

Hiatus

The new *Cantwell Review* had just been published online and already the complaints were coming in from the contributors. Why wasn't there any bio information so the poets could advertise their work, their latest publications, the journals in which their poems had appeared, the venues at which they would be reading their work? Audiences wanted to know this information. And how about a little thumbnail jpeg photo to go along with it, while you're at it? *Oh, and there's a typo in the third line of the sixth stanza that wasn't in the manuscript I sent....*

Thus, the immediate satisfaction of seeing the journal live, online, after six or eight months of soliciting poems, stories and reviews from various writers, reading the endless submissions, selecting work, corresponding with poets, working with the web editor and publisher – in his “spare” time, time he could be devoting to his own writing – vanished in the onslaught of picky complaints. Yes, there were the expressions of gratitude as well, but, bland as thank-you cards, they paled in comparison with the edge of self-righteousness, the sheer *attitude* some of the petulant writers expressed, venting their hurt feelings, their outraged aesthetic sensibilities in Hamlet-like soliloquies, as if they'd been insulted somehow, offended, treated like dirt; they laced their remarks with veiled threats, bordering on the language of lawsuits. Or was Person still gun shy after the George Clark episode, the crazy guy whose poetry he had rejected, who had bombarded him with pathological e-mails full of very *real* threats? Yes, these complaints mainly took aim at his moral failings, his ham-handed notions of art, his dubious character as a pathetic poetry review editor.

It was always a toss-up, Person reflected. Who was the bigger prima donna, the writer, who more often than not had an image of him- or herself as a gifted *artiste*, or the editor, the lordly arbiter of taste in charge of his or her private empire? The enforcer of arbitrary guidelines? More than one editor had thundered with Isaiah-like moral outrage about the crime of simultaneous submissions, or of submitting previously published work, or sending work that went beyond word- and line-limits, the presence or absence of certain contact information. He'd never outlined these objections himself, but it was remarkable the number of people who withdrew work from *The Cantwell Review* once it had been accepted elsewhere. Of course, Person appreciated the heads-up since it made his work easier, but the occasional abject apology, as if pleading leniency from a sentence to exile in Siberia for certain thought-crimes made Person feel a little embarrassed. Who did they think he was? Pol Pot? Worse – who did they think he *thought* he was?

Maybe he just needed a break, Person thought. Maybe, he considered for the ten thousandth time, he could find a guest editor...he resolved to bring this up with Burt Ashe, the publisher, with whom he'd collaborated these past five years.

Or *maybe*, and suddenly Person was electrified by the idea, *maybe* they could go on hiatus...*temporary* hiatus, if that wasn't redundant, or *indefinite* hiatus. Hiatus! The word publishers and editors in denial used when they threw in the towel and didn't want to admit it. At least there were no half-used subscriptions to reimburse since *The Cantwell Review* was an online journal, free to all. *Indefinite hiatus*. The more he said it, the more Person liked the sound of those words. Permanent limbo. Momentarily Person considered soliciting work from George Clark, "accepting" a poem and then holding it hostage forever, as an act of revenge – like suffocating a baby in its crib. Just desserts.

To the tune of the Beach Boys' "Surfin' USA," Person composed a little ditty:

We'll all be plannin' out a route
We're gonna take real soon
We're shuttin' down our computers
At The Cantwell Review
We'll all be gone for the decade
Were on hiatus to stay
Tell the poets we're on a break –
Hiatus U.S.A.

The publication of the new *Cantwell Review* coincided with the spring student poetry reading at Hausner College, where Person was a dean in the Admissions Office. Old Murray Fitzsimmons, the head of the English Department, called to invite him to attend the reading in the student center. Murray reminded Person of a character in a Charles Dickens novel with his air of intellectual fog, his eyebrows sprouting out all over like something neglected in a garden, his stooped gait and lumpy nose.

"You can even put in a plug for *The Cantwell Journal*," Murray generously offered.

Rather than correct him, Person decided to try out the new status on Murray, just to hear himself say it aloud. "Thanks, Murray. You know, we're going on hiatus now that the current issue is online. Indefinite hiatus."

"Really," Murray murmured, more a comment than a question. Murray's dense gray eyebrows shot out over his bifocals like birds' nests blown about by the wind. It sounded like disappointment to Person, and he wondered if Murray had been planning to submit some poems.

"It's time to take a break," Person confirmed. "It's become a chore more than a

pleasure, keeping *The Cantwell Review* functioning, and we aren't holding anybody's work, so now's the time to do it. We'll re-evaluate our mission." How grand that sounded! *Re-evaluate our mission: As if The Cantwell Review* were a humanitarian cause.

"Indeed." Murray nodded sagely, though again Person sensed disappointment.

Mark Person usually looked forward to the poetry readings the college sponsored. There were always a couple of bottles of wine served in the thimble-sized cups in which you took doses of Nyquil, and a plate of fruit and cheese and crackers. But more and more he felt like an old has-been among the hipsters. More and more frequently, the students read their poems from their cell phones, more often than not thumbing the scroll-wheel past the lines and losing their place.

It made Person think of the brochures for "maintaining an independent lifestyle" that he used to find at his mother's house in Potawatomi Rapids, when he visited her. Her recent death somehow gave him the irrational feeling that poetry was dying, too, passing on to some other form of existence, becoming something akin to the elevated toilet seats, latex-free silicone wand comfort wipe extensions for use in the bathroom that he'd read about. A "male urine guard" had caught his eye, he recalled. "Gently elasticized cups slip over the penis to absorb up to two ounces of liquid, waterproof exterior, stay-dry lines...." *Feel confident all day.* Yet somehow the ads had only shattered Person's confidence, as he'd watched helplessly while his mother became more and more dependent on caregivers, until the multiple organ failure had finally killed her.

