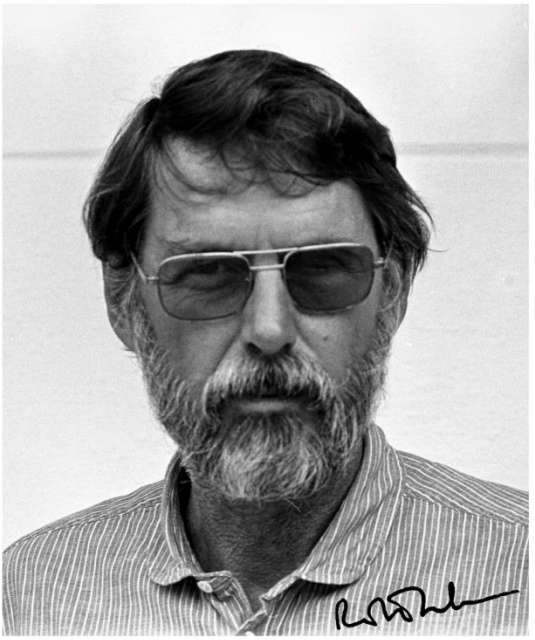

Remembering Creeley

Honoring legendary poet &UB Professor
Robert Creeley
(1926-2005; at UB 1966-2003)

Remembrances

Michael Anania (UB English, 1961-65): **"**Creeley, Reading"
Robert Duncan told me with a small measure of resentment that you shouldn't read with Creeley. "He's a torch singer," he said. "He'll pull the audience in until he's whispering in their ears." Torch singer? Well, maybe, but jazz inflected, certainly. I heard Creeley read at least a dozen times and despite Duncan's caution, read with him once, at the Y in New York. He had a way of making a reading, however large, seem intimate. Like a jazz soloist, in his use of voice, space, breath and silence, he made the poem seem as though it were being invented in the moment. Non-vatic, anti-declamatory, his was the most instructional of reading styles. He was showing you how the poem was made.

In Chicago in the late 80s, with an audience of more than a hundred and fifty, he read forty minutes of poems early and new, then moved around to the front of the table and asked for questions. What followed was what made the occasion so memorable, not so much questions and answers but a conversation built on Robert's uniquely elliptical, casual style, half an hour or so of Robert, with his audience leaning in, torch singing, I suppose.

Burt Kimmelman
My first encounter with Robert Creeley was in about 1965 when I heard him read a poem in a documentary film being shown on PBS. The poem was astonishing to me, who had just begun writing in my later teens, for its rare simplicity as well as oblique clarity. About a year from then Bob read at SUNY Cortland, as I recall, and then again in the fall of 1967 when, as the co-editor of the college's lit mag and with some state slush funds, my fellow student-poets and I organized a "poetry convocation" attended by the UB poets of the time and others from elsewhere. I next saw Bob not too long thereafter in Cortland again when he returned for another reading.

He became a guide for me, and I would say at times over the decades a mentor, and his poetry, always an influence on mine, has only grown more present in my own work. His tutelage extended to my critical work as well. He was a brilliant thinker, on the cutting edge. I don't regard all poets as especially thinkers too. But Bob was that, and yet his poetry doesn't necessarily reveal that depth right off. On the other hand, one is always struck by the craft. His work stands as an

oeuvre that is a cornerstone of twentieth- and twenty-first-century letters.

Last but not least, Bob was generous. I don't know if the story of Williams having been rather uninviting toward younger poets (or just toward Bob) is true, but the story of how Bob was making up for this lack rings true to me, who benefited greatly from his kindnesses. As much adulation as he and his work have received, I believe he is still to be fully appreciated.

Fred Wah (UB MA Literature & Linguistics, 1967)
He gave a reading from *For Love* at the University of British Columbia, February '61, I think. He wore a loose shirt, Levis, and Clark's Desert Boots. The desert boots were quite cool then. Pretty much part of the west coast jazz cool I emulated. I also wore Clark's. They were British and so was British Columbia. I believe when he came back to teach at UBC the following year he wore a corduroy sports jacket, but still the desert boots. Very Albuquerque I thought. Same desert beige. He got me a TA at UNM in '63-'64 so we (Pauline Butling and myself) followed him back to Albuquerque from Vancouver, right after the '63 Poetry event. He and Bobbie lived out in Placitas, small Pueblo house, Volkswagen. He wore blue workshirts, and the desert boots. Me too; they were my main shoe in the early 60's and actually made more sense in the desert than rainy Vancouver. Bob was very New Mexico, blue collar and jeans. I don't remember him keeping his cigs in his shirt pocket. The Zippo appeared from a jean pocket.

