# AUGUSTINE BOWE

*The presiding judge of the Municipal division of Circuit court had been a man*
*Frederick Nims, a distinguished Chicago poet, pays tribute to this little-known sid*

**By John Frederick Nims**

HE WALKED for miles along the lake every day, summer and winter. And somehow it always seemed he was striding into the wind. Or, when the season permitted, even in his sixties he swam for miles along the shore line. More than once, as I watched him leave the water, his eye alert, his gesture boyish, I had the sense that he had been swimming against that current too, as he swam against so many.

It is hard for me to recall his poetry without being distracted by such images. For some years the Bowes' lake front apartment had been almost a second home; he had been almost a second father. I felt free to drop in with anyone, particularly with anyone who had literary interests: with the girl from Bennington who ate all the fruit in the centerpiece and became known as "The Banana Girl"; with the young playwright who could not quite afford socks, but whose *The Glass Menagerie* was beginning to catch the eye of the Chicago critics; with Allen Tate, violin case under his arm, all ready for an evening of Mozart duets with Julia Bowe, our hostess.

When we arrived, it might be to find Oliver St. John Gogarty, with his rollicking songs and his stories about Yeats and the Irish rebellion. Or we might find our host in earnest conversation with J. Patrick Lannan, his close friend of many years, about what might be done to save *Poetry*, in times when Chicago's world-famous magazine seemed in danger of going under forever. A subject for Giorgione or Titian, these two friends leaning their impressive—some would say "leonine"—heads together across the crystal and the onyx, like Florentine princes of the great days: Gus Bowe equally at home in the courts of law and the libraries of literature; Pat Lannan, with his spectacular collections of jade and modern painting, equally at home in the worlds of power and culture. Or, in a wild leap across the centuries from the past of the Medici to the future of the "happenings" that had not yet happened, we might find the young Claes Oldenburg, a friend of the Bowe children, quietly at work on his drawing of their father.

Sometimes I would let myself in alone late at night, and turn to the long living room that at first seemed empty. The books all along one wall were in many languages: my friend had himself been trained in Greek and Latin, and for many years had spent every summer in France; his wife Julia knew not only French, Spanish, and Italian, but had studied Russian, Arabic, and even Hebrew so that she might read the Old Testament in the original. Here the ages met: above the ravine of books, the marble bust of Dante scrutinized, from beneath the ceiling, Joan Mitchell's brilliant canvas of the *Tour de France*. Entering the dimly lighted room, I might not notice at first that he was still up, in a favorite chair in his favorite corner, reading perhaps, or writing, or pondering on the doubtful doom of humankind, as the lap robe half fell from his knees and the great draperies billowed around him in a wind that blew not only from across the lake but from out of time and space. Then he would be on his feet and coming toward me—one of the few presences I have known I would call noble—very tall, his brow Yeatsian, his step springy even in age.

We might have a midnight brandy and water, and he might talk, with enthusiasm, but sharply, wryly, about what he had been reading, about Surtees, perhaps, or Toynbee, or Benavente. Or he might select one of the long yellow pads at his feet, the lined legal tablets in which, night after night, year after year, he wrote his poems. The rest of us might be out with the long-haired fruit-munching cuties, who were doing term papers on subjects like the Authority Symbol in James Joyce, or we might be pub-crawling with the visiting writers. He preferred solitude to the society of all but a few: preferred poetry itself to the company of poets.

The poems he read from these tablets sometimes hit us with a not unpleasant tingle of surprise, like that of static electricity. They were not quite what we expected, these poems that opened with lines like:

> *He is gone to smithereens,*
> *Drugged with dope and drink . . .*

Or,

> *God said to Moses: "Ten commands*
> *Are enough for the likes of you . . ."*

# , POET

Or,

*God, do not despair*
*Of Your experiment.*
*There are apes more fair,*
*More fit for merriment*
*Twisting on their tails . . .*

They seemed to us alive and jaunty, but we might wonder at first if perhaps they were too improvised, too slapdash, too high-handed with the demands of meter and even syntax.

