the free and feral dog
miss dropping the paper in its owner's hand?

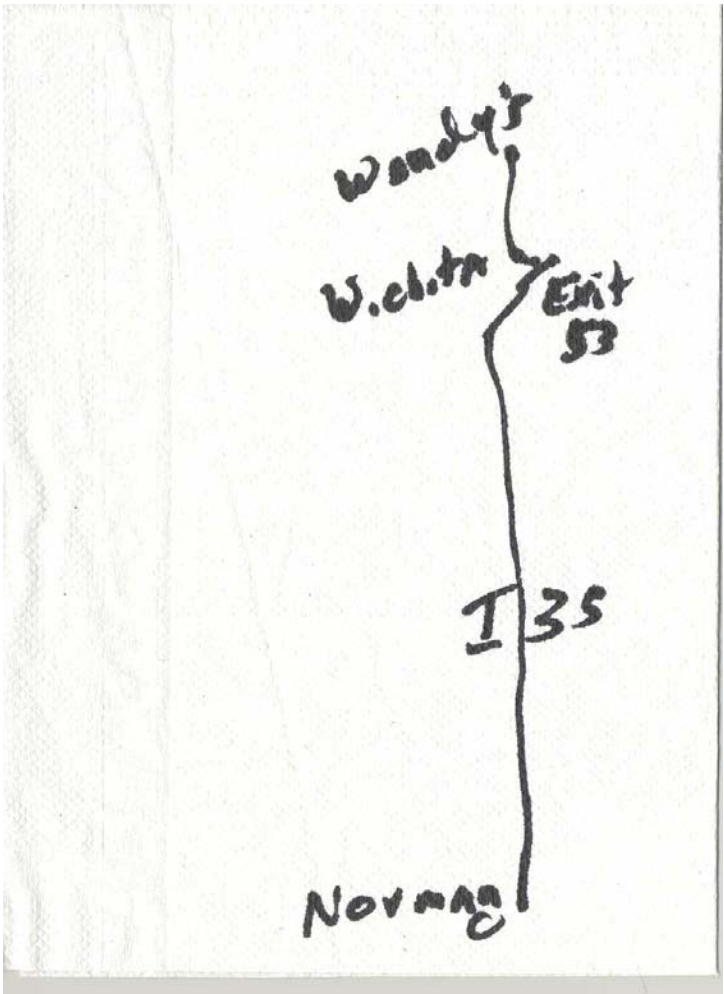
CLEARING THE CELLS

In seven years a body's cells renew,
the person in a sense reborn, they said,
and as with so much else the forties taught,
I do not disbelieve.

But when to start the count:
last coition, touch of any kind,
end of hope,
decree in hand?

And how to measure change?
First, cells reach backward for the pleasure lost,
then, as they slough, feeling
abstracts itself.
Climax is fact
less felt than filed.
Vital signs of hate and love go flat
as cells of that one body die.

The figure will not stand.
Rock clogs the cave-mouth
though the cells renew.
Resurrection morn is every day.



WICHITA WENDY'S SATORI

"It ain't so much the kin; it's the wont to."

Oklahoma jock credo

Loose after strain I had prepared it for
and just now tested,
pain forgotten--
body at ease:
better than ever
on the watch.

Behind, two decades in a heat I'd lost
to someone quicker on the turns
who hit a finish line I hadn't seen.
Ahead, a course whose length I didn't know,
desire to start suspended.

Suddenly laughter.
A bright-eyed bevy:
still-clean toddler;
women, out of my age group, pert and fresh;
and--none of the above.

Charm old enough
not to know better;
watching me watching with an even gaze.

AN EX-WIFE'S BIRTHDAY

To cease to be one flesh is not that hard:
not with a slash, but touch by touch denied
the pattern is unlimned.

The household goods and all the daily life
can be apportioned or dispersed with ease,
almost relief,
burdens that one no longer need assume.

Escaping custody,
the children find their lives and disappear.

Finally,
no matter what we might have been,
we always choose ourselves.

Though you were once in half of all my days
and this and every day makes that grow less,
you cannot be denied in what remains.

FEMME FATALE

Few would think you fatal.
Almost primly dressed,
you soften edges with a Southern voice.
Confidante, mentor, mother seem your roles.

I have seen your fire.
Greying and prey to gravity,
you shine.

LONG DISTANCE LOVE

There is no news, and there is never much:
one slept, one didn't, what s/he did instead;
the mail was this or that; the weather such
and such; what separate, scattered children said;

what's on tv, or will be; who was here
for lunch or talk; films showing or to come;
consoling word that children of a peer
are faring somewhat worse and staying home;

the office gossip; scandals of both states;
the paper shuffled, work there is to do
before one even thinks of setting dates
to come together. Nothing really new.

