



Our Interview with Poet Larry Jabbonsky



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replete with poems and songs
so that the sight, touch, and smell
of book and record stores
are unmistakable, or at least familiar.**

Sally from the Norwalk Public Library: Thanks for joining us on the **Poetry Page**, Larry! You have a poem – “Thought for Food” – in our 2019 **Art & Text** exhibit booklet. It is a lovely, sensitive, playful poem (“tender utterances/falling off the bone”).

In your bio for the booklet, you explain how you are recently retired after forty years as a business writer in corporate America, and how, in college, you majored in Journalism/Communications with a minor in Creative Writing. You go on to say that you are “excited about putting it all to better, more imaginative, and ideally altruistic use.”

I take this to mean that you are excited about spending more time on your creative endeavors now?

Larry: Thank you for the elucidation, Sally! And thanks so much for the chance to talk about one of our shared passions: poetry!

Not to discredit my business-writing past— I was involved in a lot of big ideas, big things—but, you’re right: I am more excited about the creative process now than I’ve been in a long time.

COVID has kept us more housebound than usual, and more than I’d prefer. But we live in a one-hundred-eighteen-year-old house, with no shortage of poetic source material in the basement or under creaky floorboards, and hosts of ghosts with whom to commune in the attic.

See?! It’s possible a poem is being born right before our eyes. Let me jot that down.

Sally: That sounds like a great house!

Please tell us a little about your past in terms of your chosen career path.

Larry: I’d say a combined career in publishing, public affairs, media relations, and internal communications found me more directly than I found it. I had to pay the bills, so took the jobs. Then things went better, and grew more organically, than I expected.

Writing and editing have always been the linchpins, and I was fortunate to write largely about consumer products – stuff people have on their dinner tables, or on the go; pretty familiar, accessible, and—in some cases—disputable stuff. It was fun.

Sally: Did you write and read poetry while working your corporate jobs? Or have you just recently returned to poetry?

Larry: No stops to speak of. I've been writing poetry since the third grade, when a teacher named Miss Zygmundt shunned my advances, ran off to Poland, got married, and broke my seven-year-old heart. That influenced some private, mildly therapeutic poems.

By junior high school, punk-oriented titles began to arrive— like “Garbage Can Lover.” This one included sadly infatuated lines, like: “I want to be at, not in your disposal.”

Poetry is inescapable, not that I've ever wanted to run away from it. I suppose there've been sabbaticals, but I've never fully left poetry.

Sally: I'm sure that your college minor in Creative Writing created a balance for you? I imagine your corporate writing was assisted by your creativity; and that your creativity helped you work outside-the-box a little, making your business writing more interesting! Do you think so?



Larry: I do. Corporate writing doesn't have to be nondescript, bland, or – God forbid – formulaic. My primary job was to get inside the heads, and capture the voices of the senior executives for whom I was writing.

Using my creative writing skills, I enjoyed bending the rules, and—where possible—obliterating the boxes. Not everybody bought it, but, as an extracurricular endeavor, I specialized in service anniversaries and various other festivities: *Need a celebratory limerick, an embarrassing song parody, or a video to go with that? Coming right up!*

On the day job, however, I had to pay at least as much attention to corporate strategic initiatives as I did to developing verse. I didn't want to get caught drifting into a poem during a financial performance review! Color-coded, commingled notebooks, and bar charts? Check!

One of my all-time favorites was a big, proud, truck-to-riches, European-by-way-of-the-Bronx guy who ran sales and franchise relations for our company's North American operations. His task was to compellingly sway thousands of associates to see things his

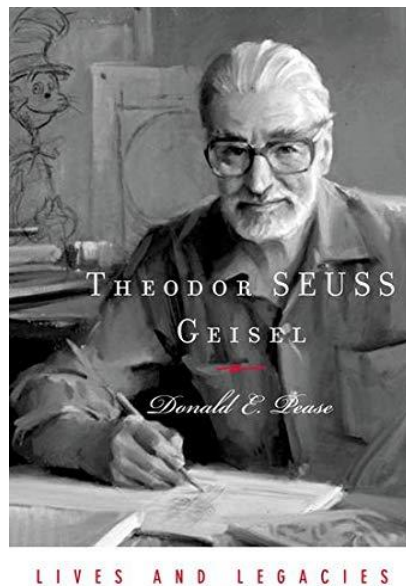
way—the company’s way—based on partnership and respect. We’d build to a crescendo in rehearsals, and I’d say, “Okay, this is where you bring out your inner mobster... or your inner longshoreman,” as the case may be.

