

Mamie in the Boneyard

I taught poetry writing at a poorhouse, a brick building surrounded by acres of land originally planned as a farm on which residents would grow their own food. By 1977 only weeds and wildflowers covered the grounds; not one of the fifty-five residents was interested in gardening.

Would they be interested in poetry? I wondered.

Having had a book of poetry published myself and inspired by Kenneth Koch's innovative approach to teaching poetry, I decided to give teaching a try.

The Jones Institute, midway between Westbury and Hicksville, was the lone residence in a commercial area. Down a long row of large trees stood a two-story structure like a long-neglected Gatsby mansion. Commuters between Westbury and Hicksville stations sped by with a rear view of the sixty-year old building.

Few passersby knew what went on beyond the fence. There was no signboard on the street.

Occasionally a resident wandered off the grounds and needed to be brought back by the police. And every so often one man walked to a small strip mall to buy tobacco for himself and whiskey for his roommate.

Abe, Palma, Helen, Frank, Warren, Sis, Margie, John, Dorothy, Hubert, Henry, Dick, Mamie, Tom and Robert signed-up for the class.

During the first session, I encouraged participants to remember one thing from their childhood. I then sat next to each individually and had them dictate their thoughts to me if they didn't want to write them down themselves. I collected the papers, shuffled them, then read them aloud as their collective effort.

I recall Abe's contribution that day—

Catcher on a baseball team
hit on the head by a batter
and suffering ever since.

He had once been a paint salesman.

The next week I asked the students the most beautiful thing they had ever seen. Again, I sat with each person, collected what they wanted to say, shuffled the papers and read them as a single poem.

Helen remembered—

In Westbury Gardens
The beautiful colored flowers
Italian flowers blue and open

By the third meeting, they began to create fuller work. With the writer's permission, I read what they had written to the rest of the class.

Warren wrote—

The sudden hush that cloaks an audience
When volunteers are needed,
The hush when an offering basket
Is passed around.

From then on, most students preferred to write their poems down for themselves.

Men sat together around a table waiting for me to begin while the women came in one at a time seating themselves in chairs spread around the room.

Dick wasn't present one morning. Not for the first time, I was told, he couldn't get out of bed. He often drank, until the staff removed the liquor bottle from his wardrobe.

Over the next several months there were absences for various reasons—the two young men began a vocational training program; another resident was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. One other dropped out because he was too depressed to come to class. Rarely were all present at the same time.

During the initial meetings a round-faced man would fidget, get up, yank up his beltless pants, walk out of the room, return and walk out again. By the end of seventeen week program, he stayed for the entire hour and a half session.

Hubert, who said he was there because his mother passed away, wore a sports jacket with glasses tucked into the breast pocket. He held a lit cigarillo between his forefinger and middle finger. The curling smoke left a pleasant odor in the room.

Chatting with students at the beginning of one class I told them that the I had fried zucchini flowers

the night before with dinner. Palma, who seldom offered an unsolicited word, uttered, "Mmm."

Palma wore her thin, gray hair in a bowl cut. She gazed into the distance, her hands resting on the table. In this class, where food was the prompt, she dictated her thoughts to me.

My sister-in-law made stuffed peppers
And a bowl of salad
For my birthday.

Mamie, 70, told me that her family once owned a dairy and vegetable farm.

"Where?" I asked.

"In New Cassel."

She said it extended from School Street to Grand Boulevard, along Union Avenue, about a mile long.

"The farm was gone by the time I grew up. When I was coming up, it was only a plot and a house. But my daddy did own a coal yard by the Westbury train station."

Helen, Sis, Margie and Dorothy were all there. I helped Mamie think about what she wanted to say as she held her pencil above her. At the end of the class, she volunteered to read her poem in front of everyone, a class first.

As I watched the snow falling lightly,
I never knew I could learn to love it.
I never knew I could love the sound of sirens in
the night
Or the birds chirping at my window in the early
morning light.

These are a few of the things I never knew I could love.

Each time we met, I discovered more of the lives of those who lived with broken furniture, rank toilets, missing windowpanes, grimy tiles, rattling pipes, rooms without light, and communal bathrooms.

When I had first volunteered to teach once a week for four months, the proposal was met with hesitance by the administration. Even after showing the director my published poems, it took several months and several phone calls before she allowed me to teach there.

The dayroom was rarely set-up; I needed to open bridge tables myself and bring in chairs from other rooms. A couple of times I had to cancel classes because the room was locked, and the staff couldn't find the key. During a rainstorm, I couldn't shut a window. Once a broken water pipe flooded the floor.

In one session Palma told me—

My father had a gas station.

I lost a kid brother in the war.

I was brought here because I was sick.

Now that I'm well, I feel better.

I'm waiting for my husband to take me home.

