

My Poetic Nemesis

by Con Chapman

April is the cruelest month, wrote T.S. Eliot, and as a poet he knew whereof he spake. (Archaic past tense provided at no extra cost.) It is in April, after all, that the rejection letters and no-you-didn't-win-the-Alice-Wamsley-Memorial-Poetry-Competition notices from the autumn submission cycle arrive in the mailbox.



Eliot: "Darn it—I lost again."

But I'd been through all that before, so last fall I put on a Bush-Obama-Petraeus Verse Surge, sending out over 400 poems. I would become a published poet before turning—well, I won't tell you what I'll be turning—or expire tragically trying.

The fruits of my labor arrived yesterday. "We are pleased to inform you that your poem *Thoughts on Waking After Spending the Night at a Kosher Vegetarian Commune* has been accepted by *plangent voices*. Due to our extensive backlog, it is anticipated that publication will not occur until the fall 2016 issue."



A (much) younger Hazel Flange

This, I thought, called for a celebration. I got in the car and headed over to the Coach & Four, the *faux*-colonial watering hole where the elite of our little exurban town—insurance salesmen, CPAs, the local zoning attorney—meet to eat and greet. And to confront my poetic nemesis, Hazel Flange.

Hazel has been lording it over me for years. She's got all the good accounts in town: McBride's Super Market, where she composes rhymed couplets for the flyers and paper shopping bags ("Looking for something to eat on Easter—Our ham and lamb will make a feaster!"); Olney's GMC-Chevrolet ("If you're going to a gala, best that you should buy Impala!"); Muckerman's Funeral Home ("We'll bury your kin with quiet dignity—we promise our bill won't be very bignity.")

Then there are the special commissions—birthday, anniversary and pet poems. Have to hand it to the old girl, she was the one who came up with business model. Go to another old biddie's house for bridge club, compliment the household dog, cat or goldfish, write a poem about it for the local paper. Then, when the owner is basking in the reflected glory of compliments from all her friends, offer to make her a laminated copy, suitable for framing—for ten bucks. "I just love your little Poodie, he is such a darling cutie!" Gag me, as the Valley Girls used to say, with a spoon.

But now the shoe is on the other foot. With *Kosher Vegetarian Commune* I'm not only published, I've introduced a *genre* of my own creation to the world of verse; poems whose titles are at least 75% as long as the poems themselves! Count them off:

*This is kosher, this is trayfe,
One unclean, the other sayfe.
All day long we work and slayfe
Keeping kosher from the trayfe.*

Pretty neat, huh! So it is with a new confidence that I stroll into the bar at the Coach & Four. It's not *Les Deux Maggots*, or The White Horse Tavern in Greenwich Village where Dylan Thomas drank himself to death—but it will do. Except for the bathroom stalls—you know the one that begins “Here I sit all broken-hearted” don't you?—the only poetry in the house is composed by Hazel, recited to a table crammed with her fawning sycophants.

I wave my hand as I stroll up to the bar and make the announcement I've been dying to proclaim for lo these so many years. “Marty,” I say to the bartender, “potato chips and snack foods for everybody—and see what the boys in the back room will have!”

With that a scramble the likes of which have not been seen since the Oklahoma land rush begins; there are only so many bags of Cape Cod Parmesan & Roasted Garlic Chips on the Snack-Rack, and it's every man for himself.



Eyes on the prize.

I order my usual—a Smutty Nose Elderberry Lite I.P.A.—and lean back to take in the room, holding the tall-boy bottle Jeff Bridges-style, oh-so-casually around the very tip of the neck. I cast a glance in Hazel's direction—she gives me the steely-eyed gaze that has caused so many budding young aethetes to realize there's room for only one poetess in our town, and she's not going anywhere.

I stand up and begin to work the room—suddenly I'm every man's hero now that the out-of-work “consultants” and “advisors” in town are chowing down on Andy Capp Pub Fries on my nickel. After many slaps on the back and congratulations, I mosey over to Hazel's table and, with an affected look of surprise, greet her.

“Why, Hazel,” I say, beaming, “fancy meeting you here! How've you been?” I don't try to party-kiss her—in her dotage she has taken to applying rouge to her cheekbones. She read in *Marie Claire* that Celine Dion does something similar to make her nose look smaller.

“Hello,” she replies in a measured tone and just the hint of a combination smile-sneer—a “snile,” a “smeer”’—on her lips. “I see you have something to celebrate—finally.”

That hurts. Hazel had her first poem published when she was in fourth grade. I spotted it for the rip-off that it was—*“Who can see the wind, neither you nor me, but when the wind is blowing, it*

tickles both my knees”—but apparently the editors of *My Little Messenger* weren't as well read as me.

“Yes, yes, that I do,” I reply, trying hard to retain my composure. “Of course, it's nothing to compare with the success you've had. Writing rhymed couplets for discount tire and battery stores.”

“Whence from your car you do dismount, check our snow tires at deep discounts.”

There is a collective intake of breath by the circle of admirers at Hazel's table, but she's as cool as a poker player sitting on pocket aces. “No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money,” she says, going all Dr. Johnson on me.

The flow of air is reversed—the little group explodes with laughter—but I ignore the obloquy they think they are raining down on me. I'm after the Big Tuna Salad on White Toast Sandwich her own bad self.

“How's about a little *mano-a-womano* verse battle—right here, right now, you and me?”

“Une petite slamme de poesie?” she replies, using up all the French she knows outside a Chef Boyardee can.

