

# A Roadmap for Becoming an Artist: “Unstopping the Story Jug” in the Poetry and Prose of Fred Chappell and Listening to the Female Voice

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“The gardener is a book about his garden,” writes North Carolina Poet Laureate and award-winning fiction writer Fred Chappell in *Spring Garden*:

He walks among these leaves as easy as morning  
Come to scatter its robins and tender noises.  
As the plants inhale the morning and its cool light,  
The book is open once again that was never shut.  
What now we do not know we shall never know. (“The Garden” 17-22)

For a writer so seemingly diverse as Fred Chappell, who has written multi-volumes of poetry, in forms as varied as the couplet, classical hexameter, Anglo Saxon, and *terza rima*, who has penned two volumes of award-winning stories, criticism, and eight novels—from darkly existential tales of terror to historical fiction, fantasy, and tall-tales—it might seem ludicrous to attempt to distill his work to any single, core idea. Indeed, Chappell can be as changeable as a chameleon, and as Keats would say, he possesses that “negative capability” to assume any narrative voice or persona, whether an “Imogene” or “Iago.” However, beyond the *tour de force* of style and genre, Fred Chappell’s poetry and prose is essentially about the art of storytelling and the function of the creative imagination, which is to share truth and knowledge and to illuminate our lives.

The writer’s task is to write a book that opens the reader “like a fan,” as Chappell says in *The Function of the Poet*, so that she “sees herself, her life, in delicate painted scenes,” peopled by “strange folks” who fill a pensive moment and who enlighten and “comfort her” (15). To accomplish this task, Chappell utilizes a variety of fictional voices—some of the most memorable of which are the women’s voices that echo throughout his writing. This essay will explore Fred Chappell’s use of the female voice, as he constructs a roadmap for shaping the artist and the delicate business of being civilized.

In order to explore the art of storytelling and the making of the artist, Chappell mines his own deep reservoir of conscious and unconscious experiences, as a kind of protean Albion in a fallen world, assuming a variety of shapes to reflect the variety in the human condition. He is an artist who tends his own garden, most often the region of Appalachia, in order to till a more universal soil. R. T. Smith notes that Chappell “begins with fictionalized autobiography and works toward parable and character mosaic” (38). While the strategy is essentially Swedenborgian and Romantic, what Chappell does, however, is far more than celebrate and sing himself in Whitmanesque fashion. “It is not a matter of autobiography or confession,” Chappell writes in “A Pact with Faustus”: “. . . it is the using of one’s very marrow and soul as a means of expression” (485). Chappell has said in his essay “Family Matters” that “to write about self and family” is a “resort to synecdoche in the belief that the less inclusive terms of autobiography can imply a pattern of larger historical and societal terms.” Writing about one’s own experiences is also an invitation to explore the past, and for Chappell “portrayal of the present is illuminated by comparison with the past” (37).

Perhaps none of those family members looms larger in his poetry than Chappell’s wife Susan. For example, in the *kunstlerroman* or artistic coming of age volume *Midquest*, and to some degree in *Spring Garden*, Susan serves as muse and symbol for the earth goddess, functioning both as a grounding force and source of knowledge in the poet’s journey. Susan is the “anima” to the poet’s “animus,” and only by “merging the two,” writes Rita Sims Quillen in “Good Ol’ Fred Wrestles His Anima: Women in the Poetry of Fred Chappell,” can he hope to create art (43). It is evident, as well, in Chappell’s later, immensely successful novels—the Kirkman tetralogy—that recognition of the female principle and voice becomes an essential component in the artist’s journey. Susan provides not only a center for *Midquest* and *Spring Garden* but, indeed, perhaps for Chappell’s creative life in general. It is no accident Chappell begins the story of his life and work in the Gale *Contemporary Authors Autobiography* essay with this sentence: “On August 2, 1959, I married Susan Nicholls” (113). Quillen explains:

Susan stands beside him throughout each section of *Midquest* in poems set on Stillpoint Hill, as the poet surveys the literal and metaphorical landscape and holds her hand. The goal here is what Abrams describes as the ultimate goal of the Romantics: “higher unity . . . or a recovered paradise . . . a scene of recognition and reconciliation . . . signaled by a loving union with the feminine other.” (44)