Creeley came to Buffalo a year or so after I did. Must have been '66. He was still wearing Clark's, and so was I. In Buffalo he got more into sports jackets, and open-collar shirts (eventually ties). I remember driving down Main St. with him and we talked about the acid scene in Buffalo. One Sunday he brought John Cage to a party at our palatial country place in East Eden. He and Bobbie rented the same place after we left.

As a Canadian I frequented Toronto and there was a great Clark's store there. On one trip I picked up a new pair of Desert Boots but they weren't suede, they were dark brown leather. Bob dug these new boots and asked about them. At that time you could only get them in Canada. I don't know if he got a pair or not. When he came to Calgary in March of 1995 to do a gig with Blaser I don't think he was wearing Clark's Desert Boots; nice jacket, shirt'n tie, and his Levis.

Debora Ott (UB English BA, 1971) "For Love – of Bob"
A poem stopped my 14-year old basketball playing self, filled my head to hear something about what it meant to be human. What it means to love. Flash back to a PBS Special. Black & white street scenes of New York; voice over of contemporary American poetry. I'd never heard anything like it. Camping in front of the TV, I waited for the credits to roll. Learned what I'd heard was *Love Comes Quietly*, by Robert Creeley. That poem moved me here to SUNY/Buffalo, and after graduating to founding *Just Buffalo*. Bob was my teacher, mentor, and friend. He said, have a plan. It lets you be in the moment. Explained that *manipulate* means to shape with the hands. Told me the power was in my hands. Looked me in the eyes and said, "always take your keys."

Michael Basinski (UB English BA 1975; MAH 1976; PhD 1994)
1976 in Clemens Hall, first floor, in Robert Creeley's class, Modern Poetry, we were assigned readings from The Poetics of the New American Poetry. In order, we were to read: Walt Whitman to Ralph Waldo Emerson, From The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry, A Statement for Poetry by Louis Zukofsky, and then on to Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Olson. At that time, everyone smoked in class and Creeley lead the way sometimes borrowing cigarettes from students. He stood the smoked butts on the edge of his desk. It was easy to be smitten by his poetry. I was. I noticed at various times he would pull out a handkerchief to clear tearing from his eye socket. Technically, it was an engineer's' handkerchief, one of the blue or red paisley bandana types. His was blue. I went to Sattlers, 998 Broadway, and bought one. These days, I still carry one. A reminder, it is with me. An anchor, it is blue.

Charles Palau (student of Creeley's, 1974-75; UB BA Philosophy, 2011)
We talked about jazz a lot. We saw Dexter Gordon together once at the old Tralf on Main and Fillmore. Bob's awareness and appreciation of, and sensitivity to, bebop drummers was extraordinary. His favorite was Kenny 'Klook' Clarke. Once he shared that although the music of Miles Davis was rightly associated with his early work, in fact his favorite horn player was Eric Dolphy.

He once remarked upon the publication of a friend's book of poems that it's good if you agree with it, going on to say that his goal was to

render testimony of experience (my words) rather than have it hinge on argument.

Robert Creeley's ear and the attention he paid to what he heard was extraordinary and accounts, in my opinion, for the impeccable measures of his words. Allen Ginsberg called him the perfect poet numerous times in public. I thought of him as a diamond cutter.

Peter Middleton "Creeley, Fall 1977"
Creeley's office at Clemens was bare. Was he making a point about the loss of much-loved rooms on the Main Street campus, or too preoccupied with changes in his own life to bother with decoration? We met there for independent study. I was 27 (he was nearly twice that), and full of questions. What was it like to have Olson as a friend? How does one write poetry now? He avoided answering. Instead he pictured Olson acolytes following in the wake of the poet's rocket finding themselves left up in the air. What do you think of Richard Grossinger? Those alchemical memoirs had inspired me to write. Creeley told me a lengthy, seemingly irrelevant story about Grossinger's vegetarian cooking, a soup that despite its variety of ingredients was uniformly brown. What I learned? That the indirections of anecdote could be more precise than focused analysis. That answers might not be what were needed.

