Reynolds Price

A PROFILE

by Lacy Crawford

It would have been an auspicious meeting indeed, if Reynolds Price could have thought of something to say. He was twenty-nine years old, just returned from a year in England, pausing in New York City. The year was 1962. It was springtime, late May. Just a month earlier, his first novel, *A Long and Happy Life*, had been published by Atheneum and had appeared in its entirety in a single issue of *Harper's*. Now he was watching from a high balcony seat as his friend Eudora Welty presented William Faulkner with the Gold Medal for Fiction at the National Institute and Academy of Arts of Letters. Price was surprised by how small Faulkner appeared on stage, how all but silently he spoke. When the ceremony finished, Price found himself alone on the sidewalk, and there, alone next to him, was Faulkner. At the time, every Southern writer stood to be compared to Faulkner, and Price was no exception. He was not an unreserved fan of Faulkner's work, and the young author had heard that the great man could be cold. Still, there they were. Price was a Southern boy with a novel. Faulkner had won the Nobel. Price looked at him and tried to come up with a greeting. The city moved around them. Then a car

pulled up, and Faulkner was gone. In seven weeks he would be dead.

Forty-four years later, Edward Reynolds Price is the author of thirty-seven published books, and he smiles to recall the young writer he was on that spring afternoon in Manhattan. It's a warm night in July 2006. Price tells the story between spoonfuls of corn and shrimp chowder at the Fairview Restaurant at the Washington Duke Inn, a local haunt in Durham, North Carolina, where he lives and teaches at Duke University. As he speaks, three waiters take turns bringing the bread basket, and the pianist, finishing his set, nods in our direction on his way to the kitchen. "And you know," Price says, his voice conspiratorial, "Faulkner *had my book*. Atheneum sent it to him." What might Price have learned had he introduced himself that May afternoon in '62? What passing of the baton might have sent him on his way? He did discover, some time later and after the novel had won the William Faulkner Prize, that Faulkner had been seen around Charlottesville with Price's book under his arm. "A good sign," Price explains. Faulkner was known to write his name in the books he chose to keep. Some years ago, Price sent a letter to Faulkner's daughter to ask if he might have the book. He shrugs. "I never heard back."

Price spoons more soup, purrs; he is a man of appetites and fond of pleasure. He has asked for his wheelchair to be positioned so he can face the room. More than a few diners recognize him. He has lived in Durham almost all his adult life, and with the exception of a few sabbatical years, he has taught at Duke—where he is a James B. Duke Professor of English—since he was twenty-five years old. He is now seventy-three. His classes are oversubscribed. He publishes a new book, on average, every eleven months. Twenty-three years ago, in the summer of 1984, he was diagnosed with spinal cancer and given, generously, eighteen months to live. That's the only time he hit a glitch in his writing. He has never married, has no children, and lives with an assistant in his house of forty-two years, where he has written novels (the National Book Critics' Circle Award–winning *Kate Vaiden* is perhaps the best known of thirteen), essays, short stories, a children's book, lyrics (for two songs recorded by James Taylor), epistles, an apocryphal gospel (yes, a gospel), plays, poems, and, currently, another memoir. As a literary decathlete, he is unmatched in contemporary American letters, though he seldom writes reviews, and very seldom reads them. "I've received many gratifyingly positive reviews," he says, "and in some cases deliriously graceful reviews; but I never received a review that helped me with future work." His respect for personal industry keeps him from the fray. "I have a certain sense of belonging to a fraternity which consists of serious craftsmen, not to mention artists," he continues. "I see no reason to beat up on people who are working at this too."

Price's benevolence, rich in his conversation, his classes, and his big, rolling laugh, finds its ballast in his fierce dedication to work—a solitary practice he protects for himself and advises for others. In much of his writing, Price focuses on forms of devotion—to family, faith, and vocation—and he is moved by the solace of consistency and endurance. His fiction and memoirs are closely observed tales of the people and places he knew as a child in rural and small-town North Carolina, parts of the world near where he lives that continue to provide stories, characters, and imagery for his work. In some of his nonfiction, he has steadily pursued with focused intelligence and scholastic rigor an understanding of the religious faith that is perhaps the central organizing principle of his life. As an avowed but non-church-going Christian, he has appeared on the cover of *Time* Magazine, and his organ pipe of a voice became familiar to millions when he delivered a year's worth of weekly radio essays on National Public Radio in 1994. Over the years he's written and spoken widely about himself and his work, always articulately but with a sureness that threatens to preclude further questions. But there's no talk of religion tonight, or of publishing, or even much of Faulkner. Price is a marvelous dinner partner. He's a flirt. And he laughs when he describes how tired he got, early in his career, fending off questions about Faulknerian influences in his work. There were none, he says, and moves on; his filet has arrived, and with a deep anticipatory sigh, he tucks in.

Price's first memory predates his birth on February 1, 1933. "I still recall the sense," he says, "of tremendous quiet peacefulness; I could see light coming through my mother's stomach." He's more certain of his second memory, when he was a few months old, lying happily in the grass while the family's goat nibbled at his diaper. He is aware that such recall is highly unusual. In his classes at Duke, Price used to ask creative writing students to describe their first memories. The only student to profess recollection from before age two was the young novelist Anne Tyler, then a sixteen-year-old freshman. Thinking over his own childhood now, Price paraphrases Tyler's late husband, a psychiatrist who studied memory. "I think writers are frequently people whose memories are too good," Price says. "They retain too much. They write to forget, to keep from going nuts."

In his fiction, Price continually returns to the sites of these first memories, beginning with Macon, North Carolina, where he was born, the first child of Will and Elizabeth Price, in the house where his mother grew up. Will was a traveling salesman, and the young family moved often: from Macon to nearby Warrenton, Roxboro, and Asheboro, towns surrounded by tobacco fields and pine forests that provide at least the partial setting for most of Price's novels and stories. "I get a good

deal of pleasure in being able to write about those places," he says, "and how wonderful they were as refuges for childhood, because that's where I had wonderful solitude as a child, wandering around the woods."

Price's childhood was, he says, shadowed by danger. His mother went into labor with him just hours after Hitler became chancellor of Germany, on a freezing night at the nadir of the Depression. "I had a very fragile first couple of years," he says; he was frequently ill and suffered mysterious, violent seizures. The births of siblings came hard, too. He remembers standing on the porch in Roxboro, aged three, watching an ambulance carry away his mother, who was hemorrhaging after giving birth to a stillborn girl. "They found one man who had her very rare blood type and who raced to the hospital so they could transfuse her arm-to-arm," he says. Price imagines that "a certain amount of fear and dread" caused her to wait years before trying for another child. Bill, Price's brother, was born just before Price turned eight. "We were both of us martyrs to bronchial infections," he says. "Always gasping."

Price was highly sensitive to his concerned parents' moods. "I'm an intense feeler, always have been," he says. "A great proneness to depression comes from both sides of my family." Price's mother, who had lost both parents by age fourteen, suffered what she called "Mother's blues." "I'd come home from school in the afternoon," he recalls, "and she'd often be lying on the sofa. I'd say to myself, Uh-oh, she's depressed . . . and later, I might ask gingerly, 'Mom, what's wrong?' She'd say, 'This is the day my father died, this is the day my mother died.' Emotionally, my mother was very naked. Neither she nor Dad had been educated beyond high school, and they had nothing that you or I would think of as psychological awareness. Mother didn't know how very deeply her fears affected her."

