

A Place for Poetry

Article by Melanie Sage

Faculty and staff poets muse on finding a balance between life and art

ESTUARINE

“... a shimmer of errors”
Nabokov

Searching for the buoy,
my father swore and swept
his flashlight, illuminating
belly, wingslap. A heron,
knee-deep, exploded from
our prow. Night replaced
the olive twilight, and because
the tide had fled we saw
the river for what it was,
a feeble channel plying
the far bank. Our argument
was lost across the marshes.
In that trickle he could do
nothing but light his damp
cigarettes, which one day
would leave him drowning
in his single lung. If only
I could shun the perfunctory
metaphors of collision, and the waters
hadn't rammed beneath us,
coaxing our keel from gravel.
If only the brackish years
hadn't borne us past
the anger, through the inlet
to the complacent bay,
we might have wedged there
a few more hours, our
propeller spitting mud
into moonlight until
the shearing pin was sheared—
precautionary metal, meant
to break before the motor can.

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POETRY HOLDS A SPECIAL PLACE at Exeter. There's the Lamont Poetry Series, which twice yearly brings leading contemporary poets to campus; the Lamont Younger Poets Prize, which recognizes poems of exceptional promise written by preps and lowers; and the Bennett Fellowship, a one-year residency offered to writers of outstanding promise who have not yet published a book, including this year's fellow, poet Kyle Thompson.

Just as important, Exeter is a place for poetry thanks to a number of faculty and staff members, present and past, who are also serious, accomplished poets. Despite the considerable demands of their day jobs—teaching English, promoting Exeter's capital campaign, tending a 5-acre apple orchard, and serving as the poet laureate of Washington, D.C.—the writers profiled here continue to make a place for poetry in their lives and to publish their poems widely. It is our pleasure to share some of their poems with you.

Ralph Sneed: Evidence of His Arrival

English instructor Ralph Sneed's artistic trajectory might best be described as a series of fateful moments and meetings, each pushing him a little closer to the literary form (poetry) that would eventually win him over, and to his authentic voice within that form.

There are, for example, the undergraduate adviser at UMASS who “eviscerated” Sneed's attempts at fiction, but hardened his resolve to keep writing; the first poetry course at Middlebury's Bread Loaf School of English in which he “wrote absolutely awful poems all semester—until the final one”; the friendship with David Huddle, a Bread Loaf professor and writer, who helped him find his narrative voice; and at Warren Wilson College, the mentorship of two gifted writers: Dave Smith, the poet whose work had originally encouraged and inspired Sneed and who became his thesis adviser, and former Vermont State Poet Ellen Bryant Voigt, whose artistic example, says Sneed, “was instrumental in nudging my work to a new level of maturity.”

The son of a World War II B-17 pilot, Sneed has often been



STEVE LEWIS

Evidence of the Journey, Ralph Sneed's first book of poems, will be published this spring.

drawn to war as a theme in his work. Nature, particularly the ocean, also figures in his poems, the result of a childhood spent on the North Shore of Massachusetts and on Long Island's South Fork (which also made him an avid surfer). "More recently," he adds, "instead of being drawn to images, I've found my impulses in phrases that I call 'postmodern jingles.'"

One of those jingles, taken from the back of an airplane ticket, is now the title poem of Sneed's first book, to be published by Harmon Blunt this spring. The poem—"Evidence of the Journey"—is the result not only of Sneed's love of the sublime and subliminal powers of language, but also of his experience in the Harkness classroom: it developed out of a series of classes in which Sneed and his Exeter students analyzed William Wordsworth's "The Prelude." "Those discussions forced something out of me," recalls Sneed. "Something swung open in my aesthetic."

Once completed, "Evidence" also brought Sneed considerable critical attention, prompting Christian Wiman to contact the poet about placing the piece in Wiman's first issue as the new editor of *Poetry* magazine—as the leading poem. "Evidence" went on to win *Poetry's* Friends of Literature Prize in 2004. Sneed, who has been teaching at Exeter since 1995, is a former Columbia University Klingenstein Fellow whose poems have been published in *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Slate*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The New Republic* and *The Southern Review*. He is the dormitory head of Cilley Hall, where he lives with his wife and three children, two of whom attend Exeter.

Kristin Fogdall: A Random Universe

As a theater and writing major at Mount Holyoke College, Kristin Fogdall studied every genre *except* poetry. However, a brief stint a few years later in the annual giving office of her alma mater changed all that. "As employees of Mount Holyoke, we were allowed to take one free course per semester," explains Fogdall, Exeter's long-time director of alumni/ae affairs and development communications. "My second semester there I signed up for a class with the New Formalist poet Mary Jo Salter."

