

A Gathering of Generations

By Donal Mahoney

An old man, a poet of the generation of Kerouac, Corso and Ginsburg, is at the lectern tonight in the auditorium of a small college nestled in the Ozarks of Arkansas. Although widely published for many years, both in the United States and abroad, he has never done a reading of his work. He attended a reading once, back in the Fifties. It was held in San Francisco and given by Gregory Corso. All the literati of the day were there, a number of them under the influence of one thing or another. But the reader tonight was so bored he swore he would never do a reading himself.

Not one to fraternize with other writers, the poet usually stays home with his African Grey parrots and Scarlet macaws. He writes at an old roll-top desk in what a romantic might call a garret, which he says is just a drafty attic over his old garage, part of an estate he inherited from his parents. He writes, off and on, day and night because he sleeps very little--two hours here, two hours there. He disdains liquor and dope but is a souse when it comes to milkshakes.

Tonight his friend of many years, an old professor at a local college, has asked him to read. The professor, almost as old as the poet, assumed the man had read his work often at various venues. The old poet for some reason agreed to do the reading. Maybe the money was attractive, although the honorarium was small. Long ago the poet's four books had been remaindered and now money in any amount helps. Seed for the parrots and macaws adds up. He lives on Social Security and an annuity given to him by his parents long ago because they figured he would never be able to earn a living. They were right.

"I can't do a thing other than write verse," he has often admitted. "Maybe a little prose if no poem pops into my mind. Sometimes I find a poem works better as a short

story. An editor tipped me off to that not long ago and I make the switch when it's obviously the right thing to do."

At the lectern tonight, however, the poet is in his Sunday best--bib overalls and a stovepipe hat set off by a white beard that drops far south of his crotch. He is--as his first and only wife once said--a sight to see but not too often.

"I would never have married the man," she said in an article in 1962, "had I any idea of his habits. He can write but that's about it."

Many of the students in the audience, almost six decades the poet's junior, have never heard of him nor have they read his work. If they had Googled his name with quotation marks around it, they would probably have been amazed at the number of major journals his poems have appeared in since the Fifties.

His work has been published more than a few times with those major writers now remembered as The Beatniks. Most of them are dead now but this man continues to write and publish not only in print but also online. Hundreds of his poems, first published in print years ago, can be found swimming on the web because he sends them out by email when he can't sleep.

"Print is in hospice now," he told the professor. "Maybe if I get enough work out on the web, a hundred years from now someone might bump into one of my old poems."

The students in the audience are there because the old professor who arranged the reading asked them to attend. Besides there are other professors in the front row the students want to impress. Could be the difference between an A-minus or a B-plus.

After being introduced by the professor, the old poet begins to read in a voice laryngitis would enhance. Since the students do not have a copy of his poems in front of them, they can't follow him and they remain unimpressed. Some nod off as the hour wears on.

At the end of the reading, the reader says he understands that many students in the audience write poetry and he wants to tell them something someone told him when he was young and new to writing poetry.

Clearing his throat, he removes his stovepipe hat, leans into the microphone and says in a loud, clear voice absent during his reading:

"A noun is nothing more than a limousine waiting for the right verb to drive it where it needs to go. Without the right verb the noun goes nowhere.

"Adjectives and adverbs are dead weight, unnecessary freight, a drag on fuel economy, an impediment to any poem in gestation or out and about as an adult.

"Worse, adjectives and adverbs are cyanide ingested to any writer hoping to create art.

"The secret, if there is one, is to write the first draft of a poem and then dive back into the text like a surgeon and excise adjectives and adverbs no matter how much you want them to stay there.

"Next, replace any impotent verb with one that has muscle, a verb that can move its noun forward until the noun ahead of it is almost forced off the page.

"Remember, a poem is not an essay for rhetoric class or a report in a newspaper. A poem is a living thing. The first draft is a fetus no one should abort. You should work on that draft nine months if you have to and then bring it to term."

When the old man finished speaking, applause broke out among students and faculty alike. The poet bowed and smiled. And then he moved back from the microphone, put on his stovepipe hat, turned his wheel chair around and rode off the stage. On this night he would have two milkshakes before going home to feed his parrots and macaws.