I remember a national convention when we scripted the slogan, “The elephant in the room is trust.” The idea was for the word “trust” to be painted on a live, adult elephant’s behind, which would be walked up to center stage for emphasis. A weighty, persuasive effect. Word got out, and PETA threatened to shut us down. Check, please...

Sally: As a child, did you read poetry? To which poets or poems were you most drawn?

Larry: Give me **Dr. Seuss** any time, day or night—

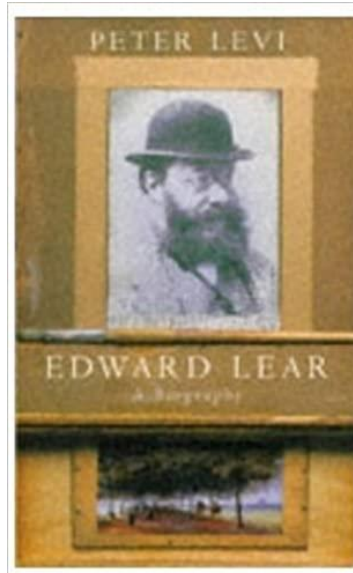
“If you never did you should
These things are fun
And fun is good.”



Of course, I’m still a sucker for **Edward Lear**’s ["The Owl and the Pussycat"](#) —

“They dined on mince, and slices of quince,
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;
And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,
They danced by the light of the moon,
The moon,
The moon,

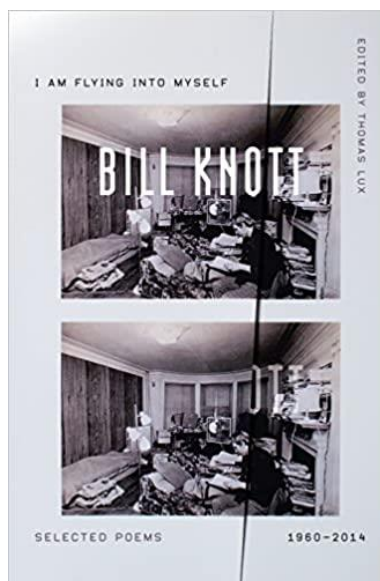
They danced by the light of the moon.”



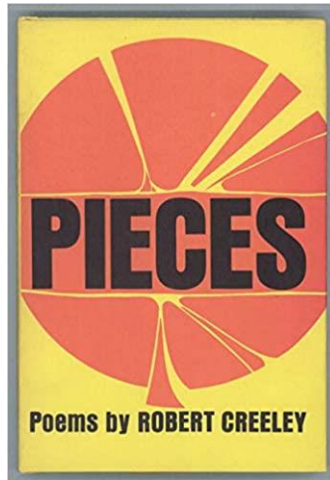
Sally: Which poets would you say influenced your own work, or brought you to poetry?

Larry: I'm taking liberties with time, distinguishing who or what came first.

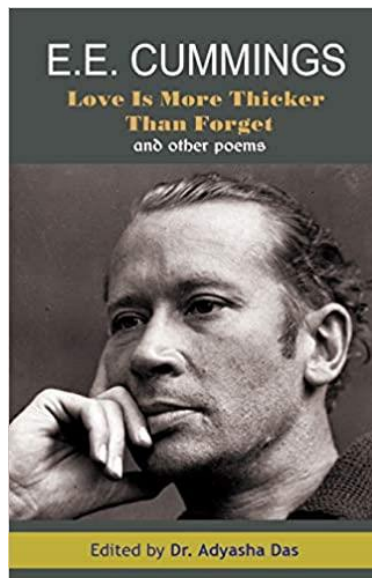
It's a return engagement, but the late **Bill Knott's**, *I Am Flying Into Myself*, has an important place in my consciousness, and on the bookshelf.



