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Recalling Archie

Archie's Heart

Roger Gilbert

Anyone who's read even a few poems by Archie Ammons knows that he has a formidable brain. Words like "suasion" and "salience" abound in his work, along with philosophical quandaries like the one-many problem, intricate geometries of center, periphery, sphere and surface, and a host of scientific topics ranging from astronomy to molecular biology. No other contemporary poet has presented himself so unabashedly as a *thinker* as well as an artist. Yet for all its abstraction and erudition, his poetry flows as much from the heart as from the head. Most critics of Ammons' work have attended chiefly to its thematic complexities, its richly intelligent exploration of nature and the human mind; this seems like a good moment to pay some attention to the other major organ that contributes to his poetry. (Archie would insist there's a third organ involved as well, one I won't be dealing with here—read the opening section of *Sphere* for a pithy account of *its* role in creation.)

The impression some readers and critics have of Ammons as a cold, aloof man, unengaged in the lives of his fellow human beings, owes something to his propensity for abstraction, but can also be ascribed to the profound solitude his work so often evokes and even celebrates. Ammons' best-known, most anthologized poems tend to focus on isolated figures wandering through empty landscapes. When an interlocutor appears, it's more likely to be the wind or a mountain than another human being. This aspect of Ammons' work clearly derives from his great 19th-century forerunner Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom most critics regard as a crucial influence on Ammons (Archie himself cheerfully acknowledged the debt). For Emerson everything always comes down to two basic facts, the Self and Nature or, as he sometimes put it, "Me" and "Not-Me," and all human relationships are dwarfed by this immense bifurcation. Over and over Emerson insists that the self is most powerful when most alone. In a famous passage from his essay "Nature" he describes an epiphany in the forest:

Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing, I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend then sounds foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance.

Like many American writers, Ammons was haunted by this passage, and echoes it frequently (see *Sphere* 19: "oh it's spring, and I'm more transparent than ever"). But he also understood that the sense of God-like height and perspective Emerson achieves here comes

at a terrible price. From this vantage point all human relations, whether intimate ("brothers") or hierarchical ("master or servant"), seem trivial, even annoying. Emerson goes

still further in his great essay "Self-Reliance," declaring "I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me." At its most extreme, the logic of the Emersonian self

demands a solitude so absolute it leaves no room for involvement in the lives of others, no matter how close.

continued on page 8



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Charcoal sketch by Bill Benson based on photo by Kathy Morris

A. R. Ammons 1926–2001

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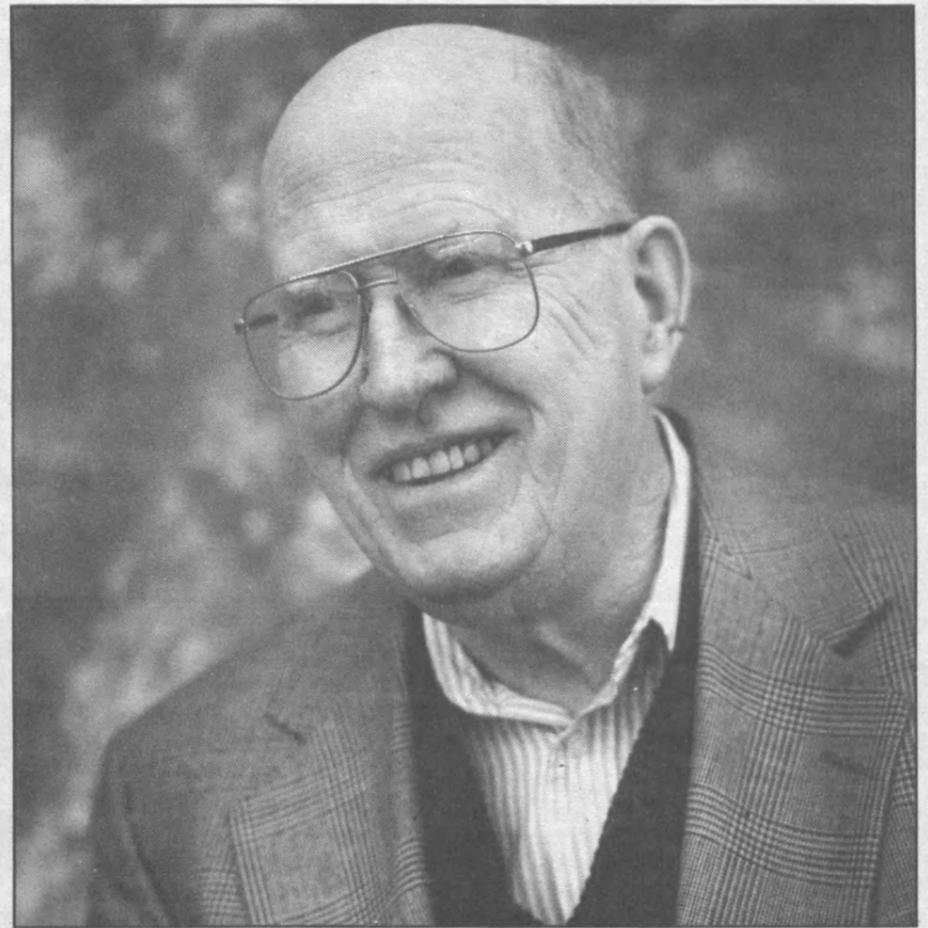
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Phyllis Ammons

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W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. for kind permission to reprint A. R. Ammons' poetry



provided by Phyllis Ammons

Archie Randolph Ammons was born near Whiteville, North Carolina, in 1926. Although he began writing poetry while serving aboard a US Navy destroyer in the South Pacific during World War II, it was not until many years later that his poetry was recognized for its brilliance. After completing service in the military, Ammons attended Wake Forest University as a biology major and went on to work in a variety of professions: as a real estate salesman, an editor, an elementary school principal, and as an executive in his father-in-law's glass company.

He began teaching at Cornell University in 1964. Over the course of his life, Ammons wrote nearly thirty books of poetry, and won nearly every major prize for poetry. Among his books are *Glare* (1997); *Garbage* (1993), which won the National Book Award; *A Coast of Trees* (1981) which received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry; *Sphere* (1974), which received the Bollingen Prize; and *Collected Poems 1951-1971* (1972), which won the National Book Award. Ammons was also the recipient of the Robert Frost Medal, the Ruth Lilly Prize, the Tanning Prize (1998), the MacArthur award, and a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation. In 1990 he was inducted into the National Institute and Academy of Arts and Letters. Ammons taught as Goldwin Smith Professor of Poetry at Cornell University until his retirement in 1998. A. R. Ammons died on February 25, 2001.

A Bibliography of Works by A.R. Ammons

Compiled by the American Academy of Poets

- Ommateum, with Doxology (1955)
- Expressions of Sea Level (1964)
- Corsons Inlet (1965)
- Tape for the Turn of the Year (1965)
- Northfield Poems (1966)
- Selected Poems (1968)
- Uplands (1970)
- Briefings: Poems Small and Easy (1971)
- Collected Poems: 1951-1971 (1972)
- Sphere: The Form of a Motion (1974)
- Diversifications (1975)
- The Snow Poems (1977)
- Highgate Road (1977)
- The Selected Poems: 1951-1977 (1977)
- Selected Longer Poems (1980)
- A Coast of Trees (1981)
- Worldly Hopes (1982)
- Lake Effect Country (1983)
- The Selected Poems: Expanded Edition (1986)
- Sumerian Vistas (1987)
- The Really Short Poems (1991)
- Garbage (1993)
- The North Carolina Poems (1994)
- Brink Road (1996)
- Glare (1997)
- Set in Motion: Essays, Interviews, and Dialogues (1996) Edited by Zofia Burr.

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Nothing Was Ever The Same

James McConkey

In the early 1960's, an executive of a chemical glassware firm submitted a few poems to *Epoch*, a magazine of poetry and fiction still published (and to increasing renown) at Cornell. The editors at that time—I was one of them—were intrigued by the poems and curious about the poet. Subjective as it is, personal memory always is capable of distortion; but I believe this is the reason that A.R. Ammons, a poet whose work was new to us, was invited to Cornell to give a reading.

Poetry readings were popular events in those days, whether the poet was famous or not; this one, held in Willard Straight Hall, so crowded the room that I had to sit on the floor. Ammons probably never expected so many auditors, and may have been painfully shy. With its gentle North Carolinian accents, his voice was an engaging one; but it was so soft that I had to cup a hand to my ear—relatively young though I was then—to capture the words. Oddly enough, the concentration required of everybody to hear the poems abetted their effect. I am not a poet, but usually I know a talented one when I attend to his or her words. It's always comforting to have one's own judgment sustained by others—here by the entire audience, and especially by such colleagues as Baxter Hathaway, who had established Cornell's writing program in 1946 and founded *Epoch* soon after; and Walter Slatoff, already an editor of the magazine when I joined the staff in 1956. (Both are now deceased.) But everybody who then taught in the creative writing program wished that Ammons would renounce glassware for us.

To our good fortune, he did, and soon became one of the writers on our staff most revered by students in creative writing; and for years he joined the rest of us in the patient task of finding unexpected talent in the ever-increasing mass of manuscripts submitted to the magazine to which he once had submitted some poems.

Archie became a friend of mine long before his stature as a major poet was recognized, before the awards began to arrive. Memory knows no past tense: I continue to feel a spiritual affinity with him, and remain gratified by his appreciation of my prose over the years, especially for his intuitive understanding of the awareness, a kind of feeling, underlying it.

Long ago, while responding to such a feeling in Chekhov, I discovered it had existed all along in me. It would be folly to attempt to define it—I would have to engage in phrases as fanciful and dubious as "the universality of the soul's unobtainable desire." Actually, in a deceptively simple poem, Archie described that desire by giving it narrative action. And he managed to do so with such exactitude that even before I had finished reading it for the first time I knew it to be one of those grand poems whose final lines, surprising though they may be, have been made inevitable by all that proceeds them. It serves as the dedicatory poem—its title forever will be "For Harold Bloom"—in *Sphere: The Form of a Motion*, published by W.W. Norton in 1974.

In 1996, I came out of retirement to inaugurate a course (one that has continued, this spring under the capable direction of Joyce Morgenroth, a dance choreographer with a background in mathematics and literature). Called "Mind and Memory," it is an interdisciplinary exploration of the creative process; it includes weekly public lectures by scientists and artists and others. They speak about the nature of their work, and how they go about doing it. Archie had changed over the years, but public performances still gave him discomfort, and I wasn't going to ask him outright to give a performance—especially one on his creative process!—in an auditorium large enough to require a public address system. I have a sort of dyslexia, more mathematical than verbal; I don't think he would have volunteered, whatever my hints, had I not told him that my problems reading a calendar had left me short a speaker after it was too late to find one, and that I might have to wing it by myself. Since a bird requires two wings in order to fly, he immediately offered to join me, as a co-speaker.

Fortunately, all of the lectures of that opening series were professionally videotaped by Dan Booth and his assistants from Cornell Media Services; all of them must exist in an archive. Even in the tape I have, consisting of edited sequences from the entire series, Archie reveals his humor (including a self-directed irony) as well as his seriousness. And—though he expresses the wish to revise a phrase—he agrees to my request that he read "For Harold Bloom." Whenever I want to, then, I can see Archie on my television screen as once again he reads to me the poem that is my favorite.

James McConkey, Goldwin Smith Professor of English Literature, emeritus, at Cornell, taught courses in writing from 1956 until his retirement in 1992. He is a writer of autobiographical prose and fiction.



A.R. Ammons with Emily Wilson and critics Josephine Jacobsen and Harold Bloom, provided by Cornell Library Rare and Manuscript Collections

For Harold Bloom

I went to the summit and stood in the high nakedness:
the wind tore about this
way and that in confusion and its speech could not
get through to me nor could I address it:
still I said as if to the alien in myself

I do not speak to the wind now:
for having been brought this far by nature I have been
brought out of nature
and nothing here shows me the image of myself:
for the word tree I have been shown a tree
and for the word rock I have been shown a rock,
for stream, for cloud, for star
this place has provided firm implication and answering
but where here is the image for longing:
so I touched the rocks, their interesting crusts:
I flaked the bark of stunt-fir:
I looked into space and into the sun
And nothing answered my word longing:

Goodbye, I said, goodbye, nature so grand and
Reticent, your tongues are healed up into their own
element
and as you have shut up you have shut me out: I am
as foreign here as if I had landed, a visitor:
so I went back down and gathered mud
and with my hands made an image of longing:
I took the image to the summit: first
I set it here, on the top rock, but it completed
nothing: then I set it there among the tiny firs
but it would not fit:
so I returned to the city and built a house to set
the image in
and men came into my house and said
that is an image for longing
and nothing will ever be the same again

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The Voice of Archie Ammons

Robert Morgan

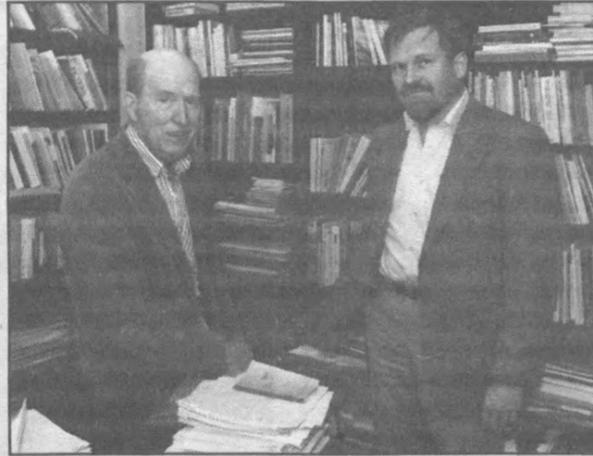
My first memory of Archie Ammons is of his reading at UNC-Greensboro in the spring of 1967. I was a graduate student then, married, working two part-time jobs. I'd read a number of Ammons's poems in magazines and knew how narrow on the page they looked and how talky they were. I'd heard that he was an executive in the glass industry.

The tall man who read that evening took off his suit coat and rolled up his sleeves the way a Baptist minister might. He read in a slow, natural voice and talked about his interest in science and philosophy. After about twenty minutes he announced that he would stop, that he didn't want to bore anyone. We asked him to continue, and he obliged with four or five more poems, including a poem in which he described looking at a mirror in a weed that looked back at a mirror in the speaker.

My feeling was that I had discovered a new voice, a poet from beyond the world of academia, who was as excited about nature and science as I was. The voice in the poems was distinctive, yet familiar, musical, and intellectual.

