The King's Coin

Danish-American Poems

FINN BILLE

THE KING'S COIN ◆ FINN BILLE

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THE MAECENAS PRESS
2020

ISBN: 978-0-944266-35-9

The Maecenas Press
Chattanooga, TN

Contact Finn Bille, 1109 Hanover Street, Chattanooga, TN 37405.

For publication credits, see notes for individual poems.

Design and composition by Annie Graham Publishing Services,
Chattanooga, TN

Printed by Sheridan, Chelsea, Michigan

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In Memory of My Paternal Grandmother (*Farmor*)
Ane Kirstine Andersen Bille
1878–1951

From her *"Sangen om Møn"*

Jeg elsker Møens høje Kyst
og lyse Bøgeskove.
Med hver en længsel i mit Bryst
jeg maa dens Skønhed love,
thi intet Sted en Pragt saa stor
jeg fandt som der, hvor Bøgen gror
ad Klintens hvide, stejle Side.

My translation:

I love Møn's lofty coast
and light green woods of beech.
With all the longing in my heart
I must now praise its beauty,
for nowhere have I found such glory
like this place where beeches grow
up the white steep slope of our cliff.

In Tribute to Knud Rasmussen, Danish-Inuit Explorer
1879–1933

These lines by Rasmussen are carved in his monument
on the coast north of Copenhagen.

Ene Luftens Ånder
kender, hvad jeg møder
bag ved fjeldet;
men alligevel jeg kører
mine hunde videre frem
videre frem
videre frem

My translation:

Only spirits of the air
know what I shall meet
behind the mountain;
but still I drive
my dogs farther onward
farther onward
farther onward.

Introduction

These are my bi-national poems. They look back to Denmark (*Danmark*), the land of my birth, and look to *Amerika* (America), my adopted country.

These poems have been selected from my work spanning five decades, and a few have been written for this collection. Some have been published, and I acknowledge those publications in notes opposite each poem. These notes also relate the settings and time references of the poems. They range from Jutland 1942 in "Last Night I Was a Child Again," to Møn 2019 in "Church Ships." Together they constitute my biography in poetry.

Although most of these poems are written from my personal point of view, as in "Every Time I Say Goodbye," I include them in this collection because they express a universal feeling or thought and emotional truth. They are in this collection because that expression relates most directly to the common experience of Danish immigrants to the United States.

In 2015 four of these poems were published in *The Bridge: Journal of the Danish American Heritage Society,* edited by Julie Allen, who invited me to read from a shorter pre-publication edition of *The King's Coin* at the 2017 conference of the Society. That same year *The Bridge* printed my poem "Time Spiral" along with two of my photographs of the staircase. "Church Ships" is scheduled for publication in the summer 2020 issue of *The Bridge.* These poems complement my Danish-American stories, which so far have only been heard in my performances at storytelling events, and on my CD *Marzipan: Stories with Music.* The title story from this CD has been edited for print and published in *The Danish Pioneer*'s Christmas issue for 2019.

I am indebted to Jeanne, my American wife of more than

fifty years, for her unstinting support, and to my fellow poets who have vetted many of these poems. A special thanks to my fellow Danish-Americans Klaus Langkilde and Jens Auken for reading the manuscript and commenting, and to Judith Caulfield of Annie Graham Publishing Services for her superb design and typesetting as well as her professional advice.

Finn Bille, April 2020

I

In Denmark I Was Born

"I Danmark er Jeg Født"

The Song

This song by Hans Christian Andersen is perhaps too committed to staying in Denmark to be cited by me, the emigrant. In fact, the singing of this very song was used in the internationally successful Danish TV series *Borgen* as proof that the company whose employees sang it every morning would not leave Denmark. This song is widely considered excessively sentimental and nationalistic; but broken down into its component ideas and feelings, it resonates with this immigrant and with my poetry in this collection.

My poems exemplify the persistence of meaningful childhood memories from "the old country." The Danish coast, farmlands, and historic sites mentioned in this song appear in my poems as the iconic features of Denmark imbedded in my consciousness. I return again and again to Denmark to stay in touch with these building blocks of my identity.

The Song

by H. C. Andersen

I Danmark er jeg født, der har jeg hjemme,
der har jeg rod, derfra min verden går.
Du Danske sprog, du er min moders stemme,
så sødt velsignet du mit hjerte når.
Du danske, friske strand,
hvor oldtids kæmpegrave
stå mellem æblegård og humlehave,
dig elsker jeg! Danmark, mit fædreland!

My translation:

In Denmark I was born, there is my home,
there I am rooted, from there, my world evolves.
You Danish tongue, you are my mother's voice
as sweetly blessed you reach my heart.
You, Denmark's breezy coast,
where orchards and hop gardens flank
the graves of ancient warriors,
you I love! Denmark, my native land.

Summer on Møn

The island of Møn lies about sixty miles south of København (Copenhagen) on the edge of Østersøen (the Baltic Sea).

Connected to Sjælland by a bridge, this is my father's birth-island and the location of my family's summer vacations at my grandparents' house in the village of Hjertebjerg.

This is where I learned to love the open Danish countryside.

Summer on Møn

1.

Morning's breath shreds mist on ripened wheat.
Blue punctures, gray smudges clouds,
as breezes promise rain, stroke bristling grain,
send golden waves away to dark green fields of beets.

2.

Sapphire head then long barred tail
explode out of the rattled stalks on wings
faster than a startled heart can beat.
Damp wind whisks him away,
absorbs the pheasant's high hoarse cries.

3.

Rain sweeps the Baltic Sea with misty skeins.
Into this hushed and darkened sky a lark
rises from the barley sea. Last rays catch wings
that gold-stitch blackened velvet clouds,
trilling for its brooding mate,
louder than the sun.

Seed

In the summer of 2010 I visited my father's native island of Møn. Famous for its chalk cliffs facing the Baltic Sea, this island south of København was joined to Sjælland by a bridge in my lifetime.

