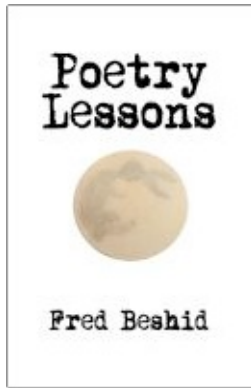


Poetry Lessons



Fred Beshid



A Thoreau-obsessed military brat moves to Los Angeles where he hopes to settle down. As he spends his days working and writing poetry, he wonders if he has a life. When he falls for Maggie, everything changes.

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CHAPTER 20

I wanted to make a good impression on Maggie's family and friends so I decided a fresh suit was in order. I asked Maggie to drive me to the dry cleaner on the way to her gallery opening so I could pick up a clean suit. She tried desperately to get me to wear something other than my signature suit but I convinced her I would feel more comfortable in my uniform. She gave up her cause after I quoted Thoreau: *If you have a new enterprise before you, try it in your old clothes.* She knew better than to argue with Thoreau.

The dry cleaner was located in one of those infernal *strip malls* that blight the American landscape. This one was typical in that it housed a nail salon, mailbox rental, tanning salon, mini-market and a donut shop. When we got to the dry cleaner Maggie was distracted by the donut shop next door. She peered inside. "I want a donut. I haven't had one in ages," she said. I asked her if she was serious as I pulled her hand away from the shop. She wriggled away and walked up to the counter. I followed her inside and watched her as she agonized over her options. The Asian lady behind the counter stood there with her tongs ready. She pointed to a pink one with multicolored sprinkles. "I want that one," Maggie said. "Do you want one? It's a special occasion. Live a little."

"I'll take a plain old-fashioned." I hadn't had a donut in years and I wondered what would happen once it was inside me. Maggie rolled her eyes as if I had made a wrong decision. "What? Do you think I have poor taste in donuts?" She said it was questionable. "What about my taste in women?"

"Superb," she said. She stuck her tongue out at me, grabbed the bag of donuts and walked out in a mock huff. As I paid for the donuts I saw a small Buddha shrine behind the counter. At his feet were some coins, sacrificial donuts and coffee. As she handed me back my change I had a minor epiphany. I realized if she could fit in here so could I. This validated my decision to make Los Angeles my home. She smiled at me like an angel as I shoved the change into

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her tip jar. When I turned I saw Maggie standing outside eating her donut. I scribbled a haiku on my pad before leaving.

*Far away from home
We make room for each other
Buddha is happy*

I walked next door to the dry cleaner and she followed me. When I walked in Mr. Kim was in the back pressing some clothes at the steam iron. He was a proud hardworking man and I liked him. We were always getting into arguments about politics or his questionable restroom policy. When he saw me he hurried to the front counter.

"Hello, Mr. Henry. Very happy to see you," he said, full of enthusiasm. "You want suit?"

"Hello, Mr. Kim. Yes, I need my other suit," I said. He pressed the button and the giant conveyor jerked to life. As I paid I asked him if I could use his restroom to change my suit.

"No, restroom no for customer," he protested as usual.

"Come on, be cool. Just this one time," I pleaded.

"No, *you* be cool. If you use restroom then everybody wants restroom."

"Okay, I'll change right here then," I said. He frowned as I started to take off my jacket. Maggie looked worried.

"You go home. Get out. Get out," he said. He waved his hands as if trying to bat flies. I started to remove my pants.

"Let's go, Henry. He's really mad," Maggie said. She started to retreat toward the door.

"No, he's not. Don't worry. He's joking," I said. Maggie disagreed with a worried look on her face.

"I told you, you no change clothes here. Bad for business if other customer see you," Mr. Kim said. I told him this could all be avoided if he would just let me use his restroom. "No bathroom for customer. You change at home," he said. As I removed my pants from the hanger I explained to him that I was on my way to a show so I could not go home to change. "Why you make problem for me,

Mr. Henry? I come to America, work hard, start my own business. Now you make problem for me. I love this country. You no respect this country.” I laughed as he went back to pressing clothes.

“Let me get this straight. If I change my clothes here then I’m not a good American?” I pulled on my clean pants.

