Creative Writing, Creative Memoirs, 2-4, 12 April 2017, Calvert Library, Prince Frederick

Rocky Jones & Cliff Lynn perform Thursday, April 6, 2 pm

Anne Arundel Community College in Arnold, Maryland

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Laura Oliver sent these:
The Third Annual Writing Intensive at St. John's College is Saturday, June 3rd and registration is now open. Please go to the link below to see our workshop descriptions and stellar lineup of presenters this year. Do take a look at the bio's of those coming to share their expertise with you. My co-creator Lynn Schwartz and I are sincerely excited about our faculty and our plans for the day. Choose from a menu of workshops and enjoy breakfast, lunch and a networking wine reception in the garden with us June 3rd from 9:15 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. For more information and a full description of workshops and presenter bios visit:
www.sjc.edu/annapolis/programs/fine-arts/spring-writing-intensive

Writing: A Power Tool for Change
Is an interactive workshop Laura will be teaching April 29th at the Hospice of the Chesapeake Life Center, located just above Severna Park on Rt. 2. This workshop is invaluable to anyone who is emotionally stuck, grieving a loss, or who feels he or she could benefit from learning how to use writing as a tool for personal transformation. To learn more contact : Elyzabeth Marcussen, 443-837-1559 emarcussen@hospicechesapeake.org **or go to**www.chesapeakelifecenter.org**.**

Writing Contest
Submit Your Story Now!
Laura is the judge of the "Chesapeake Voices" literary contest sponsored by the *Delmarva Review*. First prize: $500 and publication. The editors are accepting submissions until May 31st. Seewww.DelmarvaReview.com for guidelines.

Jill Jepson: Dealing with Doubters, Part 1

I am blessed with a circle of friends and colleagues who are excited by my successes, generous with their support, compassionate when I'm grieving, and patient when I'm venting. Things haven't always been this way. I've sometimes had to deal with people telling me I couldn't write or that it was

impossible to make it as a writer. Sometimes they would suggest I give up and become a flight attendant or teacher or television reporter instead. Others labelled my writing a "hobby" or "pastime." Someone once called a serious story I'd labored over "cute." One ven burst into laughter when I started reading a story to her!

Doubters are people who question your talent and attack your work. They are people with agendas. Sometimes they are hostile. They may want to hurt you. Other times, they are simply jealous, clueless, or insecure.
Doubters come in all shapes and sizes…
The aggressive doubter. A better word for this type of doubter might be *hater*. The aggressive doubter is the one who openly criticizes, ridicules, or disparages your work under the guise of being "honest." "It's just me," a long-ago boyfriend of mine used to say when he sent me reeling with some comment. "I'm a very honest person." He wasn't. He was just cruel, as aggressive doubters always are. The only good thing about aggressive doubters is that they are easy to identify. You never have any doubt when you're dealing with one.

2. The passive-aggressive doubter.This is the person who hides their hostility under the guise of support. It is the friend who tells you how much they admire your work, but then shrugs off your successes. It is the person who gives backhanded compliments, or praises you in a tone of voice usually reserved for children. I know a writer whose father would send him "helpful" clippings of magazine ads for trade schools, suggesting he'd never make it as a writer. Another was continually told by a friend that her work was "really coming along for a beginner." A third sent a copy of a story to a friend who never read it, claiming she was "too busy." Passive-aggressives are more challenging than aggressive doubts because they're experts at pretending to be supportive even as they're undermining you.

3. The envious doubter. I know a woman who achieved every writer's dream: She was offered a two-book contract with a huge advance for her very first novel. While most of her friends offered her lavish congratulations, a coworker sent her an article about writers who receive large advances only to see their books tank in the marketplace. The article made a big deal about how those writers' careers are over almost before they begin. It was a crushing thing to read for this brand-new writer who was already understandably nervous about her new success, but for the rest of us, it was transparent. The coworker's envy was crystal clear.

The envious doubter is often the worst because they are in pain. Their envy comes from their own insecurities. They are worried that they are not enough, that they are fundamentally flawed, that they have little to offer– and nothing fuels that fear more than someone else's success. The envious doubter responds to their own insecurity by trying to level the playing field. That means bringing the successful person down. Because they are driven by

strong emotions, the envious doubter can often go to great lengths to make you miserable.

