

Remembering Cleveland

(for Etheridge Knight)

by Clay Rooks

I don't talk to Cleveland Brown or write to him anymore. But he doesn't talk to or write to me either. I'm not sure he's still alive. The booze and the drugs might have killed him by now. Writing poetry was his only other addiction.

I met Cleveland in Minneapolis when I was twenty-five after dropping out of graduate school. He was already a noted poet and I had ideas of becoming one. I had been published, and I had a script at Dudley Rigg's Brave New Workshop.

I didn't know any writers or artists then, except the would-bes I'd met in college, like myself. Nor did I believe then that it mattered if you knew anybody. I was young and I thought that only raw talent mattered. And my talent was raw. But I knew a lot then and I was sure of what I knew.

One of the things that I knew was that Cleveland Brown had talent. His poems were appearing in the poetry anthologies popular in contemporary poetry classes. That wasn't why I thought he was talented, but that's how I first came to read his work. His prison poems were his best.

Like every student of literature, I had studied the great poets, especially the dead ones. But Cleveland was like none of them. He was the third son of a black sharecropper from Mississippi who'd died when Cleveland was still a boy. Thirty years later, Cleveland was a junkie about forty years old who'd done time for armed robbery. I was just a white kid from a middle-class family in the Midwest who was ready for his life to start. I knew I'd spent too many years in classrooms. I was ready to learn about the world and Cleveland was willing to teach.

Cleveland lived in a weathered, white wooden house in one of Minneapolis's older neighborhoods with his second wife, Sara. She was a heavy woman with fair skin and very blond hair. They had no children and Sara seldom seemed to be home. When she was there, I sensed a tension, though nothing spoken between them ever betrayed its source. I think she loved him,

and she always watched him closely, especially if we were drinking together. She watched him out the corners of her eyes, without letting him see her watching. I think she counted his drinks.

One day in early spring, I went to visit Cleveland. Sometimes Kate, my young wife, would go with me. Cleveland liked her because she was pretty and smart, and she treated him like a normal person, not like a name. But we didn't know him well yet and I'd come alone that day.

I parked my old Fairlane on the street and walked up to the house. It had an open porch across the front. The screen door was closed, but the wooden door was open. I knocked and waited. No one came. I looked through the screen door, then went down the porch to look in the living room window. It was open. I could smell spaghetti sauce and through the kitchen door I could see a big pot on the stove. Cleveland enjoyed making and eating spaghetti. He was somewhat vain about his special sauce. I was sure he wouldn't leave while it was simmering. He might have forgotten I was coming, but he wouldn't forget his cooking.

I found Cleveland out on the south side of the house down on his hands and knees digging in the dirt. He was making a garden; he was planting okra and drinking beer. His hands were dirty and he looked happy. He invited me to join him, then began to tell me about okra and its virtues.

I picked up a fistful of soil and held it out to him. "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," I recited.

"What's that?"

I repeated the line.

"What's that mean?"

"It's from Eliot's 'The Wasteland,' you know?"

"Oh. Somebody they have you read in college?"

"Yeah."

"That intellectual stuff is no good, see?" he said. "Poetry has to be for the people, for the masses, for everyone. A poem has to be, understand?"

I wasn't sure I did, or if I did that I agreed, but I nodded, deciding to think about it later.

"You bring any of your own poems?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Read them to me while I finish planting."

"Here. You mean read them aloud...out here?"

"Yes."

"Well these aren't really written to be done aloud," I said. "I just thought you'd read them."

"That's a mistake," Cleveland said. "Poems should be made to be spoken. All poems were originally part of the oral tradition. They were spoken, performed. In Africa, they were chanted and sung. They were not written. They were passed by mouth."

"But if they're sung, then they're songs."

"A good poem should be like a song. It should roll off the tongue."

"Are you saying that what a poem sounds like is more important than what it means?"

"If you can't hear what it means then it is no good. It's just intellectual claptrap." He turned and looked at me intently. "You must forget all that jive you learned in college and teach yourself to speak from what's inside you."

