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From Old School (2004)

Class Picture

If our school had a snobbery it would confess to, it was its pride in being a literary place — ... the glamorous writers ... visited three times a year. Our headmaster had studied with Frost at Amherst and once published a collection of poems ... The other English masters carried themselves as if they, too, were intimates of Hemingway, and also of Shakespeare and Hawthorne and Donne. These men seemed to us a kind of chivalric order. ...

How did they command such deference — English teachers? Compared with the men who taught physics and biology, what did they really know of the world? It seemed to me, and not only to me, that they knew what was most worth knowing. Unlike our math and science teachers, who modestly stuck to their subjects, they tended to be polymaths. ... They would put it back together with history and psychology, philosophy, religion; even, on occasion, science. Without pandering to your presumed desire to identify with the hero of a story, they made you feel that what mattered to the writer had consequence for you, too.

There was a tradition at my school by which one boy was chosen for a private audience with each writer who visited. We contended for this honor by submitting a piece of our own work (poetry if the visitor was a poet, fiction if a novelist), with the winner to be chosen by the writer a week or so before the visit. By custom, only sixth formers, boys in their final year of school, were allowed to compete.

Robert Frost's visit was announced in early October. At first the news made me giddy, but that night I grew morose with the dread of defeat.

Despite our school's hierarchy of character and deeds, class was a fact. It was not just the clothes a boy wore but the way he wore them. How he spent his summers. The games they knew how to play. ... The padding that hemmed them in and muffled the edges of life; yet even in the act of kicking against it they were defined by it, and protected by it, and to some extent unconscious of it.

Maybe that was why so many of us wanted to become writers. Maybe it seemed to us that to be a writer was to escape the problems of blood and class. Writers formed a tribe of their own and regarded the others from a position outside the common hierarchy. This gave them a power not conferred by privilege — the power to create images of the system they stood apart from, and thereby to judge it. We had talked in class about Pasternak and his troubles, and the long history of Russian writers being imprisoned or killed for not writing as the Party wished. [...]

The day after John F. Kennedy won the Presidency, George Kellogg won the audience with Robert Frost. Our school newspaper printed his poem in a box on the front page. It was a dramatic monologue in which an old farmer feels the bite of mortality on the first cold day of autumn.

Robert Frost arrived at the school... When he appeared, the ordinary din of the dining hall died almost to silence. [...] Frost read in the chapel that night. [...] He picked his way slowly through the first line, as if the thought were just occurring to him. And then his dry voice filled

like a sail and became good-humored and natural and young. ... Now and then I saw him shift his gaze from the page to us without losing a word. He wasn't reading; he was reciting. He knew the poems by heart, yet he continued to make a show of reading them ...

[...] George ... told me he'd spent more than an hour alone with Frost in the headmaster's parlor. ... Frost didn't say much about George's poem, not in so many words, anyway, but he recited a few of his own and gave George some pointers. [...]

Ah, I said. Great.

We walked along. Then George said that Frost had left him with some advice.

What was that?

Do you know where Kamchatka is?

Not exactly. Alaska? Somewhere up there.

Mr. Frost told me I ... should go to Kamchatka. Or Brazil.

Kamchatka? Why Kamchatka? Why Brazil?

He didn't explain. [...]

Jesus. Kamchatka. Kamchatka.

Later that night I went to the library and looked up Kamchatka. It was a peninsula in the remote far east of the Soviet Union, on the Bering Sea. Very few people lived there. It was dark half the year so they couldn't grow much of anything. They lived on the salted meat of salmon and also of bears, which greatly outnumbered the people and proved a sorrow to the unwary. When the taiga wasn't frozen over, it swarmed with biting insects. There were many volcanoes and they were active. The only picture in the Kamchatka entry showed two figures in parkas watching the top of a mountain being carried skyward on a fist of flame.

I closed the encyclopedia and sat listening to the wind rattle the mullioned panes behind me. What was it about Kamchatka, that a young writer should forsake his schooling and go there? Spectacle, maybe. The drama of strange people living strangely. Danger. All this could be good matter for stories and poems. But Frost himself had lived in New England all his life at no cost to his art, and I wondered if he'd ever actually been there. I guessed not. But it meant something to him, Kamchatka, something to do with the writer's life, and what else could it mean but hardship? Solitude, darkness, and hardship.

But he had also mentioned Brazil. I rose from my deep chair and crossed the room past boys dozing over books and exchanged the "K" volume for "B."

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