

On Tour with Max · *Miles Wilson*

WE'RE HEADING WEST, somewhere near the Texas/New Mexico line, driving from Canyon to Socorro. Max is in the back seat drinking Shiner Beer and hiccuping. He has been complaining about his rough handling in the question-and-answer session after last night's reading. The girl didn't look like the sort who would mix it up in public, although you really can't tell anymore, but she knew Max's early poetry a lot better than he did and was grimly partisan about its bald misogyny. When Max tried to jolly her out of a scrap, she creamed him, and the local faculty host had to step in, flapping it all away and inviting everybody to the reception. Max drank and sulked his way through the party, but I got him back to the motel before any serious damage was done.

We're on our way to New Mexico Tech because Max's last live-in was a grant writer, and twenty-five years ago Maximilian Pfluger was a big item in American poetry. John Ciardi called him "a pivotal countermotion in American letters." Max's friend parlayed this history into a National Endowment grant for a reading tour. Why I'm here is that the grant has a gimmick designed to give a younger poet some exposure while the colleges take an old gray reputation to the bank. Happily for Max, most faculty members apparently don't read once they leave graduate school, so reputations on the circuit lag a generation or so.

Unofficially, I'm expected to keep Max mostly in line: colorful, but on time for the next reading. Before I signed on, an NEA staffer sized me up over lunch, pointing out that NEA didn't need any bad press in this political climate and that the organization would certainly want to review my own grant needs following a successful tour. The staffer urged me to think of her as my personal grantsperson.

As it turns out, keeping Max in line hasn't really been much of a chore. He is generally no worse than cranky, and when he drinks too much he tends to get sullen or sleepy instead of outrageously memorable. Still, I've had to behave more responsibly than suits me.

So instead of a one-trick pony, we give the schools a dog and pony show. Most nights, though, Max is the dog. Max fancies himself a good reader, but he is mainly loud. His gestures are all choreographed and his inter-poem patter was scripted in about 1958 and hasn't changed since as

far as I can tell. He still makes jokes about the Beats. There are probably literary antecedents for our act, but I don't really think I want to inquire too closely.

Although I'm the warm-up act, I usually draw a better reception. Max doesn't mind. He's getting some attention for a change, the booze is mostly free, and he's even finagled a couple of coeds into the sack. He also wets a line at every school for a visiting writer job. Some of these places are odd enough that he just might land one.

The tour is supposed to last four months and take in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, and Nevada. There must be two hundred schools in Texas alone, counting junior colleges, and it feels like we've hit most of them. The National Endowment deal doesn't require matching funds, so even places who've never seen a live poet order us up like examination copies of a textbook they have no intention of ever using.

Max also bootlegs a few extra readings on the side to supplement the NEA money. Mostly, though, he doesn't have the stamina to be much of a hustler so he settles for what's at hand, which is me. NEA wires us each a check every two weeks and Max is already into me for \$800 I'll never see again. This is more or less ok because Max claims to have assurances that he is next in line to judge the Walt Whitman competition, although he has the decency not to remind me of this as he consummates another loan. He may be lying, but I can't take the chance that he isn't. A WW would jump-start my career which keeps refusing to turn over, the starter grinding away while my battery goes on losing juice.

Max is done with the Shiner and on into a bottle of Wild Turkey that he lifted from the reception. I've tried to broaden his range of chemicals but he is unreconstructible: "Whatever killed Berryman and Thomas is good enough for me."

It's only April, but already the road feels like a strip of bacon under the sun and I know how much I wouldn't want to be here when summer really gets down to business. And I think about all those schools. Make no mistake: this is the satellite circuit, not the main tour. We do not stop at Southern Methodist or Boulder or the universities of Texas or Oklahoma. We read at colleges where the faculty mournfully says, "This isn't the end of the world, but you can see it from here." Places nobody but William Stafford goes.

At most of these schools, there's an MFA from somewhere sunk up to his axles in freshman essays. They press sheaves of poems on me, asking if I'll intercede with Max on their behalf. Nobody seems to get an MFA in fiction writing anymore.

I don't tell them that Max pretends to read only the work of attractive women and that he has trouble getting his own stuff published these days. All the old editors are dropping off; the only automatic Max has left is *The Norton Anthology* which is not a bad gimme at that. He stays in year after year because he's got something on one of the editors from graduate school days—some irregularity with sources in his dissertation, as far as I can gather.

