

## SAM MURRAY, BOOKSELLER

by Wally Swist

In the late 40s, after the war,  
your territory representing Rand McNally  
stretched from western Pennsylvania  
to Maine, and all along the way  
you stopped at every used bookstore,  
came to know every book dealer,  
selectively accruing local histories,  
fine bindings, Limited Editions Club  
classics in slipcases, and your reference  
of books on books, which I would see  
sitting in your study, as we politely  
parleyed the cost of each book  
I selected for my bookstore's stock  
because you purposefully neglected  
to place a price on them.

Your reference  
library stretched in splendor  
from floor to ceiling, shelf after shelf  
of bibliographies and auction records,  
where I would sit on the floor  
at your feet, venerable Scotsman,  
wise and kind heart, never quite making  
my turn in profit that was the norm, but  
acquiring clean copies of rare books  
that sold right after I brought them into  
the store. Always remembering  
your wife's insistence to stay for lunch,  
simple fare tasted more like haute cuisine,  
Campbell's tomato soup

and tuna fish  
on white bread, in that grand dining room,  
the three of us sitting in the ambiance  
of a painting by Norman Rockwell,  
always the quality of the light slanting  
through the windows a remembrancer  
of a prospective on a palatable eternity  
amenable and welcome for all, not unlike  
your sharing your perennial philosophy  
after the penultimate heart attack, with you  
comfortable again, lounging in your robe,  
as we gently haggled over the prices of books  
in the stacks I had culled from your shelves,  
and you offered that *life was like a layered  
box of chocolates,*

and you had thought  
that there were none left  
on what you had surmised was the last layer,  
until you discovered you could pull back  
the fancy dark cardboard separator  
and you found an entire layer more to enjoy,  
the spines of the books lining the shelves  
from ceiling to floor shining their tributes  
in the lamplight, their raised spines and gilt  
lettering radiant and gleaming,  
never a moment of ultimate despair apparent  
in your voice, always that glimmer in your eyes,  
the sparkle in your wry smile, your swivel chair  
squeaking with a renewed joy with your weight,  
that now is your legacy to me through  
the decades of what a bookish life can emulate.