After I came to Cornell in 1971 and got to know Archie better, I discovered he had grown up on a small farm in eastern North Carolina, and been raised in both the Southern Baptist and Pentecostal Holiness churches. I was from the western part of that state, with a similar religious background. And we both loved the poetry of nature and science. Though we wrote in different styles, we joked that we would divide up the state of North Carolina at the Yadkin River, him taking the eastern half, me the hills and mountains of the west. I felt at home at Cornell because here was a fellow Tarheel, excited as I was about Emerson and Whitman, Darwin, and memories of hymn singing. Our families went on picnics together, and we took our sons on long walks in the nearby parks.

In those early days, I met with Archie and Baxter Hathaway almost every day in the Temple of Zeus for coffee. We often



A.R. Ammons with Robert Morgan, photo by Claude Levet provided by Cornell University News

met on Saturdays also. It was the best part of my job at Cornell, to listen to Baxter talk of Italian Renaissance criticism, the American West, the academe of the 1940s and '50s, and listening to Archie's quips and mocking asides.

I have never known another writer who made himself available to students and colleagues the way Archie did. Almost every day he arrived at Goldwin Smith Hall early in the morning, and with a break or two, stayed there the rest of the day. I think he needed to be talking to people. He didn't like solitude, perhaps because he'd had too much when he was younger. He did his writing in short periods each day, and then looked for someone to chat with. We will never find another writer in residence who is so accessible, day after day, year after year.

I recall with special fondness Archie's willingness to take unpopular and often irritating points of view in discussions. He would force us to think further about assumptions and pieties. He was also willing to be advocate for the truly disadvantaged, the outsiders to academia. He was a large man, and he often

seemed larger. He was always able to surprise us. Wherever he was, he was a presence, a leader.

The voice in Archie's poetry is its most special feature. He is known for the fine abstraction in much of his verse, for the philosophical movement and energy. But it is the voice that carries the thought, at once familiar and sophisticated, witty and spare. It is the immediate idiom, the living character in the speech of the poems, that make them memorable. His is one of the most distinctive voices in American poetry. There is no one like him.

Archie had a true gift for paradox, in his conversation, and in his writing. He could make ideas palpable, and one way he did it was through the surprise of paradox. He had a special knack for finding the right texture of diction in unexpected linking of words.

I will never forget him delivering the final line of an early poem in that first reading at Greensboro: "What destruction am I blessed by?" Another poem celebrated the multiplicity of a world "ripe with entropy" as he yoked the abstract and the vegetal.

Goldwin Smith Hall and the Temple of Zeus will never seem the same without Archie. And the English Department and writing program will never be the same because he was here for more than thirty-five years. But we will always have his words on the page. And sometimes, when I am walking down the hall of Goldwin Smith, I still seem to catch sight, out of the corner of my eye, of his tall, stooped figure shuffling along, patrolling his beat, and I think I hear the tenor of his laughter as I pass the door of the *Epoch* office. Then I stop and realize, no, we will not hear that voice again.

Robert Morgan teaches at Cornell University and is the author of several books of poetry and fiction, including the novels *The Truest Pleasure* and *Gap Creek*, winner of the *Southern Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction* for 2000.

The Whistle

Ingrid Arnesen

It's the one men make to women walking, the first note rises briefly, the second lengthens as the pitch falls like a smooth slope—it's the one you want to miss but can't. That day in the mid-eighties, it was Archie's wink to me, from the steps of Day Hall, the fortress, near Sage Chapel. I may have been there to check a paystub, or on my way to teach, but it made me laugh. "You got a whistle from the McArthur Fellow!" a friend said later. This whistle was quintessential. Archie, genius visionary, far from his celebrity, he was free to whistle, to draw a figure in the air:

life, life is like a poem: the moment it begins, it begins to end: the tension this

establishes makes every move and moment, every gap and stumble, every glide and rise significant:

for if life or poem went dribbling endlessly on, what identifiable arc or measure could it

clarify: within limits the made thing accepts its revelation and dissolution, its coming and going, beginning and ending, being and nonbeing: the poem moves through the smooth or astonished

beginning, the taking on of engagement and complication, the gathering up of direction and

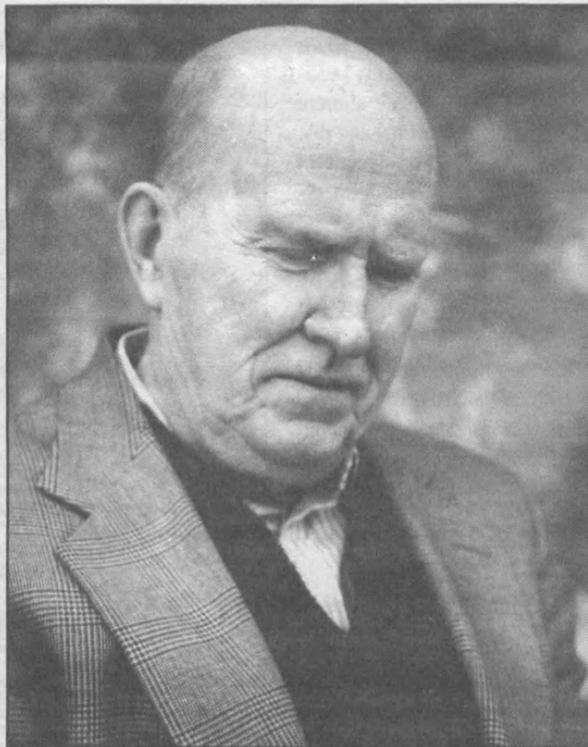
possibility, and the falling out and fading away: this is all so reasonable, we sometimes

wonder why grief tells us so we wanted to cling to being, the good things, oh, the good things,

but in real life as in real poems clarifying form,

from *Garbage* p. 66

I first knew Archie as my teacher in a poetry workshop in 1973; I remember that he came to class somewhat beaming and embarrassed one day, he had won a prize (the National Book Award for his *Collected Poems*). I can see the gold seal on the sepia tinted cover. Our class met in the A.D. White House, we sat around a large wooden table on 19th-century chairs, and Archie walked around lively in the room. Once he asked me the difference between a spondee and an anapest and luckily I happened to know. I remember he told us that "poets



provided by Phyllis Ammons

have to be ruthless" with their writing. Archie was Zen in his teaching, he never touched a line, he refrained from prescription, from sending a student's poem in another direction, but tried to sense the direction it was going in, urging you to follow it. He never believed poetry could be taught, but he laid out the universals as clearly as a blueprint. In that room I was in awe, I knew I was in the presence of the great.

So it was difficult to live up to his attention, I was incredulous at his approachability, his willingness to meet with me through my undergraduate years and after my graduation. He stood in line at my commencement, a clear, hot day in May, and my friend whispered he was there because of me. I didn't believe that then, and do not know to this day if it is true, but now I like to think it is. He and Phyllis Ammons even acted as my matchmaker once, introducing me to an Italian millionaire count, which, of course, turned out to be a fiasco.

Through the last decades of the century Archie was my mentor and friend; the confluence of these roles is intricate and was not easy; he had a profound influence on my life, perhaps greater than he knew. Today, when I tell my student TA's they can make a lifelong impression on their students, I am thinking of Archie. One of my Chinese students quoted his own professor in China, who said "Teaching is the most important activity" because only your students can carry out your

research when you are gone. Last week, when I was in St. Louis at the center of the continent, right along the Mississippi, on a Hollywood star marked for T.S. Eliot, alongside one for Red Skelton and Shelley Winters, I stood in tears and my Minnesota friend asked, so what did your Chinese student say?

Knowing Archie changed my life, not only am I still trying to write poetry, not only did I take an MFA at Davis, California, where I met Ruth, not only did I go to Sweden to translate contemporary women's poetry on a Fulbright, not only this plot, Archie's presence is inextricable from place, from this landscape, from Ithaca: it was one of the forces drawing me back in 1982, it is part of what makes this place sacred, magical, or secularly spectacular. I am one of many, Shinji came all the way from Tokyo twice, the second time he confided that he was ostensibly on a faculty leave for literary research, but that he really came to "talk to Archie." With Shinji back, we resumed our poetry meetings at Zeus, or in Archie's office, when the voices were too loud. Many times I came poemless. Once when I was asked, I said all I could write was garbage, and Archie looked at me strangely, for quite a while, and I could not know then that he was writing the real *Garbage*.

Later I had started writing "building" poems; the first after reading *Garbage*, but I didn't have a limit or the double line, so there was no time for breath. Archie was vehement about easy abstraction, in his insistence on the poem having motion, it's the verb not the object, nor the cumbersome adjective; as my dance instructor says, it's not the destination but the journey that counts when we plié. I was struggling with lists, naming, blockages that kept me from the motion of the poem then, as well as the confinements of syntax, when language turned against my drift, I'd lash back with a made-up word, or an ungrammaticality, and try to get away with it.

It is impossible to believe that Archie isn't coming back, that there will never be his eloquence at the T of Z; the matching of wits I listened to, our laughter, and talk of the universe, density, and back pain, our sharing of photographs and grapefruit, or seeing his latest publication. Today when I look at the acrid willow sweep branches through March winter, or yesterday's sunset lacing the neighbor's icicles in series, I know Archie would take note. Now the landscape of foothills and glacial beds is bereft, Archie's presence to ash. What we can carry are his awe, his wonder—the universe is flat, yet multi-dimensional; the couple next to our table is love-blind, and what has led up to this particular squirrel leaping on snow, just now—

Ingrid Arnesen directs the International TA Training Program at Cornell University. Her poems and translations have appeared in *Concourse*, *The Bookpress*, and in the 1993 *Nordic Poetry Festival Anthology*.

A Love Note: A.R. Ammons as Teacher

Kenneth McClane

And because whatever is
moves in weeds
and stars and spider webs
and known
is loved:

in that love,
each of us knowing it
I love you...

from "Identity" by A.R. Ammons

I first met A.R. Ammons at the behest of a woman I was dating when I was a freshman at Cornell in 1969. As a black student from Harlem who missed the City, I had begun to write what I then considered to be poems. To be brutally honest, I didn't know anything about poetry: to me good intentions and a fistful of pain was art; my suffering was enough. That my creations were largely eruptions of my own distress was something I had yet to learn, and most powerfully. Add to that dreary mix the Vietnam War, the deaths of Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, my lust-ridden body and my proverbial loneliness, and you now have my mental state. My girlfriend, who understood much more about art and its rigors than I, wanted me to meet "the famous American poet" who taught at the University. I didn't know who A.R. Ammons was, and the fact that he was a great American writer meant little to me. I simply wanted to be corroborated.

In those days, Mr. Ammons' office was located on the second floor of Lincoln Hall and he was directing the Center for the Creative and the Performing Arts, the last time I believe he ever undertook administration. Later on, Ammons would move to the second floor of Goldwin Smith Hall, where E.B. White, Vladimir Nabokov, and Carl Becker had maintained offices, but that day he was still in Lincoln, sitting behind his unusually large desk, topped with an abundance of scraggly plants and a large ficus angling towards the light, like some pæan to survival. Archie tended to love plants that were pot-bound and floundering: he coveted—I think in most things—those things most bedraggled and tossed out.

I can vividly recall handing Mr. Ammons a sheaf of poems, which he gracefully accepted, and his offer to read my poems in a week's time. As a teacher of creative writing, I now understand what a great imposition such requests are; and I know that Ammons—then as always—was besieged with the irrepressible output of a legion of young who felt that they had something essential to say. That day, Ammons ended our meeting by saying in a very slow southern drawl, "I'll see you next week."

I did not return. In truth, I felt there was nothing he, a white man, from North Carolina, could tell me. At the time I didn't know anything about Southerners, and I painted them all with a broad stroke, something of which I am not very proud. To me, Archie was a symbol of that litany of racial violence—beginning in 1619 and moving to Selma—a legacy that had hurt me, in many profound and ill-understood ways. I didn't know much—I was a head full of the transgressive and the transgressed—and I was angry. That Archie would become my greatest champion was something I had yet to learn; that we would spend hours talking, become friends and later colleagues, forging an alliance that was as strong as it was sometimes difficult, this, too, was all in the future.

Little did I know then that Archie and I were beginning that difficult dance which taints all relationships between writers: we had work to do, we had to be self-invested, and the thing which made us care for one another, the art, was as ravenous as a Minotaur.

Later, at times, we would have arguments about what a poem could achieve. Here I would argue for writing needing to be political—what else could I believe?—and he, of course, would challenge the narrowness of my beliefs. In truth, I knew he was right; in truth, I suspect, Archie knew I could argue little else. Sadly, at these moments, we were all too human and all too different: our connection made difficult, I submit, because it was a connection.

But in 1970, as luck would have it, I would sign up for Creative Writing, and lo and behold, the teacher was A.R. Ammons. Mr. Ammons never mentioned our previous meeting; he might not have remembered it, although I doubt if that were the case. He, most probably, had the forbearance to excuse my previous lapse, while I, for my part, remained silent. Let me simply state that the class was a wonderful one, and I am glad to this day that fate brought me beyond my own prejudice.

Ammons ran the seminar in a gentle, non-hierarchical way. He did not assign exercises or demand that students experiment, say, with the villanelle or the sonnet form. What Ammons desired was for students to write as their imaginations dictated. It was the writing (and the *need* to write) that would offer the impetus for refining and divining craft: it was

the writing that would suggest one's own individuality. Here, of course, Archie was listening to his own experience. He had not been taught to write in a writing program; he, in truth, had little respect for them. His poems came from his need to convey his wonderment, to find meaning "in the moon-tossed and the vanquished," to invoke those things "left out."

Ammons' method was uniquely suited to me and to many others. What he affirmed was that for him, *you* were sacred, in all your dilapidation. And for the multitude of us who were the intellectually unwashed, this was the greatest confirmation. Ammons permitted us to speak from a position of strength; we were not simply the raging, the uncouth, the crazed; we were not, that is, what our parents feared. No, we had something precious to relate if only we could honor it. And our own entanglements, our awkwardness, our incoherence, could create heady music.

Ammons' classes were wonderful for another reason. Although we didn't spend a great deal of time talking about famous poets—we rarely read other poets, we never read Archie's poems—we did sense that poetry was the highest calling. Much of this came from the workshop setting itself—we were convened as a congress of wisdoms, impertinences, and enthusiasms; much of this came, no doubt, from the undeniable brilliance of Ammons himself. When he spoke about poems, one felt as if one were in the presence of this century's Coleridge or Dr. Johnson. And indeed one was.

Crucially, Ammons' sense of the world was so omnipresent that when one listened to Archie, one was, in truth, walking in one of his poems. Quintessentially, when Archie was serious (and not playing around or doing his "I'm just a country boy"/hick routine), one could simply put line breaks in his elegant oratory and it would be an Ammons poem. Disconcertingly, for those of us who wanted to be practitioners, it was as if his poems came from some marvelous, bottomless fount. Archie, seemingly, had only to open his mouth and revelation flowed. This, of course, was not always true. But Archie did appear like a poetic medium, a channeler of the consequential. Writing may have been difficult for him, I know at times it was, but still when it came—and it always came—it spewed torrential and provident. To my knowledge, I can think of only one other contemporary poet so closely attuned, in speech and life, to her verse, Gwendolyn Brooks, who, incidentally, we lost just a few months before Ammons.