He looked up from the steam iron. “Yes. You bad American. You go now,” he said. I thanked him again as I put on my suit jacket. I hung my dirty suit on the rack and left. As soon as we got outside Maggie jerked my arm and said I was really mean to Mr. Kim.

“No, it’s just a game he likes to play. He likes to argue about who’s a better American.”

“I think you should apologize to him,” she said.

“Look back at Mr. Kim. I bet he’s laughing right now,” I said. When we turned to check on Mr. Kim we saw him standing at the steam press smiling to himself. He looked up and waved to us.

“I guess you’re right. He looks happy,” she said. I said my visits always brighten his day. After we got in her jeep Maggie started laughing. “The absurdity of all this just hit me,” she said. I smiled and shrugged as she started Ellie. “I wish you could see yourself standing there in your underwear arguing about patriotism. You’re such a nut,” Maggie said.

“I just don’t understand why he insists he’s a better American than I am,” I said.

“Don’t ask me. I’m not sure how to win that contest.”

“I have to admit there are times when I don’t feel American. But I think I’ve paid my dues.” Maggie asked me how I paid my dues as we stopped for a red light. “Well, I served my country as a military brat and I sat on Lincoln’s toilet.”

“Did you say Lincoln’s toilet?” She looked at me as though I were insane.

“Yeah, when I moved stateside I decided to travel around and do *American* things. It was all very helpful in getting me acclimated to my country of citizenship. I traveled all over this great land guided by the spirits of Kerouac and Twain. I saw Walden Pond, the mighty Mississippi, New Orleans, Yosemite, Death Valley, Santa

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Fe, the Grand Canyon, Nantucket Island, Manhattan, Graceland, the Corn Palace, Mount Rushmore. I went to Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Robert Johnson said he sold his soul. I went to the Lincoln Memorial and stood where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his historic *I Have A Dream* speech.”

“I’m impressed, but what does any of this have to do with Lincoln’s toilet?” she asked.

“Excellent question. I also went to Lincoln’s house in Springfield, Illinois. While I was on the house tour I had this urge to see the inside of his outhouse. When the tour guide was not looking I slipped away from the group and sat on Lincoln’s toilet in the outhouse in the backyard. While I was in there with the door closed I felt this really strong connection to Lincoln. I felt really *American*. This was the pivotal moment I was searching for.” Maggie laughed.

“Sitting on Lincoln’s toilet? Are you making this up?” she said. I could tell by her tone she was not buying my tale.

“Yes, it’s true. You can’t just make up a story like that,” I said. She shrugged her shoulders and said there would be no point in making up a story like that. I started to laugh as I remembered something funny from that trip. My laughter made her suspicious and she asked me why I was laughing. “I just remembered something else. On that trip I saw something funny. I saw a church that had *PEACE FART* written on the roof in Christmas lights. As I got closer I realized it was supposed to say *PEACE ON EARTH* but some of the lights were out.” Maggie started laughing hysterically. I was afraid she was going to lose control of the jeep.

“Peace Fart. Now, that’s something you couldn’t make up,” she said.

As we drove I could see Maggie scanning the trash piles on the sidewalk. I knew the temptation was too much for her to resist. It made me worried. “It’s trash day. Look at all that treasure,” she said with a wild look in her eye.

“You’re not thinking of stopping now, are you?”

“Well, you never know. I must if I’m called to,” she said.

“But look at what you’re wearing,” I said. “You’re all dolled up.”

"I know, that makes things more complicated. But you know it's my connection to the Universe." I knew by this point that it was futile to try and talk her out of anything. I also knew she had some kind of sixth sense about attracting objects into her life. I knew the allure of trash day was too much for her to resist. I sat back and prepared for the inevitable. "I'm drawn to this alley coming up," she said. She made a right turn down an alley behind a row of small commercial buildings. Concerned about entering the seedy back street I asked her if she was familiar with the alley. "You have a problem with this alley?"

"I never met an alley I liked. Nothing good ever happens in an alley," I said.

"What are you talking about? All my best finds come from alleys," she said. We crept along in the jeep as she examined the piles of discards next to the trash bins. "There it is!" she said, pointing to an old sofa. I groaned. "You're a seeker and I'm a finder."

"That's not going to fit in the car," I said. I shook my head hoping she would come to her senses as she pulled up next to the discarded sofa.