4. The advice giver. No matter what stage you find yourself in your career, you will always have people telling you what you should be writing, how you should be marketing yourself, and why you aren't as successful as you could be. Advice givers are sure things would go so much better fo you if only you did things the way they think you should. The irony of advice-givers is that they are usually not people with extensive experience in book publishing and marketing. Often, they are people who've never written or published a single thing.

Advice givers should be distinguished from true helpers. The editor, teacher, coach, or writer friend who offers useful suggestions and fresh ideas is someone to be cherished. The advice giver, on the other hand, gives advice when it isn't wanted, needed, or helpful. They put you in a double-bind. If you take their advice, they just keeping giving it, since you've indicated to them that you want them to. And if you *don't* take their advice, they just keep giving it, only with a higher level of frustration. You can't win!

Doubters are problems for all writers. A single one can inflict a lot of grief….

Kay Redfield Jamison's *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character*, is an illuminating account of the relationship between illness and art in the life of this great American poet, who would have celebrated his hundredth birthday on March 1, 2017. In the passage below, Jamison speaks of his great poem "For the Union Dead" and of how Lowell himself viewed it. We're pleased to present the text of the poem as well—with special thanks to Farrar, Straus and Giroux, on the occasion of their publication, this spring, of a *New Selected Poems* of Lowell.

An excerpt from *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire*

Lowell, although he was reluctant to describe any poem as his "best," nonetheless had chosen "For the Union Dead" to include in a collection of poems selected by poets as their best work. He read "For the Union Dead" for the first time in June 1960 before a crowd of thousands gathered in Boston Public Garden. The poem, he said, was about "childhood memories, the evisceration of our modern cities, civil rights, nuclear warfare and more particularly Colonel Robert Shaw and his Negro regiment, the Massachusetts 54th." He added that he had brought early personal memories into the poem because he wanted to "avoid the fixed, brazen tone of the set-piece and official ode." The poem, Lowell said later, "may be about a child maturing into courage and terror."

"For the Union Dead" pulls together many strands of Lowell's thinking and experience; it combines his public voice and political conscience with autobiography. Bound in history, it is first and foremost an American poem. It stares into the American character, as the eagle gazes into the sun. It is about a nation born in courage and descending into slack and rust; it is about valor and the corruption of valor. It asks, Which noble acts, which right things done, enter and stay in memory? What remains? What can be preserved? When art memorializes acts of courage and high deeds, can it stand against indifference? Is decay—moral, civic, a "savage servility"—inevitable?

For the Union Dead
"Relinquunt Omnia Servare Rem Publicam."

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
The airy tanks are dry.

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled
to burst the bubbles

**drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant
fish.**

**My hand draws back. I often sigh still
for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom
of the fish and reptile. One morning last March,
I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized**

**fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,
yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting
as they cropped up tons of mush and grass
to gouge their underworld garage.**

**Parking spaces luxuriate like civic
sandpiles in the heart of Boston.
A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
braces the tingling Statehouse,**

**shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel
Shaw
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry
on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,
propped by a plank splint against the garage's
earthquake.**

**Two months after marching through Boston,
half the regiment was dead;
at the dedication,
William James could almost hear the bronze
Negroes breathe.**

**Their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city's throat.
Its Colonel is as lean
as a compass-needle.**

**He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,
a greyhound's gentle tautness;
he seems to wince at pleasure,
and suffocate for privacy.**

**He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely,
peculiar power to choose life and die—
when he leads his black soldiers to death,
he cannot bend his back.**

On a thousand small town New England greens,

**the old white churches hold their air
of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags
quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the
Republic.**

**The stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier
grow slimmer and younger each year—
wasp-waisted, they doze over muskets
and muse through their sideburns . . .**

**Shaw's father wanted no monument
except the ditch,
where his son's body was thrown
and lost with his "niggers."**

**The ditch is nearer.
There are no statues for the last war here;
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling**

**over a Mosler Safe, the "Rock of Ages"
that survived the blast. Space is nearer.
When I crouch to my television set,
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like
balloons.**

**Colonel Shaw
is riding on his bubble,
he waits
for the blessèd break.**

**The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.**

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Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Poet Who Stirred a Generation of Soviets, Dies at 83

By RAYMOND H. ANDERSON *NYTimes* APRIL 1, 2017

Yevgeny Yevtushenko reading his poetry at Tchaikovsky Concert Hall in Moscow December 1962.
CreditAssociated Press

Yevgeny Yevtushenko, an internationally acclaimed poet with the charisma of an actor and the instincts of a politician whose defiant verse inspired a generation of young Russians in their fight against Stalinism during the Cold War, died on Saturday in Tulsa, Okla., where he had been teaching for many years. He was 83.