I was driving toward the town of Stege when I caught a glimpse of a man and a tractor in a plowed field. He bent down and appeared to hold something heavy. I imagined that he was removing a boulder from the field so that he could sow his grain. He would be carrying on a very old practice.

Ever since cultivation started in Denmark over a thousand years ago, farmers have dug up and removed rocks brought from Scandinavia's northern mountains and ground smooth by glaciers of the last ice age. With these solid stones of granite and other igneous rocks, farmers have built walls, barns, houses, and churches that still stand today.

Seed

A man bends down
off his tractor he bends down.
He is plowing the kingdom
where the ice came, and left
scoured, rounded stones.

A man bends down
where his father bent down,
where his father's father
bent down, his horse blowing
steam in the cold spring air
off the Baltic, where his father's
father's father's father
bent down, his oxen waiting,
loam in the cleft of their hooves
rich dung plopping and steaming.

A man bends down
lays hands on a frost-heaved stone
caresses its glacier-smoothed curve
his hands exploring
where soil meets stone.
He squats, hefts, lifts, carries
pressing granite to groin.
Back arched, breath held, face crimsoned,
he staggers to the sledge
that horse or ox or tractor pulls
to clear his alluvial field
to sow his seed
to harvest wheat
to bake his daily bread.

Summer Night

Late one midsummer night in 1968, my wife Jeanne and I wandered out on the narrow country roads close to my mother's house in Flakkebjerg on Sjælland.

Like other Danish-Americans in southern states, I miss these northern nights.

Denmark, like the southern-most part of Alaska, lies between 54 and 58 degrees north latitude. In the summer, Danes enjoy twilight nights when the sun seems to hide just below the horizon, but they have to travel north to experience midnight sun.

First published in my *Rites of the Earth*: *Selected Poems 1965–1990*, Chattanooga, TN, 1994.

Summer Night

Why alley cat
staccato silence from the night
mew, and to the silent
pre-dawn undulations of the barley seas
dance your tail slow, cobra-like
and follow over the hill
us out of our time
into the cats-eye yellow sky
where the jade ocean waves
rise with descending light breez-
ing toward dawn this tilting stage
which rubs the static blotched
and blushing sky?

Why cat mew
and leave us in the rising sea?
Go find your dark stove corner
we have no shelter errand
our goal is now
vibrant with us
lovers from the night
parting at dawn
with night.

Dane Graves

Just north of Nørresundby in northern Jutland (*Nordjylland*) where I was born lies Lindholm Høje, a burial site with many graves enclosed in ship-shaped stone settings from about the fifth to the eleventh centuries, including the Viking era. Like other Danish-Americans, I take pride in coming from a truly old country of seafarers, explorers, and emigrants.

Published in *Southern Light: Twelve Contemporary Southern Poets.*
Ed. Ray Zimmerman. Chattanooga, TN: Ford, Falcon & McNeil, 2011.

Dane Graves

Stone ships cannot be moved.
Stone vessels cannot float.
Stones set in arid hills
can only settle deeper—stay stone
raised by faith in winds
that blow to richer fields:
Stone stand against strong winds
that carry lighter vessels out to sea.

Grandmother's Songs

Farmor's Sange is a collection of lyrics written by my paternal grandmother (*Farmor*), Ane Kirstine Andersen Bille. It was preserved and given to me by my father, Frank F. Bille. As the poem implies, she was deaf. Her grave is in the churchyard of Elmelunde Kirke on the island of Møn.

Nothing ties an immigrant to his land of origin as does seeing his family name on a gravestone.

A family member has objected that this scene is fictional. I am sure that this exact meeting has not occurred, but the poem contains the emotional truth of my memory.

Grandmother's Songs

Cursive verses in a faded notebook,
songs of praise for her island,
lay hidden under doilies and napkins
decades after she had died.

To me she had been Grandma.
We called her "*Farmor*"—fathermother—
deaf, severe, stingy with smiles
except when we, the Copenhagen kids,
arrived each summer. Then she bent down
to kiss me, face softened, eyes bright,
when I could call her "*Farmor*" directly in her ear,
when she could whisper my name
together with "sweet" and "darling"
into mine.

So few the words I heard from her,
so like a distant country her inner voice,
that when I found her lyrics, my visits
to her grave, where her mute self lay
while I remembered in America, became
a celebration of her songs.

Off the Baltic, wind shakes boxwoods
that surround her grave, and out there
on the horizon the glinting sea,
the waving beech woods, and
the stately cliffs of chalk
echo her songs of praise
that I never heard from her
directly in my ear.

Apples

My paternal grandmother (*Farmor*) wrote the letters that I call the Apple Letters from the village of Hjertebjerg (literally "Heart Mountain") on the island of Møn to København where her son, Svend Olaf Bille, my uncle, was studying mechanical engineering.

Apples

When her kettle whistled
its ephemeral vaporous wail

she scalded the old clay pot,
steam sighing from its spout

as she pinched, let fall
dry leaves of tea, dusty

memories of his playful
trusting hand in hers,

then poured her boiling water
to find comfort in amber

heat that made her shiver.
Dear son, she wrote,

to her boy gone off
to learn the city's ways:

I hope you got the apples,
the last of this year's harvest.

Ten

In my story "When I Was Ten," I return from America to give my book of poems *Rites of the Earth,* in which this poem was first published, to my mother as a way of balancing my brother's gift to her of his first oil painting forty years earlier. This story is included on my CD, *Marzipan: Stories with Music*. My brother, Per Henrik Bille, helped me build our dugout in this poem and the story.

Ten

When I was ten,
I disappeared in the flower bed
under the beech, next to the locust.

We sat hunkered under clods hung and falling
from branches and boards.

We had dug to our own depth
and built a fire in our own earth stove.

I would snake through the hatch,
the heel of my hand slipping on the clay brink,
and slide to the burlap floor.

