

broadsheet

new new zealand poetry

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Interview with Robert Creeley
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Please Note: At this stage no
submissions will be read. The poems
included are solicited by the editor.
All submissions will be returned. Thank you.

Contents

<i>PREFACE</i>	<i>/ 5</i>
<i>RIEMKE ENSING</i>	<i>/ 6</i>
<i>TIM JONES</i>	<i>/ 8</i>
<i>WANJIKU KIARIE</i>	<i>/ 9</i>
<i>RICHARD LANGSTON</i>	<i>/ 11</i>
<i>WILL LEADBEATER</i>	<i>/ 13</i>
<i>RACHEL McALPINE</i>	<i>/ 14</i>
<i>HARVEY MOLLOY</i>	<i>/ 15</i>
<i>JAMES NORCLIFFE</i>	<i>/ 18</i>
<i>JOHN O'CONNOR</i>	<i>/ 19</i>
<i>PETER OLDS</i>	<i>/ 21</i>
<i>JENNY POWELL</i>	<i>/ 23</i>
<i>LAURA SOLOMON</i>	<i>/ 25</i>
<i>BARBARA STRANG</i>	<i>/ 26</i>
<i>PAUL WOLFFRAM</i>	<i>/ 28</i>
<i>INTERVIEW FEATURE</i>	<i>/ 31</i>
<i>NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS</i>	<i>/ 40</i>

The Street

i. m. Robert Creeley

*It's like walking
down the street
you thought was
there yesterday*

*but, it's different
somehow, perhaps it's
the girl's dress,
how it's no longer*

*like what she
wore before, it's
a different colour, a
different garment*

*as if it's now
missing, but you see
it, like it's no longer
in place, the dress*

*the day, your
step on the street.
I think of it
this way, of*

*love, of life, of
an eye slowly
breaking, walking
down this street.*

Mark Pirie

(from London Notebook, ESA W, 2005)

Preface

The late American poet Robert Creeley (1926-2005) had a major influence on contemporary world poetry in English. He is known but not primarily for his role in the 'Black Mountain' group of poets whose revolutionary poetics emerged in American poetry in the 1950s. The group included many future names of note like Creeley, Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Ed Dorn, and Robert Duncan among others.

In 1976 Alistair Paterson, who had a keen interest in the direction of 'open form' poetics, arranged Creeley's visit to New Zealand. The trip proved to be an important one in Creeley's life and work. As well as his work becoming well known to local poets, a volume of his poetry, *Hello*, was later published here that same year by Alan Loney's Hawk Press. Creeley also met at a reading in Dunedin his third wife, Penelope Highton. Marrying a New Zealander kept up Creeley's relations with the country and in 1995 he returned for a second visit.

As a reminder of the value of these visits, I was recently given by Paterson a published transcription of a taped conversation between Creeley and himself (made at Creeley's suggestion) during Paterson's visit to America in 1982. During the conversation Creeley comments on the influence of American poetics on New Zealand poetry in the 1970s and early '80s (that led to the compilation of Paterson's anthology, *15 Contemporary New Zealand Poets*, Pilgrims South Press, Dunedin, 1980, and its eventual publication in America by Grove Press). Creeley also makes interesting comment on the poetry of one of our foremost poets, Allen Curnow. The information contained here has been little known in New Zealand (although it was published in a small literary journal, *Buff*, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1983). With its publication here, the information will become readily available to scholars in New Zealand. The publication of scholarly pieces, as shown in the previous issue devoted to Louis Johnson, is something *broadsheet* aims to continue.

In addition to the featured interview, *broadsheet 3* continues its policy of publishing different poets in each issue and in this issue welcomes a further 14 poets to its pages. Issue 3 includes work by Rachel McAlpine, Peter Olds, James Norcliffe, John O'Connor, Richard Langston, Riemke Ensing, and the Otaki-based Kenyan author Wanjiku Kiarie, who first came to New Zealand in 1979, and is an exciting and powerful performance artist.

Mark Pirie
Wellington, May 2009

M A T A R I K I

for Bernard Gadd (1935-2007)

A friend from another country
planted a tree every time one of her friends died.
She chose carefully, each tree representing her friends' background.

At first she planted pines. So many came from Europe
in those dark days. Their grateful shadows now make light of
summer
when stories are passed round the table and shade shields against
the memory of loss.

Now there's a forest and everyone present still and talking.
Also a cedar, a banyan and a beech.

In the orchard are olives and figs, trees for life and living.

Ash spreads its golden leaves in autumn and oaks make riots with
reds.

Gradually local trees were added. Kowhai and totara, rata and
mamaku.

Birds live abundant, singing psalms all day.
Clematis blossoms high and bees feast content.

I think of this paradise now, in Matariki, when we look back and
remember.

