New Introduction to *The Poetry Workshop and its Discontent*

It has been a little over nine years now since I published *The Poetry Workshop and its Discontents: A Report from the Dark Underbelly of Academic Creative Writing* on Dan Schneider's online literary journal *Cosmoetica*. It would be hyperbolic to state that the essay caused a sensation. Still, the unique nature of online publishing allowed this essay to achieve a level of readership that likely would have been impossible had it appeared in a traditional print journal. I am sure it is the most widely read piece of work I have ever produced; within the provincial world of contemporary poetry criticism, the essay is famous.

Certainly nothing else I have written has generated so much correspondence—this despite the fact that, for a good chunk of the past nine years, I have not been an easy person to contact. The most rewarding emails I have received have been from young writers who were contemplating whether or not to pursue their own MFA degrees: some to thank me for warning them off from graduate school altogether, others for helping them enter into the process with their eyes a little bit more wide open and alert. And I have naturally received correspondence from other "outsider" poets, many quite learned, but simply unable to stomach the academic environment. When you have been educated and lived for a long time within the poetry workshop culture, it is easy to develop at least the subconscious belief that it is the only world in which a poet can even exist. I wrote *The Poetry Workshop* in part as a rebellion against that idea; my reader response over the years has helped me to realize how delusional such thinking truly is.

Still, as far as I can discern from my life now far outside of the PoBiz, the long term impact of *The Poetry Workshop and its Discontents* has been negligible. The MFA factories still chug on at full steam and, within that milieu, the reaction to my essay has been one of studied indifference. If *The Poetry Workshop* has made me a kind of anti-hero among the outsiders, within the "official" poetry world it has merely made me an invisible man. I have read essays touting the benefits of MFA programs written by people who had clearly read my essay and were obviously responding to it, but who refrained from mentioning it or addressing it directly. But this has really come as no surprise to me. My primary critique, after all, is that the academic poetry world operates under the same small-minded, careerist ethos as a town rotary luncheon. Naturally those folks aren't going to look up from their congenial small talk, their shallow mutual admiration and their chicken cord en bleu, to address the village crank yelling insults from the window, no matter how trenchant his observations might be.

To put the essay its proper context, I should note that *The Poetry Workshop and its Discontents* was very much the product of my own emerging revolutionary romanticism. Ten days after it was posted on *Cosmoetica*, I was at the massive FTAA protest in Quebec City, choking on tear gas and helping to pull down the big barbed wire fence that had been erected around the old city, so that the corporate elite could ink their secret, anti-democratic trade agreements, protected from the masses who would pay the cost. I wrote *The Poetry Workshop* after spending the spring semester conducting a satire campaign against the University of Southern Maine, where I was an adjunct instructor. I had written letters to the Maine Attorney General, the Governor of the state, all the members of the University Board of Trustees, all the deans and all the local newspapers, charging the president of USM with committing fraud for charging unsuspecting students

full tuition for classes taught by part-time faculty, when "our salaries as determined by the flawless free market system prove we are only 25-33% as valuable as full-timers."

I felt that humanity was entering a moment of potentially revolutionary transformation and I wanted to be part of it. To me, that meant making battle where I lived and worked. Before getting an MFA I had been a wrestler, an infantryman and a philosophy student. My mind and my nervous system had been trained for close quarters combat. In 2001 I was brimming with contempt for my fellow academics who were content to criticize society from positions of privilege, never once questioning the institutional role they themselves played in reifying an exploitive economic system. At most they might chastise the athletic department for having contracts with Nike, or call for divestment from some particularly odious third-world dictatorship. But I never heard any academics discuss how their own jobs might be directly contributing to what was wrong with the world.

I felt, and still feel, that the chief function of higher education in America is to indoctrinate and indebt the young. The idea so popular among right-wingers, that the academy is a bastion of liberal propaganda, is laughable. It is not entirely false—liberal arts majors are required to regurgitate plenty of politically correct, identity politics dogma. But the overwhelming majority graduate with a committed belief in the American Capitalist Empire. They have no choice but to believe: they graduate tens of thousands of dollars in debt and will need to find their own place within the Empire if they ever hope to buy their lives back by paying it down. Maine at the turn of the century had still not come close to recovering from NAFTA (and still hasn't, nine years later) and as a young faculty member I was very aware that my students were paying a lot of money for a piece of paper that

would offer them no guarantees, aside from the guarantee of long term debt. My colleagues who were blithely assigning hundreds of dollars worth of obscure textbooks about such things as the "oppression of gender construction" were not contributing to anybody's liberation.

But most dismaying of all to me was that my own participation in this system was predicated on the fact that I was a poet. Not "in spite of" the fact that I was a poet, but "because." The story of how poetry writing became its own academic discipline, something that one can even earn graduate degrees in, is the story of the rise of the Academic-Industrial Complex itself. The college creative writing programs had their beginnings after World War Two, when schools everywhere expanded on the influx of G.I. Bill money. They exploded in the 60's and 70's, swelled by the waves of baby boomer students. Post-baby boom they continued to grow, as career-driven, entrepreneurial MFAers sold the concept of the "creative writing major" to college administrators desperate to maintain expansion, as the ideal method for retaining students too lazy or dim to even bullshit their way through a traditional English major.

