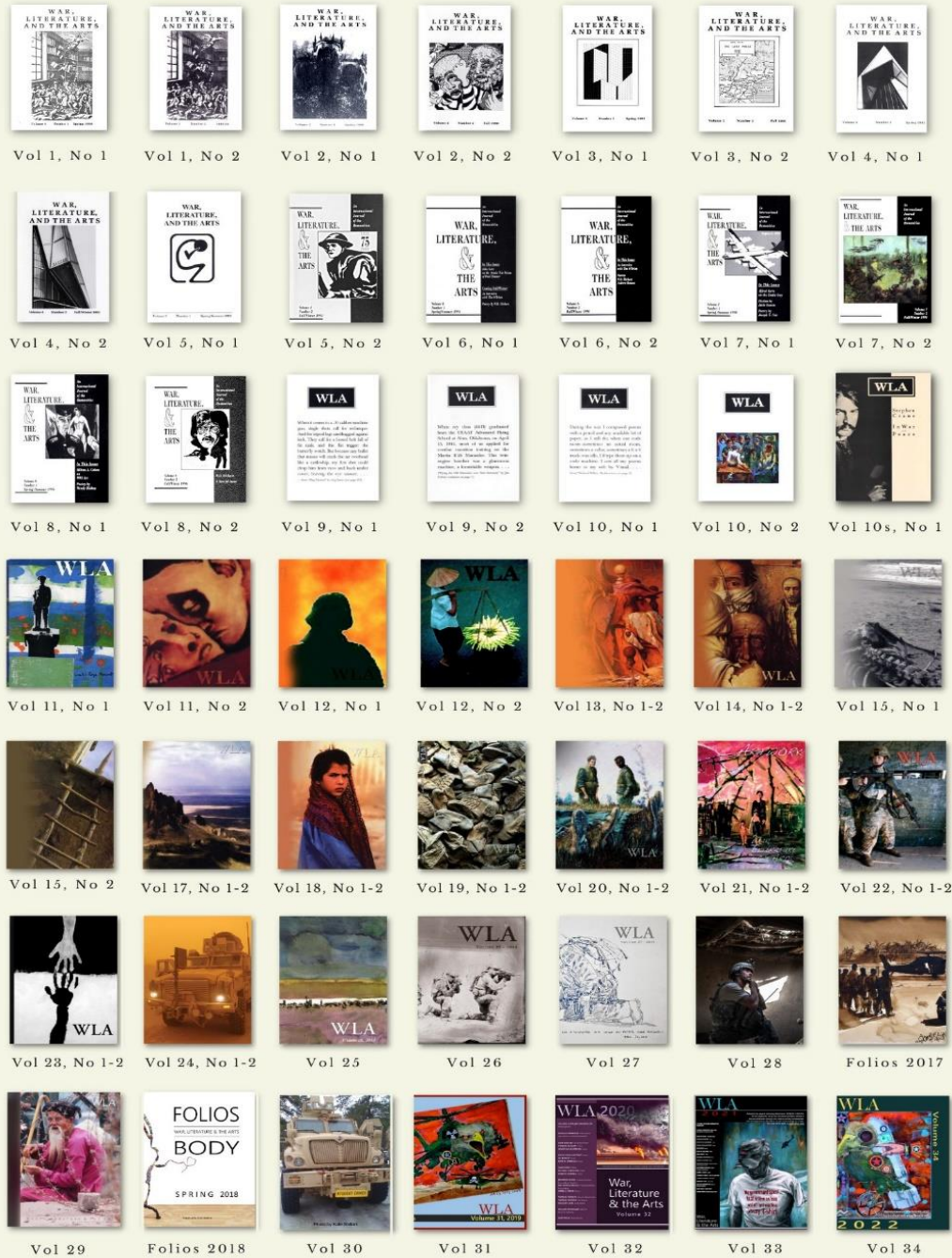


Editor's Note: A Glance Rearward—WLA 1989-2023

Thomas McGuire

WAR, LITERATURE, AND THE ARTS || 1989-2023



WLA's Origins and Rapid Growth

WLA kicks off its thirty-fifth anniversary year with this issue. Who could have known, all those years ago, what the future would hold for the journal in the ensuing decades? From modest beginnings in 1989, the journal has grown into something much greater than an arts and literature publication.

