

For Poets, a Turn for the Verse

White House Salute To the Masters of Rhyme 'n' Readin'

By Donnie Radcliffe
and Joseph McLellan

The Carters gave a party for some poets yesterday, with readings and refreshments and a string quartet to play. The two-hour celebration was enough to break the lease. And everyone was there except for what's-his-name from Greece.

There were poets in the foyer, there were poets on the lawn, and if they had their way, the party might have gone till dawn. But this was not permitted by our stalwart Secret Service, who did what they are paid to do look sharp while feeling nervous.

The president was working on the crisis in Iran, and also on the situation in Afghanistan. And everybody understood, with things in such a tizzy, that Jimmy would have liked to come, but probably was busy.

(A group of poets were invited once to a soiree, back in the age of Camelot, the time of J. F. K. But then a missile crisis came along at the last minute, and so the party had to stop before they could begin it.)

No crisis stopped them yesterday; the poets were abundant, and patrons of the art were there (perhaps a bit

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Spins and Curves From the Mind Of Karl Shapiro

By Paul Hendrickson

The last time Karl Shapiro was invited to the White House, JFK was in and history got in the way. He and 200 other poets had come to town to honor Robert Frost on his 80th birthday. There was a reading at the Library of Congress.

"Just before we were supposed to climb in these big blue buses to take us over to the White House, one of the librarians got up and said the whole thing was off, that an 'international incident' had just taken place. He said it involved a naval blockade. It was the Cuban missile crisis."

John Clardi, one of the poets who gave a brief reading, made a pointed reference to "the grinning presidency" in one of his poems and complained, a few lines later, that "new postal regulations forbid the mailing of anything real and accurate." Later, privately, he said that he found the wait "insulting," and when told that Rod McKuen was one of the invited poets at the party, he said, "That adds to the insult."

"The last time I came here," he said, "Johnson was president and you could drive up to the door and they had something worth drinking. There's nothing potable in this administration." He added that Carter "had my vote until today—now I'm not so sure," then paused and said that he would "have to consider the alternatives."

Not present at the party was poet and ex-senator Eugene McCarthy, but a report was supplied by Washington poet Toby Thompson, who had seen him outside the White House: "We had to wait outside about 45 minutes and it was freezing. Gene McCarthy came up behind me and said the only way he could get into the White House now was by being a poet and waiting in line. He walked away after a few minutes. Then there was a horrible, loud, shrieking noise—it was the starling-scattering system. I wonder how many poems will be written in the next year about standing outside the White House in the cold and listening to the sound of amplified starlings."

Other poets were less bothered by the inconvenience or managed to take it in stride. Ann Darr said that she thought the sound of starlings was "part of the entertainment."

"I can't be cynical about being invited to the White House," said Robert Hayden, "and I didn't mind the wait. There have been times when poets weren't welcome here."

In general, the poets seemed to consider it a festive occasion of special significance. "some of these poets I've never seen in neckties before," said William Packard, editor of the New York Quarterly, "and some of them should have been in rags."