Price's awareness of his own fragility emerged from a complicated sense of mutual dependence he shared with his father. Will Price, like most of the men in his family, was a terrible alcoholic. The birth of his first child required a long and dangerous labor; Reynolds was breech, and after an unsuccessful night, the doctor emerged from the bedroom to tell his father, "I may be losing them both." Will fled the house for the woodshed, where he got on his knees and bargained with God: If you save them, I will quit drinking. Mother and child lived. "What was that like," Price wonders, "trying to cure himself of alcoholism before A. A. even existed? And all while getting up every day to sell refrigerators and stoves by knocking on people's doors in rural North Carolina? While trying to maintain a complex wife who was an orphan? By the time I had an awareness of him, he seemed a very troubled man. He wasn't clattering around the house or harming anybody, but he had a very worried countenance. Distracted. He wasn't the dad who was going to be down on the floor with his tie off, playing with you."

Price, whose first childhood books were illustrated stories from the Bible, was aware of his father's promise and of its Old Testament echoes. He has written that as a small boy, he favored the picture of "young Isaac bearing his own funeral pyre up a hill behind his father." Even before he could read, Price knew his father's constant fear that a return to the bottle would cost his son's life. "There was never any question that he loved me," Price recalls, "but he was the only man I ever knew who knelt by his bed every night to pray. Mother once said, 'What do you think he's talking about?' He'd be down there half an hour."

Perhaps as antidote to his anxieties, Will Price was also, as Price has written, "of all the comedians I've watched, the third-best after Chaplin and Keaton." Price's mother returned the gift. "They had a wonderful marriage," Price says. "There was no money in it, but it was so congenial, and they had wonderful senses of humor and fun. Mother's blues never lasted long." Both were storytellers, performers, anxious to please, and Price grew up alternately learning from their watchfulness and practicing his own. "Any mimic as good as Will must watch his subjects with a minute closeness," he wrote in his first memoir, *Clear Pictures*, "and at least a third of Elizabeth's pleasure came from her hunting orphan-eyes. . . . So I was all the more fortunate in one more of my parents' legacies, their gift for attention."

By the age of five, Price, who was "never good at ordinary kid-stuff," had developed an obsession with drawing elephants. (His children's book, *A Perfect Friend*, stars an elephant.) He determined that he would be an artist, and for years he spent countless hours assembling sketchbooks, often of faces. But when he was a teen, his ambition foundered. "I had gone to a few museums," he recalls, "and I began to think, Maybe you're not good enough. I was a good copyist, but I wasn't a very original painter." Another form of expression recommended itself. "The realization coincided with my having a wonderful eleventh-grade English teacher named Phyllis Peacock. I was the teacher's pet; I was the bright kid who loved to work. She gave us regular writing assignments, and returned mine, saying, 'This is very good, now write something longer.' By the time I was sixteen, I knew that I wanted to grow up to be a teacher and a writer." His early efforts were poems of the sort which, he says, laughing, "everybody does in high school: '*I am the most miserable child under the arc of the sky, genius though I am. . . .*' "

Price attended Duke University on full scholarship, majoring in English, but his plans to write were stalled. Like all young writers, he had to find his subject and the courage of his voice. He thought he lacked both. Weaned on Hemingway, Price feared he hadn't seen enough of life. "I was a Depression and World War II boy, so I didn't travel," he explains. "I had never got off the East Coast." He figured fiction

would have to wait until he could graduate, grow up, and meet the world. His lone early attempt at a short story was written at the last minute, after much procrastination, for a freshman composition class. It was the story that would become "Michael Egerton," one of Price's most anthologized works. But although the piece attracted praise and advice from the visiting writer Elizabeth Bowen, Price shelved the story. Always an outstanding student, he preferred the relative safety of rigorous class work, through which he enjoyed fulfilling his elders' ambitions for him.

Then, in the winter of Price's junior year, on his twenty-first birthday, his father was diagnosed with lung cancer. Will Price called for his son and asked him to remain, choosing Reynolds's company above anyone else's; while Elizabeth and Bill visited the hospital, it was Price who stayed by his father's side. "They removed his lung, and the surgery killed him," Price recalls. "But it was a very dramatic, beautifully shaped, yet horrendous episode, three weeks when I was suddenly summoned by him to run his death, preside over his death, which I did. And I did a damn good job of it. I was holding his wrist when his pulse quit."

Price spent the last days and nights of his father's life alone in an armchair by the hospital bed. On the few occasions each day when he left the room, he noticed he was being carefully watched by the curious relatives of an unknown patient across the hall, whom he later described as "three young men who looked like brothers, all with long necks and thick country-skin." Their voyeurism was both intrusive and generous. Through their eyes, Price saw the measure of what he was facing, and how well he was holding up.

He was proud too of his father's summons, by which Will had granted Price the authority of manhood while he was dying, rather than leaving a vacuum for Price to fill. His death then awarded an opening. "I was more than ready to grow," Price writes in *Clear Pictures,* "and there in the generous absence of my father's huge presence, I began to move into that grown life I'd suddenly won." That life was the life of a writer.

Price returned to Duke. In the fall of his senior year, he dusted off "Michael Egerton" and revised furiously. He was working in William Blackburn's narrative writing class. Blackburn, who was a campus legend for having mentored William Styron, among others, taught an impassioned engagement with narrative prose. Price was braced. Like tumblers in a lock, that spring a series of creative gates turned.

On a visit to Duke Hospital—a different hospital from where his father died—to see a friend, Price saw in the hall the same three brothers who had watched him the year before. They passed him without recognition. Price read their reappearance as an omen for his writing, and he imagined his father's death as they would have told

it: the boy across the hall, the hushed, mournful room, the unknown struggle they tried to witness from their vantage point. This imagining gave Price his story and the narrative distance to write it. Shortly thereafter, sitting in a Howard Johnson's restaurant with a friend, Price was taken by a pretty blond girl who entered, trailing her boyfriend. She was tall, sturdy, adoring, and proud, and she reminded him of the daughters of subsistence tobacco farmers who had befriended him in his lonely grade-school years. He had his character. He named her Rosacoke.

Her story, "A Chain of Love," was drafted by May. It's a platonic love story in which teenage Rosacoke sits with her recovering grandfather in the hospital and watches the slow death of a boy's father behind the closed door across the hall. Toward the end, Rosacoke silently enters the room unbidden, bearing flowers for the boy, and witnesses father and son engaged in the hard private work of dying. Her final thought, "If he had to die wasn't that as good a way as any, leaving his living picture back here in that boy?", is a blessing on Price's father, and on Price himself.

"A Chain of Love" was a success. As Price later wrote, "Rosacoke had stood up live from her first paragraph." Eudora Welty, visiting Duke as a lecturer that spring, read Price's work and sent it to her agent, Diarmuid Russell. Price had been awarded a Rhodes scholarship for postgraduate study at Oxford that fall, and he left for England with Eudora Welty's agent as his own.