And poetry? Was it really becoming obsolete in an age of video games and iPads? Person wondered: Was poetry meant to be read on a page or listened to? As if it were an either/or proposition. Sometimes with dramatic flair readers could make drab verse sound compelling and profound. This was the case with Murray Fitzsimmons, who started the student center reading with one of his own, an erudite poem about the evanescence of all earthly things, peppered with references to Shakespeare, Keats and certain biblical verses from *Job* and *Ecclesiastes*. Impressive in an intimidating, scholarly sort of way but what did it look like on the page? Murray read with sonorous gravity. *This is important* his tone proclaimed.

As Murray resumed his seat and the students paraded to the lectern in the pre-selected order, Person again remembered the catalog ads for bedside supports, back-protective pillows, sleep apnea masks, diabetic socks to ease swollen feet, side-angle nail clippers, LED reading glasses, extra-long shoehorns, adjustable stools with angled seats and removable armrests, anti-aging collagen creams....

The first student reader began by informing the audience that he didn't really want to be there. A sure way to generate enthusiasm for his poetry. Eric was a boy trying

without much success to grow a beard; shoelaces of his sneakers untied, a dirty pullover sweater.

“I’m only doing this because it’s an assignment,” Eric grumbled, and then, yes, whipped out his cellphone and began reading in a bored voice – no doubt a defensive gesture meant to mask his lack of self-confidence. Person felt for the boy, recognizing himself at such a tender age.

And so the readers went, half a dozen of them, until the last one, a young woman named Adrienne. *As in Rich*, Person thought. Adrienne made Person sit up and take notice. Again, he couldn’t tell if her poetry was any good, but he liked what she read, like much student verse about a broken heart and relationships gone sour but with a kind of resigned humor, he thought a voice full of sad irony. Person reflected that while the girl was attractive – lithe, blond, clear complexion – he no longer lusted after girls below the age of thirty. He wondered if this were a built-in biological response of the older male. Young girls just seemed too innocent, too pristine, too *virginal*...And again he thought of the ointments for leg cramps, the Sherpa recliner covers, the padded storage ottoman, the disposable clothing protectors, the bedside commodes and shower seats...

“We have with us this evening Dean Mark Person, formerly part of the English faculty and editor of *The Cantwell Quarterly*,” Murray Fitzsimmons noted after Adrienne had resumed her seat. “Unfortunately, Dean Person tells me that *The Cantwell Journal* is going on hiatus and won’t be publishing again until further notice. Dean Person, would you grace us with some of your poetry?”

Person stood up to the muted applause. Something in the polite hand-clapping told him he was reading on borrowed time. *Glow in the dark house numbers*, he thought, going to the lectern, *microwave potato bakers, nose hair trimmers*...

“I only have a couple short poems,” Person apologized. “They’re actually about writing poetry, maybe a result of my years as a poetry editor.” Placing his typed sheets on the lectern, Person read two short poems.

On Writing Poetry

Sixty years old
and I still can’t get it right.
It seems so simple,
yet the hygienist tells me
I’m flossing wrong,
my technique with the brush is flawed;
I need an electric toothbrush,

and to rinse with mouthwash more often.
It's a crime what I'm doing to my gums.
Have I considered trying the pre-brush rinse?

I resolve to work harder,
be more diligent,
but every time I go back
for a check-up,
it's the same story.

On Writing Poetry II

I've owned cars over
a quarter century
but I still don't know
how to recharge the battery,
check the oil,
know where the coolant goes.

You spend so much
money on these things
you think you'd know
how they work.

This is the last car
I will ever own
until the next one.

On Writing Poetry III

"Is this all you do?"
Priscilla asked the fifth time
we had sex, missionary style,
her voice a challenge.

I kissed my way
down her belly,
knowing this, too,
lacked imagination.

But it bought me time
for the trials

that lay ahead
as I considered
the perfection of my art.

The third one, Person admitted to himself, he'd read for Adrienne, and he felt like a dirty old man. *Thermal knee supports, gel toe separators, prune wafers, reusable bed pads, massaging contoured back wedge, Viagra, Cialis, Levitra...*

"Thank you, Dean Person," Murray announced when Person sat back down, "and this concludes the Hausner spring poetry reading. Please stay for some wine and refreshments."

Most of the students – there must have been thirty people at the reading – left the student center at once. Person was elated to see that Adrienne had stayed behind and was chatting with Milly Spaay, one of the English Department professors.

"I so enjoyed your poetry," Person said to Adrienne, pouring himself a thimble of merlot. "Please feel welcome to send me some of your work. We might be able to use it in *The Cantwell Review*."

"Why, thank you," Adrienne blushed. "I thought that Doctor Fitzsimmons said you were going on hiatus." Person stifled a desire to stroke her like a kitty-cat.

"We haven't made a final decision, actually," he confided. "We're still evaluating the review's future. Clarifying our mission."

"What's this?" Murray Fitzsimmons bellowed from behind him, and Person realized Murray had been eavesdropping. "Well, I'd like to send you the poem I read this evening. I think it would fit splendidly in your journal!"

Person smiled at Fitzsimmons while Adrienne walked away with another student.

"Thanks, Mr. Person. I'll send you some poems soon!" Person watched Adrienne leave the building and felt a little pang of loss.

Everybody's on Hiatus,
Hiatus USA....