Susan is Chappell’s idealized Beatrice; she is also the monomythic female principle who accompanies the hero in pursuit of knowledge. Like Wordsworth’s Lucy and her association with nature, Susan is the female principle linked with the image of water, representing simultaneously the source for our origins and a hope for rebirth. Chappell writes in “On Stillpoint Hill at Midnight” (*Midquest*):

The moon, Susan, ’s a-tilt now.  
Let us join hands, descend  
this star-bathed hill  
to where the study light, the kitchen  
light, corridor the dark.  
Let us enter breathless our leaking house,  
turn bedsheets, prepare to voyage  
wherever these midnight waters  
stream. (138-46)

Associated as well with the moon, Susan represents imagination, the wellspring to creativity and a Romantic conduit for illumination and enlightenment.

Modeled after Dante's *Divine Comedy*, *Midquest* begins in Chappell's thirty-fifth year. The poem is an unabashed *kunsterroman*, in the tradition of *Aurora Leigh* by Barrett Browning, who called her piece a "verse novel," as does Chappell (*Midquest* ix). However, *Midquest* has more in common with Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, with its Romantic, philosophical flavor and more ambitious conception. Indeed, Chappell has called his poem an "overture or prelude." He says in *Plow Naked*: "... as soon as I thought of the musical analogy, then the whole structure came to mind. Four huge movements as in a symphony, with themes and sub-themes, in *fugato* organization" (135). Another analogy that Chappell utilized in conceptualizing the poem was the old-fashioned needlepoint sampler: "It occurred to me," he explains, again in *Plow Naked*, "that it would be nice to have a kind of showpiece like an early American sampler of different kind of verse forms for stitches. And I made a list of different forms, everything from elegiacs to blank verse to free verse to whatever else is in the work" (134). The poem, however, is modeled after Dante's epic and employs conventional epic traditions, as well as other innovative poetic strategies, but most important, after the somber existential, allegorical novels of Chappell's earlier publications (*It Is Time*, *Lord*, *The Inkling*, *Dagon*, and *The Gaudy Place*), novels that clearly portray the world in bleak, postlapsarian terms, *Midquest* aims straight for the kind of acceptance of the world and epiphanal moments that Wordsworth achieves in *The Prelude*. Chappell makes clear that *Midquest* provides a vision of rebirth and renewal, as does *The Divine Comedy*; however, Chappell also writes that the poem is "in its largest design a love poem" for Susan or the idealized female principle (*Midquest* xi).

As Dante takes stock of himself on his thirty-fifth birthday, so too does Chappell's character Old Fred. In the process, Chappell employs his "sampler" of verse forms: free and blank verse, terza rima, Yeatsian tetrameter, rhymed couplets, classical hexameter, dramatic monologue, stream of consciousness, epistolary, elegiac, even Anglo-Saxon verse. As in any epic, there is a scope and breadth to *Midquest* that captures not only the Appalachian region with its array of distinctive characters and voices but portrays a universal dimension, particularly as the poet celebrates himself, his own emblematic rebirth, and the potential for rebirth in the reader as well. The volume has four parts, each representing one of the essential elements: water ("River"), fire ("Bloodfire"), air ("Wind Mountain"), and earth ("Earthsleep"). Chappell explains the numerology utilized in the volume: "... four is the Pythagorean number representing World, and  $4 \times 11 = 44$ , the world twice, interior and exterior" (*Midquest* ix). Each volume has eleven chapters, each is dominated by a different "element of the family" (x).

As in all epic poems, the mythic descent into Hell offers one of those unique opportunities for illumination. In "Cleaning the Well," young Fred is lowered into his grandfather's well to perform an ablative ritual to clear the water of fallen debris. As he is lowered, the boy muses:

Two suns I entered. At exact noon  
The white sun narrowly hung above;  
Below, like an acid floating moon,  
The sun of water shone.  
And what beneath that? A monster trove

Of blinding treasure I imagined. (14-19)

The treasures he finds seem trifles of everyday life—"plastic pearls, monopoly / Money, a greenish rotten cat, / Robber knife, toy gun, / Clock guts, wish book, door key" (56-59)—the retrieved "things" of life past. The speaker adds:

Was it worth the trip, was it true Descent?  
 Plumbing my childhood, to fall  
 Through the hole in the world and become . . .  
 What? He told me to go. I went.  
 (Recalling something beyond recall.  
 Cold cock on the nether roof of Home.) (61-66)

The descent and symbolic death are not only necessary for the hero but hold the potential for rebirth, as the end of the poem reveals.