But Welty gave Price an even greater gift in the example of her work and the variation of experience she awarded her characters in domestic settings in the small-town South. Price recognized the world she was drawing on, and the richness of narrative she had found there. "Her work showed me," Price wrote, ". . . that the world I had known for twenty-two years (the people, places, language) was a possible subject for serious fiction." He saw that he had lived enough to begin.

From that point on, he confides, "I don't think I ever seriously doubted I was a good writer." He pauses to listen to his own words before continuing. "It wasn't some cocky, I-am-the-Shakespeare-of-the-upper-South sort of confidence," he says. "On the contrary, I could just quietly do it. And for what it was worth, that's what I did."

For three years at Oxford, from 1955 to 1958, Price worked at his fiction while completing a thesis on John Milton's *Samson Agonistes.* The ancient, rain-soaked Oxford yards were a world away from the pine forests of North Carolina, and in his notebooks, Price sketched ideas for a novel about Rosacoke Mustian and waited out his distance from home, where the ambience would inform his drafting. But Price's attention to *Samson Agonistes,* the blank-verse, seventeenth-century retelling of the Old Testament story of Samson's blinding and banishment, was nonetheless working

its way through his imagination. The morality of Milton's verse, and in particular the notion of the unassailable hand of divine fate, found a confluence with the narratives emerging in Price's notebooks. While Price's contemporaries in the States were largely advancing work that rejected the postwar domesticity of the 1950s, setting ambition and self-realization in opposition to the regressive pull of family and convention, Price was dreaming up a novel about a girl who was "too good." "[Rosa's] greatness as a woman, a person," he wrote in his notebook, "was her desire, her obligation, always to make the kind gesture, the touch, the thing which seemed to her clearly, if not always desirably, *right*, and right because she thought it would make somebody else happy."

In 1957 the poet and critic Stephen Spender published "A Chain of Love" in the British literary periodical *Encounter*, which he edited. The piece attracted a good deal of attention and earned Price a job offer from Duke teaching freshman composition. Price returned to Durham, rented a trailer, and spent the next three years, as he says, "either on campus learning how to teach, or sitting in a corner of the little trailer, learning how to write a book."

That book, *A Long and Happy Life*, begins like this:

> Just with his body and from inside like a snake, leaning that black motorcycle side to side, cutting in and out of the slow line of cars to get there first, staring due-north through goggles towards Mount Moriah and switching coon tails in everybody's face was Wesley Beavers, and laid against his back like sleep, spraddle-legged on the sheepskin seat behind him was Rosacoke Mustian who was maybe his girl and who had given up looking into the wind and trying to nod at every sad car in the line, and when he even speeded up and passed the truck (lent for the afternoon by Mr. Isaac Alston and driven by Sammy his man, hauling one pine box and one black boy dressed in all he could borrow, set up in a ladder-back chair with flowers banked round him and a foot on the box to steady it)—when he even passed that, Rosacoke said once into his back "Don't" and rested in humiliation, not thinking but with her hands on his hips for dear life and her white blouse blown out behind her like a banner in defeat.

In his thirteen novels and four collections of short stories, Price never strays far from the prose rhythms and basic elements of this opening passage: long sentences in the idiomatic vernacular, chock-full of the sort of loving detail that recalls the vigilance of small-town storytellers; a mention of death; a biblical allusion (Mount Moriah is where Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac; in this story, it serves as the name of a Negro church); a sturdy, faithful black servant; and two young attractive characters working out their relationship, one of them running and one trying to hold on.

Price is interested in the ways characters come to understand their dependence on one another. In his fiction, dependence is the human condition. "For Rosacoke is older now," he wrote in his notes on the novel, "and therefore infinitely more dependent on other people (nothing on earth is as independent as a child), more entangled—to the point, finally, of suffocation." Price sees the fullness of the adult self in relationship to others; his characters are not so much faced with change as with gracious surrender to the roles they are due to play, as children, siblings, spouses, and parents, or—in a few notable cases—as solitary adults.

In *A Long and Happy Life*, nineteen-year-old Rosacoke, having been in love with the fatally attractive Wesley Beavers since she was twelve and he fifteen, finally gives in to his advances and becomes pregnant. Wesley has left their hometown for Norfolk, where he sells motorcycles and dates other women, a fact not lost on Rosa. To make matters worse, in the moment of their lovemaking, he calls Rosa by another woman's name. In the book's climactic scene, Rosa must decide whether to accept Wesley's loveless but not unkind offer to elope. To the contemporary reader, it is almost unthinkable. "Of course," Price agrees, "the way you're taught now, Rosa would have gone to Raleigh and aborted that child! But Rosa isn't a culturally sophisticated woman. She hasn't read *Madame Bovary* or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. She comes from a world in which the older values like fidelity and endurance and long-range commitment and devotion were still very powerful."

Rosa's world—rural, northeastern North Carolina in the late 1950s, true Price heartland—is not yet lit by the language of self-awareness, and she experiences her life unmitigated by irony, mass culture, or psychological idiom. Here is Rosa delivering an elegy for her childhood friend Mildred, dead in childbirth at age twenty-one: "The other evening I thought to myself, 'It is nearly Mildred's twenty-first birthday' so I walked down to her place after supper, and nobody was there except the turkey. I didn't know till the next afternoon they had carried her away. There I was just wanting to give her a pair of stockings and wish her a long and happy life and she was already gone."

Rosa's intended gifts—the useful stockings and an innocent wish—trace the known world of Price's early characters; if his prose were scored for theme, it would range several octaves, from the most rustic detail to the loftiest prayer. Price balances his characters' naïveté by grounding them in the dirt of their hometowns and in their own corporeality. Thus Rosa is met by a turkey at her dead friend's house; and thus Rosa's body is described with great care. "That was the thing I worked on so hard when I began writing my first novel," Price recalls. "I wanted to make both Rosa and Wesley physically attractive people so they would work on the reader's

own erotic sensibilities. I wanted you to think, Whoo, nice boy! Whoo, nice girl! I tried to learn that from D. H. Lawrence. When he got it right, nobody made characters more physically exciting than he. I don't think I've ever written a story about a character who wasn't somebody whom you'd be glad enough to sit down beside on a bus or at a train station café."

Experiencing characters' bodies also reminds the reader that bodies are vulnerable. And indeed, throughout Price's fiction, women die giving birth, babies die being born, and men die of illness, suicide, even of snakebite. In much of American fiction of the twentieth century—until the clear reversal of the advent of AIDS, which in Price's novel *The Promise of Rest* takes the life of the youngest member of a Price literary dynasty—modern medicine plays an enormous but unsung role, allowing characters to avoid thoughts of the clock until appearance and desire begin to flag. Price preserves a pre-penicillin understanding of how death propels life forward. Rosacoke, after all, must decide how to respond to her pregnancy, having just buried a friend who died in childbirth, and her awareness of her own mortality shapes her thinking: she longs less for freedom and pleasure and more for responsibility and security. Hers is a revelation that in modern life is usually reserved for the aged. As another Price character realizes, "What set him off from others his age . . . was the fact he'd always believed in death, his mother's main gift. He'd always known that individual people *leave* apparently forever; that the hope of knowing, really knowing, any single person must be exercised *now*."

Rosacoke, with similar intent, resolves to say yes. It is a decision made first out of devotion to being good—that is, doing what is right (Wesley has, after all, taken the first step in this direction)—and she hopes that from it, love will grow.