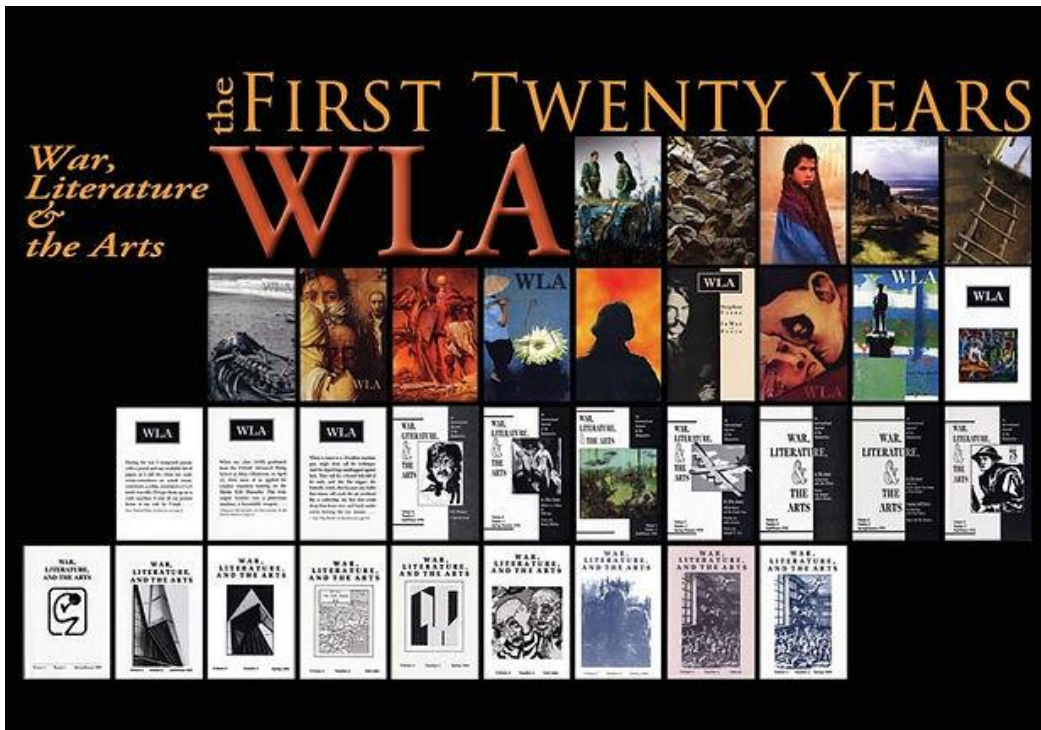
The journal has matured into a thriving community, a community that serves as a gathering space for people interested in exploring the imbrication of war, literature, and the arts. In recent decades, the community that *is* WLA has hosted two international conferences, launched the annual David L. Jannetta Lecture in War, Literature & the Arts, and sponsored staff editors and writers to work with veterans' support groups and writing initiatives.

Who would have guessed, in 1989, that WLA would have the kind of staying power, relevance, and resonance the journal has achieved? Back when a group of Vietnam War-era English professors assigned to the Air Force Academy English Department launched the inaugural issue of WLA, the journal's masthead sported six staff members: two editorial leads (Col Jack Shuttleworth and Lt Col James Aubrey), three associate editors, and an administrative assistant. Six critical essays, spanning one-hundred pages, comprised the first issue. Modest beginnings, indeed.

Midway through 1989, the stick passed to Donald Anderson, who published Vol. 1, No. 2 in the Fall of 1989. The journal's second issue featured only five critical essays, but Anderson already had big plans for expanding the journal's range and readership. By 1991, WLA ran its first book reviews and a Robert Morgan short story. The next issue saw a proliferation of creative offerings with poetry and photography added to the mix. In quick succession Anderson opened the genre aperture to include creative nonfiction, memoir, art, and personal essays.

During its first two and a half decades, **WLA** was a print-only journal. That all changed when Bill Newmiller convinced Anderson digital was the wave of the future. Today, we publish solely on-line, putting out a single issue annually. Each volume typically runs two to three hundred pages. Our electronic footprint allows us to connect ever-growing numbers of contributors and readers across the globe. At last count, we averaged over two million downloads of **WLA** pages annually. In any given month, we receive correspondence and submissions from people on three or four continents.

With each successive printing, the journal boosted not only its range of offerings, but also the girth of each volume. Meanwhile, Anderson became increasingly adept at attracting more compelling, more complex creative writing, commentary, and criticism. A quick glance at the demonstrable changes on the public face of **WLA**—our distinctive covers—shows how the quality of our art features stayed in step with the ever-improving quality of the journal’s written content.



