My Brush with Literary Greatness

I need to tell you about my brush with literary greatness. Well, perhaps not greatness, but at least with a small degree of local notoriety. For I did indeed have a shot at the big Kahuna of writing awards offered to those of us in the region with misguided notions of authorial competence.

Every year my university sponsors a contest for aspiring writers. It's in the memory of a fellow by the name of Todd Huxley. Never met him, but he apparently was kind enough to bequeath monies, the interest of which supports the monetary awards and administrative costs associated with running the contest. The annual posting of brightly colored placards throughout the campus heralds the event.

I never really paid much attention to these posters because I had never even contemplated writing fiction. But several years ago on a plane ride to California, I became sufficiently bored to light up my laptop and write a story born of family lore. Typing out my memories and then embellishing them shamelessly made the hours pass far less slowly.

I liked the freedom that fiction allowed, particularly against the backdrop of my usual writing, all of which must be accurate, well documented, and scholarly. As you might gather, editors of scientific journals frown on articles based on flights into fantasy and ample use of poetic license.

Referrers also wouldn't be too pleased if my clinical reports swayed from fact toward fancy. Like if I depicted a child as regularly overcome by vivid dreams about ooze-leeching predators with heads the size of school buses and toes comprised of the dead bodies of classmates when, in reality, the youngster had experienced one nightmare involving a scary bat.

My story was left forgotten on the disk drive until several months later when I noticed a bright yellow poster announcing the year's writing contest. I toyed for a moment with the idea of submitting my story, but then remembered that I had no training as a fiction writer and that I would be competing against people with long track records of literary output. I also recalled the fateful words of my tenth-grade English teacher who, upon reading my paper about "Catcher in the Rye," offered me the following advice: "Gordon, whatever you decide to do with your life, make sure it doesn't involve written expression of the English language." While his judgment might be suspect given my not wholly insignificant scholarly output, I figured he could be right on the mark regarding my capacity for writing fiction.

Having firmly decided against humiliating myself more than I could avoid, I walked past the poster and carried on with the day. But you know the power of grandiosity and the lure of potential recognition. They steadily wear away at good judgment and make you overstep your normal bounds.

And so began a process of convincing myself that my story was really pretty good and that, after all, I had embarrassed myself over the years in far more exotic ways, so why not see what might happen if I submitted my story? The worst that I could imagine was that one of the judges might shake his head in stunned wonderment that someone would write something so overpoweringly atrocious and then have the gall to enter it into a competition. And maybe he'd decide to submit it to one of those bad writing contests you see on the Internet or hear as a novelty piece on public radio when they read stories that begin with lines like, "It was a dark and cold night when I saw my future freeze in the winds." But, hell, you can't remain in academics for long if you get overly addled by manuscript rejection. What was one more? Undaunted by all manner

of neurotic musings, I printed out my story, put it into a manila envelope, and sent it off to the contest coordinator.

Enough weeks passed that I forgot entirely about the writing fellowship. Then one day I opened an interoffice envelope that, to my complete incredulity, contained a letter informing me that I was a winner in the annual Todd Huxley writing award. I would be lying to you unconscionably if I professed any degree of nonchalance in my reaction to this notification. Truthfully, I was about as pleased with myself as I had ever been around non-family matters. Sure, I've had my share of books and articles published over the years, but here I had won an award for fiction and my first story at that. Be assured that I strutted about for days on end, looking forward to the official award ceremony at the end of the month.

The presentation of prizes turned out to be a formal and sober affair, complete with carefully-trimmed tea sandwiches, a citrus punch, and at least three individuals sporting black turtlenecks and matching berets. These literary events were, as best I could tell, serious business. Normally voluble faculty spoke in hushed and reverential tones like you'd expect at a memorial service or, maybe worse, a budget meeting. The attendance of both the president of the university and at least two Deans added to the occasion's prestige.

After a few lofty introductory remarks, the President turned the ceremony over to the faculty member who coordinated the contest. He explained that a first prize and honorable mention were awarded in both student and faculty/staff divisions. He then announced the winner of the student category, a young medical student who wrote (and read to us) a moving essay about her first experience with a patient dying.

Next, the fellowship coordinator said that it was time to trumpet the first prize

winner in the senior division. He informed everyone in attendance that the committee had to struggle hard this year to select the best from a bumper crop of fine submissions. They settled on a group of three poems by a woman who worked as a unit clerk in one of the surgical departments. In their opinion, her poetry demonstrated uncanny insight and a wonderful lyricism. They also agreed that it was the last of the three poems that had convinced them that she was truly the best of the literary breed.

You'll have to trust me when I tell you that I wasn't the least disappointed by my second place showing. I couldn't believe I had won anything, especially when I heard that my story was selected out of a large pool of other contenders, many of whom were written by English professors and established poets and prose writers. Runner up was a far better outcome that I had imagined when I first contemplated entering.