Yet the greatest aspect of Archie as mentor was his absolute belief in human individuality and the poem as the ultimate embodiment of truth. As he instructed me in an unpublished poem, "Improvisations for the Main Man Ken McClane":

Since poetry declares nothing ever
even in its fantasies and ljes
but the truth
I do not
guide the declarations shallow,
canalized, into only what
I would hear or have heard:
If the truth is
as it is
unavoidable
it need not be pursued
and cannot be fled:
But there, profound,
dissolved,
it doesn't prick your feet with
thorns
but sustains you merely into your
own endeavor:
truth that deep is perhaps
no longer truth.

For many of us who have learned from him, it was Archie's irrepressible restlessness that so made us love him. Archie would not lie, he understood the demolitions in the depths, the danger of a wisdom too highly prized, and he asked that we be willing to risk presence, that we not heed the merely easy, the fatuous, or the pretty. In class, his comments on poems tended to be more general than local. Although he was interested in a word or line—his rich, "that's nice" often declaring his joy—Archie tended to engage in large claims and "constellations" of meaning. His method seemed more an affirmation of our small announcements than the nuts and bolts of the poem as thing. Whenever someone would claim that a poem should do this—say, no poem should be a political tract, or no one should write a "love poem"—Archie, deftly, would find a million ways to prove that poet's criticism ill-considered. There are no boundaries on love or poetry, he would say. As he was wont to remind us, "critics are untanglers, poets tangle": our work as poets "is to work wonders."

Once a colleague in the English Department came up to him and asked him in a group of poets if he had read a new book on Wallace Stevens. Archie looked at this self-satisfied critic who, I guess, thought he was making good conversation, and said, with a twinkle in his eye, but not without a touch of

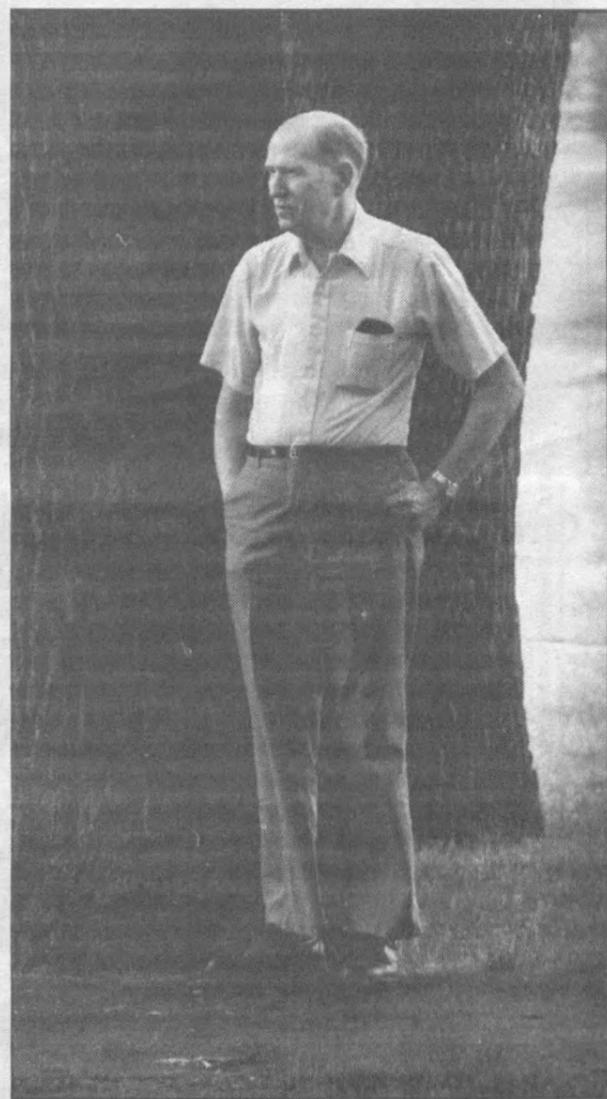


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anger, "We do not get paid to read books. We get paid to write them. You read us." Those of us who were writers welcomed that tongue-lashing. In the academy, all too often, we are the whipping boys of the scholars who somehow forget that they write about us—that a dead writer was once living. Archie would not brook this. He knew how fragile we all were; he knew, and intimately, how much one could suffer.

It was wonderful to be taught by an elder who saw us as knowledgeable, sacred, in-process, and gifted. I remember how he would prize something I said or wrote because it was out of the academy, street-wise, extra-ordinary, or simply true. That we at times didn't appreciate all that he committed to us is understandable; that he remained a tireless defender of our rights to our authority shall remain with me as the greatest instruction.

Kenneth McClane teaches English at Cornell and is the author of Walls, a book of autobiographical essays, and Take Five: Collected Poems.

Elm Taking for A.R. Ammons

Now the wind has doomed the elm
and the land's border is irreparably transmuted:
And how again doomed I am, believing yesterday in the
elm,
and today, in the elmless country:

Go with the flow, things come and diminish, the way
of the world is up and out: such adages take
away the sting, I'm sure—they're a bandage on the mind:
but the heart is a limb crashing into the earth, trying

in each downward arc to sustain: if I give a mite
I might recapture the premise. But with lovers,
explanations—even the sustainable ones—are like beached
boats:
Yes, the seas remain, Yes there can be further sailings: But
the ship

of the heart is the ship unmitigated: free, water-ready,
absolute:
Tell me of the heavy surf, of the shoal near the ship's
singing: Tell me
of the land where the elms dwell, where the heart dwells,
where the limbs
rise and fall and rise again, no matter what.

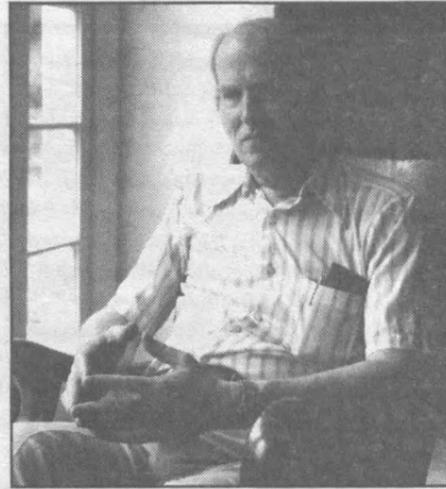
Teaching With a Light Touch

Cynthia Bond

Too late for an *homage*, too early for an epitaph: the impossible condition of this writing...

I'm not sure if I ever told Archie that my first meeting with him was facilitated by the plumbing at Goldwin Smith Hall. Like all memories, that one's not entirely accurate: I undoubtedly first met Archie at some Cornell English Department function when I was admitted as an MFA student in 1984. But when I finally approached Archie to ask him to be my thesis advisor, I was so terrified by his prominence, by his national reputation (not knowing his local one), that I would repeatedly walk past his office door and cower in the ladies room three or four doors down trying to get up the courage to ask him to be on my committee. I'm certain on many of those trips I saw him seated at his low Steelcase desk pressed against the wall thumbing through some book as I slipped by unnoticed, only to try again when my nerves allowed. Of course I eventually did make it to his office, of course he agreed to be my advisor and, over the next 17 years, he became much more to me.

I found out later that the fear was mutual. In the summer of 1985, Archie asked me to be his teaching assistant for a verse-writing seminar he was teaching. I was his second choice. I found out why one day when he and I were walking back to Goldwin-Smith from lunch at the Green Dragon, discussing our students. As an explanation for the students' initial shyness, I offered that perhaps Archie intimidated them. Archie countered that he was sure they were afraid of me. While it is true that in those days I had honed the outer face of my shyness and insecurity into a fierce mask of stark, crew-cut angularity, I was surprised by his remark, probably hurt by it. "Why would they be afraid of me?" I asked. "Because I'm afraid



provided by Phyllis Ammons

of you," Archie answered, characteristically frank, "afraid that you won't like me." It was the first real meeting between us. For he had precisely articulated my fear about him: that my prickly, confused, mannishly-affected self would alienate this old-school gentleman, son of the South like my father and my father's generation. But I didn't really know him then.

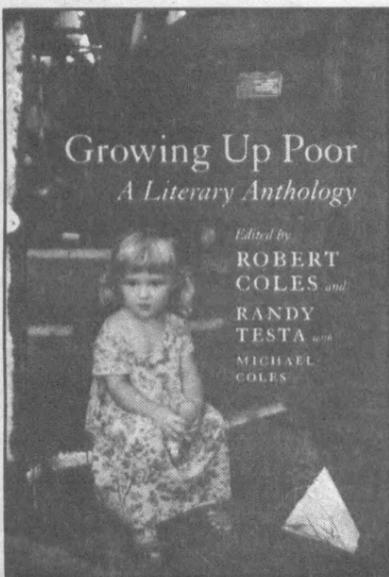
I think Archie's greatest gift as a poetry teacher was his forbearance. Archie was not looking for clones nor did he try to put his mark on any student poet. If you sounded like Ammons (or tried to), you chose it or it chose you. In poetry writing, Archie believed in something like William Blake's dictum: if the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise. He used to encourage writers to do the outrageous more outrageously. If there's something that people find sticks out in your work, do it more: maybe that's where the source is. Of course, it was mightily encouraging as a young poet to have my work read and taken seriously by him. But he let me alone in it to write more fully into myself; his praise was weighty but his touch was light.

While Archie was my poetry teacher, my

thesis advisor and my teaching mentor, what I learned most directly from him was extra-literary. The poetry seeped in almost as a by-product of our interactions. While certainly he read and critiqued my work and showed his own on a fairly regular basis over the years, it was the daily talks about daily things that sunk in deepest. Archie taught me about anxiety, not the abstract condition of the thinking mind, but the everyday how to live with it. Archie counseled me on my personal relationships (me: "will I ever meet someone who's nice to me?" he: "you might, but you might not like him very much"). He shared his insights on living far from one's region and family. Or the appeal of Larry King's interviewing style. Or country music lyrics. Archie was a man of extraordinary contradictions: accessible but guarded, generous and cranky, provocative and restrained, impossibly abnegating and proud. It was watching him maintain those contradictions (and as with all of us, sometimes only partly succeeding) that was fascinating and instructive.

Archie was fond of saying that the good thing about poetry is that it is completely, beautifully useless. To be truly useless in this world, he meant, is a rare and special thing. That statement is a classic example of his particular brand of inversion, displaying while simultaneously covering his uncertainty about his project. What is entirely certain is that his readers would not agree that Archie's poetry is useless. Readers find song, solace, great humor and high reflection in his work. Archie's audience is far-reaching and deep loving. It is unfortunate that Archie didn't always believe that. But here we gather together to say again, this time across the divide: we love you, Archie, we miss you, we will never ever let go of you.

Cynthia Bond is a poet and lawyer who teaches writing at Cornell Law School.



Growing Up Poor

A Literary Anthology

Edited by

Robert Coles and

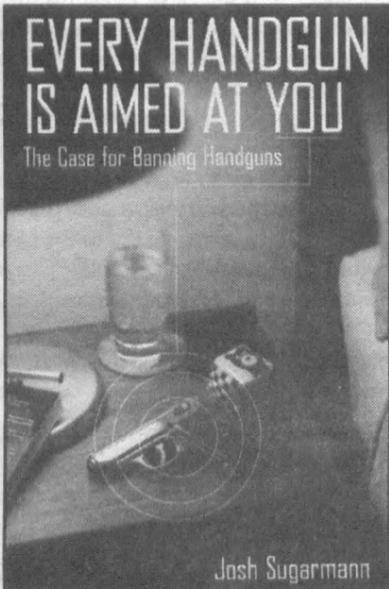
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Wednesdays With Archie

Christine Cox

"That Elizabeth Bishop poem is just plain bad," said A.R. Ammons, vehemently. "*Grandmothers. Rain.* Such crap." Ammons—winner of virtually every prestigious poetry award, including a MacArthur Prize and two National Book of the Year awards—undoubtedly knew what he was talking about, but for a moment I wondered. He'd been through a stroke; his diabetes was about to cripple him; he was on painkillers for some undisclosed agony that would eventually kill him. His wit, ribald and scathing, alternated with loose ruminations. He seemed to me like a man about to be engulfed by the faltering of his body.

The dissing of the grandmothers/rain poem occurred at my first meeting with a small group of poets who worked weekly with Archie during the last year of his life. "Christine," he said, having disposed of Bishop, "read one of yours." This was a little scary, considering whom he had just skewered. But there were only two other poets present to witness my possible humiliation: Ben, a retired stock investor, and Richard, a blind professor emeritus who had just miraculously read—in Braille—the disgraced Bishop poem. We were amateurs, joking and vulnerable.

I'd chosen my best poem to read first, so everything was on the line. "Wow," he said when I finished. "Send that one off for publication. And read us another." The second, a longer prose-poem, he decapitated—and advised me to throw away the body. Inflation, deflation. The man was acute enough.

I first met Archie Ammons 30 years ago, when I took a beginning poetry class from him at Cornell. In those days, he was kind to all of us overwrought undergraduates. He attacked neither our shallowness nor our imagined depths. He praised minimally and gave us A's.

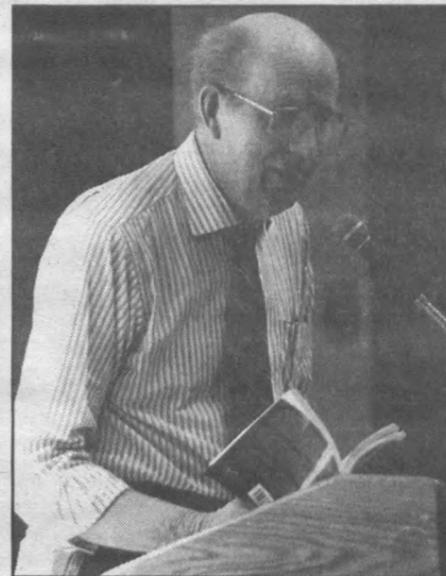


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Now it seemed to me that he'd changed in some undefinable way—who hadn't, really, I told myself. Nevertheless, I was bemused when he mis-heard a line in Ben's poem about option trading—something about covered calls and uncovered puts. "Uncovered puss," chortled Archie. "Uncovered puss!" And he smiled his slow, Southern smile. "I've got a dirty mind," he said, delighted. Indeed.

But could an aspiring poet such as myself walk away from an opportunity like this, to get weekly feedback from a poet of A.R. Ammons' stature? Yes. Absolutely. But I was not that poet. Archie, with all his afflictions, still had an extraordinary ear for the false word, an extraordinary eye for the misplaced line break. He also had an encyclopedic knowledge of the range of poetry out there: who had written a dreadful sestina, for example. And I just plain liked the man, dirty mind and all.

