

The Colorado Poet Winter 2015



Included in this issue:

- Interviews with David Mason and Robert Cooperman
- Goings-on- around- town



Stay Warm and Write Up a Storm!!

Life can seem bleak and dreary in the winter months. While some people love a cold snap, others feel the dropping temperatures acutely in their nerves as well as their bones. Here are some fun facts and a prompt that might help with accepting the cold months ahead:

- The coldest temperature ever recorded in the world was -128 degrees Celsius, in Vostok Station in Antarctica in 1983. Puts things into perspective, no?
- Snowflakes start as ice crystals that freeze around small pieces of dust in the air. As they fall to the earth, the ice crystals join together to form snow flakes. Every snowflake is different!
- Writing prompt: "Precipitate as weather, she appeared from somewhere, then evaporated, leaving only memory."
— Haruki Murakami, *Dance Dance Dance*



Interview with David Mason

By Bob King

Sea Salt: Poems of a Decade, 2004-2014. Red Hen Press

Bob King: Our last interview with you was in Issue 5 of 2007 [The interview may be found at <http://www.coloradopoetscenter.org/eWords/issue5/lookingback.html>] where we talked about your verse novel *Ludlow*, which won the Colorado Book Award in Poetry for that year. And here we are, ten years after your book of lyrics, *Arrivals*, with all lyric poems which are both quiet, it seems to me, and powerful at the same time. Do you think your lyrical work has grown and strengthened or at least changed and, if so, in what ways?



David Mason: I desire never to repeat myself, but to push with every poem into something I have never done before. So yes, I do hope the poems have changed in ten years. And I am quite sure they have: the poems in *Sea Salt* were often driven by extreme and barely-navigable crisis, risking raw feeling and hopefully pushing through it to something other people can recognize, and have moved beyond the knee-jerk despair of some earlier work; they have embraced life. The notion of achieving a single style and sticking to it like a marketing program is anathema to me.

BK: Your subtitle intrigues me. By stating “poems of a decade” —rather than just giving the dates—you suggest, it seems to me, something important about this set of ten years. I don’t want to get into biography if you don’t but if that subtitle is a kind of underlining of ‘that decade,’ what caused you to empathize that?

DM: Yes. I’ve never done anything like this before. In fact I had another book essentially finished when my life exploded. A long marriage ended and I fell in love with Chrissy (Australian poet Cally Conan-Davies) and two things struck the template of my work like a hammer. First, the shock and emotion of shattering a past and seizing a more authentic present, and second, coming into contact with a superb poet who inspired me to take new directions. The book comprises a handful of poems from the earlier manuscript, on which I had worked for years. But I also threw out a book’s worth of poems and worked in a large number of newer pieces written under more intense circumstances.

Sea Salt is a book of changes and metamorphoses—death, loss, divorce, new love and the wrenching difficulties of new love. I don't actually care whether readers see it through a biographical lens or not. The hope is that my personal trials are dramatized enough to become universal, or at least broadly sympathetic. The goal is to *give* readers at least as much as I get by trying to say these things. I want them to find little dramas of human becoming, what Keats called "soul-making."

BK: Help me put my finger on a facet of your work. Knowing you, I know a little about your biography and can figure, for example, if the speaker of a poem is married or divorced or remarried. But it turns out not to be "important" for the poem. I can tell and feel they're grounded in heartfelt personal experience, but they seem to have a power far beyond the facts of experience. There's a—I don't want to say "general" in its usual sense, but—a general way they exist in art and apply to life that goes beyond the personal. Do you know what I'm trying to say? What's that quality?

DM: Thank you so much, Bob. I do understand something of this. For starters, I have spent most of my life writing about *other* people in narrative and dramatic work, so the poems built on personal joys or traumas take on the same dramatic scope as poems about other people. "Mrs. Mason and the Poets," one of the two short narratives in the book, is about a nineteenth century Irish aristocrat living in sin in Italy, but the energies of the poem owe something to my own personal crises, my own psychic obsessions. "The Fawn" is pretty much a true story straight out of my childhood, yet the structure of the poem steps back and sees it as a national story about the grief of America as it relates to nature, religion and war.

