Creative Writing Wednesday 8 December 2017 2-4 Calvert Library Prince Frederick Bring about 6 copies of a well-worked piece to share.
I know you are scattered, but perhaps you want the excuse to hide and write. So wherever far-flung spot you are, peruse, and with luck something here will jump-start your own writing. Just get it down, pencil on paper thence to brain, before you hit the computer to type it up!

VIA COUNTERPOINT PRESS

JAMES SALTER: WHY I WRITE

AN AMERICAN MASTER ON THE ORIGINS OF HIS CRAFT

November 29, 2017 By James Salter

“To write! What a marvelous thing!” When he was old and forgotten, living in a rundown house in the dreary suburbs of Paris, Léautaud wrote these lines. He was unmarried, childless, alone. The world of the theater in which he had worked as a critic for years was now dark for him, but from the ruins of his life these words rose. To *write*!

One thinks of many writers who might have said this, Anne Sexton, even though she committed suicide, or Hemingway or Virginia Woolf, who both did also, or Faulkner, scorned in his rural town, or the wreckage that was Fitzgerald in the end. The thing that is marvelous is literature, which is like the sea, and the exaltation of being near it, whether you are a powerful swimmer or wading by the shore. The act of writing, though often tedious, can still provide extraordinary pleasure. For me that comes line by line at the tip of a pen, which is what I like to write with, and the page on which the lines are written, the pages, can be the most valuable thing I will ever own.

The cynics say that if you do not write for money you are a dabbler or a fool, but this is not true. To see one’s work in print is the real desire, to have it read. The remuneration is of less importance; no one was paid for the samizdats. Money is but one form of approval.

It is such a long time that I have been writing that I don’t remember the beginning. It was not a matter of doing what my father knew how to do. He had gone to Rutgers, West Point, and then MIT, and I don’t think in my lifetime I ever saw him reading a novel. He read newspapers, the *Sun*, the *World-Telegram*, there were at least a dozen in New York in those days. His task was laid out for him: to rise in the world.

Nor was my mother an avid reader. She read to me as a child, of course, and in time I read the books that were published in popular series, *The Hardy Boys* and *Bomba, the Jungle Boy*. I recall little about them. I did not read *Ivanhoe*, *Treasure Island*, *Kim*, or *The Scottish Chiefs*, though two or three of them were given to me. I had six volumes of a collection called *My Bookhouse*, edited by Olive Beaupré Miller, whose name is not to be found among the various Millers—Mrs. Alice, Henry, Joaquin, Joe—in *The*

Reader's Encyclopedia, but who was responsible for what knowledge I had of Cervantes, Dickens, Tolstoy, Homer, and the others whose work was excerpted. The contents also included folktales, fairy tales, parts of the Bible, and more. When I read of writers who when young were given the freedom of their fathers' or friends' libraries, I think of *Bookhouse*, which was that for me. It was not an education but the introduction to one. There were also poems, and in grammar school we had to memorize and then stand up and recite well-known poems. Many of these I still know, including Kipling's "If," which my father paid me a dollar to learn. Language is acquired, like other things, through the act of imitating, and rhythm and elegance may come in part from poems.

I could draw quite well as a boy and even, though uninstructed, paint. What impulse made me do this, and where the ability came from—although my father could draw a little—I cannot say. My desire to write, apparent at the age of seven or eight, likely came from the same source. I made crude books, as many children do, with awkward printing and drawings, from small sheets of paper, folded and sewn together.

In prep school we were poets, at least many of my friends and I were, ardent and profound. There were elegies but no love poems—those came later. I had some early success. In a national poetry contest I won honorable mention, and sold two poems to *Poetry* magazine.

All this was a phase, in nearly every case to be soon outgrown. In 1939 the war had broken out, and by 1941 we were in it. I ended up at West Point. The old life vanished; the new one had little use for poetry. I did read, and as an upperclassman wrote a few short stories. I had seen some in the Academy magazine and felt I could do better, and after the first one, the editor asked for more. When I became an officer there was, at first, no time for writing, nor was there the privacy. Beyond that was a greater inhibition: it was alien to the life. I had been commissioned in the Army Air Force and in the early days was a transport pilot, later switching into fighters. With that I felt I had found my role.

Stationed in Florida in about 1950, I happened to see in a bookshop window in Pensacola a boldly displayed novel called *The Town and The City* by John Kerouac. The name. There had been a Jack Kerouac at prep school, and he had written some stories. On the back of the jacket was a photograph, a gentle, almost yearning face with eyes cast downward. I recognized it instantly. I remember a feeling of envy. Kerouac was only a few years older than I was. Somehow he had written this impressive-looking novel. I bought the book and eagerly read it. It owed a lot to Thomas Wolfe—*Look Homeward, Angel* and others—who was a major figure then, but still it was an achievement. I took it as a mark of what might be done.

I had gotten married, and in the embrace of a more orderly life, on occasional weekends or in the evenings, I began to write again. The Korean War broke out. When I was sent over I took a small typewriter with me, thinking that if I was killed, the pages I had been writing would be a memorial. They were immature pages, to say the least. A few years later, the novel they were part of was rejected by the publishers, but one of them suggested that if I were to write another novel they would be interested in seeing it. Another novel. That might be years.

I had a journal I had kept while flying combat missions. It contained some description, but there was little shape to it. The war had the central role. One afternoon, in Florida again—I was there on temporary duty—I came back from the flight line, sat down on my cot, and began to hurriedly write out a page or so of outline that had suddenly occurred to me. It would be a novel about idealism, the true and the untrue, spare and in authentic prose. What had been missing but was missing no longer was the plot.

“Latent in me, I suppose, there was always the belief that writing was greater than other things, or at least would prove to be greater in the end.”

Why was I writing? It was not for glory; I had seen what I took to be real glory. It was not for acclaim. I knew that if the book was published, it would have to be under a pseudonym; I did not want to jeopardize a career by

becoming known as a writer. I had heard the derisive references to "God-Is-My-Copilot" Scott. The ethic of fighter squadrons was drink and daring; anything else was suspect. Still, I thought of myself as more than just a pilot and imagined a book that would be in every way admirable. It would be evident that someone among the ranks of pilots had written it, an exceptional figure, unknown, but I would have the satisfaction of knowing who it was.