I soon discovered that I was not to hear any new work from him. He claimed that his recent stroke had left him reasonably intact—except for his creative impulse, which had apparently disappeared along with a few brain cells. I made sympathetic noises, but he corrected me. "I don't mind," he said. "I've written so much in my life." And he really didn't seem to mind. Just having written good work, once upon a time, left him content.

But his disinterest in writing puzzled and frightened me: Is creativity just a matter of nerve and tissue? Is it no different than a limb whose mechanism can be disturbed by an errant clot? But I didn't question him further. Instead I asked him about the past. He finally confessed that besides the MacArthur and the National Book of the Year awards, he had won the National Book Critics Circle Award of Poetry, the Frost Medal for Distinguished Achievement in Poetry, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, and the Bollingen Prize in Poetry. And other awards—a Guggenheim, for example. Still, he said, somewhat incredulously, he used to be so shy that he wouldn't read his own poetry out loud.

He got over it. He read plain, letting his spare, remarkable words spool quietly out into the room. The theatrics of some poets—Bly in particular, with his folksy strum-the-music-while-I-read style—disgusted him. "What's the matter," complained Archie. "Can't he make the words sing by themselves?" Archie's words not only sang, they had perfect pitch.

He was irreverent, courteously. He blushed easily. He had an eye for beautiful women. He was unassuming and unafraid to criticize. And when I saw him in the hall just after he found out that he was dying of cancer, he simply shook his head at the bizarre nature of this world, and kept on walking. "I'm one sick puppy," he said as he passed me by. And he was, he was.

Who Put the Wisdom in the Hidden Parts?

Roald Hoffmann

When I think of Archie, I think of a whirlwind in full motion, yet held stock still. By the only constraint that could bind the ultimate motion. A human being's word.

Whirlwinds are ornery, and he sure could be; just get him started about his teeth. Or Yeats. Or religion. Literally still? That he wasn't—this was the special joy that those sitting with him in the Temple of Zeus gained. But in him the grace of a Southerner, hardly the one born to wealth, blended with the nature of a philosopher. He was a natural philosopher—not the clever thinker all happy with himself, but the observer, at peace with the restless universe.

The figure of the whirlwind rises in many of Ammons' poems. Here are two short ones:

Bottommost

We circle the sinkhole
the coil spins in:
when the speed is close and sufficient,
a tube of nothingness
opens down which
attracted objects mill exodus.

and

Planes

The whirlwind lifts
sand to
hide holy
spun
emptiness or erect a
tall announcement
where formed
emptiness is to be found

The first poem includes a "we" that is (just like a "you") I think pretty unusual in an Ammons poem. Part of the quietness of his poems, the contemplative stance, is achieved by eschewing the overly personal. The "I" is most certainly there, but think about how different, how less bombastic but no less effective in drawing us in, that "I" is in Ammons compared to, say, Whitman.

His poems move from whirlpools and dark holes to whirlwinds, if not tornadoes. The figure is natural, but the questions are deeply metaphysical: How is nothingness to be defined; how are we to reconcile one of the essential tensions, the quietude sculpted by impelled motion?

"Planes" also reveals another characteristic of great poetry that comes naturally to Ammons. I will call it clumsily "heightening by backtracking" or "turning back to climb higher" or "resonance in reverse." Look at the "holy" in line 3 of "Planes". It carries the

weight of ambiguity of holiness or the quality of having holes, plus the third enriching acro- phonic similarity to wholeness; as we puzzle out whether Archie is getting religious (impossible), the "emptiness" bounces us back. "Holy" becomes the center; the poem bounces back and forth around that word, like a laser beam amplified by mirrors.

Incidentally "Planes" is a 1983 version of a slightly different poem published in *The Really Short Poems of A. R. Ammons*, and retitled there "Hollows." It appears on a card which Archie sold at Baxter and Sherry Hathaway's Ithaca House Gallery. An important place for many of us. Perhaps he retitled the poem because he had another one for which he wanted the "Planes" in the title:

Substantial Planes

It doesn't
matter

to me
if

poems mean
nothing:

there's no
floor

to the
universe

and yet
one

walks the
floor.

These short poems are so much more than cleverness, they are deeply philosophical. Their span is cosmic, from tempest, to weed, to universe, and their philosophic range commensurably immense. Take "Substantial Planes": A question is asked, about the meaning of poetry—asked, even if it is distanced from the poet, who will dismiss it. The query is answered by a deft deflection that is metaphysical. Human beings create the foundation, call it worry, from which poetry will surely rise like a mad vine.

Rise, in Ammons' craft, to help us understand the hidden parts. When a long time ago, people needed a place from which an answer could be given to Job, they chose the whirlwind. The same motion that Ammons poetry, quietly, returns to time and time again. The universe, in all its parts—from piddling puddles to reeds, weeds, and spiraling galaxies is accepted. By Archie, for us.

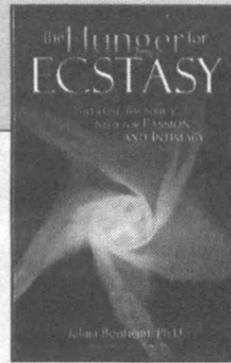
Roald Hoffmann is a chemist and writer at Cornell.

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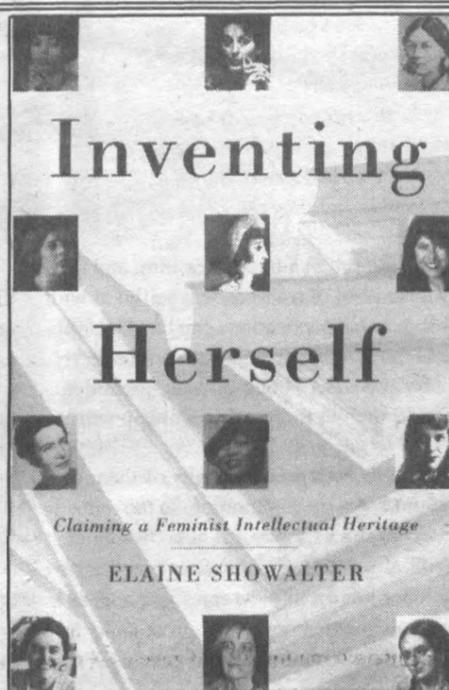
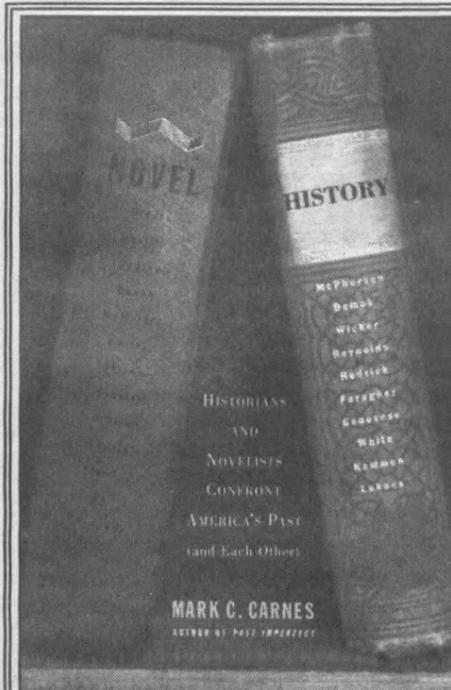
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Archie's

continued from page 1

Ammons both accepts and regrets this logic. Much of his poetry courts the kind of solitary splendor that Emerson espouses, yet often with a certain ambivalence. Consider this poem from his 1981 volume *A Coast of Trees*:

I'm walking home from, what,
a thousandth walk this year
along the same macadam's edge
(pebbly) the ragweed rank
but not blooming yet,
a rose cloud passed to the
east that against sundown would be
blue-gray, the moon up nearly
full, splintering
through the tips of street pine,
and the hermit lark downhill
in a long glade cutting
spirals of musical ice, and I
realize that it is not the same for
me as for others, that
being here to be here
with others is for others.

This is a deeply Emersonian poem in which solitude and sublimity commingle. It's surely no coincidence that the speaker's attention comes to rest on a hermit lark, a similarly isolated singer, nor that the bird's song is described as "musical ice." An essential coldness precipitates the poem's conclusion, its apparent rejection of community and relationship. Yet the almost stuttering articulation of that final insight seems to me to betray a profound ambivalence toward its implications, an ambivalence still more powerfully underscored by the poem's title, "Poverty." Here and elsewhere in his work Ammons' declarations of solitude hover uneasily between pride and shame, privilege and privation.

Ultimately Ammons refuses to join Emerson on the path of pure selfhood. While he feels the call of solitude and often answers it, he also recognizes his moral and psychological entanglement in the lives of others, those at a distance as well as those close by. Ammons expresses this double condition beautifully in *Sphere 19*:

...I don't love anybody much:
that accounts for my width and most of my height: but

I love as much as I can and that keeps me here but light:

The first statement is almost shocking in its matter-of-fact attribution of the speaker's magnitude to his lack of emotional bonds. Yet the qualification that follows retroactively calls our attention to the slippery word "much," which leaves a margin for love to abide in, however diminished. (Notice how the word shifts from a negative to a positive in a typically Ammonsian sleight-of-grammar: "I don't love anyone much"; "I love as much as I can.") If detachment from others induces an Emersonian expansion of self, attachment to others supplies the crucial counterweight, preventing the self from soaring into empty space like an untethered balloon (a danger Ammons felt more keenly than most people).

"I love as much as I can": that turns out to be quite a lot. Solitude may be the most prominent element in Ammons' poetry, but his *oeuvre* contains many poems in which connections to others are central. One such connection, of course, is his relationship to readers. Ammons always insisted in interviews that his explorations of solitude were intended to reach others as solitary as himself: "I imagine other lonely people, such as myself. I don't know who they are or where they are, but they're the people whom I want to reach" (*Set in Motion*, 65). The paradox here is that by giving himself over fully to his own loneliness, the poet may succeed in establishing a deeper bond with others than could be achieved through more overtly social forms of address. Ammons explicitly links this vision of poet and reader to the Emersonian self in a passage from *Glare*:

...that's why the so-called
Emersonian self is not "imperial"—

the solitary self is alone *in the*
world with a consciousness directed

toward all but by only one, one little
guy seeing and saying, not speaking

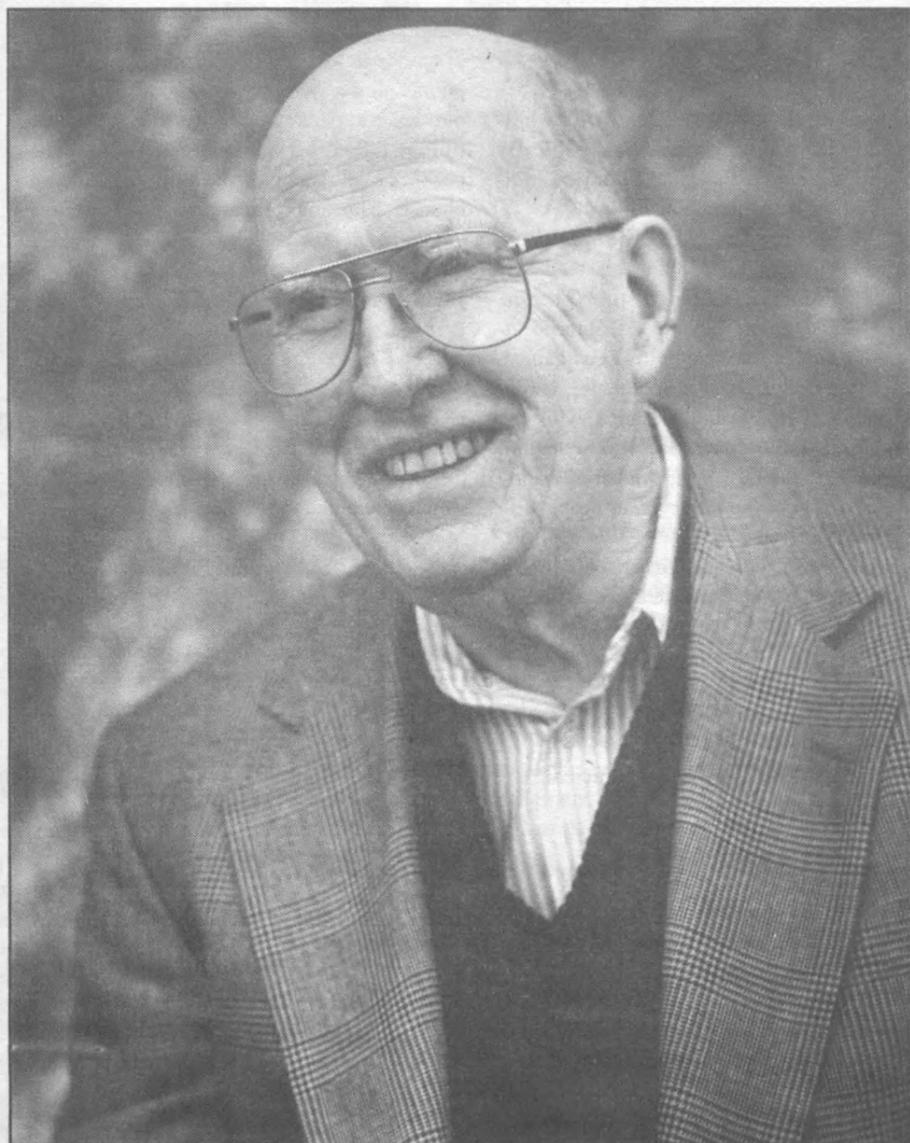
through the megaphones of public
structures but if to anyone to another

alone, one to one: if those ones
add up to millions, still they are

single threads unbraided:

Ammons' use of italics to emphasize the phrase "in the world" is unusual for him, and suggests the intensity of his desire to reconcile the Emersonian ideal of transcendent selfhood with a sense of community and connectedness. For Ammons, genuine connections can be made only with individuals, not groups. He disliked the word "audience," with its suggestion of collectivity; like Whitman he saw himself as writing for solitary readers, "single threads unbraided." (This may be why he gave so few poetry readings—he seemed to prefer reciting his poems to one person at a time.)