So there is some alchemical way in which the personal and the historical have always been the same thing for me. I developed an acute sense of historical memory and detail from a lifetime of reading and thought and listening to old people tell their stories, so the personal is never merely the personal. It is always the universal, and vice-versa.

But there's more. The ear guides the poems. They owe something to all poetic music I have ever encountered—to Frost and Yeats and Auden and Bishop and MacNeice and Hecht and Dickinson and Seferis and Lawd knows who else.

David Mason continued

The fact that I am hard of hearing, that I hear the vowels in human speech but not the consonants, creates an odd lyrical movement, sound bridges of assonance, deliberate cuts or abrasions of consonance, so I live in language in an entirely impersonal way, as a liquid medium heard differently from the way other people sometimes hear it. More and more I am convinced that this is a gift. This is the tremendous luck of being deaf to so many things that distract other people, so I can hear an inner music, a secret coherence, that gives the poems a particular flavor, no matter what subjects they undertake.

BK: The sea is a powerful and multiple metaphor for you in this book. “The decades come in waves, the waves pass on / and echo back from rocks below the firs, a sound already gone,” you write in “Mind.” The final poem, “Sea Salt,” reminds us “The sea stands still and moves, / denoting nothing new, deliberating now.” As the ocean is certainly present in Greece, a favorite country for you, as well as the American northwest where you spend some time, you’ve had a chance to experience a lot of “ocean imagery.” What makes it so compelling for you?

DM: First, it's what we are. Our tears are precisely the same chemistry as seawater. All life comes from water. Our bodies comprise mostly water. Ocean is essence and is us. Just as our hearts are metronomes counting time in our lives, so the sea counts time, or counts beyond time, a universal rhythm Homer would have heard. How does this relate to Colorado? Well, Colorado was once undersea—we have the fossils to prove it. So the land here remembers the sea. As a child, I once found a fossilized scallop shell in the New Mexico desert—it ended up in a science museum in Washington State. The desert remembers the sea and the sea adores the desert. Auden touches on this in *The Enchafèd Flood*.

The sea is life, the sea is death. It is the imaginal, the fantastic, the marvelous. There's always a smell of decay down there, where you can see violent and beautiful encounters every single day. To live in the realm of house and car and freeway is, to me, a living death, disconnected from the real. So being by the sea, like being in the desert, reconnects me with what is and what is important.

As for Greece, don't get me started! It's like Colorado with a lovely sea in its midst and something like three thousand years of continuous literary history built in to the very language you use when buying a loaf of bread. For me, there is nothing else like it on earth.

David Mason continued

BK: This may seem to be a small thing, but you address yourself in the second person in several poems. “You breathe the last mouthful of wine / and seem to float into the air” in “Marco Polo in the Old Hotel” and even as narrative in the past: “You woke hungover on the stones / to find a curious fox sat watching you...”. What does the use of this pronoun allow you to do?

DM: Actually, I've begun to think I overuse the pronoun—which I picked up from writers like Hemingway. The effect is obvious: a writer's intimacy becomes by extension or implication a reader's. Well and good. But I'm trying other things now. So much of what we do concerns the use of pronouns—what happens when we remove them altogether? Keats's greatest poem, “To Autumn,” refuses the “I,” as if to suggest that the ego has finally been dissolved in what is, and when he uses the “you” or the “thou” he means *autumn*, the season itself. The poem opens to the world beyond all of us, and these days I'm tending in that direction. No regrets about pronouns in *Sea Salt*, where I'm clearly trying to move beyond the personal in any way I can, but something else is happening in the recent poems. I'm moving on.

