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VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S ENCHANTED SUMMER: ASHLAND, OREGON, 1953

Three months out of a lifetime of writing are a brief span. For Vladimir Nabokov, however, the time from June to September 1953 concentrated his efforts in an unsurpassed way and brought him a happiness he had rarely experienced. During that summer he produced literary output well beyond anything previously. It came about because he sensed a revival of his imaginative capacity. The period marked a turning point, a breakthrough, an *annus mirabilis.* Nabokov would say it was a time of enchantment. Examining it in detail shows how person and place complemented each other to bring about a period of rare fulfillment.

The main attraction in Ashland, Oregon, for Nabokov was butterflies. For many years each summer he and Véra had driven thousands of miles throughout the United States (Véra did all the driving; Vladimir never learned) from their eastern residence in pursuit of Lepidoptera. They had intended to summer in Portal, Arizona, but found the weather too cold and windy. Nabokov captured three butterflies, *Erora quaderna,* in the Chiricahua Mountains on May 22 and May 25, now in the Cornell University Insect Collection. When Véra encountered a rattlesnake near the back door of their cabin (Vladimir dispatched it with a lead pipe), they decided to leave (*Véra*, 195).

Ashland is an ideal base for a lepidopterist. The town is near four different eco-regions, producing a rich biodiversity, second only in the U.S. to the Appalachian region. That distinction invites an equally rich variety of butterflies. One hundred and eighteen species have been found in the area.

The Nabokovs arrived in Ashland on June 4 and stayed until September 1. During those three months Nabokov wrote every day. His productivity was prodigious. Brian Boyd lists his accomplishments: finishing a draft of *Lolita*, writing several chapters of *Pnin*, making progress on his translation and notes for his enormous edition of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (he later called it "my poor monster"), translating *Conclusive Evidence* into Russian, and writing two poems, "Lines Written in Oregon" and "The Ballad of Longwood Glen" (Boyd, 224-225). The quality and quantity of his writing was unsurpassed in his experience. And he knew it.

His realization is evident in "Lines Written in Oregon." In ten stanzas of rhymed triads Nabokov weaves a rhapsody of gratitude for his creative awakening. He has found Oregon fecund with blue birds, bear, hares, lilies, ferns, orchids, clover, "*l'or du pauvre*" (gold of the poor) dandelions, and, of course, butterflies. The poem is addressed to the Large Emerald moth, Esmeralda, that joins Nabokov to "rest / Here, in the bewitched and blest / Mountain forests of the West."

The poem invokes a sense of Arthurian romance with the place names of Lake Merlin (located in Washington, fifty miles north of Portland) and Castle Creek (near Eugene, Oregon) in "the forest with its fairies." Nabokov has awakened in this magical, "bewitched and blest" place where "the very air is stranger" to find this "Damsel, anchoret, and ranger." It is an astonishing recovery: "And to think I deemed you dead!" Just several weeks into his Ashland stay, Nabokov realizes an imaginative power that he feared he had lost. Waking from a nap under the blueish-green shade of the oak tree in his Ashland backyard, he ends the poem by repeating the German word for "always," *immer*, to Esmeralda.

The importance of this moment cannot be underestimated. Nabokov, at 54, was still on the periphery of the literary world and far from financially secure. The life of a writer is always precarious. For Nabokov, a Russian emigrant aspiring to be an American writer, it was even more precarious. His anchor in these choppy waters was butterflies. He writes in *Speak, Memory* that "the highest enjoyment of timelessness—in a landscape selected at random—is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the

contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal" (*Speak Memory*, 139).

The Nabokovs were nestled in the home of Arthur Taylor, a professor of social studies at Southern Oregon College. Taylor, his wife, Blanche, and their daughter, Georgia, had gone to Oswego, New York, only sixty-seven miles from Nabokov's Ithaca residence, where he was teaching in the summer session at New York State Teachers College.

Illustration 1. 163 Meade Street, Ashland, Oregon

The Taylor house was a small two-story cottage at 163 Meade Street, a steep climb above the town's main thoroughfare, Siskiyou Boulevard. All the modest, wood-frame houses along the short two blocks of Meade Street had been built during the first decade of the twentieth century. The front yard of the Taylor house held a madrona tree and a Ponderosa pine; the back yard contained the Oregon Oak featured in "Lines Written in Oregon."

