

MEMOIRS OF A
PROFESSIONAL HOUSE GUEST

GO FORTH AND PREACH THE GLAD TIDINGS

I became an evangelist for poetry in a rather unpoetical way. No disembodied voice commanded me in rhymed couplets to go out into the countryside and preach. I was not flung onto my knees by a blinding tableau where a white bearded Whitmanesque figure reached down from a cloud and gripped my hand. I endured no crisis of spirit as I wandered through a dark wood past eye-searing visions of writhing and tormented souls. Instead, I came to my sacred calling through a favorable convergence of place and time. Simply put, my wife and I were newly arrived in upstate New York. Needing work I knocked on the door of New York State Poets-in-the-Schools, just as they were expanding out of the Boroughs of New York City into the hinterlands of Upstate, into the Leather Stocking Country and beyond, to the wilds of the Adirondacks, all the way west to the Niagara Frontier.

This is how it began: Myra from the PITS offices in Chappaqua phoned one day to say she liked my poems and my resume and was I interested in becoming a poet in the schools?

“You would be the program’s northernmost poet-teacher,” she said.

I felt honored to be asked to be one of a handful of people who would be in on the ground floor of the PITS upstate enterprises. You’d have thought, given my excitement, I’d been invited in on some lucrative Startup. But this was not one of those deals that begins with a lot of elbow grease in some dingy windowless basement, gradually expands as name recognition seeps into consumer consciousness until, Voila! You have a product that sits securely on an eye level shelf in the global market place. I needn’t hold my breath for prosperity’s long white limo to arrive with the lavish retirement package complete with beach house and mountain chalet.

I knew ahead of time that the market share of the product I’d be selling was just too miniscule. All the serious poetry lovers in America could fit comfortably in Yankee Stadium, with lots of room for vendors of beer and hot dogs. But poetry *did* happen to be my calling – a craft I had labored long hours over, until I knew, like others before me, that each poem I sweated over would simply have to be abandoned, somewhere short of perfection. Nonetheless, I was seized by a genuine sense of vocation over the prospect before me. For like the rag tag outfit of blissed-out poetry brokers, and hawkers of poetic wares I would soon be laboring alongside in the vineyards of the New York State public schools, I was certain of one thing: that poetry lives in nearly everyone’s soul, but especially in the hearts and minds of the young.

And so, after accepting Myra’s offer, I looked at my territory on a map. It would take in Grandma Mosses country in the East and follow the New York border north to include Lake George, the Queen of American Lakes. It would dogleg west up into the Adirondack Park to the very headwaters of the Hudson,

even to the source of that great river, Lake Tear-of-the-Clouds, (though there were no schools, that I knew of, that high up in the drainage). Then, following the lonely but scenic secondary roads that ran through the tiny hamlets of North River, Indian Lake, Long Lake and Old Forge, my territorial boundary would swing back along the southern Adirondack foothills, taking in communities as varied as Gloversville to the west and Saratoga Springs to the east.

This sprawling terrain of tiny scattered school districts would comprise my bread-and-butter turf. I could drive to these places from the trailer my wife and I were living in, at the time, on the outskirts of Glens Falls. But I was free to make incursions much further out, to poach distant territory, provided I had a place to lay my head at day's end. That was an unwritten law all itinerant poets lived by. And when the pickings in my territory got slim, during years of downturns in school and State funding, I would spend much time on the road. Then, as the genial guest of some dignitary from the school district, I would arrive in my season, not unlike the circuit riding preacher of a bygone era, bearing gift-wrapped spirits for the household worthy of the highest class of snake oil salesmen, ready to preach the good news of poetry and dunk converts of all ages in Jordan's waters that ran deep with the submerged verses of the ages.

But before I started making the cold calls to school administrators; enticing them to hire me to come in and work with their children on poetry with the promise of matching funds from the Empire State's coffers; I must undergo a brief indoctrination. Myra at PITS assured me my credentials were rock solid. Not only did I hold a Masters Degree in English from Brown University – an ostentatious diploma written in Latin with the ink of the Provost's signature barely dry – but I had a fine body of published poems and a year as a teacher in the trenches of a Massachusetts Junior High School tucked neatly under my belt. All that remained was for me to travel to the great city of Albany to see the wizard of poet-teachers, Malachi Deerfield, and have him stamp his imprimatur on my application.