His death, in a hospital, was confirmed by a close friend, Mikhail Morgulis, with the TASS news agency, Radio Free Europe reported. It said he had been admitted late Friday in "serious condition," but the cause of death was not specified. His wife, Maria Novikova, and their two sons, Dmitry and Yevgeny, were reportedly with him when he died.

Mr. Yevtushenko's poems of protest, often declaimed with sweeping gestures to thousands of excited admirers in public squares, sports

stadiums and lecture halls, captured the tangled emotions of Russia's young — hope, fear, anger and euphoric anticipation — as the country struggled to free itself from repression during the tense, confused years after Joseph Stalin's death in 1953. In 1961 alone Mr. Yevtushenko gave 250 poetry readings.

He became, as one writer described him, "a graying lion of Russian letters" in his later years, teaching and lecturing at American universities, including the University of Tulsa, and basking in the admiration of succeeding generations before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

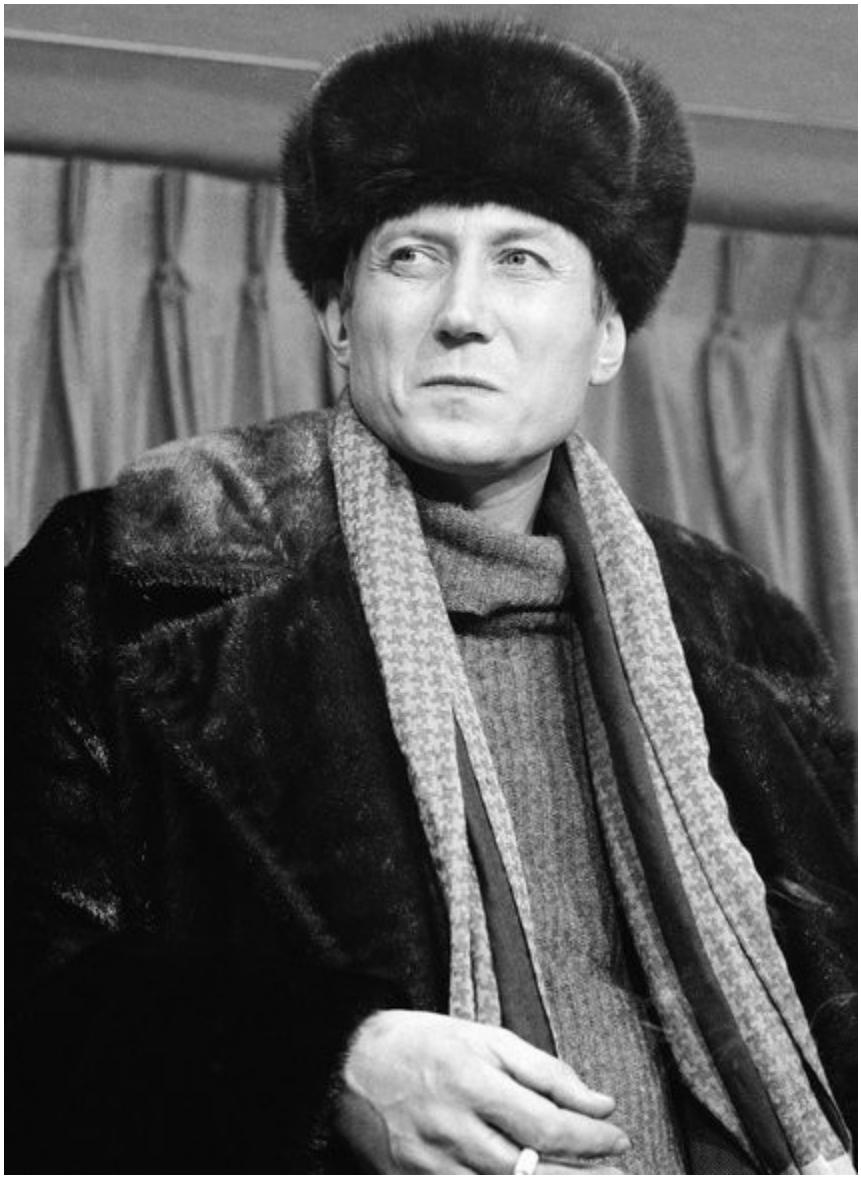
But it was as a tall, athletic young Siberian with a spirit both hauntingly poetic and fiercely political that he established his name in 20th-century literature. He was the best known of a small group of rebel poets and writers who brought hope to a young generation with poetry that took on totalitarian leaders, ideological zealots and timid bureaucrats. Among the others were Andrei Voznesensky, Robert Rozhdestvensky and Bella Akhmadulina, Mr. Yevtushenko's first wife.