"I'm not taking the whole thing, silly," she said. She pulled out her utility knife from her purse. "This'll only take a second." She smiled at me in sympathy. I watched as she went over to the couch and skinned it like fresh kill. She hummed a little ditty to herself. Dogs were barking at us from behind the fence. It was a funny sight. She was trying to stay clean in her homemade dress and heels while skinning a sofa. I reached into her purse for her camera and took her picture. She seemed unphased by the flash. After a few seconds she looked up at me as if to check on me.

"You seem quiet. Are you okay?" she asked in a concerned tone.

"Don't worry. It's just a sign of resignation. It's like Thoreau said in *Walden*, 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation.'"

"I'm sorry, babe. We'll be out of here in a jiffy." She frowned at me before finishing up her work. Once the sofa fabric was

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liberated from its past life she rolled it up and tossed it in the back of the jeep. There was already enough fabric in the back to build a yurt. As we turned onto the main drag towards the gallery, I asked her if she was satisfied. "I feel great. You're the one that's suffering," she said.

"So let me get this straight. You believe that oneness guided you to this couch because oneness wanted you to have the fabric you just liberated from that sofa?"

"Yeah, I guess so," she said. "That's an oversimplification but I can live with it. What do you believe?"

"I think you could have let that one go. I think Thoreau said it best, 'A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.'"

She let out a sarcastic laugh. "That sounds hypocritical coming from you, because you are constantly criticizing. I don't think that's leaving things alone."

"I don't criticize. I *question*. There is a big difference."

"Whatever," she said with a roll of her eyes.

"Where did you learn to skin a sofa like that anyway?" I asked. "Charm school?"

"It's going to be fun tonight," she said, changing the subject.

"I'm not sure I'll be comfortable in this *art* crowd. I'm out of my element."

"Don't worry. They're just people. Just be yourself," Maggie said.

"You sound like my mother," I said. My mother used to tell me that all the time. *Just be yourself*. That was her stock answer whenever I ever expressed any anxiety about having to move to a new base and start over at a new school. *Just be yourself*. But what if you don't know who you are?

"Then don't. Use your shield of invisibility," she said. I couldn't tell if she was mocking me.

"Good idea. I always forget about my shield of invisibility. Thanks for reminding me," I said. She looked smug like she felt clever but I still had concerns. "In case my shield of invisibility fails and people try to talk to me, what shall I say?"

“You mean about my paintings? Well, say whatever you want. No one is going to expect you to know anything about art.”

“Remember what happened with Mr. Shrike before? You didn’t seem happy about that exchange.”

“That was fine. Say whatever you want,” she said.

“Can’t you give me some buzzwords or something?”

“What are you talking about? What kind of buzzwords? And since when do you want my advice about what to say to people? You do pretty well on your own.”

“No, I mean technical jargon. Words you use in art school like *context* and *process*.”

“Oh, you mean *art speak*. All that art theory stuff. Let’s see,” she replied. We stopped at a red light and she thought hard. She lightly tapped her head. “Well, you could say things like *juxtaposition* and *recontextualization*. *Reappropriate*. I don’t know. I wasn’t very good at all that theory stuff in school.”

“*Recontextualization* is a good one. I like that. I just remembered hearing the term *post-modern paradigm* somewhere.”

“Yeah, that’s a really good one. You’ll do fine. Don’t worry. Remember to have fun,” she said. She squeezed my leg.

“Speaking of words, did you write an artist’s statement?” I asked.

“Shrike takes care of that. I tell him what I was thinking and he throws something together.” I asked her why she felt so comfortable delegating such a huge personal responsibility. “I don’t know. He’s way better at that stuff than I am. I guess I don’t see it as a *huge personal responsibility*. I see it as more of a formality. The paintings are my personal expression. Not that piece of paper on the wall.” I shrugged. “Have you ever seen Picasso’s artist statement?” Maggie asked. I shook my head. “But you’ve seen his paintings, right?” I nodded. “I rest my case. You see, you’re a *word person* and I’m a *visual person*. It’s my calling to create the images and someone else’s job to talk about them.”

“You made your point.” She thanked me. “What about collectors?”