Phone lines, like final couplets, bear the strain
of longing's burden they cannot sustain.

OCTOBER SONG

*"...it's a long, long while from May to
December"*

The sun is cooler and the light is pale,
the shadows more and early.
The clouds, not Rubens bulges of the spring,
swirl and arrow out in feathers,
splitting in brushstrokes thick enough
to call attention to the medium.

An odd October.
Plenty of birds and butterflies remain.
The prairie dog,
twirling his tail and rocking towards his hole,
revels in green and seeded grass.
Cattle are bunched and fat.

There's water in the South Pease five days running;
ducks swim through barbed wire in the playa lakes.

The aquifer is safe another year.

Somewhere else is catching heavy shit
if nature balances.
Perhaps an icecap melts or desert starts
to shift the moisture here,
delight the ranchers into buying stock
in spite of what they know,
wash out, the only time in twenty years,
a Motley County bridge.

Emptying out,
letting the muscles near my eyebrows slack,
I cannot worry.

The full moon almost fills my side-mount mirror,
fixed for a glowing moment.

The gas tank holds enough.
My welcome's sure as it will ever be.
I'll beat the moon to Lubbock and lie down.

AN AARP MEMBER CHECKS INTO A MOTEL

"You drive like old people fuck!"
(Major teenage insult of 1950)

Ignorant of how any bodies fucked,
most of us read the vehicle as wheeled,
Nash or DeSoto maybe.
Eights, like everyone, were straight,
old-people movers, chugging back and forth
to church and work,
wide at the turns and grinding through the gears.

Carless, we refused designs
too blocky for imaginations fueled
by streamlined Jags and Petty girls
without dings or navels
we knew we'd never steer.

Steady at fifty-five,
we move on wheels designed
by those we beat in movies,
check mileage scorned
when gas was priced our age,
hoping to thin the mixture in our blood.

The secret now is starting,
holding to limits of reflex and wit,
anticipating others' moves,
changing the pace
to take advantage of an opening.

Getting there's half the fun.
More when you know you'll get there

with means and speed you choose.

Now, with a card that certifies me old
and checks me in at net less ten percent,
it's over the river and through the woods
to...somebody's grandma. What big...eyes...

FOR AN EX-LOVER'S EX-HUSBAND

Three diptychs in the Victorian style

I. Pre-Raphaelite

Sooty and hoofed, you carry different horns
than those to come.
Spurning the figure trussed by fraying bonds,
you drool for newer prey.

Shining and smooth, armored against flaw,
his shoulders broad enough to spread the wings
that stir the form revirginized by hope,
he cuts the martyr's bonds to raise a nymph.

II. Dorian and the Twilight of a Faun

Safe in the attic,
magnet for consequence and guilt
the idyll skirts,
your face grows dim.

No armor now but wearing satyr's horns,
he sees the nymph turn woman,
feels Arcadia change
through heated look or coolness in a shrug.

III. Look then upon this picture....

Horns spread and sharpened,
stumbling on slotted feet,
wrinkled from old memories and new faults,
he finds you in the mirror of her face.

LEAVING THE CAPROCK: A LINEAR SEQUENCE

Taking the Plunge
Elevation 3179

I

It tilts before it slopes,
and slopes before it drops,
and drops before the gullies turn to grooves
and grooves to slits where water never rests.

II

The landscape folds and opens.
A clump of cedar. Twenty miles
to bluffs beyond the Pease.

Right, in the final haze there'll be for months,
march pylons, definition of
how far it is to nothing.

III

No side roads here but dirt.
Pickup's antennae
transmit to silence;
tires signal plumes the wind can read
angling north to nowhere
that I care to go.

IV

No buzzards, hawks, or litter:
no decay, nothing to hunt,
or spare.

Matador, Motley County
Elevation 2347

*"Finally they came across something human. It was
a grave."*

Richard Brautigan, The Hawkline Monster

"Service you can TRUST" has been shut down,
and "Bob's Oil Well" is dry,
but "Trail Dust / Motel TV" lights its sign
to tempt the traveler.

Almost abstract as justice,
the courthouse plaza never has filled out
to guard against marauders.

Only the cobbled, blocky jail defends
the north against our nature.

An empty feed store guards the town
against the graveyard flanked by furrows
dragged from the scrub mesquite that marches east.

Patched, bare, and poor,
brushchoked or scalped,
bleaker till better.