BK: In a *Hudson Review* book-review (Winter, 2014), you mention an experiment you frequently conduct: reading only the first lines of poems, which usually “prove soporific in the extreme.” That got me to look at your first lines and I think they indeed give a flavor of your certainly non-soporific work: “Tell me again about the butterflies” “You have to stuff it all back in,” “The vigil and the vigilance of love,” “The reed, dried and cut, could make a pan-pipe / on an idle day,” “Gone are the curls of smoke,” “How could they know,” “Once I was a young dog with a big thorn.” Do a lot of your first lines survive revision? Is that how you get into a poem? Or are they just as often the result of revision?

DM: Superb question again. Everything is revision, but much revision happens before I ever open my laptop or put pen to paper. I do think I am right about first lines, and even teach a workshop based on this observation, but I don't always *will* everything consciously. Sometimes I'm just listening, trying to hear the nub of the thing and trying not to bore myself. As an editor, I must say that most poems lose me at the opening line—as if the poet thought he or she deserved to be heard no matter how good the writing. Ted Kooser suggests that this might be the curse of the creative writing industry: the notion among our contemporaries that there will always be ten people who care what you have to say. I agree. If you write for the classroom, for the workshop, you have already thrown in the towel. You have already given up the task of being a poet. You need to write to entertain Sappho and Archilochus and Shakespeare and Whitman as well as the stranger in line at Starbucks. If you can make those “guys” pay attention, then you might be writing a poem.

BK: You've written in such a variety of genres—poetry, essays, memoir, libretti—that I almost hesitate to ask what you're working on now. But...what are you working on now?

DM: The immediate task is to review a biography of Ezra Pound for the *Wall Street Journal*. It's a big opportunity, but daunting, trying to say something real and accurate in a small space. I've been writing new poems that have taught me about possible new directions. A chamber opera (with composer Tom Cipullo) about Picasso and Gertrude Stein premieres in Seattle in May, with a performance in San Francisco as well, and as you might recall my libretto for Lori Laitman's *The Scarlet Letter* is to be heard on the Opera Colorado stage the following year. A roughly drafted novel has been broken up into some short stories that might have potential. And my children's book, *Davey McGravy*—a story in verse to be read aloud to children and adult children—will be out early in 2015 with wonderful illustrations by Grant Silverstein.

So the work is continuous. Other projects are visible on the horizon—that receding line over both desert and sea.

Interview with Robert Cooperman

By Bob King

Just Drive (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2014)

Bob King: This is your 15th book, by my counting. You've done a number of dramatic narratives (like *In the Colorado Gold Fever Mountains* which won the Colorado Book Award in Poetry in 2000) as well as forays into autobiographical material, like growing up Jewish in New York (*My Shtetl* and *The Words We Used*). Here we get a full treatment of the life and times of a New York taxi driver. What pushed you to bring this material to life?

Robert Cooperman: A couple of years ago I was asked to review an excellent poetry collection by an Albuquerque poet-cab driver, Mather Schneider. The collection, whose title escapes me now, was terrific, but I realized that Mather's experiences behind the wheel were so different from mine. His time driving was fairly genteel, and I know he's still at it: He had some regular customers he drove to and from work, some eccentrics, but nothing too fraught or dangerous; plus he was able to talk to the people he drove—I just wanted to pick them up and drop them off and get on to the next fare, which is basically how it works in New York.

I guess it was the difference between driving in a mid-sized city and driving in the Belly of the Beast, otherwise known as New York. But after I finished my review, memories of my own cab-driving days started to flood back, as well as memories of my brother's far wilder adventures as a hack, and my father's. He'd drive whenever he was laid off from his seasonal job as a blocker in the ladies' hat frame trade. Frankly, I hadn't thought about those days too much ever since I'd left New York in August of 1974, only too happy to forget about my time behind a taxi wheel, to forget about the heat, the congestion, the noise, the throbbing in my right ankle, the lack of street fares, the rudeness of some fares, the assumption by others that of course I was out to rip them off, and the constant fear that I'd be killed, despite the plexiglass barrier between the driver and the back seat. But my mind wouldn't be denied, so I started writing.

