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“A Regular’s Notes”
Approx. 2,020 Words

A Regular’s Notes

It’s another night in my favorite dive, The Blue Muse.

As usual, I’m balanced on a barstool, watching Bea the bartender do her stuff. Bullshots and vodka tonics. Dubonnet with a twist, no ice. Tecate and Molson’s and Killian’s Irish Red in spotted glasses. (A glance around yields a vision of sorts: on the scarred tables, dozens of beers sifting their bubbles upward in hourglass tumblers, as if time were running backwards. A low level wonder, maybe. But a wonder.) I inhale nosefuls of hazy air and eavesdrop on the talk.

Writers’ talk. What else? We scribblers have been gathering here more often than usual lately, waiting for the winners of eight \$3,000 Individual Artist Grants to be announced. It could come at any time, so most of us are dropping by every night, just in case. Who wants to miss the bash or the brawl when the news flash hits? Not me, pal. Not me.

I tap my glass, and Bea sets me up with another Old Bushmills.

“Think it’s tonight?” she says.

“Maybe.”

My usual line. But what more can I say? The eight winners are being chosen by an out-of-state panel: a poet, a critic, a fiction writer and an editor. Nobody knows who they are. Or if somebody knows, he’s keeping mum. Individual Artist Grants are new from the Colorado Council on the Arts and Humanities, the first of their kind in this state, a pilot program — and nobody wants to screw up the process. Especially not writers, who were targeted for the first year’s grants because they’ve received a disproportionately dinky amount of direct support in the past.

Not that we’re easy to help. With the exception of The Blue Muse, we don’t get together much. We tend to be irascible and resist networks, even those we invent ourselves. And there’s more than a modicum of disagreement among us about the proper use, if any, of government funds.

Take the poet by the front window. The guy with neon highlights sparking off his glasses. As usual, he’s regaling a hapless acquaintance about the evils of government subsidy. The phrase “academic fringe pseudo-literature” seethes over the crowd-noise across the smoky room, calling up memories of the publicly funded junk we’ve run into now and then. Take the 200 page collection of “the one word poems,” for instance, or the gloriously stupid computer program designed to catalog and list by frequency of use the words that make up *Macbeth* . . . both supported by the NEA, or the NEH — or some other well-meaning acronym.

But these are exceptions to the rule. The fact is, most arts funding goes to projects whose value is either apparent clearly a matter of taste. And after you winnow out those you consider imitators, charlatans, and old-boy network grant-eating sharks, the bulk of support ends up

reaching artists who do all of us honor. Even the poet railing in his neon aura would probably admit that many fine artists who’ve received grant money would otherwise have been forced into a more debilitating struggle for recognition. Of course, if his underlying assumption is that art springs from suffering — that the longer one suffers in obscurity, the better one’s art will be — these arguments wouldn’t sway him.

“How about another?”

I glance up at Bea with a start.

“Ground control to Major Poet,” she grins.

I feel my ears go red. “Cute, Bea. Real cute,” I tell her, then finish the last swallow and squint as it burns down. “Another.”

Bea takes the glass and winks with all the tired joviality of an ex-prize fighter. It reminds me that nobody gives grants for waiting on artists, or for being their parents, or for marrying them or growing up their children. If suffering made art, you’d see whole families on this side of the bar — a thought I like so much I repeat it to Bea when she brings my drink.

“Don’t cry in that,” she says, pointing at the Bushmills. “Save your salt for a margarita.”

A soft heart and a hard head, that’s Bea. I watch her move on down along the bar, checking for empties, scooping up tips. Rumor has it she was married to a poet once, a hot Italian who (as it turned out) only wanted to write about her. Idealization, the shrinks call it. Seems poets are particularly susceptible. I peer across the bar into the big mirror behind the rows of bottled liquor watching the plasmic motion of the crowd behind me. Mostly poets, it looks like, laughing like trumpets or gazing intently into the eyes of their companions, or into the red-

cupped candle flames on the thick wood tables, or into their drinks. I consider the word *susceptible* — its Latinate richness, nearly as delicious as *sycamore* and suddenly find myself focusing on the nape of Bea’s neck, where the hair is pinned up: a few chestnut strands are floating loose there, light as filaments spun out by Whitman’s spider. I breathe a sigh into my whisky, swirl it in amongst the shining cubes of ice, and climb down from my stool.

Whenever there’s money riding on my poetry (in this century, only when grants are at stake) and I feel myself growing maudlin about the mouth, I don’t seek the company of other poets. They’re likely to be in as bad as shape and thus no help. Instead, I spend time with my prosier friends, the fiction writers. Such as these hunched around a table like poker players, swapping lies. They’re at The Blue Muse every night lately, too, because — in case I haven’t mentioned it — both fiction writers and poets are eligible for Individual Artist Grants.

I sidle into any empty chair and melt right into the circle. Nods of greetings all around. But basically I don’t make a ripple, because these struggling writers and novelists — incredibly enough — aren’t grousing about the latest fat movie deal or crooked agents or editors who are functionally illiterate. They’re actually debating the merits of grants. And I thought I’d find refuge among practical people!