To a great many MFA credentialed poets, there is nothing at all wrong with this—quite the contrary, it has been a great blessing. They claim that the academy has provided the space for contemporary poetry to flourish, providing "the best" poets generous institutional support and freeing them from the mundane burden of earning their daily bread. They apparently believe that the finest poetry is produced by well-fed lap dogs, rather than hungry wolves. That the world of academic poetry in every sense resembles a grand Amway-style Ponzi scheme seems not to trouble them.

At the time I wrote *The Poetry Workshop* my blood coursed with righteous indignation toward this attitude. But nearly a decade is a long time, and it's been years since I've felt much motivation to be angry about any of that. I have long consoled myself with these wise words from Robert Graves: "How you come to terms with the Goddess is no concern of mine. I do not even know that you are serious in your poetic profession." As for myself, I am quite certain that the Goddess did not chose me as one of Her own simply so I could become a mediocre careerist within a decaying institution, a modern day equivalent of the temple eunuch.

What follows is *The Poetry Workshop and its Discontents*, mostly unchanged from its original form. It is certainly more vitriolic than anything I would produce on the subject now. Years of practicing yoga, Tai Chi, meditation and simply being a happily married man have all contributed to mellowing me somewhat. But the writer who produced *The Workshop* was much closer to the subject than I am now, more well-informed on the matter and more personally invested. I have been content to let him continue to have his say. I have edited only with a concern for brevity, attempting to maintain both argument and tone.

The Poetry Workshop and its Discontents:
A Report from the Dark Underbelly of Academic Creative Writing

In May of 1995 I accepted a three-year University Fellowship from Syracuse University, to pursue a Masters of Fine Arts degree in creative writing. I was a combat veteran of the Gulf War and I had used the Army College Fund to earn a BA in Philosophy. I was a working class kid who had resolved to avoid working

for as long as possible. And now, for the next three years, I would be paid a little over ten thousand dollars a year to write poetry and to take classes in prosody and literary history. I felt like I had won the fucking lottery.

And I hoped that I was gaining something even more important than the financial support and the time to write; I hoped this would be my ticket into the "big leagues" of American poetry. Since my childhood, I had liked reading and writing more than anything else, but prior to attending college, I could never have imagined that any such thing as an MFA program existed. Like many people, I had assumed that all writers, even poets, supported themselves primarily through book sales and free lance checks—this despite the fact that I had never bought a book of poetry, and did not know anybody else who had. But during college I began to read quite a lot of contemporary American poetry and I noticed that virtually all of the poets I was reading had attended graduate programs in creative writing, and that they taught creative writing. I became aware of a complex web of graduate programs, literary journals, grant committees, writing conferences and artists' residencies. It appeared that having a career as a writer was dependent upon inserting yourself somehow into that complex web.

If you had asked me at the time: "Why are you getting an MFA?" I would have given the proper, high-minded answer: "Because I love poetry and want to spend more time honing my craft and perfecting my art." I actually did love poetry. I had even read quite a bit of poetry, which is often not the case with MFA students. I really did want to become a great poet. I wanted to write poems that would make people feel the same way I had felt the first time I read Rilke or Keats.

But even more than that, I wanted to become a successful poet. I was an American, after all, and I wanted my own version of the bourgeois American dream, even if my own version of it was decidedly literary. I wanted to have poetry books with my photograph on the back. I wanted to be admired by pretty, bookish women. I wanted to give readings in bookstores and on campuses. I wanted to be a sophisticated, liberal intellectual who drank wine with other sophisticated, liberal intellectuals, while talking expansively about literature and life, and last week's *New York Review of Books*.

To my readers who are sneering as they read that last paragraph, I can only say that I join you in sneering. My "literary" aspirations were petty and mediocre and my ideas about high culture were naïve and politically uninformed. During the four years between my discharge from the army and my admission into Graduate school, the life of an academic poet had appeared before me, seeming as a glamorous reprieve from the much more mundane possibilities I had previously envisioned for myself: working at the post office; becoming a social worker; teaching high school English and coaching wrestling.

To be accepted into a highly regarded MFA program felt like a tangible stamp of legitimacy—an important institution was officially recognizing me as a poet. *They were even giving me money.* It seemed like an important first step in accruing even more stamps of legitimacy. Intellectually, I realized it was mendacious to equate institutional "stamps of legitimacy" with actual artistic merit. But emotionally, I craved that sort of institutional legitimacy. I was that odd sort of young person that American society often creates—my entire life I had been poor, but thanks to my education and to the media, I had learned to identify most strongly with the anxious ethos of the middle class. I wanted financial security and social prestige. I

wanted some sort of official recognition of the fact that I was indeed a poet, a *real* poet, and not just a hobbyist.

