

## Some Questions for Poet Alfred Nicol

Amanda Mooers, Interviewer

*How did you first find poetry? Or did it find you?*

I knew very early on that I wanted to be a writer. I mean very early on, before I could read. A neighbor sat in her front yard reading a picture book of Moby Dick to her son and I looked over her shoulder. The drawings excited my imagination immeasurably. I never forgot the experience. I began trying to teach myself to read by saying the letters of a word so quickly that they began to slur together. My method doesn't work, of course. "Cat" would be pronounced "Saty" if it did. The point is that my earliest literary experience was not in the least abstract; it was altogether physical. The picture of Ahab lashed to the whale seared itself into my mind. Then I began my own literary work focusing intensely on the sound of the names of letters, mistakenly believing that I could figure words out that way. I certainly did learn from my error. If I'd had a teacher to show me the right way to go about it, I'd have missed out on that intense physical encounter with the written word. That's poet's work.

Though both of my parents made education a high priority, neither of them had had much of it. My mother did not attend high school. My father was asked to leave his sixth-grade classroom for some bit of misbehavior and he never went back, though he did later receive some technical training at the high school level. But my mother would kneel beside me at bedtime and recite the Catholic prayers in French; that was a lovely verbal music that stays with me just out of hearing. And my father had a good singing voice. He sang around the house all the time. When I first heard a CD of Hank Williams' songs only about 10 years ago, I realized that I knew all of the words to all of the songs. They were the songs my father sang. That's not a bad first influence for an American poet—rather like a Scottish boy listening to Robert Burns.

Again, with all of these early influences, it's the sound of words that worked on me. There's also Dr. Suess, who is a delightful poet and ought to have a volume in The Library of America series. And the first record album we had around the house, which came with the stereo my parents bought: Nat King Cole. I became a shower-crooner myself imitating him.

*Who are the poets you read again and again? Do these poets influence your current work and if so, how?*

I guess it should come as no surprise that one of my biggest influences is not a poet per se but a writer of songs, Bob Dylan. His work is of vital importance to me. Another poet for whose work I feel a great affinity is Philip Larkin. Both of these writers use rhyme to great effect. But they have something else in common. Both are willing and able to bring "negative emotion" into their work. Too many contemporary poets write as though they are trying to please an audience; they say things that people want to hear. Certainly a lot of gloomy poems get written, but they are generally written about political or social issues on which there is widespread agreement, at least within the literary community. It's safe to be angry in the abstract about something that all your friends are angry about. Or despondent in the abstract. But Dylan and Larkin both express emotions that are not particularly attractive. Dylan will come right out with it: "You've got a lotta nerve / to say you are my friend." And Larkin's entire body of work cries out: "I am a lonely man, and it's my own fault: I chose this life, and I would choose it again." You may not want to take either of these men as a role model, but it's enormously freeing to have their work as an example. If I'm not at least a little close to the edge in the act of writing, I find the writing loses energy.

Starting out as a poet, some of the first poets who mattered to me were Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan. I envied the obvious friendship of these three, which did not exclude honesty; they

could be very critical of each other's work. Now I'm lucky to have a group of poets with whom I share the same kind of intellectually honest relationship, The Powwow River Poets. I can't believe my good fortune. I'm almost reluctant to admit that Bill Coyle, who is a younger man than I, is someone I'd list with Larkin and Dylan as among my favorites. But when our workshop rolls around on the second Saturday of the month, I walk toward the library anticipating something new and wonderful from him. And Deborah Warren will be there, Rhina Espaillat and David Berman, Bob Crawford, Len Krisak, Midge Goldberg and Mike Cantor. They are the best group of people anywhere; I'm glad to be included. The discussion is not limited to that one Saturday each month. We exchange poems via email all the time. Richard Wollman sometimes sends me two or three poems a week! Wollman's own work is strikingly like that of Eugene Montale (without his having been consciously influenced by the Italian poet), and not much like my own. Maybe for that reason we've been particularly helpful to one another as readers. He's had a major hand in helping to revise some of my own best work, including the title poem of my next collection, "Elegy for Everyone."