Peter Siedlecki (UB PhD)
When I was a Fulbright Senior Lecturer in Poland and the State Department sponsored a number of visits by Bob to European colleges, he came to Cracow--which was not on his itinerary--to visit me. I told him that one of my magister (master's) candidates, a young mother who had lost her academic enthusiasm after the imposition of martial law, had chosen his poetry as her thesis topic. He asked if he could meet her and respond to any questions she might have. Needless to say, it changed Romana Paszkowska's life. She was thrilled and did complete her thesis. On another occasion when I was Sr. lecturer in the former East Germany and he was in Finland, we got together at a literary conference in Marburg, on the North Sea, where he read his poetry. I was seated at a table with some professors from a variety of European universities. A young woman from Riga mentioned how wonderful it would be to have such a great poet visit her university. I suggested she ask Bob, but she declined saying he would never come to Riga; so I

asked him. He checked with the diplomat who was accompanying him. He did visit Riga and read.

Charles Ryback (UB English BA, 1992)
I was born and raised in Buffalo, New York, and lived in New York until I was 22 years-old. When I was 17, I showed up at SUNY Buffalo and was a bad, under-prepared student from a public high school with a reputation (Bennett Tigers!). I had no idea what I wanted to do or what an English department was. SUNY accepted me because they accepted Buffalo kids and believed in educating the people of their state. Eventually I wandered into the English department, asked some guy named Robert Creeley for directions, who sent me to some guy named Leslie Fiedler, who said I needed to go downstairs to Carl Dennis, Susan Howe, Raymond Federman, Barbara Bono, and Max Wickert. Looking back now, this all seems like a complete accident, serendipity at its most immaculate. How do you walk into Robert Creeley's office and not know who he is, as a professed reader of poetry? After admitting this to you, I barely deserve to live. It was no accident. It was public education, exactly as designed by the generations before. It completely saved and changed my life and all I had to do was be alive and show up.

When I accepted my first tenure-track job in higher education, one of my new mentors, also a poet, said to me, "Let me give you some of my friend's work to read. He's a great guy, a good friend, and has been truly supportive and influential when it comes to my own work. I basically just try to imitate him." He then handed me books of Creeley's poetry, signed with personal notes over the years. All I could say was, "You're friends with Robert Creeley? 'Bob'? Let me tell you how I once claimed to be a lover of poetry and didn't know who he was . . . even when he was standing right in front of me."

Thomas A. Trinchera (UB English BA 1994)
I think the best story I have about Robert Creeley was when he lectured to my biography and autobiography class when I was an undergrad. Robert Newman was our professor and he'd invited Professor Creeley to come and talk to us about his own experiences teaching a graduate autobiography course and more specifically about his lifelong study of Simone de Beauvoir. A friend of mine and I used to sit in the front of the class—it was a GREAT class, we had a lot of fun in it—which meant that Creeley was sitting about three feet from us. I of course

already knew about his reputation as a local and national poet—a few of my other professors taught his poetry in their classes—but hearing him lecture was a mystical experience!

A few years later I was invited by a friend of mine, a HUGE fan of Creeley's and always envious of the class lecture I'd heard, to a reading by Creeley where he was accompanied by a local jazz band. I'd seen him read several times at various events, even had him sign a copy of his latest collection of poetry for a friend of mine who lived in Maryland, but this was another mystical experience. The band would play these long, flowing jazz strains & Creeley would just chime in whenever he felt like it. I think it's about the closest I ever got to seeing a classic beat poetry reading accompanied by music!

