
Opening Extract from...

Old School

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OLD SCHOOL

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Why did you lie to me?
I always thought I told the truth.
Why did you lie to me?
Because the truth lies like nothing else and I love the truth.

Mark Strand, "Elegy for My Father"

CLASS PICTURE

Robert Frost made his visit in November of 1960, just a week after the general election. It tells you something about our school that the prospect of his arrival cooked up more interest than the contest between Nixon and Kennedy, which for most of us was no contest at all. Nixon was a straight arrow and a scold. If he'd been one of us we would have glued his shoes to the floor. Kennedy, though—here was a warrior, an ironist, terse and unhysterical. He had his clothes under control. His wife was a fox. And he read and wrote books, one of which, *Why England Slept*, was required reading in my honors history seminar. We recognized Kennedy; we could still see in him the boy who would have been a favorite here, roguish and literate, with that almost formal insouciance that both enacted and discounted the fact of his class.

But we wouldn't have admitted that class played any part in our liking for Kennedy. Ours was not a snobbish school, or so it believed, and we made this as true as we could. Everyone did chores. Scholarship students could declare themselves or not, as they wished; the school itself gave no sign. It was understood that some of the boys might get a leg up from their famous names or

great wealth, but if privilege immediately gave them a place, the rest of us liked to think it was a perilous place. You could never advance in it, you could only try not to lose it by talking too much about the debutante parties you went to or the Jaguar you earned by turning sixteen. And meanwhile, absent other distinctions, you were steadily giving ground to a system of honors that valued nothing you hadn't done for yourself.

That was the idea, so deeply held it was never spoken; you breathed it in with the smell of floor wax and wool and boys living close together in overheated rooms. Never spoken, so never challenged. And the other part of the idea was that whatever you *did* do for yourself, the school would accept as proof of worth beyond any other consideration. The field was wide open. Like all schools, ours prized its jocks, and they gave good value, especially the wrestlers, who merrily wiped the mat with grim, grunting boys up and down the Eastern Seaboard. The school liked its wrestlers and football players but also its cutthroat debaters and brilliant scholars, its singers and chess champs, its cheerleaders and actors and musicians and wits, and, not least of all, its scribblers.

If the school had a snobbery it would confess to, this was its pride in being a literary place—quite aside from the glamorous writers who visited three times a year. The headmaster had studied with Robert Frost at Amherst and once published a collection of poetry, *Sonnets Against the Storm*, which it now pained him to be reminded of. Though listed in the library's card catalogue, the book had vanished and the headmaster was rumored to have destroyed it. Perhaps with reason; but how many other heads of school had published even one poem, good or bad, let alone a whole volume? Dean Makepeace had been a friend of Hemingway's during World War I and was said to have served as the model for Jake's fishing buddy Bill in *The Sun Also Rises*. The

other English masters carried themselves as if they too were intimates of Hemingway, and also of Shakespeare and Hawthorne and Donne. These men seemed to us a kind of chivalric order. Even boys without bookish hopes aped their careless style of dress and the ritual swordplay of their speech. And at the headmaster's monthly teas I was struck by the way other masters floated at the fringe of their circle, as if warming themselves at a fire.

How did they command such deference—English teachers? Compared to the men who taught physics or biology, what did they really know of the world? It seemed to me, and not only to me, that they knew exactly what was most worth knowing. Unlike our math and science teachers, who modestly stuck to their subjects, they tended to be polymaths. Adept as they were at dissection, they would never leave a poem or a novel strewn about in pieces like some butchered frog reeking of formaldehyde. They'd stitch it back together with history and psychology, philosophy, religion, and even, on occasion, science. Without pandering to your presumed desire to identify with the hero of a story, they made you feel that what mattered to the writer had consequence for you, too.

Say you've just read Faulkner's "Barn Burning." Like the son in the story, you've sensed the faults in your father's character. Thinking about them makes you uncomfortable; left alone, you'd probably close the book and move on to other thoughts. But instead you are taken in hand by a tall, brooding man with a distinguished limp who involves you and a roomful of other boys in the consideration of what it means to be a son. The loyalty that is your duty and your worth and your problem. The goodness of loyalty and its difficulties and snares, how loyalty might also become betrayal—of the self and the world outside the circle of blood.

You've never had this conversation before, not with anyone.