*You worked in printing for twenty years—why the move to poetry?*

Believe me, printing was never an alternative to poetry. Poetry is a calling; printing was a job. My first son was born while I was still in college. I needed to make a living, and I thought—mistakenly, as it turns out—that if I took an artisan's job I would be able to write in the evenings, not having to "take my work home with me." I did not realize how drained I would feel after a long day in the shop, how much of my time and energy would need to be devoted to raising my children. I'm proud to say that I became a very good printer, and I feel as though bringing up my two sons is the best work I've ever done. I was not as successful in trying to write all those years, though. I did keep it up almost all the while. I stopped at one point for almost two years. Since consciously deciding to "be a poet" in my sophomore year of high school, that is the only time in my life when I did not write.

I certainly had no time to spare for "po-biz," though. I published only a handful of poems over the two decades. In the late nineties, a new press at The Maryland Institute College of Art agreed to publish a book of mine titled "Ask." The book would have been an art object itself, printed on an old Heidelberg letter set press. I saw the proofs, but my heart sank when I saw the mistake the students had made in backing up the pages incorrectly. Had they folded those signatures and put the book together, half of the pages would have been upside down. It was back to the drawing board, and since the students who'd done the work had graduated, the work couldn't begin again till fall. By then another editor had taken over, and he decided in favor of another manuscript, so mine never got printed.

In October of 1998 I was able to "retire" from printing and devote my time entirely to writing. The "Life of Riley" is essential to poetry. One can industriously go about writing a book of fiction or non-fiction, researching, setting up time charts, travelling to find out about specific locales. Writing poetry is largely a business of waiting around for something whose arrival you cannot be sure of, listening in silence to silence. One can appear very lazy doing this difficult work. Poetry is less like industry than it is like fishing, patiently waiting, risking the waste of time. Or like gardening, except that the seed-packages are unmarked. You can do the planting but you never know what's going to come up! Lucky me, at least I have something to show for the nine years I've spent courting the muse. My first book, *Winter Light*, was published in 2004. An anthology of poems by the Powwow River Poets, which I edited, appeared in 2006. And a second book of my own, *Elegy for Everyone*, is supposed to be published in the next few months. It makes it easier to justify such lack of industry. As the son of a factory worker, my unconscious (and so inarguable) definition of what makes a man has a lot to do with hard work, so this is something I take quite seriously.

*Where do you write? Explain your writing "process".*

That question follows nicely from what I just mentioned, my idea that a man has to go off to work in

the morning. When I first left printing I began a routine of arriving at the Newburyport Public Library as soon as it opened in the morning. I would sit there surrounded by books and force myself to write for several hours “by any means necessary.” Once I even grabbed books down from the shelf and copied one phrase from each –whatever phrase caught my eye– to make a poem:

*Hymenaeus & The Scholar*

*Coffee. Different  
marriage proposals to read.  
His commitment to  
reason had scrawled above it,  
“Tendency to disappear.”*

*Terribly crowded,  
and if the answer is two,  
 (“My love, don’t fail me–”)  
he needed a few more days,  
a ten-minute walk, these lines.*

*It would be absurd  
to hope for that. A murmur  
of talk, rendezvous,  
windows of a pastry shop.  
His pretty, freckled wife. Go*

*on, all the lights in  
the paintings, her small hand  
on Sundays after mass, rich,  
“the result of emotions,..”  
“Dear Elena,” he began.*

The whole poem is in italics because every word of it is stolen from a book in the library. A lot of what I did at that time was experimental. I wrote to keep writing.

I remember Diane DiPrima telling me when I was a young man that one must write stream-of-consciousness for months to write off the top layer and get to the good stuff underneath. That had long been part of my “method.”

After a few months I rented a small apartment. That way I could get tea without interrupting my writing. I didn’t have to wait for the library to open. If I felt tired I didn’t have to quit for the day; I could nap for twenty minutes. Or I could write all night long if I felt particularly inspired.

But I still approached my work in poetry the way I’d approach any other work. I didn’t wait around for inspiration. I’d noticed that those lines that came to me in the night and demanded to be written, which I’d find later scribbled on little scraps of paper on the nightstand, were really no better than lines I took absolutely for granted as I worked hard at my desk in the daytime. I was learning something that I later found perfectly expressed in a poem by X. J. Kennedy, which I have by heart:

*On Being Accused of Wit*

No, I am witless, often in despair

At long-worked botches crumpled, thrown away—  
A few lines worth the keeping, all too rare.  
Blind chance not wit entices words to stay  
And recognizing luck is artifice  
That comes unlearned. The rest is taking pride  
In daily labor. This and only this.  
On keyboards sweat alone makes fingers glide.

