PAUL THEROUX

THE ODD-JOB MAN

Every spring, on the first free day after exams, Lowell Bloodworth and his wife, Shelley, drove to Boston from Amherst and then flew to London. He told people he was seeing his publisher. But he had no publisher. The London visits had begun when, as an associate professor, Bloodworth was working on his edition of The Family Letters of Wilbur Parsons. He had brought a box of the letters, rented a room near Sloane Square, and stuck them into a thick album, working by the window with a brush and a bottle of glue; he added footnotes in ink and gave each personal observation a crimson exclamation mark. English academics mocked his enterprise. He would not be drawn, but Shelley said, 'It's not easy editing the letters of a living poet.' English academics said they had never heard of Parsons. Bloodworth had a reply: 'The only difference between Wallace Stevens and Wilbur Parsons is that Stevens was vice president of an insurance company and Parsons was president – still is.'

'Why is it,' an Englishman once said to him, 'American academics are forever putting their fingers down their throats and bringing up books like these?' Bloodworth had thought of asking that man to help him find an English publisher. It struck Bloodworth as odd that the mere mention of his book caused shouts of laughter in London. Especially odd since this book, brought out in America after several delays by a university press, got Lowell Bloodworth the tenure he wanted, and now he was earning thirty thousand dollars a year. But it was the salary that embarrassed him, not the book. There was an additional bonus: The Times Literary Supplement gave him one of Parson's collections to review, and years afterward Bloodworth said, 'I do a little writing for the TLS,' often claiming credit for anonymous reviews he admired.

He liked London, but his links with the life of the city tended to be imaginary. There was that huge party at William Empson's. Bloodworth had gone with one of Mr Empson's former students (who, as it turned out, had not been invited either). Bloodworth talked the whole evening to an elderly man who told malicious stories against Edith Sitwell. The stories became Bloodworth's own, and later, describing that summer to his Amherst colleagues, he said, 'We spent quite a bit of time with the Empsons …'He appropriated gossip and gave it the length of anecdote. One summer he saw Frank Kermode across a room. In the autumn, for a colleague, he turned this glimpse into a meeting.

Nine summers, nine autumns had been spent this way; and always Bloodworth regretted that he had so little to show after such long flights. He craved something substantial: a literary find, an eminent friend, a famous enemy. Inevitably his rivalries were departmental; the department had grown, and for the past few years

Bloodworth's younger colleagues, all of whom flew to England in June, had come back with similar stories. In the warm, early-autumn afternoons they would meet at Bloodworth's 'Little Britain' on the Shutesbury Road; the wives in Liberty prints swapping play titles, the children jerking at Hamleys' toys, and the men discussing London as if it were no larger or more complicated than Amherst itself: 'Leavis is looking a lot older …,' 'We saw Iris Murdoch in Selfridge's …,' 'Cal's divorce is coming through …' This last remark from Siggins, whose preposterous anecdotes Bloodworth suspected were nimble parodies of his own: lately, Bloodworth had felt (the word was Parsons's) outgunned.

This was the first year the Bloodworths had spent their English vacation outside London. They were flushed from Sloane Square by the department. On their second day in London they met Cliff Margoulies on Pont Street. He had a story about Angus Wilson. That afternoon, they bumped into Siggins at the Byron exhibition. Bloodworth said he was just leaving. The next day he had gone back to the Byron exhibition and seen Arvin Prizeman: there was just no escaping them. He ran into Milburn at the Stoppard play, and Shelley had seen the Hoffenbergs at Biba's. Each encounter was alarming, producing a keen embarrassment Bloodworth disguised unwillingly in heartiness. The prospect of a summer of these chance meetings made Bloodworth cringe, and so, at the end of their first week, the Bloodworths took a train to the village of Hooke, in Kent, where they rented a small cottage ('Batcombe') for the remainder of their vacation.

