

"HOW ELSE NOT BE LOST"

a review by Robert M. West

James Seay. *Come! Come! Where? Where?*. University of North Carolina Press, 2024.

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JAMES SEAY, a native of Mississippi, is Professor Emeritus of English at UNC Chapel Hill. He has published several collections of poetry, and he received the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1988.

With twenty-seven years having passed since the publication of James Seay's marvelous last book, *Open Field, Understory: New and Selected Poems* (1997), and with the author now well into his eighties, one could be forgiven for assuming that that book would stand not just as his last-as-in-latest but as his last-as-in-final. Yet Seay has continued to write and to publish work in magazines and journals, including poems – see, for example, "Now We Eat the Dark Vein," which in 2017 appeared in *The New Yorker* – and especially essays, which have appeared in *Harper's*, *Blackbird*, *Oxford American*, and other estimable venues. *Come! Come! Where? Where?* – his first book of prose – combines his recent nonfiction with his earlier forays in the genre, giving us a volume authored over a span of at least half a century. Given the long time over which the essays were written, the consistency of the author's voice is noteworthy: the narrator of "Damn You, Love," which first appeared in 1976 in *Esquire* (as "The Wicked Witch of North Carolina"), is the same worldly, recondite, psychologically insightful persona as that in "The Chandeliers," which *Oxford American* brought out in 2021. As varied as these essays are – and they're quite wide-ranging in their subject matter – they achieve an admirable unity in large part due to that consistency of voice.

Unlike many poets' essay collections, this is a book of personal essays, not exercises in literary criticism, and so its cohesiveness also has much to do with the running backdrop of the author's life history. One

could almost approach it as a highly episodic, highly selective, out-of-sequence autobiography: we read a good deal about Seay's parents and grandparents, about his childhood, and about his decidedly non-academic work experiences as a young man. We learn about his son Josh, who died of illness in his early thirties. We read about some of his travel across the US and abroad. He introduces us to his present home and tells of both harmony and conflict with his neighbors – of the bird variety as well as the human. We hear virtually nothing about other subjects one would expect from a memoir *per se*; for instance, his past marriages are only glancingly acknowledged, there's nothing about his long career as an English professor, and while there's plenty of reference to his life as a reader, there's precious little mention of his life as a poet. While such absences are interesting – I think of Marianne Moore's remark prefacing her incomplete *Complete Poems*: "Omissions are not accidents" – they certainly don't weaken the book, which just as it is offers a compelling, multifaceted portrait of the author and a great deal of pleasure and wisdom. (Of course, territory not covered here could appear in a sequel. After all, the poet Donald Hall recently produced not one but two fine books of personal essays in his own mid-to-late eighties.)

The title *Come! Come! Where? Where?* comes from an Audubon Society description of sparrow song: "come-come-where-where-all-together-down-the-hill." The insistent

invitation ("Come!") leads to the anticipated response ("Where?") – and indeed these essays take us to many remarkable places: to Seay's home today, to the eerily lighted bedroom where he slept as a child at his grandparents' house, to Manhattan (including stops at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Twin Towers), to the cemetery where Josh rests, to Moscow (including the cemetery where Chekhov is buried), to the Aialik Glacier in Alaska, to the Everglades, to the barrier islands off the Mississippi Gulf Coast, to a tugboat on the Mississippi River, to the Canyon de Chelly in Arizona, and to the Mississippi Delta wilderness Faulkner's readers know as the Big Bottom. The volume's title also hints at the surprising direction some of the essays take: Seay himself seems a bit bemused by the fact that a meditation on eating and drinking, "Our Hands in the History of It," concludes by evoking his childhood interest in pocketknives.

Now and then Seay can draw in a reader and keep them spellbound but also uncertain for some time where exactly it is they're going. Consider the introduction to "The Weight of a Feather," the third essay of the book's twenty:

Laura, who comes every other week to clean my house, seems not to engage with the little narratives I leave for her. On my refrigerator, for instance, I have three fish magnets that I arrange in a simple linear narrative, no *Last Year at Marienbad* or *Memento* stuff. At the top of the story is a fish I got in Barbados. It is a barracuda-looking fish. But if it is in fact a barracuda, it is one goofy-looking barracuda. It's just swimming along with no thought for the tomorrow—or, for that matter, for the

moment. Below it is a shark that I have set in a vicious downward angle in pursuit of what looks like a snapper, but it's not a red snapper, more blue and green. Probably a spangled emperor snapper, though the emperor when frightened will change its color, so who knows. The snapper is swimming desperately upward in the direction of the nitwit barracuda, but its attempt to escape is clearly doomed. The shark is hungry, relentless. Laura rearranges the fish in peaceful and parallel paths across what I intended as an ocean of pain and truth. I don't think she has a Disney World narrative in mind, but that's the story I see. (11–12)

In some ways that opening makes a good snapshot of the book's style: the delivery is crisp and entertaining, with invocations of both high and popular culture, international travel, and the author's knowledge of matters far beyond the ivory tower. Here as elsewhere we also find deftly deployed verbal effects associated with poetry: for example, there's a remarkable amount of alliteration throughout, beginning with the very first sentence (*Laura/little/leave, who/house, comes/clean, not/narratives*). It's a captivating paragraph.

One probably wouldn't guess, though, that an essay that starts in such (mostly) lighthearted fashion and then proceeds to humorously describe other aspects of the author's home décor – charmingly detouring through memories associated with those items – would eventually reach a deeply poignant reflection on Seay's relationship with his father, followed by an equally poignant account of the elder Seay's experience of a life-altering work injury. One wouldn't guess that trajectory,

but that's the one we're led to take, through a series of moves as thoroughly graceful as they are surprising. Having conducted us to this destination, Seay closes with a meditation on narrative:

It is commonplace to note that some of the stories we attempt to tell elude or otherwise fail in their mission. Likewise stories that we are told. We can't follow the narrative line; it escapes us utterly or we lose it somewhere along the way. Or the import of the story eludes us. As for the stories we tell, those that involve a sense of play are particularly prone to misinterpretation. They have the wrong traction, the wrong tonal register, the wrong timing. They can embarrass us or leave us unsatisfied with our attempt. On Wikipedia they would be in need of disambiguation. But we continue to offer those stories for play in the world. (21)

We need to tell and hear such narratives, he goes on to say, to cope with life's overabundance of pain and loss. To quote the rhetorical question with which he closes the essay, "How else not be lost in weeping for the hurt and the too-soon gone?" (21).

Indeed, several of the other essays (such as "Wheat Field with Crows," "Snugfit Eyepatch: The Monocular Proof," and "You Dumb Bell") do revolve around loss, but they do so with an inspiring kind of philosophical good humor. And others (such as "Avian Voices: Trying Not to Kill a Mockingbird," "Big Boss Man," and "The Single-Wide Wars") stay mostly clear of the elegiac. *Come! Come! Where? Where?* isn't a sad book, even when it does deal with sadness; it's genuinely as life-affirming as the sparrow song translated by its title. ■