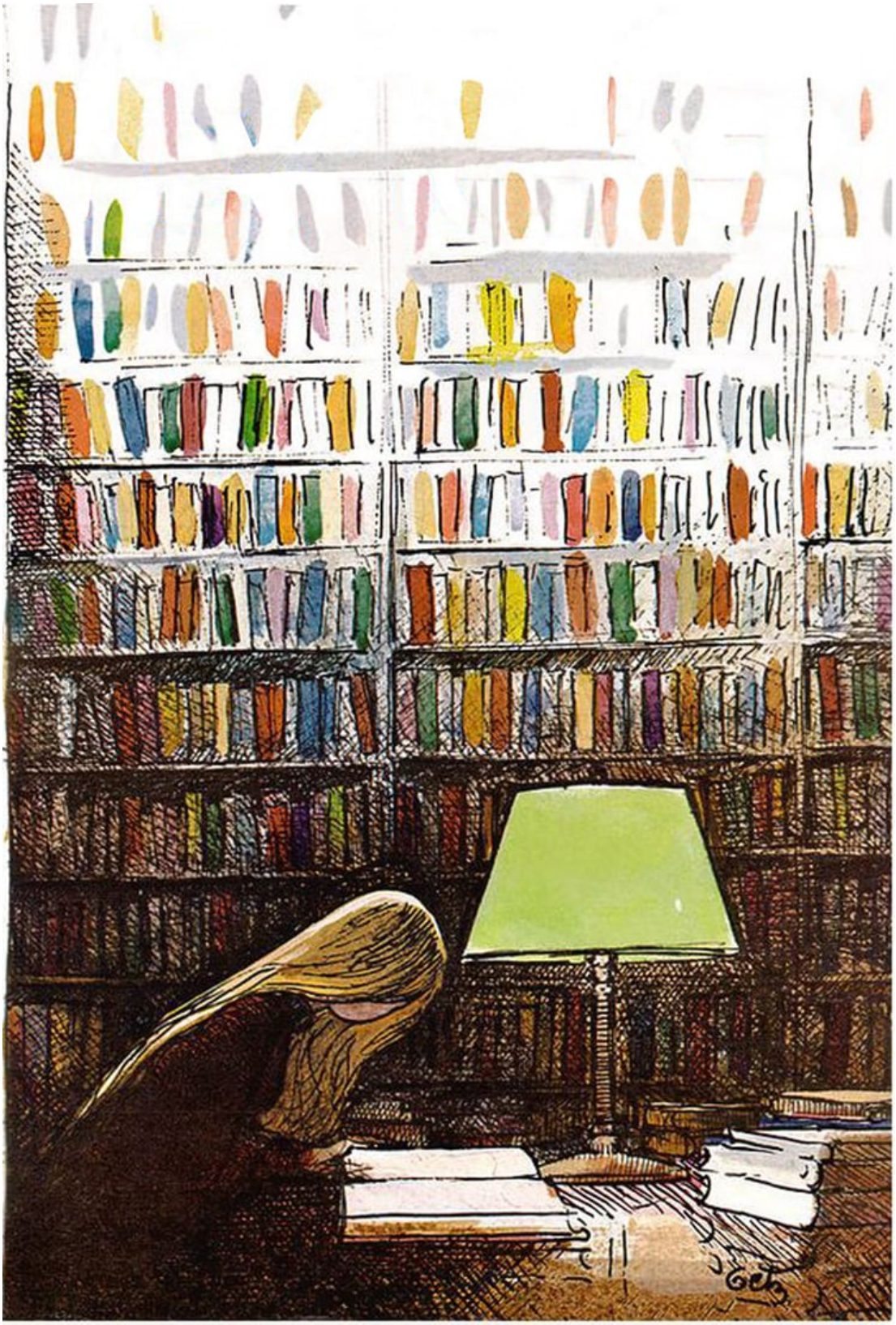
ABD

by Fred McGavran (February 2023)



Cover for New Yorker Magazine, Arthur Getz, March 1973

Every occupation has its dead ends, but ABD, “all but dissertation,” is the deadliest of them all. After four years of college, two for a master’s degree, and two more years of course work for a PhD in classics from Georgetown University, Edward Lund was so burned out he could not even choose a topic for his dissertation. The Stoic philosophy of virtue through self-containment fascinated him, and no Stoic would do something intellectually and morally useless for self-aggrandizement. Thus he joined the vast army of ABDs doomed to struggle along as adjunct faculty with no hope for a tenure track job, or spin off into selling insurance, annuities, or driving for Uber. Life, which seemed so exalted in the company of Zeno and Cleanthes, suddenly became endlessly drab, as when a traveler sees only desert wastes unrelieved by even a mirage.