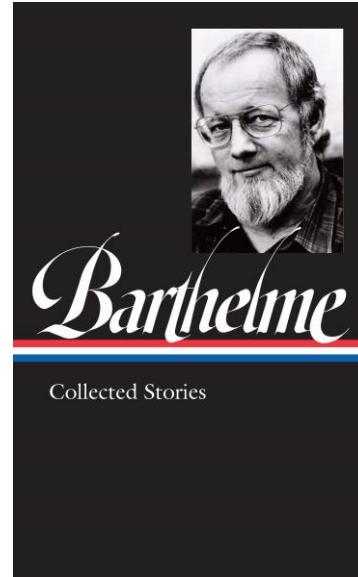
Alternately popping up are **Robert Creeley's** *Pieces*, or **Frank O'Hara's** *Lunch Poems*.



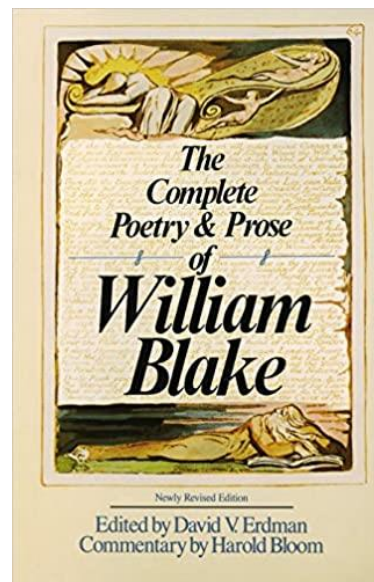
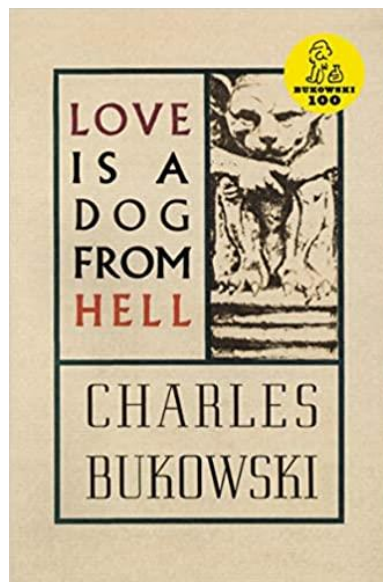
Who else? **E.E. Cummings** has saved us a boatload in Valentine's Day cards.



Richard Brautigan and **Donald Barthelme** are stalwarts.

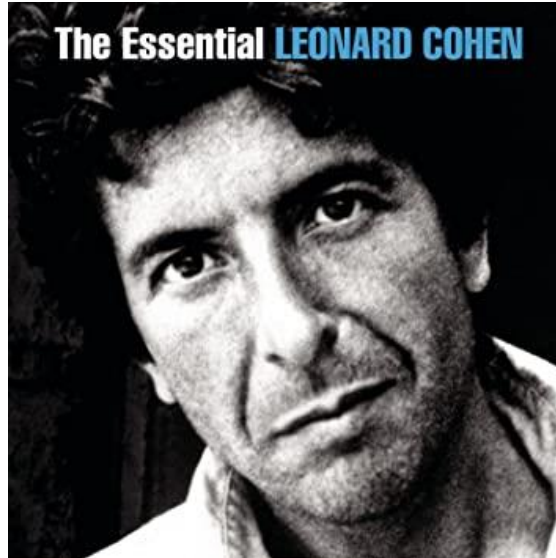


Barely leaving the Bs, notwithstanding **Charles Bukowski** or **William Blake**.



I love the written rhythmic word; the iteration of alliteration, if that makes sense. So, with your permission, I'd like to expand your question to include singer-songwriters among my biggest influences— artists, poets in their own “write,” if you will— who tell stories, raise issues, cite indignations, break hearts, and patch them up:

Leonard Cohen, Loudon Wainwright III, Ray Davies, Patti Smith, Gil Scott-Heron, John Prine, Tom Waits, Lou Reed. Did I mention Bob Dylan? Smokey Robinson? Jeff Tweedy? Billy Bragg? Martin Newell? Laura Nyro? Randy Newman?



