

25SHORTGRASS.DOC

From the inn to downtown Key West, a shortcut passes two bookstores to reach the poetry conference. Better today to take the longer route to be on time and on budget.

Bookstore infatuation makes a piccolo player trying to kick a lip salve habit seem like an afterthought.

The shortest route records a sidewalk romance the year workers poured the concrete. "Vivian + Henry" appears four times in one block, carved under the date "April 1977." Ol' Viv scores the next block a month later in a newer sidewalk. But now she's in love with "Larry."

What fun to imagine how Vivian would feel to walk back over those vows inscribed in concrete after she's a granny so soured on men that she'd hire an air drill to erase the past if she thought she could get by with it.

Across the street from the lover's log, Ernest Hemingway stayed three weeks to await delivery on a 1928 Model A Ford to drive north. All this took place in his Cuba days, before he bought a home in Key West.

Hemingway history renews free from tour buses' sound systems twice on the hour, 60 steps from my hotel room window. I considered taking a ride to be able to write more on the town.

An ol' gal on the phone said tickets cost \$29.95 plus tax for 40 minutes and include a 10 percent discount at the tour's gift shop. Before she hung up, she smartmouthed "the press card query" by recommending hiding the card in a safe place until I left town.

The innkeeper suggests renting a bicycle for \$12 a half-day to pedal along behind the tour, eavesdropping and exercising at the same time. Hombres with indoor cat boxes and cat food on the coffee table like him don't have any advice to spare, in my opinion.

The longer way to the Center goes through street hustlers even at this early hour. Midway, a musician beats on an upright piano in wild runaway boogie. His come-on basket attaches to his stool to shake in rhythm with his movements. How he protects his tips with his face to the keyboard is a mystery. Safe to bet, however, a guy smart enough to roll a full-size piano out on the sidewalk for a concert can do without Brinks to guard his dough.

Up ahead, an arm-swinging ruckus starts between two street hombres. Blessed are the peacemakers only works in Little Bo Peep settings. No time lost at all to wait for lights one block back to slow traffic so I can jaywalk to avoid a scene fueled by beverage alcohol or exotic weed smoke.

All the shops are still closed over here. In one inset storefront, backed by a heavy mesh door, two black ladies' slippers rest side by side in neat abandonment. Clutter reveals no clues. There are no wine bottles or cigarette butts, or even an old blanket to direct imagination toward prurience.

She, whoever she was, could have left a disclaimer, giving away all rights to write about her shoes. But you can bet a shoe store against a shoe horn, if a graybeard comes along, glances down, or breaks stride, the walls are going to vibrate with "Dirty old man, dirty old man."

Once there, the program says Robert Pinsky, three times U.S poet laureate, keynotes the conference. Relax, only a few lines are going to be reviewed or repeated here. All that's going to be passed on for now, Mr. Pinsky says, is "Like the Zulu people, we must consult our ancestors, not worship our ancestors." He sure picks a good one to fit we shortgrassers, who need our grandparents' counsel to guide our tenancy of the lands.

Now, if that's too much poetry, take my seat behind a lady who holds up a cell phone camera with two hands to shoot a hundred thousand frames minimum an hour, and you'll support guillotine sentences for such offenses on a statewide crusade.

Her blouse sleeves drape far enough to block peering under her upraised arms. She shifts to pan the stage and ruin a side angle glimpse. Camera clicks punctuate her bracelets' rattles. And the ol' boy directly behind clears his throat in rasps harsher than a streetcar's brakes to reduce audio contact.

Sound waves bounced from the ceiling transmit Mr. Pinsky's final words through the barrier: "Poetry is essential, more so than pop music or movies, for example, because poetry is more intimate. It involves lips, tongues, ears, breath."

At intermission, the camera lady packs her bag. She slips the cell phone into a slot to signal that off an ol' heifer goes with three hours of my paid admission on film.