

Neil H. Wright

TO VIRGINIA PECK

who, a student of John Crowe Ransom and poet
and scholar in her own right, taught her
generations at Middle Tennessee State College/
University for thirty-odd years and will not
be forgotten there.

1936

You were then, it was said,
Belle of the Vanderbilt campus—

And “living in sin” with your Prince Hal
Until stern chancellors and deans redeemed the time—

they made you marry!

When he came, that smiling young actor,
fresh from an oil rig in Texas and rattling Shakespeare,

to ask your father’s permission,
as was done in those days,

the old man didn’t know which daughter he meant;
“Take whichever one you want,” he said,

as if his were the say.

1966

Fall, winter, spring,
you taught us how to read—

Ransom, gentleman Ransom, and foursquare Housman,
caustic Jarrell and devout arrhythmic Hopkins,

Eliot the abstruse and Bishop so precise,
mad Lowell and the Cold Sage;

Auden’s Saxon dirge, Millay’s love-bent measures,
the jewel of Ireland and the drunken roarer of Wales—

later the stridencies of anguished Plath
and her sultry-voiced sister . . .

Fall, winter, spring,
you taught us how to know—

strange and beautiful hybrids
of language, image, sound . . .

“Stand and perform,” you said, and were impatient
and wry when we struggled—

some of us knew you had refused to teach
until they paid you same as the men

for your degree.

1976

Summers you retreated to the cabin,
bra-less, hose-less, finally husband-less,

to Nature’s court: “a large court,” you said,
“with many underlings”;

your day lily fields
bore the children you never had,

row upon row of beauties behind the cabin,
Nature naturing at your hand—

and like the spiders you loved so well,
you spun, flung out, your web

of flowers, poems, rapartee,
thoughts of enduring thread;

yours too a large court, with many underlings.

1990

Now the gyre its course has run,
Nature’s will is almost done;

let the Southern lady lie
underneath the Southern sky.

Let her webwork silverspun
join the spheres to make them one;

let earth and memory compose
an epitaph for this wild rose.