As Chappell "plumbs" his past, a portrait is presented of simple, home-spun values, but adequate to suffice as a balm for the troubling visions of the early novels, and more important, they are essential for this portrait of an artist as a middle-aged man. For example, in "My Grandmother Washes Her Feet," the poet as a young boy listens to stories of those "tainted apples" on the family tree: John-Giles, who had a predilection for whiskey and bad women; Bubba Martin, who "killed himself at last with a shotgun" (43), and Paregoric Annie, who was overcome by madness. "There's places Family ties just won't stretch to," says his grandmother (58), leaving young Fred to speculate just where he will fit on the family tree—with the misfits or with the tried and true good folk of the Green Valley? Old Fred, however, has few delusions: "I strained to follow them [the good folk], and never did. / I never had the grit to stir those guts. / I never had the guts to stir that earth" (126-28).

In poems like "My Mother Shoots the Breeze," "My Mother's Hard Row to Hoe," and "My Grandmother Washes Her Vessels," we learn of family legends and the common threads of character that are sewn together to provide a mythos for the poet, a mythos that becomes not only a source for storytelling but for values. The characteristic Chappell humor and the poet's matter-of-fact realism keep the poems from sinking into bathos and sentimentality. Yet there is a Romantic appreciation for the physical world that tempers the realism, as seen in "Second Wind" when the grandmother escapes a house full of mourners on the day her husband is buried and watches "a wade / Of breeze" come "row to row," rippling across the cornfield, feeling sublimely lifted from the pall of death and sadness (91-92). With such poignant "spots of time," Chappell provides loftiness to the down-home humor, and the reader is enriched for journeying with him.

In the poems nature is associated, in the Romantic sense, with the female principle, and is the source for language, though language can only hope to create the illusion of capturing the natural world. Like Shelley, Chappell believes that the "first duty of poetry is to entertain. After that, it can instruct, enlighten, ennoble, and perform all the high minded feats of intellectual and moral gymnastics that it ever has a yearning to perform" (81-82). The poet is the ultimate "outsider," in Chappell's view. He recalls in *Plow Naked* someone asking him why he became a writer—and his answer is revelatory: "Because I wasn't invited to the party." Detachment, Chappell believes, is "indispensable for the writer" (53). The poet is the "chronicler" of culture; she finds herself in a world that appears fundamentally meaningless and imposes a semblance of order upon the chaos, though as Chappell suggests in "Hallowind" the order is illusional. He writes again in *Plow Naked*: ". . . when I look out my study window upon the world that I must live in, all I see are disaster, formlessness, motion

without purpose, rampant accidents, confusions twice confounded, perplexity doubly perplexed” (88). However, through the illusion of language, the poet is able to create “an arbitrary and ramshackle sort of organization” so that the reader thinks “he has imposed an order” (89).

Chappell closes *Midquest* with another trip to Stillpoint Hill with Susan. The vision or epiphany that is transmitted to the reader is one that offers sanity, “sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing,” as Keats would say. It also looks forward to the *Spring Garden* volume in its gentle admonition that we look to knowledge and to home (the “book light and kitchen light”) as sources for satisfaction and balm in this care-worn world and, with as much dignity as possible, that we tend our own gardens. Chappell concludes *Midquest*:

Susan has taken my hand, I clutch  
 her voice though it comes fitful  
 in the starshot earthdark.  
 Her voice is in surges  
 the soothing of a thousand waters.  
 .....  
 These are the flower-worlds with all  
 the visionary petals shriveled away.

