

The poet Richard Wilbur was born on March 1, 1921, in New York City. He was raised in North Caldwell, New Jersey, not half an hour from Manhattan, in an unimposing stone house his parents rented on a somewhat eccentric estate created and resided on by a retired British businessman. Dick remembered the place fondly as both a gentleman's farm and a modest rural retreat, complete with tennis court, swimming pool, and lawn bowling pitch, as well as an obligatory complement of chickens.

But Dick was not to the manor born: his father, raised in Omaha, made his living as a commercial artist in New York, and his mother, the daughter of the city editor of the *Baltimore Sun*, was a homemaker. Dick and his younger brother Lawrie, who followed him to Amherst College and then into the military during World War II, made inventive use of the estate, in effect a small colony of supremely anglophilic British expat families. Dick's sustained and sustaining love of the natural world began there, a love that resulted in a large number of masterful poems, poems at once formally elegant, intellectually alert, and when called for, moving. Take "Hamlen Brook," set on the ninety-acre property in Cummington, Massachusetts that Dick and his wife Charlee lived on from the early 1970s, a property that had its own tennis court and pool, as well as deep woods and a stream. Cats replaced the New Jersey chickens.

Hamlen Brook

At the alder-darkened brink
Where the stream slows to a lucid jet
I lean to the water, dinting the top with sweat,
And see, before I can drink,

A startled inchling trout
Of spotted near-transparency,
Trawling a shadow solider than he.
He swerves now, darting out

To where, in a flicked slew
Of sparks and glittering silt, he weaves
Through stream-bed rocks, disturbing foundered leaves,
And butts then out of view

Beneath a sliding glass
Crazed by the skimming of a brace
Of burnished dragon-flies across its face,
In which deep cloudlets pass

And a white precipice
Of mirrored birch-trees plunges down
Toward where the azures of the zenith drown.
How shall I drink all this?

Joy's trick is to supply
Dry lips with what can cool and slake,
Leaving them dumbstruck also with an ache
Nothing can satisfy.

After graduation from Montclair High School, where he wrote and cartooned for the school paper, Dick matriculated at Amherst College, happening to arrive on September 21, 1938, the very day of a devastating hurricane. At Amherst he was a particularly loyal Chi Psi, at the time a fraternity filled with football players; perhaps unsurprisingly, he was also something of a prankster. But he was an accomplished English major. Much of his energy went into the *Amherst Student*, of which he became editor in his senior year. A declared isolationist until Pearl Harbor, he wrote an editorial, published on December 8, 1941, titled "Now That We Are in It." That editorial has on occasion been reprinted as an exemplary response to the conflict that largely defined the lives of Dick's generation. As an enlisted man in the Army Signal Corps, he served in major combat in Italy, notably at Monte Cassino, one of the bloodiest battles of the war, and then in France, Germany, and Austria. He often recalled that he spent what seemed like endless hours of alternating shellfire and calm hunkered down in foreign foxholes reading poetry. In a series of wartime letters to his teachers at Amherst, he recounted, often wittily, what he was going through. Those teachers, principally Theodore Baird and Armour Craig, encouraged Dick's poetry and prose. He remembered them with great fondness for the rest of his long life.

Shortly after graduation in June 1942 Dick married Charlotte Hayes Ward, known to all as Charlee, a warm, high-spirited student at Smith. A few days after the

wedding Dick received his draft notice; he promptly enlisted in the Army Signal Corps, had stateside Basic and Signal Corps training for many months, and sailed for North Africa in November, 1943, a few weeks after the birth of Ellen Wilbur, the first of their four children. The third, Nathan, in due course graduated from Amherst. Charlee's obituary in the *Boston Globe* remembers their marriage as, among literary couples, all but uniquely successful.

