

Finding Keats at a Red-Hot Speakeasy

By Patricia Mahon



With Simon & Garfunkel's "America" streaming through my Sony Walkman, I packed my black trunk and waited on the front steps of my parents' Center Hall Colonial in suburban New York. I still remember the white, metal handrails and how a little bit of rust had collected around the base of the mounts where they met the slate.

My parents weren't 'airport people' so my father invariably 'called a car' when anyone had to go anywhere that entailed air travel. He could have purchased a vacation home on the money he spent transporting people to and from Newark, LaGuardia and JFK airports.

A guy named Tony loaded my bags into a late model Lincoln that doubled as a limo. I slid across the worn leather bench seat where an old copy of *The New Yorker* was crammed into the back pocket and the stench of car freshener leached out from the vents. As I waved goodbye from the gritty windows, I felt a pang of sadness. It would be so much easier to stay --- take a job in Manhattan, become a train commuter with a blow-up pillow and yesterday's newspaper. But I wanted something more. So, I left New York at 22 to pursue my English PhD at Tulane University in New Orleans. They awarded me a coveted teaching fellowship.

New Orleans was a treasure trove of historic homes, stately manors and stunning 19th century architecture. I rented an oversized room in a pre-Civil War Southern mansion in the city's Garden District right off Audubon Park. My landlord "Jackson" drove an old Bentley Corniche. He was a stout, red-faced Southern boy who collected rents for his mother. She owned the big house along with several other 'big houses' in the area. I first met him at the bannister as I was dragging my bags up a back, stair case. He smiled at me through the balusters, wiped his wet face with a yellow handkerchief and stated, "You must be the little Yankee Girl?" I gave him a strained smile and quickly yanked my suitcase up the stairs.

At \$450 a month, the room was a find. It had a massive fireplace and private bath, leaded glass windows, and ornate molding and scroll work that tucked into each corner with seamless precision. I stared at that ceiling quite a bit. I wondered who else did back in the days of Dixie and "the bonny blue flag." Who were they? What did they dream about? And, when they went to sleep at night, what did they hope tomorrow would bring?

From St. Charles Boulevard, I could walk to class and the library. I was all study and business back then. I was going to get my degree and teach poetry and writing with a new passion that was less about Critical Theory and more about Creative Context. That was my plan.

I was given three sections of Freshman English --- about 120 students and over 600 essays for \$666 a month --- hardly a windfall. How could I forget those checks – the number of the Beast. In the mornings, I taught basic composition and expository writing to groups of disinterested frat boys and vapid sorority girls. In the afternoons, I attended my own classes toward my doctorate. At night, I graded beer-fused essays packed with platitudes, clichés and hackneyed maxims. In the wee hours, I wrote my own reports on literary theory and criticism. There was something powerful about being awake and aware when the rest of the world wasn't. It was my only time to get a leg up on uninhibited thought. If I was to become one with the great poets, I was convinced that I had to be as tired and as tortured as they were.

I handed in my first doctoral essay on John Keats. 'The Complete works of Keats' was a small, select tutorial. He was the young, long-suffering Romantic poet who made 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' one of the most quoted poems in literature. Keats was renowned for his imagery, descriptive metaphors, lyricism and dying at 25. The assignment was to write about his use of stanzas and structure, but I couldn't get past his verbal "straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness," so I wrote about that. My paper was well constructed and creative. It was good.

But 'good' didn't matter to Professor A. He was a bitter man --- angry and long-tenured. Bald and bow-legged, he roamed campus with a cantankerous old, bull dog. Famous for ridicule and merciless dress-downs, he was the bane of every female grad student's existence. On the very first day of class, he stared out onto Gibson Quad from the small, square 1940's classroom window. It was an awkwardly long gaze. I tried to follow his eyes past the old oak and ginkgo trees and the swags of Spanish moss when he suddenly pounded his fist on the table and scowled, "No boys studying literature anymore?"