So now what? he asked himself. The scholarships and teaching stipends were gone. He couldn’t move back with his parents.

“You might fit in my apartment,” his girlfriend Shannon O’Connor suggested. “We could share the rent.”

With beautiful black hair and the most demanding and sympathetic expression Ed had ever seen, Shannon lived in a tiny one-bedroom apartment in Alexandria, Virginia, a subway and a bus ride from her own PhD degree program in English at Georgetown. He knew his things would fit in. The problem was paying half the rent.

“That might work,” he said slowly.

“So what are you going to do?” she continued, hoping her question would nudge him out of his self-imposed inertia.

“I could work construction,” he replied, remembering the hot happy summers working for contractors in his home town before he was trapped in an academic discipline more demanding than

any union apprenticeship.

“Ed, that’s great!” she said, delighted her strategy to get him moving again was working. “I just saw the government’s rebuilding St Elizabeths Hospital in DC. You can get a job there.”

“Oh?”

“They have to tear it down first. The whole project will take years.”

“Oh.”

“Ezra Pound was there for twelve years,” she continued. “They thought he was crazy for making propaganda broadcasts for Mussolini during World War II.”

Shannon was writing her doctoral dissertation on Pound and T.S. Eliot, her favorite twentieth century American poets, but Ed was only half listening. He was thinking about Cleanthes, one of the first Stoics, who supported himself as a water carrier and slept on a covered porch in the marketplace at Athens. So after the easy move of a table, a lamp, and a laptop computer from his graduate school dorm into Shannon’s already crowded living room, he carried his clothes upstairs and squished them in with hers in her closet. Like Cleanthes, he was ready to work, but unlike his hero he had no courses to attend or lectures to give at the end of his workday. He was a laborer with no future and no hope.

A week later he drove up to the derelict hospital campus and was amazed. The grounds sprawled over 300 acres on a bluff overlooking the conflux of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers with a spectacular view of the rivers to the South and the Capitol Building to the North. He was amazed such vistas had been reserved for the mentally ill. Passing abandoned buildings resembling Civil War armories scattered across the park, he began to understand the vistas had not been part of

the patients’ treatment plans.

Clad in a hard hat, jeans, steel-toed boots and a backpack, Ed lined up with the other new hires in front of the construction manager’s trailer. He fit in with the younger men still eager and strong before the beer and the endless toil stretched them out of shape and ended all relationships except those begun in barrooms. Looming over the trailer was the Center Building, four stories high with a tower over the entrance, a nineteenth century conception of a medieval castle along the Rhine. Crenelated battlements stretched all around a structure large as a city block, but instead of keeping attackers out, the walls were to keep inmates in.

As the line moved up to the manager’s window, Ed studied the building’s facade. Windows covered with plywood, the Center Building appeared purposeless and blind. No longer were there any patients to look out at the Capitol or the rivers, an enticement to some to recover or escape and frightening others to remain embedded in their cells. A diagram stuck on the side of the trailer showed that before they could convert the building into offices for the Department of Homeland Security, they had to gut the interior, knocking down everything except the outer walls.

“You do a good job with us here, we’ll put a good word in for you with the construction company,” the man in the window said.

That’s when Ed realized he had been hired for demolition, not construction.

He was handed a badge and some papers to complete and was herded off with the other new hires for orientation on how to remove toilet fixtures and to wear a respirator at all times to be safe from the contagious dust of a century and a half of madness. In the afternoon they were given a tour of the building. The dust congealed, clotting up over his respirator.

As he followed the foreman through passages hardly any other living person even remembered existed, Ed felt fallen plaster crackling under his boots. Thus began the most brutal and exhausting job Ed Lund had ever had.