I read your poems and watch the bright stars. They signal promise
and look, already poets coming to celebrate.

Outside the local library, I gather seeds from the puriri trees.
These I will sow
in my garden in friendship and memory of you and the many
felled in our past.
No axe will bite here but as evening falls, a shivery breeze tastes
like salt off the sea.

**DOWN GEORGE STREET
IN THE RAIN**

I talked to the shop signs
down Cuba Street
down Cashel Street
down George Street in the rain.

I sidestepped the shoppers.
Take that, Phil Bennett!
Take that, old lady with a limp
and orthopedic shoes.

We were as gods
as eighteen-year-old gods
who wore our Gore High jerseys to the bottle store –
they wouldn't let us in.

We smiled upon our people.
People, we said, we walk among you.
Don't bow, don't scrape, don't even step aside.
In gratitude, in wonder, let us pass on

to our destinies, our mortgages
down Cuba Street
down Cashel Street
down George Street in the rain.

THE TORCH

A torch is an insignificant gadget
I thought,
until our bus got stuck in the mud
in the midst of darkness
on a countryside road
twenty minutes walk through slippery/muddy paths
from a freezing village called Kaheho.
Among our luggage we carried maize and beans,
bananas and taro.
Could have been a nightmare of a journey
without the guidance of the tiny beam of light
from Cousin Emily's torch.
She shone it here and there,
through narrow dark paths,
down the valley,
across the river,
up the ridge.

As we bent over the final barbed wire fence
the tiny torch shone our way all the way
to Auntie Beatrice's doorstep.
More torches appeared flashing,
revealing many faces, smiling faces of my relatives
not seen in many years.
With the light from our small torch
we entered the hut
to greet, to touch my favourite Auntie,
lying sick in bed,
her face distorted with pain.

She recognised my voice, my face,
she cried, we cried,
we hugged, we clung to each other
and laughed.
The light from our little torch
was still shining.

GRANDPA

Lend me your hand Grandpa,
let's take a walk
and talk of the mysteries,
the healing powers
of the strong mugumo tree.
Here I am in Aotearoa,
Grandpa,
like the kikuyu grass
reaching out, spreading her roots
beneath the kowhai tree,
like the tui waiting
for the kowhai to bloom.
I long to hear your story,
the strength
of the sacred
mugumo tree.

1997

FIRST BORN

Under hot lights feeling grew intense.
'Shove,' the working doctor said, 'shove,'
when we wished for a gentler word.

You were silent under stirrups of pain,
falling back on the white bed
feverish with concentration.

I stood in the corner
my face to the wall
talking to my excitable ancestors –

who flooded through me like water.
Your bones and your flesh
your limbs and your eyes

are being renewed
right here, now,
in this room.

Her small dome was at life's opening.
The lantern
of her perfect miniature body.

Born, she stared back at us,
as if surveying the damage –
swabs, sutures, blood.

In that moment
her unblinking eyes
possessed all the wisdom,

windows into a deeper world.
They said, there now, tremble
at the fullness of love.

TRAVELLING

True, my body was home all day,
and my passport went unstamped.
It rained and I drank red wine from Sicily.
Uncorked, I imagined the blue swim to Algiers.
And being there in a bar beside a movie poster
of a man in a trenchcoat who was about to save the day.
Sunset, goodbyes, and a final kiss.
The last plane on the runway.

I rolled an orange along the bar.
It was from Valencia. It was hot there, too.
It reminded me of a book, pages of blue heat:
dust, a donkey, a priest and a communist riding by.
I closed that book just as they shouted,
'Hey you, you crazy hombre, what are you doing here?'

IMPRESSIONISM

Walking along
the left-hand side
of Kitchener Street
towards the art gallery
I saw a blonde woman
in a long black dress
standing against
the brick wall;
but as I drew closer
her dress merged into
an elongated shadow
and her blonde hair
became a spot of sunlight.

ROMANCE

Any old moon will do:
a quarter, half,
 full, or new –
just so long
as it shines on you

and I don't mind – if,
in the evening,
it is early or
 late

just as long as
your love for me
is reflected in your eyes
as the moon's image
is mirrored in the
 lake.

**IN THE OLD DAYS
WE WERE HEROES**

The old days were a place of ice.
These days are a tropical island.
Just so you know. It's time to know.

In the old days we brought our own flour.
We said our own prayers.
We ate our own ponies.

These days a barge delivers
pallets of Pepsi.
Every household has a dinghy.

Six people have laptops.
There's a church and a pastor,
and a dentist in Nukunonu.

FLATLANTIS 2

A land lightly sketched
in pencil.
A drawing never shaded.
Lines to let the light through,
that's all.
A dotted line.
A pattern never finished,
never used, never made.
To be erased
by the sea.