Lisa Fishman

I did not meet Bob until January, 2002, having been taught by his work since the mid-80's, when my college poetry teacher, Diane Wakoski, urged me toward him. For that act of "bibliographic teaching" I have always been grateful. It brought me to the black-and-white New Directions paperbacks *Mirrors* and *Memory Gardens*, on the shelf in the used bookstore I worked in. The poems in those two collections (1983 and 1986) remain really deep points of contact for me. Because Creeley, as he existed in my mind at that point, had been so important to me, I applied to his class at the Key West seminar when I was teaching at Beloit College. (Key West! Of all places. Yet that's where he was, and where I was able to get college funding to go.) I didn't attend the first evening's "cocktail gathering," choosing to swim and walk instead, and met him only the next day in the classroom. He was, as everyone says, both very kind and clearly honest—fully present, with a light touch. My ten pages included a three- and a four-line poem ("Note" and "Tone") that were me starting to give myself permission to come out from under the descriptive personal narrative poems I had learned to do. Simply put, he responded strongly and generously to those two poems, while everyone else did not. It was the affirmation I needed, to trust the ear and the spaces between things (words, music, ideas) in ways I had learned so long ago from him, as his reader, but had not truly or fully practiced. Bob wrote a blurb for the book that emerged from that experience of en-*courage*ment; those two poems basically begin *Dear, Read.*

He was, as I think many people will say, a prompt and enthusiastic correspondent. I remember that he marveled at the ease with which

poets could now "connect" with each other via list-servs and e-mail—he thought it was great that people could so easily become in touch with each other and that communities could form. Here I thought I'd include two excerpts from his e-mails. In the first, I hear his voice so clearly in a mere three words from one of his sentences: "Rain's a pleasure—" you have to *hear* the dash, so I include it in the quotation. (It also shows how kind he was about having poems sent to him from rural Wisconsin; he set a standard for generosity that I'm not always able to live up to.) In the second of the two e-mails below, he was doing his own bibliographic teaching and community building, pointing me toward Pam Rehm and Elizabeth Robinson and articulating what he thought the three of us have in common.

> Dear Lisa,
> Those are excellent poems you sent [. . .] Just lovely in what it says and the movement of the language. [. . .] Anyhow I much hope things keep moving for you and that the sad recent deaths find place as clearly your poems have for them. Rain's a pleasure—here it's been unusually constant, after a long dry spell last summer and fall. (July 21, 2002)

> Dear Lisa,
> [. . .] It is the intensity and wish to locate an entire "world" that attracts me [. . .] with fact of feeling, ambience, transcendence, call it, "the spirit,"—one that is not just one's self but equally isn't simply the extension thereof either. That plus impeccable 'ear' seems it. (July 30, 2002)

Jonathan Skinner (UB English PhD 2005)
Creeley in the doorway of Village Voice Books in Paris, sticking his phone number in my shirt pocket, saying come to Buffalo. Creeley attending the Cornershop poetry readings, sitting next to the radiator, he loved Anya. Creeley offering me an opened tin of Altoids before the movie. Creeley sweet: pointing to *Political Cactus Poems* in the stack of his reading, giving the wry thumbs up. Creeley cutting: *ecopoetics*, what is that, fiddling while Rome burns? Creeley polishing his eye at the front of the graduate seminar on *The Great War and Modern Memory*, exhausting himself talking while no students dared interrupt. Creeley walking his big shaggy sheepdog Sophie by Blackrock towers along the Niagara River. Creeley forbearing but stern when I confessed

I'd forged his and Tom's signature to get Raworth's paperwork through, having forgotten to do so when they were in town. Creeley reading "Dover Beach" at the Just Buffalo Valentine's Day event, making us all cry as he pronounced the word "love."

Steve McCaffery

Of the many memories I have of Bob the following two occur with some force. In 1980 Bob staged a Festival of Canadian Poetry as a part of which I did a performance at Darwin Martin House. The performance involved climbing a stepp ladder and droppig eggs into a bowl on the florr. One egg missed and smashed on the floor. Confused I appealed to Bob whether I should continue or stop and wipe up the mess. Bob instantly replied Go on with the goddam performance. Second: I had read in an issue of The Annual register (1790s I believe) an anecdote of a one-eyed man which I recalled to Bob's immense enjoyment in Toronto when he visited. The story goes "A one-eyed man laid a wager with a two-eyed man that he, the one-eyed man, could see more than the other. The two-eyed man instantly took the wager at which the one-eyed man said I see your two eyes and you see only my one-eye."