But Mr. Yevtushenko did so working mostly within the system, taking care not to join the ranks of outright literary dissidents. By stopping short of the line between defiance and resistance, he enjoyed a measure of official approval that more daring dissidents came to resent.

While they were subjected to exile or labor camps, Mr. Yevtushenko was given state awards, his books were regularly published, and he was allowed to travel abroad, becoming an international literary superstar.

Some critics had doubts about his sincerity as a foe of tyranny. Some called him a sellout. A few enemies even suggested that he was merely posing as a protester to serve the security police or the Communist authorities. The exiled poet Joseph Brodsky once said of Mr. Yevtushenko, "He throws stones only in directions that are officially sanctioned and approved."

Mr. Yevtushenko's defenders bristled at such attacks, pointing out how much he did to oppose the Stalin legacy, an animus fueled by the knowledge that both of his grandfathers had perished in Stalin's purges of the 1930s. He was expelled from his university in 1956 for joining the defense of a banned novel, Vladimir Dudintsev's *Not by Bread Alone.* He refused to join in the official campaign against Boris Pasternak, the author of *Doctor Zhivago*" and the recipient of the 1958 Nobel Prize in Literature. Mr. Yevtushenko denounced the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968; interceded with the K.G.B. chief, Yuri V. Andropov, on behalf of another Nobel laureate, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn; and opposed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.



Mr. Yevtushenko in January 1972 during a news conference at Kennedy Airport in New York before a four-week tour of readings.CreditDave Pickoff/Associated Press

Mr. Yevtushenko wrote thousands of poems, including some shallow ones that he dashed off, he admitted, just to mark an occasion. Some critics questioned the literary quality of his work. Some writers resented his flamboyance, sartorial and otherwise, and his success. But his foes as well as his friends agreed that a select few of his poems have entered the annals of Russian literature as masterpieces of insight and conscience.

Written and read to crowds at critical moments, Yevtushenko poems like "Stalin's Heirs" caught the spirit of a nation at a crossroads. In Russia, writers could be more influential at times than politicians. But they could also be severely rebuffed if they offended, as Pasternak did with his novel

Doctor Zhivago and Solzhenitsyn did with "The Gulag Archipelago" and other works.

Anti-Semitism lingered in the Kremlin after Stalin's death. In one instance, nervous officials thwarted efforts to raise a monument at Babi Yar, a ravine near Kiev, Ukraine, where thousands of Jews were machine-gunned and buried in a mass grave in 1941 by the invading Germans.

The reason the Kremlin said it resisted a memorial was that the Germans had shot other people there, too, not only Jews. Mr. Yevtushenko tackled the issue in 1961 in blunt verse that stunned many Russians and earned him acclaim around the world. The poem "Babi Yar," composed after a haunting visit to the ravine, included these lines:

There are no monuments over Babi Yar.
But the sheer cliff is like a rough tombstone.
It horrifies me.
Today, I am as old
As the Jewish people.
It seems to me now,
That I, too, am a Jew.

Alluding to the pogroms that erupted at intervals over the centuries, Mr. Yevtushenko went on:

It seems to me,
I am a boy in Byelostok.
Blood is flowing,
Spreading across the floors.
The leaders of the tavern mob are raging
And they stink of vodka and onions.
Kicked aside by a boot, I lie helpless.
In vain I plead with the brutes
As voices roar:
"Kill the Jews! Save Russia!"

In a country ruled by Marxist myth, ostensibly free of bigotry, "Babi Yar" touched nerves in the leadership, and it was amended to meet official objections. Even so, it moved audiences. Whenever Mr. Yevtushenko recited the poem at public rallies, it was met with stunned silence and then thunderous ovations. He wrote once that he had received 20,000 letters hailing "Babi Yar." Dmitri Shostakovich composed his _Thirteenth Symphony_ on lines from that and other Yevtushenko poems.

But Mr. Yevtushenko was not allowed to give a public reading of the poem in Ukraine until the 1980s. "Stalin's Heirs," published in 1962, also stirred Russians, appearing at a time when they feared that Stalinist-style repression might return to the country. It was published only after Nikita S.