And even as it's happening you understand that just as your father's troubles with the world—emotional frailty, self-doubt, incomplete honesty—will not lead him to set it on fire, your own loyalty will never be the stuff of tragedy. You will not turn bravely and painfully from your father as the boy in the story does, but forsake him without regret. And as you accept that separation, it seems to happen; your father's sad, fleshy face grows vague, and you blink it away and look up to where your master leans against his desk, one hand in a coat pocket, the other rubbing his bum knee as he listens desolately to the clever bore behind you saying something about bird imagery.

There was a tradition at my school by which one boy was granted a private audience with each visiting writer. We contended for this honor by submitting a piece of our own work, poetry if the guest was a poet, fiction if a novelist. The writer chose the winner a week or so before arriving. The winner had his poem or story published in the school newspaper, and, later, a photograph of him walking the headmaster's garden with the visiting writer.

By custom, only sixth formers, boys in their final year, were allowed to compete. That meant I had spent the last three years looking on helplessly as boy after boy was plucked from the crowd of suitors and invited to stroll between the headmaster's prize roses in the blessed and blessing presence of literature itself, to speak of deep matters and receive counsel, and afterward be able to say, You liked *By Love Possessed*? You're kidding. I mean, Jesus, you ought to hear Mary McCarthy on the subject of Cozzens . . .

It was hard to bear, especially when the winning manuscript came from the hand of someone you didn't like, or, worse, from a boy who wasn't even known to be a contender—though this had happened just once in my years of waiting in the wings, when an

apparent Philistine named Hurst won an audience with Edmund Wilson for a series of satirical odes in Latin. But all the other winners came, predictably enough, from the same stockpond: boys who aced their English classes and submitted work to the school lit mag and hung around with other book-drunk boys.

The writers didn't know us, so no one could accuse them of playing favorites, but that didn't stop us from disputing their choices. How could Robert Penn Warren prefer Kit Morton's plain dying-grandmother story to Lance Leavitt's stream-of-consciousness monologue from the viewpoint of a condemned man smoking his last cigarette while pouring daringly profane contempt over the judgment of a world that punishes you for one measly murder while ignoring the murder of millions? It didn't seem right that Lance, who defied the decorums of language and bourgeois morality, should have to look on while Robert Penn Warren walked the garden with a sentimentalist like Kit (whose story, through its vulgar nakedness of feeling, had moved me to secret tears).

I'm not exaggerating the importance to us of these trophy meetings. We cared. And I cared as much as anyone, because I not only read writers, I read *about* writers. I knew that Maupassant, whose stories I loved, had been taken up when young by Flaubert and Turgenev; Faulkner by Sherwood Anderson; Hemingway by Fitzgerald and Pound and Gertrude Stein. All these writers were welcomed by other writers. It seemed to follow that you needed such a welcome, yet before this could happen you somehow, anyhow, had to *meet* the writer who was to welcome you. My idea of how this worked wasn't low or even practical. I never thought about making connections. My aspirations were mystical. I wanted to receive the laying on of hands that had written living stories and poems, hands that had touched the hands of other writers. I wanted to be anointed.

Frost's visit was announced in early October. At first the news made me giddy, but that night I grew morose with the dread of defeat. I couldn't sleep. Finally I got up and sat at my desk with two notebooks full of poetry I'd written when taking a break from stories. While my roommate muttered in his dreams I bent over the pages and read piece after piece like:

song (#8)

to the hopeless of the hopeless of the night
i sing my song and hopeless end my song
and do not pity me for i am without hope and
do not pity them for they are without hope and

There the poem ended. Beneath it I had written *fragment*. I'd written *fragment* beneath most of the poems in the notebooks, and this description was in every case accurate. Each of them had been composed in some fever of ardor or philosophy that deserted me before I could bring it to the point of significance. The few poems that I had finished seemed, in the hard circle of light thrown by the gooseneck lamp, even more disappointing. The beauty of a fragment is that it still supports the hope of brilliant completeness. I thought of stitching several of them together into a sequence, à la "The Waste Land," but that they would thereby become meaningful seemed too much to hope for.

I would have to write something new. The deadline for submission was three weeks away. I could write a poem in that time, but what kind of poem should I write? Aside from being good, it would have to stand out from those of my competitors. But at least I knew—barring some dark horse like Hurst—who my competitors were.

There were three.

