

# EDITORIAL

We don't always read the cover letters in our screening sessions but we do read the complaint letters. Some time ago we received one that at first I found completely absurd before thinking that it might be a popular misconception. In the letter, the writer was upset that we had not accepted any of his work and added that he was further insulted by the fact that he could imagine us rushing around Manhattan in our suits and ties with attaché cases making arbitrary decisions about who gets in the magazine and who doesn't.

My umbrage for the uninformed comments came from the fact that Iris Stoler was reading me this letter during a screening session in her home, as we do not have an official office. I was sitting there listening to this letter wearing my one pair of jeans that still fit and a rather ratty T-shirt, reading through a sleepy haze because I had worked a twelve hour shift the night before. All of your editors have regular jobs, most of which do not pay very well and most, if not all, of which have nothing to do with magazines, academia, or the arts. I am a Federal Law Enforcement Park Ranger at the Statue of Liberty, which almost pays enough to cover the bills, but costs me four twelve-hour shifts a week—overnight. I start when the sun goes down and go to bed when the sun rises. None of your editors are paid by the magazine. And in the place of an attaché case I carry an old leather bag that I purchased at Joseph Hanna's on Greenwich Ave. many years ago, the same place William Packard purchased his bags and leather that he used to cover all of his books. I only own one suit that probably doesn't even fit. And our editorial process is far from arbitrary. It is arduous and exacting and will be discussed at length in a future editorial.

So if I am a beat cop at the Statue of Liberty, how did I become your editor?

I met William Packard in the summer of 1994. I had been turned down by the Vermont College MFA program because of a lack of undergraduate English courses and was taking additional English credits there as part of their Adult Degree Program. I had no money and could get no student aid because it was not a degree program, but had decided that this would break the log jam that I was living in and might eventually open doors for me. I had acquired a Visa Gold Card from one of those "you have already been accepted" promotions and proceeded to put the costs from the entire semester on it. The program was non-traditional and encouraged me to undertake auxiliary learning methods as part of the course work.

At about the same time that I was in the process of applying to Vermont College,

I met a coworker at the Statue of Liberty who shared the same interests. We began by sharing a similar taste in movies and the conversations digressed to what a boy like me from Virginia was doing in New York. One thing led to another and eventually Douglas Treem invited me to meet his friend, Anna Adams, a poet in the village who was regularly published in *The New York Quarterly*.

I went to meet her and was very impressed not only by her writing but also by her person. Had I not first met this elderly lady in her apartment, I would have thought her to be homeless. Of slight stature and in her late 80's, Anna was dressed plainly enough but had a somewhat disheveled appearance and was wearing a different sneaker on each foot with the heels either cut out or crushed down to make them into slippers. I entered the small, cramped studio on Barrow Street with delight, navigating the stacks of books that occupied most of the apartment to a seat by her writing desk. Anna was not some well-dressed academic type poet with fluttering students buzzing around; Anna was real and did not give a rat's ass about anyone or anything but writing.

I had been forewarned by Doug that once he had asked Anna to read a friend's work and comment. He said that they sat in the cramped, crowded and overrun studio with the friend in a chair near Anna's typing space (where I sat) and he by the wall where Anna would still do Yoga positions standing on her head, and Anna on the lone mattress that filled the space between the studio and the bathroom and began talking uneasily about the manuscript she had read. Early on in the discussion, he said that Anna decided she needed to go to the bathroom—she took the manuscript with her. As Doug sat closest to the bathroom he apparently could see movement through the slightly ajar door and surmised that Anna was rummaging around looking for toilet paper, muttering. And then he said that he could see bits of the manuscript being torn into strips, apparently problem solved and comment made. I was hoping that I fared better, maybe, maybe not, I really don't remember if I cared, I was so excited to meet this woman and was so in awe, not of her apartment or her clothing, but of her dedication to her poetry—complete and total. After moving to New York in 1992 to pursue poetry, I had finally met the real deal.

The upside is that Anna read my poems, did not wipe her ass with them, and said that I “must love language.” This was the first time that I had heard this compliment but knew in my gut right away that it was absolutely the highest praise one could give.

In preparation for meeting Anna at Doug's suggestion, I had sought out a copy of *The New York Quarterly*, managing to finally find and purchase NYQ 54 at the magazine stand on 6th Avenue. For several years I had been trying to read poetry magazines, searching and searching for one that I liked, so I opened this edition

with the same yawning trepidation I had come to open all of them. As I began flipping through the magazine I loved each poem I read. I read it cover to cover with exigency. It resonated through my entire being. This was exactly what I was looking for, unpretentious poetry, poetry that was for anyone, poetry that was anyone, poetry that I could simply enjoy reading, poetry for me. I was elated, my gut feelings about poetry had been right all along—poetry did not need pretensions or high-mindedness; it could just be me and who I was—a simple park ranger. I wanted more of this.

So after my experience of meeting Anna coupled with my newfound love for this magazine, *The New York Quarterly*, I signed up for a workshop with William Packard to supplement what I was doing at Vermont College. The first night of class Bill asked each person in the class, later I found out his standard question, “Who do you read?” I don’t remember the first well known poets with which I responded, probably Whitman and Dickinson, but at the end of my short list I answered Anna Adams and myself. The class chuckled, as I knew how pretentious saying myself might sound, but Bill immediately looked up from his note taking, or poem writing or whatever it was he was doing, slapped the table with his hand to quiet the class and said “Yes! That is absolutely correct, if you don’t like what you are writing—why are you here?”