With a quorum, we can get into debates like who is the greatest, most poetic living songwriter named Paul? McCartney or **Simon**? Should those **Beatles** publishing credits be attributed to **Lennon and McCartney** or McCartney and Lennon? Just the beginning of some great, heated arguments.

Thanks for the question! In terms of self-awareness, this conversation is therapeutic! It's edifying. I'm having fun!

Sally: Do you currently have a favorite poem that you return to again and again?

Larry: **Leonard Cohen** has a song called "Anthem," with a T-shirt-worthy refrain: "**There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.**" Beautiful. Timeless.

Richard Brautigan wrote a nine-part poem, "[The-Galilee-Hitch-Hiker.](#)" with one part about Baudelaire buying a hot dog and smoking opium at a baseball game. After "an angel committed suicide by jumping off a low cloud," Brautigan yielded, "The game was called on account of fear." Among my all-time favorites.

In a song called “In C,” **Loudon Wainwright III** sings:

“If families didn’t break apart
I guess there’d be no need for art
But you and I know they do
So I sing in C to you.”



Sally: In terms of publishing, have you published in poetry journals, and literary magazines?

Larry: As you so kindly mentioned at the top of this interview, your 2019 **Art & Text** exhibit booklet featured one of my poems. I love that you described it as “playful.” It’s my first officially published work in several years. For that, you and the **Norwalk Public Library** have a warm, enduring place in my heart.

Two of my best friends and greatest instigators merit critical mention here. To inflame the innocent, let’s call them screenwriter and attorney **Mike DeLisa** and novelist and innkeeper **Fred Schneider**. Together, from high school through college and into our married-with-children years, we formed an underground writing and art collective called **Congo Lust**. Published sporadically and diminutively, it remains a stark, promiscuous, hopefully humorous state of mind—as long as none of us ever consider running for public office. Don’t ask. It could have been called Inner Prisms.

Sally: Please share with us your thoughts on publishing.

Larry: During one of your recent poetry programs, Sally, I believe you said—I'm paraphrasing—that self-publishing used to be frowned upon, but is now gaining more widespread acceptance. That's great news for someone like me.

I'm proud of my rejection letters – the few from *The New Yorker* are suitable for framing.

I have too much stuff to hide away in shoeboxes or junk drawers, awaiting posthumous publication. My wife Sharon is a great, patient, attentive listener, but we have to disburden her and a small circle of friends – the Mikes, Freds, Scotts, and Eds.

I said earlier that poetry is “inescapable.” I take that personally. Let me waffle and more broadly say it should be compulsory, more pervasive.

On a recent solo album, legendary **Kinks** co-founder Ray Davies posed a worrisome question in song: “Where is the poetry?” We must increase productivity while improving availability and access.

Wait. That's too corporate.

As I elaborate on the topic of publishing, what I mean to be saying is that we can't let poetry dry up. The internet is a crazy, expansive place, where successful communications are measured in clicks and views. I want to keep bookshelves, and record bins, replete with poems and songs so that the sight, touch, and smell of book and record stores are unmistakable, or at least familiar.

Sally: In your bio in our **Art & Text** booklet, you specifically thank poet **Ezra Lovcroft** “for making poetry a big part of your transformation.” Ezra is a great friend of the Norwalk Public Library, and the community! Please share with us how he has helped you as a poet.

Larry: We wouldn't be having this interview without Ezra. Ezra and his husband Scott were our best men, our two-person wedding party. They stood up for Sharon and me on a beach in Maine in 2014, and they remain among our dearest friends.

How has Ezra helped me as a poet? Oh, man. He lives to write and writes to live – intrinsically strapping his passion, wisdom, and powers of observation to a demanding day-to-day existence. He copes and hopes, inspiring the same in others. He's older than me by only a few months, so he'd probably reject the “mentor” moniker, but his writing and presenting advice has been amazingly supportive.



Scott, Larry, and Ezra

Sally: Yes, he's wonderful!

