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Literature night

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WE are in a slot beneath a Greenwich Village restaurant. The walls are painted brick, close together as in a bad dream, widened only by rows of mirrors and by our faith that the red EXIT signs actually lead somewhere. At the head of the room is a velvet curtain, a stool, a mike, and a music stand. The cover charge is $6, which gets you a drink and two hours of poetry and fiction.

This is not the Village of Edna St. Vincent Millay, carefree and copulating, nor of Dawn Powell, anxious and copulating, nor yet the East Village of Allen Ginsberg, copulating. The writers who are reading tonight are professionals. They have to have day jobs, to be sure--no one below the pay grade of John Updike makes a living at literature--but they also take their avocation seriously, as do the fifty people in the audience who have braved the rain that pasted the sidewalks up at ground level with yellow leaves.

There are three writers on the bill. One is a young woman, a typical Trinidadian: She grew up in Queens and lives in Inwood. Another is a lawyer at a downtown investment bank, who wears a dark blue blazer, a striped tie, and a serious mien. The Nehru-shirted MC, who will also read, is perfect for his role, welcoming and enthusiastic. His colleagues, he assures us, will "beguile you with their work."

Reading in public has become an unusual activity, and it calls forth an unusual tone of voice. In the English-speaking world this voice is slightly slower than conversation; slightly rhythmic, if the piece to be read is poetry; slightly forced; and, it must be said, rather uniform and stolid. This voice has been universal since the twin advents of literary modernism and recording technology. I have heard several albums of the Caedmon label, which recorded every 20th-century poet you have heard of, and the bards all sounded essentially the same, even Dylan Thomas. The only standouts were Richard Eberhart, who talked like the geek who had come to fix your computer, and Marianne Moore, who talked like my late maiden aunts. My wife heard Andrei Voznesensky in his prime, and she says the Russian was more operatic. But though detente and the end of history have given us many Russians, we have not acquired their style. The virtue of the Anglo-American style is that it gets the job done. A clever speaker--minister, politician, motivator--can slip seamlessly from his opening jokes into his subject matter. But easy in, easy out. The mildly formal manner of authors chalks off a playing field, focuses the fans, and lets the game begin.

The young woman's short story fulfills one of the two main tasks of a writer, describing what you don't know. Its two characters were Queens residents, of a different race and twice her age, facing what we hope to avoid but probably won't, the consequences of decades of things unsaid. The host's poems fulfill the other writer's task, describing what you do know. They are bright with New York moments: a list of people who talk for a living--"bartenders, doorkeepers, beggars, teachers"; a woman in shorts on a haggard South Bronx street saying, "Beauty is what I live for."

But there is an elephant in the room, and unlike most such beasts, it is named. The host and especially the lawyer read a number of poems related to 9/11 and its aftermath. The host speaks of himself as living in the "last golden years of empire ... ruled by men with eyes of lobsters." Well, well. We do not go to poets for strategy. Compared with the policy recommendations of Mayakovsky and Pound, disdaining those who protect you is a minor dereliction.

The lawyer bears down on his subject without polemics, tracing the stages of unforeseeing, reaction, and return. "Century's end," goes one laconic line, "was rather uneventful." What did jihadists know of Y2K? They use the Prophet's calendar. The day of the attack, he was working--temporarily, he thought--in Midtown. Spared, he asks himself: "Do your days seem different? Perhaps longer?" Of watching Bush on television in a commuter bar, he invokes, like the host, another catalogue of four: "bartenders, patrons, the homeless, the nation." Mordantly he encompasses the trauma with Wall Street lingo. "I'm short on Afghanistan, long on bonds.... Position yourselves."

In time, business resumes. "Now we are back, the usual suspects in the usual places.... Clerks bemoan the loss of Krispy Kreme." He asks the always unsettling question: "Why did you return to these crooked, storied streets?" (what do you do to earn the air you breathe?). But he believes in his work, and New York's: "Perhaps to fund a county or a country." Still we are all tired. On another television, in an airport lounge during a business trip, he watches clips of Gulf War II. "Imagine confronting the bristling dawn without the inane."

War poetry is a tough act. Wilfred Owen fought and died in the trenches, and wrote about them searingly. But when we think of his century's dislocation we turn first to "O o o o that Shakespeherian rag." You can be too close to torment to talk about it; nobody likes visiting hospitals. Maybe the last war poet was Homer, with his gods and guts. We humanize him by focusing on Hector's farewell to his wife and son, or Achilles' meeting with Priam, where a questioning and self-conscious attitude appears. But most of the poem is killing, beauty, and beautiful killing, God (not Zeus) help us.

The lawyer's longest poem was an elegy to Daniel Pearl. He invokes poetic predecessors, Milton, Shelley, and Auden. They rhymed, as if confident that they were writing for eternity. The lawyer (who does not rhyme) makes no such claim; today, he says, that burden rests on Pearl's colleagues: "Newspapers now embody the boldest use of language." Does that also include magazines? Suddenly I feel prodded. Thanks a lot.