

Men Go to Great Lengths to Woo Reclusive Poetess

by Con Chapman

SOMEWHERE NEAR KNOB NOSTER, Mo. Etaoin Shrdlu, a Professor at the University of Missouri-Chillicothe, is not much of a woodsman, but he's carrying a heavy load of chiggers and cockleburrs today as he hacks his way through the underbrush here in search of an elusive quarry; poetess Sara Thaler, a misanthropic versifier who attracts men by repelling them.

Knob Noster, Mo. Even yettis find it a little out of the way.

"She told me she wouldn't see me unless I moved very far away," he says as he looks down at a Google Earth image that he believes includes the location of Thaler's lean-to shanty. "I'm here to tell her that I've set up permanent residence in Madagascar."



Marvell: Curls by Lilt Home Permanent.

Shrdlu first became smitten with Thaler when he read the poem for which she won the 2006 Coy Mistress Award, given annually by

the Andrew Marvell Society to the female poet who writes the most off-putting verse in the manner of the group's namesake. Thaler took poetry industry analysts by surprise, winning the competition with a single couplet and upsetting several gloomy competing poetesses who had written longer works.



"I can't believe I didn't win!"

Thaler's entry reads in its entirety as follows:

*The grave's a fine and private place,
Now if you please, get out of my face.*



George Ade: Yes, you've never heard of him.

Shrdlu is a noted specialist in the Midwestern Smart-Aleck School of Literature and writes frequently on neglected masters of the genre including George Ade and Ring Lardner. He knows he is not alone in competing for Thaler's affections, as the woods here are thick with the corpses of assistant professors who died plighting their troths, or in some cases trothing their plights. "I thought moving to Madagascar would give me the inside track," Shrdlu says ruefully. "Then she sent me a text message saying there was an opening on the International Space Station."



"Incoming assistant professor, tweed jacket with elbow patches!"

Romantic poetry often focuses on the unattainable as an object of desire, giving male poets excuses to write sonnets for women they cannot hope to win. "There's an old country saying, 'Fox don't chase a rabbit after he's caught it,'" Shrdlu says. "That's why foxes don't write poems about rabbits."



Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath: "Uh, actually I think it's your turn to have a baby."

Thaler denied that she is a member of the man-hating school of female poets whose most noteworthy member is Sylvia Plath. "'Man-hater' is such a harsh term," she says. "I really like it."

