

# States of the Union

## MELODY AND MYSTERY

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

**H**ERE, according to Walt Whitman, is what great poets say to their audiences: "Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose you enclose, What we enjoy you may enjoy." And here is what happened one Friday this past October when Diane and I put Walt's sermon to the test.

**9:15 a.m.** Right now we could use an enclosure. The chill rain has driven us and quite a few others to the shelter of a great maple, one of several that embellish the Waterloo Village green. Waterloo lies close by the Allamuchy Mountain in northwest New Jersey. It encompasses some 10,000 acres of early American history—a steepled church, a canal decorated with geese and mallards, a stone gristmill, a forge, a tavern—all the customary symbols of restoration.

But these grace notes are not what brought us here. Diane and I are attending the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival (the R is for Rockefeller), which Galway Kinnell has billed as "probably the largest assemblage of poets and poetry lovers ever held on the continent."

Kinnell, the Dodge Foundation's "point poet" in planning this unprece-

dent ed affair, is one of a half-dozen Pulitzer Prize-winners slated to perform. The others are Gwendolyn Brooks, Carolyn Kizer, Stanley Kunitz, Mary Oliver, and Gary Snyder. Joyce Carol Oates will be here later, as will Alicia Ostriker, Kenneth Koch, Allen Ginsberg and quite a few others. Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) has already arrived, looking jauntily militant beneath a gray cap.

In all, some 50 poets, musicians and actors will instruct and entertain us. What they enjoy we may enjoy.

Diane and I suspect that to complain of the cold would be to miss the point. The poets will make their own weather. When "Fuel oil won't flow," Gary Snyder has observed in a poem about practitioners of his craft,

*Fire poets  
Burn at absolute zero  
Fossil love pumped back up.*

Alicia Ostriker's crisp "Stanzas in October" are really about geese, but now they seem to urge Diane and me to listen for

*A long sound, when the sky is overcast....  
Why do we raise our faces, as at a gift?*

Here beneath the maple I do not raise my face. Instead I eavesdrop on a conversation between two teenage girls standing nearby. One is showing her friend a poem she has penned in her spiral notebook, only the opening lines of which am I able to make out: "The thought of you leaving/just breaks my heart in two."

"Mary," exclaims the friend, "that's really good. It's so *sad*."

The youthful conversation reminds me what this first festival day is all about: It will focus exclusively on high school students, about 500 of whom have been bused in with their teachers from towns across New Jersey. "The idea," a teacher here has told me, "is to harness the students' creativity."

Some of the creativity this morning may be harnessed beneath the little striped tent-roofs of yellow and white that adorn the green like sun-scoops. The poets are conducting writing workshops there for anxious acolytes. Diane and I go our separate ways, wandering from tent to tent.

In the first I find the poet Sonia Sanchez, a small, brown woman with a gleaming smile; she is enchanting her young charges. Sanchez' poetry can be insistent and strident—"listen to me/ screeaaan this song," she urges in one poem, a jagged appeal to her "young... brothas and sistuhs." But here on the green she is all gentleness.

A nervous student has just read aloud a poem of her own that begins with a question: "Will our love stand the test of time?" Now Sanchez takes the work in hand and gives it a second reading, her sweet cadences turning this halting effort into something surprisingly lovely.

"Thank you for having the courage to share your poem with us," Sanchez says to the student—and then, in an apparent afterthought: "You may want to think some more about your first line. It doesn't startle us because we've heard it before. You see," she adds, laughing, "it's hard to write an exciting love poem. We all think we're experts on that subject."

**Noon.** Performing poets have been popping up everywhere: Ruth Stone in the Tavern, Galway Kinnell in the Church, Diane Wakoski in the Meeting House.

There is no rational way to choose. So I head for the Gazebo, which is really an open-sided cupola, where all nonpoets have been invited to hold forth. Today, anyone who wishes can read aloud from the works of Langston Hughes. Walt Whitman will be the featured poet tomorrow, Emily Dickinson on Sunday.