One of the most well known attacks on the workshop system is Donald Hall's 1988 essay, "Poetry and Ambition," in which Hall argues that poetry workshops teach students to mass produce aesthetically insignificant and forgettable "McPoems," the literary equivalent of fast food. It is somewhat ironic that this landmark criticism was made by Donald Hall, who is a very boring academic poet, and a textbook example of a careerist poet masquerading as a latter-day Robert Frost. Hall was the American editor for the famous *New Poets of England and America Anthology* of 1957. It is a dull read, but was crucial in terms of establishing a map for literary power and influence during the second half of the last century.

Still, despite the fact that Hall is a mediocre poet, his essay is full of valid criticisms, and I owe it a debt of gratitude. I read it during my final year in graduate school, at a time when I was deeply mired in depression, alcoholism, and morbidly self-absorbed poetics. I was the poetry editor of *Salt Hill*, which was at the time beginning to emerge as a nationally recognized and distributed literary journal, a fact that I took very little pride in—I couldn't articulate a single reason why *Salt Hill* was any better than, or even different than, the countless other small literary journals we were competing with for shelf space in book stores across the country.

Still, *Salt Hill* was managing to catch on—we were becoming what you might call a "credible CV line." One year we even managed to publish a poem that got

selected to appear in the self-proclaimed *Best American Poetry* anthology. Although I was the poetry editor when *Salt Hill* got selected for *Best American*, I didn't actually pick the honored poem—the credit for that goes to a very hard working and committed founding editor named Michael Paul Thomas, who was almost entirely responsible for launching *Salt Hill* and making it a big success. From the very first issue, he had a great talent for soliciting and publishing not-very-good poems by famous poets.

It was a really big deal to have one of our poems selected for *The Best American Poetry Series*. Getting selected means a journal has "arrived" on the scene in the world of academic creative writing. We were listed in the *Best American* credits, right alongside the big boys like *PloughShares*, *The Paris Review* and *APR*.

The poem chosen was "The Difference Between Pepsi and Pope" by Denise Duhamel. At the time, she was a real comer in the poetry world—probably still is; I don't keep up on that sort of thing anymore. I once observed her networking at a *Poets and Writers* conference in Washington D.C. She was really good at it, and her poems had a sense of humor, and they were a little bit more original and inventive than most. She has a book called *Kinky*, comprised of a series of poems about Barbie. The poem that we published was pretty good, but there was something strange about it. The title was lifted from a poem by David Lehman called "The Difference Between Pepsi and Coke," and Duhamel's poem appeared to have been written at least in part as an excuse to heap praise on the Lehman poem.

Now David Lehman is of course the series editor of *The Best American Poetry Anthology*. I remember when Michael showed us the poem, I commented, "Hey, this is sure to get picked up by *Best American*." Naturally I was joking. Surely a

poem praising David Lehman could not possibly get picked to appear in an anthology where David Lehman was the series editor. Surely there were other, less embarrassing choices available. We published another poem in the very same issue by Duhamel that was just as good, maybe even better, and it didn't heap any praise at all upon David Lehman.

But damned if the one praising David Lehman was not picked up for the big showcase. The "guest editor" that year was John Hollander. In his largely incoherent introduction to the edition, Hollander confessed that he had only even read directly from 40 literary journals. I have a hard time believing that *Salt Hill*, only then in its fourth or fifth edition, was among Hollander's chosen few reads; if it was, then somebody had to have made sure of it. And apparently Mark Van Doren's former star pupil just couldn't resist the kitschy, pop culture, soda pop reference.

I was also in the process of finishing my own graduate thesis—seventy pages of poetry, maybe ten of it actually any good. Still, despite the fact that I wasn't happy with my manuscript, I was diligently preparing it for the book contests. As the poetry editor of *Salt Hill*, I had received countless review copies of new poetry books, and while I didn't think my own manuscript was very good, I knew it was no worse than most of the books I received in the mail. Aside from one or two poems, I knew my manuscript could not possibly contribute anything meaningful, but I was also about to graduate. I had a small, but for me, substantial amount of student loans to pay back. I wanted to get started on my career, and that meant I had to start publishing my poems and that I had to win a book contest.

The only way to get a job teaching creative writing at a college (aside from no-benefits, adjunct work) is to have at least one nationally published book. And the only way to get your first book published is to win a contest. Because there is no profit in publishing poetry, the majority of poetry publishing is subsidized by the contest system. It is a kind of collective vanity press. Thousands of poets enter the book contests each year—especially young poets, fresh out of graduate school. Publishers hire a famous, established poet to judge the contest, and they charge participants a twenty to thirty dollar "reading fee." It's like buying an expensive lottery ticket, although often times this lottery is rigged. Even the least cynical observer would have to concede that quite often the judges know going in that they will be selecting one of their friends or former students. (*Note from 2010: A few years after this essay originally appeared, research librarian Alan Cordle launched his seminal website Foetry, which provided well-researched and detailed specifics about how corrupt the poetry book contest system truly is.).*

Most workshop poets will swear up and down that they are always concerned first and foremost with the quality of their poetry. Well, I won't try to speculate on what truly motivates other people. I only know that during my last two years in graduate school, I was almost always on some level concerned with trying to put together the sort of manuscript that might win me a contest. In terms of my work, this meant that I spent less time struggling after my own poetic vision and more time trying to imitate already successful poets.