Witless, that juggler rich in discipline  
Who brought the Christchild all he had for gift,  
Flat on his back, with beatific grin  
Keeping six slow-revolving balls aloft;  
Witless, La Tour, that painter none too bright,  
His draftsman's compass waiting in the wings,  
Measuring how a lantern stages light  
Until a dark room overflows with rings.

That poem of Kennedy's is my *ars poetica*. It's a fine corrective to all kinds of soft notions about how poems get made, and it's especially helpful to someone whose self-worth is so directly tied to the idea of "doing a job right." I haven't grown out of being my father's son.

*Tell me about your move from the Beats and free verse into formalism.*

Poems like the one I showed you, "Hymenaeus & the Scholar," are formal poems, though they're not traditional poems. They're formal in that they obey a set of a priori rules, rules that someone else could follow in writing a similar poem. The rules for that particular poem are simply that each phrase that enters the poem has to be the first phrase that makes itself legible as the poet scans through a library book at random. It's a silly kind of form, but it's a form.

Any game that has rules is a formal game. The difference between a game of tag and just running around in the schoolyard is that there are rules for playing tag. I've always loved the game of baseball with its near-perfect set of rules. I quickly lose interest in a game where the rules are set aside for any reason at all.

No one in the world would have referred to the poems I was writing ten years ago as "formalist" poems. But the formalist imagination was hard at work all the time, working too hard, I would say now, re-inventing the wheel time and again. The rules for writing a sonnet are quite as beautiful as those that govern the game of baseball, and one can invent any number of different games without coming close to creating one nearly as good.

Generally when people speak of formal verse now they mean metric verse, of course. Blank verse is a pretty open-ended "form" but we would consider any poet who wrote blank verse to be a formalist.

It's actually a shorter leap from the Beat poets to metric poetry than it would be from typical lit-mag main-stream free-verse to metric poetry. Ginsberg's father, Louis Ginsberg, wrote and published traditional metric poetry. He recited Milton aloud at home. Ginsberg himself was keenly aware of his (albeit-eccentric) poetic lineage. When I attended Ginsberg's class at Naropa Institute he used as his texts poems by George Herbert and Thomas Nashe. William Blake and Christopher Smart were more important to him even than Whitman; the lines of "Howl" owe a great debt to Smart's weird wonderful poem "Jubilate Agno." Ginsberg was never "winging it" as a poet. He didn't mistake the imperative to "break the iamb" as a call to forget about meter altogether.

The other poets usually grouped under the rubric “Beat” are hardly free versers of the sort one reads in today’s literary journals. Gregory Corso, wildest of all, taught himself to write by reading Shelley and Keats in prison. If you think he was not concerned with meter, read his long poem “Bomb.”

Kerouac himself read the Bible and Shakespeare ceaselessly.

To me, these writers don’t represent a break with the tradition. I don’t think they saw themselves that way either. Ginsberg for one seemed positively obsessed at times with locating himself within a poetic lineage. I picked up that obsession from him. Right from the start I’d make long lists of my poetic “ancestors.” It’s a boyish self-aggrandizing thing to do, but fun. And it does at least make you aware that this art of ours isn’t a recent fad.

As an aside, I’ll show you a metrical, rhymed poem on which Ginsberg and I collaborated back in 1975. I say that we collaborated; actually he wrote the last line for me when I showed it to him and complained that it didn’t finish the way I’d planned for it to finish. He got my meaning exactly right.

### *Pilgrimage*

The purpose of the sage  
Is pilgrimage,  
Like dust to alight  
Upon the sacred stage  
And beg the Mercy of a Might  
Whose single breath of rage  
Could waft the man from sight.

This path I trust.  
Should the Deity  
And I agree,  
His death must  
Prove His sympathy  
And all return to dust—  
May God then hold His breath for me.

The Black Mountain Poets, who have their own section in Donald Allen’s famous anthology that included the Beats, were more intent on “breaking the iamb.” Charles Olson was no sonneteer. But Robert Creeley’s early poems have a very formal, song-like feel to them. They sound like Thomas Campion updated. Listen to this one:

### *The Way*

My love's manners in bed  
are not to be discussed by me,  
as mine by her

I would not credit comment upon gracefully.