I wrote when I could find time. Some of the book was written at a fighter base on Long Island, the rest of it in Europe, when I was stationed in Germany. A lieutenant in my squadron who lived in the apartment adjoining ours could hear the typewriter late at night through the bedroom wall. "What are you doing," he asked one day, "writing a book?" It was meant as a joke. Nothing could be more unlikely. I was the experienced operations officer. Next step was squadron commander.

The Hunters was published by Harper and Brothers in late 1956. A section of the book appeared first in *Collier's.* Word of it spread immediately. With the rest I sat speculating as to who the writer might be, someone who had served in Korea, with the Fourth Group, probably.

The reviews were good. I was 32 years old, the father of a child, with my wife expecting another. I had been flying fighters for seven years. I decided I had had enough. The childhood urge to write had never died, in fact, it had proven itself. I discussed it with my wife, who, with only a partial understanding of what was involved, did not attempt to change my mind. Upon leaving Europe, I resigned my commission with the aim of becoming a writer.

It was the most difficult act of my life. Latent in me, I suppose, there was always the belief that writing was greater than other things, or at least would prove to be greater in the end. Call it a delusion if you like, but within me was an insistence that whatever we did, the things that were said, the dawns, the cities, the lives, all of it had to be drawn together, made into pages, or it was in danger of not existing, of never having been. There comes a time

when you realize that everything is a dream, and only those things preserved in writing have any possibility of being real.

Of the actual hard business of writing I knew very little. The first book had been a gift. I missed the active life terribly, and after a long struggle a second book was completed. It was a failure. Jean Stafford, one of the judges for a prize for which it had been routinely submitted, left the manuscript on an airplane. The book made no sense to her, she said. But there was no turning back.

A Sport and a Pastime was published six years later. It, too, did not sell. A few thousand copies, that was all. It stayed in print, however, and one by one, slowly, foreign publishers bought it. Finally, Modern Library.

The use of literature, Emerson wrote, is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it. Perhaps this is true, but I would claim something broader. Literature is the river of civilization, its Tigris and Nile. Those who follow it, and I am inclined to say those only, pass by the glories.

Over the years I have been a writer for a succession of reasons. In the beginning, as I have said, I wrote to be admired, even if not known. Once I had decided to be a writer, I wrote hoping for acceptance, approval.

Gertrude Stein, when asked why she wrote, replied, "For praise." Lorca said he wrote to be loved. Faulkner said a writer wrote for glory. I may at times have written for those reasons, it's hard to know. Overall I write because I see the world in a certain way that no dialogue or series of them can begin to describe, that no book can fully render, though the greatest books thrill in their attempt.

A great book may be an accident, but a good one is a possibility, and it is thinking of that that one writes. In short, to achieve. The rest takes care of itself, and so much praise is given to insignificant things that there is hardly any sense in striving for it.

In the end, writing is like a prison, an island from which you will never be released but which is a kind of paradise: the solitude, the thoughts, the incredible joy of putting into words the essence of what you for the moment understand and with your whole heart want to believe.

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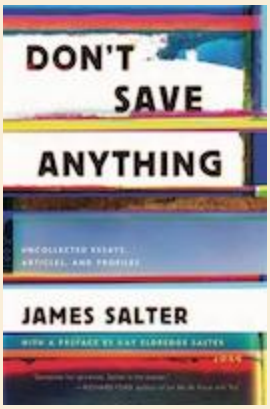

From Don’t Save Anything: The Uncollected Essays, Articles, and Profiles of James Salter, *by James Salter, courtesy of Counterpoint Press.*

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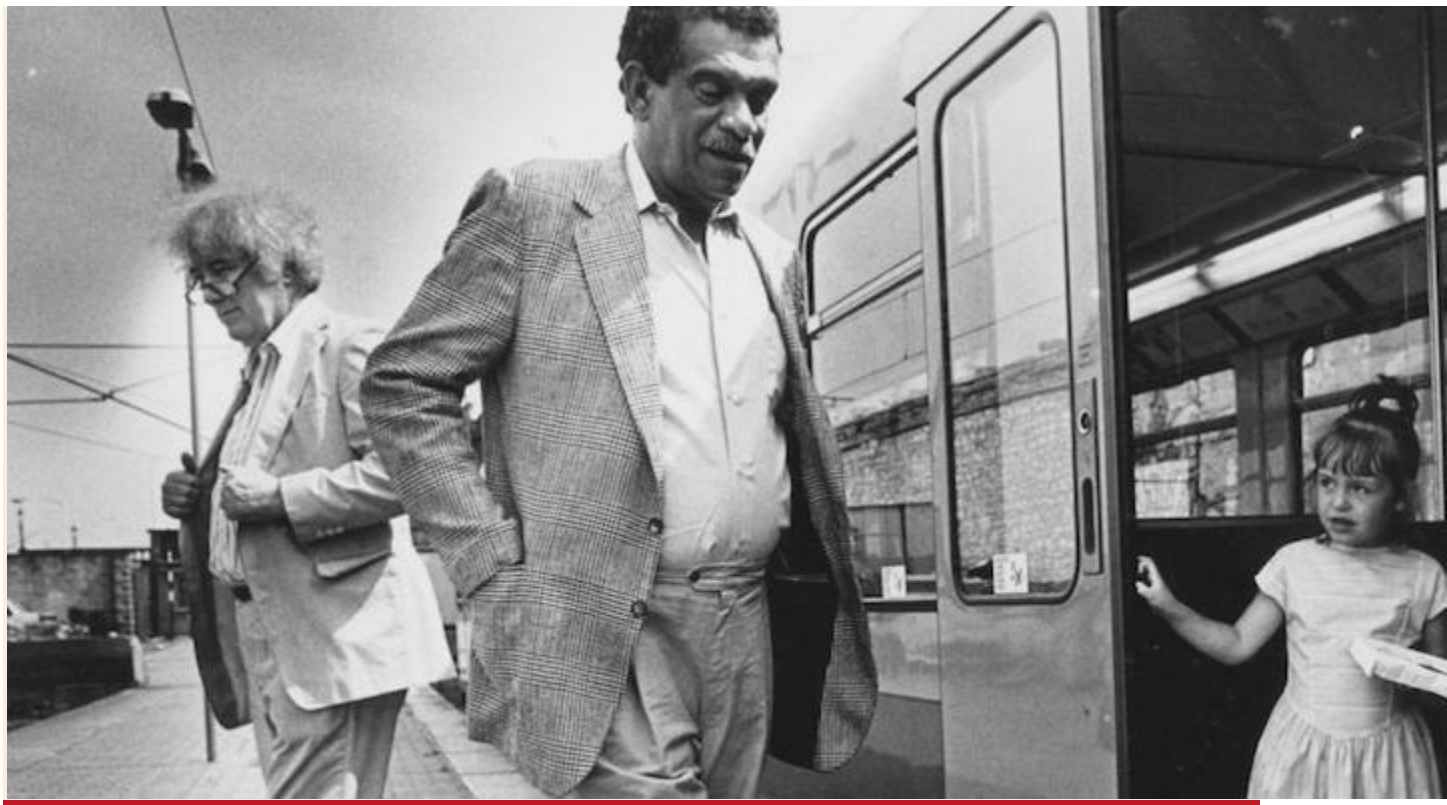