I was mired in the early stages of mediocre careerism, and I knew it, and it was leading me into spiritual crisis. I simply could not articulate a single reason why it was important for me to keep writing poetry, given that poetry seemed to be culturally insignificant and that my own work clearly did nothing to challenge this fact. It all just seemed like so much chatter, and the only reason I could figure out

for trying to pursue my own career as a poet was a self-involved desire to add my own chatter to the rest of the noise.

I knew that the workshop culture lay at the center of my emotional and artistic discontent. But when it came to poetry, the workshop culture was the only world I'd ever known, and so I just didn't have the perspective, or the vocabulary, to criticize it. Hall's essay was very useful in this respect. One passage, in particular, accurately described the pathetic course my own literary ambition had taken:

> *At twelve, say, the American poet-to-be is afflicted with generalized ambition…at sixteen the poet reads Whitman and Homer and wants to be immortal. Alas, at twenty-four the same poet wants to be in the New Yorker…*

Of course, not three months after I read this essay, I went to a *Poets and Writers* conference in Washington D.C. where Donald Hall was a featured panelist. So clearly Hall is not offended by the professional poetry world when it is celebrating him. And there is a definite strain of upper-class elitism throughout the entire essay—a casual over-valuing of the traditional literary canon, as if the *Norton Anthology* was some sort of objective historical record. At one point, Hall waxes nostalgic about his Harvard years, providing a small list of his fellow students who also went on to become famous poets. One of the clear messages that comes across from "Poetry and Ambition" is: "You wannabe poets need to leave the *New Yorker* to real poets like me and Galway Kinnell." Despite his high minded rhetoric, Hall's main complaint seems to be that workshops have made the club too big, that they have made it too easy for the riff-raff to join.

Hall's smartest criticism of the poetry workshop is that it requires poets to write poems too quickly:

> *The weekly meetings of the workshop serve the haste of our culture. When we bring a new poem to the workshop, anxious for praise, others' voices enter the poem's metabolism before it is mature, distorting possible growth and change. "It's only when you get far enough away from your work to begin to be critical of it yourself"—Robert Frost said—"that anyone else's criticism can be tolerable…" Bring to class only, he said, "old and cold things…" Nothing is old and cold until it had gone through months of drafts. Therefore workshopping is intrinsically impossible.*

This is essentially the conclusion I had reached by the end of my first semester in graduate school. There were a lot of poems I simply would not bring to my workshop meetings. Any time I wanted to do anything vaguely experimental or strange, I knew bringing it to workshop would prove to be an exercise in futility. It wasn't that my workshop mates were stupid—indeed, whenever one of them brought a strange or experimental poem of their own to the workshop, I tended to say stupid things myself. Workshops require participation—especially graduate workshops. You have to say things about the work your fellow poets bring in. But when a poet hasn't yet figured out what he or she is trying to do in a given poem, it is pretty useless, even counter-productive, to start giving the poet all kinds of advice on what to do with the poem.

Sometimes a poet does bring something strange and experimental to workshop, and nobody understands it—the poet probably doesn't understand it yet, either.

Everybody sits around the table and says: "Wow, this is really trying to do something different." Or often times the members of the workshop and the presiding professor react with a certain amount of hostility—"What is this, some sort of crazy experiment? It certainly doesn't look anything like a poem to me!" It's not cool to be strange in a graduate poetry workshop, which is kind of alarming, when you consider how strange some of the greatest poets seemed when they first appeared on the scene. It's hard to imagine, for example, that Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman would have been warmly received into a graduate workshop, had the institution existed in the mid-nineteenth century.

More often, the poet brings in the same basic "poem" he or she has already figured out how to write by borrowing a lot of syntax, phrasing and rhythms whole-cloth from poems that he or she has read on the recommendations of one or another famous poet-professor. Not surprisingly, rules about what constitutes plagiarism are treated with a great deal of moral relativism among workshop poets. Roughly speaking, it considered fair use by way of influence when you borrow from a more established or older poet, but it is considered plagiarism if you borrow from a peer. One poet in my workshop, a young man from the South, used to catch a lot of shit for borrowing lines or phrasings from poems by other poets in the workshop. Yet when I closed one of my own poems with a partial phrase and an entire rhythm I'd obviously lifted directly from a poem everybody was familiar with by the National Poetry Series Winner Roger Fanning, everybody called it one of my very best poems. This double standard always baffled my younger workshop mate. He once said to me: "I don't see what's the big deal if I used one of K's lines. The manuscript I used to get accepted here has dozens of lines I stole directly from Stephen Dobyns."

When everybody brings in poems that are basically derivative and uninteresting, the workshop is able to flow along nicely: "Oh, another poem about your mother dying!" or: "Another poem about fall!" or: "Another poem filled with trite observation about the mystery and beauty of the everyday world!" Everybody can relax and start talking with more confidence, although even now, the conversation only addresses the most superficial aspects of craft: "Hey, maybe you should break this line here," or: "How about switching this word," or: "Maybe instead of this flower being a rose, it should be a tulip—a tulip is slightly less self-consciously poetic."