I thought of Yeats, and Eliot, and Dylan Thomas. I had spent years reading and studying their poetry to better appreciate and understand it. I tried to imagine their great poems being chanted or performed like songs. How could all their allusions and symbolism be caught by ear alone?

As he dug, he requested again that I read my poems to him. After what he'd said about poetry, I was afraid he wouldn't like them and I read them poorly. He listened to each all the way through before commenting.

"I hear something there," he said. "The seeds of poetry are there, you understand? You need to make them grow."

"Water them?" I said, straight-faced.

"You don't hear poetry yet," he said, emphatically. "You only read it. You have to find

your own poetic voice. It must be yours, nobody else's. You haven't found it yet, but you have one. I can hear it trying to come through."

He stopped to smoke. His breath was heavy with beer. I had thought he was kidding me before--about the seeds and growing--trying to be kind, or funny. But he was serious.

"What does it sound like?" I asked. "My voice?"

"I don't know. I can only tell it's there," he said. "You have to learn to speak your poetry. It has to come from here." He poked his finger into my chest. "Not from here." He poked my head. "Learn to listen to what's inside you. And know what you feel. Be truthful."

Cleveland had dark brown eyes that either seemed to penetrate yours or they appeared to be two dark stones that saw nothing. When he talked about poetry, they penetrated. But around the dark irises his eyes were often jaundice yellow or bloodshot, or both. He'd once told me it was because he had hepatitis from shooting "horse" in the years before prison.

"I'm not a heroin addict anymore," he told us once over a spaghetti dinner. "They gave me drug rehab in the joint. Now I'm a methadone addict." He laughed aloud and shook his head. "Makes no difference. I'm still a junkie. You don't never stop being a junkie."

Hearing Cleveland talk like this made Sara very nervous. She changed the topic and offered more spaghetti to everyone. Cleveland went to the kitchen to serve himself. While he was gone, Sara took his beer and pretended it was hers. When he asked for more beer, she said there wasn't any. He began swearing. Sara then insisted on getting coffee right away. Kate offered to help. Later when we were home in bed, she told me that the coffee Sara had given Cleveland was almost half sugar. Sara had given her a knowing look, but had said nothing.

"I don't know how he could stand it," Kate said, "but he drank three cups like that before we left."

As I got to know him better, I learned not to offer to start drinking with Cleveland. If he was already drinking, it didn't really matter, but I quit taking beer or whiskey when I went to visit and I never offered any at our place unless he asked. I felt like I wasn't being honest, but I didn't know how to say anything about it without offending him. Instead, I encouraged him to work, to

write poetry. He'd told me that he was living on grant money from the Endowment. He didn't want to waste it. He was writing new poems. I asked to see them, but he always declined. He had me show him all my new work, then he would critique and criticize it. Sometimes I wouldn't take any poems; I'd just go to visit and talk.

Cleveland liked to talk about being black as much as he liked to talk about poetry. His perceptions on history and people and the world were unlike any I'd ever known. He hadn't liked Nixon; he admired Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver. That was no surprise to me, but his reasons were not those of the academic liberals I had known in college. He dismissed them as he did the poetry they taught. He spoke about slavery, and Black Power and White Power, and of revolution and liberation. But he insisted that whites were also enslaved now and they needed revolution and freedom as much as blacks.

"It's the system, Jack. The society and the government. We're all caught in it together. See, you don't realize that everybody is a nigger in some way."

But I thought I did realize it. All of us who grew up and went to college in the late 'sixties prided ourselves by thinking we were, at sometime, especially if we were white.

"You can't live in my skin and I can't live in yours," he said. "But I can tell you we both got to get free."

Cleveland's belief that poetry had to be for the masses and must be spoken took us to Steward's Café. In the evening the café became a neighborhood bar. On Thursday nights after dinner, we would meet there. I don't know how Cleveland managed to get permission for his small group to gather at the bar. Maybe he didn't have permission.

I was not the only young poet that Cleveland took an interest in. Ray Brady also came to every weekly get-together. Ray was about my age and he had the dubious distinction of being considered the best black poet in the Twin Cities, at least before Cleveland came. Three or four other young poets came now and then, but I remember no other steady participants.