Khrushchev, the semi-liberal party leader who was then involved in a power struggle with conservatives, intervened as he pushed his cultural "thaw." Stalin had been condemned anew the year before as having been a mad tyrant. The poem appeared in *Pravda*, the Communist Party's official newspaper, and caused a sensation. "Stalin's Heirs" opens with a description of Stalin's body being borne in his coffin out of the Red Square mausoleum to a grave near the Kremlin wall.

Sullenly clenching
His embalmed fists,
He peered through a crack,
Just pretending to be dead.
He wanted to remember all those
Who carried him out.

Mr. Yevtushenko went on:

I turn to our government with a plea:
To double,
And triple the guard at the grave site
So Stalin does not rise again,
And with Stalin, the past.

And later, the main point of the poem:

We removed
Him
From the mausoleum.
But how do we remove Stalin
From Stalin's heirs?

By the time democratic changes brought down Soviet Communist rule early in the 1990s, Mr. Yevtushenko had risen in the reform system to become a member of Parliament and secretary of the official Union of Soviet Writers. Along the way he received high honors, was published in the best periodicals and was sent abroad as an envoy of good will. He also endured abuse, jealousy, frustration and censorship. He once joked that Moscow censors were his best readers, the most expert at catching his meanings and nuances.

Yevgeny Aleksandrovich Gangnus was born on July 18, 1933, in Zima Junction, a remote lumber station on the trans-Siberian Railway in the Irkutsk region of Siberia, near Lake Baikal. His father, Aleksandr Rudolfovich Gangnus, was a geologist, as was his mother, Zinaida Ermolaevna Evtushenko, who became a singer. His parents divorced, and the boy took his mother's surname. Yevgeny spent his early childhood years with his mother in Moscow. When German troops approached Moscow in late 1941, the family was evacuated to Zima and stayed there until 1944.

While growing up, Yevgeny accompanied his father on geology expeditions to wild regions of Kazakhstan and the Altai Mountains, where his father recited poetry. The boy learned to love nature and literature.

He was also drawn to sports. At 16 he was selected to join a professional soccer team. But sudden literary success compelled him to abandon that ambition. Soon his poems began appearing in newspapers, popular magazines and literary monthlies. The authorities praised his early poems, which he later called "hack work," and he was admitted to the elite Gorky Literary Institute and to the Soviet Writers' Union.

But after Stalin's death — Mr. Yevtushenko was almost crushed to death in a funeral stampede in Moscow — his work began to run counter to Soviet Realism, the officially sanctioned artistic style, reflecting instead new thinking about individual responsibility and the state.

Themes of state repression and fear had recurred in his work over the years, but he also began introducing personal matters into his work, as he did in his long poem "Zima Junction," about a return to his hometown in 1953. Published in 1956, it was followed by more volumes of poetry that refused to conform to the approved modes of expression. After he praised *Not by Bread Alone*, Dudintsev's caustic 1956 novel about Soviet life, Mr. Yevtushenko was expelled from the Literary Institute.

But as the 1950s grew to a close, he had published seven volumes of poetry and was allowed to read his work abroad. In the next few years he became familiar to literary circles in Eastern and Western Europe, the United States, Cuba, East Africa and Australia. Indeed, a virtual cult began to develop around him after *Time* magazine put his portrait, as an "angry young man," on its cover in April 1962 and printed a laudatory article about him `as a leading spirit in a changing, liberalizing Russia.

Mr. Yevtushenko stressed that American writers had been important in his literary development.

Later that year, he exchanged words with Khrushchev at a Moscow exhibit of contemporary art. Mr. Khrushchev, who had simple tastes and was facing serious political challenges, flew into a rage against abstractionism and made threats of coercion. A neo-Stalinist crackdown on modern art, literature and music followed the confrontation.

Mr. Yevtushenko kept a loyal following, writing about nearly everything of importance at home and abroad. He paid tribute to Senator Robert F. Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. after they were assassinated. He honored Allison Krause, one of the students shot to death at Kent State University during a Vietnam War protest. He chided John

Steinbeck for not protesting the war in Vietnam. In the poem "Russian Tanks in Prague," he criticized the Soviet-bloc invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. (It was circulated only hand to hand, going unpublished until 1990.)