Paducah
Elevation 1888

Here you're on Easley Street,
can choose between motels,

see big-screen movies, find
the only Dairy Queen for sixty miles,
whichever way you turn.
It even boasts a slum.

Civilization only got so far.
Brick streets run to dust
a short block from the courthouse;
decay from boarded stores
eats at the square.

More is mirage.

Crowell
Elevation 1476

There never was a picture show.
The depot building high and dry,
five blocks from any rail.

Stone two-story buildings derelict
built on Greely's myth.

Vernon
Elevation 1203

In Thalia nothing's funny.
Civilization lurks
past fat and boring fields
on slab made avenue by rows of trees.
Two towers for water,
suburbs,
stores unboarded, and,
the clearest sign of market-tested worth,
triumphant brand-new arches painted gold.

Oklahoma Border Line

Sand and shallow water.

Unpainted liquor store and honky-tonk.

Sign: "No Tolerance."

FAREWELL TO EURYDICE

Moving toward light and life,
I cannot feel you follow.
Sorrow brought you. Now
you choose your shadows.

A backward look, though futile, does no harm.

THE ENGLISH CALL IT PATIENCE

"It's a heart-breaking game." Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust*

"If only" is the motto.

Random looks malevolent:

the nine that turns up one too soon;

the mocking flush across the spread

that counts for nothing here;

the wrong trey covered when you had a choice
that looked indifferent.

Then there's guilt:

missing a chance to move the queen,

turn up a card that would have given shape

to hopeless muddle.

An Ex-Wife's Birthday, Ten Years After

Sisyphus must be happy, said Camus.
Stone grinding gives warmth,
wears a familiar path,
makes burden glory.

What God has joined we cling to,
guilt as prop and guide.

Myth has no friction.
Densest stone wears down in living use.

Flicking a pebble forward, Groucho-bent,
seems hardly tragic.
Time to push over, stand,
and see the hills ahead.

MOJO WORKING SOWHAT

So what this meeting's for show flag schmooze hang
out woman right age not bad (walk across gym floor
ball bounce no mood for scrimmage urge to try one
fake right move left swish all right! miss no big deal)
get game face on face-off hey this/that interests?
metaphysics (flashback '53 gray book issue stuff on
eyeballs leaps to spirit how? Thomistic voodoo
whocares) what kind crystals game called cold shower
dress out gone

"POEM FOR TWO WOMEN AT THE SAME TIME"

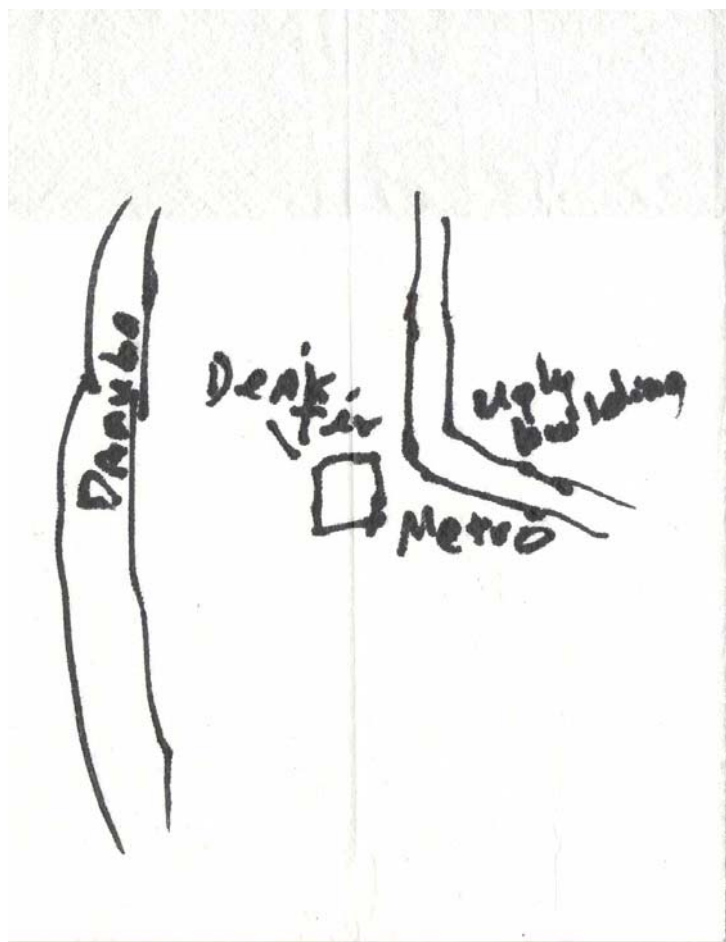
After Sándor Csóori

You matched women tick and tock,
desire wound just enough
to time your poem.