BK: Your work is generally conversational, but the style seems really pruned or pared. The first three lines of 'Nightshift,' for example, may not look exceptional—"Most cabbies wanted nightshift: / more street trade, better tips, and no getting up at 3:30 AM"—but there's a clipped economy to those lines. In an earlier interview (Issue #14), when I asked about your

process, you replied: "So I just get down to it, and toss everything and the kitchen sink and bathroom commode into a first draft then whittle and whittle and whittle." So how *do* you whittle? What guides the whittling? And does this refer to ideas and events in the poem or to particular word choices or both?

RC: Anything that I think doesn't belong in the poem, goes. So if the poem is about driving nightshift, I toss out any asides or digressions (these can always have their own poems), and just bore into the subject matter like a crazed carpenter bee. I also try to get rid of any slack formulations, any "to be" verbs, or dull tags like "he said," "he told me." I try not to repeat words, and of course when I get to the conclusion of the poem, I want to have readers do a little work for themselves, and not tell them everything.

So bearing that in mind, I try to show more than tell, though sometimes telling is unavoidable; I am dealing with narrative, after all. But I'd rather create an image than just tell readers what they're supposed to see, to make readers do a little work, so the enjoyment is more piquant. I've found it's always better to bore in on one incident in a poem. If you have more than one dramatic moment, you dilute the drama, drain away the reader's interest. You want each poem to depict a single, unique experience, something that readers can immediately recognize, something big.

It's like the Aristotelian notion that an epic should be about one specific thing: THE ILLIAD is about Achilles' wrath; THE ODYSSEY is about Odysseus' desire to finally get home to Penelope and Ithaca. If you make your epic, or if I make my narrative poem about more than one thing, it ends up not being about anything. Whew, that was windy!

BK: I once introduced Carol Bly at a writer's conference and found out, getting ready to "read" a short story of hers, she was holding one sheet of paper with a few notes. Turns out she "told" her short stories orally over and over, making revisions as she improvised, I imagine, before she ever really and finally wrote them down. I bring this up because you must have "told" many of these stories or anecdotes from your experience as a cab-driver. Did you? And if you did, how did that help, or maybe hinder, the final writing-them-down?

RC: Again, I never thought about my cab driving days from the instant I stopped driving in mid-August of 1974 (on a day that was so hot and humid and miserable I feared was going to do the Technicolor speedway all over the dashboard of my cab), until I reviewed that other collection. No, I take that back, I used to dine out, a lot, on the story about the guy with the gun, who really did work for the post office, in the poem "Boxing Out." That one actually happened to my brother. So did the one about the drunk, has-been British actress, who was, I think Sarah Miles. He told that one to me once, and I kept telling it and refining it in my own head, until it was my story, the way Jerry Garcia would take a Dylan song or Traffic's "Dear Mr. Fantasy" and make them his own, if that's not too hubristic of me.

By the time I was ready to write those two poems, it was almost like the automatic writing that Yeats's wife claimed she'd do, to get him interested in her as a medium and conduit to the "other world," and also as a future wife. The poems just leaped from my typing fingers onto my computer screen, and the only real work I had to do was make sure they were poems, not ranting screeds.

BK: Going back to the autobiographical aspect. This job of driving a taxi—well, how old were you? It was before you came to the University of Denver for a Ph. D. in creative writing. What can you tell us about that period in your life? And about wanting a Ph.D. in creative writing?

RC: I had just turned 28 when I started driving a cab; it was the winter of 1974, and my dad had died in December, December 10th, to be exact, and I was hurting emotionally. I was also hurting fiscally: I'd been accepted into the Ph.D. program (I wasn't accepted into the Creative Writing program until I was on campus for a quarter) at the University of Denver and had once again lost a job (to be honest, I was all but unemployable: a complete screw up who when I did have a job would usually be writing poems instead of doing my work. I also lost an editorial assistant job because I'd more or less told my boss to screw himself, I was going on a TV game show: I won a pittance and was promptly fired, but a friend in the Writing Program, when I got to Denver, said I looked familiar, and then realized she'd seen

I took out a student loan, but didn't get a fellowship until later. My brother told me there were plenty of openings at his garage, so I talked to the dispatcher, an utterly perfunctory interview, he gave me the answers to the ten questions on the hack test (that's what they did back then: if you could read and had a better memory than a three-toed sloth, you could pass the hack test—there's a scene in the old TV sit-com TAXI in which the Reverend Jim takes the hack test. It's gut-busting hilarious and very, very accurate), I passed the vision test, and was unleashed onto the streets of New York.