“That's right. Winner take all. Must be original, spontaneous work, rhymed and metered.”



“My apartment has a separate meter,” one of her followers says, displaying the level of ignorance that is required in order to appreciate Hazel’s verse.

“Stifle it, Maeve,” Hazel snaps at the woman, and then says to me—“You’re on.”

“Peachy,” I say with a smarmy smile. “Ladies first—and no crib notes.”

The room is so quiet you can hear a chip drop, and from the bar I detect that Bob Smuldowney, head of the Public Works department, has let one fall to the floor.

“If I’m not mistaken, that was a Cool Ranch Dorito?” I say with a note of expectation in my voice as I wait upon the answer, showing off my ear.

“That’s amazing,” Smuldowney says.

“*That’s* what it takes to be a first-class poet,” I say smugly. “Hazel—your serve.”

The dowager versifier clears her throat. She cocks her head a little to one side, like a parakeet—my guess is what she comes up with will be as derivative as “Polly want a cracker?”

She steadies herself by putting her fingers on the table, closes her eyes, tosses an errant spit curl aside and begins.

*How lovely to be a poet
How wonderfully rewarding*

*It is like a free vacation trip
On a cruise ship you are boarding.
But each night when I'm finally done
I brush my teeth and floss.
A poetessa's job is this:
To pick wheat from the dross.*

I'm tempted to yell "mixed metaphor," but it's the playoffs, and I know I'm not going to get the call. No ref wants to blow a freestyle poetry battle in front of a big crowd and I have to say, even though it's against my interests, that I agree—let 'em play.

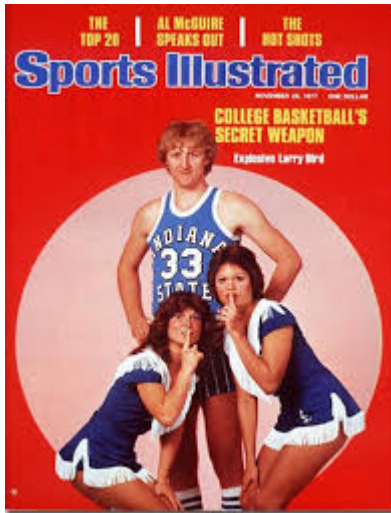


Woman with distaff: Whence it came, hence the name.

Hazel's toadies are applauding politely but this *is* a bar, the audience is disproportionately male, and most of the guys are sitting on their hands, waiting to hear something from the non-distaff side.

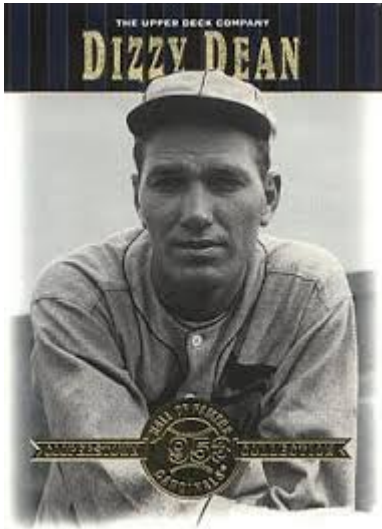
"Great stuff, Hazel," I say magnanimously. "I'll give you the email address for *The New Yorker* when we're done." This is known as

“trash-talking,” and as a Celtics fan during the Larry Bird Era, I learned from the master.



“Shhh—Larry’s going to recite now!”

The guys at the bar are looking at me with a mixture of hope and trepidation. They're the ones who've been scratching doggerel on the walls of the stalls in the men's rooms, inking *haiku* above the urinals, suffering under the yoke of genteel feminine poetry for so many years as Hazel asks them to turn down the games on the four giant-screen TVs so her umpty-dumpty-dumpty/umpty-dumpty-dumpty lines can be heard. If I can take her down, it will be a Spartacus-like moment; the joint will once again be free for belching and bad language worthy of Dizzy Dean, who drew the scorn of St. Louis English teachers for saying “He slud in there” on the Baseball Game-of-the-Week.



Dizzy Dean: He really said it.

"Hazel," I begin with an off-hand, informal air that catches her off guard,

*this is stupid stuff;
your pansies and violets—
your fairies at dawn or later in
the gloaming.*

*what the hell is a gloaming anyway?
and why would you bother to use it when poeming?
I do not like it, and no man could;
find another word please, if you would.*

*but in the meantime, hear me out;
the matter, we say, is free from doubt.
a bar's not the place for poems like lace doilies,
and also I noticed your nose is quite oily.*



Kudos!

I hesitate to use the word “claque,” but the guys are behind me all the way on this one, and the place erupts with a noise not heard since Jason Varitek stuffed his catcher's mitt in Alex Rodriguez's mug. They don't call it “home court advantage” for nothing.

The ladies' table is a bit taken aback by the rough tactics and the thunderous acclaim, but Hazel recovers like the pro that—I have to admit—she is.

“Nicely done,” she says, although I can tell that it pains her to put a smile on her over-glossed lips.

“Thanks—you're still my favorite poet named Hazel,” I say. Good sportsmanship is contagious, I guess. “Have a drink on me, okay?”

Hazel considers this for a moment, then says “Yes—I think I will,” and advances to the bar where Marty says “What'll ya have?”

“I think,” she says as she eyes the racks of expensive liquor behind him, “a Brandy Alexander—with Courvoisier VSOP Cognac.”

“Hey,” I say quickly before Marty can pour. “I meant anything under five bucks.”

Available in print and Kindle format on amazon.com as part of the collection “poetry is kind of important.”

