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## A Class Act

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## A CLASS ACT

Dick in the classroom was a presence immediately felt. The “teaching” began to happen before he said a word. This can’t be described any more than the lines of force between earth and moon can be seen. We’d all take our seats at the big table in Room 210, the seminar room, Dick would light up his first Pall Mall, and the air would become charged. Charged with a comfortable tension, a grim amiability. You had to be there.

“Okay,” he’d say at last. “Who’s got a poem today? That’s *pome*, by the way. Rhymes with home, as Stafford says. Not po-eem. Jesus.”

“I’ve got one, Dick,” says one of the more eager souls.

“Good! Good!” Dick booms with the false relish of a kind man about to dig into a bowl of oatmeal at a poor friend’s dinner table. “Pass it out, Ted. Jesus, it’s hot in here. Anyone mind if I open a window?”

Dick starts to lift his 240 pounds out of his chair when a husky fellow in eastern tweed stops him. “I’ll get it, Dick,” he says. He believes, as the rest of us do, that poets should not have janitorial duties. We spelled poet with a capital *P* in those days. We were impressionable. We knew Dick had gotten drunk with Dylan Thomas, had snored in the same bed with him, and that Dylan had read Dick’s poems in manuscript. And so we were eager to save him from all sorts of menial indignities. We were glad to be flunkies. Well, hell, we were apprentices, after all. Dick didn’t mind a bit. He let us fetch the beer, taxi the girls, call ahead for reservations, gas the car. He, in turn of course, would read our new poems almost any time of night or day. We were his gang, his mob.

“Oh. Thanks. Christ,” he says, sagging back into his chair, elbows on the table, the heels of his hands grinding at the hangover thumping in his temples. “I drank too much last night. Did you see me last night, Jim?”

Jim laughs. Several others laugh. Dick looks up, bewildered and hurt, a wonderful act.

“I know I saw *you*, Ed,” he growls.

Ed growls back. They both chuckle.

“Jesus, I think I insulted Therez again,” he says, dark now with false shame. “All right, never mind. She probably deserved it anyway. Now. Go ahead. Read the poem, Ted.”

Ted reads his poem. It's a long poem, apparently about the rigorous rewards of living close to nature, out in the woods, in a cabin, among the bears and trees. There seems to be a ghostly woman nipping in and out of the strained images.

Ted finishes the poem. There's a dead silence filled only with Dick's breathing. You can almost hear the snowflakes crashing into the window sill. A thin woman in a cotton dress is shuddering stoically.

Dick frowns, his face darkens. He lifts his right arm high above his head and opens and closes his hand six or seven times. His eyes are bright with ominous good humor. "Comments," he says, wagging the fingers of his raised hand as though to traffic-cop the comments forward.

"Ted knows his survival techniques," says some wag.

Ted laughs, appreciating himself somewhat, oblivious to the harpoon in his chest.

Dick lowers his arm, his fist thumps the table. He looks at us suddenly as if he's never seen any of us before. This is the second week of the quarter. By now we've all been to his house on Eddy Street. Some of us have stayed with him through a night, drinking vodka and Fresca, listening to Dixieland jazz and swing. Some of us have eaten chicken cacciatora at his table.

"More comments," he says, straightening himself in his chair, folding his arms across his chest like Mussolini. "*Dica, che l'aquila ascolta,*" he says.

We all laugh. We know what it means and the story behind it. "Speak, the eagle listens." Mussolini's favorite poet, Gabriele D'Annunzio, the man who bombed Trieste single-handedly, used to say it. He'd receive young aspiring poets with that phrase. D'Annunzio, an exasperated romantic, wrote poems such as "To a Torpedo Boat in the Adriatic."

"All right then you cowards," he says. "What does this mean: 'The gate offends my peeling love?'"

"Is it all right if I close this window a little?" asks the shivering woman in the cotton dress.

Dick lifts his head from the poem, fixes the woman with a blank gray gaze. He's not being mean, he's just a beat behind because of the hangover. "What? Oh, sure. Are you cold, honey?" He's solicitous now, eager to make a guest comfortable. "Sure, honey. Close it if you're cold. I'm sorry. I drank too much last night. Maybe I said that before."

“His lover has contracted syphilis,” says a grim, bearded fellow wearing a beret.

Dick stares at him as if he’s just stepped out of a flying saucer. He squints, blinded by incomprehension. Bewilderment, annoyance, and a trace of disgust twitch in his face. “*Who’s got syphilis? What the hell are you talking about?*”

The grim bearded fellow backs down a little. “He means his girlfriend is sick,” he says quietly. “She’s got scabs.”

Dick looks around the room, his mouth severely turned down at the corners, his eyes large with outrage. “His girlfriend is *sick?*” he says, mild now as Jack Benny. “He’s not talking about his girlfriend, smarty! He’s talking about his goddamned *barn!*”

“No, no,” persists the bearded fellow. “It’s there, in the first line. ‘She dances like Egypt out of my desuetude, combing dalliance out of her hair.’ You see?”

“I think I’m going insane,” Dick murmurs to the lovely but very quiet blonde girl in the red sweater sitting immediately to his left. Then, to the rest of us, he announces, “Oh, by the way. I’m not going to be here next Tuesday. I’ve got a reading in Great Falls. I may be able to get Tony to take the class. If we can get him out of Eddy’s Club, that is. You may have to take him at gun point.”

Everyone chuckles at the idea, except Ted. “Actually, I was talking about Lily Langtry,” he says, breaking the rule of silence. The writer of the poem under consideration doesn’t offer a defense. It only wastes time. “You know,” he continues. “Lily Langtry. The *fin de siècle* actress.”

