

4: THE ART OF PROSODY

I. I Was At A Party When A Fat Woman

I was at a party when a fat woman came up to me and said: "I saw something in the paper about you. You write poetry, don't you?" I admitted that I did. "I collect stamps," she said.

II. There Was A Time When I Was Writing Poems

There was a time when I was writing poems far too quickly for them to be properly filled up with whatever it is that good poems are filled up with. I knew this, but still it was hard to turn off the typewriter and go mow the damn lawn. Finally I decided to confide in my friend, the Other Poet. I called him on the phone.

"Hello," he said. "I can't stop writing poems," I said, "I just can't stop the flow. For the last three days I've been writing poems almost constantly. You wouldn't believe the pile of poems I have on my desk. I'm almost out of erasable paper. My ribbon is in need of changing. My wife thinks I'm headed for another nervous breakdown. My dog shat in the kitchen last night because I forgot to walk him. Even when I'm on the toilet, I keep getting lines for poems. I'll never have time to revise them and polish them properly. I'm writing too many poems. I need help."

The Other Poet said: "Is this a crank call?"

III. I Was Sitting In The Garden Nibbling

I was sitting in the garden nibbling on a raw carrot fresh from the earth, when the Other Poet came in the back gate. He ran up the stone path to the garden, which is located on top of a small hill in the back of our backyard.

"Guess what?" he said. "You sold a poem for ten thousand dollars," I said, between nibbles. "Nope," he said. "You've taken a thirteen-year-old mistress," I said, between nibbles. "Nope," he said. "You've written the perfect poem," I said, between nibbles. "Nope," he said. I finished the carrot and said: "Okay, I give up."

"I've planted a garden," he told me, beaming, with pleasure. "Jesus Christ!" I said, "it's already September. We're going to have our first fall frost in a few weeks. You'll never grow anything this year."

"You know," he said frowning, "you aren't really cut out to be a poet."

IV. One Sunny Afternoon In Early September

One sunny afternoon in early September I took my son walking in the woods. I wanted to find a perfect spruce tree, one about six or seven feet tall with branches

evenly developed all the way around the trunk. My intention was to dig up this ideal tree, once I found it, and bring it home to transplant outside our dining room window.

The boreal woodland near our home is largely comprised of spruce trees - there are millions of them within driving distance from our house - but we weren't having any luck in finding this perfectly rounded tree I could so easily visualize. The problem was that we were walking along a tangled, overgrown path in the very heart of the bush, and where the forest is so thick, the spruce trees tend to grow too closely together, thus failing to develop evenly on all sides. A far better place to look for a perfect spruce would be in an open meadow or a gravel pit, some place where a tree might grow alone, uncrowded, out in the open.

My son, being only eight at the time and very fond of the bush, didn't especially care that we weren't having any success, but nevertheless I felt I should explain it to him. After I finished my explanation he looked at me curiously and inquired why then we were still searching in the forest. I said: "Because there are so many spruce trees around here, I can't help but think there must be a perfect one around here somewhere."

After a couple of hours more we gave up and came home. The Other Poet was sitting on my front porch when we drove up. I told him all about what we'd been doing, and why it was so futile. He said: "I guess spruce trees are like poets."

My son looked at him for a moment and then said: "That's silly. Spruce trees don't walk in the woods looking for perfect poets." Then my son went into the house to get himself a Coke.

V. The Other Poet And I Went To This Farm

The Other Poet and I went to this farm to get some chicken manure for my garden. It was a shovel-your-own place, but the price was right - only twenty-five cents a bag. I'd purchased green plastic garbage bags, but it turned out that they weren't intended for hauling the soggy, rather heavy chicken shit.

When I lifted the first fully packed bag, I had a premonition. Still I hugged it to my chest and staggered off toward the car. Suddenly I felt my fingers go through the plastic and sink into the warm, wet contents. Then as the rich aroma wafted up to my nose, the whole bag tore to shreds, leaving me holding a few scraps of green plastic and a couple handfuls of what-helps-your-garden-grow. The manure poured down my legs and buried my feet.

The Other Poet came running up. "I know you'll want to, but don't write about this incident without making a few critical changes," he said. I asked him why. "It's an imperfect parable," he replied. Standing shin deep in ripe chicken shit, I wasn't feeling very quick witted, so once again I asked for an explanation. "Because," he said as though speaking to a child, "for a poet, it should have been bullshit."

Ken Stange (from *Cold Pigging Poetics*)