VIA AGNI

LONG TABLES, OPEN BOTTLES, AND SMOKE: HANGING OUT WITH DEREK WALCOTT

SVEN BIRKERTS ON LITERARY LIFE IN 1980S BOSTON, WITH A TRIO OF GREAT POETS

November 22, 2017 By Sven Birkerts NY Times

I learned a good deal about poets and poetry from Joseph Brodsky, whose classes I audited in the 1970s in Ann Arbor and whose opinion on most anything I took as holy writ in those days. Joseph was a great one for naming and ranking poets, and much of our conversation consisted of him delivering his various verdicts. "Miroslav Holub is terrific, ya?" Or "Yevtushenko, he's just shit." So-and-so was in fact a good poet, "too bad he had to get a Bly-job." I was all ears, and tuned in closely whenever a new name appeared on his list. "Derek Walcott," he said one day, "Caribbean poet—look him out [sic]." And I, ever dutiful, did just that, picking up *Sea Grapes* and *Another Life*. I remember liking both, and I also remember pushing myself to like them still more so I could be adequate to Brodsky's esteem. I certainly felt Walcott's power and freshness, and got that this was poetry with a unique rhythmic surge. But at that point I hadn't fully connected with it. Some time later, after I moved to Cambridge, I thought I might try to get closer by writing about the man. I decided to set Walcott's work and worldview against that of his fellow Caribbean writer V.S. Naipaul. The two had been friends in their youth but had since taken radically divergent paths, Naipaul dismissing his roots, Walcott putting his at the core of his poems and plays. I had heard there was friction.

When I finished, I showed the essay to Brodsky, who seemed to like it well enough. He made some noise about showing it to Walcott—the two had by this point become fast friends—but if he did, I never heard anything about it.

*

My memories here are impressionistic and jumbled. I know it was around this time—1981—that Derek was hired to teach at Boston University, where he also founded and then presided over the Playwrights' Theatre. Brodsky was then teaching at Mt. Holyoke and, as if obeying some larger pattern of intended convergence, Seamus Heaney had recently begun his semester-a-year teaching stint at Harvard. All three had at different times been taken up and touted by Robert Lowell; all three published with Farrar, Straus and Giroux. They could have set up as rivals, but instead became friends with a rabelaisian gusto rarely—maybe never—seen in academe.

What a delight it was to see these three utterly distinctive looking individuals together at a party! And it seems, looking back, that there were parties all the time. Long tables, open bottles, and smoke. God, how people smoked in 1981—Joseph with his L&M's ("Wystan smoked these"), Derek with filterless Pall Malls, Seamus with his Dunhills. And everyone gathered around them doing the same. If the reader now expects accounts of high literary seriousness, however, she will be disappointed. These gatherings were about play. They were exercises in comic brinksmanship. Who would pull off the night's best line, the funniest story; which of the three would most quickly reduce the other two to convulsions? Those of us lucky enough to be at the table barely got a word in. If we had any function, it was to keep things going, to prompt. A question, a compliment—it didn't matter, anything could be a trigger. Joseph was usually first out of the box with some dark jibe, which would inevitably set Derek into volatile contortions, releasing his extraordinary laugh, a full-body explosion. It would then fall to Seamus to offer the judicious sardonic rejoinder. I wished I could have brought it all home in a jar. My stomach hurt from laughing. I lay in bed, my head spinning from combined excesses, but also with the feeling that the world was, as Frost had it, "the right place for love."

I've gotten ahead of myself—it's the way of memory. I actually met Derek in 1981 at the start of the school year. I'd heard he was allowing non-students to audit his poetry seminar, and hurried to get a place. At the first class meeting, we gave our names. I remember being nervous. Maybe, I thought, he had

read my essay. I waited for a look, an indication. Nothing. I didn't dare ask him when we had conversations later.

In this setting of students and admirers, Derek was very meetable—as Seamus too would later be (Joseph could be a bit more standoffish). We all soon found out that Derek enjoyed going out after class, sitting around over coffee or Chinese food, surrounded by the adulatory young. He did not drink, though word was out that he had been a big carouser in his younger days.

We met in #222, the same second-floor room on Bay State road where Robert Lowell had taught his now-legendary seminar that included, among others, young poets George Starbuck, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. Derek was pleased by the association and often invoked his old mentor "Cal." Our class, which I audited for two years, had a loose free-associational format, like nothing I'd experienced—at least not before I met Joseph back in Ann Arbor. Was this how poets did it? It seemed radical and right, such a change from the syllabus-driven proceedings I'd known as an undergrad. In these sessions, a poem would be passed around—a ballad, something by Thomas Hardy or Elizabeth Bishop, say—like a specimen we could study, or, more flatteringly, like a melody handed off to a group of musicians to see what might happen. Meanings were not at issue—not in any conventional way. The conversations turned on rhythm, rhyme, cadence: the elements we came to see as primary to meaning.

Derek was all about repetition, sounding out a line or two, maybe from "Tom o' Bedlam's Song," pausing often to highlight some pairing of sounds, making us listen and echo them back, slowing things even more, until an iamb or a caesura reared up enormous in the ear. He was an appreciator, an enthusiast, and he taught us mainly through the modulations of his own reactions. "Do you hear that? Say that line again!"

From the hagg and hungrie goblin
That into raggs would rend ye,
And the spirit that stands by the naked man
In the Book of Moones—defend ye!

