



*Irma's Seed*

*Beach Poems and Life Poems*

Robert M. Craig

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# Irma's Seed

*Beach Poems and Life Poems*



*by*

Robert M. Craig

## Books by Robert M. Craig

*From Plantation to Peachtree Street: A Century and a Half of Classic Atlanta Homes* (with Elizabeth Stanfield, William Mitchell, and Elizabeth Dowling) [1987]

*Atlanta Architecture: Art Deco to Modern Classic, 1929–1959* [1995]

*John Portman: An Island on an Island* (with John Portman and Aldo Castellano) [1997]

*Bernard Maybeck at Principia College: The Art and Craft of Building* [2004]

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*The Architecture of Francis Palmer Smith: Atlanta's Scholar Architect* [2012]

*Red Rivers in a Yellow Field: Memoirs of the Vietnam Era* (editor and contributor) [2018]

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*Savings Lives: A History of the Ocean City Beach Patrol* [2019]

*Georgia Tech Campus Architecture* [2021]

*Oyster Shell Alleys and Other Remembrances of Times Past* [2021]

*Irma's Seed: Beach Poems and Life Poems* [2021]

DEDICATION:

*To the memory of Irma Eareckson*





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## Introduction: On Crossing Disciplinary Lines

My career as a teacher and writer has focused on aesthetic subjects for several decades. As a historian of architecture I have visited and photographed some of the great architectural landmarks of the world—in China, Italy, Greece, England, France, Germany, Holland, Russia, and the United States, among many other places. My catholic interests have encouraged an enlarged view of architecture in its broader context, including the garden, natural landscape settings, the streetscape, the neighborhood, and the city, as well as interior settings, furniture, decorative arts, pop culture, and material culture. This attention to context has prompted cross-disciplinary investigations and appreciation for what one art form contributes to another. In 1935, French architect Auguste Perret wrote, “[An architect is] a poet who speaks and thinks in construction,” and Perret defined architecture as an “object all at once constructed and sculpted.”<sup>1</sup> Goethe encouraged his contemporaries with this advice: “One ought, every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words.”<sup>2</sup> And Leonardo da Vinci observed that “painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen.”<sup>3</sup> All such evocative pursuits are art.

In 1997 I published my first poem—or rather, it was published without my knowing that it would be. Architect John Portman had asked me to write what he called the “critical essay” in a book to be published in Italy treating his recently completed beach house on Sea Island, Georgia. The beach house was a retreat for the architect, the place where Portman created his own art in multiple mediums. The most monumental vehicle of artistic expression was the architecture itself, a 22,000-square-foot concrete dwelling that could rightfully be called Portman’s *Haus eines Kunstfreundes* (House for an Art Lover). Full of museum-quality art works (his own and others’ paintings, furniture, and sculpture), Portman’s beach house (which the architect

called Entelechy II) is truly a late twentieth-century “House for an Art Lover.”<sup>4</sup>

The published monograph on the beach house, called for two additional essays to be written by Mr. Portman and by a member of the editorial staff in Italy, but mine was to be the focal description and assessment of the house, its architecture, and its art. I was at mid-career in a “publish or perish” world of academia, and I appreciated the opportunity. Moreover, keeping professional company with an architect of the stature of Mr. Portman was welcome. In appreciation, I sat on “my beach” in Ocean City, Maryland, and composed a poem about Portman’s beach house entitled “Temple of Renewal,” and I sent it to Mr. Portman with a brief “thank-you” note. When the book *An Island on an Island* (Milan, Italy: Arcedizioni, 1987) came out, Mr. Portman had included the poem. It is republished in this collection.