Community Beyond the Journal's Pages

As early as the mid-1990s, the journal featured work by literary lions such as Carolyn Forché, Robert Pinsky, and John Balaban. From the beginning, however, Anderson was equally committed to discovering and developing emerging voices, many of whom got their publishing start with **WLA** before going on to build notable writing careers. The journal remains committed to striking the balance right between established and emerging talent in each of our genre categories.

From the second half of the 1990s to 2010, **WLA** embarked on a pivotal growth and development phase. This period witnessed the expansion and diversification of the journal's distribution efforts and readership base. By 1995, just six years into its existence, the journal was already printing seven hundred copies per issue. Anderson also began outreach efforts that established the groundwork for extending **WLA's** essential work beyond the pages of the journal.

A 1996 special issue dedicated to the work and life of W.D. Ehrhart emerged as an important marker of **WLA's** early expansion. What grew out of this issue served as a catalyst and inspiration for subsequent outreach efforts. On the heels of the special Ehrhart issue, a number of **WLA** volumes featured a trove of talented writers, poets, artists, and critics whose work focused on the Vietnam War, but that conflict was not the sole subject covered by the journal.

By 1998, Anderson had the momentum to convene a multi-day symposium featuring roundtable talks, interviews, and readings by several recognizable names from the realm of Vietnam War poetry: Yusef Komunyakaa, John Balaban, W.D. Ehrhart, Dale Ritterbusch, D.F. Brown, Joe Cox, and John Pratt. This gathering of war poets showcased **WLA's** knack for

bringing together diverse groups and individuals interested in exploring the imbrication of war, literature, and the arts.

Word was out that the journal had become a vibrant venue for creative writers, artists, poets. But equally important was the way in which **WLA** (our outreach efforts, in particular) had begun to function as a kind of public square for serious conversation, and indeed debate, about war and its role in literature, film, the arts, culture, and the broader culture.

The Jannetta Lecture & Two International Conferences

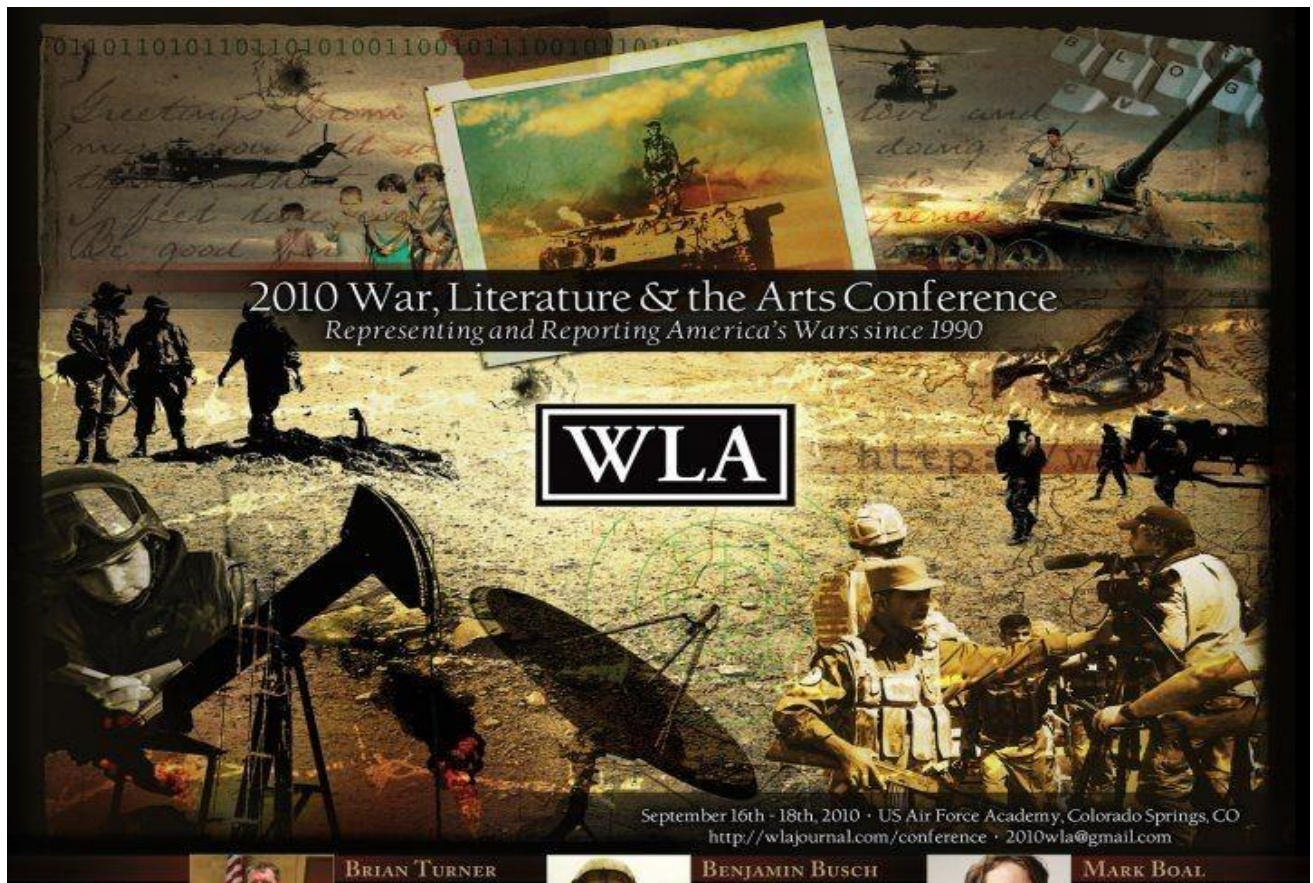
The Vietnam War poetry symposium laid a foundation for a variety of educational and community-building activities that **WLA** has come to be known for over the past two decades. In 2008, Anderson launched the David L. Jannetta Distinguished Lecture in War, Literature & the Arts. Funded by a generous endowment from David Jannetta (USAFA Class of '75), **WLA** and the USAFA Department of English and Fine Arts hosted Tobias Wolff, who delivered the inaugural Jannetta Lecture. Nearly a thousand Air Force Academy cadets, faculty, and staff attended Wolff's address.