George Kellogg was the editor of our literary review, *Troubadour*. The review was very old and still appeared in its original format, on stiff heavy pages, in an engraved typeface that made every poem and story look like a time-worn classic. I had wanted the editorship myself and lost it by a single vote of the outgoing board, which left me with a dreary consolation title: director of publication. This was a disappointment, but not a blow. George had earned the position, tirelessly soliciting manuscripts from other boys, burning the midnight oil to put the latest number to bed before deadline. I did none of those things. *Troubadour* was the only gallery I had for my work; it never occurred to me to recruit rivals.

The very fact that George had earned the editorship made it appear less enviable. I wasn't after an A in Citizenship. Not that George couldn't write. He was a well-schooled, proficient writer, mainly of poetry. He always wrote in traditional forms, the villanelle in particular, and his subject was loneliness: an old man picking his way across a fairground the morning after the fair; a child waiting outside a Greyhound station for a ride that doesn't come; a darkened theater after everyone has left save one old woman slowly gathering her things, dreading the long walk home to her empty room.

She dons her scarf, she dons her balding fur;
She takes her time, 'til Time at last takes her.

You could tell, reading George's poetry, that he knew his stuff. His lines scanned, he used alliteration and personification. Metonymy. His poems always had a *theme* and were full of sympathy for the little people of the world. They bored me stiff but George had expertise and gave occasional intimations of power in reserve.

I didn't really believe he would win. He seemed more professor than writer, with his watch chain and hairy tweed cap and slow, well-considered speech. The effect was less stuffy than dear, and that was George's problem; he was too dear, too kind. I never heard him say a hard word about anyone, and it visibly grieved him when the rest of us made sport of our schoolmates, especially those with hopes of being published in *Troubadour*. At our editorial meetings he argued for almost every submission, even knowing that we could take only a fraction of them. It was maddening. You couldn't tell whether he actually liked a piece or just hated turning people down. This provoked the rest of us to an even greater ferocity of judgment than we were naturally inclined to.

George's benevolence did not serve his writing well. For all its fluent sympathy, it was toothless. I had some magazine pictures of Ernest Hemingway tacked above my desk. In one he was baring his choppers at the camera in a way that left no doubt of his capacity for rending and tearing, which seemed plainly connected to his strength as a writer.

Still, I knew better than to write George off. If he just once let a strong feeling get the better of his manners, he might land a good one. He could win.

So could Bill White, my roommate. Bill had already written most of a novel, the first chapter of which we'd published in *Troubadour*. Two men and a woman are isolated in a hunting lodge during a blizzard. The narrator does not explain who they are, how they got there, or why they're together. But as you read on, you begin to get the picture: one of the men is a famous actor, the woman is his wife, and the second man is a surgeon. The men are old friends, but it emerges that the actor's wife is having an affair with the surgeon, who, it turns out, had once saved the actor's life with an impromptu tracheotomy during a safari.

Have to take my hat off to you, said Montague. Tricky bit of tradecraft, given the circumstances. Storm blowing the damned tent down, and the beaters into the liquor. I shan't forget it.

Not at all, not at all, said Dr. Coates. The merest intern could have done as well—probably better.

I shan't forget it, Montague repeated. I'm forever in your debt, he added coldly.

Aren't we all, said Ashley, pouring herself another scotch. She stared at the falling snow. Whatever would we do without the good doctor's services?

You bitch, said Montague. You perfectly beautiful bitch.

Though Bill hadn't let me read the rest of his novel—he was letting it settle before the final polish—I doubted that the hunting party's meticulously described rifles would stay locked in their cases for long.

Bill's people weren't only genteel, they were gentile. So, I assumed, was Bill. He had bright green eyes and pale skin that flushed easily in heat or cold. His manner was courtly, amused, and for some reason he seemed especially amused by me, which I liked and also didn't like. He played varsity squash. It had never occurred to me that he might be Jewish until his father came to visit, the spring of the previous year. Mr. White was a widower and lived in Peru, where he owned a textile company. He had Bill invite me for dinner at the village inn, and seeing the two together produced a certain shock: both of them tall and fair and green-eyed, Mr. White an older version of his son in every respect save the Brooklyn in his voice and an almost eager warmth. He referred often to their family, and it soon became obvious that they were Jewish. I had roomed with Bill for two years by then and he'd never given me the slightest hint. Though I practiced some serious dissembling of my own, I'd never suspected it of Bill.

I thought of him as honest, if aloof. Who was he, really? All that time together, and it turned out I didn't know him any better than he knew me.