His ear was tuned for incantation, for the way sounds in the right pulse could drum up emotion. *That into raggs would rend ye*—"Listen to that, do you hear it?" I felt uneasy at times, aware that I did *not* in fact hear "it," or maybe just wasn't clear on what he wanted us to be responding to. But isn't this the oldest story? The listener beside you at the concert goes into raptures during some passage and you can only assume his is the deeper sensibility, cut from a finer cloth.

Contemporaries did not get much airplay in those classes, at least not in the early days, but I do recall one exception, when Derek found himself completely taken with Adam Zagajewski's "Going to Lvov." The poem is long, and we read it out loud again and again. And, as sometimes happens, the world would go away for a time. All attention was on the beat of those translated lines:

To go to Lvov. Which station for Lvov, if not in a dream, at dawn, when dew
gleams on a suitcase, when express
trains and bullet trains are being born. To leave
in haste for Lvov, night or day, in September
or in March. But only if Lvov exists,
if it is to be found within the frontiers and not just
in my new passport, if lances of trees
—of poplar and ash—still breathe aloud
like Indians, and if streams mumble
their dark esperanto, and grass snakes like soft signs
in the Russian language disappear
into thickets.

Derek's reasons for adoring it are immediately clear. Zagajewski is writing directly in what I think of as the key of Walcott—and Brodsky—moving forward by the same logic of transformations, assuming the same coded equivalences between the things of the world and the words with which they are transmitted. Here the poet plays with such likeness directly, joining in our

minds the visual punctuation of the Russian “soft sign” and the sibilance that calls up the movement of water.

Derek’s instruction, his sleeves-rolled-up approach to the poetic line, was persuasive, but even so I’m surprised all these years later how much those incantatory repetitions have stuck with me, how they inform not just my sense of the various poems we discussed, but my reading of poetry in general. The process, I’ve learned, is very different from engaging with prose, even highly crafted literary prose. A poem is a thing made of sound, Rilke’s “tall tree in the ear.” You do not address it in logical sequence, as a set of messages, and hurry on. Instead, you greet it with a different kind of attention: all those syllables, those sounds, have combined to make meanings and sensations. You grasp that primary fact at the same time as you grasp those meanings and sensations. Derek never stated the matter in quite these terms, but this is what I understood him to be communicating.

This talk, this instruction, was offered to us by a great poet working at the top of his powers. The work of those years—collected in *The Fortunate Traveller* and *Midsummer*—was Derek’s very finest, and we were lucky to be in the room with him. Though it can never be measured or fully described, there is a definite radiance emanating from what Shelley called “the mind in creation”—a sense of concentrated intent, of passion. Derek was writing at a mighty clip and the publications confirmed it.

Those of us who went to his class all knew his routine— that he woke at first light and wrote. By the time he arrived at 222 in the late morning, his workday was mostly behind him, and when class ended after two hours, he was ready to adjourn for food and coffee. The understanding—I don’t know if it was ever expressly stated—was that we would not talk poetry. Lunch was meant for banter, jokes, and insults; it was for talking about *Barney Miller*, his favorite show, not Hart Crane.

Derek loved verbal sparring and being silly—and he could be *very* silly. When he was in the throes, it was easy to forget that this man could also

strike the elegiac note like few others. That *was* his note—it defines his work. Stately, mournful, the poems carry the sorrows of colonial oppression as well as the stuff of his own melancholic temperament, as in these opening lines of "North and South," possibly the first of Derek's poems that gripped me fully:

Now, at the rising of Venus—the steady star
that survives translation, if one can call this lamp
the planet that pierces us over indigo islands—
despite the critical sand flies, I accept my function
as a colonial upstart at the end of an empire,
a single, circling, homeless satellite.

It was the gravitas that captured me right away, the voice, and only after that did I hear the sense—the poet pronouncing on his great themes of place and empire.

Nowhere does Derek express the Caribbean's colonial legacy with more sensory nuance than in the poem "Jean Rhys," in *The Fortunate Traveller.* Here is the first stanza:

In their faint photographs
Mottled with chemicals,
Like the left hand of some spinster aunt,
They have drifted to the edge
Of verandahs in Whistlerian
White, their jungle turned
tea-brown—even its spiked palms—
Their features pale,

To be penciled in:
Bone-collared gentlemen
With spiked moustaches
And their wives embayed in the wickerwork
Armchairs, all looking coloured
From the distance of a century

Beginning to groan sideways
from the axe stroke!

Jean Rhys was the white West Indies–born writer who made her name with a number of novels, including *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which has been described as a "prequel" to *Jane Eyre* in telling the story of the first (mad) Mrs. Rochester. Walcott captures the imagined atmosphere of her girlhood, attuned to setting, cultural milieu, and rendering each separate detail with his keen artist's eye (Derek was, it should be said, an accomplished watercolorist and a number of his books feature his work as the cover art). To me the power of this passage, representative of the rest of the poem, is found in the play between the clarifying precision of the details and then the sudden imposition of the vast perspective of centuries. And of course the music. Poet Robert Graves helped launch Derek's career with these early, and now often quoted, words of praise, saying that he "handles English with a closer understanding of its inner magic than most (if not any) of his English-born contemporaries." Consider just the play from "hand" to "aunt" (pronounced *ont*, of course) to "verandahs" carried over to "palms," and then the mimetic crackle of "wives embayed in the wickerwork" . . . The poet could make the slightest nuances of sound serve him. In that latter line we pick up a settling sensation from the drawn-out vowels in "embayed," which, suspended between the crisp vowels of "wives" and "wickerwork," suggests the brittle tension or unease of those women.

Let me stay with *The Fortunate Traveller* just a moment longer, to cite the book's concluding poem, "The Season of Phantasmal Peace," with its almost orchestral consonances, its powerful feeling of gravity overcome:

Then all the nations of birds lifted together
The huge net of the shadows of this earth
In multitudinous dialects, twittering tongues,
Stitching and crossing it.