Dennis Tedlock

Up this creek, they say
Sandia Man butchered a mammoth
chert tools sealed under limestone, and
down the creek, they say
was Drop City South—
you won't find that on a map
acequias don't go there either
Fullerdomes hard to heat
bricks of mud and straw make better homes
rafters of ponderosa
granite runs down to the foothills.

In Nickel City, they say
one way to celebrate
is to run red lights late at night
one right after another, fast

talk your way out of the ticket
tell the cop it's a special occasion
be observant
take a good look at his left wrist
admire his Mickey Mouse watch.

Saying goodbye to the Duke City
he reads to a circle of friends on the grass
Siberian elms spread wide by now
each one stands for a National Guardsman
who never marched home from Bataan
the poet speaks of survival on Bay State Road
dark night of the soul—
there is such a thing as getting too close
to home.

Late at night in the Black Rock firehouse
everyone else has gone, but we
might not make it home in one piece.
Thanks for putting up with us
and putting us up.

Charles Bernstein

Penelope Creeley asked me to ghostwrite something that could be read at the memorial tribute to Robert Creeley at the American Academy of Arts and Letters. (My tribute to Bob, is in Pitch of Poetry.)

Along with his poetic hero, William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley is the great 20th-century American poet of the everyday. For Creeley, the ordinary is not something represented but rather something enacted word by word in each poem. His works combine searing emotional intensity and mind-boggling linguistic invention, proof that lyric intensity is dependent on formal ingenuity (and the other way around). Creeley was exemplary in his support of younger poets who rejected a poetics of complacency that reigns now, as it did in his time. He championed the radical modernists of the generation before him. And most important, he was necessary company to those of his own

generation who risked the most in their successful transformation of postwar poetic thinking.

Susan Howe

Often my fondest memories of the Poetics Program during the late 1980s and 90s with its ambitions, furies, hilarities, criticisms, enthusiasms, and disjunctive leaps, are centered around the Firehouse on the corner of Amherst and East Street where the Creeleys lived. This imposing structure designed in the Arts and Crafts Style with the Italianate addition of a tower was built in 1912 during Buffalo's glory days. ENGINE NUMBER 15 is engraved in stone over the keystone of the elaborate sandstone entrance on the Amherst side (used by the Creeleys as a garage). We entered through the East Street door. Once inside, a stairway led to the central living area. On the wall at the top a framed 8 foot tall portrait of Lord Byron against a blue background fading to orange. I think it was a poster Robert Indiana had designed for an opera house in Santa Fe. The author of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and close friend of the Shelleys— George Gordon Lord Byron—English Romantic poet and man-of-the-world who risked everything including himself; majestically, capriciously indifferent, faced me down as I climbed up.

The upstairs landing led to a long high ceilinged loft-like living space. To the far left was an open kitchen with a solid Garland industrial stove. Eight gas burners on the top with an attached griddle and grill**.** So much cooking went on there! In my imagination it resembles an open hearth. At that end of the space an octagonal sunroom had been added on as a greenhouse. There were beds of green pink iris in spring, early flowering day lilies, and a grape arbor. If you climbed the trellis that bordered the surrounding roof garden you looked across the Niagara River to Canada.

So many many evenings, so many assortments of visitors gathered in this open room with Bob sitting at the end of the long dining table, Penny providing endless quantities of food, other visitors bringing wine and other stimulants. Possibly when Warren Tallman was in town—some table tapping and spirit rapping. Bob sitting at the end of the long dining table, students and visiting poets, gathered around. I think of the Firehouse as a

domestic but rebellious force field inside frame fields. It was good to come in. To *return* in Robert Duncan's sense of poetry as a common property open to experiment and risk at the same time teaching. Never forgetting invisible spirits roaming through other pilgrimages and passages on the way to whatever new spells and promises will take place. Robert Creeley made us believe in the political urgency of our task not in a capitalist sense but one of sharing independence.

Speaking of his own early writing days and his admiration for W.B. Yeats he said: "He was the Poet—for our imaginations then, just as his life seemed so specifically connected to his work." He could have been speaking for himself.

Over in Sligo, Thoor Ballylee, the 14th-century Hiberno Norman tower. Over here, the Firehouse. Engine 15. The years just before and just after the Millennium.

HERE

Up a hill and down again.
Around and in—

Out was what it was all about
but now it's done.

