

# David Wagoner

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an excerpt from

## *First Class*

(A Play in One Act)

### INTRODUCTION

I was a student of Theodore Roethke during my senior year at Penn State in 1947. I took two courses from him: a poetry workshop and a seminar on Yeats and Hopkins. He was an extraordinary teacher, as some of his other students have testified, among them James Wright, Richard Hugo, and Carolyn Kizer. I had been writing poems since I was ten and had a trunk full of them when I first encountered Roethke. After two weeks, perhaps less, in his workshop, I said to myself, "If he's right, everything I've ever written is terrible." And fortunately, I decided he *was* right. Thereafter, like many others before and after me, I tried to follow his precepts and at least some of his examples.

At the time he was relatively unknown as a poet, but that same spring he published his second book, *The Lost Son*, which advanced his standing significantly among his contemporaries. During the following decade he won the Shelley Memorial Award, the National Book Award, and the Pulitzer Prize.

I became his colleague at the University of Washington in 1954, and we were close friends till his death in 1963 at the age of fifty-five. In a book called *Straw for the Fire*, I published excerpts from the 215 spiral notebooks where he wrote fragments of poetry and prose, the latter being what he had just said or might say tomorrow in class or perhaps had said at some party. (He frequently carried a clipboard and wrote down his own remarks, and I confess I did something of the same kind after being with him for an evening.)

His bipolar difficulties were well known on campus because he shared them over the telephone, during his grandiose phases, with the head of the University of Washington Library (whom he despised for his taste in literature), the president of the university, the mayor of Seattle, and on several occasions the governor of the state of Washington. At these times he would assume

several powerful roles, among them the head of the Mafia-like Purple Gang of Detroit and a professional boxer. (He shared the latter alter ego with the English poet John Clare, whom he admired greatly.) He would also call writers all over the country, including Lillian Hellman, Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur, Stanley Kunitz, and W. H. Auden, and recite poems he thought they might not have noticed before, as well as new poems of his own; suggest collaboration on unlikely projects; or forecast visits, most of which would never take place. The head of the English department in those days was Robert B. Heilman, who helped protect and defend Roethke even during his most outlandish episodes.

However, Roethke never put his students in danger, and as far as I've been able to find out, they never felt afraid of him. The teaching of poetry seemed to make him more orderly, to intensify his gifts as an instructor and critic, and to give him mesmerizing powers of persuasion. Though he never became an editor himself, he had to a high degree one of the most necessary qualities of a successful one: he was genuinely glad, even joyful, when one of his students wrote a good poem, and he showed no trace of jealousy or rivalry.

Most of the teaching methods of artists in all categories have gone unrecorded. We know very little about what great painters and great composers, for instance, said to their pupils. In *First Class* I've tried to re-create the atmosphere of one of Roethke's poetry workshops, working mostly from my memories of him and a number of examples of the kinds of poems and opinions he admired, some of the near rituals he used both on students and himself, some of his unique spirit, and some of the hectic ways Time and Place would leap over each other for him as if he were in charge of both.

The most charismatic man I've ever met was not Adlai Stevenson, Prince Philip, Billy Graham, Dylan Thomas, or Ted Bundy (all of whom I encountered as a reporter, a fan, or a teacher), but Theodore Roethke, and if I've been able to recapture some of that charisma here, I'll be satisfied.



*The time is the late 1950s. The place is the campus of the University of Washington in Seattle. A desk with a lectern and a chair. A full-length standing mirror and a loaded coat rack. A record player. THEODORE ROETHKE enters carrying a battered black briefcase and an armload of books with paper bookmarks, note-*

*books, and loose sheets. He wears a suit that looks slept in and a disarranged tie. He moves with a rolling gait like a bear walking a tightrope and seems slightly haunted, wary, conscious that all eyes are on him. He puts down the books and papers in a sloppy pile and begins checking a class list, glancing around the audience.*

Hi. (*checks list*) Hi. (*checks list*) I'm counting heads. Only one to a customer, please. I suppose everybody's here. Everybody who wants to be. Maybe not everybody who *should* be, but—

*He assumes a more professorial attitude, which he frequently breaks out of. He is by turns a talk-show host, a ringmaster, a lion tamer, a classical orator, a song-and-dance man, a lyric baritone, a shaman, a kind of city editor of poetry, or whatever suits the occasion or his fancy. He acts slightly fatigued and put-upon in his normal mode but is always capable of surprising bursts of energy.*

If you're looking for Advanced Thermodynamics 201, you're in the right building but on the wrong floor. Though you'd be welcome anyway. We might teach each other something. I've been hired to promote Poetry here. But I'm not supposed to upset anybody. Fat chance. Poets do upset people, sometimes on purpose. If you should happen to become one, expect to have a status somewhere between a bank robber, a congressman, and a tax collector. This is a poetry workshop, God help us. Literally. You're going to write poems. You're going to write the best poems you can write. (*smiles around unpleasantly*) How do you do that? Anybody? How do you get ready to write the best poems you can write? (*apparently gets a good answer*) Well, yes, of course. You read some. You try to find good poems and you read them and you try to figure out what a good poem is. Let's see now. I'll assume you've read Yeats and Hopkins and Dylan Thomas and William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens and e. e. cummings and Farmer Frost and Tiresome Tom Eliot. Have you read Louise Bogan? (*no response*) Stanley Kunitz? (*no response*) Rolfe Humphries? (*no response*) Archie MacLeish? Kenneth Fearing? Ruth Pitter? Hart Crane? John Crowe Ransom? Edward Thomas? Wilfred Owen? (*speeds up*) Auden? MacNeice? Hardy? John Donne? Ben Jonson? Vaughan? Herbert? Herrick? Champion? The Earl of Surrey? Sir Thomas Wyatt? The anonymous Elizabethans? All of Mother Goose ten times?