Because academic creative writing programs purport to be places where writing is "taught," workshop discussions tend to focus almost exclusively on craft, although generally only at the most superficial levels, since most students in MFA programs are not well read enough to discuss craft with any degree of subtly or sophistication. Discussing a poem's subject matter is verboten, aside from commenting on whether or not it is lucidly presented. Now craft should be important to any poet—at the most basic level, a poet is a person trying to arrange language in such a way that other people will think it sounds compelling. But to pretend craft has traditionally been the primary concern of poets is to ignore most poetry ever written. Certainly John Milton was a master of iambic pentameter, a virtuoso at metrical substitution, but to say that Milton was primarily concerned with craft is like saying that Oliver Cromwell was primarily concerned with battlefield tactics.

Blake and Shelly wanted to radically alter the collective consciousness of the entire race, but in the academic poetry workshop, a much more mediocre ambition is encouraged: that of getting published in magazines or in books that might be read,

at most, by five thousand or so people. Of course the best way to get published is to make your work sound as much as possible like other work that has already been published. No matter what a poem might be about, the goal is the same—to make it look as much as possible like a respectable Shaker cabinet.

This not only promotes a cautious and constipated aesthetic, it also promotes a basic sameness of themes. Most academic poets are middle class, even upper middle class, and so the accepted themes for academic poets tend to be pretty middle class: I used to play catch with my dad; I helped my sick parent die; I learned to cook with garlic from my old immigrant grandmother; sometimes I feel a quiet and modest yearning after a New Testament-style Heavenly Father; I take stoic satisfaction in some basic aspect of daily middle class life like eating authentic Irish porridge or listening to Opera broadcasts on NPR. When a political theme does manage to creep into an academic poem, it is usually some sort of safe, liberal-palaver that nobody reading could possibly disagree with—prejudice is hurtful, Vietnam was hard on all of us, too bad there are poor people, ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe is somber and sad, etceteras.

Poetic themes that don't adhere pretty closely to general middle class experience are often subtly criticized in an academic poetry workshop for being "unclear" or "obscure." And to be honest, by the time most poets make it into a graduate workshop in poetry, especially a competitive one, they have pretty much already learned what topics are acceptable to write about—they wouldn't be there if they hadn't. There are exceptions—one guy in my MFA program wrote a very long, morbidly self-indulgent series of poems about his life as a cross-dresser. And, of course, for the poet who is not interested in writing about the trials and tribulations

of middle class American life, there is always the option of becoming a surrealist.

But for the most part, the Academic creative writing world is a white world, a white, middle class world, and it is filled with the same quiet, well-mannered bigotry that one finds everywhere else in the world of the white middle class. A middle class white male poet like Billy Collins writes trite, bland and perfectly friendly poems about being a white, middle class male and he is roundly praised for somehow managing to articulate some sort of "universal humanity." But when poets of color write about their own life experiences, it is common for white academic poets to dismiss their work as "agenda poetry." This isn't to say that white middle class academic poets have no sensitivity to a certain type of liberal, middle class multi-culturalism. For example: many white middle class poets write about listening to Jazz. In fact, poems by middle class, middle aged white guys that awkwardly refer to Jazz constitute one of the growing genres in the world of academic poetry.

The world of academic creative writing is also pretty male centered and dominated, even sexist and misogynist, although I am inclined to believe that the program I attended in Syracuse was an exceptionally outrageous example of the old boy's club run amok. Three different people, including two eye-witnesses, told me that Stephan Dobyns drunkenly berated a woman in his workshop for writing too many poems about sexual abuse. A woman poet told me that another male professor once condescendingly informed her that he didn't think rape was a worthwhile topic for a poem. And many of the younger male student-writers in the program felt entirely comfortable using misogynist, homophobic language in casual, classroom conversations.

Of course there is room at the top of the academic poetry world for people of color, gay poets, and women (especially if they are attractive), so long as they adhere to the official workshop ideology of "craft first." Again, I will reiterate: I consider craft extremely important. But from my experience, "craft" within the academic poetry world tends to be synonymous with the most cautious and bland aesthetic. And furthermore, by training large numbers of young poets to view craft as separate from and, by extension, more important than overall artistic vision, the workshop system helps to ensure that the majority of poems recognized and published in official "PoBiz" venues will be small and mediocre of vision.

Bertolt Brecht wrote: "One cannot write poems about trees when the forest is full of police." The dominant ethos of the graduate workshop is one hundred and eighty degrees opposed to this: "But one must write poems about trees! Because if we start writing poems about the police, it might cause narrative confusion and compromise the unity of voice! And it might make it harder to get published or to win government grants."

Recently I had a poem accepted by a new literary journal being put out by some graduate students. I had mailed them the poem about eight months ago, and the acceptance letter contained a brief apology for the long delay in replying. But since I spent quite a bit of time working on a fledging literary journal myself, I understood entirely. Starting up a literary journal is hard work—long hours and no pay. Once a journal gets established within a graduate program, the affiliated university will occasionally endow a small stipend for one or two editorial positions; for the most part, everybody is working for free.

