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Please understand from the start of the story that the odds are nil of your being converted to poetry festivals, poetry reading, poetry books, or poetry communicated on paper or over microphones, CDs and computers. The country may not be free, but readers still are.

I am a fine one to be addressing freedoms, checked in and registered for four days of poetry readings and workshops in a burg called Waterloo, New Jersey. Desk clerks are unable to locate the city limits, much less the town. The hotel's slogan further confuses the issue with the title of "International Conference Center."

The only international flavor around comes from the small newsstand selling Hong Kong rabbits' foot keychains in the lobby. But the way Wall Street opened last Monday, the dreamy-eyed hombres in the coffee shop may not be poets or fans but international traders dumbstruck by the market crash over the whole world.

The Mabel Dodge Foundation funds the Waterloo festival in a big way on dough made way back before markets spoiled things. For a festival location, think of a state park by a beautiful stream harboring waterfowls, shaded by tall, tall hardwood alders, floating the first fall colored leaves

onto the grassy banks and onto the porches of 19th century houses.

For the opening day, a Thursday, pick a number in the multi-dozens to count the yellow school buses and secondary conveyances unloading bucking, pitching high school students from New York City and all over the Mid-Atlantic states. The exact numbers are a guess.

To sharpen imagery, visualize kids so thick that they must be falling from the overhead branches like leaves and twigs. The press tent lady projects 20,000 folks will be here during the four-day festival. She bases her estimate on reservations factored to the big tent that holds 1600 to maybe 2000 seats.

Odds of her being right are slim. Statisticians from Harvard University couldn't count the young bodies sprawled in aisles and slumped behind the last row of seats on this kid day. Not to overlook the stray drifters lolling around concession stands to avoid uncool workshops. The riverbanks attract them, too. Subdermal-inked bodies shod in high-topped boots stuffed with flowered mesh stockings lift waves of hormones powerful enough to put the white geese barging into the grounds to molting and send swans to congregating on far shores.

All the while, adults slosh from tent to tent in raincoats or under the shelter of umbrellas. The schoolteachers stand off, stricken by pupil shock and school bus trauma turned deep inward toward severe distrust of all mankind.

In spite of rain, or because of rain, lines never diminish going to portable restrooms. Crowds, however, remain polite and orderly. One lady told my pal she forgot her purse in the big restroom in the center of the park. An hour and a half passed, yet she found all the contents intact, including cash and credit cards.

The Borders book tent on the grounds enjoys heavy traffic with so many word people on hand. Authors, after readings, take turns autographing their new and old books in a tent adjoining the book pavilion.

At the first Dodge festival we attended, the featured poets circulated in the crowds. From the poet laureates of the U.S. on down to new names, we all ate under the trees off paper plates. But I suppose as the name writers began to be paid more to make other festivals or give workshops at summer schools, they became tired of attention, or needed privacy to rehearse. Two or three times I see people receive cool receptions when they ask one in a main tent to sign a book.

The end of integration of the poets and the audiences, plus the natural division of the students from adults, changes the atmosphere. I sense more and more distance from the seatmates in the small tents for afternoon sessions. No one shows from Mertzon or Angelo. Poets or aficionados don't read newspapers or discuss the news. The ban on talking on cell phones under the tents stuns the audiences. Hand and lip twitches become bothersome answering imaginary calls.

Understand I am not losing any money on the stock market. I do worry whether the man on the Divide shipped a crippled bull to the packers before the economy made the fall cow sales weaker. Be our luck also for a disastrous early frost to accompany a major international inequity in the rate of exchange on Mexican corn shucks for holiday tamales; that would ruin our Christmas.

My pal has been a herder so long and around so much ranch stuff that she reads minds. Once she catches me looking off, pats my hand and says, "Go ahead and call. It's an hour earlier there."

And I am right; the packer market has dropped, too ...