Please hold my hand, may we  
 go down now, home?  
 Where booklight and kitchen light  
 furrow the silence? (62-66, 74-79)

Peter Makuck explains the essence of the four latest works in Chappell’s canon: “In the Kirkman novels, as in his poetic tetralogy *Midquest*, Chappell is redefining the nature of what ultimately sustains” (170). The Kirkman books doubtless accomplish this end and in some sense serve as culmination of the whole of Chappell’s canon, certainly in their teleological exploration of those dualities operating within a fallen world and how we might adjust given that burden. However, they also are an extension and completion of the *Midquest* collection as they suggest specifics for that adjustment. Chappell explains: “I began to toy with the short stories generated by *Midquest* and struck upon the notion of a quartet of novels which would balance the *Midquest* tetralogy, surrounding that poem with a solid fictional universe” (CAAS 124). He further visualized the novels as an attempt to clarify his ideas about storytelling: “The four novels were to be progressively sophisticated in technique, a little model of the history of modern fiction” (CAAS 124). These factors make *I Am One of You Forever* (1985), *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* (1989), *Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You* (1996), and *Look Back All the Green Valley* (1999) fitting companions for much of the writing that preceded them and *tour de force* prose pieces in their own right.

The “fictional universe” that Chappell planned for the Kirkman novels follows the same essentially Dantean and Pythagorean organization of *Midquest*. The four elements—water, fire, air, and earth—provide focus for each volume respectively, and each book has ten chapters with an epilogue rounding off the number to eleven, just as in the structure of *Midquest*. Also as in *Midquest*, the Kirkman tetralogy is essentially about the art of storytelling and the significance of this art as it helps us adjust to and accept the less than perfect world in which we operate (note Chappell’s playfulness with his protagonist’s name “Kirkman,” an Appalachian or Scot-Irish version of “Chappell”). The cast of characters introduced to us in *Midquest* form a

chorus in the Kirkman books to flesh out and reflect upon ideas presented in the poetry. Young Jess Kirkman, an artist-in-waiting until the last volume, is the narrator of the four-volume *kunstlerroman*, though his father Joe Robert (the J.T. of *Midquest*) is the principal focus of *Brighten the Corner* and *Look Back All the Green Valley*, and often a center of intelligence in each of the novels, as his son Jess comes to terms with the past and its reflection upon the present and with the arduous task of becoming an artist; however, the women in the novels, like Susan in the poems, function as sources of inspiration and sources for good storytelling. They accompany Jess on his quest to become an artist, and they provide potent models for good storytelling. The women in the volumes are often portrayed as solid, dependable, flexible enough to bend with hard times, frequently taskmasters, while the men are often troublesome tricksters, though Chappell makes clear that the twain go a long way to complementing each other, both genders offering knowledge that Jess will apply on his journey.

From the array of stories and family legends, Jess gathers his own collective “spots of time,” which lead him to the small epiphanies necessary to travel safely in this woeful world, and he discovers, largely through the women characters, how to translate those epiphanies into art. One of the characters who offers particular illumination is Aunt Sam, whose story concludes *I Am One of You Forever*. Like “The River” in *Midquest*, *I Am One of You Forever* (1986) is structured around the element water—opening with the poignant vignette of Joe Robert and Jess having finished a building project to surprise Jess’s mother, Cora. The bridge they’ve constructed to span the creek glistens in the sunshine, just before they hear a loud rumbling of water roiling toward them and father and son scramble up to the road for safety. The Challenger Paper Company has illegally opened the floodgates. Joe Roberts mutters, “the bastards,” as the bridge is torn away from its mooring and washes downstream on its side—a startling metaphor for our best efforts gone awry by the callous vicissitudes of life and crass commerce.

Aunt Samatha Barefoot’s narrative, a singular story in this volume of mostly men’s stories, provides poignant advice for Jess on his journey as an artist. Aunt Sam is the family musician, a colorful woman, a legend, “as full of mischief as my father” (166), Jess recalls. She is a woman, intrepid and determined in pursuit of her art, brave enough to follow her vocation despite family reservations, and a woman whose fanciful words and expressive voice simply enthrall Jess. Joe Robert declares that she “knows how to live with her feelings. When she wants to cry, she just cries right in front of everybody and goes on with her business. When she wants to laugh, she doesn’t hold back an inch” (169). When Aunt Sam comes to visit the farm, Grandmother Annie Barbara Sorrells (Samantha’s cousin and a character whose name references the famous mountain ballad) is visited by bitter-sweet memories, since music was once her own ambition but she was ordered to give up her fiddle playing by her sternly religious father. Forbidden to go to Scotland for a folk music festival, Annie Barbara relinquished her place to her cousin Samantha, and thus began the sterling career that spanned the decades and included regular visits on the Grand Old Opry. Over the years, the family heard only occasionally from Aunt Sam, and Annie Barbara, who had given up her own music in order to concentrate on “running the farm and on Jesus,” wouldn’t allow the children to listen to the Opry on the radio. Jess muses: “. . . until Aunt Sam had showed up, [his grandmother] had quietly succeeded [in erasing all her youthful memories and ambitions]” (174). As close as the two women were in their youth, it seemed there was now “a flaw” in the relationship, “a hairline fracture no one else would notice but which remained a tender spot between the two” (174). When Aunt Sam finally convinces her cousin to join her in an evening of making