At the end was the beginning,
Just like it said or someone did.

Keep looking, keep looking,
Keep looking.

The singular way he read his poems aloud. The way of hesitant interruption, irony—brevity. Present and past lines hovering

Hold on dear house,

'gainst the long hours
of emptiness, against
the wind's tearing force.

Bruce Jackson "Moving"

Over the years, Bob, Pen, Diane and I spent a lot of time talking at the Creeley's place or ours, having dinners and drinking plonk and/or single malt, (in the early years Bob and I dulling our brains further with smoke). Bob was one of the great talkers and if he got on something he was fascinating to listen to. He was a vigorous and ranging autodidact, so he was always learning new things and getting excited by them. He had an encyclopedic knowledge and memory of literature, art and music, and an exquisite gift of ordinary language, so his riffs were just about always a delight. I don't think I'm sentimentalizing; other people have noted the same thing, and closer to the time.

There was a period in the mid-1980s when Bob and I got into the habit of letting those conversations drift to endless grousing about how boring and academic UB, and the English Department in particular, had become. I remember Pen and Diane sitting there in silence (how could they get a word in?), doing things with their eyes or eyebrows that I translated as, "That again?"

Yeah, that again. Gone was the red-hot arts scene that had brought Bob and me to Buffalo in the 1960s and nourished us in the 1970s. Buffalo was my only academic job, so I had thought the way things were here were the norm, rather than an aberration. Sometimes we catalogued the dead, the retired, the otherwise departed from English, Music, and Art. UB was about then beginning its metamorphosis from a panoptic university to a STEM university with an arts and humanities component. The permeable academic borders in the arts and humanities we enjoyed when we came to UB were giving way to departmental walls as the Albany money stream attenuated. That's not just nostalgia: I can see it in my photographs.

I think Bob was more attuned to that change than anyone else on the campus. He was the most collaborative artist I've known: writing poetry is solitary stuff, but he also did important projects with painters, sculptors, and musicians: Georg Baselitz, Francesco Clemente, Jim Dine, Robert Indiana, Marisol, Steve Swallow, and others.

The UB English Department was then going through a particularly grumpy phase, but other things had changed as well. All the adrenaline activity connected with opposition to the Vietnam War was over, and the exhilarating rock music scene that exploded at Woodstock had grown routine.

We would usually end with fantasies about how we would find elsewhere the Buffalo Weimar we missed, and how we would move to

that place, and all would be swell again, never boring or grumpy again, never pedantic again.

That entire fantasy evaporated in an elevator of a hotel in Washington, D.C. Diane, Bob and I were there because Bob was giving a reading at a meeting of the MLA, and we were then working on our hour-long film about him. As a condition of our filming, the managers of MLA forced Diane and me to join or pay an exorbitant day-fee (neither of us was a member before or has been since). I don't remember if they forced Bob to join or pay the day-fee as well. They'd invited him to do the reading, so maybe they didn't, or maybe he got a reduced rate.

After the reading (a huge chamber, packed), Diane, Bob and I went up to our rooms. The elevator was slow; it stopped at every floor, with a lot of coming and going at each stop. Near the front were three or four loud English professors. We couldn't figure out what schools they were from, but it was obvious from their conversation what they were.

In that short vertical trip, they touched on a dazzling number of the same pedantic subjects and used some of the same pedantic academic language and articulated that same pedantic superiority to literature that had largely fueled Bob's and my grousing back in Buffalo. It was preternatural.

The three of us, several times during that ride looked at one another with expressions I would translate as saying: "How did they get the Buffalo script?"

We reached our floor and got out. The elevator doors closed and the professors' conversation ascended to new heights without us. Bob's room was one way, ours the other. We stood there in silence for a moment, then Bob said, "It's the same everywhere."

"Yes," I said.

"Wherever we go, they're going to talk like that," Bob said.

"Yes," I said.

"I guess we're not moving," Bob said.

"I guess not," I said.

Diane didn't say anything but I knew perfectly well what she was thinking: "Pen and I could have told you that thirty boring conversations ago. Buffalo is as good a gig as you guys are going to get, or might want." Actually, she'd said versions of that to me several times on the way home from the Creeleys', or when we were doing the dishes after they left our place. She was right.

