

On the Company of Cleveland Poets

By Diane Kendig

One of Robert Creeley's favorite words was "company." He was always talking about being part of a company—a company of family, of poets, of artists, of this group here on this night around this table, eating and drinking and talking, always talking. When the company constricts so does your world, so do you. The first thing he said when we talked about Allen Ginsberg's death in 1997 was, "The company keeps getting smaller." Company, for Bob, was whom you thought in terms of, whom you talked with.

—Bruce Jackson, "On the Subject of Company" in *Buffalo Report*

The Company at Cleveland State University

When I graduated from college in 1972, I got a teaching job in North Central Ohio, living first in Vermillion, then Oberlin until 1976. I led a quiet life and a bit desperate-- though not a life of *quiet desperation*. Suffering from depression on and off for several years beginning in college, I had found reading and writing poetry helped me cope. I had wonderful colleagues at Oberlin High School, but the poetry scene was all about Oberlin College, and though as a townie I was welcome to use the wonderful library with its space age cocoon chairs and to attend amazing readings, I did not find my *company* there.

About the summer of 1974, I had earmarked some money toward a cross-country bus trip or a poetry course, and because my mom was hospitalized that summer, I signed up for Alberta Turner's contemporary poetry course at Cleveland State University and spent the summer taking buses in a triangle from Oberlin to Cleveland to Canton to Oberlin. Alberta was a terrific teacher, filled with stories about the poets who had read at CSU and stayed at her house in Oberlin. Wide-ranging in her tastes, she seemed equally enthusiastic about all contemporary poets, Wilbur to Ginsberg, the Apollonians and Dionysians alike—which was not exactly her public image.

Invited by Alberta, I started driving into Cleveland the first Friday of each month for CSU's Poetry Forum, with its mix of bag ladies and crazy men, faculty and students. It was a very grassroots group, not academic in tone. Many academics attended but non- and anti-academics such as Christopher Franke, Russell Atkins, and Cy Dostal were there too. Russell was still editing his avant garde magazine *Free Lance* and Cy was leading another public workshop on the third Fridays. The English Department articulated that

the free workshop was part of the university's commitment to serving the surrounding community, a commitment which impressed me, both then and later when I witnessed English faculty members volunteering in the Cleveland Public Schools and bringing those Cleveland students into CSU for introductions to literature and writing. I especially recall Dave Evett's lesson on Brueghel and Auden's take on Brueghel.

If Alberta was the Head of the Poetry Center, surely Leonard Trawick was the heart...and the hands, often covered in ink as he spent a lot of time at the print shop some days. Leonard helped to build the Poetry Center series to the very impressive national reputation it has today with cat-like capacity to pay attention both to the poem and to the page and an unearthly capacity for hard work.

I helped out with the Poetry Center Book series for one year. Mostly it was my job to sort out the real quackeries, like the ones that came in handwritten in crayon, and return them with a polite note. Then after a winner was chosen, I would return the manuscripts with form letters, while Alberta and Leonard held many back to return with personal notes.

Once, a letter came back from someone seething because along with his rejected manuscript he found a tiny, sharp knife with a speck of white paint on the handle. He wanted to know who the warped-minded messenger was and what the mind-game message: was he supposed to fall on it? Such a knife usually sat on Alberta's desk for opening manuscripts and apples, and there was a good chance that I, working there in my always hurried, slap-dash way, had somehow wrapped the knife into the packaging. I felt awful, but Leonard wrote a polite note saying we were all too overworked and unpaid to be planning mind games, and though he had no idea how it got into the package, he was sure it was an accident.