GHOSTS OF ST JAMES

Yuri

I toured in the Ballet Russe
till I fell from the flies

now I slam doors
play havoc

with the electrics
race the stairs up to the gods.

We toured Paris
before the St James

my sharp-cut black suit
I stole from dear Coco.

I bring my own weather
an icy draft

rippling the border curtain
on a midsummer night

before the tumblers turn
in the main door lock

& I switch back on the lights
once the manager's left.

I ignored politics but favoured
Bakunin over Trotsky

so take my current role
as a constant source of interruption

with good humour
trust me

I'd never mess with the flying system.

The woman in red

You don't want to meet me
I'm always returning

from my final
trip-filled performance

the boos of the audience –
my death sentence –

the dressing room's empty
but my mascara run face

stares back
from a grease streaked mirror.

I'm the cries you hear
from the mezzanine changing room

the lady in the red dress
at the end of a flooded corridor.

I'm not meant to be here
& I wanted to be gone for good

but some nights
I wake to find myself rising

from up under the boards
warping them just enough

for the bitch above to lose her step.

Author's Note: These ghost stories are adapted from David McGill's
Full Circle – the History of the St James Theatre (1998).

ORTHOGRAPHY

the door is called adore
and I do not know
whether this is more
description or injunction

the world is so full
of letters and music
that when I spell your name,
my love, I hear love
singing a counting song
an aide de mémoire,
while the pianist in the bar
explores the côte d'ivoire
with a cockeyed topee
on his head and
a melody in his fingers

and eye before see, I sense
you there as I swing the door
on its hinges opening and
receiving love or deceiving
love by shutting it out

but when I spell your name
my love, each letter sings
admittance and sings so strongly
the trees are full of words and
the world wobbles in the wind

SCENE FROM A LOST MOVIE

1960/

small town in the West

the stranger has just 'rode in'
his '49 Caddie rusting

on the dusty street outside
a saloon called the Shining Cloud

*

he buys a good ole boy
a whisky for the talk

he never tires of /
a girl picks up a blue guitar

& sings his pain to sleep /
he doesn't want to leave

her lyrics on the sawdust floor

*

when he rides out tomorrow

he says he'll follow the wheat fields

& the rain

ARLES, 1910

twenty years on
& the painting is marked already

& grimy. you're
out of the picture now who

gave it life
who lent an ear to – of

all things – a
girl from a local parlour

who was prob-
ably pleased with the business

at first.
such posthumous fame she

has – such light

THE PAINTER

You are admired,
and your paintings are admired
by people who want to be like you.

This poem will be read by people
who already know this fact...
If you ask me to evaluate your work

I can only say:
The paint is thick with colour and
intention, and the hills look like

the hills we played in on hot
Central Otago summers;
with miners' teeth, and wild cats,

and silverbelly eels in the water-race,
and willows, and church, and bones
of old horses.

THE OCTOPUS

In the mud at low tide
there's a dead octopus

spread out like a tablecloth,
and a young black-backed gull

tugging at its tentacles,
flapping its wings in frustration.

From the roof of a building
other gulls watch the young bird try

where they have failed...
The tide turns:

the dance is over.
The water will eat it.

**FROM VIET NAM :
A POEM JOURNEY**

Woman with Birds in her Head

She is the woman with birds
in her head.
At night they burst from their cage
and circle
her head, her hair branching
into rain forest green.

The birds flap in a festering
flutter of fear
looking for jungle dragons whose
orange breath
was fire across their feathers,
for the old black
thunder to fall through the sky.

For the birds their nightly release
is never
a flight to freedom,
her head
is their haven and hell,
her hair
where they perch in the dark.

The woman is used to the birds,
spirits of the dead
that sleep in the daytime nests
of her head.

Darkness dawns in a blaze
of light headedness
and a rush of wings.

Her dreams echo
with red noise.

Song of the Deep Moon

Fate carries us like a thousand clouds
to drift
to whisper under the breath
of wind
to float
across the dreaming sea.

When the wind rises and the sail
is full
I will follow you, pure star
of night
who guides me
across the vast sea.

Close to the hills of home I will
find you
where the light falls from darkness
in threads
of silk
tying us to the moon's song.

IN SHACKLES

There must be some way out of this.
Iron cuts my wrists.
Around one ankle, a ball and chain.

I have been sitting here since the last ice age.
Nobody guesses how old I am.

They think one, maybe two hundred years;
My hair matts, my fingernails twist, gnarled –
My eyes roll back in my head,
A leper imitating prophesy.

For five quid, I'll tell you your future.
You may not like what you hear.

O my dear, I will tell you the truth.

I am out of time. I don't think, I just do.

