

# EDITORIAL

A group of editors, normally four or five, would gather every third Sunday afternoon at William Packard's apartment on 14th Street at 4 p.m. Bill had the one chair in his apartment for guests—an old, hand carved, wooden chair on precarious looking, but solid wooden blocks. It was a family heirloom. The remainder would sit on red folding chairs, one of which had a swath of faux leopard skin leather glued to the seat. Bill would play classical music, sometimes marches, during the screening session as we sat around the wicker submissions basket, somberly opening the envelopes, making stacks around our chairs of trash, those poems to be passed along to Bill, and those going back out rejected. I had been a reader of and subscriber to the magazine, then was published in it, then began to study with Bill at NYU. Now I was entering into the world of editing the magazine.

In February of 1997 Bill asked me to move some back issues from the basement of a brownstone in Brooklyn to a barn by Neil Smith's house in upstate New York. I was wide-eyed and new to this editing thing and wanted to help in every way that I could so I agreed. I arranged for the truck and some of the help to load the boxes. Early one morning Peter Arcese drove me to the Ryder facility on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn to pick up a truck that was the largest they had for residential customers. We arrived at the brownstone not knowing fully what was in store for us. The sky was an overcast grey with a chill in the air. Soon after, Andrea Lockett, whom Bill had arranged to meet us, and Steve Devivier, a friend and fellow officer from work I had asked to help on a lark, arrived to help. The boxes of magazines were stored in the cramped basement at the foot of a narrow stairwell; everything was covered in the typical New York fine black dirt that accumulates. The one thing we found there that none of us was sure about was the five foot pile of dryer lint—we just worked around it. It was not practical to lift the boxes through the old coal chute as had been previously planned so we began the process of carrying the boxes one by one up the stairs through the narrow doorway, down the hall, out the door, under the exterior staircase, and to the truck. Andrea managed the loading and stacking of the boxes on the truck and Peter the cataloging of the boxes as he had been advised by a doctor to not lift the heavy boxes. The job seemed insurmountable—there were hundreds of boxes. A light snow began to fall.

Soon a homeless fellow came along and offered to help for \$20. The catch was that we would have to spot him the \$20 first so he could go get some food. Facing many more boxes and thinking it would be interesting to see if he returned, I gave him half. I have to say I was shocked to see the homeless man return after about 25 minutes, roll up his sleeves, and carry as many boxes as, if not more than, the

rest of us. I paid him double.

The truck was packed and loaded three boxes high and completely filled the bed of the truck. Andrea, Steve and the homeless man departed as they were only able to help on this end. I drove the truck and Peter followed in his 1986 maroon Cougar. We slowly made our way upstate and finally arrived in Philmont, NY in the late afternoon. The barn next to Neil's house was clapboard with an enclosed upstairs where the remainder of the back issues already resided. There was no more room in the upstairs. The barn had no electricity. As promised, there were some pallets in a field nearby on which we could stack the boxes. The help, however, that had been previously promised by Bill, was nowhere in sight. With it being so late in the day and no lights in the barn, Peter and I drove to a strip-mall I knew on Route 9 in Hudson, NY to get flashlights and a little dinner. As we ate, I found it ironic to be back at this particular strip mall as I had lived just a few blocks away in the Summer of 1989 while waiting on my government housing to come through at Valkill, a site at the Roosevelt-Vanderbilt NHS in Hyde Park. I had come a long way in life in those few years and realized sitting there that I was solidly on my journey and in the right place to learn.

We returned to Neil's house. I backed the truck down the sloping lawn to the barn entrance. There had been some recent snow and the ground was somewhat soft but it supported the truck and I had to navigate important subterranean traps such as the well line; Neil worried the entire time. We laid down some pallets and began the process of unloading the truck. Darkness soon enveloped us and I got into a routine of moving and re-stacking the boxes. At one point we had to go and get some more pallets from behind the barn in the dark field. As we turned to go into the field Peter noticed a dark image moving at the edge of the woods just across the moonlit field. He stopped dead in his tracks and got quietly excited—"A panther!" he whispered feverishly. "Do they have panthers around here—I swear it moved!" Not a panther I assured him, just the trees at the edge of the field looking quite panther-like in the shadows of the moonlight. Soon, however, the skies became overcast, and a light snow began falling—the weather had caught up to us.

Finally, by about midnight, the last box was in place and the truck swept out. The truck, though, unbeknownst to us, had been sinking into the lawn the entire time. We tried unsuccessfully to get the truck out of the muck. By 1 a.m. we gave up and called for a tow truck. The tow truck arrived and pulled the Ryder truck up the hill with its wench. We tried to save the grass as best we could, but Neil was still glad to see us go. We returned the truck to a gas station/Ryder facility just north of the strip mall on Route 9 in Hudson. Peter drove us back, I remember nodding out for most of the trip. We arrived back at Peter's house on Long Island at daybreak. This would not be the last time to move the boxes.