Back at the apartment Shannon was watching a show where a vibrant young couple was rehabbing a house before flipping it. Along with her husband and several subcontractors, the wife was happily swinging a sledgehammer at a wall.

“That could be us,” Shannon laughed.

“I hope not,” Ed said, getting a beer out of the refrigerator and going into the bedroom to undress and shower. When he returned, the house had been transformed and happy buyers were lining up out front. There weren’t any happy buyers lining up to inspect the Center Building. The Department of Homeland Security had tried unsuccessfully to decline the gift, fearing the occupation of the prior owner would reflect negatively on its competence.

Gutting the Center Building was nothing like rehabbing a bungalow in Southern California. Starting on the top floor, they removed the toilets and bathroom fixtures, loading them onto carts to be tipped out the window into railroad-car sized dumpsters. Then came the sledgehammers smashing into walls to expose and remove miles of copper wire. Then more wall smashing, stirring up dust so thick Ed’s respirator was covered. Then back to the apartment in the evening, where an increasingly appalled Shannon watched his transformation from a graduate student to a demolition worker.

“Is there asbestos in there?” she asked as he finished his second beer while eating Chinese takeout.

“They gave us respirators,” he replied.

“I’ll be glad when you’re done,” she said.

“We’ve got another eight buildings to gut when we finish The Center.”

She looked at him.

“I’m applying at the construction company as soon as we reach the first floor,” Ed continued. Even Cleanthes had not had to work like this.

He opened his third beer. By the end of his first week, he was having a beer when he came home, a beer or two with dinner, a beer after dinner, and maybe another for a good night’s sleep. Fridays he’d meet some of his demolition team at a bar to start the weekend reeling. Two twelve packs during the week, another for the weekend, and all thoughts of a dissertation were dissipated in sweat and dust and washed away in beer. Instead of the Stoics, he sat transfixed by Netflix unable to talk, to argue, or to feel. Shannon saw him drifting away but didn’t know how to call him back.

“I met with my advisor about a thesis topic,” Shannon said one evening over carryout.

“Oh.” Ed reached for a paper napkin and looked at her as if she had just stabbed him under the table.

“I want to do something about Pound as an editor. He saved Eliot’s *The Wasteland* from being incoherent, but he couldn’t edit himself.” She was getting excited. “His *Pisan Cantos* are unreadable by anyone except a specialist”

“Oh.”

“Yes. You need a classics degree and Mandarin Chinese to read the text and on top of that be a Renaissance scholar to get the allusions.”

“So call your dissertation ‘Pound’s Evolution From Comprehension to Meaninglessness,’” he joked.

“Ed, that could work,” she said seriously, going back to her salad.

He thought he was being sarcastic; she thought he was trying to help. This was the last real conversation they had for weeks.

Floor by floor the demolition crew descended until they started sledgehammering a long wide corridor along the east side of the building. The windows were so high they had to knock out part of the wall to dump the debris. Across the corridor opposite the row of windows were cells, just large enough for a cot and a closet. Perhaps the inmates lived like monks, rising when the sun touched their open doors and retreating into the darkness when evening came.

How long can I take this shit? He asked himself as he tore into the wall of a cell. Down poured the plaster and shards of the wood that had supported it. Then he swung into a space that cracked open like an eggshell, leaving a square of wood stuck to the end of his sledgehammer. He lifted off the square. Someone had cut a piece out of the wall and replaced it with a painted board. For what? Ed wondered. He reached inside. Through his glove he felt something bend and shift. Lifting it out, he saw it was a sheaf of papers tied with a string.

Now what the hell? he thought. Stepping out of the cell, he held the papers up to the light. They were handwritten by a ballpoint pen in Latin. Ed returned to the cell and felt deeper into the wall. Yes, there were more, down so far he couldn’t reach them. Stepping back he raised his sledgehammer, smashed open another section and found more papers, these written in pencil and so dusty he had to brush them off to see they were in English.

He looked out into the corridor. The rest of his crew was happily smashing apart the cells. Ed put the papers in his

backpack. When he returned to the apartment that afternoon, he showered without first opening a beer.