Like the sun, I burn;
Sparks fly from the fire at my feet,
What care I about these chains,
I don't mind this servitude –
Spitting, hissing like Caliban,
Formulating, for *centuries*, escape plans.

The law was handed down.
Join forces underground.

Go on, spit in my eye and I'll tell you your future;
You'll die, I will never grow old.

THE LONG BODY

She has been removed,
the two-dimensional woman
who dangled down our wall
for twenty years

leaving her ghost,
a varnished shadow
on faded wood.

She has vanished
whose shallow
depths glowed

(her breasts it was said
were made of molten
beer-bottles).

The hasty man,
jerked her down
her right foot fell

and broke in half –
he forgot
she was frail.

LEARNING ABOUT TORTURE

The last time we went out together
thunder clouds rumbled
lightning tore holes in the sky.

As I shut the gate
rain drops rang on the pavement;
the lifeboat siren was wailing.

Ignoring all the omens
I climbed on the bus for
the long ride to the city

and you cycled
down Linwood Avenue

you said it was fun
in the storm,
you felt quite young.

We walked into the film,
it was *Elizabeth*, with

elegant script, costumes,
and refined medieval tortures.

**FROM THE STRANGER WITHIN :
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC POEM**

Strangler Fig

*Take a large notebook and begin in the middle
Because you never know which way things will go.*

We spent the day
in the cool of the
cathedral-canopied jungle
learning secret songs
from an old man
crouched between twisting
tentacled vines and stilt rooted
pandanus.

After singing for an hour
we lay silent
on the jungle floor busy
with shadows
cast from trees
and listened to insects
sing back to us.

While the others slept
I lay uncomfortably
still watching a giant
fig with cargo net of
roots creating
dark recesses
that hide the spirits
whose songs
my throat was
sore from repeating.

Leaving the others
to their dreams
I found the old man
chewing betel.
He pointed
at the fig and explained
that the trees, like spirits
grow from rotting
remains of others
and on their twisted
mesh of legs
move slowly
through the jungle.

Water

For a month it's dusk all day.
A heavy sky sleeps between the mountains
and the world diminishes as the
rivers swell.

In the men's house I draw
genealogies until the clan is
exhausted, then we tell stories
and tire of our own company.

I learn seven adjectives
to describe the passage of water
three new relationship terms
and a swear word from an 'uncle' under a drip.

A woman goes into labour.
The river is a dark serpent
she eats her banks and refuses
passage to the aid post.

Through the rains her screams are faint.
Waiting with the father we watch
the fire lick wet wood
and listen only to the rain.

In the early morning light
I extend the genealogy.

**CREELEY / PATERSON:
A CONVERSATION**

During his 1982 visit to the United States, Alistair Paterson spent a few days with Robert Creeley, in New Mexico. At one period during this time, some of the conversation was taped. The following interview formed part of that conversation.

Paterson: Well, here we are again – and six long years after your tour of New Zealand.

Creeley: Six amazing years, Alistair, thinking of what you've finally got together there. That visit, as you know, was an extraordinary experience in every way – not only because it took me to parts of the world I might otherwise never have visited, but because of the chance it gave me to meet a diverse and extraordinary company. What seemed to me then to be the case – with very obvious and real exceptions – was a New Zealand literary community that in many respects was still straddling a commitment to old-time, British models and habits but recognizing a particular authority in the language base and a need to acknowledge local social and economic forms. This seemed to me to be very much the case, and a useful aspect of what James K. Baxter stood for – whether he accomplished it or not being beside the point. But thinking of those six years and seeing that anthology of yours¹ that Grove Press has just published – that's extraordinary (how shall I say it) fruition. It's a demonstration, and in no way a fabrication...

Paterson: The last thing I intended to do was to fabricate, to create a situation that didn't exist. I wanted only to demonstrate what seemed actually to be there.

Creeley: It really argues in every respect the authority of New Zealand poets and poetry in common with other English-speaking peoples and cultures, and that's remarkable – absolutely! And then when I read texts like Allen Curnow's recent book², I'm dazzled! I think it's extremely so – remarkable! You know, I liked his earlier poems. In some almost old-time comfortable manner, I had an affection for the habits and tones of traditional English verse but I never felt it was especially close to me.

Paterson: In that sense, do you see Allen Curnow's work as having moved closer to what's been developing in American verse over the last twenty-five years or so?