Here, the funky earth smell and the acrid smoke
of papers and damp twigs afire
became our sacraments.

We would sit hidden, quiet, warm—
the only sign to the adult world,
the swirling smoke mingling
above with winter fog.

Last Night I Was a Child Again

According to family legend, British bombers flew over the hospital when I was born on March 7, 1942, in Nørresundby on the north shore of Limfjorden in northern Jylland (Jutland). They would probably have been headed for the German naval bases and industry around Hamburg, Germany, where many civilians would be killed.

We were relatively safe in Denmark under German occupation.

Published online in "American Diversity Report," March 2020.

Corey Mesler's poem "Last Night I Was a Child Again in Raleigh" was published in his book *Among the Mensans* by Iris Press, 2017.

Last Night I Was a Child Again

—after Corey Mesler

Last night I was a child again
in Jutland, Denmark, nineteen forty-two.

My mother's milk surged as I suckled
and kneaded her distended breast.

A growing roar shook windowpanes,
her dripping nipple swung away.

She shuddered, looked outside and up
as dark things in a wedge crept by.

She wept and trembled, crushed
my face into her breast as engine noises dimmed.

I sucked in eerie silence, blissful, unaware
that German mothers and their children
soon would suffer, starve and die.

Granddad's Song Book

We found this book in the attic of my father's home place in Hjertebjerg on the island Møn. It belonged to my paternal grandfather, Hemming Hansen Bille (1878–1975), who is buried alongside my grandmother in Elmelunde churchyard. The title of this 1896 edition is *Sangbog udgivet af foreningen for højskoler og landbrugsskoler* (Song book published by the Association of Folk High Schools and Agricultural Schools). This treasury of Danish song culture contains the lyrics for over five hundred songs.

My grandfather belonged to the local glee club (*sangforening*), whose members knew the melodies of many of these songs and led the singing at the local commmunity center (*forsamlingshuset).*

When I attended school in Denmark, all Danish students were required to memorize song lyrics (*salmevers*) and to participate in singing lessons. I still remember parts of lyrics that I learned in the early 1950s.

When I taught at a Danish Folk High School in the 1990s, the venerable tradition of morning song (*morgensang*) was alive and tuneful with some of the songs in this book.

Dannebrog is the name of the Danish national flag.

Published in *The Bridge: Journal of the Danish American Heritage Society*, Vol. 38, No.2 (Fall 2015).

Granddad's Song Book

My grandfather's hand
has worn down the gold
on his song book's leather spine,
but the Danish *sang* and *bog* still glow.

My thumb finds the spot,
where his thumb has worn through
many layers of cardboard paper
their edges sealed with sweat.

He carries this hoard of lyrics
spine on palm, thumb on cover
through his island village
to the meeting hall to sing.

In step with neighbors—
farmers, blacksmith, teacher—
they arrive under cloudy skies
bundled in grey and black.

Creased, coffee-stained
pages open to the text
of beloved songs whose melodies
they know and sing in brightest hues.

They sing of Dannebrog in red and white.
In green, they praise the island's beech groves
then raise blue voices for the sea
embracing, cradling Denmark's shores.

Now back in Tennessee,
I clutch his song book and recall, I feared
my granddad's calloused hand, but I never
knew the man who sang these songs.

Migrant Voices

This poem refers to our second immigration, when my brother Per and I left København to join our father in California.

We lived on the sixth floor on Østerbrogade above Trianglen where several street car lines converged.

Immigration amounts to what some psychologists call forced adjustment, as the rails force wheels to alter course.

Migrant Voices

We lived above convergence:
streetcars slowing, stopping,
squealing through the curves,
electric motors winding down
soprano to low baritone.

Their short stops, rapid exits
sang of life's brief recess,
the urgency of moving on.

We immigrated to America
where I woke from dreams
of warning bells and metal keening
when hardened rails
force wheels of steel
to alter course.

Every Time: Danish Memories

Most of these poems are fourteen-line blank verse sonnets preceded by the title line—that is, the unrhymed lines are semi-regular iambic pentameter (five pairs of unaccented and accented syllables). They reflect my notion that our minds are structured with images and hidden memories that are triggered by similar events or images: what Marcel Proust called "involuntary memories" that dominate his *In Search of Lost Time* (*À la recherche du temps perdu*). For me, as for other immigrants, these memories often relate to my Danish childhood.

Proust cites these line from Shakespeare's Sonnet 30:

> When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
> I summon up remembrance of things past,
> . . .

Robert Frost writes in "West-Running Brook" about a standing wave that seems to be running upstream:

> It is this backward motion toward the source,
> Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
> The tribute of the current to the source.

I acknowledge my debt to David Allen Evans. His poem "The Story of Lava" starts, "Every time I smell Lava soap it is 1948."

II

Every Time: Danish Memories

[Every time I see a swan fly,]

In this poem I imagine that my mother introduced me, the future immigrant, to the migrating swan. The setting is Tuse Næs near Holbæk on Sjælland where we lived when I was a toddler.

This poem is the subject of my performed story "Recycled Poetry," included on my CD *Marzipan: Stories with Music* (with music by Rick Davis on the hammered dulcimer).

All my adult life I have considered the wild mute swan (*Cygnus olor*) a kind of personal totem. This relationship has meant that I always look for this swan, the national bird of Denmark, when I visit the country of my birth.

I migrate like the swan. Every year I fly to Denmark and back to America.

i

Every time I see a swan fly,
I ride my mother's arms in bouncing woods.
Green blurs and soughing wind in beech leaves
mingle with her scent and heat at every step
into the sunny meadow at the water's edge
where pastures interlace with narrow bays.
The landscape steadies as she sits close
to the gentle beat of water lapping shore
yielding to a high pitched urgent pulse.
She holds me up to see a pair of swans
push off with wings, then walk on water, rise.
White feathers whistle in synchronous flight
while red beaks point to the bright horizon.
Their music fades, their blending, waving specks
merge, recede and molt, melt in silver glint.