Over the years, fifteen different distinguished war writers, poets, and playwrights have graced the Jannetta stage: Elliot Ackerman, John Balaban, Ben Fountain, Brian Turner, Dunya Mikhail, Benjamin Busch, Suzan-Lori Parks, Mark Bowden, Sarah Nović, Doug Stanton, Dan O'Brien, Luke Mogelson, Alex Kershaw, and Roxana Robinson.

Heavy lifting from energetic young staff writers and editors such as Jesse Goolsby and Brandon Lingle made possible the journal's hosting of two international **WLA** conferences held at the Air Force Academy, one in 2010 and the other in 2018. These gatherings brought together creative writers, artists, critics, scholars, historians, playwrights, poets, filmmakers, and scholars. Masterminded and led by Goolsby (with support from **WLA** Managing Editor/Permanent

Professor/Department Head Col Kathleen Harrington), these events were resoundingly successful, in-person meetings that attracted more than a thousand of the journal's readers, contributors, and admirers.

The WLA conferences not only revealed the extent of this community's considerable reach and growing reputation; they helped confirm and underscore our belief that WLA warranted the title of "international journal of the humanities." Attendees from more than eighteen countries participated in lectures, readings, panel discussions, paper presentations, film screenings, and camaraderie.



The 2010 WLA Conference featured 40 panel and special sessions held within the USAFA Cadet Area (Fairchild Hall). Beyond the panels, the event featured a gallery showing of Benjamin Busch's Iraq photography, film screenings lead by Mark Boal (*Hurt Locker*) and Carol Dysinger (*Camp Victory, Afghanistan*), poetry readings by Brian Turner, photo essay presentation by Pulitzer Prize Winner Craig Walker, and a keynote by Dexter Filkins.

2018 War, Literature & the Arts Conference

Representing and Remembering War

September 20–21, 2018

US Air Force Academy, Colorado | wlajournal.com/conference

Keynote Speakers:

SUZAN-LORI PARKS
Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright



ROBERT OLEN BUTLER
Pulitzer Prize-winning author



Special Presenters:

BRIAN CASTNER

MEG MCLAGAN

MAURICE DECAUL

DUNYA MIKHAIL

ELYSE FENTON

DAN O'BRIEN

RICHARD JOHNSON

G. KURT PIEHLER

MARTIN LÖSCHNIGG

HELEN THORPE

BRIAN TURNER

BENJAMIN BUSCH

J.A. MOAD II

Hosted at USAFA's Polaris and Arnold Halls, the 2018 WLA Conference featured panels, readings, art exhibits, stage performances, and classroom visits. Suzan-Lori Parks' *Father Comes Home from the Wars* was integrated into several courses to allow students direct engagement with the playwright. As part of the conference program, Parks delivered the 2018 Jannetta Lecture. Robert Olen Butler presented a Keynote Address. Thirteen other acclaimed war writers, poets, playwrights, and artists delivered special presentations.