Illustration 2. Meade Street

Nabokov sent the poem to Katharine White, his editor at *The New Yorker*, who promptly answered on June 21, "My admiration for your 'Lines from Oregon' is unbounded; it is a poem to read aloud again and again. <…> Please give my greetings to your Esmeralda. I do hope that your various books are going well and that your summer will continue to be an enchanted one" (Berg Collection, New York Public Library). The poem was published in the August 29, 1953 *New Yorker.* Taylor later mused, "Funny thing. I've sat under that three hundreds of times and it never resulted in any verse which *The New Yorker* would buy" (Medford *Mail Tribune*, July 4, 1954).

The house was within easy driving distance of many places to hunt butterflies. The weather was ideal, with virtually no rain or inclement weather during the Nabokovs' entire stay. Keene Creek, eighteen miles east of Ashland off State Highway 66 (known as the Greensprings Highway), was Nabokov's favorite spot. Specimens in the Cornell University Insect Collection specify eight capture dates during June and July at that location. The Harvard University Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) has forty-nine specimens Nabokov captured there on July 19. Forty-seven are *Plebejus anna ricei* (Anna's Blue), one is *Pieris marginalis* (Margined White), and one is *Anthocharis laceolata* (Gray Marble). Nabokov sent them to the MCZ in a large round

Charlotte Charles Sherry Pralines tin, still on display at the museum (*Fine Lines*, 289; photograph of the pralines tin is on p. 193).

Illustrations 3-4. Charlotte Charles Sherry Pralines tin and *Plebejus anna rice* (Anna's Blue)

Other specimens in the Cornell University Insect Collection were captured at Mount Ashland (five outings), Pompadour Bluff (three outings), Rogue River National Forest (two outings), Siskiyou Peak (two outings), and Soda Mountain (one outing). (I have taken seriously Nabokov's suggestion in "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" that "The locality labels pinned under these butterflies will be a boon to some twenty-first-century scholar with a taste for recondite biography.") Between June 11 and August 2, Nabokov went butterfly collecting at least twenty-three times, almost half of the fifty-two days during that interval. He sent ten different types to Harvard and Cornell, 132 butterflies in all. He may well have hunted on other days, but butterfly collectors, like fishermen, don't always return with catches. Nabokov wrote his sister Elena Sikorski in September, "The passion for butterflies has turned into a real mania this year, and there have been many interesting discoveries" (*Selected Letters*, 139). Many indeed.

Illustration 5. Ashland in the fifties with Mount Ashland on the horizon

Chasing butterflies nicely complements the sedentary occupation of writing (for Nabokov, it more often was supine—he preferred writing on his bed), and after Nabokov devoted mornings to the strenuous pursuit of these flitting beautiful creatures he would devote afternoons and evenings to Humbert Humbert's pursuit of "beautiful, beautiful, beautiful" Lolita. Most of Nabokov's work at this stage had arrived at the point of his dictating his handwritten manuscript to Véra as she typed something close to the final version. Boyd reports that once Nabokov was through with each page, written with a Blackwing pencil featuring a soft number two lead and replaceable eraser, he would crumple it up and throw it away.

Ashland, in 1953 a town of eight thousand, lies insulated between the Cascade and Siskiyou mountains in the Rogue River valley, eleven miles from the California border. Taylor's Meade Street house was just several blocks away from the Ashland Public Library and a few more from the downtown shopping area, everything within easy walking distance. Immediately upon arriving in Ashland, Nabokov met with Elmo N. Stevenson, president of Southern Oregon College, perhaps arranged by Taylor. He made good use of the college library in Central Hall, opened just two years earlier. In a letter of July 23, Taylor wrote to the college librarian, Myrtle Funkhouser, "Nabokov wanted me to thank you for your courtesy," adding that the Nabokovs "seem to be real nice" (Southern Oregon University Archives). Over the summer Nabokov read Fielding's *Tom Jones* and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, attended at least one of the productions of the Oregon

Shakespeare Festival during August, and played chess with Arthur Kreisman, head of the college English department.