A near-epiphany ensued. "I can't explain what happened," recalls Fogdall, "but from the very start, the poems kept coming; this new voice emerged." Both Salter and another Mount Holyoke professor, Nobel Prize-winner Joseph Brodsky, took notice, with the former publishing Fogdall's first poem in *The New Republic* and the latter advising her about graduate programs in poetry.



MARY JO BROWN

"Stray information" often serves as an inspiration for Fogdall's poems. "I love the idea of random information speaking about something universal," she says.

She went on to earn an MA in creative writing at Boston University, and soon thereafter accepted a position in Exeter's development office.

Both her geographic background (she is a native of Seattle) and her confessed fondness for "stray information" serve

as inspiration for Fogdall's poems. "I love the idea of random information speaking about something universal," says the poet, who often conducts extensive research on her subject matter and cites as influential on her own work the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, Emily Dickinson, John Donne, Louise Glück and Wallace Stevens.

Now in her 12th year in Exeter's alumni/ae affairs and development office and the parent of a current upper, Fogdall continues to write wherever and whenever she can, and her growing body of work is garnering important attention. In 2004, she was recognized by the N.H. State Council on the Arts, which awarded her an Individual Artist Fellowship. She is also the past recipient of an Emerging New England Artist Award from the St. Botolph Club Foundation, and her poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *New England Review*, *Partisan Review* and the online magazine *Slate*.

ONLY THE NIGHT

for Rex and Margaret McGuinn

A stack of buildings laid against the sky;
the sky emulsified and sleek; the rows
of lapidary windows, set and lit,
not carefully, I know, but seeming so.

The spire clock with amber hands; our hands
in streets and passageways, that point away,
to sea, to vague atrocities about
to happen to our hearts, come what may.

There's always more to come. The city guards
its store of tiny lamps; the clippers, tightly
moored, are just offshore; and you and I
will find ourselves by vagaries of night

pried open, released to all we cannot face,
as if the dark could love, and not erase.

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Todd Hearon: A Tenuous Balance

Todd Hearon may have been the only kid at his North Carolina elementary school to opt out of recess. “I’d stay inside to work on huge, handwritten sagas involving magic carpet rides and Farrah Fawcett Majors,” explains Hearon, an English instructor. Early subject matter aside, the desire to write stayed with Hearon, who later experimented with songwriting before arriving, “after much reading,” at his literary form of choice—poetry.

Hearon explains that the themes or ideas in his poems vary according to where he is in his life and what surrounds him. In recent years, he says, this has meant responding to America’s involvement in the world; to global and domestic catastrophes; even “to



BRIAN CROWLEY

what it means to commit oneself to another person within such a world.” It is subject matter that has simultaneously inspired

and consternated Hearon. “I have been faced with the new artistic problem (new for me, not for art) of how to find a place in my poems for the ugly, the treacherous, the false, the banal—things that have always, of course, been there, but that seemed to have floated to the surface of my consciousness, stayed put and sought expression.”

For Hearon, such expression “often begins with an irritation: something in yourself unsettled that needs to get into words.” Listening, too, is key, both as he begins a poem, and as he completes it. “The poem itself will tell you when it is finished,” he says. “The irritation that was perhaps its genesis will not be so much allayed as contained, having found its proper form. The disequilibrium will have found a

tenuous balance, Frost’s ‘momentary stay against confusion.’ The poem looks back at you from its world and says, ‘Move on.’”

Moving people with his poems, particularly critics, is something Hearon, who also writes plays and essays, has been doing a lot of in the last several years. In 2003, he was awarded a Dobie Paisano writing fellowship from the University of Texas at Austin, and in 2000, a Paul Green Playwrights Prize. And Hearon has just been honored with a 2007 PEN–New England Discovery Award, which he hopes may lead to a first book contract.

Hearon has been teaching at Exeter since fall 2003 and lives in Wheelwright Hall with his wife, the poet Maggie Dietz. In the spring of 2004, Hearon founded the Lamont Younger Poets Prize in memory of Exeter English instructor and poet Rex McGuinn. The prize recognizes works of exceptional promise by Academy preps and lowers. Hearon’s poems, translations and reviews have appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*, *Slate*, *The New Republic* and *The Southern Review*.