Of course they reminded us of the work of Emily Dickinson, a favorite poet of his and one that he occasionally sounds like, tho he was too independent to sound like anyone for very long. But she might have written his "Multitudes minimize the soul," and would surely have been proud of his "An oarlock can defeat the sea" —which even has her little trick of repeating a vowel-sound two syllables later, as in "So drunken, reel her bees." Probably in *The Scallion and the Rose* he comes closest to her manner. He was certainly like her in indifference to publication and fame. He did have several groups in *Poetry* between 1941 and 1945, when it was edited by George Dillon, Marion Strobel, and Peter De Vries, but this was more an arrangement with friends than submission to a magazine. After becoming president of the Modern Poetry association, he refused to let the magazine have any more of his work, altho he was encouraged to contribute by Karl Shapiro. Nor did he submit poems elsewhere. Instead, the yellow legal tablets accumulated over the years, as Emily Dickinson's little packets had accumulated, until finally there were hun-

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*f letters, a poet. Here John*
*of his friend, Judge Bowe.*

WINDS ARE BLOWING

My lady, winds are blowing
You have not heard before,
And there are oarsmen rowing—
What God do you adore?
The latchet that's undoing,
You shuddered at it once,
But here comes God a-wooing
Punctual as a dunce.
Lady, walk slow and humble,
Not fleetfoot as before.
There is a frightful stumble
Just outside your door.

GONE

He is gone to smithereens,
Drugged with dope and drink.
Gone with lecherous kings and queens,
Quicker than a wink.

Gin can do a sovereign in;
Whisky can make a foolish saint.
Skies sober men expect to win
Are cozy, neat, and quaint.

The heaven that a brawler sees
With his alcoholic eyes
So dazzles, his unsteady knees
Refuse to kneel before such lies.

THE ANSWERS

I must know all the answers.
It will not do for me
To dish up tunes for dancers,
Tweedle-dum and dee.

If I rig out a rhyming thought
That half explains your woe,
No melody however wrought
Need speak of where you go.

But that is what you ask of me.
Like Delphi's steaming earth
I must invent a blasphemy
That will explain your birth.

ROUNDSMEN IN THE NIGHT

I envy no man for his beer;
I wish no man's wife.
And yet I know my staying here
Will not be furthered but by strife.
There must be musketry at call;
There must be roundsmen in the night.
There must be lock and bolt and all
The shuddering armory of fright,
So that we sleep this night in peace
And wash our waking eyes with dawn.
Only mutton [broth and fleece!]
Trust, and nibble at the lawn.

## A. M. D. G.

You did well by the fifty-cent chicken dinner;
Some crumbs and some gravy are spilled on your vest.
Try the paddle-wheel now; you may be a winner.
He died when the sun was three hours to the west.

It is twenty-five minutes after two.
A soldier was lifting a sour wet sponge;
In pity he gave his spear a lunge
That pierced His side—it seemed the decent thing to do.

A fat old woman with a cheerful face
Has been grinding green cabbage all afternoon,
Grinding it into edible lace.
Out near the graveyard is a hurdy-gurdy tune.

God made them all: He gave them loaves and fishes,
These unwholesomely lean, these fat unwieldy people.
He must have known about these paper dishes,
And the asbestos roof they want to buy for His steeple.

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## MES PENSEES, M. PERRICHON

1. It is time now
   I should have something to say.
   I have been on the earth 50 years;
   It is time I had seen things worth telling.
   And if I have not,
   That too is worthy of mention.

2. Beware the man that believes.
   Distrust the man that doubts.
   But the man who believes while he doubts
   Is apt to be a useful friend.

3. Avoid the man that looks always at the grave.
   Beware the man who never looks that way.
   A heavy stone weighs too much on the mind—
   Only a fool thinks stones are made to sit upon.

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## RAGGED BONES

I walk the cemetery through.
  Bones are more or less free under grass;
I feel them in the chilly dew—
  Naked distals tingle as I pass.

Thank God for stones that keep them down!
  Ragged bones half free of flesh would rise
On half a thigh, come galloping to town.
  You're never sure what part of a man dies.

Have you ever seen a ghost?
  Dead men are walking through my brain.
A ragged rock upon a seething coast,
  I beat back death, again, again.