*An Island on an Island* was one of three book projects on which I collaborated with John Portman, whose own career as a modern “Renaissance man” (architect, planner of urban centers, painter, sculptor, and furniture designer) was inspiring. He did not limit his creative efforts to the single discipline of architecture. Similarly, I’ve been encouraged to stretch my own creative expression. Off and on, both before and after the Portman beach house book project, I have penned occasional incidental verse, usually referencing significant or emotional times in my life. Historically, poems can be longer narratives: I recognize that in earlier centuries whole tomes were written in rhyme, truly epic poetry. More recently, poetry is often shorter, less elitist, and even populist, including the humorous and brief ditties of Ogden Nash and indeed Burma Shave signs along the highway. Periodically, in recent decades, I tried my hand at composing something in between.

I have never resisted being an interloper into fields not my own: painting watercolors, remodeling the mess decks on an aircraft carrier,<sup>5</sup> strumming a guitar in a college folk-singing group, or sight-reading show-tune sheet music and popular ballads as a pianist in an impromptu fraternity combo (skills I regrettably have not maintained). But fundamentally I believe all things are possible, as we grow and live our brief lives. So why not publish a book of poetry? If folk tunes and jazz improvisation can inspire symphonies, and if geometry can shape architecture or whole cities, then perhaps poetry (documenting

both ordinary and extraordinary events) can cross beyond singular disciplines to record universal experience. As suggested below, my high school English teacher, Irma Eareckson, encouraged whole generations to take a moment out of busy and intense professional lives, and read, or even write, a poem. In this collection I operate with a certain "poetic license," even while pleading guilty to committing poetry without a license.

I believe there is a difference, in almost every field, between the prosaic and the poetic. In my own field as a writer on architecture, it is clear that some built works (buildings with a lower-cased "b") never rise above the level of meaningless prose, while some Architecture (with a distinctly upper-cased "A") is poetic. The evocative nature of music, poetry, theater, *and* art/architecture has led me to appreciate the picturesque qualities (especially the scenographic imagery) of "painterly" architecture. The Beaux-Arts tradition has always insisted that architecture is fundamentally an art and beauty its objective. The intellectual intention, symbolism, and meaning of a more prosaic civic building may appeal to the rational, while the expressive, sensate, and artistic dimensions appeal to the emotions. We respond to one with understanding; the other with empathy. Some architects (Bernard Maybeck at Principia, Edwin Lutyens in Surrey, Moshe Safdie on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem), are truly expressive poets, creating and preserving that ambiance, that *genius loci* (sense of place), that "quality without a name" which is quintessential, memorable, and sometimes indefinable in words.<sup>6</sup> For me, it has been a career challenge to try to convey that poetic quality to my architecture students through slide lectures, coordinating descriptive/critical word with artistic image. Finding the right words to describe the indescribable, as a historian, or even a biographer of self, can be daunting. I have found that some sentiments and emotions and experiences are best documented and expressed through poetry.

The collection of poems in *Irma's Seed* falls naturally into two sections: beach poems and poems about life's experiences (in childhood, at funerals, in the arts). To the extent that the most personal of verse is autobiographical, this volume is a companion book to my narrative collection of essays and short stories about my youth entitled *Oyster Shell Alleys and other Remembrances of Times Past*, published simultaneously. Both books include photography as a companion art

to illuminate respective subjects. I am a visual person. Many of these images serve as frontispieces introducing what an essay or poem then conveys in word.

Such collaborations of the visual and the written word have informed my professional work throughout my career, inasmuch as historic buildings—ancient and modern architectural landmarks—may be described and analyzed, but they must also be *pictured* in the reader's, or the student's, mind's eye. Thus, my class lectures and books are always illustrated. Fundamentally, architecture must be experienced, so travel is the ultimate architectural encounter. In this collection it is hoped that the reader's imagination will be stimulated by both picture and word, prompting like excursion and exercises in travel through the reader's own comparable imaginings. In this way, the collected experiences recorded in both books may be found to be universal.