It was not a coincidence that a mile from this village was the house of the American poet Walter Van Bellamy, who had been living in England since the war. Bellamy was an irascible man of about seventy who had known both Pound and Eliot – and been praised by them – and who (though the airfare to New York was less than his well-publicized phone bill) described himself as an exile. Bloodworth was not the first American to get the idea of going to Hooke with the intention of making Walter Van Bellamy's acquaintance; there had been others – poets, Ph.D. candidates, anthologists – but invariably they were turned away. Out of spite they reported how they had found Bellamy drunk. The more Bellamy protected his privacy, the more scandalous the stories became.

Bloodworth, who gave a Bellamy seminar, was anxious to verify the stories. He had often talked to Wilbur Parsons about Bellamy's influence: Parsons acknowledged the fact that Bellamy was the greater poet, but they had, Parsons said, been good friends and had once dated the same Radcliffe girl. Now, Bloodworth's ambition went beyond verifying the scandalous stories or even meeting the man. He had in mind an edition of poems that would be different from anything scholarship had so far produced. This book, 'Presented by Lowell Bloodworth,' would consist of poems in Bellamy's hand, photographs of work sheets and fair copies, discovered drafts, inky lyrics, all of them nobly scrawled instead of diminished by the regularity of typefaces. It would be a collector's item: Introduction by Bloodworth, Notes by Bloodworth – the sort of book

got up to honor a dead poet's memory, an exhibit showing crossed-out lines, second thoughts, hasty errors in the poet's own handwriting. Bloodworth's sections, of course, would be printed in Times Roman. In his mind the book became such a finished thing that when he remembered he had not yet met the man he grew restless to see samples of his handwriting.

'I've seen him,' Shelley said, several days after their arrival in Hooke. It was at the off-license. Bellamy (confirming scandal) was buying an enormous bottle of gin. The man behind the counter had said, 'Will that be all, Mr Bellamy?' and Bellamy had grunted and gone away in a car. Shelley described Bellamy closely: the hair, the walking stick, the green sweater, the car, even the brand of gin.

Bloodworth was excited. The next morning he saw the car parked near the village's cricket ground, and on the grass Bellamy was throwing a mangled ball for his dog to fetch.

'There are people,' said Bloodworth, 'who'd risk losing tenure to be right here at this moment.'

The poet shambled after his dog.

'Say something,' said Shelley.

'This is an historic moment,' said Bloodworth. He added, 'I mean, in my life.'

'No, say something to him.'

But Bellamy was headed in the opposite direction, flinging the ball.

'Rain,' said Shelley, looking up. She spread her palms to the sky. There was a sound, far off, of thunder, and a spark of lightning from the underside of a black cloud.

Bloodworth shook out the umbrella he habitually carried in England. He said, 'Bellamy doesn't have one.'

The poet seemed not to notice the rain. He tramped slowly, circled by the excited dog. For a moment Bloodworth imagined Walter Van Bellamy, the American poet, struck by lightning and killed instantly while he watched from the boundary of the field. He drew grim cheer from the reflection, and saw the thunderbolt's jagged arrow enter Bellamy's head, saw the poet stagger, and himself sprinting across the cricket pitch, then kneeling: critic administering the kiss of life to poet. Bellamy's death would make an attractive article, but if Bloodworth managed to bring him back to life the poet would be grateful, and it was a short distance from lifesaver to literary executor; indeed, they were much the same.

The sun broke through the sacking of clouds, and it was then, in the barely perceptible rain, that Bloodworth ran across the grass and offered his umbrella to the poet.

‘What do you want?’ said Walter Van Bellamy, wheeling around, startled by Bloodworth’s panting.

His ferocity did not stop Bloodworth, who said, ‘I thought you might need this. I happened to be passing –’

‘Who’s that?’ said Bellamy. Shelley – her plastic raincoat flying like a cape – was making her way to where the men stood.

‘That’s my wife,’ said Bloodworth. ‘Shelley, I’d like you to meet Walter Van Bellamy.’

‘Who the hell are you?’ demanded Bellamy.

Bloodworth introduced himself.