Here is the other Derek. Though his vision from the start had much to do with the pressures of empire, he also expressed a counterpoint vision of the extraordinary beauty of nature. His eye took in light and color, rejoiced in the proliferations of tropical flora, and he was never not heeding the measured tempo of the sea. It was his attentiveness to this alternately percussive and soothing rhythm, his powerful conjuring of an order beyond human travail, which made that poem so powerful. Derek composed a moment of pure duration, a feeling of nature linked to love and not yet befouled:

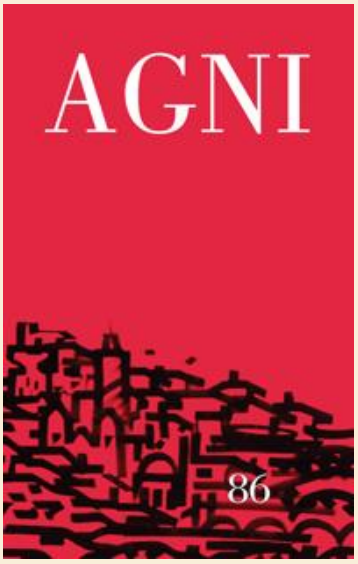
And this season lasted one long moment, like the pause
Between dusk and darkness, between fury and peace,
But, for such as our earth is now, it lasted long.

Looking back all these years later, I appreciate more than ever the importance not just of Derek's work, but also of what it meant to have the force of such dedication to the art in our midst. And then to have it so massively amplified by the near presence of Seamus and Joseph. Three of our greatest poets, all at the height of their powers, urging each other on. Imagine the inspiration of that.

These, I think, were the best years—before the Nobel Prizes. Say what you will, the feeling in a room changes when a certified Nobelist is present, never mind two or three. There is, of course, the overt or conspicuously concealed regard of the non-Nobelists present; and then the deft but still obvious efforts of the laureates not to be acting as eminences. It's true, of course, that the poets were already known and honored before then, but somehow their earlier celebrity energized much more than it constrained.

After he won the Nobel in 1992, Derek was less often at BU. He traveled, taught, and eventually, as his health began to decline, spent more and more time in Saint Lucia with his partner Sigrid Nama. There were years when I did not set eyes on the man, though reports came to us from Seamus, who visited him there frequently. It had been well over a decade since those early classes. Nevertheless, I could not pass room 222 without a cinching tug of recollection. Another decade on and I still can't.

Memories of Derek bring back the feel of the times, how it was for all of us who came up together wanting to be writers. We showed up at the same readings, went to the same bars afterward. We watched each others' trajectories closely as we sent our work to literary journals. In this we were no different from would-be writers who came before or after us. The only difference might have been the figures we took as our inspirations. Derek, Seamus, and Joseph were each a force unto themselves. *Autochthonic* is the word I want: self-generating. They put forth entire and unique poetic worlds. What was remarkable, given that, was how obviously and enthusiastically they enjoyed each other and communicated the idea that poetry—literature—was not a competition but a commons. Many of us, I know, count it our great good fortune to have learned that as we did.



This essay originally appears in issue 86 of AGNI. *Featured photograph by* ***Matt Kavanah***

Galway Kinnell's poetry transformed the world, but the world has changed

By CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER

DEC 01, 2017 | 7:00 AM

Galway Kinnell was often compared to his favorite poet, Walt Whitman, whose "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" Kinnell movingly read aloud every year on the far side of the Brooklyn Bridge at a benefit for the New York poetry library Poets House. Like Whitman, Kinnell — who died in 2014 having won the Pulitzer, the National Book Award and a MacArthur, among other honors for books published between the 1960 and 2006 — was a poet of capacious interest in the natural world, profound commitment to social justice, and deep sympathy for the people he saw.

He was a poet of his time, meaning both that he depicts the world, concerns and values of the last third of the 20th century, and that his poems are like those of many of his peers born at the end of the 1920s — A.R. Ammons, Philip Levine, W.S. Merwin and Adrienne Rich — who broke free of the strict formalism of 1950s American poetry to create the more impressionistic, sometimes surreal, nature-focused poetry of the late 1960s and 1970s. For many, Kinnell's poems are exactly what one thinks of when one thinks of contemporary poetry. All of his books are collected here, along with a handful of late poems. It is impossible to consider the landscape of the last 50 years of American poetry without Kinnell.

Kinnell was inarguably a great poet. Among the subjects he was best at were steadfastness in marriage and parenthood. In his famous poem "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps," Kinnell's young son Fergus wanders into his parents' room when "we lie together, / after making love, quiet, touching along the length of our bodes, / familiar touch of the long-married." Then Fergus "flops down between us and hugs us and snuggles himself to sleep, / his face gleaming with

satisfaction at being this very child." There is no ball and chain here, no ambitions crushed beneath the weight of child-rearing. Kinnell's world is enlarged and infinitely specified by his love for his family. Specificity itself — the great bounty of attending intimately to life's minutia — is another of Kinnell's great subjects and poetic practices.

Like many of his generation, whose faith was shattered by the Vietnam war, Nixon, the struggles of the civil rights movement and the turmoil of the late '60s, Kinnell turned to the secular spirituality of nature for his religion, as he does in the much anthologized "Blackberry Eating":

I love to go out in late September
among the fat, overripe, icy, black blackberries
to eat blackberries for breakfast,
the stalks very prickly, a penalty
they earn for knowing the black art
of blackberry-making; and as I stand among them
lifting the stalks to my mouth, the ripest berries
fall almost unbidden to my tongue,
as words sometimes do ...

Kinnell's readers are granted constant and intimate access to his body, to his sensations, to what it feels like to taste and touch and see and hear and think as him. This was a profound priority, an invitation to empathy, to communion, that was essential to Kinnell's sense of what poetry could, and should, do. For him, the poet's work is to come as close to the world as possible with words, to express its contradictions and complexities in literally breathtaking detail, looking

until the other is utterly other, and then,

with hard effort, probably with tongue sticking out,
going over each difference again and this time
canceling it, until nothing is left but likeness
and suddenly oneness

At his best — and he is very often at his best — Kinnell is capable of transforming the world at hand — in both urban and country settings, for he split much of his life between New York and Vermont — into a grammar that can point us toward, be our access to, profundity, to truths, and what often feels like Truth itself.

Nonetheless, it is hard, with all that is happening in the world and especially in America this past year, to say that this is the top book of poetry I'd recommend reading right now. Contemporary readers, especially younger ones, may have a hard time swallowing optimistic secular spiritualisms like the notion that "everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing." Perhaps not enough room is left in these poems for another kind of wisdom: the ambiguity and uncertainty that newer poetry has become very adept at conveying.