Illustration 6. Oregon Shakespeare Festival, circa 1954

As Stacy Schiff notes in her biography of Véra, the nearby verdant mountains and the Taylors' rose garden accorded well with her (*Véra*, 195). Because she was Nabokov's editor, researcher, typist, translator, collaborator, chauffeur, and overall factotum, her wellbeing was vital to her husband's disposition and productivity. She needed to be as happy as he for the summer to turn out successfully. Adding to the pleasure of both Vladimir and Véra was the proximity of their son, Dmitri, who, after finishing his sophomore year at Harvard, had secured a summer job as a truck driver and, several weeks later, a bulldozer operator on a road-building project in Roseburg, just over one hundred miles north of Ashland. Dmitri was able to spend weekends and days off with them until he left for British Columbia in mid-summer to join fellow members of the Harvard mountaineering club.

Nabokov sent a second poem, "The Ballad of Longwood Glen," to Katharine White on July 27. William Maxwell responded on August 10 to tell Nabokov it "didn't seem right for us. We all felt that it has an interesting idea, but that the verse itself somehow fails to walk successfully and safely that razor path between the deliberately simple and the merely flat" (Berg Collection, New York Public Library). Nabokov revised the poem over the next several years and succeeded

finally in securing an acceptance from *The New Yorker.* The published version of July 6, 1957 is a narrative of thirty-two couplets set in woodland Oregon.

The poem is full of wordplay and puns involving trees and woods as it tells how the meek florist Art Longwood climbs a towering oak tree to retrieve a ball he has thrown into it, never to return. He leaves behind a wife, two children, father, step-father, and father-in-law, all witnesses to the event. His wife remarries to become Mrs. Deforest and "the sky-bound oak" is cut down; the material world is fickle and transitory. Art Longwood is a Prufrock who realizes his wished-for destiny; while Prufrock laments that he "should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas," Longwood ascends high beyond earthly bounds, exclaiming, "What tiaras of gardens! What torrents of light! / How accessible ether! How easy flight!" He miraculously is transformed into a butterfly and flies to an ethereal realm. The poem identifies the exalted place art (or Art) occupies for Nabokov, a place to which Nabokov aspires to ascend.

When Nabokov read the poem at New York City's 92nd Street Y in 1964 he mistakenly stated that he wrote it in Wyoming. Afton, Wyoming had been another enchanting place for him, and he may well have melded the memories of Afton and Ashland. He wrote the location of several butterfly catches as "Rogue River (25 mi. east of Ashton)," combining the names of the two towns.

Illustration 7. Keen Creek, 18 miles east of Ashland

The poem, however, reflects more closely his summer of 1953 in Oregon: driving through the "tinkling weeds," "down a rutted road... into the glen" resembles an outing of the Nabokovs to their favorite butterfly-hunting place at Keene Creek. The tree Longwood climbs is an oak, like the one in the Taylors' back yard that inspired Nabokov to write "Lines Written in Oregon." Arthur Taylor was called Art by his friends and colleagues, perhaps inducing Nabokov's name choice. One of those who flocked to the scene is "A drunken rogue," bringing to mind the Rogue River valley in which Ashland is located.

Letters written by Nabokov, his wife, and friends during the summer attest to his productivity and his euphoria. On June 15, Nabokov asserted to Katherine White, "We are very happy here" (Berg Collection, New York Public Library). On June 20, Nabokov wrote to Edmund Wilson that Ashland was "a lovely place" and "The collecting is good" (*Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, 282). On June 22, Alison Bishop wrote to Véra Nabokov, "It is superb that Vladimir is being so prolific. We await the poem, the story, the novel, and the Pushkin book" (Berg Collection, New York Public Library). In July Véra wrote to Alison, "V. is still writing steadily. I wish I could prevail upon him to take a short rest. The butterfly collection is still growing" (Berg Collection, New York Public Library). On July 27, Nabokov reported to White, "Ashland seems to be singularly favorable to inspiration." This last observation stands out among these ringing endorsements: "singularly favorable."

It is not possible to determine exactly Nabokov's daily routine beyond his habitual regimen of outdoor mornings and indoor afternoons and evenings established during previous summers in Telluride, Colorado and Afton, Wyoming. The pages of his pocket appointment book are blank except for notations of arrival (June 4) and departure (September 1) and the jotting on July 2, "Isabelle and Rockwell would like a cottage, preferably from July 7th, for a month." Of course, that open space was what helped make the period a summer of enchantment—no appointments, no obligations, nothing on the calendar. The other months are filled with notes for classes, meetings with students, and other information relating to his teaching at Cornell and, on December 6, the notation: "Finished 'Lolita' which was begun exactly five years ago" (Berg collection, New York Public Library). The one mention of Nabokov in the Ashland *Daily Tidings* came upon his departure on September 1: "During the Taylors' absence Dr. and Mrs. V.V. Navokov of Cornell

University have been living in their home. The Navokovs left yesterday for Cornell." (The erroneous title and spelling show the editor's passing knowledge.)