[Every time I see a kite fly,]

I base this poem on a vague memory of my father's giant and un-airworthy kite that he built after the war. In København we lived in a very small apartment on the sixth floor (*femte sal)* of a crowded tenement on Prags Boulevard close to Amager Fælled, the old commons.

Published in *The Bridge: Journal of the Danish American Heritage Society*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Fall 2015).

ii

Every time I see a kite fly,
the war is over where I am four years old.
My dad brings out the kite that he has built
in secret, hoping, believing that it will soar
above the copper crosses of Copenhagen,
higher than the twisted spire of Our Savior's Church
launched on a shifting wind now blowing from the west,
freed at last from its covert attic workshop,
his pigeon released from its dovecote.

Cold wind stirs dormant grass on our Commons.
My clog boots crush liberation fliers in the mud
as we try to launch the monster kite, father pulling
mother holding, me clinging to her skirt.
She wrestles the buffeted kite, thrusts it heavenward.
I feel a lift in her dress. I hear the crash.

[Every time I touch a wire fence,]

This poem is set, like the kite poem, on the commons of the island of Amager in København.

While I imagined the meeting with the refugee girl, the camp for German, and perhaps Polish, refugees on Amager Fælled (the commons) is historically accurate. "Football" (*fodbold*) is, of course, soccer.

iii

Every time I touch a wire fence,
I'm six outside the camp for refugees
that fills the field where we played football
last summer when no fences stopped our games.

Crowded now with tents and strangers penned
like cows on Uncle Harald's farm, this refuge
draws me when a girl comes to the fence, looks out.

Her clogged feet wrapped in muddy burlap rags,
thin body swathed in coarse black cloth,
white face scrimshawed with wire shadows,

she smiles through prison gloom.
Mirrored in her dark and joy-filled eyes,
I see a boy shut out behind these wire bars.

[Every time I see a snake plant,]

København 1968. Tea in the *hygge* (the difficult-to-define Danish quality of homey coziness) of my aunt's small apartment. The Florida location is Sanibel Island. *Sanseveria* is a part of the Latin name of the same plant, also called a mother-in-law's tongue.

Perhaps more than any other Danish mood, the immigrant misses the ritualistic gathering and togetherness, with candles and coziness that is typical of tea time or coffee time in Danish homes. This is the phenomenon of *hygge.*

I was amazed to see this house plant in the wilds of Florida. It reminded me of how little wilderness is left in Denmark.

iv

Every time I see a snake plant,
Aunt Rosa serves me steaming lapsang souchong
in her doily parlor above streetcar tracks.
Freezing rain fogs panes in wooden sashes
behind clay pots of mother-in-law tongues.
Dark tea pours from her striped Brown Betty pot
while red hot coke behind the isinglass
glows tropic heat on sanseveria.
Marzipan and Danish pastries sweeten
smoky tea, while she puffs clouds from black cigars.

Now every time I see their dark green spikes
crowd into shade of vine-choked oaks in Florida
I'm back in Rosa's refuge from the chill
of northern winters where the snake plant
always thrives in lairs of aunts who spoil us
with their cozy heat, with tea and cake.

[Every time I hear a fly buzz,]

Hjertebjerg, Møn, 1951. For my paternal grandfather, Hemming Hansen Bille (1878–1975). So who said that you can't write a poem about an outhouse?

Published in *Southern Light: Twelve Contemporary Southern Poets.* Ed. Ray Zimmerman. Chattanooga, TN: Ford, Falcon & McNeil, 2011.

v

Every time I hear a fly buzz,
I am nine years old on Granddad's outhouse seat.
My thighs and palms feel all the touches
that have smoothed the darkened wood.

I have moved the hand-carved latch of oak
to span the gap between pine door and frame
in the circle scribed by our many turnings.

The fly drones on against the dusty screen
like gentle snoring of the sun-still fields
while the secret workings of all our bodies
mingle with the smell of loam and fresh-cut dill.

No matter where I hear the fly buzz, Granddad's
lime-washed, plastered walls surround me
as I sit alone, at ease with all my people
always in sunny summer at the center of the world.

[Every time I hear a tambourine,]

Flakkebjerg, Sjælland, about 1982. The fiddlers are my two brothers, Per Henrik and Sten, and the accordion player is my sister Lene.

The reference in the last lines is to the Danish tradition of *rejsegilde*, the party held when a house has been fully framed.

vi

Every time I hear a tambourine,
I'm forty at my mother's country home,
her thatched, half-timbered farmhouse,
warm refuge from the Christmas storm
where all her children gather.
Snow beats on window panes and fire crackles
while brothers bow their fiddle strings
and sister pumps her big accordion
in flickering light.
Deep in shadow
I search our old toy chest to find a tambourine
and tap the hoop to stir the rusty jingles,
thump softly on the thin skin drum
like the village idiot beat a broken pail
two hundred years ago when—
framed and raftered—this cottage
rang with rustic dance tunes.

[Every time I step into a graveyard,]

In memory of my younger brother, Sten Bille (1948-2005). We buried him in København's Assistens Kirkegård, walled off from the busy street, Nørrebrogade.

vii

Every time I step into a graveyard,
I struggle to hold up my brother's coffin.
From city street to walled-in cemetery,
his fiddler friends bow dancing memories,
accordions insist on breathing tunes
he loved, while brushing weeping willows, yews

on new-raked gravel paths into its core
where motor noises from the street have dimmed,
where cedars scent our noisy cavalcade
slow-marching to the merry country song
he fiddled with them at last solstice dance.

Wherever headstones speak of passed-on kin,
in Lima, Paris, Budapest, or Rome
I hear his strings play on, I skip a step,
my shoulder takes the strain, the music stops.

[Every time I say goodbye]

Set, like the "Tambourine" poem, at my mother's renovated farm house in Flakkebjerg on Sjælland.