What would you say to a young composer who didn't go to concerts or recitals or listen to music on records? Or to a young painter who didn't go to art museums or galleries or the studios of other artists? Or to a young playwright who didn't go to the theater?

*He has been stalking restlessly, and now he points.*

There's the library. Your assignment this term is to read the bulk of poetry written in English. You don't have to read all of *The Faerie Queen* to know whether it's going to be useless to you. Or all of *Paradise Lost* or all of *The Excursion*. But you can dig and eat and scrape and scratch. You can absorb. You don't have to annotate or grub like a scholar. Your brains are capable of osmosis. Treat the poetry section of the library like the Land of Osmosis.

Hinx, minx, the old witch winks.  
 The fat begins to fry.  
 There's nobody home but Jumping Joan  
 And father and mother and I.

You hear the thump and smack of those Mother Goose rhythms? Opening line: six syllables, five beats. You won't find lines like that anywhere else. Make them your closest friends. There are hundreds and hundreds of thousands of poems in print, most of them bad, many of them good, some of them wonderful, a few of them marvelous, a precious few of them meant for you to love with all your heart. You have to find them, and the sooner the better. They'll change the poems you try to write into something better. Your best work will be a kind of magic amalgam of them. They'll live in your spinal cord and come to your rescue. They'll change your life. Go find them.

*He holds still for a moment, letting this sink in.*

Bear with me. I've been trying to teach people like you something about the nature of poetry by rewriting it for them for lo these many years. I still think I can teach any fool—present company included—to write at least one poem that a literate adult can read with something like pleasure. Of course, I only really believe that on alternate Tuesdays. And don't use the phrase *writer's block* in here or tell me that old one, *I just can't think of anything to say*, because I'll

barf. I usually barf anyway on the way to class, but I'll barf twice. The problem of what to say about *anything* was solved for you long ago in *Tristram Shandy*.

Did'st thou ever see a white bear? cried my father. No, replied the corporal. —But thou could'st discourse about one in case of need? —How is it possible, quoth my Uncle Toby? —'Tis the fact I want, replied my father. A WHITE BEAR! Have I ever seen one? Ought I ever to have seen one? Or can I ever see one?

Would I had seen a white bear? (for how can I imagine it?)

If I should see a white bear, what should I say? If I should never see a white bear, what then?

If I never have, can, must, or shall see a white bear alive, have I ever seen the skin of one? Did I ever see one painted? Have I never dreamed of one?

Will my father, mother, uncle, aunt ever see a white bear? How would they behave? How would the white bear behave? Is he wild? Tame? Terrible? Rough? Smooth?

Is the white bear worth seeing?

Is there no sin in it?

Is it better than a BLACK ONE?

*He paces, fumbles with papers on the table, assesses the audience.*

Or do you want me to give you assignments to get you going? Little easy exercises? All right. Write a poem about your mother. All poets do. Eventually. And if you think *that's* hard, write a poem about your father. All poets do that eventually too, even if they don't think they do. Write a poem from the viewpoint of somebody you don't like. Write a poem every line of which is a lie. You won't like it when you're done, but you'll learn a lot trying to do it. Write a poem every line of which ends with the sound of *r*. It's the only sound that works. All the rest sound like hell, but with *r* you have to make music. Write a poem describing a landscape with no people in it. Some place you know. Make the reader feel the same way you do about it, but don't tell the reader how to feel. Write a very slow, very quiet poem, a poem to be whispered. Write a loud, angry poem. Write a fast, high-spirited, passionate poem. They're not the same, though some actors seem to think they are. If you owned a boat or a horse, what would you name them? Say why, and you've got a poem. And if you

can't think of anything else, write a pep song for the police department. And if you don't want me to tell you what to write, remind yourselves you're moving among your friends and classmates like actors in a play being watched by the gods. They want to know who you are, even when you're in bed and trying to hide under the covers. All day, every day, you're moving among miracles, and you have nothing to write about? If you aren't already an animist, pretend you are. If one of your gods had an animal form, which one would it be? Which bird? Which flower? Which tree? What kind of weather? There's obviously more than one god. The Romans made a mistake when they settled on one. Look at them now. How could one god cause all that confusion?

Or here's the best assignment I could possibly give you, the most valuable, the most educational, the one you'll thank me most for if you think about this class someday in the future. Make a list, as long and as complete as you can, even if it's maybe only a sentence each, of your earliest memories. You may not be able to figure out what they mean, but if they weren't important, even vital, you wouldn't remember them. And don't be afraid to write *anything*. Keats said poems had better come naturally or not at all. But even so, he kept forcing them out because now and then they were wonderful, and he never knew which was which ahead of time.

If you take a glance around this room, you're looking at people a whole lot like you. You have something in common. This is one of the very, very few rooms on this campus where, after taking something apart, students are putting it back together again in new ways. Where people are writing down on paper what's never been said before. Or are at least trying to do that as often as possible. You're in here for mysterious reasons, whether you think so or not.