My measure is a sundial.
Letters shading as the solstice moves,
recording what they gave:

Discipline not quite sterile.
Passion's hysteric edge recalled
each time I slice a carrot as she taught.
Pleasure in uncomplicated lust.
Lesson that "Why not?" is not quite enough.
Passion's heat turned friendship.
Return to love returned.

Learning to read my seasons.



WHIRLWIND COURTSHIP

Sucked In

Sky bruised copper, tingle in hushed air,
tv's radar sweep--
before, false omens always--
spectacle draws us more than fraidy hole.

Too late to hide.
Watching funnel swirl
habits, lovers, ties too broad to wear.

Inviting, moist, uprooting.

If funnel pours beyond
it won't be Kansas.

How can I refuse?

Spit Out

Sorting what's left,
adjusters note the liability:
it wasn't like you to go fast or far;
next time hold tighter.

They cannot pay for or restore the old.
Ties that bound swept out.

Patterns from fragments.

Nor is it Kansas.
Where matters less than force
that cleansed, lifting
in flight's illusion though it dropped.

DUST BATH

Really, the ornithologists would say,
that sparrow bathes to rid himself of mites.

Theologians think
God's eye is on the bird
that stands for lechery and noise.

Here in this asphalt Eden we are free
to think the sparrow plays
in dust it finds about the fruitless tree,
what we rise from, go to, revel in.

GOOD FRIDAY, RIDING NOWHERE

This day, I do not disbelieve, you died.
All Lent and more, tied
to machines that labored to amend
defects of cartilage, I ached to bend
this knee to grace
lost in the falls that led me to this place:
under a barren fig my lover tends.
It flourishes. What life sends
we take. This bike,
point it which way I like,
sits still at fifteen miles an hour.
Hooked up to nothing, all that power
chained to an endless round.
Once I found
my way by number, up and down
the church aisle, flanking priests to trace
the way you took, face
down in garden to tomb's belly up.
You did not throw the sponge.
I'll face another sun.

HANK WILLIAMS, YOU WROTE MY LIFE SOWHAT

So what this letter says your feets in the street on the
road again 2000 miles three days and gonna make it
home tonight wherever friend says how can you be
thrown out weren't even in the country practice
chairman says you'll get a lot more writing done
monument? look! lesbian friend says oh you broke up
with your girlfriend too hey Ma I'm chic 'bout as
welcome as boll weevil need a home long lonesome
gotta end wrong Bessie rock it with Chuck got it and
gone between Hank's and Waylon's rambling men

HOME BY SUNRISE

The west is dark.

A few clouds bar the promised sun.

Returning to the niche worn forty years,
the mind's on automatic.

An impulse.

Wrench the wheel. Break out.

Flame in tangled metal.

Habit and lane lines hold.

Besides, a few clouds bar the promised sun.

The west is dark.

UP LIKE A ROCKET: A SEQUENCE

UP LIKE A ROCKET....

CONTROLLED BURN

The fire you say you feel
you say you hope will end.

I can try to douse it
as often as you wish.

The fire need not burn long,
Just strong enough to free the ore
to make us rich for life,
or burst the fluid from beneath the crust.

Or, burning longer, lift us off,
escaping gravity, free-falling,
farther and farther out.

EVERYDAY POEM

Today is meetings, shopping, freeway, noise,
lunch with your sister,
fruit and granola bars for me,
massage or exercise to keep us loose,
forget the tightness where we touch to love.

As if I could. Head, heart, and body reach,
hoping to stretch to meet the thought and urge
I trust you have. And, without ending, will.

DAYBREAK

Two decades running in the dark,
mile upon mile to seek a place to rest.
Circling inward on myself
tighter and tighter in routine
to keep out change I would not face.

You broke the circle.
Now, in your daybreak, I am free to move
farther and deeper than I ever went.

HAVING THE CAKE

Not crumb by crumb but whole rich round
you offer cake to eat and have again.

We cannot live on frosting.
I want the cake as climax to
course after course served and devoured with love.

HORIZONS

Limits before have always been imposed:
doubts, money, distance, kids,
tangle of obligations.

Now, sagging a little, age-spots here and there,
inner and outer scars laid bare,
nothing is left to lose.
Whatever's mine is yours.
Whatever's yours is right.

END USERS

If, at our ages, we were still unmarked,
how could we begin?