I had by then moved to Cleveland for graduate school in English at CSU, where I received a great education from the professors there who taught a lot of Cleveland's poets: Susan Gorsky (Modernism), Peggy Broder (Irish Lit), Leonard Trawick (Romanticism, more specifically, Shelley And Keats), Earl Anderson (Old English), Louis Barbato (Shakespeare), and Alberta Turner, plus David Larson and Liz MacAndrew. I graduated in 1978 with an MA, but I got an unofficial MFA in my seven years of monthly C.S.U. workshops, though I have no paper to show for it. CSU faculty

who attended the workshop included Gary Engle, Phil Salmon, Dan Melnick, Alberta, later, John Donoghue (the world's greatest poet to also be an electrical engineering prof) and everyone's ideal reader, editor, and critic, Leonard. Then too, there were the non-CSU attendees Bob Vance, Pat Vaire, Joan Nicholl, Bob McDonough, Angela Ellston, Bill McLaughlin, Linda Monacelli Johnson, and countless guest poets, from Cynthia McDonald and Heather McHugh to some really creepy folks who came and went quickly when they saw it wasn't all about fame and glory but hard work and laughter.

The Coventry and Other Companies

Once moved to Cleveland, I threw myself into the writing scene beyond CSU, especially in Coventry, my neighborhood, where I gave my first reading in Coventry Yard with Roz Neroni and Tim Joyce, both since moved to L.A. Old-timers will recall that dramatic summer evening of 1977 which turned into a fiasco of extreme proportions as Daniel Thompson passed around free jugs of wine and audience members got drunker and drunker and eventually began knocking over thousands of dollars of speakers from a balcony as people fled from the scene like rats from a brush fire. So, a good time for all.

In the course of that demoralizing yet exhilarating first reading I found the Cleveland poets to be such a welcoming, helpful community, made up of several, overlapping communities, a veritable Venn diagram of poetry. Alberta always said she didn't want the CSU Poetry Center to be the Center of all Cleveland poetry, that she believed it was so healthy that Cleveland had a street scene and a CWRU scene (those sherry hours!). There was also the Poets League of Greater Cleveland (now the Poets and Writers League), which took on so many great projects in addition to its two earliest: a monthly workshop and a newsletter, the latter with the great privilege of being censored by the Ohio Arts Council because some citizen felt Christopher Franke's column was not the proper use of taxpayer money. There was the Hessler Street scene made up mostly, I felt, of d.a. levy wannabes, though later, when Daniel Thompson was organizing, it got more eclectic, too. (Eclecticism being Daniel's middle name.) Of course, to mention Daniel is to mention several communities, from the Junkyard Readings at Myron Kaplan's Junkyard to the Big Mama Poets, who once got Daniel to appear naked (except for a well-placed ribbon) at one of their performances. Wow, Big Mama! I recall

Adrienne Rich stopping in the middle of her reading to say how fortunate Cleveland was to have the Big Mama Performance group. Those women were so far ahead of their time, they should have been considered science fiction: Barbara Angell, Linda Monacelli Johnson, Sarah (Sally) Pirtle, et. al. And then there was and is the Butcher Shop, that exclusive critique group founded by Bob Wallace, which still sits around fireplaces, long after Bob has left us, explicating each other's poems, never as ruthlessly as they claim but with the focus and the resulting heat of a magnifying glass.

When I say that the Cleveland poetry groups were communities, I mean the poets supported each other's lives along with their work. In 1979 when a gas oven blew up on me, and I was covered with 1st and 2nd degree burns, Barbara Angell gave me better medical advice than the hospital had, while other poets helped me move into a safer apartment. We got each other through divorces and book publications, muggings and lost jobs and falling in love...and out. We had a softball team in the summer of 1983 that played poet softball teams in Youngstown and Toledo. We ate and drank together at picnics and at the Mad Greek and post-reading receptions in homes and libraries. But the poetry work is what brought us together and we workshoped and rewrote and proofread by day, in the only Arabica then, on Coventry, (where Judith Crandall revised my first book) and in the all night diner on Euclid after midnight and at Irv's, in downtown parks, and at the Cleveland Art Museum patio.