Professor A didn't like women in his class room. He was annoyed that we occupied his seats and monopolized his time. Deep down, he didn't think we belonged. We weren't equipped to dabble in such serious and tragic things as Romantic poetry, fatalistic thinking, human despair, and creative isolation. Women could never possibly grasp the gravity and enormity of the world's enduring ontological questions and metaphysical uncertainties.

Armed with our first essay results, Professor A pulled a frayed notebook from an old, leather shoulder bag. He opened to a page saved with a red tassel bookmark and sighed heavily. He looked around the room, quivered, stretched out his jaw in audible clicks and fixed his eyes on me. In a low, strained almost tortured whisper he asked, "*Who Ever Told you – You Could Write?*"

The room went dead silent. Eyes darted into corners and blank book pages --- seeking cover. Suddenly, I wasn't at my small college back in New York anymore. I was Dorothy scurrying along the yellow brick road somewhere between the Talking Trees and the Flying Monkeys.

It was a pejorative question. To answer was defeat. To not answer was submission. I had several options, and I had to think quickly. I recalled all the years of planning and paperwork to get me to this moment --- the books, the study, the journey, the pocket change, the student loans and the long nights of regurgitating literary theory and long forgotten lines from 'Dover Beach,' 'Don Juan,' and 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.' I thought about my GPA, the Comprehensives, and the GRE's – the endless exams and benchmarks that had consumed the better part of my 22 years. No, he would not take this from me. I earned my seat at this table. I collected myself, straightened up, pressed my shoulder blades into the back of my chair and replied --- "*Everyone actually.*"

From that day forward, Professor A and I were on a collision course. A war of nerves became months of opposition and calculated resistance. I was ultimately forced out of his class. He won --- or did he? I decided that every Tuesday from 4 to 6, I would take a different course at a brassy little place down off Decatur. Those slow-jamming blue notes of the clarinet, trumpet, and saxophone became the lecture of my life.

There were no measured lines or metered feet --- just two-tone patent leather Gatsby brogues tapping out ground beats on an old hickory floor. I can still hear the rumble of the old brass ceiling fan and taste the lukewarm Lonestar, soft-sipped so as not to miss a note. It was an anthology of swing and boom --- a rhapsody of soulful groove and honey croon. It was a long chill, a big easy, and a brief escape from composition and form. This was the poetry I had been looking for.

In a red, hot speakeasy I found Keats --- his "*pipes, timbrels and unheard melodies.*" In the rhythms of ragtime, I found him "*forever piping songs --- forever new.*" In a foot-tapping, head-nodding lounge of Southern swing, I found the young, poet's "*wild ecstasy.*"

For years, Professor A was the monkey on my back and the demon at my shoulder. He was the one that never believed in me at a time when we were all struggling to believe in ourselves. I recently decided to *google* him only to find that he had just passed away. I felt a pang of grief. We had an unfinished conversation. I needed to tell him that he was wrong about women and about me --- but most of all --- about Keats.

Professor A was a creature of configuration and form that became devoid of music and song. He could never really hear the cadence, see the colors, or feel the passion of poetry. He became a caricature of himself, a Dickensian parody-- a slave to iambic pentameter and a prisoner of structure, limitation and preconception.

On his *Legacy Page* some of the online tributes described his tutelage as "tough love" and "tough teaching." Perhaps this is true. He never deterred me and in some odd way, he did inspire me. He became my anti-hero --- the quintessential villain in the novel of my life.

But I will remember him for what I came to understand on those long afternoons with hot, chicory coffee and cool jam. Creative expression need not be boxed into rigid formats and configurations. Sometimes we just need to let it flow --- because existence has a tempo. There is an inherent rhythm in everyday things and if set free, words can write their own story. The sounds of the soul are our most sacred dialogue so we must grab art, music and poetry --- not by the throat --- but by the hand and permit it to tame us, heal us, and save us.

Professor A was a renowned Keats scholar but ironically failed to grasp the poet's core lessons about life and the creative heart:

"Give me books, French wine, fruit, fine weather," Keats wrote "And a little music played out of doors by somebody I do not know."