Creeley: It's moved closer in the sense that while it has nothing to do with the formal agency, it has *absolutely* to do with what I feel is a necessary impatience with a traditional conditioned sense of what the world is and how one is to find it. What's remarkable in these poems, is not only that they are the work of an older man – I mean, frankly, when I was a kid in college I had the greatest respect for Yeats' later poems; and subsequently, when William Carlos Williams became a decisive model for me, I was deeply moved by the poems of his late period. I think Curnow's poems are of this order – they are great poems of the human disposition and of a necessity that everyone of us has to deal with: to break free of any restrictive writing habit. That he's succeeded is what is so extraordinary in Curnow's recent work. I guess that for a time in American writing, as in New Zealand, we possessed a young and coy culture; it became necessary to go for broke in the common daily habits we had as a people – and to see someone so magnificently doing it, that's something! And it isn't as though he's kicking over the traces in some specious sense at all – he's using all the resources he's ever known as a poet, and making these exceptionally powerful statements of that disposition at a point of age and in a particular place. Those poems are adamantly New Zealand – that's what's so forceful about them. That's the point for me and that's what's parallel with American writing. Again, Williams is the chief progenitor, as is Pound – progenitors of what we as a culture, you might say, had to make particular using our own resources and persons in the habit of a particular place. We couldn't really use English habit to define the dilemmas of being American. If we had wanted to do that, frankly, we would have had to do what James did and Eliot – and others obviously did – we would have had to transport ourselves, if it were possible, to England.

Paterson: Although Curnow's operating in a particular time and place (and of course, I agree with your comments on the quality of what he's doing), I still have a sneaking suspicion that he's subconsciously and in part influenced by American writers. How do you feel about this?

Creeley: I would be proud if that were the case, and it would be an honour indeed, to feel even in part that the poetry had such a stamp. It's possible, of course, and it's possible that the elders of my generation (as in the work of Williams towards the end of his life, or Pound in those extraordinary last *Cantos*) gave him some curious permission – a permission he was asking for and needed. But the thing that's extremely moving in the poetry of Allen Curnow is that his new writing has an adamant need to be articulate and specific in relation to a particular way

in which he feels he ought to be. There's no longer any edge of decorum, there's no longer any displacement in relation to courtesy – yet he's a very courteous man. He's remarkably courteous in his writing, and he's lived a very – no, not a mannered life, but a life very informed by manners, by old-time, British-derived sensibility for which I have a great respect. I dislike, indeed, a life without manners – I don't like doors being slammed in my face, nor do I want to slam them in other people's faces.

Paterson: Allen Curnow has, of course, put fifty years of labour into the cause of New Zealand writing and now in the last phase of his development (and I assume it's the last phase) he's suddenly flowering in a new way – and with much more writing still to come, I'd think.

Creeley: It certainly seems that way – but again, I remember that during my New Zealand visit we were at one point visiting a class at the University of Otago. It was purporting to read New Zealand writing and I suggested to the class that it might take parallel English poems of the same period and see what difference there was between the language the British and New Zealand poets were using.

I thought, why not see how the particular place in which these people were living was forcing them to alter their vocabulary, alter their disposition to the way the sky looks, the way the seasons fall, the way the common habits of being British were being transformed in this new place. They didn't really want to do that – maybe because it was work they didn't find attractive – but with Curnow, it's terrific the way he makes place and person absolutely specific. There's nowhere else Allen Curnow could be writing those poems.

Paterson: Which is, in a way, very strange as he wrote in his earlier years of the problem of 'standing upright' in New Zealand, and that maybe some time, some other person 'born in a marvellous year' might achieve it – yet here he is, doing exactly the thing he thought was out of his reach and out of the reach of his contemporaries.

Creeley: Looking at it from that point of view, my wife Penelope (who is a New Zealander) has frequently been aghast at the slaughter of the beech forests and, frankly, at the New Zealand disposition towards trees – period! That long sequence of his (Curnow's) – it's just magnificent! I know what she was talking about, and I've even seen some of that forest in a very meagre sense like driving through in a very rushed manner – but no one has treated those trees, dealt with the problem, in a more specific manner.

Paterson: And no one has ever made such a specific – and literary – statement about the New Zealand environment. The cost...

Creeley: The cost, and the fact it entails to the people living there – and the poem – a magnificent counter-foil doctrine. You know, Rayner...

Paterson: Dr. Rayner³?

Creeley: You'll never forget him, no --

Paterson: And he was an American?

Creeley: He had a little time here, I gather – and a dentist is an absolutely perfect person for that, for that emotional and economic disposition. So I thought this – no, I was dazzled when you showed me that work. I think it's magnificent, I think it's really extremely good and it – well, I'm also dazzled by a great deal in your anthology ... it seems to me equal in every respect to anything put out in New Zealand.

Paterson: I'm delighted to hear you say that, both about the anthology and about Curnow's work – and I certainly share your views on what Allen's doing. But meanwhile, over the last six years you've spent your time largely in Buffalo, New York State?

Creeley: Yes, Buffalo and New Mexico.