Yet I ride by the margin of that lake in  
the wood, the castle,  
and the excitement of strongholds;  
and have a small boy's notion of doing good.

Oh well, I will say here,  
knowing each man,  
let you find a good wife too,  
and love her as hard as you can.

How long a leap is it, really, from a poem like that to the kind of poem that I try to write? I would like to think it is no leap at all. One poem that I originally wrote in imitation of Creeley later needed only a couple of changes to get published in *The Formalist* magazine edited by William Baer.

I always did apply a kind of “measure” to my verse. For years my way of writing involved a kind of meditative focus on the intake of breath; I would then type whatever words came to mind while “breathing out.” It was like crossing a zen practitioner with a saxophone player. It’s a good way to keep your writing from getting too “heady.” It gets the whole body involved. You write from the solar plexus rather than from your intellect. That’s awfully important in writing poetry. Poetry suffers as it gets farther away from dance. Pound said something to that effect. Well, you need your body to dance.

The problem with using one’s breath-pattern as a “measure” in writing poetry is that the breath-pattern changes depending on the emotional state of the poet. I found it awfully hard to re-enter poems in order to revise them when I wrote that way. Ginsberg’s “First thought / Best thought” dictum enforces itself under those circumstances, because if you go in and make changes, they often sound out of place. You’re not in the same state of mind; you’re breathing differently today than you were yesterday. The “measure” changes.

I began to experiment using a measure that could be replicated; I began counting syllables. Kenneth Rexroth, a west coast poet who’d been something of a mentor to the Beat poets, wrote most of his poetry in syllabics. The lines of his poems were usually either seven or eleven syllables long. I’d written some of my earliest poems in high school this way in imitation of my first poetry-hero, Dylan Thomas. His great poem “Fern Hill” is a syllabic poem, though not all the lines are of the same length.

I felt like an apostate even adopting that rudimentary “outside” structure. At the time I was thoroughly persuaded that form in poetry should be “organic,” as Denise Levertov put it. It had to come into being as the poem was composed; any pre-existing form was an antique. The poem ought to take shape the way a tree takes shape as it grows; you mustn’t pour a poem into a mold.

It all sounded convincing because so much of it is true, all except the assumption that to write a sonnet is to pour a poem into a mold. Any sonnet that works as a sonnet is a poem that found its way into that shape as it was being written.

Anyway, I hope that the lessons I learned over so many years of reading the Beat poets, the Black Mountain poets and the San Francisco Renaissance poets have carried over into the kind of writing that I do now. Certainly the habit of letting the breath be instrumental in shaping the line stays with me; there’s only the added tension of playing that energy against the meter. Sometimes the line that I

“breathe out” is shorter or longer than a line of iambic pentameter. That creates a caesura partway through the line, or an enjambment that carries the breathe through two or three or more lines.

Allen Ginsberg himself showed me how to read Milton by inhaling whenever a comma appeared. It’s great fun. Sometimes that will slow a line down to a snail’s pace, there’ll be a comma after nearly every word. Other times it would require a saxophonist like Sonny Rollins to do it right because the breathe extends over many lines. Here’s Satan getting tossed out of heaven. Try reading it Ginsberg-fashion, only pausing to inhale at the commas:

Him the Almighty Power

Hurld headlong flaming from th' Ethereal Skie  
With hideous ruine and combustion down  
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell  
In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire,  
Who durst defie th' Omnipotent to Arms.

I’m afraid I’m trying to say too much all at once. It’s funny how important all of this remains for me. But getting back to what I began to tell you, I began to write syllabics and had success with them. I found that I was able to return to a poem the next day or several days after I began writing it and pick up where I’d left off. I was able to complete more ambitious projects. And it didn’t hurt that every poem that I wrote in syllabics eventually found its way to publication.

When I first attended a Powwow River Poetry workshop, I brought along one of my syllabic poems. It was pretty well received by the other poets, among them Len Krisak, a former student of J. V. Cunningham. Cunningham’s uncompromising opinion equated real poetry with metric verse, and I think it’s fair to say that Len shares that opinion. When I had read my poem to the group, he remarked, “Not bad for free verse.”