“Look what I found,” he said to Shannon, taking the ancient papers out of his backpack. “Somebody in there knew Latin.”

“What?”

“Two sheaves of papers hidden in the wall, one in English and one in Latin.”

“The diary of a madman?” she quipped.

“I want to look at the Latin,” he said. “Here.” He handed her the papers written in English. “Why don’t you see what you can make out of these?”

They spread out the pages on the kitchen table.

Two hours later, they were still looking at them. They were written or sometimes scribbled on anything from toilet paper and paper towels to paper in all different sizes and shapes.

“I can’t figure it out,” Ed said, lifting up a page to look at it closer. “It’s in Latin, but I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

For the first time in weeks, he had had only one beer when he returned to the apartment.

“I can’t either,” Shannon said. “Mine are talking about an aura enveloping the world like a mirage that only the faithful can see and the enlightened can enter.”

“I’m starving,” Ed said, suddenly realizing he hadn’t had anything to eat since noon. “Pizza?”

“Pizza,” she replied. When the delivery arrived, Shannon went to the door while Ed restacked his papers. Turning them over, he saw typed on the back of one sheet a letter to Professor Ashworth Haines at Georgetown University dated February 6,

1952.

“Why do we always order pepperoni?” Shannon asked, setting the box on the table.

“Who was Ashworth Haines?” Ed asked.

“Ashworth Haines?”

“He must have been on the classics faculty at Georgetown. On the back of one of the pages there’s a letter asking him for a recommendation for a position in classics.”

“Have you heard of him?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I can check him out at the department if I ever get a day off.”

“I’ll go,” Shannon said. “I got thin crust. Is that OK?”

“And here’s a letter on another page from somebody who sounds like his daughter about the grandkids,” Ed continued.

Shannon was delighted. It was the first time since she had told him about her dissertation they had talked other than in monosyllables. And if Haines had been writing the Latin, who had been writing the English?

“The opening lines of *The Pisan Cantos* were written on toilet paper,” she said, thinking out loud.

“Why were they writing on toilet paper and the back of old letters and hiding them in the wall?” Ed wondered.

“Maybe they were crazy,” Shannon said.

“Maybe.”

Sledge-hammering through the cells along the corridor the next day was the longest since Ed had started. How can I spend my life knocking down walls when I could be reading the oddest

Latin manuscript I have ever seen? he upbraided himself. No more discoveries in secret compartments that day, though. Just another Friday where the crew ached for the cold sharp oblivion of a bar room blaring sports TV and young women pretending not to be interested until the evening games were over. His crew was surprised when Ed said he had to go home early.

“Father Durst was delighted to hear from you,” Shannon said when he got home. She followed him upstairs and talked while he showered.

Durst, the chair of the Classics Department, had practically begged Ed to apply for another year as a teaching assistant to make up his mind about his dissertation. The Jesuit was not persuaded by his appeal to Stoic philosophy.

“What did he say about Ashworth Haines?”

“He looked him up in the archives. Haines was the department head from 1937 until 1951, when he had a nervous breakdown and was committed to St Elizabeths.”

“Did he say what his specialty was?” Ed asked excitedly, stepping out of the shower and drying off.

“Latin translations of Aristotle and other philosophers from Arabic translations of the Greek. The Greek manuscripts weren’t known in the West at the time they were translated.”

“Now I remember,” Ed said. “We read his book on medieval Latin translation in one of my courses.”

“Durst said it sounded like you were getting near to choosing a topic for your dissertation.”

Ed wrapped himself in his towel and stepped past her to the dresser.

“Maybe,” he said.

After she had showered and they went out for Thai, they sat down at the kitchen table to study the papers again. Ed found some notebook paper and began translating the Latin manuscript. It was entitled *The Impulses of Ibrahim bin Har'shun.*

"Who the hell was Ibrahim bin Har'shun?" he wondered.

"I'll google him," Shannon said, picking up her phone. She frowned. "There's a Wikipedia stub about him. He lived in Baghdad in the twelfth century and was a contemporary and teacher of al-Hariri. Only a few fragments of his *Impulses* survive."

"And who was al-Hariri?"

Shannon worked the phone again.