In the mid-1980s, Mr. Yevtushenko championed the glasnost campaign of "openness" waged by the Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev. In a speech to the Writers' Union, Mr. Yevtushenko assailed privilege, censorship and the distortion of history. He was a member of the first freely elected Supreme Soviet, the country's standing Parliament. He went on to publicly defy the hard-line conservative plotters of an attempt to seize power in 1991. The coup attempt, which temporarily deposed Mr. Gorbachev, sent a shock wave across Russia and around the world. Mr. Yevtushenko was later given a medal as a "Defender of Free Russia." The upheaval became the backdrop for a novel, *Don't Die Before You're Dead*.

Mr. Yevtushenko did not write only about political and social issues. He composed verses on love, nature, art, travel and the various pains and joys of life. In 1956, for example, while married to Bella Akhmadulina, he wrote "My Beloved Will Come":

My beloved will come
And wrap me in her arms.
She will notice the changes
And understand my fears.
Through the black downpour, from night's gloom,
Forgetting in haste to shut the taxi door,
She will run up the decrepit stairway
Flushed with joy and longing.
She will enter soaking wet
Without knocking.
She will take my head in her hands,
And her blue fur coat will slip
Happily from the chair onto the floor.

Mr. Yevtushenko had four marriages. He married Galina Semenova after he and Bella Akhmadulina divorced. His third wife, Jan Butler, was an English translator of his poetry. His widow, Ms. Novikova, whom he married in 1986, has taught Russian at a preparatory school near the University of Tulsa. Besides his sons Alexander and Dmitry, he had three other sons, Yevgeny, Pyotr and Anton. A complete list of survivors was not immediately available.

Mr. Yevtushenko kept homes in Russia and in the United States and taught at the University of Tulsa, the City University of New York and New York University (where one student remembered him dressed in silver suits "stalking back and forth across the front of the lecture hall" as he read his poems in "booming Russian"). He traveled widely, reading his poetry, lecturing, teaching and giving speeches to overflow crowds at universities.

Through it all, Mr. Yevtushenko regarded himself as a patriot. In *Don't Die Before You're Dead,* he summed up his ambivalent feelings of triumph, nostalgia and remorse as a survivor of the defunct Soviet system. In a poem on the final page, "Goodbye, Our Red Flag," he wrote:

I didn't take the czars' Winter Palace.
I didn't storm Hitler's Reichstag.
I am not what you call a "Commie."
But I caress the Red Flag
and cry.

Poetry made him famous, but Mr. Yevtushenko preferred in his later years to describe himself as a "poet, writer and filmmaker." He published dozens of volumes of poetry, translated into dozens of languages. He acted or appeared as himself in several films, directed two others, wrote essays, compiled three volumes of his photographs and wrote two novels.

He preferred Oklahoma to New York. "In some provincial cities you can find the real soul of a country," he told *The New York Times* in 2003. "I like the craziness of New York, but New York is really not America. It's all humanity in one drop. Tulsa is very American." He called Tulsa "the bellybutton of world culture." There he enjoyed watching younger generations coming into their own. "Someone is near," he said to one class in dramatic tones. "I feel it. Someone always has to be the leader of a generation. Someone has to be born. Why not one of you?"

He had shown the same fervor a decade earlier, in July 1993, when the Concert Hall of the Rossiya Hotel in Moscow was the setting for a celebration of his 60th birthday and by extension a testimonial to the defiant poets and writers of the 1960s who broke through the iron grip of Stalinism.

"Today you, one of the initiators of the Sixties movement, turn 60," President Boris N. Yeltsin wrote in a congratulatory letter to Mr. Yevtushenko. "Your innate, multifaceted talent arose brightly in the now-distant years of the 'thaw.' The civic consciousness of young poets then played a huge role in the spiritual liberation and awakening of the people of Russia." A gray-haired woman agreed, telling a reporter: "He was a symbol for us then. Later he was attacked for not being exiled or sent to the camps, for making a career of protest. But not many of us had the courage to stand up to the regime, and he did. You can't blame him that he survived."

Mr. Yevtushenko, still the crowd-pleaser in a brown silk suit, closed the evening by reading a poem called "Sixties Generation":

"We were a fad for some, some we offended with our fame. But we set you free, you envious insulters. Let them hiss, that we are without talent,

Sold out and hypocrites, It makes no difference. We are legendary, Spat upon, but immortal!"

The Dark Times: A Ghazel, by Marilyn Hacker

Tell us that line again, the thing about the dark times…
"When the dark times come, we will sing about the dark times."

They'll always be wrong about peace when they're wrong about justice…
Were you wrong, were you right, insisting about the dark times?