Steward's bar was Cleveland's training ground for us. If you came you had to read your poetry. You could also drink, of course, but you had to perform each week and you could not do

any poem more than once. And you had to read before you had too much to drink. So we read and we drank. Beer was ordered by the pitcher. We always commandeered the same corner table. After getting beer, Cleveland would announce to any patrons present that a poetry reading was going to take place as soon as he sat down. Steward's patrons were always very polite. I never heard one complain, but then again on Thursday nights there were seldom many people there. And by the time we would finish usually only the few too drunk to leave were still with us. Somehow mass appeal kept eluding us.

Then one Thursday night a man in blue jeans and a checkered shirt walked in and came over to our table. He wore wire-rim glasses and had a red bandanna headband tied around his long graying hair. Cleveland greeted him heartily, thanked him for coming, and they sat down with us. The guest was Robert Bly.

Bly drank with us and clapped when we read. He seemed to enjoy himself. He read two of his poems. I don't remember which two, but I've not forgotten that while he was reading the three patrons left in Steward's walked out. He didn't act like he noticed, but I heard Cleveland ask him to come again the next week...and he didn't.

He never came again.

I think that hurt Cleveland. Bly was one of the few contemporary white poets that Cleveland admired, but perhaps that was because Bly befriended him.

After several weeks, a Thursday came when we were the only ones in Steward's. Then it happened two Thursday nights in a row. That ended it. Cleveland let the readings drop altogether. He never organized another one there or anywhere else. I didn't mind. Steward's had given me more experience, but it hadn't convinced me that poetry was for the masses, for the common man, as Cleveland claimed. I began to argue that poetry was elitist and always had been, at least in modern times. The common man didn't give a damn about poetry. And that was fine with me. Cleveland rejected my point of view. We argued. I told him that he was a balladeer, a storyteller, a special case. He considered, then agreed. But that's not the only kind of poetry, I said, nor should it be. And I didn't think I was that kind of poet. He lectured me on poetic voice

and poetry for the people. We both had too much to drink and said some cross things to each other. I went home that night and read T. S. Eliot, silently, to myself.

Later in the spring, I went to see Cleveland one afternoon. I had seen him only a few times since the Steward's Café readings. In my writing I was trying to use what he'd taught me and work it into my own style without admitting I was doing it. Now and then I still showed him a poem, but usually I knew what he would think without having to ask.

He kept telling me that he was hard at work on his own poetry, but I couldn't see any evidence of it. His writing desk looked the same each time, the same pile of papers, magazines, bills, and clutter. He talked about writing, but mostly he drank beer. I wasn't much help to him. I would still say things to encourage him to keep working, though I doubted he was and I drank with him whenever I saw him. He had already been drinking steadily when I saw him that afternoon.

"You going to the reading tonight?" I asked.

"No," he said with disdain.

"They picked two of your poems, didn't they?"

He nodded.

The Twin Cities Poets Collective had decided to publish another collection of poems by the Cities' best poets. It was to be an open competition.

"Did you send in the poems I told you to?" Cleveland asked.

"Yes."

"Did they take one?"

"No."

This seemed to confirm something Cleveland was thinking.

"Didn't you see the list?" I asked.

He got up and went over to his desk. After looking around, he came back with an envelope and some sheets of paper. He glanced over them, then handed them to me. One was the list of those chosen for the book; the other was a letter of congratulations, with a special note at the

bottom.

"Is Ray's name on the list?" he asked.

I looked. "No."

He named another young poet we knew.

"Nope," I said, scanning the list.

Cleveland drained his beer and laid back in his easy chair. A clouded look came over his face.

"This note says they want you to read tonight at their reading," I said.

"I'm protesting by staying home," he said. "I refuse to be a part of it."

"But they let you into their clique," I said. I knew well that pointing this out would irritate him.

"I'm going to demand that they remove my name from the list."

"Tonight?"

"No, I can't go. I'd tell them what I think of the whole thing. It'd cause a big disruption."

"I'd like to see that."

Cleveland looked over at me. "No, I can't," he said, turning back.

"Why not? You know what they did."