Devotion as discrete from love is the moral axis on which Price's fiction turns. "Rosacoke does what all the women in my mother's family did," he explains, "with all their alcoholic husbands: they just sat there and waited until the men got sober and came back home." Price does not judge his characters (or his relatives) for their devotion, which to him represents not passivity but patience. His moral voice is therefore subversive, disregarding the *I want, I need* voices of contemporary feminism or of the self-actualization of both genders. "The men I grew up around could go off and have love affairs, as Blue Calhoun does," he continues, referring to the 1992 novel of the same name. "They could take a young girl to Florida and rent a house and stay with her for six or nine months, and when they returned, life was not exactly waiting, but when they used their key to open the front door, they found out their wife hadn't changed the locks. And I'm not sure that such acceptance is entirely wrong."

But a patient character, in Price's hands, is not an inert character. Price is not a Puritan, and in his fiction appetites are given their due; he knows that desire drives a narrative in a way responsibility never will. He explains that *Blue Calhoun* is partly based on the true story of a beloved cousin, "an absolutely loveable alcoholic," who left his family and ran off with a teenaged girl for a while. In the novel, Blue Calhoun ultimately surrenders to his responsibility as a husband and father, even though he pays a hefty price and is left alone to raise his orphaned granddaughter. Price recalls visiting his cousin decades after his affair with the girl, when he was old and dying in the hospital: "I said, tell me about Jane Brown [not her real name]," Price recalls. "And my cousin gave me a hawk-eyed look and said, 'You know about that?' I had been young when it had happened, but I told him, 'You know what? I do.' And he told me, 'Reyn, that was the happiest I ever was.' "

Price smiles. "And boy, I knew I had a novel there!"

Price was born within a few months' time of two similarly prolific and high-profile American novelists, Philip Roth and John Updike. They debuted in close succession (Roth with *Goodbye, Columbus* in 1959; Updike with *The Poorhouse Fair* that same year and with *Rabbit, Run*, in 1960; Price with *A Long and Happy Life* in 1962), and in their work all three have delineated a specific range of American geography and culture, places now forever mapped by their fiction in the common imagination. But in contrast to his peers, Price has repeatedly set his books in the past, preferring the first half of the twentieth century and small communities largely untouched by politics, pop culture, and contemporary sensibilities. His frequent use of rural settings rebukes the American dream of the big city as a place where one can be reinvented. Transience and urban environments challenge the centrality of place he sees as essential to the making of human personality, and therefore to the novel. Urbanization, he told an interviewer in 1966, "could be the death of the novel as we have known it . . . a lessening value in human life of roots, of literal rootedness in place, in land . . . in an intimately known and long-experienced atmosphere."

For Price, American individualism has gone too far in denying the role of family origin, and in his novels—the great majority of which are coming-of-age stories—he prefers to explore the fullness of characters in their rootedness rather than in their transitions. *Rootedness* here means not only one's personal history, even from earliest childhood, but also the experience and influence of those who lived and died before one was born. Some characters carry hopes and fears bequeathed by generations before, with a genealogy of desire as sure as one of hair and eye color.

Blue Calhoun learns this from his mother, greeting her—old and blind—on her porch:

> I cleared my throat and went on towards her to take her hand and kiss the palm. She'd known right along but just the same I said "It's Blue."
>
> She held onto me. "It always was."
>
> I sat in a cane-bottom rocker beside her. Then I thought that through—*It always was.* I said "You've known me way more than half of your sweet life and all of mine."
>
> She still hadn't faced me but looked straight out to the empty road.
>
> "Don't undersell yourself, old Blue. You were in my mind when I was a girl and my dry body was flat as a dime."
>
> "Before you knew Dad?"
>
> "Whole geological *ages* before."

Such possession by the past would likely set anyone fleeing for freedom, but Price's characters, whether by self-fulfilling prophecy or higher design, never succeed in breaking free. His fiction is set apart by this sort of literary Calvinism, the trajectory always toward the past. When his characters find contentedness, it is by return to where they began: to a town, to a partner, or to solitude, whichever seems their fate. Happiness is won of steadiness toward others, and redemption is found in telling the tale. Price's fiction does not celebrate the self, and the free-love sixties and seventies, greedy eighties, and new age nineties successively left him cold. It could be argued that Blue Calhoun runs the way Rabbit Angstrom runs, but Blue's story is one long keening for atonement: "I'm hoping to make slim amends," he pleads, "by telling this history that's all but true."

The influence of the past on characters' lives lends a sense of hyperauthority to Price's fiction, which is best expressed by the fantasy one character has of the entire world as a giant's dream: "I never felt realer than the world," says Hutch Mayfield, the central character in Price's Mayfield Trilogy, in the middle volume of the series, *The Source of Light.* "I only thought we were all being *dreamt*. We were simultaneous figures in a tale being dreamt by a giant asleep in a cave at the heart of a bare world, otherwise alone." It's a fantasy Price has written of having himself as a child. Additional stylistic elements pull Price's fiction to the edges of realism; he is comfortable with allegory and with the use of dreams as prophecy, and his characters often bear names that leave no doubt as to their function in the narrative: the teenage paramour who drives Blue Calhoun crazy is named Luna; the young hero of *The Tongues of Angels*, who guides two characters from life into death, is called Bridge Boatner.

Price's characters are not unaware of their plight, and some question whether free will even exists. As Hutch Mayfield thinks of his own lonely life, "There were all the clues (a chain of hints beginning at his birth, with his mother's death) that whatever giant was dreaming his life was dreaming it solo—a solitary journey with skirmishes of company. And any attempts by the characters to change the plot were foiled by the dreamer."

Hutch and his peers may be more right than they know. When he's drafting, Price told me, "I've always said I know A and Z, and then I invent B through Y. I do know their fate. And have I ever been surprised? I tried to make Eva in the Mayfield Trilogy commit suicide in the second volume, and she wouldn't die. She was just too vital. I can't remember another character surprising me. Little amusing things, comic things, pratfalls, but no, that's the only time I can remember a character refusing."

Consequently, Price's fiction is at its best when it is told in the first person by a character who illuminates the individual's desires at constant war with the obligations of destiny. In this mode, Price can open the throttle on his regionalist's ear, the storytelling voice that is witty, alive, and rich in idiosyncratic metaphor. It is this quality of voice that marks the 1986 novel *Kate Vaiden*, the surprisingly sad story of a woman who abandons her newborn son. Like in *Blue Calhoun,* the novel's conceit is a letter of atonement. Though Price received heaps of angry mail about the book from women who could not actually believe that a mother would leave her child, he says, "Poor Kate, she was an orphan"; and in the world of Price's fiction, this condition of aloneness is her destiny. "There's no one in my work who would accurately be described as evil," he says. "Nonetheless people do evil things to one another—mothers leave their babies, cruelties are perpetrated."

Kate's individuality, coupled with her infectious sensibility, makes her Price's most popular heroine. She's resourceful, original, and authentic, such as when she describes searching for solace as an orphaned girl among the books in the local library: "Miss Mabel Davis, the spinster librarian, was deaf as a biscuit but had the knack of knowing what book you needed on any given day and leading you to it, with no grins or cooing." Later, once she has fallen from Miss Mabel Davis's favor, Kate says, "I was on my own now, to find my cure like a dog in the woods."