Well, that got my back up. For me, a poem written in syllabics was the height of formality. As time went by I heard similar disparaging remarks about free verse from Len. I decided to show him! My intent was only to write a single poem in one of his antiquated meters, then go back to writing free verse. I used a poem by Emily Dickinson as a metrical template and wrote one of my own. (Ironically, Dickinson is the very poet that Ginsberg had recommended that I read.) Here it is, my first consciously formal poem:

### *Empty Streets*

I went out on a holiday  
In Berkeley, once, alone.  
Most everyone had gone away.  
The sidewalks were my own.

And I had nowhere left to go—  
I’d put the world behind me.  
I hid out in the open so  
That nobody would find me.

The sun, even, had other plans  
And did not come to shine.  
My shadow was another man's.  
These shadows all were mine.

And I was happy, in a way,  
My world was just this size.  
There was no clutter in the grey  
For me to organize.

*I am alone. I am alone—  
Who says this suits me well?  
The voice I heard was not my own,  
But no one else could tell.*

My plan of attack backfired on me. It was supposed to be a hit-and-run job. I was going to write just the one metrical poem and have done with it, but I found it so pleasant to work in meter that I've never stopped since. Meter and rhyme to me were like wonderful Christmas presents, the best gifts ever. I'm forever playing with them.

*What do you feel formalism allows you to achieve that free verse doesn't?*

To oversimplify, as everyone seems to do when this topic is broached, formalism allows me to know when something I've written is a poem. For years and years I wrote poetry, line after line. I have notebooks filled with the stuff. I never had a good feel for when a particular poem would begin, or where it should end. Louis Zukofsky said that "A man writes one poem all his life." That was almost too literally true in my case.

At least, if you are writing a sonnet, for instance, you know that it will end at the end of the fourteenth line. Of course, if you have any understanding at all of the form, you realize that a sonnet has to accomplish certain things before it gets to the end of the fourteenth line. So the pressure's on. It's like a basketball game when the clock is running down. The play becomes more intense. The players play with more energy. Poetry is all about getting as much energy as possible into as few words as possible. Any technique or tool that helps charge words with energy is worth keeping around.

You can take some pride in learning to use the tools well. It's a good place to put pride. It won't do to be proud of your "inspiration;" that's taking credit for what the muse brought you. You don't own your gifts. Your muse is likely to abandon you in a huff if you pretend not to need her.

But you can take pride in hard work, in putting to good use the tools available to you. That's the message of the poem by X. J. Kennedy that I showed you. Once you've become adept with the traditional techniques of poetry, you can use them to great expressive effect. Listen to what Kennedy does in the twelve line of his poem. We see the juggler flat on his back before the Christchild, "Keeping six slow-revolving balls aloft."

Now, by line 12, which is the one I'm quoting here, the iambic pentameter has worked its way into the

reader. Something in the reader has come to expect the 5 beats per line, the steady *ta-DUM ta-DUM ta-DUM ta-DUM ta-DUM* under the more complex changes in the spoken language. But in this line, by substituting a trochee for an iamb in the first foot, and substituting a spondee in the second foot, he surprises us with a line that reads *DUM-ta DUM-DUM ta-DUM ta-DUM ta-DUM*. A poet or reader who is familiar with iambic pentameter knows that both of these are allowable substitutions: they don't "break the meter." That's to say the line is still a line of iambic pentameter, but a line of pentameter with six stresses. Kennedy has accomplished precisely what he tells us the juggler is doing, keeping six balls aloft. An effect like that is only available to someone working in meter. When working in free verse, a small metrical change can have very little effect on the reader because no expectation of pattern sets up the expressive break in the pattern.

Working in meter allows for countless expressive effects like the one I've tried to describe. It gets a little technical trying to describe them, so I won't go on in that vein any longer. I'll only say that these effects are abstract and technical only in one's description of them; they are utterly physical when they happen upon the reader. It's not an intellectual thing. Most readers are probably not even aware of what hit them, but if they have any sensitivity at all, they know they've been hit. The line I've quoted is taken from a very moving passage. Kennedy's sophisticated use of meter helps to charge the language with meaning.