Maggie Dietz: A Life in Poems

“Once I learned how to write, arranging and rhyming words became a form of play for me,” says poet Maggie Dietz, Exeter’s 2002–03 George Bennett Fellow (whose interview with Donald Hall appears on page 28). In those early years, Dietz spent hours reading a collection titled *A Child’s Book of Poems*, a gift from her mother on her 5th birthday. “I couldn’t get enough of it,” she laughs; “traditional nursery rhymes alongside poems by Dickinson, Blake, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and ‘children’s poets’ like Eugene Field and Edward Lear.”

By age 6, Dietz had written her first “book” of poetry, and while *that* volume never received the critical attention it may have deserved, her new book, *Perennial Fall*, published last spring by the University of Chicago Press, is winning rave reviews. Dietz explains that many poems in the volume, several written during her Bennett fellowship, “take up some kind of loss.” Yet she resists being characterized as a “dark poet.” “I write only through the lens of the real,” she says, “though much of my work does spin into some imagined place—imagined, but not unimaginable.”

“Unimaginable” might, however, describe the twist Dietz’s career took during her days as a

FROM ROOTS MUSIC

NEW ENGLAND (I)

First night of stars now in the longest space.
The rains have left us and gone underground
to trouble old New Hampshire root and bone;

the stores are closed; the river’s crashed its bounds
and slides like a vagabond through town.
Nothing remains of April we can own

but this: fresh riven starlight and the drowned
river, falling to us from far upstream,
upsky—all elsewhere, someone else’s past . . .

Here in the constellation’s wavy glass
as the eddy suffers it to pass and gleam,
trace in your transitory bearings, home.

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Maggie Dietz has earned glowing reviews for her first book of poems, Perennial Fall, published last year by the University of Chicago Press.

Boston University grad student, when one of her professors, Robert Pinsky, was named the U.S. Poet Laureate. A request for Dietz to assist Pinsky with correspondence and phone calls soon morphed into something more significant for both poets. “Robert had this idea to create a video archive of ordinary Americans reading poems they love,” explains Dietz. “Of course, finding these people would involve national outreach, and making the project go would require significant fundraising.” Undeterred, Pinsky created the Favorite Poem Project, later appointing Dietz its director. The project was wildly successful, giving rise to a series of short video documentaries featured on PBS’s *NewsHour*, three anthologies co-edited by Dietz and Pinsky, Favorite Poem readings across the United States, and five week-long summer poetry institutes for teachers at Boston University, with a sixth to be held this summer.

In 2006, Dietz was awarded an Individual Artist Fellowship by the N.H. State Council on the Arts. She is a past recipient of a winter writing fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, MA, and of the Grolier Poetry Prize. Dietz’s poems have appeared in journals such as *AGNI*, *Harvard Review*, *Literary Imagination*, *Poetry* and *Salmagundi*. She teaches the advanced undergraduate poetry workshop at Boston University and is assistant poetry editor for the online magazine *Slate*. Dietz resides in Wheelwright Hall with her husband, Academy English instructor Todd Hearon.

PERPETUAL BETWEEN

A book a hinge, the page a hinge.
The mind, this way and that, a hinge.
Your hand, opening the music of
the instrument, a hinge. The instrument
a hinge. The mood hinged upon
the song. The song a hinge. And you
and I—o metaphysicians—hinges.
The body hinged: the jaw, the lids,
the valves. The house a hinge, holding
things in and out. The moment opens,
closes, opens, closes. The night. The clock.
The thought. The heart. The door. The breath.

From Perennial Fall by Maggie Dietz. Copyright © 2006, The University of Chicago Press.

It is a crisp, November day:

the sky, the trees, the leaves
obey it. There is an eloquence
in Phelia’s voice as she places
a small portion of Garrah’s ashes
into the second ground.

She murmurs disconnected old things
to sounds that are distorted
and strangely tuned.

It is her music.

This time there is poetry praying
for her. This time there is
no sound of Garrah in her head,
other than a scratch of drifting leaves,
small winds easing over spare
limbs of oak and elm, mute colors pausing in
poems of safety, solitude, submission,
order, grace forming a pattern
of song in her mind.

*From Why the Woman Is Singing on the Corner
© 2001 Dolores Kendrick*

Dolores Kendrick: Washington’s Poet Laureate

Donald Hall is not Exeter’s only poet laureate. Dolores Kendrick, a member of the Academy’s English department from 1972 to 1993 (when she retired as the Vira I. Heinz Professor Emerita), is now in her second term as the Poet Laureate of Washington, D.C. Kendrick grew up in Washington and first began writing at age 12. In high school, after a teacher told her that her prose was “too fat,” Kendrick says she figured “the only way to solve that problem was to switch to poetry, which demands an economy of language.”