He then proceeded to ask how I knew Anna’s work and I told him the brief story about a man from work, Douglas Treem, who had introduced me to Anna and they both had highly recommended that I study with him. He then became intrigued with my job and wanted to know if I carry a gun—was I “like a regular cop?” I told him I did and that I was and he turned to talking about Phillip Mahoney who was an NYPD Sergeant, for whom he had written the introduction to his book, *Supreme*, and did I know of him? I didn’t and that seemed to be that. He continued around the room. That night I handed in the poem that I had brought with me, as I thought this was the tradition, but apparently I was the only one. It was entitled “A poem you will never see in *The New York Quarterly*.”

The following week, my poem was returned to me in shreds of black and white amidst a sea of orange highlighter markings with a detailed and accurate explanation attached. Bill talked about how his bark was worse than his bite and that others should not be afraid to turn in work, how he growled but inside was a real “pussycat.” I had much to learn about everything, not just poetry.

About the third week into the class Bill arrived with a red plastic folder. He called me to the front of the class the minute he came in and put his stuff down on his table. He handed me the folder and said, “I have this problem. This woman keeps stalking me. I have an order of protection that she ignores and NYPD cannot find her to serve her with these papers, she has broken into my apartment and

calls hundreds of times each day.” I later learned this was not an exaggeration. He looked up and right into my eyes and said, “Can you find her? This is the background on her, the case, and the papers that need to be served.” This was not a conflict for me and of course I wanted to do what I could so I said, “Yes.”

The very next night, a warm summer night as I recall, I went to the apartment building where she lived, walked right up to the doorman behind a very large reception desk and asked for her by name. When he asked who I was I replied “Federal Delivery Service.” Now mind you it was about 9 o’clock at night, so I added, “It is very important.” He turned and went to the wall where there was the phone and the bank of buttons to call each apartment. He pressed the button and then turned to face the wall. I could see his head nod slightly. He returned and said that there was no answer. I said “Thank you for trying,” turned and walked out the front door. I stopped outside the building for about five minutes, just in the shadows and then turned and went promptly back in the lobby. The doorman was standing talking with a woman who was leaning nonchalantly against the wall with her arms crossed. The minute I walked in she straightened. My gut told me immediately. I went over, identified myself as a police officer, asked for and saw identification, and served the papers. I called Bill from a nearby payphone to give him the news and filed the necessary paperwork with the court the following day. Case closed.

Toward the end of the semester I had decided that getting an MFA from Vermont College was not right for me. I had met with the director of the program, Roger Weingarten, while I was there in the spring who had told me to read contemporary poets voluminously in preparation for re-applying to the program. I had said that I wanted to read both contemporary poets and poets across history to learn all that I can. He had replied that they did not have anyone familiar enough with the historic poets to assist me. Now this just did not seem right to me especially after my experience with Anna, seeing her books crammed into her apartment, my resonating with *The New York Quarterly*, and now having had Bill as a teacher for a semester, who not only taught across history but could quote the greats at will. I knew in my gut that getting an MFA at Vermont College was not right for me. I belonged in this newfound place. I phoned Bill and got his answering machine—the twenty-third Psalm being read in his delicious voice before being told to leave a message. I began leaving a message and he picked up the phone—still screening calls. I told him my predicament of wanting to study more with him and asked if I could take his workshops and pay him to work with me outside of class? He said that it would be possible, but if I had wanted a degree and was going to pay anyway I might as well continue my plan of obtaining a Master’s degree with him at NYU.

I made application to the Gallatin School of NYU and with Bill’s recommenda-

tion letter was accepted to study there. The Gallatin School being semi-traditional meant that I would take half of my course work in a traditional classroom in the English Department and the other half of my work, if I wished, in a workshop or tutorial setting. I wished. Of the eight elective courses that I took for my Master's I took all four of the tutorial courses with Bill. In addition, Bill allowed me to "key" his workshops at NYU throughout this time. This meant that I would take attendance, get handouts to those who missed, etc. Basically I was a Teaching Assistant, but this allowed me to take the workshops for free (I still had no money), while observing Bill's teaching in a workshop setting to augment what I was learning on Saturdays in the tutorial classes.

For over two years I met Bill every Saturday for the tutorial classes which were all held at the Chelsea Gallery Restaurant, a diner at 14th street and 7th avenue. We always sat in the front smoking section right under the fan. Over hamburgers we would discuss the workshop from the week before and then my reading and writing assignments for the Master's work. This was no light matter. Bill worked my ass off, but this was exactly what I wanted. The reading and writing load both were almost twice as heavy, sometimes more, than that for what I was doing in the traditional classroom. Sometimes I was brought to literal tears with the workload, but Bill, the master teacher that he was, knew exactly how much to assign and how much I could take and exactly to what point he could push me. Always just to the edge and I loved every minute of it.

One winter's night during my course of study, I had the pleasure of attending a play of Bill's, *In the First Place*, produced in the Lower East Side at a small black-box theater. I met Doug and Anna there. Afterwards we met up with Bill who was elated that Anna had come. They had not seen each other in years. We walked toward the subway, Doug and I up front, Bill and Anna lagging behind lost in conversation about poetry. I have a vivid image of that night in my mind, the snow had begun to lightly fall through the light of the streetlights overhead and settle on their shoulders as they walked and talked behind us. At the end of the block, Doug and Anna parted and Bill and I decided to sit in a corner pizza parlor and have coffee. He said that he had lost a friend that day. It was January 19, 1997, and I had heard on the news on the way to the play that James Dickey had died. We talked for at least an hour probably even longer but the time always flew by, as Bill shared memories of James Dickey. When we parted I ducked into the subway as Bill walked off into the lighted snow. Little did I know that this would be one of my last vivid memories of seeing Bill walk.

Following the tradition of Bill including his own work in the magazine (which he did originally at Karl Shapiro's behest), I have included a poem of mine in this issue. I feel this is the best way to know anyone who writes. The story of my becoming editor will continue in issue 64.