"Technique is the test of sincerity," is the way Ezra Pound put it. That's almost the exact opposite of the assumption that many young poets bring to the art. They believe that considerations of technique get in the way of really expressing themselves, of letting it all out. What Pound is telling us, what Kennedy is showing us, is that language can only get at meaning on a deeper level through technique.

*It's almost a cliché for people to say that poetry is an oral art form. Do you agree? Do you write for the page? Or do you write poetry intended to be read aloud?*

I write poetry to be spoken by an ideal voice in the mind of the solitary reader. That sounds pretentious, I know, but I think it describes exactly what is going on when I most enjoy poetry as a reader myself. I'm not a big fan of poetry readings, to be honest. I truly believe that my "ideal reader" –whom no one has ever heard, of course– does a better job of reading Yeats' poems aloud than Yeats himself. I suppose the best argument for poetry readings is that you may hear something in a poet's way of reading that later becomes part of the voice you hear inside your head as you read. The ideal reader picks up an accent sometimes, and sometimes it sticks.

The best poetry performers, of course, are singers. They don't always have the best poetry to work with, but they certainly make the most of it.

*Confessional poetry—what are your feelings about it? Who or what do you write for? Are there limits for you as a poet when it comes to disclosure?*

Well, lyric poetry is expressive poetry. Like nearly all contemporary poets, I am by and large a lyric poet. (That's to say I'm not writing epic poetry, I don't generally write dramatic monologues, I rarely write narrative poetry that isn't a kind of narrative/lyric hybrid.) So I write poetry meant to express emotion. Songs for the page, more or less. And whose emotion am I able to express, really? My own.

That doesn't mean that I'm locked into my own little world, that I can't empathize with anyone else. It's just that, if you hurt and make it known to me, and I empathize with you, I don't really "feel your pain," as President Clinton used to say. I feel some new pain of my own, the imagined equivalent of your pain.

Tolstoy is very good on this subject. He is a master artist painting on the broadest canvas imaginable. He brings an entire world alive. But to hear him talk about it, you realize that "War and Peace" might justifiably be titled "Song of Myself."

### *The Song of Miss Lily*

Miss Lily has a hollow face,  
A hollow face has she.  
And when I see Miss Lily's face  
It always frightens me.

I remember Lily's face  
When she was just a lass.  
And is that not Miss Lily's face  
I see within the glass?

That is a poem of mine about a woman's fear of growing old, her sense of loss. Naturally I'm not so keen on getting older myself, so it's easy to feel something like what she must feel, and sing the song of it in her voice.

I suppose "confessional poetry" is poetry written in the first person where the "I" really seems to be the poet himself. But the self at any given moment, self-perceived, is a fiction. "I" is always another, as Rimbaud said. The poems of mine that a reader would be most likely to assume are straight from the heart, just naked statements of the way I feel, make use of every bit as much artifice as any of my other poems. What happens is that I sing the song of one clear emotion selected from the usual tangled mix in my heart. Yes, I really feel that way, but only fleetingly; a number of other emotions and considerations give the lie to the one I choose to let stand alone in the poem.

### *I Go Near Love*

I go near love advisedly.  
Someone is there, expecting me.  
She may not be as mindful, though,  
Of consequence we cannot know—  
With loss the only certainty.

She pictures love a tranquil sea.  
I know how cold its depths may be.  
Love is a place I would not go:  
I go near love,

Where, looking in her eyes, I see  
The soft flame burning quietly,  
And my brief wings beat to and fro

About that mesmerizing glow.  
Though I may fly I am not free:  
I go near love.

Every word of that poem is true for the moment of the poem. But when you hear me say, “Love is a place I would not go,” you can be sure that “I” is another.

Probably the nagging concern that people have about confessional poetry is not that the poet reveals too much of himself; it’s that he reveals too much of the lives of those around him. It’s unseemly to invade someone else’s privacy that way. “My wife’s manners in bed / are not to be discussed by me.” And there are other things I might want to keep to myself.

Most great lyric poetry is written about things the poet might want to keep to himself. What’s essential is that those things undergo a seachange, a transformation, in coming across the threshold into the poem. Poems aren’t made to spread gossip. They’re made to tell “the news that stays news,” as Pound put it. If “I is another,” so too is the lover of I, toward whom he expresses his longing in a poem. She’s not the actual person with whom he makes love and argues, she’s been lifted into art. *Lifted* into art, and now she is someone with whom the reader is on familiar terms. No need to invade her privacy. I is the reader, her intimate.

