

ENDPAPER; Unwanted Poem Tendencies

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MONDAY Thought of joining the Navy today, but realize I must first resolve my closet unwanted-poem tendencies. The Navy's one-page guide to sexual harassment, which defines harassment in terms of traffic lights (red for rape, green for "hi"), specifically lists "unwanted poems" in the yellow-light category. But which poems are unwanted? Perhaps the Department of the Navy is preparing a follow-up guide. In the meantime, what will I do? Just bought a collection of William Carlos Williams poems. Have I made a terrible blunder, destroying my chances for a promising Naval career? TUESDAY My father was in the Navy. My cousin was, too, on a submarine, and used to bring exotic gifts from faraway ports. I am drawn to the Navy, but still I worry about my poetic orientation. Someone did send me a poem recently. That's what led me to experiment with the William Carlos Williams volume. A friend sent a poem by Kenneth Koch that is a parody of a Williams poem about plums in the refrigerator. It wasn't that I wanted the Koch poem. Not at first. I mean, I didn't ask for it or anything. But once it arrived, a photocopied sheet folded smoothly in a crisp white envelope, I wanted it very much indeed. Should I have resisted temptation? I enjoyed it extravagantly.

WEDNESDAY A.M. Confused. The friend who sent the poem grew up on an Army base in Germany. Does the poem therefore fall under military jurisdiction? Is

it safe to consult a recruitment officer? I haven't read enough Williams to have any firm opinion of his work, myself. But when I read the original Williams poem about plums, I wanted it, too. Who would not? I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast Forgive me they were delicious so sweet and so cold P.M. Fool! Why reveal my secret to anyone? I just confessed to a friend who teaches poetry in a university. He was shocked. "William Carlos Williams? What terrible taste you have!" Just so my family doesn't find out. I'm sure these poems were isolated incidents. THURSDAY Ate an apple, as I am out of plums. Then, in an attempt to comfort me, my professor friend called to remind me that in the 18th century, Shakespeare was considered crude, and "Hamlet" a lurid, bloody piece of trash. What is the Department of the Navy's estimation of "Hamlet"? I read "Hamlet" in high school, once, I admit it, but I was young, and anyway it was the 60's. FRIDAY Today I can think of only one thing: Robert Frost. I dreamed of Frost: he walked through a snowy pasture carrying a large cracker barrel on his back. Obviously a warning from my subconscious -- Frost was dismissed as a pastoral, cracker-barrel cornball for years. Lionel Trilling revived his reputation with a speech recognizing Frost's dark modernist side. But has the Department of the Navy read the Trilling speech? And Trilling himself is out of fashion now. What if the Navy requires documentation? I can't remember what volume of his it's in. Nevertheless, I have a burning desire to send a Robert Frost poem to someone. "O hushed October morning mild. . . ." I think I was born this way. SATURDAY Dryden thought Chaucer had no rhythm because Dryden couldn't pronounce Middle English. Emily Dickinson was ignored in her lifetime. Gerard Manley Hopkins was scorned until F. R. Leavis embraced his work in the 1920's. T. S. Eliot destroyed and then remade Milton's reputation within 10 years. And what about Eliot? Or Philip Larkin, now reviled as a misogynist subscriber to spanking magazines? My favorite poet is James Schuyler. Is this wise? And Elizabeth Bishop. I have read no Naval criticism of them, but still. Schuyler was in the Navy; he mentions it in "The Morning of the Poem." Does that help? He won a Pulitzer Prize for the book containing that poem. But, then, the lines referring to the Navy were about picking up some other guy, a soldier. Randall Jarrell was in the Army Air Corps. An Army poem, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," is his most famous, though not his best, poem: From my mother's sleep I fell into the State

And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.

Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.

When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Is that an unwanted poem? By the Army? By the Navy? SUNDAY I'm not sure I want to join the Navy, after all. I don't even know what ball walking is, for one thing, so how, having learned the lesson of Tailhook, can I be sure I am not doing it? And, too, today is a friend's birthday. I wanted to include a bit of an Auden poem on the card: Live beyond your income,/Travel for enjoyment,/Follow your own nose.

What if there is a search and Auden's "Selected Short Poems" is found in my locker? Or my postcard of Walt Whitman that I use as a bookmark? Or my copy of Robert Lowell's "Day by Day"? Are Marianne Moore's baseball poems wanted? How can I be sure? And if I have changed my mind about John Berryman's love sonnets, and no longer want them, what can I expect from the Navy? Some days I don't know which poems I want. Some days, I don't want any poetry at all. Is this natural? Perhaps I could receive counseling. I just read an essay by Jarrell which he wrote for Mademoiselle in 1956 called "Love and Poetry." He quotes William Blake: Children of the future Age/Reading this indignant page,/Know that in a former time/Love! sweet Love! was thought a crime.

There are so many crimes, so many yellow lights and red lights and behavior incompatible with the military. What poem would I send my superior officer to express my gratitude for basic training? Would Keats be suitable? May Swenson? Don't ask, don't tell, don't send.

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