The Company of Visiting Poets

Meanwhile, an amazing array of visiting poets came through town, mostly at Cleveland State, which had great funding. From 1978-84, I helped to host Seamus Heaney, Czeslaw Milosz, Robert Creeley, Andre Voznesensky, Adrienne Rich, William Stafford, Heather McHugh, Tillie Olson, and Allen Ginsberg, among others--not because I was anybody, but because I was working part-time and could make time to chauffeur.

One of my favorite passengers was Milosz, a few years before he won the Nobel Prize, en route to Cleveland's most authentic Polish restaurant, where we were meeting other poets for dinner. Soon we were lost in the Flats in my ragged red 1976 Ford Granada. As I careened through the streets, trying to get found, Milosz looked at the little stuffed unicorn on my dashboard and said, "Have you seen the new Walt Disney film

about the unicorn? It's surprisingly good." And while I drove, he told me about the Disney movie, not a conversation I ever expected to have with one of the world's greatest poets. Then we got stuck at the railroad tracks in the Flats, right as one of the factories was closing permanently. The men all walked out together from their last day of work, slowly and solemnly, carrying silver lunch boxes and red and white coolers, while cameramen shot photos. Milosz and I looked at the men and at each other there at the end of another era, and then the gates lifted, and we drove on. We found the restaurant, where the staff had dressed up in native costume for the poet, and he ordered bigos. As he dug into the big plate, he actually got tears in his eyes and said amazed, "This is the best bigos I have had since I left Poland."

We had huge audiences for Milosz, Heaney, and Voznesensky because for each reading, we tapped into Cleveland's ethnic communities. Heaney had not yet won the Nobel Prize, in fact, was using the reading tour as a means to raise money to buy a new car. But Cleveland's large Irish-American community turned out in such large numbers that we had to move the audience to a larger room at the last minute. CUT? Still and all, Heaney and Milosz read in the evening, so nothing prepared us for the crowd of Russian-Americans who showed up in the middle of a weekday afternoon to hear Voznesensky. He read a poem he had just written about his visit to the gravesite of Robert Lowell, about whom few in the audience, even Americans knew anything.

I learned everything about turning out poetry audiences from those three readings, in part from their agents. The Cleveland presses all but refused to print any publicity for poetry readings, often not even printing the events in the free listings. Cy Dostal used to say that the Cleveland media had washed their hands of poetry since d.a. levy days, that they had been a part of the d.a. levy persecution and now wanted nothing to do with poetry. I don't know, but man, it was easier to publish a mediocre poem in the *New Yorker* than to get a poetry press release published in Cleveland. Adrienne Rich once read to 14 people in a 500-seat lecture hall at C.S.U. because the word didn't get out. Knowing we wouldn't get the usual media outlets, we used the newsletters and radio shows of the ethnic communities, and those people came out in droves. Ever after, even when I left Cleveland, whenever I had a poetry event to host, I would brainstorm what connection I could make to a non-poets group of listeners, and I'd reach out to them. When Ginsberg

came for two days in October of 1982 for a reading at the Cleveland Institute of Art, no one wanted to pick him up at the airport. I was hardly the woman for the job, not being much of a Ginsberg fan at the time—Alberta Turner’s class notwithstanding—but I could not bear the idea of a poet having to wend his way alone on the Rapid, so I volunteered myself and Barry Zucker, who had a big black boat of a car. Ginsberg was wearing a white shirt, suit, and tie when we picked him up. On the ride, he told us that it was the first time he had been back to Cleveland since he had come to help raise money for d. a. levy in 1967, and he recalled the police as being the most brutal and meanest-looking he had seen, dressed like fascist thugs and fully armed. (Now I wish I had asked him if he meant they were the meanest he had seen *up till then*, or if he really meant they were worse than the police in Chicago in 1968.) We took him to the house of Bonnie Jacobson, where he stayed both nights. That evening, the Jacobsons had a party where some behaved badly, but Ginsburg himself was so gentlemanly and so kind, that evening and the whole two days, he totally won my heart, and I remain his forever fan.

