

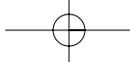
Foreword

REED WHITTEMORE owns the only sort of immortality that matters to a writer, which is to have written things that people remember years later. There is the perfect imagist poem about the enormous silence that follows after a high school band finishes practicing on the football field in a small town and the poem about the man waiting and waiting and waiting for the woman upstairs to get dressed for the party he sincerely doesn't want to go to. There is the poem about the French Foreign Legion and the heat and the gin and the bitters and everyone itching and bitching. There is his fabulous rant against New York ("Let me not be unfair Lord to New York that sink that sewer/ Where the best and the worst and the middle/ Of our land and all others go in their days of hope to be made over/ Into granite careerists") and his "Psalm" ("The Lord feeds some of His prisoners better than others") and his love song to America—

Your suitors grow old, old, their lyrics sodden,
And their passions fizz in the soft westering rhetoric,
But you, oh Nik Nak Nookie, Dairie Queene,
From all your Southern Cal to Keep Maine Green....

— which springs from a deep comic fountain, the deep well of American jitterbug language and spirited jazz, and like so many of the jazz greats, Reed ("Sweets") Whittemore likes to hang out in professor clothes. Poet clothes are for tourists. Your real American poet doesn't need to go around in a serape and sandals, Jim Bob, he goes undercover in a blue suit and white shirt and you don't know he is a poet unless you read his stuff.

Memorability is no small matter. There are Large Pachyderms in Poetry World with lists of awards as long as a pool cue, whose names give off deluxe reverberations of distinguishment and rotundity and luminosity and enchiladatude, and you know them and I know them, and they come to Your Town to speak and to read, and the literati are in a happy dither about who will sit next to Whom, and yet if one tries to remember,



say, a particular poem his or her eminence wrote, there is only a series of graynesses and a faint recollection of scattered precipitation. They are like the lady in W's poem "Mrs. Benedict" who is remembered many years later for all her talk but what she said is, alas, beyond recall.

This prospect is so painful to us writers that we can't talk about it. We struggle to put the goods on the page (acid-free so it will last and last) in a durable form and we have our shining moment and then it's gone and the future of our hard work is awful to contemplate. We come upon ourselves in a used bookstore in good condition for 35 cents, we spot ourselves on a library shelf, and the most we can possibly hope for — the most — is that once a year or so, a tall bookish young woman will pull us out and open us up and something, something, will catch her eye to the extent that she will sit down and read. Maybe our friends the English teachers will put us in front of their restless charges but that is not the same as being read as we know who have been English teachers. We are hoping for that tall girl in the khaki shorts who has been striving for success and now she needs friendship and understanding and she turns to books.

And if she gets to W and passes over the two yards of Whitman and pulls out Whittemore's masterful *The Mother's Breast & The Father's House*, she will notice his haiku ("A traditional haiku has seventeen syllables/Hasn't it?") alongside his New York rant and his marvelous fable of marriage ("Well there was the story of the little pig/Who grew up to be an enormous handsome but anal hog/And was always sweeping and dusting the slops/So that the widow Brown thought she was going mad") and she will come upon his little catechism:

To achieve faith one must suffer for decades
 And to suffer one must get up early and raise a family and go to work
 Suffering is middle class
 It was invented by Benjamin Franklin
 It begins with the search for a loaf of bread and ends with funeral expenses
 It is composed of ten parts body and five parts bank account
 It is caused by God
 Being part of His clumsy plan to extract positive charges from His creation
 In anticipation of something better

It is a sustained, witty, morally serious wham-bam poem that if she were to stand up at the Grand Poetry Slam tonight in front of the young and

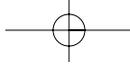
restless drinking vodka Mazurkas in the basement of Guy's Lounge and if she shouted out the whole thing, people would clap and yell for more. She could holler out the Foreign Legion poem and "The Abominable Snowman" and she could recite—

In good ole day ze king need no committee.
 Was nize,
 Him says, them does; him sells, them buys.
 Good system.
 But then come big push make king one of guys.
 So king buy chairs, say me no king me chairman.
 So knocked off paradise.

