

Ghosts of Christmas Past

The Hungry Poet and his father declare a truce.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

Steady Eddy was saying that the Hungry Poet had gone home for Christmas and reported that the family had stuffed him with so much love and turkey—and trauma—that he couldn't properly be called "a hungry poet" again until probably sometime next Easter.

"The poet says he and his family declared a Christmas truce," Steady said, "just like armies used to do in the old days. His folks agreed not to remind him that he dropped out of medical school, thereby throwing away a promising career, and he agreed not to remind them that they voted for Reagan and Bush, thereby throwing away a promising country.

"The poet says on Christmas Eve, he and his father drank mulled wine and listened to Dylan Thomas reading 'A Child's Christmas in Wales,' and then they got out the old HO-gauge trains and played with them for hours, the way they used to when he was a little boy and his father was the big 'doctor-schmocter.' His father is retired now, and the poet says because neither of them is a doctor now, they could be just civilians and talk like fathers and sons talk.

"His father told him that when he learned his only son had dropped out of medical school it almost killed him, because what this world needed was not another starving poet. What this world needed, desperately, was all the good medical doctors it could find. 'What the hell can a poet do for a dying

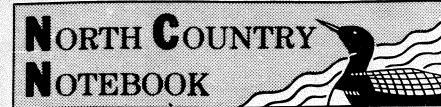
child?' his father had raged. 'Read her a goddamn sonnet?'"

That had all been a long time ago, many bitter years ago, many missed Christmases when the poet had been sailing on freighters in the December storms or sailing into far-off ports where little children died like flies, and it was there that his father's angry questions inundated him.

"I wanted you to be like me," his father said this Christmas Eve. "Now I know what your mother always knew. You have to be like you."

They had embraced, and then his father had gone up to bed and the poet sat by the pine-winey tree, its lights blinking and winking and reflecting in the huge thermopane windows. *The thousand points of light!* he thought. He turned off the tree and went up to the bedroom of his boyhood. The Siamese cat looked in on him and then padded back to his parents' room. The poet stared at the cold white world outside his window, and then he slept. He dreamed that he was in an operating room. He was cutting into a patient's heart, and the patient's eyes were wide open, watching him. It was his father.

"On Christmas morning," Steady was saying, "the poet was the first one up. His parents' bedroom door was closed, and he felt like he had all those Christmases when he sneaked down to see what his presents were. It was a long time since he felt that way. He made a pot of coffee, turned on the tree lights and sat there. There were birds coming to the feeder—cardinals,



His folks didn't remind him that he left medical school, and he didn't remind them that they voted for Bush.

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grosbeaks, finches and juncos—in the snow below. The Siamese was watching them. That's what got him thinking about this poem. He says it took a pot of coffee to get him started—and a kettleful of mulled wine to finish it. He calls it 'Temple Cat at the Thermopane.'

On the window ledge, a feeding bird watches the cat who watches the bird. There is more than glass between their lives. Their lives now close as drawn knives. *This cat padding our temples in the Olden Days. This bird passing our temples in the Golden Rays that reach the poles. (Although sometimes resting, even nesting in our highest spires.)*

We have an accommodation with this cat. He guards our accumulation against the rat.

The rat we fear. The rat so near. The rat we hear contesting our foundations contemptuous of nations waiting and mating and learning our ways.

The cat keeps him wary thus, we abide with cat and trap and new pesticide. Without wings the cat and I we watch the finches feed and fly.

Cat. Rat. Bird. I.

We are each of us still contemporary. Each may be yet only temporary or may be not.

Some say there is *A Master Plan* that most surely favors Man.

Some say there is *Another Plan* and the eventual Master is not Man.

It is moot as to Who will Win And Why?

"The doctor told the poet," Steady said, "that he was going to frame it and put it up on his wall—up with all the other diplomas. You can eat for a long time on that." ■

George Vukelich reads selections from *North Country Notebook* Sunday nights at 9:30 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WERN (88.7).