

## Poetry Man

Bowman's Corner had not seen his like before. Dressed in black jeans, black boots, black leather jacket, black leather gloves, carrying a black leather valise and sporting a neatly-trimmed, salt-and-pepper Van Dyke on his impassive face, Poetry Man marched the length and breadth of the village several times a day. He was never seen in the company of others, never seen talking to another villager, never seen in or on a motorized or wheeled vehicle. He simply strode like a gunslinger, an implacable hepcat Gary Cooper, through the midst of the village.

"What does he want from us?" some of us asked ourselves. "It's not right to walk around like this just refusing to talk to anyone else. It's just not right."

Poetry Man did not appear to have, or need, a job. Rather, for most of each day, and sometimes into the early evening, Poetry Man held down a study desk at the Benedict B. Bowman Memorial Library. It was to that desk that Poetry Man repaired several times in the course of a day. On the desktop beside the valise, stuffed with fresh, crisp, gleaming white sheets of paper, rested his fountain pen, an expensive, old-fashioned implement that one filled from an inkwell. When he wasn't staring off into space, lost deep in his thoughts, Poetry Man busied himself filling each of these pieces of paper with sudden spurts of verse.

Other library patrons could see the verses taking shape, even from afar. Even while pretending to not be curious about what this man was doing, they were giving Poetry Man's jottings furtive glances. They could clearly see that his stanzas were perfectly sculpted, like his salt-and-pepper Van Dyke, forming little choo choo trains of thought: ABBA. ABBA. CDDC, CDDC, EFFE, and so on.

After he had been seen so engaged for a few weeks, people began gathering at the library window to watch him with the same rapt wonderment with which they once marveled at the skills of the village blacksmith as he shod horses, or the

town baker making mince meat pies, the apothecaries making pain-killing potions and the cows having sex. Poetry Man made no attempt to hide his labors from their prying eyes. He was, in fact, so wrapped up in his joy at the shape of words on his paper that he did not seem to even notice the village voyeurs at the window. Caressing the words on the paper with his eyes, he could have been an architect reacting to an aesthetically pleasing blueprint or an artist admiring the accuracy of her sketch.

“He writes words for no reason but to pleasure himself,” Jack Hoffman whispered, simultaneously awestruck and terrified at the spectacle.

“Yet he does not share any words with his fellow human beings,” Stan Jensen responded. “Such as ourselves.”

“What kind of a person would be so selfish and inconsiderate?” someone else intoned.

“Right,” Jack Hoffman said. “It just ain’t human.”

It was true. Poetry Man was an island unto himself, an oblivious verse machine. His mental landscape was a vast open steppe, a trackless savannah, a moonscape containing only his boot prints and millions of miles of unpeopled, unblemished space.

Unable to stand his inscrutable presence in their midst, the villagers of Bowman’s Corner came alive with gossip and rumors of the most febrile sort.

“I sneaked a peek at what he was writing,” Jack Hoffman told his group at the library window. “It had some sexy stuff in there and something about death and maybe even some French words.”

Stan Jensen said, “I’ll bet he’s a secret murderer who rapes his victims and then strangles them with those black leather gloves. That’s why he was writing about death, to cover his tracks, the dirty rotten BASS-tid.”

“Have you seen the way he walks in those tight black pants?” Bob Horsly asked. “Kind of delicate-like, a bit swishy under that macho strut, if you catch my drift. What’s he hiding?”

“What kind of man writes poetry anyways?” Jack Hoffman concluded.

Cars now swerved at the sight of Poetry Man on his black, heel-clacking perambulations through the heart of Bowman’s Corner. The police had taken to cruising slowly along behind, two blocks distant, after receiving numerous complaints. Letters to the editor appeared in the weekly community paper. One, in its entirety, read, “There’s a threat growing in our midst and I know that my fellow citizens of Bowman’s Corner know exactly of whom I speak.”

Poetry Man was an itch that Bowman’s Corner could not reach to scratch. He loomed so large in the collective consciousness of the village that his name did not even need to be mentioned to call him to mind. Just a slouching gesture and a squiggle of the hand, suggesting writing on air, and a knowing nod was enough to open that coffin lid.

He was, the villagers soon determined, trying to drive Bowman’s Corner collectively out of its mind. Or tell them something that they were not equipped to hear.

“What does he want from us?” They repeated. “It’s not right of him to walk around like this not talking to anyone else. It just ain’t human.”

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Jack Hoffman and Stan Jensen decided that, if the town law enforcement officials would do nothing to stop Poetry Man, they would take matters into their own hands.

One afternoon, the two villagers strode into the unfamiliar territory of the library reference room, where Poetry Man was holding down a study desk. Pretending to peruse the encyclopedias, the two dumbfounded men studied their

prey with sidelong glances, morose nods and disgusted pursing of lips, as if their mission was one of those thankless but necessary jobs like collecting the village trash or unclogging a sump pump.

When Poetry Man stood up to take one of his customary ruminative strolls around the room, the two men put their plan into action. Moving toward his desk, they scanned the half-finished verse on the paper. Hoffman caught the word “voluptuous” and nearly fainted with outrage. That’s a sexy word, he decided, and this is a public institution used by children. Some child could walk by here and see that sexy word and have sexy thoughts. Stan Jensen stood off the side, unable even to bring himself to be in contact with Poetry Man’s universe.

When Poetry Man returned to his study desk, the two villagers stood like sentries in waiting on either side of it.

Jack Hoffman said, “What have you got to say for yourself, Mr. Voluptuous? What kind of filth are you writing today?”

Poetry Man made no response. He did not even look at Jack Hoffman and he hadn’t noticed Stan Jensen at all. While he was somewhat distracted by the looming presence of Hoffman, Jensen snuck around behind him and got down on all fours.

“We have a nice town here in Bowman’s Corner,” Hoffman said to Poetry Man, who had still not deigned to look up at his interrogator. “And we don’t need the likes of you ruining it for us. Why don’t you move to Waterville or Upper Falls where they are more open to your kind?”

Poetry Man still said nothing. Angered more by his insolent muteness than his poetry, Hoffman shoved the black-clad wordsmith backwards. Poetry Man lost his balance as his legs collided with the prone Jensen, and he fell onto the library reference room floor in a most undignified manner. Jensen quickly got to his feet and dusted himself off, paying particular heed to those points on his body that had

come into contact with Poetry Man. Other than an “oof” of exhaled air when his body hit the floor, Poetry Man said nothing. He remained on the ground while Hoffman and Jensen stared at him waiting for something, anything, he might offer in response.

“There’s more where that came from,” Jack Hoffman finally said after the silence became too uncomfortable. He and Jensen then left the room.

Poetry Man got slowly to his feet, straightened his papers, took his seat and began writing again.

Later, as he strode back to his apartment, one could detect a slight limp in his otherwise steady gait. His impassive face gave no clue as to the trauma through which he had just passed.