

certainty that I wasn't supposed to have seen what I did, that I'd been let in on a secret I was better off not knowing.

The second time, I was a young man. I went to Saint Mark's Church to hear the poet James Schuyler. Early, killing time, I passed a basement window crammed with books. The nearby door was held ajar by string tied to an iron railing. A hand-lettered sign read OPEN. I went down the steps and found myself in an apartment with no furniture, just towering piles of paperbacks. An old, witchy-looking woman (she was, in fact, probably my age, now) came up and introduced herself. "I'm Gertrude," she said. "Take a look around." I poked at the piles, afraid of knocking one over. There was no reason why anything was in any particular place. There were no sections or subjects. The books rose high, like stone columns left by a departed civilization. Oddly, near the top of one stack I found a copy of a Schuyler collection I had not yet read, *The Crystal Lithium*, with its seascape cover by Fairfield Porter. I still have it. I can see where Gertrude wrote, in now-fading pencil, \$1.50.

At the reading, Schuyler was surrounded by a coterie of young poets who laughed at his jokes and rushed off to get him diet sodas. He looked unhealthy and glared at the assembling audience. Afraid of making eye contact, I focused instead on the one touch of color in his clothing: a pair of vibrant, mustard-colored sneakers. When he began to read, he was inaudible. The audience crouched forward, trying to make out the occasional word. He introduced each poem with a certain gusto, but the text he treated with indifference, if not distaste. It was something to be gotten through quickly. I don't think I have ever listened harder, or felt more irrationally rewarded, than when I made out in their entirety the last two lines of "Closed Gentian Distances":

Little fish stream

by, a river in water.

...a poem from the very book, I would discover later, I was clutching in my hands.

Finally, a few years ago, I saw that the British playwright Simon Gray would host a strange-sounding event at which several scenes from his plays would be performed by well-known Broadway actors. It was held in the auditorium of a public library.

Gray was tottery. A few years before, he had given up both drinking and, as I was to read later, leading what sounds like an almost-bigamous double existence. With that, his writing had gone slack. Paradoxically, this new benign style gained him a greater following than when he was so subversive and funny. He had become, in the English