Over the next few years of study I took four courses directly with Bill through NYU. The classes were independent study, but we met every Saturday at the Chelsea Gallery Diner, “the restaurant” as he called it. When asked if I could pay him for his time that he spent above and beyond NYU, Bill would always joke, “just buy me a burger.” We had burgers every Saturday for a number of years, which I loved. The coursework that I did on those Saturdays with Bill was terrific. In one semester I read the entire bodies of work of Pound and Whitman. Bill always read the material right along with me. He never asked me to do anything that he, himself, had not, or would not do. Another semester we read all of the historical literary criticism from the Greeks to all three volumes of *History of Criticism* by George Saintsbury. And yet another semester entailed reading all of the works by both Plato and Aristotle, and I mean *all*.

One evening in the summer of 1997, I received a call from Erica Smith, a fellow assistant editor who had dropped by Bill’s apartment saying that she had found Bill on the floor of the apartment, that he had apparently suffered a stroke and had been taken to St. Vincent’s Hospital. I went to the hospital the next day and Bill’s immediate concern was his classes. Since I had been assisting with them already, he asked that I take them over until he got out of the hospital. Bill’s recovery would last longer than he or anyone else had anticipated with him being transferred to Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Center on 5th Avenue near 106th Street for several months. I would visit Bill on a regular basis, bringing him news from his classes including the poems from the workshop. I would return the following week to pick up instructions for the class as well as the poems. Bill would dictate to me feedback on the poems to pass along to the students.

Bill returned to the classroom the following semester. At this point he was confined to a wheelchair. “Keying” the class, as he called it, now included going to Bill’s apartment and pushing him to class at NYU. Bill jokingly referred to us now as “pushers.” Bill lived on the second floor of the building and could navigate the stairs at his apartment by holding onto the banister with his good arm, stepping, and dragging his paralyzed leg to the next step and repeating. Those of us who helped in this process would carry the bag and the wheelchair to the bottom of the stairs, wait for him to come down, then get him into the wheelchair at the bottom of the stairs, take him out the front door and then repeat the process going down the stairs of the front stoop. The trip itself along the streets of New York from his apartment on 14th Street to Washington Square Park was a journey. Things you don’t normally think about just walking down the street like how many corners don’t have ramps and the large cracks in the sidewalks now stood out. And Bill loved a smooth ride. The most dangerous were the cracks. The curbs you could learn to navigate. You would learn to use your feet on the back of the wheelchair to lift the front tires over obstacles, but there were always the cracks that lurked, and Bill hated those as they would give us “flats” as he called them. The front

wheel would get caught in the crack and then pull off of the rim. For this there was the screwdriver duct-taped to the bottom of the seat of the chair. Bill would have to get out of the chair and be helped to a standpipe or some other place to sit while I would wrestle the solid rubber tire back onto its rim. We would always continue, and Bill would be just a little more cautious in surveying and subsequently warning me of cracks, but we would always continue to class. More than once on the way to class, I would stop the wheel chair in the middle of the street as the “Don’t Walk” sign began to blink and I would ask, “Do I get an A? Or do I leave you here?” He would immediately guffaw and slap his right hand on the arm rest of the wheelchair. He didn’t have to answer, we both knew the answer: A’s didn’t matter, grades were a convention of silliness and distraction. The only thing that mattered to Bill was the student learning and growing. The trips home would always involve a stop at “the restaurant” for a hamburger, then reverse the process of navigating the stairs. Bill would be completely exhausted by the time he got home, but he would be ready nonetheless to repeat it with another “pusher” the very next day for another class.

Over the next several years Bill would go in and out of the hospital, always asking me and a few others to take over his classes when he did. I would make sure he had groceries, get the mail, etc. A number of people helped with each having their own set of responsibilities. Bill usually had someone coming by the apartment every day—we each had our regular day. As time went by Bill gave me more and more insight into the magazine as things needed to be done. One night at one of our regular burger sessions, he said that he had been thinking about his mortality since the stroke and asked if I would be willing to take over the magazine should anything happen to him. I said immediately that it was something I had to consider. And consider I did. I was overwhelmed at the prospect. I had some idea but really no idea what all it would entail, how much of my time it would take, and the ultimate question was could I even do it. Finally after talking to many friends and others associated with the magazine, I acquiesced into a realization that if Bill thought I could do it, I needed to trust that, that maybe I was not the best decider of whether I could do it or not, but Bill was, just as he had been in my studies and mentoring me with the magazine to this point. One night in 1998 Bill called me to come to the apartment. He had set up a meeting at “the restaurant” with myself and Dion Pincus, one of the board members of the magazine. He pulled out a document that he had typed up on parchment colored paper, three copies, one for him, one for Dion and one for me. On this paper he had listed the NYQ board as it stood at the time and at the bottom was a paragraph that stated I was to assume control of the magazine should anything happen to him as well as to be his literary executor. I hesitated one last time, but Bill shook his hand in the air, waving it back and forth rapidly, palm toward me and said, “No, no, no—don’t worry, you can do it.”

*To be continued...*