‘I’m just going home,’ said Bellamy.

‘We’ll walk you back to your car.’

Bellamy said something, but Bloodworth realized he was talking to his dog.

Bloodworth said, ‘Wilbur’s a great friend of ours.’

‘Richard Wilbur?’ Bellamy seemed to relax.

‘Wilbur Parsons.’

‘Never heard of him,’ said Bellamy.

Bloodworth started to describe Parsons’s contribution to American poetry and Bellamy’s profound influence on the man (‘Going back to what you said about mankind’s terrible …’).

‘Say,’ said Bellamy, interrupting him, ‘do you happen to know anything about light plugs?’

‘Light plugs?’

‘These English plugs have three colored wires, and they just changed the goddamned colors, if you please. I’ve been trying to figure out which wire goes where. Ralph’s

never around when I want him, and I spent the whole morning trying to connect my new shaver.'

'Leave it to me,' said Bloodworth with energy.

'I really appreciate that,' said Bellamy. 'Come over this afternoon around drink time. Bring your wife if you want. This plug's driving me nuts.' Bellamy helped his dog into the car and without another word sped down the road.

'Talk about luck,' said Bloodworth.

Shelley said, 'He seems kind of rude.'

'You'd be rude, too, if you'd had his life. Shelley, he's got wounds!'

In the pub, The King's Arms, at lunchtime Bloodworth inquired about the way to Bellamy's house. The landlord started to tell him, but halfway through the explanation the door flew open and a tall muscular man came in. The man was young, but balding like a man of sixty. He wore a leather jacket, and under it a T-shirt. He grinned and ordered a beer.

'Here's the man who'll tell you the quickest way to Bellamy's,' said the landlord. 'Ralph, come here.'

'What's the problem?' asked Ralph.

'Ralph here works for your friend Bellamy. He's the odd-job man.'

'It's a husband and wife thing,' said Ralph. 'My wife does the housework and cooking. I do the odd jobs – gardening, that lark.'

'When he feels like it,' said the landlord.

'When I feels like it,' said Ralph.

'I know a lot of people who'd give their right arm to work for Walter Van Bellamy,' said Bloodworth.

'Not in Hooke you don't,' said Ralph. He winked at the landlord. 'Right, Sid?'

Bloodworth suppressed a lecture. 'You were saying, the quickest way …'

'Oh, yeah. Here, I'll draw you a map.' He made the map carefully, sketching the streets and labeling them, marking the way with arrows, noting landmarks.

Bloodworth was surprised by the stubborn, conscientious way the odd-job man worked with his pencil, and when Ralph said, ‘I think that’s worth a beer, don’t you?’ Bloodworth dumped change on the counter for three pints.

At half past four, the Bloodworths walked the pleasant mile along winding country roads to Bellamy’s house. The house was not signposted, nor did it have a name. It was a converted farmhouse at the end of a close lane, set amid crumbling farm buildings, a roofless barn, broken sheds, and fences with no gates. They were met at the front door by a woman of about thirty with a white, suspicious face.

‘Mrs Bellamy?’

‘She’s in Italy.’

Bloodworth explained his errand. The woman said, ‘Wait here.’ She closed the door in their faces and bounded through the house; they heard her on the stairs. Then she returned and led them to an upstairs room, where Bellamy sat at a cluttered table. On the table were papers, unopened letters, a stack of books, a wine bottle, a glass, and the electric shaver with its flex exposed.

‘I’ll have that fixed in a jiffy,’ said Bloodworth. He lifted the shaver and, pretending to examine it, looked past it to the swatches of paper with their blocks of blue stanzas. He was glad, but it was not the simple thrill he had once invented for himself (‘Walter was showing me some of his rough drafts …’): in this script he saw his finished book, that album of scribbles.

‘Doris,’ said Bellamy to the woman, ‘bring a couple of glasses, will you?’

Bloodworth took the plug apart, stripped the wires, and said, ‘Looks like you’re hard at work.’