"They're pages and pages about him. He was the most sophisticated storyteller in the Islamic world. His *Impostures* are still studied for their wit and wordplay."

"We may really have something here," Ed said.

"They cite a Haines article on translating al-Harari in Wikipedia."

"Why would Haines be writing out Har'shun's *Impulses* at St Elizabeths?" Ed wondered. "Do you think he memorized them?"

"Maybe they have the Har'shun manuscript at Georgetown," she said. "I'll ask Father Durst." Ed was still lost in his own speculations. "But I think I know who wrote mine."

"The pencil papers?" Ed said, returning to the present. "Who?"

"Ezra Pound."

"Didn't Pound make his reputation with translations from the Latin and Chinese?" Ed said, feeling again the excitement of discovering something new. But it was too good to be true.

“How can you tell?”

“I’ve seen photos of the original manuscript of *The Pisan Cantos*. The handwriting looks the same.”

“This is unbelievable,” he said.

“I’ve got my dissertation,” she said to provoke him.

“And maybe I’ve got mine.”

By Sunday afternoon, Ed had translated the first section of the *Impulses* entitled “The Messenger.”

“Pound’s pencil version calls it ‘L’envoi,’ the sending,” Shannon said. “It’s a tradition in medieval poetry, but it’s always at the end of the poem and dedicates it to a woman or a patron.”

“But this isn’t a dedication,” Ed said and began to read. “‘Dark is my cell without the sun …’”

“‘Drab, drab, drab, without color and without light, I kneel with the courtiers awaiting the prince’s return,’” Shannon continued. “My God, Ed. Pound was using Haines’ translation of Har’shun to write a poem no one has ever seen before.”

They alternated reading through the first section.

Ed translated the last lines from the Latin: ‘“The prince did not return from the battle, and my knees were sore on the mosaic floor. Where are the carpets of Tabriz, the emblazoned Phoenixes of Neyshabour, when the servant kneels? The sound of distant hammers grows closer; the miniatures of my prince are crushed. My verses I will shred and leave the scraps for the slaves in the morning. What perfume will arise to quench this conflagration?’”

“What could anyone do with that?” Ed wondered.

“‘My Prince is hanging upside down, and I crouch in the cold

bright cave,’” Shannon read. “It’s a reference to the death of Mussolini, the same as in *The Pisan Cantos*. ‘The cold bright cave’ was the open air cage where the Army held Pound in Italy before he was sent back to the States.” She kept reading. “‘What black servants of my Prince will carry off my epigrams and return to me my soul?’ Those are the Africa Americans in the prison camp with him.”

They were silent for a moment.

“Shannon, this is crap. I’ve never read anything this bad in medieval or any other kind of Latin.”

“Anything by Pound is worthwhile,” she countered. “Do you know what part of the hospital you found this? Pound was in a place called the Chestnut Ward.”

“One of the letters asked Haines if he liked the Chestnut Ward better than the other place they’d had him,” Ed replied. “And I’m back to smashing up an insane asylum.”

“What do you mean?” Shannon asked.

“If the Latin had been serious, I was going to give my notice Monday. Now I’ll put in an application for the construction crew.”

“The pencil papers mean a lot, if they are by Pound,” she argued. “It doesn’t matter that Har’shun was a lousy writer. It’s what Pound did with it.”

“We don’t even know it was Har’shun,” he countered. “And the poems read like someone took Pound’s style and turned it around on him.”

The next day Ed asked his foreman the name of the large room they were demolishing.

“Beats hell out of me,” the foreman said. Ed had been such a good worker he didn’t want to leave him disappointed. “We

could check it out with the manager."

So during their lunch break, they went to the construction trailer and looked at the old blueprint.

"There it is," the foreman said, pointing to the long open ward they were tearing apart.

"The Chestnut Ward," Ed read. "That's where Ezra Pound stayed."

"Who?"

Ed didn't answer.

"This proves Pound wrote them," Shannon said that evening when he told her the name of the ward. "As soon as I've typed up the pencil papers, let's drive to Yale. They have the original Cantos manuscripts, and we can confirm the writing is the same."

She was so excited she nearly forgot to ask the most important question about his day. "Did you apply for the construction crew?"

