

EDITORIAL

I remember cobbling together my first collection of poems, *Surviving Desire*, on my hands and knees, literally. But at least I wasn't alone. The brilliant and prolific William Matthews was showing me the way. We were in his apartment on the Upper West side of Manhattan. He'd agreed to give me consultations on how to order poems in a book. *This is how to do it*, he said. And as though a great wind swept through the room, he threw the pages up in the air, allowing them to fall willy-nilly on the floor. Now Mr. Matthews' forays into the mythological cadences of Jack Daniels were no secret, even legendary. But I'd been with him most of the morning and had spotted no sighs of the bottle cracking. The shock on my face must have registered, because he laughed at me before plunging to his knees. *Well. Come on!* he commanded. I followed his lead. Without another word uttered, I suddenly knew what he was about. Like two dogs sniffing in tandem, we began picking up poems that seemed to follow a thread. What was the thread? With words I could not tell you. But by the time I left his apartment I felt as if I had ingested a powerful mind-altering substance. I learned more about poetry that day than in the two years I persevered in Columbia U's MFA program.

A great teacher is an amazing gift. And I have been so very very lucky. Robert Hass once spent an hour and a half extolling the virtues of great first lines. And then, when I visited California, he escorted me on a private journey to what he considered one of his most amazing places, the lighthouse at Point Reyes. The day was windier than Emily Brontë's Peniston Crags! But not even the deafening winds against the waves could drown out Hass' own unmistakable rendition (I begged him!) of "Meditation at Lagunitas", maybe his most famous poem:

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
of that black birch is, by his presence,
some tragic falling off from a first world
of undivided light. [...]

Wow.

In 1983, at the now antiquated, though legendary (to those of us who attended!) *Voices Women Writing Workshops* in Santa Cruz, I sat in the classroom of one Irene McKinney. Audre Lorde was also teaching that year, as was Adrienne Rich who stopped by to say hello to friends and to give (lucky us) a spontaneous address. But I only had eyes for Mz. McKinney as I fondly called her, with her heavy and distinctive West Virginia drawl. Maybe it was the accent that lured me to a land of foreign imaginings. To this day I'm not quite sure.

I have always had something of the renaissance plaguing me. I am lured as much by the filmic mysteries of Maya Deren, as by the theatrical wizardries of Tom Stoppard, as by the simple breathtaking beauties of Bashō. But when I brought this up to my new teacher she looked at me as though Mandarin were my first tongue. *I have always been so single-minded about writing*, she said quite simply.

In one class, Irene handed out xeroxed reproductions of paintings by Remedios Varo, simultaneously jump-starting two loves I carry with me to this day, the wonders of ekphrastic poetry, and the otherworldly possibilities endemic in surrealism. Among other things, it was her way of *writing down the bones*, of dismissing the notion of writer's block as the poor excuse it is, of saying, *There is a way to rev up creativity with every breath*.

I followed her about like a puppy dog. I followed her for the next 27 years. I followed her until her death from multiple myeloma last February. She was my lodestar. My mentor. She had other students, notably Jayne Anne Phillips, who had morphed from one-time student to eventual friend. And although I had arranged readings for her at Cody's in Berkeley, visited her at various poet-in-residences around the country, was made at home several times at her 320-acre beloved family farm, counted as present when her beagle, Mary, was stolen by coyotes, as well as when her last little mutt, Pia, died on the lawn (surrounded by an amazement of hummingbirds!), and even championed and funded (though she never knew) her last collection of poems with a well-known press, even though I probably drank more espressos with her (and she could certainly put them away!) in more cities in America than anyone else in her life, I don't think I ever quite made the transition to friend. Even in her last months as I literally sat at her feet* and listened to her read me her latest work (*flunkey, fawner, flatterer ... sycophant?*), I'm not sure that I wanted to. What is our artistic life

without a lodestar, a guide upon which our higher attentions are always fixed, a better (though perhaps more challenging) place to strive to in our life and work? If I create anything of value for the rest of my life, it is because I have learned how to detect the finer points of telling the truth from this matchless teacher, one who never doubted her calling or her purpose for a single second.

Irene McKinney ended her life as the poet laureate of West Virginia. And as I will echo in my essay on Irene in the next issue, it is solely due to her poems that West Virginia can now claim a unique and lasting literary voice.

When I was asked to join the editorial board of *Poetry Salzburg Review* I nearly said no. My objection to most literary publications is their Kalnienk Vision. In addition, although I had taught my share of poetry seminars, the idea of judging other poets' work in print seemed another milestone altogether. But then I started reading back issues of *PSR*, piles of them. What surfaced for me was a feeling not unlike the hallucinatory effect of William Matthews' mystical floor. Here was a sensibility so elastic, and so broad in vision, it was reminiscent of one of Robert Hass' or Irene McKinney's greatest classrooms. The international scope of the work enlightened me at once that by accepting the mantle of this journey, I would be seated in a peerless vantage, a remarkable spot of learning. And I was right. With each submission, whether in my tiny estimation they seem fit for publication or not, I am permitted the most remarkable glimpses into very intimate windows of global consciousness. If in this role I am expected to be lending a kind of professorial mindset to the task, then I'm afraid I have fooled poor Messrs. Görtschacher and Schachermayr. For it is I who has become the beneficiary of some of the greatest teachers of our craft: the poets who find their way from around the world to fill the very international pages of this journal. Lucky me.

Ally Acker

* Her bedroom was tiny. There was only one chair, which Irene sat on. The rest of the floor and the walls were covered with some 7,000 volumes of books. Knowing Irene, I can quite confidently say that she read each and every one. She remained a student all of her life.