

*Alfred, there is little information available about your background (family, childhood, etc.). Is there a reason for that or would you be willing to share some with me?*

I was born in 1956, the second of my parents' four children, whose births followed a pattern: girl, boy, girl, boy. My parents were working-class French-Canadian people from large families. My mother was the next-to-youngest in a family of twelve children; my father had eight brothers and sisters. Nearly all of the socializing my parents did was with family members. When I was a young boy, my playmates were my cousins.

Neither my mother nor my father had much education. She completed her eight years at the Catholic elementary school which I later attended, Sacred Heart School in Amesbury, Massachusetts; after that, she worked at a hat factory and took care of her elderly mother. My father did not even make it through elementary school. He was asked to leave class for misbehavior in the sixth grade and he never returned. He did attend a technical high school later on, where he studied mechanical drafting. He took a job in a sheet metal shop, where he was made foreman and worked until his retirement. His co-workers had great respect for him. When I was old enough to work summers at the shop, they would tell me, whatever I might accomplish, I would never be as intelligent as my father. I liked hearing that.

Though my mother claimed to have never read a book all the way through—it hurt her eyes, she said—she was a regular contributor to “Confidential Chat,” a women’s forum printed in *The Boston Globe*. The contributors had nicknames for their bylines, so I don’t know if I ever read anything she wrote. The participants swapped recipes and advice. My mother was a tireless housewife, sleeping no more than 5 hours a night. She baked all of the bread we ate; she made most of our clothes. And her warmth and affection held our family together. She was loud of voice and loud of laughter; she pickled tomatoes and grew grapes to make jellies, she left nuts out for the squirrels and fed birds from her hand; she would sit on the porch and wait to greet us coming home from school. She was still a young woman when she died; the family suffered terribly; we fell apart, to tell the truth. It seemed to me that we four siblings had been like kittens in a box till then. After her death, we went our separate ways, even though we lived under the same roof. I was fourteen, and I felt guilty about her death, because at fourteen one begins to assert one’s independence, and on some level it felt as though I’d done too good a job of getting free.

Despite their lack of education, my parents shared a great faith in the power of education to create a better life. Our schoolwork was always encouraged, to say the least, and we all did quite well as students. When I was accepted at

Dartmouth College, it was celebrated as the first time in a decade that anyone had gone from my high school to an ivy league college. I don't know if that's actually true, but you get the picture.

*After you left Dartmouth College you entered the printing industry for 20 years. What exactly did you do in the industry and why did you stay for so long?*

Well, I think there are two contributing factors to my having persevered so long in circumstances not ideal for an aspiring poet. The first is that I may have been carrying in mind the image of the sheet-metal shop as the kind of work that real men do. I gravitated toward hands-on work that required a little craftsmanship and a lot of endurance. That's certainly what the printing industry demanded.

I might have escaped that unconscious inclination to equate meaningful work with labor had I not had to support a family immediately upon graduation from college. Syd Lea had spoken to me about working as an editor for *The New England Review*, which might have been a better way to go, but I got married and my first son was born during my senior year at Dartmouth. My wife and I went to live near her parents in our home town. I was pretty ineffectual when it came to thinking about ways to make a living—I never did improve much in that area, to be honest—my degree in creative writing worked about as much magic as my wife's high school diploma did when it came to finding work. I worked as a farmhand, as a poet-in-the-schools, as a house painter, and finally as a pressman. I was embarrassed, because I knew I'd been given a rare opportunity: here I had an ivy league degree and I was having trouble putting food on the table. Meanwhile our bills were piling up. I got the notion that we'd be better off in San Francisco—I was probably running away from my problems, like a true poet—so we sold all of our belongings at a yard sale and came away with three hundred dollars. I took the money with me on a bus to California while my wife and son went to live with my father. I talked my way into a twelve-hour night shift at one of the big printing firms in the city, saved for a month or so and sent air fare to my wife, and made enough in a year to pay off my debts. By then we may have been getting homesick; we certainly hadn't put down any roots in The Mission District. I got an offer to work in the pre-press department for a printer back east. As it turns out, I had a knack for that kind of work, and I began to earn enough to make ends meet. So I stayed with it— for twenty years!