Taking Stock, Expressing Gratitude

Given our modest origins, it is both humbling and satisfying to consider what **WLA** has managed to achieve during the three-and-a-half decades of its existence. The journal has indeed become something more than just a publication. **WLA** has become something much larger than that original staff led by then-Col Jack Shuttleworth could have ever imagined.

WLA's exponential growth and expansion under Donald Anderson's leadership helped our staff and supporters come to see the truth in the claim that literary magazines and scholarly journals do create community, something akin to kinship bonds. In this regard, I previously quoted the Vietnam War poet, Bruce Weigl, who wrote the following concerning his appearance in the journal: "I'm excited about being in the magazine, and I appreciate your support because I feel a kinship with **WLA**." Since I took the stick from Anderson, many contributors and readers have shared similar sentiments.

Today, the journal is not only a respected assembly point for creative and critical work; it is also a place where professional relationships, and indeed friendships, can be fostered. These relationships motivate and inspire **WLA** to continue cultivating our commitment to discovering and bringing to light the best contemporary imaginative literature, art, and critical writing focused on war.

The journal's story over the years bears out the old adage that work begets work, good work begets better work. The impact of two international conferences, our long-standing commitment to improving the quality of the journal's written and visual content, and the perennial success of **WLA**-supported programs like the Jannetta Lecture and our support of veterans' writing programs—all these achievements attest not only to the journal's staying

power, but also to **WLA**'s position as a serious, trusted contributor to necessary conversations about the role of war in culture, the arts and literature, and society at large.

This story of growth and development reminds us that none of the journal's varied accomplishments happened by chance. If innovative and visionary thinking brought **WLA** into existence and propelled its rapid growth, it was a simple combination of hard work and a commitment to excellence that ensured the journal would not only stay the course, but be around for the long haul.

From its inception, **WLA** has been a volunteer undertaking. Producing any given issue has always involved hundreds of labor-intensive activities—indeed labor-intensive acts of love. Since the journal has no official budget or funding mechanisms, a volunteer spirit has always been the engine behind its creative yield.

Because the work done here at **WLA** is performed *pro bono*, it is the least we can do to stop and thank the many people, past and present, who have built and sustained **WLA** over the years.

We owe a special debt of gratitude to all the behind-the-scenes folks who make the journal possible. Take, for example, someone like Gary Mills, who has been a quiet, steady force behind our electronic publication efforts in recent years. When Anderson recently told me **WLA**'s never looked better, I reminded him that the journal's new look and layout is all Gary's doing.

Gary is but one of dozens of folks who keep **WLA** afloat. It takes a small army to publish each issue and to sustain our outreach efforts. But Gary goes above and beyond. Like all of our volunteer staff, everything Gary gives to and does for the journal is a labor of love. He receives no compensation. As our webmaster as well as our visual design guru, Gary maintains our

permanent internet presence and brings each individual issue into being on the web. For many years, Gary has also labored in the trenches, holding down dual roles as a copy editor and our primary typesetter. He expended literally thousands of hours, on everything from the layout of this issue to creating hyperlinks. His stunning work on Ben Busch's Ukraine photo spread alone cost him dozens of hours to create. We at **WLA** are pleased to see Gary moving into a senior editorial role and out of the trenches. He will now be able to focus on his writing projects, but we know how hard pressed we will be to find ways to fill the utility infielder shoes he has worn for so long.

From start to finish, producing a single issue requires an investment of thousands upon thousands of hours on the part of our staff. **WLA** Volume 35 is no exception; it has been several years in the making. Although I have singled out Gary Mills' contributions for special consideration, I would be remiss not to thank dozens of staff members whose tireless work make this and every issue possible.

Some of our heaviest lifting comes from folks like Dave Buchanan, Hugh Martin, and Sarah Nance—all immensely talented professionals who fill key senior editorial positions for us. Other indispensable genre editors who made this issue and recent volumes possible are as follows: Jonathan McGregor, Brandon Lingle, Ross Gresham, Jim Bishop, Sonja Pasquantonio, Jesse Goolsby, Sean Purio, Richard Johnston, Matthew Komatsu, Thomas Vargish, Greg Laski, Lori Davis-Perry, Allison Trueblood, and William Newmiller.