For each of us, such poetry-inspiring events are cherished moments of our personal lives, so we record them for our children; perhaps they may even be found to have value for posterity. With this in mind, we create scrapbooks, compile photo albums, and seek to preserve memories, collected as what Marcel Proust called "*À la recherche du temps perdu*"—remembrances of past [even lost] times. The snapshot fixes the specific moment; our memories fill in the rest, perhaps recalling and recording the character or spirit of the recorded moment. Thus, we sometimes caption or annotate the photograph or record the event more fully in a journal or diary, amplifying the occasion with greater, or more personal, detail. In the larger environmental context, whenever we can, we also hope to preserve the very physical setting itself, the architectural sites of our life's experiences. The call goes out to "save the old homestead" or preserve from modern intrusions the admired qualities of a place. This conservation urge, for professionals and citizens alike, ultimately reaches all the way from souvenir collecting to formalized historic preservation and to a societal call to maintain our neighborhoods and preserve our historic districts, homes, and notable public buildings. These are the settings of our "*temps perdu*."

In both *Oyster Shell Alleys* and *Irma's Seed*, there is a palpable feeling of regret regarding changes to the environmental fabric of my summer hometown of Ocean City, Maryland, the settings for many of the

stories, autobiographical recollections, and poems. Such changes may appear to be unavoidable and “wrought by time,” but in reality they are brought about by individual commercial interests that in other, more enlightened, communities have been tempered, thankfully, by a better sense of stewardship and a concern for the “general welfare.” This confrontation of memory and money is encapsulated in the bitter opening poem of the *Irma's Seed* collection, “Beach Development: Composition in White and Black.”

Those familiar with Ocean City will recognize local references in other poems—to Trimper's carousel, to the Alaska Stand, and to the Esskay clock on the boardwalk. But the real subject, as with all poetry, transcends the surface narrative, the local, the obvious. What is empty in Ella's yellow basket? Why will Miss Otis not dine with us today? There were back alleys in both Ella's life and in Maurita's in “Oyster Shell Alleys” ( cf. the namesake story in the companion volume to *Irma's Seed*). Other poems recall familiar experiences of a local auction, the common reaction upon hearing a joke, the memory of observing seagulls, or lifeguards, or uncouth tourists on the beach. “The Wave” is about body surfing and was first published in *Saving Lives: A History of the Ocean City Beach Patrol*. Could it be that during those long days on the lifeguard stand, the author was watching the ocean and guarding swimmers, but also composing poetry in his head?

*Irma's Seed* is dedicated to the memory of Irma Eareckson who taught English from 1928 to 1972 at The Principia School, known in my day as The Upper School. She graded student “themes”—those myriad high school writing assignments—awarding separate grades for the essay's content and mechanics: one grade for the student's ideas, expression, and writing skills, while the other grade was for punctuation, grammar, and syntax. You could earn an A over F or an F over A, and everything in between. I was enrolled at the high school between 1958 and 1962, and was one of the sophomore students in Miss Eareckson's “Civilization” class (a combination of world literature and world history), and was later exposed to her creative writing class as a senior. In the latter Miss Eareckson issued an extraordinary classroom/homework assignment, lasting throughout the school year. She required each student to write a novel. Each chapter of the novel was to be a different form of literature: an essay, a sonnet, a one-act play, a short story (in whatever “chapter” order the student wished).

It was a formidable charge that bolted many a teenager out of his/her adolescent shell. Somehow we knew we were in the hands of a consummate teacher who brought out the best in all of us. In return, we revealed to her (in Miss Eareckson's own words), "the beauty, the freshness, the progress in skills, the humor, the courage, the love, the heartbreak, the confident sharing of [our] most private ideas."<sup>7</sup>

That year-long high school novel was assigned almost six decades ago, and it is the rare teacher who has had that kind of lasting impact on her students. Many of Miss Eareckson's students, no matter their future professions, also became writers. More than a few went on to attend top colleges and to enjoy careers as journalists, editors, authors of books, and even a speech writer in the White House. In this, my twelfth published book, I especially remember Miss Irma Eareckson.