Ezra holds open mic nights. On our exact date of the **Norwalk Public Library's** closing due to the pandemic, we had our first ***Ezra Lovecroft Presents... The Unexpected Poet...*** open mic night scheduled. Everyone was so excited about it (and then so disappointed that we had to cancel). Once we reopen and are allowed to have live programming again, we will be hosting that along with many other poetry programs. I hope to have a **Poetry Page** celebration!

Do you participate in open mic events? Do you like giving readings of your work?

Larry: I do participate in open mic events. Ezra issued a friendly challenge to join him at an open mic night a while back—maybe two years ago—and I've had nearly perfect attendance since.

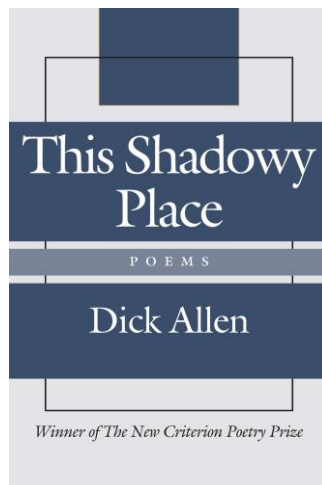
It's at once terrifying and exhilarating.

Funny, I spent most of my corporate career prepping senior executives for speaking engagements in front of some big, bad, global audiences, but being the guy in front of the curtain on the microphone can be daunting. Ezra's patience and tutelage have been a huge help.

Sally: Do you attend any poetry workshops, or prefer to work independently, and privately? Please elaborate.

Larry: Writing workshops are on the to-do list. I'd actually escalate that to the must-do list.

I haven't been in a formal workshop environment since the late 1970s, when I completed four one-on-one independent studies with the poet [Dick Allen](#), my creative writing professor at the University of Bridgeport. He was poet laureate of the state of Connecticut 2010-2015.



Sadly, Dick died after suffering a heart attack on Christmas day in 2017.

I remember him exhorting me to engage all of the senses in my writing – sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch – helping the reader relate to how humans receive sensory information, though he said it much more convincingly than that: “Tell me how that peanut butter sandwich really tastes! The bread? Now add the jelly! What’s changing? More scotch? Now try tuna fish... .”

Professor Allen was also the advisor of [GROUNDSWELL](#), a magazine of the arts that I contributed to regularly, and edited in my senior year at the University of Bridgeport. Cool memories.

In preparation for this interview, I dug out a few binders of my work with Professor Allen. In one of his critiques, he wrote in thin black pen: “Ironic, nasty, but pointed and neatly arranged.” I’ll take it. I only wish I’d had the chance to reconnect with him before his death. Maybe later. His poetry and guidance remain great, ongoing gifts.

Sally: That's so great that you had Dick Allen in your life back then, Larry.

In terms of workshops, **Norwalk's Poet Laureate, Bill Hayden**, holds virtual poetry workshops every first and third Monday. You might like that!

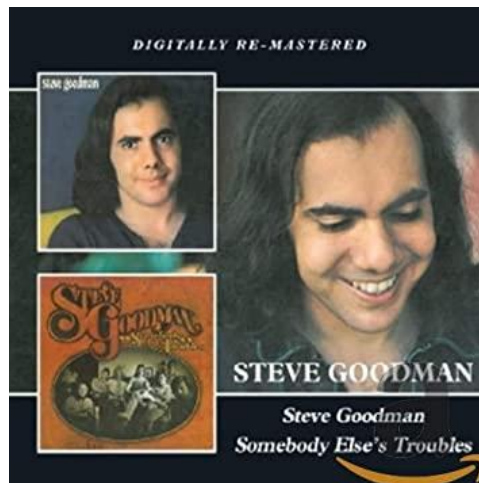
Would you say that you lean mostly toward free verse, or do you write formal verse, as well?

Larry:

On this count, Sally,
We must not tally
Or dilly-dally
Nothing is sweeter
Than precise meter.

Sorry, couldn't resist!

The late singer-songwriter Steve Goodman recorded an album called "Words We Can Dance To." Mine don't always rhyme, but they usually come with a beat and rely – as mentioned earlier, on the iteration of alliteration.