Kate Vaiden has been cited as a special triumph for its evocation by a male author of an authentic female voice. Throughout his work, Price makes deft use of diction and description to give his characters seductive personalities. Watching them struggle against their fates is both revealing and troubling. We'd follow them anywhere, but we fear they have nowhere to go. And who hasn't sensed, at times, the

presence of an unseen, controlling hand in life? Price understands this dark sense of destiny as unique to his fiction: "There is something outrageous in my work," he says, "and I'm glad there is. I think there's something scary about it, and it pleases me."

By 1984, the year Price was fifty-one years old, he'd published eleven books; had been teaching for twenty-five years; owned a home in the country on forty acres of land, with forests, fields, and a living pond; and was dug in deep in a life that worked. That spring he'd finished the first third of *Kate Vaiden* when a curious weakness in his lower legs caused him to seek medical attention. Doctors discovered a large but slow-growing tumor—ten inches long and wide as a pencil—entwined with the long fibers of his upper spinal cord. Given the size and location of the tumor, Price had been given an astonishing span of uninterrupted life. Now time had run out: the tumor was outgrowing the narrow space in his spinal column, choking him from the feet up. "Big demon," Price calls it. "Big eel."

In a much-admired memoir, *A Whole New Life*, Price chronicled the five weeks of near-lethal radiation treatment that slowed the tumor's growth long enough to allow him to survive until the emergence of the medical breakthrough that would save his life—an ultrasonic laser scalpel, capable of the cell-by-cell precision necessary to carve the tumor from his spinal cord without killing him. The radiation, however, destroyed healthy nerves too, leaving Price paralyzed from the chest down.

"The doctor told my brother I had eighteen months in the summer of '84," Price recalls, "and Bill didn't tell me, because I didn't want to know. Not that I was afraid of bad news, but I knew that if they gave me a deadline, I'd beat it, just to prove I was an overachiever. Give me eighteen months? Fuck you! I'll die in fourteen!" Price laughs. "But twenty-two years later, here I sit."

Price's voice emerges from deep in his belly—he has written about the day the muscles of his abdominal wall collapsed, giving this formerly slim man the St. Nicholas belly that now anchors him in his chair, beneath massively developed shoulders and arms, on which he rises every few minutes to free up his circulation. Because he cannot balance his torso, he pulls his left leg up by the pants cuff onto the right, forming a sort of tripod, atop which he sits; his stillness and his seated silhouette recall a Buddha, at least until he speaks. His voice seems to have gathered what power his legs have lost, such that the center of gravity in the room shifts to him the minute he rolls in and issues his greeting. For the able-bodied person standing up, the experience is not unlike Alice in Wonderland's: you are suddenly way too tall and seized with the desire to sit down too.

"It's awful," Price says congenially. "I hate sitting on my butt sixteen hours a day. But it's not a choice. And I'll tell you an interesting thing: virtually every friend of mine, old or new, will come up to me and say, 'Reynolds, I had a dream about you last night, you were up and walking!' And I'll say that the truth is that I've never been in the wheelchair in a dream of my own. Never once. So my unconscious either is denying it, or it hasn't perceived it yet. In fact, in my dreams, I'm often flying."

During the heat of the battle, in the summer and fall of 1984, Price was fighting, simply, to live (the effect of the radiation on his nerves wouldn't become clear for some months yet, though every day brought new loss). Furthermore, the initial exploratory surgery of his upper spine caused nerve damage that was the beginning of outrageous, chronic pain. As weakness set in, and he began to really hurt, Price asked for, and received, two clear instances of help from a lifelong source of solace.

In the first, Price awoke on an early July morning to find himself not in his bed but lying on the banks of a lake he recognized: Lake Kinnereth, the ancient Sea of Galilee, now in northern Israel, which Price recognized not only from two visits to Israel and Palestine but also from his study of the Bible as the site of many scenes from Jesus' life. Sure enough, asleep around him were men he understood to be the twelve disciples. One man woke and came to him, beckoning him to follow. Price knew him to be Jesus. Price stripped and followed him into the lake, wading out to his waist, where Jesus poured handfuls of water over Price's head and neck, where the scar from his exploratory surgery was trying to heal. Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven" and headed back to shore.

Price wanted more. He called out, "Am I also cured?"

Jesus said, "That too." And Price was home again.

The second encounter was aural, occurring again when Price was in bed. In the summer predawn, as it was becoming clear that he was losing the use of his legs forever, he directed a question to the ceiling, "How much more do I take?" A voice beside him, neither male nor female but "thoroughly real and near at hand," gave a one-word reply. "More."

In writing about these moments, Price takes candid account of a reader's potential skepticism and details his unsuccessful efforts to explain his visions away as dreams or hallucinations resulting from the most powerful wishing. But the experiences remain irreducible for Price, who has believed since early childhood in God—whom he calls a "supreme creator"—and in the historical Jesus as one manifestation of this God. Price doesn't practice his faith in public, and he writes about it with open circumspection. He does not attend church. "I've haven't felt at all comfortable allying myself with any form of institutionalized religion since I left college,"

he says, explaining his frustration with the human limitations of the Church, in particular the way the clergy and their congregations failed to address civil rights. "At Oxford, I realized that I had gone through a whole childhood, adolescence, and four years of spending every college Sunday at Duke Chapel and had never heard one single denunciation of racism. And I just thought, I don't believe I need to keep going to this place if it's as morally blind and frightened as that. They were frightened to talk about racism in the South. Or anywhere else, for that matter, because America is a bottomlessly racist country."

Across Price's fiction, black characters are more loyal, generous, and honest than their white counterparts. Price has at times been accused of sentimentalizing, but these characters are born of his own experience. "I went back and checked the census records," he explains, "and at the time of my birth, the county had about a 65 percent black population. My tremendously complex relationship to the individual black people who were around the various family homes in my childhood was unremittingly rewarding." Price's family employed a deeply beloved ancient gardener and sometime child minder, the man Price knew as "Uncle Grant," whose age was unknown and who might have been born a slave. Price continues, "To this day, I don't understand where the African-Americans I knew got the endless patience and forgiveness of us that they exercised, and still do."

In his most recent book, *Letter to a Godchild (Concerning Faith)*, published just a few weeks before we met in the summer of 2006, Price details the earliest days of his belief in the divine, which were spent not in church but outdoors. It was while roaming the woods outside his home, at age six or seven, that he was first given a vision that in some ways prepared him for the encounters he would have when stricken with cancer. "In a brief, single full moment," he writes, "I was allowed to see how the vast contraption of nature all round me . . . was bound into a single vast ongoing wheel by one immense power that had willed us into being and intended our futures, wherever they might lead through the pattern, the enormously intricate woven pattern somehow bound at the rim and cohering for as long as the Creator willed it."

"Since that childhood vision," Price says now, "I have felt that either the creator was interested in me, and had certain hopes and expectations of me, or that I was more sensitive than a lot of other people to forms of knowledge that are out there waiting to be stumbled upon. Maybe that's part of what artists are, they're stumblers, they're people who stub their toe on something and say, Wait, what was that? Wait, that was a vision of the unity of being, and I saw it! Maybe some people are going so fast that they don't even bother to stumble."