Published in *Southern Light: Twelve Contemporary Southern Poets.* Ed. Ray Zimmerman. Chattanooga, TN: Ford, Falcon & McNeil, 2011.

viii

Every time I say goodbye,
I see my mother lean
on the brown half door
overhung by thatch of bundled reeds
spotted green and weathered grey.

Her red rag tight around her brow,
she struggles to smile, her knuckles white
her blue eyes blank
as I turn
my face reduced to memory.

III

At Home in America

In Washington, D.C.

In 1953 I immigrated to America together with my father and my older brother, Per. We travelled by Greyhound bus from New York to Los Angeles.

We stopped to spend several days with relatives in Virginia outside Washington D. C., where Per and I were shown—and dragged through—the monuments. But as this poem indicates, I responded to American nature, not to its monuments. The epiphany of my encounter with the blue jay influenced me profoundly.

In Washington, D.C.

All flags and marble monuments
bored me, the immigrant boy.
Lincoln was not my king
the obelisk puzzled me, and
war memorials exhausted me.

But in the thick green air
of Virginia's woods
a loud shriek pierced me
when a bluejay flew
across my wandering path.

Its raucous voice said,
This is your country:
this emerald wild
this saphire gleam.

At Santa Anita Racetrack

When my family immigrated, we lived for a while in Arcadia, California, the home of the Santa Anita Racetrack, where I learned to drive in its parking lot.

But the race track seemed to belong to yet another world that was alien to us.

At Santa Anita Racetrack

parking lot, my dad said,
"In America you have to learn to drive,
in Los Angeles you won't survive
unless you learn to drive."
He said it in Danish
so it didn't rhyme, but it had the ring
of a new big truth, a rule
which here on this asphalt plain
slot-lined for a thousand cars,
could not be denied, though drivers
came here to bet on horses
as their engines, pinging, cooled
and hot thoroughbreds, their blood lines
hyped, raced round and round.

I stalled my father's nineteen fifty Kiser
astride white lines on sun-bleached tar.

Our Mountain Stream

This poem is set in the San Gabriel Mountains of Southern California in 1960. It is dedicated to the memory of our father, Frank Folmer Bille (1913-1997).

What could be more satisfying for a father who had led his family to America than to find and control—to whatever small extent—a portion of wilderness as the pioneers did? —And to find that wilderness so close to the vast, sprawling, paved over, metropolis of Los Angeles.

Our Mountain Stream

Every time I see
the portrait of my dad
smiling awkwardly within
an ornate, golden frame
his formal suit of pinstripe blue
shirt white, and tie Old Glory bright
red as his native Danish flag,

every time I see him captured there
I want to break him out
transport him to our mountain creek
in shorts and t-shirt.

There in cottonwood-green shade
above all smog and flags
his crooked grin
could not conceal his happiness.
Bright eyes and open hands
received from us, his sons,
smooth grey river rocks
that he fit lovingly into our dam
that checked the flow of time
up there, back then, in San Gabriel's
mountains, along a wild and green-
fringed stream, above brown
air of L.A.'s other Angels.

L. A.

Published in 1973 in *Credo,* the literary magazine of Georgia State University, this strange poem is wide open for interpretation. The Latin of the last line echoes the grammar lessons in Danish schools, where all grammatical terms were Latin. It means conditional past perfect, or "maybe had been."

My family immigrated to the famously smoggy Los Angeles area in 1953. I returned there to land at Los Angeles International Airport in 1959, and in 1963 I graduated from Pepperdine College—then located in the city, and now Pepperdine University in Malibu.

L. A.

Once again I passed over California
a hummingbird riding the beak of a condor
a feeble toe in each nostril hole
a stubborn iridescence in the eyes
of the king of the dead
heaving the thinning air away
in growing patterns of flight
toward a rumored light.

Somewhere near sunrise
I struggled for a hold
I shivered in the height
and by cooling winds off the continent blown
nearly wrenched to a fall
    like a blurred feathered ball
through LA's sanctimonious smog.

Once again I passed over California
not a bird on a bird
but an incomplete moan
in an unknown form
of the *subjunctive plusquamperfectum*.

Into Georgia, 1963

This poem of internal migration, written for this collection, attempts to capture the culture shock of following my future wife into her native state. At the same time, the lush southern nature impressed me deeply, especially after having lived in semi-arid Southern California. In some ways it was a return to the green woods of my Danish childhood.

Into Georgia, 1963

Flat-land foreigner in this third world,
western deserts in my bones,
old world kingdom in my blood,
I slowed to span old asphalt cracks,
bounced in and out of pot holes,
drove south on US twenty-seven

into the country of coal piles in yards
whites-only Elks Clubs and dirt-yard schools
rebel flags and boyscout bugles
Church of God and Hardshell Baptist
white-columned mansions, clapboard shacks
on red dirt roads.

Dust choked me here
but I revived in shades of hickory and oak
above the slow Chattooga's mist-veiled flow.

Fence Post

Does every immigrant to America have a need to re-live the westward-moving pioneer's experience? Can any transplanted Dane who is not bound to a city resist the urge to buy and occupy land—a domain that would never be obtainable in Denmark? My wife Jeanne and I could not.

We set the fence post at our retreat on Lookout Mountain in Jeanne's home county of Chattooga, Georgia.

Fence Post

We found the gum trees, pine, and sumac
cut across our deeded line.
This clumsy clearing of vague boundaries
revealed a post we planted there
decades past to mark our land.
Sawed from native oak we felled
to plant our peach and plum trees,
we set it here in sweat and loam.

Wind has blasted valleys in its wood
to show soft, easy seasons,
and left grey ridges for the harder years.
Solid stake, how did it last?

Can our fence line be restored?
I lean against the post. I fall.

Letter from the Kingdom

I found this letter in 2015. I received it in 1959 as I entered Pepperdine College in Los Angeles (now Pepperdine University in Malibu). Galway Kinnel published his book of poems, *What a Kingdom It Was,* in the same year.