music, the fracture is miraculously healed. Annie Barbara accompanies her cousin on the piano to the tune of “Come All You Fair and Tender Ladies.” When they finish, to the delight of neighbors and friends who have come to meet the famous aunt, they are holding hands “like schoolgirls and listening” to Jess’s awkward rendition of “The Green Laurel.” Looking back on the event, the narrator of the book, the grown-up Jess, now an artist and singer of his own poems and tales, declares, “If I could sing . . . I wouldn’t sit scribbling this story of long ago time” (179), and with these words the first book of the tetralogy ends.

The women’s tales of *Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You* (1996) offer specific instruction in the delicate business of being civilized and serve to balance the tales told by the uncles in *I Am One of You Forever*. Air is the element that binds together the stories in this volume of the tetralogy, with the corresponding humour sanguineness suggesting beneficence, joyfulness, and hopeful confidence. Wind is directly related to storytelling, since in the Appalachian dialect a *windy* is a story. While Jess again is the principal narrator of this volume, Chappell relegates him almost to a silent listener, as grandmother Annie Barbara and mother Cora serve as conduits for the stories. In the narrative frame, Annie Barbara is dying and her daughter is tending her, as Joe Robert and Jess sit quietly aside to observe the passing of a time, in this case “time past” which informs the artist’s vision: “If we lose your grandmother, if Annie Barbara Sorrells dies,” says Joe Robert to Jess, “a world dies with her” (5).

For Jess, the young artist-to-be, the women represent imagination, inspiration, even that fierce illumination that augers the duality of the “fearful symmetry” and signals the postlapsarian state. “We will listen to the wind whisper and weep and tell again those stories of women that your mother and grandmother needed for you to hear,” muses Joe Robert to his son. “We will hope that this house stays rooted to its earth and is not carried away by the wind into the icy spaces beyond the moon” (5). When the grandmother’s passing is complete at the end of the book, when time, for a moment, has been skewed and all the clocks in the house are hopelessly out of kilter, the past fuses with the present to bode a new time: “It would be a different kind of time [without Annie Barbara],” Jess contemplates; “it would not be steady in the least and the winds would be cold in our faces against us all the way” (228). When Joe Robert asks Jess if he is ready to go down the dark hallway to bring his mother back to them, Jess answers that he isn’t ready but will go with his father. Joe Robert says to him, “Good, . . . [s]he’s going to need us.” Jess, the artist son, replies, “We’re going to need her too” (228). Chappell’s narrative frame thus provides a critical aesthetic for these women’s stories and how they speak directly to the artist who must learn “to listen,” and, like the women, be a conduit for all the voices of stories yet to be written—but that have already been told.

Fred Chappell has written considerably in his criticism about the female voices that have illuminated both the worlds of fiction and poetry. In his collection of essays, *A Way of Happening*, he praises the work of five new Southern women poets and in the process shares some thoughts about his own creative process, ideas that are echoed in *Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You*. “I have a distinct foreboding,” he writes, “of the tough-guy stance and the moralized anecdote that have so broadly characterized the Southern male poetry of this present generation are losing freshness and interest. Perhaps the time has come for a subtler poetry that thrives upon the kind of psychological nuance we find in Eve Shelnett, Betty Adcock, Kathryn Stripling Byer, Martha Vertreace, and others. . . . If Southern poetry ever learns to sing to the moon instead of howling at it, we will have to thank the alto and soprano ranks, the softer but not necessarily sweeter voices” (111). It is that softer voice that Jess learns to cultivate from the women storytellers of the third of the Kirkman books.

