

Jim McGarrah – Three Poems

To Sweep the Soot Away

When his marriage ended
my brother became a chimney sweep.

A filthy job, I thought it must fulfill
an urgent economic need—bills to pay,

two boys to support, an ex-wife.
Why else would any person

wait for the stilled wind to still
the dust and dirt and dead feathers

from the brick funnels
atop those slick and steeped roofs?

“Unnoticed and with a view over streets
full of well-lit homes,” he told me

was how he liked to visit
happiness, how it rose

in the sweet smell of pine smoke
and how, breathing in the ashes

from each family around the fire, he could
wish for a life his own life had denied.

What Happens if You Never Stop

Drive far enough west at dusk and you outrun
darkness proving time is unnatural.
It’s only a Coriolis effect to fight chaos,
the way the planet curves to make you
trust you need somewhere to get to
like a retirement party or a third martini.
This marvel pelts you first in the eastern
part of Kansas with a rain of clichés—majestic,
sprawling, endless, scenic, uncluttered,
and grand—all hyperbole for flat.
Keep driving. Light will go on forever.

The sky opens and scoops the land up whole.
Where you are it is day, where you were
it remains the night before.
If you could keep driving far enough
would darkness disappear?

Portrait in Shades of Blues

My father had no desire to suffer
needlessly. He was no martyr, a hero
from WWII maybe, but he denied
that label as well. He gambled, cursed,
attended church, gave money to charities,
did business with everyone in the county
as an honest and helpful man who made
no enemies that didn't deserve to be.
A white man in the Eisenhower era,
he watched Fred Astaire movies
at the theater and played Bing Crosby
on a jukebox at our small-town VFW.
My father showed his family love as he
was taught and understood love should
be shown, with grace, patience, and duty.
But when his world became a blue place
full of memories, he bought cheap whiskey,
retreating to a small room in our large home
with a stack of records, a paper cup, and a bag
full of ice. There he sat with buried friends,
numbed by a war he had fought and memories
he never asked for. He wailed through
each record. The songs seeped between
a narrow crack in the French doors, rolled
along the hallway and into my bedroom
late at night. I listened to his off-key cry
in melodies carried perfectly nowhere
but in his primal mind. His choir
had magical names—Blind Willie,
John Lee Hooker, Howlin' Wolf, Son House,
Ray Charles, Robert Johnson, Furry Lewis.
In strange harmonies, they all sang sad words
about crossroads and killing floors and perils
of love with a feeling that my father knew
the war had taken and in a voice he wanted back.

Jim McGarrah is the author of ten books. His poetry collections include *Running the Voodoo Down* which won an Elixir Press book award. Lamar University Press released *A Balancing Act: New and Selected Poems* in May of 2018. His poems and essays have been published in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Barcelona Review*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Collateral*, *December*, *North American Review* and *Southern Indiana Review* among others.