Mr. White gave us a good feed that night. He was a friendly, comfortable man, but I was still trying to catch up and I'm sure I looked at him with more than polite curiosity. If Bill noticed, he didn't let on and afterward gave no sign of feeling compromised by my knowledge that he was not who he seemed to be. That made me wonder if maybe he'd never meant to seem not Jewish—if my surprise was simply the effect of my own narrowness and anxiety.

I didn't really believe that, of course. I believed that Bill had meant to deceive, and that his aplomb in the face of discovery was not innocence but a further artifice by which he masked his disquiet and, intentionally or not, forced me to probe my own response. Why not? That's how I would've carried it off. We never talked about any of this, naturally. For a while I worried that Bill might hold what I knew against me, but he didn't seem to. Maybe he was relieved to have someone know. That I could understand, very well.

When the time came to choose roommates for our final year we didn't even bother to discuss it. Of course we would room together. Nobody got along better, even if real friendship eluded us.

Bill was a contender. His characters were stilted but he had confidence and his stories were eventful and closely detailed. Most of the work in *Troubadour* suffered from generality. The more general, the more universal—that seemed to be the guiding principle. Bill's talent was particularity. How the snow creaked underfoot on a very cold clear day, or what the low white sun looked like through a tangle of black branches. The tackiness of a just-oiled rifle stock, the tearing sound of a bored woman brushing out her long hair in front of a fire. Everything in his work was

particular and true except the people. That hurt the longer pieces, but in Bill's shortest, most implicit stories, and in his occasional poems, the exactitude and poise of his writing could carry you away. He had me worried.

So did Jeff Purcell, known as Little Jeff because we had another Jeff Purcell in our class, his cousin—Big Jeff. In fact Little Jeff wasn't little and Big Jeff wasn't big, just bigger than Little Jeff, who resented Big Jeff, partly no doubt for inadvertently imposing this odious nickname on him. Little Jeff was a friend of mine, so like his other friends I called him Purcell.

Purcell habitually kept his arms folded across his chest like a Civil War general in a daguerrotype. This bellicose pose suited him. Under his bristling crew cut he cultivated a sulfurous gift for invective and contempt. He was the Herod of our editorial sessions, poised to strike down every innocent who presumed to offer us a manuscript. He had exacting standards: moral, political, aesthetic. Purcell even flouted the timeless protocol of pretending to admire the work of his fellow editors. At one of our meetings he declared that a story of mine called "Suicide Note" read as if it'd been written *after* the narrator blew his brains out.

Purcell came from a rich, social family, but you wouldn't have guessed it from his stories and poems; or maybe you would. His subject was the injustice of relations between high and low. He had written a ballad about a miner being sent deep into the earth to perish in a cave-in while the mine owner hand-feeds filet mignon to his hunting dogs, cooing to them in baby talk; and his last *Troubadour* piece was an epistolary story in which a general writes congratulatory letters to various grieving women after getting their husbands and sons slaughtered.

You may rejoice for your fallen hero, knowing that his heart was perforated for our glorious cause, and you and your little ones can rest assured that his missing head, wherever it may be, is filled with the

pride of sacrifice and radiant memories of the homeland for which he died so eagerly.

This story was, I felt sure, inspired by a certain passage in *A Farewell to Arms*, but when it came up for consideration I bit my tongue and let it go. It wasn't bad. Cartoonish, of course, like all of Purcell's work, lurid and overwrought, to be sure, but venomously alive. Anyway, I myself was in debt to Hemingway—up to my ears. So was Bill. We even talked like Hemingway characters, though in travesty, as if to deny our discipleship: That is your bed, and it is a good bed, and you must make it and you must make it well. Or: Today is the day of meatloaf. The meatloaf is swell. It is swell but when it is gone the not-having meatloaf will be tragic and the meatloaf man will not come anymore.

All of us owed someone, Hemingway or cummings or Kerouac—or all of them, and more. We wouldn't have admitted to it but the knowledge was surely there, because imitation was the only charge we never brought against the submissions we mocked so cruelly. There was no profit in it. Once crystallized, consciousness of influence would have doomed the collective and necessary fantasy that our work was purely our own. Even Purcell kept mum on that subject.

He was a threat. His attack was broad, even crude, but you could feel his discomfort with the cushion he'd been born on, and his fear that it would turn him into one of the fatuous bloodsuckers he wrote about. If he humanized his targets, muted his voice, used a knife instead of a cudgel . . . Yet he didn't necessarily have to do any of that. In a field of stiffs, one of his cartoons could win for simply being alive.