Paterson: Now, I know that you're a long way from New Zealand geographically, but you've been there and I also know from what you've told me, that you've acquired a great feeling for New Zealand. How do you feel about the general progress of literature there – and poetry in particular – over those six years?

Creeley: I think it's, usefully, far less modest than it was – it feels far less 'faint' in relation to its proposed models. I went through New Zealand, for instance, to Australia when I was in that part of the world, and I arrived there to a very aggressive and happy time in Australian poetry – and was, again, all too briefly there. I was in Sydney for about a week and then went to Perth – two very different places, obviously – and as different as New Zealand's North and South Islands. I thought there was a great confidence amongst Australian poets, and there was a useful and clear authority in their own disposition towards their writing. And I didn't think they were asking in some curious manner, for any kind of approval from anyone – including Americans. They had developed the habit of international festivals, etc, etc ... like the Adelaide festival. They were interested in my visit, but such visits were no longer remarkable occasions for them. I was trying to think, you know, of the author of *Crow*...

Paterson: Ted Hughes.

Creeley: Ted Hughes. He would now be probably the most decisive poet in the English *milieu* – at least, certainly in terms of public authority – and a very gifted man without question. But while the Australians might

have said, 'Gee, Ted Hughes is coming!' they didn't feel any awe-filled timidity towards him. I felt, at least during my visit to New Zealand, that people were very good to me – not only courteous, but also extremely hospitable. I felt at the time, that there wasn't that kind of confidence in New Zealand – but I feel it's there now and I think that Grove Press's publication of *15 Contemporary New Zealand Poets*, is really the point. Grove has had a long history in this country of being an incredibly astute publisher of 'foreign' material. Their authority in publishing has been built on their actions in regard to European writing, and they've clearly been 'wise' whatever their Managing Director's, Barney Rossett's, disposition has been – and pretty flamboyant at times! But he has a very canny eye for what is really and decisively new, and he has editors like Fred Jordan (who's happily now back there), and Donald Allen – both of whom have been absolutely crucial in Grove's ability to know not simply what is new in terms of public interest, but what's new in regard to literary possibilities. And I think that his publishing of your book (which will, frankly, not make him that much money, or necessarily enhance his reputation as a publisher) – but, you know, the fact that he has published it is to my mind, very significant. You see, there are many poets who would probably have so very little public estimation that he wouldn't touch them with a ten foot pole – and you've certainly got a very significant ally in him as a publisher. For instance, when I talked to James Laughlin who publishes *New Directions* here, he was interested and he charmingly recalled as a young man skiing in New Zealand – and he loved it! There were two brothers – I wish I could recall their names – like a classic, old-time, wealthy family who bought large amounts of New Zealand mountain for skiing. Anyhow, they shall be nameless, but the point is that he remembers it as a very charming physical place, with interesting and hospitable people – and he had an old-time affection for Frank Sargeson.

Paterson: Who died recently...

Creeley: Who died. It was very hard for Laughlin to get into thinking of New Zealand in any other way.

Paterson: In fact, over the last thirty years or more, he's had no contact with New Zealand apart from the occasional letter from Frank, and the letters and books he sent in return.

Creeley: Yes – and see, about three years ago, at the University in Buffalo, we had hopes for a series of festivals and conferences on various solid situations in the English speaking cultures. We were going to begin with Canada, our nearest neighbour, and we proposed then to move on to

New Zealand and Australia, and then finally to invite a cluster of younger British writers – and possibly to go on to a very socially and politically distraught discriminating state. And we sadly came a cropper, because the funding required was simply not available.

Paterson: But you did pull the Canadian thing off?

Creeley: You see, my colleague, Robert Bertholf, the Curator of the Poetry and Rare Book Collection at Buffalo – which has, by the way, an extraordinary collection of New Zealand and Australian material – called up the New Zealand Embassy to see if the people there might be interested in helping, or could suggest any means of finding funds for bringing writers in. The gentleman Bob talked to said, ‘Poets in New Zealand! I didn’t know there were any!’ Now, that’s three years ago!

Paterson: That’s incredible! Three years ago – and right at the very time when New Zealand poetry was reaching out towards the world!

Creeley: I guess that, as Pound used to say, it could be a firm argument for the contrary of not making a large noise in a crowd of very volatile people – you know, he actually said the contrary. He was saying, rather viciously, that Allen Tate’s the kind of person who, if he saw a child wandering towards an open well head, wouldn’t want to make an unseemly noise in order to draw attention to the fact. And I think it’s time to make a lot of unseemly noise in regard to New Zealand writing – because I think it’s time that people began reading it.

Paterson: I’m very interested in what you’re saying because, over the last five weeks, I’ve been moving around the United States talking to writers and people interested in writing. I’ve the feeling that, in spite of what you’re saying, Americans – and particularly American writers – are very much closed in within the confines of their own country. It’s not going to be easy to get them interested in work that comes from New Zealand.