Palma, who attended all the classes since the lessons began, didn't show up one morning. The staff would never tell me that a resident would be absent for a session.

I knew that Mamie shared a room with Palma, so I asked her.

“Where’s Palma? Is she OK?”

“Yesterday morning her chest of drawers was empty. She’s gone.”

“Did her husband come for her?”

Mamie shook her head.

“Her husband passed many years ago,” she said.

I didn’t ask where Palma had gone to.

Before I began to help Mamie with the day’s assignment, she handed me a poem she had written on her own.

Yesterday we sat here.

Today you’ve gone, and I sit here alone.

I see you in the books I used to read to you,

In the music you listened to

And in the walks we took together.

No, Palma, I am not alone.

Mamie became more forthcoming with each session and often reminisced about her life in Westbury and told me about her childhood.

Her father met her mother in Floral City, Florida, where he worked in a phosphate mine. He moved to his family’s farm in Westbury because her parents wanted their children to attend school, an unlikely thing to happen in the rural Panhandle. Mamie was about six when they moved.

“I had two brothers. My father died in an accident. He was driving a wagon back from the coal yard and was hit by a train.”

Recalling her childhood, in Florida or Westbury she didn’t say, she wrote:

When I was a little girl,

We would visit a beautiful flower garden.
There were roses and asters,
Daisies and sunflowers arranged
In different colors.
The purple and pink asters formed
A lovely border.
The rose bushes each had a different
Bone next to it;
Cow bones, large bones.
We loved to visit this garden of flowers
And bones called "The Boneyard."

Thick glasses rested on Mamie's nose. She wore her wiry hair swept back revealing small ears and a broad forehead free of furrows and wrinkles. Her hands were smooth, but her skin was often ashy. I never thought to bring her lotion.

Once a year, a local department stores donated clothes to the institute and the staff gave Mamie first pick. While they encouraged her to take whatever she liked, she said, "This is all I want." The months I taught at the Jones Institute, she wore a spotless white dress with pale yellow circles and a triple-strand artificial pearl necklace.

People are always giving me things:
Love, water.
I always try to give to the girls in the building,
To those who need.
To walk with people
And keep them from falling,
Help open and close a locker.

Most residents wore clothes stained and steeped with age. One day I asked Mamie why others didn't have fresh clothes, as she and Palma did. Not since Palma's absence did Mamie's lips tighten. I had touched on something she would rather avoid, an opinion she would rather not state. I didn't pursue this any further. We began to work on the day's theme, 'Animated Animals.' Her familiar smile returned.

I stood by the edge of the pond
Watching the ducks swim among the lily pads.
Some were white and some were brown
And seemed not to be aware of their
surroundings.
To them, all was right with the world.

John had been at the institute for twenty years and walked around the property each day, from the street to the railroad tracks. He wrote—

I saw them:
Black cats
Brown spots
Brown cats
Here out back.
I saw a dog.
He was nice and friendly,
Brown with sandy ears.

Mamie remembered a different time.

To walk through the woods
And pick the purple violets
And watch the brown sparrows flutter away

When someone is near.

“This was my family’s once, from Westbury station to here,” she told me.

She rolled the pencil between her fingers.

“Do you want to write this down? Is this a poem?”

“No, I want to tell you about it. It was the biggest farm owned by African Americans around,” she said.

“All the way here.”

She saw my skeptical look. The first time she had mentioned her farm, it was considerably smaller.

“You don’t believe me?”

“Poetry isn’t about what is true but what you truly feel,” I said.

“This isn’t a poem. The farm once stretched from the coal yard by the train station all the way to here.”

“Maybe we can make it into a poem,” I said.

A half-hour later, when I returned to her after having worked with other students, she had written—

How I miss the little wooden schoolhouse
Set back from the road.
The building is old and the pictures are all gone.
In this place I still see faces of girls and boys
Eager to get on with their lessons
And learn more about the world.

The prompt for another session was to begin with poem with the word ‘if.’

If I were a steamship,
I would sail the seven seas.
I would stop at every port:
New Orleans, Natchez,

That's enough in Mississippi.

One day I brought in poems by Menke Katz. I sat with Mamie and read to her about a hymn to a mouse, praise to a stutterer and burning villages. She, too, knew what it was to be small, to be a mocked and lose your home.

Students named the program's final session 'Symbols of Feelings.' Here is Mamie's final poem she wrote in the class.

The house is clean,
the furniture is sparse,
the table is laden with simple fare:
peas, potatoes, bacon and eggs,
and butter freshly churned.
There is fresh honey,
and the scent of cured ham fills the air.
Welcome neighbors,
to this simple fare,
the food of life.

As I was leaving the room, Mamie handed me a shoe box filled with sheaves of papers upon which she had written some of her memories and a family prayer book.