I do not read; I am content to loaf on a folding chair within the little wooden rotunda, watching others take their turns. "O, let America be America again—" reads a black student, her voice quavering with emotion,

*The land that never has been yet —  
And yet must be.*

**1:15.** We are gathered in the main tent, a great, green enclosure that seats 2,800. Galway Kinnell, looking bardic and benevolent in a turtleneck sweater, rises to present the 14 teachers he has been working with all week in a special poetry-writing seminar. Each teacher has been asked to read a poem written under Kinnell's tutelage. Quite a few of the offerings seem head-on responses to this man's catalytic presence, which must have raised some disturbing questions in minds accustomed to dispensing firm answers. "Be daring," said the poetry instructor.... "is how Anne Seltzer of the Peddie School in Hightstown begins her poem. She proceeds to deny the possibility for boldness in a life defined by motherhood:

*"Be daring," he said.*

*No, not I.*

*I am the source, not the fire.*

Others, like Wayne Slappy, who teaches English and physical education at Vailsburg High School in Newark, have beamed urgent messages toward their students:

*You think you're cool and act real  
tough.*

*Well let's see if you're tough enough.  
...Let me tell you something before  
we get started—*

*If you don't cool down, you'll be  
among the departed.*

**3:20.** Diane is off somewhere listening to lyrics, and probably I should be doing the same. But I want to talk with Scott McVay, the director of the Dodge

Foundation, who has come by my picnic table in front of the Meeting House. I ask McVay why he and the foundation have gone to all this trouble.

McVay is not one to answer hastily. "For me," he begins, "you start with a song." That happens to be precisely how he started his own career—not with poetry but with the songs of whales, dolphins and porpoises. He has published 25 papers on the subject and has traveled twice to the Arctic with expeditions studying the bullhead whale.

From "Songs of the Humpback Whales," a scholarly paper McVay and



GALWAY KINNELL

physiologist Roger S. Payne coauthored in 1971, I have already picked up some clues regarding this festival's origins. The paper begins by evoking "the quiet age of sail," when whalers could sometimes "hear the sounds of whales transmitted faintly through a wooden hull." But "In this noisy century... of propeller-driven ships," sailors can no longer hear the songs.

McVay and Payne then present detailed diagrams and "spectograms" of underwater whale-song recordings. These describe "what we believe to be the humpbacks' most extraordinary feature—they emit a series of surprisingly beautiful sounds, a phenomenon that has not

been reported previously in more than a passing way."

When McVay joined the Dodge Foundation 11 years ago, not long after it was created, those "surprisingly beautiful sounds" kept echoing in his mind, bespeaking the delights and dividends to be gained from respectful listening. From whales to humans was only a natural step. "Language," he tells me now, "may be the distinguishing feature of the human species, and poetry may well be the pounding heart of language"—something, in short, that we need to keep listening for above the technological din.

**8:40.** We have had dinner with friends at a highway restaurant; arriving back in the main tent, we realize we have paid for our truancy. Gwendolyn Brooks and Ed Sanders started without us, as did the talented mime, Yass Hakoshima. At least we are in time to hear the Paul Winter Consort, that lustrous quintet of musical speculators.

Diane and I stay close to each other, hoping to discourage the sharp night air. Surveying the tented scene, we see that most of the teachers and students have departed. In their place has arrived an older but fresher contingent of poetry fans, perhaps 600 in all. Like us, they have made themselves small against the cold. No one, however, is leaving the tent.

Paul Winter, holding a golden soprano sax, appears on stage with his colleagues: a pianist, a cellist, a flutist, and a man who plays all manner of percussive instruments. Later, they will improvise accompaniments to Gary Snyder's poems; for the present, they are on their own.

Incredibly, they begin to play whale songs, or rather to accompany the plangent underwater tapes in which we are suddenly drenched (courtesy of Rosewood Sound Systems). First we hear those eerie whoops and blasts, songspouts that to my landlocked ears sound simultaneously sad and joyful.

Then, one by one, the musicians take up the lush themes, playing *tutti* to the whales' *solo*, and reminding us that from the deepest realms comes music. For the next 30 minutes we are all sailors, our hull a canvas tent, awash in this festival of melody and mystery.