*Tell me about your writing development during that time period.*

I always thought of myself as a poet; I always maintained at least the illusion that I would write poems of some value. Sometimes it took some doing to convince myself that it wasn't an illusion, though. Since I hadn't achieved anything of note in any other pursuit, my sense of self-worth became almost entirely involved with my writing. And what did my writing amount to? I have an entire shelf full of hard-bound journals full of not poems, but lines of what might be called poetry written in the "first thought/best thought" manner of middle-period Allen Ginsberg. I would simply breathe in, watch mindfully to see which words or phrases uttered themselves on the out-breath and scribble them into a journal or type them out on an Olivetti that the poet Erica Funkhouser gave me. The only readers I had for the occasional poem that resulted were Erica and Syd Lea. They'd get a short manuscript in the mail from me every three or four years, and respond with enormous generosity, whereupon I'd submit the poems to magazines and have them rejected. But I'd only try one or two places; I didn't want to waste my writing time on po-biz. There was not a lot of "writing development" going on. I would say that I learned how not to sound exactly like an imitation of Allen Ginsberg. I learned that Creeley's manner of thought was nearer my own, but finally pushed that too aside, as too abstract. I tried on early Neruda; that heated, emotion-drenched surrealism of his was more to my taste than the cool French kind. I tried to write like Denise Levertov. I read everything I could find by Robert Duncan, which led me to H.D. I would have to say that her later, longer poems were my best model for a number of years. I knew next to nothing about prosody, but I did find out about syllabics from reading Kenneth Rexroth, and I had good success counting syllables: every poem that I ever wrote in syllabics eventually got published. That was my first inkling that a little bit of "formalism" might be beneficial to me, though you can imagine, given my models till then, that I wasn't thinking of anything like what came to be called the New Formalism.

The great good of all that scribbling was that I came to recognize the sound of the voice inside my head. That's the instrument I use to make whatever music gets into my poems. Luckily, when I became associated with the Powow River Poets, I was able to find some accompaniment in the tradition: I started allowing myself the use of rhyme and meter. I found my *métier*.

*How did you first get involved with the Powow poets?*

I think it was in 1999 that I read an article in the local newspaper, The Newburyport News, about The Powow River Poets, in which Rhina Espaillat

and Len Krisak were interviewed. It gave the time and place of their monthly workshops, and I decided to attend, though I did not expect to find anything like what I experienced there. I took a seat beside a woman who introduced herself as Deborah Warren. When my turn came to present a poem, I read one of my syllabics, which Len Krisak dismissed as “not bad for free verse.” I took offense, as at the time I considered syllabics the height of formalism—at least as high as I intended to climb. It was a few months later, after having endured other slights of that kind, that I decided to try my hand at writing in meter, if only to show Len that I could do it handily. I copied out a poem by Emily Dickinson and scanned it—of course it was in ballad meter but I couldn’t have told you so at the time—and I used my old method of simply writing down whatever came to mind, except that I fit it to the pattern laid out. I wrote “Empty Streets.” Though that poem appears in my second book, it is actually the first poem I ever consciously wrote in form. Len made a very big deal of it in the workshop, and I am eternally grateful to him for having goaded me to try my hand at writing in meter.

*I am writing about a few differences I see in your work from Winter Light to Elegy for Everyone. Would you share with me details on when the poems for each volume were written and how far apart? Also, what changes did you see in your own writing from WL to EFE and even your new work? What prompted the progression of your writing?*

As you can tell from my answer to your last question, it would be problematic to speak of a progression in my writing judging from the difference in the poems in my first two books. Many of those in my second book were written before some of those in my first. “Closet,” “Daily Practice,” “The Difference,” “Empty Streets,” “Landscape with Odd Man Out,” “The Song of Miss Lily” (which is the first poem I published in *The Formalist*), “To Live Within His Means” and almost all of the verse written in Ichabod’s persona could have been included in *Winter Light*. A much longer version of “A Deaf Ear” appeared in the Winter 2001-02 issue of *Pivot* as “Punching the Clock.” When I step back and try to get a perspective on the way my poetry is heading, everything I might say provisionally about the direction it is taking could be contradicted using examples of recent poems. If I try to claim, for instance, that I’m bringing a more conversational tone into my poems, as in “Elegy for Everyone,” “Bat,” or even in the rollicking anapestic tetrameter lines of “Mother’s Side,” the devil’s advocate in me could trot out poems like “Lullaby for a Scholar,” “Old Haunt,” or the poem that you took for “Think,” “Pensées Pourries.” I often decide that the poem of sheer imagination is the kind I should be writing, like “End of the Season” (which is a favorite of mine)—

maybe that's where my writing is headed?— but I don't find many poems like that when I glance through those I've written in the past 18 months or so. Speaking as someone who once considered Robert Creeley his most important influence, I really no longer have any desire whatsoever to empty my poet's toolbox the way he did. I plan to avail myself of form, meter, rhyme, metaphor, conceit, persona, and every register of speech that might come in handy— I'll resort to alliteration like in *Beowulf* if need be. I've seen poets whose judgment I value highly cringe when reading my poem, "Mother's Side." Maybe that poem doesn't work on the page for some readers, but it's far and away the best poem I've got for reading aloud. That's a poem I tried to write for twenty years, until finally the right sound came to me while raking leaves. Of course it should sound like Dr. Seuss; it's a boy of the age of Dr. Seuss's intended readership that experienced those events.

Actually one of my most recent projects was to write a series of dream-notations in free verse for a book of prints that my sister Elise is publishing. Elise is a wonderful, award-winning printmaker.