"I don't know what else to do with these," she said. "No one else is interested. But I think you would be. I'm afraid that they would be lost if I didn't give them to someone who would keep them safe."

In the box was a bible.

"Don't you want to keep this?"

“It is special. That’s why I want you to keep it for me. I have a bible in my room.”

Over the next several weeks I read the papers she had given me, checking some of the information against the records I could find at the Westbury Historical Society. With the help of the librarian, I confirmed most of Mamie’s information.

In Mamie’s prayer book I found the names Tamero and Oyo. In old-fashioned handwriting that had faded two words were written: Old Calabar and Barbados, most likely their last stop in Africa and first in America. The list of names continued: Tamero and Oyo’s son, Obium married Rose, Nero and Bridget were their children. Many names in the book weren’t legible, but I could decipher Richard, Cato, Elkanah, Hannah, Cloe, Jupiter, Benjamin, Peni, Ruth, Nancy and Sarah. Altogether, this seemed to represent at least six generations born on Long Island, most enslaved, some born free, all eventually living and dying as free men and women.

Most interesting amongst the artifacts was a photograph taken of Westbury school children at their desks. There are no names, but I assume that one of the black children is Mamie.



Courtesy of the Historical Society of the Westburys

Mamie's family had been granted land by a Westbury Quaker, but over the years, piece by piece it was sold. By the end of the 19th century the farm was gone. A group of African American women bought a large plot to establish the Garnet Fresh Air House, a summer respite for black women and children from New York's tenements.

By the time Mamie was born all that remained of the original grant was a half-acre plot. She remembered dairy farms nearby, cows staked out creating circles in the grass as they grazed, a blacksmith shop, and a smokehouse to cure meats from cows no longer able to lactate. There was one pig shed.

After her father's death Mamie cared for her mother while she worked as a washerwoman at Hesse's Hotel. There she fell in love with a trombone player from Trenton who played at a club in Westbury. She married Newey Brown and moved to Trenton with him. He played with a band and brought back stories to her about the places he had been. When the band played again in Westbury, she came with him.

Mamie was there the night the police raided the club and arrested Newey for possession of marijuana. When Mamie went to visit him at the jail, she couldn't find him.

"He's been let out?" she asked.

No one had an answer.

Over the next several months, Mamie waited for letters from her husband—from prison, from Trenton, from a juke joint in South Carolina—but none arrived.

There was a poem was in the memory box that I had not heard before. I don't know when she wrote it.

Sultry, swinging and some well-known
Jazz artists such as:
Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman,
Duke Ellington, to name a few.
Each has his own part which blends together
Making the whole.
Mood setting for dancing,
Then . . . the first voice . . .
The clarinet, piano, trombone,
And trumpet solos.

When Mamie's mother died, her brothers grabbed what they could, leaving her nothing. Then the old house was gone, too, when the town foreclosed on the property because of years of back taxes and sold the house.

Mamie rented a basement room at the hotel, but when the inn changed hands, she lost both the room and her job. That summer she became a maid-of-all-work at the Garnet Home. But at summer's end families returned to the city.

Over the years Mamie worked on Old Westbury estates, living on the grounds, cooking, caring for children, helping an aged woman, learning about flowers from estate gardeners. However, sadness slowly descended upon her. Treatments by the best Long Island doctors were unable to help.

Mamie's employer's cousin, Henry Underhill, had once been a trustee at the Jones Institute and another, Harry, the Keeper, and so arranged for Mamie to live at the alms house.



When the poetry classes ended, I volunteered for another stint, but the director equivocated. While waiting for her to decide, I went to visit the residents.

I asked for Mamie at the office.

The woman behind the desk, the same one I had seen for seventeen weeks, looked disdainfully and said nothing.

"I taught the poetry class here."

"I know who you are," she said.

"I'd like to say hello to her."

"Does she know you are visiting?"

"No."

"She needs to know in advance."

"I didn't know that. Besides, how would I do that?"

"Did you call?"

"No."

"You need to call before visiting."

"Can you call her for me, please?"

"You need to call yourself."

“O.K. Can I use your phone?”

She stared at me and moved to keep the office phone out of my reach.

“There’s a pay phone in the hall.”

“What’s Mamie’s phone number?”

“She doesn’t have a phone.”

“So how do I call her?”

“Call the office and leave a message.”

“Do you mean that I need to call to talk to you, so I can leave her a message?”

The conversation continued this way for another minute, until the secretary said, “She isn’t here today.”

“Where is she?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“It’s confidential.”

“When will she be back?”

No answer.

“Is the director in?” I asked, knowing she rarely arrived before noon.

Growing visibly irritated, the receptionist shrugged her shoulders, rose from her seat and went into the back office.