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## GENETICS

Rough hands are laid on amorous horses;
  Hounds must love the proper hounds.
Cattle are bred so no remorses
  Assail the ones we keep in bounds.
Only our peasants breed at random,
  Have here and there a pensive child
That shudders when we shove and command him.
  The rest are amenable and mild.

dreds. Occasionally selections or whole tablets would be handed over to a typist: five notebooks of 1938, for example, include what presumably he cared to preserve of his work up to that time. In preparing a selection of the poems of Augustine Bowe, I have gone thru more than 50 of such typed notebooks and looked at many of the handwritten originals: over 1,500 of the several thousand poems he probably wrote.

One saw at a glance that we were mistaken in thinking the poems mere improvisations. Many times the poet would work over the same piece again and again, laying it aside perhaps for years to return to it with a fresher eye and a stricter sense of poetry. Indeed, it is not always easy to know which of several versions should be considered the final one. It is clear that his apparent nonchalance was an air. Like Yeats, whom of all modern poets he admired the most, he seems to have taken great care to seem careless, taken great pains so that he might seem to have taken none.

Anyone who might feel that the poems show too little concern for traditional technique would be taken aback, as I was, by his earliest work. With lines like "He is gone to smithereens" in our ear, what are we to think of stanzas like these, which go back to at least 1927?—

*So if the cup be hollow,*
*Wine at the lips is red;*
*Whatever sadness follow,*
*Let the forgetful dead*
*Have, for their songs of grieving*
*Looms to be ever weaving*
*Joys for tomorrow's thieving,*
*When revelry has fled.*

Or,

*Daylight is ever breaking*
*Upon some sleeping land,*
*In thoughtless rhythm shaking*
*White waves on yellow sand.*
*The woe that sleep has nourished,*
*That sobbed on night's dark breast*
*Until its pain has perished*
*When tears gave way to rest. . . .*

Or,

*There stood a white-mailed figure*
*All alone,*
*Whiter than hawthorne branch*
*He stood beside,*
*And that was Tristram who had*
*Feasted not . . .*
*She too was robed in white,*
*And ghost to ghost*
*The moon-mist drew her to*
*The hawthorne tree . . .*

Or,

*O you that long have traveled*
*The land of light and lies,*
*Come now and see unraveled*
*The dark yarn of surmise.*

These are very good imitations, or exercises in-the-manner-of. The first even has the stanza form of Swinburne's *The Garden of Proserpine*. The second is early Yeats, like the broken fourteeners of "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree." The third is Tennysonian. The fourth is pure Housman. There are probably even readers who would feel that these four pieces are more "poetic" than lines about going to smithereens. It is interesting to consider the difference for what it suggests about the nature of poetry. But perhaps even more interesting is the question of why a poet who could write so easily and mellifluously in several accepted manners should go on to the smithereen kind of thing at all.

No true poet is content to counterfeit the voice of another, no matter how well he does it. To write in someone else's manner is to be little more than a ventriloquist's dummy. The poet's bird has been the nightingale, or the skylark, or the raven—but not the mockingbird. What Augustine Bowe wanted to find was a voice of his own, a voice in which he could express his own experience of reality. And the reality of his 20th century did not present itself to him in terms of weaving looms or yellow sands or ghosts in the moon-mist.

He had something more urgent to say about the doubtful doom, and he needed his own voice to say it. I am more concerned here to present a friend for others' approval than to praise him myself, but I think it perfectly fair to say that my friend did indeed find a voice of his own. If I were shown a poem of his, one typically in his manner, I think I would recognize it as his even if I had not seen it before.

I cannot say that of all of his contemporaries. Perhaps one need not be as blunt as Yeats, who once surveyed a little group of eager-eyed poets and said something like, "Gentlemen, the one thing certain is we are too many." But still, contemporary poets!—what plagues of them there are! A half hour spent in a book store specializing in literary magazines and "little" magazines and we can come up with the names of a hundred poets we are assured are promising. " 'New poets,' " wrote Jules Renard, "remember that term, for you will not hear from them again." Most of our hundred poets have no importance because they have no voice; they are the wax dummies of the Muse. Who remembers Alice Brown or Mary McNeil or Frederick Knowles or Josephine Daskam? Yet these were hailed in an important anthology called *The Younger American Poets*. It was published in 1904. And any anthology of "new" poets, of those who are the rage of a season or two, who give the readings and win the prizes, is full of the Browns and Daskams of

the time—of the new poets who will never be old ones.