When I moved back to Denmark in 1955 with my mother and three siblings, we welcomed missionaries from American Churches of Christ, the church affiliated with Pepperdine College and the church that our relatives in California introduced us to when we immigrated. Our aunt who sponsored us was as eager to include us in her church community as she was to make us Americans.

I have heard from other immigrants whose families have been recruited by, and absorbed into, faith communities of Danes in America as they arrived from the old kingdom.

By 2015, I had distanced myself from organized religion, thus agreeing with the very secular majority of modern Danes in Denmark for whom religion seems a quaint aspect of a faded kingdom.

Letter from the Kingdom

What a Kingdom It Was
—Galway Kinnell

Sister Annelise in Denmark
wrote to me in California
on onion skin, now yellowed
in a blue, red envelope cut open
to preserve King Frederick's stamp.
What a kingdom it was.

She wrote of Sunday mornings,
sermons and prayers
for the Kingdom of Heaven,
bowed heads and Bible verses
of my now-abandoned faith.
What a kingdom it was.

She wrote that she would pray
to the King of Kings
for the young disciple that I was.
What did she wish for me?
What for the world I live in now?
What a kingdom it was.

IV

Hello Again, Farewell

The Little Mermaid

The Little Mermaid *(Den Lille Havfrue)* sits on a boulder in København harbor.

Andersen's tale by this name is the ultimate immigrant's story, a tale of two worlds.

When you are in København , take the harbor tour so that you can view her from the water as I did.

The Little Mermaid

. . . once you have a human body
you can never become a mermaid again.
—H. C. Andersen

A Japanese shivers under her umbrella.
"Is this little statue the world-famous Mermaid,
the one from the tale I heard as a child,
this bronzy girl splashed by cold water
from the swells of a passing cruise ship?"

But she stares as if at a long-lost sister.
As her umbrella lifts with a gust from the sea
her wet cheeks send me back
to my Danish childhood,
Mom reading "The Little Mermaid":
human with fish tail, girl of two worlds.

Church Ships

Fanefjord Kirke is a medieval church on the southern tip of the island of Møn. This church is famous for its frescos created by Elmelundemesteren—the master craftsman and his crew who painted the interior of Elmelunde Kirke, where my grandparents are buried. The ceilings in both churches are vaulted.

All Danish churches that I have visited have one or more model ships hanging from the ceiling and facing the altar. Most models are sailing ships and many are ships of war showing their guns.

The tune is the Danish national anthem, "Kong Christian stod ved højen mast," the equivalent of our American "Star-Spangled Banner."

The bleeding king is Christian IV, who was wounded aboard his flagship *Trefoldigheden* (Trinity), in 1644 at the battle of Kolberger Heide against a Dutch fleet allied with Sweden.

Coffee, the Danish national drink, came initially by sailing ships from the Orient. Sugar used to sweeten it came from Danish plantations on the Virgin Islands where slaves cut, gathered, and pressed the cane and loaded the sugar on Danish vessels.

Published in *The Bridge: Journal of the Danish American Heritage Society*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Summer 2020).

Church Ships

Three ships hang in Fanefjord,
the church looks out to sea
and paintings in the ceiling
tell stories of the fall of man.

A devil with his pointed tail
looks through the ropes
of a frigate with its guns run out
while dangling over flames of hell

a poor parishioner and sailor man.
The organ blasts the martial tune
"King Christian stood at lofty mast"
to bless these men-of-war

hung from vaults above
on iron rods. Their models
could have seen the bleeding king
and heard the thunder of his guns.

These battle ships can testify
to the perils of the sea.
They aim their bowsprits at the altar
and the man nailed to the cross.

Their sails remind all worshipers
of Danish wind-blown vessels
bringing coffee from the East
and slave-cut sugar from the West.

The Devil grins through shrouds and stays
while Adam at the gate of Paradise
looks back to see three bone-dry hulls
hung up and locked far from the living sea.

Hijab in Sorø

The year is 2013. The place is a clinic in the provincial town of Sorø on Sjælland, near the home of my brother, Per Henrik Bille.

Denmark, like other European countries, is struggling to adapt to its minority Muslim population.

Published in *The Bridge: Journal of the Danish American Heritage Society*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Fall 2015).

Hijab in Sorg

"You are sick," she said,
the Danish doctor,
in perfect English.
"Ja, jeg er syg," I said.

In the waiting room
talk hummed, muted,
pages fluttered, rustled.

When a patient left
all muttered "farvel"
looking up.

When a headscarf
entered, murmurs ceased
eyes averted, rustlings rose.

When the doctor's door hissed,
closed behind the scarf,
talk resumed as strident chatter.

Hijab came out. All voices stilled.
Hijab retreated, exited
with a click and a thud, the outer door
let in, cut off, the clanging of church bells.

"Farvel" I said as I rose
"Farvel" they muttered, looking up.

I left in search of a pill
against infection.

On a Beach

From a vacation trip to the island of Fyn, this poem illustrates the Danish affection for local landscapes and for naming hills and headlands.

Although the Danish word *sjæl* does mean *soul*, the origin of the name *Sjælland* has more to do with seals and possibly inlets.

Farfar is my paternal grandfather, father's father.

On a Beach

The land out there, low, hazy, green,
is the island of Sjælland
sjæl meaning soul.
I stand on the island of Fyn.

I taste the names in Danish
on the tongue that travels here
to speak the language of my childhood,
but I cannot name this bluff
whose ice-ground rocks
washed out by storms
now cover beach and crowd
the brackish shallows:
weak ramparts against waves
that gather strength across the strait.

My *farfar* called this hill by name
remembered shipwrecks at its base.
We picnicked here, my mother
pointing and naming,
and when a swallow launched
from its clay bank nest,
I cried, "Look mother, look!"

This Danish Church

The experience related in this poem could have taken place in any of the many typical Danish village churches built during the Middle Ages.