Sally: Now that you are retired from a day job, do you maintain a set writing schedule for your poetry? Or do you simply allow inspiration to work its way?

Larry: Inspiration is welcome at any time of day or night. I keep threatening to set a daily writing schedule, and also one for physical exercise, walking with Sharon and Cleo, chasing the grandchildren, and eating three meals a day. So far it's been happening only in fits and starts.

I have hundreds, maybe thousands of scraps of drafts and ideas—odd lines, and homeless couplets—waiting for a poem. Lots of stuff in the works—in binders, and on Word docs, on hotel stationery, paper bags, or barroom napkins—you get it, right?

Sally: What would you say is the recurring theme in your poetry, if there is one?

Larry: I don't think there's a recurring theme in my writing, per se. It can be dark at times. I'm organizing a volume of horror poems, mostly tongue-in-cheek. Previewed here: "Do me a favor. I left a razor in your father's vestibule..." The notion of man's inhumanity to man doesn't take a holiday. Or does it?

Sally: Do you find your poems surprise you?

Larry:

Yes, my best stuff seems to sneak up on me.

I always keep pen and paper handy—in the car, on the nightstand—never know when a good line will occur to me.

Sally: Please share with us things you enjoy outside of poetry! I know you have a rescue lab, Cleo!

Larry: Cleo rescued *us*.

Just keeping up with my grandchildren will make this retirement thing more rewarding.

What else? I want to give back.



I want to learn to play the harmonica.



I want to alphabetize my CD and record collection by artist.



I'm a big baseball fan. I used to say the New York Mets affected my mood at least 162 times a year. Now I'm not so sure. Thankfully, though, I have two beautiful, toddling, sprinting distractions.



Sally: Well, I wish you a very happy retirement filled with many new poems, Larry!
Thanks so much for participating in the Poetry Page!

Larry: Thanks again, Sally. This is a huge, humbling moment. Next time anyone asks about my work, I'll send them to the **Poetry Page**.



Cleo, Larry, and his wife, Sharon

Now, three of Larry's poems...

“It pays to be strong,” was about twenty-five years in the making. I was honored to read it on the Norwalk Public Library’s virtual LitCrawl last year. It’s certainly my longest poem, but I’m still not sure it’s finished

It pays to be strong

Long way from Laos to Amarillo
He wonders what possessed her to go
From single-party socialists
To wild-and-woolly western trysts

Fools suffer still
Hoping she will
Come back before long
It pays to be strong

Empty bottles, smothered cigarettes
Mister Christopher gathers regrets
Holy-on-high magnificence
Reduced to drunken reticence

Sainthood removed
Heaven has moved
Earth by doing wrong
It pays to be strong

They sit sanguine among the depraved
Believing the season will be saved
Mass-delusion emboldens them
Like great legs with a turned-up hem

Let reason swill
Beyond their will
The maddening throng
It pays to be strong

Two proceeding haplessly as one
Family pared to mother and son
Tragedy keeps them together
Birds of a red, wretched feather

Oh, what a shame
To share the blame
That needn't belong
It pays to be strong

Mountains do not abide mistakes
Indecision prompts unlucky breaks
A hard road to recovery
Psychedelic discovery

Roll up a sleeve
Land make-believe...
Possessed by song
It pays to be strong

Belie the powers of invention
A pious sea of inattention
Wade a while with John the Baptist
Scam the meteorologist

Feather the storm
Adorn the norm
A festooned sarong
It pays to be strong

No more shall we attribute our faults
To large amounts of specialty malts
We will dine with faltering friends
Until this loathsome story ends

Gnaw off a leg
Or, better, beg
Someone bang a gong
It pays to be strong.

—LJ

Caregiver's call

Your father has taken a fall
He just missed a step
That's all

An old-centurion sprawl

He didn't yell
Didn't bawl
We found him prone

Down the hall
Learning anew
How to crawl.

—LJ

Last time I was afraid

Last time I was afraid
The bills had all been paid
The beds had all been made

The dogs had all been fed
Every word I said
Consoled your heart, your head

We struck a pose of obedient bliss
Something was horribly muddled, amiss
I gave you a quick, disquieting kiss.

—LJ