Yet while all Ammons' poems seek one-to-one connections with readers, many of them also explore more intimate relationships predicated not on solitude but on communion. In the remainder of this essay I want to consider the place of others in Ammons' poetry, his acknowledgment of and investment in the lives around him despite the call of solitude. This is a neglected aspect of his work, in part because the poems that exemplify it are not usually the ones that appear in anthologies. As I've said, Ammons is best known for poems that feature a lone protagonist in a natural setting communing with the elements. He established his mastery of this mode in his first



provided by Phyllis Ammons

volume, *Ommateum* (1955), a book almost completely devoid of sentient beings apart from the speaker. Even here, however, the imprint of other lives can be faintly discerned. Indeed the book's first poem begins by invoking the name of another: "So I said I am Ezra." This famous line, the inaugural gesture of Ammons' poetic career, has been variously interpreted as referring to an Old Testament prophet and a modernist poet, in either case suggesting a bold assumption of authority on the speaker's part. In fact, the Ezra Ammons claimed to have had in mind was a childhood friend, a hunchback who later died in World War II (in which Ammons also served). The adoption of his dead playmate's name thus becomes a complexly elegiac gesture, a way of acknowledging the place of otherness within the self while maintaining a kind of theatrical distance. Of course this significance gets clouded by the poet's withholding of Ezra's true identity in the poem, thus allowing the name's Biblical and literary overtones to resonate. The real Ezra exists in the poem only as a phantom, the trace of a life rather than a fully formed other.

In a series of poems written shortly after *Ommateum* appeared, Ammons gave flesh to the ghosts of his childhood. Turning sharply from the starkness and abstraction of his first book, he began to write with a new vividness of detail about remembered scenes and companions. At first he lavished his attention on animals, like a favorite hog named Sparkle whose slaughter he witnessed:

Oh, Sparkle, when the axe tomorrow morning falls
and the rush is made to open your throat,
I will sing, watching dry-eyed as a man, sing my
love for you in the tender feedings.

She's nothing but a hog, boy.

Bleed out, Sparkle, the moon-chilled bleaches
of your body hanging upside-down
hardening through the mind and night of the first freeze.
("Hardweed Path Going")

Another poem memorializes the family's snake-bitten mule, Silver:

Silver came up to the gate and stood head-down enchanted
in her fate
I found her sorrowful eyes by accident and knew:
("Silver")

The unabashed sentimentality of these poems will surprise readers of Ammons who only know his more visionary and philosophical work. The poet himself may have felt slightly embarrassed by them, to judge by their absence from his *Selected Poems*. Yet the tenderness and empathy toward other creatures they display informs all his work, if seldom so openly.

Ammons tempered the pathos of the farm series in another poem written shortly afterward, "Coon Song." Like "Silver," this poem centers on a moment of eye contact between human and animal; here, however, the encounter is suffused not with affection but a kind of grim recognition:

I got one good look
in the raccoon's eyes
when he fell from the tree
came to his feet
and perfectly still
seized the baying hounds

Heart

in his dull fierce stare,
in that recognition all
decision lost,
choice irrelevant, before the
battle fell
and the unwinding
of his little knot of time began:

Unlike Silver and Sparkle, this coon is not a domestic animal with a name and a history; its otherness is more absolute, its gaze more opaque. Yet this doesn't keep the speaker from finding a message in it: "reality can go to hell / is what the coon's eyes said to me." Where Sparkle's fate elicits grief, however, the coon's imminent demise arouses a strange anger in the speaker, which he directs with startling vehemence at the reader:

you want to know what happened,
you want to hear me describe it,
to placate the hound's-mouth
slobbering in your own heart:

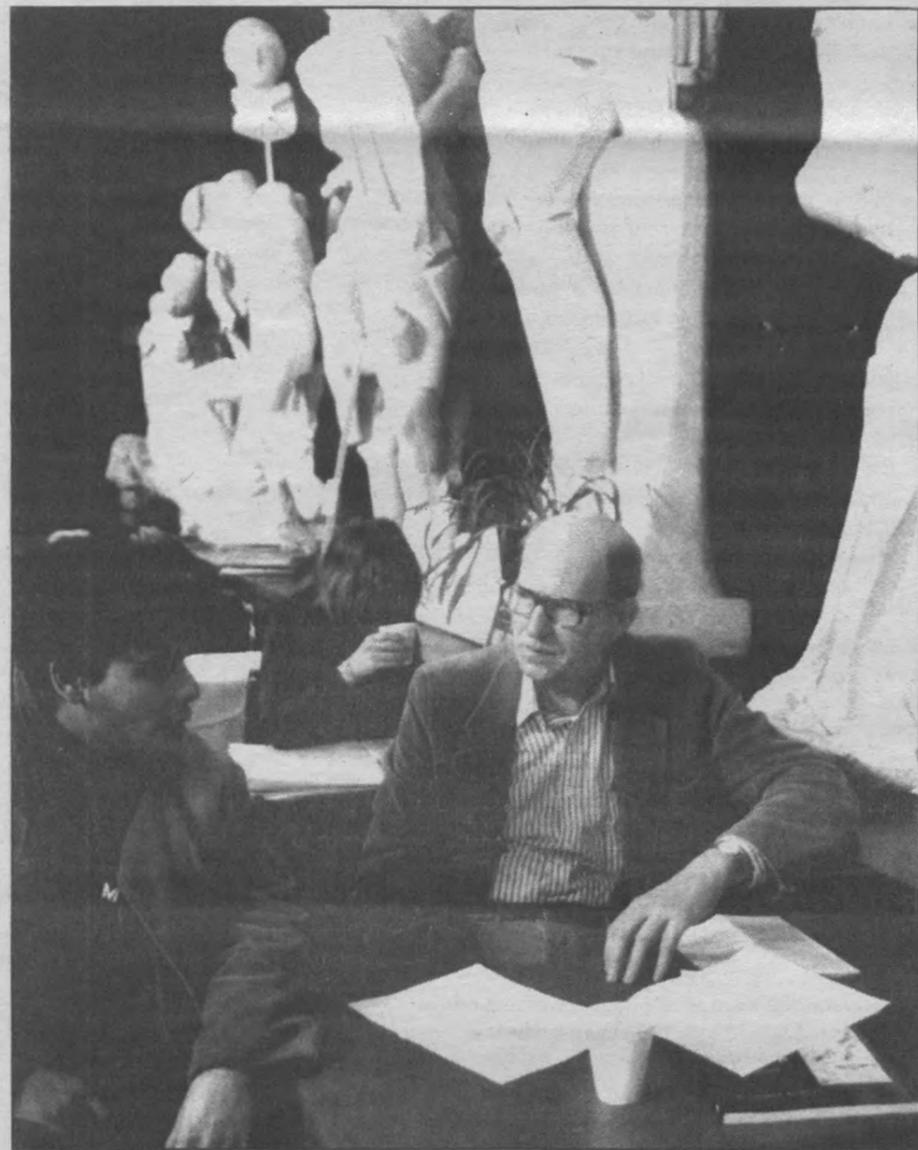
Next, as though to distance himself from the voyeuristic bloodlust he ascribes to us, Ammons foregrounds the poem's purely formal properties, specifically its use of indentation:

(all this time I've been
counting spaces
while you were thinking of something else:

The poem ends with a curiously jaunty tag that further belies the speaker's rage at the coon's fate:

what I choose
is youse
baby

Irony, hostility, and artifice all protect the speaker from the horror of the coon's plight, which nevertheless remains palpable in every line. A poem like this suggests that the coolness readers sense in much of Ammons' work reflects not his detachment from the suffering of others but his excessive identification with it.



A.R. Ammons with Student in Temple of Zeus
provided by Cornell University Photogrpahy

There are limits, of course, to the empathy humans may achieve with other species. Soon after writing these animal poems, Ammons wrote another poem based on childhood memory, this one focused not on an animal but a weak-minded woman named Nelly Myers whom his grandmother took in as a girl and who worked on the Ammons farmstead. Her abject condition seems to have inspired a fierce devotion in the poet, who movingly records his grief at her death:

oh where her partial soul, as others thought,
roams roams my love,
mother, not my mother, grandmother, not my grandmother,
slave to our farm's work, no slave I would not stoop to:
I will not end my grief, earth will not end my grief,

I move on, we move on, some scraps of us together,
my broken soul leaning toward her to be touched,
listening to be healed.
(“Nelly Myers”)

This poem is uncharacteristic of Ammons in its naked emotionality and occasionally stilted language; yet its passionate testament to a person others saw as worthless reveals the poet's deep attachment to the lowliest among us, a principle he voices more abstractly in better-known poems like “Still.” While Archie chose not to include “Nelly Myers” or the animal poems in his *Selected*, they all may be found in the wonderful collection edited by Alex Albright called *The North Carolina Poems*, which features a priceless photo of the poet as a tousle-headed, over-alled farmboy on its cover.

The expanded edition of *The Selected Poems* does contain what many critics regard as Ammons' masterpiece, “Easter Morning,” which also revisits his North Carolina childhood, this time from the perspective of an adult who has outlived most of his kin:

when I go back to my home country in these
fresh far-away days, it's convenient to visit
everybody, aunts and uncles, those who used to say,
look how he's shooting up, and the
trinket aunts who always had a little
something in their pocketbooks, cinnamon bark
or a penny or nickel, and uncles who
were the rumored fathers of cousins
who whispered of them as of great, if
troubled, presences, and school
teachers, just about everybody older
(and some younger) collected in one place
waiting, particularly, but not for
me, mother and father there, too, and others
close, close as burrowing
under skin, all in the graveyard
assembled, done for, the world they
used to wield, have trouble and joy
in, gone

For all its affectionate detail, the aunts and uncles in this passage remain slightly generic (there's the “trinket aunt” genus, for example). This may be because “Easter Morning” explicitly aligns itself with a high Romantic tradition in which loss is universalized and offset by the consolations of nature, and so it can't afford to evoke these relatives in all their particularity. Some twenty years later Ammons returns to the subject of his dead elders but this time individuates them, supplying names and other distinguishing traits:

the world, so populous, is so decimated: there
were 40 aunts and uncles: there was Aunt

Blanche, and Uncle Claude, Aunt Mitt, Aunt
Kate (I loved her), Uncle John (commanding)

and Uncle Frank (soused), and Aunt Lottie,
Addie, Laura....
(*Glare*, 114)

The difference between these two passages provides a measure of the growing warmth of Ammons' later work. Family, friends, even acquaintances become increasingly present in his poems; not just as shadowy others but as intimate participants in the poet's inner life. Growing older, Archie seems to have discovered that he was never as alone as he once thought.

The most intimate of all relationships is, ideally, marriage. Ammons wrote about this subject infrequently, but when he did it was always with piercing insight. He seemed especially moved by very old couples and the afflictions they endured. A poem called “Parting” from *A Coast of Trees* offers a poignant portrait of a woman with Alzheimer's whose slightly more competent husband visits her at a nursing home:

...she watched her
husband tremble in to call

and shoot up high head-bent
eyes: her mind
flashed clear through, she was
sure of it, she had seen
that one before: her husband

longed to say goodbye or else
hello, but the room stiffened
as if two lovers had just caught
on sight, every move rigid
misfire in that perilous fire.

I know few poems that so artfully balance pain and tenderness, the very condition that parts husband and wife seeming to foster a strange renewal of their love in all its dangerous uncertainty. The physicality of Ammons' language is largely what keeps the poem from bathos: verbs like “tremble,” “shoot up,” “flashed,” “stiffened” and “caught” make the atmosphere of dread and desire almost unbearably palpable. The slightly off-balance repetition of “fire” in the final line completes its vision of love as a heroic ordeal for old as well as young.

Ammons' own marriage seldom receives much attention in his poetry before the '90s, but in that decade he began to acknowledge its centrality to his life—for example by using the pronoun “we” to describe his outings and excursions. His wife Phyllis appears more and more frequently in Ammons' late work as a figure of great strength and serenity, and while these references are often anecdotal, a few poems express his devotion to her more directly.

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Archie's Heart

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Here is "A Birthday Poem to My Wife":

Have you considered how inconsequential we all
are: I mean, in the long term; but

anything getting closer to now - deaths, births,
marriages, murders - grows the consequence

till if you kissed me that would be a matter
of great consequence: large spaces also include

us into anonymity, but you beside me, as the
proximity heightens, declares myself, and you, to

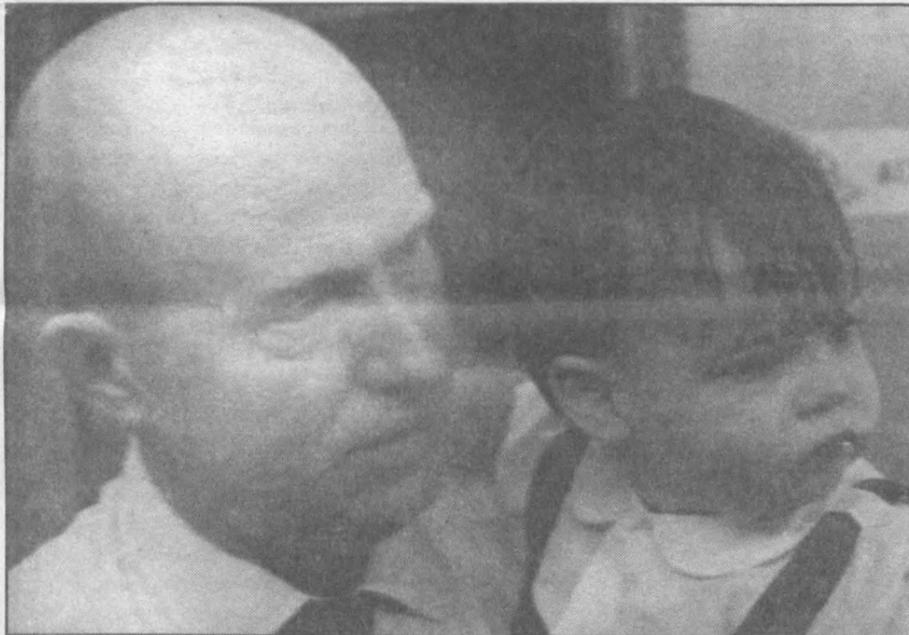
the stars: not a galaxy refuses its part in
spelling our names: thus you understand if you

go out in the backyard or downtown to the
grocery store - or take a plane to Paris -

time pours in around me and space
devours me and like inconsequence I'm little and lost.

I'm strongly tempted to call this the finest love poem of the last twenty years—maybe more. Part of its pathos comes from the way it implicitly sets the solitary splendor Ammons had so long espoused against the exhilarations of intimacy and finds the former sadly lacking. To be alone is no longer a condition of transcendence but of annihilation; conversely, love is now a means rather than an impediment to ascension, as well as a shield against the withering vastness of time and space.

The other person nearest Archie's heart, of course, was his son. John makes cameo appearances in some of the long poems, but again it's not until the '90s that the poet openly voices his paternal love, as in this beautiful lyric from *Brink Road*:



provided by Phyllis Ammons

FOR MY BELOVED SON

The blackberries that ripened
soon after you left are

ripening again and thunderstorms
after the broken-down winter

are rolling through here again:
I keep looking for the season

that will bring you home:
I don't know how many times

I've put in the seed, watered
the plants, counted the blossoms.

