

Barbaric Yawp

By Charles Rammelkamp

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric YAWP over the roofs of the world.

– Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

Mark Person had not been to the Association of Writers and Writing Programs – AWP for short – since it had been held in Baltimore sometime back in the last century. He remembered finding it utterly depressing, being around so many writers. Of course, he knew theoretically that there were hundreds of thousands of aspiring poets and novelists, but to find them all together in one hotel had been downright claustrophobic, especially watching the ambitious young ones, newly minted MFA's looking for jobs and book contracts, kissing the asses of the older, more established ones, and everybody smiling at him in the hope that he was somebody famous. It all reduced the magic of literature to the world of commerce and competition. He vowed never to go to one again, and in fact, when the convention was held in Washington, several years back, even closer to Algonquian than Baltimore, he hadn't attended.

Yet this year he was going to attend the conference in Boston with his friend Roddy Nettles, who now lived in New York. The two had been close friends in Boston when they were in their bachelor twenties, renting apartments in Beacon Hill, and AWP seemed as good an excuse as any to re-visit the Hub, as the city was called, though really a much more provincial city, despite its charms, than any “hub of the universe.” Also, having published a couple of poems in *The Cantwell Review* by Murray Fitzsimmons, the head of Hausner English Department, Fitzsimmons had found some money to subsidize Person's expenses. So, really, why not?

But then it turned out that Roddy, an attorney, couldn't get away since a high-profile tax fraud case was coming to trial that week. So Person went alone, having reserved a room in the Marriott in Copley Square. The convention was being held in the Hynes Auditorium on Boylston Street, a few blocks away.

At least he'd be incognito, he figured. He had nothing to sell, nobody to meet, no panel to be a part of. Still, he'd have to choose from among the hundreds of presentations, attend some, to justify himself to Fitzsimmons.

Person flew into Logan Airport a step ahead of a snowstorm that had clobbered the

Midwest and was bearing down on the Mid-Atlantic before following him to New England. It would make the next two days in Boston a challenge, but Person didn't really mind; the winter had been so mild. Climate change, he figured. Global warming. But after checking into his room he lay low that first night, staying in his room, reading, watching television, calling his wife Linda back home in Algonquian, turning in early.

The next day the storm had caught up with him, but he walked the several blocks from Copley Square to the convention center, soaking in the city of his youth, remembering his time here from a third of a century before. Hadn't there been a movie theater in this block where he and what's-her-name had regularly gone before returning to his Beacon Hill apartment to have sex? Angela. An affair that lasted six weeks, before Angela moved on to New Haven to start her life over. And what was the name of that bookstore chain, hadn't there been one around here? All gone now. The wet, heavy snow blew sideways into his eyes. He ducked his head into his collar.

At the Hynes Auditorium, Person joined the lines for registration, claustrophobic in the crush of people, all looking furtively around at one another.

“Was that Jeanette Winterson?” a young woman ahead of him asked her companion. They looked like college students.

“Where?”

“There.”

“I can't see....”

“Never mind.”

By the time it was Person's turn to collect his nametag and tote bag, he was sweating from the close contact, the jostling, thousands of people jammed together like the crowd at a rock concert or sporting event. The tote bag contained a map of the convention center identifying which vendor booths were where, a catalog of panels, readings, and book fair participants, and a pen.

“Was that Augusten Burroughs?”

Person looked around at a young man with beard talking to his girlfriend – or so he assumed she was his girlfriend, by the way he had his hand on her ass.

“Where?”

“Over there. Oh, wait. Can’t see him any more, but I’m sure it was him.”

“Cool,” the girl cooed.

Person consulted his catalog to see what presentations he might attend. There were scads of them about creative writing programs in academia. Teaching Mutt Lit: Genre-Benders, Hybrids, and Other Weirdness in the Creative Writing Classroom. Apples and Oranges: How Different Academic Systems Have Produced Different Models for Creative Writing Programs. One-Room Schoolhouse: Teaching the Private Writing Workshop. On Labor: Junior Women Faculty in Creative Writing Programs. Creative Convergences: Integrating the Arts and Technology in the Writing Classroom. All Voices Everywhere: Teaching Creative Writing to Marginalized K-12 Students. Bound, Not Gagged: Artful Constraints in the Creative Writing Classroom.