Mostly, though, Max is out of touch in the poetry biz: he thinks Galway Kinnell is still a comer. So I read their poems. They're usually pretty competent and they all sound alike, as though they were written by sleepwalkers with elaborate sensitivities. They remind me of my own poems; we're all slicing up the same pie. Which is why each first book must be hailed as the appearance of a distinctive new voice. These are the manuscripts that Yale and Wesleyan and Pittsburgh will not be publishing. After a while, the poets will give up or publish at some dinky press with the half-life of a subatomic particle and be tenured or not be tenured. Some of them already divine this and are a little brittle with visiting writers and their preferments.

Everywhere, though, you see them being buffed by thousands of freshman papers, worn smooth by the handling of chairmen and deans until there are no rough spots for a poem to stick to. At a party, a drunk and funny MFA from Cal Irvine—a lopsided man who had just switched from the raw, Third World witness poem to the somnambular lyric in hopes of publishing in *College English*, which was the benchmark of contemporary verse for his chairman—told me that he often thought of his senior colleagues as occupying the rocking chairs of literature while he and his like held the folding chairs. There are a lot of decent, desperate people dying out there in the polar reaches of academe.

This is too depressing to dwell on, so I try as I can to make little notches in the academic conveyor belt. I tell one chairman that the best journals are now publishing so much haiku that the Academy of American Poets has lobbied for Congress to put import quotas on Japanese verse just as it did on Toyotas. At another school, I lament to the student paper America's

shocking neglect of sports poetry and reveal my plans for a publishing venture to redress that disregard: The Full Court Press. At a college in eastern Colorado, I whittle a bit on a dean who read three Edna St. Vincent Millay poems by way of introducing me on a night when Max's aesthetic digestion gave out and I had to solo. The next morning before we left, I bought mauve ink and rose paper at the college bookstore and in my best imitation of a woman's hand wrote "Flee, all is discovered." I tucked the flap into the envelope without sealing it and put it in campus mail for the dean. And so on. Nothing really outrageous, just little nicks here and there.

The Wild Turkey has made Max nostalgic. He remembers fondly his role in making American poetry safe from Eliot. He has chronicled these campaigns before, but it comes out different every time he repeats himself.

"We were just routing the last of the footnoters at Princeton when Bill Empson turned up on a panel and had me hanging on at the bell. But Doc Williams was working my corner that night as cut man; he patched me up and I got back after it in the next round. Even *Partisan Review* gave me the decision."

From the poetry wars of the fifties, Max moves on to literary slugfests in other venues. Though he now sags considerably, Max once fancied himself a brawler. Edmund Wilson wrote in his memoirs that Max had the sneakiest left hook in American letters. Max's history in the ring is checkered to be sure, but he's enjoyed some notable successes. He KO'd Alan Dugan twice and Delmore Schwartz once, and it took Mailer a combination followed by a shove to put Max down. He threw James Dickey into a briar patch in Tuscaloosa and once decked Dylan Thomas unfairly when Max was young and Dylan was drunk. Later, though, he loaned Thomas money. Now Max laments that nobody cares enough about poetry to get into fights about it anymore.

Max rouses himself from the legendary past to ask where we're heading. He is apprehensive to learn that we have entered New Mexico. One of his former wives may be living in Santa Fe and there's apparently a matter of some delinquent alimony. He worries that she might somehow conspire to seize his earnings the way the IRS used to grab Sonny Liston's purse after every bout.

But mostly he's sorry to be leaving Texas and its petrodollars behind. Don't believe those twangy howls about the price of oil. The colleges are still awash in it like academic shiekdoms. The faculty looks as scruffy as

anywhere else, but the schools are outfitting themselves handsomely. They move up a notch in NCAA football classification, they endow a chair in petroleum engineering or laissez-faire, and they amass a phalanx of new vice-presidents. They also throw elaborate receptions for itinerant poets. Max has fattened on Texas.

I figure it's going to be early evening before we make Socorro. Max's bladder is not what it used to be and we have to stop every fifty miles or so. Max has a quaint sort of modesty and always squeezes through the fence to find some kind of scrub cover. I'm not entirely sure how I feel about Max, but when I see him there hunched forward pissing into the wind and distance of New Mexico, I feel a tenderness towards him that takes me by surprise.