Bob didn't make the move until 2003, when he went to Brown. The reasons were different by then. I'm still here.

Pen Creeley "Looking Back"

Robert's sister Helen told me her little brother almost didn't speak until he was 7 years old, but once he started he was out of the gate like a greyhound. Throughout a long, full and complex life Robert's abiding passion was for words, the articulation of ideas and feelings, what it meant to be human. When I imagine Robert as a child, the only male in a family of very bright, funny, well-read and talkative women, I can only assume his head was very busy indeed during that quiet period. His close companions were animals, especially a Great Dane called Lena, and his pigeons, but he must have been listening acutely, absorbing the sounds of speech, picking up on all the nuances of family interaction, learning the sounds and rhythms of the Massachusetts countryside he loved so dearly, and thinking, thinking, thinking.

Although Robert's youthful ambition was to be a vet, his passion for articulation and language, begun by listening to the talk of the women of his family, was confirmed and developed by teachers at his New Hampshire boarding school. His love of animals stayed with him all his life. But his love of teaching as a way of communicating, as a way of "thinking on his feet," as a way of respecting and learning from the other, became almost as primary to him as writing. For him teaching was not to claim knowledge as an authority or possession but as a way to open up possibility. He looked for chances to change a mind, and to be changed and stimulated himself, in turn. His gratitude that teaching allowed him a place in the world, even afforded him a living poetry could not, was immense. Robert made two professional claims for himself: that he was a writer, and that he was a teacher. He used to say with both pride and amusement that he had taught at every level of education, from kindergarten to PhD, except for the 6th grade.

When I first saw Robert he was reading poetry to an inattentive lunchtime crowd at the University of Otago in New Zealand. When I saw him later, through a window, he was teaching. My own experiences with the teaching profession had been at an opposite pole from Robert's ways of transmission. My education had been steeped in authoritarian notions of necessary culture, so I avoided both the occasions I saw him working. Luckily we met later, through friends. We began to talk. I did not realize I was learning as I listened and talked myself. Of course I didn't take notes or write anything down.

Robert told me of a poet whose work he loved. I heard the name. Some weeks later, after Robert had left New Zealand to continue traveling in South East Asia, I remembered the sound of the name, or thought I did, and found the work of Charles Bukowski in the university library. I was surprised by the writing—it was not quite what I had expected. But I knew I was very ignorant, and somewhat shyly included some comments about Bukowski in a letter to Robert. He was so kind in his response, telling me I had mistaken the poet's name: he had told me about Louis Zukofsky, not Charles Bukowski. Uh-oh. Big mistake! I suppose that could have been the end of it all, right there. But it wasn't. A lifetime followed. Now I laugh when I remember, but Robert's quiet acceptance and re-suggestion, waiting for my possible response and recognition, is what moves me, indicates to me his innate understanding of teaching and vulnerability.

Carol Cook told me that when her husband Al was assembling what was to become UB's legendary English Department, in the 1960s, his only point of contact with Charles Olson was knowing that he was living in Gloucester. So Al wrote a letter addressed simply to Charles Olson, Poet, Gloucester, Massachusetts. Al took the chance, Charles received the letter, and from some perspectives the Glory Days of the English Department about which Bruce Jackson has written expand from that point. To me the Poetics Program is a continuation of that initiating energy, that moment of chance and dynamic contact, of ideas, conversation, company, learning, exchange, self help and mutual interdependence.

I was not here in those early formative days of the English Department. The energy had somewhat ebbed, as I understood, when I first arrived in 1976. But when Robert was offered the Grey Chair in 1978, he wanted to re-ignite some of that excitement by bringing in poets, teachers, scientists, musicians, and artists to talk to students, to talk with students. We began a series called Walking the Dog, named for a jazz musician's sense of taking the line for a walk, for the artist Paul Klee's similar expression, and for Robert's and my habit of doing literally that: talking while we walked the dog. Now my memory is not precise, but I think we brought in a guest a week, every semester for two years. We also began the Olson lectures, an annual series of

lectures and readings by people particularly associated with Charles Olson.[1]

They were thrilling times. The sense of contact and companionship in ideas was vivid, the energy often intense. Robert Bertholf was newly the curator of the Rare Books Collection in the library, and participated in many events. With his help, and the participation of the Canadian Embassy and the President of the University, we organized a conference of Canadian writers, which lasted several days and brought writers as diverse as Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Atwood, bpNichol, Steve McCaffery, Fred Wah, and Margaret Avison. Sometimes the Albright Knox was the venue. I remember the auditorium there being packed for Lawrence Ferlinghetti's reading. But a reading by Allen Ginsberg on the Amherst Campus was poorly attended. We had put our usual posters up all over town, and all over the campus, but we were told later no one actually believed Ginsberg would come to read in Buffalo.