It was like a poetic form, the descriptions of these seminars and panel discussions, a title followed by a colon and a succinct, enlightening explanation. They could be sonnets or villanelles. Panelles. Seminets.

There were also panels on getting published and the business of publishing. Where Marketing Meets Development: Who Said Fundraising’s Not Fun? Not Just a Blog: How Publishers and Writers Can—and Should—Use Tumblr to Create and Promote. Tossing Off the Covers: A Peak Under the Sheets and Behind the Scenes of Running a Nonprofit Literary Organization. Bored Board: Rethinking Your Most Important Volunteers. Money Is a Kind of Poetry: Strategy and Tactics for the Small, Independent Nonprofit. Choose Your Own Editor: Creating Meaningful One-on-One Services for Writers. Hurdles and Widgets and Dishes: The State of Literary Publishing.

Publerinas. Editinas. Literets.

Where did *The Cantwell Review* fit in here, Person wondered. He was not sure what the expenses were that Burt Ashe, the publisher, encountered. He himself did not get paid. He just read submissions and wrote book reviews, corresponded with poets.

There were also panels on the art of writing itself. Using Careless Speech for Careful Writing—The Art of Using Unplanned and Casual Language to Convey Style and Meaning. The Ten-Minute Play: The Essential Ingredients. Looking for Real-Life Humberts: The Unreliable Narrator in Creative Nonfiction. Please Complete Me, Please Don’t Make Me Gag: Love Stories for a Cynical Age. Epistolophilia: Using

Letters and Diaries in Creative Nonfiction. Changing the Sheets: How Best to Get Sex on the Page.

What to choose, which to attend?

And then there were the ones about writers in modern society. Poetry Readings in the Age of Social Media. The Artist as Activist: On Seeing and Saving the Natural World. Yoga and the Life of the Writer. Video Games, Fan Fiction, and Comics: Alternative Genres as Legitimate Literature.

In other words, overwhelming.

Person ducked out of the auditorium and walked back through the snow toward his hotel, having decided to spend the day at the public library.

“Was that Derek Walcott?”

In the hotel dining room the next morning Person consulted the program directory again, thinking he might just work up the fortitude to actually attend a few discussions. While he scanned the catalog – how like a breakfast menu – he overheard two women at the next table. By the ID’s on lanyards around their necks, dangling like crucifixes, he gathered that they were here for AWP too.

“Ugh, there must be ten thousand people crammed into that auditorium!”

“I know, and the jostling for the elevators is just killing. I keep expecting one of those things to snap its cables.”

“The famous writers get to read in the grand ballrooms, but all the panels seem to be in these small airless rooms with low, fiberglass ceilings.”

“And then you think you're not going to see anyone you know but you keep passing people who you don't like very much.”

“I thought I saw Don DeLillo in the lobby.”

That did it. Person's little wall of fortitude crumbled and like a mouse scurrying back to its hole he returned to the sanctuary of his room, where he decided that instead of going right away to AWP, he'd check out Kendall Square first, where he and Roddy had worked decades back at the Transportation Systems Center. Maybe then he would come back to Boston, return to Hynes.

It was kind of comforting, actually, riding the subway trains, entering the dry warmth of the underground station at Arlington Street, taking the green line two stops to Park and transferring to the red line to cross into Cambridge. The rush hour was over and he was able to get a seat and look out over the Charles River as the train crossed the bridge.

But once he got off the train in Kendall Square, looking at the ugly government building office complex where he'd worked all those years ago was a let-down. He remembered with fondness his first job after graduate school as an editorial assistant and the friendships he'd made with Roddy and Lenny Cohen and the others, but the East Cambridge office park itself was drab and boring. Was the tall one called "Building One?" He tried to remember. He walked over toward Broadway with the snow still coming down but before he even got there he turned around and went back to the subway. Maybe he'd go catch a matinee at the Brattle in Harvard Square, he thought, but then he remembered Lenny, who'd retired to Hawaii several years earlier, had told him the place had closed long ago...