Augustine Bowe needed a voice of his own because what he had to say was his own. Skeptical, rugged, independent—he paid little respect to received ideas. Among his many notebooks are found a number of pungent apothegms: "I said his head was empty—it is a pity it was not." "He talked almost always to himself, and it was a long time until he learned he was talking to a fool." There is the same sharpness in many of the poems, which, with a sense of cosmic mischief, turn upside-down the ideas too many of us live by. Perhaps, he will say, faith can move mountains, but it might be better to leave the mountains where they are. False gods may do much good, he tells us; some prayers flatter God indecently; the first great error was arithmetic. Truth, he felt, is not to be imprisoned in the conventional phrases, since existence itself breaks from the categories. Life proceeds by a kind of grand indifference to the trivia most of us live for. To express such convictions as these, he began by trying the voices of other poets, but found that none could speak for him.

In his mature work, there is almost never heard the echo of another writer—perhaps most surprisingly, there are no overtones of W. B. Yeats, his favorite. There might be a touch of Wallace Stevens, another favorite, in just a few lines like "The fanciful engravure of the sky." Or of Thomas Hardy in certain combinations of the ironic and the lyrical, in the jostling together of the jaunty and the gauche. One does not look for unity of tone here; the poet himself would have disdained a uniformity he would have thought false to the welter of experience. The strong sense of incongruity he sensed in the universe expressed itself in ironic juxtapositions. Among cypresses and monks and the lazy dapple of orchards, we are brought up short by coming upon hamhocks and garlic and barges of lard; at the solemnities of a funeral, our attention is called to the feedbag of oats that keeps the undertaker's horse glossy. Tho the poet could write a traditional lyric legato in lines like

*My lady, winds are blowing*
*You have not heard before . . .*

he often deliberately twitted the rhythm into contortions, as if making fun of the punctilio of meter. With the most serious subjects, he is likely to be most flippant. To express the inscrutability of God in creation, he uses an image grotesque as any in the poetry of Edward Taylor:

*That one was bright:*
*Left no tail-light showing*
*In the night.*

An image that seems almost mischievously meant to perplex the reader; how is one to take *that*, the image of God as a car disappearing around a corner, or as a giant mechanized firefly? In these sudden outbursts of rowdiness, of what Hopkins called "tykishness," in these abrupt angularities, these frank unprettinesses, the poems at times remind us of Romanesque or Gothic: the impish tricks of rhythm and diction are like the goggling faces that peer out of the capitals of St. Trophime, or like the leering gargoyles of Notre Dame. This is mockery that mocks even itself.

But the cloister is not only its freakish column, nor the cathedral only its gaggle of gargoyles. Tho conscious of incongruity and able to jest about it—what Irishman is not?—Augustine Bowe had a deeply serious mind, deeply committed [as we say now], committed not only to issues of the day but also, but especially, to the mystery of our existence. Altho I would hardly call him a Tennysonian poet, in thinking of him and his work my mind comes back again and again to "the doubtful doom of humankind." This seems to have been what he contemplated day and night, and accounts for a remote Celtic melancholy, a sense that his mind was off with the old unhappy far-off things in what should have been his most festive moments. Time and again I have watched his thought drift away from the "perfect" martinis by the lake at sunset, or from the bloom of wine and candlelight a little later, or from the vivacity of the evening's talk and music—for the company, if he had company at all—was exciting: have seen it drift away and knew it was with Julia, the wife he loved so much ["I found a face in all the million faces"], or with his son John, young and endangered in a world at war, or with his pretty daughter Julie Anne, about to have a child, tho she herself had survived childhood only on the risks of insulin. Or it might be with all of us, or with the doubtful doom itself: the great face of death which, altho he lived to be a vigorous 73, was daily as present to him as to any monk of Zurbaran.

"Be mannerly with death," he counseled us. He was always mannerly himself, and death returned the courtesy. He had been striding along the lake as usual, one cold February day—then suddenly, in an instant, he was not striding there at all, but in some other dimension: off into the winter clouds, we might imagine, or into one of the inscrutable regions he had speculated upon all his life: the walker had not bothered to carry wallet or identification, and it was hours before anyone knew that the tall figure in the snow bank had been the chief justice of the Municipal Court of Chicago, and among the most distinguished of the city's million faces. ■