This poem expresses the longing most parents feel for their grown children with a tact and delicacy reminiscent of classical Chinese poetry. The theme might easily yield to self-pity, yet by assimilating his son's movements to those of seasons and plants Ammons renounces any direct claim on him. Only by tending his garden can he hope to nudge the cycles of nature along and so hasten his son's return. The perennial parental wish to be visited has rarely been voiced so mildly, without a hint of reproach.

Where his shorter poems tend to emphasize individual relationships, it's in his long poems that Ammons explores his larger visions of community and connection. I want to juxtapose some passages from his three masterpieces in the long form, *Sphere* (1974), *Garbage* (1993), and *Glare* (1997), that together chart the shifting proportions of head and heart in Ammons' later work. While all of them show the poet's abiding commitment to the human species in both its highest and lowest phases, the increasing particularity of his engagement with others suggests a gradual closing of the gap he had once felt between himself and his fellows.

Sphere is Ammons' most openly Whitmanesque poem, and in it he borrows a key metaphor from Whitman to express his solidarity with others:

...it's because I don't want some
thing that I go for everything: all the people asleep with

me in sleep, melted down, mindlessly interchangeable,
resting with a hugeness of whales dozing:
(43)

For Ammons as for Whitman sleep is the great uniter, leveling differences and gathering all humans in its fluid embrace. Yet while this image suggests utopian possibilities that Ammons develops more fully later in the poem, it remains fundamentally abstract in its figuring of people as a single substance, "mindlessly interchangeable." In *Garbage* Ammons offers another image of utopian community, this one far more local and concrete. Ithacans especially have reason to be grateful that Archie celebrated their most beloved institution so eloquently:

an early June morning in early June, we, having
already gone out to breakfast, pop into the red

Toyota Tercel and breeze down the hill by Lake
Cayuga to the farmers' market, so bright, so

clear, rows and rows of cars and stalls and,
beyond, boats docked calm on the glassy inlet:

the people look a little ruffled, like yards
trying to come out of icebound winters into

springs, the old stalks still there, the space
of the new stuff not filled out: affliction

here, where the heavy woman, heavier than last
fall, leans over to swish one knock-knee past

(check that rhyme) the other; affliction there,
where the wobble-legged man leans over to his

arm crutches, a four-legged progression: aging
women, drooped breasts under loose T-shirts,

hair making a virtue of snow-white or veering
off into an original expression of blue:

toothless, big-bellied, bald, broad-rumped,
deaf: the afflicted, hurts hurting but less

than they hurt at home or, if hurting more,
with some compensation: one absolutely lovely

person, perhaps: the radiance of some babies'
faces, the perfect interest of some boy in mud

puddles: and this is all under the aspect of
eternity, soon to be: but listen to the

good-mornings and how've-you-beens and
were-you-away-any-of-the-winters, along with

the hanging baskets of fuchsia, purple and red
and streaked white, tuberous begonias with the

freshest colors alive, bread, and stall after
stall of vegetables, goat cheese, honey, coffee

plus a live minnequin who is moved to thank you
by coins and bills dropped in a hat: this is

we at our best, not killing, scheming, abusing,
running over, tearing down, burning up: why

did invention ever bother with all this, why
does the huge beech by the water come back every

year: oh, the sweet pleasures, or even the hope
of sweet pleasures, the kiss, the letter from

someone, the word of sympathy or praise, or just
the shared settled look between us, that here

we are together, such as it is, cautious and
courageous, wily with genuine desire, policed

by how we behave, all out of eternity, into
eternity, but here now, where we make the most

of it: I settle down: I who could have used
the world share a crumb: I who wanted the sky

fall to the glint in a passing eye:
(11)

It's hard to believe the same poet wrote these lines who once declared "being here to be here / with others is for others." I don't mean to suggest that Ammons ever repudiated solitude as his primary condition, but in passages like this one he seems to have found a powerful antidote to

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And Living Things Too

David Weiss

... I would endeavor to destroy the old antithesis of
Words and Things; elevating, as it were, Words into
Things and living things too.

—Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, Oxford, vol. I, pp. 352–3

It is hard, foolhard probably, however seductive the impulse, to attempt to say anything comprehensive about poetry on the order of Coleridge's "best words in the best order."

What could possibly hold true, after all, across the vast floriculture of verse?

What could the Song of Solomon, the haiku of Basho, the lyrics of Sappho, Emily Dickinson and Edward Braithwaite and the sonnets of Phillip Sidney have in common?

Not subject or form or tradition.

And yet Coleridge's characterization of poetry—a definition, really—"the best words in the best order," does imply criteria by which we can tell, or judge, what's best.

Those criteria, if they don't simply collapse into matters of taste, have to do with how language is used.

Is there something in the way that poets use language that makes of them a confraternity across time and place?

If Coleridge's "best words in the best order" were just another way of saying that poetry is the most eloquent of the language arts, then he would simply be referring to rhetorical skill, to turns of phrase. But Coleridge is also speaking of the poem as an entity, not as a collation of memorable verbal moments. His ambition for poetry is to "elevat[e], as it were, Words into Things and living things too."

Other poets have had similar ambitions.

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand. . .

writes Whitman, who means it.

we enter into word-rain and
so closely think we live, nearly live.

is one of the ways Archie Ammons has phrased it in "Tertiaries."

"The poet comes to words as nature comes to dry sticks," says Wallace Stevens in his "Adagia."

W.C. Williams' version, "No ideas but in things," wings straight past words into embodiment, pointing to a similar belief.

Archibald MacLeish's chestnut, "a poem must not mean, but be," has a like import.

A poem is a process of incarnation, which means: not "second or third hand."

Stevens called the incarnating moment "the intensest rendezvous."

What is it about a poem that makes it first-hand?

Robert Lowell's: a poem is not the record of an event but the event itself, is a way of clarifying it.

Not everyone has this feeling about words.

Yet if you think about the most intense reading experience—in fiction, that immersion which loses all track of time; in verse, the stricken glee or quickened awareness, of which the top of Dickinson's head coming off is the famous instance—you'll know what I am referring to. For poets, that Words can be living things is a kind of gnostic truth, an article of faith.

Words may be just signs, but "the best words in the best order" attains to more than that. In the alembic of poem-making, words become more than referential, more than bytes in the data stream.

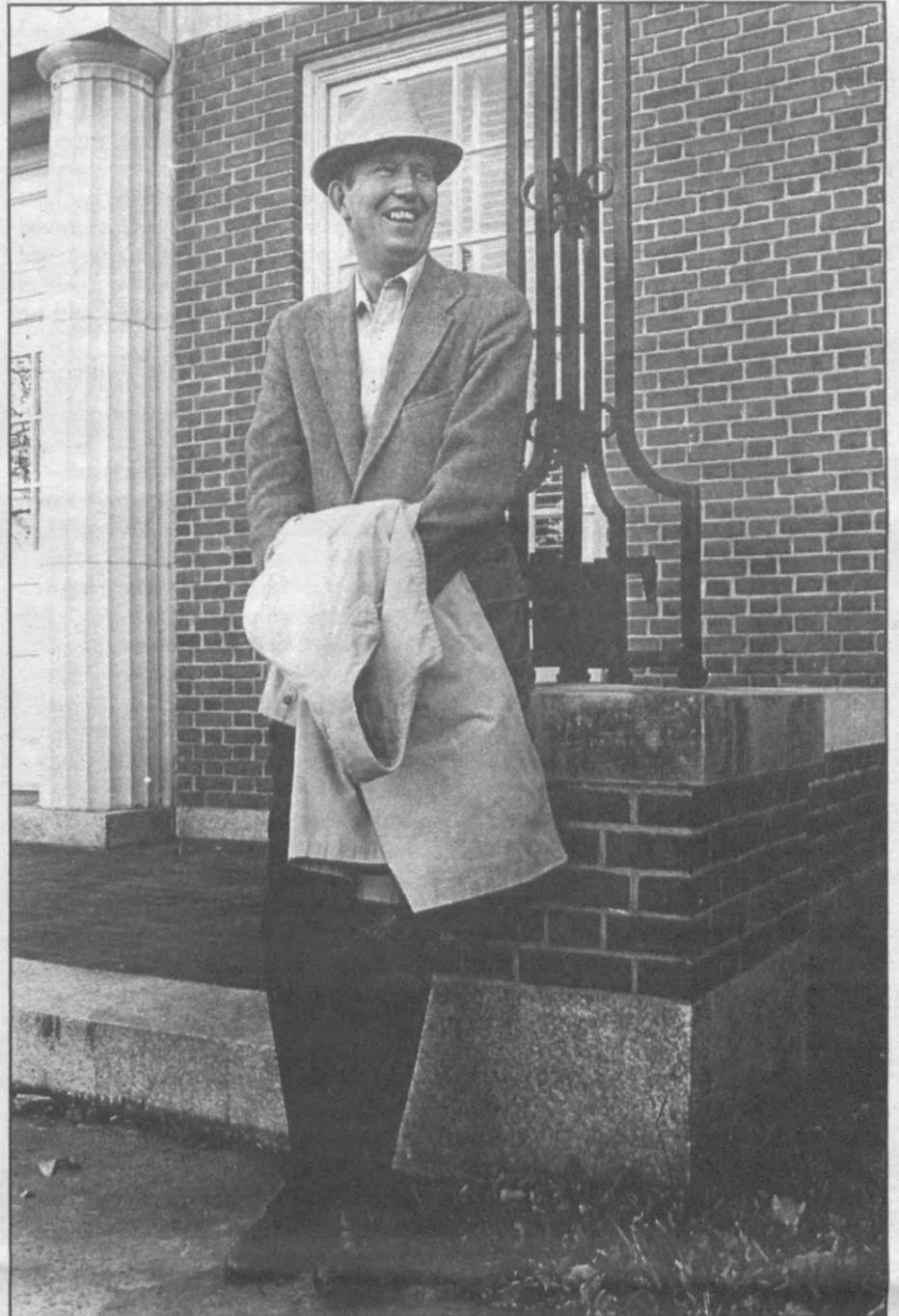
Is it merely the hubris of poets to believe that words can be so potent?

Plato thought there was something to it.

His opposition to the poets had to do with his understanding of how the language of poetry actually works. He understood that the powerful effect of hearing or reciting verse has to do with, and is, in fact, a consequence of, the heady linguistic brew which poets ferment from "the best words in the best order."

Like passion or wine, poetry, Plato knew, could be intoxicating. It collapses the distance and distinction between the listener and what he is hearing.

How does it do this?



A. R. Ammons as visiting professor at Wake Forest University provided by Cornell Library Rare and Manuscript Collections

In a word, through *mimesis*.

Plato uses the term, says the classicist Eric Havelock, to "describe the poetic experience. It focuses initially not on the artist's creative act, but on his power to make the audience identify almost pathologically and certainly sympathetically with what he is saying."

Epic and dramatic poetry for Plato are a "way of reliving experience in memory instead of analyzing or understanding it."

Plato in his wariness of poetry understands its power exactly. The trouble with poetry lies in its capacity to induce an identification with it, and a consequent "submission to its spell."

It is this particular power of poetry to foster identification that supercharges memory and makes this "intensest rendezvous" so highly memorable. The uses made of poetry in an oral culture—to educate, to pass on knowledge—had everything to do with its capacity to heighten memory and make it more absorbable. Meter is just one element toward this end.

Making identification possible, collapsing the distance between reader and poem is, I think, the *sine qua non* of poetry, its ancient hypothalamic imperative, which remains in force twenty-five hundred years later far into the history of written culture.

Now we have no end of what Plato was plumping for: analysis and understanding, written culture's strength; but poetry's power to move us still underlies our reading.

How does poetry move us, then?

("To be moved": the verb we use when we mean "to identify with.")

How does it move us, since most poems we read silently to ourselves, without the rhapsode's persuasive voice to carry us along on its magic carpet?

It does so, I think, by putting us through the experience of what it is about.

What a poem is about is something the reader must undergo to find out.

The experience of reading, examined closely, reenacts (or, to say it less insistently, serves as analogy for) the subject or event or crisis of the poem; sometimes, it even reenacts the phenomenon or feel of "experiencing" itself.

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Archie's Heart

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it. The farmers' market is a kind of earthly paradise, full of bounty and beauty, and while not devoid of mortal afflictions, these are temporarily offset by the myriad "sweet pleasures" of human contact. The centrality of the first person plural here is all but unprecedented in Ammons' work; note how the pronoun "we" swells from its initial reference to the poet and his wife to become planetary in scope: "this is / we at our best." From this expansive height the poem's focus gracefully contracts again, first to the couple ("the shared, settled look between us"), and then to the speaker alone ("I settle down"). The settling that occurs in the last lines I've quoted entails both renunciation and feasting. To give up the longing for transcendence and totality, world and sky, means to discover the wealth of the local and the contingent, crumbs and glints that sustain and nourish. Having once ended a poem with the uncompromising assertion "less than total is a bucketful of radiant toys," Ammons is now finally willing to settle for those toys and that radiance.

In *Glare* Ammons revisits the farmers' market but this time moves even closer to its denizens, singling out a particular figure to name and extol:

the man four-legged with arm braces
isn't there anymore, and the lady
too fat to wobble her knees past

each other, where was she, and Mrs.
Fox, a decisive sharp lady with a
constant near-smile and a fine-lady

accent, where will her like be found
again, here by the waters of the
Inlet, the boats' reflections too

glassy to bob, the gulls crying
downward swoops, the ducks flicking,
drawing those huge wedges of

ripples behind them: but here is a
young man and woman holding hands,
looking at the vegetables as from

another planet, she with a bottom
broad & warm for planting, his
schlong adequate to bed the

deepest seed, and the black dog
licks the baby's face, the stroller
bumping to the plank cracks:

even where the air is empty it is
filled with space and sunlight,
the jabber of buyers and sellers:

those who miss the missing will soon
be missing: Mrs. Fox, are you gone,
or do you wait somewhere in a nursing

home and someone else is preparing
your potatoes, mashing them maybe
when they are already cold: are

you healing, may you return, will we
see you again: we hardly knew you,
still now we realize we loved you,

your face set with a smile, your
quick movements, your choice salad
leaves: the market will leave the

shoreline, the giant poplar will
give up more than its leaves, the
ladybugs all frigging this morning

on the green plant or weed will have
to shop this strange place for
the needed damp: the wind almost

totally missing will show up somewhere
else and sing a different song or
maybe the one known here heretofore
(11)

Self-consciously a sequel (it even bears the same section number), this passage lacks the expansive lyricism of its predecessor in *Garbage*, but gains a corresponding warmth and particularity. The relation between the two passages is curiously reminiscent of Ammons' great shore odes "Corsons Inlet" and "Saliences," in the second of which he returns a day later to the beach he'd walked in the first and enumerates all the creatures who've disappeared. The absence of Mrs. Fox and other remembered figures becomes an occasion for both lament and praise, in the manner of the classical *ubi sunt* poem. But new faces have taken their place, like the young couple whose sexual ripeness the poet bawdily celebrates. Transience and renewal mingle in that delicate counterpoint of which Ammons is the contemporary master.