But sentimentality is a quick ride and we're not down the road too far before I'm filling time by erecting headlines for the tour: "Pfluger Flops in Fort Collins: Max No Factor on Poetry Scene"; "Poet Pukes at Podium: Grody to the Max." Headlines don't have much staying power either so I start doodling with dialogue. I've been thinking about trying my hand at fiction after the tour. A guy I knew in grad school is a junior editor at Doubleday which ought to give me a leg up. Anyway, it's fun to fool around with stuff I'll never get into my poetry. Usually, it goes something like this.

"When Meryl Streep takes off her clothes it's art. When I take off mine, it's \$300 or 30 days."

"Your tits are prurient. Hers look like two big bowls of Wheaties or something. Besides, you didn't go to Yale."

"How do you know where she went to school?"

"I saw it in *Parade Magazine*."

"*You said you didn't read anymore.*"

I try to make up lines that have some ginger to them; if you can write snappy dialogue, there's no telling how far you can go.

Pretty soon it's late afternoon and the sun is going down like a slug of hot lead. We're still a hundred miles or so from Socorro and I'm getting hungry, so when we top out a long rise I'm glad to see a sign inviting us to stop at Ryan's Crossing.

Ryan's Crossing turns out to have all the comforts of home. Besides a cafe, there's a bar, general store, post office, and tv satellite receiver franchise all in roughly two and a half buildings. I gas up the Hertz while Max

goes on inside. When I'm done, I park the car around the side where the pickups are. As I walk out front, I can see another truck maybe five miles out, busting its springs down a dirt road heading in, a long shroud of dust in its wake.

Max is sitting expansively at the one table that's right in the middle of things. I figure it's ok since the place is mostly empty and we'll be long gone before the Friday night crowd arrives. Max's bar etiquette is not all it should be, and he's not quite enough of a relic to get away with some of the stunts he pulls. But his luck is generally good, he's got a quick tongue in a pinch, and so far I've managed to bundle him out the door the two times when luck and wit were clearly not going to forestall mayhem.

Although the sign over the bar reads "This Property Insured by Smith & Wesson," Ryan's Crossing is pretty genial. The chili is great and the bar whiskey is cheap. There's not a video game in sight and the juke box has some old tunes that Max plays over and over. Before I know it we're both looped and the place is full of cowboys, maybe twenty or so, all in hats they don't take off and two or three of them with women. My automatic warning light goes on, but the whiskey keeps shorting it out and I finally switch to manual override. On the one hand, no one's talked to us which is not a good sign, but Max has no contention in him tonight and the bartender, clearly a veteran and therefore a finely tuned barometer of trouble, seems not the least uneasy.

So I'm not ready for it at all when I come out of the john and see three guys around Max at our table. The rest of the bar is quiet so I can tell right away that this is not a friendly get-together. I check the bartender, but he's going to let it happen. Max has just finished saying something, but his back is to me so I can't make it out. The cowboy across the table from him lets out a sort of laugh that seems to narrow his face.

"A poet? Well, tell you what. I never heard a real poet say a poem."

"Careful, Tommy, them poets is all queers. He might take a shine to you."

"Queers and Jews."

A snappy line might still pull it out, but Max is saying nothing and the only thing I can come up with is trying to pass us off as good old goys which is not true and which I don't think anyone here would get anyway.

"So what you're going to do is climb up top that pool table and start saying poems till I tell you to quit."

"I never seed a naked poet neither. Let's strip him down, Tommy."

And I'm thinking that I should have taken up industrial hygiene in college instead of poetry. Or that with just a little luck I could have been on the road with someone a lot sweeter who stayed out of bars. Or maybe a real brawler—Jim Harrison or Phil Levine, say—people who get left alone. Instead, I've got Max who is sour and paunchy and couldn't go two rounds with a sonnet anymore. I'm still hoping that maybe we can ride it out with nothing worse than humiliation when Max swings his elbow off the table into the groin of one of the cowboys and gets knocked sideways off his chair. I figure I'm next, so I start to move and get a pool cue flat across the kidneys and then the lights go out.

