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Breakfast around the pool at the Cypress Inn the first morning ends with an announcement by the innkeeper to expect cold weather. He says the temperature may drop to 42 degrees Fahrenheit today – an all-time low.

The same channel he watches promised in the room a while ago that San Angelo, Texas could expect a little ol' chill to 10 degrees F. Ten degrees Fahrenheit in the Wool Capitol means the 09 Divide features frosted hollow horns humped up and eating raw prickly pear, slobbering and slinging cactus juice to freeze on each ribcage all day. Plus, the few woolies left on top become fewer by devouring toxic bitterweed in death wishes that make a suicide bomber sound like he's decided to join a rescue squad.

Forty-degree weather feels temperate at home. Here this morning, with the innkeeper's staff dragging out big gas burners to warm the patio, the bandana tied around the neck and jacket collar turned up like a boatswain's feels warm enough to walk to the conference eight blocks away.

On the main drag, a lady already opens her seashell-engraving booth. We exchange warm good mornings. After the December writers' conference on Sanibel Island, the poetry workshop teacher's evaluation suggested to direct my writing talents toward seashell engraving. At least she was

kinder than the teacher on the same trip who asked whether palm fronds were available in Texas to weave baskets.

Theme for the conference honors two-time Pulitzer Prize winning poet Richard Wilbur. Mr. Wilbur, an 89 year-old, winters in Key West. His fame and talent draws a lot of good poets here for this occasion, seven or eight big-league word churners where you might hear two of this caliber on the same program elsewhere.

Promptly at 9 a.m. comes the command to turn off cell phones, followed by a welcome address that cuts the 19 minutes most spellbinders need to say good morning. The master of ceremonies says, "All the introductions will be that the speakers will call out their own names, mounting the stage. We don't need to know how many grandchildren they have, or how long they were stuck in the airport at Miami."

In about 10 more words, the program launches into big-name poets reading poetry or sitting on panels answering questions. The audience feels special, too. Respectful is one guess, awe a second one. Enrollment is limited to 350 people interested in writing and reading the language.

The break for lunch falls short, like one p.m. to two. The crowded bar and restaurant across the street from the center serves good food fast and reasonable. A two-dollar

bill in a waitress' apron pocket wins a seat in a window enclave with speedy menu and a tap water drop-off. Second two-dollar bill adds one bacon slice to the sandwich and an extra spoon of pasta salad.

Four bucks is no dough at all in Key West joints. Child plate hamburgers may cost nine dollars and chocolate ice cream on a small cone might take more than a fiver. Part of the meal last night was six oysters on the half-shell for 10 dollars. Instead of saying "skimpy," it's best to say the oysters came larger than the eyes in tapioca pudding.

Travelers dumb enough to bring along kids or grandkids on a trip farther than 10 miles from home at least should learn to use two-dollar bills for bribes. Years after I herded my mob of eight broncs, one pass by a hotdog joint hit strong enough to sense a wet highchair or feel an onslaught by wild urchins dead bent on spilling the yellow mustard into the pickle relish on the table top.

Without a 20 year-old man to lead interference, I can't reach the bar's restroom from up front or pay the bill in a hurry. Football fans stand four deep at the bar. Their elbows levering back and forth to lift their beers blocks the space. Twice, a first down or field goal one

delays my needs. Better to get a check and retreat back to the conference.

The emcee wasn't kidding. Barely enough time remains to gain a seat before the program begins on the hour. One can't say when or where country boys fit, but be assured that poets never know the difference, or care where you are from or where you ate lunch.