I often worry that my poems may appear “unseemly.” I often experience a sense of shame as I step down from the stage at a poetry reading, as though I’ve revealed something that should have remained hidden. Ultimately, though, I think that really translates into a concern that I haven’t served the art well enough, that I didn’t make real poetry happen, the sea-change didn’t come about.

### *Self-Portrait*

Isn’t it rich of me  
To write and then revise a poem  
About leaving you  
After sharing a cup of tea  
And resting in your company,  
Entirely at home  
Deceiving you?

*Do you consider yourself a regional poet?*

No, but I think other people decide that sort of thing, if they care enough about a poet to want to claim the poet as their own.

*What do you read for prose?*

Oh, I read a lot of prose, though I don’t read quickly, so “reading a lot” doesn’t mean I get a lot of reading done. Right now I’m reading Flannery O’Connor. She’s wonderful. Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* was a very fine book that I read recently. I also try to read something written in French every day, often something by Georges Simenon, though right now it’s a book called “Monsieur Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Koran.” Every so often I read a fat history book. *The French Revolution* by Charles Downer Hazen, in two volumes. *Lincoln* by David Herbert Donald. Things like that, books that I’d have found terribly

dull at other times in my life. Now I find them centering. In books like those the words mean just what they mean on the surface. It's not an edgy experience to read them, as it is to read poetry or fiction. And every year I indulge in reading a book or two about baseball.

*Tell me about your experience at Dartmouth. Did you have any mentors there? How did they affect you?*

The best teacher I ever had was a man named Harry Schultz. He was well over six feet tall. His hair had turned completely white when he'd been held prisoner by the Germans during World War II. When he walked across campus you could see that shock of white white hair moving along above the heads of other people. I studied Milton and the metaphysical poets with him. Though I admired him immediately, it took us a while to connect. I was an unkempt and long-haired factory boy; I didn't speak very well. I may not have appeared to be a serious student. But nothing mattered more to me than the Tradition in English Poetry. An outsized young man's ambition was kicking in my chest. He figured that out and was very happy to be of use. He gave me a place to read, a wooden chair in his back yard beside Occum Pond. He was going to be my thesis advisor. I was going to write about George Herbert and H. D., religious poetry before and after Freud. I'm sure he'd have convinced me not to waste my time on that wet-behind-the-ears Big Theme, to simply do close analysis of the poems, which is the only thing for which I had a real aptitude. But my first son was born right then and together we decided to put the thesis aside.

Syd Lea was teaching at Dartmouth when I attended. I saw him get into a terrific argument with a visiting poet; Syd was defending the poetry of Allen Ginsberg. I signed up for Syd's seminar on Wordsworth and Wallace Stevens. He gave me the key to his research office in the Baker stacks. It is evident, looking back, that Syd didn't really buy into the teacher-student relationship where I was concerned. He considered the two of us as young poets with something to learn from each other. He certainly treated me as an equal, which was a pretty heady experience for me. He's a friend for life.

Through Syd I met another young professor, Dick Corum. Dick was an important teacher for a number of student poets there, including Louise Erdrich. He combined a laid-back California outward appearance with a fiercely intense intellect. His way of reading was profoundly influenced by Freud. He'd bring all of that to a close reading of a poem I'd written only the day before. It was terrifying. I was always afraid he'd find out something terrible about me that I was unaware of myself! But it was a gift of untold worth to have one's poems taken so seriously. He was an extraordinary teacher.

Another person from whom I could have learned a lot was Jay Parini. I'm afraid I wasted my opportunity. I have indeed learned a lot from him, but only through reading his books. I kick myself for not having gotten to know him better while I was at Dartmouth. I think I held a grudge against him for not admiring the Beat writers sufficiently.

*What advice do you have for young poets?*

Read deeply.

*Do you still write any free verse and would you ever publish it?*

I have a number of old poems that I still have every intention of including in a book someday. I kept them out of the book that will be published this year because the publisher, Alfred Dorn, is a man who worked tirelessly for many years to promote metrical poetry at a time when it had fallen into disfavor. He's interested in publishing metrical poetry, so the manuscript I gave him is entirely verse.