(See [http://www .elisenicol.com](http://www.elisenicol.com))

I really haven't answered your question because I can't. Poetry writing for me is a not very conscious process. I take what I'm given. I feel grateful to be given anything, and I panic just a little when nothing comes along for a while.

*How did you come to know Allen Ginsberg? Being somewhat familiar with Ginsberg's work and very familiar with Larkin's, there is a big gap between the two poets. What about each made the most impression on you?*

I'm mortified to remember that I withdrew from Dartmouth in the middle of a term toward the end of my first year; I wonder how much of my father's factory-wage went to waste? But I'd spoken to the beat poet Diane DiPrima when she came to read there; I'd decided that a real poet like me didn't belong in "the academy," and I went off to Colorado to "The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics" at Naropa Institute in Boulder. Ginsberg taught there, as did DiPrima. William Burroughs lectured. Gregory Corso came busting into my apartment looking for popcorn.

Ginsberg's teaching was all about tradition. He drew upon an eccentric but well-defined lineage of poets. I first heard Thomas Nashe's poem, "In Time of Pestilence," read aloud by Ginsberg. He loved George Herbert's poetry. There was Blake, of course, in his personal canon, and Hart Crane held a high place in it. But to hear Ginsberg tell it, Samuel Johnson's crazy friend Christopher

Smart was the biggest influence on his own poetry. “Howl” came from “Jubilate Agno.” I was mesmerized to hear all this talk of tradition. I’d been walking around all my young life feeling as though I’d been “chosen” for something, and here was a noble lineage, there for the taking. I only had to become a great poet to include Milton and Keats in my genealogy! So Ginsberg gave me a reason to go back to Dartmouth. I returned with a purpose. I’d study the English tradition in poetry. That might be frowned upon as too Eurocentric and patriarchal nowadays —probably at the time, too, for those better in the know—but it was just the thing for a factory boy turned poet. It showed me another way to be a man, which was of first importance to me. Strange to have learned that from decidedly queer Allen Ginsberg.

So you see, Ginsberg’s influence on me as a young writer was exactly the opposite of what you might have supposed; far from imparting any kind of literary radicalism, he was my link to the great tradition of English and American poetry.

Larkin I came to much later, probably as a result of my silly pastime of drawing up poetic genealogies, as in Spencer begat Milton, Milton begat Blake, etc. There was a yawning gap in the genealogy until I realized what a great poet Larkin was. There is almost nothing that he chose to save that isn’t to my taste. You never have to wade through junk reading Larkin. And he never writes poems that are advertisements for the poet, poems that say: “Notice what a fine poetic sensibility I possess, and don’t you agree that my sentiments should be universally shared?” Because the answer would be, “No, Philip. We’re probably better off feeling differently than you do.” Except the truth is that, more often than not, our own thoughts and feelings are equally suspect; we just don’t write them down, nor do we write as well.

*Many of your poems have a very succinct summarizing end line, which, in my opinion, makes them into a balanced and complete unit (there are exceptions to this, I know and I am writing about the differences). Is this something you do intentionally, or do they fall into place that way in your mind?*

I remember reading an interview in which Robert Creeley was asked how he knew where a poem should end, and he said, when it begins to feel like it’s coming around again, circling back. My way of writing is like that; it’s like taking a walk, but hopefully one that takes me somewhere. One doesn’t want to go over the same ground, or come back the same way. There’s no need to come home. You pitch your tent where you end up, and that’s where you live now. You write till you get there, and then you stop.

That description might not seem to jibe with writing in form, with writing a sonnet, for instance. Why should you suddenly arrive at an unknown destination exactly 14 lines after setting out? But you only have to take into account the magic of the form, the inherited influence it has on the way you proceed. Say you really were walking in the woods: you almost certainly would follow the paths that are already laid down, which may have been there for centuries. On Po Hill in Amesbury, where I spent so much time as a child, the main path used to be part of a road from Boston to Maine, and before that a Native American trail. Literary forms are like those paths that have been around forever; they're probably the best way to get somewhere. They get you there quicker than wandering would. The difference is that in writing in form—unlike following a trail—the destination changes depending on what the poet brings to it.

Sometimes you walk past your best stopping place. The poem that ends my second book, "Your Other Men," may seem like it knew exactly where it was going from the start, but my first draft of that poem was a two-page rant in couplets. Bob Crawford showed me that everything of value was contained in one section of fourteen lines, and I took his suggestion to make it a sonnet of sorts.

I wonder if I'm making any sense, but I will point out that a great many of my poems talk about walking, so this idea in all its vagueness is yet central to my method of composition. "Encounter with the Naysayer" is the best example; then there's "The Date" and "Empty Streets." And there are quite a few others in which the idea of a walk figures in one way or another — "Actaeon, After"!