The traditional fears, the habitual tropes of exclusion
Like ominous menhirs, close into their ring about the dark times.

Naysayers in sequins or tweeds, libertine or ascetic
Find a sensual frisson in what they'd call bling about the dark times.

Some of the young can project themselves into a Marshall Plan future
Where they laugh and link arms, reminiscing about the dark times.

From every spot-lit glitz tower with armed guards around it
Some huckster pronounces his fiats, self-sacralized king, about the dark times

In a tent, in a queue, near barbed wire, in a shipping container,
Please remember *ya akhy*, we too know something about the dark times

Sindbad's roc, or Ganymede's eagle, some bird of rapacious ill omen
From bleak skies descends, and wraps an enveloping wing about the dark

times.

You come home from your meeting, your clinic, make coffee and look in the mirror
And ask yourself once more what *you* did to bring about the dark times..

translation of Brecht's lines more resonant in my mind..."
—*Marilyn Hacker*

After Dylan's Nobel, What Makes a Poet a Poet?

By DAVID ORRMARCH 24, 2017

"I'm a poet, and I know it. Hope I don't blow it."CreditAssociated Press

The Swedish Academy is responsible for awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature, and over the past hundred years the group has become renowned for such feats of discernment as denying the prize to Robert Frost, perhaps the most widely read poet of the 20th century, and bestowing the award upon the Swedish writer Erik Axel Karlfeldt, perhaps the most widely read poet in the Karlfeldt family. As has been extensively discussed, the academy's most recent attempt at literary kingmaking was to

deliver the Nobel to Bob Dylan, perhaps the most widely read poet whose work is not, by and large, actually *read*.

Months after his elevation, the response to Dylan's prize — and in particular to what it might suggest about the words "literature" and "poetry" — remains mixed. Various Dylan fans continue to be pleased, various English-language novelists continue to be annoyed, and various American poets continue to say something or other that no one is paying much attention to. Beneath the surface of this amusing situation, however, is an intriguing tangle of questions about high and low culture, the nature of poetry, the nature of songwriting, the power of celebrity and the relative authority of different art forms. These questions all largely turn on the notion that Bob Dylan is, if not a poet, at least poet-ish to some notable degree. Indeed, "he is a great poet in the grand English tradition," according to Sara Danius, the permanent secretary of the academy. It's a theory every poetry critic is familiar with, if only because it often emerges in conversations with the many people who don't read poetry. "I don't know much about the things you write about," one's airplane seat companion will declare, "but I listen to [insert famous musician] and to me, he/she is a real poet."

And why not? Lyrics look like poems, or at least a particular kind of poem. They often rhyme. And when we hear the words in a well-delivered song, the experience we have seems to resemble the way we're often told poems are supposed to feel — like a distillation of overwhelming emotion. Plus, as the academy is quick to note, the ancient Greeks didn't distinguish between poetry and song. "In a distant past," Dylan's citation reads, "all poetry was sung or tunefully recited, poets were rhapsodes, bards, troubadours; 'lyrics' comes from 'lyre.'" Given all these points in favor, isn't it better to expand a word's definition — "literature" or "poetry" in this case — than to limit it?

Maybe. And yet this line of argument becomes increasingly

problematic the further it proceeds. Yes, song lyrics look like poems if you print them on a page. But they're very rarely printed on a page, at least for the purpose of being read as poems. Mostly they're printed so that people can figure out what Eddie Vedder is saying in "Yellow Ledbetter." And for that matter, screenplays and theatrical plays resemble each other more closely than do songs and poems, but that has yet to result in Quentin Tarantino winning the Pulitzer in drama. As for the ancient Greeks, well, the fact that a group of people thought about something a certain way nearly three millenniums ago doesn't seem like a compelling argument for thinking the same way today. (The ancient Greeks also sacrificed animals to their gods — maybe the Swedish Academy should dispatch a few reindeer, and see if that produces a laureate willing to show up for the ceremony next time around?)

Then there is the music. A well-written song isn't just a poem with a bunch of notes attached; it's a unity of verbal and musical elements. In some ways, this makes a lyricist's job potentially easier than a poet's, because an attractive tune can rescue even the laziest phrasing. But in other ways, the presence of music makes songwriting harder, because the writer must contend with timbre, rhythm, melody and so forth, each of which presents different constraints on word selection and placement. To pick just one example, lyricists must account for various forms of musical stress beyond the relatively straightforward challenge of poetic meter. In Fleetwood Mac's otherwise poignant "Dreams," Stevie Nicks tells us, "When the rain washes you clean, you'll know," a line that would be completely fine in a poem. Yet because the second syllable of "washes" falls at a higher pitch and in a position of rhythmic emphasis with respect to the first syllable, Nicks is forced to sing the word as "waSHES." This kind of mismatch is common in questionable lyric writing; another example occurs at the beginning of Lou Gramm's "Midnight Blue," in which Gramm announces that he has no "REE-grets" (all of them presumably having been eaten by his egrets).