But it turns out, as I’d hoped, that these are practical writers. None of them has a negative word to say about money, and there’s even a consensus that grants are legitimate. The reservation seems to be that grants encourage the idea of artistic competition. An odious notion, the reasoning goes, because a program like Individual Artist Grants could end up pitting a Melville against a James, a Williams against an Eliot.

As we’re mulling over the implications, Bea leans into our circle and starts loading empty bottles onto her tray.

“Hey, Bea.” The voice belongs to an author of bilingual new-Dadaist street fables, who peers up at Bea from under his wide-brimmed leather hat. “You think these grants’ll do nothing but express the judges’ biases?”

Bea gives him a puzzled glance. “What else?”

A silence. Everyone looks surprised, abashed or confused. Then a young woman in a rust-colored jumpsuit, a feminist writer of mystical science fiction novellas, pipes up.

“But that’s unfair! Laying their biases on us.”

Bea shrugs. “Maybe so, But they’re readers, and that’s what readers do. Now . . . how about another Manhattan?”

The other woman sighs, then nods.

“Anybody else?” Bea says.

Glasses are drained amid grunts of assent all around. Bea takes everyone’s order and heads back to the bar. The conversation moves on to a new horror story, about the editor of a major publishing house who went crazy and ate the manuscript. A masterpiece, the raconteur assures us, and the author’s only copy.

One tale follows another, each speaker trying for more and bigger effects. And suddenly it hits me that every writer at the table is competing with every other one. Just as we all compete for the attention of editors, the notice of book reviewers, the remote and almost mythical interest of readers. Maybe we pretend not to compete because admitting it would mean admitting our

ambition — and the American public prefers its artists humble. But, as Malcolm Cowley puts it in his book *Exile’s Return*, “the truth is that all writers are ambitious: if they were really humble they would choose a craft that involved less risk of failure and milder penalties for the crime of being average.

Bea rearrives with her cargo of fresh drinks. As she passes them around and settles each bill, I find myself thinking about her Italian ex. I think about her life at The Blue Muse. I think how nobody’s average, really. But pretending to be average is a kind of self-protection: it wards off failure. Could it be that the undercurrent I’ve been feeling at The Blue Muse and thinking of as anticipation is, in fact, fear of failure? Out of 274 applicants for Individual Artist Grants, 266 will “fail.” Maybe a budding Melville or a struggling Eliot. And of those who “succeed,” who knows how many will ever turn out to be better than average?

I look around the room at the crowd that’s already begging to drift out into the night. (Everyone’s become aware of the hour’s lateness, meaning there’ll be no announcement this evening.) I consider that every writer I know is never more elated than when the first, freshly printed copy of his latest work arrives in the mail, and never so depressed as 15 minutes later, after he’s read the work over and begun to regret every word. Publication raises the stakes. You’re no longer competing with your own best work, but the work of every other author you’ve read. And you know the competition will go on in your reader’s mind, too. Are you really any good? How many readers do you need to settle the question? How many prizes? How many grants?

That’s it, I think, gazing at the dissolving diamonds of ice in my glass. Whether you win or lose — the grant, the hefty advance, the spot on *The Times* bestseller list — the outcome feeds your doubt. The question is never settled.

“You done with the crystal ball?” Bea says.

I nod and hand her the glass.

“You know,” she says, “my ex-husband used to stare into his drinks like that.”

“You ever see him?” I ask.

Bea shakes her head. “Last I heard he was in New Guinea.”

“I thought he was a writer.”

“He is. He was doing some kind of multi-cultural theater work. A Papuan musical version of *My Dinner With Andre*.”

From the look on Bea’s face I can tell that I shouldn’t risk a smile. “Sounds fascinating.”

“He’s a genius.” She says wistfully. “Or maybe just a crackpot.”

A soft heart and a hard head. That’s Bea.

“You ever take in movies?” I ask her. She gives me a straight look. “I never go out with regulars. You *are* a regular, aren’t you?”

“The Blue Muse, Bea? It’s my second home.”

“Too bad,” she says.

“Yeah. Too bad.”

Outside on the street, I stop and peer back through the bar’s front window at Bea lifting chairs and flipping them. With a deft twist of her wrists, onto the tables upside down. Maybe it’s

the way the faint light descends from the shaded ceiling fixtures. Or the routine skill Bea brings to her task, but the scene feels timeless. I feel timeless, looking at it.

And suddenly I find myself hurrying up the street toward home, where my typewriter has already begun to glow on its desk. The urge to write it all down is on me, an urge my doubt and its hirelings — editors, grant-givers, reviewers, even readers — still can’t touch.

Best of all, the crucial first sentence is there in my head before I bend over the keys and type it in: “It’s another night in my favorite dive, The Blue Muse.”

I roll it up to read it over, then lean back in my chair and wait for the rest of the words that will follow.