The halls were unusually quiet. As I turned to leave, I noticed the dayroom’s door was ajar. Mamie, her head on her chest, sat in a chair, immaculately dressed as always.

“Mamie,” I called.

“Mr. Dobrin,” she said as she opened her eyes and lifted her head.

"I'm happy to find you," I said. "The office said you were out for the day."

"I'm here," she said.

"How are you doing?" I said taking her hand as I pulled over a chair.

"I'm fine. But I'm moving out soon."

"Really," I said, not being able to contain my surprise. "After all these years."

"This has been my home for a long time."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know."

"Why are you leaving then?"

"It's being sold."

"Sold?"

"That's what we've been told. There's nothing special about Jones, but it's nice to be part of it. I expected it to be open forever. They didn't tell me where I'm going. Everyone I know is gone already. They said there is a nice nursing home for me for me to go to."

"Thank you for the material you gave me," I said, the prayer book and things. I'll keep it safe for you."

Soon after my visit with Mamie, a short article about the institute appeared in *Newsday* about the institute, established in 1836 by wealthy Quaker Samuel Jones, which now was to shut.

Sale of the property became necessary to close the deficit between operating costs and income. The residents were placed elsewhere.

Trustees of the institute said they closed Jones in anticipation of a \$2 million sale of the 13-acre property to King Kullen Supermarket. They said that the 69-year-old structure had become too expensive to operate and that the residents' monthly Supplemental Security Income checks were not enough to cover costs.

Perhaps the reporter knew where the students were. He was good enough to say that a few were in a nursing home in Westbury. I drove to the single-story building in what looked like a converted motel. I parked my car and entered a vestibule. A man sat slouched on a couch, his hair uncombed, his shirt rumpled.

“Hubert,” I said.

He didn't look up.

“It's me. Arthur.”

By now I knew the signs of medication.

“From poetry class.”

He didn't acknowledge my presence.

“What do you want!” a woman shouted from the reception desk in the lobby.

I began to explain the reason for my visit but didn't get far when she admonished me: “You can't come in here and start talking to people.”

“But I know him. I've come to visit. To say hello.”

“You need permission to talk to someone.”

“So I'm asking.”

“We don't need trouble-makers here. Get out.”

“This isn't a prison.”

“If you don’t leave now, I’m calling the police.”

“Are there others from the Jones Institute here?”

“Get out!”

“Let me leave a note for them. They can call me.”

I jotted down my phone number and handed it to her.

“Now.”

Before I could turn, she crushed the paper in her fist and threw it into a wastepaper basket.

I kneeled beside Hubert to say goodbye.

The director of the nursing home refused to take my phone calls. A letter I sent requesting to visit the former Jones residents went unanswered.

Then one day when I drove past, I saw that the nursing home on Brush Hollow Road had also closed. If any of the students had been there, they were now scattered else.

The Jones Institute appeared in the news once again, this time to report that it had reopened as the Jones Manor, an adult home in Bayville. Maybe this time I would find someone from the institute.

The receptionist at the Manor’ desk was pleasant but puzzled when I asked about residents from the Jones Institute. She never heard of the place, she said. Neither did the home’s manager. This was a private facility, not a public one.

In the lobby well-groomed men and women chatted, played mahjong, cards, read, watched TV and shot pool. There was no acrid smell, no medicinal odor. Artificial flowers adorned tables.

What had once been an almshouse for the indigent was now a residence for aging middle-class Long Islanders.

The Jones Manor was sold in 2014 and reopened as a for-profit assisted living facility. Now called Jones Manor on the Sound, rooms averaged \$4,000 a month.

The Jones Institute, the Westbury old age home, the Jones Manor and the Jones Manor on the Sound made me think of my wife's grandfather who lived his final years at the Daughters of Miriam home for the aged, his "last stop," as he called it. And what a lonely stop it was. Separated from the familiar scenes of home, eating unfamiliar food, days without purpose, outliving most friends and eventually his wife. Life was a matter of waiting for a visit, a meal on a tray, fistfuls of pills.

Pop had family who cared about him; he had a wife who had cared for him. He did get phone calls, people did visit. Jones residents, though, were poor and homeless, and they rarely had visitors. Unlike many who can look back upon what once had been a life of fond memories, few residents could call up such experiences. Many had been beaten down by life's cruelties. I'd never known a resident to be physically mistreated, but they were inflicted with the pain of indifference, days without hours, months without days, luckless lives.

Yet even at the institute I found consolation.

When I met Mamie for the last time, she said to me, "You taught us to see the beauty in everything."

They had taught me the same thing.

I end with Dick's poem.

A piece of lace
That had no face
That remembered triumph
And a smile of a bride.
The weaning of babies
School books
The last letter before Pearl Harbor.
A piece of lace
A fragment of time
Who, with God, knew the drama of one family
A piece of fragile lace
Almost human.