So I could imagine dozens of perfectly understandable reasons why my poem might have stayed with them for month after month. It might simply have been misplaced—believe me, when you send your poems to a small literary journal, you should be resolved to the fact that your work might end up getting lost: crammed down deep in somebody's sofa cushion; carted off into the bedroom of some editor's child and used as a background for drawing pictures of cats and clouds and trees; misplaced with an entire stack of poems in a forgotten desk drawer.

Or the journal itself might stall out, mid-issue, for several months, even for good: perhaps some sort of feud exploded among the faculty, leaving everybody in the program feeling emotionally battered, casting about for another program that will accept them as a transfer. Or maybe the editor and assistant editor were a hot romantic item early in the semester, but now they've had a messy breakup, and the resulting tension is so icky that nobody wants to attend staff meetings anymore. Hell, a fistfight might even have broken out among the staff. These sorts of things happen at small literary journals, especially those associated with graduate school programs.

It is also possible that the editors in question had liked my poem and were considering it for publication, but were first waiting to see if they could get any poems by more famous writers instead. I understand this, too. When graduate students get involved with a literary journal, sure, maybe they are partly doing it out of a passion for literature—maybe some of them are ONLY doing it out of a passion for literature. But some of them, at least, are also doing it because they recognize it as an avenue for career advancement—a way to increase their visibility within the world of academic creative writing, to begin marshalling a power base of friendships and favors.

Working as an editor on even a small-scale literary journal can be played for a networking bonanza. It allows you to meet lots of other poets, even famous ones. Some poetry editors even attempt to openly trade on their position in order to get their own poems published in other journals. Once I mailed some poems to a journal run by MFA students and not even a week later, their poetry editor mailed me a batch of his own poems. I never mentioned in my cover letter that I was affiliated with *Salt Hill,* but I was listed in a couple of different places as the poetry editor—somebody who was fanatically up to date on the markets (and plenty of scrounging, young Academic poets are) would have recognized my name.

Working on a literary journal is one way to go about becoming a playa' in the PoBiz world, but only if your literary journal has managed to become "established." The year I went to the Poets and Writers conference, *Salt Hill* was becoming "established." There was a definite murmur about us on the convention floor. Many somewhat well known poets, people with one or two books published, dropped by our table to chat. Michael Thomas, our founding editor and a brilliant networker, managed to get us into the VIP suite, so that unlike most of the people at the convention, we got to look at Robert Bly and Galway Kinnell up close.

Now there are hundreds, maybe even thousands, of literary journals in the United States, but a relatively small percentage of them are able to garner the sort of informal and widespread recognition required to join the loosely drawn web that constitutes the "officially recognized" academic poetry world. The reason *Salt Hill* was able to do it is simple: we had published lots of famous poets. It's a well known fact that within the world of academic creative writing, a literary journal is judged much less on the literary quality of its content and much more on the star

quality of its table of contents. People making the rounds at the convention would stop at our table and pick up a copy of our journal and invariably their eyes would head straight to the table of contents: W.S. Merwin, Charles Simic, Brigit Pegeen Kelly, Allen Grossman, Albert Goldbarth, Heather McHugh, Jean Valentine and etceteras. As they scanned *Salt Hill's* list of contributors, their eyes would sometimes bulge. Then they would put the journal back down and reach across the table to shake my hand: they were very glad to meet me. Maybe *Salt Hill* was new and maybe they hadn't actually even heard of it yet, but they could tell by our list of contributors that we were a legitimate publication, very respectable. In the months after the convention, I received about two dozen poetry submissions, with vague, chatty cover letters addressed to me personally, declaring how much the writer had enjoyed his or her conversation with me at the *Poets and Writers* convention. Now I was in the early stages of a very bad bout of depression the weekend of that convention—I promise, nobody on this planet can honestly say that he or she had an enjoyable conversation with me.

I don't know that many poetry editors would admit that they care about a poet's biography when they get a poetry submission. If you look through *The Poet's Market*, almost all the submission guidelines have some sort of high-minded sentence to the effect of "we publish the best poetry we receive, no matter who sends it to us." And for a lot of journals, this is probably true. But a lot of people, especially graduate students, don't really have the self-confidence or even the reading ability to form their own critical judgments. So if they receive poems from a poet they're already familiar with, they will read them more carefully and generously. And if they open a submission envelope and the first thing they read is a cover letter that says: "I've been published in *Poetry*," it's going to get their attention. Even if they think most of the work published in *Poetry* sucks, they also

know that *Poetry* rejects most of the work it receives. For a lot of editors, prior-publication is treated as a kind of letter of recommendation. When they see that another, more prestigious journal has already given a poet the stamp of approval, it makes them feel much more comfortable doing the same.