When I come around, they've propped me up in a chair and Max is on the pool table. They've left Max's clothes on—a break for Max, a break for them—and he is reciting poetry. One eye is swollen and he keeps pawing at his nose which is bleeding. He's a little unsteady, tilting above the felt, but his voice is ok and gets stronger as he goes:

"The land was ours before we were the lands's
She was our land more than a hundred years
Before we were her people. . ."

"Hey, that ain't poetry; it's got to rhyme. You trying to mess with us?"

Max stalls and it hangs in the balance. I don't think Max knows any poems that rhyme. The man nursing his groin looks like he's getting ready to climb up on the table.

"Louise, you been to college. Is it poetry if it don't have rhymes?"

Tommy is still running things and he's going to do this right. I try to shape a prayer that whoever taught Louise her obligatory literature course did not give her a "D" and a loathing for anyone who reads poetry or writes it. I pray rather than bet, because the odds are not good.

"It used to have to rhyme. But I don't think it has to anymore."

Max coughs a couple of times and starts up again when Tommy breaks in and tells him to do it from the beginning.

When Max is through, nobody says anything until Tommy tells him to keep going. He recites two more Frosts, a Robert Penn Warren, and something I don't recognize. It turns out that once he gets rolling Max can rhyme like a bell. The next time he stops, somebody hands him a beer.

Tommy turns out to be a fair but tough-minded critic: "It ain't Willie,

but it ain't bad at that. You know some more?"

Max is warmed up now and begins to use the table like a stage, working the audience that horseshoes around him. He does Roethke and Thomas and Housman. The beer is replaced by whiskey bought by Curley who says no hard feelings about the elbow in his balls. Max has his foot to the floor now, redlining it, ad-libbing between the poems. He's sweating up there in the smoky light with a little blood caked around his nose, his eye squeezed shut and already going purple. They're clapping and cheering after each poem and I can see a few boots tapping along when Max leans into a rich iambic. He does two encores and then finishes with Yeats:

"Heart-mysteries there, and yet when all is said

It was the dream itself enchanted me:"

Max is almost singing it now and I see that it's not just the words, maybe hardly the words at all, but the current they generate that carries us along.

". . . that raving slut

Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,

I must lie down where all the ladders start,

In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."

The bar is bedlam: hooting and piercing whistles and stomping. Louise is up on the table wrapping Max up and leaning into a long, looping kiss. Curley pounds me on the back and someone is passing the hat. It comes back full of wrinkled bills and Max, down from his perch, sets the hat on the bar and says we'll drink it dry. Tommy shakes his hand and apologizes and someone gives him some ice wrapped in a bar towel for his eye. When Louise asks Max who wrote the poems, Max tells her he did.

"All the ones you liked anyway, honey. Why would I go around remembering what somebody else wrote?"

I can see that Louise is not too sure about this, so I ask her to dance. She wants to know what kind of guy Max really is and I tell her that I wouldn't even try to guess. After someone cuts in, I go back to the bar. Max's flush has faded and the jaundice he gets from drinking is starting to rise. I go to work on him, but it still takes me most of an hour to pry him loose. By then he's said a couple of things that could have been taken wrong except for all the sloshy good will.

Finally, there are good-byes all around. Curley asks Max his name and Max says it's Wallace Stevens. Then we're out in the dark which nips me

like a tonic. We walk around to where our car is, but instead of getting in, Max opens the door of a pickup and hoists himself up so he's standing hunched in the door frame, holding himself there with one hand hooked around the back of the cab. I can't see what he's fooling around with in his other hand, and then he starts to recite "The Windhover." So I ask and he says whenever he can't get a stream started he recites Hopkins.

"If I want to puke, I do some late Auden."

What he's doing is pissing on the driver's seat. He gets three more trucks before I give up on talking him out of it and back the car out into the rutty lot. Max comes shambling then, stuffing himself back in, and even though a dog has started to bark I can see that we're going to get away without getting shot.

Max picks the back seat again. I've about run out of patience with myself because I can't begin to sort out how I feel about all this.

"They'll think twice about screwing with the next poet that comes along," says Max. He unlimbers a long, foggy belch and settles in. "And kid, let that be a lesson. If you want to grow up to be an artist, you can't ever let them get too familiar." Then he rumbles off to sleep.

And we're ninety miles out of Socorro, steady at 80 with all the windows down, taking our luck and chances down the road.