The author of four celebrated books of poetry, as well as plays and lyrics, Kendrick explains that her poems “select” her, and her need to set them down in writing can be downright visceral. “A poem could come to me anywhere,” she says. “Trains, planes, busses—wherever the poem challenges me is where I write. Sometimes it’ll wake me up in the middle of the night, and I have to obey the call.” The works of three poets, William Shakespeare, Robert Browning and Gwendolyn Brooks, Kendrick’s late mentor,

have guided her in her craft; she is, she adds, particularly indebted to Browning, whose dramatic monologues influenced how Kendrick channeled the voices of the slave women in her award-winning book, *The Women of Plums* (now in its 18th year of publication).

Kendrick says that “taking poetry to the people” has been an overarching goal during her tenure as Washington, D.C.’s poet laureate. Indeed she spends much of her time giving readings and discussing poetry in venues across the city, and tirelessly champions the works of other poets (“the distinguished, the up-and-coming and the fledgling”), frequently through public readings and competitions of her own design, as in a new initiative, *Voices of Vision*, a carefully designed online poetry series of contemporary poets as visionaries. This spring, as part of a series organized by Donald Hall, Kendrick will read from her own work at the Library of Congress.

Kendrick is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, among them a National Endowment for the Arts Award, a teaching Fulbright and a special Fulbright Award for Outstanding Accomplishments in Education and Literature, and an honorary doctorate of letters from St. Bonaventure University in southwestern New York State. She is currently at work on a new book of poems.



STEVE LEWIS

“Taking poetry to the people” has been an overarching goal for emerita instructor Dolores Kendrick during her tenure as Washington, D.C.’s poet laureate.

Charlie Pratt ’52: Poetry From the Ground Up

“If I wrote prose,” says former English instructor Charlie Pratt ’52; P’83, P’84, “I probably would write personal essays.” Instead Pratt, the long-time owner/operator, with his wife, Joan, of Apple

Annie orchard in Brentwood, NH, writes poetry, because “it’s something I can get my mind around the whole of.”

Pratt began writing in the 1940s while a second- or third-grader at the Fenn School, receiving encouragement from teachers there and later from his instructors at Exeter. Through the 1950s and ’60s he continued writing off and on and studying poetry, most notably with John Frederick Nims during one summer at the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury. Long interested in form and the sounds of poems (he likes rhyme and off-rhyme), Pratt characterizes his own work, which often focuses on family or his 5-acre orchard, as “traditional.”

INTO PLACE

It’s not so much a departure as an arrival,
Or rather, a having arrived – as when, out driving,
You pass an orchard on a southward hill,
Old apple trees aslant in heaps of prunings.
For Sale. What do you know of apples? Still,
One morning you wake up under a different ceiling

And feeling that you’ve not chosen but been chosen,
Are something less than owner, more than guest.
You fertilize and mow, attend the slow
Growth of apples readying for harvest,
And settle into place like leaves or snow,
Unfold like a letter delivered as addressed.

Copyright © Charles W. Pratt

Since the late 1970s, Pratt has been director of Exeter’s George Bennett Fellowship, which brings emerging writers (of poetry, fiction or nonfiction) to the Academy for a period of one year and provides them housing, a stipend and the time and space to focus exclusively on their craft. As director, Pratt reads everything that is submitted, culling out the finest pieces for review by a committee. “I’m always amazed at the quality of the work,” he says, noting that the poetry submissions he likes best are the ones that “surprise” him.

Perhaps ironic for one so focused on the abundance of a yearly harvest, Pratt is not a prolific writer. “Five poems would be a fantastic year,” says the poet, who generally begins a poem after “an image gets into [his] head” and “combines with words” he likes. Then he is “consumed” by it until it is done. He knows a poem is complete when it stops “nagging” at him, “when it sounds right after I’ve said it over and over to myself.”

Pratt’s first published volume of poems, *In the Orchard*, was an American Library Association Notable Book for 1986, and he has six times been a finalist for Northeastern University’s Samuel French Morse Poetry Prize. His poems have been published in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Commonweal*, *Poetry*, *The American Scholar*, *The Atlantic* and elsewhere. Among the poets he particularly admires, Pratt cites John Donne, Robert Frost, Donald Hall, Seamus Heaney (“I love the early Seamus Heaney”), Maxine Kumin, Andrew Marvell and William Butler Yeats. ●



BARBARA HOBSON

Charlie Pratt’s poems often focus on family or the 5-acre apple orchard he runs with his wife, Joan.