"I'm not sure what I'm going to do now."

"Whatever it is, it has to be something with these papers," she insisted.

"We don't even know if there is a Har'shun manuscript," Ed countered.

"I'll ask Father Durst," she said. "And I'll go through Ashworth Haines' file again."

While Ed smashed down walls in The Chestnut Ward, Shannon returned to the classics department, talked with Father Durst, and went through Haines' file. Stuck to the back of a fading article that praised his book comparing the Latin translation of Averroes with the original Arabic was a long letter from

his daughter to be used in his obituary.

“After his breakdown, my father’s happiest days were with Ezra Pound in The Chestnut Ward. The two of them would sit together for hours, reciting poetry and laughing hysterically. Sometimes they passed notes back and forth. He told me they were composing something that would demonstrate the failure of all art and science to make any impression in a world gone mad. Once I saw him immediately after a visit by T.S. Eliot. Pound and my father ate all the chocolate Eliot had left for Pound. Father said that was their final gesture of defiance to a generation so depraved it had wrongfully imprisoned them both.”

“Was any of that in the obituary?” Ed asked her.

“None of it.”

“Had Father Durst ever seen or heard of a Har’shun manuscript?” Ed pressed her.

Shannon hesitated.

“No,” she said softly, afraid everything she’d worked for to lure him back to classics was failing. The Stoic in Ed demanded facts to support their conjecture about the two manuscripts, but the Haines manuscript wasn’t a translation of anything. “So maybe it’s just the rant of a crazy old man.”

“That’s it!” Ed exclaimed, suddenly understanding. “Haines made it all up!”

“And Pound turned it into a parody of his own poetry,” Shannon continued.

“So we have two old men laughing themselves silly over a fake manuscript of Har’shun and a parody of *The Pisan Cantos*,” Ed said bitterly, sinking back into himself.

“Pound’s diagnosis was manic-depressive’ Shannon continued.

“He would go off like a skyrocket, then crash and burn in self-recrimination and despair.”

“And Ashworth Haines went right along with him, maybe even egged him on,” Ed said.

“Now you have your dissertation topic,” Shannon said hopefully.

“I’ll call it ‘The Madness of Translation,’” he joked. “But how can I put all that time into what was a private joke between two crazy old men?”

Shannon saw the Stoics drawing him back to their empty porch. Like Pound he could sink too deeply into himself for anything coherent to emerge. If she couldn’t break their hold, his last opportunity to spring from the rubble would be lost.

“Haines was ridiculing the scholarship that condemned him as mad,” she argued. “And Pound was ridiculing the whole literary establishment that said he was a genius but was helpless to have him released.”

“It isn’t all about a fake translation and bad poetry?”

“No. Together they mocked their work to show the world—not them—was mad.”

“Or maybe even God,” he added under his breath, crossing a line with Haines and Pound the Stoics had never approached.

“Isn’t that worth a dissertation?”

“I could call it ‘The Scholar’s Revenge,’” he joked, but she could see he was serious.

Instead of applying for a construction job, Ed put in his notice. He agreed to stay on two weeks until they could find a replacement and the new semester had begun at Georgetown. When they were finally able to drive to New Haven, the librarian at

Yale confirmed that the pencil papers were Pound's.

Driving back to Arlington Shannon was talking happily about their twin dissertations on Pound and Ashworth Haines. When they hit a traffic tie-up in New Jersey, she realized he had not said anything except "Uh-huh" and "I guess" for fifty miles. He hadn't been listening to her; he was sinking back into his idealized conception of Stoic virtue.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied.

"Come on, Ed."

The traffic started to creep forward again.

"What's the point of a dissertation about a fake translation into Medieval Latin?" he said bitterly.

The traffic stopped again.

"Didn't any of the Stoics have a sense of humor?" Shannon said smiling.

"Seneca said it was better to laugh about life than weep about it."

The traffic started moving again.

"Well?" she asked.

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Episcopal Retirement Services. Black Lawrence Press published *The Butterfly Collector*, his award winning collection of short stories in 2009, and Glass Lyre Press published *Recycled Glass and Other Stories*, his second collection, in April 2017. For more information, please go to www.fredmcgavran.com.

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