Without the ongoing commitment of these team members, **WLA** simply could not keep up with our high volume of submissions, nor could we complete the difficult work of editing submissions for publication. Each of these folks mentioned here knows exactly how much it

takes to keep **WLA** going. For their efforts, we must say always and everywhere: *Thank you, thank you, thank you!*

WLA also owes an immense debt of gratitude to all the writers, poets, artists, and critics who have made the pages of this journal such a pleasure to read over the past thirty-four years. Your contributions are truly labors of love as well.

Producing work for small journals like **WLA** comes at great personal cost, often with no compensation beyond the satisfaction of publication. In this issue, Benjamin Busch's Artist Spotlight section highlights this point. To capture his war photos, Ben travelled three times to Ukraine. His work was dangerous, and it was entirely self-funded. Since **WLA** is unable to pay contributors like Ben, all we can offer them is a platform worthy of the quality of their work and heartfelt gratitude. Thanks to Ben and all the other contributors who make **WLA** a place that readers come back to—we can't thank you enough!

Finally, huge thanks and kudos go out to all the unnamed people who have served and supported **WLA** over the years: former staff members and their families; our longtime, loyal readers and supporters; support folks at USAFA, ranging from graphic designers to videographers (Cody Spain) and from lecture hall technicians (Rob Wells and Kevin Watson) to training devices personnel (Holly Brower); and, finally, to all the volunteers Goolsby conned into helping with the big conferences.

Again, thanks to all who have assisted with the real work, the work of making **WLA** a force for good in the world—here's to another thirty-five years.

In Memoriam

In closing, the journal dedicates this volume to the memory of our long-time film review editor and a frequent contributor to **WLA's** pages, Thomas Vargish. Tom passed away on September 12, 2023, in Colorado Springs with his youngest son, Roland, at his side.

Tom had many talents, many loves. He was a globetrotter in his day, a world-class fly fisherman, an indefatigable reader, a charming and witty conversationalist, and a damned good friend. But for of all his gifts and talents, Tom will perhaps be best remembered for a rare characteristic, one that singled him out as a throwback of sorts to an age of good manners and chivalry. The phrase I hear most often from those who knew him: "He was the kindest, gentlest soul I've ever known."

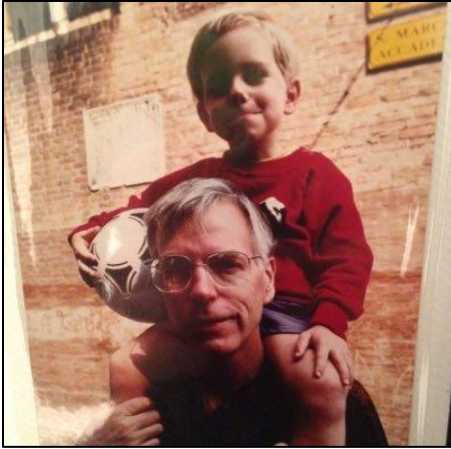
But as nice and kind as Tom was, he was above all a towering intellect, a no-nonsense, hard-driving man of learning. An old-school Rhodes Scholar and Guggenheim Fellow, he was a polymath who counted figures like Lionel Trilling and Edward Said as friends and colleagues. Tom could quote and parse long passages from Sophocles or Virgil just as easily as he could recite fifty lines from *The Waste Land* from memory, without missing a beat.

Tom's field and true home, though, was Modernism. Vargish was a man who loved his Woolf and Faulkner as much as his Joyce and Conrad. Though he had some quarrels with certain sides of Hemingway, I am certain he would not take offence at me saying goodbye to him by quoting from the epigraph which Hemingway placed at the start of his classic tale of the Spanish Civil War, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (a passage lifted from John Donne):

No man is an island,

Entire of itself,

Every man is a piece of the continent,



Tom and his son Roland in
Sestri Levante, Italy

A part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea,

Europe is the less.

As well as if a promontory were.

As well as if a manor of thy friend's

Or of thine own were:

Any man's death diminishes me,

Because I am involved in mankind,

And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;

It tolls for thee.

As Donne's lines remind us, we are the less for Tom's passing. In his roles as a teacher, mentor colleague, and friend, Tom's "going away" creates a void and absence for us here at **WLA** that can never be filled.

Good night, sweet Tom.