

## ROBERT CREELEY, 1926 - 2005

Poetry happens for so many reasons. Robert Creeley once said “I seem to be given to work in some intense moment of whatever possibility, and if I manage to gain the articulation necessary *in* that moment, then happily there is the poem.”

It would be hard to overestimate the courage of Robert Creeley, who left Harvard’s manicured grounds in his early-20s to become the poet Charles Olson would call “the figure of outward.” Even at their most interior moments, his poems are concise projections outward of the manifold and vulnerable workings of the human psyche. Olson, 15 years his senior, dedicated his life-work, *The Maximus Poems*, to Creeley, and in one of his most famous poems, referred to him as the man who gave him “the world,” a tribute to the acts of imagination that Bob made possible through his poems, his belief, and even his conversation.

This spring we lost one of the great believers in poetry and its power to transform life and modes of thought into a more complex, resonant, nuanced reality; a poet who never lost sight of the politics that attend those thoughts and feelings. A poet who found a form to accommodate what Wallace Stevens called the violence from within that presses against the violence from without.

His poems are precise and knowing and have what one of his early books call “the charm.” Each word in a Creeley poem is chosen with such great Yankee economy that it resonates with several possible tones in quick succession—the way “hello” can register anything from surprise to friendship to a call for help, and—in an effect that’s pure Creeley—often conveys all these messages at once.

Along with his monumental achievement as a poet, his creative output included over a thousand pages of essays and fiction, a truly unquantifiable volume of letters, as well as the editing of the Divers Press, the *Black Mountain Review*, various anthologies, and selections of Whitman, Burns, Olson, and Oppen.

The facts of Robert Creeley’s life should be familiar to readers of the *Newsletter*; still, read, if you haven’t recently, his amazingly moving, instructive, and hilarious *Autobiography*. On the web, it’s worth checking out the electronic poetry center at Buffalo, where there are links to dozens of poems and sound-files, obituaries and memorials. In fact, Bob was the first poet I

knew to embrace the electronic realm. It matched both the breadth and speed of the author of *A Quick Graph*.

Bob's story was legendary. By the time I read his poems as a teenager he had lost an eye; swum the Charles River; shared a freshman classroom with Hawkes and Ashbery; lived abroad, started a press, and hung out with Blackburn, Dahlberg, Levertov, and Duncan; taught at Black Mountain with Cage, Rauschenberg, and Cunningham, et al.; drank with Kline and Kerouac; fought with Pollock; typed Ginsberg's *Howl*; appeared as Lancelot in Spicer's *The Holy Grail*; had ice-cream at the Zukofsky's; broken bread with Graves, Beckett, Williams, and Pound; and had married three times. His word "company" stood in for all of that and more.

For poets of my generation, Creeley's international renown has been a fact of life. He never submitted to the view that poetry was only for the few, and he made it possible to imagine that the often obdurate domain of the poem was meant for everyone. His experiments with language extended into a deep and ongoing engagement with the visual arts and music. He collaborated with artists as diverse as Francesco Clemente and Marisol, Joe Brainard and Alex Katz, R.B. Kitaj and Susan Rothenberg, among many others and worked with composers such as Steve Lacy, Steve Swallow, and the group Mercury Rev.

A lot has been said recently about Bob's generosity, which took many forms. He had no tolerance for bullshit or whining but was capable of incredible patience, and if he saw something that was in his power to fix, he did so. And lest we forget, he could be fierce as all get-out. He was a devoted teacher, undeterred by the persistent critique of the role of poets in universities. Conversely, on the Black Mountain model, he was more interested in bending institutions to support poetry. That was one of his labors. Teaching at Buffalo was less Romantic on the surface than driving an ambulance in the Second World War or chicken farming (Bob's first career!) or living on the cheap in Mallorca and writing fiction, as he did in the 50s, or even teaching at Black Mountain. But it was no less bold a gesture and speaks to the persistence of his self-determination. He made that inhospitable landscape thrive for nearly 40 years, eventually bringing in Susan Howe and Charles Bernstein. He and his beloved Penelope made their home a locating center for generations of poets.

He loved other poets. I mean, the whole enterprise of being a poet, including its public obligations. Mario Cuomo appointed him the first New York State Poet Laureate, an office he delighted in. But with Bob, prizes were never what the conversation was about, so you could be

his friend without realizing he was awarded the Frost Medal, the Shelley Memorial Award and—for his collection *Life and Death*, written while he was in his 70s—the Bollingen Prize.

While his work is now a fact of American letters, part of what's beautiful about Bob's life in poetry is its restless energy, the way he let patterns return. Echoes, mirrors, and windows are all reflective, unstable media, ephemeral as the body. The means by which we see, or hear, ourselves as others. What is ephemeral is, in some sense, always new. I remember opening *Windows* in 1990. Its first section, "The Company" (originally published as a chapbook from Burning Deck) begins with the poem "Song." So windows opened not to a view but to a sound, not an answer but a question. Bob was in his 60s and seemed to have found a place from which it was possible to begin everything again:

What's in the body you've forgotten  
and that you've left alone  
and that you don't want—

or what's in the body that you want  
and would die for—  
and think it's all of it—

if life's a form to be forgotten  
once you've gone and no regrets,  
no one left in what you were—

That empty place is all there is,  
and/if the face's remembered,  
or dog barks, cat's to be fed.

Maybe it's a rhetorical question, maybe not. But like so much of Bob's engagement with the world, the line is transformed by a genuine curiosity and an ability to face the nothingness always teetering just off the page. The most unimaginative of reviewers called Creeley's poems solipsistic and self-involved—and that was what they risked, the accusation of being too personal. But for Bob, the body was at the core of public understanding, a common experience that linked us all, far beyond the dividing lines of ideological, psychological, or aesthetic affinities. If he took the world personally, what else was there to do?

One of the great experiences a poet can have in adult life is genuine admiration for a fellow poet. Bob was unabashed in acknowledging his own elders, and that fact of his personality only served to fuel and clarify his own work. He was a bridge between the moderns and the present, devoted not to usurping them but taking the whole scene as one. He was always passing it on. The point was never to be alone there. He was intense, a powerful and improvisational presence in the lives of so many poets working in the field for the past 60 some years.

Robert Creeley was a genius of his art. This original and beautiful man, husband, father, teacher, was a true and honest friend to many of us and was, as he would say, the best of company. His poems are a continuing inspiration for us to persist both in the poem and in the world.

As Creeley wrote in a late letter to William Carlos Williams, “bless you for being clear to all that a world can mean.”

PG; August 1, 2005; St. Mark's *Poetry Project Newsletter*