

An Interview with Poet Dennis Rhodes
(Seen in the 2013 print version of *The Alembic*)

MG: Can you recall a specific experience that pushed you into writing poetry?

DR: I started writing poetry at about 8 years old; I realize as an adult that writing and poetry were a child's escape from a once-crippling obsessive compulsive disorder which I have suffered from for 50 years and which is now largely under control. Poems evoked a small thrill in me and a sense, as in *A Chorus Line*, that "I can do that".

In fifth grade I had a Mr. O'Conner as my English teacher; he was an Irish immigrant, a man of about 35. One day he was, as usual, lecturing in class, expecting the class to take notes. Privately, I tuned out and began doing a bit of creative writing in the margins of my notebook. This was a time also when I was "fleeing" into writing because of my severe OCD—writing was an escape and relief. Being a savvy teacher, Mr. O'Conner surmised that I was not paying attention. He stealthily began moving around the room, with the collusion of the class, until he came to the back of my row. He did not alter his tone of voice so I remained blithely in my own world. Suddenly, to my horror, I felt his breath on my neck--his presence was palpable. Worse, he was reading what I'd written clandestinely. After a minute which seemed like an eternity, he said to me: "Finish that. Just not now." He could have made me stand in the hall as punishment. He could have sent me to the principal's office. By doing what he did, giving me a qualified permission to strike out on my own, he encouraged—even made—me be a writer.

In the ensuing years, poetry grew more and more important to me. I would sit as a 12 year old in the public library and read biographies of famous poets such as Robert Frost, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Carl Sandberg--and others. They fascinated me. I had no doubt that I

wanted to be a poet. Without a doubt, Robert Frost is my favorite poet and I think America's finest poet. I think his work has influenced mine a lot, as well as the work of W.H. Auden and Emily Dickinson. I have sometimes in a poem of mine consciously parodied a certain poet out of tribute to them.

MG: Was there a major influence that compelled you to write your first collection *Spiritus Pizza*?

DR: Spiritus is an iconic landmark in Provincetown, a center of gravity of gay life and love—in “P'town”. It's been the center of many hook-ups, break-ups--and life fuck-ups [therefore] rich with poetic influences and themes.

It's a legendary venue in P'town dating [back] to the mid-70s. At one o'clock a.m., all the bars and clubs in town close, empty out, and virtually everyone goes to Spiritus to mill about, cruise, see and be seen, have pizza, coffee, catch up with fellow tourists or fellow "townies"; it is a sort bazaar and a vast cruising ground. It is simply the place to be if you are in Provincetown for a summer visit. You can see everyone who was out anywhere that night and make your move accordingly. Spiritus is open till 2 a.m. but, the crowd dwindles and lingers till three-ish. It's amazing. The only other can't miss place like it is daily 4 p.m. tea-dance at the “Boatslip”, equally iconic and famous. It made perfect sense for my first book to be centered round the spirit of Spiritus--it is the social heart of the most important place in the world to me. It teems with humanity from sullen drag queens to arrogant leather men to young men. Anyone could write a poem there—just grab a napkin.

MG: In many of your poems particularly in *Spiritus Pizza*, you have a variety of different forms of poetry and sometimes blend genres together. For example, in “Pounds” you

combine free verse and rhyme in the same stanzas. Is the choice of form determined by the subject?

DR: I am not a formalist poet. I don't set out to write in sonnets or villanelles. Oddly, I approach my poetry like a reporter covers an event—I want to get in the essential details as concisely as possible. The only forms I use somewhat consistently are sonnets and haiku. I'd have to describe most of my poetry as lyrical free verse. I deal more with ideas than images, although I think that once in a while I paint a really enduring image. Like in one poem when I described an upended dead bird as a crashed Cessna. I just feel constricted by the idea of a form but this back and forth has encouraged me to try my hand at a sestina.

[Further on haikus], I love their conciseness of thought and the language. I think a good haiku really hits the bulls-eye with the reader. As far as rhyme is concerned, that old first line usually tells me whether the poem will have rhyme because the thoughts and impulses behind it speak to me in rhyme. Unlike many modern poets, I do not look down at rhyme; I have great respect for solid poems that rhyme. One of the greatest American lyric poems, Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* is a masterpiece of rhyme and controlled emotion. It is universal. I respect forms and poets who adhere to forms because it's really hard to do well. I like limericks! I like "list" poems if they seem to work naturally. I generally write a poem straight thru at first blush, other times I'll carry a fragment around and complete it when the spirit moves me.

MG: How do you respond to negative criticism and how does that affect your writing process and what was your route to getting published?