Two such churches are prominent in my memory: Tystrup Kirke on Sjælland, and Elmelunde Kirke on the island of Møn where my paternal grandparents are buried.

These churches typically have frescos (*kalkmalerier*) painted on the vaulted ceilings to illustrate biblical tales and warn of the perils of sin and damnation. Devils with pointed tails and flames of hell share space with renderings of common life and activities, such as sowing and harvesting. Many are faded to near-invisibility, but some have been restored.

I have no record or memory of the church where I was baptized as an infant.

This Danish Church

I thought I knew that I had left behind
all churchiness for simple earthiness.

What made me stop to photograph this church,
this ancient monument to priest oppression,
this boulder-built, step-gabled, lime-washed
edifice of parsons' and of bishops' rule?

Yet here my lenses focused sharply
on red tile, white walls, grey rock.
My feet directed me inside to stand
hushed, mystified and baffled at the altar's rail.

Here sprinkled blessings had touched my infant head
before, like faded frescoes, my parents' pledges died,
but nothing could erase the bone-deep echo
of hymnal praise for the landlord of this house.

Grave Letter

My mother's ashes were buried—loose in the soil—in the village churchyard of Flakkebjerg on Sjælland.

My mother had lived for many years in a restored farm house across the road from the railroad station, now defunct, which gave the small settlement its name: Flakkebjerg Station.

She liked to walk the farm road up the hill to the old village of Flakkebjerg and its church whose core was built around 1100.

The granite grave marker has a cross, an anchor, and a heart engraved on it for *tro, håb, og kærlighed.*

Grave Letter

In memory of Ruth Nich Rosquist, 1919–1997

My mother's warm embrace
had lingered as the train
rolled me away last time
my tears flew back
to Tennessee.

The letter from the Danish
Lutheran State Church
on paper subtly watermarked
with Queen Margrethe's
cursive seal demanded

in its dry pro forma style
that I pay the lease
on the churchyard plot
that holds her gray remains,
where a marker named the body

now reduced to ashes
mingling, urnless,
with her parish soil:
Three thousand Danish kroner
to extend the sexton's care.

Flakkebjerg Kirke

To the ecclesiastic auditor
I answered, no,
I'll take the headstone,
let roots of apple trees
embrace her memories.

Let her ashes mingle with its soil
inside the tile-topped churchyard wall,
shadowed once a day
by the whitewashed stone-built tower
of this ancient village church.

Let these dull cinders
of her multicolored life
continue to enrich what grass may grow
in the second thousand years
of her homeland kingdom.

Leaving the Railroad Station

Is this a poem about the returning emigrant's disillusionment?

Wild roses become rose hips, or *hyben,* on thorny bushes, but with a lot of work and sugar, they make excellent preserves.

Leaving the Railroad Station

Doors slam shut.
Asphalt platform backs away.
Black wires grid gray skies.
Concrete railroad ties blur by.
Electric motors moan then wail then keen.

Rusty rails worn silver bright keep pace
along a dusty bank where glints of red
telegraph through moving windows,
then stop. The train speeds on
leaving only ghostly afterimages:
scarlet fruit of withered roses.

Time Spiral

The round church (*rundkirke*) at Bjernede, situated close to Sorø on Sjælland, is the only church of this design on Sjælland. Most of Denmark's round churches were built on the island of Bornholm in the Baltic.

The staircase is built into the church wall. When I climbed the narrow stairs, I felt immured, and my claustrophobia asserted itself as I struggled to escape down this constricting corkscrew, the only way out.

I imagine that I hallucinated, traveling back a thousand years to the time when the church-fortress was built during the reign of Valdemar den Store (Valdemar the Great), 1157–1182.

Historians disagree on the fortress function, but not on the fact that it was built by the powerful Hvide clan, nor that it was well suited as a refuge for the family in times of armed conflict.

Published in *The Bridge: Journal of the Danish American Heritage Society*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Fall 2017) with two of my black and white photographs of the staircase.

Time Spiral

—In the fortress-church of Bjernede on Sjælland, Denmark

I set my foot on granite
in the twilight of the stairwell.
Left hand, right hand grope in vain
for purchase on old stone and grout.

I span from wall to wall across
these narrow steps that rise,
twist, curve from sight into the past:
A thousand years ago

when masons' chisels split
and hewed to square, round
scattered boulders gathered
out of fields and pastures.

Up step by step I rise
to spiral back into medieval gloom.
Up, out from this dark curve I lean
into a day-lit niche.

Here, framed in iron, leaded panes
show grave stones, fences, gravel paths.
I breathe out heavy air held back in dread,
my fear-flushed cheek against cold rock.

Waves in hand-blown glass distort
a team of horses plowing rich dark soil,
an oxcart trundling down the lane.
I breathe again in time-warped gasps.

A thousand years of pressure on my chest,
I stumble down. Soft hands fend off
rough walls for balance in retreat
until I stagger out into fresh air,

fall, dazed, on grass outside the church.
where fields bloom green past rocky walls
while crows, caw-calling, flap onto the belfry
and settle on the window ledge.

Salt of ancestors disturbs my tongue
when I lick my bloodied hands.

Time Spiral

The King's Coin

I did not lose a Danish coin on the bus, but I vaguely remember my mother taking me to see King Christian's funeral cortège in 1947, and the coin shop on Frederiksberg is a clear, recent memory.

A one-*krone* coin also plays an important role in my story "Kings of Duarte."

Published in *The Bridge: Journal of the Danish American Heritage Society*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Fall 2015).

The King's Coin

In memory of Christian X, King of Denmark 1912–1947

I know I promised to keep King Christian
safe in my pocket on his Danish coin,
but I lost it on the Greyhound bus
between Chicago and L.A.

I have gone back to Copenhagen
between castle and canal
where I, then five years old, had held
the flag and mother's hand
as his empty-saddled horse
rang steel on granite cobblestone.

