

JEAN ZIPP

The Gift Outright

Precious Posy—

I was a sophomore in college when I joined a small group of students—eight of us—who were aspiring poets. We took ourselves very seriously, although neither a Walt Whitman nor an Emily Dickinson emerged—at least not by the end of that school year.

Our mentor, Robert Grove, a professor of English Literature, was an indulgent critic—perhaps too much so. His evaluation of our work was always encouraging. He provided the impetus when inspiration lagged.

During the fall semester of 1942 Robert Frost came to speak to the student body. Many among them, even though they might not have aspired to poetic heights as did we, wanted to hear this distinguished speaker. The auditorium was full. Students stood at the back and alongside the walls.

Frost's poetry may be thought of as the voice of New England. He studied at Harvard but did not graduate. He worked as a teacher, a cobbler, and a New Hampshire farmer before he gained international recognition when two volumes of his poems were published—one in 1913, the other in 1914. When he came to speak to us he was a professor of poetry at Harvard, but in 1949 he returned to teach at Amherst where in 1916 he had begun his academic career.

Professor Grove arranged for us—the Poet's Circle—to come together at his home that evening so that we could meet the great man. We sat at Robert Frost's feet! He listened as we read our poetry to him. He was kind and thoughtful and generous in his praise. He urged us to follow our dreams and told us how he had pursued his own.

He was a young husband and father when he determined

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to see this country and the people who lived in it. Just as a hobo might have done, he bundled some necessities into a red bandana which he tied to a sturdy stick and on foot set off on his journey. He had an impressive wife. She was there to greet him when he returned many months later. He had us in thrall.

There were only two women in our group. One was your Gigi. The other was Edna Givens—an aloof person who had the only single room in the dorm. We wondered how and why that special privilege was granted to her. And why did she not have to obey curfew? Only later did I realize that Edna was a lesbian. Today that choice doesn't bear the stigma that it did in 1942. It was Edna who went on to publish in the *New Yorker*. Distinction was mine as well; I was the only one who had to watch the clock.

As 9:00 slithered closer, I whispered a reminder to Professor Grove. Our session was gearing up. He called the dean and asked for an extension of curfew. One extra hour was as much as the dean would allow, with the proviso that Professor Grove walk me back to the dorm.

You may be sure that during the extra hour, I hung on every word. As 10:00 approached, Frost became more and more fascinating. There was no chance of another extension. Reluctantly, and with a warm hug from that amazing man, I left the group and like a kid in kindergarten walked back to the dorm under professorial escort.

After the fact, I learned that the seven remaining members, along with the professor and his wife, stayed on with Mr. Frost until the wee hours of the next morning. I'm resentful even now when I think of that deprivation—for deprivation it most certainly was.

Years later, on January 20, 1961, Robert Frost, by then an old man, became the first poet to recite a poem at a presidential inauguration—that of John F. Kennedy. The new president had previously requested that Frost recite one of Kennedy's favorite poems, "The Gift Outright." It was an appropriate piece for the

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ceremony—a paean to the fight for our country’s independence from England. Frost agreed. However, in his hotel room on the night before the inauguration, Frost wrote a new poem, “Dedication.”

It was a cold, windy day in Washington DC. Frost’s white hair blew wildly, and his hands trembled as he placed on the lectern his copy of the new poem. The glare of the sun on the snow around the capitol blinded the poet. He wasn’t able to read “Dedication.” Instead, he began to recite from memory “The Gift Outright.” As he came to the end of the poem, he faltered. Kennedy took Frost’s arm and finished the recitation in his stead.

Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.

I was in love with Robert Frost. On that Inauguration Day, my admiration extended to President Kennedy. Two brilliant men—one at the height of his political career, one who had attained glory far earlier—an unforgettable pair.

Maybe one day you’ll be a poet and will read one of your poems to me. Gigi.