DR: I believe strongly in establishing working relationships with editors of journals: I don't believe in shot-gunning poems out to various publications. In the past five years, there are 5 or so

journals that have embraced my work, whose editors have a sense of my strengths and weaknesses. I like that. It takes the sting out of rejection when an editor has published you in the past. I am not an academic poet and I've not had an interest in getting an MFA. For me, it's not a question of "publish or perish!" I'm just a guy who has written poems since he was ten years old because it comes naturally. I never give advice unless it's asked for and I do not personally welcome advice I've not asked for. I've never workshopped a poem. I don't believe Walt Whitman workshopped his poems either—I've a feeling it would have truly fucked up his work. An individual's voice is so precious that the root of one's work should be the cultivating, care, and feeding of that voice. A Robert Frost poem is truly and only a Robert Frost poem; only Billy Collins writes like Billy Collins. I started to feel truly comfortable with and about my work when I realized I may never have acclaim for it in my lifetime; I feel confident that the quality of my body of work will somehow "outlive" me. Also, to paraphrase the late great Howard Cosell, I never "played the game." I never [sought] to elbow my way into the poetry establishment by courting, wooing, and flattering certain poets. I've always been content to let my work speak for itself. I've neither taken nor given workshops but just found myself getting better as I went along. No two people react to a poem in the same way. Like all art, it's subjective. A poem rejected by one journal has often found a home in another journal.

MG: Going back to your poem "Pounds," your tone of voice is unique in that the subject is male but, the language is what most would expect to be coming from a female point of view. Do you have any views regarding gender roles in poetry or gender roles in general?

DR: Actually the poem "Pounds" is written from a decidedly male point of view--it deals with an HIV patient praying his pounds up. Written in the early nineties, it was a time [where]

there were very few effective medications and many gay men with AIDS were rail-thin, with so-called "wasting" in their faces. Weight is deathly important and the narrator's struggle with his scale--imploing his scale--reflects that. In regards to gender overall, I cannot help but write my poems from a male point of view. I know a lot of women but I by and large don't socialize with them. Because love and loss are universal, I know that my poems can nevertheless touch and speak to women though—see my "Memo to Straight Girls" in *Spiritus Pizza*. I appreciate humor so it often shows up in my work.

MG: Many of your poems especially in *Entering Dennis*, seem not only to evoke feeling but also tell a story. Why did you decide to write poetry instead of prose and have you considered ever writing fiction?

DR: In *Entering Dennis*, there are indeed a number of "stories"; actually I have also written fiction but a short story is such a different animal. Telling a story via a poem is like telling a parable—it's short, compressed and if done well, can leave the reader as satisfied as a good short story or novel. I cannot speak for how well I do it, that's for readers to judge.

MG: Do you have any favorite poem(s) or poet(s) that have influenced your work?

What authors or poets do you recommend aspiring writers should read?

DR: Robert Frost because he is hands down our finest American poet. Also, Walt Whitman because he revolutionized poetry. Edna St. Vincent Millay because she wrote about love and sex without apology or shame.

[For] short stories and novels: J.D. Salinger's "Nine Stories", in my opinion is the best collection of short stories by an American writer; Grace Paley's book of short stories *Enormous*

Changes at the Last Minute because of her great influence on short story writers; Hemingway, of course, because his writing style was singular—*The Sun Also Rises* is my favorite novel. Also, reading Mark Twain is critical. His use of irony and humor even in dealing with serious subjects. Hemingway called *Huckleberry Finn* America's first real novel. Lastly, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*--it stands alone and has been relevant to 4 generations thus far.

MG: Are there any poems you have written that you wish you could go back and edit?

DR: Of course; but instead of change I'd eliminate some! W.H. Auden said he scratched some poems because they were dishonest. That resonated with me. I've probably, over the years, have written poems that did not express what I truthfully felt or believed. These days, I try hard to bring candor and honesty into my work. It's the actual "building" of the poem that truly engages me. I love to savor the cadence of a line, to see how it sounds aloud and to see if it flows effortlessly into the next line. Effortless may not be the right word because when I'm absorbed in a poem, it's anything but! Looking back on poems and disavowing them is known as "killing your babies". It's certainly OK to do that, even with published ones.

MG: This question might be overused but, what is your personal definition of poetry?

In my opinion, [poetry and] the finest poetry is universal, transcending time and culture. I think it was Robert Frost who said "A poem is a momentary stay against confusion." What a quote! Reading a terrific poem aloud testifies to the truth of that

statement. And of course Archibald Macleish said "A poem should not mean, but be".

Those remain my favorite descriptions of poetry and poems.

MG: Do you think poetry is better when read aloud or read in solitude?

DR: Both, I love reading poetry aloud and I often do so alone. In speaking a poem, I can absorb a good bit of its craft--how it was put together. It's like seeing a large home and then being shown the blueprints!

MG: When do you find it easiest to gather your thoughts and write? Is there a special place, time of day, a memory you have to trigger your creativity?

DR: A poem for me is usually sparked with one line that pops into my head, usually the first line. A line alone can stay with me and "tug at my sleeve" until I stop being lazy and sit my butt down to write. For example, a recent poem started with the line "Spring is a dangerous time"; it reposed in my notebook for two months before I realized that I wanted poetically to address my suicide attempt nearly three years ago. (Don't worry, I'm perfectly fine now and have no plans or expectations to do it again). Anyway, once I sat down, the poem--forgive the cliché--wrote itself. It just flowed. I love, just love, the integrity of a single line, the number of syllables, the flow of thought and speech. I'm reading aloud and reading along as I'm writing.