The coin shop clerk ransacked his drawers
until he found King Christian's *krone*,
apologized for smoothed-out edges,
the king defaced and pocket-worn.
He did not understand when I said,
perfect!

WHAT REVIEWERS HAVE SAID

In *The King's Coin,* Bille's graceful, vivid poems work a kind of magic, putting the poet's Danish memories and songs into eloquent English while capturing the ephemeral but undeniable cost of emigration and adaptation to a new cultural context. As a poetic autobiography, it is both poignant and thought-provoking. What are the sounds and smells and fleeting sights that shape our sense of self? This collection makes a sensually and emotionally rich contribution to the literature of hyphenated identity that should resonate with readers far beyond the borders of both the remembered Denmark and America he so skillfully evokes.

—Julie K. Allen. Editor, *The Bridge: Journal of the Danish-American Heritage Society*

The "Salt of ancestors disturbs my tongue" ("Time Spiral"), Finn Bille shares with readers in his new collection *The King's Coin*. Reminiscing a lifetime of experiences both as native son and as immigrant, Bille explores the discovery of his past and present selves divided between the Old World and the New: "I taste the names in Danish / on the tongue that travels here" ("On a Beach").

The King's Coin provides historical and personal commentary to aid the reader in her sense of place and family ties; these poems meander among nature and past events, travel and poetry, balancing between observation and invention. And it all began with "A man . . . plowing the kingdom / where the ice came" ("Seed"): a reminder of the important choices we make in harvesting the memories we let go and those we keep.

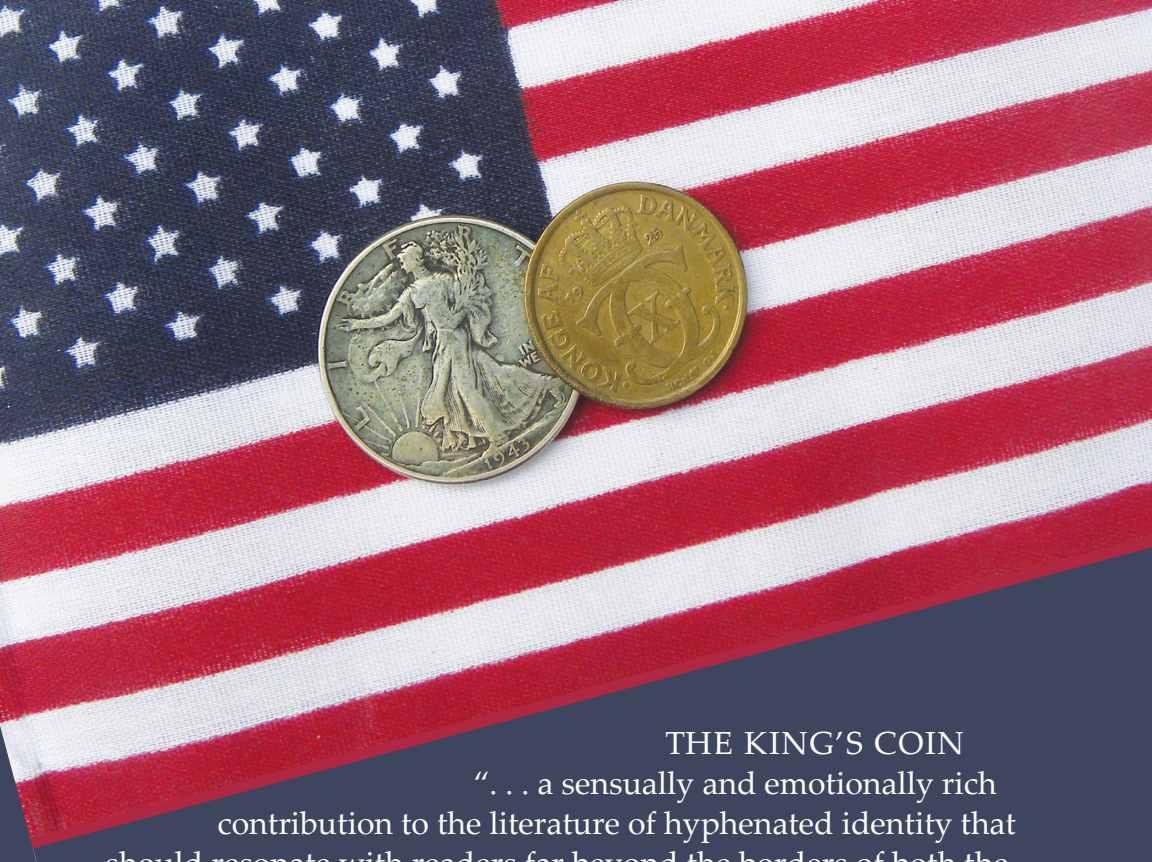
—KB Ballentine, *The Light Tears Loose; Almost Everything, Almost Nothing*

The King's Coin digtene er gennemsyret af 'røddernes' betydning i en fysisk og mental transitionsproces mellem gammelt og nyt. Det ene sprogbillede forbindes med et andet og skaber

verdener, der mødes og adskilles for til sidst af forenes i én fælles forståelse. Narrativet trækker i dig og løfter dig med på rejsen i et rigt fabulerende formsprog, hvor du tager digtene i besiddelse, ligesom digteren tager sit nye land I besiddelse.

[*The King's Coin* poems are saturated with the significance of roots in a process of transition between old and new. One image blends with another, creating worlds that merge and part to finally unite in a common vision. The narrative pulls you and lifts you into the journey in richly fabulating poetic forms, compelling your embrace of the poems in the same way the poet adopts his new country.]

—Peer Louis Aarestrup. *Kanas land, Asfaltblomstens duft, Diamantpigen*



THE KING'S COIN

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—Peer Louis Aarestrup, Author of *Kanas land*

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ISBN 9780944266359
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9 780944 266359

THE MAECENAS PRESS
Chattanooga, Tennessee