

from *Ode To Sunset, A Year In The Life of American Genius*
a fiction

“Lousy poet.”

That was all he remembered before the pain took over. That and “She’s my wife.” He couldn’t help wondering if it was literary criticism or just a prejudice against poets.

Wendy crying and repeating “I’m so sorry, Carl, I’m so sorry.” But that was later, the blinding white light in the emergency room, her woeful face, and he might have dreamt that.

He’d been surprised, touched by Courtney’s offer to provide a place for him to convalesce after he was released from the hospital. But then they were almost family, going way back to when she was a little girl, the daughter of Sheila’s friend from Princeton, the painter Sally Laroche, née Mander. Sally had settled in Oakland, on Broadway near the old Treadwell Mansion where the College of Arts and Crafts was located. Courtney was four or five when she’d declared that she intended to marry him. Of course everyone thought that was just darling but why a rogue like Carl Wendt? Back nearly twenty five hazy years. He realized finally, or it was pointed out to him, that there were unresolved feelings and father figure fixations, particularly evident in the stormy relationship with her mother.

Her father, who had divorced Sally when Courtney was just a baby, had over the years become very wealthy as a developer of architecturally unique communities, most famously as the designer of the tornado proof home, an idea he’d come upon while contemplating a plastic champagne cork.

The concept and subsequent development outside of Oklahoma City had been slammed in the local press as glorified bunkers and prairie dog settlements until a Finger of God monster cut a mile wide swath through the area and shredded everything in its path except for the shiny concrete and glass mounds built by Eugene Laroche.

Laroche assuaged his abandonment guilt by showering money and expensive gifts on his daughter which essentially turned her into a confused spoiled brat. Then that time, she was probably sixteen, drunk, at one of her mother’s frisky art crowd parties, she tried to seduce him, going so far as to stick her tongue down his throat and grabbing the pump handle, and which he fended off with a conscientious aplomb he hadn’t realized he possessed. Around that time, he still recalled with regret, he was on the outs with Sheila and the inevitability of separation hung in the air like a bad odor. Courtney, after that rebuff, always seemed a little uncomfortable or awkward around him, not that he saw much of her as his orbit, more and more, revolved around his engagements and interests in the city.

Sally died of an aneurism while Courtney was away at the university in Santa Cruz. He’d seen her at the funeral, thinking how much she resembled her mother, bright but troubled. The jet-setting architect was too busy to make it that day so he’d never had a chance to meet the guy and tell him what a prick he was for abandoning his daughter.

Laroche probably figured the generous trust fund he had set up for her was enough. Fortunately there were old family friends. He knew that she’d lived with Sheila, Sierra by then, and Jerry for a while. Occasionally he would run into her at the odd art show or literary function, and one time, very drunk but keeping her hands and tongue to herself, she announced to him that she was writing. Poetry, some

criticism. He had been caught by surprise, vaguely but not over-enthusiastically congratulating her. She never offered to show him her work. And he never asked to see it.

She'd prepared the spare bedroom that had been her office for him. It had a foldout couch. She was living with David Bloom in a little house on Russell. "Just down the street from where Jack lived with Neal and Carolyn," she liked to remind him. David Bloom got the teaching job at NAIF. Stoddard was out.

Maybe that was the problem. Actually, there was no maybe about it. That was the problem. Bloom was an autocratic little egotist, a citer of rules, definitions, proprietary or otherwise, a walking encyclopedia of arcane and irrelevant trivia that posed as scholarship, hardly a breaker of rules. What good was it if you had a photographic memory but couldn't interpret what you were remembering? Short-sighted, what Woody Allen had already said about intellectuals, totally brilliant but clueless.

Sure, Stoddard was a drunk, but he also had an intuitive feel for what made great literature. As a poet, his efforts resonated, workman-like, with an understanding of his lineage and craft. Drink was destroying his ability to represent that unique sensibility. There's that warm glow and instant gratification of alcohol versus the slow and intermittent doubt plagued appreciation of having perfected the art. After a while, spirits alone fuel the feeble flame as sole and soul consolation. He understood that quite well. He had said as much in his article, *Failure of Nerve in the American Literary Landscape*, published in *JOAN, The Journal of American Nephrology*, a venue Nora had suggested as having deep pockets and a no-brainer for someone with his rep.

What was it his own doctor had said, "Your liver's got more scars than a knife fighter"? That was one of the reasons he'd gone off the sauce, unimaginable as that was, because the medication he was taking impacted his liver functions, and combined with booze, would effectively destroy it. He didn't think his love of drink should be suicidal. Then Bolinas happened.

The problem, the real problem, was the unflattering, nay, vicious, review he had written of *Ugly & Disappointing*, David Bloom's so-called guide to modern poetry published by Knopf.

The review had appeared in an obscure online literary journal, *Boiling Point*, edited by a young woman who was an adjunct professor at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, so he had no idea of who might even read it. It was one of the many miscellaneous literary sites whose stock and trade was the indie book scene publishing self-congratulatory puff pieces by beardless pretenders and MFA grads. It came as a fawning request for an essay on poetics, a book review, even a poem, anything with his byline. And it paid, an honorarium, but money all the same. He'd been desperate.

