

Poet Laureate

"Are you impressed now?" Rob asked his wife Cate. "This overlooked town, this *we'll never be Cambridge or Wellesley*. Now, we are sitting here to honor our first poet laureate." Rob beamed at Cate, squeezing her hand. "*Your* poet laureate."

Rob and Cate arrived at the arts center auditorium early for the ceremony. They sat in the first row in two seats marked *Reserved* with their names. The mayor had called Rob the previous week.

"Rob—may I call you Rob?"

"Madame Mayor," he said, surprised by this call.

"Oh, please, no need for formalities," she said.

The mayor explained that the city had chosen its first poet laureate as part of its drive to promote the arts and culture. The announcement would happen during a ceremony when she would cut the ribbon for the renovated arts center.

"I can't tell you right now who our inaugural poet laureate will be," the mayor told Rob. "But I'm sure that you will be happy with our selection. And you should be prepared to speak at the ceremony: in part, about what our own poet laureate can bring to the city."

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Rob could see the *wink-wink* coming from the mayor. "I'll be there."

"Should I wear a tie?" Rob asked Cate earlier that evening as they were getting ready. He was intent on taking a step up in the English department. The dean had told him that his publication output was good, and his teaching evaluations were good enough. More prominence in the community might seal the deal to become the next department chair.

"The president wants our chairs to face outward to our community—however you do it," the dean told him. Rob was convinced that the added title of city Poet Laureate was perfect: few actual obligations, good PR for the college, a role that he could shape to his benefit.

Next to Rob and Cate's seats were seats reserved for *Harrison T. Harpsichord and Guest*. Harrison T (always the T, he insisted) ran the writing group at the public library and was an English teacher at the high school. Harrison T had invited Rob to his freshman classes each September over the past three years to read his poems and speak about the importance of poetry in a well-rounded education. Rob appreciated the

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gesture. He enjoyed the chances to read, even if the audiences comprised students who looked like they were doing penance.

After Rob's most recent visit, Harrison T mentioned that he also was a poet. "I have two collections published."

"Really?" Rob said.

"Yes. I would be honored if you would accept a set of them. A small token of thanks for spending valuable time with my students."

Rob sat down with the first volume that weekend entitled *Nantucket, a Bucket*. He tried to take the work seriously.

Nantucket
A bucket
Don't drive it
Can truck it
Gold nugget
My luck it
A bucket
Nantucket

Rob opened the second volume, *I am, I am*. Before he finished the title poem, Rob laughed out loud. He thought, "I'm supposed to be laughing, right?" That *must* be the point of the poems. How could anyone write them with any other intent?

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Harrison T had entered the auditorium with his guest. Harrison T was a lean and lanky man in his 60s, while the woman appeared to have a birth year that began with a '2.'

"Good evening, professor. I am so glad that you and Cate are here to take part in this celebration."

"Of course. I got a call from the mayor last week," Rob said. "She asked me to have some prepared words." Rob pointed to two handwritten pages on his lap.

"Ah, professor, always prepared," Harrison T said. "Let me introduce—"

"Your daughter. I've been looking forward—"

"My lady friend, Moriah. She recently took a position at the library."

"Oh, of course," Rob said, trying to recover. "Wonderful to meet you. And this is my wife, Cate."

Cate jabbed Rob in the ribs. She whispered in a tone that Rob recognized all too well, "Nice going, Mr. Tact. I may have thought that, but I knew enough not to say it... and is that his real name? Harrison T. *Harpsichord?*" C'mon."

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"Nah," Rob said. "I asked him about that once, and he says he adopted a penname for his writing. In real life, he's *Gary*: Gary T. Harpsichord."

The announcement of poet laureate came at the end of the evening. Rob had always enjoyed the anticipation of good news. He did not mind the wait. While the five city councilors and the recently appointed cultural commissioner took their turns to speak, Rob's mind wandered. He would invite high school students to his college who wanted to pursue writing as a vocation. He would ask Harrison T who those students might be. He would invite Harrison T to poetry events on campus.

Finally, the mayor spoke. "We are so blessed in this city to have such talented people, devoted to their creativity and to their city. I am honored to introduce our first poet laureate: Harrison T. Harpsichord."