But Bellamy was staring at the plug. ‘I don’t understand why they don’t sell the shaver with the plug on. I suppose that’s too simple.’

Bloodworth repeated, ‘Looks like you’re hard at work. New book?’

‘What’s that?’ Bellamy said. ‘Oh, fiddling around. My wife’s out of town. That usually gets me writing.’

‘Lowell’s a writer,’ said Shelley.

‘Robert Lowell?’ said Bellamy.

‘No – me,’ said Bloodworth. ‘I do a little teaching on the side to pay the grocery bill,

that sort of thing. Well, I mentioned my Parsons edition this morning. I like to present a poet, get him an audience. Some people call it criticism, but I think of it as presentation. And' – Bloodworth bit a length of plastic from one of the wires – 'I do quite a bit of reviewing.'

'You don't say,' said Bellamy.

Bloodworth saw he had not roused him. He took a breath. 'I've even done some reviews of your work.'

'That's funny,' said Bellamy, turning from the plug to Blood-worth, 'I don't recall your name.'

'It wasn't signed. Actually it was for the TLS, so you could hardly be expected –'

'The TLS? Was it about a year ago, that review of Hooked?'

Bloodworth did not hesitate. He stuck the last wire into the plug and said, 'Yup.'

Bellamy struggled to his feet and snatched the plug out of Bloodworth's hands. He weighed it like a grenade – Bloodworth thought he might throw it – and said fiercely, 'Get out of here this minute and take your wife with you. Doris!' (She stood in the doorway, a wineglass in each hand.) 'See these people out. You, sir,' he said to Bloodworth, 'are over-certain to the point of libel, and if there's one thing I will not stand –'

Bloodworth did not wait to hear what it was. Bellamy was a big man, and enraged he looked even bigger. There was a story that Ezra Pound had taught Bellamy to box. The fact was pertinent, for it is well known that Pound had sparred with Hemingway. The Bloodworths bolted.

At the road they paused for a last look at the house. The house was lighted; the lingering storm had darkened the late afternoon. But as they watched, the lights went out, all at once, just like that. And they heard within the house the poet howl.

'The plug,' said Bloodworth. 'I think I've made a mess of that too.'

Bloodworth thought of writing Bellamy a letter, explaining everything. But it had gone too far for that, and Shelley said, 'Let's forget it, Lowey. It was a horrible mistake. There's no sense crying about it. We can go back to London and see some plays.'

'And Siggins, and Margoulies, and Prizeman …' Bloodworth flinched: a return to London was a return to the department.

‘But we can’t stay here. Not after that.’

Bloodworth said, ‘I hate to leave empty-handed. Let’s give it a few more days.’

They saw no more of Bellamy. Bloodworth watched for his car, his dog, for any sign of him; but the poet had withdrawn to his farmhouse. Bloodworth hiked through the damp fields, hoping to meet him, and he imagined a situation in which he could undo all his bungling. He might happen upon the poet drowning, or lamed by a fall, or cursing a blowout Bloodworth could fix. It might rain again: a crippling thunderbolt. No opportunity presented itself. And Bloodworth walked alone, for Shelley had come down with a cold. She sat in ‘Batcombe’ with the electric fire on, reading a Dick Francis she’d found on the bookshelf.

One evening, leaving Shelley at the cottage, Bloodworth went to The King’s Arms and saw Ralph. Ralph said, ‘If you know what’s good for you, you won’t come over to the farm!’

‘I guess he’s pretty mad.’

‘He’s been screaming his head off for the past three days,’ said Ralph. ‘I don’t know why, but he takes it out on Doris and me. I mean, I don’t care myself. I tell him to his face to leave me alone. But not my wife. She’s the quiet type. Just sits there and takes it. He’s a bastard, he is. You Yanks are all alike.’

Bloodworth didn’t know what to say. Finally he said, ‘Bellamy is a very gifted poet. But his reputation has suffered. I wanted to help him.’

Ralph said, ‘You’re a great help. He had to get an electrician in. For the lights. You fused ’em.’