Creeley: In the past, as a culture, we’ve been interested in foreign writing and what I’m going to say are large and generalizing comments – but from 1976 (the American bi-centennial year) we were still feeling a lot of the emotional relief that came from the ending of the Vietnam war. And maybe as a result of that war, we’re now experiencing a fading confidence in the authority of Americans – we’ve had to recognize a very significant shift in our public and our private state. We’ve certainly seen our economy battered, and we have raging and awful unemployment. We’re suffering from the same inflation you’re experiencing – and we’re having to recognize that our much touted standard of living has, by no means, the authority it had, say, twenty years ago. The poverty in the

larger cities is immense and unremitting. We no longer feel the former confidence we had in being Americans – however our disposition might be regarded by the rest of the world. This is felt in our literature, and while the present generation of younger writers – writers between thirty and forty-five – are confident in the sense of the 1940s poets who could write a poem to some effect, the passion of their address to social dilemma or even the comparable experience of others, is remarkably meagre. There are real exceptions – the third world writers, so to speak – the Nuyorican poets, the assorted Puerto Ricans living in New York City, the third world poets generally, black and chicano, are still a very extraordinary group that's politically and socially involved. And there are exceptions like Carolyn Forché possibly, who make their poetry an old-time vehicle for telling other human beings, frankly, about what the circumstances are in Central America. And I respect them for this. Whether their work stands up as deathless poetry or for its formal order, is another question and I'm not really that much involved in it right now. But there's been a lot of – not complacent – a lot of a quiet sort of passionless rhetoric, which really drives me up the wall. As an older man, and as a person of the same generation as Allen Ginsberg, Robert Bly, Denise Levertov, and James Dickey, I find this curiously careful way of writing, very boring.

Paterson: And do you think in this sense, and over recent years, American poets have lost the ability to take risks, to move out? Is that right – although, of course, it's another of those sweeping generalizations?

Creeley: The only risk-taking that I'm presently aware of in poetry is in the work of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. And their abilities are so determined by an investigation of linguistic patterns that they don't obviously want to, or need to take risks – and they lose a wide spectrum of readers because of their concentrated and intellectually particularized use of language patterns.

Paterson: Who are the poets working in this area, Bob?

Creeley: There are several I think of immediately – some of them have very strong links with the feelings of Ron Silliman on the West Coast, with Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews – a very bright Englishman actually, whose been in Toronto for the last few years – and Steve McCaffery. Canadian poetry, by the way, is I think, rather characteristically far more exciting than American writing presently is.

Paterson: What poetry was it you said – Canadian?

Creeley: Canadian poetry, which is much more active in terms of writers as a common group.

Paterson: And speaking of this kind of thing, it seems to me that in the '50s and '60s, the United States experienced the most important development that has occurred in poetry of the English speaking world in 50 years – and I believe that to be the case, and that you personally and in company with Olson and a large number of other people were responsible for this.

Creeley: Since then there's been a re-occurrence of – shall I say – a complacent, critical authority. I grew up in such a *milieu* – with the New Critics of the '40s – and I'm very sensitive to it. I mean, I can smell it a mile away when it's coming. I sure know what it feels like and we have now, the old-timer, Harold Bloom, still pontificating in various ways that I find, personally, useless. But even more sinister is the increasing authority who are frankly, 'approvers', and the public judges of poets connected with this passionless group. But I don't want to start talking in some condemnatory way, here. It wouldn't take much wit to discover who I'm talking about. So again, we're back to circumstances that are remarkably dictated by critical authority. A friend, who is himself a poet – and did a remarkable interview, 'One Test of the Language', with Ed Dorn, pointed out to me that the present journals publishing poetry have an unusual economy. In a given issue there would be about two or three – maybe eight to 10 – pages of poetry, 30 to 40 pages of critical text and an equal amount of documentation – like literary history. But the disposition towards poetry has moved back to occasions for critical surmise and judgement. When that happens, the poetry of the period is largely stifled – I mean the poets, for whatever reason, have seemingly lost the authority of their own decision.

Paterson: Your colleague and elder, Charles Olson, was plainly the leader of the Black Mountain group, and was looked upon as the theorist even though I know a great deal of that theory came from you personally. How is Charles Olson now viewed in American critical circles?