Cleveland then took off on a tirade saying what they'd done and what he would say to them, and how he felt belittled and betrayed by them.

"Politics, you understand?" he said heatedly.

I said yes, but it was a new concept to me; politics in art.

"You should tell them what you just said to me," I told him.

"I can't. I'm staying home. Protesting."

"If you believe what you said, you should go."

Cleveland considered, then he said, "Okay, but my car's not running."

"I'll take you," I said, jumping up. "If you promise to speak out."

"I will."

"Then I'll be back at 6:30 sharp to pick you up," I said, and I shot out the door for home. As I drove I kept hoping that he was out of beer, that he would eat something and drink lots of coffee.

The Twin Cities Poets Collective reading was held at the Walker Art Center next to the Guthrie Theatre. Dr. Edward English from the University of Minnesota was at the podium. I'd seen him before. He tended to speak very distinctly, with a British accent. He might have been British. He was lauding the Poets Collective and the book they were having published. It would be "important" and bring "well-deserved recognition." He mentioned a few of the poets to be included in the book, Cleveland among them. Finally, he got around to introducing the poets who would read.

When Dr. English introduced Cleveland, he said how honored they were that a poet of Cleveland's stature was going to be in their book. Then Cleveland went by me and down to the podium on stage.

Cleveland got that smiley, actor's look on his face like he did when reading before an audience. His voice took on a resonance not present in his normal speaking voice.

"I'm going to read two poems tonight," Cleveland began. "The first is called 'Hearing the Old African Drum Song in Prison Blues.' I wrote this poem some years ago when I was living at the Joliet State Prison in Illinois."

I slumped back in my seat. He was going into his patter. He had a whole repertoire. He was going to "entertain and enlighten them," as he liked to say.

Cleveland glanced down at the podium. Then looked out into the audience, he started to recite, but abruptly stopped.

"Before I read this poem I need to say a few things," he said. Cleveland turned toward English. "You know what you've done here isn't right. And it is an embarrassment to me and to others. The truth is, I don't very much like being your token nigger."

English said something from his seat, then hurried to the podium.

"I assure you, Mr. Brown, and everyone here, that is not the case."

"How many other blacks are in the book?" Cleveland asked.

"I don't know," English said, flustered. "There aren't that many...here. In the Cities."

"What about Ray Brady?" Cleveland said, pointing him out in the crowd. "Last time he was in your book. This time he's out; I'm in. One nigger at a time. And what about Indians?"

"Your comments are not fair, Mr. Brown. I don't take politely to what you're implying. It was a blind competition. We didn't know who wrote which poems. They didn't come in on colored paper, you know."

Near the front someone booed Cleveland. Back up where I was we were urging him on. Yes, Cleveland. Go, Cleveland.

"They didn't come on colored paper? Your words," Cleveland said. "You didn't know who they were from?"

"No," English said emphatically. "We did not."

"Then how come everyone who's a member of the Poets Collective is on the list...and almost nobody else? Coincidence?"

The audience erupted. I jumped to my feet and began clapping. Others were hooting, cheering, and stomping their feet.

"Well, you're not a member," English stammered.

"And I'm not going to become one," Cleveland said.

The hooting and cheering grew louder. Another man approached the podium and signaling to English. He said something to him. We couldn't hear what he said, but English went back to his seat. Then the man held up his hands appealing for silence. The audience quieted. He didn't appear happy. I thought they might be going to force Cleveland off the stage. Then behind to my left, I heard Ray Brady begin to chant, "Read, read. Read, read," real low. I picked up the chant and it spread through the upper audience. After a minute, the man by the podium appealed for silence again and motioned toward Cleveland. The audience became quiet again. The man nodded to Cleveland and moved off stage.

Cleveland read his two poems in his best voice. We in the upper audience gave him a

noisy ovation. Then Cleveland and I walked out. Ray Brady went too. Over half the audience followed. Many came to shake Cleveland's hand or thank him or compliment what he'd said. Cleveland was gracious but outrageous, too. There in the parking lot, he held court for all who wanted to be near. He enjoyed performing in public, and tonight they adored him. I stood to the side and waited to take him home. But I guessed he would want to go drinking first.