I drove down from Glens Falls in the aftermath of a blizzard that had wound down the night before. The streets of Albany were clogged with towering snow banks. Over the phone Malachi had given me an address on Lily Hammer Lane off Madison Avenue. I toiled along in my brave little rice burner, front wheel drive and 4 new winter treads keeping me from slip-sliding all over the slick greasy roads, until I found Rue Lily Hammer. Malachi lived in an unlikely little cottage with brown clapboard siding sandwiched between two Victorian duplexes. The incongruity of the place lent it a mysterious gingerbread air. The domicile's resident spirit was standing out front with a curved shovel in each hand as I parked on the street, letting my passenger side kiss the tall bank. Malachi was short and broad shouldered and wore a brown leather jacket, black ski cap and tan work gloves. My first impression was that he could have been the subject of an APB regarding a snow shovel heist. He nodded and spoke a perfunctory hello and thrust one of the implements he was holding into my hands.

“Mind helping me shovel out?” he said.

I may have been a little irritated about being cadged into a job by a stranger without the proper introductions; but I set to work tossing snow up over my shoulder to the side of the drive. As the most experienced teacher-poet in the upstate region, there was much I could learn from Malachi. No doubt the Guild Hall apprentices of old had to perform their share of drudgery under the master's tutelage during their pre-journeyman days. After the two feet of newly fallen snow

had been heaved to the side to clear a narrow lane for Malachi's Saab and my humble rice burner, he invited me into his cottage. So cluttered was the interior, it would be putting it delicately to say the spiders needn't have worried about their webs being disturbed by the broom. But I was intrigued by the floor to ceiling bookcases with strange and fascinating tomes that I imagined were filled with arcane and forbidden knowledge.

We plunked ourselves down in Malachi's kitchen to talk nuts and bolts. My host brushed a leggy white Manx named Ariel from the table, lit a Garcia Vega and poured two mugs of Utica Club. He dribbled a shot of something into a dainty glass for his beer to chase down his gullet. Leaning back in his chair in a ruminating trance as smoke thickened like a bank of sea fog around us, Malachi fielded my questions with a friendly but distracted air. His speech was all pith and disparagement seasoned with invective. His thin receding hair revealed a forehead worthy of a great man's bust, a Beethoven or even a Napoleon. His compact, weightlifter's build made his head a size too big for his body.

We ended by agreeing that he would observe me teach a few third grade classes in one of his program schools, then report his findings to Myra in Chappaqua. When that time came I passed his acid test, having earned my bones the prior year at the junior high level, a tough environment for any rookie teacher to have to learn the ropes. After that, I soloed in school districts in my area, and didn't see much of Malachi until the following autumn, though we began to build a friendship over the phone; he was a garrulous and often inspired talker.

Those were my salad days as a poet-teacher in the program. I had a bag full of writing tricks that I perfected in school after school. I learned how to intertwine poetry with my own personality so that my students didn't know where one ended and the other began – a good thing, by the way. The deadening effects of poetry isolated from real, blood-stuffed life, inertly lying on a text book page awaiting the literary scalpel's dissection, are too well-documented to go into here. And, as good fortune would have it, I just happened to be a rural boy going into rural districts. I loved the pastimes of rural life – fishing, hunting, bird watching, botanizing, anything in the outdoors. I could talk up the boys with my hunting stories and read them my hunting poems; and I got along well with the girls, where the majority of closet poets sprung from. I was always quick to read the girls' notebooks filled with page on page of poetry carefully copied in their swooping and graceful hands. And to every creation that a student earnestly scribbled onto the blazing white island of the page, I offered ready praise, helpful tips, gentle criticism, to nudge the young poet out of the ditch and back on the winding and scenic byways of poetry.

After teaching I spent every night at home with my wife in a pleasant enough trailer court, where mostly elderly couples tended their neat yards, their units looking out on a grassy quad where maples blazed orange and red in the smoky autumn twilight. We lived with our two cats, Van Gogh of the torn ear and the slight gimp, whose claw-raked cheeks were jowly with scar tissue from brawls with other toms; and Gansevoort, named for the historic town where we found him – ah, Gansevoort, the affectionate long hair with a tail bushy and striped like a skunk, who came running across the twilit quad into my arms the moment he heard his name.

And finally there was my wife, Jan, whose dislike of poetry in high school merited an outburst long remembered by the nuns, who ended up marrying a poet,

and who was now an insurance underwriter for the Glens Falls branch of Continental – the writer and the underwriter, ensconced in their long and narrow aluminum trailer with its fragile sloping awning above the entrance, fringed with dahlias planted by our landlady in the summer, littered with fallen leaves in autumn. The wide earth seemed to take forever to darken over that broad slip of green quad. It was a time in our lives when each moment that greeted us was hefted and regarded, if not by me, then by the one standing beside me watching the twilight deepen.



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From the upcoming book *Memoirs Of A Professional Houseguest*