

ROUND THE PARK TWICE

The other night Tim Walz spoke at the Democratic convention, and his most meaningful line (to me) was, “Never underestimate a public school teacher.” In that second, he had my vote. Of course, he had my vote before that—but I spent 34 years of my life as a high-school English teacher, having to endure people squinting at me through a barely-checked derision that seemed, wordlessly, to be saying, “And that’s *all* you’ve managed to achieve?” I’ve had novels published, been responsible for two films, written satirical sketches for NPR—but it all washed away in a bleach of condescension with the term: *high-school teacher*... I had breakfast with the former executive producer of *Morning Edition* last week—a man of 72 whom I probably hadn’t seen in 40 years—and he asked me, “Robert, are you solvent?” I didn’t know whether to laugh or feel insulted. (I did both.)

I was thinking of all this as I walked twice around the pond in Roosevelt Park the other morning. The dawn was remarkably autumnal (temperature in the 50s at 6 AM) and my fellow walkers were wearing sweatpants, hats, tracksuits. An older man in a striped long-sleeved shirt played tennis with his grandson.

With my walking stick I passed the bench where my late sister used to sit with her dog Angel. A plaque on the bench read: *Frank J. Dopart. Remembering a man and his dog. 1946-2022.* I never met Mr. Dopart, but it pleases me that his dog managed a credit in his memorial.

Speaking of credits, the other things running through my head this surprisingly temperate morning were images from the movie I wrote. Two days ago the director sent me, via computer, a rough assembly of the movie. Lynn and I sat in *The Metuchen Times* office (the best computer in the house,) and, with considerable astonishment, watched a 91-minute draft of the film—no music, no sound effects, no credits.

But there it was—this story unfolding on the computer screen—this period tale of 1943 that I’d spent more than a decade tinkering with, trying to get all the pieces to reverberate at the same frequency. Here it was: in costumes, in color, actors pouring their hearts out in service to this intimate comedy-drama. By the final fifteen minutes Lynn and I had both dissolved in tears—partially because of the miracle that the film actually got made, and partially because of the poignancy of the ending.

The director, whom I spoke with on the phone yesterday, was still looking for a few trims—and so I watched it again, by myself, late last night—cried again—and this morning, as I make a second trip around the pond, my mind is evaluating lines that might be relegated to the cutting room floor. I pass, for the second time, a squat no-necked man in a black t-shirt who has never once looked up from his phone. A father fishes with his son on the footbridge. Driving to the park this morning, the iPod in my car played Matthew Broderick singing “I Wanna Be a Producer”—and, as I walk, the song won’t leave me alone, especially the moment when one of the weary accountants does his sort-of *Porgy and Bess* interlude: “I credits all de mornin’/And I debits all de evenin’/Till dem ledgers be right.” It still makes me laugh out loud.

The sun shines in a pure blue sky. Last week a former student (from decades ago) wrote to me, on her birthday, informing me it was her “57th year to heaven.” It was a reference to Dylan Thomas’s “Poem on His Birthday” whose first line is “It was my thirtieth year to heaven.” It was a poem I taught to her 10th grade Honors English class when she was sixteen! That this poem still occupies one millimeter of her brain, after a lifetime, is nothing short of astounding to her former teacher who now walks through his seventieth year to heaven. And the day and the world and the ducks around me in Roosevelt Park suddenly feel unknowably beautiful.

I think of another line by Dylan Thomas: "Time has ticked a heaven round the stars." I'm not even sure what it means, but I like its music.