Later, we were living in Finland for a year when Robert was offered the Capen Chair and the possibility of starting a poetics program. Bob Bertholf was instrumental in liaising with then Provost Bill Greiner, who would usually call very late in the dark Finnish nights, as it was the end of a working day on the east coast of the US. Robert was traveling a lot then in Eastern Europe, which was still behind the Iron Curtain, so Bill Greiner and I would talk. He would make suggestions for me to pass on to Robert. I would groggily try to remember, or even write them down. Early faxes helped. The eventual plan was written by hand on a yellow legal pad by Bill Greiner. Robert agreed to it. Those yellow pages stayed for years on Robert's desk in the Firehouse. From that beginning followed the Poetics Program in its formative iteration.

Once we were back in Buffalo and living in a big old firehouse on Amherst St in Blackrock, the excitement of assembling the company for the new program began. I remember vividly Robert coming back from a reading in New York, telling me he wanted Charles Bernstein to be the first to join him. I remember meeting Charles then, young and hip, big eyes magnified by pink-framed glasses, wearing a jaunty hat. Soon Charles and Susan Bee were living in Buffalo too. They would often come over for dinner, or to pick up their daughter Emma who was a friend of our daughter Hannah. We, and especially Robert and

[1] I use the pronoun 'we' here, as I felt completely engaged in the planning, the thinking, and the logistics of the program. It was all part of our daily lives. I had no official authority in any of it. But along with Robert, I gave it my very best shot.

Charles, would talk for hours. We planned and hoped for Susan Howe to become part of it all, and soon she did. Dennis Tedlock and Ray Federman joined in with their Chair funding, and the game was on.

Robert thrived in the company of friends and colleagues, and particularly the students, who came from all over the country. Some of them were already innovative and published poets. Many of those students continue now in their own lives the practices of teaching, learning and publishing that the particular interaction of the Poetics Program imagined and engendered. Robert encouraged students to start magazines, and would offer funding to enable them to do so. One magazine in particular I remember being worked on regularly, and with great intensity, not to say frustration, at Robert's desk, so the editors could use his computer. A computer was then still a rarity in a household: it was the early 90's, so much was just beginning, there was much to be figured out. Robert loved the internet, was thrilled that UB was to have one of the first possibilities for joining the web. He was set up, ready and waiting when UB first went online. When the sound of that initial "handshake," those tinny rattlings and gurglings that went on for what seemed like five minutes, first jarred through his study, oh did he beam with delight.

The Poetics Program became the center of our lives in Buffalo. The Firehouse was a great place for parties and gatherings. There were big occasions for visiting speakers or artists, sometimes for international scholars and poets who would come to be part of the program for a while; sometimes there would be gatherings to start a new semester. Sometimes Robert would hold seminars there for a whole semester. We even hosted two student-associated weddings. Robert's emphasis on the importance of the company, the interaction of peers, caused a new student, Anya Lewin, to think at first he must be talking about some corporate entity. But then she got it, and soon started her own reading series and gallery in an old storefront on Lafayette St near Grant.

Now, too many years later, those days of the Poetics Program, of our children's school days and of the Firehouse are all inextricably intertwined. They were rich, full, busy days. The Poetics Program, and the people associated with it, gave our world connection to ideas, active thinking, changing times, new developments and the energy that generates them. I know Robert would join me and our family in celebrating its continuance, and in giving every thanks to this University and this city, this community of poets and writers, this dear company for making it all possible.

Thank you for remembering . . . Remembrance—mighty word.
Emily Dickinson to Louisa and Frances Norcross, November 1882

For other tributes to Creeley, see the ECP,
http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/creeley/

Front cover photo credit: Bruce Jackson