Rob was ready to stand up, then quickly retreated to his seat. He looked at Cate, then quickly turned to Harrison T and shook his hand. "Wow. This is... amazing."

"I am honored. Professor, I am honored."

Harrison T walked up to the podium, pulling out his two pages from his jacket. Rob turned back to Cate. He shook his head. "Can you believe

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this? I've got five volumes published, and a sixth whenever the damn publisher gets off his iambic ass. I won the Baudelaire award, twice, for translating French poetry. I've written poetry in French that the French like... I coached youth soccer for two years, and we don't even have any kids! Harrison T, jeez, what does he have other than a drivel of lines that barely rhyme with Nantucket?"

Rob thought about the acceptance speech that no one would ever hear. As the applause continued for Harrison T, he reluctantly joined in. He watched as Harrison T stood on the stage, beaming.

Harrison T began his speech. "Fellow lovers of words and rhyme: each of us is more than our bank account. We are more than resumes with flattering job titles. We are even more than devoted family members or good neighbors. We are creators of culture. Through our creativity, through our inspired words:

"We spread joy.

"We elicit laughter.

"We incite sadness and anger, when we must.

"We inspire wisdom.

"We make our community better and more beautiful.

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"As your Poet Laureate, that is my mission. That is my mandate."

The mayor followed Harrison T. "And we also have the privilege of having in our midst an English professor, a fellow poet, who will assist Harrison T with some of his creative ideas and handle the nuts and bolts. I know that in my job, I couldn't survive without those hardworking people in the background. Professor Rob, please come up and say a few words."

Rob had no intent of coming up to say a few words, not the words that the mayor expected. Not the words that he brought with him. Then he felt Cate squeeze his hand.

"Oh, what the hell," he said so only Cate could hear him. "I would've too busy anyway."

He straightened his tie. He crumpled the two pages and dropped them on the floor as he walked up to the podium.

Rob looked out into the audience, then glanced at Harrison T. "This is a special night, and Harrison T. Harpsichord is a special member of our community." He hesitated. What to say next?

"I've gotten to know Harrison T over the past three years. I've been a frequent guest at the high school, and I know how much he gives to us, the community! We are so fortunate that he is part of this city."

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Rob saw Cate smiling at him. He went on. "Poetry is important—and not just because the college pays me to teach it." The audience laughed.

"And I know that Harrison T loves poetry. He gave me copies of his two volumes. Very special gifts. If you haven't read his poems—boy, you are really missing something.

"Harrison T believes that there is an inner poet in all of us. Just as he has shown us *his* inner poet in these volumes, he wants to bring that out in all of you. I know that Harrison T will do his darnedest to spread his love of poetry over the next two years. And I will help him with this important mission."

Rob returned to his reserved seat, next to the one reserved for the city's first poet laureate. He reached over to shake the hand of Moriah, smiling his best consolation smile. He then turned to Cate.

"It'll be okay," she said. "I'm proud of you. You're *my* laureate."

The mayor gestured for Rob to stand up again and join her and Harrison T. In her best mayoral voice, she proclaimed, "Let's have two great years of poetry in this city. We have the right creative leadership!"

The crowd stood and clapped for Harrison T one more time. Perhaps some were also clapping for Rob. The mayor patted Rob's hand and spoke

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below the din of the applause. “Rob, thanks for your support. We are a better city because you and Cate are part of us. What a wonderful endorsement you gave for fellow poet Harrison T... I noticed that you had notes, but you left them behind and came up here and, I suppose, spoke from the heart. You must have such special feelings for Harrison T.”

“You could say that.” Rob had calmed down.

The mayor gestured toward Harrison T for the final word.

“Professor Rob, you are a gracious colleague and a friend that, that... for once, I am at a loss for words.” The audience laughed again.

“Professor Rob, I can imagine your standing in my place—someday.

“The Mayor asked me to do a short reading. This is from my most recent volume. Ahem. *I am, I am.*

I am
I am
Siam
Blue yam
Red ham
Pyongyang
I am
I am

“Fellow creative audience members: I am working on my next Massachusetts volume. Once I make some breakthroughs, you’ll be

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hearing new poetry soon after. Maybe some of you can help me. I seek words that rhyme with Belchertown.”

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