On the GI bill Dick began graduate work at Harvard in 1947, intending to earn a doctorate in English. He was happily sidetracked by being appointed a Junior Fellow in his second year, giving him the freedom from course work that allowed him to write the poems that resulted in his widely noticed first two books, *The Beautiful Changes*, 1947, and *Ceremony*, 1950. Having received an M.A., he joined the Harvard English faculty, then taught at Wellesley for two years, moving on to Wesleyan, where he stayed for two decades, finally retiring, in 1986, after seven years as the writer in residence at Smith. A year later, he was named Poet Laureate of the United States. He concluded his academic career by returning to the Amherst College classroom in 2008, at age 87, as the Simpson Lecturer, a post held after World War II by his friend and mentor Robert Frost. Dick retired from Amherst just four years ago; numerous Amherst students, including those who drove him from and back to Cummington, recall his warmth and generosity no less than his intellectual rigor. One of them, a Geology major not in one of his courses, asked Dick why he wrote poems. "To be of use" was the straightforward answer.

Richard Wilbur will be remembered as one of the major English language poets of his generation. By common consent he was the unrivaled master of lyric verse in his time. He was scarcely less accomplished in meditative blank verse poems, modeled to a degree on the work of the poet he most admired, and for many years taught, John Milton. He also published a number of critical essays, most strikingly on the poems and poetics of Edgar Allan Poe, the subject of the dissertation that gave way to the eight further books of poems he published, at regular intervals, after 1950. In 1956 his third book, *Things of this World*, won Dick both the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and the National Book Award. From the perspective of 2018 it stands as one of the signal achievements in verse in the last three quarters of a century. Other prizes followed as the subsequent volumes were published, most notably a rare second Pulitzer, awarded in 1987 for *New and Collected Poems*. Dick had another writerly career as the foremost translator

of classic French drama; his many versions of Molière have been performed steadily for the last sixty-some years, and Dick's translations of poetry in half a dozen languages only enhanced his reputation. In translations as well as original verse he was a remarkably skilled rhymers. Dick's biographers, Mary and Robert Bagg (Amherst '57), contend that one has to look as far back as Alexander Pope (1688-1744) to find his like.

Given his accomplishment, which included writing the brilliant lyrics for Leonard Bernstein's opera *Candide*, honors and offices followed. In addition to the prizes noted above, he was awarded a Bollingen Prize, a Prix de Rome, a Ford Foundation fellowship, and, in his last years, the "Tell It Slant" award from the Emily Dickinson Museum. He was justifiably proud of his service as president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. And honorary degrees came his way, from, among others, Amherst, Wesleyan, and Yale.

In 1969 Dick and Charlee—to whom he addressed a handful of the finest love poems we have—bought a property in Cummington, Massachusetts. They had spent significant time, on fellowships, in Rome and New Mexico, and they continued to spend winter months in Key West, but for Dick Cummington was something of a return to the semi-rural idyll of his childhood. He walked in his woods, raised vegetables in his garden, acquired a new set of Hilltown friends, played doubles tennis on his challenging court, and he wrote poems, his final book, *Anterooms*, appearing 2010. In his 1998 three-part poem, "This Pleasing Anxious Being"—the title quotes Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard"—he recreated three ordinary moments in his long life, moments he made more than ordinary in conversational blank verse. The concluding section evokes a Christmas trip to Baltimore when the poet was seven.

Wild, lashing snow, which thumps against the windshield
Like earth tossed down upon a coffin-lid,
Half clogs the wipers, and our Buick yaws
On the black roads of 1928.
Father is driving; Mother, leaning out,
Tracks with her flashlight beam the pavement's edge,
And we must weather hours more of storm
To be in Baltimore for Christmastime.
Of the two children in the back seat, safe

Beneath a lap-robe, soothed by jingling chains
And by their parents' pluck and gaiety,
One is asleep. The other's half-closed eyes
Make out at times the dark hood of the car
Ploughing the eddied flakes, and might foresee
The steady chugging of a landing craft
Through morning mist to the bombarded shore,
Or a deft prow that dances through the rocks
In the white water of the Allagash,
Or, in good time, the bedstead at whose foot
The world will swim and flicker and be gone.

Richard Wilbur died in October, 2017. It was a long and fulfilling life.

President Martin, I move that this memorial minute be adopted by the faculty in a rising vote of silence, that it be entered in the permanent record of the faculty, and that a copy be sent to Richard Wilbur's family.

Respectfully submitted by Daniel Hall, William Pritchard, and David Sofield (chair)