Among Kinnell's most important late works is "When the Towers Fell," a long poem written after 9/11, which feels deeply prescient right now. Of the fallen towers, Kinnell says, "often we didn't see them, and now/ not seeing them, we see them." The truth of this applies to so much we'd taken for granted, the loss of which now overruns our news feeds. This poem represents a very personal working through of a very public tragedy by a deep and earthbound mind. Kinnell here trains his considerable descriptive powers on imagining what it was like to be in the towers when the planes struck: "Some let themselves fall, begging gravity to speed them to the

ground. / Some leapt hand in hand that their fall down the sky might happen more lightly."

We need this poem again, and more poems like it, which ache to understand others' suffering, which suffer over a suddenly dashed dream of what could and should have been, what should be. Kinnell teaches that kind of attentiveness.

Teicher's most recent book of poetry, "The Trembling Answers," was published in April. He is also the editor of "Once and for All: The Best of Delmore

Galway Kinnell's "Collected Poems." (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

"Collected Poems"Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: 640 pp., $35

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It’s Okay to Be Selfish with Your Writing

By Adrienne Reiter

Anthony Bourdain claims his best writing is done first thing in the morning half asleep over coffee. Truman Capote claimed to write best hungover when half his brain was out of the way. Writing isn’t just about creation. It’s equally about destruction. As writers, we dismantle our original ideas and fabrications to give birth to the genuine. We all know where our writing sweet spot is. Guard these hours selfishly!

Creating and destroying our imaginary worlds require time, space, and action. Home, work, family, *life*, the distractions are endless. It’s easy to get caught up in our “more practical” and “less theoretical” chores. This is when writers stop being writers. It’s also what makes writing an act of physical courage. Writing requires stamina, strength, and perseverance. Showing up is half the battle.

Writing is never a waste of time! The saying is, 100,000 hours makes a master. It’s not 100,000 genius hours. It’s not 100,000 talented or prolific hours. It’s just 100,000 hours of work. It doesn’t have to be quality. We write to write to perfection.

You’re probably thinking, “But I feel so bad for not making enough money, isolating myself, (insert “more practical crap” here).”

Writing is inherently impractical, and the world needs more of it! Evolutionary Cosmologist, Brian Swimme puts it succinctly. "By pursuing your allurements, you help bind the universe together. The unity of the world rests on the pursuit of your passion." If you feel moved to write, the sin is not to. Our fall from grace as a society is in our lack of imagination. Everything is constructed by the creative energy of the universe. Proof of this is found in the laws of thermodynamics.

Like Bourdain and Capote, I prefer to write in my sleepy hours curled inside the subtle feelings of consciousness. Right when I wake up I compose with a pad and pen over coffee, later to be transferred and edited onto my laptop when I'm no longer hanging out in those more subtler realms. Only right out of my dream state am I able to sequester my rational, critical intelligence to work within these realms.

I know writers who work exclusively in the evenings. As we are all physiologically different, we are unique creatively. Yet, it's equally hard to train ourselves to push our self-doubts out of the way. Artists often feel less than when they're not successful commercially. It's this modern thinking that we need to deconstruct. This deforms our imagination. Our economy is like a machine. If it's warped, it doesn't work. We keep writing because we must.

Whether it's late in the evening, first thing in the morning, or for three days in a row, your writing time is sacred and needs protecting. Selfishly treat your writing as your most important work. Everything else is just paying the bills and making ends meet. If you write the same time everyday your brain adapts and after repetition will automatically switch to 'writing mode' during these times. If you don't have a writing routine, start one. Right now. Today!

Bio: Adrienne Reiter writes mystery, speculative, and literary fiction. In May '17 she'll be an MFA graduate from, California Institute of Integral Studies. She is both traditionally and independently published. Adrienne lives in San Francisco.

So . . . how do you say it? Agni.

by Sven Birkerts

It was T. S. Eliot who wrote how "our beginnings never know our ends," and I would like to second him on that as I think back to origins.

I arrived in Boston in the late 1970s, a young man crazy about all things literary - writers and writing and the burgeoning culture of little magazines. The best place to find these was a bookstore called Reading International on the corner of Church Street and Brattle Street in Cambridge, and it became an almost daily destination for me. Standing in front of the display rack just inside the door, I would soak in the auratic emanations from *Antaeus, The Hudson Review, The Threepenny*

***Review*, *Parnassus*, *Field*, *Brick*, *Ploughshares*, and, yes, *The Agni Review*. That was what AGNI was called back then, and I was as susceptible to the mystique of the name as to the drolly precise cover drawings by David Itchkawich that marked that era of its cover design. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the journal was edited right there in Cambridge. Though I had not published anywhere before, I resolved that I would find my way into those pages.**

And I did, though my very brief prose poem about Anton Chekhov would not appear for several years. I certainly couldn't have imagined that I would one day have that most alluring journal at the center of my life.

Years after I was first beguiled by the magazine's name, after my prose poem had appeared and - this was Cambridge, after all - met Askold Melnyczuk, the founding editor, I finally heard what I assumed was the correct way to verbalize it: Ann-yee. That was how he said it. No 'g'-sound. And all this time I'd been telling people I'd published in OG-nee. Or was it AG-nee? How confused I was, later, when someone from India - possibly a Sanskrit scholar - heard me say the name and shook his finger. "No, no - it's UG-nee."

The Surprising Evolution of Dinosaur Drawings

Many people visit the fossil hall at Chicago's Field Museum for the dinosaurs; but a certain kind of art lover goes for the murals. Originally painted by the famed wildlife artist Charles R. Knight in the late 1920s, each of the hall's 28 murals presents an elegantly composed moment in time: armored squid tossed onto a desolate Ordovician beach, a duel between *Tyrannosaurus* and *Triceratops*, saber-toothed cats snarling at flocks of giant vulture-like *Teratornis*. There's a dreamy quality to the images, impressionistic landscapes blending with vibrant animal figures. It doesn't quite matter that the renderings are now scientifically out of date; they're convincingly alive.

Such works of paleoart—a genre that uses fossil evidence to reconstruct vanished worlds—directly shape the way humans imagine the distant past. It's an easy form to define but a tricky one to work in. Paleontological accuracy is a moving target, with the posture and life appearance of fossil species constantly reshuffled by new discoveries and scientific arguments. Old ideas can linger long after researchers have moved on, while some artists' wild speculations are proved correct decades after the fact. Depictions of extinct animals exist in the gap between the knowable and the

unknowable, and two recent books, *Paleoart: Visions of the Prehistoric Past* and *Dinosaur Art II: The Cutting Edge of Paleoart*, probe the different ways creators have tried to bridge that divide.

