

“I am a phony,” Shel Silverstein announced in a lecture hall filled with young men, teachers, a headmaster, and me, the editor of the campus newspaper in 1959, my final year at Kent School (then for males only) in Connecticut. I was the one who had brought him there.

We’d met several times before when he was a popular cartoonist for the long-defunct LOOK magazine (died in 1971). My dad, Kim’s grandfather, was its humor editor in the 1950s and ‘60s. He bought some of Shel’s best cartoons. One depicted two shaggy prisoners hanging in leg and arm chains halfway up a cell wall with a tiny window high above them. The caption—“Now here’s my plan”—drew stacks of letters to the magazine, some from psychiatrists and philosophers who suggested that the cartoon was a celebration of undying human hope in the face of mortal danger.

With scant hope that this shy artist and poet would agree, I asked my dad if he could enlist Shel to come to my school to engineer a hoax. Surprise: he liked the idea. I set the plan in motion by running a bogus article in the paper announcing that “William Reynolds” was going to teach a mandatory course at Kent, for seniors only, on “group dynamics.”

The first obligatory class was scheduled for a night session when the bearded lecturer, armed with notes I had provided, berated us. We were out of touch with the world, he said. We were consumed with “rowing your boats down the stream”—an insult to the school’s popular and trophy-winning racing shell program. We would each have to buy his textbook, *Dynamics and The Man*, for an exorbitant price.

We were unobservant, Dr. Reynolds said. We were clueless about him. We didn't even know who he was, he said. We sat silent and still. He had been speaking for almost an hour.

"I am a phony," he said. Pandemonium, laughter—and shouts from one or two in the crowd who had thought they recognized him from his photos—"You're Shel Silverstein!"—but were afraid to challenge him.

He had fooled almost everyone else, including one of the old-school teachers, who had whispered to the headmaster early in the harangue, "This guy knows how to control a class."

Around the same time, Shel released an LP called "Hairy Jazz." He was the vocalist, accompanied by a Dixieland band. He acknowledged that for the most part he didn't actually sing in the recording. "I shouted," he told me. And it was true. I can still hear his ragged voice lamenting, "I wonder who's kissing her now?"

I'm among many who are missing him now.

**Gurney Williams III**