Instead, he went back into Boston, got on the green line train and stayed on as it sailed past Arlington and Copley and Hynes stations, and he spent the day at the Museum of Fine Arts and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. At ten that night, back in the Constitution Ballroom, there would be a dance and reception, with free beer from ten to eleven, but after a greasy dinner at a Kenmore Square subshop, Person just returned to his room at the Marriott and went to bed. It was still snowing, the streets cold and slushy with the wet, melting snow.

On Saturday, the last day of the conference, the weather finally cleared; the sun came out. Person thought he really should put in an appearance at AWP. He could always make stuff up about the panels he'd attended, for Fitzsimmons' benefit, but there were also likely to be some people at the booths he might enjoy seeing. Dzanc Books or Red Hen Press, *Main Street Rag* or *Tin House* or some other publication or press to which he'd submitted work. He wondered if *Chamber Four*, the Cambridge journal, had a booth there. He should check the directory.

But Person also wanted to walk around Beacon Hill a little, now that the weather was better, before he had to catch his flight back to Virginia. He wanted to go past the building on Myrtle Street where he'd had an apartment, at the crest of the hill, before it sloped down toward Suffolk University, and around the corner to check out Roddy's old digs on Pinckney Street, facing Louisburg Square. He remembered somebody filming a Burt Reynolds film there one year, a romantic comedy, and in front of his own Myrtle Street building Ken Russell shooting a scene for a movie called *Altered States*.

But immediately, despite his optimism and the brief window he'd allowed for AWP, upon entering the auditorium his spirits sank. Throngs crowded the bookfair. Depressing snippets of conversation slipped like poison into his ears as he made his way around.

"My poem was nominated for a Pushcart Prize..."

"My collection was a finalist but it didn't get published. I'm afraid I'm a perpetual bridesmaid..."

"I've applied for an arts grant from..."

"Hoping to land a three-book deal with ..."

"Was that Sharon Olds I just saw getting on the elevator?"

Like an undergraduate at a party needing to hold a cigarette or a drink just to occupy his hands and give him some sense of purpose or protection, Person stood in line for what seemed like an hour and bought an overpriced latte to anchor himself as he walked among the stalls.

"What do you mean, my book's not available yet? Why do you think I came out here from San Diego? To experience the shitty weather? You *promised* me it would be ready and I could get my copies, you *assured* me..."

Person glanced around at the redhead staring daggers at the university press representative who sheepishly hung his head, shrugged his shoulders.

Further on, at the Dzanc Table, he saw that Jennifer Spiegel was going to be signing copies of *Freak Chronicles*, and he remembered reading a review of it by Roman

Gladstone in *Chamber Four* and thought he'd wend his way over there, if he could find where it was in the maze of numbers to see if he were making progress, when suddenly a commotion on his left disturbed him. A man shouting at a terrified-looking girl who looked to be some sort of under-assistant marketing type, probably a college intern, booths using his map as a guide. He peered down the aisles, checked the booth

“You gutless sell-outs! If you had an ounce of integrity you'd publish my book in a heartbeat, but you're just sheep submissively following your establishment masters. You should hang your head in shame for perpetuating the same old garbage you've been taught to promote. Look at you! I should laugh if I weren't so angry. Why, if I _“

With a shock, Mark Person recognized his nemesis George Clark, the angry self-styled revolutionary community college poet who had fired off threatening e-mails to him for rejecting his daring, ground-breaking radical poems. Here he was at his old tricks, browbeating a kid. The girl's eyes were wet behind her glasses, her lip quivering.

On an impulse, Mark Person contrived to trip over a stack of books and pour his cup of scalding coffee down the collar of Clark's shirt. Clark let out a blood-curdling shriek, a barbaric yawp indeed, the cry of a wounded elephant, and whirled to see what had happened. Everybody for twenty feet around had also turned at the sound of his cries and watched in complete silence.

Person, meanwhile, had lost himself in the crowd and was headed for the door. Fuck it, he thought, he was going to go to Beacon Hill now. Behind him, he heard a voice rise above the others and wondered vaguely if it referred to him, to Clark, or possibly to somebody else.

“Hey, was that James Franco?”