Where the passages I've just quoted lean toward affirmation in their emphasis on community, other sections of Ammons' long poems deliberately seek out less hopeful instances of affliction. Ammons shares Whitman's impulse to incorporate or, in Walt's trope, "swallow" every form of pain and suffering he can imagine. Again *Sphere* is most openly Whitmanesque in its gestures:

... I
know my own—the thrown peripheries, the stragglers, the cheated,
maimed, afflicted (I know their eyes, pain's melting amazement),

the weak, disoriented, the sick, hurt, the castaways, the
needful needless: I know them: I love them: I am theirs:
(17)

This is very close in tone and cadence to Whitman's famous declaration in *Song of Myself* "I am the man, I suffered, I was there"; but where Whitman gives a harrowing catalogue of individual "agonies" (a fugitive slave, a dying fireman, etc.), Ammons contents himself with a quick series of abstract epithets. Once again, he moves toward a more concrete rendering of this theme in *Garbage*:

...what of so much

possibility, all impossibility: how about the
one who finds alcohol at eleven, drugs at seventeen

death at thirty-two: how about the little
boy on the street who with puffy-smooth face and

slit eyes reaches up to you for a handshake:
supposing politics swings back like a breeze and

sails tanks through a young crowd: what about the
hopes withered up in screams like crops in

sandy winds: how about the letting out of streams
of blood where rain might have sprinkled into

roadpools: are we to identify with the fortunate
who see the energy of possibility as its necessary

brush with impossibility: who define meaning
only in the blasted landfalls of no meaning:

who can in safety call evil essential to the
differentiations of good: or should we wail

that the lost are lost, that nothing can be right
until they no longer lose themselves, until we've found

charms to call them back: are we to take no
comfort when so much discomfort turns here and

there helplessly for help: is there, in other
words, after the balances are toted up, is there

a streak of light defining the cutting edge as
celebration:
(15)

Two days after Ammons' death, Robert Pinsky chose these lines to read in his memory on the PBS News Hour, perhaps because they manifest a social conscience the poet himself often denied having. Like Whitman, Ammons was driven to acknowledge the ubiquity of human misery while maintaining his essentially affirmative posture. Here the strain of that effort becomes palpable. Unlike the market passages, these lines offer no pastoral images to soften the pain and brutality they document. The tentative questions that frame Ammons' instances of horror ("how about...") betray genuine perplexity, as though the poet were forcing himself to confront a set of facts he'd managed to evade till now. While the passage eventually moves toward a renewal of the celebratory strain, its troubled questions remain unanswered, its impulse to grieve for the lost unrefuted. The balance may come out on the side of celebration, but the very process of totting it up, integer by bloody integer, serves to darken and disturb that result.

As he did with the farmers' market, Ammons follows up on this theme in *Glare* while narrowing his focus to a single embodiment of it:

she said, it's hard to have hope
when there is no hope: she'd run

back and forth looking after people
till her legs wouldn't work: she

would send her legs a message and they
either wouldn't get it or wouldn't

do it: she just lay there, poor
thing: I told her to have hope: she

said there wasn't any, or not enough
to pay much attention to: she died:

the adopted son she staked her life
on was shot dead by somebody at the

7-11: just a month or so later:
she didn't know about that: I reckon

she got off just in time: you'd be
surprised, though, how folks can get

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And Living Things Too

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The result is that we are put *inside* an experience, whether it is of listening to a nightingale, or coping with the loss of one's beloved, or watching a woman pull a nail from her shoe, or of being enchanted by how the mind works.

Implicit in this *modus operandi* is poetry's core belief about knowing: that to know something is a matter of understanding, not of information received; that understanding comes to us not from distanced observation but from entering into. Knowledge comes through subjectivity, a subjectivity so thorough that it fuses with its object.

Still: *how* does it do this?

By every means possible.

By whatever means make possible the mimesis of "reliving experience in memory."

Each poem marshals the resources of language as fully as it can for this purpose.

And each poem is its own story of how it manages to be richly resourceful in this way.

The resources a poem marshals to make it a living thing are not primarily imagistic or visual, though it has often been thought so. A lyric poem is not, *ut pictura poesis*, a picture in words.

What is concrete about a poem is not this image or that but the orchestration of a complex embodiment of feeling, thought and circumstance.

If poets are namers, they are in the way that an entire poem is the equivalent of a word that stands not for a thing but for a particular experience or apprehension of the world.

Not all poets are equally adept at, or attuned to, putting in play this aspect of poetry's force. Those poets who are manage it only some of the time.

One poet who has pulled it off with great frequency is Archie Ammons. With Ammons, making a poem become-what-it-means has always been a formal imperative.

Sometimes a poem can be mimetic in a simple way, a re-presentation of something specific; this is something Ammons took from William Carlos Williams. But Ammons is a philosopher-poet, in the tradition of Wallace Stevens and so he is less content than Williams with the purely kinesthetic.

Here are familiar Williams and Ammons poems side by side which show the difference between them:

Poem

As the cat
climbed over
the top of

the jamcloset
first the right
forefoot

carefully
then the hind
stepped down

into the pit of
the empty
flowerpot
—William Carlos Williams

Small Song

The reeds give
way to the

wind and give
the wind away
—A.R. Ammons

Williams rekindled in American poetry an exuberance of pure being. Ammons' eye is trained less on being than on becoming and the processes of change. He has always

been concerned with the elusive. In a sense, "Small Song" is a working model of Ammons' method. Ammons is almost always attempting to "give / the wind away." The way he does this is to "give way." To give way is to give oneself up and subject oneself to the forces that are at work, at play. The difference between giving way and giving away, the movement from yielding to revealing, is accomplished with a punning sleight of hand.

Ammons is a metaphysician of the natural world.

It might be truer to call him a naturalist of living-in-time.

He has taken on the task in his poems of explaining, as Milton put it, "the ways of God to men"—God, for Ammons, in the American tradition, being nature. But nature, for Ammons, takes in the universe as well as the world of living things, and the universe for Ammons, is not human, nor human-like, nor congenial to any of our atavistic centrisms.

Ammons has always allied himself with the non-human order. The nature of non-human nature (of which the human is a part) is flux and metamorphosis, processes of generation, transformation, and decay, movement subject to the large law and small forces, processes grand in thoroughness and scope but not in meaning. Where does meaning come from? It comes from finding the forms of mutability; it comes from finding one's place in this order and assenting to it, which is to see it as beautiful. Ammons' famous poem "Corson's Inlet" is the great poem of this work.

In this sense Ammons is a formalist.

His craft is the crafting of the forms of natural and human existence.

The long poems, like "Tape for the Turning Year" and the recent and magnificent "Glare," have as their aim the exacting representation of human life and consciousness over time.

Because of this the long poems have found for themselves a tone of ironic self-deflation. They aim to demote the notion of poetic persona in favor of the many-mooded and many-minded, from the sublime to the ridiculous to the cranky, petty, attentive, reflective, critical, contradictory.

For Ammons, the wind the reeds give way to is time; and thus, if he is a formalist, he is seeking the forms time takes, in him, in the world.

In "Entranceways," a self-elegy from *Sumerian Vistas*, he imagines himself at the very last moments of his life,

having learned how to
stay just as one is
swept away.

"Entranceways" is a great instance of embodied poetry. The poem sets itself at a precipice moment, a still-point-of-the-turning-world moment, and how Ammons gives it to us is not as an instant balanced between being here and being gone or as a moment of acquired illumination, but as a turbulent nexus of opposing forces. The brilliant enactment of this condition is concentrated in the line breaks. The line break at "how to" makes it ironically plain that what he has learned is not "how to stay" but "how to stay" solely at the moment of being "swept away." The penultimate line "stay just as one is" seems to say that staying is a matter of stability, of identity: to stay "just as one is" is to stay put. But that, the final line makes clear, is an illusion and an impossibility. The meaning of "just as one is," placed back into flow of context, dissolves into the larger situation of being "swept away." Stability has no place here. Each succeeding line destabilizes the others. Being "swept away" is the very thing that makes it possible to know "how to stay." It's a knowledge midwived by a maximal sense of mortality.

Irony here is a mode of comprehension, a kind of metaphysics; it is embedded in an understanding of things.

Ammons' irony, however, can cut in more than one direction. The poem is entitled, "Entranceways," not exits. Earlier in the poem he writes, "I will finally / be here / in going's final syllable." The poem's final syllable is "away," which in Ammons-play can be read as "a way." A finality that is a path of some sort. This is not a transcendent vision. Or, it is if we assent to natural process and the sort of afterlife that Walt Whitman points to in "Song of Myself" at a similar moment of imagined death: "If you want me again, look for me under your boot-soles."

If you want Ammons, you can find him diffused and embodied in his poems, and in the terrain and wildlife of our region, which his poems have depersonified and incarnated into a true equivalence of what they are.

David Weiss teaches writing at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.



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Archie's Heart

continued from page 12

over something like that and keep
on trucking, if they have legs: she

didn't: nope: but she didn't know
anything about the son: pretty

lucky: old lady
(36)

The two basic sources of human suffering, disease and violence, intertwine here in a grim fable that parodies the Whitmanesque impulse to find some element of good in the worst afflictions. If Mrs. Fox stood for all the losses that deprive us of accustomed pleasures, this nameless woman exemplifies loss as a relief from pain, both present and to come. No large rhetorical gestures sublimate the wrenching specificity of her story; the poet simply presents her case with a kind of sardonic shrug. Even his minimal effort to draw some comfort from her fate lacks conviction, as line break and colon interrupt and elongate the closing phrases so that they almost seem choked out: "pretty / lucky: old lady." In this passage, written at the end of his career, Ammons has moved so close to another's pain that any attempt at celebration feels hollow.

Archie never really stopped celebrating, of course, even in the face of death. (The opening section of *Glare* ends "come, let's / celebrate: it will all be over.") Even as his own health declined, he remained warmly engaged in the lives of others. I'd like to end this essay by reflecting briefly on the place of friendship in his life and poetry, but to do so I must shift to a more personal register. I was privileged to know Archie for about thirteen years, during which I benefited incalculably from his wisdom, humor and encouragement. For a poet who presented himself to the world as a misanthropic loner, he was amazingly gregarious, often sitting in the Temple of Zeus or in his office with the door open just waiting for visitors to drop by for a chat. He loved to talk, about anything and everything, from sports to politics to sex and other bodily functions. (He could be incredibly bawdy, and incredibly funny, often at the same time.) I've never known anyone as addicted to conversation; much of his later poetry was really a refinement and intensification of the unbuttoned everyday talk he loved so much. Some lines from *Garbage* capture this love with his usual mix of lyricism and goofiness:

...I

don't know anything I want anybody to believe or
in: but if you will sit with me in the light

of speech, I will sit with you: I would rather
do this than eat your ice cream, go to a movie,

hump a horse, measure a suit, suit a measure:
(11)

Many mornings as I passed through Zeus to get my coffee I'd decline Archie's invitations to sit and schmooze for a few minutes, explaining that I had to go prepare my class (which I did); I'd give anything to go back and have those missed conversations now.

While Archie was fully capable of being gruff when he felt put upon, he was unfailingly generous and kind to his many friends, who included colleagues, former students, neighbors and fans. And yet he seems never to have realized just how much of himself he gave away, to judge from a heartbreaking passage in *Glare*:

sometimes I get the feeling I've never
lived here at all, and 31 years seem

no more than nothing: I have to stop
and think, oh, yeah, there was the

kid, so much anguish over his allergy,
and there was the year we moved to

another house, and oh, yes, I remember
the lilies we planted near that

siberian elm, and there was the year
they made me a professor, and the

year, right in the middle of a long
poem, when I got blood poisoning from

an ingrown toenail not operated on
right: but a wave slices through,

canceling everything, and the space
with nothing to fill it shrinks and

time collapses, so that nothing happened,
and I didn't exist, and existence

itself seems like a wayward temporizing,
an illusion nonexistence sometimes

stumbles into: keep your mind open,
something might crawl in: which

reminds me of my greatest saying:
old poets never die, they just scrawl

away: and then I think of my friends
who may have longed for me, and I say

oh, I'll be here the next time
around: alas, the next time will

not come next: so what am I to say
to friends who know I'm not here and

won't be back: I'm sorry I missed
you guys: but even with the little

I know I loved you a lot, a lot more
than I said: our mountains here are

so old they're hills: they've been
around around million years but

indifference in all that time broke
itself only to wear them out: my

indifference is just like theirs: it
wipes itself clear: surely, I will have

another chance: surely, nothing is
let go till trouble free: when

I come back I'm going to be there
every time: and then the wave that

comes to blank me out will be set
edgy and jiggling with my recalcitrance

and my consciousness will take on weight
(43)

I suspect we all have moods like the one expressed in this passage, in which life feels illusory, the years we've traversed insubstantial. But not all of us respond as Archie does here, with regret for the friends he feels he's abandoned. Poetry was his ultimate vehicle for making himself present, for giving his consciousness weight and substance, and from now on it's only in his poetry that he will be there every time. But speaking for myself and for the many others who sat with him in the light of speech, I want to say: Archie, you were here.

Roger Gilbert is a professor of English at Cornell, where he specializes in American poetry. He is coeditor of The Walker's Literary Companion and The Quotable Walker.



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Almost Chinese

Minfong Ho

Just about this time two years ago, in April 1998, Archie Ammons read a selection of his poems during the "Ammonsfest" at Cornell arranged in his honor. The large auditorium in Goldwin Smith Hall was packed, and I sat on a step near the top, catching only an occasional glimpse of Archie's balding head. But his voice, and his gentle wisdom, came through—his poems like the rice paper that had wrapped those coconut candies of my childhood, dissolving on the tongue before the sweetness kicked in.

Archie's poems have always sounded wonderfully "right" to me—perhaps because they seemed as if they could have been, even should have been, written in Chinese. The only poems I had grown up reading and reciting had been Chinese ones. Usually just short things: four lines of five words each, or longer ones of a few dozen lines, with seven words a line. Some were meant to be sung, and had a more varied structure; but whether they were sung, or chanted, or just silent on the page—poems to me had always been structured around rhyme, rhythm—and monosyllables.

Chinese is, after all, a monosyllabic language, made up of discrete "characters," each one comprised of a cluster of strokes. The simplest character can be made up of just three of four strokes (as in the words meaning "big" or "moon," for instance), the most complex ones can take up to twenty-some strokes to complete. Each character must be written in the same amount of space, so that Chinese schoolchildren, when practicing their penmanship, learn to write on paper that has been divided neatly into square boxes all the same size.