If, in sharing these poems, I have borrowed a few hours of the reader's time, I trust it will be deemed a worthwhile diversion. Perhaps the enclosed verses will stimulate memories of the reader's own life experiences. Some among you—whether doctors or teachers or lawyers—may also cross disciplines, as I do here, and put pen to paper, and express your feelings and share your experiences, through poetry. For me, Irma Eareckson planted the seed.

Robert M. Craig

December 2020

## Endnotes

- 1 Auguste Perret, "Architecture" *Revue d'art et d'esthétique*, 1/2, 1935 quoted in Bernard Champigneulle, *Perret* (Paris, France: Arts et Métiers Graphiques, 1959), 1959–60: "L'Architecte est un poète qui pense et parle en construction. Architecture: objet à la fois construit et sculpté."
- 2 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (Berlin, Germany: Johann Friedrich Unger, 1795–6) (The Harvard Classics Shelf of Fiction, 1917), Book V, Chapter 1, stanza 8.
- 3 Leonardo da Vinci, *A Treatise on Painting (Trattato della pittura)* (a collection of Leonardo's writings on painting, drawn from his *Notebooks*, begun in Milan, compiled by Francesco Melzi, and first published in France in 1632 based on Melzi's compilation in the Vatican Library). The modern version, *Treatise on Painting*, was published in 1817.

- 4 Entelechy is a philosophical term derived from Aristotle meaning the realization of potential and which Portman interpreted with the word “becoming.” The ideal permeates his work as a designer who sees art as the emergence of creativity, design as the manifestation of ideal beauty becoming real. Portman named his two houses, Entelechy I and II (the first built in 1964 in Atlanta, Georgia; the second is the 1986 beach house). The phrase “House for an Art Lover” [*Haus eines Kunstfreundes*] references a 1901 competition sponsored by the German design magazine *Zeitschrift Fur Innendekoration* and famously entered by Glasgow architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh whose well-known design remained an unrealized project on paper until eighty-nine years later. Mackintosh’s *Haus eines Kunstfreundes* drawings were submitted to the 1901 competition (as was encouraged) with interior decorative designs by his new wife Margaret Macdonald. The rules for the competition indicated that only “genuinely original modern designs will be considered,” and although the Mackintosh/Macdonald entry was lauded, it was disqualified because the architect was late in submitting certain interior views of the projected house. Almost nine decades later, Graham Roxburgh, the consulting engineer responsible for restoring Mackintosh interiors in nearby Craigie Hall, decided to build Mackintosh’s unexecuted House for an Art Lover (begun in 1989–90, just a few years after Portman’s beach house). Headed by Professor Andy MacMillan, then Head of Architecture at Mackintosh’s famed Glasgow School of Art, Roxburgh’s team erected Mackintosh’s Art Lover’s House in Bellahouston Park, Glasgow, and the house opened to the public in 1996.
- 5 See “Interior Decorator for a Warship,” in *Red Rivers in a Yellow Field: Memoirs of the Vietnam Era* (Ashland, OR: Hellgate Press, 2018), 406–430.
- 6 See Christian Norberg Shultz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979), and Christopher Alexander, *The Timeless Way of Building* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).
- 7 Irma Eareckson, quoted in Henry Hamlin and Norman Anderson, *A Century of Progress: A Pictorial History of The Principia* (St. Louis: The Principia Corporation, 1997); 44.



Beach Scene. Photo by Wee Yu Chwern from Pixabay.



Beach Image by Free-Photos from Pixabay.

PART I:  
*Beach Poems*





Beach Cottage. Photo by JayMantri from Pixabay.