*Farewell, I'm Bound To Leave You* is in some part an experiment in “revisionist myth-making,” as Chappell utilizes the stories of these women to explode stereotypes associated with females. For example, there is Aunt Sherlie Howes (“The Figuring Woman”), who is a paragon of reason and rational thinking, and there is Cousin Earlene Lewis (“The Fisherwoman”), befriended by the irascible Old Man Worley who decides to teach her the fine art of fly fishing and in the process both the troublesome old man and the young girl are transformed. On the day that Earlene catches her biggest trout, Worley breaks his ankle. For the first time, Earlene has to drive a motor vehicle in order to find help for Worley, thus experiencing a harrowing coming-of-age adventure. In the course of their friendship, Earlene’s confidence and self-assuredness blossom, while Worley is humanized and softened a degree through his association with Earlene. Their story is a metaphor for both the potential sympathy and mutual benefit possible between the sexes, as well as a lesson in storytelling—the patience one must acquire as he “fishes” for a narrative. Cora, Jess’s mother who is telling Cousin Earlene’s story, answers Jess’s question as to how she knew all the details of the story: “She told me a lot,” replies Cora, “and then I put myself in her place so that I could tell the story to you. That’s what storytellers do. Maybe you’ll remember that if you ever take a notion to tell stories” (100).

Another lesson Jess learns about storytelling and life in general is that we all perceive our stories, our realities, from our own unique vantage points, making the same stories oftentimes remarkably different from person to person. The best example is found in “The Shooting Woman,” where Jess hears his grandmother’s version of the infamous kite tale, which culminates in the marriage of his mother Cora and father Joe Robert. Joe Robert had politely requested from his colleague Cora at the school where they both taught some item of silk apparel in order to fly a kite he had constructed for an electricity experiment in his class. Instructed by her mother Annie Barbara, Cora happily complies with an old silk petticoat dyed bright red, since she would never wear such an undergarment herself. As usual, Joe Robert, in an attention-getting ploy, goes to the extreme, continuously flying the scarlet kite right outside Cora’s classroom window, much to Cora’s chagrin. In the meantime, Annie Barbara has a new plan for Cora to purchase a case of shotgun shells and perfect her marksmanship. The next time Joe Robert flies his bawdy kite, Cora opens her classroom window and shoots the kite to earth—to the utter awe-struck surprise of Joe Robert. “So that’s how she won his heart,” Jess says when his grandmother’s tale is finished (38).

Jess had heard the tale from his mother and from Joe Robert; however, this version, portraying his grandmother as wise match-maker, was a new one. Jess reflects, “I’d understood from listening closely that the various stories I heard about specific events didn’t always match; sometimes, in fact, they were totally contradictory” (27). Significantly, Annie Barbara’s distinctive rendition of this family tale is shared as she and Jess are in the storeroom checking the grape juice jars for leaks in the seal. The mundane chore offers two important benefits: the opportunity for Annie Barbara to share an alternative reading of a family legend, as well as to serve, after dinner, the flawed jars of juice, now miraculously transformed, like a fine story, into wine—an appropriate metaphor for the artist to be familiar with. Jess thinks, “I had never heard how my grandmother had planned out the whole drama from day one and how her strategy had worked every step of the way as perfect as a waterwheel turning” (38).

The women whose stories Jess hears as they “unstopper the story jug” (179)—Aunt Sherlie Howes, Earlene, Cora, Selena Mellon (the tranquil woman), Chancy Gudger (the madwoman), Ginger Summerall (the feisty woman), Angela Newcome (the charitable woman), and others—serve Chappell’s fiction, and Jess’s transformation