The unfortunate set of circumstances included the request for a review arriving around the time he'd picked up a comp copy of Bloom's book at Nora's, always his backup mail drop when he was on the fly, so to speak, and for six months, including all of that summer and early fall of the previous year, loose as a goose on the loose, he had had to avail himself of a variety of places to bed down, and in one of those temporary layovers, he'd found time to read the purported guide to modern poetry and, given his humor, such as it was due to his circumstances, it had struck him as narrow minded and shallow, as if it were the reread of a graduate thesis, and he had vented his spleen in no uncertain terms nor had he minced words, and, this being before he got his own internet connected device, hit the send button on

the computer in Nora's office, not thinking twice, only remembering with annoyance Bloom's leveraging him into a reading he hadn't particularly wanted to do, though had he not he might not have hooked up with the heartbreaking ball-busting Grace Niklia which was either a good thing or bad thing depending on the day he thought back on that particularly intense time in his life, and had all but forgotten about the hit piece he had written on Bloom's book until sometime after the first of the year when *Boiling Point* finally got around to publishing it, and by then he was well ensconced in Courtney and David's home. Nora, who'd read it over his shoulder while he was writing it, had warned, "That's going to come back and bite you."

Bloom didn't take it too well. There were points of contention, of course. He had not held back, one of his visceral skills being cutting invective. Titled *Caveat Poetae* he started by stating the warning. *Anytime one comes across a book that purports to be a 'guide to modern poetry,' as this turd does, alarm bells should sound and the snake oil detector should be flashing Beware! Beware!*

Questioning the author's credibility only twisted the knife.

Once into the text of this depressingly uninformed self-nominated guide, it becomes immediately evident that the author knows very little about modern American poetry or modern poetry, in general. There is no substantive grasp of the complexity and depth of the modern (putatively post-modern) artistic trend in poetry.

He should have left it at that and not enlarged the compass of his displeasure.

The poets cited are American Kennel Club breeds who sniff and tag within an exclusive poet park made up of friends and associates from academe, sycophants, and professorial recommendations.

And, as was inevitable when the vitriol came to a boil, he took his hobbyhorse for a ride.

The fog shroud of New Criticism envelopes academic thinking about American poetry to this day, entrenched and resistant to the obvious revolution that resonated through the early decades of the last century and reanimated by the recognition of a counter-culture of the post-war era, a revolution that effectively dislodged the Anglo boot heel from American Literature's metaphorical throat to allow the voicing of a unique native gestalt. The literary oligarchy has been demeaning that reality ever since in the guise of maintaining some sort of literary standard based on the misguided presumption of Anglo superiority with its championing of Eliot clones. They are in denial that a linguistic and cultural drift has occurred, particularly evident the further one is removed from the thrall of the ivory towers of the East. The effects of this shift are apparent in the distinctive American poetries emerging from diverse language origins whose grounding esthetic is no longer under the thumb of the imperial glot.

Then, as a disgruntled elder bemoaning the gullibility of the younger generation: *A degree in literature, an MFA in writing is merely the platform upon which to build one's education. The real education begins once all that has been put behind as necessary but not entirely useful. Yet some authors who pass themselves off as some kind of authority on modern poetry have not moved on to discover the genuine American poetry written outside the purview of academic institutions, and whose undereducated opinions carry with them the stale closed air of the classroom, the seminar, the workshop. Class and privilege allow access, and the iron ivy of the Anglo-American hegemony is pervasive in inserting its stooges in positions of erroneous and biased punditry.*

Never did the thought enter his mind that he'd end up living in close quarters with someone he'd eviscerated in print.

It is vain and ignorant to think that one can encapsulate the breadth and depth of modern poetry in a volume of less than 200 pages replete with extra wide margins. This vacuous cerebral foam is merely a prop giving the illusion of substance, essentially a dreary, tediously long essay that treads water but does not do a lot of actual swimming. Perhaps the only section of any interest, which should have been titled "Poets Behaving Badly," is one that winks at the prevalent cronyism among poetry contest judges as if that were the only grounds to be distrustful of elitist cliques. The world of practicing poets is a byzantine labyrinth worthy of Dante's circles of Hell. Poetry fortunately is unaffected by the scrabbling self-devouring narcissism of the engines of its creation. It may take years, centuries even, for the truly great examples of poetic psyche to be considered or reconsidered.

He had pulled his punches in the wrap-up, considering the gutting he had inflicted in the body of the text. At least that was the way he saw it.

The reliance on tradition is a useful stage from which the contemporary can tap into the greater underlying consciousness and perform the poetry of the future in a guise that is timely. No one really goes to a performance and says "great proscenium!" This ostensible guide to modern poetry unfortunately lists only the stage hands and producers, the actors are hardly ever mentioned.

He regretted that what he had written was an indiscretion, not so much because of what he had said, but how it affected the atmosphere in the cramped quarters on Russell.