## Beach Development: a Composition in White and Black

The beach cottage faces seaward,  
Shingle-clad,  
Gabled with roof of shakes from forest hewn,  
And dormered north and south,  
White balustraded seaside porch,  
White mullioned sashes in white window frames,  
White pickets and a white arched gate,  
Highlights in the morning light  
Against the weathered form,  
A house conceived as summer home and shelter to the soul.  
Drawn free hand, not with T-square edge,  
And rendered by the years and nature's touch,  
The cottage nestles in the white of dune,  
Its only limb, a narrow finger of a boardwalk  
Stretched toward sea;  
And on the boards,  
A barefoot child walks down to open shore  
To build white castles in the sand.



Little Girl. Photo by lauralucia from Pixabay.



Condo 1. Photo by Robert M. Craig.

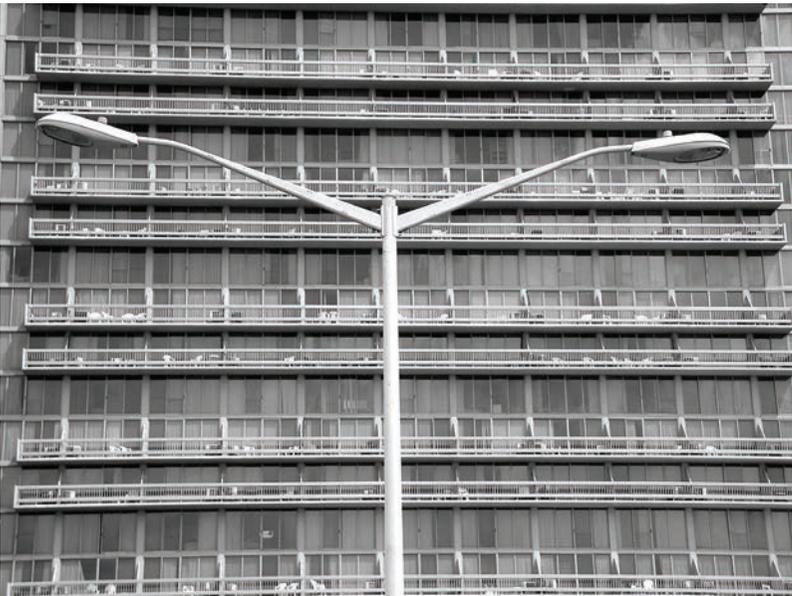
The high-rise condominium  
 Stabs the beach and sky,  
 A blunt, discolored phallic form  
 Of moneyed power,  
 Brutal concrete  
 Gouged with recessed, blinded Cyclopean eyes  
 In monolithic cemented mass,  
 Hard,  
 Gaunt,  
 No mullions, trim, or purity of white,  
 A shaft of engineered technocracy,  
 A stele with inscriptions of no meaning,  
 Wordless grey,  
 Selfish shed,  
 Homeless cells with rails of metal,  
 Rendered on graph paper with hard-edge pen  
 Now casting shade and chill  
 From sea-grass dune  
 To high tide line  
 And out to sea at eve.



Sand dunes and empty beach. Photo by Robert M. Craig.

Yesterday,  
The nameless “they”  
Drove large and long, black cars  
From nowhere to the beach’s edge.  
Anonymous,  
They trekked across the dune in big black shoes  
And rimmed black hats,  
Hard men,  
Blunt,  
Moneyed and black-suited, patent-leather men,  
Who waved fat arms in sweeping gesture  
End to end across the open beach  
And pointed stubby fingers  
Disdainfully,  
With black intent,  
At white picket fences.

Today,  
The men in black shoes returned,  
Officials from nowhere,  
And,  
In the short hours of one grey afternoon,  
Tore down  
The white mullioned cottage,  
The white porch posts and balustrades,  
White window sashes,  
Pickets of the white fence planted in the bright white sand,  
And crushed the weathered walk of boards,  
Stretched out beyond the dune to open shore.



Condo 2. Photo by Robert M. Craig.

