OPENING REMARKS

Along a stretch of U.S. Route 40 near Effingham, Illinois, the land hums with the echoes of labor, ambition, and quiet sacrifice. Iron & Ashes tells the story of Silas Vance, an octogenarian engineer who has built a life from precision, endurance, and an unyielding moral compass. His scrapyard becomes both a stage and a crucible, where the past and present converge, and where the spirit of his son, Arthur, lingers—visible only to those attuned to honor and memory.

Through his encounters with Rose Halvorsen, a retired attorney whose sharp intellect steadies the chaos of human ambition, this poem traces a landscape where progress is not merely measured in steel and asphalt but in integrity and continuity. Here, roads and buildings are more than infrastructure—they are the repositories of choices, the witnesses to courage, and the markers of legacy.

In the interplay of iron and ashes, the following poem charts a world where the endurance of human spirit shapes the town, the roads, and the very course of history itself.

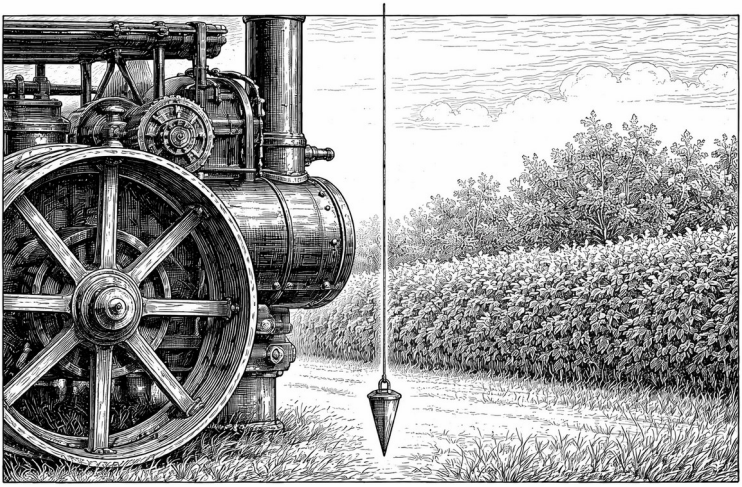
Welcome to the audit. Iron and Ashes.

Measure twice… because the truth only happens once.

"He set a plumb line in the midst of my people "

—Amos 7

ACT I: THE YARD AND THE MEASURE



Scene 1: The Road and the Ground

Sing, O Muse, of the long-spun road that runs past the house of Vance,
The Old National, blackened by centuries, patched with labor and tire.
Two lanes, faded like the memory of men who built the land with sweat and mule,
Under the July sun that smote the air with heat and shimmering mirage.

Here, the asphalt exhaled a heavy breath of bitumen, mingling
With ragweed, chicory, and wild parsnip, choking the roadside ditches.
The poles of telegraph, trembling in the heat, seemed molten,
And the horizon bowed to the sun's merciless eye.

Along this way moved the pulse of man's invention:
Ford LTDs with jagged chrome, semi-trucks laboring like ancient behemoths,
And humble Buicks of widows who remembered the road before the road grew tired.

When they passed, silence reigned not as absence, but as a deeper song:
The rasp of cicadas, electric and relentless, vibrating through the silver maples.

The land itself held memory in its clay-loam heart,
Ancient, rich, unyielding, the very soil that had broken pioneers' plows.

Rising from this soil, the tall house of Vance,
Gingerbread trims sharp as the eye of a master mason,
Held dominion over iron and earth, anchoring the place against the march of time.

The gates stood open wide; the shoulder widened in gravel,
Hammered flat by generations of weight.

Only the wise could read its measure, only the steadfast recognize order in the seeming chaos.

FIELD NOTE — U.S. 40 SHOULDER

The shoulder of U.S. 40 is not a place so much as a held margin between intentions. It runs alongside the road like something that never quite committed to becoming part of it, yet never fully escaped it either.

At first light, it shows its age without apology. Gravel pressed into asphalt like memory pressed into bone. Faded paint lines that still insist they matter. Grass growing where surveyors once believed grass would not be allowed to grow.

The road itself moves with certainty. Traffic passes through it as if it were a law already written. But the shoulder is different. The shoulder is where things hesitate. Where they break down. Where they are set down for later and sometimes forgotten altogether.

There are places where old tire marks overlap like repeated decisions. Places where oil has soaked into the earth so deeply it has stopped pretending to be temporary. Wind gathers here in uneven ways, as though it is reading something written in a language too old to translate cleanly.

A man standing here does not feel outside the road. He feels beside it, which is not the same thing at all. Beside implies witness. Beside implies judgment without interference. Beside implies that movement belongs to someone else, and observation belongs to you.

Every so often, a truck passes and the shoulder tightens under the pressure of its speed. Dust lifts, hesitates, then settles again as if reconsidering whether it was ever disturbed.

Nothing here is permanent. But nothing here is forgotten either.

EPIGRAPH — ON IRON

Iron is what remains after everything
unnecessary has been burned away.

It remembers heat more clearly than it
remembers form. It remembers pressure longer
than it remembers name.

Left alone, it does not improve. It waits.

And when it is finally called back into use, it does not ask
what it once was—only what it is now required to carry.

CLOSING FRAGMENT—BEFORE THE ROAD CONTINUES

There is a moment before any road resumes itself, when the weight of what has been seen has not yet settled into language. It hangs instead in the air like dust that refuses to decide where it belongs.

What has been gathered here—iron, ash, record, witness—does not resolve neatly. It never was meant to. It only takes its place, one piece at a time, until the shape of it begins to suggest something larger than its parts.

The yard will continue to hold what the world releases. The road will continue to carry what it cannot keep. Between them, the balance remains uneasy, but intact.

Nothing is finished. Not really. Things only reach the point where they must be set down long enough to be seen clearly.

And then, as always, the road asks to continue.