Robert Creeley gave Jerry Roscoe and me a funny ride one fall when Creeley was visiting writer for several weeks. He wanted to visit the Asphodel Bookshop out east of Cleveland, [Was it in Burton, OH then?] a wonderful shop of small letterpress books and broadsides run by Jim Lowell. Robert talked nonstop the whole ride. (And I drove, so we never had to tell Robert to “look/ out where yr going.”) Mostly he seemed to ramble on and on about people, all by first names, none of whom we knew. When we got to the bookstore, he went on in this vein, with Lowell nodding occasionally. At one point, he mentioned, “Allen,” and Jerry, thinking we finally had an “in” said, “You mean Allen Ginsberg?”

“No,” Creeley answered. “Allen who helps me with plumbing.” Clearly Jerry and I were not of that company.

Creeley gave me insight into the visiting professor gig that week when he showed up in my office smoking and talking –because he *was* always talking. He was frustrated about a manuscript about himself that a professor had asked him to proofread, filled with errors. “It even misspells Allen Ginsberg!” he said, showing me the error. Then he began about how much he hated teaching creative writing. He said he was trained as a *literature* teacher, for chrissakes, but he tended to get these gigs for was creative writing. Then a

C.S.U. professor walked into the room, glared at me, glared at Creeley, and said, “Where have you been? The class began twenty minutes ago.” And he left with the poet in tow, casting one more look at me, who had unwittingly provided Creeley a 20 minute reprieve from the job.

If Creeley disliked teaching creative writing and was rather inept at it, Heather McHugh was a genius at it. Having never taken a creative writing class before, I had been to Breadloaf and seen enough of the mind games and preening that went on in academic workshops to think no one did much but rip poems apart or contrast poems unfavorably. But Heather was the most generous, attentive, corrective reader and commenter I’d ever seen at work on the poems of beginning students. In one week observing her with the C.S.U. students, I could see how to teach productive creative writing workshops.

And Tillie Olson, though not a poet by form, surely a poet by sensibility, taught me so much about Cleveland in her two day Spring 1982 visit. As we drove from the airport, she pointed out to me where the land had been cut away for the Rapid Transit and asked a lot of questions about public transportation. She came with a list of sites she wanted to visit, beginning with Erie Cemetery in downtown Cleveland. I recall her pausing at one tombstone and reading the dates, which ended with something like, “Age 17 years, three months, and 4 days,” and saying, “You see how every day mattered to them?” She also wanted to see the WPA murals at the Cleveland Public Library, which just happened to have an exhibit up on the Great Depression. Olson stood looking at a wall of black and white photos of Bread lines and asked to speak to the librarian. Politely, she noted how wonderful the exhibit was, “but it only shows the people as passive. There were protests too,” she said to the librarian. “And people were arrested.” Of course, I knew, she was one of the ones arrested out on the docks of San Francisco. The librarian thanked her and said she would tell the curator. Then we drove to see St. Theodosius Russian Orthodox church where *Deer Hunter* was filmed and still later a Red Grooms’ *Welcome to Cleveland* exhibit. None of these places was on my radar scope, and Olson took me there and led me to new appreciations for, and new ways of looking at, Cleveland.

Post Script

I stayed till 1984 and would have stayed forever if not for having to make a living. I cried when I accepted a tenure track job out of town, knowing it was a great opportunity to use everything I had learned for a full salary with (finally) health care, but knowing too that I was leaving the best company of writers I would ever have. And though I have lived many places since, I have never known such a great company of writers living in close proximity, and I am grateful to have come of age as a poet in Cleveland.

Still, there is another quote on the community of poets by Cuban poet Jose Martí, who once wrote, “What company good poets are!” For the longest time, I misread that quote as “What good company poets are,” and surely my Cleveland poet friends were good company. But Martí was actually writing about American poet Longfellow, from whom he lived most far. It was Longfellow’s words that kept Martí company, and it is the books and anthologies and news of my fellow Clevelanders that keep me company now, some quite far-flung, some living close to me now in Massachusetts. It was always about the words and about the company, which we keep, across the miles, despite the years.