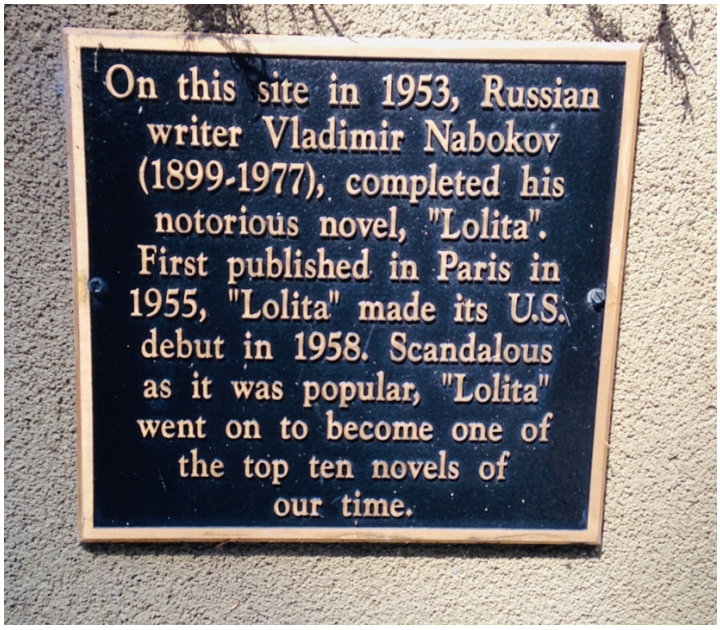

Illustration 8. Memorial plaque on the house rented by the Nabokovs

The heartfelt summer paid a dividend physically. Nabokov wrote his sister in September that he was now "capable of walking up to 18 miles a day in mountainous terrain and usually do ten, and I play tennis better than I did in my youth" (*Selected Letters*, 139). The many days of hunting butterflies in the mountains and meadows surrounding Ashland had brought about his robust health.

The Nabokovs took several weeks to drive back to Ithaca, stopping at Jenny Lake in the Wyoming Tetons to visit Dmitri, who was camping and hiking there. Their first night en route brought them to Burns, Oregon, a town of three thousand in the high desert 279 miles northeast of Ashland. Burns is among the many places Humbert Humbert lists in his lascivious automobile tour of the United States during 1947 and 1948 as a place of an argument with Dolores Haze: "On N. Broadway, Burns, Oregon, corner of W. Washington, facing Safeway, a grocery" (*Lolita*, 148). In fact, a Safeway was located there. It opened in 1924 and remained until the sixties. The building now houses an art gallery and print shop.

Illustration 9. N. Broadway, Burns, Oregon, corner of W. Washington

This geographic touchpoint provides insight into Nabokov's preoccupation with detail. He doesn't see the world in a grain of sand; he sees the sand itself. His work at the MCZ, carefully analyzing the minutiae of butterfly genitalia and wings is one example. Another is his requiring his Cornell University students to describe the bedroom wallpaper in the novel *Emma Bovary* on a midterm exam. In these instances, Nabokov is pursuing the intricate design implicit in each piece of the puzzle. The more he pores over the pieces, the more he realizes the intelligence in the design. And the closer he comes to a triumph over the apparent meaninglessness of our world. That Safeway in Burns, Oregon, invokes Humbert Humbert's search for a safe way as he and Lolita careen over all the United States.

It is highly unlikely that either of the two species of Esmeralda visited Nabokov in the Taylor back yard since their range does not reach beyond South America (Esmeralda Longtail) or British Columbia, Canada (Polychrysia Esmeralda). But for Nabokov what is imagined is more important than what is material. And his imaginative powers returned that summer in Ashland, raising his senses into a state of enchantment. It was as if an Esmeralda landed in his midst after a long sleep. His expression of joy in the poem is palpable: "*immer, immer*."

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