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“What about them?” I asked her to point out important people to be nice to. “Collectors don’t really go to openings. They don’t want to be antagonized by desperate artists trying to get them to come to their studios to see their paintings. Collectors generally go before the opening. Shrike has a preview for them. The art opening is just for people looking for a scene. People that wish they were artists.”

We arrived at the Shrike Gallery at 1800. When I opened the car door I could smell the stench of methane. The foul odor came from the La Brea Tar Pits across the street where many a dinosaur met its demise. As I got out of the car I chose my steps carefully to avoid the tar oozing from the cracks in the parking lot. It was a constant reminder that I was walking in the footsteps of dinosaurs.

The gallery was a plain, long narrow white box. The kind of space that begs for decoration when it’s empty but looks complete with the mere addition of a few paintings on the wall. Maggie’s paintings looked great in their temporary home. When we walked in Shrike was on the phone in his office so we took a look around. “Wow, Maggie. Here we are. Looks great,” I said. I squeezed her hand.

“Thanks, Henry. I couldn’t have done it without you, you know,” she said.

“Don’t be silly. You were a brilliant artist long before we met.”

“Thanks, you’re sweet.” She walked around the room barely able to contain her excitement. I trailed along behind her as she admired her paintings. She looked at them longingly as if saying goodbye to them all. As I looked at the pieces I remembered all the happy faces she had painted underneath the finished paintings and laughed to myself. She asked why I was laughing. She seemed worried as though something was wrong.

“It’s nothing. Everything is fine. I just remembered all the happy faces underneath,” I said.

“Shhhh. Keep it down. That’s *our* little secret,” she said. She looked back into Shrike’s office. Just then Shrike emerged from the back. He took one look at Maggie in her homemade dress and stopped in his tracks.

“What the hell is that?” he asked.

“You said be different. Careful what you wish for.” He came over and kissed her on both cheeks. “Bravo. You look fabulous.” He struck a pose. “How do *I* look?” he asked, pointing to his checkered ascot.

“Fabulous,” Maggie said. “I’m sure you remember Henry.” I held out my hand.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Henry,” he said. “Remember to call me Eddie.” I remembered our previous meeting at the studio and laughed to myself.

“Hi, Eddie. The place looks great.”

“Thanks to Maggie. She’s the one that breathes the life into my little white box.” He turned around and started pointing to each painting as if counting to himself. “Well, my little Maggie should be proud of herself. Did you notice how many pieces are sold already?” he asked. He held up the price list in a clear plastic sleeve. A red dot was placed next to each painting’s title. Maggie looked at it in disbelief.

“The show is already sold out? Are you serious? Who?” she asked. She hopped up and down unable to control her excitement.

“My dear friend Richard was here bright and early,” Shrike said. His fake English accent reappeared. Maggie commented on what a nice man he was. “He’s a reclusive little devil, isn’t he?” Shrike scratched his head. “Oh, Amanda brought the limo by. She couldn’t decide which painting to buy so I convinced her to buy two. She’s my kind of woman. How do I get in her will? How much is that woman worth anyway?”

“She’s pretty loaded. She’s nice but strange,” Maggie said to me.

“Rich people can afford to be strange,” I replied. They laughed.

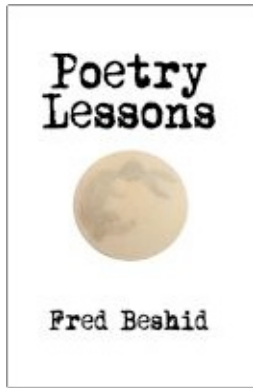
“Oh, and the toy guy with the kids. What’s his name? I can’t recall. He’s new. You don’t know him.”

“A new collector? That’s great,” she said.

“Who else? Oh, yes. The usual suspects, of course. Dane, Bruce, Rusty. I think that’s it. Now leave me. I must prepare for my show.”

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With that, Shrike turned on his heels and went back into his office. I pictured him in the back fussing with his hair while practicing his fake accents. It takes a special person to convince people to buy something expensive they don't even need. But he was good at this job. A sort of chameleon. He could assume other people's identities and personalities. When he wanted to he could make them feel comfortable as though he were one of them. He could also make folks very uncomfortable. Maggie excused herself for a last-minute freshening up.



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