What makes R.W. permanently readable and relevant is his wit and humor, which is the underground spring that keeps the gardens of American literature green. Even in Whitman (yes! Those long lists!) and Dickinson ("Hope is the thing with feathers"), even in Hawthorne and Melville, Emerson, and on into our own day, and in R.W.'s kin Elizabeth Bishop and Howard Nemerov and Kenneth Rexroth, the comic muse is what gives them a voice that sounds contemporary to us decades later. It's what makes Mark Twain readable. And also Sweets Whittemore.

I did not meet him in a library but in a classroom in Minneapolis in July, 1964, a movie-star handsome poet and teacher conducting a class in modern American Lit. I sat in the middle of the room. He paced up and down the aisles as he talked about literature as the defender of humanity against the violence of the mass, a noble undertaking but also a job of work that a man or woman does in the ordinary course of things, just as you would plant a field or weld a fence. He was an engaging teacher, hungry for a conversation which I could not give him, being too crippled by self-consciousness, too aware that I went from his class to my job in the scullery, carrying stacks of steaming-hot dishes to the head of the cafeteria line, but his one line about literature being a job stuck with me and sticks still. Other teachers dazzled us with how they could reel off erudite paragraphs — no hands! — about the intellectual cross-currents of the age in which this poor ignorant writer toiled at his task, but Mr. Whittemore took a ground view of literature.

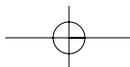
I went out and bought with my own money earned in the scullery the hardcover edition of his *The Fascination of the Abomination* and read it over

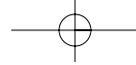


and over, as one does if one is broke and invests in a book — for the affluent, books are shiny beads, and for the poor, books are bread — and I loved the story of the thirteen-year-old boy riding his bike no-handed for seventeen miles of paved and unpaved road on Cape Cod for no reason other than to do an amazing thing and the story of the boy lying in bed and waiting for 12:29 so he can pull the string he has rigged to turn on the radio on the bureau in exact time for the tubes to warm up for Sammy Richey and His Connecticut Smoothies on “Noonday Melodies” on WTIC. (And now, reading this memoir, I see that those boys were Reed himself, growing up in New Haven, amusing himself amidst the implacable troubles of his elders.)

The teacher who paced that classroom was a man who did not find Hamlet a useful role model and who was not, perhaps, as stunned by Thoreau as some of us were when we were 17. He came along a little early to go live in a commune and grow beans and weave his own shirt. World War II veterans tended not to do that and, having learned how to live with the Army, tended not to look on all social organizations as corrupt and worthy of subversion, only as slow, frustrating, worth struggling with, capable of accomplishing good, and, in the end, much more interesting than a pond, more worthy of attention. And so Mr. Whittemore left Minnesota soon after I met him and went off to Washington to become a laureate, critic, teacher, biographer, and satirist. Politics is in need of poetry if it will have a humane soul and not be locked up in a professional cabinet, and so he served as a poet of the capital. The idea of a life of bemused separation seemed unworthy to him. And so he became an amiable radical, a servant of the greater invisible community, and perhaps because he considered that that community could use a good rant against New York, the capital of American Lit, that this would be a useful tonic against those dreamy photographs of the Chrysler Building at night, he went to work and did it —

Oh New York let me be fair you hell town
 I was born to the north of you have lived to the west of you
 I have sneaked up on you by land air and sea and been robbed in your
 clip joints
 I have left you hundreds of times in the dream that I could
 Leave you
 but always you sit there





FOREWORD

xv

Sinking
 my dearest my sweet
Would you buy these voids?

The happy servant of the community walks that no-man's-land between
lyrical and comic poetry where so few poets dare to go —

To pass through the season of loss and emerge with a good suit
Is to thank God
And take inventory

"The poet is somebody who writes poems because he has failed at every-
thing else," wrote R when he was in one of those long moods, but failure
is useful camouflage for a satirist—

I can see no artists at all, but I know that they're out there
Struggling against the heat and the walls to retain their integrity,
Which some of them know and some of them don't know that they can't
possibly keep.

 But going hard at it anyway, as I am.

As he did, and now, as he rests in his old age, those of us who remember
the high school band, the man pacing downstairs, the New York rant, the
psalm, the Foreign Legion, and much more, are given this feast of a mem-
oir of a man of letters of our time, to rummage in his desk and read his
mail and find out where those poems came from. "Some books are unde-
servedly forgotten," said W.H. Auden. "None are undeservedly remem-
bered." Mr. Whittemore's are remembered and that is all the reward one
could wish for.

GARRISON KEILLOR