Beyond the many technical differences, though, there is the simple fact that people don't really think of songs as being poems, or of songwriters as being poets. No one plays an album by Chris Stapleton, or downloads the cast recording of "Hamilton," or stands in line for a Taylor Swift concert, and says something like, "I can't wait to listen to these poems!" That's true no matter how skillful the songs, since competence isn't how we determine whether a person is participating in a particular activity. We don't say someone isn't playing tennis just because she plays less brilliantly than Serena Williams, nor do we say William McGonagall wasn't a poet just because his poems were terrible. So if Bob Dylan is a poet, it follows that anyone who does basically the same thing that Dylan does should be considered a poet as well. Yet while people routinely describe both Dylan and Kid Rock as "songwriters" and "musicians," there are very, very few people who refer to Kid Rock as a poet.

That's because when the word "poetry" is applied to Dylan, it isn't being used to describe an activity but to bestow an honorific — he gets to be called a poet just as he gets to be a Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient. This may seem odd, because we don't typically recognize excellence at one endeavor by labeling it as another, different venture. But poetry has an unusually large and ungrounded metaphoric scope. Most activities exist as both an undertaking ("hammering," as in hitting something with a hammer) and a potential metaphor tied to the nature of the activity in question ("McGregor is hammering his opponent now!"). But poetry's metaphoric existence is only loosely tethered to its sponsoring enterprise. When a person says something like, "That jump shot was pure poetry," the word has nothing to do with the actual practice of reading or writing poems. Rather, the usage implies sublimity, fluidity and technical perfection — you can call anything from a blancmange to a shovel pass "poetry," and people will get what you're saying. This isn't true of opera or badminton or morris dancing, and it can cause confusion about where metaphor ends

and reality begins when we talk about “poetry” and “poets.”

Moreover, while most people have limited experience with poems, they do generally have ideas about what a poet should be like. Typically, this involves a figure who resembles — well, Bob Dylan: a countercultural, bookish wanderer who does something involving words, and who is eloquent yet mysterious, wise yet innocent, charismatic yet elusive (and also, perhaps not coincidentally, a white dude). When you join all of these factors — the wide metaphoric scope of “poetry,” the lack of familiarity with actual poetry or poets, the role-playing involved in the popular conception of the poet — it’s not hard to see how you might get a Nobel laureate in literature who doesn’t actually write poems.

Yet if this dynamic explains why people weren’t baffled by Dylan’s Nobel, it doesn’t explain why quite a few poets and English professors wanted him anointed. One would think, after all, poets might be put off by the idea that songwriters can be poet enough to win a prize in literature, when the implied relationship is so clearly a one-way street. (John Ashbery will be waiting a long time for his Grammy.) But in fact, poets have often benefited from the blurred edge of their discipline. Poetry has one primary asset: It’s the only genre automatically considered literary regardless of its quality. Popular songwriting, by contrast, has money, fame and Beyoncé. So there is an implicit trade going on when, for example, Donald Hall includes the lyrics to five Beatles songs in his anthology “The Pleasures of Poetry” (1971). But it isn’t just a straight swap in which song lyrics are granted literariness and poems take on a candle flicker of celebrity. Poetry also benefits in a subtler and more important way, because the implicit suggestion of these inclusions is that only the very best songwriters get to share space with poets. Poetry’s piggy bank may remain empty, but its cultural status is enhanced — in a way that is hugely flattering to poets and teachers of poetry, even as it is insulting to brilliant songwriters who happen to be less famous than, say, the

Beatles.

Which is what makes this a risky game for poets. Culture is less a series of peaceable, adjacent neighborhoods, each inhabited by different art forms, than a jungle in which various animals claim whatever territory is there for the taking. It's possible that poets can trail along foxlike behind the massive tiger of popular music, occasionally plucking a few choice hairs from its coat both to demonstrate their superiority and to make themselves look a bit tigerish. With Dylan's Nobel, we saw what happens when the big cat turns around.

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