As I said, my head was not in a great place, so it was just as well that I drove nights. I'd have these weird experiences of seeing a guy of a certain age in a natty suit, and believe, hope, it was my father. One guy who got into my cab looked freakishly like my dad. I froze for an instant, before I started driving. I can't remember the exact date I stopped driving, but I did leave for Denver about a week later, ecstatic to get out of New York, guilty that I was abandoning my grieving mother (I'd told her I'd delay going for a year, but she insisted I get on with my life), and scared of being away from home (New York) for the first time in my life.

BK: And as you always seem to be working, what's going on now with your writing?

RC: Two things, really. The one that's closest to completion is a manuscript about my mock-heroic and near tragic battle against my local draft board when the Vietnam War was going crazy and the innocent dead were piling up like logs in a river's bend. It's called DRAFT BOARD BLUES, and I even wrote a blues song to kick off the collection. I've got to do some severe editing and rearranging of poems on it, but I've got all the poems I need, more or less.

The other project is called MY FATHER'S WAR, and it's also book-length sequence of poems about my dad's experiences at Fort Bragg toward the end of World War II. The war ended before he could be shipped overseas, and he was discharged, but his real battles were with the anti-Semites he had to deal with in barracks. They didn't realize he was a Golden Gloves boxer, so when it came to a bare knuckles drill, he whaled on this one guy who assumed he was a candy ass New York Jew who was all mouth, and no brawn. He didn't have any trouble after that.

I'd also like to do one more manuscript about my violent alter ego, John Sprockett, a prequel to his horrible adventures in the Colorado Territory. This one will be about his growing up in Missouri, his dreadful father, and how he became the killer he was in three or four of my collections about him. And, as they say, that's all folks.

GOINGS-ON-AROUND-TOWN

[Joseph Hutchison](#), Colorado's new Laureate, is featured in a 3-part interview with Maureen Dioallas on "TweetSpeak: the best in poetry and poetic things."

"Why I Teach Poetry"

<http://www.tweetspeakpoetry.com/2014/10/29/why-teach-poetry-interview-colorado-poet-laureate-joseph-hutchison/>

"Let Go of What You Mean to Say"

<http://www.tweetspeakpoetry.com/2014/11/05/interview-with-colorado-poet-laureate-joseph-hutchison-part-2/>

"Everyone Has Imagination"

<http://www.tweetspeakpoetry.com/2014/11/12/interview-colorado-poet-laureate-joseph-hutchison-part-3/>

Martin Balgach read his poetry for Birmingham, Alabama's Nitty Gritty Magic City reading series on Thursday, January 8th, 7PM at Desert Island Supply Co.

Martin Balgach is the author of *Too Much Breath* (Main Street Rag). His writing has appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Cream City Review*, *Fogged Clarity*, *Rain Taxi*, *Verse Daily*, and *Stirring*, among other journals. He holds an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts, works in publishing, and lives with his wife and son in Erie, Colorado.

Colorado poet, founder and executive director of Lighthouse Writers Workshop, Michael Henry has been moderating once a month (4th Tuesday) sessions at the Denver Art Museum for people to combine the art of poetry writing with visual art. For more information: <http://lighthousewriters.org/content/upcoming-events/>

Colorado poet, Hilary DePollo and photographer Kit Hedman gave a public presentation on January 20th at 7 p.m. at the Denver Women's Press Club. RSVP 303-722-8676.

To include your event/publication/news, etc., send info to bellenwrites@gmail.com