Price's devastating illness, coming out of the blue in his middle age, was a sort of enforced stumbling that confirmed his lifelong sense of having been singled out for attention by God. He had always had, as he writes in *A Whole New Life*, "a powerful suspicion that the creator takes close note of some creatures and apparently very little of others—a notice that's hardly egalitarian and that hardly always proves fortunate for the chosen creature or tribe. . . . The creator's *chosen* die so often in torment."

This fundamental fact of the attentions of the Judeo-Christian God can be understood to be at work in Price's fiction as well as in his faith. His literary Calvinism is a reflection of a very real Calvinism, to which he will not completely commit—"I'm not signing on to say that some people are born to be damned," he says—but his fiction's steady rewarding of characters who accept misfortune with patient grace reveals what he will claim to be a Christian morality. "Running steadily through my work," he writes in *Letter to a Godchild*, is "an implicit praise of the always startling degree of tolerance and compassion shown and commended by Jesus."

Nevertheless, while the small towns of Price heartland are studded with churches and his characters are often to be found inside them, his fiction stops well short of proselytizing. He is aware that in contemporary secular society a religious commitment can be viewed as naive at best, in literature as in elite universities. "A stranger wrote to me the other day," Price says, "and asked me, Why are you the only American writer who talks about God? And I've often tried to think who was the last significant American writer who had no trouble claiming that he or she was an observant religious person. I'm aware that it probably means that a certain number of people give my work the bypass, saying, Well, he's that guy who believes in God."

Price has turned his prodigious intelligence to his search for the evidence for his faith in several volumes on religious inquiry and scripture. It's a practice he began before his cancer was discovered, in 1978, with *A Palpable God*, a book for which Price learned enough Hebrew, ancient Greek, and Koine—the Greek vernacular in which the gospels were first written—to translate anew entire sections from the Old and New Testament (he already had Latin). Price originally turned to this work to try to relearn something about narrative, finding in the short, "blindingly lucid" narratives of the Bible the most basic elements of abiding stories. Emerging from the work was a conclusion about narrative itself. "The root of story sprang from need," he writes in the book's introduction, ". . . for credible news that our lives proceed in order toward a pattern which, if tragic here and now, is ultimately pleasing in the mind of a god who sees a totality and *at last* enacts his will." Price had prepared himself to understand the crisis of his cancer as part of a larger and ultimately

benevolent design. As a sign that he had been singled out for God's attention, therefore, it was a gift.

For a few harrowing months, however, his illness cost Price the ability to work. "I had to quit writing *Kate Vaiden*," he recalls. "I had put her on the train to Norfolk, and then I could not touch the work for about a year. I couldn't walk into my own study, could not enter the room. It was as if there was some kind of monster living there. And I thought, well, I guess I just won't finish my career as a writer."

As Price's lower body withered, and the pain increased, he went to live with a cousin and her husband, and there he spent long, anguished, idle days. But he found that he could draw, and day after day, he worked with Japanese brushes and colored inks to capture his vision of Kinnereth, in particular Jesus' face. "As the lines moved down in ink on paper," he later wrote, "I knew I was suddenly concentrating for more than ten seconds on something better than the pain that roared all down my spine." By the fall he had received a commission from a small college in Arkansas to write a play. Gradually, his brain was "rewired" for writing, beginning with drawing—the first creative work he had loved as a boy—and moving him back through plays, poems, and eventually to a return to *Kate Vaiden.* "I was not conscious that this was happening," he explains. "If I had been, I would have quit; I would have thought, This is corny. But I was drawing madly, and then I got to work on the play. It was a kind of archaeological dig to get back to the work, but I wasn't sitting there thinking, I hope this makes *Kate Vaiden* start again. I had just put that aside."

A former student, the writer Dan Voll, came to stay with Price and help him to live. "He started using that haunted study," Price recalls, "and my big old IBM Displaywriter computer. And that made it a little easier for me to eventually get back in there." Voll was the first of twenty-three assistants; every year, Price solicits the help of a new graduate from Duke, often young writers who trade the work for room, board, and a year to focus on their writing. "After Dan came and stayed," Price adds, "I got back to work, finished *Kate Vaiden*, and it was published and did well. And from then on, I never quit."

The specific type of cancer Price suffered is sometimes congenital, and Price suspects that he was in fact born with the tiny beginnings of the tumor—a form of predestination his characters would recognize well. But the gift of his writing outlasted the tumor, and he believes that it too is divinely willed: "I have no question that God put this machine in me," he says, "and that I'm expected to make the best of it, whatever it is. Books come to me without a whole lot of searching. They just dawn on me. I do think of it as something separate from myself. And in the morning

when I wake up, I say my morning prayers, and I always ask for help with my work, and acknowledge where it comes from."

Divine source or no, Price is careful to preserve the conditions of his creativity. "People don't know that there's a great virtue in getting up and going to work," he says. His advice to younger writers is to protect the unconscious, which, he says, paraphrasing John Knowles, "is like dogs and children: it loves routine and hates surprises." "If you're a morning person, which I am, or an afternoon person or an evening person, then arrange your life so you turn up with your pencil or your computer at whatever time your body is most likely to let the generator go to work. For me, it's 10 a.m." He cites a note Graham Greene makes in the preface to his *Collected Stories*, in which he refers to the creative voice as the "nègre in the cellar"—a French idiom meaning "ghostwriter." "I never thought of it that way," Price explains, "but if I read a draft before bed, up to the point where I've run into trouble, well . . . it sounds like braggadocio to say it, but every morning, if I get up and get to my desk, I can read the *New York Times* for half an hour online, and look at my bids on eBay, and then, by ten o'clock, the nègre has delivered his findings for the night."

Price's rate of publication has almost doubled since his illness; he has published twenty-six books in twenty-three years. "I must say the wheelchair has been a help to industry," he admits. "Since 1984, when I sat down for the rest of my life, I've written eight months a year, six days a week, between three and five hours a day. And I've gotten a lot of work done as a result. The other option was to go crazy. Either work or go crazy."

During the months when Price is not writing, he teaches. They are twin loves, and they feed one another. For a few years when he taught creative writing, for example, he felt it only fair that he be subjected to the same criticism his students were experiencing, so he began to produce short stories according to the class's requirements and submit them for discussion. Several of the pieces in his *Collected Stories* were originally written, essentially, for class.

"I keep saying loudly," Price says, "just so they make no mistakes, that the idea of retirement has never creased my brain. I am going to be hauled out of there in a wheelbarrow. Given the way I teach—one term a year—who would want to quit? I love it. I think I'm good at it, and I love it."

He speaks of students across the decades—the "good years" of the 1960s to the mid-1970s, a "wonderful time to teach in terms of intellect and student vitality and profound engagement with political life in the country" and, more recently, he laments the political apathy of gifted students called by the siren song of lucrative

careers in finance. “There was a very bright man in my Milton class a few years ago,” he recalls, “who came to see me right before he graduated. I said, Craig, what will you be doing? He replied, Well, you’re not going to like this, Mr. Price, but I’m going to work for Morgan Guaranty. Just for three years, to make a little money. And I said, Craig, could you just kneel here at the foot of the wheelchair and lower your head? He looked at me as though I’d gone mad. I said, If you’ll do that, I’ll just put one bullet at the base of your brain and get you out of your misery now.”