So there's a good chance that the journal in question was holding my poem, waiting to see if they could get a more famous name to take my place (actually, it is a fairly long poem, and they could easily publish two or three much more well known poets in the space they have instead given to me). Like I said, I don't really blame them. When graduate students go to the trouble of putting together a literary journal, it is only natural that they should try to use it as an opportunity to increase the quality of people they do business with. After all, it is practically un-American to labor for no kind of reward at all. Of course, my own publication bio includes poems and reviews in at least a few fairly well-known small journals, and I actually teach creative writing at a college, so within the world of academic creative writing, I'm not exactly an embarrassment to the contributor's notes. Somebody scanning the contributors notes could say: "Well, I've never heard of this guy, but he's been in *The Marlboro Review* and *Poet's Lore* and *The Harvard Review,* and I've heard of them, so I guess it's okay to like his poem."

Maybe I'm exaggerating the kind of impact the contributor's notes have on the reception of a literary journal, but I'm not exaggerating by much. If you want to start a literary journal, and you want it to be an effective networking tool, you need to make it into the type of journal people want to be published in, even people who can publish wherever they want. And the easiest way to do this is to get poems by as many famous poets as possible. They don't even have to be very good poems, just poems that have a famous name attached to them. In the early days of *Salt*

Hill we were glad to publish anything by a well-known poet, without regard to literary quality, although there were actually a few times when almost all of us voted to reject poems by well-known poets. Luckily, Michael Thomas always had the bigness of vision necessary to over-rule us.

One way for a young academic poet to start acquiring publication credits is to write reviews. Every classy, academic-type literary journal has a review section. Getting a review published is far less difficult than getting an actual poem published—there simply isn't as much competition. I never wrote a review that I wasn't able to get published. It's a wide open market—a lot of academic poets shy away from writing reviews, because they think it will actually require them to spend time reading and thinking about poetry.

However, they are largely mistaken in this belief. Writing reviews that are good enough to publish in literary journals is quick and easy. When I first joined the staff at *Salt Hill*, I read and reviewed three books in one weekend—and I spent most of the weekend drinking bourbon, and then throwing up and holding a bag of ice to my temples. And everybody on the staff agreed that my reviews were very good—meaning that they looked like the type of reviews that might be published in any other academic literary journal.

At this point, as a service to my readers, I will explain how to write a review for a poetry book in one hour or less—and I mean a book that you have never even read before. I have used variations of this formula to write several reviews that were published in credible literary journals—and not just the one I edited. And I would say that ninety percent of the book reviews I have read in academic literary

journals were also written with this one-hour or less formula; at any rate, they certainly could have been.

Step one: Start by establishing that you are an erudite and well-read critic. Open the essay with some sort of literary anecdote:
"In an *American Poetry Review* essay, Edward Hirsh once wrote…blah, blah, blah" or "At a poetry reading, Mark Strand once remarked…blah, blah, blah" or "In his important work on the Romantic poets, *The Visionary Company*, the renowned critic Harold Bloom observed…blah, blah, blah." It doesn't even matter if the opening anecdote actually has any relationship to the poetry book you are reviewing. This opening bit of rhetorical flourish is merely to establish that you have been to graduate school, or that you were at least an undergraduate major in creative writing at some place like Sarah Lawrence.

Step two: Write: "In his/her recent collection of poetry, *insert name of book here*, poet X **a.** reconfirms that he or she is one of the important voices in contemporary American poetry **b.** establishes him/herself as one of the important voices in contemporary American poetry **c.** emerges as one of the future voices of American poetry." You also might want to mention the poet's earlier work. You needn't be too specific—just mention an earlier book title or two (obviously you don't need to have actually read them), so that the reader will know that you are up to date.

Step three: Turn over the book and read the blurbs by other famous poets (there is a forty percent chance that one of these blurbs will be by David St. John). Paraphrase the first blurb into your review. Now actually read through a section of the book, until you find five or six lines that seem like they might demonstrate the

point being made and then quote them in the body of your review. Don't worry, this shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes or so—most book blurbs are so vague that you can safely follow them by quoting almost any section of the book at all, or for that matter, almost any section from any other book.

Step four: Repeat step three. If there are more than two blurbs, repeat once more.

Step five: If you have actually read the book and have any original ideas about it, this is the place to share them. By now, your readers have seen you parrot the words of at least two famous poets, so they will believe that you deserve to make one or two points of your own, provided that they are modest and not too specific. If the poet you are reviewing is not very well known, you can even offer a minor, very gentle criticism, as long as you concede that this does not diminish the overall quality of the book.

Step six: Repeat step two.

Step seven: Repeat step one. (*Note from 2010: Some my reviews from this era live on to this day, quoted as blurbs on Publisher websites, even footnoted in academic essays. Seriously—reviewing is a breeze!)*

But what if you read a book and didn't like it and now you want to write a negative review? It's not impossible to get a negative book review published. I once wrote a scathing review of a book by an East Coast poet and managed to get it accepted by a literary journal published in California. But for the most part, negative reviews are rarely published. After all, the world of academic poetry and creative writing is really just a very complex web of networking and patronage—a bad review is

always going to offend somebody, and that somebody's friends, as well. You can't even take a six inch step out of line without stepping on somebody's toes. Besides, there's so much favor to be curried by writing vacuously glowing raves, why would anybody waste the time cultivating potential enemies?