The Artists Who Paint Dinosaurs

As *The Atlantic*'s Ross Andersen wrote in a piece about paleoart in 2015, "To contemplate a dinosaur is to slip from the present, to travel in time, deep into the past, to see the Earth as it was tens, if not hundreds, of millions of years ago." *Paleoart*,published by Taschen this fall, is primarily focused on how this past appeared to artists starting in the 19th century, when the genre first took root. A lavishly reproduced gallery of 160 years of prehistory-themed art, the book includes a series of short contextual essays from its author, the journalist Zoë Lescaze. Many of the animals presented in *Paleoart* may look odd to the modern eye: bloated, skeletal, or dragging their tails in the scientific fashion of the time. Lescaze doesn't spend much time reflecting on the changing paleontological ideas that informed the drawings and paintings, though. "I came at the artwork through a more cultural lens," Lescaze told me. "How they might reflect the political events of that period, or events in that artist's own personal biography, and other techniques that any art historian would bring to a work of fine art."

The oldest entries in the genre, in particular, illuminate how paleoart can reflect both political and aesthetic movements, Lescaze said. The first formal reconstructions of extinct animals appeared in the 1800s, around the time the first Mesozoic fossils came under scientific study. Europe was in tumult, with empires wrangling over colonial territory, and discoveries around biodiversity, extinction, and evolution were coming at a blinding pace. As such, reconstructions often took on an allegorical cast. The French artist Édouard Riou depicted marine reptiles such

as *Plesiosaurus* and *Ichthyosaurus* squaring off like warships on the high seas, perhaps reacting to the naval battles of the Napoleonic wars, according to Lescaze. In the apocalyptic watercolors of John Martin, nightmarish beasts writhed and flailed in the antediluvian ooze. The artist Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins thrilled Victorian Britain with paintings and sculptures of dinosaurs presiding as regal monarchs over tropical kingdoms full of lesser reptiles.

But paleoart didn't really come into its own until the arrival of Knight. An American painter who began his career in the late 19th century and reached his peak in the early 20th, Knight worked closely with scientists such as Henry Fairfield Osborn and Barnum Brown to portray his subjects as accurately as possible, given the assumptions at the time. (In keeping with Osborn's ideas, Knight gave his dinosaurs reedy, lizardy limbs, rather than the beefy, bird-like legs the fossils actually suggested.) Nearly blind by the time he was in his 30s, Knight opted for a naturalistic style full of heft and movement, with complementary colors, soft palettes, and expansive scenery. By Knight's death in 1953, Lescaze said, his creations had directly influenced films like *King Kong* and *Fantasia*, writers such as Ray Bradbury, and a plethora of young paleontologists and artists.

***Laelaps*, 1897 (Charles R. Knight / courtesy of American Museum of Natural History, New York)**

During Knight's life—and for some time afterward—paleoart remained a fairly loose field. Painters came from an assortment of backgrounds; some were trained illustrators, and others were enthusiastic amateurs. While they adhered to the larger paleontological views of the time, not everyone was necessarily concerned with anatomical rigor. In the 1930s and '40s, European artists like Mathurin Méheut sought romance in prehistory with Art Nouveau designs and evocative watercolors, setting his bat-winged pterodactyls and drooping long-necked dinosaurs among asymmetrical arabesques. The Soviet paleontologist Konstantin Konstantinovich Flyorov (a great fan of Knight's, Lescaze said) escaped the enforced artistic realism of the USSR by depicting the ancient world as a series of off-kilter fairy tales filled with dragon-like dinosaurs.

Toward the end of the 20th century, however, overt metaphor and experimentation were largely replaced by rehashes of Knight's style, and artists drifted further away from the genre's scientific underpinnings. The majority of those illustrating extinct animals were commercial artists without much knowledge of paleontology. A lack of accurate references encouraged large amounts of plagiarism; any one artist's whim—a pose, a speculative anatomical detail—often became the *de rigueur* way of picturing an animal for decades afterward. (Knight's dinosaurs, for example, have had a long and productive career in books, in movies, and on lunch boxes since his death.) There were exceptions, Lescaze said, such as the moody forests and skeletal dinosaurs that Ely Kish began painting in the 1970s. *Paleoart* ends its survey with her work. In doing so, it misses out on one of the most transformative periods in the genre's history.

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A major reassessment of dinosaurs that began in the 1960s, and finally took hold in the 1980s, positioned them not as dull evolutionary failures but as active, warm-blooded animals. Researcher-illustrators like Gregory Paul and painters like Mark Hallett began developing a rigorous anatomical style in accordance with new findings, slimming their animals down to lean creations of muscle and bone. In 1993, *Jurassic Park* tapped into this momentum, setting a new baseline for what dinosaurs should look like and sparking a popular craze that never quite faded.

The internet had a fundamental effect on paleoart, too. It became easier to find technical information on prehistoric animals' anatomy, or the latest theories about their behavior. Image-hosting sites like DeviantArt, curated websites like The Dinosauricon, and dedicated blogs served as hubs for a growing paleoart community. Email listservs and the rise of social media meant researchers, professional artists, and amateurs could collaborate with each other on a wider scale. The field, in the 2010s, has become more accessible, accurate, and forward-looking than ever before—as well as more stylistically constrained.

***Dinosaur Art II: The Cutting Edge of Paleoart* is a dispatch from this internet age of paleontology, and is in some ways a revealing companion to Taschen's *Paleoart*. Published in October by Titan**

Books, it compiles in-depth interviews and curated work from modern paleoartists across the globe, as collected by Steve White, a U.K. comics artist. (The book is a sequel to 2012's *Dinosaur Art: The World's Greatest Paleoart*.) Some of the featured illustrators, like Brazil's Julio Lacerda, create digital images that look like photographic collages, while the artist Andrey Atuchin works in a clean, detailed style akin to that of classic *National Geographic* drawings. All the animals in *Dinosaur Art II* conform closely to modern scientific convention; most of the profiled artists work in the hyper-realistic mode that has come to define the genre. Compared to the breadth of approaches contained within Lescaze's book, the results can look a little standardized and tame.