Price continues. “He still works for Morgan Guaranty. Too, too many of them do. But they come back. I’ve reached the point now, after forty-eight years of teaching, where they come back when they are near to retirement. They will have been working at Morgan Guaranty or selling mattresses or whatever, and I’ll go to their reunion, and a fat bald guy will sit down and say, Mr. Price, remember me? Usually I do. Having taught over three thousand students, I remember them far more often than you might think possible. The alumnus will say, to remind me, I wrote a paper about the symbolism of color in *Heart of Darkness*. I remember it instantly. And by the way he says it, I realize the peak intellectual moment in this man’s life was that paper he wrote for my class. Teaching is a wonderful life. It is one of the supremely benign callings; provided you mean well, you can do a lot of good in the world.”

Price teaches two classes: a course in Milton and a smaller seminar in the Gospels of Mark and John, two of the four canonical gospels in the Bible. In the seminar, students study Price’s own translations alongside the primary Greek texts, and then write their own apocryphal gospel. It’s an exercise in biblical exegesis, translation, historical analysis, and, ultimately, prose fiction techniques, which Price undertook himself in *Three Gospels,* his 1996 translation of two complete gospels alongside a gospel, from scratch, of his own. Writing one’s own gospel amounts to an act of near-heresy for Christian literalists, but Price’s intention was not revision so much as preservation: the original story of the canonical gospels, told in lucid prose that frees it from the centuries of translation, accommodation, and updating that can leave scripture stripped of basic narrative pleasure. *Three Gospels* is oriented around the central assertion, like a pin on a map, that Jesus in fact lived and was in fact the divine manifest; beyond that, however, Price approaches scripture as story. In his version, Price restores the humanity of Jesus—his fear and his pleasure—and pauses over the most interesting moments, such as when he weeps by the grave of his friend Lazarus before raising him from the dead, and the comic moment when he has to try twice, using saliva and dirt, to make a blind man see (the first attempt, it would seem, didn’t involve quite enough spit).

The result is a story canted toward human relationships. It is accessible, humane, and full of ambivalence, elements often bafflingly, coldly absent in both the Old and the New Testaments, given their focus on collective experience and allegory over individual experience. Character ambivalence creates space for reader sympathy, and in this context, the divine interventions seem striking rather than puzzling.

In his gospel seminar at Duke, Price continues the work of trying to understand the stories he calls "the most successful narratives of all time." His argument is clear: unless one ascribes the worldwide spread of Christianity to exceptionally seductive early priests and preachers, it seems Jesus' story has been taken up by literally billions of people on the strength of the threadbare hand-copied stories passed from region to region and tongue to tongue throughout the ancient world. His question is simple: Why are they so powerful? Equally compelling to Price is the history of Western art emerging from the gospels, as he writes, like "sparks from their core." To his list of primary literary influences—Tolstoy, Hardy, Milton, Welty—Price would add the authors of the four canonical gospels.

His work with scripture landed Price on the cover of *Time* Magazine three years after *Three Gospels* was published. The accompanying headline—*Jesus at 2000: Novelist Reynolds Price offers a new Gospel based on archeology and the Bible*—speaks to millennial anxiety (the cover date was December 6, 1999) and to the rarity of contemporary writers addressing religious texts. Price sees the secularization of art over the last centuries—and the open hostility to religion in recent decades—as an anomaly in human history. But his annual seminar, for which there's a lengthy waiting list, is hardly packed with young religious types, and his lectures are delivered with careful perspective. What he teaches is not the power of Jesus, but the power of story. He no longer teaches creative writing proper; he doesn't have to. "Every year," Price says, when they write their own gospels, "students always come up with the best writing I've ever received."

On a totally still, stifling July afternoon, Price is just finishing up his day's work. Outside, sweat bees sit motionless on the air; inside, a new memoir is "roaring down the tracks." This one will cover Price's time at Oxford, his early teaching years back at Duke, and a final year in Oxford leading up to the publication of *A Long and Happy Life.* The book stops short, however, of a time about which Price has written very little: the weeks in 1965 when he was losing his mother to twin cerebral aneurysms (an almost unheard-of medical occurrence). The loss was in many ways harder than his father's death. "I just adored her so much," he says. "It was such a long sadness." Having far and improbably outlived both his parents, Price

leavens old grief with gratitude and humor: "I'm constantly rolling by the mirror and thinking, Who the hell is that old guy in here with me?"

His assistant brings him his usual late afternoon drink, two fingers of gin, no more, which Price uses to wash down the pain pill he hopes will "take maybe 20 percent off" the constant "colossal" nerve pain he has suffered since his radiation and spinal surgeries. "It's like your legs have fallen asleep," he explains, "and they've just woken up and they're going *NEARNEARNEARNEAR*. You know that feeling? Take it up by a thousand. If you were in this much pain, you'd be in the emergency room." Morphine dulls the pain, but it dulls everything else too. "If I want to be conscious," he continues, "I'm going to be in pain. It's that simple. Work and good company distract me from it. I haven't canceled anything for pain in twenty years. Period. I figured that out. Anyone who stays home because they feel sick is crazy. Unless you're contagious: if you've got smallpox, stay home. Otherwise, get the hell out of bed and go to the party."

Price has just returned from a party, in fact, an annual lakeside family reunion up in Warren County, North Carolina, where he is now the second-oldest of some fifty attending relations. Over Price's lifetime, his family has scattered from their hometowns; "there's only one of us," he laments, "who any longer lives in our old county." Going back, and especially passing by his mother's childhood home, where he was born and which has now fallen into disrepair, is "a rather melancholy trip." Across his family, he says, "there is very much a sense of expulsion from the garden."

Price's house in Durham is on a short, straight stretch of winding country road, built on a wooded hill not five hundred yards from the trailer he rented as a young man first returning to Duke to teach. He greets visitors in the living room and gestures toward the other spaces, including the new ground-level wing, built to accommodate his wheelchair. There he sleeps and writes: "That's sort of the inner sanctum," he says, "and I guard that. We won't go in there." There is no shortage of sights for a visitor to the living room, whose every surface seems covered. The only visible span of wall space is glimpsed between the teeth of a set of shark jaws mounted on the chimney; the rest of the brick features framed photographs, drawings, and paintings, including a large portrait of Price himself, painted by a former student, and a white death mask of John Keats. There are lamps, trinkets, and figurines on every tabletop. An upright piano hosts sheet music. Books and magazines abound. The house's clutter is visually exciting, but it is nevertheless a quiet space: the phone can't be heard, nor clocks, a radio, even the humming of a refrigerator. The huge, idiosyncratic array of objects makes the room feel comfortably settled and deeply individual, the secret mollusk layers of a longtime, private inhabitant.

"I always thought I wanted to have an enduring companionship," Price says. "But I always wanted the last person who was likely to provide that. And when I was laid up with paraplegia, I began to conclude that maybe I hadn't really wanted an enduring relationship after all, because I had sought it with such bad information about myself and other people at a time when I ought to have been a lot smarter than I was. So maybe I really was not after anything permanent. Certainly I had generated around myself a dwelling that hardly had room for anyone else to walk in and unpack a comb and a brush."