into an artist, as keepers of good society, forces for moderation, manners, and common sense. They are also conduits for the “Wind Woman,” who inspires the artist and provides a source for all stories; they are guides to the underworld (the collective unconscious or repository for all our stories); and they are keepers of the family legends. In one of the most significant, surreal, and magical parts of the book, Cora takes Jess up Ember Mountain to meet the Wind Woman. She tells her son that if he ever takes “a notion to write about our part of the earth, about the trees and hills and streams, about the animals and our friends and neighbors who live in the mountains, then you must meet the Wind Woman, for you’ll never write a purposeful word till you do” (104). On the way, Jess encounters a variety of women who are necessary on his journey to become an artist, and each imparts her own unique wisdom, but it is the Wind Woman, like Graves’s fearsome White Goddess, whom he must visit alone and who teaches him the most valuable lesson of all. As Jess waits in the empty cabin, he sees a mandolin on a chair and volumes of Homer, Milton, Shakespeare, and Virgil scattered about the room—all emblematic of the particular vocation that is the writer’s: a solitary vocation, one where the music, the rhythms of language, and the erudition and inspiration provided by poets who’ve come before are necessary for inspiration. When Jess closes his eyes, his head rings with “speaking voices and voices singing and instruments playing” (114). At last he claps his hands over his ears, and all goes silent except for the sound of the wind. “Now I understand,” he thinks. “This journey was for me to come here to this cabin and let these sounds come upon me. I can’t figure them out by myself. The Wind Woman will teach me how to lay out these sounds in proper fashion . . . [and to be] patient to consort the sounds of the hollers and slopes and valleys below into music” (115). The visit to Wind Woman is Chappell’s metaphor for listening to those “ancestral voices,” as Coleridge writes, that speak to us the stories and legends of the past, and she will help the artist sift through and make sense of the voices of the past, voices that reside dormant in our collective unconscious, future fodder for art.

The final story in *Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You* (as do the last vignettes in *I Am One of You Forever* and *Look Back All the Green Valley*) touts the special place that music holds for Chappell as the most sublime of art forms and as the inspiration for the literary arts. “The Remembering Woman” is related through multiple points of view, since that is how the truth of our stories comes to us. Jess notes that for this tale there are four storytellers, the appropriate Pythagorean number—his grandmother, his mother, himself, and the celebrated musicologist and folklorist, Holme Barcroft (196-97), who visited the mountains collecting ballads when Jess’s mother was a little girl. Together the narrators make “a quartet,” Chappell writes, “soprano, alto, tenor, baritone” (197). The nuances of the story they tell reveal the best part of fine storytelling: “Stories have a hundred motives and a thousand sources,” Jess says, “some as recognizable as tiger lilies, some as hidden as secret mountaintop springs” (197).

We also meet in this magical tale a pair of lovely Irish bacchantes, Quigley and Qualley Lafferty, and their twelve sprightly children, whom their parents call the “Whippets.” Barcroft comes to stay at their farm in the western Carolina mountains, as he gathers native music for his book. To celebrate the event, the Laffertys have a square dance, inviting the whole valley to the celebration. Music fills the mountains, poetry in every nook and holler of the hills; it is an Appalachian “bacchanal” of the most superb, though completely proper, sort. The language of this section of the book is extraordinarily rich and lyrical, often exquisitely poetic (211). As the music swells and the dancers lose themselves in the moment, Barcroft sees the house begin to reel and tilt, quite literally—“. . . it had become a merry-go-round, turning steadily

and stately as the music went just a little bit faster” (218). At last, the giant harvest moon rises like “a hot-air balloon,” perfume filling the air and moonlight effusing the landscape. Like a benign version of “Tam O’Shanter,” the magic of the night calls the “ghosts out of their graves” (220), and when the house and Dr. Barcroft finally come to rest at the end of this magical episode, moonlight (imagination) and music have transformed them all. Annie Barbara declares that she doesn’t understand a thing about the improbable story, and Cora agrees but tells her son: “You have to realize, Jess, that a lot of people looked down on us, saying we were ignorant hillbillies and other things they ought to be ashamed of saying” (221). It is clear, however, as Hesiod would have understood, that their country fare has much to make them proud: “So if our works and days,” Cora says, “got written up in his [Barcroft’s] books that were read and admired all over the world—well, why shouldn’t we take a mite of pride?” (221). Cora closes the story with a final reference to time, linking past and present to future time, and the end of the volume to the beginning. Doing so, she puts into perspective Chappell’s faith in imagination, which will unite science and reason with emotion and love—Blake’s Zoas fittingly reintegrated: “My husband likes the new ways. But you know what? There was one thing about Dr. Barcroft that reminds me of Joe Robert. It’s the way he talked about the moon, like it was as dear to him as someplace he might have lived. What is it about men that they can’t keep their hands off the moon? Joe Robert told me he thinks men will travel to the moon someday.” Jess, the young artist, responds to his mother, “I think so too” (221).

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