But I did write and publish one viciously negative review, in the last issue of my tenure as poetry editor at *Salt Hill.* I felt like I had to do it, as an exercise in spiritual emancipation. The book I went after was Larry Levis' posthumous collection, *Elegy.* At the time, it was the hot book in the world of academic poetry. *The American Poetry Review* seemed to be publishing poems from it in every issue. Michael Thomas had even managed to secure one of the poems from the book for an earlier issue of *Salt Hill*, and he had also dedicated that issue to the memory of Larry Levis.

However, the book was terrible. Readers of academic poetry might remember Levis' prose-like and entirely unrhythmic lines, and his trademark use of the typographical symbol "&" instead of the actual word "and." He had always been a terrible poet, and his final book was especially bad, loaded down with clunky phrasing and monotonous syntax, and heavily seasoned with manipulative and sentimental pseudo-spirituality. One evening, after a graduate student reading, I was talking about how horrible it was with another poet, when two or three other student-poets chirped up to declare that they thought the book was great. Of course, when I asked them why they thought it was great, they were naturally unable to render anything like a coherent answer—the best one woman was able to do was to repeat several times that she had found it "gorgeous."

Normally I would have just dismissed this as yet another example of the fact that most MFA poets are incapable of independent thought. But at the time, I was also trying to decide upon a book to review for the next issue of *Salt Hill*. So I actually wrote a very detailed, thorough and savage review of *Elegy*, taking no small amount of satisfaction in the fact that I would quite possibly be the only person in America who was publicly acknowledging how terrible it was, which meant nothing less than also implying that the whole of the academic poetry world (including my own journal) was riddled with hypocrisy.

I do not want to exaggerate how big my gesture was. I was nobody in the academic poetry world before I wrote the review, and I have remained nobody since. And probably no more than five hundred or so people ever read my review. But I have to think that at least some of those people became very upset and irrationally offended by it, doubly so because my attack was thorough and convincing. I do know through the grapevine that there are at least a few people in the world who have heard my name only in connection to my review of *Elegy*, and that they think I am an asshole for writing it. For a writer like myself, a refugee from the academic poetry world, such knowledge is a comfort, cold though it may be.

During the first year after I completed my MFA in poetry, I moved back to my hometown of Portland, Maine. I got one job as an adjunct creative writing teacher at the University of Southern Maine, and another job working with developmentally disabled and autistic people. I had a manuscript ready to send out to the poetry book contests—almost all the poems in it had been through workshops, or had at least been read by one or two poet-professors. I didn't send it to any contests, though, because I was too broke. I did send out batches of my poems, sporadically, to literary journals, and got some of them accepted for

publication—much more sporadically.

By my second year after graduate school, I had thrown away most of the poems I wrote during graduate school. The new poems I was writing were much better, and much more fun to write. I wrote them entirely by myself, without seeking the advice of any workshop mates or mentors. By my third year after graduate school, I had a new manuscript. However, I remain too broke to enter book contests, and I can no longer even imagine a time when I will not be too broke to enter them.

But in the last couple of years, I have also come to the conclusion that reading fees are a pretty absurd waste of money. In the first place, even if I am as good a poet as I think I am, my chances of winning a book contest are still statistically miniscule—in fact, if I am as good as I think I am, my chances are probably even more miniscule. And then, even if I did win, what would I actually be winning? A ticket to the disgusting world of academic politics? Suppose I should get lucky and win a major book contest. Then what? There would just be new, more heated competitions waiting for me on the other side. I'd have even more pressure to keep networking and glad-handing my way through conferences and readings. And suppose I should get lucky and win more contests and publish more and more books, always with the very best publishers. Suppose I should become a "famous" academic poet. Then what? A "dream job" teaching in an MFA workshop, having to deal with a new generation of desperate and hungry young academic poets looking to break into the PoBiz?

I decided: No thanks to all that. I will continue to send poems to literary journals that I think are carefully edited—which counts most of them out, and especially most of the more "prestigious" ones. And I will never waste my money subsidizing

the book contest system, although it means I will quite likely never publish a book of poems, unless I can come up with the money to do it myself (in which case, it will not be considered a "real" book in the academic poetry world). Essentially, I have reached the conclusion that being a poet and a pursuing a career in academics is impossible. Maybe not for everybody, but certainly for me.

From time to time, another poet will ask me for advice about applying to MFA programs. I don't recommend against it in all cases, but I do suggest extreme caution. Unless you come from a family with money and your daddy is going to cut off your allowance if you aren't doing something "productive," there is no way an MFA is worth paying for—and I don't care what school it is. If you can get into a program that will give you a tuition scholarship and a stipend or TAship to scrape by on, it might be worth doing, just as a break from actually working. It does give you a lot of time to read and write. So if you are a full grown man or woman, and settled comfortably into your own skin, and you won't mind being surrounded by a large amount of social hysteria and anxious careerism and general hypocrisy, then a Graduate Program in Creative Writing (provided they offer financial support) might be just the place for you.