In his nonfiction and interviews, and in glimpses of his fiction, Price is unusually candid about his personal experience—few aspects of his childhood and his family's experience have been off-limits in his memoirs to date. But he has always maintained a Chinese wall around his love affairs, which emerge only in strongly erotic, imagistic passages in his poetry. These mentions, along with his expression of disappointment with the Church for its prurient concern with sexuality, make it clear that a lifelong partner, had he chosen one, would not likely have been a woman. Still, in his fiction and his poems, and in his interactions with men and women, he demonstrates a wide capacity for desire and appreciation. Price admits to a fleeting regret about not having had children, which was "never a conscious decision"; but the shadow of his father's bargain with God falls long. "I'm too much like him," he explains. "He was always thinking of the million awful things that could happen to me, every day, and he transmitted those anxieties to me. I'd have worried too much. I don't think I would have been a good father."

Adult children, of course, might now care for him in his paralysis. But that's selfish, Price says, "and anyway, there's no guarantee that if I had had children, they'd be here to take care of me now." He was close to his two nieces in their childhood and now dotes on his grand-niece. (Brother Bill is an archivist and historian in nearby Raleigh.) "So no," Price concludes, "I don't really regret it. I've got my thirty-seven books on the shelf, and I'll settle for those, I guess."

For a writer of Price's discipline, however, the appearance of a solitary life is an illusion. He is in passionate communion with his work. He has written of himself as "a well-fed, air-conditioned anchorite," and the reference to the eccentric medieval mystics who walled themselves into tiny spaces, spending day and night alone to pray, study scripture, and write, is an apt indication of the love Price finds outside his admittedly rich history of human affairs. Anchorites wrote often of the rapture of union with God, won of spending years in quiet contemplation and close concentration. Price lives by their same calling: *pay attention.* It is borne out in his fiction by the singularity of description, metaphor, and diction, and in his nonfiction by the

precision of memory in his memoir and in the exhaustive scholarship of his books on scripture. Even his life as a paraplegic requires close attention to his body: Nick, the new assistant, has "about 727 physical skills he has to learn. You turn the wheelchair wheels this way, the chair goes this way, Reynolds goes here." The trick, Price explains, "is that Reynolds is breakable." Indeed, a slip backward in his chair several years ago left him with broken vertebrae in his neck. Even failing to lift himself by his arms regularly increases the likelihood of pressure sores, infection, and deep, deadly blood clots.

Against such fragility sits the durability of the physical world, which reveals itself ever more to close scrutiny. Price has made a decades-long study of the land around his home and stops conversation twice to point out a familiar deer with her fawn, picking her way down the hillside. He finds comfort in the fantasy that the animals around him are the same from year to year, companions in their unique, wild lives. The old snapping turtle in his pond, he reckons, "is the same snapper that's been there since I moved here in 1958" and which, decades ago, began taking the feet off of ducks on the water; Price frowns and draws his finger in slow loops to indicate how the one-legged birds swam thereafter. The migrating heron drawn to the water's edge appears often in his poems as an omen:

> the one
> That's brought me each winter solstice
> For twenty-six years now whatever code
> I've earned for the past year, need for the next.

Price points to the death mask of Keats. "A friend, a former student, brought it to me from the Keats House in Hampstead," he recalls. "I said I wanted it on the chimney wall, and we hung it up at the spot I indicated. I rolled back to look at it, and I said, Rob, I think that's exactly how tall he was in real life. Keats was a small boy. So we got down Walter Bate's *John Keats* from the bookshelf, and we measured, and sure enough, that's five-foot-two off the floor. By the sheer grace of God, we hung it right."

Before the wheelchair, Price made a pilgrimage to the room where Keats died, above the Spanish Steps in Rome. "That narrow little room is unbearable. You look at that lovely decorated ceiling, and, oh . . . Keats lay in a little single bed in there for several weeks, after he was too weak to walk." From memory, Price recites a fragment of poetry found on a scrap of paper after Keats had died of consumption, at age twenty-five:

> This living hand, now warm and capable
> Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
> And in the icy silence of the tomb,
> So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
> That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
> So in my veins red life might stream again;
> And thou be conscience-calm'd—see here it is—
> I hold it towards you.

It's a poem a dying Price character recites with his father in *The Promise of Rest*, and it makes Price shiver. "Some people think it's supposed to be from a play, but I think it's just a poem for Fanny Brawne," Price says, referring to Keats's great love, whom he had to leave behind in London. "But who knows? I just think about that last trip to Rome, when Keats's friend Joseph Severn was so loyal to him, and sat there by his bed, and drew pictures of him as he was dying, and then Keats said to him some of the best words ever said in any language. He'd been unconscious, and he rallied, and he said to Severn, 'Hold me up, and—'"

Price swallows a sob. " 'Hold me up and do not be afraid, but thank God, it has come at last.' For Severn. 'Do not be afraid.' "

Price first visited Rome while he was at Oxford, and he has just finished drafting that section of the memoir in progress; soon it will follow him home, to the writing of *A Long and Happy Life,* its subsequent publication, and the moment of the almost-encounter with Faulkner in Manhattan. Far from writing to forget, Price finds solace in remembering. "One of the joys of working on this memoir," he says, "is realizing how total the continuity is over time. I have no real sense whatever of being anybody other than that person who sailed for Oxford on September the 30th, 1955."

It's a curious statement for Price, who argued in *A Whole New Life* that the only way to survive a near-death experience and ongoing disability was to recognize that one would never be the same person again. But that was more than twenty years ago, and the house, the woods, the heron, the snapping turtle: these things have not changed. The discipline of close, lifelong observation returns the gift of unity to the watcher. Price's approach to his work, as to his life, might be best articulated by Bridge Boatner, the young painter who narrates *The Tongues of Angels*:

> I was behind on my reading of contemporary fiction and poetry. So I didn't know that, at that moment in San Francisco and New York, Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac were urging the same. *Transcribe the world!* They thought of their method as Buddhist. I thought of mine as Christian, but I kept that to myself.
>
> Hadn't Jesus gone to great lengths, in numbers of parables, to teach just that? Only the endlessly watchful life is worth living and will be rewarded.

Price is eager to discuss the new memoir, already "alarmingly long" in the drafting. His memory is rewarding him with vivid recollections of beloved teachers, friends, and students; at Oxford and in London, he learned at the feet of Stephen Spender, Lord David Cecil, and W. H. Auden, and he tells of dinner parties attended by George Orwell's wife and numerous colorful eccentrics in postwar England. He's especially pleased to have found the book's title, which came to him on a visit to Thomas Jefferson's Monticello in nearby Virginia. Price explains, "We were on a private tour, about six o'clock in the afternoon in October, in deep dusk. There aren't any electric lights in Monticello, just oil lamps; so we went through in darkness, and the tour guide was telling us how Jefferson went bankrupt in part because he was addicted to French wine. He said Jefferson kept a wide array of French wines, but he kept very few ardent spirits. And I thought, what are 'ardent spirits'? I came home and looked it up, and sure enough the phrase is in Webster's: it means hard liquor; the strong stuff. And I thought, The only people I've ever really loved in my life were ardent spirits. Who had a huge appetite for life."

Ardent Spirits, Price's thirty-eighth book, will be published in 2008.

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