Dick picks up the poem and studies it closely, like a man looking for the fine print in a used-car contract. “There’s no goddamned Lily Langtry in this poem! Anybody see any goddamned Lily Langtry in this poem?”

Ted turns bright red. “Well, I meant someone *like* Lily Langtry. Lily Langtry as, uh, *prototype*. It could have been Jenny Lind or Ethel Barrymore. It doesn’t matter.”

Dick reads aloud:

The cabin in those winters bleak  
Lit again by sighing embers  
Like an old theater intercepting fate  
Intersticed by she who Decembers  
Into dying roles, inamoratas, so to speak . . .

Dick interrupts himself, slamming the poem down on the table. "‘Intersticed by she who Decembers’?" he says, greatly appalled. "Since when is December a *verb*?" His mouth stretches back in what would be a huge grin of only the corners of it would lift. Instead, his mouth lengthens in a flat line. He looks as inscrutable as a giant bullfrog. "What about these Latinates, Ted," he says after a long moment as a bullfrog. "In that moment, no one has been able to look at him. We are the tadpoles, small and blind. "You know, poets quit using syntactical inversions around 1901, Ted."

Ted studies his poem, or pretends to. We all study it, or pretend to. Pretend to hunt out the Latinates, the inversions, the 1901 obsolescence.

"Look," says Dick. "Don't let yourself fall in love with those multisyllabic words, Ted. The strong words are the one- and two-syllable Anglo-Saxon words. You're not writing a pharmaceutical prescription, for Chrissakes. You're writing a poem. Now, what about this line, 'The branch of light cracks across my eyes'?"

"I think it's damned fine," says a brooding blond fellow with heavy supraorbital ridges. He's wearing a motorcycle jacket, black denims, boots.

"You're right, it's not bad," says Dick, raising his arm again. This raising of the arm signals something. It signals something like time-out. Time-out to reconsider. Reconsider everything. Maybe his impression of the poem. Maybe his teaching job. Maybe his life. "Not too bad at all," he says. "But compare it to, 'She dances like Egypt out of my desuetude, combing dalliance out of her hair.' For Chrissakes, Ted, do you *say* things like that to your friends? Is that a natural way for you to *say* things?"

Ted thinks this over for a few seconds, then says, very softly, "No, not really."

"See," Dick says, leaning toward Ted who seems to have shrunk perceptibly. "When you write a line like that, what you're doing is writing 'poetry.'"

Everyone nods. We all know better than to write "poetry."

"You're trying to make this into a poem by elevating your diction, see. What you're saying to yourself is, If I can make it *sound* like a poem, then it must be a poem. You see?"

Ted, tadpole among the tadpoles, nods.

"Jesus Christ, I don't even know what 'desuetude' means!" Dick laughs. "What an ugly goddamned word."

Ted, in a small voice, gives us the definition.

"Thanks," says Dick, like a man who's just been handed a dead hamster.

It's a bleak moment for Ted, but Dick never leaves someone bleeding without offering a Band-Aid or two. He tells Ted to go at it again, that his poem has a moment here and there of something he calls, "psychic rhythm." He goes back to the line about the branch of light. He tells Ted to drop Lily Langtry, and desuetude. He tells him to trust his ear, not his head. His fine education has given him words like *desuetude* and *inamorata* and *intersticed*. We've already got a smart poet, he says. His name is W. H. Auden. Trust your language, Ted, he says. And by your language, I mean *your* language. Your private vocabulary. The words that mean more to you than any other words. If you come from a farm, then "wheat" beats the piss out of "desuetude."

Another poem is passed around the table. The poet, Jim, reads it.

"Jesus," Dick says, pounding the table like Khrushchev. "You rotten son of a bitch," he says. "I haven't written a poem that good all year!"

We all look at Dick, shaken, hoping that he's kidding. But no, he's serious! He means it! We're all stunned into a jealous reverence of Jim's poem.

"Nobody gets to write poems better than the teacher's," Dick says, his voice low with Sicilian treachery. It's like a communique from Lucky Luciano in exile. Then he explodes: "Out! Out! Get out of here! You flunk! Go back to your people in shame!"

Everyone laughs, enjoying his act and what we now have come to recognize as the highest praise a poem can receive.

We discuss Jim's poem for a while, unable to fault it except for a misplaced comma or excess article. "Nit-picking," Dick called it, a very important part of criticism. He also called it "Picking the fly shit out of the pepper."

Finally Dick says, even though only forty minutes have passed, "I'm afraid I drank too much last night. Let's get the hell out of here."

We move heavily out of our chairs, gripped by a reluctance we've come to expect. It's those invisible lines of force. We're still held by them, and three or four of us will be drawn along behind him to his Eddy Street house where the vodka and jazz will flow.

We're almost out the door, but Dick is still in his chair. He's staring at something ten miles away. We stop in our tracks and wait. "Look at that sky," he says, lifting his arm, pointing at something we can't

see. There's something new in his voice, something we haven't anticipated. He heaves himself out of his chair with a magnificent groan and moves to the window. The clouds are breaking up. He leans on the sill. "Look there," he says. "Between those clouds. In that gap. Jesus, that's lovely. See, the sky in that gap is bluer than the sky on either side of those clouds. It looks too far away, like in one of those primitivist paintings, where they get the perspective screwed up. It's as though there's sky behind sky. There's blue, and then, bingo, there's final blue. Christ!" He's wearing that big, slap-happy grin a generation of students will see and be warmed by.

But does he mean it? Is he really overcome by this patch of final blue? Can anyone grin like that, like a giant baby with gold teeth, and really mean it? We don't know. This is 1965 and it's too soon to know. He's new on the job and we're the greenest poets who ever filled our lungs with syllables.