***Fish Theft*, 2015, which depicts *Hesperornis* harassing a fishing *Pteranodon* (Julio Lacerda / *Dinosaur Art II* / Titan Books, 2017)**

Today, the field is seeing a growing tension between a more cautious approach to paleoart and an urge for experimentation. In an attempt to make paleoart more academically credible, artists of the last few decades have often emphasized skeletal fidelity over all else. This proved to be a bit of an overcorrection: Compare a cat skull and a living cat, and it's easy to see that skeletons aren't always a good reflection of an animal's flesh-and-blood appearance. Dinosaurs and prehistoric reptiles illustrated in the modern era have a tendency to look like skin shrink-wrapped over bone. A certain amount of cultural inertia and cliché also lingers, even in more carefully reconstructed art. Predatory dinosaurs in particular are still often depicted in relentless battle, mouths open in frozen roars.

In the 2010s, paleontologists and artists have been pushing for more radically imaginative approaches to soft-tissue anatomy and behavior, and less reliance on standard tropes. The "All Yesterdays" campaign—named after a provocative paleoart book published in 2012—challenged artists to think more broadly about prehistoric animals as living creatures, with sleep habits, social interactions, and foraging behaviors. All Yesterdays–style dinosaurs might have humps, or extravagant inflatable sacs, or unsuspected feathers. "There's a nihilistic aspect to [the

movement],” Mark Witton, a British paleontologist and one of the artists in *Dinosaur Art II*, told me. “We don’t really know what’s right or wrong about our [soft-tissue] reconstructions, so we might as well be as bold with them as our science will allow. … It’s more just about being honest, and exploring many possible truths rather than one tried-and-tested take on a subject species.”

Only traces of this new approach appear in *Dinosaur Art II*. Artists like Brian Engh, David Orr, and Rebecca Groom are exploring a wider range of styles, including conscious homage, fine art, and Pixar-inflected designs. As long as the art is grounded by a scientific understanding of the animal in question, Witton said, there’s still a lot of room for inventiveness. “Certain styles distort reality by necessity, so if we simplify the form of our subjects into basic geometries … or apply surreal color palettes, are we still making paleoart?” Witton asked. “We’re still scratching the surface of paleoart’s potential diversity.”

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While paleoart is a form of scientific art, its value doesn’t always lie in its level of accuracy. According to Lescaze, while researching *Paleoart*, she met a Smithsonian paleontologist who showed her an original Knight dinosaur painting he had in his office. He’d fished it out of a dumpster after a new director disposed of outdated art to make space in the collections. “They’re complex artifacts, and vulnerable in a way that other works of natural history illustration aren’t,” Lescaze said of vintage pieces of paleoart. “Nobody’s going to throw out the John James Audubon, but works of paleoart that are rendered obsolete regularly get discarded. … It’s really important to look back at some of these and say, yeah, they’re not scientifically accurate anymore, but who cares? What else can they teach us?”

Whatever the influences or techniques, paleoart is fundamentally an attempt to glimpse something that can never be fully seen. Anybody who tries to reconstruct prehistory fills in the gaps with their own preoccupations, turning real animals into symbols of obsolescence, savagery, or martial power. Many modern artists are trying to strip these projections out of their art, but changing cultural ideas and paleontological consensus can make doing so difficult. “Evolution is a brush, not a ladder,” the artist Emily

Willoughby notes in *Dinosaur Art II*: not a direct route going anywhere, but, rather, a messy bundle of approaches. It's only fitting that the art depicting its sweep should be similarly difficult to pin down.

Titan

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How Do I Know When a Poem Is Finished?

Naomi Shihab Nye, 1952

When you quietly close
the door to a room
the room is not finished.

It is resting. Temporarily.
Glad to be without you
for a while.

Now it has time to gather
its balls of gray dust,
to pitch them from corner to corner.

Now it seeps back into itself,
unruffled and proud.
Outlines grow firmer.

When you return,
you might move the stack of books,
freshen the water for the roses.

I think you could keep doing this
forever. But the blue chair looks best
with the red pillow. So you might as well

leave it that way.

Naomi Shihab Nye

Naomi Shihab Nye gives voice to her experience as an Arab-American through poems about heritage and peace that overflow with a humanitarian spirit.

embed poem
add to anthology
print

Years ago, I was grateful for NEA grants, and several from the DC branch. Doesn't hurt to apply yourselves. This year's grants in creative writing, available for fiction. Poetry next year.

***Washington, DC*—The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has an extensive history of supporting literature in America, providing funding for the creation of new works and for the translation of some of the world's best literature into English. As part of this ongoing commitment, today the NEA announced it will award $1.2 million in fellowships as part of its fiscal year 2018 grantmaking. "The National Endowment for the Arts is proud to provide crucial funding to support these individuals in their creative endeavors and to continue expanding the range of ideas and viewpoints available to readers," said Amy Stolls, NEA director of literature.**

Creative Writing Fellowships

In FY 2018, the NEA will award 36 Creative Writing Fellowships of $25,000 each for a total of $900,000. Fellowships alternate between poetry and prose each year and this year's fellowships are to

support prose—works of fiction and creative nonfiction, such as memoir and personal essays.

This year's fellows hail from 20 states and grew up in settings ranging from the Blue Ridge Mountains to a Midwestern dairy farm to a Native-American reservation in Washington State. Among the recipients are first- or second-generation Americans with family roots in countries such as South Korea, Iran, India, and Ethiopia. The fellows demonstrate an array of backgrounds and interests—from a writer in the tech industry to an opera librettist, an atmospheric scientist to a crime reporter. A third of the recipients have yet to publish their first book while others are critically acclaimed authors.

Through its Creative Writing Fellowships, the NEA gives writers the freedom to create, revise, conduct research, and connect with readers. These fellowships are highly competitive, with 1,692 eligible applicants in FY 2018. Applications are reviewed by a panel through an anonymous process and are judged solely on the artistic excellence of the work sample provided.

Since 1967, the NEA has awarded more than 3,400 Creative Writing Fellowships worth $46 million. Many American recipients of the National Book Award, National Book Critics Circle Award, and Pulitzer Prize in Poetry and Fiction were recipients of NEA

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The 2018 Dorset Prize

Deadline: December 31, 2017
Final Judge: Dana Levin
Prize: $4,500
$3,000 cash prize and a week-long residency at MASS MoCA worth $1,500

The Dorset Prize is open to anyone writing in the English language, whether living in the United States or abroad. Translations are not eligible for this prize, nor are previously self-published books. Poets submitting work for consideration may be published authors or writers without prior book publications. Please read the complete guidelines before submitting your manuscript. (Find on the Internet).