Many words are formed as the combination of two simple characters: loyalty is "center" over "heart," endure is "knife" over "heart," bright is "sun" beside "moon," east is "tree" behind "sun," autumn is "wheat" on "fire," man is "field" over "strength," peace is "woman" under "roof," and so on. Many of the basic characters are pictorial, stylized images of the sun and moon, hand or mouth, rain or river, horse or bird.

Why does all this matter? Simply because, to me, Archie's poems seemed Chinese. They sounded right, they looked about right, the images they conjured up were within my



photo by Jay Paris

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visual reach, as the meanings they hinted at were within my conceptual one.

I remember the first time I heard Archie read. It was in the Temple of Zeus, 1979, back when it still looked like a garage sale of Acropolis remnants.

Dark and musty, the pale people in black turtle-necks: poets. The place intimidated me, but I liked the donuts. I went in one afternoon, hungry, bought my jelly donuts, and stayed to watch what was happening. Black turtle-necks were taking turns standing up to intone things—long, meandering, polysyllabic things. A poetry reading: I had heard about such things. I stood behind a plaster cast of a large torso, a safe distance away, and started to eat my donuts. Couldn't understand what the words were about, felt vaguely embarrassed that grown-ups were emoting in the open like that.

Then this one man got up, even more grown-up than the others (but no turtle-neck) and began reading. I listened spellbound. Him, I could understand! His words were pure, simple, mostly monosyllabic and almost monochromatic—like the subtle brushstrokes of grey and black on rice paper in a Chinese landscape painting. He spoke of running water and cloudy skies, autumn geese and a quiet, structured longing. And he said all this in English.

I felt as if fragments of myself which had always been separate, were now being fused.

When he finished his reading, I managed to make my way up to him and said, "Your poems—they're almost Chinese," and then I bolted. I hope Archie took it for the compliment that it was meant to be. I think he did.

Afterwards I walked around Beebe Lake a few times, in a bit of a daze. It was fall, the leaves all gold, geese winging overhead, the first frost fossilizing the ferns underfoot—this palpable reality actually corresponded to the Chinese poems which I had been taught since childhood to memorize, and also corresponded with the English words Archie Ammons had read out. The congruency of it all—it was an exhilarating feeling.

Over the next several months, I read more of Archie's poems on my own, and went to more poetry reading sessions where he might read. Gradually, through my growing familiarity with his words, the once-exotic world of Ithaca became familiar as well.

With his poetry, Archie made me trust words. I wanted to work with them the way he did, with that self-effacing rice-paper quality, not to use them to Shape Life, or Explain it, but simply to wrap little bits of it up, keep the moisture out and the flavor in for awhile, until it meets a wet tongue.

As a teacher, Archie didn't instruct as much as show by example, and because we saw that he was disciplined, humble, sustained, patient in his writing and his way of living, we tried to be too. As a man, he should have been intimidating, but instead was so approachable—curious, kind, and just reticent enough to make shy people able to open up to him. And I liked the way he talked—it was rather like the way he wrote: with those tantalizing pauses that gave his thoughts ample space to wander around in.

Once he came and sat down next to me, and pulled out a scrap of paper from his shirt pocket. On it was scribbled something that he said he had just written—what did I make of it?

"Sometimes a maple seed
can hold on so
tight it spins
way out on the wind strong
enough to snap it free!"

I read it over, twice. It was early spring, and I had only recently noticed how the tiny boomerang-shaped seeds of maple trees spun in the wind like tiny propellers. So I knew at

least what he was talking about. What he might be alluding to, however, seemed more mysterious. I took a deep breath, and made a stab at it. Some girls can be like that maple seed, I said—they grow up totally sheltered and attached to their family, until some man from nowhere comes along and sweeps them away.

Archie smiled, and pocketed the scrap of paper. Looking back on it, I think now that he had known something I hadn't realized then: that I'd been talking about myself. My family in Singapore had been a tight-knit one, and had adamantly opposed my marrying an American who had, sure enough, swept me off halfway around the world from them. When the poem appeared in published form (first in *Worldly Hopes*, then later in *The Really Short Poems of A.R. Ammons*), he had titled it "Bride (for Minfong Ho)." I was totally taken aback, but of course felt honored.

Later I translated some Tang dynasty poems from the Chinese into English, and showed them to Archie. But if I was hoping he would edit them, improve them by somehow "poeticizing" them, I was disappointed. He read them over carefully, made encouraging and appreciative comments about them—but he did not change them. I think that was how he taught, not as a surgeon, intrusively, but as a gardener would, by nurturing young shoots. I learnt so much from him without even realizing it at the time.

My translations were published as an illustrated book for children, with the original Chinese characters printed vertically on the side of every page. Archie was, typically, wry yet generous with his praise, saying on the dust-jacket, "The book is delightful in every conceivable way. This is an understatement." I never pointed it out directly to him, but I think he realized that the book was an outgrowth of his poem for me. My book was titled *Maples in the Mist*, because it was dedicated to my three children, Danfung (Red Maple), Shiao-fung (Dawn Maple) and Tingfung (Straight Maple). It was my way of telling Archie that the maple seed in his poem had taken root and produced seeds of her own.

Trees have often been a strong motif in his poetry, and the last poem that he read at the "Ammonsfest," the last poem that I ever heard him read, had a starkly powerful image of trees. It spoke of life's approaching end like walking down a row of trees, the path striped with light and shadow. The poem was almost like a prayer, with grace and heartfelt reverence but without the sanctimony of religion. Light and shadow, spring and winter, life and death, passion and indifference—it is a row of trees, it is the spokes of a wheel, it is a pattern we are all familiar with, because someone like Archie Ammons has walked us through the ever-changing, ever-constant patterns.

Minfong Ho has received various awards for her books, among them a Caldecott Honor, Best Books for Young Adults (American Library Association), Notable Children's Book (National Council on Social Studies/Children's Book Council) and Parents Choice Award. She has also received the Southeast Asian Write Award, and Singapore's Cultural Medallion. Ho received her MFA from Cornell. She lives in Ithaca with her husband, John Dennis, and their three children.

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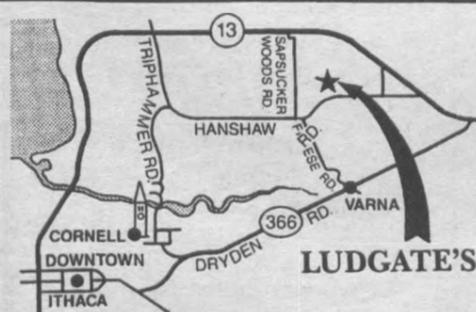
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The Gift of Poetry

Deborah Tall

With the death of a poet, a particular set of ears and eyes, a particular voice and vision, vanishes from the world. The history of that vision—a lifetime's worth of poems—remains on the page, but never again will that specific mind encounter a specific moment in our specific world. And so there will always be an absence, echoing after. A gap in possibility.

The late Archie Ammons, asked to define poetry, once wrote, "I can't tell you where a poem comes from, what it is, or what it is for...The purpose of a poem is to go past telling, to be recognized by burning."

Poem as flame, enactment, past telling or pigeon-holing or paraphrase, past purpose itself. To not mean, but be, as we poets often remind ourselves. To have the courage of illogic or new-found logic, a willingness to linger in uncertainties. The poem each time uniquely itself—un-self-consuming combustion.

Pasternak said it much the same way: "a cubic piece of burning, smoking conscience—and nothing else." "A poem is a meteor," said Wallace Stevens, adding speed and celestial origin. "Hope's proof and finest messenger," said Terrence Des Pres.

Ammons himself ventured this analogy: "A poem is a walk." It resembles a walk, he said, in the way that it makes use of the whole body—"not simply a mental activity; it has body, rhythm, feeling, sound . . ." It has shape, he added—a departure and a return. And, crucially, "every walk is unreproducible, as is every poem."

Yet a walk erases itself. It leaves no echo or notation. Undeterred, Ammons insisted: "Walks are useless. So are poems."

Useless. It's that characteristic twentieth-century shrug of poetic self-deprecation. Or call it humility. Or defiance. Or despair. What's the use of these poems we labor over? They make nothing happen. And yet . . .

We experience a fine poem as a gift. It has no use-value, of course, no standing in the economy. The giver, the poet, can't even depend on the gift of the poem being received, can't demand a thank-you note, can only give. Repeatedly. But for the reader, the recipient, a poem is a gift in the best sense.

"Gifts are your teachers," as Bill Holm puts it, "not your obligation or the fulfillment of a bargain. They are supposed to disconnect you from your own life for a few minutes, so you can see it more clearly. A good gift delivers a brisk shock. A good gift cannot be reciprocated without damage to the soul. You must take it and live."

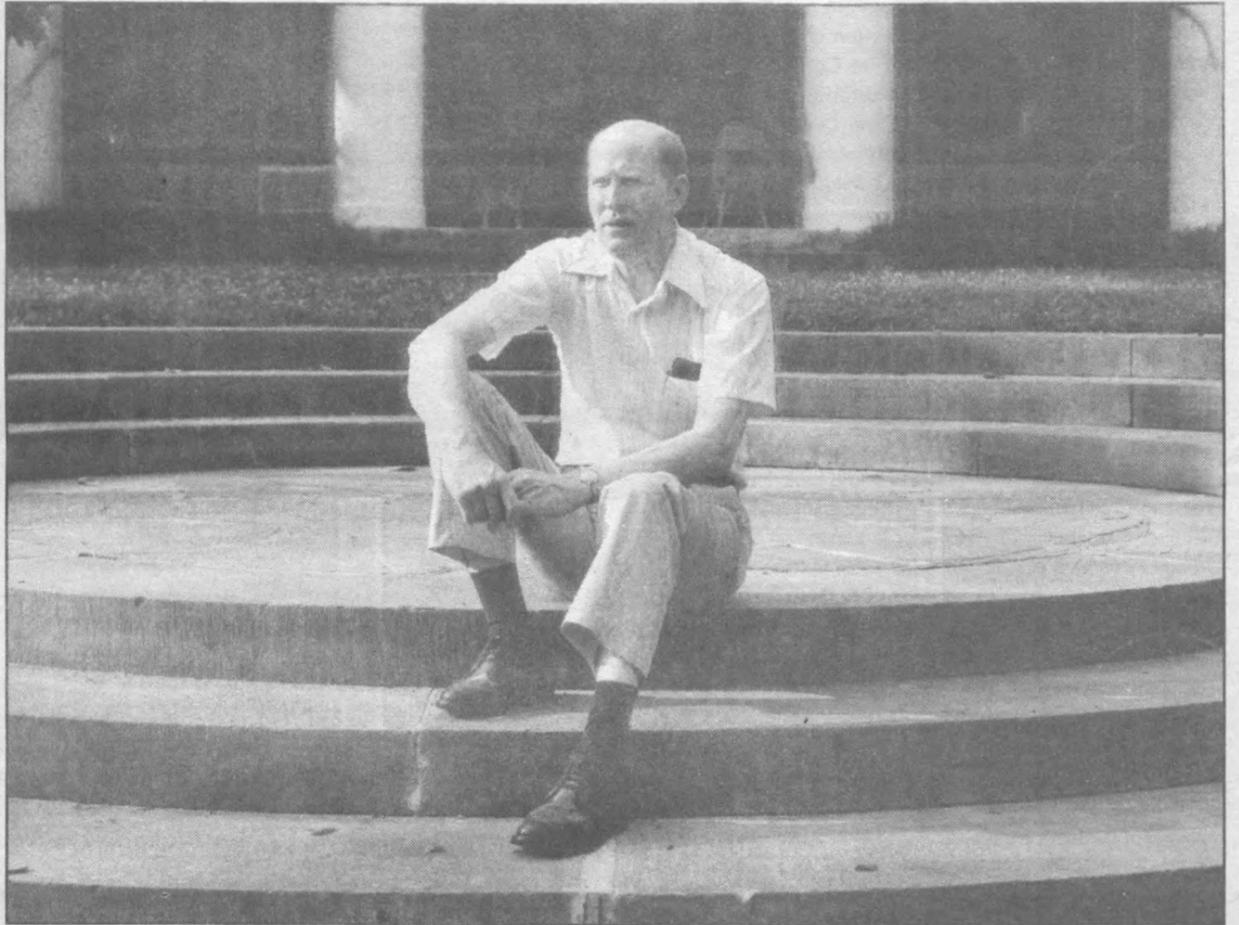
A good poem is a shock that can alter your course. Like Rilke's epiphanic, "You must change your life." You receive it and live. You receive it and pass it on.

But this, too, is but an approximation, a diminishment of the poem's powers.

Ammons got it right. By the end of his essay, "A Poem Is a Walk," he said, simply, of poetry: "Nothing that can be said about it in words is worth saying."

Amen.

Deborah Tall's most recent book is Summons, chosen by Charles Simic for the Kathryn A. Morton Poetry Prize. She teaches at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.



provided by Phyllis Ammons

Archie's Gifts

Alison Lurie

The outward simplicity and modesty of both Archie Ammons' demeanor and his verse often disguised an ambitious and complex seriousness. Even his earliest poems celebrated the minute and glorious details of the natural world, and also, incidentally, his own gifts of patient observation and dazzling representation. In "Bees Stopped," for instance, he calls attention to some of the small things that "people never see" but that the poet himself looks at closely enough to rejoice in:

Bees stopped on the rock
and rubbed their headparts and wings
rested then flew on:
ants ran over the whitish greenish reddish
plants that grow flat on rocks
and people never see
because nothing should grow on rocks:
I looked out over the lake
and beyond to the hills and trees
and nothing was moving
so I looked closely along the lakeside
under the old leaves of rushes
and around clumps of drygrass
and life was everywhere
so I went on sometimes whistling

Many readers of this poem, the next time they were outdoors, must have looked (perhaps for the first time) at the plants that grow flat on rocks, and went on their way whistling—I know I did.

Even Archie's shortest poem contains the same messages, in astonishingly condensed form.

The reeds give
way to the

wind and give
the wind away.

He reminds us to look carefully at how reeds move before a wind, and by this movement reveal the invisible presence of the wind. But as most readers know, the reed, out of which Pan made his wind-pipes, is the traditional instrument of the poet. The very existence of this brief verse therefore reminds us that Archie, though now, alas, invisible to all who loved and admired him—is still present. His poems, in another sense of the phrase "give away," are his gift of himself to us.

Alison Lurie is a member of the English Department at Cornell, and the author of many novels. Her latest publication is Familiar Spirits: A Memoir of James Merrill and David Jackson.

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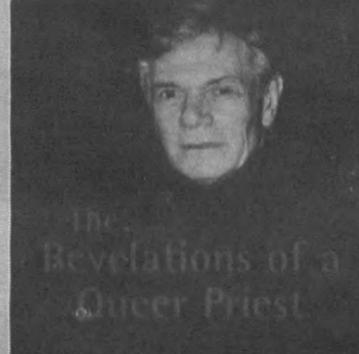
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