‘An American poet,’ said Bloodworth, still thinking of Bellamy, ‘needs an American critic, an American audience.’

Ralph said, ‘Hey, is it true that one third of all the dog food in America is eaten by human beings?’

‘No,’ said Bloodworth.

‘I heard that somewhere,’ said Ralph. ‘The thing is, I suppose, my wife has no sense of smell. She burns things. What I’m trying to say is, it’s hard to be a cook if you can’t smell.’

‘Funny. I’d never thought of that.’

‘Some people are born that way. Old Bellamy shouts about his food – says it’s too salty, or overdone, or underdone. My wife’s disabled and he shouts. Sympathy? Not him – just poems.’

‘Why do you put up with it, then?’

‘I take a pride in my work,’ said Ralph. ‘And you can’t beat the money; Bellamy’s rolling in it. You buggers make a fortune. But Christ, I could write the stuff he does! Ever seen it?’

‘I teach it,’ said Bloodworth.

‘It’s rubbish,’ said Ralph. He recited in a lilting voice, “‘I was walking down the road. I seen two cows. The sky turned green. My uncle don’t like me. Oh-oh-oh. I remember them cows. Humhum-hum. My heart she’s shaking like a big fat drum.’”

‘He never wrote that.’

‘Oh no? I seen it. The most awful crap. I could do it myself. I do do it – tried it once or twice, pretty good stuff. Pomes.’ Ralph grinned. ‘You know what I think? I think he gets people to write it. He’s got so much money, and these sickly looking buggers are always sloping around the place – “Don’t touch this, don’t touch that.”’

‘You haven’t read any of his books,’ said Bloodworth.

‘The hell I haven’t,’ said Ralph. ‘And I’ve done a tidy sight more than that. I’ve read the stuff on his desk, all the scribbly papers. “My heart was walking down the road and seen two fat cows,” that stuff. “Chickenzola, how’s your father.” I’ve read the lot. It stinks.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘I don’t care if you believe me or not,’ said Ralph. ‘If I wasn’t making money off him I’d go and give some lectures. Rent a church hall somewhere and say, “Well, here’s the truth about your so-called great poet, Mr Bellamy –” That’d shake him!’

Bloodworth said, ‘Suppose I was to say to you, man to man, “Prove it”? What would you say to that?’

‘I’d say, “Why?”’

‘Let’s say I’m interested, I want to give you a chance,’ said Bloodworth. ‘I know what you’ve been through.’

‘It would cost you something.’

‘How much?’

‘More than ten quid, I can tell you that.’

‘Let’s say fifteen,’ said Bloodworth.

‘Let’s say thirty,’ said Ralph.

‘You drive a hard bargain.’

‘Like I say, I’m me own man. My wife, she just takes it from him. Bellamy thinks an odd-job man is someone you shout at, but I do my work and I shout back. I take a pride in my work – whatever I do, I take a pride in it.’

Ralph, Bloodworth could see, was three-parts drunk. He wanted to cut the business short. He said, ‘Now let’s get this straight. What you’re going to do is bring me two or three examples of his bad poetry …’

‘Listen,’ said Ralph, ‘make it fifty quid and I’ll bring you the whole bloody lot in a bushel basket!’

That evening Bloodworth told his wife Ralph’s extraordinary story. Shelley was fearful, but Bloodworth said, ‘After what he’s done to us? Thrown us out of his house – and we went over there with the best of intentions. I tell you, he deserves what’s coming to him.’

‘I didn’t like the look of that Ralph. He’s probably wrong.’

‘Probably,’ said Bloodworth. ‘But think of the manuscripts, work sheets! Shelley, they’re gold! And what if he’s right?’