In 1950 you lacked words
to speak desires you barely felt.

I lacked grace to know
less in a kiss is more.

Our lives and bodies now are palimpsests,
story laid on story, rising through
no matter how the parchment's scrubbed.
Or pentimientos, old loves ghostly looming.

Let figures rise, stories come unedited.
We are our pasts. I love you. We are here.

MEMORY BANKS

Yours, you say, is often overdrawn:
you forget taxes, details, say
that when we part your feet can touch the ground,
forgetting how you got that high.

Mine has a surplus:
numbers, places, songs,
trivia only used in parlor games.
But also how we met, and what you said,
the first electric, accidental touch,
and so much more you would not let me
put into a poem.

Draw on me any time. This kind of loan
keeps us both floating,
brings returns I never dreamed of
at interest rates that make the bankers blush.

OKARCHE OVERPASS LOVE SONG

Trains and heartache: a thousand blues songs,
Longing, escape, regret.

Here I'm above the tracks,
Car engine ticking idly
In slow-fading sunset,
Cell phone, at this height, on digital,
Loving you two thousand miles away.

Two time zones west, you say it's cold.
Old lives and loves detain us for a while,
And night, we know, will come.

Now, as I touch you through the phone,
What light is left is lovely.

FAST FORWARD

“It’s a long, long while....” “*September Song*”

You reproach that I moved on before love’s body cooled.

Waiting is for the young.

I dare not look to see what month it is,
but summer’s heat is past.

What then to do? Choke back a sob?

Did that long ago.

Lie in the dark and brood?

The dark comes soon enough.

How to deal with reruns caught on tape:

Hit the fast forward button,
skip the dull parts—recriminations,
tears, what-ifs, vain regrets.

Rewind to start again. Cut to another chase.

A POOR MOUSE

“I hold a mouses herte nat worth a leek
That hath but oon hole for to sterte to”

“The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”

In crueller days, carnivals used boards with numbered
holes

taking bets on where a mouse would hide.

Set falsely free, the tiny rodent scurried to random
safety,

was winkled out and set arun anew to settle bets.

Starting is not my problem.

Practiced at dodging claws and epithets,

mostly I’ve been impelled

like men in blues and Waylon Jennings songs,

midnight rider far too old to stay up late,

place I come to like the place I left

until the tender lady feels the tail

and dumps me out to seek another hole.

AN EX-WIFE'S BIRTHDAY, TWENTY YEARS AFTER

“...let us be as strange as if we had been
married a great while; and as well bred as if we
were not married at all.” *The Way of the World*

Once we could not speak
without an edge of pain.

You spoke the words that set us free
to be ourselves.

Now, separate as long as we were one,
regret and bitterness are gone.

Still, you sound a little wary,
cannot or will not say
phrases that formed our private language,
fearing, perhaps, a spell
that calls up what you thought I was--
or cannot call from what I have become.

ENVOI

No fireplace heat to rock beside
or candle's double end
will forge the link.

Decades and oceans gape.
Words unfleshed take shape
to lie between us like a bridge or blade.

SUPERHERO SOWHAT

“Everybody wants to be Cary Grant. I want to be Cary Grant.” *Archibald Leach, aka Cary Grant*

“Bob Davis” mythological blue-eyed handsome rambling man doing funky Broadway on Madison County bridges unbearably light Shadow knows what lurks in men’s (and women’s) hearts international man of intrigue and intrigues scholar statesman poet backdoor hootchie kootchie man with slow hand Mick Jagger Charles Bukowski Mohair Sam

Bob Davis gloomy Sunday Kočevje hotel flipping channels snooker soap operas too-young half-nude MTV well over sixty still wearing jeans joints stiffen 8000 miles from home nobody knows his name can’t get no

Find phone booth say magic word change into quote marks can’t stay young but always immature

UNDER YOUR SKIN

"I shall not exist if you do not imagine me."

Lolita

You cannot see me.
Tightest, dampest cloth cannot compel
attention to my breasts.
You cannot breathe my pheromones,
touch soft skin inside my thighs,
feel beard brush down your body.
Soft seductive tones
cannot draw you near me,
nor tongue reach private juices.

Theorists say language wrote this.
Your brain's 900 area knows better.
We fall together in a wood
pulped to what you hold.

Robert Murray Davis



Brief Biographical Note:

[The Ornamental Hermit](#), published by Texas Tech University Press is the latest collection of essays by Robert Murray Davis. His views of life as a newly single male are chronicled in [Mid-Life Mojo: Guide for the Newly Single Male](#), published by Oak Tree Books.