

Understanding Poetry · *Stuart Friebert*

The last time I saw him, that summer we were visiting at his villa near Salzburg, one of my students screwed up her courage to ask for his autograph. He'd just come up from the cellar, insisting on bringing up one more case of Coke. He was quick to point out he could still get it in the old bottles. Only if you have a ball-point pen, Fräulein Sally, I love writing with them, he said, wiping the sweat off his face with the cowboy handkerchief I'd given him on my last visit.

Pen in hand, he beckoned us to follow him out to the porch. We went along like schoolchildren on a walk to the museum. From a bell jar on the sideboard, he carefully rolled away one long, thin cigarette from the arched pile—Turkish, I realized, from his poems—the way a player plays Pick-Up-Sticks. We formed a half-circle around him, Sally stepping forward slightly. He licked his lips, wet the pen and wrote his name with a tiny flourish next to the Turkish script. There, he said, handing it to Sally, Now let's sit outside in the garden and listen to your airforce on its way over our Alps. We coaxed him into reading a few more poems with the last of his voice that day—he'd had surgery on his vocal chords but the radiation had gone well, he assured us. Besides, my doctor likes me to read. Stretches things down there. When a jet slashed past, he paused mid-air, There, that's enough now, your people have the last word. See you next year, perhaps—did you like the sandwiches? I might have some dark beer my neighbors are brewing, next time you come. He led us back down the path to the bus.

Christmas, the first of his cards came. Mein Lieber, has Sally smoked it up yet? I had to think some to make the connection. Lordie, I thought, smoked it? Typical of you, old pal! Sally was still at school, so I called on the pretext of wanting to show her a certain book. I knew Günter wouldn't have wanted me to ask her directly, so I sort of wondered aloud, just before leaving, What's ever happened to that autographed cigarette?

I was hoping you'd ask, she said. Right there! On the mantle, under a little glass bell, there it was, fairly aglow, the signature still alive, looking a little Turkish perhaps.

And so our little correspondence started up in earnest. I wrote back, on the oldest postcard I could find at the bookstore, Dear G, Nope. Not yet. Every three or four months, for the next year or so, he'd write, sometimes just, Yet? Sometimes something like, Is it thin air, finally? I'd try to find out, write back, and on and on. Finally, Sally graduated, moved away. Dear G, I remember writing then, I'll have to save some money before I can check on the cigarette again. Sally's gone to China on a fellowship.

Günter's wife handed me the last card in our exchange, which never got sent. I'd come to visit, but he'd died a week before. I stared down at the tiny script, Lieber, I guess she never understood my poems at all.