Ralph was not in The King’s Arms the next day. Bloodworth stopped in at lunchtime, then returned at six-thirty and stayed until closing. He watched an interminable darts game, he made himself ill on cider, and briefly he wondered if the whole affair might not be the blunder Shelley feared it was. But the critic’s rules were not the poet’s, and what the poet called ruthlessness the critic might give another name. Bloodworth sympathized with Ralph, the oddjob man; he saw the similarity in his tasks and the critic’s: they received orders from the man whose poetry had earned him privileges, and stood at the margins of the poet’s world, listening for a shout, waiting for a poem. But what critic had marched forward and snatched a poem from under the poet’s nose? None had dared – until now. Bloodworth saw himself on the frontier of criticism, where there was danger, and not the usual tact required, but elaborate deceits and

stratagems, odd ways of doing odd jobs. He went to bed with these thoughts, though Shelley woke him throughout the night with her coughing.

‘It’s not like Ralph to miss a day,’ said Sid, the landlord, the next day.

Bloodworth said, ‘It’s not important.’ He wondered if Ralph had betrayed him to Bellamy, and he knew a full minute of panic.

He met Ralph after closing time on the road. Ralph said, ‘Running away, are you?’

‘I thought you weren’t coming.’

‘It’s all in here,’ said Ralph. He slapped his shirtfront. Bloodworth heard the sound of paper wrinkling at the stomach of the shirt. He was excited. His Introduction would be definitive. The book would be boxed. It might cost twenty dollars. Ralph said, ‘Let’s go somewhere private.’

They chose the churchyard, a shield of gravestones. Ralph said, ‘My wife was off yesterday. She gets these depressions. I might as well be frank. It’s her tits, see. I don’t understand women. I keep telling her they’re not supposed to stick out. Look around, I says, lots of women have the same thing. But she –’

‘What about the poems?’ Bloodworth said.

‘Don’t rush me,’ said Ralph. ‘You don’t care about anybody’s problems but your own, do you? Just like old Bellamy.’

‘We’re taking the evening train.’

‘First the money.’

Bloodworth peeled off five five-pound notes and counted five more ones into Ralph’s dirty hand.

Ralph said, ‘Why not make it forty? You’re rolling in it.’

‘We agreed on thirty.’ Bloodworth hated the odd-job man for putting him through this.

‘Have it your way.’ Ralph undid the buttons on his shirt and took out a creased brown envelope. ‘I hope you appreciate all the work I put into this. It seemed a lot of trouble to go to, but I said to Doris, “Thirty quid is thirty quid.”’ He handed the envelope to Bloodworth.

‘I’m glad you’re a man of your word,’ said Bloodworth.

‘Well, you seemed to want them awful bad.’

Bloodworth shook the hand of the odd-job man and hurried to ‘Batcombe’ to tell Shelley. But partly from fear, and partly from superstition, he did not open the envelope until he was on the train and rolling through the Kent hopfields. At first he thought he had been swindled; the folded sheets, about ten of them, looked blank. But they were only blank on one side. On the other side were the collapsing rectangles of typed stanzas, lines which broke and sloped, words so badly typed they had humps and troughs. And there was a letter: I hope you apreciate all the work I put into this but a deals a deal altho it take me a whole day to type up this stuff and any time you want some more lets see the colour of your money! Yours faithfully, R. Tunnel. PS I enclosed herewith one I wrote meself so you can compare.

But the drunken typing and misspelling that made them valueless to Bloodworth did not disguise the beauty of the lines. Reading them made his eyes hurt. He turned quickly to Ralph’s own poem, which began,

The odd-job man thats me

Messing around in my bear feat

Can make a stie from some tree

Raise up pigs for the meat.

The polecat, he thought, and his anger stayed with him for four English days. But back in Amherst he recovered himself, and when the department met for drinks and showed their trophies – Waterford crystal, a Daniell engraving of Wick, a first edition of Howards End – Bloodworth brought out his folder and said, ‘I’ve got some unpublished Bellamy variants in here, and the work of a new poet; he’s terribly regional but quite exciting.’ Prizeman squinted; Margoulies smirked; the others stared. He shuffled the summer’s result, but as he passed the poems around to convince the men, it struck him that he had the oddest job of all.