He did.

For a while after that I saw Cleveland much less. I had quit taking him my poems. Tired of poetry and his criticism, I was occupying myself with writing another play. The few times I did see Cleveland, he'd either been drinking heavily or he appeared stoned. I guessed he was smoking a lot of dope, but I didn't ask.

One Saturday, Cleveland showed up at our door and he didn't look too well. His eyes were glassy, bloodshot, and yellow. He seemed to be a little drunk but also agitated and high-strung. Yet on the surface he was animated and talkative. He surprised us by saying he was leaving, he was done with Minnesota.

"I'm going to Mississippi to live with my mother," he said. "Going back home."

The news disappointed me, but I nodded.

"When are you going?" Kate asked.

"Today," Cleveland said. "Leaving in just a little while."

Kate and I exchanged looks.

"You're driving?" I asked. I wondered where Sara was. "Traveling alone?"

"How about some coffee?" Kate said.

"No, I can't," Cleveland said. "I have to get going. You see my mother's sick. I have to go take care of her."

"Oh we're sorry to hear that," Kate said. She gave me a curious look, then went into the kitchen to make coffee.

"Listen," Cleveland said quietly after Kate was out of the room, "I hate to ask you, but I'm kind of short on cash after getting my car fixed. I just need some gas money. Do you suppose you

could...loan me some?"

"Well...maybe. How much?"

Cleveland seemed to study me while thinking quickly. "How 'bout fifty?"

That was substantial money to us. I knew what Kate would say. "We don't have that kind of money..." I started to explain.

"How 'bout twenty?" Cleveland interrupted. "Twenty?"

"Twenty what?" Kate asked, bringing in coffee.

I hesitated. "Uh, dollars," I said. "Cleveland needs gas money. To get to Mississippi. To see his mother."

Kate handed Cleveland a cup of coffee and the sugar bowl.

"Just a loan," Cleveland said. "I've got money coming. In Mississippi."

Kate handed me a cup of coffee. Her expression said neither yes or no. She was leaving it up to me.

"I'll look and see what we've got in the apartment," I said.

I went into the bedroom and checked my wallet, Kate's purse, and our reserve in the dresser under Kate's nighties. Usually there wouldn't be that much, but I found twenty-two dollars. I counted out twenty and went back to the living room.

When Cleveland saw the money, he drank his coffee down quickly. Then he was on his feet.

"I just wanted to stop and say goodbye," he said, heading for the door. "Thanks for helping me out. You're good people. Keep the poetry coming."

He hugged Kate and we shook hands, then he was gone. I felt like I was being deserted, yet it had been months since we'd talked about poetry or writing, except for that night at the Walker. But that had been a lesson in politics.

"He really didn't look well," Kate said, interrupting my thoughts.

No, no he hadn't.

About three hours later, Sara arrived. Her blond hair was a mess and her left eye was bruised and swollen.

"Is he here?" she asked, nearly in tears. "Has he been here?"

"Yes," Kate said, taking Sara to a chair. "He was."

"He left here about one or one-thirty," I said.

"Oh, he's gone, isn't he?" she cried.

"He said he was going to Mississippi to see his mother," I said. "He told us that she was sick."

Sara broke out sobbing. Kate sat beside her trying to comfort her. I went into the kitchen and got Sara a glass of water. She drank some.

"He's dying," she cried. "Cleveland's dying. His mother's not sick. He's sick."

Kate looked up at me as she put her arm around Sara.

"We could see that he didn't look well," I said, "but we didn't know it was so serious. What's the matter with him?"

"He's got hepatitis. Bad. He's on the 'horse' again."

So that was it. Cleveland had displayed every symptom, and I had missed it. I'd helped him con me.

"You didn't give him any money, did you?" Sara asked, looking anxiously from Kate to me, her eyes pleading.

I had a sinking sensation in my stomach. "Just twenty dollars," I said, "for gas."

"Oh no," she sobbed.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I wouldn't have given him gas money if I'd realized..."