While I wasn't at all disturbed that someone else would be reading the winning submission, I was understandably curious about who had bested me. After all, I do have this pronounced Y chromosome that produces unnecessary quantities of competitiveness. I really had to know what was required to attain the status of Literary Numero Uno.

Now for a bit of personal disclosure: If there were a measure of poetry IQ, I would fall in the profoundly retarded range. Really. My poetry development became arrested somewhere around the age of eight when I had to memorize the "Raggedy Man" out of my Louis Untermeyer Anthology for Mrs. Johnson's third grade reading class. The only other contact with poetry early on came when I helped my older brother memorize the "Charge of the Light Brigade" for one of his hostile English teachers. For days on end, he'd shout, "Half a league, half a league, half a league onward." I was a full league from understanding why such memorization was necessary.

On those rare occasions in college when I found myself in a class that considered poetry, I could be counted on to miss the point of the poem entirely. While I liked the textures of the words and the rhythms of the verse, I wasn't much for divining what the poet apparently had in mind when he or she sat with a quill in hand.

I remember once that I was enthralled with this girl who happened to love the poetry of Antonio Machado. In a candle lit dorm room and with her eyes misty from having connected with the poet's soul, she read a poem about a man with olives in his saddlebag riding a pony. She made the mistake of asking me if I could feel the existential plight of the horseman and I made the mistake of saying that it sounded to me like a poem about a man with olives in his saddlebag riding a pony. It turned out to be a short-lived relationship and an even shorter evening.

With all of that as a backdrop, understand that I am not a good judge of poetry. For all I know, the three poems this woman submitted were right up there with Robert Frost, Walt Whitman, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Now the first offering was a poem about a poem about purple plums glistening with moisture in the refrigerator. (One of my more verse-savvy residents later explained that the poem about the purple plums was a classic by William Carlos Williams). Continuing that theme, the next poem was a poem about writing a poem about a poem about purple plums glistening with moisture in the refrigerator.

As best I could tell, this lady was seriously into fruit, or at least into poems about fruit. But, then again, maybe those plums were a metaphor for the existential plight of inanimate objects or the growth potential of womankind.

But it was the final poem, the one that the judges felt tipped the scales away from my short story, that proved to be the wrecking ball that demolished my composure. I

kid you not that this last offering was a rather graphic account of a woman experiencing her annual PAP smear. It began something like, “Here I lie on the cold black leather/my feet bound by the even colder steel stirrups . . .” and then went on to express what seemed to be this woman’s profound wish that it was her female lover’s warm hands performing the procedure, not the gloved digits of an uncaring male physician.

Because I wasn’t sure if I was the only one who thought this poem a tad strange, I scanned the room to see if I could pick up a hint of a smile or maybe even the beginnings of a smirk. But all I saw were looks of joyous wonderment or deep contemplation. If you closed your eyes, you’d swear you could hear finger snapping and the funky sounds of Miles Davis. These people were, without a doubt, deeply moved by this lady’s account of a routine medical screening that, I would have to guess, didn’t normally move women to wax poetic.

Amidst this sea of reverential appreciation, all I could think of was, “Gordon, only you could lose a competition to a woman who writes poems about wet plums and gynecologic procedures.”

I was fortunate that, with the reading of that last verse, the ceremony was over. I barely made it out the door before I began laughing as hard as I had ever laughed. It was one of those laughs that hurts your back and makes your stomach ache and leaves you gasping for air and every time you think you can control yourself the scene enters your mind again and you end up back where your started, doubled over and crying and trying to think of genocidal atrocities or devastating car accidents or anything that could get your mind off something like having lost a writing contest to a woman who writes poems about wet plums and gynecologic procedures.

I was so tickled by my foray into the world of the literati that I had to take the

afternoon off to regain my composure. Staying in my office was no help at all because one by one faculty and staff in the department, upon hearing about my experience, felt it necessary to share in the hilarity.

But later that weekend, when I could finally think about the award ceremony without laughing uncontrollably, I began to take a different perspective. It dawned on me that I should follow the advice of all of those motivational gurus and use this downturn in my literary fortunes to promote my fuller growth not only as a writer, but also as a human being. I would not let this loss deter me from discovering my potential as a muse. Dammit, I was going to throw all caution to the wind and become a poet myself. If that lady can win the contest with her poems, then by golly she'd have to compete with some of mine.

And so I reached over for a pen and began writing what I was convinced would be the undisputed winner of the next Todd Huxley Writing Fellowship. I called it "Prostate Exam" and it began, "Here I stand bent over/My hands gripping the cold black leather of the Gurney, my pants around my ankles." You get the idea.