And then,  
The city men in black shoes  
Now rimmed in sand,  
Sweat pouring down fat faces  
In the white-hot summer sun,  
And, with stubby fingers  
Staining pure white page,  
Unrolled large drafting sheets  
Of hard, black building lines,  
The black lines of another dark grey shaft  
Of high-rise homeless cells,  
Designed to tarnish pure white sand  
In shadowed, monolithic slabs  
Of grey concrete.

And as the black shoes turned away,  
Toward long black cars,  
Now casting long black shadows  
Of impending night,  
The high tide washed away  
The last built castle in the sand,  
And the barefoot child was never seen again.



The Old Breakwater. Photo by Henryk Niestrój from Pixabay.



The Alaska Stand sign. Photo by Robert M. Craig.

# The Alaska Stand

High noon at the Alaska Stand,  
And a little boy  
With sand-drooped trunks  
And no sandals,  
And a hand-held windmill on a stick,  
Cranes a sun-burned neck from under counter ledge,  
And tugs the hem of Daddy's bathing suit.

The sky is blue,  
And sun is hot,  
And the counter ledge offers no shade  
As the little boy stands  
First right foot,  
Then on left,  
Then right again,  
And hopes the college boy would hurry.

Once (just yesterday)  
From Daddy's shoulders high  
With dangling legs  
Held safe by Daddy's arms,  
The little boy had seen  
The college boy hold  
Swirling twist of frozen cream  
Miraculously up-side-down,  
And when the ice cream cone emerged again,  
A skin of chocolate  
Covered all above the wafer cone.

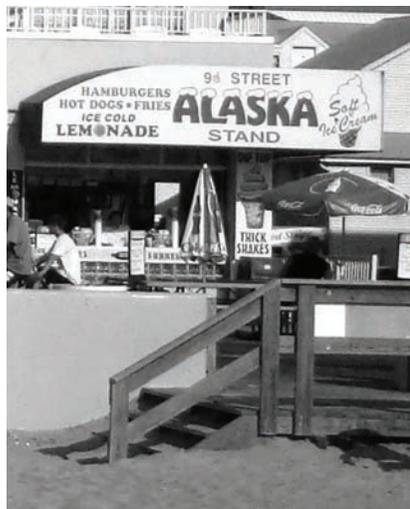
But now, from boardwalk hot  
By summer sun,  
With right foot, left, and then the right again,  
The little boy on tip toes  
Sees an outstretched arm  
From top of ledge,  
No college boy attached,  
But reaching down to him  
A swirling, pinnacle  
Of chocolate-covered ice cream swirl  
That towered over wafer cone.

With windmill blowing gently on his wooden stick,  
And ziggurat of chocolate swirling cream,  
The little boy begins his trek  
Across the cinder boards  
Whose tar, like chewing gum,  
Sticks softly to his heel;  
And now, at quickened pace,  
The boy steps down on sand  
Now baked in mid-day sun,  
Aflame with coals no longer red,  
And runs toward shade of  
Orange beach umbrella  
Poking in the grains of cooler sand.  
The windmill spins its Don Quixote dragon wings  
As ice cream gathers 'round a tiny fist  
And dribbles into valley nearest thumb  
And down to wrist,  
And chocolate tower begins its wayward lean.

“We’re over here,” a voice rings out,  
But heat of powdered sand  
Contrasts with ice cream now forgot,  
As tiny legs run faster  
Cross the desert fire floor,

With windmill spinning round  
And chocolate tower,  
Eroded at its base,  
Now hanging desperately  
Above the rim  
Of wafer cone.

At last beneath the shadow of the orange desert tent,  
With both feet cooled by darker sand,  
And windmill on a stick  
No longer turns,  
The little boy stares down  
At empty cone.  
And then his eyes,  
Unfocused through the forming tears,  
Look ten feet back  
To white hot beach,  
Beneath the high noon sun:  
The swirling tower  
Of dissolving cream  
Lies melting in the sand.



The Alaska stand. Photo by Robert M. Craig.