"He didn't spend the money on gas," Sara said. "You can be sure of that."

I hoped she was wrong, but I knew she wasn't. Cleveland had given me one last lesson.

"It'll kill him, you know?" Sara was crying. "He's a great poet. A great writer. But he's dying. The 'horse' is going to kill him. I'll lose him, I'll lose him."

Sara cried and Kate tried to comfort her. I wondered what I could do to help, but I

couldn't think if anything now that Cleveland was gone.

After Sara calmed down, Kate offered to get her some ice for her swollen eye. Sara seemed embarrassed that Kate had noticed. She declined the ice and went to leave.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" Kate asked.

"No," she said. "This isn't the first time he's left me. Or got back on the 'horse.'"

Before now I would have been surprised to hear these things about Cleveland. I might not have believed them. But now they were the intimate details that shaded in the portrait of my mentor.

"Is there anything you need?" Kate asked.

"No," Sara said. "I always keep some money hidden away. He didn't find all of it." She smiled, a bit self-consciously, then said goodbye and left.

We never saw her again.

For the next several months, I followed the arts news in the newspaper and in *American Poetry Review*. I expected to see Cleveland's obituary every issue, but I never did. I didn't know if I had missed it or if he hadn't died. I wrote to his mother's address, but I never got a reply.

Kate and I moved a few times, first to Iowa, then to Louisiana, and we had two boys in the next five years. I published a few things. I was working at LSU as an information specialist and still writing poetry and plays at home at night when I saw a flyer that Cleveland was coming to read at the university.

I went, of course, but Kate stayed home.

The reading was classic Cleveland. He played the audience right into his pocket. Afterwards, I went with the college crowd to a local bar where Cleveland was lauded, fawned over, and lavished with drinks. About an hour later, I finally got an opportunity to get close to him. The professor who was shepherding Cleveland around, and was now almost as drunk as Cleveland, didn't like me butting in, but I ignored him. When he realized that we were old friends, he invited me to sit with them.

We talked a while, filling in the past few years. He was happy to hear that Kate and I had

two sons. He was divorced from Sara.

I showed him a couple of new poems.

Then it was late and I'd drunk more than I wanted to. I needed to go home. Cleveland went out with me to get a breath of air and have a smoke. We talked a little more out front of the place. He'd had quite a lot to drink, but I noticed that his eyes weren't yellow.

I realized I had missed him, somewhat.

"I have somethin' I always wanted to ask you," I said.

"Have some'um to ask you, too," he said. "Go 'head."

"I've wondered for a long time what you really thought of my poetry. And the two I showed you tonight. Could you hear the voice?"

Cleveland looked at me, bleary eyed, but steady. He smoked on his cigarette.

"What I think," he said, "is that all your poems sound like they're written by an educated white guy. Nothin' else much to 'em. Not people poetry."

Cleveland's comments burned right though me. All the sounds of the street went mute as his words echoed in my head. I realized I was staring at him. The taste of stale beer came up in my throat. I turned to walk away. Cleveland caught me by the sleeve, stumbled, and fell against the building. I turned around.

"I was going to ask you," Cleveland said, "do you think you could lend me twenty? Just till tomorrow?"

I was incredulous. But then I saw how hollow he looked leaning against the barroom window in the dark.

"Didn't they pay you for performing?" I asked.

"Yeah, but it's a check and I can't cash it till morning when the banks open."

"Ask the professor," I told him. "I'm sure he'll front you some bucks. He won't miss it much."

I left him standing there and went off down the sidewalk trying to remember where my car was.

"Hey, you gimme a ride to the airport 'morrow morning?" I heard Cleveland call after me.

"No, I can't," I said, not looking back.

The next day I had a rotten headache and I was angry. I thought about sending Cleveland a letter telling him that all his poems sounded like they're written by a black ex-con junkie. I wanted to. But I didn't. It seemed stupid when I was sober. And when I thought about it, I knew we didn't have anything to say to each other anymore.

I didn't really think about it after that. I might never have remembered it, but sometime later I heard that he had died somewhere in Mississippi.

Maybe he did.

Now and again I think about Cleveland...but not too much.

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