Creeley: Well, I went to a conference on Olson's work at the University of Iowa which is, really, 'home ground' for the kind of authority I'm speaking of. It's been known for years as a very conservative, critical place – and anyhow, we got there, Ed Dorn, Robert Duncan, and myself. (We were the primary people involved with Olson and were the poets who were to read there.) I was intrigued and amazed to recognize that of Olson's actual work there wasn't much more than his *Archaeologist of Morning* in print. The only section of *Maximus* available was the first 10 or 12 letters, so to speak. None of the Grossman or Jonathan Cape texts were in print. There was some critical writing available, thanks to Donald Allen; but here was the poet we were there to honour, and his works were

largely unavailable. At the same time, there were critical texts variously published by Harvard, the Louisiana University Press, the University of Texas Press – and I’m trying to think of who published the last one. Anyhow, there were four major critical works on Olson, but there was no range of Olson’s work available.

Paterson: So, the man who was to be honoured was virtually absent from the proceedings?

Creeley: And to this day, sadly, that’s still primarily the case. The University of California is to bring out a definitive edition of *The Maximus Poems* – hopefully within the year. But on this occasion, Olson was sort of rushed into glory with that peculiar sense that he would not be attending. That happened even more viciously with Zukofsky – a poet of I think, equal merit. I recall that a few years ago when there was the hope the literary journal *Contemporary Literature*, published by Templeton University, would be doing an issue on Zukofsky, there were no critics who were willing to write for it except a few of the younger and more adventurous. Thanks to the University of Maine – of all places – he continues to claim a critical response and judgement. In the last few years, however, I doubt that we’ve had any more than one poet parallel to Allen Curnow – which might be true in regard to ability, but not in terms of what the texts would argue. Curnow’s work is plainly remarkable, and a more than ample demonstration of the value of New Zealand writing and its place in the English speaking community.

Albuquerque, New Mexico
11 November 1982

Notes

¹ *15 Contemporary New Zealand Poets*, featuring the work of Rosemary Allpress, Allen Curnow, Riemke Ensing, Michael Harlow, Stephen Higginson, Rob Jackaman, Jan Kemp, Alan Loney, Rachel McAlpine, David Mitchell, Alistair Paterson, Elizabeth Smither, Kendrick Smithyman, C.K. Stead, and Ian Wedde.

² *You Will Know When You Get There* (Auckland: AUP, 1982).

³ Curnow’s persona in ‘A Fellow Being’ (*You Will Know When You Get There*).

(*Editor’s Note:* This conversation between Alistair Paterson and the late American poet Robert Creeley, which stopped being recorded when the tape ran out, was first published in *Buff* (State University of New York at Buffalo, 1983). This is its first publication in New Zealand.)

Notes on Contributors

ROBERT CREELEY (1926-2005) was a distinguished American poet, who visited New Zealand twice, in 1976 and again in 1995.

RIEMKE ENSING is an Auckland poet. Her selected poems *Talking Pictures* was published by HeadworX in 2000.

TIM JONES lives in Wellington. His latest collection of poetry is *All Blacks' Kitchen Gardens* (HeadworX, 2007).

WANJIKU KIARIE is a Kenyan actress, poet and storyteller. She first came to Aotearoa in 1979 with the London-based theatre group Keskidee, and now lives in Otaki with her husband Martyn Sanderson.

RICHARD LANGSTON is working on his fourth book of poems, 'Shark Fin Soup and Other Poems', to be published later this year.

WILL LEADBEATER is an Auckland poet and former poetry reviewer for the *NZ Herald*. He has had published several collections of his poetry.

RACHEL McALPINE produces technical books like *Write me a web page, Elsie!* and also writes fiction and poetry. A stay in Tokelau got her comparing those low-lying, heartbreaking, inaccessible atolls with Antarctica.

HARVEY MOLLOY is a Wellington poet and teacher. His collection of poetry, *Moonshot*, was published by Steele Roberts in 2008.

JAMES NORCLIFFE's sixth collection *Villon in Millerton* was published by AUP in 2007. Recent work has appeared in *The Literary Review*, *Alimentum Harvard Review*, *Iowa Review* and *Gargoyle*.

JOHN O'CONNOR is a Christchurch poet, editor and critic. His new collection of poetry is forthcoming from HeadworX.

ALISTAIR PATERSON is an editor, novelist, critic and poet. He planned and initiated Creeley's 1976 visit to New Zealand and helped with Creeley's second visit in 1995.

PETER OLDS is a Dunedin poet. The poems included here are taken from his new collection, *Graffiti* (No. 28 in the ESAW mini series).

JENNY POWELL is a Dunedin poet and literacy teacher. She has had three individual and two collaborative collections of poems published.

LAURA SOLOMON is a fiction writer and poet. A collection of her stories, *Alternative Medicine*, was published in 2008 by Flame Books, UK.

BARBARA STRANG lives at McCormacks Bay, Christchurch. She has had published a book of poetry, *Duck Weather* (Poets Group).

PAUL WOLFFRAM is a Wellington-based ethnomusicologist and poet. The poems included here are part of a longer sequence written while Paul was conducting fieldwork in Papua New Guinea.